

Ruthie & Bill Katz Archives

Our Immigration Stories: Fortunee Massuda

By Ellen Katz Block

The following story about Fortunee Massuda and her family is compiled from an interview with Merle Branner on October 27, 2019 and subsequent conversation with Ellen Katz Block on November 15, 2019. Please be sure to access the entire story at the NSCI Archives website. <https://www.nsci.org/archives>.

Most of us don't think of Jewish refugees as coming from Egypt but for Fortunee Massuda and her family, Cairo is the place from which they emigrated and, as for those who escaped Nazi Germany, leaving their home would not have been their choice.

Fortunee was born in Cairo, as was all of her family: her father, Lietto (Eliyahu), her mother, Rachel, her two older brothers, Jacob and Ben, an older sister, Donya and a younger sister, Sylvia. They were among the relatively small community of about 2500 Jews segregated from the larger Cairo population of about 3.3 million people. As Jews, they were not allowed to have citizenship or a passport; they were not allowed to work for the government; their identification cards were stamped "Jewish." Within Jewish society, there were doctors, lawyers, independent entrepreneurs and a thriving community, self-contained and surrounded by life centered on the synagogue. The family, like many in the community, were Karaite¹ Jews, and intermarried within their own religious group. Lietto owned a business manufacturing scales and weights. Rachel, like all Egyptian women, did not work; Jacob was in medical school; Ben was in engineering school; Fortunee and her sisters attended private school. During WWII, Rachel's father, Fortunee's grandfather, had purchased a passport and citizenship from Italy, thus the family had documentation as Italian nationals, a happenstance which would save their lives.



The Six Day War between Israel and the Arab states of Egypt, Syria and Jordan began on Monday, June 5, 1967. Fortunee recalls vividly, as one often does with traumatic events, that by 11 am, the government began picking up Jewish men, nearly 600 in all, including her two brothers, Jacob and Ben, and taking them to the local police station where they were held. They did not return home and were not heard from. On Monday, Lietto went to work and was told by a friendly policeman to close his factory and go home, which he did. By 9 pm, with still no word from his sons, Lietto, with a shamas from the temple, went to the local police station. He and the shamas did not return home either and also were not heard from. On Tuesday, June 6th, Rachel went to the Italian embassy, asserting her Italian citizenship and learned the whereabouts of the detained Jews. Of the hundreds of Jewish men who were imprisoned, about 40, in Fortunee's recollection, were "Italian" men, destined to be deported. On Thursday, June 8th. Lietto, who was 51 years old, was released as the Egyptian government was not holding foreign nationals over 50 years old. The government did, however, confiscate his factory, his bank accounts and his home so the family had no possessions of value, no income and no way to earn a living. That night, a policeman came to the Massuda's door and told them that Jacob and Ben had been expelled from the country and taken, in handcuffs, to the port city of Alexandria where they were put aboard a ship bound for Italy.* He did not know exactly where the ship was going but he told them

their sons had told him that if he went to their home and told their parents what had happened to them, the family would give him money.

About two weeks later, in mid-June, the family received a call from Jacob and Ben, who were in a refugee camp run by the Italian government. Donya, who was over 18, left to join her brothers. Although Rachel and especially Lietto, did not want to leave Egypt, they knew they had no choice. Before they could do so, however, the Egyptian government demanded they pay taxes on the business which the government had already confiscated. Lietto used the last of his money to do so, leaving them with no money for passage on an Italian ship. In October 1967, they were able to leave (with 1 suitcase and five Egyptian dollars each) on a ship for which the Italian government paid. When they arrived in Italy, Jacob and Ben were at the port to meet them along with a representative from HIAS, all three of them telling the family not to get off the boat but to go straight to France because the United States quota for Italians was full. HIAS paid for the family to continue on by ship to Marseilles and then by train to Paris. They somehow arranged for Jacob, Ben and Donya to get to Paris as well, where they all lived in a hotel for 3 ½ months, paid for by HIAS.

The family had a choice as to whether to emigrate to Israel or the U.S. Lietto was afraid that if they went to Israel, the boys would immediately be taken into the Israeli army and would not be able to finish their education. Rachel's mother and sister were living in Boston and with their help and that of HIAS, an apartment was waiting for the Massudas when they arrived there. HIAS further helped by getting Lietto get a job as a mechanic at Beth Israel Hospital; they helped Rachel obtain a job as a typist; they helped Fortunee and Sylvia go to school. As all of them spoke only Arabic and French, they all had to learn English, and all eventually became U.S. citizens. The Dean of Georgetown University, who was Jewish, gave Jacob a chance to enter the medical school there. He ultimately graduated from Georgetown and did his residency at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Evanston. Ben finished his education at M.I.T. Donya married and settled down to raise a family which left Fortunee and Sylvia at home.

Fortunee finished her remaining 2 ½ years of high school, then went to college, working various jobs to finance her education. She wanted to go to medical school, but her father did not think girls should become doctors so she became a pharmacist, as did Donya. Fortunee completed a 5-year work/study program at Northeastern College in Boston, living at home and saving every dollar she could, graduating as a pharmacist in 1975. She decided to go to Chicago and told her parents she would live with Jacob while he was doing his residency at Northwestern but instead, got her own apartment, working at Northwestern Memorial Hospital as a pharmacist and holding a side job at Osco. She discovered that she truly disliked being a pharmacist but, during this time, met a resident in podiatry who interested her in his field. She applied and was accepted to podiatry school at the Illinois College of Podiatric Medicine in Chicago, working night and weekend jobs and teaching pharmacology until she graduated at age 28. Following her surgical residency, Fortunee opened an office in a storefront in Hyde Park which grew into an enormously successful practice with 12 clinics, a staff of 65, and a surgery center in Hyde Park. She also managed a successful school of podiatry clinics for 4 years in a field in which women were not very visible.

In 1986, when she was 37, Fortunee met her husband, Charles Hannon, who was Catholic but converted, under Rabbi Mason's tutelage, to Judaism in 2001, 11 years after their marriage in 1990. Fortunee's parents, devout Jews, didn't want to come to her wedding and in fact, her brother, Ben, "disowned her"

as his sibling. Her brother, Jacob, however, convinced her parents to come to the wedding for which she is extremely grateful. A few years ago, she and Ben began talking again.

The family still has strong attachments to Israel. Lietto wanted to be buried in the southern port city of Ashdod, a center for Karaite Jews, near his mother. Ben sold his very successful engineering business, emigrated to Israel and lived there for 22 years, only recently returning to be nearer to his children. Rachel lived in Israel with Ben for the last few years of her life and is buried there as well.



Fortunee, now retired, completed B'nai Mitzvah at NSCI in 2018 after finally having some time in her life to do so. Because girls in Egypt were never allowed to learn anything - no music, B, music and certainly not Hebrew - being groomed only for housewife tasks, exploring her Jewish roots and being part of a Jewish community was and is extremely important to Fortunee. She is very empathetic to the plight of immigrants, recalling her own overwhelming feelings of being "lost" and "ungrounded" when the family had to move abruptly and says that the U.S. gave her "everything" – unlimited opportunities - as a Jew and as a woman. She believes we need to help people establish a stable life in their own countries so as to prevent the discombobulation and up-rootedness of emigration though she recognizes this may not always be possible. She believes in legal - definitely not illegal – immigration and that the U.S. should open its doors even more than it does at present to welcome hard-working immigrants who, like her, can make a great contribution to their communities.

¹Karaite Judaism or Karaism is a Jewish religious movement characterized by the recognition of the written Torah alone as its supreme authority in halakha and theology. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karaite_Judaism

**The Massuda family was lucky. Many Jews who didn't have a foreign nationality were sent to the Abu-Zaabal prison, a notoriously brutal military facility outside of Cairo, where they were held sometimes for 3 years or more. The Red Cross came to the rescue with the aid and support of the French and Spanish governments which provided passports to help liberate those imprisoned.*