

End of my Algerian idyll

Algerian-born Jocelyne Shrago spent a happy childhood in Algiers in a warm extended family. She tells **Bea Lewkowicz** how this comfortable life came to an abrupt end

Jocelyne Shrago was born in 1945. She grew up in an area of Algiers called Bab El Oued where her father was a postmaster. They were French citizens. She remembers being part of a close-knit family, going to synagogue and going to the beach. But in 1954 their lives were suddenly interrupted by the Algerian War of Independence. Jocelyne urged her father to take the job of the postmaster in Alès in the south of France and in 1962 the family moved there. In 1962, Algeria's new citizenship laws drove 95 per cent of the country's remaining 130,000 Jews into exile.

Jocelyne studied English in Montpellier and came to the UK as a teaching assistant. She met her husband in the UK and settled in north London. She kept in close contact with her family and spent every summer holiday with their two children in France. This is her story.

JOCELYNE SHRAGO: I lived from 1954 to '62 with guns and plastiques (bombs) and death. The War of Independence started in '54. I was nine and remember walking in the street with my father when a man was gunned down. He was covered in blood. Even now, I can't stand the sight of blood.

You had plastiques in dance halls, in the cinema, in the milk bar. You didn't know where they came from, as it was a three-prong war. There were the Arabs who wanted their independence; the OAS ('Organisation de l'armée secrète'), which was the group of French who wanted to stay because they had been there for generations. And there was the French Army.

When my niece was one year-old there was a plastique in a nearby shop. I was 16 and covered her with my body. I was covered in glass but the baby was safe.

At the beginning of the 60s we heard gunfire when we were at the dentist. My mother was in the dentist's chair and she said: "I want to see what is happening outside." From the balcony we saw two of my uncles carrying my aunt Simone. She had been shot and her daughter Micheline got a bullet in her foot. My aunt had a bullet or two in her thigh. They were taken to hospital and had surgery. Simone, who is now in her 90s, can hardly walk as a result. My cousin still has the scar.

BEA LEWKOWICZ: What position did the Jews take in this?

JS: Everybody, Jews included, wanted to stay put! General de Gaulle came to Algiers in the 50s and said, "Je vous ai compris!" (I understand you). But I don't know whom he understood: the Arabs who wanted their independence? The French or the Europeans who wanted to stay put? And he was lying because he already had made a deal with the Arabs, saying, "If you join the Allies to fight the Germans, you will get your independence." So, in 1945 the war finished, and in '54 the war in Algeria started.

There were Jews who supported independence, the left wing. I am sure there were Jews in the OAS but you didn't know who was and who wasn't.

My parents and my uncles weren't involved. They had to earn a living.

Most people left in '62 when graffiti appeared saying, "La valise ou le cercueil" (suitcase or coffin). I pushed my parents. I'd had enough. I walked to school and there were catcalls and it just didn't feel safe. I wasn't able to go out. To this day, wherever I am, in a café or a restaurant, I sit facing the door to see who is coming in.

BL: What sort of identity did you want to transmit to your children?

JS: Am I from Algeria? Am I from France? Am I from England? Who am I? The only constant has been that I've been Jewish all the time, but the rest has changed. And our son, who is now in Israel, is pushing for us to move there. No way. I've moved enough in my life: In one life, three different cultures, three different set-ups. Enough. Home is where your roots are now. ■

This is an excerpt from an interview in the Sephardi Voices UK Archive. See: sephardivoices.org.uk. The interview can also be viewed by appointment at the British Library: www.bl.uk/listening. Dr Bea Lewkowicz is the Director of Sephardi Voices UK, which is dedicated to filming testimonies of Jews from North Africa, the Middle East and Iran who now live in Britain.



Jocelyne holding Algerian-style matzos that she can buy in Marseille or Paris

WHAT I BROUGHT WITH ME...

A beautiful tray, a recipe and the pot it was cooked in are the things Jocelyne holds dear, years after her family's flight from Algeria

HER PARENT'S SILVER TRAY

"In 1934 there was a pogrom in Constantine. The Arabs went on the rampage, ransacked homes and killed everybody. My parents and sister went over the wall to our Arab neighbours. When the mob asked them, 'Have you seen them?' They said 'No. We don't know anything about them.' Unfortunately they ransacked our house. I have tablecloths from that episode which have been ripped and repaired. This big silver tray was totally folded. I don't know how they did it because it was very strong."

COUSCOUS AU LAIT (AN ALGERIAN POST-PESACH DISH)

"At the end of Pesach we picked wheat and brought it to the house for my mother to make beignets (a sort of doughnut made with yeast). She also made couscous au lait: you steam the couscous three times in a couscoussier (a metal pot with a funnel-like lid) and it becomes lighter. Add butter and 'du petit lait' – fermented milk – made by mixing plain yoghurt and water. We served it with broad beans or sultanas and sugar. I have two couscoussiers; one for meat, one for milk."