

## Nasima Yusif: Mukhtara<sup>1</sup>

*(Born in 1947, in Bishmizzine; currently living in Bishmizzine; recorded at home. Language: colloquial Arabic with a slight northern accent.)*



I am Nasima Yusif, I was born in 1947 in Bishmizzine. Both my parents came from the same village. Our socio-economic status was middle. My father used to work on the land, in agriculture. My mother used to work at home. During my mother's time women did not have any time to rest. She used to prepare the dough, and take it to the wood-fired bakery in the village to bake the bread. She used to wash the clothes by hand, walking long distances to fetch water - unlike today water wasn't available everywhere. We were a big family - six girls and two boys - so because we were so many we enrolled in several different schools. There were both private and public schools in our village, and I was one who attended a public school. My elder brother and sister both attended a Bishmizzine private school. My other sister and I had to attend a public school in order for our parents to be able to afford our education. My father used to earn practically nothing. When the Lebanese pound had value he used to earn five pounds a day. I studied as far as the Brevet, and things were going well - I didn't miss any years of school, and finished all my classes. Each year I passed the final exam and moved on until the Brevet. I was planning to study at Dar al-Mu'alimeen in order to qualify as a teacher. This was my ambition and I wanted to continue my education. Then the son of the mukhtar of the village came and asked for my hand in marriage. At that time I was eighteen or nineteen years old.

We got married, I stayed at home and gave birth to three children, one girl and two boys. I took care of them and brought them up. Yet I often wondered if this was going to be all my life. Impossible! I was still young and energetic. My husband is twenty years older than me. Things were alright, and we went on like this until the children grew up. There was a company in the village, and I started asking if they needed a secretary. I wanted to get out of the house and work, for my children didn't need me anymore. All I could do for my children was help them in the evening with their homework. I knew that I could easily manage the housework. I got a job in the company - I was lucky - and worked there for twelve years. I enjoyed it a lot and never felt tired. I used to work from seven till three o'clock with a one hour lunch break. Then I'd come back home and finish my housework. And so I worked for twelve years. Then, during the war period, the salaries started shrinking and we often received our pay checks late. So I thought, what's the point in working when I'm hardly earning anything? Should I go on just to be able to tell people that I'm

working? So I left the company which was now in bad shape.

By that time my children had grown up - my daughter traveled to Canada and got married over there, my eldest son graduated and enrolled in the General Security Forces. My younger son first worked in agriculture. Now he's in the United States, it's God's will. My eldest son is married. It happened that the municipal elections were coming. My husband's father had been mukhtar for the past forty years, and when he died at the age of 102, my husband was appointed mukhtar for around four years. I used often to help out by preparing all the documents and drafting out the papers. When the elections were first announced I thought I shouldn't participate. Then several women from the village who appreciate and like me encouraged me to run, seeing that I used to prepare all the documents. People began to criticize me, they started complaining that there are many men fit to be mukhtar, why should a woman run? I was so provoked that I decided to run for mukhtara to spite them. I wanted to show them what a woman is and what she can do! I wanted to prove to them that women are entitled to run for such a position. I had confidence in myself and in my ability to take on such a job, a job people suppose only men can do. Before when I prepared all the documents for my father-in-law and husband, no one complained. Yet now that I would have to sign my name on official documents some people objected. The elections took place, they were correct and fair, and I received 75% of the votes while my male competitor took less than 25%.

Now I'm working as mukhtara and I feel that I'm being useful. It's true that it's nothing very important but I feel that I am giving. Women are capable of doing anything, so why should they sit in the corner once they are forty? I'm fifty one years old, and I don't feel my age because I'm working. I'm happy because I'm helping people out. People from the North who live in Beirut need help to finish their papers, I help send the papers to the proper departments. Sometimes I charge them, sometimes I don't. (pause)

Our life then was very different from the easy way most people live today, we were raised differently. Most people didn't have cars. I remember that when I had my own house I used to walk to the town and buy groceries. If I happened to meet someone I knew, they would help me carry my stuff, but if not I would have to do it myself. I had young children then. I remember I used to arrive home exhausted, unlike today when anyone who wants to buy a packet of matches goes by car. Life now is much easier. Rain or shine, we used to walk to school, there wasn't a bus to take us. Our parents used to make us plastic coveralls to protect us from the rain. (pause) In April, when we were young, we used to pick over the wheat and put it on the roof to dry. Then we picked it over again, and our parents would take it to the mill and prepare their mouni (food stores) for winter. The same for grapes - we used to go to the fields and pick the grapes, then we'd pick them over and leave them on the roof to dry. Part was used to make wine, and the rest was kept as raisins. We also used to pick almonds and walnuts. Everyone in the village who had a tree near his house did the same. We all pitched in, boys and girls, there was

no difference between us, because our parents couldn't cope on their own. Anyway there was nothing better to do to pass the time, there were no beaches or means of entertainment - it was a village, so we killed time working. In the winter, when neighbors visited each other, they were offered fig jam, raisins, wine - all prepared at home. That is how they lived. (pause)

The games we played when we were young were mostly boys' games - we used to play marbles, hopscotch, climbing trees, jumping rope, hide-and-seek. We used to pick olives - my parents never hired people to do this work as people do today. The schools used to give us a break, it was called the 'olive break' and lasted for around two weeks, so we could help our parents. When it rained in autumn, there used to be snails scattered in the fields, and I remember we used to wake up early and walk through the muddy fields collecting snails. We never ate them at home, but we enjoyed picking them. My parents used to heat water to boil wheat on a wood stove. That was the month when the pine needles fall, so we used to go early in the morning to collect them, pack them in bags and bring them home to burn in the stove.

I remember once my sister and I were going to pick grapes. We were on our way back after filling a big basket. One of the boys we used to play with had told us that if we ever saw a wasp heading towards us, not to run, because then it would follow us. He said to stand still, it will think you are a tree and won't come after you. My sister and I, on the way back from our grape-picking mission, saw a wasp going into hole in the ground. I picked up a stick and started sticking it in the hole, and all of a sudden the wasps were swarming out of their home. My sister grabbed the grapes and ran, but I stayed there standing. I wanted to see whether our neighbors' theory was true or not. The wasps stung me all over my face. Had this happened today I'm sure they would have taken me to hospital as a poisoning case, but back then nothing happened and I felt fine. All they did was put ice on the stings and my eyes got swollen, but I was fine in a couple of days. These same neighbor boys taught us how to catch scorpions with a string and a piece of candle. We played a lot of boys' games. We rarely went out of the house at night. Every evening the whole family would gather and we spent the time together. (pause)

Before school started we used to get our books ready. We used to take our older brother and sister's books, and any book they didn't have we bought. We used to repair the old books with gum that we made from the resin of almond trees. Our parents used to collect it and put it in a container, and we added water to it and left it in the sun to melt. The product was very similar to glue. In our days we had to wear a school uniform - nowadays it is rare to see children wearing a uniform. We were punished if we didn't wear them. (pause)

I could manage a job and housework once my children were in school. I'd come back from work, and cook. I used to clean the house during the weekend. (pause)

Myriam: How has living in Lebanon been?

Nasima: Concerning our life, there's a difference between living



Picture Credit: Fulvio Roiter, Lebanon, National Council of Tourism in Lebanon, 1980

in the city and living in the village. We're content here because we were raised in the village - we didn't go to study at universities outside. Two years ago I traveled to Canada to visit my daughter and I was really very anxious to get back. Life abroad is good for those who live there, but while I was there I missed my village, my home and my country. The weather over there is really cold, so once my daughter had delivered, and I'd helped her out, I came back. The only reason I travel is to see my loved ones, not to see the country. In spite of all the wars that took place, and the agony we went through, I believe that our country is the best. I have a son in the United States, he's been there several years and he wants to come back. My daughter would like to come back too but the economic situation isn't encouraging. That's why they're abroad. My eldest son, the one who lives here and works with the department of General Security, has provided us, his father and I, with medical insurance. If he hadn't had a health insurance policy for his wife he wouldn't have been able to have children - his wife is pregnant. His salary isn't enough, he can't afford to build his own house, that's why he's living with us. Nowadays people have a lot of needs, there's a minimum income and everyone wants to live comfortably. In the old days not everyone had a car, a television, or a video.

Myriam: What do you do as mukhtara?

Nasima: I help people fill out official papers such as driving licenses, identity cards, marriage registrations and certificates - birth certificates, death certificates, and so on. All these papers have to be approved by the mukhtar or else it won't be officially registered with the government. Passport applications are also prepared by the mukhtar. It's a pleasant job and it is without a salary. People really appreciate the mukhtar because he or she has no office hours, people visit the mukhtar at any time to get their papers processed. Few people can manage to do their papers on their own.

Recorded and translated by Myriam Sfeir

### End Notes

Mukhtara, the feminine form of mukhtar, an elected local official, unsalaried, who processes official papers that people need.