

Preface

César (Ran) and Diane (Dina) Hettena were siblings born in Cairo, Egypt, in 1923 and 1928 respectively. Both wrote memoirs recounting their lives in Cairo up to the time they left Egypt — Dina emigrating to Tel Aviv in 1946 and Ran to New York City in 1948.

Diane's husband was Raphaël Recanati, scion of a distinguished banking dynasty. His father, Léon Recanati (1889–1945), founded the Palestine Discount Bank in 1935, which has since grown into one of Israel's largest and most prominent investment groups.

I found myself identifying with both narratives, even though I left Egypt in 1961 under very different circumstances.

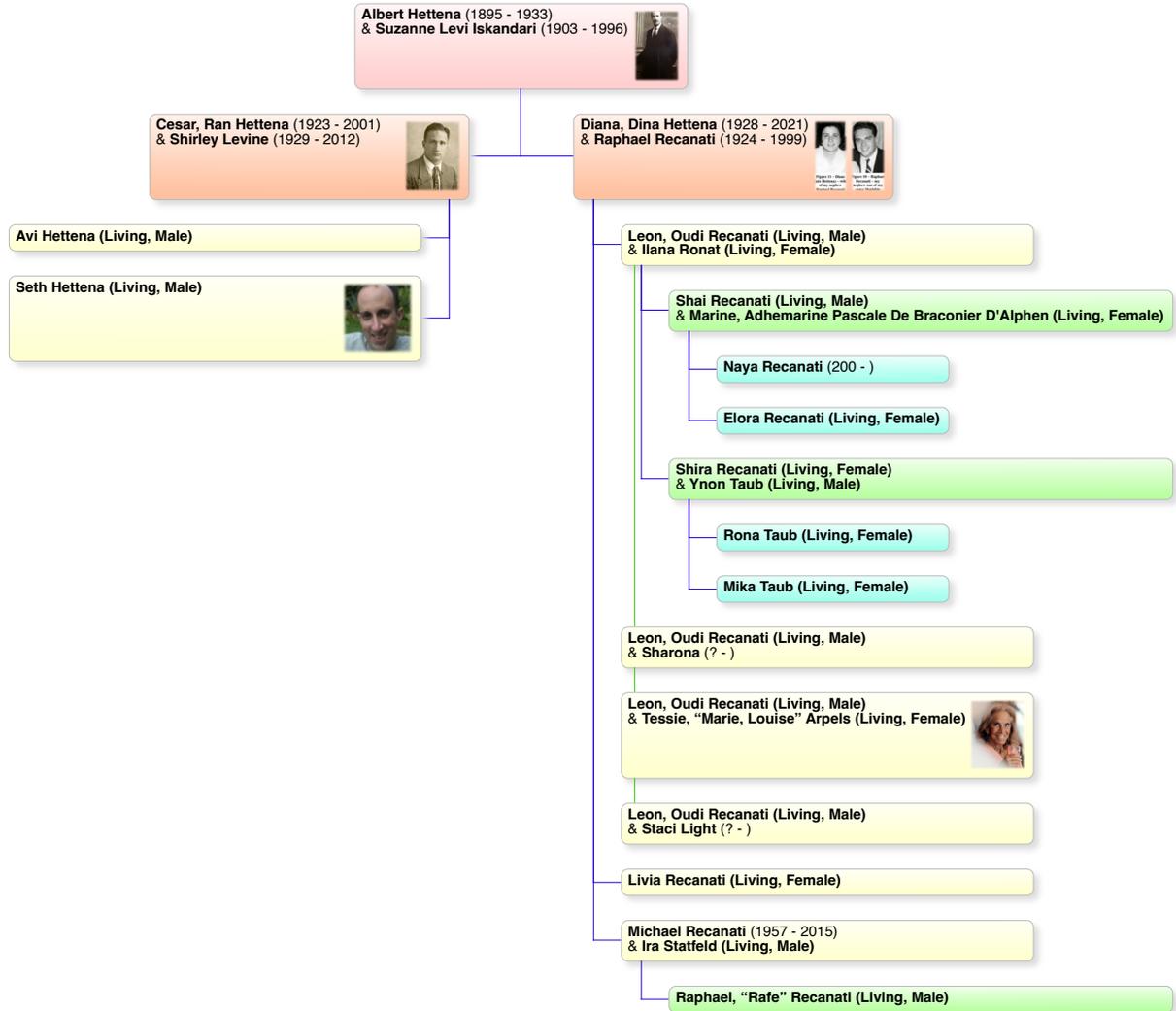
At that time, I was entirely unaware of Zionist movement activities during the 1945–1948 period, and my recollection of the political events following 1948 differs in several respects from those described in these memoirs.

I was particularly intrigued to learn that their father, Albert Hettena (1895–1933), shared many similarities with my own family. He had attended the Collège de La Salle in Cairo, as did my father. He served as chief engineer at the Egyptian railroad company, where my grandfather was chief physician. Later, he was admitted to the same engineering school from which I graduated in 1966: L'École des Travaux Publics in Paris, founded in 1898 by Léon Eyrolles.

Joseph Hazan—a classmate of and revolutionary activist with [Henri Curiel](#) (1914-1978)—who built a publishing and printing enterprise in Paris, helped finance the launch of Léon Eyrolles' publishing company for engineering books.

Alain Farhi

Albert & Suzanne Hettena



Cairo 1923-1945

by Ran Hettena

The first thing I can remember is the birth of my sister, Diane. At the time, we lived in a big apartment in the suburbs of Cairo. My aunt, Tante Farida, the family midwife was attending to my mother. The birth must have gone fairly well. I don't remember hearing any screams or any great commotion as I waited outside with my relatives.

As was the custom in those days, the house was full of my uncles, aunts, and others, all awaiting word of the delivery. After the birth, I was led into my mother's room. Someone handed Diane to my father and he raised her up in his outstretched arms. She had a full head of hair and looked very pink and pretty. The year was 1927. I was four years old.

I was born into a family of Sephardic Jews living in Cairo. I was a British subject at birth in a country dominated politically and financially by Great Britain. My citizenship was a matter of convenience; Jews in Egypt had privileges if they had foreign citizenship. They could avoid the notoriously corrupt and inefficient courts, for instance, and take a grievance to a foreign tribunal. At home, we spoke French the language of the Jewish community in Egypt. We learned Arabic talking to the servants.

The British ran Egypt well. The telephones worked and the electricity supply was in good order. The streets were busy with horse-drawn carts but clean. In the evening, the radio filled our home with concerts from across Europe. We were able to pick up radio stations out of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. If you had shortwave, you could get Berlin.

Still, it was Africa. The maids swept scorpions off the back porch and ravages of locusts would descend upon Cairo every few years or so. You would get word via telephone and telegraph that a swarm was on its way. As soon as you heard, you closed all the shutters, shut every window tight and stuck rags to fill the gaps to prevent any bugs from entering. The sky would turn black with locusts, millions of them. You could hear them buzzing and hitting the windows. But they weren't interested in the city; they were looking for crops. And when they found crops; the buzzing cloud would descend and it would be complete devastation.

For my first eight years or so, we lived a rather carefree existence. Servants did all the cleaning and once a week a laundress would our dirty linens and wash them in a tub of boiling water on the roof. Food came fresh from the local market. Milk came from a man who brought his cow to our doorstep and filled a pail for us in the courtyard. The seamstress, Zina, brought her sewing machine to our home to mend our clothes. Another man brought round a block of ice wrapped in burlap that kept our icebox full and gave us cold water to drink in the torrid summers.

Dad and Diane with servant

In my early years, we lived in an apartment in a place called Shehamza. There I used to practice pelote-basque, known here as jai-alai. I used to fling the hard wicker ball down a long hallway against the wall so many times that the plaster eventually gave way. The wall was never fixed. When my family got their first radio, a big Atwater-Kent from America, my mother was delighted. She put it up against the wall to hide the broken plaster.

One day, I tried to hang something on the wall outside the balcony of our apartment. I drove a nail into the plaster, but the nail didn't hold and some of the plaster gave way. Then I drove another hole next to it and the plaster gave way again. To me the two holes in the plaster looked like eyes without a face. So I took a screwdriver and made the outlines of a head. And the head is still there. When my sister Diane visited Cairo recently, she said she could still see it on the wall of the building.

My father, Albert, was chief engineer at the Egyptian railways, a job that paid well. He attended college in France and wed my mother, Suzanne, when he returned home. It was an arranged marriage. Their life together was brief. My father was the youngest of nine brothers and sisters. Our family gatherings on Passover and the Jewish holidays were huge affairs and the dining room table would stretch on forever. There were dozens of children. My mother would reward us with 10-cent pieces if we were quiet for 15 minutes.

The family was my whole world. You never went to outsiders for anything. All our parties were almost all intra-family. My cousins were my best friends and we spent much of our free time together. The family would vacation together for a month or two in the summer at a big

apartment house my aunt Adele and Uncle Jacques rented in Port Said on the Nile Delta. You would awaken there in the morning and go sit out on the verandah. A servant would bring a cup of coffee and a small delicacy and you gazed out on the deep blue, blue sea. We took long walks on the jetty with a sculpture at its tip of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the man who developed of the Suez Canal. Uncle Jacques helped us build a huge kite, the nicest on the beach.

Later, we vacationed in Alexandria and Ras El Bar. My Tante Marcelle and Uncle Emile lived in the Alexandria neighborhood of Sporting only a block away from the Mediterranean. The beaches were long stretches of white sand, the water clear and calm. My cousins and I went to the beach every morning and got terribly sunburned. We took long walks in the cool evenings, talking and laughing. Those are perhaps the happiest memories I have from my childhood.

Albert Hettena

My uncles ran the Hettena Brothers construction business. My father, however, wasn't a partner. He was somewhat different from his older brothers in that he was well educated. Learning was not a big priority in his family and my father was picked on as being the equivalent of what you would today call a nerd. My uncles spoke Arabic, a sign to me that they were less refined. Albert attended a top-notch Catholic school in Cairo, Ecole des Freres. Apparently, he must have done very well, although he never bragged about it, since he was admitted without any special preparation into Ecole Speciale des Travaux Publics, the best engineering school in France.

School in France was not cheap and my father had to pay his own way. He was a good violin player and earned money playing weddings, bar-mitzvahs, afternoon teas and the occasional hotel ensemble helped pay for school overseas. My mother was good musician too. She studied in a French convent and learned to play piano well, with the help of a musical nun. Together, my parents would play beautiful duets of Brahms, Chopin and Schubert. You always heard a piano in my house. After my father died, she never touched the piano again.

My father loved France. He played a great deal of soccer there and became a big fan of the sport. When he returned to Cairo, he always read *Candide*, one of the Paris newspapers and followed the teams. He was more European than Egyptian. Friends and family who were visiting

France would consult with him before they left and he would draw up an itinerary for them of everything they should do and see.

But my father had a huge vice: gambling. The family was full of big card players who would gather almost every Friday night for big games of baccarat and poker in the large home of my uncle Elie. Huge sums were won and lost. My father was always there. Some days he would make money; more often than not, he lost. He had a weak heart and the doctors continually advised him that the stress was bad for him. But it didn't matter; he couldn't stay away. When he got paid, he would give my mother whatever money she needed and they the rest down on the card table. It was not unusual that he would lost his entire monthly salary. The gambling would spark big arguments between my parents.

"Après moi," my mother would say, "le deluge." (Loosely translated as "I don't care what happens. I'll be gone")

The two years of my father's life were very difficult ones. I was very aware he was seriously ill. Every morning, my mother made sure my father left with his small aluminum canister of "trin-trin" or nitroglycerin. When he came back, she would always ask him how many tablets he had taken that day. If it was only a few, it was a celebration. If he had taken money, it was clear he wasn't feeling well. He had a lot of trouble climbing stairs to our apartment. he would stop to rest on a landing, breathing hard. When he caught his breath, he would take another flight and so on. His health got worse and worse.

By then we were living in a rather luxurious apartment on Al Manakh Street in Cairo near the Ottoman Bank. It was a huge open apartment in perhaps one of the nicest apartment buildings in Cairo. My uncle Benjamin lived across the hall. The only problem for me was the apartment was a long walk from school. I wore out my shoes walking back and forth to classes and home for lunch every day.

One night, when I was 9 years old, I was awoken by screams from the bedroom next door. It was mother. She was called for one of the servants, Hanein. My mother told her to open the window and for a second, I thought my father had fallen out of it. She told the maidservant to fetch uncle Benjamin. He came running in in his bathrobe as my sister who was then 4 and I went to see what was wrong. My father was gasping for breath and I noticed a little saliva had collected in the corner of his mouth. Benjamin slapped my father a couple of times to try and revive him. A doctor who lived in the building arrived, also in his

bathrobe. The doctor listened to my father's failing heart with his stethoscope. My asking him, "What is it? What is it?" Benjamin must have known. He kissed my father once as his heart pounded out its last beats. Then he kissed him again and my father was dead. He was 37.

Then came a rough time -- the "deluge" my mother had predicted. My father's gambling left us with no savings, no insurance and no assets. We had to let go of our servants Mohamed and Zenab, a husband-and-wife team my sister and I had grown very fond of.

My mother was devastated. Back then, a widow's life was said to end with the death of her husband. For a long time, she dressed all in black: Black dress, black hat and black veil. Many years later, she would say that she mourned for eight years. She only spoke of household matters, essentials or financial worries. She always gave the impression that she feared for the future.

My sister often fell ill the year after my father's death. She cried all day during her first day of kindergarten. Before the class was dismissed the teacher walked around with a box of candies, offering one to each child. As she walked by Diane, she paused. "For you, there is no candy," the teacher said. "You were crying all morning." To this day, she almost never cries.

Uncle Elie

But my uncles, in particular my uncle Elie, took responsibility for us. They paid our rent, our groceries and the servants. We remained in the same fancy apartment for about a year and a half, until my mother decided it wasn't right to keep living off my uncles. We moved into a second floor apartment with a balcony in a brand new white building on Mohamed Haggag Street.

My uncle Elie, the head of the Hettena Brothers company, became a surrogate father for me. For some months after my father's death, my uncle Elie took me to live with him in his big villa in Giza on the way to the pyramids. I called him Papa. In the house in Giza, I shared a bedroom with my cousin Maurice who was my age. I was treated as an equal in that household.

"Tu vois celui la?" my uncle Elie told Maurice, motioning at me. "C'est ton frere." ("You see him there? That's your brother")

That was all he needed to say. If Maurice got a toy like a daisy gun, I got the exact same thing. We had our bar mitzvahs at the same time, and we often got to go to the movies together. My uncle would insist on buying the tickets for us, afraid that he would do God knows what with the money. I never minded this arrangement, but Maurice was always offended.

"Why can't I buy my own ticket?" he would demand.

Sometimes he wouldn't go to the movies because he insisted on buying his own ticket. I never understood this fit of pride from a little boy. Perhaps it has to do with his artistic temperament. He played violin very well, so well in fact that he settled in South Africa where he became the first violinist in the national symphony in Cape Town.

Later, when I was a teenager, we were able to help my uncle Elie when he fell ill. He came to stay with us in Cairo so he could be closer to his doctors. He also had a heart condition. I remember walking into his room and sitting down next to him. He was suffering tremendously.

"Ask God to cure Papa," he told me in Arabic. He died soon thereafter at age 60.

None of my uncles lived past the age of 60. My uncle Benjamin followed my father a few months later on the way back from a picnic. One afternoon, he and his wife Emma took my mother for a ride in their new car, a Studebaker. Barely two hours later, they returned with Benjamin dead in the arms of the chauffeur. It was one funeral after another, year after year. The black funerary carriage pulled by four horses became a familiar sight. Pallbearers carried the casket on their shoulders, followed by criers, professional women whose job it was to weep, lament and scream. Everybody kept dying. It was so bad that afternoon siestas during visits to my grandmother's house made me nervous. One time while my aunt Nina napped in the room with me, I would rush to her side to make sure she was still breathing.

While my father was alive, I was not a good student. The teachers used to say "intelligent mais etourdie." (Intelligent but careless.) I was more than distracted. My mistakes were enormous. When I entered high school at Lycee I enrolled in the advanced Section Egyptienne, where Arabic was one of the courses. That was a mistake. I spoke very little Arabic and did not like it. Pierre Ghali, who changed his name to

Boutrous-Boutrous and became the United Nations secretary general., was a classmate. But the upheaval of my father's death the year before and my poor study habits was a bad combination. I failed the exam at the end of the year. The school made me do the year over. The future U.N. secretary general, who spoke better Arabic, passed.

A Lycée Report Card

After my father's death, things changed. Doing the year over gave me some confidence. I was a bit older, more mature, and something clicked. I got interested in school and I elevated my ranking in the class, which had been stuck in the middle of the pack. I played with intensity and purpose. I had a good memory and that helped with the weekly assignment to memorize a poem in French. I would recite the great French poets: Moliere, Racine, Corneille, Baudelaire and Prudhomme while Diane followed along in the text, correcting here and there. I could remember a sonnet after reading it three or four times.

And so we settled in to our new life on Mohamed Haggag Street. Every morning at 7:30 my sister and I were on our way to Lycee. In the yard of the school was a huge mango tree and a flamboyant ponciana tree that shaded us from the broiling sun. "Liberte, egalite, fraternite" the motto of the French Revolution, was printed above the blackboard for us to see everyday.

The imposing stone stairs right of the center yard led to a terrace and closed doors. The doors were opened only once at the end of the year. Then the whole faculty took seats on the terrace, while students and families sat in the yard below. They read very formally the "palmarès" or prizes. After my father's death, my name began to be called each year as I rose into the No. 2 spot in the class, behind my good friend Ramon Arar. I never passed Ramon, except when he was sick for a couple of semesters. The competition was usually between myself and another boy named Pardo, who was usually in third place.

After school, we returned home in the late afternoon. Evenings were spent in the large family room seated around a square table, which served for meals and schoolwork. We did not have toys. I had a small chess set with some missing pieces for which I carved replacement. My sister invented games playing teacher, serving tea, and so on.

In the spring, all the Hettenas would gather at Uncle Elie's villa for Pesach. The house was filled with flowers and the huge table was set with a white embroidered cloth. All the silver and flower arrangements ran down the length of the table. The seder was Iraqi style and lasted a long time. The matzah in Egypt was very thin, very large, flat and round. There was an abundance of haroseth, a thick syrup made from dates and walnuts. A retinue of soufraguis or waiters in formal attire brought in mountains of lamb with rice and an Egyptian meat pie with pine nuts and pomegranate wrapped in a super-thin layer of matzah.

We had few friends who weren't Jewish. One exception was Nachary Nasr, a good friend of mine who came from a very well to do Muslim family. He was a brilliant student, very sophisticated and well read. He visited our home often, playing chess, sometimes with his eyes closed. I rarely went to see him, but once he threw a party for us and invited all his cousins. His family received us very warmly. Servants brought out a big spread on huge copper trays.

Egyptians were as a rule extremely hospitable. They would greet you at the door with warm exclamations of "Ahlan," meaning welcome. In hot weather, guests were greeted with a tray of cold water and confiture (candied fruit). A crystal bowl sitting in a silver container held the candied fruit. You would spoon some dates, orange or quince, taste it and then discard the spoon in a glass of water. They often insisted you stay longer or have a second helping. It was not unusual to pour the contents of the candy dish into your bag as you left.

I used to get an allowance of six piasters a week, roughly the equivalent of a quarter. That was just enough for a matinee at the movie theater. I loved the movies, especially the mysteries and thrillers from England and America, like *False Faces*, *the Invisible Man*, and *Came by Night*. I also enjoyed westerns, and comedies with William Powell and Myrna Loy. My sister always wanted to see *Snow White* and the other Disney movies, but I always chose what we saw. I felt a little guilty about this later on.

Groppi's was another indulgence. Giacomo Groppi was a superb Swiss chef whose chocolates and pastries were coveted by visiting heads of state who left with suitcases packed with goodies. Everyone knew Groppi's and his place on Adly Pasha Street had an outdoor garden that served dinner under the stars with music and dancing and tea "dansants" in the afternoon where pashas sipped coffee with their mistresses and rubbed shoulders with British officers on leave.

We moved again when I was 16 into our last home in Cairo. We rented a bright, six-room flat at 51 Falaki Street, not far from the Lycee. We kept earthenware jugs of water with shiny brass covers on the kitchen windowsill in the shade that anyone could drink from. We called them "gargoulettes" (water coolers) and they kept the water cool and fresh. From time to time, the apartment filled with the smell of chestnuts and orange peels roasted over a kerosene stove to perfume the air.

The Falaki Street apartment overlooked a courtyard. From the second floor, we would watch the "menagued," a professional carder on his annual visit to restore our lumpy cotton mattresses. He removed the cotton from the mattress, and beat the lumps out of it with a mallet and a tool that resembled an archer's bow. The rhythm of the blows created a twanging musical sound as he struck the cotton on the bow. We slept more comfortably when he was done.

The kitchen door of the Falaki Street flat opened on a landing, which was like a small balcony. This entrance was reserved for deliveries from the iceman, the Syrian baker with his fresh bread and the milkman. The milkman brought fresh cow's milk which he had to boil and skim cream from the top as it cooled. He also offered donkey's milk to those who wanted it. Tante Farida believed that I was so smart because I was given donkey's milk as a child.

The milkman was the suitor of our maid Hanem, which is Arabic for "noble lady." She had come to us as a young woman and it was her first job. She was decent, kind and hardworking, but she was unattractive, had buck teeth and hardly ate. She invested all her savings in gold jewelry, which she wore on her arms, ears and neck. Egyptians believed that wearing your savings was a safe and prestigious thing to do. She and the milkman married and had a beautiful daughter.

The rear bedroom at 51 Falaki Street had a balcony that overlooked an open-air movie theater. You could see the movies from our apartment, but you couldn't hear them. Luckily, we moved into the apartment after I had taken and passed the baccalaureat exam in 1940, the final exam at the Lycee. Otherwise, the movies could have proved a huge distraction.

To prepare for the baccalaureat, I came home from school and locked myself in my room for two solid months. I studied and studied and studied and was well prepared by the end of it. The subject that gave me the most trouble was history. There wasn't time to read the whole

textbook and we hadn't covered it in school. I only got through the first section on the American Revolution. Luckily, when the exam came, the history question was on the causes of the War of Independence. I placed No. 400 out of 10,000 students. Not bad, given there was some Arabic on the exam.

I went with my friend Ramon Arar the next day to the Lycee and asked for my certificate. My family owed the school money and I was afraid they would withhold my diploma until the account was settled. I was not exactly well regarded at the bursar's office. After Uncle Elie's death, my other uncles had stopped paying the Lycee and it was difficult to pry any money out of them. When the bill got too big and school officials threatened to toss me out, my uncles would pay for a couple of months. So when I asked for my certificate, a school official asked me if I was paid up with the bursar. He knew I wasn't, but he gave me the certificate anyway. And that's why I have remained very loyal to the Lycee all these years.

The next few months were perhaps the best period of my life. With the exam behind me, a big step had been completed. I was young, not even 17, and I began looking for my first job. World War II had begun and Britain was at war with Germany. It was called "drolle de guerre," the funny war. We viewed it as a distant conflict between Allies. The only thing that changed in Cairo was the influx of British GIs. The Hettena Brothers construction company made some money building housing for the troops. Otherwise, life went on as usual. It would be some time before Egypt awoke to the seriousness of the threat.

I had first heard of Adolf Hitler a few years earlier. There was an effort by the Jewish community in Cairo to boycott German products. This was not without irony because my Uncle Joseph represented several German companies in Egypt. He spoke and wrote German, visited Europe and understood better than anyone else in my family the ominous nature of events in Nazi Germany. For the most part, conversations about Hitler were intellectual ones. Absent was the fear that, in hindsight, should have been engendered.

I was too young to be drafted so I hunted for a job. Three months went by and I became desperate. Finally, my Uncle Jacques helped me land an interview at the Marconi Telegraph Co. I got hired. Completing Lycee had left me with an overinflated sense of superiority. I felt myself way superior to the other inductees, all of whom were Egyptian. My uncle was excited, thinking that I would make a career as a telegraph operator.

I only lasted a year but the training was instrumental in my work for the Israeli underground in Cairo.

At Marconi

At Marconi, I underwent six months of rigorous training in Morse Code reception and transmission before moving up to the entry level position of checker. Much of the work consisted of relaying messages from British soldiers to families back home. During the Battle of Britain in 1940, the messages that came in from London were all in the same vein. "Bombed out darling, but safe. Don't worry." Or "Bombed out darling. Some damage. We'll take care of it." They would report that so-and-so was killed or grandma had a heart attack during the raids. The messages would close: "We're in very good spirits. Cherrio. Lift up." We also handled some coded military messages.

But I failed at the checker's job of routing outgoing messages to the correct station. I would send a message destined for Romania to Turkey. The company would launch an inquiry into what went wrong. The explanation was simple human error -- mine. "Error much regretted." The Egyptians, whom I considered beneath me in terms of education, culture, and the like, wouldn't make such silly mistakes.

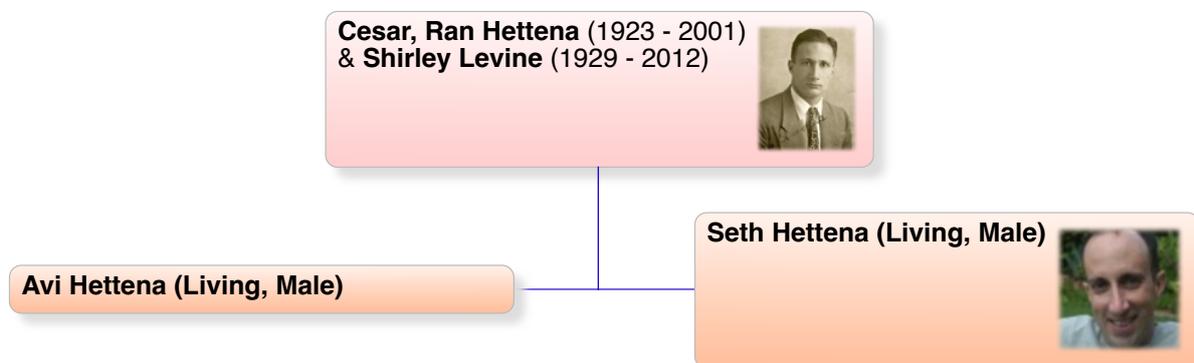
As a Marconi employee, I could use the posh company club across the street. There was a big billiards table, but I preferred ping-pong. The British managers always hung around drinking and the club officials would come and watch me play ping-pong. It was hard to respect the British managerial class; they were second-rate people: lazy, cliquish big drinkers. I was in the club in the summer of 1941 when one of the senior Italian employees (who were made to administrative work because of Italy's alliance with Germany) walked in and said "Germany attacked Russia." We celebrated. There was a new ally on our side. I left Marconi after a year. The problem was the night work. One week you worked normal hours and then the next you worked the overnight shift. Working all night got me completely discombobulated and I had trouble sleeping.

I still had my overinflated sense of self. I considered a lot of things beneath me. I lasted one day at a job at the Army distribution center, in a position of a glorified grocer, apron and all. My mother told me to wait for a few days but I couldn't. Jobs like that in Egypt were done by servants, or so I thought. One of the people at the distribution center told me, "Don't think I come from the street. I also have a degree like you."

The next job I landed was at the Gateno Brothers department store, which sold furniture and household goods. I also saw that as beneath me. I hated the job, kept it quiet and lasted only a short while. If you worked there, in my eyes, it meant you were nothing. And truth be told, I was nothing then.

Around this time, in 1941, the war turned much more serious. About the same time as Hitler's invasion of Russia, the British swept across the whole of Africa, then defended only by two Italian divisions. The British ran through the Italians like a knife through butter. But then the Germans reinforced the Italians with the Afrika Korps under the command of Erwin Rommel. Things changed overnight. Suddenly, there were big battles. Rommel pushed the British back across North Africa, back into Egypt. More tanks rolled through the streets of Cairo. Before I turned 18, I joined the British Civil Defense Force. I lied about my age and they never asked for proof.

Ran & Shirley Hettena



Dina Recanati Memoirs

[The Dina Recanati Art Foundation Ltd](#)

The little four-year old girl sits on the porch of a house in a summer resort in Egypt. Ras El Bar, a beach community, is constructed for the summer seasons only. Straw and wood huts are assembled for just this short period of time, three months of a sand paradise before the Nile gushes down with its fertilizing mud and erases the site. The silt is thick, red, and coarse and floats heavily like islands on the river. Before the flooding takes over the place, houses are literally moved by barefoot workers and pulled by carts harnessed to donkeys, leaving this delta stretch desolate and silent. The little girl contemplates the scene and wonders how all this will be moved and brought back again the next year. It is now the night my father died. I remember noises, commotion, and from the hallway only a few feet away, my eyes still heavy with sleep, I saw my parents' bedroom. My mother at the side of the bed is jumping up and down screaming as my father lay still on his back. This was a brass bed with a canopy trimmed with lace borders. My mother disheveled, out of control, her face barely recognizable, was a frightening picture. Terrified, I run to my brother's room, find him sitting on his bed, sobbing, his head between his hands. I asked him what is happening, he answers "Papa est mort," Realizing I did not understand what that meant, he replied by moving

his head from side to side and by raising his arms in helplessness.

That was the first time I was confronted with death; I was confronted by it without knowing its meaning. I remember how tormented I was by the fear of my father being buried alive. What if the dead were not dead? I was obsessed by the notion that he could never come back. I could not understand it. I waited for his footsteps in the hallway, but they did not come. I remember that week and for some time after, the house was filled with visitors. Large brass trays filled with little cups of Turkish coffee, went back and forth from the kitchen. The ritual of Shiva lasted eight days. Chandeliers and mirrors were covered with black muslin fabric. People visited once, three times or more, as the local superstition demanded. One did not go home directly after a Shiva visit or a funeral. When coffee was brought in, it would first be served to the bereaved who would barely bring it to their lips, then the visitors would be served. No one refused a Shiva coffee. Nothing else was served. For thirty days rabbis would arrive in the late afternoon to say their prayers and eat a meal.

For a long time, my mother dressed only in black. Her dress was black, her hat was black, and

her veil was black. Many years later, she would say again and again that she mourned for eight years. True to the culture, she made her grief very visible. I had started kindergarten. I was five years old. On very rare occasions my mother would pick me up from school. She was a big woman, attractive and impressive in her mourning attire. All eyes turned towards this twenty- eight-year-old widow with two small children, a girl five, and a boy, nine.

I have few recollections of my father, shreds perhaps of his tall image as he arrived home from work. He would place his hat and cane on the coat hanger and clap his hands to call me. I would run down the hallway to land in his arms as he lifted me. My father Albert Hettena had studied in Paris. He was a serious violinist who helped pay for his education by playing the violin weekends in an orchestra. After receiving an engineering degree at the Ecole Des Travaux Publiques and leaving a heartbroken mistress behind, he returned to Cairo. There, his brothers and sister convinced him to remain at home, and arranged a match with Suzanne Levi Iskandari, my mother. She came from a good family, studied in a French convent and inspired by a very musical nun, she played and loved the piano. My father worked for the government, building roads and bridges. He became Chief Engineer of the Egyptian Railroad System and made a very good living.

After his death, my father's name was never mentioned. Maybe there was too much pain, maybe there was too much anger. My mother felt that life had betrayed her. Her husband's death had left her feeling abandoned and rejected and as though, her life as a woman had been snatched away from her. His body was buried together with his memories. I never really knew who he was.

In the following years, I was to witness many more deaths in our family and many funerals. The funerary carriage pulled by four horses, with its black frame and white stained glass, was a familiar sight. The coachmen in formal attire, with top hats held the reins. Following the hearse was a procession of mourners who accompanied the deceased part of the way to the cemetery. Muslim funerals were different: men carried the casket on their shoulders and were usually accompanied by "criers," professional women who wept, lamented and screamed.

My Uncle Benjamin, who lived across the hall from us, died some three months after my father. One afternoon, he and his wife Emma took my mother for a ride in their new car, a Studebaker. Barely two hours later they returned with Benjamin dead, in the arms of the chauffeur and the doorman. My father's family was comprised of six brothers and three sisters, none of whom lived very long

lives. Heart disease was present in the family. As a consequence of my father's death, my brother and I were driven out of the nursery before our time and the business of our childhood was over too soon. Furthermore, we had to move to less expensive quarters, servants were discharged and only one remained for housekeeping.

I was very fond of Mohamad, he was kind and compassionate and worked for us with his wife Zenab as a couple. I remember my mother whispering that she had to cut expenses, and that the couple had to go. One afternoon, perched on the table of the large kitchen, I told them in confidence of their upcoming discharge. I often think of that moment, and how I must have hurt them. Believing I was letting them in on a secret, I must have caused them a lot of pain, but perhaps my telling them made it easier for my mother. The year my father died, I was very sickly. A big gauze bandage covering my eyes, I had to be led on the way home from the eye doctor by my mother. Some time later, I lay in bed crying as Tante Farida tended two large boils. Tante Farida, the friendly aunt, was an accredited midwife who was loved by all. She was known to ride a mule to tend the sick and to deliver babies in villages in Upper Egypt. She also delivered all the babies in the family, and many more.

Shortly after my father's death I started kindergarten. At school there was the French

teacher, small, blue eyed, and attractive.
The first day of school, I
sat on the little chair, my head in
the hollow of my arm, against the
little table which served as a desk.
The room was painted gray and
was populated by little people.
Intimidated and frightened, I
sat there and cried silently. I
believe I must have remained in
that position all morning until
it was time to go home at noon. Before we were
dismissed, the teacher passed around the class
a box of hard candies, offering the children the
sweets. As she walked by me, she paused, and
said “for you there is no candy, you were crying
all morning.” I needed comfort, a hug, a smile of
reassurance, I wanted someone to say, “it is all
right.” Instead I felt the cold blue eyes of scorn. I
felt humiliated. I must have understood then that
crying was a bad thing. To this day I cry very little
if at all.

We are in a new apartment having left behind the
Manach Street building that was owned by my
uncles: twin structures which were considered
very tall and prestigious.
Life in Rue Mohamad Hagag was pleasant
and were it not for its association with the death of
my father, I would not have found the move very
significant. Our building was very white, brand
new and seven stories high. Our apartment was one
of three on the second floor. We entered through

a little vestibule that led to the foyer, a large room at the center, and from which one could enter every room, as well as the hallway, which led to the bedrooms, bathroom and the kitchen.

Years went by going to school, to the Lycee with my brother. Returning home in the late afternoon, there was the usual homework. Winter evenings in the family room, were spent around the square table, which served for meals as well as schoolwork.

I remember chestnuts being roasted on the kerosene stove, releasing a pungent aroma of kerosene, and tangerine peels. In the evening, the tangerine peels were placed on top of the stove to perfume the room, while a light meal was served. Whenever we had fried eggs, my brother and I would divide them so that he would have all the yolks and I all the whites. This arrangement suited us both since we each liked the different part of the egg.

The corner room, the family room, was bright and cheerful, with two pairs of large French doors leading to the balcony, which ran the whole length and width of the room.

On the balcony, my brother and I played a crude version of soccer. There, sometimes a Milan would dive into my snack, snatching it away from me, without so much as touching me. These birds of prey resembled large crows and would often circle where there was food. On that balcony wall, my brother with screwdriver and hammer

carved an unsuccessful bull's-eye, which he turned into a mask to cover the holes. This engraved figure was still there some forty years later when I visited Cairo and looked up to the second floor. Every morning at around 7.30 a.m., Ronnie and I were on our way to the Lycee. Since I was too young to walk alone to school, Ronnie was to take me with him. One day, about half way, as we passed the Cairo Museum, I spotted a glove on the sidewalk. Ronnie picked it up. It was the right hand of a beautiful brown leather glove, a man's glove. Cairo was never too cold in the winter, and if we ever needed gloves to warm our hands, it would have been a light knitted wool. This glove was leather, luxurious and uncommon and to us it seemed the ultimate in opulence. Ronnie who had a big hand, slid his fingers in it and carried his bag. The left hand, went into his pocket to cover the fact that he possessed only one glove. The next day, as I protested, Ronnie gave me the glove to wear, for part of the way. I too proceeded to put it on, even though it was huge for my hand, but it gave me a great feeling of importance and grandeur. We got into the habit of sharing the glove for a while. Every Sunday afternoon we went to the movies. My brother would choose the film, usually a Charlie Chan story or a comedy with William Powell and Myrna Loy. Sometimes it would be a western. Titles like Snow White or Fantasia did not come into consideration. It was his decision since he took me with him more as a favor than for the company.

At the death of our father, Ronnie was thrust

into the role of man of the house. Overnight he had ceased to be the carefree boy, without worries or obligations. He played with intensity and purpose. He became competitive and earned himself the reputation of being a very serious student. I began to perceive him as the responsible and wise older brother, on whom one could count. We were devoted to each other, but without being demonstrative. We cared but never outwardly expressed it. We were weighed down by the expectation of duty and performance. We felt our mother had sacrificed her life for us. Years we knew we could not repay. Ronnie and I never really fought. He was not the kind of brother who tortured his little sister, I was not the kind of sister who pestered her older brother. We lived close but parallel lives. We concentrated on keeping our heads above water. We did not understand then that bonding more intensely would have helped us in our journey. We missed out on the joys of confiding in each other, we missed the support we could have given each other. Perhaps this was partly due to the difference of age and maturity, in addition to the fear of being further burdened. However, we had high regard for each other, respected each other's privacy, and above all had great affection for each other.

We did not have toys. I remember a chess set that Ronnie played with, when friends came.

A couple of pieces were missing but he replaced them by carefully carving his own rendition of the knight and queen. When I was alone, I played teacher and class. The salon Louis XV and the dining room were closed, and only used for holidays, guests and formal occasions that were few. I would line up the chairs of the dining room in rows and distribute copybooks. I would recite the latest poem we had learned in school to these pretend pupils who paid absolute attention to my every word. I reprimanded or praised, and they listened.

On other occasions, I played cashier at the movie house. This invariably happened when the seamstress Zina came home to mend and fit our clothes. When the sewing machine was open its shape suggested the ticket window of the cinema. I would sit behind it and sell tickets to the customers with a little polite conversation now and then. There were times when I played manicurist, and pretended I had to work to raise my poor children. I don't ever remember being bored. I satisfied myself with games that I created, with toys that I would fabricate with wooden bobbins of thread, making sure I put them back in place after play. My mother never bought me a toy or a book. I don't remember her telling me a story, or even having a conversation. Her talk was mostly about household matters, essentials, or her economic worries. She always gave the clear impression that she carried with her a great fear of the future. I remember occasional visits of my maternal

grandmother, who came to console my mother for her great misfortune. She sighed with her, pitied her but never encouraged her to attempt to remake her life. The culture seemed to accept that a widow's life was terminated after the death of her man. She was to remain alone, sad, denying herself any right to happiness.

She was expected to devote herself to her children and find joy in family. Since my father died without leaving any fortune behind, we were dependent on his brothers, who stepped in and made sure that we were well taken care of. They were wealthy and assumed very naturally the responsibilities of the family of their deceased youngest brother. We were included and welcomed at every family occasion and we went to the best schools. What we did not have was a father to guide us, love us and protect us. We lived decently though modestly. We never felt materially deprived; we did not have money, but we were not poor. We were taught pride and honor, sometimes to an exaggerated degree; this developed in us an extreme sensitivity and a tendency to take offense easily. From the ways of our culture and our mother's insecurities, we learned consideration and respect for others, also an obsessive habit not to disturb. I in particular learned to please and not to confront. My world then was made of little things as well as grave and dramatic ones. Even though they had different

impact and consequences on me, I treated both with equal importance.

I acquired my taste for poetry and literature from my brother, by spending time with him while he memorized Moliere, Racine, Corneille, Beaudelaire and Prudhomme. I would hear him as he recited by heart, while I followed text in hand, correcting here and there. That is how I could declaim passages of *Le malade imaginaire*, *L'Avare*, *Le Cid*, and more. Those moments were very precious and left a very profound influence on me. I remember them with tenderness and nostalgia.

I am now in the Lycee where I spent the first seven years of school. In the yard is the huge mango tree, and the poncianas which shaded us from the hot sun. The imposing stone stairs right at the center of the far wall led to a terrace and closed doors. Those doors were opened only once at the end of each year, at which time the whole academic faculty sat above on the terrace, presiding over the students and families sitting below in the school yard on chairs aligned for the occasion. They read very formally the "Palmares" and distributed prizes. My brother was amongst those who were mentioned with honor. I was not. A very average student, I would only be receiving a mention in recitation and drawing. The girls and boys schools were separated by a wall that to me seemed impenetrable. Since the school took the whole length of the block, the girls

entered from one street and the boys from another parallel street, thus never meeting. The bell sounded at the beginning and end of every class. Like a church bell, it was pulled by a cord from below and its pleasant sound could be heard in the distance. The doors were closed after the bell tolled. At that time, one would have to go through the administration entrance and that meant trouble.

In that same school yard, I learned about feuds, politics, and hatred. Denise and Fanny were the best of friends, and inseparable. One day, behind the long row of fountains, war erupted, and two barricades were formed. The two girls had a following of fanatics who shouted and screamed on their behalf. More so, the clan of Denise was articulating fury and spitting fire, singing La Marseillaise. Everyday Fanny's clan became more and more depleted. I had joined the weaker clan because their vulnerability appealed to me. As pressures mounted and barely half a dozen fans were left, I succumbed and joined the other party. I still think of that act of shifting. I wanted to be accepted and included amongst the strong, the mainstream. I could not oppose so many. For that I had betrayed my original choice. No one ever knew what the feud was about. That was the first time I had witnessed a senseless fight, a meaningless conflict and a need to express vociferous anger without understanding the substance.

Many years later, I went to the theater to see *Les Miserables*. The wonderful scene at the barricades brought me back to the schoolyard. The Lycee being a French school taught French history and the 1789 revolution was of course very important and central. “Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite” were printed above the blackboard for us to see everyday. That period of French history was perceived as heroic and exciting. It is likely that the students identified with the heroes and heroines and the fight for a cause.

Sundays and holidays in particular were always spent with family. My Uncle Elie, the eldest, lived in a villa in Guiza. He was the brightest of all the brothers, and the head of the family and the business. When my father died he told his son Maurice, “you had one brother now you have two.” He was referring to my brother Ronnie. We spent many wonderful days at the villa. We would sometimes leave home in the late afternoon as life in Cairo began to drift in with the evening breeze. The carriage drawn by two horses went on its way, in no special hurry, crossing the Kasr El Nil Bridge, then the Dokki bridge and reached its destination in time for tea.

This ride was beautiful and it had the real flavor of Cairo, the splendor of the Nile, the Palm trees, the bougainvilleas, all amounted to the enchantment of that city.

Elie's beautiful house was called "the Villa," and many happy occasions took place there. Among them the Bar Mitzvah of my brother which was celebrated together with that of Cousin Maurice. It was a grand party and a glorious evening. I remember a large elegantly dressed crowd and heaps of presents for the boys. On a huge table, covered with lace cloth, were onemeter high decorated cakes. Everyone called them "mounted pieces"; they were gracefully wrapped in pink sugar ribbons, painted with marzipan fans and hazelnut lace, each with a particular theme, color and flavor. Groppi was the pastry place par excellence, and the most glamorous caterer in Cairo. He was a superb Swiss chef, a legend in his field, who came to Cairo to dazzle the Royal Palace as well as the Careens. Everyone knew Groppi's and his place became the most fashionable meeting place in Cairo. They had thé dansant and dinner under the stars with music and dancing. Thé dansant took place in the afternoon, where people would meet in the open garden at teatime. Mothers, to see and be seen would take their daughters or nieces there. Occasionally, these young women would be introduced to young men, or to the family of a young prospect. It was considered proper.

My mother's social life was mostly concentrated around family gatherings and events. Between her family and my father's, there were many aunts and uncles, also a lot of cousins of my generation. They would meet around coffee and home-made goodies, Egyptian style. These had a distinctive taste and their aroma of orange blossom and rose water cried for praise. After they complimented each other, they would exchange the latest news and gossip. Thus, many afternoons and evenings were spent on balconies, everyone fanning themselves in an automatic gesture. There was also a lot of card playing. My mother would always bring us a chocolate back from her visits, a marron glace or some kind of candy. This was her way of saying "I love you."

Some weekends I would go to Uncle Jacques and Tante Adele. Their daughters were about my age and Sophie, who was a "blue baby" and had a heart condition was often home and sometimes in bed. Their apartment was in Garden City, and their home was always filled with guests and card games. They often took me with them to the famous Guezira Sporting Club, on which grounds the races took place. There, one met the chic, the rich and the beautiful, as well as the gamblers. The space was divided into First and Second classes, the latter being mostly used by the "natives" with lesser means.

While Egypt was not a colonial country, it had many aspects of one. The British presence was felt; officers would appear with their baton, haughty and important in their uniforms, a bit like lords of the domain.

The races were held in the winter, always on weekends. The gardens were meticulously groomed. Besides watching the races and the parading of the beautiful Arab horses, nervous and proud, spectators sat at tables where tea and dainty pastries were served with panache. The Nubian waiters clad in white turbans and snow-white galabeyas with red or green sashes, poured tea with impeccable manners. Sometimes there would be gold embroidery on their chest and sleeves but that was reserved for higher-ranking attendants.

Tante Adele was always considerate and kind to me. She bought me my first watch, took my brother and me to the Luna- park of what was at that time thought of as a world exposition. She took me on vacation with Huguette, her younger daughter with whom I spent a lot of time. Adele, however, was not so attentive to my brother. I believe there may have been some feelings of jealousy since Ronnie was intelligent, a good student, and responsible and Richard her son was not. He was a bad student, often got in trouble and gave his parents a hard time.

Adele was a very energetic woman, who had married Jacques who, in fact, was her maternal uncle. She drove her own car, was bossy, enterprising,

and took care of herself and of others. She was very different from my mother who criticized Adele's independence and did not particularly like her. Adele's husband Jacques was a hardworking man, who was in charge of supervising the construction sites. Though not highly educated, he was invaluable to the business. My uncles were builders and contractors and many large projects in Cairo were attributed to the Hetttena Bros. They had introduced the Simplex system for digging foundations in to Egypt, and their huge machines were seen and heard all over Cairo. Having a brother in the field was very advantageous in a business where theft and corruption were common occurrences.

Two or three times a year, we would visit Uncle Joseph and Tante Farida and their five children. Their apartment was in Guiza, on the top floor of the splendid building that Tante Farida had bought with her own money, money for which she had worked hard. Their apartment had four exposures. The facade was on the street facing the zoo. Sometimes at night the animals would roar and scare us. On the opposite side was the Nile and the most beautiful view. There the dahabiyas or houseboats languorously anchored on the banks of the River awaited the evening cool. Joseph was a peculiar man. He uttered sentences that no one understood and spoke in riddles. His family, however, was likable and pleasant. Tante Farida was an outstanding woman; she was bright, kind and modern. She drove a little Fiat Topolino, the tiniest car ever made. Sometimes, she came to pick

up her children from school and would invariably take along anyone from the family that was there. I often had the fun of being stuffed into her two-seater, together with a few other cousins. We must have struck people like a circus act, so many of us piled in one small vehicle.

There was also Uncle Isaac. He was our favorite. His was a strange story. Mrs. Atal, whom we all called Granny and whose husband was associated in business with the Hettenas, apparently adopted him. For some reason he remained with her in Manchester, and grew up as her son and very much an Englishman. Mrs. Atal dearly loved him. Why he was separated from his brothers was never told. Some said that this was a business deal and that she was barren. Many years later, he came back to Egypt and she came with him and his family.

Isaac, an early riser, had the habit of visiting at seven in the morning, when he came to have breakfast with us. He would ring the bell in consecutive rhythm, and that was the signal for the whole household to get up and greet him. Even though it was early, we were always delighted to see him. He was amusing, perceptive, and friendly. Aunt Margaret, his wife, intensely disliked life in Egypt, and had no appreciation for the exotic. She left Egypt to return to England with our cousin Marjorie. We missed Marjorie, she was sweet and lovely, and we had great times together.

As Hitler began marching over Europe, many debates on political issues were heard. Still, life

went on for a while almost unperturbed. Europe was far... The carefree atmosphere of Egypt however was destined to be disturbed. With the threat of war, many people became very weary and cautious. Business slowed down, construction stopped. That of course meant that the family with its assets in construction material and machinery was left with very little work to do. Everyone participated in tightening up during that lean period. Elie, Jacques, Emma and of course my mother looked for more modest quarters. Once again, we moved due to circumstances we could not control.

We found an apartment at 51 Rue El Falaki, a five-room flat, very near the Lycee which was decent and light. The building was less exclusive but there were many families with children my age. A more informal style dominated. For my mother, this must have been a strain. She valued her privacy and fortunately friendly neighbors soon respected that.

Sarina who lived in the building across the courtyard had five daughters. Her husband, whom she called Rafla, short for Raphael, worked in a "domaine" or plantation in Upper Egypt and soon became romantically involved with the wife of the landowner. Sarina was heart broken, unhappy and she lamented the betrayal. She would refer to the other woman as Madame Zeft, an Arabic insult meaning, "tar." Looking at him, it was hard to believe

that this insignificant man could arouse such passion. On the third floor was Mrs. Hara, a widow with her daughter Cecile, who was my age. We went to the same school, and saw much of each other.

On the fourth floor was Celine, an orphan who lived with her aunt, an old lady, Mademoiselle Amar. Both women were sisters to the landlord, Monsieur Gabai. The two cousins were very close and soon we all became good friends. We played hopscotch on the service stairs, going from floor to floor usually through the kitchen where the doors were left open. The kitchen door opened on to a landing which was like a small balcony. This entrance was reserved for deliveries. The iceman, the milkman, the Syrian baker with his fresh bread, all came to that door. There, we sometimes sat and giggled about the Zilber boys who lived on the third floor and whose attention we tried to get. Because of the heat, earthenware jugs of water were always placed on the kitchen windowsill in the shade. Any one was welcome to drink. These jugs were called 'gargoulettes' and they kept the water cool and fresh. They had shiny polished brass covers in the shape of a dome, on the surface of which we could see our distorted reflection.

At times, we watched from the second floor to see the "Menagued" upholsterer beat the cotton and renew the comforters. He would appear once a year, sit in the courtyard and set up his tools. We would follow the rhythm of his beat as he separated the lumpy old cotton to transform it into

snow-white flakes. For that, he used a tool that resembled an archer's bow. The wire would be stretched tightly on each end of the long stick and he would beat the wire with a wooden mallet as the cotton passed through it. He would then stuff the fresh cotton in the new fabric cover, which he sewed together in elaborate designs.

From that same spot, we would watch the milkman arrive with his cow. The servant from the fourth floor would come down with her jug and he would milk his cow. When the milk reached the "rattle" sign, which was equivalent to one pound, he would stop and pour the warm, foamy milk into the jug. It was not unusual to meet this cow in the fashionable streets of Cairo, side by side with chauffeured cars. My own family never made use of the cow. Another milkman brought our milk to our door, and of course we had to boil it. We would also learn how to skim the heavy cream from the top of the milk as it cooled. On rare occasions, the same milkman would bring donkey's milk for those who wanted it, as it was reputed to have great qualities. Tante Farida claimed that the reason my brother was so smart was because he was given donkey's milk as a child.

The milkman was also the suitor of our maid Hanem, which is Arabic for "noble lady." She had come to us as a very young woman and this was her first job. She was not attractive, had buckteeth and was very skinny for she hardly ate. However,

she was very kind, decent and hardworking. In the language of the employers, she was a “perle.” She invested all her savings in gold jewelry which she wore on her arms, ears and neck. As she moved, the precious metal trembled and made pleasant sounds. Egyptian women believed that wearing one’s capital was a safe and prestigious thing to do. Over the years she developed a relationship with the milkman and subsequently they married and had a beautiful daughter.

One day my brother came home from school devastated. The administration had called him in to say that tuition was overdue. We knew that the situation was difficult but had not realized it had come to that. My mother decided to take me out of school, as only two months were left before the end of the school year. She made arrangements to have me tutored at home by Gisele, Sarina’s eldest daughter. Thus, my brother could remain to the end of the year. Boys in Egypt were regarded as more important than girls. Besides, Ronnie was in a more advanced class and he could not afford to miss classes. I often think of how simply my mother accepted that fact. She never even went to talk to the administration to ask for an extension.

I left the Lycee without regret. It was anonymous, crowded and sometimes strict. On the wall of the main stairway that led to all classes, was a large blackboard hung in a very conspicuous place. There, for the duration of one month,

one could read the names of students who had cheated or done something inappropriate. They had a system of shaming students and exposing misbehavior. Fortunately, I was never inscribed on that blackboard of shame, but I often thought of what that did to those who were.

A sense of urgency about the future began to surface. Soon we began to see a lot of uniformed personnel, British, Americans and Free French. They became more visible in the street, in restaurants. Groppi's became very populated with officers and local people began to mix with the military. Cairo was bustling with different nationalities and appearances. There was a great deal of activity and information being exchanged and passed around. Business began to pick up and there was an air of prosperity. Every empty apartment became very valuable. Across the hall from us, a couple of women moved in. If this was not a brothel, the tenants must have been call girls. None of the neighbors complained because apartments were scarce and rents high. These women were discreet and never disturbed anyone. In my mind this added a touch of exotica. Sham El Nissim was the holiday to celebrate spring. Egyptians went on outings. The parks filled with people who came from all over. Carts pulled by horses or mules carried Arab families. The women, in colorful dresses, sang and clapped; the children joined in, accompanied by indigenous drums and tambourines. Rod el Farag, on the Nile, was transformed into a fair ground. It was a day for

picnics, magicians, puppets, games and food. There was joy, and everybody participated. On that holiday Tante Farida held a big party every year, inviting the whole family and friends with their children.

The British began the preparation for war. It was 1940. The High command was responsible for the land forces of Egypt and would have to defend the Suez Canal. There was also the threat of the Italians in Libya and Ethiopia, who outnumbered the British and were far better equipped. The British began a furious training and building program of military bases, depots, workshops, etc. to accommodate the 300,000 troops that were to come. The local community participated and profited in this effort. In the midst of fear and anxiety about war, Egypt prospered. The climate of public opinion amongst Arabs was now shifting towards the Axis. The considerable French influence in North Africa began to wane. The capitulation of France and the Vichy Government had disappointed many Francophiles. The French, for decades, had gained their influence in this part of the world by importing their language and culture. The English were seen by many, as the enduring heroic nation that stood up to Hitler. The European community and European press certainly saw it this way. For the British, their presence in Egypt was crucial. Although public opinion was restrained and not always friendly, the British made sure that the government in power was favorable to them. In the meantime, one felt safe in Cairo.

Believing that the English were the future, many families took their children out of French schools to send them to English ones. I was sent to St. Mary's English School, which was a forty- five-minute ride by tram from our home. It had large grounds, attractive buildings, a spacious courtyard, where we played baseball and volleyball. The classes were not as crowded as at the Lycee, teachers were much more attentive to the needs of the students, and it was run like a small private school.

There, I felt more like an individual than in the French school, where it was hard to keep track of students in crowded classrooms of forty and more. The nuns were kind and helpful and mother Magdalene was a real educator. She had a good command of language and literature. There were teachers like Miss Monypenny and Miss Baldassar who were very special. Miss Monypenny, who was tall and skinny with spectacles, was the daughter of a Presbyterian missionary, who had lived many years in Singapore. She taught us to love Shakespeare and poetry and told us a lot about the world outside. She had many stories of her travels and of life in the mission in Asia. She developed our curiosity and interest. She was a born teacher with a great love for children and people. Miss Baldassar, short and portly, pounded English into us methodically and with patience. Three months later, we were able somehow to manage the new language. In St. Mary's, I blossomed, often receiving little medals that we were allowed to keep for a

whole month pinned on our uniforms. They were given for merit and scholarship.

I was surprised to be mentioned in my senior year, during the special school assembly for the distribution of medals in the big hall. The whole school listened with attention as Mother Magdalene read aloud two papers. They were compositions written by an English girl called Natalie Radi and myself. The subject was the autobiography of an old shoe. Natalie's was about a shoe that the tide brought back to the shore after great adventures. Mine was about an old shoe that found its way to the bottom of a closet. It was a lucky charm that trailed after the bride and groom's car. The text began with an arrogant remark made by a new shiny shoe, sitting on the top shelf.

The school bus took ages to reach its destination, so I often took the tram, which began shortly after seven. I would take the number 30 tram, sit in the Ladies compartment, because, like the first class it was upholstered, and private. The number 30 was printed above for all to see. It was also accompanied by a color code for those who could not read. I would read or dream, and sometimes chat with girls who came on a couple of stops further on. We would pass through a populated area where busy men and women were on their way to work or to do errands. Many women were dressed in the native style. Black melayas would shroud their bodies, leaving only a suspicion of what their

shape underneath was really like. They walked anonymously and proudly. Beneath their shrouds they carried their pain, their secrets and their hopes. Some would cover their faces with a 'boroh', leaving their eyes exposed. Eyes were usually heavily made up with kohl to appear very large. In Egypt eyes communicated powerfully. The 'boroh' had a golden bobbin piece at the top of the nose that enabled it to sit comfortably on the face. It was appealing and mysterious and created an aura of the unknown. Since the days of ancient Egypt and Cleopatra, eyes played a dramatic role in beauty. It was common to hear the Arabic expression "on the beauty of your eyes." Kohl was used generously. Sometimes hands and feet were painted orange with henna.

I would look at all those people with fascination. The tram would make a detour, reaching Cairo's main train station, go round the circle and travel straight on to Shubra where my school was. I would return home at around four, when I would have lunch at the little table near the window in the entrance way.

On one of those afternoons, my mother had visitors, and from my seat I overheard their conversation. They discussed marriage, and my mother made a comment that stayed with me. She said she wished for her children to be married and be happy but absolutely not to have children. While at the time I was not very disturbed by the remark, the thought returned to me again and again over the

years. Why would she feel otherwise? At twenty- eight, her life as a woman had ended. She was victim of her culture, as well as of her own character and passivity.

Summer months lingered. For much of the year, the weather was warm, and the light was bright. Schoolchildren had a long vacation and offices closed between the hours of 1 and 4pm. At the height of the summer, the temperature would easily reach 45 degrees or more. During those hours, people would find shelter in shady spots and those who could afford it would remain at home till the late afternoon. Shutters would stay closed to keep out the torrid heat and many enjoyed the siesta. In August, some fled the city to Alexandria or to another seashore. We spent two or three summers with Tante Marcelle and Uncle Emile, in their Alexandria home. Alexandria had the most beautiful 11 km. long corniche, on the Mediterranean. My aunt and uncle lived in Sporting, only a block away from the sea. Everyday my cousins and I went swimming, either at the local beach, or else we took the crowded bus to Stanley Bey or Sidi Bichr. Most of the time we rode standing. The bus ride took about a half hour and the conductor would shout “Chatby,” “Smouha,” “Sporting” as we stopped at different stations along the way. People would get off, others would come on. On that line, most were vacationers, with straw hats and baskets for the beach. These were wonderful beaches. The sand was white, the water clear and calm. At Stanley Bey, hundreds of

cabanas built on terraces embraced the bay. There, vacationers remained for a good part of the day, taking their meals and sometimes their naps. The fashion of the time was to wear long cotton robes in vibrant prints, tied at the waist, which ladies liked to show off together with their large straw hats. These hats were usually trimmed with colorful ribbons and silk flowers. We always found family or friends to sit with under a parasol or in the shade of a cabana. Agami was the finest of all beaches, but it was far, and mostly patronized by people who had cars.

In the evenings we would walk on the corniche or join the grown ups in one of the cafes on the water for a cool lemon granita. In Sporting, crowds would stroll among the many shops and vendors, between the displays of souvenirs, sweets, kebab and ice cream.

Other summers we went with Tante Adele and Uncle Jacques to Ras El Bar. We would drive towards the Delta, Damietta, park the car in the nearest town, and from there, take a Felucca on the Nile, to bring us as close to the hut in Ras el Bar as possible. The hut was situated at about half way between the River and the sea so that it was a five or ten minutes walk either way.

I remember Uncle Jacques leaving for the beach very early in the morning and returning to sit on the verandah, in the shade. The loukomadis

vendor would pass singing its praises, and Jacques would bargain with him, often buying the whole tray. Loukomadis was a Greek egg fritter sprinkled with sugar or honey. It was sometimes served as a treat for breakfast. Later in the morning, men would walk in their fresh pajamas to visit, or to do errands, dragging their feet in the sand. These pajamas were considered proper by some. For instance, Emile would go about in his pajamas while Jacques would never indulge. Emile was more indigenous in his ways, language and customs.

One summer was spent with Jacques and Adele in Port Said. There, Uncle Isaac, Margaret and our cousin Marjorie joined us. I have very fond memories of that summer and of taking long walks on the jetty with the sculpture of Ferdinand de Lesseps at the tip. The builder of the Suez Canal had a permanent place of honor in that port. During that summer, Uncle Jacques and all the cousins around him built a huge kite. It was the nicest on the beach, strong and very colorful. In the late afternoon breeze, we would all go to fly it.

Most of the population, however, remained in Cairo. To escape the heat, they would stroll in the Public Gardens. The Persian Garden was a favorite, even though one had to pay an entrance fee of one piastre. It contained a knot garden, a beautiful fountain with intricate Persian mosaic patterns, and a great variety of flora. Sometimes

people simply walked along the banks of the Nile. Coffeehouses were filled, and men would linger for hours reading the newspaper attached to a wooden stick, so it could not be removed. They would play with their Sebha, or amber beads, and were often engaged in noisy games of backgammon. In Arab cafes, the radios would blast. Open-air movie houses were a good place to spend a hot evening. On street corners, jasmines strung as bracelets and necklaces were sold, and young women would wear them. The heat would further intensify the already strong aroma of the flowers. The air was very dense and most public places had ceiling ventilators. Although summers were extremely hot, I have no memories of their being unbearable. Sporting Clubs with swimming pools were the social meeting places of the elite. The grounds were splendid, with Palms, bougainvilleas, hortensias and Oleanders. There would be swimming, dining, music and card playing. Chatting and flirting, suntanned women, dressed in white or in pastels, would socialize around the pool with long frosty drinks. Many were elegant, attractive, charming and witty.

There was a layer of society that paid a lot of attention to its pleasures and entertainment. They dressed well and had an intense social life. A small group participated in the war effort, and ran clubs for British officers. Meadi and (Guezira) were the very popular Clubs, where Jews and Christians mingled easily. The Guezira Sporting Club was mostly British.

One morning in 1942, my mother sat in her bed, sipping her coffee, reading the newspaper. She read aloud Churchill's speeches, those superbly inspiring words that the whole world remembers. She read with pathos. We were beginning to be aware of Hitler's evil, of the danger if he were to advance further. During family gatherings, there was talk of crossing to Palestine or to the Sudan. There was fear of rape and assault. Cousin Henriette said that she knew how to make herself look very old and unattractive. My friend Suzanne recently told me that she remembers waiting for her husband in the car while he stocked up on gasoline for the possible journey to the Sudan, when a young Arab put his head through the car window and threatened her: "tomorrow I will have you." In general, there was fear that the local population would rise against all Europeans. Centuries of occupation, of control and suppression, were bound to erupt in anger.

There were demonstrations and riots. One day, large angry crowds screamed and gesticulated as they marched through our street. Some demonstrators tried to break into buildings along the way, including ours. That same evening, the "bawab" or doorman who normally slept across the doorway, went from one apartment to another with a plate decorated with flowers and pound bills in the center. He was clearly saying, "thanks to me you have not been harmed." All the tenants showed their gratitude by adding generously to the contents of the plate. To

thank him of course, and also in the hope that he would not turn against us.

While anti-Semitic feelings were dormant in the past, it was clear that the Jews were now a target. The Jewish population of Egypt numbered 65,000 to 80,000. They were mostly middle class and hardworking. Some had been there for centuries. They enjoyed a certain freedom, and the different governments since the Ottoman occupation in 1517 were tolerant. Before that, the position of Jews was less secure.

In general Jews socialized amongst

themselves. We had few non-Jewish friends.

Zachary Nasr was a very good friend of Ronnie's.

He was a brilliant student, very sophisticated, and well read. He came from a very well to do Muslim family. He visited our house often and freely, playing chess, sometimes with eyes closed and engaging in animated discussions. Ronnie rarely went to him.

He lived in a far away neighborhood, while we lived in the heart of the city. It was easier for him to drop in and visit. Only once he gave a party for us and invited all the cousins. His mother and sister were there and they received us very warmly. They put out a spread that was generous and elegant, Egyptian style. Huge copper trays, on which a great variety of foods were displayed, were brought out by waiters and placed on low tables. The hosts were open and made us feel very welcome. Jewish families entertained in a more European style with a buffet or around the dining room table.

Egyptians were generally very hospitable. They received with warmth and generosity. In hot weather, guests were greeted with a tray of cold water and confiture. An attractive tray, with matching spoon holder and confiturier, would be offered to sweeten the palate. A crystal bowl sitting in its silver container would hold the candied fruit. The guest would spoon some dates or orange or quince, according to the season, taste it approvingly, then discard the spoon in a glass of water. One would then proceed to drink from another glass of cool water. The silver spoon holder had an intriguing design. It was forged gracefully in such a manner as to enable each spoon to have its own niche; I still have one of those confiturier. The little spoons would hang from their handles, and as the tray moved, they would gently sway. Later, Turkish coffee would be served with a biscuit or a homemade cookie. Egyptians loved sweets, and the culture of sweets was everywhere.

In general, they knew how to make one feel very welcome, and always went out of their way to convey that feeling. It was not unusual in an Arab home to pour the contents of the candy dish into your bag as you went home. When a guest arrived at the door, he or she would be received warmly with exclamations of "Ahlan," meaning welcome. They also had the habit of insisting, whether it was to invite one to stay longer or to have a second serving. Politeness demanded that you accept only after insistence.

One did not have to be rich to be generous. People would partake of their modest meal with a guest, or just break bread, or offer rosewater as a sign of friendship.

While the Egyptians were kind and warm, they could also be agitated in a brawl. Pride and honor played a big role, on those rare occasions, one had best keep away. The bottles would break and be brought out with the Nabouts or heavy sticks as weapons.

The Fodas were a well-known Muslim family. They were landowners, and very respectable. They lived in a beautiful townhouse, had four daughters, and a son. I was quite friendly with the daughters, and we saw a lot of each other. Mademoiselle, their French governess was a lovely woman. They went to an excellent Catholic school, Les meres de Dieu, where many aristocratic families sent their daughters. One Easter vacation, I was invited to go with them to their Esba, in the country. This Country Estate encompassed a vast area of 1000 Fedans or acres. The main house was very large and beautiful with separate wings for the girls and the boys. It was bright and cheerful and over the beds, white netting hung from the canopy to protect against bugs and mosquitoes. The farm was irrigated by man made canals that carried the water. There were trolley wagons pulled by horses. Rails had been built to facilitate transportation, and we rode every afternoon in the hay all over the farm.

We were given small pouches filled with coins that we threw to the village children as they ran after us shouting in joy. “The masters are there, and they brought with them coins and candies.”

While the privileged enjoyed a good life, and Cairo enchanted many, the jasmine and bougainvillea did not make up for the poverty and squalor that was all around.

The writer, Naguib Mahfouz described brilliantly the dark alleys where amputations took place. Beggars would have limbs cut off so as to practice begging more profitably. In the streets of Cairo, it was common to see beggars without limbs, or mothers with babies hanging from their breasts, waiting for coins to be tossed their way. Barefoot and clad in rags, the poor walked the city endlessly. While the streets of the rich were spared these sights, the more populated areas were filled with the illiterate, the hungry and the blind. Misery was normal.

Most accepted this with passivity. It was part of the panorama, part of the culture. A visit at Satout's, my mother's wet nurse, was enough to make one understand the degree of poverty that existed. She lived in a tenement in a remote neighborhood. To reach her room, one had to climb three flights to the roof while making sure not to stumble on the loose steps or fall through the gaps in between. One finally arrived at a very small

room, with mere holes for windows. There was no electricity, no bathroom. A little wooden stool, an old blanket and an old trunk furnished the place. A Turkish coffee pot, a few utensils and a primus stove indicated that someone lived there. She must have sold her belongings and all that my mother gave her to help her son and supplement the meager allowance she received from us. Her grown son was indolent and did not work, but somehow, she kept going.

Ignorance was commonplace. The poor could not read. Word of mouth and the blasting radio of the wretched neighborhood café were the sole source of information. News, prayers and sermons were broadcast and, of course, the music of Om Kalsoon and Abdel Wahab. Om Kalsoon was the great singer of her time, a legend in the Arab world and is still heard today on the radio all over the Middle East. Her voice was unique and her songs were very long, with the same short phrase being repeated throughout. It was the quality of her rich voice and the nuances that made her extraordinary success. For me, this kind of music had no appeal. A cannon sounded at about 5pm, and all work came to a complete stop. It is Ramadan, the Holiday when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. It stretched over a period of 30 days.

During hot spells, it was especially hard on workers to go without food or water. In our house, the maid and sometimes the

neighbors' servants together with Satout, would sit around the tableya, a foot-high wooden table, and have their fast-breaking meal.

The "tableya" would be spread with all sorts of good salads, foul – an Egyptian dish made of dried fava beans and well-seasoned, along with condiments, onions and cheeses. On other nights, it would be lamb and rice and, of course, salads. Satout would first reach for a cigarette, then water, and only a little while later would she begin the meal. I used to love to join them sitting on the kitchen floor and around the tableya. We used to break the native fresh bread and dip it into the fool. There were no plates. We all ate from the same platters placed at the center. Somehow, those meals had a special taste and a certain solemnity. It was as if food and water deprivation were a reminder of the suffering. The radio blared prayers and sermons. This was a time when religious beliefs and passions seemed to reach their peak.

The evenings would be spent munching on sweets and drinking Turkish coffee. I loved that holiday because Satout came and stayed with us for the whole month. To me she appeared to be about a hundred. In reality, she must have been in her late sixties. She used to sleep on the floor, anywhere at all, on a little carpet. She was blind and somehow managed to come to us from afar by asking people for directions. She used to tell us stories, sometimes quite terrifying, about Brahmans and Mamlooks.

After that, everyone would go to bed, to be awakened by the sound of the cannon at about four am. Those who fasted would wake up, set up the tableya once again, and have the last meal until dusk. Pessach at the Villa was a very festive event. The house was filled with flowers and the huge table in the “grande salle a manger” was set with a white embroidered cloth. All the silver was out, arrangements of flowers were aligned the length of the table. The seder food and the matza were spread out in a repeat rhythm so that all could reach it. This seder was Iraqi style. There was an abundance of Harosset (Iraqi style), a thick liquid date syrup garnished with loads of walnuts. Uncle Elie would preside at the head of the table, and the Seder would last for a long time. The chanting and singing would fill the house, interrupted only by the passing around of the different traditional Seder foods. Then the meal would be brought in by a retinue of soufraguis or waiters, all in their formal attire, turbans and red sashes over snow white gallabeyas. Mountains of lamb with rice, as well as mayena, which was an Egyptian kind of pie made with matza so thin that it resembled filo dough. This would be layered with chopped beef, pine nuts, and grains of pomegranate and placed in the oven until it reached the golden colour. Matza in Egypt was very thin, and made in a very large, flat, and round shape. There was also the traditional chicken, the fava beans cooked with lamb, dill and green onions and more. Glasses of wine would be filled one after the other. At the end of the meal, there was more chanting and prayers. In Sephardic tradition, the

Seder is celebrated the first night only.

The next day was usually celebrated by lunch at Jacques and Adele's. I remember one occasion when Adele had a lamb slaughtered for the holiday. The lamb was brought to the roof of the house, and the shohet came to do the slaughtering. Bloody handprints were carefully marked on the walls of the rooftop, possibly to ward off evil and harm and as a reminder that the sons of Israel were spared. Hamsa, meaning five in Arabic, was represented in the form of a hand. The Hamsa is an amulet that people in the Middle East have adopted as a good luck piece against the evil eye. They wear it out of superstition as well as a decoration.

Adele would fuss at Pessah, directing the cook to prepare the many different plates, and creating an atmosphere of festivity.

Even though Pessah was focused on foods, and on parties, we all participated in the celebrations. I remember with joy the holidays. Not all Jews in Egypt were very observant, however, every Jewish holiday was celebrated and marked with its particular style. Being Jews, there was no doubt they were different and mostly kept amongst themselves socially; still, they got along well with Arabs as well as Christians in their daily contacts and at work. Yom Kippur was celebrated at Tante Emma or at Tante Adele's. Because I wanted to appear grown up, I began to fast at age eleven. That day was usually spent in quiet respect and solemnity also in idleness and laziness, reading a novel or magazines. Towards the end of the fast my mother would begin

to look up at the sky and pray to heaven in murmurs and sighs.

The breaking of the fast was a big party with guests arriving after the first star appeared in the sky. There was a buffet with a spread of salty goodies and sweets that were lavish and plentiful, as well as cool lemonades and tea and coffee. A couple of hours later a proper hot meal would be served. As a rule, all the family was there and the children too. It was joyous and happy.

There was little mingling between the communities. Sometimes in the skating rink, we chatted and flirted with young Muslim men, mostly University students who came to skate. But all in all, there was a very strict code of behavior for girls. They were simply kept away from boys and even more so outside their community. There was very little intermarriage and when there was, it was mostly limited to Jews and Christians.

Muslims could have many wives, and could divorce by simply declaring so. It was a situation that was hard to tolerate. Even though many emancipated men did not marry more than one wife, it was a risk very few girls would take. Jewish girls expected permanence in marriage.

There was more interaction with Coptic families. Mr. Milad, a Copt, was my father's best friend. He was a mathematician, who had an enormous library in which every book was catalogued, covered meticulously in brown paper and labeled in an identical manner. After my father's death, he often came to see us. We would tell him

about our studies. Sometimes he would offer to tutor us in Math during final examinations. The Copts were native Christians, considered by some to be the original Egyptians who remained in the region after the birth of Christianity. They were educated, and contributed extensively to Egyptian society. Many entered politics and the academic field and they were generally hard working and well respected.

Now there was discontent. The germ of anti foreign feelings had pierced. 'Foreign' meant anything that was not Muslim. King Farouk was also a source of displeasure. Instead of leading, he was busy being a playboy and a tyrant. Anti British feelings became openly apparent as Rommel advanced in the desert.

That week was crucial. It was June of 1942. The Germans were advancing, crushing the British 8th Army. Over a two-week period, the Axis forces stormed into Egypt, reaching within sixty miles of Alexandria by the end of June. The British, in desperate fighting, held off the German advance. Evacuation was in progress, families of military personnel were sent off to South Africa, amongst them my cousin Edgar's family. He was a doctor and a colonel in the British army.

One afternoon Uncle Joseph appeared; he had come to have a talk with my mother. He explained that in this crisis she would have to worry about herself and the children. When he left, my mother, tears running down her face, once more felt abandoned. In my imagination, I saw images of

trucks and cars filled with military personnel and civilians leaving the country. A couple of days later my uncle Isaac came to the house and told us that under no condition would we be left behind. There would be room for us in his son's car. We would be joining him, his son Victor (the English) and his daughter in law Erica. We felt relieved by the thought of not remaining alone. We also knew that there would be less room for gasoline cans. We all waited in an atmosphere of gloom and anxiety. The situation was at a standstill. After a succession of changes in the high command of the 8th Army, General Montgomery appeared on the scene. He brought with him inspiration and a sense of hope. The great battle of El Alamein in late October of 1942 ended in victory for the British who had finally defeated the Germans, pushing them back to Tripoli. The immediate danger had passed and we all began to breathe. Being British subjects, Ronnie was mobilized in the British army, and began his training not far from home. I continued my life with school. Meanwhile war songs were heard constantly over the radio. Vera Lynn, Bing Crosby, Rina Katie with "j'attendrai," all the nostalgia of the troops pouring into the lyrics. A lot of energy and vitality was in the air.

Social and cultural life in Cairo, as well as entertainment ranged from family and friends, meetings and visits and card playing, to club life, to dancing parties that the young organized around birthdays and other events. There was the gramophone or the electric pickup with records

borrowed from everyone. People talked about the fancy balls at the Mena House and the Shepperds Hotel that were the pride of the Middle East. They were opulent palaces, elegant and lavish. Some Cairenes belonged to literary, or musical clubs, or political discussion groups. There were no significant concerts and theaters except for visiting companies- mostly it was limited to local companies and comedians. A very talented actor of the time was Rehani.

At the opening of the Suez Canal, in 1889, Imperatrice Eugenie came to Cairo for the celebrations. The Opera House had been built for the occasion and Verdi had composed Aida. The event was extraordinary as the joining of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean had great political and commercial impact on Egypt and the world. The Opera House, with all its glamour, had attracted some theatrical groups from Europe to come to Cairo, the Comedie Francaise amongst them. In 1946, I was lucky to secure a seat in the second balcony to see the Comedie Francaise, in a performance of *Le Malade Imaginaire*. I was in awe of the place, of the atmosphere, and of how a book was transformed into a play on stage. I believe this was the first time I was in the presence of a visual art that had nothing to do with Ancient Egypt. There were also night spots like the Auberge des Pyramides, for dinner and ambiance, near the Pyramids. There, King Farouk could be seen accompanied by various women, night life of cabarets and music halls with belly dancing and

music, were there to entertain. Badiaa was famous on the Place de l'Ezbekiah where some of the greatest belly dancers performed. Men would go crazy over them. There was a lot of gossip around the conquests of those stars, for whom men lost their heads and contemplated suicide. I was once taken to a matinee performance by Tante Andrée and her family. It was a sensual dance, very graceful, and not at all vulgar. In the context of the time, women taunted, and tempted, and did not feel degraded. Mostly men patronized those places. Cairenes would venture into the exotic and colorful bazaar of Khan El Khalil. There one could find silver, copper, jewelry and Egyptian antiquities. Local people would get bargains, and the foreigners would pay ten times the price and believe they got it for a song.

Some would ride to the Citadel, sitting on a hill frowning at Cairo. This structure, impregnable in the age of Saladin, is visible from a distance. There was the Egyptian Museum that possessed the greatest art treasures of ancient Egypt and where Tutan Khamoun's gold chambers were exhibited in tight quarters, badly lit, and without fuss. Visitors were few, and occasional lovers wandered hand in hand through its halls, knowing they did not risk being seen. There was no Modern Art around. Events like the weddings of King Farouk to Farida and his sister Fawzeya to the Shah of Iran prompted many artists to decorate Cairo for the Occasions. At that time huge columns and arches with portraits in

color of the couple were erected. Some designers were brought from Europe, but most work was done locally. Creativity however excelled in pastries that looked like art. On those occasions, colorful tents were erected in intricate patterns. Guests clad in holiday clothing would sit on gold and red armchairs that were lined all around the tent walls, listening to music and watching belly dancers undulating their firm bodies. Huge platters of pastries, as well as colorful syrupy drinks were then brought in for the guests to consume. Women and men were separated in different areas. Life was leisurely, and did not abound in energy and action. It was absorbed and enjoyed at the pace at which it was lived. Everything seemed to have more depth. I sometimes think of how much we miss, moving as fast as we do.

I began to be aware of myself as a girl. Jimmy, a boy whose father was English and his mother Maltese, asked me to go to the movies. He was a nice young man who came regularly to the Skating Rink. We skated together on our roller skates to the music of Marches, Bolero or Comparssita. We rolled around the Rink, tirelessly, with all the other young skaters. Some were good, the rest tried to imitate them. This was a place that was transformed into an open-air cinema in the summer. When I approached my mother to ask permission to go to the movies with Jimmy, she responded very negatively. She never asked me who this young man was nor did she explain why it was wrong for me to go. She simply said that it was shameful. I went

anyway to a matinee performance, chaperoned by my cousin Odette, held hands with the boy, and thought it was bliss. On other occasions Fernand Hendi would wait outside my window to catch a glimpse of me. From a distance he would stand there for long periods of time looking towards the balcony. Though he meant nothing to me, I liked the attention. In Egypt, men in general, liked to woo girls silently, and often sigh, and sometimes cry. It was part of the culture. Interaction amongst the young was very difficult and the need for flirtation and contact was often translated into melodramatic behavior. It was as if to reassure oneself that love existed and also to appear in the eyes of others as someone to whom this love was happening. These manifestations of loving someone from afar were common and did not detract from the intensity of the experience. Eyes behind the Boroh sent messages much stronger than words could express. The intense passion that existed in the imagination was no less important. Actually, the restrictions that were imposed on the young increased their passion and curiosity, as well as firing their imagination.

My mother's cousin Henry, who was a professor, was known for his love for Blanche. His suffering and his pain were the subject of many conversations. Although the relationship was mature, and Blanche had been his mistress for a period of time, he and his mother would discuss the unfolding of this adventure in every detail with the entire family or whoever would listen. His tears were

the envy of his cousins and also the source of their mockery.

French education was prevalent. Nineteenth and twentieth century literature influenced behavior and the imagination. We all read Madame Bovary and Colette. We somehow expected a beautiful woman to have the respectability of a husband, as well as a lover swooning over her. Grown ups often spoke about whose lover was who. Honor and appearances were central in the bourgeois existence of Egyptian Jews. The Mediterranean passionate behavior was extensive and was also mixed with the Egyptian pride and face-saving attitudes.

The El Alamein crisis had prompted many families living in Alexandria to come to Cairo. Alexandria had been bombed and it was closer to the front line. The rumbling of tanks was only a few kilometers away, and the fear of the German advance was increasing every day. Fearing for their lives, people began to leave the city. My mother's sister Marcelle, her husband and their two daughters left for Cairo. They left for safety but also because Emile had not succeeded in his business. Marcelle had married her maternal uncle, because the family had decided it would be good for Emile. He was in fact a good for nothing man, lazy, a man who ran after every skirt he encountered, and who was oblivious to the pain he was causing his wife. Marcelle on the other hand, was a good woman who never revolted,

and who swallowed her pride. She sat and fed her frustrations literally and waited. Many years later, the artist Ziona Shimshi did an installation at the Herzliya Museum which consisted of some twenty figures in different poses sitting, passive, gazing at nothing... She called the exhibit: "They are sitting and waiting." It brought to mind the many "Marcelles" I encountered in Egypt, and elsewhere.

The cousins Chouchou and Lily were around my age and we saw a lot of each other when they came to Cairo. They lived across from Groppi's and from their huge terrace we could hear the music. The neighbors' boys often came up to dance and we would have our own little party.

It was now 1943. Ronnie was stationed in Aden, where he directed the operations of BOAC. In January of that year, I received a letter from him, wishing me a happy birthday. He also wrote that in his armoire, in the right pocket of his tweed jacket, I would find an envelope. To my surprise, the envelope, which was addressed to me contained birthday wishes and a five-pound note. I had never received such a present. That my brother found the time to be so attentive before his departure to Aden moved me beyond words. It was something I would remember for the rest of my life.

Many European civilians found refuge in Cairo, among them the entourage of the deposed king of Yugoslavia. Three or four young men from this group moved into the fifth-floor apartment

of our building. They were good looking, in their twenties, well educated, and with very good manners. One of them, Guy de Sansin, claimed to be a count, and seemed very proud of his title. In reality, he was extremely refined, knew a lot about the world, and his attitude was that of fine breeding. We began a flirtation talking from one balcony to another and soon this developed into a friendship. He came to our house met my family, including all the cousins. My mother somehow allowed those encounters without objections. I believe that this was because she had met Guy and appreciated his ways, also perhaps because the war had brought a new measure of understanding and perspective. In order to see me, Guy had to include my two cousins Lillian and Lily as chaperon. We would all go to Groppi's for tea, or we would take long walks exploring the different parts of Cairo, like Guezira, the Citadel or the Pyramids. We went to all those places, but always accompanied.

Guezira is a place one never forgets. Its gardens, its aroma of jasmines and the rows of Poncianas and Jacarandas with their red and blue flowers are engraved in my memory. Every Cairene of that period knows the magic of those alleys of huge trees with red blooms on fire and the heavenly fragrance of the 'fol', that cluster of jasmine blossom the size of a rose.

This was a wonderful year, I was happy and doing well in school. I was in love.

But a few months later, Guy was transferred. I relished and lingered in the memory of the relationship, not questioning the workings of life, of the presents it gives us, of its license to take them away. I thought of the wonderment of love, of that feeling which sweeps one's entire self away. This was my first love. I had discovered the emotion in my teen years, with intensity and with innocence. I had felt privileged to be able to feel so deeply.

Sometime after Guy's departure, two British intelligence officers came to our house and spent some time with us, chatting, inquiring, questioning. After a couple of visits, they never returned. Many years later Ronnie told me that Guy belonged to an Elite intelligence unit which had been parachuted behind enemy line.

With my neighbors, Celine and Cecile, we would often join a group of young friends in a café called Issaivitch, known for its ice cream and 'foul'. The teenagers would hang around the square, with their ice cream cones, chatting, and then would move towards the bridge. The Nile attracted like a magnet. Gliding on the river were the feluccas with their huge sails. Those same boats used since ancient Egypt were still sailing the river. Four thousand years had not altered their lines or their grace. The Kasr El Nil Bridge was cool, and there was often a breeze in the evening. The sky at night in that part of the world is unique, a most

extraordinary vision. The millions of stars are so bright that one feels immersed in them.

At that time, the Pyramids were an hour away by tram. We would go down at the terminal station, walk up the winding little hill, and arrive at the foot of the Pyramids. The place was almost always deserted and silent. One felt in total communion with these gigantic structures, emerging from the sand. Camels would slowly roam, or simply sit. One felt in awe and overwhelmed, it was a magical moment. History was all around.

A little further out was the Sphinx in all its majesty and splendor. It did not matter how many times we visited the place; we always felt compelled to return. Even though at the time I had not realized the power of its impact and the influence this experience would have on me, I knew I was privileged to be there, to touch the stones, and to walk on the site.

When I visited some forty years later, the site was built up with many souvenir shops blocking the view. One could not experience anymore the Pyramids emerging from a distance as one slowly approached. Thousands of visitors came to spend the day, littering the grounds and just having a good time as if in a picnic ground. The feeling of a sacred and unique place was lost.

That feeling, however, was retrieved in Luxor.

There, the environment and its monuments were

respected and protected.

Youth in Egypt in the forties felt in turmoil. While many enjoyed and participated in the “dolce vita,” some had the need to belong to a cause. Europe was burning and bleeding, many felt that it was wrong to be completely on the outside. The Lycee had a group, which was called the ‘Amicale’. There, young intellectuals met socially and discussed politics. Franco, Stalin, Hitler were favorite subjects. They were communist oriented and attracted the young who wanted to help make a better world. I joined that group for a short time through my cousin Fifi, who was a member. She was my only contact and she spent time teaching me the structure of the party, its cell organization and how it functioned. I soon tired and dropped the idea. In November of 1944, two Jewish young men, members of the Stern Gang, assassinated Lord Moyne, Minister in residence in the Middle East, in Cairo. The assassins came from Palestine to commit the deed. It was in protest of British policy to forbid entrance of Jewish war refugees to Palestine. The British were furious. Some Arabs, particularly the Muslim Brothers, sympathized for a while with the Zionist cause but otherwise it was condemned. The Jewish population was terrified. Even though no one could condone assassination, many admired the two young men who crossed the border to bring attention to a tragically pressing problem. They knowingly committed a deed from which there was no escape.

Shaken and disturbed by the event and the cause behind it, I went to see Mr. Weissman a few days later. I was told by a friend that he was the father of Aviva Naggiar, a family very committed to the Zionist cause. I arrived at his office in the afternoon without an appointment. I asked to see him alone because of the personal nature of my mission. I faced him across the desk and explained that I was very moved by the courage these young men displayed. I wanted to do something for the Jewish cause. Our people were dying in Europe, and I wanted to help. He listened very attentively, and explained to me that actions like that were not really commendable and terrorism was wrong. I left not knowing what to make of this conversation. He did not indicate what was right.

I had graduated from St. Mary's and was holding a job teaching English, at a private school, while working afternoons at the British Consulate. Evenings I tutored a young cousin of mine, Claude. Claude was the son of Mimi and Saul. Cousins that we all loved and admired. Mimi was beautiful, kind and lovely and Saul her husband was handsome, charming and a great sportsman. He was Egypt's fencing Champion and we were all in awe at his accomplishment. One Sunday I went to the pool at the Sporting Club, and there met some acquaintances who invited me to accompany them that evening to a youth center called Maccabi. We all went.

The Club was in a large apartment in an office building on the Rue Emad El Din. There, I met a large group of young people who had come to listen to a lecture given by a man called Shertock, who later on would be known as Sharrett and would become foreign minister of the State of Israel. He spoke for a long time and he spoke in Hebrew, assuming that young Jews knew the language, although we did not. There was also a lot of singing, the atmosphere was pleasant and friendly, and I felt very much at ease. This was the beginning of my interest and involvement with Zionism. I returned again and again and soon I found my place. The youths were interesting and intelligent. The 'movement' as we called it, provided for the young and particularly for girls a place to meet other young people, establish friendships and get away from home to escape close and strict parental supervision. The movement was divided into groups, each bearing a Hebrew name. At the head of the group was a leader. The latter would lecture on the history of the Jews and Zionism. That is how I learned about the Dreyfus affair, the Balfour Declaration, Herzl, and anti-Semitism. The leaders talked a lot about building the Jewish State. Many were preparing for Aliya, to go to Palestine to build a country where Jews could have a haven. Boys and girls went on excursions together, learned about defending themselves in case the Arabs would attack the Jewish Quarter. Young idealists argued with their parents, the latter not wishing to see their children leave a comfortable life, to go toil the land for a dream. They loved Egypt and had no desire to

see their offspring venture to unknown grounds. In the meantime, the Muslim faction was restless and discontented. There were increasing demonstrations and riots, they wanted the British out and the Jews by the side were also in disfavor. There was serious information that on Balfour Day, in November of 1945, the mobs would attack the Hara, (Jewish Quarter). I was assigned to accompany DR with a basket of grenades to bring to the Quarter. We had covered the top of the basket with oranges, and went on our way. The Haganah in the Hara had built roadblocks. The whole day was spent with “yes, they will attack, no they will not,” we were fed information every hour. At the end of the day we received news that the alert was over. The Quarter was safe. At about ten that night we set out to leave the Jewish Quarter to return home. We had to walk through a long street in a totally Arab neighborhood, the Mouski. The Mouski was a very colorful local shopping district by day, a sort of a bazaar. That night it was totally dark and deserted.

We walked straight without exchanging a word, about half way to the end of the street; a huge slab of glass came forcefully down missing us by inches. We kept going silently, hoping for the best. It was dark, but we did not light our flashlight. We just kept going till we reached the end of the street, which was a big square Ataba Khadra, where all trams of Cairo converged. We were still within half an hour walk from home and we hurried along the silent and deserted streets.

Whoever was in charge of that operation should have taken into account that it was dangerous to be on the street that night. We were young and did not ask questions, we thought that that was the nature of the mission. Strangely enough we never really discussed what had happened. It was a shared danger, a sort of a secret. Perhaps D. who was very involved in the Haganah told his superiors about it, but he never mentioned it to me. That same night the Jews of Alexandria had suffered severe damages.

Around that time, I was sworn in into the Haganah. I pledged in a most dramatic way to serve my people and defend them. I was brought to an apartment, (I knew to whom it belonged because my grandfather lived across the hall) in total darkness, my eyes bound, and made to sit in a barber's chair. A blaring light flooded my face, a Bible and a gun were brought in, and I ceremoniously swore to defend and protect my people. Egyptian Jews, while being very committed, also had a very marked sense of humor. They turned a dramatic commitment into a theatrical experience. They kept the rules, but they also exaggerated and laughed at the ceremonial aspects. They liked to play the hush-hush games, took unnecessary chances, and risks that later would backfire. They made sure the Jewish Quarter would be defended.

The Hara was a very old quarter where Jews were concentrated and segregated for years. It is estimated that some 10,000 Jews lived in the Quarter around that time. Most of them were indigenous, or immigrants from other Arab countries; they were generally poor and many depended on the charity of the community. In their lifestyle, the indigenous Jews had assimilated into their Egyptian environment.

The Ottoman rule had gradually given Jews of the area more freedom and enabled them to develop their skills as merchants, financiers and middlemen, professions that were not accorded high status in the Muslim world. In the 19th Century, first Montefiore and Cremieux and later on the Alliance Israelite Universelle, had introduced schools and western education. Well to do Jews left the Quarter as the Ottoman Empire allowed them to live elsewhere and gave them more rights. They began to play an economic role. By the twentieth century, there remained in the Jewish Quarter only the poorer class. The rest of the Jews lived all over the city. They lived well with their neighbors and enjoyed their respect. They were the wealthy, the professionals, and the middle class.

Besides the indigenous population, there were a number of Jewish immigrants from different parts of the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and Europe, who came to Egypt in the 19th Century. The

composition of the population at that time ranged from Sepharadim from Greece and Turkey, to Iraqi, Syrians, Tunisians and Moroccans, Italians, and some Europeans. World War I had also brought some Jews from Palestine who had been expelled by the Turks and came to find refuge in Egypt.

My brother returned from Aden. I could not wait to draw him into the movement. As I had hoped, he embraced it without difficulty and took on an important role. Soon he had many important responsibilities, amongst them the building and operation of a clandestine radio station that emitted and received messages every day to and from Palestine. This he did from his bedroom in Rue El Falaki. He transmitted in code and was in charge of decoding the information.

The girls in our group were given different assignments. N.S. together with another girl were given the task to accompany men to an apartment regularly at 2 o'clock in the afternoon when it was scorching hot and no one was out in the streets. The place was used originally as a radio station but when this became dangerous, they moved the station to Rue El Falaki, our home. "The apartment" was subsequently used as a meeting place, to exchange information and other uses. The place was supposed to appear like a natural place of rendezvous and the girls had a grand time playing the mistresses. To see the humor in this, one must know what N. looked like. She was the intellectual type with glasses, a serious girl who looked like anything except mischief. They would make up their faces

heavily with rouge and eye shadow, wear high heels, and look very guilty and grown up. They would sit in one room all afternoon and do homework. (N. was a student at the American University).

D and I were in love. We made a beautiful couple. We were both committed, good looking, we shared an ideal, and belonged to a group that was supportive. That year was spent in excitement, activities, and a total feeling of belonging. The group would go on long walks in the evenings on the Kasr El Nil Bridge. We sang a lot, patriotic songs, also songs of love to Jerusalem. D. was a decent young man, intelligent, good natured and caring. Akiva was the Shaliyach (the emissary). He was sent from Palestine, together with a couple of others to lead, prepare and educate the youths to go to Palestine. He was born in Germany, and lived with his wife and daughter on kibbutz Naan. He was intelligent, handsome, had a lot of charisma, and was a wonderful teacher. He inspired us all, lectured, and projected his enthusiasm. We looked upon him with admiration and respect.

In December 1945, a new Shaliyach arrived, (new to me). He came to the “locale” accompanied by Akiva. I learned subsequently from an older member that he had been in Egypt in 1943 together with Akiva to establish this Zionist youth group. The two of them were very successful despite the fact that forming a nucleus group was no easy matter in Cairo and Alexandria. The youths were

argumentative, loved the good life, joked about everything and were not so keen on hearing about the holocaust and the tragedy of the Jews. However, they were listening and understood very well what this was all about. Soon a serious group of youths was formed and developed into a force that focused on Palestine and the Jewish State.

The Shaliyach was Raphael. He had returned on a second mission. This time he came to organize the Aliya Bet, the underground immigration. He had just lost his father and there was a sad, reserved look about him. Because of his role, he was effaced and not very visible. That night there was a big party; there was a lot of singing and dancing, and I was having a grand time. Raphael asked Akiva who I was, because he explained he was going to marry me. That evening he came with Akiva to our house, went up to the apartment in the elevator, then decided that to ring the bell and present himself could appear strange. They left intent on postponing the meeting. Raphael somewhat resembled Orson Welles; he was good looking, a bit stocky, with a very brisk walk. One had almost to keep up pace with him. He was intelligent, sharp, quick, and very sure of himself. He was determined and somehow one had the impression that he always got his way. He had beautiful teeth and an engaging smile. His long eyelashes were the envy of many girls. Raphael began to work. He had no papers, and had entered Egypt illegally through the desert. He needed a safe place to stay. My mother under pressure from my brother and myself agreed that he

could stay with us. Raphael and I began to see more of each other. I accompanied him on assignments. We went by train to Alexandria for the day to plan to buy a ship for Alya Bet or illegal immigration. The discussion took place in a rowboat, in the port itself, in broad daylight. I sat at the bow, while the others were discussing how to move a few hundred Jews from one country to another, without arousing suspicion. Eliahu Braha and Albert Guetta as well as R. sat in that boat planning. My presence was to make this outing appear to be innocent. They did not however go through with this project. Instead a plan for one thousand Jews to be moved to Palestine went successfully into effect. It was scheduled for Pessach vacation when trains were full with travelers and Jewish soldiers going on leave to Palestine. Overnight, one thousand Egyptian Jews, young men and women dressed as soldiers with legitimate papers passed the border between Egypt and Palestine.

I was to accompany R. in different missions and meetings; he did not talk Arabic and I was the one to answer conductors or others. On one occasion I accompanied him by train to Ismaillia, where he had an important meeting. I waited all day for him at the ATS Club and we almost missed our train back to Cairo. That night we had a rendezvous with Ronnie at Midan Ismaillia shortly after 11 p.m. The train was expected to arrive a little before that time. When we reached Cairo, we learned that the governing party had fallen, and that the Prime Minister had been thrown out of office. The government was in

chaos. The city was under curfew. In silence and in darkness we made our way to the rendezvous point. But Ronnie was not there. After waiting a while we made our way home, walking briskly in the shadows of the buildings, and in the hope that we would not be stopped and asked for our papers.

During that period Raphael made a number of trips to Palestine without proper papers. He crossed the border ten times through different routes. On one occasion he traveled with false papers by plane. While waiting for departure at the Cairo Airport, he met Yolande Gabai, a young woman who was also doing underground work. She asked R. to yield his place to her on the plane, she had to get to Palestine. She spoke in a slightly loud voice to make her point and to convince him. He was traveling under an assumed name and she almost caused him great trouble, not realizing what she was doing.

The arrival of Raphael brought with it more excitement. I was very flattered to be paid all that attention. I was chosen for assignments. The Shaliyach for us was a sort of a Prince of Israel and to be included in that inner group was the utmost privilege.

This situation also brought with it its anxieties. My emotions began to shift from D to R and then back again to D. I loved the action, the glamour and the overwhelming inspiring strength and personality of Raphael- I also loved the familiar culture, the gentleness and caring personality of D.

I would shift back and forth, while D. waited and Raphael, sure of himself, knew it was a matter of time. I felt loved, appreciated, desired and wanted. What more could an eighteen-year-old wish for. I chose to embark on a new life and share it with Raphael. It was July of 1946. In our conversations he said he had to study shipping, a profession needed to link the shores of Palestine to the world. This would be our lifeline for survival and the development of the economy when the new state would be established. He spoke with assurance, vision, and conviction. This would have to come to pass. There was not even a shadow of a doubt. I believed him. We would have to marry in October, so as not to miss the school year. We would travel to England to study.

Raphael left Cairo for the last time with false papers and with the fear of being discovered. Because I worked at the British Consulate, I was able to obtain a visa for Palestine for him. I took the Egyptian passport where the photo of the owner was switched for that of Raphael, to the consul in charge of visas, Mr. Boreman. He stamped the visa on the spot, but may have felt that something was not right. He handed it to me and said kindly “good luck.”

Raphael returned to Tel Aviv, to his family. As he walked up the stairs, his mother greeted him and said how good it was to have him back. She also added that now he would have to settle down

and that they would find him a novia or bride. To this Raphael replied that she need not bother, this was already done. His mother had lost her husband barely the year before. Her older son Daniel had gotten married to Mati that same year and it must have been hard for her.

A few days later, I was to travel to Tel Aviv to meet the family. I had never been to Palestine before. In my mind, the country was beautiful, exciting, and a place where I would instantly feel happy and at home.

Ronnie and I decided to fly to Lod. At Heliopolis, we boarded a one-engine plane that transported seven passengers. The pilot looked us over and sat us according to what his judgment considered our weight to be. We flew very low, and we could see the expanse of the Sinai Desert that separated Egypt from Palestine. It was vast and dry and beautiful.

We arrived at Lydda, which was more of an aviation field than an airport. There, Raphael met us. Meeting the Recanatis was an experience. They appeared to me as a formidable group, a Sephardic family, French speaking and very traditional. Mathilde, the matriarch, carried an appearance of reserve, severity, and sadness. She was a no-nonsense person, who did not utter redundant phrases or words. She did not dispense warmth or friendship, and seemed to be critical of her surroundings. The

rest of the family, in a tribal gesture, gathered around her. There was no hostility, just suspicion. This was a style I had not known. I learned later that strangers in general, were not easily welcome, and that the family was very private. The silly notion that the bride to be would be received with enthusiasm and open arms was soon dissipated. I observed, took it all in and filed it somewhere in my mind. My main interest was my love for R. and nothing else really mattered. I was surprised that the land was dry, with little green, and very few trees. Water was scarce and often there was none. There were very few services. Women would carry their heavy bundles and grocery shopping, sometimes for long distances. Many were fragile European women who were not used to the heat, and walked dragging their swollen feet.

There were some wonderful moments as we traveled around the country. In the Kibbutzim, young men and women in their sandals and shorts worked and toiled, exposing their long tan legs. They glowed with energy and determination. The future was theirs. In Tel Aviv, we would have breakfast or tea on the seashore in Viennese type open-air cafes where orchestras played light music. The real enchantment however was Jerusalem. It seemed that centuries had not touched it. This magical city reflected thousands of years of history. It was the summer of 1946 and the British were still very much there and visible. Soon I had to leave for Cairo, to get ready for my wedding and upcoming trip in October.

In the meantime, back in Cairo, my mother made preparations for my departure. She sold the jewelry my father had given her, which consisted of a pair of diamond earrings, a diamond bracelet, and a solitaire, to send me off in a proper manner. She took me to a well-known house that specialized in Bridal trousseaux. There, young ladies trained at a local convent, embroidered a number of nightgowns and lingerie in silk and satin. She also took me to a fashionable dressmaker to make a lace wedding gown as well as a couple of dresses for the trip. She gave a party for all the family and friends. It was a strange celebration since R. was not there and no one had ever met him except for Uncle Isaac. I had very little need for silk embroidered gowns where I was going. A student life hardly included laundresses. My mother took pleasure in preparing what she believed was the correct thing to do- she sacrificed the little savings she had. This was a culture where one had to appear with dignity.

The day came when we had to leave. My mother and I arrived at the Cairo Main Station, accompanied by Tante Andrée, my mother's younger sister. We were on our way to Palestine where I was to be married, and the occasion was a happy one. Friends and family came with boxes of chocolate and flowers. People around us hurried with packages and bags. There was noise and joy and tears. I was leaving for a new life. As the train pulled slowly away from the station, I looked up at the large clock,

watching the seconds click, and wondered whether I would return. Egypt had been good to me: I loved the Egyptians, I knew their ways and mentality. Although not an Arab Egyptian, I had felt at home. Despite the tragic loss of my father, I had spent eighteen years of my life in a place where people were kind, generous and hospitable and wished me well. The sun always shone, and the beauty of the place was overwhelming. Here, my experiences had been good. I left Cairo behind, as well as friends and family and streets that I was not to see again for a long time. Here I had felt accepted and wanted. As the train accelerated, I felt pretty happy with the world and myself.

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Raphael & Dina Recanati

