

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.

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*,

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?

Picture Credit: May Masri und Jean Chamonn



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 firepot 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. *Husseini* is a hall where Shi'ites hold their religious ceremonies.