

unusual experience. Despite the inquiries and the sense of not belonging which characterized the first part of my stay, the visit to the synagogue on Friday night, with the Antebbis inspired me with holiness.

The Shaarei Zion Synagogue is the focus of Jewish life. Apart from being a place of prayer, the synagogue also serves as a place of study for old and new generations alike. Furthermore, various family celebrations are held there - circumcisions, Bar-Mitzvahs and weddings. I entered the women's gallery - ezrat nashim - which was literally filled from end to end. The women wore elegant clothes according to the latest fashion. I glimpsed downstairs - at the luxurious prayer hall, and there too the men were extremely well dressed. I was told that nearly every Sabbath during the summer, people celebrate a "bridegroom's Sabbath" (shabbath hatan). The bridegroom-to-be was honored with reading of the Tora, in itself a very distinguished event. When the prayer was over, we returned to the square at the entrance to the synagogue, where the congregation had gathered, and we then walked home for lunch. The meal included typical Halab dishes, for which I developed a taste and began to enjoy during the forthcoming weeks.

My hostess Nina, was accustomed to taking a walk on Saturday night towards the seashore - about 1 1/2 km. away. I accompanied her and on the way, we were joined by her sisters-in-law and friends. The walk turned into a sort of social event. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to become informally acquainted with the women. They asked numerous questions about my private life and about life in Israel in general. The time we spent in each other's company brought us closer together, and Nina was invited to bring me over for coffee that same evening. This is when I got to know the Shaalo family, with whom I stayed afterwards until I returned to Israel.

I moved my heavy suitcases from Ocean Parkway to the Shaalo's home, and settled in Terry's (the youngest daughter) room, who seemed very happy to have me and gave me an enthusiastic welcome.

On the evening of my arrival, there was a family gathering - brothers, sisters and cousins - in the Shaalo's spacious home, and already that evening I became aware of a fact which was to repeat itself on numerous occasions during the interviews I held for my research. This concerned the flight of dozens of Halab families to Israel, particularly during the 60s - 80s. Young men and women of marriageable age had to flee, mothers of children were separated from their families to flee from Syria, and the same was true of entire Jewish families. The stories both resembled and differed from one another, but they all focused on one central theme - the need to run away from the fear, the unknown, from oppression, from a Jewish minority life in a Moslem majority - towards freedom and a safe Jewish life.

I have chosen to tell the story of 3 sisters from the Antebbi family, which is characteristic of many similar stories.

Eleven years ago, Esther Antebbi and her eldest daughter (7) obtained a passport to leave Syria via Turkey. Her husband and 5-year old son remained in Syria. The Syrian authorities promised that the family would be re-united in a matter of months. Esther and her son meanwhile arrived in Israel, but the months which separated the family extended into years. Ultimately, the father and son were forced to flee. For the son, this proved to be a long traumatic experience. According to his mother, he finally managed to recover and today he is an outstanding student. The father - who used to own a popular toys store in Syria, was unable to find work in the U.S. and made his living as a laborer.



Efrat Kedem - First on the right, with Tania Shaalo (nee Antebbi) behind her.

Couple on the left: Eli and Nina Antebbi, with Eva the youngest sister and her husband, and Raphael Shaalo, Tania's husband.

אפרת קדם - ראשונה מימין, אחריה טניה שאלו לבית ענתבי. הזוג משמאל
אלי ונינה ענתבי ובאמצע אהוד ואחותו חסכתה לבית ענתבי ובעלה, ורפאל
שאלו ובעלה של טניה.

Another sister - Eva, the youngest - fled Halab via Turkey to Greece, where she stayed for 8 months. Her flight from Syria had cost her a lot of money. From Greece, she eventually made it to Israel and later travelled to the U.S. where she got married and is very well off.

But the most dramatic story of all was that told by my hostess, Tania Shaalo:

Tania was 20 years old when she fled from Halab together with two more friends. This was in 1973 - in the midst of a severe winter. The person who smuggled them out of Halab was Armenian and was paid hundreds of dollars by the young women. He drove them by car to Beirut. There, Tania's uncle awaited her, and she spent 10 days with his family. At this point, she had no idea that she would leave Beirut for Israel. She was told that she was about to encounter the greatest experience of her life and that a great opportunity awaited her.

