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Memoirs of a Lost Arab World
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"It was a trying time for dreamers," Wadad Makdisi Cortas wrote of the year 1935. She was 26 and "yearned to speak my language, to read Arabic books, and to foster Arab independence and solidarity." But she had just become the headmistress of a girls' school in Lebanon that was a particular thorn in the side of the French colonial rulers.

As in their other colonies, the French imposed their language, insisting that the students at the Ahliyah National School for Girls not only be taught in French but also use it at recess. "Students who insisted on speaking Arabic were to be singled out, and those who persisted were to be given detention," Cortas recalled. (Of course, as history marched on, English won the battle to become the global lingua franca.)

Cortas' memoirs span the 20th Century: She was born in 1909 and died in 1979. She writes beautifully, with dry humor and with sadness, of living and traveling in a Middle East without borders and of the agony inflicted as frontiers were carved into a soil alive with friendships and family ties - agonies that continue to this day.

She evokes a time when Jews and Arabs mingled freely, then stopped due to the growing conflict as Palestine was forcibly transformed into Israel. And she describes from personal knowledge - she was one of 12 women amidst 1,000 men at the American University of Beirut - women's struggle for a place in the public sphere.

Cortas was still the headmistress when my mother taught at Ahliyah years later and when I went to school there decades later. So I turned to the just-published English translation of her memoirs, **A World I Loved: The Story of an Arab Woman** (Nation Books) with anticipation mixed with apprehension. She was a formidable woman and I had left a lot of homework undone: I was sure she would reach across the pages of time to hold me to account.

To my mind, perhaps the book's most astonishing revelation was that she was only five feet tall. She so towered over everyone, her back straighter than the wall in the

assembly hall where we were gathered for pep talks and music. But of course she spoke from the stage and we were much smaller then.

When she was growing up, in the early days of the 20th Century, Arabs were not yet worried about Zionism. Cortas describes a mixed Middle East that included White Russians, Armenians, Turks, Jews and many others among the Arabs. In her youth, this woman from what had just become Lebanon even visited a Jewish kibbutz in the Galilee. She describes it as efficiently run by recently arrived Polish Jews but "completely detached from the life of the area." Arabs only later discovered that many kibbutz dwellers were being trained in modern warfare at the same time as the British empire was disarming the Palestinians.

Cortas' writing is often lyrical. She depicts a Beirut where mulberry trees and orchards stretched out in place of today's chic restaurants and cafes. "We learned to love the sea in all of its moods," she writes, and tells of the old fisherman Khalil who remained by the sea when the Italians bombarded the Lebanese coast on the eve of World War I. His philosophy: "Conquerors come and go. Only the sea is eternally with us."

She was bred on politics, which were then as they are now a matter of life and death. She listened as her father and his friends argued long into the night whether Arab aspirations for independence would fare better under a weak Ottoman Empire or by supporting the British and French. Arab nationalists chose the latter and paid a price still exacted today.

Cortas came from a family of redoubtable women, and her father supported the equality of the sexes. She and her sister were the first girls from their school - they also studied at Ahliyah - to go to university. At the American University of Beirut, they were able to get an education but had no social life. In a puzzling insight into social mores, roller-skating was the only sport considered proper for young women.

The female students were not allowed to attend historical plays, but could take up public speaking, and they happily debated the emancipation of women and political freedoms. The student body went on strike to protest British and French imperialism, but America was looked upon with favor as "a great center of liberal ideas." That was then.

Cortas visited America many times in later years, admiring its "organization and discipline" but finding that "grace had vanished. Life was a swift race, and no one could afford to loiter." She noted that black students at the University of Michigan, where she worked for a post-graduate degree, were a small minority and were "quite aloof. When it was my privilege to have contact with some of them, they unloaded their painful recollections." In perhaps the understatement of the century, she thought it would "take a long time to change the situation."

This globe-trotting woman also taught in Iraq back in 1930. Her daily commute in Baghdad involved a boat ride across the Tigris, past riverbanks adorned with tall palms dangling red dates, gardens, and palaces. "I did not have eyes enough to see all the haunting sights of this magical city."

But Cortas soon got into trouble. Chosen to speak to a cohort of graduating pilots, she "prepared a fiery speech expressing pride at seeing the first Arab aviators fly in Arab skies. I must have been strongly moved, for the speech disturbed the British authorities." For the rest of her stay, she concentrated on her teaching.

Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and the whole Arab world were intertwined then, and, in spite

of the borders, still are. Cortas' daughter Mariam married the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said. Cortas helped to found and served on the board of many organizations, including the Institute for Palestine Studies, to which I am affiliated.

This intertwining is why to be an Arab is to sometimes live in a well of sorrow. My mother, who also taught in Baghdad in her youth, before her exile from Palestine, spent her last years in Jordan. The advent of satellite TV into many homes since 2000 meant that she was daily buffeted by graphic images of terrifying death in Iraq to the east and in Palestine to the west. Perhaps many Arabs found some meagre comfort, as I did, that their parents were no longer alive for the Israeli assault on Gaza this winter.

Cortas wrote before she died in 1979: "War has crowded the memories of my youth and old age and every stage in between." She witnessed the early flowering and brutal crushing of Arab nationalism; the catastrophic loss of Palestine in 1948, which has defined the region since; national liberation movements; the growing rapaciousness of oil wealth, local and foreign; and the succession of home grown dictators and their freedoms denied.

Her last years were marked by the horrors of the Lebanese civil war, described in staccato sentences in between sheltering from the fighting. Yet her legacy lives on and the school she served for so long has remained a byword for Arab nationalism. But her nationalism was never of an ugly, exclusivist kind. Rather it was about people attached to their land being able to express their identity amidst diversity.

She wondered whether succeeding generations would "prove wiser" than her own. As if to answer that question, the introduction was written by her daughter Mariam, who worked tirelessly to get the English edition published in time for the 100th anniversary of her mother's birth. Mariam has loving, and unflinchingly honest, memories of her mother.

And the afterword is written by Cortas' granddaughter Najla, an accomplished actress, who discovered during a visit to Lebanon in 2006, when war raged once more, that she was the veteran now, comforting children and "somehow responsible for future generations." She and her peers fought down their fear and went on to protest in old ways and new, blogging and creating art, music and theatre, with "no sense of resignation."

Had Cortas lived through the horrors of the wars of the present day, she would also have seen much determination and sensed many changes, small but tangible, giving hope that a world loved is not yet lost. It is still a trying time for dreamers. Yet there are dreamers still, of all races and creeds, striving for a different reality.

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