Monastir, Tunisia

The Jewish Boy from Monastir

Guy Sitbon

Not all families took part in the commemorative celebration of Rabbi Shémeoun. My mother Juliette solemnly swore to do so once during a typhoid fever epidemic that was decimating the town, and from which my sister Daisy made an almost miraculous recovery. The celebration involved a rite in which children and adolescents had to walk in procession through Monastir, carrying lit candles and chanting in Hebrew all the way to the synagogue. The ceremony took place at dusk, when the souk shops were still open and the cafés were teeming with customers.\(^1\) People out in the street, all Muslims, watched unsurprised as our cortege passed. They knew our traditions by heart, and would even offer a match to relight our candles when the breeze blew them out.

On Moulèd and Aïd el-Kebir, the town transformed, as if by magic, into a kind of fairground, with a merry-go-round, swing-sets, fakirs, snake charmers and fortune-tellers setting up their stalls in streets and squares.\(^2\) The air vibrated with the drumming of darboukas, bendirs (tambourines), and the strident notes of the zukra, a kind of goatskin bagpipe, as hearts danced with joy.\(^3\) The Muslims would

1. A *souk*, or *souq*, is a market or a bazaar. In the original, the author used the word without italics, suggesting its incorporation into everyday French vocabulary.
2. Moulèd (also Mawlid or Mawlid al-Nabi al-Sharif), is the celebration of the birthday of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha (sometimes simply Aïd or Eid), is the Festival of the Sacrifice—one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over, it commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy.
3. A *darbouka* (also spelled *darbuka*, or *darabukka*), sometimes called a goblet drum, is an ancient Middle Eastern percussion instrument. Shaped like an hourglass and with an animal skin stretched over its widest end, the *darbouka* is played by hand. Similarly, the *bendir* is also a traditional
FIGURE 17. Guy Sitbon in Monastir, age fourteen.
wear their Sunday best, but we would not; still, the festival atmosphere sent vibrations through the whole crowd. It was many years later that I learned the real meaning of Moulèd (the feast of the birth of Prophet Mohamed), which I had always thought was just a big Monastirian street party.

During the colonial era, the French attitude toward Monastir was largely dismissive. They set up three elementary schools with a half-dozen teachers (we should give them our blessing, by the way), a post office, a town hall, a tax bureau, and nothing else. I remember only three or four French families in town. The church was attended mostly by Sicilians and Maltese who, like us, spoke fluent Arabic. They had immigrated to the country long before the protectorate was imposed. There were barracks outside town that housed a dozen or so French soldiers whom we never laid eyes on. The police station was run by three civil servants, usually Tunisians. The town was administered by a caïd, a handful of cadis (judges), a few ouzirs (notaries), a sharia court, and an amine, who kept order in the local marketplace.4

In the town prison, a big barn of a place, some one hundred square meters large, with impressive barred windows, you might find two or three drunks picked up off the street the previous evening. Apart from the “Christian foreigners,” the native population had been divided into two parts since the dawn of time: on the one hand, some twelve thousand Muslims, and on the other, my people, a hundred and fifty Jews. Even though we were a tiny minority, we had a very high profile in the town.

Businessmen, manufacturers like my father, who opened the first soap factory—still today called mèkinet saboun (the soap factory)—shoemakers and hairdressers: we had an obvious presence in the souk, and our celebrations, like the feast day of Rabi Chameoun, never went unnoticed.5 This is the way it had always been, and no one suspected it would ever be otherwise.

Not a single house had a bathtub or shower. Everyone went to the hamman once a week to wash. After my eleventh birthday, I started going in the morning with my father, but prior to that, I would go in the afternoon, with the women. The sight of all those mostly naked women didn’t trouble me in the least. Only Faïza made my heart skip a beat. I decided I must be in love with Faïza Mzali, with whom I shared a bench in our last year of elementary school. She always wore the same calf-length green dress and black lace-up North African hand drum, but it features a much larger head (striking surface), and thus a deeper tone. The membrane is stretched over a wooden frame.

4. Sitbon is inconsistent in his choices about which words to define for the reader. Definitions in parentheses are his; we provide the following: a caïd is a leader (in this case, similar to mayor); Sharia courts, which were abolished in Tunisia in 1956, administered Islamic law; an amine is an administrator or custodian.

5. Mèkinet (or makinet) saboun literally means “soap machine.”
patent leather shoes, and always wore her black hair in braids. Her compositions (in French, naturally) were better than mine, but mine weren't so bad either. We never put it into so many words, but we were both proud of each other. During recess, she didn't play with the others, but just stood in a corner by herself, still as a statue. I didn't dare invite her over to play with the rest of us, for I understood that as the only Muslim girl in the whole school of thirty pupils, she probably felt uncomfortable. Nor did the two or three French boys mix with the Jewish and Maltese ruffians that we were. Faïza's parents could have easily enrolled their daughter in what was called the École des filles musulmanes, just as the Muslim boys attended the École franco-arabe run by Mr. Pétèche, where my father had studied for four years. But the Mzali family, the wealthiest in town, thought it more appropriate that their daughter be schooled just like the French were in France.

In rue Gabriel-Médina, we were the only Jewish family. I wasn't aware of this “isolation” until much later—until just recently, in fact, now that everyone seems to be into ethnic anthropology. Back then, it would never have occurred to me that there was anything unusual about where we lived. We lived in a house; that's all I knew. And walking from the market back home, you'd pass by Dar Trimeche (the Trimeche family home), Dar Kalala, Dar Bchir, Dar Rokbani, and Dar Aghir. Apart from the Trimeche olive oil factory, our soap works, the Fondouk (a kind of inn, or caravansary), and my father's three houses, there were no other buildings. After Dar Aghir, you were at the edge of town, and our unpaved street continued into the countryside as a path for camels and burros, lined on either side by bushes of prickly pear cactus, bearing the most divine fruit. It goes without saying that we knew all our neighbors, and no family event ever escaped our notice. Births, weddings, illnesses, and deaths were shared by the whole neighborhood.

My mother would sometimes visit the women next door. As a child, I was allowed access to the women's quarters, so I would tag along. Juliette, my mother, was sought out by all the ladies of the town for her inimitable singing voice. She had a large repertoire of popular tunes, and could sing ballads and laments by all the greats, from Abdel Awab to Saliha, even better than the original. After tea and cakes had been served, and all the gossip circulated, the lady of the house would invariably beg Juliette: “Sing us something. Whatever you want, Juliette, your choice.” My mother would coyly demur, but after much coaxing, would sit up on her ottoman and launch into “Les bateliers du Nil,” in a voice that still gives me goosebumps. Her audience would swoon with pleasure. Sitting at the feet of the performer, I felt like the king of the world.

6. The School for Muslim Girls, and the Franco-Arab School, respectively.
7. Abdel Awab is most likely a phonetic spelling of Mohamed Abdel Wahab (1901–1991), the revered Egyptian composer, singer, musician, and actor. Saliha, or Salouha ben Ibrahim ben Abdelhafid (1914–1958), was a famous Tunisian singer.
8. “Les bateliers du Nil” (ferrymen of the Nile River) does not refer to a single song but, rather, to ancient chants (traditional work songs) sung by boatmen on the Nile to set the rhythm for their labor.
One day in late 1942, I was almost nine at the time, the German army occupied Monastir. The Jews knew they had the most to fear, while the Arabs thought they stood to gain. The fleet of the only three automobiles in the whole town consisted of share taxis (louages) that shuttled between Monastir and Sousse, the closest large town. Seemingly overnight, all three had portraits of Hitler on their windshields. One of the vehicles, belonging to Douik, went so far as to brandish a Nazi swastika on its splash guards. Everyone seemed to think that this was in the normal course of events. I, for one, was frightened. We didn't talk about it at home, but I'm sure my parents were terribly worried. My father, along with all other Jewish adult males, was sent to a work camp in Sousse, where his job consisted of clearing the rubble from the port that had been bombed by the Americans. In his absence, the most senior worker at our soap factory, Salah, took over operations and made sure that production continued smoothly. Salah was one of the family.

We didn't have any friends in Monastir. We had cousins (Jews, all related) or neighbors (Muslims). Still, I was friendly with one neighbor: Hachmi Bchir. He was the youngest child in the house next door, just my age. I could already read the newspaper, so I would tell him all about the war between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. When the Jews were winning, I was happy, but he was not. We were eleven or twelve, we had no idea what the fighting was about, but we didn't agree. Though no one ever mentioned it in my family, I got the impression that in his home, his father, a man given to serious pronouncements, made his opinion known. None of this stopped us from playing together in the street, where no automobile had ever ventured. Camel caravans, yes; horse-drawn carts, naturally; but never a car.

Jews and Arabs, like Aragon and Elsa, lived “apart together.” The word “Jew” was (and remains) an insult. Even today, I am not comfortable telling people in Tunisia that I’m a Jew. I feel guilty. The Gaza Strip, Palestinian refugees, finances, and so on and so forth. The word Muslim, in Arabic, has a completely different meaning from the same word in French, or any other language, for that matter. In French, Islam is a religion. In Arabic, mislim denotes first and foremost membership in a universal community, an ethnicity, a nation, a family, a block. Mislim is good, Youdi is bad. We coexisted for thirteen centuries without ever feeling that we were part of the same group. Until the French arrived, we spoke the same language, shared the same Arab-Muslim civilization; we traded, helped each other out when we could; but let's not delude ourselves—we were foreigners to one another.

On a recent visit back to Monastir, some children accompanied me in the street, the way they often escort tourists. I spoke to them in the local Monastir dialect, the inimitable Arab accent of Tunisia’s eastern coast that any kid can spot immediately.

---

9. French surrealist poet Louis Aragon and French-Russian writer Elsa Triolet were one of the most famous literary couples of the twentieth century. The expression “apart together” is a line from one of Aragon’s poems, in which he describes their tumultuous relationship.

10. The words Mislim and Youdi—in italics in the original—refer to Muslim and Yehudi (or Jew), respectively. The particular spelling renders the local dialect and pronunciation.
They were stunned. How could you be both a tourist and Monastirian? I told them I was born in Monastir, just like them, that I had lived there for almost thirty years, and that I was a Jew. The peals of laughter that I set off must still be resonating on the city ramparts. They weren’t buying it, not for a minute! To think I could make them believe that the enemy had lived in Monastir, that I was Bluebeard, or a child-eating ogre! I’ll bet they’re still laughing today.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz