

# The personal effects of one of Lebanon's greats

Exhibit recounts dynamic period in country's history through the work of Michel Chiha: *Rana Rinawi reports*

Three years ago, Michele Helou Nahas and Claude Doumet Serhal were assigned the mixed blessing of cleaning out their grandmother's house.

Marguerite Pharaon Chiha had just passed away. But as her granddaughters sadly went through the house in Yarzee, however, they stumbled upon their grandfather's private and historically-significant documents.

Michel Chiha had died 44 years earlier, leaving behind a legacy as a newspaper owner, one-time politician, and promi-

nent political figure who played a crucial role in the founding of the modern state of Lebanon.

His private documents – including a hand-written draft of the Constitution, which he was instrumental in creating – are now being displayed in a free exhibit at the Nicolas Sursock Museum. The exhibit, which runs until June 4, is not only a homage to Chiha, but also an account of historical events that took place in Lebanon between 1919-45.

"We wanted to show the history of Lebanon through Chiha's archives," said Nahas.

"We thought that, being part of our history and heritage, the archives should be exhibited."

Entitled Historical Pages of Lebanon: Archives of Michel Chiha, the exhibition was inaugurated last week by the Michel Chiha Foundation under the patronage of President Emile Lahoud.

"Exhibiting archives was a really difficult task. You're not dealing with paintings, but with dry materiel," Nahas said.

The exhibit may not be artistically eye-catching, but it is historically fascinating.

Dated letters, telegrams, conference documents and newspaper clippings are displayed in chronological sequence and are informatively labeled to explain how they are related to the events surrounding Lebanon's birth and independence.

The exhibition's material is

subdivided into 12 categories, each revolving around a significant historical event in which Chiha was involved. In addition to the material at the exhibit, a cacophony of verbatim quotes in French and Arabic from Chiha is played in the background.

The exhibit starts with documents recounting a series of events that occurred following the end of World War I, when Lebanon was occupied by Allied Forces and placed under French mandate. Other documents illustrate the declaration of Greater Lebanon in 1920.

One display depicts Chiha's only term as an MP, from 1925-29. During this period Chiha, who studied law in Cairo, allied himself with others equally interested in endowing Lebanon with a solid judiciary system.

Although the exhibit offers

an impressive display of history from his days as a politician and later as the owner of Le Jour newspaper, the highlight revolves around the Constitution.

Chiha was appointed a member of a commission in 1925 that was assigned to draw up the Constitution. The 13-member commission formulated 12 questions that ultimately determined how the country functions.

The questions, which were sent to several Lebanese figures in order to survey their opinions, asked whether Lebanon should be a republic or constitutional monarchy, if seats in Parliament should be allotted according to sect, and what the head of state's responsibilities should be.

The exhibition displays the 12 questions, as well as the answers of some renowned figures from various organizations.



Chiha: "It's a work of memory to teach some, and remind others who he was"

Also included in the exhibition are the Constitution's original manuscript, three typed drafts with hand-written corrections and annotations – all in French – as well as the definitive version of the Constitution, which was translated into Arabic by Chible Dammous.

Chiha's allegiance to the Constitution continued after it was formed. On display are letters that illustrated Chiha's disapproval of President Beshara Khoury's re-election in 1949. Khoury was Chiha's brother-in-law and friend, but the Constitution stipulated that presidents could not be re-elected until six years after their last term ended. Chiha was also a firm believer that the public should study the Constitution.

An article he penned and published in his French newspaper, Le Jour, in 1949, reflected his opinion on this issue: "Because the people are barely familiar with their Constitution and their basic rights, because to the vast majority of Lebanese citizens the very basics of the judiciary systems seem indecipherable and secretive, the authorities are able to abuse their powers and lead its populace like sheep, like rabble, rather than a community of human beings."

After its independence in 1943, Lebanon's international

relationships increased. This is illustrated by correspondence between Chiha and several diplomats such as Charles Malek (the first Lebanese ambassador to Washington) and Ahmed Daouk (the first Lebanese ambassador to France.)

The personal documents also illustrate the role Chiha played in the monetary negotiations between France, Lebanon and Syria in 1947.

When deputies Saeb Salam and Henri Pharaon decided to come up with a new color for the Lebanese flag in 1944, Chiha proposed using a magenta color, the dye which was extracted from the murex during Phoenician times. Although the idea was not ultimately used, the exhibit displays various color samples.

The section dealing with the death of Chiha at the age of 63 in 1954 includes photographs of his funeral, condolence letters, and telegrams addressed to the nation and his family.

A final section displays some of Chiha's articles published in his paper, which he bought in 1937 and owned until his death.

"We chose to display the articles related to the Palestinian problem because he was such a visionary. He denounced the dangers of a Jewish state on our borders as early as 1945," said

Nahas. "He foresaw the dangers. Things he said could have been written last week – they are unfortunately so true."

A replication of Chiha's office, using his furniture, is also exhibited. His purple-lit workspace includes a walnut-tree wood desk, an art deco lamp and a compilation of Le Jour.

Although the exhibition does not focus on Chiha's poetic side, documents hint that he was a poet and a writer with an international audience.

His numerous accomplishments also inspired Serhal, in collaboration with Nahas, to write a book with pictures and explanations in French and Arabic of the exhibited materiel.

"I was only 4-years-old when he passed away," said Nahas. "I don't remember much of him. It is through his work that we realized who he was."

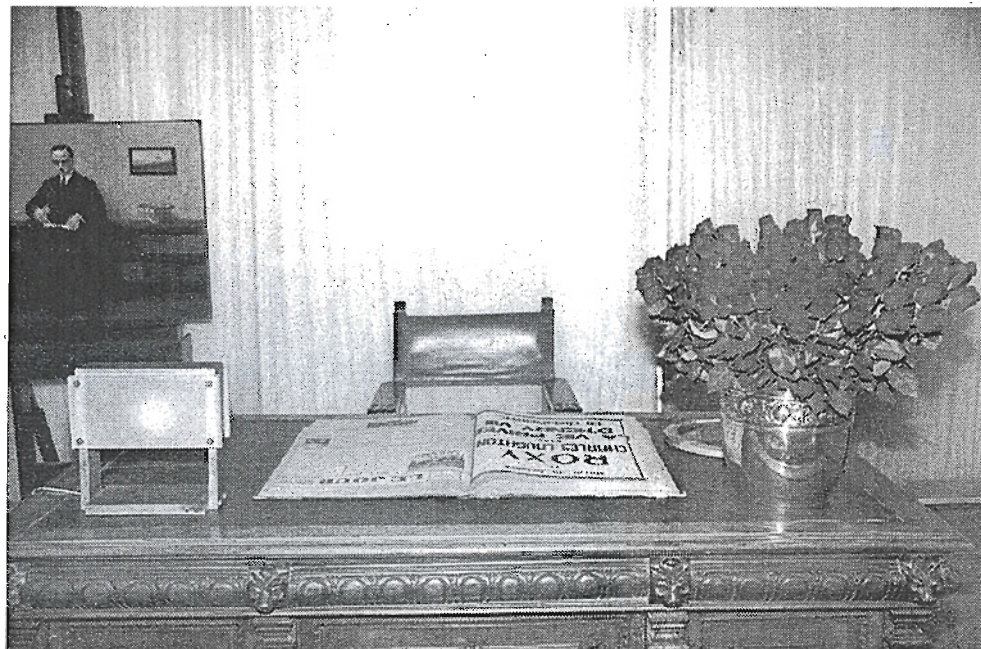
"It's a work of memory to teach some, and remind others who he was."

The exhibit is open daily from 10am to 1pm and from 4pm to 7pm. Entrance is free, and guided tours are available in English, French and Arabic.

The Chiha Foundation is also sponsoring a conference analyzing the Lebanese system Friday and Saturday at the American University of Beirut.



Chiha's identification card



Reproduction of Chiha's office, as exhibited at the Nicolas Sursock Museum