



Happy Birthday Teta Shams



The enthusiasm that prevailed among Teta's loved ones before the 12th of July never subsided in spite of the devastating ongoing war. Actually Teta never realized the exact nature of the preparations leading to celebrating her Centenary; all she could relate to were small details that were very important to her such as her "parents" visiting her from America, or Joe and Helen arriving from Australia and Joe picking the figs every morning.

The enthusiasm has turned into anxiety by all about the safety of Lebanon and the Lebanese who remained inside. For Teta Shams, however, aborting the event because of the war did not amount to more than her visitors being delayed for some time. Her prayers were directed at ending the war whenever she was reminded that a war was going on.

Now that UN Resolution 1701 has been adopted on the day of Teta's intended Centenary, leading to the resolution of the problems and issues that led to the war in the first place, let us hope that Teta's sincere prayers have contributed in that direction. What better birthday present could be offered to Teta than the hope of the end of hostilities, and her loved ones from overseas visiting her.

God Bless Teta Shams, God Bless Lebanon and God Bless You All.






**Centenary of
Shams Nasr Abi-Hanna**



August 2006





Our story begins in a small town called Hamat in the North of Lebanon. Shams was born to Ibrahim and Saydeh Nasr some time between 1906 and 1907. The Hamat official parish records indicate that she was christened on November 30th 1907. She was the youngest of the couple's five sons and three daughters.

Shams was merely a baby when her mother and four of her siblings left to the United States in search of a better life. She was thereby left to be raised by her grandmother that she remembers as *Hajjeh*.

As a young girl, Shams lead a simple rural life in the small village of Hamat. Her schooling consisted of lessons in the church attic given by Madame Astir, a woman whose name she still recalls to this day.

Towards the end of World War I, a young man named Hanna Abi-Hanna moved to Hamat from the mountain village of Bcheeleh to pursue a career in shoe making earning him the title of *Maallem*. Maallem Hanna was in his mid-twenties when he spotted Shams filling water at the village well and she caught his attention. Urged by his family and friends to marry and settle in Hamat for good, he asked her father for her hand in marriage. Shams's father approached

her asking if she would agree to marry Hanna Abi-Hanna, the *Bcheelani*. She answered him innocently yet cannily by saying “As you like.” Hanna, age 25 and Shams, age 16 were hence wed in 1923. Regardless of it appearing to be an arranged marriage, it was one based on genuine love, compassion and support for one another.



The only family they had besides each other was Umm Hanna. She had moved with her son to Hamat and lived with the couple until her last days. She was infamous for her imposingly strong character and somewhat difficult attitude. Shams, on the other hand was very humble and quiet and had to put up with her mother-in-law in silence.



The times were difficult and their financial situation was not one to be desired. Despite their poor circumstances their strong bond of love helped them carry through. In times of extreme need, without waiting to be asked, Shams would give up a bracelet or watch for Maallem Hanna to sell to sustain his business.

Once, Mallem Hanna and Shams walked from Hamat to Bcheeleh in the snow. They got lost along the way, so Mallem Hanna asked Shams to wait while he kept walking. When he finally saw a light indicating that they had reached the village, he went back to bring Shams with him.

He worked hard at the shoe store in order to support his family, while Shams would do whatever she could to lend a hand. They had no electricity so she would go and gather timber for heating, cooking and washing. She also took on jobs like olive and fig picking, cracking almonds as well as silkworm raising and cigarette production. During the summers she would go down to the beach by foot with a few women from the village

to collect salt and gather fish left by the waves in the rocks and bring them back to sell.



Even with all the hard work, Hanna and Shams had been blessed with five children, Michel, Joseph, Nicholas, Hoda and Sabah.

Maallem Hanna had started to feel nostalgic for Bcheeleh, so in 1938 he took his family along and decided to give life there another chance. The family struggled to make ends meet and a year later the lack of funds was such that Maallem Hanna sold his land and his home in Bcheeleh for a modest amount of 900 Liras, enough to cover his debts and take a trip to visit their relatives in Hamat. While there, he sent after Shams and the children to come back with all their belongings. They then resettled in Hamat with the care and help of their relatives who each did as much as they could to support them.



During that time World War II had erupted and the British army was mobilized in Hamat. This allowed the family to bring in some extra cash in exchange for washing the soldiers' clothes and uniforms.

When Michel was still a child, they lived in a house that was in a very poor state. A neighbor, seeing some water and clay drop from the ceiling, warned Shams that it didn't look safe. Only minutes later, the roof collapsed, Shams managing to escape through one of the windows harmless.

They were forced to move very often, renting small houses throughout the village. Home furniture to them consisted of no more than a mattress and blanket. Finally, in 1948 they were able to move into a larger house with its private well and a gas oven. The extra rooms that they didn't need were leased out providing some additional income.

The three eldest sons, Michel, Joseph and Nicholas left school at the completion of primary

to help their father in running the family business. It was such concessions and determination that allowed their youngest brother Sabah the opportunity of continuing his education all the way to university level.

Shams always made sure the family had their meals together. On busy days, she would prepare the food and take it to the store where they all gathered to eat.

In 1951, the hard work having paid off, Michel was able to travel to Australia in search of a better future. Seeing that good opportunities may arise, he was soon followed by Joseph and Nicholas who assisted him in a shoe repair stores they set up with what they had learned from their father. Joseph was the only one who stayed in Australia and tended to the stores, while the others came back to raise families in Lebanon.





Just before laying the foundations of their house, Maallem Hanna and Shams, each separately, made a vow to offer 5 Liras to the church and have the cross lit. It was not until afterwards that they discovered they had made the same vow.

Sabah had graduated with a degree in Architecture from the American University of Beirut by 1959, following which he went to work in Kuwait. During the mid-sixties, Maallem Hanna bought a piece of land in the center of the village and very close to the house where Shams was born. A house was designed and built for the couple, on that piece of land, the first to their name. This house has since witnessed three generations of beautiful families and continues to attract them from all over the world.

The love affair between Maallem Hanna and Shams lasted until the last days of Hanna's life. Upon his passing, Shams insisted that he be buried in Hamat where he could remain close enough for her to visit regularly.

After Shams's children had all grown up and made fine livings of their own, they took her on travels to all corners of the world. She visited her sons and grandchildren in Australia more than once.



In the early-seventies, she went to the United States where she was reunited with her sister Latifeh after an absence of 66 years. She also made several trips to Kuwait where Sabah as well as many of her grandchildren have made homes.



Teta Shams remains enthroned in her house in Hamat, waiting for and enjoying visits by her “subjects” from inland or from overseas. Each visit serves to invigorate her antique bodily and mental senses, and her pure outlook to life. **God bless her.**



