

Jeanette Martinez, Employee in a Factory

(Born in 1940, in Ba'bda; currently living in Hadath; recorded outside the factory. Language: colloquial Arabic with touches of French.)

My name is Jeanette Martinez. I began working in the National Wool Factory. I started working to help my family. I passed my childhood here, in this job. We had a hard time. I suffered to raise brothers and sisters, to pay for their schools, and to fix the house. My mother didn't know how to work outside, then. We were fatherless. We went through difficult times, but God helped us. My brothers and sisters grew up and got married, they had children. I stayed at home and kept on working. There was one brother left. I had to work so that my brother could be properly educated, even though he's older than me. I was the one responsible for managing the household as if I was the oldest. I did well at work.

God helped me and I was blessed with a husband. He was very good (begins to cry). I had to fight with my relatives for his sake because they wanted to marry me to the brother of my sister's husband. They caused me a lot of trouble, so I had to elope. We got married. I left my job, and had two children, Nicole and Diego. For twenty-six years, believe me, he gave me a good life. He used to work with chimneys, he was a chimney builder. We managed and things went fine until he got ill, he had a very serious disease in the lungs. I had a very, very difficult time. Because he was a foreigner, I had to pay his insurance and social security. My boss, Mr Soli Khattar, helped me a lot, really they were more than a family to me, they helped

more than my family did. But it was no use, I ran here and there for more than a year, but to no avail. He died, and there was the war and everything.

So I returned to my job, I worked in order to raise my children. My son was in the Antonine Institute, the tuition fees are very high. My daughter was in her last year at the Soeurs des Franciscaines. You couldn't stop their education, no, you had to do the impossible for them to finish. I started working again, God helped me to work. Then my daughter got married and now she has two daughters. She teaches at La Sagesse and she is doing well. As for my son, during the war, because he is a foreigner and the only son, I had to send him away. He left for the United States (voice trembles). He's a very good boy, believe me, but I've lost him. He calls me at the end of every month but that's it, he's living abroad, you know how it is. He's a generous and sensitive person, but when you live for such a long time over there you can't ever live the same life here again. He got married and has two children. Now my daughter still is not established properly, and my son has a family, so I say that as long as my health allows me, with God's will, I'll keep on working and spare them having to spend money on me. I like my work, I like my employers, and they like me. I consider them as family. I am working so as not to be a burden on the children. It's difficult to ask your children for money. It's true my children are very generous, but still I find it difficult to ask them for money. Imagine the expenses of running a house, electricity, rent, telephone, everything! Now, I'm working and managing. As long as God gives me health, I'll keep on working. 'C'est tout'. This is my life. I don't know what to add.

Zeina: That's all?

Jeanette: Yes, that's my life from beginning to end.

Zeina: When you started working here how old were you?

Jeanette: I started working when I was fourteen, it was the time when I should have been enjoying my youth. I grew up here. The nuns used to tell my family, it's a shame, keep her in school, she's clever. But we couldn't, I had to work. You know, in the old days it wasn't like now. I'm talking to you about fifty years ago. My father died when I was three months old. I had to work to help my family. I used to worry if I missed one day's work, how would the money last until the end of the

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month? But like all children, I wished to go to school and learn. So after I started working - and my mother as well, God helped her to find a job - I went to night school in Furn al-Shebbak. They used to give night classes from six to seven at night. (pause)

Zeina: What do you remember from those days?

Jeannette: Oh, I remember a lot of things, bad things and good things. There is always a road which goes down after a road which goes up. Small things used to make me feel happy. For example on the feast of St Antoine, I used to be happy because it was my brother's birthday. Small things like that! If we sewed a dress, that was an event - "Today I'm going to have a new dress!" But I used to get upset because I couldn't be like the other girls. I never went on outings like them. My family refused to let me go. I had to stay at home. That is why I was so happy during my married life, I went whenever I wanted, I even went to the Casino three times. No one did that in those days. When I was a girl, I was always in fear, it was always no. My mother used to tell me that we had to be careful now, after we moved from Baabda to Hazmieh, we had to be careful about what people say. "For God's sake be careful!" It was always like that, fear and terror. When I got married and I had children, I used to think that though my mother, God rest her soul, was strict with us, yet she was right. You don't realize until later. You have to behave in a way that doesn't annoy people. One has to weigh the pros and cons of every thing one does.

Especially after my husband died - it was sixteen years ago, he was forty four - I went through a very difficult period. In everything I do, I always make the sign of the cross and pray to the Lord to keep my honor safe. No matter where you go you have to be careful about people, you have to be aware of everything. I endured a lot especially during the war when my husband got sick. I found myself on my own. I was in a difficult situation, money was tight.

Zeina: Could you tell me more about this?

Jeannette: There were times when I had no money to pay the school fees of my son. What to do? My children were still very young. I couldn't show them my worries. I used to put my head under the quilt and cry, not knowing what would happen tomorrow. I would wake up and find that the Lord had helped me, I'd come to the factory and find there was money due to me. I'd take it and pay for the tuition. I have to say something, the factory owners were very generous with me. The brother of Mr Soli Khattar used to tell me when the time came to pay the fees, "Martinez, this is on me." He took over the tuition. If the Lord hadn't been there, he wouldn't have sent me someone to pay the tuition. There was the war, it was impossible to ask

"We were in the mountains, we came and saw our house burning"

your family to help. Everybody was going through a bad time, and they had children in schools too. Now, I'm working, if ever I need LL50,000 I wouldn't need to ask my daughter or my son. Since I was a child I'm used relying on myself and providing for others, I thank the Lord a thousand times because I'm still working and in good health. I don't want them to spend money on me (pause)

Zeina: What else do you remember?

Jeannette: I remember that it is wasn't easy for a woman to work. It's difficult to manage both her home and her work. That's hard. What else do I remember? The tape recorder makes me uneasy.

Zeina: Try to act as if it isn't there.

Jeannette: When I was young I felt happy to come to work because I had friends here. I can't tell you that I had a childhood like other girls, no, I can't say that. But small things used to make us happy. If we went to buy a blouse or something, even if we had to pay for it by installment, we were happy. And whatever our family could give us made us happy. My mother used to knit, I kept begging her, "Knit a sweater for me. I want to wear this blouse tomorrow you have to sew me this or that!" I liked to look neat, I was a bit of a coquette.

I started seeing my husband four years before we got married. He was our neighbor. He used to say "Bonjour". We never went anywhere. Just "Bonjour" "Bonjour". I saw him, he saw me, and that was it. (laughs) We spent four years saying 'bonjour' to each other. He used to say, "I haven't seen you today" - things like that. We were living in hope much more than in real life. (pause)

I remember Christmas, especially after I had children. I was happy that I had a home and everything. When Christmas came around, my husband and I used to take the children to the shops to buy gifts. We were the only ones in the building who did that, in the past people didn't know about 'Pere Noel'. He used to prepare everything, just like people do now, balloons and decorations. We had lots of fun. Every Saturday, I used to wait impatiently for my salary to go to the flower shop in Bab Idriss to buy him flowers. He loved flowers. My biggest joy was to get them for him. (pause)

There's one thing in my childhood which I've never forgotten. The nuns used to organize 'kermesses', This made me feel good, I'd finally be doing something like the rest of the girls. There was a train which used to pass near here [points to the Damascus road]. A group of girls organized an outing with

their parents, they were going to take nargilehs and everything. I went home and asked my mother, could I go with them? The train fare was half a pound. "No, no, it's not my business, ask your brother." "Mother, please, God keep you, please let me go." Then my brother Tony came home. I asked him and he said no. "Listen, please!" The answer was still no. That day, I went to bed very upset, I cried a lot. Until now, I've never been on a train (smiles), though it used to pass by here every hour. When I married, I went everywhere, when I was a girl, nowhere. We used to stay at home, sit on the stairs, eat watermelon seeds, watch people passing by. We went nowhere. When there was a holiday, we went to the souk, and that was it. But secretly, never, we never did anything in secret. I was afraid of doing that.

When I got married, I started to have fun. We stayed a year and a half without children. My husband knew that I liked Egyptian films, so he used to buy us tickets, me and two or three of my work-mates here. We used to go to the cinema, wrap sandwiches, and take peanuts and melon seeds with us. We went to all the Egyptian films, we didn't miss a single one. I enjoy these memories (pause). Later I worked to help him because he was a foreigner, he didn't always have a work permit. I asked him if I could help more, and he said, "Why not?" So I started working so as to rent a house, because the first three years we stayed with my in-laws. Then we rented a house. I was so happy! I was buying things for my own house. I used to invite my friends to visit me. Yes, this was the period when we were happy. I felt that I was free. My husband used to treat me very well, he did whatever I wanted. If I wanted to go out with my friends, he didn't stop me. As a girl, I always wanted to go to Harissa. Every first of May there's a pilgrimage to our Lady of Harissa. I didn't go until I was married and had children. They were three and five years old. I took them to Harissa with my friends - not with my husband, he was working - I went with friends from work. We had a picnic, we had a nice time, it made me feel good, I will never forget. This is how I spent my life until my husband fell ill. The children had barely grown up - Nicole was eleven and Diego was eight - we were in Ash'out, spending the summer there. We used to come and go because of the war. We never had time to rest and enjoy our lives. Before the war ended, my husband fell sick and the cycle of suffering started all over again (cries).

Before I met my husband I fell in love, like everyone else, I fell in love. Yes, before I got married, when I was thirteen or fourteen, at work, I loved someone. But my grandmother used to tell me, no, his family are stuck-up people, you wouldn't be able to live with them. But he was good. I was always alert to the sound of his motorcycle, always waiting for him to pass by. But we never had the chance to go out.

Then I got married, and when you do that you have to tell your husband everything. So he told me 'C'est normal', don't worry. We talked to each other, we stayed for fifteen days in the hotel, and we discovered each other. He talked and I talked about everything that had happened to us. It's better to be honest from the beginning of the road. I never hid anything from him. You don't hide, and I don't hide. Whenever there was something wrong, it showed on my face; and

I was faithful to him. I told him everything in the past. Yes, I had dreams, like any girl has, but things change, and I couldn't fulfill any of my dreams. I wanted a house of my own, I wanted to go out and have new clothes. I did none of this, it remained a dream.

But there was a time when I had some problems at home because my sister was living near us, and she wanted me to marry her brother-in-law. My husband and I had already promised each other to marry. I spent seven months of suffering. If I wanted to

downstairs I had to think about it. It was a whole year of misery, the worst period of my life. Imagine, the time my family was going to visit Jerusalem they took me to my uncle's house in Sheeh so I wouldn't be left in the neighborhood alone. They didn't want me to see George [husband]. That was before our marriage. There were so many fights. But there were nice things as well. For example, on Independence Day, my family had forbidden me to talk to him, and the road was closed for buses and cars, so he came and met me here at the corner of the street. I spent the whole day happy because I had seen him and talked to him. These are nice memories. (pause)

It was only much later that I accepted the death of my husband, I realized that I'm like everyone else. It was hard for me because my marriage was the only happy period of my life. I was so lucky to marry a person who recognized my worth and respected me. A lot of people tried to stop me marrying him. But I was stubborn, I wouldn't marry anyone else. They all attacked me for doing that, my family, the neighbors. He was so nice! I wish I had a photo of him to show you how good and handsome he was. I say it's God's will that he died when he did. I believe in God's will, I can't do anything about it. We're all going to die sooner or later. But I never lost hope that he'd get better, I ran from one hospital to another. Even under shelling, I went to the American University for medicine he needed.

I used to pray to the Virgin Mary not to let him realize what was wrong with him. Had he known, he would have gone crazy, because he went through a similar phase when his aunt was dying. The only thing I was praying for was that he wouldn't realize what kind of sickness he had. Until the last minute I kept telling him, "My love, you'll get better". He

"My marriage was the only happy period of my life"

stopped eating and lost his hair. "You see you'll get better, it will take time for you to recover your strength". I would tell him, "Look your hair is growing" but it wasn't. He would say "You're right." Praise the Lord, how He makes people not see. "If you weren't getting better the doctor would not have let you come back home." We brought him back home so my mother could help me give him the treatment. She worked for twenty-two years at a sanatorium so she knows how to give shots. She used to help me take care of him. So he believed that he was getting better.

I don't know, it might be his sickness, it might be the way he used to treat me, I forgot all the bad times I had before I met him. I started counting my life as starting the moment I married him. Here at work, they liked me. When I had to breast-feed the children, whether at eleven or one o'clock, that was alright. My mother took care of the children for me. The owners of the factory were really nice to me. I can't deny it, right up to now. I used to leave work at three in the afternoon, tidy the house, and take care of the children. Believe me when my children were young, I didn't go anywhere. I looked forward to going home, seeing my husband, sitting with him on the balcony, drinking coffee, and taking care of my children. I didn't care for anything except my children and my husband. If I was washing clothes, and noticed that the children wanted to go out, I'd stop washing and take them to a stream near the house. They'd have fun for a while, then we'd go back home, and I'd finish my work. Go out, see my family, see his parents, no, the most important thing was him and the children. He had a good character, very caring and loving, but he had a short life. I had a wonderful time with him. Who is the woman these days who lives with her husband for twenty-six years without fighting with him?

To be honest, I once had an argument with him, we had been married only fifteen days. For three days he stopped talking to me, I felt very bad, I didn't know the reason. I asked him, "What did I do, George, tell me what went wrong?" "Nothing, nothing." I told no one, not my parents, not anyone. Later he told me that when we were invited to a dinner with his friend I accepted to eat a bite from his friend's hand. I took it out of politeness. My husband was upset because of that. How could I know? I said, "Georgie, how could I know that he's like that? You should warn me, and if I do the same thing again then you have the right to be upset." He never shouted at me, he never told me off in front of anyone.

He had only one fault, he used to bet on the horse races. You know in those days one did not earn money like we do today. He used to go to the races. I didn't object. Every Saturday or Sunday, it depended. Once, he went to the races after taking his salary from his father. I was about to give birth. He came back depressed, he must have lost. He went again on Sunday, to try

and get it back, but he lost again. We had put money aside for the hospital, he took it so as to win back what he had lost, without telling me. He came in the afternoon looking upset. I got scared, I was afraid that he'd had a car accident, he'd only recently learned how to drive. He said, "No I didn't have a car accident but I have to tell you something which will upset you." So he told me the story. I said, "So what! Is there any difference between your money and my money? Don't worry, we can replace the money". He said, "Nana, I spent your salary." "First of all", I said, "There's no difference between mine and yours. Second, money will come again. We get money, it isn't money that gets us". He said, "I swear on the life of the

"We used to stay at home, sit in the stairs, eat watermelon seeds, watch people passing by"

baby that I will stop". I told him, "Don't swear on the child or on anything, I'm happy with you the way you are. The most important thing is you and me, the money will come back". Believe me, after that he stopped. His friends used to buy books to see how much the horses weigh, how many races they'd won. His friends used to ask him, "What happened? Why did you stop?" He used to say, "It's my wife". I told him, "Don't say 'my wife', people will think I forced you". He said, "It was you. If you haven't been so open and forgiving about it, if you had fought with me, I would have gone back just to spite you." Truly, a woman can really be everything, you can lead the man wherever you want, he is 'un grand bébé'. That was the only problem we ever had, in addition to the one I told you about. After that we had no arguments, not even about the children, or anything. A lot of people were interfering in our lives, asking me why I was working since my husband had a job. I told them it was my decision.

In life everybody faces problems, but the woman has to know how to handle them. She has to handle her house, her work, and everything. A husband and wife have to be in harmony. In this way they will live the best life ever. No one is perfect but the Lord. My husband was really nice, he had one bad habit - betting on horses - but I accepted him the way he was. Everybody told me he wasn't good, he didn't have a house of his own. But together we built a house and a chimney as well. We did all that and one shell came and -- I believe it was the loss of our house that caused my husband's death. We were in the mountains, we came and saw our house burning! Imagine working for fourteen years to build a house and then to see it burning. He made the best chimney with the best material. Every thing we did was by installment. We were still paying them when the shell hit it and burnt it to the ground. And we say thank God, but seventeen, eighteen years of life are gone like that, and you find yourself without a house. I think this affected my husband's health. You have people who can bear and others who can't. (pause) I think that's it.

Recorded and translated by Zeina Misk