

One evening, her relatives dressed her in several layers of clothes and instructed her to go downstairs and wait for a person in a taxi, wearing a red shirt and hat and holding a newspaper. This person accompanied her to see her friends (...*) and a few more youths who had arrived from Syria. They all left for Israel. The welcome awaiting the young immigrants to Israel is one of Tania's most exciting memories - and indeed, this proved to be the biggest experience of her life.

The encounter with Israeli soldiers motivated her to host me in their home and reciprocate, in her own way, the exciting - albeit difficult times she had experienced in Israel.



Halabi wedding in Deal: Third generation Halab emigres.

בתורה חלביה בילי : דור שלישי של יוצאי חלב

But these were not the sole flights of the Antebbis and other families from Halab. These stories shed a light on the miserable life which Halab Jews had led in Syria for many years

To help me get a closer look at what typifies the Halab community - I was introduced to one of the prominent figures in the community - Murad Gindi. When I inquired why Halab Jews are not involved in U.S. politics, he replied that they were not interested in taking an active part in this sphere. In fact only a few of them vote, and Gindi is one of them.

Gindi himself has 3 large stores which he took me to see. His sons run the stores, working very hard, while he takes it easy most of the day. When he starts recounting his "history", he points out that he arrived in New York 16 years ago, rented a house and worked very hard. He speaks in terms of "a united community", which makes no distinction between poor and rich, although this is common enough. In his opinion, those who were poor could immediately become rich, and there were many examples of this.

When he reflects about Syria, he recalls how in 1980 they heard knocks on the door and were terrified of the Moslem Brothers. In Halab, Jews Arabs and Christians

* Censored by the editor.

lived in the same building. Despite the relatively good relations which existed among them, the Jews lived in perpetual fear and anxiety. His hate of Syrians was reinforced after his abortive attempt to flee to Lebanon, his capture and transfer to the "Maza" jail. He sat in solitary confinement and was miserable, yet, he explains to me : "I am here in the U.S. and not in Israel and this is a fact. Furthermore, I like it here. Had I wanted to, I would have made aliya, but I want to stress that Israel has been in my heart all my life, and when something bad happens over there, it hurts and I have a difficult time. This is how I am connected to Israel."

When I became acquainted with mundane life in the U.S., I discovered that for Halabi women, the pattern has not changed. Like in Halab, here too they don't work after they get married - usually at the age of 18 - nor do pursue their studies beyond high school. Only women who must help support their families go to work. The women pamper themselves, and lead a closed life within the community. Social activities include card games, having coffee at one another's homes, attending weddings and family events. What pre-occupies them are their children and marrying off their daughters.

The Halab families are not accustomed to travelling much and are not familiar with America. They save money for their children's future, occasionally go on trips to visit relatives in Israel, Central and South America. The men work hard - from morning till night, and some even work on Saturdays. They do not encourage the women to study or go to work, observing the same life style which prevailed in Halab. The center of their life revolves around supporting the family and strengthening ties with the extended family. The focus of their spiritual Jewish life - is the synagogue.

I was lucky enough to be invited to a wedding in Deal, a town where 70% of the residents are wealthy Jews, most of whom emigrated from Halab years ago. I saw and experienced the wide social gaps existing between this class of wealthy Jews who spend the summer and/or most of the year in expensive houses and their brothers who live in Brooklyn. Although this was a wedding of a third generation Halab emigre - it combined an authentic oriental style with a local American one. At the same time I heard no complaints from the newcomers - on the contrary, they expressed satisfaction and gratitude for having made it in the U.S.

Israel is not a subject for discourse, unless a political issue is raised. They are all concerned with establishing their economic and social standing - for their own as well as their children's sakes.

If at the outset of my visit I had felt hesitant, anxious, and uncomfortable, as my visit progressed and particularly towards the end, I felt as though I were one of them. I "fitted in" within a relatively short time, thanks to the

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