

## **Interview with Dr. Aldo NAOURI in Paris, France May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012**

Aldo NAOURI was born on December 22, 1937, in Benghazi, Libya. His father, Yoseph NAOURI, was a tailor and was born in Tripoli in 1901. His mother, Bouba HASSAN, was born in Tripoli in 1903. Aldo was the last of ten children born to this couple (7 survived), but his father died of diabetic coma at the age of 36, two months before Aldo was born.

The family was extremely poor, but the father's family had the rare distinction of having been granted French citizenship in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dr. Naouri refers to the precious "livret rouge" from the French Consulate in Tripoli, which testifies to this.

The mother spoke only Judeo-Libyan, a dialect of Arabic spoken by the Jews of Libya, and was illiterate, but extremely resourceful. She was an expert storyteller and Aldo remembers the family gathered around her in the courtyard of their home in a cellar, recounting *The Count of Monte-Cristo* or other French novels, in Judeo-Libyan. She wore the traditional clothing of Jewish women in the Ottoman Empire, with billowing pantaloons under her tunic. She also wore not only one, but two "haïk", the traditional shawl North African women wear to cover their head and shoulders. Dr. Naouri explains how she started her day, retrieving a burning ember to start the day's fire in the conical, ceramic oven in the courtyard to make coffee. He also describes how she made *matzot* for Passover, washing the grains of wheat herself, drying them in the sun, and grinding them with a stone mortar and pestle.

Aldo's eldest brother, Bramino ("Albert", in French) a tailor, was 17 years older than he and the next brother, a man with an astute capacity for making and losing money, was 12 years older. Both of the older brothers could recite the Torah by heart.

The family was extremely pious and the week was centered around Shabbat.

The history of Jews in Libya is quite ancient. Dr. Naouri refers to a book by Renzo de Felice about the Libyan Jews. The USHMM Library has it in the English translation. He mentions that it dates back to the time that people were "*trogloodytes*" – living in mountains-side cave dwellings.

In 1942, the Italians who had occupied Libya, decided to expel all citizens of countries with which Italy was at war. About 32 Jewish families with French citizenship were sent to Algeria, first stopping at the Ben Gardane internment camp in Tunisia. Dr. Naouri describes in detail some of the memory "flashes" he has of this period. One of them concerns a large, green trunk with a trick bottom, where illicit things, such as money were to be smuggled out of the country. Those caught smuggling could be shot immediately.

The first part of the trip, in trucks, from Benghazi to Tripoli, took quite some time, over a week. Dr. Naouri describes meeting his maternal grandmother and one of his uncles for the first time in Tripoli. The family then took a train from Tripoli, finally stopping with two other Jewish families in Orléansville, now called Chleff, in Algeria. Settling into the community was difficult. The Algerian Jews, who became French under the *décret Crémieux* in 1871 had lost their nationality when this decree was repealed under the laws of Vichy. They resented the refugees from Libya who they considered uneducated and backward, but for some reason, had kept their French nationality despite the Vichy regime. So, the Naouri family had to fight not only anti-Semitism from the Arab population of Libya and Algeria, and the French

colonial *pied-noirs*, and the wealthy Jews from Livorno who had been transplanted into Libya and Tunisia, but also from indigenous Jews in Algeria, who could not even understand the Judeo-Libyan dialect. Later, Aldo took Arabic at the local public school, but an anti-Semitic teacher made life difficult for him, although he was the best student in the class. He also went to the *Talmud Torah* on Thursday's and Sunday's. He remembers that a young girl with whom he was smitten made a date to see him the morning of his *bar mitzvah*, so he ran off to meet her.

Later, Aldo Naouri went to the public high school in Mostaganem, boarding there.

When it came time to choose a profession, he was told to become a dentist. Although he was enrolled in the Faculty in Algiers, he persuaded his family to let him follow a friend to the Faculty in Besançon. However, his first-year academic results were so outstanding, he changed his orientation to medicine and moved to study in Paris.

Meanwhile, his family, which had moved to the city of Rezilane after their house was destroyed by the 1954 earthquake in Orléansville, evolved from the status of refugees (from Libya), to earthquake victims ("sinistrés"), to repatriated French citizens ("repatriés") to France when Algeria gained its independence.

Dr. Naouri became a well-known pediatrician, but has written quite a few books with a psychiatric basis. The interview involved a certain amount of analysis of events about which he had also given much thought, most particularly language and the impossibility of translating certain concepts into certain languages. One of his daughters is a novelist, another is a translator, and his son Laurent is a well-known opera singer.

Dr. Naouri feels that he lived through the period of the war without trauma because of the extraordinary love and protection his mother and siblings offered him, despite their poverty, relegating them to the lowest rung of the Jewish social status in Libya and Algeria and the dire conditions of continual exile.

Places: Benghazi, Tripoli (Libya), Gabès, Djerba and Ben Gardane (Tunisia), Orléansville , now Chleff, Mostaganem, Resilane (Algeria)

Expressions: *Youdi kelb* (Dog of a Jew), several terms used in psychoanalysis: such as "signifiant", *haïk* – the traditional shawl covering the head and shoulders.

See essay in the book edited by Leila Sebbar: *Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane*. Scan included with interview.