On the Karaite Trail

A roots trip back to the Egypt of my father's youth takes in a culture of 1,000 years and a friendship that has withstood the vicissitudes of politics, religion and time

ESSAY / Brenda Gazzar Cairo

THE FIRST COUPLE OF decades of my parents' lives have always been something of a mystery to me. Growing up in Barstow, a small California desert town best known for being a pit stop on the way to Las Vegas, my older sister Audria and I were somehow raised by our parents with a solid Jewish identity. We attended synagogue once a month when our student rabbi came to town from Los Angeles and trained well in advance for our bat mitzvahs, but gradually I began to appreciate that my family background is much more complex than meets the eye.

There were hints of differences from other Jewish families we had met. For Thanksgiving dinners, along with turkey and stuffing, we ate stuffed grape leaves, the prerequisite roasted eggplant, and a homemade noodle dish called *tagarinas* garnished with a *za'atar* mix of oregano and parsley. At the large family gatherings in our Barstow home, it was predominantly Arabic that was spoken by my parents' generation. During memorial services for a relative, we took off our shoes, knelt on makeshift prayer rugs and chanted Psalms and other verses from the bible to ancient oriental tunes.

My warm and loving American parents told me that they had grown up in Egypt as Jews of the ancient Karaite sect, whose members rely solely on the written bible as scripture, rejecting the Talmud and later Rabbinic works as divine sources of Jewish law.

Although they were willing to share stories of their lives, my family's heritage was still an obscure, distant reality that seemed to elude me. Today, my parents regularly attend a conservative synagogue near their home in Orange County, California, but their Karaite heritage is manifested through lively prayer gatherings held several times a year at the homes of relatives and friends.

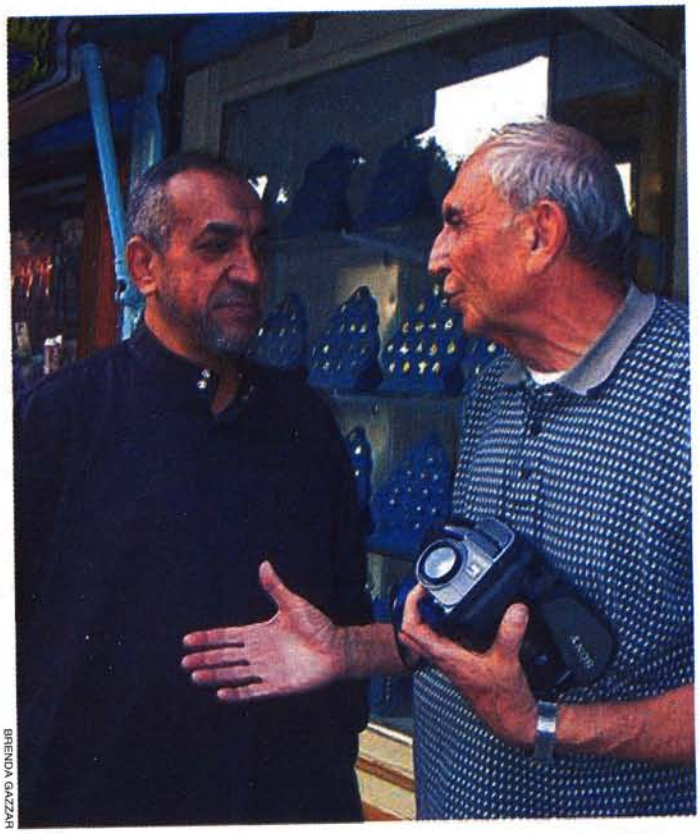
So when the opportunity arose to accompany my 71-year-old father Albert Gazzar to Egypt in late November 2006, I knew I shouldn't pass it up. I wanted to see him there, to connect with his past and to make sense of my family's highly nuanced and sometimes turbulent history. My mother, Amy, chose to stay behind in Israel, where my parents had been visiting, to meet cousins she hadn't seen since she was a child in Egypt.

For me, the three-day trip revealed that my father — apparently like many Karaite Jews of his day — had been well integrated into Egyptian society. In fact, he had a relatively normal upper-class Egyptian youth. However, as political tensions heightened between Israel and the Arab world, the situation would gradually become more difficult for him, his family and all Jews in Egypt — whether Karaite or not.

And for "Baba," a man of few words and sharp wit, this trip back to his native Cairo, though not his first, served to confirm what he had long suspected: that he was much better off for having left Egypt 45 years ago, due to the poor living conditions and an anti-Jewish atmosphere that he feels has grown more prevalent in the years since he left.

I knew that "Papoo," my father's father, was one of roughly 1,000 Jews in Egypt who were imprisoned during the Suez Crisis five decades ago. I knew that Papoo's two Cairo jewelry stores were confiscated along with other Jewish businesses by president Gamal Abdul Nasser during the crisis, and that my grandfather, who apparently had a knack for socializing with the right people, used his political connections to help some Jewish families get their papers in order to leave the country as the situation worsened. My unmarried father left Egypt in 1961 in search of a better life where he could speak his mind, worship as he chose and feel like an equal no matter what his religion. Papoo and my grandmother remained in Egypt until the mid 1960s, finally joining three of their four children in the United States and living out the rest of their years in Phoenix, Arizona.

But I also knew that my father had many cherished memories of growing up in Egypt, that his best friend there to this day, Ibrahim, is a Muslim, and that his Christian and



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WHERE HE CAME FROM: Dad (right) and Ibrahim have shared mutual respect, appreciation and affection since childhood

'He had Egyptian citizenship, but it didn't help him... To the authorities, he was a Jew.'

Muslim friends had come to his defense when he was shown disrespect or discriminated against for his religion.

AROUND A MILLENNIUM AGO, the Karaites had a thriving and robust community in Egypt that even rivaled at times the mainstream "Rabbinate" Jewish community, but their numbers and strength ultimately dwindled. Some 5,000 Karaites were left in Egypt in 1948, alongside some 70,000 mainstream Jews. Today, I'm told there is one Karaite woman left in Egypt and less than one hundred mainstream Jews in Alexandria and Cairo.

Karaite Jews are today mostly concentrated in Israel, numbering somewhere between 12,000 and 25,000, most of them living near Ramle in the center of the country and farther south in cities like Ashdod and Ofakim. According to mainstream Jews, the existence of the Karaites dates back to the 8th century when a man by the name of Anan Ben David is said to have broken away from the leadership of the Jewish community in Mesopotamia and establish himself in Jerusalem. However, Karaites say that there was always a branch of Judaism that followed only the Tanach and trace their origins to the time of Moses. Despite their differences, Orthodox rabbis consider the Karaites to be Jews.

As far as Dad remembers, relations between the two Jewish communities in Egypt were amicable though they had separate synagogues and intermarriage was not allowed by their leaders.

Although my father had visited the country with my mother in 1992 and I had lived in Cairo for six months on a work/study fellowship not long ago, it would be our first time in the country together. With a video camera rolling in my hand, my highly focused father and I navigated through the overcrowded, dirty and boisterous streets of the Egyptian capital in an effort to locate the two apartments where Dad was raised with his three older siblings, the beautiful French Catholic elementary school he attended, the pharmacy where he worked his first job as a pharmacist, and the two jewelry stores that once belonged to his father, in the heart of Islamic Cairo.

In the upscale Heliopolis suburb, an Egyptian woman in an Islamic headscarf remembered that the Gazzar family had lived in her apartment some four decades ago but declined to let us inside. (If she remembered our family name, she likely also recalled that the family was Jewish, Dad later surmised.)

We also visited the Heliolido Club, where Dad was a member for at least eight years and played on the club's volleyball team with his good friends Ibrahim and Pierre. After practice twice a week, they used to take long walks and go out to eat hot dogs or pasta at their favorite Heliopolis restaurant. Dad was the only Jew on the 12-member team and said his colleagues treated him like any other player. During the Suez War in 1956, however, the club adopted a policy that Jews could not be members and he was forced to stay away until the decision was reversed a few months later.

Dad likened it to segregation of African Americans in the United States. "I felt really hurt. I felt really like a third-class citizen," he recalls.

ON OUR SECOND DAY IN CAIRO, we visited the towering Karaite synagogue in Abbassiya but we found it closed to the public and secured by armed guards who prevented us even from filming the synagogue's exterior. My mother and her six siblings, also natives of Cairo, were raised in a strict religious household and attended synagogue regularly. Dad's wealthier and more secular family went to services only on Yom Kippur during his earlier years, when they lived nearby. Once they moved to Heliopolis, it was too far to attend.

Like most Karaite Jews, my father spoke Arabic and some French at home, and even had an Egyptian surname — El Gazzar, which means "the butcher" in Arabic. (Some long-forgotten ancestor may indeed have been a butcher, although we don't know for sure.) Perhaps it was because of their deep roots and integration in the country that many of my Karaite relatives remained in Egypt longer than their mainstream Jewish counterparts — many of whom had immigrated to Egypt within the last couple hundred years from Europe and other Middle Eastern countries.

We also briefly visited the former elementary school known as "El Sybil," where Grandpa was detained during the Suez Crisis and held for at least a year. Dad vividly remembers when the soldiers knocked on their door in the middle of the night to take Grandpa in "for questioning" after Britain, France and Israel launched a joint attack on Egypt following Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal. Grandpa went along, confident he had nothing to be concerned about and would return home shortly. For the first couple of months, Dad said, they had no idea where he was.

"They thought he was a Zionist," Dad once told me. But while Grandpa was excited about the prospect of a Jewish state, he had no desire to move to Israel at the time, considering himself fully an Egyptian.

"Generations and generations from his side were from Egypt. He had Egyptian citizenship but it didn't help him," Dad said. "To the authorities, he was a Jew. Ultimately, citizen or non-citizen, that meant you were a bad guy, under suspicion."

When our taxi driver dropped us off in

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The Jerusalem Report

the conservative Islamic neighborhood al-Darb al-Ahmar, we didn't know whether we would manage to locate Grandpa's jewelry stores, or even if they still existed. We followed a long narrow dirt road in a commercial district that appeared to be an endless and very crowded open market, with poor merchants in traditional *jalabias* selling everything from fruit and vegetables to live rabbits. Dad felt strangely out of place here as we walked for what seemed like forever, finally passing the tentmakers' district where merchants sell beautiful pieces of embroidered fabric and decorative quilts. Suddenly, we found ourselves facing a large yellow mosque in Bawabet El Metwalli Square and Dad knew we were very close.

We turned right into another narrow street and within seconds Dad spotted the smaller of Grandpa's jewelry stores. A tall, intimidating man in a black *jalabia* eyed us from across the street as we entered the store, and then followed us inside. Known as Abu Azzem, he is the owner of the store that bears the same name. When Dad introduced himself, Abu Azzem's eyes grew large and he told us to sit down.



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TRADITIONAL MODERNITY: The Karaite Jewish community in Egypt observed its particular customs but was well integrated into Egyptian society

He said he knew my grandfather and had even worked with him as an apprentice for several months as a teenager. My grandfather, known as Tewfik Eliahou El Gazzar had built a solid reputation for himself and was a good businessman, Abu Azzem said. He also said Grandpa's clients included wealthy Muslims, those with high-ranking positions in Egyptian society, and even drug dealers, but my father was skeptical of the latter. Like other Jewish jewelers, Grandpa used to give small gifts with a customer's purchase to encourage them to come back, Abu Azzem related, adding that the vast majority of jewelers in Cairo used to be Jews. (In fact, a very large percentage was from the Karaite community; my mother's father was a jeweler in Cairo, too.)

"The older generation of Jews were good people," Abu Azzem continued. "The new generation of Jews hates Islam." Dad and I exchanged looks but we did not interrupt him. According to Abu Azzem, my grandfather helped Jews who were fleeing the country to smuggle out some of their wealth by melting their gold jewelry into plates and then coating them with silver to fool customs officials. Dad was skeptical about that as well, saying it is difficult to fool customs' officials in this way.

We said our goodbyes to Abu Azzem, quickly found Grandpa's main jewelry store around the corner, which had recently been remodeled and was in gorgeous condition, and made our way back to our taxi. We are unclear as to what happened ultimately to Papoo's businesses. During the 1956 war, they were sequestered and put under the control of a military officer called a guardian, who apparently didn't know anything about the trade. Dad does not know whether his stores were ultimately given back to his father and then sold to new owners, or permanently taken away by the government.

We have been told that Grandpa faced charges or accusations of smuggling and perhaps espionage, intensive questioning by authorities and likely torture. However, he was exonerated and shortly afterward, he decided to leave Egypt with my grandmother.

Dad had reserved our second evening in Cairo to see his closest friend Ibrahim, whom he last saw here 14 years ago. The two Ibrahims — my father was also called ibrahim but became Albert in the states — lived in the same neighborhood, al-Daher, while growing up and used to make the two-mile trek together each day to and from their elementary school.

I HAD MET IBRAHIM BEFORE AND even ate dinner with his family one Ramadan evening during my Cairo stay in 2000, but only after seeing him and my father together did I really understand how much a part of each others' lives they once were. When Dad knocked on his door in the trendy Mohandiseen district, "Barhum" gave my father "Tifa" — their nicknames — a tight embrace that lasted several seconds. For the next three and a half hours, the two of them talked nonstop in Arabic about their mutual friends, the practical jokes they used to play on their teachers, and how both they and Egypt have changed over the decades. They remembered the Sudanese Christian triplets, with whom they used to play soccer and, as if on cue, broke into verses of songs from their favorite movies.

Both were quite secular in their younger days, and had gradually grown more religious in their later years, they said. "We were not religious and we were not politicians," Ibrahim said of their youth. Perhaps that is what allowed their friendship, as a Jew and a Muslim, to withstand Egypt's political earthquakes and what allowed them to remain so close throughout the first 25 years of their lives. But as I saw my father laughing heartily with Ibrahim over their childhood antics, it became clear to me that much more is binding them together now.

It is mutual respect, appreciation and affection that only a childhood friend who was "more than a brother" could provide. It is a friendship that didn't have to grow in Egypt and certainly one that didn't have to continue four and a half decades after my father made the decision to leave Egypt and all that he knew behind.

The following night in Cairo, as Dad and I shared a meal of doughy *fiteer* covered in honey and nuts, I wondered whether my father would ever see Ibrahim again. "Will you call Ibrahim to say goodbye?" I asked, as we sat on the restaurant's second floor overlooking an incredibly noisy and crowded square in Mohandiseen. "No," he nodded. "It's a little bit emotional. He would say, 'I miss you.' I would say, 'I miss you.'"

And then, in a statement that now only half-surprised me, he added: "If we come back, I'll visit him again."