

## Maha El Khalil Chalabi and the International Association to Save Tyre



Tyre, the «Phoenician Metropolis» praised by historians for its past beauty and glory, was founded in 2750 B.C. It rapidly became the most important commercial centre of its time renowned for its purple dye and glass industries.

Throughout its long history, Tyre defied the conquerors of the Old World. It stood against the mighty Babylonian King Nabuchadnezzar for 13 years and defied Alexander the Great for seven months. During the 1st century of our era when Saint Paul sailed to Palestine, his ship berthed at Tyre where a small Christian community had already taken root. After the Arab conquests in 636 A.D., the sugar industry flourished in the city and Arab Caliphs used the port to embark on expeditions against the Byzantines. At the end of the 11th century came the Crusaders who captured Tyre and built a magnificent cathedral

using columns from pagan and Roman temples.

However in 1291 the Mamluk dynasty of Egypt totally destroyed the city in order to prevent the Crusaders in Cyprus from regaining a foothold on the Lebanese coast. In the years that followed, Tyre sank into obscurity despite the attempts of Fakhr el-Din, Emir of Lebanon, to rebuild its port in 1634.

It was only a few years after Lebanon's independence that excavations were begun to uncover the remnants of this magnificent city. What has been uncovered till now represents only one tenth of the city's archeological treasures. Maha El-Khalil Chalabi, who founded the International Association to save Tyre, talked to Al-Raida about the past and future activities of the association:

Q: Ms. Chalabi, how would you present succinctly the problem of Tyre to Al-Raida readers?

A: Tyre is internationally known as a first class archeological site, however this has not been sufficiently valued on the archeological level. Excavations which started in the old city in 1943, four years after Lebanon got its independence, were slow. What has been uncovered till now represents only one tenth of the archeological contents of Tyre. This means there is a lot more work to be done.

Moreover, the establishment of Palestinian refugee camps in the city, in places that were not then considered of archeological value but which are considered so now, adds to the problem.

Also during the past nine years of war, these archeological sites were very badly damaged by Israeli air raids and shelling. This is why the International Association to Save Tyre was created in May 1980.

Its main aim is to awaken the international conscience to the cultural value of Tyre and to the necessity of preserving and developing this national Lebanese heritage.

Q: What have been the major activities of the Association till now?

A: The IAST is made up of National Committees from seven different countries: Great Britain, Belgium, West Germany, the U.S.A., France, Tunisia and Lebanon.

Its first activity was to organise a «Day for Tyre» at UNESCO headquarters in Paris with lectures, films and exhibits (5/5/80).

One year later (2/6/81) the National British Committee organised a reception at the House of Commons to present Tyre's problem. During the past two years a number of film exhibits and lecturers on the history and cultural value of the city toured the following places: Wisconsin University (U.S.A.), the Royal Museums of History and Art in Brussels, Royal Museum of Mariemont in Belgium, a Tyre cultural evening in the Tunisian city of Carthage, the making of a

film «Tyre, our Memory in Danger» which obtained a special award, conferences on Tyre at major Lebanese universities and finally a «Week for Tyre» in Paris, Lyons, Marseille, Strasbourg and Chalon-sur-Saone in France.

Q: What resolutions have been adopted by national and international organizations in favor of Tyre?

A: There have been nine resolutions adopted till now by national and international organizations in favor of Tyre.

The first was the resolution adopted by the UNESCO Executive Council (23/5/79).

It was followed few months later by resolution no. 459 of the UN Security Council, then of the European Parliament (19/9/80), by the UNESCO General Assembly in Belgrade during its 21st session. The House of Commons in London signed a petition to safeguard Tyre on 5/12/1980) and The U.S. Senate adopted resolution 1944 in favor of the city.

The last resolution to safeguard Tyre was adopted during the fourth conference of Arab Tourism Ministers in Tunis under the umbrella of the Arab League.

Q: Many people ask themselves, when they hear about the activities of your Association, whether it is the right time now to spend so much effort on stones and past history while there are so many pressing human problems that need to be solved.

What is your answer to these people?

A: I tell them that our concern with the cultural heritage of Tyre is one aspect of our fight to resist occupation and safeguard our country. There are many ways one can serve and defend one's country. There are the political and military ways and also the cultural one. This cultural way is often neglected but I believe it is of the utmost national importance because it aims at preserving our history and heritage.

Q: As a native of Tyre, and daughter of one of its most eminent politicians, how would you describe the role the women of Tyre have played in safeguarding their city?

A: The women of Tyre for instance were among the first to organize manifestations against the French Mandate and to demand the vote in the 1940's. I remember very well how women used to demonstrate in the streets when I was very young.

Also, during the last 15 years, there were many direct political actions by the women of Tyre, and this in a very overt and noticeable way.

Q: Being based in Paris and travelling a lot as part of your work, what image do you think people have about Lebanese during the past nine years of war?

A: I think that the Lebanese woman was a party in the war and not just a spectator. In general she is of course more moderate and has been a moderating or a reconciling element in many cases. She has been more involved in human problems than in political ones. She was not on the forefront of the political scene but has backed many political leaders.

The Lebanese woman has been deeply involved in social and medical problems, which gives her a very respectable image abroad. But it is not enough to be a woman, you have to have other qualities to succeed in life. To be a woman can sometimes be a handicap. So you have to overcome this handicap and demonstrate that you are not only a woman but can play the role you have been asked to play.

Q: What are the future plans of your Association?

A: Parallel to the archeological projects, the association is conscious of the importance of human and economic development in Tyre. This is why it is planning to build a cultural centre and a documentation centre that would be used by all the people of the region. The Association is also planning to set up an office for the planning and reconstruction of the modern city of Tyre which has been badly destroyed by the war. It would also like to set up an «Artisanat Centre» which would help bring life back to local traditional arts and crafts.