The Secret Jewish Identity of the Jamal Twins, Egypt's Belly-dancing Stars

King Farouk and Richard Nixon were among their fans, they starred in dozens of films and their photos graced magazine covers around the world. But it is unlikely that the audiences who packed the halls in the 1950s and '60s knew the truth about the Egyptian sisters who became international stars

By **Ofer Aderet** | Jul 11, 2018

25 Tweet

0 Subscribe

- An Israeli singer returns to her Yemeni roots – and fans in Yemen approve
- Lesbian love out, prostitution in: How Israel censored erotic literature in the 1960s
- Why is Israel still covering up extrajudicial executions committed by a Jewish militia in '48?

During World War II, many nightclubs were opened in Egypt's big cities to cater to the legions of foreign soldiers who were stationed in the country. One of the best-known of these institutions was Helmieh Palace, in the suburbs of Cairo. The club offered a somewhat unusual artistic program. Meticulous attention to costumes, gigs by the best musicians and precision choreography made it the wellspring of a new Middle Eastern culture.

Helmieh Palace's biggest floor act was the Jamal Twins. Rigorous training, endless exercises and daily rehearsals produced an extraordinary result. The duo's performances were as dynamic as they were inventive, exhibiting superb coordination between the movements of the two dancers and – a major innovation – a perfect match between dance and music. Their show, which also made virtuoso use of an array of props, wasn't just another ecstatic Middle Eastern dance by a performer who seemed immersed within herself.

Helmieh Palace was only the springboard that catapulted the sisters to international stardom. Their appearance in a large number of Egyptian films – initially in brief segments that, by public demand, grew constantly longer and more central with each new picture –

gained them a reputation throughout the Arab world. They were dubbed “marvelous Egyptian pleasures,” “the sultan’s beloved exotic dancers” and “the dancing dolls from Egypt.” They were known sometimes as “Laila and Lamia,” and at other times as “Lys and Lyn.” Their fans included Egypt’s King Farouk and U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon. But it’s unlikely that any of the viewers who packed the halls in which they appeared in the 1950s and ‘60s knew the secret of the Egyptian belly dancers who became stars.



Helena n as the Jamal Twins. Credit: The Jamal sisters' archive / National Library

That secret is revealed in their personal archive, which was recently obtained by the National Library in Jerusalem. They were not twins, they were not Arabs and their surname was not Jamal. In fact, the belly dancers known as the “Egyptian twins” were Helena and Berta, the daughters of Fishel Alpert, who hailed from Eastern Europe.

The sisters’ archive, which contains hundreds of photographs and yellowing newspaper clippings, is an anomalous collection in the National Library. The venerable institution, which celebrated 125 years of activity last year, takes pride in collecting every available documentation of Jewish culture, but it’s not every day that it comes into possession of photos of young women in scanty dress, modeling bathing suits, holding snakes or reclining on a tiger-skin rug.

“It’s not just a curiosity. There’s a story here about Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe who settled in Egypt, integrated culturally and adopted a new, Middle Eastern identity,” said Dr. Gil Weissblei, curator of the National Library’s photograph collection.

Helena and Berta Alpert were born, respectively, in 1930 and 1932, in Alexandria, Egypt, to a musician couple. Their father, Fishel, originally from Czernowitz (now in Ukraine, formerly in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Romania and the Soviet Union), had moved to Vienna, where he was a violinist in the symphony orchestra. At the

end of the 1920s, for unknown reasons, he moved to Egypt. He met his wife, Jenny (Janine), an opera singer and also the daughter of Eastern European immigrants, in Alexandria. During World War II, the family moved to Cairo.

— Advertisement —

The Egyptian capital's Jewish population numbered a few tens of thousands at the time. Zionist activity in the city intensified when soldiers from Mandatory Palestine serving in the British Army arrived in the city along with emissaries of the Jewish Agency and of the Mossad Le'aliyah Bet, which brought illegal immigrants to Palestine. The family was Zionist, but didn't especially flaunt its Jewishness.

"Father wanted us to be violinists, but at the age of 5 we started to go to ballet lessons," Berta related years later, according to clippings found in the library archive. The sisters noted that they had the same teacher as King Farouk's daughters. Very soon, in addition to classical ballet, they took lessons in Middle Eastern dancing "and discovered an extraordinary talent for the movements," according to Weissblei. "We danced at parties, at fundraising evenings and afterward in movies – we appeared in about 30 movies," added Berta. Fame arrived quickly, and with it performances alongside such major names as the singer Mohammed Abdel Wahab and the belly dancers and actresses Taheyya Kariokka, Samia Gamal and Naima Akef.

Their father took a dim view of this turn of events. “At first, he didn’t approve of it. He didn’t like the path we chose. He tried to discourage us,” one of the sisters was quoted as saying. And, according to Weissblei, “The girls’ mother feared for their future and worried that they would be exposed to what she deemed a licentious world.”

— Advertisement —

The temptation, however, was great because their father lost his source of income at the time and the family was plunged into an economic crisis. At first the girls kept their performances a secret from their father. Their mother accompanied them to every rehearsal and show, a custom she continued to maintain years later as well.

Once the sisters became famous, however, it was no longer possible to keep their father in the dark.

“Their success was dazzling,” Weissblei said. “They put together a virtuoso artistic program that showed off their flexibility and ability as professional dancers.” It was at this time that they were given the stage names of Laila and Lamia and invented the surname Jamal and a cover story to augment their allure. The daughters of Fishel from Czernowitz morphed into the Jamal Twins from Cairo.

The age difference between them was indiscernible; the audience believed they were watching identical twins. Nor did the sisters do anything to refute the lies that were spread about them. “We looked alike and our clothes were designed especially for us. We were special because we danced together – something that hadn’t been done until then,” Berta recalled in an interview.

They kept their Jewish origins well hidden.



Helena and Berta Alpert, also known as the Jamal Twins. Credit: The Jamal sisters' archive / National Library

"The cover was perfect, and it's safe to assume that none of their many fans in Egypt and elsewhere imagined that they weren't Arabs," Weissblei said. They didn't reveal their secret even when they appeared in the 1957 Indian film "The Jew's Daughter" ("Yahudi Ki Ladki"). In an interview about their work in the movie, they didn't mention that they were actually the daughters of a Jew. Instead, they focused on the fact that they were able to sing the Hindi lyrics to the song that accompanied their dance.

— Advertisement —

The sisters received ever more invitations to appear abroad. Their greatest popularity was among audiences in Singapore and India. In addition, they appeared in countries including China, Japan, the Philippines, Turkey, Thailand, Cambodia and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), during the 1950s. A dance in one of their Indian films was banned by the local censors for "immodesty."

As they crisscrossed the Far East they received unusual gifts from their new admirers. According to the sisters, the list included five pythons and two cobras, which they received in Saigon, a tiger given them by a fan in Calcutta and a kitten in Thailand. "We sent the tiger and the snakes to Cairo because the guests in the hotel complained," Helena said, perhaps not altogether seriously.

Meteoric rise

In 1948, at the time of Israel's creation, there were some 42,000 Jews living in Cairo. As Egyptian nationalism surged, many Jews

lost their jobs and the community suffered anti-Jewish riots and arrests. The effects of the 1952 military coup that brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power gradually changed the atmosphere and made possible the sisters' meteoric rise. By 1956, the majority of Egypt's Jews had immigrated to Israel. The duo's frequent trips abroad stirred the suspicions of the Egyptian military authorities; perhaps they also knew about the sisters' Jewish origins.

At the end of 1957, in the midst of a successful Asian tour, the sisters received a telegram from their father, who remained in Cairo, though the sisters' mother was with them, as always. He warned them not to return to Egypt: The police wanted to question them about espionage activity, and had issued a warrant for their arrest.

The way was thus paved for Helena and Berta to move to America. It wasn't difficult to find an impresario to invite them to tour in the United States, and in fact they'd had their eyes on America for some time as a safe haven. "The Greek owner of the nightclub in Bombay had a Greek friend in Washington who also owned a nightclub," Berta related. "So the Greek gentleman from Bombay wrote to the Greek gentleman in Washington, and he invited us to dance there," her sister added.



The Jamal sisters on the cover of an American magazine. Credit: The Jamal sisters' archive / National Library

Only one problem remained. How could they get a visa quickly? According to one story, which reads like a fairy tale – like so many stories in the archive about their career – that very evening an American Congressional delegation visiting India attended the Bombay nightclub where they were appearing. The group was utterly captivated by the belly dancing of the "twins." The next morning they had the coveted entry visas.

"We were supposed to be there for a week, but we stayed for a few months," their mother recalled. They started their tour in Washington, D.C., where Vice President Richard Nixon was in the audience. "He told us he liked our show very much and predicted that we would have great success in this country," one local newspaper quoted Berta as saying, in an article titled "Princesses of the Nile." They then went on to New York, where they were welcomed with open arms by the surging art scene in the city. They also appeared in Miami, Chicago and other big cities.

The fresh breeze that the two sisters from the orient brought with them dovetailed with various popular trends of that era in the United States. Their cooperation with the Arab-American musician Eddie "The Sheik" Kochak and his band also boosted their popularity. "They were adept at creating a symmetrical image of movement and transforming it with virtuosity, imbuing the music that impelled them with vitality. The connection between them and the musicians, and between them and the audience, was thrillingly alive," Weissblei said.

The contemporaneous press had high praise for the sister act. In addition to their dancing skills, they were said to speak five languages: English, French, Arabic, Italian and German. They were not altogether fluent in Arabic, they would admit afterward. They grew up within Egypt's European milieu, speaking French, and viewed the indigenous Jewish population as "Arab Jews." They used Arabic mainly in the market and when addressing the servants in their parents' home. Another language in which they were fluent was Yiddish – but they kept that bit of information hidden from the media, apparently not wishing to reveal their true ethnic background.

Shortly afterward, though, the dream came to an end, before their big plan – to appear in a Hollywood film – could come to fruition. The two decided to get married, one after the other, and shared their lives with respected businessmen "who apparently didn't like their occupation of immodest dancing in nightclubs," according to National Library official Weissblei. Now, instead of passionate performances, they focused on teaching belly dancing.

Helena (aka Lyn, Lamia) died on Long Island, New York, in 1992; her sister Berta (aka Lys, Laila), who lived in Connecticut, passed away in 2016. Neither sister had children. Berta's partner, David Marks, was an Auschwitz survivor who immigrated to Israel right after the establishment of the state. A few years later, after seeing action in the War of Independence, Marks moved to the United States and became a successful furniture manufacturer. He and his first wife had been friends of Berta and her first husband. After he and Berta lost their partners, they became a couple.

According Shelly Abrahami, Marks' daughter from his first marriage, Berta "lived only in the past [in her last years], and wanted to talk only about her past." She suffered from dementia, Abrahami told Haaretz in an interview last month, but didn't forgo any opportunity to dance: "Even in that condition, when she was invited to dance, she smiled and her face lit up. Suddenly she got up and danced like a girl. The body doesn't forget. It was amazing."

In their conversations, Berta often harked back to her childhood in Alexandria, to the smell of the sea and to the sight of the pyramids in Cairo. Years later, when she visited Israel, she turned down a suggestion to visit Egypt as well. "She had very good childhood memories, but she was frightened of Egypt and was afraid that they would arrest her even after all those years," recalls Abrahami, adding, "When we were in Eilat, I asked her if she wanted to go to Taba, but she was afraid."

Last year, Marks decided to contribute the archive of materials about the two sisters to Jerusalem's National Library. "Everything was in a very large suitcase," his daughter says. "We thought it would be a shame to throw it out, it's such a unique story, about two Jewish girls who became stars in Egypt back then."

Weissblei, with whom they were in contact, adds, that Marks “was always charmed by the photo albums, the souvenirs and the stories from Berta’s glory days. Having experienced the vicissitudes of Jewish fate in the 20th century on his flesh, he thought that his wife’s story also deserves to be part of the highly diverse mosaic of the documentation of the Jewish people.”

Ofer Aderet
Haaretz Correspondent

Comments

Sign in to join the conversation.

Trending Now



Israel's Ultimate Consideration in Shooting Down the Syrian Drone



Russia Working to Remove Iran From Syria Border, Israeli Sources Say



Orgies, Blackmail and anti-Semitism: Inside the Turkish Cult Targeted by Authorities



Sarah Palin Slams Sacha Baron Cohen After Falling for 'Truly Sick' Prank for New TV Show



Israel Shoots Down Drone Infiltrating From Syria

FAQ | Contact us | Newsletters | Terms and conditions | Privacy policy | Cancellation of Digital Subscriptions | Management | Editorial | Accessibility | Advertise on Haaretz.com |



Israel News
Middle East
Jewish World
U.S./World
Business

Partnerships
Haaretz Labels
Dan Hotels in Tel Aviv
Israel Real Estate
Today's best deals

Archaeology
Life
Science
Sports

Culture
Purim
Books
Travel
Theater
Movies and TV
Food
Poem of the Week

Columnists
Bradley Burston
Chemi Shalev
Allison Kaplan Sommer
Anshel Pfeffer
Sayed Kashua
Ilene Prusher
David Rosenberg
Carlo Strenger
Vered Guttman

Opinion
Daily Cartoon
Letters to the Editor

הארץ
חדשות
תרבות
ספורט
ספרים
סרטים מומלצים
קפטן אינטרנט
שבוע הספר 2018
מונדיאל 2018
לילה לבן 2018

TheMarker
חדשות
שוק ההון
צרכנות
נדל"ן

Finance
ת"א 35
מדד תל אביב בנקים 5
מניית טבע
מניית טאואר

Haaretz.com, the online edition of Haaretz Newspaper in Israel, and analysis from Israel and the Middle East. Haaretz.com provides extensive and in-depth coverage of Israel, the Jewish World and the Middle East, including defense, diplomacy, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the peace process, Israeli politics, Jerusalem affairs, international relations, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Israeli business world and Jewish life in Israel and the Diaspora.

© Haaretz Daily Newspaper Ltd. All Rights Reserved