

Salwa Nassar as I knew her

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By Najla Aqrawi

Reviewed by Nazik Saba Yared

The book is a touching homage to the first Lebanese woman physicist, Dr. Salwa Nassar, written both with love and admiration. Before embarking on Salwa Nassar's life, the author sets the background presenting a lively and very picturesque image of Beirut in the first half of the Twentieth Century: its schools, poets, writers, and teachers. At the same time, the author gives a brief history of the Junior College, (a women's college, now the Lebanese American University) in its early days, its curricula and strict rules and regulations, student life, and social and cultural activities. The rest of the book reveals the social constraints imposed on women's clothing, outings and activities, as well as the economic hardships the Lebanese people had to endure during and after the first World War. The book also refers to the many volunteers both men and women, professors and students who helped alleviate the social and economic hardships the people were subjected to.

Mrs. Aqrawi starts her book by remembering her first day at the Junior College in 1931 when she met a fellow student, Salwa Nassar, who later was the same friend who dictated to her her will, when she was on her deathbed in Middlesex Hospital in London. Between that first meeting and the last, the author gradually unfolds the life and work of an exceptional woman, gleaned information from numerous reference books, letters, documents, interviews, and people who knew Dr. Nassar, as well as from her own personal memories of the unforgettable years she spent with her.

Salwa Nassar came from a poor family in Shoueir, but her outstanding performance in mathematics since her early childhood helped her obtain a scholarship to enter the Junior College and later AUB, where she was the first woman to enroll in the Mathematics Department. While studying, she assisted in the chemistry laboratory at the Junior College and gave private lessons, and after graduation she taught mathematics, first in Palestine and then in Iraq where the author describes the prevailing political and social atmosphere. Her dream was to save enough money to enable her to pursue graduate studies in the United States and specialize in Nuclear Physics. Since she had been offered a scholarship by Smith College, she enrolled in that College in 1939 and obtained her M.S. in Physics, then went on in 1940 to Berkeley University in California to work towards a Ph.D. with such world famous physicists as

Oppenheimer, McMillan, Lawrence and others. The outbreak of World War II deprived her of the necessary material to carry out her experiments, so she interrupted her work and went back to teaching physics at Smith College until she returned to Berkeley where she taught and continued her studies, and finally obtained her PH.D. in 1945 on "Cosmic-Ray Showers." Salwa Nassar was thus the first Arab woman to specialize in nuclear physics and the eighth woman to graduate from Berkeley with a PH.D. in Physics. In the meantime, Nassar had become a member of several scientific societies, had published many papers on nuclear Physics in the most prestigious scientific journals, and had the results of her research included in a university textbook on modern physics. She received many offers for a teaching position in physics in the best American universities, but she turned them all down to return to Lebanon in 1945 and serve her own country where scientific research was virtually unknown, and where the most elementary laboratories were unheard of.

She started off by teaching at the Junior College to which she felt attached and indebted to the end of her life. Naturally, she introduced a number of Physics courses into the curriculum. Between 1949 and 1950, when she was visiting her professor at Ann Arbor University, she was asked to equip a Cloud Chamber for the Physics Department there. Back in Lebanon, she taught physics at AUB, before becoming head of the Physics Department until 1965. Here she devoted all her time and effort to the academic development of the department acquiring some equipment such as a microscope for nuclear emulsion and a neutron monitor. During this period she actively pursued her scientific research abroad, lecturing and writing, participating in international conferences and advising on scientific reforms in education in Lebanon. The author refers to some of Dr. Nassar's many talks and papers, summarizing the main content of those that were not on nuclear physics, but on general subjects such as education, creativity, religion and science.

Dr. Nassar was also responsible for the founding of the Lebanese Institute for Scientific Research, struggling for ten years before it finally saw the light in 1963. In recognition of her research and educational efforts she was granted several medals, and her name appeared in the 1960 issue of the "Who's Who in Atoms."

Salwa Nassar's love for her first college made her give up her scientific research once again to become in 1965 President of Beirut College for Women (formerly Junior College), a position she, unfortunately, could not hold for long. One year later she fell ill with cancer and died of leukemia on February 17th, 1967, at the age of fifty four. Yet, in the short period of her presidency, she managed to improve the

curriculum and keep a balance between a liberal arts education and scientific specialization.

The author describes the last days of her illness and her funeral in full detail and with deep emotion. Added to the value of this exceptional woman's academic achievements are the numerous stories and anecdotes intertwined with the facts of her daily life that enliven the book and make for fascinating reading.

Salwa Nassar was not only an outstanding physicist, but a woman who strongly believed in women's rights to liberty

and equality with men, as well as their right to education, and the best in Western civilization. With great love and affection, the author also introduces us to the various aspects of her friend's personality: her sensitivity, modesty, self confidence, and acute sense of humor. Her moral courage as well as her generosity of heart incited her to abandon many opportunities in the United States in order to serve her College and country.

Reading Mrs. Aqrabi's captivating book, leaves the reader with a feeling of great admiration for this unique woman and a hope that it will create among our young women and men, a desire to emulate her and follow in her footsteps.

By Najla T. Akrawi

In September 1931, Najla Tannous, a graduate of the American School for Girls in Tripoli and Salwa Nassar, a graduate of Broummana High School, joined the freshman class of the Junior College in Beirut. It was a bold step for the two teenagers to pursue Higher Education, a privilege, usually reserved for boys at that time. They both came from a rural background and culture with strong ties to the native soil from which they drew vigor and inspiration. Najla came from Bishmizzeen, a village in the Koura district in North Lebanon, and Salwa from Shweir in the Metn area.

They had many things in common, which brought them together, and developed into strong ties of genuine friendship, which lasted for many years - a life time for Salwa, and ever present in the memory of Najla

Hardwork, integrity, a deep sense of loyalty to family and educational institutions, pride in achievement, and an innate sense of humor were some of the traits they shared and lived by over the years.



In 1933 they graduated from the Junior College and were the proud holders of a Sophomore diploma with honors. Salwa joined the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the American University of Beirut and Najla went to Iraq to teach at the Girls Training School in Baghdad.

In later years they met again, in Iraq, Beirut, Paris, London, and finally on this campus (of The Lebanese American University), where they attended the ceremony of the laying down of the foundation stone of Sage Hall in 1933 .

In 1965, Salwa became the president of Beirut College for Women and her friend Najla was ever ready to help

in any capacity. Najla made her contribution through her work with the Alumni Association as board member and later as president of the Alumni Association. This book you have with you today is a reflection of a deep friendship of two kindred souls. It is a work of love for an institution they both considered as their second home, but above all it is a tribute to the memory of an exceptional Lebanese woman who made her stand among the great of this world.