

FROM CHEMISTRY TO ARCHITECTURE,
TRADITIONAL CRAFTS AND AGRICULTURE:
MY MULTIPLE LIVES

My personal story is interwoven around the main events that have shaped Egypt in the second part of the 20th and the early 21st centuries. I lived through five wars, witnessed the last years of a patriarchal feudal society, survived the socialist revolution, the humiliating defeat of 1967 and the open-door policy. From 1972 onwards I joined all demonstrations demanding accountability, transparency and a better future for the underprivileged masses. In the 70's I witnessed, appalled, the resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood, and in 2011 I participated in a long awaited popular uprising that was unfortunately high-jacked by their organization. My personal life reflected these political upheavals and I changed my professional focus four times.

It seems that from the very beginning I came to this world under the sign of dichotomy. Duality was a constant of my life: 1943, the year of my birth, the shadow of the second world war, but for our country, the lingering years of a "belle epoque" where the Egyptian pound was stronger than the pound sterling.



Pic.1 My father (third from the right) with his parents and siblings.



Pic. 2 My mother dressed up for a presentation at court wearing the traditional head cover or *yashmak*



Pic.3 My parents wedding picture

I was born in a land-owning family, to quite apolitical parents, but I do recall my mother's boycott of British goods and how stoic this decision was at a time where everything was imported from what was then Great Britain. From the first Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948, I remember the black out, the shouts of "put out the lights", and being carried in the middle of the night to the basement of our house into rooms

lined up with mattresses, by my beloved Egyptian Jewish nanny, Mademoiselle Sophie.

I was too young, however to realize that we had been defeated and lost Palestine, a fact that, four years later, was going to trigger a revolution.



Pic. 4 Myself, at four (second from left) with my cousins at the wedding of our older cousin



Pic 5. Our yearly winter holiday in Upper Egypt showing from left to right, on the front row my mother, myself at five, my brother and on the second row, a guide (?) my paternal aunt, my father and my Egyptian Jewish governess, Mademoiselle Sophie. She married two years later but her relationship to my mother was so strong that she always came back to her for advise and protection and spent more time with us than in her own home. Her departure in 1956 was a source of great sorrow to all of us.

As I grew up, I was passed to the hands of French governesses, was sent to the Cours Morin, a French school that had no Arabic in its curriculum, where our history book read “nos ancêtres les Gaulois...” and where we were scolded with expressions such as: “do not act like little Arabs”. However, at home, we were an oriental family and when greeting adult relatives, we children had to conform to traditions and bow to kiss their hands. The same ritual also took place when we went to our land in the Delta, the *izbah*, a word later to disappear from our daily vocabulary because of its “feudal” connotations; but this time it was the peasants who had to perform and from a very young age we were taught to quickly withdraw our hands to spare them the consummation of the humiliation. I remember resenting both practices and to the great displeasure of my mother rebelling against it.



Pic. 6 Age six, between my cousin and my brother in the company of my first French governess, mademoiselle Cullet.



Pic. 7 “Classe de 7ieme” at the Cours Morin, I am the fourth from the left on front row.

When I close my eyes, I can still feel my grandfather's house- where I was born and where we lived as a tribe, reverberating with preparations for big parties and resounding with the voices of Om Kulthum and Abdel Wahab. We led pampered lives, but this did not prevent our parents from instilling in us the hatred of the British occupation and resentment at the mismanagement of the country. We had our share of rebels in the family with two Marxist cousins dispatched to England to avoid imprisonment.

I remember the tension during the last years of King Farouk's reign, culminating, in 1952, with the burning of Cairo; the worry, followed, a few months later, by elation at the first news of the revolution, as it meant the long awaited end of British hegemony and of the corruption of the palace and that of political parties. King Farouk was deposed and exiled, and within a year Egypt was declared a republic and general Mohamed Naguib became its first President.

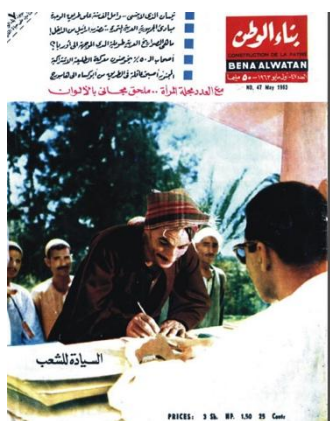


Pic 7. 1952, Abdine palace besieged by the "Free Officers".



Pic 8. King Farouk's reviewing for the last time his guard of honor before boarding he royal yacht of *El Mahroussa* on his way to exile.

In 1954, our life was turned upside down by two new major events. The first was the promulgation of an agrarian reform, limiting land ownership. My apolitical family was so unaware of what was going on, that only a few months earlier they had acquired more land. I was growing into adolescence, and because of my French "dialectical" education, was whole heartedly won to the cause of social justice and equal opportunities. Furthermore, as my immediate family was not involved in politics, we were expropriated but not sequestered. I could understand the need to limit agricultural ownership, but why were we suddenly considered enemies of the people?



Pic 9: Queue of peasants signing up for the 5 acres granted by the Agrarian Reform. The fragmentation of large properties into individual small plots instead of regrouping them in cooperatives came to be disastrous for the country's economy.



Pic 10: The "Council of the Revolution" in 1952, showing the leaders of the "Free Officers" surrounding Muhammad Naguib two years before he was ousted.

The second important happening was the removal of President Naguib who was calling for the return of the military to their barracks, and his replacement by colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser. It appeared later that Nasser, and not Naguib, had been the leader of the "Free Officers" who had orchestrated the coup. Grown-ups around me were extremely apprehensive, fearing a military dictatorship. Their worse predictions materialized as Abd El Nasser strengthened the hold of the army on all of the institutions of the State; massive demonstrations filled the main squares to support him, shouting "down with democracy"... No voices dared to oppose him, though there were hushed up criticism about the bloody liquidation of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The growing unease was interrupted in 1956 by the “triple aggression”- the Suez War, triggered by the Nationalization of the Suez Canal. The whole of Egypt rallying around Gamal Abdel Nasser, bracing itself to face outside danger, rushing to volunteer in defense of home and country and everywhere, the resounding sounds of military music.



Pic.11: 1954, crowds sheering the newly appointed president, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Notice that women were demonstrating shoulder to shoulder next to men and that none was wearing a *higab*



Pic.12: 1956, President Gamal Abdel Nasser raising the Egyptian flag on the buildings of the Suez Canal Administration .

I recall being summoned with my brother to our father’s study where it was “suggested” to us, as the country was at war, to dispense with our new wardrobe and donate this money, along with our savings, to the war effort. I remember the exultation at the Soviet and American ultimatums forcing French and British troops to withdraw from the Suez Canal area they had occupied. The political victory was transformed into a military one, and the nation was ecstatic at the hope that, one day, soon, the revolution would be able to return usurped Palestine. The general euphoria was clouded by personal feelings: First, the departure of my French governess whose presence was becoming an embarrassment to everyone, including herself; then the painful expulsion of many Egyptian Jews some of whom had been family friends for generations. This was the sad period where every Jew was suspected to be a potential spy, and where people who felt differently were considered unpatriotic, if not traitors.

These were difficult times to live in, because having owned land, we were branded as “old regime”. The country was taking a turn to the left and by 1961, when the so-called “July Socialist Laws” were promulgated, I was old enough to realize the ambiguity of my situation. On one hand, I was all for Arab Unity, justice for the Palestinians, and the Non-Alignment policy. I had read Dostoyevsky, Jack London and Sartre, and was convinced that my “class” had abused its privileges. So, I sympathized with many of the ideas of the revolution: (industrialization, self-sufficiency, pacification, social security for the workers, land to the peasants, education for all...), but even if land reform could be justified, how could one accept nationalizations that often looked like personal vendettas, or the arbitrary policy of expropriation and sequestration that left whole families with six pounds a month? The worst was the establishment of a police state, the reign of fear and the silencing of dissident voices.

My conservative elders were accusing the regime of Communism, but, as they had personal reasons for resentment, I was suspicious of their impartiality. How could the regime be described as communist, when my two Marxist cousins, first granted pardon by the revolution, were now rounded up with other Marxists (keeping company to whoever remained of the Muslim Brothers) in the concentration camps of Abu Za’bal, Fayyoun and Kharga Oases !!

It was with all these mixed feelings that I graduated from school in 1962. In my utter confusion one thing was clear: Like many other women of my generation, I owed my education to the revolution. “Women represent half of the society and have to work shoulder to shoulder with men”, was one slogan that I first thought was being effectively applied. In the new constitution, we were given equal rights and voting power. But why was Egypt’s leading feminist, Dorreya Shafik, under house arrest? The paradox was difficult to digest.

Whatever the case, I was the first female member of my family to go to university. Ironically, the changes affecting our society had convinced my father - more effectively than I could ever have done – to prepare me to be independent, as it had become obvious that there was no security in pre-arranged traditional marriages. “Education is the only thing no one will be able to take away from you”, he often bitterly repeated.



Pic. 13: Rawiyya Atteya in 1957 was the first Egyptian woman to enter parliament.



Pic.14: Dorreyya Shafik's hunger strike “..Our freedom goes hand in hand with the freedom of the country. There can be no free Egypt with enslaved women.”



Pic. 15: 1956, Egyptian women voting for the first time. Notice the shorter sleeves, the uncovered hair, proofs of the secular character of the Nasserist era.

Pic.13,14,15:

The dichotomic discourse of the Regime: On one hand giving us the vote and allowing us to enter Parliament, on the other denying us the right to dissent and house arresting Doria Shafik for demanding democracy. Slogans of the Nasserist era were only meant as a “progressive” façade....

I had been a troublesome, rebellious adolescent - features further encouraged by my “French” upbringing, always challenging family authority and resenting what I perceived as discrimination against my sex. I had therefore chosen to study sciences to prove that I could perform as well as, if not better than, any boy, and that I deserved to be taken seriously. My school record had been my father’s joy and pride. It was a big shock to him that I was going to conclude my Baccalaureat in four years instead of two because I was too busy reading through world literature and philosophy. Irrespective of this fact, I ultimately graduated with excellent grades and had the choice of joining any university faculty I wanted. I opted for the American University in Cairo (AUC) because my early education in French schools left me- at the time- with little proficiency in the Arabic language; a serious obstacle to taking notes and answering exams, were I to go to Cairo University. In addition, although of course I spoke Arabic very well, my “r’s” were dubious and I was afraid to be spotted as a member of what was then termed the “reactionary classes”.

AUC was then offering a BSc degree in “Physical Sciences” so, with the aim of becoming Madame Curie, I joined that department where I found myself amidst my old classmates of the Lycée. (Though at that time we were outnumbered by boys, most of the girls, like me, had a French background, so the campus of the American University came to be known as the best place in town to learn French!). Already in my sophomore year in spite of the fact that I had qualified for a scholarship, I had discovered two things: one, that I was not good enough to become Madame Curie and two, that I had no inclination to be a chemist. But I did not know what I wanted to be. I found my life so uninspiring, and the contradictions so difficult to assume, that I took refuge in books. I was feeling quite constrained by the “shoulds” and “should nots” of the family, though I could not avoid noticing how vulnerable my parents had become, attempting to live as if nothing had changed, and holding their breath, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, so as not to attract the wrath of the socialist regime. The month of July was a particularly difficult one as it was in his speeches of the 23rd and 26th that President Gamal Abdel Nasser announced the decrees that were rocking our lives. Like today with Mr. Trump, you were given little choice, you either had to be for or against. So, I was doubly isolated from the main stream of my fellow citizens; I was torn between two different societies and belonged to neither.

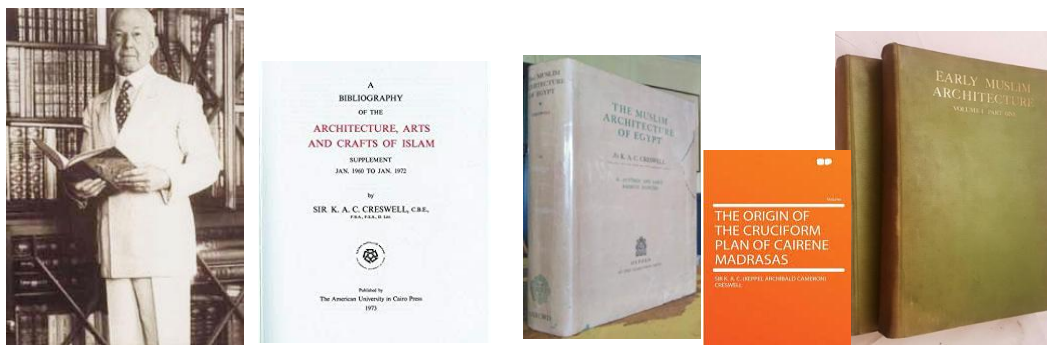
I was maturing, however, and learning the benefits of a liberal education. One course in particular was a revelation: Professor Nowayhi ‘s “Arabic Literature”. For the first time in my life I was taught my own language by a brilliant teacher. I was fascinated, but I did not realize, back then, that this was only the first step towards a reconciliation that would take me few more years to achieve.

In 1964, worn out by the tension created by the “Committees for the Liquidation of Feudality”, my father passed away. There was no one any more I cared to impress. Nevertheless, I felt I owed him that Bachelors degree. In the last semester of my senior year I took a course in Arab History with Dr. Afaf Lutfi El Sayyed. The door left ajar by Professor Nowayhi was suddenly pushed wide open. I read passionately through our history, discovering the wealth of our culture and by the time I graduated in the summer of 1966, I knew what I wanted. An identity.

I decided to search for my roots and, like Ulysses, I embarked on a long journey. It started with my mother’s graduation gift, a three-months tour of Europe that I felt I needed in order to cut the umbilical cord with my “French” past. Today’s young Egyptians cannot realize how difficult it was back then, to travel out of the country. First, we were not persona grata in the West: remember the Nationalization of the Suez Canal, Abdel Nasser’s defiance of the West, his policies of Arab Nationalism, Non-Alignment, and especially his stand against Zionism. Moreover, his relations with the Soviet Union had made us quite unpopular in the Western World. Consequently, it was quite an undertaking to obtain entry visas, but it was even more difficult to get an exit visa from the Egyptian authorities. You needed to be sponsored by someone living abroad, committing himself, in writing, to assume all the costs of your stay. The document had to be approved and duly sealed by the Egyptian consulate in the host country before being presented to the scrutinizing eyes of the bureaucrats of the Ministry of Interior, fearing that you might be some kind of time bomb, going to the enemy and exploding to embarrass the regime. Once you were declared safe, you were allowed to take with you the stupendous amount of five Egyptian pounds or its equivalent in any “hard currency” of your choice. I have to remind my reader that at the time the US dollar was officially worth less than one quarter of our Egyptian pound but could reach double this value on the black market (it is now worth sixteen Egyptian pounds!).

Returning from my grand tour, I perceived Egypt with different eyes. I felt like a romantic tourist discovering thousands of years of a hidden civilization. I could still see the discrepancies of the old and new regimes, all the right slogans that had gone wrong, but the bitterness was gone. In the second semester of the academic year 1966/67, I went back to my Alma Mater, enlisting in the brand-new MA program in Islamic Art and Architecture. This is when I really learned to read Arabic, fighting through the medieval chronicles of Ibn Duqmaq, Al-Maqrizi, and Ibn Iyas with an Arabic/English dictionary in my hand. I was fascinated by Islamic architecture and I was discovering my native city, not the capital of Farouk or that of Gamal Abdel Nasser, but the Cairo of a thousand and one nights. I had wonderful teachers, Christel Kessler and Michael Rogers. I got along very well with both of them, academically and socially. I still felt marginal and living in a cocoon, but my life was taking an interesting turn. Not only was my Arabic improving, but as I accumulated erudition, I could teach a thing or two to those “real” Egyptians who, for so long, had labeled me a *khawagaya* (a foreigner).

Professor Creswell was still alive, with all his books around him in the two rooms above Oriental Hall at AUC. Christel Kessler was looking for a student assistant to fill his book orders, and to re-shelve volumes after each class - he did not want precious bindings to be spoilt by labels. She was also in need of someone to take care of the labeling and filing of the Islamic art slide collection. She recruited me and, for almost four years, I spent 12 hours a day working and studying in the little antechamber that preceded her office.



Pic. 16: Professor Creswell was the “ pope” of Islamic Art. His books “Early Muslim Architecture” and “The Muslim Architecture of Egypt” set the basis for this field of academic studies. They remain to this day very important referential works for architects interested in the Arab world as well as for Islamic art historians.

Though he saw me every day, I cannot ever pretend I built a relationship with Professor Creswell. Apart from the morning nod, he hardly noticed me. He did not like people handling his books and suffered my presence as an appendage of Christel whom he worshipped. Only once was the ice broken, the day I asked him for a dedication on my newly acquired “Muslim Architecture of Egypt, Vol. I”. He was pink with pleasure at the superb binding and said: “how flattering!” He also asked whether I knew who had done the binding, to whom it had belonged and where I had found it, for it was very difficult to obtain, even at that time. I like to believe that he accepted me a little bit more after that incident, as, on one occasion, he asked me to his rooms in order to show me how to open large books without endangering their bindings.

However, the wonder was that I had free access to the best collection of Islamic art books in Egypt, and I was paid for it! I was finally getting to be financially independent. I was on a scholarship, but the family money had dwindled and the twenty-five pounds I was paid to assist Professor Creswell were really welcomed. Apart from this, I had my father’s pension of some thirty pounds and was making an additional twenty-five teaching French. All in all, my monthly earnings amounted to eighty pounds, at the time quite a decent sum, particularly since I was still living with my mother and enjoyed free food and lodgings. Moreover, we lived much more frugally then, as we were required to tighten the belt in order to build our country. There was a shortage of hard currency, imports were limited to the minimum, luxury items were inaccessible, and even locally produced consumer goods were sometimes in shortage as exports to the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc were intensified in order to pay military bills. But believe me it was not that hard to live without smoked salmon and aluminum foil!

These were the least of our concerns; the real problem was elsewhere. Arab unity was proving hard to achieve. On campus we were making bitter jokes such as: “Who are the Arabs: people who like Um Kulthum”. Cynically, it seemed that the “Diva “ of Arab music was the only thing we had in common.



Pic. 17: 1958, Presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser and Shukry El Quwatly of Syria establish the United Arab Republic.



Pic.18 The flag of the United Arab Republic



Pic.19: Map showing the northern and southern provinces of the United Arab Republic.

The union with Syria had collapsed in 1961, our relations with the Iraqi revolution had ups and downs, the Algerians we had helped so much in the last years of French occupation were resenting our patronizing attitude, and we were fighting against our Arab brethren in the disastrous Yemen War. The draft was imposing a high toll on all classes of society, it was like a medieval oubliette, once it had taken hold of someone, you never knew when he would surface back. Many dreams were collapsing as the classes that had been given access to education were frustrated by the lack of job opportunities. Since the state was the sole employer, after graduation, young people had to wait years before being called by the “work force,” only to be engulfed by a bureaucracy that often had nothing to do with what they had studied. Though workers and students remained silenced, some institutions like the Lawyers Syndicate were starting to raise their voices, and intellectuals were hardly disguising their criticism. The funeral of Nahhas Pasha had turned into a huge demonstration calling for democracy. This was the period of the “dawn visitors”, and the concentration camps where some leftists had been forgotten, were now also occupied by people of different ideologies, liberals and members of the resurging *Wafd*, the main political party of the pre-revolutionary era. Jokes displaying a morbid sense of humour were breaking the wall of silence, making fun of our predicaments. The Socialist Party, the abuses of the regime, the president. Nothing was sacred anymore.

In the midst of these perturbations the bells of war were tolling once more. In the spring of 1967, President Gamal Abdel Nasser had closed the Tiran Strait, blockading Israel, and asked for the withdrawal of the United Nations Forces from Sinai.

Young men around me were eager to go to war and dismissed my apprehensions with a disdainful “women cannot understand”... This was finally the day we had been preparing for and we were finally going to redress the wrongs inflicted on the Palestinian people. So strongly did we believe in the infallibility of our army that my mother was preparing to spend the summer in Tel Aviv. We woke up on the 5th of June to the sound of military music. We were at war.

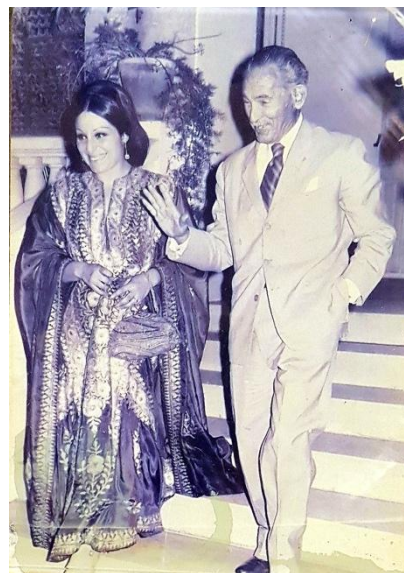
I have difficulties even today re-living this period. There was no transparency and no one cared to inform us of what was really happening. Cairo radio station was emitting military music interrupted by short reports listing the number of enemy planes we had shot. There was no mention of our own losses. We spent our time glued to radios attempting to know the news from the BBC and Radio Monte Carlo; but their broadcasts –jammed with interferences by the authorities who wanted to keep us in the dark- were hardly audible. The situation looked grim, but no one suspected the size of the disaster. People were queuing to volunteer, but it took sometime for the Socialist Party to organize in each quarter training camps for men and nursing courses for women. On the 9th of June we were finally told that we had been defeated.

The country was in state of shock at the humiliation and loss, but, in spite of the general depression, life had to go on. The nursing course I had enrolled in started at the end of June and was to last two months. The war was lost, but it was difficult to go back on the commitment. It was summer and the university was closed, I thought it would take my mind off my distress. It was very hard, serious work twelve hours a day from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. I believe that this was my first encounter with the real world. We were assigned to the emergency ward, helping on-duty staff in any way we could. It was a brutal insight into the lives of underprivileged Egyptians: women who had set themselves ablaze because their husbands were divorcing them, girls who had swallowed potash to avoid marrying men old enough to be their fathers, children rundown by cars because their mothers were elsewhere, men who had knifed each other for futile reasons, accidents that could have been avoided had they had more humane circumstances. Women volunteering with me were coming from all kinds of backgrounds: house wives, students, professionals, and through them I met a wide span of opponents to the regime, from the extreme right to the extreme left. I was finally out of the cocoon. The police state had temporarily relaxed its grip and after work we used to meet for painful, endless, discussions going deep into our wound, analyzing why and where we had failed. In spite of the prevalent gloom I made friendships that were going to last a lifetime.

In the fall I returned to university. It is at that point that I met Hassan Fathy. I was searching for him. My studies had made me proud of my heritage, but had not solved the dilemma between my western education and my Egyptian background. Like me, he was a hybrid of two cultures but instead of being torn apart, he saw it as a blessing. His secret was to deepen our knowledge of both and chose what suited us best from each. To illustrate his point he took me to the madrasa of Sultan Hassan and played Brahms on his violin: the great achievements of the two civilizations are complementary, he said, and there is no contradiction....

The idea was simple and the demonstration magical and quite convincing. My ordeal was over and the puzzle of my identity was gradually being pieced together.

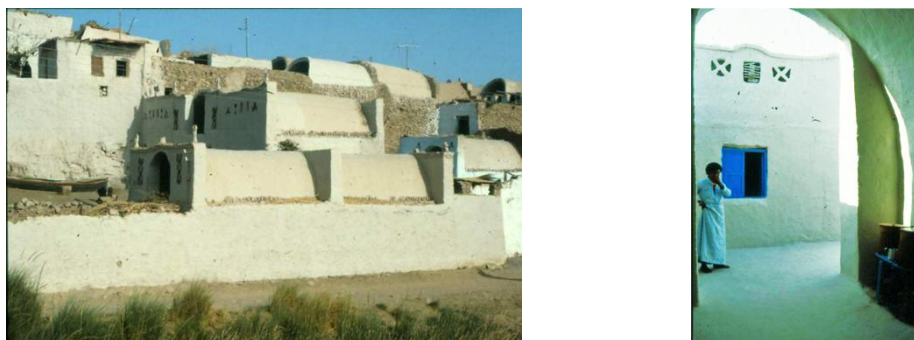
Hassan Fathy did more than reconcile me with my own culture. From our early childhood our parents had been very conscientiously taking me and my brother to all the archeological and historical sites; since we owned land I had been quite often to the country site; we had camped in the desert and pic-nicked in all kinds of scenic surroundings. But in all these visits we never really mingled with the rural communities around us. We remained aloof as if we were tourists in our own country.... We lived in two different worlds, and I arrogantly had felt that ours was the more “developed” and that there was nothing “these simple people” could teach us... Hassan Fathy showed me what we



Pic. 20: Attending a reception with Hassan Fathy

owed to this other Egypt, that of unassuming peasants ploughing the land along the Nile, of shepherds roaming in deserts or settled in distant oases. While we, urban elites had shed our skin to imitate dominant cultures, they had, up to the end of the 20th century, succeeded in preserving our culture for us, thus linking our present with our past: I discovered how vernacular architecture perpetuated age old techniques and methods of construction, and was introduced to a wealth of rural and Bedouin crafts rivaling artifacts preserved in museums. I was grateful and humbled...

Fifty years before it became an international issue Hassan Fathy also introduced me to ecology and to one of his main concerns, appropriate technology.



Pic. 21 Nubian styles, techniques and methods of construction can be retraced back to Pharaonic architecture, the most interesting of these is the building of vaults without making use of a centering infrastructure.



Pic. 22 : A 20th century pottery from Siwah Oasis, on the right and on the left a parallel from the Egyptian Museum.



Pic. 23: 20th century Nubian decorative basketry perpetuated traditions from the earliest Pharaonic dynasties.

Long past were the days where I had felt totally alienated from my fellow citizens! In spite of the repression that was coming back after minor amendments, the country was moving; Writers were criticizing, workers were on strike and students were awakening.

In 1970, President Gamal Abdel Nasser died and Anwar El Sadat came to power. He had promised to bring an end to the “no war, no peace” situation but as he was late in delivering, people took to the streets and I joined the dissatisfied in the large public demonstrations in Midan El-Tahrir. This was the time of

the secret gatherings where we listened to a blind musician who had become the voice of all dissidents, Shaykh Imam, chanting the acerbic verses of another critic of the Regime, Ahmad Fouad Negm. It was also the golden period of the political jokes and I discovered another of our national characteristics: we could laugh at our own bleeding wounds...



Pic 24: We gathered in clandestine meetings behind closed doors to hear the duo of Shakh Imam and Ahmad Fouad Negm denouncing the abuses of the Regime, its repressive police, corrupted elites and their mismanagement of the country.

I was now terribly busy, as in 1969, two years before obtaining my MA, I had started teaching at the Higher Institute of Tourism, later to become part of Helwan University. My students were nice young people, but had been very badly prepared for higher studies. They had been accustomed to study by heart from very short notes sold by their professors (a quite lucrative business), and resented having, instead, a list of outside readings. The department was not properly equipped: we had a very poor library and an ignorant librarian who identified books by their color; as I was reluctant to make my fortune photocopying documents, the alternative was to have relevant chapters photographed by one of the students and distributed to the rest of the class; this caused irreparable damages to my own books. I also had problems taking my students to visit monuments as the time assigned to my lectures (one hour and a half) was too short to face the congested traffic of Cairo. The administration was uncooperative and never agreed to grant me the half day I needed for such visits and I had to bargain with other teachers to schedule outings. Though I did not particularly enjoy the experience, I still persisted in teaching for a decade as I felt I was repaying my debt to society.

In 1973, a few months after my first marriage, the long awaited miracle occurred: Our armed forces crossed the Suez canal, destroying the Bar Lev line, the myth of Israeli infallibility, and raising the Egyptian flag over the Suez Canal, if not over the still-occupied Sinai Peninsula.

Another marvelous thing happened to me that same year: upon the recommendation of Michael Rogers and Albert Hourani I was accepted at Oxford for a DPhil. Because of the war, I arrived there for trinity term 1974, and because I needed to consult the Egyptian National Archives, my residency requirements were reduced to one semester a year for two years.

In Egypt, the political and economic scenes were changing: the Socialist Party was finally abrogated, there were talks of the return of the political parties and the "Open Door" policy was starting. We had dismissed the Russians and now were courting the United States. There were also accusations of our defection from the Arab ranks. The atmosphere at Oxford as in Cairo was extremely political. I felt terribly isolated working on the 14th century. We were only a handful of Arab students, but the ones with whom I fraternized were all studying contemporary history. I regretted not to have done the same. By the end of 1977 Sadat made his historical visit to the Knesset and in 1978 the Camp David agreements were signed confirming our fears of a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace. We were very much opposed, not because we wanted war, but because we thought that had we gone to the negotiation table as an Arab Block we would have had better chances in achieving a just and sustainable peace. We were right as time has proved that Camp David did not succeed in bringing an end to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

By the end of 1978, having finished most of my research I went back home to start writing but I had other worries. My marriage had collapsed, and I had to achieve financial independence. I was back teaching at the Faculty of Tourism, but my salary was barely enough to pay for house help. I refused to make money

selling notes to students, a usual practice in Egyptian Universities. What was I good at? Back in the late 50's I had started acquiring traditional costumes, first for fun, then as I grew older and developed an art historian approach, as a serious collector. Hassan Bey had also introduced me to another Egypt, the one of the simple folks and their crafts. We had canvassed the countryside and the oases looking for whatever had survived of the great traditions of the past. I decided to start a craftshop making accessible to other women the dresses that, by now, I was wearing everyday; I also felt I could have a role slowing down the eradication of age old skills. For a long time I thought I could manage to take care of the shop, teach, and write my thesis. But, with time, I discovered that it was impossible.

My studies of our past architectural achievements had played their role in my life, making me proud of my legacy and of my identity but they were far removed from our everyday realities; what I wanted now was to be dealing with an aspect of Egypt that was still alive and where I could make a difference. Eventually, as I had never enjoyed it, I gave up teaching and I devoted myself to what I liked most: researching, collecting and promoting traditional crafts. I travelled throughout the country purchasing whatever artifacts I could find. I am presently convinced that I took the right decision as I succeeded in gathering – in the right time, before they completely disappeared- what is now one of the most important collection of hitherto unrecorded Egyptian traditional costumes, jewelry, flat weaves, pottery and baskets.

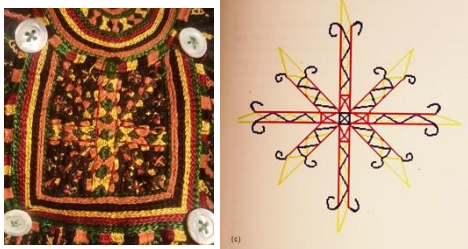


Pic. 25 and 26: My collections of traditional costumes and crafts were exhibited and presented in live shows in Egypt as well as in several European capitals.



Pic 26

Though at the time I only collected these items because they were beautiful and deserved to be preserved, I discovered while studying them they were more important than I had first thought: Firstly they could be directly tied to age old artistic traditions. Secondly as, regardless of variations in proportions and techniques they all displayed similar symbols, they provided tangible and undeniable proof that irrespective of distant geographic locations, beyond religious and ethnic diversity, we were one Nation sharing the same heritage. Thirdly the fact that these symbols were perpetuating Pharaonic, Coptic and Islamic emblems melted down in one tradition, bore witness to the multicultural and pluralistic nature of our Nation.



Pic. 27: On the left an embroidered cross from a 20th c. tunic from Siwa, North of Egypt and on the right the drawing of a similar pattern from a 4th c. excavation in Nubia on our Southernmost frontier.



Pic. 28: Crosses on dresses of 20th c. Muslim women of Upper Egypt



Pic. 29: On the left embroidered radiating patterns on 20th c. Siwi tunics reproducing the rays with hands of the Sun-God Aton.



Pic. 30: Embroidered patterns on a 20th c. dress from Upper Egypt reproducing the same decorative as a 14th c. Mamluk sampler.



Pic. 31: A 20th c. dress from Upper Egypt displaying Christian crosses as well as Muslim triangular talismans.



Pic. 32: A 20th c. tunic from Siwa showing Pharaonic, Christian and Muslim talismanic symbols, as well as a contemporary plastic horse shoe

I was nearly 40, and following the peace treaty with Israel we hoped that both the psychological and material negative effects of the 1967 defeat were coming to an end and that a brighter future was ahead for Egypt. Unfortunately, we did not foresee the rise of fundamentalism that from the early days of president Anwar El Sadat was left to infiltrate the different levels of the establishment and most particularly educational and financial institutions. Though at the time their networks were not clearly identified as Muslim Brotherhood they grew rich and powerful and established ramifications all over the country and at all levels of society. Ironically, they were ultimately to bring to his doom the person who allowed them such power: in 1981 during a military parade, Sadat was assassinated by officers affiliated to their organizations and Hosny Mubarak became president.

One day in 1979, two American women Elaine Strite and Jayme Spencer, both of whom were to become good friends, came to the shop to show me the embroideries of a Mennonite sponsored income generating project established by Elaine in the then still occupied Sinai Peninsula. I was later invited to visit and before I knew it, in 1981, I was asked to take it over. I had a lot of hesitations, never having worked in



Pic. 33: Discovering the Thursday Bedouin souk in El- Arish.



Pic. 34: Mme. Aziza and Mr. Mohamed from El Arish Needlework distributing to and collecting work from our Bedouin embroiderers.

development, but I felt ashamed to refuse without trying. When I had visited their workshops in El Arish I had been impressed by their dedication and the fact that, to help people they had nothing in common with,

they had sacrificed their comfort, living in extremely frugal conditions in a country that was not their own! I could do not do less...

Therefore I started spending one week a month in El Arish. For a long time, the women there led me to despair, all they knew from us inhabitants of the valley was the often-corrupt bureaucracy and they resented me for replacing Elaine. At the end of the two years I had given myself to succeed or fail, they suddenly, without warning decided to accept me. From that time onwards we established a strong relationship of mutual trust and in the decade to follow the project grew as a cottage industry giving work to hundreds of Bedouin women.



Pic. 34: Haggah Sorayah and Mme Zeynab in our workshop in El-Arish cutting the cloth to be prepared in little bundles and distributed to the embroiderers.



Pic.35: When I first went in El Arish I discovered that during the Israeli occupation, all of the nice dresses had been sold to tourists; consequently most embroidery patterns were lost. I used my collection of Bedouin dresses to make a "bank of samplers".

In the early 80's, I had met the man of my life and remarried. My new husband Renaldo Tommasi, was Italian and, though an engineer by profession, was dreaming of having his own olive orchard and making his own olive oil. He bought a concession of some 500 hundred acres of desert land and embarked on land reclamation. In secret, I wondered at the paradox (by now I realized, a constant parameter of my life) that reflected the changes of fortunes of Egypt... In the 60's we had sold the last parcels of our inheritance, rich black soil of the Delta, for pennies, and now we were buying sand in the middle of nowhere, far from water and electricity! But I was proud that he had adopted my country and wanted to invest in it. Unfortunately on January 1989 he had a terrible car accident on the Desert road. It took us a year and a half in hospitals and a lot of suffering to recover, but his health remained precarious and he needed my help to manage the property. At that point I did not need another change in my life as, from chemistry I had gone to Islamic architecture and from there to regional traditional arts and crafts; however, I had no choice but to start a new career, agriculture.

I was faced with multiple difficulties. The first years, as we were the only project in the middle of the desert, we were raided by Bedouins who wanted to sell us, in the morning, what they had stolen from us the night before. The police was helpless (or conniving...) and we had to organize our own militia to guard the land. Then we were caught in the struggle for power between the Ministry of Agriculture, the Sadat City authorities and the Ministry of Irrigation, each claiming sovereignty over us and surpassing themselves in all forms of harassment and vexations. On the other hand, I knew nothing about agriculture in general and olive trees in particular and could not afford the risks of empirical mistakes. For watering, feeding, pruning and pest control we recruited specialists from Cairo Faculty of Agriculture, the Institute of Horticulture and the National Research Center for Agriculture, all of whom delighted in giving us conflicting instructions.

The plantation was large and included some 40 0000 trees; when, after five difficult years they started to flower, it appeared that we had been given an assortment of different varieties, each displaying a different stage of maturity. I was at a loss as, at harvest time, it is essential to know how many trees can be harvested to assess the manpower required for the task. A young Italian expert, Aldo Biondi, working with the Italian Cooperation saved me. He helped identifying the trees and we discovered that over and above the seven varieties my husband had required we had been given thirty different ones... To be able to harvest I had to draw charts for the 520 acres where every variety was represented by a symbol within a small square. It took me three years to complete the job, but it allowed us to harvest efficiently and rapidly. Moreover, thanks to Aldo's identification we could harvest each variety separately and when we

acquired a press, we were proud to produce seven mono-varietal types of extra virgin oil! With his guidance we also combined them in particular proportions to obtain sweet, medium strong and bitter-strong mixtures.

Within few years, in spite of all the challenges, our orchard became one of the best in Egypt, and the olive oil we produced came to be considered by many experts as one of the best in the world. This however was not the end of my troubles as I had to deal with market fluctuations, the rapacity of wholesale dealers and the often-irrational decisions of the different ministries ...



Pic. 36: Harvesting the olives



Pic.37: Our olive press

But throughout these difficult years, my worse trauma was my encounter with my old acquaintance, the fellah. I was appalled to find out, fifty years after the revolution that freed him, the agrarian reform that entitled him to own land, the socialist laws that were to educate and protect him, the open door policy that intended to bring him affluence, that he was still as miserable and helpless as he had ever been.... Then, suddenly remembering my youth I realized that, at least now, he does not have to kiss our hands!! But I wondered, is this enough of an achievement?? Were all the sacrifices in vain?

When my beloved husband passed away in 2003, I decided that it was meaningless to continue in a project that had been his dream, but had never been mine. I suddenly realized how hard my life had been, sold our share of the land and, after fifteen years of partial exile in the wilderness, happily returned to Cairo. I could finally immerse myself in my old life, collecting and promoting crafts, campaigning to halt the destruction of the urban fabric of the historic city as well as resume my interest in what was happening on the political scene.

The country was in crisis, as instead of the promised affluence, the open door policy adopted by the government starting with the Sadat Era had set the ground for unscrupulous investors. The medieval city, already threatened by decades of mismanagement and growing pollution, was left at the mercy of real estate speculators and its urban fabric seriously damaged by demolitions and disfigured by offensive high rises. State factories suffering from mismanagement, were privatized; but instead of being upgraded their machinery was sold as scrap iron and their buildings pulled down to take advantage of rising land value; thus a skilled working class numbering hundreds of thousands faced unemployment or joined the masses of unskilled labour. The long fiber cotton, for which Egypt was famous, was disappearing due to faulty agricultural strategies: For the first time, I had difficulties in finding the fine cotton cloth that for over a century had been our pride and glory. Gradually, textiles produced in other parts of the world, China, Korea, Turkey started to invade the market. This affected me as I felt strange using imported fabric to produce traditional costumes !!! I was also confronted with the toll to be paid for my lack of regular visits to El Arish and the growth of the income generation project came to a standstill.

However, what was happening on a national scale was more serious than any personal difficulties. There was an obvious erosion of the middle class and the gap between rich and poor had grown to outrageous proportions. From 2006 onwards discontented but peaceful protesters with different demands regularly disrupted the traffic of the main streets of large urban agglomerations. With the exception of Mehallah El Kobrah, the center of the Egyptian textile industry, these gathering were not very large. In spite of that they were considered a threat by the police state and were always brutally repressed, thus exacerbating resentments and adding to the unrest.

I went back to my old habits and joined the demonstrations taking place in Cairo and Alexandria. For years it really seemed that our contestations were not leading us anywhere till, finally, in January 2011, the volcano erupted and millions were in the streets.



Pic.38: The Awakening of the Egyptian people, Midan El Tahrir, January 2011

In a first stage the crowds called for the end of an abusing regime, social justice and dignity for all. In a second step they demanded the drafting of a new constitution and reforms to insure the establishment of democratic rule. We knew it was going to take time, for this reason, the first request of demonstrators was to elect a President known to the people and who could fulfill their aspirations; the second step was to elect a parliament. What the military council ruling the country after the resignation of president Mubarak imposed on us was first an amendment to the old constitution (already under criticism by intellectuals and sectors requiring political reforms) followed by a general election to chose a parliament. This was a disaster, as thousands presented themselves for the job and it meant that, apart from some well-known figures in Cairo and Alexandria, the people in the different governorates had to vote for someone they did not know. This also meant giving the country to the Muslim brotherhood, the only organized sector that had successfully grown in the shadow of the previous regime ... During their year long rule they attempted to undermine existing institutions and threatened all our cultural values; when they were finally ousted by a second wave of massive popular revolt, due to the absence of organized political civilian leadership we fell prey to the same totalitarian regime we had been trying for so long to shake....

Thus the peaceful revolution of the Egyptian people was twice aborted and we returned to the status quo.



Pic. 39: The graffiti of young revolutionary artists on wall surfaces around Midan El Tahrir were telling the story of the Egyptian people: Their glorious past and their sad reality...their confrontation with a brutal world that gave them little hope, their sudden awakening to the possibility of change, their fears and anxieties dreaming of a better future.

One day, not so long ago I looked back at my life and its correlation with the political events I lived through became obvious: Graduating from secondary school I aimed at becoming a scientist as the slogans of the 1952 Revolution had glorified the participation of women in developing the country; the disillusion that followed the country's collapse of 1967 pushed me into an identity crisis and I decided to deepen my knowledge of my culture and become an Islamic Art scholar . My encounter with Hassan Fathy made me discover that while, from the 16th century onwards urban elites had liquidated their heritage to graft themselves on an alien culture, it is the simple folk of Egypt, peasants, Bedouin and oases dwellers who had up to the end of the 20th century perpetuated millennia old legacies; thus my interest shifted from the arts and architecture of medieval princes to the study of vernacular architecture and what is described by the demeaning expression "folkloric crafts", as if they had not been rooted in the Grand Artistic Tradition of Egypt! Finally my involvement in my husband's agricultural project might not have been fortuitous nor simply out of love for him: destiny had chosen for me to be born to a land-owning family; political upheavals and my will had taken me far away, but the odds had returned me to the land. Like Ulysses, my voyage had brought me back where I had started from...

Now that the cycle has closed, it might be time for my fifth and I hope ultimate career - the sum of the parts - writing about regional costumes, traditional crafts, vernacular architecture and maybe if time allows, one day, my memoirs about the different Egypts I have lived through.

Shahira Mehrez
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