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# EGYPTIAN COUPLE REUNITED IN CANADA AFTER 55-YEAR SEPARATION

By **Janice Arnold, Staff Reporter** - May 24, 2018 50 0

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*Robert Khalifa, left, holds the letter he sent in 1963 to Yvette (Levy) Setton. It would be their last contact for more than half a century. (Janice Arnold/The CJN)*

Robert Khalifa never forgot the kindness of that dark-haired girl on the school bus. It was his first day at a new school and he was feeling lonely and awkward.

“She patted the seat beside her and invited me to sit down. She was so nice, and that was it,” recalled Khalifa, 60 years after the first time he met Yvette Levy. He was 12; she was 14. They were living in Egypt, in the affluent Cairo suburb of Heliopolis.

They grew friendly and dated for the next five years. They even spoke of one day getting married.

But history intervened and the couple would not see each other for another 55 years, until Khalifa and Levy, now Yvette Setton, were reunited when she visited Montreal over the Victoria Day weekend.

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each other. We both cried when we saw each other at the airport," said Setton.

She was clutching the blue air mail letter that Khalifa sent her after he settled in Montreal in 1963, the last communication between the two of them, until they reconnected a few months ago over the Internet.

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Setton married Joe (who had been their English teacher), immigrated to the United States and has lived in Alameda, Calif., ever since. Khalifa married Carol in 1970. Both are grandparents now.

Their spouses are happy about their renewed friendship, they say, and don't mind their daily phone calls, some of which last more than two hours.

"I changed my phone plan, so I can make free calls," said Khalifa, who's now retired from a career in management. Setton, who raised three children, had a career running a neurosurgeons' office.

The two lived across the street from one another and went to the same Jewish elementary school, but had not noticed each other before that fateful bus ride.

Khalifa's mother, a French teacher, placed him in a Catholic Jesuit school, but he didn't last more than a semester and transferred to Ecole de la Communauté Israëlite de Caire, the middle school that Levy attended.

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The mores of Egyptian society at the time limited their relationship. Just being seen together in public confirmed that they were an item – heaven forbid they be caught holding hands. But it was a mixed school and they always sat together.

> *We never forgot each other.*
> *– Yvette Setton*

She taught him how to dance and he remembers the first movie they went to see together – a John Wayne western. “We helped each other with homework, going to each other’s houses,” he said. She interjected: “Mostly he helped me.”

They went to different high schools, but saw each other on weekends.

But the future was darkening for the Jews of Egypt, as it had been since the 1956 Suez Crisis. One of Khalifa’s brothers was imprisoned on dubious charges. His parents decided to leave the country, even though Khalifa’s father was a respected figure among his Muslim neighbours. They started over with very little in Montreal.

Setton’s father, who was an official of the Jewish community, spent the rest of his life in Egypt (her mother was deceased), but her siblings went to Israel.

Despite their bitter separation, they realize that they were lucky to leave when they did. After the 1967 Six-Day War, life became intolerable for Jews in Egypt and many of their acquaintances suffered. Neither has been back to the country.

With the expansion of social media, some years ago, Khalifa tried to locate Setton, without success. She was doing the same, asking others to help her find Khalifa, because she was not computer savvy.

When they couldn’t help, Setton tried herself and found him on Facebook in October. They exchanged photos, to see if they would recognize each other. “He used to have a ton of hair,”

Setton said, while looking at his smooth pate.

"I never did anything like this," she said, "leaving my husband and family, never traveled on my own, or stayed in a hotel alone.... It almost doesn't feel real."

> *He is my friend forever. – Yvette Setton*

They are already talking about when she might come again (Khalifa has health issues that make flying to California inadvisable).

Setton says that "he is my friend forever." Khalifa's fond look said everything about how he feels.

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**Janice Arnold, Staff Reporter**

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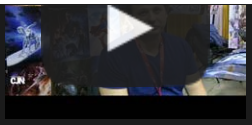




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