

Anas Barakat Baz

A woman who realized her dream of giving medical help to secluded women who could not be seen by male doctors



The early twentieth century in Lebanon and the neighboring countries saw the spread of western influences and life style among the educated classes, which were reflected in the prevalence of Victorian reserve blended with romantic idealism. Poets and writers like Nikula Fayyad, Felix Faris and others, idealized women in their writings. Love in its platonic or sexual form was etherealized, spiritualized and raised to the altar of sacredness. Woman's freedom meant freedom of love and marriage but not sexual freedom. A woman should be respected, protected and provided for but she should not be allowed to work, even when she had no one to support her. Educated women of the period followed this conservative ideal. They produced writers and artists; they founded voluntary welfare associations; but rarely did a woman of the middle class care to practice a permanent profession. It was only among the working classes that money-earning jobs were taken up.

Exceptions to the rule, however, were not totally absent. A young girl belonging to the middle class, called Anas Barakat, dreamt of studying medicine and becoming a career woman. She longed to help those female patients who were condemned to suffer and die because male doctors were not allowed to enter their apartments. Anas had received, at the British School for girls in Beirut, a solid secondary education and she waited for an opportunity to realize her dream. The opportunity came in 1901, when one of her sisters decided to go to America to join her husband. Anas was 27 but she had an iron will and an overflowing energy and was readily accepted as a medical student at the University of Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A. Within 4 years of study, she obtained a medical degree, after which she specialized in gynecology and practiced her profession in several hospitals. Back in Lebanon in 1908, she was entrusted with the task of directing St. George's hospital in Beirut, which she did for 4 years. In the meantime, she opened her own clinic and persuaded her sister Zahiyya to study pharmacy in America. After her return to Lebanon with a pharmacy degree, the sister opened two pharmacies, one in Beirut, the other in Dhour-Shweir.

Dr. Barakat now realized her dream of giving medical care to women who were deprived of it but she did not limit her interest to medical work. She was an active member of welfare associations which

flourished at the time and she sponsored the creation of a women's society called "As-Sidq" (Honesty). Her patronage of girls' schools materialized in the prizes she offered in her name to honor students in the schools of "Nour-al-Hayat", "The Greek Orthodox School", "The Three Moons School" in Beirut, and the "Sirāt School" of Aley.

It was on the occasion of a medical lecture she gave at a meeting of a welfare association, in 1915, that she met the man who was to become her husband. Jirji Baz was a writer and journalist, an ardent champion of woman's emancipation. He had founded a women's magazine called Al-Hasna, (recently revived in Beirut), in which he persistently defended woman's rights and supported her claim for education and work. His intense feminist zeal had won him the title of "Woman's Supporter". Anas found in him a kindred soul; they were married after a short period of betrothal during which they occupied themselves with the translation of the memoirs of Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and philosopher. Their marriage, and the birth of two sons, only spurred them to double their cultural and social activities. As a token of his admiration for women, Mr. Baz wrote a book called **A Crown for Woman's Head**, in which he compiled biographies of historical women who had achieved distinction and contributed to the welfare of humanity. He dedicated it to his wife. Anas took a cultural trip to the States for further experience. Her fame as a successful gynecologist and expert in women's psychology spread in the Arab world. The American University of Beirut adopted her as one of its graduates. The Lebanese Government honored her with the Golden Medal. Her example was followed by many ambitious young women who took the daring step of studying medicine twenty years later. The pioneer woman writer, Salma Sayegh, dedicated to Anas her first collection of essays, **An-Nasamāt**, with the following dedication: "To dear Anas, who has made a rapid ascent to the summit of human idealism, who has illuminated our struggle for freedom and taught us to serve with love and knowledge".

(Information mainly obtained from an Arabic article by Emily Nasrallah, published in the women's magazine Feyrouz, Feb. 1982.)