

Changing Places:
Out of Place and Out of Egypt

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I.

Let me begin by reading a passage from a memoir, by Andre Aciman. The title of the book is *Out of Egypt*. This conversation takes place when Andre is about five years old.

“Uncle Isaac asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up.

‘An ambassador,’ I replied, eyeing my grandmother, who had planted the idea in my head.

‘And of which country,’ he asked. I said I didn’t know yet.

‘Which country are you a citizen of?’

I had never thought about it before, but the answer seemed so readily obvious to me that I failed to see why he asked.

‘France, of course,’ I said.’

“France, of course,’ [Uncle Isaac] says. ‘Doesn’t even know what country he’s a citizen of, and his grandmother wants him to be its ambassador. . . . You’re not French, I’m French,’ he said to me.”

The boy is the author, Andre Aciman, remembering a scene from his childhood in Alexandria, Egypt. It takes place in the home of his great grandmother. Andre was a resident of Egypt, as was Uncle Isaac.

Andre’s confusion is understandable.

He was born in 1951 in a French-speaking home in Alexandria. Various members of the family—four generations of his extended family—also spoke Italian, Greek, . . . and Arabic, in addition to French. His families were Jews of Turkish and Italian origin who had settled in Alexandria in 1905. His two grandmothers were fluent in six or seven languages as well as Ladino, the language of Sephardic Jews who had fled from Spain to Italy to Turkey, and then to Egypt.

Why wouldn’t the boy be confused?

Changing places, places changing.

This paper is about both. It draws on the memoirs of two men, Andre Aciman and Edward Said. To clear up possible confusion, let me note that Said’s last name is spelled S-A-I-D, and pronounced SIGH-EED. Aciman, so far as I know, is pronounced about the way it is spelled, A-C-I-M-A-N.

Edward Said’s memoir is *Out of Place*. Aciman wrote *Out of Egypt*.

These are stories of two men who spent their early years in the Middle East, came to the United States in their early teens, stayed for college, and as adults made their lives and academic careers in this country. As boys they lived in several places, places that changed drastically as they grew up and forced them and their families to flee.

Both families were minority people in the countries they left. The Saids were Arab Christians, not Muslim and not Jewish in the new state of Israel. In Egypt the Saids were not seen as Egyptian, but as Syro-Lebanese or Levantine Christian, known by the Egyptian Arabic word “Shawam.” The Acimans were Jews in predominantly Muslim Egypt.

Each was forced to move from home because of much larger events, events over which they and their families had no control. Their stories are not only of individual lives, but of revolutionary changes in their places of birth.

I chose to write about these books because of my interest in the Middle East. I read them several years ago with great pleasure. I remembered the books as expressing the authors’ deep yearning for their homelands.

But reading the books again, I was reminded that they are not romantic stories of growing up in an exotic world. Aciman and Said grew up with material comfort and educational opportunity. But like all people whose homelands undergo drastic change which forces them to make drastic changes themselves, they have a strong need to make sense of their lives, of the people and places in which they grew up, places that are still part of their identity, even after many years and at great distance. Said and Aciman tell their stories very differently, but both remind us of the enormous impact of changing places.

Let’s begin with Edward Said.

II.

“Even though they lived in Cairo in 1935,” Said begins, “my parents made sure I was born in Jerusalem.” Jerusalem was then the capital of Palestine, a land under British control. In the years of his childhood, Edward, his parents, and three younger sisters moved back and forth between Cairo and Palestine, and in the summer, Lebanon. In the 1940s Jewish forces took over more and more of Palestine, and at the end of 1947 the Saids fled to Egypt. Five months later Israel declared itself a state.

Three years after that, Said, then 15, left his Cairo home for prep school in the United States. He lived in this country until his death in 2003 at the age of 67. For much of his life he was professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University and a world renowned scholar and author.

Said's memoir covers his life until he was 27, when he had almost completed work for a doctorate in literature at Harvard. He was 64 when *Out of Place* was published. The book, he writes, describes "a lost world," "people and places [that] no longer exist."

For most of his life, Said says, "the overriding sensation I had was of always being out of place." One "gnawing problem" was his name. "[I]t took me about fifty years to become accustomed to, or, more exactly, to feel less uncomfortable with, 'Edward,' a foolishly English name yoked forcibly to the unmistakably Arabic family name Said. . . . [M]y mother told me that I had been named Edward after the Prince of Wales, who cut so fine a figure in 1935. . . . Said was the name of various uncles and cousins. But the rationale of my name broke down when I discovered no grandparents called Said."

Said's mother was born in Nazareth, the daughter of a Baptist minister. She attended school and junior college in Beirut. Said's father as a young man was urged by his father to leave Palestine to escape conscription into the Ottoman army. He made his way to the United States, worked a number of jobs, studied at Western Reserve University, and volunteered for the American army in the First World War.

He returned to Palestine in 1920 as an American citizen. He joined his cousin as partner in Standard Stationery Company in Jerusalem, and then opened a branch of the company in Cairo. By the time Edward left Egypt, it had become by far the largest office equipment and stationery company in the Middle East.

"Curiously," Said writes, "nothing of my father's American decade survived except his extremely lean retellings of it, and such odd fragments as a love of apple pie a la mode and a few often repeated expressions like 'hunky-dory' and 'big boy.'" By virtue of his father's citizenship, Edward was also an American citizen.

ESCAPING THE GERMANS

In 1942, during the Second World War, a German army was winning in North Africa and was expected to take Alexandria, then Cairo, where the Saids were living. The British defeated the Germans in Egypt later that year, but in the spring the threat of invasion was real. The Saids, living in Cairo, left suddenly for Jerusalem. Said tells us that the day his father decided to leave, he "came home for lunch and told my mother simply to pack and get ready, and by five that afternoon we were off."

"Instead of boarding the luxury Wagon-Lits train in [Cairo] for the twelve-hour overnight journey to Jerusalem," Said says, "we were on the run from the rapidly approaching German army, in my father's black Plymouth, its headlights blued out," for a harrowing ride through the Sinai desert. They did not return to Cairo for six months.

When Edward, almost seven, returned to school in Cairo, he became, in his words, “a thoroughgoing problem boy for whom one unpleasant antidote after another was devised,” mainly by his father, a theme that Edward elaborates at many points.

His schooling in Cairo was interrupted by the family’s frequent stays in Palestine. When he was almost eleven, Edward entered the Cairo School for American Children, “as an American businessman’s son,” he says, “who hadn’t the slightest feeling of being American.”

TROUBLE IN PALESTINE

But for most of the next year Edward attended St. George’s School in Jerusalem, as his father had done. It was his first all-boys school and, Said says, “the first with which he had a deeper connection than with the ones in Cairo; . . . for the first and last time in my school life I was among boys who were like me.”

Palestine was “a place I took for granted, the country I was from, where family and friends existed,” Said says. The family home was in “a part of West Jerusalem that was sparsely inhabited but had been built and lived in exclusively by Palestinian Christians like us.”

In the mid-1940s, however, “the signs of impending crisis were all around us,” Said says. “Gray and sober Jerusalem was a city tense with the politics of the time as well as the religious competition between the various Christian communities, and between Christians, Jews, and Muslims.” As Jews took over more and more of Palestine, Edward and his family left for good in December 1947. Edward was 12. He would not return for 45 years.

Five months after the Saids left, the British left Palestine and Israel declared itself a state. The neighboring Arab nations attacked, but Israel repelled them and took over about 70 percent of the former British mandate of Palestine. Most of Said’s extended family fled and settled mainly in Jordan and Lebanon.

Edward made his first trip to America in 1948. While his father was treated in a New York hospital, Edward spent the summer at a boy’s camp in Maine. Despite some success in swimming and softball as “Ed Said, the Cairo wonder,” Said writes, “for me there was a sense of lonely purposelessness. Where was I? What was I doing here in an American setting that had no connection to what I was, or even what I had become after three years in an American school in Cairo?”

When Said was almost 14, he entered a school in Cairo known as Victoria College. It was, he recalls, “by far the most complex social and academic situation I had ever negotiated, and in most respects I quite enjoyed its challenges.” One of the older students, the head boy, a bully in Said’s eyes, became known to the world years later as Omar Sharif.

Said was expelled from Victoria College in 1951 (the year Andre Aciman was born), and was sent to America to enroll in Mount Herman, a prep school in Massachusetts. He felt out of place

there, although his grades put him at the top of his class. Four years at Princeton were not much better, but he found a home in scholarship, and went on to graduate school. Most summers he returned to his family in the Middle East.

REVOLUTION AND WAR

After college graduation, Said went back to Cairo for a year to sample the life he would lead if he were to take over his father's company. He discovered he could not work in something his "father owned and had created." And Cairo was not the stable place he remembered. People "like us," he recalls, were "amphibious Levantine creatures whose essential lostness was momentarily stayed by a kind of forgetfulness, a kind of daydream" of luxury and entertainment.

Even as a student in America, Said knew that Egypt was changing. A few months after he arrived at Mount Hermon, mobs in Cairo rioted and burned down buildings on a day that came to be known as Black Saturday. The Said family business was destroyed. That summer a cabal of army officers overthrew the monarchy, and eventually Gamal Abdel Nasser emerged as the nation's leader. Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956. In what is known as the Suez War, Israel, Britain, and France invaded Egypt, but withdrew under pressure from the United States and Soviet Union.

Egypt had been, Said writes, "a place that had once been the welcoming open, luxurious, and voluptuous paradise for foreigners. . . . [but now was] the beginning of the end for our community of Shawam, Jews, Armenians, and the others. . . . Slowly, members of this community began to disappear—some to Israel, to Europe, and a tiny number to the United States. . . . some left in anticipation of what was to come; later others were forced to leave penniless because of the Suez and 1967 wars. Victoria College and our circle of friends were totally non-political." "Ironically," Said points out, "during the fifties, separated from his . . . former partners, my father's fortunes soared and his influence as a businessman grew."

Cairo was "the one city in the world in which I felt more or less at home," Said writes, "but . . . our days as alien residents in Egypt were finally drawing to a close." And with a destructive civil war in Lebanon, the family eventually had to leave its longtime summer home there.

Let us turn now to Andre Aciman, author of *Out of Egypt*.

III.

Andre Aciman was born in Alexandria in 1951, about fifteen years after Edward Said. Andre lived there with his family until he was 14, when the Nasser government expropriated assets owned by Jews and forced them to leave the country. Andre's father went to Paris to work;

Andre, his mother, and younger brother lived in much reduced circumstances in Rome. Three years later they moved to the United States.

Aciman completed his education in this country, earning a bachelor's degree from Lehman College of the City of New York and a doctorate in comparative literature from Harvard. He is now professor of English and creative writing at the Graduate Center of City University of New York and a resident of New York City. He published *Out of Egypt* when he was 44 years old. It was his first book. He has since published novels and essays, mostly about people remembering their past. He is an expert on the works of Marcel Proust.

Andre's father owned a successful textile business in Alexandria, and the family lived very well. His mother, a very pretty woman, was deaf. She spoke good and fluent Arabic, but no English. Her father, born in Aleppo, in Syria, was a rich "wheel merchant" in the bicycle business. Andre's other three grandparents were Sephardic Jews, born in Constantinople.

THE GERMAN THREAT

In 1942, as a Germany army threatened Egypt's biggest cities, and Said's immediate family fled by car to Jerusalem, Aciman's family gathered in Alexandria. Aciman writes that his great grandmother "decided to put into effect an old family expedient. She summoned all members of her family to stay in her large apartment . . . and they came, like Noah's beasts, in twos and fours, some from Cairo and Port Said, and some from as far as Khartoum."

As the Germans advanced, Andre's aunts and uncles discussed their options. "What do you mean there is nothing we can do," said Uncle Vili. "We can escape."

"But where," asked Aunt Marta. "To Greece? They've already taken Greece. To Turkey? We've just barely gotten out of there. To Italy? They'd throw us in jail. To Libya? The Germans are there already."

Aunt Flora chimed in: "There's nowhere to go. "I'm tired of running. I'm even more tired of worrying where to run."

Andre's father said he could still remember seeing his parents' empty home on the day they left Constantinople thirty years before. As his father had seen his own father's home stripped to the bare walls.

"This is the last time this apartment will ever house so many," said Andre's great grandmother.

"The way the world is going, I wouldn't be so sure," said Aunt Esther.

"Esther was right. The family would seek refuge in the old matriarch's home three more times."

REVOLUTION AND WAR

The second time the clan gathered was during the Arab-Israeli War in 1948. Zionist agents hunted down Uncle Vili, beat him severely for spying for the British, and threatened to do the same to other men in the family. Vili, who had worked for British intelligence for a dozen years, escaped to France.

The third threat came during the Suez War of 1956, when the extended family moved in with the great grandmother for ten or fourteen days. “[M]ost of the living room and entrance furniture was moved against the walls, mattresses were laid down, and when my grandmother saw that there were not enough mattresses . . . , she had old blankets, some dating as far back as the Crimean War, taken out of storage and put down for the children to sleep on.” At the same time, in Cairo, Edward Said, a new Princeton graduate, was starting his year working in his father’s business.

The Suez War ended as suddenly as it started, but Aciman’s family worried, and his parents remained with great grandmother.

“My friends tell me that Nasser won’t forgive this attack,” a well-placed friend told the family. “There will be serious reprisals . . . Nationalizations. Expulsions. This includes Jews.

“Jews?”

“In retaliation for the Israeli attack.”

“But we’re not Israelis,” Uncle Isaac protested.

“Tell that to President Nasser!”

EXPROPRIATION AND EXPULSION

The fourth crisis came in 1964. As the Nasser government harassed and threatened Jews, seized their property, and deported them, Aciman’s family was again living in the great grandmother’s apartment. Uncle Isaac was arrested for treason, but a week later telegraphed that he was safe in France.

This story follows the pattern of Said’s family in Palestine almost twenty years before. Over 18 months most members of Aciman’s family left Egypt, either expelled or going voluntarily; most settled in France.

Andre’s father, however, did not want to leave, “and to prove the point,” Aciman says, he “had added another floor to his factory, invested in several apartments, commissioned new furniture, and to cap his list of fantasies, had enrolled me, when I turned nine, in what throughout his early

years in Egypt had always seemed an exclusive institution incarnating the very peak of British splendor: Victoria College” in Alexandria. (Said had earlier attended the Victoria College in Cairo.)

Only one English boy remained in the school; Andre was the last Jew. He did not do well at VC. His report card for the second year was, he says, a disaster. Speaking mostly French at home, Andre was unable learn Arabic; his grade for Egyptian National Studies, taught entirely in Arabic, was zero.

As Aciman’s family left Egypt, Uncle Ugo hoped to stay, and revealed that he and his immediate family, in order to mask their Jewish origins, had been baptized in the Greek Orthodox church. “It’s not that I’m shocked,” Andre’s grandmother told Ugo, “it’s that your Greek is so awful. You could at least have chosen a more plausible religion.”

“The news that my father had lost everything arrived at dawn one Saturday in early spring 1965,” Aciman recalls. “The bearer was Kassem, the factory’s night foreman.” Kassem and Andre’s father “sat at the kitchen table, urging one another not to lose heart, until both men broke down and began sobbing in each other’s arms.”

As the remaining members of the family prepared to leave Egypt, his father tells Andre, then 14, “ ‘this is what I want you to do. Since it’s clear they’ll arrest me tomorrow,’ he said, ‘the most important thing is to help your mother sell everything, have everyone pack as much as they can, and purchase tickets for all of us. . . . In case I am detained, I want you to leave anyway. I’ll follow later.’” Later in the day his father for the first time offered Andre a cigarette.

IV.

After leaving Egypt, Aciman and Said watched mostly from America as change wracked the Middle East. Although Said made annual trips to see his family in Lebanon and Jordan, he was stunned by the total Arab defeat in the Six Day War of 1967. The Israeli victory changed Said’s life. “For the first time since I had left to come to the U.S.,” he says, “I was emotionally claimed by the Arab world generally and by Palestine in particular.”

Said took up the cause: that the world should recognize the existence of Palestine and its people. He favored Palestinian-Israeli negotiation of a two-state solution to the conflict in his homeland. He wrote and lectured, involved himself in various organizations, and became a prominent though controversial public figure in the continuing political struggle.

During this time Said, a talented, well-trained musician and pianist, also wrote books on music and was for many years music critic of *The Nation* magazine. In 1999, he and Daniel Barenboim, then music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, founded the West-Eastern Divan

Orchestra, composed of young Israeli, Palestinian, and Arab musicians, which continues to train and perform today.

When Said returned to Palestine in 1992 after an absence of 45 years, he recalls that he “discovered anew that . . . a network of towns and villages in which all the members of my extended family had once lived was now a series of Israeli locales . . . where the Palestinian minority lives under Israeli sovereignty. . . . nowhere more starkly than at borders, checkpoints, and airports.

“One of the routine questions I was asked by Israeli officials (since my U.S. passport indicated that I was born in Jerusalem) was exactly when . . . I had left Israel. I responded by saying that I left Palestine in December 1947, accenting the word ‘Palestine .’

“‘Do you have any relatives here?’ was the next question, to which I answered, ‘No one,’ and this triggered a sensation of such sadness and loss as I had not expected.”

V.

Aciman does not cite any great clarifying event in his life, but the impact of his family’s expulsion is strong. He recounts visits years later to older members of his family in England, Paris, and Venice and reflects on memory, longing, and the meaning of changing places.

He hears a somewhat accepting attitude toward change when he travels to Paris to visit his grandmother and Aunt Elsa, both in their nineties, in their modest apartment. His grandmother had *nine times* seen the men in in her life lose everything—their homes, their businesses, their fortunes—first her grandfather, then her father, her husband, five brothers, and then her son.

“‘Man is like a bird, one day he’s here, another there,’ said my grandmother, invoking a familiar Turkish parable concerning a certain very lazy sultan, who after years spent sitting on one end of his sofa, suddenly decides to move to the other end. It meant,” Aciman says, “that despite appearances, people seldom migrate very far, that things hardly change, that life always comes to the same.”

When Aciman visits Aunt Flora in Venice, she expresses the agony of change. “I am a citizen of two countries,” she says, “but I live in neither , and I never look people in the eye . . . I don’t even think I know who I am, I know myself the way I might know my neighbor: from across the street. When I’m here, I long to be there,” she says. “When I was there I longed to be here.”

As Aciman leaves Flora’s tiny apartment and crosses the Venice lagoon, he writes, “I turned and watched the city sink into timeless night, thinking of Flora and of all the cities and all the beaches and all the summers I too had known in my life, and of all those who had loved summer

long before I came, and of those I had loved and ceased to care for and forgot to mourn and now wished were here with me in one home, one street, one city, one world.”

“An exile,” Aciman says in an essay, “is not just someone who has lost his home; he is someone who can’t find another.”

VI.

Said started writing his memoir as he was recovering from three early rounds of chemotherapy. He had received a fatal diagnosis of leukemia at age 56; he started work on his memoir three years later. The book, published when he was still alive at age 64, is dedicated to his doctor and his wife, in that order.

“The main reason . . . for the memoir,” he writes, is “of course the need to bridge the sheer distance in time and place between my life today and my life then.” Sadness and anger pervade the book, and he expresses harsh feelings for his parents and the life they made for him. He has “no wish to hurt anyone’s feelings,” he writes, but his “first obligation” has been . . . to be true to [his] perhaps peculiar memories, experience, and feelings.” Now, he says, “it does not seem important or even desirable to be ‘right’ and in place. Better to wander out of place, not to own a house, and not ever to feel too much at home anywhere.”

Said’s book ends with this statement: “With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place.”

Aciman wrote a very different book. At the end of *Out of Egypt*, Aciman tells of his family’s final Seder on their last night in Alexandria. He leaves his grandmother’s apartment and walks alone. “I . . . took the soggy pancake out onto the seafront. There, heaving myself up on the stone wall, I sat with my back to the city, facing the sea, holding the delicacy I was about to devour. . .

“And suddenly I knew, as I touched the damp, grainy surface of the seawall, that I would always remember this night, that in years to come I would remember sitting here, swept with confused longing as I listened to the water lapping the giant boulders beneath the promenade and watched the children head toward the shore in a winding, lambent procession.

“I wanted to come back tomorrow night, and the night after, and the one after that as well, sensing that what made leaving so fiercely painful was the knowledge that there would never be another night like this, that I would never eat soggy cakes along the coast road in the evening, not this year or any other year, nor feel the baffling, sudden beauty of that moment when, if only for an instant, I had caught myself longing for a city I never knew I loved.”

Savor these words now. Because it turns out that this is the second of two published versions of that walk on Passover night. In the first, which appeared in the magazine *Commentary* in 1990, before publication of *Out of Egypt*, Aciman expresses similar thoughts. But there are differences.

In the magazine story, Aciman is not alone on that walk; his brother is with him. In *Out of Egypt*, his brother is not only invisible in the final scene, he is not in the book at all. Aciman confesses this in an essay in a later book, about memoir writing, called *Tell Me True*.

Moreover, the last sentence, as first written for *Out of Egypt*, “voiced an altogether different sentiment,” Aciman claims. “I had never loved Egypt. Nor had I loved Alexandria . . . In fact, as originally written, this sentence ended with the rather anticlimactic but far more paradoxical words : ‘I suddenly caught myself longing for a city I never knew I hated .’ But, by another irony,” Aciman says, “this statement was not in keeping with the sunny and ebullient portrayal of Alexandria I had adopted throughout the book . . .

“One of my very first readers immediately sensed this disparity between the word ‘hate’ and the city I seemed to love so much and asked me to . . . reconsider. In light of my affectionate , at times rapturous descriptions of Alexandrian life, wouldn’t, perhaps, the word ‘love’ have made more sense?

“No one could have been more right,” Aciman says. “Without a second’s doubt , I crossed out the verb ‘hate’ and in its place put down the verb ‘love.’ From hating Alexandria , I now loved it. Easy.”

Aciman’s essay includes still one more confession. “The night walk . . . on our last night in Egypt, with or without my brother, never did occur.”

Even so, Aciman says, “this fiction grounded me in a way the truth could never have done. This . . . is how I should have felt had I taken a last, momentous walk that night.”

What are we to make of this?

Going back to Edward Said: We know that Said, at 64, twenty years older than Aciman, accepts his Palestinian heritage as part of his identity, and the anger, pain, and sadness that go with it. Aciman, only 44 when he publishes his memoir, seems uncertain about how to treat his Egyptian past.

Aciman wrestles with his memories of Alexandria. Does he love the Mediterranean sea and sky, which he describes so lovingly in *Out of Egypt*? Or is he maybe not so much “out of Egypt” as he would like to be?

Does he accept that he both loves and hates Egypt, that for better and worse, Egypt is still part of him, even if it threw him out, and that maybe changing places is not so bad. As his ninety-year-old grandmother, exiled to Paris, said, “Man is like a bird, one day he’s here, another there.”

Or does Aciman accept the confusion, the pain and the delight that may come when identity changes from moment to moment, the way that Aunt Flora describes herself in Venice: when she is in one place, she wishes she were in the other.

Most of us never experience the loss and love of place that these men lived. What we cannot doubt is that changing places, however we feel about them and ourselves, leave indelible marks and shape us—as they did Andre Aciman and Edward Said.

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