

CHAPTER FIVE

Algeria



## Country Snapshot

Jews have lived in Algeria since antiquity, with the first evidence of Jewish life dating to the late Roman era. Although the exact origins of Algerian Jewry remain somewhat unclear, what is known is that over the centuries, the Algerian Jewish population grew as a result of several waves of migration. It is thus that Algerian Jewish life, which had been decimated by the Berber Almohad dynasty in the twelfth century, began to thrive again in the thirteenth century following an influx of Jews from Spain. The Algerian Jewish community would grow yet again over the course of the next two hundred years, as waves of Jews arrived from Spain in 1391 and again in 1492. These Spanish Jews served as links to Iberia and facilitated trade, particularly between North Africa and the Kingdom of Aragon. As a result, the northern Algerian cities of Tlemcen and Constantine became important Jewish centers during the early modern period.

In the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire established a regency in Algeria, which put the area under nominal Ottoman control all while allowing it a significant level of autonomy. Two centuries later, the Ottomans extended their reign further west, taking control of the northern city of Oran in 1792, which had been under Spanish rule since the sixteenth century. Following the withdrawal of the Spanish, the Bey established a Jewish community, which helped to repopulate the area and breathe new life into the city. The resettlement of Jews in Oran was just one of many episodes of Jewish migration that characterized the Ottoman period; just as in neighboring Tunisia, Algeria welcomed the immigration of Livornese Jews in the seventeenth century. As opposed to the case of Tunisia, however, where Jewish migrants from Livorno kept to themselves and established separate communities from the indigenous Jewish population, over time, the Livornese Jews who settled in Algeria mixed with the native population.

The French invasion of 1830 marked the start of several significant political, civil, and cultural shifts that would irrevocably transform the lives of Algerian



MAP 6. Algeria. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

Jews. Even as the French were in the process of establishing their grip on Algeria, the colonial powers began to break down the traditional power structures that had governed Jewish life in Algeria for centuries. Rabbinical courts were dissolved, and the power of the *muqaddams*, or traditional Jewish leaders, was eroded as the French sought to bring Algerian Jews under tighter control. In 1847, the French created Jewish consistories, or administrative bodies, in Algiers, Oran, and Constantine. These consistories, modeled after the ones created under Napoleon in mainland France, were civil bodies that oversaw the administration of the Jewish communities. Despite these attempts to strengthen French control over Algerian Jews, the community by and large resisted the imposition of French Jewish systems onto their ways of life.

This changed significantly with the passing of the Crémieux Decree in 1870. Named after Jewish statesman Adolphe Crémieux, the eponymous decree

bestowed French citizenship upon the overwhelming majority of Algerian Jews *en masse*, irrevocably separating them from Algerian Muslims, who remained colonial subjects. Following the decree, Algerian Jews began to assimilate into French culture at a somewhat steady pace, attending French schools alongside their European peers. Within a couple of generations, French had become the language of the community, and Algerian Jews were climbing the ranks of the social ladder, forming a new middle class and moving from the poorer Jewish Quarters into European neighborhoods. Jews took up different professions, working as artisans, civil workers, and teachers, as well as in the military and liberal professions. It is important to note, however, that the majority of Algerian Jews remained in the lower classes, and that adoption of French language and culture was not uniform across the country. The Jews of Constantine, for example, were less quick to adopt new ways of life, as were rural Jews, and those living in the south.

The Crémieux Decree, while it opened the door for Jewish upward mobility, also stoked the fires of anti-Semitism. European settlers, who were loath to see the entire population of native Jews become their civic equals overnight, were quick to react. Thus in 1871, the year following the decree, Algeria saw the establishment of its first anti-Semitic league, and over the course of the next two decades, anti-Semitic riots occurred in Tlemcen (1881 and 1883) and in Algiers (1884 and 1885). The Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906) in mainland France only added fuel to the fire of intolerance, spurring the creation of more anti-Semitic leagues, and resulting in riots in 1897 in Mostaganem and Oran.

European violence toward Algerian Jews was to rear its ugly head yet again some forty years later, when the Nazi-allied Vichy government came to power in France. Vichy anti-Jewish statutes were applied in both mainland France and Algeria, stripping Jews of their right to work and to own business and property. Furthermore, in 1940, Pétain's government abrogated the Crémieux Decree, thus denying Algerian Jews their French citizenship and rendering them stateless. Algerian Jews remained in this state of legal limbo until 1943, when the decree was reinstated and their rights restored.

Despite the traumatic experiences of World War II, Algerian Jews by and large envisioned their future as intimately linked to France. A small minority even went so far as to join the Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS), a far-right French paramilitary organization whose sole aim was to keep Algeria French—by any means necessary. Although some Jews went the opposite route and fought for the pro-independence Front de libération nationale (National Liberation Front, or FLN), on the whole, Algerian Jews were rather disinterested in nationalist movements—be they Algerian or Zionist—and were thus caught in an uncomfortable middle as the tensions between the colonized population and the colonial power came to a head in the violent Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962). In the aftermath of Algerian independence from France, thousands of Algerian Jews

relocated to France, along with the vast majority of the so-called “pieds-noirs,” or European settlers who had established themselves in the colonial territory. Approximately five thousand Jews remained in Algeria following the 1962 exodus. Today, there are barely a handful of Jews in Algeria, although there is a significant Algerian Jewish diaspora in mainland France, and a sizable minority population in Israel.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*

Bellevue Bel-Air, Constantine

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## Excellent Frenchmen

Jean-Luc Allouche

My last photo from back then: school year 1960–1961; sixth grade, A5; Aumale High School in Constantine (today called Réda Houhou High School). Have a look at the last row in the back. The second from the right, that's me: little rooster with bangs brushed to one side, ears sticking out, a bit of a show-off. The first boy in the same row, standing right next to me, the towhead, that's Pierre Zerbib. My eternal rival ever since elementary school. I systematically outclassed him, to the great joy of my parents, and to the bitter disappointment of his. That year, I swept all the prizes (except for the ones in PE, drawing, and music: nobody's perfect!). You'll excuse my retrospective vanity, but it should be said that our teachers and parents had a certain idea of excellence, and that they placed the bar very high.

Thirty-six pupils on the threshold of their high school years. Fifteen in ties. A few in more or less properly fitting jackets. Hair combed and side-parted. I've forgotten the names of most of my classmates. But I can unerringly identify their "ethnic" background: twenty-one Muslims, or "natives," as we said back then, nine Jews, and six Christians. A fairly representative breakdown of the town as a whole. Please, spare me the anachronistic cries of protest at my "divisive" gaze, as they say today, which doesn't get caught up in politically correct niceties, but rather takes the pulse of a *de facto* "diversity" that had no need for sugar-coated slogans! That's just the way it was in colonial society; we identified ourselves first and foremost by our origins and by our family culture (religious, culinary, etc.). No getting around it. But that didn't mean all these children decked out in their Sunday best couldn't be turned into "excellent Frenchmen," as the Maurice Chevalier song went, though with reference to very different circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

1. The author refers here to a popular song by Maurice Chevalier, "Ça fait d'excellents français" (literally: that makes excellent Frenchmen), released in 1939 and whose goal was to rouse the patriotic



FIGURE 18. The sixth grade, class A5, Aumale High School of Constantine, 1960–1961 school year. Jean-Luc Allouche is the second from the right in the top row.

Excellent Frenchmen? Really? Well, at least in the minds of our schoolmasters. Will I ever forget Mr. Fassier, our French and Latin teacher that year, and his tireless effort to steep us in the beauty of Molière, the subtleties of *rosa, rosa, rosam*, the joys we would soon discover in the Gaffiot?<sup>2</sup> Even back in elementary school, the memory of Mrs. Guedj, Mr. Lounis, Mr. Hassoun, Mrs. Vallée, and Mr. Elbeze, my teachers at the Jean-Jaurès School in the Bellevue neighborhood, remains deeply rooted in my psyche.

For they all had a lofty idea of their own vocation: to raise this unruly band of rascals, more accustomed to brawling on the soccer field and in battles à la *taouat* (makeshift slingshots consisting of a bit of leather and two rubber bands) than to the harsh reality of multiplication tables. Whether we were raggedy *douar* dwellers, or lower middle-class sons of equally lowly office clerks, or well-to-do offspring of local Arab notables, doctors, or merchants, we were all bound by the

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spirit of young men who had just been drafted into the army to defend France during the early days of World War II.

2. Refers to French philologist Felix Gaffiot, whose name became synonymous with his 1934 publication, the *Illustrated Latin-French Dictionary*.

same school dress code and civics lessons, the same regular hygiene reviews (fingernail inspections were among the more humiliating).<sup>3</sup> On occasion, the teacher's steel ruler on our curled fingertips came to settle disputes that would otherwise have disturbed the smooth operation of that virtuous republic of learning.

Our lessons included a semblance of Algerian history (from Jugurtha to Emir Abd el-Kader, by way of Sidi Okba), but without much emphasis.<sup>4</sup> And believe me, it took a while to convince us that we were the proud progeny of Vercingetorix, Charles Martel, Joan of Arc, Bayard, Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Pasteur. Excellent Frenchmen, I'm telling you! Those "hussards noirs" of education were waging a much more worthy war than the one launched by the paras against the mechtas.<sup>5</sup>

Still, my secular and compulsory instruction was coupled with a Jewish education, no less compulsory. I would see quite a few of my classmates in the photograph on Thursdays, Sundays, and during all school holidays at the Talmud-Torah (the "Alliance") on rue Thiers, all under the watchful eye of my father, who was just as concerned about my assimilating our ways and traditions, as he was about my school grades.<sup>6</sup> For, when it came right down to it, the Jews of this town, unflinching upholders of their religious heritage, were no less dazzled by their French citizenship, may Adolphe Crémieux be praised.<sup>7</sup> (It was only much later that I began to reflect upon what was at stake in the Crémieux decree, and what its real consequences were.) But, look, didn't our grandfathers fight in World War I? My own father served in 1939, before being interned in a Foreign Legion work camp once the Vichy regime's anti-Jewish laws went into effect.<sup>8</sup> None of that prevented this "indigène Israélite," or "native Jew" as his military record stated, from fighting at Monte Cassino, then landing in Provence and fighting alongside his fellow Algerian infantrymen and Moroccan auxiliaries. "*C'est nous les Africains . . .*"

3. *Douar* refers to a group of tents or huts that encircle an open space.

4. Jugurtha (160–104 BCE) was Numidian military leader who fought against Rome; Emir Abd el-Kader (1808–1883) was an Algerian religious and military leader who spearheaded the struggle against the French invasion of Algeria in the nineteenth century; Sidi Okba (622–683), or Okba ibn Nafi, was the Arab general who began the Arab conquest of North Africa in the early years of Islam.

5. The *hussards noirs* were dark-uniformed elementary schoolmasters who began teaching when education became compulsory in France in 1881. The term itself, which builds on the word *hussard*, or military horseman, was coined by the French writer Charles Peguy (1873–1914). *Paras* is an abbreviation of *parachutistes*, and refers to a specialized French military unit. *Mechtas* refers to rural villages in North Africa.

6. See Introduction.

7. See Country Snapshot: "Algeria."

8. Under Vichy, according to the first Jewish status law of October 3, 1940, Jews were forbidden from civil service jobs, including teaching; nor could they serve in or work for the military, or participate in any political activities. The law of October 7, 1940, expanded the initial law, abrogating the Crémieux Decree and thus causing Algerian Jews to lose their French citizenship altogether. The following year, in July, under the second Jewish status law, Jews were barred from the financial sector, and were no longer allowed to own businesses.

you know, the marching song of the First African Army . . . And no, it actually wasn't the OAS.<sup>9</sup>

All of that to say that my patriotic education was no less intense than the other two. But here's the thing: there were also my Muslim classmates. I had the feeling they weren't quite so convinced they'd be exemplary Frenchmen any time soon, or French at all, for that matter. One day, a neighbor girl I'd befriended—actually, in the hormonal effervescence of adolescence, I lusted after her—left suddenly for the *maquis* to join the freedom fighters. Other friends took part in the unrest, as the struggle for Algerian independence reached a fever pitch. I understood the intolerable injustice they were all experiencing; but I knew that their freedom would come at the price of another injustice, the inexorable exclusion I would suffer.

The day I discovered that the Muslims in my class, ten-year-olds just like me, were the only ones required to carry ID cards, I knew I could never take a hard-line position against them, though sometimes it wasn't easy. In addition, my immediate family, unlike some of our more pro-OAS uncles and cousins (though we did have some Communist relatives), never cultivated any strong nationalist feelings. This was probably due to the fact that my father had many Muslim colleagues, whom he held in high esteem, and who reciprocated that respect, and these mutual feelings extended well beyond Algerian independence. But most especially, we had become very close to our Muslim neighbors. The Kesranis were my second family; my sister was practically raised by Mrs. Kesrani; their son Faouzi was my best friend, and we have kept up our friendship over the years, despite the geographical distance and the intervening decades of separation.

Even though Constantine was an historically pious center of Qur'anic teaching (the birthplace of Ben Badis, after all), the Islam practiced there was actually fairly relaxed, and it never really seemed foreign to me, certainly not exotic in any way.<sup>10</sup> That said, the "events" caused us to avoid places like place des Galettes in the heart of the old Arab medina, where we used to spend Passover at my aunt's house.<sup>11</sup> This Islam was undoubtedly less demonstrative than what we see today, based on what I have witnessed during recent visits to Algeria, where a proliferation of garish mosques, long beards, and hijabs have forgotten the modest beauty of what was once everyday Islam. I grew up in the shadow of the Sidi El Kettani mosque,

9. The author refers here to the song "Le Chant des *Africains*" (The Song of the Africans), whose refrain is "C'est nous les Africains, qui arrivons de loin" (We are the Africans, who arrive from afar). Originally composed and sung as "We are the Moroccans" after a show of bravery by Moroccans in World War I, the lyrics were eventually modified to include all "Africans"—ironically, perhaps, referring primarily to descendants of white settlers who identified as French. The song was adopted by partisans of French Algeria during the Algerian war for liberation. The OAS (*Organisation de l'armée secrète*) was an extreme paramilitary wing of the movement that sought to keep Algeria "French."

10. Abdelhamid Ben Badis (1889–1940) was a prominent religious scholar and Algerian Islamic reformer. He is best known for having founded the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema (1931).

11. Throughout the long struggle for Algerian independence, and even until the end of the twentieth century, France continued to refer to the conflict not as a war, but rather as the "events" in Algeria.

in a Turkish-style Arab house, amid the muezzin's calls to prayer, the firing of the canon to signal the beginning and the end of the Ramadan fast, the enticements of merchants in the Souk el Asser (*Ya madam, tichri laïdam?* Over here, Madam, some eggs for you today?) and most importantly, the Arabic language, spiced with Hebrew, which we spoke at home (*Ya mou'olam, sidi*, my mother would be constantly imploring a male authority figure). All sorts of Arabic expressions graced our daily joys and woes: *'Hachek* (All due respect), *La'adek* (May you be spared!), *Ta'ych* (May you live! said after someone sneezes), *Maya gzéra* (What a misfortune! It took me a while to figure out that *gzéra* is actually Hebrew), *Harani kabara lik* (May I be your atonement!), and here again, *kabara* is none other than the Hebrew word *kabara*, with the same meaning). Who still uses these expressions today, I wonder?

Oh sure, I would sometimes chuckle when I saw a barber use his rusty blade to slaughter a sheep on Eid, where our ritual butchers seemed like real experts, deploying razor-sharp knives that they would check between every animal they sacrificed, making a tiny cut on their own fingernail.<sup>12</sup> The youthful braggadocio of a young man already a bit bewildered about the grimly uncertain future we were facing. I can still picture scenes from the eve of Passover, when Arab merchants would make sure to stock the requisite ingredients for our holiday season: kosher salt, the *'hout cha'abi*, and so on.<sup>13</sup> I can still see the unforgettable sight of a cheikh dressed all in white who would come to the synagogue founded by my great-great-grandfather to hear the recitation of the Ten Commandments in the unadulterated Arabic of Saadya Gaon (alias "Al-Fayoumi," the brilliant ninth-century Egyptian rabbi). Even today, on the occasion of Chavouot (Pentecost), Jews of the Constantine diaspora recite his homilies, without always understanding them.<sup>14</sup>

Do I need to remind you of Malouf, the music that was the veritable soundtrack of our childhoods?<sup>15</sup> At home, my parents were constantly bickering over who, in their opinion, was the greatest singer. For my father, it was Raymond Leyris; for my mother, Fergani. The languorous melodies of this Arab-Andalusian music, with the local inflections of my native town, have stayed with me ever since. Naturally, they accompanied my son's wedding, even though he has never been to my homeland.

12. *Eid*, which here refers to Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha, is the Festival of the Sacrifice—one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over; it commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy.

13. *'Hout cha'abi* (also rendered *'hout sha'abi*) likely refers to a kind of meatball made with sardines.

14. The Jewish holiday known in English as Shavuot falls fifty days after the second day of Passover, just as Pentecost is celebrated on the 50th day after Easter Sunday.

15. Malouf is a type of music that came to North Africa from Andalusia. Typically played by small orchestras composed of violins, drums, sitars, and flutes, its lyrics are based on forms handed down from classical Arabic poetry. The term itself, *ma'luf*, means "familiar" or "customary."

Practically speaking, we were immersed in an amniotic symbiosis with Arab culture: the values of *‘haram*—taboo, sin, and *‘hchouma* or *‘eib*—shame, modesty, or even prudishness, determined the social confines of our lives, both Jewish and Muslim, more effectively than any barbed wire that enclosed our neighborhoods during curfew. One more image: my mother, alongside the Arab neighbor women, inspecting the sheet soiled with the blood of a young bride, Malika, proving to the city and the world that her honor had been preserved until her wedding night.

For we were all steeped in this same obsession with honor, women’s honor, it goes without saying. And there was no worse offense than insulting the virtue of someone’s mother, sister, or aunt. I dare not repeat here the loud, colorful, terribly virile insults we used to hurl at each other, like ancient Greek warriors before battle.

All of that is dead, but not yet buried. When I bring up this childhood in front of my own children, they’re often surprised: “We get the impression that you had a wonderful childhood, despite the war.”

Well, I guess I did, then. If they say so.

But what will be left for my grandchildren?

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

Alger

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## Diar-es-Saada

Joëlle Bahloul

My class picture from 1958, taken during my second year of elementary school at the Diar-es-Saada School for girls, speaks volumes about my childhood. We were forty pupils, a mix of French and Arab girls. To take this shot, they had us assemble in the school courtyard, in three rows, in front of the big classroom windows. Most of the girls were Arabs. There were only French girls seated in the first row. I'm right in the middle, next to the school mistress's daughter, my rival for the top rank in our class. The second and third rows are made up of mostly Arab girls, all standing, with a French girl here and there. Does this arrangement of pupils correspond to an "ethnic" ranking of Algerian society? More than a half-century after the fact, that is how my memory interprets the picture.

Perched high above the city of Algiers, Diar-es-Saada is an apartment complex built in the early 1950s by the architect Ferdinand Pouillon. In 1957, my parents, sister, and I moved there, into a brand-new three-room unit. Most of the people in the neighborhood were French. A few well-to-do Algerian Arabs also lived there, including our neighbors, the Mekachtalis. During my four years of elementary school, most of my Arab classmates lived in shanty towns on the outskirts of the city, in dilapidated dwellings that utterly lacked the modern conveniences of our apartment. I never ran into any of those girls outside of school; their world was light-years from mine and from the living standards of most French girls.

And so it was that I grew up in the glorious Mediterranean capital of Algiers during the waning days of colonialism. An unbridgeable gap separated me from my Arab classmates, in both our social life and our everyday culture. Arabic was their language; French was the language imposed, the language of the colonizer. We Jewish girls, unlike our "ethnically French" classmates, had a long family and community history in North Africa, and French was the language of our emancipation, our Europeanization, the language we had to master perfectly in order to



FIGURE 19. Second grade class, Diar-es-Saada School for Girls, Algiers, 1958. Joëlle Bahloul is in the first row, fifth from the left.

demonstrate our full-fledged belonging to the French nation. Arabic (or Judeo-Arabic) was the language of our grandparents, a relic of the past that our parents wished to put behind them, and not to pass down to the next generation. French was the language of our compulsory success, a point driven home by my father's particular investment in my performance on French dictation exercises, the stakes of which were nothing less than an historical reckoning.

He tolerated not a single spelling mistake. One or two slip-ups, and I was the shame of the household. I had to get perfect grades just like my sister, five years my senior, whom my parents considered the model pupil. But I also had to outperform the daughter of our schoolmistress. Little Frédérique made my home life miserable. Every month, I had to bring home a victorious report card that declared me first in the class. As a Jew, my father had been interned by the Vichy government at the Teleghma work camp from 1942 to 1944.<sup>1</sup> His two daughters' high achievements at a school that embodied the same country that had so brazenly stripped him of his citizenship amounted to a kind of revenge. By earning

1. Teleghma was one of two internment camps in Algeria where Algerian Jewish soldiers were held during World War II. The decision to intern the Jewish soldiers was initially taken by the Vichy government as part of the October 1940 anti-Jewish legislation (which also abrogated their French citizenship), and was enacted in March 1941 when the order for demobilization and internment was given. The second camp was located at Bedeau. In both camps, the Jewish detainees were primarily given humiliating, useless, and physically demanding work tasks to perform, such as breaking rocks.

better grades than the school mistress's daughter, even more than a decade after my father's internment, I helped erase his years of disgrace. It was as if, as a Jewish girl, I was claiming victory for France for the second time, via the French language. And so it was that at the Diar-es-Saada elementary school, Frédérique and I alternated between first and second place in our class. Coming in second was not acceptable for my father, however, and whenever my report card showed I'd dropped out of first place, even when my teacher's comments were full of praise, the mood back home would be tense. Especially compared to my sister who, my parents never ceased to remind me, had always managed to be first in her class. In their view, the fact that my rival also happened to be the daughter of our school-mistress was no excuse.

I was completely unaware, of course, of the historic dimension of my personal experience as a young Jewish girl in colonial Algeria. And even if I did hear adults saying that Jews sided neither with the colonizer nor with the FLN, I sensed very deeply how much effort my parents put into joining the ranks of the community of French citizens. In the minds of Algerian Jews, this integration carried enormous symbolic weight, as it represented a veritable decolonization. Apart from the tensions of my classroom rivalry, I have only the vaguest memory of my school friendships with French girls, and the only one I do recall is Hélène Delestan, whose family lived right below us. There were very few Jewish girls in my class, and my Algerian childhood was not characterized by a profound connection with the Jewish community of Algiers. My family did not attend synagogue with any regularity, mostly just for weddings, and our Judaism was expressed mainly within the family circle, when we would perform the domestic rituals of the Hebrew calendar.

Of this Algeria in the time of colonial war, I remember more than just the moments of violence. Certainly, we lived in fear of bombings, Arab street demonstrations, and reprisals by the French army, especially in 1960 and 1961. My mother was particularly vulnerable to this constant state of anxiety and dread. Right up until our move to France in the summer of 1961, my father continued to go out fishing every Sunday morning with his brothers in a little boat they kept docked at the Algiers marina. On certain Sundays in that terrible year of 1961, his passion for fishing might well have turned deadly: to reach the marina, he had to go through Arab neighborhoods that were in full revolt. As my mother stood on the balcony all morning awaiting the return of the *pater familias*, my sister and I would try, but usually fail, to distract her from her deep apprehension. To earn forgiveness for his tardy return and to calm my mother's reprimands, he would produce the bounty of the day's catch and demand that we clean and fry the fresh fish at once. Ever since, lunches that include fresh fish have come to symbolize, for me, a sense of relief and of families reunited.

During the final years of French Algeria, the word "war" was never pronounced. It was censored from all adult discussion. In its place, the euphemism

“events” came to designate any manifestation of violence, which historians were later to describe as integral features of the war for independence. My memory has retained some of these “events” more clearly than others, especially the numerous bombs that went off on those summer nights of 1961. Unable to sleep, we ended up counting the explosions, all the while hoping that they would go off as far from our neighborhood as possible.

But a few days before our (definitive) departure for France, a bomb exploded on the doorstep of the apartment building opposite ours. By then, my parents had been saying for a while that it was high time we got ourselves out of that hellish situation, despite the deep grief they felt at the idea of abandoning the land of their childhood and their history.

Until the violence had finally spread to the large coastal cities, my Algerian childhood had been marked by joyous family gatherings on Sundays in spring and summer, picnics in the forests of Sidi-Ferruch, and days spent swimming at the beaches around Algiers. The women would fry that morning’s catch right there at the picnic spot. My aunt Germaine would make pizzas and her famous *cocas* (pastry stuffed with tomatoes, fresh peppers, and onions). The Castel family, whose father was a close childhood friend of my father, would join the gathering of cousins, uncles and aunts, and grandparents, and always bring their delicious contribution to the picnic meal: Mrs. Castel’s caramel flan, more delicious than any flan I have tasted since.

From my Mediterranean childhood in late colonial Algeria, I also prefer to retain my sensory memories of the fragrance of jasmine and eucalyptus, of the glorious colors of bougainvillea, and of the taste of fresh loquats and calentita (a dense chickpea bread) sold by the slice outside the school gate after class.

It was only later in Paris, where I was a student in the 1970s, that I learned the history of the Algerian war for independence, and discovered the Arab culture of my native country, a part of my own culture erased by my experience of a dying colonialism.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

Djelfa

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## Djelfa, My Beloved

Albert Bensoussan

During my teenage years, once a month on a Friday, I used to go down to the Messageries on Amiral-Pierre Boulevard, between Bresson Square and Government Plaza, to pick up a package that had come up on the southern bus line, the Djelfa-Boghari-Medea-Blida-Algiers route.<sup>1</sup> It was a heavy box that contained, we would discover after untying it, an entire sheep, quartered, a gift from Israel Khalfa, our dear friend and my sister's father-in-law.

Djelfa, the Gateway to the Desert, as it was known, was a relatively affluent little garrison town whose principal source of wealth was the military installation established by General Yusuf (who was made French by Napoleon III). French troops kept close watch over this promising Saharan territory that would soon be awash in black gold. Mr. Khalfa ran one of the two grocery stores in town—the other belonged to the Agous, the second most important family in Djelfa, and rival to the Khalfas. His vast establishment was several stores rolled into one: a grocer's, a fine tea shop, a chocolate shop, a bakery, and, last but not least, a strictly kosher butcher shop. This explains why, once a month, Israel would have the *chochet* (ritual slaughterer) certify the butchering of a few animals from the flock, one of which would be reserved for us—a token of his close friendship with my father, going back to when he was an adjutant-major at the Orleans barracks adjacent to the Algiers Kasbah, and young Israel was a private, working as a medic. The meat would last us two to three weeks, in the form of grilled chops, lamb collar with potatoes, *mequena* with brains, saddle of lamb with green peas, trotters for the *lou-bia*, tripe and other bits of offal for the cumin-spiced *shkemba*, and all the mince-meat, mixed with rice, that we used to stuff the delicious *hasbane*, the crowning

1. *Messageries* refers to state-run shipping or courier services.

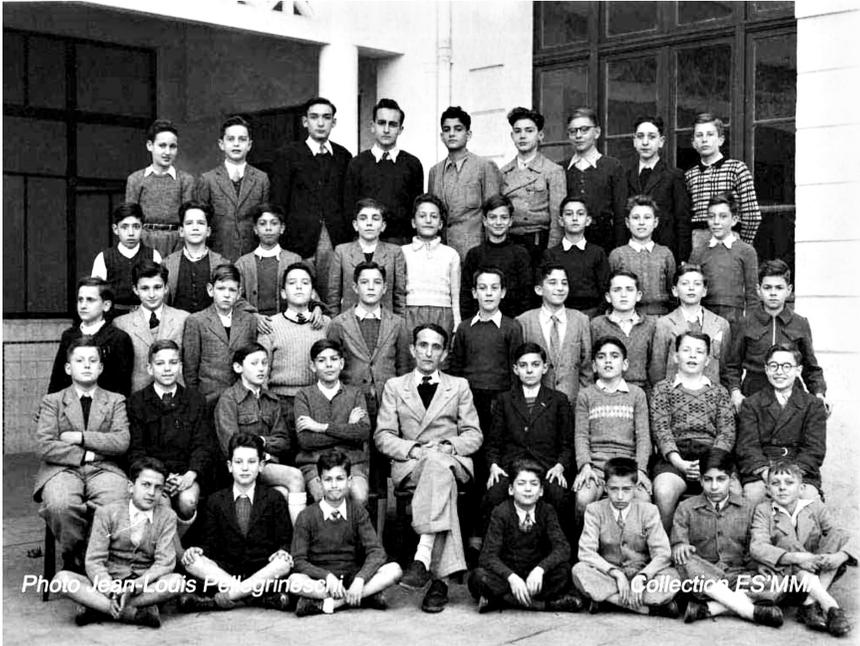


FIGURE 20. Gautier High School, Algiers, 1948. Albert Bensoussan is the third from the left in the second to last row.

glory of our couscous.<sup>2</sup> So, whenever Israel spent Shabbat with us—he came up from Djelfa on a regular basis to settle business matters in the big city—he would wolf down first one plateful, then a second; he'd drool over the tripe, devour the stuffed artichokes and the white beans with lamb trotters that my mother called *tchraa* (sorry, my Arabic is the worst), at which point he would sit back and push his plate away. Then, lo and behold, he'd gallop down the four flights of steps of our apartment building, climb up the Telemly slope, take the path of the Aqueducts all the way over to Sept-Merveilles, only to return to the table a half-hour later to finish off the copious banquet my mother had prepared for him, for she knew he was a jovial food-lover who carried his one hundred extra pounds of flesh well. And so that my mother wouldn't ever skimp on his portions of all that fine, spicy fare, he always said to her: "Someday, my dear Aïcha, I'll pay you back for all this." But my mother, who didn't appreciate being reminded of the name she was given at birth, back in Nedroma, would head back into the kitchen, muttering: "It's Alice, remember? Alice . . ." And that's just how it was.

2. *Meguena* refers to a type of omelet or frittata; *loubia* is a stew with white beans; *shkamba* is a stew made with tripe; *hasbane* (sometimes transcribed as *osbane*, or *osbana*) is a traditional sausage made using sheep intestines as casing and stuffed with lamb, chickpeas, parsley, and spices, which is sometimes referred to as "the haggis of Algeria."

One spring afternoon when I was just five, I was horsing around with my older brother—we were trying to spin a chair on one of its legs, with me sitting on it—and our little circus act ended in catastrophe. I fell, catching my leg on a cross-bar and fracturing my young femur, and my thigh immediately doubled in size. And who was there at the time, sipping cinnamon coffee in the kitchen with my mother? None other than Israel Khalfa. This sturdy giant of a man picked me right up and ran all the way to the Laverne Clinic on avenue de Pasteur, down the hill from where we lived, where the physician put my thigh bone back in place and hoisted it in the air with a pulley so that the fracture could mend; and there I was, lying flat on my back with my leg in the air for forty days, not one less. And when that time was up, the same Israel Khalfa, medic extraordinaire, who served the 9th Zouaves at the Orleans barracks, came to pick me up at the clinic exit. He loaded me into the front seat of his sedan and, six hours and some 185 miles later, I finally discovered Djelfa, at the intersection of the roads from Laghouat, the oasis that was home to the Khalfa family's Mozabite ancestors; from Aflou, where Leïla Sebbar was born right around the time of my Djelfa arrival; and from Bou-Saada and the Ouled Nail mountains, birthplace of Israel Khalfa's beautiful wife—slender figure, little white feet in her *kabkab* that clicked along the tile floors, and oh! those intensely Prussian-blue eyes that you sometimes find among the ladies of Algeria's deep south.<sup>3</sup>

During that time, I walked with a cane, dragging my left leg, the one that had been patched together, and for an entire month, I followed a strict diet of semolina and dates that helped me put on weight, regain my strength, and return to Algiers a little less fragile and a little more rebellious. Absolutely aghast, my mother, who used to enjoy speaking in a secret language with my father at night in bed, could not believe that I was now speaking Arabic like a native-born Djelfan. I got my education in three main places there. First, the market, where twice a week I would tag along with my protector's older brother, the one we called Ammi Bahé—nickname, need I mention, for Abraham, or rather, for Brahim—who practiced the profession of tooth-pulling.<sup>4</sup> I would sit on a mat spread out on the sandy ground and admire how adroitly he handled the dental forceps. The second place was the antechamber of the synagogue, where the local rabbi would crack the whip over those of us who were preparing for the bar mitzvah (actually, over all the boys of that age), sitting on the ground and muttering in Hebrew. And last, but far from least, the courtyard of the house where I played with Nessim, the master's nephew who was a head taller than me, and his little sister Rivka, who loved to brandish my cane, which she pretended was Abd el-Kader's saber, *ya ouilli*.<sup>5</sup>

3. Most likely of Ottoman origin, *kabkab* (sometimes rendered *qabqab* or *qab qab*) are platform clogs made of wood, often carved and decorated somewhat ornately.

4. *Ammi* is a variation on the Arabic word for uncle. In this case, it is an honorific title, rather than a reference to a blood relative.

5. *Ya ouilli*, typically transliterated as *ya wili*, is an expression of astonishment.

It wasn't a cane that the rabbi wielded, but a long switch that he waved over our heads as we crouched on the floor mats, barefoot, all wearing *chéchias*, as was proper for boys who had to learn Hebrew and read all the holy texts.<sup>6</sup> I had trouble following, since he only spoke in Arabic, just like all the kids. *Ya Daoud, kelb ben kelb!*<sup>7</sup> he shouted at the class dunce who, if he talked back, would be grabbed by the two biggest boys in the group and laid on the floor, legs lifted high so that the rabbi could aim for the soles of his feet with the switch, causing the unruly boy to scream in pain with every blow. During this, I busied myself with my chalk and slate attempting to trace the tricky architecture of the aleph: the slanted bar, the upper and lower horns—which the earliest scribes designed based on the head of an ox.

“What did you learn today?” Rivka would ask, shaking her henna-dyed purple curls.

But since she was asking me in Arabic, I just shook my illiterate head, and she shrugged her shoulders in return. We would sit on a little bench next to two baskets filled with semolina and crushed dates, where she would dip her cupped hand, first in one, then in the other. Next Thursday, or maybe Sunday, she would accompany her mother, Lalla Ralia, to the foyer of the synagogue where we boys would be droning our *Aleph-Beth-Gimel-Dalet*, signaling that it was time for our ten o'clock snack—those soft, crumbly balls that would fill out the cheeks of the rabbi's entire brood.<sup>8</sup> What were they called, that special treat? I used to know, but I've forgotten everything; I'll tell you why.

And since I was sitting there watching Bahé on that Monday or Wednesday, market day, with all the *fellahs* and Djelfa notables crowding around the various stalls, the tooth-puller let me hold the forceps, the tool of his trade.<sup>9</sup> It was the only pair he had. He set a goblet and a bottle of Phénix brand anisette on the ground—sometimes, it was the anisette more than the toothache that attracted customers. Ammi Bahé was a gentle person; you never heard anyone scream in pain as he did his work, as was often the case back in Algiers, where patients' cries pierced the adjacent walls of the waiting room of our bona fide dentist, whose name must have determined his vocation, Dr. Machtou.<sup>10</sup> “*Babata*,” said Bahé, moving slowly; but since I had such trouble understanding the old man's Arabic, I

6. A *chéchia* (often transliterated as *sheshia*) is a soft skullcap worn by many Muslim men, particularly in North Africa. In certain regions, it was also worn by Jewish men and boys.

7. The expression *Ya Daoud, kelb ben kelb* contains both an address (the equivalent of “Hey David”), and an insult (“son of a dog”—literally, here, “dog, son of a dog”).

8. *Aleph-Beth-Gimel-Dalet* are the first letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and so the expression indicates that the pupils are reciting their “ABCs.”

9. *Fellahs* are peasants or farmworkers.

10. The irony of Dr. Machtou's name derives from the fact that there is a common dental instrument referred to as a *machtou* (a type of plugger, or tamp). The instrument was certainly named after its creator, world-renowned endodontist, Pierre Machtou, who would not have been a household name at the time of the author's childhood. The irony is thus likely a product of the author's adult life.

thought he said *batata*, or potato, and I couldn't understand what a potato had to do with someone getting a tooth pulled.<sup>11</sup> But it hardly mattered, and in less time than it took for me to repeat "potato" to myself, the tooth had been removed and the cupful of anisette had been swished around and swallowed. Djelfa knew no pain, woe, or agony. And that's just how it was.

I would return occasionally to Djelfa for an entire month in the summer, laughing again at the bad boys getting foot-whipped at the synagogue (it was a way for me to feel I belonged). Since I was already kind of grown up, Mr. Khalfa, whose shop was closed on the Sabbath, woke me up early on Saturdays and took me to the hammam, at the time of day reserved for men only. This was something he'd always done with his own son (who would later marry my sister), but who was now away at boarding school in Medea, so at synagogue I would take his place beside his father, who was so proud of his lineage, and whose *talet* would cover my forehead during benediction.<sup>12</sup> But before any of that, we had to be purified in the incredibly stifling humidity of the public bath. I turned my body over to the expert hands of the masseur, who used not only his oiled fingers to loosen our joints, but also his feet, as he stood on us with his full weight, massaging our backs with each step as we lay listlessly by the pool of steaming water. We would then cool off in a different room, lying on mats where we would be served piping hot tea, whose taste and fragrance put me in a state of euphoria I have never experienced since.

Back home after prayer, the women were awaiting our return, and Simha, the beautiful German-eyed wife (everyone remarked on it, since in this part of the world, most people were dark-skinned, or even black), brought in the wine and lamb croquettes for the Sabbath benediction. Little Rivka was always there, ready to slip the tiny mound of semolina and date paste that she'd patiently confectioned the previous evening into my hand. And as always, as she poured something for me to drink, she made me pronounce the word that was so difficult in my "European" throat, *kakhra*—which means bottle, right? Yes, the hardest word to pronounce in Arabic, and she would laugh out loud at my gaping mouth and my impotent glottis, proceeding to call me *khmar*, which means something like idiot, or nincompoop.<sup>13</sup> But now Rivka had grown up, and I couldn't see her unless she was veiled, because Jews in this southern region were more modest than their city sisters, especially in Algiers, where they always went to parties on Sundays at the Jewish Student Union on rue Nocard (a cul-de-sac off rue Michelet), a fertile terrain for husband hunters and the starting point of many an endogamous union.

11. *Babata* is likely a deformation of the Arabic word *belbata*, which is related to waiting and patience; in this context, we might understand Bahé as enjoining his patient to "be patient."

12. A *talet* (or *tallit*, in English) is a fringed prayer shawl worn primarily by Jewish men in more observant traditions.

13. The author's *khmar* is likely a phonetic rendering of a certain pronunciation of *hmar*, which means donkey in Arabic.

Back to Djelfa again, and for the last time—long before the rebels had locked down the town with their campaign of terror. It was one afternoon during a *Hana* celebration.<sup>14</sup> Make sure you pronounce *ha* all the way in the back of your throat, more like *kha*, because this ceremony involves animal sacrifice. Nessim was getting engaged to Israel's youngest niece—maybe she was also called Aïcha, a name still common among our mothers and girls back then. I was eighteen at the time, and had come down especially for the event. The old Salmson that had driven me to and from Djelfa in the past had long since given up the ghost, and we now took the far more convenient Inox, as it was nicknamed, a little aluminum-clad train that ran on a narrow-gauge track between Blida and Djelfa, taking (only) five hours. You had to catch the regular train between Algiers and Blida, then change platforms at the Rose du Sahel station to get on what felt like a toy train, which would often catch fire on the high plateau in summer, in the heat of the day. The Muslims on board would take advantage of the necessary stop to get off, unroll their prayer rugs on the sand on either side of the train, and pray for God's mercy, while the others snored away in their compartments, sweat dripping from their brows.

That evening, in the stately villa of the elder Khalfa, the betrothed were ushered in: Nessim, surrounded by his companions who had already circled the house seven times, as prescribed by ritual, and Aïcha, the fiancée, flanked by her mother and godmother, a cloud of transparent tulle surrounding her head. In the center of the ceremonial room, a large tray bore the pyramid of henna paste, topped by a date as a sign of fertility and happiness. That night, we danced late into the night to the strains of traditional *nouba*, but also to the daring *pasos dobles* that groaned out of a brand new Teppaz turntable brought straight from the merchant's store.<sup>15</sup>

Rivka was displaying some daring behavior, despite the presence of her two brothers who, I can still see them now, were sitting to her left and right on chairs pushed up against the wall. She had let down her copper-colored curls (because of the dye), and her ripe throat let loose hoarse ululations at each dip and bow of the fiancée, whose henna-dyed hands bore a starry pattern that she would wave before the dazzled eyes of Nessim, cupping his face as they danced together. It was then that Rivka got up—I'm sure this is exactly how it happened—and, imitating her cousin, came over and surrounded my face with her chubby hands. Oh yes, she had grown quite a bit in those teen years. And we danced, first Arab-style, each holding one end of a scarf that separated us, then drawing closer; but we also danced French-style, for even in remote places like Djelfa, we knew how to be modern, and I could feel her shapely waist between my hands, which were

14. The *Hana* or *henna* ceremony refers to the practice—common among Muslims, throughout the Middle East and South Asia, but also among Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews—of applying henna paste to the hands of brides and grooms in a gesture of protection and benediction.

15. Found throughout the Maghreb, *nouba* (or *nūba*) is a musical form with Arabo-Andalusian origins.

trembling slightly because I knew that everyone, including her brothers, were watching us. A bit later, as there was still a little henna left from the pyramid, she took the flat stick and dipped into the supply, removing a tiny amount the size of a date, and tucked it into the palm of my hand, completing the gesture by wrapping a gauze ribbon around my hand, tying it in a bow. And then she asked me to do the same to her. Was I really so clumsy? I smeared a turd-like ball of the henna paste into her open palm, which I then wrapped in a fine piece of lace. After that, we danced the night away!

The next day brought the return rail trip, and I rode home barely able to hold my head up from lack of sleep, my left hand (or was it the right?) still enclosing the doubloon-shaped bit of henna, which I discovered the next morning when I finally unwound my bandaged hand and saw the perfect circle of rust-colored dye. During the entire trip home, I thought of Rivka who was so grown up, so filled out, probably from eating so many semolina-and-date balls, whose name I had on the tip of my tongue, but have managed to forget in the interim. For as soon as I got back to the house, the phone rang and it was Israel Khalfa:

“So, Benyamine,” he shouted through the receiver. “It seems you got engaged last night?”

“Wh . . . wha . . . what?” I stammered, unable to speak, my throat in a knot with all those Arabic words that were even more unpronounceable than usual.

“Yes, little Rivka’s brothers were looking for you this morning. So, what do you say, *yabné*, my son, tell me, *yabné* . . .?”<sup>16</sup>

Dumbstruck, I hung up the phone—yes, I was incapable of uttering a single word—and at that moment, all the Arabic words that Rivka had so patiently taught me since my awkward age of five were blown away in a deadly gust of simoom wind. And that’s how it came to pass that I learned nothing, and forgot everything.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

16. *Yabné*, typically transliterated *yabni*, means “my son.”

Rue Joséphine, Bône

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## Between Agony and Delight

Patrick Chemla

I know how wrenching the experience of exile was for my parents. I know that my mother had to practically drag my father away, as he couldn't accept the idea of leaving, of quitting his clerical job. For him, this forced departure felt like he was running away from something, and indeed, he was: after independence, as a "European" in Algeria, he found himself abruptly cast as representing the boss, as somehow symbolizing France and, as such, subjected to pressures and threats that, once in France, sent him into a psychic tailspin from which he was never to fully recover.

My brother, eighteen years my senior, used to tell me what it was like growing up poor. A relative poverty, to be sure, since the apartment where we lived had been purchased by our grandmother with the insurance money she got when her husband, a railroad worker, was killed in an accident. This apartment was located on the edge of the place d'Armes, which back then was synonymous with the Arab quarter. The place name itself immediately calls to mind a paradoxical proximity and distance, for just one street—rue Joséphine—stood between us and a world we would have to leave behind in order to gain access to the better European neighborhoods. As it happened, the Arabic-speaking part of our family still lived in the Arab quarter.

My brother was a child during World War II. His loss of French nationality during the Vichy regime scarred him for life. The whole family underwent a period of intense anxiety. But after Liberation and the lifting of the anti-Jewish measures, his only desire was to move beyond that dark chapter of history and to rebuild a new life, a future that would necessarily be Algerian.

What also emerged from my brother's narrative was a happy life with robust friendships among his adolescent peers of all religious origins. Unlike my sister, four years his junior, whose carefree childhood included no memory of contact



FIGURE 21. On the left, six-year-old Patrick Chemla, on summer vacation in Bergère-sous-Montmirail (Champagne). He is accompanied by his mother, his older brother, his older brother's wife, and their child.

with Arabs, boys like him could circulate freely and defy the invisible boundaries among the confessional communities. Even today, he is still proud of his friendships with Arabs—the word “Muslim” was not in use back then—and in particular, with those who would become local leaders in the FLN. Having gone to France for college, he came back in the summer of 1960, wife and children in tow, and was greeted at the dock by his best friend, an Arab. But even though he planned to settle back in Algeria, whose independence he fully supported (to the great disapproval of our parents), he soon came up against the harsh realities of a country steeped in hatred. Everyone around him strongly recommended that he stop seeing his FLN friend, who himself was the first to urge my brother to go back to France, in what proved prophetic terms, as “there was no future for Jews in this country.” And with that, he decided to take me with him to France when I was nine years old, leaving behind our parents, whose friends assured us they’d do everything they could to see that they remained safe.

As for me, my childhood was marked by war (I was three when it started), but also filled with maternal love. I learned very early that we were Jews, and that Arabs were not to be trusted, even though they were our closest neighbors, with whom my mother traded cakes and cookies on the religious holidays that gave rhythm to the calendar. Sometimes, in exchange for delivering the goodies, I’d

get rewarded with a delicious *kesra* that the neighbor cooked over her *kanoun*.<sup>1</sup> As French became my native language, I assimilated a whole colonial vocabulary, while my parents spoke to each other in Arabic when they didn't want me to understand. This is why I learned no Arabic from them, nor did I have the chance to pick it up from the neighborhood, since the sectarian threat that loomed over the city meant I wasn't allowed to go out. It was only once I got to school that I was able to make friends with a few Arab kids. But we would naturally part ways as soon as we left the school grounds, and the only friends I was allowed to invite over were Jewish.

One day when some school chums came over for a birthday party, I was hurt and embarrassed by their contemptuous looks and snide remarks when they saw where I lived. I suddenly became painfully aware of our poverty, the stray cats that left a strong stench of urine in the stairwell, everything that made up the ordinary existence of Algeria's working-class Jews. I knew full well that there was such a thing as rich Jews—whenever I'd ask for some expensive treat my father would respond, "I'm not a Rothschild"—but we didn't socialize with any. And yet, I always had the impression—an accurate one, it turned out—that we were not poor, and that I could get whatever I wanted "if I worked hard at school." It was impossible to overemphasize the importance of school; a fanatical belief in emancipation through learning and cultural betterment prevailed among families of our social rank.

Of course, there was also the beach during summer vacation, and I still have fond memories of the warm waters of the southern Mediterranean. I especially recall how we'd go out for our evening stroll on *cours Bertagna*, the big square where families would all gather after dinner. The adults spoke in hushed tones of the barbarous acts committed by the *fellaghas*, their whispers reaching my ears as I enjoyed a lemon sorbet, the famously fragrant *créponné* that you can't find anywhere today.<sup>2</sup> Agony and delight were thus inseparable, leaving a lasting impression on me. Most of the time, once school let out for the day, I would hole up at home where I had unfettered access to my sister's book collection. This library was where I learned about Greek and Latin mythology, but it also gave me a chance to read my father's detective novels on the sly, along with other, more licentious works. The pleasure of reading has stayed with me ever since, as well as a love of language, and undoubtedly, a love of republican, secular France. I knew very early that what was being presented to me as fact didn't add up: on the way to the market, when I would ask my mother why the "natives" we'd pass were all barefoot, I never believed it was because they couldn't stand wearing shoes. As for acknowledging that Jews were also "natives," that my family name was that of a Berber

1. *Kesra* is a savory Algerian flatbread cooked in a frying pan or on a griddle; a *kanoun* is a charcoal brazier used for cooking, generally made from terracotta.

2. *Fellaghas* refers to armed militants fighting for Algerian independence.

tribe long ago converted to Judaism, it took me a very long time to excavate that repressed historical truth. However deeply anchored in their Judeo-Arab culture, my parents strove to be recognized as French, and so denied their Arab identity. They even invented a genealogy linking us to Sephardic aristocracy, as if to erase any suspicious indigenous heritage.

They were also profoundly religious, but they practiced their faith in a paradoxical fashion: although we did eat kosher, as a rule, I was to keep it a secret from the rabbi that I would occasionally indulge in a ham sandwich. My mother, although she had never read a word of Lacan, knew full well that forbidding anything only makes it more desirable, and she was not about to deprive her children! And so, shrimp and other delectable seafood often made an appearance in our Judeo-Arab dishes. I have to say that our table was always bountiful, open to all, and that both the constraints and the pleasures of oriental hospitality provided ample excuses to feast. And all that without alcohol, apart from a very watered-down anisette: an odd taboo surrounded the consumption of wine, which we linked to our experience with an alcoholic uncle, but which likely had more to do with our close proximity to Islam. And then, at each year's Passover celebration, we would sacrifice a sheep. The two Jewish families in the building would pitch in to purchase the animal, which would then be kept on the rooftop terrace for a while before the holiday, as if we'd adopted the thing, until the fateful day when the rabbi, whose hand I had to kiss, would show up to perform the ritual slaughter. To say that this scene made an impression on me would be a massive understatement, such was the holy terror it struck in my soul, even while the rest of the household experienced it as a festive event. Perhaps I was already marking my distance from a world that would vanish overnight once I arrived in France, where such unlawful bloodletting would naturally be out of the question. And many years later, when I did some research into the matter, I found that official Judaism now completely avoids any reference to animal sacrifice, even though it had been an annual ritual throughout my early childhood. It was as if this obvious link to Aïd attached itself to us even in our exile on Christianized shores, making it necessary to deny both its existence and the significance of our common Abrahamic heritage.<sup>3</sup>

. . .

Forty years later, I felt the need to go back to Bône, which had since become Annaba, and revisit the sites of my childhood. The apartment was occupied by my mother's former maid. She welcomed my wife and me warmly. She asked after each member of the family whose every secret she had come to know. She wept over the death of my mother, who was her friend and used to translate French for

3. Aïd, which refers here refers to Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha, is the Festival of the Sacrifice— one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over, it commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy.

her. In the background, I saw a photograph of her husband in his ALN fighter's uniform.<sup>4</sup> This was all the confirmation I needed to understand how much they had protected my parents, how strong their friendship must have been despite the racism that reigned in colonial Algeria. Truth be told, I'd already known about our guardian angels, from the time my father barely escaped an assassination attempt in a back alley: he sensed he was being followed, and a shouted warning from one of our neighbors, a fishmonger, saved his life.

What has stayed with me from my war-torn Jewish Algerian childhood is the traumatic memory of unremitting terror in the face of horrors described to me in only the most veiled terms. This trauma has a lot to do with my political activism, and with my turn to psychotherapy. But this same trauma is also, for me, an anchor in the Judeo-Arabic culture of my youth—a culture that is a source of abundance, and of openness to a world that I persist in envisioning as cosmopolitan.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

4. ALN refers to the *Armée de libération nationale*, or the National Liberation Army. The ALN was the military wing of the political movement known as the FLN (*Front de libération nationale*, or National Liberation Front).

La Marine, Algiers

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## An Algiers Girlhood

Alice Cherki

Coming up with a photo of me as a child has been quite a feat, my dear Leïla. And it's not only because so many of our books, furniture items, and picture albums, as well as my teenage diaries, were never forwarded after my parents' hasty post-1962 departure, and thus ended up in the cellar of our house in Hydra, but also because it was uncommon back then to have one's picture taken other than by a professional in a studio. That's how I ended up, finally, unearthing a studio photo taken with my older brother. I'm decked out in one of those classic smocked dresses that inevitably characterized my childhood, and my hair is cut in a short Louise Brooks bob, with bangs that lay flat over my ears, a style I revolted against as a teenager to liberate my lighter-colored, naturally curly locks.

I was born and raised in Algiers, capital of colonial Algeria, far away from the southern deserts or the mountains of Constantine. Capital of colonial Algeria, but also capital of free France between 1942 and 1945, which lends my childhood a different tone from that of my cousins and friends who lived in Laghouat, Setif, or Tlemcen. The most pervasive image of my earliest years is that of my paternal grandfather's villa. "The villa," as we used to call it, was located in upper Algiers; not in the chic European neighborhoods of Hydra or El-Biar, where mixing with non-Europeans was rare, but just beyond Bab-el-Oued, across from the cathedral of Notre-Dame d'Afrique, more commonly called "Notre-Dame l'Afrique."<sup>1</sup> Getting there was quite a hike: the tram took you as far as place des Trois Horloges, and then the trolley got you only as far as Maillot Hospital. After that, you had to walk, or rather, climb, since the slope was very steep, and once you reached the villa gate, you still had to go up a long flight of flat, wide steps. Halfway up the staircase, there lived an "Arab" family, tenants of my grandfather's, I believe, though I was

1. The English name for Notre Dame d'Afrique is *Our Lady of Africa*; the author explains that the cathedral was often called, mistakenly, *Our Lady Africa*.



FIGURE 22. Three-year-old Alice Cherki at the photographer's studio in Algiers.

never really sure. Nor did I know whether they were originally from Kabylia, or the Aurès region, or from Algiers itself, since they all got lumped together under the same “Arab” label. We’d say hello as we passed, most often in French, or mumble a *salam aleikoum*, as we made our way up the stairs that led to the rusty doorway of our grandfather’s villa. We went to visit the paternal grandparents fairly often, for all Jewish holidays and sometimes on the Sabbath. Occasionally, my brother and I would even stay over for a few days at a time.

He was an imposing man, this grandfather, with steely gray eyes, a short beard, *gandoura*, and *tefillin*.<sup>2</sup> In the morning, he’d shut himself in the kitchen and talk to some invisible person I couldn’t identify. I was later to learn that he’d been a real tyrant with his children. Having forced nearly all his daughters into endogamous marriages, he also “arranged” my father’s marriage to the daughter of a man who was Jewish, but in a manner different from his own—an agnostic, in fact—but whom he held in high esteem nonetheless. The girl was a beauty, and my father was handsome. From what I’ve heard—I wasn’t there, obviously—it was a grand civil and religious wedding ceremony, complete with steam bath, a henna party, and all those traditions that I’ve pretty much forgotten, I must admit. It was like what the Muslims did, different and the same all at once. At the hammam, which we called the Moorish baths, the mother-in-law and all her daughters sized up the body of the future bride, which they all agreed was a bit on the skinny side. And the girl, already seventeen and brought up in a less traditional way than most, felt a bit awkward, but said nothing. For she had chosen her husband-to-be; she hadn’t said “yes” under pressure. She’d been introduced to him, found him very much to her liking, but had felt perfectly free at the time to refuse the suitor, if such had been her wish, as she enjoyed telling people many years later.

Grandfather spoke fluent Arabic, and could read in Hebrew and in French, the lingua franca of all business transactions. He spoke to his grandchildren in French as well, though it was a French sprinkled with incomprehensible words, probably borrowed from the Judeo-Arab dialect, which I took to be terms of endearment meant exclusively for me. Even though I was a girl, he used that dialect to call me “strong-willed” or “inquisitive.” My maternal grandfather also spoke perfect Arabic, the language he would use with the dock workers down at the port, or with the homeless and destitute, whom he’d try to help out, much to his wife’s displeasure. My father also spoke colloquial Algerian Arabic. He had co-workers who were called “Muslim natives,” with whom he had the most cordial relations, full of mutual respect and, at times, a knowing complicity.<sup>3</sup> There was a real solidarity

2. A *gandoura* is a long, light-weight, loose-fitting long tunic, worn by both men and women in North Africa; *tefillin* (also called phylacteries) refers to small black leather boxes containing verses from the Torah and designed to be strapped around the arm and forehead during prayer—a practice usually reserved for men in highly observant Jewish communities.

3. Translated here as “Muslim natives,” the original expression “indigènes musulmans” belongs to a particular colonial vocabulary whereby non-European and non-Jewish inhabitants of Algeria were

between him and his employees, established in that curious Franco-Algerian mash-up of a language.

My father always spoke about a friend and colleague of his with a patently Arab-sounding name who, during World War II, allowed him to use his name as proxy so that he could continue working under the Vichy laws, which banned Jews from a wide range of jobs. My brother had a good friend, a Muslim, at his high school, the Lycée Bugeaud, now Abd el-Kader High School, a boy who grew up to become a medical doctor. My ninety-three-year-old aunt still remembers her classmates, girls from well-to-do Muslim families, all very pretty and more brazen than she. And she talks about Suzanne, the daughter of a marine engineer, who ended up marrying Jean Amrouche, as if this were the most natural thing in the world.<sup>4</sup> “We were in the same class together,” she said, “from middle school through graduation.” She’d go on about how different the two sisters were, with the elder Suzanne more intellectual with a stocky build, while her younger sister was slender and supple, and a bit scatterbrained.

Still, these friendships never went further than the threshold of our homes. That’s just the way it was. I don’t recall there ever being a Muslim at our table, even on those Seder evenings when tradition has us leave one seat empty for an outsider in need. And the only little girl to enter the family home was a friend from grade school whose father was a teacher, a Kabyle Muslim whose French wife was most likely raised Christian but, like her husband, was agnostic. Granted, we were in Algiers, which is hardly representative of the entire country. Yet, even in Orléansville, the town of the first earthquake, or Ain Basnam in the Chelif valley, children and teens alike made friends exclusively with peers from their own religious group, whether Muslim, Jewish, or Christian. And even among Christians, I believe that Catholics and Protestants did not mingle much. We lived in worlds, or rather, in spheres, that were foreign to each other. On the school playground, I would speak French with my friends Fatiha, Nadjma, and Khedija as we played jump-rope. But they never invited me over. Their world was a mystery to me; I wasn’t allowed in. A tacit understanding, a mystery safeguarded. The situation was different with the Catholic girls, however, for I knew from a very young age that they wanted nothing to do with me. I would have to wait until I went away to college before making friends with them and discovering common ground with those who were then called progressive Christians. It was also at university that I met up with old Algerian friends, whose causes I had come to espouse.

To each his God, even for the nonpracticing, even for the nonbelievers. But when I look back on all of that today, I have to say that when it came to my particular

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referred to as *indigènes* or indigenous, and governed by exclusionary legislation known as the *Statut juridique des indigènes d’Algérie* (the Indigenous Algerian Juridical Statute).

4. Jean Amrouche (1906–1962), also called Jean el Mouhouv Amrouche, was an Algerian poet and journalist of Kabyle origin, whose family had converted to Catholicism. He is one of Algeria’s earliest French-language writers.

group of family and friends, there was never even a hint of racism. Never in my grandfather's villa, nor in my own home, did I ever hear a disparaging word against Muslims as a group. Speaking for myself, racial slurs were simply not present in my upbringing. Toward the end of World War II, my mother was active in the Union of Algerian Women, which was allied with the Communist Party of Algeria, and she volunteered at a mother-and-child social service called *La Goutte de lait*.<sup>5</sup> At the neighborhood market—between Lycée Bugeaud (a school for boys, except for the college prep classes, which admitted girls, most notably Assia Djebar), and the Nelson Beach House, sandwiched between the Lazergues Middle School (today Frantz Fanon High School) and the ice cream vendor Grosoli (a sumptuous Italian *gelateria*)—the fruit and fish vendors knew who my mother was, and recognized her immediately as “the blue-eyed Jewess,” her affectionate nickname. I walked, or rather, trotted alongside her, silent but steeped in the smells and sounds, the burst of voices in that Franco-Algerian dialect that I was too young to identify as such, but which was so natural to my ear. And especially, based on my “experience” of rejection at the state-run French nursery school, I was keen to absorb the complexity of the adult world.

I've lived a long life, and every moment bears the trace of this world where I was born and raised. The sounds of the Arabic language, the way people greeted one another with those interminable “*salam aleikum*.”<sup>6</sup> The muezzin's call—and it was a live voice in those days—was like a pleasant soundtrack humming in the background. And the music, too—Arab-Andalusian, Judeo-Andalusian, who could tell?—whose melodious strains mixed with Brahms concertos, Beethoven symphonies, or Edith Piaf crying over Marcel Cerdan. And all the words having to do with pain: “Where does it hurt? Your heart? Your head? *Ouin youjaa fik? rasik, galbik??*”<sup>7</sup> And our maid Aïcha, who helped my mother around the house in the late 1940s, and who would forbid me from entering when the tile floor was still wet from her mopping. She was a big, beautiful woman, but I especially remember that she had what was called a “sleeping child.” Back then, even after my little brother came into the world, I had only the vaguest notions about all things sexual, but the idea that Aïcha was carrying inside her, now and forever, a sleeping child, was something that both perplexed and awed me for the longest time.

Do you know where the most trivial details of lost memory reside? For me, I have to confess, they come to land on the beignets of Algiers, those airy sugar-powdered fritters they sold down at the foot of the Casbah or on rue Michelet,

5. *La Goutte de lait*, which literally means “the drop of milk,” is a French-based nonprofit organization devoted to helping new mothers feed and care for their infants.

6. The Editors observe that the author uses two different transcriptions of this greeting (*aleikoum* and *aleikum*). We have maintained this inconsistency, which may be the result of a simple editing error, but might also be the result of the author's own indecision as to how best to render in written French the oral Arabic expressions that were such an important part of her childhood.

7. Standard transcription would be “*Ween yujaa fik?*”

today's rue Didouche. The sight of the dough puffing up as it hit the hot oil used to fascinate us as children. It was my favorite treat, far more delicious, in my view, than those pastries stuffed with almond paste and dripping in honey that our mothers, Jewish and Muslim alike, were so adept at confectioning. Years later, and for a short time only, I would find those same beignets in Paris on rue Saint-Séverin or rue des Écouffes. I've been searching in vain ever since for those long-lost vendors. Even in Algiers.

Another trace of the past, this one less anecdotal, is the remarkable understanding, the immediate empathy that I feel with regard to young Muslim women, whether born in Algeria or in France, several decades my junior. I can guess what they're going to say when they talk about their childhoods, the stern fathers, the strict mothers who won't befriend their daughters and who sometimes, just sometimes, seem to want them to suffer the same fate as they did; and the brothers, oh yes, the brothers who set themselves up as the guardians of their sisters' virtue. Even today, it is difficult for me to decide whether this strange familiarity is a function of our shared cultural traditions, or whether it is the result of the way those traditions have been changed by the other world, and by the perilous navigation back and forth between one world and the other.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Rue de Vienne, Oran

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## Kaddish for a Lost Childhood

Roger Dadoun

Which way, left or right? Sea breeze out of the West, or arid inland wind, Arab desert realm? Stage left, domestic inferno with no exit, or stage right, a garden they call Eden? Going up or going down? Once outside the gate of the low-slung house with its interior “patio”—nothing but a wretchedly miniscule courtyard—the child, left to his own devices, hesitates. A tiny, motionless wavering: “Where to?” Might it be here, in this pause, in this lapse, that his primordial childhood is anchored: the pivot—the blind spot of the whole city—*Wahrān*? Because, quite simply, the street where the child will venture, the street he’ll soak in, fear, and get drunk on—*eh borracho!*—is a smooth street with a gentle, almost imperceptible slope, just enough to make soccer balls and marbles lose their way and end up in a sewer drain, helpless before the pull of gravity.<sup>1</sup> It’s a street that grants our *carricos*, makeshift race cars built of wooden boards, scrap iron, and ball bearings, the honor of hurtling all the way down to the line of horse-drawn carriages stationed along the dingy square down below—that is, provided our scrappy little pavement-level vehicles are not confiscated by infuriated merchants or concerned parents.

Everything located upstream holds still for just a fraction of a second, long enough for infinite childhood vibrations to resonate. From this median point in space and time, at the center of the world, gate, street, mosaic of neighborhoods, sprawling city, nearby ocean, and lofty lands are broken down into concatenated concentric waves, a boundless double horizon. Just as he prepares to make it his

1. *Wahrān*, is an approximation of *Wahrān*, the standard romanization of Oran (Dadoun’s birthplace). *El borracho* means “the drunkard” in Spanish. The coastal city of Oran was deeply influenced by Spanish culture; Spain ruled the city and its surrounding area for more than 250 years (1509–1708; 1732–1792).



FIGURE 23. The Dadoun family, around 1943. From left to right, in back: the father, Juda, the mother, Camille, and Roger. In front: Roger's little brother George and little sister Andrée.

own, to incorporate it, the city swoops down on him, inhabits his mind, a light head made heavy with arrows pointing him in all directions. Oran is a rotating disc, a tectonic plate in (e)motion with fragments drifting off course, dancing and crashing back onto themselves, a movable knot of anxiety, coated in tenderness, a puzzle, each piece of which, however familiar, harbors a mystery, an iridescent opacity imprinted on the soul.

A swarm of things, marquetry of one's being-there, this Oran, *Ouahran*, with its dog's bark of a *wha*;<sup>2</sup> it's the still-Chaldean reed-pen of an *Ur*; it's the *Urbs* knocked off its orbit, torn apart, shredded into many, teetering just a mere *clina-men*, whatever crops up there bunches together, branches, and rows, sweating the here and now, *hic et nunc*, as the erudite pataouète might say,<sup>3</sup> swirling around in this still boyish head—all of that, miraculous wonder, I say, is by grace alone, the only inclination of an imperceptible urbanistic elevation that creates a memorable arrow out of an otherwise prosaic commercial artery (“native fabrics,” “colonial groceries”), which, in this pure, fleeting instant seizes a child's soul, bobs, O fragile wobble! first to the right, *chouiïa*, then to the left, *chouiïa*, making fine adjustments until he imagines himself the *axis mundi*.<sup>4</sup>

#### DESCENT, MOTHER, *MARE NOSTRUM*

As if the echo of a *Shema Yisrael* recited beneath the *mezouza* at dawn's first light continued to resound within him, two calls duel within the boy, puffing him up: the incoming guard (paternal) and the outgoing guard (maternal).<sup>5</sup> Outgoing, on the downswing: from the mother, for the mother, down to the “low” neighborhoods, opening onto the sea, an oblation—turn right, little guy. Incoming, on the upswing: that's the father's business, it's for the father, rising all the way to the Village Nègre, losing itself as it meanders the parade grounds and the Jewish cemetery—to your

2. Here Dadoun refers to the city using the French transcription of its Arabic name, Ouahran (sometimes spelled Ouahrane), where the first syllable is pronounced “wah,” in English. Note that the author uses a variety of different spellings for the city's name: Ouahran, but also Oran (standard spelling, in both French and English), and Wahrān (standard romanization of the Arabic name).

3. *Pataouète* is the name given to the French dialect of the Algerians of European origin, more common among the working class, heavily inflected by Arabic, Spanish, and Italian, full of local color and popularized through novels and plays that used it to comic effect. In and of itself, the word has no other meaning; it is likely the result of a deformation of the pronunciation of Bab-el-oued, a densely populated working-class neighborhood of Algiers.

4. *Chouiïa*, or *shwaya*, is Arabic for “just a little.” The word was used even by non-Arabic speakers in colonial Algeria and is still used today in metropolitan France.

5. Known in English often as simply the Shema, the *Shema Yisrael* is an important Jewish prayer recited twice daily by observant Jews. *Mezouza* (or *mezuzah*) is the Hebrew name given to the small metal case that holds a handwritten biblical text. The name derives from the Hebrew word for doorpost, which is where the object is affixed in Jewish homes.

left, kid.<sup>6</sup> And here, at this tiny little meeting point, a large gap, *urbi et orbi*, cleaves open the child's gaze: all the races of creation, all the puzzle pieces gathered and keeping watch among themselves, an immemorial rallying point.

When he doesn't accompany his mother on her pre-Sabbath Friday shopping excursions, the child is off on his own, fluttering here and there. He goes down rue de Vienne on his right, crossing in front of the wide boulevard Magenta (view from above: Grand Synagogue, bus depot, Maison du Colon), quickly turning left onto the coarse paving stones of a short, dark, and almost surreal alleyway that leads to the busy rue de la Révolution, which runs parallel to another main thoroughfare, the somber rue d'Austerlitz, known as "Jews Street."<sup>7</sup> Here he is, smack in the middle of the Jewish Quarter, which is nothing like your typical mellah or ghetto, and which some call in Judeo-Arabic, "Rappolione," a distortion of Napoleon, in honor of France's emperor Napoleon III, who deigned to set his imperial metatarsus there during his 1865 visit: he was on his way to a nearby theater to see a play in Spanish, which he had the good grace to applaud.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the picturesque "multicultural" neighborhood met with the goateed Emperor's approval, since it confirmed his liberal policy based on the principle of "perfect equality among natives and Europeans," a policy undermined and eventually gutted by colonials and soldiers. For the child, "Rappolione" is that endlessly winding, multicolored reptile of a street, whose scaly back consists of innumerable food vendors pushing their carts through streets bordered by woefully dilapidated houses (called "gourbis," the mother says), ideal for baroque circumambulations among gunnysacks full of spices and crates brimming with fruits and vegetables, to the rhythm of shouts and cries, taunts and teases of Jewish, Arab, and Spanish merchants, all vaunting their displays of good eats in a French spiced by their respective language, or the reverse. A tiny headed odyssey worthy of Joyce, excellent *gana* (luck, in Spanish, as opposed to *kerce* in Arabic, a jinx—the child sees them as the two poles of life: to have *gana* or to have *kerce*?), of a movable feast that leads down to the fresh marine breath of the fish market, where the child stares in fascination at the Spanish or Arab fishermen's deft and friendly handling of the slimy fish parts that they pack into crates and wicker hampers.

Beyond the fish market, at the steep turn of the Valès ramp, Oran's tectonic plate tilts suddenly toward the port and the sea. If he and his friends dare descend the nearly vertical staircase leading down to a favorite swimming hole, to "take a dip" in water shimmering with motor oil and carpeted with floating slabs of

6. The *Village Nègre* (literally, the Negro Village) was a settlement for indigenous Algerians of various tribes established in Oran 1845 after the colonial military authorities had razed their homes for strategic and security reasons.

7. La Maison du Colon was built in 1930; the three-story structure housed various agricultural offices (cooperatives, farmer's unions, cattle inspection services, and the like).

8. *Mellah* is the name given to the walled Jewish neighborhoods in Morocco and in Algeria.

tar, the child will inevitably cross paths with a procession of Arab dock workers, exhausted and coated with the dust blown in by the sea winds from all four corners of the world, who pick their way uphill to their scattered hovels or their modest houses in the Village Nègre.

#### ASCENT, FATHER, SOLID GROUND

Climbing up to the Village Nègre—change of direction, change of setting. Tectonics of the city: slow upward rise. Drifting out to sea now, beyond the jetty, beyond the lighthouse, in an archipelago lurching beyond the harbor, the trawlers and steamers of the boy's dreams. Gates announce the Arab Quarter: cantaloupe and watermelon vendors have set up their boxy tents chock full of luscious globes, where the father will stop on his way home to feel, smell, weigh in one hand what will be the crown jewel of that evening's meal. He walks up boulevard Joseph Andrieu, hemmed in on either side by two imposing barracks, where "tirailleurs" (including, perhaps, some "Senegalese") sound their trumpets and work through their exercises.<sup>9</sup> Beggars, most of them blind, sit cross-legged against the high outer walls, holding empty tin cans to the rare passerby, moaning the same haunting refrain in Arabic, the same rhyme and rhythm ("*a waouldi/al wallidi*") that will throb in his head until he reaches the paternal "shop" on the corner of rue Tagdempt—two resolute syllables that resound with the prestige of the Emir Abd el-Kader who made this western Algerian city his capital, lively sonorities that reassure the boy as he passes in front of a miserable hovel of a barbershop where he meets the piercing gaze of the bearded Arab barber, Mephistopheles in the flesh, busily placing his cupping glasses on the base of his clients' skulls to pump their blood and relieve their pain.<sup>10</sup>

In his modest shop reigns the father: oasis, treasure island, den of discovery, joy of play, utopia's promise, smelling of leather, pitch, and glue. The child in his element, the heir apparent. Whenever an Arab client arrives on the scene, greeting the father with a sonorous *Salem ah-lek*, the child feels like the entire shop is sucked into that massive burnous, quickly settled on a small stool.<sup>11</sup> The man removes his shoes, worn paper-thin. With a quick look, the father assesses the man's shoe size; out of the glass-doored display case, he takes several pairs of superb loafers that would have been the envy of the fine Italian bootmakers of the Via del Corso. His

9. The word *tirailleurs* refers, simply, to infantrymen, but the *tirailleurs sénégalais* were a corps of infantrymen recruited in the French colonies, originally in Senegal but later from other territories. The expression is synonymous with colonial subjects pressed into service in the defense of France.

10. The beggars are addressing the children in Algerian Arabic, calling out to them, "oh, my son, oh my children." The author's transcription of the Arabic is unusual, with the vocative *ya* replaced simply by *a*, likely reflecting local pronunciation.

11. A *burnous*, sometimes spelled *burnoose*, or *bournous*, is a long woolen cloak with a hood, worn by men in North Africa.

client cautiously tries them on for size; other pairs follow in rapid succession as the father watches for subtle signs that reveal the man's peculiar likes and dislikes. He argues for the indestructible soles, the soft pliability of the uppers, and then finally, in the bold light of day, he presents the fruits of his own labors, the product of his expert and faithful hands, unequaled *objets d'art*.

The sales talk hobbles along, fueled by mint tea and verses of the Qur'an articulated in a singsong Arabic. The name of Allah shuttles back and forth between the two protagonists—one to lower the price, the other to justify it. The endless back-and-forth shows no sign of concluding, and the child goes out to buy himself a piece of *chemyia*, a favorite honey-soaked semolina confection. He wends his way through the Arab quarter—a mixture of calm and unknown, a universe at once familiar and wholly other: a different pace, slower and more muffled; different shapes traverse the space: burnouses; djellabas; haiks; baggy, white sarouel pants; bolts of brightly colored silks and velvets; veiled faces and turbaned heads; other sounds (Arabic and Berber, studded with popular French expressions, Judeo-Arabic music polluted with refrains of the occasional French or Spanish pop song); other gazes (hospitable or hostile, wary or friendly, piercing or evasive, indifferent or attentive).<sup>12</sup>

An other world (*unheimlich*) that, at the same time, never tires of trying to make itself "domestic" (*heimlich*), with daily visits by Arabs to the family home: the itinerant pots-and-pans vendor who comes to swap his wares for used clothing items; peddlers of water, eggs, honey, and chicken; even an official incense dispenser who perfumes the house in no time; and the indispensable "Shabbat Arab," brought in from the street to "light the fire" (unlawful for Jews on the Sabbath)—essential for the morning coffee; and the entire family of Arabs that staff the hammam, who make the best breads and cakes, and the Saturday *tafina*—and that's not even including the supplier of amulets (*khlizez*) or the healer who does house-call exorcisms.<sup>13</sup>

At the far end of the Arab Quarter, where it widens out and disperses, all is calm. The city opens down below onto a limitless marine horizon, and up here, as if in a gesture of symmetry, it expands into a vast plateau, empty most of the time: the military parade grounds, the Jewish cemetery. His Aunt Zari is the guardian. It is closed on Saturdays, Sabbath rest. It's a visit day: the child accompanies his mother in a horse-drawn carriage. Tea, *tornos*, phonograph records (for the teens), and conversation (for the mothers).<sup>14</sup> Passing before the abundant *schéol*,

12. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women. A *haik* is a traditional outer garment, made up of a single large swathe of cloth wrapped around the body and worn by women in North Africa.

13. *La tafina* is a typical Sephardic Shabbat dish. Usually made with meat and vegetables, it resembles a French *pot-au-feu* or a Spanish *cocido*.

14. *Tornos* (also called *halwat tabaa*) are Algerian tea cookies, typical of the Oran region.

frozen, petrified with tombs, he contemplates the cemetery that seems to extend to infinity, a gigantic wart atop the city.<sup>15</sup> For him, this is where *Ouahran* comes to an end. Beyond is terra incognita, nothingness. The endless checkerboard of stones laid down for eternity reverberates into a spotless azure with the beats of *paso doble* and tango.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

15. *Schéol* is the French rendering of the Hebrew noun *sheol*, which designates a realm similar to Hades, insofar as it is a place of darkness, reserved for the dead.

Rue d'Alger, Blida

## Like a Slap in the Face

Line Meller-Säid

It was a Friday, an icy winter evening. Blida was hunkered down in its seasonal hibernation mode. I was nine years old. In rue Coulougis, a small crowd was gathered around a stall selling hot peanuts. Basket in hand, woolen scarf around my head and shoulders, feeling small and fragile among these jostling adults, I was suddenly pushed up against another woman's back. She whipped around, furious: "Hey, stop your shoving, Fatma!"<sup>1</sup>

The contempt behind these words was stinging. I was stunned and outraged. First of all, how could anyone believe that I, shy little mouse that I was, would have shoved someone just to get ahead in the queue? But even worse, that "Fatma" came at me like a slap in the face. I've often thought back to that scene and to the indignation I felt. It was a long while before I was able to make sense of my anger. That woman, confusing my scarf with an Algerian haïk, had taken me for a little Mauresque.<sup>2</sup> I wasn't a little Mauresque. And I didn't speak Arabic. But I wasn't a little French girl either. Surprisingly, these words come back to me today, expressing the paradox of my status back then: I was indeed French, yes, and I spoke only French, but I didn't consider myself a "little French girl." What was I, then? It seems to me that if I'd had to ask myself this question way back then, I wouldn't

1. Fatma is a common Arabic first name for a woman; in certain contexts, however, it is used by non-Arabic speakers as a generalized term for all Arabo-Muslim women or girls, and thus as an insult.

2. A *haïk* is a traditional outer garment, made up of a single large swathe of cloth wrapped around the body and worn by women in North Africa. The term *mauresque* comes from the French word *maure*, which means "Moor" and refers to the Muslim inhabitants of North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. As an adjective, the term has some technical value—Moorish architecture, for example, designates a certain building and decorative style found in the Maghreb and in southern Spain. Its use in this text has a racialized and pejorative connotation.

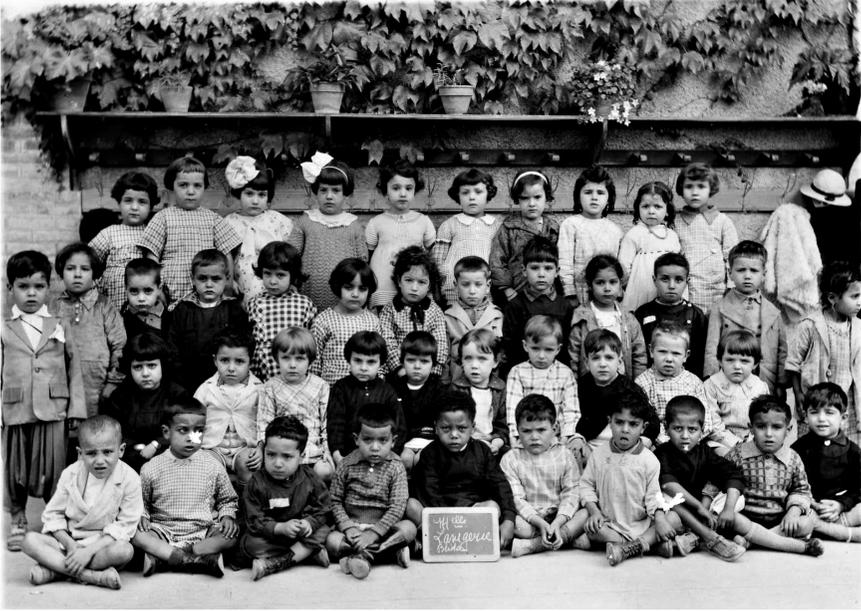


FIGURE 24. Lavigerie Preschool, Blida, 1936–1937. Line Meller-Said is the fifth from the left in the last row.

have been able to define myself in any way other than in strictly negative terms with regard to others.

Of course, I knew I lived in a family that followed Jewish traditions; my father would occasionally go to synagogue with my grandfather on Shabbat, while women kept the religious roots alive at home in the kitchen, where they made holiday dishes and sweets. But at the time, I don't think I'd reached the stage of introspective self-definition where I could consider myself a "little Jewish girl." It was more like a nebulous intuition than a categorical identity.

Still, I did experience one brief but searing incident when a young Muslim girl from the neighborhood hurled an insult at me as she passed in the street: "Filthy Jew!" I've often wondered about where that hateful impulse might have originated. To be sure, there were phrases so embedded in the language that they had almost (well, almost "almost") lost their sting, such as when a donkey driver would try to get his stubborn animal to move by shouting: "Get going, *yehoud!*"<sup>3</sup> Or when a disgruntled shopper in the midst of a quarrel would call the shopkeeper a "Jew." But where could a child have picked up such an ugly expression, if not at home? I found the whole incident deeply troubling.

3. *Yehoud* is a phonetic rendering of the Algerian pronunciation of the Arabic word for Jew, *Yahud*.

Fatma was our housemaid's name. Because I was still so little, she would walk me to school, which I started very young—I must have been around two and a half years old. I used to love sitting next to her in the courtyard to watch her preparing the *diouls* she used to make *bestels* stuffed with ground meat.<sup>4</sup> She'd dip her hand into a salad bowl full of a semi-liquid batter, scooping up just a bit, and then with a supple flick of the wrist, she'd spread it quickly over the surface of a convex skillet heated on the *kanoun*.<sup>5</sup> Then, with the point of a sharp knife, she'd carefully loosen the round, paper-thin sheet and lift it off, adding it to the stack. I'd gobble up the pieces that fell from the edges. The way she'd grill peppers over charcoal used to fascinate me, too. Oh, that smell of roasting peppers! Beyond the confines of time and space, that smell is the talisman of childhood memory.

One day, the neighborhood was vibrating with the sound of a brass pestle drumming frenetically on its mortar, then another, and still another, and soon a veritable concert of these implements, so familiar in Muslim and Jewish kitchens, filled the air with their disturbing metallic clang. Fatma pointed to the sun, which was veiled in a perfect circular haze: "It's the djinns. If we pound hard enough, they'll go away."<sup>6</sup> It was a long time before I understood that what I had witnessed was a solar eclipse, a terrifying phenomenon for simple folk.

Blida, literally "little city," earned its name back then. You could get around with ease. Whenever she needed something, my mother would send my brothers or me out to "do errands." More than anything else, we feared the fateful words upon our return: "Take this thing back!" Because the merchant would grumble and protest, before finally agreeing to take back the faulty item. (Decades later, I can still see my mother, in France, becoming incensed when a neighborhood grocer refuses to offer her credit when she is just a few pennies short on her purchases.)

The whole extended family lived within a relatively circumscribed area. My aunt Reinette, our supplier par excellence, bargained for the choicest produce at the Arab market. Vegetables "straight from the mountain slopes," baskets of woodsy-smelling mushrooms from Chréa, she knew where to go and how to haggle, taking as long as she needed to get the price she wanted: "Madame, you're exaggerating, you're cutting out all my profit margin," the seller would protest, but in a colorfully accented French typical of Arabic-speakers. Both sides had learned their scripts to perfection.<sup>7</sup>

4. *Dioul* refers to phyllo dough; *bestels* are savory pastries that use phyllo dough stuffed or layered with meat or other fillings. Similar to *brik* in Tunisia, *burak* in other parts of Algeria, or *bourekas* in Turkey.

5. A *kanoun* is a charcoal brazier used for cooking, generally made from terracotta.

6. *Djinn* are genies, or demon spirits.

7. The original French, "*Ya Madame, ti xagères, ti coupes li binifice*," phonetically reproduces the Arabic accent of Algerians, and includes the Arabic vocative prefix *ya*, used to signify direct address. (O Madame . . .)

I wish Fatma hadn't always spoken to me in French, and that goes for the shopkeepers, too. It seemed natural at the time, and it meant that I never needed to learn any other language. My parents had no trouble speaking in the local vernacular, which got sprinkled with a few Judeo-Arabic expressions when spoken by my grandparents, who were as fluent in this dialect as they were in the French they'd learned as children. My brothers picked up all the local street expressions when they played outside, especially the bawdy trash-talk of the soccer pitch. I'll never forget the resounding slap my mother delivered to my older brother when he called his younger sibling "*oueld el qah'ba*" (son of a whore), an insult to the mother as well as the son.

During endless gab sessions out on the balcony, as their agile fingers prepared *rechta*, *caoua*, or other types of pasta, my mother and aunts would exchange secrets that were not for all ears.<sup>8</sup> Their Arabic proved very practical when it came to keeping children from discovering stories they were never meant to hear.

Outside the family compound, female gossip found a home away from home at the hammam. The hot, moist stuffiness of the place muffled the sound in impenetrable steam. A woven fiber bath mitt rubbed over a big cake of Marseille soap guaranteed the perfect scrub. One day, a girl sitting next to me asked how old I was. "Oh, you're too young, don't look!" She was in the process of removing her pubic hair, using some smelly paste, a common practice among Muslim women who came to the baths to purify themselves at the end of menstruation. I couldn't believe my eyes.

Already accustomed to dividing the world into distinct categories, I couldn't figure out why Muslim women would come and pray on the tomb of a rabbi in Blida's Jewish cemetery, sprinkling their heads with water. I was to learn that the holy man was reputedly gifted with the power to intercede on their behalf so that they might bear children. Heaven knows no borders!

But earthly borders are totally random! My uncle Georges used to affectionately call the elderly Oum el Kheir "*yema*" (my mother) because at birth, he had been "sold" to her for a penny as a way of warding off the evil eye that seemed intent upon harming my grandmother's male newborns!

Unconcerned with any outside considerations, the Lavigerie elementary school focused on each individual pupil's merits. It happened occasionally that a "bad pupil" would be forced to wear a dunce cap and get paraded around the school, from classroom to classroom, by a "good pupil." The role of "good pupil" sometimes fell to me. How did I ever agree to do such a thing? But who would have dared back then to disobey a direct order at home or at school? It was simply unthinkable.

8. *Rechta* are thin noodles, but also the name of a dish where meats, vegetables, and chickpeas are heaped atop a pile of *rechta*; *caoua* (sometimes spelled *kaoua*) are a type of Algerian homemade pasta formed by rolling bits of dough between the thumb and fingers. The raw dough is dried in the sun. To serve, *caoua* are fried and then topped with vegetables or meat and sauce.

When it came to clothes, there was little room for originality. Long pants, which would have protected us much better from the cold weather, were utterly unknown to girls. Boys were hardly better off, with their short pants. My greatest luxury was a pair of gloves that I'd wear on the way to school as I grasped my book bag, but which we weren't allowed to keep on once inside the classroom, despite the frigid Blida winters and the meager heat produced by the coal-burning stove. To prove to us how much better we had it, our second-grade teacher reminded us that the little boys who lived in the mountains had to walk miles to school "with nothing but a bowl of chickpeas in their tummies."

All sorts of events interrupted the normal flow of my schooling. The years 1940–1943 left behind traces of the vile deeds Vichy France carried out under Marshal Pétain. To be sure, I sang in all innocence: "Maréchal, nous voilà."<sup>9</sup> Yes, I raised the flag every morning in the schoolyard whenever my class rank afforded me that honor. But then came the day, the astounding, terrible day in December 1941, when all Jewish pupils of Algeria were informed that they were not to come to school the next day (overzealous Algeria took the French law a step further: in mainland France, elementary schools did not fall under this new ruling). But neither I nor my brothers were affected by the law: we were among the rare privileged families whose father, having received military honors (a medal was the least they could do for my father, who was forever handicapped by his war injuries), did not lose their French nationality following the repeal, on October 7, 1940, of the Crémieux Decree of 1870 that had granted Jews full French citizenship.

The anti-Jewish legislation left me, therefore, on the peaceful shore of public schooling. But the teacher, of no will of her own, I imagine, stopped letting me "raise the colors," despite my good grades. I was also left out of the "skaters' ballet" performed by the school for Veteran's Day.<sup>10</sup> Still, I joined in to "curl" the strips of paper to be attached to the cylindrical headgear of the girls taking part. Again, I ask myself in hindsight: why didn't I simply refuse to do it? And the answer was the same: who would have even imagined disobeying a direct order at home or at school? Yet all the while, even if I wasn't fully aware of it, my interior borders were closing in, my difference was starting to show, I had really and truly turned into "a little Jewish girl."

And the immutable return of the seasons continued, despite the turbulence of history. During my early years, Ramadan occurred during the long summer months, which means that I have come to associate this holiday with that intense heat that envelopes you like a protective cloak. The much-anticipated daily *ftour*

9. Written in 1941, the song "Marshal, here we are!" was dedicated to Marshal Philippe Pétain and considered the unofficial anthem of Vichy France (the name given to the unoccupied, southern portion of France during WWII). During the Vichy period (1940–1944), it was performed at official events in France and Algeria.

10. The Veteran's Day in question refers to the *Fête de la Légion des combattants*, organized under Vichy. It is no longer celebrated in France.

was announced by one cannon shot, followed by the muezzin's call to prayer from his perch up in the mosque's minaret.<sup>11</sup> The city was suddenly deserted for about forty minutes, after which it would once again be buzzing with conversation among the sated faithful who would pause in front of every pastry shop. Those holiday treats were so scrumptious, little semolina cakes stamped with an almond in the middle (*qualb lose*, or almond at the heart). The streets of Blida were steeped in a subtle honey fragrance that lasted beyond the holy month. At the end of Ramadan, special cookies were exchanged among families, and we always got our plateful. We would return the favor and send the plate back laden with goodies of all sorts, since "one never sends a plate back empty," a precept I still adhere to.

Exchanges took place in the other direction on Jewish holidays, Passover in particular. Muslim families enjoyed our matzah. Just before that celebration, it would occasionally happen that someone would call out to my mother, Cécile, sometimes referring to her with a surprising honorary term: "*Ya Marabouta*, when is the Jewish holiday coming?"<sup>12</sup> The question had to do with their yearning for seasonal rains, "the Passover rains," as they were called, that replenished the land.

My father, Avellan Saïd, whom everyone called Monsieur Avellan, always held his cane horizontally under his paralyzed left arm, which gave him a recognizable profile. When many of his war veteran "friends" turned their backs on him during the Vichy years, even though he was one of the most upstanding of the lot, his Muslim acquaintances proved a source of great comfort. Perhaps he found solace among them on that terrible day in August 1941, when he returned from Algiers, exhausted and hopeless after Xavier Vallat greeted his delegation with nothing but scorn when they attempted to plead the case of Jewish war veterans who'd had their pensions suspended.<sup>13</sup>

The repercussions of that perverse ideology were felt long after the war was over. The young generation was steeped in anti-Semitism. I experienced its sting firsthand.

I was fourteen. Invited for a short stay in Chr ea, an Algerian mountain resort, I was making my way back to the chalet via a less traveled path, enjoying the mild summer air of the mountains. A group of idle French teenagers, both boys and girls, were sitting at the foot of a large cedar tree on a hillock a short distance from the road. They were laughing and joking among themselves, when suddenly they broke into a chant, aimed straight at me: "Jew! Jew! Jew!" Coming from their mouths, this common word lost its everydayness and became an insult.

11. *Ftour*, also written *ftoor*, refers to *iftar*—the evening meal that breaks the Ramadan fast.

12. Feminine form of *marabout*, a religious scholar or teacher in Maghrebi and West African Islam, a holy person whose tomb often becomes a pilgrimage site.

13. Xavier Vallat, a fervent Catholic and anti-Semite, was a French politician and a government administrator under Vichy. As head of the General Commission for Jewish Questions, he was in charge of implementing antisemitic legislation in France (and, by extension, in Algeria).

I seethed with blind fury. And like a boomerang, the echo of a long-buried phrase emerged from the depths of memory: “Hey, stop your shoving, Fatma!” The same tidal wave of emotion submerged me once again, filling me with revolt and impotence. All of a sudden, it made sense. Way back then, the woman was addressing the little Mauresque that I wasn’t: “Hey, stop your shoving, Fatma!” That otherwise trivial name exuded contempt. And now, by heaping abuse upon the little Jew that I actually was by hurling abuse at my origins, presumed to be insulting by definition, these thugs saddled the word “Jew” with all the infamy channeled by racist stereotypes. An otherwise simple name, neutral in and of itself but tinged with perversity, now oozed with hatred.

My heart bursting with rage, I turned away and continued down the path, long haunted by that repulsive litany. This deep seething riled both my angers. In the blink of an eye, the little Jew became Fatma. And then, suddenly, I felt an immense sense of relief at using my present exasperation to name my past indignation. I’d at last found the key!

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Avenue Claude-Debussy, Algiers

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## “No, Not Jewish. Israelite”

Daniel Mesguich

“Mother,” my dear Leïla, is a common noun. If I say, “my mother,” everyone understands, right? By simple analogy, since everyone has, or has had, a mother. But here’s the thing: my mother has nothing to do with yours. They are two essentially distinct people, and if I say, “my mother,” you still know nothing about who I’m referring to. “Mother” is a common noun, but “my mother” is a proper noun, and as such, is radically untranslatable into anyone else’s language (Jean will always be called *Jean*, won’t he? Never *John* or *Juan*). The possessive adjective is what makes her mine and nobody else’s. “My mother” is nontransferable. I am alone with “my mother”; I *keep* her. The same goes, my dear Leïla, to a certain degree, for my childhood.

Here’s what I mean. However tender and idyllic, however “intelligent” it may be, however steeped in nostalgia or pride (or especially when steeped in arrogance, which is so often the case and obvious to anyone willing to hear it), and even when seductively packaged and stamped with the wistful label of “memory,” any claim of belonging to a tribe (be it a country, a people, a nation, a community . . . be it the Jews of Algeria or the Irish of New York, or—what do I know?—folks living in some corner of Nanterre) has always bored me to tears. First, because it is blind to its own banality (tell me, if you please, who *hasn’t* been born somewhere?); second, because it derives such joy in accepting, with the smugness of one who built it with his own two hands, that which could only have been imposed on him; and finally, because of the all too frequent ease with which it hastens to confuse, or even replace “thinking” with “belonging” (I’m from this place, therefore, I am like this). As for me, I do love (and I love more than anyone can imagine, believe me, Leïla—my childhood was happy, carefree, and wonderful), warming to the memory of the deceased loved ones who surrounded me back then—and that includes memories of my own dearly departed childhood self. Yet rightly or wrongly, I can’t



FIGURE 25. Daniel Mesguich and his mother in front of the central post office in Algiers, 1960.

help but read this memory, when people stake their claim to a given heritage, as something that sooner or later ends up building a wall: one made up of living faces instead of stones; a wall of one of those shelters whose doors open only in order to better exclude, deny, or even destroy those others, precisely those who “don’t come from this place, who are not like this.” In short, dear Leïla, I don’t think I can tell you anything about “my Jewish childhood in Algeria.”

It’s not as if, like so many *pieds-noirs* (I almost wrote “so many *other* *pieds-noirs*,” yet I have most assuredly never been a “*piéd-noir*,” even though that’s what we even called ourselves back in Algeria, but I didn’t find that out until years later, after I’d moved to France),<sup>1</sup> it’s not as if I’ve never been suddenly submerged, just as they have been, by a delicious sorrow triggered by the memory of a lost fragrance, an unrecoverable flavor, a voice gone forever, some obscure and distant sensation of fear, shame, or love (especially love), and a myriad of faces. The faces of my parents, of course, at their most splendid, for example, when they’d take us to the beach at La Madrague, in Guyoville, or the Eckart Woods, also known as the *bois d’Eckart* (which today is written “des Cars”<sup>2</sup>), or just to the Milk-Bar (pronounced “*milqueubar*”) in the lower part of rue Michelet to have a *cheval-de-bois* (our name for a *croque-monsieur*<sup>3</sup>), or to quench our thirst with a *Crush*, a *Pschitt* (two kinds of orange soda, like *Orangina*), or a *Selecto* (a cola produced by the famous Hamoud Boualem brand with its guarantee of 100 percent artificial flavoring, which we all adored). Faces then so different from those in Marseille, the miserable “Algerian refugees” that my parents would become.

Other faces: Mamie Renée, my maternal grandmother, whom I’d telephone first thing every morning—I was the early riser of the family, apart from my father, who would have left for work long before—at exactly ten minutes to seven, right after I’d read, lying flat on my stomach in the hallway, the two three-panel comic strips I followed, “Guy l’éclair” and “Bebel et Illico,” which appeared in the *Journal d’Alger* slid under our door every morning.<sup>4</sup> Yes, Mamie Renée—in whose bed I loved to sleep on Wednesday nights, on rue Alfred-Leluch, using the excuse that she had a television set and that the series *Ivanhoe*, starring the young Roger Moore, was

1. The expression *pieds-noirs* was used to designate those of French (and more generally, European) extraction who lived in Algeria during French rule of the territory. The ambiguity to which the author alludes derives from the fact that Algerian Jews were often subsumed into this category. However, while Algerian Jews held French citizenship (from 1870 to 1940, and then again from 1943 until Algerian independence in 1962), most Algerian Jews were not, in fact, of European extraction.

2. The proper name “d’Eckart” of “Bois d’Eckart” is phonetically identical to the expression *des cars*, which literally means “buses” in French. Eckart Woods is thus transformed, through phonetic slippage, into “Bus Woods.”

3. A *croque-monsieur*—called a “wooden horse” in colonial Algiers—is a grilled ham and cheese sandwich on brioche bread, a staple of bistro food in France.

4. “Guy l’éclair” is the French name for Flash Gordon; “Bebel et Illico” very likely refers to the American comic strip “Bringing up Father,” sometimes referred to as “Jiggs and Maggie” (and usually translated in French as “La famille Illico”).

on every Wednesday evening—my grandma Renée who always asked me whether she'd put too much powder on her nose before going out to meet her lady friends at the Hotel Aletty brasserie (and she did always put on too much powder).

Yet another face: that of Lamria, our housemaid with the misshapen legs (she had polio as a child), mopping the already clean-as-a-whistle floor with an old cloth and cascades of water that, in the Algiers heat, would evaporate almost on contact with the red and yellow arabesque designs of the floor tiles (I'd watch them dry as if by magic, utterly captivated), or using her own meager savings to buy my sister a certain treat, *Chocorêves*, which my parents forbade her from having because she couldn't eat just one, and that you could get at a five-and-dime on rue Dujonchay.

Or the face of Mr. Troucmanoff, the ruddy tobacconist, a racist "white Russian"<sup>5</sup> whose shop was across the street from our house at 13 avenue Claude-Debussy, and who sold chewing gum and "biberine" (a fruit-flavored sugary powder you'd suck out of its straw-like package, one of my little sister's and my favorite candies), as well as Sargent-Major brand pencil holders made out of plastic (blue for boys, pink for girls), specially molded with three different sized grooves to help you learn where to put your fingers while writing.

And the face of Mr. Ruottolo, the neighborhood butcher, and who always complained that he couldn't read his weight on the scale because his belly got in the way; and the face of the toy store owner, topped by a tall chignon that made her look like one of the dolls she sold in her shop, La Boutique—which was further up the street on the opposite side from us, almost facing the Debussy Cinema (where we saw every technicolor Western ever screened)—where my father would buy me, for the precious sum of fifty old francs, tin soldiers which I would use to make "movies" for my little sister, who would always cry at just the right place, when the hero would die in glory. The store was the victim of repeated plastic explosive attacks by the OAS (we'd pass by in the aftermath, and my mother would forbid me to pick up any toys off the sidewalk out front, even though other kids were doing it).

And the face of Mr. Victory, my last schoolmaster (after Madame Vix and Mr. Godot) who, each morning, would grant the most worthy among us the honor of filling the inkwells set into our little desks.

And the face of Amar, my friend who lived across the street (son of Mahmoud, a handsome man who disappeared suddenly one day—kidnapped by the FLN, it was said, though it turned out he'd actually left to join them, for he resurfaced as a hero at Independence), and who I'd talk with a lot (but about what?) until nightfall, each of us from his own balcony.

5. "White Russian" refers to a person from Belarus. Yet the author's use of quotation marks around the expression may indicate a reference to the "white Russians" who fought against the Bolsheviks.

And, of course, there was Mamie Léonie, my paternal grandmother, who ruled, like the queen mother, from a large leather armchair draped in brightly colored cloth, her bad leg—with its varicose veins hidden discreetly under black stockings—resting on an ottoman, and whom I never once in my life saw leave her large apartment at 4 boulevard Laferrière, where, every day at “cocktail hour,” I went to watch *Rin Tin* on television (“The only thing that dog can’t do is talk,” she would never fail to declare at the end of each new episode), and then to play with a rag ball in the hallway with my cousins, while my father and his brothers, my uncles, sipped their anisette and commented on “the events”—which meant the war, and, without a doubt, the impending “departure.”

And the face of Mohamed—the harmless hobo who, for a pittance, would take the whole building’s trash down in the elevator—on the day when, only a few seconds after a black Peugeot slowed down along rue Michelet (where I happened to be walking to school) and lowered a window to point the barrel of a machine gun right at him, he was left bleeding to death on the sidewalk, his belly ringed with a belt of little holes, murmuring “*aïe imma, aïe imma*” (oh Mama, oh Mama).

And so many others, my dear Leïla, so many others . . .

Faces, fragrances, flavors, or voices, no longer seen, smelled, tasted, or heard, but which must have followed me across the Mediterranean. Yet an interior sea, literally and metaphorically, the one I swim in every summer—though on the other side now—is also what separates me from that time and place. Yes, for now a sea separates me from my childhood. Today, unlike so many others with childhoods to revisit, for me to go back to that place, to rediscover the streets, houses, and gardens that are so much a part of my most intimate self, that made me who I am today, I would be going to a *foreign* country, a land that is now *other*. To visit my childhood, I need a visa.

As for my “Jewish” childhood, I have to tell you, dear Leïla, and the French (I almost said “the *real* French”) who will read these pages, the French of France, Jewish or otherwise, that no, I did not have a “Jewish” childhood in Algeria. At any rate, not in the way one might imagine it, with me basking in some Biblical tradition, more or less Arab-inflected, my parents and I taking part in some exotic and picturesque ritual or other. Not even if the word “Jewish” calls to mind some kind of symmetry with little Christians who attended catechism on Wednesdays and went to church on Sundays, or little Muslims immersed in their Qur’anic readings and family traditions. In truth, I never so much as set foot in anything resembling a synagogue in Algeria, and I don’t recall my parents being acquainted with anyone who could be construed as a rabbi. And our house—where there was not a single religious object in sight—looked exactly like any other house lived in by Catholics, and we ate exactly the same things they did. Don’t forget that the Crémieux Decree had passed through here and left its mark (the “Décrémieux,” as two great Algerian Jews, Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, so cleverly put it): at the time of my great-great-grandparents, some fifty years after the French conquest

of Algeria, this decree of October 24, 1870, which Adolphe Crémieux managed to push through parliament, offered the “native Jews of Algeria” full French citizenship, practically overnight, which they accepted en masse. In barely three generations, they swapped their traditional djellabas<sup>6</sup> for three-piece suits, came to speak French as well as any Frenchman of the mainland (how many times did I hear my father complain about a radio or television host who made some unforgivable error in French usage!), and more or less unlearned their Arabic (their Hebrew was already long gone)—my grandmothers, though they spoke French fluently, could also carry on a conversation in Arabic with an Arab. My father, who was older than my mother, could still understand some Arabic, but he couldn’t really speak it (he knew a few expressions, but he never assembled them into anything like a grammatical sentence); my mother, however, didn’t know a word, nor did I. Often, when an Arabic word just seemed to spring naturally to the lips, they would immediately add on the French translation, the way the Belgians do on their administrative forms and outdoor signage—mired as they are in their Walloon-Flemish battles: for instance, someone would say of an unhappy woman, in one breath, “*rhaïba, poor woman*” (although *rhaïba* already means “poor woman”); or if some life-threatening event was looming, you’d say “*laestorna* may God spare you” (*laestorna* already meaning “God spare you”). The little they kept of their traditions involved rare and discreet family celebrations which, like everything else in their lives, whether objects, thoughts, or desires, bore names that were translated into French (Christianized, in other words): instead of “circumcision,” they said “baptism”; “communion” replaced “bar-mitzvah”; “Kippur” became “The Day of Atonement” (this holiday, which required a daylong fast, was, to the best of my knowledge, the only one we ever celebrated, but men considered it an excuse for a huge evening dinner with their friends, and women thought it was a way to slim down, while children simply enjoyed imitating the adults). Yes, as soon as the Jews of Algeria obtained their French ID cards, they began to lose their Jewish identities. From the Arab Jews they once were, they became not French Jews, but Jewish Frenchmen and women. In order to no longer be Arabs, they (nearly) ceased being Jewish.

It has been said that they took on the language, fashions, lifestyle, and even the mentality of the *colonizer*. No doubt. But this can be seen from a different angle. For them, the colonizer had always been the Arab. For the most part, the Jews had been there, along with the Berbers, some seven hundred years before Christ, far earlier than the Arab or Turkish conquest of Algeria.<sup>7</sup> To resemble the French, to be French, was a miracle, a godsend, for it meant they could cast off the signs of their centuries-long subjugation. If they hid their Jewishness, if they

6. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women.

7. See Country Snapshot: “Algeria.”

made no display of that particular identity, it was because they didn't want anything to remain that reminded them of that indignity, that humiliation. Their minimal Jewishness was encrypted. They invented a new Marranism: this time it was not because being Jewish was outlawed, as was the case for the Marranos, but because they forbade themselves their own Jewishness.<sup>8</sup> They sought to merge with the universal. They decided to be the children not of colonial France, but of republican France, the France of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.<sup>9</sup> And you could hardly tell them apart from the “other” French of Algeria, the descendants of the *pieds-noirs* (who were themselves often of Italian or Spanish descent). We considered ourselves Algiers Jews, from “Algiers proper,” as they said back then. With the exception of the *rue de la Lyre* Jews who, like the Jews of Constantine, were considered backward (which meant not French enough, still too Arab), the Jews of Algiers were by and large the most “assimilated,” as they used to say. But in having to translate everything, they ended up transforming themselves. In other words, the act of translation changed both the object to be translated and the subject doing the translating. This type of “bad faith” was nonetheless nothing at all like those deep, dark family secrets that one hides from the world at all cost. No, their own strain of bad faith was “sincere”: the Jews of Algiers had truly *forgotten*, in the end, that they had ever been Arabized. And thus it was that while they were “Algerian”—some since 700 BCE (in all likelihood, my father's family), others since they had been hounded out of Spain and Portugal by the Catholic kings (in all likelihood, my mother's family)—these Algerian Jews all left for “their” country, France, in 1962.

But “Jew,” as you well know, *Leïla*, is the quintessential wandering signifier. A funny word, isn't it? Ghostly, slipping back and forth through whatever borders would attempt to limit it to a single definition. “Jew” just keeps coming back, doesn't it? In Algiers, in my family at least, we let it go. Oddly enough, we preferred the word “Israelite,” undoubtedly considered softer. “Jew” was for the others; it was the word the Catholics used. For insults. (Perhaps there's some Cratylism at work here: “Israelite” is too long, too fancy to be used as an insult, while “Jew,” admittedly . . .). And “Jew” rarely came unaccompanied; it was almost always preceded, until it seemed to form a single unit, by a word almost as short: dirty. Dirty-Jew! Still, the word did occasionally enter our home. On my parents' lips, as they lowered their voices mysteriously, usually when they seemed to be admiring someone whom the Christians could also admire. Sometimes, they pronounced only the first initial, as if speaking in code, lowering the volume almost

8. Marranism refers to the secret practice of Judaism by the Marranos, Jews living in Spain or Portugal during the Inquisition and who converted to Christianity to escape persecution.

9. Italics in original. This is a variation on the official title of the 1789 French declaration of human rights, whose official title is “The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.” Mesguich may be gesturing to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was signed in Paris by more than fifty nations.

to a whisper, with a kind of secret pride: “You know, he’s a J.” Or “Mendès-France, Blum, Einstein, and Freud, they’re all Js.”

One day, I must have been around six at the time, one of the class bullies, probably inspired by something he’d heard at home, grabbed me by the collar on the stairs leading from my school on rue Volta down to rue Michelet, and said, with that jovial unfriendliness of one who has discovered your terrible secret but is willing to refrain from making it public so long as you, the guilty party, are ready to play along and own up: “So it’s true, isn’t it, that you’re a Jew. Right?” I remember answering with such touching sincerity that I still smile even now: “No, not at all. I’m an Israelite.” “Oh yeah? Okay, sorry,” he replied, almost embarrassed, proving that the only thing his six-year-old self knew about Jews was to hate them. Here’s what my mother told me one day: “Jew is not a race, it’s a religion. We’re French. You, my darling, are French. There are French Catholics, French Protestants, and French Israelites. We are French of the Israelite faith.” I recall not being surprised by her use of the word “faith,” whose connotations seem so Christian, though I didn’t know that at the time. Nor did I notice her exclusion of the word “Jew” in favor of “Israelite.” But then again, this religion I’d heard about, that I’d seen being practiced by others, but which was completely absent in my family life, must therefore have been not what we *did*, but what we *were*. Still, I was miles away from formulating such a thought on that day.

I don’t remember ever being called a dirty Jew except for one time—I must have been seven or eight—in front of the plane tree in the little schoolyard on rue Volta, while we were playing a favorite game of ours involving apricot pits (little piles of five pits each were set up about three yards away, and using a single pit, we had to “wipe out” one whole pile with a single throw; if we failed, the missiles stayed where they were, but whoever destroyed the last pile pocketed all the pits, so the more skillful among us strutted around the playground with canvas sacks full of them), and I was winning so far that day. But even though frontal insults were rare, the more subtle ones came at me from all directions. The word “Jew” was a banal playground slur, spoken in anger or derision, by Christians who used it interchangeably with “bastard” or “shit-head,” or especially “cheapskate” or “tightwad,” and there in the midst of all this, I had to pretend nothing was happening, as if I didn’t hear it, or worse, laugh along with everyone else. I endorsed the insult, in other words. Insulted myself. And yet, the word “God” (which, here again, was said in the Christian way, “the Good Lord,” etc.) could be heard more often in our home than in the families of my Catholic friends. Though it’s true that they attended catechism and Mass, they seemed to get off easy where God was concerned. The name was never mentioned. They lived secular lives. In my family, however, my father, my uncles, my grandmothers tossed the name around constantly, which might account for the strange impression I had that everything with us was weightier, deeper, more epic, more legendary, more steeped in spirituality

and seriousness than elsewhere. If religion was absent, God was more present in our words and minds. So you see, dear Leïla, this is no simple matter.

A French Jew of Algeria, a Jewish Algerian Frenchman, an Algerian French Jew—my hesitation in formulating what I am might already be a clue, and my tendency toward universalism that I mentioned earlier might well be the effect of that difficulty, don't you think? My unwillingness to put words to my Jewish childhood in Algeria already speaks volumes about that Jewish childhood in Algeria. But no, I don't actually believe that, not really: born in a “France” (it has to be in quotation marks) separated from France (we called it *la Métropole*) by a sea, in a country that has since become foreign to me, under a doubly fragile nationality, not really French to the French of France, because from Algeria, and not really French to the French of Algeria (or to the Arabs, for that matter!) because Jewish, yes, a Jew but in word only, a Jewishness so encrypted it was all but absent—so, not “really” Algerian nor “really” French nor “really” Jewish (even though, if ever some hostile environment should require it, I would be prepared to assume each of those words)—how in the world, my dear Leïla, how, I ask you, can I possibly, even if I were to accept the premise, be expected to tell you anything about “my Jewish childhood in Algeria”?

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Boulevard du Nord, Orléansville

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## With All Due Respect . . .

Aldo Naouri

Spring 1981. We picked up a couple of hitchhikers—two teachers, one in physics, the other in history. They had gone to Mers El Kébir “to knock back a few beers.” I introduced myself by saying that I had lived in colonial Algeria and that I was on a return visit to show my wife the country. They offered to show us around Oran. I accepted the offer, although I knew the city perfectly well.

We stopped in front of their high school and they told us about the history of that institution, which had once been called the *Lycée Lamoricière*—the high school where I took the second part of the oral baccalaureate exam. They concluded by leading us to the place de la Révolution, the former place d’Armes, opposite the city hall. They went on to name the different streets that led to the square, calling them by their former and current names. “And, a little higher up, you come out onto a street which used to be called, with all due respect, the *rue des Juifs . . .*”<sup>1</sup> My wife hadn’t noted the “with all due respect,” one of those orientalisms deployed painstakingly by locals in an attempt to embellish their French—with varying results.

When we were alone, I explained to her that this was the translation of a polite phrase, *Hachak*, intended to protect the listener from any discomfort that might arise when the conversation cannot avoid discussions of dirty things, of filth, of shit—categories that included Jews. I added that if I had told our interlocutors that I was Jewish and also Arabophone, they would have certainly spared us the expression, for the simple reason that the delightful codes of Arab politeness would have dictated that they put their gratitude for the service I’d done them by revealing my identity ahead of their need to protect us all from the word “Jew.”

1. *Rue des Juifs* means Jews Street.



FIGURE 26. Aldo Naouri, around ten years old, circa 1948, in Orléansville (now Chlef).

Culturally, I am, and I remain, an Arab. That's why I can speak as I do. My mother tongue is Judeo-Libyan, a dialect like you find in so many different languages, except that this one was Arabic. It's the language that has been spoken, for several generations, by different branches of my family, although my paternal family was a special case in that they had French nationality. It was precisely for this reason that we were chased out of Libya in 1942: Mussolini had decided to expel all enemy aliens from his territory.<sup>2</sup> Under the auspices of the Red Cross, we were deported to the nearest French territory, Algeria.

After two months of traveling, we reached the city of Orléansville, modern-day Chlef, where a Jewish community was ready to welcome us, my mother (already a widow) and her seven children, of whom I was the last. And so we experienced a double, if not a triple, resettlement. We didn't know a word of French. We were also an object of curiosity and rejection for the Jewish community, for whom our presence triggered a kind of psychodrama: our clothing and our religiosity triggered a return of the repressed, reminding them of their ancestors at the very moment when the repeal of the Crémieux Decree left them stripped of their French citizenship.<sup>3</sup> The worst thing, as far as they were concerned, was that we were able to keep our citizenship, something made possible, as I would discover decades later, because it was given to one of our ancestors by state decree before the conquest of Algeria. As for the Arab population, they took a close interest in us, offering help despite the differences in our respective dialects. The friends of my eldest brother, who was seventeen years older than me, continuously asked questions about this

2. Although most of Libya's twenty thousand Jews were, at the turn of the twentieth century, considered Ottoman citizens, some seven hundred Libyan Jews held French citizenship, typically passed down from a French ancestor. When Italy took control of Libya in 1942, Mussolini ordered that all Jews with French citizenship be removed to camps in neighboring Tunisia or Algeria.

3. See Country Snapshot: "Algeria."

blesed country where, despite colonization, the Jews had remained close to the Arabs whose language they spoke, albeit mixed with strange expressions that turned it into its own dialect. I remember a conversation between my brother and his new friend Ahmed, who taught me how to read before I was even five years old. Ahmed was trying to persuade my brother to join him in his resentment of France. And then came my brother's response: "In Ben Gardane (the border post between Tunisia and Algeria), for the first time in my life I was called 'Sir.' This was certainly a change from the Italians who would only address me with the insult '*Ebreo cane sensa paese sensa rei*' ('Jewish dog, with neither king nor country'), and from the Arabs who would only call me '*Youdi kelb*' ('Jewish dog'). It was France who gave me back my dignity. France is my motherland."

If I remember those words with such precision, it's because I would hear them again at the moment when, at the height of the Algerian War, the same Ahmed and his friends tried to convince my brother that the fight for independence was legitimate. My brother would say those same words to me when, as a Parisian student returning on vacation, I declared my support for that very independence. Occasionally, our mother would intervene in the conversation by uttering the prayer that she always used, "*Elli ihabounha ou elli nhaboulhoum yteh 'alihoum*" ("May what they wish for us and what we wish for them fall upon their heads").

It was her leitmotif. I heard it for the first time when I asked her about a traumatic scene that I witnessed on numerous occasions, without being able to make sense of it. I must have been six, going on seven. We lived right next to a stable that functioned as a kind of "park-and-ride" for the fellahs, the peasants who came to sell their harvest in the town markets. They had to leave their donkeys and mules there. It was often the case that, when one of them came to pick up his donkey, it would refuse to move. So the peasant would beat it. When this failed to have any effect, he would double his efforts, accompanying the beating with insults addressed to the beast, evoking its whore of a mother, its bastard of a father, its apostate grandfathers and so on, which would gradually escalate into extraordinary violence. Sometimes the donkey would move as a result. But if it didn't, the beatings would continue thick and fast, accompanied by "bitch, son of a bitch," which would pave the way for the ultimate insult, held in reserve up until that moment: "Jew, son of a Jew, filthy Jew, son of a filthy Jew, curse them all!"

It is true that we enjoyed good relations with our Muslim neighbors, particularly the women. They appreciated our Arabic dialect. Sometimes, when they came around, they would catch my mother singing in Arabic or listening to the Arabic radio. They would consequently launch into long speeches, commenting on our amazing closeness—our shared belief in one god, our common rejection of pork, and the same veneration of the heroes of our shared stories: Ibrahim, Yishaq, Yaacoub, Musa. They would finish by lamenting the fact that they could eat our food but we couldn't eat theirs, and that we stubbornly refused to recognize Muhammad as the final prophet. I admit that, with the distance I now

have, I cannot ignore that their words contained a kind of commendable struggle between the rational and the instinctive, and between the reality of the moment and the ingrained tendencies that they had inherited.

But the worst form of Muslim anti-Judaism that I ever experienced was not inflicted on me by peasants or working-class people. I experienced it, and genuinely suffered from it, at the hands of an Arabic teacher whom I had in ninth grade. I felt it from the first hour of class. It was a lesson in Arabic oral expression. He asked who knew how to speak Arabic. I raised my hand. He asked me to go to the front of the room and tell a story. I related, slowly and without the slightest mistake for him to correct, a walk in the forest. He sent me back to my seat, reproaching me, with an expression that I preferred to believe severe rather than hateful, for having an accent. It was the accent of my dialect, of my mother tongue. Recently, upon listening to Libyans on television, I realized that my accent was also theirs. The following class was a lesson in literary Arabic, the first language I had started studying, back in sixth grade. The teacher was forced to admit that I excelled in it—much to his dismay, no doubt, since our class contained a lot of Arab and Kabyle students. I never found out if that was the reason why, starting with the very next class, on Saturdays from ten to eleven, he unveiled a strategy that would last the whole year. This class was reserved for the reading of the Qur'an. There were two of us Jews in the class, and we were the ones he chose to start off the reading. But you can't start reading the Qur'an without pronouncing the Shahadah, the profession of faith: "*La illaih Lallah Muhammed Rassoul Allah*" ("There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger"). And so it was that, every Saturday, while our parents were taking their positions in the synagogue for the reading of the Torah, my friend and I were forced to reaffirm our conversion to Islam!

The worst, though, was still to come. Since I pointed out the arbitrary nature of his grading and the mistakes that he claimed to find in my work, throughout the entire year he withheld the accolades that I should have received, despite the fact that I was at the top of the class in practically every subject, including Arabic, literary and spoken. What's more, he went so far as to take me off the honor roll in the second term because of "my attitude," or so he claimed. When I went to the principal to complain, giving him my version of the facts, he threw up his hands and said there was nothing he could do.

So it is not without a certain sense of despair that I bear witness to the growing success of a myth, one that is keen to relativize Muslim anti-Semitism, making it out to be simply a byproduct of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

—Translated by Rebekah Vince

Constantine, Algeria

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## The Hammam, and Afterwards

Benjamin Stora

In the beginning was the hammam, with the women, on Friday afternoons, the time reserved for Jewish women. Men and women never mixed there, needless to say, any more than Muslims and Jews did, which created a double separation, and for Europeans the hammam was just one of those *native* things. Ah, those steamy afternoons spent in the company of half-naked aunts and cousins . . . Mothers scrubbed the children, talked about their husbands and the dishes they'd begun preparing that morning for the Sabbath meal. They assumed that the children wedged between their thighs weren't listening, that they were like so many pieces of furniture. But nothing escaped their eyes or ears. Discovery of the female body: intriguing, surprising, fascinating in all its scented voluptuousness . . . For me, the Orient will always be a world of women (and when I returned to Algeria in the 1980s, I was distraught to find that the streets had become forests of men). It was the women who organized the holidays, oversaw the children's education, and reigned supreme over the domestic sphere.

Men were invisible, the father practically absent from daily life. Mine used to work straight through the summer, and would show up only on weekends during our month-and-a-half-long vacations at the beach. Here again, water and women, under the blazing sun this time, among my almost exclusively female extended family: my father had five sisters and a brother; my mother had six sisters and a brother. And there I was, the youngest of the clan, with just one older sister, the favorite pet of some forty cousins. But once I'd turned eight, no more Friday afternoon hammam for me. "He's getting a little old, isn't he?" the guardian told my mother. I was suddenly cast out of the paradise of women and ushered into that universe of prohibitions and fear. A veritable shock, lived and recounted by all men raised in the Orient. I now had to go to the hammam with my father, on a different day of the week.



FIGURE 27. Benjamin Stora at age five, in 1956, with his father at place de la Brèche in Constantine.

I was never afraid of women who dressed like “natives.” Probably because that’s how my maternal grandmother dressed, the one who spoke no French. In fact, she spoke nothing but Arabic, the language she and I used to communicate. Then there was the Muslim maid who would come to the house on Saturdays to do the ironing, casting off her veil as soon as she entered, and because it was the Sabbath, she would turn on the lights and light the stove for us. I used to talk with her a lot, in both Arabic and French. I would also play with Smaïl and Sebti, the two Muslims who worked in my father’s semolina business. So we were all quite close, though it never went any further than that, even in Constantine, despite what they sometimes say. Yes, the borders between the Jewish and Muslim communities—thirty thousand and fifty thousand members respectively, out of a total population of one hundred thousand—were a bit more porous than elsewhere, and the Europeans were definitely in the minority. But in Constantine, as in the rest of the country, segregation along communal lines was the hard and fast rule, and this was the heart of the problem. Jews lived among themselves, with their customs and beliefs; Muslims and Europeans likewise. I have no memory of a Muslim sitting at our dinner table, nor of a Jew dining at a Muslim home. There was no mixing in the domestic sphere, and scarcely any at the public school, named after Diderot, not far from rue Grande where I lived, in the heart of the *charrah*, the Jewish quarter.<sup>1</sup> In my class, I recall something like five Muslim pupils for some twenty Jewish ones, and a handful of Europeans, five or six, which says something about social, economic, political, and juridical disparities in 1950s Algeria. When it came right down to it, what did we have in common, Jews and Muslims? Shared languages, Arabic and French, the same prayer schedule, our musical roots, and the marketplace, the streets where the women passing by in their black veils were, for me, the embodiment of a pious form of Islam, very traditional.

Apart from my grandmother Rina Zaoui, everyone in the family dressed like Europeans. But the families on my mother’s and father’s sides were not of the same cultural origin. The Zaoui clan, who lived over on place des Galettes, were the foremost goldsmiths in Constantine. Reputed for their artistry, they made “native” jewelry in the Berber style, prized by both Jews and Muslims. The Storas, on the other hand, constituted one of the grand old families of the region. My great-great-grandfather had once been president of the Israelite Consistory of Algeria, a solemn assembly of Jewish elders. My grandfather was a notable freemason, and an important local official in Khenchela, a town in the Aurès Mountains of eastern Algeria. In the 1930s, many members of the Jewish community were committed leftists, promoting the secular values of the French Republic, but this didn’t prevent them from respecting Jewish holidays and traditions.

1. The author here uses a phonetic variation on the transcription of *la hara*, typically used to designate Jewish neighborhoods in Tunisia, but also in Eastern Algeria (where Stora’s hometown of Constantine is located).

My father went into the semolina business after a downturn in the family's fortunes. Still, he had a considerable library, a working knowledge of the law, and the profile of a true anti-Fascist secular intellectual with ties to the Surrealists, following the example of the painter Jean Atlan, a good friend of his from their school days back at the Lycée Aumale, the most prominent high school in Constantine. He passed his baccalaureate in literary Arabic under the guidance of Professor Lentin, but he didn't speak the language often, unlike my mother, who made daily use of the local Arabic dialect, as did her own mother. My mother, who had a middle school education, spoke perfect French as well. Hebrew was reserved for religious matters, at the synagogue or the "Alliance." After my father's death in 1985, I realized the importance of cultural mixing: of my mother's oriental Arabic; of the French of my Francophile father, which paved my way to republican rationality; and of the reading and study of Hebrew. In other words, the importance of a kind of strategic marriage of social and "civilizational" diversity. And, because my parents were both quite cultured, I was born heir to a robust, yet mixed, intellectual legacy. But this brought its share of fear as well, once I'd left childhood behind.

Fear, first of all, of not being at the top of my class, of letting my parents down, of not respecting religion. Like all mothers, mine bore the responsibility of passing the religion on to her children, and made sure that I not only learned my school lessons by heart, but that I never missed my prayers—a spanking awaited whenever I did. Fortunately, I was always first in my class; this filled my mother with pride and she showed me off to the whole family, embarrassing me no end. My life followed a strict schedule: after the first three days of the week at public school and before my Friday afternoon at the hammam, on Thursdays I would go to Talmud Torah at the Alliance school.<sup>2</sup> (Sometimes I was allowed to skip my Thursday lessons since, more than anything else, my mother wanted me to graduate with honors from public school.) I could read Hebrew, but didn't understand much. To this day, I can decipher a text, but still don't really know what I'm reading. The prayers came back to me when my parents died. Every Saturday morning, I would go to synagogue with my father, the "Algiers Temple" of Constantine, where the service was not classically Sephardic, but decidedly more French—complete with a prayer for the President of the Republic. This was my ritual from the age of five to thirteen, but it was in France, at the Tournelles Synagogue in Paris where all the

2. Typically, Talmud Torah refers to religious schools where Jewish boys receive elementary instruction in Hebrew and the scriptures (the Talmud and the Torah). It is worth noting, here, that Stora locates his religious education *at* the Alliance Israélite Universelle school. Unlike most other countries of the Muslim Mediterranean where Jewish youth were educated at Alliance schools, in Algeria, where the Jews had been French citizens since 1870, Jewish children attended French schools. The Alliance network in Algeria thus functioned somewhat differently: it was less involved in general education beyond the elementary level, and the classrooms of the Alliance schools were thus often repurposed for Talmud Torah instruction (where it could also be supervised by the more secular Alliance administrators).

exiles from Constantine would gather, that I celebrated my bar mitzvah in 1963. (Back then, we called it our “communion.”)

Saturday afternoons we often traveled to America via the magic of the silver screen. My friends and I would go to the Vox (later renamed Le Triomphe), where joyful pandemonium reigned during screenings of war films and westerns. The whole Jewish community rushed to the Vox to see Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*, with that nasty Edward G. Robinson—the one who urged the Jews to worship the golden calf. There was no pandemonium during this screening; you could hear a pin drop, the silence almost reverent. I was sometimes allowed to see a second feature with my parents at the Colisée (a lovely old building destroyed after independence). This is where I saw unforgettable films, the ones that made me a film-lover for life: *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, for example, in 1957, or Kalatozov’s *The Cranes Are Flying*. Or, two years later, Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows*, which would resonate with me so deeply—I identified with the Jean-Pierre Léaud character. It was that, without my realizing it quite yet, I was starting to feel oppressed by my surroundings. This would become clear to me only after we arrived in Paris, at the end of the war, in June 1962.

But my greatest fear was the war, the attacks. In 1957, at the age of seven, I saw a man die in the street right next to me. In 1958, perched on my father’s shoulders, I caught sight of De Gaulle in Constantine. In 1961, I was there when the great musician Raymond was assassinated: I was at the market with my mother when he was shot dead.<sup>3</sup> At twelve, just a preteen, I was keenly aware of the war, of what my father was risking by simply going to work every day, and of the anguish in my parents’ voices even behind closed doors. I knew all about the political situation. Time seemed to drag. During the last two or three years of the war, we went out as little as possible, and I spent my time up on the rooftop terrace playing with my cousins. I almost never went to school anymore. Our community, like the others, closed in on itself even more tightly than before. This made our arrival in France even more traumatic, since our close-knit family scattered to the four winds, to Marseille, Aix, Toulon, Nice, Strasbourg, and Toulouse . . .

As for us, we ended up in an anonymous northern suburb of Paris, Sartrouville, after a temporary stay in the basement of a statelier building in the city. With my accent and Arabic always on the tip of my tongue, there I was suddenly attending high school at the Lycée Janson de Sailly, suffering not only from the cold weather, loneliness, and the rampant individualism of French society, but also from taunts and ordinary antisemitism—all new to me. It didn’t take me long to discover that, in order to assimilate, I would have to conceal both my Jewish and my oriental

3. Cheikh Raymond, stage name of Raymond Leyris (1912–1961), was a famous Algerian Jewish singer and master of Andalusian malouf music who was beloved by North African Jews and Muslims alike. In June 1961, he was assassinated in broad daylight by Algerian Muslim militants in the Jewish marketplace of Constantine.

origins, decode the new social norms, and work very, very hard to become, once again, the head of the class.

And yet, there was no nostalgia. Farewell, of course, to the scent of the women, the smell of our houses, the aromas of the food and the streets from back home; farewell to the medina, the donkeys, the heat, the light . . . In exchange, I was soon to experience a new sense of freedom. The insecurity of the war years was behind us now. My horizon was broadening, the pressure of the community that I hadn't really noticed until now was beginning to lighten, and new standards were replacing those I had always believed to be written in stone. Yesterday's prohibitions slowly fell away: religious rules, dietary restrictions and, later on, sexual taboos. It was around the age of fourteen that women ceased to be objects of a worrisome fantasy, and my childhood finally drew to a close. I continued my study of the West thanks to the French public school system, and at last I could call a spade a spade: no more furtive looks, no more scheming, hidden thoughts, no more time lost beating around the bush.

Still, though I never denied the East that lived within me, the West that surrounded me was winning out, and I was ready. For French Algeria had also been the West in the East. Especially in that very peculiar city of Constantine, very Jewish and very Arab, so unlike Algiers, where Jews didn't speak Arabic, and ultimately so different from both the rest of Algeria and from Europe. Constantine was a city where Jews were both steeped in oriental religious traditions and very westernized at the same time, very secular. So much so that, when we landed in France we were already, despite our oriental appearance, fluent in the codes of the West.

Muslims also felt this same sense of acculturation, more profoundly in Algeria than in Morocco or Tunisia.

I am someone who has never lived in the past, never cultivated any sort of nostalgia or orientalist fantasy, never longed for those special holiday sweets, not then and not now. I've always known where I was and where I came from. It was only later that I started to ponder the importance of origins. I never had an identity crisis, I never really felt "torn": my roots came together at the end of a childhood that was at once happy and oppressive, lived between the Republic and the Orient. The warmth and the brotherhood of my community were lost, and I missed them, but I would soon find them again under another sun, the sun of Paris in May 1968, when I committed myself to the political revolution. But that's already another story . . .

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Guelma, Rue Zama

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## The Courtyard

Dany Toubiana

For Chichette:

Summer, 2011. It materialized all of a sudden in a luminous flash while I was on vacation, watching the sun set behind the Monts du Vivarais. A revelation, the black and white checkerboard pattern gleaming from the buckets of water just splashed all over it, reflecting the dazzling sun. It was obvious: the memory of the interior courtyard of the house on rue Zama where I was born, in Guelma, emerged as the indisputable center of my childhood recollections. A site of memory that, still today, single-handedly conjures hope and disillusionment, sharing and squabbling, laughter and tears, games and daydreams.

My father, whose own father was a Tunisian Jew, always emphasized the fact that the Jews of Algeria were French.

French? Indeed, they were, but still . . .

In this land of Islam, Jews and Muslims shared certain traditions. There were rituals, such as circumcision, that were common to both, and which took place, for the most part, at the family home. Women hollered *yoyous* at Jewish and Muslim weddings alike.<sup>1</sup> For that matter, in my school textbooks or storybooks, there was never any mention of either Aïd or Yom Kippur.<sup>2</sup> In the Christian

1. *Youyous*, or *ululation*, are long, wavering cries, usually emitted by women and associated with ceremonies of various types, typically in the Middle East and North Africa.

2. Aïd, which refers here to Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha, is the Festival of the Sacrifice—one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over, it commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy. Yom Kippur is known as the Day of Atonement and is considered the holiest day in Judaism. Observed ten days after Rosh Hashanah (or New Years' Day in the Jewish tradition), it is an occasion for repentance and purification, marked by a total cessation of work and abstinence from food and drink.



FIGURE 28. Dany Toubiana, six years old, at the École Sévigné in Guelma.

tradition, processions and communions were directed outward, toward the larger, less demonstrative population. The lasting image, for me, is one of a more glorious communal consecration, bathed in a solemnity that struck my imagination. As a little Jewish girl, I could better relate to the lifestyle of my young Muslim friends, but I envied the Christian girls' freedom.

The picture now came alive, and I could hear the echoes of our childish laughter while the women of the house, who had agreed to wash down the courtyard that day, cleaned, and we kids splashed around in the suds. I was eight going on nine, and this was to be my last year in the courtyard, though I didn't realize it at the time.

Eleven families occupied the apartments of a house built around a common central courtyard. Those living upstairs had the advantage of easy access to the rooftop terrace, from their larger, better lit apartments; the ones living in the downstairs units had the privilege of direct access to the courtyard. A microcosm of Algeria at a time when society was more or less divided, the house was organized around the courtyard, with some groups of people who kept their distance and avoided the courtyard, and others who had their regularly scheduled activities there, or used it for special occasions. There was one French family "from France" whose aloofness kept the rest of us at arm's length, and another one that would vacillate between friendly and standoffish. Of this second family, the husband came from France and the wife, who was born in Algeria of a mixed Judeo-Christian marriage, was torn between the two cultures. Then there were the rest of us, all born here, Jewish or Muslim families, noisier and more outgoing, who spoke to one another in either our dialect of Arabic or in French.

I can conjure up the faces: Jean and his dog Kim; Sharif and Nabil, my downstairs friends; the two brothers Georges and Daniel, constant rivals; the sisters Zohra and Tita who lived upstairs. The adults constantly talked politics, taking the world apart and putting it back together again in these early days of the Algerian war for independence. There was also something warlike about the games we children used to play: we'd use lemons for grenades, and broom handles for machine guns. My sister was a formidable fighter; I preferred reading or imaginary travels.

Jean belonged to the other Jewish family of the compound. For reasons that were never clear, our mothers wouldn't speak to one another, and often bickered. Jean, my sister, and I made up a game that played on this inexplicable rift. We would stand in front of our respective apartment doors, and all three of us would call out to our mothers at the same time.

They would rush to the doorstep, while we would go back to our normal playing, as if nothing had happened, observing furtively to see how angry they would get. We were sure that this would be an excuse for them to go at one another. "Phooey," my mother would say, shrugging her shoulders. "Phooey," Jean's mother would conclude, pretending she'd come to put away her broom, which she always left outside the door. And each would then return to her chores, conspicuously

turning her back on the other, making a show of her annoyance. They didn't say anything, but we could tell from those looks that they hadn't been fooled for a minute by our ruse.

Old Zoureida continued to make her flatbread over her *kanoun*, giving out little pieces to the children gathered to watch.<sup>3</sup> Every spring would witness the return of Missud, the mattress-maker, who would stay for two days to stuff and stitch back together all the household's mattresses whose wool stuffing we would have removed, washed, and sun-dried on every available surface of the courtyard, in advance of his arrival.

For every Passover feast, my father would buy a sheep, who we would name either Messaoud or Bob, and who we would invariably come to adore, only to see him stolen away from us on the eve of the holiday by the knife-wielding rabbi.

Daily life continued normally, despite individual political commitments outside the house, positions that were more or less common knowledge and were deliberately kept silent within the discreet walls of the house.

No one ever talked about the murder, during the 1945 riots, of the husband and son of Fatma Bensallah, who was only able to stifle her resentment thanks to her unshakable religious faith.<sup>4</sup> We pretended not to notice when Jean's blustering father would defend French Algeria, parading around on his motorcycle with his hunting rifles on full display. Above our apartment lived Djamilia's family. Her husband was an FLN leader who had fled to Tunisia, leaving her alone with their three children. Everyone in the house knew about this, but no one ever mentioned it. The tensions of the war ate away at the ties that bound the country's various communities, but the women of the house were determined to maintain what they called "neighborly" relations. Jean's mother was the sole exception.

Thursday, laundry day. As she does every week, my mother shares the laundry room with Fatima Bensallah. Mother gets the water boiling, and soon the smell of laundry soap comes wafting over the terrace. The washing room is thick with steam rising out of the washtubs. There's one big tub for bedclothes, napkins, and other whites; a smaller one for clothes; and an even smaller one for "delicates." I'm between seven and eight years old. School will soon be out for the summer, and the June sun is already beating down on the terrace. I love the contrast between the sunbaked tiles and the water spilled across the floor in the relative shade of the laundry room. My sister and I splash around to our heart's delight. Mother scolds us when we get in the way as she moves about. We want to give her a hand, to help

3. A *kanoun* is a charcoal brazier used for cooking, generally made from terracotta.

4. The "riots of 1945" refers to what is now known as the Sétif and Guelma Massacres. On May 8, 1945, as crowds gathered in the two towns to celebrate the Nazi surrender, the parades took on a nationalist, anti-colonial character. Altercations between protesters and French police occurred; European settlers were attacked and Muslims were shot. Tensions escalated as a result, and over the next six weeks, French colonial authorities and settlers retaliated with disproportionate brutality, killing somewhere between six thousand and thirty thousand Muslims.

her scrub the linens on a washboard. Apparently, women in Algiers have washing machines. And come to think of it, I've never seen the "French from France" who live in our compound ever use the laundry room. Maybe they have a washing machine at home that we don't know about? Tired of trying to shoo us off, my mother finally gives us our father's handkerchiefs to wash. We scrub them with a brush before giving them back for her to toss into the boiler.

It's laundry day and I'm happy, for the terrace will be ours for the whole day. We can play hide-and-seek among the sheets hung out to dry. When the afternoon siesta is over, around three, and the terrace starts to fall into shade, it's the women's hour. One woman's laundry day is enough to gather them all. They take turns bringing mint tea, coffee, croquettes and *makrouds*, cornes de gazelle and cigars aux amandes.<sup>5</sup> It is during these gatherings that my sex education begins. Out of earshot of the men of the house, these rather reserved women tell their secrets in a highly coded language. My mother speaks fluent Arabic, and takes part in these conversations. It's laundry day and I love these moments when my mother lets her hair down and laughs heartily with her neighbor friends. I'm discovering the spontaneous complicity and solidarity that exists among women. Even the little boys of the household seem to understand that this moment belongs to women and girls only, whatever age the boys might be. They wander off of their own volition, to play among themselves further away. My friends Zohra, Tita, or Salima burst out laughing, and I envy them their ability to share in what their mothers or sisters are saying in Arabic. I'm the pure product of the French Republic, and I only speak French. On this particular day, Zoureida looks angry. She plops herself down on the ground, sighing loudly. Words start pouring out of her mouth, sounding like a stream of insults. The other women chuckle and tsk, weighing in on the subject at hand. Zoureida finally relaxes. I don't say a word. I love these stories and try desperately to understand what it is that has everyone giggling. No one seems to have noticed that Fadhela, a woman in her forties with a gleam in her eye and a knack for practical jokes, has slipped away. Suddenly, her head appears from behind the drying sheets, preceded by a piercing shout, full of fury. She has painted a mustache above her lip, pulled her hair back and put on a red *chéchia* and donned a man's *gandoura*.<sup>6</sup> She steps into the circle of women, which has widened to accommodate her antics, and begins gesticulating, miming what I take to be an argument between husband and his wife. She rolls her eyes, sticks out her

5. *Makrouds* are diamond-shaped Maghrebi cookies made with semolina flour and stuffed with dates and nuts; *cornes de gazelle* (literally, gazelle's horns) are cone-shaped pastries made with flour and filled with almond paste and orange blossom water; *cigares aux amandes* (literally, cigars with almonds) are cigar-shaped sweets made by stuffing sheets of *brik* dough (similar to phyllo dough in texture) with almonds.

6. A *chéchia* (often transliterated as *sheshia*) is a soft skullcap worn by many Muslim men, particularly in North Africa; a *gandoura* is a long, lightweight, loose-fitting long tunic, worn by both men and women in North Africa.

fake paunch, imitates first a man's gruff voice, then an exaggeratedly flutey voice of a woman. Zoreida has completely forgotten her grumpy mood and is laughing along with the others. My mother is laughing so hard that tears are streaming down her face. I don't understand a single word of this adult pantomime taking place entirely in Arabic, but I can tell that it's a rare moment of unbridled joy, something that goes beyond the silly anecdote being parodied. It's almost four in the afternoon now. Sharif has just come to whisper to his mother that his father has arrived back home. Almost instantly, the laughter ceases. The women get up all at once. They collect the plates and cups, and sweep away the crumbs. Fadhela has returned to her usual demure self. Pandora's Box has closed again, but for the mere ten minutes it was open, a whole feminine universe poured out, a secret world full of sisterly joy. That day, those women, who did not possess the words I was so proud to be learning at school, had presented me with my first experience of theater. In my current work as a stage director, I still dream about the unadorned simplicity and emotion of that shared experience.

Of the Guelma courtyard, there remains nothing but a photograph taken by my sister in 1993, when she traveled back for a visit. A moment stolen from time, somewhere between yesterday and now. On that day, just as in my reverie, the black and white tiles are shining. They must have been washed down just before. The door to our apartment is to the right as you enter. Carpets are hanging from the terrace all the way down to the first floor. The photo shows fine weather, and the soft light of this late afternoon seems to have preserved, as though it had seeped into the peeling walls, something of the house's timeless aura.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*