

In her recent autobiography, Queen Noor of Jordan details a dramatic life. Carinthia West, her classmate at a school in Washington DC in the Sixties, talks to her about the book and her life with the dashing Hashemite King

# An *unexpected* life

HERE CAN BE no doubt that my old friend Queen Noor of Jordan has had a remarkable life. The extraordinary story of the former Lisa Halaby, the eldest child of an Arab-American father, Najeeb Halaby, and a mother, Doris, of Swedish extraction, is told in her book *Leap of Faith: Memoirs of an Unexpected Life*. The book describes her fascination with her Syrian roots; her schooling during the Kennedy administration, when she became politically aware; and her time at Princeton University, where she was deeply affected by the Vietnam War. It recounts her parents' divorce, her early career in urban planning, which took her to the Middle East, and her introduction to King Hussein. She details their secret courtship and whirlwind marriage in June 1978, the birth of their children, and all the turns of fortune that were played out against a background of world events, from the Camp David peace talks and the Gulf War, until the King's tragic and untimely death at the age of 63.

Throughout the book, Queen Noor offers her own distinct perspective on some tough geopolitical issues. She also details the period of waiting prior to the Gulf War in 1991, when her husband shuttled back and forth in diplomatic efforts to avoid con-

frontation.' He tried so hard, and it was so frustrating,' she says.

Even at school, I remember her displaying a strong sense of right and wrong, whether standing up for school injustices or campaigning on civil-rights issues. Her late husband paid tribute to this desire to uphold the truth, when he gave her the name 'Noor' (Noor Al Hussein means literally 'Light of Hussein'). 'It was the most precious gift my husband ever gave me,' she says.

The dedication in *Leap of Faith* reads simply: 'For my beloved Hussein - light of my life'. Their marriage was a love match; it survived a miscarriage, the jealous intrigues of the royal court, and rumours of affairs fuelled by international gossip columnists, none of which she shirks from addressing. In one of many moving letters, this one on the occasion of their tenth wedding anniversary, King Hussein wrote: 'I thank God for our life of love, and the children we are blessed to have. I know it is not all I would have wished for you or anything close to that. I know myself. I know my shortcomings, and I also know I am blessed to have you by my side, loving, caring, brave and pure.'

Over the many years of our friendship, I observed that it didn't matter what political crisis the King was experiencing - he always respected his wife's opinion. Sometimes, I

would intercept an amused look on the King's face at some shared exchange or observation on her part. Gentle teasing was often their conversational currency, and must have provided an antidote to court etiquette. It was clear they had fun together, whether escaping to indulge their love of flying on a helicopter trip to the desert, throwing off their panicked security detail on a private motorbike ride, or entertaining their family and many friends at their summer palace on the sands of Aqaba, with its views of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and Egypt.

The last time I saw the King and Queen together was at their twentieth wedding-anniversary party, held at their house in England, just two months before the King was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Queen Noor's three step-children, Abir, Prince Ali and Princess Haya, and her own children, Princes Hamzah and Hashim and Princesses Iman and Raiyah, applauded as the royal couple took to the dancefloor. That night, all of us privileged enough to be counted as friends received the same generous and courteous greetings.

No matter what his personal or political circumstances, King Hussein always noticed the things that mattered to other people, whether it was a child shyly proffering a drawing or a Bedu bearing a petition.



*Photograph courtesy of Weidenfeld & Nicolson*



From top Queen Noor addressing the Landmine Survivors Network in Amman, 1998; the marriage of the King and Queen of Jordan in 1978; Queen Rania, Queen Noor and her daughters, Princesses Iman and Raiyah, pray at the late King's grave in 1999; with King Abdullah II, 2002; with Kofi Annan, International Women's Day, 2002



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As will his many other friends, I shall miss him, but for Queen Noor it must be unbearable: 'I miss him throughout every day,' she says. 'It wasn't conceivable to me that his time on earth would be ended like that. I was convinced that his spirit was far greater and more powerful than that terrible disease. Nonetheless, I don't believe that his death was a failure, it was simply a transcendent passage and a new beginning for him.'

Queen Noor says that she brought to her married life an optimistic nature. 'I think that is the one thing that joined my husband and me together: we were idealists and optimists.' She also gave him a place to feel secure in an often insecure society and a frequently dangerous region. 'He told me that the first time he looked into my eyes, he knew,' she says. 'For me, I was sharing time and ideas with the King of Jordan. He was not an ordinary human being. He was a figure of respect but also someone who I instinctively felt needed to be protected.'

After they were married, he loved to discuss affairs of state with her. 'I'd kept journals over the years, and, late at night, I would sometimes raise issues or want to clarify some of the events that had occurred in the day, which, of course, was not necessarily what you want to discuss when you're going to sleep. But rather than saying: "Leave me alone," he encouraged me to try to document some of the experiences and events that we were observing. It was clear in both direct and indirect ways that he wanted me to write this book. I felt I should try to make a modest contribution in demonstrating what an extraordinary individual King Hussein was, as a nation-builder, peacemaker, and a global citizen.'

When he was undergoing treatment in hospital, she encouraged him to record on tape memories of his life and work, as material for publishing his own memoirs. 'It would have been priceless to have more of his own words, but sadly the treatment was just too draining.' *Leap of Faith* ends with the King's joyful homecoming from the Mayo Clinic to a tumultuous welcome from the Jordanian people, followed by his sudden turn for the worse and death. After the state

funeral, Queen Noor slowly began the writing of her book, finding the act cathartic in itself during a long period of mourning.

'I felt it was the fulfilment of a duty towards Hussein and my Arab and Muslim family. It was wonderful to sit down with friends and family and reminisce. We talked about the Hashemite family history, the 1967 War, Islam, Arab culture, family matters - everything. For all of us, those were happier moments, rather than sad ones, where he was alive for us.'

Queen Noor's life has changed radically since her husband died. She considers Jordan home (her son Hamzah is Crown Prince), and has reorganised her commitments to ensure the continuation of her key initiatives, and to support the new King and Queen of Jordan. She still retains houses in England, where her two daughters are at school, and in Washington DC, where she spends much time fundraising for the King Hussein Foundation, and raising support for global issues such as the Ottawa Landmine Ban Treaty, women's rights, humanitarian support for refugees, and lobbying for greater understanding and peace. 'I triangulate,' she says, laughing. 'I'm somewhat in a state of perpetual motion.'

In these uncertain times, does she worry that the publication of *Leap of Faith* will cause any upset? 'I simply hope it will make a modest contribution to promoting a more balanced and real perspective, not only on

past history and regional politics, but in the search for peace and the way forward.'

Her devoted care to her husband in the last months of his life resulted in an outpouring of affection from the Jordanian people, which she describes as 'one of the most extraordinary privileges of my life. I feel singularly blessed to be a member of such a family.'

She explains how she has tried to simplify her life, at the same time as adjusting to a 'sometimes bewildering mass of complex family and work challenges' – and bringing up four highly motivated and sensitive teenagers ('the joy of my life').

In Jordan, she continues her work in education, environmental conservation, culture and sustainable community development with special emphasis on women. In addition, the King Hussein Foundation is developing plans to build a leadership centre in Amman, to promote dialogue at all levels among people of all ages, backgrounds and political persuasions on issues critical to the Middle East. She is also particularly proud of the United World Colleges, over which she has presided since 1996. UWC was founded as an antidote to the devastation of two World Wars. Perhaps the world's leading institution pioneering education for peace, the UWC is a network of colleges around the world, each a miniature global village of young students, dedicated to international understanding and peace.

Another peace project Queen Noor is involved with is the International Commission on Missing Persons. She is one of six commissioners who work to address the humanitarian and political tragedy of approximately 40,000 missing persons in the former Yugoslavia, helping their families determine the fate of loved ones lost during the armed conflicts of the Nineties. The commission has been responsible for setting up the world's most advanced DNA processing technology for identifying



Photograph: Michael Arnaud

the remains of those people killed. After September 11, Queen Noor met Mayor Giuliani to offer this technology to the families of the missing.

One year after King Hussein's death,

circled the Kaaba seven times. In the epilogue of *Leap of Faith*, she reflects on her feelings at this time, and her sense of gratitude for the example set by her husband – 'his faith, patience and calm in the face of conflict and hostility, but above all his vision of peace'.

In her life to follow, she knows there will be many challenges. 'My concerns are how best to balance my priorities so that I am the most useful I can be. I might

one day be able to make up for having been an absent friend, daughter or sister for so many years. But, for the moment, I am still in transition. I am hoping *Leap of Faith* will be one small building block in a bridge of better understanding that can make a difference in the world. Because, in the end,' she says simply, 'I am so lucky to have had his love.' ■

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Queen Noor made her own healing pilgrimage to Mecca, along with a few close friends and family. 'Even before I became a Muslim, I found the values and principles common to all three monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, resonated strongly as a framework for living and for understanding one's responsibilities in life.' Wearing the simple white robes of the faithful, she felt a heightened sense of reverence in the company of thousands of other pilgrims as she

*Leap of Faith: Memoir of an Unexpected Life* by Queen Noor is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson