

Bushra Haffar: State Employee, Ministry of Tourism

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



Picture Credit: Debby Saoud

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 *maîtrise* 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 twelfth 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

Bushra Haffar

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.

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



Picture Credit: Debby Saoud

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.

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

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

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 where 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