

Student's Name

Instructor's Name

Course

Date of Submission

*The Man in the Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World*

### Book Review

The story of the Cairo Jewish family told by Lucette Lagnado presents a moving account of the hardships endured by the Middle East Jews in the times of rising Arab nationalism after WWII. The author reminisces on her parents' lavish life in the cosmopolitan Cairo of King Farouk's times, contrast this picture with the deprivations of the city's Cairo community under the Nasserist government, as well as with the impoverished existence of the exiled Jews in France and the U.S. At the same time, Lagnado's narrative introduces the reader to magnificence of the WWII and post-war Cairo, together with the vistas of the 1960s Paris and New York.

The story of the Lagnados begins with the chronicle of the 1940s Cairo, which is depicted as the lavish center of trade and entertainment, much valued by Lucette's father, Leon. The latter is the very "man in the sharkskin suit", or "the man in white" who is referred to a charming socialite with extensive business interests who is prone to womanizing and other worldly pursuits in the beginning of the novel (Lagnado 10). Struck with the beauty of Edith, Lucette's mother, Leon breaks his habit of noncommittal to any single woman and marries her, providing for a lush wedding. Since then, a story of the Lagnados really commences.

Describing the events that were to transpire in Cairo, the author mentions that her father's family came from Aleppo, or Halab, an important Syrian city where his ancestors were for centuries the well-known rabbinical family (Lagnado 34). Leon inherited both

intense piety and the uncanny capacity for business making from his Halabi ascendants. Nicknamed 'Captain Philips' by his British friends, he came from the role of the broker negotiating minor business deals with Egyptian fellahin to the position of expert negotiant whose partners included such luminary companies as Coca Cola. Leon spent his nights frequenting most celebrated cabarets and nightclubs of Cairo where the circle of his acquaintances included even King Farouk himself, who was likewise a notorious womanizer and gambler.

Leon's life changed when his marriage with Edith was consummated. A delicate and shy, this pretty but bookish girl initially felt uneasy at being introduced to her husband's family. While the marriage soon gave birth to the first child, Lucette's elder sister, the relations between the couple were sore, as Leon continued on his womanizing habits. However, after Edith gave birth to the son, César, it seemed that the future was hopeful.

The 1952 Egyptian revolution changed everything. Incensed by King Farouk's corruption, the lower-class Egyptians rebelled against the corrupt monarchy of Farouk whom they accused of plotting with Israel and the U.S. against Arab interests. Their anger was directed not only at foreign companies and Egyptian nobility but also at the Jewish community who was viewed both as disproportionately rich and connected with the monarchy.

In six months after the uprising, the monarchy crumbled, and a new revolutionary regime was installed. The 1956 Suez Canal war led to massive exodus of Egyptian Jews to Israel or other countries, and eventually the limitations on the property taken abroad were instituted. Thus the Lagnados were reduced to near poverty when leaving Egypt for France in 1963.

The picture of Paris depicted by Lagnado is starkly different from that of the prosperous Cairo of the 1940s. The rue du Faubourg Poissonnière where the refugees had to

settle was packed with decrepit buildings and populated by underclass elements. The HIAS social workers tried to assist the Lagnados, just as the other refugees' families, while subjecting them to the bureaucratic procedures that humiliated the family's dignity. The HIAS tried to prevent Leon from traveling to the USA with his family, as he broke his leg during his last year in Cairo, but eventually they had to acquiesce (Lagnado 214).

At the same time, the author hints at aspects of the Parisian life enjoyed by some members of her family. For instance, César, Lucette's elder brother, found a lot of companions and friends at Montmartre, the famed Parisian area with the multitude of cafes and cabarets. In particular, the Folies Bergère music hall was César's favorite attraction, even though he was disappointed by showgirls there (Lagnado 215). Thus for some Lagnados, Paris was not merely a dreary place of exile.

Having left for the United States, the family eventually arrived in New York. There they had to cope with reserved hostility on the part of Sylvia Kirchner, their assigned social worker, and with paying their bills on the Brookline apartment the Lagnados rented from one Basil Cohen, a Jew of Halabi descent as well (Lagnado 239). Despite his age and maladies, Leon continued to try to follow his ingrained sense of honor and style. He strove to resume his business activities, while on immeasurably lower level than in Egypt. The family soon became a part of the Levantine Jewish community that tried to keep to themselves in spite of living near the center of the cosmopolitan American civilization. This was supplemented with the lack of glamour they had known in Cairo but lacked in New York, supposedly the most fashionable city on Earth (Lagnado 253).

In total, the story of Lucette Lagnado presents a staggering account of hardships faced by many formerly affluent Jewish community members from Egypt in their wanderings after 1956. Even though they may have found some relief, the Lagnados still hoped of returning to their true homeland, Egypt.

Works Cited

Lagnado, Lucette. *The Man in the Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World*. New York: Ecco, 2007. Print.