

## Oral History Interview with Madame Aimée BERESSI in Paris, France May 17, 2013

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Madame Aimée Beressi, née Setton, was born on May 12, 1924, in Cairo, Egypt. Her father, Chaloum SETTON, was born in 1881 in Alep, Syria, where his father sold livestock. Chaloum's mother died at an early age and his father and he went to live in Cairo, where his older sister lived with her husband and children. Chaloum worked for a bank in Sohaj in Middle Egypt, but his wife could not adapt to life there, and when she lost a child to typhoid fever, they moved back to Cairo. Her mother, Esther Nahman, was born in Cairo, but her family immigrated from Kavala, Macedonia, present-day Greece. The family spoke French, Arabic, and English at home. Aimée later said in conversation after the interview that she spoke only Arabic until the age of 5.

Aimée was the only girl and the second-to-the-last child born. In order of birth: Joseph, Victor, Félix, Raymond, Aimée, Robert.

Aimée's father attended a Sephardic synagogue and the 5 boys all celebrated *bar mitzvah*. The family observed Shabbat and the Jewish holidays, but did not adhere strictly to Orthodox practices. Aimée received no Jewish education herself. The family lived in the center of Cairo in a neighborhood where Muslims, Jews, Catholics and Greek Orthodox families lived.

Aimée attended a French private school for girls and her brothers attended a Catholic boys' school where classes were also conducted in French. She later attended the *Lycée Français* and obtained her baccalaureate. She then enrolled in the American University of Cairo for two years, wanting to become a journalist. She abandoned her studies in 1942 or 1943 to take a job in an English firm as a translator, for a pittance. She kept this job, still living at home, until 1947.

The rise of Nazism during the 1930's and the plight of German Jews is not something she remembers. She did mention that at the age of 15 (1939?), she was struck by the sadness of a woman from Vienna who was invited to her family's Passover *seder*. She also met Russian and East European immigrants connected to the family of the wife of one of her brothers. The family seemed more preoccupied by Mussolini's conquest of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Libya, a direct threat to Egypt. She does not remember rationing or restrictions, or a particular influx of foreigners during the war.

The fact that the British Protectorate ended in the mid 1930's did not seem to change things for her family. She did mention that King Farouk was pro-Nazi and that SS officers were in Egypt to advise him. She thinks that they are responsible for the way that Egypt treated its Jews in 1947 and during the war between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries.

Aimée joined the clandestine Egyptian Communist Party, during the war, where she met her future husband, Armand Beressi, who worked as an *agent de change*. She dropped out of the university partly because attending an American university seemed to be in contradiction to Communist principles. It is interesting to note that the Egyptian groups studied the Koran and its precepts about women. Later, in France, she was disappointed to find that the Communists were hardline Stalinists and not open to discussion. She severed her connections with the Party in France.

Aimée said that she did not experience any evidence of anti-Semitism until late 1947, when the U.N. voted the creation of the State of Israel. She was planning to marry Armand Beressi in June, 1948, but he was arrested a few months prior to that date and sent to a detention camp west of

Cairo, the camp of Huckstep for a year. Jews were convicted of “Zionist conspiracy”, even if they had no involvement in politics or connections to Israel. She maintains that one person from each Jewish family was sent to this type of camp. Her younger brother, Robert, spent two years in a camp near the Oasis of Farga, in Northern Egypt, either from 1949 – 1951 or 1950 – 1952.

One of her brothers emigrated to South Africa. Another brother had a factory that manufactured cotton knits. In 1954, the factory was nationalized and the Egyptians proposed that he remain to run the factory for a ridiculously small salary. He left for France with his family.

In 1949, Aimée and Armand left for France on tourist visas. They were obliged to turn in their Egyptian passports, so were “stateless” refugees. It took a while for the Beressi’s to obtain papers so that they could work. Her husband started in publishing and did quite well, eventually selling his business to the French publishing house specializing in educational material and textbooks, Hachette. Aimée trained to work in health care, but abandoned this to care for her husband. In 1979, Armand died of cancer at the age of 58.

They had two sons, one of whom is in publishing and another is a doctor. Both sons have two children.

After her husband’s death, Aimée returned to the Sorbonne to study Arabic for 2 years. Then, she joined a friend to study Jewish history, Hebrew and the Talmud at the center for Jewish studies, named after Edmond Fleg.