THE JEWISH ADVOCATE®
Established 1902
Vol. 208 No. 22 JUNE 2, 2017 — 8 SIVAN, 5777 www.TheJewishAdvocate.com
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An Egyptian Jew's story of 1967

By Solomon Gabbay and Aaron Ginsburg
Special to The Advocate

BEACON HILL – Dr. Solomon Gabbay, a cardiologist living in Newton, was born in Cairo, Egypt. At a meeting of the Vilna Shul's Havurah on the Hill here recently, Gabbay spoke publicly for the first time about the events surrounding his imprisonment during the 1967 Six Day War.

Joined by his nephew David, Gabbay described the living conditions of Egyptian Jews. Starting during World War II, Jews were unable to become citizens. Many Jews obtained foreign passports after German General Erwin Rommel got close to Cairo. Gabbay's father did not; he worked in the Ministry of Education and feared losing his job.

Under British domination, Egyptian nationalists became pro-Axis, and anti-Jewish. After 1948, many Egyptians resented the creation of Israel and Egypt's humiliating defeat in the Israeli War of Independence. The Jews of Egypt paid the price. At least 25,000 were expelled in 1956 after the Suez Crisis.

"Or they just left," Gabbay said, "with the permitted one suitcase and five Egyptian pounds [about $20] because there was no future for them in Egypt."

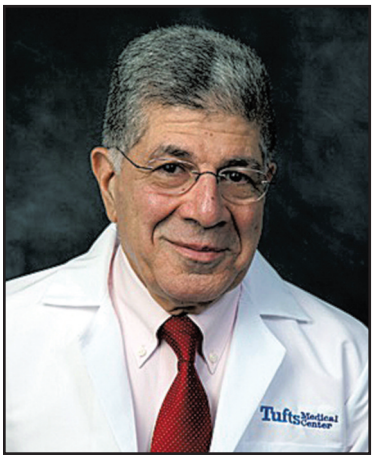
"I attended French primary and high schools," he said. "On the street on the way to synagogue, I was pointed out and called, 'Yahoodi' [derogatory for 'Jew']. My cousin was encircled by taunting teens, until his brawny Arab friend intervened to save him from a beating.

"It was not all bad," Gabbay continued. "My professor allowed me to defer my chemistry final exam so I would not have to light a Bunsen burner on Yom Kippur."

Gabbay attended medical school at Cairo University. Since Jews were not permitted in the military, Gabbay did his mandatory service in the Public Health Service, assigned to the villages of the Upper Nile. The Cairo Rabbinate arranged for him to become the "physician to the Jewish community of Cairo."

"On my way home for lunch on June 5, 1967, after days of building tension," Gabbay said, "I heard loudspeakers on street posts loudly playing military music and announcing the war's start, announcing the downing of IDF airplanes. 'Fifty downed,' then, '80 downed,' then, '100 downed,' and so on. Fear for Israel's survival, and ours, gripped the Jewish community.

"At midday, there was a knock on the door of the family apartment," he continued. "A secret policeman asked for me and my brother, Moses, by name, saying we had to go to the local police station for 'a little while' to 'answer some questions.' My father insisted on accompanying me. On the way, we saw Moses walking home. We pretended not to know or see one another. I was



Dr. Solomon Gabbay

26 years old."

"My father was older, so he was sent home," Gabbay said. "I was placed in a cell overnight with 30 other men. By late afternoon, my brother Moses was rounded up and put in the same cell. We were held overnight in the standing-room-only cell. The next morning, with our families standing across the street looking for their loved ones, we were put on trucks and taken to Abu Za'abal prison. For weeks, our families did not know where we were."

"Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were imprisoned for years in Abu Za'abal," Gabbay said. "They had the privilege of having a radio. On the third or fourth day of the war, the radio came on loudly for a moment with the announcement of, 'Glorious victories by the Egyptian Army on the second front!' We understood that Israel had driven the Egyptian Army back to their second front."

"At the prison, we were made to run in a circle until an officer hit us with a belt, randomly assigning us to cells," he said. "My brother and I were assigned to the same small cell holding dozens of men. There was nothing in the cell but a concrete floor."

"For the next six months," Gabbay said, "we remained in the cell, packed so tightly that we slept on the floor squeezed together, lying head to toe on the bare floor like sardines, with no room even to roll over. At night, the guards would wake the prisoners up and force them to yell slogans like, 'Down with Israel,' and 'Arabic Palestine.' In the morning, we were taken into the hallway and made to walk on our elbows and knees like dogs. A prisoner with mental development issues would laugh when the guards made them do this, and his laughter prompted beatings."

Gabbay said the sanitation was unspeakable, and food was scarce. They were not charged with any crime.

"My brother and I kept kosher all the time we were prisoners," he said. "Our diets consisted mainly of *ful medames* [cooked fava beans] and pita. Occasionally, meat was served, but since it was not kosher, those who kept kosher traded their shares with cellmates for more bread. After a

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Published weekly on Friday by The Jewish Advocate
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ISSN 1077-2995. (USPS-275-020).

Gabbay

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while, we were permitted to have short family visits every couple of weeks. Our parents brought food to supplement our rations."

In a couple of weeks, Egyptian authorities released and expelled from the country Jews with foreign passports. After six months, the remaining Jewish prisoners were moved to Liman Tora maximum-security prison, where there was more exercise and longer family visits.

After 18 months, 167 Jewish prisoners remained. They had no idea when they would be released. Muslim Brotherhood members had been in captivity for 15-to-25 years.

On June 25, 1970, after three years of imprisonment, Egyptian authorities freed and expelled the Gabbay brothers through the efforts of the Red Cross and Israel.

"We were loaded onto a truck and taken to the airport, where we saw our parents, who had brought us each a suitcase," Gabbay said. "After some time in Paris, Moses went to the United States to complete his education. A few months later, my parents and sisters joined me. During Passover, on April 15, 1971, we followed Moses to Boston."

Moses died in 2016. His son, David, recounted a May 2008 trip to Cairo with his mother's family. Moses and Solomon Gabbay did not go.

"We visited and prayed at Kniis Ismailia, on Adli Street, the site of my aunt and uncle's wedding in 1958," David said. "At the apartment where my mother grew up in the 1960s, she was able to reconnect with her neighbors who still live in the building. Her old neighbors, who are Coptic, spoke of the challenges for religious minorities in Cairo after the Jews left.



PHOTO COURTESY SOLOMON GABBAY

The Gabbay family prior to their expulsion from Egypt

> *"For the next six months, we remained in the cell, packed so tightly that we slept on the floor squeezed together, lying head to toe on the bare floor like sardines, with no room even to roll over."*
>
> **– Dr. Solomon Gabbay**

"Connecting with my father's past," he continued, "I went to Tahrir Square, where my paternal grandfather worked in the Ministry of Education. We visited the El Daher neighborhood, which is located next to Sakakini, where my father and uncle grew up. The area was home to the vast majority of Jews in Cairo.

"I visited the prisons where my father and uncle were imprisoned," David added. "Abu Za'abal was an hour's drive from the center of Cairo, while Tora is closer to the city. Both prisons remain active. I stood from a distance and admired the vast structures, as I watched families line up to visit prisoners.

"I imagined what it was like for my father to walk a like a dog at Abu Za'abal or run laps in the blazing summer heat at Tora," he said. "I wondered if prison life had improved since the 1960s. My guide said it had not.

"My uncle, Solomon Gabbay, repressed most of his memories from Egypt, particularly life in jail," David concluded. "Over the years, my father would retell stories during family holidays like Rosh Hashanah and Pesach that would jog my uncle's memory. In many respects, my sister and I carry these memories with us. My uncle occasionally treated guards in need of medical attention. The more time we discuss prison life, the more my uncle remembers."

Aaron Ginsburg is an Advocate correspondent.



PHOTO COURTESY SOLOMON GABBAY

The Gabbay family, with Solomon, second from left, Moses, center, and David

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Published weekly on Friday by The Jewish Advocate
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ISSN 1077-2995. (USPS-275-020).