

Memorial Minute for Maria Youssef (Sept. 23, 1932 – Nov. 19, 2012)

Maria was born on September 23, 1932. At the age of six, during the great Long Island hurricane, her family immigrated to New York from Prague.

At the age of twelve her mother died suddenly, and Maria was shipped off to Birch Wathen Quaker Boarding School in New York. This was where she first came in contact with Quakers. However, it wasn't until the '60s that she reconnected with Friends. Her son Hishem remembers that suddenly they were going off to Meeting on a Sunday. She remained a member of the Pittsburgh Friends Meeting, although in later years, after moving to their farm in Dayton, PA, she was able to attend Meeting only sporadically.

She met her husband Kamal in Paris, where she was working for a dance magazine. Kamal was representing Egypt at an arts conference. Although not a professional dancer, Maria at one time took classes with Martha Graham.

In the '60s she worked with the Council of Federate Organizations, which had an office in East Liberty. COFO was formed in 1962 to coordinate and unite voter registration and other civil rights activities.

In the late '60s Maria developed a debilitating illness that kept her confined to the house. A number of women from the Meeting made the decision to visit her on a weekly basis to give her support. Coffee at Maria's soon became a fixture and a support for the women who attended. Many a sticky problem was worked out in this setting. Maria's wonderful hospitality and ability to make people feel welcome were an important part of keeping the group going as long as it did.

Maria was a founding member of the Middle East Peace Forum, which brought together Jews, Palestinians, and Christians to dialogue and learn from each other and share thoughts and ideas for peace in the Middle East. The group lasted for almost 30 years and only recently disbanded.

In 1987 Maria partnered with Bette McDevitt to start a travel agency that catered to the activist community. After going on a tour to the Middle East, Maria decided that she could do a much better job of arranging the tour and Forum Travel came into being. Scilla Wahrhaftig became the bookkeeper and a year later bought Bette out. Maria and Scilla continued Forum Travel, arranging tours to the Middle East, sending people around the world to attend peace conferences and generally catering to the local peace community until 2001, when the agency closed just before 9/11.

In recent years Maria had lived on their farm in Dayton, PA, constantly opening her home to family and friends. Maria died on November 19, 1912, leaving behind her husband Kamal, their three children, and four grandchildren.