

Anbara Salam Al Khalidy

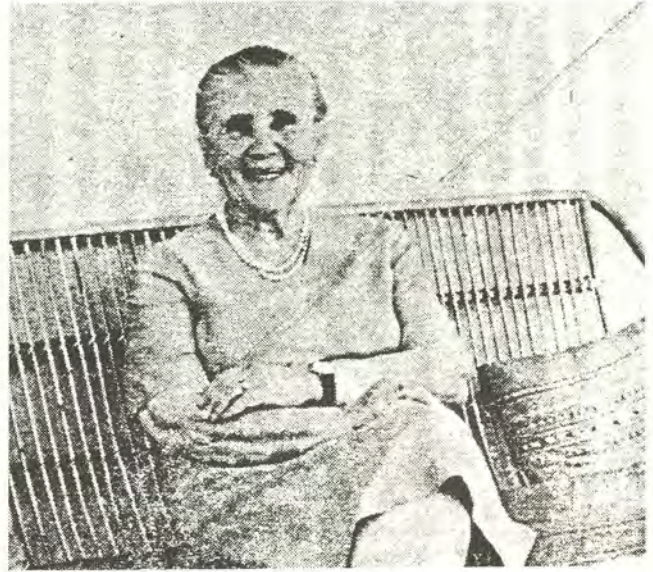
Anbara Salam el Khalidy, elder sister of political leader and ex-prime minister Saeb Salam, was born in a well-known politically active family of Mousaitbeh in Beirut at the turn of the 20th Century.

Her father, Selim Salam, was a successful businessman and a respected Sunni figure of his time. He was one of the first men to transcend the confessional barriers separating Muslims and Christians at a time when relations between both communities were confined to polite, superficial business relations. He befriended many Christian religious leaders and brought a Catholic priest to teach his children French. Moreover, despite strong objections, he sent his sons to study at the Syrian Evangelical College which was to become the American University of Beirut. He was also among the first Lebanese to send his son abroad in 1910 to specialize in Agricultural Engineering in England.

Although Selim was a busy man and the head of a large family of 9 sons and daughters, he became quickly aware of his daughter's intelligence and her love for reading and writing. He believed in the necessity of educating women so he asked one of the most eminent Lebanese intellectuals of his time, Abdallah al-Bustani, to teach his daughter Arabic and literature. Selim Salam also encouraged his daughter to think liberally and he stood by her all his life.

When she was ten years old Anbara Salam was pushed to wear the veil by her mother and her relatives. This decision angered her and she felt as if she was entering an "iron gate". This also meant she could no longer play with her brothers in the garden nor climb trees. She decided that one day she would do something about it.

At fifteen she became attracted to the idea of Women's Liberation, a movement which coincided with the rise of Nationalistic feelings among all Arab countries under the Ottoman rule. This was the era of the "Arab Awakening". Thus, in March 1914 Anbara Salam and a group of enthusiastic young women formed one of the first Arab Women's Associations. It was called **Jamyiatu Yakthat al Fatat al-Arabiyya** or the **Arab Girls' Awakening Association** and its aim was to encourage bright school-girls to continue their higher education by helping them financially and morally.



Anbara Salam was also a member of the **Lebanese Women's Union** and the **Union of Arab Women**. The first President of the **Union of Arab Women** was Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'rawi. This union, which preceded the creation of the Arab League (of men) pressed Arab governments to introduce new laws pertaining to the status of women. It insisted that the minimum age of marriage for girls be sixteen. It asked for a compulsory medical examination of future spouses one year before their marriage. It demanded both the right to vote and the right to be represented in National Assemblies. The first countries to comply with these demands were Syria and Egypt, which had appointed women as cabinet ministers.

In the 1920's a big controversy arose in Muslim communities around the compulsory wearing of the veil or "Hijab". Both advocates and opponents of the veil fiercely defended their views. Anbara Salam was an opponent of compulsory wearing of the veil. A two-year-long visit to England in 1925-27 confirmed her point of view, especially when she saw the freedom with which English women moved and acted in their society.

On her return to Lebanon, and during a talk about her English trip to a mixed audience, Anbara Salam took off the veil defiantly. She was the first to do so in Lebanon. This courageous move created a big scandal. For her, it was a point of no return.

On August 9, 1929, in the midst of her popularity and of her social and political activity Anbara married Ahmed Sameh Khalidy, the director of the Arab College in Jerusalem and a

leader of Modern Education in Palestine. She moved to her husband's homeland where she became active in the **Palestinian Women's Movement**. While raising a large family, Anbara translated into Arabic Homer's Iliad and Odyssey and Virgil's Aeneid. She loved Palestine dearly and was heart-broken when she had to leave it after the first Israeli-Arab War in 1948, never to return again. Shortly after, her husband died.

For the remainder of her life Anbara was a fervent advocate of the Women's cause. Among the issues she believed in most were: the necessity for all women to further their education, to participate hand in hand in political and social activities with men, and to fight against confessionalism and narrow ethnic sentiments which divide Arab people instead of uniting them.

Years later, and at the insistence of friends and family, she agreed to write her memoirs which she entitled: **A Trip in Memory between Lebanon and Palestine**. This book is among the liveliest socio-historical documents of an era that saw the birth

of two great movements: Arab Nationalism and Women's Liberation. It is also a book which abounds with stories about her friendships with outstanding women such as Julia Tohmeh Dimashkieh, Salma Sayegh, Ibtihaj Kaddoura and others who played a crucial role in the Women's Movement in Lebanon.

Wafa' Stephan

N.B.

At the time of writing this article Anbara Salam el Khalidy is living in Beirut among her numerous children and grandchildren. Two of her sons are professors one at the American University of Beirut, the other at Harvard University.

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- (1) The Arabic title of the book is **Jawlatun Fil Thikrayat Bayna Lubnan wa Falastine**, published by Dar al Nahar, 1978.