



Adventist School Mouseitbeh (ASM) entrance

Photo courtesy of Elias Choufani.

# Adventist School Mouseitbeh (ASM)

## MELANIE RICHES WIXWAT

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Adventist School Mouseitbeh (ASM) is a coeducational day school operated by the East Mediterranean Region of the Middle East and North Africa Union Mission. Following the educational ideals of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it offers four levels of education (kindergarten to secondary) and is accredited by the Lebanese Ministry of Education. Currently (2020) the school services approximately 600 students, the majority of them are non-Christian.

## Early Beginnings

ASM is a descendant of “Ecole Adventiste,” established in 1929 as the first Seventh-day Adventist educational institution in Lebanon. The school began under the direction of Hana (Hanna ) Jubran Nasr as a one-teacher elementary school with five grades, a kindergarten, and an enrolment of seven students, with all subjects taught in Arabic and French.<sup>1</sup> Most early teachers were French and German Adventist missionaries from Europe. Shukri Nowfel, the first Lebanese Adventist pastor, taught Arabic.

When the Mouseitbeh Seventh-day Adventist Church was completed in 1929 in Zeydaniye, Mouseitbeh, the elementary school established its permanent quarters, sharing the same building and grounds as the church. It quickly established a good reputation in the community as students became known for their high standards of character and conduct.<sup>2</sup>

In 1947 Adeeb Fargo succeeded Nasr as principle.<sup>3</sup> Enrolment had grown to over one hundred and fifty students who came from many different religious backgrounds. Even though the Lebanese curriculum was taught to prepare students to take the government exams, daily Bible classes and a morning devotional period were held. Every Friday morning the teachers invited their students to attend Sabbath School the following day, often with over ninety children attending. In addition, extra-curricular activities such as weekly Junior Missionary Volunteer Society (JMV) were also offered.

During the 1947-1948 school year, a number of children who attended Sabbath School decided to be baptized, despite the opposition from parents and relatives.<sup>4</sup> Dedicated teachers who spent many hours in the classroom as well as in the after-school programs included Naim Oweis, Evelyn Dikran, Rose Dikran, Aida Ghazal, and Minerva Nowfel.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the 1947-1948 school year, the student body began to outgrow the space provided in the Mouseitbeh Seventh-day Adventist Church and had a number of needs. Adeeb Fargo, the school principal from 1948 to 1951, wrote: "We could have many more (students) if the walls of the classrooms could be pushed back to accommodate more, if Middle East College graduated a few more teachers, and if the Lebanon Syria Mission could provide a little more money for the school budget." When over two hundred students registered for the 1948-1949 school year, a small library was added as well as a science laboratory and some physical training apparatus.<sup>6</sup>

The Junior Missionary Volunteer society, now fully organized, had seventy students in attendance. Fargo wrote with some humor: "Some teachers have grown one or two white hairs as a consequence of hard work and great responsibilities; others complain appendicitis; none have gotten married; but among the students, 98 percent attend regularly, 99 percent are always on time, and only one quarter of one percent cause problems."<sup>7</sup> All were looking forward to a grand investiture in the Spring.

It was in 1953 under the leadership of Salim Noujaim when the Ecole Adventiste began to offer secondary classes and was renamed the Beirut Junior Academy (also known as Beirut Arabic School).<sup>8</sup> When Jad Katrib became principal for the 1955-1956 school year, there were 385 children enrolled. Noujaim, now the Union Educational secretary, reported that the academy was the largest elementary and secondary school in the Union and included eleven grades.<sup>9</sup>

Under Katrib's leadership, the school was on its way to becoming a financially sound and self-supporting institution. Between 1955-1957, Pastor George Raffoul conducted a baptismal class which resulted in the baptism of seven young people.<sup>10</sup>

The school played a considerable part in the welfare and progress of the Sabbath School, MV society, and the Ingathering campaign of the East Mediterranean Union. The students, although predominantly Muslim, enthusiastically grouped together with Middle East College students and teachers to engage in ingathering adventures, often raising more money than all the other fields in the Union.<sup>11</sup>

The year came when the academy urgently needed additional space due to its rapidly growing enrolment. The Middle East Division committee voted on March 8, 1957 to pass on the amount received from the General Conference 1956 Missions Extension Offering to the Beirut Junior Academy to enable them in their expansion.<sup>12</sup> The Mouseitbeh church building and its facilities were handed over to the school to help with the school's physical needs, and a new church building was constructed on the school property.<sup>13</sup>

Issa Kharma was appointed principal in 1960. The 1962-1963 school year began with an enrolment of 297 students and a staff of eleven Adventist teachers. Under the direction of Kharma, nine out of ten students (120 children) at the school were members of the Sabbath School. He writes "we made our first goal to bring every pupil to the Sabbath School." They accomplished this by contacting the parents and informing them about the program and its importance to their children, also meeting with them in a Home and School Association meeting to enlist their cooperation.<sup>14</sup>

For the 1965-1966 school year, Mouseitbeh school became the only self-supporting institution in Lebanon. Its academic standards compared with the most advanced educational institutions in Beirut, which offered the same range of classwork.<sup>15</sup>

When Alfred Akar assumed principalship in 1967, the school was upgraded to a 12-grade school and the name changed to Mouseitbeh Adventist Secondary School (MASS). Later in 1987, Grade 13 (equivalent to college freshman) was added.<sup>16</sup> The school continued to achieve unprecedented records of success in government examinations, with some passing at 100 percent.<sup>17</sup>

Plans to boost Adventist secondary education in Lebanon were approved during a meeting of the Middle East Division committee on March 22, 1967. The committee approved building a third story on the Mouseitbeh school and adding classes to complete the secondary level of education.<sup>18</sup>

Enrolment continued to grow. In 1968, Principal Hugh Cowles<sup>19</sup> reported that there were 480 students and the school continued to be the largest Adventist institution in the Middle East, offering the first part of the Lebanese baccalaureate curriculum.<sup>20</sup> A high percentage of students were successful and excelled in their government examinations.<sup>21</sup> In 1970 during the Middle East Division Spring committee meeting on March 19, 1970, it was voted to urge the MASS "to give careful study to the possibility of offering the Baccalaureate Part II in order that our Adventist youth may be prepared to serve in professions requiring official recognition."<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the traditional classes, Cowles implemented a vocational program that integrated sewing, typewriting, painting, and carpentry into the daily schedule. During vacations and days off students used the

skills they were learning to help with school renovations and other projects. They were paid three Lebanese pounds per hour that went towards their tuition. The program continued until the Lebanese Civil War.<sup>23</sup>

## Civil War and After

Civil war broke out in Lebanon and continued for a period of 15 years from 1975 to 1990. During this critical time in Lebanon's history, the school was led by Samir Shahine until 1988 and Issa Kharma (who served as the director for both MASS and BASS from 1989 to 1998). It continued to serve the community in providing quality education in times of peace and security during times of unrest.

MASS became a "shelter in the time of storm" for the students. During the times when it was impossible to hold classes, the teachers invited their students to come in the afternoons for sports activities. Often 100 or more students would come and play basketball, football, and other kinds of activities.

Elia Wehbe, a teacher of physical education, remembers: "We were able to keep our students well-controlled and safe during intense periods of war. By engaging them in interesting activities we managed to keep them from running around the neighborhood." Wehbe began a volleyball team consisting of Christian and Muslim students that competed with other schools from the nearby areas.<sup>24</sup>

Wehbe was also the youth director for the Mousaitbeh Adventist church. Students were invited every Sabbath afternoon to attend a branch Sabbath School. He remembers one weekend when the youth were gathered in the hall doing their activities. "A communist party arrived and wanted to use the school for offices, but the teachers, and students, and other adults in the school refused to let them enter. Parents arrived with their weapons and began shooting at the group. Nobody was hurt but the party knew they would not gain access to the school." Students felt safe, loved, and a part of a large family. Today (2020) many families are sending their children to ASM, in some cases up to four generations.<sup>25</sup>

In 1982, due to the Israeli invasion, hundreds of families fled from south Lebanon to Beirut. The school was chosen by the government to house more than 35 displaced families for several months. During that time the school administration and teachers supported these families by providing food and shelter and recreational activities for the children to help keep them busy and out of trouble.<sup>26</sup>

After the war, in 1997 the Lebanese Ministry of Education (MOE) began a new approach to education in which the teaching load was to be decentralized. Grades were divided into "cycles" (divisions) and Heads of Divisions (HOD) served as the management board for day-to-day work. When Elias Choufani became principal in 2002, he implemented this approach, installing management positions for each division, and in addition, subject coordinators who planned, trained, implemented, and evaluated each subject individually.<sup>27</sup>

In 1998 the MOE introduced an instructional approach that utilized technology in assisting with the lesson planning. Choufani organized workshops and over 50 training sessions for the management board, teachers,

parents, and students to help facilitate the learning process of operating and navigating through the technicalities of the system.

In 2011, Choufani began a program in which specialized teachers were brought in to deal with the special needs of students - those who needed extra help to grasp their lessons and those who excelled in class, needing more challenge.<sup>28</sup>

During an Education conference of the East Mediterranean Field (EMF) in October 2013, it was decided that in order to reflect the identity of the school as an Adventist institution, the English name should be changed to Adventist School Mouseitbeh (ASM). This change also reflected the literal translation of the Arabic name in the permit granted by the Ministry of Education. An action was taken at the Year-end meetings of EMF on November 18, 2013 to put this into effect.<sup>29</sup>

On the cutting edge of innovation, ASM began a program in 2018 that other schools are now following. In addition to the electronic platform that was begun in 1998, teachers began recording detailed instructional videos that are uploaded to an online library for students and parents to view at home. Parents and teachers have been happy with the combined background in education and technology.<sup>30</sup>

## Enrolment

Enrolment changed a lot over the years. Before the war in 1975 and up to 1982, the school was serving approximately 340 students. When Kharma became the school director at the end of the war, enrolment increased to 1,150 students during a period of two years. Later, when the situation went back to normal, the school had to reduce student enrolment in order to comply with the government requirements regarding space and develop libraries, laboratories, and teachers' rooms. Currently (2020), the government requires a certain amount of space for each student, which leaves room for a maximum of 670 students.<sup>31</sup>

Today (2020), ASM continues to provide a well-rounded education to children in the community. Awards are frequently given by the government for exceptional exam results to students who regularly rank among the top 10 schools in Beirut.<sup>32</sup>

Community service plays a vital role in the ASM curriculum. Working with the Children Cancer Centre in Lebanon (CCCL), the ASM students participate in various fund-raising activities to collect money for the hospital. Their non-competitive sports teams combine with other school teams throughout the year to participate in fund-raising programs. Gifts are collected at Christmas time to hand out to the children, and the school choir participates in fund-raising events. In the spring, food parcels are prepared by the students, parents, and teachers and distributed to poor families in the area.

Graduations are a major affair for both the pre-school and the high school. The Adventist message is shared through speeches and prayers. Everything is focused-from the school Facebook posts to celebrations-on

the work and philosophy of the church.<sup>33</sup>

## Legacy

Guided and supported by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Lebanon, ASM continues to uphold the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. ASM has been faithfully serving the community. Many school graduates have become leaders in their fields, physicians, professors, judges, high officers in the army, internal security services in Lebanon, and bank managers. Strong ties exist between the school and the alumni who donate funds to help poor students complete their education at ASM.

## Principals

Hana Jubran (1929-1948); Adeeb Fargo (1948-1951); Salim Noujaim (1951-1955); Jad Katrib (1956-1959); Issa Kharma (1960-1967); Alfred Akar (1967-1969); L. H. Cowles (1969-1971); Jad Katrib (1971-1972); Samir Shahine (1973-1988); Issa Kharma (1989-1998); Johnny Manassian (1999-2001); Elias Choufani (2002-present).

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