

## Raqiya Osseiran: Retired Public School Teacher

*(Born in 1918, in Saida; currently living in Beirut; recorded at home.  
Language: educated/colloquial Arabic, with some French.)*

I'm Raqiya Osseiran, I was born in Saida in 1918. My parents were cousins and I was the oldest child. I have four sisters and two brothers. I went to school in Saida, at the Saint Joseph de L'Apparition school. My mother had been a school teacher, she received her diploma during the time of the Ottoman empire, and then took up teaching. I was brought up in an atmosphere where women worked, I always knew that I would work after completing my education, that I would teach. Because my mother was a teacher she received a brochure about Dar al-Mu'alimeen wa al-Mu'alimat. I loved the brochure and kept on reading it night and day. I was interested in its rules and regulations.

I received my Brevet certificate when I was twenty years old. Unlike today, schooling then wasn't a continuous process, it was often interrupted. I was a bit slow because I changed schools several times. After graduating from school I enrolled in Dar al-Mu'alimeen to become a teacher, and I was among the forth generation of students that graduated from it. I was first sent to Bint Jbeil to teach - new graduates were generally sent to rural areas. Since we were scholarship students we had to work for the government for five years. They posted me to Bint Jbeil because I was from Saida, it's close to Bint Jbeil. There were no schools for girls in Bint Jbeil then, there was only one school for boys. I was the first one to open a girls' school there. With the help of Izzat al-Khateeb I rented a building, and ordered all the necessary furniture and equipment. Many parents were interested in enrolling their daughters, but I only accepted a hundred girls from all those who applied. I opted for the double shift system and our school was the first to apply it. During the war period many schools adopted it. The system meant that there was a morning shift which stretched from eight o'clock in the morning till midday, and an afternoon shift which extended from midday till four o'clock. With the help of Salim al-Khoury, who was educational inspector at that time, I divided the shifts according to age groups - pupils aged between seven and ten did the morning shift, those aged ten to thirteen did the afternoon shift. The results were good - the girls were eager to learn and they all did well. I stayed in Bint Jbeil for two years.

As you know, today and in my time, working women were considered desirable for marriage. I was working, I was



educated, and I was earning a good salary. Many men flocked around me wanting to marry me. I was very young and ignorant, I had no idea about the qualities a husband should have, nor how to go about choosing him. Besides, I was only twenty and at that age one is romantic, loves poetry, and enjoys sweet talk. There was a young man from the Sharara family who watched me from afar, and sent me twenty-paged and sometimes forty-paged letters in which

he eulogized me in verse. He sent me words of love without even knowing me. Naive as I was, I believed him. He asked for my hand in marriage and we got married. It was a miserable failure of a marriage. We disagreed on everything, his opinions concerning marriage, companionship, women, their standing in society and in the family, were very different from mine. He used to be drunk most of the time, he vilified me and often cursed me. I wasn't used to that - unlike him I was raised in the city, and in my family we never used bad language. Eventually we divorced.

I met my second husband while processing some retirement papers for my mother at the Ministry of Finance. He was a man whom I had known previously, but whose name I had forgotten. He introduced himself as Hamdi al-Hajj. We saw each other when I visited the Ministry again to finish my mother's papers. When the papers weren't ready Hamdi told me not to bother coming to the Ministry anymore, he would deliver the papers. After that he visited my mother, and asked for my hand in marriage, and we married. I have two children from my first marriage, namely Waddah and Azza. From my current husband I have Walid, Sawsan, and Marina. I'm living with my second husband in this house. (pause)

As I told you, when I was young I was very romantic, I loved poetry and reading. At the age of eleven I used to read the novels of Melhem Karam. They were stories about love, suffering, and so on. I was hopelessly romantic, easily affected by sweet talk and poetry. When I first graduated I wrote in Sawt Al-Mar'a (The Voice of Woman), it stopped long before you were born. I published several articles in it, but stopped because I was busy with my problems. So I started reading rather than writing. These are my recollections.

I remember that when national independence was declared I participated in the demonstrations that took place in Saida. First of all, it was a very important event, and second my cousin Adel Osseiran was one of the prisoners held in the Rachaya fortress. They took them from their beds late at night in their pajamas. We eagerly joined the demonstration, I



walked in the first ranks chanting and shouting. I recall that the year Lebanon gained its independence was not a normal working year, it was a year of joy. The president and other national leaders like Riad al-Solh visited different parts of the country. At each place there were crowds waiting to congratulate them, and listen to the stories they had to tell.

Concerning my job, I was very happy in it. The pupils were all intelligent and eager to learn, they were receptive and cooperative. Time flew without me feeling it. I always had so much work to do, I had loads of exercise books and exam papers to correct. But I was happy because my students were improving. (pause)

Myriam: Did your mother or grandmother ever tell you their life stories?

Raqiya: I didn't know my grandmother for she died when my mother was pregnant with me. My mother was a marvelous person, her life story should have been recorded. I say that not because she was my mother, but because she was exceptional. She bore six children while working, at a time when it was very rare for women in general, and Muslim women in particular, to work. My father died months after she conceived their sixth child, he was forty three years old. He collapsed on the street while walking, and died of a heart attack. My mother took on the responsibility of raising us after my father died. She worked hard to bring us up and educate us, her salary at that time was enough to educate us and she sent us all to private schools. Everyone who knew her - family and friends - used to look upon her as a heroine because she brought up a family single-handed. I often think of her, and her memory is still alive within me. I salute her. (sheds tears)

Nowadays young women are more mature. But I would like to advise them to be very careful when they marry. Money isn't important, even education isn't important. What is fundamental is for the spouse to have a well-integrated personality. Of course a woman should make sure that there's no nervous disorder, because this ruins everything. Then once a woman gets married, she has to be patient, very patient, because divorce isn't good. Of course there are extreme cases such as my first marriage. My first husband was psychologically unbalanced, he suffered from schizophrenia and his spoilt upbringing made him worse. Then, if a woman is convinced that she wants to terminate her marriage, I advise her never to remarry, never. This is my advice to all young women. I believe that a woman's emotional life should end with divorce, she should never re-marry, second marriages don't work. The first marriage always leaves its traces, and a woman carries with her her past and children. Moreover, who knows, she might end up with someone who has the same qualities as her first husband. Furthermore, a woman's position is always weak, given the conviction shared by the woman, her husband, his family, and society at large, that she is to blame. This is a very mistaken idea, and it's exactly what happened to me. When one marries for the second time she has to be very patient. I believe it's better to put up with bitterness,

and stick with one's first marriage, or one should divorce and live alone. I struggled for my children to stay with me - as you know a Muslim woman has a mahr; I had a piece of land as my mitakha<sup>1</sup>. I gave up the land in return for my children. The judge told me that this is what my husband wanted, so I agreed and the children stayed with me.

When my husband and his family heard that I was going to marry again, they went and kidnapped my children from school. Their school mates brought me their school bags and books, and told me that their father had picked them up from school. We entered into custody battles. Even though I had a promise from my husband that if I gave up my right to the piece of land, I would have custody of the children, yet the court disregarded this promise. My first husband wasn't fit to be a father, if he had been, I wouldn't have left him in the first place. He used to give the children to his sister to look after, and leave them without food or money. His sister would return to her parents' house leaving him with the children. When he found himself helpless he used to leave them in front of my parents' house in Saida and disappear. My children suffered a lot for four or five years. They would start school in Beirut, and then they'd have to finish the year in Saida. We all suffered a lot until we made a truce, we agreed to put the children in boarding school. I was given charge of our daughter Azza, and put her through school. He enrolled our son in the Frères in Jounieh. But he never paid the tuition fees, never gave either of them pocket money. I paid for them. Because I worked all my life, and was still working, I could manage to do that, but my family also helped a lot.

I also remember that when we decided to get married, Hamdi and I, I was very happy, he promised me that he would take care of my children and raise them as his own, and that he loved me and them. Our jobs were good and our married life was joyful. But what affected our relationship is that we lived with his parents, and his four brothers and two sisters. They were originally from Tripoli but were living in Beirut. So whenever relatives or friends came from Tripoli they would stay at our house. At times we would have ten people sleeping at our place, and we had to feed and look after them. I often felt crowded out. It affected me a lot, though at first I was happy and content.

I stopped work in 1982, the year of the Israeli invasion, when I was sixty four years old. After I got married the second time I asked to be transferred from Saida to Beirut. My life was always full, especially during the last twenty years. My husband had a good post, we used to get invited out a lot. I used to teach and take care of my children. Even though I had a maid, I always used to cook and take care of the children. Sometimes we used to go out to nightclubs with friends, and come back at dawn, so I would change my clothes and go to work without even sleeping. My life was full, there were good times, I worked a lot, at my job and in my home. I took care of my children and grandchildren. When my son got married, for forty days I used to steal time in the evening to give the



baby a bath, even though I was still working then and had a family of my own. I used to cook for us and for my son, for forty days he'd come and collect his food, since his wife was unable to cook. I did the same for my daughter Azza - she had twins - until she and her husband sacked me (laughs). Azza's husband used to tell her that he would help her but he never did. I got tired and suffered hardships, but I'm happy that all my children appreciate me and admit that I treated them all equally. (pause)

I believe that most men are unfaithful. Some are faithful. After they marry, men start having affairs, as if they were imprisoned - this is what causes problems (pause). Thank God, my three sons-in-law are faithful - in fact their lives revolve around their families. The two daughters who are abroad visit me for a month each year, and their husbands phone them everyday. They chat about everything that has happened, as if they were together. This is what married life should be. My sons are also like this. I think that educated and mature people marrying today believe that their home is their kingdom.

I founded the school in Bint Jbeil in 1938-1939, the year of my graduation, and the year when World War II began. I recall that before they transformed Palestine into Israel, business and commerce flourished in Bint Jbeil. I remember that the day after we opened the school in Bint Jbeil the girls were wearing their school uniforms, with white collars and white hair bands, and their exercise books were prepared with their names on them. All this was prepared in one day. The economic situation was good then, people had money, and there was eagerness to learn. The war didn't affect Lebanon much. From the time World War II began, there began to be talk of the end of the French Mandate, and independence. There was action all the time. Many Lebanese leaders were imprisoned because of a strike that took place in Bint Jbeil, after the citizens got into a fight with the French army. There was a lot of action during the war, and these actions gave us hope.

Yet I believe that during the French mandate we were better off. Of course the occupation had to end and Lebanon had to have self-rule, but the situation under the French was good. Educational levels were high. Those who had elementary certificates in those days were better than those who have the Brevet today. The subjects in the old curriculum were advanced, and the level was high. Of course we would never give up independence, but the Mandate period was not that bad. We had good relations with the French. The good relationship we have with France now has its roots in that initial relationship. (pause).

Myriam: How has Lebanon been as a place to live in?

Raqiya: I believe that our life in Lebanon is very simple and easy. We Lebanese are close to each other, I can't imagine living anywhere else. I visited Paris when my children were studying there, and I saw how difficult their transport system

is. If you have to go to a doctor you come back home ill. Distances are so far. I've visited several countries - Germany, Romania - I can't imagine myself living there. Life in Lebanon is very simple, in any Lebanese neighborhood one finds everything one needs. For instance with a 'service' taxi you can go anywhere for only LL1000. This doesn't exist in any other country. There are some people who complain about being poor, yet abroad you find more poor people. Many don't have homes and they sleep on the road - this is non-existent in Lebanon. No matter how poor a person is, he will always find somewhere to sleep. Our life is warm, easy and enjoyable.

Before I met my second husband our family doctor and friend, Dr Afif Moufarrej, told me that I should marry again. I answered that society looks down upon divorced women with children as 'second hand', no matter what good qualities they have. I couldn't imagine remarrying, but then I met my second husband. He appeared to appreciate me very much, and he seemed convinced that I was the innocent party in my first marriage. But it was only talk. Society doesn't respect a divorced woman, neither do one's in-laws. Eventually the husband will end up not accepting you, and blames you for the least thing that occurs. Many men aren't good. The question is how can one know if the second husband won't be as bad as the first? The very same qualities that made me leave my first husband are present in my second. I thought I knew him but I turned out to be wrong. Both my husbands were after my salary, all they cared about was the money I earned. My first husband used to waste his salary the first week he earned it, and then he wanted to spend mine. My second husband used to interfere in the way I lived and dressed. He used to argue with me about silly things, such as why I took a taxi rather than the tram. He used to tell me what to buy, he'd say, "You don't need more shoes" - this was because his sisters used to teach him how to treat me. For instance if I bought a face cream his sister would say to me, "You are so shallow, spending your money on face creams!" Yet she had all kinds of creams herself. Whatever his family told him he used to believe. In addition my second husband was very handsome, so women used to flock around him, and this upset me. He was not mine. Besides being greedy, he was a womanizer, and was pleased with himself because of the way women flocked around him. I was twenty two years old when I first married and twenty six when I married for the second time. When one is young and ignorant one tends to see qualities in a partner that aren't there.

But to conclude I never felt defeated and brought up two generations. My children are successful and I'm happy. I have no emptiness in my life.

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir

## End Notes

1. The mahr is a dowry designated by the bridegroom for the bride on the date of the marriage. The mitakher is that part of the marriage endowment that is held back, and only paid if there is a divorce.