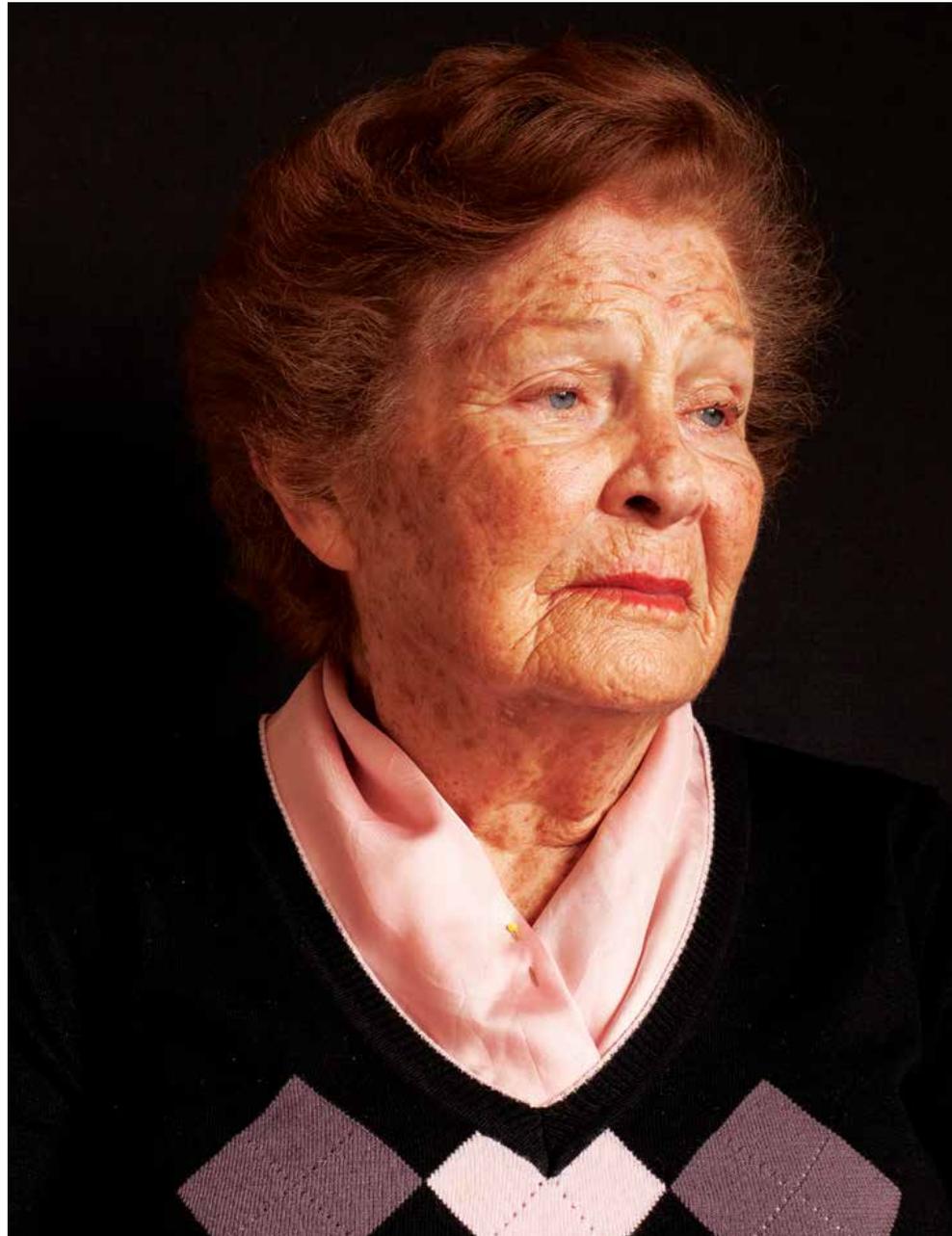


WE CONTINUE OUR SERIES, BASED ON INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES FROM THE ARCHIVE OF SEPHARDI VOICES UK, THAT UNCOVERS THE STORIES OF SEPHARDIM FROM AROUND THE WORLD



THIS ISSUE:

Cultures unite over a Beirut bridge table

Rebecca Hakim-Dowek grew up in Beirut in the early 20th century. It was a cosmopolitan and lively city – until civil war struck. Before her death in 2019, Rebecca spoke to **Bea Lewkowicz** about her life there

BEA LEWKOWICZ: Where were you born?

REBECCA HAKIM-DOWEK: I was born in Tiberias in Palestine, in 1925. We lived in the old town. We used to have a house at the foot of the mountain. We didn't have many neighbours actually. There were maybe two or three other houses, not more than that, and then you had the mountains where all the Bedouin lived on open land. We went sailing, fishing and swimming in the lake. There was a nice place called the Lido, where they had tennis courts.

I was quite an adventurous person. I liked walking on my own. I used to walk in the mountains and collect flowers, and sometimes even wild spinach. In winter, it was like a garden. It was so beautiful. All the mountains were covered in white flowers. I remember once I walked quite far and got lost. A Bedouin was passing and saw me, so he helped me and took me back to my father. I got quite a scolding not to go walking in the wilderness like that again!

I left Tiberias when I was a very young girl, and that's all I remember. It was in Lebanon that I did most of my growing up.

BL: Why did you move to Lebanon?

RHD: I went to Lebanon when I was three years old to attend school there – the Italian School for Girls – which was run by Italian nuns. There were quite a few Jewish people from Beirut that used to go there and I still have a friend from that school. I was with my mother, sister and brother in Beirut, and in the summers we went back to Tiberias to see my father.

When I was very young, we used to travel by car between Tiberias and Lebanon. We went through Syria sometimes, via Metula to Damascus, and then from Damascus to Beirut. And then there was another way we were able to go: from Haifa, going up to Naqoura, or Rosh Hanikra as it is called in Hebrew. After that you had to book a place on a bus and get a visa. I had a French passport, which made things easy for us.

During World War II my father died so we stayed in Lebanon after that.

BL: Did life change after your father passed away?

RHD: Yes, it was a big change because we had no income. I was 16 or 17 years old and had to leave school. I was at the American School for Girls by then, and it was quite expensive so I had to find a job. I went to see a friend of my

father, who taught me a few things about work in his architect's office, and after a few months, I got a job there. There were interior designers as well as architects and they were renowned as the best in Beirut. I helped out with ideas for decorating, and colours and furniture. They hired me because, apart from French, I knew English and Arabic. I also learnt how to draw for the architects. They had their own factory where they also made furniture materials.

BL: Who were your friends?

RHD: I was the only girl in the office, so I became very friendly with the wives of the employees. They sometimes invited me to spend weekends with them up in the mountains.

They were mostly Christian and were like sisters to me. We loved going on picnics together, it was nothing very elaborate, but we enjoyed our life. We went skiing together, for example. I used to get up at five o'clock in the morning and we took our skis by train to the bus, which took us to the ski resort. We were young. We were full of energy.

When I got married and had my children, it was these friends who really helped me. They used to come and stay and look after me. By that time, I had no relatives left in Lebanon.

BL: Did you also have Muslim friends?

RHD: After I married, I learnt how to play bridge. And playing bridge, you meet all sorts of people. You have courage, you meet new people and that's how I became friends with lots of Muslim families and Palestinians, and they knew I was Jewish.

I was aware of being Jewish; when I went into a room where I didn't know anybody, I made a point of telling them. Either you wanted to be friends with me or not. So, we became friends. And once people accept you, it's all right.

Beirut was very cosmopolitan. I had a lot of Jewish friends too, but I was different because I had Muslim friends and everybody thought I was crazy. But I liked them.

BL: Did you experience any antisemitism?

RHD: You couldn't always avoid it. You felt it. For example, when you were in a group, they didn't want to

hurt your feelings but they might be talking between themselves and if you passed by, they'd stop. What do you think it was? They were talking about something that they didn't want you to hear. Right? So, you felt that. But in the long run, they used to make an effort not to hurt my feelings, because I knew how to play bridge, you see? [laughs]

BL: How did Lebanon's Civil War [which lasted from 1975 to 1990] affect you?

RHD: It affected you in the long run, the way the atmosphere changed; you were more aware of the people surrounding you. And then they started fighting.

When the trouble started in Beirut, it was so bad, with shootings and bombings. I sent the children to France. My husband and I stayed on in Beirut because of our business. You work all your life; you want to keep something from it. We were responsible for all the people working for us and we had to look after them.

It was very difficult. You didn't know when you were walking if you were going to have a bomb explode near you, or if a stray bullet would kill you. I can't count how many times I was driving in my car and fighting started. I don't know who was fighting whom, but I managed somehow. I put my foot on the accelerator and sped. I wasn't going to stay there any more.

At the end, it became very unpleasant. But when you live there all your life, you hope it will pass, that it will become better. But it didn't.

BL: You moved to London in 1976. How did you adapt to English life?

RHD: It wasn't difficult. I had my uncle and his family here. My aunt introduced me to friends of hers. I played bridge and that opens a lot of doors for you. When I learned it, everybody said to me, "You're crazy. Why are you learning bridge? Spending all this money?" I said, "I'm preparing for my old age", and it's true, I did very well.

BL: Do you feel at home in England?

RHD: I never felt I belonged anywhere. I didn't live in Israel for long enough, I didn't feel I was Lebanese – I wasn't a Christian or a Muslim. I don't feel English. I don't feel I belong anywhere. It must be a nice feeling, to feel that a place is yours and that it belongs to you. ■

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