AL-Raida

Lebanese American University

Volume XVI, Nos. 83-84, Fall/Winter, 1998-1999 *The Pioneer* الرائدة

Women's Lives in Lebanon

25th Anniversary

IWSAW

ABOUT IWSAW

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) was established in 1973 at the Lebanese American University (formerly Beirut University College). Initial funding for the Institute was provided by the Ford Foundation.

OBJECTIVES: The Institute strives to serve as a data bank and resource center to advance a better understanding of issues pertaining to Arab women and children; to promote communication among individuals, groups and institutions throughout the world concerned with Arab women; to improve the quality of life of Arab women and children through educational and development projects; and to enhance the educational and outreach efforts of the Lebanese American University.

PROJECTS: IWSAW activities include academic research on women, local, regional and international conferences; seminars, lectures, and educational projects which improve the lives of women and children from all sectors of Lebanese society. The Institute houses the Women's Documentation Center in the Stoltzfus Library at LAU. The Center holds books and periodicals. The Institute also publishes a variety of books and monographs on the status, development and conditions of Arab women, in addition to *Al-Raida*. Twelve children's books with illustrations, and two guides, one of which specifies how to set up children's libraries, and the other which contains information about producing children's books, have also been published by IWSAW. In addition, the Institute has also created income generating projects which provide employment training and assistance to women from war-stricken families in Lebanon. The Institute has also devised a "Basic Living Skills Project" which provides a non-formal, integrated educational program for illetrate and semi-literate women involved in development projects. Additional IWSAW projects include: The Rehabilitation Program for Children's Mental Health; Teaching for Peace; and the Portable Library Project. The latter project was awarded the Asahi Reading Promotion Award in 1994. For more information about these or any other projects, write to the Institute at the address provided below.

ABOUT AL-RAIDA

Al-Raida is published quarterly by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) of the Lebanese American University (LAU), formerly Beirut University College, P.O. Box 13-5053/59, Beirut, Lebanon; Telephone: (01) 867-618, ext. 288; Fax: (01) 791-645. The American address of LAU is 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1846, New York, NY 10115, U.S.A.; Telephone: (212) 870-2592; Fax: (212) 870-2762. e-mail: al-raida@beirut.lau.edu.lb

PURPOSE AND CONTENT: *Al-Raida's* mission is to enhance networking between Arab women and women all over the world; to promote objective research on the conditions of women in the Arab world, especially conditions related to social change and development; and to report on the activities of the IWSAW and the Lebanese American University. Each issue of *Al-Raida* features a File which focuses on a particular theme, in addition to articles, conference reports, interviews, book reviews and art news.

SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES: We seek contributions from those engaged in research, analysis and study of women in the Arab world. Contributions should not exceed ten double-spaced typed pages. Please send a hard copy and a diskette. We reserve the right to edit in accordance with our space limitations and editorial guidelines. Submissions will not be published if they have been previously published elsewhere.

SUBSCRIPTION

THE ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION FEE FOR *AL-RAIDA* IS US $ 30. SUBSCRIPTIONS BEGIN IN JANUARY AND END IN DECEMBER.

AL-Raida
Lebanese American University
Volume XVI, Nos. 83-84, Fall/Winter, 1998-1999 *The Pioneer* الرائدة

Women's Lives in Lebanon

Guest Editor: Rosemary Sayigh

Table of Contents

Cover: Designed by Zouheir Debs

Al-Raida

The Quarterly Journal of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World
Lebanese American University
P.O. Box 13-5053/59
Beirut, Lebanon
Telephone: (01) 867-099, ext. 288
Fax: (01) 791-645
e-mail: al-raida@beirut.lau.edu.lb

Assistant Editor: Myriam Sfeir
Layout: Zouheir Debs
Research Team: Ghena Ismail, Zeina Misk, Michelle Obeid, Myriam Sfeir, Dania Sinno
Photography Team: Photo Journalism Class, LAU, Beirut

Rosemary Sayigh*

Women in Lebanon Tell Their Lives

Introduction: Oral History

Oral history as research approach emerges partly from nineteenth century European romantic nationalism, with its enthusiasm for folk-lore and folk-narrative, partly from journalistic investigation into social conditions, for instance Mayhew's study of the London poor (1861) or, much later, the radio journalist Studs Terkel's classic study of the Great Depression (1970). Another contributory influence was the turn taken by historians towards material conditions, social relations, culture and 'mentalities'. Ironically, anthropology contributed little to oral history in spite of its primary focus on pre-literate peoples. This was because anthropologists like Malinowski believed that 'primitive' peoples either had no history, or did not know it.[1]

Paul Thompson in his introductory book on oral history explains why most historians reacted with distrust to a method associated from its beginnings with the desire to record - hence implicitly to change - marginality.[2] He shows how oral history developed differently in France, Britain, the United States and other parts of the world, but how it has always been characterized by an interest in the local, the marginal and the 'unvoiced'. The Popular Memory Group takes the problematics of oral history further, tackling the problem of the effect of 'official' history on popular memory and the interaction between the 'public' and the 'private', offering a critical guide-lines on how life stories should be recorded and 'read'.[3] On a practical level, oral history is increasingly being used in Third World projects, whether in public health campaigns, fighting desertification, mobilizing deprived communities, or to preserve indigenous knowledge of natural environments.[4] In some countries oral history is used in schools to awaken children to their social environment. On the academic level, oral narratives are increasingly being used in research concerned with refugees, migrants, and other marginals.[5]

Up to now oral history has not found a place in university curricula in the Arab world. Several factors may explain this strange omission: most Arab universities are state-controlled, with social study curricula built on 'classic' Western texts, with little attention to recent critical trends. In courses on methodology, the survey is dominant. Critiques of Western epistemology such as those made in Subaltern Studies are not to be found on Arab university reading lists. It may also be that the hierarchy of the written over the oral may be stronger in the Arab region than in, say, India which also possesses both literate and oral traditions. How otherwise explain the neglect of orality by social scientists in the Arab region? In spite of an enormously rich verbal culture, we find no teaching or research in sociolinguistics, little research focussed on everyday speech, few folklore studies, and almost no life story recording.[6]

The particular relevance of oral history for Al-Raida is that it has been widely used in feminist research, based in the personal character of women's oppression, and in the fact that modern feminist theory has been centrally concerned with the relation between the individual experience and social relations. The perception that 'the personal is political' inspired women both to write autobiographies and to record other women's life stories. Life story work with working class women, women in national or ethnic struggles, marginal women (excluded castes, deviants, colored immigrants in 'white' societies) is producing a burgeoning, theoretically exciting literature.[7] Dominated until recently by non-Arab researchers, Arab and Middle Eastern women's studies have avoided the personal and the subjective. Written autobiographies and memoirs by Arab women are increasing - among them Fadwa Tuqan, Fatima Mernissi, Ambara Salam Khalidy, Evelyn Accad, and Bothaina Shaaban. Yet though oral life story recordings with women would enrich not only 'women's studies', but also our understanding of history, social structure and culture, such work remains rare.

Why Life Stories, Why Lebanon?

Al-Raida's editorial committee has long wanted to publish an oral history issue, and it seemed appropriate to make this

* *Rosemary Sayigh is an anthropologist and oral historian who lives in Lebanon, and is currently recording Palestinian women's experiences of displacement.*

first attempt coincide with the Special Issue commemorating the founding twenty five years ago of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW). The problem that first faced us was choice of topic: what particular subject would be both appropriate for the Special Issue, and certain to be illumined by using oral history methods? The editorial committee discussed several possibilities - Lebanese pioneer women, the women's movement, women in the Civil War, gender ideology in popular culture - and finally decided to record and publish the life stories of a cross-section of women living in Lebanon. By shifting the focus from 'Lebanese women' to 'women living in Lebanon' we aimed to underline the pluralism and mobility of the people who live in this geo-political space.

Life stories are a contested form within the social sciences, just as oral history is within history. Critics of life stories have accused them of not telling us enough about history; of artificiality and lack of focus; of over-emphasizing the individual 'I'; and of exploiting marginal women.[8] It is obvious that life stories are not going to give us answers to specific questions that historians may have about past events, or anthropologists about contemporary structures and processes. But this kind of criticism emerges from a scientistic and hierarchical approach to social research, one that draws a firm boundary between the public/political and personal/domestic, defining history as 'events' or 'facts', and minimizing both the relevance of the personal and the agency of the individual.

Oral and feminist historians, however, have argued that a total perspective on history, society and culture has to include the personal, the subjective, and the domestic.[9] Historian/feminist theorist Joan Scott has demonstrated how the history of working class movements in 19th century Britain and France cannot be fully understood without reference to gender ideology.[10] Italian historian Luisa Passerini used the life stories of male and female Italian workers to demonstrate the need to understand working class culture in order fully to understand politics and history.[11] These studies point to the necessity of exploring a series of intersections - between structure and culture, between the individual and society, between the political and the domestic/personal, between different levels within the 'self' - that life stories by their nature illumine.

Even life stories that do not directly speak to particular questions always tell us something important, as much through what is suppressed or 'forgotten' as what is voiced. Though the autonomy they give the speaker is never total, yet it is certainly greater than the question-and-answer format allows, however 'unstructured'. Its orality makes the life story closer to popular culture than more constrained kinds of social data. Further, the oral life story has value through the way it tends to express collective, historically-transmitted character stereotypes.[12] The orality of the life story demarcates it from the written autobiography, making it less likely to form a developmental narrative of a singular 'I', and much more likely to testify to the situation of a collectivity with which the speaker identifies her/himself.[13]

We chose Lebanon as field for Al-Raida's first exercise in oral history work because of its ease of access, and because of our familiarity with it as residents and researchers. But given IWSAW's Arab scope we believe there should be an extension of this experiment to other Arab world areas, perhaps in collaboration with researchers working on oral narratives elsewhere.

In life story work, there is always the choice to be made between opposite strategies, that of maximizing or minimizing the number of speakers, with negative and positive consequences in either case. Some of the most interesting life story work has been done with a single speaker, as in the celebrated I, Rigoberto.[14] Here the aim is not to represent a given collectivity but, through interpersonal intimacy, to gain in depth of understanding and interpretation. At the other extreme, when a researcher aims to portray a whole collectivity - whether a population, community, class or movement - representativity and comprehensiveness become vital aims, leading to a strategy of including as many 'types' as possible. Of course large samples reduce the time researchers can spend with individual speakers, lessening the chances of a true collaboration. This in turn may affect the quality of recall, what is told and what is not told, interpretation and 'writing up'.

At Al-Raida, we decided to opt for the maximum number of speakers, based on our perception of Lebanon as terrain for a very heterogeneous population, whether in terms of origin, class, sect, residence, occupation, or relationship to the state. We adopted the principle that choice of speakers should be based on categories of women that we - the research team - could identify from our own everyday knowledge. Hence our care to include noncitizens, recent citizens, foreign wives, and disadvantaged citizens; peripheral regions such as the Beqa' and the Israeli-occupied South as well as Greater Beirut; and 'ordinary' housewives as well as the professionals and self-employed workers to be found in such abundance.

Beyond the aim to represent social heterogeneity, fluctuation in Lebanon's recent history made it useful to vary the ages of our speakers. They are distributed roughly equally between those over fifty; those aged from thirty five to fifty; and those aged between twenty and thirty five. The childhood memories of the oldest speakers go back to French Mandate Lebanon, those of middle-aged speakers to early independence, while the youngest give us children's memories of the Israeli invasion of 1982. Another principle of selection was to choose less well-known women rather than those already locally famous through the press and

television chat-shows. Without asking speakers about their religion, we aimed not to omit or under-represent any of Lebanon's communities. Of course space limitation means that many occupational categories are un- or under-represented: we have only two of the hundreds of women who work in the state or municipal administration, only one of thousands of teachers.

Although we aimed not to intervene in the telling of the life stories, we agreed to put one question at the end: "How do you view Lebanon as a place for women to live in?" Though all the life stories carried implicit answers to this question, yet asking it brought explicit responses that indicated, first, the degree to which women reflect on gender conditions, and compare them between the different countries they know from periods of migration, travel, or television. It also revealed an extreme diversity of perspectives. But, more significantly, responses showed that for many women attachment to Lebanon, or desire for its reform, took priority over gender conditions.

Most recordings were carried out in the speaker's home, often with family members or friends present. Narrators were invited to use whatever language they preferred. Translating and transcription were carried out by the researcher who did the recording. The transcripts were discussed by editor and researcher in an effort to find English equivalents that preserve speakers' meanings and style, and to clarify unclear points. When speakers used English or French in the middle of Arabic we tried to convey this linguistic pluralism, using '' to indicate where such language switches have been made. Space limits constrained us to make cuts, in some cases substantial ones. We apologize to any speaker who feels her story has been deformed. Three speakers asked to see their transcripts before publication, and were able to do so.[15]

Lebanon as Space for Women

Here I try to outline characteristics - structural and cultural - that give Lebanon its specificity as context for women's lives. I shall not attempt an historical background - there are many excellent sources.[16] What I shall focus on is not Lebanon's history, political system or culture in the formal sense, but rather on the people who inhabit Lebanon, their heterogeneity in terms of origin, status vis-a-vis the state, class, region of residence, and community; and how this heterogeneity interacts with gender. I shall also try to indicate some aspects of the politico-legal and economic system that affect women's lives.

Underlying - and sometimes at odds with - its Arabicity, Lebanon has always been an area to which people have migrated. They have come from everywhere, primarily the Arab hinterland, but also other parts of the Ottoman empire, and both western and eastern Europe.[17] Lebanon's geographical position brought early penetration by Western traders and Christian missionaries, adding to the plurality of cultural institutions and influences. It is also an area *from* which people have migrated to every corner of the world, producing a diaspora comparable to that of Greeks, Armenians, Jews and Palestinians.[18] Migration has had various demographic and cultural consequences, in terms of citizenship, marriage, continuing contact, eventual return.[19] A relatively large sector of the population has lived abroad, has relatives in the diaspora, and speaks more than one language. Further, the population contains a substantial number whose citizenship is recent; in addition, Lebanon contains a large, multi-racial, multi-class, ex-patriate sector, including around 350,000 Palestinian refugees, as well as non-Arab workers. These noncitizens occupy specific niches in the economy and class/sect structure.

Since Independence (1943), population mobility has also taken the form of rural-to-urban migration, with Beirut growing to absorb around half the resident population, a process greatly speeded up by Israeli attacks against the South. Already well established before the Civil War, mobility was immensely increased by the years of fighting, during which it is estimated that more than 800,000 people left Lebanon, sometimes permanently, but often to return with new perspectives, new skills and children educated abroad. The cultural effects of such frequent and varied displacements have not been studied; what is undoubted is the mass nature of this movement, whether voluntary or coercive, which has left few families in Lebanon untouched.

Any discussion of Lebanon as context for women must foreground the upheavals and military conflicts that have occurred since Independence. During the last twenty five years there have been three Israeli invasions, the occupation of a large part of South Lebanon, and continual attacks on civilian as well as military targets. In addition, there have been all the battles that preceded and followed the 'Two Year War' (1975/6), and that continued even after the Ta'ef Accords (1989). The whole period has been filled with displacement, loss of life, and the destruction of property and infrastructure. Women have been part of this multiple conflict not only as victims, they have also participated as fighters, party activists, and peace-makers - in Beirut on 30 November, 1986, women from both sides tried to cross the 'Green Line' in an effort to end fighting. After 1982, women also organized a movement to liberate the 'arrested and disappeared'. There is still no general picture of how this longdrawn out conflict affected women and gender, though some of their varied experiences were recorded in a special issue of Al-Raida on the war.[20]

Like Palestine with which its history is closely tied, Lebanon's geographical position made it a gateway for multiple cultures, ideologies and fashions, adding to its pre-modern cultural heterogeneity. Catholic Europe and Protestant America established important teaching institutions here and, as elsewhere, women were

particularly targeted by foreign missionary and educational activity. Lebanon's three decades under French Mandate was a formative period during which its boundaries were enlarged, its legal system established, and the outline of a sectarian state system laid down. France also left a strong imprint on language and culture. Yet Lebanon was also from the late 19th century the historical site of the Nahda, an Arabic cultural renaissance; and Arabism has been a mainstream ideological current contesting westernizing tendencies. A third language (English) and culture (American) have become increasingly powerful through globalizing institutions to which they are allied - US-style business, American universities, satellite TV, communication technologies. Other languages and cultures exist besides the 'big three', based in immigrant communities (eg. the Armenian), returned emigrants, and foreign cultural institutes with their local 'circles' (see Esther Qamar, this issue).

But though Lebanon has been characterized as 'multicultural' and 'open', this has not worked towards a 'globalization' of gender. With gender norms embedded within mobilizing notions such as 'authenticity' and 'identity', authoritarian tendencies have focused around women, setting limits to their 'individualization' that only the very determined escape. Though these limits are variable rather than fixed, breaching them may lead to family violence against women that the legal system condones. The importance of family - a recurrent theme in the life stories as in social science writing about Lebanon - necessarily implicates gender, since it is in family settings that the hierarchies of age and gender are performed and absorbed, with family 'honor' a value that ranks families socially while unifying them discursively. With rapid sociocultural change, gender norms are re-drafted as symbols of cultural authenticity and national identity, that is as values that have to be preserved.

Social science writing often assumes that the education of women leads automatically to expansion in their employment, but the two trends need to be looked at separately. In Lebanon, until recently, not all educated women worked, and most working women were not highly educated. The majority of university-educated women either married immediately after graduation, or worked briefly until marriage; after marriage they often took up social work or personal vocations. The model family remained that of the single male wage-earner and the sitt-fil beit ('lady-in-the house'), a formula underwritten by controlled rents and tax evasion. This was so in spite of the 'pioneer women' who worked as teachers and doctors in the Arab world, or migrated alone to North America.[21] It was only with the post-Civil War rise in standards and costs of living that middle and lower-middle class households felt the necessity of more than one salary (see Nasima Yusif, this issue). At another class level, unschooled women worked because of need, mainly in agriculture, house-cleaning, or industry (see Sukna Khal, Adele Kerbaj, Mary Abu Kalam, Alia Fattah, Jeannette Martinez, 'Umm Hadeer', this issue). Yet high levels of education and employment for women in Lebanon have not yet had a radicalizing effect on gender norms.

Women's early visibility in social life, business, the arts, professional and manual labor, contrasts oddly with their almost total absence from the Lebanese political arena. On the one hand we have the early enfranchisement of women (1953), constitutional equality and a democratic political system; on the other, a striking absence of women from politics and upper levels of the state even compared with other Arab countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, where women have become Cabinet Ministers, heads of departments, judges, ambassadors, and members of Parliament. In Lebanon there have been only four women deputies since independence, all linked by family to the political elite. This is a paradox that Lebanese women have different 'takes' on, with some believing that women shouldn't compete with men in the public arena; others that family comes first; others that women themselves are to blame if they don't activate their rights (see Hiba Kawas, this issue). Yet others are beginning to compete (see Nasima Yusif, this issue). The veterans of the women's movement continue to work for the greater participation of women in politics and, as with employment, this situation may be changing. At the recent municipal elections (August 1998), several women candidates presented themselves, and between mayors, councillors and mukhtaras, one hundred and twenty one were elected.

For many Lebanese feminists, among them the late Laure Moghaizel, the main instrument for reproducing gender norms in Lebanon is a political system which gives control of personal status affairs to religious/sectarian courts.[22] This system both reproduces sectarian communities by pressuring members to marry within them (civil marriage doesn't exist in Lebanon), and deprives them of any alternative court of appeal. Though different in detail, the family codes of all the sects are biased against women (see Raqiya Osseiran, this issue).

It is ironic to recall that, earlier in this century, Beirut was a centre of Arab feminist journals and women's movements, in common with Damascus and Cairo.[23] Educated Lebanese women like Mai Ziadeh and Julia Dimeshkieh took part in the Nahda. Others were educators, nationalists and feminists.[24] Several published memoirs, notably that of Ambara Salam Khalidy, point to the interweaving of nationalist and feminist motivations among pre-Independence women activists. Some historians say that the Lebanese women's movement was at its peak just before and just after Independence. Though its history has not yet been researched, we may speculate that among several factors inhibiting its growth have been: i) the rapid expansion of commercial, intellectual, and aesthetic

professions for women; and ii) the appeal of alternative collective frameworks - political parties, sectarian institutions, NGOs - that compete for women's public energies. The appeal of these alternative frameworks can be felt in Khadija Herez's life story (this issue), and in Dalal Bizri's study of Hizbollah women.[25]

Narrators and Narratives

This editorial cannot comment comprehensively on the life stories presented here, they are too varied and too rich. I shall limit myself to a few general observations. To begin with, let me note the multiple internal differences they illuminate.

The age spread of our speakers is not perfect but it does include women from almost every decade since World War I, with a slight majority born after 1963. In terms of class, though a large group of speakers is positioned somewhere in the middle (8), a larger number (10) were born in poverty, and have worked and scraped to achieve a minimally decent standard. One of our speakers is destitute ('Marie'), and two others can be described as 'poor'. At the other end of the scale we have six speakers who can tentatively be classified as 'wealthy'. Of course such class-classification is crude, since some important elements are invisible (eg. connections). One point that emerges with relative clarity is the link between class and urban/rural residence. Most of the poorest speakers come from, and still live in, rural areas. The wealthy and upwardly mobile 'middle' are mainly Beirutis; if not born there, they have moved there for purposes of education and work.

In terms of regional distribution, we recorded with women who originate in the North, the South, the Shouf mountains, Saida, Tripoli, the Beqa'. Only six speakers were born in Beirut though eighteen are currently living there. This pattern is even visible in a single life story: as a newly graduated teacher, Raqiya Osseiran was first sent to the deep South, to Bint Jbeil; later she was transferred to her home-town, Saida; and later still, after marriage to a state official, her work shifted to Beirut. Association between Beirut and a successful career is evident in several of professional women's stories, for example that of fashion designer Loulwa Abdel Baki, musician Hiba Kawas, iconographer Lena Kelekian, urbanist Maha Yehia, and surgeon-to-be Dalal Aziz.

Sectarian affiliation was a problem for us. On principle we needed to achieve a rough sectarian balance, yet on principle we were unwilling to endorse Lebanese sectarianism even minimally by asking speakers what sect they belonged to. What is interesting, however, is the absence of sectarian references from speech. Thus, though several of the life stories are impregnated with religious feeling, only two or three make clear reference to religious affiliation, beliefs, or practices. This does not mean, of course, that they are not practicants. Rather it should be interpreted as a result of the politicization of sect in Lebanon, so that people suppress such references, whether from discretion or from political principle. A few of the speakers indicated beliefs that might be called 'theosophical', suggesting a desire to transcend sectarian politics. Yet others - Nada Moghaizel Nasr, Loulwa Abdel Baki, Sylvana Lakkis - expressed a reformist nationalism that is explicitly anti-sectarian.

As noted earlier, Lebanon's population shows an extreme degree of variation of status vis-a-vis the state. Beyond the simple dichotomy of citizens/noncitizens, there are variations within the citizenry (eg. between longterm and recent citizens), as well as within the noncitizen category, differentiated along racial, class and status lines.[26] Our sample shows some of this variety, containing a Palestinian refugee, three citizens whose parents or grandparents migrated to Lebanon, and two who have become Lebanese through marriage. Discrimination within the citizen category is underlined by the story of Sylvana Lakkis. Victim of polio, it was only through persistence that she managed to exercise her rights to education and work.

These life stories illustrate the indirectness of relationship between personal stories and history. Two speakers, Raqiya Osseiran and Esther Qamar, briefly recall French Mandate days, and the demonstrations surrounding Independence. The war years are present in most narratives, but they only dominate two: Umm Ragheb's, who has lost sons and nephews, and Khadija Herez's, for whom war meant activism, imprisonment and family rupture. For others, war brought destruction of home (Jeannette Martinez), displacement inside Lebanon, or a move abroad. For others again, it meant exposure to shells or kidnapping by militias, or daily danger. A few hardly mention the war. We would surely be wrong to infer that such omission means not having been affected by it. More likely it is due to avoidance of a painful subject, a form of 'forgetting'.

The age stretch of our speakers produced pictures of historic change in childhood, professional opportunity, marriage, and housework, as history interacts with region and class. The most striking finding to emerge from these comparisons is the immense difference made to girls' lives by being born in an urban or a rural milieu. Esther Qamar, Raqiya Osseiran, and Bushra Haffar, city girls, all achieved high levels of education, though born before 1920. Women from villages - Myassar Ismail (born 1935), Adele Kerbaj (1937), Khadija Herez (1942), Nasima Yusif (1947) - give wonderful descriptions of growing up in the country, but all were either prevented from going to school, or had their education cut short by marriage. The growing importance of education is evident from those younger speakers who remember little of their childhoods except study (eg. Dalal Aziz, Maha Yehia). Age comparisons show increasing

freedom for women to enter 'male' professions - Vasso Salam (born 1948) was at first refused admission to the Architecture Department at the American University of Beirut. Dalal Aziz (born 1972) was able to study surgery at the American University Hospital. It is significant that almost all speakers in 'unconventional' professions - work in human rights, art, film-making, fashion, music, urbanism, sports - were born after 1960. All are from urban backgrounds, and most are unmarried. Housework plays little or no part in their lives.

Ambition for education emerges as one of the unifying themes of this set of life stories. Most of the speakers who didn't go to school expressed a still-bitter regret (especially Myassar Ismail, Jeannette Martinez, and Alia Fattah). Memorable descriptions are given by Myassar and Khadija Herez of listening outside the classroom while their brothers learn inside. Speakers who were lucky or bright enough to 'complete their education' emphasize its subjective importance: Bushra Haffar who got through university while giving birth to children, still dreams of a PhD. Reem Haddad links education to independence, a supreme value for her. For Sylvana Lakkis, education in Czechoslovakia was the breakthrough in discovering her rights. Nada Moghaizel Nasr finds working in education (training teachers) a perfect amalgam of giving to society and learning more herself. Several speakers - Maha Yehia, Hiba Kawas, Rania Stephan - are still engaged in complex educational and work trajectories.

The generational structuring of the sample similarly enables an historical perspective regarding the work women did and do. Women's productivity has clearly been high through the whole period covered, whether in formal employment, in voluntary work, in paid labor outside the home, in money-saving labor inside the home, or in work not primarily aimed at income-earning ('hobbies'). What changes is the kind of work society allows women to do, and the part played by work in a woman's life and sense of 'self'. Work formerly considered unsuitable for women has opened up to them. For many of the younger women in this collection, their work is part of their identity. "My life began when I started working" (Mirella Abdel Sater). "For me, work is not a transitional period, it *is* my life"(Maha Yehia). But this degree of commitment must meet head on a societal conception of woman that identifies her with childbearing; a conception that allows women to work, but only temporarily, and only in kinds of work that don't interfere with her ultimate vocation. Women forced by necessity to work are all women born in rural areas, deprived of schooling. Two were orphans. No surprise there! Yet though their work never supersedes family relations, they may express pride in being providers (Jeannette Martinez, Alia Fattah), or enjoyment in the work itself (Adele Kerbaj), or identification with a prestigious institution (Mary Abu Kalam).

It could not be expected that single-session life story recordings would yield the frankness about sexuality that we find in Brazilian Women Speak.[27] It is quite understandable that speaking 'for the record' should impose self-censorship. Given prevalent speech norms, it is noteworthy that some speakers expose the failings of husbands (eg. Raqiya Osseiran, 'Umm Hadeer', Marie), or difficulties of relationships (Rania Stephan). Marie's verbal promiscuity forms a marked contrast to a general suppression of sexual reference, underlining a 'good'/'bad' dichotomization of women prevalent in so many societies and periods. One senses that for most women here gender problems are too complex an issue to broach within the limited chronological format of a single-session life story.

The question of Lebanon as context for women aroused very different responses. A rather large segment - mainly older speakers - responded primarily as nationals, foregrounding their attachment to Lebanon and their preference for living here rather than anywhere else, evoking social warmth and family solidarity. Younger speakers are noticeably more ambivalent and critical: Mirella Abdel Sater dissociates herself from people who continually downgrade Lebanon, but admits that to be Lebanese is no privilege. Maha Yehia deplores the extent of poverty and squalor. Vasso Salam praises the warmth of Lebanese social life, but attacks post-war destruction of habitat and environment. Loulwa Abdel Baki inveighs against the current Lebanese scene, which she sees as characterized by corruption and unconcern for the country's future. Nada Moghaizel Nasr similarly emphasizes concern for Lebanon; her evocation of the phrase 'balad/walad' (the country is like one's child) points to an interesting assimilation between maternalism and nationalism. Sylvana Lakkis's is a rare voice noting that handicapped women bear a double burden. For what is striking in most of these critiques is that gender plays so little part in them. Women speak less from a consciousness of inequality as women than from their dissatisfaction as Lebanese citizens with the state of the country. Perhaps it is true to say that while gender-based experience pervades all these life stories, their narrators speak to us primarily as social beings, as embedded in a society and region going through political, social and cultural upheavals that make gender problems secondary.

Conclusion: Assessing the Experience

One of the most interesting aspects of this project was its unfamiliarity for researchers and speakers alike. The five-member research team - Myriam, Ghena, Zeina, Dania, and Michelle - are either journalists or social science graduates, trained to formulate questions that probe some particular aspect of 'social reality'. It went against the grain of their training to confront a 'subject' without a list of questions. For the speakers, too, telling their own life story was

difficult. A minority were comfortable with the life story concept, but most asked specific questions as guides. And for most, the main difficulty was not where to begin, but how to continue, how to move from one episode or 'landmark' to another. They got stuck, expressed fear of being 'boring', or of leaving out something important, or not getting things in the right (ie. chronological) order. This problem in fact masked another, the selection of material: what in their lives was important, what was interesting, what was worthy to be told to readers of Al-Raida? Reem Haddad locates one reason for such fears when she talks about 'modesty' training; and other speakers note the unaccustomed nature of speaking about themselves. Particularly for women, rules of discourse repress speech about 'self' (hence the tendency of many older women to use 'we' rather than 'I'). Between the mundane stories that people tell in family and neighborhood settings and a story to be recorded and published there lies a formidable hierarchical boundary which is not easy to cross. Another problem is the way exposure to newsprint and television has stamped the question-and-answer format on popular consciousness, encouraging the expression of 'opinions' but discouraging reflection on the 'self'. It is for this reason that the life stories mostly took the form of conversations - and we have reproduced them this way - rather than monologues. It is much to the credit of the researchers that they showed patience and persistence, and succeeded in eliciting a fine set of narratives. The speakers are equally to be congratulated on their sincerity, cooperation, and effort of recall.

Given the end of the boundary between 'public' and 'private, I'd like to thank all those who made the task of editing this issue of Al-Raida so memorable - narrators, researchers, everyone in Al-Raida office, Mr Nabil Najjar and the LAU photography group, Zouheir at Technopress, and the indefatigable Myriam.

End Notes

1 Anthropologists' neglect of indigenous oral histories is changing, partly as a result of Vansina's work in Africa: Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology (New York: Routledge, 1965).
2 Paul Thompson, The Voice of the Past: Oral History (Oxford University Press, 1978) provides an historical overview and comprehensive lists of classic texts, including Mayhew's London Labor and the London Poor (1861), and Studs Terkel's Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression (1970).
3 "Oral histories are complex cultural products involving interrelations ... between private memories and public representations, between past experiences and present situations": The PMG theorize speakers as 'social individuals', who "speak out of particular positions in the complex of social relations characteristic or particular societies at particular historical times": Popular Memory Group, "Popular memory: theory, politics, method' in Richard Johnson et al. eds., Making Histories (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p 241.
4 See Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, Listening for a Change: Oral History and Development (London: Panos Publications Ltd, 1993).
5 Eg. Liisa Malkki, Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).
6 There are of course exceptions: Hilma Granqvist made scrupulous use of oral recordings in her studies of Palestinian peasants in the 1930s. Scholars who have studied beduin groups have given recorded speech centrality. In the Palestinian field, oral history recording is increasingly being used as a form of struggle against 'silencing'. There has also been growth in work on Arab folk-tales, informal narratives, and life stories (much of it done by women scholars).
7 Some useful readings: Jean McCrindle and Sheila Rowbotham, Dutiful Daughters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977); Susan Geiger "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content", Signs vol 11 no 2, 1986; The Personal Narrative Group, Interpreting Women's Lives, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989).
8 See discussion of the life story in Rosemary Sayigh, "Researching Gender in a Palestinian Camp: Political, Theoretical and Methodological Issues", in Deniz Kandiyoti ed., Gendering the Middle East (London: I.B.Tauris, 1996), p 156.
9 See Kumkum Sanghari and Sudesh Vaid eds., Recasting Women (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); also Jo Stanley, "Including the Feelings: Personal Political Testimony and Self-Disclosure", Oral History, vol 24 no 1, 1996.
10 Joan W. Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
11 Luisa Passerini, Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
12 See Passerini, Fascism in Popular Memory, p 19-63.
13 Because of its orality, the life story resembles the 'testimonio' as genre particularly suited to the recording of experiences of marginality: see John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio" in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson eds., De/Colonizing the Subject (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
14 Rigoberta Menchu with Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, I Rigoberta: An Indian Woman in Guatamala (London: Verso, 1984).
15 It was interesting to find that changes made were often away from orality towards a more formal, written style.
16 Kamal Salibi, A House of Many Mansions (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988).
17 Among them Turkmen, Armenians, white Russians, Poles, Kurds, Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis.
18 See Albert Hourani ed., The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992).
19 Migration from Lebanon has been mainly to the United States, Latin America, Canada and Africa, but also since the Civil War to Europe and Australia.
20 Al-Raida, vol XII, nos 70 and 71, 1995.
21 Evelyn Shakir, Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States (Westport: Praeger, 1997), reviewed in Al-Raida vol XV, no 82, Summer 1998.
22 Laure Moghaizal, Al-Mar'a fi al-Tashri' al-Lubnani (Beirut: IWSAW, 1985).
23 See Thomas Philipp's list of magazines in "Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt", Julia Beck and Nikki Keddie eds., Women in the Middle Eastern Women (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). Out of 15 magazines listed, nine were published in 'Syria'.
24 On outstanding Lebanese women, see Shereen Khairallah, Sisters of Men (Beirut: IWSAW, 1996).
25 Dalal Bizri, L'ombre et son double: femmes islamistes libanaises et modernes (Beyrouth: CERMOC, 1995). See also Yolla Polity-Sharara, "Women and Politics in Lebanon", Khamsin no 6, 1978.
26 Status differences within the noncitizen category include: refugees, immigrant workers, voluntary ex-patriates, foreign wives. Conditions of work or of naturalization differ between them.
27 Daphne Patai, Brazilian Women Speak (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

Loulwa Abdel Baki: Fashion Designer

(Born in 1965, in Beirut, originally from Ain Bal [Shouf]; currently living in Beirut; recorded in her workshop. Language: colloquial/educated Arabic; with some English and French.)*

My name is Loulwa Abdel Baki. I was born in Beirut and as a child I studied at the Collège Louise Wegmann. I later went to the American University of Beirut where I took a BA in Psychology. Since childhood I'd had the ambition of studying fashion design. From the age of eleven I used to draw designs at home, and invent things. So I went to New York and studied fashion design there, in the Parsons School of Design in Manhattan. After that I worked for two years in a company called Necessary Objects, for 'pret à porter'. Then I moved to another company called Street Life, also for 'pret à porter'. I reached a point where I had to decide my future, whether to live in the United States or live in my country. I felt that my place is in my country, and that I can give a lot to it. I felt that Lebanon needs me more than America. It was a difficult decision to make because I was doing well, I could have had more success in the States. People have more possibilities there than in Lebanon. But I decided against staying in the States and came back to Beirut at the end of 1989, while there was still fighting. In fact the war was nearing its end but no one knew that then. I came back to Beirut with the idea in my mind of opening a shop, and calling it Kalabsha. It would be a shop and an atelier at the same time.

Zeina: Why Kalabsha?
Loulwa: I didn't want a French, or Italian or English name. At that time, names like Linea were very much in fashion. I wanted to give it an Oriental name. Kalabsha isn't a pure Arabic name, but it's Turkish. I think I got it from watching Badri Abu Kalabsha, if you remember him in 'Ghawwar al-Tawshi' and 'Sah al-Nawm'. I found this character very amusing, so I wanted to name the shop after Badri. Kalabsha has other meanings as well, such as handcuffs.

So I fixed up the atelier and the showroom here in Lebanon, on Hamra Street. I worked on my first collection and I held the opening show in the St Georges Hotel, under the ruins. You remember the St Georges Hotel, it was in the city center, in the middle of the ruins. I didn't feel like doing it in one of the chic hotels. At that time, the Coral Beach was really 'in'. I didn't want to do it there because I don't look at fashion as restricted to one category of person, to one specific class that can afford it and has money. At that time, some of the monied class wasn't thinking about the situation, it didn't care what was happening to the country. The most important thing for them was to dress elegantly and to show off. In addition, I felt that this class hadn't been affected by the war, not at all. I couldn't join that stream, it's not me. As a symbolic gesture I decided to hold the opening of the collection in the Hotel St Georges, a hotel that had been very chic but now was destroyed by the war. We made preparations, lighting the hotel facade with candles which we set in sand bags, and we cleaned up a bit. But we kept it as it is with all the graffiti on the wall, such as 'Abu al-Hol marra min huna' ('Abu al-Hol passed by here'). And we covered everything with candles, it was entirely lit with big and smaller candles, two meters, one meter tall, which were made to order specially for this occasion by a handicrafts shop in Zahleh. We held the fashion show. It turned out to be a bigger success than I had expected. I invited four hundred people, nine hundred showed up. Several international newspapers wrote about the show. The Washington Post wrote a whole page about me - not me, my work. The Boston Globe wrote about it on page one, Reuters mentioned it. In Japan, my name became 'Loulweh'. Antenne 2, TF1, CNN, all wrote something, and all the Lebanese newspapers as well. All the media! It was a success, I was lucky. This helped me to carry on in Lebanon.

Since then, twice a year, I prepare a new collection, one in summer and one in winter. Thank God, I'm doing fine. No only do I do 'pret à porter', I'm also designing costumes for the theater. I designed the costumes for Ziad Rahbani's two plays 'Lawla fushat al-amal' and 'Bil-nisbeh lal-karameh wal-shaab al-'anid'. These costumes were very futurist. We worked in metal, plastic, leather - materials people here aren't used to working with. It was fun, I enjoyed working on it. I also worked with Roger Assaf on his play 'The Bold Soprano', for Jawad al-Asadi on 'The Maids', and a film with Jean Claude Kudsi, 'Le temps d'un retour', as well as Christine Dabaghi's film 'Zeinab wa al-nahr' Right now, I'm designing the costumes for a ballet. This means the versatility of my design work is not limited to the two yearly fashion collections.

I don't know if you think it's important, but what I want to say is that it was very crucial for me to make clothes for everyone. We were emerging from a war, and I think people can't afford to show off, what we need to do is work to improve the country. I'm depressed because this isn't happening, I'm not seeing people doing anything. This is the time to work and be productive, to be strong, and try to become 'modern'. I don't

[The word language here refers to the language used by the speaker]

find this atmosphere in Lebanon. I feel that people are giving more and more attention to appearances. People don't know where to situate themselves class-wise - are we middle, are we lower, are we upper? They're mixed up. Everybody wants to be upper-class, it's a total confusion. Everybody must have a Mercedes, everybody must wear diamonds, everybody has to be seen in the best places. They spend all their money in seconds, just to show off. And a big part of my work has to do with 'showing off'. I'm trying to change this a bit if I can. Okay, it's very nice to have clothes, it's nice to feel good in one's body. But this isn't everything. That is why the clothes I make - I'm not advertising here - are not expensive. Anyone can afford to buy them. They aren't clothes to brag about. My work is characterized by its simplicity, it's not decorated with beads, it's not overloaded. It's not dressy and expensive. I don't think of woman as a princess, the way they used to think before the war, that she's a princess and everything she does should fit this image, that she should be pampered, that she should have a chauffeur. No, I think that women should work and produce, because life is tough now, the days of the princess are over. We can't go on being pampered and acting like spoilt brats. That is why my clothes suit the type of woman who has ambitions, who has other things to do besides pleasing her husband, or waiting for him to come home. I am trying to create clothes in which a woman looks nice, feels good, and looks beautiful as well. We don't have to put a veto on beauty, there's nothing better than beauty, whatever its kind. But clothes aren't everything.

Unfortunately I still find a lot of women who have nothing on their minds but what to wear, how they will appear in the morning . It's more important how she feels, not how she looks. She doesn't care how people find her, she's empty inside, the most important thing for her is how to look, how to appear. I don't understand why. I think this is a mistake. Women should forget how people look at them because people change every minute. Today they say a woman is cute, the next day they say she is old, no one will look at her. What will be left for her? Nothing but crying over the past. No, I don't think people here have hobbies, things they really want to do. For me the most important thing is hobbies, work, things you find important. Here they don't have this, they have lost everything.

For me the present period is worse than the war, it is the decline of Lebanon. Maybe I should not be talking this way. The rest are giving hope, but for one to have hope there should be work, change. I'm not seeing this. I'm not witnessing depth of vision, neither from the government nor from the new generation. The new graduates don't have jobs, they've lost hope, you have no future unless you have waasta, (connections). They are not focusing on their personality, on their strength and their capacity. It is not their fault, it is the fault of the people who are hiring them. A person will get hired, whether he can do the job or not, because his cousin works there. I am not saying that everyone is like that, of course I cannot generalize, but this is the majority. Some people are really trying to make a difference. I don't know if you have questions to ask?

Zeina: It is you, your own life, your own story that I am interested in.
Loulwa: 'These are my feelings'. My art -- if you want to consider my work as art - it's maybe commercial art because I am selling it - but if you consider a part of it as art - 'it cannot but be engaged'. I can't do something if it has no meaning. It has to have a meaning, it has to be practical, it has to have a purpose.

Zeina: You as a person who started your own business, how do you perceive it?
Loulwa: I perceive myself as a person who struggled a lot to reach where I am now. When I first opened the shop, women were completely against it, they refused to wear clothes 'made in Lebanon'. It was out of the question. I worked hard to offer them an international standard at the same time 'made in Lebanon'. They were against me, I was a bit 'contre-courant' when I started. I named my shop Kalabsha, people were against it - how unclassy it was! I wanted to name it this way, because I believe in being oneself. I didn't want a French name because I'm not French, I'm Lebanese and Arab. If I'm going to speak about me, I have to talk about what is around me. I can't talk about me just like that. I am an ordinary person who is working like any other person. I don't consider myself as an exceptional artist, or unique as a person. I'm ordinary, simply ordinary. I have a certain talent that I'm using to benefit myself - of course - and the people around me. This is my way of earning my living. This is what I do. I can't just work only to earn money. I have to look around, see. For me to be happy, people around me should be happy. One cannot be happy if the people around one aren't satisfied with their lives. Don't take me as an extremist, but there's a certain atmosphere I dream of living in, an atmosphere where you feel comfortable, where you're a decent Lebanese citizen, and you have your value in this country. This is what I'd really like to have. I don't know how to talk more about me. Do you want me to talk about fashion, how to cut the tissues? I can't tell you how I react to a piece of tissue, the fashionable color of the year. I can't tell you because all this has become part of me. I feel it but I can't explain it. I don't know what else to tell you.

Zeina: Tell me anything about your recollections, your memories - you started straight off with your profession.

Loulwa: Yes, my profession, because what I'm telling you is the *result* of all my thinking, of all my childhood. I grew up in a very open-minded house where the emphasis was on education; not only on education, but also on tolerance of other people, and on not showing off. My father is a wealthy man, but never in his life did he spoil us. He didn't allow us to behave like spoilt children. He looked after our education in every way he could. It wasn't easy, especially when your friends in the school are - no, no, don't put this, I don't want to talk about it. He taught us tolerance, to accept everybody, even those who are against you. We should accept them and discuss their differing points of views with them. My mother taught me spirituality, she is an artist, she has a lot of taste, and this influenced me. My brother is a musician and engineer. My sister is a graphic designer and painter. I am a designer and I also sing. We are a family. I don't know what to say. What do you want? What is important for you?

Zeina: I don't want to lead you in a specific direction.
Loulwa: No, please do, because I forget a lot. Please ask me something.

Zeina: What made you decide to lead your life the way you do?
Loulwa: I don't want to be a sheep. I don't want to follow a stream that I don't know. As I told you, the country badly needs change. I am hearing all these stories, I can't cover my eyes like a donkey, I can't put 'des oeillères'. I have to react and act with my surroundings. I can't bear social injustice, from the time I was a child, I can't. Every time I felt an injustice, I used to say no. Maybe I'm too idealistic, maybe I'm utopian. All of these bad things make me want to work to affect and maybe change the people around me positively, God willing. I am not a negativist, and I'm not saying that everything around me is a catastrophe. No, there are a lot of things that could be improved in this country so that we can lead a decent life. Do you think our lives are decent now? I think there should be more democracy, I don't want to talk about politics, you know how things are. I can't sit all day idle, wasting time and drinking coffee. This won't give me anything, it's useless. If I want to do something I have to have hope, I have to see the hope, I have to do something which makes me feel good and happy. I hope you understand? I don't want to talk about what has influenced me because I don't care about the 'I'.

Zeina: I mean you as a person -
Loulwa: I showed it, I showed who I am. I think I was clear. What do you want me to say? I'm sensitive? I am. Tell me exactly what you want. I like to have fun and laugh. I like to have amusing people around me, who make me laugh, and with whom I can laugh. I like to meditate, it relaxes my nerves. I feel that I'm a person on a journey. I might have a year ahead of me, maybe fifty, maybe more. I have to try to improve, not to stagnate. Improve not only in terms of money, but also in terms of my personality. I have to break complexes, get over all those things which you grow up with, start breaking them bit by bit in order to become a better person. This is what I want to do, so I can have a clear conscience. (pause)

Why I'm telling you all this is that I feel in Lebanon we have to do a lot, especially now. Lebanon is weak in comparison to a neighboring country, Israel. 'This is haunting us day and night, it is taking everything from us'. I feel that every one has to be aware and face up to the situation. We should learn how they think, this is important for me. They want to destroy us. We have to be very aware. We have to know how to defend ourselves. They have destroyed so many things. It's a danger that is haunting me day and night. At least we should be strong. But what I am seeing, the Lebanese people are numb. They have no energy for struggle anymore. They care more about where to eat and drink, how to have fun.

I'd like to be able to influence people and to make them more tolerant. We're a very small country. We are - I don't know - we don't know how many we are. Each community claims that they are the majority. We have so many sects, but fanaticism will lead us nowhere. It will restrict us and confine us. I don't understand how people who have studied in universities, and traveled, and seen the world, can still be fanatical. Fanaticism is fear. I am against that. People here are afraid of each other. On the contrary, they should be tolerant and accept each other. This is how to advance. New York, why is it such a great city? Because it has all the peoples of the world in it - Africans, Arabs, Cubans, Israelis, French, Americans, etc. This city is great because it's a melting-pot for all these cultures. How do we develop and advance? It's by being exposed to other ideas. You learn from others, you aren't God. This is what makes a country develop, this is something that people here haven't realized. They think that if they are from a specific community that they are better than others - of course not! Every community has something good. If we joined them together we would be more advanced. Tolerance is very important, but no one is seeing this. They are afraid, their fears push them away from each other, and they go back to their original groups. This is something I wanted to say.

I have one more thing to add. If the Lebanese people think that they can go on cutting trees and putting up all this concrete, well in ten years time Beirut won't be habitable. In fact it's already uninhabitable. Humans were born to be in harmony with nature. We need harmony with nature to be mentally and physically balanced. The destruction of the sea caused by illegal dumping of garbages and pollutants, the traffic noise and pollution will turn against us. People aren't even aware of this, they have no idea what is happening. I don't know why the schools aren't teaching 'le sens civique'. You are in the Green Line Association and so am I. We need to back up the environmental groups whose voices are barely heard. But this is so important! I want my future children, to live in a country where they can breathe, which won't give them cancer, or an ugly view of life. Lebanon was a beautiful country, and it is getting uglier by the day. (pause) The best thing if one wants to improve the other is to talk; through talk one can make a difference. If you talk, and someone else talks, we will make a difference, have an impact. We cannot stay silent and put blinkers on our eyes.

Recorded and translated by Zeina Misk.

Mirella Abdel Sater: Human Rights Lawyer

(Born in 1966, in Dora, Beirut; originally from Mazraat al-Shouf; currently living in Beirut; recorded at IWSAW. Language: colloquial/educated Arabic.)

I'm used to talking about a cause, or defending a case, but talking about myself is embarrassing. (laughs) It feels strange. I often use myself as a medium to communicate ideas to people. I like my life. I believe that my real life began when I started working on human rights issues. It was then I started knowing myself and people. Before that my life was an ordinary one.

I was very much affected by the war. During a war one experiences fear, hunger, and so on. I come from a middle class family, we are neither rich nor poor, but even if you had money during the war, you couldn't go out and buy things. There was no water, we couldn't take a shower, and so on. This was an experience that enables one to appreciate the value of life and feel contentment. When I went to Canada I met a lot of people who were depressed and unsatisfied. I told them to imagine living with no electricity for a week, without taking a shower, or to be robbed of their freedom of expression, movement, dress, and so on, and imagine how depressing that would be. Maybe by nature I am a happy person. The war affected me tremendously, though I was too young to participate in it. My parents shielded us from the war. I went to school and then to university. I didn't do anything heroic, on the contrary I was terrified of the war and was the first to hide in the shelter when there was shelling. I have nothing more to say about the war except that, like all the Lebanese, it taught me a lot of things.

My life really began after I took my 'license' and started working. I worked in many different fields before I became a lawyer and started working on human rights issues. I worked in a bank and I was not very happy. I used to prefer making coffee to doing paper work. I left the bank to train as a lawyer because I knew that this would suit my personality - I like change and interaction. I can't live without experiencing new events, I want something to make me soar or make me fall. So I left the bank and started my legal training. A the same time I gave private lessons and freelanced for 'La Revue du Liban' and for 'Magazine'. I did not want to be a full-timer with a magazine because my aim was to become a lawyer. I also taught French in a language center. After I finished my Law degree I knew that I wanted to practise law but in what? Now all my work is focused on human rights issues.

A very important event in my life was meeting two people who influenced my life tremendously, Laure Moghaizel and Tina Naccache. I learned from Laure how to be rigorous - she was very disciplined and serious. Many thought that she was strict with others, but in fact she treated people exactly the way she treated herself. She used to wake up at the same time everyday, go to work at the same time, she followed this pattern till the last day of her life. She never changed, faltered or complained even when she was ill - this is something I learned from her. She taught me discipline, and through her I learned how to be meticulous. She wanted every one around her to be meticulous, if they weren't they used to suffer. I met her during the last two years of her life and she was very, very, very good to me and I learned a lot from her. I believe that this was my good luck. I took on her qualities without feeling the age difference, my lack of experience, or a difference between us in intelligence. I am sure she never realized how much she influenced me, and how much I learned from her. What I managed to acquire was only a tiny part of the qualities she had and these qualities have benefited me a lot.

Laure used to amaze me - she would choose a topic that had nothing do with human rights and then mold it and research it in a way to fit human rights purposes. Her whole way of thinking and analyzing was amazingly precise. I can't imagine anyone working with Laure and not being touched by her. I used to color my hair before meeting Laure, and whenever we used to sit to discuss work topics - well she never said anything or interfered, but I used to feel uncomfortable, because I knew I did not look my true self. I was worried about what Laure would think. So I re-dyed my hair using a color a bit darker than my natural hair color. After that I felt more natural. Laure wasn't beautiful, but to me she was. I aspired to be authentic like her. She was to me what she was to most Lebanese citizens, a role model. When I joined the Moghaizel law firm I was supposed to work with Dr Fadi Moghaizel [Laure's son], I never dreamt of working with Laure or with the law cases that she handled. My work was mostly to do with firms, and none of my cases had anything to do with human rights. Once, Laure needed someone to go somewhere, I can't remember where, and I immediately offered to go. I couldn't believe my luck - she was like a god to me, I couldn't believe that she was talking to me! Though, in fact, Laure was very modest and natural. I remember that I did what she asked thoroughly and completely and she was pleased. Bit by bit she started sending me places to finish legal papers for her, and I'd finish my work promptly so as to be able to work with her. Yet I never neglected my work

in the office. She often told me that she liked the way I worked, and once she told me that she liked how I presented myself when working on a case. According to her I always got promising results. So whenever she had work she used to send me. At a certain point I wasn't any longer working for the law firm but only worked with Laure on human rights cases.

Yet I should make it clear that my interest in human rights work was not triggered by Laure Moghaizel. Though she sacrificed her whole life for the sake of human rights, yet she didn't preach human rights day in day out. No, I met a person called Tina Naccache, who I believe embodies human rights. When she talks to someone she does it from a human rights perspective. If she wants to move this chair, get dressed in the morning, put on make-up, cut her hair, she thinks of it from a human rights perspective. Before I worked with Laure, while I was with the Moghaizel law firm, I had begun working with foreign domestic workers and their mistreatment, and was helping them in prison. I used to feel that my legal work was dry, I never enjoyed it. To me lawyers are supposed to lead a life of action, just like films where they take on challenging cases and defend the innocent! I accepted a case where a Filipino domestic worker was falsely accused, and I helped her out, and she was found innocent. After that I decided not to work with firms although it's more profitable, less time-consuming, and easier. I left the Moghaizel law firm because I wanted to deal with criminal cases, and with the penal system. I've worked a lot in commercial law and I still sometimes accept cases of that sort, but I wouldn't want to spend my life working on such cases. I'd rather accept criminal cases. Those two people, Laure and Tina, influenced my life very, very, very, very much. (laughs)

"I want something to make me soar and make me fall"

At the beginning you asked me about my religion and had it not been that this is a life story, I would have refused to answer. I hate, I really hate such questions because they remind me of the war. When one used to say I am Christian or Muslim during the war, 'Christian' and 'Muslim' had nothing to do with religion or faith, it was more like a classification. This categorizes people, and once that happens people become separated from each other. Not to mention that it makes certain people come closer and it repels others. Also, to be honest, religion is against women, there is no religion, no matter how much it claims that it gives rights to women - and I know that when you publish this a lot of people will feel offended -- yet I believe that, deep down, everybody, the Pope and the Imams included, will admit, if they are honest, that women are unjustly treated. Hopefully when they elect a female Pope (laughs), may be -- I believe in God, our existence has no meaning unless there is a God. We came here on a mission and I am sure there is a God, but I can't explain why. I am a very scientific person, and yet what I'm saying is not scientific at all. I feel it just like I feel love or friendship, I feel that God is here and when I need Him (or Her), I pray to God, and since I was brought up as a Christian I pray as Christians do, 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit' - this is the only way in which I can talk to God. I haven't invented my own prayers yet. (laughs) I can't say that I believe in any religion - I don't - they are too many, and there is the endless question which is the most legitimate. Last but not least, I do believe that religions look down on women and discriminate against them. I usually don't claim to be Christian, it's just written on my identity card.

Let's see what pushed me into defending women's rights. First, Lebanese society is very unfair towards women. It's not just our society, in fact all societies -- even those that claim that they are the most progressive -- treat women unjustly. Why should we only talk about the big problems - marriage, beating, infidelity, divorce, adultery? Small things are damaging too. Walking on a road men often verbally harass women, and I believe that this is psychological abuse. Maybe I'm overdoing it, but such an action affects me and bothers me. No matter what a woman is or does she is basically viewed as a female and any one can -- These small details are enough to make me want to defend women's rights.

I changed schools several times because of the war. We are three children, I have a sister and brother, as well as my mother and father. We are a calm family, my father is a teacher, he writes books, he is a historian. My mother studied business but she spent most of her time with her children, taking care of us. We are very ordinary people. We have some artistic talents, my sister sings opera although she studied advertising, and she has a really nice voice. She inherited this talent from my mother who also has a nice voice, though she never sang in public. My sister took courses in the Conservatoire de Paris and currently she lives in France. My brother has a degree in arts and works in an advertising agency. We do not have problems in my family, we are very calm people. My childhood was a very ordinary one, like every Lebanese girl's childhood. My parents were a bit strict, yet they made sure to give us all a proper education. They are not the type of parents who believe that a women's lot is to get married - of course they would love to see me get married, but they never drummed the idea of marriage into my head. On the contrary, they are proud that I'm successful in my work, and in what I do. Yet there were always limits to our outings, we had a 'curfew', we had to be home by a certain hour. I believe that my childhood was a very ordinary and peaceful one. My parents were very good to us, we never felt isolated from them, they didn't put pressure on us to work and earn our living - on the contrary. I still live with my parents, and they never make me worry. I'd like to be independent, and cover my own needs - without necessarily getting married - yet on the other hand living at home gives me a lot of advantages. It enables me to be free and help people. But I don't really like the term to 'help' people, because the more

one works in the field of human rights the more one feels she needs the people she is helping. It makes you feel you have worth, you are doing something good that gives others happiness. When there aren't people to help, you start to look for them. It's mistaken to say I'm sacrificing a lot to help others, I'm sacrificing my life for human rights. I disagree. The person working in human rights is far happier than the person in need of help. You reach a stage where you need these people more than they need you.

I changed schools several times when I was young, it didn't upset me because I love change. In spite of this, my friends have remained the same. I was a student at Champville, Sagesse-Ashrafieh, Sagesse al-Hadath, and Saint Coeur. I also changed universities, I was first enrolled in the Université Saint Joseph (USJ), and studied there for two years, then I continued my 'license' at La Sagesse university. After graduating in law, I did my legal training at Mr Marcel Ja'ara's office. I recall that the days when I was doing my training were very enjoyable. My professor was very capable and he taught me a lot, but at the same time he wasn't strict. The schedule wasn't strict, and the atmosphere was cheerful and yet serious. I was very happy while doing my training.

Since I started working on human rights issues I've changed a lot and people around me no longer understand me. I used to question this change and wonder why have I changed, and why people are unable to understand me anymore. Then you find people who resemble you in their way of thinking, and you start enjoying being with them. For instance, if I condemn a certain situation, those people understand, they have experienced problems and you share a way of thinking. Human rights work is a whole, Myriam, you can't go to work and then come back home and beat your maid. You can't put up with your husband mistreating you and at the same time attempt to help a woman whose husband is abusing her psychologically. Maybe most people are schizophrenic, I don't know, I can't any longer tolerate this duality of thinking something, working on something else, and leading a life that is not congruent with my thoughts.

"All my emotions are channeled towards human rights and women's rights"

Imagine, yesterday I was on the way to a dinner. In front of me there was a Rolls Royce, and I was about to go crazy because some people in Lebanon are hunting for food in garbage cans. I started thinking why doesn't this man sell his car? The following day I read in the newspaper that a German sold his Rolls Royce to help people in Sudan, he distributed the money to the starving in Sudan. People with me couldn't understand why I was so upset about the Rolls Royce issue. According to them I was exaggerating. I was upset because the money used to buy the car and pay for its driver - - it's a shame to have such a difference in the world. The others with me couldn't understand why I was so upset. Honestly this really torments me. Maybe the best thing to do is sit at home and refrain from communicating with anyone. (laughs)

You asked me about my emotional life, had you not asked I would have talked for two days without mentioning it. Of course, I am like everyone else, I have loved, I love and I will always love. I don't know what people will say (laughs), but this is not the important thing in my life. All my emotions are channeled towards human rights and women's rights. Everything revolves around them. Of course my parents (sighs) would like to see me married. But I, after I came back from Canada, the latest idea that appeals to me, I haven't told anyone about it, it will appear in Al-Raida first (laughs), I feel like going to Africa to investigate how people are living there. I can imagine spending the next ten years of my life in Africa. Some people might be sorry for me, "Poor thing, she is thirty two years old and soon she won't be able to get married, look what she's talking about!" If my mother finds out she'll go crazy. When I came back to Lebanon an aunt said, "Mirella, it's time for you to think of yourself" For her thinking of myself meant getting married, and she believed that sacrificing my life for human rights gives me nothing. But she is wrong, it's for me. I think that if I get married I won't be doing myself a favor, it will benefit my husband, children, and society It would be the biggest sacrifice.

When I went to Canada, I met African women from Congo and Mali, and the best friend I had in the session was from Congo Kinshasa, Marie. I'd give anything to go to Congo and visit Marie. There was also a woman from Burundi who told me that there is an embargo there. I'd like to see how it is when a country is under embargo. I'd like to go and see the Tutsi and Hutu tribes in Rwanda. I discovered that there are countries different from Lebanon, Europe and the Arab countries. I've discovered Africa! Of course I've read about it, but I now feel like - - some people would pity me for sacrificing ten years of my life, throwing them away to go to a place which people run away from. That's my dream now.

You want me tell you about my emotional life? So if I am to tell you now, I know that I might change, only crazy people don't ever change their minds. If you ask me how I foresee my life, I imagine it to be in constant change, full of traveling and struggling for human rights. Struggle is a big and pretentious word - "Ya latif, an 'activist'!" But I can't imagine having a stable life, for to me stability is a 'defaut'. I mean getting married and having kids. Of course I'd love to have children, especially a daughter so that I could teach her my ideas. But I know this is egotistical. My only consolation for not having children is my belief that children should not be molded into what we want them to be. Children don't necessarily turn out the way one wants them. It's better not to have children. Why should I dream of having children, and then they maybe turn out to love accumulating money? So the concept of children, family,

and husband currently doesn't interest me. Of course I'd be kidding myself if I denied that I wouldn't want to have someone next to me, and we both love each other, and then of course we'd have children. Yet, this institution, marriage, at the moment it gives me goose pimples (laughs). Of course when I reach eighty I'll regret it, for in Africa there are no pensions, but this is how I'm thinking now.

Currently I'm in the stage where I want to change the world, but I'm starting to feel despair because the world is not going to change. I am bothered by the fact that I work, work, work, and the situation stays the same, or maybe it becomes worse. Maybe, with the work I'm doing, I'm contributing to the worsening of the world! Often I feel despair, and I say no, I'll go and work, accumulate money - but then I won't know what to do with the money. And then I go on and say no, no, this was just a phase, I want to go back and sacrifice. Then I say God, what has gotten into me, why should I torture myself and go and search for the most unfortunate woman in the worst prison in Lebanon? But then I realize that I was much happier when I was going to the prison to help her, and even if she made me laugh for five minutes I felt that I had achieved something. What about your life? (we laugh together)

"I'm proud of my dark skin, the blackness of my hair, and my Arab features"

I'm not a romantic person, not at all, but I love looking at the sea, and I love traveling. Every country I visit last I find to be the most beautiful. Now if you asked me, I'll tell you Canada is the nicest; before I used to think it was Greece. What else do I like? Although as a lawyer one has to talk a lot, I'd rather listen. I'll tell you about my 'defauts', like those singers who, when they are asked about their faults, claim that they are too kind-hearted (laughs). I'm a bit stubborn and inflexible. If someone tells me something is so, I'm usually not convinced. I register it in my mind and I continue working my way till I reach a point where it's clear whether I'm right or wrong. If I'm wrong I tell that person that he was right. I don't believe easily, maybe these people aren't correct, even if they are people who are very close to me. I have a problem with trust (laughs). For instance, recently I gave Tina a paper I had written, and asked her to correct it. She told me not to put 'domestic worker', but to change it to 'worker at home'. I said yes. But then I thought why? 'Domestic' means something to do with the house, it has a positive meaning not a negative one, so why ? When I went to Canada I discovered that there's a trend nowadays not to use the word 'domestic' because it's considered insulting. Tina was right, and I had to change the whole report I was writing on domestic workers. When I gave the talk, I spent the whole time scanning the text to spot these words and change them. Yet up to now I'm still not very convinced that 'domestic' is wrong. See how stubborn I am! (laughs).

Myriam: How has living in Lebanon been?
Mirella: Look, I belong to the school of thought that says Lebanon is the Lebanese and the Lebanese are Lebanon. I am Lebanon. I don't go around asking what has Lebanon given me? I'm part of this, even only to a small degree, destroying or spoiling something. I have some weird theories (laughs). I believe a little in reincarnation, maybe I was born in Lebanon because there is something I have to do here, or it's a punishment, or because I have a role to play. Sometimes I feel that my living in Lebanon oppressed me and it has oppressed every one born here - of course not as much as the oppression in Colombia. But I feel it's not a 'cadeau' to be born in Lebanon.

You know earlier on, before traveling, I was a bit confused. I didn't know where I stand, especially in Lebanon where we all have an identity crisis -- am I Christian, am I or am I not part of this Arab world? Or I am Muslim, and I believe in -- People in Lebanon will always have an identity crisis and I believe Christians experience it more. If I go to France, immediately they tell me that I am an Arab coming from an Arab country. With my features and my face I am the typical Arab woman (laughs). So will I tell them no, I'm from Ashrafieh? (laughs) When one gets in contact with others who are also different [from Europeans], you start liking yourself. For instance towards the end of my visit to Canada I met people from Pakistan and Africa. Mistakenly, they thought I was from Pakistan or from the Arab world. A nice feeling came over me, a feeling of belonging. The choice of Canadian food is limited, they don't have so many dishes. So you feel proud that we have hummus and tabouleh, and a big variety of mezzeh, and we have the main dishes and the sweets. You start thinking to yourself, we have had so many civilizations that passed through our land, and you become happy because we are an ancient race and we have our own civilization.

Now I am more proud after Zidan won the cup (laughs), I started boasting to people and telling them, "See what we Arabs are capable of!" The people that surrounded me, my friends, used to consider themselves Phoenicians. What do they mean, Phoenician? I don't understand. All my friends are Muslims and Shi'ites, and I'm scared of saying something inappropriate, a remnant of my previous environment. There is nothing wrong with feeling Arab, on the contrary it's a reason to be proud that he or she belongs to something. Maybe currently the wheel is not turning in our favor, but there will come a time when it will. Now it has started with Zidan! (laughs) In Canada everyone put out the Moroccan flag, and everyone thought that Morocco won the world cup, not France. So now I'm proud of my dark skin, the blackness of my hair, and my Arab features.

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir

Mary Abu Kalam:Employee at LAU

(Born in 1935, in Hasbayya; currently living in Beirut. Recorded at LAU. Language: Ms. Abu Kalam used occasional classical words in mainly colloquial Arabic speech, suggesting the seriousness with which she took the task of telling about her life at 'the College'.)

I am Mary Adib Abou Kalam from Hasbayya. Born in 1935. We had neighbors from the Dabaghi family, and Najla Dabaghi was in charge of everything in Beirut University College (BUC). She -- my brother went to the college first. In the beginning we have to talk about Najla Dabaghi in order to be able to talk about myself. Najla Dabaghi was in charge of everything in the school - selling, buying, everything - she and Mr. Stoltzfus. My brother went to work at the college. I was very much attached to him. I stopped eating and drinking. My mother asked Najla Dabaghi, "Will you take this girl? Haram, she can't stay without her brother." Najla said, "They won't accept her. She's too young." One day she came and told my mother," Come on, get her ready." In those days there was -- let 's not say that there was poverty, there was financial need.

So my mother took me to my brother. He was sixteen and I was fourteen. I felt really happy, I no longer wanted to stay with my parents in the mountains. When I first came the College I was welcomed by a woman called Nelly Francis. She was like a mother, she took care of me and trained me. But my first mother was Najla Dabaghi. She took care of me. My mother had asked her not to let me go anywhere. Whatever I wanted, she let me buy. I rented a bicycle. She told me that everything I need - chocolates or whatever -- was in the college. But - I used to invent needs so as to go out - I was a child. I couldn't use the bicycle unless I took her permission.

"They had to put a stool for me to stand on because I was so young"

Ghena: So you tried to fool them?
Mary: No I didn't. I asked her, "Please let me go out." I was a child. They opened a kindergarden in which the Americans could put their children, and I was like a baby-sitter. Later there were more children. Everyone wanted to bring his children. It was a small room. In BUC in those days, there was only a villa, Sage Hall, Nicol Hall, and a small room for the kindergarden. I used to play with the children. They couldn't ask me to do other work, I was too young. Later they started to give me work. We had thirty women students in the college, no, sixty students. We got up early everyday to feed these students and we washed dishes in a sink (laughs). They had to put a stool for me to stand on because I was so short and young. After that I played in the nursery till noon time, the children and I. Then every couple came and took their children and I went up to work in the college. They taught me how to work because at the beginning I didn't know.

So Najla Dabaghi told me -- you have to write about Najla Dabaghi. Build her up! She is our neighbor, she may read this. She told me, "Mary, go and take this milk bottle to the president." Oh! I forgot to tell you, the moment I came to college I was received by Mrs Nelly and someone else called Mrs Johnson. She took me to the market, bought me shoes, a dress and hair bands. Everyday she came, she took care of me and gave me a lesson in English and Arabic - no, not Arabic - English - so I could speak to her. There were many Americans. Oh, I don't remember all their names. Every year new Americans came. They didn't bring Arabs very often. There was Mrs Bweiri and Mrs Najjar, but they were very old. There was Noura, in the evening she was everyone's mother. I worked in the nursery with the children. I was the first one to work in this nursery. I was a housekeeper for the children. Later the American children increased. So they sent us someone called Miss Saydah. I worked with Miss. Saydah for ten years. I started with a salary LL10 a month. Write that!

One day Najla Dabaghi told me, "Mary, go take this milk bottle to the president." I thought, "Oh! how can I meet the president without putting on some make-up?" So I went to the nursery and brought the 'red medicine'. I smeared it on my face, and brought what they call 'shash' (bandage). I braided my hair and tied it with the bandage. As I was going out I took the milk bottle. I looked like a 'Barbara'[1] mask (laughs). I went out. The college in those days was filled with prickly pears. Write that! There weren't as many buildings as today. It was mainly prickly pears and pine trees. As I was going, there was a pathway inside the college that takes you to the upper gate. As I was going along, the bottle fell and broke. I started crying. The president called them to ask about the milk. They told him they had sent the bottle with Mary. He came and found me. He said, "Mary, you're very young. How could they send you to do such work? Why are you crying?" I told him, "The woman in charge will shout at me." So he took me to her and told her, "Please don't scold Mary, because she's very young." He took a photo of me here on the road. He wanted the milk because the Americans were going up to 'Ainab. They used

to rent a home there. They were all Americans there, no Arabs (laughs). The president treated me kindly like a daughter. He liked me a lot, but not in the way that people may think. He took care of me and taught me and asked others to teach me.

Then I started to work. They gave me rooms to look after. I used to make the beds in the teachers' rooms. That was my new work, and I went to the kindergarden at midday. We were responsible for the dorms as well. There were thirty girls. We used to go to the dining room to give the girls their meals. I should say what they gave the girls for breakfast, shouldn't I? In the dining room, there were twenty tables. We laid the tables in the morning, at noon time and in the evening. We gave the girls their food and we washed the dishes. Later when there were ninety students, they brought us eight workers from 'Ain Zibdeen, men and women. They helped us.

"The College in those days was all prickly pears and pine trees"

Before Najla Dabaghi left they brought Mr Hajjar to the college. They introduced him to us because he was going to be in charge. This Mr Hajjar was a very good man. He liked the workers and gave them a lot of attention. Write this! He preferred me to the other workers, and felt sorry for me because I was a young girl - not that he preferred me in that manner, I considered him like a father. Whatever happened to me I went and told him. My parents weren't close to me, so I went and told him. Najla Dabaghi left, and he replaced her. Whatever happened to me, whatever anyone said to me, I went and told him, and he listened.

Then my father came and worked here in the college. He worked here for about twenty years, and my brother for twenty eight years. My father, brother, and I worked here in the college. Ah, I forgot to tell you that before my father came, my brother said, "Let's go and see Beirut." Can I tell this?

Ghena: Of course. I want you to tell me all about yourself.
Mary: Yes, before that, the first month I came to the college, there was a woman, Mrs Beech. Write Mrs Beech! This Mrs Beech was in her room. I was a young girl, I didn't know that I had to knock on the door to go in to give her the blankets. So Mrs Beech locked me in the toilet till noon-time. This story should come after the one when I broke the milk bottle. I went on screaming till noon-time. They looked for me but couldn't find me. At noon-time she let me out. When they saw me they asked me where I had been. I told them I was locked in the toilet. Najla Dabaghi got really upset.

I went to the gate and told my brother that they lock people up in this school. I said we should leave. He went before me, he got on the tram, and I followed later. I was washing dishes, I couldn't leave before. I took a taxi. I didn't know that a taxi is different from a 'service'. A 'service' then cost fifteen piasters. "Where are you going?" I told him, "To Al-Nouriyyeh market" (laughs). All the way people were calling 'taxi!' 'service!' and he didn't stop to take any passengers. I felt afraid. I put my hand on the door. He asked me, "Where are you going, young girl?" I told him, "To the Burj." Before I got down he told me to pay him. So I opened my purse. I had 25 piasters. I gave them to him. He told me, "No, I want LL1." I told him, "I've only got twenty five piasters so you'd better take them." I met my brother there. Our aunt brought us back to the college. She did not allow us to return on our own. We would have got lost because we were new in Beirut. Our aunt told us, "Come on! Why did you get upset? They must be looking for you everywhere." My aunt was a wise woman. She brought us back to the college and we were scolded by Najla Dabaghi.

The following Sunday, my brother told me that we wanted to see Beirut. It was his idea. We had a break every Sunday. We went to the Manara, and started to throw stones at the sea. You know, we were just children. We walked and threw stones till we reached the port area. Then my brother said that we should start returning. We went from the port area and reached Sakiet al-Janzeer. In those days it was all prickly pears. There were no buildings. When we got there we started crying. An old man saw us and asked us, "Where are you going?" We told him, "To the university." He took us to the American University. My brother told him, "No, not this university." So he brought us to the College. We arrived at ten o'clock at night, after they had been looking for us everywhere.

The first incident was the milk bottle incident, the second was when I was locked in the toilet and ran away with my brother to our aunt's place, and the third incident was when we went to see Beirut and got lost. Beirut, ya Beirut!

After a while they closed the kindergarden, and I started to work in Irwin Hall. They wanted to build a building. I went back to work in the dorms. In those days many events were held in the college and we had a lot of work. There were no machines for cleaning the floor. Later, they expanded the kitchen. Najla Dabaghi left and they expanded the kitchen. This big building was constructed, Shannon Hall, Orme Grey building. We worked. What shall we write? It's all work.

Ghena: You haven't told me about your family or personal life.
Mary: Well many men proposed to me. Yes, really, many men proposed to me. I turned some down, some my parents turned down because -- in the past parents liked to let their daughter work to help them out financially. They wanted to keep the girl to help them in their old age.

Ghena: What else?
Mary: Women came to the college from Kuwait, Iraq. After I'd been here for a long time, they called me and said, "You have to take care of the girls, take them to their rooms, guide them." They chose me because some of the girls came from Kuwait,

Mary Abu Kalam

Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Abu Dhabi. They said, "Mary, go with the girls, take good care of them." I was the one chosen to show them their rooms and tell them about everything. In the past, whenever someone telephoned one of the girls, we had to go upstairs to tell her. Whenever a girl wanted to take a bath -- Oh, how stupid I am, I should have mentioned these things at the beginning. In the past there wasn't hot water in the dorms. Every day one of us had to go and light the primus. She heated water for them. Every day three or four girls took a bath, they couldn't have a bath everyday, only once every three or four days. Everyday at four o'clock, tea was served. Everyday one of us had to serve tea to the American teachers. They wanted to drink tea at four o'clock. We took care of them. There was a rule for washing clothes downstairs. We went down and sorted the blankets. We sorted them according to names. Everyone wrote her name on her clothes. Students used to have their clothes washed at the college. They liked to have parties, 'carnivals', they brought fortune tellers. They had many parties, and at the end of each year they held a graduation ceremony. Up to today they hold this ceremony. The school gave a lot of attention to these things, and we participated in this too. When there were formal dinners they told me, "Mary, you should get properly dressed". They used to have us wear a 'formal costume,'[in English] pleated caps, and a black and white dress, with white sleeves and gloves, and white shoes and socks. This is what the woman who served at table wore. They stopped this because Najla Dabaghi was the one who gave attention to these matters. She was a very elegant lady. She didn't want the workers to look untidy in the dining room. Write this please! Yes, let people know about this. Today the workers' clothes are not neat. They used to sew us navy blue dresses with white collars, and bordeaux dresses. They used to bring us a tailor to sew our dresses. Write this please, this is most important! Write this so that the college will know that much more attention was given to the workers' appearance in the past. I want to shame them, they're bringing us such cheap material. See how neat the clothing in the section at Jbeil is! They brought them shorts and T-shirts on which they wrote 'LAU' and put two wheat ears as symbols. Very neat. And see what they wear in winter--tights and neat sweaters. You can't tell the workers from the students. Don't be upset! Here, we have several religions. You'd find one woman who wants to put on the veil, some want to wear very long dresses which get easily dirty. In Jbeil they are all one religion. In the past we had three or four religions on campus, but we all wore the same costume. In the past, when there was an evening occasion, we wore hats. Write this! Write how we wore black dresses with white collars. That was how we dressed on formal occasions. Now they give us one dress which we wear when we're cleaning

the toilet or receiving people. Write that they aren't neat. Let them read. What else can I tell you?

Ghena: You haven't told me much about your family.

Mary: I don't see them everyday. I see you more than I see them. I have a sister who lives in Hasbayya. She's married. I have two other married sisters. My sisters are all fine, thank God. My brother is in America. When my brother left the College, they gave him a silver tray as a thank-you to my father. My father worked here in the College for twenty years. All the 'mobilia' of the Orme Grey Hall was made by my father. Since I came to Irwin Hall I have been in charge of it, before that I was in charge of Shannon Hall. I survived many events. People came and went. Eventually, I ended up in this College having heart surgery. Write that I ended up with heart surgery and a good reputation.

We have to write that I was called to witness the putting of every cornerstone in this college except for Nicol Hall and Sage

Hall. They made a party and thanked Mary Abou Kalam for her presence. When you write the introduction, write that whenever they established a building, Mary came, she was young, and she stood next to Mr Stoltzfus and Mrs Grey. They made a party each time, and Mary came and served the tea, food, and drinks. Not that I was the only one, all the workers came. Write that the faculty apartments building was a garbage heap (laughs). Also the Fine Arts was on a garbage heap. Write that the girls were not allowed to go out. A girl who was about to graduate had to be on campus by six o'clock and the one who had a BA had to be back by seven o'clock. They used to knock on our doors in the evening so that we'd open the door for them. Write this in

the introduction. One forgets to mention certain things. Girls were not allowed to smoke. Once girls came to smoke in my room.They said, "Mary, you are a worker, they won't punish you". They burnt the room. They burnt all of Nicol Hall. Oh no! I shouldn't say it, they might deduct this from my compensation money.

Ghena: This happened a long time ago. Presidents have changed since then.
Mary: Yes, they brought cigarettes to Mary's room They bought cigarettes for ten piasters and everyone of them took a smoke (laughs). They said, "Mary, you can't be kicked out of the college. We want to smoke in your room." They sent me to the market to buy cigarettes for ten piasters and each one of them took a puff (laughs). One day Miss Haddad knocked on my door to say everyone should go to the dining room for lunch. I went to the dining room, and the girls threw the cigarettes in the waste paper basket. The waste paper basket was next to the curtains. The paper caught fire, the curtains caught fire, and the whole building caught fire. All of the girls' clothes got burnt. I didn't have clothes. I had one dress only. I had some jewelry which turned to ashes and my LL10 monthly salary. They [the students] told me later, "We will buy you clothes. Don't tell the college about us. Tell them, I smoked because I was upset, my cousin died (laughs). We'll take you and buy you clothes." They never bought me clothes. My parents bought me a dress later. I didn't tell the College about them. I took the blame and the College compensated them, and did not compensate me for the clothes I lost, or my salary. The College paid everyone of them LL1000, and they paid me nothing. Because I told them that I set fire to the room. In those days if a girl was found smoking she'd be suspended from the College.

"I was called to witness the putting of every cornerstone in the College"

Ghena: All the building was burnt?
Mary: Not all of it. Just the floor in which my room was. They brought the fire engine to put the fire out. Nicol Hall had two floors then. In those days three girls worked in every corridor. Today one woman works in the whole building. Write! (She laughs) In the past in every corridor three girls. Today I work alone in this building. In the past four or five girls worked with me. Today I am alone. The number of workers is too little compared to past days. Today the college is bigger. Now everyone has an office and two sitting rooms (laughs). My God, how much this college has changed!

Ghena: Was the College nicer in the past?
Mary: Yes, it was nicer in the past. It's true there wasn't much money but people were satisfied with what they earned.

Ghena: You earn more now?
Mary: I earn more now. After forty nine years. In the past I took LL10 and bought a lot. Now I earn LL1, 500,000 and I can't buy anything. Write this please.

Do you know what I told the president in my speech on Labor Day? I represent the workers here - because I'm old - I told him, "Dr Riad Nassar, Gentlemen, I would like to start my speech in the name of my co-workers. We congratulate you as president of the Lebanese American University. We thank God for your presence, you are a precious jewel." Then I told him that we hope he will continue the path which he has started, helping LAU to become one of the most successful educational institutions in Lebanon." May God extend your life and time in leading this institute." All the presidents were good with me.

Say that Mary loves the College. Her voice is always heard because she grew up in the College. Her voice is loud because she's very passionate about her work, that's why she keeps shouting. Explain to them. She likes the College more than her own house. And now she's really upset because she's about to retire. I'm not working for money. I like the College because I grew up in it.

Ghena: Tell me more about your parents?
Mary: My family is very good, it's very respected. My father had a rank of an engineer. My mother worked at home. She was a housewife. She had many children. She did everything with her own hands. She brought water from the spring, she went and washed in the river. She brought up a big family. Now you have written about four or five pages. Please write them in chronological manner.

Ghena: Do you feel that your life would have been different had you lived in a place other than Lebanon?
Mary: I haven't tried. Well, yes, I've traveled. Say that I've been to London, I stayed there for a month. I've been to Kuwait for a month and Paris for fifteen days. I went to Canada once for a month and another time for three months. I attended my nephew's wedding. And I'm going again next year. I lived in Canada, but I didn't like the life there. There no one speaks to others. Everyone lives on his own. God created the world so that people could talk to each other. When I was in Canada, I was locked inside my brother's house. We went and invited our neighbor to come and drink coffee. She wanted to call the police because we were disturbing her. God! how can one live on his own? The first time I went to Canada I didn't enjoy it. The second time my brother and his wife were retired. Every day they took me to a new place. I thought it was nice, but nice for a vacation, not nice for living. Here I visit you and you visit me.

Recorded and translated by Ghena Ismail

End Notes

1. Saint Barbara was an early Christian Saint on her feast day children wear masks like those of Halloween.

Dalal Aziz: Resident Surgeon

(Born in 1972, in Saida [Sidon]; originally from Neeha [Shouf]; currently living in Beirut. Recorded in her house. Language: colloquial/educated Arabic.)

Shall I start from the beginning family-wise? I'm the oldest child and I'm from Saida. I have two sisters. I don't remember my childhood. My mother tells me that I was very quiet and calm. From an early age I was bright and did well in school. I guess this is what was special about me. I was always first in class and in the entire school. I was always chosen to represent the school in competitions against other schools. My childhood wasn't remarkable. I remember that I was rather introverted and not very sociable.

When Israel invaded Lebanon [1982], we left Saida for the mountains to escape the war. I attended the 'Lycee' there. Nothing special happened, I concentrated on my studies and eventually graduated from school with a Bac. II in 'mathelem'.[1] At school my whole life was spent on studying but I also liked gymnastics. I used to read a lot. My dream was to enter university, but I had no idea what to specialize in. Everyone used to tell me that I should do medicine and become a surgeon. But, when it was time to go to university, I still hadn't made up my mind. I was very confused, that's why I chose the 'mathelem' section in school so as to be able to study anything I wanted in university. I always liked doing difficult things so I applied to both the Engineering and Biology departments. I was accepted by both Engineering and Chemistry. When I had to choose I asked my father for advice. He recommended I should take chemistry because it would enable me to do medicine later on. According to him, a degree in medicine was better than one in engineering. So I took his advice and studied chemistry. When I first got accepted I hadn't decided finally to be a doctor. I started off with chemistry but later shifted to Biology because by then I wanted to be able to continue in medicine. I did well in my BS degree. At university I still concentrated mainly on my studies but after entering medical school I realized that there are other things in life to explore. That's when I started giving more time to myself. I traveled a lot during vacations and started going out more often.

During my fourth year in medical school I had to choose a specialization. To be honest, I felt lost, I didn't have the faintest idea what to specialize in. Surgery crossed my mind but I dismissed it because all my teachers and colleagues discouraged me. Yet after much thought I applied for surgery because there was nothing else I wanted to do. I told my parents and warned them that I might never find work, because people here can't conceive of going to a woman surgeon. I received a lot of encouragement from my father, who suggested that I do obstetrics and gynecology, but I didn't want to. At first I didn't tell my colleagues that I was applying to do surgery, only a very few close friends knew. Then the word spread in the hospital, and when people knew about it they were shocked. Everyone tried to dissuade me, telling me that I wouldn't be able to find work once I graduated, and that I was ruining my career. Everyone asked me, "What are you trying to prove?" They knew I was competitive but, according to them, I should think more about my future, and potential family life. I took no notice of them because I really like this field, I felt that it suits me, though of course it's tiring. I don't know what may happen but I hope all goes well. (pause)

Myriam: What more can you tell me?

Dalal: I think the reason you're interviewing me is because I'm doing something special, because I'm a surgeon. What I have to say is that my life before the third year in medical school was very monotonous. I focused only on my studies. I was a successful student and this was rewarding, but that was all. I can tell you about some people, some friends who influenced my life. For example, I had a friend called Bishara. We were both chemistry students at the beginning. From the first day in university we used to compete to see who would get the best grade. We'd wait impatiently to see who was doing better. When I shifted to biology, he prayed that I would stay there so that he would be first in chemistry, with nobody to compete with. Afterwards, we became real friends and worked on projects together.

Picture Credit: Mona Eid

My closest friends today are people I used to work with in class. In anatomy courses, we used to have bodies to do autopsies on. We were seven or eight students working together and we became friends. We worked on projects concerning organ transplant together. We went and asked people about their perceptions of organ transplant. We also went to religious officials to find out their opinions. We worked on several other projects together, and made presentations on them. It was very enjoyable. Bishara is in America today doing family medicine, and we've stayed in contact through e-mail. He is doing very well there. He was one of the first to encourage me to do surgery. He used to tell me that I should specialize in the field that

I was really interested in. When he chose to do family medicine, all of us were surprised because he was an excellent student, and family medicine is considered a very easy specialization in Lebanon. But he was convinced. Now, he is doing so well in this field that the program director has promised him that once he graduates, he will become an 'attending'. The point is that when you really like your work you are likely to excel in it. Nowadays, doctors here are being encouraged to apply for family medicine whereas before they avoided it.

Myriam: Tell me more about the 'war atmosphere'?
Dalal: You may be surprised, but I enjoyed the 'war atmosphere'. (laughs) We were in the mountains and the village was not affected by the war, it wasn't shelled or bombed. I didn't experience the terror of being attacked at any moment. We didn't feel threatened because Neeha is very high up and we were never really targeted. We lived the war atmosphere but were not directly affected. Only once Israel bombarded our area, but it was far from where we were and there was never any real threat. In fact I was excited by the war and wanted to learn to shoot. I loved the idea of being in a battle. I used to nag my father to teach me how to shoot. I even wanted, if I had been older, to join in the war. I wasn't really feeling the danger, I only sensed the excitement. People kept coming and going and there was always news, I kept aware of what was happening.

Myriam: What about your family?
Dalal: About my parents, my mother is strict, while my father is cool and relaxed. My mother remained strict with me until I went to university. At university I matured, and so my mother trusted me more. At first when I wanted to do anything or go out, I used to tell her. Then she changed, and I had more freedom. I didn't have to report to her any more. Yet I still tell my parents about my plans, though now I have the freedom to decide for myself. Now I have a holiday coming up and I've decided to go to France with my friends. This was something my parents would never have accepted before I went to university, because they are conservative. They couldn't conceive of a girl traveling on her own. Now I still tell them my plans and take their approval, but I feel I'm the one who decides. But family is very important for me and my family is very supportive. I still rely on them for a lot of things. My schedule is very hectic - I work one day on, one day off. This means I have to sleep in the hospital. I can't leave my work even for a minute. Most of the time I don't have time to do my own paper work at the Ministry of Education. It's usually my parents who help me, or my sisters. I have two sisters, I'm the oldest. One sister is in her last year of university doing midwifery, and the other is in her first year, she is specializing in tourism. I rely on them a lot because I'm so busy. I don't like this, but I don't have a choice, especially now that I'm in open-heart surgery.There's not a single day during the week in which I am free. If I'm free it's at weekends when all government offices are closed. For example, I'm going to France on holiday and it was my father who applied for my visa. My parents are very supportive, and I rely on them a lot. My sisters and I are their top priority, and I feel that they live for us. I also love my sisters and appreciate them. (pause)

Myriam: What else do you remember?
Dalal: I used to believe that my graduation day would be a very special day, that I would feel different afterwards. I graduated with my BS, and then from medical school, and discovered that it isn't true. Because at each stage in my life, I was thinking about the next step.

I learned to depend on myself when I traveled without my family. The first time was when I traveled to Egypt, where I had an exam to complete, with my friends. We did some tourism,we stayed together, and never took a taxi unless we had a guy with us. Once on this trip we were shopping at a hotel - I love buying clothes- I left my friends to buy something I'd seen before. I didn't tell them I was going because the shop was close, and I expected them to stay in the same place. When I got back, I didn't find them, they had gone. I searched for them everywhere in the hotel. It was the first time I had traveled, and I wasn't used to being alone. I went back to the shop and told the salesman I was lost, and asked him for advice. He told me about nearby places to visit. I went and visited them, and then went to the restaurant where we had previously agreed to have lunch. My friends were there. This was a small incident, but those two or three hours I spent on my own were very important. They gave me self-confidence. Another time there was an exam in Greece. Again we were a group of students. Most of them had to come back early, except two girl friends and me, we could stay longer. So we decided to stay for three more days on our own. Until today we remember those three days as one of the best times in our lives. I remember I bought a statuette of Hippocrates. None of my friends wanted to buy it because it reminded them of medical school, but I liked it a lot because words were engraved on it, and it was old and attractive. I bought it and carried it with me all day long because I had nowhere to put it. At the end of the day, while we were waiting for the bus, it fell on the ground and got broken. I was very angry. Then when I came back to Lebanon, my father mended it for me and now it looks fine, even better because it seems older now.

My life is a very ordinary one. The most dramatic moment was when I applied for surgery. It was difficult since many people were pestering me and asking, "What do you think you are doing?" and "What are you trying to prove?" Today, very few people do this. None of my professors told me not to go into surgery, but they all advised me to choose something else. I was the only girl who entered surgery. Now there is another women applying to do surgery. She's still an intern. She's planning to specialize in ear, nose and throat. I'm usually not so talkative. (laughs)

The atmosphere in medical school and at the hospital isn't agreeable. All around me people complain and regret that they did medicine. I'm not the type to complain and I don't regret doing medicine, even though it's very tiring, and up to now it's not rewarding. We still don't earn salaries, and we still need time before we graduate. By then we will be around thirty five

years old. A big chunk of our life will be gone. And in the end you may or may not be successful. The atmosphere in the medical school is very stressful because there is a lot of competition. You have to strive to get the best grades, otherwise you'd be out of medical school, or you won't reach the position you really want. Plus there are no guarantees. There is always competition and there always will be, as each year there is selection. This never stops. The stress is there all the time. The surgery specialization has a pyramidal system where each year the weaker students are weeded out. This competition creates tension between colleagues because you always perceive your classmates as competitors. This means there are a lot of groups. I have my own group where there isn't tension. We go out together. I don't perceive them as rivals.

Picture Credit: Mona Eid

Last month, I was in Emergency on twenty four hour duty. Some days I don't even have time to eat because there's so much work in Emergency and nobody to cover for me. So I can't leave. When you are off, you have to sleep. You can't do anything else because you are so tired. In the American University Hospital (AUH), professors are 'attendings' and patients are admitted under their name. But, in practice, we take care of the patients, and in addition we have to make sure to follow instructions so that the attending doctors are satisfied. Sometimes, we feel we are learning things, and it's rewarding. Other times, we are just executing orders and doing the dumb work, which is annoying. So there are good and bad sides to it, but the important thing is the ability to be flexible. This I learned from life. I used to be very rigid and strict. But then I realized I would never get along with people and friends if I stayed this way. So I became more flexible. Now I 'm happy with my life in the hospital. Most people around me grumble that it's tiring and there is no reward. Though it's true, I'm happy with it, maybe because I feel I am doing something I really like and it is worth it.

It's difficult to imagine how my life will be in the future, though I often try to visualize it. Like all young women I believe that eventually I should have a family of my own to stabilize my life and feel secure. But children would have to come later, after my residency period, because the way I work now I couldn't have children. I'd like to have a family and settle, it would be difficult, but I think it should be possible. The most important thing is to find someone who understands you. What I think about most is my career, and how to succeed as a surgeon who is a woman. I think about this a lot, it won't be easy. I wonder, after I have graduated in surgery, shall I have patients? Many people tell me ,"You may graduate but no patient will put his life in your hands." That's what most people around me say, that they will never trust their life to a woman surgeon. I'm used to this kind of talk and it no longer affects me. I'd like to go to America and do a fellowship there. It would give me more confidence in myself. I could start off in the States and eventually come back and work in Lebanon. People won't accept a woman surgeon immediately, it will take time. I know that I have taken a risk in my choice of specialization. I might be exhausting myself for nothing, who knows? (pause)

Do you want me to tell you about myself? Even though I'm Druze and proud of being one, I go to church, I go to Harissa and pray there. I believe in all the gods. I'm very sensitive. For instance if I watch a film that has a touching scene I start to cry. As you notice, my voice is soft, when people see me they tell me I should have done pediatrics (smiles). I am very shy, I blush easily, I cry easily. But I'm doing surgery, and when I see blood in the operating room it doesn't affect me. I enjoy cutting, sewing, these things don't affect me. When I look at male colleagues who are surgeons, they don't all have exceptional personalities. Some are very qualified, some aren't very qualified. It's a profession that requires persistence mainly. (pause).

Another thing about myself is that I'd like to travel round the world and meet new people. Two months ago I had 'rotation' in the Maqassad, and met two medical students doing their elective there, one from France - originally from Algeria but now she's living in France - and the man was French . We asked them what brought them to Lebanon, why would two French medical students want to do their elective in Lebanon? The man told us that while visiting Turkey on a vacation he met some Lebanese and liked them, so he thought of visiting Lebanon. We befriended them and went out with them several times. One thing you won't find in the Lebanese is their simplicity, they were very spontaneous and simple. They say what comes into their heads. There're not pretentious. If something is expensive they admit that they can't afford it, unlike us. What I liked was their spontaneity and simplicity. These qualities which you often find in foreigners attract me. During my time at the Maqassad I realized that the 'attendings' accepted me as a surgeon more than they do at AUH. I used to go into the operating room and they would hand over the case to me from start to finish.

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir

End Notes

1. Bac II in 'mathelem' is a high school leaving certificate with emphasis on mathematics and physics.

Ria Charafeddine: School Administrator, Foreign Wife

(Born in 1955; in Greece; currently living in Sur [Tyre]; recorded at IWSAW. Language: Arabic with a slight southern accent.)

I was born in Greece and lived there until the age of fourteen. After that I left Greece to join my parents in Germany. We had stayed behind in Greece, my sister and I, because of our education. It was difficult for us to enroll in schools in Germany. My parents took my brother with them, not because he was a boy, but because he wasn't keen on studying. My sister and I stayed at our grandparents' house in the village. When the village school had no more classes for us we moved to the city, and lived with relatives to go to school - this is common in Lebanon too. Each year our parents promised to come back, but they never did so after three years we joined them in Germany. It was difficult living without our parents, we often had problems.

In Germany I couldn't go to school immediately because I didn't know the language. So after much thought my parents decided to enroll me in a vocational institute to acquire a skill. They took me to a hair dresser, and after he had inspected my hands he agreed to train me. But I had to go to school as well because vocational schools in Germany require students to attend classes two or three times a week. There I had to study different subjects -- history, humanities, and other subjects -- along with courses dealing with my vocation. I felt that it was not enough, so I started attending night school. As soon as I finished work I used to go from six to ten o'clock to an institute called 'Volkshochschule' which mostly taught languages. After finishing the language courses, I decided to continue and take an intermediate certificate, there was the possibility to do this at night four times a week. But in the end I got so tired that I couldn't cope, so I left the vocational school and entered a special school for people who hadn't been able to finish their education. I attended this school for two years. For the Baccalaureate certificate you could do interior design, education, social work, and so on. I decided to study social work, and all in all it took four years, three years of university, and one year where I had to work and conduct a study on a subject of my choice. Then you get a degree from the government. For my study I concentrated on the disabled and worked with them, and then I got interested in social work and I worked with Greeks and Turks (laughs). You know that there is a sensitivity between Greeks and Turks. Honestly, when I went to Germany and met Turks, I realized that they are human beings just like us. Our history portrayed -- the Turks really harmed us a lot and it wasn't easy what we went through, but our history

books pictured Turks as monsters. At that time Greek and Turkish young people had problems, they'd come -- I wanted to help them. Maybe it's because I constantly wanted to improve myself that I couldn't understand people who were always full of pity for themselves - and here I mean Greeks and people from all nationalities -- I couldn't feel sorry for people who didn't try to learn the language, or who constantly complained that they were foreigners. I tried to work with them, but it depended on the job they gave you and the continuity.

After I graduated there was no vacancy for me to work with Greeks, and I was unemployed for a while. Then I got an offer of work with a center that looks after people with psychological problems, drug addicts and so on, so I went. At the center I admitted that I had no previous experience, but after two days they informed me that I could start working there. I said I was scared, and they explained that they'd been employing really qualified, experienced people, but they weren't able to cure people, so they thought of trying someone with no experience. I worked there for over three years. One year I had to visit prisons every week. I worked with drug addicts who'd been imprisoned for taking drugs, and had to do their papers and accompany them to the rehabilitation center. This was the beginning of my professional career. (pause) My last year working at the center was very tough, one has to be firm and not adopt other people's problems as one's own. Those suffering from psychological problems used to come and tell me their problems, and I learned a lot. There were many things that I hadn't studied or experienced as a student.

I lived with my parents till I was eighteen years old, then, when I started studying, I left home. Of course my parents weren't always happy with the things I did, especially because Greeks over there are more restrictive with girls than back home. If you go out somewhere and people (Greeks) see you, they go and tell your parents, "We saw your daughter out, she was in a cafe drinking coffee", or "She was at the cinema" - even if you were out with two other girls. Girls are more closely monitored there. I left home not only because my house was far from the college, but also because there were a lot of confrontations between me and my parents. So I left home for many different reasons and during that period I met a lot of girls -- I met people and started participating in the woman's liberation movement, and worked actively with them for several years.

It was at that time that I met my husband (laughs). When I met him I was very active in the women's movement. I remember that the first thing we discussed was the rights of women in the Arab world, or Lebanon. The women's organization there was an all-women organization, there were no men. After operating for several years it started accepting men, in its earlier stages they didn't allow men to join. At first it was a united movement, but then it started splitting because women were not agreeing on everything. So when I met my husband I was actively involved in this movement. I remember that we used to think that women in Lebanon and the Arab world had no freedom. Now I don't think that anymore (laughs). I used to believe this because the people around me believed it, and I didn't have any other information. There were maybe only one or two Arab women living in the area where we were living, and I didn't know them. The first time I met an Arab woman was when I came to Lebanon. Then I realized that the image we had of them was mistaken, for in Lebanon there are a lot of women who are studying and building a career, and there are women activists who fight for women's rights. I believe that the women's movement here is improving and developing, yet it's different from the movement in Germany in the sense that there we worked on the ground. We opened a shelter for battered women, we searched for a flat, painted it, and fixed it. My work with the women's movement got less after a time because I had a lot of studies, and because there were things that I didn't approve of such as the split between men and women. Why should we say that all men are alike? I felt I no longer belonged, so I left. (pause)

How I met my husband and our story together is a very important part of my life, especially that we're from different religious backgrounds and from different countries. (pause) I never expected us to get married because there was a lot of difficulty - on my husband's side, not mine. Of course my parents would have preferred me to do things their way, but with the endless battling between us - you know I was never the typical Greek girl in Germany - usually Greek immigrants send their daughters to vocational school, they study, then work, and at the end of the day their parents find them a suitable husband, they get married, and 'end of story'. Because of my endless fights with my parents, they couldn't tell me what to do and what not to do. I decided. They didn't like it, perhaps they were upset, but they couldn't tell me what to do. But the parents of my husband had more influence on him than my parents had on me, so the problem wasn't -- As I told you, I couldn't believe that our story would end in marriage. The problem wasn't my parents, it was his parents. All my friends used to look upon our story as a legend, there are two people who love each other, Ria and Ali,

they love each other, but it is a very difficult story because there are forces pulling them apart. Many people were advising my husband, "Forget about her, she's a foreigner, they bring trouble, they can't adapt, forget about it." But my husband and I knew that they were wrong. I knew that I could adapt because of my experience. I could learn the language, I was certain that I could do it. It wasn't because I was blinded by love that I wanted to move to Lebanon. I thought a lot about it, and visited Lebanon, I knew what was ahead, I studied the situation rationally, and thought about things from all angles and perspectives. I asked myself can I adapt? And if I can't what will happen? Will I go crazy and complain all the time? I had to take a decision and I had to abide by it. I knew that I couldn't change my mind in the middle of the road and complain about the lack of electricity - at that time there were electricity and water shortages, especially in the South, we used to go for five or six months without electricity. I knew that all Lebanese women had to worry about how to get water to wash their clothes, to bath. When I came and saw the situation I started asking myself, What do you think, Ria, do you want to go and live there? How do you see the situation? You have to be realistic and see things clearly. Love is not enough as a basis for living somewhere difficult. But if one thinks of one's interest, without love, this is -- I didn't think, fine, I love Ali, but the conditions in Lebanon are so difficult that I will look for another relationship that gives me a bit of love and satisfies my needs and interests. I didn't think that way.

"We used to think that women in Lebanon and the Arab world have no freedom"

My husband finished his studies, two years before we got married. He came back to Lebanon, and there were no promises between us. We didn't know what was going to happen, it was up to God, written in the stars. (laughs) I was amazed one day to receive a letter from him telling me, "Come to Lebanon". The reason I'm telling you that our story was like a legend is because -- my friends used to tell me, "You'll see, it will work out, be patient and wait". I stayed in Germany for two years after he left before he sent me the letter. I always used to write to him but he never answered (laughs). Six months after he left for Lebanon, we met in Germany, and in fact I received two or three letters from him throughout this two year period. There was nothing personal in the letters that we exchanged, just general conversation about the war, the country, the people. After we got married I heard that it was very difficult for his parents to accept that their son should marry a non-Lebanese. He waited for me too, I didn't know that. I heard that all their attempts to marry him off to a Lebanese failed, so in the end his parents, I mean his father, accepted facts and agreed to his son marrying a foreigner.

There are stories similar to ours and even more difficult ones. But I think that marriage between Lebanese men and foreign women isn't easy. It's difficult for foreign women to accept life over here, and it is difficult for parents to accept them. It depends, too, on the atmosphere they live in, whether it's 'open' or 'closed' religious. My husband's family is very religious, yet at the same time they are open-minded. My father-in-law has never asked me why I don't wear the veil, though other people around him and in our circle have asked me. My husband's family are religious, but at the same time they are educated and that is important. If they were fanatic it would have been difficult. One day I may wear the veil, but it will be when I've reached a stage where I am fully convinced that I want to wear it, not because someone has forced me to. From the beginning I was prepared to face up to problems as they arose. I was not going to give up, and pack my things, and leave whenever I faced a problem. But until now - and now its not going to happen -- I was never given an ultimatum, either this or there will be problems. They are very open-minded with me so I was able to adapt. Whenever I meet with the foreign wives in Sur (Tyre) -- there are a lot of Russians, one Greek woman, and one German -- they are always complaining (laughs). They complain that there isn't this, there are no cultural events, no theater, no ballet. I often ask them, "Why don't you do something about it?" Besides, from the beginning I knew that there's no theater or ballet in Sur. They also complain about the schools, according to them there are no Sur schools fit for their children. (pause)

I don't believe that there's a big difference between Arab women and European women's feelings. What bothers me also bothers them. I'm saying this out of experience. But foreign women should understand that women here are much more patient, they're used to things, from an early age they learn to be patient and put up with visitors. It is usual abroad - and maybe in the capital too - that visitors phone before visiting, and there are

certain times when you visit. In the South and in rural areas this doesn't apply, people visit each other whenever they like. They don't call up or ask if they can visit, and you're expected to offer them hospitality. A foreigner has to get used to this. When I first came to Lebanon I felt flustered whenever we had people visiting and I had to make coffee. Even if you aren't feeling well you have to act as if you're fine, and aren't bothered by the unexpected visits. You have to pretend to people that you are happy with their visit. People here can do this because they're trained to it. Also if someone is sick they need to rest, people shouldn't visit them. But here everyone comes. This has nothing to do with being a foreigner, the feelings of the Lebanese sick person are no different from that of foreigners, but at the end of the day you have to bear the visits. The doctor tells you you have to rest, but people don't let you do that. There are things that I can't get accustomed to or understand even though I've been able to adapt. Now I can talk openly about these things, at first I couldn't express myself because I didn't know the language. Also I was scared that people would take it badly and misinterpret my intentions. Now things are smoother and life is easier because I'm able to express my feelings, and what bothers me.

At home we always speak in Arabic. I didn't speak any language except Arabic with my husband, because I was worried that if I spoke in German with him his relatives would think I was telling him something I didn't want them to understand. Because of my experience in Germany I know how it feels when one doesn't know a language. So I tried to speak to him in my broken Arabic, and this was the same with my children. I didn't try to talk to them in my mother tongue, Greek. All foreign mothers say that at home the mother's native language is spoken and usually the father understands. But if I had done that, my husband wouldn't have understood what we were saying because he doesn't know Greek, so I couldn't do it. I feel a bit upset with myself because I ought to forget all these things, and talk to my children in my language. Now my oldest child, my daughter, speaks Greek well and understands everything, but the younger ones can't speak it. My husband and I speak Arabic; sometimes if we want to hide something from the children we talk in German. However, this doesn't work anymore because although they don't speak German, they understand it. The children speak Arabic and they study English at school. My older children understand and speak Greek, but they can't write it. They also understand German but can't speak it. Language is important, you don't just express yourself, you express other things. I haven't solved this problem and I feel that now it's too late to do anything. (pause)

Myriam: Tell me more about your childhood.
Ria: We had a lot of land in Greece but it was worthless. When my parents traveled to Germany, I was seven years old and my sister was six. Our memories of childhood are agreeable, we used to play and slide on the hills next to our house. As we grew up we learned what each season brings, we used to live each harvest, the olive season, the wheat season, the grape season. We lived in a village, my grandfather had land with olive trees, grapes, and wheat. He also had sheep and goats, so we used to experience everything that was common in rural life. People here ask me, "How do you know about all these things?" I explain to them that I'm also from a village. I'm very happy that I had such a full and happy childhood, but sometimes I feel that I have lived too many lives. I moved from a village to a provincial city, then to another country, first Germany, then Lebanon. So sometimes I feel I have a 'mixed identity'. This shows up in language. I feel that I have no one language that is my own, I keep having to switch between the languages that I know. I feel my first language is German, I lost my Greek because I left Greece so young. Now when I talk Greek I have to translate, it's not that I don't know Greek, its just that I'm slow. Concerning the languages that I speak, Arabic, Greek, German and English, I make use of Greek when hunting in my mind the word to use in Arabic. Life is similar in these two countries, we have a similar culture. Using Arabic I come closer to the Greek language, my childhood and my life here reminds me of it. Yet, I feel I don't have an identity of my own. Some people say its an advantage but I think one tends to feel very mixed up. I have met a lot of Lebanese women who were living abroad, daughters of returned migrants who used to live in Africa, America, and other countries, and they claim that they have experienced these same feelings of confusion.

When people ask me if I would leave my children with my parents or my in-laws, if I had to work abroad, my answer is no. No matter how difficult life is, children are better off with their

parents. Even if their life improves, parents should be around when their children are developing and growing. When I went to Germany, I lived with my parents for several years, but they weren't able to cope with my growing up, and I used to wonder, Why are they so strict? Where have they been living? We had a lot of confrontations. There are a lot of Lebanese immigrants from Brazil, Latin America and Africa here. I know them because I'm responsible for the nursery and elementary section at the Jaafariah school in Sur. They come to Lebanon to put their children in school, they leave them with their parents or brothers, and they go back to Brazil, Paraguay, and so on. They say schools there don't teach Arabic, society there is too free, they don't want their children growing up spoilt. But leaving them alone here is not a very positive thing to do, it affects the children negatively. How can they guarantee that their children are secure here? Who can guarantee that? They tend to say that young girls there engage in sexual activities (pause), especially that these subjects are not talked about, talking about them is taboo. I believe that children are better off with their parents. As to children learning Arabic, this isn't a valid reason. (pause)

"I wasn't going to give up and pack my things ... every time I faced a problem"

When I decided to get married I knew that I had to convert to Islam. It was a condition, I accepted it, and converted to Shi'ite Islam in 1984. My children are Muslim, - but they have Greek passports. Once while I was giving birth to my youngest child, there was a Christian doctor attending. He knew I was Greek married to a Muslim, so he asked me if my husband had converted, and I told him that I was the one who converted to Islam. When he heard this he became very red, and looked very upset. It was the first time I experienced such fanaticism. I used to think that Muslims were fanatic if someone converted to Christianity, but not vice versa. I never expected this. The doctor was so angry he didn't even visit me after I delivered. In Greece there are fanatics and here there are fanatics too. Every one feels that his religion and his society is the best. But if we remain like that we won't be able to know each other better and learn from each other, or take the good things from both sides. But until now this is difficult to achieve, especially here in Lebanon, because of the war and its effects. People still need to find their identities. The Lebanese have an identity crisis and they have to work on it, this is my feeling. This is a sensitive subject, let's drop it! (laughs)

Myriam: How has living in Lebanon been?
Ria: When I first came to Lebanon I was like a small child. You don't know the language, you have to learn how to speak it, you have to learn your way around the place where you live. You have to learn everything from scratch. You can't talk because you don't know the language, you can't express yourself with words, you start smiling (pause). Then there comes a point when you no longer want to smile, you think, leave me alone! I'm fed up, enough is enough! But you have to go on working. You have to prove to people that you are learning the language, learning how to cook Lebanese food, learning the customs and habits. And step by step you grow and - but as a feeling it is very -- as if you are a child again. It's a strange feeling, you are an adult, you know a lot of things, but because you are in another country you feel that you are a child. People want to show you the road, how to move about, how to act, cook, dress. You need time to grow, and for others to start accepting you more. If you ask me if I've matured, I'll tell you "Yes, 90%" (smiles). Yet I still feel a small child, and they make me feel a small child. This feeling of being small stems from the way they perceive me. I feel they don't want me to grow 100%, no one will accept this, "You have to remain a foreigner, you'll never speak the language properly, why should you be like us?" Do you understand what I mean? Some other times you hear people saying, "This is the foreigner that was able to adapt, you don't feel that she's a foreigner". They may tell you this, but at the same time they want you to remain in the dark about some things, they don't want you to learn everything (pause).

How has living in Lebanon been? I want you to say that I respect people, and what I'm saying doesn't mean that I don't. For example I love walking, but in Sur it's hard to do this, because every two steps I see someone I know, and then I have to stop to greet them. But it's also good to live somewhere where every body knows you. If I pass by a grocery shop and need some vegetables, but have no money, I can buy things and pay later. The same for clothes. This is good, that they know you and trust you, though you start accumulating debts (laughs).

There's one thing I'd like to tell you about. It's an impression that I gathered from living here, that people don't accept criticism easily. If you comment on something someone has done, they don't deny it or admit it, but they try to find justifications. If I ask, "Why did you spill the water?" people don't say, "It was an accident I'm sorry." No, they hunt for reasons to justify what they did. They tend to act as if it's not their responsibility. I encounter it a lot while working with children in school, it's very common, and it's driving me crazy. I think to myself, why is this so? There's no big deal in admitting it. As if there's fear stemming from one's upbringing. People are used to shying away from honesty and being blunt. This is the impression I've got from my social and work relations. According to me, this is the reason underlying the problems you sometimes find between colleagues at work.

In general my social relations in Sur are very good. I have a lot of friends, the family is very supportive, and if they hadn't accepted me I wouldn't have been able to live here. But it's very important for one to have friends.

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir

Alia Fattah: Housewife, Retired Worker

(Born in 1952, in Beirut; of Kurdish origin; currently living in Musaitbeh, Beirut. Recorded in her home. A son present. Language: colloquial Arabic, with some French words.)

I am forty six years old and I have six children, five daughters and a son. What should I tell you about my life story? My life is beautiful, I'm happy, thank God. I'm not bothered by my husband. I won't say - I bore six children, I got a little tired, but thank God they grew up, they got an education and I'm very happy with them. When I was young, I lived in my parents' house, they were very simple people, religious, how shall I tell you, a very simple family. They loved to do good to people. We are religious as well, a very ordinary family, kind-hearted. This was the atmosphere I was raised in. Also, thank God, my husband, he's the same. He's religious, he fears God, our consciences are clear. We haven't hurt anyone, we don't harm anyone. We have no problems with anyone. Thank God, we have a happy life. We educated our children and they all graduated from university. The older ones are employees, they are working, thank God they are satisfied. We are a good family and I know that all the neighbors here like us. I don't want to brag, but we have been in this neighborhood for thirty five years. The neighbors like us and they know what kind of people we are. What shall I tell you?

Michelle: Actually, I don't have questions for you. Could you try to remember your earliest recollections?
Alia: I don't have anything special to say. My oldest daughter -

Son: Tell her about your old dream of getting educated.
Alia: Yes, yes. I used to long to be educated, like my children, to have a degree like them. But in those days forty, fifty years ago, people didn't really care a lot about a girl's education. They used to say - God rest her soul, my mother always used to say that a girl, no matter how much schooling she gets, she has to get married eventually, and stay at home, and raise her family, and cook for them, and take care of her house and her family. Schooling doesn't benefit girls. That's what they believed a long time ago. I don't agree, I'm against this idea. I say that schooling for girls is more important than it is for boys. Because, thank God, my daughters are educated, they worked. I married two of them, the older girl and the third girl, and they are content in their homes and with their men. They are employees, they work and they are happy in their houses. To speak frankly, I like education a lot. I kept telling my children, since they were young, inshallah - to the extent that I can manage - I want you to get educated. Education is wonderful, whether for men or for women. What else shall I tell you?

I got married to my husband and I lived here. He worked for the Salamoun family. He was a boy, about twelve years old. They were satisfied with him. He worked well for them so they were happy with him. He stayed with them, and when he was nineteen or twenty he got married. We married young. I was fifteen. That's what it was like a long time ago. People used to marry very young. We stayed here. We got married here, and stayed here. We have been here, for thirty five years, working for the Salamoun family. But thank God, we have another house, for the future. We thought that one should have another house. We bought a house - property is God's - it's our property, we have furnished it and fixed it up. I helped my husband, I won't deny it. I worked, and helped him, because of course he couldn't manage on his own. All the children were in school and there were many expenses. We bought it at the beginning of the 'events' [civil war]. It has been there for twenty years. I helped him, thank God, and I worked as well as him. Now for the past five or six years he hasn't been allowing me [to work], my health doesn't allow me any more. I'm not very well, I get 'crises.' The children are grown up, thank God. So he told me, "There's no need for you to work and get tired." He told me to rest. "Rest! You have a family, if you take care of it, it's enough." I used to work with him, to help him.

Son: She used to cook.
Alia: Even during the war, I didn't stop. I used to cook at the Al-Nahar newspaper. Madame Ramadan - she works for the newspaper - she said, "Now is a time of siege and war, do you mind cooking for us?" It was during the Israeli siege. I said, "Yes, why not?" To cook for the newspaper employees, there's nothing wrong with it. At that time, I was still working. Even during the war I kept helping, until we had covered all the expenses and guarantees. As they say, 'a future for our children.' We don't have this - what shall I say? - we don't have so much wealth. I always used to say there's nothing to leave my children except education. And the fact that I gave them education is a blessing from God. And that's it (laughs), what more shall I tell you? I have nothing more to say.

Michelle: I know this is difficult, but can you think of any events in your life?
Alia: Really, nothing happened that changed my life, thank God, ever since the children were young. As I was telling you, I used to help their father in order to educate them and buy them things they wanted. Children, you know - maybe this generation is different - the older generation - I can speak for myself - was more easily contented. My mother used to get me clothes. She was the one who bought them for me. There was no objection [ie. from Alia]. "I bought you these clothes", "Merci, mama." There were no complaints. Today, the child wants everything according to his own taste. In my time there was more contentment, my mother used to put food before me, I'd eat it. I'd never say, "I don't like this food", or "I don't want to eat it." Now my youngest daughter, if there is food that she doesn't like, she won't eat it. Clothes - I have to take her with me so that she can choose. This generation is different.

"I say that schooling for girls is more important than it is for boys"

Michelle: Are you originally Lebanese?
Alia: Yes, we are. I was born here. We have been Lebanese from a long time ago, from the time of my father and grandfather.
Son: From the area of Musaitbeh.
Alia: Yes, from Beirut.
Michelle: Maybe you can remember something about your life with your parents, you were talking about that a while ago?
Alia: Thank God I was happy at my parents'.
Son: My mother was indulged.
Alia: I didn't have any sisters. I had five brothers, there were no other girls besides me. It's true, I was happy at my parents'. They indulged me. How shall I say this? It's true that they didn't give me an education but, as I told you, a long time ago they didn't care about education for girls. It was the least of their concerns. But thank God, I was happy. Only yesterday I was telling my children how once, when I was young, my father, God bless his soul, bought me a skirt from Souk al-Tawileh, if you've heard of it. This was one of the oldest and finest souks in Beirut. He bought me a skirt for LL70. That was a lot then. Forty years ago, we would pay LL10 or LL15 for a skirt. During those days we used pounds not thousands, right? He bought it for me though it was so expensive, because I liked it and chose it. I told him, "Baba I like this skirt." He said, "You want it?" I said, "Yes." So he bought it. They never disappointed me, they bought me anything that I wanted, and did everything I asked except for this question of education. I would have liked to be educated. But thank God, I was happy in my childhood. Even after I got married, thank God, I am very happy with my family and my house. I got a bit tired, I won't deny that. But I felt that I should help so that they [children] could turn out educated.
I got married at the age of fifteen. Marriage then was not like now. Parents would come and say, "Well, we saw this girl, and we like her." His mother and father would come, they would say, "We like you and we like the girl. She's calm, we like her, and we want her to get engaged to our son." My mother said, "But my daughter is still young, and she doesn't know your son," and things like that. Before, that's how things were. My mother told me, "There is a suitor asking for you." I said, "I don't know, what do you say?" They said, "These people are decent and their son is decent. He has a job and he's not badly behaved. He doesn't drink, he doesn't gamble." In the beginning, those were the basics. He was twenty four, twenty five, not more than that. My mother said, "What shall we say to them? They come and go, they want you." I said, "I don't know. How do you find them?" She said, "We find them good. We think he suits you." I said, "Fine." Even in my own marriage I didn't have a say! Now they meet each other, live with each other, study each other's characters. "Each time has its generation, each generation has its time." My children now, I didn't interfere in their marriages. They made their own choices. My eldest daughter married a Christian. Yes! They fell in love. In the beginning, I won't deny it, we found it difficult that our daughter would marry from - yes, I won't hide it - "How is that! Who is he?" She said, "Mama, religion is God, and religion is behaving well with others. He is a very good man and I like him." [I said] "May God give you happiness." My other daughter also chose her husband. Now my son is engaged as well. He too, thank God, is building a house. He is waiting for his house to be finished. He bought a house in Deir Koubel, I don't know if you know it, outside Beirut. Now he is waiting to move. So this generation is different from older ones, just as I'm telling you. Everyone gets married in his own way. We know who they love and we don't object. It is their life and they are going to live it.

Michelle: I wish everybody could think like that.
Alia: I am like that. I didn't object to the girls' decisions nor to the boy's. "It is your life and you are going to live it." I just want you to be happy." I don't want more than that.

Michelle: What else can you remember?
Alia: (pause) What else shall I tell you? Thank God, now we are religious, we pray, we fast. We went on the pilgrimage, their father and I, around five years ago. He [husband] goes every year. He likes it. But I only went once. So thank God, things are good. I say it is like that because when we are straight with God, God will make us succeed.

Michelle: How do you find Lebanon as a place for women to live in?
Alia: It is a beautiful country. Its people are very ambitious. They are very giving. Compared to other Arab countries, I think it is the most civilized. A woman's pride here, thank God, is respected. I know from my daughters, their husbands respect and love them. Really, I find Lebanon to be the best country.

Also it's the country I was born in. If they made me choose from among all the countries of the world, I'll choose Lebanon. Seriously, all these wars, and everything that happened, we never moved. When the shelling reached here, we'd just go inside a little bit. There is a room inside, it's slightly safer. We would sit inside. When the shelling got strong, we would sit there. I would say, "God is the one who protects, but this room is better." The shelling reached this street, here, I'd be scared. But I always thought that if God wrote us a long life, we would live. This is our fate.

Son: Tell her about when you tried to learn to drive.
Alia: (laughs) Once I told my husband, "Teach me how to drive so that I can go out and buy things." He taught me for a while and then said, "No, no this is too difficult." I said, "Why? Be patient with me!" He taught me a little more and then he said, "Woman, you aren't fit for this. You're too nervous." When there was a lot of traffic I got nervous. He said, "No, never!" (laughs) So I left the whole thing - "Forget it!"

Michelle; Maybe you can speak a bit more about your work?
Alia: My work, mainly it was cooking. I worked hard but I was happy. It was very tiring. Then I'd come home, work in the house, cook for them, wash and bath them. They needed a lot of work. I'm the type of person who takes good care of her children. I used to bath them twice a day. Madame Salamoun, God rest her soul, used to tell me, "My daughter, you'll die from the way you work! Stop bathing them and changing their clothes so much." Daily I'd wash their clothes. And in those days, there weren't washing machines. I used to wash by hand. She'd say, "Don't do all of it, keep some for later." I'd say, "I can't, Madame, I can't. I like to see my children looking clean and tidy." I loved to see my children clean. It's the most important thing. I used to take a lot of care of them.

"There's nothing to leave my children except education"

Michelle: Are your parents still alive?
Alia: My mother and father, no. But I still have two brothers. Two of my brothers died. My father died of cancer, my mother had heart problems. I always say, "May God prolong the lives of all mothers." Because, really when one looses one's mother and father, I don't know, I felt that I lost everything. I always say there is no one dearer than the mother and father. The child is very dear, but when one loses her mother and father, she feels that she has lost everything in this world. Maybe because my parents used to love me and I used to love them very much, I was very affected by their death, seriously, a lot. All I can say is, may God have mercy on their souls. No one can do anything about this. One day we will also die.
Two weeks ago, I took the young ladies [daughters] and went to the beach. I don't know how to swim but I love the sea. I don't dare go in deep, only up to here (points to her waist). (A child enters and she cuddles her). I think I have told you everything that happened in my life. I haven't had many stories or problems to talk about. My husband works here in this building, he is in charge. He also has a car. He drives people, he works a bit with his car. The children -- Khaled, works in sanitary equipment, the daughters, the older one graduated ten years ago.

Picture Credit: Marilyn Stafford, A Photographic Journey through Lebanon in the Sixties, Saqi Books, 1998.

Son: She studied mass media in the Lebanese University, four years ago. Mona graduated in marketing from Beirut University College.
Alia: She works for the company owned by the Beydoun family. But the other two are still in school.

Recorded and translated by Michelle Obeid

End Notes

1. Alia used the word 'crisa'. This may mean asthma, bronchitis, or other types of chronic illness.

Reem Haddad: Journalist

(Born in 1969, in Beirut; currently living in Beirut; recorded in the American University of Beirut. Language: English.)

Okay, I was born in Beirut, and I don't remember anything really before the war. I have vague memories of the mountains, nothing else. Then when the war got too bad, when I was six or seven, we went to the United States. We stayed there two years and then came back. Then at the age of fifteen I went again to the US, I did my high school and college there.

Of course I remember the war, my childhood memories of the war are like everybody else's so I am not going to bore you with those. But when I left here, I left with a hatred, really, of Lebanon. I wanted out, I hated it, I hated it because of the war. I couldn't take it. So in the US I really immersed myself in American culture and tried to get away from everything Lebanese, everything, I even forgot the language. It took me a year to get over the war, the nightmares. Then, you know, you grow up. I went to college, and towards the end of my junior year, the war ended. I didn't think much about it, okay, the war has ended. Then I came back to Lebanon because I wanted to see it. In fact you grow up, and realize that you don't really hate it. Something happened and you hated it, but it's not the country. I wanted to come back and see, do I really hate it or was I affected by the war?

Picture Credit: Mona Eid

The first time I came, it was just for a few months. I loved it. I realized that I really do love it. That first time I immersed myself in social work. I loved -- There were lots of -- now there are lots of kids on the streets - but before there were even more. The souks were still [ruined]. It was much much poorer. I started befriending children on the streets. I stayed with them, that's why I stayed for a long time, because I couldn't leave them. Then I went back to the US, finished my studies and worked for -- okay, I have a BS in business, actually in human resource management, and BA in radio, television and film --communication. Then I worked for almost a year, at Fox News, a television station there -- it's like ABC or NBC -- in Washington DC. Then I decided to move back here. My parents had moved back and they wanted to live here. That's why I moved back. First I got a job at Future TV. I worked there for a while, and then when the Daily Star opened I moved to the Daily Star. In a nutshell, that's it. I'm still with the Daily Star. This is my history basically. (laughs) What kind of things do you want?

Michelle: Well it's up to you. You are free to choose what you would like to talk about. It is how you see your life story.
Reem: I seem to be going through a phase in Lebanon. I am frustrated, for example, by the corruption that is going on at the government level. This is really upsetting. This is the phase I'm in, "Why? Why? Why?" I could easily go back and live in the US. Not that there's no corruption there, there is. But it's an easier life. Here, there is so much to fight for. Sometimes I feel that you write and you write and you write, but people don't listen. Nobody listens, and I feel like saying, "Hey, listen to me, you're going to regret this". For example, when you see an old house going down -- It's been a frustrating experience because when I came here, supposedly my country was being reconstructed. But I don't see it being reconstructed. Okay, the infrastructure is great. But this isn't what I came to see. To see a country so beautiful, the old houses - the ignorance of pulling down an old house, you know? This frustrates me. Things like that. I wish the media were stronger. It's not strong enough. So this is my latest phase. I go through a lot of phases. (laughs) I don't know if this is interesting? Do you want anecdotes? Or experiences here?

Michelle: Whatever you feel like talking about.
Reem: You know, people don't think of their lives as interesting. You just live day by day. (pause) There's another part to the phase I'm in: here, in Lebanon, some people are very active and they fight for things, but most people just accept things as they are. This bothers me as well. You should fight for change, fight for it, don't just sit there. But they just sit there. For example, if a building is about to go up and it's going to ruin something, they sit and they don't fight it. In the US they do human chains, and they fight things. They don't accept things. We have to change things somehow. You can't

get anywhere without fighting. I don't think that this is interesting.

Michelle: Don't worry, I am sure people will find what you're saying interesting.
Reem: Let's see. (pause) Why don't you ask me some questions, anything, just to get me going?

Michelle: I know it's difficult. Think of any recollections, earliest recollections. You said you've been abroad and you've been back. Or anecdotes, events relationships with people.
Reem: Relationships -- I would say my closest relationship was with two children I adopted from the street. These were -- I wonder what has happened to them? I think my favorite relationship was with them. When I first came back, I was only twenty-one or something like that, and I loved them, I really loved them. They were beggars, and we developed a great relationship. We used to have lunch together everyday, and we became really, really good friends. And then they disappeared. The father is Syrian so he took them back to Syria. And the frustration -- I mean they were being abused all the time, he used to get drunk, hit them on the streets, and force them to beg. And my recollections are out there with the little girl and the boy. She was nine years old. I used to sit with her while she sold her gum. If I had to stay with her all night, I'd do it. She was a little girl and anyone can do anything to her. That's what I remember, sitting with her till four in the morning until she had sold her gum, and her horrible father came to take her back again. She had no mother. But I put them in school - they'd never been to school. And then the father came and took them out, and took them away. I miss them, until now. I keep thinking about them. If only -- I was just a student then, I was poor, not that I'm rich now, but then I didn't even have a job. I didn't have anything. I was just a kid. If they were here now I could do so much more. Now that I'm working and have a salary, I could do so much more for them. I keep wondering where are they? Where did he take them? To Syria, but where? How can I get them back? What has happened to them? The father might have made them prostitutes by now, but I keep wondering if I can find them some day and bring them back. I guess by now they should be teenagers, early teens. I would say this is my strongest relationship, other than with my parents of course. But that I take for granted. It was a great experience. It opens your eyes, you learn.

"Sometimes I feel you write and you write ... but people don't listen"

My friends were all worrying about their boyfriends. I couldn't care less. I was a late developer, I never really cared about boys. It was like, okay, they exist, men exist, but they were always a bore for me. Things are happening in the world, children needed to be saved, there are things to save. I wanted to save the world. (laughs) So this is the mentality I came to Lebanon with, to save Lebanon. (laughs) Well, it didn't work out. (laughs) You grow up and you realize. When you're young you think you can save, you think you can do something, people will listen to you. I've been here for five years now and I've grown up. People don't listen to you, and you can't save the world. But you can always take a chance on what you believe in. You have to take a chance. I wish I was more of a leader so that I could influence people to take a chance.

What else? I'm trying to think of something interesting. (pause) When I said that I immersed myself in their [American] culture, it wasn't completely so. I remember going there at fifteen. It was a completely different culture, completely. Being fifteen here was different then from being fifteen now. Because of the war we couldn't ever go out. I never had -- you are three years younger, you might have had it -- I never had the chance to date, to go out to parties, the normal teenage life. We were extra innocent because we had to be back home, because of the curfew -- not our parents' curfew, the war curfew. I remember that in the United States I was invited to a party and I went. I remember, um, first of all everybody got drunk. They were all only sixteen and they were drinking. It was a birthday party and the girl's parents, as a present, gave her a male stripper! As a present! Imagine a fifteen year old from Lebanon thinking, "What is going on?". It was a big shock. In that kind of thing I didn't immerse myself. Also I had to take a stand against certain things. And then my college life -- I insisted on living in the dorms although my parents were only twenty minutes away. It was maybe silly, to go to the dorms. But I insisted, one day I just said I'm going. The first year, I'd lived at home. Then I decided that if I were ever going to get the full experience, I have to live in a dorm and see what it's like. It's once in a lifetime. I'm only twenty-one and I'm going to enjoy it. I remember I just applied, and my parents didn't know about it. They were going and coming between the States and the Gulf - that's where my father was working -- so I said, "Oh, I'm moving out to the dorms, good-bye!" (laughs) My mother took it well. At first my father said, "Why, why?" then he also accepted. So I moved to the dorms and it was a wonderful experience. I miss it. I was sorry to graduate. Not for studying that much but for the life. You learn a lot.

I went to the University of Maryland. There were 45,000 students. We were five hundred people in a classroom. The professor was a little person up ahead with a microphone. You learn how to learn. Nobody is spoon-feeding you. You sit there and you can't raise your hand, who's going to raise their hand in front of five hundred people? So you really learn how to depend on yourself. I don't think it's so much that you learn about the world, it's more you learn about people, about how to be independent. Is this the kind of thing you want?

I have very, very, very loving parents, wonderful parents. If they weren't wonderful, I wouldn't be living here. Because it's difficult when you finish college and come back home, you have to adjust to your parents all over again after you've been independent. But my parents are very - - basically they have their lives and I have my life. But we live together. And I lead completely my own life. They don't interfere and I don't interfere. We just leave messages for each other, where we are, in case something happens. Definitely if they were the type that would interfere and ask me questions, I think I would have said, "Okay, this is my life". If you think about it, in the States, most people move out at twenty-one, they don't come back. Here we stay with our parents. So if the parents aren't understanding, to accommodate and understand each other, it's difficult. I don't think I would have survived. Thanks to them I am surviving. I have an older sister. No brother. I always wished for a brother, always. When I was younger, I used to pretend I had a brother, an older brother.

Picture Credit: Mona Eid

If I'm going to survive in Lebanon, one of the things I really want to do is get a piece of land away from everybody, and build a small house without cutting down a single tree, and live there around the trees, because I need nature. There is no nature here. The only nature I can get is to come here to the American University. And I'm lucky that I can come in here. Most people can't come. Now I'm going crazy because there's nowhere for children to play. The other day I was at the Sana'ya Public Garden and I was so touched. I saw this old, old man sitting on a bench. He was just watching people. It's this tiny park, they just sit there and look at the trees and look at people. Where can they go? That's it, the Sana'ya Garden. Old people aren't going to the mountains to look at trees. Anyway now even the mountains don't have trees. This is another thing that is upsetting me. I can pick up and leave anytime I want, or go to the American University. But the poor people, I feel so sorry for them. And I hate this new class that has emerged, the nouveaux riches. I hate them because they are so selfish. They flap their money and they flap themselves, it's horrible. There are these poor people and the nouveaux riches are showing off. Things like that. It's for them I stay in this country, not for the rich. Seriously, I'm writing for these people. One day, somebody will listen. We must have parks, a clean environment. Maybe it's becoming boring because I am only giving my opinions?

Michelle: Don't worry . You're saying interesting things.

Reem: I wish the world would think like you. I look at the old pictures of Beirut and I feel so frustrated. I feel I was born too late, does that make sense? I should have been born in the last century, definitely. Or in the 1920s, 1930s, maximum. When I see pictures of old Beirut I want to belong there, with the people there, not now. I always have this feeling. I think a lot of people do actually. They think that this is progress, when they build high-rise buildings, but it isn't progress. It's so frustrating! Here they are, going through what the West went through forty years ago. Eventually they will become aware. But by that time they will have spoilt everything. The trees, there's nothing. It's all construction, construction. I feel dizzy, I'm going crazy with all this construction. I need some trees around me. I need it, and I'm sure everybody needs it. I think this is why people are always yelling at each other. They're so stressed. Seriously there is no place to go and calm down, just look at trees, don't you agree? You need people who fight for it. There are a handful of activists who fight, fight, fight. I know them, I interview them all the time. They're doing their best. But we need a government that understands, not just constantly doing construction. In my line of work I come across all these people who are trying so hard to improve the country, to make people aware of human rights and environment. But unless you have the government backing you, an aware government that knows that people need these things, I don't know how far they'll get, and I get upset for them. I'm very opinionated. Shut me up, I will shut up! (laughs)

Michelle: I don't want to shut you up, I want you to talk more.

Reem Haddad

Reem: Let's get away from opinions. I think everybody like me -- have you ever lived outside the country? -- it's difficult for people, sixteen to twenty-four, these are formative years - you form your opinions, and when you're between two cultures you get lost. There was a period when I didn't know, was I American or was I Lebanese? What am I exactly here? And what applies to where? Here in Lebanon, there is a difference really, you have to find your own niche. But here it's all about power, people are constantly after power, power is driving me crazy. Once I interviewed somebody who had just been appointed somewhere, and the power had already gotten to him. A few weeks before he was nothing, and now he was showing off. I thought, oh God, I've never seen power affect people this way. I'm sure it happens in the US. But here they just don't hide it. (pause) I'm trying to think of some recollections.

Michelle: You've been to so many places. It takes an effort, but I am sure you'll think of something.
Reem: I told you about the party in the US when I was fifteen. (pause) I won't talk about my childhood in the war, it was the same as everyone. Recollections -- well I enjoyed high school in the US a lot. I've always loved the theater. As a kid, I didn't think of it as 'theater', I thought of it as 'Broadway'. I wanted to be a Broadway actress. This was my dream, I'm going to be on Broadway no matter what. It wasn't just a dream, it was an obsession. All the musicals, I listened to them over and over again. I spent my childhood listening to musicals. I'd go to my room, shut the door and put on the music. I pretended it's me, I'm singing this song. This started at the age of -- it started in the US at school, I played in a musical called 'Annie', ever heard of it? It's about a little girl. I was about ten and Annie was ten. After I saw it, [I thought] I'm going to be on Broadway! Nothing can stop me, I'll be on Broadway. So I really - - it was a dream, an obsession. It wasn't healthy. (laughs)

But I went to the US, and in the US, by then, you could have this dream at ten, but you could also be taking tap-dancing lessons. By the time I got there and got myself around to it, I auditioned for everything. I used to read the papers and audition for everything. I didn't make it to Broadway, I didn't make it to my high school production. (laughs) I ended up -- my high-school was great for me -- they look at the child to see what would make that person think, and they realized that I liked theater and singing and things like that. So in my schedule, they incorporated a theater lesson. I remember I had lessons like chemistry, and in the middle I had to go to my singing lesson. It was great. They did a lot. I acted in 'The Chorus Line', it's a musical, but for kids. There in high-school, I got a little of my frustrations out, I was able to do theater and dance. I was able, finally able to do something of what I wanted. And of course, I did the usual things, the prom, which we don't have here. The prom and Valentine dances and all these things that they do. So these are happy memories of high school. Definitely easier than Lebanese schools, education-wise.

Then college years, my recollections are -- okay, I had to work very hard, because there were so many students in the classes and sometimes I couldn't understand. I didn't have the nerve - - I'm not like that, no I felt self- conscious. That's how I learned to use the library. I discovered it. I had to find out what this guy is saying, so go look in the library. That's when I developed a love for libraries. I love libraries -- put me in a room full of books! I go crazy. I could spend days. Every time I go to the US for a vacation, there's a bookshop with three floors. Put me there and leave me for days! Here, we don't have that many bookshops. Here you can't buy books, they're so expensive. And there are no public libraries. I miss that, I miss having a public library. I love looking at all the books. You can just borrow them and return them. It's so simple.

Michelle: Can you tell me again, you first left at nine?
Reem: I was seven. Actually I turned seven on the airplane. Then at the age of nine I came back. Then I left again at fifteen, just like now in August.

If you want to know the woman I admire most, it's my grandmother. She has passed away. She was a graduate of the Beirut University College. In those days it was rare for women to go to university. She was a graduate and she was very strong. She married young, and her husband, who was much older, died and left her with two babies. She raised them by herself - - in those days that was difficult. She was Palestinian, she worked at UNRWA. There were lots of men who asked to marry her, but she refused to marry anyone. Nobody could raise her daughters, only she. People came to help her with money -- all her brothers -- and she refused. She wanted her daughters to grow up and not owe anything, even to their uncles. Nobody should help her, she refused to owe anyone anything, or to feel, "I have to be nice to this person because I owe him money". And this I admire. I think it's wonderful that she was so strong. In those days women -- we're talking about a long time ago -- women used to depend on men. She refused to. She was a feminist. When I was younger, I considered her a feminist. "Why do I need a man?" In those days, not only did she study but she worked to raise her two children. Now we think it's normal but then it was rare. She lost her man when they were kicked out of Palestine, during her exodus. She left everything behind. All this she did on her own. It's been six years since she passed away. The problem is, when you're young, you don't appreciate the people around you. You don't look at them and say wow! It was later that I discovered that, my God! -- now if she were alive -- I mean it's so frustrating that you're old, and you understand, and now she's not there. But there's

> "If you want to know the woman I admire most, it's my grandmother"

something. When I was younger I did realize, but more for fun, I said, "Do write your life!". I was thinking more about the Palestinian exodus than about her as a woman. I said, "I will write it for you, I will write a book about you". So she sat there and she wrote. She wrote a lot. I was supposed to edit it. I never did. I remember before she died she said, "Well, aren't you going to write my book?" At that time I was in university, I had my own studies, I didn't have time. But I still have her papers. I still have it all and one day -- I need to take a vacation -- I'll edit them. She was wonderful. I didn't really appreciate it then. She never bought anything for herself, it was all for her daughters. But the thing that impresses me is her refusal of help. I am like that. I hate to be in debt. This is very important. She is my ideal woman. What else shall I talk about? Is that okay?

"There was a period when I didn't know, was I American or was I Lebanese"

Michelle: It's very good.
Reem: My life story ! (sarcastically). I don't think about having a 'life story'. I don't like to talk about myself, I'm not used to it. Especially not in our house, where my mother believes in modesty. She has the old mentality where we must all be modest. You never talk about yourself, never. You don't care about appearances as long as you are clean and neat. We don't care about beauty, we don't care about these things. We are a Protestant family, we have the Protestant ethic. We don't talk about ourselves, we don't like vanity. We must always be simple.

I remember something that might be interesting. When I first went to the US, we had a Green Card and we had to go to the US every year to keep the Green Card. So once we went and I started feeling edgy, okay, now what? My parents were going from museum to museum, and being the ignorant person that I was at thirteen, I got a little bored. "Let's put her in a camp." We didn't know anything about it but it turned out to be the best experience I could have had. Because it was a black camp. They were all black and I was the only white - if you want to call me white. I don't think we're white, we are Mediterranean. It was an incredible experience. I went there for a week, every single day with them, every single day. And if I had any racism - I don't think I had but maybe I did -- it was incredible, we became really good friends. This was an important thing in my life.

Michelle: What do your parents do?
Reem: My father is a doctor, Dr. Fuad Haddad, he's an anaesthesiologist. My mother was teaching English at BUC. Now she is the executive secretary of the Joint Christian Council Committee which cares for Palestinian refugees. I get my love of social work from her. Actually from both of them. From my father, I got more of the -- he doesn't procrastinate, he wants things done now. I'm like that. From my mom I get my love of social work, and love of trees, and love of old houses. When I was little we had to stop and say, "Look at this old house, how beautiful!" All this comes back you know. "Look at this wonderful mountain, how green!" Now I notice all this when I write. It comes back from them. Look, look, look! (laughs) I looked so much. (pause) You want more recollections? Things that have affected my life? (pause). I think that's about it, really the things that have affected me.

Michelle: How do you think Lebanon has been as a place for women to live in?
Reem: I think, compared to other Arab countries, Lebanon is great. Women definitely have a presence here, definitely. But I'll tell you something. I'm very sad about this new generation. I speak as if I am fifty. (laughs) But seriously, the people who have reached their twenties or are in their teens, women, they focus on looks and not on brains, or what you can achieve in life. I don't know what's happening to them. The other day, my sister came from America for a visit. She was telling me that the women here look like prostitutes. What happened? I don't know. Now the women here, they reach eighteen or nineteen, and they only focus on how they look. Too much, it's an extreme. Well, everybody cares [about looks], but this is an extreme. Nothing about what you can achieve in life, nothing. Notice now all the modeling shows, Miss this and Miss that. Fine, the looks. But then what? What have you achieved? What do you stand for? What?

So I think, honestly, women are going backward. When you only care about how you look, wear tight clothes, and to show off, you're going backward. This is what I think about women here. They could achieve so much. I don't know where the fault is, whether the parents, or the schools, or what. Am I making sense? They're not being encouraged to feel that you can do something. My God, you - we - can change the rules, maybe, a bit. Go for it! You can do anything, everything, better than a man. We don't compare ourselves to men, why should we? We have our own standard, and we can go higher. I don't know what's wrong with them. My generation -- I think we're the last, or maybe yours -- they're more down to earth and practical. They care about education, and they work very hard and want to get somewhere, whether it's a career or something else. Here, now, they just go to college to find a boyfriend, and then get married, and just hang up the degree. Don't go to college! But they could do so much more, so much more. They're smart and they can do it. I don't know who is -- they are degrading the value of women. I don't know why. I haven't figured it out yet. They think freedom is to dress up and go out. This isn't really freedom. Freedom is thinking and fighting for what you want, achieving, being somebody in this life. And feeling that you lived, and made a difference in this world. The world should be different because somebody has lived here. Show it, do something!

Recorded and transcribed by Michelle Obeid.

Bushra Haffar: State Employee, Ministry of Tourism

Picture Credit: Debby Saoud

(Born in 1938, in Tripoli; currently living in Beirut; recorded in her office in the Ministry. Language: English.)

You want to know who I am? I am Bushra Ra'fat Karim, born in Tripoli in 1938. I am the fourth child in the family, three girls and one boy. I'm the youngest. My mother died when she was thirty eight years. She was beautiful. I remember the day she died. I was thirteen. I saw her dying and that was a very hard experience for me. The doctor was with us, but he couldn't do anything. It was the worst shock of my life. I could not believe it. But she had been suffering all her life.

We lived with our father. I was good at school. When I got the Certificat I was only ten or eleven. Nobody could pass the Certificat exam at that age. Then I reached the Baccalaureate and I took my two Baccalaureate degrees in mathematics and in literature, and succeeded in both. I remember that at that time it was good to have both. My family was so proud of me! I was the only girl among seventeen boys, and we were from the North, I was the only girl to pass the Baccalaureate. Then I continued, I did philosophy, I didn't do any more mathematics because I always wanted to do sociology or psychology - in the humanities these are important. The next year I did my philosophy exam and passed it. I was sixteen at the time.

My family had lots of projects for me to continue my studies, to become a doctor, etcetera. They didn't at all want me to get married, they wanted me to continue my studies. But at seventeen or eighteen I met my husband - he's my first cousin - though at that time I wasn't thinking about marriage. Out of pride or maybe — but it was the most perfect thing of my life. He was fifteen years older, but he knew the minute he met me that I was going to be his wife, and he followed me day after day, and month after month until — I was too young for love at the time. I looked at him and saw that he was a good man, and that I could live with him. So we got married when I was eighteen. My family wasn't happy at all, but at least my father blessed our marriage; my husband is his nephew, so he was with us. My aunt, sisters, and all of them were against this marriage. My mother was dead at that time. I married this man, and you know it's funny to speak about my plan to continue my studies at that time, but it had to be so. He was working in Saudi Arabia, and getting good money. But he had to stop and return to Lebanon so that I could continue my studies. He didn't have a higher degree at that time so he was ready to make the sacrifice, and leave his job and salary and come back to Lebanon. He left everything and came back and I helped him to continue his studies. We stayed a year in Tripoli, I had to finish school.

In 1957, we left for America where we settled in order to study and get our BA and MA, whatever. He took up electronics and electrical engineering, and I went to a college in Indiana which was equivalent to a university of today. I was eighteen then, I enrolled in that college just to study sociology and psychology. But after three months I got pregnant with my son, and that was another shock in my life as I was not expecting that, I was too young to know that I should have taken precautions. Anyway, I got pregnant, and we both decided to have the child, and Nassim was born in 1958. I had to take care of him and continue with university as well. My husband went on with his two engineering degrees, and was also preparing to go for his master's. But by then I was fed up, I was too young to accept life in the United States, I was lonely, and I didn't really fit in American society at that time. Because you know, I was from Lebanon, from Tripoli, for me life there was a shock, completely different, nothing like the life I had been leading before, when I was the youngest in the family and everyone was taking care of me. There I had to do everything by myself. I had to bring up the baby and didn't know anything about it, so it was very, very difficult. I remember I used to cry with my son. At the hospital they saw that it was difficult for me to take care of him, so they sent me a nurse from the Welfare. They sent me an old woman who used to come for three or four months to take care of the baby, and show me how to bathe him, and how to feed him, until I could do it.

My husband was very busy, he couldn't be with me as well because he had to study day and night. So I had to manage, and believe me it wasn't easy when you don't have anybody, neither maid nor mother, nor sister nor friend, nobody at all. So this lady left feelings inside my heart because she was always loving and taking care of the child, until I got used to my son. He eventually became an American citizen and really profited from that because, thanks to this nationality, he now has a permanent job in the United States. I stayed there until my son was three. Then I told my husband that I'm lonely in this small village in

Indiana, it's too much for me. I returned to Beirut and started managing my house there. I left Tripoli when I was seventeen and never lived there again.

My daughter was born in 1960, and now she is living in Paris. When I came back with two children I still had this feeling in my heart that my education should go on, and that I'll always nag about this if I don't continue. So my husband said, "Why don't you go back to university?" I remember my daughter was very young then, only two months old. I didn't go to the American University, I went to the Lebanese University. That was much easier for me as I could go in the afternoons, from 4 to 8 pm or 5 to 9 pm when my husband would be back from his work. I didn't have a maid at that time, so my husband would stay with the children, and I continued my studies. I sat for my Psychology/Sociology degree, I was eager to study and I got a 'mention bien'. I did my exam papers in French, as originally my education was in French, it was when I went to the States that I started acquiring English as a second language. In the LU, I used the three languages, and this helped me a lot. So I took my degree, and wanted to go for a master's or a doctorate, but my husband said, "That's enough, now we have a family." And I too thought it would be too much for me to do a doctorate, although I really wanted to do it, and I even enrolled at the university to continue for maitrise in Sociology, but then I found out that it was very difficult.

After I took my degree I thought, why don't I work? I'll get a maid to take care of the children. My professor, the one who taught me statistics at the LU, said, "Why don't you fill out an application to do statistics at the Lebanese University? You can always use this knowledge." I said, "Why not?" so I did.

Zeina: When was that?
Bushra: In 1964. At the beginning I did four months at the airport doing interviews, asking people what they like and what they don't like about Lebanon. But then I didn't like this work. At least I liked it, but not with those people, because sometimes they want to answer and sometimes they don't want to answer. I wanted to quit, but there was somebody here at the Ministry of Tourism who said, "We will take you in." In 1964, I started working, first in the airport and then here in the Public Relations Department. I really loved it. I served a lot, I did many jobs. I think this is what I always wanted to do, public relations, to be in contact with people, to serve my country. I'm doing a job that I love to do, contacts with everybody, foreigners, Lebanese, business men, different kinds of people. I have been so long in this job that I learned a lot, and I love it. Every time my husband says it's time to quit, I say no, I love it. You know we were really like a family, we respected each other, we were working as a team not as individuals, there was no competition at any level. Now I'm doing production. Everything that is printed at the Ministry of Tourism, such as lists, posters, etcetera, all these things come from my department. Many of them I do myself.

Zeina: Are you the head of the department?
Bushra: Yes I am. I don't need to go on, because of the money. And then I say, why not? My children have grown up now and they have their families. I have three children and they are all making a success of their lives, hamdillah. I have one in the States you know, the 'American', his citizenship was a blessing. During the war, our house in Beirut was always a target for shells, we lived on the twelvth floor, and we got three shells on our house. My son was young at the time, only seventeen years old, so we said, let's send him to the States. We had forgotten about his American nationality. So we said, why don't going down to the American embassy and find out about it? When we went there, within fifteen minutes they had found out everything about him, and renewed his passport, and said, "Whenever you want you can send him to the States." That's what we did, we wrote to a friend of ours in the States asking him to find a university where our son could continue his studies - at that time he had finished his Baccalaureate at the International College - so he left for the States in 1975. He applied to Minnesota University, and started studying business. He finished his BA, and applied to Columbia University where he did his masters in Finance. Then through Columbia University he was accepted as a 'Banquier', then at the Bank of New York. Now he has moved to Chase Manhattan where he has a very nice job, he's very satisfied. I am sorry only for one thing, I don't expect he'll come back to Lebanon, he's happy in his life, and has adapted so well to the life of New York. I can see that we have lost him - I don't have the exact word for it - I mean it's a loss when you don't have your family beside you all the time. My daughter Dania was a top student at the American University - all of them are very smart. But she got married to a very nice man, a broker, and they are living in Paris. She has got used to life in Paris, but she can't work because they have two children, and she has to take care of them. So Dania isn't working, and I always feel upset in my heart that, with all her intelligence - she was a top student - she isn't using it. Her husband is going to be transferred to Abu Dhabi very soon, and I am hoping and praying that over there she will be able to do something with her life. She can give a lot, Dania. My youngest daughter, Rayya, is working at the Ministry of Finance with a group of experts who are working for the UN and the World Bank. She is very happy with her work. She is married to a doctor, and has two children, two adorable girls. I am really blessed, at least I did something from the family side; I have three children who are very happy.

My husband sacrificed a lot, you know, both of us we sacrificed a lot for our children. When we were starting our life, we didn't have a lot of money, our income was very limited, but we did our best to send them to the best schools, and then to continue their higher education. We thought this should come before anything else, before a house, before a car.

Zeina: Now what about your work?
Bushra: Work — at the beginning I was here at the National Council of Tourism. At that time, in 1964, the Council of Tourism was linked to the Ministry of Finance, and we worked

independently of the Ministry of Tourism. We use to do all the promotion for the Ministry of Tourism. There were a lot of things we wanted to do, but you know our money used to come from the Ministry of Finance. At that time I worked in the Research Department, we used to make statistical studies and, you know, information about hotels and restaurants and cafes. Then after that - for a couple of years, my boss was Mr Michael al-Khoury - I was sent to work with the Minister of Finance, who was at that time Dr Elias Saba. I worked with him as an assistant for couple of years. Then, after Dr Saba left, another Minister came, Mr Fouad Nafaa. I worked with him for a year and a half - yes for the Minister! - and then I was sent to the Minister of Tourism. Then he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs. He asked me if I would go with him there. Since I was always circulating, I thought why not? He said, "Do something new, do something different, meet people, see everything." That time I was wrong. I went to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but I didn't like it there. I had to see people, to prepare the program, it was interesting, but I couldn't go on doing it. After Mr Nafaa left Foreign Affairs, I left and came back to the National Council of Tourism. This was changed after 1982 when Mr Sami Maroun came. At that time they gave him the National Council, which they changed to the Council of External Economic Relations. It became more economic and business than tourism. We worked with Mr Maroun for a couple of weeks, and then again it was changed, and we went back to being the 'National Council of Tourism', working on brochures, pamphlets, and so on. Then they said, "Okay, let's go back to the Ministry of Tourism", and they cancelled the National Council. There were several changes, but I never changed my field, it was always production work that I did. Even when we were the Council of External Economic Relations, I did the same work, but they added economic affairs. I'm not alone, we are a team, but what I do is always related to the tourists' need for information. We do brochures, pamphlets, cassettes, gadgets, posters, anything that the tourist might ask for.

Picture Credit: Debby Saoud

I'm still working. Sometimes I think I should quit, but then I say, why? I am still in good shape, I can work, I can still give. My children, my family, they need a lot of me. I give them as much attention as I can. When they are away there's no problem, but when they are here they give me a hard time, because then I have to fly, I have to work at the office, and I have to take care of the little ones and the big ones! And of course, my husband! He complains sometimes, but I manage. I think my social life is alright. Although work and the family are very important, I still manage to have a social life. Almost every day I do something. I have a maid. My husband gives me my freedom and I'm very happy about it. I love my country a lot. To tell you the truth I don't like to live in the States. I always felt like a foreigner there, and I always wanted to come back. Maybe I was too young then to appreciate it. Even now when they tell me to come – we have a Green Card - but we never wanted to live in the States. I never felt that I could adapt to the life over there. I love people, I love children, I love to go to out on the streets and talk to somebody, to a shopkeeper, to a friend, to the concierge, to anyone. In the States I felt I was alone. Here there's my family, and my friends. When my son was born I wanted to come back, my loneliness left a bad impression on me. Now I cannot think of being outside Lebanon. During the war everybody wanted to leave, but I said, "Alright, I will go away for three months," but I never wanted to stay away. We had a Green Card, and I turned it down. I also had a French Green Card, but after a year we let it lapse. I said, if I'm not happy outside Lebanon, why should I go? People said that it was crazy to let them go. With my children, it's something else, when they left they were very young. But older people, how can they forget where they belong? How can they forget their memories, and life, and patrimony? For me, it's important to belong, and I never belonged in France or in the States, that's why I always came back.

The time I spent in the United States, I don't have good memories of it but I had experiences there that gave me strength. During the war here, when I was under the shells, when we didn't have enough of anything - water, food, bread - my husband says how strong I was. I tell you this is the experience I gained from the States. I was seventeen, and I had a hard time, and I learned to depend upon myself. I saw how the Americans live over there, it's tough on everybody. Women there have to work hard, and they have to run for everything, and most of them don't have enough money. Many people imagine that life is beautiful there, but it isn't. People have to work very hard for their living, they have to run all the time, they have to compete. That experience helped me a lot. In Tripoli at seventeen I wasn't strong at all. I got strength from living in the States.

I'm a happy person, I don't complain. Lebanese always

complain. There are too many beautiful things in this country that nobody appreciates. My goodness! When I see how people live, especially women, here they're living so well, they can't find anything like that outside you know! French or American women, when they're old, they live at home in loneliness. Their families and their children don't come to see them. It's not like here, a friend, a neighbor, the man in the street, anybody can visit you, talk, help you, maybe if you need money, he can give it to you. That feeling you don't find outside and the Lebanese don't appreciate what they have. They don't know what they miss when they are outside. If I was in the States, my children would be American, they wouldn't have time for me, so what shall I do? Here you never think about that. Even the loneliest person has somebody who looks after him, or a friend, or a neighbour. God, we should appreciate it! Human relations are the most important things in life, and we have it, and others don't have, it or not to the same degree. We live in groups, we live in families, we live in tribes - I always thought of this as beautiful. (pause)

The war was tough on us like everybody else. It was really tough. For example, in 1982, we were living on the twelfth floor in a building on Corniche al-Mazraa. On the twelfth floor we were exposed to everywhere. Two rooms were destroyed by shelling. I remember one time I was speaking to a friend on the phone, I can't remember the date, and a big shell landed in my house, it was only two meters away from me. My friend on the line thought I'd been killed, and my daughter who was in the other room thought so too. It was the most horrible day of my life. I was screaming like hell. I ran to my daughter Dania who was in the other room. We started running down the stairs, we didn't know what else to do, so we kept running. Another shell hit our house when we were almost on the ninth floor. My youngest daughter panics whenever she remembers those days. Thank God when we talk about it, we talk of sadness. It was a terrible war, and stupid! A stupid war!

My father died when I was in the States in 1958. I remember when I called to speak to him, I was out of my mind, when I knew. My husband took me out for a drive, I was screaming, screaming. I was very attached to my father. After my mother died, he was the only person left to us. I was screaming, and the policeman stopped us, he thought that my husband was beating me. My husband had to explain that this was nothing to do with him, I'd got news about the death of my father. I was out of my mind. The shock was terrible, being away alone, I wanted to be with the family but they told me, "It's too late, they have buried him, why should you go back now?"

In 1960 Dania was born. I was pregnant when I was in the States, but I came back here to deliver because it was better to be near my family. I remember in the States I used to wait for the mailman, me and my brother, every single day - funny how these memories come back - to see who would get the mail first. The mailman used to come around ten o'clock, and I wouldn't move from the window until he came to deliver the mail. I always waited for letters from my sisters, my aunt, I always asked them to write. But people don't write, and when I received a letter it was the biggest joy of my life to hear their news.

Now I am where I belong. I feel bad that people are emigrating. Some of them adapt, but I couldn't adapt. Maybe now I could take it better than before. But I feel lost alone, with nobody around me. If I die or if I live, if I'm happy or if I'm sad, I need to share it with somebody. Now every time I travel alone I have this feeling recurring in my heart, as if I'm leaving Lebanon, even though I know I'm coming back. Even at my age I haven't overcome it. Sometimes I ask myself, why? But that's the way it is. We cannot change how we are. I am a very affectionate person, I can get along with anybody, I can forget their mistakes, I accept them as they are . Everybody has his bad side and his good side. If you look at the good side, you see he's a wonderful person, why not! Many people here always look at the bad side. I don't understand this. If you are open to them, you can make friends more, you can challenge more, you live a better life and you enjoy life more!

You find many people who regret their lives, who say that if they had their life again they would do differently. I never had this feeling. For instance, my choice of my husband. Although it needed a lot of courage, it was against my family, I think I made the right choice. My husband is a wonderful person, really, he has character, he is loving and caring, and he isn't selfish – most men are selfish — with him the family always comes first, I and the children, and the family. He is always last. We are the ones who are admired and cherished, he is ready to sacrifice everything for us. Though my family did not agree at the time, I think I chose the right person for the children and for myself. Only one thing is a problem, we're cousins, at that time I didn't know one shouldn't marry cousins. But thank God the children are fine, they have no problems. But they always say, no more cousin marriages in the family! I don't regret anything. To get a doctorate, maybe! But it wouldn't have given me more than the experience I had in my work, so I don't really regret it.

"During the war everyone wanted to leave... but I never wanted to stay away"

My husband likes to read, he loves music. We all love music in our family, my son plays the piano, we love music, operas, concerts, and the theatres. When we go to New York we always book in advance. The children play music all the time – classical music, Arabic music. I'm ashamed of it, but I didn't have the chance to listen to Arabic music, they tell me Umm

Kulthoum, or Wadih al-Safi or — I listen to them sometimes. But we all love classical music.

Reading! I read all the magazines and newspapers from beginning to end. The children read a lot, my husband too, myself from time to time, but not big books. I have the grandchildren to look after, and believe me it is difficult to find time. Sometimes I get fed up. Ah! I could kick them out, I ask them to go away. But the feeling that you get when you see your children have their own children, you can't compare this feeling with anything else. It is a wonderful feeling that when you pass away, you know that part of yourself is still living, and carrying on what you have done.

Work - I will keep on working as long as I can. Maybe I should have done something that would make more money for me, because the job here is very badly paid. But then what if you have more money and you aren't satisfied? I always had my husband working, and whatever I earn is just my pocket money, I had the luxury of working for satisfaction in what I'm doing.

Zeina: What else do you remember? Maybe your life in Tripoli?
Bushra: Tripoli was a very conservative city, and still is. I remember my mother was a very liberal person, she was beautiful, she was one of the first women in the 1950s who didn't wear the veil. Though she wasn't educated - women then weren't getting educated, maybe a certificate or so - but she was open-minded and always wanted the best education for us. Her brother was very conservative. My mother would say, "I want to take off the veil." My uncle would say, "She's a woman, what does she consider herself?" But she was strong, she would say, "I have a husband, and he will order me what to do, not my brother, nor anyone of my family. I won't put on the veil, and I won't let my daughters do it." When she sent us to school to the Orthodox School in Tripoli the same thing happened.

It's very difficult to talk about myself, believe me. I got married at seventeen and never lived in Tripoli again. Now I belong more to Beirut than to Tripoli. But whenever there's a way to help, maybe make a brochure about Tripoli, I'm always ready to do it. I was born there, it's the city of my father, my mother, my great grandparents. I feel related to Tripoli, but not as much as to Beirut. Now I feel Beirut is my home. I love to go back to Tripoli, to the old city, but not to live there, it was my childhood, nothing more. Although Beirut is an ugly city, yet there is something attractive about it. It's a cement city, it's ugly, but there's a special attraction. We all ask ourselves what there is in this city that makes people come and come again. It's ugly, there is no greenery, no scenery, nothing. But once people get used to the life here, they become attached to it. Sometimes I compare it to New York. New York is a hundred times more interesting, but Beirut has something. We have exhibitions, music, shopping, whatever you want. When you see other cities, they are nothing compared to New York, because there you have everything. That is why I say that maybe Beirut, maybe, is a little bit like New York. Beirut has everything - festivals, exhibitions, concerts. There's Baalbek, Byblos, Beiteddine, the small villages, you find something to do the whole year round. Go to any other country in the world, you won't find what we have here. It's this active life that makes us attached to Lebanon. Well, I don't want to talk about the war. We were fed up with it. Everybody suffered. Were you here?

Zeina: Yes.
Bushra: I didn't leave either. We had a really hard time. I remember once we had an accident when there was the Israeli blockade. They had closed the city, we were in the Western part, they wanted to remove the Palestinians. I remember that we had no water, no electricity, no fruits. Fruits! We didn't have any kind of fruit. After seventeen days of that, I don't know how it happened, I said to my husband, "Look, look, there are pears!" So he ran down to the street and got us a kilo of pears. It was a feast for us, a holiday (laughs). I should have written my memoirs of the war. Once, I remember, the Israelis were shelling the Palestinians. Because we were living on the top floor we could see it all, we could see were they were hitting. The next day was a holiday, a'eed al-adha. I said to my husband, "We're sick and tired of home, let's go and eat in a restaurant." We decided to go and see the area where they had shelled yesterday, because we knew many people living there. At the time we had a small red Fiat. My husband was driving, I was sitting next to him, and my daughter Dania and a friend of the family, Fadi, were in the back. We drove down to Tareek al-Jadeedeh, we know the area very well. We were saying, "Oh, look here! Oh, look there!" We were pointing at the bombed houses. We didn't know it, but a car followed us, up to Verdun Street. We could have died that day - the streets were empty, there was nobody out except people like us who wanted to look around. So this car blocked our way, they told us to follow them. I said to my husband, "Follow who?" He said, "I don't know, they're militia." They took us to an empty building that served as their headquarters. I know now who they were but I don't want to mention their names. They told us to go inside, we went. We had to go through a big corridor, each one of us was put in a separate room. They accused us of being spies for the Israelis. They wanted to kill us, really, they took each one of us alone, my husband alone, my daughter alone. They were interviewing us, one by one, to see if we were saying the same thing. After three hours of interrogation they let us out, they said if we had not been one family we wouldn't have stayed alive. Later I found out who they were. After that they continued to follow us. We went to Al-Basha on Bliss Street to have lunch after all we had been through, and they followed us. They were three or four militiamen, they followed us home, and stayed there till the next morning to see if we really were one family. Now when we talk about it we laugh, but it was really frightening, we thought our end had come. We started reading the fatiha (laughs). It was a terrible, terrible war. When the war planes were bombing the reservoirs on the roofs, haram, Rayya was very young then, she used to cry and scream, "I'm going mad, I'm going mad." Anyway it is over now. I hope we will never have this again.

Recorded and transcribed by Zeina Misk

Khadija Herez, Resistance Activist

(Born in 1942, in Majdel Silm [South Lebanon]; currently living in Beirut's southern suburbs; recorded in her home. Language: colloquial/educated Arabic.)

Let me start with my childhood. Until seven, it was a happy childhood. We were in the South, and my mother and father were at home. I was the youngest. I was very indulged by my father, my mother, and my siblings, because I was the youngest. I mention this phase because it is related to certain social issues. Because after this stage - I said my childhood was happy - after I was seven, my father fell in love with another woman. Of course problems started at home, a phase of misery began. I would see my mother and father fighting, and for sure this upset me. I remember that I used to cry alone at night. The pillars of the family were shaken, because of the entry of another woman, of course a man changes his behavior with his wife and with his children as well. After this my mother brought us, and came to Burj Hammoud, [Beirut] because she did not accept to be with another woman, my father's second wife. We were together, my mother, my uncle and my older siblings. We lived in Burj Hammoud.

We started adjusting to the new atmosphere and I made friends. I became thirteen years old. I don't know if I have skipped some phases, I want to go back to childhood. The first phase, from five years and above — my brother was older than me, he was in school, my father didn't put me in school based on the idea that it's a loss for a girl to go to school - so this needs emphasis. The school was near our house. My brother used to go to school, and I would follow him. I was about six years old. I would follow him and stand behind him in front of the door. My brother would enter the school and I would stand and watch the children, how they stood in line and sang the national anthem. I would memorize most of the songs, the national anthem, and all these things, until I got tired, and went home. Of course I would go back with 'a broken wing.' When my father saw this, he would say, "Khalas! Next year I'll put her in school, haram, Khadija is intelligent." He saw that I memorized the poems given to the children, and my brother did not. My brother would hit me because I memorized and he didn't. Every year he would say, "Next year", and I would dream of the coming year. I would dream of my satchel. That phase was full of dreams. Every year there was this dream that was broken. It was broken under the pressure of social customs. Even if my father wanted to put me in school, my uncle would say, "You want to teach girls? Tomorrow she'll get married and leave". So he taught the boy and didn't teach me. It seems that I had persistence, that I wanted to learn. When we stayed in Burj Hammoud, it so happened that - God Almighty was preparing the circumstances - we stayed near a school. I was in my twelfth year. I insisted to my mother that I wanted to go to school. In any possible way I wanted to learn. If you saw the film Zahrat al-Kandoul, I would walk and look at the billboards or any book, I wanted to read come what may. Once I was telling this to my mother and she was sitting thinking. She said, "I want to speak to the teacher, maybe he'll teach Khadija."When she said these words, I felt that she opened a path for me. She said, "But we need money, because this is a private school." Our income was very small. My older siblings worked. So I told her I would work at the tailor's, there was a tailor that specialized in brides' dresses, I would work and earn money in order to go to school. My mother agreed. She was happy for me to be educated, but found it difficult to pay. I went to the principal of the school, they were our neighbors. I sat in the administration office. I talked to him, and my excitement showed. He said, "That's it, come tomorrow and I will give you the books and you will learn." The next day, I went, I couldn't wait to go. When I got there I entered, he wanted to put me in first grade, because I didn't know anything. I went red and green and started sweating. I was tall for my age and they were very young, and they all stared at me (laughs). I felt very uncomfortable. I sat, the teacher was explaining, I was very nervous, and the atmosphere in the class was tense. I went out. I went to the teacher in the administration. He said, "What's wrong?" I said, "I don't know, it's very difficult, because the others are so young." He said, "It's alright, will you sit here, and I will teach you?" I said, yes. So in two or three days, I finished the ABCs.

Picture Credit: May Masri and Jean Chamoun

I studied for seventeen days, then my thyroid got infected. I was very weak. I went to the doctor, and I had a tonsillectomy. The doctor told my mother that she should take me to the South because of my health. My mother took me to the South. Now I began getting suitors, and the school phase was gone. But when anyone asks me, I don't say that all I've done is a literacy class, I say that I've taken my Baccalaureate. Yes, because I read and write as if I had. I have written for several magazines. I have also participated in several conferences, conferences for women in Iran and here in Lebanon. So my education was like that, seventeen days (smiles). I took my BA in seventeen days.

After that, like I said, just what any other girl might face, especially if she has any degree of good looks, the marriage demands start, persistently. Our environment is one that prefers to marry the girl off hastily - "Her marriage is her protection," ideas like that. So marriage was obligatory, by force that is. A

person came, and I did not want him, I did not want to marry him, but [my] parents insisted because he had a good name and a good family, things like that. They insisted, and there were many problems, and the marriage took place by force, and it lasted by force for sixteen years. But during those sixteen years I was always sad, always going back to my parents' house, and leaving it again. And these children came during these phases, in between the anger and the reconciliation, and his travels. I won't say anything about him except that we did not get along. Also marriage was imposed on me. It was imposed on me and I did not feel that there was anything in common between me and this person. So I began living in misery all over again. I got beyond the childhood misery after my father and mother were separated. I lived a phase of calmness and education and achievement. Then we started suffering again in the middle phase, if I can call it that. Finally a separation took place. In addition, after I was separated, there was a very big tragedy. He stopped me from taking my children. And of course when a woman is attached to her children and they are attached to her, it is tragic. The children and I all suffered. At the same time, despite all this suffering, I had to go every week to the South to see the children because they were there and I was here. I had no one to spend money on me, so I was also looking for work so as to keep myself, and be able to see my children and give them [money]. This, despite crying and suffering, because I had left my children. I could not continue with them, and staying away from them was very difficult. I suffered more than enough.

In this tragic situation, I had to look for work and learn. I enrolled in a nursing school and entered an institute that teaches typing and English. In the morning and evening I worked in the archives of Al-Wahda newspaper. There was a newspaper that was issued by the National Committees, I also worked in its archives, to cover my expenses and trip to see the children. This was the time when the political situation and the occupation of Palestine started engaging my thoughts. We were in Kuwait, my family and I, in 1967, during the June war. Of course I was following the news, minute by minute, second by second. It could be because I was living a life of deprivation, a life full of suffering and anxiety, maybe this pushed me to feel with other peoples - Palestinians, Vietnamese - my sympathy with them was above the usual. Whenever I heard that they had caught a young man in Palestine, or they had taken land or destroyed a house, I would feel a lot of pain. Or any country - Nicaragua, or any other country of the world - whenever I heard of oppressed people who are struggling for liberation, I would sympathize and interact, and even live with them, live with them in my imagination, in my house, with my children. I was living with them, and my dream started growing. I wanted to become a rebel with the rebels.

"They put a bag on my head and tied my hands behind my back"

I was like - young women dream about suitors - I was dreaming of how to become a rebel, how to go to Palestine, how to meet Abu Ammar, how my children will become fida'yyeen when they grow up, how we will live in the wild. I lived in these fantasies. When we came to Lebanon, and there was the disagreement between my husband and me in 1979, and we separated, it was like a chance to realize my dreams.This wasn't why I got a divorce, it was because the marriage was wrong from the beginning, there was no harmony between us, and I spent sixteen years of my life getting angry, and being reconciled, and divorcing, and returning together for the children's sake. This last separation was final because it was the third time. In the Islamic shari'a, after three divorces a woman cannot go back. So I freed myself for a period in order to build myself as a new person. I wanted to achieve my dreams of education, and of revolution. I never thought of marriage or of other things. So I affiliated with the National Committees. The National Committees were a group of Lebanese men and women, who worked socially, militarily and politically. We were separate from the Palestinian Resistance. The National Committees were Lebanese. There was also the Lebanese Students' Union. These were young men and women who were Lebanese and who wanted to liberate Palestine. I joined them. At the same time, as I told you, I entered a nursing school and an institute to learn language and typing. I started working on building myself. I worked with great enthusiasm, like someone who had been imprisoned and was let loose. It was as if I went out to the world all over again. I was involved in this political work among people who were striving to liberate their land. We participated in all these demonstrations, sit-ins, any voice was raised to demand the rights of people, I was one of the participants.

This is an introduction to a very sensitive and important part of my life, which was my capture. The Israelis captured me. Now we have reached the 1980s. In 1982 the Israeli invasion took place. Before the invasion, and after I started learning, I met a man - he is from our village and we are related - but what brought us together was our encounters at political meetings. There was mutual attraction and we got married. He was the political officer in charge of the second sector in the South, the middle sector. I was in Beirut. But he was in the National Committees. Thank God, we were compatible on every level, mentally and emotionally. We had a daughter who was the fruit of harmony and love. During this time, in 1982, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon happened.

After the Israeli forces entered Lebanon, they captured my husband. He was wanted from the beginning. They arrested him, with other people, they arrested many. I started working against the occupation, in every possible way. We would organize demonstrations, we would distribute leaflets, all

against the Israeli presence on Lebanese lands. They used the pretext of the PLO, and getting rid of the Palestinians, but that is not what they did. They took everybody. They did not discriminate, they invaded Lebanon and overdid it too.

So my husband was in detention, and I was working on the ground against the Israeli occupation. We had demonstrations, we demanded the liberation of the prisoners in Ansar, we demanded Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese lands. Because of these actions, I became followed by the Israelis. When there were demonstrations, I was the one leading them, and I would be shouting at their head. It was obvious that I was the organizer. As a result the Israelis started following me.

"In Nabatiyeh prison we had underground cells, it was a place where even animals could not be put"

To move to the subject of the men in Ansar [Israeli detention camp], we were organizing demonstrations to demand their liberation. There were around five thousand men. They arrested them in different ways, we can say savage and brutal. They entered houses in a brutal way, arrested many. Before I entered prison, they had taken five thousand men to Ansar camp. The situation in the detention camp was very bad. Ansar camp was on a hill side. They made the men sleep on the ground, on rocks, under tents. The prisoner would put his shoes under his head to sleep. At the beginning they were not allowed to leave the tents. Around twenty men in one tent, forced to stay all the time. Conditions among the prisoners were very bad. They had to put their head between their legs and their hands on top of their heads, three times a day, morning, noon and evening, so that the soldiers could come in and count them. They stayed like that for three months.

During this time, I was moving around in the South and organizing womens' demonstrations. There were no men to participate. We were clashing with the Israelis. We clashed more than once and I was injured. The crowd took me, that day they carried me to the Red Cross to treat my injuries. When we reached Sur, the Red Cross wasn't there. I said, "I don't allow you to touch my wounds until the person in charge in the Red Cross and the Press are present. I want my voice to reach the farthest place in the world." I was telling them this while I was bleeding. I climbed into a car. I did not let them touch me. Finally the person from the Red Cross came, and someone from Al-Nahar newspaper and Al-Safir, and I think someone from UNICEF. I spoke to them. I said, "They [Israelis] said that they invaded in order to stop Palestinian missiles from reaching Kiryat Shmona. Now they are sitting in the cafes on Hamra, and they have taken all our men and put them in prison." I had brought children who were carrying signboards, their fathers were in detention.They wrote on the signboards "I miss you, baba!" - touching, affecting words. Most of the prisoners were lawyers, teachers, or doctors and had nothing to do with [politics]. What is important is that we were able to reach out with our voices. I accomplished the aim of the demonstration as I bled.

Of course, after this they followed me. I couldn't sleep at home anymore. Every month, the Red Cross would bring and take letters between my husband and me. I used to write a couple of words, "Muhammed, I'm alright, and Maryam our daughter is alright." You know, in the beginning your [concern] is your own husband, then you see that all the men are detained, the whole nation is detained. So your concern grows. It is no longer a private matter.

After that they started pursuing me, I couldn't stay at home. I was always driving. I would put my daughter next to me in the car and move from place to place. We had work, surely. We were rousing people against the occupation. Convincing people to go out in demonstrations against the occupation isn't easy. It requires a lot of work. How do you convince them? I used to focus on those whose families were imprisoned - her son, her husband, her brother - so that she would respond to me.

My last demonstration before they captured me was on the blessed A'eed al-Adha. The Israelis always attempted to calm things down, to pacify people by differentiating between them and the prisoners. [They would say] "These men are in prison because they are troublemakers, but we won't bother ordinary peaceful people." Of course it wasn't true. They started publicizing on their radio that they were going to release prisoners on the A'eed. Now we knew that was just to lower tension, and that if they were freeing anyone, it must be people who had no importance. They never released a man who mobilized people, only young children. They took a lot of children, also handicapped people. They didn't spare anyone.

I want to go back a little bit to the invasion. When they invaded it was June. We were in our village, Majdal Silm, and we were going back to the village which we were living in, Bazourieh. On our way back, we saw tanks, they moved and nobody seemed to pay attention. The tanks had orange flags on them. We were astonished. Usually we saw Palestinian tanks, but these were different. We approached slowly, and before we reached home in Bazourieh people told us there is an Israeli invasion. We went to a village called Aiseer where we have friends. My husband escaped, he went into hiding. Israelis were everywhere, in all the villages and on all the roads.

Up to that moment I hadn't seen them [Israelis]. Our friends' house overlooks the road. It was sunset. We began to see the Israeli tanks and troops and equipment advancing. And the villages of South, I won't say that I am fanatic over them, but I am part of this land. It is normal for me to love this land [voice

shakes], because its people are good-hearted. But these people, the farmers who plow the earth and live with the land, these have a purity in their relation to their land. The South has long been the object of shelling, shelling, shelling from the Israelis, and attack by commandos, and kidnapping and killing. I feel solidarity with it, as people and as land. When I saw the Israelis everywhere, entering and walking, I felt deeply upset. Their war machines were stepping on this pure land, they were spoiling this beauty, this purity, and innocence, they were stepping on it brutally. I felt as if I have a daughter and someone is raping her in front of me, and there is nothing that I can do. I started screaming and crying, I started beating my head on the wall, I started pulling my hair. I could not watch this sight (voice rises). The world was silent as they entered. Weak people, they killed them, animals, they killed them, land and trees, they broke them. There was a destruction of humanity, of everything that was beautiful. In the midst of this silence, I couldn't hear a single voice of rejection that would cool my heart. There was universal silence. And they, in their savageness and strength were killing these defenceless people, and no one resisted them. This was a very difficult moment, and it could be that from this moment I decided to attain martyrdom for the sake of this land. After they took my husband, after they took the other men to Ansar, we started to act.

My last demonstration before I was captured was in November. I gathered a very big group of women - sisters, mothers, wives, and relatives of prisoners. I gathered them saying that we would go up to Ansar. We wanted to see the prisoners, and see who would be released. Each one had hope. Few were the houses where a man wasn't taken. It was difficult getting to Ansar - there were many check points, "Why are you going there?" We arrived at a place very close to the camp. Ansar camp resembled the camps which the Nazis designed for the Jews, and which they applied to us. It was a large camp. It was surrounded with barbed wire, all around, and hills of sand. You get there, but you can't see anyone. The sand hills were very high, and you couldn't go up because of the barbed wire. You could only see the tent tops. Fifty meters before the camp, there was a check point. "Where are you going?" We said, "We are coming to meet the prisoners you are going to release." So they let us pass. We reached the camp. We gathered, we were many.

An officer came out, he wanted to see what was happening. All the women started talking at once. He said, "Choose one to speak for all of you." They chose me. He said, "Why are you coming here?" The other women were saying things like, "I want to see my son, please let him out" [in a begging voice]. I said, "I am here to ask you why are you here?" He said, "What do you mean, why are we here?" I said, "Yes, why are you here? Isn't this Lebanese land? It is not Tel Aviv. (raises voice) Why are you here?" He said, "How can you say this?" I said, "I came to tell you that you are not a defensive army as you call yourselves, you are an army for destruction, for killing and for crime." He wasn't going to tolerate this, he directly called a soldier and said, "Get her out of here." The soldier came after me with his baton. Chaos started, naturally. I started running, and when I ran, he started shooting. Fear and chaos took over, the women started screaming. As I was running, I saw a high hill where they had placed a water reservoir to give water to the camp. I tried to climb up, but the sand was slippery. Even though they were shooting at me I finally reached the top. From there, the camp was right in front of me. I screamed "Allahu Akbar! [God is greatest] Men! We are here! We are a women's demonstration!" And I started screaming 'Muhammad,' as loud as I could (smiles). In that same moment all the men came out. They started climbing on each other's shoulder to see what was going on outside. The men inside started shouting, and the women outside were screaming. One would scream, "My son!" The other would shout, "My mother!" Of course no one knew anyone.

Chaos took over. They started firing at them inside, and firing at us outside. We scattered in the wilderness and in the fields. The sun was setting. God knows how we were re-gathered and went back home. Inside, among the men, some were injured. But this was the spark that incited the men's freedom. The Israelis stopped — they were allowed to go out of the tents. They saw that the women - this is good to focus on since your journal is a women's journal - this women's demonstration made five thousand men rise up to take their rights as prisoners from the Israeli state. They started demanding their rights and clashing with the soldiers. They started going out when they wanted, asking for better food, they demanded all the rights which they had lacked before - clothes, beds, everything in the Geneva Convention which the Israeli state signed. The spark was launched by the women's demonstration.

After this of course, they followed me more than before. They didn't wait long after the demonstration, around two months later they arrested me in the South. It was through a trick. It was the beginning of November. I had our daughter with me. Every night I would sleep somewhere different, partly because I was pursued and partly because of my work. I went home to get winter clothes for my daughter. I got there at sunset. I was exhausted, and missing my home. I sat and read, and fell asleep. Maybe that's what God Almighty wished. We both fell asleep. I didn't wake up until I heard a bang on the door. It was eleven o'clock at night. I opened my eyes and it was dark. Even when I looked out of the window, the whole village was dark. I asked, "Who is it?" She said, "Ilham." Ilham is our neighbor's daughter. I felt safe so I opened the door, and it was very, very dark. I opened the door and a man entered. I said, "Who are you?" He said, "I am Sa'eed. Don't you know me? I'm Abu Tarek." Abu Tarek was a Resistance leader. I said, "I don't know anyone called Abu Tarek." I was still arguing with him when the soldiers pushed the door open, and entered, and he disappeared. I never saw him again. Naturally they started — they attempted to terrify me the minute they entered. They started shouting and cursing. I told him, "Don't shout, there's a child sleeping, she's only one and a half." When I said that, they shouted lounder, one of them hit me with the end of his rifle. They pulled me to the stairs. I was barefoot, in my nightgown. I was going down and thinking, what will happen to her? As I

went down I saw the neighbors' doors open. There was no one. On the second floor, in the apartments under us and adjacent to us, the doors were all open, and they were empty.

After I left prison, I found out that they had dragged Ilham by force, and made her stand at the door. When she had knocked, and said, "I am Ilham", they took her away. They also took everybody from the apartments. I don't know where they took them. Terrorism! They came for me, why should they terrorize the whole building? They cut off electricity from the whole village. They scare a little girl! Their ways are terroristic and they accuse us of terrorism! Later I found out that one of them wanted to shoot her, and the other refused, and they fought over it. Because I kneeled to get my shoes, he yelled at me and hit me with his rifle.

When they took me, of course two were on either side of me, and they put a gun at my head. I started laughing, "What! I must be very important" (sarcastically). They swore at me and said, "Quiet! Not a word!" They took me to the Shajara center in Sur, the interrogation center for military people. They seated me at a table and said, "Read! We will come soon." Everything was in Hebrew. No one came. I started to lose my nerve. It was night time, one o'clock. They work on weakening the nerves and breaking you. They suggest things that are terrifying, especially for a woman. Eventually five investigators came. All five of them talked. They put a bag on my head, my hands were tied behind my back. They became swollen. It turned three o'clock, or more, God knows. I was about to break down, I had no more [strength], beating, terror. How long can I endure? They stayed like that for fifteen days, interrogation and torture. They threatened me with rape. Of course when they threaten and your head is in a plastic bag and your hands are tied, you don't think, impossible, they won't rape me. Also because he would pull my shirt off. The investigation period was the most difficult period of my life. It was something you can't dream about. At the same time I could hear the screams of the men. They were always being taken, they moved all day long in the South seizing men. I would hear the men's screams. What can I tell you? Now my mind is lost (drinks water).

I stayed fifteen days during which I was exhausted, I kept passing out. Thank God, they were not able to take any information from me. I told them I'm a housewife, I cook, I sweep the floor, and things like that. The interrogator would go crazy. "Am I a donkey?" he would say (laughs). "I know everything about you." The accusation against me was transporting missiles directed at Kiryat Shmona. The Israeli/Lebanese meeting was supposed to take place there. They accused me of this, and I was innocent of it (laughs). He said, "How did you transport them, how? We have thirty thousand soldiers here. We invaded Lebanon so that the children of Kiryat Shmona can sleep comfortably." But we Lebanese, our children must not sleep peacefully. There is constant shelling and bombing on us. My children grew up under shelling. Rare was the night when I didn't have to wake up and take them and escape to a shelter. There were no shelters anyway. We dug holes and made them into shelters. The government didn't do anything for us.

They moved me to Nevi Terza prison, in Palestine. They took me, I remember the car drove for about five hours. It was a pick-up, my hands were tied, the bag was on my head, and my feet, too. A soldier sat next to me with [a gun at my head]. I saw him from here [under the bag]. All this distance, with this exhaustion, and I am a woman! The investigator used to drag me by my hair, he would lift me by my hair and beat me with his big army boots! He would hit me with his hands on the back of my head until I passed out. Then he would throw water on me, and he would talk dirty to me. Is this civilization?

We reached the prison in Ramleh. I didn't know where I was. The prison has a huge gate and high walls, and an old tree without leaves. It was depressing. When I entered, they gave me a bunch of clothes to carry. I entered a very long corridor. I heard the voices of the Palestinian girls, the prisoners. The corridor was long and there were rooms on both sides. I walked in the long corridor. They asked me, "Where [are you] from, Lebanon?" I said, "Yes." They started calling each other, "Girls, a prisoner from Lebanon! (shouts), a moujahida, a fida'iyya from Lebanon." They started clapping, they were very happy. They hadn't expected a Lebanese woman to be a fida'iyya. I was the first Lebanese [female] prisoner. At that time there was no women's prison in Lebanon.

A new suffering journey started. But what reduced the suffering and gave me strength was what I acquired in the Ramleh Prison for women. They were very strong. It made me so proud, they are like rocks, Palestinian women in prison. They made it a kingdom, not a prison. They gave the Israeli warden a hard time. She would tell them, "Go on shout, fight, pull my hair. When I want I can lock you in." Then the Palestinians would tell her, "One day this key will be with us." They had lots of persistence and courage, they weren't afraid. They studied while in prisons. They had a library as big as the wall, full of books. They struggled, they made contacts with the Red Cross, and international organizations, as well as international lawyers to make this library. It had all kinds of books - politics, literature, health. Each new prisoner makes a program [list] of all the books she needed. I tell you they turned it into a kingdom. One prisoner had been there for seventeen years. Her name was Therese Hanafi. She was released after we left. Rawda Baseer had been there for nine years. Hanan Maseeh had been there for twelve years. They had formed a government and divided the roles. There was a woman in charge of the library, you took the books from her. When you finished the book there was a discussion,

"The spark was launched by the women's demonstration"

everybody would meet and discuss the book with the one who read it - what had she understood from the book? But there was tragedy as well. There was a child of one and a half years old. Her mother had given birth to her in prison, and they kept her there. A little child inside the cell - where are the Arab kings? Where are the rulers of the world? Where is humanity? When she is two years old, she won't be able to stay, they'll take her out of prison. Her mother is in prison, her father is in prison, her grandparents are in prison. Some organization will have to take her.

After three months, they made a branch of Ansar prison for women, in South Lebanon, in a government building for tobacco in Nabatiyeh. They transferred us. They made underground cells. In Neve Tirtsa there had been twelve prisoners from Lebanon - not Lebanese but from Lebanon - Palestinians, a Turk, a Lebanese from Ghazieh. When we became twelve women we demanded that we should be detained on our land, not in Palestine. We demanded this from the Israeli government, but later we regretted it. With the Palestinian prisoners, the atmosphere of the prison and the conditions all were better in Neve Tirtsa. It was an official prison. Whereas in Nabatiyeh we had underground cells, it was a place where even animals could not be put. They put us there in the beginning of September, the beginning of the winter. We spent the first three months in the cells, we couldn't even stretch our legs. It was very cold. There was no lavatories. They made us do pipi [urinate] in front of each other in a container which remained with us in the cell. And the wardens behaved in a disgusting way. They would steal from each other, they had lice in their hair. And yet they think that we were raised in forests!

I stayed one year in prison. We had cultural activities, I made a wall magazine out a chick pea can. We didn't have pens or papers. We had prizes for the best poem or thought. The prize was a grain of salt, maybe, because they rarely gave us salt. We always ate canned beans, with no meat or anything. We started craving for potatoes (laughs). One time they gave us fried potatoes, three pieces for each. We hid them, to look at and smell, because they were related to the outside world. We also made demonstrations on Mother's Day because some of us were mothers.

I was the only one whose husband was also imprisoned. The men prisoners supported my husband when he went to demand the right to visit me. The visit was forbidden. So they made demonstrations and demanded that my husband be allowed to visit me. After seven months they allowed him to visit me in prison. When he came, it was a big surprise because of course I hadn't been told. I was standing at the door of the cell. I heard his voice, I grabbed the bars of the cell and I started screaming, "Muhammad, Muhammad!" I banged on the door until they brought him. Of course the wardens surrounded us. I sat with him, and I hadn't seen him for nine months. I couldn't talk and he couldn't talk. I would say, "What?" He would say, "What?" (her eyes redden). He came in his [prison] clothes and I was in my prison clothes. It was pathetic. We were wearing the same thing, both of us, worn-out soldiers' clothing.

When we finally got out there was a new tragedy. Our daughter who was one and half when I was captured couldn't recognize me, Maryam [voice shakes], she couldn't recognize either of us. Of course she had stayed at her grandfather's house, they had come and taken her. When I was released, they brought her to my house. I tried to carry her, she cried and told her grandmother, "Look at this woman, she wants to take me." I would cry, "No, no, I am mama, I am Khadija." She would look at me like that and say, "Mama was taken by the Jews, but she will come." I would say, "*I* am your mama." Then I started singing the songs I sang to her when she was a child, so that she would remember. I got her old toys that were at home. After two days she said, "Are you the mama that the Jews took? You came now?" She was two at that time, two and a half (pause). For two months she was scared of her father. We had brought her and escaped to Beirut, the occupation was still there in the South. She was attached in the beginning to her father and suffered a lot. She stopped eating and we had to give her serum. It took her a while to forget. When she forgot about her father, they arrested me. She suffered for her mother. Her grandmother told me that she spent two months crying [voice shakes] day and night. During the day she would go around the house shouting, "Mama!" Every time she saw a red car coming she would say, "Mama is coming", because my car was red. She had hardly forgotten me and adjusted to her grandparents' house, and started to consider her grandmother her mother, when we came. What did we do? We took her from her grandmother. Her grandmother was in the South, under the occupation, and we were in Beirut. Again she spent two months crying. My nieces and nephews would hold her, she couldn't sleep at night. She would say, "I want my family, I want my home."

Thank God, we are still with the Resistance. After I left the prison, I joined the Islamic Resistance. Before I was in prison, in 1982, this movement arose. I started coordinating with the Islamic Resistance, and my work is with them. There is no longer a Palestinian Resistance. There is a group of young men and Hizbollah. I started working with them. I was coordinating with them, the Resistance and Hizbollah. Now I am in Al-Shaheed Organization as the director of the Program for the Support of the Mothers and Wives of Martyrs. My work is involved with wives of martyrs who are raising their children, so they won't leave them or put them in an orphanage. My role is social now, but it is also supporting the Resistance. Al-shaheed [the martyr] is a resistance fighter before he is a martyr. When the fighter goes out to fight knowing that his family will be protected and receive all its rights in life, he will be at ease. This is a support for the Resistance. May God grant us the strength and energy to persist in supporting liberation movements, supporting rights, and fighting oppression wherever it exists, in Palestine or elsewhere.

Recorded and translated by Michelle Obeid

Myassar Ismail: Palestinian Housewife

(Born in 1935, in Haifa [Palestine]; currently living in Sa'dnayel [Beqa']; recorded in her home, in the presence of husband and a daughter. Language: Palestinian colloquial, of the older generation.)

Myassar: Do you want me to tell you the story chronologically? I'll tell you from the date of my birth until today. I'm sixty three years old today. I'm Palestinian of course. I was born in Haifa. I'm the eldest. For five years I was the only child. I was followed by a girl, she lives in Kuwait today. She was followed by a brother who lives in Saudi Arabia. My father was a train driver. Although he belonged to the traditional period, he was understanding of modern days. He was aware. My mother lacked my father's awareness. My father tried to give us the best living standard possible. Later we went back to our village, Sha'ab, and lived there for a year. When Jews and Palestinians started fighting each other, my father joined the resistance and we moved to another village called al-Ba'ineh. Then we moved from al-Ba'ineh and went to Jwayyeh, and stayed there for a year and seven months. People were almost without clothes. Life became difficult. Eventually we came to Beirut. When I was fifteen years old and eight months, I married. When I first got engaged, my husband was an employee in the post office. His parents owned land, and he didn't have any brothers. He joined the Sha'ab local defense force. When the leader, Husni was killed, he was free. So he came to his relatives in Anjar. We were in Beirut. He wanted to get married, so we got married. I went to Anjar. In Anjar, life was extremely miserable, it was all mud, cold, no heating, desolate. People could only eat one meal a day. He was also in debt. We left Anjar for Beirut. In Beirut, also life was hard.

Ghena: You knew that he was in debt?
Myassar: No, not at all, I wasn't aware yet of such things. Anyway, I'd been engaged to him from when I was in Palestine, from the age of eleven. People weren't as enlightened then as they are today. We stayed in Beirut for two years and I had my first baby, a girl, Ilham. The hajj [husband] had an opportunity to be employed here as a school teacher. So we moved back to the to Beqa', to Anjar, there was only Ilham. We lived for seven months in Anjar and then we rented a home near Sa'dnayel. And here we are today living near Sa'dnayel.

I gave birth to five girls and four boys. My husband is a school teacher. I am a home person. I look at life from a clear perspective. I don't like ambiguity and games. I deal with whatever is serious, thank God! We both put much effort into bringing up our children. One son is an engineer, another is a doctor, a third is a dentist, the fourth an administrator in

UNRWA, and the fifth is a school principal in Beirut. As for the daughters, two of them are employees, a third has a master's degree in chemistry from Canada, the fourth is married and lives nearby. Thank God, we're living happily and content. The most important thing is to have a plan for oneself. One should know where one is heading, and be content. My nature is to accept anything that is reasonable, I'm not demanding. I'm not of the kind of woman who likes to rest. I don't avoid work so as to stay young and in good shape. As much as I can give, I give. Do you hear? And here I am. This is our life. Some of our children are here and some of them are abroad. I am here at home, the hajj and me.

Ghena: No, this isn't enough!
Myassar: What do you want me to tell you?
Ghena : Major landmarks?
Myassar: Wallahi, nothing comes to my mind right now.
Daughter: How were my grandparents?
Myassar: Concerning your grandparents, I was favored by my father. Whatever I wanted I had. Whatever I said was true. (pause) And my brothers were good.
Ghena: Nothing more! You don't remember anything about your childhood?
Myassar: First of all, your grandfather was strict - you're not allowed to join in a wedding, you're not allowed to go out. We didn't enjoy our childhood. We didn't live as children. We didn't feel free.
Ghena: Why did you say he was modern?
Myassar: He was modern in the sense that he accepted certain things and rejected other things. For example, he would have allowed me to go to school, but my mother influenced him. It was she who was responsible. It wasn't my father who refused me the privilege of education, it was my mother. That's what happened to me. Thank God! Here we are, living and content with what God has chosen for us. What can I say concerning my childhood?

Ghena: Aren't there major events that you recall?
Myassar: I don't think that anything that happened has a place in my memory now. Nothing! I was engaged to the hajj when I was eleven years old. My father engaged me the first time when I was seven years old, to his nephew. Then a dispute arose between the parents, and my father stopped wanting his nephew. Then I was engaged to the hajj with whom I'm living today. I've been engaged to him since I was nine. Good? We stayed engaged for six years, and we got married, and we came to Anjar, and as I told you life was —

Ghena: How was your childhood? How was your relationship

with your mother, brothers and sisters, neighbors?
Myassar: We didn't mingle much with people. We couldn't go to a wedding or to anything else. He didn't give us the chance to mix with people. He didn't allow us to talk to anyone. That's how he was. That's how they all were in the older Palestinian generation. The girl wore sleeveless dresses, she played with a skipping rope, and went to school, until she reached puberty. Once she reached puberty, they covered her and that was it, she wasn't allowed to go out. Girls were oppressed, they didn't have the freedom you have today. Whether you rebelled or not, nobody would have listened to you then. And the one who encouraged this pattern of life to persist was my mother. My mother wanted it more than my father. If he wanted to say yes, she said no. They didn't allow us to go out, not with anyone. That's my story.

Ghena: No, you haven't said anything yet.
Myassar: There is nothing. Wallahi I can't remember. Close the recorder!

[Recording was resumed next day, in the morning]

Myassar: My mother was one of those ignorant women (almost cries) —
Ghena: It's interesting how differently my father perceives your mother. He sees her as an ideal woman.

Myassar: Of course, she was ideal with *them*. Yes, believe what your father says, she was ideal with the boys. But with the girls, no. My father was better with me than with the youngest sister, Fatmeh. He preferred me to the other girls. My childhood was better than that of many people, but there was a lot of suffering as well. Children weren't given their rights. They were neglected. Parents didn't show sympathy, they overburdened them with work. They didn't think that they are still children, they wanted to relax at their children's expense. I want to forget all this. Do you hear? I want to forget, and I almost forgot. If I have to tell you from the very beginning — this is my program. I told you the second child came five years after me. For those five years I lived as a special child. Do you hear? Then my sister came, followed by my brother. My mother, as I told you, wasn't aware. She was a backward woman, she seemed to come from three hundred years ago. Do you hear? I told you she was selfish. They sent my brothers, who were much younger than me, to school. But my sister and me, no. I went and begged my mother. I told her, "Mother, you want me to help you, bake, wash dishes, bring you water - I'll do it all." She said no to school. I asked her, "How shall I live?" She told me, "As I lived you will live." See what kind of answers she gave! I took my brother, who was seven years younger than me, to school. I stood just outside the classroom while the teacher explained the lesson. Do you hear? I listened to the teacher as he was explaining the lesson. Whatever the teacher explained, I grasped. When my brother came home, when he recited, counted, and read, I repeated after him. So I almost learnt how to read, and I studied the Quran through my younger brother. Do you hear? As I told you I was seven years old when my father got me engaged to his nephew. Then when I was nine years old he got me engaged to the man I'm living with, the hajj.

> "I believe that to be happy inside my home is much better than seeing the whole world"

Ghena: How did you feel when all this was happening?
Myassar: How do you feel today when you rebel and protest? I wanted to rebel, but that there was something bigger than me, beyond my capacity. Do you hear? Beyond my capacity. I couldn't face them with what I was feeling. I was engaged to him for five years. His hand didn't touch mine. Do you hear? This was in Haifa.

Ghena: Were you upset when you got engaged?
Myassar: No, I didn't know what it meant. Everyone around me got engaged, I got engaged like the other girls. No, what upset me was being deprived of education, my mother's attitude, my father's attitude, daily life.

Ghena: You didn't play with other children?
Myassar: No, that wasn't allowed. Other children played hopscotch, they skipped rope. But if I wanted to go out and play, my mother would tell me that I had to carry my brother. See! You weren't free. If you wanted to go down, you had to carry your brother and play with him. When did I have the chance to play? When my brother was sick, and I had to bring a number for him to be checked by the doctor. If my brother was crying and my mother wanted to finish some work at home, I carried my brother and went out. If we wanted to bake, I took the bread to the oven. If they needed me to fetch water - these were the only times, when I could go out. But to go out without carrying something, this wasn't allowed. Do you hear?

Ghena: But I know many Palestinian women your age who went to school in Jerusalem.
Myassar: Yes, of course. I know all the schools' names by heart. There was Marmash School, and the Nuns' School close to our home. Girls from all classes went to school. When other girls went to school, I started crying, I tried to persuade my mother because I knew my father was not the problem. However my father wanted to please my mother, because her health wasn't good, and she needed to depend on someone. Had I confronted my father, he might have taken me to school. However, I was a child so I talked to my mother. I didn't know better. I talked to her because she was my mother and I thought she would listen to me. But she didn't. Do you hear? They didn't allow me to go out to play unless I carried my brother or sister. Just at the Feasts, we went to the swings, I and my sisters and brothers.
Then there was fighting between Arabs and Jews. In our home

[Haifa], the lower floor overlooked the Arab quarter, the upper floor was next to the Jews. Our neighbors on that side were Jews. Perhaps they were a bit more free, but their lives were basically the same as ours, they had the same style of living as us. Their house had three rooms and was shared by three families. One kitchen for all. Then the war started. We had olives. Your grandfather took his holiday, and we went to our village, Sha'ab. My mother was either pregnant or breastfeeding then. When we went to our village, there were small clashes between the Arabs and the Jews, but not serious. The Jews didn't only attack the Arabs, they attacked the English, they dynamited buildings. When we left Haifa, I was only eleven years old, but I knew everything that was taking place. Before that there was World War II when Germany fell. Our Jewish neighbors celebrated, they started dancing and singing. We witnessed all that before we left for our village. My mother was late giving birth to Fatmeh. My father's holiday ended and he went back to Haifa. While my mother was preparing herself, and collecting the crops - we were getting ready to go to my father - suddenly he came. He told my mother, "Wait. Yesterday they killed a Jewish health worker. The situation is tense." By that time, the Jews had taken parts of Haifa.

Picture Credit:Leena Saraste. For Palestine, Zed Books, 1985.

They made a truce and we stayed in our village. In these villages there were no girls' schools. You, because you were raised in a city, you wanted to get educated. I also wanted to get educated, in Haifa I saw girls going to school in front of me. However, in the village things were different. In the village, if you were only six years old, you had to fetch water, and harvest olives, you had to work just like older women.

Now while we were in Sha'b, the real fighting started between Arabs and Jews. The Salvation Army entered Palestine. Akka fell. Near us there were two villages, al-Birweh and al-Damoun. They also fell. Men in our village started to arm themselves. Weapons were expensive, a good gun cost £P100, the lowest was £P65 and people did not have as much cash as today. They shared. A man in our village, Abu Isaaf - who was with al-Hajj Ameen al-Husseini - brought some weapons and came to our village. Then the men in our village set up a defense force containing 120 men.

Before the day that we left for our village, I never knew sickness. I wanted to be sick, because my mother took my brothers and sisters to the sea when they were sick. Because I was healthy I had to stay at home to clean, wash dishes, scrub the floor and fetch the water. She never took me with her. Do you hear? My family had a small garden in the village where they planted mint, and peppers, and other vegetables. I used to go to water them. This is good for your story! Once I went and I was watering the hot pepper and mint plants - "In the name of God the most merciful and compassionate." There was what we called the 'Jewish grave', it was as if carved out of rocks, and it had the exact shape of a grave, and water fell on it from the stream. It was a really beautiful scene. Water fell and lilies appeared on its surface, they had a nice smell, they were white, yellow and red. As I was watering I suddenly saw a cat jump in front of me - an ordinary cat - but it jumped two or three meters high. Its body became very long and stretched. This attracted my attention. I saw it jumping. There was a high cactus hedge. A few seconds later, another similar cat jumped the same way the first one had. It also stretched its body, and went up, and sat next to the first cat on top of the cactus. Both of them. I looked at them - "In the name of God the most merciful and compassionate" - I noticed that their eyes were not those of ordinary cats, they were split vertically. I felt terrified. Their looks were frightening. I had always heard that in our village there were strange things. I didn't talk or scream or do anything. I left and went home.

Now in the summer we slept on the roof. Nobody slept inside the house. A special place was made for the parents to sleep in, and the rest of the family sleep together on the roof. There was a lot of dew. They used to leave the mattresses out until ten o'clock so that they would dry, and then they took them in. So I went back home and slept, and I remained sleeping. My mother didn't usually leave me to sleep. At ten o'clock I

couldn't stand up. They started calling me from downstairs. I tried to get up but felt dizzy. I went down stairs, and I slept continously for two months. I didn't eat. I became like a ghost. I didn't dare talk about what I had seen, because people said that if you tell, it comes to you in the night and hurts you. At that age, one doesn't know better. So I stayed sleeping.

My aunt came to see me. She and my mother were sitting near my feet and talking. I could hear them. She was asking my mother what was wrong with me? My mother said, "Wallahi, I don't know. She went out to the garden, and came back and slept. And she's still sleeping. I don't know what happened to her." My aunt said, "What if she saw what my daughter Fatmeh saw? Since then, for six months she hasn't had her period." Fatmeh was older than me. So I understood that what I saw had been seen before. There had been a doctor in our village before the fighting started, but now he moved to another village. Akka fell, and there was no doctor. My father sent for the hajj - who is my husband now - he gave him a pony and sent him to bring a doctor. That day also I didn't speak. The doctor said that I was suffering from typhoid. There was a battle near our village. Everyone in our village went out, men, women and children. They carried guns, sticks, rakes, and forks. Everyone fought. Women carried water and food, and followed the men and ululated so that the men wouldn't turn back. I stayed at home. I began to hallucinate and not to see properly. I stayed like that for some time.

"No soap to clean with, no kerosene to make light, no thread to sew with, I never lived like that before"

Then, gradually, I started to stand up and eat. One evening I was on the roof, and my mother told me to take to my brothers and sisters downstairs, also to carry pillows, blankets, covers and mattresses. We had to sit outside under the olive trees. The Jews were about to attack Miar which was next to our village. It was supposed to be for one night only. People were fasting. I was still weak, unable to walk or carry anything. However I was forced to, everybody was carrying something. We carried everything, and went and sat under the trees for seven or eight days. We watched how beduin bake bread, and we baked like them. We bought milk from beduin on the road. We sat up among the olive trees for forty days, everyday thinking that we would go back the next day. But we didn't. People started to go to Lebanon, those who had cash. If they could afford to spend time in Lebanon they went. My uncle's wife panicked every time she heard shooting, so she went to Lebanon. We tried to leave with our uncle's family, but the Salvation Army turned us back. We rented a house in al-Ba'ineh, it's a village where half were Muslims and half were Christians. We never had sectarianism in Palestine. We were all neighbors and never looked at each other in a sectarian manner.

So we went and stayed in al-Ba'ineh. My mother, aunt, future mother-in-law and sister carried water from the well, with the Jews in the mountains above us. They couldn't work during the day because the Jews could see us, so they worked in the evening. We rented the house in al-Ba'ineh for six months. I remember the rent was LL17 a day. In those days the LL 17 was worth something. They bought wood and prepared for winter. We planned to spend the winter there. One night, our neighbors came, they said, "Abu Ghazi, come out and see Haifa from Mar Elias. You can see the battles going on". I slept, and my mother was chatting with other woman. I woke up to hear my mother screaming, my sisters and brothers shouting, and the sound of battle outside. There were about a hundred men in front of our door. I asked my mother, "What's going on?" She told me the country had surrendered. I felt lost and I imagined the Jews invading our village and ready to do all the terrible things we had heard about.

I saw my father dressed in his work overalls with his cap on his head. My mother, brothers and sisters were crying. He told her, "You must leave just as you are. Don't carry anything, nothing, between here and Lebanon is a long way." My mother was worried that we might get dirty on the journey, so she took one dress for every child. She put everything in a bag. When he came, he asked her "What's this? I told you to go without anything". She said, "What if they get dirty?" He told her "Then stay here with the clothes." She stayed, and I was crying. My uncle had brought a man's slippers. I put them on and walked. Before we reached mid-way, the slippers were gone. I continued walking barefooted to Rmeish, Bint Jbeil, Jwayya. We arrived at dawn. The Israeli airplanes started flying over us. I shall never forget this scene all my life. Never. There was a pool of water. We wanted to drink. A drink of water was sold by the Lebanese for one and a half piasters. A drink of water cost one and a half piasters! We found buses waiting for us, and drivers were calling, "Halab, Homs, Sham, Baghdad, Ba'albeck, Beirut, Saida, Sur, Tripoli." People got on the buses for free.

We went to Jwayya, which was no more than sixty or seventy kilometers from Palestine. We thought we were close. Many people had left without money. Some people went back to their villages in secret. Many died on the road, killed by the Israelis. It started snowing and Palestinians weren't used to the snow.

[Unfortunately we have had to cut much detail about the exodus and life in Palestine because of space constraints.]

Ghena: What about your adult life?

Myassar: When I got married? Okay. Before I turned sixteen I got married. As I told you he was an employee in the post office. In Palestine, everyone had land and was living well. We came here. He was a member of our village's local defense force. When the leader Husni was killed, they were set free. Where did he go? He had relatives in Anjar. Anjar is mud, cold, misery, no proper roads, and ham wa gham (burden and sorrow). They used to steal charcoal from al-Kfeir so that they could make a

fire to cook. I found that the dowry he had paid - £P 400 - he had paid part in Palestine - he had borrowed from his relatives. When we entered the house after the wedding party, just after he closed the door, someone knocked on it. It was his cousin. "What's wrong?" Someone had come to him that day asking for LL15.

Ghena: This happened on the wedding eve?
Myassar: Yes, on the wedding eve, before he slept with me.
Husband: No, we had already slept together.
Myassar: No, no, no, we hadn't. He closed the door. The people left and he locked the door. We hadn't done anything yet. Nothing. So what did I do? I had my nkout.[1] How much did people give in those days? Five pounds. He had reckoned that I would have money with me. He wanted to corner me.

You know I hadn't lived in a village before. The clothes I had prepared were different from their clothes. They were all villagers, miserable. What can I tell you? I had long robes, suits, velvet dresses, scarves, and I looked different. Everybody asked, "Where has this woman come from? Is she a Christian? After staying there for two months, I got haemorrhoids, they were caused by cold and hunger. Then your grandfather came. From Saudi Arabia. ARAMCO needed workers, whoever had a skill went and worked. As I told you, your grandfather was a train driver, he came to Anjar and saw how we were living. He told the hajj, "Why do you stay in this place? Go to Beirut, you'll surely find work." Abu Muhammad [husband] was educated compared to others. He had reached seventh grade. We went to Beirut and we rented a house for LL11 LL10 for the house and LL1 for the light. We stayed in Burj al-Barajneh near my parents. My father was away in Saudi Arabia. I told you that my mother was unfeeling. I used to buy vegetables in the afternoon because then they were cheaper. He worked in a stone quarry. He couldn't work in building. My mother lived next to me, and my father-in law's home was in front of mine. I never entered either of their homes when they were having lunch. I didn't want them to know that anything was wrong with me. I suffered from anaemia. I only ate supper. When Abu Muhammad came home in the evening I put out the food and ate with him. My mother lived next to me, but she never knew, and never asked. Never. She had flour in barrels, she got it from UNRWA because she had so many children. For me, my husband and his father, our flour was not sufficient. If I went and took two loaves of bread from her home, she'd ask for them.

Eventually, God helped us. My father kept telling Abu Muhammad about people who went to Beirut, until one day he went to sit for an exam in the Beqa'. He came back to Beirut thinking that he had done well in the exam. But people who had money paid bribes. They gave LL400 . In those days LL400 was a lot. We didn't have money to bribe anyone. We wanted to clear our debts and eat. He thought he had done well, and stopped going to work. He stayed home waiting for the results. One day I told him, "Go and ask". He went and asked. They told him, "You failed". He started shouting, "I want to see my papers!" The gate-man was kind and showed them to him. He came and told us his story. I was crying and beating myself. I had recently given birth to Ilham. My milk was dry. I said, "God will help us". I washed her clothes and diapers in cold water. There weren't Pampers like today. There was no more milk in my breasts. I cried.

Eventually, my uncle on my mother's side went to see the inspector of UNRWA schools, Diab Fahoum, and told him our story. He said, "I know that he is better educated than all those who were accepted, but he doesn't have money to bribe anyone". Fahoum went and checked the grades. He found out that they were lying. The day after, wallahi, I was washing clothes and crying. My hands were shivering from the cold. It was February. That day Abu Muhammad said, "It's over". When they didn't call for him, he put on his work clothes, got on the bicycle, and back to the stone quarry. I sat crying and washing. And suddenly Diab Fahoum's maid passed by. She knew me. She asked me, "Where's Khaled?" [husband] I told her, "Khaled has gone back to misery." She said, "Tell him go to see Mr Fahoum. He's going to get a job." I ran to your grandfather's house and told them to call for Khaled. He came at once and was given the job.

In those days, I used to pray to God for him to have a salary of LL40 a month, so I could pay the rent of LL11, save LL10 and live on LL10. He got employed. Those black days and misery I didn't go through in your grandfather's house. Because in Palestine, they had land, and when we came to Lebanon my father received his end-of-service benefits. My mother had gold. Those days I lived with your uncle [husband] were new to me. No soap to clean with, no kerosene to make light, no thread to sew with, I never lived like that before. But I put up with it all, I put up with it and deprived myself until he got a job. Even if I had nothing, my mother wanted me to give her. She cannot give you, you have to give her. This is her style. So when Khaled got a steady job, and we came to Anjar, I didn't forget the lesson I'd learnt. I kept in mind that one day he might lose his job, so I should always be prepared. I wanted always to have cash. Do you hear? This was the path I chose. And how much was his salary? LL40. Others who bribed got a salary of LL110, though he had a higher grade on the exam than all of them. I always decided what would be spent and what would be saved.

"I always decided what would be spent and what would be saved"

I care a lot about looking nice, having a tidy home, and that my children should be well dressed. I wanted to have a plan for every child's future. Do you hear? Yes, for every child, whether girl or boy, I had to have a clear future plan. I sewed clothes for

us all. I sewed things for the house. They were never deprived of anything. Whenever someone got sick, I made sure he went to the right specialist. I calculated everything. I did not believe in extravagance or laziness. I believed that to be happy inside my home is much better than seeing the whole world. If my house and children are in good shape, then thank God, I have reached what I aimed at. We have built our own home. We are the first Palestinians to buy land and build our home in Saadnayel. In 1966 we bought land in Sa'dnayel. If I ever spent from the sum allocated for savings, the next month I considered myself in debt until I'd paid it back. So we bought a cement factory and a motorbicycle, but the hajj — how can I tell you? His knowledge is restricted to education, he has no idea of commerce and money. The workmen aren't honest and he is not aggressive. When you discover that those working for you aren't honest, you should be tough with them. Anyway it didn't work out.

Ghena: You stayed in Beirut until when?
Myassar: Until 1953. When he was employed by UNRWA we came to the Beqa', We stayed for seven months in Anjar. Then we came to Sa'dnayel. Your grandfather's relative told me, "Sa'dnayel is better for you, it's a village, there are roads and electricity." We came and settled in Sa'dnayel in 1953. We forgot the hunger and misery. Though his salary wasn't big, and it didn't increase for a long time, but believe me, his salary was more than enough for us.

Husband: I worked and she —
Myassar: I managed everything. Thank God.
Husband: She unwound the wool sweater, and re-knitted it for the younger children.
Myassar: In the Beqa' we have to wear wool for seven months. The first year, I bought wool and made sweaters for my children. For the girls I made dresses. The second year I unwound the sweaters, brought some new wool, and made new sweaters out of the old ones. Never, do you hear? never has failure had a place in my life. Even in the days of hunger failure never showed in either of us. If you entered my home - I had a quilt - I hung clothes on the rope, and hung a quilt to cover the clothes. In the second room I had a bed and I put boxes under the bed. And on the bed I put a white blanket. So if you entered my home you couldn't see signs of failure [poverty]. I went down to the market, I saw what children's clothes were in fashion. Then I bought the material needed for sewing. No one taught me how to sew, I taught myself. So I sewed for myself and my children the same things I saw in the shops. The same goes for my home. When we built in 1968, I said I don't want a large home because I have children whom I want to educate. I wanted to have money in my hands, so that when one of my children needed education I would be able to manage it without having to ask anyone. So we built a three-room house. Do you hear? And he planted a garden in front of the house, a garden with vegetables and fruits. The children went through UNRWA elementary education, but after that you had to put them in private schools which you had to pay for. I didn't have one or two children only, I had nine, five boys and four girls.

Ghena: You didn't discriminate between girls and boys?
Myassar: No, no, not at all, never. Whether a girl or a boy, the clever child had my full support. Do you understand me? I didn't want to repeat what I had gone through with my children. My mother was the suspicious kind. If a girl stood on the balcony, she'd ask her, "What are you doing? What are you looking at on the road?" I trust the child. I don't discriminate. The clever child has our support. And thank God, we didn't need anyone. I tell you, people borrowed from us. We never asked anything of anyone. I educated one of my children in America, another in Romania, a third in Russia, the fourth in Spain. Yasser spent seven years in Spain. He could have graduated as a doctor. I don't know what happened to him there.

Ghena: When one of your children didn't show competence, such as Yasser, how did you react? Were you understanding or tough?
Husband and daughter: She's tough, tough.
Myassar: I can be tough but with moderation. Listen to me, your son is your mirror. Neither me nor their father were able to make them reach where they have reached the easy way. There was no time for fooling around. From beginning to the end I took life seriously. But there are things that you have to forgive. Yasser, for example. Everyone told me to leave him there, they said, "He spent the money and time without doing anything useful, let him face his fate abroad." I could have listened to them and said, "Yes they're right, let him face his fate, why should I care about him?" But I didn't. I told them to go and bring him back home. Do you understand? He's been back now for nine years. Often I remember and feel upset. He had the opportunity to learn and become a doctor, respected. What happened to him? He could have gone astray for one, two, three or four years, but you don't continue all the way through. He lived in this home and saw what we went through to bring them up.

Ghena: Had you lived in Palestine, would your life have taken a different course?
Myassar: No. I am ambitious. Since I came into this world. Since I was a child that was my nature. This isn't something I acquired, it's in my blood. Now listen, I'm telling you about myself. Even if I had more money I would have maintained the same life program. Nothing would have tempted me. Life doesn't tempt me. See, in the days of hunger, I wished - it was a wish - that I knew how to sew or to do anything that would be financially rewarding. I wished. Now I say sometimes that he [husband] was lazy with me, or I may have been lazy with myself. There passed a time when I could learn. That was after I got married. My mind was open and I had the potential.

Recorded and translated by Ghena Ismail

End Notes

1. Nkout: This is the gift given to the bride by her own family, usually money.

Hiba Kawas: Musician

(Born in 1972, in Saida; currently living in Beit Miri; recorded in her home. Language: colloquial/educated Arabic.)

Shall I start with my childhood? I was born on July 17th 1972 in Saida, and I am an only child. I came after seventeen years of marriage (laughs), I have a notebook of all the incidents of my childhood, from the day I was born. My mother used to keep a record of my development. I started doing things very early, for example, I was only six months when I stopped using diapers. At the age of one year and a half, I started writing. My mother discovered me holding a pencil between my fingers and copying the newspaper. When I was only a month old, at the time a child begins to listen - I used to have stomach colics - I started crying when my mother turned the radio off. When the music was on, I didn't cry. This was the first sign of a link between me and music. My mother was a soprano and plays the piano, and my grandmother has a nice voice and plays the 'oud very well, so the family encouraged my interest in music. When I was two and a half, my mother heard someone playing 'Jingle Bells' on the piano, when she came into the room she saw me perched on the piano chair, playing with two fingers. She brought me piano teachers. In Saida, there are no professional music teachers, I had to learn with many different teachers, and I suffered a lot until I reached the Conservatoire.

At four years old, I started to compose, though surely not as I compose today. At four, I used to spend hours playing the piano, so my mother tells me. During the same period, I enjoyed inventing things. I used to carry a hammer around the house. You can't say that I lived a girl's childhood. I had the body and the feelings of a girl but the mentality of a boy. I didn't play with girlish toys. I had a room of my own, a dream room, very well equipped for a young child. I didn't play with dolls, I only played with toys that needed construction. I remember once people came to our house to repair it, they gave me a hammer and I started working with them. When I was three years old, I made a small wooden guitar with strings and a device to change the tuning; my father still has it. I also learnt how to deal with electricity. By eight, I could repair any electrical equipment. When the electricity in Saida was changed from 110 to 220 volts, I changed the electricity in our house.

What else? I wanted to discover a cure for cancer and heal people. When I was six the school magazine did an interview with me, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I said I wanted to become a doctor to treat poor people, and discover a cure for cancer. I entered school at the age of four and a half - my mother was the school principal. These are the stories she told me. I enjoyed reading a lot. Like any young child, I started with fairy tales. According to my mother, I didn't like the way these stories ended. At six I started writing and recording the music I composed. I still have some of the recordings. Though there's a lot of difference between the person I am today and the person I was twenty years ago, yet there's a connection, you can feel they are the same person.

There are four major stages in my life, this was the first one, my early childhood. All my friends were boys, I used to play wars, cops and robbers. I used to shoot. At eight, I wrote my first poem and composed its music. It was during the Israeli invasion [1982], it was called the 'Zaman Ghaddar' ('treacherous time'). At eight I finished elementary school and moved to the intermediate. In the second stage, between eight and twelve, I started reading Gibran, and by twelve years old, I had read all of him. This helped me a lot at school, that I knew his writings already. During my early childhood my friends were my cousins, we were about the same age. In the second phase my friends changed - of course, my mother was my best friend through all the phases [mother comes into the room]. Between eight and nine, I formed most of my knowledge, I read Gibran, Mikhail Naimeh, Shakespeare - I read all his plays and sonnets. I don't say that I understood everything, but when I moved to secondary school it was helpful to have read these things five years earlier. During that period I also read the Bible and the New Testament. I knew the Quran by heart. I used to read medical books as well, because I wanted to study medicine. At

eleven, I started reading history and politics. As I told you, I wanted to cure people from cancer, I made a room in our house into a workshop and laboratory. I spent a lot of time there - it was fully equipped. I used to do experiments. At the age of twelve, I invented a medicine for burns - on my twelfth birthday, I was badly burned, I used it on myself. Then all the family started using it, I made bigger quantities, but couldn't discover a material that would preserve the medicine over time.

When I was twelve, the Israeli army evacuated Saida, and I wrote a song called 'The Wedding of Saida'. Until the age of fourteen, I used to write poetry, then I discovered that I don't like language as much as music and art. At thirteen, I participated in a contest organized by UNESCO. The president of the jury was Walid Gholmieh.[1] I won the first prize with a song whose words and music I composed. I remember I was in first secondary at that time. Walid Gholmieh me told that I should go to Paris to study music, but I wanted to finish my education first, I was still young. This was my first encounter with Walid Gholmieh. At the same time, we formed a music group in Saida, I used to write and distribute the music for it.

I forgot to tell you about our school concerts. I had my first concert when I was seven years old, I played the piano. Apart from school concerts, our music group started to organize private concerts during the last two years of school. We were eight, everyone played on a different musical instrument; we used to spend the whole year practising, and hold two concerts a year.

In the last years of school, I did experimental sciences. I had a lot of plans in mind. I wanted to study languages, and to travel to many countries, learn their languages and get to know their music. I was also interested in pathology, to discover a cure for cancer. Not only this, I wanted to discover the mystery behind the Bermuda triangle. At that time, I wanted to do *everything*, now I am more focused in my aims.

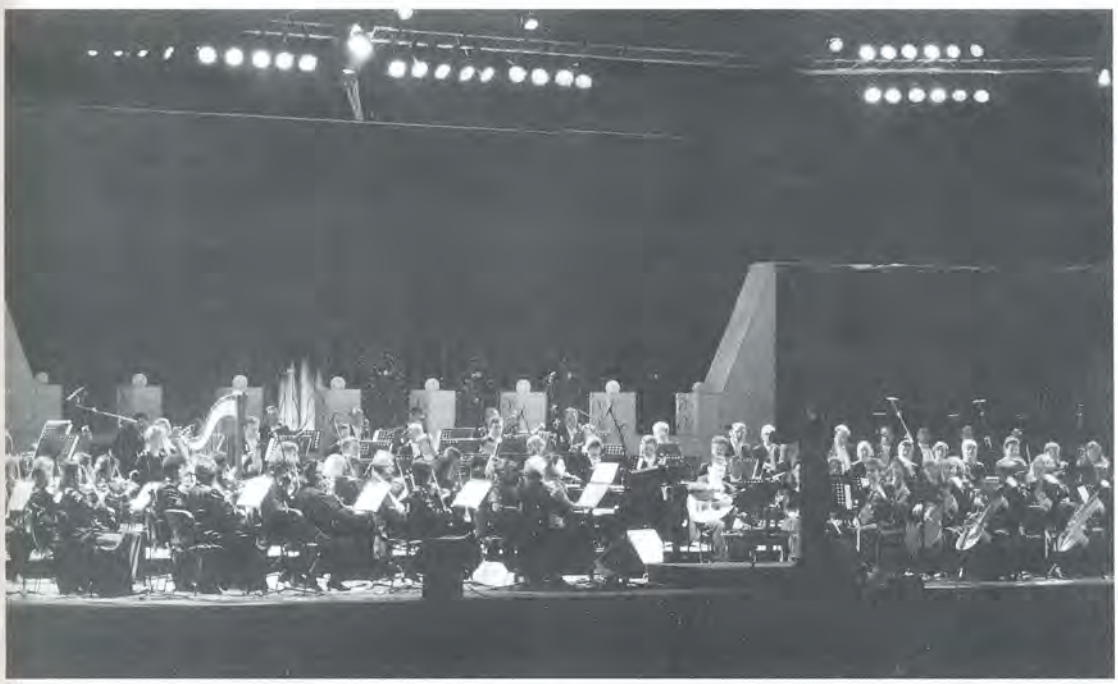
I liked music a lot - instead of returning from school and studying, I used to go and rehearse with the music group. I have a longing for music, I began to focus on it. At that crossroads, having to choose between pathology or music, I was sixteen. I went to Walid Gholmieh for his advice. I believe that the universe is ordered, I believe in the universality of being. We are one with the universe. It is one piece, you cannot separate. I believe that there is a universal power, some may call it God, you can call it anything you want. My personal power is somehow connected to this universal power, there is a discipline in the universe, everything is organized. So what happens in my life is part of this order, and because we are part of this universal power our will to power plays an important role in disciplining the self to reach its goal. Though I went to Walid Gholmieh for his advice, I already knew that I was a musician. But I had a fear, I used to ask myself, am I really a musician, can I add something new to music? If I can't, let me work at something else where I can add something new. My aim of originality is part of my aim in composition. The music I am composing is different from earlier Arabic music, and different from other world music traditions. I am a new person, with an Arabic Oriental voice that doesn't exist in the west. I am a new person with new music in the Arab world as well.

Now my fourth phase begins. When Walid heard my voice and my music, he said I should do nothing else. He expected I would do something original. He still remembered my performance when I was thirteen years old. So at sixteen I went to the Conservatoire, I graduated with a masters degree in music composition with high distinction, and a masters degree in operatic singing, also with high distinction, and higher studies in musicology, conducting and piano. Of course, attending the Conservatoire was a new experience, and I began to see a different future. My musical personality was clearer. I started participating in concerts with the Conservatoire. I tried to record all my compositions in the studio because it's important to listen, it's a way to criticize, to improve. From then until now, Walid Gholmieh has played an important role in my life. He encouraged my obsession with music and composition. It's important to have someone near you who makes you feel you must continue. He encouraged my work on Arabic opera, and this has been basic. He has also taught me many things about life. I believe the musician is inseparable from the person. Your philosophy and perspective enrich your music and give it meaning, so that it's more than notes on paper. Walid Gholmieh has taught only one person in the Conservatoire to compose, that's me. He wants to transmit all his knowledge to one person. I wish the whole Arab world would pay more attention to the transmission of knowledge and ideas. Many experiences have ended with the death of a person. This means always having to start from the beginning. At the Conservatoire, I learnt musicology, composition and opera from Dr. Toufic Kerbage; music composition, conducting and musicology from Walid Gholmieh; and opera from Garo Tchadarian. I took piano with Madeleine Madawar.

Here I should speak about my travel to Italy and my study there. In Italy, it was a different phase, the most important musicians in the world are assembled in the Academy I was invited to study in. The best opera singer in the twentieth century, the best cello player, were teachers there. The students were professors who teach music in universities. The Chigiana Academy in Siena is one of the best musical academies in the world. I was the only student who hadn't finished her diploma. I was very young compared to the others. The musical experience and culture I got from Italy is something I surely wouldn't have received here. We all should know the music traditions of the world. People are mistaken if they think that Western classical music is not an extension of our culture. Classical music started in Mesopotamia and moved to Egypt, then to the Greeks, who gave it to the Romans and from there to Europe. During the Abbasid period, music was very complex and completely different from Arabic music as it is today. This is proved by the descriptions of Abbasid music we find in books, they all describe how the music was written at the time. There are no music notations, only descriptions. There are many reasons for

this. One of them is war - Hulagu destroyed libraries and documents. Even the musical instruments we have today were all present then in elementary forms.

The Chigiana Academy is a very special place. It's only open during certain months of the year. A day spent there is equal to a year elsewhere in the quantity of information that you receive, the courses are very intensive. Carlo Bergonzi taught me opera, any encyclopaedia you open will tell you that he is the greatest tenor of the twentieth century. I also studied with Franco Donatoni who is one of the most important composers of contemporary music in Europe. This was an experience! Life there was different, it was a musical environment, when you walked in the streets you heard music. The Academy is an old royal palace. We studied from eight in the morning till nine at night. Then we gathered in the main square, where a symphony orchestra was rehearsing. It's an environment you couldn't dream of! It was a totally different experience.



I came back to Lebanon, and since then I think that a new element has entered my composing. From the beginning, I composed with the spirit of the Orient and the technique of the West. But when I came back from Italy, a new sound emerged which is the contemporary sound. I brought this sound with me from Italy, and my music composition improved. This will help me to compose Arabic opera. I am combining all the techniques I learned in order to suit Arabic words. It is very difficult to sing in Arabic at a high pitch and over a wide range. I was also able to find the pitch that is able to carry these words over long passages.

At first, when I came back from Italy, I passed through a stage of depression. Here again, Walid Gholmieh played an important role, he encouraged me to continue with musical composition. He said that I should give in to my obsession for music. I'm sure it wasn't by chance that I was invited to give a concert in Saida where I presented some of my musical compositions. Then I recorded some new songs. Then I made a leap in music composition, in 1995 when I traveled and recorded a composition with a symphony orchestra, and then released my first compact disc. Others were released later, with music I composed when I was sixteen. During that period I gave a lot of concerts at the Presidential Palace, in the Russian Cultural Center, and in Italy where I was studying. I also traveled to Germany and gave a concert there with the Stuttgart Symphony Orchestra. Also in Syria. I went to a lot of places outside Lebanon. My name began to be known. Earlier I recorded a song "Ughanika habibi' ['I sing to you, beloved'] which was played on television, and people liked it. The press accused me of appearing and disappearing, but this was because I was still studying and preparing my masters degree, to which I gave priority. Then I released the compact disk 'Ughanika habibi', and this was followed by the concert I gave at the 'Forum de Beyrouth' (1991). This was a great experience. All my life I had been preparing for this event. It was a complete music experience because I was involved in all the details. From that concert onward, I consider I entered a new phase. I am not going to talk about what I am composing now, it is a new thing I am working on, and it will need a year to be ready. All this is to achieve Arabic opera, something new in the history of Arabic music. I forgot to tell you that during that period, I also finished clinical psychology at the Lebanese University. What else? I read a lot especially in philosophy, history and politics. I read everything in general, but these are my priorities. That's all.

Dania: I will ask you a question now. How do you evaluate Lebanon as a place for women to live in?
Hiba: For women to live in? I do not look at it in that way. In my view women create their own place. There is no country for women and country for men. It is how women behave in a given country. They either create their own place or they don't. In Lebanon, women are more active than in other countries, or maybe they started to do something before women in other Arab countries. Now there isn't much gap between Lebanon and the Arab countries, all women are aware that they have to be active.

It was women's mistake, they relied on men and gave them authority. I am talking history here. Women are demanding their rights, but they only need to exercise them. What are they waiting for? Are they waiting for men to give them their rights? Everyone asks me whether I am with the demand for women's rights, and I always reply in the negative. The mere fact of asking for your rights means that you are in prison and asking the warden to open the doors for you. Who can stop a woman from acting? Who can tell her no? And if someone were to say no, what would happen if women disobeyed? The first time might be difficult, but after that it would get easier. I blame women for one thing, they have a kind of twisted intelligence, they use twisted methods to reach their aims. They tell their husband that he is the man of the house just so as to be able to hold him by the ear, and make him do whatever they want. All women are the same, there is no man who does not do exactly what his wife asks him to. She weeps in order to gain control. Her strongest instinct is motherhood, it prevails over everything, over her work and over becoming an achiever. The motherhood instinct blinds her. If women changed this twisted intelligence, which I call 'women's intelligence', they would have achieved greater things throughout history. But this didn't happen. Be more direct and achieve more! Civilization was originally based on women. When men were busy hunting, women were creating languages. During the earliest eras of civilization, women were household heads. Then the man discovered lead or iron, and worked with it. They took power over women. Power shifts from one person to another, depending on who is doing the work. Iron was replaced by money; today the one who owns the most money is the most powerful. In my opinion, the situation of Lebanon is very good and it prepares women to be whoever they want. We are eating the rights of men. Don't worry!

Dania: Do you think you would have been a different person had you lived elsewhere?
Hiba: Born elsewhere, or lived part of my life elsewhere? I'm sure I would have been a different person, because it would have been another culture, another conscience, another collective unconscious, another life, another experience, another background. My Oriental culture is a very old and very deep, and it is very present in me, both Oriental culture and Oriental philosophy. We are the ones who created them, we who are living in this region. Philosophy developed here, religion also. Our history is awe-inspiring, its reservoir is very big. Our music is different, our sensations are different, our musical background is different. The philosophical dimension of our music is not present in the West. I say we have a musical tradition which, if it was written differently, would be more beautiful than any other music. I'm a person who belongs to anywhere in the world which accords with my feelings and mentality, but there is an Arabic Oriental tradition present in my music, and in my mentality, culture and unconscious.

What else? I can tell you that besides working on my performances, I am a teacher at the Conservatoire and a member of the executive board. I am also a member of the curriculum committee, and of the committee which prepares teachers to teach in schools. I also teach at the Lebanese University in the Faculty of Health. For my concerts, other than the composition, I take care of all the details. I supervise everything from A to Z. I write the contracts, I do the negotiations, I do my own marketing, I follow up on all the details, otherwise I can't sleep.

Besides Walid Gholmieh and my parents, there is another person I should mention, someone whose help has been essential and is currently my friend, Bahia al-Hariri[2]. I met her - besides the fact that I'm from Saida - I met her at a concert in the presidential palace in 1993, and our friendship grew. She liked my music, I sang both foreign and Arabic opera then. She believes in my work and she is encouraging me. She helped me make my first compact disc, she helped to finance the production, because music needs money, especially the kind of music I'm working on, there's a lot of expenditure but little income, the profit never covers your expenses. She has become more than a sister. These are the people in my life - my parents, Walid Gholmieh and Bahia al-Hariri - who have supported and backed me.

When I'm composing music I am inventing something very abstract, especially that I am doing something which did not happen before in the history of our music. I'm still at the beginning of the road. Writing music has allowed me to choose a different kind of poem. I have stopped writing poetry, I believe that language is very material, and music is more abstract. Language expresses things, and helps people communicate daily, but not to express important feelings, or the universality of being. Language divided the universe and renamed everything - this is a tree, a house, a dog, a table, a cellular phone, you and me. Language helped divide the universe at a time when it was still a whole. Now every poem I choose revolves around Sufism. Sufis believe in the universality of being. Sufi poetry tries to purify language from its materialism. That's why it suits music better, through its abstraction. Music is the absolute, physics proves this. Nature expresses its presence through sound -- imagine complete silence, as if someone has pressed 'pause' on the universe! It isn't possible. Even if you shut your ears there is still sound, sound never disappears. They say that the universe started with the big bang, but it was nothing more than a vibration and a sound. All scientific theories confirm the presence of vibrations everywhere. Life is a vibration, then it is a sound, every living being, even our cells vibrate. Music after all is a science, one of the oldest sciences. If you go back to the earliest civilizations, the first sciences were music, astrology, philosophy, then mathematics and medicine. They developed, but the science of music was always present.

Recorded and translated by Dania Sinno

End Notes

1.Walid Gholmieh is the Director of the 'National Conservatory of Music'.
2.Bahia al-Hariri, sister of the current Prime Minister, member of Parliament, and Chairwoman of a cultural foundation in Saida.

The 25 Year Life Story of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

How did it all begin? How did it develop? What are its future prospects? These three questions, along with many others, come to one's mind when talking about the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World. Answering them, we felt, could help trace the 25 year life story of the Institute, a life story marked by a seventeen year civil strife which has, undoubtedly, slowed the momentum of its activities, but has not succeeded in hindering its determination to move ahead in promoting the advancement of Arab women.

Recollections and Testimonies

Riyad Nassar, President of the Lebanese American University

In the early seventies, the Lebanese American University (LAU) was still a women's college. Serious thought, however, was given to the possibility of changing it into a co-educational institution. With this perspective in mind, several consultations were held with the Board of Trustees, members of the alumnae, friends, faculty and students. The pros and cons were debated, and eventually the decision was made to implement the change. We felt that if we wanted to develop the institution further, we could not invest in half of the country's population. We had to expose the total population to our liberal educational system. Another factor that affected our decision was the results of a questionnaire that was sent, at that time, to the students asking them whether they preferred the college to remain as it is (a women's college), or become co-educational. As I recall, approximately 80% of the students preferred the latter. So we felt that change was pertinent. Yet, we strongly believed that in order to honor its heritage, this institution had to continue offering women a special and unique service. The idea of doing something for women, therefore, became clear and it was approved by the constituencies of the University. Out of all the discussions that took place, the whole group voted for creating an institute for women studies in the Arab world. But the final approval had to come from the Board of Trustees, so the administration proposed the idea and the Board endorsed it.

Once approval was granted the details of the Institute started being worked out internally. The implementation of this new idea needed funding, so the President of the University at that time, Dr. Schechter, approached the Ford Foundation which agreed to give us seed money to start the project and kept on financing it for the first two or three years. The initial amount we received, in 1974, was $ 30,000. We received all in all $ 80,000 from the Ford Foundation during the first three years of the Institute's inception. By the end of three years, the Institute had a successful record that enabled it to attract money on its own from other foundations, women organizations, governments and individuals. And here I give the previous Director of the Institute, a very dynamic and professionally qualified woman, a lot of credit because she was able to impress people and convince them that the Institute could deliver.

After funding was secured, we needed a director to run the Institute. Dr. Schechter and myself - I was Dean at that time - thought of Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr. She was a faculty member at LAU, and had a good record in teaching, research and running the nursery school. It took some convincing to get Julinda to move away from teaching, which was her primary interest. We had to do a lot of arm twisting to convince her to take the position. We were proven right, she did an excellent job throughout the 24 years she served as director. She managed to nurture the institution from an embryo to a very reputable one.

When we set up the Institute the first task Julinda had to undertake was to develop a mission for the Women's Institute. Since she was reporting directly to the Dean, Julinda and I, along with the President, worked for days on developing a philosophy for the Institute. Certainly Julinda was more informed on these issues because she was working with a team of professionals and was consulting with people outside the University. But I as a Dean had a say and so did the President and finally we came up with a mission statement for the Institute, namely "to serve as a data bank and resource center to advance a better understanding of issues pertaining to Arab women and children; to promote communication among individuals, groups and institutions throughout the world concerned with Arab women; to improve the quality of life of Arab women and children through educational and development projects; and to enhance the educational and outreach efforts of the Lebanese American University."

Throughout the years we tried to move away from the political sphere. The Institute was more of an intellectual, academic, research, documentation institute than a lobbying place for women's rights. Universities usually try to shy away from the political arena. For instance, we did not want to be lobbying for the amendment of discriminatory laws against women; not because we did not believe in it, but because we thought independent organizations would be more effective in exacting change than an academic institution. However, this did not stop the Institute from working towards increasing people's awareness on women's and children's issues.

Irene Lorfing, Former Research Associate at the Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World

Before joining the Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World, I was working on a collaborative research project on family formation patterns and health in Lebanon. In the course of my work, I witnessed for the first time some of the problems that Lebanese women faced because they were women. When I joined the Institute in 1977, the war was raging but the office was vibrant with enthusiasm. After a few months of research and documentation on the status of Lebanese and Arab women, I realized the immensity of the task ahead. My collaboration with the Institute lasted ten years during which we concentrated our efforts on research, documentation, networking with Arab and international organizations as well as planning and participating in regional and international workshops and conferences. We have also introduced at the Lebanese American University, the first course on women's studies in the region. These were very productive years that laid the path to the growth of women's centers in the Arab countries and increased the interest of Arab researchers in women's social, economic and political roles and their status in their respective societies. Our research efforts concentrated on: the identification and elimination of sex stereotypes in school textbooks; sex role attitudes and cultural change; women in employment and development in the Arab world; tasks of women in the Lebanese industry; Lebanese women heads of households; the economic contribution of Lebanese women and its effect on family dynamics, socialization patterns of Lebanese children; and comparative studies to assess Arab women's situation in the family and society. We have also prepared, at the request of UN organizations, plans of action for young girl's and women's programs in the Arab World and a research design to study women's profiles and assess their situation in the family and community (UNICEF, MENA region).

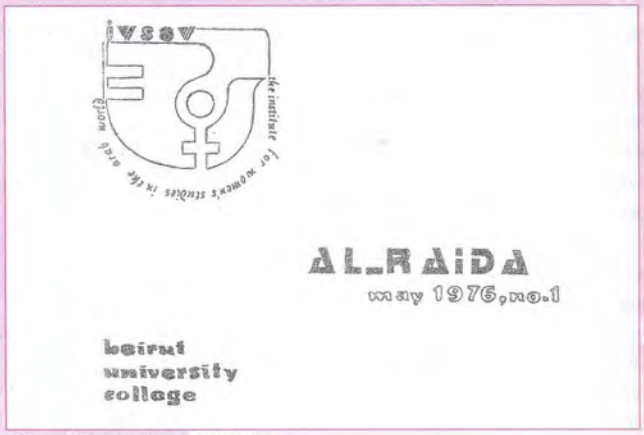
Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr, former Director, with the staff of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

Another important component of our work was the planning of regional conferences on the issues facing the integration of Arab women in development. These conferences were attended by policy makers, UN and Arab organizations, prominent Arab researchers and women's NGOs. In addition we have participated and attended conferences all over the world. We have, for instance, cooperated with the Mediterranean Women's Study Center (KEGME) in Greece for the preparation of the 1985 women's decade in Nairobi.

The war was raging, but we always managed to find a boat, a plane or a car that would take us to our destination. It was important to communicate our findings and experiences, make our voice heard and reinforce our networking. Nothing seemed to stop us. I believe that the legitimateness and urgency of the task we had decided to initiate and undertake kept us going. As a pioneer Lebanese institution in the Arab world, we had to succeed and I think we did.

Rose Ghurayyib, Former Editor of Al-Raida
Al-Raida: How it All Started

Founded in 1973 at the Lebanese American University through a grant from the Ford Foundation, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World started publishing, in 1976, a newsletter of eight pages, reporting about the noteworthy activities of the Institute. The newsletter eventually evolved into a quarterly publication of sixteen large-sized pages, called Al-Raida (the pioneer). Its aims were briefly defined as follows: pursuing closely and steadily the modern feminist movement in the Arab world; reporting on its activities as represented by unions, conferences, congress, seminars, declarations and claims; publishing articles which drew their material from documentation and research. For this purpose, the Institute started establishing a documentation center, with Arabic and English reference books and magazines to be used by members of the Institute and other people interested in reading and/or writing about the women's movement as well as Arab women. The first ten numbers of Al-Raida were published both in English and Arabic, using a separate pamphlet for each language. This required a double amount of work and expense. Since 1980, the publication has been limited to the English issue and, in 1992, the number of the pages was raised to thirty two, then to forty eight in 1996.



Cover of the first issue of Al-Raida

Future Prospects

Nabeel Haidar, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Lebanese American University

Question: The Institute is located on the Beirut campus which hosts most of its activities. In your capacity as Vice President for Academic Affairs, how do you envisage the future networking between the Institute and the other two campuses of the University?

Nabeel Haidar: The Women's Institute is a University Institute. Its scope of action is the whole university in its three campuses - Beirut, Byblos and Sidon. The reason why the Institute did not do much in Byblos and Sidon before is due to the Lebanese war which started shortly after the Institute was established. During 1997 and 1998 however, the activities of the Institute reached out to the Byblos campus and some were conducted either in cooperation with local NGOs in the Byblos area or solely by the Institute.

Question: Are there any plans to offer a degree in women's studies, BA or a minor?

Nabeel Haidar: Although I personally would like to see a degree in Women's Studies at LAU, unfortunately I do not believe that it is financially feasible at the present time, the reason being that there will be very few takers (majors) of this degree. At this time what we should be concerned with is raising awareness among our student population to issues related to women. Here I must emphasize that we should not only address female students but more importantly male students. I believe that awareness may be brought about through lectures, workshops, seminars, outreach programs and well thought of courses. We should always keep in mind that women do not live in a void but together with their male counterparts; therefore, education on women's issues should address both men and women.

In the future, the near future, we look forward to start offering courses in which the plight of women is approached from the angle of justice and peace - a course like "gender equality" - where the injustice practiced against women could be shown to be a factor of instability at the national level. A few courses (perhaps four to six) could form a minor area of specialization, but a whole program of thirty six credit hours is unlikely at this stage.

Question: Do you think that increasing women's and men's awareness will lead to a greater involvement of Lebanese women in the public sphere?

Nabeel Haidar: I was very disappointed recently during the municipal elections when only a few women decided to run for elections. This shows that our women lack confidence in themselves. They should get engaged - in force - in all types of elections not as a women's block but as full-fledged citizens. Why should we ask for women to be appointed in key positions if they themselves decide not to be involved?

Mona Khalaf, Director of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

Question: Do you envisage, as the new Director of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World any major changes in the mission of the Institute?
Mona Khalaf: The mission of the Institute, as set by the university revolves essentially around three major areas: academic research, documentation and networking. It is, therefore, an academic unit within the University set-up. I do not anticipate any basic changes in this broad mandate, at least not in the near future. Here I would like to open a small parenthesis. The Institute was the first of its kind in the Arab world. Its inception, however, almost coincided with the outbreak of the civil strife in Lebanon which went on relentlessly for seventeen years and resulted in a huge displacement of the Lebanese population, its systematic impoverishment and a drastic increase in the number of women headed households. Within this context, the Institute felt that it could not limit its activities to academic ones. It undertook outreach programs to help women in the lowest social strata who desperately needed this help to survive. Thus, along with pursuing its academic endeavors, the Institute developed action programs for the community.

Question: Within this broad mission, do you think that new perspectives would emerge, particularly at the research level?
Mona Khalaf: Definitely. Despite all the progress achieved and the reduction in the gender gap during the second half of this century, the basic issues related to women are still the same. A significant change has, however, been witnessed in the way these issues have been conceptualized in the context of development. We have, in fact, gradually moved from a "women in development" (WID) approach which stressed what women need from development into a "gender and development" (GAD) approach which prioritizes what development needs from women. And here, when we talk about development, we are not limiting it to economic development. We are talking about sustainable human development, a development achieved by people and not for them, a process in which all people irrespective of gender are essential agents. This new gendered outlook to development which emphasizes its human and sustainable components cannot but affect the course of research and training undertaken at the Institute.

Question: The name of the Institute is linked with that of the Arab world. How would you assess the achievements of the Institute in that respect?
Mona Khalaf: As mentioned earlier, the achievements of the Institute have been jeopardized by the Lebanese civil strife. But efforts have already started to network with other centers in the Arab world. In fact, through a grant from the Italian Association for Women in Development (AIDOS), the Institute is presently engaged with three other documentation/information centers in Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine in collecting and exchanging information about women's rights in their respective countries.

In addition, the Institute is expanding the scope of its documentation center through the collection of books, journals and studies with the purpose of making it *the* reference on Arab women's issues.

AREAS OF RESEARCH

Preference will be given to research in the following areas :

1. Role of women in national integrated development.
2. Women and rural development .
3. Women and industrial development .
4. Working women - employment .
5. Social and legal status .
6. Conditions under which women live .
7. Contributions of women in different fields.
8. Self-concept .
9. Organizations.
10. Education - vocational training .
11. Abolishing illiteracy .
12. Social taboos that hinder women's development .
13. Population growth and family planning .
14. Health and nutrition .

I W S A W's GRANTS

1. Grants will normally not exceed L.L. 7500 .
2. Preference will be given to individuals or groups with long standing commitments to the Arab world and with adequate qualifications to undertake research .
3. Preference will normally be given to projects that can be completed within 12-18 months.
4. Grantees will be expected to make their research results available to the Institute . They might be requested to participate in seminars and conferences .

Closing Date

There are no standardized application forms for submission. Proposals must be received by August, 31st 1976 .

Source: Al-Raida, No. 1, May 1976, p.9

Lena Kelekian: Geologist, Iconographer

(Born in 1959, in Beirut; of Armenian and Greek Cypriot origin; currently living in Bois de Bologne [Matn]. Language: English, with some Arabic.)

My name is Lena Kelekian. I was born on the 18 of May, 1959, in Beirut, of Armenian parents. My father is Lebanese Armenian, my mother is Cypriot. I have one sister, two years younger than me, her name is Hilda. I went to an Armenian elementary school, where my parents put me to learn Armenian. Of course we also learned Arabic, English and French. Then I was at the British School, and later I went to the American University of Beirut. My passion was to become a geologist, a scientist like my grandfather. So I went into AUB to study geology, first to get a BS and then an MA. But I did not finish my thesis; I had to leave because of the war.

From when I was four years old, I used to collect rocks and minerals from all the countries I visited. At that age my grandfather told me what platetectonics are. We used to have the map of the world in our dining room so we would learn the world while eating. That was my mother's indirect way of teaching us (laughs). My grandfather taught us how South Africa fits with South America. This really hit my brain. My mother was from the Royal School of Music (UK), she always encouraged us -- besides school studies, we had to have so many professors, because my mother didn't know Arabic we had to learn Arabic, our national tongue. In fact once we insisted on learning Greek instead of Arabic, but she said, "You are Lebanese you have to learn Arabic. I am Cypriot so I speak Greek. Now we are very fluent in Arabic.

When were young, both of us were naughty. When I was six years old and my younger sister was four, we learnt the piano, and tennis and skiing as well. When I began to play the piano, from six years old, we used to give recitals at AUB Assembly Hall, which was really nice. The first time I stepped into AUB, I had to -- there was a banyan tree and I jumped all over its roots. I told my mother, "One day I'll come to this place and learn." And it happened (laughs). AUB was always part of my life. Our cousins didn't go to AUB, they went to the Imperial College in London, all the clan studied in London, but we, the Lebanese ones, went to AUB, although I continued later at the University of London. I was good at the piano then, I know all the journals used to write, "The little pianist", and "What will she become?" and I don't know what. Then, with the war, things changed, our piano teacher passed away, I entered university, and we were always studying. Twice a week we had piano lessons, and at the weekend my father used to take us to the theatre or the cinema, whatever. During the summer, we had fun, my mother used to take us to see our friends, and sometimes we traveled. And then, as you know, I started geology at AUB, though my father wanted me to do business - because he's an industrialist. But I hate business with all my heart (laughs). So I kept on saying, "No, I want to become a geologist". So I kept on, and took my degree. I didn't get my minor degree, because in my time they didn't give you a degree as a minor, but I did all my electives, mainly archeology. I always liked ancient art. Once, while I was at the British school, I won the Fabriano prize for art.

Zeina: My sister won it too!
Lena: Really? How nice! It's an encouragement. My mother used to paint before she became a pianist. My sister and I did it the other way round (laughs). It's all expression through the fingers, but in a different way. It is always art. While at AUB, I took theater courses because I always liked to combine science and art together. I love this combination. Geology is the mother of all science, because in it there's biology, chemistry, physics, everything. And then combining, embellishing it with art, this is what I like. In 1981 I graduated with a BS. In 1982, I was doing my MA when there was the Israeli invasion, we had to leave the dorms, so I didn't finish my thesis.

Zeina: Where did you live?
Lena: We lived in Zalka, on the highway. That's too far to come and go everyday. So we had to live in the dorms. It was the first time that we lived away from our parents. Then in 1982 there was the invasion, and that's when I became a 'true believer'. It was because of the many events that were going on around us. Before this I wasn't a 'true believer', but that year I came to my senses, I became a 'true believer' through some miracles through which God helps us. I read the Bible and my mother helped me - she is a 'true believer' too - so I got to understand the meaning of life. Now I have my own view, my own way of thinking. Here, for example I make a triangle (she draws a triangle). On the three sides of the triangle you put 'theology', 'sciences', 'arts'. Let me tell you this, and then I will come back to my motto in life.

In 1982 I did some research on my own, because of the war I couldn't go back to AUB. First I did research on fur, then I decided to read the Encyclopedia Britanica, a volume each month. I stopped because the little letters were too hard for me (laughs). Then I started painting. I had taken extra courses at

AUB, you know, for example ceramics. I started painting first on plates, then I decided to paint icons. Part of our family is Cypriot, and we have British and Greek members. I had done Byzantine art and architecture in my archeology elective courses as I told you. But I couldn't find anyone to teach me. Then, you know, I used to pray everyday, it happens that whenever I ask something from God, somehow, somewhere, he gives it to me. It was then I read about Père Lammens visiting Lebanon. I said to myself, "Look at that! He is the best iconographer in the world!" So I tried to find him. He said, "You'll teach me geology, and of course I'll teach you iconography." Of course they choose whom they teach. I was his only student, and we used to go, my mother and me, to the convent. At that time he was staying for a couple of months in Lebanon - usually he's in Paris or Europe. Later I met him in Paris, and we continued. He told me, "Since you are a geologist and into mineralogy" - because my thesis was going to be on minerals, I have a big collection, you know that ancient peoples used to extract natural pigments from minerals - "You are the expert in minerals and I don't know anything about them. So I will teach you, and you will paint icons in the authentic Byzantine way." So he taught me the real way, step by step, starting from the wood, which took us several months, and I carried on with him and with other iconographers my grandfather introduced me to in Cyprus, Greece, and all over Europe. I went on for ten years studying icon painting and restoration. I was painting and creating things, and I continued my research in extracting pigments from minerals, also from vegetables and animals, though you can't compare them with minerals which have a much wider range. My professors at the University of London, where I continued later in restoration and conservation, told me that I have discovered new pigments. Wherever I went in the world I used to collect and exchange rocks with my geology friends - I am a member of the World Association of Geology.

Maybe God bestowed on me a talent for expressing myself in a different way, just to put the pictures in my hand, and spread the news to everybody. It's a way of preaching. So I started doing icons, they came out beautifully. I said to myself, "Why don't I take some courses in theology?" I went on and studied theology for four years, and I got a DST.[1] So during that time, I was doing my iconography research, and studying in Europe, and doing theology. By 1992, I had my DST, and had ended my studies in Europe, and was painting. They were nice pieces, I was happy with them. I used to go to art exhibitions. At one exhibition the lady owner asked me what I did. I said, "I and my sister Hilda, I paint icons and she paints parchment." Hilda had graduated from BUC in fine arts and interior design, then she moved into sacred art, Christian and Islamic. So we were both working in parallel expressing the same theme in different ways, mine, the old Byzantine style, hers is her own, but both are the renewing of old art. While I was at the University of London, where I did conservation and restoration, and later when I was in Italy, one of my professors said, "You have a different green, it's very rare, where did you find it?" This is how I found out that I have discovered new

pigments. I have eighty nine colors, up to the Renaissance they had forty three. So I had a bigger range, including undertones. It is very enjoyable to pick and extract pigments. It is science and art in one. All my icons are made from natural pigments. Now the University of London wants me to write a book on natural pigments. I started, but I have so many things to do. Then in 1992, this lady I was telling you about said, "Let me see what you do." So we said, "Fine, we will bring you some of our work." We always wanted to have exhibitions but we never thought it would happen.

Zeina: Where was it?
Lena: At the Station des Arts. I took some of my work that I had at home and Hilda took two of her parchments. We went to her office. Juliana Seraphim, a well known artist was there, she was surprised to see young people like us doing such good work. The gallery owner, Marlene, told me that she would open her new gallery with our work. So wow! That was good (laughs). The opening was under Monseigneur Audi's patronage. He is my spiritual father. It was a big success. We were two sisters, and everybody thought that we were nuns. From that day we started exhibiting together, Hilda and me. After that we prepared a brochure, like this [shows a brochure], which explains what an icon is, what a parchment is, also the cross, and the history of fresco. There are crosses

like this, these are symbolic. See - one, two, three points for God, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is an Armenian cross, this is Byzantine, this is Syriac. This is so people who get an invitation will be interested in reading it. People have been very encouraging. There is scientific research behind our work. We should always be humble, because this is not our work, it's what God gives us. I always combine theology and sciences together, it is very nice, especially in the US, I have many friends there.

In 1992 - because I had become a member of the Iconographers of the World in the USA - when I sent them an invitation, they gave it to Dr Billy Graham, and he wrote us a letter. I opened it and read it, it was Billy Graham writing to us, he wanted to purchase one of my paintings and one of Hilda's for his museum. So in fact we were encouraged by everybody, and our work was getting almost sold out. I did not want to sell all my icons, but my mother convinced us that we should spread their blessings to other houses. After that we had another exhibition. And that same year, 1992, we sent the icons to the Museum [Billy Graham's] and to the Salon d'Automne in Paris. It was the 90th anniversary. They accepted our work because it was new to them. We just sent one piece each, to be selected from among 3000 artists. From 3000 they select around 500, and we were among those. These were the first sacred art paintings to be chosen in the whole ninety year history of the Salon d'Automne. We carried on, and started exhibiting all over the world. We got invitations from London, Paris, from all over France, from Italy, from Stockholm. We were awarded a gold medal by the Association de Mérite et Dévouement Francais. And there were other awards.[2]

Last year, several artist friends told me that there was a notice in the newspapers about the Judraniyat competition, as part of a project to beautify Lebanon. They said it had to be a mural painting to decorate the wall of the Sassine tunnel in Beirut. "And since you are a muralist ... !" I forgot to tell you that I did mural painting at the same time as restoration and conservation of icons at the University of London, and in several other countries - Greece, Italy, and Spain. We visited old churches, maybe more than a thousand, in remote islands where nobody lives. We went in rowing boats. Yes, on the borders of Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece, where nobody goes. So I said, okay, it's good something new is being done in Lebanon. I took an appointment and had an interview. I felt a bit overqualified, I didn't want to take anybody's place. They said, "No, anybody can enter the competition." There were rules. You can not -- in the tunnel you have to have something that does not distract the drivers. I did thirteen designs, then I forgot about it because I was too busy with other exhibitions. Then the organizers called me, they said, "The deadline is in two days, don't forget." So I started working. I sat at the computer with friends who are better than me in graphic arts. I did two designs. One was with different types of trees found in Lebanon, with a sky like Lebanon's. It was fresh and nice. It so happened that a year ago I saw a painting of a tree, just one tree. I cut it out and put it up in my studio. I was looking at that tree for a whole year. I always wanted to paint it. It was in my brain, so I used it for one of the designs. For the second design, I did a museum with the paintings of all Lebanese painters. It was as if you were walking into a museum in the tunnel. After a month, there was a jury, I was the winner of the first prize (smiles). The jury asked how come that I had shifted from icons. I said I hadn't.This could be my geological background coming out. I couldn't have put icons in the tunnel, no way! Now they want me to be in the Executive Committee. Judraniyat has a plan to embellish all of Lebanon, mainly tunnels and empty walls, to give a colorful touch to the grey cement that is everywhere. It will refresh people. Now I am working with the Judraniyat helping them to beautify Lebanon.

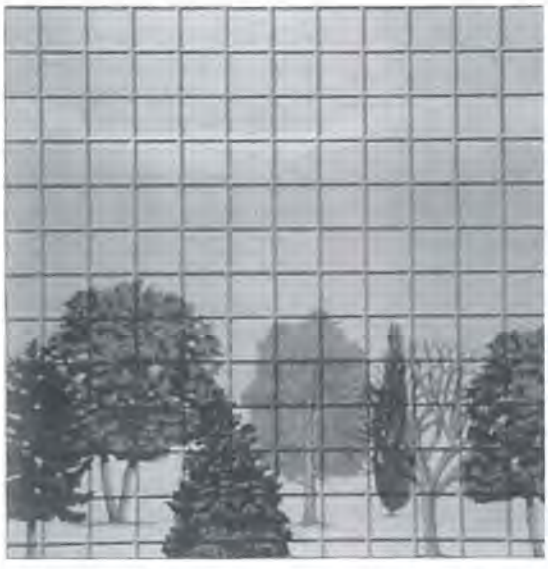
My sister is also involved, but now she has got married and is busy cooking (laughs). Now Hilda is the General Manager of our father's factory. It makes uniforms. She told me I should come and help. I gave it a try for six months. My God, I couldn't, I couldn't get there in the morning. I can't wake up before ten o'clock. I sleep late, and I enjoy it. If I'm not painting, I'm dancing somewhere. Believe me I have to socialize, or something happens to me. I had to try the business field and industry, but it didn't work out for me, I couldn't. I am back to sciences and arts, and to my prayers

Let me tell you what my motto in life is. There are several. First, the motto of the family is the verse in the psalms, "Be as clever as the serpent and as humble as the dove." This has always been with us. Then there is the triangle I told you about. This is the way I combine the scientific, the spiritual and the artistic. Just as we eat every day to nourish the body, so we should nourish the spirit so as to be in balance and have a happy life.

You can speak to God at any time you know, no problem. For example, in the morning I always pray. I have my own prayer, first praising God, then asking him to protect us and give me what I want. He will take care of you. At night I always read the psalms and pray. I light a candle and say my prayers, and then I sleep. Even if its four o'clock in the morning, I don't care how sleepy I am, I keep my eyes open, read the psalms, pray, and thank God. What I do is to make use of the sciences in art to praise God. I take pigments from the earth and I give them back to God in his image. Do you want me to say anything else?

Zeina: Say something about you as a person.
Lena: Ah, as a character too? Me, what should I tell you? I like to be with friends, I love my friends with all my heart, and I always like to make new friends. I am friends with scientists in NASA who are into theology, they're true believers.

Zeina: What exactly do you mean by 'true believer'?
Lena: It is to believe in God, to believe in Jesus Christ, to believe in the Virgin Mary. To become a true believer you have to know who is God, omnipotent, omniscient. And Jesus is the son of God who came for us, was crucified for us, for our sins.



So if you believe in God through Jesus Christ. Then you have to pray always. This is as if you have your cellular always open to God. Okay? What I am saying is that you should always have contact with God. If you have this relationship, whenever you are in need he will always come to you and help you. Before I sleep, I say my prayers and say please tell me what you want to tell me. So I open the Psalms at any page. Then I read the page and He gives me His message. Always a different page. You just open anywhere and read. And then I have all those prayers against bad people, and I pray for all the poor on earth. Maybe I am preaching, no? (laughs) It is because you are asking me what I think inside. Usually I don't talk this much because I give my formula very scientifically to my friends. And to my surprise, most of my friends from AUB are true believers, and sometimes they look at me and say, "What's this, you are always dancing?!" I can go and dance every night, there is nothing wrong in it. It's as if, because I do icons, I should be saintly, and not go dancing until four in the morning. But if you know who you are, nothing can go wrong; you know where you stand, where your limits are. After all, I'm a normal person, a woman not a nun. I lead a normal life, and a believer life. I enjoy having fun, there is nothing wrong in it. Sometimes I give lectures to schools on iconography and how to behave in life, and I always tell them it's okay to have girlfriends and boyfriends. I don't have a boyfriend but it's because I don't want to, it would be a loss of time for me. It's alright if you find the right person. But if you don't find the right person, it's a waste of time. I have so many friends, we go out together, but I don't find myself bound to somebody. Maybe now I'm at an age when I should think seriously of -- (laughs).

Zeina: What about Lebanon, as being born Armenian ?

Lena: Ah, you know, they are very nice people, the Armenians. But I am not a fanatic Armenian. Some are fanatics. I never speak Armenian in front of anybody who doesn't understand the language. I don't have many Armenian friends, although I like them all. I have only one, maybe two, and they are like me. We don't mingle much with the secluded part (gestures with hands). I have nothing against them but I don't like their seclusion, 'Us' and 'You.' For me, it's all the world. Lebanon is my country, I am Lebanese but of Armenian origin. I could be Cypriot but, no, I feel Lebanese. No, it is the whole earth that we belong to, we are human beings. I don't differentiate between people. I enjoy the intellectuals more, but I respect everybody (pause). What else can I tell you? Well, I love my parents too (laughs), and my sister, and my dog. I run to help anybody who wants anything from me. What else? I have bad habits. I can't wake early. I can't take orders from anyone. Nobody gives me orders. I only take orders from God. Not even from my parents. When we were young we used to get beaten (laughs), oh a lot. We were often punished. I was the lazy type. Ah yes, when we were really young, Hilda and I, Hilda is like that, if my mother asked her to fetch a glass of water she would go straight away, she was good. Me, no, I didn't go, so I ended up going fifty times to get them water as a punishment (laughs). And she would laugh at me.

What else? Oh, I am lazy, I don't fix my bed, I don't cook. It might be different if I got married, I don't know. I like to have breakfast in bed (laughs). I am getting spoilt here. Maybe I have other vices, I don't know. What else? When I walk in the mountains I always have my eyes on the ground, and I always find things. Once we were in Cyprus, my uncle took us somewhere to a restaurant, the whole family. While we were walking, guess what I found in the parking lot -- jasper! It is a semi-precious rock. The whole parking lot was full of jasper. I love collecting, it is my passion. I like painting on walls too. Maybe I'll do something for 'Beirut 1999.' I like dancing a lot. It's exercise, it is real exercise, and it is creative. All your body moves. It's exercise with music. And I like to wear attractive things. I don't like to look messy. Because, as a woman, I feel you should be 'coquette.' I like wearing mini-skirts in hot weather so that they don't think I am a nun (laughs). But all this is within limits, within rules and limits. You must know where you are and where you stand, where your limits are. So you won't hurt anybody. One day I would like to write a book on sciences and geology too, and a book on icons, the rules and everything, painting, restoring the symbols.

Recorded and translated by Zeina Misk

End Notes

1. Diplome Superièure en Théologie, a course given by the Université Saint Joseph and the Université du Saint Esprit de Kaslik.

2. Lena Kelikian lists exhibitions she and her sister have participated in and awards they have won: the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, in museums and galleries in Stockholm, Copenhagen, New York, California, Muscat, Qatar, Kuwait, Malta. Also listings in international artistic Who's Who and Yearbooks. Lena is also member of many local cultural associations such as Beirut Patrimonie and the Movement Culturel of Antelias.

Adele Kerbaj: Farmer, Gardener

(Born in 1937, in Barouk [Shouf]; currently living in 'Ain Ksour [Shouf]; recorded in her home; others present, Anissa Najjar. Language: Druze form of colloquial Arabic.)

Picture Credit: Ghena Ismail

Adele: We were three sisters at home, we had no brothers. My father, God bless his soul, loved farming. We had cattle, sheep, goats and cows. Because I didn't have brothers, our mother used to wake us up at six o'clock to go to the fields, to bring our father grass, and then go to school. When we came back from school in the afternoon we worked, we helped our father in the fields. When we got older, there was other work. Everyday we stayed in the fields helping our father until twelve or one at night. My father, God bless his soul, liked to have goats. We had to feed them, we used to bring grape and fig and blackberry leaves to feed the goats. My mother forced us to feed them. She made me feed the sheep either evening or early morning. I used to get upset. (smiles) I told my elder sister, "You feed them and I'll bring water". There was no water in the village. Every day in the evening we used to bring water from the river. I didn't like feeding the sheep. I was afraid they'd bite my hand (laughs). So I went to bring water. I took the container and went to the river with the girls. In the morning I went to bring water two or three times, and the same thing in the evening.

Days passed and I grew older. My father didn't have sons to help him, so we had to help him. The seasons passed, we had to harvest wheat, barley, hummus. Everyday he took us with him to pick the crops and help him. Sometimes we went back home, and sometimes we slept in the fields. He took mattresses with him. The field were one hour far from our home. Instead of going and coming, during the summer, he took mattresses with him and we slept in the fields.

Anisseh: They slept in tents.
Adele: Yes. Not only us, our neighbors also. We took with us tea and other things, and we had a lot of fun there. Then my father broke his leg, may God not break anyone's bones. He was sixty or seventy years old. My elder sister was married. I suffered a lot. I had to go to the field every day. Throughout my whole life I suffered. Every day I had to go to the fields, and in the evening I had to wash. There were no washing machines in those days. I brought water and washed while my mother stayed by my father.

Ghena: By then you had stopped going to school?

Adele: Yes, I didn't get a school certificate. I only reached second or third grade. But I continued to read. I like to read a lot. I wanted to go to school but my parents needed me to help in the fields. I had a sister who was younger than me and the elder sister got married. So I worked in the fields alone. We had an apple tree and orchards. There was a lot of work.

During that period, God sent me a decent man from another village. I married him. He turned out to be (pause) very kind and decent, but he wasn't lucky. Life was not generous with him. Whatever money he made, we spent. I lived with him for thirty years. No month was better than the one before. (laughs) His financial situation was the same from the day we married until the day he died. I helped him, and he respected and appreciated me, and his parents did as well. Me too, I love and appreciate them. My husband has been dead for four years, but nothing has changed in our home. My brothers-in-laws, sisters-in-law and mother-in-law all visit me, they all like me. Thank God we lived decently, but we weren't well off.

Anisseh: Didn't you inherit some land?
Adele: My father, God bless his soul, didn't have sons. He only had girls. He gave us land. He divided the land among the three of us. I sold two pieces of land, I helped my nephews and nieces. They weren't very well off and they were orphans, I felt sorry for them. I helped the first nephew in building and I also helped him when he wanted to get married. We have been here for twenty years, guarding this building. They pay us LL200,000 per month. This doesn't last more than four or five days. I asked the owner for an increase. He said he couldn't. I asked him to register us with social security. He told me he can't, he's a foreigner. So I pay for doctors and medicines. That's why we were never able to save money. Every month I

get a temperature. I pay from LL60,000 to LL70,000 for medicines and doctors' fees. We had no children. When we first got married I took medical treatment, but God didn't give us children. This is my life. Now I'm sixty years old.

Ghena: No, this is too short. I want to know more.
Adele: You want me to tell you about my life? You'd need two days. (laughs)
Ghena: That's alright, I'm here to listen to you.
Anisseh: Tell her about Baadharan.
Adele: When I went to Baadharan I was newly wed, (laughs) a twenty one day bride. My parents-in- law made charcoal. They needed someone to help them. I said, "I'll go with you." I went with them, I was a twenty one day bride, and I filled fourteen bags of charcoal. It was the olive season, and they were looking for laborers to help them, but they couldn't find any. I said, "I'll help you." I wasn't used to collecting olives - in the Barouk we didn't have olives. The first day I picked olives for an hour, and then I got a head-ache. I'd pick and rest. My mother-in-law said, "You aren't used to the olives. I told you to stay home, but you insisted on coming." It was very tough the first day. The second day they asked me if I wanted to go with them and I said, "Yes." She [mother-in-law] told me, "Why come? The whole day you hardly picked two olives. It's not worth it. Why don't you stay here?" I said, "No, I'll take some matté." The second day was better than the first. I worked for a while and when I got tired I went and prepared matté and coffee for them. At noon I prepared lunch. The third day was even better. So I picked olives with them for a month, and I felt very much at ease.

Then my husband decided to move to a village called Tir Jbeil. He wanted to work with charcoal. He thought working with charcoal would be more profitable. I said, "We know nothing about charcoal. We're only just managing with olives, let's stick to what we're doing." He said, "No, your sister's husband knows about charcoal, I'll cut it and carry it." So we moved to Tir Jbeil. We stayed in that village and rented a house. He went and cut wood. He did well. I took matté and coffee for them. Everyday I went to them, we stayed until three or four o'clock and then returned home. We felt strange the first few days, but then things went well. They decided to light the mashhara [a place where charcoal is burnt]. They had to sleep near it in the open air. They told me to sleep there with them but I said, "No I'll sleep at home." They slept in the woods for a week and worked the mashhara. Our daily income from the mashhara was LL5. I said, "Are we going to live in the woods, and suffer for LL5? Let's move to Beirut and find some other work."

"There is a proverb that says, 'Even if a man is a piece of charcoal, his presence is a blessing' "

We went to Hazmieh. We rented a room and a kitchen and he started to work in the port. His daily income was LL7. He went to the port in the morning and came back in the evening. The LL7 covered our food, rent and all expenses, it was more than enough. At the end of the week we had LL35. We went to the Sursock market. For LL15 we bought everything we needed for the household. LL20 remained. We bought kerosene, coffee cups, plates, everything. Also potatoes, onions, tomatoes, rice, sugar. All this didn't cost more than LL15 to LL20. We were well-off and happy for one or two years. Then the Palestinians started to fight, and we ran away with our clothes only. You want me to tell you my life story? Oh!

We ran away with only our clothes. They told us that some people wanted someone to guard a building in Hazmieh. We came back to Hazmieh to guard a building. We didn't like the place where we lived, it was only one room. I couldn't receive guests. The residents paid us LL25 a month and we made an extra LL25 in tips. That added up to LL50 a month. Thirty years ago that was like LL500,000 today. So we stayed in that building. Every Saturday we cleaned it. The Lebanese singer, Wadih al-Safi, was one of the residents. When he found out that were from Neeha in the Chouf he got excited, and told all the residents to give us LL10 every month. He gave us money very often. I was contented there.

We stayed in Hazmieh until fighting started at Jisr al-Bacha. Then we had to leave. We went to al-Na'meh. He [husband] went to work in a glass factory on the Bchamoun road. I took shoots and planted them. We stayed in al-Na'meh for one or two years, until Maarouf Saad was killed. We left with nothing but the clothes we were wearing.

We went to Barouk. We stayed for a year there. We planted vegetables. He had no experience in agriculture. "Get up to water the tomatoes!" I'd tell him. He'd say, "What's the hurry? We'll water them tomorrow." I'd say, "Let's pick the beans." He'd tell me, "What's the hurry? We'll pick them next week." I was angry the whole summer and ended up doing all the work. He appreciated my hard work, but I got upset. Then we managed to find work in an aluminum factory in Ain Maar, with Raymond Najjar. We pulled strings for him to get a job. He did well in the factory. He stayed for four years, and we rented a house in Ain Maar. The house was close to his work. He came home, had lunch, and went back to work. Then Kamal Junblat was killed. The Druze and Christians started to fight, each group said that the other group had killed people. When the fighting started we left with nothing but our clothes.

We went up to Baadharan. We spent the winter there. We rented an olive orchard. I would tell him, "Come on, it's a sunny day, let's go and check the olives." He would say, "Why the big fuss? It's still early." Time went by. It would be ten o'clock and we had two hours' walk to reach the olives. I used to get angry and upset. We rented an olive orchard and I worked very hard.

I told him I no longer wanted to work with olives. I was talking in front of my in-laws. They said there was a building in 'Ain Ksour, in Shahhar, we could go and guard it. They brought us here, the garden was all brambles, it looked terrible. There were also people from the Syrian National Party and the Socialist Party. I asked him, "How can we stay here? We're all alone, we have no children." We thought about it, but then I decided that we would stay. We didn't know anyone in Ain Ksour. We were new in the area. But after a while we started to know people, we started to exchange visits. The days passed. We stayed for three years. The fourth year war erupted. Israel invaded. Months passed, and there was the 'War of the Shouf.' Our home was burnt down. We ran away carrying with us nothing but our clothes.

"My father didn't have sons to help him so we had to help him"

We fled to Beirut. We stayed there six months. We sent a request to the building owner to give us our end-of-service payment. We told him that we wanted to go back to our home because it was burnt - everything we possessed was in the home, our furniture, jewelry, everything. He agreed but he wanted us to continue to guard the building. We said, "How can we guard the building? It's been burned down." He told us to stay in Barouk until he's back from Saudi Arabia. When he came back he asked us to continue guarding the building. We accepted. He polished the floor, cleaned the walls, all of this [points at the walls] was black as charcoal. We stayed for a while, then A'oun's war[3] started. We'd be sitting here and shells would be coming at us from both sides. We'd be sitting on the balcony, shelling would start and we'd go into the bedroom. "Oh God, what evil have we done?" We'd go down to the shelter. We'd be drinking coffee or matté and we'd leave everything, shut the door and go down. We stayed one year all through Aoun's war. Sometimes we'd put food on the stove and before even tasting it, we'd have to turn off the fire and go down. I said to my husband, "Wouldn't it have been easier to go to our village and die among our relatives?" However the owner insisted that we continue to guard the house. When the war ended, the roads were opened. We were about to relax when he died. During the war he didn't die, he died -- (pause).

Ghena: You told me you needed two days to finish telling me your life story.
Adele: Now you have interviewed twenty five women? Did they talk about their lives with their husbands? What should I tell you about?
Ghena: Your childhood, things you liked to do, how you spent your life, happy and sad moments.
Anisseh: You traveled to Egypt.
Adele: It's true. I like to travel. I also like farming. My heart and soul are in farming. You can deprive me of food or water, but not of gardens, plants and flowers. I often told the building owner, "If it wasn't for the water and the land you had I wouldn't have stayed." I have a passion for farming. I have to go down to the garden five or six time every day. In the morning I have to say, "Good morning" to it. (laughs) At noon I tell it, "May God encourage you!" And in the evening I tell it, "Good night." I have a hobby of planting lines of beans and lines of tomatoes. I love to pick them. (laughs) I just adore it. Then comes the season for mulberries here. Everybody tells me that the 100 kilos of mulberries should give me LL300,000 to 400,000 a month. I tell them, God knows I don't make a single pound out of this. Since the first day I entered Abdul Ghani's building, twenty years ago, I haven't made a single pound from the garden. I give friends - people whom I love and who are kind to me - I feel that it's my duty to pick and take to my friends. The beans I send my friends are not going to make them richer but I like to send them things. It's a hobby. Whenever you come to see me you'd find me among the plants and flowers in the garden. We used to have orchards in Barouk. I used to stay there all day. We had five orchards. (pause) If I could have a look at what the other interviewees told you - they're more educated perhaps - I'd have been able to talk better. (pause)

Anisseh: When you were a young woman in your parents' home weren't there men other than Kamel who wanted to marry you?
Adele: There were many suitors. Oh God! I feel shy. (laughs) Many men asked for me. Ten suitors came. (laughs) Frankly, I wasn't in love with my husband when I married him. My parents encouraged me to love him. I wanted to marry someone close to our village. He loved me and I loved him, but my father did not want me to marry him. My father wanted a man who would live in our house. Because he didn't have sons he wanted me and my husband to live with him in the same house. My husband was shrewd. He told my father that he accepted that we should live in my parent's home. He married me. We stayed in my father's house for three months. Then he said, "You believe that I'm going to stay in your father's house. Aren't I a man? I want to work and live with you in our own house." I said, "How can we do this to my poor parents? We have property here. There's plenty of space, this house could take ten more people." But my husband wasn't interested in work or income. I suffered a lot with him. He didn't want to stay in my father's house, and he didn't want to work. Of course I had to leave with him. I must say that he was a very kind man. He didn't object if I went to see my family twice a day. Haram! Whenever I cooked and felt like taking some of it to my parents in Barouk, and asked him if I could go, he would say, "Am I stopping you?" Sometimes I would ask him, "Why don't we live in Barouk?" He'd tell me, "I didn't break my promise to your father. I told him we'd live with him. We lived with him for three months." I told my husband then, "All those suitors came and none of them could outsmart my father except you, you fox" (laughs). Others call Baadharan people foxes.

There was a man who wanted to marry me and take me with

him to Kuwait. That was the man I wanted. I would love to travel. My husband's father had a sweet tongue. So as to persuade my father to marry me to his son, they came to visit us very often. They kept visiting us for two to three years. Frankly, I wanted to marry the other man and go with him to Kuwait, I didn't want to stay in the village. This was my fate. I didn't gain or lose anything. When he [husband's father] first saw me I was a young girl going to collect grapes. I was putting the grapes in the basket when two men passed by. One was a man from our village, and the other was from Baadharan. They greeted me. I responded to their greeting and offered them grapes and figs. When I went home in the evening after a long working day, I found him [the man from Baadharan] in our house. I thought to myself, "Oh, I gave this man grapes in the morning, what is he doing in our house?" (laughs). Neither my father nor my mother nor any of us knew him. My father, God bless his soul, asked him, "Where are you from?" He told him, "From Baadharan, in the Shouf." My father greeted him - he used to stay at home all day because his health was poor, and he liked to receive visitors. My father-in-law was a very shrewd man. He chose his words well. He talked to my father, and after a while they began to dance. I was shocked. I thought, "Oh God, what a man!"

The second day in the evening my future father-in-law came, bringing with him a bag of charcoal. My father said, "Why all this, my brother? You must have carried it all the way from the woods, you shouldn't have done that" He said, "It's alright. You are in most of the time, a charcoal fire will keep you warm." He spent the evening at our place, and again they danced. "Oh, God!" I thought to myself. Two or three days later he went to Baadharan and brought his wife with him. He came and spent the evening with his wife at our place. My father, God bless his soul, and my mother wouldn't allow them to leave. They told him, "You can't leave with your wife at this hour. Stay!" My father-in-law just wanted to be persuaded to stay. They stayed at our place. His wife was very sociable.They spent the night at our place and left the next day.

"You can depive me of food and water but not of gardens"

Two or three days later my father-in-law came back and told my father that he wanted his son to marry me. My father told him, "Ten to fifteen men have asked for my daughter, but I don't want to let her marry a man who'd take her out the village. I want her to stay at home. I have a lot of land to attend to and I don't have sons. Her older sister is married, and her younger sister can't work or do anything. This girl is the blessing of our home. She is all we have. If she hadn't worked we wouldn't have eaten." He told him, "We'll do as you wish. Not only will my son stay at your place, we'll stay too if you want." My father needed to hear that. Two or three days passed, and then my father came to ask my opinion. I told him, "You refused to let me marry the men I liked, and now I refuse to marry this man." He told me, "Oh daughter, this man is willing to stay with us, his father too. They'll take care of the orchards. We have seven or eight orchards, we shouldn't forget about them." He kept talking to me like that. One or two weeks later my father-in-law came with his son. Poor man [husband], he'd broken his leg and couldn't walk. When I saw him I screamed at my father, "What! Am I to marry a man who walks with a stick? His parents must be crazy!? I don't want to marry this man! You'd better understand." For a year his parents kept coming, and my father kept begging me, "Please, daughter, accept them. I don't have sons. I have no one to care for me." I told him, "Why don't you think about me? The most handsome men asked for me and now you want to give me to a poor man who walks with a stick." He told me, "Oh, daughter, his leg is broken. It's only a matter of weeks and he'll be walking without a stick."

The days went by, and I got married to him. He was very kind and decent, but he wasn't productive, he wasn't serious about work. If things came easy, fine, if not he didn't bother himself. I suffered a lot. Shall I tell you about my wedding? My parents celebrated for three nights. Every night they invited all the neighbors. Thirty years ago weddings were really splendid. The dresses I bought filled three cars. No other girl in Barouk bought as many dresses as I bought, no girl received as many gifts. My parents bought me gold, rugs, brass. They were trying to make it up to me for marrying me to a man I didn't like. But to be honest my husband's family were all very kind to me. I've never had a clash with any of them. Never have we argued. They weren't well off, I figured that out from the beginning, and I accepted my fate. My husband, God bless his soul, lacked motivation, he didn't have enthusiasm.

The day he died he passed by his brother's house. He invited them to come and spend the evening at our place. At seven o'clock my husband came back home. He asked me if there was a packet of cigarettes. I told him, "You've been out the whole day and now you want to smoke here? No, you shouldn't smoke." I went inside to prepare matté but I found that we didn't have enough. I told him, "Alright, go and get yourself cigarettes and bring some matté." He said, "I've been out the whole day, you go." As I was going out he told me to bring him a bottle of arak. I told him, "No, I won't bring you cigarettes and arak. You go and bring it." He said, "No, you bring it with you, and do it with a bride's smile." I said, "Okay." I went to the shop, I brought him cigarettes and a bottle of arak. I came back. As we were drinking coffee we started calling, "Kamel, Kamel!" His brother was sitting on the sofa, he had come to take his matté. We thought he [husband] was kidding.

Throughout our life together I used to tell him, "My God, are you going to stay like this? We don't have children or security.

How shall we live when we get old?" He used to reply that he would die before me. Whenever he told me that, that he'll die young, I'd tell him, "You won't die young! God will make you suffer because of the arak you drank." Things happened as he expected. His death cost us nothing, not a tissue paper. We didn't have to pay doctors. He died at nine o'clock at night. God bless his soul! So many people came! We didn't expect it. They read poems for his soul. Young people were reading poems inside. We sent the news to Baadharan and to Barouk. My family came before his family. Baadharan people came at about two in the morning. They wanted to take him up to Baadharan. I told them, "You take him up on the condition that you take him to his home. He built the home, let him rest in it for two hours." They said that this wasn't possible - "We'd reach there at four in the morning and then we'll have to take him at eight o'clock to the 'village house.'[3] I told them, "I have been living here for sixteen years, I've spent good days and bad ones. You think I don't know about the Shouf!" They said, there's no difference between Shouf and Shahhar. I said, "So you don't want to take him to his home?" People discussed the matter, and then my sister-in-law's brother said, "We'll do as you wish, we'll take him to his home. But we won't tell people in Shahhar of his death." I said, "Alright." We reached Baadharan at four in the morning. We waited until nine or ten o'clock, then they moved him to the 'village house.' They arranged a place of condolence. All the sheikhs and relatives were saying, "May we enjoy a funeral like his, and testimonies like his!" You can't believe how many people came! He was poor but he had a good soul. God sent people from Kfar Matta, Abey, Bsateen. People wanted to give their testimonies [repeat his good qualities]. He had an incredible day. It was two or three in the afternoon when people returned to their homes.

Picture Credit: Ghena Ismail

At eight in the evening I called my sister-in-law and her brother. I said, "I wanted to broadcast the news of his death in Shahhar and you refused. However, God bless you, you took him to Baadharan, his village. Now I'm thinking of holding a condolence for him here and to stay there for a week." My brother-in-law said, "This would be a great relief for me, I won't have people coming to pay their condolences at my home." I told him, "I'm doing this for your sake. You have four young men, and you are my fifth young man. We don't want to bring bad luck to your house, dear brother." I've been living in that village for sixteen or seventeen years, there's no village where I don't know people.

We stayed in Baadharan for a week, on Thursday we came here ['Ain Ksour]. We had decided to hold a funeral for him on Sunday. We put money for charity in the letters of announcement. I put LL5,000 in every envelope. I put LL50,000 for the 'family house'and another LL50,000 for Abdullah's house. On Sunday seven cars came from Baadharan, and seven cars from Barouk. We held the condolence for him, and announced his death in Barouk and Aley. We didn't miss out any village. The condolences here were even better than the one held in Baadharan. My God punish me if I'm exaggerating.

My husband's family were very gratified. They said, "Speaking frankly, Kamel was no more than a guard, and poor. We didn't think that people will show so much respect for his death. It's all due to your efforts." I told them it was my duty, he was my husband. So we made a condolence for him. We stayed from ten in the morning until twelve at night. One of my friends brought two cars filled with food. He said that people would come from Baadharan and Barouk to spend the whole day with us, they would need to eat. At three or four in the afternoon they put tables outside for the men and tables inside for the women. More than a hundred people ate, and food still remained. Oh God, as if we had a wedding! My husband's family felt very grateful. They said, "We didn't know that you had gained so much respect over the years." My sister's family, my nephews in Barouk, came early in the morning. They brought with them a hundred meat pies, and cheese and kishk (cries).

I stayed on here. My mother-in-law and my sister stayed with me for thirty days They didn't leave me. I was in shock, I had a terrible headache. Every hair on my head seemed to be causing me pain. They took me to the the American University Hospital. They wanted LL600,000 to do an X-ray of my head. I went to Sitt Anisseh and told her. She gave me a card with which I saved LL200,000. They took LL400,000 for a five-minute check-up with some machine, and they gave me medicines. I had a year of treatment, I suffered a nervous breakdown. I don't know what happened to me, I felt very depressed. I begged them to cut off all my hair. I'd always felt strong and active before.

I brought my nephew to stay with me. He worked as a taxi driver in Beirut. He went and worked during the day and stayed at my place in the evening. He was a young man. I didn't allow him to put on television or the radio. He got upset, "What's

this? Do you want to imprison me with you? I'm a young man, I need to have fun." I told him, "Didn't you love your uncle?" He said, "I loved him, he was like my father" - he didn't have a father. When he died my nephews were very shocked and upset. The first seven days after he died they came every day from Barouk to Baadharan. Everyday some family members came from Barouk to stay with me. They brought food with them, and cooked for me. Then when I came here, it was the same thing. They cooked food and came all the way from Barouk to stay with me. For a whole month I didn't have to cook anything. My mother-in-law and sister stayed with me for a whole month, thirty days they didn't leave me. We didn't put anything on the stove. The moment I opened my eyes in the morning I found the neighbors with thyme-bread.

Its true we suffered a lot, but I felt more at ease when my husband was alive. For four years I haven't spent an evening at anyone's place. At six o'clock I close the door and stay inside. Whoever visits me is most welcome. But if no one comes I sit and read. When he was alive we went out a lot in the evening. Sometimes we went to Kfar Matta, even to Abey. Today, even if you tear me up, after six o'clock I won't step out of the house. I'm really upset these days. There's a proverb which says "Even if the man is a piece of charcoal his presence is a blessing!" It's true, his presence was a hundred blessings for a woman who doesn't have children. However, this is what God chose for me, and I have to accept it.

Ghena: Had you lived in a country outside Lebanon, do you feel you would have led a different life?
Adele: I don't know, God only knows. Oh, let me tell you why I felt different this year. Last year — my brother-in-law has three sons. One of them likes me a lot. One day as I was sitting with him, he said, "Aunt, my mother and I are planning something, will you join us?" I said, "Tell me what's up." He said, "My father has worked for thirty years in the airport (laughs), he never went on a plane. We want to go for a week to Egypt, will come with us?" I said, "How can I go to Egypt?" He said, "Oh aunt, I'd like you to come with us. Besides, if I want to go out on my own you'll stay with my mother. If you can't afford it, I'll take care of the expenses." I told him, "I'll think about it." The next day as I was working in the field, he passed by. He said, "Please, for the sake of all those you love, come with us." I said, "What will people say - she buried her husband, and then went to have a good time in Egypt?" He said, "Don't pay attention to people's gossip, they're ready to talk if you only go to Baadharan." I told him there was also the problem of money. He said, "You have many friends who would lend you the money." I said, "I have nothing but my salary." Two days later he passed by again. I told him, "God must love you! Yesterday my nephew Yusif brought me $200 for the pine nuts." How would I find the rest of the money? He took the $200 and left. One week later, he finished the papers, and I found myself in the plane. Sitt Anisseh gave me $200 and told me to pay her back whenever I could. We went. It was the 13th of January. It was snowing. I didn't know how to leave. Who would take me to Bsateen? But my nephew passed by, and he took me. (laughs) I said, "Does any one except the mad and stupid go to Egypt when it's snowing?" My nephew told me that there's no snow in Egypt. We arrived at the airport at eleven. At one the plane took off. My sister-in-law and I were laughing like crazy people. I told her, "You sit next to the window on the way to Egypt; on the way back I'll sit there." (laughs) We agreed.

We landed in Egypt. The taxi driver asked us, "Where do you want to go?" We told him we wanted to go to a hotel. He asked, "What kind of hotel do you want, medium or luxury?" We told him, no, we want a medium one. He took us to a hotel. We were very tired, we sat and ate. The second day, early in the morning we started to wander around. We asked, we didn't miss anything. We went to the pyramids, to the Sphinx, the Nile, Mohammed Ali's palace, the zoo. Everyday we went somewhere new. We had brought food with us. Oh God, if we hadn't brought food we would have starved. There's no good food there. The whole week we wished we could find thyme-bread or fried chicken, but we couldn't. We had brought with us kishk, halaweh, mortadella, cheese, yogurt, coffee, fig jam - we didn't forget anything. In the morning we had breakfast at the hotel, (laughs) their breakfast was a boiled egg, milk, tea - we didn't like their food. The hotel staff found us having matté. They asked us, "Is this a narghileh you're having?" We told them, "This is matté, come and join us." A little while later we prepared coffee, we served some to the hotel owner, he really liked it. We told him, "As long as we're here you'll drink with us."

We had great fun there. Everyday we went out early in the morning. We came back for lunch, slept for two hours and then went back out. We stayed out until ten and eleven at night, as if it was daytime. All the street lights were on. It's safe there. If you feel tired you find seats on the pavement. Whenever we got tired, we sat down and ate nuts, we always had a bag of nuts with us. We really enjoyed ourselves. It was Ramadan. In the evening when the prayers were read announcing iftar we went out. The road was filled with tables of food. The food was donated by rich people so that poor people can eat. Dishes and spoons were laid. For a month a different meal was served every day. Every day we went there. For a week we kept wandering until midnight. I consider this was the best week of my life. I'm sixty years old, and I really lived for that week. This is all (laughs). And now we tell you good night and may all your days be filled with happiness. Come to us everyday and we'll entertain you, we'll tell you a new story.

Recorded and translated by Ghena Ismail

End Notes

1. Matté is a herbal infusion imported from South America, especially popular with Lebanese Druzes and some Shi'ites.
2. 'Aoun's War took place in 1989; it was directed against the Syrian Army and Syria's Lebanese allies.
3. Druze villages have a 'village house', public space where, for example, bodies are laid before burial.

Sukna Khal (Umm Ragheb), Mother of Martyrs

(Born in 1931, in South Lebanon; currently living in the South; recorded in her home. Language: southern regional form of colloquial Arabic)

In these villages here in the South, our work is in the fields. I worked for a long time in tobacco, in the fields, in harvesting, things like that. This is our life. When I got married, I gave birth to Sheikh Ragheb. How did I raise him? We didn't have then the things we have today. There were no ready-made diapers, no. We would diaper the child, and we had to wash the diapers and the bed if the child wet it. I raised him until he grew up. I had eight boys and four girls. This boy grew up [Ragheb]. He would keep telling me he wanted to stay in the mosque, "I want to go to the mosque, mother, I want to go to the mosque." [If I said] we have work, he [would say], "No mother, it is time for prayer, I have to go to the mosque." Thank God, we raised him, and he grew up, and he went to Najaf. First, he went to Sayyed Mohammed Hussein and learnt from him; and then he went to Najaf. In Najaf, he had a neighbor, a sheikh. This sheikh would tell him, "You should shorten your tongue [be careful what you say]." He would reply, "Never shall I shorten my tongue, never. I shall only speak the truth"

Of course in Iraq, they were against him. He came [to Lebanon] for a visit, he was not supposed to stay long. So when he came, they went to his house [in Najaf], to the other sheikh, and they asked him, "Where is Ragheb?" He said, "He has gone back to his country." They beat the other sheikh and said, "You must bring him back." So they sent a message telling him not to return to Najaf. He stayed here, he never went back.

Then Israel invaded. What shall I tell you? If I really want to speak, I wouldn't finish in three days. Israel invaded. When this happened he was still in Iraq. I said, "Thank God, my son isn't here". Of course he was against the Israelis. He returned. They started going and coming to him. They wanted him to work with them. They went to his house. He stood up, he was sitting on the roof. He said, "What do you want?" They said, "We want Sheikh Ragheb." He said, "I am Sheikh Ragheb, what do you want ?" They held out their hands. He said, "I won't put my hand in yours." They said, "What, our hands are impure (nijis)?" He said, "Yes, impure, because you are fighting Islam. You have come in war not peace." He left them and went down to the mosque. We all went down with him to the mosque. In the mosque people heard 'Allahu akbar ' and started entering the mosque to pray. The Israelis left. But they started keeping watch on him. They watched him wherever he went.

Picture Credit: May Masri and Jean Chamoun

One day, he slept at my nephew's. My nephew lives down there, he went and slept over. (sighs) What shall I say? I woke up in the morning to milk, we have cows. We own cows, flocks, we live like that. As I went out in the morning to milk the cows, I saw my sister coming early in the morning. "What is wrong with you, sister?" She said, "Come with me to the husseinieh[1], they have taken Sheikh Ragheb. They came, they took him and left." We stayed about eighteen days sitting in the husseinieh. We passed through very difficult days until they brought him back. When they brought him, I kept after him, "Sheikh Ragheb, they will take you again, stop talking against them." He would say, "Don't worry mother, Israel won't take me again. Israel isn't stupid." But with the young men he would say, "They will assassinate me." You see? I kept on watching him, wherever he went I watched him, where he was, where he went, where he came. One day he was going out of his house, and I saw troop carriers going up to his house. I stayed standing there until they had come and gone. When he saw them he went out to the fields. I started looking for him, I don't know how it happened, I wasn't looking where I was walking and I fell down. I injured my knees a little. When he came back I said to him, "Is this what you want, Sheikh Ragheb? I have to run after you all the time". He said to me, "Mother, you want heaven for a quarter of a pound? The road to heaven is hard. If one isn't patient, he will never reach it."

They kept on watching him and watching him until they killed him. They killed him near his house, Israeli agents. Israel had someone kill him without even talking to him first. They used to tell him, "If you stop preaching against us, we will leave you alone." He said, "Whatever I find important to say, I will say." So the Israeli agents put their eyes on him [watched him]. And here we are, we still have our worries. See my nephew [points to a picture on the wall], he was seventeen years old, and this one [another picture] was eighteen years old - they were also killed. And this is their father. He died, and this son died a year after him. And we are still here struggling.

Michelle: How many sons are left?

Umm Ragheb: I still have four boys. And here we are, just like you see us. I am drowning in anxiety about where this one went and where that one came from. But we have to leave our worries to God. In any case this world has nothing of value. No one should want anything from it. I urge every woman who has children to send them to the young men of the Islamic Resistance to attain martyrdom. She also must reach martyrdom. Because this world, what does it have? Even if one lived a million years, one would eventually die. And if someone has not done any good deeds, what will he do there? Who will he find to defend him there? Nothing defends a person except his actions. And we have to do good deeds for God to be satisfied with us. My father, God rest his soul, lived for one hundred years. I asked him, "Father, what did you get from this world?" He said, "Here I am, I get up from this mattress and I go back to sleep on it. How long do you think a man can live? When one is over forty -- here I am, if I want to move from one place to another, I need someone to lift my feet because they hurt." What shall I tell you about our life? It is all so bitter.

Michelle: Tell me more about important recollections.
Umm Ragheb: What shall I tell you? (laughs sarcastically). When worries increase, a person forgets the things that have passed. Ever since Sheikh Ragheb left the house, believe me, I have not had one happy day. He's been dead for fourteen years. And we still have the same worries. One day there is the party [Hizbollah] against the movement [Amal], one day the car is -- one day he is going somewhere and you worry where did he go? How did he go?

Michelle: Try to remember some of your first recollections.
Umm Ragheb: When I was a young woman, we used to work in tobacco. Everyone worked in tobacco, one [Lebanese] pound daily. Sometimes a pound and a quarter, if they wanted to pay her well. We worked from sunset to morning, for a pound. So that we could buy a thing or two and go home. That's how people used to live. You think people used to live like today? People today live well, and they are comfortable and they have money. But they aren't at ease, they aren't satisfied. People used to work before, they would go to work, come back, a woman would have her children around her. She would feel happy. I was happy when I had my children near me. But when they grow up, you don't know any more where they go, and you don't even ask them, and you're never relaxed. There is no one with me at home. All my children are married. I live in these two rooms alone. My children are upstairs. One lives there, and his brother over him. There are three apartments.

Michelle: What else would you like to tell people who will read your story?
Umm Ragheb: What shall I say? I want to tell the world that no one should be greedy for the things of this world. No matter how long one lives, eventually one will die. There will be judgment there. There are angels, the people will be judged, and the day will come when a person will stand 70,000 years at one stretch. What will people do? Today if one stands one day, he will get tired. He can't stand for one hour. What will he do during that great stand? I want to tell those who don't fear God, what will they do there? I advise people that there is nothing in this world. I am not saying that one shouldn't even ask about this world, but one should ask about the other world first. One will go there, even if one lives a million years.

Michelle: What else? Try to remember things about your life.
Umm Ragheb: An important thing about my life was that when my children were still young, I would gather them all every day at sunset, and clean them and feed them and put them to sleep, and myself sleep next to them. That was the best time of my life. That is the best that life can be. But ever since they grew up I have always been worried, always felt oppressed. Wherever a child went, I didn't know. For a woman, the best time is when her children are young. She gathers them and puts them around her and she will feel comfortable. But when they grow up everything changes.

It is true that I feel very sad about Sheikh Ragheb, but I am also happy. I am both sad and happy, because he has become a martyr, he is in the hands of God Almighty. Inshallah he will be like Hussein [Imam Ali's son]. A woman does not like her children to be happy with material things. When her children are martyrs, it means that they go directly to heaven. We can't really know, we don't see these things, but God knows. But when he leaves religion what does it mean? He's going to hell. A woman will be sad, she'll feel more upset than if her son attains martyrdom.

Michelle: Tell me a little bit about your own life now.
Umm Ragheb: Now, thank God, my children are near to me. Now this one, Sheikh Ismail [son], prays the sunset prayer there. He was in Iran, then he came back. And all my other children work. I spend my time like this, when I don't have anything to do, I pray, at noon I put out my praying carpet and I pray so that God may help [our lives] and be satisfied with us. I always say, "Please God, if you are satisfied with me, let me know." My heart will be comforted if I know whether he is satisfied with me or not. The most important thing is for God to be satisfied with everyone. What else shall I tell you? If I have something to do at home, I do it. I go out to the field and plough it a little bit. My back almost always hurts me now. If I sit down for a long time, I can't get up. But I move around the house a little bit and I feel better.

Michelle: Can you tell me a little bit about when you were young? Maybe before your marriage?
Umm Ragheb: Before I got married I used to work in tobacco. For as long as the government existed, we have been working, and they have been eating [taking the money]. Am I right or wrong? We work, they eat (laughs). In the end they start showing off. They are a government! What is this government doing for us? If these young men from the Islamic Resistance were not present, what would the government have done? Did

you ever in your life hear that someone fought Israel? This is God's will, but they [Islamic Resistance] have no planes, they have nothing. But they [Israelis], even with their planes and their tanks, they can't defeat us. This is God's will. Ali, peace and prayer be on him, when he wanted to eat, he would make a small sandwich and eat it. They would ask him, "Ali, is this all you can manage?" He would say, "Yes, this is my capacity." But when there is war, it becomes a matter of God's will. And these [Resistance], God Almighty will support them so that they can destroy Israel and America. Because Israel and America are doing wrong. But, the Islamic Resistance are in the right. God Almighty will support them and strengthen them, inshallah. And we pray for them all the time.

Michelle: How do you find Lebanon as a place for women to live in?
Umm Ragheb: Well, we are just surviving. Some live well. Some don't live well. We are just surviving. Thank God, it is fine. But we need to feel a change. The sons of our own religion, these are against those, and those against these [she means Amal and Hizbollah], one gets very upset about this. Against Israel, if we were all together against it, then that's good. That's the best thing. We should all be against them. Why should these be against those and those against these? We are not against the Movement [Amal] or the Party [Hizbollah]. We are against Israel because they are unbelievers. All people here should stand together. When we become one hand, nobody will be able to stand against us, not even Israel and America.

Michelle: Is there any particular incident or story about your life which you would like to tell us?
Umm Ragheb: (laughs) What else do you want me to tell you? When Sheikh Ragheb died, he was almost thirty. He would have been fifty by now. Now all my children are married. He had five girls and two boys. One boy was born before he attained martyrdom, and one boy after [his death].

Michelle: Did you go to a school when you were young?
Umm Ragheb: There were no schools in my time. I wish there had been schools. We could have been able to read, get enlightened, read the Quran. Thank God we behave according to what we know. Once a woman came to my house, she came with a journalist. She came naked [unveiled]. I said, "Where are you from?" She said, "From Nabatieh." I said, "And your appearance is like this?" She said, "Yes, what can we do?" She came with journalists who wanted to talk to me. She said, "Yes, I'm from Nabatieh."

Michelle: Is that all you want to tell us?
Umm Ragheb: What shall I tell you? That's what our lives are like. This world means nothing. Whether we eat an onion or we eat something good, it will go down to one's stomach, and that's that. And I don't care what I eat. If I have a grain of wheat, I will boil it and eat it. I don't care. But may God the Almighty consider us believers. And also you, may God Almighty enlighten you more. You know, you understand, you read, but what can I know? How can I know what you know? Do you read the Quran?
Michelle: Sometimes I read.
Umm Ragheb: No, you should read all of it. Keep reading the Quran and you will know, you will find it is the best thing. The best thing is the Quran. I always wish that I could read. I wish the revelation could just drop on me like it dropped on Muhammad (laughs). The children call me, "Mother, come up!" I go up, he calls me to have lunch. It is difficult for me to stand up because my back hurts. I have my stove inside but I cannot stand up when I'm working. So I have this small fire-pot here.

[She turns to a wall where there are photos, and tells me who they are.]

This is my daughter's son. He was fifteen years old. This is my husband's brother's son. If you've ever heard of him, his name is Said Harb. They put explosives in his car near his house. Then his wife had a car accident and died. She was only twenty five years old. Now their children live with their grandmother. They had two daughters and a son. Up to now they don't believe that their mother is dead. She sent them to school and went to work. She had a car accident and died. As for him, they put explosives in his car right outside his house. We were talking to him. He said, "If you are making ghameh [stuffed intestines], I will come back and have lunch with you." He was talking to us from inside the car. He put his foot on the accelerator and the car exploded. His father arrived and found him dead. His father fell sick and died right away. This was my nephew, he attained martyrdom when Israel invaded. On that same day he said to me, "Today is my martyrdom." He knew. He was throwing stones at Israel. Israel came and besieged all this village. They fired at them here. These are my sons, this is Sheikh Ragheb. At that time he was still learning at the Sayyed's [Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah], in Beirut. He was seventeen years old, he was young. The other two are my sons, Abdallah and Ibrahim. This one also died. On the eve of Ramadan, he told me, "Mother, I have something to do." His wife and daughters were waiting, he wanted to buy things from the grocery shop for dinner. He saw someone coming, it was his son. He got up to lean on the wall, there was an electric wire, it killed him. The electricity had been cut off for eight days. Look how fate works! Anyway, the most important thing is for a person to be able to look after himself. What can one do? If one is not patient, what can one do otherwise? How did Fatima Zahra endure? How did Zeinab endure when they killed her brother in front of her? I don't ask about this world anymore. Even if I live now, one day I will die. My husband died more than twenty years ago. He fell sick and died.

Recorded and translated by Michelle Obeid

End Notes

1. Husseinieh is a hall where Shi'ites hold their religious ceremonies.

Sylvana Lakkis: NGO Activist

(Born in 1968, in Jbeil; currently living in Jbeil; recorded in the Beirut office of the Lebanese Sitting Handicapped Association. Language: colloquial/educated Arabic.)

Sylvana: Please tell me if I start to be boring! My name is Sylvana Lakkis. I was born in 1968, in Jbeil and I'm currently living there. I'm disabled, I had polio as a child. I'm from a family of four girls and one boy. I'm the oldest. My mother doesn't work, she stays at home. My father helps the Sheikh al-mufti in Jbeil. They call him the 'pen' of the Sheikh.

When I got disabled, as a child, immediately I had to leave home. In those days there weren't so many doctors in Lebanon outside Beirut. They say that in Jbeil there was only one doctor. So they took me to Beirut to see a doctor. It was a shock for my parents when this happened to me, especially that I was their first child. I had to leave home to be treated. They put me in an institution. Two years later I returned home. But when I was four they put me back in the dormitory to start school. I studied at 'The Two Holy Hearts School' in Aley. Luckily it was a mixed school - it had both normal and disabled students. It was difficult in those days to enter an ordinary school, because most ordinary schools didn't accept disabled students. My mother tells me that she tried hard to persuade the school director in Jbeil that she would come during the break to stay with me and help me. He wouldn't agree. He told her that he couldn't admit disabled students into a normal school. This was the reason for a big change in my life, forcing me to live the first phase of it separated from my family. My family were in Jbeil and the school was in Aley. I used to come home at the week-end.

During the secondary school stage, I traveled to Czechoslovakia, and that was a major land-mark in my life. It changed everything. My mother would have preferred to put me in a normal school but she had to take me to Aley because the direcor in Jbeil wouldn't accept me, and because she was determined I should go to school like other children. This is something for which I'm grateful to her today. If she had given in to feelings only, it would have been a catastrophe for me. In the second stage I had the opportunity to travel and continue my education abroad. I consider that my real life began at this stage. Before that, until my adolescence, every step of my life was a battle, first to be able to live like other people. Nothing was easy. I was disabled and Lebanon was not prepared for people like me. I couldn't go out to the streets to play with other children. There was a lot of repression during childhood. Though I must say that my family, our neighbors, and the environment in which I was raised were all very kind.

Ever since I was a child, I liked group work. My friends and I tried to do something in spite of all the difficulties. In the second stage I started to face bigger problems. I wanted to have a presence. I didn't want to be marginal, I wanted to overcome the barriers I was meeting. When I went to Czechoslovakia, I discovered that I had rights, and that I could turn my dreams into reality. Here in Lebanon, all I was told was that I had to submit to reality, I had to accept things the way they were. My uncle used to tell me, "Silvana, your life won't be easy. However you can live. You may not be able to do everything, but you can live." Whenever anyone told me this I grew defiant. No, I want to live just like anyone else. I insisted that my present situation needn't be the final one. In Czechoslovakia I lived on my own. For the first time I felt that I could be independent, that I could get on the bus on my own, that if I wanted to go down stairs there would be stairs or an elevator.

Ghena : In Lebanon you couldn't get on a bus?
Sylvana: No, because buses weren't equipped for the disabled. I don't use the bus, although the new buses in Lebanon bear the disability sign, which should mean they are equipped, though they aren't. Now I have my own car. I finished secondary school in Czechoslovakia and then I got a university degree in translation, and returned to Lebanon in 1976. I came full of confidence that my qualification would help me find work. I had forgotten that things in Lebanon are different. I forgot that there are problems that affect one's daily life. Immediately after I came, I started to look for a job. I was shocked to find that no one would hire me. Had someone normal had my qualifications, he would have been hired immediately. I had studied four languages and I was qualified to work in translation. But I couldn't find work in my field.

The year 1986 was the second important landmark in my life. Travel abroad had made me realize that I had rights, and that I could attain them if I persisted. After return, I took a second decision, that my rights should be pursued along with other people's rights. What I mean by this is that, in the beginning, I saw my problem as a personal one, but than I realized that it affected a large category of people. The moment I knew that there was something called the Association for the Disabled I joined it. I called the Association and told them that I would like to volunteer to work with them. That's where I started. At that point, I had a paid job. I was teaching English - although my domain was translation. I worked with the Association

during the summer vacation. I had intended to go back to teaching again once the summer was over. But I entered the Association and I have stayed with it ever since. Why? Because I knew that everything I felt deprived of and was trying to achieve was a general problem . These problems had to be tackled as a public issue. My welfare should be joined to the welfare of others who have similar problems.

In those days, 1986, there was fighting. You know how the situation was. I wanted to go to the South because there was a real need for people to help there. I went to the Association center in Saida and stayed there for four years. There I discovered more of the misery we have in this country, how many problems we have, and how much work is needed. With my colleagues in the Association I started work. We were able to achieve new things, new programs, trying to change the society's concept of the disabled. I started to feel the meaning of our existence, that we are people who are different, and that we are giving all our time for the public good. This made me feel empowered. I had a lot of defiance, yes, but I became more confident, my belief that we could really make a difference became stronger.

In 1989 I entered the Saint Joseph University to become a social animator. This was a new specialization and it was being tested, it was not licensed yet. When we started out on this course we were told that we might not get a degree because the subject wasn't licensed. However, when we realized how important the subjects were, we didn't care about the degree. We were really concerned with developing our work, because when you talk about the social animator you're talking about real work. We took a special course, for maybe three years, this helped me to work better. I made a small contribution in my work along with my colleagues, we established branches in other areas of Lebanon, and we strengthened our work.

Of course if I talk about my personal ambitions – in this country you cannot achieve much but you can try to change things. Unfortunately it needs much time. The problems are so large, and there is such a lot of misery that I feel shy to speak of my personal life. Social discrimination upsets me, though I understand it and believe that I'm above letting it affect me. Discrimination exists everywhere in society, in all classes, and among the intellectuals and officials more than the ordinary people. This discrimination is obvious. I'll give you an example. If I go with a non-disabled person to meet someone, although I'm the director and I have made the appointment, the person I'm visiting automatically speaks to the normal person who is with me, not to me. If I want him to pay attention to me, I have to take the initiative. This is true of every relationship.

"They treat you here like a bag of potatoes"

After evaluating our work, my colleagues and I have discovered that the disabled woman has a double burden if she wants to fulfill personal dreams. Every one wants to feel loved, likes to feel that he is living. We suffer more than ordinary women because we live in a society that gives the man the role of earning money, and the woman the role of producing children. In our society [gender] roles are rigidly fixed. We disabled women, well, we don't have a physical hindrance, but perhaps we're not as appealing as women who can walk, so people consider that we cannot perform our function. Of course I'm speaking in general terms. Because of this, less attention is paid to us by our families, and by people. Second, even in people of our generation there is discrimination, also within the women's movement. Maybe they aren't aware of it but it exists, you can feel it if you attend conferences or lectures. When any issue is being tackled you find that the problem of the disabled woman either comes at the end of paper, or it doesn't come at all. Most probably it's not there.

Ghena: I'm not sure if I can comment here a bit? Up to now you've been talking about your personal life in general terms.
Sylvana: My daily life is entirely within the public sphere. But if I want to talk about myself as a woman, I'd ask why should I work so hard to convince the other person that I'm like him? If I'm applying for a job, if I'm going to a party, if I want to love. Why shouldn't I be accepted like any other woman, as having dreams, as having a family? We struggle to have all these ordinary life experiences. Maybe we'll live them, maybe not. It so happens that I'm satisfied with my life in the public domain. I feel fulfilled here. But still, like everyone else, I aspire to stability, and I should be able to find it. I told you that in the beginning when I searched for work, no one accepted to hire me. I even looked for work at lower levels than I'm qualified for. I remember that I once applied for work at a telephone exchange. They should have been glad to have an employee who speaks several languages, but even there they refused to hire me because of my disability. I went to congratulate the president on Independence Day. He said "God cure you my daughter!". Why should he ask God to cure me? He has a disability too by the way. Really I don't know what to tell you about myself! They say I'm obsessed by work -- maybe because I feel that there are so many issues that need to be tackled.

What do I like? I like to travel. I like to get to know ordinary people living in the narrow streets. I feel fulfilled within the group. I hate lies and fear them. They say that one learns from experiences but I haven't learnt. For instance I believe whatever you tell me, although it may not be true. Lies are what I hate most in life. But I have something which I think is a blessing, it's a belief that life continues no matter what happens. Perhaps this is what motivated me to push on despite all the difficulties. My dreams were small in the beginning.

For example, I dreamt of driving a car. My father didn't want to get me a car because he didn't believe that I could drive, he was afraid that I might have an accident and be killed. But I insisted, I worked, and then I bought myself a car. Later my dream was not to depend on my parents. I wanted to work and be independent. This also was realized. Now my advice is listened to at home. It satisfies me to feel that I'm capable of being depended on by my family. What more can I tell you?

Ghena: So far you have talked about things in a general context.
Sylvana: I told you about suffering in childhood because I couldn't play. During adolescence I had to fight to have social relationships. That meant a lot of suffering. One spends a lot of time simply sitting and thinking about oneself, about his problems, and boredom. Everything seemed closed in one's face. The parents were not aware. No guidance. My parents didn't bring me a wheel chair, they brought me a children's carriage. They didn't know that with the aid of a simple wooden device I could be helped to move from the chair to the bed. We did not know then, when I was a child, that the car could be modified for the disabled. Simple things were complicated. You were deprived of your daily needs. What can I tell you? That if you wanted to go to the bathroom you'd have a problem? You want to go on your own, without being helped. That was a problem for me before we discovered a special apparatus, my parents and I. Joining the Association helped in many ways. In the past, when I saw a high wash basin, I didn't know that if it was constructed in a different way I could wash dishes. Today we know. At the Association we tell whoever comes to us, how we can help him or her fix their home so that they can live an easy life. It never occurred to me that if my bed was lower than the chair the bed could be made higher. Do you understand? The more independent you became in your daily life, the more relaxed and confident you feel. In the past fear always accompanied me. What did the future hold for me? If my parents died, what would I do? This is the worst feeling you can have. Now this has changed, but only after you have given a lifetime's effort. We are deprived of living normal lives unless we fight for happiness. The most difficult stage is when a girl is an adolescent, when she has the need to love and attract the attention of men. These weren't easy stages. But I -- these were the major landmarks in my life -- my childhood, my travel, my return, joining the Association, going to the South.

"In Czechoslovakia for the first time I felt I could be independent"

We in Lebanon are slaves of appearances. In our society, one can be on the verge of death but feel shy to express himself. They taught us that this is shameful, just as they teach a girl that when she wears a skirt she should sit in a very uncomfortable manner so as not to show her legs. Or they say this kind of game is for boys, not for girls. Now I tell myself that if I could live again, I should live more aggressively, more confidently, and not wait for others to approach me, but take the initiative myself. Here I'm addressing girls specifically because they may pass through the stages that I passed through. It's all a matter of how much people know. I was saying that Lebanon is a country of appearances, and this creates many boundaries. Some people feel shy to walk with a disabled person. We may meet the disabled at home, but we don't want to walk with them on the streets. They deal with the disabled as objects of sympathy. This is something I reject totally. That's why I like to talk about the ugliest things that happen, because now I'm liberated from them, and I don't want others to go through what I went through. Really if you look at the Association, you see men and women living a good life. This shows the distance we have traveled in seventeen years. Some of the discrimination has diminished.

Another point which I would like to talk about also isn't related to me alone. This is that we are setting an example to others who are working in the public domain. We are proving to others that if one strives and insists on reaching certain goals, they can be reached.

Ghena: This is part of the stage you're living in now?
Sylvana: Yes. This stage is very important, and I see that we have a bigger role than we ever had before. There is a real need for our action because 7% of the Lebanese population is disabled, and we have to take care of this 7%. I don't consider that we are responsible for the problems of the 7%, no,we are responsible for addressing the problems of the 90% who do not understand the problems of disability. (pause)

Ghena: So far everything you have mentioned is related to disability. Is it alright to ask you, can you recall anything of your life that's not connected to disability?
Sylvana: I can't, I can't, my disability is imprinted clearly on my life, it has daily consequences.

Ghena: You felt that disability was the problem, or how Lebanese society views it was the problem?
Sylvana: No, society makes it a problem. I'll give you an example. Sometimes during my work I traveled on my own. I participated in the Beijing Conference for Women and in many other events. I went around the world and worked, but nowhere did I feel that my disability was a problem. People outside treat you like a human being. One's competence and willingness to participate are what matter. There is real integration and a more natural life. The moment I stepped back into the Lebanese airport my suffering resumed. They treat you here like a bag of potatoes. So, as I told you, we're concerned with the problem of the 90% percent of the population who don't understand disability. Disability is not a

health problem. It is a social problem, a problem that accompanies us throughout our lives.
Ghena: Before we stop I'd like to ask you if you feel like referring to a particular stage in your life?
Sylvana: I'd like to talk about my vision of the country . I wish there would be a serious stand in Lebanon so that first, all the organizations and associations, and second, all the people notice that we are losing our country, Lebanon. Why? Because everyone of us is working on solving a problem without tackling the root causes. I think that the root of our problems lies in the fact that we lack real citizenship. Because of this, any public issue seems irrelevant to the average person. If you talk about women's issues, you notice that only women, and only particular women, attend the meetings. Men don't attend, ordinary women don't attend. They consider this to be an issue that is separate from their daily lives. If you talk about the municipal elections, it's the same people, others don't feel concerned. If you talk about unemployment - or any other issue - it's the same. In our opinion, our main necessity is that we should admit our mistakes and try to work together on building our country - all of us, including the marginalized groups. And we should admit that sectarianism is a big problem. You may ask how is this related to disability? I tell them -

"My daily life is entirely within the public sphere"

Ghena: What else would you like to tell me?
Sylvana: What can I say? Concerning hobbies, I like drawing a lot. I felt I could express myself through drawing. I like cloudy weather, I don't like heat. Since I was young, I tried to read books that were a bit difficult for me. I was always searching for myself. Who am I? I felt that by chance I might find an answer. I felt very optimistic when I saw the postman, though not because I was waiting for a letter from someone. I had many friends. I felt that there were small things that did not seem important to others but that were important to me. I liked to hear about people who sacrificed themselves for the sake of others. Really! Maybe that's why I feel fulfilled in this place. Since I was young I was very influenced by my mother. We saw her knitting wool jersies. We asked her, who are they for? She told us, for the children in the neighboorhood. In those days, in the 1970s, Palestinians were in the South. She made me curious to know who these people were. Perhaps that is why I chose later to go to the South. When I went there I didn't go only to work in the Association but also to help people. I have a passion to work through a group for people. This is the most fulfilling action for me. (pause) Friends -- I have friends who have been my friends for ten years. This is something I'm proud of. It isn't easy to sustain a friendship for such a long time. (pause) I've lived through many social changes.

Here we're going back to disability, but there are beautiful things that I lived through, especially in the days of emergency, when there was bombardment, especially the last time, in 1996.[1] I was pleased to see people's surprise that a group of disabled were coming to help people who are not disabled. I was observing this direct transformation in people's attitude towards us. Before this, people thought we couldn't help others, that we only needed to be helped. But I'm in a constant state of anger. I'm always angry about the things people take for granted, angry because people don't educate themselves. We Lebanese have passed through many difficult circumstances but every time a deputy comes and showers us with slogans that he never fulfills, we elect him again. I am really angry with people because we could liberate ourselves from our problems. I don't allow myself to forget my anger, because it's this - anger - that pushed me to overcome these ugly things. I am talking here as a citizen. As a citizen I also participated, I attempted to revive public frameworks, not by joining specific organizations, but by participating in campaigns such as the one for participation in the municipal elections. Whenever there's a campaign related to a public issue, I join it.

Ghena : Would you like to tell us a little more about your jobs?
Sylvana: In the beginning, with the help of a thousand waastas, I was able to teach English. Of course employment is a general problem, I'm not the only one who faced it. When I first came to the Association I began on a voluntary basis. Now I'm paid. Then I worked in an institution called 'The Human Call', and I worked for Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation as a translator. I worked there for a while. Then I started to translate on an individual basis, I translated studies as a freelancer. Then I was invited to take up an administrative job in the Association. Now I have many job offers, it's much easier for me to find a job, first because I've accumulated a long experience. Also I have experience in more than one field, now I'm rejecting offers. But I have spent most of my time in the Association. I have been an employee here since 1990 and from then I couldn't engage in other voluntary work. I have to give all my time to the Association. I train others. I have contributed to establishing other branches in the South, Saida, Nabatieh, four centers in the Bekaa, and in Jbeil. I'm in charge of our Jbeil center as well.

Ghena: Do you want to tell us a bit about the work in these branches?
Sylvana: We are a movement of demands. All our work is related to the rights of disabled people. All of our work is with people. We work on changing wrong social concepts, we work on helping the disabled to become independent.

Ghena: So you work with the disabled and the rest of the society as well?
Sylvana: Yes, and with the government too. We work with the disabled by finding out where they are, and visiting them. If they need rehabilitation we give them the opportunity to learn

a job. If they need work we look for jobs for them. We guide them. The disabled may not know that they can change things in their life. We help them discover that if they make some changes in their home, they can get around without anyone's help. This is the first help. Through the disabled person's interaction with us and our programs, they start gradually to develop. We always aim at encouraging the disabled to become an active member of the Association, and work on helping other disabled people. We tell the parents that the disabled has energy . There are parents who over-worry about their disabled children. They help them too much. If one wants a drink of water, the parents bring it. Here is our role, to correct these wrong ideas. We have to persuade parents that though they are close to the disabled today, this won't last. This is very basic in our work. The second thing in our work is raising demands. We have been demanding for a long time that there should be an association for every kind of disability in Lebanon, and that these associations should be connected to, or represented by, a ministerial department. We are also calling to have building regulations so that no building license should be given unless criteria related to disability are included. This is an issue that needs a lot of work and pressure. First, to train the groups, second to mobilize them, third to stay ready for any development. For instance, next week we're going to walk through Beirut city, we will distribute brochures about our rights and needs. Then we will join in a concert with the popular singer Sami Hawwat, in 'Ain al-Mraysseh, and we will distribute the brochures during the concert, and talk to people. We'll try to be present in all the key places in the city. The event is supposed to be covered by the media. The laws we are demanding are being rejected. Some while ago we heard that our draft was included on the work agenda of the Government, but the Ministers refused to discuss it.

Ghena: What was the law?
Sylvana: It is related to integrating the disabled in society, for instance having a quota system in employment. This law is based upon the International Convention for the Disabled. It is the result of many experiences. They [the Government] are refusing to discuss this law, they say it's suitable for Sweden but not for us. Hariri said this. And Hrawi said that this is not the time for the disabled. So we need to exert more pressure. Now I'm asking all the branches to carry out campaigns. To put up posters and slogans until our demands are met. If we have to camp in front of the president's palace, we will. We will pursue our demands to the very end. By the way, we had a role in helping the Palestinian disabled in Lebanon to form their Association. In the beginning we allowed them to use our center. Now they have their own.

Recorded and translated by Ghena Ismail

End Notes

1. She is referring to the Israeli attack of 1996 against South Lebanon, in particular the Qaana Massacre.

Marie: Homeless, a Beggar

(Born in 1924, in Aley; currently living in Beirut; recorded on the street. Language: colloquial Arabic tinged with a mountain accent.)

My father died when I was ten years old. My mother asked me, "Do you want to stay in Aley?" - at her aunt's place. I said, "Alright." I stayed in Aley. What I begged was taken by my mother's aunt. She was the hotel's owner. People used to give me money. She would come to my room and take it all. I left Aley. I went and worked. I was still a girl. I worked for an Englishman. He was a laundry man, he ironed clothes. I received tips. He gave me LL 45 per month. I worked there for a while. I was fifteen. Then I came to Beirut to see my aunt, my mother's sister. I was walking and I said to myself, "I'll sleep in this hotel, and tomorrow I'll visit my aunt. It isn't dark yet." I entered the hotel - it was called the Nazl Bhamdoun - I found a man eating nuts and drinking alcohol. He told me there was no room in the hotel (pause). He said, "I'll take you to sleep at my aunt's". I said, "Alright". I went and slept at his aunt's home for two nights.

Ghena: Where was your mother then?
Marie: She was at home. I went to Zahleh with this man. I slept for two nights at his aunt's home. I liked Zahleh, so I invited my aunt's husband to attend our wedding. We got married and went to a hotel. Yes, he wanted to marry me. We went to a hotel in Beirut and got married. We went to Bhamdoun and stayed at his parents' home. He didn't have a house of his own. We ate and drank at his parents' home. Later he rented a home for me. I got pregnant and had a boy, Fuad. He [husband] starved me and tortured me. He gambled and didn't give me money. So I stayed with him for three years and then I divorced him. I left the boy with his grandmother, and left. (pause)

Then I went to work as a maid, but I left. I found another man to marry. I married him and regretted it very much. Why did I marry him! He imprisoned me at home. He didn't allow me to go out. He pulled my hair, he didn't allow me to go to the shops.

After that he told me to give him money and he'll divorce me. I told my sister's husband he wanted money, "Give him money so that he'll set me free." He told me, "I'm afraid of him." He [husband] traded in weapons. That was his work. I stayed with him for seven years and gave birth to four children, a boy and three girls. He beat me and beat me without my doing anything, with the stick, with the belt. My hands were bleeding, my back was red like blood. "Save me from him!" Nobody listened. "Save me! Save me!" Nobody listened. Then I prayed against him. He came in the evening and I was at our neighbor's place. The girl was sick, we wanted to take her to the doctor. He told me that I had stepped on her stomach. Think of that! So he


Picture Credit: Samah Hijawi

slapped me twice on the face and went and slept in another room. He had cows, I slept next to the cows' room. I started praying and asking God that he would get into trouble and end up in prison. His brother came and woke me. He said, "It's eight o'clock and you're still sleeping! Get up and see what has happened to Elias. He has killed someone and they have put him in jail." I liked that (laughs). I laughed because God had answered my prayer. He was drunk, got into a quarrel and shot someone. The man was in a coma for three days. I was laughing (laughs). He said, "What! You're laughing instead of crying?" I laughed because my prayers were heard by God. I left. We sent his father to the prison. He brought from him [husband] a paper divorcing me.

My second daughter's husband was killed by a shell. She went to the monastery and served there. Beyond Jounieh. She has two daughters. Another of my daughters lives in Sin al-Fil, she has three children. She used to visit me, but she doesn't any longer. She gave me her phone number but I lost it.

Ghena: When you divorced the second husband you took the children?
Marie: I left them with their grandmother on their father's side.
Ghena: You didn't want to take them?
Marie: I went to look for work.
Ghena: You told me you had three daughters. One is in the monastery, one in Sin al-Fil, and one in Jbeil. What about the boys?
Marie: One boy.
Ghena: You said you had a boy from the first husband and a boy from the second husband.
Marie: Yes.
Ghena: Where are they?
Marie: The boy is in Jounieh in the civil service.
Ghena: The second boy?
Marie: I went around and had fun. I wandered.
Ghena: The other boy from the first husband, where is he?
Marie: I lost the first one. I saw him once in al-Burj. His wife (pause), he got married (pause), his wife told me, "This is your son." I said, "What? Show me his identity card." I didn't believe her. She showed me his I.D. It was true. He was my son. He didn't say, "Mother, come and stay at my place" or anything. He didn't say anything. I kissed him and left (pause). Now I've lost sight of him.
Ghena: So you left your second husband after he went to prison, and you went to look for work?
Marie: Yes. He's married now. He came out of the prison and got married. He stayed in Jbeil.
Ghena: What happened then?
Marie: I went and begged, I begged on the streets. Once my husband stepped on a fork, and it cut off three of his toes and after a while they had to cut all of his leg off. Now he uses a stick to walk with. He has only one leg because he tortured me. He beat me even when I did nothing. I told him I wanted LL1 to repair something. He beat me. Whenever I asked him for anything he'd beat me. See what God did to him! They amputated his leg. I didn't feel sorry for him. Do you think what he did was little! He hung me from the balcony and I was screaming (pause). He made a tent for me and imprisoned me in it. A tent on the roof. I couldn't go downstairs. Once I went downstairs to talk to his mother. He saw me and beat me - why had I left the tent? Oh God, how he tortured me. He was a terrible tyrant. Haram, once he beat his mother with his slippers. He beat his mother on her head.
Ghena: How did you live after leaving this husband?
Marie: I wandered around in the afternoon in this area.
Ghena: Wandered around! I know that you used to work, you didn't beg.
Marie: Yes, I loved like that, I went with men, for pleasure.
Ghena: Not for money?
Marie: No, for pleasure. And sometimes for money. The policemen used to catch me and put me in prison. Once they put me in for three months. Then I got out of jail and wandered around again. Then they caught Marie again.
Ghena: Marie, how did you decide to start sleeping with men?
Marie: After I divorced my husband. The first husband and the second one. I got upset. I found out that these men were no good. They didn't feed me or provide for me or anything. (pause)
Ghena: Was it easy for you to start this work?
Marie: Yes, easy, natural. (laughs) The story is finished.
Ghena: No, it's not finished.
Marie: Yes, I went with people and I was imprisoned. I got out of jail. I went with people again. I was imprisoned again. They kept imprisoning me.
Ghena: What did you feel?
Marie: What did I feel? (laughs)


Picture Credit: Samah Hijawi

Picture Credit: Samah Hijawi

Ghena: Yes, were you content or did you regret anything?
Marie: No, I didn't regret, I was content.
Ghena: Are you content now?
Marie: Now I suffer from diabietes. I have to keep buying medicines. I was unhappy only when I went to prison.
Ghena: Men treated you well?
Marie: Yes, in the past I wasn't fat and ugly like now. Now I'm old. I used to be beautiful as a young woman. I put make-up on my cheeks and lips. I put make-up on, yes. Once I went out with a shoe-maker. I told him, "Give me LL5." He gave me. We went in a taxi. Oh, I wish it had been a taxi, it was only a 'service'. We walked for an hour. We reached the place and found two men sitting outside. He opened his bedroom and told me, "Go inside." I went in. Oh God, what he did! As soon as he got on me, the neighbors came. "Open the door!" - they were cursing him - "Open the door!" Two men came inside. They hit me on the head and they hit him on the head. I left him to be beaten and ran away. I saw a married couple on the road. The man told me, "Come and sleep at our place." His wife got mad. She pulled my hair. She was jealous. I told her, "I don't know your husband." A man passed by wearing pajamas. He defended me. He saved me from her hands. Then I left. (pause)
Ghena: That is your life story?
Marie: That's it.
Ghena: I want to know your whole life story.
Marie: I told you my life story.
Ghena: Can a life be told in ten minutes?
Marie: Yes, it can. I got married, I was divorced, I had children, and I did that, as I told you.
Ghena: Who is the person you love most, your mother, your children, one of the men you met?
Marie: I loved a man, but he went to Jordan. I was young then.
Ghena: Why didn't you marry one of the men you loved?
Marie: Like that.
Ghena: Why?
Marie: No one married me.
Ghena: Why?
Marie: They took three bones from here and put them here. That's enough.
Ghena: No one loved you?
Marie: No one loved me. What could I do? There were many women in the Burj, many like me. Men felt satisfied.
Ghena: None of these men got married?
Marie: They didn't marry me. What could I do?
Ghena: Didn't you want to get married?
Marie: Yes, but they didn't want to marry me.
Ghena: Why not?
Marie: They want to marry girls. I'm a woman.
Ghena: Marie, this can't be all your story. Can you tell me it again?
Marie: (Angrily) I married the first man - I met him in the, Nazl Bhamdoun. "Will you marry me?" I asked him. He said, "Yes". We went to Zahleh and got married, and went to a hotel, a different hotel, Khadawiyyet al-Kubra. I was still a girl. He slept with me and I became a woman. He took me to his parents' place in Bhamdoun. We spent one night in the hotel and then went to Bhamdoun. He worked whitewashing houses and also worked in manual labor. I lived with him for three years. Then I divorced him and left the boy [her son] with his grandmother. I left. Then I met another man. "Will you marry me? Will you marry me?" He kept on asking. I told him I had money. But all I had was LL10,000. When we got married he hit me on the mouth. I was bleeding. He wanted me to bring him money. I brought him money. He bought cows, three cows. Everyday he beat me up. Every week he used to beat me. I kept asking for a divorce. He wouldn't divorce me. I stayed with him for seven or eight years. I had four children. I asked God to harm him, he was imprisoned. I got divorced while he was imprisoned.

Once I went and found a man. His friend was sitting next to him in the car ...

[Marie tells stories of several encounters with men. We decided not to publish them because other speakers whose words appear here might feel abused.]

Ghena: Marie, isn't there anything in your life but your stories with men?
Marie: No, that's it. A woman is born, she gets married and has children.
Ghena: What about your children and mother?
Marie: What can I say about my mother? (laughs). I once hit her with a stone.
Ghena: You hit your mother - why?
Marie: I was upset with her. (pause)
Ghena: Marie, I need to ask you one more thing. If you had lived somewhere other than Lebanon do you feel your life would have been different?
Marie: Live outside Lebanon?
Ghena: Would you have liked to live somewhere other than Lebanon?
Marie: I would have liked, but I couldn't. My children didn't help me. They didn't give me money to travel. You need money to travel. My niece and her husband went to America.
Ghena: Are you trying to remember something to tell me?
Marie: I'm trying to remember a story but there aren't any more stories. (pause) Don't you want to bring photographers so that they'll give me money? They took a photo of my stick once. Come back in a few days, come back!

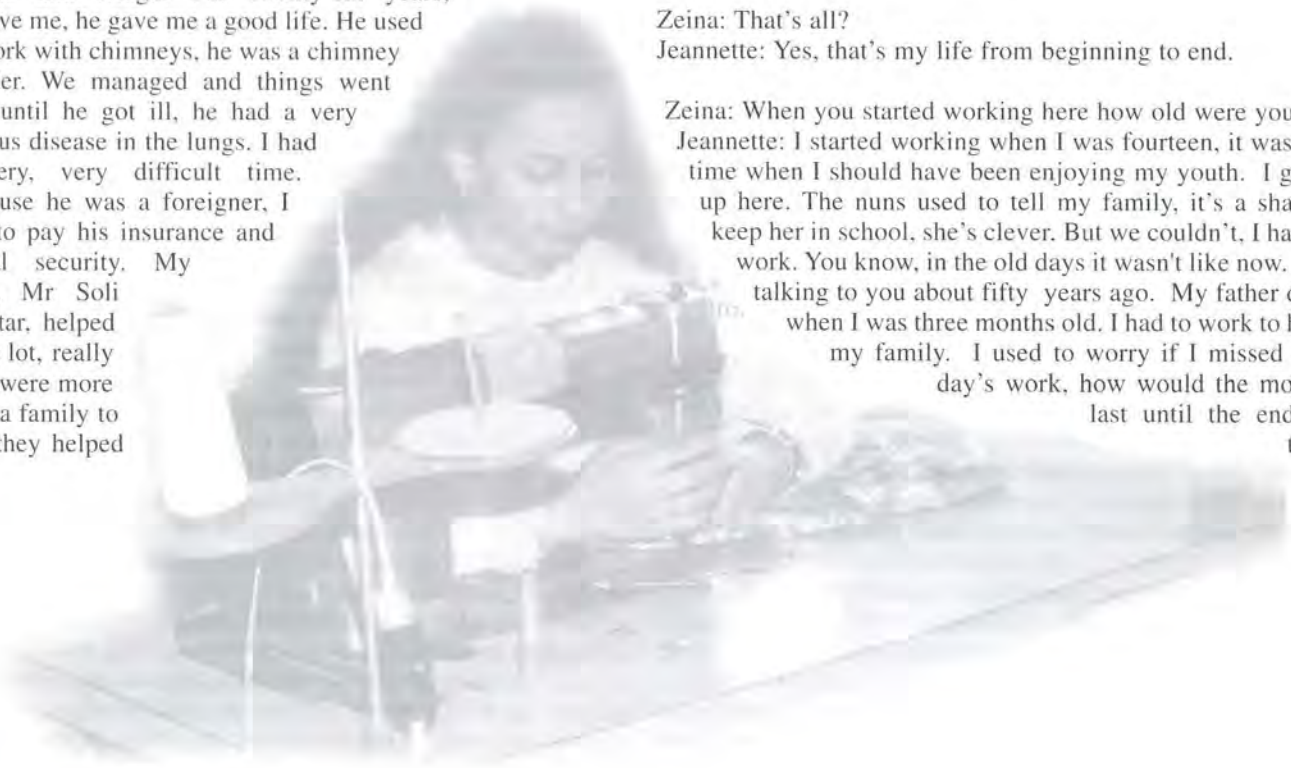
Recorded and translated by Ghena Ismail

Jeanette Martinez, Employee in a Factory

(Born in 1940, in Ba'bda; currently living in Hadath; recorded outside the factory. Language: colloquial Arabic with touches of French.)

My name is Jeanette Martinez. I began working in the National Wool Factory. I started working to help my family. I passed my childhood here, in this job. We had a hard time, I suffered to raise brothers and sisters, to pay for their schools, and to fix the house. My mother didn't know how to work outside, then. We were fatherless. We went through difficult times, but God helped us. My brothers and sisters grew up and got married, they had children. I stayed at home and kept on working. There was one brother left. I had to work so that my brother could be properly educated, even though he's older than me. I was the one responsible for managing the household as if I was the oldest. I did well at work.

God helped me and I was blessed with a husband. He was very good (begins to cry). I had to fight with my relatives for his sake because they wanted to marry me to the brother of my sister's husband. They caused me a lot of trouble, so I had to elope. We got married. I left my job, and had two children, Nicole and Diego. For twenty-six years, believe me, he gave me a good life. He used to work with chimneys, he was a chimney builder. We managed and things went fine until he got ill, he had a very serious disease in the lungs. I had a very, very difficult time. Because he was a foreigner, I had to pay his insurance and social security. My boss, Mr Soli Khattar, helped me a lot, really they were more than a family to me, they helped more than my family did. But it was no use, I ran here and there for more than a year, but to no avail. He died, and there was the war and everything.



So I returned to my job, I worked in order to raise my children. My son was in the Antonine Institute, the tuition fees are very high. My daughter was in her last year at the Soeurs des Franciscaines. You couldn't stop their education, no, you had to do the impossible for them to finish. I started working again, God helped me to work. Then my daughter got married and now she has two daughters. She teaches at La Sagesse and she is doing well. As for my son, during the war, because he is a foreigner and the only son, I had to send him away. He left for the United States (voice trembles). He's a very good boy, believe me, but I've lost him. He calls me at the end of every month but that's it, he's living abroad, you know how it is. He's a generous and sensitive person, but when you live for such a long time over there you can't ever live the same life here again. He got married and has two children. Now my daughter still is not established properly, and my son has a family, so I say that as long as my health allows me, with God's will, I'll keep on working and spare them having to spend money on me. I like my work, I like my employers, and they like me. I consider them as family. I am working so as not to be a burden on the children. It's difficult to ask your children for money. It's true my children are very generous, but still I find it difficult to ask them for money. Imagine the expenses of running a house, electricity, rent, telephone, everything! Now, I'm working and managing. As long as God gives me health, I'll keep on working. 'C'est tout'. This is my life. I don't know what to add.

Zeina: That's all?
Jeannette: Yes, that's my life from beginning to end.

Zeina: When you started working here how old were you?
Jeannette: I started working when I was fourteen, it was the time when I should have been enjoying my youth. I grew up here. The nuns used to tell my family, it's a shame, keep her in school, she's clever. But we couldn't, I had to work. You know, in the old days it wasn't like now. I'm talking to you about fifty years ago. My father died when I was three months old. I had to work to help my family. I used to worry if I missed one day's work, how would the money last until the end of the

month? But like all children, I wished to go to school and learn. So after I started working - and my mother as well, God helped her to find a job - I went to night school in Furn al-Shebbak. They used to give night classes from six to seven at night. (pause)

Zeina: What do you remember from those days?
Jeannette: Oh, I remember a lot of things, bad things and good things. There is always a road which goes down after a road which goes up. Small things used to make me feel happy. For example on the feast of St Antoine, I used to be happy because it was my brother's birthday. Small things like that! If we sewed a dress, that was an event - "Today I'm going to have a new dress!" But I used to get upset because I couldn't be like the other girls. I never went on outings like them. My family refused to let me go. I had to stay at home. That is why I was so happy during my married life, I went whenever I wanted, I even went to the Casino three times. No one did that in those days. When I was a girl, I was always in fear, it was always no. My mother used to tell me that we had to be careful now, after we moved from Baabda to Hazmieh, we had to be careful about what people say. "For God's sake be careful!" It was always like that, fear and terror. When I got married and I had children, I used to think that though my mother, God rest her soul, was strict with us, yet she was right. You don't realize until later. You have to behave in a way that doesn't annoy people. One has to weigh the pros and cons of every thing one does.

Especially after my husband died - it was sixteen years ago, he was forty four - I went through a very difficult period. In everything I do, I always make the sign of the cross and pray to the Lord to keep my honor safe. No matter where you go you have to be careful about people, you have to be aware of everything. I endured a lot especially during the war when my husband got sick. I found myself on my own. I was in a difficult situation, money was tight.

Zeina: Could you tell me more about this?
Jeannette: There were times when I had no money to pay the school fees of my son. What to do? My children were still very young. I couldn't show them my worries. I used to put my head under the quilt and cry, not knowing what would happen tomorrow. I would wake up and find that the Lord had helped me, I'd come to the factory and find there was money due to me. I'd take it and pay for the tuition. I have to say something, the factory owners were very generous with me. The brother of Mr Soli Khattar used to tell me when the time came to pay the fees, "Martinez, this is on me." He took over the tuition. If the Lord hadn't been there, he wouldn't have sent me someone to pay the tuition. There was the war, it was impossible to ask your family to help. Everybody was going through a bad time, and they had children in schools too. Now, I'm working, if ever I need LL50, 000 I wouldn't need to ask my daughter or my son. Since I was a child I'm used relying on myself and providing for others. I thank the Lord a thousand times because I'm still working and in good health. I don't want them to spend money on me (pause)

Zeina: What else do you remember?
Jeannette: I remember that it is wasn't easy for a woman to work. It's difficult to manage both her home and her work. That's hard. What else do I remember? The tape recorder makes me uneasy.

Zeina: Try to act as if it isn't there.
Jeannette: When I was young I felt happy to come to work because I had friends here. I can't tell you that I had a childhood like other girls, no, I can't say that. But small things used to make us happy. If we went to buy a blouse or something, even if we had to pay for it by installment, we were happy. And whatever our family could give us made us happy. My mother used to knit, I kept begging her, "Knit a sweater for me. I want to wear this blouse tomorrow you have to sew me this or that!" I liked to look neat, I was a bit of a coquette.

I started seeing my husband four years before we got married. He was our neighbor. He used to say "Bonjour". We never went anywhere. Just "Bonjour" "Bonjour". I saw him, he saw me, and that was it. (laughs) We spent four years saying 'bonjour' to each other. He used to say, "I haven't seen you today" - things like that. We were living in hope much more than in real life. (pause)

I remember Christmas, especially after I had children. I was happy that I had a home and everything. When Christmas came around, my husband and I used to take the children to the shops to buy gifts. We were the only ones in the building who did that, in the past people didn't know about 'Pere Noel'. He used to prepare everything, just like people do now, balloons and decorations. We had lots of fun. Every Saturday, I used to wait impatiently for my salary to go to the flower shop in Bab Idriss to buy him flowers. He loved flowers. My biggest joy was to get them for him. (pause)

"We were in the mountains, we came and saw our house burning"

There's one thing in my childhood which I've never forgotten. The nuns used to organize 'kermesses'. This made me feel good, I'd finally be doing something like the rest of the girls. There was a train which used to pass near here [points to the Damascus road]. A group of girls organized an outing with

their parents, they were going to take nargilehs and everything. I went home and asked my mother, could I go with them? The train fare was half a pound. "No, no, it's not my business, ask your brother." "Mother, please, God keep you, please let me go." Then my brother Tony came home. I asked him and he said no. "Listen, please!" The answer was still no. That day, I went to bed very upset, I cried a lot. Until now, I've never been on a train (smiles), though it used to pass by here every hour. When I married, I went everywhere, when I was a girl, nowhere. We used to stay at home, sit on the stairs, eat watermelon seeds, watch people passing by. We went nowhere. When there was a holiday, we went to the souk, and that was it. But secretly, never, we never did anything in secret. I was afraid of doing that.

"My marriage was the only happy period of my life"

When I got married, I started to have fun. We stayed a year and a half without children. My husband knew that I liked Egyptian films, so he used to buy us tickets, me and two or three of my work-mates here. We used to go to the cinema, wrap sandwiches, and take peanuts and melon seeds with us. We went to all the Egyptian films, we didn't miss a single one. I enjoy these memories (pause). Later I worked to help him because he was a foreigner, he didn't always have a work permit. I asked him if I could help more, and he said, "Why not?" So I started working so as to rent a house, because the first three years we stayed with my in-laws. Then we rented a house. I was so happy! I was buying things for my own house. I used to invite my friends to visit me. Yes, this was the period when we were happy. I felt that I was free. My husband used to treat me very well, he did whatever I wanted. If I wanted to go out with my friends, he didn't stop me. As a girl, I always wanted to go to Harissa. Every first of May there's a pilgrimage to our Lady of Harissa. I didn't go until I was married and had children. They were three and five years old. I took them to Harissa with my friends - not with my husband, he was working - I went with friends from work. We had a picnic, we had a nice time, it made me feel good, I will never forget. This is how I spent my life until my husband fell ill. The children had barely grown up - Nicole was eleven and Diego was eight - we were in Ash'out, spending the summer there. We used to come and go because of the war. We never had time to rest and enjoy our lives. Before the war ended, my husband fell sick and the cycle of suffering started all over again (cries).

Before I met my husband I fell in love, like everyone else, I fell in love. Yes, before I got married, when I was thirteen or fourteen, at work, I loved someone. But my grandmother used to tell me, no, his family are stuck-up people, you wouldn't be able to live with them. But he was good. I was always alert to the sound of his motorcycle, always waiting for him to pass by. But we never had the chance to go out. Then I got married, and when you do that you have to tell your husband everything. So he told me 'C'est normal', don't worry. We talked to each other, we stayed for fifteen days in the hotel, and we discovered each other. He talked and I talked about everything that had happened to us. It's better to be honest from the beginning of the road. I never hid anything from him. You don't hide, and I don't hide. Whenever there was something wrong, it showed on my face; and I was faithful to him. I told him everything in the past. Yes, I had dreams, like any girl has, but things change, and I couldn't fulfill any of my dreams. I wanted a house of my own, I wanted to go out and have new clothes. I did none of this, it remained a dream.

But there was a time when I had some problems at home because my sister was living near us, and she wanted me to marry her brother-in-law. My husband and I had already promised each other to marry. I spent seven months of suffering. If I wanted to go downstairs I had to think about it. It was a whole year of misery, the worst period of my life. Imagine, the time my family was going to visit Jerusalem they took me to my uncle's house in Sheeh so I wouldn't be left in the neighborhood alone. They didn't want me to see George [husband]. That was before our marriage. There were so many fights. But there were nice things as well. For example, on Independence Day, my family had forbidden me to talk to him, and the road was closed for buses and cars, so he came and met me here at the corner of the street. I spent the whole day happy because I had seen him and talked to him. These are nice memories. (pause)

It was only much later that I accepted the death of my husband, I realized that I'm like everyone else. It was hard for me because my marriage was the only happy period of my life. I was so lucky to marry a person who recognized my worth and respected me. A lot of people tried to stop me marrying him. But I was stubborn, I wouldn't marry anyone else. They all attacked me for doing that, my family, the neighbors. He was so nice! I wish I had a photo of him to show you how good and handsome he was. I say it's God's will that he died when he did. I believe in God's will, I can't do anything about it. We're all going to die sooner or later. But I never lost hope that he'd get better, I ran from one hospital to another. Even under shelling, I went to the American University for medicine he needed.

I used to pray to the Virgin Mary not to let him realize what was wrong with him. Had he known, he would have gone crazy, because he went through a similar phase when his aunt was dying. The only thing I was praying for was that he wouldn't realize what kind of sickness he had. Until the last minute I kept telling him , "My love, you'll get better". He

stopped eating and lost his hair. "You see you'll get better, it will take time for you to recover your strength". I would tell him, "Look your hair is growing" but it wasn't. He would say "You're right." Praise the Lord, how He makes people not see. "If you weren't getting better the doctor would not have let you come back home." We brought him back home so my mother could help me give him the treatment. She worked for twenty-two years at a sanatorium so she knows how to give shots. She used to help me take care of him. So he believed that he was getting better.

"We used to stay at home, sit in the stairs, eat watermelon seeds, watch people passing by"

I don't know, it might be his sickness, it might be the way he used to treat me, I forgot all the bad times I had before I met him. I started counting my life as starting the moment I married him. Here at work, they liked me. When I had to breast-feed the children, whether at eleven or one o'clock, that was alright. My mother took care of the children for me. The owners of the factory were really nice to me. I can't deny it, right up to now. I used to leave work at three in the afternoon, tidy the house, and take care of the children. Believe me when my children were young, I didn't go anywhere. I looked forward to going home, seeing my husband, sitting with him on the balcony, drinking coffee, and taking care of my children. I didn't care for anything except my children and my husband. If I was washing clothes, and noticed that the children wanted to go out, I'd stop washing and take them to a stream near the house. They'd have fun for a while, then we'd go back home, and I'd finish my work. Go out, see my family, see his parents, no, the most important thing was him and the children. He had a good character, very caring and loving, but he had a short life. I had a wonderful time with him. Who is the woman these days who lives with her husband for twenty-six years without fighting with him?

To be honest, I once had an argument with him, we had been married only fifteen days. For three days he stopped talking to me, I felt very bad, I didn't know the reason. I asked him, "What did I do, George, tell me what went wrong?" "Nothing, nothing." I told no one, not my parents, not anyone. Later he told me that when we were invited to a dinner with his friend I accepted to eat a bite from his friend's hand. I took it out of politeness. My husband was upset because of that. How could I know? I said, "Georgie, how could I know that he's like that? You should warn me, and if I do the same thing again then you have the right to be upset." He never shouted at me, he never told me off in front of anyone.

He had only one fault, he used to bet on the horse races. You know in those days one did not earn money like we do today. He used to go to the races. I didn't object. Every Saturday or Sunday, it depended. Once, he went to the races after taking his salary from his father. I was about to give birth. He came back depressed, he must have lost. He went again on Sunday, to try and get it back, but he lost again. We had put money aside for the hospital, he took it so as to win back what he had lost, without telling me. He came in the afternoon looking upset. I got scared, I was afraid that he'd had a car accident, he'd only recently learned how to drive. He said, "No I didn't have a car accident but I have to tell you something which will upset you." So he told me the story. I said, "So what! Is there any difference between your money and my money? Don't worry, we can replace the money". He said, "Nana, I spent your salary." "First of all", I said, "There's no difference between mine and yours. Second, money will come again. We get money, it isn't money that gets us". He said, " I swear on the life of the baby that I will stop". I told him, "Don't swear on the child or on anything, I'm happy with you the way you are. The most important thing is you and me, the money will come back". Believe me, after that he stopped. His friends used to buy books to see how much the horses weigh, how many races they'd won. His friends used to ask him, "What happened? Why did you stop?" He used to say, "It's my wife". I told him, "Don't say 'my wife', people will think I forced you". He said, "It *was* you. If you haven't been so open and forgiving about it, if you had fought with me, I would have gone back just to spite you." Truly, a woman can really be everything, you can lead the man wherever you want, he is *'un grand bébé'*. That was the only problem we ever had, in addition to the one I told you about. After that we had no arguments, not even about the children, or anything. A lot of people were interfering in our lives, asking me why I was working since my husband had a job. I told them it was my decision.

In life everybody faces problems, but the woman has to know how to handle them. She has to handle her house, her work, and everything. A husband and wife have to be in harmony. In this way they will live the best life ever. No one is perfect but the Lord. My husband was really nice, he had one bad habit - betting on horses - but I accepted him the way he was. Everybody told me he wasn't good, he didn't have a house of his own. But together we built a house and a chimney as well. We did all that and one shell came and -- I believe it was the loss of our house that caused my husband's death. We were in the mountains, we came and saw our house burning! Imagine working for fourteen years to build a house and then to see it burning. He made the best chimney with the best material. Every thing we did was by installment. We were still paying them when the shell hit it and burnt it to the ground. And we say thank God, but seventeen, eighteen years of life are gone like that, and you find yourself without a house. I think this affected my husband's health. You have people who can bear and others who can't. (pause) I think that's it.

Recorded and translated by Zeina Misk

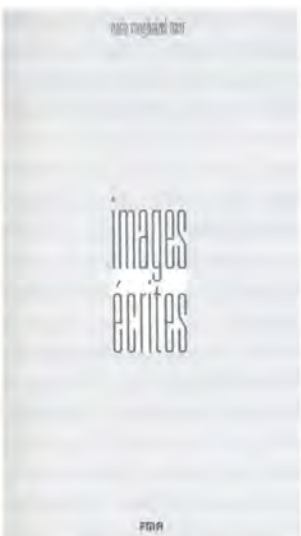
Nada Moghaizel Nasr: Writer, Educator

Picture Credit: Debby Saoud

(Born in 1955, in Beirut; currently living in Beirut; recorded in her office. Language: educated/colloquial Arabic, with some French.)

I would like to start my life story by saying that I was brought up in a happy home, I was born into a family that I believe is exceptional in that my parents were two people who were living a great love story. I often felt that I was the fruit of it. I was their first-born and when she was pregnant with me my mother wished for a girl. I was welcomed as a girl, which is unusual here, most people prefer to have a boy. My parents had a great love for one another, and also a great 'national project', so that I felt that the country was also my family - Lebanon and its reform was among the projects of this couple. Because of the exceptional family atmosphere, I've made an effort since childhood to cultivate my memory. I felt that I had to remember everything, even small details. I always considered the chance to be born in this family as a debt, that I was given something that I did not deserve. I feel I was given a lot, and as much as I have been given I should give back.

By the way my mother also experienced this feeling, she was also brought up in a happy home and she, like me, was the fruit of her parent's love. My mother also felt she had a debt to pay back, as much as she was given she wanted to give back. This is one of the explanations of the course of her life, this huge project that she began when she was only seventeen years old, namely the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in Lebanese law. As if she felt - it didn't stem from discrimination against her personally, on the contrary, as a woman she was given a lot, it was because she thought it was her duty to help "the less fortunate and the most in need" as she always said. In our family the idea was always there, that others should benefit from what we had received. We always felt in this house that one cannot live in a small enclosed cell, and that awareness of public interest is a duty. Currently I work in the educational field, not in law, but we all feel, that wherever we work in, we ought to give back something of what we've been given.



In this happy house we used to care for all the small details of everyday life. My parents used to care for small details, for instance in our house you would always find flowers, my mother always filled the house with flowers. Also my parents were happy that they had several children - we are five - whenever we came back home my mother used to say, "The house is lit by the presence of the children." When we were home it was like a feast. Our parents listened to us. They felt that our ideas were important, they used to take our opinion, they listened to us. I lived in a house where children were respected. I'm certain that our ability to think was brought about and built through this listening. We weren't considered as incomplete adults but as independent persons. When I was young, if my mother had a lecture, she'd read it to me and ask my opinion and take it into consideration. Among other things, my mother often read us poetry. Before I'd learned the language well, with all its vocabulary, she began reading me poetry. It was something I loved about our house, that it was a house where poetry was recited. It was important for me that our parents were happy as a couple, and were happy with their family and had a 'national project' too.

These are the important things about my childhood, and I believe that it's due to the way I was brought up that I studied education. I did university studies in Paris and have a PhD in education, yet I feel that my real training was before, at home. My first training was at home, and then I took off to acquire theory so as to be able to name the things that I had lived. Even in the books that I write - there is one in process now, and another published one called 'Images écrites' - it's as if I'm telling in an indirect way the story that I lived. I feel as if the child that was happy in that family, has continued to live inside me, and gives me the ability to understand my own children and other children, and helps me in my work which is

education. I feel I have a continuous relation with this child that is within me. This child teaches me things, it teaches me how children feel anxious, what scares them, what upsets them, what makes them happy, what helps them to learn and grow. All these basic things in my private life and my professional life, I learned indirectly from home. Also - and this is very important - we felt that we were loved unconditionally, and without limits; but at the same time - and this is important too - there were rules, rules that were clear and fixed. For instance, when we were in our mountain house, we were not allowed to go out between one and three o'clock because our neighbors might sleep in the afternoon and we shouldn't disturb them. We also had to be home by a certain time. There were rules in this house and I believe this gives children security for they feel that there is authority at home as well as love.

This house where we were brought up is no longer there because my parents passed away - I don't like to use the English term 'to lose one's parents', nor the French - they say 'perdre ses parents' - I prefer to use 'when my parents died'. Because I think you don't lose your parents. Of course parents die, this is life and we can't change it, at a certain time people pass away. Yet they don't go. I don't feel that I have lost my parents. They died but they are still present, and their presence is still strongly felt. They were 'references' and such strong ones that until now I still feel they direct me in my life. I feel like I'm holding my parents, inside me, and I feel them with all my senses at every minute. Whenever I have to decide something - and you know that life is all about choices, big and small - and according to me even small choices often carry with them basic ones - I feel that in all my life choices my parents are present. They help me, accompany me, and give me the strength to go on. It wasn't through personal strength that I was able to go on with my life after their death, it was they who gave me strength. There is a sentence that my mother often used to quote to us when we were young, "Even if we are suffering we remain elegant." I mean by elegance having pride. When my father and mother died I felt we had to practice the phrase, be elegant, stand on our feet, act like them and be worthy of them. I'm always conscious that we have to be worthy of being their children. This saying and others remain with us. There was another they used to say after the war broke out, and we were living in different places, that each one of us should be happy wherever he or she is, and that we had to be a bit more happy for the sake of others. This was very important because it allowed us to grow and move on. For instance for five years I had to live in Paris, because I was studying there. It was difficult for me to distance myself from those to whom I was so attached. This approach is interesting, for it shows how a family can enjoy strong ties and closeness, and at the same time allow its members to grow, and become independent and take decisions. I believe this is something very important in Lebanon. Family ties are important for us in Lebanon - studies conducted after the war showed the importance of family ties in preserving people's mental health. Had this war taken place in a society where there aren't firm family ties there would have been more people suffering from psychological problems. So family ties need to be preserved. In my family we had strong family ties, but at the same time there was - I want to insist on the word - not 'individualism' but 'individuation'. Our house was one in which its members were allowed to grow independently. We weren't to be molded, we were potentials that had to blossom, and to blossom we needed support. So we were constantly supported, we became independent individuals who were also members of a very united family. I'm focusing on this, because as Lebanese it is important that we learn how to preserve our family ties, and at the same time allow persons to be independent.

I often think - and this is one of the themes of my life - of the question of filiation. What does it mean to be the child of such people, how does one continue with what one has gathered from them, and at the same time be oneself. I have thought a lot about this, and have concluded that one resembles one's parents not by imitating them, but by internalizing the values that they taught and the behavior they lived. They taught us a lot, their actions and the way they were, through their personality and through their dealings with us, and with others, and with the country - through these we learned. They weren't the sort of parents that cram you with instructions, do this, do that, you can't do this. They taught us through their way of life. There is a line of poetry that I like very much that goes as follows, "What we are shouts louder than what we say." They were poles of identification for us, and I internalized them to the point where I was able to transform them into a personal project through which the inherited qualities may be continued.

The Joseph and Laure Foundation was founded to continue this inheritance, but I feel that one can work on an inheritance through one's personal project as well as through foundations. The purpose behind this foundation is not commemorative, the aim is for Laure and Joseph Moghaizel's national project to remain alive. We want to preserve the values that they proclaimed and actively fought for for the past fifty years, values of human rights, and the best way to do this is to

continue working along the same lines. In this way they remain alive and give society nutrients it needs, and continue to enrich our society.

Another thing I recall was that my parents always talked about 'a'ilat al-tayibeen'. The family as they saw it wasn't just the small unit linked by blood relations - though of course their family was important to them and they gave it a lot - their family was larger, it included - and I consider them to be members of my family - all those people who shared, and believed in the same values as they did, the values of human rights. My parents often repeated the words 'a'ilat al-tayibeen, a'ilat huquq al-insan' ('the family of human rights'). I feel very deeply that all who believe in these values are members of my family. Many people who belonged to the same school of thought used to come to our house, eat with us, so I always felt that my family is big. The family of Joseph and Laure was a big one and I can't talk about myself without talking about belonging to this big family.

Talking about my family life, I'd like to say that my parents attended to the details of our lives - we always had flowers at home, and whenever we came back we used to find a new book my father had put on the table to encourage us to read. We often discussed the books we read, and talked about our projects, and the problems we faced. Our everyday life was filled with these things. Each Saturday we also used to go out and have dinner together, it was something sacred, my parents never accepted any dinner invitation on Saturday evening, it was kept specially for us. And every Thursday night my mother and father used to go out and have dinner together. My mother always referred to my father as 'the guest of honor'. Both of them cared about the details of their relationship, and I grew up to believe that a relationship is like a plant, for it to grow one constantly has to care for it and water it. Relationships are built, and they are built through daily follow-up, caring for details, caring for the relationship as if it was a person. One has to care for this person-relationship so as to make it grow and mature. The home I grew up in was made up of all these things, and even though this house is no longer present in reality, it is present within me. That house that was full of paintings, flowers, books, joy, love, discussions, accompanies me. Beauty is eternal. A flower dies but its beauty lingers on, the effect of beauty in us doesn't end. This does not mean that our house was pain free. This house knew pain, but I learned through living there that one can transform pain into something positive. When I talk about this happy house, it doesn't mean that we didn't experience pain - on the contrary - but we learned to accept pain and make something out of it.

Another thing I should mention is my constant feeling that I am parent and child at the same time. This I acquired from my closeness to my parents. I am a parent and at the same time I am a child, and I like this articulation between these two statuses. I feel that I can be myself through this articulation, this is me, myself. To be a parent is to be responsible, to give and to share what you have and what you know. To be a child is always to grow, a child is some one who grows, who always learns and who is free. So I continually feel responsible, and I have to protect, share, give, orient, understand; and at the same time I feel that I continually have to learn, I'm always in this process of learning. I feel that I can learn from everything, as if I'm always taking private lessons. My every day life is like a series of private lessons. When there are problems or obstacles I say to myself that the lesson has begun. I have a capacity to learn, I know that I have much to learn, I'm eager to learn. I also feel very free because somewhere I'm a child, I can be free, I can be fresh while I look at things because I'm always in this process of becoming. I believe that my development is not complete nor fixed, I'm always in this process of growing. I'm always learning, growing, and at some level I'm free. Maybe this is why I chose education as my profession. What I do is teach teachers. I think that to work in the field of education one has to be both teacher and student; if you haven't kept within you the student and child you once were, you won't be able to understand the student or the child. You always have to be in this articulation if you want to accompany a child in his project of growing and learning. You have to keep this relationship between these two statuses of parent and child, of adult and child. This was the fundamental reason why I chose this profession, also because I want to give other children what I was given. I feel that through the field of education I have the means and tools to name the things I was given, and in turn to pass them on. This is why I chose this profession.

I have three children and this is a very big project in my life. Through my children I make use of the child I was, but - this is important - I don't want to repeat my experience through them. They are different people, and just as my parents loved me the way I was, and allowed me to grow and cultivate my capabilities, and didn't mold me into what they wanted, I try to do to that with my children. One has to love a child, be present for him, and support him all the way in order for him to have enough courage to embark on a project of his own. This project might be different in form but not in content. There is an image I love, it's the image of a plant, supported by a stick, but then bit by bit it grows, and gathers enough strength to hold itself erect and be independent. So I feel that as much as you support a child, encourage and are present for him, so much he will have the ability to be independent in the future. There's another picture I like - through pictures one can talk about oneself - this image I saw on a poster of an international organization. It shows the world with finger prints all over it. The house I was brought up in diffused this idea, that through one's life - please, I'm not bragging, I'm saying this without pretentiousness - one has to leave a certain imprint on the place where one has lived. One can't live without leaving a stamp. This idea was always present in our house, one had to leave an imprint, though what kind of imprint and in what field could be different.

I can't talk about my life story without mentioning my feeling of responsibility. We were made to feel responsible for the country we were born in. There's a phrase that my father often repeated, "Our country is a collective and continuous project."

Nada Moghaizel Nasr

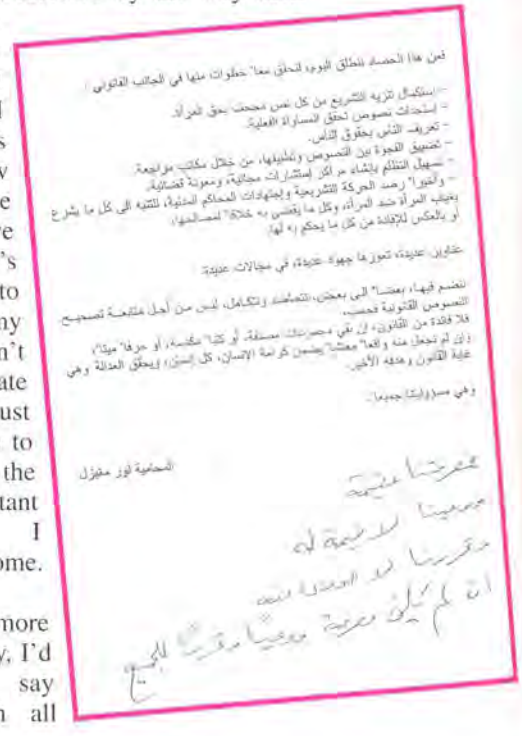
I like this idea that ones country is a project in which everyone participates. According to him citizenship is participating in this continuous project. One should have a project of one's own but one should also participate in this public project, and feel responsible for it, and be a partner in building it. The idea of partnership was always present while I was growing up. My mother, at the age of seventeen, when she was still at her first year of university, started a project to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in Lebanese law, and she continued with this project throughout her life. Nothing stopped her, she never gave up, she had a lot of patience and determination. Among the things that I learned is that one has to be very patient when embarking on projects, also one must have a methodology. To be able to succeed in one's private or public projects, one has to have a methodology, as well as determination, hope, patience, and the ability to cooperate with others. Whenever I talk about myself I have to talk about this house because this is what made me what I am. As I told you earlier I teach at university and write books, educational books. My latest book, entitled 'Images écrites', portrays educational images about childhood and education, the articulation between the status of parent and child that we talked about before shows up. Through my profession, work, through writing, through organizations and projects I engage in, I feel I'm transforming and translating all that I've learned. (pause)

If I'm asked to tell my life story maybe what comes first to my mind is beauty and happiness. I'll give you a small detail. I remember that at Christmas time each year my mother used to choose a specific theme, and we all used to participate. I remember also that we ourselves used to make the decorations we hung on the tree. We used to tell our parents what we wanted as Christmas presents, but my mother used to buy us what we asked for, and other things as well. According to her the element of surprise was a gift in itself. This is one of the small details that my parents cared for. All these nice things are now within me.

Myriam: Is there anything you'd like to add?
Nada: There is a statement I have read by Christian Bobin which says that most people when they talk about their parents are usually talking about the past, but he when talking about his parents is talking about the future. This statement meant a lot to me. When I talk about my parents I'm not talking of the past. I don't like nostalgia. Things that have really taken place are never lost, that's why, in my opinion, one never loses one's parents, they continue to exist, in different ways, on the personal and national levels.

Would you like to know what I studied at university? I did my 'license' in Lebanon, and then left for Paris to do my graduate studies in education. I returned to Lebanon and worked in a research center, and then I taught for several years. I'm currently teaching at the Université Saint Joseph and I'm teaching people who will become teachers in future, and I enjoy it very much. I'm also responsible for the continuing education program for teachers of elementary classes. I like working with people who have experience in the educational domain, and who work on the ground. I organize an educational day for them each month. I also love writing, through writing I feel that I'm taking pictures and developing them. It's my feeling that the more you experience rich things in life the more you enrich your capacities of thinking and knowing. You start seeing things more clearly, you gain insight, you acquire the ability to observe things and feel them. This is a source of happiness for me. It's a gift from life, but also it was created by my parents because they discussed things with me, and showed me things, so as to cultivate my thinking faculties. The poetry my mother read to me when young has refined my structures of perception, it strengthened my ability to understand things. I love poetry, and I believe that through it one can understand a lot of things in life.

Myriam: What about your own family?
Nada: I have a daughter who is sixteen and a half, and two boys of thirteen and a half. My house is full of paintings and books - I owned paintings before I had a house of my own. With my first salary I bought a painting by Awwad and paid for it in installments. In my house I try to carry out things that I learned from my parents. We share a lot in my house, but each member has his own place. Sometimes I make a contract with my children, I believe this facilitates dealing with them. When one knows what one's rights and obligations are, it facilitates one's dealings with others. We can't totally eliminate arguments and conflicts of interest, so I try to solve such problems in a non-violent manner, through having a law where one's rights and duties are spelled out. Conflicts are bound to take place, but the method used to solve conflicts is very important. I feel that my children are gifts from life, and I always tell them so. Children are very much affected by the way their parents look at them - this has been proved by several studies. One's capacities grow better when one has a positive image of one's self. I try to apply this in my family, I don't want to imitate my parents, I just try to pass on to my children the most important things that I learned at home. (pause)



If I'm to talk more about my story, I'd like to say something, in all

modesty, I feel one is the author of his life. Of course life is full of hindrances and it's true that we are not always free to be the authors of our life. To be the author of my life I mean that - let me start like this: there's a saying of George Khodr's that "war is dictation." I hate dictation, I refuse to allow anyone to dictate the course of my life, nor do I allow circumstances or problems to affect its course. This doesn't mean that I refuse to accept problems, on the contrary. But I don't like circumstances to rule my life, so I try to transform this problem into something positive. To be positive, I believe you have to be creative. Here I'd like to quote a neurologist who says, "Humans are not beings of perception, but beings of representation." Perceiving things is one part, and how you represent the givens is another. What are you going to do with these givens? We have this problem, this pain, this illness - what are we going to do about it? It's something we can't overcome - pain, death - I don't want to sound - I'm not saying that I am stronger than circumstances, but I like this way of dealing with things. There are things in life you can't change, so you have to accept them.

Even if something is painful I try to find the lesson behind it. I feel that my life is my responsibility and I have to make it a happy one. I have to care for it and make it a happy life even if there is pain in it. However there are things that one can change. I lived in a house where there was a lot of optimism and enthusiasm. Both my parents had many projects to accomplish for the sake of the country, and they succeeded in achieving most of them. Laure Moghaizel managed to change twelve different laws in the course of her life, and before she died she did her best to have the Lebanese government sign the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. She was a courageous, strong and optimistic woman, not to mention that she was determined, patient and systematic. My father also contributed to bringing about a democratic culture in Lebanon, he was the founder of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, and was its president, and he was with Laure the founder of the Lebanese Human Rights Committee. He fought hard to include a clause in the Lebanese Constitution which would commit Lebanon to respecting human rights, and international conventions relating to human rights. Both my parents had dreams, they struggled and managed to achieve a lot, they made change.

Myriam: How has living in Lebanon been?
Nada: I feel responsible for Lebanon, I'm not sitting and waiting to see what Lebanon will give me. I grew up in a place where Lebanon was a project we felt responsible for. I used to feel that Lebanon is one of the children of the family, as if we were responsible for him. If he is sick it is our duty to help him recover, he can't do it on his own. We all felt responsible for Lebanon. Lebanon is not an abstraction. Lebanon is a project or, as my father said, a 'collective construction'. I feel that Lebanon is a project, and each one of us in his own field must give it something. Lebanon is our responsibility, and depending on how much we give it, to that extent it will match our aspirations. The more we invest in it, the more it will resemble our dreams. Lebanon is not something separate from us, we make it the way it is. I grew up with this idea and it is very clear to me that we make the country what it is, all of us, every day. I'll give you a very simple example: by stopping or not stopping when the traffic sign is red we are creating Lebanon. If we participate in the elections we are creating Lebanon. If we engage ourselves in a civil association that works in a certain field, we are creating Lebanon. When one takes one's profession seriously, and tries to accomplish it in an outstanding manner, one is building Lebanon. If one's personal relationships are ethical and carry with them the values of human rights, if one listens to and respects others; all this helps create Lebanon. I believe that Lebanon as country of human rights, the Lebanon that I aspire to, the project that my parents sacrificed fifty years of their lives for, is a collective project, and is created every day in all fields. It all depends how much we care for the public interest, which at the end of the day is also private interest because it affects one's private life. Take for example the question of the environment. It is considered to be a matter of public interest, yet in fact each one of us is affected by the environment in his everyday life, we are falling sick, coughing, going to hospital, because of pollution. So according to me the public interest is strongly linked to each one of us. All of us have to take into account the public interest because it is affecting his or her daily life.

When I finished my studies I was given a very tempting offer to teach in a French university, but I preferred to come back. I felt responsible for Lebanon, I was born here and I'm responsible for it. If we Lebanese don't work here, who is going to? If we don't take the initiative and initiate projects, how are these projects going to take place? I don't believe in "Papa Noel', if we just wait for things to get better nothing will change. Time alone won't bring change, we can sit, wait, and complain, but things won't change. I believe that as much as we invest our energy, talents, and knowledge, so much this child - I mean country - will improve. This slip of the tongue is nice - 'child'/'country' (balad/walad) (laughs). I believe change will eventually occur, we must be patient and hope. Living somewhere other than Lebanon would have meant nothing to me my personal life takes meaning in a certain place and flows into something that is public. This is something I inherited. I can't imagine a private life that is isolated from collective life. I want my personal life to be happy but at the same time flowing into something that is bigger than me. I take pleasure in my work and in the organizations that I am member of. Pleasure is important in life, but it has to flow into something that is bigger than us. For me, the project can't be purely personal, it has to become public for it to have full meaning. This feeling of responsibility and debt that accompanied both my parents still accompanies us at home. That's why I can't live anywhere else, I'm not needed there, Lebanon is my place, our child, if we I don't take care of it, who will? We can't leave it and take care of other people's children, for who is going to make sure that our child is growing?

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir

Raqiya Osseiran: Retired Public School Teacher

(Born in 1918, in Saida; currently living in Beirut; recorded at home. Language: educated/colloquial Arabic, with some French.)

I'm Raqiya Osseiran, I was born in Saida in 1918. My parents were cousins and I was the oldest child. I have four sisters and two brothers. I went to school in Saida, at the Saint Joseph de L'Apparition school. My mother had been a school teacher, she received her diploma during the time of the Ottoman empire, and then took up teaching. I was brought up in an atmosphere where women worked, I always knew that I would work after completing my education, that I would teach. Because my mother was a teacher she received a brochure about Dar al-Mu'alimeen wa al-Mu'alimat. I loved the brochure and kept on reading it night and day. I was interested in its rules and regulations.

I received my Brevet certificate when I was twenty years old. Unlike today, schooling then wasn't a continuous process, it was often interrupted. I was a bit slow because I changed schools several times. After graduating from school I enrolled in Dar al-Mu'alimeen to become a teacher, and I was among the forth generation of students that graduated from it. I was first sent to Bint Jbeil to teach - new graduates were generally sent to rural areas. Since we were scholarship students we had to work for the government for five years. They posted me to Bint Jbeil because I was from Saida, it's close to Bint Jbeil. There were no schools for girls in Bint Jbeil then, there was only one school for boys. I was the first one to open a girls' school there. With the help of Izzat al-Khateeb I rented a building, and ordered all the necessary furniture and equipment. Many parents were interested in enrolling their daughters, but I only accepted a hundred girls from all those who applied. I opted for the double shift system and our school was the first to apply it. During the war period many schools adopted it. The system meant that there was a morning shift which stretched from eight o'clock in the morning till midday, and an afternoon shift which extended from midday till four o'clock. With the help of Salim al-Khoury, who was educational inspector at that time, I divided the shifts according to age groups - pupils aged between seven and ten did the morning shift, those aged ten to thirteen did the afternoon shift. The results were good - the girls were eager to learn and they all did well. I stayed in Bint Jbeil for two years.

As you know, today and in my time, working women were considered desirable for marriage. I was working, I was

educated, and I was earning a good salary. Many men flocked around me wanting to marry me. I was very young and ignorant, I had no idea about the qualities a husband should have, nor how to go about choosing him. Besides, I was only twenty and at that age one is romantic, loves poetry, and enjoys sweet talk. There was a young man from the Sharara family who watched me from afar, and sent me twenty-paged and sometimes forty-paged letters in which he eulogized me in verse. He sent me words of love without even knowing me. Naive as I was, I believed him. He asked for my hand in marriage and we got married. It was a miserable failure of a marriage. We disagreed on everything, his opinions concerning marriage, companionship, women, their standing in society and in the family, were very different from mine. He used to be drunk most of the time, he vilified me and often cursed me. I wasn't used to that - unlike him I was raised in the city, and in my family we never used bad language. Eventually we divorced.

I met my second husband while processing some retirement papers for my mother at the Ministry of Finance. He was a man whom I had known previously, but whose name I had forgotten. He introduced himself as Hamdi al-Hajj. We saw each other when I visited the Ministry again to finish my mother's papers. When the papers weren't ready Hamdi told me not to bother coming to the Ministry anymore, he would deliver the papers. After that he visited my mother, and asked for my hand in marriage, and we married. I have two children from my first marriage, namely Waddah and Azza. From my current husband I have Walid, Sawsan, and Marina. I'm living with my second husband in this house. (pause)

As I told you, when I was young I was very romantic, I loved poetry and reading. At the age of eleven I used to read the novels of Melhem Karam. They were stories about love, suffering, and so on. I was hopelessly romantic, easily affected by sweet talk and poetry. When I first graduated I wrote in Sawt Al-Mar'a (The Voice of Woman), it stopped long before you were born. I published several articles in it, but stopped because I was busy with my problems. So I started reading rather than writing. These are my recollections.

I remember that when national independence was declared I participated in the demonstrations that took place in Saida. First of all, it was a very important event, and second my cousin Adel Osseiran was one of the prisoners held in the Rachaya fortress. They took them from their beds late at night in their pajamas. We eagerly joined the demonstration, I

walked in the first ranks chanting and shouting. I recall that the year Lebanon gained its independence was not a normal working year, it was a year of joy. The president and other national leaders like Riad al-Solh visited different parts of the country. At each place there were crowds waiting to congratulate them, and listen to the stories they had to tell.

Concerning my job, I was very happy in it. The pupils were all intelligent and eager to learn, they were receptive and cooperative. Time flew without me feeling it. I always had so much work to do, I had loads of exercise books and exam papers to correct. But I was happy because my students were improving. (pause)

Myriam: Did your mother or grandmother ever tell you their life stories?
Raqiya: I didn't know my grandmother for she died when my mother was pregnant with me. My mother was a marvelous person, her life story should have been recorded. I say that not because she was my mother, but because she was exceptional. She bore six children while working, at a time when it was very rare for women in general, and Muslim women in particular, to work. My father died months after she conceived their sixth child, he was forty three years old. He collapsed on the street while walking, and died of a heart attack. My mother took on the responsibility of raising us after my father died. She worked hard to bring us up and educate us, her salary at that time was enough to educate us and she sent us all to private schools. Everyone who knew her - family and friends - used to look upon her as a heroine because she brought up a family single-handed. I often think of her, and her memory is still alive within me. I salute her. (sheds tears)

Nowadays young women are more mature. But I would like to advise them to be very careful when they marry. Money isn't important, even education isn't important. What is fundamental is for the spouse to have a well-integrated personality. Of course a woman should make sure that there's no nervous disorder, because this ruins everything. Then once a woman gets married, she has to be patient, very patient, because divorce isn't good. Of course there are extreme cases such as my first marriage. My first husband was psychologically unbalanced, he suffered from schizophrenia and his spoilt upbringing made him worse. Then, if a woman is convinced that she wants to terminate her marriage, I advise her never to remarry, never. This is my advice to all young women. I believe that a woman's emotional life should end with divorce, she should never re-marry, second marriages don't work. The first marriage always leaves its traces, and a woman carries with her her past and children. Moreover, who knows, she might end up with someone who has the same qualities as her first husband. Furthermore, a woman's position is always weak, given the conviction shared by the woman, her husband, his family, and society at large, that she is to blame. This is a very mistaken idea, and it's exactly what happened to me. When one marries for the second time she has to be very patient. I believe it's better to put up with bitterness, and stick with one's first marriage, or one should divorce and live alone. I struggled for my children to stay with me - as you know a Muslim woman has a mahr; I had a piece of land as my mitakha[1]. I gave up the land in return for my children. The judge told me that this is what my husband wanted, so I agreed and the children stayed with me.

When my husband and his family heard that I was going to marry again, they went and kidnapped my children from school. Their school mates brought me their school bags and books, and told me that their father had picked them up from school. We entered into custody battles. Even though I had a promise from my husband that if I gave up my right to the piece of land, I would have custody of the children, yet the court disregarded this promise. My first husband wasn't fit to be a father, if he had been, I wouldn't have left him in the first place. He used to give the children to his sister to look after, and leave them without food or money. His sister would return to her parents' house leaving him with the children. When he found himself helpless he used to leave them in front of my parents' house in Saida and disappear. My children suffered a lot for four or five years. They would start school in Beirut, and then they'd have to finish the year in Saida. We all suffered a lot until we made a truce, we agreed to put the children in boarding school. I was given charge of our daughter Azza, and put her through school. He enrolled our son in the Frères in Jounieh. But he never paid the tuition fees, never gave either of them pocket money. I paid for them. Because I worked all my life, and was still working, I could manage to do that, but my family also helped a lot.

I also remember that when we decided to get married, Hamdi and I, I was very happy, he promised me that he would take care of my children and raise them as his own, and that he loved me and them. Our jobs were good and our married life was joyful. But what affected our relationship is that we lived with his parents, and his four brothers and two sisters. They were originally from Tripoli but were living in Beirut. So whenever relatives or friends came from Tripoli they would stay at our house. At times we would have ten people sleeping at our place, and we had to feed and look after them. I often felt crowded out. It affected me a lot, though at first I was happy and content.

I stopped work in 1982, the year of the Israeli invasion, when I was sixty four years old. After I got married the second time I asked to be transferred from Saida to Beirut. My life was always full, especially during the last twenty years. My husband had a good post, we used to get invited out a lot, I used to teach and take care of my children. Even though I had a maid, I always used to cook and take care of the children. Sometimes we used to go out to nightclubs with friends, and come back at dawn, so I would change my clothes and go to work without even sleeping. My life was full, there were good times, I worked a lot, at my job and in my home. I took care of my children and grandchildren. When my son got married, for forty days I used to steal time in the evening to give the

baby a bath, even though I was still working then and had a family of my own. I used to cook for us and for my son, for forty days he'd come and collect his food, since his wife was unable to cook. I did the same for my daughter Azza - she had twins - until she and her husband sacked me (laughs). Azza's husband used to tell her that he would help her but he never did. I got tired and suffered hardships, but I'm happy that all my children appreciate me and admit that I treated them all equally. (pause)

I believe that most men are unfaithful. Some are faithful. After they marry, men start having affairs, as if they were imprisoned - this is what causes problems (pause). Thank God, my three sons-in-law are faithful - in fact their lives revolve around their families. The two daughters who are abroad visit me for a month each year, and their husbands phone them everyday. They chat about everything that has happened, as if they were together. This is what married life should be. My sons are also like this. I think that educated and mature people marrying today believe that their home is their kingdom.

I founded the school in Bint Jbeil in 1938-1939, the year of my graduation, and the year when World War II began. I recall that before they transformed Palestine into Israel, business and commerce flourished in Bint Jbeil. I remember that the day after we opened the school in Bint Jbeil the girls were wearing their school uniforms, with white collars and white hair bands, and their exercise books were prepared with their names on them. All this was prepared in one day. The economic situation was good then, people had money, and there was eagerness to learn. The war didn't affect Lebanon much. From the time World War II began, there began to be talk of the end of the French Mandate, and independence. There was action all the time. Many Lebanese leaders were imprisoned because of a strike that took place in Bint Jbeil, after the citizens got into a fight with the French army. There was a lot of action during the war, and these actions gave us hope.

Yet I believe that during the French mandate we were better off. Of course the occupation had to end and Lebanon had to have self-rule, but the situation under the French was good. Educational levels were high. Those who had elementary certificates in those days were better than those who have the Brevet today. The subjects in the old curriculum were advanced, and the level was high. Of course we would never give up independence, but the Mandate period was not that bad. We had good relations with the French. The good relationship we have with France now has its roots in that initial relationship. (pause).

Myriam: How has Lebanon been as a place to live in?
Raqiya: I believe that our life in Lebanon is very simple and easy. We Lebanese are close to each other. I can't imagine living anywhere else. I visited Paris when my children were studying there, and I saw how difficult their transport system is. If you have to go to a doctor you come back home ill. Distances are so far. I've visited several countries - Germany, Romania - I can't imagine myself living there. Life in Lebanon is very simple, in any Lebanese neighborhood one finds everything one needs. For instance with a 'service' taxi you can go anywhere for only LL1000. This doesn't exist in any other country. There are some people who complain about being poor, yet abroad you find more poor people. Many don't have homes and they sleep on the road - this is non-existent in Lebanon. No matter how poor a person is, he will always find somewhere to sleep. Our life is warm, easy and enjoyable.

Before I met my second husband our family doctor and friend, Dr Afif Moufarrej, told me that I should marry again. I answered that society looks down upon divorced women with children as 'second hand', no matter what good qualities they have. I couldn't imagine remarrying, but then I met my second husband. He appeared to appreciate me very much, and he seemed convinced that I was the innocent party in my first marriage. But it was only talk. Society doesn't respect a divorced woman, neither do one's in-laws. Eventually the husband will end up not accepting you, and blames you for the least thing that occurs. Many men aren't good. The question is how can one know if the second husband won't be as bad as the first? The very same qualities that made me leave my first husband are present in my second. I thought I knew him but I turned out to be wrong. Both my husbands were after my salary, all they cared about was the money I earned. My first husband used to waste his salary the first week he earned it, and then he wanted to spend mine. My second husband used to interfere in the way I lived and dressed. He used to argue with me about silly things, such as why I took a taxi rather than the tram. He used to tell me what to buy, he'd say, "You don't need more shoes" - this was because his sisters used to teach him how to treat me. For instance if I bought a face cream his sister would say to me, "You are so shallow, spending your money on face creams!" Yet she had all kinds of creams herself. Whatever his family told him he used to believe. In addition my second husband was very handsome, so women used to flock around him, and this upset me. He was not mine. Besides being greedy, he was a womanizer, and was pleased with himself because of the way women flocked around him. I was twenty two years old when I first married and twenty six when I married for the second time. When one is young and ignorant one tends to see qualities in a partner that aren't there.

But to conclude I never felt defeated and brought up two generations. My children are successful and I'm happy. I have no emptiness in my life.

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir

End Notes

1. The mahr is a dowry designated by the bridegroom for the bride on the date of the marriage. The mitakher is that part of the marriage endowment that is held back, and only paid if there is a divorce.

Esther Qamar: Women's Movement Activist

(Born in 1919, in Argentine; father originally from Bishmizzine, mother Spanish; currently living in Beirut; recorded at home. Language: Arabic, very elegant and correct, no foreign admixture)

Picture Credit: Samah Hijawi

Esther: Do you like the Arabic language? We used to take Arabic lessons, me and my father. He was young when he went to Argentine and married an Argentinian lady. For this reason I adored the Arabic language and I learned it even before my father; he became envious of me and learned it after me. We came here to Lebanon, for six months just to look around the country, and show my mother Lebanon because she was originally from Spain, from a good family. During the Spanish war she fled with her family to Buenos Aires. We were born there. However, as we say, things happen beyond our will, my father died in an accident and my mother remained here a stranger in this country. I went to the American School in Tripoli, because my father was originally from Bishmizzine in Koura. I went into boarding school. The other children used to laugh at me because I spoke formal Arabic; but my teacher, Mr Jeha, used to tell me, "You are speaking correct Arabic, they are jealous of you, don't change!" He used to encourage me; it was only later that I learned colloquial Arabic.

When I finished school, I moved to Beirut, I wanted to go to university, I remember they wouldn't accept me at university before I reached eighteen. Because I was very bright and had a good memory I finished school early. Then Mrs. Maddock, the school administrator, came with me and tried to convince the administration that I was an unusually bright student and shouldn't be held back. They agreed that I should study science and mathematics at the American School, and enter the university at seventeen.

At that time, I met the person who later became my husband, he was our neighbor, and our ways used to cross on the street. I told him I couldn't get married, I was like the man of the house, I need to carry on my education. The Americans had promised me that once I finished they would send me to Columbia University, and teach me at their expense. He said, "Isn't it better to have a man in your family?" We were two sisters and one brother, but we didn't have any uncles on either side. He promised to support me and encourage me all through my education, anywhere I go, whatever level I might reach, he said he would stay beside me. So we agreed. And that is what actually happened, he was a really good man. I finished my education, and I mastered Arabic literature. I adored Arabic literature, I studied all the diwans of the major writers, my hobby was to widen my knowledge of the language. I knew four languages: Arabic, Spanish, English - I learned it at school - and I also knew French because my husband worked at the 'Haut Commissariat.' These four languages helped me a lot, you know they're the most spoken languages worldwide.

From the time I was a child, I noticed that women in Lebanon were not treated as they should be, so I wanted to work in the social domain. We established Mar Elias Orphanage, each lady was to adopt a girl; they were mainly orphans and girls from broken families. We established it in 1949, I was then still young and enthusiastic. Women as you know spoke mainly French then. I was appointed secretary, and I wanted all the records to be written in Arabic. So these women relied on me to keep the records, and from that time I have been the secretary of the board, and shall remain so as long as the president is still alive. Many vice presidents came and died, and others followed them. Later we changed the name of the orphanage for the sake of the morale of the girls. I noticed that the word 'orphan' is a shame or a stigma, though some of the girls were wonderful, they learned a vocation, most of them got married. When we wanted to change the name of the orphanage, many women objected, they said no one would give money anymore. You know we used to collect money through lotteries, the cards ranged from LL1 to LL50. We also used to organize dances at the Saint Georges Hotel. I used to threaten them that if they didn't change the name I would resign. I said, "You want people to give you money out of sympathy? I will force people to give us money, I'll tell them that one day the poor will rebel and take all your money." They finally agreed with me and the name was changed to the School of Mar Elias Bateena. We asked for a license to give these girls elementary education, and we established a school. Now it's a very important school that graduates students who go directly to university. One day the bishop donated five thousand meters of land to build on. We took a loan from the bank and the president, Mme Hortense Tamer, organized many fund-raising bazaars. No one refused to help us; today we are proud of this school.

In 1952, I was elected secretary-general of the Lebanese Red Cross, the Furn al-Shebbak branch. In 1975, the World Year for Women, my organization delegated me to the Lebanese Women's Council because of my work with the orphanage, and my knowledge of four languages. The convention was supposed to be held in Mexico city, there were delegations from about sixty participating countries headed by presidents or prime ministers. I remember Jihan al-Sadat headed the Egyptian delegation. We worked together; she showed affection for the Lebanese. I appeared there, they asked me to talk about Lebanese youth and Lebanese women. I spoke in Spanish of course, and I appeared two or three times on TV. I appeared mainly because of my knowledge of the Spanish language. We

were able to transmit all our messages to the president. I remember the president of the Israeli delegation was there and when she started to talk we agreed to leave the hall. It was a shock for everyone. I persuaded my Spanish-speaking friends also to leave with us. There was the presidential delegation and other NGO delegations. I was with the presidential delegation. Later in the seventies I was elected to the Executive Committee for the National Association for the Preservation of the Environment headed by Sonia Franjieh. We were three ladies - Lady Cochrane, Salwa al-Said and me. In 1979, it was the World Year for Children. I was in Beit Meri then, we had escaped from Beirut because our house had been bombed. We wanted to do something for children. We established the Civil Association for the Protection of the Child in Lebanon. The president was Rose Marie Ellen Seikaly, as usual I was the secretary. I wanted everything to be written in Arabic, all the files. From 1979 till 1992, I remained in this post. Here too the Maronite bishops gave us two thousand meters to build an institution. It was originally for the mildly mentally handicapped, we used to teach them. Then we established a technical school for them as well as a small factory. We made an agreement with a certain supermarket for the children to fill bags of sugar, tea and coffee for a certain wage. Till today this Association is still working, but on a smaller scale.

When I entered the Women's Council, I remained as secretary from 1975 until 1992. You know the Women's Council includes all women's activities and groups in Lebanon; cultural, social, everything, even academic. The president then was Najla Saab. When she died Emilie Fares Ibrahim took her position; but during the war she got sick and went to Paris. The vice president was Oussaima Diab, she was threatened by a Palestinian group and resigned. I was the only one left. I was living in Furn al-Shebbak, in East Beirut, and the Council's office was in Zarif, in West Beirut. I used to go there under heavy shelling, I didn't want the Council to lose anything of its presence and role. The Lebanese Women's Council was an active member in the General Union of Arab Women, and a member of the International Women's Council. We had correspondence from everywhere that needed following up. Twice I was almost killed, but God saved me. In 1992, I handed all the records of the Council, along with the correspondence, I sent everything - all the files, well-organized - to the president in Paris, in the hands of a priest. Eventually she came back, and 'took all the glory' as we say, because she remained the president. She was followed by Aman Kabbara Shaarani. Linda Matar followed Aman, she never left Beirut, she knew how hard I worked and suffered for the sake of the Council. She used to say, "Esther, the Women's Council stood on your shoulders, and we appreciate you a lot." Then I discovered that people forget. I got sick in 1992 and had two serious operations, and needed treatment, so I had to stay away from the scene for a short period. They made me an advisor to the Women's Council.

I forgot to tell you that in 1969 I was awarded the Work Medal. Few are awarded this badge of honor other than syndicate members. Charles Helou was president of the republic then and the prime minister was Abdallah al-Yafi. There was a nice celebration held at the Mar Elias school. In the 1970s I was also a member of the YWCA, I was the president of the Committee of Social Affairs. Here also I translated the records into Arabic; we worked hard. Here is a list of all the associations I joined and worked with (hands list).

Twice I appeared on TV and talked about the activities of the Women's Council and the conferences I'd attended. I headed a delegation to a conference in Mexico, I headed the presidential delegation to Baghdad, to a conference on the creation of women cadres. Saddam Hussein was very hospitable and helpful during the Civil War, he donated LL50,000 for the orphanage. At the orphanage there was no segregation at all, neither on a religious nor on a sectarian basis. We were very grateful for his donation.

When I had babies I used to read while breast feeding them, some people used to say I was crazy. At school, the others would play while I would go and read in the library. I used to go to the library of the American University of Beirut. Reading was my passion. This is my life. For the time being I still attend major meetings. What else would you like to know?

Dania: Tell me more about your memories.

Esther: I traveled to a lot of countries during my work with the women's movement. I traveled to Moscow, we attended many meetings. I remember the program in Russia was set to spend a week in Armenia. I objected, saying that we know a lot of Armenians in Lebanon, we preferred to learn something new about other people, it would be better to go to Leningrad. So they changed the plan and we went to Leningrad. Truly, what we saw in Russia was unbelievable, people were very hospitable and polite. Because I was in the presidential delegation, they asked me to give a lecture. In the Women's Council there are a lot of political party members, and of course everyone representing a party wants to speak on behalf of her party. But I wanted to represent the Lebanese, not parties. Some women wanted to talk about the Palestinian cause, but I told them that though I pity the Palestinian nation, yet they were responsible for our plight in

Lebanon. We did a lot to help them, but we cannot allow them to use our country as a substitute for Palestine, and establish a state within a state. I told them we shouldn't talk about the Palestinian cause, and this did not please many.

Wherever we used to go, we stood out as Lebanese. I remember an incident in Mexico City, we were at a restaurant, me and the vice president of the Women's Council. Two other persons were speaking Spanish among themselves, one a Colombian, the other from Uruguay. So one told the other, "They (we) seem to be speaking Arabic," and the other replied, "Arab women wear veils." I spoke to them in Spanish saying that we are Lebanese, and the woman with me is a Muslim studying at the university along with men. I said that we were both Lebanese, and not all Lebanese are veiled. Some Arab countries require women to wear veils, but not all Arab countries. So the man apologized and thanked me. When I talked about the Lebanese people, they asked me why haven't Lebanese women reached high positions yet? Is it because they lack self-confidence? I told them that, in my opinion, Lebanese women voluntarily abstain from high positions. If they were ever offered a high position, they would prefer to give it to their father, husband, brother or son, and would think last of themselves. Lebanese women are capable of reaching high positions but it is they who keep themselves at the end. Once Emily Fares Ibrahim ran for the elections but few voted for her. This was the case with Laure Tabet also, she was the first president of the Women's Council. I remember a certain Mr Naim who told me that there is no use in gathering votes for women, because women themselves don't vote for a woman. He added that the best thing to do was to convince women themselves to elect other women. Let women act as citizens with duties and rights, and not expect anything from men.

In addition, at the Council there were many regional meetings. We went to Damascus several times and visited people's homes. We were invited by the Minister of Culture - she was a woman - we also visited the Golan Heights and were shown the destruction caused by the Israelis. I asked how could this happen, since Syria is a strong country with a strong army. They said that there had been many betrayals. We visited the city of Kneitra, where everything was destroyed - there was only one house left, the mayor's home, even the grass was burnt to prevent reconstruction. Anyway, they did not do less in Lebanon.

In the Civil Association for the Protection of the Child in Lebanon, we celebrate the anniversary of the Association every year, always under the auspices of the first lady, Mona al-Hrawi. She never misses an occasion. We also have a bakery there, we do cake sales and bazaars where we exhibit the work of children. Every member is responsible for a stand. Raising funds was through our efforts and our activities. Other world organizations also helped us in fund raising, especially the World Vision Organization. What else would you like to know?

Dania: I would like to know more about yourself, about the major episodes in your life.

Esther: Fine. I told you I attended several conferences, I was also a member of the Women's League; most of the members were ambassadors' wives. Once the wife of the German ambassador proposed to found the Gourmet Club. Each one of us would bring the best recipes of her country. Whenever we were invited to an embassy, say the Greek Embassy, they would show us films about the country, and then they would distribute recipes of their food. We actually published a cookbook and sold it for LL50. This was at the Women's League. In the Women's Council today, they do fund-raising lunches. I attended one of them. What was good about the Women's Council was the fact that it brought together women from different sects, parties and beliefs, and there was agreement among ourselves. During the war, there were members of different parties - Phalangistes, socialists, communists - but when they met in the Council they would act as members of the same party. They all respected each other. I liked this about the Women's Council, I am sure it does not happen in other organizations. In other organizations, members are hand-picked. Thank God, when I was with the Council, I worked hard and filled my post. Now, God be with them, I hope they're working on the improvement of women's conditions, on their achieving high positions and participation in decision-making, on becoming deputies - elected not appointed - and becoming members of Municipal Councils. Once in the Women's Council we held a panel discussion on women and law. It was very successful. Speakers representing different countries discussed the laws of their countries regarding women. When we published the book of the conference, many lawyers read it and were impressed. Ask me more questions!

Dania: Tell me more about your memories.
Esther: I was engaged in a lot of social activities. My husband used to encourage me in everything I did. He used to tell me that good work always lasts. I also used to work as a coordinator at the Ministry of Economy. I always enjoyed social work. I was once asked on a television program how I was able to manage my activities in the social domain along with my family responsibilities. I said that all it needs is organization. Social work does not demand a lot of effort; it is better to spend time on social work rather than on playing bridge. We used to sew clothes before the feasts and donate them to needy families. Truly, women used to sympathize with unfortunate families. They used to work hard and send donations. I remember a story when the school was still an orphanage, one of the orphans, Marie, who was beautiful, met a rich man and married him. Each feast, she used to send boxes of sweets to the orphanage. Once, I and my daughter were visiting a friend who had a new born baby. As we were sitting, Marie came in and introduced herself to me. I heard people around me whispering about her. So I said, "Let me introduce you to the people in the room." I told them, "You see this lady, even after she became rich and reached a high position in our society, she never stopped thinking of the orphans." Everyone admired her. It was after that incident that I decided to change

the name from orphanage to school. It was a daring step, people seldom give money except for orphans. But people should help others to stand on their feet. I don't believe in pity.

Dania: Do you feel that your life would have been different had you lived elsewhere?
Esther: I would never live anywhere else because I adore Lebanon. When other people fled, I stayed here. I was very attached to the Arabic language, and I was also attached to Lebanon because of what my father had told me about the country. And I saw the capacities and elegance of the Lebanese people. For example my father was a member of the most important clubs. I was always very proud of my Lebanese identity, and I excelled in the Arabic language. Once the Argentinian ambassador called me "la mauvaise Argentinienne". I didn't want to have Argentinian nationality, my Lebanese nationality is enough.

I've had this tendency since I was a child, to help others, always underprivileged people. Back at school, we once visited a prison, and I told one of the prisoners about doing good, and about the love of God. He said, "I'm a killer, aren't you afraid of me?" I replied, "No, in every one of us there is a part of God. There's something good in each of us. If you return to yourself and try to change yourself, God will forgive you." I was pleased with this experience, this is what I enjoy in life. Now, though I am sick and no longer young, I still have a good memory, and my hearing is pretty good, I still feel I can carry out my duties and services. I am pleased that though my hands shake when I eat, they never shake when I write. God gives me this power. I can't serve people physically anymore but I can still serve mentally. (pause)

Dania: When were you born?
Esther: You'll be amazed, I was born in 1919. I was nursed by a woman called Julia, she was an (American) Indian. She had only one son, he was hunted down by the government and later he was shot. I will never forget the sorrow and pain Julia endured, the silent and deep pain.

Dania: How do you evaluate Lebanon as a place for women to live in?
Ether: In my opinion, it is better than any other country. First, the girl can do whatever she pleases, her parents do not exert pressure on her. Some parents may do so, they may be hard on their daughters. But we still have the family. I remember once it was my birthday, we invited all the family, my four children and my grandchildren. There was someone there from Stockholm, a Swede. He sat in a corner and cried. When I asked him why he was crying, he said he would give ten years of his life for such a gathering. In Sweden, youngsters do not appreciate the family. In Canada or the USA, the girl leaves home at seventeen. I don't like this way of living. You will say I have an old-fashioned mentality, but this is why I like Lebanon. I like Lebanon because a person can live with honor and self-respect, especially in villages, because there they still have the Lebanese ideas of honor. In other Arab countries the woman is unprivileged, she is often forced to do things against her will. Women here are more appreciated than men and I respect Lebanese women because they impose themselves without being aggressive. In the Women's Council, we insist that the woman's family, children and husband have priority over her duties at the Council. When she finds that her children don't need her anymore, she is welcome at the Council. This is very important. I remember once when we were going to Baghdad. There was Shi'ite woman whose husband was a bit closed-minded, he didn't want his wife to travel to Baghdad with us. She asked the president of the Council to change her husband's mind. When the president talked to him, he said that they had eight children, and that they need their mother more than the Council does. Then the president herself stopped the woman from going, telling her that we didn't want the Council to be a reason for problems within families.

In my case, it was my husband who supported me most, he never held back from giving me money for membership fees or donations, though we were not very rich. We lived a happy life. He used to tell me, "Listen, Esther, we should educate our children and let them reach high levels of education, we want them to be independent" - one of my sons is a lawyer, another is an engineer - "other than this we do not want to save our money, we want to spend it." We should not worry about the future, God has already designed it. For example, we used to spend the summer in Dhour al-Shweir. Sometimes he used to come home and invite me to spend the week end in Ehden. He used to love life and enjoy it. Even when our children were grown up, he preferred to go alone with me to dances and parties. He used to tell me that tomorrow our children will have their own lives. He was a poet, he always used to leave poems on the door for me to read. We lived a very happy life, but unfortunately he died early from a heart attack. Then I continued life alone. Thank God the organizations I was a member of helped me a lot in overcoming my sadness. He died in three days. I remember I became very depressed, I sat in my room all day and pictured him in front of me. I recall that three women from the Women's League visited me, among them the wife of the Indian ambassador. She came into my room, which I refused to leave, and told me that they needed me, they wanted to take a picture for the Gourmet Club at the Center. I replied I couldn't. After they insisted a lot, I agreed to go with her on condition that we come back immediately. We started walking, and she stopped at each store looking in the window. When we reached the Center, I started crying, I wept loudly, and the women there soothed my pain. Going out with them helped me a lot, it proved to me that I could still be useful, that there is meaning in life, and that life is beyond my room. What else can I tell you? Of course, you are interested in the improvement of women's condition. This can happen on one condition, we do not imitate the West, and don't pursue unimportant pleasures which only bring regret.

Recorded and translated by Dania Sinno

Mirna Raad: Sportswoman, Golf Champion

(Born in 1965, in Sierra Leone; originally from the Shouf; currently living in Beirut; recorded at the Golf Club. Language: French, with some English words.)

Mirna: Where do you want me to begin? With my date of birth? I was born on the 30th of September, 1965. Most of my childhood was spent in Sierra Leone, in Freetown, Africa. We came back to Lebanon finally in 1974. I have very good memories of Sierra Leone because it was at its very peak, life was all parties. Though we were young, I still remember my parents' parties, ladies in white and men in shorts, very impressive. The beaches in Sierra Leone were beautiful, coconut trees leaning over you while you swim. I still have images of Sierra Leone as vivid as if it were yesterday. I lived my first five years there and then when I grew older I was brought here to school. We children visited Sierra Leone only in summertime. Then, in 1974, we settled here for good. When the war started we had to move again, this time we went to Paris.

Picture Credit: Rouba Abou Zeid

I spent the first years in a boarding school with my brothers. I was a pupil at the Nazareth school; when it closed I had to move to the Champville school. I spent a year there - I was among boys, I was very happy, it was a nice year (laughs). It was the first year that they allowed girls into the boarding school at Champville, I had a good time there. Then my parents decided to leave Lebanon because of the situation, and we went to Paris. The funny part is that we decided to go by car, we went from here to Paris by car. It took us a month, but it was beautiful, we visited many countries. We spent a year there, then we came back by car.

While we were in Paris I started sports, I took up track and field. I was a good athlete but not as good as in the sports I choose now. Because I grew up with boys I went into sports, maybe if I had grown up with girls I would have gone into other domains, such as fashion or music. As to music, my mother always wanted me to be 'la fille portrait', she made me study piano and classical ballet. I used to cry every time I went to ballet lessons. Then I started athletics, I did many sports, but mainly it was long jump, high jump and running. When we came back from France, we spent a year here. Then the war started again and we had to go back for a second year. I still regret not having gone into sports while I was in Paris, I think if I'd gone into sports from then I would have been someone different. Here you feel sports are a waste of time, you don't improve as you do in Europe, they don't appreciate your skills as they do there.

Dania: How old were you then?

Mirna: I think I was nine the first time we were in Paris. During the second time I was around twelve. It was the perfect age to start sports. Now when I think back I regret that I didn't. I used to play tennis I didn't take it seriously, maybe because our parents didn't guide us towards sports. Then I came back to Beirut, and I finished school, and went into university. At the beginning I took special education. I always wanted to work with deaf mute persons - up to now I would still like to work with them. I don't remember why, but it didn't work out; so I shifted into archaeology. When I finished university, I worked for a while in my field. I went to Petra and did some excavation there. I also did some excavation in downtown Beirut. But I don't remember a time when I wasn't doing some kind of sports. At the beginning I was in athletics, then a friend introduced me to basketball. I started basketball, then another friend introduced me to squash. I was playing basketball and squash, and at the same time doing skiing and fencing. I was good in all sports. The only problem was, as my father used to tell me, I used to reach a certain level in a sport and then shift to something else. But the problem was not me, it was them, my parents, because they never pushed me into sports. Alright, you can practise and give effort, but at a certain point you have to give more, and invest more money, you have to go out and be in touch with competitors. In my case, I was limited by Lebanese standards, I couldn't go further. My parents didn't encourage me to become more competitive, they always thought that I would shift to another sport. But I used to shift because it was the utmost I could give here in that specific field.

What else did I do? I was good at squash - at the Lebanese not the international level - maybe with a bit of practice I could reach a better level. I'm very serious in my practice, I don't joke, I don't like to do things half way. My father used to tell me, "Mirna, stop playing squash." I used to say, "I know someday I'll stop, but now I don't feel I like stopping because I can still do better." Now I'm playing golf, squash doesn't interest me as in the past. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday I used to play squash and basketball, on Tuesday and Thursday I did fencing and painting, and Saturdays skiing in the morning and basketball in the evening. My life was full of activities, I mean sports activities, not intellectual ones. I wasn't much interested in anything else except the cinema. I wanted to leave school after the Brevet class, and go into the cinema business. But my parents insisted that I should finish my education first. By the time I finished school, I didn't want to do this anymore. I was so

hooked on classical films that I used to spend a full day watching them. If I review my life up to now, I realize that in every period I had to be passionate about something, and I would take it from the beginning to a point where I could give no more; maybe somebody else could give more but these were my capacities.

Then I discovered golf and dropped everything and concentrated on that. I never thought golf could be so interesting. When I think about it, it's outstanding, it's a complete sport. Those who don't know it think that it's boring, there's no effort, you just walk and hit the ball. But if you want to play at the competitive level you have to have a high level of physical fitness, you have to walk for several hours and to have a certain consistency in your play. It takes a lot of time if you want to play at a competitive level. It's mentally and physically draining. It joins mind and body. You can't play golf and think about your night-life, or lunch with your friend, you can't, you are out of this world. You have to concentrate on the game, your target is the eighteen holes, and when you finish playing you feel a state of transcendence, as if you are floating. I started golf at a time when the lowest handicap for women was sixteen. The first time I saw the ladies' board, I went home and told my father, "Imagine! There's a sixteen handicap!" At that time sixteen was professional for me. When I started, I had a handicap of thirty one, and my aim was to reach a handicap below ten, my obsession was to reach a single figure. Then I began to find out what is a nine and a ten handicap. I started playing, and in six months I went from thirty one to nineteen. I knew that sixteen wasn't much of a handicap, but for me it was like zero. Now I have a handicap of 2.9. There is something that marked me a lot in this game, my aim was never to win but to lower my handicap. My instructor always used to tell me to keep my handicap high in order to be able to win competitions and trophies, but I refused, I wanted to lower my handicap, that was my aim.

I remember one day I was playing with a man, he lives in France, he plays well but he has his own point of view about golf. While we were playing, he told me - I had a handicap of fourteen then and had been playing for a year and a half - he told me that if in two years I didn't reach a handicap of nine, I would never be able to become a good player. I worked hard for it. My first contest was in July 1991, and by July 1993 I had a handicap of nine. I was so happy, I wanted to see this person and tell him about the level I had reached. Years later this same person came to Lebanon and asked about my handicap. They told him what it was. He said, "I always knew she's going to be a good player."

Picture Credit: Rouba Abou Zeid

At the time when I started golf women weren't allowed to travel for matches because their lowest handicap was sixteen, women would never reach a handicap of nine. So it was always men who travelled for contests. I remember someone told me, "When you get to nine, we will send you to play golf abroad." It was kind of a challenge, as if I would never reach a handicap of nine, it was too difficult. To get to ten is easy but to get to nine you have to record six games in competitions below your handicap. I felt as if they were just talking. So I started, nine was the figure for them. I worked hard for it and I reached a handicap of nine. I pointed out my handicap to them. "Now I am nine," I said, "What are you going to do now? You should send me." The first match that was coming up was the Greek Open [Amateur International Greek Open]. I pointed out to them that in September we would have the Open. I nagged a lot, and finally they agreed, they said, "Alright, we'll send you there." We formed a team and went there. But it was a mess. I was very intimidated by the other players, they had more experience than me, they had played lots of contests during the summer, whereas we have only one course to play on. I was a bit disappointed by my performance but I came back and started working on my play, and now whenever there is a match they send me to play. Last year I went to the Mediterranean Games. Every year I see that my game is improving, year by year, it's strange, you feel a certain maturity in your game. Every year I travel, I change my concept of the game, I learn new things, I learn a new attitude on the course. I have gained maturity, from last winter to this summer I feel the change in my performance. Since 1992 until 1998, I always won the Lebanese Ladies Championship. Three years ago they started the Lebanese Open and I have been winning it. Hopefully in November we shall have the Asian Games, and women will go. I'm preparing myself now. This is everything about my life, what else do you want to know?

Dania: Tell me more about the important landmarks in your life. Were there turning points?

Mirna: I think that at the beginning, when I was a student of Collège Notre Dame de Nazareth, I was very reserved, a very quiet person. The main turning point in my life was when I went to the Saint-Coeur and made friends with a girl who changed my life. We began to skip school, go to the beach during school days, hitchhike all day long. We used to go to the Tam Tam beach (Jbeil). At Nazareth, I never, never used to do these things. She taught me how to relax and enjoy life, how to enjoy simple things. She was a tomboy. I was a tomboy too, but she was more courageous, she would face a person and tell him the truth to his face. I learned a lot from her, how to fight for my rights, and to continue with what I want to do. I think this

was the major turning point in my life, it did me good because before I was very shy. After I met her I became more daring and outgoing - maybe she gave me confidence in myself - she was very self-confident, and she taught me that. There have been things in my life that I wanted to do. I knew that I couldn't do them straightaway, but that a time would come when it would be possible. But I always keep on trying, like if I want something maybe it will take me ten years but I will end up doing it. (pause) This is my life.

Dania: How is Lebanon as a place for women to live in?
Mirna: Lebanon? Listen I should tell you something, I grew up in a very easygoing family, I didn't experience what others feel who have conservative families, where girls can't go out, or can't do things their brothers can. My family is relaxed - for example at fifteen I travelled alone to a country where I had no relatives or friends. Maybe this helped in building my personality, not to worry. They let me do whatever I wanted, for example flying - I just came one day to my father and told him, "I want to learn how to fly." He said, "Fine, go ahead." If we wanted to do anything, it was," Go ahead, do it." In addition we have this thing in our family that bad news travel faster than good news, so we never worry, we can stay for three days without calling our parents, it's fine. As for the Lebanese woman, she is trying to liberate herself, but I think she still needs to do a lot to be completely liberated. Women are trying to work and to become more independent, but we remain in a fairly conservative milieu. I think we need one or two more generations for men to accept that women can have similar rights to them. When it comes to the point, you feel that Lebanese men like to be above women. No matter that men consider themselves to be European in their way of thinking, I think this isn't true. We have to fight a lot for our rights, and we always have to challenge them. You really have to face up to men otherwise, they won't acknowledge you. You need to prove yourself, not once but many times. This is my experience in sports, this is how I feel - I have no experience in work - I had to prove myself a lot to be allowed to travel and represent Lebanon abroad.

Dania: Would your life be different had you lived elsewhere?
Mirna: Yes and no. Yes, because in the sports field I know that if I were in Europe or in the States, they would have taken advantage of my capacities. This is the only reason, they would have appreciated me more. Now when it comes to family ties, hospitality, friends, social life, no, I don't like to be elsewhere. I like it here, it's warm, you can rely on people, I'm proud of being Lebanese. I like our mentality, I like family ties, friends. In Europe or elsewhere, you don't find this. You'll be living by yourself. Even if you have family and friends, it's a different concept. No, socially, I like to be in Lebanon. (pause)

Dania: is there anything you would like to add?
Mirna: I told you all my life, I may have forgotten a few details but this is it in general. I think I've had a good life, up to now I'm very happy with it.

Recorded and translated by Dania Sinno

Vasso Salam: Architect, Foreign Wife

(Born in 1948, in Ethiopia; of Greek origin; currently living in Beirut; recorded in her home. Language: English)

I am Greek by birth but I was born in Ethiopia, in Africa, and was five when my parents moved to Lebanon. They were supposed to stay in Lebanon for only three years but, like all foreigners, they loved it and stayed on. Unfortunately I never learned to read and write Arabic - they said it wasn't worth it. I speak perfectly, with no accent at all, but I never learned how to read. I received a French education at the Collège Protestant then later I did my 'mathelem' at the International College. I wanted to study Architecture, but at the American University of Beirut (AUB) they didn't allow girls into the School of Engineering, so I lost a whole year, though I had a scholarship to do Mathematics. I stayed out of university a whole year, writing petitions and collecting statistics from schools of architecture in Europe. So AUB ended up by accepting me and I was the first girl among five hundred boys, actually we were two, there was one other girl at the School of Engineering. It was a wonderful experience, though the competition was unbelievable. We were spoiled because we were the only two girls. I had many different funny stories because of my name, which was Vasikilaious. Both the students and the teachers always thought that, being a foreigner, I couldn't speak a word of Arabic, so I heard many comments about myself, and I pretended I didn't understand anything.

I graduated in 1972, stayed on during all the war, and only left towards the end of 1990, during 'Aoun's war'.[1] We went to London for a while. I married my Architecture professor, Assem Salam, and we have been working together all these years. Only lately, when he was elected president of the Order of Engineers and Architects, he's been too busy - he's a perfectionist who works day and night - so I started working on my own. Assem didn't teach me during my first year at AUB. He used to teach the senior students, but I noticed him from day one, and it was love at first sight, I heard bells. It was just like the cheap love stories that you buy in supermarkets. Well, after a lot of - - I'm sure he noticed me because I was the only one there, after a lot of problems, we lived together for a while, and then in 1982, after the Israeli invasion, we ended up getting married. But not straight away, because in 1982 Assem got very sick, he had a very serious cancer. We went to the United States. They gave him a five to ten percent chance of survival, but he's an unbelievable person, his attitude from day one was that he was going to conquer cancer. He is one of the people who demystified cancer and told all his

friends about it. Usually people here don't talk about it and don't pronounce the word 'cancer'. Most of his friends came along with us to the States, not to mention his brothers and some of his children. He had a year of chemotherapy - that was hell - and that brought us closer together.

What else can I tell you? (pause) Although I'm Greek I consider myself very Lebanese. I stayed on. We didn't leave this house during most of the wars here. There were battles in the garden, the house was hit twice. We weren't there, we had just moved out. I think it was an enriching experience, the city was almost totally empty, and one went back to basics. We had a few friends who stayed on in Lebanon. We learned how to survive, we created a small community. We were one of the few families to have a very big generator, we used to give electricity to the bakery next door. We had a well and we used to distribute water to people around us. I miss that period. Then at least we had hope that the situation would get better for everybody. I think peace has done more damage to the city than the war itself. Take Solidère for example. My husband was one of those who started the campaign against the Solidère plan, they have destroyed (sighs) about 80% or 85 % of the city, of the old Beirut that we knew. Beirut has completely lost its identity. They kept one or two streets of the old city unchanged and the rest is totally transformed, it's like any new city anywhere. And damage has taken place outside the area of Solidère. Take this area for example. It used to be all old houses and lovely little gardens, we saw it slowly disappearing. You see that enormous building there (points), and there are others like it around us, it used to be a set of lovely old houses and gardens connected together, there were flowers. People sold the houses, they were demolished, and in their place they built all these enormous buildings. Now I feel we are living at the bottom of a well. We used to have wonderful roses and flowers, but they died because we don't receive the sun any more. All that's left is a bit of greenery and some jasmine here and there. The old Beirut with all its charm has disappeared, whether because of major project like Solidère and the enormous roads they have been building, or through the private buildings that have gone up everywhere. People want quick profits, they demolish the lovely old houses and build enormous sky-scrapers.

"Living in Lebanon is both charming and unbearable"

What shall I tell you about myself? My husband is very good at interviews, but I'm very shy (pause). I have no children, my husband has children from a previous marriage, I consider them like my own. I wasn't an only child, I have a younger brother. My childhood was very happy. Maybe most of my generation had happy childhoods. I was the first-born, and spoiled by my parents. I was lucky to have a father who used to tell me stories at bedtime. He had a doctorate in Greek History and Philosophy, so he didn't tell me stories of princesses who kiss frogs, but stories from Greek mythology, it was really wonderful. Of course my mother gave us love and affection. I'm happy to have this multi-cultural background, and at the same time I feel extremely Lebanese.

I mentioned going to London, it was after the Israeli invasion, only towards the end when things became unbearable. We were really exhausted. All the children were at home. Slowly with time we started sending them away to school abroad because things were becoming unbearable. During the war we moved our work to home - the little work that we had - later there was no work. The family unit was quite strong, everything took place here, friends gathering in the garden in the afternoon, we would work here, the children were here. And then suddenly everybody left. We moved to London, but it was as if we hadn't left because we kept reading the papers and listening to the news. And we came back often, my husband more than me. I took a few jobs restoring the houses of friends, but at the back of our mind was the idea of coming back and starting again here. We never really left Lebanon, we never thought of establishing ourselves somewhere else.

I forgot to tell you that I left once before - this was before I married Assem - my family left, and the situation was getting very bad, it was the beginning of 1976. I went to Abu Dhabi for almost a year and worked for a classmate of mine. It was really funny, he had obtained a work permit for me, and the moment I arrived at the airport the official looked at me strangely, because it was written in the work permit 'the engineer Vasikilaious'. [in Arabic al-mouhandis is male]. He went, "Is this the engineer?" After that there was no problem, I was accepted and respected, and they used to ask my opinion. There was absolutely no problem, they weren't male-chauvinist as I'd expected, though all our clients were local Abu Dhabians. I lived in a small Lebanese compound, we used to eat Lebanese food, so the Lebanese side of me gained and slowly overtook my Greek side. When there's a game - like the other day there was the European basketball championship - I'm very Greek, also when I hear Greek music, but basically the Lebanese side of me is stronger.

In London our first job was restoring our own home. At the beginning we had a tiny mews - it was like a doll's house - later, when we started going to London more often, we bought a bigger house and we restored it ourselves. The first thing in England that surprised me was the building laws. It's not like here where you are allowed to build any horror you want, and nobody says any thing. There the preservation is unbelievable, the laws are very strict. You need the permission of several government offices as well as the approval of the whole neighborhood if you want to change one window, or the color of your window, or make a door. In some areas you aren't allowed to touch anything. I wish we could imitate them a bit, at least in certain areas, to try to preserve the little that is left. Later I had a few work projects. The choice of materials that you have there is wonderful, and the luxurious

things that you get in London, also the working facilities. You can solve your problems and make orders on the telephone. The high quality of the workers is an advantage there. But here it's also good, because I have the same workers as before, and they are like members of my family. They have been with my husband for years. With English workers, it's totally different, they have to take their tea-break every half hour, while Lebanese workers -- Now, for example, I'm in a hurry to finish something because of the weather, we have had some delays, but for my sake the workers are coming on Sundays. They work until late at night, and do anything you ask. Here you have a family relation with your workers, whereas there it's totally professional and impersonal. Later I discovered a Lebanese in London who had brought over all his cousins and relatives from Lebanon. I've been using him and have introduced him to a lot of friends. Whoever wants to have a job done in London uses them.

London on the other hand -- well, I tended to prefer France, but my husband studied in England, he made me discover London. Paris is love at first sight, London you fall in love with slowly, you discover it day by day. It's where I'd choose to live if I can't live in Lebanon. Without any hesitation I'd choose London rather than Athens. I mean all you have to do is walk on the streets of London, it's a different experience, the element of surprise is everywhere.

Living in Lebanon is both charming and unbearable. You have the hospitality and the warmth of friends, and the fact that people just ring at your door and enter without phoning first. In London they take appointments days before. But it's impossible to live here, and it's becoming worse. Just in commuting you lose hours and hours daily for nothing. Thank God for the mobile telephone, at least you can make a few phone calls when stuck in traffic, but you lose time constantly. Right now there's this house that I was supposed to finish at the end of the month, but we started having electricity cuts again, and they don't have a generator, and we lose hours waiting for electricity. The basic things that you take for granted anywhere else, here we don't have them. I don't see any hope, it's getting worse and worse. We don't know where we are going, or what Lebanon is going to be. The government talks about tourism, and having I don't know how many millions of visitors. What sort of tourists will come? A month ago I was in Athens, there are unbelievable beaches there. The whole Greek littoral is accessible to any one. There are no private beaches, anybody can go anywhere and swim. And you have those semi-public beaches that are run by the Ministry of Tourism where you pay the equivalent of a dollar and a half, and it's ten times more luxurious than the best beach here where you pay $20. They have green grass everywhere, no cement, stone paving, trees, you have chairs for everybody to sit on, volleyball courts, stone ramps.

Here in downtown Beirut, they have lately re-done all the pavements of the town, and they say that they have ramps for the handicapped. Have you looked at them? First of all they are thirty centimeters high, with holes in the middle of the passage for the handicapped. There's no planning for the people, no plan for the future, what are we going to become?

I can't see myself living anywhere else. Frequent visits and holidays abroad, yes! But for living permanently, no. I'm a person of habit. I mean I've had the same hair-dresser for the past thirty years, the same dentist, gynecologist, and pharmacist. I can't stand change (laughs). I'm a very faithful person. If I was forced to, I might go somewhere, it would have to be definitely the Mediterranean, somewhere in Provence or somewhere in Italy - not America.

As to other activities apart from my profession, I'm proud to say that six years ago a group of five of us, friends, took over the Beirut Theater in 'Ain al-Mreisseh, restored and re-opened it, creating a small cultural center. Apart from plays, we've had conferences, exhibitions, music, ballet. This year we had a special program for the 50th anniversary of the Nakba. Now we have decided to stop our activities and give the chance to somebody else to take it over - we've worked for six years. There were five of us - my best friend Huda Sinno was the manager, there was Elias al-Khoury, the editor of Al-Nahar's cultural supplement, Nawwaf Salam, Ghassan Tueini and me. I was mainly responsible for the exhibitions, and they mainly for the theater and the rest. It was really wonderful. When it first opened, there wasn't any theater in Lebanon, we had many people. It belongs to the Sinno family, and Huda is married to a Sinno, so we rented the place and fixed it up. It's a tiny place that only takes two hundred and twenty people. But we managed to bring really important plays from Tunisia and Morocco, we've had the ballets from Europe, and the best groups in the Arab world, and some foreign ones. But it was very time-consuming. We were helped financially by some banks, and by the 'Friends of the Beirut Theater'. A lot of young people came, which was wonderful. The recent program we had for Palestine was great, we brought Marcel Khalifeh and many others. When we invited the son of Che Guevara, I thought the whole building was going to collapse. Now we need a rest. I don't know who will take it over, we are trying to encourage younger people. We might come back in a couple of years.

Before I used to work with my husband , now I work from home and my projects are mostly restoration. For the past seventeen years we have been working on the Mukhtara Palace, its an enormous complex. People know that we work in restoration. It's really wonderful to try to keep -- We did a little house up in the mountains, it was four walls with nothing left of it, no windows, no roof, no nothing. We restored it, and created new levels inside, and it has become a real jewel. We went to people who sold old tiles, we used old tiles and elements to make it look as it was when it was built. We try to be truthful and honest in our approach.

Recorded and transcribed by Myriam Sfeir

End Notes

1. 'Aoun's War took place in 1989; it was directed against the Syrian Army and Syria's Lebanese allies.

Rania Stephan: Film-Director

(Born in 1960, in Beit Miri; currently living between Paris, Beirut and West Bank, Palestine; recorded in Beit Miri family home. Language: Arabic, with large parts in French or English.)

From what we said earlier, I feel I should introduce myself as a film director. So I will begin with how I got into film directing, how I chose to be a film director - or how film-directing chose me. It took me a lot of time to realize that I am a film director. The first time I realized this was when someone called me a director. He said, "Now we are going to introduce director Rania Stephan." It was when a film of mine won a prize; its title is 'Qabila'(Tribe). I made it in 1990. It was in the Los Angeles Video Festival. It was practically the only video art film from France. So I sent it, and it was accepted in the festival, and I went to Los Angeles to present the film, and I was introduced as 'Rania Stephan, director.' It is only then that I realized I had become a film director. It is very strange how things happen. From then on, I considered 'Qabila' as my first film even though I had made films earlier.

How I got into the films -- in Lebanon it was very difficult to choose to be an artist. I mean in my family, there was nothing against art , no taboo. But in our environment, and in a situation of war, it was very difficult for me to finish the Baccalaureate and say I want to be an artist. It was unrealistic. You couldn't earn money, there was no horizon, there was no way, no openings towards art. I didn't know what to do. During the Baccalaureate year, I remember very well, there was a scene from life, I was in the Collège Protestant, and someone came from France, an inspector. He came to see how the Collège was functioning during the war, and he asked us what we were going to do. Everybody in my class knew, they had already chosen, "I am going to be a doctor," "I am going to be an engineer," "I am going to do biology, or agriculture." I said, "I don't know." Everybody looked at me and said, "Shu!" ('What!') In fact I used to know very, very, very well what I wouldn't do, definitely not architecture, or agriculture, or anything like that, but I didn't know exactly what I would do. There were things inside of me struggling, not knowing what they are, or how to express themselves. That was on one hand. On the other, we didn't have a strong cinematographic culture at home, or in my environment. And there was the war.

I remember very well going to the cinema on my own in Beirut. Nobody in my class used to do that. I remember walking on Hamra, I'd find an interesting movie and go in. This was something not many people did. I used to watch everything, from Kong Fu to Bergmann. I did not have in my head a specific category of films I wanted to see. I did not have a 'culture cinéphelique.' I used to watch Kong Fu, action films, everything. I used to pass by a cinema and go right in. I don't know how the idea of cinema got crystallized. In fact, when I was eighteen, after finishing the Bacc, my sister was in Australia and we had relatives over there, I decided to join her rather than go to the American University of Beirut. I was accepted, but there was nothing I wanted to do at AUB. Going to Australia was a very important step, because I left home and family, and started living on my own. I left school and entered university. I left Lebanon and lived abroad. So there were three new factors in my life. It took a lot of time to grasp these. When I reached Melbourne, I didn't leave the city. It took me four years to digest all the changes that were happening in my life. I was discovering myself, I was discovering the university and Western culture.

What did I want to do in the university? I went 'instinctively towards' the arts, and I decided I had a sort of curiosity about the cinema. I thought, let me try Cinema Studies, let me try Art History, let me try Religious Studies, let me try Theater Studies. No one was telling me what to do. On my own, I chose things that I was 'curious about', and wanted to explore. So it was by chance that I arrived at cinema, theater and art history. I started studying the cinema, and then something strange happened. A door opened in my mind. Studying cinema was like a door for me, which made me understand how the world functions. Because with cinema we studied history, sociology, psycho-analysis, linguistics, semiotics, Marxism, political history and feminism. Everything went through the door of Cinema Studies. It was as if one opened a window and light came in. I was understanding how everything functions, how the world is constructed, how everything works. It was really great. I fell in love with cinema and I started specializing in film direction. But I didn't imagine I would make films, or that I would hold a camera in my hands. I remember that during the four years in Australia, I visited Lebanon, someone had given me a three minutes 'Super - 8 film', I was supposed to film the family, but I was too shy even to hold the camera. Now when I look at the film, the only thing I filmed is the spaces between people. Neither my mother, nor my father, nor my sister or brother show in the film (laughs), only the spaces between them. I was too shy to point the camera at anyone. The passage between theory and practice was blurred and obscure, I don't know how I got through.

'Anyway'- Cinema Studies - I did a BA with honors in

Australia, I came back to Lebanon after 1982. Then, something very dramatic happened in my family, my mother died and the family was somehow dismantled. All the children left. The whole 'dynamics' of the family changed after the death of my mother. We were very close to each other, but physically we were distant, even though we were trying to maintain a close relationship with each other in spite of the distance between us. 'Definitely,' things changed in the dynamics of the family after my mother's death.

I went to France, I don't know how to tell you (pause) 'en fait,' I met Jacques in Lebanon, three months after my mother died. I want to make a parenthesis here. I was born in 1960, so that when the war started I was fifteen. So I lived four years of war and then I went to Australia for four years and then I came back for a year to Lebanon, in 1983, when my mother died. I was here two months before she died. So I was here practically all that year. After the death of my mother, three to four months later, I met Jacques. He was a graphic designer and photographer from France, and was working here. So something like a 'combinaison de deux événements', Jacques was supposed to leave Lebanon, we were going out together, and I was not working because I was involved with the family, and with my mother. I had finished my BA and didn't know what to do. So I decided to go to France, and go to the IDHEC. And at the same time I was with Jacques.

Zeina: What is the IDHEC?
Rania: Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques, in France. Jacques was going to France; I was going out with Jacques; I was not doing anything in Lebanon. So why not continue my studies in France and at the same time be with Jacques? I didn't know that I would stay with Jacques. The situation was rather dynamic. I left Lebanon. It had never occurred to me before that I would go to France, not like the Francophones who had the 'French Dream'. I didn't have any 'particular attachment to France' even though I was at the Collège Protestant. We were very much inclined towards Arabic culture; we were not very westernized. As a flashback, I remember once in the Collège we made a small film. I don't know whether this helped me decide to go into film directing or not. I remember that it was very exciting to make a film. But it wasn't after doing the film that I decided to do cinema studies. All the choices were a bit mysterious. Perhaps because in Lebanon, one is not encouraged to choose an artistic profession. Anything like that was not 'stressed', it was more of a 'hobby'. In short, I went to France and entered a university to do my MA. This university - Paris VIII - had both practical and theoretical training. So I continued theoretical studies, and I started using a camera, and I was living with Jacques (smiles). I won't talk about my personal life.

Zeina: No, no, it is part of you as well.
Rania: I lived with Jacques, and went to the university. But Paris VIII was a very 'interesting place'. It had been very active in 1968, so all the important people in cinema of 1968 used to teach there - Deleuze and all those of the Cahiers du Cinema. But at the same time, it was not well known, it was not approved by the government because it was left wing, and at the same time it was not well-equipped. We made a student co-operative, and bought equipment, and started in this way to practise film-making together. We used to work on each other's movies, and make new ones. This is how I started to make films, in the co-op circle, doing videos which are a marginal product. I got into it bit by bit. At the same time, it was very difficult, I think that my relationship with Jacques (sighs), prevented me from doing something very open in my profession. There was pressure. Our relationship was very passionate and very ... confused. I was so involved in the relationship; it was difficult to do anything outside it. The only door outside Jacques was the video group, unconsciously this thing was continuing without my knowing where it came from. My relationship with Jacques lasted for seven years. We got married and then we separated. I left Jacques in 1990, about the time I was starting to make my first film. I think 'ce n'est pas un hazard', because in the relationship I had with Jacques, he wanted me to be totally his. It was very difficult to do anything outside my relationship with him. So, when I started making the film, our relationship was shaken and fell apart. It was the 'tip of the iceberg.' It became obvious that it was impossible to stay together because I had to express myself, and he was not giving me the opportunity to do so. When I left Jacques, I started making video films on a very small scale. I used to make videos and send them to film festivals. I always used to have a 'travail alimentaire', and to make my videos in the context of our small association where we had equipment. This was something constant. I gradually became able to survive from film-making at a very low level. But I couldn't live without a job.

We reached 1990 - I divorced Jacques and started making my first film. Maybe I can (pause) think a bit on my own, or with you out loud why -- I think maybe if there hadn't been the war, or if my mother hadn't died, my life would have been different. Maybe I would have finished my BA at AUB, got married and had three children (laughs). But this didn't happen. What happened is - - how to say it? Okay, let's take it from another side. Now I'm thirty eight, I'm trying more and more to focus on my professional and artistic life. Though I have a personal life and a very blossoming relationship, I don't think I will marry again. Because I feel that I haven't spent enough time on my professional life. It is very important for me, the choice which was so obscure and came from so far away, and which took me so long to express myself in. If I were to stop and do something more traditional, I would go mad. The older I get the more I feel that I should go deeper in this unclear road. Being an artist is not something clear, because one has to manage one's job and one's artistic work, even in video. I was always in a situation where I could either make films for money, or make my own films, video art, the films I think about. So this struggle is always present, and gets into a more traditional frame, that is having a life, a more conventional one - or to have children. All three things keep on coming up - art, work, children. It is not that I have put an X on them. But every time I have to make a decision I feel that I have to engage more in this road, art, which

is getting clearer and clearer to me as I go forward. It is something like 'nécessité'. The Ancient Greeks believed in 'le hazard et la nécessité'. I believe in this as well. There is chance and there is destiny. Maybe it was just luck that I got to Australia and found cinema studies. Yet I can not do anything else except go on in this obscure and tough road. When I think how my life could be, or could have been, or if I could have done something else, I don't know, I don't think so.

So in 1990 I left Jacques, I divorced him. Bit by bit, I started getting into this life, but I had still a 'travail alimentaire', and small films. I stayed like this till 1995, when I received a grant from UNESCO, in France, I had applied for a grant to make a video film in Palestine and I won the grant out of 1500 candidates who applied for art grants, and twenty who applied for art video. I won the video grant and went to Palestine to make a film, its name is 'Baal and Death.' In parentheses, this is the first time that I live totally from my work. This is very important for me. I reached a new phase where I can sustain myself. For two years I went back and forth between France and Palestine to make this film. I jumped from video 8, art video, to more professional equipment. I jumped from no production to production, I jumped from not being able to sustain myself from film-making to being able to do so. And I went to Palestine, something I'd never thought of doing. I discovered a lot of important things, the situation of the Middle East in general, and the situation of the Palestinians and the Lebanese.

So I lived in France from 1983 to 1995. I went to Palestine from 1995 on and off until 1998. I used to go for three months to Palestine and come back to France. What I want to say is that when I won the grant to make the film in Palestine, I had a feeling that I wanted to come back to the East. I had absorbed the West in a certain way. Of course no one can absorb it completely, but I understood how Europeans function, how they work, and how they live. And I had like a feeling to come back to the East, and rediscover it. I think that here as well there was 'le hazard et la nécessité'. I won the grant and I had a 'désir d'Orient' as they say. Lots of things developed in me in the West, and blossomed in those three years, in my return to the East. My Arabic improved a bit, I started thinking more in Arabic, speaking in Arabic. I started seeing how Arab societies function, at an older age. It is not that I had lost contact completely, but it is different when you live in the society.

I think there is something else, I don't know if it's related to the fact that I am a woman or an artist, I don't know if I am an artist anyway. It is more that I can't stay in one place. I keep on going back and forth to Lebanon. I am not able to come back permanently. I don't know if I can. For sure it is not going to be a final settlement in Palestine, it is only for some projects. But for sure I can't live all the time in France either. There is something like 'wandering' now which is happening to me. I don't know if I have a stronger relation with -- because now I'm now thirty-eight, I am a woman, I don't know how they will accept this in Lebanon. There is something like 'mouvance' one has to live it, I don't know how. All I know is that when I look at my school friends, I see that we have different pathways. All my friends - most of them -- when I got divorced I was thirty, they had just got married or had their first child, and I started making the first film. When I first met Jacques, they were finishing their university education and were going out, they hadn't settled down, but I had settled down. When they started settling down, I gave up stability. When they started making children, I started making films. It's something like a reverse progress. I come to Lebanon every now and then, I haven't lived here for a long stretch since 1983. So I'm not looking to see if I'm accepted as a person in Lebanon, with the 'status' I have. I mean I have an unusual 'statut social'. But this doesn't worry me a lot. I don't know if it's because I'm an artist that they will accept that I'm divorced, or because I'm divorced they may accept the fact that I'm an artist. I don't know what is covering what. But for me, I feel very comfortable with myself, because the older I get, the closer I get to what I really feel inside of me. 'So I don't judge myself negatively.' (pause)

As a storyteller, don't like to be boring. This is why I am not giving 'boring details.' If I think about the films I made, I think, oh, can I add something? When I was with the video group, there were three tendencies. A friend of mine used to make movies in which he filmed himself, very closely, 'his own body, his own experiences, his own sexuality, his own deviances, his own craziness.' It was as if the camera was stuck to him. Another used to film 'one step further,' I mean she used to film herself, but from distance. I feel I talk about myself in my movies, but 'one step even further.' Maybe it is our background, because the two persons I have talked about are French, and they are used to being 'articulate' about themselves, 'being an artist and talking about themselves.' We were not brought up to talk about ourselves. Okay, you can talk about yourself, 'but how to articulate this in an artistic manner is an apprenticeship, it is not natural.' You feel like putting yourself in this situation, but you have to learn how to articulate it. I feel a bit 'removed,' my films talk about myself, they talk about me of course, but 'one step further even than them.'

For example my first film, the film I consider to be the first, is the one we talked about, 'Qabila.' It was about my tribe in Paris. After I left Jacques, my life changed completely. Before, I was always concentrating on the couple, and the relationship with Jacques, and it was difficult for me to do anything outside the relationship. And I continued with the video group 'by miracle, or by addiction, or by a survival thread that was leading me throughout this.' When I left Jacques, I had something like a 'quasi-tribe' in France. I thought that we should get something good from the East and put it in the West, that is the intimate relationships we have here among people. I was trying to create

a family circle in Paris, which would be my new family, where you don't have to be related by blood to each other, but to be like a family, or a tribe, in which we take care of each other and love each other. So the first film was 'Qabila,' 'the portrait of my tribe.' The second film I made was about a relationship I had after Jacques. It was very 'unrequited love.' So I made 'Phèdre,' a tragic, unrequited love. After that I made a film about the end of love, and it was called 'Tentatives de jalousie.' It was someone I loved who went with someone else. Every time it was one step further, it was never me talking, it was someone talking on my behalf. 'Tentatives de jalousie', 'c'est un poème russe d'une femme qui est quittée par son aimant, et moi j'ai fait ce poème et je l'ai mis en images. Bien sûr c'est moi qui parle à la place du poème'.[1] After that, I made 'Baal.' 'Baal' was also a change in my life, there was production, there were actors, costumes, a whole process which I discovered or at least I practiced this process with 'Baal.' Filming in Palestine was very difficult. Most of the time, I was the only woman in the team. All the rest were men. There were two women actors. I don't know, there is something strange, I was simultaneously aware of the actual situation of women, and femnist theories. I didn't feel while filming 'Baal' that, because I am a woman, it was easier or more difficult. But for sure, no woman went to the places I went to, and filmed where I did. It was the first time.

I don't think that it's 'par hazard' that I'm working in video. Video technology almost coincided with the women's liberation movement. It was in the 1970s that video technology was introduced, and in the 1970s that women started voicing themselves, and saying 'that they wanted to contribute in the arts.' So a lot of women used the video 'as a means of expression.' It is not only because it is an accessible means, it's also because you can have your own means of production, which is very 'important. I feel that because I am into video art, which is a marginal category of film making, and being a video art artist and a woman, I feel that I am a bit on the margin still.' Now I am writing my first feature film so I don't know if, 'when you go into the mainstream' - I won't do a mainstream film - but when 'you go into a type of industrial product, an artistic product,' the issues may change a bit. Because I will discover 'the amount of antagonism.' I think that with video art, since it was a new medium, women took it to express themselves. No one told them where to start and where to stop, there was 'no antecedent male art before them. They were not influenced. It is an interesting thing to study video art. As a woman film maker, I think that writing a feature film - because I think I am writing a feature film about Lebanon, the events will happen in Lebanon - it is a way for me to get back into Lebanon. I cannot imagine myself coming back to Lebanon and settling in Lebanon without having a project. I thought it would be interesting to get back to Lebanon, and at least try and work out something, since the film is about my relation to Lebanon which is a bit conflictual. I think it is a good way into resolving my relationship to Lebanon. Also it will maybe reveal the difficulties a woman will have in a product which is more industrial. Everything will be involved in this film. When you make a feature film, it is a more expensive process, it becomes harder for a woman to do it because men have the power.'

Zeina: In terms of funding?
Rania: 'In terms of funding. As a first film. There are lots of bodies in Europe that help first film makers, enough money to exist, but you have to know how to knock on the right doors, and go into a certain process. But I will try to do this. Maybe I should say something else. When I was doing cinema studies in Australia, an idea came to me about a film. And I persisted in this idea, maybe this helped me go into holding a camera. I come from Joun.' I don't know why I am speaking in English. 'Maybe I can say things in English I can't say in Arabic?! I come from Joun village.' As a family, we Stephans are very attached to Joun. We have a very intimate relationship with it, because my father used to talk a lot about it, and we used to go there for three months every year. There was a Lady Stanhope who lived in Joun, 'an English Lady, an 18th Century traveler.' She settled in Joun, and died there. 'I always wanted to do something about her because she was an exceptional woman, because I wanted more to talk about Joun than Lady Stanhope. To talk about both. It is when I came to France, I said that I am an Oriental woman in the West, I wonder why a Western woman would go to the Orient? All this problematic came up to me, and I said I have to do something about Lady Stanhope and why she wanted to go to the Orient. So this idea about doing something about Lady Stanhope -- I always say that if I have only one film to make in my life it will be this one, and it will be more focused on why an Occidental woman would choose to settle in the Orient. And also what is very funny is that I read a lot about Lady Stanhope, she was exceptional, interesting, very probably difficult, a very strong personality, a bit lunatic, interesting anyway. What I remember of her as a child, what I used to hear when I was running about in the village, is about her outrageous sexual life. It is funny that two hundred years, one hundred and sixty years later, what remains about her are the rumors of her crazy sexual life. One story running in the village is that she used to imprison her lovers, especially those who disobeyed her, in her dungeon'. So imagine you grow up on these stories of this weird English lady who imprisoned her lovers in a dungeon! (laughs) These are the sexual fantasies running in the village. When we grew up a bit, my aunt told me that her uncle was her lover. So people in Joun had a relationship with her. 'I think she is a powerful image, a powerful woman, and a powerful sexual object, yes object. So when I first started cinema, I always had in mind that I should do something about her. And I might, no, no I will do something about her, because I read a lot about her and I like her. Ça va?

'Let's conclude this section.' I have to say that this film I'm writing on Lebanon is finally a film where I am talking about myself. Of course the main character will not be me. 'I will not be acting definitely, the character will have to resemble me. Maybe finally, not finally, this film about Lebanon will be a first person enunciation, more than the other films that were always (pause) a tool, an intermediary between myself and representation. So the film about Lebanon, the one I am writing, is definitely about my relation to Lebanon, my relation to my

own épanouissement, my own history. It has more to do with myself directly, maybe it will be the child I will make at the age of forty. That concludes a chapter of my life'. (pause)

I was thinking that it is strange how one speaks about oneself in oral history, there is something organized and there is something loose. I was talking with a friend about Rossellini, an Italian director. He was saying that Rossellini made a horror movie. When one reads biographies of big film makers, you feel that everything was ordered, everything was organized, one thing after the other, they knew what would happen next. People write about others retrospectively in a very organized manner, they tend to forget that there is a lot of 'barbottage' (muddle). There are, in one's life, a lot of things you don't realize or absorb. You only realize them when they are in the past, or when you see them from a distance. When one is -- as an artist one passes through obscure periods, not knowing where one is going, if what one has done has meaning or not. This is very personal and private, because what is difficult in art is that your life and your work are intrinsically woven together. You are not going to the office from nine to five, no, you're working at home, and it is your life you are talking about. It is difficult when you say this is important, or I think I will do this, you cannot but do what you are feeling, or what you think you should be doing. But you cannot always evaluate. Or at least that is how I see it - maybe geniuses do not feel this way, but I on my little level go through very obscure and unclear periods - should I be doing something or not, all the choices you have to make. Because when you read the biographies of famous directors, they seem linear. But if you go into the details of their lives, it is not like that. They have messed up, they have films no one talks about. I am reading about Pasolini to see why he was interested in Palestine, and why he actually went there in 1963. He also made films that no one has ever seen, or that are less important than the rest. So when one is in this position of talking about one's life, and how to organize it, and what to say, there is at the same time a 'ligne directrice' and a lot of superfluous details that fall out from the 'curriculum.' So it is strange how one talks about oneself. 'I can say that I am thirty eight, and I feel I am way behind. Maybe what I am living now, I should have lived when I was twenty eight. The seven years during which I did not do much while I was with Jacques delayed me a bit, but now there's more concentration, less superfluity. I know better how to work now. At the same time what you live is what makes your work richer. You cannot say that seven years are lost, but at the same time I say they are lost. I have two versions. I feel the more I, I am discovering myself more, I am trying to be truer to myself. I am discovering myself more, not less. It is not always easy but I think it is more mature at least to know myself. I think if I should retrospectively try to understand why I chose this path, why I lived the experiences I did, why I lived in so many countries, and why I have a sort of nonlinear life unlike other women. I have to know myself. I have to live my experiences to the limit, I have to know myself, I have to go deeper, to be more and more conscious about myself.

My dream - maybe the conclusion should be my dream - my dream for the future, is to try - because I think that it is hard to combine economic assets with this process of self-knowledge and self-learning - my dream would be to be able to live from my work. To be more financially independent, because now, as an artist, I live on a very limited budget. I am very tight, I am self-sufficient but I cannot. I cannot provide for my friends, for the family. So my dream is to be able to live from my work more, in order to be more socially, more large, more solid, more at ease, not for climbing the social ladder but to provide for my friends and my loved ones. To provide for my family if needed, I mean to be more dependable economically. Now, I managed to be self-sufficient, but I cannot be dependent on family or friends, never. So in this sense, my professional - - the path which was very obscure has become a bit clearer now.

In this self-knowledge process, I was reminded that - you see how aware I am of the economic aspects of my life - I was reminded that I have the opportunity to teach a course at Bir Zeit in the Women's Studies Program, which is a very active and interesting department. In fact they are trying to prepare an MA curriculum, so 'they asked me to give a course in cinema studies, I will be teaching, Women's Representation in Films in the WSP, which is very interesting for me. Because for a long time, since university, I haven't gone into theory, I went into practice. It is not that I have forgotten theory, no, but I am no longer up-to-date. So this course will allow me to refresh my memory about feminist and film theory, and to be more articulate about it.' And also to know that - since this film I am writing is about a woman and her experience with the reconstruction of Lebanon - 'so it's not by chance. Here it's le hazard et la nécessité - like the Greeks again. I am writing about a woman who is living the reconstruction of Lebanon, and, simultaneously, I have to articulate theoretically women's representation in films. Maybe they will feed into each other, probably they will. I am very happy to do this because I have never taught at a university. I think it's important for me to refresh my theoretical background, to try to present the women's issue in a sort of 'hot spot.' Because it is not easy in Ramallah to talk about this issue. Since I am writing in a very personal way about this woman, the whole process is going in the same direction, which is good. I think I need to know if I am any good at teaching at university. 'As an artist, you need to have a job to be able to earn a living, maybe one opportunity will be to teach and do my films. So this is it, now I am going this way, we will see what happens.

Recorded and translated by Zeina Misk.

End Notes

1. 'It is a Russian poem of a woman whose lover left her, and I wrote this poem and I put it into images. Of course it was me who was talking through the poem.'

'Umm Hadeer'[1]: Herbalist and Fortune Teller

(Born in 1953, in the Beqa'; of Turkmen origin; currently living on the outstkirts of the village of Irsal [Beqa']; recorded at home. Language: colloquial Arabic with a slight beduin accent.)

Let me tell you my story. My mother was a healer, a humane woman. She cured women who don't have babies, whose wombs are tired. I used to stay close to my mother, I'd watch how she did things, and her principles. Now, for the past fifteen years, I have been following her principles, her medicines, her way. A lot of people come from Beirut, from Saida, from al-'Ain, from Labweh, from Ras Baalbek, from Hermel, from Homs. They come to me, a legitimate doctor, and I prescribe them medicines. These medicines cost $50 dollars, maybe $60 dollars. They either get them or give me money to get them. I get them [medicines] from the spice dealer. One of them is saffron. Each thirty grams cost 25,000 Syrian pounds. These things are cheaper in Syria than here. Here, the gram costs $10 dollars. I buy it and mix it with authentic honeycomb. We avoid adulterated honey. I mix them together as my mother used to do a long time ago. Now I use it in the same way.

Picture Credit: Marilyn Stafford. A Photographic Journey through Lebanon in the Sixties, Saqi Books, 1998.

May God keep your health, my life story is like this, my grandfather followed the path of the sheikh, and the sheikh followed the path of my grandfather. This was forty or fifty years ago. He was in the area of Golan, Kneitra. He lived for a hundred and thirty years. Then God took him, so my father also followed the profession.

Michelle: How do you mean, he took the path of the sheikh?
Umm Hadeer: 'Sheikh' means he has his own 'way'. He sees hiddenwritten curses, he sees visions. Two of my sons also have the way, like their grandfather. I have another son who has four daughters who does the same thing. May God's good increase. This resource (mawrid) is one that we had in the past, and we are maintaining it now. People come and are grateful, thank God, and we keep up this way.

Michelle: Tell me about yourself, about your first recollections.
Umm Hadeer: My first recollections - until twenty five years ago, I was happy. But from the time he married a second wife and humiliated me, by God the story of my life is bad, not good as before. He hates the way I live with my companion's children. He sees me, excuse the expression, as a black snake.

Michelle: Are you the first wife?
Umm Hadeer: I am the first wife. And now all his concern is with his wife. He rarely visits me. Only when there's a feast or something special. If there's nothing, he doesn't come. He pretends not to know us. And now I'm really tired. Here, let me show you my head (removes her veil and shows a mark on her head). Five or six days ago he hit me on the head. I had to go to the hospital. Why? Because he was upset. First, he hadn't got money from my sons. He got angry, he wants money from them. My children have become young men. And now, thank God, we are living comfortably. I have my sons, they are young men, they are healers. Thank God, now I am better than before.

Michelle: Tell me more about your life, any recollections you would like to tell me.
Umm Hadeer: Many things have happened, praise the

Prophet. The stories that have happened to me! For ten years, he [husband] has been trying to control me. He hardly gives me any money. He is angry with me all the time. He hates my children. And he won't allow his other children to stay in the house with me. He hates my sons. He has hated them for the past three years. He wants money from them, and my sons don't have money to give him. They work and they can barely feed their own children.

I have nine children and my companion has nine. I have five boys and she has five boys. I have four girls and she has four girls. Nine by nine. And you know, nine by nine, it's difficult to seat them around the same mattress or dish. I told him it's difficult for me to live with you with this crowd. I won't put up with it. She and I, thank God, are on good terms. She doesn't fight with me and I don't fight with her. And whatever you hear from me you will hear from my companion. We both agree against him. "Under destruction, under construction," we agree. A female does not harm a female, but a male does. If a male is good, the female will be better. If a man doesn't give face [give attention] to the child and the woman, you will find him having difficulties in his life. But my husband works, may God maintain your good health, he makes sieves, drums, rababas[2]. Wherever he goes, he solves people's problems. Only our problems, he makes them worse. Our situation is bad, very bad. If you need any favors, for an 'amal,' (curse) for undoing magic - - my mother, may God have mercy on all the deceased, died here in Labweh two years ago. I was trained by my mother. I took the same path that she walked on.

Michelle: Would you like to elaborate more on that?
Umm Hadeer: The 'doctor' always diagnoses a woman through the vein in her hand [wrist]. When she touches the vein in her wrist, if there's a child she'll know. If there's no child, she'll know. If the patient needs a medicine, it will hardly cost LL10,000. My mother would buy the medicine and mix it with honey and four other kinds [of herbs]. Thirty grams by thirty grams, she mixed them with honeycomb, which must not be adulterated. Everyday the man has to drink a fresh egg, and the woman has to take the medicine. If the problem was with the woman, they will know, and with God's will they will have children. For us this way has become a kind of inheritance. We inherited it from our mother and from our grandparents. My grandfather, the father of my father, was a sheikh of a path. And my mother was my grandfather's cousin, the daughter of his half sister's mother. She married her (maternal) uncle's son. And as they say, a whole life has passed, and they enjoyed their way of life. My mother's (maternal) uncle taught her, so she learnt Arabic medicine. She spent her first fifteen years in a convent in America, and she learnt about medicine and herbs. She learnt there and she gave out Arabic prescriptions for women. She gave syrups. She prescribed for cysts and for fibroids. If one has an infection, he will drink the first cup; with the second, the sickness will be over. They used herbs that people walk on the street. But we buy them from the spice dealer.

Michelle: What other memories would you like to tell people about?
Umm Hadeer: Memories - people remember each other by kind treatment. When a person is good and kind, and treats one's neighbor well, then she is remembered. If your neighbor says a bad word about you, you have to pretend not to understand. If a person lives in a tent, then he can behave badly, all he has to do is fold his tent and leave. But when you live in a solid house, it is different. You cannot blacken your face with your neighbor, or your neighbor's son. Sometimes you are upset, sometimes he is upset. But he is before your mother and your father and your brother. Appreciation of the neighbor is more important than appreciation of family. Why? Because the life story of anyone starts with dealing well with others and humoring them.

Michelle: How old are you?
Umm Hadeer: I am forty five years old. We are originally from Lebanon, from Kub Ilyas, from the Rashed family. I only leave Lebanon to buy medicines, or other things. I go to Homs.

Michelle: I heard you speaking in another language.
Umm Hadeer: Yes, our language is Turkmen, Kurdish.[3] Turkmen are different from the gypsies. We are not gypsies. They call us gypsies, but we are Turkmen.

Michelle: What is the difference, could you explain?
Umm Hadeer: The difference is that Turkmen don't beg. They refuse to beg, and they never send their children to beg. Gypsy children who beg stand in the sun, they beg, "Give us for God's sake." These are the gypsies. We are Turkmen. We look for jobs. We sweep floors in houses, we wash dishes in houses, we clean houses ... I have suffered a lot but, thank God, now with these young men [sons], I'm resting. In the past, I suffered a lot.

"They call us gypsies, but we are Turkmen"

Michelle: Tell me more about that.
Umm Hadeer: In the beginning, I didn't get pregnant. I got married very young. I stayed four years without children. Then I got children, I delivered them one after the other. I started struggling to feed them. There was no income in the beginning. There was no work. I used to work the land. Three quarters of us did that. We were laborers, we worked with vegetables, onions, fruit. We were living here. We worked as laborers on land that produced vegetables, eggplants, courgettes, peas, beans. I worked in this way. When there was work we could save around LL1000. LL1000 'talked' then [had value]. From year to year we would save LL2000. Some years we were able to save LL3000. We would be so happy! In

the end my mother told me, "Daughter, this isn't a good way to earn a living for your children. You should observe how I work, and do the same".

We used to work in the summer with vegetables, on the land. In winter we worked in houses, sweeping floors, and washing dishes, wherever there were rich people - in Zahleh, in Shtura, in Muallaqa. We would leave our husbands and children during the day and come back at night. In the beginning when we worked, we would save money, as if in a money box, maybe LL250, LL100, LL50. Every month I would hide money in a shampoo container. In the beginning we did not even have shampoo containers, I hid money in a gasoline can. We would empty the can, clean it, dry it, then heat it on the fire and turn it into a money box. I saved money 'franc' by 'franc' without the knowledge of the man [husband]. By the end of the year I would find LL1000, maybe LL2000 in it. Then I would start buying things. I accumulated more money. The future came and we bought a piece of land. I bought this land alone [without husband]. Then I built a house, and sold it. I bought another house and have been living in it for the past thirty years. The house belongs to me. The next-door one belongs to the young men [sons], and I live with them.

"Every month I would hide money in a shampoo container"

I am an only daughter and I have an only brother left. He has been in Jordan for the past five years. May God maintain your health! my mother died, and then my father died. My father died this year. He moved around a lot, he made gold teeth and false teeth, he was a dentist. He was also a 'doctor' of women. But he grew very old, he was in his hundredth year. We were nine sisters with one brother. From the nine, I am the only one left. All died a natural death. Eight of them died, and now I am lonely and my brother is lonely. They died suddenly, God's death, heart attacks.

Michelle: What else can you recall from the events of your life?
Umm Hadeer: That is all I recall now.
Michelle: What did they tell you in the hospital?
Umm Hadeer: They said that his beating reached the muscle. We were digging for water. I had brought a water driller because I was buying water by the lorry load, LL5000 everyday. Every day we need a lorry load. By the end of the month it amounted to LL300,000. No, we were ready to pay workers to drill for around $100 and have water forever. We drilled a hundred and fifty meters and didn't reach water. Then God's mercy descended on us, they dug another two meters and we reached water. Thank God! It was when the water didn't come up that he got angry and beat me. He hasn't talked to me for the past fifty years and when the water didn't come up, he got angry and hit me because I hired a driller without informing him. He hit me. I couldn't tell what he beat me with. Maybe he slapped me, maybe he used something, I don't know. I lost consciousness and they took me to hospital. This is my life story! I haven't been hit by him for fifteen years. Before that I was very oppressed. If I tell you that I often slept with my feet sore, believe me! He's a tyrant. Did you ever hear of a tyrant? I will never forgive him, not in this world, and not in the next. Inshallah he will suffer in the other world just as much as he made me suffer in this world. He will suffer in Hell's fire, inshallah. He doesn't give me money, even if I pluck my eye out. During the day time you will find him hanging around his wife. For me that's the best, if he stays with her I'll live like a queen. I live for my children. And I live from the sweat of my hands, may God maintain your health. For example a woman comes and asks me for a cure, if God grants her a son she'll bring me a hilwan [gift] of $50 or $100. Some of them give me L 500,000. Some of them promise me LL200,000. It depends on their vow (nidr). People come to me because of my reputation. A lot of people know about my way, what I do, what I use. I touch the vein of a human being, I feel the pulse, I rub it. Then from the pulse I feel if there's a result or no result. If someone has problems with their thyroid, I also give them medicines. I prescribe a certain herb along with a kilo of lemons. They must keep the peel and throw away the pips. They mix the herb with the lemons and directly the patient should drink. The first day, the second day, whenever he drinks he throws up. He will throw up mucus or saliva. The thyroid will rest. The patient will come and tell me that his thyroid problem is gone, he will give me a gift. He may give money.

Two of my sons follow the same way. But they don't treat thyroid, they undo curses. They write a paper, they put it into a bottle without you knowing, they dissolve it inside the bottle, and they pour it for you and say "with blessings." "Did you drink it?" You say, "I did." If you have a husband who argues with you, if your fiance argues with you, they might make such a paper.

Michelle: Did they ever write something against your husband?
Umm Hadeer: Yes, they did. My husband, may God keep your health, someone wrote for him against me. And my children undid it. They made a hijab (magico-religious spell)for me. I had an old one, they removed it and made a new one. I was fine for fifteen years. But now recently, you never know what has been written in the past two weeks after the beating he gave me. I didn't speak to him after that, because I know that the curse has been renewed. Now the boy [son] is preparing something new to undo the curse.

Michelle: Did they give you medicine in the hospital?
Umm Hadeer: Yes, I drank a medicine and they gave me eight stitches in my head. I don't know what he beat me with. But he hit me in front of the house. He pushed me to the wall. He hit me with his hand, with his ring, I don't know what he had in his hand, I just found myself unconscious. They took me to the

hospital and gave me serum. I'd say I lost three kilos of blood. And for the past week I have been feeling so dizzy I can hardly lift a cup in my hand.

Michelle: Did you ever go to school when you were young?
Umm Hadeer: No. But my work is like a profession. Just like my mother prepared medicines from herbs, my father wrote a book about them. When my mother died, may God have mercy on all the dead, he took back the book. You know how old people are. A lot of young and old people came to him, he gave someone the book, and now the book is gone. I tried very hard to keep it. I don't know who took it. My mother spent fifteen years of her life in America. She read the Quran and Quranic verses. The Americans study it. You know that foreigners teach people and educate them. When my mother was in America, she gave birth to my other sisters who died, and my brother. She was married when she went to America and my father was with her. My father traveled to Turkey, Libya, Kuwait, Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan. He went to all countries under the sun, though if you met him you'd think he hadn't been anywhere [ie. he was modest]. He left no area without visiting it and, in the end, he came back and died in Ba'albek. He was visiting, he had his car and he died in it. They told me, "Your father is coming to visit you." I said, "Is it possible? My father is in Jordan." They said, "He is coming and he has prepared a big pick-up with all his things in it." He had meat, chickens, vegetable, he didn't leave anything. He was passing by the hospital because he had heart problems. It was Friday night, he was in Ba'albek, and the car was with him. He got in the car, he was about to start driving. Later they came and found the car. They brought him immediately. He died suddenly. I didn't see him before he died. He was in Jordan, he used to work and send money to my mother. When my mother died he was very sad. My mother also was coming over for a visit. She had the same story, she also died on a Friday evening. When she died, she had with her LS40,000. She came from Jordan to Syria, and from Syria to here. She brought LS40,000 and also some Lebanese [money] because she had carried so many things. She was going to stay for a week. On Friday night she died. Half an hour before she died she had taken a shower, and there was absolutely nothing wrong. Our house - we were renting a house lower down - because the new houses weren't finished, we had bought the land but the houses weren't yet built. My mother has been dead for three years, and the houses still aren't ready. Every time we make a couple of pounds we build.

Michelle: How do you find Lebanon as a place for women to live in?
Umm Hadeer: Well, I have lived in this Lebanon, and terrible things are happening. We Turkman people, we prefer to spend the night under our bed covers, in our long dresses. Excuse me, but you see these young girls, their clothes are shocking. Such shocking clothes make trouble. Life in Lebanon is full of fear. If I don't recognize who is in a car, I'll never ride in it. People can never know what is going to happen. Tell me, where do you come from?
Michelle: I'm originally from Beit Shabab.
Umm Hadeer: I visited Beit Shabab a week before the 'events' [civil war], right before the battle between the Phalangists and the Palestinians. Abu Hassan [husband] was working for people there as a wood cutter. The 'events' started, and we escaped from the shelling. We worked on the lands there, with olives, vegetables, and fruit. We also worked in Wadi Shahrour. This was our work. Now I go every Saturday and Sunday to Al-Assi [river] to tell fortunes and see people's futures. But I don't allow them, my daughters, to leave the house. One of my daughters has two sons and two daughters. I don't allow them to go out. The future, the protection (sutra) of the girl is her house. Four of my sons and three of my daughters are still unmarried. One son and one daughter are married. My companion also has a son and daughter who are married. Our son Hussein works in sanitary equipment, in Hazmieh.

"We inherited this [knowledge] from our mothers and grandparents"

For twenty five years we lived in wooden houses in Kfarshima. We were children when we lived there. But life became difficult when the fighting started. And Beirut was very crowded, there were no longer opportunities for people. That's why I prefer the Beqa' valley. May God bless these parties that emerged! Hizbollah is strict with these Shi'ites but it is protecting them. They're all wearing veils. They have a new way of thinking. Some people wear clothes above the knee, but these people are different.

Michelle: Are you Shi'ites too?
Umm Hadeer: No, we are Sunnis. We are a people who find that Christians have more pride and religion than Muslims. Why? Because if a Christian swears on his children, you can believe him. If he swears on the cross, you can believe him. I have spent a lot of time with them. They used to come to my mother for cures. They say "Inshallah we will return and bring you something", and they come back. The Muslims say, "Inshallah we will come back" but they never do. The Christians come for a diagnosis and they say, "By the cross, or by God, if our wish is realized we'll give you one gift on top of the other." Once they swear you know you haven't lost your time. One has to be kind. Our neighbors come twice a day to our house. They tell me that my heart is kind.

Recorded and translated by Michelle Obeid

End Notes

1. 'Umm Hadeer' is a fictitious name.
2. Rababas are one-stringed instruments played mainly by beduin.
3. It was not clear why Umm Hadeer claimed both Turkmen and Kurdish origins.

Maha Yehia: Academic, Urbanist

(Born in 1968, in Beirut; at the time of the recording she was living in Beirut; recorded in her Beirut office at the American University. Language: English with some Arabic.)

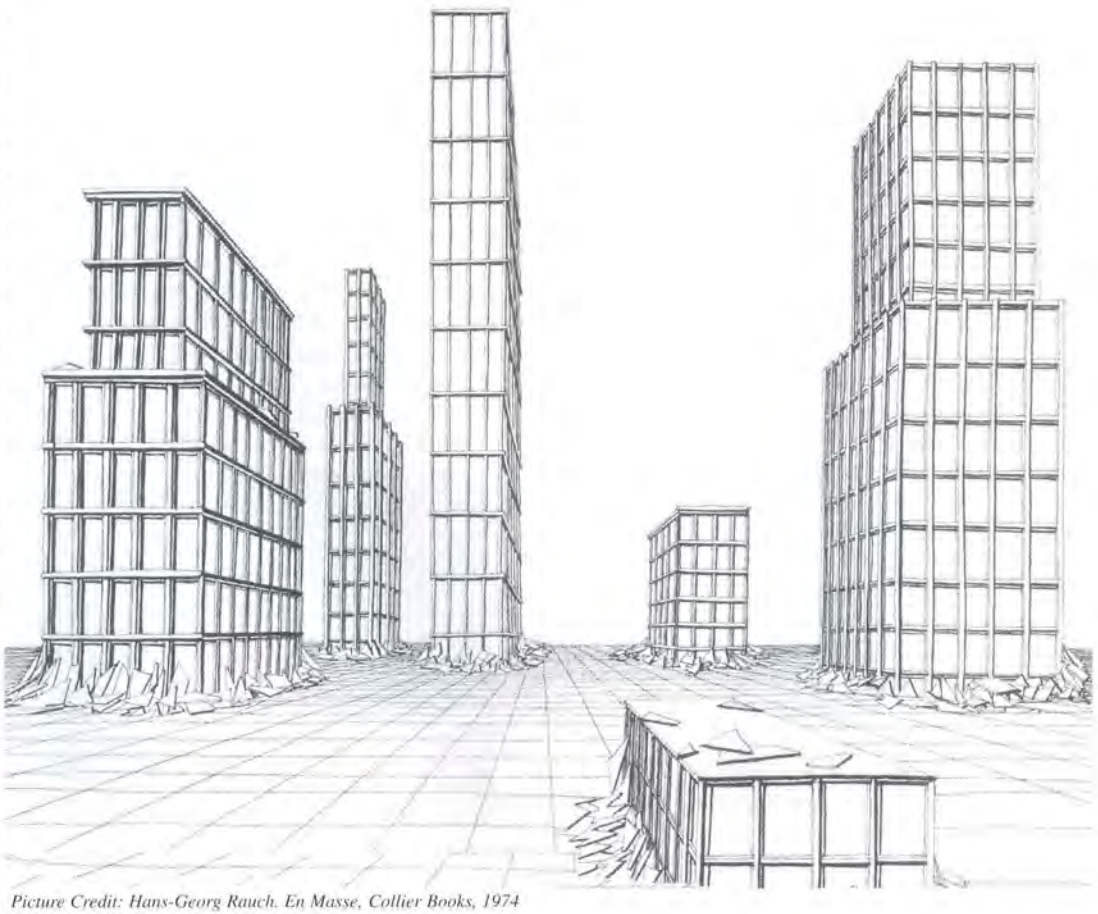
Maha: What do you want me to say? (Laughs) I'm not that good at talking about myself. I can tell you that I was born here, I lived part of my life between Lebanon and Africa. At six years old I was put in a boarding school. I studied at the Evangelical School in Saida. Then, we moved to England and then came back to Lebanon. When I graduated from school, I went first to Belgium then to France. I did my undergraduate degree in Parsons University where I majored in architecture, the mother school is actually in New York. Then I moved to Architectural Association in London, where I did my masters and PhD in housing and urban planning. When I graduated, I came back here and worked for seven months. I taught part-time at the American University of Beirut and worked with Ghassan Taher. We worked on the southern suburb project which is now known as Elissar. When I came here I was still working on my PhD. At the end of that period I went to the United States, to MIT, to do my second PhD there in the history, theory and criticism program in the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning. I stayed in Boston for five years. The first two years in the United States, I was working on the dissertation of London, so there was an overlap of two years. My first dissertation topic was housing problems and conflict of property rights in Lebanon, and changes in the architectural and urban environment during and after the war. As case studies I compared the Elissar and Solidère projects. It was kind of a critique of the policy of reconstruction in Lebanon. I started my field work in 1991. At MIT I focused more on the history of Beirut, I worked on the transition from the Ottoman period to the French Mandate. This period extends from 1889, when Beirut became the capital of a wilaya, until Independence in 1943. My idea is to study how this political transformation affected city life, especially that many historians believe that there was a kind of break between the Ottoman period and the French mandate. My idea is to prove that there was also a continuity in many things and that has lasted until today, for example in many laws, and that this continuity has been disregarded. (pause) What else do you want to know?

Dania: Tell me about things other than education, tell me more about your life.

Maha: (Laughs) Let me talk about education, it's better. To tell you about my life - education played a very important role in my life, partly because I'm still studying, partly because, due to education, I had to move to different places. This has its negative as well as positive aspects. Among its positive aspects is the fact that it opened my eyes to many things, many different people, I moved and lived in many countries. Only for my university education, I moved between France, England and the United States. At the same time, my parents lived, and still live in, Belgium and some of my relatives live here. This moving from one place to another opened my eyes, early in my life, to different people and different modes of thinking. This was the major thing that affected me and made me who I am today. Among its negative aspects, moving from one place to another makes your relations with people more difficult, you have to make a double effort to maintain your friendships and other relationships. It is easy to lose your friends because you don't see them as much as before. Because I used to come back to Lebanon once a year, it was easier for me keep up with my Lebanese and Arab friends than with others I met during my undergraduate years. This was the major disadvantage. That's everything I can tell you about my life.

I love my grandmother a lot, I lived with her for a certain period of time, she is very important to me. My relationship with my parents is very strong. They encourage me a lot, without their encouragement I wouldn't have done what I did, they gave me the freedom to do whatever I wanted, as well as the confidence in myself to continue whatever I started doing. My father raised us to believe that education is the most important thing in life. My mother taught us that nothing is impossible. Now I'm becoming very romantic and idealistic, Dania, I don't know how to talk about myself!

Dania: Tell me about the important episodes in your life.
Maha: If I were to think back about the major episodes in my life moving from one country to another affected me a lot. Now I'm more aware of its consequences than before, especially that now I'm going back to New York for eight months. I thought a lot before taking this step, although the offer is good one and



Picture Credit: Hans-Georg Rauch. En Masse, Collier Books, 1974

I'm very excited about living in New York, I've never lived there. The job offer is a good one, I wanted it badly, it will allow me to finish my dissertation. I hesitated a lot because I want to settle down here now that the situation is calm and one can do a lot. In work, for example one can do a lot here. I think Lebanon is a bit more difficult than other countries because you have to create your own work opportunities. There are no facilities as in other countries. But there are a lot of cultural activities, this is very important for me. There are a lot of activities, there is more life than when I came back here in 1991. In 1991 I wasn't happy at all. I remember people were rioting for bread. When I came back I didn't know anybody, everyone I knew was still abroad and I couldn't find my school friends. I wasn't happy at all, I found the move back here very hard. I immersed myself in my work and did nothing else. This year was different, I found that there is a lot one can do here in things that are important. For example, I can see myself getting involved in the children's rights movement. This is very interesting and important to me. This year I didn't get involved in such activities, but when I was in the United States and France I was very involved in all kinds of activities. In France, for two years, I used to publish a poetry magazine; I and a friend of mine used to organize poetry readings, and we started an international fair at the university. We used to do a lot of things, at least on the cultural level. In London, for some reason, I was not as active. In the United States, I became active with the Arab students at MIT, mainly in my last two years there. I was also part of a larger group of people involved in cultural activities, so I became much more involved at the political level. We tried to do different things in terms of representing or questioning Arab identity and Arab politics within a society which usually rejects these things. But that was as part of a larger group of people; there's a very active Arab community in Boston. (pause) I started to be interested in politics, some poetry readings used to be organized around politics and what was going on here, whether the civil war - and I insist it was a civil war - even though there were many uncivil elements in it - in addition to other wars, whether Israeli aggression, Israeli invasion, and Israeli occupation of parts of Lebanon, not to mention Palestine. In the United States, I think the environment allowed me, or helped me, articulate the war differently with a community of people. Do you want more details about the activities we used to organize?

Dania: Yes, why not?
Maha: I don't think anybody will be interested to read this. (laughs) Do you have anything in particular you want me to talk about?

Dania: Whatever you find worth mentioning regarding your life history, about your experience here in Lebanon.
Maha: When I said there is a lot one can do here, I mean both at the professional as well as the personal level. Like other places, living in Lebanon has its pros and cons. The cons I don't need to go into. At the professional level, when I came back in 1991, it was very hard to deal with the environment, and the fact that I'm a woman, my colleagues weren't very happy that I was a woman working with them. Now this has changed. Then again the work environment has also changed. I am working on my own rather than as part of a larger group now, I'm not working in a company, where I think the politics are different. There, being a woman would definitely be more of a

problem in different ways. Here I'm involved in an academic environment which has been quite a cocoon for me in many ways. Being at the Center for Behavioral Research has helped a lot, and made the transition to Lebanon easier. Being at the American University of Beirut made my life here much richer, I was part of a much larger academic intellectual environment, I didn't feel so alienated. And most of the people I've been working with are expatriates like myself, or professors and academics and students. That helped a lot. It's a much richer environment as far as I am concerned. I think that professional women still have problems here. For example, if I were to become active as a woman architect, there are certain problems that I would face. There are laws in the syndicate that stipulate that neither women nor men are allowed to work from their homes, they have to have an office. It makes sense because there are a lot of people who are graduating from lower level universities, they come here and begin to practise without having an office. As long as there is no exam that guarantees a certain level of competence among architects and engineers, we will always face problems in terms of architecture. They imposed that law in order to hold the office of any engineer or architect responsible for any wrongdoing. But it makes it much more difficult for the woman architect who has children, but who would like to practise her profession. She either has to have a registered office or be affiliated with a company - if not, she can't work. This practise counters what happens abroad. Abroad many people work from home, and this helps things for women especially. It helps women who take care of children or elderly people at home. Whether man or woman, it becomes easier for them to work at home. I know many women who were doing very well in their jobs, but were obliged to quit because they couldn't manage, both job and family responsibilities. Maybe they have children and don't want to leave them to a nurse. These are some of the laws that make it hard for women to work . At the same time, the Syndicate isn't seeing the changes that are taking place in family structure. There have been a lot of changes during and after the war. We hear a lot about family disorganization, divorce and so on. Regulations should take these changes into account according to the environment we live in, and this isn't happening here at all. I am talking about other people's experience. I haven't experienced this, but I've seen it happening.

I can imagine myself living back here. As I said earlier, every place has advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages here, we have the family, there are friends, there is a society which we are part of, the situation here is good. It is time for us to give now, maybe there are certain things which we don't take notice of, talking to other people makes us aware of them. There are a lot of things that need change, especially after seventeen years of war. I lived part of the war here like other people, and it's not because I traveled a lot that I'm noticing these things. I think we have lost a bit of our humanity. You hear many stories - for example someone wasn't able to enter Emergency because he couldn't pay the deposit. We are in a frightening economic situation, people are suffering a lot, but if one has the will, one can get involved in small associations and help people. For example, we don't have a side walk, there is no country where they don't have a sidewalk. There is no life on our streets, we only have Hamra street where one can walk, or the Corniche. In Damascus or Turkey there are crowded streets, full of life; here after seven o'clock all the streets are empty. We can make awareness campaigns, hold discussion groups on certain debatable issues. I think it is very important to have relations even among different associations. Syndicates can play a very important role. I was really shocked here with the elections of the engineers' syndicate, to what extent war politics played a role. The 'war logic' has affected the younger generation, they elected people not on the basis of their personal qualifications, but rather on their sectarian identities. After several years of reconstruction - and I say 'reconstruction' in inverted commas - I think that sectarianism has become much more intense than before. There should be reconstruction of a whole country, not just of sectors. Even in Beirut, each sector has its own plan of reconstruction, without taking into consideration the whole city or country. What else do you want to know about me?

Dania: Let us return to our first topic, your recollections of your past. Do you think your life would have been different had you lived in a different place?
Maha: Yes, I think that in a very paradoxical and perverse manner the war contributed a lot to who I am today. If it were not for the war I would never have left, my parents would never have thought of sending me to Paris, London or the United States - certainly not at the undergraduate level - and then they sent me back here because I was forgetting my Arabic. My parents played an important role in making us, me and my sisters, not forget Arabic. Had I stayed here I'm sure I would have gone to AUB and my experience in life would have been different. What the environment expects from women here is completely different from abroad. Here we are raised to believe that we should study, get married, have children - this is our life. If the woman works it is good, some approve of women's work, others don't, each according to his own beliefs. These expectations are very low and that doesn't encourage women. I think women need to expect much more of themselves, much more than society expects of them. Living abroad partly taught me that, partly again my parents. Since we were young, my mother used to tell us that nothing is impossible, when you set your mind on something you can do it. Neither she nor my father ever stopped us doing anything - "If you try you may succeed or fail; if you fail the first time, you should try again until you reach your goal." At home, I never felt that I'm a woman and what is expected of me is only to procreate. When you go to college - also college is very crucial at the undergraduate level - there you experience a lot of new things, new people, and a new environment. You learn how other students live their lives and you learn to appreciate yours. I am trying to think of episodes in my life that might be interesting to you.

Dania: To you, not to me.
Maha: A turning point in my life? One episode that was a

crucial turning point - not really a turning point but I still remember it - is from the time of the poetry reading sessions. A friend stood up and read a poem, and halfway through the poem we realized that she was telling us how she was abused by her father. I will never forget, I don't think any of us who were there will ever forget. For me it was the first time I was exposed to something like that, it made me realize that we take a lot of things for granted. I grew up in an environment where my parents are what we call here a 'normal family', what is normally expected of a family, a father, a mother, children. I've never heard of, nor can I understand, how a father could attack his child, it's something beyond my imagination. I do not think anyone who was there would ever forget. First, because she chose to come out and talk about it publicly, after never having talked about it before, not even to her friends. Second, the courage it needed to stand and talk. Probably she needed to talk about it, to say that this has happened to me. It was one of my first wake-up calls. There are a lot of things that we take for granted.

Another episode was less than a wake-up call, but it made me believe that one can certainly do something at the personal level. After the Israeli invasion, when the situation in Lebanon was very bad, we all went through many frustrations, those of us who lived abroad endured the same frustrations as those who stayed, though in different ways - for example, not being able to get messages across. Your parents, your family and friends are being bombed left, right and center, and you are in a place where, first of all, the news about Lebanon is presented differently, and, two, people don't understand or read the news. The injustice of it is really horrendous, I don't think I'll ever be this angry again. Again three years ago, when the South was being heavily bombarded, I became very upset. You know what is going on, but outside things were presented differently, as if we were the ones who were doing this - this was the European and American media presentation of the situation. And then in the middle of all this frustration, you realize that at the individual level, a little poem may make people start thinking, they may not believe what you are saying, they may not accept it, but at least they start questioning what they believe and thinking that maybe what they aren't getting it right. These little episodes are very important for me because they really give me a certain strength, I feel that I can do something. Even if I can get one person to question what they believe about events in Lebanon, then I think that is already an achievement. To achieve something I really believe we can begin with one person. It takes time but we may end by reaching somewhere.

> "At home I never felt that I'm a woman and what is expected of me is only to procreate"

Poetry has always played an important part in my life. Right now I've stopped writing, it's temporary, I always write and stop for no particular reason. I started writing at the age of ten or eleven, I write all sort of things, writing has always been crucial to me. If I couldn't write I don't know what I would do. No matter what kind of writing I'm doing, it has always been important to me, as a way to express myself but also as a way to think. I think a lot through my writing, I pick up my pen and don't know what I'm going to write until I start writing.

There something stuck in my memory which I don't think will ever go away, it was when one of my best friends died in a car accident. It was a tragedy, she was very young. I think this is an experience everybody has gone through, everyone has lost a person they care about, may be more so in Lebanon than in other countries. It teaches you the value of life, how short life is, and how it shouldn't be wasted on trivialities.

My niece and nephew are the love of my life, this is something more cheerful than the things I mentioned earlier. I have a niece and a nephew, I love them a lot. What do you want me to tell you? Let me tell you about a happy incident, when someone asked me to sign one of my poems for him. Of course I was surprised, and I remember I wrote him something very stupid. I was embarrassed. (laughs) Tell me when we can stop.

Dania: Whenever you want.
Maha: One more thing along the same line, our taking a lot for granted about the family, and the family environment. Back in 1991 I did a lot of interviews with people living in the Ouzai area. The things I saw were unbelievable, sometimes I used to go back home and cry. You see the real price of the war. There was a mother living in a small room full of rats, she had a handicapped child and her husband was dead. You are placed face-to-face with the horrors of the war. Sometimes I think we didn't learn anything from the war. This frightens me a lot, especially when I think of what we're leaving for our children.

Now I'm thinking, back when I was talking about the issue of being a woman and working, one of the differences between here and abroad is that even though I respect women's choice to work or not to work, to have children or not, I respect the choice other people make, it's their life. But sometimes people do not respect my choice, the amount of time I have devoted to my work and my professional life. Somehow the expectations here from a woman are that work is only a transitional period until I find a husband. For me, it is not a transitional period, work is part of me. Just as I have two legs and two arms, so I work, and the work I'm doing is part of me, part of how I express myself, how I think and live my life. Even when I get married that's not going to change. Of course my priorities will change, I will rearrange my priorities, one has to be flexible. But work is part of me, I love it.

Recorded and transcribed by Dania Sinno

Nasima Yusif: Mukhtara[1]

(Born in 1947, in Bishmizzine; currently living in Bishmizzine; recorded at home. Language: colloquial Arabic with a slight northern accent.)

I am Nasima Yusif, I was born in 1947 in Bishmizzine. Both my parents came from the same village. Our socio-economic status was middle. My father used to work on the land, in agriculture. My mother used to work at home. During my mother's time women did not have any time to rest. She used to prepare the dough, and take it to the wood-fired bakery in the village to bake the bread. She used to wash the clothes by hand, walking long distances to fetch water - unlike today water wasn't available everywhere. We were a big family - six girls and two boys - so because we were so many we enrolled in several different schools. There were both private and public schools in our village, and I was one who attended a public school. My elder brother and sister both attended a Bishmizzine private school. My other sister and I had to attend a public school in order for our parents to be able to afford our education. My father used to earn practically nothing. When the Lebanese pound had value he used to earn five pounds a day. I studied as far as the Brevet, and things were going well - I didn't miss any years of school, and finished all my classes. Each year I passed the final exam and moved on until the Brevet. I was planning to study at Dar al-Mu'alimeen in order to qualify as a teacher. This was my ambition and I wanted to continue my education. Then the son of the mukhtar of the village came and asked for my hand in marriage. At that time I was eighteen or nineteen years old.

We got married, I stayed at home and gave birth to three children, one girl and two boys. I took care of them and brought them up. Yet I often wondered if this was going to be all my life. Impossible! I was still young and energetic. My husband is twenty years older than me. Things were alright, and we went on like this until the children grew up. There was a company in the village, and I started asking if they needed a secretary. I wanted to get out of the house and work, for my children didn't need me anymore. All I could do for my children was help them in the evening with their homework. I knew that I could easily manage the housework. I got a job in the company - I was lucky - and worked there for twelve years. I enjoyed it a lot and never felt tired. I used to work from seven till three o'clock with a one hour lunch break. Then I'd come back home and finish my housework. And so I worked for twelve years. Then, during the war period, the salaries started shrinking and we often received our pay checks late. So I thought, what's the point in working when I'm hardly earning anything? Should I go on just to be able to tell people that I'm working? So I left the company which was now in bad shape.

By that time my children had grown up - my daughter traveled to Canada and got married over there, my eldest son graduated and enrolled in the General Security Forces. My younger son first worked in agriculture. Now he's in the United States, it's God's will. My eldest son is married. It happened that the municipal elections were coming. My husband's father had been mukhtar for the past forty years, and when he died at the age of 102, my husband was appointed mukhtar for around four years. I used often to help out by preparing all the documents and drafting out the papers. When the elections were first announced I thought I shouldn't participate. Then several women from the village who appreciate and like me encouraged me to run, seeing that I used to prepare all the documents. People began to criticize me, they started complaining that there are many men fit to be mukhtar, why should a woman run? I was so provoked that I decided to run for mukhtara to spite them. I wanted to show them what a woman is and what she can do! I wanted to prove to them that women are entitled to run for such a position. I had confidence in myself and in my ability to take on such a job, a job people suppose only men can do. Before when I prepared all the documents for my father-in-law and husband, no one complained. Yet now that I would have to sign my name on official documents some people objected. The elections took place, they were correct and fair, and I received 75% of the votes while my male competitor took less than 25%.

Now I'm working as mukhtara and I feel that I'm being useful. It's true that it's nothing very important but I feel that I am giving. Women are capable of doing anything, so why should they sit in the corner once they are forty? I'm fifty one years old, and I don't feel my age because I'm working. I'm happy because I'm helping people out. People from the North who live in Beirut need help to finish their papers, I help send the papers to the proper departments. Sometimes I charge them, sometimes I don't. (pause)

Our life then was very different from the easy way most people live today, we were raised differently. Most people didn't have cars. I remember that when I had my own house I used to walk to the town and buy groceries. If I happened to meet someone I knew, they would help me carry my stuff, but if not I would have to do it myself. I had young children then. I remember I used to arrive home exhausted, unlike today when anyone who wants to buy a packet of matches goes by car. Life now is much easier. Rain or shine, we used to walk to school, there wasn't a bus to take us. Our parents used to make us plastic coveralls to protect us from the rain. (pause) In April, when we were young, we used to pick over the wheat and put it on the roof to dry. Then we picked it over again, and our parents would take it to the mill and prepare their mouni (food stores) for winter. The same for grapes - we used to go to the fields and pick the grapes, then we'd pick them over and leave them on the roof to dry. Part was used to make wine, and the rest was kept as raisins. We also used to pick almonds and walnuts. Everyone in the village who had a tree near his house did the same. We all pitched in, boys and girls, there was

no difference between us, because our parents couldn't cope on their own. Anyway there was nothing better to do to pass the time, there were no beaches or means of entertainment - it was a village, so we killed time working. In the winter, when neighbors visited each other, they were offered fig jam, raisins, wine - all prepared at home. That is how they lived. (pause)

The games we played when we were young were mostly boys' games - we used to play marbles, hopscotch, climbing trees, jumping rope, hide-and-seek. We used to pick olives - my parents never hired people to do this work as people do today. The schools used to give us a break, it was called the 'olive break' and lasted for around two weeks, so we could help our parents. When it rained in autumn, there used to be snails scattered in the fields, and I remember we used to wake up early and walk through the muddy fields collecting snails. We never ate them at home, but we enjoyed picking them. My parents used to heat water to boil wheat on a wood stove. That was the month when the pine needles fall, so we used to go early in the morning to collect them, pack them in bags and bring them home to burn in the stove.

I remember once my sister and I were going to pick grapes. We were on our way back after filling a big basket. One of the boys we used to play with had told us that if we ever saw a wasp heading towards us, not to run, because then it would follow us. He said to stand still, it will think you are a tree and won't come after you. My sister and I, on the way back from our grape-picking mission, saw a wasp going into hole in the ground. I picked up a stick and started sticking it in the hole, and all of a sudden the wasps were swarming out of their home. My sister grabbed the grapes and ran, but I stayed there standing. I wanted to see whether our neighbors' theory was true or not. The wasps stung me all over my face. Had this happened today I'm sure they would have taken me to hospital as a poisoning case, but back then nothing happened and I felt fine. All they did was put ice on the stings and my eyes got swollen, but I was fine in a couple of days. These same neighbor boys taught us how to catch scorpions with a string and a piece of candle. We played a lot of boys' games. We rarely went out of the house at night. Every evening the whole family would gather and we spent the time together. (pause)

Before school started we used to get our books ready. We used to take our older brother and sister's books, and any book they didn't have we bought. We used to repair the old books with gum that we made from the resin of almond trees. Our parents used to collect it and put it in a container, and we added water to it and left it in the sun to melt. The product was very similar to glue. In our days we had to wear a school uniform - nowadays it is rare to see children wearing a uniform. We were punished if we didn't wear them. (pause)

I could manage a job and housework once my children were in school. I'd come back from work, and cook. I used to clean the house during the weekend. (pause)

Myriam: How has living in Lebanon been?
Nasima: Concerning our life, there's a difference between living

Picture Credit: Fulvio Roiter. Lebanon, National Council of Tourism in Lebanon, 1980

in the city and living in the village. We're content here because we were raised in the village - we didn't go to study at universities outside. Two years ago I traveled to Canada to visit my daughter and I was really very anxious to get back. Life abroad is good for those who live there, but while I was there I missed my village, my home and my country. The weather over there is really cold, so once my daughter had delivered, and I'd helped her out, I came back. The only reason I travel is to see my loved ones, not to see the country. In spite of all the wars that took place, and the agony we went through, I believe that our country is the best. I have a son in the United States, he's been there several years and he wants to come back. My daughter would like to come back too but the economic situation isn't encouraging. That's why they're abroad. My eldest son, the one who lives here and works with the department of General Security, has provided us, his father and I, with medical insurance. If he hadn't had a health insurance policy for his wife he wouldn't have been able to have children - his wife is pregnant. His salary isn't enough, he can't afford to build his own house, that's why he's living with us. Nowadays people have a lot of needs, there's a minimum income and everyone wants to live comfortably. In the old days not everyone had a car, a television, or a video.

Myriam: What do you do as mukhtara?
Nasima: I help people fill out official papers such as driving licenses, identity cards, marriage registrations and certificates - birth certificates, death certificates, and so on. All these papers have to be approved by the mukhtar or else it won't be officially registered with the government. Passport applications are also prepared by the mukhtar. It's a pleasant job and it is without a salary. People really appreciate the mukhtar because he or she has no office hours, people visit the mukhtar at any time to get their papers processed. Few people can manage to do their papers on their own.

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir

End Notes

1Mukhtara, the feminine form of mukhtar, an elected local official, unsalaried, who processes official papers that people need.