Cairo: A Memoir

A Former *Le Monde* Correspondent Reflects Back on Nasser's Time

By Éric Rouleau

Raised in France from early childhood and educated in the republic's public schools, including the Alliance Israelite Universelle, my father naturally supported the country's concept of "*laïcité,*" (secularism), the complete integration of Jewish citizens into their homeland, and was therefore opposed to all forms of Jewish nationalism. Although he was an atheist, or perhaps a deist—I never knew precisely—he nonetheless remained committed to the traditions of Judaism. He celebrated all the major holidays—Passover, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—despite allowing generous portions of liturgical prayers to be skipped. He didn't object, except to taunt me playfully, when during my teenage identity crisis I decided to take evening courses at a synagogue to study the sacred texts like the Talmud as the precursor to a rabbinical career. Then I lost my faith.

Nor did he object to my decision to join Hashomer Hatzair (literally, "The Young Guard"), the Zionist youth movement with Marxist influences. I suspect that like me, my father was ignorant of nearly everything about Zionism and Marxism, two ideologies completely absent from his intellectual universe. I left the movement a year later, disappointed by its attempt to reconcile Jewish nationalism with international Marxism.

Every five years, my father would save up enough money for us to take vacations in Lebanon where to our delight, the abundance of water, the exuberance of its flora, and the bounty of its orchards contrasted with arid and dry Egypt. From Cairo, a ramshackle train from a bygone era, with deafening clatter of iron, would slowly bring us across the Sinai. A bus then drove us to Tel Aviv where we visited my brother who'd emigrated to Palestine before World War II, less by idealism than a taste for adventure. Nothing else drew me to the Holy Land, where we spent only two or three days before taking three months of vacation in Lebanon.

▷ Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser with Éric Rouleau, Cairo, June 1963. *Courtesy of the author*



We were well integrated into Egyptian society where Jews held a privileged position. In the center of Cairo, the business districts would fall into a deep lethargy on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Many of the department stores, boutiques, banks, companies as well as the Stock Exchange stayed closed. Cafes, restaurants and cinemas operated at a slower pace. All one needed to do was walk down the main streets of the capital to see the glittering names of the upscale department stores like Cicurel, Chemla, Gattegno, Orosdi Back, Adès, Oreco, Le Salon Vert, La Petite Reine—all belonging to rich Sephardic families. There was only one other department store comparable to them, Sednaoui, which was owned by Christians of the same name who'd emigrated from Syria.

Leading the Jewish community was Haim Nahum Effendi, Egypt's chief rabbi, from 1925 to 1960. He was a senator and member of the royal academy, a position that was worth his exceptional erudition. An accomplished polyglot, he spoke as well in literary Arabic as he did in Hebrew, Turkish, French and English. Thanks to diplomatic missions he undertook for the sultan of the Ottoman Empire until 1920, at a time when he occupied the functions of chief rabbi for the entire empire, he maintained close relations with European political circles—an advantage he used while serving the Egyptian authorities and the Jewish community. A product of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in Paris where he spent his early years, he shared with most Egyptian Jews "integrationist" or assimilationist convictions, and with them, their reticence over emigration (*Aliyah*) to Palestine. For a long time, Egyptian Jews confused Zionism with philanthropy, believing that their small donations helped Jews fleeing European persecution, much to the chagrin of Zionist movement leaders.

Furthermore, the notable figures of the community, led by the chief rabbi, began to slowly become aware that the Palestine conflict could have serious consequences for Jews in a country where the majority of the population could only be hostile to the Zionist project. Thus their constant need to proclaim themselves loud and clear as "both Jews and patriotic Egyptians." It was a declaration of faith that earned them the support and protection of the palace and the government and even the goodwill of the Muslim elite, before the escalation of the Judeo-Palestinian conflict. Egyptians naturally felt a unique sympathy toward Palestinians, their neighbors who had been stripped of a part of their territory by a minority of foreign colonialists.

Interviewing Hassan El-Banna

Before his assassination on February 12, 1949, I had the opportunity to interview Hassan El-Banna for the *Egyptian Gazette*, an English-language daily newspaper where I worked as a journalist. The supreme leader of the Muslim Brotherhood had

led the campaign against the creation of a Jewish state and provoked in me a feeling of indescribable anxiety.

Stocky and wearing a loose red tunic for the occasion rather than a suit, his face framed by a messy black necklace of a beard, he received his guest with a clerical smoothness, staring at him with a piercing gaze. He was clearly trying to seduce his interlocutor using a playful sort of cunning as well as flowery language and well-structured analyses supported with a host of quotes and apparently inexhaustible anecdotes. He seemed indifferent to the fact that I was Jewish.

A brilliant and passionate orator, his demagoguery, with its prophetic overtones, made large crowds go wild with enthusiasm. He believed that only Islam could cure the ills that the people suffered from. His main targets were, aside from Zionism, British colonialism, the "moral turpitude" of Westerners, "infidels" who held all the economic power along with the wealthy, who he denounced for their selfishness and greed. He unforgivingly condemned socialism and communism as foreign doctrines that were incompatible with the message of the Prophet. He attracted admirers and supporters thanks to the many networks he controlled around the country and the social, athletic and charitable associations, as well as the free clinics and schools that he had built—thus overcoming the failures of the state while at the same time using them as a cover for plots and terrorist operations. Two years after our interview, government agents killed El-Banna as revenge for the assassination of Prime Minister Mahmoud Fahmy Nokrashy Pasha by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the years that followed the second World War, the national movement's priority wasn't the fight against Zionism, but rather resistance to British occupation, against which activists from the leftist Wafd party, along with Communists, organized public meetings, sit-ins and protests.

I participated in one of them in February 1946, the largest ever organized by the National Committee of Workers and Students. It led to a bloodbath. Faced with a sea of tightly packed and boisterous protesters rushing onto the Ismailia Square (which became Tahrir Square after the Nasserist Revolution) where the British military barracks were, security forces opened fire on the crowd, killing some twenty people and wounded hundreds more. A bullet ended the life of a young student marching beside me. The scene of this massacre would burn itself into my memory. The prime minister, Ismail Sedki Pasha, who also happened to be a major figure in the business world, had dozens of Wafdist and communist figures arrested and banned from the clubs and publications they led. However, the event gave powerful momentum to the national movement, which, six years later, brought about the fall of the monarchy— a prelude to the evacuation of the British bases in the Suez Canal Zone.

Zionists and Communists

The political climate further deteriorated beginning in November 1947 when the United Nations General Assembly decreed the partition of Palestine into two states—one Jewish, the other Palestinian Arab. The decision would cause a surge in anger and mark the beginning of a Judeophobic campaign. The press, which until then had exercised restraint, began attacking Jews, accusing them of being both "Zionists" and "communists." The creation of the State of Israel signaled the divorce between Jews and their compatriots around the Arab world. Zionist officials saw it as confirmation of their argument that non-Muslim minorities had no future in Islamic countries. Emigration to Israel surged once again. And yet my family like many others decided not to leave the country, still holding out hope for a return to normal.

The government of King Farouk exploited the situation to discredit the Marxists, calling them "Zionists in disguise." Beyond the Jewish background of many communist leaders, their decision to support the partition of Palestine made them highly suspect; they had thus implicitly endorsed the objective of the Zionist movement, whereas for years they had considered it "reactionary" and "racist." In fact, Egyptian communists, like most of their comrades around the Arab world, supported the decision of the Soviet Union to vote in the United Nations General Assembly in favor of partition and thus the creation of a Jewish state. This blind conformity would cost them for years, despite remaining deeply hostile to Zionist ideology. The Jewish Anti-Zionist League, for example, was dissolved by Egyptian Authorities, its leaders arrested and its publications seized. An offshoot of a communist organization, the league also had defended the creation of a Jewish state.

The reaction by authorities was even more brutal during the invasion of Israel by the Arab armies. On May 15, 1948, hundreds of supposed "communists," and "Zionists" were held in two separate internment camps near Cairo. Many among the communist leadership, both foreigners and Egyptian citizens, were expelled from the country. They had more luck than their Iraqi counterparts, though, where three were hanged in Baghdad on the pretense that they supported the partition of Palestine. Eventually, I too was arrested, and subject to intense questioning about my political positions before being released on bail a month later while the pre-trial investigation continued. Given that martial law was in place, my imprisonment could have lasted indefinitely. Under threat of a double conviction for Zionism and communism, unemployed and without financial resources, I decided to leave Egypt. The police did not prevent my departure, but would only issue me an "exit without return" visa. Unwanted by my native land, deprived of my family, my friends and acquaintances, I left with two feelings: the sadness of emigrating and the joy at moving to France, the country so loved by my father. There a second life awaited me, one full of so many surprises. Several months later, on July 23, 1952, the "Free Officers" led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, seized power and one year after that, founded the republic.

Return to Cairo

Threatened with prosecution for "Zionist and communist activities" and expelled from Egypt, my exile lasted twelve years, and was the source of the surreal aspect of the welcome reserved for me upon my arrival at the Cairo airport. Accompanied by my wife Rosy, a news photographer, we were received by a senior official from the Information Ministry with unusual consideration, driven in an official limousine to a grand Cairo hotel where a suite had been reserved for us. A large flower arrangement was there, with a card indicating that "the president of the republic" welcomed us. All these honors were certainly enough to surprise this former *persona non grata*.

The genesis of these events took place in Paris several months earlier, in the spring of 1963. I was the editor of the Middle East section for *Le Monde* newspaper, a position that had been bestowed on me in the face of all logic, since at the time all Arab states refused to issue entry visas to Jews. The newspaper's management trusted me no doubt due to my previous reporting in sub-Saharan Africa, at a time when it was not easy to work there since the decolonization movement was in full swing. Certainly my knowledge of Arabic and English could also have explained their odd choice, but that wasn't enough to open the doors to me in most of the countries of the region. My investigations in Israel, Iran and Turkey may have suggested an ability to knock down walls of the "Arab fortress," but I had no illusions, given the serious hostility that Israel provoked in the region. I even thought of resigning from the position to devote myself to another region where my background would be of no consequence.

A ray of hope would shine three years later when an Egyptian journalist visiting Paris asked to meet with me. I knew Loutfi El-Kholy by reputation—he was a talented columnist at the daily paper *Al-Ahram*, an essayist, playwright, and leftist. Over the course of the lunch I had invited him to, he made me a proposition that would lead to a major turning point in my professional life. He told me that he had been given the task by Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, editor-in-chief of *Al-Ahram* and friend and confidante of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, of extending an invitation to me to visit Egypt. All of its amenities would be at my disposal, he assured me, to carry out an investigation, and I would be free to travel wherever I wished and speak to whomever I wished, even members of the opposition, and free to publish my writings with no censorship of any kind. An entry visa would be immediately issued to me for whatever length of time I needed—the very privileges that the Nasserist Egypt of the time virtually never granted to foreign journalists. Made aware of the offer, the management of *Le Monde,* authorized me to accept the invitation on one condition: all costs of the trip would be paid for by *Le Monde,* and not the Egyptian paper.

Several decades passed before I was able to penetrate the mystery around the odd invitation from the editor-in-chief of *Al-Ahram*. Speaking with several confidantes

of Nasser after his death, in particularly his chief of staff Sami Charaf, I discovered that political calculation had led to the decision to open Egypt to a special correspondent from *Le Monde.* With Algeria having gained independence the previous year, Egypt and France had renewed diplomatic relations; Nasser wanted to end the years of quarreling and confrontation by inaugurating a relationship built on trust with the government of President Charles de Gaulle, who he greatly admired, something that would prove reciprocal. And all the more so because he believed, not without reason, that Paris was offering newly sovereign countries a third way, allowing for an escape from Soviet-American binary system.

The persistent hostility between the two countries had to be cleared up as much as possible using various means, including French media. Only *Le Monde*, considered at the time to be pro-Gaullist and a supporter of the Third World, whose authority and influence went well beyond France's borders, had the potential to contribute to the *rapprochement* between the two nations. Nasser's advisers, in particular the director of *Al-Ahram*, no doubt inspired by Loutfi El-Kholy, believed that a first step in that direction would be to establish a relationship between the person who led the Middle East section at *Le Monde.* It wasn't a completely crazy bet: I was regarded in both political circles as a "progressive," likely to be supportive of certain accomplishments of the Nasser regime.

The tenor of my articles had caught the attention of Egyptian officials. During the Belgian-Congolese crisis in 1960, I had clearly taken a position in the confrontation between Brussels and Léopoldville (the former name of the Congo-Zaire capital) in favor of the independence movement and its leader Patrice Lumumba, the victim of a large international conspiracy (to which the United States was no stranger) that led to his assassination and replacement by Mobutu. I was one of the only journalists in the French press to reveal the underside of the secession of the Katanga province directed by the Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK), the Belgian holding company that exploiting the rich copper mines. Like all major companies during the colonial period, it feared that independence would infringe on its excessive privileges.

Two years later, in 1962, in a series of articles, I defended the Yemen Arab Republic after the overthrow of the monarchy. My sustained criticism of the Shah of Iran (who was considered in the West to be a "major reformer"), his human rights violations and his submission to the will of the United States, caught the attention of Egyptian political circles that broadly shared my politics.

My relative sympathy for Nasser's Egypt contrasted with the open hostility of nearly the entire press toward the "dictator" in Cairo; my paper wasn't the only one to criticize the Egyptian president, to compare him to Hitler and Stalin, to accuse him successively or simultaneously of being a fascist, communist, or worse—an agent of the

Kremlin. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't fooled by the familiar insults in the West used to demonize Third World leaders who defied the established order. The leader of the Egyptian revolution hadn't merely overthrown a monarchy, dispossessed the major landowners, dismantled the British, French and domestic industrial and financial oligarchies, as well as nationalized the Suez Canal—the flagship and symbol of foreign takeover in the Nile Valley—he had also established cordial relations with the USSR and its satellite nations as a counterbalance to Western influence, in particular that of the United States. The fourth French republic criticized first and foremost his support for the Algerian people's uprising, virtually declaring Nasser the instigator of that independence movement. Since all is fair in love and war, the campaign against Nasser had a decidedly moral tone, to better conceal the hidden interests of these major powers.

I felt that it was entirely legitimate for Nasser to support the Algerian revolution, to want to erect the Aswan Dam as a way to expand and streamline the irrigation of a country that was largely desert, as a way to increase its energy capacity and in the process, that of its industrial potential. I considered it rather petty on the part of Washington in 1956 to deprive the project of its financial and technological support as a way of "punishing" Nasser for its arms deal with Russia which after all was justified by the United States' refusal to sell Egypt those very means for self-defense.

Resisting Imperialism

It wasn't difficult to share the enthusiasm of the Egyptian people, as well as all people of the Third World when the Suez Canal Company was nationalized on July 26, 1956, an initiative of unprecedented temerity for the time. It was a revolutionary act, the second in the region after the aborted nationalized of Iranian petroleum four years earlier by the moderate nationalist prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh. His defiance led him to be vilified and denounced as an agent of Moscow, then finally overthrown in the 1953 coup d'état fomented by the CIA. In both cases, however, the reacquisition of national resources was consistent with the rights of sovereignty and did not violate the interests of shareholders who were lawfully expropriated and fairly compensated.

The retaliation against Nasser, compared to what Mossadegh experienced, seemed to me even more brutal and just as unjustified. Barely three months after the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, Israeli tanks entered the Sinai while French and British forces landed at Port Said in order to, it was claimed, separate the warring factions. In reality, the common objective of the allies was to bring down Nasser's republic, as well as the Jewish state's desire for free access to the Suez Canal, and above all, take over the Sinai. The victory of the invaders appeared certain, despite the robust Egyptian resistance, until the day that U.S. President Eisenhower put an end to it, demanding and obtaining the withdrawal of all foreign troops. The Soviet

premier, Marshall Bulganin, had himself threatened to intervene militarily, no doubt a symbolic gesture of support from Moscow to a developing nation.

The one-of-a-kind American president wasn't without his own interests either. He had taken umbrage at the collusion between London, Paris and Jerusalem behind his back, with their obvious goal of having dominion over Egypt. Eisenhower was right, though; his intervention brought the popularity and influence of the United States in Egypt and across the Middle East to new heights while the failure of this "tripartite aggression" sounded the death knell for the Franco-British presence in Egypt and marked the beginning of the decline of these two powers in the region. The damage done to Israel was no less: the Jewish state was seen more than ever as an expansionist state in the service of Western imperialism.

In spite of all this, I went back to Egypt with strong reservations regarding the Nasser regime. The overthrow of the monarchy followed by major economic and social reforms, as well as the restoration of national sovereignty after the permanent eviction of the British occupying forces, admittedly satisfied the convictions of my youth. But the military aspect of the regime established by the junta that seized power on July 23, 1952, remained from my point of view an indelible stain. In the conflict two years later that would pit Nasser against General Mohammed Naguib, the leader and icon of the revolution, I believed that the latter, in wanting to legalize all political parties, from the Muslim Brotherhood to the communists and to restore parliament, was right.

Paradoxically, I wasn't unsympathetic to the arguments made by General Naguib's adversaries: that such democratization would merely reestablish the influence of big business, which still had the means to dominate the political scene. The single-party system was in place in most of the countries that had achieved independence since World War II, and it seemed that it was the price to pay to insure progress and well-being of people in developing nations.

Torn between these two diametrically opposed arguments, I thought I'd found the right position in the belief that single party system or not, nothing justified depriving public freedoms, the violation of what we would later call human rights. The brutal repression in Egypt of all of the opposition—liberal Wafdists, communists and the Muslim Brotherhood—was intolerable to me, especially since abuse of all kinds was not uncommon in internment camps. *Le Monde* reported, at the beginning of the 1960s, the death under torture of two prominent intellectuals who I had known personally in Cairo in my youth, two men I admired: Farid Haddad, the "doctor to the poor," who was one of my high school classmates, and Shouhdi Attya El-Chafei, who I had known when he was editor-in-chief of the weekly *Al Gamahir* (The Masses). Shouhdi, an adjunct English professor whose charisma and intelligence seduced more than a few people, played a major role in the communist movement. The bitter irony

was that the two men had been beaten to death by their jailers even though neither was fundamentally anti-Nasser.

I had their memories in mind when Mohamed Hassanein Heikal welcomed me the day after my return to Cairo in June 1963. Over the course of the dinner in my honor on the terrace of the Semiramis, a hotel on the banks of the Nile, I wanted to immediately dispel any ambiguity that could have colored our budding friendship. I thanked him for the invitation and for giving me the opportunity to once again set foot in my native land, this time under quite different conditions than those that led to my exile. I was also grateful to him for obtaining the agreement in principle from President Nasser for an interview with *Le Monde,* a privilege that the leader rarely granted. While incidentally revealing my ethical boundaries, which I strictly adhered to, I made it clear that my friendship would never be unconditional and that I would be publishing a series of articles upon my return to Paris that he most likely would not like, but which would honestly reflect my own views, views that were certainly not his own nor those of the Egyptian leadership. Heikal, a very understated man, accepted the message with a surprised grimace, and then, it seemed to me, a barely-disguised look of satisfaction. Loutfi El-Kholy, who was present for the discussion, later told me that the *Al-Ahram* editor preferred by far to deal with a man of convictions, as he was himself, even if our opinions diverged. He felt that good faith criticism coming from a credible observer better served the Nasser regime than praises from a servile journalist. As an experienced journalist himself quite familiar with the Western press, my intransigence surely did not shock him.

I then brought up the most taboo question of all, that of the persecution of political prisoners, saying I was planning to pose it to the president during the interview. Knowing that Heikal would of course warn Nasser about it, I added that in world opinion, or at least France's for the purpose of our newspaper, the internment camps eclipsed the positive aspects of Egyptian government policy. The implicit warning was not lost on Heikal, who in response merely flashed an enigmatic smile. Several years later I would learn that he secretly shared my opinion.

My meeting with Gamal Abdel Nasser several days later would be decisive in more than one way. First, I was pleasantly surprised by the cordial simplicity of how he received me. Dressed in canvas pants and a light cotton shirt with an open collar, he welcomed us, Rosy and me, in a relatively modest home in the Cairo suburb of Manshiet El-Bakry, where he had lived as a young military officer—lodgings he preferred to the palaces provided by the republic. The living room where the interview took place was furnished in the tradition of the Egyptian middle class—imitation Louis XV couches and armchairs—far from reflecting the status of a head of state. The grayish-green wall was decorated with signed portraits of Third World leaders:

Tito, Nehru, Zhou Enlai, Nkrumah and Sukarno. The room did not have air conditioning, and a fan made the June Cairo heat just bearable. Our interview—which alternated between English and the Egyptian colloquial Arabic—lasted more than two hours. Heikal was present, but out of respect to the president he never said a word during the conversation.

Tall, with the massive shoulders of a slightly stooped boxer and an intense but kind look, our host spoke first to put us at ease. The ice was quickly broken: he was lonely, he complained, ever since his family, wife and children, left for Alexandria for their summer vacation. The house, where we saw no aides or domestic help (except the one who served us lemonade and Turkish coffee), felt desperately vacant to him. Fortunately, he added, he worked a lot, too much for his taste, in his home office. Despite his schedule, he forced himself to take time to indulge in his favorite sports, swimming and tennis. Didn't he have a hobby to pass the time? Nasser wouldn't go so far as to confide his affection—which his friends knew about—for movie Westerns, nor his passion for chess which he played as often as possible with General Abdel Hakim Amer, his closest friend among the officers who seized power in July 1952. He would go on to fire him with a heavy heart after the 1967 military debacle in which Amer, then military chief-of-staff, was held responsible.

Nasser displayed an insatiable curiosity and an extraordinary ability to listen. Before I could formulate the first of my questions, he asked me at length about my professional life, the way French media worked, the freedoms they had, and, most surprisingly, about my personal life. How many children did we have? Where did we live? How was I able to purchase our apartment in the center of Paris with payments on an installment plan? What are the interests included in a French bank loan? What percentage of our household income went to paying back those loans? My astonished look caused him to excuse himself for his indiscretion, explaining that he trying to figure out a way to provide Egyptians with low-cost housing that they would own, and he was asking the question to know if such a project was a utopian one in a developing country where the income of the vast majority of citizens was barely enough to survive. And as if his office hadn't provided him with all relevant information about me, he asked me about my origins, the life I had led in Egypt in my youth, all while carefully avoiding the reasons that led to my exile. We were "neighbors" since my birthplace, Heliopolis, was near his home in Manshiet El-Bakry where the interview was taking place. He was clearly engaged in a game of seduction for which men gifted in communication have the secret.

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