

May 8, 2019

OUT OF EGYPT: בצאתי ממצרים

Celebrating Egyptian Jewish Heritage at Shearith Israel



365th ANNIVERSARY



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CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL /
Year of Years Celebration



Family photo taken on Rosh Hashanah 1961 in Alexandria

The Farhi Family in Egypt 1899-1967

By Alain Farhi

Egyptian by birth
Jewish by faith
French by education
American by adoption

My paternal grandfather Hillel Farhi was born in 1868 in Damascus to a Sephardic prestigious family whose ancestors, originally from Catalonia (ca 1302), arrived in Syria in 1731. He visited Egypt for the first time in 1899. Shortly after receiving his MD degree from London, he returned to Egypt and married Esther Setton from Aleppo. Hillel died in Cairo in 1940 after a long career as Chief Doctor of the Royal Egyptian Railways. In addition to his private practice, Hillel was also a prolific author of religious essays, commentaries, books and articles in literary newspapers. He translated into classical Arabic the daily prayer book (Siddur Farhi) as well as the High Holidays prayer books and the Haggadah. This endeavor had finally allowed Jews of Arab countries to understand their prayers and it allowed the Arab countries to better understand their Jewish countrymen. These books remain to this day the only ones ever published with an Arabic translation.

My father Azar Farhi was his eldest son. As many Jewish boys of his generation, he was educated at a Jesuit school. In their quest for the best education for their children, Jewish families did not hesitate to send them to a Catholic parochial school. They did not perceive it as a threat to their Jewish principles and community. Azar studied law and was intending to practice at the International Courts (*Tribunaux Mixtes*). But upon graduation, the International Courts were abolished. Foreign residents in Egypt could

no longer be judged according to the laws of their country of origin. Egyptian laws became the rule of the land, applied to all residents.

My father had to pivot and choose a new career. He started Peerless, a knitting factory for t-shirts, underwear and socks. With Nasser's policy of economic strangulation of the Jewish community, my father's business was nationalized in 1963. Shortly after, he was asked to lead as general manager for the conglomerate of the all the nationalized knitting factories. And life went on until June 1967.

He married my mother Antoinette Harari in 1943 and lived in Garden City near the Nile. My maternal grandparents were both born in Aleppo. My grandfather Ibrahim Harari came to Egypt in the early 1900 to seek his fortune. He had a business importing British woolen fare.

My parents had 4 children. I am the eldest son. We all went to the Lycée Français du Caire de Bab El Louk, a secular private school where most Jewish families sent their children. Children of well-to-do muslim and christian families were sent there as well. The curriculum was rigorous and most teachers were French nationals. Wednesday afternoons were reserved for sports and boy scouts' activities when we were bused to the Méadi track and field complex. Most kids knew each other but rarely socialized after school hours because of heavy loads of homework . We socialized on Sundays-our only day off before 1957. After the October War in 1956, The Egyptian Ministry of Education took over the direction of the school. The French administrators and teachers were expelled and 50% of the curriculum was taught in Arabic a language we spoke fluently. Classmates from the Lycée have remained close friends whether they emigrated or stayed in Egypt.

Our religious education was done by our parents. Sit-down dinners on Friday nights and for the high holidays were the big events. For my bar mitzvah, rote learning was supervised by a rabbi during private sessions. During the winter, we all met for Friday night service at the downtown synagogue *Sha'ar Hashamayim* commonly known as *Temple Ismaélie* to plan our activities for Saturday evening and Sunday.

As most teenagers in Cairo, my social life was centered around going to the movies, biking, card games, backgammon, and sports. I was an avid swimmer and fencer (saber). Every Sunday morning, I would go horseback riding in the desert around the Pyramids and the Sphinx in Giza. We had to avoid any political discussions as it would bring our parents aggravations and reprisal from the authorities, so our social gatherings were mostly spent dancing to American, French and Italian songs. I have fond memories of the three long months of summer vacations my family took in Alexandria, a city bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

After graduation in 1961, I went to Paris to study engineering. My family (parents, two sisters and a brother) stayed in Cairo. Having kept my Egyptian passport (very unusual for a Jew after 1956), I did return to Cairo for several summer visits.

On June 6, 1967, my father, brother and our Farhi relatives were spared the automatic round up of Jews by Nasser. My future father-in-law was summarily expelled as he held an Italian passport. During the 6-Day War, my family hunkered down and left in July

abandoning all of their assets. After a sailing from Alexandria to Marseille, they arrived in Paris to wait for a US authorization facilitated by the HIAS to immigrate as refugees. On February 29, 1968, we landed at Idlewild airport in freezing weather and were driven by my maternal uncle to Brooklyn in his huge American car to start our American life.



In December 1974, Jeannine Toueg and I were married at the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue in a ceremony officiated by the late Rabbi Louis Gerstein (z'l).

Jeannine's parents Maurice Toueg and Sarina Sabbagh were both born in Egypt with their ancestors arriving at the turn of the 19th century from Iraq and Aleppo respectively. A description of her mother's apartment and life in Cairo at that time can be found in Lucette Lagnado's book *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*. Jeannine and her family left Egypt in June 1967. As Italian citizens, they resided in Milano for a few years before immigrating to NYC. Maurice Toueg owned a construction company in Cairo and imported textiles in Italy.



Jeannine parents' engagement photo in 1945

In 1988, we were posted overseas, returning to the US only in 2005. We joined Congregation Shearith Israel in 2010 as we were often in Manhattan for the Jewish Holidays.

Jeannine and I have two children: Philippe and Sabrina and three grandchildren: Hannah, Theo and Nico. Philippe and his wife Libby live in San Francisco; and Sabrina and her husband Adam live in Brooklyn.



The photo above was taken recently in Florida. Pictured from left to right: Theo, Philippe, Jeannine, Sabrina, Nico, Adam, Libby, Hannah & Alain