

THE ARMENIAN WOMEN IN LEBANON

The history of the Armenian community in Lebanon begins in 1921 when the French transferred the remnants of the Armenians of Cilicia, Syria and Anatolia to Beirut after the massacres perpetrated by the Turks in 1915. Later, in 1937, when Alexandretta (modern Iskenderun) was ceded to Turkey by the French, more Armenians came. Those who settled in Beirut were given the area near the port and started their life in ragged tents and wretched tin shacks. Soon these poor dwellings became concrete-built houses, shops began to open and the men made use of their handcraft skills. They opened schools and built churches. As they began to learn Arabic they exercised their traditional skills in business and commerce, established workshops that developed into factories. In 1975 the Armenian community in Lebanon numbered around 150,000 most of whom lived in Bourj Hammoud and the rest in the suburbs, in Anjar, Chtaura and Zahle. The community supported a number of churches, a network of schools, daily newspapers and magazines.

What was the contribution of the Armenian woman in building the community to its prosperous state of business, culture and education? Some of the women coming from Turkey, who had received their education in missionary schools, worked as teachers in the schools, others who had no education worked as cooks, baby nurses, or did handwork and embroidery to earn a living. Many of them were widowed with children for whom livelihood had to be earned by the mothers. Those Armenian women coming from Turkey, in spite of the hardships, persecution and starvation, still kept an indomitable spirit to struggle for their survival. They had the strength and health inherited from their mountainous and vigorous climate. They had an unwavering faith in God coupled with deep religious ideals. Armenians as a race are particularly talented for the arts and crafts. Their children are imbued with a love for music, since every Armenian home has at least one musical instrument through which they are taught to play and sing their folksongs and melodies. Besides their musical heritage, they have their own traditional folk dances, costumes, embroideries, style of building and world famous architecture. Their history, rich in events and contributions, helped to create in them a strong national feeling which served to link them together and made them practice self-help and cooperation in their lands of emigration. Their love for education was so great that they sacrificed a lot to educate their children. The family traditions to which they anchored so strongly assured for them a sort of stability in the unstable life of a refugee.

Women in the home as wives and mothers are usually very traditional. The husband is the real head

and leader of the family, he works outside and thus does not share in the family work. The wife is responsible for all the housework, and most of all, raising of the children. Relatively few husbands help in bringing up the children, although among the younger couples this is changing as husbands extend more help to their wives in child rearing. There is good discipline at home and children learn to behave from early childhood. Parents emphasize the need for academic excellence and achievement. Many of the parents take charge of giving their children music and art education.

The Armenian women gradually developed into community conscious individuals organizing activities to sustain the churches and schools that needed a good deal of moral and financial support. They organized bazaars where they sold their embroidery and homemade Armenian delicacies to raise money. Each church had its women's auxiliaries that up to the present carry their roles as supporters of their faith and education. To mention a few of those groups there are the Armenian General Benevolent Union's Women's auxiliaries and the Armenian Red Cross that sponsor summer camps, maintain medical centers and give first aid to war casualties. A ladies' guild helps the orphanage in Ghazir, which is under the auspices of the church, and the Home of the Aged that gets its main support from the Women's Auxiliary. Other women's groups work for the hospital in Azounieh, Shouf; the Sisters of Hripsime have an orphanage in Bzommar. Karageuzian Foundation runs a vocational school for girls of school age who for one reason or another are out of school. Various women's organizations support schools and education. Without their devoted services, schools cannot meet their financial obligations. Also they promote culture and encourage young artists. They organize painting exhibitions, concerts, children's choirs, dance groups, invite prominent musicians and artists from abroad.

The education of women has gained ground recently and more young women are pursuing a secondary education and the percentage of those getting a university education is increasing. Two women's secondary schools have been operating for decades, the A.G.B.U. Tarouhi Hagopian Girls' Secondary School and Hripsimiantz Girls' Nuns School. Due to the educational advancement many women have professional careers mostly in the field of education, nursing, pharmacy and secretarial work. More and more we see the women entering the business world either through private enterprise or through management and executive positions. The career women's percentage is small however, compared to the large

number of those women who stay at home and raise a family. Among this latter group of women those who have a secondary education show discontent for their role as mere housewives and mothers. They are in search of self-fulfillment which can truly give meaning to their lives. Even though they attend lectures, and pursue hobby type activities like flower arrangement, physical fitness exercises, first aid courses, these activities don't seem to satisfy their desire for self realization. There is a great need for well organized continuing education programs in language instruction, hygiene, child care, adolescent problems and others. There is also a need for publications in the Armenian language on women, child psychology and family relations. The lack of a good women's magazine is greatly felt. «Yeridassart Hayouhi», (The Young Armenian Woman), was published by a well-known woman writer and journalist, Siran Seza, for fifteen years but upon her death, in 1967, the magazine was discontinued.

The Armenian woman has a long and rich heritage of learning and culture; specially the aristocratic classes in ancient Armenia were highly cultured. In the 5th C.A.D., Zvig was a woman of great learning who established her own school in the palace headquarters and educated the intellectual elite of her time. Among those she taught some became historians and writers and mentioned Zvig's name with great admiration in their writings that have reached down to us. There were queens like Khosrovanoush who spent her whole dowry to build the great centers of learning called Sanahin and Haghat, which were universities of those times. Princesses and great ladies of the aristocracy became patrons of learning by charging the monks to copy, illustrate and illuminate important manuscripts. They built cathedrals and churches in memory of their families.

As an example of even illiterate Armenian Women's appreciation of culture is the miraculous journey of the most voluminous manuscript written in the 10th Century. The women of Moush who fled from Turkish persecution carried different parts of the great Manuscript, hiding it in the most secret dwellings and caves until they reached the boundaries of present Armenia.

With such a heritage as an inspiration, the Armenian women in Lebanon have done well and deserve recognition. They can do more if they are given more responsibility in community leadership especially in the areas of education, culture, social and medical work. The percentage of women serving on responsible positions and on important religious, political and cultural committees is low indeed.

As the new Lebanese Armenian women with a university education emerge, it becomes essential to incorporate their efforts and contribution on a deeper level for securing a better future for the community in Lebanon.

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