

A Tribute to the First Women's Journal Published in Lebanon

By Azadouhi Simonian Kalaidjian
Department of English
Lebanese American University



The editor of *The Young Armenian Woman*, Siran Seza, on the occasion of her 40th anniversary as an editor and writer. Beside her is Azadouhi Simonian (Kalaidjian), the main speaker on that occasion in December 1967.

"The Young Armenian Woman" (*Yeridassart Hayouhi*), the first women's journal ever published in Lebanon, was founded in Beirut in October 1932 by a woman writer and journalist, Siran Seza (Zarifian). In her first editorial, Seza wrote "The publication of this journal arises not from a whim, but from a necessity. Psychologically, any desire that is suppressed will eventually seek expression through different channels, overcoming all kinds of hurdles along its way....*Yeridassart Hayouhi* aims to bring together all the Armenian women, regardless of differences of age, education and social background, to participate in efforts to ennoble the souls and to educate the minds of the members of the Armenian community." The journal, which was usually 32 pages in length, was published regularly each month for two years until 1934. After a lapse, it continued from 1947 until 1968, when it ceased to be published.

A talented editor as well as a writer, Siran Seza was born in 1902 in Constantinople, Turkey, and died in Beirut in 1973. She received her secondary education in the American College and graduated in 1919. Before arriving in Beirut in 1922, she

worked as a volunteer for the Near East Relief organization following World War I. Later she pursued higher studies at Columbia University in New York City for three years, specializing in literature and journalism, during which time she received her Masters Degree and became a Ph.D. Candidate. She returned to Beirut in 1932, whereupon she established her journal.

At the age of 15, Seza had already translated into Armenian Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Renowned Armenian poets such as Vahan Tekeyan recognized Seza's literary talent and published her writings in the leading journals of the period. Her style and language were considered to be rich and mature at an early age. Her two published novels were *The Rampart* and *The Sinner*.

Siran Seza's literary and journalistic talents, coupled with her educational background, set high literary and intellectual standards for her journal. It was not just another women's magazine concerned with fashion, culinary arts and romance. Among her contributors were male and female writers, educators, essayists and social theorists.

Through her editorials, Seza urged the Armenian woman to rise from her humdrum existence and address concerns which would bring about radical changes in the community's social, cultural and educational structure. She invited women to assume responsibilities along these lines. Seza's constant criticisms of women's absence from decision-making positions, such as boards of education and other committees, brought about needed changes by convincing the leadership of the day to let women participate in these decision-making bodies. Seza vociferously advocated the education of women, especially an education which prepared women for a career outside the home. She also stressed the need for continuing education programs for older women through her editorials and specially researched articles.

By reading the pages of *Yeridassart Hayouhi*, Armenian women were exposed to the views and attitudes of the international women's movement. March 8th, International Women's Day, generated many editorials. Seza heralded women's right to vote in the Lebanese parliamentary elections in the early 1950s. By inviting the Armenian woman to join hands with the Lebanese Arab woman in shouldering responsibilities for the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of all women in Lebanon, she created and strengthened women's awareness of their civic and legal rights.

Through her editorials, Siran Seza endeavored to bridge the gap between Armenian and Lebanese women, a gap which was

Atribute to the first Women's Journal published in Lebanon

created by the language barrier. She thus wrote of the necessity for Armenian women to learn Arabic and to participate fully in the Lebanese Arab women's movements. Arab women writers, such as Emily Nasrallah, Leyla Usayran, and Aida Idriss, as well as pioneering figures such as Laure Tabet, Alexandra Issa El-Khoury, Jamal Harfouche, Salwa Nassar, and Marie Sabri were featured in the pages of *Yeridassart Hayouhi* with admiration.

Women's movements in other Arab countries, such as Syria and Egypt, also received special coverage. One editorial in particular (February 1954) supported Egyptian Women's Association President Doria Chafic and her associates' hunger strike, undertaken to stress their desire that women occupy executive positions in the Egyptian Government and other national decision-making bodies.

A researched article was devoted to prominent American women who had struggled for civic rights of women in the United States, such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton, through whose tireless efforts the U.S. House of Representatives passed a law bestowing on women the right to vote. Other Western women were introduced to the Lebanese Armenian audience through the pages of the journal, such as Frances Perkins, Louisa M. Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Baker Eddy, Clara Barton, Jane Adams, Helen Keller, and others. Eleanor Roosevelt's message on the occasion of the International Declaration of Human Rights (1968), and its complete translation into Armenian, received extensive coverage.

Along with international and Arab women, Seza also wrote about the achievements of Armenian women in Armenia and in the Diaspora. Women writers such as Zabel Yassayan, Sibil, Hayganoush Mark, Silva Gaboudigian, Zabel Boyadjian, Zarouhi Kalemkarian, Marie Beylerian, Zarouhi Bahri and others were given due recognition. Armenian women artists were also presented through their art exhibitions along with women music educators, pianists and violinists.

Seza was especially supportive of young women columnists, essayists and writers. Through her encouragement, a group of university graduates made their mark on the journal as contributors during the publication's last five years. Such names as



A cover of the journal from the 1960s.

Janet Kassouni (Houri), Asdghig Kojaian, Cecile Keshishian, Mary Tarpinian, Arsine Tarian, Rita Balian, and Azadouhi Simonian (Kalaidjian) appeared frequently during those final years. This same group of women celebrated the 40th Anniversary of Seza's literary career and the 15th Anniversary of the publication of *Yeridassart Hayouhi* on 7 December 1967 in Beirut.

A year later, in December 1968, the last issue of the journal was published with an editorial entitled "Good-Bye" in which Seza lamented the fact that there was no successor to take the publication of this journal upon herself, nor was there an editorial board which could ensure its continuity. Certainly, the lack of funding for the publication was the most insurmountable problem.

Seza's husband, Dr. Nerses Kupelian, an essayist himself, had firmly believed in the role of *Yeridassart Hayouhi* and supported it financially throughout the years. With his death, it became difficult to continue publication. The journal was later taken over by a group of young men who called it *Yeridassart Hay*, meaning "The Young Armenian Man". This journal, however, had a short life. Currently, a group of young Armenian women from the United States and the Middle East are making efforts to organize a bilingual publication (Armenian and English). If this project succeeds, we will be happy to hail the reappearance of *Yeridassart Hayouhi* in the Middle East, North America and Europe.

The odyssey of *Yeridassart Hayouhi* is an amazing tale which can inspire us with the best traditions of the Armenian community in Lebanon. In addition to its contribution to the awakening of the Armenian woman and its questioning of the accepted social, educational and economic order, the journal also became the conscience of the community. For years, it alerted the Armenian leadership to the dangers and pitfalls lurking in the community's life and also served as a sounding board for new ideas and procedures to be tested.

Tribute is due to the pioneering achievements of *Yeridassart Hayouhi* during such times when women did not have much influence on the social, economic and political life of Lebanon. Since that time, much has been accomplished to ensure more extensive participation of women in decision-making processes. However, the unique role of *Yeridassart Hayouhi* is still worthy of the highest praise and tribute to Siran Seza's pioneering efforts in women's journalism.