

# CROSSROADS IN CAIRO, 1942



19, RUE HAWAYATI

WHERE THREE  
EMPIRES MET

PATRICIA AZARIAS  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
2016

### CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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# Preface

---

The day I buried my mother I finally opened the box she had hidden on the top shelf of her wardrobe, and for the first time I understood who she had been.

Throughout my childhood in Sydney there had often been stifled hints, evasions, quick glances between her and my aunt, and sudden silences from her cousins. It had all skated over my mind. Then there had been my accidental discovery, when I was fifteen, of a tiny yellowed newspaper cutting announcing her marriage to my father, but her name in the notice was someone else's, not her maiden name. It said she was a widow. She had never explained and I had never asked. In the back of my mind was the knowledge that for years she kept a secret box at the back of the top shelf of her bedroom wardrobe – a cardboard suitcase-like container, its hard plastic handle fitting through a cutout in the lid, that had originally housed her fur stole from the days when my father was still giving her gifts. The box was blue and battered. I was vaguely aware that she had hidden it behind old sheets, wooden artefacts carved by the Italian prisoners of war billeted in my parents' house in Cairo, rusty tablecloths embroidered by a great-aunt in the Ottoman tradition, and other discouragements to the curious. Too green, too absent, too preoccupied with studies and a career, I knew almost nothing about the box and its contents. When I came back to Australia after twenty years away, I knew even less. It lay forgotten and buried in its hiding place.

But somehow its existence must have sunk into the recesses of my memory, because suddenly, on the way back to my mother's apartment from the cemetery, as I stared out blindly through the car window, a picture of the box, seablue, bulging, too full to close properly, materialised sharp and vivid in front of my eyes, and I knew without question that if I wanted to bring my mother back – and dear God, I wanted to bring my mother back – the only way was to open it at last.

The shock of her accident was only four days old. My mother Sol – the sun in Ladino – had been a very young 83, fit, vigorous, demanding, imperious. There was no lift to her third floor apartment and five times a day she would bound up the stairs and skip down. She thought nothing of walking a mile a day. At 74, she had joined me on my UN posting in Zimbabwe, ridden horses in the midst of rhinos and giraffes on weeklong jeep-less safaris, snapped pictures of charging bull elephants from five yards away, and been invited to numberless parties. My mother loved parties.

That morning, she had bought a new pair of shoes. They had heels, and another thing my mother loved was new shoes with heels. She and another 83-year-old girlfriend were going to play bridge with a younger girl of 81, who lived at the bottom of a flight of stairs. My mother and the girlfriend paused at the top of the stairs. Construction was going on and there was rubble lying in random heaps all the way down. The handrail had been removed. My mother gaily told her girlfriend that she was going to put on her new high heels.

“No, no, why don't you wait till we get down to the bottom of the stairs,” the wiser 83-year-old suggested.

Character is destiny.

It seems that my mother insisted. “No, I want to put them on now!”

So she unlaced the sensible brogues she was wearing, took out the new little white high-heeled sandals, and put them on. Halfway down the stairs, one of the new heels caught on a stair and my mother was unable to regain her footing. It happens when your leg muscles aren't what



they once were. And when there is no railing to hold on to. She tumbled head over heels and two steps from the bottom landed on her head.

She sat up, and at first she seemed to be speaking quite normally, even merrily, but after a few minutes her speech became slurred. She was unable to get to her feet. Her friend panicked, rang the doorbell of the 81-year-old, and called an ambulance. My mother was still trying to speak and move her hands.

At that moment I was in the city giving a speech to a conference. No-one interrupted me, and at the end I was flushed and triumphant, like an actor after a performance. Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“A phone call for you”.

“It’s probably nothing, but your mother is in St Vincent’s Hospital at the moment. Can you leave now?” I will always be grateful to my assistant Caterina for that “probably nothing”.

At the hospital my mother’s eyes were closed. Her small brown arm with its delicate Nahum wrist lay on the blanket. She was wearing her best watch. I took her thin hand in mine and asked her,

“Tu m’entends?” (Can you hear me?)

No reply.

In French – after all, we were from pre-revolutionary Cairo -- I said,

“If you can hear me, squeeze my hand”.

There was an almost imperceptible squeeze. Although I didn’t know it then, that was the last communication I was ever to have from my mother.

I told her it was nothing, that she just needed to rest and that she would be fine in the morning. I believed it then, too.

What happened next is a blur. The only thing I remember is that a kind young Chinese neurologist – later I would discover it was Dr Charlie Teo, not yet as famous as he would become – took me into small room and explained that my mother would never recover, that her brain had

swelled inside her skull. For some reason I still don't understand, it was not possible to remove part of the skull to allow the swelling to escape. The most we could hope for was that my mother would survive as a vegetable.

Bizarrely, a picture of myself wheeling my semi-comatose mother out on to the grass at the seafront at Bronte Beach, and putting my cheek against hers in the sunshine, arose unbidden in my mind's eye. Bronte Beach? I barely knew Bronte Beach. But there it was. I told the doctor I would joyfully give up job, house, career, if it meant I could have the privilege of looking after her. He didn't smile. I still didn't understand that there was no hope.

For three days I came to the hospital and sat by her bed as she slept on. Even when they wheeled her into a room on her own, I still didn't understand. On the third night, exhausted, I went home to sleep. At midnight, the phone rang. A broad Aussie accent told me matter-of-factly that my mother had

At the funeral at Sydney's Chevra Kadisha, almost a hundred people came for a woman with no money, no position, nothing to offer but her personality. At the Rookwood cemetery she gave me the best gift on earth, an understanding of love.

And now, I was on the way back to her apartment, with the picture of the blue box floating sharp and insistent through the white blur in front of my eyes. When I arrived at her apartment, I dragged a chair to the wardrobe and climbed up. The box was there, at the back of the top shelf, behind a jumble of sheets, wooden objects, tablecloths, and placemats. I freed it, took it by its handle, climbed down, carefully laid it on her bed, and, at long last, opened it.

A jumble. Yellowed newspapers from 1942. Photographs. Letters. Official documents, a marriage certificate, a death certificate, from an Italian prison. A note from a prison chaplain. Names I had never heard. It all spilled out as if it had been waiting to be freed.

As I rummaged through the papers, three photographs seemed to appear and reappear on different thicknesses of paper, some copies on glossy photographic stock, some on matt, some simply on ordinary photocopier paper. In one, my mother, perhaps 30 or so, was leaning back against a gate, a secret smile on her face. Next to her, obviously the other half of the couple, stood a confident, burly man with a strong masculine presence that jumped into life straight off the black and white surface of the paper. I had no idea who that man was, but I could see right away that my mother was deeply contented.

In a second, and there were nine or ten different prints and copies of the same photo, a group of eleven family members, dressed in the fashion of the very early twentieth century, stared solemnly out at the photographer. The oldest, a man probably in his seventies, was wearing a tarboush. The youngest was a baby in elaborate dress, on the knees of its father. I turned one of those copies over, and at the back of the baby, someone had written "Solette". My mother? But I had no idea who all the other people were. And why was the old man wearing a tarboush?

I had never seen the third. It was a large photograph of my parents on their wedding day. It had been torn.

As I started discovering the truth, I was to learn that behind these three photographs lay three extraordinary stories, which intersected in the slight figure of my mother. I was to travel to nine countries, work in nineteen archival institutes, visit numerous places of relevance and interest, and talk with scores of people. I was to discover who the confident man standing next to her had been, how idealism and a taste for risk had brought him to Egypt, and what his terrible fate was. I was to find out that behind the family group stretched, over more than five centuries, the rich and turbulent history of a people unfamiliar to the English-speaking world. I made up my mind that these three stories, these three streams that converged in my mother, these three paths to my mother, were worth exploring, worth describing, worth being made known to others beside myself. And it was the best way I had of finding out just what had made my mother what she was.

So in the end, it was not just to bring my mother back that I wanted to tell these stories. It was to honour the man standing beside her, to try to bring to life a culture and a society that lived for hundreds of years but that is now almost dead, and to discover the environment that had produced my father. But it was my mother, my small, difficult, optimistic, innocent, life-loving mother, who was the point of intersection of these three stories, of everything that I found in that bulging blue cardboard box that I laid on her bed that bright summer day in February nearly twenty years ago. This thesis is for her.

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# Abstract

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The focal point of this non-traditional Ph.D. thesis is the apartment at no. 19, rue Hawayati in central Cairo, where my mother Sol, one of the last of a long line of Spanish Jews, lived in the nineteen thirties and forties.

The two sections bookending this thesis, Section 1: ZACCARIA and Section 3: DONOVAN explore the hitherto unknown stories of my mother's two husbands, both wartime intelligence agents, one an Italian anti-fascist spy working in clandestinity for the British in Egypt, the other an officer in British Army Intelligence and the Secret Intelligence Service, both of them meeting entirely different fates.

Section 2: NAHUM, set in between, traces the background of her people over fifteen centuries, from Jerusalem to Spain, then, successively, Amsterdam, Smyrna, Cairo and Sydney.

Exploring these three narratives took me down three paths to the crossroads in Cairo, 1942, namely to 19, rue Hawayati, the point of intersection of the three routes that I follow in the thesis. Each of the paths that converged on that focal point emerged from one of the three empires: the Austro-Hungarian for the ZACCARIA section, the Ottoman (NAHUM) and the British (DONOVAN). I followed all those paths *in situ*, undertaking several journeys over the forty months of this project, visiting nine countries and some nineteen institutes and organisations. I have woven into the text my own research experiences, and occasionally, some clearly signaled imaginative reconstructions where no sources were available, and have sought to place the individual stories firmly within their historical contexts.

Several themes appear throughout: the effects of nationalist impulses on the societies where they appear; the complexities of identity, especially in the Levant; the role of memory in the recreation of historical narrative; and, perhaps most fundamentally, the way individuals may either be swept along by larger historical forces, or find ways of facing them head on and emerging undefeated.



# Introduction

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## The “non-traditional” Ph.D.

Traditionally, the Ph.D. has been a form of apprenticeship for scholars in waiting for the academy. However, over the past twenty years or so in the humanities, and especially in the discipline of history, a different purpose for the Ph.D., and an associated set of perspectives and writing styles, have emerged in Australia and several other countries. Essentially, the goals of this newer approach are to democratize the writing of history, to create “History that People Want to Read”<sup>1</sup>, and to write history, if not for the people, at least for a wider set of audiences than the specialists in the academy. In pursuit of these aims, a writer of history may now legitimately seek to engage the reader’s empathy, insert personal reflections and perspectives, include elements of biography, memoir, and family lore combined with analysis and interpretation of historical sources, and even, with suitable signalling, imaginatively reconstruct long-ago contexts and events. But although it results in endless flexibility, this approach is not a licence to ignore or misrepresent facts deliberately, or to write fiction. On the contrary. The art comes in providing a readable, accurate and illuminating account that successfully engages the reader, so that the writer becomes both a storyteller and an analyst.

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1 See Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath, *How to Write History that People Want to Read*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2009.

The avowedly “non-traditional” dissertation I present here falls within this newer school. My intended reader is not the specialist in any one of the four major trajectories of history I seek to explore in this thesis, but rather the general English speaker, who may not be familiar with one or more of these narratives, who is willing to read about them, and whom I wanted to address in a readily assimilable, spirited but not fictionalized style.

Accordingly, as I explore those three large historical configurations, I seek to make use of a number of ingredients in addition to historical narrative: memoirs of people I knew, met or was told about, biographies of family members or historical figures, family lore, my own experiences as I undertook the travels, my own responses and observations, site visits and archival research that the thesis required, an appreciable analytical element, and an occasional, and (clearly signalled) imaginative evocation of long-dead worlds.

I use photographs, many of which I took myself, but I do not invent dialogue. I convey my own impressions and even feelings, but I have sought to indicate clearly that that is what they are. I do not avoid all attempts to engage the reader’s personal emotions, but at the same time, I hope I have not done so at the expense of factual accuracy. Above all, I seek to give the reader, in an accessible and engaging form, an appropriate level of familiarity with the many historical contexts which are covered in the dissertation. For the historical canvas in this thesis is very large, in terms of time and space, as the reader will soon see.

I should like to stress that this thesis is not intended simply as an account of a single family’s journey. Rather, it is an exploration of three large historical structures, of the ways the fates of individuals can be shaped by large historical movements and events, and of the responses of the individuals themselves. The person at the centre of the thesis, and at the intersection of these three large systems, the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and British Empires, is my mother Sol. Like Estreya (star), and Luna (moon), the name Sol (sun) is a traditional one among Spanish Jews; and my mother Sol, born in Cairo in 1911, was one of the last of a long line in that once large and important community. Her culture, her

conduct, her philosophy, and her life and those of her forebears, her two husbands, her companions, and her clan, were powerfully shaped by great historical movements; and one of my aims in writing this thesis was to examine the ways in which those “macro” events influenced, on the “micro” level, the individuals I have sought to portray, and, conversely, the ways individuals themselves fight to avoid being simply the victims of fate.

Because the thesis is constructed around three major trajectories of history, they should, logically, be outlined first.

## **The paths from three Empires to my mother: a short introductory overview**

### **The Ottoman Empire and the Jews**

The very first Jews are said, on limited evidence, to have arrived in Spain, possibly with the Phoenicians<sup>2</sup>, any time between the 10th and the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. Another group probably arrived after the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E.; and the next wave is said to have arrived after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Roman general Titus in 71 C.E. In Spain, under Roman rule, and during the first part of rule by the Goths, the Jews lived relatively unmolested until the early fourth century, when Europe’s first church rulings against Jews appeared in the peninsula. When the Arian Gothic king then ruling Spain converted to Catholicism in the late 6th century, anti-Semitic measures escalated, increasing in severity until in 711 C.E., the Umayyad invasion from North Africa opened a period of intermittent, uneasy peace and high cultural achievement for the Jews.

The Jews of Toledo – according to family legend, my mother’s family, the Nahums, were from Toledo – lived in this edgy, but largely bloodless, co-existence with their Catholic and Muslim neighbours until 1085 C.E., when Alfonso VI took Toledo, so winning the Christians’ first major

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2 As they were known to the Greeks, after the purplish-red dye they exported. The Phoenicians were also known as Canaanites.

victory in the long process of regaining control of Spain. Life for the Jews of Toledo became increasingly painful until the decisive pogrom of 1391 killed almost all of them. In 1492, as is generally known, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella signed the Edict of Expulsion, giving the Jews only a few months to sell everything and leave the land where they had lived for more than a millennium – unless, of course, they were willing to convert to Catholicism.

Family tradition has it that, with the Expulsion, the Nahum family went from Spain to Amsterdam, and remained there for about a hundred years before leaving for Smyrna in the Ottoman Empire, in the early 17th century.

In 1453, Sultan Mehmet II had conquered Constantinople, and his son Beyazid II, surprised, and slightly scornful, that any monarchs would expel some of their most productive citizens, had in 1492 invited the Jews to settle in the Ottoman Empire and rebuild it after the war. The former Spanish Jews, still speaking their dialect of Spanish, called, variously, Judeo-Espanyol, Djudyo, Ladino, or Espanyol<sup>3</sup> (as my mother herself called her second language), began arriving in Smyrna in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century after first settling in Constantinople and Salonica. In this lively, multicultural, prosperous and engaging port, the Nahum clan remained, preserving language, customs and religion, but readily interacting, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes not, with the other Ottoman communities, until 1906. In that year, my great-grandfather Jacob Nahum decided to leave Smyrna for the more stable and flourishing city of Cairo, where my mother was born five years later.

These major trajectories, that of the Spanish Jews and that of the Ottoman Empire, intersecting in the person of my mother, were now joined by a third, that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

### **The Austro-Hungarian Empire and Amaury Zaccaria**

In 1941, my mother met a 28-year-old Istrian anti-fascist in Cairo. The name on his birth certificate was Amaury Zaccaria<sup>4</sup>, but my mother

3 The Ladino spelling. See Appendix 2.

4 I found a copy in the files of the Archivi Centrali dello Stato in Rome.

knew him as Raoul. Unwilling to serve in Mussolini's fascist army, he had, at considerable risk to himself, volunteered to the British, who trained him and his brother to act as spies in Italy and report back on ship movements in the bay of Naples. His father and his grandfather had both been involved in progressive politics and clandestine activities during the period of Austro-Hungarian rule over the Istrian peninsula, so the family pattern of active resistance to reactionary regimes had been set for him long before he contributed to it himself. After he had volunteered, the British took him for further training to Egypt, Palestine and North Africa. During one of his rare off-duty moments in Cairo, he met my mother. Energetic, irreverent, optimistic, she was a good match for him. They fell in love and, in February 1942, married very near her apartment.

On 3 October 1942, he and his younger brother were put in a submarine by the British, and taken from Malta to a beach near Naples, where they were set ashore. What happened after they landed was a story I had known nothing about – indeed I had not known of his very existence – until the day I buried my mother and found a hidden suitcase full of photographs and documents. To research and tell this second story, and thereby honour his bravery and high spirits, was an important objective of, and element in, my narrative.

### **The British Empire and Major Maxwell Mylrea Donovan**

Two years later, also in Cairo, my mother married again, this time to my father, a Major in the Intelligence Service of the British Army in Egypt. Egypt was a lynchpin of the British Empire, for its canal and for its strategic location guarding the approach to India. So the defence of the British position in North Africa had, by 1942, become a do-or-die proposition for Britain and its allies.

My father was born in Liverpool in 1920, and joined the Army as an undergraduate straight from Oxford, where he had, with his parents' high hopes, been sent to prepare for the Diplomatic Service. The only child of two distantly related parents, both emerging from unusual family histories, which I tell in the third section (DONOVAN) of the

thesis, he had spent all his school holidays in France and Germany was fluent in both languages. The war intervened. In Egypt, he interrogated German prisoners of war, and, according to his military record, but quite unbeknownst to me until now, saw service in Greece, Vienna and Iraq. From a tiny entry in that record, I discovered an extraordinary fact that linked him directly with Amaury Zaccaria.

Following victory at El Alamein and triumph in the war itself, the British presence in Egypt became increasingly redundant, and my father, now married to my mother, applied to the British Diplomatic Service. His choice of wife, however, too foreign, too Jewish, too much older than him, with too little English, told against him, and he was rejected. The next step was unclear, but one thing was certain – he did not want to go back to England. He and my mother accordingly migrated to Australia, arriving in January 1948.

Although my mother had enthusiastically advocated, as an adventure, the move to the new country, the Sydney of 1948 came as a shock to a woman who had been used to the sophistication and multicultural environment of Cairo. But in time, practical, energetic and no-nonsense as she was, she both adapted to, and in some ways, actually shaped, the city she had chosen in her thirties. As the 1960s blossomed, and Australia began rapidly changing, she became quite passionate in her view that she was living in, if not Elysium or Zion – like many of the Spanish Jews of Egypt, she was never really a Zionist – at least in one of the most beautiful and exciting cities on the globe.

### **Interplay of the “macro” and the “micro”**

These three large historical systems dramatically shaped the lives of the individuals portrayed in this thesis. The influence of the first was very basic. When my mother, and indeed all her relatives, were asked to define themselves, they would typically think long and hard, then slowly answer, “Spanish Jew”. This is still the case in the 21st century, more than five hundred years after the Expulsion, when my uncle Élie, my mother’s first cousin, gave me this answer in 2013 at the age of 94<sup>5</sup>.

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**6** 5 The issue of identity is a key theme of this thesis.



So there is no doubt that the history of the Jews of Spain had a profound influence on all these individuals.

The Ottoman Empire, which enabled Spanish Jewish culture to be preserved, defined and affected my mother to a very considerable extent. Her own mother had been born in Smyrna, and the sassy, irreverent, multicultural character of that port city had seeped into the culture and the identity of its Spanish Jewish inhabitants, to the point where they would recall with nostalgia, and repeatedly recount later in Egypt, the jokes, the multi-ethnicities, the food and the habits of the Ottoman environment. The crumbling of that Ottoman structure was a major factor in the Nahums' decision to leave for Egypt. And of course, Egypt itself was an Ottoman society until the 1952 military coup. Nostalgia for Egypt and the arcadian life they lived until they were forced to leave in the 1950s was, and is, a defining feature of those who grew up there, as members of foreign communities, in the first half of the 20th century, and this is especially true of those of them who were Spanish Jews. So the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire also had a profound influence on the individuals it affected.

The influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on the individuals portrayed in this thesis is also very clear. The motivations of my mother's first husband were materially shaped by his forebears' antagonism to that Empire's reactionary character. Just like his father and grandfather, he rebelled against an illiberal regime, and ended up paying the heaviest price. The dead hand of the Austro-Hungarian Empire reached out across the decades and touched my mother and her sister, as will be seen in the thesis, and brought about, indirectly it is true, but very decisively, the marriage of my parents and my own existence.

And the influence of the British Empire on the lives of my father and mother, and on my own, was also fundamental. It was to help defend the British Empire that my father was sent to Egypt; it was the victory of the British (made possible by the brilliance of the Ninth Australian

Division) at Alamein that saved my mother's life; and it was to an outpost of the British Empire that they were able to emigrate.

The other influence the British Empire had on individuals portrayed in this story was the repulsion and rebellion the British colonizing power aroused among some of the young Jewish left-wing idealists of the Egypt of the twenties, thirties and forties, most of whom were of Spanish Jewish background. The life of one of these in particular, now 85 and living in Cairo as the last Jewish-born male in the city, perhaps the most remarkable of all the individuals I met, and an intimate of two of my mother's cousins, was profoundly affected by the British method of ruling Egypt. I touch on his story in Appendix 1<sup>6</sup>.

At the centre, the intersection, the crossroads, of all of these trajectories and stories sits my mother Sol, a leader, a vivid, forceful personality, who loved once in her life, who lived through tectonic shifts of history, who survived great personal loss and elemental betrayal, and who lost her *joie de vivre* – temporarily – only once in her life. The stories I wanted to tell were, essentially, those of Sol herself, through her forebears, her companions, and her family.

## **My research process and methods**

The large canvas where these four stories sat had to be explored with the use of a number of research methods.

My first recourse was to archives. The museums, libraries, and institutes I worked in were:

### **In Italy:**

The National Archives in Rome, the Archives of the City of Rome, the Gestapo Museum in the via Tasso in Rome, the Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste, and INSMLI (Istituto nazionale per lo studio dei movimenti di liberazione in Italia) in Milan;

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6 Albert Arié's story is in an Appendix because, although it is of exceptional interest, it is not completely germane to the themes of this thesis.

**In England:**

the National Archives in Kew, England, the Intelligence Museum in Bedfordshire, Kings College London Library, the Imperial War Museum in London, and the Bexhill-on-Sea Museum in Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex;

**In Spain:**

the Maritime Museum, Cadiz, the National Library in Madrid, the Jewish Museum and Library in Girona, Spain;

**In Turkey:**

the Jewish Museum in Istanbul, and the Arkas Art Centre in Izmir;

**In the United States:**

the Center for Jewish History in New York and the New York Public Library;

**In France:**

the library of the Alliance Universelle Israélite;

**In Croatia:**

the Municipal Offices of the town of Lovran.

The National Archives in Rome were the primary source for the first section of the thesis, and were my first port of call. They contained voluminous, very detailed archives relating to the capture, interrogation, trial and eventual fate of my mother's first husband and his brother; further files on his father, Istrian Communist leader and spy, on his mother and her arrest and imprisonment, on one of his three uncles, a younger brother of his father, and on his grandfather, who had been watched as a spy in 1915. I was the first person to have opened one of these files in almost a hundred years.

The archives of the City of Rome, which are located in a suburb of the city, quite separately from the National Archives, contained further details on the last days and hours of the brothers, and a note from the priest who heard their last confession.

The Gestapo museum in the via Tasso in Rome contained, among other things, further copies of the fascist newspaper *Il Tevere* (The Tiber), in the 10 November 1942 edition of which the fate of the two brothers was announced on the front page. That newspaper was found yellowing in my mother's hidden suitcase.

The Risiera di San Sabba (an old rice factory in Trieste which the Germans turned into the only concentration camp ever set up on Italian soil) contained the record of the execution of the brothers' father in that place, and a number of other documents which illuminated the context against which both father and sons fought.

The INSMLI in Milan contained a number of books in Italian detailing the activities of the father of the brothers, who was a key leader of the Communist Party in Istria.

I was repeatedly refused permission to read the files of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, popularly known as MI6) that related to the two brothers, despite a personal request from Australia's then Foreign Minister and an approach by Australia's High Commissioner in London, and despite the fact that the Italian archives covering many of the same individuals were publicly available. Obviously I have had to write without the benefit of that information.

However, I was able to compensate to some extent. Although the National Archives in Kew contained less than I had hoped, I did, thanks to a fellow researcher, find the log of the captain of the submarine which took the brothers to Italy. I also found a number of SOE (Special Operations Executive) files which obliquely referred to the two brothers and their fate. Although the brothers were engaged on espionage rather than the SOE's task of sabotage, the SOE files did evoke the atmosphere of official Cairo at the time, with its pressures from London and the risks run in the field at a time of imperfect knowledge.

The Intelligence Museum in Bedfordshire has a series of dioramas, one of which shows an intelligence operative with very much the kind of equipment the brothers would have been carrying with them when

they landed. This proved invaluable for the recreation of their landing scenario.

Further details about SOE training, which, without proper archival backup from SIS, I had to assume had common elements with SIS training, was available from the Dobrksi Archive in Kings College, London, whose papers I also consulted.

The Imperial War Museum also contained a number of exhibits and documents relating to the training of spies during the Second World War.

My Donovan grandparents had lived in Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, and the Bexhill-on-Sea Museum was able to provide me with their old address, which I then visited.

In Spain, the Patronat Call de Girona, the Jewish Museum, Institute and Library, contained a wide range of documents on medieval Jewry in Spain. It also houses the remnants of a mikva, a ritual bath, for women. The museum has a shop, with items like songbooks and histories which are hard to obtain elsewhere, and many of which I was able to buy. They would also illuminate the story.

The National Library in Madrid has a number of original documents from the Inquisition. Written in black ink on thick cream paper, these are mostly the records of the trials of converted Jews who were deemed to be still practising Judaism but in secret. It became clear from these documents that the Jews of Spain were not confined to money-lending and followed many occupations. This in itself was significant, in that it underlined the difference between the experiences of the Sephardic and the Ashkenazi Jews. On a few trial documents that I saw, some of them relating to women, someone had written in the margin the word “tormento”, i.e. torture, which was the punishment to be meted out to the supposedly “still-practising” Jew. The general impression gleaned from these 500-year-old files was strangely similar to that conveyed by the 20th century Italian fascist press collected in the Gestapo museum in Rome.

The Maritime Museum in Cadiz proved to be a rich source of drawings and illustrations of the ships of Columbus' period. In all probability, ships similar to those carried the Jews away from Spain.

In Turkey, I visited the Arkas Cultural Centre in Izmir. I had timed my visit to coincide with an exhibition the Centre was holding on the history of Izmir. I knew that there were going to be several paintings, drawings, lists and documents relating to the life of the Jewish community of Smyrna, and indeed I found a number of illuminating and charming ones.

After attending a wedding at a synagogue in Istanbul, I also visited the Jewish Museum in that city, and saw a diorama of a Jewish bride of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jewish traditions were not the same in Constantinople as those in Smyrna, but still the kinds of items in the trousseau were not very different.

In Croatia, I visited the offices of the municipality of Lovran, the town where my mother's first husband was raised. As will be shown in the thesis, this visit enabled me to find his boyhood home and consequently understand much more about his motivation in volunteering to the British.

In France, I spent some weeks in the archives of the Alliance Universelle Israélite, the organization which had sent young French Jewish men to the "backward" Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire to help them enter and cope with the modern world. I found the letters of two of these who had been based in Smyrna. They were enlightening about the unforeseen impact of all this idealistic activity.

In the United States, I went to the Center for Jewish History on E. 16<sup>th</sup> St, New York, and found an original front page of a newspaper from Smyrna, written in Hebrew characters but reading as Ladino. The Center also gave me several gifts of academic books on Sephardic Jews. Unfortunately I had no time in New York to explore other Jewish libraries.

Apart from my visits to actual institutes and libraries, I also went to a number of relevant places of interest, and undertook a number of activities aimed at retracing my forebears' footsteps and giving authenticity to my narrative. In considerably greater comfort, I followed the same route as my ancestors took, according to family memory, from Toledo to Cadiz, following the Edict of Expulsion, but even so, the difficulties of the journey were all too apparent in a series of harsh landscapes. I walked the same streets of Izmir as they must have done when the city was called Smyrna (in English – Smyrne in French, Izmirna in Ladino). I went to the synagogues where they worshipped, and to the cemeteries where they were buried. In Cairo, I walked the same route as my mother and aunt did from the bank where they worked back to their apartment, and I entered their apartment myself. I went to the desert outside Cairo, as they did.

In Italy, I went to the beach where my mother's first husband landed in Licola, near Naples. Thanks to an introduction by Australia's then Foreign Minister, I was able to walk around inside the Regina Coeli prison in Rome where he and his brother were held, and I stood on the spot at Forte Bravetta, half an hour outside Rome, where they met their fate. I found the house where they were brought up.

In Bexhill-on-Sea and Liverpool, I found the houses where my Donovan and Spencer forebears had lived, and in bitter cold visited them all. The photographs are in the text. These visits revealed very clearly the kind of family and environment my father had come from.

As the Director of Internal Audit for the United Nations, reporting on peacekeeping activities in difficult countries, my watchword had always been *If you don't go, you don't know*. I followed the same principle for this thesis, and my on the spot research amply proved its value. By going, I learned, and what I learned, I have sought to convey.

My third research method was the interview. My prime original source was my mother's first cousin, Élie Nahum, 93 when I first met him in Milan. Élie, lively, affectionate, nostalgic, wrote a charming book, *En Égypte Trente-Cinq Ans*, in which he reminisces about the halcyon

days of his youth in Cairo, and which I have unabashedly drawn upon (with attribution). Another family source was another of my mother's cousins, Sylvia Nahum, who is the wife of Élie's younger brother Joseph, as well as being the daughter of my mother's aunt Rebecca. (Sylvia and Joseph are also first cousins). I spoke repeatedly to both of them, as well as to Sylvia's twin sister Yolande in Milan. I interviewed Élie's publisher, Émile Gabbay, and several other former inhabitants of Cairo, virtually all of them from Spanish Jewish background.

In Izmir, I met five members of the Jewish community and spoke my primitive Ladino with all of them, including a woman in her 90s, who, to my delight, corrected me when I unthinkingly uttered Spanish instead. In Cairo, as mentioned, I met a most exceptional and impressive personality whose father's background was Spanish Jewish and who has also hand-written his reminiscences, which I have had transcribed. In Paris, I attended gatherings of former inhabitants of Cairo and interviewed those attending. I was helped to find the only living relatives of the two Zaccaria brothers, and I interviewed them in Milan. Everybody I interviewed was co-operative, interested and generous.

Lastly, it goes without saying that I consulted very many books, both primary and secondary sources. These will be found in the Bibliography. Standing out among them were: my uncle Élie's reminiscences, *En Égypte Trente-Cinq Ans*<sup>7</sup>; the unpublished memoirs of Albert Arié, the remarkable man I met in Cairo, which I have had transcribed and am translating into English; Gudrun Krämer's academic account, *The Jews in Modern Egypt 1914–1952*<sup>8</sup>; *Histoire des Juifs sépharades: de Tolède à Salonique*, by Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue<sup>9</sup>, one of the numerous works of scrupulous erudition that I consulted written by Esther Benbassa, the doyenne of Sephardic history. This book has been translated into English and has reached a sizeable audience; *The Goths in Spain*, by

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7 Élie Nahum, *En Égypte Trente-Cinq Ans*, Nahar Misraïm, Paris, 2011.

8 Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914-1952*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1989.

9 Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Histoire des Juifs sepharades: de Tolède à Salonique*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2002.



E.A. Thomson<sup>10</sup>; *Toledot: Historia del Toledo Judío*, by Juan Blazquez Miguel<sup>11</sup>; *The Jews of Christian Spain*, by Yitzhak Baer<sup>12</sup>, the ‘bible’, so to speak, of the subject; *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience*, by Jane Gerber<sup>13</sup>; *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*<sup>14</sup>; *1492: The Poetics of Diaspora*, by John Docker, a non-derivative, learned and absorbing approach to the tragedy of the Jews’ expulsion from Spain, which ranges widely across centuries, cultures and cuisines<sup>15</sup>; *The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*, by Haim Beinart<sup>16</sup>; the nine-volume history of the Jews of Turkey by Abraham Galante, all of which I purchased<sup>17</sup>; *Juifs de Smyrne*, by Henri Nahum (no relation)<sup>18</sup>; the charming, illuminating catalogue of the Arkas’ Centre’s 2013 exhibition on the history of Smyrna; *Hijas de Israel, Mujeres de Sefarad*, a compilation of articles on the Sephardic woman through the ages<sup>19</sup>; *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean*, a magnificent and readable book by Philip Mansel<sup>20</sup>; Stanford J. Shaw’s book *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic*<sup>21</sup>; *The Historic Synagogues of Turkey*, by Joel A.

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10 E.A. Thomson, *The Goths in Spain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1969;

11 Juan Blazquez Miguel, *Toledot: Historia del Toledo Judío*, Editorial Arcano, Toledo, 1989.

12 Yitzhak Baer, *The Jews of Christian Spain*, Vols. 1 and 2, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 5753 – 1992 (1973-1984).

13 Jane S. Gerber, *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience*, The Free Press, New York, 1992.

14 Vivian Mann, Thomas Click and Jerrilynn Dodds, *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, George Braziller in association with the Jewish Museum, New York, 1992.

15 John Docker, *1492: The Poetics of Diaspora*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2001.

16 Haim Beinart, *The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, Oxford, 2005 edition.

17 Abraham Galante, *Histoires des Juifs de Turquie*, Éditions Isis, Istanbul, 1940.

18 Henri Nahum, *Juifs de Smyrne XIX-XX siècle*, Aubier Histoires, Paris 1997.

19 Yolanda Moreno Koch and Riardo Izquierdo Benito, eds. *Hijas de Israel, Mujeres de Sefarad: De las aljamas de Sefarad al drama del exilio*, Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Cuenca, 2010.

20 Philip Mansel, *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean*, John Murray, London, 2010.

21 Stanford J. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic*, NYU Press, New York, 1991.

Zack<sup>22</sup>; Keith Jeffrey's book, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service 1909-1949*<sup>23</sup>; Mimmo Franzinelli's book which touches on the two brothers, *Guerra de Spie: I servizi segreti fascisti, nazisti e alleati 1939-1943*<sup>24</sup>; *The Secret Agent's Pocket Manual 1939-1945: The Original Espionage Field-Manual of the Second World War Spies*, issued by British Special Operations Executive and American Office of Strategic Services<sup>25</sup>; and *Colonising Egypt* by Timothy Mitchell<sup>26</sup>, an analytical account of the effect of the British presence in Egypt.

### **Models for the thesis' style of history writing**

Not being a professional historian, but wishing to cast these stories within the contemporary mode of history writing I touched on earlier, I searched for models to guide me on the way to write them down. With the encouragement and help of my supervisor, I looked first at classical models: the chatty, personal, ever curious Herodotus; the sober Livy, who nevertheless does not scorn to arouse the reader's emotions; the senator Tacitus, expert in rhetoric; the sarcastic Lucian of Samosata, excoriator of the "lying" Herodotus; closer to our era, the academician Ranke, father of some historians' mantra, *Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*<sup>27</sup>, but no stranger to the personal, the emotional and the rhetorical in his own writing; the magisterial Macaulay, superb exponent of a range of literary and rhetorical devices; the often hysterical (to my taste) Carlyle; the gossipy Gibbon, who conveys sordid palace intrigues in magnificent rolling periods; more recently still, the dry, factual Bury, who dispassionately sets down one event after the other, but who also

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22 Joel A. Zack, *The Historic Synagogues of Turkey*, The American Sephardi Federation, Istanbul, 2008.

23 Keith Jeffrey, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service 1909-1949*, Bloomsbury, London 2010.

24 Mimmo Franzinelli, *Guerra de Spie: I servizi segreti fascisti, nazisti e alleati 1939-1943*, Mondadori, 2004

25 British Special Operations Executive, American Office of Strategic Services, *The Secret Agent's Pocket Manual*, Conway, London, 2009.

26 Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, Cambridge University Press, 1919 edition.

27 Various translated as "as it really was", "as it actually happened", or "as it actually was". Its intention was to present historical events in a comprehensive and unbiased way.

lapses (only very occasionally, though) into the personal and emotional; the structuralist Lewis Namier, who, despite his focus on the structures of history, can also, from time to time, set down an actual narrative; and the analytic historian Braudel, who does not for all that eschew the literary device – among others. I very much enjoyed this journey through the various styles of history writing, learned a great deal, and began to identify my own inclinations, tastes and possibilities.

My supervisor also encouraged me to look at some models of the present day, at books which had some thematic connection with my thesis. We hit on seven relevant prospects, along a spectrum from the work of fiction to the traditional, factual, academic thesis turned book<sup>28</sup>. Each them occupied a different place along that spectrum, according to a set of four criteria I decided on, namely the level of factual content, and, concomitantly, the amount, and quality, of the research underpinning the work; the inclusion or otherwise of a scholarly apparatus; the use, or absence, of artistic choice (as opposed to logic) in the selection, arrangement and expression of the material; and the overtness, or otherwise, of the personal presence of the author.

At one end of the spectrum sat the work of pure artistic invention, one where the author was a palpable presence (overt or subterranean), which was underpinned by minimal research, which used a number of literary devices, and which had no academic apparatus whatever.

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28 These seven contemporary books were *Egyptian-Jewish Émigrés in Australia*, by Racheline Barda, a book based on a careful, scrupulously conducted academic thesis; *The Holocaust in Salonika: Eyewitness Accounts* edited by Steven Bowman, which consists of three personal reminiscences chosen and arranged by the editor; *The Man in the Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World*, by Lucette Lagnado, an essentially factual memoir replete with artistic choices, such as recreation of dialogue and the development of a narrative thrust; *Trieste*, by Dasha Drndic, a brilliant novel based on very deep research, with powerful artistic choices in language and structure; *Every Man Dies Alone*, by Hans Fallada, a novel based on two real-life characters but with very little other factual content; *All That I Am*, by Anna Funder, which, by the author's own account, takes the facts about her (real-life) characters' histories and weaves a work of fiction around them the way an palaeontologist creates a whole dinosaur out of a single tooth; and lastly, there was *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, by Edmund de Waal.

At the other stood the work with a factual content underpinned by a large amount of research and supported by a full scholarly apparatus, no artistry as such (as opposed to logic) in the selection and arrangement of the material, and no personal presence of the author.

The one that seemed the most relevant to me was *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, which recounts the search by the author for the stories behind a family collection of netsuke, miniature sculptures used as hooks in kimonos. Historical facts are the backbone of the book, but they are woven into a personal narrative telling the story of the author's own discoveries as he made them. No dialogue or situations are invented, and the book cannot be considered a novel.

This is not the place to repeat the detailed analysis of these books that I undertook, according to the set of criteria above, as I was trying to alight on a model for my own style of history writing. In my view, the most conspicuously successful artistic achievement was *Trieste*, but I knew I could not match the author's literary abilities, nor, in any case, did I want to create a work of fiction.

Among the classical authors, the writers I admired and enjoyed the most were Herodotus and Macaulay, the one partly for his unashamed, endearing injection of his own experiences and opinions into his narrative, the other for his rhetorical and literary skill. Among the contemporaries, the best and most realistic model for me was, as I say, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. Putting them together yielded, in all humility, a possible model.

The way I finally decided to adopt was to interweave four strands: a factual exposition of the larger historical trajectories, set out in narrative form, together with associated analyses; a positioning of the story of the individuals in my story within those larger movements, and an exploration of the ways the historical currents influenced the individuals; a narration of my own research experiences; and (but only where I felt it appropriate or necessary) a clearly signalled, imaginative reconstruction of events.

My intended reader was, as I said earlier, the general English-speaking one rather than the specialist, and I determined to craft the story so as to involve that reader as deeply as possible in the narrative, without having recourse to the writing of fiction. This interweaving of four strands was the way I chose for that purpose.

What I had alighted on seemed to be an extension of the *Hare with Amber Eyes* model, with a considerably larger canvas, many more individuals and historical periods, and a wider range of cultures and nations. A non-traditional approach, perhaps, but authentically my own.

Now that I had settled on a voice, a style of conveying the stories I wanted to tell, I had to decide on the structure of the thesis, and devise my own ways of expressing them.

### **Structure and expression in the thesis**

Actually, it was the stories themselves that dictated the structure of the thesis to a large extent. The work is divided into three main sections, each telling one of the narratives that intersected in my mother<sup>29</sup>. Although it is not chronologically the first, I decided, as I said, to begin with the story of her first husband Amaury Zaccaria. No-one had ever told this story in English<sup>30</sup>, and moreover, I was the first person, English or Italian, who had done the archival research, in English and Italian, required to tell the history from both the English and the Italian points of view. I was also the only person who had delved into his gripping family background. I had travelled to the place where he and his brother came from and understood their context and motivations, spoken to old family members who had known them personally in Egypt, met their descendants in Italy, seen my mother's photographs, read the newspapers in my mother's suitcase, and stood in the places of their imprisonment and ultimate fate. The more I found out about him, the more I realized that this was a significant, moving, and unknown

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29 The story of the Spanish Jews and the discussion of the Ottoman Empire are merged in Section 2: NAHUM.

30 Although it does appear in two Italian sources: Franzinelli, op. cit., and Giovanni Pelluso, *Sbarchi a Cuma*, Pozzuoli Magazine, 18 dicembre 2011. Neither of these seeks to provide any kind of in-depth account.

story of wartime heroism that needed to be told, and the more I became gripped by it. For me, once I had found it out, it had to take pride of place. I have called it by his family name, **ZACCARIA**.

The second section that converges on my mother, **NAHUM**, tells the story of the Spanish Jews up to the time my mother (whose own mother was from the large Nahum clan) met, married and lost her first husband in Cairo. As the second section ends, the narratives of the first two sections of the thesis finally join up, and the reader is back in Cairo at the point where she meets Amaury Zaccaria.

My intended reader was a person who knew next to nothing about the Spanish Jews apart from a vague belief that there seemed to have been a golden period of harmony and prosperity before the Expulsion of 1492, and a period of horror during the Inquisition afterwards. I knew that many people, including some Jews, did not realise there were actually any Spanish Jews at all, or that the Spanish Jews were really Jews in the first place. I wanted to make the story live for those readers.

In the early part of the **NAHUM** section, which deals with the more remote eras of history, the archival evidence is quite sparse, so I had to devise another method than the interweaving of archives with personal experiences to engage the reader. Essentially, that method sprang from my own imagination. For example, when, on the morning of 4 August 2014, I walked the streets of the old Jewish quarter of Toledo, they were, to my astonishment, completely empty. However wrongly<sup>31</sup>, this actually felt like total ethnic cleansing, September 1492<sup>32</sup> today. Perhaps to compensate for the greyness, there suddenly, quite spontaneously, arose in my imagination a picture of those deserted, narrow alleys noisy and teeming with life. Before my eyes there appeared an enterprising young woman very much like the Sol who had been left alone in 1943

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31 But was it entirely wrong? Hannu Salmi (op. cit. p. 180) says “What has actually happened is a subset of what can happen, and to understand what actually occurred historians need to understand what could also have happened but didn’t”. In fact, “total ethnic cleansing” is not far from what actually did happen in Toledo. Today there are no Jews living there at all.

20 32 The Jews all had to leave Spain by the first week of August 1492.

to lead her small family, but dressed in a jubbah and qamis<sup>33</sup> rather than a tweed skirt and a blazer. As a means of making history live for the general reader, briefly situating a Sol something like my mother in that more remote context, or rather in a series of those remote contexts, was a device that seemed to spring naturally to my pen.

For the more recent stages of Spanish Jewish history, those of the Smyrna and Cairo periods, in contrast, the sources are much richer. Now I could access archives in plenty, and take advantage of reminiscences, in print and in person, and of interviews with old family members and their equally elderly friends and comrades, and could learn from visiting Izmir, Istanbul and Cairo. So here I could adopt the same method as I had in the first section, namely, the interweaving of my personal research experiences with the story itself, the better to illuminate the context. For instance, when my private minibus got stuck hard up against the walls of the houses in the sunless, extremely narrow streets of the old Jewish quarter of Izmir, the (former) poverty, hardship, unhealthiness, and hazards of that pinched, noxious environment were brought vividly home to me – and accordingly, I hoped, to the reader – more so than would have been the case with a simple declarative statement that the streets in that quarter were narrow, malodorous and unsafe.

At every stage throughout this second NAHUM section, I have sought to show and analyse the influence that the large currents of history had on the individual lives I was portraying. Perhaps the most vivid instance can be found in the segment covering the Expulsion, where this great turn of events, this major remodelling of a society, dramatically alters, and is manifested in, the lives of the individual forebears of my mother Sol. To make that effect as clear as possible, I posited an imagined Sol as an individual pitched into that maelstrom and emerging from it battered but alive, refusing, as I said at the outset, to play the role of victim of fate.

I also sought to set out the effect that their peregrinations had on the culture of the Jews, particularly as it reinforced and extended

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33 The jubbah was a mediaeval flowing robe with large sleeves, and the qamis was a tunic of transparent gauze.

their multicultural outlook, and made them less reluctant to uproot themselves. The moves also altered their habits and thoughts. One clear example comes from my mother's own history. Her grandfather Jacob Nahum, born and raised in Smyrna, was devoutly observant, and spoke only Ladino, Greek and Turkish; she herself, two generations removed, and born in Cairo, was heavily influenced by the French culture imported by Napoleon into Egypt and the wider Levant, was, accordingly, secular and modern, and unlike her grandfather, spoke mainly French, with Ladino only as a second language, and Greek and Italian as subsidiaries.

The third section of the thesis, **DONOVAN**, deals with the last of the histories that had an important impact on my mother, and that she faced mostly with courage and aplomb, but sometimes with despair, that of my father, Maxwell Mylrea Donovan, and his context. It would be hard to imagine a background more different from my mother's, but even here, the method I had hit upon in the two earlier sections seemed to emerge naturally as I wrote. I travelled to Liverpool and Bexhill-on-Sea and saw the houses where he and his forebears had lived, and so, by interweaving the historical record with my own experiences, I was able to illuminate the context in which he had been brought up. For example, it became clear to me as I saw the house and the suburb where he had been brought up in Bexhill-on-Sea, that there would be nothing an adventurous young boy could want more than to escape from this complacent safety into an exotic and eventful future. Equally, I drew on my own experiences as a student at Oxford to illuminate his, although they were rather different.

### **The larger themes underlying the project**

The project itself covers quite a large canvas, from the Phoenicians of remote antiquity to the Sydney of 1948, and stretches across a number of countries including Spain, Holland, Turkey, Egypt, Croatia, England, Italy and France, but there seemed to me to be some common themes. The first deals with the effects that intolerance and xenophobia have not only on the groups which are damaged and displaced, but on those initiating the persecutions and expulsions. The range of "possibilities",



as Hannu Salmi calls them, is large, and many of them are, by definition, not understood by the zealots in their rush to exclusive power. In the text will be found a number of instances where live and let live was elbowed aside and replaced by a narrowness which proved harmful to the perpetrators as well as to the victims, in both the material and the non-material senses. This is not to argue for the preservation of Empires, but merely to point out that in their post-colonial dissolution, things of value – prosperity, tolerance and humanity among them – have often been jettisoned, sometimes for a very long time.

Another theme is the role of memory in the writing of history. This is a controversial subject. Since the 1980s, there has been a boom in scholarship in memory studies, but one of the foremost theorists of this area, Geoffrey Cubitt, has called this “thorny territory”<sup>34</sup>, while another, Pierre Nora, argued that memory and history were cleaved apart, and, more forcefully, my former fellow student Norman Finkelstein, calls it, with characteristic verve, “surely the most impoverished concept to come down the academic pike in a very long time”.

Sceptics notwithstanding, it is now generally agreed that memory and history are inextricably entangled. In fact, the basis of my thesis is the inter-generational remembering between my mother and myself. Collective memory, particularly collective Jewish remembrance of particular moments in history, is often sustained by a whole series of rituals<sup>35</sup>. For example, my mother’s memory of the Passover seder, which in their turn recall real historical events, mingled social and individual memory, as do her elderly cousins’ memories of other rituals connected with the destruction of the First and Second Temples. Without these memories, which are, now in the early years of the 21st century, on the verge of being lost, this history would not have been possible.

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34 Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory*, Manchester University Press, 2007, Introduction.

35 Amy Corning and Howard Schuman, in *Generations and Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2015, say (p. 1): “collective memory is memory shared by the members of a group, with the memories helping to create and sustain the group, just as the group supports the continued existence of the memories”.

A third theme is that of identity. As I mentioned, the Spanish Jews of today have to think hard before they give an answer to the question of who they consider themselves to be. Actually they have, and have had over the centuries, multiple identities – Spanish Jewish, Egyptian, Ottoman, Turkish, Bulgarian, Yugoslav, Spanish, French, and Italian, and today, Israeli, American, Canadian, Australian, Latin American, and so on, wherever they have scattered to. Even a single individual could have several identities – the sons of my great grandfather Jacob Nahum, for example, considered themselves to be Spanish Jews, Ottomans, Egyptian and French. All at the same time. The predominant identity may be quite different for different people. For the extraordinary man I met in Cairo, it was Egyptian. For others, it was Jewish. For some today, it is French, or Italian, or Latin American. That is in terms of nationality. There is also the question of political identification. The Jews of Egypt could be variously pro-Zionist, anti-Zionist, a little bit Zionist, Communist, anti-Communist, anti-imperialist, internationalist, progressive, conservative, or any combination or shading thereof. Some would identify themselves by their profession, others by their degree of religious observance. Multiple and hybrid identities were common, as were multiple languages.

For my mother's first husband and his forebears, the question of identity was a complex one, too, a mixture of national, political and social strands emerging from the multiple occupations of the Istrian peninsula and the new political movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The language requirements**

In the Italian, French and Spanish archives, and in the printed reminiscences, the records were obviously in the Italian, French and Spanish languages. Fortunately, my French is near native, since I spoke French with both my parents<sup>36</sup>, studied it at university, and constantly speak it in my own family. I learned Italian at university, lived and worked in Rome for the UN for several months, and travelled several

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36 My grandfather, Dr William Terence Donovan, insisted in his will that I speak nothing but French at home. My father carried out his father's wishes to the letter.

times to Milan, and accordingly I speak and read it with relative ease. As I was growing up, my mother insisted that I take Spanish lessons, and while my Spanish is not as fluent as either of the two other languages, I read it without too much trouble and manage to hold a reasonable conversation. Without my knowledge of these languages, it would not have been possible to do the research required for this thesis. I could not have read the archival sources or interviewed the people I met. I even succeeded in extricating myself from a couple of sticky situations by dredging up some Ladino from the depths of my memory. All of that background was brought to bear. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

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The project has taken over three years to research and write. During that period, I have benefited from the generous help of scores of individuals. Those debts are recognized in the Acknowledgements. Improbable coincidences, and unplanned good fortune, have been a recurrent feature of the project throughout. I have taken three long trips – journeys from Australia are never short – eaten new foods, fallen ill several times, recovered, and gone on to travel some more. I have covered a very wide canvas, in both space and time. Above all, I have learned.

For me, perhaps the most important thing I learned, the chief discovery of the whole project, was the unknown story of my mother's first husband, Amaury Zaccaria, whom she knew as Raoul. It is with this story, accordingly, that the thesis begins.



# **1. ZACCARIA**

**The Path from Laurana  
and the  
Austro-Hungarian Empire**

## a. The Mission, 1942

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*“They were a very happy go lucky pair  
and we never heard of them again”*

Zaccaria brothers’ SIS case officer<sup>1</sup>

### i. Landing, October

By the time midnight struck on 9 October 1942, Lieutenant John Walter David Coombe, commanding the submarine HMS UTMOST, had gone for six days without much sleep at all. His log<sup>2</sup> shows that Lt. Coombe was working hard. He had a tough act to follow, and, after four long years as a lieutenant – one year more than usual – he was under pressure to prove himself on this posting.

For most of its three-year life, the little vessel, with its crew of 26, had been under the command of Lieutenant Commander Richard Cayley, a full rank up from Coombe’s, who had pitted the 630 tons of UTMOST against 70,000 tons of enemy shipping, and won. In eighteen months he had sunk four enemy vessels, German and Italian, damaged four others, including a heavy Italian cruiser, landed eight parties of SOE agents for sabotage in Italy and brought them all successfully back, and earned a DSO<sup>3</sup>. A photo of Lt-Comdr Cayley with his crew, dated 6 February

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1 Quoted in Keith Jeffery, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service 1909-1949*, Bloomsbury, London, 2010, p. 497.

2 ADM 199/1226 in National Archives, Kew, London.



Cayley and crew on UTMOST, February 1942

1942, shows a high-spirited company, and what seems on the face of it to be a popular, good-humoured but commanding captain. Sewn on to UTMOST's Jolly Roger is its log of successes.

So it was a challenge for a mere lieutenant to take command of the same vessel, and on 9 October 1942 John Coombe had been at the helm for all of three weeks. He – and Cayley's smiling crew – would live for another six.

Cayley himself would survive only until 8 January 1943. Before he died, at the helm of another submarine, HMS P311, he had earned an exceptional two bars to his DSO, "for courage, enterprise and devotion to duty during successive submarine patrols". His submarine, P311, carrying two midget submarines, was blown up by a mine off the coast of Italy, with the loss of all on board. He was only 36<sup>4</sup>. Even as early as October 1942, Lt. Coombe knew he had big shoes to fill.

Utmost had left port in Malta on 3 October. On board were the two Zaccaria brothers, in civvies. Amaury, tough, sunny, a man's man,

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3 <http://uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/3540.html>. Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs are in my collection.

4 Today, in St. Mary's Church in Manchester, there is a plaque to his memory.



HMS UTMOST

who had married my mother in February, was 29, Egon, his sensitive, handsome brother, engaged to my aunt Esther, only 25. No strangers to submarine life, they had eaten a proper dinner the night before, and though English, that was the last good meal they would ever have. They prepared their kit, and waited for the signal, wide awake but exhausted. During the last six days, they had not been allowed to leave their cabins except for brief periods when they studied their instructions, and that only under supervision, but even so, they had slept no more than had Lt Coombe.

The submarine silently approached its target. It was 30 minutes past midnight and very dark. Records show that on the night of 9 October 1942, there was no moon at all. Through the periscope, though, Lt Coombe could see lights dotting the shore. So either the Italian government had not imposed a blackout, or it had, and Italians were not respecting it. Lt Coombe suspected the latter. His opinion of foreigners was not high, as would soon be evident.

The sea was calm in the darkness, and Lt. Coombe could see a slight mist on shore. Conditions were ideal for a landing. External conditions, that is. Inside the submarine, the brothers' thoughts were racing. They sat quietly. It was too late for protests now. In any case, their English would not have been up to it. Nor had it ever been before, in their arguments with Hooper and Degolle in Cairo<sup>5</sup>.





*Alfredo Salitonastaso*

In the submarine, the brothers readied their uniforms. These were authentic Italian uniforms obtained from prisoners of war in camps in Egypt. The SIS station in Cairo had been in no position to provide realistic imitations of uniforms, or plausible forged identity papers. The most practical solution had been to find genuine Italian prisoners of war who rather resembled the brothers, simply take their papers and uniforms, and give them to the two men.

Amaury had been given two separate sets of papers, both of which are now in the National Archives<sup>6</sup> in Rome. The first, no. 060654, was in the name of Lieutenant Alfredo Salitonastaso, a “tenente medico”, or medical staff officer with the grade of lieutenant, working in the military hospital in Naples. It was dated 4 July 1940, was covered in official purple stamps, and was endorsed by Lieutenant-Colonel Basso Battista, doctor. Alfredo appears in his photo to be a bookish, somewhat naïve individual. Bespectacled, rather innocent, he is looking up at an undefined object,

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5 Hooper (spelled Huper) and Degolle were to be repeatedly mentioned in the brothers’ statements to the court as MI6 staff in Egypt urging them to carry out espionage in Italy. I have not been able to find out their rank.

6 In Italian, the *Archivi Centrali dello Stato*, the State Central Archives.



Guido Blandone

his tie correctly tight around his neck, his one star prominent on his shoulder. It is impossible to dislike Alfredo Salitonastaso.

Amaury's other identity document, no. 089391, was in the name of Brigadier Guido Blandone, recently promoted from simple Carabinieri. It is endorsed by Lieutenant-Colonel Italo Nùzzolo, commanding officer of the *leg. Torr. Carab. Reali del Lazio*<sup>7</sup>. It is dated 14 February 1941, and is also covered in official purple stamps. Guido Blandone is clearly a bon vivant, no stranger to a good plate of pasta. He looks out to his right, satisfied, appraising, his signature across the photo clear and loose, a double chin doing battle with a tight tie, a smile about to break out on his lips. It is impossible to dislike Guido Blandone either.

How many hundreds of IDs must Hooper and Degolle<sup>8</sup> have gone through to find two who resembled Amaury so closely? And how would they have obtained those hundreds in the first place? Italian prisoners of war were not held or supervised or fed or taken care of by the SIS station in Cairo. Rather it was the Army's responsibility to house and sustain them. Who in the Army would SIS have approached to

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7 The Torre legion of the Royal Police of Lazio.

8 SIS Cairo personnel mentioned in the Zaccaria borthers' statements to the court.

obtain hundreds, if not thousands, of identity documents? A possibility, if not a probability, would have to be Army Intelligence, the Intelligence Corps in Egypt. And my father was a Captain, then a Major, in the Intelligence Corps in Egypt. Although in later years he rarely spoke about what he did in the war, he did sometimes say that one of his tasks was to interrogate German prisoners. Perhaps he had a colleague who interrogated Italians. Certainly Italian prisoners of war were billeted in my parents' house, in 1944. SIS records are closed, and my father has been dead for 28 years, so I can only have recourse to conjecture. Perhaps my father knew about the Zaccaria brothers well before he met my mother. One of my uncles certainly thought so, and built up a scaffolding of somewhat rickety speculation around the possibility<sup>9</sup>.

Egon's aliases were of another class altogether. The first, no. 5777, was in the name of Giordano Bruno Selmi. Ironically, the involuntary donor of the alias, Giordano Bruno Selmi, was named after the astronomer and philosopher Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake in 1600 for espousing scientific ideas about the cosmos which contravened Church dogma. In later centuries, including the 20th, when Giordano Bruno Selmi was born, Giordano Bruno was revered as a martyr for liberty of thought. So who knows what his parents thought when their son, named after the free-thinker, volunteered for Mussolini's blackshirts? For Selmi was a *capo manipolo*, an officer, a First Lieutenant, in the companies Mussolini had set up as the military arm of his fascist political movement. And he had joined up even before the war, since his identity document was dated 23 September 1938.

Giordano Bruno Selmi is a handsome devil, who looks out at the viewer with an unimpressed, arrogant, hard gaze, over a clear, upward slanting, educated signature, underlined as an indication of ambition and self-importance. His black shirt and black tie give him away immediately. His hair is impeccably coiffed, and over his black shirt he wears an elegant white jacket, perhaps indicating a naval connection.

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9 Researching my father's military records, I would discover this was false.



Giordano Bruno Selmi



Antonio Dagieli

Egon's other ID is in the name of another handsome devil, Antonio Dagieli, who had begun his army life as a Tenente S.P.E. (*servizio permanente effettivo*), a career lieutenant in the Army. Antonio wears a glorious and elaborate uniform, faultlessly tailored, with gold braid, an ornate cap topped by a gold crown, and numerous varied gold pips on his epaulettes. On 30 June 1941, Antonio had been promoted to Brigadier, by the same Lieutenant-Colonel Italo Nùzzolo who had promoted Blandone. He looks like the maiden's ideal of an officer, very good-looking, probably reliable, and certainly professional. At least that was the impression his photo gave me.

All four documents in the National Archives are still in their original leather covers, and all four show signs of wear. Blandone's document, for instance, is shiny and rather curved, as if he had habitually put it in his back pocket and sat on it. Perhaps while eating.

How many people had handled these small dark green leather-bound booklets before me? Certainly Amaury and Egon. Unquestionably the original owners, possibly their wives, mothers and children. I could imagine Dagieli's mother feeling a stab of pride opening the ID and looking at the picture of her fine-looking son. Degolle and Hooper, too,

without a doubt, perhaps even Millar<sup>10</sup>. I could even imagine the jovial Amaury teasing his brother, claiming he was not as handsome as either of his aliases. For decades the booklets had been buried inside their waxed orange envelopes in the file in the National Archives, but now, seventy years later, opening them, running my hands over the smooth shiny leather, I was literally in touch with the past. I found the hair rising on my neck.

Oddly, the personalities of their aliases do not seem to be unlike those of the brothers, with, of course, the exception of Selmi.

As well as the IDs, the brothers had train tickets and leave passes.

Lieutenant Coombe had studied year-old aerial photographs and naval chart 1728 of the west coast of Italy. Since the brothers were supposed to go to Naples, he had looked for a good landing site nearby, and had settled on the very long open strand reaching unbroken from Lake Fusaro at its southern end, to Scauri at its north, an enormous elongated beach 72 kilometers long. The southern end of the strand was no good, he thought. Too many houses, too many people. But about 9 kms north of Lake Fusaro looked like the ideal place, at the entrance to the mouth of the Lago di Patria, at one of end of the beach at Licola.

On an October morning 70 years later, the beach at Licola looked to Signor Pelluso<sup>11</sup> and me to be wide open, almost completely flat, and deserted except for the odd man trudging along it. To the north, it seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see. To the south, it seemed to end in a curve of hills. I could see right away that no dinghy or kayak could be hidden on this exposed strand. Even if an attempt had been made to bury something, the mound would have been obvious for miles. Certainly any object left on the surface of the sand would have been seen immediately, especially by a coastal patrol looking for anything unusual.

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10 James Millar, the head of MI6 in Cairo.

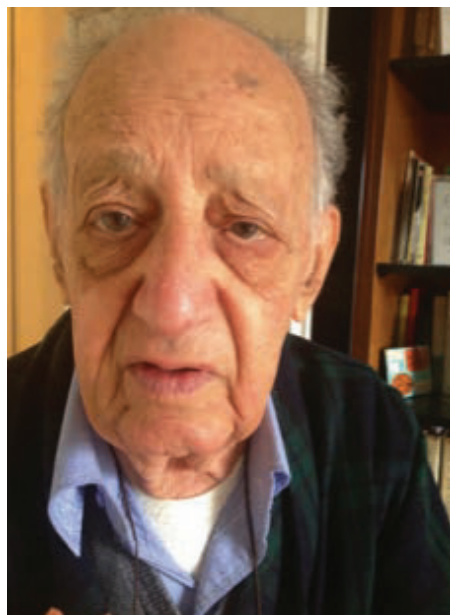
11 Sr Giovanni Pelluso is the author of *Sbarchi a Cuma*, Pozzuoli Magazine, 18 dicembre 2011, an article which details the experience of Sr Pelluso's father in the capture of the Zaccaria brothers. Sr Pelluso kindly drove me to the beach at Licola where the brothers landed.



The kayak in the submarine had already been assembled and was standing ready to be launched. These small dinghies were known as folbots, folding boats, and were in the double steeple shape characteristic of the normal kayak. Today, many folbots are made of modern lightweight materials, their frames of carbon fibre or aluminium, and their shell of corrugated plastic. But the folbot waiting for the brothers on the night of 9 October 1942 in the hull of *UTMOST* had a heavier wooden frame and a thicker layer of rubberized canvas for a shell. Although designed only for two men, it was not very light or easily disassembled.

Now, decades later, Sr Pelluso and I gazed silently out over the bleak scene. Newspapers and random litter were blowing across the sand as we stood. A solitary man walking slowly on the beach stared at us defiantly. This was no Copacabana. The day was bright, but sadness and desolation were heavy in the air. My heart contracted. When the brothers landed, it was very dark, as Lt. Coombe reported, and the bare strand, under a black sky, with only the flickering of the stars for company, would have made a dismaying contrast with the teeming warmth of Cairo which had embraced the brothers less than a week before.

It was time, 1.05 a.m. Now there was no turning back. The crew launched the folbot through the small hatch – folbots in submarines were made specially narrow to fit through the hatches – and the brothers were



*My uncle Elie, 94, seventy years later*

finally out, on the open sea, in the deep black gloom. The oars clanked dully against the wooden frame. It was cold in the open air. Night-time temperatures are about 10 degrees Celsius in Naples in October, according to standard meteorological charts. They breathed deeply and whispered to each other. There was a quiet splash as the first oar hit the water. The rope linking the folbot to the submarine played out slowly.

Egon had been against this caper from the start. This was not what he had signed up for. Ten days earlier, he had paid the last of his sad, countless visits to my uncle Élie, who was only three years younger than him. At 22, Élie and his brother Clément were working in their father Abner's office in the rue Emad-el-Din in Cairo, helping in the family paper importing business. Amaury was often with my mother Sol (they had been married since February), and my aunt Esther was busy working at the American military base<sup>12</sup>, so Egon, a sensible fellow, the good boy of the family, who had never really wanted to do any of this, and who – justifiably – liked and trusted Élie, was often at a loose end. He would come to the office and sit dejectedly on the other side of Élie's desk, telling him he did not want to go on this mission. His older brother had over-ridden him countless times, but this time was different. Now was the last possible chance they would ever have of turning back. But there

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12 She had started working there in mid 1942.

was still a small possibility of success, it might make a difference to the war against fascism, and the British had mingled insistence with threats, so there was no choice but to go through with it. In his small apartment in Milan, Élie, at 92, recalled with total clarity Egon's resigned reluctance, and 70 years later, speaking about the troubled and handsome boy and his eventual fate, he stared unseeing out of the window, tears dimming his old eyes.

The brothers started paddling to the shore. Lt Coombe reported later that the rope between the folbot and the submarine was, at first, playing out as planned. The arrangement had been that when they reached shore, they would give three strong tugs to the line, and the folbot would then be pulled back in to the submarine by the rope.

As they paddled towards the shore, Egon rehearsed his doubts, yet again. This was crazy, they still had one last chance to get out of it, they should turn back now to the submarine, they should risk the British prison they had often been threatened with, they should not become tragic heroes, because this mission had been so full of holes that chances were very high that that was exactly what they would become, no-one had been sent to receive and help them, they didn't exactly know where they were going to land, or exactly how they were to get to Naples from there, they were loaded down with ludicrously disguised radio transmitters, parts, money, jewels, there was no proper plan for getting out, their exposure would be greater and greater as time went on, they should remember Sol and Esther, remember their parents ... But their father, the extraordinary Communist leader Alessandro, and their mother Maria Soucek, just as committed – *they* would never have backed out. The brothers went on.

Peering ahead in the gloom, they could see little but blackness, and, off to the right, some pinpricks of light. How on earth were they to see well enough to land, bury their equipment, and leave the scene? Was that a faint noise from the beach? Could it be a patrol? They didn't want the gentle splash of their oars to be heard. They stopped paddling, peered desperately into the dark, and waited. At this point, Lt Coombe,



worried that the rope had gone slack, ordered the crew to pull the folbot back in to the submarine. It was 1.45 a.m.

My mother had often told me that in Egypt, after God came the British. That was one of the reasons she, a Spanish Jewish girl from Cairo, had married my father, a British officer. Today, when the British have long given up their empire, it is hard for us to understand how powerful were the habits of thought fallen into by people under British rule or orders. A wish to please the masters, not to admit inadequacy or fear, to hide one's lack of fluency in the masters' language, to deny and suppress one's own secret thoughts, never to express criticism, to avoid the masters' punishments – all of these were characteristic of the disempowered people under British rule or influence, and indeed under those of all colonizing powers.

So when the brothers arrived back at the submarine, they simply could not bring themselves to say they were actually reluctant to go. Instead, pitifully, they said the shore was too far away.

Lt Coombe gave that short shrift. He wrote in his log: *This seemed a very poor excuse indeed and I told them so.* It was indeed, a rather poor excuse. The shore was only three-quarters of a mile away. But Lt Coombe brought the submarine even closer, to only a quarter of a mile from the shore. No excuses this time.

There was nothing for it. The whole operation had to go ahead. They had been trained, more or less, their IDs and cover stories had been readied, more or less, their equipment and uniforms had been procured, the submarine had been deployed, SIS London had been alerted and had endorsed the operation, SOE Cairo had been told, the crew had busied themselves around the brothers, it was impossible, embarrassing, to cancel the operation now. It was as though the invitations had been sent, the wedding gifts accepted, the organist was playing, the groom was in front of the altar, and it was too late for the bride to back out. It was 2.25 a.m.

For the next hour, on the surface in the darkness, the brothers continued on their way. Sometimes they stopped to peer into the blackness. Given



*The cave of the Sybil of Cuma today*

the later testimony of Pvt. Cardinale, who was to find the boat, coast guards were patrolling the shore every half hour. Maybe the brothers heard a patrol and stopped to let it pass. Maybe they were whispering to each other, arguing about what to do. Sporadically, they paddled forward. Sr. Pelluso canvasses the possibility that they were discussing handing themselves over to the Italians, but later, when they had the chance to do so, they did not do so with any conviction. Before, and particularly after, their capture, they certainly did nothing that would indicate that that was their intention, whatever they might have said. Perhaps that was out of panic, perhaps out of principle, it is hard to know. I think it was out of a fundamental principle which would shortly come into its own at the moment of greatest crisis. Certainly they continued paddling till they reached the shore. It was 3.20 a.m.

But they had been paddling in what for Lt. Coombe was the wrong direction, towards the south, and the line was becoming too taut. At the southern end stood ruins that for the brothers would soon have a terrible resonance. These are the ruins of the acropolis of Cuma, founded

Sybil of Cuma, a dread prophetess (Greek: sybilla) of Apollo who, in legend, and in Virgil's *Aeneid*, was a guide to the underworld. And the entrance to the underworld was the nearby crater of Avernus, which today contains a lake on whose shores the Sybil's cave can be found and which is connected to it by a fearsome tunnel. The very name Avernus means, in Greek, "without birds", because birds would all be killed by the sulphurous fumes emanating from the crater.

When Aeneas asks the Sybil to take him down to the underworld through Avernus, Virgil gives her these words:

*Tros Anchisiade, facilis descensus Averno; noctes atque dies patet atri ianua  
Ditis; sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras, hoc opus, hic labor est.*

*Trojan, son of Anchises, the path through to hell [Averno] is easy:  
the door of black Dis is open night and day:  
but it's very hard, very arduous,  
to retrace your steps, and come back out to the air above.*<sup>13</sup>

As it was to turn out, the path through Avernus for the brothers was not in fact easy at all, although hell is certainly where they ended up. And they never did get to retrace their steps and come back out to the air above. Instead, between 2.25 and 3.20 a.m. on 9 October, they intermittently kept stopping, looking, listening, and starting again, paddling towards Avernus and the Sybil's cave, towards a dark fate that would not let them out of its grasp.

But the delay during that hour of blackness was to prove fatal for Amaury and Egon, because at 3.21 a.m., Lt. Coombe took a decision. He thought that unless he moved now, it would be too late to get the submarine clear of the bay and into deep water – and therefore invisibility – by dawn, as originally planned. At 3.21 a.m., he cut the rope. "I was reluctantly compelled," he writes in his log, "to cut the Folbot adrift".

The brothers were now on their own, on a craft they would never be able to hide. They had five hours of freedom left.

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13 Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI. My translation.

Normally dawn comes at 7.08 a.m. on 9 October in the Naples region, according to standard meteorological tables. To a lay person, it seems strange in retrospect that Lt Coombe would have needed almost four hours to get the submarine away to safety, when it had only taken from 12.30 a.m. to 1.05 a.m. to leave deep water safety and launch the brothers. Did he panic too soon? Was he too irritated and impatient at the comings and goings and hesitations and excuses of the two brothers? Would the dauntless Lt. Cmdr. Cayley have behaved differently and waited just a little longer? It is impossible for a lay person, at this distance in time, to say.

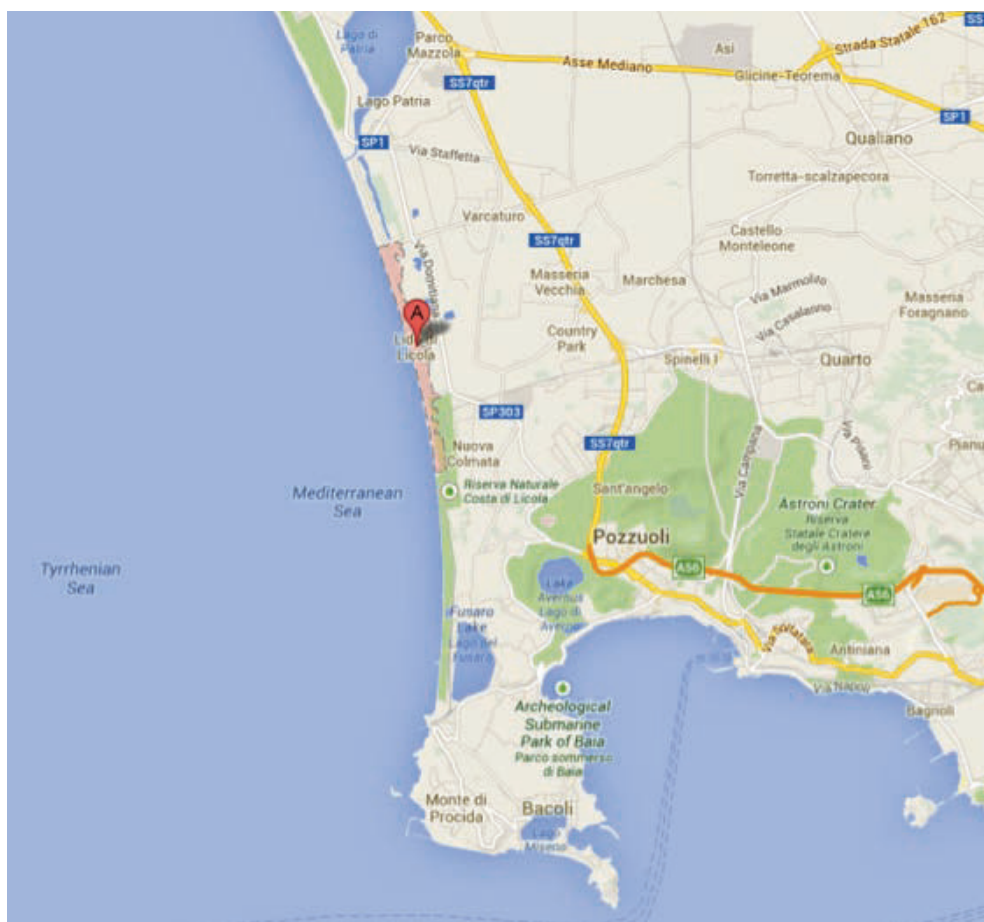
There is no doubt, however, where Lt. Coombe stood. He finishes his account of the operation thus:

*It is considered that when the Agents are of a foreign nationality (as in this case), they cannot be relied on to obey orders and carry out instructions in the same way as British personnel, no matter how keen and reliable they appear to be. In addition, it is felt that great assistance could be given to the Commanding Officer if an interpreter came in the submarine.*

The lieutenant could not have known how imperfect the preparation of the mission was, how reluctant at least one of the brothers had been to embark on it, how frequent the Italian coast guard patrols were, what the route of those patrols was, how the brothers had done everything they could to please the British short of sacrificing their own lives. What is clear is that the lieutenant either could not, or would not, give the brothers the benefit of the doubt. They were not British, therefore they must have been unreliable and insubordinate. It does not seem to have crossed his mind that they might have had good reasons for going the “wrong” way.

Why, indeed, were they paddling towards the south, where there were more lights and people? There could be at least three reasons.

One could be that they knew they had to take a train to Naples, since their mission was to report on marine movements in the Bay of Naples. Most of the trains to Naples from the area would have had to be leaving from Pozzuoli, near Lake Avernus, and over 8 kms , as the crow flies,



*Licola Beach, Pozzuoli and Bay of Naples.*

from the entrance to Lago Patria, where Lt. Coombe thought they should be dropped. By road, it would have been considerably longer, and the longer they were trudging along back roads, or scrambling through woods, the higher their risk of being discovered. They might have seen that the lights were actually not so numerous towards the south, and thought they could get away with landing closer to Pozzuoli.

Another could be that they were concerned that if they paddled towards Lago di Patria, they wouldn't, in the total blackness there, be able to see well enough to bury their radio transmitters and receivers and spare parts and other gear properly, or indeed to find a good place to bury them in the first place. Getting on the train to Naples loaded up with all that equipment would simply be asking for trouble, even, or especially, if they were in uniform. If they hid the equipment, or even some of it, properly, under some bushes, they might always come back and get it later.

Perhaps – and, given later Italian testimony, this is the most probable reason – they noticed that in the direction of Lago di Patria, coast guards seemed to be patrolling the beach with dismaying frequency. Perhaps, over the calm sea, they could hear them clanking along and chatting just where the landing was supposed to have been taking place. There was a coast guard post at Vercaturo, a little inland south of Lago di Patria, and to get to Pozzuoli they would have had to pass very close to it. And there was another coast guard station at the mouth of the entrance to the lake.

The feelings of Amaury and Egon when they realized the rope had been cut, that they had been left to their own devices, that they somehow had to bury not only the boat but the rope, as well as much of their gear, on a flat and exposed stretch of sand, with lights and people not too far away, can only be imagined. Under later interrogation by the Italians, they did not of course describe their shock, alarm and anger at the time.

When they landed on the night of 9 October, they did what they could. It had all taken too long, dawn was only a few hours away, patrols were frequently searching the coast – indeed it later emerged that they had missed one by only 20 minutes – they had been trained to leave the coast and go inland as quickly as possible, so they simply hopped out into the water and dragged the folbot up a short distance out of the water in the darkness, leaving footprints and grooves in the wet sand. There was no time to dismantle it, and in any case it was not easy to disassemble, being made of wood and heavy canvas, and in the blackness they couldn't see properly to take it apart. They quickly changed into their uniforms, Amaury into Salitonastaso's, Egon into Selmi's. Lugging along with them all the equipment and the other gear was quite impossible – why had SIS Cairo ever believed it could be done? – so, hoping against hope that the boat would not be found for a day or two, they left their civvies and some of the heavy kit under a few spindly bushes nearby, and did their best to conceal the boat and the other kit under handfuls of sand, planning to come back later. It was all most unsatisfactory. And they were sleepless, tense, exhausted, and thirsty.

Nevertheless, they made good progress inland, carrying with them only some of the paraphernalia and leaving the rest. Nothing happened to stop them, and their hopes started to rise.

But at 4.45 a.m., all hope died in an instant. They saw flares go up on the beach they had so recently left. From the submarine as it was pulling away, Lt. Coombe saw them too, and at 4.15 a.m.<sup>14</sup> recorded a white rocket, three white flares and two red flares<sup>15</sup>. "I feared," he wrote in his log, "that this might indicate that the Folbot had been discovered".

Indeed it had. Private Giuseppe Cardinale, 41, 4th Company, 79th Coastal Battalion, was trudging along the sand with his mate, Private Michele Baldassarre of the same unit, on cold, boring, night-time coastal patrol. On the beach it was still quite dark, although the false dawn may have begun to cast a shadowy light over the scene.

In recent months, coastal patrols had been reinforced all over Italy. The Italian Navy, highly professional and, in general, bravely staffed, had won some victories in the Mediterranean – by the time the brothers landed, it had sunk or damaged 28 Allied ships, including the battleships HMS Queen Elizabeth and Valiant, and over 100,000 tons of merchant shipping – but in fact it was no real match for the Royal Navy, whose commanders were given considerable autonomy, unlike their Italian counterparts who had to seek endorsement for every action from Rome. The Royal Navy also had the advantage of modern detection and communication methods like sonar and radar, and, above all, of ULTRA. By the last third of 1942, it was no secret in Italy, too, that the war in North Africa was unlikely to be won, and, for the Italian government, the conclusion from that, and from the losses already sustained from enemy action, was obvious: the Allies could well be landing in Italy in the near future. Mussolini also had to contend with rapidly declining public support for the war. So if the Allies were possibly going to land in Italy, and if there were sections of the public who were pro-Allies and

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14 It is hard to tell what the exact time was. All depositions from Italians put the earliest moment of discovery as 4.45, and set that time as the starting point for subsequent events.

15 He missed the green one, perhaps from inexperience.

anti-Mussolini, then chances were high that spies, or advance parties, or other intelligence gatherers, would be surreptitiously landing somewhere along the coast to scout out the territory, met and abetted by sympathetic locals.

So Mussolini considerably strengthened coastal patrols. Indeed, so concerned was he that he brought soldiers back to Italy from North Africa even before the second battle of El Alamein on 23 October, and deployed them on coastal patrol service. One of these very soldiers happened to be Sr Pelluso's father, who had been sent back from North Africa just in time to join the unit that found the two brothers and interrogated them near the beach at Licola.

In his deposition at the brothers' trial<sup>16</sup>, Pvt. Cardinale testified, in typescript:

*On the morning of the 9th inst., as I was on coastal patrol duty with Private Michele Baldassarre on the stretch of coast between Observation Post XI and Unit 72 (Licola), I noted, some way up the beach, a canoe made of rubberized canvas and containing a dagger and an oar. We immediately notified Sgt. Aniello Pagnotta<sup>17</sup> commander of Observation Post XI, of our discovery. I would like to point out that the canoe was not there on the first, outward, leg of our patrol, which occurred at about 3 a.m., but that it was there on the return portion. [He was correct].*

*I have nothing more to add.*

*Read, confirmed, and signed on 24 October 1942.<sup>18</sup>*

The brothers had just missed the patrol on its outward journey.

In actual fact, that deposition was not exactly signed by Pvt Cardinale, because, as someone has handwritten under it, he was illiterate (*analfabeta*).

However, Pvt. Baldassarre *could* write, if slowly and awkwardly, and his deposition is word for word the same as Pvt. Cardinale's.

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16 Box 810, file 10164, Archivi Centrali dello Stato, [National Archives], Rome.

17 Sic. The correct spelling was Paniotta.

18 My translation. All the translations from the Italian archives are mine.



The brothers had managed to evade the first, outward, patrol, but had been trapped into having to abandon the canoe, which was found by the second, return, one. It was 4.50, and the alarm had been raised.

Puffing as they ran in the sand – they were both almost 40, as were many of the soldiers on coastal patrol<sup>19</sup> – Privates Cardinale and Baldassarre rushed to Observation Post XI, about 600 metres away. It took them some little time. Sergeant Aniello Paniotta, their commanding officer, takes up the story<sup>20</sup>.

*On 9th of this month, around 5 o'clock, the coastal detail patrolling the stretch of beach between Observation Post XI and Unit no. 72, on their way back from the latter, noticed, some way up the beach, a canoe made of rubberized canvas and containing a dagger and an oar. Immediately the two privates, Michele Baldassarre and Giuseppe Cardinale, informed me of their discovery. I gave the alarm right away and went to the site. Once I had ascertained that what I had been told was true, I sent up one flare to illuminate the scene, three white flares to indicate "attack by dangerous agency", then one green flare and two red, repeated twice, to indicate "successful enemy landing".*

*I instituted a search of the entire surrounding area, during the course of which a number of objects were found scattered about. These were a backpack, spare parts for a radio transmitter, small tins of food, and clothes. Standing guard over the objects was Private Vito D'Aloisio.*

*I have nothing more to add.*

Pvts. Cardinale and Baldassarre belonged to the 4th Company of the 79th Battalion, which was stationed at the mouth of the Lago di Patria, as the police report to the court later stated<sup>21</sup>. That was the very spot which Lt. Coombe had, unknowingly, picked for their landing.

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19 Their dates of birth are given in their depositions. Their age would seem to indicate that most younger Italian men had already been called up for actual military service.

20 In his deposition to the Court, dated 24 October 1942.

21 Legione Territoriale dei Carabinieri Reali di Napoli, ref. no. 14130, dated 24 October 1942. *Rapporto di denuncia*, in Box 810, file 10164, Archivi Centrali dello Stato, Rome.

So, far from being “low, well-wooded with very few and well spaced out houses”, as Lt. Coombe, and presumably the brothers, had observed from the submarine, the locality was in fact extremely dangerous for the brothers since it was exactly where there were many coast guard personnel, at two coast guard stations. It was not exactly happy go luckiness that prompted Amaury and Egon to pause on the dark surface of the water, time their landing so as to miss a patrol, and paddle southwards to the beach at Licola.

Year-old aerial photographs may not have shown these installations clearly, and it is highly unlikely that Naval Chart 1728 would have shown them either. When he chose his landing spot, Lt. Coombe probably made the best decision he could at the time.

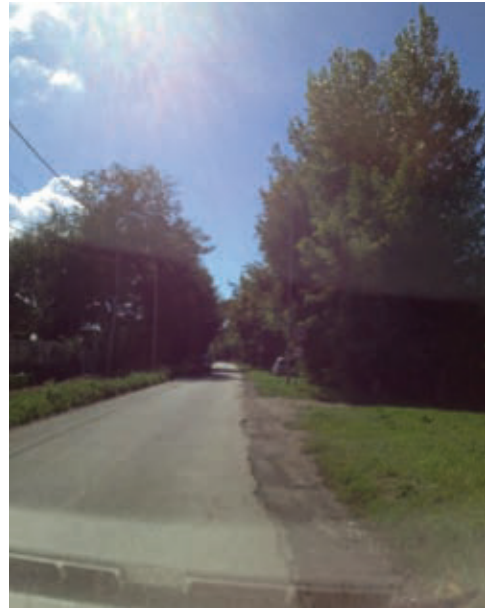
By 5 o’clock, when Pvts. Cardinale and Baldassarre arrived panting in front of Sgt. Paniotta, Amaury and Egon were scrambling through the wooded area leading to the road to Cuma.

That wooded area can be seen at the back of the photo, taken in October 2012. The beach is just beyond the woods.

Trudging along the dirt road – today it is lightly tarred – carrying a heavy box (I was to learn, later, what was in it) and other gear, they were hungry, thirsty, dry-mouthed, spent, angry, and on edge. They hoped to catch a train from Pozzuoli to Naples later that morning, but for the moment, they urgently needed to rest and get something, anything, to eat and drink. It was 7.30 a.m., and they were about to make the biggest mistake of their lives.



*Beach lies beyond horizon.*



*Road from Licola to Cuma today*

## **ii. Capture, October**

Pvt. D'Aloisio, who was standing guard, had been one of three coast guard soldiers. The coast guard detachment at Varcatura, about a mile away to the north, had noticed the flares. Three coast guard soldiers from the detachment, Corporal-Major Gennaro De Falco, and Pvts. Vito Bianco and Vittorio d'Aloisio, had run down to the beach, and started searching the scrub between the sand and the trees.

It was still dark. But they kept trudging along the sand, catching their trousers in the sparse scrubby bushes and getting sand in their boots. At around 6.30 a.m., it became light enough for Pvt. Bianco to notice something in the undergrowth. "An open backpack, various tins of food, a bag containing spare parts for a radio apparatus, some clothes, including three silk shirts, one of which was grey-green, a leather belt, two coats, spare collars for the shirts, etc." He called his superior officer, De Falco, over.

De Falco told D'Aloisio to stand guard over the items. They lay about a hundred metres, he later testified, from the place where the canoe had been found.

De Falco and Bianco went on searching, and few yards along they found a tie and a hat. All of this obviously pointed to an “attack by a dangerous agency”, a “successful enemy landing”.

Here is the story Amaury later told, under interrogation:

*Contrary to what had been agreed, the dinghy remained in the sea. It was supposed to have been pulled back to the submarine by the British, using a rope that joined it to the submarine. I can't explain why the British preferred to abandon it and cut that rope. Maybe to gain time.*

*We took off our overalls, got in the water, changed into the uniforms and took up our pistols. I was in the uniform of a medical lieutenant and my brother in that of a lieutenant of infantry. On the beach we left those overalls, two raincoats, a knife, tins of food, and other not very useful things. My brother shouldered his kitbag, containing personal items and his half share of the 750 000 lire. I dumped my kitbag containing personal items and my half share of the 750 000 lire in a nearby bush with the intention of coming back to get it later. I lifted up the radio and followed my brother. I then had second thoughts and came back to get that bag or at least the money, but I couldn't find the bush in the darkness.*

*So as not to waste any more time I turned back and followed my brother inland.*

*We were walking along without any accurate means of setting our course [senza un giusto riferimento]. We were trying to get to Naples and find somewhere where we could set up the radio<sup>22</sup>.*

So Amaury took the radio himself. He did not leave it on the beach. In fact, his first thought had been to take the radio, rather than any civilian clothes, which, to him, seemed “not very useful”. He does not mention the radio transmitter spare parts which the Italian coast guard found under the bushes. But he does not seem to covet the money at all.

So far, not exactly “happy go lucky”. And not at all indicative of any wish to dump the British and return to Italy as a civilian, quite the reverse.

In 1941, Cuthbert Bowlby, Head of the Middle East Section of SIS, had aired his views of Italians when asked to respond to a scheme using Italian prisoners of war as agents:

“Italians make very bad agents”, he opined, “ although many of them dislike the Fascist regime yet they love their country and dislike danger. I am afraid that any attempt of this kind will merely be treated as a beneficial repatriation scheme”.<sup>23</sup>

And, writing 68 years after the event, the author of the only officially approved history of the Secret Intelligence Service, quoting the brothers’ case officer, added his own opinion that the fact that the brothers were not heard from again “rather confirm[ed] Cuthbert Bowlby’s prediction in January 1941 that recruiting agents from captured Italian servicemen might ‘merely be treated as a beneficial repatriation scheme’”.

“A beneficial repatriation scheme” – remarkably supercilious, and, in the case of the brothers, quite the reverse of accurate, as we shall see.

They had been given no directions, there was no-one to meet them, and among their personal effects as listed later by the prosecutor, there was no compass, so they must have had, as Amaury said, “no accurate means of setting our course”. Who, I thought, sitting horrified in the Reading Room, had been happy go lucky here?

Another canard is that they wanted to turn coat and hand themselves over to the Italians. Later, the Naples police were to deal with that quite effectively:

*If they had wanted to hand themselves over to us, they would not have put on the uniforms of our Italian Army*<sup>24</sup>.

What happened to the money? They had each been given 375,000 lire by the SIS station in Cairo. It is unclear how the station obtained such a large sum in lire. It may have been found in Tobruk, or among Italian

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23 Jeffrey, op. cit., p. 425.

24 Legione Territoriale dei Carabinieri Reali, op. cit. p. 7.

prisoners of war, or sent somehow from Italy, perhaps through SOE means. Without a (prohibited) look at SIS files, the source cannot be known.

Amaury says he left his 375,000 lire on the beach. But Corporal-Major De Falco, in his deposition, clearly says: "I saw absolutely no money" [*non ho visto affatto danaro*]. De Falco's two subordinates make no mention of money in their depositions. Amaury, when he made his "confession", had no reason to lie. He had been searched, he had already admitted to taking British money during his two-year training period, and he already knew his fate. Somehow the money found its way to the coffers of the Servizio di Informazione Militare (SIM), the body that would coordinate the brothers' prosecution. What happened to it later will never be known.

By 7.30 a.m., men were swarming all over the beach, phone calls were being made, and search parties were being sent out. There were shouts, squeaking of boots on sand, snapping of twigs as men stepped on the low, dry bushes.

The brothers were flagging. Amaury, especially, was tired. He was the one who was carrying the heavy wooden box. This box provided the only light moment I was to have as I traced the brothers' path from Cairo to Forte Bravetta.

When the State Prosecutor made his summary deposition to the Special Tribunal for the Defence of the State, he listed the items that Amaury and Egon had brought with them from Egypt and Malta. The first item on the list is a "Radio-transmitter, housed in a wooden case. On the case was a bronze label reading APPARECCHIO VIBRO-MASSAGGIATORE, or *Vibrating massage apparatus*. Product of Marelli<sup>25</sup>, Milano, Model A/41, M.M. 58190."<sup>26</sup>

A vibrating massage apparatus. So this was the disguise for the radio-transmitter!

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25 The Stabilimenti Marelli still exist in Milan. Today they make magnets.

26 Prosecutor's Summary Deposition, p. 15



*Radio transmitter case in Intelligence Museum, Chicksands, Bedfordshire*

The Reading Room at the National Archives in Rome is a silent and solemn place, and the story unfolding in the files was grim in the extreme, but the somber calm of the scene was shattered by a sudden chuckle coming from the reader at the table near the big windows, who was then obliged to leave the room. The thought of a couple of spies hauling along essential equipment like a vibrating massage apparatus was a whiff of pure merriment in the grief.

Actually the *apparecchio vibro-massaggiatore* was laughable on several levels. The Military Intelligence Museum at Chicksands, in Bedfordshire, which I had just visited, has a diorama of an SOE agent using, precisely, a radio-transmitter of the kind given to British agents during the war, whether SOE or SIS. The leather case containing the transmitter looks exactly like an ordinary small suitcase, or briefcase, of the period. To a casual observer, it would not have merited a second glance. On the other hand, a heavy, obtrusive wooden box, with a polished brass label brightly proclaiming itself to be an *APPARECCHIO VIBRO-MASSAGGIATORE*, was just asking to be examined further.

Why the SIS station in Cairo believed this wooden box was, first of all, readily portable, and second, convincing, cannot be determined without an examination of SIS files, which is not permitted. On the face of it, it looks like a mistake.

Perhaps it is more interesting, however, than a mere mistake. Contemporary accounts of the objects British troops found among Italian officers' belongings after Tobruk do in fact mention a few massage machines. Chester Wilmot, in his classic wartime eye-witness book, *Tobruk 1941*, claims<sup>27</sup> that Italians feared the desert and its discomforts, had been persuaded by Mussolini that plunder and riches would be theirs, and had sought to reproduce as far as they could their life in Italy, with families, bottled water, flagons of wine and fresh rolls. And, it seems, the odd vibrating massage apparatus. For it is quite likely that this box, if not its contents, was the genuine article, taken from an Italian prisoner of war.

This of course is a one-sided view. Many Italian soldiers had fought bravely and successfully in a number of tough engagements in North Africa – the 10th Army at the first battle of Sidi Barrani, and the Folgore Division at the second battle of El Alamein<sup>28</sup>, for example, but their political and military leaders let them down severely, and consistently. However, it would not be unfair to say that, by and large, a superior *de haut en bas* view of Italians was endemic among British officers (and not only Lt. Coombe), men, and indeed the public at large. It was a view which painted Italians as soft, self-indulgent, unreliable, cowardly, and unmartial, and no fit heirs of the tough, adamant centurions of ancient Rome. The real exemplars of these virtues, were, in a common British view, the British themselves.

So it is not surprising that the SIS station in Cairo might have believed that a wooden case containing a vibrating massage apparatus would be a convincing accessory for a couple of travelling Italian officers. If that is true, it probably says more about those in the SIS station than about the Italians themselves.

Any mirth in the outer lobby of the National Archives was therefore tempered by a sad familiarity with attitudes like these.

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27 Chester Wilmot, *Tobruk 1941*, Penguin Australia, 2009, p. 71.

28 Of whom Major-General I.T.P. Hughes of the British 44th Infantry Division said, offering what was perhaps a simple and fitting eulogy for those remarkable men, "I wish to say that in all my life I have never encountered soldiers like those of the Folgore."



The other items in the list of objects drawn up later by the prosecution were:

**No. 2:** Spare parts for radio-transmitter:

- a. Four quartz transmitters on frequency Kc/s 3472 –7095 – 7791.5 and 6319;
- b. Three transmission reels of 20, 40 and 80 meters;
- c. Four high frequency reels;
- d. Wires to make an antenna;
- e. Wires for a receiver, with pins and screws;
- f. Headphones;
- g. A transformer
- h. Two reception valves made by R.C.A.
- i. Two double transmission valves made by R.C.A.

**No. 3:**

- a. one book: *Storia [sic]<sup>29</sup> e Moralità*, by Giulio Caprin (in Italian)
- b. one book: *Men and Other Animals*, by Ugo Bernasconi (in Italian)
- c. one book: *Manual for Infantry Officers*, July 1940 edition (in Italian).

**No. 4:** One Army cloth backpack, belonging to Egon Zaccaria, containing:

- a. One cloth greatcoat
- b. One infantry lieutenant's jacket
- c. One pair of officer's trousers
- d. One infantry lieutenant's cloth bag
- e. One tie

**No. 5:** One Army cloth backpack, belonging to Amauri Zaccaria, containing:

- a. One cloth greatcoat
- b. One medical orderly's jacket
- c. One pair of officer's trousers
- d. One medical orderly's beret
- e. One tie
- f. One pair of spurs. (Spurs? At this stage, I couldn't see the point).

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<sup>29</sup> A mistake by the prosecutor. The real title is *Storie e Moralità*, i.e. Stories and Morality, not History [Storia] and Morality. The book is a collection of tales. It was published in 1926.

**No. 6:** One officer's leather belt with holster and Beretta pistol, 9 Caliber, no. 842760, as well as 19 cartridges for said pistol, in the possession of Amauri Zaccaria.

**No. 7:** One officer's leather belt with holster and Beretta pistol, 9 Caliber, no. 689024, in the possession of Egon Zaccaria.

**No. 8:** One dagger with a metal finger-shaped handle, in a leather sheath.

What they had dumped on the beach was, according to Pvt. Bianco, an open backpack, various tins of food, a bag containing spare parts for a radio apparatus, some clothes, including three silk shirts, one of which was grey-green, a leather belt, two coats, spare collars for the shirts, etc.

So actually they took with them most of the items they had been given.

The books in their kitbags give strong clues to the brothers' interests and characters. Surely it was Amaury who chose the first one listed by the prosecutor, *Storie e Moralità* by Giulio Caprin (1880-1958). Caprin was one of the signatories of Benedetto Croce's brave, famous anti-fascist manifesto of 1926, but he was more of an individualist than a communist and many of his 50 books, including *Storie e Moralità*, deal with the courage of individuals as they oppose inane orders from authority. The similarity with Amaury's own character hardly needs underlining.

A similarity of the second book, *Men and Other Animals*, by Ugo Bernasconi (1874-1960), with the personality of Egon, is also obvious. A painter, a litterateur, and an aesthete, Bernasconi was even less of a communist than Caprin, and *Men and Other Animals*, a thoughtful travelogue, was a clear reflection of the sensitivity and curiosity of the young man calling himself a "designer", or artist.

One devil-may-care brother who marched to his own drum, the other seeking and responsive to beauty. Both solidly anti-fascist, but neither absolutely committed to the Party, its discipline, its organization, its theories and its requirements. Their extraordinary father, of course, would probably have had the *Communist Manifesto* in his knapsack. As for their

grandfather, the socialist spy, he might well, in 1915, have been reading an anti-war pamphlet by Rosa Luxemburg.

Now, at 8.30 on the morning of 9 October 1942, the Zaccaria dynasty of high-minded, energetic, literate, self-sacrificing, bourgeois leftists, was in danger, under the Sybil's cave, from a typical peasant combination of suspicion and hospitality.

The brothers slogged on, ever more slowly in the growing heat. The kitbag was getting heavier and heavier and sweat was starting to run down their backs. Unbeknownst to them, two people had observed them, one an army private, the other a peasant. Nothing new passes unnoticed in the sleepest countryside. At last they came on a little knot of buildings in the middle of some fields.

Working in one of the fields –not his own – was a 30-year-old peasant, as he is described in his deposition, Antonio Cammarota, of 28 via Cuma. They walked up to him and asked him if he had any kind of animal – the deposition says *un somaro* [a donkey – the word is also insulting, just as it is in English] which would take them to the nearest railway station.

Already, several things become obvious. They didn't know where or what the nearest railway station was, and they were tiring rapidly. Further bewilderment from the reader in the Archivi Centrali dello Stato. Why had they been dumped in completely unknown territory, without a map, without a compass, without a reception party, without any indication from aerial surveys or other maps as to where the railway stations were or what they were called, never mind a timetable? If the SIS post in Egypt had been able to get to my mother in Cairo the November 1942 Roman newspaper that I had found in her secret box, this must have meant they had some sort of agents or other contacts in Italy that month, and presumably in October too. Why were these contacts not used? At the very least, why couldn't information about railway stations have been obtained either from Italian contacts or from the War Office, the Admiralty, or another department in London? Or from American sources? Or from prisoners of war in Egypt? Or from Italian sources in London? Or from sources in Malta? SOE had a very

active station in Malta. Or right next door, from SOE in Cairo? SOE agents were much better taken care of in Italy.

*They were a very happy-go-lucky pair and we never heard from them again.*

Indeed.

As they stood there with sweat trickling down their faces – I was there during the day in October and walking along via Cuma was hot work then – Antonio told them he had no donkey but that his father had a cart which might do. No, Egon said cautiously, we'd better just keep walking.

Two strangers in a tiny village cannot pass unseen. (Did the SIS post, weaving their fancies in the safety of Cairo, imagine that somehow they would?) Antonio's padrone, the owner of the land he was working, saw them right away and came over while they were talking to Antonio. Carlo Rocco was 64 and canny. He asked what was going on here. Amaury, who was the more tired, said they were looking for a cart to take them to Pozzuoli. Rocco told them that if they wanted to take a train, they'd be much better off going to the Cumana del Fusaro railway station, which was nearer. Egon asked how many kilometers away it was, and Rocco said four.

At this point, Amaury gave himself away. He exclaimed – and in his verbal deposition Rocco reproduced his pronunciation *testualmente* [exactly] – Quattro chiloMETri!! [Four kiloMETers!!!] In standard spoken Italian, the emphasis is not on the *third* syllable [MET] but on the second [O – chiLOmetri] (although in French it is on the third – kiloMÈTres), and in his deposition, Rocco said his suspicions were immediately aroused by the faulty Italian pronunciation. For the previous two years, Amaury had been speaking very little but French – he spoke to my mother and her relatives in French – and he had grown up in essentially a Slavic region, so in his fatigue he made a mistake. He pronounced the word as if it were French. Warier of officials than of strangers, Rocco did not report his suspicions to anyone. In any case, with a few minutes, Amaury's pronunciation would give him away to a much more dangerous person – the brothers' nemesis, arriving in military uniform.

Private Gaetano Di Benedetto, from Company 2, 319th Coastal Brigade, was walking near the road from Licola to Fusaro with his mates Private Michele Barone and Private Mario Ravagnan. They had seen the flares and had emerged from barracks, interestingly at only eight o'clock, over three hours later (what took them so long?) Pvt. Di Benedetto, however, was about to make up for any morning sloth. By now it was just over eight thirty a.m.

As they were trudging along, Pvt. Barone glimpsed, about a hundred yards away, what he thought was the figure of an officer, accompanied by a soldier shouldering a knapsack. The three of them dashed towards the figures but they lost them from sight in the trees. Fortunately, a carter was passing by, and, as they stated in their depositions to the court, he told them he had seen two officers near a local chapel by the wayside. One of them, said the carter to Di Benedetto, was *intento ad osservare i propri pantaloni* [intent on observing his trousers].

A throwaway little sentence that brought me up short. The sly, boorish humour implicit in the carter's comment, and the fact that it was not only reported by De Benedetto but also included in the official transcript of his deposition, gave off a sudden whiff of the essentially coarse culture fostered by fascism in Italy. All of them together, the carter, the private, the army major taking down the private's comments, and the official transcriber, are tacitly in on the joke against the man who was preoccupied with his trousers. The scene as Di Benedetti made his deposition unexpectedly rose in my imagination – perhaps a small, bare room with walls, floor and desk of dark-brown wood, a mote-filled shaft of sunlight beaming down from a high window, a musty smell of unwashed men, Di Benedetti standing at attention, the major and the transcriber sitting down, all of them keeping a completely straight face, all of them collectively enjoying an unstated superiority over the foolish spy who had kept looking down at his trousers and had then managed to get caught. It is possible that the man looking down was Amaury, who was wearing the trousers of the rather plumper Blandone. They might well have been quite loose, or too long, certainly not very comfortable. SIS Cairo would probably not have bothered to have had them altered.

Barone ran off to report the sighting, and Di Benedetto and Ravagnan continued looking. They found the chapel but not the officers. So the two of them split up, with Di Benedetto taking the side roads next to the main road and Ravagnan the main road itself.

Meantime, still under the eyes of the canny 64-year-old Rocco, the two brothers pressed on. Turning a corner into Via Cuma, they came upon a young man of 19 standing outside a nondescript house near the chapel. It was number 28. In fact, the young man, Michele Cammarota, was the younger brother of the peasant Antonio they had just been speaking to and who had told them he had no donkey.

Now they tramped over to Michele, and Amaury asked him if he could take them to the railway station at Cumana del Fusaro, whose name they had just learned from Rocco. Michele said he had no means of taking them there, but that his father, who was due back soon from Baia, would certainly be able to help them. The boy noticed Amaury's damp forehead, saw they were obviously exhausted, and, with customary peasant hospitality, invited them inside. Gratefully, the brothers accepted and asked if there were any wine to be had. Inside the house, their mother, Matilde Palumbo<sup>30</sup>, gave them some grapes, which, in their biggest mistake of all, they sat outside to eat. They had only a few minutes of freedom left.

Di Benedetto was very near, in fact only about a hundred yards away. Looking ahead, he saw, sitting outside no 28 via Cuma, two young officers sitting eating grapes. Di Benedetto went up to them and asked them for their papers. They gave them to him, not before, he says, telling him they were "*miei superiori*" [my superiors]. It is not hard to discern a class resentment, and consequent triumph, in Di Benedetto's words – ironic given the socialist sympathies of the whole Zaccaria dynasty.

Their hearts must have been pounding as they handed over the documents. But everything was in order. The papers were genuine, the photos not unlike. Di Benedetto, however, was still suspicious. These had to be the dangerous enemy aliens who had prompted the flares they

had seen from barracks. He asked them where they had come from and where they were going. They answered they were going to Naples but did not say where they had come from.

Reading Di Benedetto's deposition in the ACS Reading Room, I was baffled yet again. The obvious question jumped to mind. Had SIS Cairo not given them a detailed, solid cover story? Had they not been taken through it a hundred times? Evidently not. They would certainly have remembered and trotted it out now if they had.

As they talked, Di Benedetto noticed their "*pronunzia esotica*" [their foreign pronunciation]. He thought to himself *These officers must be bogus*. To make sure, he went on chatting, but this was just a pretext to gain time to allow his mates to catch up.

Boldly, the two brothers asked Di Benedetto to help them get some sort of transport to Fusaro. They suggested a cart, since that is what the Cammarota brothers had proposed. Di Benedetto pretended to agree, and went off, ostensibly to get the cart, but in reality to look for help. He found Ravagnan, and the two of them pulled out their guns and approached the Zaccarias.

This was the brothers' last moment of freedom. It was 9 a.m.

Amaury and Egon objected, but to drawn guns pointed straight at their faces. Unwillingly they followed Di Benedetto and Ravagnan back on to the road. Barone and Guglielmo Lo Casto, a sub-lieutenant he came upon on the road, found them there and joined them.

Seventy years later, Sr Pelluso and I drove from the beach at Licola down via Cuma. We stopped the car and walked along in the heat, looking for no. 28. On the edge of a field, we located the house, a banal little structure newly painted in yellow. Outside, under an overhanging roof, a couple of plastic bins were marking the spot where the two young antifascists, the adventurer and the artist, had been about to be consigned to the dustbin of history<sup>31</sup>. Here was not a scene of fire and

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31 A famous insult by Trotsky in 1917, castigating the members of the Congress of Soviets who objected to the Bolsheviks' seizure of power.



brimstone, a plunge into the roaring flames of Avernus, just a quiet little house in a quiet little street, nobody about, nothing much happening. But seventy years before, on that same spot, something was happening. The two soldiers' guns jerked their guns upward, a signal to the brothers to get up.

As soon as he had risen from the chair, Amaury's mind had started racing. His first thought was not the money, not even the radio, or the jewels. He wanted only to destroy the codes. As the six of them, Di Benedetto, Ravagnan, Barone and Lo Casto, and the two brothers, trudged along to the local Coast Guard office, Amaury was desperately working out that the only way to prevent the Italians from seizing the radio and using it to send false information to the British was to tear up the sheet of ricepaper with the transmission codes on them, and try to swallow the pieces.

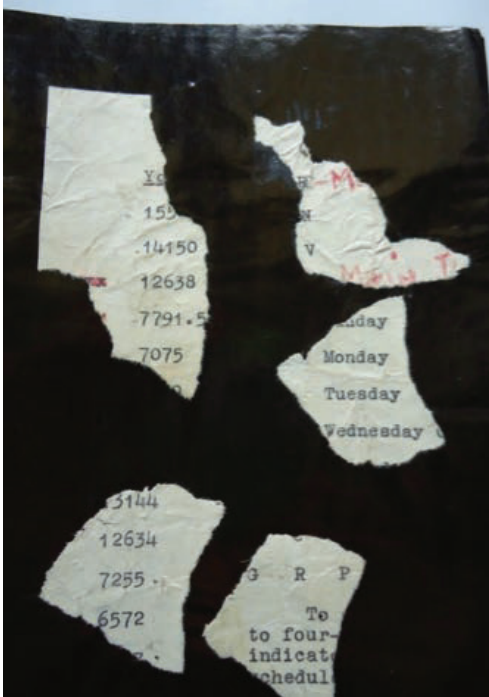


On the road, the little group of privates met one of the officers scouring the area, a Lieut. Amedeo Canton, who took command. He in turn asked for the brothers' papers, and although they were in order, he knew (in his deposition he says, I was *absolutely certain*) that these officers were bogus. He took Egon's pistol away from him, and told Lo Casto to take Amaury's. Egon did not resist, but Amaury did. He tried to grab his pistol from his bag, but Lo Casto threw himself on him and overpowered him. In the scuffle, though, Amaury found the opportunity to seize the sheet of ricepaper with the codes, tear it into little pieces and swallow most of them.

Or at least, half swallow some of them. In two waxed orange envelopes in the files of the Archivi Centrali dello Stato, I found many of those same little pieces, mounted on seven sheets of black plastic. Several fragments were irregularly stained with a brownish red colour.

Ravagnan says in his deposition: *I was able to retrieve small pieces which I gave to my superiors.* The red stains are not soil. The soil of the district is black and grey. The stains are not rust. Rice paper does not rust. Are the stains blood? They look very much like some sort of liquid, which has run a little and then faded over time. While Lo Casto held Amaury down, did Ravagnan use force to "retrieve" the small pieces from Amaury's throat? Neither of them says so in his deposition. What then are the red stains?

It was strange to run my fingers over the delicate paper and speculate on where those fragments might have been retrieved from, and what might have caused the reddish brown stains. What was certain was that Amaury realized the game was up, and that the only duty he could fulfill now was to prevent the Italians from using the codes to convey misleading information to the British. Of course, the codes would certainly have given them away as spies, but so would all the rest of the items they were carrying. It was not to avoid them being labeled as spies that Amaury tried to destroy the codes. It was to do his duty and protect the British from false information.



*It is considered that when the Agents are of a foreign nationality (as in this case), they cannot be relied on to obey orders and carry out instructions in the same way as British personnel.*

All the worst fears of poor, pessimistic Egon had been realized. He was so shocked that, unlike Amaury, he at first had no heart to fight back. After Amaury had been overpowered and had yielded up some of the fragments, there was still a short distance to Company Command Headquarters, and during that walk, Canton started talking to the slender young artist. He asked him where they had come from and where they were going. In what Canton called an “evasive tone”, Egon said they had come from Ravenna and were going to Naples.

Ravenna, of course, is completely on the other side of Italy to Naples, the eastern side, and is much further up the peninsula, even further north than Florence. Why Ravenna? Was that part of a cover story? Did it just pop into Egon’s head as a place which was very far from Naples, where they could not be traced, where neither of them had ever been? Or conversely, was there someone there, perhaps known to their father, who would have been able to “vouch” for them?

In any case, it was obvious that the game was up. The game had been up from the moment that Lt. Coombe had cut the rope. There was only one thing to do – try and spin a story that would save their lives.

They were taken inside the Company Command Headquarters, and were sat down in front of Francesco Zecchin, 48, a major in the Reserves. Zecchin was a well-known Venetian engineer, who in the 1930s had created a unique glass factory in Murano using a different process from the usual clear Murano product. Zecchin’s factory had failed in 1939, but not before being favourably featured a number of times in *Domus* magazine. It is unlikely that Zecchin would have been a fascist bully. He was a mature and educated man, who had run a business in the face of fierce competition, and was used to dealing with artists.

His first question was: *Are you Italian officers?* In view of what Egon was about to admit, their answer was sadly ironic: *Of course, of the very purest [Certamente e dei più puri].* They meant they were the genuine article, but

the truth about their “purity” was to be revealed in the next box of files in front of me on the Reading Room table.

Zecchin asked them where they had come from and where they were going, and they trotted out the same line about Ravenna and Naples. Zecchin must have raised his eyes to the ceiling: “*it was easy for me ... to convince them it was pointless to go on with this charade [inutile continuare la commedia]*”.

Egon had somewhat recovered. He tried another tack. He told Zecchin they were Italian citizens who had escaped, first to Yugoslavia, and then to Egypt via Bulgaria, Turkey and Syria. They had wanted to disembark near Dalmatia so as to see their families. The British had promised to help them do so, but instead had dropped them off on this beach, saying that if they refused the British would throw them into the sea. They had fully intended to give themselves up to the Italian authorities so that they could be reunited with their family.

Actually, there was a good deal of truth in this tale, but it did not wash with Major Zecchin. Why did they “escape” in the first place? They had been subject to call-up! Egon then came even closer to the truth, saying that they had been part of a battalion of “foreigners” [*allogeni*, literally “other races”] who had been considered by the authorities to be suspect. This unprompted assertion was revealing. In the Italian army, Egon, the son of a Slovene woman, had greatly resented, as he said in his deposition, being allocated to a “foreigners” battalion. Indeed, that was why he had so readily agreed to desert and accompany Amaury on this adventure in the first place.

At that point, the incriminating objects were brought into the room – bags, spare radio transmitter parts, tins of food, a large sum of money, and the rest of it.

One can almost see Major Zecchin’s wry smile. He says he asked a few more questions. Amaury confirmed Egon’s story. He acknowledged that indeed they had been in the pay of the British for two years, but claimed that when they landed they had fully intended to give themselves over to the Italian authorities and work for Italy. It was a desperate throw.

In less than a fortnight, the Naples police would expose that sham in clinical detail.

Zecchin spotted the obvious weak spot. If they were going to turn themselves over to the Italian authorities, why hadn't they done so right away? Why had Egon said to Canton that they were going to Naples? But Zecchin was not a natural prosecutor or fanatic. At this point, with palpable relief, he turns the whole matter over to other authorities. The beach at Licola did not fall under his responsibility, the sector at Cuma was not part of his mandate, and as quickly as possible, he would be sending the two boys to the Regimental Commander at Bagnoli to be placed under the supervision of the competent authorities. Of any competent authority, as long as it wasn't Zecchin's. His sigh of relief and weariness escapes from his report and flies across the decades.

In the early hours of the afternoon, under armed guard, the Zaccaria brothers were bundled into the first of the five prison vans they would be entering over the next month.

### **iii. Prisons, October/November**

#### **Bagnoli**

Two hours later, this first van arrived at Bagnoli, a suburb to the west of Naples. When the brothers stumbled out, they found themselves looking up to an imposing complex of shining white buildings built on terraces, one above the other. Almost brand new in 1942, the complex is still standing as it was built in the 1930s. For years there have been consultations, meetings, proposals, and disputes about the best use of the site, and these days it is disused<sup>32</sup>. But uncomfortable though it may be to admit it today, and ironically for the Zaccaria brothers, Bagnoli was in some ways an example of Fascist social conscience and benevolence, at least in its original conception.

After the First World War, Naples had been full of homeless teenagers and abandoned, maimed and orphaned children. Sewage sat stagnant

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32 *Quale destinazione per l'ex collegio Ciano*, La Repubblica, 12 May 2012.

in the streets, mothers and babies commonly died at birth, and children ran wild, starving and unschooled. To cope, Mussolini had in 1925 created the *Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia*, a nationwide social assistance program aimed at improving the lives of desperate and abandoned Italian youth, and not incidentally, at inculcating correct political thinking.

Mussolini's government had created the program at the national level, but it was supposed to be implemented locally. In Naples, the local level rose magnificently to the challenge. The Bank of Naples Foundation, wishing to mark its four hundred years of existence, decided to finance and build an extraordinary street urchins' paradise in Bagnoli, with schools, dormitories, a church, a theatre, sporting grounds, workshops, and an infirmary, all shining white, on a large terraced site facing salubriously to the south. King Vittorio Emmanuele III cut the ribbon in May 1940, and the college was named Costanzo Ciano College, after the recently deceased father of Mussolini's Foreign Minister and son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano. In another irony for the Zaccaria brothers, Galeazzo Ciano himself, after falling out with his father-in-law, was tied to a chair, turned to face away from the firing squad, and shot in the back<sup>33</sup>, labeled as a traitor.

The big white complex at Bagnoli never did get to house even one of the 2500 orphans and street urchins it had been built for. The Italian War Ministry took it over and occupied it until late 1942, and it was still a War Ministry building when the Zaccaria brothers, in the last stages of exhaustion, saw it first on the afternoon of 10 October after Zecchin had bundled them off. For a few months, it was then turned over to a Fascist Youth organization, and after the Germans invaded in 1943, it became one of their officer training schools. The Germans' tenure was also short-lived. A United States Air Squadron occupied the site for about a year, and after the war it became a DP (Displaced Persons) camp<sup>34</sup>.

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33 Although there are claims that he tried to face the firing squad, in a gesture of defiance.

34 Later it was taken over by NATO.

As a footnote, a terrible fate befell hundreds of the DPs in Bagnoli. As putative Soviet citizens, they were forcibly “repatriated” to the Soviet Union as part of the (American) Operation Keelhaul, there to meet firing squads of their own. So in its early years, Bagnoli housed supposed traitors to both fascism and communism, many of whom, in all likelihood, wanted nothing more than the same kind of peaceful life, and most of whom ended up dying the same way, under bullets from a line of raised rifles.

There were no raised rifles for Amaury and Egon, only a nervous boredom now as phone calls were made, searches conducted, and forms filled in. They sat waiting for the van that would take them away from the paradise at Bagnoli, to the nearest prison, which was at Poggioreale on the other side of Naples. Amaury might not have been sorry at the time. For an individualist and rebel like him, Bagnoli, with its regular, regimented façade, its pompous paternalism, and its generally overbearing Fascist style and presence, still so overpowering today, must have been especially oppressive. Of course much worse was to come.

It came in Poggioreale, across the other side of town, the same day.

### **Poggioreale**

Today, in 2014, the Poggioreale prison, on the eastern side of Naples, looking out to Mt Vesuvius, has been the subject of investigation by members of the European Parliament on the grounds of violation of human rights<sup>35</sup>.

The prison was built in 1914 to house 1387 inmates. Nowadays between two and three times that number are crowded into its cells, although the statutory number is 1503. Present-day newspaper articles and documentaries<sup>36</sup>, some filmed in secret, show eight, ten or even twelve

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35 *Carceri, europarlamentare visita Poggioreale: situazione drammatica* Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar *critica le condizioni dei penitenziari italiani*, 24N News Italia, 28 March 2014.

36 E.g. *Ecco come pestavamo i detenuti in carcere* (this is how we beat prisoners up), Le Inchieste of the Corriere della Sera, May 2012.

EMERGENZA CARCERI VISITA IERI MATTINA DEL DEPUTATO PD SANDRO GOZI, ACCOMPAGNATO DAI RAPPRESENTANTI DI "CERTI DIRITTI" E "PER LA GRANDE NAPOLI"

## Inferno Poggioreale: situazione esplosiva



di Anita Calzavara

I turisti da soli, seppur argutamente significativi, non bastano a dipingere quei rospi di detenuti che si assieggiano nel carcere di Poggioreale. A confermare la tragica situazione dei detenuti è stato il deputato del Pd Sandro Gozi, ieri in visita nella casa circondariale napoletana. Un giro ispettivo in cui Gozi è stato accompagnato da Yuri Quagliari, segretario dell'associazione sindacale "Certi diritti", e da Roberto Casalone, presidente dell'associazione locale "Per la grande Napoli". La delegazione ha fatto ingresso nel carcere di Poggioreale alle 10 e ha poi tenuto una conferenza stampa all'uscita del carcere. Per il deputato Gozi questa è stata la prima visita al carcere napoletano: «La situazione è grave - ha spiegato - il carcere di Poggioreale ha il triste record del carcere più sovraffollato d'Europa. Siamo a una popolazione carceraria di oltre 2.700 persone quando, in base al regolamento, dovrebbero essere 1.600, quindi questo è un problema enorme, soprattutto nel padiglione Ilogio». Se la situazione carceraria è oggi esplosiva, con problemi di sovraffollamento e carcere strutturato spalmato sul tutto il territorio, il "sottosistema" di Poggioreale rappresenta il termometro del sistema nell'arco dell'ispirazione. Una situazione grave e proprio per le condizioni delle patrie galere, l'Italia ha incassato una pesante sanzione da parte della Corte Europea dei Diritti dell'Uomo di Strasburgo. Secondo direttive europee, infatti, ogni detenuto ha diritto a 9 metri quadrati di spazio, a Poggioreale, in molte celle, proprio per il sovraffollamento, i tre detenuti non possono neanche restare in piedi nel contemporaneamente. «Il padiglione Napoli - ha commentato Gozi - è

senza il detenuto per cella, ma ci hanno detto che arrivano anche a 10 quindi è evidente che i detenuti sono ammucchiati gli uni sugli altri. Siamo, quindi, molto lontani dalle norme europee e da quelle nazionali che ci hanno condannato e che continueremo a condannarci se non riusciremo a migliorare la risposta dello Stato».

La visita ispettiva di ieri ha riguardato principalmente i padiglioni "Napoli" e "Roma", le zone del carcere, dove presenti bambini, detenuti per reati commessi alle spicce, e nel padiglione Roma i "non offenders" (detenuti per reati minori) insieme con i detenuti e i detenuti in attesa di processi. La situazione più critica per Sandro Gozi riguarda i detenuti in attesa di cura: «Ho parlato con un detenuto cardiopatico - ha detto il deputato Pd - molto preoccupato perché non sapeva quando avrebbe ricevuto un intervento in cui era in attesa e anche il suo compagno di cella, un uomo con problemi di disidratazione e costretto su una sedia a rotelle, che non sapeva il programma di cura da seguire. Inoltre, c'è una totale assenza, in relazione ad una camera di riposo, dei trattamenti psicologici. Siamo, infatti, a 13 ore al mese di assistenza psicologica per 2.700 detenuti».

**«I NUMERI DICONO CHE CI SONO 2.700 DETENUTI EFFETTIVI SU UNA CAPACITÀ MASSIMA DI 1.600 UNITÀ. IN ALCUNI PADIGLIONI, COME IL "NAPOLI" E IL "ROMA", CI SONO ANCHE 10 DETENUTI PER CELLA. QUOTE LE SANZIONI DELLA CORTE EUROPEA»**

Una vita in precarietà quella dei detenuti senza spazi e spesso chiusi tutto il giorno in celle molte volte con il bidacchio chiuso. Gozi ha parlato anche dell'attuale della sanatoria preventiva e dell'assistenza: «C'è bisogno dell'assistenza - ha chiesto - Ho presentato una proposta di legge alla Camera per i mesi successivi entro il 14 marzo del 2013 con pena detentiva non superiore ai quattro anni, se la legislatura parte dopo ci sia una forte sensibilità e una ampia valutazione da parte del deputato».

or more to a cell, some with bunks stacked up one above the other, and no room for a person to sit up. Claims of stripping and beatings, of deaths in custody, of guards planting drugs, of violence and threats, insanitary conditions, suicides, hunger strikes, and rat droppings in food, abound in these documentaries and other testimonies. Poggioreale is no Copacabana either.

Protests, both organized and individual, have been frequent. External inquiries, including those by the Italian Parliament, have been held and speeches made by officials and politicians, but the situation always seems to remain unchanged.

Today the prison's blackened century-old stone walls and heavy iron doors, now painted an incongruous forest green, sit side by side with glass-fronted high-rises, little shopping centres, some apartment blocks, and a few trees. It is a bleak, windy, unlovely part of town, far less salubrious than Bagnoli.

Conditions were considerably worse in October 1942, when the brothers sleepless and silent, arrived at reception.

At six in the evening, the prison police van had arrived at Bagnoli from Poggioreale to pick them up. To let in light, it had only one window, barred and small, at the back. Otherwise, it was dark and uncomfortable on the hard wooden benches inside. There was no communication with





*Fourteen to a 20 sq. m. cell in Poggioreale in 2012: a protest*

the driver and the prison warden in the front. In the back with the brothers sat two hefty, unsmiling guards with their pistols unsheathed. Night was closing in, and it was getting cold.

It was not an easy ride from Bagnoli to Poggioreale. Most of the roads that had survived the concerted Allied bombings – by the time Amaury and Egon had arrived in Naples, the city had been bombed ten or twelve times, with a main target being the steel mill in Bagnoli – were either full of potholes or covered in big, widely-spaced cobblestones. The brothers, tightly handcuffed, were jolted helplessly about in the gloom, unable to use their hands to steady themselves. They were dropping with fatigue. Was it really only sixteen hours ago that they had been in the British submarine, being lectured at by Lt Coombe? They had had no sleep since then, and precious little before that. No-one had bothered to give them anything to eat or drink, they were covered in dried sweat from the heat and stress of the day, and they badly wanted a meal, a wash and a bed. They had had a series of shocks, starting with the cutting of the rope. The slender and sensitive Egon, in particular, the lover of beauty, was exhausted. Had they been properly prepared by the British



*Poggioreale exterior*



*Poggioreale inner courtyard*

for eventualities like this? Had they been prepared for the possibility of torture? Of separation? Amaury tried to put heart into his young brother but his own spirits, for a change, were low.

As soon as they arrived at the prison in Poggioreale, the brothers were separated and searched yet again. They were stripped to their skins, and their clothes were examined minutely, the linings ripped open, the buttons cut off. Everything was taken away, even their shoe laces<sup>37</sup>. They were given coarse grey prison shirts and trousers. Then they were roughly prodded into separate cells. It was 8 p.m.

If the cells in Poggioreale are dirty in 2014, in 1942 they were likely to be truly filthy. In one corner of every cell stood a stained and stinking toilet, used by more than the one man it had been intended for. The lucky ones had a wooden bunk covered with a thin mattress, and no blanket. Amaury and Egon, however, were not among the fortunate and each had to doss down on a mat on the floor. But on the floor there were shallow puddles of a nameless putrid fluid, and their mats were on the same level as the cracked and foul-smelling shoes of their cellmates. Those cellmates were all common felons, or lower-level Mafiosi, and somehow their knives and daggers had not been confiscated. The advent of these hungry, sleepy, and nervous new arrivals into the already packed cells was not welcomed by the resident thugs and crims.

In the early 1940s, there were 7,000 inmates in Poggioreale, five times more than the prison had been built to accommodate. The overcrowding meant that one of the favourite forms of punishment of the Italian fascists, namely solitary confinement, was probably not imposed on either Amaury or Egon.

Dirty, sweaty, hungry and exhausted, they fell into a fitful sleep on the floor of their separate cells. The morning would bring an unpleasant surprise. Not the last.

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<sup>37</sup> This scene draws on the testimony of Francesco Nitti, nephew of a former Italian Minister, who was arrested in 1926 and held for three years as a political prisoner, as cited in *Fascist Political Prisoners*, Nathaniel Cantor, Professor of Sociology, University of Buffalo, in *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol. 27, Issue 2, 1936.

## **Imprisonment and Interrogation**

At this point in the brothers' story, the first interrogations began and the extensive set of trial documents started to be prepared. The documents now fill several files in the National Archives in Rome. Many times, as I turned one thin carbon copy after another, all neatly filed in date order, I was struck by the contrast between the brutality of the fascist regime, on the one hand, and the punctiliousness of the correspondence and reports, on the other. Each item of correspondence is meticulously numbered, dated, stamped – there are many stamps – and cross-referenced; the bureaucrats and lawyers writing them employed the sternest, stiffest, most correct official jargon; and they filed copies with finicky exactitude. They came from a world where the trains had been unnaturally forced to run on time. Actually, the relentless, hammering precision with which the official documents list chapter and verse of the “crimes”, the incriminating objects, and the individuals the brothers dealt with, goes beyond punctiliousness and turns into a kind of sinister relish.

Most remarkable of all is the fact that the crimes against political prisoners, including death, were committed under the umbrella of legality. The *Legge di pubblica sicurezza* (Act for the Enforcement of Public Security) of November 6, 1926 declared all opposition political parties illegal, and provided for internment for rebels. On 25 November, the *Legge di Difesa dello Stato* (Act for the Defence of the State) reinstated the death penalty and imposed heavier sentences on political offenders.

For the Zaccaria brothers, the key provision of the 25 November law, though, was its creation of the *Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato* (Special Tribunal for the Defence of the State), the star chamber “court” which would “try” them and, in one day, pass its sentence. (Another of the provisions of the *Testo Unico delle Leggi di Pubblica Sicurezza* often abbreviated as TULPS, the Code of Laws concerning Public Security, was the creation in 1927 of the OVRA, the Italian Secret Police. I would soon find out that the OVRA played a major role in the fascists' pursuit of Alessandro, the father of Amaury and Egon).

Here was legal form screening unjust substance, a typical feature of dictatorships. Essentially, the TULPS laws tacitly allowed any actions, however wrong, immoral, brutal, arbitrary, or previously illegal, to be taken against political prisoners, if the aim was to preserve the “security of the state”, that is, of course, the regime.

Now, like a many-armed monster, the clanking machinery of state began lumbering inexorably forward. Arrayed against the two young and beaten Zaccaria brothers would be a fearsome collection of official bodies:

- the *Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato* (the star chamber), and two of its constituent parts, the *Ufficio di Cancelleria* (the Chancery Court) and the Procura Generale (the Public Prosecutor’s Office);
- the *S.I.M.* (*Servizio d’Intelligenza Militare* or Military Intelligence Service), which was part of the Comando Supremo, the Supreme Command, and one of its (the SIM’s) parts, the *Centro C.S. di Napoli* (Centro Controspionaggio -- the Counter-espionage Centre of Naples);
- the *Questura de Napoli* (the Central Police Station of Naples);
- the *Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia*, and its *Direzione Generale degli Affari Penali*;
- the *Questura di Fiume*; and
- the *Ufficiale dello Stato Civile* of the *Comune di Fiume*.

Correspondence from, and among, all of these offices, fills the Zaccaria brothers’ files.

There was no appeal against the findings or sentences of the Tribunale Speciale. It consisted of one president, chosen from active serving officers from the general staff of the Royal Army, the Royal Navy, or the Royal Air Force, and the (volunteer) Militia for National Security; five judges, chosen from the Militia; and one reporting judge, chosen from the legal personnel of the Armed Forces. The Minister for War determined the court’s composition.

The Tribunal’s strong military flavor shows that, like most insecure dictatorships, the fascist regime in Italy viewed the society it ruled as quite as full of mortal enemies as any wartime foe, and had no hesitation

in deploying all the broad resources and powers of the state for its own restricted political ends.

“Trials” under the Tribunal never lasted very long. The brothers’ trial would last less than one day.

Apart from the Special Tribunal itself, the most feared of these bodies was the SIM, namely Military Intelligence. Together with the Naples police and prison officers, the SIM interrogated the brothers, and assembled the whole file for the prosecutor at their “trial”, drawing on many sources among the list of bodies above.

Just as the Tsar’s smallish intelligence agency, the Okhrana, had turned into the much larger Cheka under Lenin, and later ballooned into the Cheka’s numerous subsequent incarnations (OGPU, KGB and so on), the Royal Italian Army’s modest intelligence service (Ufficio I) gave birth in 1925 to the much larger SIM, three years after Mussolini became Prime Minister. And just as in Britain and the United States, there were numerous intelligence agencies with similar mandates – during the war in Egypt, for instance, the British Navy, Army and Air Force each had its own intelligence service, and there were SIS, the Field Security Service and, to some extent, SOE as well – the SIM in its early years also faced other parallel agencies in the Italian Army and the Navy.

But in October 1942, the very month when the Zaccaria brothers were captured, the SIM was finally designated as the only intelligence agency in Italy, with the others all subsumed within it. The SIM was now supreme, just in time to manage the notorious Zaccaria case. For the brothers had now become a case.

The SIM was headed by a wily and experienced bureaucratic infighter, Cesare Amè, a colonel of 48, who had won three medals for bravery in the First World War<sup>38</sup>. It had four sections, a staff of about 1000, about 9000 informers, and branches in the major Italian cities and in several locations abroad, including one in Cairo headed by a Col. Carlo Sirombo, who passed as a Spanish businessman. Amè scored his bureaucratic

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38 Unlike the Zaccaria brothers, who died in their twenties, Amè died in Rome in 1983 at the age of 91. He wrote a book, *Guerra secreta in Italia 1940 – 1943*, which was republished in 2011, interestingly.

success essentially by bringing the SIM under the Supreme Command, thus establishing primacy over the other intelligence bodies.

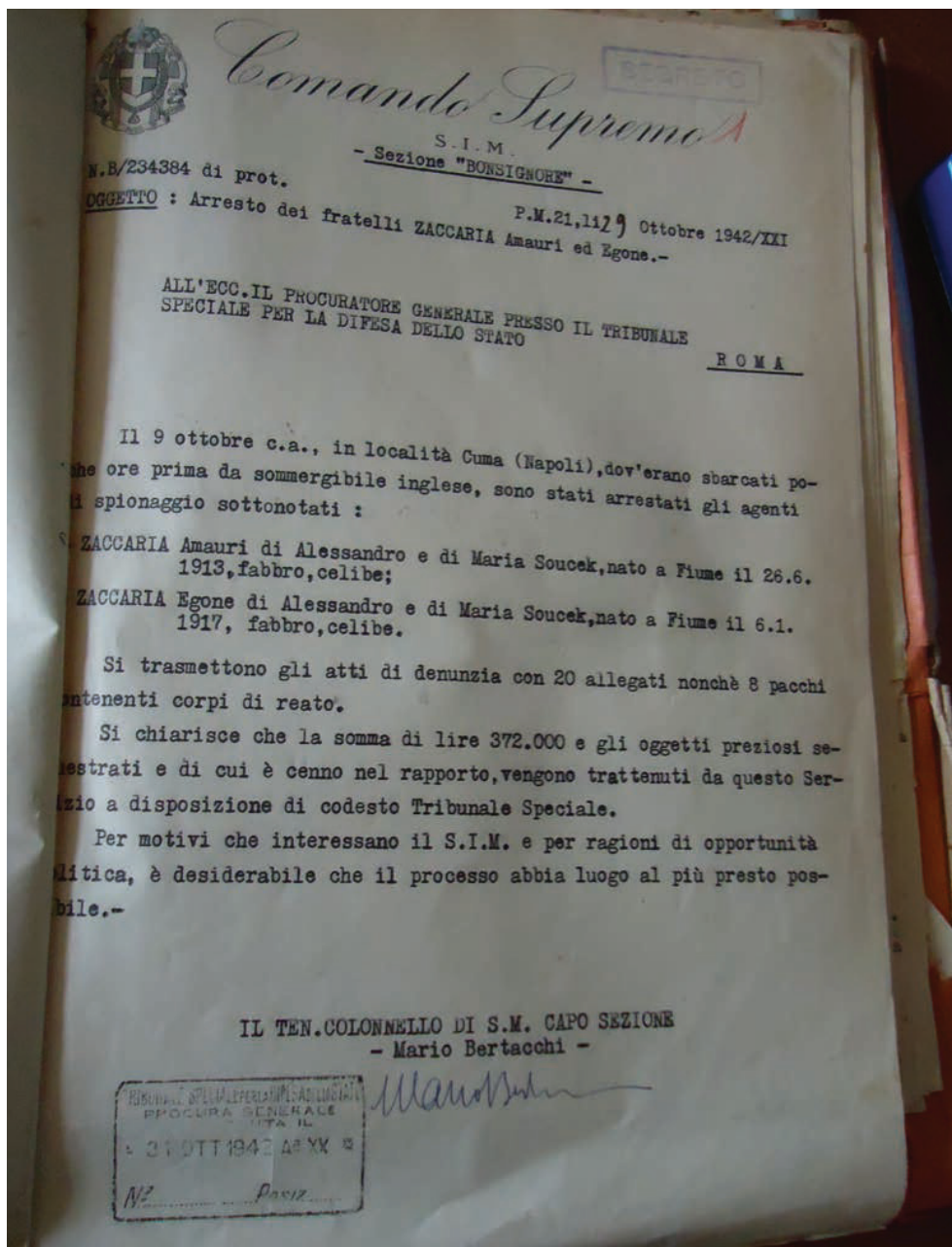
There were three main sections in the SIM: the *Ufficio "Calderini"*, or Calderini Bureau, whose six units managed the SIM's "offensive" operations; the *Ufficio "Zuretti"*, which provided analysis; and the one managing the Zaccaria case, the *Ufficio "Bonsignore"*, better known as the *Sezione (Section) Bonsignore*, which handled "defensive" operations for all armed services through its four sections and its several *Centri Difensivi speciali (CEDIS)*, Special Defence Centres. The inclusion of the *Sezione Bonsignore* under the Supreme Command is clear in the heading of the document below.

The SIM's so-called "defensive" operations under the *Sezione Bonsignore* were essentially counter-espionage, and here the Italians did score a number of successes. The head of the *Sezione Bonsignore*, Lieutenant-Colonel Giulio Fattarappa Sandri, specialized in "turning" spies, using scenarios dreamt up by his section – sham escapes, fake attacks, sabotage (with minimal but assiduously recorded damage) against military installations, and the rest of the bag of tricks<sup>39</sup>. He even "turned" a spy without the spy ever realizing it.

The other bodies, such as the Police Headquarters in Naples, are self-explanatory, except for the Ministry of Grace and Justice. This essentially was a Department of Justice. When the Department had been formed in 1861, it had been constituted to deal with both civil and religious (i.e. Catholic) legal matters, and had continued under this title until the centrist government of Giolitti removed the "Grazia" in 1920 and renamed the Department the *Ministro della Giustizia e Affari di Culto*, "culto" meaning religion as a whole, not just the Catholic Church. Mussolini, however, seeking to co-opt the Catholic Church, reinstated the "Grazia" in 1932, and it was under this name that the Department dealt with the case of Amaury and Egon.

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39 Thaddeus Holt, *The Deceivers: Allied Military Deception in the Second World War*, Simon and Schuster, 2004, p. 122.



The Sezione Bonsignore shown as part of the Supreme Command.

This formidable assemblage of powerful bodies all required a confession as a starting point. The statements of Lo Casto, Bianco, d'Aloisio and the others were all well and good, and they were neatly ordered and filed in sequence, but "legally" speaking, the conclusive evidence was always going to be a confession from the culprits.

The job of the jailers and the police in Poggioreale was to soften up the victims for the interrogation to come. There were no *giudici*, no *dottori*, no *avvocati*, no *procuratori* in Poggioreale. They would all emerge, like black bats, later, in Rome.



So certain actions at the low level of the prison cell had to be undertaken, and the “evidence” obtained, so as to provide the begowned and fearsome judges at the high bench with a justification for a death sentence.

Interrogation by police, SIM and prison officers over nine days finally yielded two statements, one purporting to be from each of the brothers. The statements – it is wrong to call them confessions, since in any non-fascist assessment the brothers had committed no crime – are dated 18 October 1942. They cover their early life in Fiume (today the city is called Rijeka and is in present-day Croatia), their father’s workshop in Laurane (today called Lovren), their military service in various locations, some smuggling activities, a bicycle theft by Amaury, his departure from home to avoid prosecution, his approach to and recruitment by the British, his inducement of his brother to desert from military service, their various travels – Turkey, Palestine, Egypt, supposedly under the impression that they would be interrogating Italian prisoners of war, the threats made to them by SIS, their training in codes and radio communications, their travel to Malta, an abortive mission to Taranto, the mistrust the British had of them, and their final embarkation in the submarine, which they name as P.36.

There are several interesting aspects to these statements: the methods, particularly torture, that might have been used to extract them; their lack of precision on any information that might seriously compromise British interests; the logical fallacies they contain, which were pitilessly exposed in the Naples police report; and the fact that they were made at all, instead of being made unnecessary by a successful attempt to “turn” the brothers into double agents.

These aspects were worth thinking about.

#### *The possibility of torture to extract the statements*

There are many accounts of tortures inflicted on political prisoners during the Mussolini era. The most credible account comes from the socialist President of Italy, Sandro Pertini<sup>40</sup>, who was imprisoned on the

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40 Seventh President, from 1978 to 1985, of the Italian Republic.

island of Santo Stefano from 1929 to 1930. As a member of Parliament, he said in the Chamber in 1947:

*I speak from personal experience . . . in prison, honourable Minister, this is what happens: a detainee is beaten, he dies under the blows, and then everyone exhibits great concern, not just those who beat the man, but also the Director, the doctor, the chaplain, and everyone who works in the prison. Then this is what they do: they strip the corpse and hang it from the grating, and allow it to be found hanging. The doctor comes and fills out the form testifying that it was suicide.*

The so-called Sant' Antonio, a name used for the torture by the Camorra, and borrowed in Santo Stefano, was a frequent method of inflicting pain and even death. It was often used in cases of protest or insubordination. It consisted of bursting into a victim's cell, covering him with a blanket, and then raining blows on him, with feet, fists, batons and the large keys of the cell. The blanket was useful because it prevented the perpetrators from being identified, and muffled the victim's cries. It also meant that the victim's body would show little evidence of the beatings. In some prisons, according to the anarchist Giuseppe Mariani, the guards did not even bother with the blanket, certain they would never be punished.

Another popular torture was akin to waterboarding – plunging a victim's head into a bath filled with water.

In fact, the catalogue of tortures in Italian fascist prisons was extensive, to be outdone only by those invented and inflicted by the German Nazis in Italy. Number 145 via Tasso in Rome was the headquarters of the Gestapo after 1943, and today, although no. 145 is a museum, the *Museo Storico della Liberazione*, the street still seems to inspire fear and loathing. Walking unsuspecting down via Tasso on a fine morning in October 2012 on my way to the *Museo Storico della Liberazione*, I wondered why it was so deserted and bleak, when all the other streets in the vicinity were animated and bustling. Only after I emerged from no. 145, my knees trembling, did the answer come – the memories of the Gestapo and its tortures in no. 145 must not have died in Rome, and the street is still being shunned.

Of course, the *Italian* fascist regime did not exactly discourage physical punishments as a means of extracting information, either. By 18 October, when their statements are dated, nine days after they arrived in Poggioreale, the brothers might well have been properly softened up. There obviously are no records of any tortures the brothers might have suffered. Meticulous though the lawyers and policemen were, even they did not document their cruelties. So the only evidence to be adduced comes from two sources: internal indications from the brothers' statements, and the testimony of other political prisoners, none of whom were placed in the lowest and most contemptible, and punishable, category, that of spies and traitors, since all who were, were shot.

After my sombre visit to via Tasso, reading about the beatings and other tortures suffered by political prisoners under the Italian fascist regime, and guessing that they would have been much worse for men labeled as traitorous spies, it seemed to me not unlikely that Amaury and Egon were subjected to some form of physical pain in Naples. A scenario I pictured to myself was, perhaps, not improbable: at 5 a.m. bulky guards burst into the cell in which the artistic young Egon lies on his mat, pull him up half-asleep, drag him to a room where a bath was filling up, throw a blanket over his head and start to rain blows on to his head and body, wrench the blanket off when the bath was full, and hold his head down in the water. A scene like this could well be completely imaginary, or it could be something like the truth. But no-one who would know the truth is alive.

Amaury would have resisted this kind of treatment more robustly. And indeed, according to the police report, he is surprised when told that his brother had "confessed" to having boarded a British submarine (named as "Trascher", translated, amusingly, as *Pescecane*, i.e. Dogfish, in the Naples police report<sup>41</sup>) in Malta for a mission in Taranto. Amaury himself had, in his separate interrogation, vigorously denied ever having undertaken such a mission. That seemed to suggest to me not

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40 There was indeed a British submarine called THRASHER (N37), based in Malta. During the war it sank 20,000 tons of enemy shipping. Two of its crew won the Victoria Cross for bravely disposing of an unexploded bomb on board, under great difficulties.

only that Amaury was a tougher customer than Egon, but also that they had not been properly prepared for possible separate interrogation.

*Little information precise enough to damage British interests materially*

If there were some form of coercion, the brothers could have been expected to divulge everything, including addresses and full names. At first sight, it appears that that is just what they did, because the statements seem to give concrete details, including names and a few dates. But on closer examination, little of the information they gave could lead to British interests being seriously compromised. The softening up succeeded only up to a certain point. The brothers are precise about their own histories in Istria, since they knew everything they said could easily be checked, but remarkably vague, and even wrong, about whatever touches the British. Names of British personnel are wrongly spelt, partial, or imprecise, names of submarines inaccurate, and addresses are notably absent. For example, they claim that the submarine they were landed from was P.36. Actually P.36 went down in April 1942, six months before the brothers' mission. They claim they had no idea where the SIS office was in Malta. This stretches credulity. They say they could not accomplish a scheduled mission in Taranto in 1941. That may be true, but gives little away. They say that "Huper" i.e. Hooper, from SIS, took them often to his office in Cairo, but do not give the address. There is little that Col. Carlo Sirombo, the supposed Spaniard running the SIM's office in Cairo, could have actually used, assuming the SIM in Italy provided him with the brothers' statements. They do give some names, like Degolle and "Swit", who must be Sweet, but they had to give something, and there is no indication that either of these was still there at the end of 1942 or that it would be possible to find them.

*The logical fallacies in the statements*

The Naples police report sets out in clinical detail the reasons why the brothers' desperate claim to have intended to hand themselves over to the Italians was spurious.

*If they had wanted to hand themselves over (said the police report):*

- a. they wouldn't have put on the uniforms of our Army*
- b. they wouldn't have disposed of the radio, the codes etc., all of which they could have, and SHOULD have, handed over to Italian authorities for the required scrutiny*
- c. they wouldn't have told Sub-lieutenant Lo Casto, Lt. Canton and Maj. Zecchin that they had come from Ravenna*
- d. Amaury would not have offered resistance to Sub-Lieutenant Lo Casto while the latter was attempting to disarm him*
- e. Amaury would not have swallowed the fragments of incriminating paper*
- f. They would not have called themselves, as they did to Maj. Zecchin, "Italians of the purest race".*

*The fact that they got rid of the radio does not prove they had no intention of communicating with the enemy. In fact, in the instructions they had received from the British, the loss of the radio had been provided for. If that happened, the Zaccaria brothers were to have communicated the fact, using a postcard and normal phrases, to be sent to*

*GUASTAFIERO*

*Prisoner of war camp 309*

*Cairo,*

*an individual controlled by the British.*

*In any case, Amaury, with his 372,000<sup>42</sup> lire, his intelligence and his knowledge of radio transmission, could easily have made another radio.*

The reasoning is unanswerable, the conclusion inescapable. The brothers never intended to turn themselves over to the Italians.

*Did the Italians try, and fail, to "turn" the brothers?*

Reading Holt's book in my uncomfortable little apartment in Rome, I was struck with an obvious possibility. Did Fettareppa try – and fail – to "turn" the two Zaccaria brothers? According to Holt, he "turned" others, so at first I could not understand why the SIM had to insist on

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42 What, I wondered, happened to the other 3,000?

prosecuting Amaury and Egon, instead of letting them do what they in any case claimed they had intended to do, namely turn themselves over to the Italian authorities, and then forcing them to become double agents. Here was a gift from the blue – two men professing loyalty to Italy, however unconvincingly, one of them slight and sensitive, the other a devoted older brother who might do anything to save the younger one from torture, men who had codes, names, information, details about British intelligence operations in Egypt, addresses, phone numbers. A treasure trove. They were ideal candidates for “turning”. Why did the whole inexorable process of prosecuting them ever get started?

Pacing the four steps between chair and wall, and the four steps back, I racked my brains for explanations. Perhaps the SIM knew it would have been impossible for Amaury to send messages after he had torn up and swallowed the codes on the rice paper. Perhaps he never told them that the two books the brothers had brought were essentially code books. Perhaps the SIM tried, and the brothers, knowing they were condemning themselves to beatings and death, refused. Perhaps their firmly expressed anti-fascist sentiments (*Manifestò sempre sentimenti antitaliani e filocomunisti* – he consistently expressed anti-Italian and pro-communist opinions – said the report from the Naples police about Amaury, and about Egon: *nutre gli stressi sentimenti* – he harbours the same opinions) would have made “turning” them an uncertain proposition. Perhaps once a bureaucratic process had been begun, especially by the Naples police, who had little knowledge of SIM operations, it developed a momentum of its own and became unstoppable. Perhaps the SIM feared that Amaury had been trained to include in any of his transmissions a code that would reveal he had been captured. Perhaps the SIM got from the brothers everything they thought they could realistically get, and then failed to explore the possibility of turning them into double agents.

Assuming the SIM did try, the facts, the brothers’ fates, then speak for themselves. Obviously, if an attempt had been made, even with torture, they did not agree to be “turned” and become double agents.

So Amaury and Egon remained faithful to their instructions and their original intentions, even after the panic induced by the cutting of the rope by Lt. Coombe and the firing of the flares. Under interrogation, possibly under torture, and certainly the threat of death, they plainly declared their anti-fascism and never sought to equivocate, or to compromise their principles. They fed their captors with little or no information that could seriously compromise British interests. And if an attempt was made to “turn” them, it failed, even in the face of death.

*It is considered that when the Agents are of a foreign nationality (as in this case), they cannot be relied on to obey orders and carry out instructions in the same way as British personnel.*

Amaury said nothing about Sol, Egon said nothing about Esther. Nothing at all. Both claimed they were bachelors. But one of them was carrying the photo of a woman. That photo, although listed by the Naples police, is not, much to my regret, in the files in the National Archives. I like to think it was of my mother. I like to think it was this one.



It was 24 October before the statements were ready, two weeks of little sleep, fear of beatings, fear of death, gibes from the criminal cellmates, slops for meals, and separation. Two weeks of matching wits with well-fed, well-rested, well-shaven officers. Two weeks of endless waiting, punctuated by panic.

Finally the statements were ready. They are written in well-rounded, grammatically correct Italian phrases, and are replete with legal jargon. This does not necessarily mean that their contents were invented, only that they were drafted by an official and not by the brothers.

Helplessly the brothers signed at the bottom of every page. Amaury's signature is hasty, almost contemptuous. It tails off at the end as though to express his scorn for the proceedings and his refusal to engage with them fully. Egon's, on the other hand, is clear, correct and beautifully set out. It unmistakably reveals the good boy, who loves beauty.

Whatever their attitude, it made no difference. They were left to wait another week in Poggioreale before being transferred to Rome, where the lawyers would take over. I could imagine the police and the prison officials in Naples being nervous that their prisoners would not cooperate properly in Rome. At all costs Naples must not be humiliated in front of the bigwigs of Rome. So further judicious softening up might well have been administered.

The Tribunale Speciale in Rome was already gearing up for the brothers' trial. On 31 October, its Deputy Prosecutor, Montalto, sent a *fonogramma* (meticulously numbered No. N1718 R.G.) to the Poggioreale prison, with instructions to keep the prisoners separate on the train that would take them to Rome the next day (1 November). He warned that *dovrà essere disposta nei loro confronti massima sorveglianza* (maximum vigilance should be exercised when dealing with them). With a hint of menace, the Roman big shot ended, with Roman brevity: *Attendesi assicurazione*, meaning, in effect "your assurance that you're taking care of this properly is awaited".

According to a telegram sent from a certain Ianuzzi on 1 November to the Prosecutor, the train was to arrive in Rome at ten minutes past seven



the same evening. Another van was waiting as the brothers, handcuffed, emerged from the train. The van took them through the streets of Rome to the Carcere Giudiziario Regina Coeli. It was 8.30 p.m.

### **Regina Coeli**

Pope Urban VIII (1568-1644), the Florentine nobleman Matteo Barberini, friend, then enemy, of Galileo, patron of Bernini, and proscriber of tobacco in holy places on pain of death, was a builder on a grand scale. Italy is full of Urban's projects – he fortified the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome, the harbour at Civitavecchia, and Castelfranco Emilia on Mantuan frontier; he established an arsenal in the Vatican and an arms factory at Tivoli; and to make the canopy over the altar in St. Peter's, he pillaged the massive bronze girders from the Pantheon, leading to the famous quip, *quod non fecerunt barbari, fecerunt Barberini*, [what the barbarians did not do, the Barberini did.]

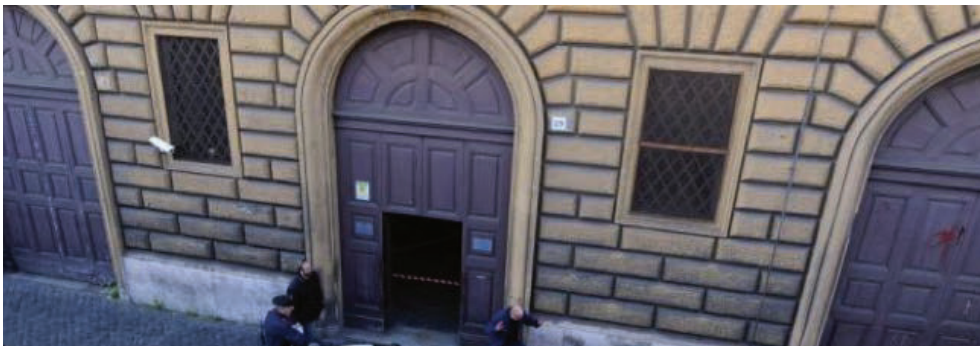
One of Urban's biggest projects was the enormous building now standing just below the Tiber, on via della Lungara – a street with a bitter resonance for Romans – along the Lungotevere della Farnesina in the Trastevere quarter of Rome. Urban had conceived it as a convent in 1642, and so it became, but after Napoleon annexed Rome to the French Empire in 1810, and suppressed religious orders, the nuns (of the Carmelite Order) were driven out till 1814. Very soon they returned, but in 1873 they were driven out again, for the last time, by a decree of the new Kingdom of Italy. In 1881 the huge edifice became a prison. It was a notorious jail during the Italian, and particularly the German, fascist periods, when it held political prisoners, and it is still a jail today. Its exact name is the *Carcere Giudiziario Regina Coeli* [the Queen of Heaven Judicial – i.e. not military – Prison].

Two of its most famous prisoners, both anti-fascists, came from opposite ends of the political spectrum. Antonio Gramsci, the socialist philosopher, cherished secular saint of socialists the world over, wrote his famous *Lettere dal Carcere from Regina Coeli*, tragic letters to his family which had moved me as a student. And Alcide de Gasperi, Christian Democrat Prime Minister of Italy from 1945 to 1953, wrote his own *Lettere dalla*

*Prigione* partly from Regina Coeli, which to him was always a synonym for bitterness rather than a reminder of the Queen of Heaven.

The Third Arm [*Terzo Braccio*] is the most famous, and notorious, section of the Regina Coeli prison. The prison is built around a huge central atrium, with corridors, or arms, radiating outward like spokes from a hub. One of these arms is the *Terzo Braccio*. In the *Terzo Braccio* were confined all the fascist-era political prisoners, and this is where the two Zaccaria brothers were decanted from the van that took them from the railway station at 8.30 on the evening of 1 November 1942.

I, on the other hand, arrived after a pleasant stroll. On a beautiful early autumn morning seventy years later, I crossed the Tiber over a bridge draped with flowers, and from the other bank, looked down at the prison from the heights of freedom. A visit had been arranged at the highest levels. I had not realized that the prison entrance was below the Tiber, down two flights of steps, but as a metaphor, it seemed fitting, as if the visitor were Dante descending into the nine circles of hell.



Indeed, I was to find my own Charon and Virgil on this visit, one in the guise of a large male guard who took my passport and made me wait in the entrance hall, the other appearing later as a Commissario of almost the same size.

Waiting in the hall was already an education. On the chairs with me were two other women, one young, both haggard and dead-eyed. Poverty was written all over their clothes, their faces, their shoes. Under a sign saying DO NOT SPIT, they chainsmoked steadily and, although obviously related, did not speak to each other. A sister and a mother, very likely, looking as if they had already abandoned all hope. Random

officials strolled past under the eye of the giant guard in his high Perspex box. I waited and the guard bared his teeth in a ferocious smile.

Like Poggioreale, Regina Coeli is overcrowded. Today it holds about 1050 people, more than the 750 it was originally built for. In 2013, Laura Boldrini, President of the Chamber of Deputies, called it a warehouse for human flesh [*magazzino di carne umana*].

But the human flesh that now appeared came as a charming surprise. A clatter of high heels, pink toenails, big hair, beaming smile, here was the petite, warm Dottoressa Anna Angeletti, Deputy Director of the Prison. The walls of her fittingly tiny office were covered in photographs of her children. She chattered excitedly to one of them on the phone, then summoned, she told me, a Commissario, a senior prison official, who would escort me round the site.

The Commissario who appeared also wore lipstick, but in her blue serge uniform she was twice the size of her little colleague. Here was my Virgil through the underworld. A Virgil who was interested in visiting Australia and had high career ambitions in the prison service. Like Dante's Virgil, Commissario was a firm and sympathetic guide.

The first place she took me to was the enormous central atrium, and another surprise. Hanging from the top tier down almost to floor level was a four metre high black and white photo of the face of Antonio Gramsci. In the atrium there was an exhibition of Gramsci's life and works. At the sight, I smiled, and a prisoner strolling past, not in uniform, smiled back and spoke to me. Buon giorno. Others greeted me as well. Buon giorno to you too. Smiles all round. But the prisoners were pale and thin and slow-moving. Most of them are in here for drugs, said the Commissario.

Off to one side of the atrium ran the Terzo Braccio, the Braccio della Morte, the Arm of Death, the Commissario told me, restored today with the same materials as were present in the 1940s, and, out of respect, not used today.

As we stood and gazed down the empty corridor, at the rows of brown iron doors with their single slots, the Commissario looked down on me from her great height and asked me whether I had ever heard of the Fosse Ardeatine, the Ardeatine Caves. I had, but could not see the connection with the Terzo Braccio. She told me the whole story.

In March 1944, six months after the Germans entered Rome as rulers, and seventeen and a half months after Amaury and Egon had been pushed into their separate cells in the Terzo Braccio, the same corridor had held 50 political prisoners, who had committed no crime except opposition to German fascism. These men were to meet a terrible and unexpected fate.

On 23 March, Italian partisans killed 28 German soldiers and two civilians in an attack in the Via Rassella. The death toll rose to 33. The commander of the German security police in Rome, SS Obersturmbannführer Hermann Kappler, decided that ten Roman lives would have to be taken for each German one, and Hitler ordered that the massacre be carried out within 24 hours. To start with, the Germans took prisoners already condemned to death. But there were far too few in the Gestapo jails. They added 57 Jews in Nazi custody, and 157 others the Germans judged to be “worthy of death”. It was still not enough. So, to help make up the numbers, they included, at the suggestion of Pietro Caruso, chief of the (fascist Italian) police, 50 political prisoners – one was Caruso’s own deputy, a clandestine spy for the American OSS, horrifically tortured in prison – who were being held in the Terzo Braccio. A handful of civilians picked up at random from the street – not just any street – ironically it was in the Piazza Barberini – rounded the numbers up. The 335 prisoners were taken to a desolate spot outside Rome, the Ardeatine Caves, the *Fosse Ardeatine*, and shot individually in the back of the neck to save bullets.

(Not one of the many Germans responsible was ever put to death for his role in this massacre. The sentences of two were reduced, one was pardoned, one was sprung from prison by his wife and taken to Germany, which then refused to extradite him, and one fled to Argentina and spent thirty unrepentant years there. This last, Hans Priebke, was

interviewed on television, expressed no remorse, was extradited to Italy and is now serving his sentence. Pietro Caruso was shot at Forte Bravetta in September 1944).

It was not for drugs that the Terzo Braccio inmates were jailed in the 1940s. And far from being empty, the whole prison in the fascist era held more than 2000 souls, three times its acceptable level.

Like other political prisoners, Amaury and Egon were put in the Terzo Braccio, again in separate cells, again with cellmates, this time, however, not thugs. They were to remain in the Terzo Braccio for eight days and nine nights. For them, there were no exhibits, no strolls, no charming jailers. The next morning, the softening up would continue.

Meantime the officials had not been idle. The Naples police had been putting together the large file I had been studying in the National Archives. It contained the brothers' statements, the police authorities' own pitiless assessment of the brothers' veracity, the list of objects found, the tasks the brothers had been given by the British, the fragments of rice paper, and twenty other statements from men involved in the brothers' capture. On 31 October, the Special Tribunal acknowledged receipt of the whole, professionally produced package.



*The central atrium at the Regina Coeli prison*

Now it was just a matter of mopping up, with the lawyers providing the cloths.

The most notable omission from the brothers' signed statements is the list of items of information they were "supposed" to provide for the British. In the Naples police report provided to the Tribunal, they are listed as:

#### **NAVAL INFORMATION**

- a) *Movements in the port of Naples (transport ships, warships, position of mines, departure of convoys and details of locations of various ships, routes and destinations)*
- b) *The existence in the port of old merchant ships camouflaged to look like warships*
- c) *Disguises adopted by warships and merchant ships*
- d) *Damaged ships in the port (in this connection, it appears that the British were interested in knowing on what side our cruiser "Bolzano" was hit by a mine. There appears to be a divergence of opinion on this score between the British Navy and Air Force).*
- e) *Warships and merchant ships under construction, repair etc., and if any, details to be provided.*
- f) *Intelligence on the efficiency of the coastal defence of Naples and region, location of posts along the coast, calibre and number of guns etc.*

#### **AIR DEFENCES**

- a) *Provide the names of the various airports around Naples and their location*
- b) *Anti-aircraft defences in each airport.*

#### **INFORMATION ON THE ITALIAN ARMY**

*The list of information items contained an aerial photo of the Bagnoli zone which showed concentrations of military material.*

*In this connection, information was especially sought on:*

- a) *Methods of camouflage of these stores, and the number of sites*
- b) *If they operated by day or by night, with or without lights, number of hours of work on the sites, numbers of workers, kinds of production and assembly facilities*

- c) *Location of the stores, and the accumulation of material*
- d) *Nature of the troops quartered in those zones*
- e) *Means of communication adopted to build up the concentration of material and men in Bagnoli, and for other areas near Naples, location of barracks and resources, both German and Italian.*

There are three possibilities here. The Naples police could have been fabricating this entire list, none of which would require any particular inventiveness; the brothers could have “volunteered” the information themselves; or the Naples police could have found the list on a piece of paper among the items in the brothers’ rucksacks.

Were the Naples police simply concocting the list of information items, using nothing but common sense? In the file in the National Archives in Rome, there is no British paper to be found which includes the list, although the fragments of British rice paper with the radio codes, meticulously pasted on to shiny black paper, are certainly present. If the Naples police could painstakingly do that, why would they not simply include in their file the British piece of paper with the list on it? The aerial photo of Bagnoli, mentioned in the Naples police report, is also not in the file. And there is no mention of any list among the objects found on the brothers. And lastly, as we shall soon see, the Naples police would shortly enlist the quite unnecessary assistance of the Servizio Informazione Militare (SIM) in Milan to make doubly certain that its message of condemnation of the brothers was as strong as possible.

The supposed disagreement between the British Navy and the Air Force on which side the *Bolzano* was damaged on also sounds somewhat odd. On 13 August 1942, the *Bolzano* was indeed struck by a torpedo from the British submarine *HMS Triumph*, and was towed to Naples, then La Spezia, for repairs. So it was probably in Naples harbor at the time of the brothers’ arrest. But why would the Air Force have thought the torpedo struck one side of the cruiser, and the Navy the other?

In short, it could be that the Naples police wanted a conviction by hook or by crook and was providing a little creative inclusion to bolster their case.

Against this argument is the (presumed) unlikelihood of an official police fabrication, given the numbers of officials that would probably have had to read and approve the file and the general punctiliousness of the file as a whole.

Did the brothers “volunteer” the list? Unlikely, given the fact that the Naples police report mentions a “questionario”, a list of information items, that they “found” on the brothers. Unlikely, also, if there actually was a British piece of paper among the brothers’ effects. Why volunteer information which was already in the hands of the Naples police?

Was there an actual piece of paper with the list on it? Perhaps. The main reason for SIS Cairo to have put this sensitive information down in black and white would have been because they mistrusted the brothers to remember everything they had to find out. But would that mistrust have overcome SIS’ professionalism? Because surely it is an elementary error to commit to paper, and then hand to your spies, a list of the information you are seeking, rather than training them to remember everything on it, or providing it in a less obvious form.

In any case, everything on the list was simply common sense. Not only that, the brothers’ fate was already a foregone conclusion, whether the Naples police were over-egging the pudding or not.

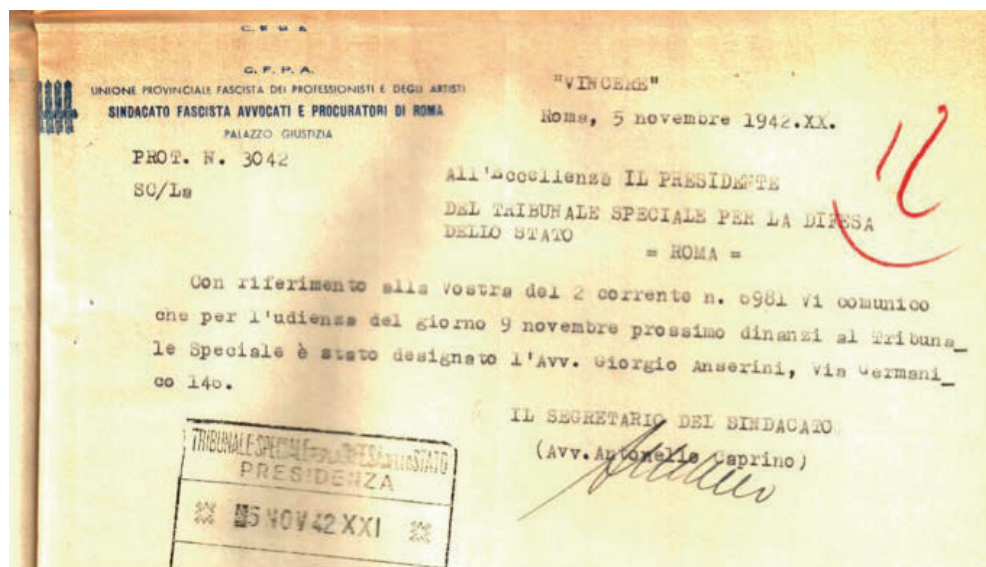
Now the clock was ticking loudly.

The Tribunal received the fat file from the Naples police on 31 October, and on 2 November, it wrote, with ostentatious correctness, to the *Sindacato Fascista Avvocati e Procuratori di Roma* (the Fascist [trade] Union of Lawyers and Prosecutors), which was the local branch of the *Unione Provinciale Fascista dei Professionisti e degli Artisti* (the Fascist Provincial Union of Professionals and Artists), requesting the trade union to provide a lawyer for the defence. Article 7 of the 25 November 1926 law creating the Special Tribunal provided that defendants had the right to a single lawyer. Incidentally, the same article stipulated that, in military fashion, there was no appeal against the Tribunal’s decision. The defence had four days to prepare; the prosecution had had a month.



The correspondence between Tribunal and lawyers had yellowed over the years. But it provided, under my hand, seventy years after the messages were sent, a clear illustration of several central features of fascism – its overt penetration of every entity, group and activity, even those that in democratic societies would be independent, like artists; its division of society into corporates or interest groups; its special emphasis on prosecution within the legal context, and its farcical insistence on following the letter, but not the spirit, of the law.

On 5 November, Avv. (avvocato – lawyer) Antonello Caprino, the Secretary of the Union, wrote back to the Tribunal, nominating Avv. Giorgio Anserini, of 146 via Germanico, Rome, as the brothers’ defence lawyer. The union’s motto “Vincere” (Triumph), was carefully typed next to its letterhead.



On 7 November, the Naples office of the Servizio Informazione Militare (SIM) wrote to the Tribunal, just in case the Tribunal did not have a proper appreciation of the gravity of the brothers’ offences. It quoted the Naples police, who might have been afraid that their evidence alone was not going to suffice without the additional support from the SIM:

*These are two extremely dangerous individuals [pericolosissimi elementi] who are capable of any action whatever. The aforementioned – both of them officially*  
*These are two extremely dangerous individuals [pericolosissimi elementi] who are capable of any action whatever. The aforementioned – both of them officially*

*listed as wanted by the authorities – are sons of a well-known Communist agent and spy, working for England and Yugoslavia, who is also listed as wanted. These two persons, who secretly left the country in 1940, were recruited in Sussak by agents of the [British] Intelligence Service, who sent them to Greece (sic) for special training. They appeared to have joined the British Armed Forces in the East, commanded by General Wavell. The father of the aforementioned is said to have been an active head of the Croatian partisan movement.*

The concern of the Naples police was unfounded. The brothers' fate had been sealed from the moment Lt. Coombe had cut the rope.

The case was listed for 8.30 a.m. at the First Session of the Tribunal on 9 November. Six witnesses were to give evidence: Cocco, Zecchin, Canton, Lo Casto, Ravagnan and Di Benedetto.

There were seven judges; the President of the Tribunal, Avv. Cav. Antonino Tringali-Casanuova, a fascist politician who would die of a heart attack in less than a year; Dott. Comm. Giovanni Presti, who had been with the Tribunal since its early days in the mid 1920s and had helped condemn scores of political "offenders"; Gr. Uff. Giovanni Gangemi; Gr. Comm. Ugo Colizza; Gr. Comm. Gaetano Palmeri; Avv. Comm. Giorgio Suppiej and Avv. Comm. Tommaso Semadini. Of necessity, all were convinced fascist loyalists.

The judgement, barely three pages long, rehearses all the arguments of the Naples police, and concludes, terrifyingly,

#### FOR THESE REASONS

*The Tribunal, having read Articles 32 (14) of the Military Penal Code in peacetime, and declares Egon Zaccaria and Amaury Zaccaria to be guilty of the offences listed therein, and condemns them to death, to be shot in the back and die with dishonour, and to the legal consequences of the sentence; and orders that the sentence be published in every national daily newspaper.*

*Rome 9 November 1942.*

Immediately, the same day, Avv. Anserini, unable to appeal against the sentence through legal means, sent a petition to the King, Victor Emmanuel III. He made as good a case as any lawyer could in the circumstances:

*I, the undersigned, Defender of Egon Zaccaria and Amauri Zaccaria, condemned to death for desertion and espionage – in consideration of the fact that their spying activities were never actually carried out, that it has not been proven that they deserted in order to go over to the enemy, and, in addition, that the two of them are genuine Slavs, request His Majesty to deign to grant them his sovereign mercy.*

Both of these documents had certainly been prepared well in advance. The judgement could not have been written, typed up and transmitted the same day as Anserini sent his appeal to the King. The proceedings were of course a charade.

What was not a charade was the heart-rending appeal that each of the brothers now wrote to the King. Still in the file, they had clearly never been sent. In any case, the King had suffered a heart attack three weeks earlier, and would have been unlikely to have read them even if they had been dispatched.

At this eleventh hour, Egon's handwriting has lost some of its clear regularity, but his artist's fervour and inventiveness have not dimmed.

*I, the undersigned, Egone Zaccaria, son of Alessandro, condemned to death, in these last hours of my life turn to the goodness of Your Majesty, seeking your mercy.*

*I have plumbed the depths of my Christian soul [anima] and I cannot consider it just, [not even after death – neanche dopo morto] that the Tribunal of men should have inflicted such a punishment on me.*

*I do not deserve it. I am not [illegible] laws [illegible] I firmly swear before Your Majesty and God that I have never taken any action to cause harm to Italy.*

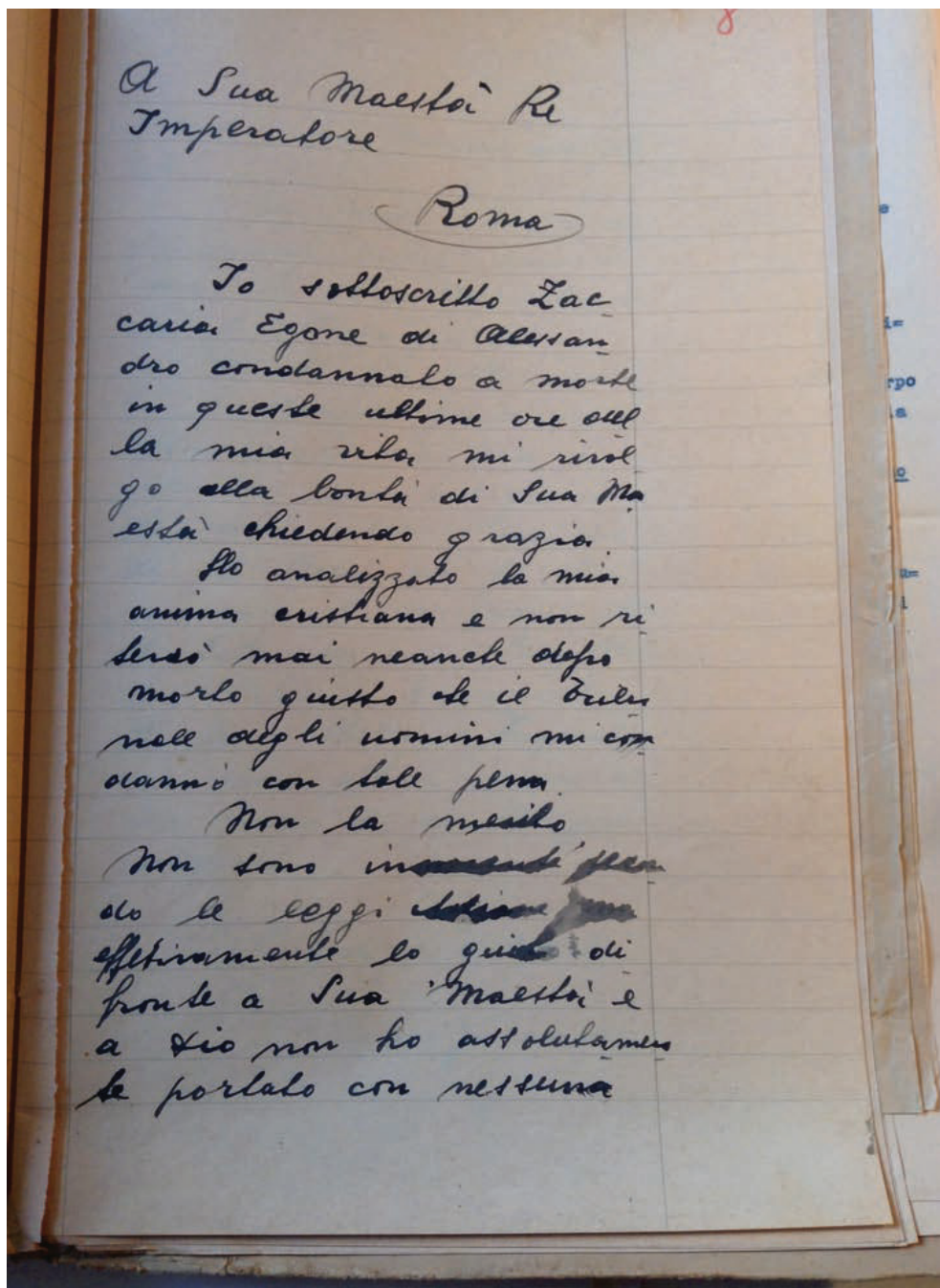
*My life is in your hands. I am sure that Your Majesty will utter the decisive word.*

*A King (that is, a real King) is always judged and illuminated by God, at school I was taught that there was once a King of Italy who was called the Good King, and so he was, Your Majesty Vittorio Emmanuele III, King of Italy and Emperor, you cannot be a lesser king than your predecessor.*

*Either mercy or death.*

*Egone Zaccaria*

A cry from the heart, a plea from an artist, replete with poignant arguments and entreaties, and even a boyish flourish at the end, this, unlike his brother's, is written in the first person. Most movingly, it is smudged in three places with what looks like water. Is it conjecture to imagine Egon brushing away tears with the back of his hand and then going on writing? Certainly the appearance of the letter would bear that impression out.



My vision in the Reading Room blurred. Turning the page to find Amaury's letter, I found my hand shaking. Here it was, just underneath Egon's. It was very different.

*The undersigned Amaury Zaccaria, condemned to be shot in the back by firing squad, for desertion and for providing intelligence to the enemy, considers the charge and the sentence unjust, given his innocence, since our [nostra] desertion was not carried out with such an intent, but instead in order to look for work, since he was a free citizen and not a soldier as has been claimed.*

*In the hope that His Majesty may wish to look favourably on his plea by according him His sovereign mercy. Therefore, repenting of the [illegible] deeds which may have been attributed to him, he still hopes that in His magnanimity, His Majesty will grant a benevolent hearing to his plea.*

*Awaiting your grace with devotion,*

*The prisoner, Amaury Zaccaria*

More defiant, more logical, but less personal, creative and engaged than Egon's, this is the letter of an older man who has no more real hopes or illusions. Written in the third person characteristic of formal communications, it reveals a man who refuses to compromise his dignity by any abject plea. In its way, this letter is even more painful to read, since even if admiration is mixed here with pity, we know that the brother who defies will meet the same fate as the brother who entreats.

No reply from the King, then. Now the condemned men had to have their last photos taken. Here they are, taken on the afternoon of 9 November:



Now, at the end, the humanity characteristic of Italians finally emerged, not from any military source but from nine civilians, six of them prison guards. One was the prison Chaplain, Monsignor Cosimo Bonaldi, who visited the two young men in their cells in the Regina Coeli prison on the evening of the day they were condemned to death, the eve of their execution, and who came with them in the van the next morning. On the day of their execution, Monsignor Bonaldi wrote a note to the file:

*I was present up to the moment the two brothers, Egone Zaccaria and Amauro Zaccaria, were executed. They received Holy Communion, and with remorse and resignation, remained calm right up to the place where the capital punishment was carried out.*

Another was Aldo Ghedini, a “Direttore Superiore” of the *Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia*, who wrote to his superiors at the Ministry’s General Division for Security and Sentencing [*Prevenzione e Pena*], saying:

*During the afternoon, the evening and the night preceding the day of execution, the Zaccaria brothers were visited several times by the undersigned, by the prison Chaplain, Monsignor Cosimo Bonaldi, and by a staff member of the prison, Arturo Mangiacapra. From the Chaplain they piously received the comforts of religion and other assistance, both in the prison and at the place of execution. As the Chaplain has said, they awaited the final hour with great tranquility of mind and gave proofs of repentance.*

*Before going to Forte Bravetta, they requested, and obtained, permission to write to those close to them. They wrote three letters which were handed over to the Special Tribunal for permission to send them on.*

*Six prison guards volunteered to accompany the condemned men to the place of execution. Their names are provided by separate note to the Ministry.*

None of the three letters is in the files. None of them could have been to Sol or Esther, for obvious reasons. They must have been to their father and their mother. Perhaps Amaury wrote to a previous girlfriend.

I was not disappointed. Instead, these last moments in the Regina Coeli prison were tinged with a warmer sense, a relief that under the synthetic carapace of fascism, native Italian sympathy could still assert itself; and

with a heightened respect for the calmness shown by the two young condemned.

Now the hour of departure for Forte Bravetta had arrived.

#### **iv. Execution at Forte Bravetta, November**

After the morning rush hour, it takes only about half an hour to drive from the centre of Rome to Forte Bravetta. On my way there, I sat in the back of a small, cheerful taxi, yellow pennant flying, windows down, sunshine warming my arm, wind in my hair, and jaunty pop songs burbling from the radio. It was a luminous day in early October 2012 and Rome was wearing her most sunlit, beguiling, warm ochre face.

Almost exactly seventy years earlier, at 4.30 a.m., in the dark, on the morning of 10 November 1942, Amaury and Egon had been led from their cells in the Regina Coeli prison to a dimly-lit waiting room. Each was still handcuffed, but at least they were not in different cells any more. They would never be separated again. The last van they would enter alive started up in the courtyard outside and bumped along the cobbles to the door of the waiting room. Roman meteorological records for that day show that the minimum temperature was 8 degrees centigrade, and that it was raining. Outside, in the courtyard, the light from the one outside lantern glinted off the trickles of rain creeping down the grimy wall. One of the two sleepy guards opened the back doors of the van and gestured to the brothers, and those who were accompanying them, to climb in. It was dark in there. The only sound was the engine idling. All nine men, Amaury, Egon, the six prison guards who had volunteered to accompany the brothers, and Monsignor Bonaldi, got in and sat down on the hard wooden benches. Amaury and Egon clasped each other's hands, for the first time in weeks, and stared straight ahead. The gates of the prison courtyard creaked open in the gloom, and the van moved forward. Two of the men in the back had less than two hours of life left. It was 4.45 a.m.

These days, it is not easy to be admitted to Forte Bravetta. The Australian Embassy in Rome had pulled out all the stops and as my little taxi

approached the gate, a man was already waiting for me to arrive. My first impression was of a mass of overgrown bushes, and a rusty gate. Where was the fort? I knew it dated from 1877, as one of fifteen strongholds built to guard against the threat of a renewed interest in Italy from Napoleon III, and that it had never been used for that purpose, but I had imagined something like the Castel Sant'Angelo, a high, overpowering wall of stone. From the gate, I couldn't see anything at all. Somehow, I had pictured the fort as standing remote and isolated from the rest of the city, but just outside, where I had got out of the taxi, there were streets of ordinary four-story pale yellow apartment blocks, a few small supermarkets, and car repair shops with bright green plastic signs.

The guide was waiting. He led me up a rough gravel path, and suddenly there appeared among the bushes, not the fort itself, but a bright white shining monument to the resistance heroes killed in the war. Or so I thought. In fact, the inscription on the monument reads:

TO THE IMPERISHABLE MEMORY OF THE HEROIC PATRIOTS  
WHO DURING THE NAZI OCCUPATION WERE EXECUTED  
IN THIS FORT, LIGHTING, WITH THE SUBLIME SACRIFICE  
OF THEIR LIVES, THE TORCH OF NATIONAL RESURGENCE.

There were forty-seven names carved into the white marble, all men. Heroes indeed. But wait a moment. No Zaccarias. Check again. They had certainly been executed here. All the documents said so. Why were their names not on the monument?

It did not take long to grasp why. The only ones honoured here were the anti-nazis, the anti-Germans, not the Italians who opposed Mussolini and died for their pains, and their principles. The Zaccaria brothers were not the only anti-Mussolini Italians who had been executed at Forte Bravetta. There had, for example, been the spies Antonio Gallo and Emilio Zappalà, who were also shot there in November 1942. But the only ones who were thought either uncontroversial, or worthy, enough to be remembered on the monument here, were the *nationalist* resisters, the ones who, from 1943 onwards, had resisted the hostile German





occupation of Italy. The political ones, the ones who had primarily opposed Italian, not German, fascism, before 1943, had been left out.

I was disappointed, perhaps because I was not Italian. Here narrow nationalism had triumphed over the broader principles of justice, democracy and opposition to fascism. The human animal is still tribal in the end.

If the brothers had succeeded in their mission, they might have played a not unimportant part in shortening the war and saving Italian lives. What they did, or tried to do, could have been much more effective in wartime than some of the activities of the other local anti-Mussolini resisters, however brave they were, in prison and out of it. But perhaps it was too much to expect that men who acted against Italy, even against an evil Italian government, could ever be honoured by a post-war Italian government.

I stood in front of the white monument and gave my word to the dead brothers that they would not be forgotten.

The guide and I kept walking along the path. A ragged macadam took the place of the gravel, and there appeared a typical two-story Roman house, pink with green shutters, but with peeling walls and barricaded windows. This must have been the home of the fort's commander. It looked entirely disused. But still no fort. Where on earth could it be? Still further, an eloquent sign emerged from the middle of the tall, wild green hedging – a big yellow triangle with a fat exclamation mark in the middle, and the word PERICOLO [danger] underneath, in thick black letters. *Pericolo* indeed, in Forte Bravetta.

The white van rattled along the same streets my taxi was to follow seventy years later, passed the same buildings, turned at the same corners. At that hour of the morning, in wartime, there was no traffic at all. But progress was slow, the streetlights few. As they approached the fort, street lights disappeared altogether and through the blackness, the van's headlights picked out wild bushes growing untidily by the side of the road. Every second was precious now. Even the cold air was a pleasure. Egon was steeling himself with every ounce of strength he had.

Inside the fort, preparations were under way. The twelve soldiers of the MVSN, and their commander, had also been up since 4.30. They had been living in the cell-like chambers I was about to see, and they were preparing their minds for the task ahead. The *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (Volunteer National Security Militia) were Mussolini's Blackshirts, the closest thing Italy developed to the SS and its predecessor, the SA, the SturmAbteilung. Most of them were fervent anti-socialists and had, as the name says, been volunteers – just like the Blackshirt Giordano Bruno Selmi, whose identity document Egon had been given to use. How ironic, or fitting, that Egon should be about to be cut down by comrades of the very man he had sought to impersonate. It was 5.45 a.m.



Finally the fort itself appeared, a low structure made of big golden coloured stones now blackened in places and worn. It seemed to have been built on a slope, and the entrance seemed to lie at a higher level than most of the rest of the structure. No wonder I hadn't seen it earlier. The ragged pathway became a bridge over what looked like a big empty moat, filled only with vegetation grown wild. Below the bridge there seemed to be at least two more levels of the fort, with small slits for windows.

At the end of the bridge stood the entrance to the fort, a pair of forbidding grey iron gates set in a stone arch. The words FORTE BRAVETTA, in black, were cut into the stone at the top of the arch, and instantly evoked the LASCIA TE OGNI SPERANZA VOI CH'ENTRATE (Abandon all hope, ye who enter here) above the gate of Dante's Inferno. But the sun shone bright in the blue sky and the bushes grew exuberantly above.

The original lock had rusted, so there was an incongruously bright little brass padlock, of the type available in any hardware store. The guide pulled out a bunch of keys, chose one no bigger than an ordinary house key, and opened the smaller door set in the big gate. It protested loudly, but slowly and painfully it swung inwards.



The first signs of dawn were appearing in the sky as the white van approached the fort. Other dawns signalled hope, a future, but this one, November 10th, 1942, would mean only darkness. It is a refinement of cruelty to execute prisoners at dawn, as if to drive home to them the bitter contrast between the brightening of the sky and the blackness and finality of their fate. I could imagine Egon the young artist feeling it acutely as he stumbled out of the back of the van into the growing light. The small iron door was already open, and the brothers were pushed in. The six guards and Monsignor Bonaldi were motioned aside. It was 6.15 a.m.

And now, at long last, after so many years of living with the brothers, for the first time I could step exactly where they stepped, my feet on theirs, my feet in theirs, a culmination. The open door revealed a long cobbled corridor, arched, with doorways cut into it at regular intervals. The brothers and I trod firmly down the corridor, but I, only I, could stop for a moment and look inside the doorways. One minute more, please, Mr Executioner. Here were the cells built for the soldiers of 1877, great swags of cobwebs slung across the barred windows, rotting, never-used urinals, walls black with damp, nameless green growths on the stone floors.

I caught up with the brothers and we walked steadily onwards, all three of us looking straight ahead at the light at the end of the corridor. A light at the end of the tunnel.



Only a few minutes of life left. Hearts starting to thud. Knees starting to give way. Thoughts of darkness, light, Sol laughing with her head thrown back, Esther sashaying down the street, mother, father, mother, gallops in the desert, the baby being left behind, swimming at the beach in Alexandria, need to be calm, show strength, dignity, firmness of purpose, make father proud, strength, strength. . .

A big courtyard, built for target practice. The sun, still very low, had partly come out from behind the rainclouds. The rain had stopped and there was a faint suggestion of a rainbow trembling in the sky. The brothers saw grey cobbles on the ground, but to my eyes they were nearly all covered in a mass of green weeds.



Evenly spaced on the top of the wall stood twelve MVSN soldiers, rifles by their sides. The brothers and I looked up at their unyielding faces and saw the enemy. What were the wooden chairs doing near one side of the courtyard? I never expected chairs. I thought prisoners were executed standing up, facing the firing squad.

Oh, yes, of course. This was supposed to be treason. You get shot in the back. The commandant came down from the top of the wall, carrying thin ropes. He turned us around to face away from the soldiers, into the slope covered in green, and said to sit down and be tied to the chairs, hands behind backs. It was 6.28 a.m.

A deep breath.

Two shouts from the commander: *Puntate! Mirate!*<sup>43</sup> Twelve clicks.

Sol. Mamma. Maman.

*FUOCO!*

Twelve sharp cracks, one great roar. Agony. Blackness. Then nothing.

It was 6.30 a.m.



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43 Ready, aim . . .

## v. Aftermath

Two years after his death, it seems that Amaury, briefly, came back. And two years after hers, fifty-five years later, so, for an instant, did my mother. Of course all that sounds ridiculous. I have no explanation for what my mother wrote about Amaury's return, or for what I heard and saw myself two years after I lost my mother. I just record it all here.

In the blue box, I found a sheet of lined, yellow paper with my mother's handwriting on it. It seemed to have been detached from a small block of letter paper, and the top left hand corner was missing, as if she had thought better of sending it and hastily torn it off. It was in French – my mother thought in French and spoke to my father in French – and it said:

*[I] want to tell you something you don't know. When you took me home after that so-called wedding reception with the officers, I saw written in the dust on the sideboard the letters "IO". That's why I was crying that cursed day. [jour de malheur]*

There was no date, and the rest of the writing block was missing, but I immediately recognized the bitter tone. That "so-called" was characteristic. After my father left us in 1964, creating the first divorce in my mother's family for hundreds of years, my mother lost her moorings. She was sent for six weeks to Callan Park. (I was doing my final school examinations and had to stay with Esther). She must have written him this letter when she was in Callan Park, in November 1964. And for years afterwards, she would employ a variety of French, Ladino and Hebrew expressions of contempt and bitterness whenever she talked about my father, that "so-called" being a frequent one.

Of course I knew what "IO" meant. It was Italian for "I". On the day of her wedding to my father, 11 December 1944, the reminder had, somehow, arrived on that sideboard, of the man she had never stopped loving.

Did she invent this story? Did she write the letters IO in the dust on the sideboard herself? Did Esther or Maurice write the letters? Nothing



can be ruled out, of course. Maurice was not always living at home, and Esther had not found anyone herself to take the place of Egon. It could possibly have been either one of them, but it did not seem plausible to me. Culturally, family bonds in the Nahum world were much too powerful, too much an ordinary fact of life. It would not have occurred to either of them to ruin the day of her wedding to a man who might in any case soon be saving them from the chaos of Egypt. Maurice depended on Sol, and Esther was never spiteful.

Inventing something like that herself sounded uncharacteristic to me too. With all her virtues of toughness and devotion, my mother was not particularly creative outside the kitchen. She never made up stories for me as a child. She loved the present, and lived for the future. And she belonged to the thirties generation of modern, intellectual, freethinking, rational leftists. Sentimentality and mysticism were entirely alien to her. Dead was dead. She was always instinctively practical. She would have given short shrift to this sort of nonsense, and might even have found it a cause for the mockery and jokes so characteristic of the Jewish world of Smyrne, only one generation away.

But she had kept the sheet of paper. So the "IO" has remained behind, well into the 21st century, even after being polished out of existence in 1944.

The story I have to tell is just as strange. For years my mother kept beside her bed a green plastic rotary phone, on which she would spend hours gossiping with her myriad friends and family. There were few objects more characteristic of my mother than this phone. My mother was very chatty and gregarious.

After I lost her in February 1995, and her belongings were cleared, somehow this phone remained down the bottom of her wardrobe, half-buried under bags of old cutlery, its wire wound around its base, its connection with the wall severed. In fact, the wall socket of the phone had been entirely removed. So the phone sat there on its own, cut off from any link with anything else.

Two summers later, the wardrobe door happened to be open as I was passing by, and all of a sudden the green phone rang. Twice. At first I stood there in front of the open wardrobe door, willing her to speak. I told her I was there, and was listening. To my unending regret, I could not bring myself at that moment to pick up the receiver. But nothing happened. She did not come. The phone did not ring again. I ran out of the room, my hair standing on end. A lot later, I found the courage to check whether the telephone socket could still somehow be alive. But no, it had indeed been disabled, and the phone was genuinely sitting there completely detached, about half a metre away from it. Perhaps it was just the heat of the summer's day.

Another after-effect came twenty-seven years later. Thanks to the efforts of a kindly researcher at the INSMLI, the Milan-based National Institute for the Study of Italian Liberation Movements, I was put in touch with Aurora, the daughter of Nicolò Zaccaria, the uncle of Amaury and Egon, the youngest brother of their father Alessandro. In Milan I met Aurora's daughter Marina, and made a new friend.

After seventy-two years, the links between Amaury and Sol had been renewed.

\*

But how had they been created in the first place? How had these two people, from quite different worlds as far as I could see at that early stage of my research, ever come together at all? In fact, who actually was Amaury? What manner of man was he? Where had he come from? What was his family? What had motivated him to embark on this dangerous course?

I wanted to find out. The story I unearthed turned out to be revealing, poignant, and highly relevant to my mother.

Ending back with Amaury and Sol in Cairo in the early 1940s, it begins in 1915.

## **b. Understanding background and motivation: Excursions into the past**

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### **i. The Zaccaria dynasty in the Austro-Hungarian Empire: Grandfather Francesco**

April 12, 1915. An unnamed person in Berlin sends a money order for 516 lire to a certain Francesco Zaccaria, then living in Brindisi, on the eastern side of the heel of the Italian boot. On April 16, this Francesco Zaccaria goes to the post office in Brindisi and cashes the Berlin draft.

On the surface, a banal little transaction. But a month later, a problem will arise with it that would not be banal at all.

Unasked, the librarian had conscientiously brought me all the National Archives' files that bore the surname Zaccaria. I had requested only Amaury's and Egon's, but here, unexpectedly, was a whole new pile of green folders lying in the sun at my desk under the huge windows of the National Archives. The oldest one was labeled "Zaccaria, Francesco", and the librarian told me it looked as though I was the first person to open it in ninety-eight years. Francesco Zaccaria?



The Austro-Hungarian Empire 1914

The papers inside the file were yellowed and fragile. The top one looked like a telegram. It is dated 20 May 1915, and fairly quivers with suspicion. It is about the money order that Francesco Zaccaria has cashed in, just over a month before.

In April 1915, when Francesco picks up the cash sent from Berlin, Italy is at a crossroads. It is in the middle of very delicate and secret negotiations with its erstwhile wartime enemies. Elegantly bribed by the British, Italy is about to turn its back on its Triple Alliance allies, Germany and Austro-Hungary, and throw in its lot with their enemies, Britain, Russia and France. (It is a prefiguration of 1943, when – too late for the Zaccaria brothers – Italy will do almost exactly the same thing).

In exchange for Italy's new allegiance, Britain has just promised it an immediate loan of £50 million, and a very large, strategic swathe of what is now, still, northern Italy – Trieste, Dalmatia, and Trentino-Alto Adige/Sudtirolo, with Istria, the little promontory behind the top of the Italian boot, thrown in for good measure. (Later, in my search for the place where the Zaccaria brothers were brought up, I would travel through most of this territory). Of course, the inducement will be paid only if the Triple Alliance – soon to be only a Double rump, without Italy -- loses the war and is forced to relinquish those former lands. The secret Treaty of London of April 26, 1915, which formalises Italy's new arrangement with Britain, is about to turn Germany from a friend to an enemy, and, by extension, into a suspicious source of money orders for 516 lire. When Francesco picks up the money on April 16, 1915, Italy will be only ten days away from walking out on wartime allies it had never fully supported in the first place. Indeed, in April 1915, no Italian soldier has actually fought in the war yet.

The flimsy papers, abruptly exposed to the sun, had felt no warmth for nearly a century. The date of the top one, the handwritten telegram – all telegrams were handwritten in those days – put it at just under a month after Germany became Italy's enemy. In crabbed, spiky writing, it is from a second-tier provincial official, one Sr Sorge – ironically a German

name<sup>44</sup> – who is a regional sub-prefect in Brindisi. Headed “Eventuale Spionaggio” (a possible case of espionage), It is directed to the Ministry of the Interior in Rome, and it says that, just over a month before, in mid-April 1915, an individual named Francesco Zaccaria had, in Sorge’s bailiwick, Brindisi, cashed in a suspect money order from Berlin.

It is clear from the telegram that Sorge does not like this money order at all. He certainly does not like this man Francesco Zaccaria, who has cashed it in. There is a strong suggestion that Sorge already knows who Francesco is and has had his eye on him for some time. Otherwise there would be little reason to suspect this transaction more than any other. Sorge asks the Ministry to find out who has sent Francesco the money, and why. I wondered why Sorge was so worried about espionage, and it occurred to me he might believe that the fellow Zaccaria might have been spying for Britain, or indeed Germany.

In classic bureaucratic fashion, the Ministry of the Interior passes the buck. The next item in the file is its referral of the matter to Ministry of Postal Communications, Postal Order Division, asking it to find out who had sent Francesco the postal order. Not to be outdone, the Postal Order Division then swats the buck right back, sending a telegram back to the Ministry of the Interior asking for the postal order itself to be sent to them by registered mail.

Sitting amused in the sun, I started thinking it through. It began to seem to me that my first reaction – that Sorge suspected Francesco of spying for a foreign government – was wrong, for two reasons. If Francesco had been spying for Britain, he had been spying for a country which was now, in May 1915, a friend. And Germany had been an enemy for too short a time, barely a month. There seemed to me to be another, more convincing, and interesting, reason for Sorge’s suspicion of Francesco.

This is a time of not only national but also political turmoil in Europe. Large sections of the Italian public, particularly the Italian Socialist Party, are against participating in the conflict at all, seeing it as an imperialist war which would oppress the Italian worker and which has nothing

to do with Italy anyway. Sub-prefect Sorge looks around the political landscape in Italy and sees communists and socialists busily using the war as an excuse to foment revolt against the established order, an established order where he, Sorge, holds a secure and valuable position.

He knows very well that at the same time, large sections of the German public, particularly the Socialist Party of Germany (SPD) are opposed to the war for very similar reasons. It is only half way through the war, a year later, that the SPD decides to support the war, and at that point those SPD members who are still opposed to it, and who still believe it is an imperialist swindle duping the working class, break away from the SPD, led by those prominent figures of my far-off student days, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. But in early 1915, all the German socialists, as far as Sr Sorge knows, are still intent on overturning society as the governing class knows it, and on exporting revolution to other countries in Europe.

For this to work, the socialist parties across Europe need to be in frequent communication. They need to send funds to each other. Sr Sorge's antennae are vibrating. A money order from Germany to a known activist, a person of interest to the authorities, busily operating in Italy, looks decidedly fishy to him. He does not yet know, of course, that two years later, the old order would indeed fall in Russia, or that in Germany itself, revolution would succeed, even if temporarily, two years after that. But in this period of upheaval and uncertainty, a beady suspicion rises from the telegram. Sorge is afraid, not so much on national as on political grounds.

All of that, of course, was entertaining conjecture dreamed up under the sunny windows of the National Archives, but three of the new, unexpected, much thicker, files now lying on the table, underneath Francesco's, seemed to support the idea that Francesco might well have been a socialist agent in league with the international left. Each of those files was labeled Zaccaria Alessandro fu Francesco, (Alessandro son of Francesco). They showed, among many other things, that in 1892,

a son, Alessandro, had been born to Francesco, in Vienna. Leafing quickly through the three fat files on Alessandro, I saw that he had, in the twenties, thirties and forties, become an important senior leader of the Italian Communist Party in Istria. He, too, seemed to have been repeatedly accused of espionage by the Italian authorities. It is this Alessandro, who, I already knew from their files, would become the father of Amaury (born 1913) and Egon (born 1917).

The dates all fitted. A pattern seemed to be emerging clearly. The WWI agitator Francesco Zaccaria, and the inter-war communist leader Alessandro Zaccaria, had to have been the grandfather and the father of the WWII anti-fascist volunteers, Amaury and Egon Zaccaria. What a find. A bow to the librarian.

Born in 1892 . . . I assumed Francesco had been in Vienna in 1892 when his son Alessandro was born. What could he possibly have been doing in the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the early eighteen nineties, apart from seeking work in the big city?

These were the years when the socialist parties of Europe were taking shape, setting their direction, assuming their character. Cells met secretly, clandestine conferences were held in Vienna, Paris and London. On no evidence at all, I imagined Francesco present at the birth of the Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party in Vienna on 1 January 1889, and even representing the party at the first meeting of the Second International in Paris seven months later. All rather romantic, to be sure. But why not?

Whatever the truth, it was already obvious that here was no coincidence. The files seemed clear. Three generations of Zaccaria men, Francesco, Alessandro and Amaury, had all at one time or another been accused of espionage. All of them had been active in a left-wing struggle against the established order, Francesco against the imperialism and class structure of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Alessandro and Amaury against the fascism of Mussolini. Clearly, Amaury had not sprung out of



nowhere. Perhaps somewhere in the Zaccaria DNA chain, there lurked chromosomes with markers for espionage, rebellion, and left-wing politics. The relevance of their father and grandfather to the two boys was plain.

I was hooked. Here were history, politics, passions, families, sacrifices, death, encapsulated, personified, in these three men of the one family line. It was too telling and interesting to stop there. I had to read Alessandro's three files properly. What I would discover in them on that sunny day in the National Archives would lead me, two years later, to stand in silence under grey clouds in the Risiera di San Saba in Trieste, the only concentration camp ever run on Italian soil, the very place where Alessandro was gassed and burned, one year and seven months after his sons had been gunned down by the twelve rifles of the Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale.

## ii. The Zaccaria Dynasty: Father Alessandro Zaccaria

Trieste today is full of charming Austro-Hungarian edifices painted in frivolous pinks, yellows and blues, decorated with heroic statues, balustraded balconies, plaster scrollwork, plump white putti, and very many flags.

In its heyday, it was the only port of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, home to Stendhal, James Joyce, and Italo Svevo, a multi-cultural potpourri of nationalities and a place of enjoyment and fun.

The pleasure-loving character of its people has not changed. Every Sunday, crowds throng the waterfront to ride in ferris wheels, eat ice-creams, sniff perfumes, drink coffee, flirt, joke, stroll, and in general enjoy life.

But take the road up the hill behind the light-hearted city, as I did, and within ten minutes a much grimmer reality materializes.

I knew from the box containing the files on Alessandro, the father of Amaury and Egon, that he had been imprisoned at a place called the Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste. This old rice-husking factory, originally built in 1913, was, I knew, the only concentration camp the Germans ever managed to set up on Italian soil. The files told how he had been captured. But they had no information on what happened then. I had to find out.







The forbidding entrance to the Risiera di San Sabba presages the somber reality within.

The original building, in one of the city's bleaker industrial areas, still stands, a three- and four-storey structure made of orange-brown coloured bricks:

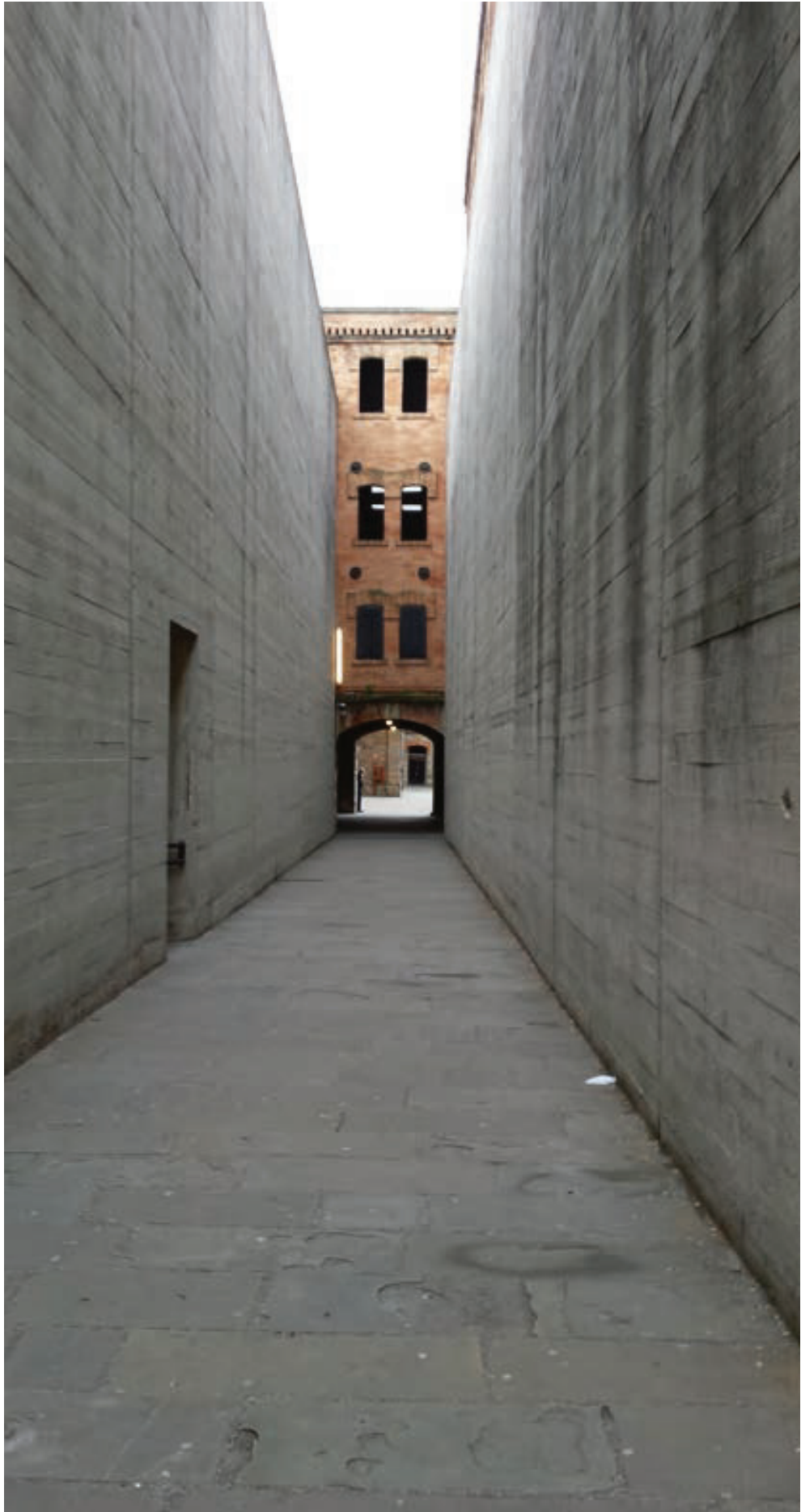
The Germans established it as a place for the detention and killing of political prisoners, and as a transit camp for Jews, most of whom were deported to Auschwitz.

The gas chambers still remain although the crematoria have been razed to the ground.

By chance, I visited the Risiera on a Monday, as it happened the only day of the week that the tiny archival office, staffed by a stooped 79-year-old volunteer, opens its out-of-the-way little door. The old man knew immediately where to find information on Alessandro. Pulling down a boxed set of two volumes<sup>45</sup>, he opened Volume 2. There, on page 362, was a single line. Soppresso – literally, suppressed, meaning killed.

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45 Adolfo Scalpelli, ed. *San Sabba: Istruttoria e processo per il Lager della Risiera*, ANED, Edizioni Lint, Trieste, 1988, Vol. 2 p. 362.



271. *Tonioli nata Bastiani Francesca*, n. a Trieste il 12.2.1910, soppressa il 21.6.1944 familiari la figlia Odilia, ab. a Trieste in via S. Marco 53
272. *Toglianic Ivan*, n. a Vrbnik (Veglia), soppresso il 6.4.1945 (messaggio Stoini)
273. *Tomasi Luigi*, n. a Safogna il 12.7.1908, soppresso il 3.11.1944
274. *Tomei Mario*, n. a Roma il 27.2.1915, già ab. a Fiume, soppresso l'1.9.1944, matr. n. 12754
275. *Tomì Irene*, n. a Fiume il 26.2.1918, soppressa il 4.4.1945, matr. n. 18727
276. *Tomljanovic Caterina*, n. a Ledenizé nel 1914, soppressa il 21.6.1944
277. *Tomcic Giovanni*, nato a Pirano il 18.7.1920, già ab. Trieste, soppresso il 21.9.1944, matr. n. 14396 (S.S.)
278. *Tonelli Virginia in Zappollo*, n. a Castelnovo del Friuli il 13.11.1903, soppressa il 26.9.1944
279. *Tramcar Carolina*, n. a Ledenice il 2.12.1887, soppressa l'1.9.1944, matr. n. 13297
280. *Trirro Vincenzo*, n. a Torre del Greco il 28.9.1923, familiari il padre Trirro Adelchi, via Pirandello 42, Trieste, soppresso il 5.4.1945, matr. n. 1/6/1907
281. *Tul Franz*, n. a Erpelle il 28.5.1913, già ivi ab., soppresso il 5.4.1945
282. *Ugotti Ernesto*, n. a Pirano l'1.11.1907, soppresso l'1.9.1944, matr. n. 13399
283. *Ume! Giuseppe*, n. a Trieste il 23.9.1913, già ivi ab., soppresso il 21.9.1944, matr. n. 14386
284. *Ursic Franz*, n. a Caporetto il 4.10.1920, soppresso il 6 o 7.1945
285. *Valdemarin Alfredo*, n. a Trieste il 23.3.1908, soppresso il 19 o il 20.12.1944, familiari, la moglie Berta n. Susek, ab. a Trieste in via Matteotti 48
286. *Valencic Ivanka*, n. a Nova Kracina, soppressa in data imprecisata
287. *Valencic Giuseppe*, n. a Javorje il 5.4.1920, soppresso il 27 o 28.7.1944, familiare la sorella Valencic Giovanna, ab. a Trieste via Patrizio n. 6
288. *Velenik Bruno*, n. a Trieste l'8.9.1919, soppresso il 29.12.1944
289. *Veluscek Anton o Veruzzi*, n. a Luciniccò il 17.1.1912, soppresso nel dicembre 1944, familiari Veluscek Carmela, ab. via Lung n. 13 (GO)
290. *Vicic Daniela*, si sconoscono altri dati
291. *Vidali Bruno* n. a Fiume il 28.4.1910, soppresso l'1.9.1944, matr. n. 13314
292. *Vidal Giuseppe*, si sconoscono altri dati
293. *Vidali Lorenzo*, n. a Pirano il 28.1.1903, soppresso il 6.4.1945 (messaggio Stoini). Commissario Politico Bg. Trieste Garibaldi
294. *Vivoda Giovanni*, n. a Milino Grande (Pisino) il 3.3.1904, soppresso il 5.10.1944, matr. n. 15103
295. *Vlah Maria*, n. a Castua l'8.9.1920, soppressa il 4.4.1945, matr. n. 18769
296. *Vratovic Matja*, n. a Mattuglie, soppresso il 19.12.1944
297. *Zaccaria Alessandro*, n. a Vienna il 25.12.1891, soppresso il 21.6.1944
298. *Zaccaria Ettore*, n. a Trieste il 23.8.1923, già ivi ab., soppresso il 26.9.1944, familiari la madre Margherita nata Rukin, ab. Str. del Friuli 136
299. *Zahar Milan*, si sconoscono altri dati
300. *Zancolich Ardemia*, n. a Portole il 30.8.1920, già ab. a Trieste, soppressa il 21.6.1944, fam. la madre Santina nata pernic, ab. a Trieste, via dell'Abro 1. G.A.P.
301. *Zane Lorenzo*, n. a Trieste 21.5.1882, soppresso l'1.9.1944, matr. n. 13943
302. *Zanetti Oreste*, n. a Gorizia il 21.6.1926, soppresso il 5.4.1945, matr. 16007, familiari il padre Aiello, ab. a Gorizia, via Vittorio Veneto 111
303. *Zancolic Emilio*, n. ad Umago nel 1925, soppresso il 19.12.44
304. *Zanoni Dino*, soppresso il 22.12.1944, matr. 17789 oppure 17925
305. *Zigovic Giuseppe*, di anni 33 nato a Visignano, soppresso il 4.4.1945, matr. 17053
306. *Zorza Gabriele*, n. a Gabrovizza (Comeno), si sconoscono altri dati

This is where the father of Amaury and Egon had met his end. How was it that he had found himself there? What light could his life shed on those of Amaury and Egon?

\*

To understand Alessandro it is necessary to have some knowledge of the singularly complex history of the Istrian peninsula, ruled as it was by, successively, Rome, Byzantium, Lombards, Franks, various dukes and counts from Friuli, Thuringia, Carinthia, and the Holy Roman Empire, Venice, Bavaria, Venice again, Hapsburgs, Napoleon, then the Hapsburgs again, in 1815. In 1861, the Diet of Istria was created, whose role essentially was to preserve Hapsburg rule by de-fusing Italian irredentists. Most of the Parliament were Italians. But in the second half of the 19th century, non-Italian nationalisms began to proliferate, and Croats and Slovenians were at the forefront of the anti-Italian, anti-Austro-Hungarian rebellion.



*Istria today.*

In 1915, the British stepped in, as we have already seen. In a dispassionate move of self-interest, one with immense repercussions, like many of their initiatives at the time, they promised Istria to Italy, to induce it to leave its allies Germany and Austro-Hungary and throw in its lot with Britain and France. In good faith, the Italian Government agreed and signed the Treaty of London. However, at Versailles, Woodrow Wilson nullified the Treaty of London and imposed the Treaty of Versailles, making Italian claims on Istria void.

Almost immediately, the Italian government, feeling entitled to do so, seized Istria, despite the large proportion of Croats and Slovenes in the peninsula (most of whom lived away from the coast), and the resulting interest in the peninsula from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. This situation lasted for two years, until in 1920, the Treaty of Rapallo was signed between the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (which was renamed Yugoslavia in 1929). A complex patchwork of sovereignties ensued. For our purposes, it is important only to note that Fiume (now called Rijeka) became an independent state, and that Rapallo left a large number of Croats and Slovenes in Italy.

Under the monarchy, rapid Italianisation began to be imposed on the whole population. But fascism did not blanket the peninsula until, in 1922, hard on the accession to power of Mussolini, the fascist poet Gabriele D'Annunzio made his melodramatic entry into Fiume on the back of a white horse to claim the city, and the peninsula, for fascism. Croatian schools and other institutions were abolished, Croatian names were Italicised, and religious practice, and even singing, in the Croat and Slovene languages were banned. Large numbers of Croats and Slovenes fled to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

So to sum up, from 1920 to 1922, the Italianisation of unwilling people became overt government policy; but from 1922 onwards, the process was greatly intensified under the brutality of fascism.

Into the cauldron of these nationalist, irredentist passions there was thrown another ingredient – the rise of socialism in the late 19th century.



We have seen that Francesco became an adherent and an activist, and now, his son Alessandro was about to follow in his father's footsteps, and even outdo his father in influence, courage and devotion.

The "communism" of left-wing idealists like Alessandro did not necessarily mean an adherence to Stalinism. Indeed in the early 1920s, there was no Stalinism at all. Much more, it meant a reaction against the immovable unfairness of the established order under Austro-Hungary and the Italian monarchy, an unfairness that penalized both the lower classes and the various nationalities of the Empire. That initial reaction led to an activism that sought to harness principally the efforts of the working class, but also those of the various nationalities. And that activism sought to emulate, in its own operations, the absolute nature of power under the old Empire, and the Kingdom. Insofar as a communist was a left-wing idealist, Alessandro was a communist. The same was true, as we shall see, of the left-wing idealists of my mother's generation in Egypt.

\*

In 1920, when Alessandro was 29 and living in Rovigno<sup>46</sup>, he began to be watched by the *Sicurezza*, the Italian Secret Police. He had socialist leanings, said the first disparaging entry in his files, and associated with "subversives". But he was described in the file as being good to his family – always a preoccupation in Italy – and assiduous in his work, which was as an administrator in the *Cassa Ammalati di Rovigno*<sup>47</sup>, "one of the most prosperous socialist institutions in Venezia Giulia"<sup>48</sup>. His demeanour is described as relaxed ("disinvolto"), but his opinions have developed, said the inspector, from a mild socialism to a much more pronounced ("spinto") version. His file is actually headed "comunista".

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46 Today part of Croatia and called Rovinj.

47 The *Casse Ammalate*, which still exist, are contributory insurance schemes against possible illness

48 *una delle più prospera istituzioni del socialismo della Venezia-Giulia*, from File F.M.993.11998 B.851 in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome.

Worse follows. He engages in progaganda. He travels to other parts of the Kingdom, organizes other subversives, and makes speeches. He has the complete admiration and loyalty of his comrades, and has considerable ascendancy over “the masses” (“le masse”). He has been expelled from Fiume<sup>49</sup> for “excessive Bolshevist propaganda”, which increased markedly after the occupation of Istria by D’Annunzio<sup>50</sup>. He has a contemptuous attitude to authority, and should be viewed as dangerous because of the hold he has over the common people. The scowl of the author of the report is palpable through the dead bureaucratic prose.

Other documents of this period show that Alessandro has “disappeared”, but has then returned from Russia, with several comrades, bearing Russian newspapers and propaganda material.

In 1920, Amaury was seven years old and Egon was three. Already their father had begun his frequent absences from home. Already they knew what it was like to have groups of “subversives” coming and going in the house. And already they had grasped that what their father was doing was secret, dangerous and heroic. A powerful role model for impressionable children.

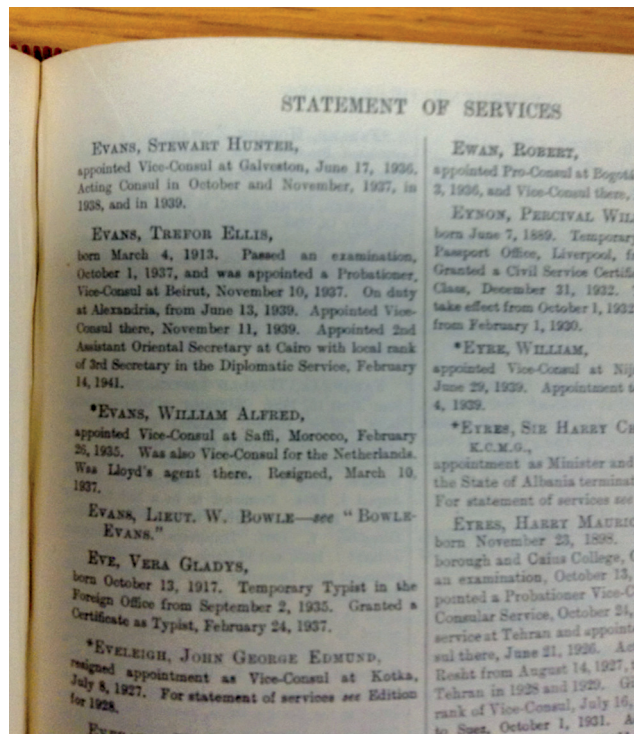
In 1923, Alessandro the comunista was arrested and thrown in jail. His photos at the time show a slight, intense young man, with little of the powerful presence that he would later acquire. By that time, he had quit – or been sacked from – his job in the insurance company, and had set himself up as an automotive engineer in Laurana. Nothing shows why he was released, but in 1930, he is being watched again, “ocultamente vigilato” [secretly surveilled], without any result. In 1935, the secret police can still not find anything against him, but they continue the surveillance, and in 1938, again, there was nothing, but still they went on watching him.

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49 Now called Rijeka.

50 On 12 September 1919, the poet and fascist sympathizer Gabriele D’Annunzio, theatrically riding a white horse, entered Fiume at the head of a collection of soldiers, and occupied it for a total of fifteen months before being ejected by the regular forces of the Italian Army. He came back in 1922.

In 1940, the patience of the Secret Police is finally rewarded. One of Alessandro's comrades, Ratomiro Kalochira, is arrested, and interrogated. He talks, possibly, even probably, after some physical persuasion. He names Alessandro. He says that Alessandro has put him in touch with an Englishman, although the interrogators did not succeed in getting the Englishman's name. Amaury, however, in his forced statement to the court, did call the Englishman "Evens". A look through the British Government listings for this period, found in the National Archives in Kew, identifies Trefor Ellis Evans<sup>51</sup> as a possibility. This Assistant Oriental Secretary in Cairo could perhaps have been the point of contact:



51 Later Ambassador to Syria, and Iraq, and Professor of International Politics at the University College of Wales, Aberystwith.

His service is confirmed in the Diplomatic Listings for 1940:

EMBASSIES, LEGATIONS, CONSULATES, &c. 59

See note on page 51 as to the significance of the letters (L), (M) and (S).

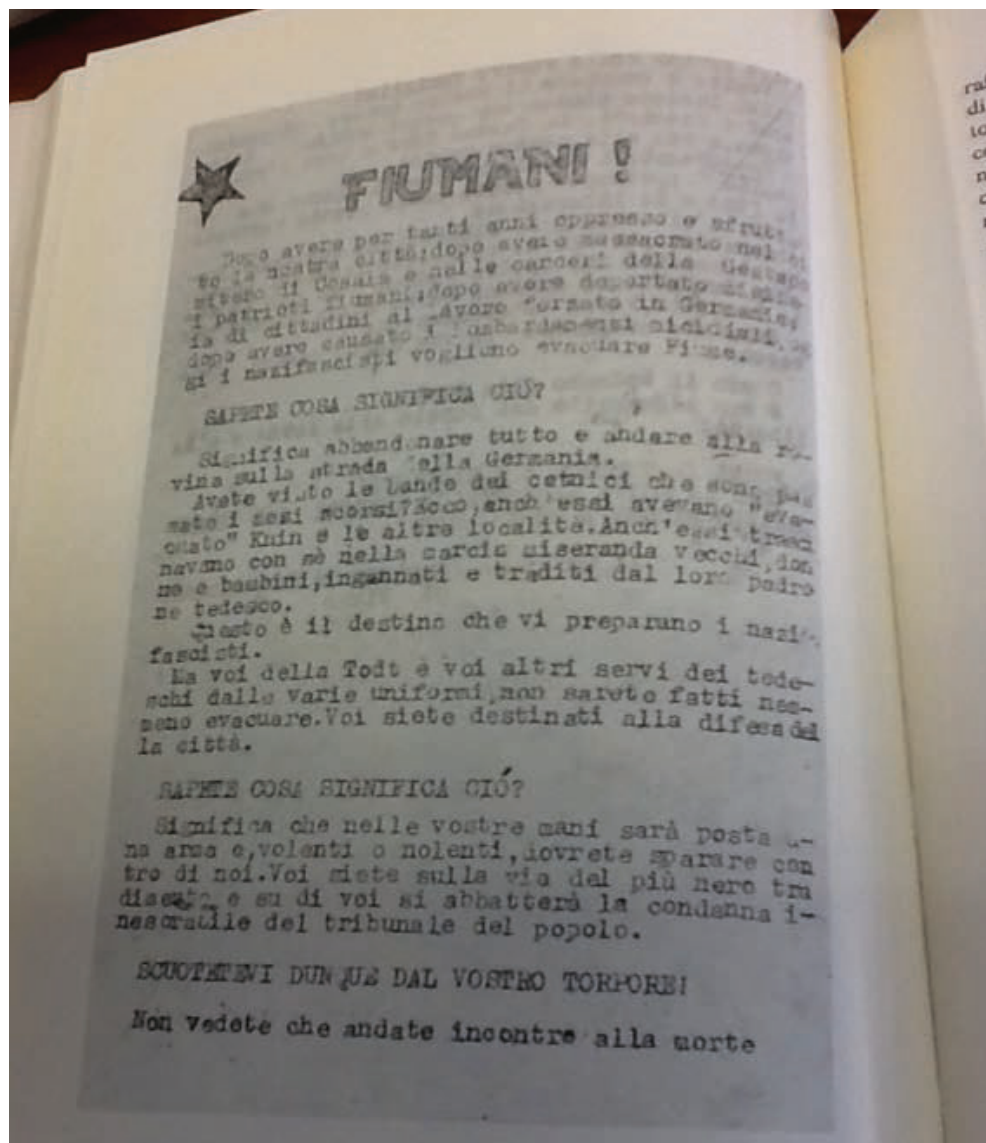
Residence.	Rank.	Name.	Salary, &c.	Local Allowance.
<b>EGYPT—continued.</b>				
<b>Cairo—continued.</b>				
	Oriental Secretary ...	Walter A. Smart (h) ...	£ 1,200-1,500	£ 200
	Assistant Oriental Secretary ...	A. N. Williamson-Napier (d) ...	800-1,000	150
	Acting Assistant Oriental Secretary ...	D. J. M. Irving (d) ...	—	—
	2nd Assistant Oriental Secretary ...	T. E. Evans (b) ...	300-600	100
	Legal Adviser ...	F. H. Tomlyn (d) ...	300-600	100
	Assistant Oriental Secretary ...	E. F. W. Bealy, C.M.G. (h) (f) ...	£E800	£E900
	Assistant Secretary ...	J. A. de C. Hamilton (h) ...	£E800	£E800
	Financial Counsellor ...	J. Johnson, C.M.G., O.B.E. ...	—	—
	Judge of Consular Court ...	E. F. W. Bealy, C.M.G. (h) (f) ...	(c)	—
	Registrar of Consular Court ...	G. W. Gerrard ...	—	—
	Crown Advocate ...	W. R. Fanner ...	£E200	—
	Archivist ...	B. C. Flynn ...	550-650	250
	Assistant Archivist ...	H. L. R. Cox, M.B.E. ...	85-350	314
	Clerical Officer ...	W. S. Forbes, M.B.E. ...	85-350	251
	" ...	T. J. McGurk ...	85-350	242
	" ...	O. R. O'Rafferty ...	85-350	227
	" ...	H. Williams ...	85-350	206
	Consul-General ...	L. B. Graftley-Smith, O.B.E. (h) ...	**	200
	Consul ... (M) ...	C. A. W. Were ...	**	200
	" ... (M) ...	T. H. Preston, O.B.E. (e) ...	**	150
	" ... (M) ...	A. W. Robertson ...	**	150
	Vice-Consul ...	G. H. Jackson ...	**	(M) 50
	" ...	Gabriel Farwagi, M.B.E. ...	—	—
	Pro-Consul ...	B. S. Lewis ...	—	—
	Medical Adviser ...	C. H. G. Pochin ...	—	—
	Consular Agent ...	R. S. Crouch ...	—	—
Assouan*	" ...	" ...	—	—
Beni Suef	" ...	" ...	—	—
Mansourah	" ...	C. R. F. Stow ...	—	—
Minieh	" ...	E. C. Bernard ...	—	—
Sohag	" ...	F. W. Shirley, M.B.E. ...	—	—
Zagazig	" ...	C. C. C. Oulton ...	—	—
Zagazig	" ...	S. M. Wood ...	—	—
Alexandria (M)	Consul-General ...	C. E. Heathcote Smith, C.M.G., O.B.E. ...	**†	300
	Consul ...	D. Wilson ...	**	150
	Vice-Consul ...	" ...	**	100
	" ...	Paul Cassar, M.B.E. ...	—	—
	Surgeon ...	G. Norman Clark, M.B., Ch.B., F.R.C.S. ...	135†	—
Damanhour	Consular Agent ...	C. H. Jeffs ...	—	—
Mehalla Kibirf	" ...	E. I. Thomas ...	—	—
Tanta	" ...	F. F. Heymans ...	—	—
Port Said (M)	Consul ...	R. E. Ellison ...	**	150
	" ...	J. A. Grant ...	**	50 (M)
	Vice-Consul ...	Joseph W. Caruana, M.B.E. ...	—	—
	Pro-Consul ...	P. P. Caruana ...	—	—
Ismaïlia	Consular Agent ...	T. A. Gibson ...	—	—
Suez (Port Tewfik)	Consul (M) ...	H. G. Jakins ...	**	150
	Vice-Consul ...	R. M. M. Brett ...	—	—

\* The post of Assouan is only open during the winter season from December to April.  
 \*\* See Table on page 125.  
 (b) Has the local rank of 3rd Secretary in the Diplomatic Service.  
 (c) Salary 500l. (d) Has local rank of 1st Secretary in the Diplomatic Service.  
 (f) Holds local rank of Counsellor.  
 (h) Has local rank of Legal Adviser and Judge of the Consular Court.  
 (M) Local allowance 50l. if officer unmarried, 100l. if married.  
 † The Consul-General has a local allowance of 300l. if unmarried, 400l. if married.

From the information wrenched out of Kalochira, it is clear that Alessandro, the anti-fascist, has good contacts with the wartime enemies of fascist Italy. So when his son Amaury, in another forced statement two years later, says that his father put him in touch with Allied representatives in Sussak, he is saying that his father was doing for him, and Egon, exactly what he had done for Kalochira a few weeks before.

Alessandro knew very well what the risks were of sending his son Amaury to the Allies. He himself, with extraordinary courage, continued his clandestine activities against the government of Mussolini. Reminiscences of two of his surviving comrades, Giovanni Cogliolina

and Giacomo Rebez, appear in a 1976 collection called “Parlano I Protagonisti” [The Protagonists Speak]<sup>52</sup>. They both talk about the activities of the small Communist group, of which Alessandro was a leader (together with a remarkable young Austrian Jewish doctor of 23, Riccardo Schafranek), as comprising copying and – dangerously – distributing communist pamphlets and leaflets, like this one from the same book, a poignantly amateurish production clearly evoking the risky conditions under which it was prepared. It exhorts the inhabitants of Fiume to shake off their torpor:



<sup>52</sup> Lucifero Martini, ed. *Parlano I Protagonisti, Memorie e documenti raccolti per una storia di Fiume nella Lotta popolare di liberazione fino al 1943*, Monografie V, Unione Degli Italiani dell'Istria e di Fiume, 1976.

In 1941, a warrant went out for Alessandro's arrest, and a Wanted poster was published and put up in several places in Fiume and Laurana. The photo in the poster shows him in all his mature power and self-confidence:



Alessandro fled the country to avoid arrest. He went to Yugoslavia. An urgent memo went out from the Prefecture of Fiume to all frontier guards instructing them that he was to be arrested at the border. To no avail. All through 1941 and for nearly all of 1942, Alessandro managed to evade capture.

That was not the end of the family's tribulations. In February 1941, the mother of Amaury and Egon, Maria Soucek, was arrested. Maria was sent to four prisons, one of which was notoriously the harshest one on the Italian mainland. Her letters and petitions from those prisons make pitiful reading. In fact, sitting in the agreeable sunshine in the National Archives, I found them so incongruous and distressing I had to stop, and go outside.

The Prefect of Fiume seems to have had Maria in his sights as soon as her husband fled the country in 1941. In February of that year, he wrote to headquarters in Rome a letter saying that, although Military Counter-Intelligence had nothing against Maria, she should be arrested anyway,

and put in a concentration camp over which Military Intelligence had no jurisdiction. Once she was safely in prison, the Prefecture could begin a little extra persecution – Maria’s letters to the Prefect begging for leave to look after her sick and aged mother were met with a curt “no, her mother is just fine”, as do the letters of her aged mother begging for leave to visit her; and even when the Prefect of Avellino, the province where she is imprisoned in Grottaminarda, begs for her to receive a tiny allowance and visit the dentist, the answer is still no. Her teeth fall out, and she does not know what is happening to her sons and her husband. She writes frantically to Mussolini (calling him Duce), to the Queen, to the prefecture, but the only answer is that she is to be transferred to an even tougher prison.

We do know that Maria was released, although there is no release document in the files. The next document in the files about Maria is in a post-war letter written to the Ministry of the Interior by her brother-in-law, Nicoló, youngest of Alessandro’s three brothers. Nicoló begs for the effects of Amaury and Egon to be returned to Maria, whose husband was “bruciato”, burned in the Risiera di San Sabba, and whose two sons gave their lives for democracy. The response is predictable – another curt “no”. Sixty-eight years after that letter, I would speak several times to Nicoló’s daughter Aurora and meet her daughter Marina Marinelli – the last remaining relatives of Amaury and Egon.

Alessandro was never actually unwillingly seized. A triumphant memo dated 14 November 1942 from the selfsame Lt.-Col. Mario Bertacchi of the S.I.M., who had dealt with Amaury and Egon only a few months before, reports that on 12 November, Zaccaria Alessandro fu Francesco had handed himself in at the Fianova checkpoint<sup>53</sup>.

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53 *Il 12 corrente si è costituito al posto di blocco carabinieri reale di Fianova ed è stato tradotto a Fiume il connazionale Zaccaria Alessandro fu Francesco*, says Bertacchi, in correct bureaucratic language: On the 12th inst., Italian citizen Alessandro Zaccaria, son of Francesco, handed himself in at the Fianova checkpoint of the Royal Italian Police.

On 10 November, two days before Alessandro handed himself in, his two sons had been executed, and their deaths had been trumpeted all over the Italian press. He must have learned about their fate very soon after it happened. He must also have known that his wife was in prison.

No-one hands himself in to the enemy, knowing that death awaits before long, without a very good reason. What went through the mind of the man who was “good to his family” when he found out about his sons’ death? Was torment at the death of his own children sharpened by guilt that he himself had led them into the trap? Had he somehow heard about the prison conditions his wife was forced to endure, largely for being his spouse? Was the remorse too much to endure? Was his surrender an attempt to expiate the guilt? Had this man with a powerful presence and a years-long past of bravery simply stopped wanting to live? Or had he become disillusioned with the lack of interest that the Italian Communist Party took in Istrian affairs? Had the man with a contemptuous attitude to authority reacted against the Party’s rigid



obedience structure? Or, perhaps the most likely explanation given the relentless pursuit of Maria by the Prefect in Fiume, was he was giving himself up to secure her release?

In the end, because this really was the beginning of the end, did the political finally take second place to the personal?

Alessandro spent nineteen months in prison, many of those in winter time. An unknown number of those, probably the majority, were in the Risiera di San Sabba. This is what the cells



of the prisoners looked like in 2014. It is hard for a man to stand up in them.

Alessandro was sentenced by the same Special Tribunal that had condemned his sons to death. On 21 June 1944, only twelve weeks before the Allies launched their invasion of Italy, he was gassed at the Risiera di San Sabba. His body was burned in its crematorium.

### **iii. Finding the Zaccaria house**

Istria is, of course, the little promontory, projecting into the Adriatic, behind the top of the Italian boot. Today most of it is in Croatia, and virtually all its inhabitants are Croat. The young people no longer all speak Italian. In 2015, I tried speaking Italian to the young waitress. There was panic in her eyes. She answered in German. For Italian, she had to find an older colleague.

As we have seen, Istria's history is famously chequered. Originally occupied by the Histri tribe, it was, in antiquity, ruled by Romans, overrun by Goths, Greeks, and Avars, and, in later centuries, exploited by various dukes from the Italian mainland. After the dukes, it was controlled by, successively, Venetians, Austrians, French, and Austro-Hungarians once again, this time for a whole century from 1814 to 1918. After 1918, it was under the authority of Italy, first democratic then fascist; and after WWII, of a central Yugoslav government under Tito in Belgrade. Now, since the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991 and after various further vicissitudes, it is finally independent, and run by a largely Croatian administration.

Today its coastline is dotted with charming 19th century towns and villages, their architecture an operetta-style froth of curlicues, putti, balustrades, and pink and yellow facades. But the old Austro-Hungarian melting pot has largely gone.

In Francesco Zaccaria's time, the promontory was a potpourri of nationalities: Italians, Croats, Slovenes, Vlachs/Istro-Romanians, Serbs, Hungarians, Germans, and Montenegrins. They lived side by side and often intermarried. Francesco's own wife was called Maria Stift, his son

Alessandro's Maria Soucek, neither of them Italian names. But just as the Ottoman Empire of my mother's family was crumbling under the onslaught of nationalism, so was the ramshackle, paternalistic old Austro-Hungarian Empire of Amaury's weakening under irredentist pressures.

The disintegration of both of these Empires would decisively affect my mother. In 1906, after four centuries, her people, the Nahums, left the city of Smyrna in the tottering Ottoman Empire, for greener, more stable, pastures under British rule in Egypt; and her husband Amaury would never have found himself in Egypt had his father and grandfather not reacted passionately against the rickety old Austro-Hungarian order and its successors, and influenced him to take up a similar rebellion. Two empires, collapsing, had thrown two people together who would never otherwise have met.

In Alessandro Zaccaria's time, the final dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire triggered decades of violence and instability in Istria. The Versailles treaty of 1918 gave the promontory to Italy, in accordance with the 1915 Treaty of London (although, classically, the British reneged by keeping Trieste, Dalmatia and Albania), and at first, there was relative calm. But in 1922, Mussolini took power in Rome and the fascist era began. For Istria, fascism was a catastrophe. Most of its inhabitants were Croat or Slovene, but it became a crime for any language but Italian to be spoken, sung, written, taught in schools or uttered in churches. Multiculturalism died in short order. Newspapers were suppressed, libraries closed, demonstrations forbidden, cultural and professional associations proscribed, schools and churches watched – the regime was calculated to provoke opposition and bloodshed.

Alessandro's opposition, as we have seen, took a communist form. He had lost his position as a medical insurance administrator because of his communist activities, so he had to find a way of supporting his family independently, and of continuing his political operations without an employer's surveillance. He set himself up as a mechanic, in the very small town of Laurana, today called Lovran by Croats but still known as Laurana by Italian speakers. In his statement to the court, Amaury

P.N.F. - Comando Squadristi - Dignano

## Attenzione!

Si proibisce nel modo più assoluto che nei ritrovi pubblici e per le strade di Dignano si canti o si parli in lingua slava.

Anche nei negozi di qualsiasi genere deve essere una buona volta adoperata

**SOLO LA LINGUA ITALIANA**

Noi Squadristi, con metodi persuasivi, faremo rispettare il presente ordine.

**GLI SQUADRISTI**

10

R. PREFETTURA DELLA PROVINCIA DI TRIESTE



IL PREFETTO  
DELLA PROVINCIA DI TRIESTE

Vedute l'elenco dei cognomi da sostituire in forma italiana, compilato a sensi del par. 1 del D. M. 5 Agosto 1926, il quale contiene le istruzioni per la esecuzione del R. D. L. 10 Gennaio 1926 N° 17 esteso a tutti i territori della nuova provincia con R. D. 7 Aprile 1927 N° 494.

Attention! It is totally forbidden to sing or speak the Slavic language in public places or the streets of Dignano. In any kind of shops, in addition, ONLY THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE must henceforth be spoken. Our troops will enforce this order with their own methods of persuasion.

*A poster exhibited in the Risiera di San Saba*

had given the address of his family home and his father's workshop. It was via della Maddalena, Laurana.

I had been myself to the places where Amaury had landed, been imprisoned and been executed. Because I had, I understood pretty well what had happened to him after he had landed in Italy. But it was only in libraries and archival institutes that I had been learning, and that only partially, about his background before the landing, about where he had come from and what might have motivated him. As a result, the picture I had of who he really was, was patchy, and, in a sense, merely theoretical. And I wanted to know who the man really was who had married my mother, and made her happy.

Just as I had understood much better what had happened to him after he had landed in Italy by literally standing and walking in his footsteps, so I would really be able to know his character, his driving forces, his history, what had driven him to Egypt, and to my mother, only by literally standing and walking in the environment of his youth and boyhood.

Ideally, I would have to find the house and the surroundings where he grew up. To do that, I would have to go to Laurana, a village of 6000 people, and find the via della Maddalena. But there was a problem. Now that Istria was Croatian, all the old Italian street names had been wiped out and replaced by Croat ones. I went to the tiny Lovran municipal offices to inquire, and there, behind a desk, I encountered yet another of the strokes of good fortune that had accompanied nearly all my searches – Zdenka Zorica.

It seemed that no records existed of changes in street names. At first, it seemed like checkmate. A long trip from Australia stymied at the last hurdle. But young Zdenka refused to give up. She sat behind her desk and thought. She had been in her job in the municipality for only a short time, but her predecessor, an elderly lady now retired, had worked at this desk for thirty years. That predecessor, she said, knew a very old lady, who might remember the where the old streets were. Zdenka called the predecessor, the predecessor called the old lady, and lo and behold,

the old lady remembered very well where the via della Maddalena had been, or, more exactly, where the street was that had been called the via della Maddalena. The street, it seemed, was still there.

Oh, Zdenka said, that's only three minutes' walk away. I'll come with you. She promptly closed her office and led me down two tiny alleys. These were not exactly streets, rather cobbled pathways barely admitting a single car. Two of the pathways crossed. At the crossing, an old lady – Lovran seemed to be full of old ladies – was standing on her balcony leaning on a stick and looking down on us. Zdenka simply walked into the lady's garden and up her stairs. I watched them conversing animatedly, saw the old lady pointing. That house, there, just opposite. Zdenka rushed back down. The old lady had remembered her even older sister-in-law, now deceased – yet another old lady – talking about the Zaccaria family who had lived in that house. They had gone away, the sister-in-law had said, no-one knew where. I knew where, though.



The house was empty. It had been empty for years. And the workshop, the workshop was still there. It was still a workshop, ninety or so years later.

I had actually found it. This was where Amaury had grown up.

The house, and those around it, were modest but certainly bourgeois residences. Alessandro had not been an uneducated mechanic earning crusts. He was a well-informed, well-read person who could readily cite



*The motor workshop beyond the gates*

revolutionary sources like Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Rosa Luxemburg, and probably had a reasonable knowledge of Italian literature. He had had enough money, whether from his employment or from party funds, to afford a two-storey house and a large workshop next door. In other words, this was not a working class household, but rather one belonging to a literate activist. I could see that Amaury had not been brought up in poverty or ignorance, even though his father had been periodically absent on his trips to neighbouring republics. The workshop next to the house was sizeable enough to accommodate perhaps a dozen cars.

Nevertheless, possibly because his father was away so much, Amaury had made mistakes in his youth. They were mistakes that many hot-headed, risk-taking youngsters might make – smuggling, “borrowing” bicycles, and the like – and he had been caught. One reason to want to escape. But now that I was there, I could see another.

For a boy in this sleepy village of Laurana, the town of Fiume, its lights winking enticingly across the bay, was the big city. Standing in this quiet, shaded little laneway, it was easy to imagine an energetic, avid boy eager to break out of the confines of the village, yearning to go to Fiume, go beyond Fiume, see the world, have an adventure, many adventures, and be somebody big. Smalltown boys – and girls – have had the same hankering the world over. I had seen for myself that my

own father must have had similar dreams in quiet, smug Bexhill-on-Sea. And in Amaury's case, the urge would have been reinforced by seeing his father leave home periodically for places unknown – Russia, Hungary, Austria, Serbia, as we later learn from Alessandro's file – and doing so in deadly secret. Derring-do! No wonder Amaury volunteered to the British. Not only would he be following in his father's radical footsteps, and doing something important and secret to defeat fascism, he would also be escaping beyond the limits of Laurana, and seeing the world. The war was just a glorious and convenient pretext. If it hadn't been the war, it would have been something else.

It all fitted with what I had learned of his character from my uncle Élie and my aunt Sylvia, who had watched him filch sardines from a plate and wolf them down whole. This was a person, a man, who seized life with both hands. His character, as it is with all of us, was his destiny. So he certainly suited my mother, who, in many ways, was just the same.

His father had put him in touch with Evans, who had put him in touch with MI6 in Egypt. In 1941 he and his brother were already in Cairo being trained for an espionage mission to Italy. But the adventure he had embarked on was now about to acquire another dimension altogether.

### **c. Back in Cairo, 1941-2 and 2014**

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They had met in Cairo in the summer of 1941.

In Europe in 1941, Czechoslovakia, Poland, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark had already been invaded by Germany, and Austria, Hungary, Sweden, and Bulgaria had, in varying degrees, accepted, or welcomed, Nazi domination. German tanks and soldiers paraded through the streets of all the subject nations. Deportations of Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, and the mentally ill to concentration camps in Poland, Austria and Germany were well under way. Tens of millions were hungry, unable to travel, in fear of their lives. Private and state assets were being commandeered by the victors.

Humiliation, denunciations, and betrayals were daily experiences. Active resistance was still in the future, but even now people were risking their lives to listen to the BBC. The invasion of Russia was imminent. The prospect of a permanent, brutal Nazi presence in the whole of Europe was very real. In short, the scene in Europe was darker than it had ever been throughout its long and bloody history.

In Cairo that same summer, there were tea and dancing at Groppi's, ball games on the charming beaches of Alexandria, film shows at the Diana cinema, races at the Turf Club, polo at the Gezira Sporting Club, whisky at the Royal Automobile Club, belly dancing at Madame Badias' cabaret near the Pont des Anglais, gallops on horseback under the shadow of the pyramids, siestas from one to four, there were grapes, watermelons, steaks – and above all, there were soldiers. They had come from Britain, South Africa, Australia, Greece, Poland, New Zealand, France, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Malta, Palestine, Rhodesia, and India, and they were all spending their leave and their money in the most beguiling, varied and welcoming city in the world. It was a paradise.

One warm Cairo afternoon in June 1941, a tall young woman of 24 was walking home for the siesta from the National Bank where she worked as a clerk. She wore high, red, cork-soled sandals, and her navy blue skirt clung to her shapely figure. Much later, she would often tell me that when she walked in the street in Cairo, heads would always turn as she passed. Home, which she shared with her mother, her sister, and her brother, was a second floor apartment at number 19, rue Hawayati (today Youssef El-Guindy Street). It was about fifteen minutes' walk away from the National Bank, in the central Cairo quarter whose inhabitants were mainly from the foreign communities – at least, fifteen minutes was how long it took me to walk that same route seventy-two years later. Of course, in 2015, I did not stop as often as she had done in 1941 – the shop windows today are not as enticing as those of 1941, and I, on this special day, was more eager to reach 19, rue Hawayati than she had been on what for her was an ordinary weekday. The route however,



has not changed very much since then. I found the same buildings still standing where they had been before.

Esther Zarmati, the tall young woman, was what the French call *coquette*, meaning not that she was a coquette in the English sense of a flirt, but simply in the French sense of taking great care over one's appearance. All her life, Esther would be highly *coquette*. A few hours before she died in 2006, at 89, she asked me to bring in a manicurist, and there and then she sat up in bed, soon to be her deathbed, and had her nails done.



In June of 1941, she was at the height of her beauty. The young man following her had caught sight of her in the street, had been instantly captivated, and had not let her out of his sight. She sashayed along the street, past the street vendor selling roasted quails, past the peanut seller, and the shoe shop. This is what those streets look like when I walked down them in June 2015:



She came to a stop in front of the windows of the Salon Vert, the Cairo branch of the Greek dress emporium of Alexandria. There, in the window, were the very latest Paris fabrics, but after their father's death ten years earlier, the family had had to forget about the very latest Paris fabrics and simply earn enough to live. The Salon Vert is still where it was. But today it is all boarded up.

The young man secretly following Esther was also tall. He had fair hair and was very good-looking. Actually, we already know him. We have seen his photograph, on page 99, taken the evening before he was executed seventeen months later. Even at that moment of supreme dread, he is very handsome, a sensitive man trying hard look fearless.

On this June day in 1941 he was too diffident to approach the young woman walking ahead of him. But he was there the next day, when he followed her all the way to number 19, rue Hawayati, and waited until she appeared at the balcony half an hour later. He knew that in Cairo in those days (and even now), a great part of a family's life was lived on the balcony. So he waited in the street, looking up, on the off-chance she would come out. Unsuspecting, she emerged, but then went straight back in. But now he knew which floor she lived on, and on which side of the landing.

I stood in his footsteps (as I had before, but in another place) and looked up at the balcony myself, decades later. Today the street where he waited, the rue Hawayati, is no longer the elegant European-style road it was in 1941.



Number 19, the building where the fatherless Zarmati family lived, is no longer the well-kept, prestigious Italianate edifice it was, but it is still there, and its front door is the same. Now, of course, there are no foreign-born residents. All the occupants are Egyptian. On the day I found the building, an old tenant had taken a blue plastic chair outside, and had sat down to watch the world go by and chat to the passing crowd.



Several stopped to ask about his lumbago, or offer him a sticky cake from a paper bag. It was very human, true to what I had always been told about the warm-natured Egyptians. Perhaps the former European residents had done the same thing, but I doubt it.

However, there is no doubt that everyone in no. 19, rue Hawayati knew everyone else, then as now. And they knew everyone in the building opposite

as well, number 20. On the second floor of no. 20, there lived Esther's cousins, the Nahum family, the six children of Abner and Esther Nahum. My uncle Élie, born in 1920, whom we have already met in his 90s in Milan, grew up at no. 20, the second of the six children. Decades later, Élie would remember how the cousins – Esther's mother Sarina was the elder sister of Élie's father, Abner – would hold shouted conversations across rue Hawayati, and would play games on each others' landings.<sup>54</sup>

In no. 20, everyone knew everyone else too. The tenants were a very multicultural assortment. Here is Élie's list of the families living in his building – the Sanchos (Spanish), Saitas (Italian), Scabas (Romanian), Bonnettis (Italian), Regenstreiffs and Samuels (Russian), Hochmanns (somewhere in Central Europe), Diamantis (Greek), Caios (Italian), Anhourys (Lebanese)<sup>55</sup>. Here on the rue Hawayati was the very archetype of the multicultural society of the Levant.

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54 Interview, May 2015.

55 Élie Nahum op cit., pp. 16–17

And they would not just know each other to nod hello in the lift. Another Levantine characteristic is the unquestioned involvement of neighbours in each others' lives. One day Sarina was waiting for her husband Léon, Esther's father, to come home for the siesta from his stationery store. He would unfailingly come on the dot of 1.15, but that day he was five, ten, then fifteen minutes late. Sarina alerted the ladies of nos.19 and 20, they alerted the ladies of nos. 17 and 15, nos. 13 and 11 got into the action, and soon the rue Hawayati was alive with heads poking out from balcony railings.

It was Madame Petrosyan (Armenian) from no. 15 who saw him first. Actually all she saw was the cane that always preceded him, coming round the corner of the rue Hawayati and the rue Sheikh Hamza (today Hoda Shaarawi). The cry went up, from balcony to balcony, "Il arrive! Il arrive!". The unfortunate man, my grandfather, had stopped en route to buy a quail, which like everyone else, he ate bones and all. (After all, everyone knew that Sarina, whom he loved devotedly, was the worst cook on the street). The husbands of the rue Hawayati would rib him for weeks afterwards.

I had come to Egypt in search of what remained of the world of my mother. All the warnings about danger and squalor had simply glanced off my skin. Nothing would have stopped me. And arriving at the clean marble airport, I knew immediately where I was. I had heard so often, as I was growing up, about Egyptian jokes, Egyptian good-humour, Egyptian warmth, that, despite all the differences that would shortly become apparent – Cairo in 1941 had a million inhabitants, but more than 25 million in 2015, the "foreign communities" were numerous then but are certainly not now, the streets of central Cairo where the Zarmatis and the Nahums lived were neat and scrubbed in 1941, but now are decorated with open drains and dead cats, the traffic then was sparse and orderly, but is now called by the locals the eighth wonder of the world because of its outstanding chaos, the buildings were well-kept then but are now, in many cases, submerged under graffiti, and are literally falling down – despite all of that, there was a charm, a warm-

heartedness, and a dignity that I recognised and was captivated by right away. I could live here, I thought. I know this place.

It did not take me long to find 19, rue Hawayati. The street names had all changed, of course, but an extraordinary man of 85, Albert Arié, the only male Jew left in Cairo, a heroic and incorruptible person with a remarkable history of political activity and imprisonment, had made a table for me showing, on the left side, all the old street names, and on the right, their modern equivalents. We shall be meeting this man again. It was only a short walk from his office. (Albert has an office. He is still active, constantly on the phone to Europe, exporting Egyptian fruit).



In the rue Hawayati (Youssef el Guindi), I duly found an open ditch, on which nobody seemed to be working, and a dead cat pointing the way.

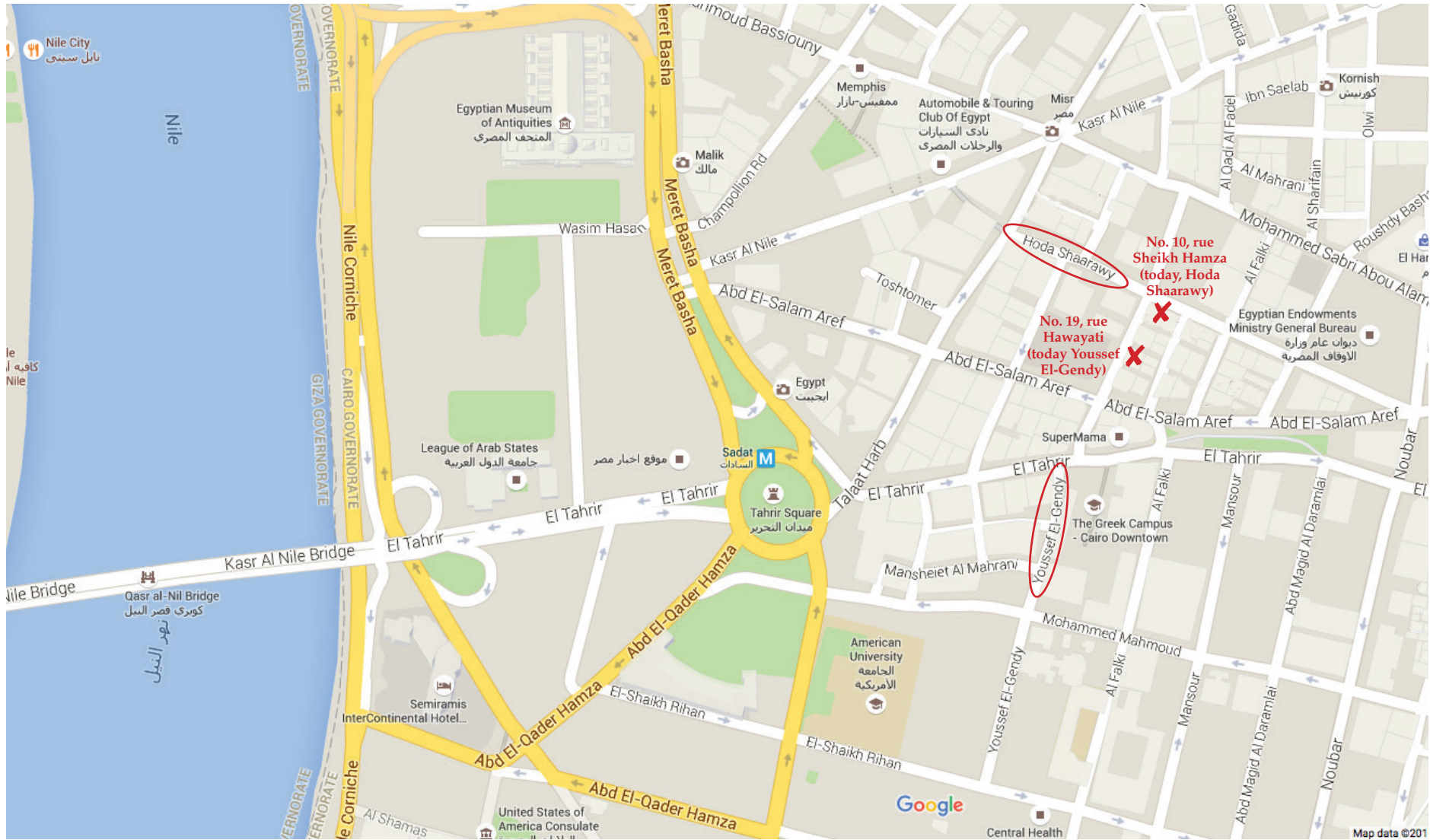
Nos 19 and 20 were the same buildings where the young Élie had scampered on the landings and slid down the banisters to the ground floor, and where Esther, her mother Sarina, her sister Sol, and her brother Maurice, had lived on the second floor.

Despite the relative decay of the buildings, their original character was still easily recognisable. This was not the old Jewish quarter of Cairo, Haret al-Yahud, where very poor Jews had lived since antiquity, until they could barely be distinguished by dress, language or habits from the Muslim Egyptians<sup>56</sup>. This was the quarter of the educated, modern, middle class Europeans, who would send their children to the Lycée Français, perhaps hold a foreign passport<sup>57</sup> speak several languages, be treated in a modern hospital, have one or more servants, set up their

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56 Albert Arié carried out considerable humanitarian work in the Haret al-Yahud during the cholera epidemic of 1949.

57 My mother's relatives the Cardosos would hold Italian passports, obtained because their ancestors had gone to Livorno after being expelled from Spain in 1492.



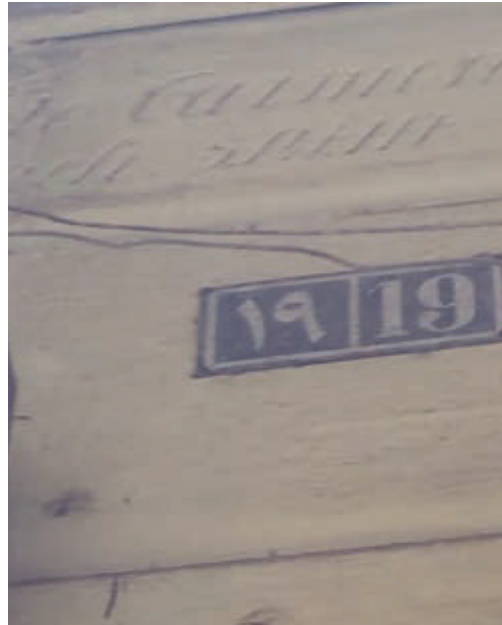
Central Cairo with No. 19, rue Hwayati



No. 20, rue Hawayati, where Élie lived, opposite no. 19, where my mother lived (today the street is called Youssef el Guindi)







*No. 19, rue Hawayati,  
where my mother lived*



own businesses or hold important positions in others, play sport in their leisure time, spend three months' summer holidays in Alexandria, go to the hammam not primarily to wash but to have a day out, with picnics and gossip, enrol their sons in the boy scouts, spend hours at the dressmaker's, have charming little afternoon teas, and go dancing at Groppi's. The language of all of them, the lingua franca, was French. At home, they may have spoken Armenian, or Ladino, or Italian, or Greek, but to each other, they were Monsieur or Madame Petrosyan, Molho, Lombardi or Papadopoulos. Their world seemed so permanent, under the comforting umbrella of the British.

I stood in front of the two buildings, and all the vanished world of my mother came alive in a rush. I heard the shouts of the Nahum children and the click of Esther's heels on the pavement. I saw two young Zarmati sisters emerging from the door of the building, each dressed for her own purposes, Esther in immaculate white and blue for basketball<sup>58</sup>, Sol in something random, for the library. It was not hard for me to recognise that tall fair-haired young man standing on the pavement, looking up, wondering how to take the next step.

Egon Zaccaria had been in Cairo for only a few months. And he had not always remained in the city during that period. He and his brother had been sent to Haifa for code and communications training at the SOE training camp on Mount Carmel, STS 102; they would also be sent to Malta for a first attempt, which failed, at an espionage mission in Italy; and, according to the statements they made to the Italian police, they would spend several months in Port Said. Now back in Cairo, Egon was probably waiting for further word from SIS' Degolle about their next training or espionage activity would be.

On the third day after he had seen Esther, he gathered his courage, dressed in a new formal grey suit, bought a bunch of flowers, and waited until she had had time to get back inside the apartment. Then he went in the street door and up the marble stairs.

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**152** 58 Esther was in Egypt's Maccabi basketball team, and met King Farouk.

He probably would not have taken the lift. He was a smalltown boy and there were no lifts in any of the buildings he had known in his youth. In any case, he was young and strong and eager. He would probably have bounded up the stairs.

I, on the other hand, favoured the lift. It must surely be the same lift today, old, timeworn, probably fickle. It was caged in indestructible black iron, with a worn black handle to open the door. Touching that black handle, I was surprised to feel my heart pounding and tears filling my eyes. My mother must have touched this very handle hundreds of times when she was young. And here I was doing the same, my hand on hers.

The young man rang the bell by the apartment door. It still works today. He had not expected to see the person who opened it – a little white-haired lady dressed all in black. She looked up at him inquiringly, and said, in Ladino, “Si, ke kiere?”

Sarina knew enough French to understand two of the words the young man stammered: “Votre fille”. She bustled down the corridor and called Esther. The first time Esther saw Egon, she understood immediately from his face that he had come for her, and not Sol. Hope sprang up that with this handsome young suitor, she could finally forget the Maccabi basketball coach who had asked for her hand in marriage when she was 17, and been refused because her older sister Sol was not yet married herself (a common attitude in the Levant).

She invited him in, and the three of them, Sarina, Esther and Egon, sat awkwardly in the front living room. Egon explained that he had seen Esther walking in the street and would like to invite her to the cinema.

Cairo at the time had numerous movie theatres. Albert Arié remembers at least six: the Royal (today the national theatre (Il Goumhouria), the Diana, the Miami, la Potinière, the Rex et the Saint James, all names revealing who the clientele really was. There were many others – the Metro Cinema, the Opera Cinema, and Cinema Radio, many of them on the rue Soliman Pacha, now Tala’at Harb, right in the middle of Cairo, a shortish stroll from 19, rue Hawayati.

They went to the newest one, the Metro Cinema, which had only been open for eighteen months, and watched a rerun of *Gone With The Wind*. Sarina did not understand much of the dialogue, even though it was dubbed into French. Egon's French was not perfect – he had studied it for two years at school in the small town where he was brought up, Laurana, in Istria (now called Lovran), and had already spent a few months in Cairo – but it was certainly good enough to move, after a second cinema outing, to the next step, which was to suggest a foursome, without Sarina there.



At this point, he told a lie. He had, he said, a friend. The friend was five years older. Perhaps Esther would like to invite her sister Sol to the cinema, and he would bring his friend. Sarina agreed. So the next week, he brought his brother Amaury, and the four of them went to the Metro. Egon called this new man Raoul, not Amaury<sup>59</sup>. He did not say that this was his brother. Degolle, Hooper and Sweet had instilled in both of them the need for dissimulation in the hotbed of spies that was wartime Cairo. Who knew, Esther was maybe a plant, an Axis agent.

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<sup>59</sup> Raoul was the third name he was given on his birth certificate. It was the name my mother, and her whole family, knew him under.



The moment Amaury saw my mother, he was instantly smitten. My uncle Élie told me that Amaury had been *“tout de suite épris de ta mère”*. The two of them were remarkably alike: bold, risk-taking, courageous, life-loving, forceful, and quick to laugh. On the way to the cinema they did not stop talking. Pretty soon it became obvious that the two sisters were very far from Axis plants. They were Jewish, for one thing, and guileless, for another. My mother would retain that quality of innocence throughout her life.

At 30, she too, had an unhappy past she wished to forget – an Italian Jewish man from Cairo, a certain Edilio Sdraffa, whose mother thought that Sol was too modern, not traditionally Jewish enough, for her son, and who had lacked the courage to stand his ground.

The light-heartedness, the high spirits, and the devil-may-care masculinity of Raoul were a tonic after the milquetoast of yore. This man was a real match for her. Suddenly, after all the struggles, the obligation to lead the little family after the death of their father, the daily grind of taking orders from the petty Caligula in the National Bank, the constant knowledge that Sarina was completely dependent on her, my mother felt the sun coming out.

The four of them went out everywhere together, the cinema, the cafés, the desert. They would take horses from the handlers near the pyramids and gallop rapturously over the rocky ground. They would camp under the desert sky. They would eat watermelons and throw the seeds into the sand. When they next came to the spot, they would find watermelons growing abundantly. They would laugh and take photographs and feel fully alive.

The photographs of her during this period show her with a secret smile of satisfaction. One of them shows her full-throated, abandoned laugh. In no other photograph of my mother ever taken, except two that I have from this period, is she shown as yielding, happily surrendering<sup>60</sup>. Elderly relatives have told me in recent interviews that when Raoul visited them, in Cairo and Alexandria, in company with my mother, they would always be in high spirits.

Actually Raoul would have to visit and stay with several branches of the Nahum tree. His whereabouts had to be kept secret in the spy-ridden quicksand that was Cairo, so he went from one apartment to another. It appears that nothing fazed him. My aunt Silvia, who was ten in 1941, remembers Raoul coming to the apartment of her parents in Alexandria, mischievously sneaking a large sardine from a carefully prepared plate due to be taken to table, holding it up and lowering it whole into his mouth, finishing the performance with a broad smile.

*Il était très sympathique*, said my aunt, you liked him right away. I certainly liked what I could see of him in the photos taken in Egypt.

On 22 February 1942, they were married in St Joseph's Church, Cairo. The church stands today where it always did, on the corner of two streets in downtown i.e. (formerly) elegant central Cairo. One of those streets was called the rue Emad el Din. Ironically, Zionist headquarters was located there in the 1930s, and my uncle Élie lived on that street as a little boy<sup>61</sup>. Today it is called Mohammed Farid, after the President of

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60 There is a photograph of them on the balcony of 19, rue Hawayati, on a spot where I was to stand myself 74 years later.





the Egyptian National Party in the early 20th century, and it is no longer a relaxed Parisian boulevard with tramways in the middle, as it was for them, but a teeming, dilapidated thoroughfare that nevertheless feels properly and authentically Egyptian.

Inside, St. Joseph's Church is coldly institutional, with little of the warmth and colour of many Catholic churches in Italy. I cannot imagine what was going through my mother's mind when, after countless generations of ancestors who had chosen death or exile rather than conversion, she entered this church to be married. Of course, she did not convert to Catholicism. She was merely going through the motions in order to marry the man she had fallen in love with.

It is hard, too, to imagine what Amaury was thinking when he organised the marriage at the church, for certainly it was he who made all the arrangements. His parents were both left wing activists, and presumably anti-clerical, but in Catholic Istria, with both Italian and Croatian strains, it may not have been abnormal for such people to have got married in a church. After Mussolini's 1929 Concordat with the Catholic Church, no other option was available under fascism.

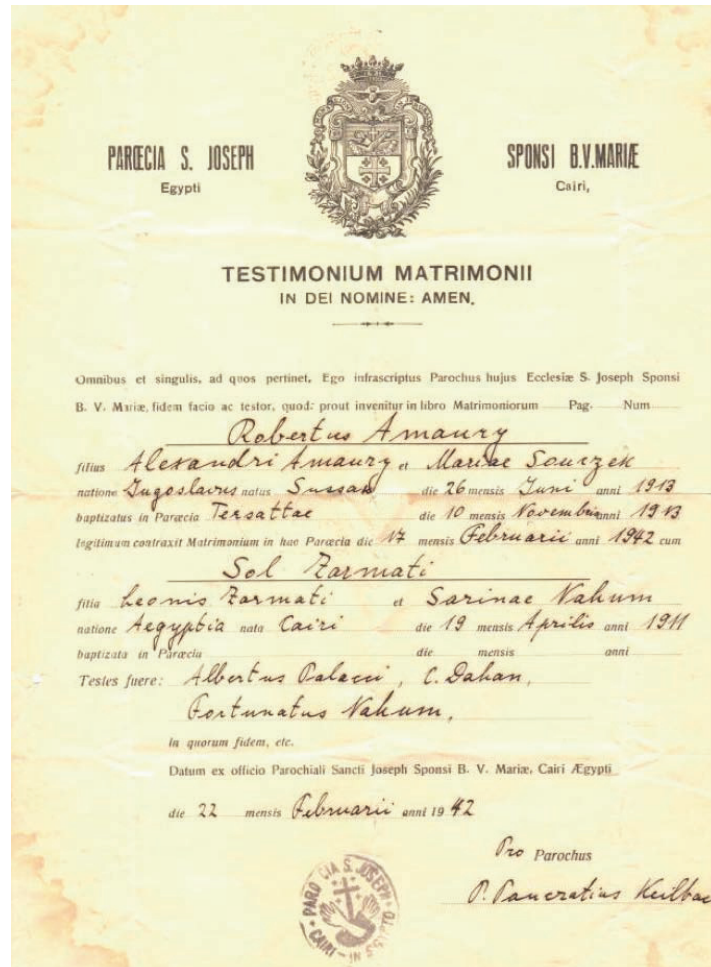




Or perhaps there was another reason for the church wedding in Cairo. The only other place where two non-Egyptians could have married would have been in the *Tribunaux Mixtes*, the so-called Mixed Courts, which had been set up in 1875 to handle all legal matters involving foreigners in Egypt. But Amaury was living in clandestinity. He could not declare to a court who he was or what he was doing in Egypt. So a civil marriage, in the courts, was out of the question. The only option was this grey, forbidding institution nearby. Religion hardly entered into their relations. Sol was very modern, secular and practical (although towards the end of her life she made me promise to bury her in the Jewish section of the cemetery, which I did, of course), and Amaury was the child of two people who called themselves communists. So not much importance should be attached to the fact that this was a church wedding. Almost certainly, there was no alternative.

On the face of it, their marriage at this juncture in the war was highly imprudent. The seesaw battles of North Africa were creating a highly uncertain environment. What with Italian offensives, Allied counter-offensives, fluctuating fortunes and supply problems on each side, aerial attacks on Alexandria, chants of the fascist hymn *Giovinezza* in the





streets, nothing presaged peace or stability. In January 1941, the Allies had taken Tobruk, which the Axis powers then placed under prolonged siege. Operation *Battleaxe* in June failed to break the siege of Tobruk, although in November *Crusader* succeeded, adding thousands of Italian prisoners to the tens of thousands already captured. (We have already met four of these prisoners, or at least seen their military ID papers). However, the Axis forces attacked again, Tobruk fell, and in July 1942 the Allied troops were driven back to a little railway station at El Alamein, 100 kms from Alexandria, on the train line that ran alongside the coast. There, in the first battle of El Alamein (the second, decisive, one would be in October), the Axis troops were temporarily stopped from penetrating any further into Egypt.

(In that month, July 1942, an episode was to occur which would become, for British authors at least, one of the most darkly humorous, even farcical, events of the war in North Africa. Some called it “The

Flap”<sup>62</sup>, others, “Ash Wednesday”<sup>63</sup>, and yet others, the day of the “Black Rain”<sup>64</sup>. On that day, British officials, panicking at the possibility of an Axis entry into Cairo, burned, or at least attempted to burn, a large number of official documents.

Major Samsom recounts:

*Meanwhile secret documents were already being burnt. Large incinerators had been placed on the roof of Red Pillars, as the headquarters in Kasr el Aini was called, and I was responsible for the safe transfer of documents scheduled for destruction. This operation was hardly over when one of my NCOs bought some peanuts from a street-vendor and found they were wrapped up in a paper marked MOST SECRET. Asked where he had got it, the vendor said he had picked it up in the street. It turned out that it was one of many papers that had gone up in smoke, but unburnt, from the open incinerators at GHQ. A strong wind had ensured that they were scattered over a wide area of the city. We could not have done a better job of distributing secret documents around Cairo if we had tried.*<sup>65</sup>

The “black rain” that fell all over Cairo was the charred detritus of the burned pages.)

Politically, too, the situation was highly volatile. The Egyptian population hated the British presence, which they viewed as an occupation, and King Farouk sought a solution to the dilemma – British power keeping him on the throne vs popular resentment against the British – by declaring neutrality. (In any case, the Axis powers were finding a receptive ear in the palace). Neutrality was hardly to the liking of the British, and on 4 February, three weeks before Amaury and Sol were married, the British forced King Farouk to accept an ultimatum – either he changed

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62 Major A.W. Sansom, *I Spied Spies*, George G. Harrap & Co, London, 1965, pp. 95-97.

63 Andrew Beattie, *Cairo: A Cultural and Literary History*, Signal Books, Oxford, 2005, p. 174.

64 Olivia Manning, *In The Danger Tree*.

65 Sansom, op. cit., p. 97.

his neutral government and called on Mustapha Nahas Pasha, the pro-Allied leader of the Wafd Party, to form a government, or he would lose his throne. On the streets and in the Egyptian military the reaction to this humiliation was profound. The first president of independent Egypt, Mohammed Naguib, was to say that this incident decisively politicized him and led him to direct action against the British.

In February 1942, these sentiments and currents were present, but they were simmering under the surface. To all appearances at that stage, life seemed to be continuing as normal. In the few weeks they had together after they decided to get married, Amaury and Sol tasted the sweetest moments of their lives. They went to the Khan Khalil district of the Muski, the great gold, silver and brass bazaar, and, with the allowance he was receiving from the British, he bought her a wedding ring. They took the 15-hour trip in a wagon-lit carriage to Luxor in Upper Egypt, crossed the Nile in a felucca and arrived in the Valley of the Kings and Queens. They saw the temples of Karnak, Hatshepsut, and Medinet Habu, the statues of Memnon, and the tombs of Seti I and Tutankhamon. In the evenings, they took horse-drawn carriages along the Nile, watching it flow wide and majestic under a huge yellow moon<sup>66</sup>.

They went dancing at Groppi's, which I was to see seventy-three years later, but they did not, of course, go on the English-only nights (one way the British alienated those they was seeking to save). They went swimming at several of the chain of beaches at Alexandria – Ibrahimiyeh, Chatby, Sporting, Cleopatra, Stanley Bay – the most fashionable one in the early 1940s – and Sidi Bishr further away – but not, of course at Mustafa Pasha, which was reserved for British soldiers and their families (yet another mistake by the British). They went out to the Pyramids, and rented horses and tents, and galloped, and ate, and slept, and laughed.

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66 I draw these pictures from my aunt Esther's memories and interviews with Élie.

In the box I found is an indistinct photograph, presumably taken by Sol, of Esther, Egon, brother Maurice, and Amaury (crouching), on an excursion in the desert):



It would have been madness for Amaury to go to the Gezira Sporting Club and swim there, even though it was frequented by his nominal friends the British, because Germans, Italians and other adherents of fascism operated in that hotbed of spies too. In any case, this egalitarian-minded man would have revolted against the elitism of that huge, luxurious complex on Zemalek, the island in the Nile<sup>67</sup>.

But there was plenty to do otherwise. They visited family – and Sol had a very large family in Cairo and Alexandria. Amaury stayed with some of them. It was in this period that my cousin Sylvia, then aged 10, remembers seeing him wolfing down the sardines, and arriving always in high spirits.

They went to the cinema, to cafés, to pâtisseries. They walked arm in arm along the corniche in Alexandria. They took picnics to the Ezbekkiya Garden and the Jardin Andalou. They never stopped talking to each other, in their assortment of languages.

The two of them spoke French together, and in the few short months they knew each other, Sol taught him some Ladino and even more Greek. They sometimes lapsed into Italian, which Sol also knew quite well. In Constantinople, he had picked up a few Turkish words, and Sol knew some too from Sarina, so their conversations were a Levantine mixture of half-remembered, not always accurate phrases in several languages, uttered with gusto and laughter. There were also more than a few Arabic words, although my mother, unlike her cousins, did not speak Arabic fluently. Gudrun Krämer outlines this Levantine mélange succinctly:

*The Sephardi immigrants [in Egypt] spoke Ladino (Judeo-Spanish derived from Latin) but frequently also knew French, Italian, Turkish or Arabic<sup>68</sup>.*

There is one other photograph of them in my mother's box:



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68 *The Jews in Modern Egypt 1914-1952*, by Gudrun Krämer, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1989, p. 27

Contentment and fulfillment are evident in Sol's face. Actually I never in my life saw her with this expression. In her life after Amaury, Sol would always be struggling, searching for something, never finding it for more than a few minutes at a time – seeing a sunset in San Francisco, watching me act on the stage – but never again encountering the profound, abiding sense of serenity and repleteness that is so clear in the photographs I found in her hidden box.

They had very little time left together. They did have all of March 1942. In April, Amaury, as he said in his statement later to the Italian kangaroo court, was told he had to go to Malta immediately for the long-projected mission to Italy. But the planning and organization of the mission were, he said, still so poor that the mission was aborted and he went back to Cairo in May. (The planning for the mission they eventually did go on was poor too, as we have seen).

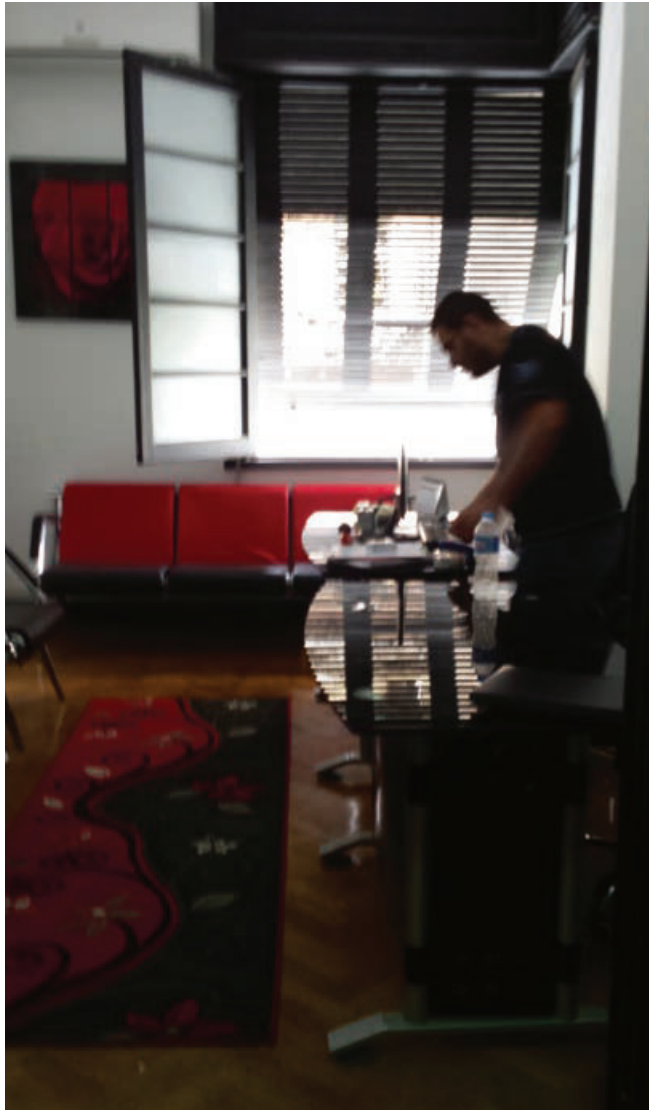
The clock was now ticking relentlessly. They were to have only a few weeks left together, perhaps six or seven, from May to July. Sometime in July, around the time of "The Flap", the British decided that British wives and families should be evacuated from Egypt. Sarina was offered a seat on the train to Palestine, but she refused to go. As the wife of a man spying for Britain, Sol was obliged to go, largely by Amaury, who did not want to alienate the British any further, and who in any case did not want to put her, both as a Jew and the wife of a spy working for the British, in any danger at all. She took Esther with her to Palestine. I have never known why Maurice did not go with them. Sarina was looked after by Élie, who moved her out of the apartment at 19, rue Hawayati, round the corner to the second floor of no. 10, rue Sheikh Hamza (today Hoda Shaarawi<sup>69</sup>)<sup>70</sup>. That apartment is a travel agency today, and the operators let me inside.

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69 Hoda Shaarawi (1879 – 1947) was a remarkable, courageous feminist who opened girls' schools, removed her hijab when outside the home, organized many social services for girls and women, and represented Egypt at numerous feminist and other congresses.

70 Interviews with Élie.





*The reception room of the travel agency, formerly my mother's living room*

This was the apartment in Cairo.

The day in July 1942 when Sol's train left the Cairo platform for Palestine was the last time Sol and Amaury were ever to see each other. I imagine them on the platform covering their panic with jokes and laughter, and Amaury silently walking back, alone, to the exit. He was to remain on his own in Cairo till 3 October 1942, when he and Egon were instructed to go to Malta for the fateful mission to Italy that was to end their lives. For my mother, what was ending on that platform was the possibility of any real happiness in the future.

During this period, Sol and Esther went to Nahariya, a resort town on the Mediterranean in what is, today, Israel but was then Palestine. My mother told me several times that in Palestine, she went to a church – why, I don't know – and that instead of giving a spiritual sermon, the priest berated her for wearing a sleeveless dress.

Sixty miles (~100 kms) from Alexandria, something was being prepared at that moment which would save the life of my mother, her sister, her brother, her mother, her cousins, and all the 100,000-strong Jewish community of Egypt, and incidentally, make my arrival possible.

The story of the second battle of El Alamein has often been told. There are dozens of books and several films on this critical battle of World War II, which turned the tide of the war, and changed gloom and panic into hope. A partial list of these books appears in the Bibliography.

Australians know about Gallipoli. They know about Tobruk. They know about Kokoda. But most Australians do not understand the importance for Australia of the battle of El Alamein. There is no general appreciation in this country that Hitler had a grand plan for North Africa that, if it had succeeded, would have meant devastation for far-away Australia: first, take the Suez Canal and Egypt, then move on to Palestine, on to the rich oilfields of Iraq, where the population was anti-British, swoop down on the biggest prize of all, India, and then join up with Japan to control the Far East. Australia's vulnerability, if that had happened, does not have to be underlined. What the Australian soldiers were fighting for at El Alamein was not just to prevent the Axis taking Egypt, but to forestall the success of the grand plan. Many Australians do not understand either, despite the exemplary efforts of Mark Johnston and Peter Stanley<sup>71</sup>, is that in this pivotal battle of World War II, Australians played a pivotal role. On the ground, at least. Certainly, the Americans provided tanks, for this largest tank battle in history; the British provided the leadership, in the person of Montgomery, and the intelligence, from the Enigma

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71 Mark Johnston and Peter Stanley, *Alamein: the Australian Story*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2002

machine; but the Australians, mainly the 9th Australian Division under the brilliant command of General Morshead, provided the combination of ingenuity, bravery and persistence on the ground that turned the tide of the battle itself.

In a nutshell, the Axis had laid down a line of mines southwards from the coast. Montgomery's plan was for the Australians to try to break through to the sea in the north, the British to punch through in the centre, and a dummy army to distract the Axis to the south. At 9 p.m. on the night of 23 October, when Amaury and Egon were still in the Poggioreale prison in Naples, and Sol in Nahariya, 950 enormous guns all spoke at once, in a boom that shook the ground, that was easily heard in Alexandria and that even today, causes the viewer of the film of the assault to flinch in his seat. The weird wailing of bagpipes in the desert followed, as Highland regiments marched forward in the dust and the whirling sand.

Élie was in Alexandria, and remembers the family clustered shakily around the radio in the lead-up to the battle. Everyone in the family was fully aware of what an Axis victory would mean for them. Even then, the deportations of Jews in Europe to concentration camps were well known, although the vast industrial scale of the murders was not. My aunt Sylvia remembers an Italian woman saying to her (Sylvia's) mother Rebecca in the street in Alexandria, *Madame Cardoso, you will be the first we'll come to get when we win*, and my aunt Esther remembered young fascists parading in the streets of Cairo singing the fascist hymn, *Giovinezza*. The lives of the Jews of Egypt were certainly in the balance in late October 1942, and they knew it all too well.

Élie's family in Cairo was calling him to come home urgently. So he went to the railway station in Alexandria at five in the morning, only to find the platform totally crowded with hundreds of people. It proved impossible for him to find a seat, or even standing room, so he made his way to the front cab, where the engineer was shoveling coal into the furnace, and sat on top of the pile of coal. As the trip progressed, the engineer would take more and more coal from the bottom of the pile, so that when they finally arrived in Cairo, Élie, covered in soot from head

to toe, was sitting on the floor of the front cab, in the middle of random little lumps of coal.

He need not have bothered. The first assault by the British in the middle of the lines failed to break through, but it was the Australians in the north, who with doggedness, ingenuity and bravery, did manage to pierce through the Axis defences and arrive at the sea. Upon which, Montgomery decided to send the main body of troops through the breach which the Australians had opened. From that moment, the battle was essentially won, although the next two weeks were grim and bloody. No Auschwitz now for the Jews of Egypt. And no Armageddon for Australia.

Other Spanish Jewish communities would not be as fortunate as those living in Egypt. After the Germans invaded Greece in April 1941, almost all the 60,000 Jews of Salonica, most of them of Spanish origin, would be deported and murdered in Bergen Belsen and Auschwitz, as would all the 2,000 Jews of Rhodes. The only ones left of a two-thousand-year tradition would be those of Egypt, Turkey, Bulgaria and the few in Athens and Palestine.

Every year when they were small, I took my children to the Anzac Day parade in Sydney, to give thanks to the Australian soldiers who fought and died in the battle that saved my family's life<sup>72</sup>, and made mine possible. In 1943, Churchill said, *As I told General Morshead in a letter I gave him before his departure from Cairo, this division has left behind it a record of energy, courage, enterprise and daring which will be an imperishable memory among all the nations of the British Empire who fought in true comradeship in the Western Desert.*<sup>73</sup> And 25 years later, Montgomery was to say, *The more I think of it, the more I realize that winning was only made possible by the bravery of the 9th Division*<sup>74</sup>. It is a fine page in Australia's history, under-

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72 At least seven Australian Jews died in that battle, according to my reading of the list of Australian dead.

73 Quoted in Australia's pivotal role in 'the end of the beginning' remains underrated at home, by Paul Kelly, article in *The Australian*, November 10, 2012.

74 Johnston and Stanley, op. cit.

appreciated not only by Australians generally but by Jews everywhere. My own debt may be insignificant, but it is deeply felt.

Sarina had stayed in Cairo, going shopping, and organizing her move round the corner to number 10, rue Sheikh Hamza. In November, once victory had been declared on 12th, the day Alessandro handed himself in, Sol and Esther came home, and moved in with her. And Sol waited for Amaury to come back. He had always come back before. The days dragged on, one by one, and he did not come. December arrived, and he did not come.

One day in early December there was a knock on the door. Standing on the threshold were two British officers. They brought some news, and they carried a newspaper from Rome. I found that very newspaper in my mother's hidden box.

It is *Il Tevere* (the Tiber), which, I was to discover, was the most notorious of all the virulent fascist newspapers of the day in Italy. In the Gestapo headquarters in the via Tasso in Rome, I found another issue of *Il Tevere* posted up on a wall on which copies of an astonishing number of other fascist newspapers were also mounted. The *Il Tevere* issue read as the most savage of all of them. The newspaper had a suitably hectoring masthead but it is the content of two front page articles that strikes the reader the most.



The first article reads:

### **TWO TRAITORS SHOT IN THE BACK**

*During the night of 9 October last, on a stretch of beach in southern Italy, two individuals disembarked from a British submarine, dressed as Italian officers. They were immediately arrested by men of our Coast Guard.*

*Supplied with false identity papers, and a large sum of money, a radio transmitter and receiver, and weapons, they were identified as the brothers Amaury Zaccaria, 29, and Egon Zaccaria, 26, Italian citizens from Fiume, both deserters who had gone over to the enemy.*

*They admitted to having been sent to Italy to carry out acts of sabotage and espionage [illegible – obliterated by the long-standing fold of the paper].*

*Convicted by the Special Tribunal for the Defence of the State on 9 November, they were both condemned and shot in the back after demotion. The sentence was carried out yesterday morning in a location near Rome.*

The second article is interesting:

### **WHY CALL THEM “ITALIANS”? THEY WERE JEWS!**

*In the highly accurate list of Jewish surnames, put together by the Jew Samuel Schaerf and published by the Israel publishing house in 1925, we see, among others listed under the letter “Z”, the name “Zaccaria”. And so we need to ask ourselves, why does the bulletin reproduced above make no mention of the fact that these two criminals were Jewish? Why, even in death notices, are the names of dead Jews and living Jews, although preceded by a misleading little cross and standard benedictions, passed off as Italian, without undergoing the necessary “quarantine”? How many times does it need to be said that a baptized, and blessed, Jew remains a Jew? How many times is it said that the worst of all Jews is the secret one? Do we want to aid and abet these evildoers?*

**BE VIGILANT! . . .**

## Due traditori fucilati nella schiena

La notte sul 9 ottobre scorso in un tratto di spiagge dell'Italia meridionale sbarcarono da un sommergibile inglese due individui in divisa di ufficiali italiani, che furono immediatamente arrestati da elementi della nostra vigilanza costiera.

Essi muniti di falsi documenti di identità, di un'ingentissima somma di denaro, di un apparecchio radio trasmittente e ricevente e di armi, furono identificati per i fratelli Zaccaria Amari, di anni 29, e Zaccaria Egone, di anni 26, cittadini italiani nati di Fiume, entrambi disertori con passaggio al nemico.

Essi hanno ammesso di essere stati inviati in Italia per compiere atti di sabotaggio e di spio-

Giudicati il 9 novembre corr. dal Tribunale Speciale per la difesa dello Stato sono stati condannati entrambi alla pena di morte mediante fucilazione nella schiena, previa degradazione.

La sentenza è stata eseguita ieri mattina all'alba in una località nei pressi di Roma.

## Perchè "italiani",? EBREI!

Nell'insospettabile elenco dei cognomi ebrei, redatto dall'ebreo Samuele Schatri e pubblicato dalla Casa editrice Israel nel 1925, alla lettera Z s'incontra, fra gli altri, il cognome Zaccaria. E allora conviene domandarsi: perchè il comunicato qui sopra riprodotto non fa cenno della qualità di ebrei che spetta ai due criminali? Perchè i giornali fascisti non distinguono gli italiani dagli ebrei? Perchè, anche nelle necrologie, gli ebrei morti e gli ebrei vivi, purchè preceduti da una compiacente crocetta e accompagnati dalle consuete benedizioni, passano come italiani, senza subire la necessaria quarantena? Quante volte s'è detto che un ebreo battezzato e benedetto rimane un ebreo? Quante volte si è detto che, fra gli ebrei, il peggiore è quello clandestino? Ci vogliamo far complici di questi malfattori? Attenzione!...

A gust from the sulphurous pit of the fascist mind. A month later, on 2 December 1942, a Cairo newspaper, *Le Journal d’Egypte Magazine*, which I also found in my mother’s hidden box, printed these few sentences:



*To conclude, the via crucis [the Way of the Cross, i.e. the martyrdom] of the Italian people has once more been watered with the blood of two heroes, the Zaccaria brothers, who, coming from outside Italy, penetrated the fascist war machine, to reaffirm the voice of justice and liberty. At dawn on 9th November, they fell under the bullets of the fascist firing squad, joining the long list of Italian martyrs.*

Due traditori. Deux héros. Two traitors, two heroes.

Who brought these newspapers to my mother? Was it Degolle? Did he delegate this distasteful job to uniformed officers? Did Millar himself do the deed? Probably not, given the British estimate of the boys as “happy-go-lucky” and unreliable. How did the British even get the copy of *Il Tevere* in the first place? If a local Italian anti-fascist got it to them somehow, why was this person not recruited to help the Zaccaria brothers when they landed? I could only speculate that it was someone from an SOE mission who went rapidly in and out of Italy on a sabotage



job and somehow bought this paper without arousing suspicion, brought it back to Cairo and gave it to the SIS station there. I do not know the answers, and they can never be released from SIS files.

I have visualised many things, but one thing I cannot imagine is how my mother felt when she opened the door to the two British officials, whoever they were. She was always very practical, but she can have had no doubt that her period of deep happiness was over.

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This was the end of the first of the three great stories that converged on number 19, rue Hawayati, Cairo in 1942, and intersected in the slight person of my mother.

Now all she had to fall back on was her family. She was the leader of the small, four-strong Zarmati group, but luckily there was the whole Nahum clan to offer support.

The Nahum clan, her underpinning, her roots, her security, her identity. In my search for the factors that had made my mother what she was, it was now time for me to explore the Nahum story, from its origins in Spain, to the time they rallied around the new widow in Cairo, in the early days of December 1942.



# **2.**

# **NAHUM**

**The Path from Toledo  
and the  
Ottoman Empire**





### a. Familiar strangers in the photograph

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These strangers looked familiar, in fact some of them even looked a lot like me. Since they were in the photograph my mother's blue box, they must be family. And if the baby really was "Solette", then these must be my mother's people, or to be more precise, my mother's mother's people. Not her father's – he had been orphaned very young (that kindly man holding "Solette" on his lap, his eyes twinkling, must be her father). So, it was not a stretch to conclude these strangers were Nahums. Sarina, my mother's formidable mother, had been born a Nahum, the eldest of ten children. These must be her brothers and sisters. The elderly man with the tarboush – he must be Sarina's father. Were these familiar strangers really my family? These people must have nurtured, influenced, formed my mother?

Searching for the influences that had made my mother into what she was, I had to start somewhere. Family was a logical place. However, occurring between 1945 and 1959, the second great Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, more than two thousand years after the first, had swept the Nahum family to Brazil, Italy, France, Israel, Cuba, and the United

States, from their comfortable multicultural paradise in Cairo and Alexandria. I knew almost none of them.

But I was determined. There was one elderly cousin in Sydney with whom I had lost touch. I called, and the twenty or more years of separation fell away easily. In her Levantine-accented French, as familiar to me as an old slipper, she gossiped and shared memories. We ate cakes, shed tears. She told me that this one was her mother Rebecca, hostess extraordinaire; that one her uncle Abner, father of six; the other Uncle Jo, the family's financial success story; this one was her aunt, my grandmother, the indomitable Sarina; that one on the left, Rachele, had died young; this one had gone to the United States; the son of that one had gone to Cuba as a young Communist; and the gentleman with the tarboush was indeed Sarina's father, the traditional, devout patriarch Jacob Nahum. I drank it all in.

It seemed that one of the six children of Uncle Abner, the man sitting on the right of the photograph, was still alive, in Milan. He was my next stop. And although I had never met him before, an unfamiliar warmth overpowered me from the moment I walked into his home in Milan. Right away I knew who he was. I was with family. I who had never had a family, who had been a solitary only child of mixed heritage, who had grown into a bookish, rather retiring adult, suddenly had a family. As it turned out, an enormous family.

Uncle Élie – what do you call your mother's first cousin? – was, is, a fount of family lore, the unofficial family historian. At 92, he worked every day in his office. He had a job. His job was family. He had file upon file, albums, collections, letters, drawings, photographs. He had written a book, *En Égypte Trente-Cinq Ans*, published in Paris, about the Nahum family and its life in the fifty short but brilliant years of its sojourn in Egypt. I recorded



dozens of hours of conversations with Uncle Élie. We forgot the silent little machine on the coffee table.

He told me about the people in the photograph. He told me that they had all, apart from “Solette”, the baby, been born in Smyrna during the Ottoman Empire. He told me that “Solette”’s and his generation were the last of a family of Spanish Jews, who, after being expelled from Toledo in Spain in 1492, had first sailed to Amsterdam, had then travelled to Smyrna, where they stayed for three hundred years, and had left Smyrna for Egypt in 1906. It was enthralling, not just as family tradition, but as history as lived through the vicissitudes of a single family. I realized how little I knew about the influences and the history that had shaped my mother. I did recall her singing songs from Smyrna, and snatches of them sprang unexpectedly to my lips. They evoked other memories – how she would describe the jokes, the irreverence, the amusements of the Nahums in Smyrna; the multicultural character of the cities she, and her mother, had lived in; the customs, the education, the dramas of the family in its two Levantine homes. I remembered how she had made me take flamenco and Spanish lessons, and how she had even, in an effort to embed Hispanic culture, introduced me to the reserved young Opus Dei representative in Sydney. There was no doubt that Spain, Smyrna, and Cairo, had all three shaped her, and so, in my search for those influences, and their historical context, I decided to start at the beginning, in Toledo, move on to Smyrna, and finish in Cairo. I was ready to go right away.

But first, Élie insisted, I had to learn more about the Nahum family. He was right. I had to understand my own neighbourhood before venturing out into the unknown Spanish Jewish world, where I had only been a fringe dweller up till now. Together we worked out a gigantic family tree. It included Nahums by the dozen, Albaglis, Avrams, Morenos, Cardosos, Sauls, Sorias, Russos, Behors, all typically Spanish Jewish names revealing the rich Spanish, Arab, and Hebrew roots of this once thriving people. There were other Jewish names like Finzi, which were Italian. It was a colourful new universe.

So we started very near to home, with my mother's parents, both of them gazing at the photographer. Léon Zarmati and Sarina Zarmati née Nahum. He is holding my mother on his lap. It is 1911.

## Léon

Quite unlike Sarina, Léon was a gentle soul. In the photograph he is the only one of the thirteen with a hint of a smile. My mother, strong-minded like Sarina, always felt protective towards her calm and tender father. And her milder sister Esther, born in 1917, a kindred placid spirit, loved him much more than she did her forceful, determined mother. Whenever they spoke to me about him, they both always used the same words: *Il était doux*, he was sweet.



As a boy in a Spanish Jewish family in Adrianople (now Edirne, in Turkey), Léon had been orphaned and sent to the house of his uncle, his father's brother, to be brought up. As fate would have it, his uncle had a daughter. It is not forbidden in the Jewish religion for first cousins to marry, and the girl's mother, without necessarily consulting him, harboured, for years, a plan for the two cousins to marry once they had come of age. Finally the time came. But at the last moment, Léon could not go through with it. He and the girl had grown up as nothing more than brother and sister, and, in an uncharacteristic display of will, and quite against cultural expectations, he refused the match.

The girl's mother was cold with rage and humiliation. She went to the synagogue, my mother would relate to me, and put a curse on him. May you lose your sight, she said, and may your marriage be unhappy, and those of your children and your children's children.



Léon 's first marriage was with a woman named Sol, but after a few years she lost her reason and had to be put in an institution, where she soon died. He went to Cairo, and there, after meeting Sarina, he had an accident which cost him the sight of his right eye.



He was a widower when he married Sarina, whose beauty had captivated him instantly. This marriage was happy. "Sarina" was the last word he ever spoke. His aunt had forgotten to specify that the curse had to cover his second marriage too. But it did have a powerful afterlife, as we shall see.

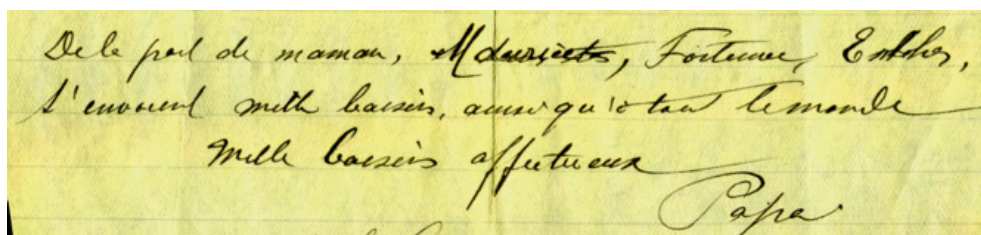
Hidden behind the frame of Léon's photograph, I discovered two letters he had written to my mother, one in 1926, when she was 15, the other in 1932. Yellowed and torn, they breathe his loving and caring disposition:



The notepaper is headed with the Cairo and Alexandria addresses of his stationery enterprise.

By this time, French had replaced Ladino as the family's language, at least as the language that the adults spoke to the children. Léon and Sarina spoke Ladino to each other. Occurring in only one generation, the change happened not only because the common language among the educated in Egypt was French but because – as I would later find out – idealistic young French Jews had gone out to benighted Jewish communities that still spoke their "primitive" Ladino and made them ashamed of it . French was the language of civilization and modernity. The road to oblivion for Ladino was paved with good intentions.

My mother was on one of her regular visits to cousins in Alexandria (most of whom had also come from Smyrna). The letter ends:



*From mummy, Maurice, Fortunée and Esther (my mother's brother and two sisters, the elder of whom died of typhus at the age of 25) – they send a thousand kisses to you and to everyone there.*

*A thousand affectionate kisses, Papa.*

“Maman” could not write herself, being functionally illiterate.

## **Sarina**

Tellingly, it is Léon, not Sarina, who is holding the baby “Solette”. Sarina’s hand is resting on his shoulder, as if to underline who the commanding officer was in this marriage. Sarina was a force of nature, undomesticated, willful, sharply ironic, unafraid, endlessly curious, avid to learn, hating to be compressed into a traditional household role. In another age, she would have run a corporation, or a university department, and subordinates would have liked it or else. But she had been born into a traditional Spanish Jewish family in Smyrna in 1879, and her father Jacob thought it scandalous for a girl to go to any school, let alone a non-Jewish one, and become independent. Sarina, though, was having none of that.

One day when she was seven, Sarina stole out of the family house in Bournabas, a comfortable district of Smyrna, and boldly walked into the (Catholic) Italian school across the road. She wanted to, had to, learn to read. She got away with it for two days, until someone informed on her to the rabbi. Her father, the patriarch Jacob Nahum, came storming in to the classroom from the quay where he had been organizing the import of some machinery, and hauled her out. And that was that. She grew up more or less illiterate.

Instead, her mother, Esther Nahum née Albagli, taught her to sew, and Sarina found it so demeaning and tedious that she never taught sewing to her daughter, my mother. My mother never learned how to sew. I always had to sew her button back on.

In an era when girls were married off at 16, Sarina remained unmarried till the scandalous age of 30, despite being a beautiful woman in her youth.



My mother always said she was too strong-minded for any man. It was only reluctantly that, five years after arriving in Egypt from Smyrna, she agreed to marry the widower Léon Zarmati – at 30, what better offer could she expect? – but they suited each other. They remained devoted till they died.

Sarina could not cook either. Nevertheless, every day she had to go to the Cairo market to buy provisions. There was a characteristic anecdote my mother and my aunt Esther often told about their mother. Sarina had bought a chicken, and had noticed a young Egyptian boy lurking behind one of the market stalls. She put the chicken in her basket, began examining some dates, bought them, and looked down at her basket to put them in, only to discover that the chicken had disappeared. Next day she saw the young boy in the market again, and, marching up to him, tapped him imperiously on the shoulder and demanded, in a mixture of Arabic and Ladino, “Quais el sorba?” “Was the soup good?”

In 1948, at 69 years old, Sarina flew, on her own, to Australia. Her life had taken her from the narrow late mediaeval streets of the old Jewish quarter in 19<sup>th</sup> century Smyrna, where she had been born, to a window seat on a gleaming DC-3, and a new country where no-one understood her. Waiting for her in Sydney, my mother had expected to find Sarina stumbling down the plane’s steps exhausted and defeated by the three-



*The formidable Sarina in her late fifties*



*Sarina and Sol in Sydney  
around 1949*

day journey (stops in Kenya and India), but incredulously, she saw her emerging dignified and smiling, on the arm of an elegant gentleman who had accompanied her all the way. This high note never wavered until her death.

By this time, Sarina had shrunk to a tiny, black-clad, white-haired figure, smaller even than my small mother.

But she had lost none of her panache. Two months before her death, she got on a crowded tram in Birriga Road, Bellevue Hill in Sydney, and saw a young man sprawling all over a seat. Unable to speak English but quite unabashed, she tapped him on the shoulder, pointed to her white hair, and gave him a gentle push. He got up, she sat down. Sarina.

The first word I ever spoke was taught to me by Sarina. Playing on the floor at her feet, I would try to take off her slippers. She said the words *las pantouclas*, “the slippers” in Ladino, often enough for me to repeat, *Las clas! Las clas!* So my first word was in Ladino.

She died in Sydney, when I was three. I wish I could remember her.

## Jacob, patriarch, and Esther, matriarch

Sitting at Sarina's left in the family photograph is her mother, Esther née Albagli, the wife of Jacob, who is wearing the tarboush. The Albagli family were rich. The confidence, even arrogance, of wealth is there in Esther Albagli's demeanor. Esther's father owned a jute business in Smyrna, and the family lived in Karataş, up on the side of the mountain. I was to receive from Uncle Élie clear instructions on how to find the house, still standing today, and from there, I would soon discover another of the jewels of Jewish life in Smyrna, the Beth Israel synagogue, now shrouded in barbed wire, and meet its wizened old beadle, Nessim Franco.

At Esther's feet sits her youngest daughter, Rebecca. (Sarina, my grandmother, was the matriarch Esther's eldest daughter). Rebecca was only seven years older than my mother, her niece, but they became best friends. Rebecca shopped with my mother for Sol's "trousseau", such as it was, for her first marriage; Rebecca married Salvatore Cardoso, another uniquely Levantine curiosity, a Spanish Jew, whose ancestors had gone from Spain to Livorno after the Expulsion. Born in Smyrna and raised in Cairo, he held Italian nationality by virtue of the chance that in 1593, Grand Duke Ferdinand I of Tuscany had invited Jews to settle in the city. Though French was his native tongue, his Italian nationality gave his family an easy exit when Nasser expelled the Jews of Egypt.

The patriarch Jacob dominates the picture. Unquestioningly devout, he wound the tefillin (phylacteries) straps every day (except the Sabbath) around his left arm and placed on his forehead the little black box with its scroll from scripture inside<sup>1</sup>, as a daily reminder of a male Jew's obligation to love and worship God. He had taken his family to live in the well-to-do suburb of Bournabas, on the eastern coastal edge of Smyrne, and from there to Cairo in 1906. (In the massacre of 1922, when

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1 The scroll carries a verse from Deuteronomy 6: 5-8: *And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a frontlet between your eyes*

much of Smyrne was destroyed, some of the worst carnage occurred in Bournabas: many foreigners were murdered there, including English, French and Jewish families. Nineteen years later, the Nahum family would have been annihilated too). Jacob held to the old traditions. He was always called *senyor padre*, my lord father, by his children, and even by his wife, he was respectfully addressed in the third person, old Spanish style. He earned his living, as we shall see, as a broker on the seafront.

The *tarboush* he wears (*tarboush* is an Egyptian word – the more common name for the hat is the *fez*), however, is not a symbol of traditionalism. Quite the reverse. In the 1820s, the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II decided that the elaborate turbans and head coverings signaling rank, wealth and religion in the military and among civilians, should all be replaced by a single plain, modern flat-topped cylinder. The *fez* became so popular that supply could not keep pace with demand. Ironically, this egalitarian measure became somewhat subverted, because by Jacob's time, the *fez* signaled respectability, dignity, and distinction. Today, there is only one *tarboush* maker in Egypt, Mohammed Ibrahim, tucked away in Cairo's famous Al-Hussein district, where there is a thriving market.

## **Abner**

Sitting on the extreme right of the picture is Jacob's second son, Abner. Abner and his wife Esther Avram had six children, of whom Elie, whom we have already met, was the oldest son (standing, top right).

For most of his career, Abner was an accountant at the big Cairo department store, *Cicurel*. But it was only once he retired that he came into his own. He set up his own paper importing business and in four short years became wealthy. Much of his prosperity was due to his friendship with the ladies of the court of King Fuad of Egypt. Because he had been born in Smyrne and had lived there till his twenties, Abner spoke Turkish fluently. Now King Fuad believed that the women of the court, including his wife, should be rigorously cloistered. He allowed them to go out only for ceremonial occasions and to go shopping, in groups. Many of these ladies could speak only Albanian or Turkish, so



when they went on their treasured shopping expeditions to Cicurel, who should they be sent to but Monsieur Abner Nahum in the accounting department, who captivated them with the charm that his son Élie was to inherit so abundantly. Later, when Abner started to import paper, this badinage with the Turkish-speaking ladies led to generous – very generous – orders of paper products from the court.

All of Abner's six children except David came to Australia, in one way or another. Those who settled in Sydney were the three youngest, Léa, Clément, sitting on the floor, and Joseph, known as Zouzou; those who visited were Odette, the eldest, and Élie. David was a member of a young people's group that described itself as communist. He was refused permission to land when he attempted to come to Australia, and eventually settled in Milan. Léa was also a member of the same group. In Australia she had a valiant career actively supporting causes like Palestine, refugees, non-English-speaking women and migrant workers' rights. Her obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian Jewish News* tells the story of a formidable, passionate woman of uncommon courage. She and my mother were allies.

ed. They moved back to Melbourne, where he worked as draughtsman, then as structural engineer, in the

He was appointed lecturer in the School of Civil and Aeronautical Engineering at Melbourne Technical

Balint diversified from his grounding in structures and became an expert in aeronautics and fluid flow dynam-

building and engineering heritage. This was achieved through his consultancy work and through numer-

■ This tribute was written by John Balint in collaboration with his brothers, Michael and Tony.

## Obituary Lea Loeve

Victor Boulos

LEA Loeve may not have been well known on an international level, but she was nevertheless an internationalist who touched the lives of many people, fought all her life for social justice and the rights of the oppressed in Australia and in other countries, and will be remembered as a heroine and mentor to the many admirers she left behind.

She died on September 11 — the day of the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York.

Lea knew only too well what it meant to be part of a minority and to suffer discrimination.

She possessed a key to the home in Toledo, Spain, from which her Sephardi ancestors were expelled in 1492. In a metaphorical sense, this was probably her key to unlocking a lasting understanding of the injustice of dispossession and the sadness of the Diaspora.

Her mother was born in Turkey, but had to leave, ending up in Ottoman Cairo, where she gave birth to Lea, the youngest of six children. In the 1950s, the bitterness in Arab lands over the Balfour Declaration and the loss of Palestine led to the expulsion of Arab Jews in Arab countries.

So Lea, her husband and son left Nasser's Egypt for Australia.

But even in Australia as a Sephardi Jew, Lea did not feel welcome among the majority Ashkenazi Jews. She never flinched at the opportuni-

ty of telling people how wonderful and hospitable the Egyptian Arab culture was and that the Palestinian people were being victimised in their own country.

She was actively involved in Women in Black (Jewish and Arab women in support of a separate state for the Palestinians), the Sydney Jewish Left and in the organisation of Sephardi Jewish women.

She would not let her disappointment at having to leave Egypt because she was a Jew diminish her sense of the injustice done to Palestinians supposedly in her name as a Jew.

Last year, a few days after Lea's bypass operation, a friend rang her to inquire about her health. "No, no, I'm fine", she said, "but the real worry is what is going on in Palestine at the moment. There is so much racism towards the Palestinians in the media that I've written this letter in response. Here, let me read it to you ..."

But justice in the Middle East was for Lea only part of a multi-faceted struggle for justice. She was a humanitarian interested in strategic objectives. She was instrumental in establishing a number of organisations in Sydney that have had an Australia-wide impact on migrants.

She helped set up the Immigrant Women's Speakout Association, which in turn was instrumental in supporting the establishment of the Association of Non-English Speaking Background Women of Australia (ANESBWA).

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, both organisations provided a voice for the hitherto-unheard migrant women.

But Lea was in her element working at grassroots levels. She helped set up the Turkish Childcare Centre in Auburn, which made child care affordable for the working-class women of the area.

Her feminist activism dated back to her youth in Egypt, where she worked to help women who had been victims of domestic violence in Cairo. So even in the 1940s she was a trailblazer.

Lea's father was a Socialist. In Egypt her family grew up on top of the Union of Musicians in Cairo. Her days, nights and mind were filled not only with Arabic music played by the members of the Union, but also with radical perspectives on the empowerment of workers.

The Union aspect was thus a precursor perhaps to her leftist tendencies. She became involved with migrant workers rights and in frustration at the lack of a voice for migrant workers within their own unions and even in their own ethnic community organisations, she helped establish the Migrant Workers Rights Committee in the '80s and managed to obtain funding for their operation.

Together with George Paxinos, Lea helped establish and support a group of mainly students/graduates from the University of NSW, who worked to help migrants apply for their Australian citizenship and subsequently helped them to register on the electoral roll.

They did so simply by setting up tables in shopping-centres on Saturday mornings. This made it possible for migrants to lodge the application forms supplied (initially reluctantly) by the Department of Immigration



Lea Loeve

Photo: Alf Liebhold

and Ethnic Affairs on a non-work day, thereby avoiding the loss of a day's pay.

Lea was multilingual. Whether it was in the shopping-centres helping migrants from different language backgrounds or walking around Bondi Beach, it was delight to hear her speak to a friend or shopkeeper in Portuguese, French, Spanish, Italian or Arabic, in addition to her adopted language, English.

In every facet of her life, Lea Loeve lived love and social justice. Her commitment to human rights for all regardless of race, sex age, the north-south

divide and others was truly inspiring. As well as working directly for many local and international human rights and social justice groups and issues, she offered support to other workers often much younger than herself who were struggling to remain optimistic in the face of what often appeared to be a hopeless struggle for justice. Lea's wisdom, advice, intelligence and love constantly replenished those who knew her.

■ Reprinted with permission of the Sydney Morning Herald.





*Jacques Nahum directing Melina  
Mercouri in his prime*

Standing second from the right is the family's financial success story, l'Oncle Jo (short for Joab) who had made a fortune in Egypt importing bicycles, the main non-camel, non-donkey form of human transport in Cairo. Later we shall be present at a Passover meal, a seder, at the home of my mother's Uncle Jo, as my mother remembered it from when she was a child. Jo's eldest son, Jacques Nahum, became a famous cineaste in France. Visiting Jacques in his 90s in his sumptuous apartment in the 9th arrondissement, with its view over the rooftops of Paris, I found a cache of his work with Brigitte Bardot, Picasso, Melina Mercouri and other stars of the 60s.

Jo's younger son, Robert, went to live in Cuba after Castro's seizure of power, and lived there till he died in a dramatic car accident in the 1970s.

The last of Jacob's children to live to maturity was David, standing on the right. David went to live in Brazil.

\*



*Jacques Nahum receiving the Légion d'Honneur from the Prime Minister of France*



*Jacques Nahum when I visited him in 2013, still alert and elegant at 94.*

Capitalists, communists, escapees, artists, wanderers, idealists, rebels, gentle souls, adventurers – where had this motley, engaging Nahum clan come from? What was their history? What, actually, was my mother’s background, or mine, for that matter? How had history shaped the Nahum clan throughout the centuries? How had individuals dealt with the powerful currents that swept them from Judaea, to Toledo, to Amsterdam, to Smyrna, and then to Egypt and Australia? How would they shed light on my mother’s story? At this stage, I knew something, only a little, but I was determined to find out much more.

Again, I followed Élie’s advice. Now I had done what he wanted, and had become acquainted with the immediate family, so at this stage, it was time to do what he had said I should do next, that is, start at the beginning of the Nahum saga. Family tradition had it, said Élie, that the clan had come from Toledo, and had gone, after the Expulsion, first to Amsterdam, then to Smyrne, before arriving in Egypt in 1906. These were my mother’s forebears. Sometimes literally, I was about to trace their footsteps, stopping at key milestones on the way, picturing a young Sol, very like my mother, leading a small family, at each one of them.

I started with Toledo.

## **b. Toledo: starting point**

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I had been dreaming about Toledo for years. When I was eleven, my mother Sol had made me take flamenco lessons. I learned how to stamp, and call *Olé!* and click castanets and flounce the crimson frills of my junior *traje de flamenca*. It was “all frightfully interesting, dear”, said my English grandmother, my father’s mother, with slightly raised eyebrows, yet deep down I was defiantly convinced this was the real me. My mother surrounded me with Spanish culture. For years she would take me every week to the Spanish lessons she had organized. Africa del Pulgar, the wife of Alejo, the Spanish consul general in Sydney, often visited our home and told me I danced better than the real Spanish girls,

and I believed her. In Spanish, I cried with Africa as Alejo lay dying, and watched him screaming on his deathbed, in terror of the hell he had been told awaited him on the other side. My mother had even introduced me to the polite, reticent Opus Dei leader in Sydney. So I took it for granted that I was half Spanish. At that age, it never quite registered with me that my mother's connection with Spain was 500 years out of date, or that it touched Spain from another angle altogether. I never quite grasped that all that stamping and flouncing and dreaming of a place ten thousand miles away could actually have been "all frightfully interesting, dear", in other words, all slightly silly, dear, in 98 Birriga Road, Bellevue Hill, in the Sydney of 1958.

When I was thirteen, my parents went together to Spain – their last trip as a couple – and came back with films and photographs of Toledo. Thirteen can be a dangerous age for a young provincial. I would stare for hours out of my little bedroom window at the English cottage garden my Yorkshire grandmother had created in Birriga Road, with its snapdragons, delphiniums and pink hollyhocks, and Toledo would become a fierce, austere legend, the hill with its fortified castle a place of romance and derring-do, the Tagus below a means of escape by a black-caped buccaneer. Even the heat – I always imagined it under a fiery sun – heightened the colour and the passion. There in Toledo, I felt, was life truly lived. The dreams of a thirteen-year-old.

Although she knew everything, my mother Sol told me nothing about the *autos da fé*, the so-called acts of faith, the burnings, the anguish, the betrayals, the murders, the emptying of the Jewish quarter, or anything about the history of her people in Toledo. I knew nothing whatever about all the pogroms and the deaths, hardly anything about the Inquisition. She wanted to protect me, and she did. So when I finally went, in 2014, I was quite uninformed, but full of anticipation.

"How many Jews are there today in Toledo?" I was curious to learn an interesting scholarly fact.

I knew a little about the Expulsion, but at that stage it was all rather detached, nothing that touched me directly.

Shlomo Ha-Nakah, my guide, originally from the small Spanish Jewish community of Istanbul, looked at me oddly.

“Two”, he answered. “You. And me”.

At that point, rather late in the day, I began to see and learn, and quite soon, having seen and learned, I was to flee Toledo as fast as I could.

The morning after I arrived, I walked alone around the former Jewish quarter, and was astonished to find that, on 4 August 2014, at the height of the tourist season, all the narrow winding little streets were absolutely empty. A few streets, a very few, only two that I could see, still bore Jewish names



– the Travesia de la Juderia, and the Calle Samuel ha-Levi, but the names of many others in the Jewish quarter were emphatically Catholic – Calle de los Reyes Catolicos, Calle San Juan de Dios, Plaza Virgen de Gracia. Street of the Catholic kings, St. John of God Street, the Virgin of Grace Square. It was sobering to come hard up against the high blank walls of the Monastery of San Juan de Dios, a deliberate underlining of conquest and subjugation, which Ferdinand and Isabella had had built right in the middle of the Jewish quarter in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, after the almost total destruction of the Toledo Jewish community in the pogrom of 1391. Although it was intended to commemorate both a military victory and the birth of the monarchs’ son Juan, the siting of the monastery in the Jewish quarter, very near the grand gate, called, under the Ummayyads, the Bab al-Yahud, the Jews’ Gate, was no accident.



Today the Jews' Gate no longer bears that name, of course. The imposing structure with its massive wooden doors, built to keep invaders out and, possibly, the Jews in, is now called simply Puerta del Cambron, (cambron is a bramble – the area used to be covered in them – quite appropriate).

Triumphantly Catholic though it is, the Monastery incorporates the Star of David in its walls.

This device is to be seen quite often in buildings of the period – possibly a testimony to the close integration of Jews in the fabric of Spanish society, over twenty-one centuries. In fact, I was soon to discover that far from being confined to the traditional



ghetto occupation of moneylending, the Jews of Spain did practically everything. There were Jewish pharmacists, barbers, shoemakers, bakers, dyers, tailors, carpenters, doctors, traders, tobacco dealers,







writers, middlemen, drapers, rag and bone men, farmers, surgeons. And these were just the occupations I collected from the Inquisition documents in the National Archives of Spain. The trades I found were those of former Jews who had unconvincingly converted and were being prosecuted, and sometimes tortured and burned alive for not being ardent enough. The National Archives of Spain are full of these prosecutions.

Walking around the tiny, twisting alleyways of the Jewish quarter of Toledo, it was easy to imagine what it must have been like – gossipy, everyone knowing everyone else’s business, families living cheek by jowl with friends, enemies and other neighbours, smells of cooking, sounds of arguments, laughter, play, music, study. People lived in each other’s pockets. A Sol argued with her younger sister Esther, and all the neighbours knew about it and took sides. A husband was late coming home, and the entire neighbourhood was recruited by his wife, the first to see him coming round the corner calling an alert to all the others keeping watch from their windows. Children poured water down from upper windows on to the heads of passersby below. They ran away laughing and hid in dark doorways and around corners. They were always found, by some neighbour or other. Young boys studied Torah in sunless rooms. Girls sewed their dowry sheets. Matrons swapped recipes and competed to cook the sweetest *biskotchikos*. Husbands and wives enjoyed quiet time together on Sabbath afternoons. In these narrow streets there could be no secrets. Here in the Jewish quarter, life was indeed truly lived. I had not been so wrong after all, in Birriga Road.

But on 4 August 2014, in these same narrow streets and little squares, there was no life at all. I was the only person there. Other life had vanished. The grey stones threw back a grey loneliness. There was just extinction, a gust from the grave, a grave as big as the whole quarter. An entire people had been removed. It was ethnic cleansing at its most irrevocable.

The city fathers of Toledo have sought to honour the dead, make up for past crimes, and not incidentally, attract the Jewish tourist market. They

have set little blue tiles bearing a menorah design into the roadways and the walls. It was not their fault that they did not understand that no Jewish person would ever tread on a menorah, or that the odd anti-Semite would try to destroy a tile:



They had also ensured that the streets were completely, preternaturally, clean. And it was not their fault either that the end result was a kind of inauthenticity and deadness, or, at best, the creation of a kind of theme park. They had done their best. It was better than some alternatives.

4 August 2014 was not just the height of the tourist season. By chance, I had arrived in Toledo on Tisha B'Av<sup>2</sup>, the most sorrowful day of the Jewish calendar, when the great Jewish tragedies are remembered – the destruction of the First Temple, and the Second, the slaughter by the Romans of more than 100,000 Jews at Betar in 135 C.E., and the Holocaust. Now, in 2014, I was suddenly catapulted, on the same day, into the midst, or rather the aftermath, of one of those tragedies, one of the worst in Western Europe before the Holocaust.

In the empty alleyways of the Toledo Jewish quarter, the past reached out and seized me. So these little streets were where Sol had come from. These narrow lanes were where I could find and understand her, even if I could never bring her back. In this place, fourteen hundred years had gone into making her, fourteen hundred years of one Sol after another, one Nahum after another, one lullaby – and she often sang me a

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2 The ninth of the month of Av. It is often held that on that date, 655 years apart, the First and the Second Temples were destroyed in Jerusalem, the First by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E, and the Second by the Romans in 70 C.E. Both destructions led to mass displacements of the Jews. It is possible, and easy, to imagine that the destruction of the Second Temple led to my ancestors' departure for Spain.

Ladino lullaby – one lamentation, after another, fourteen hundred years from the Romans, to the Visigoths, to the Ummayyads, to rule, however temporary, even by Jews, and finally, very finally as I could see in front of my eyes, destruction by Catholic kings, in succession down the centuries. Time rolled back, with me in its grip. I could, with hardly any trouble at all, see the Sols of 71 C.E., of 589, of 711, of 1045, of 1391, and of 1492, landmarks in the history of the Spanish Jews. They were leaning out of their windows, calling to their brothers and sisters to come in for dinner from the street, roasting the *karne de ternero* on the spit. I could hear the soft sounds of the Ladino they spoke as they bent over their elderly parents and tucked in a blanket over their knees, and feel their fear at the knock on the door, century after century.

Those centuries had created my mother. If I wanted to discover all the stories behind the photograph, and if I wanted to find her and really understand her, do what I had wanted to do when I left the cemetery, I would have to start at the beginning, follow time down the centuries, and meet, in the places where they lived, the Sols who had gone before, and made my mother what, and who, she was.

### **c. Antiquity to Muslim Invasion of 711 A.D.**

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The first Jews, from a small region on the eastern Mediterranean may well have arrived in Spain before the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. as passengers or crew on Phoenician trading ships. So it is possible, even probable, that even well before the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. created the first real wave of refugees, a few Jews had, in this remote antiquity, settled in the Spanish peninsula.

In 586 B.C.E., lured by the riches of Solomon's great temple and treasury, Nebuchadnezzar attacked and defeated Jerusalem, destroyed the huge temple, raided the treasury, and dragged most of the Jews of the region to slavery in Babylon. A few escaped, and fewer still made their way to Spain, probably over the sea. Some of this small band settled in a hilltop

fortress in the centre of the peninsula, a town which became known as Toledo. A few continued living in the town, but most settled around the foot of the hill and became farmers. I imagined a Sol of that remote time intrepidly trading with local growers and organizing produce for foreign merchants.

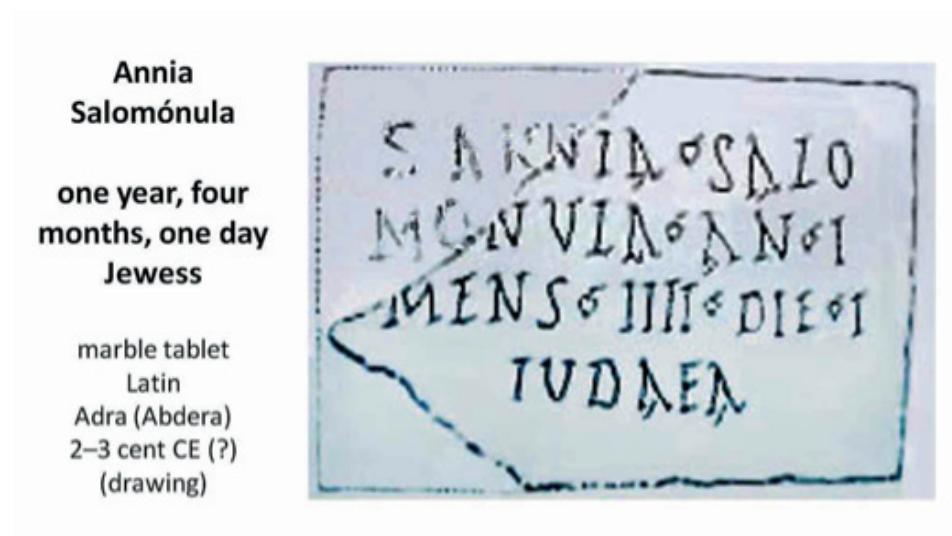
Little is heard of the small Jewish community of Spain for the next six centuries or so, until in 71 C.E., however, a much larger group, possibly enough to be called a wave, arrived as refugees after the Romans destroyed the Second Temple. The Jews of Judaea had rebelled against Roman rule and in that year had been defeated by a combination of Roman ruthlessness and Jewish miscalculation. In the face of a long Roman siege, the Jewish Zealots had sought to spur the Jews' fighting spirit by burning the remaining food in the city, but the tactic backfired when the population became too weak to resist. For the second time in their history, but not the last, Jews lost out to superior military strength, and were forced into slavery and exile. The last remaining wall of the Second Temple is still in Jerusalem, enormous even by the standards of today.

Some of the Jewish refugees from the destruction of Jerusalem arrived in Toledo, to find the kind of landmarks – aqueducts, baths, sewers, theatres, and possibly synagogues – that they already knew from Roman Judaea. Over the next two hundred years, they gradually integrated into the population and adopted the peninsula's version of Latin as their everyday tongue instead of Aramaic (although Hebrew was always the language of prayer).

A little fragment from these same early years, found in Adra, to the east of Granada, attests to how well the Jews had become interwoven with other communities in Spain and around the Mediterranean. It comes from the tomb of a baby named Annia Salomonula, who died at one year, four months and one day old. In the very name of this one child three languages are united: Latin, Hebrew and Greek. Annia is Latin, Salomon is obviously Hebrew, and the affectionate diminutive –ula is



still in use as such in modern Greek. In the fragment, she is called a JUDAEA<sup>3</sup>.



A Sol of that peaceful period would, if she were anything like my instinctively non-sectarian mother, be friends with Romans, Greeks, locals, everybody.

The rise of the Church in those early years of the millennium brought an end to this easy co-existence. By 306 A.D. the Church was well established in Spain, and in that year the Church Council of Illiberis passed Europe's first anti-Semitic decrees, forbidding intermarriage,

3 This fragment is discussed in the Encyclopaedia Judaica, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971, p. 221

and imposing excommunication for adultery with a Jew, and even for sharing a meal with Jews.

In 410 A.D, the persecution of Jews in Spain was relieved somewhat when the Germans invaded Spain after conquering parts of France. The Arian<sup>4</sup> Goths were much more tolerant than their Catholic co-religionists<sup>5</sup>, and there was a temporary lull in the persecution of the Jews, but in 589 A.D. they converted to Catholicism, and prejudice and the maltreatment of the Jews began all over again: convert or be exiled, tortured, impoverished, or deprived of children – the same cruelties that were to be inflicted seven, and eight centuries later on the Jews of a country that they loved and, after hundreds of years, considered their home.

#### **d. Muslim Period: 711 A.D. to 1492**

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Relief came only in 711 A.D., with the Muslim invasion of Spain from North Africa<sup>6</sup>, part of a massive muslim expansion that was to cover the Arabian peninsula, parts of the Byzantine Empire, Egypt, and North Africa before arriving in Spain. The Muslim invaders were attracted to Spain not only by its wealth and potential, but, more immediately, by the internal divisions and weakness of the Catholic Gothic rulers, who had little support from the people, or, of course, from the Jews.

When the Muslims invaded, the Jews of Spain were not only overjoyed, they were useful. Tariq ibn Ziyad<sup>7</sup>, the leader, had too few men to rule the conquered territories of Spain, so he enlisted the Jews. From hiding

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4 Arians believe that the Son has a subordinate relationship to God, while for Catholics, the Son is as divine as the Father.

5 Possibly because Arian belief is closer to the Jewish doctrine of the Messiah. Some Arians were even accused of "Judaizing".

6 To a modern mind, it is ironic that the Jews of Spain were saved successively by Germans and Arabs.

204 7 Gibraltar, Djabal al Tariq, the Mountain of Tariq, is named after him.

in back rooms, the Jews now ruled whole cities, one of which, for a time, was Toledo.

This period ushered in, if not the Golden Age of harmony and tolerance, at least an uneasy peace. Jewish learning flourished mightily in the years following the Arab invasion. Poetry, biblical exegesis, law, diplomacy, medicine, philosophy, geography, botany, mathematics and translation were all fields where the Jews of Spain made outstanding and long-lasting contributions. Perhaps the best known of the many distinguished Spanish Jews of the period was Moses ben Maimon (1138-1204), known to the Western world as Maimonides, who applied to traditional Jewish teaching a set of approaches with strong links to Aristotle.

Jewish learning did not live in a vacuum in Spain. Nothing illustrates the harmony that could prevail among the three religions of the peninsula than the interaction of Muslims, Jews and Christians in the transmission of ancient science (particularly astronomy) through translations by Jews from Hindu to Arabic, Hebrew and Latin, and the development of new scientific advances like the astrolabe and its accompanying astronomic tables. Thomas F. Glick says:

*The crowning achievement of medieval astronomy in Spain was the compilation commissioned by [the Christian] Alfonso the Wise entitled the *Libros del saber de astronomia* (The Books of Astronomical Knowledge) . . . These included . . . a treatise on the armillary sphere and other on the quadrant, observational instruments that [the Jew] Isaac Ibn Sīd had used; and an elementary astronomical treatise called the *Libro de al Alcora* (book of the Celestial Sphere – a kind of spherical astrolabe), based on a ninth-century work by [the Muslim] Qustā ib Luqā, with introductory material, probably by Isaac ibn Sīd and a final chapter by another Jew, “Don Moshe” on astrology . . . <sup>8</sup>*

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8 Thomas F. Glick, *Science in Medieval Spain: the Jewish Contribution in the Context*, in Vivian B. Mann, Thomas F. Glick and Jerrilyn D. Dodds, eds, *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*, George Braziller in association with the New Museum, New York, 1992, pp. 93-4.

This one example is emblematic of the very significant advances in knowledge that can did occur when the talents of all the communities worked in harness together. Scholars today point out that the idea of Convivencia as propounded since the 19th century is unduly rose-coloured, and masks inter-community conflicts, some of them even murderous. They are right of course, but at the same time it cannot be denied that, among the scholars of Spain at least, and the cultivated classes, there was indeed something like a golden age of harmony, even if it did not always percolate down to the population at large.

The scholars in their studies could not prevail against powerful popular passions in the streets, against the rising influence of the Church, or the increasing power of the Catholic kings. In 1085, Toledo became the first city to be conquered by the Catholic rulers in the efforts to regain control of the whole of Spain from the Muslims. Life became increasingly uncomfortable for the Jews of Toledo as the next three centuries wore on. In 1380, there was an economic crisis in Spain, which predictably led to riots against the Jews. In 1385, the Inquisition arrived in Toledo, and on 20 June, 1391, Christians attacked the Jewish quarter, and murdered nearly all the inhabitants. A few escaped, possibly, I imagined, including a Sol of the day and her little family, and returned traumatised to their homes. But worse was to follow.

## **e. Expulsion: 1492**

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The Alhambra is one of the glories of the world, considered by many to be the most beautiful series of pavilions, halls, courtyards and reception rooms ever built anywhere. Restored in the 14th century, sitting high above the city of Granada, it has cool streams trickling past orange groves and flower gardens, delicate columns supporting exquisitely carved ceilings, and high, secret belvederes, garlanded in roses and watered by fountains, from which the enchanted viewer can gaze down on the city below.





There is melancholy among all this beauty. This was the very last place in Spain where the Muslim writ ran, after nearly eight centuries of victories by Catholic monarchs progressively working their way south from their northern strongholds. In early 1492, the last Muslim ruler, the Sultan of Granada, Mohammed XII (Boabdil), surrendered to the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, in a formal ceremony at which, famously, his mother had forbidden him to kiss the victors' hands. Later, in exile in Morocco, this sensitive, tragic ruler was to lament his loss, writing to his host, the ruler of Morocco, that he was hoping against hope that "our wounded and grief-stricken souls will be healed from this great pain".

The Alhambra itself was not destroyed. Indeed, it was taken over by the Catholic monarchs themselves. To it they began to add their own particular style. Next to the exquisite lightness and refinement of the Arabic architecture, sometimes actually cheek by jowl, the victors' taste appeared to me, when I saw it in 2013, to be rather heavy and crude:



In March of 1492, that roughness was about to be displayed in full force. The buildings themselves might not have been razed, but at the end of March, something else was about to be wrecked, in the Alhambra – the multiculturalism that had so enriched the civilization of Spain for centuries. It was the end of Muslim, and, for the next five hundred years, Jewish, life in Spain.

The Sala de Embajadores is the most imposing of all the imposing halls in the Alhambra. Every inch of its walls is covered in intricate, elegant designs, and its windows are placed and decorated with charming artistry. But at the same time, its echoing, shadowy spaces inspire fear and awe.



It was in this hall, the room where the thrones of the monarchs were installed, that the Alhambra Decree was signed on 31 March 1492 by Ferdinand and Isabella. The death knell for the last two thousand years of Jewish life in Spain was sounded in clause 4:

(4) Therefore, we, with the counsel and advice of prelates, great noblemen of our kingdoms, and other persons of learning and wisdom of our Council, having taken deliberation about this matter, resolve to order the said Jews and Jewesses of our kingdoms to depart and never to return or come back to them or to any of them. And concerning this we command this our charter to be given, by which **we order all Jews**

**and Jewesses** of whatever age they may be, who live, reside, and exist in our said kingdoms and lordships, as much those who are natives as those who are not, who by whatever manner or whatever cause have come to live and reside therein, that **by the end of the month of July next of the present year, they depart from all of these our said realms and lordships, along with their sons and daughters,** menservants and maidservants, Jewish familiars, those who are great as well as the lesser folk, of whatever age they may be, and **they shall not dare to return to those places,** nor to reside in them, nor to live in any part of them, neither temporarily on the way to somewhere else nor in any other manner, under pain that if they do not perform and comply with this command and should be found in our said kingdom and lordships and should in any manner live in them, they incur the penalty of death and the confiscation of all their possessions by our Chamber of Finance, incurring these penalties by the act itself, without further trial, sentence, or declaration. (Translated by Edward Peters)<sup>9</sup>

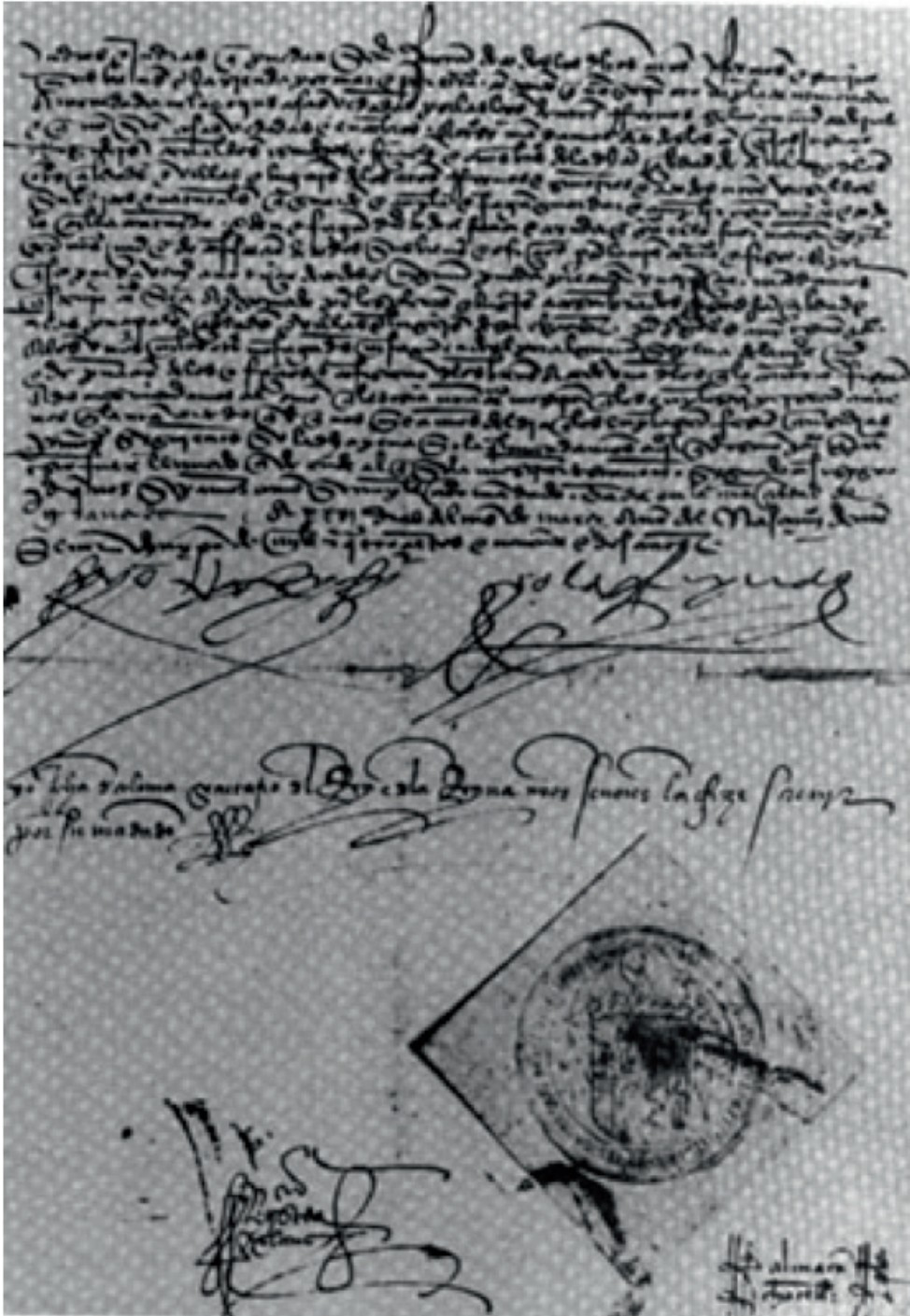
The 80-year-old leader of Spain's Jewish community, Abraham Senior, who had arranged, and even financed, the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella and become their respected adviser<sup>10</sup>, together with his friend Don Isaac Abravanel, 65, brilliant financier and counselor to the monarchs, still living in Toledo, struggled heroically to avert the catastrophe. To no avail. Many factors have been canvassed as being behind their defeat: the intimidating influence over the two monarchs of Tomás de Torquemada, Spain's first Grand Inquisitor, who had Jewish ancestors himself but who was the most rabid of the persecutors of the Jews, a religious wave that swept Spain requiring "cleansing" of all "infidels", the greed of the monarchs and Christians generally for the possessions of the Jews, and Jane Gerber's preferred explanation, the one given in the decree itself, that the Jews had been proselytizing "bad" Christians<sup>11</sup>.

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9 Peters, Edward. "Jewish History and Gentile Memory: The Expulsion of 1492." *Jewish History* 9 (1995): 9-34, at 23-28. Reprinted in: Constable, Olivia Ed. *Medieval Iberia*. Philadelphia; University of Pennsylvania UP, 1997.

10 Gerber, Jane, *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience*, The Free Press, New York, 1992, p. 128.

11 Gerber, op. cit. p. 137. This is a puzzle, since Judaism is not normally a proselytizing religion.



The signed page of the Alhambra Decree

A Sol of the day could, of course, have never been admitted to the fearful chamber where the decree had been signed. But half a millennium later, here was the daughter of another Sol walking about it with impunity. Fearing no penalty of death or loss of possessions, a Jew *had* returned. Only a small triumph, to be sure.

I imagined a little Nahum family in 1492, led by a young Sol, all of them living meanly, secretly and desperately in Toledo, reacting to the news of the Expulsion with dismay and despair. In Toledo, there were almost no Jews left. As I pictured it, the heat was crushing, and mother Sarina, 73 years old now, was spending the whole day lying on the couch in the dark back room. The shock of the expulsion decree had been a blow from which she had not been able to recover. A messenger from the Jewish community of Segovia had arrived in Toledo, telling the few Jews of Toledo that in a week a group of Jews from his city would be passing by Toledo on their way to Cadiz, where ships paid for by Jews would be waiting to take them away from Spain. The little family could join them. That was the last week in July, when I was also in Toledo. The heat was fierce, even indoors. There was only a little money, from selling the house for far less than it was worth.

A contemporary Christian writer, Andrés Bernaldez, was to write<sup>12</sup>:

*The Christians picked up very many haciendas, and magnificent houses and heirlooms for a song. They [the Jews] would go about hawking them, begging for a buyer, and not finding one. They offered a house for a donkey, and a vineyard for a little bread or a blanket, because they were not allowed to take gold or silver away with them.*

(What a strange echo for me, who had often heard almost exactly the same stories about the Jews who were forced to leave Egypt in 1956.

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12 *Cá ovieron los christianos sus haciendas muy muchas, é muy ricas casas y heredamientos por pocos dineros, y andaban rogando con ellas, y no hallaban quien se las comprase, é daban una casa por un asno, y una viña por un poco paño ó lienzo, porque no podían sacar oro ni plata.*

Andrés Bernaldez, *Historia de los Reyes Católicos C. Fernando y Doña Isabel*, Volume 1, Nabu Public Domain Reprints of 1870 edition of the *Historia* of Bernaldez (1450 – 1513), p. 338.

They too had had to sell their apartments and houses for a song, they too were not allowed to take gold or silver. Plus ça change).

At this point I had a choice. I knew that the Nahum family had ended up in Smyrna, in Turkey, which they had left in 1903 for Egypt. I knew that after Mehmet the Conqueror had defeated Greek Byzantium in 1453, the economy of his Ottoman Empire had slumped dramatically as a result of the war, and that Mehmet's son, Sultan Beyazid II, astonished, and slightly contemptuous, that any monarchs would expel some of their most productive citizens, had leapt in in 1492 and invited the Spanish Jews to help develop his realm<sup>13</sup>. Beyazid had even sent ships to bring the Jews of Spain to the Ottoman Empire. And I knew that many of the ships that took the Spanish Jews to Constantinople (where most of them went first) had left Spain from Valencia, a Mediterranean port on the eastern coast of Spain. So it was probable, on the face of it, that the Nahum family would have left Spain from Valencia, on one of the Sultan's ships, and gone to Constantinople.

On the other hand, I had my uncle Élie and his recounting of the family tradition that the Nahum family had first gone to Amsterdam and had travelled to Smyrne from there. If that were true, it would mean that they did not leave Spain from Valencia but from somewhere else, probably an Atlantic not a Mediterranean port. Which could it have been? Professor Howard Sachar provided a possible solution. In his masterly and detailed account of the departure of the Spanish Jews, he says

*On August 2 and 3, 1942, the last professing Jews on Spanish soil clambered aboard ship in Seville and El Puerto de Santa Maria<sup>14</sup>.*

For me the choice turned out to be easy. Was it out of family solidarity, and respect and affection for my Uncle Élie? Was it the result of my

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13 He is said to have exclaimed "who is this wise king who impoverishes his own country and enriches mine!" (Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. 2, p. 460).

14 *Farewell España: The World of the Sephardim Remembered*, Vintage Books, New York, 1995, p. 73.

previous reading<sup>15</sup>, from which I had learned that many Jews had gone from Amsterdam to the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century, attracted by its expanding trade? In any case, I plumped for Uncle Élie and family tradition.

El Puerto de Santa Maria is next to Cadiz, on Spain's Atlantic Shore. So I decided to travel the same route, Toledo to El Puerto de Santa Maria, which, if Uncle Élie was right, the little family would have had to take. I wanted to experience as much of their journey for myself as I could. A braver person would have done it like them, on foot, or on the back of a donkey, with very limited food and water. I took a nice picnic lunch, and drove an airconditioned car.

I had never seen the central plain of Spain at such close quarters before. The land was flat, as flat as a griddle. The sun seemed huge, and very near. Anyone venturing outside at that time of year would indeed be broiled alive. How would it have been possible for old people or babies to survive this torture by sun? The road to Seville, resting stop before Cadiz, stretched on endlessly. As I sped along the motorway, I tucked into the cheese baguette, took a sip of water, and stared out into the unforgiving landscape. I saw the little family laboring, hungry, thirsty, and exhausted, in the searing heat, far away in the distance, on the plain.

Mile after mile after mile. Even my imagined Sol was wilting. I could see Esther in her high heels finding it completely impossible, and taking them off, the fastidious beauty walking barefoot on the stony ground. Her feet began to bleed. Her brother Moses was carrying Sarina, but it was already clear that Sarina was not going to survive.

In fact, like very many others on these horror marches, Sarina was to die on the way. In the heat, the burial had to be done even faster than Jewish law prescribed.

There was no time for weeping. There was no food. The little they had been able to take with them had gone by the second day. Curious

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15 Especially Philip Mansel, *Levant*, John Murray, London, 2010. On p. 29, Mansel says: "In the seventeenth century, Smyrna's international trade was dominated by the Dutch and the English".

peasants came out to stare, and scurried back to the cool of their huts. One or two of them shouted insults, and one even threw a knife at close quarters. It hit Moses, and cut his arm, but he was too weak to retaliate. One evening, a peasant woman, filled with pity, came quietly with two roast chickens and a bottle of water. It was thanks to that woman that the little family survived at all.

Barrelling impatiently along the highway, I was asking myself how much longer the endless plain would go on. Anything would have been better than this interminable scorching flatness. Ahead of me loomed mountains. The road started winding upwards. But if the plain had been extremely difficult, the mountains were practically impossible. Rocky, impassable even by donkeys, they could be negotiated only on foot. Now there were no peasants to offer food. And as the little family climbed, they were getting nearer and nearer to the sun. Finally Esther could go no further on her own. Although Moses' wound had become infected and painful, he and Sol together supported Esther up hills and down to valleys. Driving along the winding road, I was incredulous. How could anyone possibly have made it to Seville over this terrain?

Here is Andrés Bernaldez again<sup>16</sup>:

*They walked over paths and fields, with great effort, and ill-fortune, some collapsing, others getting up, some dying, others being born, yet others falling ill.*

At last I drove into Seville, to a pleasant hotel in the old Jewish quarter. The narrow streets were crowded and cheerful. In August of 1492, though, the Jewish quarter was practically empty. Doors gaped open, chickens clucked in deserted yards. But it was shelter at any rate. Food, such as it was, was finally available. Sol, Moses and Esther fell on to the stripped mattresses the departing Jews had left behind, and slept for twenty-four hours.

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16 *Iban por los caminos y campos, por donde iban con muchos trabajos y fortunas, unos cayendo, otros levantando, unos muriendo, otros naciendo, otros enfermando*  
Bernaldez, op. cit. pp. 341-2.





The Farewell Trek

After my own night's rest, I left Seville restored. Not long after Sol, Moses and Esther themselves left Seville the next day in August 1492, local people desecrated the graves in the town's centuries-old Jewish cemetery.

My plan had been to take a boat down to Cadiz on the Guadalquivir River, since I thought that must have been the way the little family would have taken. The river is wide and slow-moving, but to the grief-stricken, traumatised travellers its dreamy pace was not soothing, for with every stroke of the oars they were leaving their ancestral homeland further behind. In Sol's pocket was the key of their house in Toledo.

These days, the Guadalquivir, though, is not navigable as far as the sea. I would have to go to Cadiz by land, not a grueling trip at all, and then from Cadiz to Puerto de Santa Maria.

Cadiz is still the important port it has been since the days of the Phoenicians. Nowadays the boat to Puerto de Santa Maria passes oil tankers, container ships, and vessels of the Spanish Navy:



But in the bay of Cadiz in 1492, the three travellers saw a score or more of caravels, naos, and carracas jostling for position along the waterfront, their sails furled, their decks crowded with men shouting and unloading boxes of spices. Next to them, the rowboat waiting to take them and the Segovian Jews to Puerto de Santa Maria looked puny, even with its single sail. The skipper was surly and rapacious, and here was barely enough room for a dozen passengers. Heartsick, Sol gave the man one of her last gold coins. The little boat lurched, rose and fell, rose and fell, creaking loudly as it cut through the white crests.



Puerto de Santa Maria is actually a calm, rather narrow channel off the choppy Atlantic waters. It is a good place from which to careen and provision ships and prepare for a long voyage. Along its banks are many ships' chandlers, and there are still, even today, earthen ramps down to the water along which a wooden ship could be dragged by a team of sailors.

On the bank of the narrow channel, there was a small caravel waiting for the travellers. The Jews of Segovia had paid the skipper the exorbitant price of 6000 maravedis<sup>17</sup> for the trip of 1300 nautical miles to Amsterdam. I wanted to get a feel for how big the ship would have been. In Cadiz, on a busy roundabout, between a McDonald's and a petrol station, I found a replica of Columbus' ship the Niña, so named because it was small:

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<sup>17</sup> About 80,000 euros. One maravedi contained about 3.8 grams of gold (today one ounce of gold is about 36 euros). Today, in peacetime, a similar sized boat would cost about 10,000 euros a week to charter. The trip of 1300 nautical miles would have taken a caravel about twenty days, with a estimated premium added to take advantage of the Jews' desperation. A very rough estimate.



*Approaching Puerto de Santa Maria*



*Earthen ramp in Puerto de Santa Maria today, possibly not so very different from how it was in 1492*



Columbus had 24 men on the Niña, but it is not likely that a ship like this would have carried only 24 Jews. It was almost certainly more crowded than that<sup>18</sup>. On 3 August, in Palos, about 200 kms from Cadiz, he set sail for the new world on his first voyage. In his journal, he sympathetically describes the ships taking the Jews away as “a fleet of misery and woe”<sup>19</sup>.

The ship holding the Jews was rowed out into the narrow Puerto de Santa Maria channel, and its sails unfurled. Sol stood silent on the deck, looking at the receding coastline of Spain. She would have seen this, as I saw it, the very edge, the very last of the Spanish shore:

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18 Estimates of the number of Jews who were expelled from Spain vary from 165,000 (Isidore Loeb (1847-1926), *Revue des Études Juives* (xiv. 162–183), to 800,000 (Juan de Mariana (1536-1624) in his *Historiae de Rebus Hispaniae* of 1592), whose estimate is almost four times what modern scholars believe to be the true number, 200,000, although no-one knows exactly.

19 Howard M. Sachar, *Farewell España*, Vintage Books, New York, 1994, p. 73.



My motorboat chugged back to Cadiz. To starboard, a sailboat came into view, bravely venturing out from the coast, far into the unknown Atlantic. My vision became clouded, possibly by the spray from the sea. As the sailboat receded from view in the mist, I said goodbye to the travellers I imagined it held:



After fifteen centuries, farewell, España.

## **f. Amsterdam: 1492 to ~1625**

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After a rough trip through the Bay of Biscay, the siblings were among the very first Jews to arrive in Amsterdam. For early September, the weather was shockingly cold. The three of them gravitated to an area now known as Jodenbreestraat, Jews' Broad Street, and sought a way of staying alive. It was not a paradise for the Jews, in these very early years of Jewish presence in the city. They continued to speak Ladino among themselves, and learned Dutch, but in the beginning they had to make a living in menial or risky trades – taking in washing, driving carriages, selling clothes from barrows. Gradually, as the decades progressed, the Nahum family, as we must now call them, accumulated capital and expertise in business.

In Sydney, my mother bought and sold the occasional oriental carpet, so I could see the Sols of this era noticing that Dutch families greatly prized carpets from the east, and deciding to contact former friends from the Toledo Jewish community who now lived in Constantinople, to have them send some carpets from there to Amsterdam. Only the poorest women in Amsterdam were illiterate, and by the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Sol of that period could almost certainly read and write well enough to conduct business. The Moses of the period also learned to read, write, and do enough arithmetic and accounting to be put to work in a large trading Dutch trading house. The Nahums never stopped speaking Ladino, and in the last years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, that ability would turn out to mean another uprooting, another long voyage by land and sea.

Towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was a large influx into Amsterdam of Jews and crypto-Jews from Spain and especially Portugal. Many of them had risked denunciations and tortures to keep practising the Jewish religion in secret, but when, in the late years of the century, they heard that seven Dutch provinces had achieved independence from Spanish rule and established religious tolerance, they decided to seize the opportunity and settle in Amsterdam, where they could practice Judaism openly.

By and large, this was a resourceful and talented group of people, with close connections in the Ottoman lands. Letters and messages in Ladino, written in Hebrew characters, went back and forth between the new residents of Amsterdam and the more long-standing Jewish residents of Constantinople. They told of tempting opportunities to trade silk, spices, cotton, seeds, bulbs (the tulip would first be sent to Holland from the Ottoman Empire), paper, carpets, fruit and leather. And in the other direction, the opportunities were in iron, lead, tin and steel. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews whom the Sultan had originally settled in Constantinople were being redirected to other parts of the Empire, and around 1600 or so, the Jewish community of the port of Smyrna was already sizeable enough to be conducting a lucrative and growing trade with the west in a large range of commodities. And the port was beautiful, the weather salubrious, the community welcoming. Interesting. Possibly very interesting indeed.

In 1612, the decision was made easier. Dutch-Ottoman trade received a major boost with the signing of the Dutch Capitulations, a uniquely Moslem form of agreement between a ruler and a foreign community, providing for a series of protections and privileges<sup>20</sup>. And in 1625, a new trading group, the Directors of the Levant Trade and the Navigation of the Mediterranean, was formed as an umbrella organization to coordinate convoys and generally facilitate Dutch trade in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>21</sup> Now the Nahum family began debating very seriously whether to go to Smyrna or not. An offer came from a Dutch trader, Elias Trip<sup>22</sup>, (1570-1636), who needed a local agent in Smyrna, one who could speak Ladino with the locals and who also knew Dutch.

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20 Mehmet Bulut, *The Role of the Ottomans and Dutch in the Commercial Integration between the Levant and Atlantic in the Seventeenth Century*, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (2002), pp. 199.

21 *Negotiating Foreignness in the Ottoman Empire: the Legal Complications of Cosmopolitanism in the Eighteenth Century*, Mauritz van der Boogert, Chapter 2 in *Exploring the Dutch Empire: Agents, Networks and Institutions*, Catia Antunes and Jos Gommans, eds, Bloomsbury, London, 2014.

22 See *Merchants, Interlopers, Seamen and Corsairs: the Flemish Community in Livorno and Genoa 1615-1635*, Marie-Christine Engels, Hilversum, 1997, p. 165.



When in 1981, I had phoned my mother and told her I was being assigned by the UN to Zimbabwe from New York and asked whether she would like to come too, a full nanosecond elapsed before she said yes. So it was easy to hear, in my mind's ear, another Sol, in 1612, urging the Nahum clan in Amsterdam to jump at the chance offered by Meneer Trip, who anyway had a Spanish Jewish associate<sup>23</sup> -- Amsterdam was another place where multiculturalism had bred prosperity – and embark on this adventure. If she were anything like the twentieth-century Sol, she would have easily prevailed over the others and indeed led the way.

Smyrna! With this third uprooting<sup>24</sup>, at least, there were no tears. Smyrna, the beautiful, Smyrna, the mysterious, Smyrna, the paradise! They hired six carriages and clattered their way overland to Livorno, where there were many Spanish Jews they already knew<sup>25</sup>.

And it was with high hearts that the Nahum family embarked on the galeasse waiting to take them from Livorno to the enticing city lying under the shadow of Mount Pagos.

The future beckoned.

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23 Possibly.

24 The first two being Jerusalem and Toledo. There would be five uprootings in all.

25 The Medici family had attracted them to Livorno for the same reasons as Sultan Beyazid had invited them to Constantinople.



*The Ottoman Empire with Egypt*

## g. Life in Izmir/Smyrne/Smirni/Smyrna<sup>26</sup>: Patchwork, Princess<sup>27</sup>, Paradise<sup>28</sup> – and Infidel<sup>29</sup> (~1625 to 1906)

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### i. Smyrna, Patchwork of Cultures

Just as I grew up constantly hearing about the Cairo of my mother Sol's youth, so was she raised with the stories, songs and jokes of the Smyrne where her own mother Sarina had spent the first 25 years of her life and where the Nahum family had lived since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Smyrne, the patchwork of cultures, the home of the sassy, irreverent joke, the teeming, complicated port, was in my mother's blood just as Cairo was in mine.

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26 The Turkish name Izmir is derived from the Greek "is Smyrni", meaning "to Smyrna". The original name may have been an Assyrian one, probably an ideophone. The Jewish community of the city called it Izmirna and Izmir. The French name for it was Smyrne, and that is what my mother called it. In English, it was known as Smyrna, in Greek it is still called Smyrni. It received its official modern name of Izmir in the early years of the Republic. The name was made official in 1930.

27 Victor Hugo said *Smyrna est une princesse* in *La Captive*, written on 7 July 1828, one of the poems in his collection *Les Orientales*:

*Smyrna est une princesse  
Avec son beau chapel ;  
L'heureux printemps sans cesse  
Répond à son appel,  
Et, comme un riant groupe  
De fleurs dans une coupe,  
Dans ses mers se découpe  
Plus d'un frais archipel*

*Smyrna is a princess  
With its beautiful crown [its Citadel]  
Joyful spring ever responds  
To its call;  
And like a smiling posy  
Of flowers in a vase  
More than one delightful archipelago  
Clusters in its seas [my translation]*

28 See *Paradise Lost: Smyrna 1922*, by Giles Milton, Basic Books, Philadelphia, 2008

29 The Turks called Smyrna *Gavur Izmir*, Infidel Izmir, because of its large non-Muslim population. Byron was famously painted in the costume of a Giaour, the Western version of "Gavur".

There is a song she often sang to me. It is one of those bold, pert, lilting Smyrniot songs in Ladino, with Greek and Turkish words thrown in for extra flavour. A beautiful girl is sashaying flirtatiously along the Cordon at the seafront, pretending not to notice the butcher's apprentices giving her the eye. To tell the truth, she's not exactly insulted:

*Morenika mi me lla-a-a-ama-a-a-n,*

*Los kasapikos,*

*Si otra vez me lla-a-a-ama-a-a-n,*

*Un besiko les do!*

*Morenika! Grasiósika! Su!*

*Morenika, grasiósika, mavra matia mou!*

*The butcher's apprentices call me their lovely dark-eyed girl! If they call me that just one more time, well, I'm just going to give them a little kiss! Dark-eyed girl! Lovely girl! Hey! dark-eyed girl, a lovely girl, [look at] my black eyes! [shout the butcher's apprentices]*

(My mother often called me *grasiósika*, graceful, lovely little girl).

This song, like very many others, is multicultural Smyrna in miniature. Its main language is Ladino<sup>30</sup>, but there is one Turco-Arabic word in there (*kasapikos*, a diminutive hispanisation of the Turkish *khasap* – butcher, itself derived from the Arabic), and three Greek ones (*mavra matia mou* – my black eyes). This song lacks only French, Hebrew and Armenian words to complete the multicultural Smyrniot picture.

Nothing reveals a culture more than its songs. A few other examples will colour the Smyrniot picture further. A cheeky one which the great recorder of Turkish Jewish life, Abraham Galante, includes in his chapter on the Jews of Smyrne, includes several Hebrew words, in both original and “corrupted” forms:

*Las muchachas del felek  
El kavod perdieron  
Mas y mas las casadas al taborla salieron.  
Al mundo ondieron por quitar el halebi.  
Que esto quiijo el Tchelebi.<sup>31</sup>*

*The girls of today have lost their sense of decorum! More and more shameless wives are being seen! They go out everywhere without their headcovering, because this is what the [Ottoman Turkish] gentleman wants.*

Several cultures appear here. *Felek* is a Turco-Arabic word meaning “these days”; *kavod* is a Hebrew word meaning “respect”; *al taborla* is a corruption of the Hebrew words *tarbout ra’a*, meaning bad behavior; the *halebi* was the very tight head covering which Jewish women were instructed to wear to cover their hair, and which Jewish men of the Ottoman period would insist on for their wives; and a *tchelebi* was a Turkish gentleman of the Ottoman period. The main language is, again, Ladino.

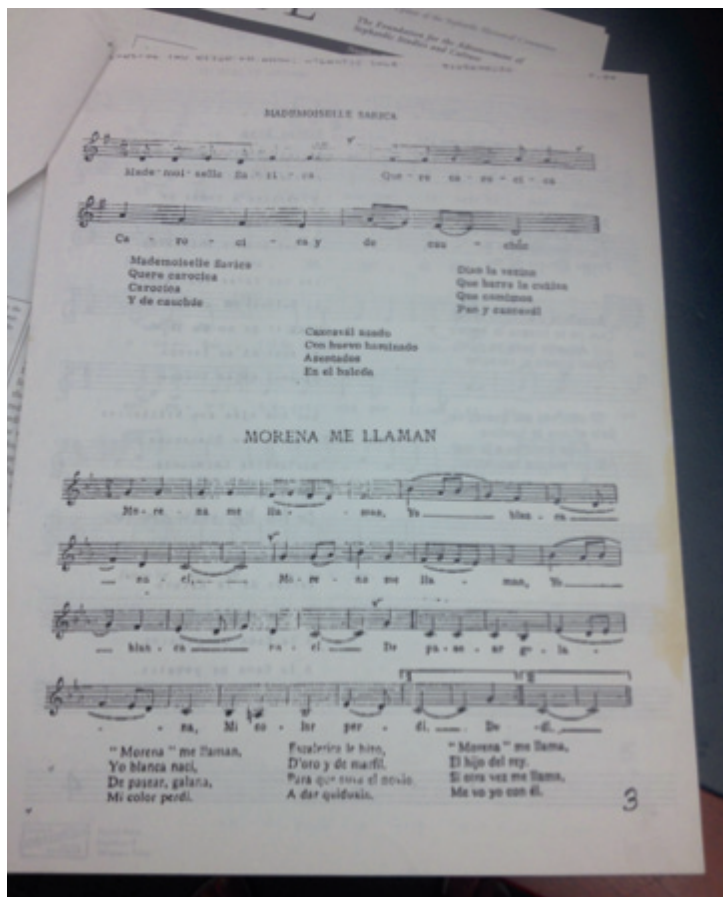
There is context to that song. In 1890, the Grand Rabbi of Smyrne asked the Turkish governor to ban Jewish girls from strolling in the street on Saturday nights in the company of young men, because such scandalous European customs were not in keeping with the Jewish religion<sup>32</sup>. The governor issued a ban accordingly, but perhaps it was not widely respected.

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31 Avram Galante, *Histoire des Juifs de Turquie*, Editions Isis, Istanbul, Vol. 3, p. 115.

32 Galante, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

Another of the jaunty, absurd little Smyrniot ditties my mother would often sing is the first song shown at the top of the page below:



*Mademoiselle Sarica*

<i>Mademoiselle Sarika</i>	<i>Miss Sarica</i>
<i>Kiere karosika</i>	<i>Wants a little carriage</i>
<i>Ka-ro-si-ka</i>	<i>A little carriage</i>
<i>Y de caoutchouc!</i>	<i>Made all of rubber [can you imagine]!</i>

In the printed version of this light-hearted, silly little song, the Mademoiselle is called Sarika, an even more affectionate diminutive of Sara in Ladino than Sarina, but my mother actually would sing Mademoiselle Marika, which must be a Greek version of the same (judeo-español) song. The tune is the same. Again, with French in the mix here, the mingling of cultures is very evident.

This page of music also shows another version of *Morenika mi me llaman*. Here Morenika says that if the king's son calls out to her just once more, she'll just decide to – go off with him!

The sassy port culture of Smyrna rings in the hearer's ears and it is not hard to see Morenika swaying down the waterfront, wearing the very low cut bodices favoured by the women of the port.



*"Jewish woman in Ceremonial Costume" 1714. Hand-coloured etching, after a drawing of Jean-Baptiste Vanmour, from Recueil de Cent Estampes représentant différentes Nations du Levant", M. de Ferriol, Ambassadeur du Roi à La Porte (Paris 1714), reproduced with the CD Boda, by the Ensemble Saltiel, Sephardic Wedding Songs, Alikobeni, Graz, Austria, 2010.*

In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, foreign visitors to Smyrna were often astonished that straightlaced Jewish husbands would insist on seeing not a single hair escape from a woman's head covering, but would appear quite indifferent to low cut bodices. (The Bible, of course, has something to say about hair but not too much about bodices). However, to be fair, Turkish and Greek women also had low bodices, often "covered" by a wisp of gauze – and so here we have the bodice as evidence of multiculturalism.



*Painting by Anoine de Favray (1706 – 1798) Dame Levantine en coiffure de ville, in Musée des Augustins, Toulouse. Detail.*

On the evidence of the songs and the bodices, if ever there was a patchwork of cultures in the world before the twentieth century, it would have to be Smyrna<sup>33</sup>. Over five centuries, countless writers, English, French, Italian, Arabic, Russian, Dutch, Armenian, Jewish, Turkish, described how the five main communities of the port – Turks, Greeks, Jews, Armenians and Franks (i.e. Westerners, themselves divided into French, Italian, Dutch, and British) – lived side by side, doing business together, quarrelling, occasionally (very occasionally) inter-marrying, sharing recipes, protecting each other, fighting each other, despising each other, playing cards together, drinking coffee together on the waterfront, investing together, borrowing from each other's languages, speaking each other's languages, shopping together, laughing and crying together, arguing about politics together, gossiping about each other, going to afternoon teas at each other's houses – simply

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33 In *Contested States: Law, Hegemony and Resistance*, Routledge, 2012, Mindie Lazarus-Black and Susan F. Hirsch say pp. 273–."Not surprisingly, Izmir was the most cosmopolitan city in the Levant in the eighteenth century" (p. 273). (And not only then).



living, sometimes in harmony, sometimes just side by side, sometimes actively hostile, the infidel with the faithful, the East with the West, the respectable inhabitants with the mocking, ironic denizens of the port.

Because above all Smyrne was a port. This is one obvious explanation for the variety of cultures in the city. In this magnificent setting, the grand sweep of the waterfront backed by the bare heights of Mount Pagus, the climate kind and sweet, the waters of the Aegean shimmering at the city's feet, it was not hard to set up trading enterprises exporting the products of the Eastern hinterland, figs, cotton, silks, fruit, tobacco, leather, sesame, beans, wood, opium and licorice<sup>34</sup>, or importing the finished products of the West. Sitting at a meeting point between Asia and Europe, the city was ideally placed to attract merchants of every trading nation, their families, their staff, their dependents, and their hangers-on. The city's multicultural character was its strength, an asset which, in the twentieth century's headlong rush to nationalism, was tragically elbowed aside.

The songs emerged from the variety of languages. A 19th century visitor, Edward Dacey, wrote in a collection of essays about the Mediterranean<sup>35</sup>:

*Smyrna is a reproduction in miniature of the Tower of Babel . . . in no place I know of are there so many communities as there are in Smyrna, each speaking a language of their own. There are the British and the French colonies; the Dutch, who mainly use English; the Italians who employ a dialect more closely resembling Maltese than the Lingua Toscana; the Greeks from the Pelopponesus; the Greeks from the Morea, who speak Albanian; the Greeks from the Isles, who employ Romaic; the Slavonians, who talk in Servian; the Jews, with their strange Spanish-Italian lingo; the Turks, Arabs, Persians, Gipsies and Kurds, all using their own tongue.*

Business was carried out in several languages, but prominent among them was Ladino, or judeo-español<sup>36</sup>. Many Greeks and Armenians

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34 Galante, Vol. 3, p. 99.

35 *The Picturesque Mediterranean in Cities Shores and Islands*, published in 1890 by Cassell Publishers, Vol. 1, p. 26, quoted in *Smyrne, Evocation d'une Echelle du Levant*, Lalurence Abensur-Hazan, Editions Alan Sutton, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire, 2004, p. 40.

36 See Appendix 2: Ladino.

could speak the Jews' "strange lingo", and a great-uncle of mine, Jacques Nahum, told me<sup>37</sup> that his father, Jo, who was born and raised in Smyrna, would frequently trade with Ladino-speaking Greeks and Turks, as would his grandfather, my great-grandfather, Jacob.



In this drawing by Denis August Marie Raffet (1804-1860),<sup>38</sup> we see three mid-19th century traders doing business in Smyrne. On the left is a Jewish merchant, on the right a Turk with his turban, and a Greek with his fustanella, or Greek pleated skirt, but wearing a Turkish fez, is facing away from the viewer. The Turk and the Greek appear to be carrying weapons. It would be unlikely that the Jew would be doing the same, as at that time Jews were not particularly warlike. What language are they speaking? Probably all three. Probably simultaneously.

Most Jews could speak Greek and at least some words of Turkish. My own Smyrniot grandmother Sarina, although functionally illiterate, spoke fluent Greek, although of course her native tongue was Ladino.

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37 Interview in Paris, 10 October 2013.

38 In Laurence Abensur-Hazan, *Smyrna in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries: A Western Perspective*, Arkas Holding, Izmir, 2013, p. 118. .

In 1905, just before my great-grandfather Jacob Nahum and the family in the photograph left Smyrna for Cairo, a subscription was raised for the formation of a new insurance company in Smyrne. Here is the list of subscribers:

Arditti, Bension, Israel, Levy, Nessim, Bohor (all Jewish names);  
Dimitrios, Halikopoulos, Nicolaidis, Krassopoulos (all Greek names);  
Elmassian, Haleplian, Baliozian, Mercourian (all Armenian names);  
Hilmy Hassan, Baroutchi, Hadji Mehmet (Turkish names);  
Battazzi, Bragiotti, Aliotti (Italian names).

One name, Haralambo Yossifoglou, is notable as being, in itself, a mixture of Greek, Turkish and Jewish. Companies subscribing included Sykes et Cie, Whittal, and Joseph Meyer (English and German).

I had to smile when I found this evocative list in the exhibition *Smyrna in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, which I visited at the Arkas Art Centre in Izmir in 2013. I knew this cosmopolitan Levantine world. The record may show that I was brought up in Bellevue Hill, Sydney, but while I was growing up, 98 Birriga Road might just as well have been 19, rue Hawayati in Cairo, that mythical pre-war paradise constantly evoked by my mother, where races and cultures mingled freely, the weather was always good and the food delicious. My mother's friends were Greeks, her food was Middle Eastern and French, she spoke Greek and Italian, as well as French and Ladino. The Turkish world was not foreign to her either, since her best friend in Cairo was a Turkish girl, Devlet. Her own mother would often talk to her about the multicultural Smyrna she, Sarina, had left at the age of 25, and *my* mother passed those stories of Smyrna down to me. So to me, the idea of a potpourri of cultures was familiar, unremarkable, the medium in which I was brought up. A regular, ordinary scene in our house in Bellevue Hill consisted of four ladies around a card table: my mother (Spanish Jewish from Cairo), her best friend Madame Gouma (Greek from Smyrna), Madame Salteri (Italian from Milan) and Madame Messara (Syrio-Lebanese from Alexandria). The next visitor could easily be my music teacher Marthe Oppenheim (German Jewish from Mannheim), or Gwen Fisher, true blue Aussie born and raised in Adelaide, or Mrs Minc, Polish-Jewish

from Łodz, or Mrs Pikler, half-Indonesian, half-Dutch, with a Hungarian husband, or Madame Odette Denis, direct from Paris.

The assortment of cultures had been just as rich in Smyrna as in the Cairo I had been “raised” in, if not more so. The resemblances were striking. And I had heard a multitude of stories about Smyrna related by my mother as I was growing up. Many of them had a multicultural dimension. I heard jokes that mingled Turkish with Ladino and Hebrew. There were tales of my grandmother Sarina secretly attempting to go to a (Catholic) Italian school at the age of seven and being summarily dragged back home by a scandalized father, anecdotes of Jews’ adroit dealings with Turkish officialdom and Greek shopkeepers. The songs and the photographs did the rest. Smyrne was familiar to me, and multiculturalism was in the air I breathed.

So when I arrived in Izmir for the first time in 2013, I experienced a shock of recognition, a feeling of being suddenly, self-evidently, back home. It was as though the city had recognized me and was welcoming me back. In my mind’s ear as I walked down the Cordon on my first day in Smyrna, there sprang a line from Hermann Hesse’s poem, *Frühling*<sup>39</sup>, or Spring, in which the poet arrives in the place of beauty he has dreamt of for a long time. In the poem, the place recognizes the poet, not the other way round: *Du kennst mich wieder* [you recognize me], he tells the landscape. Smyrna was recognizing me. I was exhilarated. Inevitably that first romantic effusion turned out to be foolishly one-sided, all

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*In dämmrigen Grüften  
träumte ich lang*

*von deinen Bäumen und blauen Lüften,*

*Von deinem Duft und Vogelsang.  
Nun liegst du erschlossen  
In Gleiß und Zier*

*von Licht übergossen  
wie ein Wunder vor mir.*

*Du kennst mich wieder,  
du lockst mich zart,  
es zittert durch all meine Glieder*

In dark abysses, I dreamt for a long time  
of your trees and blue skies,  
of your fragrance and birdsong.

Now you appear  
in all your finery, drenched in light, like  
a miracle before me.

You recognize me, you entice me  
tenderly.

All my limbs tremble at  
your glorious presence!  
(partly my translation).

slightly silly, dear, in fact. It would not be long before I realized that Smyrna, the rich and teeming diversity I had been raised with, had essentially been replaced in the early twentieth century by nationalism run amok. From embracing and consisting of many smaller patches, it had become one big one with very small variations of colour still visible on the edges. And I would learn, too, that Smyrna was not always the paradise I imagined, even before the baleful forces of nationalism supervened.

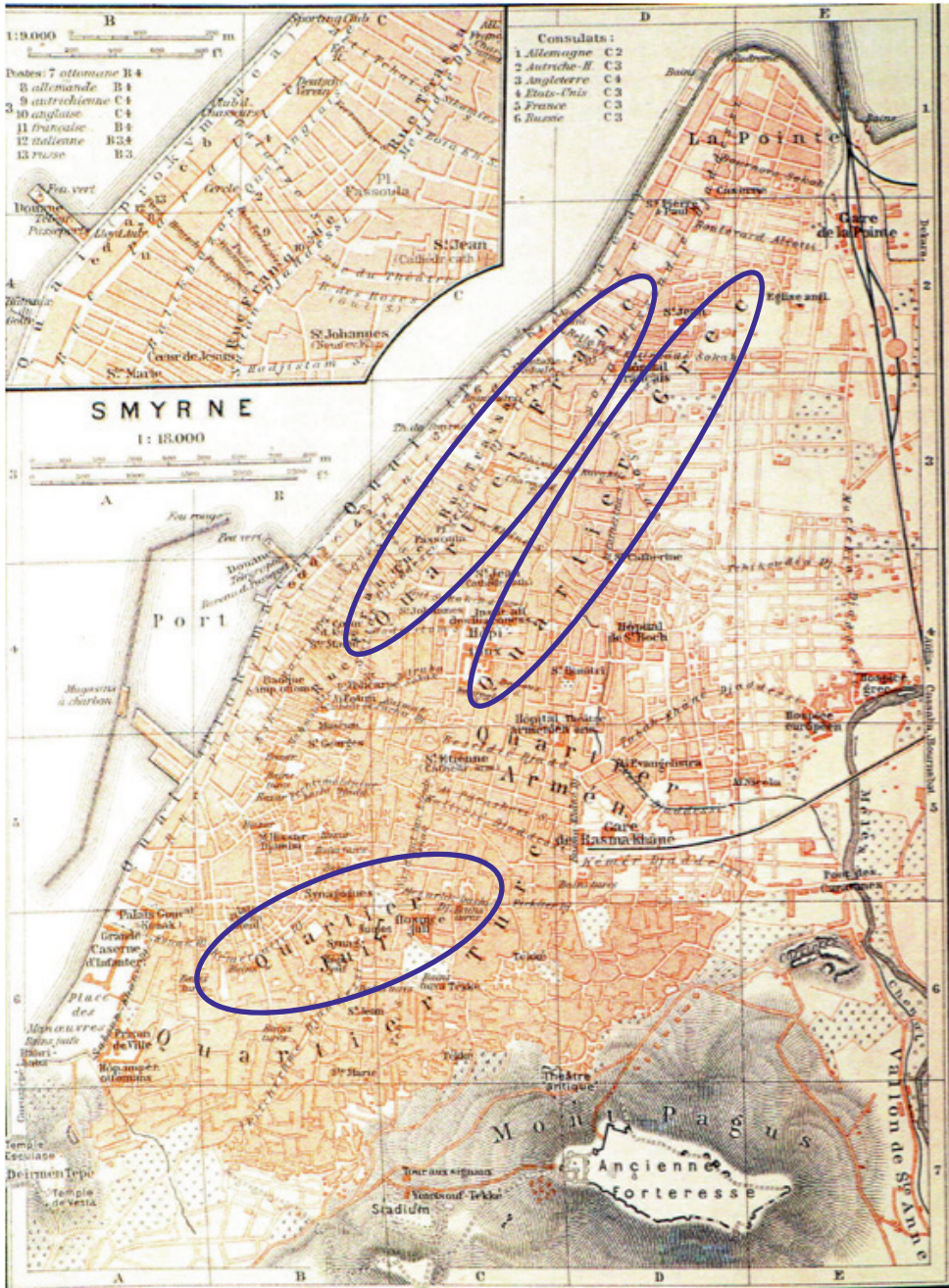
### **The cordon and the quarters**

While the similarities were very marked, in some ways social diversity in Smyrna was not structured in entirely the same way as in the Cairo I grew up with. In my mother's pre-war Cairo, Italians, Jews, French, Greek and Armenians lived in the same building and often shared a landing, whereas in the Smyrna where the Nahum family lived for centuries, each community tended to live in its own quarter. But far from being European-style ghettos where the dwellers were unwillingly locked in at night, the Smyrniot quarters were more like neighbourhoods, developed only as a matter of convenience, for proximity to places of worship, slaughterers, and religiously approved food and clothing shops. They underlined, rather than compromised, the multicultural character of the city.

The map below<sup>40</sup> shows the Quays which formed the Cordon, the main road- and railway lining the port; the Turkish quarter to the south-west; the Jewish quarter nearer the port, just to the north of the Turkish quarter; the Armenian quarter to the east; the Greek quarter to the north; and to the north-west, the most prestigious "Quartier Franc", the foreigners' quarter. It invites a little tour, starting with the Cordon.

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40 By Joseph Meyer (1796 - 1856) in *Smyrna in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, op.cit, p. 105.



Map 7: The Waterfront of Smyrne – the multicultural Cordon



A charming postcard of the late 19th century<sup>41</sup> shows ladies with parasols picking their dainty way down the Cordon, while a file of camels parades right behind them. Is that a Danish flag on the left? It would not be surprising.

The Cordon, the great road- and light railway lining the waterfront, was the heart of multicultural Smyrne, the hub where traders of countless nationalities, strollers, frequenters of cafes, ships, horses, and certainly camels, united to give the city its character and its real *raison d'être*.

My great grandfather Jacob Nahum could easily have been one of the men waiting and walking up and down the Cordon in the picture below. He was a *courtier*, a middleman, who, according to my great-uncle Jacques Nahum, Jacob's grandson, son of Jacob's son Joab, waited for ships to come in with their cargo of finished goods from Europe, and arranged for them to be transferred to a retailer, collecting a commission on the way. A certain amount of haggling among the camels generally took place. Jacob would also seek a ship's buyer interested in figs, or grapes, or opium, or any of the raw goods grown in the hinterland of the Empire. One of his, and my mother's, and my, forebears could well have been the model for the Jewish trader in Raffet's drawing.

41 Abensur-Hazan, op. cit., p. 28



It was an insecure profession, whose uncertainties were one of the several reasons Jacob decided to uproot the whole family and leave for Egypt in 1906.

Today the Cordon is a very clean relic of those hectic days. The cafes have not disappeared, but the name of at least one of them signaled to me the role of the Cordon today:







These days the once bustling and teeming old wharves lie deserted and silent. In the interests of preservation, they are out of bounds to the disappointed visitor. But only a little imagination is needed to hear the camels snorting, the traders hailing each other, the ladies laughing, the masts creaking and snapping in the breeze.

It is not all nostalgia on the Cordon today. The grand promenade is still lined with imposing buildings and waterfront cafes. And Smyrne is still a busy, even clogged, port. The waiting ships visible in the distance lie outside the port limits and unload their cargo on to smaller vessels, thereby avoiding hefty port fees, as they have done for years.

Starry-eyed, oblivious of history, I took my first romantic walk down the Cordon one hundred and ten years after Jacob and the family had left Smyrne from this very seafront, breathed in the soft air and put my face up to the warm breeze. It would be some time before I learned about some of the less delightful aspects of this complicated, beguiling city.

## **The Quartier Franc**

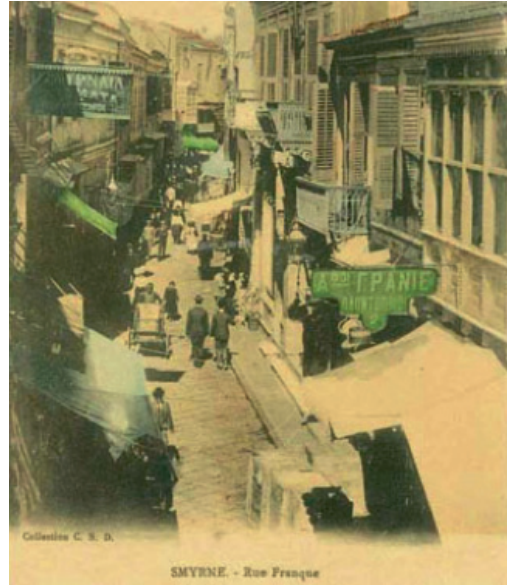
The wealthiest and most elegant quarter was that of the foreigners, the Franks, so called irrespective of whether they were English, Dutch, Italian or French. The biggest street in the Franks' Quarter was the Rue Franque, modern and hygienic even in the 19th century, one street back from the Cordon, the wide street running along the waterfront.

An 1880 view of the Rue Franque shows clean awnings, well-dressed shoppers, solid stonework facades, and a remarkable absence of litter.

Another view of the Rue Franque, showing two shop signs in Greek. A large proportion of small retail enterprises were Greek, not only in Smyrne but also all over the Levant. This is the main reason why my grandmother spoke such fluent Greek, as, later, did my mother in Cairo<sup>42</sup>.

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42 I saw the same pattern of Greek small retail enterprise a hundred years later when I worked in Zimbabwe, and it is prevalent today in Sydney as well.



The Frank quarter included the wharves, the headquarters of the large maritime enterprises, the luxury shops, the cafes, the clubs, the theatre, the Sporting Club, and the Casino. It contained the Cordon, and stretched along the seafront towards the north-east.

### The Armenian Quarters and the Armenians

The Armenian quarters, mainly Getezerk, Karap and Haynots, were a little less prosperous than the Quartier Franc, but were still well-to-do, with large stone houses and modern windows, as well as the Ottoman balcony/windows from which women could look down on the street below. This oriental feature was to be found in all the quarters, including, as I was to see for myself, the Jewish one.



In Smyrna the Armenians had built four churches, several schools, a hospital and even a theatre. In the mid-19th century, they numbered around 6,000<sup>43</sup>.

This retouched photograph, of uncertain provenance, shows an Armenian demonstration in one of the Armenian quarters of Smyrna. Throughout the first half of the 19th Century, ordinary Armenians would take to the streets protesting against the division of Armenian territory between Russia and the Ottoman state, and against their own elites, who were loyal servants of the Ottoman government and therefore, in the eyes of the non-elites, quislings.

The Armenians would of course pay a heavy price in the 20th century for having a different culture, a different religion, and an unpardonable wish to have a consolidated land of their own. That desire had been growing for centuries. For much of the four hundred years of Armenian presence in the Empire, they had chafed against the “unutterable contempt”<sup>44</sup> shown by the Turks to Christians, against their exclusion from full legal status, the periodic looting of their shops and homes by Turks, corruption in tax and other government measures, the prohibition against ringing of church bells on Sunday and, in general, their second-class status in the Empire. Reform attempts, some forced on the Ottoman government by European powers, always seemed to achieve nothing.

In the 19th century, Armenian intellectuals, educated in Europe and willing recruits to the notion of nationalism that had originated in the French Revolution, formed political parties aimed at improving the lot of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and, ultimately, at securing a homeland of their own.

These efforts provoked further oppressive measures from the central government. Sultan Abdul Hamid, the head of government, formed a militia which embarked on a series of massacres. Nationalism had taken

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43 Alexis de Valon, *Une année dans le Levant: voyage en Sicile, en Grèce et en Turquie*, 2 vols (2nd edition, 1850)II, 64, cited by Philip Mansel, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

44 Ramsay, W.M. (1897). *Impressions of Turkey during Twelve Years' Wanderings*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. pp. 206–207

hold of the Turkish elites and the concept of Turkey for the Turks had embedded itself in their minds. The modernizing Young Turk movement sought to bring down the corrupt, disintegrating old Ottoman regime, and, for one year, succeeded. Sultan Abdul Hamid, much to the joy of the Armenians, stepped down.

But the next year, in 1909, a countercoup targeted the Armenians and tens of thousands were massacred. It was another step towards Armageddon for the small, productive, talented community.

The end, for most of the Armenians, came in 1915. The First World War had opened with Russia and the Ottoman Empire on opposite sides. When Turkish forces were routed in an early battle, they blamed the Armenians for taking the side of Russia. The match was put to the tinder in the city of Van, when all Armenian men were called up to enlist in an unarmed battalion. Rightly suspicious, the Armenians tried to buy time, but the governor of the province, Jevdet Bey, refused and mounted a siege. Intellectuals and distinguished Armenians were arrested, deported and killed. Widespread massacres began.

In Constantinople and scores of other towns and cities in Turkey, Armenians were killed and tortured in their hundreds of thousands. They were burned, drowned, poisoned and inoculated with typhoid. Estimates of the number murdered vary widely between 600,000 and two million, partly because of the unreliability of Ottoman censuses as source documents, but few today dispute the testimony of many eyewitnesses and the reports of many journalists.

Smyrna became a deportation centre. The city sheltered the last major Armenian community to have survived the massacres of 1915, perhaps as a result of the city's "infidel", multicultural character. But the reprieve was short-lived. Most Armenians lost their lives in the Great Fire and the massacre of 1922<sup>45</sup>.

It is clear that by 1906, when Joab Nahum and his family left Smyrna for Cairo, the threat of tectonic shifts, both literal and figurative, under the family's feet was already present. The Ottoman Empire was falling

45 Giles Milton, *op. cit.*

apart, and in the middle of the turmoil no peace-loving *courtier* would find it any easier to make a living. The only way was out.

## The Turkish Quarters

An 1880 view of the Turkish quarters shows substantial stone-built houses, most of which are far from being slums. Mount Tagus can be seen in the distance. Since the Turkish quarters were away from the low-lying, insalubrious area near the port, people there were healthier, homes more spacious, and sanitary arrangements more sophisticated than those of the Jewish quarter below. This appears to be a purely residential area, although a careful look will reveal two minarets.

How close the various quarters were can be seen in the 1890 photograph<sup>46</sup> below.





Here the Greek Orthodox church, St. George, in the Greek quarter, is only a short distance away, perhaps three or four kilometers, from two mosques.

### **The Greek Quarter and the Greeks**

The Turks might officially have been in control of the government of the Empire, but, as Philip Mansel has pointed out<sup>47</sup>, the Greeks behaved as if they ran Smyrna. There were perhaps twice as many Greeks as Turks in the city. Their quarter was full of solidly-built houses, apartment buildings, schools, hospitals, and churches. They were industrious, well-educated, and cohesive.

They were also, particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century, intensely nationalistic. In the broad Greek community, anti-Semitism was rife, although Greek religious leaders often deplored it. The blood libel and periodic rampages through Jewish quarters could, in the Smyrne of the 19th century, co-exist quite easily with personal friendship and business relations among Greeks and Jews.

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<sup>47</sup> In *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean*, John Murray, London, 2010, p. 171.

## The Old Jewish Quarter

The old Jewish quarter down near the port, where the Nahums may have lived till the beginning of the 19th century, and which included a large bazaar, was the poorest of all the neighbourhoods. Rickety two- and three-storey houses with multiple apartments, called *cortijos*, leaned against tiny synagogues and packed bazaars. The narrow streets were always crowded, there were no private bathrooms, and food preservation was primitive. Donkeys, hawkers, beggars, shoppers, merchants, middlemen, waiters, children, rabbis, fishmongers, greengrocers, jewellers, all thronged the streets. Pungent smells filled the air. The noise was incessant. I would discover that, apart from the almost complete absence of Jews, the area is not so very different today. Perhaps there is better plumbing.



*Lithograph of the Smyrna bazaar in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century  
(private collection)*





*Bazaar in 2013 during my visit*



*The bazaar in Smyrne today, during my visit, the tiny apartment above the shop harking back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even before*



*The entrance to the bazaar today. The building on the left is in the cortijo , or apartment, style popular from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to today*



*Less litter. Better plumbing*

*But there is still poverty in the bazaar in Smyrne today. And nationalism.*



Fire was a constant menace in the Jewish quarter. In 1740 and 1772, great conflagrations broke out – the second one destroyed the whole Jewish quarter, the bazaar, and nine synagogues and killed dozens of Jews. For twenty years, until the government gave its permission to build new synagogues, the community had to hold prayers in private homes, and there was an outpouring of joy when the approval was finally granted; but in 1841, another fire destroyed nearly all the synagogues. The worst fire before Jacob Nahum and his family left Smyrna in 1903 occurred in 1881. Galante says:

*In August 1881, the large Egat Bazar quarter, entirely inhabited by Jews, was devoured by a fire which lasted for seven hours and destroyed not only the Egat Bazar, but the Boudour Ali and Iki Tchechmelik and a part of the Greek quarter. Despite the efforts of Jewish firefighters, the fire consumed about a thousand Jewish homes and drove about 5,000 Jews into poverty.*

Earthquakes were another scourge. In 1688, a huge earthquake devastated the city, and the bazaar in the Jewish quarter was the worst hit. Another, in 1778, destroyed two-thirds of the city and lasted for forty days. The last earthquake before the Nahum family left struck in 1902, and lasted for a month.<sup>48</sup>

The poorer Jews down by the waterfront also had to contend with a repeated onslaught of various plagues – typhus, typhoid, cholera – which infested the narrow alleyways and crowded houses.

As I explored the old Jewish quarter, it seemed as if the streets and bazaars had not changed very much in a century or more. The streets are so narrow that my van got stuck fast between two houses, attracting a horde of men offering their numerous valuable, and voluble, opinions on how to get out. A laden horse could never have negotiated these tiny streets, let alone a camel. Even a donkey would have had some trouble. It meant that beds, sofas, tables, had had to be carried in by hand. It meant that in the days before sewerage, any passerby was liable to be an unwilling beneficiary of ejected nightsoil. It meant that nothing was private, or completely clean, that no-one could ever be alone. It meant poverty.

The houses typically had a few broken steps up to a large double door decorated with elaborate, rusted ironwork. There were all the expected features: flaking plaster, peeling paint, the extra first floor room overhanging the street, a relic of the days when women were sequestered but could at least look out from there unobserved, and windows with rusted iron shutters on either side, from which strings of laundry were hung for all to see.



## ii. The Synagogues and the Nahum House

There are still a number of hammams, public baths. But it was the synagogues of the old town that I wanted to see. I wanted to feel how my forebears worshipped in the days before affluence lifted them out of the old quarter into the middle class suburb above.

There are so few Jews left in Izmir that, once the request went out, it was not hard to find someone show me round the old synagogues. Shlomo spoke only Turkish and Ladino, but it was like finding a long-lost cousin. He ushered me into another century.

Old, that is, pre-modern, Smyrna had thirty-four synagogues, most of them built in the Spanish style. The key to the old Spanish synagogue style is eye contact. Unlike in Ashkenazi or more modern synagogues, there are no serried ranks of pews one behind the other. Instead, there is a very Mediterranean sociability, even clubbiness. Everyone faces everyone else, everyone faces the rabbi, and there can be no isolated meditation. And despite the extremely comfortable padded seats, there can be no loss of focus. Someone is bound to see you, and nudge you awake. There is a strong reinforcement of community, even, in some of





*The Shalom Synagogue in the old Jewish quarter*

*The Bikur Holim Synagogue in the old Jewish quarter*





the synagogues, a subtle feeling of circling the wagons against hostile forces. Before the service, there is much gossip, facilitated by the layout, much deal-making, much political discussion, much polite inquiring after a son's studies, much hitching up of the tallit, the white prayer shawl striped in blue, and a few whispered injunctions to quiet down<sup>49</sup>.

The Spanish synagogue style is not originally Spanish, however. It owes a great deal to the Arabs. A typical Arabic *majlis* (reception, or reception room) is lined with benches or seats set flush against the wall, with an empty space in the middle. It is not surprising that after many centuries of living under Arab rule, the emigrés from Spain adopted an Arabic design for this most formal and solemn "reception room".

In the typical Spanish synagogues, that empty space in the middle is occupied by a higher area from where the rabbi preaches and teaches.

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49 A 19th century engraving of the old synagogue of Segovia shows how the seats were arranged facing each other. See Vivian B. Mann, Thomas F. Glick and Jerrilynn D. Dodds, eds, *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Mediaeval Spain*, George Braziller in association with The Jewish Museum, New York, 1992, p. 117.

Today only eight synagogues remain in the market area of Smyrne. Some of them are closed:



but the ones that are still open are the last relics of a world, a culture, that is very near to disappearing altogether – the world of the Spanish Jews of Smyrne.

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As the Jews of Smyrne became richer, they moved up the escarpment, to cleaner air, and built large houses that clung to the side of the cliff. The name of the suburb that grew up there was Karataş.

The only problem was that the escarpment was very steep. The winding path up from the port and the centre of the city was exhausting for men, donkeys and horses, and for women, it was impossibly inconvenient. So in 1907, a Jewish businessman, Nesim Levi, built a unique structure, which he called the Asensör, a Turkification of the French word *ascenseur*, a lift or elevator.

My uncle Élie's instructions had been clear. To find the house of his grandmother, Esther née Albagli, in Karataş, take the Asensör to the top, turn left, walk for fifty yards, and knock on the door. The house has a view over the whole sweep of the bay.

The Asensör was a surprise, a tall chimney-like structure housing an external lift.



Inside, the lift was panelled in wood and had leather seats. This lift had obviously been for the rich in those days, although today the passengers are not all so well-heeled. Instead of taking a whole day jolting on the back of a donkey to reach the top, we took about two smooth minutes.





From the restaurant at the top, the whole of Izmir was laid out. All very spectacular, but I was too impatient to find the Albagli house to wallow there. In the late 1860s, my uncle Élie's grandmother Esther Albagli, the daughter of the wealthy jute merchant, had left that house as a young girl to marry the Nahum patriarch Jacob, eventually to live with him in Bournabas, a newer suburb down on the waterfront level. As I turned left along the narrow street from the top of the Asensör, there she was, Esther Albagli, in a carriage, wearing her lowcut, belted wedding dress, starting out on the uneven road down to the port, her trousseau in a chest bumping along ahead, her face unsmiling behind her lace veil.



*19th century Jewish bride with trousseau, diorama in Jewish Museum, Istanbul*

My first view of the street of the Albagli house was not promising. Was this Karataš, the well-to-do suburb?



But a little further on, on the side of the street that looked out over the bay, there stood three houses, the only ones that might have been candidates. One was pink, one yellow, one blue. Their owners had installed several protections: cameras, outside lights, and ceramic plaques depicting the evil eye, in blue, yellow and white, strategically placed near or above the front door.



(The evil eye was a constant presence in 98 Birriga Road, Bellevue Hill, Sydney as well. My mother often used to make the phthou!! spitting sound that warded it off. Greeks do it too, even today).

The yellow house



and the pink one



looked promising, but they had gates. So since Élie had told me to knock, I went up to the blue one, which had no gate, and with the image of Esther Albagli still vivid in my mind, rapped on the front door. It could only have been this one, an ancestral Nahum home.

Still mentally in 1868, I was half-expecting a bearded merchant in a skullcap and long embroidered caftan to open the door of this old house and speak French. Or Ladino. On the threshold, the teenager in jeans and trainers smiled courteously and said, in perfect English, can I help you?, and inside, it was all Los Angeles – an American reality show on a giant screen, and American videos on the coffee table. Multiculturalism of a different kind. The French, and the Armenians, and the Greeks, might have disappeared, but horizons had not shrunk altogether. And there are still about 1200 Jews left in Izmir.

I was about to discover the 20<sup>th</sup> century centre of Jewish life in the city. Back at the top of the Asensör, I noticed an anomaly down among the sea of 1960s apartment buildings:



The synagogue, I was told. So I made my way down and stood dismayed in front of the largest synagogue in Izmir. It was smothered in security – closed iron gate, chainlink fence, cameras, guards' booth in front. It seemed hopeless to try and penetrate.

Just as I was turning away discouraged, a small door in the iron gate opened and a suspicious, gnarled old face emerged. The beadle, Nessim Franco. (Franco is a common name among Spanish Jews). When I



answered him in Ladino, his face split into a grin and he motioned me to come in. But inside, it could also have been in the West – pews, not cushioned benches against the wall, and no central pulpit or study platform. I did not linger. The Nahums had never worshipped here.

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The synagogues that remain in Izmir are the ones left after the 17th century cataclysm that overwhelmed the Jews of Smyrna, primarily, and the rest of the Ottoman Empire Jews, as well, namely, the rise and fall of the False Messiah, Sabbatai Sevi, the most famous of all the False Messiahs of history.

### iii. Sabbatai Sevi

Sabbatai Sevi was born in Smyrne, just across the road from the bazaar of the old Jewish quarter where my van had become stuck. His synagogue also stood near the present-day bazaar. Fittingly, his birthplace is a ruin today. It is a neat metaphor for the destruction of the desperate hopes for messianic deliverance that spread like wildfire among the Jews of the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century.

Sabbatai Sevi, and the profound effect he had on the Jews of the Ottoman Empire, including the Nahum family, cannot be properly grasped without understanding that the hope for deliverance by a charismatic figure lies very deep in Jewish consciousness. Even before the Christian era, there were at least three leaders who promoted themselves, or were promoted, as messiahs, of whom the best known is Judas Maccabeus. Between 167 and 160 BCE, Judas Maccabeus led a successful revolt against the Seleucid leader Antiochus, who had proscribed Jewish religious practices, and because he had thrown off a hated foreign ruler, many Jews considered him the Messiah. He was to give his name to the Maccabi sports movement of Zionist youth, still active around the world today. (Soon we will see how it touched the Nahum family in Cairo).

In the first century of the Christian era, about seven men claimed to be the Messiah, including Jesus of Galilee; in the second century, there were at least two, including Simon bar Kochba, whose revolt against the Romans was at least temporarily successful; in the 5<sup>th</sup>, the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> century, several more appeared; with the Crusades, messianic claimants proliferated, one of whom, David Al-rui, was to become the subject of a novel by Disraeli, *Alroy*; and in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a well-known claimant, Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia, arose who, eight centuries later, was to give his name to the computer of a character, Belbo, in Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum*. Unsurprisingly, the troubles of the Jews of Spain also gave rise to one or two messianic claimants, but for the Ottoman Jews, the major forerunner of Sabbatai Sevi was David Reubeni, who travelled to Turkey, and who was believed by "Marranos" to be the messiah because he had received from the pope and the Portuguese monarch a promise to cease the persecution, even if temporarily.

Broadly speaking, the intense hope for a messiah typically arose when Jewish communities were being unbearably persecuted. The fact that the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire were not persecuted to anything like the extent they had been in Spain and Portugal, did not, however, prevent the rise of Sabbatai Sevi. A number of explanations for his rise have been put forward. One powerful trigger for the movement could well have been the 1648-9 series of Chmielnitsky pogroms in Poland and the Ukraine (well known in the Ottoman Empire), when Cossacks under the leadership of Bogdan Chmielnitsky massacred over 100,000 people and destroyed around 300 communities<sup>50</sup>; Gershon Scholem<sup>51</sup> stresses the religious and kabbalistic basis for the wave of belief in Sabbatai Sevi that overwhelmed the Ottoman Jews; and the Jewish Encyclopedia also includes English Messianism, the claim in the Zohar that 1648 was to be the year of the deliverance of the Jews, and the millenarian belief that 1666 was to be the apocalyptic year, all as influences helping to create the extraordinary insanity that swept through the Ottoman Jewish community and beyond in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Sabbatai Sevi was not of Spanish Jewish origin. He may have been of Ashkenazi background, since the name Sevi is unknown among Sephardim. His father, a poultry dealer, probably came to Smyrna from the Morea in Greece<sup>52</sup>. Sabbatai Sevi was an odd individual, prone to fits and ecstatic frenzies, but with a powerful personality that commanded adherence. At 22, he proclaimed himself the Messiah. He began travelling all over the Ottoman world. Followers showered him with money, a few authorities declared that there was biblical support for his messianic claims, and from Smyrne his secretary sent a message to all the Jews of the world that began:

*“The first-begotten Son of God, Shabbethai Tebi, Messiah and Redeemer of the people of Israel, to all the sons of Israel, Peace!*

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50 Freely, op. cit., p. 12

51 Gershom Scholem, *The Mystical Messiah*, Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 6-7.

52 Freely, op. cit., p. 13

There was ungoverned delirium in the Jewish community. When Sabbatai Sevi came to Smyrna in 1665, he was wildly acclaimed by hysterical mobs. His movement spread all over the Ottoman world, and even to the Jews of Holland.

Naturally, none of this sat very well with established rabbinical authorities, or indeed with the Ottoman administration. Frenzied mobs, after all, are hard to control, by either spiritual or temporal authority. Sabbatai Sevi was threatened with excommunication by the rabbis, but in the face of challenges from authority, he defiantly continued his travelling, his proselytizing, and his collection of money. It could not last.

The end, when it came, was ignominious. Sabbatai was arrested in Constantinople in 1666, and imprisoned. The Sultan offered him a choice between death and conversion to Islam. The electrifying herald of a new Jewish dawn, chose conversion to Islam. He was appointed the Sultan's personal doorkeeper, and died in Albania on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, 1676.

For the Jews of Smyrne, the long-term effects of the Sabbatai Sevi episode were dire. Essentially, the traditionalist rabbinical authorities had won. They were now free to impose their own strictures, their own commands, their own requirements. Their word was law. Intellectual freedom was severely compromised for centuries, up until at least the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Henri Nahum, in his comprehensive and elegant book, *Juifs de Smyrne, XIXe au XXe siècle*, says<sup>53</sup>,

*At the middle of the nineteenth century, the Jews of Smyrne were in a woeful state of . . . intellectual backwardness*<sup>54</sup> [my translation]

My mother often told me a story, which is hotly denied by other family members. It seems that one day a free-thinking Nahum patriarch, already exasperated by rabbinical obscurantism, was given a putrid

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53 Aubier, Paris, 1997.



chicken for the Friday meal. He knew it had come from the shochet, the ritual slaughterer, who acted under rabbinical authority. He grabbed the chicken, stormed out to the rabbi's house, and threw it on the Sabbath table right in front of the rabbi. Upon which, he was excommunicated. My mother would retain that free-thinking, rational cast of mind as long as she lived.

#### **iv. The Alliance Israélite Universelle**

Into this discouragingly anti-intellectual, anti-modern world there blew a new wind. Some considered it a beneficent breeze blowing away cobwebs, others a destructive hurricane tearing down a community's most precious assets. Actually, it was both. It was the Alliance Israélite Universelle.

Based in Paris, the AIU was formed in 1860 largely to bring the benefits of modern French culture to the Jews of the Orient. AIU schools were set up all over in the Ottoman Empire, in Iran, and in North Africa. They were staffed by idealistic young French Jews who saw their mission as a civilizing one, aimed at equipping the backward Jews of the Orient with the education and tools needed for success in the modern world. Some of the more thoughtful teachers, however, had their qualms. Were they destroying something of value in the headlong rush to modernity?

A young Monsieur Fresco wrote to the AIU from Constantinople:

*Judeo-Spanish is the preeminent language of the people, and it will remain so for quite some time whatever we might. Everyone agrees that we should do away with Judeo-Spanish, that there is no reason to preserve the language of our former persecutors . . . and nevertheless, the lower classes, the bourgeoisie, and even the "aristocracy", as they are called here, everyone still speaks and reads Judeo-Spanish and will continue to do so. In committee meetings where all the members are well educated, and everyone knows French, a discussion started in correct, even elegant French will, often in an instant, inexplicably move into Judeo-Spanish jabbering. The most "select" dignified Jewish ladies when paying a call on a friend will be politely chitchatting in French*

*and suddenly break into jargon. Turkish is like a borrowed suit; French is gala dress; Judeo-Spanish is the worn dressing gown in which one is most at ease”<sup>55</sup>*

But the view that Judeo-Spanish should be done away with was not universal. The more thoughtful of the young teachers could see the drawbacks. In the archives of the AIU in the 9<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in Paris, I found letters to Paris headquarters from an M. I. Bazalda which represent the views of a few of the young teachers of the time. One of them reads:

*Since we cannot wipe out our fellow Jews’ use of the jargon that isolates them from other Europeans, that narrows their horizons and makes it impossible for them to follow, and take advantage of, developments in foreign literature, let us break with the traditions of the past. . . The teaching of Spanish can be very useful for us, however long our pupils, of both sexes, spend at school, even if it is only two years. . .our children will have learned to read and write in a language they understand easily, while if they read in French, they will constantly come up against terms they do not understand. (My translation)*

The link between language and customs and traditions is very strong. Because in Turkey, it proved hard to extirpate the Spanish language, it also proved hard for these enlightened young westerners to eradicate some of the customs that were so characteristic of the Spanish Jewish community of Smyrna.

Some of these customs sound, to the modern reader, altogether charming and revealing.

Among these were all the traditions that surrounded that most fraught of all ceremonies, the wedding.

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55 *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jews in Transition: the Treachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860-1939*, Aron Rodrigue, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1993, pp. 130-1.

## v. Wedding Customs among the Jews of Smyrna

In the little synagogues I had visited in the old Jewish quarter of Smyrna, all the dramas of family life for centuries were hatched, or covered up, or whispered, or forgotten. Here was where two fathers, perhaps prodded by their wives, perhaps impelled by financial need, would arrange a match between the son of one and the daughter of the other. Sometimes, among the poorer Jews, the prospective bride and groom had not yet reached puberty<sup>56</sup>. They could be as young as nine. In such cases, the bride would live with the groom as brother and sister, in his parents' house, even for several years. But the brides and grooms of the late nineteenth century were more typically in their late teens or early twenties.

For families like these, weddings had to be preceded by several stages. First was the settling of the terms of the marriage. There would be protracted negotiations between the two fathers and uncles. Often the Grand Rabbi would be called in to adjudicate, and indeed the rabbinical sources are full of questions to and responses from rabbis on the fair and proper payment from each party. The broad aim of the negotiations would be to protect the bride. This stage is called the *shidukhin*.

The next stage, called the *kidushin*, was the engagement ceremony. Among the Spanish-speaking Jews of Smyrne, this was generally called the *cortes*, or court, because the groom would receive the bride and family and friends as a king receives his courtiers.

The bride was taken to the rabbi's home by her family and friends to meet the groom, who would be there with his. Traditionally, the rabbi, in the presence of both families and their friends, would hold one corner of a handkerchief and offer the opposite corner to the fiancé, saying to him, in a mixture of Hebrew and Ladino, *Tomach kinyan y chevoua que desposatech con fulana hija de fulano*, meaning *Take the Kinyan and swear that you have engaged yourself to marry x, daughter of x*. The rabbi would then do the same with the fiancée. When these formalities were over, the rabbi would, on behalf of the fiancé, hand over to the girl a gift called a *nichan* or *besa mano*, consisting of bracelets, earrings, and watches

56 Galante, op. cit. vol. 3, p. 92

with chains. *Alkonfites*, sugar coated almonds (a word with Arabic and Spanish roots), would be served to all.

The fiancé would continue giving the girl presents. The gifts were called in Hebrew *sivlonot*. The most picturesque one was the gift of a lantern with henna inside it. The henna was put on a dish, surrounded by thin wax candles, and placed in a lantern, which was ceremoniously carried to the girl's home on a Thursday. The fiancée was supposed to dye her fingers with the henna and hand out the rest to her family and friends. The Thursday night that this ceremony happened was called the *notché de alhenya*, the night of the henna (again the Arabic is evident, this time in the "al" prefix), and marked the first day of the wedding ceremonies. This was the night that the mother advised her daughter on the right way to manage a marriage. Incidentally, this must have been an Ottoman custom also followed by Greeks. My own Greek mother-in-law followed this custom with me on the eve of my own wedding day.

The next Saturday was the *chabbat de entradoura*, the Sabbath during which the beadle of the synagogue, the *shammach*, proclaimed in a loud voice to those attending that Sol(say), daughter of Léon, was about to be married to Isaac (say), son of Moses.

Next, the trousseau had to be inspected and its value estimated. Once properly appraised, the trousseau was carefully placed on large bronze or copper discs, together with pots of jam, and sent to the home of the groom.

Another requirement was the ritual bath. This happened on the Friday of the week before the wedding and was called the *Banyo de novia*, the bride bath. All the women involved in the wedding, the bride's mother, the future mother-in-law, the close relatives, the bride's best friends, were invited to the bath-house. There the women would arrive with picnic baskets, and spend the time eating, drinking, singing and dancing. While dancing, "the bride [was] expected to drop her bath towel, as if by accident, in order to assure the future mother-in-law that she [had] a healthy and flawless body"<sup>57</sup>. Then the bride's friends would crumble

a *rosca* over her head, a ring-shaped cake made of fine flour, sugar and almonds, which signified virginity. Pieces of the *rosca* would be handed out to the younger girls present, to wish them a marriage in the future.

The wedding itself, *nisuin*, happened the next Friday, in the presence of a rabbi. Actually, according to Stanford J. Shaw<sup>58</sup>, the consent of the Grand Rabbi, or that of his representatives in the provinces, the Chief Rabbis, was indispensable before a marriage could be celebrated.

The bride was escorted by her parents to the house of the groom, where the blessing was pronounced under a huppah, or canopy. I could imagine the procession completely blocking the narrow little streets where my van had stuck, the mother weeping, the father swallowing hard, the younger sisters envious, the bride terrified. If, however, the bride shared any of my mother's characteristics, like vigour and daring, that Sol would have bounded into marriage as a great adventure, possibly after dragooning the groom into marrying her. She might not have dropped the towel obediently, or bothered with the henna on the fingers, but she would certainly have insisted on signing the ketuba herself.

If the bride were short (and my mother's small stature was certainly inherited from her Smyrniot forebears), she would put her feet in special clogs made of mother-of-pearl, which had been made in Rhodes.

(There were about 2000 Jews in Rhodes, many of them of Spanish origin like my mother. Their culture and customs were very similar to those found in Smyrne. Almost all of them ended up being deported and murdered in 1943. In the (German) list of those who were deported there are eleven women called Sol<sup>59</sup>).

The *ketuba* was, and is, the marriage contract. As beautiful and elaborate as the family's means allow, the *ketuba* had, and has, as its basic intention the protection of the interests of the bride. It prescribes the obligations of the groom with respect to his wife, which normally comprise food, clothing and conjugal relations. Generally the *ketuba* makes it hard for

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58 *History of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic*, NYU Press, New York, 1991, p. 151.

59 See <http://www.sephardicstudies.org/keridorhodeslis.html>

a man to divorce his wife without paying a pre-determined sum, and without giving up his rights to any property she may have brought to the marriage, and to any sum of money he may have given her when they marriage. The *ketuba* is signed by two witnesses, who are thereby testifying that they know that the groom has pledged his life to his bride. In other words, the marriage is an arrangement entered into by the bride and groom themselves, and the role of the witnesses is simply to formalize that pact. The bride and groom can sign the *ketuba* if they wish.

In the Ottoman Empire, the *ketuba* often had an elegant tripartite form:



although some, written on a single square paper, were much simpler.

Now came the eight days of eating, dancing and drinking. It was customary, the first night, to serve seven dishes: *sutlach* (sweetened, milky rice), served first so as not to clash with the meat dishes that would follow; fish; *siete en bocas* (seven in the mouth, in Ladino), tiny boiled and sugared almond kernels, seven of which could easily fit in anybody's mouth at once; *ojaldre* (meat paté, stuffed with pine-nuts and almonds); patties made of brains; *ménéado* (a dish with almonds); and pigeon. This last, a symbol of love, was served only to the bride and groom.

The next day was a Saturday, the *chabbat de boda*, the Sabbath of the wedding. The newly married couple and their parents would receive the congratulations of family and friends, who brought gifts. The gifts were each written on a piece of paper. The groom would then make the rounds of the guests, collecting all the pieces of paper on a dish. The

idea behind this custom was that if Providence ever decreed that the groom should become a beggar, that sentence was deemed to have been served by the groom's tour around the room on the *chabbat de boda*— an interesting window on the precariousness that still haunted the Jews of Smyrne in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even after they had been thriving in the city for many years.

The women had their own day, during which they all inspected the trousseau. And on the last day, the bride was placed on a great fish (presumably made of wood), the symbol of fertility, carried about the room, and wished many children to surround her in the years to come.

A number of wedding songs from the Smyrniot Jewish community have been preserved. Here is a charming representative one, *El Novio le Merko Skarpines* (the Groom has Bought her Elegant Shoes)<sup>60</sup>

<i>El novio le merko skarpines</i>	<i>The groom has bought her elegant shoes</i>
<i>La Novia mos bengá kon briles</i>	<i>May the bride come to us with gold threads [in her hair]</i>
<i>Ke le sea la ora buena</i>	<i>May she be blessed and happy</i>
<i>La ora para bien sea</i>	
<i>El novio le merko espejo</i>	<i>The groom has bought her a mirror</i>
<i>La novia mos bengá kon velo</i>	<i>May the bride come to us wearing a veil</i>
<i>Ke le sea la ora buena . . .</i>	<i>May she be blessed and happy</i>
<i>El novio le merko galechas</i>	<i>The groom has bought her clogs</i>
<i>La novia mos venga derecha</i>	<i>May the bride come with blessings</i>
<i>Ke le sea la ora buena . . .</i>	<i>May she be blessed and happy</i>
<i>El novio le merko armario</i>	<i>The groom has bought her a wardrobe</i>
<i>La novia mos venga del banyo</i>	<i>May the bride return from the ritual bath</i>
<i>Ke le sea la ora buena</i>	<i>May she be blessed and happy</i>

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60 From *Boda*, op. cit.

The *briles*, or gold threads in the hair, were still being worn in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a touching photograph of an older Smyrniot lady putting on, once again for the photographer, the wedding finery she had worn on the day of her marriage years before. And the bride of the song, the recipient of *galechas*, or clogs, was obviously short . . .



I had been so charmed by these customs that I wanted to see how many of them had survived. The only Jewish wedding I was able to attend was in Istanbul, but it was a world away from the 19<sup>th</sup> century one of Smyrne. Here the modern world had invaded in force. No clogs were to be seen, no *briles*, no great fish, and especially no processions in the street. Instead, three policemen sat outside iron doors set closely in the wall, passports had to be submitted, and there was a long wait for clearance, all thanks to the 2003 bombings of the Bet Israel and the Neve Shalom synagogues which killed 57 and wounded 300. Inside, there were no gentle little songs about ritual baths or veils or mirrors. (Indeed, the whole ritual of the bath was no longer observed, nor was the inspection of the trousseau). Instead, there was loud piped music from *Fiddler on the Roof* – *Sunrise, Sunset, If I Were a Rich Man*, and the rest of it, and a fortissimo rendition of the *Hatikvah*, the national anthem of Israel, which echoed against the walls. There was a *ketuba*, there was Hebrew, there were even, hearteningly, Muslim guests in their headscarves. But there was no Ladino at all.

In this wedding both the bride and groom were Jewish, but mixed marriages have now become the norm in the 17,000-strong community in Istanbul. Change is to be expected, but all the same, I felt a pang of regret.



## vi. Cemeteries in Smyrna

There is the same feeling of nostalgia for a charming, vanished world in the cemeteries of Izmir. The Jewish cemeteries of Izmir and Constantinople must be the only ones in the world where virtually all the names are Spanish Jewish. A sea of Spanish Jewish graves. For me, a far cry from Sydney, where the Spanish names are a vanishingly small minority among all the Ashkenazis. Many of the old gravestones in Smyrne have an innocent, obvious clue as to the occupation of the deceased: here are a fishmonger:



a shoemaker



and a tailor



(These carvings were an Ottoman custom also followed by Greeks).

From the point of view of multiculturalism, there were gravestones in Greek:



WOE!

*May your memory be blessed.*

and French



in the Jewish cemetery.

It would be impossible to envisage Jewish gravestones in Greek and French today in Turkey. Monolingualism has crept in. Most of the guests at the Jewish wedding seemed to be essentially monolingual in Turkish. Perhaps this is because they were from modern, nationalist Istanbul rather than the comparative backwater of Izmir, or perhaps the polyglot history and culture of Smyrna have not altogether died in the city of today.

Nevertheless, even in Izmir, there is still a sense of the wagons circling. I went to visit a 90-year-old woman, Roza Bencuya, who speaks and thinks in Ladino. Her building had 12 apartments – 10 of them were inhabited by Jews. Her identity card shows her religion – Musevi or Jewish – and she remembered for me the foods her mother made and the day of her own wedding.



Nostalgia, charming customs, a vibrant Jewish community in Smyrne, were all very well. But in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, change was in the air, not only in the city but also six hundred miles away in Cairo.

One factor which had begun to make Smyrna less inviting for the Nahum family was the increase in Greek anti-Semitism. Greek anti-Semitism had always been a feature of life in Smyrna. The reasons were not only religious but political. The main “religious” “reason” was an age-old one – the accusation that Jews would murder a Christian, usually a child, and use his blood in one or other of their rituals, most often in the preparation of unleavened bread for Passover. This so-called “blood

libel”, this fantasy, impervious to all proofs to the contrary, has had an extraordinarily long life, and is still being propounded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Russia, the United States, Israel, Egypt, and several other countries. Throughout history it has been used as an excuse for murdering Jews.

In Smyrna it had begun to escalate in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Philip Mansel says that

*[in Smyrna] Greeks accused Jews of ritually murdering a Christian child in 1868, 1872, 1888, 1890 and 1896 ... some Jews were murdered; others took refuge in Turkish houses. The bells of St Photinia rang against Jews in 1901, sparking off anti-Jewish riots”*<sup>61</sup>

Hand in hand with religion went politics. One of the political “reasons” was essentially that the Greeks considered the Jews, who were a *dhimmi* or protected inferior community, to be the close allies of the Turks, and since 1821, when the Greeks of the mainland had begun their revolt against the Ottoman power, relations between Turks and Greeks had been for the most part very hostile. The Greeks attacked the Jews because they were a proxy for the Turks, and in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Turks were still too powerful for the Ottoman Greeks to attack them directly.

Multiculturalism, in other words, was fraying badly in the Ottoman Empire. It was beginning to look very unstable, with irredentist movements proliferating throughout its huge territory.

For the Nahum family, another factor was the increasing corruption of Ottoman officialdom. Although the Jews had become adept at working their way round Ottoman venality, the rise of another environment not too far away where corruption was not nearly as suffocating was interesting. Very interesting indeed.

Then there were the plagues, the fires, the earthquakes that had to be regularly endured in Smyrne. It was all getting to be too unattractive. From six hundred miles away, Egypt, with its strong British presence, its order, its good climate, its increasing population of foreigners (including

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61 Mansel, op. cit. p. 172.

many Jews), its booming economy, its opportunities, looked too good to pass up.

So it was with high hearts that in 1906 the Nahum family – Jacob, Esther, and their children Sarina, David, Abner, Fortunée, Joab, Rachel, and Rebecca, whom we have already met – embarked on the steamer waiting to take them from the bustling docks of the Cordon to the enticing city lying on the banks of the majestic Nile River.

The future beckoned.

## **h. Life in Cairo (1906-1948)**

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*L'exil n'est point d'hier, l'exil n'est point d'hier!*

(It is not only from yesterday that we are exiled, no, not at all!)

Saint John Perse, *Exil*.

### **i. Nostalgia**

In Toledo I had found no Jews whatever. In Cairo today, the situation is better. There are seven Jews in the city, all of them women. All of them but one, the leader of the community, Magda Haroun, are in their eighties. There is also one man who was born a Jew. We shall be meeting him later on.

Why are they still living in Cairo? Magda Haroun, who is in her sixties, told me a story one warm evening on her mother's balcony in Cairo. It appears that one of these six elderly ladies has a sister in Marseilles.

The previous summer, she had embarked on what she intended to be a three-month visit to her sister, but within a fortnight she was back in Cairo. People in France were so *aloof*, she said. Here in Cairo, when I



go out, the baker asks how I am, someone always helps me across the street, people stop to chat with me, the hairdresser tells me a joke, the girl from the shoe shop pops out and gives me a piece of *loukoum*.

That is a large part of the Egypt my mother grew up in and loved: the warmth of the culture, and the ineradicable good humour of the person in the street. Egyptians tend to love jokes. The Egyptian joke, the *nokta*, is famous. Nearly all of the reminiscences written by “foreigners” who had lived in Egypt contain at least one example of the *nokta*. Here is a typical one from Egyptian Jewry, compiled by Victor D. Sanua<sup>62</sup>. My mother’s cousin Clément used to tell this one too:

*An Egyptian man is visiting Scotland, and wants to attend the Highland Games. He goes to the entrance and sees it is very expensive. While standing, he notices that men called McDonald, McLean, McAdam, Mc something are allowed in free after giving their names. So he strides confidently to the man standing at the entrance and says McGuaghi!! (Maqwaghi means “laundryman” in Arabic), and goes in free<sup>63</sup>.*

As I grew up in Bellevue Hill in Sydney, I heard this word *Maqwaghi* many times to indicate the drycleaner or the laundry or the presser, and reading this *nokta* in Sanua’s book, I burst into nostalgic laughter.

The 100,000 Jews who lived in Egypt during what they now view as the glory years 1885 to 1956 have virtually all gone, to France, Italy, Israel, Brazil, the United States, England, Switzerland and a few, very few, to Australia. The seven who are left do not even constitute a *minyan*, or quorum, to hear prayers. But to hear the exiles talk today, those years of their childhood and youth, in Cairo, Alexandria and Port Said, were years in Arcadia.

These were the middle-class Jews who mostly lived in the thirty-odd streets of the elegant centre of Cairo, or near the waterfront in Alexandria. They spoke and educated their children in French, even if at home they spoke Ladino or Yiddish (only a few Jews in Cairo spoke

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62 *Egyptian Jewry*, compiled by Victor D. Sanua ed., published by the International Association of Jews from Egypt, Brooklyn, 2005.

63 IAJE Newsletter, Vol. 5 no. 2, 2003, p. 13, reprinted in Egyptian Jewry.

Yiddish); and on 14 July they celebrated the fall of the Bastille and sang the Marseillaise with more gusto than the French themselves. They were professionals, traders, employees, bankers, brokers, importers, accountants, shopkeepers, doctors and lawyers. They sent their children to the Boy Scouts and to the Maccabi sporting club; they shopped at Pellegrini and Nahoum, the Alexandrian department store (the names alone are evocative of a successful multicultural society), or at Cicurel in Cairo, which displayed the latest Paris fashions in their shop windows; they had their hats and dresses made by the local Greek, Armenian, Italian or Jewish seamstress, who would often make home visits; the ladies visited each other for charming little afternoon teas; families spent their holidays on the beaches of Alexandria; they played cards and went dancing in one of the many nightclubs; they attended symphony concerts and the opera; they played tennis and went to the horseraces; they rode horses and went camping in the desert; they tended not to speak Arabic beyond the market and kitchen variety, although there was a substantial minority that was fluent; they had good working knowledge of Greek, Italian and sometimes English; they varied in their observance of Jewish traditions and rituals, sometimes within the one family; their names were Levantine: Aghion, Amiel, Cattai, Choueka, Cicurel, Eskiya, Harari, Hazan, Jehiel, Madjar, Maleh, Mizrahi, Mosseri, Nahum, Palacci, Rossano, Saltiel, Saporta, Vidon, Zarmati, Zilha. Absurd though it may seem, this catalogue of Levantine Jewish names has for me something of the power of the names of the Achaean contingents that Homer lists in rolling cadences in Book 2 of the Iliad.

With one voice<sup>64</sup>, they miss the life they had in Egypt. (Even I miss it). Gilbert Cabasso, former Alexandrian, describes<sup>65</sup> his feelings as he walks out into the street in Paris ...

*Et c'est Paris, la fadeur des murs et des sons, la nostalgie, la haine de la nostalgie ...*

And this is Paris, the dreariness of the walls and the sounds, nostalgia, hatred of nostalgia ...

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64 Almost. There is one exception. We shall be meeting him below.



“Out of Egypt”<sup>66</sup>, a funny, poignant, beautiful evocation of the author’s youth in Egypt, is probably the best-known – with good reason – of all the nostalgia-for-Egypt genre which has grown up since the foreign communities’ forced departure. Less famous though it is, my uncle Élie Nahum’s affecting affecting book is full of the same mingled regret, humour, anecdotes, and sadness. In its preface, he describes how, in his seventies, he is consumed with nostalgia for the life of Egypt:

*Une partie non négligeable de mon temps est dévorée par mes souvenirs qui jaillissent spontanément de je ne sais où ni pourquoi, qui s’insinuent comme des éclairs dans le flux de ma pensée pour m’en distraire et me plonger, en plein jour, dans une béate reverie<sup>67</sup>.*

A not inconsiderable part of my time is consumed by my memories, which spring spontaneously up, without rhyme nor reason, from an unknown source. They penetrate like bolts of lightning into the flow of my thoughts, distract me and, in plain daylight, plunge me into a blissful reverie.

Another exile, Albert Pardo, has written a book of reminiscences<sup>68</sup>, in which he includes his poem, *Sous ton ciel bleu* [Under your blue sky]. Here are encapsulated all the love, regret and gratitude that the exiles feel for Egypt, its engaging people, and the life they had there:

Under your blue sky  
The sons of the Nile  
Bestowed abundant gifts on me:  
Thoughtfulness, Trust, Friendship.  
Under your blue sky  
I always strove  
To deserve what they granted me.  
Far from your blue sky  
I am constantly speaking  
Of your generosity and goodness

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66 André Aciman, *Out of Egypt*, Picador, New York, 1994.

67 *En Égypte Trente-cinq Ans*, Nahar Misraïm, Paris 2006, p. 9

68 *L’Égypte que j’ai connue*, [the Egypt I knew] by Albert Pardo, Nahar Misraïm, Paris, 2003

And if the well-known saying is true  
Which says *He who has drunk of the water of the Nile*  
*Will drink it again,*  
Then I shall return to slake my thirst.<sup>69</sup>

One feature of the life they had in Egypt which the exiles miss the most is the multicultural character of their childhood and youth. For this reason, among others, Zionism never achieved significant purchase on the Jews of Egypt, despite the occasional display of anti-Semitism by the British, some of the foreign community and the Egyptians. Of course there were the Zionist Maccabi sports club, and the Zionist representative office, and some Egyptian Jews did go to Israel, a few even to kibbutzim, but monoculturalism, a single approved way of thinking, a single language, a single religion, a single accepted culture, bored and irritated many Jews who had grown up with a diversity of all four<sup>70</sup>. My mother herself spoke good Greek, Italian and Ladino, and thought in French, and as I was growing up, much of her ever-present nostalgia for Egypt centred around its multicultural environment.

There were other things about life in Egypt that she missed, of course, and remembered and recounted to me. Nostalgia affected every generation of the foreign communities born in Egypt. My mother's was one of the first of these, and was therefore in closer contact with the religious traditions and rituals brought from the Ottoman Empire than subsequent generations were. One of the great religious customs that she would recall with special nostalgia was the seder or Passover dinner celebrating the Jews' escape from the Pharaoh. Some of these customs have been lost, so it was worth recording here what I could recall of my mother's nostalgic childhood recollection of a family Seder held when she was eight years old.

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69 Quoted in Sanua, op. cit.

280 70 Quite apart from the political dimension of Zionism.

## ii. The Seder of 1919, as my mother remembered it

In 1919, the Passover meal, the seder, was held, for the first time, at the home of her Uncle Joab Nahum, the brother of her mother Sarina. *L'oncle Jo* had become wealthy in the thirteen years since the family's arrival in Cairo. He had created a business importing bicycles, the main non-donkey, non-camel, non-pedestrian mode of transport in the capital, and it had paid off handsomely. His new house was larger and more sumptuous than the apartment of any of the other brothers and sisters, so it seems there was a family decision to hold the seder there. This particular seder made a great impression on my mother, who was eight years old at the time. She would often tell me about it when I was growing up in Sydney, nine thousand miles, four decades, three generations and several cultures removed from the Cairo of 1919.

Although it was held in *l'oncle Jo's* grand new home, the seder was, of course, conducted by his father, the patriarch Jacob Nahum, who had brought the family out of Smyrna to Egypt in 1906. My mother always spoke of the high respect with which the elderly Jacob was treated by his wife, his children and his grandchildren. His children always called him *senyor<sup>71</sup> padre*, my lord father, and addressed him in the third person: *would my lord father like to come to the table now? Everything is ready*. His wife Esther, in the old Spanish way, would also address him in the formal style. As for the eight-year-old Sol, she was mostly too overawed to address him at all.

My mother vividly remembered, and often recounted, the preparations, the elaborate food, the songs, the atmosphere of good cheer, and in particular, the heroism and naughtiness of her little brother Maurice. At that seder, it was the role of Maurice, as the youngest male child present, to ask the traditional question, *Why is this night different from all other nights?* This is the question asked by the youngest male Jew at the Passover seder all over the world, whether in Baghdad, Sydney, New York, Warsaw, Izmir, Buenos Aires or Madrid, but no longer, unfortunately, in two of the Nahums' ancestral cities, Toledo and Cairo.

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71 This is the Ladino spelling

That year, it seems that the six-year-old Maurice, under the spotlight for the first time, came within a hair of disgracing himself, but was rescued by Sol and went on to a glorious triumph.

It should be remembered that this was a Spanish Jewish seder, so many of the traditional recitations were in Ladino as well as Hebrew. And the basic purpose of the seder should also be stressed, which was to celebrate the escape of the Jews from slavery in Egypt.

My mother remembered the preparations for the seder taking weeks on end. For many days beforehand, *l'oncle Jo's* house was the scene of a mighty flurry of cleaning – sweeping, disinfecting, mopping, rinsing. All the women, and the maids, would pitch in. (With the frequent exception of my mother's mother Sarina, the famous loather of housework). The wife of the patriarch, Esther Nahum, née Albagli, would direct the proceedings, and *l'oncle Jo's* wife Fortunée, and his brother Abner's wife Esther, née Avram, would obey instructions.

"Cleaning" is far too mild, a misnomer. The Jews had left ancient Egypt in such haste that they had had no time to wait till their bread rose, so they were told not to put yeast in their dough. To remember the unleavened bread of their escaping forefathers, Jews for centuries have celebrated Passover with bread made without yeast, which the Nahum clan, and all Sephardic Jews, call *matzAH*. Houses are swept extremely clean, to ensure that there is no leavening whatever, not even a speck, in any corner of the house. This was done by the Nahum family in Egypt as long as the patriarch Jacob Nahum, my mother's grandfather, was alive.

If the family had pets (not a particularly common habit in Cairo, where stray dogs and cats were more the norm), the mother would, if very religious, actually slip socks on their paws to ensure they brought no leavening into the house. But still, every corner, every object, every surface, had be completely spotless and leaven-free.

When the big day arrived, the long table, under its elaborately embroidered white tablecloth (no contribution from Sarina to the sewing), bore many dishes, the result of perspiration and laughter in the

kitchen. There was the plate holding the inner parts of many romaine lettuces, which stand for the *maror*, the bitter herbs Jews traditionally eat to remind them of the bitterness of slavery and exile in Egypt; there was the dish of *haroset* (a mixture of apples, dates, chopped almonds, and wine meant to recall the mortar or the bricks that the Jews had to make while enslaved in Egypt); there were two little bowls of salted water; there was a leek soup; there were the traditional *huevos haminados* (eggs left in a warm oven for 24 hours until they turn brown), a bowl of the Egyptian spinach soup *molokheya*, which the family had learned to enjoy after thirteen years in Cairo (in Sydney, my mother would make it too), *albondigas* (meatballs), and a special treat for young Sol who loved them, and would love them all her life, there were *bamyas*, baked okra in tomato sauce. There was a big dish of rice, cooked, as my mother would always do it, first in oil, then in a broth, till a crust forms on the bottom. (She always saved the crust for me. It was my favourite, and still is). And most important, there was the plate with three pieces of *matzah*. A bowl of *mrouziya*, currant and walnut preserves, was tantalizingly positioned just out of reach on the credenza. My mother remembered Maurice, her younger brother, dragging a chair, climbing up, reaching across and sneaking a finger in the *mrouziya* when he thought no-one was looking. Of course there was wine, because all the blessings of the Passover meal are supposed to be accompanied by, anointed by, wine.

Here is how I remember my mother's recreation of that unforgettable evening, told to me when it was just the two of us on the sunroom sofa at 98 Birriga Road, Bellevue Hill, Sydney. The words are mine, the story is hers. She did not remember all the words to the songs, so I have taken the liberty of filling them in, from other sources. And I myself may not have remembered every detail exactly. Nevertheless, this is my recollection, my recreation of her recreation of the way a Seder was celebrated by a family of Spanish Jews in Cairo in the early years of the twentieth century. I can still hear my mother's voice.

The rest of the family have started arriving. Everyone has just washed carefully, and is wearing his very best clothes. Sarina could hardly care less about fashion, nor could Sol, unlike her younger sister Esther, but

even they have taken trouble and are fresh and almost stylish. Sarina has a new cream coloured blouse and Léon a new shirt with a high collar. Each person coming in, including Sol, touches the fingers of the right hand to the mezuzah<sup>72</sup> on the door and brings them to the lips. Cheerful exclamations of *moadim le simcha!!* (literally festivals for joy in Hebrew) spring from all lips. Smiles and beams all round. This is a joyful festival. The Jews have miraculously escaped from Egypt. Two thousand three hundred years later, here at the table are Jews serenely about to eat matzah, perhaps on the very same spot in Cairo (why not?) where an oven had stood from which some long-ago ancestors, in terror of the Pharaoh, had hastily dragged their bread in its unleavened state, and fled.

Everyone takes his place at the table. All stand, holding up their cups of wine. The cups are silver and new. They are one of the first things Jacob has bought since he started to be prosperous. Little Maurice can hear his heart thudding. He has a starring role tonight and he's scared he might not remember his lines. He's only six years old.

Jacob the patriarch begins. Holding his cup of wine up, he sings, in Hebrew, the traditional blessing -- *Baruch Ata Adonai, Melech ha-Olam, boray pri ha'ghéfen*, Blessed art Thou, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

The whole table choruses AMEN.

Jacob then says, in Ladino, *Y beveran cado su vaso areskobdar*<sup>73</sup> (everyone will drink his wine while sitting down). The wine of the Zarmati children has been diluted, but Maurice, for a dare, and from high excitement, drinks more than a half of his cup right away, well before any food has passed his lips. Everyone sits and sips his wine.

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72 A small case containing a scroll from the Torah, screwed to the right side of the front door of a house.

73 A word that is uniquely Ladino, with no Spanish equivalent. It may have a Greek origin. It means "resting".

Esther, Jacob's wife, gets up from her chair and ceremoniously brings, from the credenza, a bowl, a jug of water, and a drying cloth. She approaches Jacob, who remains sitting, and who says, in Ladino, *Se lavaran las manos y nos diran berakha. Porque? Porque nos vamos a comer matzah.* (They i.e. You will wash your hands and not say a blessing. Why? Because we are going to eat matzah. Esther holds the basin and pours water over Jacob's hands, which he then dries.

It is now the turn of Joab, Jacob's eldest son, in whose house the seder is being celebrated. In Ladino, he recites: *They shall take a leaf of lettuce and dip it in salted water, and say a blessing over the fruit of the earth.* The whole table utters a half-groan, half-exclamation, *aaah*, in agreement. Everyone reaches across, takes a piece of lettuce, dips it in salt water, and eats it. Joab recites the blessing, in Hebrew.

Joab's brother David is next. He holds up a piece of lettuce and says: *Maror!* Bitter herbs. In a mixture of Ladino and Hebrew, he recites: *Tomaran de la lechuga y entinieran en el haroset y diran Baruch Ata Adonai:* They will take a piece of lettuce and dip it in the *haroset*, saying Blessed art Thou, O Lord.

Jacob then resumes the role of the patriarch. He takes the three pieces of *matzah*, and says, in Ladino, *Tomaran las tres matzot:* You will take the three pieces of *matzah*. He breaks one of them into two pieces, places one of the halves between the other two unbroken pieces, and the other half he slides under the tablecloth, for later, *para apikomin*, a word derived from the Greek *epikomion*, meaning afterwards. Of course Jacob, Esther, Sarina, Joab and his brothers, having been born and brought up in multicultural Smyrna, are all very comfortable with Greek. As, incidentally, was my mother. (For me the repercussions of her excellent Greek would be life-changing).

Maurice's head has begun to swim. There's more wine. Jacob seems to saying something else in Ladino, something about filling their glasses and reciting the Haggadah, the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Maurice looks frantically to right and left. He'll never be able to do it. Everyone is singing, in Ladino: This is the bread of affliction, which our

forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. Whoever is hungry, let him come and eat (Maurice is very hungry just now), whoever is in need, let him come and join us. This year we are slaves, but *el anyo que viene* (next year), we shall be free.

This is it. All eyes turn to Maurice. He is the youngest child there, or rather the youngest *male* child, so, to Sol's indignation, although she loves him, the spotlight is on him. He knows he is supposed to say something, but nothing comes. For a whole minute he stares mutely at the tablecloth. The table smiles encouragingly. Next to him, Sol, who knows his lines perfectly, and is furious that girls are not allowed to star, kicks him under the table and in a stage whisper, hisses, *Mah nishtanah* . . . the beginning of the line he, as the youngest male child present, has to say: Why is this night different from all other nights?

As if stung, Maurice jerks up in his chair. The question comes tumbling out. Jacob says: Why is it that on all other nights during the year we eat either bread or *matzah*, but on this night we eat only *matzah*? Sol knows this one well: *Matzah* is eaten because the Jews fleeing Egypt had no time to wait for their bread to rise. The next question: Why is it that on all other nights we eat all kinds of herbs, but on this night we eat only bitter herbs? Maurice knows the answer: bitter herbs are eaten to remind us of the bitterness of slavery in Egypt; the third: Why is it that on all other nights we do not dip our herbs even once, but on this night we dip them twice?: we dip twice, once in salt water to symbolizes the replacing of tears with gratefulness, and the second dip, *maror* (the lettuce) in *haroset*, symbolizes sweetening the burden of bitterness and suffering to lessen its pain; and the last, why is it that on all other nights we eat either sitting or reclining, but on this night we eat in a reclining position? we recline at the Seder table because in ancient times, a person who reclined at a meal symbolized a free person, free from slavery, and so we recline in our chairs at the Passover Seder table to remind ourselves of the glory of freedom. Sol has jolted his little memory into life. Much of his life, Maurice would be leaning, to one degree or another, on Sol.



Maurice is so excited and happy at his performance – and so hungry – that he reaches out for some more wine. Sol digs him in the ribs and kicks him again. Finally! The food is served, *albondigas*, meatballs, Maurice's favourite. Everyone makes a fuss of him. Léon beams. His little son has not disgraced the family. There is a respectful, but very short-lived, silence while everyone tucks in. It is all delicious, a triumph. To the women who have spent days peeling, stirring, basting, Jacob utters words he has learned from the Greeks in Smyrna: *Ya sta hieria su!* A salute to your hands!

Now for the family singing, all together, around the table. A familiar, very Jewish song, all in Ladino.

*Who here knows and understands? Praised be God.*

*Which are the thirteen?*

*Thirteen are the attributes of God (Los Ikkarim)<sup>74</sup>*

*Twelve are the brothers with Joseph*

*Eleven are the brothers without Joseph*

*Ten are the Commandments*

*Nine are the months of pregnancy*

*Eight days before circumcision*

*Seven days (with the Sabbath)*

*Six are the orders of the Mishnah (the oral Torah)*

*Five books of the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)*

*Four mothers of Israel (Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel)*

*Three are our fathers*

*Two are Moses and Aaron*

*One is the Creator*

*Blessed be he and his holy name!*

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74 Maimonides (1138-1204), the pre-eminent Spanish Jewish Torah scholar, physician, astronomer, and philosopher, established thirteen principles: God Alone is the Creator; God is Unique and One; God is Incorporeal and Incomparable; God is First and Last; We are to Pray to God Alone; The Words of the (Hebrew) Prophets are true; Moses is the Chief Prophet; The Torah has been Divinely Preserved; Torah Cannot be Changed; God knows All Things; God Rewards the Righteous; The Messiah will Come; and The Dead will be Resurrected.

By this time, Maurice is well and truly over-excited. It is already two hours past his bedtime, and he has been eating and singing lustily with everyone else. When everyone gets up to go home, he runs amok, streaking past Sol, hiding behind the curtains, dashing into the kitchen, shouting. Sol, ever the big sister, catches him from behind a sofa and pulls him out. Everyone is laughing. Even the dignified, intimidating Jacob smiles. Love, indulgence, and joy fill the air.

My mother would never forget that evening. Sitting with me on the sunroom sofa in 98 Birriga Road, Bellevue Hill, Sydney, at twilight, she brought the seder of forty years before to vivid life, so that the room disappeared and the big family table, with fifteen or so Nahums around it singing, materialized, and ghostly voices, chanting an ancient Ladino ritual, echoed in the ebbing light.

### iii. Élie goes to school

My mother's cousin Élie was born in 1920, nine years after her, and for him the nostalgia centred less around religious customs than around his upbringing. As do others born around the same time and writing later, like Albert Oudiz,<sup>75</sup> Élie spends a large part of his book, *En Égypte Trente-Cinq Ans*, lovingly recalling the variety, security, and fun of his education in Cairo, his walks to school, his excursions, his salutes at Scout camps, his holidays at the beach in Alexandria. The stories evoke a world which existed for a brief period of history, but which seemed wholly sheltered and permanent at the time.

After breakfast, when the milkman would trudge up the back stairs with his great milk churn and pour fresh milk into a pot held out by the family maid, the nine-year-old Élie would leave the family apartment with his brothers David and Clément, bound for the French Lycée, where most of the Cairo Jews were educated<sup>76</sup>. (The modern, middle-class Jews of

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75 *Je Viens d'un pays qui n'existe plus*, Albert Oudiz, Nahar Misraim, Paris, 2004.

76 There were other schools, including one in Cairo charmingly called *La Goutte de Lait*, the Drop of Milk. *La Goutte de Lait* had been set up by a Jew of Italian origin for poor Jewish children, and gave them free meals and milk. There were Jewish schools in Abassiyeh.

Egypt did not create or attend Jewish schools in any significant numbers, and, unlike in Smyrna, the Alliance Universelle Israélite did not play a major role, perhaps because the Jews of Egypt were not benighted enough to make it worthwhile for the Alliance).

Holding each other by the hand, the little Nahum brothers, every school day, walked past the Bata shoe store and the shop of Monsieur Avessian, the Armenian cobbler. They carefully crossed the rue Manakh, where they would meet up with another group, the Zaccai brothers, and schoolmates Menashe, Schwartz and Goldstein. All together they came to the Gattegno department store, where they teamed up with the brothers Lidji, and on they all proceeded to the Rond-Point Suarès. In 2015, I followed their route myself. A troop of children could not so easily cross the Rond-Point Suarès (nowadays called Mustafa Kamel) today:





*The Lycée Français in the 1960s, in a photograph taken by my uncle Élie Nahum*



*The Lycée Français today, during my visit in 2015*

Constantly hitching up their leather satchels which were always, maddeningly, sliding down their backs, they walked on, chattering and exchanging their *banouras*, their glass marbles. Now in front of the French Embassy, they saluted the *Kawass*, the huge Sudanese police guard, resplendent in his fez, short embroidered, long-sleeved waistcoat, white shirt, black bowtie, wide black cummerbund, and white *shalvar*, balloon trousers gathered in at the ankles, and he saluted them back. They continued along the rue Hawayati, which we already know, where Jacques Nahum, their cousin, would join the party. (We have already met Jacques Nahum, now 95, too). Soon they would be arriving at the door of the Petit Lycée, for the smaller boys, and the Lycée des Filles.

The Lycée at that time was a golden building of four storeys, with the French flag flying on top. It looks imposing in a photograph taken by my uncle Élie when, like many nostalgic ex-Cairo exiles, he went back for a visit in the 1960s.

Today the Lycée is no longer on its old site, although it continues to operate elsewhere. Riding past it in the car of the one Jewish-born man still remaining in Cairo, I was not surprised, or even very distressed, to see what has become of it:



Since the school day stretched from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m, schooling was exhausting for little boys. The slight little Élie, no Stakhanovite, was rescued by the protests of his mother and allowed to go home earlier.

Élie's mother, Esther née Avram, was to come to a sad end in Sydney in the late 1950s, but now, in the mid-1920s, she was in the full vigour of early middle age. One of her favourite activities was to take her youngest children with her to the hammam, or Turkish bath. Laughing in his still warm tenor, Élie at 94 recounted to me the story of one of his mother's visits to the hammam<sup>77</sup>.

#### **iv. David and Élie in the Hammam**

One of the most pleasurable customs that the Ottomans had introduced into Egypt was the visit to the hammam. Of course the sexes were segregated, except that mothers could bring young boys under the age of eight.

A visit to the hammam would take the whole day, and would be a combination picnic, song, dance, wash and gossip. The hammam was not a place for solitude. Quite the reverse. A group of ladies and their children, plus one or two maids, would pack wicker baskets full of sandwiches, omelets, oranges, mandarins, plates, and knives and forks, and would pile tablecloths, sponges, towels and clean underclothes in the centre of a square cloth, tying up the four corners to make a neat bundle. En route the ladies would chatter comfortably and a few early giggles could occasionally be heard. The little boys unwillingly drafted into the group would dawdle and have to be pulled along by the hand. On this occasion, David, Élie's brother, was a highly reluctant participant. He already suspected the worst.

The room, a large circle with a translucent dome, was lined with cushioned marble benches, with gaps in between. In the gaps were little sunken pits crowned with high taps, from which descended powerful streams of warm water. Squeals when the water was too hot, or when it caught a comb in a lady's hair, echoed around the room. The room was

delightfully warm and moist but not foggy. Some ladies would sit on the floor, while others, on the benches above them, would soap a sitting friend's back and shoulders and rub them with a lifa.

The agreeable gossip would occasionally be interrupted by a song. One lady would begin, perhaps with one of the perky little Ladino ditties the family had brought from Smyrne, *Ansina dize la muestra novia*, for example, in which a bride charmingly touches a groom's hair, eyebrows, eyes and so on, and asks him what each of these is called. He answers, for the hair, these are gold threads for you to embroider with; for the eyebrows, these are bows (as in bows and arrows) with which you slay me; for the eyes, these are almonds for you to eat, and so on, and each verse ends with a chorus, *Goze la novia con el novio*, the bride is having a fine time in the groom's company. The singing lady would enumerate each part of the groom's face in a solo, and the whole hammam would join in the choruses.

For very lively songs, dancing was imperative. One or two of the more agile ladies would get up from the bench, and, swathed in their generous towels, would essay a few decorous steps while tittering and making gestures of mock embarrassment. The others would clap and cheer them on. A couple more ladies would allow themselves to be persuaded. More of them would get up the courage to join in, and soon the group would all be swaying, singing and laughing together. And at the end, everyone would collapse in a breathless, giggling heap on the benches and the floor. (In the 1980s, I would have similar experiences with ladies in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia).

On this occasion Élie's younger brother David looked on, far from amused. Darkly, he suspected what was about to follow. The great scrub. Oh no, it was going to be the great scrub, he knew it.

He was not wrong. That day, it was decided to start with the children, and Élie, then seven years old, was the first one to go. Completely disrobed, he was carried to the tiled pit by the maid, and there a sturdy woman, naked to the waist, was waiting. She grabbed Élie's arm, threw warm water over his head, and soaped him from head to foot. With

a *chaboulouk*, a sponge, she rubbed him vigorously all over and then rinsed him off with a *kouz*, a cylindrical metal container full of water, which was thrown several times over his head. Running the palms of her hands closely over Élie's chest, back, and legs, the woman swept off the dripping water and handed the little boy over to the faithful maid, who was waiting at the side of the pit with the burnous open wide. Élie was enveloped in the towel, endured the hood being pulled over his head, and submitted to a thorough rubbing to make sure the burnous had absorbed every drop from the drenching.

"One down!" cried his mother, who now turned to David to tell him to get undressed. But David, having witnessed the whole frightful operation, resolutely objected to taking off his clothes and entering the pit. Blandishments and threats were of no avail.

Captured and held fast by his mother and the maid, he wriggled mightily, launching furious kicks to right and left, all in vain. Squirming and thrashing, he found himself gradually being undressed. When they got down to his underpants, his resistance reached a climax. Somehow he managed to wriggle free of their grasp. He fled, bawling loudly, by a little staircase nearby, and hid inside an empty cabin. The maid attempted to enter it herself, but he ducked under her arm, broke out, and dashed to the corridor leading to the exit. Just in time, he was caught, and brought kicking and howling back to the hammam, but this time he was allowed to keep his underpants on. There ensued an epic struggle with the half-naked washwoman, who, with some difficulty, won the combat, drenched him, and thrust him into the waiting burnous. Back on the bench next to Élie, he steadily muttered recriminations and invectives against the whole concept of washing and the hammam in particular.

Once everyone was clean and fragrant, the food would be set out, and the serious business of lunch would begin. By the time no-one could eat another thing, it was three in the afternoon, and a siesta was in order after the exertions of the day. The ladies would dress, pack everything up, and exit in a procession down the streets of central Cairo, back to home and their waiting beds.



An old Turkish harem tradition, surviving well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Egypt. And beyond.

## **v. Akela, beks, beks, beks, AOUUU**

Almost all the young Jewish boys, and even the Greeks, Armenians, Italians and others, were enrolled in the boy scout movement, but each community had its own packs. Little Élie, at the age of eight, was an enthusiastic participant in the Jewish troop.

The Scout Movement was formed in Britain by Lieut.-Gen. Robert Baden Powell (BP) in 1908, in the full flush of mid-imperialism. In a very British way, uniforms, quasi-military rituals, ranks, badges, good turns, and physical challenges were the order of the day. Smaller boys were called wolf cubs, the oldest Rover Scouts, there was promotion on good behavior, and scout leaders were called Akela, the hero wolf of Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, or Bagheera, the kindly black panther. The movement spread all over the world, sometimes to rather incongruous cultures and countries like Poland, Mexico, Nigeria, India.

Élie was enrolled as a wolf cub in the Maccabi (Cairo) troop. The Maccabi sporting and scout movement, on the rue Boulac, (later called, in the politically correct environment of the day, the rue Fouad the First<sup>78</sup>), rejoiced in the luxury of a wooden shed with two partitions. Inside were chairs, tables, cupboards, and other paraphernalia, to be used for instruction of wolf cubs. Sack races, grab the hanky, the broken telephone game, knot tying, all the classic activities of the scout movement, were a wonderful discovery for the little eight-year-old.

Soon after he joined, Élie went on a scout camp. Today, in his apartment in Milan, attached to the wall, a greatly enlarged photograph of himself at that camp, serious, determined, dedicated, dominates his living room. He is nine.

After an exhausting day at the camp doing woodcraft, hiking and sport, the group leader, Mademoiselle Sardas, a.k.a. Bagheera, read from *The Jungle Book* (in French), the campfire was lit, the boys were tested on

78 (1868-1936). The father of King Farouk. He was also, of course, Fouad the Last.

what they had learned, and finally, before turning in, it was time for the two last songs, the Grand Howl, followed by the Hatikva, the Zionist anthem.

The movement may have spread all over the world, but few scenes anywhere could have been as delightfully bizarre – and emblematic of Levantine society – as this troop of dark-eyed little Jewish boys, whose origins lay in ancient Judaea, Spain and Turkey, who were living in Egypt, who were Levantine in culture, who belonged to a movement named after a Jewish liberation fighter of the first century B.C., who spoke Ladino at home, who thought in French, who were totally urban, sitting cross-legged in the empty desert, lifting their little fists to their temples, leaving the second and fifth fingers open in a V-shape to represent the ears of a wolf created by a British imperialist author and deployed in a British imperialist institution, chanting *Akela, beks, beks, beks, AOUIIU*, chorusing the Grand Howl, and following it up with the rather ponderous Zionist anthem, in front of Bagheera, Mademoiselle Rebecca Sardas of the rue Emad el Din, Cairo.

I suppose BP would not have blinked an eye. Jewish life in Egypt, in a cameo.



My mother's own childhood fitted in this pattern of school and carefree three-month summer holidays in Alexandria. At the beach, in the daily games of cops and robbers, played with her friends and cousins, she would always be the chief robber, mischievous, laughing, commanding. Perhaps it was then that she developed the characteristic hortatory raised left forefinger.

Here she is, beaming, at front centre, another characteristic position. At left rear, standing to attention, is her cousin Joseph, who became the husband of my aunt Sylvia, my first port of call when I began this project.

My mother's young womanhood was not so charmed. Her father Léon Zarmati was not conspicuously successful in his paper goods store, and she had had to leave school in her teens to help the family out. She was twenty-two and working as a clerk – reluctantly, because she would rather have been a doctor or a professor – in the National Bank when her father died. Now she was the head of the family. Her younger brother Maurice, indulged by Sarina as the only boy, and leading a chequered existence, could not contribute. The burden fell on the oldest child, the one who had been “responsible for Maurice, Fortunée and Esther”. Sarina, who would rather have been a field marshal, had instead to keep house. The family was nevertheless very close.

My mother continued working at the bank. She had no choice, no leeway to become involved in politics, not enough education to learn about Marxism, not enough time for exposure to the wretchedness of everyday life for the huge majority of Egyptians, not enough room in her all her responsibilities for new complications. Zionism never really captured her either – life in Egypt was far from the martyrdom suffered by Eastern European Jews, she liked Egyptians too much to consider them enemies, and she instinctively shrank from mandated emotions, heartiness and single-mindedness. She was mildly sympathetic, not passionately anti-Zionist as many young Egyptian Jews were, but Zionism was on the periphery of her mind, not at the centre.

The coming of war did not change much in her life, at least at the outset. She was still working at the bank, still going to libraries to learn more in her spare time, still giving almost everything she earned to support the rest of the family. She was lying down after work in the back bedroom she shared with her mother when her younger sister Esther came in to tell her that the handsome young fellow she had accompanied to the cinema had a slightly older "friend", and that he wanted all four of them, he himself, Esther, the slightly older "friend", and my mother, to go out to the cinema together.

\*

Twenty months later, with her life turned upside down, the young widow walked cheerlessly out of the same apartment, to go and visit her sister Fortunée, who was dying of typhus in a quarantine hospital on the outskirts of Cairo. Her life was about to change.

**3.**  
**DONOVAN**

**The Path from  
Bexhill-on-Sea and the  
British Empire**



In February 1943, three months after the visit of the two British officers bearing the news of Amaury's execution, my mother, then 31 years old, was standing at the bus stop on the corner of the rue Hawayati and the rue Sheikh Hamza. She was on her way to visit her sister Fortunée, who was to die of typhus within a few weeks. Only a month before, my mother had been hit by a runaway bicycle, had fallen into to the roadway, and had consequently lost the child she was carrying, Amaury's<sup>1</sup>. That in fact was the end of Alessandro's line. She remembered later that as she was waiting for the bus, a peddler in front of her was crying *Vecchia Roba! Vecchia Roba!*<sup>2</sup> and giving his donkey a familiar smack on the rear. She did not notice the British jeep nosing its way down the rue Sheikh Hamza towards her. She was thinking that now she was herself a *vecchia roba*, without a husband, without a child, without a sister, but with a mother, a brother and another sister who all needed to be taken care of. By her. The jeep slowed down as it neared her.

At the wheel sat a very young British officer. He had glimpsed her from fifty yards away. Something about the woman waiting on the corner reminded him of his own mother. As he approached the bus stop, he stared hard at her. Then he stopped the jeep. Lieutenant Maxwell Mylrea Donovan had been in Egypt for three weeks. He was just 22. Five years later he would become my father.

Where had this stripling sprung from, who was to wrench my mother's life out its predictable track, and remove her to the other side of the world, only to abandon her and their child (me) twenty-one years later?

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1 As told to me by my aunt Sylvia, daughter of Sarina's youngest sister Rebecca.

2 Old wares! I heard this same cry in the Cairo of 2015.

Because I wanted to explore the chief factors that had shaped my mother's life, and because the Donovan story had influenced it decisively, I began investigating the world my father had come from, that had made him what he was, and that had ended up tearing my mother away from her natural environment. I made up my mind to find out more than the fragments I had heard as I was growing up. My father and his mother, my grandmother (who came to live with us in Australia when my grandfather, Dr William Terence Donovan, died) were never very forthcoming with details of their past. My father was an only child, so there were no siblings to ask. And he abandoned my mother and me when I was quite young, so I never knew very much about him. So I was obliged to do what I had done when I was finding out about Amaury, namely, go myself and see not just where he himself had grown up and been moulded, but who the forebears were whose heredity, and character he shared. I went to Liverpool, to Bexhill-on-Sea, and to St John's College, Oxford, and spent substantial time researching military records, wartime histories and Hansard for both the House of Lords and the House of Commons. His story, and that of his forebears, turned out to be gripping and revealing.

This is what I discovered, the Donovan story, the third of the three that converged on my mother, the story of the second secret agent she came to marry, and of his antecedents. It starts in Ireland, and the Isle of Man.

For my father's mother, my very English grandmother, Charlotte Louisa Donovan, née Spencer, born in Liverpool in 1900, I was slightly aberrant, a hybrid. To be sure, English was my mother tongue. As a child, I wrote poetry in English. I started a school magazine in English. I read all the English school books, Richmal Crompton's *William*, Frank Richards' *Billy Bunter*, Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* and *Secret Seven*, even *Biggles*. I went to a proper Anglican girls' school, run on attenuated British public school lines, with houses, sporting fields, and Latin. I listened to the Argonauts on ABC radio and was enrolled as Meleager 47. I aimed to go to Oxford like my father.

But there was always that alien corn, my mother's multiple Spanish, and Jewish, and Italian, and Egyptian, and Turkish influences, and my music



teacher Marthe Oppenheim's love of Mozart, all of them unloaded on to me in full. Angular in her high-necked pearl-grey blouses, a cameo brooch at her throat, my grandmother would sit erect and listen to my castanets and flamenco stampings with raised eyebrows and a tolerant little smile. For an Edwardian girl who had learned to play the charming, correct salon pieces suitable for accomplished young ladies, my hot tears of mortification when my playing let beloved Mozart down seemed excessive, slightly silly, dear, in fact. As for the food of Cairo which I would devour with little exclamations of pleasure, she never managed the *andjinaras kon limon* (the lemon artichokes), the *fideyos* (fried angel hair pasta) or the *karne de ternero kon bamyas* (the veal with okra), let alone the *molokheya* (Egyptian spinach soup) or the *foul medames* (Egyptian staple soup of red beans, served with oil and a chopped hardboiled egg), or even the sweet Greek *baklava*, that my mother would serve up with obvious pride. She never smacked her lips and exclaimed, as my mother often endearingly did, how good her own cooking was. Even if her food had been palatable.

But my grandmother had been born and raised in Liverpool, where *bamyas* were, at that time, rather thin on the ground, although they are there in abundance now. This is the house where my grandmother was born, 5 Rocky Lane, Anfield, Liverpool, as it was when I found it in 2015. It was 19 March, 1900, and the same day, her mother, Charlotte Anne Spencer née Fairhurst, died, leaving a sizeable estate of £5314 12s 9p, according to the probate of 27 April 1900<sup>3</sup>. Her daughter was baptized in St Margaret's Church,



*5 Rocky Lane, Anfield, Liverpool, in 2015, the house where my grandmother was born and where her mother died the same day.*

3 Today's equivalent is about £550,000.

Anfield, on May 13th. The child's father was listed as a "General Manager" on the birth certificate.

The next year, 1901, saw great changes in the life of the little baby. Eighteen months after her birth and her mother's death, her father George Spencer married a second Charlotte, moved to a much larger and more imposing house, possibly with the Fairhurst money, and changed his occupation. The new wife was French, Charlotte Roubaud, the daughter of a professor of music, whom my grandmother would call mémé, never maman or mother, let alone mummy. The new occupation of the baby's father, George Spencer, as listed in the 1901 list of houses in the civil parish of West Derby, was undertaker, but many years later, that would again change to something grander.



*The more imposing house at 3 Ellerslie Road, St John the Baptist parish, Liverpool, in 2015. This is the house where George Spencer moved in 1901 and where my grandmother was brought up.*

Looking at this house in 2015, I could see right away the proof, if I had needed it, that my grandmother had been gently and comfortably reared. The young Frenchwoman who became her stepmother was only 22, according to the marriage certificate, and relatively kind, but she went on to have four children of her own, all of whom are listed in the

1911 English census as living in the house, together with their father, their mother, my grandmother (eleven years old), and one servant.

My grandmother never knew the whole-hearted involvement of a mother's love. Rather it was the kindness of a stranger. The French newcomer taught her to play the piano (even in her seventies my grandmother would remember the salon pieces with extraordinary accuracy). The newcomer would, out of politeness, never forget to include her in family outings. The newcomer would make sure, with the servant, that she was fed and dressed. But there were a thousand telltale little clues that the little girl was an outsider. Her half brother and sisters were all younger and close in age to each other. They did not look very much like her. They had in-jokes and teasings that she was spared, out of pity.

Possibly because my grandmother never experienced the full warmth of a mother's love herself, she was never as intensely involved with her own son's life as she might otherwise have been. For her son, my father, as we shall see, that void had to be filled, with far-reaching effects that would touch me acutely years later. And so the repercussions of the death of the Fairhurst girl in 1901 would still be felt, a century later.

When I was growing up, my grandmother often told me that, as a child, she had been taken to play with some children named Donovan, who lived on the other side of Liverpool, and that one of those children would grow up to be her husband, my grandfather William Terence Donovan, my father's father. A charming tale. When I was a little girl I often asked to hear it. But in 2015 I was to discover from documentary research that there were several striking gaps in this story, and in certain others she told me. The search turned out to reveal a world as far from my mother's as it was possible to be.

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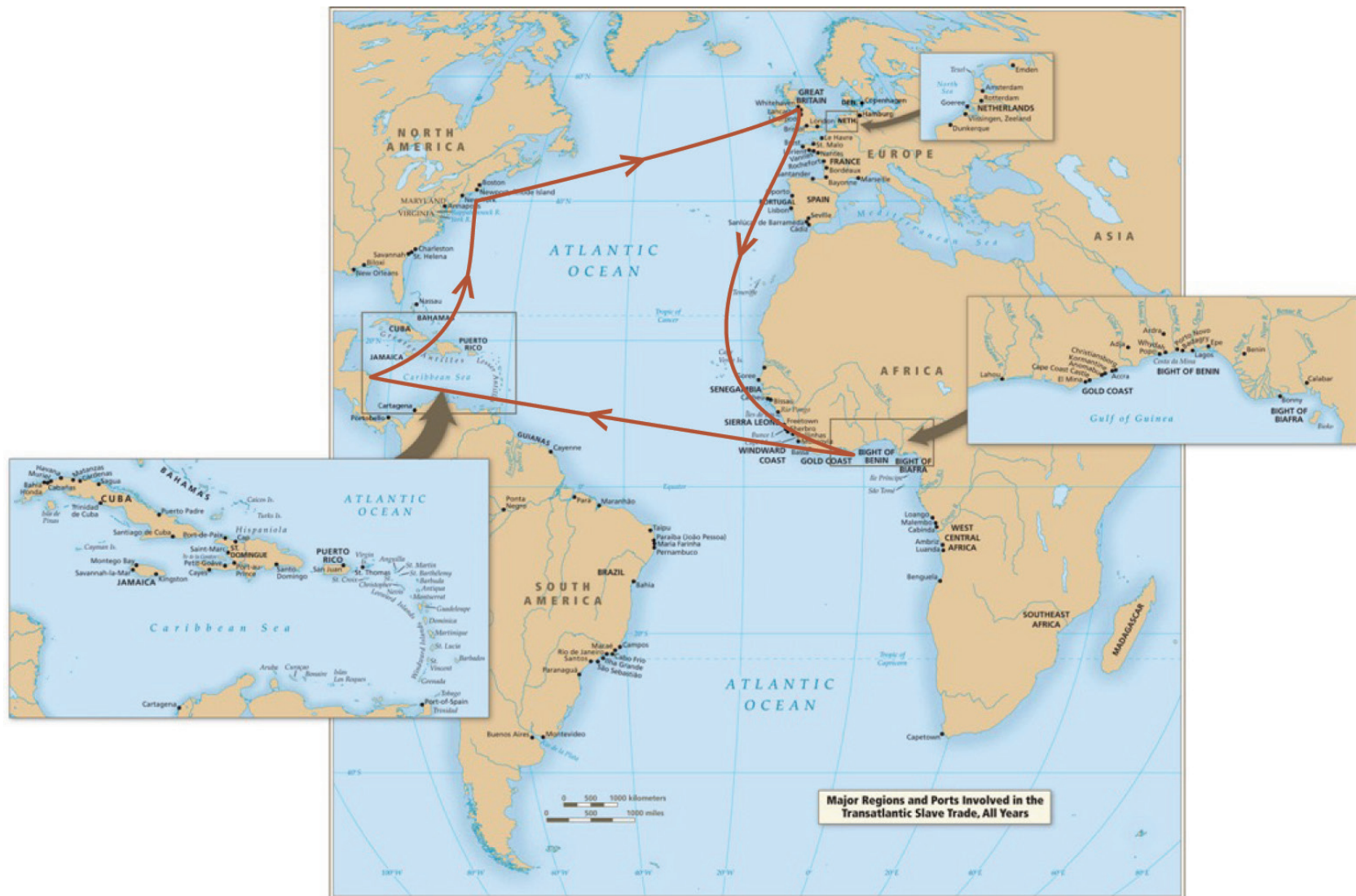
In the early 19th century, Liverpool was already well on its way to being the second biggest and most important port in England, if not Europe. The geography was ideal. The River Mersey provided a deep, safe, tidal inlet into the English land mass, and opened, conveniently, out

into the Irish Sea. From the Irish Sea, the way down to West Africa was straightforward. And from West Africa across to the West Indies, the route was clear and not hard to navigate.

Those destinations give an obvious clue as to the original source of Liverpool's wealth. In 1699, the *Liverpool Merchant*, the first ship of its kind, set sail from Liverpool port for West Africa, then to the West Indies. The load it carried from West Africa to the West Indies can easily be guessed: it comes as no surprise that its cargo consisted of human beings. The *Liverpool Merchant*, in other words, was a slaver. Soon the slave trade was thriving. Indeed, in these early years of the port of Liverpool, it was the single biggest contributor to the city's riches. Sugar was not far behind. Demand in Europe for what would quickly become a staple also increased steadily from the 17th century onwards, and it was West Indies sugar, highly profitable and also based on the slave trade, that filled up the slavers on their way back to Liverpool.

In 1715, the first commercial dock in Liverpool was built on the banks of the Mersey. It was the catalyst for a massive expansion. Throughout the 18th century, trade with the American colonies boomed, in slaves, cotton and numerous other commodities, and the port of Liverpool boomed with it. Shipbuilding, iron working, rope making, pottery, and scores of other new industries emerged in the town. As Manchester, only about 30 miles away, grew to become a great manufacturing city, Liverpool was perfectly placed to provide the nearest outlet for all its neighbour's exports. The port of Liverpool, and the city itself, both grew dramatically. Huge buildings – docks, company headquarters, municipal centres – began to line the banks of the Mersey. Most of them are still there now, monumental and grandiose, a daunting spectacle for the raw young immigrant even today. Along the docks all manner of sailing vessels sat at anchor – Mersey Flats, windjammers, schooners, clippers, packets and dozens of others. And in the 1820s and 1830s, steam began to replace sail, and the towering, noisy steamships crowded the docks and generated their own industries, and their own profits.

For the ambitious, or desperate, youngsters of the two less fortunate Celtic islands across the Irish Sea – Ireland and the Isle of Man – Liverpool



Slave and Sugar Routes

looked like an El Dorado. They came in their droves. By the mid 19th century, fully one-third of Liverpool's population was Irish. Most of the immigrants lived in appalling conditions and were considered outsiders and inferiors by the English. Not only were they hard up, many of them Celts, i.e. pariahs. But while the way to the top was steep and full of pitfalls for the immigrants, it was not always blocked altogether. If they worked hard, those ambitious youngsters could earn certificates, learn a trade, marry well, and take their first steps up out of the rat-infested Liverpool tenements.

Around the turn of the 19th century, three of these young hopefuls were born, none of them in England. All of them would migrate to Liverpool, would energetically – and successfully – seek advancement, and would become forbears of my father, Maxwell Mylrea Donovan.

The first of them, Edward Mylrea – Mylrea is a typical Manx name – was born on the Isle of Man in 1796, became a shoemaker and sailed across to Liverpool to make his fortune. In the 1851 English census, he is shown as aged 55, still a shoemaker, and living in Liverpool at 32 Upper Stanhope St with his wife Ellen (51), his daughter Isabella (17) a vest maker, another daughter, Ellen (13) and a lodger. We shall be meeting Isabella the vest maker again very soon.

These days 32 Upper Stanhope St presents a sad picture. Standing in front of it in bitter cold in May 2015, I could see, that however derelict it looks today, it was still not exactly a tenement. It could well have been a real home. So Edward must have done reasonably well, probably better than if he had stayed on the Isle of Man, although the existence of the lodger probably shows the family needed the money.

Westwards across the stormy Irish Sea, another shoemaker, the second of these three aspiring youngsters, was born later, in 1821. He too made up his mind to seek his fortune in the growing metropolis. In his 1855 marriage certificate, this second of our three young men, Bartholomew Donovan, shoemaker, is shown as being the son of John Donovan, farmer. The fact that Bartholomew refused to work the land like his father, but instead learned a trade as a rung up on the ladder, shows he wanted a



*32 Upper Stanhope St, Liverpool, in 2015.*

better life and was prepared to take risks to get it. Bartholomew could also read and write. His signature on his wedding certificate is firm and forward-looking.

In Liverpool, Bartholomew found work as a shoemaker, and we know that there he made the acquaintance of a more senior man in the same trade, one we already know, namely Edward Mylrea, the first of the three intrepid migrants. Bartholomew may even have been apprenticed to Edward, because we here find the classic master-apprentice scenario played out. In 1855, Bartholomew married Edward's young daughter Isabella, who at 21 was thirteen years his junior. And in the 1861 census we find all of them, Irish and Manx, living together in 32 Upper Stanhope Road: the shoemaker Bartholomew Donovan, Isabella née Mylrea his wife, their two sons, Edward Mylrea Donovan and Richard Mylrea Donovan, as well as Isabella's father the shoemaker Edward Mylrea himself and his wife Ellen. We will soon be meeting Bartholomew's ambitious eldest son, Edward Mylrea Donovan again, for he was to become a central figure in the Donovan/Mylrea/Waring/Spencer chronicle.

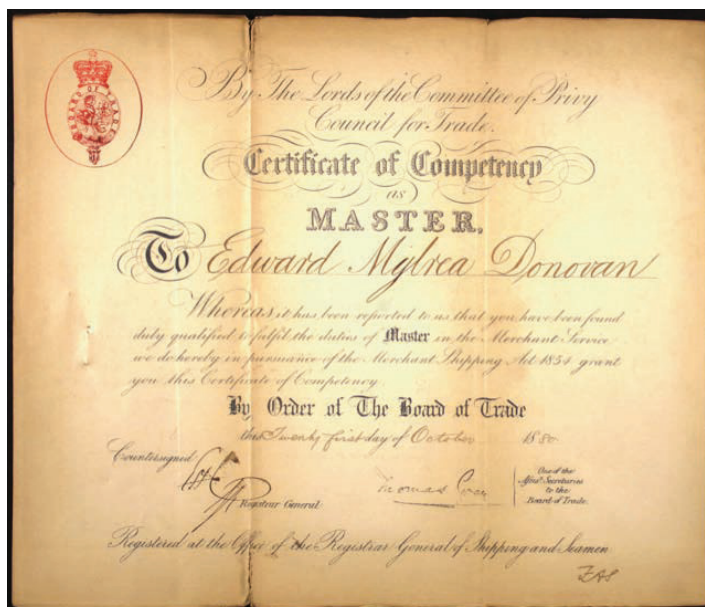
The third of our eager young immigrants, John Waring, was born in Lisburn, Ireland around 1802. A cabinet maker, he married Elizabeth in Ireland, and they too made the rough trip across the Irish Sea to Liverpool. There they had three children – Samuel James Waring in 1838, John Henry Waring in 1843 and Margaretta Shaw Waring in 1845. Strangely, the lives of all of these mid-19th century Waring children, Samuel, John and Margaretta, or more precisely the lives of *their* children, would become intertwined with the Donovans, the Spencers, and the Mylreas, in an extraordinary snakes and ladders saga of arduous ascents, sudden plunges, and interconnections across generations.

The Mylreas and the Donovans having been connected by the marriage of Bartholomew Donovan and Isabella Mylrea, who both went on living at 32 Upper Stanhope St, their son Edward Mylrea Donovan united and continued both family lines. Edward Mylrea Donovan was my great-grandfather, the father of William Terence Donovan, the kindly, humorous doctor who was my father's father. Edward's tale, I discovered in 2015, was quite different and more tragic than the fable I had been brought up with. And it too was a tale which reverberates down to the present day.

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My grandmother, for understandable reasons we shall soon see, had always told me that Edward Mylrea Donovan, the father of her husband William Terence Donovan, had risen from being an Irish cabin boy to becoming the owner of a shipping line, the Donovan Castle line. To my mother and me, both of us listening in awe, she recounted that Edward had always wanted his son, William Terence, my grandfather, to marry the daughter of another shipping line, and that when the young man fell in love with her, my grandmother, and married her instead, Edward brutally disinherited William Terence – his only son, she said – and gave all his money to the Battersea Dogs' Home. She even had a photograph of the Battersea Dogs' Home secreted in a scented mauve lace bag, which she very occasionally showed me as a special favour. For years my mother and I believed this romance. My Levantine Jewish mother,





especially, felt privileged to have been let in on the secrets of the lives of the august British. The truth, it turns out, was otherwise.

Edward Mylrea Donovan was just as ambitious as his father the shoemaker Bartholomew, perhaps even more so. Shoemaking was not enough for him. Liverpool was a seafaring town, and the kings of the seafarers were the master mariners. Edward made up his mind to become a master mariner. At 19, he climbed the first rung and obtained his Second Mate's Certificate, and at 21, he collected his certificate of competency as First Mate. Only the last stage remained, and on 21 October 1880, at the age of 23, Edward Mylrea Donovan finally succeeded in becoming a Master Mariner.

It was a giant leap up from his grandfather John Donovan, the Irish "farmer", for which read "probably indigent peasant" from Ireland. Far now from toiling in the mud of the bogs and potato fields of Ireland, Edward Mylrea Donovan was at last entitled to be called Captain and to command a merchant steamship. Captain Donovan, Master Mariner! It was enough to get married on, and on 12 October 1881, almost a year to the day after he had become a master mariner, Edward Mylrea Donovan, bachelor, master mariner, married Susannah Boote, spinster, at St James' Church, Walton on the Hill, Liverpool. Susannah was to become the mother of the kindly doctor, my grandfather.

But Edward Mylrea Donovan's life was not to be all plain sailing, so to speak, far from it. Eighteen years were to pass, during which he travelled the whole world, commanding vessels of varying sizes, leaving his wife and four children to manage as best they could on their own back in Liverpool.

Certainly Edward was bringing in enough money to move from a very modest house at 188 High Park St in Toxteth Park (just around the corner from the birthplace of the Beatle Ringo Starr):



*188 High Park St, Toxteth Park, Liverpool, in 2015. The whole row of houses has been scheduled for demolition*

to a rather grander residence at 44 Arundel Avenue:



*44 Arundel Avenue in 2015*

The fortunes of the Donovan line now seemed to be stable, even rosy. But disaster was not far away, indeed two disasters. The first struck in the nineteenth year after Edward Mylrea Donovan obtained his Master Mariner's certificate. In charge of the steamship *Belle of Ireland*, Captain

Edward Mylrea Donovan had sailed from Manchuria on 1 October 1909, the ship carrying 32 crew and 6000 tons of soybeans. The Belle of Ireland, only three years old, had two decks and two masts, was schooner rigged, and had a double bottom, six bulkheads, and six water ballast tanks of a capacity of 920 tons. Her length from stem to stern was 360.6 feet, her main breadth 48 feet, and its depth of hold from upper deck to ceiling at 'midships 28 feet. Her gross tonnage was 4,229.79 tons<sup>4</sup>. In other words, she was big, at least for the time. She was the largest steamship built in England in 1906, according to the Ships List<sup>5</sup>.



*The Unfortunate Voyage of the Belle of Ireland.*

From Manchuria, the *Belle* steamed to Natal, where she received orders to unload the cargo in Hull, in north-east England. In order to “replenish her bunkers”, as the later report into the accident put it, the ship first went to St. Vincent in the Caribbean. She then crossed the Atlantic, steamed through rough waters in the Bay of Biscay, continued up the west coast of England, and then turned eastwards and southwards around the top of Scotland and down the North Sea. The voyage had been going well and everything was normal.

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4 Formal investigation into the circumstances surrounding the damage sustained by the ss Belle of Ireland, Liverpool in 1909, Board of Trade Wreck Report for Belle of Ireland, BOT Unique ID 19732, February 1910.

The ship was making its way down the English coast to Hull, when, during the night of 9-10 December, the accident happened<sup>6</sup>.

The weather was hazy that night, with a choppy sea. Like Liverpool, Hull, the ship's destination, lies near the deep end of one of the inlets into the English land mass. Just like the Mersey in Liverpool, the Humber in Hull provides not just a safe harbour for scores of ships, but an open outlet to the sea, which, in the case of Hull, is the North Sea.



*Entrance to the Humber.*

Coming down the North Sea, the *Belle* was obliged to negotiate a hairpin bend at the mouth of the Humber, round a thin spur that projected out at the very tip of the turn. Towards the end of that thin spur of land stood a lighthouse, the so-called Spurn Lighthouse, which is still there today.

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6 What follows is drawn from "BELLE OF IRELAND" (S.S.).

*The Merchant Shipping Act, 1894.*

*IN the matter of a Formal Investigation held at Liverpool, on the 22nd, 23rd, 24th, and 26th days of February, 1910, before T. SHEPHERD LITTLE, Esquire, Stipendiary Magistrate, assisted by Captain W. H. SINCLAIR LOUITT, and Commander A. S. HOUSTOUN, into the circumstances attending the damage sustained by the British s.s. "BELLE OF IRELAND," of Liverpool, through stranding about 2 miles south of Witherness, Yorkshire, on or about 21st December, 1909.*



*The Spurn lighthouse today*

The light from that lighthouse is still important for a navigator attempting the approach to Hull. Its beam was even more vital in the early 19th century, with no computers or satellites to provide backup data.

On the night of 9-10 October 1909, that beam was not visible to the watch, probably because of the haze. The second mate looked for it as the ship approached Withernsea, near the hairpin bend, but at 12 midnight he told the Master that he could not see it. He looked again at 4.45 a.m., but again, he could not see it. The Master then made the mistake for which he was heavily censured and punished by the inquiry. Without taking a depth sounding, he estimated that because the lights were not visible, the ship had not yet travelled far enough down the North Sea coast of England, and had not yet reached Withernsea. He was wrong. It had.

Entering the chart room at 5.45 a.m., the Master was startled to hear a roaring, sucking, splashing noise that, if his estimates had been correct, should not have been there. With sinking heart, he realized it was the sound of surf breaking against rocks. The ship had travelled further south than he thought, and had steamed much too close to the shore. He gave urgent orders to turn her away from the coast towards the open sea. Too



*Donovan, Mylrea, Waring.*

late. There was a deep grinding noise, and, after an uneventful voyage of over 14,000 nautical miles from Dalny<sup>7</sup>, Manchuria, China, the ship crunched to a shuddering halt on the gravelly sand of Withernsea, on the east coast of England, just a few short miles from its final destination.

This was the shipwreck not only of the *Belle of Ireland*, but of the hopes and dreams of Edward Mylrea Donovan. The inquiry, in February 1910, said that he had been “recklessly navigating” the ship, and stripped him of his Masters Certificate for three months. He was now virtually unemployable. Far from being a plutocratic ship owner, he was now just a sailor out of a job, with a wife and four children to support. At least he had been able to put aside some substantial savings over the previous eighteen years.

Fate had not finished with Edward Mylrea Donovan. In September, barely seven months after this decisive blow, his beloved wife Susannah died from cancer at the age of 50, leaving him with the four children on his hands. The youngest, aged 10, was my grandfather, William Terence Donovan.

At this point Edward Mylrea Donovan – my grandmother always said that “can’t” wasn’t in the Donovan vocabulary – refused to give up. He went back and got a Certificate of Competency as First Mate of a Foreign-Going Ship. It was not a Master Mariner’s Certificate. It was humiliating. But it was not unemployment. He had not admitted defeat.

Edward Mylrea Donovan never actually remarried. Possibly after selling 44 Arundel Street, he bought a property at 25 Menzies Street, a few steps around the corner from where he had started at 188 High Park Street in Toxteth Park. Today 25 Menzies Street consists of a shop below and rooms above, and it is hard to tell what it must have been like in 1910.





Fifteen years later, in 1925, at the age of 68, Edward Mylrea Donovan died at 25 Menzies Street. After settling real estate debts left by his wife, he left to a widow, Elizabeth Lumley, “who has looked after and cared for me for the last fifteen years”<sup>8</sup>, and who had also been living in 25 Menzies Street, the sum of five thousand and fifteen pounds fifteen shillings and ten pence, which equates to about £260,000 today. In the 1911 census, Elizabeth Lumley (then 32) was living at 25 Menzies Street with her husband George (then 38), their two young sons and George’s brother. Edward was not there then. Presumably he bought the property and moved in just after the census was taken, or perhaps at census time he was away on a ship. Doubtless he established a relation of affection with Elizabeth Lumley, whose husband must have died in the meantime. What is certain is that, although he did not leave his four children with any debts, Edward left none of them any money in his will. He left everything to the widow Lumley. So in that sense, my grandmother had been right all along. The youngest of Edward’s children, William Terence, would just have to rub along as best he could<sup>9</sup>.

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8 As he said in his will.

9 The *Belle of Ireland* did not stay out of service for long. It continued operating until 1929, when it was wrecked at Yesan Point, Esamisaki, Japan.

We will shortly find out what happened to my grandfather William Terence Donovan, but for the moment let us return to the Warings. Here is a story of much greater wealth and stability.

We assume that John Waring, the first Waring furniture man, the third of our intrepid immigrants, who had come to Liverpool from Belfast, must have been in the port city in 1838, because that was the year his oldest son Samuel James Waring was born there. The infant Samuel James Waring, the first of two to bear that name, would grow up to be an outstanding successor to his Belfast father John Waring. Building on his father's foundations, he would create a very substantial wholesale cabinet maker business, and later a large building company. His furniture company, Waring's, would supply furniture to hotels and public buildings throughout Europe, and become a sister firm to the Waring-White Building Company, which would build the Liverpool Corn Exchange, Selfridge's department store and the Ritz Hotel. The energy, good judgement, and luck of this first Samuel James Waring would provide the financial backing for the brilliant and celebrated success of the next generation. That next generation was the one that touched my grandmother.

In 1860, this first Samuel James Waring, son of John Waring, himself had a son, also called Samuel James Waring. The son, the second Samuel James Waring (1860-1940), the third generation in the furniture business, inherited all the ambition and drive of his father and his grandfather.



Samuel James Waring jnr was to become one of Britain's greatest entrepreneurs of the first half of the twentieth century. We shall call the great man Uncle Sam, as my grandmother did. He was to play a decisive role in her life.

*Uncle Sam Waring, looking more than a little like my grandmother*

In 1893, Uncle Sam went to London to set up a branch of the thriving family furniture business. He was fabulously successful. A short four years later, the Waring firm merged with the famous but financially strapped fine furniture manufacturers Gillow and Company, and Waring and Gillow was born. To begin with, Waring and Gillow was a giant homewares department store with branches all over England. My grandmother brought to Australia a set of very solid Waring and Gillow cutlery, and I have many of its knives and spoons today. The company's red brick main store at 164-180 Oxford Street in London, was a monumental turn of the century marriage of grandeur and delicacy. A huge, ornate building designed by Frank Atkinson, its massive size, lush curlicues, round porthole windows, and imposing columns proclaimed to the public, the government, and indeed royalty – Queen Victoria bought furniture there – that this firm was a force to be reckoned with. And the individual behind the firm's success was, without a doubt, the respectable swashbuckler Uncle Sam.

Waring and Gillows thrived mightily. Its Lancashire factory had hundreds of workers, who toiled under the most rigid discipline. One of the W&G craftsmen was to recall later that “training at W&G was very strict indeed, conditions were very Victorian, Edwardian, no singing or whistling at your bench, no talking to the next journeyman unless working on the same job and exactly five minutes tea break morning and afternoon.”<sup>10</sup>



10 Narrated by “RBA”, a former Gillow craftsman working in Lancaster, and interviewed by Pauline Churchill, preserved in the North-West Sound Archive. See <http://www.tim-churchill.co.uk/Gillow.htm>.



*Detail of the porthole windows of the Waring and Gillows building, Oxford St, London*

In 1910, there was a restructure of the firm which was to bring considerable parliamentary grief to Uncle Sam twelve years later. The company had been seeking to construct a new building, but neighbours' objections that it would block their light caused such long delays that the company approached bankruptcy. Uncle Sam and his shareholders sustained sizeable losses. After the 1910 restructure, a new company was formed, however, and it went on to make a major contribution to the armed services in the First World War.

*Another view of Waring and Gillows Oxford Street*





*Nottingham Branch of Waring and Gillows*

The First World War saw a huge expansion of Waring and Gillow's field of operations. The firm became a contractor to the Armed Forces. From homewares, it branched out into aeroplanes, housing for Navy munitions, and tents for the British Army.



The company fashioned Navy munitions boxes from teak and DH9 aeroplane wings and propellers. Women in the firm's White City and Lancashire factories handsewed thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of tents for the army. Deficiencies and gaps in military equipment were filled in short order. All three of the armed forces depended on Waring and Gillow's output, and the quality and speed of production were consistent and impressive. But the gratitude of Britain's airmen, soldiers and sailors, let alone the British Government, for the firm's solid and reliable products, was not enough to save Uncle Sam from a nasty spot of unpleasantness in the House of Commons four years after the war ended, in 1922. In reacting, he did something very few people have ever done.

Uncle Sam became a national figure. In 1919, he was created a Baronet, and became Sir Samuel Waring of Foots Cray Place, in Kent. Foots Cray Place was an 18th century Palladian mansion which Uncle Sam had bought in the late 19th century.



*Women factory workers  
hand sewing canvas at  
Waring & Gillow's White  
City factory, 1914-1918.*



*Meeting of Waring &  
Gillow workers in factory  
yard. Notice how many of  
them are women.*



*Women workers of the Tent  
Circular Section at the  
Waring and Gillow factory  
at White City in August  
1917.*



Uncle Sam also owned Gopsall Hall in Leicestershire, another 18th century mansion:



Today neither of these lovely buildings survives.

Uncle Sam became active in good causes. He served as a director of the Duchess of Sutherland's Cripples' Guild, and as a member of the Executive Committee of the national Association of Ex-Soldiers, and was an active supporter of the Boy Scout Movement, and a founder of the Higher Production Council.

But trouble was looming. In 1922, Lloyd George ceased to be the head of the wartime Coalition government, and in that year, Uncle Sam was raised to the peerage and became Lord Waring, Baron Waring of Footscray Place. His ennoblement provoked a storm.

On 17 July 1922, a Mr. Ronald McNeill M.P., a Unionist, and therefore a political opponent of Lloyd George, rose to make a statement to the House of Commons. The very Establishment Mr McNeill, educated at Harrow and Christ Church, later 1st Baron Cushendun and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who has, unfairly, been rather neglected by posterity, was a master of the barbed insinuation. As recorded by Hansard of 17 July 1922, he said:

*Lord Waring as a business man was managing director of a large business in London which went into bankruptcy, I think, or, at any rate, was re-constructed in 1910. The whole share capital in the original concern was, I think, wiped out. There was nothing fraudulent in that, but, at all events, it was not very successful business.*



*In the meantime, the War came along, and the head of this business, who is now Lord Waring, saw his opportunity and, I believe, made for himself a very considerable fortune at the White City in constructing and turning out equipment for aeroplanes on Government contracts. That was for himself. No part of that fortune went to paying the shareholders ...*

*I only mention that to say this: that it is a curious circumstance that four or five men are singled out in the whole of this country for what ought to be regarded as a very high honour. I suppose this gentleman came under the category described by the Prime Minister as the "political list." I do not know. I do not know whether it comes under charity. Anyhow, four or five men are singled out ...*

In other words, Mr McNeill was accusing Uncle Sam of cheating his shareholders for his own benefit, and for buying his peerage with his ill-gotten gains. The veiled implication behind the caustic word "charity" is actually quite clear. Uncle Sam was being accused of being a "friend" of Lloyd George. In other words, Uncle, if not Father, "knew Lloyd George". "Charity" was meant to sting.

It did. As Mr McNeill was drawing to a close, Uncle Sam, who was sitting in the Distinguished Strangers' Gallery, and in whom the Irish roots had never fully died, shouted down into the body of the house, according to my grandmother, and a textbook I was later to read at Oxford, "That's a damned lie!". Not many people have done that.

Like The Times the next day, Hansard politely reports this interjection as "That is a false statement". But my very proper grandmother, in this instance, was probably telling the truth.

It is not clear what was a damned lie, the charge that Uncle Sam cheated his shareholders, or the one that he had bought his peerage. In any case, Uncle Sam's reply on 19 July in the House of Lords, his first – a remarkable baptism in that other place! – dealt only with the shareholder issue. He too – not just the shareholders – had sustained great losses, he said, with the delays in erecting the new building. But the new company, he said, had indeed done well with its wartime government contracts.

He challenged Mr McNeill to repeat his charge outside Parliament. Mr McNeill never did. However, two days later, again under cover of Parliamentary privilege, he refused to withdraw his accusation. Uncle Sam's apoplexy reverberates down the decades.

But in the end, Waring and Gillows' material – in both senses – wartime contributions had simply been too large. The Leader of the House, Austen Chamberlain, still, in July 1922, in the Lloyd George coalition, rapidly squashed the matter once and for all. In a Prime Minister's Statement, he said:

*Mr. CHAMBERLAIN ... The other peer whom the hon. Gentleman attacked, Lord Waring, was in the Gallery—*

*Sir F. BANBURY And made a disorderly interruption.*

*Mr. CHAMBERLAIN And made a disorderly interruption. I am not in favour of disorderly interruptions, but sometimes they can be understood, if they cannot be excused.*

*I am informed that the statement which the hon. Member for Canterbury made – that Lord Waring took personal contracts at the White City, and made a fortune from them, while the shareholders of Waring and Gillow received no benefit from them – is the contrary of the fact. I am informed that Lord Waring organised the manufactures at the White City for Messrs. Waring and Gillow exclusively, that the entire benefit and profit went to the Company, and their shareholders, and that the War Office stated that the output attained was phenomenal, and tendered his firm special thanks for relieving them from a grave situation.*

*Mr. LAMBERT Is there not to be an inquiry into these cases?*

*Mr. CHAMBERLAIN No.*

And there never was. Uncle Sam went on to make more millions, to become a yachting friend of the tea magnate Sir Thomas Lipton, and to leave the sum of £138,625 18 shillings and 11 pence in his will, the equivalent today of about ten million pounds, a sum which does not include the value of his properties.

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It is now time to draw the links among our three plucky young immigrants. To simplify, Edward Mylrea Donovan, the Master Mariner (grandson of the Manxman Edward Mylrea and son of Bartholomew Donovan, the first two immigrants), had four children. The youngest of Edward's four children was my grandfather William Terence Donovan, born 1899. The second youngest, born about 1890, was Herbert Bartholomew Donovan. Herbert Bartholomew married a Mary Frances Ann Yeo in 1911.

Mary Frances Ann Yeo had a sister, Ethel. In 1908, Ethel Yeo had married Richard Paul Waring, grandson of the original John Waring, the third of our young immigrants. Richard Paul Waring was a first cousin of Uncle Sam (their fathers Samuel James Waring and John Henry Waring were brothers).

A third Waring sibling of the generation of Samuel James Waring I was Margaretta Shaw Waring. Margaretta married George Spencer, my grandmother's father. So Uncle Sam was the first cousin of my grandmother's father.

Remarkably, it therefore turns out that my grandmother Charlotte Louisa Spencer and my grandfather William Terence Donovan were related not only to each other but to Uncle Sam.

When my grandparents met again as 19 year olds in 1919, the renewed connection was quite delightful. They had not seen each other for years. After his mother's early death, my grandfather had been sent away to St Oswald's College boarding school in Ellesmere, Shropshire. He had been only ten years old. A rather sad little list survives from 1911, showing the pupils of St Oswald's. Number 17, William Terence Donovan, is the only 11-year-old. All the others are older. It is hard to avoid the thought that Edward Mylrea Donovan, his father the Master Mariner, had, after his wife's death, simply unloaded the little boy to a convenient institution, no doubt in the lad's best interests, but not in the end, to his emotional advantage. In any case, the widow Lumley may

not have wanted an inconvenient reminder of the first wife hanging about the house.

So neither of the young people had had the benefit of a mother's all-forgiving, all-encompassing love. Neither of them had had a solid anchor in the form of a close family life. For both of them, the discovery of the other was joyful and miraculous. They may have had no mothers, but now they had each other. They fell instantly and passionately in love, and that ardent, magnetic attraction would never wane. Each was easily the most important person in the other's life. They made scenes, had heated arguments, were jealous, demanding, difficult, had rapturous reconciliations, and were utterly devoted to each other for thirty years.

My Spanish Jewish mother was much more English than they were. After Amaury's execution, her practical, commonsensical side had triumphed, and telling me about my grandparents' passionate attachment to each other, she would give small smiles of ironical amusement. This time it was *her* eyebrows that were raised. Perhaps because they experienced, throughout their lives, emotions that she never did, even once, with their son, my father.

NAME AND SURNAME	RELATIONSHIP to the Family in General & Individual	AGE at Birth	SEX	PARTICULARS as to MARRIAGE	PERSONAL OCCUPATION	Industry or Service with which he was connected	Military Ser- vice: Name of Regiment or Service	Whether in Spain	RESIDENCE at 1800	NATURALITY at time of 1800 Census	INFIRMITY
1. John Andrew David Bell	Single	16	Male	Single	School	390			York, Carlisle	050	
2. William Benjamin Hill	Single	16	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Hanley	052	
3. Philip Griffith Swain	Single	18	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Hanley	052	
4. William Young	Single	19	Male	Single	School				Lancs, Warrington	050	
5. Abraham Goodell Jones	Single	19	Male	Single	School				Lancs, North	051	
6. Leslie John Gerson	Single	18	Male	Single	School				Wales	051	
7. Lawrence Nedley Anston	Single	18	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	050	
8. John James Jones	Single	18	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	120	
9. David Swadlow Williams	Single	17	Male	Single	School				London	050	
10. Richard Arthur Lippard Bell	Single	15	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	050	
11. Thomas Oswald Carter	Single	14	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	050	
12. William Harrison Lomas	Single	15	Male	Single	School				Lancs, Stronsall	050	
13. John Bourne	Single	14	Male	Single	School				Lancs, Stronsall	050	
14. Edward Arthur Acatt	Single	14	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	052	
15. William Maxwell Bell	Single	14	Male	Single	School				Lancs, Liverpool	058	
16. Griffiths Rowan	Single	13	Male	Single	School				Lancs, Liverpool	050	
17. William Thomas Rowan	Single	11	Male	Single	School				Lancs, Liverpool	050	
18. Thomas Rowan Rowan	Single	10	Male	Single	School				Lancs, Stronsall	141	
19. Thomas Richard O'Brien Rowan	Single	10	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	230	
20. Francis Shilbury	Single	17	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	180	
21. John Shilbury	Single	15	Male	Single	School				Lancs, Stronsall	101	
22. Edward George Rowan Rowan	Single	16	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	121	
23. Rowan Rowan Rowan	Single	15	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	121	
24. David Rowan Rowan	Single	14	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	121	
25. Griffiths Rowan Rowan	Single	13	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	121	
26. Richard James Rowan	Single	12	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	121	
27. William Rowan Rowan	Single	11	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	121	
28. Thomas Rowan Rowan	Single	10	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	121	
29. John Rowan Rowan	Single	9	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	121	
30. William Rowan Rowan	Single	8	Male	Single	School				Staffs, Stronsall	121	

**CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF MARRIAGE**      **GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE**

Application Number: 6527452-1

1920. Marriage solemnized at <u>The Register Office</u> in the District of _____ in the County of <u>West Derby</u>								
No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Business.	Mother's Professional Father.
57.	10.20	William Severee Benson	28 years	Bachelor	Medical Student	4 Denman Road WEST DERBY	Edward Benson	Master Mariner
		Charlotte Louisa Spencer	20 years	Spinster		53 West Derby Road WEST DERBY	George Spencer	Barmaid Proprietor
Married in the <u>Register Office</u> according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the <u>Church of England</u>								
This Marriage was solemnized between us,			I, <u>W. Benson</u>		in the Presence of us,		I, <u>Mr. R. Blaney</u> & <u>H. B. Hooper</u> & <u>Johns Wallaesteguit</u> <u>Mr. Spencer</u> & <u>Harriet F. Cleaver</u>	

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a register of Marriages in the Registration District of West Derby  
Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 27th day of May 2015

MXG 540957

CAUTION: THERE ARE OFFENCES RELATING TO FALSIFYING OR ALTERING A CERTIFICATE AND USING OR POSSESSING A FALSE CERTIFICATE. © CROWN COPYRIGHT

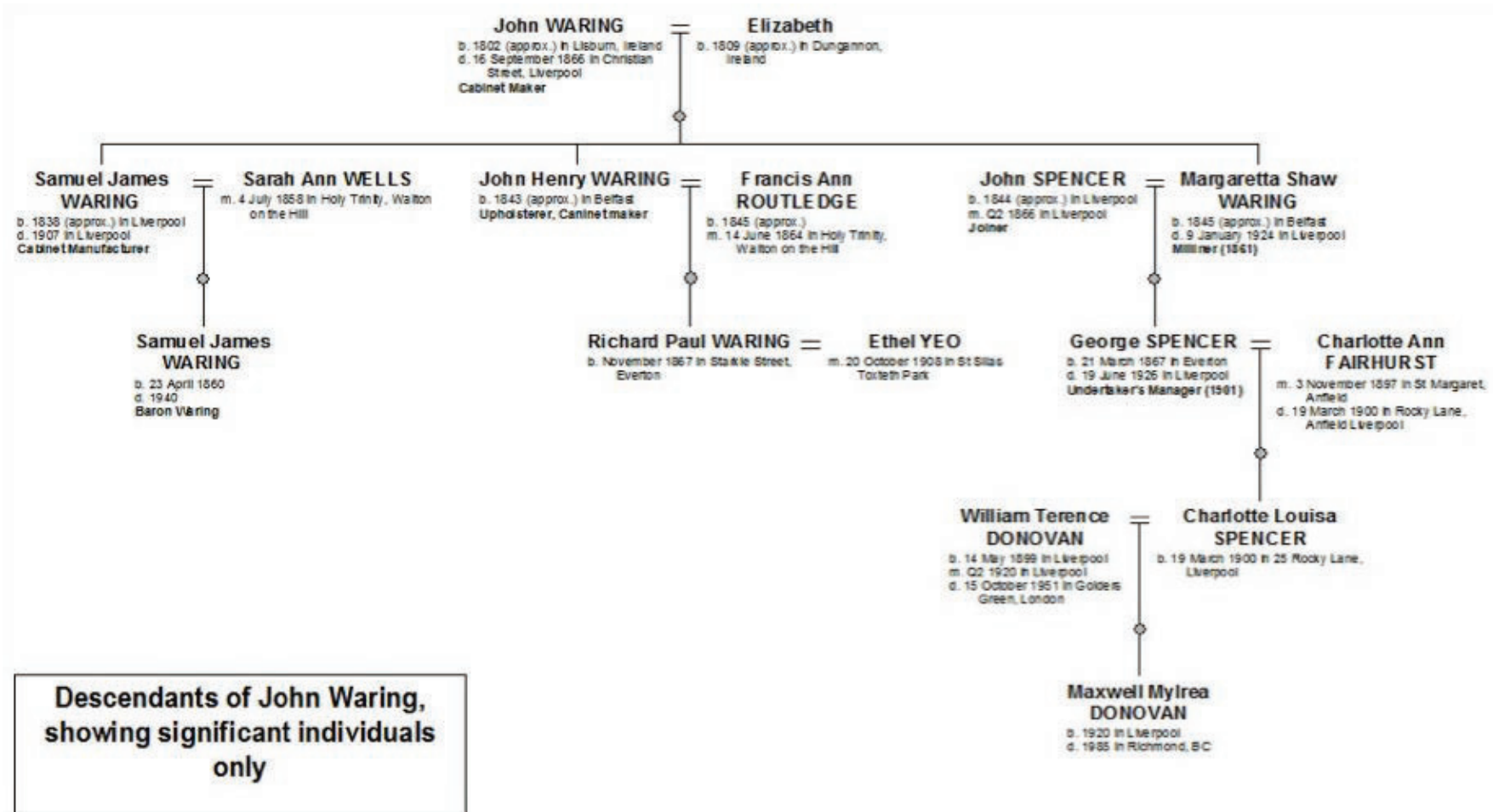
**WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.**

SMU

The result of intense mutual involvement of two healthy, loving, young people, in the days before contraception, can easily be predicted. The foreseeable duly happened. Upon which, both fathers refused to support them or to have anything more to do with them. And neither of them had any money of their own. In 1920, it was all dreadfully shameful and terrifying. The two frightened young people were being cast out into the void.

At this point, Uncle Sam came to the rescue. My grandfather was one year into his medical studies, and Uncle Sam undertook to give them five pounds a week, about £200 in 2015, until William qualified. It was enough for the two of them to get married on, and they duly did, on 28 April 1920. The witnesses were two strangers and a half brother of the bride.

Who approached Uncle Sam can only be conjectured. There were no mothers to help, and only disapproving, unsympathetic fathers. Perhaps, in their panic, the two of them sought an interview with the great man as a last resort. It is easy to picture them in his anteroom, backs straight against wooden chairs, hearts pounding, waiting to be admitted.



My father was born on 12 August 1920. There would never be another child.

At the bottom of the family tree is Maxwell Mylrea Donovan, born in Liverpool on 12 August 1920, died sometime in October, 1985, in Canada I believe. This was my father.

From his earliest years, he was always intended for the Diplomatic Corps. Everything was done for him with that goal in mind. As a teenager, he seldom spent the holidays from Bexhill School at home. Every year, he was sent to live with a professor in Germany during the vacations, and as result his German was completely fluent. One relic of those German years was a meerschaum pipe which took pride of place on one of his bookcases in Sydney.

In a comfortable leafy middle-class street in comfortable leafy middle-class Bexhill-on-Sea





sits the house the kindly doctor and his wife brought him up in, 18 Holmesdale Road, “Westwood”:

Finding the house was not difficult. But I had come to England straight from the donkeys and tooting horns in the clogged, unmoving intersections of Cairo, and from the window of the London to Bexhill train, the pleasant scenes of sheep safely grazing in green meadows, the picturesque little railway stations (Appledore, Ham St, Winchelsea, Eastbourne, Rye), the rural lanes, hedges, meadows, conservatories, seemed like a vision from Mars.

At the Bexhill Museum in Egerton Road, the tweed-clad volunteer ladies could not have been more helpful. Within half an hour they found Dr William Terence Donovan in the 1936 census, and gave me the address.

One thing became immediately obvious. It was a similar impression to the one I had picked up when I had found Amaury’s house. It was that any young fellow of spirit would want to escape from here. Amaury had had the bright lights of Fiume winking enticingly across the bay, and his father’s secret dashes to far-off points, to lure him away from Laurana into deeds of derring-do. This complacent safety, in Holmedale



Road, Bexhill-on-Sea, also invited challenge and rebellion and curiosity. (But would the young Max not have been better off bending his head and simply coming back to this sanctuary after the war instead of doing what he did?).

Of course he was regularly going to Germany, but the shelter, orderliness and discipline of his professor's house in Mannheim could not satisfy his longing for the romantic and exotic. He learned French, however, and studied it at Oxford. As a result, his French was impeccable, more elegant and correct than my mother's natural demotic. His German, of course, was totally fluent.

Nearly everyone who has been to Oxford, including me, is marked for life. He certainly was. Oxford enabled him to borrow the clothes of a strong and superior man and look convincing. In 1940, he emerged from St John's College with a B.A. (Hons) in modern languages. His tutor was Will Moore, the model for Professor Welch in Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*.

(When at the end of my first degree from Sydney University, I made up my mind to go to Oxford myself, the only person I knew to contact there was Will Moore. He sent me an amiable handwritten letter, which set the course for my future life. The Moore Society at St John's, a thriving modern languages group, is named after him).

Being a beefy lad, almost six feet tall, Max also rowed, not quite well enough for the first Oxford team, but certainly for the second – perhaps a more gentlemanly spot.

In March 1941, at the age of 20, he volunteered for the Army at Winchester. I remember him saying with pride that, with a degree from Oxford, he could have joined directly as an officer, but that he democratically chose to join up as a regular soldier instead. Perhaps that was the Irish peeping through.

His period in the ranks did not last long. The Army must have seen quite quickly that he was not the usual recruit. In September 1941, now 21 years old, he was granted an Emergency Commission as a 2nd

Lieutenant in the Army's Intelligence Corps. He then began his training. In October, he took a course in War Intelligence at the School of Military Intelligence at Matlock in Derbyshire for a month; from 9th February to 10th March 1942, an Interrogation Course at Cambridge; and from 5 May to 10 June a Photo Interpretation Course at Matlock.

Soon it would be time to put all that training to good use.

The most logical posting with his German in mind was Egypt, where hundreds of thousands of German prisoners of war were being held after their defeat in the second battle of El Alamein in November 1942.<sup>11</sup> At last the exotic was within reach.

On 16 January 1943, he was posted to Army Intelligence I.O. Middle East. The innocent pink-cheeked young Englishman was intoxicated by the teeming, pungent streets of Cairo. Beautiful dark-haired women sauntered beside his jeep, exotic foods were there for the taking, the weather was balmy even in winter. He suddenly felt alive. He was only 22.

A tiny entry in his Army record shows that his assignment was secret.

About three weeks after arrived, he happened to be driving a jeep in central Cairo, near the rue Hawayati, actually on the corner of the rue Sheikh Hamza and the rue Hawayati. Standing on the corner was a black-haired young woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to his own mother, albeit in a slightly darker version. Sharp-featured, sad-eyed, she was waiting for a bus. Recently she had been hit by a runaway bicycle and had lost the baby she was carrying. It was four months since Amaury had been executed.

He stopped the jeep. In faultless French, he asked her, foolishly, for the time. Unaware of his interest, and caring less, she told him, but he did not drive on. He picked up his courage, and asked her where she lived.

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11 The Italian historian Giorgio Rochat estimates that there were about 400,000 prisoners taken by the British in North Africa and Ethiopia: (*Sono circa 400.000 i prigionieri fatti dagli inglesi in Etiopia e in Africa settentrionale*). Rochat, Giorgio, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943. Dall'impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta* [The Italian Wars 1935-1943. From the Ethiopian Empire until defeat]. Einaudi, Milan, p. 446. A large proportion of these would have been German.



British influence in context

She gestured to no. 19, rue Hawayati, said “deuxième étage”, and got on the bus which had tooted at him to move.

How he found a florist in this strange new city is unclear. When she came home again, she found the front living room filled with a huge bouquet. She believed it was some suitor or other for her younger sister Esther and had no suspicion whatever that it was for her. But he came calling soon after, and it was not long before the young Englishman with his Celtic colouring of black hair and blue eyes managed to win over Sarina, who called him in Ladino “El Quaker Oats”, pronounced El KWAHcair Otts, in other words, the Englishman.

He had less luck with my mother. She resisted his siege for a long time, almost two years. Only a few letters of his from this time survive, and they are painful to read given his betrayal and abandonment of her twenty-one years later. They beg, they idolize, they despair. Once he waited for two days at a railway station, hoping that she would come from Alexandria. Still, she did keep some of them in her secret suitcase. Some are intact, others are torn in half.

Meantime, events that would influence his life were happening eight hundred miles away: a war had come and gone in Iraq, arising from a threat to Britain’s oil supply. Britain had governed Iraq (under a League of Nations mandate) since 1920, but in 1930, preparatory to granting Iraq self-government in 1932, Britain imposed a treaty allowing it to station British troops in the country once it was declared independent. For the Iraqis, this was a biting humiliation. In 1940, a nationalist politician, Rashid Ali, became Prime Minister, and almost immediately made overtures to Germany.

Rashid Ali soon seized absolute power, and overtly sought German military assistance. From the start, Churchill considered Rashid Ali’s government to be illegal, but of course, beyond the illegality was the question of oil. Iraq was not exactly “a far-away country [of which] we know nothing”<sup>12</sup>. It might have been further away, but it was more

immediately vital. Axis interest in and power over the oilfields were self-evidently unacceptable.

On 2 May 1941, the British attacked the Iraqi Army. Within days, the Germans and Italians had joined the battle on the Iraqi side, with supplies sent from Vichy France. Various colourful units joined the British side: a flying column under Brigadier James Kingstone, carrying out the last purely horse exercise in British military history, a detachment from the Arab Legion commanded by the legendary Glubb Pasha, Lt.-Gen. John Bagot Glubb, and soldiers from Indian Infantry Brigades and the Gurkha Rifles. The Empire was rallying.

Falluja fell, Basra weakened, and with only 1450 troops against 20,000 on the other side, the British advanced on Baghdad. Rashid Ali was quite unaware of how comprehensively outnumbered the British were. He panicked, and fled to Germany, accompanied by most of his government and the Grand Mufti. On 1 June the old pro-British monarchy returned. The whole thing was over in a few weeks.

Now popular Iraqi resentment at the British presence boiled over, and there were riots. The usual scapegoats, the Jews, bore the brunt of the violence, with over 100 killed and 850 injured. To keep order, the British established Persia and Iraq Command, and in August 1943, Lieut. Maxwell Donovan was transferred to Baghdad to PAIC headquarters as an Intelligence Officer.

Even though they had been bested in Iraq, the Germans “intensified their attempts to organize espionage and subversion in Syria, Iraq and Persia after the Allied occupation of those territories, though they encountered increasingly effective counter-measures”<sup>13</sup>. Possibly Lieut. Donovan, now aged all of 23, who was “to be I.O. (M.E. SecList)” (Intelligence Officer – Middle East Secret List?) according to his military record, made a worthwhile contribution to those counter-measures, but exactly what it was can only be conjectured. Logically, his German would have been put to use to translate intercepts and possibly interrogate captured

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13 F.H.Hinsley, C.A.G. Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol. 4: Security and Counter-Intelligence*, Syndicate of Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 209.

Germans. He may have gone to the desert for reconnaissance, since the only thing I remember hearing from him about his time in Iraq is that in the desert he was given salt tablets by the Army.

The British were to remain in Iraq until 1947, but Lieut. Donovan, useful though he no doubt was in Iraq, was hankering to return to Cairo. He managed it in December 1943, and his feelings on seeing my mother again were overwhelming. Hers were a mixture of repulsion, gratitude and panic. In Cairo, the British, she told me dozens of times, were only one level below the deity. It was flattering that one of the master race was so abjectly at her feet. And she was utterly practical. Amaury was never going to come back. This Englishman offered an escape from a drama that she, and everyone, knew was brewing in the streets. It would not be long before the new order took over. And then, life for the Jews would, without a doubt, be distinctly uncomfortable.

The Englishman seemed to enjoy the family's society. My aunt Sylvia remembers him driving my mother to Alexandria and taking her on picnics to the beach. She must have gone on picnics on the beach in Alexandria with Amaury. What went through her mind when she walked the same paths with the Englishman?

The illusions persisted through the early months of 1945. In February he was posted to the Balkan Counter-Intelligence Section.

The story of the British about-face in Greece has largely been forgotten in Britain, although not in Greece. During the war, the British, the Americans, the Russians, and Greek anti-Nazi partisans of all stripes had stood shoulder to shoulder, and Greek gratitude to Britain and its allies for its liberation from Hitler's troops was profound. Indeed, on 3 December 1944, a crowd of demonstrators collected in Syntagma Square<sup>14</sup> in support of the partisans, chanting Viva Churchill, viva Roosevelt, viva Stalin!

Churchill, though, felt disquiet, as did the government of Greece. The partisans had become too prominent, and the most prominent among them were the Communists. Britain was still at war with Germany,

340 14 The main square in Athens.

and was still allied with Communist Russia, but the last thing Churchill or Roosevelt wanted was a Communist ascendancy in Europe after the war had ended. The Greek government sought British help. In his memoirs, Churchill recalled his memo of 29 August 1944, which said: *It is most desirable to strike out of the blue without any preliminary crisis. It is the best way to forestall the EAM*<sup>15</sup><sup>16</sup>.

Suddenly shots rang out in Syntagma Square. Whether it was Greek troops, Greek police, or British soldiers that actually fired the shots is not important in the end, because there is no doubt that they were fired with the approval of the British. The victims had been unarmed, friendly civilian demonstrators; and the British had even given guns to Nazi collaborators to enable them to join in on the attack. 28 people died. “Within days, RAF Spitfires and Beaufighters were strafing leftist strongholds as the Battle of Athens – known in Greece as the *Dekemvriana* – began, fought not between the British and the Nazis, but the British alongside supporters of the Nazis against the partisans”<sup>17</sup>. Greece descended into civil war.

In February of 1945, a few weeks after the Syntagma Square massacre, my father was appointed to “Censor” in the Balkan Counter-Intelligence Section with the rank of Captain. I know he was in Greece because he told me so himself. If his role in Greece meant involving pro-Nazi German-speakers among the population in the struggle against the communists, then my father was working for the enemy, as far as the Zaccaria men would have been concerned. So my mother married two intelligence operatives, one a communist sympathizer, the other a convinced anti-communist. Would Amaury, who after all was also in the pay of the British, have understood? Would his father Alessandro?

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15 The EAM (*Ethnikón Apeleftherotikón Μέτωπον*, or National Liberation Front) was a left-wing group formed by the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Union for People’s Democracy, and the Agricultural Party of Greece. It is certainly true that although socialists were important in the EAM, the Communists dominated it. There was, in Churchill’s view, a serious risk that the EAM would take power after the war.

16 Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol.5, Harmondsworth, London, 1952, vol. 6 (1954), p. 252.

17 Article in *The Guardian*, 30 November 2014.

For by this time, she had finally given in and married the Englishman. In the end he had worn her down. The nine years' age difference, her coolness to him as a man, her utterly different temperament, all of it he brushed aside. At the age of 24, he married a woman of 33, a widow who had not forgotten her dead husband, a foreigner, a Jew, gregarious where he was unsociable, forceful where he was weak, left-wing where he was conservative, unfailingly nurturing where he was periodically ruthless. It proved to be a mistake.

Their marriage in Cairo on 11 December 1944 was attended by a crowd of people she could not speak to – other British officers of the Intelligence Corps, few of whom had more than rudimentary French. Amaury, as outlined earlier, was almost there.

My father did not stay long in Greece. Three months later, on 19 May 1945, he was sent to Austria, to work in the Counter-Intelligence Section of Zone HQ18. He was present in Austria from the very earliest days of Allied presence in that country. Chaos, looting, rapes, and hunger were everywhere, and former Nazis were still common among the population.

The British had had very little information about what had been going on in Austria during the war<sup>19</sup>. There had of course been no Austrian government in exile in Britain, nor had there been any significant resistance movement to contact and obtain information from, although some heroic individuals and groups did what they could against overwhelming Nazi force and widespread support for Nazism inside the country. At the end of the war, there was very little reliable intelligence, either about the population's continuing adherence to Nazi principles and power, or about Soviet intentions. There were also hundreds of thousands of German-speaking prisoners of war.

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18 The British Zone was in the south of the country, while the Russians, who had liberated Vienna, were in the north-east and the Americans in the north-west.

19 This short section draws on Alice Hills, *Britain and the Occupation of Austria, 1943-1945*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2000, and its review in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5.3 (2003) 131-132.



So Captain Maxwell Donovan doubtless played a key role at this early stage. A fluent German speaker (although with a High German not an Austrian accent), a trained, experienced intelligence and interrogation agent with a quick and retentive memory, perfect eyesight, and an underlying ruthlessness, he was a good choice for a job probably requiring a combination of curiosity, intelligence and severity. What exactly it was I have never been able to find out.

He stayed in Austria till October 1945, a total of five months. In the ten months since their marriage in December 1944, he and my mother had spent only two months together, not enough for either of them to acknowledge that a mistake had been made. On 1 January 1946 he was made a Major. He was still only 25.

Looking down his military record, set out in tiny, crabbed almost illegible handwriting, I was suddenly brought up short. A minuscule entry for 21 March 1946 says that as of that date he had joined SIS in Egypt. SIS! The coincidence was startling. It seemed almost incredible that my mother's two husbands, completely unknown to each other, completely different from each other, one an independent, rebellious, manly free agent, the other more of an organization man, from opposite sides of the political spectrum, from opposite sides of the European region, both met through two separate chance encounters in different years but on the same Cairo street, should both have worked as intelligence agents for the same SIS and trod the same corridors in Cairo. Yet it was true. Did my father know Degolle or Sweet or Millar? Did he seek to join SIS to find out more of what had happened to Amaury? No-one will ever know. SIS will not open its files.

In any case, this was his last posting. He applied to the Diplomatic Service but even with an Oxford degree and a fine wartime record, his choice of wife, and possibly his Irish name, went against him, and his parents' dream of decades for their only child was shattered. He was rejected.

Now he rejected in his turn. He refused to take the standard path of returning to grey, rationed, class-ridden England and going into

banking, or shipping, or something else safe. Instead he turned his face towards the warmth and the opportunities of Australia. In late 1947, after a full complement of intense experiences in Egypt, Iraq, Greece, and Austria, the English boy from Bexhill-on-Sea decided to take the Sephardic woman from Cairo, and their baby (me), and embark like tens of thousands of others, for a new life in Australia.

When they heard his plans, his parents were aghast but politely acquiescent. They came to Egypt to see the new baby and to say good-bye. With dread, my mother learned that when they arrived in Cairo she was supposed to make them tea. The English, she knew, liked tea. But with no idea how to make it, she took a stab in the dark, bought a new saucepan, half filled it with tea-leaves, added a little water, covered it, boiled it for fifteen minutes, and, heart beating, served the result up to my grandmother, who smiled gently, and that same afternoon went straight out and bought a Waring and Gillow teapot at Cicurel. With a teacosy.

Sarina and Dr and Mrs Donovan smiled gamely at each other but had not a single word in common except Quaker Oats. But the shock of seeing the ship carrying his only son, his only child, sail away from the dock at Port Said, for a country on the other side of the world, was too much for the kindly Dr Donovan. His heart suddenly weakened, and within three years he was dead. He was only 51.

Sarina was tougher. It was not long before she too decided to come to Australia too. But Senyora Sarina was not about to take six weeks on a slow boat. She, who had been born in the narrow back streets of Smyrna, who spoke only Ladino and Greek, who unhesitatingly bought unplucked chickens from the local Cairo market, decided to come by modern aeroplane. The journey took three days.

Meantime my mother was having a hard time in Australia. One day a few years before, in the section where she worked in the National Bank in Cairo, someone had asked: "Y a quelqu'un ici qui puisse lire l'anglais?"<sup>20</sup>. Ever game, my mother had piped up "Moi!". It was a

letter. “Doehr Seer”, my mother announced, before the supervisor snatched the letter out of her hand. So when she arrived in Australia, and heard the pungent accent of her new countrymen, it was a shock. She could understand absolutely nothing, nothing at all. And she could speak even less.

Her first meal in Australia was spent in tears. For six weeks, on the British ship from Egypt, she had had to eat Brussels sprouts, boiled beef and blancmange, so after the ship docked she asked to be taken to a restaurant. Spaghetti! A magic word, the only one on the menu that she did recognize. At last some Mediterranean food! When she saw the limp little white worms in their vinegary red sauce, spooned straight out of a heated Heinz tin, my mother burst into tears. Cairo had not been devastated like Warsaw, or Budapest, or Vienna. Thanks to El Alamein, it had been a paradise of plenty and sophistication during the war. Australian society in 1948, on the other hand, was very monocultural, and the waitress was unsympathetic. The Anglo-Saxons had won the war, and if their spaghetti was good enough for them, it ought to have been good enough for the foreigner.

Intolerance of non-English speakers was rife. In the beginning, my mother was shouted at the street – “Woy don’t you speak Ostra-a-lyan?” “Get out, reffo”, “Shut up”; she had sticks and umbrellas shaken in her face, she was shoved in the street, she had to go to the chemist to buy olive oil in a tiny medicinal bottle, artichokes were given to pigs, but it did not take her long to rally and, like her Smyrniot forebears, turn adversity and intolerance into a joke in the time-honoured Jewish way. Her laughter-loving cousin was typical of this Jewish characteristic: crossing the Sydney Harbour Bridge once in the days when there were ticket collectors, she was gossiping, forgot to pay and drove straight through. The collector banged on her car and snarled, “Hey! You! Come back here!” She twinkled up at him and answered, “You shouldn’t tell Come back here! You should tell” – and then she broke into song – “Come Closer to Me!”

My mother grew to love Australia. She felt sorry for her cousins who had left Egypt for Paris and Milan, because in Sydney she had found another paradise.

Her friends were legion. They came from every part of the population – crusty old Australian judges, tentative young Indonesian musicians, wily Hungarian merchants, life-loving Greek Smyrniot ladies, Italians, Spaniards, Poles, Viennese, French, old and young, they were all her partners in gossip, coffee and cards.

Without exception, they remained faithful to her after the cataclysm struck. For years my father had been making tepid attempts to escape, taking overseas trips on his own, seeking solace elsewhere, but it was only in 1964 that he struck the final blow. In 1964, from Manila, he announced that he was leaving my mother and me and associating himself with a Filipino woman. My mother had had no idea.

In her family background, divorce was completely unknown. There had been absolutely no instance of divorce in the Nahum clan for hundreds of years, if ever. There were plenty of unhappy marriages, but they were generally turned into jokes, even by the miserable parties. Husbands of nagging wives were laughingly depicted as clattering down the stairs tearing their shirts open, crying, *Je n'en peux plus! Je n'en peux plus!*<sup>21</sup> They would commiserate with their cronies at the local corner café, where they were chaffed and could laugh at themselves. For a wife to be completely and publicly abandoned by her husband was the ultimate shame. My mother could not believe it had actually happened to her.

For six weeks, just as I was doing my final school examinations, she disappeared into a psychiatric hospital built for the insane. When she emerged, I hardly recognized her. She had become a little stick insect, half her size, and she was by no means cured. What made her state of mind worse was our financial uncertainty. Every month we were on tenterhooks as to whether my father would send his monthly allowance to us. She was in no fit state to work, far from it. I was 17, so I did what

I could – Woolworths, Kentucky Fried Chicken, anything that came to hand. Some months that was all we lived on.

It took my mother some years to recover. When she spoke of my father, she would use a string of Ladino and Hebrew words to indicate disgust and contempt. What helped her most, apart from time and her friends, was visiting me abroad. After I first began my UN career, she came and lived with me in New York. She would stride enchanted down the avenues, lustily soaking up the variety and bustle, back to her real self. And especially with me, later, in Zimbabwe, she was the Sol of Cairo once again, boldly riding a horse into the middle of a group of giraffes, snapping pictures of huge elephants from a few yards away, making friends, attending parties, cracking jokes. Dauntless.

And that is how I remember my mother – eagerly volunteering to go on a horse-back safari though wearing only an ordinary street dress, and once on the horse, riding calm and erect under an arch formed by the necks of six giraffes, three on each side. If only Amaury could have seen her.

# Conclusion

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My three-and-a-half year journey down the paths to no. 19, rue Hawayati has taught me more than a set of new facts. Originally, on the day I discovered from her hidden box that my mother had a past I had known nothing about, my principal aim had been to understand who my mother really was. At the outset, I mainly wanted to unearth the stories behind the documents and photographs I found in the box, and to honour the courage of the man I discovered she had married.

But over the course of three and a half years, I have learned and understood much more. I have learned about the many ways history can be explored, understood, and written; about the role and value of memory; about the complexities of identity; about the causes and effects of the rise of nationalism, particularly in what William McNeill calls the “polyethnic hierarchies”<sup>1</sup> of huge Empires; and about the ways individuals can interact with the larger forces of history. I have come to conclusions, some firm, some conditional, that, at the outset, I did not suspect I would.

One of the main outcomes of these last three and half years has been an appreciation of the many possible ways of approaching the discipline of history. This is not just a matter of style. Certainly, as I outlined in the Introduction, each writer has his own style, dry, or rhetorical, or pompous, or chatty, as the case may be; and each writer adopts a different way of including, or excluding, his own presence. My own

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1 William H. McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History*, University of Toronto Press, 1986, p. 52.

preference has turned out to be for weaving my own experiences into a history that, I hoped, people would want to read.

But, as guided by my supervisor through the work of Hannu Salmi<sup>2</sup>, I have come to see that there is a wider issue, namely, a radically different way of looking at history which goes well beyond style. Salmi posits that, especially in the case of remote periods, what we know is what those cultures wanted us to know, or what has survived by accident, not what the culture really felt like, in all its richness, its daily life, its sounds, its smells, its momentary events, to the people living then. It follows, says Salmi, that there are worlds of possible events which may well have occurred in the past (and not just events, but also thoughts, emotions and representations) and of which we “know” little if anything, in the sense of knowing from written or other remaining evidence. So, in order to know, we have to bring to bear other evidence, and our own imaginations. “We can ask,” says Salmi, “why realism should only mean that which actually happened, the factual. Could it not also mean seeing the past as a world of possibilities? Then history would not be a closed entity but would remain open, potential, and a scientific account of it would have to include a place for the possible as well as the actual”. Ironically, of course, this would *really* be life *wie es eigentlich war*.

Emboldened by these concepts, I have ventured to imagine a possible Sol on the trek from Toledo to Puerto de Santa Maria, and another eagerly seizing the chance to venture to Smyrna from Amsterdam, in the hope that this will not be considered nothing but “a romance laden with footnotes”<sup>3</sup>, but will be taken in the spirit of typifying open, not closed, history.

So, in short, one outcome of the years of preparation of this thesis has been a much wider understanding of the discipline of history.

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2 Hannu Salmi, Cultural History, the Possible, and the Principle of Plenitude, in *History and Theory* 50 (May 2011), 171-187.

3 Salmi includes this disparaging comment from James Buchan in his review of Natalie Zemon Davis’ biography of Leo Africanus, as an example of the thinking that only the facts that survive constitute real history.

Another, related, outcome has been a recognition of the usefulness of memory. Here my timing was fortuitous. I was able to take advantage of the memory of family members in their 80s and 90s, just before those recollections were to have been lost altogether. One family member, my mother's first cousin Élie Nahum, has written his reminiscences (as have a number of nostalgic former Cairenes or Alexandrians), but in formal interviews and less structured conversations over coffee, he recalled a good deal more than he had written down, and I have been able to use many of those extra memories. The others I spoke to – Sylvia Nahum, 85, in Sydney, her twin Yolande Bigio in Milan, Jacques Nahum, 94, and Ralph Hayat, 75, (the son of Odette Hayat née Nahum, Élie's older sister), both in Paris, had not written any reminiscences, but they shared their memories not only of their own Arcadian life in Egypt, but of their parents' memories of life in Smyrna.

My own mother's memories of her life in Egypt, from her childhood onwards, have formed an important part of the thesis as well. My memory of her memory of the Passover seder she attended as a little girl has been preserved in one of its sections. And more generally, I absorbed from her every day a picture of the joys of life in Egypt, and the liveliness of the world of Smyrna, so that, even though they were rose-coloured, they assumed an unassailable reality of their own. I have often said that I was brought up not in Bellevue Hill in Sydney in the second half of the twentieth century, but in the Cairo of the first half, and in the Smyrna of the late nineteenth.

So, remarkably, I was able to travel down a direct and personal route to the Ottoman world of the late 19th century, as opened up by my own relatives. These multigenerational memories evoked a world that was multicultural before the term came to have its current meaning, and whose inhabitants wore their many identities with unthinking ease.

The memories I gathered in individual and group meetings were valuable supplements to the paper records in official archives, and by using all of these sources – archival documents and other records, written reminiscences, and recollections from face-to-face conversations – I hope I have been able to “rescue” from oblivion some of the people



who touched my mother's life in one way or another; to recreate worlds that risk being forgotten; and, possibly, to bring those stories and narratives to wider public attention.

Since the 1980s, memory studies have become a virtual industry, as the editor of the journal *Memory and History* has said<sup>4</sup>. There have been many detractors, one of whom I cite in the text, although they are fewer today. But after all the benefits I have received from memory during the last three and a half years, one clear conclusion is that I am not one of them. Memories have been indispensable for this thesis.

A third outcome relates to question of identity. The many identities of those of my relatives who lived in the Ottoman Empire and its aftermath make the issue of identity one of particular relevance to my project. Today the idea of a single identity is discredited, but in all three of the Empires figuring in this thesis, the complexities of identity were particularly marked.

For the Zaccaria family, identity was necessarily fractured – Amaury had an Austrian grandmother, a Slovene or Croat mother, and an Italian father and grandfather; he lived in a land ruled, as we have seen, by a succession of French, Italian, Austrian and other conquerors; he spoke Italian and Slovene (or Croat) at home, and French to my mother; his father identified strongly as a Communist, but his own affiliation was less ironclad; he nevertheless, politically, identified as a firm anti-fascist.

My mother first and foremost identified as a Jew, and like many, she underlined this with identification of family ancestry across a long period of time. For her, for the Nahums, and for many Jews, this was the only fixed and firm identity that remained permanent through time and place, over the centuries of wanderings. But she also thought of herself as Spanish, related easily to modern-day Spaniards, and insisted on my taking Spanish language and even dance lessons; in addition, she had imbibed many elements of Ottoman culture like its food and its ready connections with other ethnicities; she loved Egypt, but never

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4 Volume 25, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2013  
pp. 5-6

thought of herself as Egyptian; she was not a Zionist, despite a family connection with the Maccabi movement; she never involved herself in organised politics but always held proudly progressive opinions; receiving a French education, she did not think of herself as French but had certainly absorbed a great deal of French culture, striving to create a Parisian apartment in her adopted country; and in the latter part of her life, she certainly proclaimed her Australian identity with gusto to her Milanese and Parisian cousins. A complex patchwork of identities.

Even my father's identity, so plainly British at first glance, held hidden complexities. The strong Irish strain was evident every day to him when he looked in the mirror and beheld the typically Celtic colouring of black hair and blue eyes; it also emerged in a romantic, wager-all-on-the-throw-of-one-dice impulsiveness, in a rejection of the British class system, and in his facility with words. After years of service to the British army, his rejection by the British establishment he had been trained and sought to join cut very deep with him, and led to emigration to Australia and an almost complete rejection of a British identity. Not that he ever felt Australian either, leaving the country after seventeen years to live in Asia as an expatriate – an expatriate what? Not British, certainly. I think, actually, that he had no real identity outside his own self.

So another outcome of my work on this thesis has been a much greater understanding of the complexities of identity, or rather – because I already had a formless, unexamined knowledge of compound identities – I have learned to bring them out into the light and analyse them in their historical context.

A fourth aspect which has emerged from the last three and a half years has been somewhat more problematical. This is the causes and effects of nationalism, especially as occurring in huge, multi-faith and multi-ethnic empires.

A number of writers assert that 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism had its roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Among many others, Arthur Melzer, for example, points to Jean-Jacques Rousseau as providing the original “seeds of nationalism”<sup>5</sup>. Other writers have pointed to a wide assortment of factors accounting for the rise of the nationalist phenomenon. For Ernest Gellner, nationalism was a necessary product of industrial development: the need for a single language and culture to carry out efficient industrial production meant that old, highly localised agrarian societies had to be superseded by single culture, single language, single state systems<sup>6</sup>. For Eric Hobsbawm, it was the resulting class divisions and the concomitant rise of powerful democratic impulses that spurred the rise of nationalism<sup>7</sup>. For Anthony Smith, to simplify his elegant and complex book, it was the institutions of the state – taxation, conscription, and administration – that actually preceded the formation of deep nationalistic impulses<sup>8</sup>. And one of the foremost scholars of nationalism, Michael Hechter, has explored and analysed a wide range of causes of the phenomenon, with the aim of answering questions such as why it is a modern experience of the last 200 years, why it is more prevalent in some societies than others, and what can be done to contain its dark side<sup>9</sup>.

William McNeill points to the resurgence of nationalism following the French Revolution of 1789, and asserts that several main factors contributed to its rise: the classical inheritance of Greek city states at war with each other; intensified communications playing upon a powerful

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5 Arthur Melzer, "Rousseau, Nationalism, and the Politics of Sympathetic Identification" in *Educating the Prince: Essays in Honor of Harvey C. Mansfield*, Mark Kristol and William Blitz, editors (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 123.

6 Gellner, op. cit., pp. 19-51.

7 "If the rise of working class parties was one major product of the politics of democratization, the rise of nationalism in politics was another". Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*, Vintage Books edition, New York, 1989, p. 142.

8 "Many would argue that . . .the state actually 'created' the nation, that its activities of taxation, conscription and administration endowed the population within its jurisdiction with a sense of their corporate identity and civil loyalty". Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, University of Nevada Press paperback edition, Reno, Nevada, 1991, p. 59.

9 Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism*, OUP, 2000, pp. 3-4.

surge of population growth; and a military system that rewarded mass mobilisation of the citizenry<sup>10</sup>.

But it is Benedict Anderson who charts the ways that nationalism gained immense emotional force in the period of my mother's lifetime. In *Imagined Communities*, he says that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that might prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings".<sup>11</sup>

This thesis has pointed out that in the particular cases of the three Empires it discusses, there are many factors that can account for the momentum of nationalism, or its variants, ethno-centricity, or chauvinism, or jingoism, or murderous fanaticism, or a combination of all of them. Among them were corruption in the Ottoman, laziness and exclusion of minorities in the Austro-Hungarian, and absent-mindedness<sup>12</sup> or, less whimsically, a ruthless pursuit of raw materials in the case of the British Empire.

Benedict Anderson has eloquently written of the "elephantiasis of [those] dynastic states", where "Hapsburgs were perched high over Magyars and Croats, Slovaks ... Italians, Ukrainians and Austro-Germans"<sup>13</sup>, and says that the result was increasing cultural, and therefore political difficulties for their rulers. The Ottomans and the Hapsburgs were manifestly inadequate at handling these difficulties. They made little effort to inculcate into their peoples an over-riding sense of belonging to, or identity with, the whole, rather than still thinking of themselves as a separate part which had somehow, usually by self-evidently unpopular conquest, been added to a set of other territories in a ramshackle and

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10 William H. McNeill, op. cit, p. 51.

11 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London and New York, 1983, p. 7.

12 Ernest Gellner refers to the well-known saw that the British gained their Empire in a fit of absent-mindedness, and says that "more laudably, the English lost their empire with a similar lack of attention". Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Second Edition, Cornell Paperbacks, Ithaca, New York, 2008, p. 41.

rickety (“elephantine”) agglomeration without a central *raison d’être*. The British Empire may have done more to instil a sense of Britishness, but among peoples of a fundamentally non-British culture, that sense was confined to an elite, which, moreover, often had a complicated love-hate relationship with the mother country. So in the end, the result was the same for all three Empires – violence, dissolution, and replacement by a host of states all claiming legitimacy on nationalist grounds.

This is hardly the place to do more than sketch some of the various analyses of the *causes* of the rise of nationalism, either in general or in the particular cases of our three Empires. Its *effects*, however, as they touched my mother, have been illustrated time and again throughout this thesis. Egyptian nationalism against the British Empire led to the departure of the Jews from Egypt, the increasing discomfort of the other “foreign” residents, and, many have argued, to the decline of the Egyptian economy. My mother’s departure from Egypt came earlier than the forced exile that was imposed a few years later, but there is no doubt that even in the late 1940s, life for the Jews of Egypt was already increasingly difficult. Croatian nationalism against first, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and second against Italian fascism, led to Alessandro’s, then Amaury’s, activism, their eventual execution, and my mother’s consequent heartache; rising Turkish nationalism made the lives of the Nahum clan increasingly difficult in Smyrna; even the muted Australian nationalism she encountered in the late 1940s led to five years or so of unhappiness until she acclimatised.

So another, more tentative, conclusion from my work on this thesis is that nationalism, while explicable in the many ways outlined by a wide variety of writers, has not always brought the benefits it promises. Indeed, it might be possible to argue that when it brings in its train murderous ethnic cleansing and cultural and intellectual narrowing, it may harm the enforcers almost as much as their victims, and not just materially.

In the end, though, perhaps the most important conclusion I have come to after carrying out this project is the last. It emerges from the interplay of its characters’ choices with the sweep of large historical movements,

from, in other words, the relation between the “micro” and the “macro”. The fate of the Nahum family, its peregrinations from one land to another, one rule to another, over centuries, would, on the face of it, seem to cast individuals as victims of larger historical developments. But at the end of this project, I have come to see that this is not the case, at least not always. Even at times of subjection, individuals may still have choices, and may have the courage to exercise them. Amaury, for instance, lived under fascism, but chose to defy it; his father and his grandfather did the same. My mother was swept to Australia, certainly, but chose to adapt instead of escaping to Europe to rejoin her cousins. The Nahum family chose to go to Smyrna from Amsterdam, if family history is to be believed, and to Cairo from Smyrna. Albert Arié chose prison rather than betrayal of his comrades and his beliefs.

So the interplay of the “micro” with the “macro” is not always a one-way street. As I conclude this project, I have come to salute the courage of many of the individuals I have encountered, in person and on paper, during the last forty months, as they face their circumstances head on, take their fates into their own hands, follow their own path, and in so doing, exemplify what it means to be fully human.



Wanderings of the Nahum Clan, Jews.





# APPENDICES

**Appendix 1 Timelines**

**Appendix 2 The Ladino Language**

**Appendix 3 The Incorruptible**

## APPENDIX 1

# Timelines

	Zaccaria	Nahum	Donovan
800-1000 B.C.E.		First Jews plausibly arrive in Spain with Phoenician traders	
586 B.C.E.		Destruction of Solomon's First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar. Flight of a few Jews to Spain	
281-219 B.C.E.		Romans conquer Spain	
71 C.E.		Destruction of Second Temple by Romans. Wave of Jews flee to Europe, some to Spain	
306 C.E.		First Church rulings against Jews in Spain	
410 C.E.		Arian Goths invade Spain from Germany	
589 C.E.		Gothic rulers of Spain convert from Arianism to Catholicism. Persecution of Jews accelerates.	
711		Muslims invade Spain.	
1085		Christians conquer Toledo from Muslims	
1138		Philosopher Maimonides born	
1391		Nation-wide pogroms in Spain. Nearly all Jews of Toledo killed	
1481		Inquisition begins in Seville	
1492		Jews expelled from Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella. Sultan Beyazid II invites Jews of Spain to Ottoman Empire. Nahum family sails to Amsterdam. Christopher Columbus leaves from Palos.	
1593		Grand Duke Ferdinand I of Tuscany invites Jews to settle in Livorno.	
~1625		Jews start to settle in Smyrna. Nahums leave Amsterdam for Smyrna.	
1796			Edward Mylrea born in Isle of Man
1802			John Waring born in Ireland
1821			Bartholomew Donovan born in Ireland

	Zaccaria	Nahum	Donovan
1838			Samuel James Waring I born in Liverpool
1855			Bartholomew Donovan marries Isabella, daughter of Edward Mylrea
1857			Edward Mylrea Donovan born in Liverpool
1860		Formation of Alliance Israélite Universelle	Samuel James Waring II, Uncle Sam, later Lord Waring, born in Liverpool
1879		Sol's mother Sarina born in Smyrna	
1892	Alessandro Zaccaria born in Vienna		
1899			William Terence Donovan, my grandfather, born in Liverpool
1900			Charlotte Louisa Spencer, my grandmother, born in Liverpool. Her mother, also Charlotte, dies in childbirth.
1901			Charlotte's father, George Spencer, remarries, to another Charlotte
1906		Nahum family leaves Smyrna for Cairo, led by patriarch Jacob Nahum	
1909			Wreck of the Belle of Ireland. End of Edward Mylrea Donovan's rise as Master Mariner.
1910			Samuel James Waring enters House of Lords as Lord Waring
1911		Sol born in Cairo	
1913	Amaury Raoul Zaccaria born in Fiume		
1915	Treaty of London promises large territory to Italy in exchange for refusing to fight together with Germany.		
1917	Egon Zaccaria born in Fiume	Esther Zarmati, Sol's sister, engaged to Egon, born in Cairo	
1918	Britain reneges on promise in Treaty of Italy.		
1920		Élie Nahum born in Cairo	William Terence Donovan and Charlotte Louisa Spencer marry. Maxwell Mylrea Donovan born in Liverpool, England
1922	Mussolini becomes Prime Minister of Italy. D'Annunzio enters Fiume. Rapid Italianisation of Istria begins.	Destruction of Smyrna. Annihilation of Armenian and Greek communities.	"That's a damned lie"
1925			Edward Mylrea Donovan dies

	Zaccaria	Nahum	Donovan
1937			MMD goes to Oxford
~1940	Amaury and Egon volunteer to British. Alessandro disappears after warrant for his arrest.		
1941	Maria, mother of Amaury and Egon, arrested		MMD joins Army as 2nd Lieutenant
Feb-42	Sol and Amaury marry	Sol and Amaury marry	
Jul-42	Sol and Amaury see each other for the last time	Sol and Amaury see each other for the last time	
Oct-42	Amaury and Egon disembark at Licola Beach	Second and decisive battle of El Alamein, which saved the life of my mother and all the Jews of Egypt	
Nov-42	Amaury and Egon executed at Forte Bravetta		
Nov-42	Alessandro Zaccaria hands himself in to fascist authorities		
Jan-43			MMD posted to Cairo, meets Sol soon thereafter
1943	Allies invade Italy	Deportation and murder of 60,000 Jews from Salonica and 2,000 Jews from Rhodes, most of Spanish Jewish background .	
1944	Alessandro Zaccaria killed at Risiera di San Sabba, Trieste		Sol marries MMD
1948		State of Israel proclaimed. War between Egypt and Israel. Sol arrives in Sydney with Patricia in January after six week voyage.	Maxwell Mylrea Donovan arrives in Sydney
1949		Sarina arrives in Sydney	
2014		I go to Toledo	

## APPENDIX 2

# The Ladino Language

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I have used the word “Ladino” to indicate the language spoken by my mother, her relatives and her forebears. I have done so deliberately. As Prof. David Bunis points out in the article below, there is considerable controversy about the correct name to give to that language. But there is no doubt that, insofar as there is a popular usage, the word commonly used to designate the language today is “Ladino”. My mother and her relatives, however, always referred to the language as simply “Espanyol”. The language they spoke was old Spanish, with Hebrew, Turkish, Arabic and French words mixed in. It is also known as *Español/Espanyol*, *Judió/Djudyo* (or *Jidió/Djidyó*), *Judesmo/Djudezmo*, *Sefaradhi/Sefaradi* and *Haketilla/Haketia*. In Israel, the language is called *(E)spanyolit* and *Ladino*. In Turkey and formerly in the Ottoman Empire, the language has been traditionally called *Yahudice*, meaning the Jewish language. It differs, although not very greatly, depending on whether it is spoken in Morocco, Greece, Italy, France, Bosnia, Turkey or Bulgaria. Traditionally, it was written in the semi-cursive Hebrew script, *Rashi*, and its cursive form, *Solitreo*, but since the First World War, it has more commonly been written in Roman letters. Despite the best efforts of several groups, in Israel and America, it is being lost and is in danger of extinction, as this cartoon<sup>1</sup> shows:

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1 From Irvin Mandel, *La Famiya Mozotros, Sentro de Investigaciones sobre la Kultura Sefardi Otomana-Turka*, Istanbul, 2012.



### **“Ladino” or not “Ladino”?**

**By David M. Bunis, Schusterman Visiting Professor of Israel Studies**

A little over a month ago, Zelda Ovadia of the Jerusalem Kol Israel radio program, which broadcasts in the traditional language still used today by some descendants of medieval Spanish Jewry, conceived and publicized an idea which at once focused world attention on the language of the Sephardim, and helped unite its widely dispersed speakers. She proposed that December 5th be recognized throughout the world as El Dia Internacional del Ladino – International Ladino Day, with day-long festivities to be held in Israel and in Diaspora Sephardic communities everywhere. Preparations for the event, and the celebration of the day itself, united many Sephardim worldwide, bringing to mind the Sephardic proverb: “Komo el ahaduth de los djudios no ay” – There is no unity like that of the Jews.

This unity lasted for about a day. The day after the celebration there came a backlash, predictable to those familiar with this community, well illustrating another Sephardic proverb: “Dos djudios en tres keiloth” – Two Jews require three synagogues (since, in addition to one’s own, one must have another synagogue which one would never deign to enter).

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2 Article for the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies, University of Washington, <http://jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/david-bunis-ladino-or-not-ladino/>

The problem in this case revolved around an issue to which members of the modern speech community have been sensitive for years: how to call their language.

Since the 1970s, Professor Haim Vidal Sephiha of Paris, a linguist and himself a native speaker of the language, has insisted that the name “Ladino” only be used to denote the archaic variety of the language used since the Middle Ages for translating sacred Hebrew texts such as the Bible in a highly literal manner. For Sephiha, the expression “avlar en ladino” (to speak Ladino) is a contradiction in terms, since, to his thinking, one should only use “Ladino” in the context of artificial translations, never for ordinary, original speech.

On the other hand, Yitzhak Navon, fifth president of the State of Israel, and Moshe Shaul, vice-president of the Israel National Authority for Ladino Culture, which Navon and Shaul helped to found in 1997, use “Ladino” to denote the language of the Sephardim in all its varieties, written and spoken, and also use “Ladino culture” to denote the group’s cultural traditions.

Who’s right?

The answer lies in the traditional Jewish tendency to distinguish between features which characterize Jews, and opposing features which are instead typical of the ‘other’, the non-Jews. Similar distinctions were also made by other ancient peoples, such as the Greeks and Chinese.

What we know about Sephardic traditions of the past derives primarily from the writings of the group’s rab זעל bis. They traditionally used the term “Ladino” in the same sense that they used the Hebrew word “La’az” (לעז) when writing in Hebrew: namely, “the foreign language of the ‘other,’ of another people, as opposed to Hebrew, **our** language, the language of the Jews.” In the Hebrew version of Psalms 114:1 we read “Be-tset Yisrael mi-Mitsrayim, bet Ya’aqov me-‘am lo’ez” – When Israel came forth out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange (or foreign, non-Jewish) language,” i.e., Ancient Egyptian. The Sephardic rabbis translated the phrase “a people of foreign language” into the archaic variety of Jewish Castilian in which they traditionally translated

the Bible literally as “pueblo ladinán” – “a people using Ladino” (which derives from Latin *Latinus*, denoting ‘Latin’), meaning the foreign (i.e., non-Hebrew) language used by the non-Jewish host group in the place and time in which Sephardic culture first arose, medieval Spain. (The selection of that word was probably helped along by the fact that “Ladino” sounded more like “**La’az**” than other candidates for naming the language, such as “Romance”

When writing original works in Hebrew, Sephardic rabbis sometimes used “**La’az**” in the sense of a written variety of their vernacular. For example, as when Rabbi Yosef Karo (b. Toledo 1488) deliberated in his *Bet Yosef* (Orach Hayyim 307) about the permissibility on the Sabbath of reading “sippure milhamot”—war stories—“bi-leshon ha-kodesh” (in the Holy Tongue, i.e., Hebrew) as opposed to those “ha-ketuvim bi-leshon **La’az**” (written in the “foreign tongue” [i.e., in the Jewish Castilian of the Sephardim]).

But sometimes the rabbis used “**La’az**” in the sense of the everyday language spoken by the Sephardim, as when Rabbi Moshe ben Hayyim Shabbetai of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Salonika reported, in his responsa collection *Torat Moshe* (Hoshen Mishpat, no. 10), on a case in which one person had asked another, in speech, whether or not to buy something, “*we-hishiv lo ... bi-leshon la’az ‘Merka, ke kolay será ‘*” (and the other *answered* him [speaking the words] ... in the **La’az** language “Buy it, because it will be easy”). Rabbi Nissim Hayyim Moshe Mizrachi of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Jerusalem, in his responsa collection *Admat Kodesh* (vol. 1, Yore De’a, no. 12), discussed the significance of certain words of “*Reuven ... ke-še-amar ha-devarim be-la’az she-perusham she-kibbel neziruto*” (Reuven ... when he *said* the words in **La’az** the meaning of which is that he undertook to abstain from drinking alcohol). In all three examples—the first, a reference to written literary language, the second and third, to forms of the spoken language (the second, including the Turkish-origin word *kolay* ‘easy,’ often used in colloquial speech)—the language of the Sephardim was denoted in Hebrew by “**La’az**.”



So, too, the Sephardic rabbis traditionally distinguished in their everyday language between “Ladino” (their vernacular equivalent of Hebrew “*La’az*,” meaning their everyday, if “foreign-origin,” tongue) and “*Lashón Hakodesh*,” or simply “*Lashón*,” meaning Hebrew. They sometimes used “Ladino” to denote the archaic, artificial literal translation language referred to by Professor Sephiha, as when a bilingual edition of Pirke Avoth published in Belgrade in 1905 was described on its title page as being “*en lashón i ladino*” (in Hebrew and Ladino).

But they sometimes used “Ladino” to refer to spoken language. For example, as when Rabbi Yaakov Khulí, born in Erets Yisrael in the 17th century, wrote in his exegetic work *Me-Am Lo’ez* on Exodus (Constantinople 1733:92a) that “*Los misriyim ... se yaman am loéz porke no savian avlar lashón akódesch si no en ladino*” (The Egyptians ... are called a people speaking a foreign language because they did not know how to speak the Holy Tongue but only in a foreign language [which, according to Sephardic tradition, Rabbi Khulí denoted by “Ladino”]). (It should be noted that, on the title page of his book, Khulí said that it was written “in Ladino,” meaning that it was in the vernacular of his readers – although not in the archaic, literal sacred-text translation style – rather than in Hebrew, the language more usual in rabbinical writings.)

Similarly, Rabbi Avraham Palachi, a chief rabbi of Izmir (Turkey) in the 19th century, wrote in his moralistic work *We-hokhiah Avraham* (Salonika 1853: 7a) that “*el ladino ke avlamos por nuestra parte no es aunado kon otros lugares en kuantos biervos, ke son demudados*” (the Ladino that we *speak* in our parts is not identical with other places in a few words, which are different). Here again, “Ladino” was used in the context of speech, in unstated opposition to Hebrew, the language in which Rabbi Palachi said he was more used to writing.

In the twentieth century, Isaac Arditi, in the popular newspaper *El Meseret* of Izmir (vol. 23, September 9 1919, p. 40), sarcastically wrote about a grumpy rabbinical scholar in his community who “shabat entero ... no aze ke meldar en lashón i en ladino pelear” (the whole day of Shabbat ... does nothing but study in Hebrew and fight around in Ladino).

From such examples we can see that, over the centuries, “Ladino” has been used to denote the language of the Sephardim both in its written forms—including, but not limited to, that used in the literal translation of sacred texts—and in its spoken forms, especially when an opposition to Hebrew is stated or implied. Thus, especially in the context of Israel—where Hebrew is the everyday spoken and written language to which the special language of the Sephardim is juxtaposed, and where *El Dia Internacional del Ladino* was first conceived and received its name—the reference to the language of the Sephardim, in *all* of its spoken and written varieties, as **“Ladino” is not a mistake but a preservation of a centuries-old Sephardic tradition.**

The use of “Ladino” in this sense does not detract one iota from the seminal contributions of Professor Sephiha to the study of the unique, archaic calque variety of the language used by the Sephardim to translate sacred Hebrew and Aramaic texts. At the same time, its use in expressions such as “Ladino culture” brings today’s Sephardic terminology in sync with the current trend to denote the culture of a speech group by the name used to denote the language itself (e.g., “Yiddish culture”). In everyday speech and writing, and in websites dedicated to this culture, such as *Ladinokomunita* – which has itself decided to adopt “Ladino” as the preferred name for the language--native speakers have begun to incorporate “Ladino” into neologisms referring to themselves, such as “Ladino-avlantes” (Ladino speakers), and, here in Seattle, “los Ladineros.” This name, coined by Seattle community member Jack Altabef, refers to an intergenerational group of Ladino speakers who gather every week to read Ladino texts and discuss Ladino culture.

**As implied by the Sephardic proverb “Bos del puevlo, bos del Syelo” (The voice of the people is the voice of Heaven), it’s hard to fight the will of the people. And in the case of the name to be used for their language and culture, the will of the majority of Sephardim seems to fall with “Ladino.”**

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## APPENDIX 3

# The Incorruptible

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In Cairo in 2015, I met the last Jewish-born man still living in the city. Born in 1930, Albert Arié, known since childhood as Titi, still lives in the Central Cairo apartment where he was brought at the age of 6. The story of his life in between 1936 and today is extraordinary. One evening, in his living room, crammed with photographs, documents, drawings and memorabilia, he told me enough to whet my appetite for more. He showed me the hundreds of pages of his handwritten memoirs, and when I said I would have them transcribed in Australia, he personally photocopied every single page and gave me a large packet to take back. They have now been transcribed, and even though not complete, constitute a document of historical and political importance, as well as a moving testimony to tenacity, idealism, strength, and unostentatious personal courage.

It was as a small child that Titi had his first brush with the reality of Egypt beyond his charmed domestic circle. One day, his father, a retailer of sporting goods and uniforms, had to go to a school at Chebinel Kanater, near Cairo, and the whole family went along. While his father was in the school, the family waited outside in the car. A crowd of barefoot urchins dressed in filthy galabiehs besieged the vehicle. They were covered in flies, and were gazing at the Arié family as if they were creatures from another planet. Titi's mother rapidly wound up the windows, and the family looked out bemused and fearful at these little brown aliens. Even today, Titi vividly remembers his first experience of wretched poverty, just outside the windows of the family car.

This was a decisive moment in Titi's life. Other young Jews, many of Spanish Jewish origins, who were also to become "communists" did so largely for the same reason, even if their shock occurred later in life – the outraged pity aroused by the privations the mass of Egyptians were enduring while the ruling and middle classes lived in unheeding



comfort. Élie's brother David and sister Léa were among those young Jews. One of the most prominent was Henri Curiel, the wealthy son of bourgeois Jews in Cairo, who would be mysteriously assassinated in Paris in 1979.

At eleven, Titi was already politically interested if not yet engaged. It was 1941, and the Axis powers were approaching Egypt from the west. Every night the eleven-year-old would sit by the radio, listening to London broadcasting in French. He heard the regular broadcasts of Maurice Schuman and General de Gaulle, and despite his mother's repeated pleas of "Go to bed, you've got school tomorrow", he stuck doggedly by the radio until the programs ended, waiting for the news of the progress of the battles.

When Titi was twelve, his older sister started going to left-wing youth groups and bringing home novels with a social theme. The book which set his future course was the great revolutionary novel *The Mother by Maxim Gorki*. The young Titi vibrated with sympathy when Russien says: "My heart swelled when I learned that there was a single truth for all men, and that they were not to blame from the wretchedness of their lives". Later in Titi's life, the clandestine cells created by the revolutionaries in *The Mother* would indeed be a model for his subsequent activities.

With this cast of mind, it was only a matter of time before Titi became active in politics. In 1943, his father took him to a new left-wing bookshop that had opened in the Rond-Point Mustafa Kamel opposite his father's sporting goods store. The man who had opened it, Henri Curiel, a prime mover of Egypt's communist movement, who was to be assassinated in Paris in 1979, later became the subject of a best-selling book, *A Man Apart*. The 13-year-old became an habitu . He read *Libert * and *France Nouvelles*, publications put out by the French Communist Party in Algeria, and all the Soviet magazines and books. Everything he read was centred on the war and the anti-fascist resistance. In his memoirs he said:

*It has aptly been said that my generation, and that of many Egyptians, were brought to Marxism by the cannons of Stalingrad.*

He began his political activities while still at school, joining a group that was studying Marxist texts. At first the meetings were intellectual. There were discussions on Trotsky, Stalin, Marx, Lenin. All rather standard for thousands of young people then and later. These young Jews – at this stage they were all Jews – also discussed the question of anti-Semitism. One of their main positions was anti-Zionism. The Zionists wanted the young Jews of Egypt to go to Palestine, but the leftwingers wanted them to stay in Egypt and wage the socialist battle in the country of their birth. Titi's stance on this has never wavered. At 15, he made a trip to Palestine with his father. Far from being converted to Zionism, Titi was repelled by the anti-Arab sentiments he found there, especially in the kibbutz he visited. By this time, Titi's own Arabic was improving. (Today it is totally fluent, of course. He speaks to his (Egyptian) sons in Arabic.). Titi's heart was always in Egypt. It still is.

In this group he had his first brush with "Stalinism". Their left-wing student group, which was subordinate to an older group of former students, was informed that a new leader was to be imposed. The new leader, Rosaline, turned out to be a dictatorial intriguer, Titi spoke up, and the result was that he was expelled. Separation from his comrades was a torment, and after a public self-criticism, he was readmitted. In his memoirs, he says, with no comment, *I have remained faithful to the ideas of my youth, I have experienced years of clandestine activity, I have gone through eleven years of prison and internment. Rosaline has had no links with communism for ages and has become an adept of the Kabbalah.*

After Titi had finally passed his baccalaureate and visited France, he enrolled in humanities and law at Cairo University and took up his political activities once more. He was surprised to learn on his return that Avant-Garde Unifiée had joined up with the Mouvement Égyptien de Libération Nationale, and that together they had formed the Mouvement démocratique de Libération Nationale (MDLN), or Hadeto in Arabic. This was now the largest communist organisation in Egypt.

The communist movement in Egypt began to display the fissiparous tendencies observable in many left-wing movements over the world.

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were spent in attacking each other. While those outside the jails were discussing the finer points of Leninist doctrine, those inside started receiving prison sentences – typically, five or seven years of hard labour. With considerable courage, never underlined in his memoirs, Titi continued duplicating and distributing illegal publications and visiting those still in hiding. What is remarkable in his memoirs is the close and unquestioning camaraderie between Jewish and Arab activists in the communist movements, mostly, that is. Many of the friends Titi made from those movements, and from his eleven years in prison, were Egyptian, and many of those still alive are his friends still. Even those from the Muslim Brotherhood.

The MDLN was decapitated by the arrests made under martial law during the last years of the monarchy. And it was not long before the police came looking for Titi as well. One afternoon, he came home from the Law Faculty to find his parents in a state of panic. During his absence, a troop of policemen had knocked on the door of their apartment (the same apartment where he lives still), and had said they had come to arrest him. The leader of the police contingent was a certain Abdel Aziz Hegazi, the most rabid anti-communist and the man responsible for arranging nearly all the arrests of communists. As a little boy, Abdel Aziz Hegazi had been taken to the uniform store of Titi's father and had obtained his Boy Scout uniform there. « Jacques » he said to Titi's father, as he entered the Ariés' apartment « don't worry, I'll just tell them it was a mistake ». A very Egyptian story.

23 July 1952, the day when the military toppled the monarchy, initially dismayed Titi. A military coup was not in the communist program, he thought, but he was soon reassured when he learned that soldiers who belonged to the MDLN had taken part in the coup. King Farouk abdicated three days later. A general amnesty was declared, and political prisoners were freed.

But tellingly, those liberated did not include key communists, who remained in the Huckstep internment camp. Over the first few months of the new regime, the MDLN's initial support turned to opposition, with the arrests and executions of working class leaders and other evidence

of repression. Titi himself continued working in his father's shop. His job was to sell shirts and sporting goods, and the Muslim Brotherhood, who saw no problem doing business with a Jew, were some of his best customers. In fact, the items they were buying were actually uniforms.

Titi's activities brought him into close contact with the members of the MDLN central committee, then living in clandestinity: Ahmed el Rifai, Sayed Rifai, Mohamed Chatta and Youssef Moustafa. They held their meetings in Titi's car, which he drove around Cairo till the small hours, and occasionally lent out. He realised how dangerous his situation was. If a clandestine communist were driving his car and were pulled over, it would be easy for the police to trace him, Titi, as the owner. Nevertheless he continued his clandestine meetings.

But the noose was tightening. German advisers (often former Nazis) were providing assistance to Nasser's secret police, Titi says in his memoirs, especially in sophisticated techniques of shadowing. Titi was well aware of the risks. He worked out a complicated route to the apartment where the duplicating machines were located, to avoid being followed, and given the persistent shadowing, of which they were quite aware, his comrades in fact decided to move the machine out of that apartment. But they were caught before they could do so.

Unfortunately, Titi had not realised that Saad Kamel, another activist, had also been living in that same apartment. One day, his old Italian friend Maria Rosenthal, who had spent a year in prison and was planning to marry Saad Kamel, took Titi to visit Saad and too late, Titi realised it was the very apartment where the machine still was sitting. His visit was, of course, noted by the German-trained secret police, who were watching the apartment closely.

On the night of 2 November 1953, Titi spent the whole evening until very late, duplicating and packing up publications. He put the bundles of papers in the boot of his car, and drove home, utterly exhausted. A few less incriminating pieces he took up to the apartment.

At dawn on 3 November, there were loud knocks on the front door. Unthinkingly, his father opened up. There stood a pack of political

policemen, led by a former junior officer who had been rapidly promoted after the military coup had displaced the longer serving officers, and who had been making a name for himself by hunting down communists. Titi woke up to find a group of political police standing over his bed demanding documents.

They ransacked the apartment and found the few documents Titi had brought up. (If his father had woken him up before opening the door, Titi might have had a chance to get rid of them in time). That was enough for them to insist on being taken to his car, where of course they found the tracts and newspapers still sitting in the boot. The police knew all about his comings and goings – a one-legged beggar at the garage entrance, to whom Titi's father had often given money, was in their pay.

Under the anguished eyes of his father, Titi was driven away, in his own car. They finally drew up at the military camp at Abassieh, and once inside the huge emplacement, Titi was taken to the military prison. He was now in the hands of the Army. It was the beginning of eleven years of imprisonment.

The prison had been built by the British. Its high walls, punctuated by watchtowers and sentry boxes, were intimidating to the gently-reared young activist. The car drove into a large courtyard, where Titi saw lines of prisoners doing their exercises while being lashed by leather belts. This, he says, was his welcoming ceremony. He was taken to an office, where a courteous official verified his identity, and then thrown into a tiny cell. The door clanged shut. The cell contained a bed, a water jug, a pot for sanitary needs, a table, a metal chair, and two blankets. A small barred window was at ceiling height. He could see nothing but hear everything.

At noon, he was handcuffed behind his back and taken at a trot to the central office of the prison. Three individuals sat behind a desk. The leader was captain Ahmed Mahmoud from Army Intelligence. Titi arrived out of breath, and Mahmoud told him that his case had been referred to the Tribunal de la Révolution and that a death sentence was a real possibility. That threat was not an empty one. Before his arrest, so-

called collaborators with the British Army had been sentenced to death by the Tribunal de la Révolution and executed. The insults now began to spew forth: hey poofter, we have ways of making you talk before we hang you. The threats had no effect, Titi says laconically in his memoirs, and he was led back to his cell, again at a trot, and thrown in, his hands still handcuffed behind his back.

A few of the leaders of the MDLN talked. As a result, Titi (who stoutly denied everything) was nevertheless punished. *I could stand solitary confinement*, he says simply in his memoirs. His father, meanwhile, was doing everything he could to find out where his son was, mobilising every possible contact. He found out that Titi was in a prison camp in the desert, and stood for hours outside its walls, waiting for exercise period to be able to see his son from afar.

Titi speaks of others who underwent torture but never mentions his own experiences. In another prison, he and his comrades were chained at the ankle, to his parents' shock and dismay. The chains were removed only at night. Others underwent the favourite torture of Egypt, beatings on the soles of the feet. Several could as a result no longer walk.

Things were not always grim in prison. 5 March 1954 was the anniversary of the death of Stalin, and the leader of the communist group decided to hold a ceremony. He demanded one minutes' silence. But all of the members of the group had only recently been released from solitary confinement, and the last thing they were interested in was silence. One irreverent wag looked around him at all the solemn faces and began to titter, and soon the whole room was rocking with laughter and echoing with banter and chat. These men were journalists, academics, scientists, lawyers, all of them idealists, most of them gently reared and unaccustomed to any kind of harsh treatment.

Titi's trial in 1954 resulted in an eight-year sentence of hard labour. Although the United Nations had condemned hard labour, the prisoners were told they had to work in the quarries in the desert. Without any discussion, they decided to go on hunger strike. Retribution was not long in coming. It took the form of whippings. The prisoner was tied

to a wooden cross-shaped object and whipped on the back, from six to thirty-six times.

Another torment was the cold. In the desert, there was no heating at night, and one thin blanket. But some of the worst experiences were not physical but political, in that Titi had to face betrayals by those he had begun to trust. Nevertheless, his solidarity with the handful of other prisoners remained unshaken.

His memoirs finish in 1958, in their current form. What he does not write about is perhaps the most extraordinary feature of Titi's extraordinary life. But he did tell me about it himself, with throwaway nonchalance.

After his eight years sentence was over, Titi was told he would be freed, provided he left the country. Others, including my mother's cousins David and Léa Nahum, had left, David for Italy, Léa for Australia, others for France, Canada, Switzerland, the United States. But Titi refused to leave Egypt. He refused to leave his comrades. He was told that if he refused, he would have to go back to prison for three more years. He did.

Friends, including me, have repeatedly asked Titi to finish his memoirs. He is 85 now and tired. But there is a treasure trove of documents in his apartment in Cairo.



*Titi in green prison uniform,  
drawn by a fellow inmate.*



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