Forgotten siren: From Cairo diva to Israeli single mother

Jewish singer Souad Zaki abandoned fame and fortune in Egypt for a Zionist dream

By RENEE GHERT-ZAND | 29 April 2014, 11:32 pm



Copies of audio recordings and films starring Souad Zaki that her son Moshe Zaki was able to obtain because they were sold outside of Egypt before the 1952 Revolution. (photo credit: Renee Ghert-Zand)

TEL AVIV — Most people have heard of Egyptian sultry siren Umm Khultum, the greatest female Arabic singer in history who dominated Middle Eastern stages and airwaves from the 1930s to the 1970s and still enjoys widespread acclaim. However, though she too was a prominent singer of popular classical Egyptian music leading up to the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, the same cannot be said of Souad Zaki.

Had political realities been different, Zaki may have become an international singing sensation like Umm Khultum, who picked Zaki to co-star in the hit 1945 film "Salamah." But as nationalism and anti-Semitism took hold in Egypt, Zaki, a proud Jew and Zionist, left her birthplace and privileged status behind for the life of a struggling immigrant in the young Jewish State.

Thus, just as Zaki's star was rising in Egypt, she became a cleaning lady at a bank in Tel Aviv.

In the wake of the recent Egyptian Revolutions, there has been renewed interest in famous female Jewish singers from Egypt. Music fans have been reintroduced to Layla Mourad, the voice of the 1952 Revolution. Mourad, who was of Iraqi-Jewish and Polish-Jewish descent, reportedly converted to Islam for her husband, or career — or both.



From diva singer to working single mother: A photo of Souad Zaki with her 5-year-old son taken right before they left Egypt for Israel. (Courtesy of Moshe Zaki)

Faiza Rushdi, an Egyptian-Jewish singer who, like Zaki, moved to Israel, came to broad Israeli public attention over a decade ago when her daughter Yaffa Tusiah-Cohen staged a one-woman show titled, "Ana Faiza," about their difficult mother-daughter relationship. (The story was followed up in a 2002 documentary film by Sigalit Banai, called, "Mama Faiza.")

But of the three great female Jewish-Egyptian singers of the 20th century, only Souad Zaki has been all but forgotten by all but the most diehard Arabic music fans. For this reason, Zaki's son Moshe, a psychologist from Haifa, was pleased to meet with The Times of Israel to recount his mother's unusual life story.



"She was the Beyoncé of Cairo at the time," is how Moshe Zaki, 69, proudly describes his late mother. "She was second only to Umm Khultum on Radio Egypt."

"I wouldn't quite say that," Yitzhak Aviezer, the musical director for Kol Israel Radio's Arabic service between 1957 and 2007 tells The Times of Israel. "I don't like to compare artists, but I'd say that Souad was a very good singer of popular classical Egyptian music. She wasn't a top star like Layla Mourad, but those who liked her genre definitely knew who she was."

As Moshe Zaki sits with a reporter at a café near HaBima National Theater in Tel Aviv, he flips through a scrapbook, pointing out photos and newspaper clippings from his mother's career.

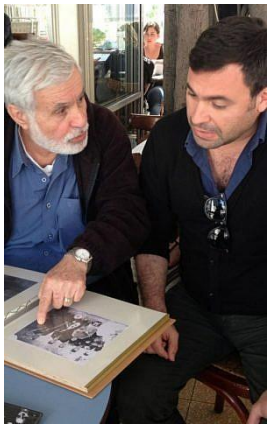
His 39-year-old son, Uri Zaki (a political activist and the former representative of B'Tselem in Washington), has come along for the interview, and he learns much about his grandmother.

"I just remember her as a big woman and a good cook. She made great stuffed artichokes and rice," the grandson recalls. "And I remember that she used to laugh her heart out. She was full of emotion."

Souad Zaki eventually moved to Haifa to be close to her grown son and his family, and Uri and his younger sister Iris (now a filmmaker and PhD candidate in London) used to go to her apartment after school. Her grandson has memories of her watching Egyptian TV and speaking in a mix of Hebrew and Arabic.

"But I never heard her sing," he says.

Souad Zaki may have never hummed a tune in earshot of her grandchildren, but she had sung after arriving in Israel. For 20 years, until she retired at age 57, she sang with Zuzu Mousa's Arab Orchestra for Kol Israel Radio's Arabic service.



Moshe Zaki shows his son Uri Zaki a scrapbook with photos and articles about his mother Souad Zaki. (photo credit: Renee Ghert-Zand)

That was her day job. But since it did not pay enough for her, a single mother, to support herself and her son, she also worked as a cleaning woman at a bank. There she went by the name of Mazal: the woman whose voice was on the radio and who was once a great musical star in Egypt couldn't be connected to the lady washing floors to make ends meet.

The work clothes Zaki donned to clean the bank were a far cry from the latest European fashions she wore as a famous entertainer in Egypt. Publicity stills glued in Moshe Zaki's scrapbook show his mother sophisticatedly dressed, coiffed and made-up.

Souad Zaki was born in to a bourgeois family in Cairo in 1915. Her father, whose family was from Syria, was a judge in one of the city's suburbs, and her mother, whose family was from North Africa, was a housewife. However, when her father took ill, Zaki had to use her singing talent to help support her six younger siblings.

Zaki began singing after high school and studied at a conservatory.

"Her uncle was the biggest real estate developer in Cairo, and he sort of adopted her and supported her," explains her son Moshe. "She made her debut on the radio as the mysterious 'Singer S,' and before long she became very popular."

She went by the stage name 'Souad Zaki.' Her real family name was Halwani, but she adopted her father's first name (a derivation of Isaac) as her last name.

Zaki's Jewish identity was not an issue career-wise, or personally. Famous composers (Muslim and Jewish alike) such as Riyad al-Sunbati and Daoud Hosni composed for her. When she was 24, she married famous Muslim qanun player Mohammed Elakkad, who hailed from a great Egyptian musical family.

"Her family wasn't happy about this," her son says. "But they knew she was a non-conformist, so what could they do. My mother and father respected each other's religions."


Souad Zaki with musicians in Egypt. (Courtesy of Moshe Zaki)

"She sang at the inauguration ceremony of Cairo University and Rabbi Simchon, the one who did the circumcision for King Farouk, performed my *brit milah*," Moshe Zaki adds to emphasize just how famous and well regarded his mother was.

"Her Jewishness was taken as a fact because she was so great. She was a *mutreba* (a diva). They loved her as an Egyptian because she brought national pride to the country."


Mohammed Elakkad and Souad Zaki during their years in New York. (Courtesy of Moshe Zaki)

Souad Zaki and Mohammed Elakkad decided to immigrate to the US as Egyptian nationalism began to grow and revolution was in the air. Elakkad went ahead to the States to pave the way for the move.

Zaki got wind in 1950 that her husband had been unfaithful to her with a female producer he had met in New York, so she decided to separate from him and took sole custody of their young son Moshe. When she learned that her family members were preparing to make aliyah to Israel, she joined them. (She had previously travelled to pre-state Israel three times to perform.)


A young Souad Zaki in the recording studio in Cairo. (Courtesy of Moshe Zaki)

Because she was so famous, she had to pretend she was going on a vacation to Switzerland to get out of Egypt. From Switzerland, she and her 5-year-old son went to Italy, and from there they travelled to Israel.

"Egypt would not have given her an exit visa to Israel," her son notes.

Once in Israel, Zaki's life changed drastically. She, by then 35, and her son lived in a *ma'abara* (transit camp) in south Tel Aviv, and later moved to public housing in Or Yehuda. A single mother, she worked tirelessly to enable her only son to attend College Des Frères in Jaffa. She placed high expectations on Moshe, who ended up studying for a PhD in France and becoming a successful psychologist.

"She saw that in Israel she couldn't reach the top, so she invested in me so that I could get to the pinnacle," the son says.

In an unusual twist, Zaki ended up remarrying Elakkad years later, when she was in her 70s. They lived in New York for seven years, and returned to Israel after Elakkad was mugged on the subway and his qanun stolen. Elakkad died in 1993 and was buried in a Muslim cemetery in Haifa. Zaki died in 2004 and was buried in a Jewish cemetery in Tirat HaCarmel.

"My mother never criticized Israel," Moshe Zaki reflects. "She simply did a 'reframing' of her life."

Souad Zaki recorded some 200 Arabic songs for Kol Israel Radio during the 1950s and 1960s, but that was at a time when relatively few Israelis listened to Arabic music. It was also before the rise of popular Mizrahi culture ushered in by the election of the Menachem Begin-led Likud in 1977.

The Egyptian government burned all her musical recordings and the four films she made there. It is only thanks to the small number of copies sold abroad prior to 1950 that we can still hear and see Souad Zaki as the *mutreba*—the diva— she once was.



Souad Zaki, the Egyptian diva, strikes a pose. (Courtesy of Moshe Zaki)

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