Mateur, Tunisia

A Triple Coexistence

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It's market day in Mateur, the little city in the north of Tunisia where I spent my childhood. Starting at dawn, I can hear the scraping of the carts on the pebbly ground of the main street; the barking of stray dogs, excited by the herds of sheep and goats; the shouting, in Arabic, of the peasants, farmers, sharecroppers, and market gardeners who hurry to take their place in the corral reserved for the impassive and disdainful camels (dromedaries in fact). Mateur is an important market town located in the center of the principal grain-growing region in Tunisia. If the rainy season, September and October, had been bad, all the growers—small-time peasants, Arab farmers, Italians, small-time French settlers—awaited the moment of the harvest with foreboding. From my window, I can see the store of one of the two grain merchants who purchase harvested wheat and put up money for future sowing. They evaluate the quality of the grains, compare them, debate. I'd go there often, drawn by the enormous old-fashioned scales on which the jute bags are weighed. Uncle Raoul and his brother Émile would kindly explain to me the difference between the qualities of wheat. They are not my uncles, but I have always called them that, out of familiarity. Every year I went to their house for the Passover celebration.

My father, a devoted secularist, did not practice any religion. At home, Jewish holidays were only marked by the appearance of special dishes prepared by my mother: msouki with matzah bread for Passover, cakes for Purim and Rosh Hashanah, stuffed chicken for Yom Kippur.¹ It is only during the seder that my singularity is explained to me—and with a good deal of solemnity—by Uncle Raoul who would translate the texts for me and repeat over and over: “We were all at Mount Sinai when Moses received the Torah from God’s hand. All of us, you

¹. *Msouki*, sometimes also rendered *msoki*, is a spring lamb stew with vegetables made by Jews from Tunisia and Algeria.
understand?” “Me too?” “Yes, you too.” How strange, something unique happened on an unknown mountain, and I don’t remember it. Yet this something is part of me, without my knowing it or being able to explain it. For the word “Jew” was never spoken in front of me, no more so than “Muslim” or “Christian”—these words were all undertones. By implicit deduction, I knew that I was Jewish, but my education “à la française,” my parents’ culture, which did not include Arabic, my father’s years of pharmacy studies in France, my mother’s baccalaureate at the French lycée in 1920, and, most of all, her sister Juliette’s prestigious status as the first female lawyer in North Africa,situated me on the side of the French language.

In Mateur, where one found Arabs, Italians, French, Maltese, Jews, and even two Russian families who escaped the Revolution of 1917 all living together, everyone knew everyone, and everyone, at some point, would end up stopping by my father’s pharmacy to ask for guidance, advice, or help. Nothing stayed a secret here: family
relations, money problems, the precarious situation of some, the relative wealth of others, French bureaucrats but also shopkeepers and craftsmen, plumbers, tailors, Jewish jewelers, Italian mechanics . . . And then there were the engineers and specialized technicians from France who inspected and directed the mines in the area: my father would invite them to lunch in an impromptu way and they’d bring my mother the prizes from their hunts, without worrying about kosher laws.

My only Arab friend, Beya, was the daughter of the grocer whose store occupied the ground floor of our apartment building. She was two or three years older than me; we played hopscotch on the sidewalk; she spoke French haltingly. One day, she disappeared. When I asked her father if she was sick, he answered me in a very serious tone: “Beya will no longer come play here; she’s a young woman now; she has to stay at home.” Intrigued, I turned to my parents for an answer. My father had no comment. Tacitly, I understood that Beya would never go to school, and that was the way of life for Arab families, period, end of story. It was understood that everyone has the right to live as they please.

I had no contact with Arab women outside of the market, the only place where veiled women could go out, even those who veiled discreetly. While French and Jewish homes welcomed me with open arms, it was completely impossible for me to enter the houses of Arab families. There was only exception, which came about thanks to Tahar, my father’s employee and a young man who had apprenticed with him since he was fifteen years old. Tahar found it amusing to teach me how to write my name and that of my parents in Arabic letters and—surprisingly—from right to left (in the same direction as Hebrew, a language I’d never heard of). So Tahar invited us to a party held in honor of his sister’s marriage. First element of surprise: women and men are separated, and the bride is absent. Slipping into the next room, I discover in half-darkness, sitting on a chair, away from the hubbub and the guests, the bride, waiting passively. The door finally opens and a man, wearing a jacket and dress pants with a chéchia2 like the Arabs in the city, slowly approaches, lifts the veil, contemplates for a few seconds the face of the woman whose eyes are cast downward, and then leaves. It was the husband. This scene, obviously unlike the marriages I had attended with my family in Tunis, awakened in me a certain anxiety. How would this woman be able to live with a man that she was seeing for the first time? A taboo question that I refrained from asking Tahar . . .

Another experience would also bring me into contact with very different customs. When my parents would leave Mateur to spend the night in Tunis—to attend a party or a wedding—they would sometimes leave me in the care of one the young women who worked at the pharmacy, either Jewish or Italian, since young Arab women did not work outside the home. It was a chance for me to live

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2. A chéchia (often transliterated as sheshia) is a soft skullcap worn by many Muslim men, particularly in North Africa. In certain regions, it was also worn by Jewish men and boys.
for a couple of days with a different family, and so to learn to know and respect others, in accordance with my parents’ educational principles. This was how I went one evening to stay with Myriam. In her modest building, where Jews and Arabs lived together, there were two young women who shared the same apartment in the midst of a swarm of children. They asked us, laughing, if it was true that “outside,” men and women danced together. So Myriam and I improvised an unconvincing tango. In high spirits, the two young women, who couldn’t believe their eyes, kept repeating one after the other: “Really, so close to each other?” They lived together, almost cloistered, with the same husband. When I told my parents about my evening away, my father, once more, remained silent.

We lived in a peaceful state of coexistence governed by implicit rules: avoid conflicts, abstain from any references to religion (even if loud curses sometimes escaped from certain mouths), respect the lines of demarcation (geographic if not linguistic, since the same language, Arabic, was spoken in both the Arab and Jewish quarters), live together harmoniously, and get along with the neighbors. Thus, for me—as a Jew who attended Passover—it was natural that I wait for my Catholic friend on a bench while she went to confession at church. But even a good kid like me had to be careful not to stray, even absentmindedly—something I would learn the hard way.

Here is the story. Mahmoud, the fairly elderly caretaker of our building, a handyman happy to do the renters’ bidding, had the habit of teasing me by blocking the way in the stairwell. But one morning, when I was late for school and he did it again, laughing, I callously pushed him back. Upon my return four hours later, my mother greeted me coolly: “Come here, you” she said with a stern look. “Is it true that you called Mahmoud an idiot?” “Well . . . uh . . . I don’t know.” “Yes or no?” “I don’t remember.” “Very well, he hasn’t forgotten, and you’re going to apologize to him; he’s waiting at the door.” Indeed, Mahmoud was standing there, looking intimidated. “Apologize to him! Apologize to him!” ordered my mother in an implacable tone. Unaffected by my tears, she insisted: “On your knees!” I cried even harder. Then Mahmoud, even more upset, and sorry about the scale the scene had taken on, spoke: “It’s alright, Madame Taïeb, it’s alright . . .” After he left, my mother told me: “I won’t tell your father about this, but remember that you are privileged, that you aren’t superior to anyone, and that you have to respect everyone equally.” A magnificent lesson, never forgotten . . .

Some time later, I became truly aware of this fact: for others, I was Jewish. War was on the horizon. I saw my father called up for service for the first time, in uniform. Then demobilization and his return home made life even more stressful.3 When a Frenchman made openly antisemitic declarations, my father became incensed and, in a stormy telephone conversation with the Civil Controller in

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3. Here, demobilization likely refers to the fact that, following the armistice signed between Germany and France in June 1940, Marshal Pétain agreed to demobilize the French Air Force.
Bizerte (the prefect, in short) who oversaw Mateur, demanded a public retraction. The person in question came to the pharmacy to apologize in front of the staff. The visit of the Resident General to Mateur provoked another incident. As schoolchildren, we were called upon to stand along the road with little signs featuring Pétain’s picture. When I told my mother, she refused outright, and thus I was deprived of what we students considered a fun outing: “But what will I say to the teacher?” “She will understand,” my mother said. Indeed, the next day, when the principal, surveying the ranks of girls, stopped in front of me and I told her that I wouldn’t be coming, she calmly responded: “I know.” What did she know? But that was nothing compared to what followed: how was I to understand, in effect, that I was forbidden access to the French high school because I was Jewish, and that I had been accepted, instead, into a Catholic girls’ school?

In November 1942, German tanks entered our dumbfounded little town. Then came the requisition of our apartment, the closing of the school, and, above all, my father’s enlistment in the Jewish labor camps set up in the area around Mateur and Bizerte to establish decent sanitary conditions and ensure regular food supplies—as American bombs fell around them. All of this highlighted certain divisions and reinforced the feeling of belonging to a separate community, between the French families who invited us over to listen to the BBC and an Arab population that remained neutral, of belonging to it and sharing its fate.

—Translated by Robert Watson

4. The resident general was the official appointed to oversee the French administration in Tunisia. The resident general effectively ran the country, despite the legal fiction of indigenous administration under the Beys of the Husainid dynasty—the hereditary monarchs who reigned during the Ottoman Empire.

5. Marshal Philippe Pétain was a WWI hero who collaborated with Nazi Germany and became the leader of Vichy (or non-occupied) France from 1940–1942. He was convicted of treason after the war and died in prison in 1951.

6. The application of Vichy’s Jewish status laws in Tunisia in May 1941 would result in quotas (numerus clausus) limiting the number of Jewish students in French secondary schools to 20 percent of the total student population.