DR. NAJLA NA'AMAN, MEDICAL PIONEER

I was born in Sidon, Lebanon, a conservative Muslim town, to a conservative yet progressive Druse family. My grandfather had migrated from a village named Atrine, located in the Shuf mountains of Lebanon, before the First World War. He had come to Sidon to begin a business venture, as Sidon was the commercial capital of Lebanon in those days.

After my grandfather retired and returned to Atrine, my father, who had not shown much interest in school, took over the family business and helped my uncle to continue his education in medicine, enabling him to become an ophthalmologist. My father was married at a young age to a thirteen-year-old cousin named Salha who lived very happily with him for thirteen years, bearing him four children — two boys and two girls. Unfortunately, Salha, my mother, died at the age of 25 from a very complicated child-birth that was not terminated. She could not be saved by any of the doctors in Sidon, due to lack of facilities and inadequate training. How deeply shocking that such a tragedy should occur in the twentieth century!

I received my schooling at the Sidon Girls' School, a Presbyterian mission school that specialized in the teaching of home economics. Since I was the eldest in the family, I took over household and child-care responsibilities upon the death of my mother, while still attending to my scholastic work for five years until my father decided to remarry and raise a second family that harmonized well with his first family, thanks to his wise management and my assistance.

In those days, a high school diploma was more than any young woman could expect. Following graduation, a bright young woman could look forward to a sheltered life, far from any exposure to a mixed environment, in which work outside of the home was prohibited. A veil covering one's head and face was required for girls in Sidon from the age of 12 onwards. I had to acquiesce to these traditions, because, even though my father encouraged girls' education, he was the product of a very conservative society. Thus, on the way to school, we were not allowed to stop and talk to anyone, not even a brother or close male relative.

In 1937, I graduated from Sidon Girls' School with distinction. Instead of immediately pursuing further studies, I was obliged to stay at home, applying my home economics skills in the raising of our large family. Meanwhile, I also became very active in Sidon's Women's Society, eventually becoming its secretary and chairperson of the children's welfare committee. However, these activities did not satisfy all of my ambitions. I wanted to teach outside of the home, even outside of Sidon, if possible. When a demand for teachers for Iraq was publicized in 1939, I joined the hundreds of Lebanese girls who traveled to Iraq to teach, on the condition that I would live with my uncle, who was now a practicing physician in a remote village named Shamiyya in southern Iraq.

The school in which I taught was a small primary one for less than a hundred students. Its staff consisted of just three teachers and a principal who was less educated than the instructors. When discord arose between the principal and her staff, I was appointed principal myself with hardly six months of experience, since I was a foreigner and the niece of the district physician. I did fairly well in my new job, and the other teachers cooperated with me.

After three years of teaching in Iraq (two years in rural public schools and one year in a sophisticated private school in Baghdad), I returned to Sidon, where life suddenly seemed quite boring after my experience of independence, travel and self-reliance. Nothing but higher education would be stimulating and exciting enough for me now, I realized.

Due to the post-World War Two economic depression, my father's business suffered. He had a family of seven children to support and educate by this time. Family planning and modern forms of contraception were not in use in those days; the common belief was that God would send the necessary fortune to care for each new child.

Upon graduating from Sidon Girls' School, I had refused a scholarship from the Beirut Junior College because higher education for women was considered unnecessary by my community at that time. Why spend money on girls' education, it was thought, when they will only get married and look after a family? Boys, on the other hand, were expected to financially support their fathers as well as their own families. Hence, they were to be given all the education they asked for.

Marriage did not intrigue me at all during my twenties, whereas higher education and academic degrees were a tempting challenge. Thus, when my appreciative and admiring high school principal, Miss Irene

Teagarden, offered me partial financial support, I didn't hesitate to seize the opportunity to join the Beirut Junior College (today LAU). I applied for work-study assistance to cover the rest of my expenses, along with whatever my father was able to contribute.

Afraid of failing after a long interruption of my studies (seven years), I worked very hard, was considered a "book-worm", and graduated with distinction. I was also elected to receive the Torch Award for 1946, and subsequently received two very good offers for teaching positions. However, my achievements had instilled in me an insurmountable drive to pursue further studies. I felt that I should not stop until I obtained a doctoral degree, but that, I knew, would limit me to education, and I preferred an independent career.

Living in Sidon near the Shabb Hospital gave me the opportunity to consider a medical profession. Nursing had always appealed to me; I found the white uniforms, the handling of medicines and the care of the sick attractive and admirable. Long before, my late mother had noticed my interest in medicine and my success in school, and had expressed her desire and hope that she would one day see me become a doctor like my uncle. I had once assisted my uncle, an opthamologist, in performing an operation. I had been a good and brave assistant, and the experience added to my desire to pursue a career in medicine.

So, why not be a doctor? I asked myself. During the years 1946-1950, while I was employed at the Junior College, I completed the required premedical courses at the American University of Beirut, and was admitted to the AUB Medical School. This was a great privilege which I should not turn down. I began my medical training in 1950. The five years of medical course-work were very hard for I also had to work in order to earn some money.

As a new M.D. in 1955, I completed one year of residency training in internal medicine, and received my license for medical practice. Soon thereafter, I found a job with ARAMCO (the Arabian-American Oil Company), which enabled me to earn money quickly and repay all of my loans. With ARAMCO at Dhahran, I was stunned to find an American small town with trees and shrubs and lawns, complete with pools and comfortable homes, in the middle of the desert. A paradise amidst the sand dunes, I wrote to my family and friends.

ARAMCO at that time provided any Saudi patient, whether native or foreign, with free medical care and hospitalization. The laboratories were more up-to-date than those of the American University Hospital in Beirut, so it was a pleasure to practice medicine scientifically without worrying about the patient's pocketbook. In Dhahran, where I was appointed to work, I saw numerous unusual medical cases, which I never would have had the chance to see again, such as small-pox in its different stages, pediatric dehydration and malnutrition, tetanus, etc.

My two years with ARAMCO (1956-1958) gave me wonderful experiences and an excellent background in general medicine (now known as family medicine), but specialization had become required, so I decided to focus on obstetrics and gynecology. I chose this sub-field of medicine because I still felt the pain of my mother's early and tragic death from complications during child-birth. Also, the strong demand by Lebanese women for the services of Dr. Susan Williamson, an American obstetrician and gynecologist at the American University Hospital, further encouraged me to focus on this specialization. After three years of residency training at AUH and four years of successful private practice in Beirut awaiting an opportunity for further training in the United States, a good offer came and I was encouraged to take it by Dr. Bichers, Chairman of the Obstetrics Department at AUH at that time. With very short notice, I had to leave my flourishing clinic and asked my family to pack it up for me. During these four years of private practice, I was delivering and performing operations at different hospitals with skill and self-confidence. My first operations were at the Ras Beirut Hospital, where I hesitated at first to operate in the absence of Dr. Abul Husn. But I soon convinced myself that since I knew exactly what to do, I could go ahead with his surgical team, and sure enough, all went well.

I spent three years in the United States, the first year at the Worcester Foundation, a renowned institution for basic research in endocrinology. It had been established by two scientists in a small shed, one of them was Dr. Gregory Pincus, who had discovered the contraceptive pill. The institute had grown very rapidly from its humble beginnings to become a major research center equipped with the most sophisticated laboratories. At the Worcester Foundation, I participated in a course on reproductive physiology with fifteen other doctors from various parts of the world. I will never forget one morning in particular.

While preparing the test tubes for a chemical experiment, I experienced the most thrilling moment of my life. A space ship was launched and reached its destination in outer space in a couple of minutes while I was still at the sink preparing my tubes. What a moving and incredible experience that was! It was some time later that I saw the launching on television and then watched the astronauts walking in outer space.

From the Worcester Foundation I next went to the Boston Lying-In Hospital (now the Women's Hospital of the Harvard Medical School), where I trained in sophisticated methods of hormone analysis that were just then being discovered. At that time the United States was short on physicians due to the Vietnamese war. Hence, many foreign fellows were offered employment applications to fill in if they desired to stay. I, however, never had any intention of staying longer than my fellowship required, because I believe that it was my duty to return to my country to assist in the scientific and medical progress of Lebanon. On my way back from the United States, I spent a few months with Dr. Beverly Murphy in Montreal. Dr. Murphy had discovered simpler methods of hormone analysis, which were becoming more popular at the time.

Returning to Beirut in 1969, I discovered that no agreement for my professional future had been reached with American University Hospital. They claimed a lack of funders or excess of obstetricians and gynecologists, or no need for a woman obstetrician and gynecologist in the department, but the plain truth was that my colleagues, teachers and classmates did not want a qualified and dedicated woman in this field to share their privileges and facilities at the AUH, which would have undoubtedly affected their practices negatively. Having decided not to stay in the United States, I very bitterly resumed my private practice, which I had lost to my competitors due to my long absence. The struggle to re-establish myself and deal with my disappointment was quite tough and challenging, but I prevailed. Building up a new clientele was especially difficult at this time because many Lebanese women had become more relaxed and even took pride in choosing a male obstetrician/gynecologist to prove their liberal attitudes.

By 1974, I had resettled and was satisfied with my achievements. I had overcome my frustrations with AUH and my competitors, and was starting to plan for an exciting team project with some competent colleagues. We planned to open a specialized women's clinic, an all-women surgical team, a women's private hospital and were considering other, related possibilities. But bad luck was about to call: The first explosion of the Lebanese civil war, in February of 1975, destroyed the building which houses my clinic on Abdel Aziz street. My patients could not come to me for months and in some cases, even years. Not anticipating the long and brutal war that awaited us, I lost no time or effort in repairing the damaged building and re-opening my clinic. In 1976, I returned to the United States briefly, with the idea of obtaining a license to practice there, but I decided to return so as not to lose my practice in Lebanon for good.

Practicing medicine during the war in Beirut was very hard. Air raids, blockades, explosions and chaos sometimes hindered physicians' ability to provide the best possible care for their patients. Thus, in 1978, I opened a second clinic in Aley in the mountains east of Beirut in order to be closer to my clientele. With two other colleagues, a pediatrician and a general surgeon, I initiated the Al-Iman Hospital of Aley, which remains up until today the best hospital in the area.

During the Israeli invasion of 1982, my home in Raouche was destroyed. Three of my siblings lost our homes and businesses in minutes that summer, and still the war went on and on.

Practicing obstetrics during war was very risky and often quite dangerous. Many time I had to rush to different hospitals under the shells and rockets between Aley and Beirut to deliver patients, some of whom had come down to Beirut under equally difficult circumstances to be delivered by me. This constituted a tremendous responsibility for many human lives, which I could not disregard. I remember once, while driving at high speed at midnight to reach the hospital in time for a delivery, I passed a Syrian barricade without heeding their calls to stop. In their fury, they fired a barrage of bullets into my car, some of which just barely missed me. A colleague saw the car and thought it had gone through an Israeli raid. Neither the soldiers nor their chief could believe I was still alive and unhurt, driving a car with four flat tires, a fallen gas tank, and the back window transformed into jagged shards of glass. I begged the soldiers fervently for a lift to the hospital, where I found my patient all ready to be delivered smoothly and safely. When the hospital director, who took care of the car, called to congratulate me on my safety, I told him I owed my life to my short stature; had I been taller, the bullet that pierced my car seat would have ended up in my head. The sight of the car the next morning was horrifying; it was only then that I shivered with fear and realized the extent of the danger I had confronted.

Regardless of the war, in my private practice I was a pioneer in gynecological surgery. People could not believe nor easily trust that a woman surgeon could be as good as a man. "She must have a male surgeon who assists her," they all thought. But with adequate training from AUH and my confidence in myself, I operated without hesitation at different hospitals with trained nurses for assistants. I also insisted on working with female anesthesiologists whenever possible so as to refute anyone who assumed that I had the assistance of male doctors or health professionals in the operating room. I remember one case in particular: the wife of a Druze shaykh needed a hysterectomy for a fibroid that was reaching up under her rib cage. Her brothers and male relatives stood at all the doors leading to the operating room to ensure that no man was present. The operation was a complete success. This enhanced my reputation and opened more and more doors for my success as a surgeon.

Looking back on all of the challenges, triumphs and adventures of my life, I can say that my greatest accomplishment was to successfully practice a difficult medical specialty during tough war-time conditions. It was very dangerous and enervating, but I survived. Having surmounted and persevered through all those hardships was my greatest achievement. I was always hoping and planning for a more productive research career, since I loved science so much, but the atrocious civil war did not give me the chances I desired. I had decided long ago not to abandon my country by leaving for good. Did I do the right thing?