Living in peace and prosperity in Cairo, Leon and Edith Lagnado remained wary of “the evil eye,” the malevolent force that comes out of nowhere to smite people who seem to have too much. Although the family had already suffered more than three strokes of bad luck—rabies, typhoid fever and the death of an infant—Edith sensed that the worst was yet to come.

She was right. In 1956, the year Lucette, the Lagnados’ youngest child, was born, the Egyptian army took over Cairo’s only Jewish hospital, ordering the doctors to leave the premises immediately. Under Gamal Abdel Nasser, it became clear, Egypt no longer welcomed Jews. The Lagnados hung on until 1963, when they departed for Paris. In a dingy refugee hotel, they debated whether to emigrate to Israel or to America—and resolved, without much enthusiasm, to purchase tickets on the Queen Mary bound for New York City.

In her first book, The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit, Lucette Lagnado, a senior writer at The Wall Street Journal, featured her father, a gambler and boyhood friend forced to eke out a living as a necktie salesman. The Arrogant Years puts Edith at center stage. In loving detail, Lucette traces the struggle of her mother to raise four kids in a working-class Jewish enclave in Brooklyn and reclaim her own identity. (Edith had been a beloved teacher at École Cat-taul, a prestigious Jewish school in Cairo, until Leon forced her to quit her job.)

Along with “girlish bursts of enthusiasm” at a Shirley MacLaine film, a tablecloth from John’s Bargain Store, a novel by Proust or Stendhal and (eventually) satisfying work at the Brooklyn Public Library, Lucette reveals, Edith often exhibited a “profound melancholy and perhaps a touch of the martyr.” Visiting Leon at a nursing home, she took note of his woman’s lib. Still a teenager, she realizes, “suddenly,” that the more freedoms feminists embraced, the more she “wanted to retreat.” A few years later she concludes that the mehitzat at the Shield of Young David Synagogue, where she chafes at the separate section segregating women from men, is the story of her return, literally and figuratively, to the faith of her fathers.

Lagnado is especially adept at capturing the drama and melodrama of her childhood experiences. Cast as Haman in a school play, Lucette reveals, she reveled in the line “Who is that dog of a dog who dares not bow down to me?”

Diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease at 16, she lay in a hospital bed, feeling sorry for herself as Edith stroked her hair and whispered “Lou lou, my pretty one.” Lusting after Pappagallo shoes but forced to live in a B. Altman sweater at Vassar College, Lucette and her co-conspirators dared not bow down to me?”

Lagnado is less adept, it seems to me, when she steps back to understand her playmate’s. Nonetheless, virtually nothing in The Arrogant Years lays the foundation for her proclamation that the world beyond the partition “is deeply wanting in comparison to the world she left behind and that as long as she does not wander outside the women’s section, she will remain miraculous safe.”

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