Neither Here nor There: A Note on Two Memoirs by Sephardic Egyptian Women

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’My father once asked me if I knew where Yonder was. I said I thought that yonder was another word for there. He smiled and said, “No, yonder is between here and there.”’ In her personal essay ‘Yonder,’ Siri Hustvedt is thinking seriously and with humor about her dual Norwegian and American heritage, and she analyses the role played by language in shaping memories. She likes words like yonder, words which linguists call ‘shifters,’ because they move with the speaker. Hustvedt is curious about the ability of language to bring out the nature of duality and the pervasiveness of ambiguity in our lives. She considers the dichotomy of here and there – her own native Minnesota and her parents’ Norway – and the space in between – the yonder: She writes about time, space, and memory. The essay is about her own home, Minnesota, and her parents’ Norway. There is wonderment about how her child-self would see the world as the disjointed, disconnected worlds of Norway and Minnesota.

The population of Egypt during WWI was approximately thirteen million, and about two hundred thousand inhabitants of the country were foreign nationals. But citizenship, religious affiliation, and ethnic origin did not necessarily coincide. About twenty-five percent of all those who considered themselves ethnically Greek, for example, were not Greek citizens.

After the outbreak of the Great War, large numbers of inhabitants who had been Ottoman subjects, including ethnic Greeks, Armenians, Syro-Lebanese, and Jews, were made stateless. Many members of these communities were investors in the cotton exchange and in mines, banks, roads, and railways. Port Said, Alexandria, and Cairo became safe havens during the First and Second World Wars (Monroe, 1981). Surrounded by persecution in Europe, more Jews started to arrive. At the time the Jewish population of Egypt was represented across the full spectrum of society: politically active Jewry, middle-class Jews who had been educated in the French language, non-rabbinate Karaite Jews, and the haute bourgeoisie (Minkin, 2019; Beinin, 1998; Krämer, 1989). Almost all of Egypt’s Jews, sixty thousand at the time of the First World War, lived in the urban centers of Cairo and Alexandria. The rest were spread among smaller cities and villages. A third were Egyptian citizens and about a fifth were foreigners. Many upper-class Sephardic Jews of Alexandria held Italian citizenship, while half of the Jewish population was stateless (Abu-Ghar, 2004).

Foreign citizenship was part of the system of ‘Capitulations,’ a system that awarded certain groups the civil liberties of the corps diplomatique. In practice, this meant that certain persons were exempt from Egyptian jurisdiction. Parallel to this extraordinary situation was the concept of mutamassirun communities or Egyptianized communities which identified individuals who were permanent residents. The idea of mutamassirun and privileges linked to extra-territoriality began to change with the abolition of Capitulations in 1937, which ended the tax immunity of foreign nationals. The Company Law of 1947 set quotas for the employment of Egyptian nationals in limited companies. The abolition of the mixed courts in 1949 established a common legal system for resident foreign nationals and Egyptian citizens.

While many members of the Jewish community were financially and educationally impoverished, as a community the Jews occupied a large number of respected positions in finance, commerce, industry, and the professions. The Cattausis, Cicurels, Rolos, Pitochotos (who went to West Africa), the Hararis, and the Menasces, were powerful industrialists and merchants, and were also in many respects the financiers of modern Egypt (Abu-Ghar, 2004). Members of these families also played significant roles in Egypt’s political circles and were close to Egyptian intellectuals, politicians, and industrialists. Wealthy Jews were conversant with Enlightenment philosophy and aware of the ideas and movements that were current abroad.

For intellectual Jews, the cultural life and ideological atmosphere in which they lived, and to which they eluded to was Europe. As such, they were indistinguishable from their Muslim and Christian counterparts. Less wealthy Jews, such as those living in the Harat al-Yuhud district of Cairo, were similarly indistinguishable from their Christian and Muslim counterparts (Minkin, 2019). Within the same neighborhood, people were, to paraphrase Jane Jacobs, on ‘excellent sidewalk terms’ (Benhabib et al, 2007, p.7).

Cairo and Alexandria had Jewish quarters, yet their Jewish communities shared neighborhoods along the lines of socioeconomic position, rather than ethnic or religious affiliations, with members of other foreign and Egyptian communities (Abu-Ghar, 2004; Ilbert, Yannakakis, and Hassoun, 1997). In 1948, an estimated 80,000 Jews lived in Egypt (Beinin, 1998, p.2), but by around the mid-1960s the demographic structure had changed and only some 15,000 Jews remained in the country. In July 1952, a military coup overthrew the monarchy. The new military regime eroded the privileges of foreigners and the mutamassirun; in practice this impinged on the position of non-Muslim citizens as well.

The markers of this trajectory were the October 1954 Anglo-Egyptian agreement on the evacuation of British military forces, the abolition of the communal courts in 1955,
the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, the confiscation of the property of British and French nationals and Jews in 1956 and Belgian nationals in 1960, and the nationalization of large sectors of the economy between 1961–1962.

The families whose stories are touched upon in this note, like most of the population in Egypt, were caught up between the post-colonial independence movements, crises of realpolitik, such as those over the Suez Canal and the establishment of the state of Israel that challenged the cosmopolitan ambience of the region, and – with it – the life and livelihood of families like these in Egypt (Naguib, 2009). Salvaging fragments of life from Egypt, these memoirs describe how life in cosmopolitan Egypt was splendid before it was disrupted.

Take us back to Cairo

Lucette Lagnado left Egypt in 1963, when Leon, her father, who is 'The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit' of her memoir's title, capitulated to the hostile climate under which Jews lived in Egypt, and agreed to move with his family to the United States. She describes how, in her early childhood in Cairo, she used to spend hours looking out the window at life on the street below, watching the endless stream of passersby: merchants pushing wheelbarrows filled with grapes and figs and apricots, vendors carrying baskets of rose petals, Arab men in white flowing robes setting up ceremonial tents for funerals and weddings. Life to her was defined by their house on Malaka Nazli Street, and their meals at home, which were passionately prepared by her paternal grandmother, Zarifa, the family matriarch, who was a prodigious cook, slipping apricots into virtually every dish she prepared, convinced of the fruit's magical, healing powers.

Lagnado traces the story of a family so closely connected to Cairo that they held on until they were forced out. Leon resisted leaving for a decade and then did so only after harassment and discrimination extinguished all hope for his family's future in Cairo. They signed papers promising never to return to the country, and, with their twenty-six suitcases, embarked on the 'Masala.' As the ship leaves the Alexandria harbour, her stoic father breaks down and cries 'Ragaouna Masr,' – 'Take us back to Cairo' (2007, p.165). Leon longed of hot round pita bread that came directly from the oven, 'bread looked nothing like bread' (2007, p.205). Leon longed for his favorite pastry shops and eating grilled whitefish while gazing at the Nile. There is a powerful scene in the book that describes Leon sitting at a side table at Mansoura's, a pastry shop in Brooklyn. The owner, Isaac Mansoura, another Egyptian Jew from Cairo, fixes Leon a simple meal that is not on the menu – fava beans simmered in olive oil and lemon with one hard-boiled egg floating in the middle. Lucette describes how Leon for an instant was almost happy.

Leon and Edith lived in New York City, yet Leon would continuously push away the professionals assigned to the family. Social workers in the US resented his lack of enthusiasm about life in the West, and his chauvinistic views of women, especially the women in his family. During interviews with Mrs Kirschner, the social worker in New York, Leon would respond by saying 'We are Arabs, Madame' (p.207). He would then continue with 'God is great.' Mrs Krischnner, a secular Jew, despised him for it.

Lagnado tells the story of how some Jews – specifically her parents – unlike so many other Jewish immigrants, did not adapt to life in the US. Her memoir poses many questions regarding departures and longing to return: Why did the Lagados get left behind when the rest of the community in Brooklyn moved to the better neighborhood of Ocean Parkway? Why did Leon insist on staying in the worn-down neighborhood of Bensonhurst, looking for a minyan every morning? Many millions of immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa went to America. They carried with them the American dream. Leon and Edith did not.

Lucette Lagnado tells the story through the eyes of Loulou, the pet name of her childhood. This is a child's view of exile and loss. Like André Aciman in Out of Egypt (1994), she conjures a vanished world, and like Aciman she calculates the emotional costs of exile with an unsentimental but forgiving eye. This is not simply the story of a family's loss of its home, its privileges, and its identity. It is a story about how exile shapes people's views of the world, a story about the mathematics of familial love and the wages of memory and time. Through the story of her father, Lucette describes dislocation and yearning. There was nothing Leon didn't miss about Egypt. He grew more and more reclusive in New York and immersed himself in prayer, sometimes spending as many as nine or ten hours a day in the synagogue that was most like the one 'back home' in Egypt.

Brooklyn was a place where bread was a mystery. Instead of hot round pita bread that came directly from the oven, 'bread looked nothing like bread' (2007, p.205), Leon longed for his favorite pastry shops and eating grilled whitefish while gazing at the Nile. There is a powerful scene in the book that describes Leon sitting at a side table at Mansoura's, a pastry shop in Brooklyn. The owner, Isaac Mansoura, another Egyptian Jew from Cairo, fixes Leon a simple meal that is not on the menu – fava beans simmered in olive oil and lemon with one hard-boiled egg floating in the middle. Lucette describes how Leon for an instant was almost happy.

Leon and Edith insisted on sanctifying food as they used to in Egypt. Rice in the United States did not come unpolished and with small stones and bits of straw in twenty kilo sacks; instead, it was 'milky white' and sealed in cardboard. Back in Egypt, good Jewish housewives performed the vital Passover task of sorting out the rice seven times for impurities. Although rice in America is purified, processed, and hermetically preserved, Lucette and Edith would pull out a white tablecloth from one of
the twenty-six suitcases they had brought from Egypt. On the spread out cloth, they would pour the rice and inspect each grain to sanitize it for the holiday. It was only several years after their arrival in New York that Lucette realized that other Jews did not eat rice during Passover.

Surrounded by hostile Jews with unfamiliar eating habits, she recounts her family’s Passover Seder in Brooklyn: ‘No matter how loudly we sang, our holiday had become not a celebration of the exodus from Egypt but the inverse – a longing to return to the place we were supposedly glad to have left’ (2007, p.263).

Tawny, large, and round

Colette Rossant was born in Paris in 1932 to a secular Egyptian Jewish father and a French Jewish mother. At the age of five, when her father became seriously ill, the family moved to her paternal grandparents’ home in Cairo. Her father died when she was seven years old and her mother more or less abandoned her. She lived with her grandparents until she was fifteen, when her mother decided that Colette needed to be more French, and she was sent to live with her maternal grandparents in post-war Paris.

*Memories of a Lost Egypt* (1999) and *Return to Paris* (2003) are slim volumes which recollect her life in Cairo and the diaspora. Fifty recipes in each book are at the core of the continuous recounting of memories. The preparation of food is presented in a condensed form throughout the narrative, yet it stands out, with clearly defined boundaries. The format of both books allows us to read them as memoirs, to easily skip the recipes and instead read the continuous narrative as a coherent story. Someone primarily interested in the practical aspects of recipes would probably not be interested in these as cookbooks, because they contain only a relatively small number of recipes.

The black-and-white photographs at the beginning of each chapter in *Memories of a Lost Egypt* provide a nostalgic tone and express the wistful nature of this memoir from a lost world. The first photograph, which is spread over two pages, is perhaps the one that struck me the most. It is a black-and-white formal picture of the author’s much-beloved grandfather, Vita Palacci, and other members of Colette’s extended family. The tender sketches Rossant draws of her Egyptian grandfather are interwoven with accounts of shared meals. With great affection, she describes the first time she met him when she disembarked from the ship in Alexandria. He takes her by the hand and gives her a warm *semis* (pretzel). This was the start of their regular outings.

With immense delight, they enjoyed *ful medames* – the very same bean dish that brought such joy to Leon – or sweets, often behind her grandmother’s back, who at times disapproved of both their excesses and the unsuitability of street food for people of their cosmopolitan standing.

Colette Rossant moved from Cairo back to Paris in 1947, where she moved in with her grandmother in the upscale 17th arrondissement. In *Return to Paris* (2003) she tells the story of a break from the life she loved, to live with a cold, domineering, and demanding grandmother in Paris. Post-war Paris was grey and lifeless compared with her lively house and neighborhood in Cairo. The kitchen and the family cook, Georgette, offered immediate comfort; ‘I was immediately drawn to it, just as I had sought solace in the kitchen of my Cairo childhood’ (2003, p.25). She had to get used to eating *omelette aux fines herbes* for a snack, instead of her usual *semis*; eventually, she explored the wonders of French cuisine and found her way, and the cook’s *pain perdu* (French toast) became her ‘comfort food.’

Back in Egypt Colette’s Egyptian family admired French culture and manners. Accordingly, Colette was shocked when, on her first day at her lycée in France, she was nicknamed *l’Egyptienne* a label that ‘stung her deeply’ (1999, p.142). She was regularly scolded by her grandmother for taking too much pleasure in food: ‘You’re Egyptian, remember? They all get fat!’ Colette felt awkward in her ‘tawny skin, large breasts, and round hips’ (2003, p.66). In Egypt, she was ‘lovely and sexy…’ in Paris, she ‘felt like an elephant’ (ibid.). To please her grandmother and assimilate into the Parisian bourgeoisie, she got rid of her excess weight and accent and started eating *sandwich au jambon* (ham sandwiches) (ibid, p.142). Her transformation from *l’Egyptienne* to ‘La Parisienne with an attitude’ (2003, p.82) began under the gentle direction of Georgette.

As time goes by, Colette discovers French food: Sunday lunches of roasted lamb stuffed with garlic, springtime strawberries bathed in crème fraîche. It is through food and the cook Georgette that young Colette finds happiness in Paris, skipping school to go to the famous farmers’ market in Port de Neuilly. Eventually, the young Colette’s life takes a more positive turn when she meets her stepfather, Mira. They both share a passion for food and their deep friendship starts over a foie gras mousse in Fleurines. Savouring the flavour, Mira looks across the table and whispers to Colette ‘food is memory’ (2003, p.100).

**Conclusion**

The authors of the memoirs discussed above tell us that suddenly and irrevocably they were cut off from the homes they loved and found themselves in distant lands. Their books leave no doubt that Lagnado and Rossant, their families, neighbors, and friends were happy in Egypt. They had people around them who loved them, gardens, cafés, shops just outside their doorstep. There were cooks, gardeners, and maids to lighten the housework, social networks close by, and festivities were celebrated hard and long.

At first glance, these books seem to fall within the familiar framework of exiles articulating longings for the world from which they have been excluded due to circumstances beyond their control. Such fragments, of course, may take any number of forms, not only food, but also photographs, letters, or songs from another world and life. In the face of being powerless to bring back or return to that world, serving fava
beans at a distant point on the map of exile is not merely a small comfort but also a meal with the extraordinary ability to express enduring attachment to Egypt.

Foods described in memoirs are often portrayed as timeless icons of an eternal, true cuisine. Here, I have been interested in the dynamic interplay of food and people in processes of historical ruptures and rebuilding of lives. It is true that ultimately the ingredients, recipes, and meals that figure in food memories tell us less about the finer details of events and experiences than about what they meant in the lives of those who remembered them and how they shaped their ‘being and knowing’ the world. Suggesting that food helps us understand a political process, in the sense that it tells us a more personal story about how, in this case, the forces of modernity dislodged the Egyptian Jewish community’s deep roots in Egypt, is another way of drawing attention to the dynamic relationships between individuals and the state of the world. Re-creations of meals emerge as physical recollections between people, times, and places (Bahloul, 1996). In this note, I have been concerned with how experiences of displacement are wedged into the aches of disruption.

When she was asked why she wrote about food rather than love, war, sorrow, and death, M.F.K. Fisher (1954) said simply that our human need for security, warmth, love, and sustenance are inseparable. In ‘Yonder,’ Siri Hustvedt writes about human ideals, challenges, and our potential to adapt, to abandon the immobile and the ordered for the ‘here’ and the ‘there.’ This note is a step in the direction toward the spaces between ‘here’ and ‘there’ – the yonder, where people sometimes find themselves, their families, and their affections.

Reference list