

Memoirs of Grandma Kamal

By Kamal Abu Chaar
Beirut: World Book Publishing, 1999.
Reviewed by Abir Hamdar

In the spring of 1997, a 76-year old Lebanese woman was sitting in the study room of her daughter's home in California, with a modern computer at hand and a grandson willing to use his writing and technological skills to transfer his grandmother's memories and thoughts into a computer. The woman was Kamal Maalouf Abou-Chaar, and the result of that circumstance is a book entitled **Memoirs of Grandma Kamal**.

The 261-page book is a personal recollection of events and experiences that have shaped Abou-Chaar's life. Although the memories touch on some political and social events, the author insists in her introduction that there is "no intention of making them a historical record." (p.4). Thus, "Memoirs of Grandma Kamal is a personal journey into the life of a strong, intelligent woman who believes in the Arabic saying: "The day that goes by will never be duplicated."

Memoirs of Grandma Kamal is divided into 10 chapters. Each chapter encompasses different phases in Abou-Chaar's life: From the authors' early childhood in the mountains, to her family's move to Beirut, the strive for knowledge, marriage and children, as well as her memorable trip to Seattle, all of which are recounted in simple, uncomplicated language.

The first chapter opens during the author's early childhood years, in the mountain area of Al Mashra. Abou-Chaar describes a home with a great deal of activity going on all year round. It was also the home of an educated family where "certain revolutionary attitudes towards girls" (p.1), were in sharp contrast to the usual norms of the time. As we read the first chapter, we learn that Abou-Chaar's mother ran the house and the missionary school that her late husband helped establish. Abou-Chaar herself comes through as a smart child, striving to discover and make sense of the world around her. In fact, at three years of age the author is intrigued by the big eyes of a cow and cannot resist examining them with a straw. We later discover that this tendency for knowledge and understanding would accompany the author throughout her life.

As Abou-Chaar grows older, she is nurtured by the discipline of a serious mother and grandmother. She is also surrounded by guests who constantly come and go. The author mentions that one of these guests was political leader Antoun Saadeh, whom the young Abou-Chaar remembers as being her broth-

er's friend and the man who sang with a rich, full voice.

In the later chapters, Abou-Chaar recounts her family's move to Beirut, and the fear and uncertainty of attending

a different school, meeting new friends and proving herself in a strange environment. But the child is strong enough to overcome all financial and social obstacles. In fact, Abou Chaar was to later graduate with flying colors from several schools and colleges including the American Junior College (LAU). Not even marriage to Dr. Charles Abou Chaar, an AUB professor, and the expansion of their family could slow down her desire for knowledge. Yet it is in Chapter 6 that the reader fully comprehends the force behind Abou-Chaar's search for knowledge. The author asserts:

I was feeling more and more a pressure to come to terms with myself. ... I needed to reach a decision but it had to be on my own steam. I had tried to walk in the footsteps of those who go searching for the truth. I had read philosophy books. These were enlightening, but left me searching. I had delved to a degree into science and mathematics. They helped, but I felt I had to keep up the search. I figured I might find it in music, and took up its study. This was a refreshing experience, but still left me searching... (p.154)

The constant search finally leads Abou-Chaar to a deep faith in God. The author says: "There is no problem that we can solve better than he can" (p. 155). And it is this deep, unquestionable faith that becomes the turning point in Abou Chaar's life and in her relationship with others.

Finally, **Memoirs of Grandma Kamal**, may be a personal recollection of Abu Chaar's life, yet at the heart of it the author captures the customs and ways of life long forgotten. She also evokes the image of Beirut as it had once been. A city "with cozy houses and large stretches of vegetables" (p. 112).

