

Vasso Salam: Architect, Foreign Wife

(Born in 1948, in Ethiopia; of Greek origin; currently living in Beirut; recorded in her home. Language: English)

I am Greek by birth but I was born in Ethiopia, in Africa, and was five when my parents moved to Lebanon. They were supposed to stay in Lebanon for only three years but, like all foreigners, they loved it and stayed on. Unfortunately I never learned to read and write Arabic - they said it wasn't worth it. I speak perfectly, with no accent at all, but I never learned how to read. I received a French education at the Collège Protestant then later I did my 'mathelem' at the International College. I wanted to study Architecture, but at the American University of Beirut (AUB) they didn't allow girls into the School of Engineering, so I lost a whole year, though I had a scholarship to do Mathematics. I stayed out of university a whole year, writing petitions and collecting statistics from schools of architecture in Europe. So AUB ended up by accepting me and I was the first girl among five hundred boys, actually we were two, there was one other girl at the School of Engineering. It was a wonderful experience, though the competition was unbelievable. We were spoiled because we were the only two girls. I had many different funny stories because of my name, which was Vasikilaious. Both the students and the teachers always thought that, being a foreigner, I couldn't speak a word of Arabic, so I heard many comments about myself, and I pretended I didn't understand anything.

I graduated in 1972, stayed on during all the war, and only left towards the end of 1990, during 'Aoun's war'. We went to London for a while. I married my Architecture professor, Assem Salam, and we have been working together all these years. Only lately, when he was elected president of the Order of Engineers and Architects, he's been too busy - he's a perfectionist who works day and night - so I started working on my own. Assem didn't teach me during my first year at AUB. He used to teach the senior students, but I noticed him from day one, and it was love at first sight. I heard bells. It was just like the cheap love stories that you buy in supermarkets. Well, after a lot of - - I'm sure he noticed me because I was the only one there, after a lot of problems, we lived together for a while, and then in 1982, after the Israeli invasion, we ended up getting married. But not straight away, because in 1982 Assem got very sick, he had a very serious cancer. We went to the United States. They gave him a five to ten percent chance of survival, but he's an unbelievable person, his attitude from day one was that he was going to conquer cancer. He is one of the people who demystified cancer and told all his

friends about it. Usually people here don't talk about it and don't pronounce the word 'cancer'. Most of his friends came along with us to the States, not to mention his brothers and some of his children. He had a year of chemotherapy - that was hell - and that brought us closer together.

What else can I tell you? (pause) Although I'm Greek I consider myself very Lebanese. I stayed on. We didn't leave this house during most of the wars here. There were battles in the garden, the house was hit twice. We weren't there, we had just moved out. I think it was an enriching experience, the city was almost totally empty, and one went back to basics. We had a few friends who stayed on in Lebanon. We learned how to survive, we created a small community. We were one of the few families to have a very big generator, we used to give electricity to the bakery next door. We had a well and we used to distribute water to people around us. I miss that period. Then at least we had hope that the situation would get better for everybody. I think peace has done more damage to the city than the war itself. Take Solidère for example. My husband was one of those who started the campaign against the Solidère plan, they have destroyed (sighs) about 80% or 85 % of the city, of the old Beirut that we knew. Beirut has completely lost its identity. They kept one or two streets of the old city unchanged and the rest is totally transformed, it's like any new city anywhere. And damage has taken place outside the area of Solidère. Take this area for example. It used to be all old houses and lovely little gardens, we saw it slowly disappearing. You see that enormous building there (points), and there are others like it around us, it used to be a set of lovely old houses and gardens connected together, there were flowers. People sold the houses, they were demolished, and in their place they built all these enormous buildings. Now I feel we are living at the bottom of a well. We used to have wonderful roses and flowers, but they died because we don't receive the sun any more. All that's left is a bit of greenery and some jasmine here and there. The old Beirut with all its charm has disappeared, whether because of major project like Solidère and the enormous roads they have been building, or through the private buildings that have gone up everywhere. People want quick profits, they demolish the lovely old houses and build enormous sky-scrapers.

What shall I tell you about myself? My husband is very good at interviews, but I'm very shy (pause). I have no children, my husband has children from a previous marriage, I consider them like my own. I wasn't an only child, I have a younger brother. My childhood was very happy. Maybe most of my generation had happy childhoods. I was the first-born, and spoiled by my parents. I was lucky to have a father who used to tell me stories at bedtime. He had a doctorate in Greek History and Philosophy, so he didn't tell me stories of princesses who kiss frogs, but stories from Greek mythology, it was really wonderful. Of

course my mother gave us love and affection. I'm happy to have this multi-cultural background, and at the same time I feel extremely Lebanese.

I mentioned going to London, it was after the Israeli invasion, only towards the end when things became unbearable. We were really exhausted. All the children were at home. Slowly with time we started sending them away to school abroad because things were becoming unbearable. During the war we moved our work to home - the little work that we had - later there was no work. The family unit was quite strong, everything took place here, friends gathering in the garden in the afternoon, we would work here, the children were here. And then suddenly everybody left. We moved to London, but it was as if we hadn't left because we kept reading the papers and listening to the news. And we came back often, my husband more than me. I took a few jobs restoring the houses of friends, but at the back of our mind was the idea of coming back and starting again here. We never really left Lebanon, we never thought of establishing ourselves somewhere else.

I forgot to tell you that I left once before - this was before I married Assem - my family left, and the situation was getting very bad, it was the beginning of 1976. I went to Abu Dhabi for almost a year and worked for a classmate of mine. It was really funny, he had obtained a work permit for me, and the moment I arrived at the airport the official looked at me strangely, because it was written in the work permit 'the engineer Vasikilaious'. [in Arabic al-mouhandis is male]. He went, "Is this the engineer?" After that there was no problem, I was accepted and respected, and they used to ask my opinion. There was absolutely no problem, they weren't male-chauvinist as I'd expected, though all our clients were local Abu Dhabians. I lived in a small Lebanese compound, we used to eat Lebanese food, so the Lebanese side of me gained and slowly overtook my Greek side. When there's a game - like the other day there was the European basketball championship - I'm very Greek, also when I hear Greek music, but basically the Lebanese side of me is stronger.

In London our first job was restoring our own home. At the beginning we had a tiny mews - it was like a doll's house - later, when we started going to

London more often, we bought a bigger house and we restored it ourselves. The first thing in England that surprised me was the building laws. It's not like here where you are allowed to build any horror you want, and nobody says any thing. There the preservation is unbelievable, the laws are very strict. You need the permission of several government offices as well as the approval of the whole neighborhood if you want to change one window, or the color of your window, or make a door. In some areas you aren't allowed to touch anything. I wish we could imitate them a bit, at least in certain areas, to try to preserve the little that is left. Later I had a few work projects. The choice of materials that you have there is wonderful, and the luxurious

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things that you get in London, also the working facilities. You can solve your problems and make orders on the telephone. The high quality of the workers is an advantage there. But here it's also good, because I have the same workers as before, and they are like members of my family. They have been with my husband for years. With English workers, it's totally different, they have to take their tea-break every half hour, while Lebanese workers - Now, for example, I'm in a hurry to finish something because of the weather, we have had some delays, but for my sake the workers are coming on Sundays. They work until late at night, and do anything you ask. Here you have a family relation with your workers, whereas there it's totally professional and impersonal. Later I discovered a Lebanese in London who had brought over all his cousins and relatives from Lebanon. I've been using him and have introduced him to a lot of friends. Whoever wants to have a job done in London uses them.

London on the other hand -- well, I tended to prefer France, but my husband studied in England, he made me discover London. Paris is love at first sight, London you fall in love with slowly, you discover it day by day. It's where I'd choose to live if I can't live in Lebanon. Without any hesitation I'd choose London rather than Athens. I mean all you have to do is walk on the streets of London, it's a different experience, the element of surprise is everywhere.

Living in Lebanon is both charming and unbearable. You have the hospitality and the warmth of friends, and the fact that people just ring at your door and enter without phoning first. In London they take appointments days before. But it's impossible to live here, and it's becoming worse. Just in commuting you lose hours and hours daily for nothing. Thank God for the mobile telephone, at least you can make a few phone calls when stuck in traffic, but you lose time constantly. Right now there's this house that I was supposed to finish at the end of the month, but we started having electricity cuts again, and they don't have a generator, and we lose hours waiting for electricity. The basic things that you take for granted anywhere else, here we don't have them. I don't see any hope, it's getting worse and worse. We don't know where we are going, or what Lebanon is going to be. The government talks about tourism, and having I don't know how many millions of visitors. What sort of tourists will come? A month ago I was in Athens, there are unbelievable beaches there. The whole Greek littoral is accessible to any one. There are no private beaches, anybody can go anywhere and swim. And you have those semi-public beaches that are run by the Ministry of Tourism where you pay the equivalent of a dollar and a half, and it's ten times more luxurious than the best beach here where you pay \$20. They have green grass everywhere, no cement, stone paving, trees, you have chairs for everybody to sit on, volleyball courts, stone ramps.

Here in downtown Beirut, they have lately re-done all the pavements of the town, and they say that they have ramps for the handicapped. Have you looked at them? First of all they are thirty centimeters high, with holes in the middle of the passage for the handicapped. There's no planning for the people, no plan

for the future, what are we going to become?

I can't see myself living anywhere else. Frequent visits and holidays abroad, yes! But for living permanently, no. I'm a person of habit. I mean I've had the same hair-dresser for the past thirty years, the same dentist, gynecologist, and pharmacist. I can't stand change (laughs). I'm a very faithful person. If I was forced to, I might go somewhere, it would have to be definitely the Mediterranean, somewhere in Provence or somewhere in Italy - not America.

As to other activities apart from my profession, I'm proud to say that six years ago a group of five of us, friends, took over the Beirut Theater in 'Ain al-Mreisseh, restored and re-opened it, creating a small cultural center. Apart from plays, we've had conferences, exhibitions, music, ballet. This year we had a special program for the 50th anniversary of the Nakba. Now we have decided to stop our activities and give the chance to somebody else to take it over - we've worked for six years. There were five of us - my best friend Huda Sinno was the manager, there was Elias al-Khoury, the editor of Al-Nahar's cultural supplement, Nawwaf Salam, Ghassan Tueini and me. I was mainly responsible for the exhibitions, and they mainly for the theater and the rest. It was really wonderful. When it first opened, there wasn't any theater in Lebanon, we had many people. It belongs to the Sinno family, and Huda is married to a Sinno, so we rented the place and fixed it up. It's a tiny place that only takes two hundred and twenty people. But we managed to bring really important plays from Tunisia and Morocco, we've had the ballets from Europe, and the best groups in the Arab world, and some foreign ones. But it was very time-consuming. We were helped financially by some banks, and by the 'Friends of the Beirut Theater'. A lot of young people came, which was wonderful. The recent program we had for Palestine was great, we brought Marcel Khalifeh and many others. When we invited the son of Che Guevara, I thought the whole building was going to collapse. Now we need a rest. I don't know who will take it over, we are trying to encourage younger people. We might come back in a couple of years.

Before I used to work with my husband, now I work from home and my projects are mostly restoration. For the past seventeen years we have been working on the Mukhtara Palace, its an enormous complex. People know that we work in restoration. It's really wonderful to try to keep -- We did a little house up in the mountains, it was four walls with nothing left of it, no windows, no roof, no nothing. We restored it, and created new levels inside, and it has become a real jewel. We went to people who sold old tiles, we used old tiles and elements to make it look as it was when it was built. We try to be truthful and honest in our approach.

Recorded and transcribed by Myriam Sfeir

End Notes

1. 'Aoun's War took place in 1989; it was directed against the Syrian Army and Syria's Lebanese allies.