


Bilingual Volume Two
Schooling in
 United
the States



APPENDIX J

FROM EGYPT TO AMERICA: A MULTILINGUAL'S STORY

Editors' Note: This autobiography was prepared on request and, as the cover note shows, with some reluctance. The modest author is nineteen years of age and at different stages of his life has mastered four languages. For purposes of reproduction here we have abridged the text slightly, and occasionally tampered with the punctuation. Otherwise, it is untouched. It stands, in our opinion, as a monument to his control over English, his fourth language. The cover note reads thus:

Dr. Andersson,

This is my epic, thrilling, breathtaking, heartbreaking autobiography. As I did not know exactly what you wanted, I stuffed it with many details that you might or you might not find of interest and relevance. Much more can be added and much can be crossed out. As you suggested, I loathe talking about myself, so I would like for the paper to be anonymous, for this and other reasons, although all that I said is perfectly true.

Cordially,

(Signature withheld)

I am a multilingual. Born and raised in Cairo, Egypt, where my family was settled for over two generations, I am also a Jewish citizen of Italy, a native speaker of French, and a prospective American. With this diversified background, I can justly claim to be international and not to belong to any specific culture, for which I am proud since I firmly believe that to be identified with a people makes one prone to succumb to the ill effects of nationalism and fanaticism which are all too often the cause of regrettable clashes between people and are to be accounted for countless bloody and useless wars.

I wish to tell my story primarily in order to show that the knowledge of several languages cannot but have a beneficent influence on an individual's life and will in no way hamper his talents and aptitudes in other fields but will on the contrary intensify them and stimulate his intellectual activity and potential by broadening his view upon the world we live in, allowing him to express himself better, and making him aware of the fact that there exist other cultures which are as fascinating and useful as his own.

A brief history of my family will better describe my origin. We are Sephardic Jews, that is descendants of the Israelites who lived in Spain until they were driven out of the country in 1492, and have lived in Mediterranean countries ever since. On my father's side, my grandfather was born in the island of Rhodes, and my grandmother in the nearby island of

Salonica. When they got married, my grandfather, who was a tradesman, decided to settle down in Egypt, which was at that time (1900) a very active and prosperous country and was regarded by many as a land of opportunities. They used to speak several languages with equal fluency, as multilingualism is a very marked characteristic of Middle-Easterners. Among these were Turkish, Greek, Arabic, and French. But Spanish, or a dialect of it called Ladino, was the language most currently used in their rapidly expanding family.

Nine children were born to them, six boys and three girls, of which my father, born in 1903, is the eldest. They had no specific nationality at that time as identification, travel, and citizenship documents were not of common usage. But as time passed, they were asked to opt for a definite nationality. Since the islands they came from were under Italian domination at that time, they chose to become officially Italian citizens and were issued passport and citizenship certificates by the Consulate. The number of Europeans in Egypt was then considerably large and they owned the major natural resources of the country, thus holding the reins of its economy, which was therefore virtually in foreign hands. The British Empire had a protectorate over Egypt and several bases for armed forces, and owned the Suez Canal. This made Cairo a sort of international community with a wide variation of juxtaposed ethnic groups, each one having its own life, cultural events, schools, churches, and characteristic activities, and the knowledge of *any* specific language or set of languages was not required for leading a normal life in the country. This is one of the chief reasons why the average Egyptian-born of Cairo was always at least bilingual.

My father, uncles, and aunts were therefore sent to Italian State Public Schools; but the French influence in the city was so overwhelmingly strong (as the French are known to be excellent propagators of their own culture) that this language did not take long to play a leading role in their lives. It was regarded as the language of the elite and knowing it was an unmistakable sign of being educated. They all subsequently left the country and were literally scattered all over the world: they now live in Italy, France, Belgium, Spain, Venezuela, Brazil, to name only a few. We do not exactly lack cosmopolitanism in our family!

My mother's native language is Arabic. Her father, also a tradesman, came from Syria and knew only Arabic and Hebrew. She received her formal education in a French school. Then, when she married my father, it seemed natural that French be adopted as the means of communication, since it was the only language that they knew in common well enough to make it their own. Their children, two boys and two girls, of which I am the youngest, were unilingual in their early years and French was their vernacular. Consequently, the latter slowly became the language of our family and the only one spoken in our house.

When my sisters grew up to school age, my father decided that it would be advisable for them to receive their education through the English language, as a British uncle of his exerted pressure upon him to that effect. The increasing anglicization of Egypt and the arrival of new contingents of British armed forces every day to face the threat of Rommel's advancing Nazi troops made them believe that one day English would be the only language used in the country by the power holders. Therefore, after a year in a French preschool (Jabès) they were

sent to an Irish nuns school, Alvernia English Convent School, from kindergarten to the seventh grade, then to St. Clare's College from the eighth grade till they matriculated.

After the second World War was over my father changed his mind and decided that we should be educated in our own mother tongue. Besides, the French *lycées* had a reputation of being excellent institutions of learning and the French curriculum of being utterly superior, in shape and in content, to the others in function at that time. Consequently, my older sister, after getting her Oxford degree, spent three years in the French *lycée* of Bab el Luk and brilliantly obtained her baccalaureate in 1952. My younger sister was stubbornly determined to go on studying in English and convinced my father to let her complete her education at the American University in Cairo, from where she graduated with a B.A. degree in 1956. She is the only member of our family to have received a totally unilingual education.

My brother, since he started going to school in 1945, was educated entirely in French, used French curricula, and took exams sent directly from France in the same *lycée*. He also learned Latin, English, and Arabic, which were taught as foreign languages. When he graduated in 1959 and obtained his baccalaureate in Mathematics, there was no place in Egypt for him to go and pursue further studies in French, and he could not leave as he was not allowed to take any money with him, so he had to apply at the University of Cairo, in the Faculty of Engineering, where the media of instruction were Arabic and English, the latter being used because very few textbooks were in Arabic and most professors had received their degrees from English or American universities. The psychological shock due to the abrupt change was great and detrimental. He spent six years in this institution where he had an enormous trouble in assimilating and integrating himself and always felt alienated. This dreadful experience has had permanent ill effects on his mind and personality.

As for myself, the story is longer and more diversified. I had spent three years in the *lycée*, from kindergarten to grade two, when, on the night of October 26, 1956, Egypt was at war. France, Great Britain, and Israel attacked Egypt simultaneously, as a consequence of new President Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal and place its administration under the authority of his government. Within the week that followed the outbreak of hostilities, all French and English citizens were expelled overnight from the country and their property was confiscated. All the French private schools had been consequently closed, including mine, so that when the situation went back to normal the problem was to find a school where I would be admitted. It did not take long for my father to decide that, as an Italian child, I would be sent to an Italian school. The best one was the Scuola Italiana di Stato a Bulacco, an institution under the direct supervision and sponsorship of the Italian consulate. The children attending this school, the teachers, and the administrators were exclusively part of the Italian community of Cairo and Italian was the only language used, although the importance of knowing other languages was stressed since the very early grades, since French and English and Arabic were all taught one hour (or two) a week, at least in the two grades (two and three) which I attended there. Surprisingly enough, even though I did not know a single word of Italian when I went to class the first day, I never felt like a stranger. The teacher paid special attention to

me and did not hesitate to use what little French she knew with me whenever she thought that I hadn't understood what she had said, and my classmates were extremely friendly. They would let me participate in all their games, invite me over to their places, and would never laugh at my difficulty in expressing myself in Italian. In this welcoming and warm atmosphere, it did not take me more than three months to speak the language with no accent at all and understand it fairly well. At the end of the first year, I could speak Italian most fluently and had many Italian friends, to the point that there was no way of distinguishing me from them as far as background was concerned. Since on the other hand French was constantly used at home because my father and I were the only Italian speakers, at this stage of my life I was perfectly bilingual.

The second year at the Scuola Italiana passed without any problem: not only was I fluent and proficient, but I also proved to be an excellent student in all subjects. My father supervised me closely in my schoolwork and often spoke to me in Italian, always trying to make me feel that after all I was Italian myself like all the other children around me and that except maybe for a minor difference in religion I belonged to their world and was not an outsider, and this encouraged me very much. Never again in my life did I ever feel so close to Italy, my supposed homeland that I have never seen. From that time until I left Egypt several years later, I kept flooding the house with Italian publications that I used to read and reread endlessly with everlasting interest. Especially during those longer summers in Cairo, I used to spend days and days doing nothing but reading Italian magazines like *Corriere dei Piccoli*, *Albi del Falco*, *Albi della Rosa*, *la Settimana Enigmistica*, *Intrepido*, etc., some of which were just translations of American comics, thus giving me an early insight into American life and history. Very often I would go into Italian crossword competitions with my father, and the constant search for words added a great deal to my knowledge of the language. In brief, Italian has played an important role in my life since then.

After two years at the Italian school, members of my family insisted that my father send me back to the French *lycée* which had reopened in the meantime. The Egyptian authorities had placed the *lycée* under their administration and decided that it should be progressively converted into an Arab school. The name was changed to Lycée La Liberté, then to Lycée Al Horreya, and there were no more French teachers. The latter were replaced by educated Egyptian bilinguals, most of whom had a European background and were themselves products of French schools. Little by little the French textbooks were eliminated in favor of either the Arabic textbooks used in the public schools or mimeographed handouts and rough paperbacks in French hastily prepared by local teachers, many of whom did not hesitate to plagiarize ignominiously those banned and rejected French books. The curriculum was agreed upon to be identical in content to that of Egyptian public schools. The languages of instruction would be both French and Arabic depending on the grade, the subject, and the year. However, in senior high school, the students would choose between an Arabic Section (in which Arabic would be the exclusive medium of instruction and where French and English would be taught as second languages) and a French-Arabic Section (in which both languages would be used). The latter operated therefore according to a perfect bilingual program. Both sections were subdivided into a Literature and a Science subsection. The examinations were

officially issued by the Egyptian Ministry of Education, and translated into French when the subject was taught in French. As an example, in the tenth grade French-Arabic (Science) section, History, Geography and Civics, Biology and Geology, Art, Philosophy, and Arabic Literature were taught in Arabic whereas Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and French Literature and Civilization were taught in French. Intermediate English was taught as a foreign language according to a program of teaching English to native speakers of Arabic. Spontaneously and not because of some school policy, only the language in which the subject was taught was spoken in class.

Thus in October 1958 I went back to the school I had left two years earlier, and it seemed so different that I had difficulty recognizing it. During my first year there (*huitième*, i.e. fifth grade) everything was taught in French but the importance given to Arabic as a subject was disproportionately great. Most of the students were native speakers [of Arabic] and therefore the required level of proficiency was relatively high, and as a matter of fact was the same as that in the Egyptian public schools in the corresponding grade. But unlike in the Italian school, I always felt that the attitude of the teachers and the students toward the foreign element in the class was one of scorn and condescendence as a reaction sprung from the awareness of their recently acquired political and economic freedom. The atmosphere was markedly hostile. Yet I knew that since for many complicated reasons I had to remain in the country for an indefinite period of time as no specific plans for the future were made yet, I *had* to learn Arabic by all means. After the revolution that overthrew the monarchic regime, outbursts of Arab nationalism led the authorities to accelerate the process of de-europeanizing all schools in the country, and drastic measures were taken to spread out the language throughout the republic and make its knowledge a *sine qua non* for leading normal life in the community.

Be it as it may, my first days in this school were a nightmare and the shock was tremendous. I knew but very little of the language and could barely decipher it. My father hired a private tutor knowing French who would come twice a week to give me the basic intensive training that I badly needed. But since the approach to Arabic was fallacious from the very beginning due to the fact that I was forced to learn it against my will, I came to hate this language with all my strength and regret all those endless days I had to spend trying to "swallow," slowly and patiently, Arabic grammar, Arabic poems, the history of the Arab world, the principles of Arab democracy, and all those thick and boring volumes of Arabic literature, much of which was filled with antisemitic and anti-occidental propaganda. The fact that I was periodically forced to write political themes against my people, against my race, and against my values, or blaspheme aloud during frequent oral examinations, aroused my anger to its paroxysm. As outburst of violence and open revolt were not permitted to me for obvious reasons, this only added to my isolation and alienation from my environment. My only relief and consolation came from the fact that I knew that this situation would not last eternally, that it was only a transient, temporary state that I should regard merely as a useful experience, and that it preceded the time when I would be free—free to develop my full potential without constraint, free to do whatever I wanted, and not having to learn a loathed language belonging to a people hostile to me and whose constant psychological persecution shook my nerves and

resulted in a permanent feeling of anxiety and insecurity which has never left me since. Besides, constant outstanding scholastic achievement in every subject regardless of the medium of instruction made me feel superior and look down, deep in my heart (since I could not show it), at this mass of fanatics who were attempting to force me to reject my ethnic, cultural, and religious heritage and who succeeded only in adding to my determination to preserve it at all costs.

Patience became the catchword. I spent eight years in the bilingual school. Since the importance of Arabic in it increased with every passing year to the detriment of French, I grew to be fluent and proficient in it and did not have any trouble at all following the courses. But I must add that I was always reluctant to use this language and did not do it unless I absolutely had to. Therefore I voluntarily never acquired mastery of it because I never cared to and it repelled me. This brings me to an important conclusion that I wish to emphasize: a person cannot, under any circumstances, be forced to learn a language and make his own if he does not want to and is strongly determined to resist, no matter how overpowering external pressures seem to be.

When I came to be the equivalent of a high school junior, an unexpected opportunity presented itself: the French Cultural Center, which had recently reopened its doors, had decided to give the equivalent of French *lycée* courses, for all grades starting from the seventh, to all foreign (non-Egyptian) students who would be interested. I could hardly believe it and yet it was true! My very last year in school would be spent in an utterly French school, where real French curricula would be used, and I would end up having not an equivalent of but *the* original French baccalaureate, the supreme diploma I had always dreamt of obtaining. I can truthfully say that the following year, embellished as it was by an enchanting romantic adventure, was the most unforgettable of my life yet, and the relief that I felt was comparable in intensity only to the shock I had experienced eight years earlier when I entered the bilingual school. I had the impression that I was slowly awakening from a long nightmare. The students were almost exclusively French or native speakers, and the teachers were all French. I participated actively in many of their cultural events, made several friends, studied hard but willingly in the language I loved, and eventually, on the eighth of June, 1967, when the six-day war opposing the Arab countries to their sworn enemy Israel was still raging in the sands of the Sinai desert, I received my baccalaureate with highest honors, having obtained nearly the maximum grade in both oral and written examinations, whereas as much as 60 percent of all the students registered for this set of tests, in France and throughout the world, were to fail that year.

It did not take me long to come back to the crude reality when the academic year was over: the humiliation of defeat pushing the Egyptian authorities to seek revenge on defenseless civilians, the situation of the few remaining Jews in Egypt became extremely precarious. My parents and I (sole members of our whole family left in Egypt) were saved from direct persecution by the mere fact that we were nationals of a foreign country and were therefore under the immediate protection of our consulate. At that time my brother-in-law, an American

attorney, was feverishly working at obtaining U.S. emergency immigrant visas for us. When they were finally issued, a few days after the open war was over, my father refused them as his pride forbade him to have to depend on anybody, even his own children, after having worked incessantly all his life to be financially independent, and as his age and health would not allow him to start a completely new life from scratch in a foreign country. My visa was not valid without them so I had to leave Egypt, alone and penniless, with no hope of ever going back. After a short visit with my uncle in Brussels, I was issued a refugee visa allowing me to stay two years in the U.S. as a "conditional entrant," before applying for permanent residence and then citizenship.

Finally, I left the old world for the new and landed in New York on the 26th of February, 1968, ready to start a new chapter of my life: eighteen years in a prison were gone, buried and forgotten. At long last, I was entirely FREE!

The first problem that I had to face was the language barrier. The latter had to be overthrown by all means as soon as possible as I was planning to complete my education in a major university where I had been admitted. I had but a theoretical, bookish knowledge of English, mainly acquired through personal reading, and the more I learned about this language the more fascinating and fertile I found it, so that my interest in it never ceased to grow. As I started to realize that the United States was such an overwhelmingly unilingual country in which the ability to communicate in English was of primary importance, I was somewhat frightened as I had never used that language in everyday life. But I took this temporary inability as a challenge and decided that the only way to learn a language is to speak it constantly, read as much as possible in it, think in it, and associate with its native speakers regardless of the frustrations resulting from the inevitable and often hilarious mistakes, or from the difficulty of finding the right words at the right time. This feeling of incompleteness arising from one's inability to express one's thoughts in perfectly structured, grammatically correct, understandable sentences in a foreign language is what worried me most. But I overcame it; and the method seemed to have good results, for within a few months I was satisfactorily fluent and felt so much at ease in English that language was no longer a handicap. But I purposefully avoid to use in conversation those few French words that have been incorporated untouched in the English language: I can't pronounce them the American way! I still have an accent of which time will hopefully get rid. Since I started taking courses, I am a straight-A student, at which I am the first to be surprised considering that I never studied in English before. Now a year has passed since I stepped foot in this friendly and welcoming Land of Freedom, and my fears are of a totally different nature: I am afraid that as time passes the americanizing pressures within the melting pot will eventually erase the linguistic knowledge from my mind leaving me American and unilingual, as happened to my nieces!

An educator will retain from my story that throughout my school-life four languages have been used as media for my instruction without my academic achievement having in the least suffered from the various "switches". This is the reason why I insisted so much on it: it is most remarkable that my intelligence, talents and creativity have not been altered in any way

(unless they have been stimulated) by my acquired knowledge of several languages. It is my firm conviction that multilingualism is a gratuitous asset that anybody can obtain if he cares to and works at it early enough. It is the key to tolerance and understanding between cultures, and from there to freedom and peace.