

WE CONTINUE OUR SERIES, BASED ON MATERIAL FROM THE ARCHIVES OF SEPHARDI VOICES UK, THAT UNCOVERS THE STORIES OF SEPHARDI AND MIZRACHI JEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD



THIS ISSUE:

“Wandering in the wilderness is something to be embraced”

On the occasion of Gabriel Josipovici’s recent 80th birthday, **Bea Lewkowicz** interviews the writer and critic about his Egyptian childhood and his latest piece of writing, an alphabetical lockdown diary.

Photography **Rob Greig**



Gabriel Josipovici was born in Nice in 1940 and spent his early childhood with his mother in wartime France, before returning to his mother's native Egypt in 1945. He studied at Victoria College in Cairo until 1956, when, a few weeks before the Suez crisis, he arrived in the UK. He finished his schooling at Cheltenham College and read English at St Edmund Hall, Oxford. In 1963 he joined the School of European Studies at Sussex University, where he taught for 35 years. He is the author of numerous novels, plays and works of criticism.

BEA LEWKOWICZ: Tell us about your latest work, created in the spring 2020 lockdown.

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI: I thought that I'd like to have a specific project to see me through that lockdown. I didn't want to embark on a new novel, because this was a tense time, and I'm not the best of companions when I'm working on a novel. So it came to me that I might keep a diary for 100 days. I am not a diary person, this would be a short thing, just to keep abreast of the changing seasons and what was going on in Britain and the world. For each day, I planned to compose a short piece on a topic that would either be autobiographical or something connected with my writing or books that interested me, or composers who interested me.

BL: You grew up in Egypt. Did you feel a sense of belonging to the country?

GJ: I didn't feel I belonged to Egypt because I wasn't born there. I arrived in the country at five years old and felt later, when I settled in England and went to Oxford, and then got the job at Sussex University, that, in retrospect, it seemed like a bracket around my life between the ages of five and 15. But they are important years. Recently, I have had stronger memories of that time. Nowadays my partner often laughs at me because I seem to be coming up with Arabic phrases more and more often.

When I began to write, I envied painters and composers who deal in an international language. English was not my first language. I learnt it when I was in Egypt and it was not spoken around me. The writers I was drawn to, such as Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov, all struggled with this issue. What was their native language? Did they give it up? Either they hated it, like Beckett, and wanted to stamp it out and throw it away – of course, he never quite could – or they fell in love with it, like Nabokov, who reinvented himself in another language. But both had a native language to return to and I felt I did not.

I was born in France, but French wasn't really my language. I was there for five years and never mingled much with other children and didn't go to school there. I went to Egypt but then Arabic wasn't my language. I learned a bit in school and



spoke it when I needed to, but that was as far as it went. Then I came to England and I wanted to be a writer – and I seem to be an English writer. I came across a remark of Igor Stravinsky in his conversation with Robert Craft towards the end of his life, which became a sort of mantra for me. He said that if Beethoven had had Mozart's lyrical gift he would never have developed his rhythmic capacities to the extent he did. In other words, make the most of what you have and perhaps you will have more than you thought. But it's a struggle. I don't and never will feel 'inward' with the language. The only other writer I've come across who seems to have had some of the same sense that there is no language for him is Jacques Derrida. He wrote a fascinating book called *On the Monolingualism of the Other*, in which he talks about himself as a Jew raised in Algeria, speaking French, not feeling at home with French because that was the colonial language, and not feeling at home in Arabic because that was the language of the people around him but it wasn't his language, and he had no tradition of Hebrew in his family. But, he says, after all, none of us has a language. We *deploy* a language, we *use* a language. So maybe this whole notion of a native language is a

nostalgia, a sense that it would be lovely to go back to something which, of course, you can't go back to. Maybe this experience of mine simply highlights something that we all have, however rooted we are.

BL: Tell us about your home in Cairo.

GJ: Maadi was then a small town a few kilometres south of Cairo. There were many houses and flats, we were moving all the time. I remember piling all of our belongings onto a donkey cart. The removal man came and you walked behind, along with the animals – we always had dogs and the odd cat – picking up anything that fell off. The last house we lived in, in Maadi, was bought by my mother with the inheritance that was all that remained of what had once been a very wealthy family. Her great-great-grandfather had come from Ferrara and married into a wealthy Egyptian Jewish family, the Cattaouis, which went all the way back to the time of the Cairo Geniza. We had two years there and it was wonderful. The house had a canal on one side and we were near to the

Previous page and top: Gabriel Josipovici in London, March 2021; right: Gabriel with his dogs in Maadi, Egypt, in 1955, when he was 14

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Sporting Club, a social hub for all the youth of the middle-class families in Maadi.

BL: Why did you come to England?

GJ: In Egypt, my mother sent me first to the Lycée because I only spoke French. And then she was horrified, this little boy of five who'd been through the war, they were making me do homework, there was no play. "Where do I find a school where the child doesn't have to work too hard and can play?" she asked. The answer was, of course, a little English primary school, where my cousins had gone. And then Victoria College, a secondary English school moved from Cairo to Maadi just when I was coming up to 12, so I went there. The idea had always been I would go to university in England...and we were about to go to England in the summer of 1956. But Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal and there was huge tension. Trying to get exit visas, we were going all the time to the equivalent of the Home Office, which was this enormous Kafkaesque building with great long corridors, full of peanut sellers and foreigners desperately trying to get exit visas.

You spent a morning waiting in a little room for the officer at the desk to call you forward and eventually he calls you, looks at your papers and says, "I can't do anything until you've been to Room 364 for this stamp. The same thing would happen the next day, you go to room 364 and when the officer sees your papers, he says, "I can't stamp this until you go to Room 694 ..."

We spent the summer like this. It looked as if there was no way we were going to get out and things were getting tense. It was incredibly hot. There was a lot of anxiety. And we had to pretend that we were simply going to England so that I could go to school there. We could not say we were going for good because then all sorts of questions would have been asked. My mother had managed to sell our house and spirit the proceeds out of Egypt and it was a question, now, of getting out. But suddenly everything unblocked: we were ready to go.



BL: Did you realise you were going for good?

GJ: I had known it all along and it was terribly painful. We had to put down some of our dogs. But there were two dogs whom we dearly loved. My aunt was a passionate animal lover and she said, "I'll take them". And there were friends and a girlfriend that I was parting from, so it was difficult. But until we were leaving on the boat, we were not sure whether we wouldn't be stopped and called back and asked to account for our financial affairs and so on.

BL: How do you describe your identity?

GJ: I used to say I was a Jew born in Europe, brought up with European values, who spent some of his childhood in Egypt and now lives in England. Sadly, with Brexit I feel a bit like Austrians must have felt after the end of World War I, when Austrian Jews, as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, suddenly found they were just Austrian, part of this tiny, rather nationalist and chauvinistic rump, and the large multilingual empire they had belonged to had been pulled from under their feet. I felt European in so far as I felt I 'was' anything. I joined the School of European Studies when I started teaching at Sussex and was extremely happy; I felt that, at last, if I had any home, this was it. But maybe homes don't last.

BL: You've said that you don't see yourself as a Jewish writer. What does being Jewish mean to you?

GJ: When I had a kind of religious crisis in adolescence it was a Christian religious crisis. I was reading Dostoyevsky and Milton. And when that passed, I didn't think anything more about it. But in my 30s, as I was struggling with my writing, I had the feeling that there was no place from which I could stand back and write in the third person. The only way of writing was to discover as I went on what it was about. It was strange, starting to read the Hebrew Bible and reading Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, to see that in Judaism within the Bible, this sense of wandering in the wilderness was not something that had to be overcome but it was a central aspect of the religion. I had read a remark in Kafka's diaries which I had underlined as an adolescent at Oxford, where he says, "Moses didn't get to the promised land, not because of anything he did but because he was a man." I found this very helpful and comforting. There was a tradition that held this philosophy to be an important element in life rather than something to be overcome. ■

See sephardivoices.org.uk. JR will be featuring an exclusive extract from Gabriel's lockdown diary, *One Hundred Days*, in its July issue.



WHAT I BROUGHT WITH ME...

A set of cutlery, engraved with his grandfather's initials, links Gabriel Josipovici to his childhood in Egypt

My doctor grandfather left Odessa as a young man to seek his fortune and ended up in Egypt, marrying into a well-established Jewish family. He converted to Islam and died in a Paris asylum before his 30th year. His daughter, my mother, an orphan at ten, left Egypt with relief when she got married, and moved to France. After the war she returned to Egypt with me and we left again in summer 1956, for England, where I went to school and then university. So nostalgia plays no part in my life. Born in wartime France, taken to Egypt as a five-year-old and leaving at 15, I have no sense of a place I wish to return to.

We left Egypt with two suitcases so as not to arouse suspicion. My mother packed a cloisonné enamel milk jug and sugar bowl that had belonged to her father and a cutlery set with his engraved initials: 'AR' for Alexey Rabinovitch. The jug and bowl were stolen one day from our house in Lewes. My mother grieved, even though she believed that life, not possessions, was the important thing. The cutlery I still have.

But my prize possession was a scrapbook my mother and I had made of newspaper clippings and photographs charting my successes in sporting events – swimming, athletics and tennis. This I burned one Christmas when home from university, convinced that if I was to move forward I must not be held back by sentimental attachments. I now see that there was more in play than that, much more. I have tried to sort it out in a chapter of my book, *Forgetting*. ■