



University of Ottawa professor Dina Salha has been haunted by memories of her great-aunt who died alone and mysteriously in Lebanon in 1983. So, captured by the desire to know more, Salha made a film about her search.

That documentary, [Lady in the Garden](#), was first screened in Australia in 2014. It will have its Canadian debut in Ottawa at this weekend's Eve Film Festival. It seeks to tell the story of her great-aunt, Wadad Rawdah El-Balah, a reclusive Lebanese artist and to find out what happened to her paintings after her death in 1983.

Salha, who teaches communications, said the film took about a year to make after eight or nine years of thinking about it — and 30 years of wondering about the fate of her great-aunt.

“The main goal ... is to fill the gaps of memory, not necessarily to prolong it,” said Salha. “Her story is missing links in terms of her life. That’s what I’m seeking to do, to fill the gaps of memory.”

El-Balah, who was born in 1910 and died at age 73, lived on her own in a remote village in Lebanon, tending to her garden. Salha said her great-aunt spoke to very few people, and likely suffered from an undiagnosed obsessive compulsive disorder and from anxiety. But she liked Salha and taught the young girl to draw and allowed her to gather flowers from the garden to make bouquets.

“When you’re five years old, you don’t understand the social dynamics, or the patriarchy, you don’t understand power relations, and you don’t understand that there are voices that are not heard,” she said about her memorable great-aunt.

El-Balah looked like the witch in *Snow White*, Salha says, with “salt and pepper bushy hair,” homemade clothes, chiseled features, and a small hump on her back.

“That’s how I remember her,” she said.



THE BEDOUIN WOMAN BY WADAD RAWDAH EL-BALAH.

The two last saw each other in 1976 when Salha was about eight or nine years old, before the Lebanese civil war made it too difficult to visit the village where El-Balah lived. Salha moved to Canada about 10 years later. After three decades of wondering about her, and occasionally seeing her great-aunt in her dreams, Salha wrote a letter to El-Balah. The letter has become the basis for the film's narration.

Salha has managed to recover seven of her great-aunt's paintings, most of which wound up poorly maintained in the homes of distant relatives. She's had them restored, a process that is detailed in the film and has taken more than six years. El-Balah's paintings are realistic portraits of wistful looking people. Salha's favourite is *The Bedouin Woman*, which El-Balah painted when she was about 15 years old.

She said she wanted to record as much of the story of her great-aunt's life and sufferings she could before those who knew the tale died. She has managed to piece together some details about El-Balah's death, for example, but much remains unexplained. "We don't know anything about her as a human being," Salha said.

The Eve Film Festival is a feminist event that highlights work by women filmmakers and directors. It covers topics ranging from the plight of refugees, to personal stories of faith, and journeys of self-love and acceptance.

"I feel very nervous," Salha said about the film screening. "The other documentaries are so strong, and I'm so psyched to see all of them, but also to see this particular documentary screened in public, where people are going to see that story. For me, it's expanding her voice, and I feel a sense of responsibility."

The Eve Film Festival is on at the Arts Court Theatre on Friday and Saturday (March 17-18). *Lady in the Garden* shows on Saturday at 2 p.m

Written by [Spencer Van Dyk](#)

Spencer Van Dyk is a Master's of Journalism student at Carleton University.