

Tablet

Books

CAIRENE DREAM

In telling her father's story of exile, Lucette Lagnado conjures the beloved Egypt and ugly Brooklyn of her youth

By **Jessie Graham**

August 28, 2007

Header



Lucette Lagnado was only six years old when she left Cairo with her family. It was 1963, seven years after Gamal Abdel Nasser had begun to nationalize Egyptian businesses and to force out the country's once-thriving Jewish community, along with other supposed foreign influences. Leon Lagnado, Lucette's father, already in his 60s by then and in ill health, had been a debonair merchant and stockbroker, who strutted through Cairo wearing immaculate white suits. He had clung to his beloved city for as long as he could. As the Lagnado family boarded the boat to France they were forced to sign a document promising never to return.

Lagnado's memoir, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, is as much about her father's love affair with the city as it is about one family's painful exile from the Middle East. Lagnado resurrects a cosmopolitan Cairo that managed to be "both old-fashioned and libertine"—where her father attended services every morning, even if he'd spent the night gambling and dancing with his mistresses (one was said to be the legendary

Egyptian singer Om Kalsoum.) In Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, where the family ultimately landed after a brief stop in Paris, Leon Lagnado was reduced to selling fake French ties on subway trains and in the stations, mourning for his lost community, never fully accepting that the family could never go home.

Lagnado, an investigative reporter at *The Wall Street Journal*, is the author of *Children of the Flames: Dr. Josef Mengele and the Untold Story of the Twins of Auschwitz*.

This book focuses more on your family, less on the political shifts that led to their expulsion from Egypt. The narrative is tightly focused, first in your apartment in Cairo, and then in Bensonhurst. Was that a conscious choice not to dwell on the politics?

There had to be a kind of an emotional truth to the book and a little girl of five and six—no matter how precocious—doesn't understand politics. She doesn't understand the bigger context. What a little child can understand is emotional turmoil. So I wanted to write about the exile, but I wanted to do it very much in the terms of a child and any child, even if they're in privileged America, their world is small—it's their house, their garden, whatever. Well, in Cairo, I didn't have a garden, I had a balcony, and an alleyway. To me, it was very precious. I would spend hours on the balcony holding my cat Pouspous. I was completely charmed by the life below. Sometimes there would be joyous celebrations, tents put up for engagements. And sometimes they were for sad and lugubrious occasions, there would be rugs brought in and there would be cries and mourning sounds. I liked my little alleyway.

It was a mixed neighborhood.

That was what was wonderful about life in the Middle East for Jews. There was an old ghetto but most of the Jews lived outside the ghetto—like my family did. As far as I know it was utterly and completely harmonious. The synagogues were mixed in with mosques; we were mixed in with Muslims.

Your father would often take you along with him on his jaunts around Cairo. He took you to the bar at the Nile Hilton, where he did business, to Groppi's café where he'd buy you sweets.



My father was impassioned by the city. It was like he owned that city, and he spoke beautiful English. The Jews of Egypt, the educated classes, spoke multiple languages. What was most neat about my father is that he was able to totally deal with the Brits, but he was also able to develop a relationship—when he sold olive

oil—with simple merchants on the street. It was a magical world. I am obsessed with the bar in the Nile Hilton. It was swank, and then the pebbled garden of Groppi's where you sat outdoors and had Chantilly cream.

Your family stayed in Cairo after many Jews had already left.

A lot of people left after 56, after the Suez War, because there were ousters of the Brits and the French, and some of the Jews had British and French passports. There was a lot of fear, but I don't think the government was heavyhanded. My father loved Egypt. He didn't want to go. He was a broker, always negotiating, and thought he could maneuver his way out of the situation. Eventually, my father accepted that we needed to leave, so he tells everybody, "Leave. Go to Israel. I will find you there." The plan was that we were going to go to Israel, and he was going to rejoin his brothers and sister.

But you didn't go to Israel, why not?

We come from a Syrian family where the sons are like gods. My oldest brother and my other brother really wanted to go to America. There was a real passion for American culture in Egypt.

How did you end up in Bensonhurst?

It was sort of a faux Cairo when we moved there. These ten sleepy little blocks of prefab houses. I can conjure no glamour about life in Bensonhurst, but all those refugees from the Levant were there. We tried to have what we had before. Little groceries opened up with Middle Eastern food.

But then this Jewish neighborhood became Italian, and your family didn't want to leave their home.

When we got there, the Syrian Jews were moving to Ocean Parkway. We didn't want to move again. When we had a hope and a prayer of being with our kind we let it slip away, and we ended up alone again. Even the other day, I invited a friend of mine from the Syrian community to my book launch. She had read my book and she said to me, "The problem is you're an outsider. You're not really a part of the community. You left." And I'm thinking, "I'm an outsider? My family, we're Lagnados. We were the Rabbis of Aleppo! I'm not an outsider."

Why did she see you that way?

Because you can't leave the community and I didn't marry a Syrian Jew.

I would imagine it would be a bit difficult to approach this memoir with André Aciman's *Out of Egypt* already out there as the definitive memoir about Jews in Egypt.



For eight or nine years I wanted to write this book, and every time I would tell people, they would say, “But you know, there’s André Aciman.” It made me crazy. First of all, I love André. But then I think about the lost worlds of the Jews of Eastern Europe and Europe. How many writers did it take to recreate the little shtetls? We start with I.B. Singer and then we go on into the modern, new generation. And yet, we had equally magical, quirky, special, soulful, extraordinary worlds in the Middle East. The Jews of Iraq. The Jews of Iran. The Jews of Algeria. The Jews of Morocco. The Jews of Tunisia. We were this unbelievably cultured place. Why can’t we produce a body of literature? And why haven’t we?

Was it in part because the European narrative of exile and the Holocaust came first? Perhaps there was no room for another narrative?

We’ve all been consumed by the Holocaust, by the evisceration, disappearance, and destruction of the communities of Europe. In the same way, we should be concerned and consumed by the Palestinian refugee narrative, where there was and is a lot of suffering. But the idea that there was, as you put it, no room for another one. I actually found myself talking to a colleague when I dared to use the term “cultural holocaust” for the exile of Jews from the Middle East. She is a Jewish reporter, Orthodox. She said to me, “Well, forgive me, but you weren’t wiped out, you weren’t slaughtered.” And I said, “No we weren’t. But communities were wiped out culturally.” To me that’s a tragedy. My first book was about the Holocaust. I was totally consumed. But until recently, the Arab-Jewish refugees weren’t a story. It wasn’t even a graceful term, “Arabic Jews.” To me it was an extraordinary accomplishment when recently I stood in front of my synagogue and said, “I was a refugee from Egypt.” It’s sort of like saying, “I’m an alcoholic.”

Why?

From the first days I came to America, my mother whispered, “Don’t say you’re from Egypt.” Egypt was this backward, primitive country. I had to be the Parisian schoolgirl. I could play the part, “My name is Lucette. I’m from France.” I didn’t out and out say I was born in France. I would say I’m from France, and that was technically true.

The social worker that managed your family’s case here saw your father as very backward.

They wanted to make sure that you’re assimilated. And then you get a man like my father, and he doesn’t want to assimilate. So I have these single-spaced notes by the social worker from the New York Association for New Americans and she records him telling her, “We are Arab, madam. We are Arab, madam.” My father loved Muslims. He loved Egyptians. He felt at one with them.

That’s quite a contrast to Aciman’s family. His family was Sephardic and they were always trying to distinguish themselves from the Arabs in their midst—to distinguish even between Syrian and Egyptian Jews. Your family didn’t seem to have such an identity crisis in Egypt.



Synagogue in downtown Cairo, 2006

My parents were really religious. My father may have been a boulevardier, a womanizer, a sinner, a pleasure seeker, and a gambler, but come morning, he was in shul. Faith was a significant issue as I approached this work; I’m not sure it is for André.

You were able to go back to Cairo in 2005, with the permission of the Egyptian government. One of the things that surprised you was that after all this time, you felt at home there.

I am an angst-ridden person, and I felt angst-free in Egypt—it seems bizarre. I would look at the Nile, and how calm it was, and I thought the people were awfully nice. If I had my own way, I’d sit with everybody and say, “Now wait a minute, wait! It worked 60 years ago, you know? We got along fine. Why, why can’t we redo that?”

What did older Egyptians say about the Jews who had left?

They never talked about missing Jews, but they all had memories. It was almost like in Germany, where I did reporting for my other book, where they say, “I knew a Jewish family.” In Egypt it was at a more human level. I spoke with our former neighbor. The old woman said, “I liked your mother. She was very sweet to children.” That was the nicest part about it. We weren’t *Yehudi*. We were simply neighbors and then we had to leave. They were probably bewildered, as bewildered as anybody.

How did you come to the title, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*?

My father died in January 1993 after a very long illness. Just after he died, I went to a Moroccan synagogue in the East 70s. I was totally broken, and this old woman comes over to me after services, and she says, “Are you the daughter of Leon Lagnado?” And I said, “Yeah.” And she says, “You know, I knew your father as a young girl in Cairo. He would come to my house and he always wore white. He always wore white sharkskin.” That was an amazing moment. She and I became unbelievable friends. I found her this supremely comforting figure. I started going to shul, would sit next to her, and always ask the same

question, almost like a child, “Tell me about the white sharkskin.”



COMMENT

PRINT EMAIL

MORE IN: CAIRO EGYPTIAN JEWRY JEWISH EXILE
LUCETTE LAGNADO MIDDLE EAST SYRIAN JEWRY
THE MAN IN THE WHITE SHARKSKIN SUIT

Tablet

ARTS & CULTURE

Books
Fiction
Film
The Internet
Music
Television
Theater & Dance
Visual Art & Design

LIFE & RELIGION

Observance
Food
Family
Personal History
Notebook

NEWS & POLITICS

United States
Middle East
World
Sports

THE SCROLL

VOX TABLET
ABOUT US
CONTACT
NEXTBOOK PRESS

Tablet Magazine is a project of Nextbook Inc.

Copyright © 2015 Nextbook Inc. All rights reserved. | [Terms of Service & Privacy Policy](#) | Site by [Superfame](#)