

A witness of change: from the pre-digital Age to the modern world.

**Fayza Mohamed Hussein Haikal**

I was born, on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1938. My father, then almost 50, had achieved literary celebrity throughout the Arab and Islamic world for his groundbreaking writings in Arabic literature as well as Islamic research. He was honored with the title of ‘Pasha’ for of his pioneering books two months before I was born and held an important position in society because of his political eminence. He was a leading member of, the opposition party known as the ‘ “Al Ahrar al Doustoureyeen” (the liberal constitutionalists) party, which he eventually headed (1943-52), and had already occupied his first political position as Minister of Education (1937), ultimately becoming head of the Senate (1945-52).

Egyptian society has traditionally viewed having boys as more prestigious than girls. However, although I was the fifth daughter, I was well received because of the recently awarded Pasha title that had spread euphoria throughout the family. I was thus called Fayza, the Arabic equivalent of Victoria, or more precisely, the winner. Moreover, my father was a very avant-garde intellectual, the first Egyptian to receive his doctorate in Law from the illustrious Sorbonne University. So for him, having a daughter was not necessarily a calamity. Having only one brother then, I was blessed with a second one soon after my first birthday.

My mother, a beautiful, very kind and intelligent woman, was married very young. As it was the custom then for girls of her social class, she went to a French convent school, where Nuns taught her good manners in addition to the French curriculum. She was happy that her husband knew this culture so well, and she loved and admired him no end. She conveyed to us as children this total love, admiration, and pride of belonging to this family, together with a responsibility to rise up to its standard.

In spite of their very busy lives, my parents found time for their seven children, especially during school holidays. We never spent our vacations in Alexandria because my father preferred to avoid the political circle he interacted with throughout the year, in order to spend a more relaxing time with his family and his writing, often at Port Fouad, for example. These precious moments, alongside the warm evenings at home, when we would play a game of dominos with my father to help him relax, or have passionate discussions with him over one subject or another, deeply marked our personalities.

Too many events in my later life came to overshadow my early childhood. However I have some flashbacks every now and then of my family's morning routines: the siblings, breakfasting in the dining room before going to school, under the watch of my eldest sister, who was attentive to the large radio diffusing its morning half-hour of Koran chanting. As soon as it was finished, (at 7:30 precisely,) she would rush us all into the car in order to reach school on time. We all went to the Lycée Français du Caire, because my father wanted us to have an international, secular education. He thoroughly believed that Religion was a family matter to be learnt at home. Despite our French education, however, and intellectual avant-garde attitude, we were in fact a conservative family, where religion and traditions were highly respected. Another flash-back from my early childhood shows me tip-toeing when passing before my father's study, not to make any noise that might disturb him, or lining up with my siblings in his study waiting with emotion and awe to receive his latest book, with a personal dedication. I also remember the Sheikh who came weekly to our house to recite verses of the Holy Book for a couple of hours or so, to bless the house and its inhabitants, while another flashback shows me myself at the club, swimming in the pool or playing and climbing trees with friends of the 'girls club' house—mostly

foreigners in those days. I remember bits and pieces that resulted in my growing up bilingual and bicultural.

I did very well in school because I loved reading and because my elder sister, who was the perfect example of an excellent student, made sure during the summer vacation that I did all my homework in preparation for the next academic year. When I reached my final year at elementary school, I came first at the French ‘certificat d’Etudes Primaires’ in Egypt. My parents were very proud of me and as my father was Minister of Education, I was told to accompany him in a visit he was about to make to schools in order to make me feel the pride and joy I myself would derive from doing well and, of course, my responsibility to be a ‘good example’ for children of my generation.

In Middle school and High School I became more independent. But the roots were solid, and I continued to do well, on the whole. My second eldest sister was studying sculpture at the Fine Arts Faculty in those days and I often accompanied her to the Egyptian Museum. This is probably where I got my first taste for Egyptology. She, and my parents, are also responsible for my love of classical music and visual arts, which engendered my unlimited fascination with beauty.

When I neared the Baccalaureate, I told my father that I wanted to study Egyptology. Supportive as always, he suggested I travel to Upper Egypt on an organized tour of Ancient Egypt greatest sites with my school friends in order to visit the great sites of ancient Egypt. He really meant for me to be sure that I really wanted to embark on such a difficult career. This trip was a fascinating adventure and I never regretted this career choice.

I finished school and entered university in 1956—the same year Egypt fought 1a triple aggression (British, French and Israeli), after the nationalization of the Suez

Canal. But for me 1956 was much more: I lost my father. It was earth shattering: My life changed completely.

As an Oriental, I strongly believe in Destiny. Destinies may be determined by genetics, if they are not 'written in the sky'. Although we do not chose them, genetics determine our health and character and, in turn, our most impactful decisions.

My siblings and I loved each other and, as far as I can tell, were educated in more or less the same fashion. We were raised as a group rather than as separate individuals, so that people spoke often about us as the Haikals, an autonomous clan of some sort. But we, in fact, had very different characters and have had very different lives and going to University began to physically break this block of family, as we studied different things and mixed with different groups of people. Unlike in school, my professors knew only me, and not all my siblings. So that is where I first really started to develop independently. I was eager to learn, and understand, not only Egyptology, but also the different social system I was now living in. Young men and women from different classes of the society and from different countries of the Arab world were studying with me at Cairo University. I studied in Arabic and lived in the heart of Egyptian culture and politics, and began to recognize my real identity. In fact it is through Egyptology that I discovered my real roots.

Egypt in the late 1950s had a little over 20 million inhabitants, about 3 million of whom were living in Cairo (today Egypt has about 5 times that, and about 20 million people live in greater Cairo). With that comparatively reasonable demography, universities could afford to have a limited number of students. In my class at the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University, we were fewer than 10 people studying Egyptology. Thus, our professors knew us individually, with considerable interaction amongst us. Because of my academic background and ability to read foreign

languages, I was immediately ahead of my classmates. Throughout my undergraduate years I was always at the top of my class. When I graduated in 1960, the year television was introduced in Egypt, I was honored by Gamal Abdel-Nasser, then President of Egypt, at the ceremony of the “Festival of Science”, an annual ceremony where top graduates of all disciplines were celebrated. A few months later, a Cairo University scholarship to pursue Egyptological graduate studies abroad, in order to return with a doctorate and teach at Cairo University, was announced. I applied for it and was awarded the scholarship and was to leave a year after my graduation. But in the meantime I had to find a job.

The Centre of Documentation on Ancient Egypt had recently been established with the help of UNESCO for the documentation of the monuments and archeological sites of Nubia which were to be flooded by the building of the High Dam in Aswan. It was the most likely place for an Egyptologist to find a job. When I went there, I learnt that the person in charge of the publication department was a Frenchman, named M. Christophe. He had been my history teacher at the Lycee Francais du Caire! I went to greet him and asked him for advice. When he learnt that I had studied Egyptology and was looking for a job, he told me that he had to return to his UNESCO position in Paris and that he was looking for a replacement who had my qualifications: someone who knew hieroglyphics and foreign languages, and thus able to collate all the epigraphic work before publication, as well as the notes of scholars who wrote their comments in English or French. It may be appropriate here to remind young readers that in those days digital photography and scanning did not exist. All the hieroglyphic inscriptions on monuments and the scenes accompanying them were hand copied and annotated. Before publication, these copies had to be collated with excellent photographs to make sure that all the signs had been duly copied with no error or

omission. I was unexpectedly offered a job beyond my expectations, but I had absolutely no experience in the matter, and feared failure. Luckily, M. Christophe told me he would train me before departing, and I immediately agreed to work with him until all of the paperwork that the government required prior to hiring anyone was gathered, examined and accepted. Three months later I was officially responsible for revising all the scientific material before its publication, and also responsible for subsequent press coverage.

I loved the job and did it well. But it was not the biggest challenge I faced while working there. I decided to go to Nubia to visit the monuments I was working on, and to contribute to their documentation. This proved to be the real challenge.

In those days, Egyptian women were not allowed to do fieldwork and live away from their families, freely mingling with male colleagues—to work thus was an issue.

I first had to show that I was doing a good job and that I was a reliable person before I dared to ask to go. Then I had to deploy my best arguments to convince my directors that times had changed and that my family had no objection to my travelling and working side-by-side with men. At last I succeeded, and I can proudly say that I 'opened the way to Nubia' for female Egyptologist in Egypt. After I left for England my position was occupied by a female friend of mine, and it became normal for young Egyptian women to pursue fieldwork, far away from home.

I left for England with just LE 5 in my pocket, as it was forbidden to take more cash than that out of Egypt and credit cards hadn't yet been invented.

My years in England (1961-1965), and particularly those in Oxford, were fundamental to consolidating my personality. It was the first time I had lived on my own, at a comparatively young age, in an environment where one had to be strong to face alone. I lived in a very different culture, based on total freedom, and demanding a

high level of academic achievement, and it was difficult to navigate all of this in order to be accepted and to not fall into a depression. The scholarship I received was for **University College/London** a chief center of Egyptology. Soon after I arrived, I went to meet the Department Head, Professor W. B. Emery, my mentor/supervisor. He received me very kindly and told me that, as he was leaving for Nubia in a couple of days, I had to spend the year taking courses to improve my Egyptological background for my future thesis. When I asked Professor Emery to include me in his team for Nubia, he spontaneously answered: "I don't take girls in my team". I explained that I had already worked there, but he replied that it was too late now. So I spent an extremely interesting year in London, improving my knowledge of ancient Egyptian language, studying hieroglyphics with **Dr. Faulkner**, one of the most eminent British scholars of his generation. I also studied the history of the ancient Middle East, which was much more complicated than that of Egypt, because of the many City States that rose and were destroyed and because of the complexity of the names of their rulers. I will always remember my teacher of history of the ancient Middle East, Miss Peggy Drawer who was a lovely woman, and probably the first person to introduce me to the intricacies of contemporary British culture. I also visited a huge number of museums with art from all over the world and from all periods, and was amazed at the wealth of culture and its diversity. I also enjoyed superb concerts, plays, and films and probably learnt in a year more than I had in all my life before. But contact with my family was complicated before the internet-age, as letters took long to reach their destination and I didn't want my mother to worry about me. Fortunately, the BBC Arabic program invited me several times to present talks on Ancient Egypt and its impact on its Middle Eastern neighbors and I used these opportunities for my family to listen to me on the radio and know that I was well.

As I realized that Professor Emery would mostly be in Egypt during my stay, I decided to visit all the universities that taught Egyptology in England in order to transfer to a place that might be more appropriate for my purpose. I fell immediately in love with Oxford when I saw it, and decided I would move there. But it wasn't that easy, because **I had to be accepted at an Oxford College.**

**I sent a letter to Prof. Cerny,** the Oxford Professor of Egyptology, to introduce myself and to ask him for an appointment. His kind answer started with 'Dear Sir', so he was rather surprised when he saw a young woman coming to meet him. At the end of the visit he told me he would accept me as a student if Prof. Emery allowed me to transfer to Oxford, and if an Oxford college would accept my application at such a late date. I was lucky, or destined, to graduate from Oxford, as the Egyptian authorities also accepted my petition to transfer, and everything went smoothly, in a timely fashion. I matriculated at **St. Anne's College in 1962.** Soon after, I became President of the Middle common room (The graduates' common room), a position that required me to escort many important visitors at St. Anne's, the most prestigious of them being Prince Phillip, the Prince Consort.

Oxford was a fascinating experience. As I looked desperately for lodgings, the Vice-Principal of my college offered me a room in her apartment. She was a very kind English literature Don, spending most of her time in college, and I didn't really see very much of her. While I received my Doctorate degree, we became friends, and remained in touch; she also introduced me to many aspects of British life.

**My thesis focused** on publishing some of the Egyptian papyri at the British Museum. One of these had a parallel at the Louvre. Since digitized data bases of museum collections didn't exist at the time, the need to compare this document with the British Museum one provided me with a good excuse to be allowed by the Egyptian



government to obtain a French visa. Considering my background and early education, it had always been my dream to visit France and meet my school friends again. Thus, as soon as I had the Egyptian authorities' permission, I visited Paris whenever I could. I met my future husband, who was preparing his doctorate there, on one such trip, at the defense of his thesis. Mohamed Abdel-Halim Mahmoud was a diplomat, the son of a very eminent El-Azhar Professor, a great Sufi who later became the head of this very old and venerable Islamic Institution. They both impacted my life profoundly as they showed me different aspects of Egyptian society, which was later reflected in my research. We married in April 1965, shortly before I finished my thesis.

After I passed my viva (defense of my thesis) I wanted to phone my family in Cairo to tell them I was now officially Dr. Fayza Haikal, and would soon return home. I had to ask a telephone officer at a post office in order to obtain a line to Cairo a few hours later--but this piece of news was probably worth waiting for!

In Cairo, I lived the active life of a married woman, who was also engaged in teaching and research. Whenever my husband was transferred somewhere as a diplomat, the family accompanied him. These new experiences taught me about life in difficult places such as sub-Saharan Africa, or easier ones, such as Europe. In Rome, for example, I taught for 2 years at Roma /la Sapienza University, because I did not want to lose touch with academic life. These were beautiful years, with moments of great joy and others with great pain when we lost dear members of our family, first my sister, then my mother and then my parents in law, or when Egypt was at war from 1967 to 1973. This life lasted until the summer of 1979 when I suddenly lost my husband who died a few months after his father.

I realized in a few minutes that I had become a widow with two young children just starting middle school. I had to be strong for them and this is what saved me. My life

took a sharp turn. We moved house to be closer to my siblings, and the children went to a different school. My career had to become important to compensate for that of their father's. I worked hard and Destiny helped. A few years after I lost my husband, The American University in Cairo needed a new Professor in Egyptology in order to establish a full major in this discipline, and I was hired. Because of my academic reputation I was invited to lecture in different countries and the Ministry of culture asked me to be the President of the Vth International Conference of Egyptologists that was to be held in Cairo in 1988. I accepted this honor and I became more internationally known, particularly because, at this congress, I gave my first paper on cultural continuity in Egypt, focusing on the analogies between ancient the Egyptian language and our Egyptian Arabic dialect. Soon after this conference I became an honorary member of the German Archeological institute. That was the first of a series of such honorary membership in scientific organizations. In 1991 at the next International conference of Egyptologists held in Turin, I was elected Vice-President of the Association. This new position corresponded in time with the digging of the Peace Canal in North Sinai, to send fresh water to this desert to be able to better exploit the land for agriculture and settlement. This canal was threatening known archeological sites in this area that had not yet been fully excavated and that therefore had to be saved. I asked the then President of the Antiquities Organization to send an international appeal for the salvage of these sites and I became the director of this newly created North Sinai Archeological Salvage Project known to archeologists as the Eastern Gate of Egypt, monitoring the progress of the digging of the canal and diverting its course when it was threatening an important site. I directed the project for many years, inviting international teams to work there, together with Egyptian teams, and following and encouraging their work and solving any problem they could

encounter until most of the sites were excavated and documented. I had an excellent field director with me, Dr. Mohamed Abd elMaksoud who had then just finished his doctorate in France on his excavations in the Sinai. To support this intensive work and new discoveries, coupled with the necessity to encourage international help, I gave lectures around the world from South America to Japan.

My friend, Dominique Valbelle, the Egyptology professor at the Sorbonne who had started her work in Sinai before the formation of the Archeological Salvage Project, generously helped new comers to the region. She also organized a number of workshops on the Sinai in Paris that I attended regularly. One of the resulting publications was kindly dedicated to me.

Meanwhile, I continued to work on my own research on the roots of Modern Egypt and on National Egyptomania, and during one of my stays in Paris in 1997, I lectured at the College de France and was granted the medal of the College and the status of visiting Professor in this most august institution.

I was also often invited to other international Egyptological congresses as well; as speaker, chairperson, or honorary president. In 1998 I was voted President of the International Association of Egyptologist, the first female to hold that prestigious post. In 2000 I presided in Cairo the VIIIth International Congress of Egyptologists. In 2004 I was presented with a beautiful book entitled 'Hommages à Fayza Haikal', published by the French Institute of Oriental Archeology in Cairo. Such homages consist of scientific articles written by international colleagues to mark their friendship and respect to a person's contribution to Egyptology, and this to me was one of the most important recognitions I have received. In 2006 the French 'École Normale Supérieure' granted me a research chair in Paris for an academic year to promote my research on the roots of modern Egypt and cultural transmissions from

the past, during which I also gave a number of seminars at the Sorbonne to present Egyptians' approach to Egyptology as their heritage and identity. I was also on the jury of many theses in this University and on others in France.

A few years later, in 2012, I was honored when the Berlin Museum and the Frei Universität of Berlin published a lecture I had given on 'Turning Points in Egypt'. A few months ago I was selected by the British Council as the Woman of the Year and also honored by the Ministry of Antiquities for my contributions to Egyptology, receiving homages of love and gratitude from a large number of my ex-students who are now the highlights of Egyptian (and foreign) Egyptology. This was a wonderful reward for many years of teaching and forming students not only at Cairo University, but also at other universities in Egypt and worldwide.

Being recognized is certainly very uplifting and heartwarming. It also attracts a lot of request from the media, Egyptian and International, but it demands constant efforts and attention to keep up with the reputation established and the expectations of the people with whom one is dealing. The future remains a challenge, but I remain engaged with my discipline, and the students who will carry on my work.