

NABIHA BEN MILAD

Nabiha Ben Abdallah Ben Milad, whose husband was a personal friend of Tahar Haddad, is one of the earliest Tunisian feminists. She grew up under French occupation and saw the birth of independent Tunisia. She has been active in the women's movement since its early days, and now at 70, she still follows with much interest women's affairs, welcoming in her home visiting feminists to tell them about her experiences with the women's movement. Guest editor Evelyne Accad and co-editor Wafa' Stephan visited her one afternoon in her home, situated right in the middle of a huge garden, very close to the city centre or Medina. On her walls are paintings of old Tunis and landscapes of Tunisia by French orientalist painters. On her dining room table lay a pile of papers, correspondence and studies, all pertaining to women's affairs. On her face was a warm and vivacious smile, and her green eyes were shining with life and compassion. Here is part of the conversation we had with her.

Q: Mrs. Ben Milad, could you tell us about your childhood in the 1920's in Tunisia?

A: I went to school in 1923. In those days young girls didn't leave home and were rarely sent to school. Boys went to the Lycee and girls had a school on El Pacha Street. We were taught religious teachings, sewing, embroidery, and of course, French language. It was a very strict nun's school and the only secondary school

available for girls. There were few primary schools for girls, either. It was a difficult time for them.

Q: Did women have to wear the veil?

A: My mother wore the veil and she made me wear it when I was 12 years old. I didn't know how to put it on myself, so she had to put it for me before I went to school. But she wasn't an illiterate woman. She read the newspapers everyday. My father was a very cultured man. He used to send us, my sisters and I, to the theatre, to music concerts and to the cinema, but we always had to be accompanied. He sometimes went with us.

Q: Did you have any brothers?

A: Yes.

Q: Was their upbringing different from yours?

A: Oh, yes. The boys went all alone to school, unaccompanied.

Q: How long did you stay at school?

A: I stayed at school until I was married, at the age of 14.

Q: Did you meet your husband before you got married?

A: Yes, I saw him and he saw me but we didn't date like young people do now. He was 17 years older than I.

- Q: Did this create any problems for you?
- A: No not at all. You know marriage is a kind of hazard game. Either it works or not. You have to fall on the right number (laugh)...
- Q: How many were you in the family?
- A: Four daughters and three sons. We were one of the most «emancipated» families of Tunis.
- Q: Were you close to your parents?
- A: I was very close to my father. Yes, I remember my father saying that he loved his daughters very much. As for my mother, she was a woman of rare intelligence, very much ahead of her time. She was a very cheerful woman, open to people. She did not receive a formal education but she knew how to read. Although she didn't learn French, she understood everything when we spoke.
- Q: What about the other members of the family?
- A: It was totally different. For instance, when we went to my uncle we couldn't speak French; we weren't allowed to. We couldn't speak freely with his daughters.
- Q: Did you learn Arabic at school?
- A: They didn't teach us Arabic at school. We had to learn it at home. We had a private teacher who taught us grammar, reading, writing and the Koran.
- Q: Were you aware of the ideas that were promulgated by Tahar Haddad?
- A: Yes. In fact, my husband's first gift to me was Tahar Haddad's book, «Our Woman in Law and Society». They were very good friends. They lived almost in the same street and used to meet everyday to discuss the question of the emancipation of women and other topical matters of the day.
- Q: Did you discuss Tahar Haddad's ideas with your husband?
- A: We were not married then. But when I was at home, I wasn't aware of the problems other women faced because we lived a rather free life. When I got married, my husband gave me all the



The young and old feminists:
Amel Ben Aba with Nabila Ben Milad

freedom I wanted.

- Q: How come your husband was so liberal in his ideas about women?
- A: You know, when I got engaged my father told me, «Nabiha, you are very lucky. You are getting married to one of the most enlightened young men of Tunis.»
- Q: How did you start becoming aware of the problems women faced?
- A: Just after I got married, **Bechira Ben M'rad** formed the **Moslem Union of Tunisian Women**. It was to teach women how to be aware of their duties, how to raise their children. She asked me to join the movement, and as she was the sister of my sister-in-law, she used to come to visit us everyday because I used to live with my in-laws. She was a middle-aged woman who spoke of freedom for women and of their rights. She was very courageous because she did not only think of upper-class women, who were more or less free considering the times, but of ordinary women, «the daughters of the masses». I stayed in this group until the Second World War. At this time the communist women's movement was starting, in 1942. Women used to meet, discuss and join in students' activities. Finally, the Neo-Destourian party took over the movement, and Bechira Ben M'rad followed because she thought it was a very dynamic movement and was moving forward. It consisted mainly of men who were interested in women's problems.