

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



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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.

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

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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, it's 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 it's 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 Jaafariyah 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)

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).

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

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