

Egypt

From: Claudia Roden: *The Book of Jewish Food. An Odyssey from Samarkand and Vilna to the Present Day*:

Every cuisine tells a story. Jewish food tells the story of an uprooted, migrating people and their vanished worlds. It lives in people's minds and has been kept alive because of what it evokes and represents. My own world disappeared forty years ago, but it has remained powerful in my imagination. When you are cut off from your past, that past takes a stronger hold on your emotions. I was born in Zamalek, a district of - - Cairo with palm trees, pretty villas and gardens with bougainvillaea, scented jasmine and brilliant red flowers we called 'flamboyants'. On the map it looks like a cocoon clinging to the banks of the Nile. For the first fifteen years of my life, it was the cocoon from which I never ventured unaccompanied. I lived in an apartment building with my parents; two brothers, Ellis and Zaki; and our Yugoslav-Italian nanny, Maria Koron. Awad, the cook, who came from Lower Egypt, lived on the roof terrace, where servants had rooms. From the windows we could see the Nile and feluccas (sailing boats) gliding by. The sounds were the muezzin's call and the shouts of street vendors. It was a world full of people. It ended in 1956, after Suez, as a result of Egypt's war with Israel.

My father died in 1993 at the age of ninety-four, a few months after my mother. They had spent the last years holding hands, switching from one radio station to another listening to the latest world events, and talking passionately about their life in Egypt. They lived near me in London, and I was the audience for their constant dramatized re-enactments of the stories of all the people they had known. These stories were capable of endless change as new interpretations were explored. At 16 Woodstock Road, it seemed that we had never left Cairo. The smell of sizzling garlic and crushed coriander seeds in the kitchen, or of rose water in a pudding, and my mother's daily meals, reinforced the feeling.

When I look through the old notes and recipes given by relatives and friends soon after they left Egypt, it rekindles memories of our old life in a vivid way. They are written in French and interspersed with remarks about who gave the recipe long ago in Egypt, how much the dishes were appreciated by a certain person, and the occasion on which they were served. Each recipe has a name. There is 'kobeba Latifa', 'fromage blanc Adele', 'hamud Sophie', 'pastels Iris', 'blehat Rahel', and so on. Most of the people are dead now. They were my parents' generation. But their recipes keep their memory very much alive, at least for me.

Our Cairo had been two cities that turned their backs on each other. One looked like Paris, because Khedive Ismail, who ruled in the middle of the nineteenth century, had wanted to pull Egypt into Europe and had brought in European architects to build it. The other had narrow meandering streets, mausoleums, and public baths; fountains with curvy iron grilles and windows screened by wooden lattices; Coptic churches and mosques with minarets rising into the sky like delicately embroidered candles. But our cooking was also from other cities. We made Istanbul pies, Aleppo cracked wheat salads, Castilian almond and orange cakes, egg flans from Fez.

The Egypt I knew was a French-speaking, cosmopolitan Mediterranean country in which life for the better-off was a sort of continuation of the Belle Epoque in an annexe of Europe, with colonial-style clubs, opera and ballet and entertaining on a grand scale. Egypt had been part of the Ottoman Empire and a British protectorate. It was led by a foreign (Albanian) dynasty, a court made up of exiles from the Turkish aristocracy, and a royal council that spoke limited Arabic. The Jewish community had a happy and important place in the mosaic

of minorities - which included Copts, Armenians, Syrian Christians, Maltese, Greeks and Italians, as well as British and French expatriates - living among the Muslim majority.

Established mainly in Cairo and Alexandria but also in a number of small towns and villages, the Jewish community was itself a mosaic of people of different origins. The original community, which was as old as antiquity, had been joined by several waves of immigrants, and these had all kept up their different cultures and identities into the twentieth century. We gave ourselves the fictional name of 'Basramite' to characterize our mixed backgrounds (no one knows where it came from). There were the Arabized inhabitants of the Haret el Yahoud - the Jewish quarter of Cairo, which we called the *hara* or simply *le quartier*, and which was built as early as 389 - and of the equally ancient Souk el Samak (fish market) in Alexandria. Descendants of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula came in the sixteenth century and then again in the nineteenth from Salonika, Smyrna, Istanbul, the Balkans, and North Africa. They were called Espagnoli and Kekeres, the latter because of the way they asked 'Que quieres?' ('What do you want?') Immigrants from Yemen and North Africa started coming in the Middle Ages. There were a few Ashkenazim. They were called Schlecht, meaning 'bad' in Yiddish. They claimed this was the local deformation of the word 'select', but nineteenth-century accounts reveal that they were so labeled because when they first arrived as escapees from pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe they exclaimed in horror upon seeing the *hara*: 'Schlecht! Schlecht!' There were Italians who followed the old 'Italki' rites, and Italians from Livorno, who followed Spanish rites, and people from Iraq and Syria. My own family was from Syria and from Turkey.

The community was polyglot. Our main language was French. We spoke it with an unorthodox grammar and special intonations, infected by all the jargons of the Levant and reinforced by gesticulations and facial expressions. We used many Italian words, such as *falso* and *avvocato*. We called our grandparents *nono* and *nona*, rag-and-bones was *roba vecchia* (old things), *taglio bianco* (white cut) was veal. We were great talkers, switching from one language to another. Every gathering was a fight to be heard. People shouted across the room and across conversations. Strangers thought we were quarrelling. It was a closely knit community, and it felt as though we were all related. Our families were large and extended - almost tribal clans.

My two grandfathers, Elie Douek and Isaac Sassoon, had come from Aleppo at the end of the nineteenth century. My great-grandfather Haham Abraham ha Cohen Douek was the chief rabbi of that city when it was part of the Ottoman Empire. His portrait in turban and kaftan wearing medals given to him - 'personally', my father said - by the Sultan Abdul Hamid II, still hangs in the synagogue in Aleppo. The same photograph looks down at me from my study wall, as it does from the walls of many of my relatives around the world. My family in Egypt always kept the key of the synagogue. When my great-uncle Jacques went to Aleppo on his honeymoon in the 1930s, he was able to open the door with it. His widow, Regine, who now lives near the Champs-Elysees, had thought Aleppo a bit of a disappointment after his build-up. She managed to get for Jacques a place in the Jewish cemetery of Versailles - a rare privilege, because it is full - and a red-carpet funeral treatment, by telling the Paris rabbis that he was the son of Haham Abraham.

Both my grandfathers left when Aleppo ceased to be the center of the camel-caravan trade, because of the opening of the Suez Canal, and when the canal and the development of the cotton trade had turned Egypt into an 'El Dorado of the Nile Valley'. Both went to live in a newly built quarter of Cairo called Sakakini, in the Daher, where everyone was Jewish (my father insisted that I must distinguish it from the *hara*, where only the very poor were left by the time his family arrived). It was built on drained marshland by Sakakini Pasha. The streets converged like the spokes of a wheel towards a baroque rococo palace with turrets and carved

angels where the Sakakini family lived. There were several synagogues, Jewish schools, ritual baths and kosher butchers. When I asked my father what their everyday life had been like, he said, 'We spent our time on the balcony talking to passers-by. The men went to work, the women prepared the meals.

Their cooking was Aleppo. It was considered the pearl of the Arab kitchen – refined and delicate. It was labor-intensive, with a lot of pounding, hollowing, stuffing, wrapping and rolling into tiny balls and fingers. The women prided themselves on their skills and - so my father said-were happy to spend hours in the kitchen. They cooked in company, and that was part of the fun. They filled chickens with meat and pine nuts, stuffed lamb with rice, rolled vine leaves and filled pastries with mashed dates. Their crowning glory was kibbeh, which was a world in itself, with dozens of varieties. Basically, it had an outer shell of pounded wheat and meat and a spicy meat and onion filling. The apartment re- With my parents, Cesar and Nelly Douek, and my sounded constantly with the ringing of the metal pestle and mortar with which they pounded the meat and wheat. It smelled of mint and spices and sizzling lamb, of tamarind and orange blossom.

My grandmother Sarah Hara did not read or write, although everyone from her large extended family sought her advice on every matter. She said the rabbis in Aleppo had forbidden her to learn because she was a girl. It had something to do with girls becoming free and able to send notes to lovers. She had married a man much older than herself and was left a widow with many daughters to marry off: She wore a long brown dress called a *habara*. With a little envy, she mocked the new generation's Frenchified ways.

My maternal grandmother, Eugenie Alphanary, was from Istanbul. She was a grande dame who spoke French like a Parisian, quoted Voltaire and Victor Hugo and was fired by the ideals of 'Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite'. The private language she spoke with my mother when they did not want us children to understand was Judeo-Spanish. She called it Castilian to differentiate it from the Judeo-Spanish that she described as a 'degraded Spanish mix' which some other people spoke. Hers was below French in her esteem, but to us it represented a mysterious lost paradise, a world of romance and courage and glorious chivalry which enmeshed us all in invisible threads of deep longing with its songs about lovers in Seville and proverbs about meat stews and almond cakes. That world was embodied by the little pies, sharp egg and lemon sauces, and meatballs incorporating vegetables that we ate at my grandparents' home. Her cold vegetable dishes had a faint sweetness about them, the pastries an orange flavor. When we bit into a pie, we found mashed aubergine or spinach. Everything had a Spanish name, and many things had an affectionate ending, like 'pasteliko' and 'borekita,' which denoted that they were small.

The friends and relatives my grandmother entertained had names like Sol, Grazia and Elvira, and family names like Perez y Calderon, Santos, Abravanel, Rodrigues and Toledano. But she had called her children Yvette, Marcelle, Nelly, Germaine, Giselle and Joseph. Her father was a teacher at the Alliance Israelite Universelle in Istanbul. The Alliance was one of hundreds of Jewish schools, a charitable institution with headquarters in Paris, which brought French to all the Jewish communities of the Middle East. She had won a scholarship to their *ecole normale* (teachers' training school) in Paris and was sent to Egypt to teach at the Alliance school there.

A few years ago, I found a book about the Jews of Egypt in the nineteenth century which contains letters by her father. He had been sent from Istanbul as a young man to assess the possibility of opening Alliance schools in Egypt and wrote back that the children spoke six languages but could not read or write and he doubted that they could ever be made to sit down. More than one school opened. My grandmother married as soon as she arrived. My

grandfather Isaac, whose first wife had just died in childbirth, fell for her milky white skin and golden red hair.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the indigenous Jews and those from other Arab countries had spoken Arabic and worn Arab clothes (they were Arab but different) - the women the *habara*, the men galabias and kaftans with turbans, skull caps and tarbooshes (fezzes). The Europeanization and 'emancipation' of the Jews began with the building of the Suez Canal and the modernization of the economy. A Jewish middle-class bourgeoisie, educated first in Jewish schools, then by Christian and secular missions, grew out of the developing cotton trade and the capitalist explosion of the country. Jewish men went into cotton, banking, the stock exchange and industries like textiles, oil pressing and sugar refining. Many stayed behind in the small trades and handicrafts. All my relatives were merchants in general commerce. They called themselves 'import-export' but they were really 'import-import', dealing with everything from towels and underwear to china, sugar, coffee, and tea. They were *khawagQat*, Europeanized men who wore suits and tarbooshes. Some toured the villages by train. Their offices and warehouses were in the bazaar area of the Hamzaoui.

My parents used to tell us how they pitied those of our relatives whose wives did not bother to give them proper breakfasts so they had to buy ful medammes (Egyptian brown beans), taamia (the Cairo name for falafel), and lentil soup from vendors at the bazaar. Later I heard from my relatives how they pitied my father because my mother did not let him eat out. It was a question of pride, not of religious orthodoxy. An account of a European Jewish traveler in Aleppo 100 years before expresses the shock he felt at seeing Jews eating food prepared by non Jews at the bazaar. Our community in Egypt on the whole was even more lax in its religious practice, but the synagogue was an important part of our lives. It was a joyous place to meet and socialize.

Every Friday evening and on high holidays, the Grand Temple was packed with people who came to hear Rabbi Nahum's famous speeches in French. By tradition, the prime minister of Egypt always came for the Kol Nidre prayer. We also attended a small synagogue on top of a garage in the garden of a private house in Zamalek. It was packed with men swaying from side to side (not backwards and forwards, as Eastern Europeans do). They sang plaintive nasal chants in Spanish modulations and tunes from Morocco, Syria and Iraq, as well as some copied from the recitations of the Koran and the Egyptian national anthem. Every man started from the beginning of the prayer book, no matter when he arrived, so the result was a cacophony. The room glittered with chandeliers and velvet drapes embroidered with gold and silver thread. The women sat outside in the garden on golden chairs under a pergola. Dressed in colored silks, perfumed and bejeweled, they exchanged the latest gossip about matches, dowries, and infidelities and visits to saintly tombs. Every so often, a face would appear at the window and shout 'Taisez-vous les dames!' ('Shut up, ladies!') and they would stop for a while and intone 'Amen!'

Jewish holidays were important occasions. They went on for days. Every member of the family was visited, the oldest first. There were always hundreds of people to kiss. The older relatives smelled of the rose water with which they washed. Depending on the time of day, sweetmeats and pastries or mezze (little salads and appetizers) were passed around. For the high-holiday dinners, tables were connected with planks. Huge quantities of food were prepared. Cooking went on for days. Housewives joined forces and brought their cooks. Itinerant cooks who specialized in certain dishes were also engaged. Every family had its own special dishes for festive occasions. Although in my day the community had become relatively homogenized and many delicacies had become obligatory on every parry table,

those dishes which reflected the origins of families were also there, and you could trace the family's ancestry by looking at the spread on the table.

Part of the appeal for me of working on this book is that there is more to Jewish food than cooking and eating. Behind every recipe is a story of local traditions and daily life in far-off towns and villages. It is a romantic and nostalgic subject which has to do with recalling a world that has vanished. It is about ancestral memories and looking back and holding on to old cultures, and it is about identity. It has been like that since Biblical times. The Bible recalls in Exodus the wistful longings of the Jews for the foods they had left behind in Egypt.