

You Are Still with Us Mai

Nazik Saba Yared

When I saw and spoke to her at the opening of Alan Gignoux's photo exhibit of Palestinians in the Diaspora on the 31st of January, little did I imagine this would be the last time I would see Mai Ghoussoub. When I asked her how long she would be staying in Beirut, hoping to meet with her and enjoy the conversations we always had when she passed through, she answered: "I arrived yesterday and am leaving in two days, I only passed by to see my parents." Typical Mai: always on the move. How does she manage? I wondered.

I cannot recall when, where, and how I first met her. I had heard about her, known she was co-partner of the famous London based publishing house Al-Saqi Books, which had published one of my books *Kul ma Qalahu Ibn ur-Rumi fil Hiha'* in 1988. I had come across and read some of her books, met her at various book fairs, but had never really known her. Until ...

I was sitting one day in the Al-Saqi office in Beirut when she approached me and asked if I had heard of the Prince Claus Award. I had not. She explained what it was and asked me to apply, volunteering to take my application and all my books and mail them to Amsterdam from London. This was Mai: always encouraging people, always ready to help in any way she can, always ready to sacrifice her time for others. That was the beginning of a very dear friendship, which her untimely death cut short on

the 17th of February this year.

Mai was born in Beirut in 1952, attended the secular French Lycée in Beirut, then took a degree in French literature from the Lebanese University, while at the same time studying mathematics at the American University of Beirut.

Like many young idealists of her generation, she adopted Marxist and Trotskyist ideas (later giving them up for a wider humanism), and actively supported the Palestinians in the early 1970s. In spite of this, she and a group of her friends were kidnapped for distributing a publication critical of PLO leader Yasser Arafat's corruption. They were brought before him and were only released because one of them had a well-connected father.

During the 1975 Lebanese civil war, she and André Gaspard, who later founded Al-Saqi Books with her, helped establish medical dispensaries in quarters of Beirut from where the doctors had fled and where there were no pharmacies. They lived in a poor Muslim area and often negotiated the release of Christian hostages, not always with success. When they once demanded that George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hand over a kidnapped Phalange Christian militiaman, his body was dumped at the door of their dispensary. In 1977, Mai was driving a wounded Palestinian

to hospital when she was shot. She lost an eye and went to the UK for further medical treatment. This was the turning point in her life.

She moved briefly to Paris and then returned to London where in 1979, with her lifelong friend Gaspard, she started the first Arabic bookshop in London, Al-Saqi Books. They had little money, and needed to buy books from Beirut, but the road to the airport in Beirut was closed. With undaunted courage they continued as best they could, stocked their store in Westbourne Grove, which later became the center for Middle Easterners in London and for UK universities. By 1983, they were publishing their first titles. But this was not enough for Mai, whose love was not restricted to books, but included music and art as well. So in the 1980s she studied sculpture at Morley College, London, and also at the Henry Moore studio.

In the beginning, Al-Saqi published books in English about the Arab World, and then added to its list of publications English novels, Arabic books, and translations – such as Ismail Kedaré's novels into English or G. Simmons' *Future Iraq* into Arabic. Mai and her partner were dynamic and courageous publishers, discovering and encouraging new talents, managing to make Al-Saqi one of the leading Arabic publishing houses before opening a branch in Beirut. In fact, she was proud that even English journals and magazines such as the *Independent* had written that Al-Saqi raised the standard of English literature and introduced the country to important works.

They turned out books on everything from literature and art, to sociology and politics, publishing Arabic and English books that few in the Arab world would dare to publish – such as *Unspeakable Love* by Brian Whitaker, about gay and lesbian life in the Middle East, or *Sexuality in the Arab World*, edited by Samir Khalaf and John Gagnon, or the novel *Menstruation* by Ammar Abdulhamid, about a fundamentalist who smelled women's periods, or the controversial works of Saudi novelist Turki al-Hamad.

Mai insisted that she and her partner never

interfered with an author's point of view or freedom of expression, respecting their readers' free choice to read whatever he/she deemed of interest. She was adamant about refusing any kind of censorship, for all that they cared about was the intellectual value of what they published, and very often published books of value which they knew would not be a commercial success – such as the *Bibliography of Lebanese Women Writers* (from the mid-nineties to the mid twenties), which Nuha Bayyouni and I put together, or important works by the poet Adonis. They also introduced Lebanese artists to a foreign public when they published the beautifully illustrated books about Husein Madi's and Muhammad Rawas' paintings.

In fact, since Mai herself is an artist, a book to her was also a piece of art, above and beyond its content. So they published many books with rich, beautiful reproductions of paintings and photographs, and this is why they very carefully chose their book covers as well.

But publishing did not stop Mai's creative work. She wrote a number of books, both in English and Arabic: *Al-Mar'a al-Arabiya wa Dhukurat ul-Asala* (1991); *Al-Arab ma Ba'ada al-Hadatha* (1992); *Leaving Beirut: Women and the Wars Within* (1997), which is a kind of memoir; *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identities and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (2000), which she co-edited with Emma Sinclair-Webb, and which focuses on issues of masculinity that have been neglected by gender studies; and *Lebanon Lebanon* (2006), a collected work she published to raise money for those displaced by Israel's 2006 bombing against Lebanon. She also wrote numerous articles for Arabic and international journals, and wrote and directed a play, *Qatalat ul-Kitab*, (The Murderers of Books), produced in 2005 in Beirut. It involved an experimental mixture of languages, techniques, artistic and literary references that ended with that beautiful sentence: "Words don't kill l... it is people who do the killing."

Although Mai loved dance and music, especially the songs of Um Kulthum, her favorite artistic mode of expression was sculpture. She loved sculpture,

she used to say, because she loved working with her hands. She started by working with clay and gypsum, after which she wanted to work with something harder, and turned to iron and bronze in order to prove that even those hard materials could be turned and twisted and given feminine forms. Her sculptures were either raised from the ground or suspended from above. In 2001, she held in Beirut an exhibition entitled *Divas*, where she twisted iron to sculpt five great international singers: Josephine Baker, Billie Holiday, Janis Joplin, Um Kulthum, and Édith Piaf. What most attracted her to them was that they carried within themselves the entirety of women's suffering, and managed to rise above it with their talent. Her sculptures and installations were also exhibited internationally. In 2004, in a duo show with the Israeli artist Anna Sherbany, part of the London Biennale at the Shoreditch gallery, she became one of the first Arab women artists to explore the veil in a public space.

Although very patriotic, Mai was "at the same time a woman of the world," as the poet Abbas Beydoun put it. When Jo Glenville was asked by Al-Saqi Books to edit an anthology of Palestinian women's short stories, she told them that as a Jew she might not be the best choice to edit a Palestinian collection. But Mai disagreed – a rare attitude in today's Arab world, for Mai was one of the few unbiased, open-minded people in this world. She was an elegant, very intelligent, humanist person who believed in variety and diversity above everything else. She supported artists, filmmakers, musicians, young designers, and writers, encouraged all, and gave each a chance. Yet, with all she had to do, Mai always made time for every single person she met, never hesitated to sit with one of us over a cup of coffee; she loved her friends and family with complete devotion.

Remembering her, the Arab literary critic Khalida Sa'id says that Mai was like a mother to all because of her vast love for every one around her, her generosity, sincerity, strong sense of friendship, patriotism, and devotion to public service. Besides her love for people, she loved art and books, film and performance, and culture in all its forms. I never understood how she managed not to miss

a single play, concert, or exhibition when she passed through Beirut even for a couple of days. Asked how she first managed to cope with being an émigré, she answered that it was thanks to her parents who had given her so much love and strength, together with freedom and a feeling of responsibility. Had her parents restrained her as a child, she said, she would never have been able to do what she did.

It is now of her parents, sister Huda, and her husband Hazem, that I think with great pain as I write this profile of a rare person in our world of sorrow and conflict.

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