

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: Coffee and cigarettes by the Nile

Cairo in the 1930s and '40s was a cosmopolitan scene. Ellis Douek, now an eminent surgeon and writer, speaks to Dr Bea Lewkowicz about his early life there. Portrait Rob Greig

BEA LEWKOWICZ: Tell us about your family background.

ELLIS DOUEK: My paternal grandmother Sarah [who grew up in Istanbul] went to Egypt with all of her children except for my father, who was born there. She spoke only Arabic and Turkish so I could not really communicate with her – and she died when I was three. She lived with us and brought her servant, a Jewish woman, to cook kosher foods, because she didn't trust my mother's keeping of kashrut. This woman used to sleep on the floor in her room across the door. That was the tradition, to protect the master or mistress.

When I woke up my nanny used to take me to my grandmother, because my grandmother woke very early. She would be sitting on a balcony which overlooked the Nile. Her servant would make her very strong, sweet Turkish coffee. And she would be ceaselessly smoking these scented Turkish cigarettes. She would pour some of the coffee on a saucer, and give it to me to lick. My memory has the smell of the cigarette and the coffee, and looking across the Nile. In the early dawn there is a mist above it, you can only see the palm trees. This is my vision of my early childhood.

I was told that my grandmother was

illiterate although very intelligent. Her brothers had tried to teach her to read and write, and were hauled up in the synagogue in Aleppo, and threatened with excommunication: why would a woman need to know how to read and write other than to communicate with a lover? She was terribly bitter about this.

My maternal grandmother Eugenie was completely different. Her father Joseph Alfandari was the headmaster and founder of two Alliance Israélite Universelle French schools: one in Tzefat in Israel and one in Tanta, Lower Egypt. His wife was from Odessa. Eugenie was sent to Paris to become a teacher. They were highly cultivated. Both my grandfathers were cotton or textile merchants from Aleppo.

BL: Tell us about the Alliance school.

ED: The one in Tanta was in Lower Egypt, in the Delta. Tanta was an industrial town, with a big Jewish population that was willing to pay to educate not only their sons

but also daughters. They taught in French: they wanted their children to make the transition from the old Ottoman world to the modern world of France, rather than England. The English weren't interested in educating anybody.

BL: How did your parents meet?

ED: They met at a party, which was rather unusual. My father says that he fell in love with my mother at once. His father was dead, so his uncle Moses Douek, who was also a cotton merchant, went to see her father, Isaac Sassoon. The two families, the Doueks and the Sassoons, were very suited and the two merchants were close friends. There was nothing exceptional about it, but it wasn't arranged by the parents.

My grandmother was horrified! She said to my mother, "What do you want to marry a Syrian merchant for? We're educated." My mother replied, "Well, you married a Syrian merchant." So they arranged a formal tea at Groppi's salon, where my father joined my mother and her parents. And they went onto the dance floor and wouldn't come back and sit down.

They married in 1933 in Cairo, and settled in a flat in the modern part of the city, near the present Egyptian Museum. I was born in 1934. We left for South America in a failed attempt to make our fortune there. It was a place called Barranquilla in Colombia, now a big city but at that time it was a hell-hole... So they decided to go back. I took it up with them

later: "This was really irresponsible of you. It was 1940, and you come back? Everybody else was going the other way!"

After that we lived in Zamalek, an island of the Nile. We had a vast semi-circular balcony with a beautiful view of the river. My memories are of my father coming home from work for lunch; having a beer on the terrace with a 'foul Sudani' (peanuts). My grandparents might come, or other relatives. Between the Nile and the balcony were fields and palm trees. And this was my calming moment...to sit there with this vegetation, and the river and the feluccas. I still paint them when I do watercolours. Now, sadly, this balcony has been turned into another room. The population of Cairo was three million then; it is now almost 20 million.

BL: Was there a cook?

ED: My mother never cooked. They entertained a lot: I remember crowds, playing cards in some rooms, lots of food being served, and an enormous number of servants. My mother's friends and sisters would often bring their servants with them. And my father would pay everybody. I noticed all the men would tip all the

servants. And they [the servants] also had a party in the kitchen and upstairs because the servants were usually friends...coming from the same village in Upper Egypt.

BL: How important was religion?

ED: Religion had no importance. But under the old Ottoman system you couldn't marry in a civil court. You had to marry in your religion. The Turks didn't care which; you could be Muslim if you wanted. But you couldn't be nothing. People asked you, "What religion are you?" I remember saying, "I am an atheist." And they would say "Yes, we are all atheists. But are you a Jewish atheist or a Christian atheist?" So there was no way out – you were Jewish. But you didn't have to believe in God.

BL: Which synagogue did you go to?

ED: Our synagogue was in Adly Street and was called Sha'ar Hashamayim (Gates of Heaven). It was built in the 1920s. The architect designed it as an ancient Egyptian temple in the middle of Cairo. It's worth visiting. I think they'd just discovered the tomb of Tutankhamen, so there was big interest in ancient Egypt.

BL: When did the country change?

ED: The change took place in 1947. It was a hostility towards the English as Egypt wanted its independence. Then there were attacks on Europeans. By 1948 things got serious. Before that there were many Zionist organisations in

Egypt. Zionists were also often supporters of the Wafd Party. The Egyptians didn't care if there was a Jewish state in Israel. Then Egypt, with the six other Arab countries attacked Israel in the 1948 war. Zionists became enemies – traitors! So they were arrested.

It was clear that we would have to go. My mother arranged to send us to schools: in England in my case, and Paris for my brother Zaki and sister Claudia (now cookery writer Claudia Roden). Nasser came to power in 1952. At first we thought it was wonderful, but by 1954 Nasser had instituted Arab Socialism, which meant that my father's business, and that of all his friends, went to pot. My parents went to Khartoum and lived there happily for a couple of years. Then the British left the Sudan, and my father received a notification from the government to leave within 24 hours. That's how we were kicked out from the Middle East. ■

Based on an interview in the Sephardi Voices UK Archive: www.sephardivoices.org.uk. Ellis Douek's memoir, *A Middle Eastern Affair*, is published by Halban, 2004. You can also hear the interview with Ellis at the British Library archive.



WHAT I BROUGHT WITH ME...

Ellis Douek only has a few belongings from his childhood, but together they reveal a slice of Egypt's Jewish history

MY PARENTS' WEDDING INVITATION

My parents married in Cairo in 1933 at a fancy venue called the Auberge du Pyramids. The invitation is written in French – no one would be seen dead writing an invitation in Arabic.

MY EGYPTIAN PASSPORT

This is stamped in French with 'annulé' (annulled). After 1956 the government decided we were not Egyptians any more.

A PHOTO OF MY GRANDFATHER IN A FEZ

This is a photograph of my grandfather Eliahu, taken in Cairo in about 1900 and surrounded by his daughters. I'm named after him. This was just after he had uprooted his family from Aleppo to Cairo.

