

Commentary Nov 2002

DOC 06298

BOOKS IN REVIEW

White Sharkskin Suit took place before she was born, she has so absorbed them into herself that the reader almost forgets she was not there.

Leon Lagnado was a truly unusual combination. Still, he was perhaps not quite so unusual in the context of Egyptian Jewry as he seems when viewed from contemporary America. As practiced in the Sephardi communities of southeast Europe and the largely Arabic-speaking communities of the Middle East, traditional Judaism was more relaxed, less puritanical, and more tolerant of religiously deviant behavior than in the Ashkenazi world. Conversely, types of Jews who would have left religion completely had they been Ashkenazim retained an often superstitious attachment to it even when they did not observe many or most of its precepts.

Even today in Israel, where Jews from Sephardi and Middle Eastern backgrounds have become heavily Ashkenazified, the dichotomy between "religious" and "secular" Jews is far less pronounced among them than it is in Ashkenazi circles. I have heard of religious families from such backgrounds whose non-observant members excuse themselves in the middle of a Sabbath meal to go outside and smoke a forbidden cigarette, something unimaginable in the case of religious Ashkenazim. It is also common to observe totally "secular" Israelis from Sephardi or Middle Eastern families kissing a mezuzah every time they enter a home or even go from room to room. The Judaism they come from was never a take-it-or-leave-it proposition.

Leon Lagnado can be viewed as a somewhat extreme case of such behavior. The Jewish community of Cairo in which he lived and raised a family was truly the community of all Cairo's Jews; there was hardly a Jew who did not belong to it and play a role, no matter how great or small. As modernized as parts of Cairo society were in the mid-20th century, it was a city in which you

were either a Muslim, Christian, or Jew—and, whichever you were, you were part of a shared world that had its holidays and rituals, its foods, customs, ceremonies, prayers, and rites of passage, and its extended families that observed them together.

Dropping out of this world was all but impossible. If you were an adventurous or non-conventional spirit, you might have found it confining or asphyxiating; but you were never abandoned or forgotten in it. It was a traditional society, small versions of which have existed in America, too, among religious separatists from the Amish to black-hat Hasidim, as well as among immigrant and second-generation ethnic communities of the kind celebrated and mourned in *The Godfather*. Yet in its essence America from its inception has been a land that has stressed individual autonomy over community.

In comparing the Egypt her family left with the America it came to, Lucette Lagnado never sentimentalizes the past or excoriates the present for supplanting it. She is aware that, had her parents remained in Cairo, she could never have become what she is today, and that the journalist mourning a lost world of human solidarity might then have grown up to be a frustrated housewife like her mother, longing for another life. Yet she also knows that, in this lost world, her parents would not have ended up, frightened and alone, in impersonal nursing homes, and that she would not have had to write about her dying father:

I tried to embrace him, reaching for his thin, skeletal frame barely covered by the blue nightgown, but more often than not he was too agitated. "Loulou, ou je suis?" he'd ask; Loulou, where am I? And then, as some nurse

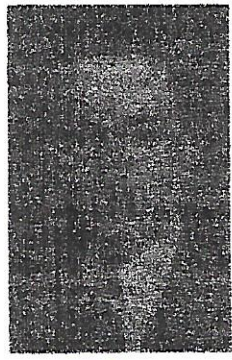
An Appeal

By

The Moshe Sharett Heritage Society

The Moshe Sharett Heritage Society would like to get in touch with potential supporters interested in its projects of publishing the rich political legacy of Israel's first Foreign Minister and its second Prime Minister.

Currently the society is preparing for print an annotated English edition of Moshe Sharett's Diaries (1953-1957), edited by Prof. Neil Caplan, Vanier College, Montreal, together with Yaakov Sharett, editor of the original Hebrew edition of the diaries. This historic document vividly portrays the dramatic conflict between moderate Foreign Minister Sharett and activist Prime Minister Ben Gurion, culminating with Sharett's forced resignation from the Israeli Cabinet prior to Israel's first "war of choice" in 1956, to which Sharett was vehemently opposed.



Contributions to the society are tax deductible in the USA.

Our website: <http://www.sharett.org.il>
Please contact us at: msharett@017.net.il
Phone: ++972-3-5227615, Fax: ++972-3-5279607
Address: 30 Ben Gurion Blvd., Tel Aviv 64588, Israel