

Alexandria was always snobbish

and the Greek community was large, wealthy, and closed to foreigners, who tried hard to penetrate it. Few foreigners would be admitted, maybe the general consuls, bank and department store managers, but very few Jews, and even fewer Syrians, whom we used to disparagingly call Levantines.

Whatever had to do with Greeks was done well. Our community was the most important one and the best. Churches, schools, hospitals, everything was taken care of by the community (Translator's note: *Here she probably refers to the Greek Community of Alexandria, Elliniki Koinotita Alexandrias, the body founded in 1843 that ran those institutions*) and by the wealthy Greeks who would make generous donations. In the "villages" (the towns of the interior, other than Cairo and Alexandria) the Greeks were the strongest in every field. It was they who produced and grew the high quality cotton varieties. For many years later the Baedeker guide would refer to the Greeks in Egypt as an "aristocracy."

We "whites" used to have the greatest contempt for the "fellahs." We used to regard them as animals. A white man could stand up against tens of black men and make them flee. Not only was it permitted to hit an Arab; it was also required. I remember my father striking a gardener, Giouma, because he had been rude,

and after he had been hit he kissed my father's hand and jacket. They were animals.

When the British took over Egypt they first pretended to be civilised, they wouldn't hit Arabs. But their civilized behaviour was short-lived. Later on, one of my cousins, Antonis Sareyiannis, happened to be in the Sidi Gaber station where he witnessed a scene that left a deep impression on him. The police chief, Hopkinson, gave an order to a fellah who replied, "*Ana mali*," in other words, "I don't care." So the handsome and gentlemanly Hopkinson stood up and began to lash the fellah in the face with his horse whip.

These kinds of scenes, and others like them, took place every day. Slaps in the face and kicks in the back were given in abundance, and the Arabs accepted this situation as if it were normal. They themselves sensed the superiority of the white race. Things have changed since. They, too, have awakened.

When my father took over the Choremi-Benachi business it was already thriving. Yet, in a few years he expanded it so much that it became the most important business in Egypt, the power and glory of Hellenism, with tens of branches in the interior and hundreds of employees, some of whom were wealthy men before they retired and others who had opened their own businesses.

Xenakis was a character and one of the pillars of Choremi-Benachi Co. He was from Chios, a tall, fit man, with black hair, no beard, and brown eyes, the eyes of a faithful dog, full of love and kindness. Costis Xenakis was stronger than most men. One night, in the Orabi aftermath (*in 1882*), he was heading home when a fanatical Arab, or maybe simply a thief, attacked him with a knife, as if to kill him. Costis Xenakis drew up his fist and gave him a punch. The Arab rolled on the ground unconscious, at which point Costis began to cry, "Oh, I've killed the poor man! Oh, the poor man! What have I done?" He lifted him and carried him on his shoulders to the Greek hospital, his own murderer, and stayed with him until he regained consciousness and he was assured that he had not suffered any other more serious injuries. He also gave him compensation and let him go free without reporting him to the police.

Because of this and other things the Arabs at the *shoona* (the cotton storehouse) and the cotton press that Xenakis managed (which pressed the cotton into balls) adored him. They knew that he was strong and strict and worked like a dog, but they also knew he was compassionate, even-handed and human, kind, good, sweet spoken, honest and correct.

After the Orabi massacre some employees went into hiding, like Mikes Loizos, who also used to work at the *shoona* and would give slaps in the face and the back of the neck generously. They would have killed him if they had found him. Xenakis, on the other hand, was not harmed because the Arabs of the *shoona* and the cotton press protected him from the killers and when Alexandria was burnt our *shoona* was not damaged because Xenakis protected it openly with his team of clerks and workers, all of them Arabs.

When we first moved to our new house in the Quartier Grec our cousin Katina Kalambokidou, the eldest daughter of auntie Argini, came to spend winter with us. She was 17, tall, slim, pale, with dark brown hair, eyes and eyebrows which made her face look even paler.

We fell in love with her from the first moment! "Katina!" She became the centre of attention for us. However, there were a few things about her that seemed strange to us. First of all, she used to pronounce the ending of the first person singular of all verbs like the Athenians did. Then, her clothes were all initialled in Greek whereas ours, everything at home, silver, clothes, linen were all initialled in Latin characters. When for the first time, we went into her bedroom to help her open her chests and put her things into cupboards and drawers we were scandalised to see the Greek initials. I asked her: "Why are your clothes marked with K.K. and not C.C.?" She answered back: "Why do you want me to have C.C. on them? Aren't they foreign?" I got upset and told her: "Only the housemaids mark their clothes in Greek. All our clothes are marked in English. The Greek characters are only for those who can't speak foreign languages." In her own quiet gentle manner she said to me: "I am Greek and I mark mine in Greek."

Her words became another landmark in my life. They filled

me with sadness and uncertainty. They opened a whole new world of questions for me. Why did our very Greek father have all his things marked "E.A.B." (*for Emmanuel Antoniou Benakis*)? Why were our clothes marked with foreign characters? Why were the Greek characters regarded as good only for servants, vulgar and low class?

These questions upset me so much that I used to put them out my mind. However, they remained as question marks and whenever I saw anything of hers marked in Greek the same anxiety would seize me: what if my parents weren't on the right path? Every time I was given a gift with my initials in Latin characters or if I happened to be embroidering my initials on my clothes in Latin the same anxiety would hit me and I would fight it back with the motto: "The Latin characters are more noble." Nonetheless, this motto never gave me peace of mind nor answered my internal questions. I hadn't gotten over yet the upset that Katina's words had caused me: "I am Greek and I mark them in Greek."

We had been told that all Jews had the devil inside them and that when you point the cross at them the devil bursts out and they collapse. At the Khedive's Garden we would often meet three Jewish girls, the daughters of Elie Menasce, who lived in a lovely house with a big garden in Moharram Bey, then still outside town.

We had a deep dislike for these Menasce girls who were older than us, each one uglier than the other. That year it seemed that all three of them had contracted typhus and had had their hair shaved off. Wearing white caps on their heads, frilled around their forehead, and their hats on top they looked uglier than ever.

"I'll make them burst," suggested Stamos, "alright?"

All the kids got very excited. Of course it was alright! But how? "Which one of you carries a cross?"

Alexandra had a beautiful golden cross hanging from her neck. It was small and made of pure gold. She showed it to him.

"Today, this afternoon, at the Khedive's Garden. Bring it with you."

At the Khedive's Garden we were trembling with excitement.

The nannies were sitting at a bench chatting away and not looking after us. With Stamos we began to search for our victims without drifting away too much. "I'll show them the cross and they'll collapse on the ground," he reassured us. And we trembled with emotion and excitement in anticipation of what was about to happen.

Just then we caught sight of the three Jewish girls, dressed in terracotta red with their white frilled caps on under their hats, approaching us unknowingly. They had reached the footpath opposite a small round greenery when the eldest girl waved at us politely.

"Watch me now!" whispered Stamos and lifted the cross threatening the girls as if he was going to hit them. We watched him panic-stricken. They probably didn't realize what was going on right away but when the cross shined in the sunlight they saw it and all three of them gave us a rude Greek hand gesture (*a moutza*) and fled.

We were very disappointed. "They didn't burst, they didn't collapse on the ground, nothing happened to them!," we cried.

Stamos didn't lose his cool easily. "They weren't close enough," he explained to us. "But didn't you see how they ran away? The devil inside them got upset. Don't you worry, they won't have a good end."

Nevertheless we kept seeing the three Menasce girls again and again in the Khedive's Garden, in good health and spirits, except they wouldn't greet us anymore.

As far back as my memory can take me, I recall our father being an austere, tall man, straight as a column, very good looking, with big black eyes, bushy eyebrows and hair and a squarely-cut beard. When his eyebrows frowned panic would overtake us. (My father was born on 15 November 1843.)

Our mother was also tall, beautiful, with nice colours, blue eyes, brown hair, red lips and good posture. She also was austere, keeping us at arms' length, like a deity that you adore without trying to get close. We never saw any affection from her, nor did we ever feel like sharing our sorrows with her. (My mother was born on 8 November 1848.) Same thing for our father, too. They

were two deities that you could adore: scared of them, we always preferred to stay at a distance.

"A child should never know how much it is loved by its parents." And: "It's better that my child cries when it is small than me crying when it has grown up." These two mottos of our mother, the alpha and the omega of our upbringing, left a deep wound in my heart when I was a child.

I never discussed nor mentioned these matters to my siblings. I would only reflect on them when I was alone on the balcony. I would let them hurt as much as they could when darkness began to fall and the sun came down and all that sadness would fill my heart and my mind.

On the left side of the balcony, in some nearby courtyard, there was a big tree where hundreds of birds would roost every evening.

I knew every little branch, every little leaf on that tree – that's how much I stared at it. During the day I liked it for its thick foliage, its relative greenness (since trees in Egypt are never very green), for its shade that fell on the sunburnt courtyard. But in the evening when the sparrows would gather and begin to squall, thousands of squalls, "tsi-tsi-tsi-tsi-tsi", monotonously, like metal, like the noise of an iron machine screeching and piercing my ears, I hated this big tree because it would gather so much sorrow, so much sadness in its grey foliage. All this sadness, all this self-pity, the sorrow, the despair, the rebelliousness of my turbulent life comes back to me again, even now, at sunset and in the evening squalling of the sparrows that gather to go to sleep. Their evening call followed me like a curse all my life, when I was a grown-up girl, in despair, and the birds would gather in the big tree of our garden in front of my window, and again later when I was a woman and a mother and they would roost in the large, short-leaf gum tree near our villa. And even now, at the end of my life, the call of the sparrows at sunset is like a scratch on an open wound and it brings back all the stimmung of my childhood sorrow and sadness, that my mother didn't love me.

My father was not religious, nor did he believe in anything. He used to joke to my mother who was devout: "You'll go to paradise, no doubt. As for me, I don't want to go, because that's where all the old and ugly women end up."

"What are you talking about, Manoli?" my mother would say scandalised, "do you want to end up in Hell?"

"Of course! All the women there will be young and beautiful, all of them sinful..."

He would acknowledge and relate to bishops and patriarchs only to the extent that they represented nationhood (not religion), in their capacity as national leaders and not leaders of the Church.

My father was violent, irascible, high-handed, authoritarian. Whatever his will, he would impose it. He would give orders. And the others obeyed. The others backed down. He was a master. Sometimes a tyrant. But always deeply noble. And honest in his thought and in his dealings. He was frank and proud, he was straight, unbending and relentless as far as conscience, was concerned. We, the children, could sense that as could all those who knew him. Father had character.

Later on in life I got to know him and to appreciate him. Till the end of his life he remained a deity that could not be approached. On the other hand he also remained the great love of my life, something like worship, like religion. I cried a lot because of him. I cried all my life. He always imposed his will on me and he made me suffer, knowingly or unknowingly. And until the end his will and his tyranny weighed heavily on my life. And yet, he remained the last great love of my life.

***Penelope Stefanous Delta**, born Benakis (1874-1941) grew up in Alexandria and then moved to Athens after marrying a Greek from Istanbul. She was a very well-known writer – the first to write books for children in Greek in the 1930s. She died by taking poison on the day that the Germans marched into Athens in 1941, at the age of 67.*

The text is an extract from "Early Memories," which she wrote in the early 1930s. In 1876, her father, Emmanuel Benakis, had established in Alexandria the largest cotton export company in Egypt.

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