

# Sometime in the early 1980s, coming back to New York

after several years in Jerusalem, we were surprised to find a letter from Edouard Roditi. For quite some time, I had been familiar with his work – poetry, translations, interviews with artists, the biographies of Wilde and Magellan, and articles on a variety of subjects. I had no idea why such a venerable figure would have reason to get in touch with me. The letter itself concerned a translation that my wife Klara and I had done of a common friend of ours, David Albahari, then of Belgrade. This letter captured so much of what characterized Edouard's curiosity, knowledge and truly remarkable generosity: he commented on the origins of some words that appeared in our text and their sources in some aspect of Vienna during the Austro-Hungarian Empire; from there, he went on to inquire as to our family origins. This classically Sephardic trait had two complementing and conflicting intents: first, to display his own illustrious family tree with the very pride that Elias Canetti so eloquently ascribes to his mother in the unforgettable opening chapters of *The Tongue Set Free*. And then, in almost direct contrast to this pride, in hoping against hope that there might actually *be* some family

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connection since there are, after all, so few of us left, and family is, after all, still family.

For Edouard the concept of family had no bounds. He created a vast network of people spread over various continents and remained a faithful correspondent and connector between and amongst all of them. He also inquired as to our activities, our interests and projects, with the promise that, the next time in New York, he would be sure to visit. Only knowing him by letter, we took this with a grain of salt. But soon after, we got a call from a phone booth saying – in his inimitably elegant way – that he had arrived and would like to drop over. We expressed concern that he might have trouble getting to us as we were then living in a six flight walk-up. “No problem,” he replied. Within less than a quarter of an hour he appeared, got through the buzzer and presented his imposing figure at our door, not in the least showing any strain. This would be the first of many enjoyable meetings. Even the last few times we saw each other, he maintained the same resiliency, the same presence of mind and body, only complaining about how so many of his close friends seemed to be getting old.

Everyone knows that all true Sephardic Jews possess unique and private archives where they gather evidence to be brought forth into the light of day at some trial of a nature and date even less pronounceable or specific than Kafka’s. Both Edouard and I fit this bill; having just spent a few years in Jerusalem, my archive was brimming with texts and tales whose letters were intent on burning a path into the sand while Edouard’s archive bore all the traces of someone who had meandered for decades through the lore of a dozen countries, languages and cultures, with the familiarity of someone preparing a meal in their own kitchen. Together we planned and wrote up an enormously ambitious project simply titled *Sepharad*.

Our aim was to present a kind of *Norton Anthology* of writings by Sephardi and *mizrahi* Jews, in two volumes of between 600-800 pages each. All in all, some 400 authors were to be included. Many of the texts would be translations from the major languages these writers worked in – Hebrew, Arabic, Judeo-Spanish and French – as well as over a dozen others such as Aramaic, Latin, Judeo-Persian, Portuguese, Greek, Italian, Dutch, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian,

Bulgarian, Georgian, German and Provençal.

Edouard died before we could make headway on our grand project. With him, went a storehouse of irreplaceable knowledge, languages, texts, and cultural nuances that no institution or book can fully embody. In Edouard's approach, the simple fact of possessing certain knowledge – of languages and their cultures, for example – engendered a particular responsibility. Translation meant not only the thrill of transforming poems close to one's heart, but the willingness to serve as a "technician," the way Edouard had done at the Nuremberg trials. Book reviewing, for example, was not simply a matter of opinion but a way of carving out space that could have some influence in providing access to alternative ways of knowing the world. The work one did covered an enormous range of possibilities and permutations, none of which should necessarily take precedence, no matter how tempting or natural that might seem. Ultimately, the relationships that one maintained (one's "good name," as it were), mattered much more than anything that could be "achieved." These are lessons that Edouard lived unassumingly.

*Brooklyn, 21 March 1995*