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Vida

Meeting Vida

Vida and I met serendipitously in 1987. I had returned to the United States after an extended stay in Egypt, the land of my birth, and was looking to make a home in New York City. Friends suggested I would enjoy an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum. It was there I saw Vida for the first time.

At the museum, I wandered around looking at sketches and paintings, and then stood before Mary Frank's sculpture of Persephone, her body composed of fragments of clay on a dais. It brought to mind the Egyptian goddess Isis, who found her slain husband in fragments, restored his broken body, and brought him back to life. As I was admiring this sculpture, Vida came up and stood gazing intently at it as well. I glanced at her and smiled.

Something about Vida seemed familiar, yet I could not define what it was exactly. She could have been one of my aunts. She carried herself with dignity and had a friendly, open countenance. Her big blue eyes sparkled with interest and energy. She wore a smart navy-blue pant suit and a cream silk blouse with a high neck to which she had pinned a brown scarab brooch set in gold. Vida's white hair shone under the lights. She was perfectly coiffed in a bouffant hairstyle that added an inch or two to her five feet. She walked gingerly in patent-leather orthopedic shoes, a large matching handbag hung over her arm. To me, this bag was distinctly in the style of bags I had seen my mother and aunts carrying, some of them created by 'Miss Egypt,' a family-owned business with an elegant shop at the Hilton Hotel in Cairo.

Why did Vida seem so familiar? Was it her body language, her ready smile, the scarab brooch, the bag, her countenance?

Have I seen this woman before? I wondered. Have we met? Maybe in Egypt?

My eyes must have been full of question marks because she caught my look and initiated a conversation as we moved around the sculpture. It is easy to speak to someone when they stir in us a sense of recognition, I thought.

Vida turned to me and with an accent similar to my mother's, who also rolled her *r*'s, she asked, "Are you familiar with the work of Mary Frank? What an amazing Persephone!"

"Yes. Powerful," I responded, adding: "I was just thinking how this interpretation of Persephone reminds me of the Egyptian goddess Isis gathering fragments of her husband Osiris's broken body, making him whole again and returning him to life. Do you know this myth?"

Vida exclaimed, "Isis, of course! I grew up hearing it. May I ask where you are from?"

When I said I was Egyptian, she began to speak to me in a familiar mix of English, French, and Arabic, a hodgepodge some Egyptians are known to use simultaneously. And so began the friendship between Vida and I, which led to meeting members of her family, and to introductions to other Egyptian Jews, who befriended me and were happy to share their memories of Egypt and their stories.

Vida tells her story

The Jews of Egypt have always had a knack for taking the best of everything around them and enjoying it. Egypt was welcoming back then, and we enjoyed whatever the country had to offer. The Jews prospered in Egypt and we made good lives for ourselves: dressed well, traveled well, led the high life, worked hard, nurtured solid communities, built synagogues and schools, founded organizations, institutions, commercial establishments, and always remembered the less fortunate among us. The rich built and supported homes to benefit and aid the orphaned and the aging; generations of children grew up and succeeded after being raised in Jewish orphanages. Not only did the Jews make an impact in business, we did so in literary fields as well. Look at Ya'kub Sanu, a nineteenth-century satirist and playwright who was involved in the political and cultural life of Egypt and got away with criticizing Muslim customs and rulers. He was better known by his nickname Abu Naddara (he who wears glasses).

Among the Jewish families who distinguished themselves in Egypt, I am remembering the Soares, Menasce, Mosseri, Rolo, Cattaoui, Aghion, and Ada families, to name but a few. They made their mark on the Egypt I grew up in. They had an impact in many spheres, including agriculture, industry, commerce, finance, the political arena, and in their respective professions. Jacob Cattaoui, for example, was in charge of the financial affairs of the state under Khedive Abbas I, viceroy of Egypt in the 1840s and 1950s; Cattaoui's son was president of the Jewish community for forty years and funded the education and training of gifted youths; the Menasces were associated with many successful trading establishments and were prominent philanthropists as well, funding the Menasce Free Schools in Alexandria; the Mosseris were in banking since the 1800s. Nessim Mosseri was elected president of the Mixed Tribunal of Commerce and his son, Youssef, followed in his footsteps. Other members of the family were known for contributions to the development of cotton cultivation, its use and export. The Ada family was instrumental in the commercialization of cotton, and were key players in Egypt's railway administration. In the philanthropic tradition exhibited by Jews, they established a hospital and a home for the elderly in Alexandria. There were so many who gave so much to a country that ended up turning its back on all of us. It breaks my heart when I think of it. But enough of this.

Do you remember the neighborhood of Smouha? This upscale suburb was the brainchild of Joseph Smouha, a British Jew living in Egypt. It had its own tennis courts and golf courses, schools, hospitals, synagogues, mosques, and churches. There are many lesser-known figures, many probably forgotten today. I have sought them out. As I study Jewish history I discover names. For example, have you heard of Isaac Vaena, who exported onions, Egypt's third-largest crop? Or those Jews in the Delta region who established cotton gins and contributed to the booming Egyptian textile industry? Habib Aripol comes to mind. He set up a factory in Mansura and his heirs ran it until the 1960s when it was nationalized. Many prominent and not-so-prominent Jews were vital in weaving the tapestry that is Egypt and contributing richly to its development.

The Jews sank roots into Egypt. You can still see where we lived and flourished, where we made our mark, even if our communities are now decimated. Really, you need only look at synagogues and cemeteries to see proof of Jewish presence. Look at department stores still in business today that bear the names of their original owners—Cicurel, Oreco, Hannaux,

Ades, all Jews. We have contributed a lot to Egypt and yes, we also benefited greatly until we were thrown out. What a pity. It is Egypt's loss and ours. From time to time, I ask myself what Egypt would be like today had the Jews remained and continued to flourish. I wonder.

In the 1930s, Alexandria's Jewish community—the community I grew up in—numbered about twenty-five thousand. In Cairo, the numbers were greater and the community more diverse, both ethnically and socially. Some lived near the poverty line in the neighborhood of Harat al-Yahud (Alley of the Jews). This was not a world I knew.

I grew up in Alexandria in an atmosphere of luxury and leisure, among Jews who knew nothing of struggle until we left Egypt. Families of means such as ours had governesses, cooks, maids and chambermaids. These chambermaids, called *camareras*, were generally Italians from Gorizia. Once they established themselves in a family and their employment appeared to be secure, they brought other members of their families into service. It was thus that many Gorizian families were reconstituted in Egypt. In the early 1900s there was even a Rabbi Raphael Della Pergola, who was from Gorizia.

Wealthy Egyptian Jews were up to date on everything and they were very, very snobbish. They really knew how to live, how to make the most of life. I was once part of that group. You can ask now, “How did you ever come down to earth, Vida?” And I will tell you that I not only came down to earth, but I came down with a resounding thud when we were expelled from Egypt. We were uprooted, forced to leave with nothing but the clothes on our backs and a small suitcase of personal belongings. Everything we owned was confiscated.

We began to feel turbulence in our Jewish communities a decade before we were forced to leave Egypt, to abandon our homes, our synagogues and schools, our wealth, our way of life, our memories, the sacred ground where our dead are buried. Everything that was meaningful to us, everything that defined us was whisked away in the blink of an eye.

As I experienced rejection and heartbreak, I thought of my parents. Time and time again I invoked them, reciting a litany of regrets to them out loud, and thinking how lucky they were not to have witnessed such times. “My father and mother, you have been spared the pain of being cast out of your home and forced to abandon everything familiar and pleasant.” I drew some comfort from unburdening my heart in this way.

My husband and I and our children were turned out of Egypt in the blink of an eye. We were given no choice, no time to prepare, no chance to come to terms with our plight. “Out, you! Go!” was the message clearly writ. And out we went. What to do when the full force of circumstance brings you to your knees? “Get up, dust off, and keep going,” Mother used to say. And that is what we did.

We connected with family in New Jersey. They gave us a safe place to land and start over, but Monmouth County where they lived was too rich for us, as we’d been allowed to take nothing with us but a few dollars and a suitcase of clothes. We explored New York, and chose Brooklyn, where we found an apartment and began our American journey. We struggled the first few years but slowly made progress and built meaningful, satisfying lives. We had to forget the rich and easy way we lived in Egypt, but we found safety and satisfaction in New York and eventually did well and felt at home.

When we decided to quit New Jersey, my husband searched for and found an apartment in Brooklyn. Without hesitation, our families pitched in with the necessities to help us start housekeeping anew. They gave us furniture and assisted us in our move; they encouraged us and wished us well, letting us know all the while that they would support us in any way they could. “It takes efforts to start over, to adjust, to build again,” a cousin said, “but you are strong and you will succeed, of this I am certain.” She was right.

My husband soon started a business that eventually made us a comfortable living. We raised our children into successful, responsible adults and professionals, and when they married and moved to Long Island, they kept after us to move with them. We felt at home in Brooklyn and told them we were close enough to visit and spend the holidays together, but would remain where we were. Even after my husband died, I stayed. “Be active, be independent” is my motto and it has served me well. Of course, after my husband’s death, I suffered the loneliness of the widow but refused to give in to my grief. “It’s a life of purpose you must lead, Vida,” I said to myself. And so I did, finding companionship among family and friends, always staying active. No dwelling on sadness for me, I thought as I woke every morning. I adopted my Catholic friend Catherine’s Latin saying, “*vietato lamentarsi*” (complaining is forbidden), and I stayed busy.

When the apartment where the children grew up felt too big and I found it too hard to maintain, my children bought me a one-bedroom