

WE CONTINUE OUR SERIES, BASED ON DR BEA LEWKOWICZ'S INTERVIEWS FOR SEPHARDI VOICES UK, THAT UNCOVERS THE STORIES OF SEPHARDIM FROM AROUND THE WORLD



## THIS ISSUE: A desert childhood

Born into the small Jewish community in Sudan, Regina Ishkenazi has happy memories of her youth. She tells Dr Bea Lewkowicz about life growing up along the banks of the Nile

### ARRIVAL BY CAMEL

"My maternal grandparents came to the Sudan from Egypt, my grandfather, Saleh Baruch, making part of the journey on camel back. He came to work on a dam and make his fortune and he became the head of the Jewish community in Wadi Madani. He was very hospitable and friendly and the only man with a radio. Everybody used to go to his house to hear the news and drink ouzo, which he loved. His business was dealing in textiles. As kids we used to climb a ladder to see what was on top of the rolls and rolls of material. The local farmers used to save up their money, lock it

up in suitcases made out of tins, and leave them with him for safekeeping.

My father was born in Egypt, of Iraqi origin. He was introduced to my mother when she was 26 years old and they had four children. I am their firstborn."

### BAREFOOT IN WADI MADANI

"When the sun was rising and setting it was really beautiful, especially by the River Nile. But otherwise it's desert. We had three or four main roads that were paved but otherwise it was all dust. Sand! We were barefoot all the time because it was hot. And when it rained, we used to have

puddles. We played in them because the water was cold.

All the houses were much the same with a big veranda that was the dining room, a small hall and a bedroom on each side. The kitchen by today's standards was tiny. We had no [everyday] oven, only a piece of cast iron, where we put the coal, and on top of that we put a pan to cook in. Because we didn't have ovens, everything was fried.

Behind the house was a big yard, where my mother built a clay oven to prepare matzah for Pesach. Like everybody, we had a servant. We had a beautiful big garden, where we used to play. I loved animals: I had a dog and a bird. Mother used to keep chickens; she collected the eggs and hatched them. It was a comfortable life.

We didn't even have a fridge. But the milkman used to come every day, and we bought two or three pints of milk. He used to come with two urns on the donkey. And he also sold us butter. It was made in a

particular way, by shaking the milk and scooping the top and it made this beautiful delicious butter.

My mother also made wine from grapes that we grew. Every time she made about six bottles.

My father slaughtered the chickens. We got meat and fish from the local market and my mother koshered the meat. My mother used to say, 'Fish is good for you, it makes you clever'. We had local fruit – mango and watermelon. Every day we had rice and bread. We ate very well.

There was no synagogue but people came to our house to pray. My father used to pray every day and put on tefillin. Every Friday night, we all stood like soldiers while he prayed. We knew all the prayers by heart although we didn't understand a word."

### BAKING WITH THE NEIGHBOURS

"We went to the local school, they taught us only in Arabic. We had very good relationships and we were all knew each other well. All our neighbours were Muslim. We also had some Christian friends, some Armenian friends and some Syrian friends. We never had any problems.

On Rosh Hashanah, the Muslims used to help my mother because she had a lot of work to do. On Yom Kippur, we killed a chicken for each child: a hen for a girl, a cockerel for a boy. On Ramadan, or feasts my mother used to help them with their baking and before Pesach, they came to help her make the matzah.

We were friendly [with our

neighbours]! My mother used to cook Sudanese food and we loved it; they [the neighbours] used to come and learn recipes from my mother.

The Sudanese people used to listen to the news on Voice of Israel every day at half past five. And they used to tell us, 'You know this is the only right news. They tell the truth, these people.'

### THE KHARTOUM CLUBS

"When I was about nine, my family were the only ones left at the Wadi. After the dam was built, business was not so good so all the Jews went to Khartoum and prospered there. The community there was about 500.

When my father wanted to educate us better, he sent us to Khartoum. My sister and I went to a Sisters' school as boarders for two years but then my parents had two more children and could not afford it. So then my mother came to Khartoum and we lived with her and all went back home for three months to be with my father during the holidays.

We had a lot of friends:

the Sudanese girls were very nice. For social life we went to the Jewish Recreation Club. The young people played sports and the elderly played cards. Each community had its own club, the Syrians, the Armenians, the Jews. I met Albert at the Club. We courted for five years and got

married in 1959. My parents were pleased because there were not a lot of men in Sudan for us to marry. After the men went to Israel many girls went there too to find husbands."

**"The Sudanese listened to the news on the Voice of Israel radio every day"**

### WHAT HAPPENED TO REGINA NEXT?

Albert and Regina had two children, Sarah in 1962 and Sam in 1964. Regina's parents and siblings emigrated to Israel in 1964. In 1966 Regina spent a year with them but went on to the Ivory Coast, where Albert had been offered a job. They stayed for four years but feeling isolated, decided to move to England in 1971. They are now settled in London with British citizenship and attend the Sudanese-founded Neve Shalom David Ishag Synagogue in Preston Road, Wembley. Two of Regina's cousins still live in the Sudan.

Does she miss anything about the Sudan? "I really miss the weather. Although it was hot, it was a nice dry heat. I used to walk for miles in the heat to my work. I also miss having a servant to do all the work," Ishkenazi told Bea Lewkowicz. ■

This is an excerpt based on an interview in the Sephardi Voices UK Archive. See: [sephardivoices.org.uk](http://sephardivoices.org.uk). You can also hear the interview with Regina's husband Albert Ishkenazi at the British Library archive.



## WHAT I BROUGHT WITH ME...

A delicate pot reminds Regina of her parents' chatter as they drank coffee, while memories of cooking take her right back to Sudan

### A PORCELAIN COFFEE POT

"I have a porcelain Jebena, it was used to serve coffee. The porcelain one (above) is more for decoration and we used pottery ones for every day. The coffee beans were roasted fresh daily, and pounded, then boiled with water in a tin container with a spout and a handle. You could smell the aroma of the coffee all over the neighbourhood. My parents and their friends would sit down and talk and laugh and drink coffee! We also had a very long pot made of clay into which we put water. We used to drink from that. It was very sweet water. The water of the Nile is very sweet..."

### MEMORIES OF MY MOTHER'S COOKING

"As we had no oven my mother used to boil meat, then marinate it with garlic and coriander and fry it. It was really delicious. She also used to make the Sudanese bread that was made out of grain from the cassava root, which had first of all to be ground and then cooked, and frequently turned on a sort of oven made out of bricks. Other favourites were a rose and orange syrup and the most delicious jam made from a fruit like an orange. My mother grated it, cut it up and boiled it for a very long time, and then added sugar and it became very, very tasty."

Below: Regina Ishkenazi's family, 1948: (back row) Sarah, Saleh (cousin), Regina; (front row l-r) her sister, and brother David



BEA LEWKOWICZ