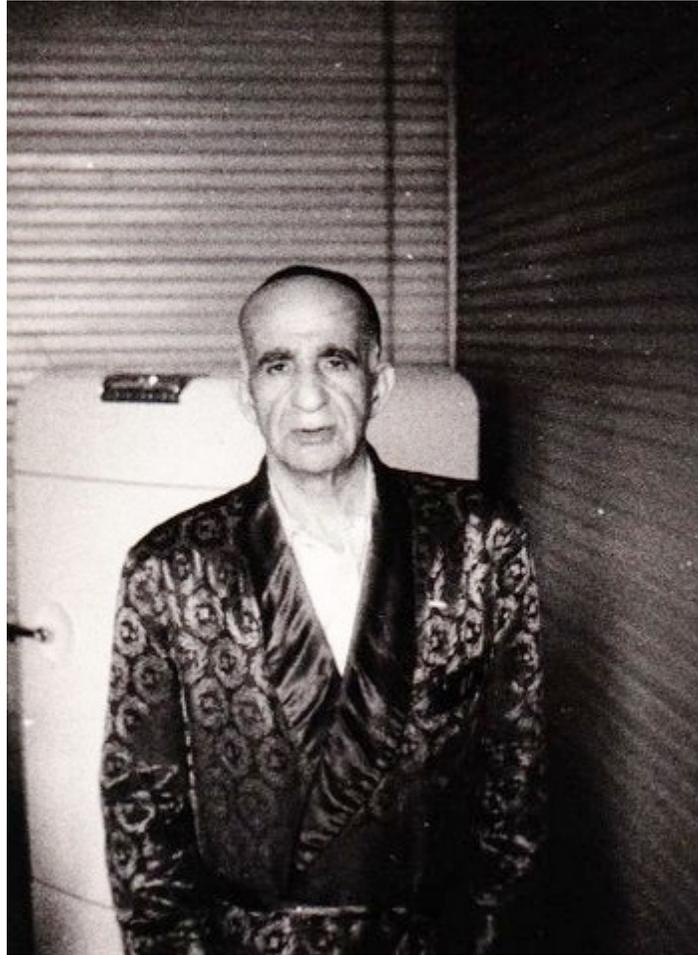


# SWEET MEMORIES



Rabbi Aaron Shoueke

# **SWEET MEMORIES**

*by Adele Mishan*

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# SWEET MEMORIES

## DO YOU CALL THAT A BATHROOM?

*Ronda Piccolella*

*Marella Sissolella*

*Telegraph, Telegraph,*

*Peeeeeeeh!*

We sang it with glee, having not the slightest inkling of what it meant – Italian, most likely. Holding hands in a circle, all four of us sisters, we screamed with delight whenever the cold water from the overhead shower tingled our naked bodies. It had to be summer, in Cairo, Egypt, on that street in the Daher section, where the tramway number three runs.

Our bathroom in the three-bedroom apartment on the second floor was a bare, square dark room. Aside from the showerhead in the middle of the ceiling, there was a tap in the wall. The floor was tiled, with a drain in its center, that's all. A wooden shelf held bars of Nabulsi soap and a wicker basket for our dirty laundry. There was also a low stool where we sat for our weekly bath.

Every Friday, a primus stove was lit after much pumping and was placed under a large tin container where we heated water. One by one, all seven of us children took turn bathing. We dipped an old brass bowl in the hot water, adjusting the temperature to our liking by adding cold water from the tap, then dumping it on our heads. Vigorous scrubbing with a loofah and soap followed, and more water for rinsing.

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How well and how lovingly do I remember Nonna, our diminutive grandmother who lived with us. When it came to her turn to bathe, she used to call me to scrub her back that was bent with age. With the cake of Nabulsi soap, I also washed her long white hair, streaked with yellow. A gentler soul I have yet to encounter in all my sixty years.

One more day of the week saw our bathroom the center of activities: washday. It was I believe on Wednesdays that Um Fatmah, our washer-woman, came early in the mornings. Draped in her black mellaya, she was greeted with a cup of strong Turkish coffee and set to work on the laundry. The tin of water in place over the primus stove, she separated sheets and towels from underwear and colors. While whites were placed in boiling soapy water, she began by washing my father's linens with great care.

My mother would look in every once in a while to collect whatever wash was rinsed and squeezed dry. It was then hung on lines outside two balconies. Nonna would get busy, and anyone of us children who happened to be around helped.

The hot sun bleached and dried our clothes in no time. The big white sheets needed two people to fold them. We used to hold on tight to the corners, flipping them, and playfully trying to tug them off our partner's hands. There were occasionally streaks of blueing, where the small blue cake wrapped on cheesecloth hadn't properly dissolved in the rinsing water.

Any ironing, leastways my father's shirts, were set aside to be taken to the professional ironers in the corner shop. Whenever it was my turn to go, I used to linger there and stare at the men who tested the hot iron by bringing it dangerously close to their cheeks before replacing it on the burning coals. Placing a shirt flat on the table, they would take a big gulp of water and shpritz it with amazing accuracy and evenness into tiny droplets all over the garment. The finished shirt was ironed to perfection.

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I am trying to remember if there was a sink in our bathroom. No, not there, not even in the smaller room where our toilet stood. The sink was in a hallway, outside the bedrooms. There we washed our hands and faces in the morning.

Our bathroom seems so primitive now compared to today's tubs and Jacuzzis. Yet, I remember a customer of my father, a wealthy important man in his village in upper Egypt, coming to visit our home, and spending much time sitting on our toilet, a novelty to him.

I wonder what my grandchildren will have to tell their grandchildren on the subject of bathrooms. That song we sang while circling under the cold shower still rings in my ears:

RHONDA PICOLLELA

November 1978

## **IN SICKNESS**

When I look back on my childhood in terms of discipline and rules, I can only say that we tumbled up. We had so much freedom. Rules were restricted to the traditional Chalchic Laws: a Kosher home, observance of Shabbat and Holidays. Discipline meant to be respectful in my father's presence. We were a house full of children. Ours was a lively home, with aunts, relatives and friends coming in and out at all times. We grew up with a sense of belonging, of feeling secure within our warm family life in our apartment in Cairo, Egypt.

When any of us became ill, it meant crawling into Mama's bed, no questions asked. The bed, one of a pair, was in the large bedroom facing the main thoroughfare where the tramway runs. It stood high above the floor; we really had to climb into it. It had gleaming brass railings, smooth and cool to the touch.

To cure constipation, we were given an enema. Much as we hated the indignity of such a procedure, the alternative was worse: a dose of castor oil. Anyone who has had the misfortune of being given a castor oil must agree that it is the most awful potion to swallow. I don't recall a smell or a particular taste other than foul. Still, it was the choked feeling of a viscous mass filling my mouth and throat. To alleviate the ordeal, my grandmother used to mix it with a freshly squeezed orange. Come to think of it, I seldom drank orange juice, even after some four decades of living in the U.S.A.

When faced with a stubborn cold, after swallowing numerous cups of tea and tilleul, or herb tea, without getting any relief, we had to resort to Aunt Zakeya. Her expertise was in administering what we called in Arabic '*kassat hawa*', literally translated, it means

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wind cups. They were glass cups in the shape of a light bulb, only wider at the base, and with a heavy lip at the bottom. The device was supposed to draw out the 'bad' air.

The patient would be lying on his face, his back uncovered up to the shoulders. Aunt Zakeya would insert a lighted match in a wind cup, hold it there for a few seconds, extinguish it and quickly place the cup on the bare skin. There it would stick for a bit, pulling in the skin and giving the patient a slight burning sensation. Seven or eight of these cups were used to cover the area. I don't know if it cured us. It certainly left round red circles on our backs for days.

At night, or in the late hours of evening, when a fever kept me awake, I used to look up at the ceiling where now and again shafts of light would be seen criss-cross, like searchlights in the sky during the war. It took me a while to associate it with the clanking of a passing tramway. Those were the headlights' reflection on the ceiling.

My grandmother's remedy for stomach ache was a poultice, a folded cloth dipped in some fatty material – was it oil or petrol? – and sprinkled with some peppery stuff. My mother kept us fed with a watery vegetable soup. All in all, we were surrounded by solicitous attentions.

I remember with fondness my grandmother pulling up a chair next to the sick bed and keeping us company for hours. What a good soul she was. She had only one story that she told and retold, very involved. I only recall that there was a friendly ghost in it, wearing tattered clothes with bells ringing as he hopped around.

Regardless of our being subjected to these ancient remedies, we grew up strong and healthy. For any serious sickness, our family doctor would make house calls. On the day that my young brother took sick with the dreaded typhoid virus, he had to be rushed to a hospital for infectious diseases. My mother packed a bag and stayed at the

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hospital, never leaving his side day and night until he was cured. We were left to our own devices, my older sister barely in her teens managing to keep us fed. I remember visiting my brother once in the hospital. You could hear moans and cries from a nearby mental facility. It was dreadful.

All of us children were born at home with the help of a mid-wife. On hearing that a Mrs. So and So went to the hospital to give birth, my mother said “But hospitals are for sick people!” I clearly remember when I was ten years old the day my mother gave birth to my little sister Ines right at home, in her own bed. We were not allowed in the bedroom. My older brother was sent to fetch the midwife. Mama’s cries made me hide in the further corner of our apartment. Nevertheless, I feel that we gained a foothold on reality. We learned that giving birth was temporarily painful, but that it was no sickness, rather a joyous occasion. We were present at a miracle.

In retrospect, I feel lucky to have been brought up by such devoted parents. Although my father spent little time with us, he looked upon us with pride and affection, akin to the love that Jacob our patriarch had for his children. No matter what, we felt well cared for.

I only hope that such family closeness will endure throughout future generations.

January 1988

## FRIDAYS

Fridays in our family was synonymous to hustle and bustle. Anyone of us seen dawdling would be sharply reminded: “Hey, today is Friday, we have to get ready for the Sabbath.” And so we did.

All the linen in our busy household was changed, floors were scrubbed. The kitchen was a war zone with the primus stove roaring under cooking pots, all in preparation for the celebration of our holy day. We came home from school at noon, put away our books and helped ourselves to lunch. It was usually a dish of yellow split peas cooked with chicken wings over rice. There was non-stop traffic for the bathroom, where every member of our family of three adults and seven children took their turn for a weekly bath and hair washing. As Mama lit two candles at dusk, she ushered in the Sabbath with the blessing: “Blessed art thou, Lord of the Universe, who has sanctified us with Thy commandments, and has commanded us to kindle the Sabbath lights.”

The table was set with a white cloth. Twelve pitta loaves of bread were placed in the center, covered with an embroidered napkin. There were delicious hors-d’oeuvre ready: a tehina spread, a potato and hard-boiled egg salad, a green salad, a plate of individual meat pies with sesame seeds that we called pasteles, and of course, a special wine cup for kiddush. Our home took on a unique quality then, in the way it looked, sounded, smelled.

My father’s presence dominated on that day. He wore a freshly laundered and pressed night shirt under his silk robe. Before sitting at the table, he would check the placing of the bread. It had to be put down in pairs, face to face, in a particular pattern. Papa would look at his family gathered around the table, and begin chanting the traditional songs welcoming the Sabbath queen into our home, and a Song of Solomon

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in praise of the virtuous woman. I remember once when I was still a young child, feeling vexed over some trifle and getting up in tears from the table. A sharp rebuke from my father kept me in my seat. He would not abide anyone missing from the Shabbat table.

We all stood up to hear the blessing over wine, Papa's voice growing strong and melodious until just before the end, when he would almost shout for the benefit of my grandmother who was hard of hearing, so that she could join us in answering: "*Lehayim*".

I can still sense with what relish Papa spoke, often of religious, sometimes of mundane matters over a glass of arak, cognac or beer. He poured a drop of liquor to each one of us, even the young ones. He would make a ceremony of offering us tidbits from the table while expounding on some Chalachic point with my brothers.

My mother would interrupt every once in a while to ask: "*Haron, shall I serve?*" "No," he would reply, while savouring the presence and the attention of his household. (I must add that at other evenings on weekdays, we ate separately to suit our varied schedules). Then, in time, the delicious cooked meal was enjoyed, followed by the blessing.

Friday evenings remained precious and very special for me throughout my adult life and into old age.

March 1988

*DO YOU KNOW CHICKEN?*

There are dozens of ways of knowing chicken: broiled, baked, stuffed, southern fried, cacciatore, curry, coq au vin, just to name a few. When not eating at a restaurant or out of the freezer, city-bred people see chicken at the market, cleaned, quartered, boned, all ready to cook. They are blissfully ignorant of what a chicken is really like.

I am also city-bred, but ask me about chicken. I grew up in Cairo, Egypt; we ate chicken once a week, on Shabbat. Since we had no refrigeration, the chicken had to be bought no earlier than Friday morning. My older brother was on occasion delegated to make the purchase at the butcher. More often, my mother would buy a live chicken from the market. The bird had to pass two tests. The first was a careful examination of the chicken's posterior. It had to be fat – the fatter, the better. Next, holding the squawky thing by the feet, Mama blew lightly on the feathers to make sure that it was not too dense, a precautionary measure for the anticipated cleaning procedure.

A ritual slaughterer was on hand, ready to kill it for a few piastres. With a knife sharp as a razor, he slit the bird's neck with one quick stroke. He then pushed the gullet through the incision and threw the chicken in a container of sand to absorb the blood. After a few flutters, the chicken was ready to be bought home.

With the skin still warm to the touch, it had to be plucked. The soft underbelly was cut open with a sharp knife, and out came intestines, stomach, heart, liver, bowels. More often than not, a cat – cats were regular visitors in our apartment – would be staring with shining eyes, waiting for a treat. If by chance there weren't any cats in the kitchen, my grandmother, Nonna, would open the front door, and, sure enough, there sat a feline. Nonna would invite it in and throw down on a piece of newspaper the precious

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intestines. Before throwing away the head, Nonna would place the eyes in a folded piece of newspaper for what she believed to be an exorcism against the evil eye. One of us children would be asked to step hard on it, while she exclaimed, drawing in a deep breath, “Hee! It burst, it melted, the evil eye of the enemy is gone!” Often, though, the fated eye would fly out and get stuck somewhere on the wall.

It was time to cleanse the chicken of all blood according to our Jewish Chalachic laws. After holding it over an open flame to get rid of the pin feathers, it was soaked in water for half an hour, then salted in and out for an hour. My mother would rub it in flour for good measure, rinse it, and only then was it ready for the cooking pot.

There was a time of year when the butcher came to our house. That was a few days before Yom Kippur, a Holy day for fasting and prayers. Traditionally, a bird was killed for each member of the family, which meant for us six chickens and four roosters. While each of us would stand before the butcher with fluttering heart, he would twirl the chicken over our head, reciting a formula transferring our sins to the hapless bird’s head before killing it.

Everyone helped to pluck feathers. I remember seeing with my own eyes a chicken running in circles without a head. And I still feel a slight shudder at the memory of a choked cry coming from the neck of a chicken I was plucking. We only kept a couple for our own consumption; the others were distributed among poor families.

Today, we give money to charity instead. We keep our hands clean. We want to shield our children from such experiences. We don’t like to be reminded that the delicious dish we are eating was once a full blooded, alive, and kicking bird. So forget it already. Bon Appétit!

February 1988

*MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD*

Imagine a small square room, red tiled: one window, two counters, and the one single piece of furniture: a garde-manger with screen doors – that was our kitchen in Cairo, Egypt, where I grew up in the nineteen thirties. An ingenious rack nailed directly over the sink held our everyday dishes. Dirty dishes were washed with a loofah and soap, rinsed, then hung up dripping on the rack. Pots got scoured with sand, with an occasional shine with steel wool, a luxury my mother kept in the hallway cupboard. A two-burner gas stove over the counter was a late invention. I well remember the loud roar of a primus stove lighting up after much pumping. For slow cooking, wick burners were used.

There was always a pot of food simmering every day for the mid-day meal. We helped ourselves individually, according to our schedule. The meal usually consisted of a vegetable or beans cooked in a piece of meat for flavouring, eaten over rice. We kept left-overs in the buffet, but only for a few hours, for it quickly spoiled in the hot climate.

On some occasions, we bought a block of ice wrapped in burlap, and with a hammer, chipped pieces of it to cool our drinks. We kept our drinking water in an “olla”, an earthenware vessel with a round base and a long neck. We filled it with tap water and left it on a window ledge. Soon, there were sweat drops on the olla's outside, while the water in it tasted deliciously cool. Every summer, my mother would bottle homemade syrups of oranges and of lemons. Diluted in a glass of cool water, they were a treat during the hot Egyptian summers.

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When our copper pots became pitted after much use, it was time to take them to the shop to be shined, or rather recoated. The boy in charge would have both feet inside the pot and do the twist, grinding away with the motion of his feet.

We bought green coffee beans and roasted them at home in a black cylindrical receptacle with a handle. To get an even cooking, we had to keep on turning the handle over and over. There was a door in it that we opened with the help of a long stick to check the color of the beans. The aroma of the roasted coffee filled the house. Once ready, a few days' supply was ground to a fine powder in a brass hand mill. The result was adequate for brewing Turkish coffee. It was drunk in small cups, smaller than the demi-tasse used in European countries. You served it either 'mazbut', with a little sugar, 'sada' with no sugar, or 'succar zeitada' for extra sweet.

Staples such as sugar, rice, oil and flour were bought in large quantities. Roaming vendors supplied us daily with fruit and vegetables. Those too poor to own a donkey or cart carried their wares on their heads in large straw baskets. Each vendor had his own distinctive chant for calling out their merchandise to the attention of householders. I remember the zucchini vendor, declaiming zucchini filled with butter, in praise of the sweet quality of his ware.

As a child, I spent hours on the balcony of our apartment, looking at the busy street. It was highly entertaining. People were walking to and fro in widely varied costumes, from the latest fashion from Paris to the 'melaya', a black cloth draping the native women from head to toe.

Barefooted children in short white robes played on the sidewalk along roaming dogs and cats foraging for food. The streetcar clanked along its rails, while cars with blaring horns vied with carts pulled by donkeys. You always knew when the garage truck was

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approaching, for it was an open flat-bed vehicle. The stench was overwhelming. In contrast, I still remember the delicious smell of freshly baked bread emanating from the bakery run by Greeks. Since we didn't own an oven, my mother's little cakes and meat pies were brought to the bakery where an enormous fire roared under the oven at the back. For the sake of kashrut, my brother had to add some little fuel to the oven before setting in our trays. The sound and sight of the roaring fires with leaping flames is etched in my memory. The bakers in bare arms punched dough in large bins in preparation for bread-making. The loaves were shaped Italian style, and placed on flat shovels with extra long handles. When ready to be baked, the loaves were placed in, then brushed with cold water to form a crust. What a delicious smell, and the taste was yummy.

Whenever we were out of some grocery item, there was a shopkeeper who supplied us from his store, just under our apartment building. From our first floor balcony, we would shout our order to the grocer while lowering a basket at the end of a rope, a pre-home delivery system.

Our childhood games, no toys, consisted of three or four basics: a ball, a jump rope, a small stone for hop-scotch, and playing cards. We spent hours of fun playing cards: old maid, a game called Jockey, war, concan, and solo, a game where you earned tricks like in bridge.

There was a period when my brothers started making things out of wood: shelves and delicately worked trays. The girls were condescendingly given the job of fine sanding.

The rear of the apartment building where we lived gave into a narrow alley. My aunt Chafia lived a few houses down with her husband. They were childless. Tante came to

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visit us every day; all of us children were very fond of her. I used to visit her whenever I needed some quiet. It was peaceful compared to our noisy household. Across from our balcony lived an old lady who kept a parrot. As we occasionally called out to my aunt, the parrot would take up the chant and screech again and again: Tante! Tante!

My brother was a wiz at building contraptions. He once concocted an elaborate mechanism over his bed that spilled water on his face at a pre-set time to get him up in the morning. As we had no telephone, he decided to set up a line of communication between our house and my aunt's. The end result was that when we needed to call her, we had to press on a clothespin attached to the railing of our balcony, and that would trigger my aunt's door bell. Every time we rang in this manner, Tante would rush to her front door, and then come out on her balcony to answer us. We became too fond of our 'phone system' till my aunt became exasperated and we had to put a stop to our game.

These are a few of many recollections I have of growing up in Cairo. Little did I think then that I would have grandchildren growing up in the suburbs of New York. Such is life.

Summer/Fall 1988

*GAMILAH*

My two older brothers decided one day that the milk sold in the grocery stores was not good enough. We lived in an apartment house in Cairo, Egypt. The question was not one of quality, but one of kashrut. We grew up in the orthodox Jewish tradition, where restrictions on food abound, from the manner of slaughtering animals permitted for consumption to careful removal of worms from vegetables. What if the Arab worker was eating some forbidden food while milking the cow?

The truth is that my brothers had spotted an empty lot right next to Aunt Zakeya's house. Not exactly empty, but I wouldn't call it a farm either. Be that as it may, there was a cow in that lot. All I know is that one fine day, as I was standing on our balcony facing the street – my favourite pastime – a bedraggled fellah leading a sorry-looking cow stopped beneath our apartment house. He looked up and shouted: "Gamilah! Gamilah!"

At the cry, my older brother looked up, dashed back into the kitchen, grabbed a dairy saucepan, and ran down the steps into the street. The farmer placed the pan under the cow's udder, and there and then, amid the clanking of tramways, the hustle of street vendors and passers-by, he milked Gamilah, sending streams of the white stuff into the pan.

He got paid and he went on his way, while my brother went up to boil the milk on the spot, for whoever heard of an Egyptian cow that was inoculated?

I am not sure how long this scenario lasted, a few days or a couple for weeks. However, I did not forget the hoarse cry of "Gamilah!"

November, 1988

*MY MOTHER*

Mama's face, with its milk white skin and blue eyes, was framed with a crown of auburn hair. She was beautiful in her younger years, but life dealt harshly with her.

My grandmother was a kind soul, and very innocent. When my grandfather went away one day, leaving her and their five daughters behind, she had no idea that he was walking out on them. It was my mother, the middle child, who took up the burden of providing for the family. She became apprenticed to a seamstress, a Spanish lady who taught her all the intricacies of her trade. The seamstress befriended my mother, who never forgot her kindness. Mama kept visiting the senora for years afterwards, when she became very old and in need of assistance.

While Mama sent her two younger sisters to school, she remained the sole breadwinner of the family. She became adept at her trade, and in much demand by the ladies of the Jewish Community of Cairo, Egypt, where they lived.

One fine day, as she was trying a dress on a customer, she blushed, as at the entrance was a young man. She urged the lady to cover herself up. Smiling, the customer introduced her to her son, who later became my father. My mother recalls that when he came courting, they sat on a balcony by the light of the moon, her hands busy with her sewing. It was to save electricity, she said.

Soon, babies were born to the couple, one after another. Two children died, the firstborn boy at the age of seven of a severe mouth infection, and the firstborn girl at the age of eighteen, of some other infectious disease. To her dying day, my mother could not refrain from shedding tears at the recollection. However, all seven remaining

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children made up a noisy household, and more than a handful of mouths to feed. We were often poor growing up, but I cannot remember any sense of deprivation.

Mama was always there to nourish and warm us. Like mother earth, she gave and she gave and she gave. One of my earlier recollections is of a serious incident. We lived on Said Street, in a fourth floor apartment at the time. One day, we heard a big commotion on the stairs, running footsteps and screaming. A woman appeared at our door, dishevelled, crying for help. She said that her husband was after her with a big knife trying to kill her. My mother took her in, gave her shelter, taking grave risks, for a Muslim enraged husband is a dangerous sort. I wouldn't have remembered any of it, if not for my older brother. He tricked me. He told me the next morning that my Aunt Chafia – whom I was and is particularly fond of – was sleeping over at our house. As I ran to see her, I was dismayed to find a complete stranger lying on the bed.

Although my mother was illiterate, she had an inner wisdom and a generosity of spirit that allowed us to grow independent and upright human beings. She knew just when to rebuke us, and when to ignore our misdemeanours. She worshipped my father, and felt unworthy of him. When the family was forced to flee Egypt in the fifties, my mother found it hard to adjust to life in Israel. She had trouble learning Hebrew, or going about on her own. Eventually, she developed the dreaded Alzheimer disease and became despondent over the dependence on us for life's necessities. After my father's death, ה'ט, she lingered another year or so, and died, ה'ט at peace in her own bed, surrounded by her family.

To this day, I find myself in times of stress mouthing: Mama, Mama.

December 1988

*PAPA'S PICNIC BASKET*

It was a capacious straw basket with a double lid opening at the top. My father used it when he went for a couple of days every few months, only his outings were no picnic.

A Talmudic scholar, he refused in his younger years to earn his living from his religious expertise. In the Jewish community of Cairo where we lived, he was known as Hakham Haron, the founder and spiritual leader of AHAVA V'AHVA, the Hebrew words meaning love and friendship, a religious institute. Many of the children who attended there after school hours have in turn established similar institutes under the same name in Israel, Europe and the Americas. It was also a center of learning for adults, as well as a house of prayers. The establishment of the State of Israel forced the closing of Ahava and the dispersion of the Jews of Egypt in the forties and fifties.

During the early years of raising his family, Papa owned a wholesale material store, mostly cotton. He had once sent a shipment of fine, long staple Egyptian cotton to England to be woven by a famous textile mill. He named the finished cloth Sarina, after my mother. The material was used for sheeting, and for making the 'galabieh', a flowing white robe used by the natives.

It was necessary from time to time for my father to travel to Upper Egypt. His aim was to reach the Cheikhs, rich landowners of the villages who could buy large quantities of cloth. To prepare for his journey, he needed to take along some food, as there was no way he could obtain kosher food in the villages. He also packed a suitcase full of several pairs of underwear and shirts, for he was a neat dresser. His three-piece tailored suits were made of fine English wool for winter, and of white gabardine for

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summer. He used suspenders to hold his trousers, and garters for his socks. It always fascinated me to watch him put the final touches to his attire before leaving the house. The stiff collar of his immaculate white shirt buttoned, he would carefully knot a colorful tie in place, use two hairbrushes to his thinning hair, spray a touch of cologne to his handkerchief before tucking it in the breast pocket, and use a lotion to soften the skin of his hands which were unusually rough. It amused me to contrast the attention he gave his appearance to the careless way my mother was groomed. If she ever ventured to try on some lipstick, it usually came on crooked.

But to get back to the basket. The first item to go in was a spirit stove on which Papa would brew his own Turkish coffee. He was very particular as to the brand and the freshness of his coffee. I remember him telling me once as he was savouring a cup that there was a skill even in the act of pouring, to make sure that a 'head' would show on top. Into the basket went the little brass pot and the delicate porcelain cup. A dozen of my mother's 'caak' – a seeded breadstick in the shape of a bagel – a salami, plus other necessities.

My father was a gifted conversationalist. He had the knack of communicating on a personal level, even with a casual encounter. His deep set black eyes had a penetrating look that touched the soul. The wide gulf that separated his background to that of his customers was no impediment to his forming a warm relationship with them.

I remember one of his clients visiting our home. He was an important sheikh in his village, a heavy set man who plumped himself in our biggest armchair. We hurried to bring him a traditional refreshment, homemade jam. On the tray stood two glasses of water and a teaspoon. The idea was that the guest would taste a teaspoonful of jam, place the used spoon in one glass of water, and drink from the other glass. He was apparently unacquainted with such a custom; he simply lifted the entire bowl of jam onto

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his commodious lap and proceeded to eat the lot. The incident became a source of amusement to us children long after the event.

All of this happened a long time ago. Funny how a picture of a picnic basket in some magazine should bring it all back to me.

December 1988

*RAS EL BARR*

Where a branch of the Nile meets the Mediterranean Sea, there is a summer resort called Ras-El-Barr, tip of the land. It is nothing but sand, sand and more sand, stretching between river and sea, to end at the point of meeting between sweet and salty waters. I cannot say what it looks like today, but when I first saw it as a young teenager vacationing with my family in the nineteen forties, there were no buildings to speak of. Rows of rough huts made of wooden planks with straw mats for walls stood side by side. I remember the day I watched some men battling a fire in one of those huts. They simply lifted the walls and flung them down into the sand.

Every morning, together with my brothers and sisters, we headed for the sea, running all the way, our naked feet burning on the hot sand. With cries of delight, we threw ourselves in the waves, elated by the sight, sound, feel and smell of the wonderful sea. We lived in Cairo, and although the Nile is a mighty river, experiencing the vastness of the sea was a novel and exhilarating sensation. For the first time in my life, I was able to grasp the concept of infinity.

When our rumbling stomachs made it difficult to ignore the passing time, we returned to our hut for lunch and siesta. There was a walk-way along the Nile, the Languette, where all the vacationers met in the afternoon. Sometimes, we hired a sailboat for the ride on the river. Once my brother and I took a rowing boat and headed for the open sea. We were curious to find out just what happened when river and sea joined. Soon our tiny boat was bopping up and down. On the Languette, our friends and relatives were gesticulating wildly, pointing at us with a frightened look on their faces, till we made it safely back to shore.

## *Sweet Memories – by Adele Mishan*

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There was a coffee house whose speciality called 'Fetira' consisted of a large flat pancake made in all sorts of flavors. One particular waiter never failed to amaze us by his dexterity. He would run around the tables taking orders from customers, reel of a few dozen orders in a sing-song voice to the cook and manage to serve each and everyone without any mistakes.

I remember the pushcarts offering Italian ices, 'gelatti', others a sweet called 'lukumadis', each vendor presenting his wares with a particular tune so distinctive as to be instantly recognisable, like a signature, a simple direct ad!!

Once or twice during the season, we would venture to the Crystal, a night spot across the river where we had a drink, watched the dancing couples, or sat bored through a show.

All and all, my strongest impression of Ras-El-Barr was the magnificent spectacle of sunset. Walking to the tip of the languette, I stared fascinated as the sun slowly sank into the sea, coloring the sky with a mighty palette. I wanted to get the whole picture, embrace in one glance river and sea, earth and sky, until my eyes hurt.

If I every should find myself in Egypt once more, I would be wary of visiting Ras-El-Bar, for who knows what improvements progress has brought to it. I prefer to leave memory intact: the bareness, the rough simplicity of it associated with such pleasurable summers.

May, 1989

*NONNA, PORTRAIT OF A GRANDMOTHER*

My grandmother lived with us as far back as I can remember. We called her Nonna. From Heliopolis where I was born, throughout our various moves in Cairo, Egypt, Nonna was always part of our numerous family. I don't remember her ageing. She never used make-up or colored her hair. Perhaps it was as I myself grew older, my conception of old age gradually adjusted itself to Nonna's face.

I have a picture of her taken at a photographer's studio. She is sitting on a carved upholstered chair, leaning one elbow on a side table, the other arm by her side, the hand demurely placed on her lap. Her feet are crossed at the ankles, resting on a pillow. Kindness shines through the wrinkles on her face. She is smiling at me, her thick eyebrows relaxed over eyes I know to be of a clear blue. She has a high forehead. Her white hair is almost covered by a kerchief with a fancy border. There is no date on the black and white photo, but that's all right. Nonna would have been hard put if asked about her age, let alone her birthday. When I left home in 1950 to set up residence in America with my newly-married husband, I embraced Nonna for the last time. I was leaving behind with my childhood all that was familiar and dear to me.

She was a simple woman, illiterate, her life centered on the welfare of her family. Her days were filled with hundreds of tedious tasks necessitated by a large household. In the preparation of food alone, how many tons of potatoes did she peel, and bushels of peas did she shell, and kilos of rice did she sort, picking away bits of stones and crawling insects. She would protest at my mother's impatient promptings to hurry up and hand over the clean rice, for the water was already boiling in the pot!

## *Sweet Memories – by Adele Mishan*

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Her eyesight remained good though she was hard of hearing. She kept track of our comings and goings, all seven of us children, ready to greet us with a smile. She used to stop several times a day in front of a wall clock we had in the family room. From time to time, she would ask my father: “Is this clock accurate?” To which my father would exclaim, “What difference does it make to you, a minute or two late or early?” Yet, there was such affection in his tone of voice, that Nonna would blush with pleasure. It was so touching to see the color rising in her wrinkled face. Often, Papa would add: “I have sheltered you for over thirty years now,” and she would smile at the pleasantries. She loved my father, and would do anything for him. He, on his part, was always considerate of her. On Friday evenings, it was our custom to hear Papa’s prayers before dinner, followed by his blessing over wine. When it came time to answer “*LeHayim*”, Papa used to say the preceding formula: “*Sabrir maranan*” real loud for the benefit of my grandmother, so she could join us in “*LeHayim*” at the proper time.

Nonna was in awe of our paternal grandmother, whom we called Nonna-el-Kebira”, to differentiate between the two. Nonna-el-Kebira lived in a fashionable district in town with an uncle. Whenever she came to visit us, Nonna would rush about, looking for my mother to announce: “Your mother-in-law is here, your mother-in-law is here!” To honor the distinguished guest, she would get busy preparing a ‘narguileh’, the water pipe commonly used in Egypt which we called ‘Sheesha’. It was quite a procedure, getting charcoal over a flame in the kitchen, filling the glass bottom of the pipe with cold water, setting shredded tobacco in the brass cup over the neck of the sheesha. Once the charcoal was good and hot, it was placed over the tobacco. The smoke was inhaled through a mouthpiece attached to a flexible tube. It was set in front of our guest, who took pleasure in inhaling now and again while conversing. The water cooled the smoke.

## *Sweet Memories – by Adele Mishan*

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Indeed, the combination of tobacco aroma, gurgly sound of water, and dancing bubbles had a soothing effect, quite unlike cigarette smoking.

Nonna indulged herself with an occasional cigarette. On an afternoon, when she was done with any chore undertaken that day, she would exclaim in finding us reading: “All day long, you stare at the book and the book stares back at you. Come, Adele, come and talk to me.” To entice me further, she would stop near her armoire and extract a single cigarette from a pack hidden in her clothes – that was to thwart my older brother helping himself, knowing full well that it didn’t work. She would sit me on the couch by her side and ask me to light the cigarette for her. The complicity created an intimacy between us that was cherished on both sides.

Did you ever feel like turning back the clock to before a particular day when you proved yourself an ass? I happened to me on account of my behaviour one summer day. We were in Ras-el-Barr for the first time, at a resort situated between one branch of the Nile River and the Mediterranean Sea. There were huts built on sand, just rough wooden floors with straw mats for walls. Our accommodations were a couple of rooms above the ground floor. We piled in, nine people, with our clothes and cooking utensils, my father having remained in the city. We were really crowded, yet ecstatic to be there. Our rooms were near the Nile, as the huts near the sea were much dearer to rent.

Nonna, in a fit of self-determination atypical for her, insisted on going right away to gaze at the sea over my mother’s objections that she would get lost. Nevertheless, she started off. My mother sent me after her to bring her back. I caught up with Nona in a few minutes. We struggled for a while till she reluctantly gave in and followed me back. Why couldn’t I have thought of accompanying her to the sea? It was such a normal wish on her part, and so stupid of me not to go along. Even though I was obeying Mama’s order, I should have gone with her. I still regret it today after so many years.

## *Sweet Memories – by Adele Mishan*

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Elsewhere I described my grandmother's patient attendance on us when we were sick, confined to bed. More than anything else, it was her presence that was precious, a feeling of trust that she was always there, loving, undemanding, accepting and caring.

Nonna died two years after I left home. It happened on a Shabbat day, when everyone in the family was present. She was having a snack. With the spoon halfway in her mouth, she drew her last breath. My sister Marcelle, on hearing a strange rattle, rushed to her side. Nonna died in her arms. Marcelle was so affected that soon after, she contracted meningitis, from which she recovered, thank G-D. All of this was told to me much later. I also heard that at my father's oration the day of the funeral, half the Jewish population of Cairo showed up. Papa, in praising her good soul, claimed she would enter paradise on foot. I can well believe that she did.

February, 1989