

Eating rice during Passover: Notes on Sephardic Egyptian memoirs

Nefissa Naguib

Preamble

Hunger stimulates memory; when people become hungry they remember food. But there is more to memory than that: to remember may also be to make a stand against dehumanization. The New York Times journalist Frank Prial wrote a piece about the kidnapping of the French correspondent Jean-Paul Kauffmann in Lebanon in 1985. Every single day of his confinement he recited by heart the names of the 61 producers listed in the 1855 classification of Bordeaux wines. The 1855 classification was organised into five groups according to their quality and price. Kauffmann would carefully write them all down on empty cigarette packets, only to lose the list each time his captors moved him – 18 times in all. Then one day they took away his pen. By the end of 1986, he had begun to forget some of the fourth growths, and then some of the fifth. His forgetfulness distressed him; and he tells us that he became Proust without the madeleine: his madeleine was his memory. He felt he was wandering away from civilization, that he was losing his humanity.

Introduction

The brain continues to be crafted throughout life (Greenfield, 2000, p. 13). Studying the brain's "plasticity", Susan Greenfield describes how as our brain matures and becomes more complex it draws more on personal experiences and less on instinct. These personalized connections, which each person makes based on prior experiences, are found within the small neuron networks of the human mind. Greenfield's argument is that the mind is the personalization of the brain (ibid., p. 14). And so it is that experience is in its essence personal; and so is our ability to remember (and to forget). Both memory and amnesia are active processes and no matter how close we are to persons in our life, our experiences are exclusive and so are our emotional responses: "Memories and mind are, therefore, inextricably linked" (ibid.). The case of Jean-Paul Kauffmann is a particularly severe example of how some people live in their memory when their sense of normalcy is disrupted and they are "losing their mind". This essay is about ruptures, recollections and forgetting, but on a much less severe register. My concern here is not the hurt, but rather human associations and

reworking of their historical past. Throughout this article I pay attention to the role of food and meals in the lives of individuals, and I argue that memoirs are a key site for the examination of the interplay of individual projects and shared cultural forms. Recollections in the memoirs in this article illustrate that history is in the stories people tell and in their practices (Cole, 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992; R. Rosado, 1980; Stoller, 1995). In the biographies social and individual memories merge somehow to shape the ways in which the authors of the book remember Egypt.

As fragile as cuisine is pervasive it reveals some of the most basic ways people sort out life, make sense of the fragmented worlds and intimate experiences, as well as how they adapt, resist or transform their life. Vignettes I draw on reveal how cooking and global moments have an after-life and are conjoined through alimentary exchanges and stories told about life with and without Egyptians. The prose from Egyptian Sephardic writings opens up new or different thoughts about ‘insider’ affiliations or differences. While the families of the authors belonged to one of the many Jewish communities in Egypt, the books speak of life events rather than religious affiliations. Contrary to the general narratives about Egyptian Jews we are told that not all were affiliated or had access to Egypt’s cosmopolitan urbane setting of manners, quality of life and aspirations. Furthermore, we learn that these tensions continued between émigré Jews in the diaspora, and among different Jewish communities in the countries they came to.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) wrote something to the effect that hell is the absolute lack of being heard. Whether represented as trauma or destiny, departures from Egypt are the basis for personal and community narratives about origins, human movements, emotions and identity. Like all, or most, literature of exile, the books in this essay are written against the vast and painful backdrop of mass displacements, and the political, economic and social tensions that impacted them. They demand that we face the many questions about forces that cause human despair, how individuals rebuild their social world, and claims people make to a culture of origin. With a focus on food and memory this is an approach that takes into account associations and repetitions that people make in order to ‘stay human’.

In brief: history and setting

Between the 1850s and the 1950s Armenians, Levantines, Italians, Greeks, Swiss, Germans, French and British joined exploration teams, mixed tribunals, chancelleries and over-seas banks in Egypt. In all that country’s ethnic and religious diversity, newly arrived foreigners joined other minority communities that had been settled for generations in Egypt. The first

World War population in Egypt was nearly thirteen million, and about two hundred thousand inhabitants of the country were foreign nationals. But citizenship, religious affiliation and ethnic origin do not necessarily coincide. About twenty-five percent of all those who considered themselves ethnically Greek, for example, were not Greek citizens.

With the outbreak of war, large numbers of inhabitants who had been Ottoman subjects, including ethnic Greeks, Armenians, Syro-Lebanese and Jews, were stateless or were included among the Russians, Bulgarians, Persians, North Africans or Egyptians. Many members of these communities were investors in the cotton exchange and in mines, banks, roads and railways. Port Said, Alexandria and Cairo became safe havens during the First and Second World Wars. Surrounded by persecution in Europe, Jews started to arrive. At the time the Jewish population was spread across all social backgrounds: politically active Jewry, middle-class Jews who had been educated in the French language, nonrabbinic Karaite Jews and the haute bourgeoisie (Beinin, 1998). Almost all of Egypt's Jews, sixty thousand at the time of the First World War, lived in the urban centres of Cairo and Alexandria. The rest were spread among smaller cities and villages. A third were Egyptian citizens and about a fifth were foreigner. Many upper-class Sephardic Jews of Alexandria held Italian citizenship, while half of the Jewish population was stateless.

Foreign citizenship was part of the system of 'Capitulations', a system that awarded certain groups the civil liberties of the 'corps diplomatique'. In practice this meant that certain persons were outside Egyptian jurisdiction. Parallel to this extraordinary situation was the concept of 'mutamassirin' communities, which identified individuals who were permanent residents. The idea of 'mutamassirin' and privileges linked to extra-territoriality began to change with the abolition of Capitulations in 1937, which ended the tax immunity of foreign nationals. The Company Law of 1947 set quotas for the employment of Egyptian nationals in limited companies. The abolition of the mixed courts in 1949 established a common legal system for resident foreign nationals and Egyptian citizens.

While many members of the Jewish community were financially and educationally impoverished, as a community the Jews occupied a large number of respectable positions in finance, commerce, industry and the professions. The Cattauis, Cicurels, Rolos, Pitochotos (who went to West Africa), the Hararis and the Menasces were powerful industrialists, and were also in many respects the financiers of modern Egypt (Abu-Ghar, 2004). Members of these families also played significant roles in Egypt's political circles, and were close to Egyptian intellectuals, politicians and industrialists. Wealthy Jews were conversant with Enlightenment philosophy and aware of the ideas and movements that were current abroad.

For intellectual Jews, the cultural life and ideological atmosphere in which they lived and to which they alluded to derived from Europe. As such they were indistinguishable from their Muslim and Christian counterparts.

Less wealthy Jews, such as those living in the Harat al-Yuhud district of Cairo, were similarly indistinguishable from their Christian and Muslim counterparts. Within the same neighbourhood people were, to paraphrase Jane Jacobs, on ‘excellent sidewalk terms’ (Benhabib et al, 2007, p. 7). Rites and regional origins distinguished the various Jewish subgroups in Egypt. Cairo and Alexandria had Jewish quarters, yet their Jewish communities shared neighbourhoods along the lines of socioeconomic position, rather than ethnic or religious affiliations, with members of other foreign and Egyptian communities (Abu-Ghar, 2004; Ilbert, Yannakakis and Hassoun, 1997). In 1948, an estimated 80,000 Jews lived in Egypt (Beinin, 1998, p. 2), but by around the mid-sixties the demographic structure had changed and some 15,000 Jews remained in the country. In July 1952, a military coup overthrew the monarchy. The new military regime eroded the privileges of foreigners and ‘mutamassirun’; in practice this impinged on the position of non-Muslim citizens as well. The markers of this trajectory were the October 1954 Anglo-Egyptian agreement on the evacuation of British military forces, the abolition of the communal courts in 1955, the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, the confiscation of the property of British and French nationals and Jews in 1956 and Belgian nationals in 1960, and the nationalization of large sectors of the economy in 1961-1962. This had a considerable impact on many ‘mutamassir-owned’ industries, as well as on enterprises owned by Muslim, Coptic and Jewish Egyptian citizens.

The families in this essay, like most of the population in Egypt, were caught up between the post-colonial independence movements, crises of realpolitik such as that over the Suez Canal, and the establishment of the state of Israel, which challenged the cosmopolitan ambience of the region, and—with it— their life and livelihood in Egypt. Salvaging fragments of life from Egypt, the memoirs describe how life in cosmopolitan Egypt was splendid. Yet something still lingers of a moment at which cosmopolitan positive forms of belonging turn to foreignness. The Jews who tell us their stories in these books belonged to middle- and lower-middle-class families, and situated themselves to a great extent within the Western-oriented society that existed in Egypt until 1952. Their cosmopolitan character and their education reflected the legacy of foreign domination which created a binary education scheme that included a European path for the affluent and an entirely Arabic-Egyptian path for others.

We know from André Aciman's book, *Out of Egypt* that there were several practices in Jewish milieus, including the many ways in which they actively and categorically disaffiliated from anything that might be considered to be Egyptian or Arab. Arabic as a language was perceived as some kind of cultural contaminant. Aciman's grandmother proudly announced that after living in Egypt for fifty years she could still not speak the language (Aciman, 1994, p. 135). Longings for Egypt which are strongly felt in the memoirs become more complicated, argues Joel Beinin, when although Arabic and native Egyptians were generally regarded as inferior, in the Diaspora, "Wherever Egyptian Jews did go, including Israel, many of them reconstructed forms of communal life and collective practices that preserved a link between them and Egypt." (Beinin, 1998, p. 21). Families that form the basis of this essay continued to organize their traditional culinary sacraments and celebrations as they had previously done in Egypt. Births, weddings, birthdays, funerals and religious rites all have their iconic Egyptian cuisine, described, prepared and served in their very own ritualistic ways.

The people

Lucette Lagnado left Egypt in 1963, when Leon her father, who is 'The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit', capitulated to the hostile climate under which Jews lived in Egypt, and agreed to move with his family to the United States. She describes how, in her early childhood, she used to spend hours looking out of the window at life on the street below, watching the endless stream of passers-by: merchants pushing wheelbarrows filled with grapes and figs and apricots, vendors carrying baskets of rose petals, Arab men in white flowing robes setting up ceremonial tents for funerals and weddings. Life to her was defined by their house on Malaka Nazli Street. In their home meals were passionately prepared by her paternal grandmother, Zarifa, the family matriarch, who was a prodigious cook, slipping apricots into virtually every dish she prepared, convinced of the fruit's magical, healing powers.

Lagnado traces the story of a family so closely connected to Cairo that they held on until they were forced out. Leon resisted leaving for a decade and then did so only after harassment and discrimination extinguished all hope for his family's future in Cairo. They signed papers promising never to return to the country, and with their 26 suitcases embarked on the "Masala". As the ship leaves the Alexandria harbour her stoic father breaks down and cries "Ragaouna Masr," - "Take us back to Egypt."

Leon Lagnado had a love affair with his city, and this is a story about what happens when two such lovers are torn apart. Before, and also after, he married Lucette's mother, Edith Matalon, Leon (who was born in Aleppo, Syria), would spend his nights gambling and womanizing, and then rise at dawn to attend morning services at his local Cairo synagogue. He lost all this when with an identity card stating that his nationality is yet to be determined he takes his wife and four children through Alexandria, Athens, Genoa, Naples, Marseilles, Paris, Cherbourg and Manhattan, before finally landing in Brooklyn. During most of the voyage the Lagnados were assisted by the Jewish aid organizations and the New York Association for New Americans. These associations attempted to provide the family with social assistance on their voyage to the US and in their new homes in New York City, yet Leon would continuously push away the professionals assigned to the family. Social workers in the US resented his lack of enthusiasm about life in the West, and his chauvinistic views of women, especially the women in his family. During interviews with Mrs. Kirschner, the social worker in New York, Leon would respond by saying "We are Arabs, Madame." He would then continue with "God is great." The secular Jewish Mrs. Kirschner despised him for it.

Lagnado tells the story of how some Jews, unlike so many Jewish immigrants, did not adapt to life in the US. Her memoirs pose many questions regarding departures and longings to return: Why did the Lagnados get left behind when the rest of the community in New York moved to the better neighbourhood of Ocean Parkway? Why did Leon insist on staying in the worn-down neighbourhood of Bensonhurst looking for a minyan every morning? Many millions of immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa went to America. They carried with them the American dream: they worked hard, they assimilated and they succeeded. But some did not want to assimilate? Lucette's parents, Leon and Edith, were either unable or unwilling to assimilate.

Lucette Lagnado tells the story through the eyes of Loulou, her pet name as a child. This is a child's view of exile and loss. Like André Aciman in *Out of Egypt* (1994), she conjures a vanished world, and like Aciman she calculates the emotional costs of exile with an unsentimental but forgiving eye. This is not simply the story of a family's loss of its home, its privileges and its identity. It is a story about how exile shapes people's views of the world, a story about the mathematics of familial love and the wages of memory and time. Through the story of her father, Lucette describes dislocation and yearning. There was nothing Leon didn't miss about Egypt. He grew more and more reclusive in New York and immersed himself in

prayer, sometimes spending as many as nine or ten hours a day in the synagogue that was most like the one ‘back home’ in Egypt.

This was a place where bread was a mystery. Instead of hot round pita bread that came directly from the oven, “bread looked nothing like bread” (2007, p. 205). Leon longed for his favourite pastry shops and eating grilled whitefish while gazing at the Nile. There is a powerful scene in the book of Leon sitting at a side table at Mansoura’s, a pastry shop in Brooklyn. The owner Isaac Mansoura, another Egyptian Jew from Cairo, fixes Leon a simple meal that is not on the menu - fava beans simmered in olive oil and lemon with one hard-boiled egg floating in the middle. Lucette describes how Leon for an instant was almost happy.

Leon and Edith insisted on sanctifying food like they used to in Egypt. Rice in the United States did not come unpolished with small stones and bits of straw in twenty-kilo sacks; instead it was ‘milky white’ and sealed in cardboard. Back in Egypt, good Jewish housewives performed the vital Passover task of sorting out the rice for impurities seven times. Although rice in America is purified, processed and hermetically preserved, Lucette and Edith would pull out a white table cloth from one of the 26 suitcases they had brought from Egypt. On the spread cloth they pour the rice and inspect each grain of rice to sanitize it for the holiday. It was only several years after their arrival to New York that Lucette realized that ‘other Jews’ did not eat rice during Passover. Surrounded by hostile Jews with unfamiliar eating habits she recounts her family’s Passover Seder in Brooklyn: “No matter how loudly we sang, our holiday had become not a celebration of the exodus from Egypt but the inverse - a longing to return to the place we were supposedly glad to have left.” (2007, p. 263).

Colette Rossant was born in Paris in 1932 to a secular Egyptian Jewish father and a French Jewish mother. At the age of five, when her father became seriously ill, the family moved to her paternal grandparents’ home in Cairo. Her father died when she was seven years old and her mother more or less abandoned her. She lived with her grandparents till she was fifteen, when her mother decided that Colette needed to be more French, and she was sent to live with her maternal grandparents in post-war Paris.

Memories of a Lost Egypt (1999) and *Return to Paris* (2003) are slim volumes which recollect her life in Cairo and in the Diaspora. Fifty recipes in each book are at the core of their continuous tales of memories. The preparation of food is presented in a condensed form throughout the narrative, yet it stands out by clearly defined boundaries. The format of both books allows us to read them as memoirs; to easily skip the recipes and instead read the continuous narrative as a coherent story. Someone primarily interested in the practical aspects

of recipes would probably not be interested in these as cookbooks, because they contain only a relatively small number of recipes.

The black and white photographs at the beginning of each chapter in *Memories of a Lost Egypt* provide a nostalgic tone and express the wistful nature of this ‘memoir from a lost world’. The first photograph, which is spread over two pages, is perhaps the one that struck me the most. It is a black and white formal picture of the author’s much beloved grandfather Vita Palacci and other members of Colette’s extended family. The tender sketches Rossant draws of her Egyptian grandfather are interwoven with accounts of shared meals. With great affection she describes the first time she met him when she disembarked from the ship in Alexandria. He takes her by the hand and gives her a warm ‘semit’ (pretzel). This was the start of their regular outings. With immense delight, they enjoyed ‘ful medames’ or sweets, often behind the back of her grandmother, who at times disapproved of both their excesses and the unsuitability of street food for people of their “cosmopolitan” standing.

Colette Rossant describes Egyptian relationships as friendly and loving, closely associated in various ways with food and, specifically, with the opportunity to satisfy one’s appetite. Her Egyptian family weddings were large and elaborate affairs, with several delectable displays of food. Rossant plainly states that her happiest childhood memories from Egypt centre on food: from the baguette dipped in garlic and oil — that she preferred to the French ‘petit pain au chocolat’ — to the ‘ful medames’ and the tomato salad, made with tarragon, chives, lemon juice and olive oil with which, later, she won her future husband’s heart.

Colette Rossant moved from Cairo back to Paris in 1947, where she moved in with her grandmother in the upscale 17th arrondissement. In *Return to Paris* (2003) she tells the story of a break from the life she loved, to live with a cold, domineering and demanding grandmother in Paris.

Post-war Paris was grey and lifeless compared with her lively house and neighbourhood in Cairo. The kitchen and the family cook, Georgette, offered immediate comfort; “I was immediately drawn to it, just as I had sought solace in the kitchen of my Cairo childhood” (2003, p. 25). She had to get used to eating ‘omelette aux fines herbes’ for a snack instead of her usual semit; eventually she explored the wonders of French cuisine and found her way, and the cook’s ‘pain perdu’ (French toast) became her ‘comfort food’.

Back in Egypt Colette’s Egyptian family admired French culture and mannerisms. So, Colette was shocked when on her first day at her Lycée in France, she was nicknamed ‘l’Egyptienne’, a label that “stung her deeply” (1999, p. 142). She was regularly scolded by

her grandmother for taking too much pleasure in food. “You’re Egyptian, remember? They all get fat!” Colette felt awkward in her “tawny skin, large breasts, and round hips” (2003, p. 66). In Egypt she was “lovely and sexy...” in Paris she “felt like an elephant” (ibid.). To please her grandmother and assimilate into Parisian bourgeoisie she got rid of her excess weight and accent and started eating “sandwich au jambon” (ham sandwiches) (ibid., p. 142). Her transformation from ‘l’Egyptienne’ to “La Parisienne with an attitude” (2003, p. 82) began under the gentle directions of Georgette.

As time goes by, Colette discovers French food: Sunday lunches of roasted lamb stuffed with garlic, springtime strawberries bathed in crème fraîche. It is through food and the cook Georgette that young Colette finds happiness in Paris, skipping school to go to the famous farmers’ market in Port de Neuilly. But then her life falls apart again, when Georgette leaves to start her own family. It gets worse when she hears that Nasser has nationalised her grandfather’s businesses. Vita Palacci dies a broken man, and his wife follows soon after. Colette Rossant’s ties to Egypt are crushed “I was overwhelmed by loneliness and a persistent feeling of being detached from my roots, from anything stable” (ibid.).

Eventually, the young Colette’s life takes a more positive turn when she meets her stepfather, Mira. They both share a passion for food and their deep friendship starts over a foie gras mousse in Fleurines. Savouring the flavour, Mira looks across the table and whispers to Colette “food is memory” (2003, p. 100).

Food is memory

The entanglement of memory and food is a common terrain of novels, memories and literary essays. For the Scandinavian reader the central, symbolic and actual relationship of food to memory was made clear in Karen Blixen’s *Babette’s Feast*. The seven-course dinner served in the Norwegian coastal village of Berlevaag delighted General Löwenhielm; he recollects exactly the culinary magnificence of the foie gras, turtle soup; Clos Vougeot, quail stuffed with truffles, followed by baba au rhum and washed down with Veuve Clicquot at the Café Anglais in Paris. During Babette’s feast the General reviews his life, his loves, and reassesses the choices he had made, and their consequences. The spectacular feast is one small strand in an intricate story of faith, love, departures and returns. In a sense, it tells us that memory is a substitute for something that is missing.

By their very nature, memoirs fill in some missing pieces, but they are inclined to be randomly associative, in contrast to representations that may be more collectively felt. Using cuisine ‘scenarios’ as narratives is rather awkward despite their significance, precisely

because they are anecdotes, dialogues and remarks which are carelessly conveyed while describing preparations, taste, flavours and family gatherings; and yet it is just this method that contains the spirit and gives vitality to cuisines as significant stimuli to memory. Memory is also about the ways in which the capacity and the need to remember depend on the possibility of forgetting. This is not the same as stating that forgetting is a purposeful process of rendering the past silent; rather that there are times when memory is a burden and it plays an integral part in sorting out genealogies from the past and creating new spaces.

At the source of recollections in memoirs lies the ability to retrieve the story. “Life consists of retellings” writes Bruner (1986); it is a reminder of the story’s lifeline and how we tell it. Narratives of meals belong to forms of memory that are culturally shaped by the place that they occupy in peoples’ lives. This is important, and is it what, as Sutton (2001) suggests, makes Connerton’s *How societies remember* (1989) such a powerful reference in the study of memory. Connerton draws our attention to memory as sedimented in practice such as, for example, eating a plate of ‘ful’ in Brooklyn. Connerton’s questioning title ‘How’ rather than ‘Why’ societies remember is our story about Sephardic Egyptian food.

Remembered meals are important because they are a link with the past, a celebration of roots, and a symbol of continuity. Although cooking is fragile because it lives in human activity, it is not easily destroyed. Joelle Bahloul writes in her study of the Algerian Jewish table, *Le culte de la table dressée: rites et traditions de la table juive algérienne* (1996), that every family has its own culinary code, which gives it its bearings vis-à-vis its regional origin, its personal identity and its position in the old country.

Treating the connections which memory produces as polyvalent objects of scholarly analysis has several significant implications. It dispenses with the division between ‘history’ as a collective, particular and normative category and ‘memories’ as popular, incongruent, and multiple (Nora, 1984). It requires attention beyond the ‘nation’ as the privileged locale of a ‘higher’ social category of historical consciousness (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992). What is at issue is how particular temporal schemes support the imagination of persons and the practice of politics. Not only are the diacritics by which Sephardic Egyptians define themselves products of a history of past social actions, but the very historical frameworks employed to understand these past production are themselves social and historical constructions.

Shifts in historical consciousness can be traced by focusing on the production of historical narratives of particular events and struggles. Narration involves the restructuring of the temporal sequence in order to resituate a current predicament and enable future action. As

Edward Bruner has pointed out, “the present is given meaning in terms of that anticipated present we call the future and the former present which we call the past” (1986, p. 142). Memory, understood as historical imagination, plays an important role in the constitution of national and post-national consciousness. Which takes us to Nora’s argument that memory must be dealt with as retrospective continuity. ‘Sites’ of memory are “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora, 1996, p. xvii).

I mention this in order to indicate that food is indeed a subject which lends itself to our understanding of how specific cuisines inform movements of people, the places they pass through, places they settle in, people they meet and the attachments they make. Cuisines, their worlds of experiences and the spaces they inhabit are sustained as ‘sites’ of memory that stretch across time and place and thus escape the enduring boundedness and distinctiveness of food. Memories and biographies circumvent genealogical purity and are vivid illustrations of how simple ingredients, recipes, cooking or accounts of eating are indeed products with a history that have profound, serious and sometimes painful stories to tell about real people living real lives.

Lagnado and Rossant represent a community that had many stories to relate about community affiliations in the Middle East. They tell stories of daily life and of the people with whom they grew up. We also need to realize that their inner life and certain pictures they carry with them, in particular the most painful ones, are hidden from us. On silence, Knudsen has argued that “[g]iven its situationally constructed nature, a life history is not a story of a life but rather a conscious, or even unconscious, strategy for self-presentation, a legitimization of moves and countermoves and of projections for the future” (1995, p. 29). This approach is close to Bakhtin and his notion of the speaker who is also the respondent: “He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances...” (1986, p. 69). Drawing on Bakhtin and examining how the tales in the memoirs transform, contest and appropriate the past, we also sense the vastness and complexity of human emotions. The journeys of food and the lives of the people who cook and eat them are told by people whose Egyptian experience ends with a devastating divide in their life.

Another aspect of this is the heteroglossia of stories: when stories are told, others soon follow, and thus a situational rather than static understanding is ceaselessly created. Not merely as what constitutes the past in this particular communal setting, but also in terms of its

articulation: a precedence, relating to temporally previous and subsequent instances, is constructed, and these instances also constitute settings in which individuals may express 'being in the world' in relation to other individuals. Janet Hoskins speaks of personal stories as "...not only a recital of events but also an organization of experience..." (Hoskins, 1998, p. 7). Telling the story Bakhtin points out how meaning and telling are understood are about crafting the tale. The skill with which Lagnado tells us the story of Leon and the way Rossant weaves in evocative family gatherings resonate well with Bakhtin's dictum of the important interrelationships of intimacy, skill and reliability. Biographies can be seen as making sense out of continued experience, and as not replacing it but rather, reshaping it and inscribing it with new meaning. In Lambek's words, the narratives should be seen as "...vehicles of memory but recognizing that they can become more or less objectified, more or less detached from the process of remembering" (1996, p. 243). Hence, the circulation and appropriation of stories and the formation of more general stories are all contained within this view. Memoirs that speak about something as familiar as food are constructive in the face of loss and longings. Distances to the past are somehow shortened. Accounts in memoirs in some sense address the erasure and transformation of nature and experience by providing a form that gives us a sense of the disruptions and attachments in time and distances.

The importance of cuisine in the tale of disrupted lives lies not only in its healing capacity, as a set of pleasurable and nourishing practices, but also in its ability to recapture and maintain memory which makes sense of the world. Here James Fernandez's work on West Africa provides tools with which to analyse lives or worlds which are destroyed and how people reconstruct them (1982). Fernandez' approach can be applied to Egyptian Jews, who have experienced a painful break from Egypt and who have an ongoing search for "firm ground under their feet." (Thomassen, 1999, p. 44). Steadiness is achieved with the continuous enculturation of typical ingredients, preparations and sharing of food that combine to make up what Fernandez calls 'the whole'. Certain cuisines that Egyptian Jews always recreate bring out the aspect of memory that is at the core of their experiences of the return to the memorable 'whole'. As such cuisines, which is to say, particular flavours, fragrances and tastes, and aesthetics are regarded as inherent, they create and recreate the 'whole' - Egypt. In the diaspora, Lagnado and Rossant situate food as a theme for personal and collective memories. Although most Sephardic Egyptians have been able to make a decent or even a very good living in exile, the diasporan community seems to live with the knowledge of significant rupture, of the severe rift created by their exile and their treatment in exile. The accounts in these memoirs reflect the lives of their authors, the worlds with which they are

connected, and the sought-after balance between loss and healing. The loss may be as explicit as that of a childhood world, from which Lucette Lagnado and Collette Rossant are now separated by time, or a favourite dish no longer available as a result of geographical and physical displacement.

Conclusions

Lagnado and Rossant, their families, neighbours, and friends were happy in Egypt. They had people around them who loved them, gardens, cafés, shops just outside their doorstep. There were cooks, gardeners, maids to lighten the housework, friends close by and festivities celebrated hard and long.

At first glance, these books seem to fall within the familiar framework of exiles articulating longings for the world from which they have been excluded due to circumstances beyond their control. Such fragments, of course, may take any number of forms, not only food, but also photographs, letters or songs from another world and life. In the face of being powerless to bring back or return to that world, serving fava beans at a distant point on the map of exile is not merely a small comfort but also a meal with the extraordinary ability to express an enduring attachment to Egypt.

Foods described in memoirs are often portrayed as timeless icons of an eternal, true cuisine. I draw attention to the dynamic interplay of food and people in processes of historical ruptures and in constructions of place. It's true that ultimately, ingredients, recipes and meals in the book tell us less about the finer details of events and experiences than about their meaning in their lives and their 'being and knowing' the world. Cooking and eating are more than metaphors of an enchanted past, they are practices that underscore political processes, they tell us more about tensions between individual experiences and the state of the world. Recreations of meals emerge as physical re-collections between people, times and places. In this essay I have been concerned with how experiences of displacement are wedged into aches that separate 'homeland' from 'exile'.

Although writing down memories involves encounters, attachments, experiences, times and places, it is for the most part a solitary act. From some confinement in Lebanon Paul Kauffmann scribbled down his wine list. He wandered through the vineyard in his mind, either real or imagined, and located the names of his 61 wine producers. When Karen Blixen tells us how Babette cooks a meal, she recounts how she is in fact recreating a bygone historical epoch. Babette was not just any cook; she had been the world-famous chef of the Café Anglais in Paris. Men had fought duels over her, for she alone knew how to turn a dinner

into a love affair where body and spirit are one. As he tastes and smells the fragrance, General Löwenhielm remembers the feasts the once world-famous Babette had prepared at the Café Anglais. He finds himself full of an intoxication of mind and heart and body which he recognizes. Like Kauffmann, Lagnado and Rossant, Karen Blixen tells what we in effect know: that memories of taste and fragrance carry possible promises of return.

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Nefissa Naguib (Dr.Philos) is senior researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI). She is a social anthropologist with broad experience in academic and applied research. Her main research focus lies in the cross section between culture, history and politics and encompasses

topics related to gender, minorities, memory, cultural heritage, political violence and transitional movements, and development issues. Naguib is the project manager of 'Muslim devotional practices, aesthetics, and cultural formation in migrancy' funded by the Research Council of Norway. She serves as director of the CMI Arab World program and is coordinator of "the cultures and politics of faith" program at CMI.