Memories and the everyday: An ethnography of a Polish-Egyptian family

Ola Kamal

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MEMORIES AND THE EVERYDAY:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF A POLISH-EGYPTIAN FAMILY

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Sociology, Anthropology,
Psychology, and Egyptology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology-Anthropology

by Ola Kamal

Under the supervision of Dr. Malak Rouchdy
November 2016
DEDICATION

Mamusiu, I dedicate this to you.
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To Dr. Malak Rouchdy, thank you for your mentorship even before I officially joined the MA program. Your encouragement to take this untrodden path and insightful understanding of the complexity of writing about oneself has been key in overcoming many obstacles I faced. Thank you for pushing me beyond my limits, and for your patience and guidance throughout this academic yet personal endeavor.

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To my Parents, though physically not around. I could strongly feel your comforting presence accompanying me throughout this journey. I am grateful for all those traces you left from your childhood and youth, and for all the memories I hold, for all the stories you told, and for our everyday. They remain my refuge at moments of loss. Your lives with their richness and your endless love remain my core.
This thesis is premised on autoethnographic research in mapping and tracing the social. The thesis suggests and explores the elements of the past playing a role in the construction of the subject throughout the everyday, allowing for various ways for creating oneself and reassembling one’s paths. The thesis reflects on the workings of memory and constructions of narratives in creating the social. My case study is my family, which is a Polish-Egyptian family. The main concepts in my autoethnography center around the issues connected to the intertwined relation between the past, present and future, the everyday, and subject formation. Through these main concepts, I analyze the following: remembrance, constellations, *sites of memory*, commemorations, the power of naming, and categories of identification. Research materials and sources include oral histories, letters, photographs, notebooks, newspaper articles and clippings, through which the past is reconstructed in the present, offering ways for understanding the present. Throughout my autoethnography, I move between storytelling and theory, blending the two together. My thesis is about connections and ways of reassembling the social as well as capturing its fluidity. Hence, my writing reflects these fluid connections, setting them all in dialogue, through moving along the past and present, memories, (im)material traces, theories and fieldwork, the public and private spheres, as well as myself as both researcher and subject.
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PROLOGUE

This thesis is a fragment of endless possibilities and interpretations of members of my family’s social existence. This fragment is in a form of a story, that collects and connects different elements of the past infiltrating the everyday through remembrance; or through (im)material\(^1\) traces invoking memories and reshaping the present. The story shows a process where both the present and past are reassembled and reconstructed and the way in which subjects are created.

This story is in the form of an autoethnography, where I zoom into my family members’ relations to the social; through them I try to make linkages to understand the social issues taking place on the socio-political and economic levels.

The story hovers around Adam, my nephew, and my parents. The story shows how Adam’s present and future are being reassembled by the way elements from the past, from my parents’ lives, are reconstructed in the present, offering him ways to renegotiate his position within the social.

In a nutshell, the thesis explores the elements of the past that get reconstructed in the present and play a role in the construction of the subject throughout the everyday, allowing for various ways of creating oneself and reassembling one’s paths within different social environments.

This thesis is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. Chapter I, titled “Introduction: Unraveling the Story”, presents the methodology, theories and concepts relevant to my research. The thesis uses autoethnography as a methodological tool in mapping and tracing the social. The main concepts in my research are around the following issues: the intertwined relation between the past, present and future, the everyday, and the subject formation. Through these main concepts I analyze the following sub-concepts: remembrance, constellations, lieux de mémoire, commemorations, the power of naming, and categories of identification. Throughout this chapter I move between storytelling and theory, blending the two together. In this introductory chapter, I explain how my autoethnography started

\(^1\) I chose to use the word (im)material throughout my thesis to reflect that both the material and immaterial are interconnected.
unraveling through main concurrent events in my life. These include Adam, my nephew’s, decision to travel to Warsaw to pursue his higher education, and the ease with which he was able to settle down and smoothly shift between different geographies and social worlds. This coincided with a changing socio-political and economic context in the Egyptian society. The other event was when I opened Mother’s suitcase and started reading the letter-exchanges between Mother and Father going back to the late 1950s, which triggered various memories and reconstructed the past. These events were interconnected, and they inspired me to examine the way in which the social is interconnected and entangled, and amidst it the subject has possibilities to reassemble his/her social realities.

In Chapter II, which is given the title, “Remembrance”, I focus on two main concepts: remembrance and memory. I look here at the way in which the past is recognized and revitalized in the present. I begin by identifying, introducing and then following the way the public and the private sphere are part and parcel of each other, and the ways in which individuals reconstruct themselves within their societies. I pave the way to how memory reconstructs the past in the present. This chapter is premised on oral histories, where the immaterial memories and flashes are complemented and sometimes triggered by some material traces from the past, such as documents, photographs and streets. Oral history shows the way in which the same incident is remembered and narrated in different ways by different people, and thus highlights the idea that there is no single narrative, nor one true historic fact. I introduce the reader, here, to the socio-political and economic backgrounds of my paternal grandparents and maternal grandfathers, who lived in different geographic spaces and social environments: Egypt and Poland. I also introduce in this chapter the narrative and theoretical threads that will extend throughout my autoethnography, such as for example the concept of naming as a transformative power, giving examples from both my paternal and maternal grandfathers.

Chapter III comes under the title “A Personal Archive”; in it I deal with the concept of lieux de mémoire (sites of memory), where I show the way in which material sources like letters, personal notebooks, photographs, official documents, magazines and newspaper clippings can also reconstruct the past in the present. Through these traces, complemented by oral histories, I introduce the readers to my parents’ social environments since their youth, the paths they have reassembled within certain socio-economic and political conditions, and the way both the private
and public spheres form integral parts of each other, leading to the convergence of my parents’ paths. In this chapter, I rely mainly on material traces as sources for my research, which I attempt to complement through narratives. By identifying and reworking the (im)material traces, I take the reader through a process of reconstructing the past, so that the present and future can be better understood. This chapter paves the way for my following chapter where I focus on subject formation.

In Chapter IV, which I title “Constellations”, my main focus is the underlying idea which I have been building in the previous chapters; namely, how elements from the past (im)material affect subject formation, and allow ways for reassembling social realities in different ways throughout mundane everyday practices. I argue that elements from the past can open possibilities for reinventing oneself and reassembling one’s own social life. I depict aspects in the lives of Adam (my nephew), my sisters and myself, where we maneuver our paths through the everyday, by forming different constellations in which elements of the past are reconstructed within the practices related to commemoration, language, and categories of classification. In this chapter, I bring together the different elements that I have been presenting throughout the previous chapters, reflecting on the connections that take place through time and space, and offering different ways for reassembling the social.

I end my autoethnography with the conclusion titled “Endless Plateaus”. In this final part I reflect on my decision to take up this research project and my choices of its methodology, sources and guiding theories. I particularly reflect on my main findings as well as the challenges faced during the course of the research.

I attach three appendices. “Appendix A” includes transliteration and transcription tables of the systems I used in dealing with Arabic, Polish and English words. “Appendix B” carries our family tree, which is relevant to this research, where both real names and pseudonyms are used (as explained in the introduction). And finally, “Appendix C”, in which I insert a number of maps and photographs referring to people, events, places and documents to create visual connections to the narratives presented in my thesis.
Chapter I: Introduction

Unraveling the Story

It was the fall semester of the year 2014. After a long day at work, I went to my Ethnographic Fieldwork class at AUC. I was sitting there listening to my colleagues briefly presenting the topics they would like to work on for their MA theses. I was listening with interest, while doodling in my notebook, and hearing how some of them expressed their hopes to change the world. I had decided to join the MA program after the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, with the aim of better understanding the changes taking place around me, and people’s efforts trying to change their realities and renegotiate their existence in society. I was also intrigued by the way in which various narratives of the major socio-political events get woven and narrated differently – be it in the form of personal narratives or meta-narratives. Joining the program, I was looking forward to gaining a deeper understanding of how societies function, and to try and comprehend the underlying layers in the overwhelming manifestations of social change that were taking place in Egypt at that time.

Concurrently, my elder nephew, Adam, was in the last year of his high school education in Cairo, and considering studying engineering at Warsaw University. In his view, the Egyptian education system had deteriorated tremendously, while the general unrest in the country since 2011 was an additional reason for him to travel to Warsaw for his university studies. I still remember our discussions about this decision, while in the background the television was announcing news about shootings at students during the riots taking place at Cairo University and in its vicinity. His decision to study specifically in Warsaw was based on the fact that we come from a Polish-Egyptian family: having a Polish mother and Egyptian father.

Since his childhood, Adam picked up the Polish language at home through speaking Polish with my mother, and then using the language and developing it during the vacations spent in Warsaw. It is interesting to note, that although Adam was brought up in Cairo, still, when the moment came for him to decide on a path for

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2 I choose to hyphenate ‘Polish-Egyptian’ to underline the convergence of what Polish and Egyptian stands for, rather than showing them as two separate entities.
his studies, he opted for Warsaw. However, when analyzing his decision, I could see that it was not a matter of choice, but was conditioned by various factors and layers of his own being, and included the socio-political and economic contexts at his time as well at a past time which affected the creation of a Polish-Egyptian family. Reflecting on this point, I found myself delving into another dimension; namely, memory and the ways in which it is invoked in the present. The workings of memory, here, are intertwined with a pattern of cyclical movement between Egypt and Poland, which have started in our family in the late 1950s. The starting point was when Father travelled on a scholarship to Warsaw to study towards a diploma in ethnography in 1958. A few years later, in 1964, Mother travelled to Cairo to do fieldwork for her doctoral studies in modern Arabic literature. Throughout the years, my sisters and I have been living in Cairo while travelling to Warsaw on vacations. My nephew, Adam, at a particular moment during particular socio-political and economic conditions, took the decision to pursue his university studies in Warsaw. Looking at it in the present, I cannot avoid thinking that the step taken by Father must have indirectly, if not directly, influenced Adam’s decision; and similarly, Mother’s practices, which instilled elements from her past into our everyday, must have offered him elements with which he reassembled his reality. On another level, Adam’s decision has invoked in me various memories of Father’s journey to Poland.

Methodology
In my research, I follow the way in which the present invokes memories of the past. The memories invoked and the narratives told give a glimpse and offer an understanding of the way in which people’s paths get carved. As mentioned above, it was Adam’s decision to travel together with the surrounding socio-political and economic conditions that invoked these memories. These memories and narratives offer an insight into the socio-political and economic conditions that affect the way people negotiate their social existence, giving an insight of the way the public and private are integrally interconnected. Memory gives a glimpse of the past, we reinterpret the past through memory to make sense of the present. Memory blends the (im)material; it connects physical objects with the non-material. Through memories invoked by written documentation and oral histories, I map the way in which the past, present and future are interconnected: “pasts and futures are implicated in present circumstances” (Hirsch and Stewart 2005, 263). By invoking the past, I am actually
trying to understand the present: “[T]he past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past” (Carr 1961, 55). The elements that are invoked in the present from the past, and the way these elements are reinterpreted and play a role in our everyday, reflect the way in which the past and present are intertwined. Thus, through the retrieval of memories a past is constructed in the present. Memory moves backward and forward in time, and makes past recognizable. When the past flashes, it is only recognized when it resonates with the present. Walter Benjamin suggests:

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again…. For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (1968, 255)

In dealing with the present as the arena which reassembles the past, I look at the everyday. On the one hand, I wanted to map the interplay between the past and present, and interpret the way images from the past flash up in our everyday. While, on the other hand, I was intrigued to see how the ‘everyday’ is affected by changes that happen on the macro level in the socio-political and economic conditions, and the way in which our ‘everyday’ holds possibilities for negotiating social life. I am using here Michel de Certeau’s concept of the ‘everyday’ which he describes in terms of “ways of operating” that should not be relegated to the background of social activities (1984, xi). The past and the everyday are interconnected: on the one hand, the everyday retrieves and reshapes the past, while the past infiltrates and shapes the everyday. I further relate these concepts to the creation of the subject in the light of Michel Foucault’s insights on the individual and the structures of power, arguing that an individual becomes a subject when subjugated to power (Foucault 1982, 781). Yet, within power, there still are possibilities for carving and negotiating different paths. Hence, my exploration of the ongoing process of subject-creation, with particular interest in identifying the potential of subjects for finding different paths despite established orders.

Remembrance is a key concept that runs through my research, as the past is invoked in the present through the process of remembering. My understanding of the concept is informed by Walter Benjamin’s work, where remembrance is a key theme which Michael Löwy explains as follows: “[I]t is the task of remembrance, in Benjamin’s work, to build ‘constellations’ linking the present and the past” (2005,
95). I find this statement of great significance and insight, as it coincides with my own effort throughout this autoethnography, were ‘constellations’ are created through the narratives I have recorded, the memories I recall, the documents I read and the (im)material traces I have sought or stumbled upon. I am inspired by Benjamin’s image of grasping constellations which the present era forms with an earlier one, rather than “telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” (1968, 263).

By analyzing these constellations, my aim is to examine the way in which the changes in the socio-political and economic spheres do not take place in discontinuity with their surroundings. On the contrary, they prove to be an integral part of the changes and negotiations taking place at the level of individuals. Even though individuals do internalize and are directly affected by discourses of power, yet I also look at individuals’ potentials to renegotiate their social existence by being able to maneuver their ways amidst the societal rules and create this potential in their lives of different paths. By bringing all these elements together, I look at the everyday, and I use memory as the arena in which the past, present and future are intertwined, in order to examine the way in which the subject is constructed.

In my autoethnography I followed material traces, such as fragments of written documentation, photographs, and even pieces of furniture at home. These material fragments formed the pieces of ‘rubble’ on which I started reimagining and reconstructing the past. I refer to material fragments in terms of rubble as a metaphor; rubble has a symbolic meaning of fragments connecting the past to the present. I am inspired, here, by Gastón Gordillo’s concept of ‘rubble’; seeing in rubble the potential to be explored as “textured, affectively charged matter that is intrinsic to all living places,” to engage with them, have them as part of the everyday, rather than looking at them with veneration (2014, 5). His description of ‘rubble’ is similar to my approach to the fragments I collect; where I connect those different material fragments from the past, whether letters, pictures, notebooks or furniture with the everyday. Each fragment of those engages with the everyday, gets redefined in the present and affects the way the present is constructed. These connections show the way in which the social can be constructed; as Bruno Latour suggests:

Objects by the very nature of their connections with humans, quickly shift from being mediators to being intermediaries. … This is why specific tricks have to be invented to make them talk, that is, to offer descriptions of themselves, to produce scripts of what they are making others—humans or non-humans—do. (Latour 2005, 79)
Throughout my autoethnography, I am not searching for a linear story with a beginning and an end. I am applying what Bruno Latour suggested, which is an approach of “sociology of associations” (2005, 9), based on “collections” and “connections” (2005, 8). I am concerned with a convergence of written documentation, with memories and the everyday to understand the social; which is a process based on connections rather than linearity. I collect and connect the following: oral histories, written documentation, observations, photographs, official documents and recollected memories. In creating these connections between the (im)material, and between ‘objects’ and ‘humans’ I attempt to understand the social. I have chosen my family as a microcosm through which I unpack these concepts.

While collecting the stories of members of my family, and examining the written documents related to my family, I reflect on the issue of the multiplicity of realities and narratives. In this microcosm, I find multiple narratives, incoherence and fragmented ‘facts’, which lead me to think that if, on the level of my family narrative, many inconsistencies occur, then how can we assume that there are unified coherent meta-narratives. In collecting the material traces I am aware that sources, as Ralph Trouillot describes them, “do not encapsulate the whole range of significance of the occurrences of which they testify” (1995, 47). They are fragments that go through a selection process; where I gather different threads to weave a story made of multiple narratives. As John Law suggests, methods do not depict realities, but “participate in the enactment of those realities” (2008, 45). Law further suggests that there is no one social reality out there, but methods create certain realities (2008). I see Law’s words in light of the story of my family, on two levels; one is the fact that I follow different methods (as will be explained later) to acquire knowledge about the social, creating different methods for reconstructing the past. The second level is that the story of my family members does not belong to the grand narratives, but belongs to stories of societies. It is a story that has different elements reassembled together. It is a story of individuals creating different realities – fluid, and not fixed in time and geographies. It is a story about connections, without a real beginning or real end. It is like a “rhizome” in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense, where the essence of the rhizome is “to have multiple entryways” (1987, 14).
Autoethnography

Autoethnography is the approach and methodology used in this research. In Smith and Watson's *Reading Autobiography*, they define autoethnography as “collectivized and situated life writing in which the *bios* of autobiography is replaced by *ethnos* or social group” and as “a situated practice of self-narration” (2010, 258-259). The autoethnographic method in itself is a tool linking the private with the public; thus, I look at my personal account by narrating and analyzing the story of my family. The significant outcome is that this personalized family story emerges as an integral part of wider issues related to the outward social world, with all its complexities. However, in the process of analyzing the changes in the socio-political and economic conditions, and their influence on the everyday of individuals, and their negotiations within their social environments, I reach a deeper understanding of the intertwined relation between the public and private spheres. As Michael Jackson suggests, “[i]t therefore makes no sense to speak of individual lives without reference to the social and historical conditions that bear upon them, nor to invoke universals without reference to the individuals who embody, experience, objectify, perpetuate and struggle against them” (Jackson 2002, 291).

In this sense, my family’s everyday practices develop different meanings when considered in light of the major socio-political and economic changes experienced by our societies. In *Ayya’s Accounts: A Ledger of Hope in Modern India*, Anand Pandian and M. P. Mariappan mention this question regarding why one should write and pay attention to the life of someone who is “unknown” and “ordinary”; he asks the question: “How do larger insights grow from such detailed accounts of individuals whom our readers will never otherwise meet?” To such questions, they respond saying:

Any account, whether a business ledger or a story to tell, is far more than a recounting of what has already happened. An account is also an invitation to nurture a relationship—a way of making unfamiliar persons and things familiar to each other, a trail of transactions through a world of experience, an image of a possible world in common. (Pandian & Mariappan 2014, 197)

Similarly, my aim from the stories I collect and tell about my family is to show the ways in which the social world is created and the connections that can be assembled beyond the example of my family.
In my autoethnographic approach, I am informed by what Carolyn Ellis calls “back and forth autoethnographer’s gaze” (2004, 37). Ellis further explains that the autoethnographer looks with a wide angle on the social aspects of a personal experience; she further elaborates that in the process, as autoethnographers “zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition” (Ellis 2004, 37-38). This movement within and beyond realms is what has drawn me towards autoethnography; this blurring of distinctions, which Ellis explains, as well as fluidity, have directed me to autoethnography as the best approach to use in my research, as my research topic also revolves around the fluidity of the social and the blurring of different temporalities.

Moreover, for my research, autoethnography was the best tool to reflect this process of zooming inwards and outwards, as it evades the usual critique addressed to anthropology, which is built on a practice where the researcher is imposed on the society s/he is analyzing, and reaches conclusions seen as coming from a position of power. By mapping and presenting stories of my life, I connect the public to the private in a process described by Carolyn Ellis as follows:

By making intricate details of one’s life accessible to others in public discourse, personal narratives bridge the dominions of public and private life. Telling a personal story becomes a social process for making lived experience understandable and meaningful. (Ellis 2009, 197)

The issue of ‘objectivity’ has occupied a central position in the social sciences since Durkheim and Weber, as natural science was adopted as a model toward objectivity. Yet, this notion of objectivity was eventually contested, even by those founding fathers; as Lazar explains “between us and the reality which we seek to know stands a whole host of assumptions, preconceptions, ideologies and beliefs” (2004, 15).

In the Ethnographic Fieldwork course (mentioned earlier), we have been alerted to the fact that even science cannot be objective; science is practiced by people who have been socialized in a different way, which drives their findings and conclusions. One of the assigned readings in this course was John Law’s *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* where he shows that even medical diagnosis can create different realities when perspectives differ (2004, 13). This is not only caused by the differences that positions confer on realities and experiences, but the nature of the social itself which defies the possibility of knowing it all, seeing it
all, and hence the need to rethink the way we search for knowledge and understanding in the social sciences.

In his book, Law suggests a different approach to methods of research, emphasizing that our methods play a role in creating, and not only describing, social realities. In my method of autoethnography, I do not claim to be describing social facts, but I see myself creating an interpretation of social realities through my research method, as well as through my own written narrative, which involves weaving stories together from different (im)material sources. I see it as a process of ‘montaging’ historical documentation, in the sense of Walter Benjamin’s concept of putting images together. In Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, he describes the image in the following words:

> It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. (2002, 463)

I see myself creating such constellations through mapping and putting together different fragments of stories from the past and present. The resulting multiple narratives tend to contest claims to objective facts. This does not only apply to autoethnographic work, where the subjective dimension is by definition significantly present, but it also proves applicable to historical research, as H.E. Carr suggests that the historian’s work is selective, and the belief that depending on facts would lead to objectivity is, in his words, a “phallacy” (1961, 11). Furthermore, research conclusions usually depend on the researcher’s identity, position and socialization. Thus, Kirin Narayan’s description of a researcher studying his/her own society resonates with the process I have been applying. She describes those researchers saying that they “absorb analytic categories that rename and reframe what is already known. The reframing essentially involves locating vivid particulars within larger cultural patterns, sociological relations, and historical shifts” (Narayan 1993, 678). Whether dealing with ‘historical facts’ or analyzing social relations, a researcher cannot claim independence and objectivity, it is s/he who holds the power of selection, representation and decision-making in the process of collecting the research material and presenting its findings.
My autoethnographic practice opened for me ways for looking into the (im)material traces in my own life and my family’s lives, that helped me reconstruct the stories evoked by memory. This in turn has led me to further reflection on memory’s role in reassembling our social life in its everyday mundane manifestations. As an autoethnographer, personally immersed within the research process, I carry the insider-outsider double-lens in my observation of our everyday. I look at traces of the past that ‘flash’ in our everyday; I consider our daily practices, in terms of the food we eat, the rituals and celebrations we maintain, the languages we use, in addition to the paths we take for study and work. I analyze how these factors eventually affect the way in which we are formed; making different associations and accordingly different decisions and paths in our lives.

Oral History and Storytelling
My autoethnography is based on the stories I collect, remember, read, montage and retell. The stories I collect are the source of data in a process that Carolyn Ellis describes in terms of “treating stories as data and using analysis to arrive at themes that illuminate the content and hold within or across stories” (2004, 196). I map and trace the way the socio-political and economic conditions shape the mundane details of people’s lives through the stories of my family, the varying historical accounts and the traces marking their routes, as well as my own observations of the present everyday. My story is not woven neatly, it is a story where gaps and incoherence prevail, and thus “in the art of telling about ways of operating, the latter is already at work” (de Certeau 1984, 88-90). I see myself as a storyteller seeking to connect my reader to a personal story to which s/he can relate, in a process similar to Walter Benjamin’s description, whereby “[t]he storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (2006, 364). Michael Jackson informed by Hannah Arendt suggests that “storytelling is a strategy for transforming private into public meaning” (Jackson 2002, 14-15). Jackson suggests the following regarding stories told:

It is in this two-way transformation of the private into public personae, and shared worldviews into personal allegories, that narratives attain their power – their seeming ability to fuse Then and Now, Here and There, the One and the Many. (2002, 231)
Indeed, throughout my autoethnography, I move amongst different temporalities, geographies and voices. It is a challenge to write about oneself. It involves constant zooming in and out; and being in a position of both researcher and subject raises immediate questions: Which storyline to start with? How to deal with all the ‘data’? How to represent others? How to name the people in my narrative? One of the decisions I made was to use pseudonyms for all my interviewees as well as my family members, with the exception of my deceased Father, Mother, my grandparents and grand-uncle. When writing about them, I use their real names as a form of commemoration. In the case of Father and Mother, when referring to them, I highlight their relationship to me, turning grammatically the common nouns into proper nouns; hence, I refer to my father as Father, and to my mother as Mother. However, when quoting publications that include their names, I keep their names the way they appear in the documents and publications.

**Sources**

In weaving together the story of my family, I have used multiple sources. My first and main source was interviews, where I have used both structured and open-ended interviews with my two sisters, family members, and acquaintances in both Poland and Egypt: “Open-ended, semi-structured formats facilitate the collection of new information, providing the flexibility to explore different topics in-depth with different informants” (Weller 1998, 373). The data I collected is mainly premised on interviews with my sisters and my own memories, my elderly uncles in Egypt and in Poland, as well as historical documentation. My two sisters are in their mid-forties, and I am in my mid-thirties, this age difference reflects different social changes in our societies at different points in time. I apply an “interactive autoethnographic process,” which according to Carolyn Ellis “consists of reflexive interviewing where the researcher includes her story besides doing one-on-one interviews” (2009, 195). These different voices and narratives in my story present a variety of views and contexts; they demonstrate how differently events are remembered, interpreted and retold.

This aspect of oral history “can merge the public and private, individual and social, illustrating the falseness of these dichotomous constructs, and the relation between them in lived reality” (Leavy 2007, 155). I find oral history particularly useful as through the histories of ordinary people we understand the shifts in
societies, whereby oral history seems to make history “more democratic” as it concerns “the life of ordinary people” (Thompson 2006, 29). Another significant aspect of oral history is that it involves a process of data collection and interviewing which sheds light on the everyday life, as highlighted by Alessandro Portelli in the following statement:

The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning. This does not imply that oral history has no factual validity. Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events; they always cast new light on unexplored areas of daily life of the nonhegemonic classes. (2006, 36)

The second source of my narrative is my family’s written documents, which include letters marking the exchanged correspondence between my parents and their families since the 1950s. These documents help me insert their voices into the story. This ‘personal archive’ includes official documents such as birth certificates, school and university degrees, marriage contracts and death certificates – which I also use for documentation purposes. With these historical documents I do not claim to present “historical facts,” as E. H. Carr suggests that “the historian is engaged on a continuous process of molding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts” (1961, 29). Historicity is reflected in my research, as the historical accounts that I collect, including my own, are in a sense affected by E. Hirsch and C. Stewart’s description of historicity as a “manner in which persons operating under the constraints of social ideologies make sense of the past, while anticipating the future” (2005, 262). Through using these sources, tools and methods I have woven a story about my family, whose stories are not likely to be told due to being part of “the unknown majority of the people” (Thompson 2006, 31). Perhaps it is not a story that belongs to grand narratives; yet, it is a story that is part of the social fabric.

As for my third source, it includes publications in the form of essays and articles written by my parents as well as those written about them. Some of these sources bring my late parents’ voices into the story, while others provide material traces of a past that is dormant in our present. Along with their notebooks that go back to the late 1940s, photographs are among my sources, which also connect the present to the past, and fill out some gaps in the stories I collect.
Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In my research, I move within three interconnected theoretical frameworks and apply them to my family: the past and memory in relation to the present; the everyday; and the creation of the subject. Walter Benjamin’s Thesis on the Philosophy of History has inspired me in the process of my research around memory, where I use my family as the locus of this research. Throughout my research I have been looking at the process of recognizing the past; that is to say I am not concerned with what things were ‘really’ like, but by the way the “memory flashes up” and represents that past (Benjamin 1968, 255). I represent and analyze memories of historical events, reflecting on the ways in which these memories are provoked and invoked, and in turn affect and alter the paths taken in the present, and possibly in the future. The same applies to Pierre Nora’s concept of lieux de mémoire, or sites of memory, which according to him carry the notion of the “embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” (1989, 7). I use his concept here to refer to very personal ‘lieux de mémoire’, which could be a suitcase with letters written by my parents, photo albums, pieces of furniture at our home, some rituals which we continue practicing at home, or even a person whose presence in and of itself creates a sense of Nora’s “continuity” and “embodied memory”. Nora suggests that “[m]emory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects” (1989, 9). So, making linkages between objects, memories and the present is a form of creating association where the social is reassembled; an idea elaborated by Latour, who suggests that objects are part of social connections (2005, 73).

The mapping of the stories evoked by these ‘sites of memory’ is a process similar to excavation at an archeological site, and just like my narrative, in which I link fragments together, archeology is about linking and not about origin. As Nadia Abu El-Haj suggests:

The notion of artifacts having sociality embedded in them is, of course, a fundamental assumption of archeological work. It is precisely the specific social, cultural, political, and economic orders and ideologies that, presumably, are being read from the archeological record. That is what is entailed in interpreting the past. (2001, 12)

Archeology is a metaphor for a process where I put pieces of the past together, and attempt to weave a story. It is by no means a story about origin, but it is a story connecting the private with the public, memory of the past with the everyday in the present, and the (im)material.
In putting those concepts together, in this order, I am not implying that there are dichotomies between each set of words, but there is fluidity, and blurred borders between them, which is why I use the term (im)material to refer to this blurred boundary. This blurring of borders is what I map in my research. In the everyday, there is a blurring of borders between the past and present; between what constitutes Poland and what constitutes Egypt; and between the personal and the public. I seek to trace the changes that take place within various social contexts in different geographies, throughout a span of over fifty years, and I attempt to identify the way these changes, that happen at different temporalities and spaces, go down to affecting how people reassemble their everyday. Law suggests, different realities overlap and their relations are “complex and messy” (2004, 61). A constant state of fluidity is where and how the memories, societies and the everyday are created and renegotiated.

**Memory**

In my research, I deal with different memories and recollections. Memory is not about the past, but is configured in the present. I do not seek to know how a historic event actually took place, rather I am interested in seeing aspects of the past that are still affecting and reshaping our lives. I find Walter Benjamin particularly useful here when he refutes historicism which sees that history can be recognized as it really was. Benjamin considers that the way to articulate the past, historically, is to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up” (2002, 255). Thus, throughout my research, I keep trying to grasp and hold the memories as they flash up. In a similar vein, Jonathan Boyarin explains the working of memory, stating that “memory is neither something preexistent and dormant in the past nor a projection from the present, but a potential for creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience of expression of the past” (1994, 22).

Remembrance is another recurrent theme here, as in the process of using memory, either by invoking personal memories or by listening to and analyzing my interlocutors’ memories. In several cases, my sisters and I had common memories. Memories are not only personal memories but are also collective memories. Maurice Halbwachs, in his book *On Collective Memory*, suggests:

There are no recollections which can be said to be purely interior, that is, which can be persevered only within individual memory … There is
hence no memory without perception. As soon as we locate people in society it is no longer possible to distinguish two types of observations, one exterior, the other interior. (1992, 169)

In his introduction to Halbwachs’ book *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser points out that Halbwachs was the first sociologist to highlight that “our conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems, that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present” (Coser 1992, 34). In invoking Halbwachs I am not suggesting that memories move only within stable social frameworks, and that no memories can be rediscovered outside the societies as Halbwachs suggests. On the contrary, I look at both, collective memories within a family, which are revived by commemorations or sites of memory within a family, as well as ways in which individual memories can create alternative paths from the social collective memories. When using the term collective memory I see it connecting the personal with the public, where collective familial stories are linked with past events taking place on the levels of nations. In light of these insights, I look at the memories of my family members in relation to societies; I trace our family’s memories and traditions, which are part of the societies we belong to, yet, being at the same time shaped by our specific experiences. Indeed, in doing so, I see how the present solicits the past, and both the present and past are reconstructed through this process. For example, celebrating certain Polish feasts in Egypt, every year, becomes an act of remembrance, similar to the sense in which Michael Löwy refers to Benjamin’s views on holidays as days of memory and remembrance that express historical consciousness (Löwy 2005, 90-91).

I see in memory a repository of past events, feelings and inclinations which even when forgotten remain lingering, and at moments flash. Memory can maneuver around power because it is personal and invisible. In Walter Benjamin’s words, the “past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized” (1968, 255). Benjamin continues the sentence saying that it “is never seen again”; yet throughout my research I see how the past flashes and then lingers. I apply Walter Benjamin’s theory of history on a personal level. Benjamin suggests that it is not possible to recognize the past as it really was, what is possible is to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (1968, 255). Throughout my narrative there are moments of transformation, rather than “moments of danger” that were flashing memories. One of those moments was the fact that
Adam, my nephew decided to take a new path and settle in Warsaw to continue his studies there. Besides the moments of transformation which bring back memories and reconstruct the past, I borrow Pierre Nora’s words that the “will to remember” (1989, 19) also saves the past from fleeting, this “will” can be traced in the practices of my family as will be explained in the coming chapters.

Nora describes modern memory as archival and dependent on the materiality of trace; and states that this leads to the focus on archiving, which is caused by fear: “fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future” (1989, 13). In my research my mother’s suitcase, with letters that go back to the late 1950s, is as already mentioned above, a lieu de mémoire, along with notes written by my father since the 1950s; together with other official documents, they all represent an archive – a personal archive which holds material traces of the past, stirring memories and images. Memory blurs the distinction between (im)material. I explore the agency of the material as a way to navigate emotion through memory. For example, a letter read in the present has agency, it invokes a sensual experience from the past. When reading my parents’ letters I can hear their voices, feel the smell of certain food or see again the details and colors of a particular place. This blending of the (im)material happens in a flash.

Mother’s Suitcase
On the day, as I was sitting at home in Cairo, and thinking of writing an autoethnography involving memory, I took the decision to open my mother’s grey leather suitcase. It was the summer of 2015; I was sitting on the floor in my apartment in Cairo, next to Mother’s small grey leather suitcase. It is the suitcase which accompanied Mother on her journey from Warsaw to Cairo on 22 May 1967, at the time when she was doing research on modern Arabic literature for her Ph.D. degree. I kept looking at this suitcase, I had never seen its contents before. And as far as I know, it has not been opened since many years ago – at least eight years since Mother passed away. The zippers of the bag were dusty and slightly rusty. I had difficulty opening it, not only because of the dust preventing its quick unzipping, but because my emotions related to this particular suitcase were holding me back. I had recently read an essay by Orhan Pamuk where he too described the moment he was trying to open his father’s suitcase, full of his father’s writings, after he had passed away. I found his following words resonating with my state “I couldn’t even touch it. Why?
No doubt it was because of the mysterious weight of its contents” (2006, 789). Mother had told me that this small suitcase carried letters which went back to the years before she and Father got married. It has been now several years since my parents passed away; Mother passed away in 2007 and Father in 2009. Its contents were mysterious, and it was difficult for me to open that bag and listen to my parents’ voices in those letters. I switched on the air conditioner. I carried a small table into the room – actually not a table, but a traditional round brass tray with engraved Arabic calligraphy, and I placed it on foldable wooden legs that are carved in Arabesque art.\(^3\) I often use it at home, it is practical, movable and I like its design. Having set it up in the middle of the room, I got flashbacks from different black and white pictures, mainly the ones hanging at home in Warsaw, with my parents standing against a background which included this brass round tray on its wooden legs.

I managed to open the suitcase; the smell of old paper greeted me. It was stacked with envelopes and cards in small plastic and paper bags as well as small boxes neatly packed. It took me a few moments to start looking through its contents. I started with the big envelopes, turned yellowish by the passage of time. Opening one of them, I found children’s drawings; they turned out to be school drawing sketches carrying my sisters’ names, Aida and Maya, with their school grades, going back to their childhood years in Kuwait. I also found some carrying my name and class. These school notebooks did not turn yellow. I came across other drawings on foolscap sheets of paper, with Father’s writing at the back of these pages. I recognized his handwriting; these seemed to be drafts of his research on Arabic epic heroes, with their other sides used as drawing sheets for us. Another paper had a drawing by our Egyptian maid, Fayza, who lived with us in Kuwait. She must have drawn it herself, as each of the other drawings had either Aida or Maya’s name, while this one had Fayza’s name. I had heard of her before; she had spent a couple of years with my family in Kuwait, and during one of the summer breaks in Egypt, her father picked her up and she was married off. This was before I was born, and I know about her from Aida and Maya who also told me that, being just a few years older than

\(^3\) Arabesque is an artistic style of geometric patterns; “The arabesques and geometric patterns of Islamic art are often said to arise from the Islamic view of the world. To Muslims, these forms, taken together, constitute an infinite pattern that extends beyond the visible material world.” For more information: http://islamic-arts.org/2011/arabesque-art-of-islamic-spain/
them, they had taught her how to read and write. This leads me to another flashback, as I remember our Indian maid in Kuwait, in her green sari, waking me up in the morning with a smile. On the back of this same drawing, I found Father’s handwriting with a paragraph about marriage rituals in Arab countries. Some of these drawings go back to when my sisters were in kindergarten, which means that some of these drawings are over 40 years old; while others were done by me, and I recognize my name in my handwriting as a child. These must go back to my pre-school years – which means that my drawings are over 30 years old!

In another box, I found envelopes with drawings and greeting cards sent to us from our cousin Anna. Anna is the daughter of my maternal uncle Witold, Mother’s only brother. She lives in the USA. I started taking pictures of those letters and drawings, and through different phone applications, I started sending them to my sister Aida, in Cairo, to Maya and Adam who were together at that time in Warsaw, and to Anna in the USA. Anna left Warsaw almost 40 years ago when she was about 12 years old. Uncle Witold’s family left Poland in 1978 when his wife, Aunt Krystyna, who is a physicist, got a teaching post at a university in the USA. They were intending to return to Poland after a couple of years, but they decided to stay in the USA. They and other family members told us that one of the main reasons behind this decision was the difficult political and economic situation in Poland, especially for academics, compared to the better living conditions in the United States at that time. Father, too, had left Egypt and traveled to Kuwait in 1966; he was delegated to Kuwait by the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance and Information in Egypt to be among the researchers founding the Center of Folklore in Kuwait. In his letters to Mother before getting married, Father mentioned that he was planning to stay for four years. Among other reasons, it was the better economic situation in Kuwait, compared to Egypt, that encouraged my parents to stay longer in Kuwait. They decided to return and settle in Egypt in 1984.

The suitcase’s contents trace my parents’ journeys and itineraries. To me it looks like an archeological site where a person tries to find bits and pieces and glues them together to recreate a past that is not gone, but a past that lingers. It is not about searching for an origin, but about finding connections. Time and space start having different meanings. The letters packed in this suitcase give flashes about the social environments in which they were written, a context within which my parents decided to get married. The letters shed some light on the socio-economic and political
conditions in both countries which affected, and in many cases, determined the formation of a Polish-Egyptian family, and its location. These letters stirred so many memories.

Pierre Nora describes memory as a “bond tying us to the eternal present” (1989, 8). It is not just a recollection of a frozen moment of the past; on the contrary, memory brings a past moment into the present where the distinctions between the past and the present become fluid. Memory can be uttered or concealed, yet remains present. Memory has the potential to transcend the socially constructed boundaries and structures; particularly the structures around time and space. The moment of sharing the photos of our letters and drawings with my sisters and cousin, across continents, marks a moment of fluidity between what is constructed as past and present, as both temporalities merged. The fact that each one of us was in a different physical location ceased to exist; as reading and sharing these letters and drawings, at that moment, created a blended and fluid temporality and spatiality; as Boyarin argues technologies of communication have altered the sense of space and time (1994, 3).

There is an aspect of social history in my work here, which involves a “constant quest for connection between structures and everyday experience” (Elliot 1995, 45), where each letter gives a glimpse of a past historic event, or past rituals, or past practices. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, I am not interested in ‘historic’ events, but about the transmitted past experiences. This past seems no longer to exist in the same way, but has been transformed through time; while at other times, this same past continues to reflect itself in our everyday.

That moment of opening Mother’s suitcase is a manifestation of how memory blurs the material with the immaterial. The letters in my parents’ handwriting summoned memories; and the letters received from uncles and aunts invoked their presence although it seemed we had forgotten about them. The concept of ‘sites of memory’ and the way they play a role in embodying and invoking memories can be linked to Bruno Latour’s view that objects too have agency, they can be among the associations made through which the social can be explored (Latour 2005, 79). The suitcase and letters on their own would not have held the same meaning if it was not for the memories they brought forth; and my memories would not have been summoned if it was not for Mother’s suitcase and its contents. As Latour suggests, the social can be seen in “associations between entities which are in no way recognizable!
as being social in ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together” (2005, 65). As will be elaborated in Chapter III, the border between the past present and future and the (im)material can be mapped in the physical objects when they invoke memories.

A sense of nostalgia is created when the memories of the past are romanticized. In our case, Mother’s nostalgia to Poland created in our everyday life a Polish home: “[a] sense of home is made part in repetitive details of daily interactions and use of space” (Feldman 2006, 11). Mother constantly tried to create a ‘Polish home’ regardless of where we were located. Mother, since the time she left Poland, was keen on maintaining practices that would create what she considered to constitute a Polish home. It truly seemed that “with increasing distance, the balance between the material and the narrative in people’s relationships to their homes shifted, and the ‘told’ occupied a larger place than the ‘touched’” (Feldman 2006, 17). Living in Egypt, Mother was keen on narrating her family’s experiences and details about their lives in Poland; her narratives included vivid descriptions of her childhood homes and their everyday. Through Mother’s stories, I could feel the smell of the trees of the forests from her childhood; I could see what her pets looked like; I could hear the sound of the piano playing in the background of a tense discussion between my grandfather and a German officer during WWII; I could reimage my grandfather’s composed intonation against the German officer’s unpleasant intonation. Mother, in ‘telling’ us these stories created in our minds images of the places that we have not ‘seen’ nor ‘touched’, and transmitted to us feelings we had not witnessed. Feldman’s statement offers, to a great extent, an explanation of the reasons that urged Mother to preserve her rituals and share her memories with us. In this sense, Mother’s past traditions infiltrate the present and future.

This feeling of nostalgia and romanticizing Poland was transmitted to us, and it expressed itself more forcefully during the times when we did not travel to Poland frequently. Thus, our everyday has always carried many aspects of this past. A nostalgia to a place and time that does not exist anymore is among the triggers that make us continue celebrating different festivities, which we have been always celebrating at home, such as Christmas and Easter. Our everyday rituals that we maintain, which Mother created within our home, manifest a “will to remember” (Nora 1989, 19). The process of remembering could start from remembering and
singing lullabies, remembering and preparing certain kinds of food, remembering and celebrating feasts at our home in Cairo or Warsaw.

Certain public festivities develop an altered meaning when they become related to the memories they hold. When celebrating feasts, such as for example Islamic Feasts, Christmas or Easter, we celebrate the meanings we have created for them, rather than their social meaning. In my family’s case, here again the personal and public overlap, where we reinvent a meaning for these public celebrations, and invoke the memories of our late parents.

Our memories of these rituals and our repetition of them create a continuation of a ‘Polishness’ which Mother was keen on recreating and preserving. As discussed by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwartz, memory is evoked “in the daily rituals of home-making in new lands practiced by the migrant” (2010, 3). After Mother passed away, my sisters and I have been very keen on observing and practicing these rituals, as though, as Connerton puts it “causing to reappear that which has disappeared” (1989, 69). By celebrating Christmas and Easter at home in Cairo, Mother’s Polish traditions reappear. We reinvent these rituals not to commemorate the religious occasion, but they represent to us a continuation of Mother’s efforts to bring the habits and traditions, within which she was raised, into our home (as will be elaborated in Chapter IV). Here, again, the religious public commemoration is transformed into a private memory, generating a different relationship towards time and space. It is an example of how memory blurs spatial and temporal boundaries, and how it changes the attributed social meanings given to material artifacts.

Throughout my research, the sense of nostalgia described above did not just remain enclosed in sentimentality towards a past that is gone; it took a different shape, and became a trigger for reconstructing the past in the present, offering ways for reassembling the present in our everyday. Susannah Radstone suggests that nostalgia melds the border between time and space (2010, 188) as will be elaborated in Chapter IV.

The Everyday
Throughout my autoethnography, I move within realms of memory and the everyday. Both are inseparable, and both create and invoke each other. Memories pop up in our everyday, as much as our everyday is shaped by the socio-economic and socio-political conditions in the societies we inhabit. The everyday includes the mundane
practices which de Certeau insightfully describes in the following statement: “[m]any everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many ‘ways of operating’: victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’” (1984, xix). De Certeau sees that society, in the act of conforming, evades mechanisms of discipline. In response to Foucault’s theories, de Certeau argues that although ‘discipline’ prevails, yet it is urgent to analyze how “society resists being reduced to it, (also “miniscule” and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them” (1984, xiv).

In my research about my family and our everyday, I am not interested in the practices themselves, but I look at them as examples of how the everyday carries mechanisms of negotiating a person’s social existence within practices of domination, allowing us to carve different realities and paths. Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos, in their book Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the 21st Century, suggest that in order to understand social transformation we need to look at ways in which “people subvert their existing situations without naming their practice (or having it named) as subversion” (2008, xiii).

The connection between memory and the everyday was also interpreted by Walter Benjamin. Scott McCracken suggests that Benjamin in The Arcades Project develops “a historical methodology that would see the everyday for what it is, but to suggest that what is, and indeed what has been might, at the same time, contain the possibility of transfiguration” (McCracken 2002, 147). I start by looking at the habits and rituals that constitute the rituals which we perform in our everyday lives. As mentioned by Ann Norton “habit, custom, and tradition draw past into the present” (1993, 454). Thus, for example, I look at the languages we speak, the food we eat, and the rituals we maintain. Each of these aspects represents both sites of memory as well as ways of renegotiating our social realities.

**Subject Creation in the Everyday in Light of Naming and Code Switching**

Mother was raised and lived in Poland, until she married Father who was raised and lived in Egypt. Before getting married, they belonged to different geographic spaces and social milieux (as will be elaborated in chapter II and III). They both had academic backgrounds related to fields of ‘culture’. After their marriage, they created a set of practices, which were invoked from their pasts and blended with their
academic interests. They have created assemblages of practices and norms that have shaped the routes my sisters and I take, and have affected the way our everyday gets negotiated within our societies, and have eventually offered certain widows of possibilities for my nephews. In my research I use my family’s past and present for a better understanding of this process. When I say that our parents practices ‘have shaped our routes’, I mean it in the sense that their pasts and life paths have brought elements into our everyday. The way we reassemble these elements plays a role in turn of shaping our everyday and paths.

I get a glimpse of my family’s past through memories, oral histories and written documents, to try to reimagine aspects of their social worlds. The power of naming has also played a role in the way members of our family have negotiated their social existence, the power to name is to “make-exist by virtue of naming” is among the categories that construct the social world (Bourdieu 1985, 729). I aim at flashing out aspects that have created my family’s current social realities, and have in turn affected the way we negotiate our everyday; as will be elaborated in the coming chapters.

After my parents got married, they settled in Kuwait. My sisters lived their childhood and most of their adolescent years in Kuwait, and I was born in Kuwait. We came to Egypt in 1984, when I was almost a five year old child. My sisters were socialized differently than me, which offers an insight into different community histories at different moments in history, and raises questions about how this affects the formation of the subject. My sisters’ recollections of the years spent in Kuwait, be it at school or among their friends and neighbors, reflect that they were socialized within a diverse society, connecting together the multiple threads of being raised in Kuwait, and growing up within a mixed family, then their move to Cairo bring threads together that explain the different routes they take.

When analyzing the everyday, what surfaces is a dialectic relation between two elements. On the one hand, the subject being acted upon, hence being subjected to certain social norms, systems of classification, or frameworks; and on the other hand, the subject being able to maneuver these social norms and systems of classification. When referring to subject formation, I use Foucault’s understanding of subject creation as linked to power:

[T]his form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality,
attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings to the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. (Foucault 1985, 781)

For Foucault, the subject is created by power, and tied to an identity with certain categories in a process that affects and is manifested in the everyday. There are different ways of seeing the interplay between being subjected to power relations and internalizing objectification, and the way the subject has agency that is manifested in everyday negotiations. According to Foucault, states bestow certain categories of classification on their citizens, and thus certain norms are set accordingly. Although this is done on the state level, still, we find that individuals with their complexities do not fall under these clear-cut categories. Judith Revel explains Foucault’s stance regarding power in relation to the subject, saying:

There is for Foucault a clear distinction to be made between what the relations of power construct in the form of an identity (that is, an objectified, reified identity, reduced to a number of definite characteristics, one that becomes the object of specific practices and knowledges), and the way in which subjectivity itself constructs its relations to itself. In the first case it is a matter of subjection that fixes identities on the basis of a number of determinations that are supposed to speak the truth of the subject … In the second case, the refusal of this reduction of subjectivity leads Foucault to theorize another form of the relation to oneself and others, namely in the concept of a way of life. (Revel 2009, 48)

In the case of my family, I trace the “way of life” which every one of us carves, as well as the systems of categorization and social frameworks to which we are subjected. De Certeau sees a possibility of dismissing frameworks, and states that “the individual detaches from them without being able to escape them and can henceforth only try to outwit them, to pull tricks on them” (1984, xxiv).

What interests me, here, are the possibilities of rediscovering and of reassembling the social via mundane practices and through the presence of invisible yet influential processes. I find Bruno Latour’s description insightful when he suggests that “sociology begins in wonder”; and elaborates that there is always “[a] paradoxical presence of something at once invisible yet tangible, taken for granted yet surprising, mundane but of baffling subtlety that triggers a passionate attempt to tame
the wild beast of the social” (2005, 21). Latour explains this process in relation to how knowledge about the social is being produced. In my research, I refer to the concept of reassembling the social in the sense that an individual has the capacity to reassemble his/her social realities even if within systems of power. In her book review of Sherry Ortner’s Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and Acting Subject, Chandra Mukerji explains that the agent is neither a passive recipient of a predetermined role nor a mirror of societal rules. The agent is, in fact, a strategic participant in social life, and exercises this strategic power in everyday life (2009, 562). In light of the above, I find Sherry Ortner’s interest in practice theory as:

[A] general theory of production of social subjects through practice in the world, and of the production of the world itself through practice. . . But the second part—the production of the world through human practice—seemed new and very powerful, providing a dialectical synthesis of the opposition between “structure” (or the social world as constituted) and “agency” (or the interested practices of real people) that had not previously been achieved. Moreover, the idea that the world is ‘made’—in a very extended and complex sense, of course—through the actions of ordinary people also meant that it could be unmade and remade. (2006, 9)

Toward reaching a better understanding of subject formation, I engage mainly with the examples of code switching, the power of naming, the ability to be critical towards hegemonic discourses as well as renegotiating categories of identification, specifically citizenship. These actions occur as part of the everyday in my family, who belong to the “ordinary people”, and through which the social world could be “made and remade” as suggested above by Ortner.

Code switching between Arabic, Polish and English is embedded in our everyday practices and features among the ways in which we maneuver our ways through the everyday. Language is connected to memory. At our home, three languages have always been spoken, Arabic with Father, Polish with Mother, while English was the common language between my parents. My sisters and I use both Arabic and Polish when talking to each other. When using Polish in Egypt we blend geographies, and the same applies in Poland when we switch to Arabic; even the code switching creates with it a blending of location as well as invoking our memory of the language itself.

A couple of months ago, I went to Al-Sawy cultural center in Zamalek in Cairo. I was sitting there among the audience, listening to a lecture by two Polish
professors about foreign students in Poland, and ways of assimilation within the Polish student life. Aida, my sister was sitting at the podium translating from English into Arabic then to Polish. She volunteered to help out translating between the three languages. My parents repeatedly recounted how, as a small child going to a shop in Warsaw with Father, he would sometimes run out of Polish words when buying something, and she would start translating what Father was trying to say to the shop keepers. Translation came to her naturally as a spontaneous act. The same applies to Maya, who finds herself translating between English, Arabic and German at her work. This must have a root in the fact that since we were children each of us was translating from one language to the other either for our parents, for our relatives or for ourselves.

In this sense, translation has become part of Aida and Maya’s everyday; and it has developed into aspects of their professional lives. Their everyday includes this factor due to the social environment in which they grew up, and their exposure to different languages, making code-switching an aspect of their everyday since childhood. Language is also a multi-layered tool, as it is an identifier, and has its effect in shaping one’s relation with different social environments. By choosing to use a specific language in a certain social environment, we create the way we are perceived. Code-switching between Polish, Arabic and English, as well as our everyday practices, take me to the potential for carving and creating various social assemblages. (This is further explained in chapter IV.)

Besides language as a tool for reassembling oneself, my sisters and I hold Egyptian and Polish citizenships. When interacting with state authorities we project the categories of identification related to the country where we are. When filling out official forms and documents in Egypt, the identity codes usually needed are ‘nationality’, ‘religion’, ‘gender’, ‘marital status’ and ‘level of education’. These categories already form a certain subject within the state. When we are in Poland, performing similar procedures at government institutions, the information provided could be different. These categories of identification that may seem as straightforward categories, actually might take us a couple of seconds to recall which State we are in while providing this information, and accordingly decide which identification to apply. States bestow categories on citizens, assuming that these categories should define an individual – an idea stated in the following lines:
The state is thus a powerful “identifier,”... it has the material and symbolic resources to impose the categories, classificatory schemes, and modes of social counting and accounting with which bureaucrats, judges, teachers and doctors must work and to which non-state actors must refer.” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 16)

Similarly, Anthony Cohen suggests that “[t]he state and other powerful social agencies compel us to compromise our individuality in our dealings with them by squeezing us into categories” (2002, 12). Yet, being holders of dual citizenships, we have the possibility of maneuvering through these categories of identification. Especially since these ‘classificatory schemes’ keep acquiring different meanings through time and at different situations, they are not fixed.

I remember Father telling us about the trip he took with Mother from Kuwait to Poland by car once in the late 1960s and then again in the early 1970s after my sisters were born. Father told us that at that time, while crossing borders, the Egyptian passport carried trust and respect, while the Polish passport triggered the doubts of security officials at borders. Mother, being a Polish citizen, was immediately labeled as a member of the Soviet bloc and categorized as part of the communist system (as will be elaborated in Chapter IV). In the same vein, though with more dramatic consequences, I remember the story of one of my uncles, who was traveling once with his wife on vacation to the Far East in the 1970s. He was travelling on his Jordanian passport, while she was carrying her Polish passport, and was therefore deported to Poland because citizens from communist countries were not allowed at that time to enter this country. At that time, holding a Polish passport was considered a source of ‘danger’ by other states, and East European countries were defined as the ‘other’. This discourse created about the ‘other’ can be detected in our family through time due to the geopolitical changes. At one point in time Polish citizenship was connected to the discourse of danger, while currently the discourse of danger has shifted towards Arabs. According to Foucault, discourses need to be treated as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (2004, 54).

The discourses created around nationalities and their attributes have developed across time, influenced by the changes in the socio-political contexts taking place throughout the years. Thus, the discourse around being an Arab can be traced in our interactions within our social environments in Poland. The Arab is now increasingly portrayed as the ‘other’, as ‘danger’. We witness the stereotyping which Edward Said describes as represented in “the West, which is rational, developed,
humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, underdeveloped inferior” (1979, 300). Among our acquaintances is Mrs. Joanna, who is in her late sixties. She married an Egyptian man in the late 1960s when she was on a scholarship in Egypt. They lived together in Egypt for a couple of years and then moved to Poland where they settled with their daughter in the early 1970s. While I was in Warsaw, I asked her how her family perceived that she was getting married to an ‘Egyptian’ and if at that time there was a discourse in Poland that did not favor Arabs, she told me:

At the time I got married in the late 1960s, Arabs did not have a bad reputation in Poland, as is the general perception now. The image of Arabs in Poland started deteriorating when Libyans started coming to Poland in the 1970s to do business, and were morally misbehaving (it was related mainly to misbehaving towards women, and encouraging prostitution). Since then the image of the Arab in Poland has been deteriorating. Now, there are many Egyptians in Warsaw who have opened small restaurants selling kebab sandwiches. I like going and talking to them, but you will find other Polish people avoiding opening conversations with them. Some are even against their existence in Poland.\(^4\)

In our everyday interactions in Poland, we are sometimes faced with manifestations of embedded discourses around Arabs, as well as certain categories of identification that are attributed to being an Arab. These categories of identification came to the forefront as well during the Egyptian Revolution in January 2011, where being ‘foreign’ was looked at with doubt due to some State discourses demonizing foreigners and their role in the revolution (as will be elaborated in chapter IV). Even though there are these attempts towards applying categories of identification on subjects, I am interested in following the “modes of subjectivation that could attempt to escape the objective frame of power and allow non-selfsame (non-identitaire) subjectivities to emerge” (Revel 2009, 47). The subject is the outcome of memory, the everyday, the social environments and the capacity to imagine alternative ways of living different realities.

**Approach and Concepts**

When joining the MA program, I felt the need to reshuffle my perceptions and positions. My thoughts and inclinations were tangled. In a general state of mess, I was in search of my research topic. Within this mess, I could clearly see my thoughts

\(^4\) This interview was conducted in Polish. The interview has been transcribed and translated into English by me.
going back to two main issues that stood out and triggered in me the urge to understand the social. The first of these was the Egyptian revolution in 2011, which at that time I saw revealing massive processes of reshaping the social on multiple levels. The second, on the personal level, was Adam, my nephew and his choice to leave Cairo and travel to Warsaw for his studies. I wanted to understand these two events, which at that time seemed as two disconnected occurrences; yet I could sense the embedded connection between what was happening in the ‘public’ sphere with the ‘personal’ decisions being taken within my family. This embedded connection goes beyond these two events; it has been the product of different elements developing throughout time. I started realizing that both the personal and the social are integrally interconnected. Looking inward into my own family members’ pasts seemed to offer me the way towards a deeper understanding of the societies I currently inhabit, and my position within them. Opening Mother’s suitcase with its letters was a starting point in linking what is very personal, emotional and to me sacred, to the public, historic, and mundane.

Concepts like ‘remembrance’, ‘the everyday’ and ‘subject formation’ surfaced in this process. Metaphors, some of which are connected to concepts, such as ‘weaving’, ‘collage’, ‘montage’, ‘flashes’, ‘lieux de mémoire’, ‘constellations’, ‘rubble’ and ‘rhizome’, emerged to the foreground as I proceeded in expressing my observations and thoughts. As Law suggests, any depiction is allegoric, and allegories or metaphors “make space for ambivalence and ambiguity” (2005, 89-90). Both John Law, in his book After Method: Mess in Social Science Research (2004), and Bruno Latour, in his book Reassembling the Social (2005), influenced my research method in their focus on breaking away from assuming that there is a monolithic social world out there, and their suggestion to break with conventional research methods. Thus, the idea that underlies my thesis, of connecting and collecting different elements towards reassembling the social, was specifically influenced by Latour.

I was particularly inspired by Walter Benjamin’s view of history and memory. His profound statement that the past remains dormant until it flashes up at a moment of recognizability (1968, 255) has inspired much of my research inquiries and constitutes an underlying theme of my narrative. His insightful concepts of ‘remembrance’ and ‘constellations’ reflect the way the past is part of the present. Benjamin breaks from the linearity of history, and instead, he deals with the past as flashes that appear in the present and can be redeemed when recognized; both the past
and present are integral parts of each other. Maurice Halbwachs, in his book *On Collective Memory* (1992), and Paul Connerton’s book, *How Societies Remember* (1989), both informed my research with their insights on the social aspects of memory, in shedding light on collective memory and commemoration, where the past also becomes reconstructed and reenacted socially in the present. Nora’s concept of ‘lieux de mémoire’, where he suggests that places embody memory and have the “capacity for metamorphoses” (1989, 19), was another guiding concept. Thus, ‘lieux de mémoire’ became a metaphor which I extended not only to places but also to individuals whose presence in itself acts like a site of memory. This metaphor connects the past with the present, and the material with the immaterial, where those concepts merge together.

Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos, in their book *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the 21st Century* (2008), and Michel de Certeau, in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), offered me ideas to rethink the everyday, and give weight to the mundane for its soft power in creating different currents that maneuver around controlling powers. They were in dialogue with Michel Foucault, who informed me on the way the subject is created and subjugated to power. Yet, de Certeau and Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos reassured me that what I observed as ways for reassembling the social were indeed feasible within structures of power. Bourdieu’s concept of the power of naming was entertaining to play with, as he suggests that power defines the social through controlling the power to name. In my research, I followed the way in which subjects, as well, exercise the power of naming over their societies’ power systems. The power of naming manifested itself in my family, in for example the use of the names Kamal, Pfabé, my sisters my nephews as well as my own name (as will be explained in detail in the following chapters). I find in these examples ways of the individual’s strife to infer meaning on the social.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), reshuffled my thinking through their simple metaphor of the ‘rhizome’. They broke my conventional tendency of seeing process as either linear or circular. Their metaphor of the ‘rhizome’ keeps coming up in my mind whenever I find myself leaning towards linearity in my processes of thinking. Hence, in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense, I followed a ‘rhizomic’ process, as the essence of the rhizome, according to them, is to “intersect” and “merge” roots (1987, 13). So, even if my autoethnography has a chronological aspect, I constantly intersect this chronology by
moving backward and forward in time, zooming inward and outward. This process emerged organically, where the theoretical concepts emerged and merged with my sources.

**Conclusion**

On the day when I was presenting to my colleagues in class the broad-lines of my thesis topic, I had no idea that I would be writing an autoethnography premised on memory and the everyday. Adam’s travel to Warsaw, amidst a moment of socio-political and economic changes in Egypt, then opening my parents’ letters, initiated my journey towards a better understanding of my surroundings. Through Adam, and his decision to go to Warsaw to pursue higher education, with the possibility of him settling down there in the future, I was able to trace many links to how the public and private were interconnected. Adam’s move to Warsaw brings events that took place more than fifty years ago to light, as the moment when my parents took similar decisions became recognizable in the present. This blend of the past and present makes me wonder how his future will be reassembled in light of that blend.

My autoethnography is my tool through which I attempt to trace the manner in which memories are in constant negotiation with the present. It also involves examining how the immaterial creates and affects the material and vice versa, in the way our memories interpret artifacts of the past, and how these artifacts trigger specific memories in us. All of this leads to an understanding of how we reinvent ourselves in our everyday. I look at our everyday practices that form constellations, which in turn carry elements from the past and the present, offering possibilities for reassembling our social realities. By focusing on my family, I am not interested in analyzing my family per se, but it serves as a specimen through which I can engage with multi-layered concepts toward a better understanding of the multiple layers and connections in the making of the social; linking the private with the public, and showing how boundaries can be blurred. The social worlds in which my family members were socialized offer an example of recreating the social space and reinventing one’s own social assemblage. Thus, borrowing Bruno Latour’s words, I follow the way actors “unfold their own differing cosmos, no matter how counter-intuitive they appear” (2005, 23). To put it in Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos words, I “look for social change in seemingly insignificant occurrences of life” (2008, XII).
In the act of telling the story of my family, I enter a dialectic relation of creating knowledge, where a personal story is an integral part of a wider story, where both are intertwined. My story is a microcosm of a larger universe. It is a personal story, yet it reveals the bigger issues which are not in discontinuity with their surroundings. In my Ethnographic Fieldwork class (mentioned earlier), we discovered that fieldwork has no beginning and no end; and indeed, as an autoethnographer, my personal recollections and the details of my everyday are an integral part of my research and this process.

In this chapter, I gave an overview of my overarching theories, methodologies as well as positionality. In the coming chapter I start delving into the reconstruction of elements in my grandparents’ past. In this endeavor, I introduce the way in which the public and private spheres are intertwined. I aim at reconstructing the past through the (im)material traces with the aim of eventually understanding the way in which elements in the social environments of my grandparents have played a role in the creation of Father and Mother’s paths later on, and eventually alter the future in the way these elements are invoked.
Chapter II
Remembrance

Walter Benjamin, in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, suggests that the “past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized” (1968, 255). In this autoethnography, I pursue such moments of recognizability – moments that revitalize the past. The process of remembrance brings the past into the present. In other words, the way we invoke memories reshapes the past in the present. Stéphane Symons insightfully elaborates on Benjamin’s process of remembrance saying that by granting the past a voice in the present “remembrance succeeds in disrupting the homogenous course of time and releases the past from the historical form of forgetfulness” (2013, 30). Subjects going through remembrance give voice to the past, and are reshaped by this same process of remembrance.

My starting point here is that of going back to the memories of my family members as well as mine around our grandparents. These memories help in the process of mapping some elements that construct the past. Memory also is my gateway toward a better understanding of subject formation; memory additionally creates a fluidity between the past and present, and has the ability to alter the everyday practices; thus, as suggested by de Certeau “[memory] derives its interventionary force from its very capacity to be altered – unmoored, mobile, lacking any fixed positions” (1984, 86).

Reimagining my parents’ social environments, as well as tracing the socio-political and economic environments in which my parents grew up, offers insights into the way they were socialized and how their paths were drawn, or disrupted (as will be elaborated in Chapter III). I am, however, interested in the present conditions, the way these conditions have been constructed and the means for renegotiating them. In our everyday, there are signs of fluidity between the past and present that get manifested when renegotiating our everyday practices (as will be elaborated in chapter IV). My overarching aim is to see how the personal is an integral part of the public and vice versa. Although this story is about my family, still, throughout the narratives, memories, and material traces of the lives of my grandparents, parents, as
well as those of my sisters and mine, I find myself looking at a wider angle. I
examine the way public and private realms are being constructed and reconstructed
through looking at specific events in history that affected societies and individuals.
The past is not a monolithic homogenous entity, there are many narratives of the past,
and I find in my family’s story an embodiment of diverse narratives and different
pasts.

To create my story, I invoke different voices, which include those of my
sisters, some of my family members and my parents’ friends. I also follow material
traces, such as photographs, paintings, and written documentation. It is through
people’s narratives, along with the images invoked by events in the present, or by
material traces, that I am able to make a montage out of these bits and pieces in the
process of creating a story – writing an autoethnography. When I refer to this process
in terms of ‘montage’, I am influenced here by Benjamin’s notion of the past as
flashing in “images” which can form a “constellation” in a process similar to that of
“montage” where images are glued together (Benjamin 2002). Constellations are
formed of elements, the elements can be traced through time; which therefore makes
me focus on following the elements that create our social environments through the
traces of a past that show up and invoke the past in our everyday.

In this chapter, my entry point to the story of my family is a glimpse of my
grandparents’ social environments, to set the stage to the formation of my parents’
paths and how their paths converged (Chapter III), and the way in which my sisters’
and my everyday are formed and negotiated (Chapter IV). By starting with my
grandparents, I do not attempt to proceed in a linear sequence. This story is not a
story of origin, but a story of possibilities; where I map stories. I, therefore, attempt to
apply a rhizomic approach, in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense, where “the rhizome
intersects roots and sometimes merges with them” (1987, 13). Similarly, within this
rhizomic chronology I move within times, forming constellations, linking the past
with the present, traveling between different geographies and histories.

During a recent short stay at our home in Warsaw in the summer of 2016, I
went through the contents of one of the bookcases there. I have been looking for
traces of a past that I have not witnessed, and which yet continues to be invoked in
the present. Our home in Warsaw has traces that help me both reimagine the past and
invoke it. In the wooden bookshelf, with sliding glass doors, stacked with Polish
books and pictures of some of our family members, I find, in the corner of one of its
shelves, a rather big beige carton square box. I do not remember seeing it before. I take it off the shelf, place it on the coffee-table in front of the armchair I am occupying. When I open the box, I find it filled with photographs from different moments in my family’s history. The photographs are grouped and tucked into small transparent plastic bags, others are placed separately. I start going through them. They are of different family members in Poland, some have Grandmother’s handwriting specifying the names and dates, others do not. Some of those photographs go back to the late nineteenth century – mainly portraits of great grandparents, great-uncles and aunts. Going through its contents, I also find pictures of Mother with Aida and Maya together with their cousins in Poland when they were small children. Then I find a small batch of colored photographs, which include pictures of Grandmother, Mother and me when we went to the United States in the early 1990s to attend my cousin’s wedding. I start showing these pictures to my nephew Adam, who is with me at home at that moment, and I start telling him some of the memories which I recollect or stories told by Mother. I show him the picture of our great-uncle Witold, Grandfather’s brother, who lost his life during WWI, being then a student at the same university where Adam is now studying. I wonder if this photo would have attracted my attention, and whether I would have shown it to Adam, had he not been studying at the same university as my/his great-grand-uncle Witold!

**Paternal Traces:**

**Naming as Transformation**

Going through the contents of the bottom shelves of the bookcase at our home in Warsaw, I find a small carton box, tied with a yellow ribbon. I untie the ribbon and open it to find several letters and postcards sent by Father to Mother. One of them is a letter sent to Mother in 1959. I stop at the name and address written on the envelope. It carries Father’s name and his address in al-Sakakini,⁵ Cairo, where he used to live at the time. I decide to carry this box of letters with me back to Cairo, where I live. Triggered by the box of letters standing now in my room, I decide to further investigate Father’s life. I look for Father’s black briefcase, which has ended up in my room a while ago. It is the briefcase in which Father kept different documents. I open

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⁵ According to the Cairo Governorate Website, Cairo includes districts, sub-districts and neighborhoods. Al-Sakakini is a neighborhood that currently belongs to the al-Dhafer sub-district of al-Wayli district located in the western part Cairo (http://www cairo.gov.eg/areas/Lists/List1/DispForm.aspx?ID=20). Also, see Appendix C Figure 1.
it, and there I find a yellowish paper: his birth certificate; the handwriting on it is worn out, but what remains clearly legible is that it states that Father was born in Cairo in 1931, and includes the names of his parents: Mohamad Yusif Kamal and 'Insaf 'Arafa; both categorized as Egyptian and Muslim. I stopped at our family name, Kamal, and I started remembering that there was a story behind that name. I had a vague recollection of Father telling us that our grandfather changed his family name to Kamal.

I decided to visit my eldest sister, Aida, at her home, and ask her about her memories concerning our family name, Kamal. I called her and asked her if she had time for me to drop by and listen to her story and memory of our family name. She told me to come over straightaway as Nabil, her husband, and Farid, her son, were out, so this would give us some time to chat without interruption. I took the car and drove to her, as she lives nearby. We sat in the salon on our parents’ arabesque sofa, with Father’s arabesque desk in front of us. The sofa set and the desk were among the pieces which are now placed at Aida’s home. In the desk, she has devoted a drawer to some of Father’s documents and photographs going back to his childhood. Aida remembers many details about the name Kamal, from the stories she heard recounted by Father, our uncles, and aunt. She tells me the following:

Our grandfather, who was born somewhere in the late eighteen hundreds, was impressed by Kamal Ataturk and his modernization project, which made him choose the name Kamal as his own, and then made it his children’s family name. The story goes back to his family lineage. My grandfather’s family is from al-Sharqiyah governorate. They belonged to a family called Ziyada; but our grandfather was so impressed by Kamal Ataturk that he decided to change his own family name to Kamal and drop Ziya. From what I know this was part of his defiance of his family, who maintained a family tradition of having their sons educated in al-Azhar; while he chose for himself a path that was the total opposite of his family’s.6

After listening to Aida’s recollections, I wanted to get to know how Maya, my second sister, remembers the story of our family name. I was also particularly interested to know whether there were differences between my sisters’ narratives. When I asked Maya, she pondered, and recounted the following: “as I recall, Father used to say that our grandfather chose the name ‘Kamal’ as his family name because he respected

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6 All my interviews with my sisters were conducted mainly in Arabic with occasional code-switching into English and Polish. The interviews are transcribed and translated into English by me.
Kamal Ataturk’s achievements and model.” Maya could not remember anything more in that respect.

In my case, as already mentioned above, I do not remember specific details; what I know is that the name Kamal was chosen by our grandfather after Kemal\(^7\) Ataturk. Comparing our three versions, it becomes clear that the three of us share the same recounted memory: our grandfather was impressed by Kemal Ataturk as a leader and his modernization project, taking him as a role model; but each of us has a different level of details around this story. Historical accounts reveal that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk worked towards modernizing the Turkish State. After World War I, he attempted to separate the Turkish state institutions from the religious institutions, with the aim of creating a nation characterized by emerging secular structures (Cleveland and Bunton 2009, 175).

After Father passed away, I heard some stories about our family from Father’s younger brother Uncle Sadik. He reminded me of things I had heard before but forgotten, and shared with me some of his childhood recollections that included details about Father’s childhood as well. He told me that his grandfather, Sheikh Yusif, was a Sheikh ‘Amud at al-Azhar.\(^8\) That was somewhere in the eighteen hundreds. My uncle explained to me that before al-Azhar became a university with faculties, a Sheikh would sit at a specific column at al-Azhar while students would come to learn from him; that was the traditional educational system. Regarding our family name, he said that his father was impressed by Kemal Ataturk, and consequently adopted the name Kamal. My uncle’s theory is that our grandfather was impressed by everything modern at that time. I remember my uncle pointing at a picture of my grandfather’s, hanging on the wall at his home, and laughingly saying: you see your grandfather is wearing a suit and a tie, and a tarbush (fez) on his head. This, in my uncle’s view, represented modern attire at that time. I, also, see

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\(^7\) The Arabic equivalent of the Turkish name Kemal is Kamal.

\(^8\) According to Nisma al-Sihiti, in an article titled “The Disappearance of ‘Sheikh al-‘Amud’ from al-‘Azhar” the author says that Sheikh al-‘Amud used to sit at one of the columns at al-‘Azhar where students would gather around him while he gave his lecture. This was the teaching system at al-‘Azhar until it started disappearing when al-‘Azhar restructured itself into a university with faculties and departments, which completely changed the teaching system together with the structures. (2009, September 18) The disappearance of “Sheikh al-‘Amud” from al-‘Azhar. Sawt al-‘Ummah newspaper. http://www.masress.com/soutelomma/2723
grandfather’s choice to study philosophy, instead of studying at al-Azhar University, as another trace of his inclination towards modernization.

Uncle Sadik had also mentioned to me that his father died when Uncle Sadik was still a child. This was around 1947, and consequently Father became the head of the family. Although Father was the second child, yet the eldest son was not up to the responsibility because he was known in the family as a free-spirited person and not particularly reliable. In his lifetime, my grandfather had already nominated Father to be the head of the family. To verify this point my uncle referred to al-ashraaf’s lineage document, which carries the name of Father as the head of the family. Recalling this story told to me by Uncle Sadik, I looked through Father’s documents in search of a brown leather folder, where I remembered Father had kept the documents related to Niqbat al-ashraaf (al-Ashraaf Syndicate) in Egypt. This syndicate is an organization in Egypt whose membership is based on lineage to Prophet Mohammad, and is the only Egyptian syndicate based on lineage and blood connection (‘Abd al-‘Al 2010, 287-288). The word ashraaf in Arabic is derived from the word sharaf which means both nobility and honor.

I found the brown leather folder, with folkloric designs. Looking inside it, I saw a small white notebook, which is the al-Ashraaf Lineage Document, listing the names of Father and his siblings. Indeed, I found Father’s name listed as “The head of the family” followed by his five brothers and sister. In this document, Father’s family name takes a different form from his birth certificate. In his birth certificate, his last name is Kamal, whereas in al-Ahraaf document, Father’s family name does not include Kamal, and the last name is Ziyada. In this same leather folder, I found a folded seventeen page long photocopy of a document issued by al-Ashraaf syndicate. It goes back to 1327 Hijri year, which is the equivalent of 1909 A.D. It is written in cursive Arabic script, listing the family lineage from Father’s grandfather Yusif Ziyada up till Prophet Mohammad.

Sitting at my desk at night, I stared at these documents and realized that I did not have any concrete memories of Father mentioning to me our al-ashraaf lineage, I had a vague recollection that Father used to say that he was connected to al-ashraaf through both his father’s and mother’s families. Looking at the documents again, I saw in them a historical document explaining to me my lineage, especially since I
was born long after my paternal grandparents had passed away, so this document seemed to offer me a historical background of my linkage to Father’s family. The following morning, I showed the folder with its contents to Maya, seeking her reaction and asking her for her reflections on the documents. She shared with me the following thoughts:

Belonging to al-ashraaf carries an honorary acknowledgement by the Muslim society. Father has mentioned that it holds with it a moral responsibility. If someone I deal with happens to know that I belong to al-ashraaf I become aware of their recognition of this lineage. Remember that in every prayer Muslims pray for Muhammad and his descendants.

I sent to Aida a photograph of al-Ashraaf document, highlighting to her the variations in our family names; then I called her asking about how she came to know of our al-ashraaf lineage and the way she perceived it. She told me the following:

I think it was in the 1990s, around the time when Father was working on collecting different official documents that would help in the process of applying for the Egyptian nationality for Mother. I remember seeing in his hands a document from al-Ashraaf syndicate, in which Father showed me that family’s last name was Ziyada. I remember that he did not take al-Ashraaf syndicate seriously, and this is why he did not consider producing for us, his daughters, similar documents. I think that to me this whole thing seemed amusing. I was interested in the name issue, but I did not care much about this whole ashraaf business.

Although each one of us has a different stance regarding the connotation of belonging to al-ashraaf and the way in which each of us relates to it, I remembered that when Father passed away Maya suggested to have his name preceded by “Al-Sharif” in the newspaper obituary; Aida and I agreed to this suggestion.

Thinking about our positions, I went back to Bourdieu’s statement “[t]itles are symbolic capital, socially and even legally recognized” (1985, 733). In the light of this statement, I see that each one of us inferred a different meaning from the al-Sharif title. To Aida, it does not hold any symbolic nor social capital; to Maya it carries both symbolic and spiritual value; whereas to me, it is not the title, but the historical document asserting the lineage, that represents an aspect of my family tree and personal history. On another level, my sisters and I have different memories and perceptions of how Father thought of al-ashraaf. Each one of us seems to remember Father’s reactions or words that coincide with her own position. It was interesting for
me to note how each one of us, through our memories, indirectly imposed a particular stance on Father. This brings me to the bigger question of how history is written: who writes it and depending on what influences it. Comparing our narratives brought to my mind H. E. Carr’s proposition that the historian’s work is selective, and the belief that depending on facts would lead to objectivity is, in his words, a “phallacy” (1961, 11).

**Tracing Paths**

Having followed the thread of our family name, I wanted to dig deeper into details about my paternal grandparents. I sought a better understanding of Father’s social environment. Since both my paternal grandparents passed away long before I was born, and as far as I can remember Father rarely talked about his childhood or his parents, I therefore decided to start by asking Aida about her memories of Father’s family. I took into consideration that her narrative is mainly mediated by her conversations with Father and Aunt Ferial, father’s younger sister. Aida tells me:

Our grandfather came from al-Sharqiyyah governorate, his family were landowners and sheikhs in al-Azhar. I know from stories I heard from Father and Aunt Ferial that our grandfather’s family had planned for him to go to Cairo to study at al-Azhar, then to return back to al-Sharqiyyah. But our grandfather had a different vision. He went to Cairo and, against his family’s will, he started studying at Cairo University (known at that time as the Egyptian University). That was before the 1919 revolution. He decided that he wanted to study philosophy. Consequently, his family disowned him, so he dropped his family name from his documents and added a new family name ‘Kamal’, and then did the same with his children’s documents. I am not sure of the dates, but he was engaged to my grandmother Insaf, who also came from al-Sharqiyyah and belonged to al-Ashraaf. I do not know how her family allowed them to get married since he had been disowned by his family. There is a picture of him, I remember seeing it in my aunt’s home, in the form of a postcard sent by grandfather from England to my grandmother in Egypt. My grandfather traveled to Oxford for a degree. I remember in my childhood seeing the scroll hanging at one of my uncle’s homes. I also remember Mother showing it to me and reading it to me in Latin; it was a degree in Philosophy. It is too bad that all these documents got scattered among Father’s family and we cannot retrieve them. From what I remember, our grandfather worked at the Ministry of Interior. As I recall Father said that he worked as a translator because of his proficiency in both Arabic and English. I do not know where he learned English. I vaguely remember my grandmother from my

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[9] Al-Sharqiyyah governorate is located in the eastern part of the Egyptian Delta.
childhood. I remember Father saying that his maternal grandmother was Turkish, and that she used to speak to them in Turkish while they would reply to her in Arabic.

I wanted to compare Aida’s narrative with Maya’s memories to spot any contradictions or differences in their stories. Maya told me that she did not remember much about our grandfather’s life: “What I know is that Father’s family comes from al-Sharqiyyah, and I remember Father saying that our grandfather graduated from the Department of Philosophy at Cairo University, and that he worked at the Ministry of Interior; but he was not an officer, he held an administrative position.”

In my attempt to find traces of my grandfather’s journey and its potential influence on our life, I recollected a conversation with Uncle Sadik at his home in Cairo. I remember seeing in his study a dark wooden frame hanging on the wall with a document that seemed to have turned yellow with time. It was written in Latin and carried my grandfather’s name. My uncle told me that this was the certificate which my grandfather obtained from Oxford. I had taken a picture of the certificate, so I went back to it and found out that it was a diploma in Philosophy, written in Latin. It was issued in 1922 by Oxford Correspondence College. Interestingly, my grandfather’s family name stated in it is “Kamal” without any reference to his original family name “Ziyada”.

Uncle Sadik had told me that he remembered growing up as a child with his siblings in al-Dhahiri in Cairo, where they owned a three-floor building with a garden. He told me that his childhood memories of his father were those of an ill father, with his two eldest brothers helping their father to move around, until he passed away when my uncle was around five years old. According to a piece of paper in Father’s handwriting, which Aida found in Father’s desk and gave to me, our grandfather was born on 13 December 1890, started working in 1911, got married in 1927, and passed away on 27 October 1947. This date of grandfather’s death corresponds with my uncle’s calculations about the estimated date of his father’s death. This personal material trace, with its handwritten dates, also corresponds to my

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10 According to the Cairo Governate Website, Cairo includes districts, sub-districts and neighborhoods. Al-Dhaher is a neighborhood that currently belongs to the Al-Dhaher sub-district of al-Wayli district located in the western part Cairo (http://wwwcairo.gov.eg/areas/Lists/List1/DispForm.aspx?ID=20). Also, see Appendix C Figure1 for the map of showing Al-Dhaher district in Cairo.
sisters’ and my memory of Father mentioning to us that he had lost his father at the age of sixteen years old.

I also remember Uncle Sadik telling me that his father worked in the Ministry of Interior, as an administrator not a police officer. He could not remember exactly his father’s profession, but I also remember him telling me about his memory of his father’s military funeral. He told me that before his father’s death they had lived a wealthy life, as they owned land in al-Sharqiyyah governorate; but after the death of their father, their inherited land was lost to their father’s family. According to Uncle Sadik, his mother had no experience in running and preserving their inheritance, so they lost all their properties in al-Sharqiyyah. According to him, their mother sold their house in al-Dhahir without even having to sell it, and they were then obliged to live in different rented apartments in the same area as well as in the neighboring al-Sakakini. He added that their mother wanted to maintain the same standard of living after their father’s death but they could not. He referred to the times when he and his siblings experienced financial difficulties, but pointed out that they were able to handle the hardships, continued their education, had jobs, and got married. Uncle Sadik’s wife, who was their childhood neighbor in al-Sakakini, had mentioned to me that she remembered our grandmother (her mother in-law) as a sociable person who took great care of her appearance. To elaborate she mentioned that even during her illness, she would get up and get dressed, wear her makeup, fix her hair, and be ready to receive any visitors that would pass by anytime. She also added that my grandmother’s cooking was exceptionally delicious and memorable.

The same image of grandmother was always portrayed and remained in my sisters’ memories from Aunt Ferial, my Father’s sister. When I asked Aida and Maya if they remembered our paternal grandmother, they had very vague recollections of her – they were both very small when she passed away. Aida and Maya’s memories of our grandmother are mediated through Aunt Ferial and our parents; they both told me that they would always hear about what a great cook she was, and how kind she was to Mother. Our grandmother passed away in 1973, so I did not witness her, my main memory of her comes from a black and white portrait that shows a middle-aged short-haired round-faced smiling woman. It was in a golden frame hanging in Aunt Ferial’s home. My memory of her is also mediated by my parents, as I remember Mother saying how warmly our grandmother welcomed Mother into her family. The memory of my grandmother’s portrait was particularly invoked when I started asking
my sisters about her, as this picture was the main trace in my memory related to my grandmother. Similarly, in her narrative about grandfather, whom she never saw, Aida’s memories about him had been invoked by the image she had of both his framed photograph and the diploma hanging on the wall in our uncle’s house.

It is worth noting here that in the process of tracing my paternal grandparents’ history, material evidence goes hand in hand with the narratives. Documents invoke memories, and memories lead to tracing material evidence that complements memory; both the material and immaterial coexist in a scattered dialogue. Aida’s memories were more detailed, she would refer to a physical trace that she saw, a picture or a document. Maya did not remember those physical traces, but only had brief memories of what she heard. In my case being immersed in the letters, documents, pictures I examine, and the stories I listen to, I find myself moving within the (im)material seeking to get a glimpse of the past that is part of the present. This process of research brings to my mind Benjamin’s notion of the past showing up in an “image which flashes up” (1968, 255). Adrian Wilding suggests that Benjamin was influenced by surrealism and hence suggested the idea of juxtaposing the past and the present, where memory works creatively, and a montaging of those images together breaks the supposed linearity of the past (1996, 51-52).

**Al-Sakakini: Material Traces**

Sitting at my desk surrounded by Father’s and Mother’s different documents, pictures, and letters, I start unpacking envelopes within which I find old black and white photographs from Father’s childhood and youth. One of these photographs represents Father as a little child, not older that five years I would say, sitting on the lap of a man, among five other men, at the outdoor table of a traditional Egyptian café. Each of the men is wearing a tarbush (fez) on his head, and they are all dressed in suits, except for one, who is wearing a galabiya;¹¹ all of them are looking at the camera. I show this picture to Aida, and she remembers Father and Aunt Ferial telling her that the photo was taken at Qahwit ‘Urabi (Urabi Café) in al-‘Abasiyyah,¹² close to where Father’s family lived at that time. I showed Maya the picture, she

¹¹ Traditional men’s gown worn in Egypt.
¹² According to the Cairo Governorate Website, Cairo includes districts, sub-districts and neighborhoods. Al-Abbasiyya is a neighborhood that currently belongs to the Al-Wayli sub-district of al-Wayli district located in the western part Cairo (http://www.cairo.gov.eg/areas/Lists/List1/DispForm.aspx?ID=20). Also, see Appendix C, Figure 1.
remembered that she saw it before, she started looking at the details of the picture, laughing how father had a fringe over his forehead similar to Adam’s when he was a child. But she did not recall stories about that picture. I do not remember seeing this picture before. The envelope holding these pictures was in Father’s arabesque desk which is in Aida’s house now. She had given me this envelope when I started collecting documents and traces about my parents’ childhoods. As I mentioned earlier, I do not remember Father talking much about his childhood and youth; so in my attempt to re-imagine his youth, I connected these threads of documents I found, the pictures I saw and the narratives I heard.

After recollecting the stories about Father’s childhood, seeing his childhood pictures, I wanted to go and see Father’s childhood and youth neighborhood; seeking to construct an image of where he lived, and collect more threads for reconstructing this image. I called up Aida and asked her: “Would you join me on a pilgrimage to al-Sakakini and al-‘Abasiyyah districts to follow our father’s childhood steps?” Aida immediately got excited about the idea. I have chosen Aida to join me as she has more memories and stories recounted by our parents about their childhood and early years. I also knew that she would enjoy revisiting those places. My sisters and I remember Father telling us that he had attended Fuad al-Awwal School in al-‘Abasiyyah. I additionally tried to recall what Uncle Sadik had told me about his childhood, and I remembered him saying that most of the people who lived in al-‘Abasiyyah and its surrounding districts at that time went to either Fuad al-Awwal School or Farouk al-Awwal School, but he could not remember which of the two my Father graduated from. Uncle Sadik had told me that after their father’s death they went to live for a short time in al-Sharqiyyah, in their village there. I remember him saying, laughingly, that even though they were going through tough times and financial hardship, still they had a dog which they named Lucky. He had told me that they did not stay long in al-Sharqiyyah and soon returned back to Cairo, where they lived for while in al-Dhahir and then moved to al-Sakakini.

Aida and I decided to head to al-Sakakini on a Friday morning by taxi, and not knowing exactly where to go, we asked a taxi driver to take us to Sakakini Square. The taxi driver drove us via Ramsis street, then turned into a side street leading to Sakakini Square, where we got off in front of the old beautiful rundown palace occupying the square – the Sakakini Palace. Once we started exploring the area on foot, Aida began having a recollection of us riding the car with Father while he was
driving through those streets and showing us where he used to live and where his school was. Aida looked at one of the old two-floor buildings with a tree in front of it and said: “Well, I guess their home must have looked similar to this one with this big balcony. Father used to say that he and his elder brother would race with their bicycles in their balcony when they were children.” Aida then added: “look how the tree is overarching the building; this also reminds me of our father joking about himself as a small child, not being able to fall asleep at night after watching King Kong movie at the cinema, as he was imagining the tree opposite his window to be King Kong.”

We walked on, asking around for directions to Fuad al-Awwal School, which we found in al-Geish street, after three young girls told us to continue walking straight ahead. We found a school building painted in yellow, looking more like a renaissance palace with white Roman statues. Aida stood in front of that school, and took pictures of it, while I continued walking ahead. There was a small shop, I entered it asking for directions to confirm that I am on the right way to the Husseiniyya School. The young man in the shop pointed at a fence beside his shop: “that is the school” he said, and added “it used to be called Fuad al-Awwal, now it is called El-Husseiniyya, and it is in the hands of the army.” I asked him what he meant by the school being “in the hands of the army”, so he clarified that it was both a public secondary school and a military school. I thanked him, and waved to Aida who was still standing in front of the school painted in yellow. After asking around, it turned out that this was now called Ismail Al-Qabani School, which used to be Farouk al-Awwal School. Aida’s recollection was that Father was pointing at that school and saying that it was his. We then took the side street leading to al-Husseiniyya school, built of red bricks in anglo-saxon style. When we approached the entrance gate, we saw young men in military uniform checking the documents of the people entering the school. As we stood there taking pictures, someone approached asking what are we looking for, and then we saw one of these military young officers coming out of the school and heading towards us, asking what we wanted. We simply asked whether that was Fuad al-Awwal School, and then left the scene, heading back to the main street.

13 King Kong is a classic film that was first released in the United States in 1933.
We took a short walk then stopped a taxi to return home. As the taxi was leaving Abbasiyya, he drove by al-Dhaiber mosque. I continued looking at the buildings, trying to imagine what it had all looked like around 80 years ago when Father was born. Following all the available threads I tend to situate Father within the early twentieth century modernized middle class milieu, based on the traces of the buildings going back to the 1920s, which stand in stark contrast to new twelve-floor buildings scattered here and there, together with the run down - once glorious – schools, along with the information I have about my grandfather’s profession, education and lineage.

Sites of Memory
After returning from that tour, I thought of Samir Rif’at, Father’s childhood friend with whom I reconnected in the course of my research to help me relate to a time I did not witness but have kept in my memory through stories mediated by Father and Mother. Samir Rif’at is known as an artist and a Professor of Plastic Arts at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo.14 According to Maha Abd el-Rahman, he was born in 1931 in al-Sakakini in Cairo. He is one of the major Egyptian artists who used art as an interactive tool with people, his artwork includes memorials, theater decorations, monitory designs and stamp designs (2015, 27-28). In one of our meetings together, Samir Rif’at told me that he had lived his childhood and youth in al-Sakakini district. He told me that he remembered from his childhood the incident about the bomb that was dropped in the area of al-Dhahir mosque, causing a huge hole in the street. He added that it had happened during WWII, when a German airplane, seeing al-Dhahir mosque space from the sky, mistakenly thought that it was a British army camp.15 He also reminded me that he and Father were childhood friends and said that they used to live a few blocks apart, whereby Father would walk to his place and they would then play football together in the streets of al-Sakakini.

I, therefore, thought of going there again, but this time with Samir Rif’at, in my attempt to re-imagine Father’s childhood and youth through his memories. When I suggested to him that we go together to al-Sakakini and the neighborhood around it, in an attempt to hear from him his memories while we were in the physical place itself where he and Father grew up, he got excited. When I told Aida about my plan,

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14 Samir Rif’at is a pseudonym I use throughout my thesis.
15 I could not find material documentation to verify this story.
she decided to join us. She remembered Father’s explanation of his poor drawing skills, saying that being Samir Rif’at’s classmate, and at a time sharing a school-bench with him, Samir Rif’at would always come to his rescue during art class or when drawing maps.

The three of us drove to al-Sakakini together. Samir Rif’at giving directions to our destination. Once we parked the car in a small side street in al-Sakakini, Samir Rif’at started remembering and showing us where he used to live and where he used to play football with Father. While walking the streets of al-Sakakini, the memories of our elderly Uncle Samir seemed limited to the place of the house where he was born and lived, and the story about the Sakakini Palace, \(^{16}\) situated in the center of the neighborhood, where we sat with him on one of the marble benches surrounding the palace. He could not exactly remember the school he and Father attended, nor the exact location of Father’s home. Samir Rif’at mentioned to me that Father was interested in philosophy and literature, so as they grew older their roads diverged and their social circles differed.

While we were taking a tour around the once glorious, now run down, Sakakini Palace, he told us that there was a tramway passing through al-Sakakini district. This reference to the tramway triggered my own stream of memories. I found myself remembering Father’s stories about how he would take his maternal aunts, who lived nearby, on ice-cream outings when he had started working and earning his own money. Father used to tell us that they would take a ride by the tramway, stop for an ice-cream, then return home. I also remembered Uncle Sadik telling me that Father enjoyed reading and writing, and he remembered that when Father was still a student he used to write short stories and have many copies printed at his own expense, then Uncle Sadik and his friends would distribute these short stories in the tramway.

This tour in al-Sakakini district did not invoke memories in me, as I do not recall visiting that place with Father. Yet it did invoke memories within Samir Rif’at. When I called him the following day, he told me that after returning home from al-

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\(^{16}\) According to Samir Rif’at, during the Suez Canal construction, rats were infesting the food and wheat storages near the construction site. Mr. Al-Sakakini had the brilliant idea of bringing cats from Cairo to the construction site so that they may get rid of the rats; and the problem was solved. So as a reward, he received from Isma’il Pacha, Egyp’t’s Khedive at the that time, the piece of land where he built his palace, which became a landmark after which the whole district was named. He also told us that, at some point, the Palace was taken over by the Ministry of Health, and turned into a museum and a warehouse.
Sakikini, his mind carried him back into the past and he remembered many things that he thought he had forgotten. Reflecting on his words, I realized that, to him, al-Sakakini presented a “lieu de mémoire” in Pierre Nora’s sense, being “an embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” (1989, 7). In my case, it was not the site itself that triggered memories, but fragments of Uncle Samir’s recollections invoked my memories based on the stories I had heard from Father. Thus, this autoethnographic process of examining material traces and collecting personal narratives, across multiple temporalities and locations, brought along flashes of memories that created constellations, and helped me develop a personalized representation of Father’s social environment and everyday.

**Ruptures and Renegotiations**

Going back to my notes about my grandfather’s act of renaming himself and his children, I saw it as a moment of rupture and transformation of his social path. The philosophy certificate, and the al-Ashraaf document provide a material trace of the approach our grandfather adopted choosing a secular (modern) instead of a religious (traditional) path. This trace of evidence and the relevant stories show an attempt toward reinventing oneself that had started with my grandfather’s naming. All of these historical accounts, material traces, and memories formed a constellation, where the past and present merged. To me, when seeing these traces, they create a moment of recognizability; these documents reflect a process in which my grandfather renegotiated his everyday, where he managed not be “subject to someone else by control and dependence” (Foucault 1982, 781). It is a similar aspect of maneuvering certain social constructs that imposes itself when I trace my sisters’ everyday and mine (in Chapter IV).

My grandfather chose to take what was at that time considered a ‘modern’ and ‘secular’ route: studying philosophy rather than theology, going to the Egyptian University, as well as receiving a diploma from a British university rather than being educated at al-Azhar, the way his family had expected him to do. Moreover, through the act of renaming himself and his children, he created for himself a new path and new social reality. I found this act resonating with Bourdieu’s concept of the power of naming, which creates categories for preserving the social world (1985, 729). Bourdieu’s concept was related to the fields of power on the macro level of the dominating political powers, manifested in states. Yet, in the case of my grandfather,
I see the struggle inverted; it exists on the micro level as he took the power of naming in his hands and transformed his social world. Through changing his family name he transcended boundaries – religious, social and national; and created a different meaning for himself and his family. Again, in Bourdieu’s sense, my grandfather had a “struggle over classification” (1985, 731). I find it particularly fascinating to discover that while my paternal grandfather used the power of ‘naming’ to construct a particular social reality, my maternal grandfather, geographies apart, also used the power of ‘naming’ to reclassify himself, as explained in the following section.

Maternal Traces:

Naming as Resistance

I grew up knowing that my grandfather, Edward, who was born in Poland where he lived all his life, was a forestry engineer. He worked as a Forest Officer responsible for state owned forests in the areas near the city of Częstochowa, in the south of Poland. Among my grandparents’ documents at our home in Warsaw, in one of the drawers of the desk that used to be his own, there is a pack of his various identification cards, among which there is a document carrying his picture. It is an identification document going back to the year 1945, where grandfather’s picture appears under the following title: Związek Zawodowy Pracowników Leśnych i Przemysłu Drzewnego R.P. (Union for Forest Workers and Wood Industry, the Republic of Poland). It states that my grandfather was born on 3.12.1899 in Zawiercie, and his title is defined as Inż. Leśnik (Forestry Engineer), having joined the Union in 1925.

Uncle Witold, Mother’s only brother who currently lives in the United States, gives a written account of how, together with Mother, they grew up in villages and small cities near forests because of their father’s work as a Forestry Engineer. Due to the nature of his father’s work, the house where they lived would include the Forest

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17 See Appendix C, Figure 2 for a map of Poland.
18 Zawiercie is a city in the south of Poland. It is around 53km to the south of Częstochowa.
19 See Appendix C, Figure 9: a picture of grandfather’s identification card.
20 Uncle’s written account appears in the introductory part of the book my sisters and I published in Polish after Mother passed away. The book’s title is O początkach powieści egipskiej (On the Beginnings of the Egyptian Novel), published in 2010. The book itself is divided into two parts, the first includes an introductory biographical section on Mother, whereby Aida had asked my uncle and three of Mother’s colleagues and friends to write personal notes about her, as well as our own reflections. The second part contains chapters representing my Mother’s PhD research papers. Uncle’s memories appear in the essay entitled “Teresa oczami brata” (Teresa through her Brother’s Eyes).
District Office (Pfabé 2010, 19). However, I did not know the exact year of my grandparents’ marriage (1932) until I came across a piece of paper which I found among Mother’s letters, written in Mother’s handwriting, where she noted that her parents would be celebrating their fortieth anniversary in 1972.

I grew up knowing that my grandfather came from an originally Belgian family. Stories differ, however, as Aida remembers the following from Mother and grandmother’s stories:

Our grandfather’s grandfather came to Poland from Belgium at the time of the industrial revolution. Being an engineer, he was appointed at a textile factory that was among the first to be established in Poland. He settled down in Poland, married a Polish woman, and gave his children Polish names. For instance, his son – our great grandfather – carried the traditional Polish name Sobieslaw.

When I asked Maya, she remembered that Mother’s paternal great grandfather came from Belgium and had vague recollections of a connection with the textile industry. However, she could not remember the details of how or why he came to Poland. I remember when I once asked Uncle Witold about our Belgian decent he did not seem to show interest or share much information about this issue. After I started doing my research, I asked him if he had any traces that showed why our great grandfather decided to come to Poland from Belgium. He told me the following:21

I read in some notes that were written long ago by my father’s sister that she knew that her great grandparents traveled around the end of the eighteenth century or early nineteenth century from Belgium, or somewhere around Belgium, to Poland. Our great grandparents were working in the business of crude metal. This is why they came to Poland. At that time, the borders between countries were different, and the movement between countries was easier.

I then asked him about my great grandfather, and shared with him the stories my sisters and I remembered about our great grandfather’s work in the textile industry.

He told me that his grandfather, Sobieslaw, worked as an engineer in a textile company; and elaborated saying:

Grandfather Sobiesław worked as a Head Engineer in a famous textile factory in the city of Łódź in central Poland. He received his university education in a city situated between France and Germany. At that time it was a normal thing for young Europeans to travel to different cities and study for their university degrees in Italy or France for example. I know that grandfather spoke French, English and German. French was

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21 I communicate with Uncle Witold in Polish. The translation of excerpts from our conversation from Polish into English is mine.
the language of the educated; we still have some of his books in French. I also have his English-German dictionary.

I have a memory which goes back to many years ago of Mother showing me, casually, while she was arranging her wardrobe, a linen wrap at our home in Cairo. I remember her telling me that the piece of cloth went back to my great grandparents’ times. My memory of this cloth surfaced when I heard from Uncle Witold and Aida about my maternal great grandfather’s engagement with the textile industry. The memory of that piece of cloth gains symbolic significance, as it represents to me the fluidity between space and time, between the public and the private, and between history and memory. It is a memory of a material trace that was invoked by listening to the recollections of my uncle and sisters. Without listening to their stories, the memory of seeing this material trace would not have been invoked. Moreover, this piece of material which survived wars and relocations, until it reached Egypt, signifies the way in which traces of the past remain dormant until, as Walter Benjamin says, they flash up at a moment of recognizability (1968, 255). It is interesting to listen to all those accounts, to have my own memory invoked, and to map the different interpretations and recollections, then glue these fragments together in a process of drawing a picture of Mother’s background and social environment.

I grew up listening to Mother’s stories about her family’s patriotism. Mother used to tell my sisters and me about her uncle Witold, her father’s brother, who died in the battlefield during WWI, when he was around 18 years old, while being a student at the Warsaw University of Technology. She would also tell us how during WWII, when Nazi Germans occupied Poland, my grandfather was approached by the German authorities who offered him to join the German Volksliste.

The Volksliste, established by Nazi authorities, comprised four categories: Volksliste I and II were people ethnically belonging to the German nation, and Volksliste III and IV were people who were classified as “Germanizable” because of some kind of German ancestry and/or “racial” characteristics. The remaining majority of the

22 Historically, during WWI, in the years between 1914 to 1918, Poland did not exist as an independent state, but was divided among three major powers at the time: the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the German Empire and the Russian Empire. According to Uncle Witold, Poland started to regain its territory after WWI, but then Lenin decided to fight Poland, as it stood in his way toward uniting with the communists in Germany, as part of his project to concur the whole of Europe. After WWI, Poland had just started to unite its army, which prior to the war had been divided into three armies: the German, Russian and Austrian. He told me that his uncle Witold, his father’s brother, was a member of the Academic Brigade from the Warsaw University of Technology, and lost his life during the war, in a battle that took place to the south of Warsaw.
Polish population were classified either as “lost” to Germandom or as “Slavs”. (Ohliger and Münz 2002, 76)

According to Agneiszka Haska, during WWII, the Polish underground movement, resisting the occupation of Poland, considered a Polish person who signed onto the volksliste committing an act of treason (Haska 2011, 534). Both my grandparents secretly belonged to AK: Armia Krajowa (Polish Home Army), and thus their engagement in the Polish underground resistance movement clearly shows their position in categorically refusing to accept the offer of being listed on the volksliste, with all its privileges. One of the reasons why my grandfather was invited to join the volksliste, in addition to his governmental position in state forestry, was that his family-name ‘Pfabé’ had the Germanic prefix ‘Pf’. Consequently, my grandfather decided to change the spelling of his family name, adding the French accentuated letter ‘é’ instead of the letter ‘e’ at the end; thus turning his family name from ‘Pfabé’ into ‘Pfabe’ to imply a French origin rather than a German name.

Similar to our paternal grandfather’s redefining himself through naming, our maternal grandfather’s decision to change the written form of his family name was affected by his political and social context. He changed the way his name was written to reflect the way he wanted to be defined in his social world. This naming process became so engrained in our family that I remember my Mother always insisting that her name be written with the accent on the letter ‘é’; so even though times had changed and political contexts shifted, but still, this little accent on a letter in her name remained a symbol of resistance and a source of pride.

Fluid Geographies
During a recent visit to Poland, I asked Uncle Henryk, the husband of Mother’s second cousin, who is now in his eighties, if he had any recollections about our family’s Belgian origin, especially since I knew that his wife’s family included elderly relatives who used to travel frequently to Belgium. In his account he told me the following:

Before WWII Poland was very diverse, there were many nationalities living in Poland: Germans, Belgians and Ukrainians, who settled in

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23 According to the Warsaw Uprising website, the Home Army (AK) was the backbone in the struggle against occupation. For more information go to: http://www.warsawuprising.com/state.htm
24 The Polish alphabet does not have the letter ‘é’, nor the cluster of consonants ‘pf’.
25 I communicate with Uncle Henryk in Polish. The translation of excerpts from our conversation from Polish into English is mine.
Poland due to trade opportunities, or to work in the growing industrial sector. They were considered Polish; they had their languages but they all felt they belonged to Poland. If someone would try to trace my family tree, I am sure that they would find different nationalities and races. Those were different times, when traveling around and settling in new places was easy compared to the times under the Soviet rule. After WWII there were acts of dividing people by race, where people became aware of their differences. Under the Soviet rule we were unable to travel with freedom even to other countries under the Soviet rule; unlike nowadays. There are no borders now and we can travel anywhere.

Uncle Henryk’s words reflect his perception of how borders were blurred, unlike later times. His views come from his current position as an EU citizen; which is different from the position of someone living in a non-EU country, where borders and boundaries are erected and strictly defined. According to Uncle Henryk, belonging to different geographies and moving within them was not complicated in the pre-war years. When reflecting on the stories I heard about Mother’s family’s patriotism, along with the different geographies to which her family belonged, I find it worth noting that the diverse backgrounds of Mother’s family were mentioned casually by Mother and her family, and even now when collecting these oral histories. In Mother’s family, there is a strong sense of belonging to the Polish land and Polish culture that subsumes other affiliations.

When I was talking to Aida about Mother’s family name and the movement from Belgium to Poland, she reminded me saying: “You know that our grandmother’s father was from a Lithuanian family, Mickunas.” I had forgotten this detail. Later in the day, I asked Maya what she remembered about the roots of our grandmother’s family. She paused a while and told me “I don’t remember if they originally came from Lithuania or Latvia; but don’t forget that all these were Polish territories, so they were Polish; but later on these parts were divided and were no longer considered to belong to Poland due to war or different political reasons.” When I asked Uncle Witold, he told me that his maternal grandfather came from Lithuania. That was in the late 1800s. According to him, his grandfather had to leave Lithuania due to political reasons, which Uncle Witold did not know. He belonged to the nobility, so when he came to Poland he married Uncle Witold’s grandmother, who also belonged

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26 Uncle Witold mentioned to me that at that time Poland and Lithuania were under the Russian Czar’s control. He added that these were the times when the nobility spoke Polish language, while the common people spoke Lithuanian.
to a noble family. He worked as a teacher and passed away in 1918 or 1919 when my grandmother was about eight years old.

Mother, too, took pride in the fact that her maternal grandmother came from a family that belonged to the Polish nobility. My grandmother’s mother’s family Rayski had its own coat of arms. My grandmother, however, went through hard times in her childhood because her father had died when she was a child, and her mother found herself singlehandedly raising her two children: my grandmother and her brother. Mother used to tell us how hard it had been for my great grandmother to secure sources of income, as her family was against the idea of having her employed. To them, belonging to Polish nobility meant that it was dishonorable for a woman to work and “receive money in her hands.” Aida tells me:

I know from my grandmother that after WWI the Polish nobility lost their property and political status. Our great grandmother received the kind of school education offered to upper-middle class women which prepared young women for their lady-like domestic life. Having received an education which included basic economics, our great grandmother was qualified to work as a secretary or book-keeper. This was unacceptable by her family, as these skills were supposed to be acquired by young women to be administered in the competent management of their own households not in the public sphere. The only source of income available to her at that time was renting out a room of her house.

Maya and I remember Mother telling us this incident about how our great grandmother’s family found it dishonorable for a woman to receive money in her hand, but did not remember the rest of the circumstances around that story.

**Familial Collective Memory**

My sisters and I grew up listening to Mother repeatedly referring with pride to her family’s patriotism during WWII; also, her own sense of pride in the Polish people’s resistance of their enemies throughout different historic moments was always evident. We grew up listening to Mother’s stories about her parents who (as mentioned earlier above) belonged to the *Armia Krajowa* – *AK* (Polish Home Army) during WWII. She would tell us how her parents used to offer hiding to Polish partisans, active in the underground movement resisting the German occupation. She frequently remembered how they would change their names and have them work in the farm. She explained to us the high risk taken by her parents. I still remember Mother telling me “if the
Germans got to know what your grandparents were doing, they would have lined us all up against a wall and shot us dead.” Mother lived her childhood with her father, mother, grandmother and brother, who is around five years younger than Mother. She used to tell us that they would receive ‘visits’ by German officers inspecting their home, and proudly repeated how Uncle, who was a little child back then, would refuse to take chocolate from the German officers. She would tell us how my grandmother would ask Mother to go and play on the piano to reduce the stress in the situation. Mother used to tell us how brave our grandmother was, to the extent of hiding and transporting weapons in her horse carriage to Polish partisans during WWII; as a woman she felt that if a German patrol passed by they would be less suspicious of her.

Aida told me that she remembered that many years ago, while at our home in Warsaw, she saw our grandmother’s Polish Home Army’s identification card. When I was at our home in Poland, I tried to locate the identification card, but I could not find it. What I found was a square box among my grandmother’s albums. It had many black and white photos from different times, and included photographs of my great grandparents as well as other family members since the late nineteenth century till the 1970s. Among those pictures, there was a black and white photograph with what seemed like a small army aircraft, crashed into trees. The back of the picture has what looks to me like grandmother’s handwriting (in Polish) saying “the Orliński accident” in Zrębiec.” When I asked Uncle Witold about that picture, he told me it could have been taken during the war period, when pilots of the Underground National Army would land in the territory of the forest under my grandfather’s supervision. However, one of those pictures has the date 1931 handwritten on it, which is before the WWII years.

27 I tried locating this ID, but could not find it. However, in grandmother’s newspaper obituary, I found written under her name “żołnierz AK i kombatanka drugiej wojny światowej” (Home Army Soldier and WWII Combatant).
28 Bolesław Orliński is a famous Polish aviator. Born 1899 died 1992, he was famous for his flight which made history – his flight from Warsaw to Tokyo and back in 1926. He played a role in the Polish army during WWII. For more information go to: http://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/1,121681,12616087,Moj_ulubiony_bohater__Boleslaw_Orlinski.html
29 Zrębiec is a village in the administrative district of Gmina Olsztyn, within Częstochowa County, in southern Poland. It was where my grandfather worked in the 1930s and where Mother was born. See Appendix C Figure 2 for the map of Poland.
30 See Appendix C Figure 5&6 for photographs of a parachute hanging between trees, and the aircraft crashed in the forest.
In Uncle Witold’s written account of his childhood years, he says that in their backyard there was a workshop officially used for fixing forestry tools; however, it was actually used for repairing partisans’ weapons (Pfabé 2010, 19). In his written account, Uncle Witold describes a former sergeant of the Polish army, active in the Polish Home Army during WWII, who was in hiding, acting as their carriage driver. He also writes about his childhood memory of witnessing young men, who did not speak Polish, spending several weeks at their home. They were pilots of the allied countries during WWII who had fled concentration camps. He adds that to him similar events were a normality, but not to be shared with outsiders (Pfabé 2010, 19).

In my process of collecting these memories, invoking my own memories and listening to the stories told by my family members about these times, I find some discrepancies between narratives, or different levels of details, but the main story-lines usually remain the same. The variations happen in the details. This process of collective memory in our family reminds me of Maurice Halbwachs’ argument about collective memory within a family, where he believes that every family has its own memories which it commemorates. He explains this idea stating that family memories are not only “individual images of the past,” but they also serve as “models, examples and elements of teaching,” and adds that these family memories not only “reproduce history but also define its nature and qualities” (Halbwachs 1992, 59). As elaborated in the introduction, when referring to Halbwachs I am informed by his analysis of memory being constructed within societies not only an individual act (Halbwachs 1992). Through Halbwachs’ suggestion that families create their own memories, similarly I find that through my family’s narratives, a framework for family memory becomes evident, which combines images of the past where the notions of bravery and selflessness are underlined. We do preserve those images of the past, of events and dates, which surpass those incidents and produce frameworks of memories, whereas Halbwachs says images and notions coexist (1992, 61).

However, in my analysis, I see that memories are not only within collective frameworks but also individual memories that flash up and do not necessarily fall under collective frameworks and offer possibilities for reassembling present paths, as explained in different parts of this research, mainly in chapter IV. In this chapter I use the concept of collective memory to
underline the way in which ‘collective’ memory transcend space and time and, where persons inclinations’ and views are affected by stories of events one heard about but did not necessarily witness.

**Zrębice: Traces of Memories**

I was a child when I went with your grandmother to see if anything remained after our house had been burnt down by the Germans; we had fled just before it was burnt. I remember seeing, among the ruins, our photo album lying open. I got closer to the album and looked at the photographs, then the wind blew and the album turned into ashes and disappeared.

This is how I remember Mother telling me about her childhood memory from WWII. I remember her calm voice repeating this memory. Until today, I can visualize this incident from the way Mother described that moment. Mother was born in 1933 in Zrębice, a village in the vicinity of the city of Częstochowa, in the south west of Poland. Currently, at our home in Warsaw, we have two paintings, hanging on the wall, of the family house in Zrębice. The paintings show a wooden two-floor house, with an entrance and a porch surrounded by trees. At the edge of the painting, there is an inscription in a faded handwriting: “Zrębice 1930.”

I wanted to listen to Aida and Maya’s account of how they remembered the story about Mother’s childhood home which got burnt down, and compare their memories to what I had collected and remembered so far. I started with Aida, she told me: “the family story that I remember is that their house in Zrębice was burnt down by the Germans at the beginning of WWII in 1939. I remember Mother saying with sorrow that both their home and the village church were burnt down.” Aida remembers going with Mother in the 1990s to visit Zrębice. She does not remember the exact year, but she tells me the following memories:

I remember Mother looking for the church, saying that from there she would remember the rest of her childhood places. Mother identified the church. When we went into it, Mother showed me the benches her family used to occupy during service; they would sit in the front rows on the left-hand side. I remember her telling me that she could see herself as a four year old child sitting with her parents in the front left row. She explained that being the family of the area forest officer, they occupied the seats in the company of the village doctor and teachers.

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31 Appendix C. Figure 7 is a picture of a painting hanging on the wall at our home in Warsaw of Mother’s childhood home in Zrębice. Figure 8 is a photograph from the year 1931 with a fragment of the house.
Maya remembers the story of Mother’s childhood home being burnt down during war by the German forces: “I think it was bombarded” she tells me, but she could not remember where exactly this home was. When I asked Uncle Witold about their home in Zrębiec, he told me that it was burnt by the German forces at the beginning of the war. The German armies were marching forward and burning whole villages on their way; and this was one of the targeted villages that they burnt down at the beginning of WWII. It is worth noting that Uncle Witold was born in 1938, so this recollection is not based on his actual experience as much as being constructed by stories he heard from his parents, as well as his later experiences of the war. While talking to Uncle Witold at our home in Warsaw, he tapped the armrest of the armchair he was sitting on, and told me the following:

This armchair was among the furniture in our home in Zrębiec. These two identical armchairs survived because your grandparents had lent them to the church along with a rug, as the church was expecting important visitors and wanted to have presentable furniture. Your grandparents were able to retrieve them afterwards, when my father later on rebuilt the house that was burnt by the Germans.

I found this same memory recounted by Uncle Witold in his written account, where he specified that after the German forces had invaded Poland in 1939, the Forest District Office along with half of the village of Zrębiec were burnt down (Pfabé 2010, 19).

**Flashes of Memories**

Although Mother witnessed war as a child, she repeated how grateful she was to her parents, as although they went through very dangerous moments, her parents managed to create a feeling of hope and trust, no matter how difficult the circumstances were. Throughout her life, whenever our family faced a difficult situation, she would always reassure us saying: “for sure, everything eventually will end well.” This sense of hope, which was generated at critical moments of danger, reminds me of Benjamin’s notion of hope, as Michael Löwy describes Benjamin’s sense of hope that “the past bears utopian hope” (Löwy 2005, 36). I wish also to borrow here the following sentence from Sami Khatib, who comments on Benjamin’s theory of hope where “hope is not an individual attitude directed to the future, but something we have been given by those who lived before us” (Khatib 2013, 3).
One of the stories I remember is when Mother told us about the time during the war, when besides the scarcity of food, my grandfather had to take cover in a different city away from his wife and children, due to being targeted to be killed by the Germans because of his participation in the Polish underground resistance movement. During that time, our grandmother heard rumors that the Germans had killed her husband. Luckily, our grandfather was reunited with his family. Despite many incidents which Mother’s parents’ faced during their involvement in the Home Army, which could have led to either having them sent to a concentration camp or shot dead by the German forces, they managed to survive the war. Additionally, Mother’s maternal uncle, Jan Mickunas, who was an army officer and was sent to a Russian concentration camp managed to escape and to eventually return home. I believe that all these life-threatening events of the past, that ended in a good way, must have created within Mother this sense that “everything eventually will end well.”

When I asked Aida about stories she remembered of the way Mother’s family was affected by the war she told me:

Grandfather’s two sisters were sent to concentration camps in Germany during WWII, however they managed to return to Poland. Grandmother’s brother, Uncle Janek,32 was also sent to a concentration camp, but on his escape route from Siberia, he managed to join the British army forces. This is how he learned English, and later on, when he returned to Poland, he became a high school English language teacher.

I asked Uncle Witold about the story behind his aunts and uncle being sent to concentration camps. I wanted to compare Aida’s narrative with his. He told me:

Only one aunt was sent to a camp in Germany, I do not know exactly why or what were the exact circumstances, but she was working there at a laundry. As for Uncle Janek, he was an Army Officer, and this was why he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp in Siberia. I know that he tried to escape several times and finally managed to return to Poland. Your great grandmother could not forgive herself that when he knocked at the door she did not recognize him – her only son. He had lost almost half of his weight. He later worked as an English language teacher; he taught your mother English in high-school.

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32 We always referred to Uncle Jan Mickunas (our grandmother’s brother) as Wujek (Uncle) Janek. Janek is the nickname for Jan.
Uncle Witold could not remember where his uncle, Uncle Janek, learned English. Aida, Maya and I know from our mother that Uncle Janek was very dear to Mother; and that she was influenced by him in her interest in English language and literature.

I remember Mother saying that she did not carry psychological scars from the war period she witnessed as a child. When I asked Maya if she remembered whether Mother remained affected by the war experience she witnessed as a child, her answer was:

The memories which Mother would tell us were usually around war events. Also, in her views about the Middle East conflict, her reference point was always the Polish resistance of the occupation. Her general sense of high patriotism, and holding on to Polish values and traditions goes back to the years of war and occupation. And, in general, in her daily habits, she hated to waste things especially food and water; and would always remind us that there are people who are deprived from food.

I remember Aida frequently teasing her saying “Mama, how come you say you have not been affected by the war experience while you always keep extra food hidden somewhere for what you call ‘czarna godzina’ (the black hour).” I asked Aida if she remembered saying this to our mother, she laughed adding the following:

I did see several things that showed that there are elements that remained embedded in Mother due to her war experience. She had a hording habit, which reflected a sense of insecurity. You are too young to remember, but when the 1986 Egyptian security police riots erupted, her reaction was to make Father go and immediately buy extra food to store at home.

Another trace of that could be seen, in light of Mother’s war-time memories, is that at home we had two refrigerators; one for daily use, and the other one had extra food and extra medicine. Not to mention that in the kitchen cupboards Mother always kept extra rice, flour, and sugar hidden somewhere. My sister Maya still practices the same at home, you will always find her keeping extra packs or jars of food; for example flour, sugar, jam and pasta hidden somewhere in the kitchen. “Mama’s house always had extra supplies, so, to me, it is something normal to also have at home extra food kept aside for an emergency” Maya tells me. Aida also remembered another incident during their years in Kuwait:

I also remember while we were in Kuwait, that our Father told us one day that Mother woke up in the middle of the night telling Father that she was hearing the sound of bombardment. Father, who suffered from insomnia and would be woken up by the least noise, dismissed what
she had said thinking that she must have had a nightmare. However, the following day, news were everywhere that the war between Iraq and Iran has erupted. Mother must have actually heard bombs being dropped on our then neighboring Iraq. So imagine how her subconscious had preserved all such triggering alerts.

When listening to each of Aida and Maya recounting these incidents, I remembered that during the earthquake that hit Egypt in 1992, Mother and I were together at home while my sisters and Father were out. I remember that the first thing she did was to immediately spot the most architecturally safe place in the flat (as she later explained), and she took me there where we stood in that spot until the building stopped shaking. I remember how, on that night, she prepared handbags for us with our most important documents, jewelry and basic clothes and food, and placed them all next to the apartment door. She was doing all this while remaining totally calm and composed. It was her first earthquake experience, but she knew exactly how to handle it. Now looking at this situation in retrospect, Mother must have remembered how to act at ‘a moment of danger’ from her childhood experiences during the war.

Mother was a person who never held grudges against others; she always found a justification of or explanation for people’s actions. However, I remember her telling us about an incident that went back to the early 1970s, when she lived in Kuwait with Father, before I was born, and when my sisters were still very young. There was a time when they had German neighbors, an elderly couple. Mother got to know that the man used to be a pilot in the German army, and by doing some calculations she reached the conclusion that he must have been in service when Poland was being attacked by the German army. I remember Mother telling me that she had a great difficulty in dealing with him. She felt very uncomfortable when he tried to play with Aida and Maya as children. To her, what the German forces did to her country and to the Polish people during war could not be justified and simply forgotten.

I remember Mother telling us how, as a child growing up during the war, she would take her sledge and go to her teacher in the middle of the freezing winter in order to take Polish language lessons, as well as Piano lessons. I remember her telling us that she was once returning from her Polish lesson and was carrying her Polish books when she saw a German army patrol car approaching, so she immediately threw away the Polish books into the woods. Had they seen her with her Polish books, they would have interrogated her and she could not tell what would have been the consequences. Uncle Witold told me that if German forces would know that
someone was giving lessons in Polish language and history to children, s/he would be sent to a concentration camp, if not killed on the spot. I remember the reverence with which Mother treated anything written in Polish. Throughout her life in Cairo, she used to stack all the Polish magazines and newspapers that she had read and were outdated. She would repeatedly say “a Polish word cannot be thrown away . . . people died to preserve it.” This is manifested in the fact that she taught her three daughters and grandson Polish language. The symbolic value of the Polish language has been so deeply engrained in us that when Mother’s second grandson was born, after she had passed away, we all spoke to him in Polish; and Aida ensured that her son would learn Polish.

As a historical event, WWII has been constructed in my sisters’ and my mind through the stories Mother used to tell us about her own and her family’s experience throughout that time, at a certain geographic space which offers a specific angle on the events. It has been consequently influenced by Mother’s position as being subjected to war at a specific point in time, and in the middle of particular dominating powers. To us, WWII is not just an event we read about in history books. Mother’s war experience connects the private with the public, a historic event like WWII is seen by my sisters and me as a private event in our family, by which our family has been directly affected. When we visited the al-'Alamein War Cemetery in Egypt, 33 Mother took us to the graves of the Polish soldiers who had lost their lives during WWII on the Egyptian soil.

This site carries, therefore, a different meaning to my sisters and me, as separate geographies come together and their borderlines are blurred. Yet the different positions of each geographic space at a specific time in history comes again and creates a distinction. In Egypt, WWII did not disrupt the lives of people; we never heard from Father a single story concerning WWII, whereas in Mother’s family it caused a huge rupture. Al-'Alamein War Cemetery, thus, acquires an additional meaning to us through Mother’s narratives: it is not simply a historic site of a battle that took place on Egyptian land, but as far as we are concerned, we personally relate

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33 El Alamein is located in Egypt, 130 kilometers west of Alexandria on the road to Mersa Matruh. According to the website of the Common Wealth War Graves Commission: “El Alamein War Cemetery contains the graves of men who died at all stages of the Western Desert campaigns, brought in from a wide area, but especially those who died in the Battle of El Alamein at the end of October 1942 and in the period immediately before that.” http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/2019000/EL%20ALAMEIN%20WAR%20CEMETERY
to those Polish soldiers buried in Egypt through Mother’s stories. It is interesting to note that the history of WWII does not emerge as one homogenous historical event; the experience of WWII, to Mother and her family, is completely different from what it meant to Father and his family. I never heard Father talking about WWII except when referring to it as a ‘historical event’; and in the narratives I collected about him and his family, the only reference to WWII was that made by Samir Rif'at, in reference to the bomb that targeted al-Dhahir mosque during WWII. In this context, I find Benjamin’s words very insightful, when he suggests that “[h]istory is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but filled by the presence of the now” (1968, 261).

In my research process of collecting and connecting different fragments of the past in an attempt to reconstruct it in the present I found myself using different tactics in collecting and creating stories. In this chapter, my aim was to construct and give a glimpse of the early childhood and youth of my parents in their different social milieux. In this process there was a change in my tactics and actions. For example, due to the lack of (im)material traces about Father’s childhood and early youth, I physically went to his childhood district, seeking to reimagine his childhood home, school and neighborhood. I then went there again with his childhood friend with the hope of getting a more detailed life story that would help me in constructing Father’s past. In the case of Mother, I did not feel the need to go to her early childhood city and district in Poland, I had several photographs, paintings, oral histories and stories that when put together constructed this past. This process sheds light on the methods for building knowledge, different tactics are applied to be able to reach certain sources of knowledge. This brings me back to the idea I presented in the introductory chapter, where research methods are made of an assemblage of approaches; exploring different ways of knowledge as John Law suggested, method is creative rather than a set of procedures, method “re-crafts realities and creates new versions of the world” by reassembling realities and not assuming that there is a single reality out there (2004, 143).

**Conclusion**
I have devoted this chapter to reimagining the social environments in which my parents grew up. In reimagining their social environments, I do not seek to trace a linear chronology, but rather a rhizomic chronology where I go back and forth, giving
glimpses of aspects of their social environments which are in conversation with the
paths that we take in the present time. I therefore chose to ‘flash up’ two main
moments of rupture in my family. I identified the first rupture in my paternal
grandfather’s path, which breached his family tradition and impacted his children’s
lives. The other is WWII in the context of my maternal grandparents, and the way in
which it affected Mother’s family. These were moments of rupture which remain
lingering in our present. Memories of these moments are invoked through
(im)material traces which I montage together creating threads that I follow
throughout this autoethnography. Those threads have a rhizomic structure, as they do
not start at a fixed beginning nor terminate at a clear-cut end, but they get repeatedly
tangled then untangled.

I have focused in this chapter on the concept of remembrance, where
memory brings the past through the present into the future. The process of
remembrance forms constellations, where both the past and present converge forming
new meanings. I find in the processes of remembrance and the formation of
constellations useful vehicles toward an explanation of how the everyday is formed
and negotiated (as elaborated in chapter IV). This chapter is based on narratives of
oral history, which “tell us less about events than about their meaning” (Portelli 2006,
36). These oral histories develop in dialogue with images in the form of material
traces such as photographs and paintings, or images invoked through memories –
where they all come together, forming constellations and telling a story through the
prism of the present.

This chapter reveals how different voices tell various versions of an incident.
This helps to break the fallacy of a homogenous history, as the multiple stories
challenge the idea of a monolithic past. Moreover, time and history are not universal
and consequently we do not end up with a metanarrative. There is not one past, there
are many, and a historical event such as WWII was totally different in my parents’
perceptions, experienced simultaneously though across geographies. This chapter also
sheds light on the way knowledge can be sought, by seeking information through
different tactics, whether being physically in a place, remembering, collecting and
analyzing oral histories, or following (im)material traces.

In the coming chapter I continue collecting traces of each of my parents’
social environments, and I move from relying on oral history to focusing on the
material traces which invoke memories and construct stories. Thus, I follow the
material traces and complement them with memories and narratives, toward mapping
the convergence of my parents’ paths. In doing this I continue the process of
reflecting the ways the past is reconstructed in the present, and the way in which
subjects renegotiate their social existence within certain socio-political conditions.
Chapter III
A Personal Archive

In this chapter, I deal with the idea of the ‘sites of memory’ which are present in material traces. Each document, each letter and each picture is a site of memory that carries within it a glimpse of history. These material traces constitute what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). According to Nora “*lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains” (1989, 12); they are created by a “play of memory and history” (1989, 19). In the previous chapter (Chapter II), I dealt with history which flashes in the present. My research was premised there on oral history, which offered recognizability to material traces, that otherwise would not have been noticed. I also tackled the material traces that invoke oral narratives. In this chapter, however, the process is reversed: a story is created as I follow different material traces, which include written documentation, letters and photographs, along with the narratives that I have collected or remembered. This chapter focuses on stories invoked by personal sites of memory that hold in them traces of the past. I present the constellations emerging from the different (im)material sources highlighted above to create images that reflect stories about the youth and adulthood of my parents within their social environments.

The sources invoke the period extending from the 1950s to the 1970s, which marks the Egyptian and Polish political, economic and social contexts with a process of many changes. These changes got translated in the way my parents’ everyday was shaped. Through giving a glimpse of these socio-economic and political contexts, I show the ways in which the public and the private are part and parcel of each other. That is to say, what happens on the socio-economic and political levels is reflected and reshapes the lives of individuals, creating convergences and different ways of reassembling the everyday. By focusing on my parents’ paths and their surrounding environments, I trace the way these connections between the private and public are intertwined. In my approach I apply Hirsh and Stewart’s concept of historicity, which “describes a human situation in flow; where versions of past and future (of persons, collectives or things) assume present form in relation to events, political needs, available cultural forms and emotional dispositions” (2005, 262). In dealing with the
past, I look at it from the lens of the present. I montage those different fragments: memories, voices and documentation to present a glimpse of my parents’ paths and the way in which their paths have converged amidst socio-political and economic transformations. In the next chapter (chapter IV), I build on this chapter in looking at the way the present is reassembled in light of the past, and how the present reconstructs the past through zooming into my sisters’ and my everyday. The sites of memory I deal with in this chapter connect the public with the private and the past with the present, where boundaries, starting points and ending points cease to exist; but rather connections are mapped.

During the course of my research, I brought and placed in my room in Cairo different written documents about my parents, which I found among my parents’ belongings, or collected from my sisters, as well as the written materials that I discovered at our home in Warsaw. Beside Mother’s suitcase, which carries letters and postcards dating back to the 1950s onwards, I have two black brief cases with my parents’ personal documents: birth and death certificates, education certificates as well as their marriage contract. In different corners of my room, I stacked boxes with different material sources that show fragments of my parents’ journeys. One box has different black and white and colored photographs from Father’s fieldwork and business trips. The pictures are from Arab countries; they include pictures of traditional clothes, jewelry and of what looks like traditional dances. Next to it, I placed albums with pictures of my parents dating back to the 1960s. Another box has postcards which I brought with me from our home in Warsaw. The old arabesque chair beside my desk is the spot where I gently placed different Polish and Egyptian magazines dating back to the 1960s. Their worn out dusty covers with faded colors stand witness to the time that passed. The articles in these magazine shed light on the international relations between the Egyptian and Polish states, others have interviews with Mother, which I had also found at our home in Warsaw, and brought them back with me to Cairo. Whenever I hold them, they still carry the scent of old wood with a tinge of humidity – a smell that greets me every time I open the door to our home in Warsaw.

On my desk, I have placed the publications that were issued after my parents passed away, giving a glimpse of their journeys. One is a book that my sisters and I published after Mother passed away, under the title O początkach powieści egipskiej (On the Beginnings of the Egyptian Novel), published in Poland in Polish language.
(Pfabé-Kamal, 2010). In this book, Aida compiled Mother’s doctoral research work, as well as personal statements written by her colleagues and friends as well as by Uncle Witold. Another publication is a special issue of the magazine *Magallat al-funun al-sha‘biyya* issued in commemoration of Father after he had passed away (issue No. 83, July–September 2009). The five dusty notebooks with Father’s handwritten fragments of appointments as well as personal thoughts dating back to the 1950s occupy a spot at a corner of my desk.

The little round brass tray standing on arabesque wooden legs now carries Mother’s published articles, as well as a little red old carton box with a drawing of a vase with flowers which holds Mother’s tiny notebooks, newspaper clippings and different business cards and invitations to cultural events in Egypt, that go back to the early 1960s. This box was kept at our home in Warsaw, as I found it lying in a far corner of a book-case which is rarely opened and used. When I first opened it there, I was surprised to see a single long grey hair. I recognized it as my late Grandmother’s, who till the very end of her life kept her long hair tied up in a bun. This single grey hair is a trace that made me wonder if it was actually my Grandmother who collected Mother’s things together into that box after Mother had left Poland, rather than Mother. These little traces invoke thoughts and memories; these traces create an archive where “[t]he dust of others, and of other times, fills this room” (Steedman 2002, 17).

My room, gradually, was transforming into an archive. My armchair was turned into a resting place for Mother’s suitcase and old photo albums. Empty spaces in my room now have boxes with different materials. I moved my desk to the center of the room. The material traces of the past acquired their central and dominant space in my present. This feeling of the transformation of my room into an archive can be seen in light of Ann Laura Stoler’s description of an archive as a *process* rather than archives as things (2009, 20). Each document, each photograph, each letter, each article and old newspaper clipping, converges with memories and official stories creating a story in the present which reimagines the past. Stoler describes that in the process of engaging with archives “imagining what might be was as important as knowing what was” (2009, 21).

In this process of being immersed in the material sites of memory; specifically when dealing with written documentation, especially the ones marked by specific
dates of events, I found myself in a dialectic relation between facts and memories. H.E. Carr defines this relation between dealing with the material and immaterial traces in the following sentence: “[t]he historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless” (1961, 30). These material traces start having a meaning when I go through them and read them. My attempts to reconstruct and reimagine the past would have been indeed futile, as suggested by Carr, if my memories were not prompted by these traces, and if they had not given me sources outside the realm of memories. These documents and other material references surrounding me have provided me with multiple paths to follow in my research. Carr further suggests that there is a constant relation between the historian and his/her facts: “the historian is engaged in a continuous process of molding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts. It is impossible to assign primacy to one over the other” (Carr 1961, 29).

The letters exchanged between my parents and their family members brought in their voices in reconstructing the story. As suggested by Marina Dossena and Gabriella Camiciotti, the letters or the epistolary discourse has distinctive aspects; it is premised on a dialogue between ‘I’ and ‘You’, which makes epistolary discourse similar to a conversation (2012, 4). Dossena and Camiciotti add that the epistolary discourse carries a “temporal relativity . . . Both past and future are always relative to the discursive present of epistolary communication” (2012, 5). My parents’ conversations in those letters mix different temporalities. Those conversations are invoked in my present time when I reread them. They are now read in different sequences, sometimes going backwards, where I get to read a letter and then go backwards in time to follow the thread of the conversations in older letters. These conversations now also have ruptures; there is reference to letters that seem to have been lost causing discontinuity when trying to reconstruct their conversations. While reading my parents letters, a fuller picture started emerging, one with gaps and openings for the imagination. The picture becomes more of a collage, one of different colors, materials, gaps and impressions.

Those letters have no beginning and no end. They were not organized chronologically, and so I would find a letter in Mother’s suitcase here in Cairo, while I would find Father’s reply to it at our home in Poland. Tracing these letters was taking me through time as well as through space. Similar to the routes those letters took between Egypt and Poland, I too had to travel between those geographic spaces
to follow the traces. I would move from a letter in the late 1980s to letters in the late 1950s. I would hold different paper textures, and start recognizing if it was sent from Poland or elsewhere. Letters sent from Poland were usually written on very delicate sheets of paper with grids. I would see letters with hotel logos from different countries, I would know they were sent by Father to Mother during the conferences he traveled to. Postcards with their different designs and pictures presented clues of where they were sent from – some having different European landmarks, others Kuwaiti landmarks, or other Arab countries; some with Polish traditional drawings, and others with pharaonic designs. The textures and designs of letters and postcards were also taking me through different geographies.

In dealing with all these letters and postcards, which I would follow and collect in our homes in Cairo and Warsaw, I would bring them back with me to my room in Cairo and work on arranging the letters chronologically. In rearranging them chronologically my main attempt was to recreate my parents’ dialogue; to better understand their concerns, and the socio-political and economic conditions surrounding each one of them in their contexts, and for easier tracing when I needed to go back to listen to them again. I, moreover, complemented their epistolary dialogue with their diaries and notebooks. All these written sources, put together, helped me get a glimpse of their social environments at those moments in history.

My process of collecting all these bits and pieces can be seen in light of Walter Benjamin’s views of the process of collection in *The Arcades Project* where he describes the “collector” and the “allegorist” (2002, 211). Benjamin suggests that the collector “takes up the struggle against dispersion . . . everything he’s collected remains a patchwork” where for the allegorist, who is the opposite of the collector, “objects only represent a key word in a secret dictionary”; Benjamin suggests that in every collector there is an allegorist and the other way round (2002, 211). In light of Benjamin’s reflections on the “collector”, Scott McCracken suggests that “[t]he new constellations assembled by the collector not only rescue the past, but point to the future” (2002, 147). The process of both collecting and inferring meaning from what has been collected throughout my research is a process for better understanding and giving meaning to the future.

In tracing all these different (im)material sources, and in my attempt to bring them together, I found myself reimagining, from the prism of my present, how my
parents’ lives were shaped within the social systems to which they belonged, and hence trying to make a better sense of the present moment, and seeking to reimagine the future. According to Hirsch and Stewart, “to understand what the individual is requires a move beyond the individual to the social and specifically the social past” (2005, 262). And, as Stoler explains, the ethnographic space of the archive is in the disconnection between “normative rules and how people actually lived their lives” (2009, 32). Unlike Leopard von Ranke, quoted by Hirsch and Stewart describing history that “[it tells] how it really was” (Hirsch and Stewart 2005, 264), I do not claim that I am telling how the historical events really were, even when I rely on ‘evidence’. In following the documentation and material traces, my aim is to see the connections between the past with the present and future, and not to provide ‘evidence’ as proof. Through this process, I seek to understand how the socio-economic and political conditions are shaped and how they change everyday practices.

Stepping into my room, sitting in the middle of all these material traces, I feel as if I am an archeologist bringing together fragments in a process of reconstructing and reimagining the past, that lingers through those material fragments, invoking various memories. This brings to my mind Gastón Gardillo’s concept of rubble, where material fragments from the past are “rubble”, that are part of the everyday. So when exploring rubble, perceptions invoke “awareness of the forces that have produced the rubble of the present, and of the way these nodes of rubble form constellations defined by their afterlife” (Gordillo 2014, 5). This is exactly how I see those letters; I am interested in how these letters/’rubble’ are interpreted in the present; and the way they gain an afterlife when reopening them, reading their content, reconstructing the past and forming constellations in the present.

In the Origin of German Tragic Drama (1925), Walter Benjamin states: “ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements’ being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed” (2003, 34). These lines inspire the process of my research in putting together the bits and pieces which transcend the past and present dichotomies. These constellations revive the past, reshape the present and infiltrate the future; and deal with them all as merged. Gordillo also refers to constellations as Walter Benjamin’s methodology, explaining constellations as used by Benjamin in terms of “a thought image” that evokes a non-causal connectivity defined by multiplicity, rupture, and fragmentation
(Gordillo 2014, 20). Gordillo is informed by Adorno’s approach in seeing that constellations have the power to counter the “fetishization of objects” (Gordillo 2014, 20). He further elaborates that “constellations point to the processes that are stored in objects but that are also outside of them: an outside that is multicentered and has a plastic, elusive form, for constellations have no clear boundaries and superimpose on each other, forming palimpsests” (2014, 20). Gordillo links the idea of constellations with rubble, where objects themselves have a “history of their own” which gives them a life of their own (2014, 20). I find Gordillo’s way of combining Benjamin’s concept on constellations in relation to the materiality of objects, and the way they have a history and a life of their own, very insightful. When reading his words and the connections he makes, they resonated with the process in which I was immersed. Each document I read, each photograph I examined, and each newspaper clipping I held, carried history. When these traces or ‘rubbles’ are followed, they form constellations that reconstruct the past.

**Documents and Narratives:**

**Father’s Notebooks**

I was thrilled to find notebooks among Father’s documents, written in his handwriting and dating back as far as to 1948. Interestingly enough, these notebooks do not actually look like being over sixty years old. They are dusty but they are intact, the paper’s texture and color seem to have turned slightly yellow, yet the color of the ink on those papers has not faded. When I opened them and started reading their contents, Father’s voice began coming out of these notebooks. Sometimes, his voice sounded familiar, when talking about philosophy or folklore, which were topics I frequently heard Father talking about. At other points, his voice was that of a young man pouring down his thoughts in a voice I had not heard Father use before. I placed his notebooks around me on the sofa at home in Cairo. I started with a big green paperback notebook. I opened it, it was a calendar dating back to the year 1948. Opening it from the right side, I found on the very first page Father’s name written in Arabic handwriting “Safwat Kamal” and below it was written “employee and student.”

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34 Translations of Father’s calendar notes from Arabic into English are mine.
I went through the pages, where I found that the notes were not written chronologically, as some pages were dated in 1949s, then jumped to 1954, while in between there were pages written in 1955 and 1954. These notes carry some of Father’s general thoughts about life, as well as some short poems. The notebook also includes pages written about Father’s readings in philosophy – some in his handwritings, others in a different handwriting. It is all written in Arabic, except for a page written by Father in English in 1951 about the role of educational institutions. A fragment which I found interesting written in his handwriting was: “Rulers in dictatorships have placed the school in the front rank in State because they have acknowledged the strong effect it has in creating a particular social system.”

This notebook covers a period of his life as a student of Philosophy at Cairo University (known as Fouad al-Awwal University when he joined it in 1951), where he graduated in 1956. Among his university colleagues and friends was Hassan Hanafi, currently Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Cairo University, who contributed to the special issue of Magallat al-funun al-sha’ biyya (2009) published in commemoration of Father. In his article, Hassan Hanafi writes about the changes that they witnessed in Egypt since their university years, pointing out that they shared the experience of the rise of the Egyptian national movement, with its slogans demanding the people’s freedom from the Monarchy, national independence from the British occupation, and the unification of Egypt and Sudan. Hanafi describes Father as “a national liberal,” and mentions that Father had joined the national resistance commando forces in 1951. According to Hanafi, Father’s circle of friends at that time included people from different political backgrounds: those supporting the regime, others belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as Marxists (Hanafi 2009, 68). When reading this account by Father’s friend, it reminded me that Uncle Sadik once told me that while Father was in Poland in 1958, Father’s ‘leftist friends’ used to pass by Uncle Sadik at home and help him with his school-work.

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35 Hassan Hanafi, born in 1935, is an Egyptian thinker and Professor Emeritus of Islamic Philosophy at Cairo University. He is recognized as a theorist concerned with tradition and modernity. Hassan Hanafi is known to have “sparked a considerable controversy among the Egyptian academics when he launched what he called the ‘Islamic Left’, where he tried to reconcile Islam with leftist thought” (Ahramonline, 14 July 2012). For more information check: http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/18/0/47564/Books/New-Release-Hassan-Hanafi-tackles-the-Arab-worlds-.aspx

36 All translations of quotations, from Arabic into English, are mine.
This account also invoked my memories of Father’s involvement in the resistance movement, which has always been correlated in my mind with his back injury, which Father told us he had developed during his commando training. This injury led to a chronic problem limiting Father’s neck movement. When I asked Maya if she remembered Father’s narrative about joining the commandos, she too could not remember any details, and what came to her mind was Father’s back injury as well. Aida remembered Father telling her that he had joined the commandos as a student under the leadership of his friend Ibrahim al-Rifa’i. Ibrahim al-Rifa’i is considered to be among the founding officers of the Egyptian Army commandos since the 1950s, and lost his life in battlefield during the Egyptian Israeli war in 1973 (Ramadan, 2014). In another notebook, which is a diary dating back to the 1950s, Father had written notes about his friendship with members of al-Rifa’i family, where he mentions that he considers them as his own family. In another notebook from the year 1958, Father wrote (on 27 June) that it is Ibrahim al-Rifai’s Birthday, which is the same date of birth mentioned in the above cited article about Ibrahim al-Rifa’i. Putting together these fragments, a story about the circumstances around Father joining the commandos is created. These collected fragments, whether through memory, written account or traces in his diaries collectively offer a glimpse of the story behind Father joining the commandos, and of the political conditions in Egypt at that time.

My sisters and I heard from Father that after graduation he worked at the Egyptian Arts Bureau (Maslahat al-funun) as the head of the Technical Secretariat Office for Yahia Hakki, who was at that time the general manager of this agency. Hassan Hanafi further mentions that the Arts Bureau was created after the 1952 revolution, and was located at the Abdin Palace, adding that both Naguib Mahfouz and Ali Ahmad Bakathir were the Technical Office Managers at that time (2009, 70). According to Hanafi “Safwat Kamal chose the field of folklore since graduation till he passed away as a method to connect his national sentiment with philosophical

37 Yahia Hakki is an Egyptian writer and novelist, born in 1905. For more information go to: http://www.arabworldbooks.com/authors/yehia_hakki.html
38 Naguib Mahfouz is an Egyptian writer born in 1911 who won the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature. He worked as well as a civil servant in many Egyptian governmental institutions. For more information go to: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1988/mahfouz-bio.html
39 Ali Ahmad Bakathir is an Egyptian novelist and playwright in 1910. His origins go back to Yemen, but he studied at Cairo University (Fuad al-Awal at that time) and lived in Egypt the rest of his life. For more information go to: http://www.bakatheer.com/english/biography.htm
thinking and his anti-colonial struggle with the spirit of the Egyptian people” (Hanafi 2009, 70).

I went through another notebook which I found among Father’s documents. It is a small blue calendar from the year 1958. That was the year he met Mother for the first time in Warsaw. In this notebook, Father wrote down appointments and things to do. Many pages as of February 1958 include appointments at the Polish Embassy in Cairo, and procedures for issuing a passport and getting the necessary vaccinations. Then on the page carrying the date 20 May, Father writes that they left Cairo and reached Vienna; and on 21 May he arrived in Warsaw. Then he starts writing a journal of his stay. His journal has gaps: there are pages that have details while others are empty or just indicate appointments. Father had traveled to Warsaw on a state-sponsored scholarship to study for a Diploma in Ethnography. This experience marks a starting point in his life that linked him to the international scientific society, and as early as 1965, his name was listed among the members of the International Agency for Ethnology and Folklore (Gad 2009, 162). Under Nasser’s regime the field of folklore studies started developing in Egypt. In an article published in 1959, under the title “A Study in the Art of Folklore,” Ahmad Rushdi Salih explains the following: “The Folklore movement would not have settled within university, research centers, museums, periodicals and conferences had it not been part of the modern national renaissance movement” (Salih 1959, 79). The Ministry of Culture and National Guidance in Egypt was at that time concerned with supporting the rise and development of a new generation of researchers trained in the methods of collecting, classifying and analyzing folk art (al-Sirafi 1959, 135).

In another old notebook, I found a few pages with Father’s inscription dating back to 1975. On the first page of the notebook he wrote down in Arabic the heading “Memories and Hopes for Egyptian Folklore.” His notes reflect some of his main thoughts about folklore. He writes that the term “Folklore” used to be interpreted in light of the history al-masrah al-shaʿ bi (folk theatre), but that he worked on amending this interpretation by using the Arabic term al-maʿ thuraat al-shaʿ biyya

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40 In another notebook, Father mentions that he traveled to Warsaw from Vienna with two other Egyptian colleagues studying economics in the context of a cultural exchange program.

41 Ahmad Rushdi Salih, born in 1922, is an Egyptian writer and journalist, known as a pioneer in Egyptian folklore studies. For more information go to http://www.almoajam.org/poet_details.php?id=508

42 All translations of quotations from Arabic to English are mine.
(folk tradition) rather than using the “European” term “Folklore”. I personally remember how Father would get agitated when hearing different people mixing between Arabic and English when referring to Folklore when saying *al-folklore al-sha 'bi* which if translated would mean ‘folk folklore’, he always insisted on either sticking to the European term or using the Arabic term. In Aida’s written account in *Magallat al-funun al-sha biyya*, published in commemoration of Father, she refers to how Father always spoke of the study of folklore as both an academic discipline and a national responsibility. Folk art, literature, traditions, customs and material culture, among many other aspects of folklore, reflect aspects of cultural continuity (*al-tawasul al-thaqafi*) and national identity. He chose folklore research methodology as his area of specialization, whereby he focused on establishing processes for the collection, classification, and preservation of Egyptian folklore. He was particularly fascinated by the sense of continuity inherent in folk culture (Kamal 2009, 64-67).

My sisters and I remember how Father considered folklore as a carrier of history, we also remember the way he was particularly fascinated by comparative cross-cultural aspects of folklore, seeing in similarities an indication of shared humanity, while in differences a mark of variety and diversity. When reading Aida’s account, I found a sentence where she refers to a moment I had forgotten. Aida describes that among Fathers documents we found my sisters’ and my school certificates since primary school. Father had kept them arranged in folders, along with drawings by Adam (Kamal 2009, 66). Aida describes that Father’s fascination with folklore and its research tools were so deeply rooted in him that they were reflected in the way he engaged with his family on the everyday. She elaborates saying that similar to his concern with classifying folkloric materials, he classified our school certificates; she also describes the way he would document with his cinema camera our journeys since the 1970s, in an act reminiscent to his fascination with documenting his fieldwork. She adds that when Father traveled to any country, he would always return with either traditional handicrafts of that country, or dolls wearing the traditional costumes of that country (Kamal 2009, 65-66). When reading Aida’s lines I remembered that moment after Father passed away, when my sisters and I had to go through his documents. I remembered how when opening his desk drawers we found several files, neatly arranged. We were surprised to find that each file was for each one of us, carrying our names. When opening the files we found our
different school certificates throughout the years, as well as our small photographs since childhood. I remember how moved we were when seeing how he kept throughout the years our certificates and different drawings done by the three of us, as well as by Adam either of Father or to Father since childhood.

In Father’s notebook, which goes back to 1975, I continued reading Father’s notes and recollections. He writes about his journey to Poland, saying that he had read an advertisement in a newspaper about “a scholarship to study folklore in Poland” and was encouraged to apply. He refers to the bureaucracy and favoritism which he faced, but was able to overcome, and managed to get the necessary approval from the Arts Bureau where he worked, to travel to Poland to pursue his studies. He mentioned that he passed the exam needed to travel, and received the required approvals of the Minister of Education, the State Scholarship Department, the Arts Bureau as well as the Ministry of National Guidance (al-Irshad al-qawmi) to obtain this scholarship.

Father mentions that he had asked Yahia Hakki, who was his boss at the time, for his advice about how he should interact with people in Europe, since it was his first trip to Europe. He then writes saying that Yahia Hakki told him “act normally my son, as an Egyptian Muslim young man.” In his notes, he writes that he flew to Poland via Vienna. He mentions that he landed in Vienna on 20 May 1958, where he stayed for 48 hours, which he describes as his first encounter of “the depth of Egyptian culture with the beauty of European culture.” Father elaborates on how people were decent, streets were clean, and the squares were elegant. He mentions that what he has seen back then in Vienna is different from the stories he heard about Europe from his friends who had traveled to the Warsaw International Youth Festival, or for studies in France and Italy. Father mentions sarcastically that girls were not eagerly waiting for the “man coming from the East and from Pharaonic Egypt,” but they were decent and friendly. In a temporal shift, Father recollected his more recent trip to Vienna in 1969 with his wife where they celebrated their daughter, Aida’s, first birthday, and pointed out that he still remembered all the places he had visited, mentioning that they had traveled through Vienna again in 1973.

Father recounts his memories of his trip from Cairo to Warsaw with the two other Egyptians traveling with him to Warsaw on scholarships in economics, and the three of them shared the same apartment in Warsaw throughout his stay. He says that
when they arrived at Warsaw airport, a lady from the Institute of Oriental Studies, Arabic Department at Warsaw University, was waiting for them in case they only spoke Arabic. Then a car took them from the airport to the hospital for a three-day checkup; they were all healthy as they had already gone through a medical checkup in Cairo before travelling. The writing abruptly stops. The rest of the pages are left blank.

When I went to my sisters to compare our memories of Father’s first journey to Poland, I discovered that the three of us had different chronologies of events, and could not agree on specific dates. Each one had a different recollection; nor could we agree on the route he took. Aida and I were under the impression that Yugoslavia was his first stop on his way to Poland. Maya told me that she remembered that when she and I returned from a short holiday in Vienna, after Father had passed away, she came across a note where Father was describing his fascination with Vienna as the first European city he visited. She could not identify the source, but from what she said I gathered that she was probably referring to his notebook from 1975.

I went back to Father’s little notebook from 1958 to check the dates of his travel to and from Warsaw. Father wrote in this agenda that his route started on 20 May from Egypt to Ankara, Istanbul, and Vienna where he would stay overnight, then on 21 May he would travel from Vienna arriving in Warsaw at 17:35. Above each destination he wrote the departure and arrival time. On 29 December 1958 he wrote that he is flying to Belgrade, but his notebook did not mention when he was arriving in Cairo. Going through these notes, I remembered that Mother kept a tiny calendar in a little red box among other tiny notebooks and newspaper clippings. Opening the box, I found the calendar dating back to 1959. On 29 December 1958 Mother wrote “Safwat leaving Poland” – writing the name Safwat in Arabic alphabet followed by the rest of the sentence in Polish.43 Then on 9 January 1959 she wrote: “Safwat arriving at Cairo” in the same manner.

Father’s notes written in 1975 about his journey to Poland in 1958 are themselves recollections.44 They were written in retrospect after almost seventeen years since he had traveled to Poland for the first time in 1958. While going through

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43 Translations of Mother’s calendar notes from Polish into English are mine.
44 I refer to Father’s different calendars as notes, as he does not write them regularly and systematically over an extended period of time.
these personal writings dating back to 1975, I had beside me Father’s calendar during his stay in Poland in 1958. Interestingly, I noticed that the two notebooks complemented each other: one told a story while the other contained factual information. Father’s narrative of 1975 is in itself a form of a ‘constellation’ in Walter Benjamin’s terms, where Father combines his reflections on the field of folklore with his earliest professional training in this field in Warsaw. Combining both together could be interpreted in light of the fact that Father’s first professional encounter with folklore was during his study in Poland. He moves across temporality and space, by reflecting on the different countries he visited later in his life, and ponders on his own feelings and thoughts emerging in response to his various geographic and temporal encounters. After reading his reflection written in 1975, I went back to his older calendar from the year 1958: one was written in retrospect while the other reflected the immediacy of the present at the moment of writing. Both notebooks bring in Father’s voice in different ways: in his 1958 calendar, he provides evidence, dates, time and locations; while in the 1975 notebook, he offers threads of his story. I see both notebooks as symbolic of how memory is preserved and created. His notes are about evidence and about a story; about materiality and about the memories they invoke. And additionally, they allude to the imagined features attributed to different geographic spaces, translated into the imaginative stereotypes created about people belonging to other countries.

We know from Father that he was engaged in many activities in the field of folklore. In the first edition of Al-funun al-sha ‘biyya magazine, which was issued in January 1965, Father had published a research paper, based on his fieldwork, on Nubian\textsuperscript{45} weddings (Kamal, 1965), including photographs taken by him as well. The magazine was issued by the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, with Abd al-Hamid Yunis\textsuperscript{46} as the editor-in-chief, and the artistic vision of Abd al-Salam al-Sherif. In this first issue, the Minister of Culture at that time, Mohamad Abd al-Qadir Hatim, wrote an opening word, where he described the Egyptian society as “Arab Socialist”, and stated that the magazine was being published in respect to the people

\textsuperscript{45} Nubia is a region occupying the southern part of Egypt and extending into the Sudan. This corresponded with the time when Nubian culture and heritage were documented, recorded and studied prior to the Nubian people’s dislocation accompanying the process of constructing the Aswan High Dam in Upper Egypt.

\textsuperscript{46} Abd al-Hamid Yunis is an Egyptian intellectual, and one of the renowned Egyptian Folklore studies pioneers. For more information go to: http://www.folkculturebh.org/ar/index.php?issue=12&page=showarticle&id=62
and in appreciation of people’s forms of artistic expression. He makes reference to the 23 July 1952 Revolution, and its role in the Arab world, highlighting the Revolution’s concern with culture and national guidance. In his closing remark he states:

I am happy to present Al-funun al-sha biyya magazine to Arabs everywhere, offered to them by the biggest Arab nation. Here they can unite their traditions, and unite their goals, so as to eventually find themselves forming one national entity with one shared tradition, despite its diversity, and exchanging art across their differences. This magazine is from the people to the people. (Hatim 1965, 5)\(^\text{47}\)

We grew up hearing and seeing Father’s immersion in the field of folklore. We listened to him talking about his fieldwork and research, and sharing his knowledge in radio and television programs on folklore. He was one of the first content editors of the radio program “Min fununina al-sha biyya” (From our Folk Arts) broadcast in the early 1960s (Gad, 2009). In Father’s notebook of 1948, I found a small newspaper clipping in Arabic about a television program which was newly recorded to be presented as of the first of July, under the title “The People’s Celebrations of the Revolution” prepared by Father; the clipping unfortunately does not carry a date nor the name of the newspaper. Another newspaper clipping, which I also found in Father’s notebook, is about a lecture delivered by him at the Ghuria Cultural Center (Wikalat al-ghuri) about “A tour in Nubia” where he would present folk aspects of Nubian culture. This clipping too does not carry the date nor the name of the newspaper. During Father’s work at the Center of Folklore in Cairo, since 1958, he carried out around forty field visits in different places around Egypt (Abu Zid 2009, 183). Father had his work published in different articles, periodicals and books from the 1950s up till the first decade of the 2000s (Gad 2009, 168-171). In 1966, he was delegated by the Ministry of Information and National Guidance to go to Kuwait as a specialist in folklore at the recently founded Center for Folklore (Markaz ri’ayat al-funun al-sha biyya) under the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information.

To invoke Father’s voice regarding the reasons behind his travel to Kuwait, I went back to his letters sent to Mother since 1959 after his return from Warsaw. I was searching for traces that would reveal the factors that influenced this path. My sisters and I had different versions and dates regarding when he traveled to Kuwait. Maya and I were under the impression that he traveled to Kuwait after marrying Mother.

\(^{47}\) All translations of quotations from Arabic into English are mine.
We know for a fact that they got married in June 1967. In a letter sent by Father from Cairo to Mother in Warsaw on 11 November 1965, he writes saying that he had been offered to either work as a researcher on folktales in al-Sharqiyyah governorate or to be delegated to Kuwait as an expert on Folklore. He was consulting her in this letter about the path they would take together. He explained that going to Kuwait would be better for their future, and he suggested that Mother could stay in Egypt until she finished her PhD research, and then they would decide where to settle down. On 16 January 1966, Father sent a letter to Mother saying that he would be travelling to Kuwait soon for a year, and that it could be prolonged up till four years, elaborating that both the Egyptian and Kuwaiti governments have to annually approve prolonging his stay.

Father traveled to Kuwait in 1966 as an expert, within the wider framework of Egypt’s pan-Arab nationalist cultural policy, which involved sending Egyptian experts to different Arab countries. Kuwait had just gained its independence in 1961 from being a British-protectorate (Rabi 2006, 359). Aida tells me “when Father travelled to Kuwait his salary was covered by the Egyptian government. His contract was based on the Egyptian government’s bilateral agreements with the Kuwaiti government.” Hassan Hanafi writes about the same point saying: “Safwat Kamal did not emigrate to Kuwait, nor did he resign from his work in Egypt; but he was delegated as an Expert in Folklore at the Ministry of Information in 1966, at that time when the Egyptian government was leading the Arab Renaissance” (Hanafi 2009, 71). In an undated letter which I assume was sent from Kuwait in 1966 (as it was among other letters from the same period), Father spoke about the prospect of travelling to Kuwait, telling Mother that it would be easier to travel from Kuwait to Europe, but he did not specify how and why it would be easier. In later letters to Mother sent in 1966, he mentioned that he started asking about possibilities to travel by car from Kuwait to Poland and that it could be done eventually; and he also referred to their plan to travel to different European countries on their way from Kuwait to Warsaw.

In his letter to Mother dated 11 November 1965, he refers to the Polish President’s visit to Egypt, expressing that President Nasser welcomed him, and pointing out that Father saw in this visit a symbol of “the deep friendship between our people,” in reference to the relations between the Egyptian and Polish peoples.
Among their letters, I found an earlier one, going back to 23 July 1960, sent from Father to Mother, in which he tells her that he had just returned from a “glorious night” celebrating the eighth anniversary of the 1952 Revolution. In his letter he refers to the revolution with the expression “our revolution” and “our people”. He says that the celebration was not only about the High Dam, but the expression Father uses is: “we have discovered ourselves. It is a great step to know our way and the future of our people. These are not my own words, but the thoughts of my people now.” I stopped at Father’s phrase “discovering ourselves,” and it brought me back to my own state after the January 2011 Revolution, which triggered in me an attempt to rediscover myself and my surroundings. Had I had read Father’s words before experiencing the revolution, I would have most probably not stopped at them, nor reread them as I did that day. This is one of the clear moments of ‘recognizability,’ where the past gains meaning in the present.

In Father’s notebook, on 1 June 1958, he writes in Arabic that he met Mother, Teresa Pfabe, the friend of Samir Rif‘at. I remember my parents used to say that Samir Rif‘at was their common friend who introduced them to each other. In his notebook, Father writes in both Arabic and English that Teresa Pfabe works at the Palace of Culture, in the Editors’ Office of *Culture and Society*, and he noted down the address and phone number. It was interesting to see, in their notebooks, both Father and Mother’s use of language in their first encounters with each other. Mother used both Arabic and Polish when writing in her notebook about Father, and Father used both Arabic and English when writing about Mother. These constellations of languages remained till the very end in their everyday communication with each other; and these three languages continue to be the languages used by my sisters and me in our everyday.

**A Lieu de Mémoire**

In my attempt to better understand and trace the contexts that brought my parents together in the late 1950s, I decided to ask Samir Rif‘at - Father’s friend since childhood - about the circumstances that led to his travel to Poland. He told me that

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48 The High Dam Father refers to in his letter is the Aswan High Dam which was under construction in Upper Egypt to control the flooding of the river Nile. It was one of the major projects after 1952, and the construction work started in 1960. For more information go to: http://www.water-technology.net/projects/aswan-high-dam-nile-sudan-egypt/

49 I use this name as a pseudonym.
he traveled to Poland twice, once for the International Youth and Students Festival held in Warsaw in 1955; and again in 1959 while he was a teaching assistant at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Egypt. He said that although he had the opportunity to establish the Cartoon Animation Department at the Egyptian Television, he was fascinated by Europe, and therefore chose to go on a scholarship to Poland (Abdelrahman 2015, 35).

Samir Rif‘at had vivid recollections from 1955 of the Youth Festival in Warsaw. He told me that Mother was the Egyptian group’s Polish-English translator, and remembered that her knowledge of English language was very good. He told me that the Egyptian group included some two hundred members who relied on Mother, and felt reassured in her company. He remembered that Mother showed them around Warsaw, and that she guided a group of fifty Egyptians on a trip to Auschwitz.\(^{50}\)

Samir Rif‘at’s account reminded me of Mother’s emphasis that Auschwitz victims were not only Jews but also included huge numbers of anti-Nazi non Jewish Polish people as well as gypsies and foreigners. I remember that she even mentioned that the list of Auschwitz victims included the name of an Egyptian.

In our first meeting, Samir Rif‘at started recollecting many memories while we talked. He told me that he lived in Vienna in the early 1960s for about five years doing his doctoral studies, during which he married an Austrian woman. He mentioned that they came back to Egypt, but due to the 1967 war the conditions in Egypt made it difficult for her to stay, so they decided to travel together to Austria. He added that he could not find a job easily, although earlier he had worked at the Opera House in Vienna; consequently he returned to Egypt alone. His words resonated with my parents’ decision to go together to Kuwait, although before the 1967 war my parents were considering that Mother would stay in Cairo to continue her work on her PhD thesis. After listening to his account, I also thought that, most probably, had Father and Mother decided to live in Warsaw, Father would have had great difficulties finding work.

I asked Samir Rif‘at about the circumstances leading to his travel to Europe in the late 1950s and 1960s. He explained that at that time Egyptian newspapers continually advertised different scholarships to various countries; that was how he spotted the scholarship to Vienna. As for his travel to Poland, he told me that he had

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\(^{50}\) Auschwitz is the German name of the Polish town Oświęcim, where one of largest Nazi extermination camps was established during WWII.
traveled to Warsaw twice. He explained that his first trip to Poland was as a member of a large group of Egyptian young men and women who traveled to attend a Youth Festival in 1955. The second time was when he was a teaching assistant at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo, and he traveled on a six-month scholarship to Warsaw studying for a Diploma in Cartoon Animation Studies in 1959. I asked him about the details surrounding his journey to Poland in 1955 to attend the World Festival for Youth and Students, and enquired whether the Egyptian government was handling the travel organization of the Egyptian delegation. Unlike his brief childhood recollections, this time he had a lot to say. His answer to my question was as follows:

No, it wasn’t the government, it was Tahia Carioca,51 the dancer. She was a communist, and she had attended this festival in 1953. This festival was held every two years. She got to know that the next festival would be held in Poland, so when she returned to Egypt, she started encouraging people in her communist circle to travel to Warsaw to attend the next one. One of my friends, his brother was a communist and was in that circle, started to convince me to travel to Warsaw. My first reaction was why should I travel to Warsaw, it is a country that is ruined by war. Then I thought, maybe it is my destiny to travel. At the same time another friend of mine, his brother-in-law was a police officer, advised him not to travel because it was too dangerous due to the festival’s links with communism. Connections with communism were dangerous at the time as Nasser was sending communists to prison. This friend did not travel. But I and a group of my friends at the Faculty of Fine Arts decided to go. We were a total of 200 people, and we traveled by ship. We tried to find a scholarship to assist us in covering the travel expenses, but no one wanted to help, except for Tahia Carioca. She said that she would sponsor our travel. She had a theater in Imad al-Din, in downtown Cairo, and decided to have a special performance whose profits would go towards sponsoring our travel. I remember I wore an elegant suit, took a bus or a tramway from Nozha street to Fuad street, then I had to walk to reach the theater. I remember that while walking towards the theater I saw police standing at every second block. I was worried, so I walked straight ahead and did not go towards the theater, then took the first tram or bus and headed directly home. I stayed up until about two in the morning, I was so afraid that the police would come and arrest me.

When I asked Samir Rifat whether he had any materials from that time, he showed me a few pictures he took of different parts of Warsaw. I could see in those pictures how damaged the city was by the war, with its ruined buildings and empty

51 Tahia Carioca was a belly dancer born in 1915. In Edward Said’s book, Reflections on Exile and Other Essays, he writes an article under the title “Homage to a Belly Dancer,” where he gives an account of his interview with her. Said states that “she had always been part of the national Left (Nasser, she said, had jilied her in the fifties because she had been a member of the League for Peace, a Moscow front organization)” (Said 2000, 353).
streets. I went back to Mother’s documents seeking more information about the context of this festival. So, I found in our home in Warsaw, among Mother’s papers, a brochure published after the festival. The festival was called “The World Festival for Youth and Students” and was held in the period 31 July–14 August 1955. The brochure includes mainly pictures from events held by different delegations, and the information appeared in Polish, English, German and what seemed to me like Chinese. When further researching the festival, I also found a link to videos from the festival, where among others, the Syrian delegation was dancing their folkloric dance Dabka in central Warsaw, as well as African and Asian delegations performing folkloric dances (Dornista 102, 2011). According to Tom Junes:

Warsaw was designated to host the fifth World Festival of Youth and Students, an international event conceived mainly as a Soviet propaganda tool. For most of the generation that had come of age during the era of Stalinism, the festival was the first opportunity to encounter youth from other countries. . . The regime envisioned the festival as a chance to display its success in rebuilding the city, and to promote the Communist system in general. For fifteen summer days about one hundred thirty thousand Polish and thirty thousand foreign youths descended upon the Polish capital. During these two weeks several official events and political rallies were organized, combined with an international youth sports tournament, cultural and artistic events, student seminars, and excursions beyond the capital. (Junes 2015, 37)

I was intrigued to know more about his second trip, taking into consideration all the logistical and financial challenges that he might have faced based on his earlier account. In response to my query, Samir Rif’at remembered the following:

I was nominated by the government to travel to Warsaw for a diploma, which I was very excited about. Nasser had already done the deal of buying weapons from Czechoslovakia, so actually our trip in 1955 was used as a beginning of cooperation between Egypt and the communist block – which is something I realized much later. When I returned from Poland the first time, I was being followed by the police everywhere I went. On my second trip to Poland I traveled by airplane, and since there were no direct flights connecting Egypt to Poland, there was a stop in Vienna, as far as I remember. The flight from Cairo to Vienna was comfortable, but then I remember the airplane that I took on the way to Poland; it was a Polish airliner, and the airplane was one of the war remnant planes. It was not at all comfortable, with its hard iron chairs covered with cloth.

The different conditions around his two trips to Poland reveal the changes in the political context in the Egyptian state in relation to the Polish state. According to
his account, in the four year gap between the two trips there was a change in the
politics of the Egyptian State. He told me that these political changes manifested
themselves upon his return from Poland the second time, as he was not followed by
the Police as was the case when he traveled in 1955. Samir Rif’at’s account of his
second official trip to Warsaw for a diploma bore similarities to the traces I found
concerning Father’s first trip to Warsaw in 1958. They both knew about the
scholarship opportunities from newspaper advertisement. There were no direct flights
to Poland, and the state covered travel expenses by airplane.

The international relations between Egypt and Poland are explained in some
historical accounts of post World War II Poland. Poland was under Soviet control
governed by a communist regime. The Soviet Union controlled Polish external
political affairs, which affected the relations between Poland and the Arab as well as
African countries at that time. Poland supported Arab countries, especially Egypt,
during the attack by Israel in 1967 – a support that was soon reflected in various
aspects such as the increased cooperation in political, economic, agricultural, cultural
and scientific fields (Ratke-Majewska & Knopek 2014, 67-68). Due to this reality,
since the 1960s to the 1980s, many Arab and African students studied in Poland; for
example, in 1973, the majority of those students where Egyptians (Knopek 2006,
148).

Among Mother’s documents in our home in Warsaw, I found a Polish
magazine Kontynenty (Continents), issued in July 1966, with a big picture on its first
page, featuring Gamal Abd al-Nasser, President of the United Arab Republic, with
Edward Ochab, Chairman of the Polish Council of State in Egypt. The article refers to
the Polish support of different Arab countries fighting for their freedom, giving the
following example: “we supported Egypt in its defense against the tri-partite
aggression in 1956” (Frelek 1966, 1).52 The article further elaborates that Poland
supported these countries which were seeking national and economic independence
by enhancing economic, political and cultural relations with those countries. The
article further explains that “the socialist powers consider the movement for national
independence as the second revolutionary wave after socialism in our era” (Frelek
1966, 1). Another article in the same magazine refers to the writer’s visit to Upper
Egypt to report on the relocation of Abu Simbel temple (Dziedzic 1966, 12). These

52 All quotations from Polish sources have been translated by me.
articles indicate the interest of the Polish State and intellectuals in the Egyptian political and cultural scene at that time.

When I met Samir Rif’at, he gave me a copy of an issue of the Polish magazine *Kinotechnik* (Cinematic Technique) published in 1960 which carries his photograph below an article about the art of creating animated motion pictures. Samir Rif’at’s photograph was accompanied by a caption describing him in the studio of film miniatures, and referring to him as coming “from far away Egypt” to acquire practice (Stradomski 1960, 2963). He also showed me a photograph of a painting he had done over fifty years ago while he was in Warsaw – a painting of down-town Warsaw, depicting the Palace of Culture which is one of Warsaw’s landmarks, surrounded by rubble. It struck me that the same painting is hanging on the wall at our home in Warsaw. When I showed Maya a picture of this painting, she remembered that it was hanging at our home in Warsaw. I asked Aida about this painting, she told me that she had found it among other unframed drawings and paintings in Mother’s bookcase at our home in Warsaw, and that she framed and hung it on the wall recently. She told me that she got interested in this painting because it was painted by an Egyptian artist documenting post War Warsaw. In my next visit to Warsaw, I looked at this painting with the Palace of Culture surrounded by ruins, then looked through the window only to see at a distance the top of the same Palace of Culture now surrounded by high-rise buildings!

These two frames, the picture frame and window frame, present two moments existing simultaneously in one place. The painting hanging there with its faded colors showing an image of post war ruined Warsaw has become part of the room with the view on the same place which has witnessed the transformation. Looking through the window and at the painting images converge. Samir Rif’at’s signature on the painting challenges the notion of him being described in the Polish magazine as coming from “far away Egypt.” Through this painting, time and space converge.

Samir Rif’at represents to me, in himself, a *lieu de mémoire*. Every time we meet, he brings along photographs of his artistic works, and among them he always has some pictures to show me of him and Father, or of him and Mother on different occasions. His recollections are not only about Father and Mother, and his stories help me reimagine the past which he describes, with its multi-layers. Through his narratives I can reimagine my parents’ everyday, and get a glimpse of how the political and economic conditions on the state level affect the journeys of subjects, as
well as how states change their tactics, which in turn affect peoples’ everyday. To me, Samir Rif’at embodies memories that continue into the present.

After listening to his narratives, I decided to follow traces about the Youth Festival as an event of the past, which in my view marked a turning point in Mother’s path. I tried to recollect what Mother used to tell us about the festival but I could not recall much. I asked my sisters about their memories. Maya and I had a blurred memory about the Youth Festival. Before I started my research we were not sure whether Father was at this festival, or if he traveled to Warsaw later on. The narratives and material traces around the Youth Festival, in which Mother had participated, shed light on aspects of her social environment, and the way the public and private converge.

**Mother’s Routes**

In Uncle Witold’s written account about the reasons that led Mother to join the Youth Festival in 1955 as a translator for the Egyptian delegation, he mentions that Mother requested to be assigned - as a translator – to any group except the American and British delegations. According to him, during that time’s political context, these two countries were regarded as a source of ‘danger to the Nation’. He explains that Mother did not want to face any accusations, especially since she was a graduate of the Department of English Philology at a Catholic University, which already was hindering her chances in finding work (within a socialist state). He adds that Mother was assigned to the Egyptian delegation, which included young Egyptian artists. It was after volunteering as a translator for the Egyptian delegation at the Warsaw Festival for Youth and Students, Mother got interested in joining the “White African Studies” department at the Academy of Sciences in Warsaw (Pfabé 2010, 22).

My sisters and I had confused memories about Mother joining the festival. Each one of us was not sure whether Mother already knew Arabic at that time, and if that was the reason behind being chosen as a translator for the Egyptian delegation. Or did she start learning Arabic later? To put this story together, I started going through the documents in Mother’s black briefcase where she kept her different school and university certificates. I opened the briefcase and started going through the documents in it. I found certificates, translated from Polish into English and into French, stating that she studied in the 1950s in the Department of English Philology at the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL) where in 1955 she obtained her Master’s
degree. Another certificate states that Mother completed her studies at the Department of Oriental Studies specializing in Arabic language in the academic years 1958/59–1961/62, enrolled at the Faculty of Philological Studies at Warsaw University.

In this black briefcase I also found certified translations of certificates of experience stating that she worked as a clerk at the Center for the Distribution of the Scientific Publications of the Polish Academy of Sciences from 5 November 1955 till 21 May 1956. She was then appointed assistant editor of two periodicals of the Polish Academy of Sciences: *Polish Science*, the Quarterly of the Presidium of the Polish Academy of Sciences (1956); and *Culture and Society*, the Quarterly of the Department of Social Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences (1957-1962). Then she worked as Senior Assistant at the Research Center for Sociology and History of Culture of the Polish Academy of Sciences from 1 October 1958 till 30 November 1959. Later she got appointed as Senior Assistant in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences from 1 December 1959 till 31 October 1962. Her last position was at the Center for Social and Cultural Problems of Contemporary Africa of the Polish Academy of Sciences from 1 November 1962 till 22 December 1967.

Mother used to tell my sisters and me that she was an independent person; she had her career and studies. She had also moved to her own studio apartment in Warsaw, as early as 1959/1960 (Pfabé 2010, 22). When I asked Uncle Witold if it was the norm at that time for young women to have their own apartments in Warsaw, he told me:

> Usually young people who moved to Warsaw would go and live with their elderly uncles or aunts; which was the case with your mother when she first moved to Warsaw. Your mother was lucky, the Academy of Sciences where she was working was building for their employees apartments that they could buy. This was how your Mother was able to have her own apartment.

In the introduction to the book *O początkach powieści egipskiej* (On the Beginnings of the Egyptian Novel), which my sisters and I edited and published after Mother passed away, there is a written account by one of her closest friends describing Mother’s home in Warsaw not only as a place for sincere advise, especially in those dark times. It is described as an asylum to get away from the cultural repressive atmosphere of the Soviet era. Her friend further describes Mother’s home saying that it was a place for friends to meet
and openly discuss cultural and political issues. She adds that Mother’s home would sometimes get so crowded that they had to sit on the floor next to her big Piano, while she served them cinnamon tea and occasionally turned on Arabic music (Komorowska 2010, 24).

While I was at our home in Warsaw, I found in a box with pictures a black and white picture of a building under construction, on the other side of the picture I recognized my Grandmother’s handwriting adding the address of Mother’s apartment and writing in Polish “under construction.” I went through the contents of a wooden shelf in a bookcase which I had never opened before. I was searching for traces of Mother’s life before she left Poland. There I found a pack of pamphlets of various concerts, opera and theater performances that were taking place in Warsaw in the 1960s. I also found many issues of the Polish periodical entitled Kultura i społeczeństwo (Culture and Society) published by the Department of Sociology and History of Culture, at the Polish Academy of Sciences. In this periodical, I found articles written by Mother in various issues between the year 1957 and 1961, covering different topics, such sociological issues and cultural aspects in African countries.

At the very bottom, I found a couple of old Egyptian magazines, with their yellowish worn out pages. I opened them gently, and found that they had interviews with Mother. I came across a sentence written in an interview with Mother, published in the Egyptian Akhir sa’u magazine in 1965, where she is quoted saying that she is not interested only in the Middle East, but she is interested in the African continent in general. I found another copy of the Al-‘Iza ‘ah wal-tilifizyon (Radio and Television) Egyptian magazine, an issue going back to 13 February 1965 where on page 41 there is an interview conducted with Mother, under the title “The Youngest Orientalist in the World.” In this article, Mother is introduced as the youngest orientalist doing her doctorate in Arabic literature, on the intersections between Western and Arabic cultures in the Egyptian society, by focusing on Egyptian fiction between 1919 and 1952. In this article there is reference that she studied for a year and half with the French Orientalist Jacques Berque, and adds that she intends in the future to carry out research on the influence of 23 July 1952 revolution on the Arab society.

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54 The name of the journalist is not mentioned in this interview.
We grew up knowing that Mother spent a few years in Paris to pursue her PhD degree in the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{55} Mother did not talk much about her achievements. I had asked Uncle Witold if it was easy for Polish young people to travel and receive scholarships, he told me the following:

No, it was not easy to travel at that time. You either had to be a very solid student or connected to the ruling party. Your Mother was a solid and intelligent student, which allowed her to travel. France also was not considered an alarming country for the state at that time, nor was Egypt. Egypt was considered similar to Poland at that time.

Uncle’s words brought to my mind the articles I mentioned earlier which reflect the historical context of Polish Egyptian international relations, as well as my Father’s letter mentioned earlier about the visit of the Polish President to Egypt.

I remember that Mother used to repeatedly tell us, with much enthusiasm, about her first trip from France to Morocco. In our home in Warsaw, I found a box with different postcards sent from Mother to her parents. Examining these postcards and their dates, I got to know about her trips from France to different European cities and countries, which included Romania and Brussels. Being in France, she traveled on a conference to Morocco, which was the first non-European city for her to visit. I found among Mother’s letters sent to her family in the summer of 1963 a postcard describing her trip, sailing at that time by ship, from Marseille to Morocco; stopping by Napoli from where she sent a postcard. In Morocco she visited Casablanca, Fes and Rabat; in each of her postcards she expressed her fascination with all the places she visited and with the people she saw. She used to tell us how in Morocco she tried all the food and all the drinks sold by street peddlers, and among the cards sent to her parents there are two postcards with pictures of peddlers, where she expressed to her mother her fascination with their features and their clothes. I also remember Mother telling me that on her way to Morocco she was taking a risk, not knowing whether she would be allowed to enter one of the cities with her Polish passport. I do not remember which city it was, but it might have been Napoli. So she made an arrangement with a French group, whom she met on board the

\textsuperscript{55} Appendix C Figure 11 features a picture of Mother’s ID for a library in Paris where her address in Paris is indicated.
ship, to put her passport among theirs so that the officers at the border would not notice her Polish (Eastern European) passport among the other passports.

Having attended Catholic schools and a Catholic University in Poland, Mother told us that when traveling she would look for Catholic convents to spend the night in a safe surrounding. She told us that she did not have a budget for staying at hotels, so she would search for Catholic convents and ask if she could spend the night there, and they would always find a space for her to spend the night. Every time she talked about this trip, she would get excited; I sensed the same excitement vibrant in her cards sent to her family throughout that trip. She returned from Morocco back to Marseille. I found letters from her French Professor J. Berque, on a letter-head of Ministère De L’Éducation Nationale: École Pratique Des Hautes Études, Sciences Économiques et Sociales, Division des Aires Culturelles Sociologie Musulmane, certifying that she is working on her PhD studies under his supervision starting from 1963. The document stated that the area of her study was the problem of acculturation in Egypt. One of the letters is a recommendation letter to travel to Egypt to conduct fieldwork.

As I mentioned earlier, Mother’s first encounter with Egyptians was during the Youth Festival in 1955. Then Mother and Father met while Father was on his scholarship in Warsaw in 1958. In an interview with Mother, published in the Kuwaiti Al-Hadaf newspaper, the interview mentions that while she was working as a researcher at the Academy of Sciences in Warsaw she was requested to translate from English to Polish during a lecture at Warsaw University given by Safwat Kamal, an Egyptian researcher of Egyptian Folklore (Khalaf 1976, 4). In the same interview Mother is quoted saying that she got to know about the ‘Orient’ from the stories she heard from her grandmother about the orient and its heroes. Arab heroes were also mentioned in poems she read by her favorite Polish poet Słowacki,\(^\text{56}\) as well as those by Lord Byron and Goethe. She adds that the novel Faraon (Pharaoh), by the famous Polish writer Prus,\(^\text{57}\) was among the novels she read during her school years. She is

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\(^{56}\) Juliusz Słowacki, Poland's great Romantic poet, playwright and visionary philosopher. Born 1809 in Krzemieniec, died in 1849 in Paris; he visited Egypt, which inspired some of his works. For more information go to http://culture.pl/en/artist/juliusz-słowacki

\(^{57}\) Bolesław Prus, (born August 20, 1847, Hrubieszów, Poland—died May 19, 1912, Warsaw), is a Polish journalist, short-story writer, and novelist; he wrote a novel titled Faraon about ancient Egypt as an analogy of power struggles in modern societies. For more information go to: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boleslaw-Prus
also quoted saying that there was a map of the world hanging at her home in Poland, where she saw the route to the East and to Egypt (Khalaf 1976, 4).

Mother told us that as a young girl, she was fascinated by stories told by her uncle, Stefan Iskierko, about his stay in Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century. I remembered this when I was going through Mother’s letters, as I found an envelope from my grandmother sent in 1975 to Mother with a newspaper clipping. It was the obituary of Captain Stefan Iskierko, who served in WWI and WWII in the Polish army abroad. I remember Mother telling us laughingly about his recollections while being in Cairo. How he would buy caged pigeons and set them free; people on the streets would then follow him saying “here is the crazy guy!” She had also heard from him of café Groppi - one of the oldest cafés in Cairo going back to 1909 - where our parents used to take us whenever they had to run errands in downtown. Mother had created her own image of the Orient through the literary works she read and the stories she heard from her uncle. Funny enough, one of my uncles in Poland had mentioned to me that my grandmother was not very enthusiastic about her daughter living in Egypt because of the stories she had heard from one of her relatives who stayed in Egypt during WWII. I gathered that he was referring to uncle Stefan whose stories about Egypt were in Mother’s eyes fascinating, yet in Grandmother’s eyes alarming.

This is an example of the multiplicity of stories and interpretations of narratives. There is no single homogenous history, but there are always different layers of interpretation depending on the position of the person listening and analyzing the narratives. This specific example, at the level of my family, throws light on the way narratives get differently interpreted on the macro-level of societies. Analyzing the above, I see the difference of positions between Mother and Grandmother affecting their interpretations. Whereas Mother was influenced by literary works, she must have been seeing in her uncle’s narratives the segments which relate to this image created in her mind of the ‘orient’. On the other hand, Grandmother was a practical and pragmatic person, so I can imagine that when hearing uncle Stefan’s narrative she must have been focusing on the practical aspects of life in Egypt which I assume she might have been focusing on what is different and alarming from her point of view.

It is interesting for me to reflect on both Father’s notes reflecting on his first encounter with a European country and people in Vienna, (elaborated earlier in this
chapter) in contrast to the unrealistic image which was projected by his friends who traveled on scholarships to Europe. Father’s notes make me assume that he had a preconceived image from his friends before he himself traveled and saw with his own eyes Vienna and later Poland. I relate this to the preconceived image of the Arab world which Mother also created in her imagination prior to visiting Morocco and Egypt, through different literary works as well as through her uncle. These examples make me borrow Benedict Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities”. In Anderson’s sense “political communities” are “imagined” because “even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communities” (2006, 6). In my parent’s case, the imagined community is not about a “political” one as Anderson argues. It is rather about an imagined cultural ethos that does not exist in reality built on narratives of others. This imagined community gets dismantled once my parents start interacting socially with people in those “imagined communities”. The personal experience dismantles constructed narratives and discourses.

**Converging Paths**

Mother came to Egypt twice to carry out fieldwork and hold interviews for her PhD; that was before marrying Father. Her first visit was in 1964, and the second visit was in 1967. Her first stay in Egypt was in the period from July to December 1964. She sailed to Alexandria by ship from Marseille, with stops in Napoli and Athens. The details of her route are documented in the postcards she sent throughout the journey to her family in Poland, which I found in the bookcase at our home in Warsaw. These postcards reveal Mother’s deep respect for the Egyptian society, expressed on different occasions, which we grew up witnessing.

Her postcards reveal how impressed she was by Egypt and its people. Besides joining Father on his field trips, Mother was working on her interviews with contemporary Egyptian writers, for her PhD thesis. Among Mother’s documents at our home in Warsaw, I found a newspaper clipping of which I had read a reference in one of Father’s letters in 1965, of an interview done by a journalist called Ma’mun Gharib. The newspaper clipping has Mother’s handwriting specifying that it was from *Akhir Sa’ a* (number 1574, 23 December 1964). The interview sheds light on Mother’s fluency in English, French and Arabic, and points out that in the absence of a Polish-Arabic dictionary, she resorts to Russian-Arabic and German-Arabic dictionaries.
This article reminded me of a yellowish roll of papers I had found among Father’s documents. It carried Mother’s faded handwriting, where she had translated Turkish words into Polish. In the Akhir sa ‘a interview, Mother refers to her interest in Arabic contemporary literature mainly because of its social and political depth, adding that she was reading some of the works of different Egyptian contemporary writers at that time, such as Tawfiq al-Hakim, Naguib Mahfouz, Yahia Hakki, Yousef al-Siba‘i and Ihsan Abd el-Qudus, among others. She highlights that she is trying to understand the society through literature, and is quoted saying: “my interest is not literature per se. … I am above all interested in its meaning from a social, economic and political angle” (Gharib 1964). This sentence resonates with my own attempts in my research; where I am not interested in the story of my family for its own sake, but I am also attempting to understand the socio-economic and socio-political angles underlying this story.

In Mother’s small notebook that goes back to the early 1960s, placed in the already mentioned little red box, Mother wrote the address of the National Union of Greek Students in Athens, the YWCA address in Cairo, and some other hotel names in Tahrir square. Looking further into the notebook, I see several Arabic names some of which are accompanied by five digit phone numbers. I close the little notebook delicately, and put it aside. I find below it some newspaper clippings from Polish magazines about Egypt and Arab countries, with occasional dates written in Mother’s handwriting, mainly from the period 1962-1967. Below them there are pieces of paper in handwriting with Egyptian names, telephone numbers, and addresses, including Ni’mat Ahmad Fuad58 and Bahiga Haykal. I did not have an idea who the latter was until I saw the newspaper interviews with Mother in 1964, mentioning that Mother was going to meet with the wife of the writer Muhamad Husayn Haykal,59 as Mother’s research included his novel Zainab. I also saw different business cards, including that of Rushdi Salih, the director of The Center of Folklore.

At the bottom of this little box, I found invitations in Arabic to art exhibitions, film screenings, lectures by Father, invitation from the Ministry of Culture and

58 Ni’mat Ahmad Fuad a known Egyptian writer and intellectual, born in 1926. For more information go to http://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=03102016&id=46497ad8-c4d8-4383-a291-6c4aeaed9fda
59 An Egyptian writer, journalist and politician, born 1888, he passed away in 1956 before Mother’s travel to Egypt. For more information go to http://www.marefa.org/index.php/%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF_%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86_%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%84
National Guidance as well as from the Ambassador of Poland in Egypt, inviting Father to attend a performance at the Cairo Opera House\textsuperscript{60} by a Polish folkloric troupe. These invitations go back to the period between 1960 and 1965. Some are about lectures Father is going to give, others of events in 1964 are addressed to “Safwat Kamal and his Fiancée.” There are also ones from 1965 which Father used to send enclosed with his letters to Mother. I also found a printed booklet with the title “Cultural, Artistic and Media Programs – Issued by the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance - State Information Agency – Center of Culture and Information in Banha.”

In that same box I came across a small greenish notebook in Arabic, on the cover of which it said: “Egyptian Railways – Subscription for 2000 kilometers – Second Class – Non-transferable Personal Subscription.” When I opened it, it had Father’s picture and name, and it listed the different railway routes to cities in Upper Egypt and the Delta.\textsuperscript{61} These included a journey on 14 September 1964 from Cairo to Malawi, then from Malawi to Luxor. 18 September was marked by a journey from Luxor to Aswan and then from Aswan to Malawi; while on 23 October he travelled from Cairo to Tanta, and on 30 October from Fayum to Cairo. We had repeatedly listened to our parents recounting these journeys taken by them together across the country during Mother’s stay in Egypt in 1964. These traces are complemented by Mother’s postcards sent to her parents in August 1964, saying that she felt Egypt was her second homeland, and told them about having spent two nights in Alexandria. In these cards she describes Father (whom they had met in 1958 in Poland) as a true Egyptian brother in the way he took care of her, and asked his friends as well to look after her. In the various cards she had sent to her parents she mentioned some of the cities she visited, such as Luxor, Mallawy, Tun al-Gabal and Ashmonin in Upper Egypt. She also sent them a card from Fayum, saying that she was there with Father and his friends, and referred to the Portraits of Fayum and their process of restoration.

**Socio-Political Contexts**

During Mother’s first stay in Egypt in 1964 she and Father developed an emotional attachment which is particularly evident in their correspondence following her return.

\textsuperscript{60} This was the old Cairo Opera House which was located in downtown Cairo, and was burnt down in 1971. For more information about the history of Cairo Opera House go to:
http://www.cairoopera.org/history.php

\textsuperscript{61} Appendix C Figure 12 has a picture of Father’s railway transportation pass from 1964.
to Poland. Father’s letters reveal that he had proposed to her during her stay in Egypt, but they took the decision that Mother should return to Poland to finish her PhD thesis first. The correspondence between my parents since 1964 includes letters sent by Father containing invitations to different art exhibitions by some of his acquaintances and friends, known to her during her stay in Egypt. In his letters he continued sharing with her news about new song releases, such as ‘Inta al-hobb’ by Um Kulthum, or the lyrics of Abd al-Halim Hafiz songs – both being famous Egyptian singers at that time. He was referring in his letters to books he had sent her, mainly novels by Yahia Hakki; and thanking her for the books she sent to him from Poland.

During her second stay in Egypt in 1967, according to their letters, Mother was supposed to come and finish her PhD thesis. By that time, Father had started his work as an expert of Folklore in Kuwait, and their correspondence shows that they had not decided whether Mother would join him in Kuwait or stay in Cairo to finish her research, while he would return to Cairo a year later. Obviously, their plan was an open-ended one. From the letters I read, it seemed that Father came to Cairo from Kuwait in mid May 1967, while Mother arrived on 22 May 1967.

In one of the letters going back to 1966, Mother is explaining to Father the difficulty she is facing in getting her passport to travel. Historical sources explain the conditions of traveling under the communist rule in Poland at that time. Polish citizens could not keep their passports at home with them, but passports stayed with the State; and Polish citizens had to have a good reason to get the State’s permission to travel. According to Norman Davies “[p]assports for foreign travel were not issued by right, but only for approved purposes” (2001, 30). In the 1960s Poland was under Communist rule, until the 1989 revolution which was triggered by the independent self-governing trade union “Solidarity,” being the first union that did not fall under the communist party. After WWII, the Polish state became a closed state, as “the Soviet Union forcibly imposed a Soviet-style communist system on Poland, regardless of the people’s wishes or the country’s independent interests” (Davies 2001, 2). It was very difficult for people to travel, and there was a general sense of xenophobia created by the state. In order to travel, people had to go through many bureaucratic procedures to attain approvals for travel:

Up to 1989, each and every trip outside the Soviet Bloc, and during most of the period, each and every trip abroad, required applying for
a passport document of one kind or another. Having screened the application and the applicant, the passport service – a department within the Security Service – gave or refused the document. Upon return one had to bring it back without delay, and apply again when planning the next trip abroad. (Stola 2015, 97)

Among Mother’s letters and magazines at our home in Warsaw I found a Polish magazine called ITD which stands for (Illustrated Students Magazine). The issue dates back to 28 May 1968 and includes an article titled “Gaps in Students’ Statistics Abroad.” The writer was questioning here the “scientific and moral-political criteria” applied by the Ministry of Higher Education for scholarships. The writer listed Mother’s name among others as examples of students who travelled abroad without returning on time; questioning the criteria behind offering them scholarships, and accused them of denouncing return to their country (Kaliński 1968, 6). In a later issue of the same magazine, on 2 June 1968, there is a correction published by the magazine quoting a letter from Uncle Witold responding to these accusations, and exposing their mendacity. He stated that Mother was academically qualified for the scholarship as she held two university degrees from two faculties, in addition to a master’s degree; and added that she was at that time in the process of working on her PhD, and pointed out that she was now married to an Egyptian citizen. At the end of the quotation the editorial board mentioned that they had also received a letter from “Teresa Pfabé’s father” (my grandfather) with similar rectification, and added that they apologized for the mistakes included in the article. I found it astonishing that at that time the article underlined that the priority highlighted for selecting students for scholarships should be based on their “moral-political” loyalties. I asked my uncle about this incident, he told me the following:

These were the times people envied and doubted anyone who had a chance to travel abroad. Accusations were made without any basis. Also these were the times of severe attacks on Jews in Poland, and maybe our family name ‘Pfabé’ sounded different than ordinary Polish names; so if someone was looking randomly at names of students they might have chosen your Mother because the family name was not a typical traditional Polish name. Who knows? They might have even mistakenly assumed that it is a Jewish name. At that time Jews’ loyalty was questioned and our family name could have contributed to making her a target for their false accusations.

Uncle’s account gives insight into their social environment at that time. Travel was restricted; he uttered in a matter of fact tone that people would “envy” anyone
who had the chance to travel. An interesting point raised by Uncle’s reflection on this incident is the issue of the family name. I find it particularly noteworthy that at this moment in history, Uncle sees that their family name - not being a traditional Polish name - could have implied Jewish linkage; while as already mentioned (in Chapter II), only a few decades earlier it implied German linkage. In both cases, what can be traced is the way in which the state apparatus reacts differently in categorizing its citizens, where the name of an individual could make him/her subject to integration or rejection by state powers.

I asked Uncle Witold about how Mother’s marriage to Father, being an Egyptian, was perceived by the family in Poland. I was also curious to know whether Mother actually informed her family of her marriage in a postcard she sent them from Cairo. He paused and nodded smiling: “yes, that’s what I heard. Your mother sent a postcard saying she was getting married.” I rephrased the question about the way the marriage was perceived by Grandmother in Poland, but Uncle evaded the answer, and what followed was a moment of silence. I understood Uncle’s silence as an indication that Mother’s decision must have been problematic, especially for my Grandmother. When I tried to probe the issue, he changed the subject.

When I asked Uncle Henryk, who witnessed that period, whether Father’s being an Arab and/or a Muslim was a problematic issue around the time my parents got married, he told me that the main issue for our Grandmother was the fact that her daughter took the decision to live away from her. When I asked Uncle Henryk about his recollections of how Father and Mother got married, he had a different version of the story. He told me that what he remembered was that Father had traveled to Mother when she was in Morocco, and both traveled back together to Egypt where they then got married. This story intrigued me, but material evidence, such as letters and postcards between Mother and her family on the one hand, and Father and Mother on the other hand, as well as their marriage contract, all confirm the story which we were told by our parents – that they got married in Cairo in June 1967 on Mother’s second trip to Egypt a couple of years after her travel to Morocco.

My sisters and I have repeatedly listened to our parents laughing about the circumstances related to their marriage. They would tell us that while Egypt was under attack, and Cairo streets where raided by Israeli shells, in June 1967, my parents managed to reach the Polish Embassy in Zamalek area to obtain an approval to get married. Among my parents’ files, I found documents that showed that on 5
June 1967, the Polish Embassy in Cairo issued an approval to Teresa Pfabe, Polish citizen living in Warsaw, holding an official passport issued on 15 May 1967, to marry Safwat Kamal, citizen of the United Arab Republic (the official name of Egypt at that time) living in Cairo. This document, written in Polish, carries a stamp from the Cairo Security Department, issued on 7 June 1967, endorsing the original Polish embassy’s stamp on the letter. Our parents used to tell us how they convinced the Polish embassy’s security guard to open its doors for them. They got the approval and the necessary paperwork for them to get married from the Polish State, invested in the Polish Consul, at the Polish Embassy in Cairo. They told us how the Consul required certain documents from Father, including a verification that he was not married nor had been married before. Father explained that it would be impossible for him to provide those documents while the country was in a state of war. Father used to elaborate on how he offered the Consul his word of honor, which the Consul in turn accepted. The marriage contract itself was issued on 8 June 1967. Mother frequently joked about how she informed her parents about her marriage by sending them a postcard.

Assembling the Everyday

I found a few postcards in our home in Poland, sent from Mother to her parents from Cairo in 1967, after their marriage, asking them not to worry about the war, and that they were safe and far from the war events. There is a card sent from Cairo, stamped by the Egyptian post office on 28 June 1967, in which Mother is telling her parents that she and Father were travelling that day to Kuwait. There are several cards sent in 1967 by Mother to her parents describing their everyday in Kuwait: Friday morning walks; listening to records with French songs; details of their apartment, situated very close to the sea, and fully air-conditioned so they do not suffer from the outside heat. She also adds that they use their car to move around as it is essential to have a car in Kuwait. Then in September 1967, she tells them that they are waiting for autumn to be able to go for walks and do more activities. In another card, Mother invites her mother to come to Kuwait as she would not able to fly to Warsaw because of her pregnancy.

In following the traces of my parents’ life in Kuwait, I go back to the interview with Mother done in 1976 in the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Hadaf, where the
reporter asks Mother about her perception of Kuwaiti cultural life after eight years spent in Kuwait. Mother answers:

When we arrived to Kuwait newspapers did not include any social news the way you can see them now in newspapers or magazines. Unlike now, there weren’t many newspapers; even the only available English newspaper was full of linguistic mistakes. So throughout that period, I witnessed a big development in the Kuwaiti culture in terms of quality and quantity, especially during the last three years, as newspapers compete to issue addendums with different information of interest to their. The number as well has increased. At the beginning there was only Al-‘Arabi magazine, and some other magazines specialized in medicine or architecture, but there are now numerous magazines, some of which are distinguished publications such as ‘Alam Al-fikr. Also, Kuwait Times has developed into an excellent magazine. The cultural life in Kuwait has also witnessed a big change, which can be seen clearly in the University’s activities, the Graduates Students Organization, and the local arts exhibitions which are of a very high standard, as well as the activities of the theater and music institutes which have created space for a variety of cultural activities in Kuwait. This also led to the expansion of cultural life outside the traditional ‘diwania’ into the new ‘diwaniyat’ taking the form of public lectures and spaces for cultural activities. Libraries and museums moved from the houses of specific persons interested in culture, to become public libraries, in addition to the national and historical museums established by the state, and available to everyone. We can now watch the performances of the Bolshoi Ballet in Kuwait, and other distinguished foreign troupes. (Al-Hadaf 1976, 4)62

Aida and Maya’s childhood and adolescent years were spent in Kuwait, so I asked Maya if she remembered the cultural scene in Kuwait, and she responded telling me about her memory of attending the Soviet Bolshoi Ballet performance in Kuwait. Aida told me “we also used to go to Cinema al-Salmiya. I think it was sometime in the late seventies that we watched Youssef Chahine’s film Hadduta Masriya, which I remembered as being awkward and depressing. I also remember going with our parents and friends to watch a film about the ABBA singing troupe.”

It is clear from these accounts that my parents continued their cultural interests in Kuwait. They also attended cultural events organized by the Polish and Egyptian embassies in Kuwait. In Mother’s suitcase, among the letters, I found several invitations to the Polish Embassy in Kuwait, and the French Embassy in Kuwait to attend receptions, as well as invitations from different cultural organizations. For example, I found an invitation from “The Arab Theater” in Kuwait.

62 The interview was published in Arabic. The translation from Arabic into English is mine.
in 1972, to attend a ceremony in honor of Zaki Tolaimat, Egyptian academic and theater critic, who established the Arab Theatre Troupe in Kuwait, on the occasion of his return to Cairo. I also found another invitation from the Kuwaiti Artists Association to a Bach Symphony concert held at the University of Kuwait, in addition to invitations from Aida and Maya’s school to the annual school parties.

In our home in Warsaw I found among Mother’s letters to her parents a newspaper clipping where there is a picture of me as a two year old child, together with my sister Maya and other children. It does not show the name of the newspaper nor the date, but Mother added in her handwriting in Polish that this was an evening at a hotel for Egyptian families to celebrate Egyptian Mother’s Day. Then in Cairo, I found in one of my parents’ albums, going back to the years spent in Kuwait, two other newspaper clippings. One does not show the name of the newspaper but is dated 8 June 1979, and features Mother’s photo with the following caption “The wife of Safwat Kamal, Expert of Folklore at the Ministry of Information is traveling to Cairo next month to spend Ramadan with the family there.” The other clipping is from Al-Siyasa newspaper, issued on 3 November 1979, again featuring Mother, holding a traditional Polish highlanders’ walking stick, with the following caption: “Teresa, wife of Safwat Kamal, Expert of Folklore receives congratulations from friends on the occasion of the arrival of their daughter (Ola).” Their circles of friends were mostly mixed Polish-Arab couples and their children, and Polish couples as well as Egyptian friends. And among their closest friends was Dr. Maria, who was a Polish doctor living in Kuwait, and I got to know from various letters, that she was with Mother when she was giving birth to my sisters and me – in Kuwait and Poland. Our parents’ closest friends with whom they spent most of their time were mixed Polish-Arab couples, by which I mean couples in which the wives were Polish, while the husbands were either Palestinian, Jordanian, Lebanese, Iraqi or Sudanese. It is with them that they spent all festivities, most weekends and vacations.

In reading my parents’ letters from the 1960s and analyzing the circumstances around their converging paths, as well as the paths they took together, what strongly surfaces is the way in which the public and private converge. The convergence of the public and private can be seen in the fact that the socio-political and socio-economic conditions in both the Polish and Egyptian states created the possibilities of scholarships between both countries which eventually lead to the possibilities for my parents to meet and later on to marry, although they come from different geographies.
The other interesting observation is the way in which nationalism, which was prominent in the Polish and Egyptian states, infiltrated my parents’ thoughts and self-expression. As explained in earlier examples, both Father and Mother in their letters to each other in the early sixties, when talking about their future plans and getting married they would converge their plans with their “national goals”; converging their goals with their countries’ missions. In one of Mother’s letters sent to Father from Poland, in April 1967, Mother refers to their bond and marriage plans, and includes her hopes that they both encourage each other in their scientific work and add a contribution to their countries. In a similar vein, Father also would refer to the growing relations between the Polish state and Egyptian state in his letters to Mother.

It is worth noting the way in which the state penetrates the personal, private and emotional lives of people. As Louis Althusser suggests, the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) penetrates the lives of people; this can be seen in the way my parents internalized the national discourses in their states and they both had a common language due to the similar socio-political conditions in the regimes under which they lived. The Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) which Althusser describes as functioning by ideology, infiltrate the private domain. Althusser lists examples of the ISA, such as cultural systems, educational systems, religious systems and others (1971, 143). This infiltration can also be seen in the fact that in the 1960s the intellectual circles which had renowned figures, such as writers and journalists, were part of the state apparatus, hence affecting the way Father took his paths. Our memory and everyday experiences capture the way in which state apparatuses are continuously used by different successive governments. At the same time, our memories are also invoked by the current events that trigger a process of remembering the stories told by our parents about the political and social changes they witnessed, and the way they affected their lives.

**Conclusion**

Seeing the dust on my fingers from the letters, pictures, and old papers contained in all those documents from Warsaw, Kuwait and Cairo, gathered now in my room, made me realize that these dust particles were not recently formed. Some particles are accumulating daily due to my open window, while other particles, which seem to belong to these letters, pictures, magazines, newspapers, books and other publications cannot be easily dusted away. They have become part of those documents, their
smell, their texture and their color. All these dust particles have converged, leaving their traces on my fingers.

This chapter has been premised on the material traces which I follow. The past they trigger is based on its recognizability in the present time. The material traces I deal with are immense, sometimes overwhelming, both in terms of the information they hold and the emotions they stir through the memories they invoke. Whether intentionally or not, I focus on points of recognizability. Thus, the narratives I collect, and the historical documents I go through, develop their meaning from my position in the present. These narratives reveal the discrepancies in remembering and interpreting events; they show that there is no single homogenous history, but that multiple histories co-exist. This chapter also sheds light on the way the private and public converge, through shedding light on the paths of my parents within the nation states they lived under which have infiltrated their private lives.

This chapter paves the way to the next chapter, in which I deal with the ‘constellations’ of all these various pasts and memories, and reflect on the way they reappear and ‘flash’ in the everyday. In the coming chapter I move to analyzing the way elements from the past linger and get reconstructed in the present; and at certain socio-political and economic conditions on the public sphere, where individuals are able to reassemble their social realities even though being in a subject position through those elements from the past.
Chapter IV
Constellations

In the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin states the following: “ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements’ being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed” (2003, 34). These lines have inspired much of my research. I see in Benjamin’s statement a process of having different elements seen together forming constellations, which is similar to the process I apply in my work. Throughout my research different elements, or fragments, from the past are blended with the present. The traces of these elements are sometimes (im)material; for example, traces of a past that lingers, memories which flash up, as well as narratives told. When put together, these elements transcend the common notion of having the past and present as two distinct temporalities. These elements form ‘constellations’ that redeem the past, as well as reconfigure the present and the future. These elements also explain the way in which the public and private are intertwined. Certain elements reflect the changes on the socio-political and economic spheres which are blended within our everyday paths. Putting together all these elements, constellations are formed; these constellations also reflect the way in which the subject is created. When I use the notion of subject, I adopt Michel Foucault’s understanding of subjectivity in terms of subjugation to power (1982, 781).

Throughout this chapter my overarching aim is to analyze the way these constellations of different elements play a role in what Bruno Latour calls “reassembling the social” (Latour, 2005). For Latour, the social “is visible only by the *traces* it leaves (under trails) when a *new* association is being produced between elements which themselves are in no way ‘social’” (2005, 6). Informed by Latour, my autoethnography revolves around associations, mapping and tracing (im)material elements. In this chapter these acts of tracing and mapping help me in analyzing the way in which the subject is created and develops the capacity to reassemble the social. I use the concepts of tracing and mapping being aware of the difference between each process. In using the term ‘tracing’, I am informed by Latour’s view of redefining sociology as a process of “tracing associations” (2005, 5). Whereas when I
use the term ‘mapping’ I allude to the process that Deleuze and Guattari refer to, where the concept of mapping is not about finding a start and end point (which an act of tracing might imply), rather “[i]t fosters connections between fields” and has “multiple entryways” (1987, 12). I find the process of mapping in line with my aim of creating connections, and different entry points in analyzing the interconnected relations between the past and present within the public and private domains and their relation to the subject negotiating and reassembling his/her social world (as elaborated in Chapter I).

I break this process down by zooming into certain phases in my sisters’ and my own everyday. By the ‘everyday’ I mean the practices that appear to be mundane, yet carry in them possibilities of renegotiating our existence within the social environments to which we belong. Michel de Certeau, in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, views the everyday practices as “tactical” in character, being ways of operating that hold in them victories over imposed order (de Certeau 1984, xix). I concur de Certeau’s view of how the everyday practices have the power to negotiate and win over imposed order, yet I do not see them as always being “tactical.” In following aspects of my sisters’ and my everyday, I follow how the mundane, the non-tactical also has power to negotiate imposed order. For example, I give a glimpse of the languages we use, our names and how we name my nephews, our commemorations, and the paths that we took in our education and careers.

The everyday can be endless when attempting to interpret the way it functions; for this reason, I keep my eye on elements of the everyday that are in dialogue with memory and the past. I am interested in the way the everyday is shaped in this process. The routes that my sisters and I take, as well as the way they affect the future of my nephews, symbolize how the past infiltrates the present, and forms the future, and hence reassembles - and in some cases - transforms our social realities. I trace the elements in our everyday which blend these three temporalities that are not distinct. I perceive the past, present and future as existing simultaneously, being formed and reformed throughout our daily practices, and affecting the way a subject is created and the way social lives are lived and transformed.

Our everyday has manifestation of a past that gets reconstructed in the present, and opens prospects for creating alternative routes and possibilities of transformations. Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos suggest, in their book *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the 21st Century*, that “moments where
people subvert their existing situations without naming their practice (or having it named) as subversion are the most crucial for understanding social transformations” (2008, xiii). Similarly, throughout this chapter I look at how the mundane practices in our family, in the everyday, lead to social transformations in our lives, specifically affecting my nephew’s, Adam, path.

Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos suggest that social transformation is not about reason but about perception and hope, “not about the production of subjects, but about the making of life. It is not about subjectivity, it is about experience” (2008, xii). They further elaborate this point saying “[w]e can trace social change in experiences that point towards an exit from a given organization of social life without ever intending to create an event” (2008, xii). I find their words resonating with my autoethnography, which does not focus on specific “events” per se, but rather sees possibilities of social transformation through the mundane experiences in the “making of life.”

In chapter II, I started off with the concept of remembrance, which brings the past to the present; where oral histories were the base that was in dialogue with material evidence. In chapter III, I focused on the sites of memory and the way they invoke the present – where material evidence was the base invoking memories and narratives. I have already used (in chapter III) the term ‘constellations’ in the sense of bringing different (im)material sources together to form a story. In this chapter, I focus on the constellations that ‘flash up’ in my sisters’ and my everyday. This chapter is premised on my own observations of the everyday and collecting the life stories of my sisters, Aida and Maya, as well as my nephew, Adam. I find Michael Jackson’s description of life stories insightful as being “the connective tissue of social life” (1998, 33).

The fact that my nephew Adam is continuing his studies in Warsaw, and settling there, can be seen in light of different yet interconnected lenses. These include the socio-political and economic changes that take place on the state level, as well as my parents’ pasts, and the routes they have taken. Added to this are the daily practices which we have maintained throughout the years, which blend together our parents’ social environments. In this chapter, being informed by Deleuze and Guattari, I start in the middle. I start with Adam’s choice to settle in Warsaw; I consider this point as situated in ‘the middle’ because it is neither an aspect of the past, nor of the future. It also marks a decision taken amid the intersections of the
public and private realms. According to Deleuze and Guattari, starting in the middle implies “coming and going” rather than “beginning and finishing” (1987, 3).

It is through Adam, and the point where he moves to study in Warsaw, that I start making connections between the everyday, the past and the present, as well as ways of assembling and reassembling different elements in our social life within certain socio-political and economic conditions. In this chapter, I focus on how bringing in elements from both my parents’ social environments, which are merged into my sisters’ and my everyday, eventually allow Adam to reassemble his social realities.

The Past Reconstructed in the Present through the Everyday

My sisters and I bring in elements of Mother’s past into our everyday. Both Aida and Maya bring those elements as well into the everyday of their children. The everyday in Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s understanding is a world that originates in ordinary members of society’s actions and thoughts (1967, 33). Through my observation and analysis, I specifically focus on the elements of Mother’s past, as they can easily flee away and become unrecognizable. Living in the Egyptian society, within its frameworks of memory, can easily subsume the memories of our Mother’s Polish past. As will be explained later, there are practices that we continue doing spontaneously, while other practices require a conscious decision of continuing Mother’s tradition, and bringing in elements of her everyday into our own everyday. Mother’s past could become, with the passage of time, unrecognizable and forgotten. As explained in Chapter II, the past gains its presence when it is recognized (Benjamin 1968, 255). Hence, our keenness on preserving the language and the commemorations of a past that belonged to Mother, to keep them recognizable in Adam and Farid’s lives, is crucial to ensure that Mother’s past would not be lost, and her symbolic presence to continue. When analyzing our eagerness to keep Mother’s past, I cannot but link it to Mother’s experience of war (as explained in Chapter II). Mother’s constant references to the high price paid by the Polish people to keep their language alive against different occupiers, and to preserve their traditions no matter how different occupying forces would try to subdue them, must have created within us a feeling of reverence towards Polish language and the traditions Mother kept at home. These practices, which Mother instilled to recreate a sense of a ‘Polish home’, whether in Kuwait or in Egypt, must have had their roots in recreating a Polish home.
even on Polish land during the years under German occupation in WWII, when Mother and her family also moved from one house to another (as was explained in Chapter II). Mother’s practices have affected Adam’s, and eventually Farid’s, upbringing. Farid was born after Mother had passed away, while Adam was raised in a close relationship to Mother since his birth.

Adam, Maya’s son, was born in the mid-1990s. When he was born, I remember that Maya spontaneously talked to him in Polish. Polish was the language we spoke to Mother; it is, literally, our ‘mother-tongue’. Throughout Adam’s upbringing, Maya created details that brought what constitutes “Polishness” to her, into his everyday, by singing to him Polish lullabies, telling him Polish children’s stories, celebrating his Name Day,\(^{63}\) travelling together to Warsaw, having him spend time with our family there, as well as having him attend the Polish School in Cairo.\(^{64}\) At that time Adam was the only child from the third generation among the Polish-Egyptian community who went to the Polish School in Cairo. Maya also accompanied him to events organized for children at the Polish Embassy in Cairo, such as Children’s Day, Christmas and Easter celebrations. Maya got a divorce shortly after Adam was born. In the first couple of years following his birth, he and Maya lived with us at home. This allowed Adam to spend much time with Mother before he and Maya moved to a place of their own. Maya was a working mother, so Adam had the chance to spend time on a daily basis with our parents even after he and Maya moved out. He used to return from school to our home until Maya would pick him up on her way from work. Adam tells me:

I liked spending time with my grandparents. I would play football with Giddu\(^{65}\) at home and he would watch T.V. with me, and we would play cards and backgammon together. As for Babcia,\(^{66}\) she would tell me so many stories about her family and the pets they had, as well as

\(^{63}\) Name Days are celebrated in Poland, a tradition in many countries in Europe of celebrating a day based on an individual’s given name. The custom originated by naming after a particular saint, and would celebrate that saint’s name day. In many countries now it is no longer explicitly connected to Christianity. For more information go to: http://www.namedaycalendar.com/nameday-meaning

\(^{64}\) The Polish School in Cairo is under the supervision of the Polish Embassy in Cairo, and reports to the Polish Ministry of Education. It has been functioning in Cairo for several decades, offering supplementary Polish education to Polish nationals, mostly diplomats whose children live in Egypt. It currently occupies an apartment in Zamalek that hosts a small Polish library, where lessons are organized in Polish language, as well as Polish history and geography. Primary level pupils are divided into two age groups having school days on Fridays, while older children do most of the work at home and meet their teachers for consultations. At the end of the school year, the students are handed certificates, indicating their level and completion of school year. For more information: http://kair.orpegl.pl/

\(^{65}\) Giddu is the Arabic equivalent of Grandpa.

\(^{66}\) Babcia means Granny in Polish, it is the way Adam addressed his grandmother and refers to Mother.
her childhood within nature. When I became older she started telling me about WWII. Lately, while taking a walk at a park in Warsaw, a little squirrel ran towards me, climbed my leg and settled in my pocket, so I immediately remembered Babcia, as we used to go to the park and feed squirrels, pigeons and ducks together. As a child, I knew by heart the names of many wild animals living in Polish forests. I remember a big old Polish book with drawings of different Polish wild animals. I also remember that when Babcia used to return from Poland, she would give me a collection of acorns from trees, as well as bird feathers. I still remember the crown she made me out of these feathers.67

I remember that whenever Mother traveled to Poland she would bring Adam Polish books which they would read together, as well as videos with Polish movies for children, and Polish cartoons. Mother and Adam always spoke together in Polish. Adam continues telling me:

As a child, Poland, to me, was about forests. Although I used to travel to Warsaw, but still before going to live there for my studies, I had this embedded picture of it as a forest. When I started living there, I realized that it is just as any other big city, similar to Cairo – it has buildings, cars, shops, not quite like the image of childhood that was carved in my mind. Babcia used to tell me many stories about the war. I sometimes hear about WWII and the tough times Poland went through under the communist system from elder uncles, the generation of Babcia. But among my friends and acquaintances of my generation, nothing seems good enough in Poland, they aren’t aware of the progress their parents and grandparents made. For example, after Poland was destroyed in WWII they were able years later to join the EU, their currency is stable enough, the government is functioning, and people know that there is accountability. My circles of friends here in Cairo are not interested in politics, nor for example care about tax systems. They are from financially well-standing families so for them these details are irrelevant to their lives.

From Adam’s words above, I could trace the different elements that reflect how being raised in Cairo made him capable of comparing the services provided by the Polish government to those given by the Egyptian one. I stopped at a sentence where Adam told me that until he moved to live in Warsaw, Poland was correlated in his imagination to a forest. Even though he has been traveling to Warsaw since childhood, the image constructed in his mind was based on the stories Mother told him about her homeland; which are in turn memories related to Mother’s own

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67 The interview was conducted predominantly in Arabic, with a few phrases and expressions in English and Polish. When we talk with Adam and Farid at home in Arabic, reference to Mother is always by using the Polish word “Babcia.”
childhood. Being the daughter of a Forest Officer (as explained in Chapter II), Mother was raised near forests, and even though Mother moved to the city as she grew up, and spent her adult life in Warsaw, yet the trace of being brought up near forests was reflected in the way Adam constructed the image of Poland.

The above example also shows how Adam deeply internalized Mother’s stories. His lens is simultaneously affected by the current political and economic conditions he has witnessed in Cairo, along with being affected by the stories he has heard from Mother about the destruction that Poland experienced during WWII. Both, the experience he has witnessed and the one he has heard of, made him create an opinion in favor of what the Polish state has achieved. In Adam’s account, his opinion of the current state of affairs in the Polish state is different from the opinion of his friends in Warsaw. His interest in these issues is also different from his friends in Cairo. So the way Adam was exposed to different narratives, and was faced with the situation of having to decide on the route he should take for his education, made him reassemble the different experiences and views to which he was exposed and create his opinion and path in a certain way. I asked Adam about what made him decide to continue his university education in Warsaw, he told me the following:

Public universities in Egypt have deteriorated; I could see this from my friends who graduated before me. On the other hand, Polish public universities have a high standard due to both their legacy, and having to compete with other universities in Europe. They now have several English sections in different disciplines to invite international students. Also, studying in a European country could offer a wider range of work opportunities in the future, whether in Egypt, Poland, or any other country. As for why choosing Warsaw, it’s for multiple reasons: I like the city, I am familiar with it, I know the language, we have a family and our home there, and most of all it is not costly.

Adam was driven, in general, by the prospect of getting a better quality of education that would eventually prepare him for a competitive labor market; which is different from the reasons behind the field of education and travel that my parents chose (as elaborated in Chapter III).

After Adam’s enrolment in the Warsaw University of Technology, I went to visit him in Warsaw. I remembered that I had been with Mother and her brother, Uncle Witold, to the University - where Adam is now enrolled - to see a marble plaque on one of the walls of the university honoring the memory of their father’s brother, Witold Pfabe. He had lost his life in WWI, when he was a student at the
Warsaw University of Technology. During my last stay in Warsaw, I suggested to Adam that we go together to his University. At Warsaw University of Technology, in its main hall, there is a marble plaque carrying the name “Witold Pfabe” along other Polish names of university students who lost their life during WWI.\textsuperscript{68} It created a connection that flashed back with Adam’s joining the same university which my grand-uncle went to. This connection came back, bringing to my mind the memory of my great-uncle Witold, and Mother’s story about him having lost his life when volunteering in the Polish army in WWI. This was a moment of ‘recognizability’, when the past was brought to the present, by the connection that blended two different points in time. Had Adam not joined the Warsaw University of Technology, he might not have kept the memory of his great grand-uncle who had lost his life during WWI nor would I have thought of revisiting this place and retrieving the memory of my grandfather’s brother.

Maya was not planning to send Adam to study in Warsaw; it has always been one of the options, but it was not her target. I remember a moment while we were at home in Cairo after Adam finished his final high school exam. Maya was sitting at the dining table, having placed in front of her a massive amount of documents and files which she was arranging – sorting out the ones that Adam needs to pack to apply for his studies in Warsaw. I remember her telling me that she would have preferred having Adam stay and continue his education in Cairo. But, then, she added that he would have a better education, and better opportunities for different job markets if he was educated in Warsaw. For Maya, the place where Adam would continue his studies was not actually a matter of pure choice; these were decisions taken based on the geopolitical contexts that marked the way countries develop, and the rights they give to their citizens. So, the fact that the Polish state became part of the European Union, while the Egyptian state was suffering from general deterioration in the services such as education, transportation, health and general public utilities, were aspects that affected the decision regarding the location for Adam’s higher education. Yet, his move to Warsaw was also a direct consequence of the way in which we reassemble our social lives. If it was not for Mother’s keenness to keep Polish language and Polish tradition alive in her practices, and without us following the

\textsuperscript{68} Appendix C Figure 3&4 show the marble plaque at Warsaw University for Technology with Witold Pfabe’s name.
same path, and Adam absorbing it all, he would probably not have had the chance to study in Warsaw under the current convenient conditions.

The above fragments, which show the route that Adam took for himself, shed light on the connections that can be drawn between the public and private as well as the past and present, where these concepts are interconnected and in a dialectic relation. The connections between the past and the present, the geopolitical changes, and the way they directly affect decisions in our daily lives, such as the choice of education and location, can be analyzed through the lens of practice theory as suggested by Sherry B. Ortner. Ortner explains ‘practice theory’, which was introduced in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens and Marshal Sahilns, saying that it was able to show the dialectical relation between the structural constraints of society and culture on the one hand, and of the social actors on the other hand (Ortner 2006, 2). Ortner further elaborates stating that practice theory, in her view, goes beyond this dialectical relation, and suggests that practice theory is a theory of history due to the following:

[T]he playing out of the effects of culturally organized practices is essentially processual and often very slow: the construction of social subjects, often from childhood; the practices of life of young people and adults; the articulation of those practices with larger events in the world, often moving to a very different rhythm. Although one can form hypotheses—guesses, more likely—about the long term implication of present practices, their effects in terms of social production and social transformation are often not visible, nor interpretable, until some time after the fact. (2006, 9)

Thus, according to Ortner, practice theory is compelling as, generally speaking, it is about the relation between the subject being created by and creating the social. I find her view of further interest to me as she speaks of the compelling point for her in practice theory being the idea that the world is made through the actions of “ordinary people”, which means that the world “could be unmade and remade” (Ortner 2006, 16-17).

Ortner’s views presented above offer insights to my attempts subtly alluded to in the previous chapters, and focused on in this chapter. Namely, the interplay between the production of social subjects, and the way the social can be reassembled or “unmade and remade” using Ortner’s terms. It is about time playing a major role in showing how the social subjects are formed, as well as revealing the interconnected relation between the formation of subjects and the major events in the world. Through
this autoethnography, I look at the actions of “ordinary people” – my family. Furthermore, by making connections and forming constellations throughout a time span where I hold threads from my grandparents’ social lives as well as my nephews social surroundings, I weave the threads together and look at the ways the subject reassembles his/her social realities.

Adam’s life included various details: reading books with Mother, watching Polish cartoons, traveling to Warsaw during summer vacations, as well as going to the Polish School in Cairo besides his regular school, and most of all speaking to his Babcia in Polish and listening to her stories of her childhood and youth experiences at a different temporality and location. When put together, all these aspects brought elements into Adam’s social world through which he created a certain path at a certain moment in his life. It materialized in the step he took to travel to Warsaw for his studies when the socio-political and economic conditions in Egypt changed.

Among the Polish-Egyptian circles we know in Egypt, Adam is the only one from the third generation - brought up in Egypt - who travelled for studies in Poland. What also intrigued me besides the elements that lead Adam to study in Warsaw, was his quick and easy adaptation to his new social setting there. This can also be traced in the fact that even though Mother had passed away - when Adam was twelve years old – her stories remained embedded within him. Moreover, our everyday continued having the elements (rituals, traditions, food, language, and narratives) that Mother brought into the home she created. In the following lines I trace the different elements which, when brought together, offered different possibilities for reassembling social life.

**Naming and the Creation of the Social**

Even before Maya gave birth to Adam, she insisted that Adam would have a name that would be both Arabic and Polish. When I asked her why she insisted on having Adam named a Polish-Arabic name she told me:

I insisted on having a Polish-Arabic name for my son, for both sentimental and practical reasons. I wanted a name that Mother would feel affinity to, just like any other Polish name. The other thing, I wanted a name that would be familiar in any country he travels to, not just in Poland and Egypt. I wanted him to have a name that would not be a barrier nor hold certain cultural connotation to a certain region.
As for Farid, Aida’s son, although his name does not have an equivalent in Polish, his nick name we use at home and with our relatives, friends and acquaintances in Poland is Polish. When I asked Aida about the choice of her son’s name, she told me it was a challenge for her to find a boy’s name that she liked and could be both Arabic and Polish, so she opted for such a combination.

Our parents chose for us names that are both Arabic and Polish. They did this intentionally; they wanted us to belong to their worlds, not to be outsiders in either world. They did not want us to feel a sense of alienation in any of those contexts that could be caused by having names that would stand out as different. As they mention in their letters to each other when planning to start a family, they discussed having their children raised as “multi-cultural”. In a letter sent from Mother to Father in March 1967, just before coming to Egypt and marrying him, she writes saying that she hopes that they both would make their home the “center of two cultures.” In the same letter, Mother adds that if they have children she would teach them to “love and admire” and “respect” both Polish and Egyptian “customs and cultures.” Holding names that are Polish-Arabic names is not the case among most of our friends and acquaintances coming from Polish-Arab families. Most of them have Arabic names. Few have Polish name and fewer have names that can be both Polish and Arabic. The fact that Father was a folklorist and Mother a literary sociologist (as elaborated in Chapter III) made them sensitive and aware of many decisions they took regarding our upbringing.

In one of Father’s letters to Mother sent in April 1967, Father makes reference to an earlier discussion between them about folklore, where he mentions Franz Boas’ book Race, Language and Culture, as well as refers to their reflections on “types of acculturation.”69 He wrote to Mother confirming that they would always share their points of view together, and referred to Mother as his “inspiration” and “professor”. Maya remembered asking Mother if she had ever regretted not completing her PhD studies, a question to which Mother’s reply was that, to her, it was more important to, actually, apply these theories in life, rather than having them written in books.

In analyzing aspects of our upbringing, the notion of ‘culture’ comes up. When using the term ‘culture’ I mean the concept explained by Ortner in terms of a

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69 Acculturation was one of the themes of Mother’s doctoral research as mentioned in Chapter II. One of the uses of this concept figures in the description of the results of contact between two or more different cultures.
“world view and ethos of a particular group of people … [and a cultural process] which emphasizes the construction of meaning, and of subjectivities, through symbolic processes embedded in the social world” (2006, 112). So, in the attempt to have us in their sense ‘multi-cultural’ our parents were conscious of making us aware of what they considered as the “ethos” of what constituted for them Egypt or Poland. A direct reflection of their thinking manifests itself in their choice of our names.

When giving our first names (my sisters, Adam and I), be it in a Polish context or Egyptian context, our names blend in with the social environments, and we do not stand out as coming from a different context. This brings me back to the power of naming which I introduced in Chapter II in relation to my grandparents. To my paternal grandfather, it was an ideological choice to recreate his social reality, while in the case of my maternal grandfather it was a socio-political decision. In the case of my parents’ choice of our first names, they were also aware of, and wanted to make sure that our names would fit within the different social environments to which we belong. Names remain a player throughout our family in defining our relations to the societies we live in. In this sense, as Bourdieu suggests “social space is multi-dimensional space” (1985, 736); and the power of “naming” plays a role in transforming the social world by transforming the categories of its perception” (1985, 729).

It was interesting for me to see among the letters sent from members of our family in Poland how they dealt with our surname (Kamal). In one postcard going back to 1973, sent from one of Mother’s aunts with wishes addressed to Aida, she writes Aida’s family name as “Kamal Pfabé.” This reminded me of an incident that occurred during a visit to Uncle Henryk, one of our relatives in Warsaw, who took out his mobile phone, and was searching for Adam’s name out loud; he had Adam’s name saved as “Adam Pfabe.” Through naming, we are recreated as belonging to one social space or another, or to both. These examples reflect the way in which we are being perceived, and transformed, through the category of naming in a mundane act of writing our name in a post card or a telephone contact list. Because our family name is a ‘non-Polish’ name, it was altered or replaced with a ‘Polish name’ among our Polish family members, as an expression of their attempts at situating and perceiving us as ‘Polish’ and belonging to their social frameworks.
Language Creating Constellations

We spoke to Mother only in Polish, she was additionally fluent in Arabic, English and French; but my parents told us that when Aida was born they agreed, after consulting with linguists, that in order for us to acquire both languages correctly, Father should speak to us consistently in Arabic, and Mother in Polish. As they chose for us Polish-Egyptian names, they were keen on having us speak both Arabic and Polish. So, it grew naturally with us to code-switch and talk to each of them in the language they used with us. They continued using English as the language of communication between them, and when we were having a family discussion it was mainly in English. As Carr suggests, human beings are part of societies and molded by societies, he further elaborates that the languages we speak are not a matter of individual inheritance, but we acquire them by being socialized within certain groups as we grow up (Carr 1961, 31).

Berger and Luckmann suggest that language has the capability of becoming “the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations” (1967, 52). They further suggest that “through language an entire world can be actualized at any moment” (1967, 54). As they explain, language can make objects that are “spatially, temporally and socially absent from the ‘here and now’” to become present in the everyday life (1967, 54). In light of Berger and Luckmann’s analysis, I see in the case of our family that, indeed, Polish language did bring into our everyday details from Mother’s life in Poland – which were “spatially, temporally and socially absent”. Mother’s transmission of Polish language to us, and in turn to my nephews, acted as a repository of specific meanings and experience as suggested by Berger and Luckmann. Code-switching between Arabic and Polish can also be seen in light of language being a “repository” of “meaning and experience”, where, by switching from one language to another, different experiences are being expressed. For example, in my case, Polish language is easier for me to use when talking about domestic issues, Arabic is the language I feel at ease with the most and in which I can joke, whereas English is the language that comes out automatically when I talk about my work. Thus, code-switching between languages transmits different experiences.

While I was holding my notebook and taking notes, my sisters talked together mainly in Arabic, sometimes using Polish and English phrases, while I took my notes in English. This is how my sisters and I usually talk together, as well as with my
nephews Adam and Farid. With Farid, because he is still a child, we talk more in Polish. When he was a baby we talked to him predominantly in Polish. Polish is the language my sisters and I feel comfortable using with children, and also with pets. It is the language that comes out spontaneously in such situations. During Adam’s and my childhood, we spoke at home in Polish, and my sisters talked with each other also in Polish. After Mother passed away, Maya and I use it less in our everyday, as we mainly talk in Arabic.

My sisters and I were never taught Polish at schools nor by teachers. We acquired it from Mother. As children, we had at home many children’s books in Polish which Mother used to read to us. Mother used to make us do some writing exercises in Polish primary school books. We would also write letters to my grandmother, uncle and cousins. At home, Mother used to play for us vinyl discs with Polish children’s stories. I remember their worn out covers and the special box where they were kept. I believe these discs were my sisters’ if not even their elder cousins’. There was this specific smell when the disc started to play; it could have been the smell of dust, but it was a nice smell which I can remember now while writing these lines.

Raising her son, Aida brings in Polish language both intuitively as well as intentionally. Similar to Adam’s upbringing, Aida too has enrolled Farid in the Polish School in Cairo. His everyday includes Polish language, from the Polish children’s stories they read together, travelling every summer to Warsaw, as well as going with him to events organized for children at the Polish Embassy in Cairo. It comes naturally to us when celebrating birthdays to sing the Polish birthday song. So this year, for example, during Farid’s birthday party celebrated with his school friends, I noticed how some of his classmates, who had not come to his earlier birthday parties, looked with bewilderment when, instead of blowing the candles after singing the birthday song in Arabic and English, we started signing it in Polish. It reminded me of my childhood birthday celebrations at home, when Mother, my two sisters and Father would start singing the Polish birthday song, and my schoolmates would get confused. We have continued this practice, so we sing the birthday song in Polish regardless of whether we have guests or not. My sisters remember that during their childhood in Kuwait as well, the birthday song was always sung in these three languages.
Reassembling Paths

Father used to say that since Aida was a child, whenever he would run out of Polish words when speaking to someone in Polish, she would translate from Arabic to Polish what he was trying to say. I reminded her of this story, and she told me:

I do not remember specific incidents, but all of us at home were translators conveying messages among us across languages. I remember you as a child answering the phone in Arabic, and then conveying the content of the conversation to Mother in Polish. Well, now, that we talk about it, I remember that back in Kuwait as a prep school student I helped Mother in translating a series of articles about Polish culture. I also worked with Mother on translating abstracts of articles in English for the Egyptian Folklore Magazine. So without actually choosing it, I was driven to translation. Currently, I teach translation, and I have translated several books, as well as having initiated a project on translation at the NGO I am working with; though in this case it’s between English and Arabic.

Aida graduated from the Department of English at the Faculty of Arts, Cairo University. When I asked her of the reason behind choosing this field, she said:

Actually, I wanted to be a journalist, and I was considering studying at the Faculty of Mass Communication. But I remember Father telling me that the Faculty of Arts, English Department would help me develop intellectually. For Mother, English was a way for me to get a deeper understanding of Western thought. They both saw that I would fit perfectly well within the area of comparative literary studies. I think that they were definitely right. And although I am generally of the rebellious type, I still remember that their opinions made much sense to me.

Aida is currently an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Arts, in Cairo University, where she has been working since graduation. Education was also the reason behind her movement between different geographies. She received a scholarship to pursue her Master’s studies in England in the mid-1990s, and then travelled to the United States for further studies. I remember how very supportive my parents were concerning her traveling on those scholarships. Both of them had taken similar paths when they were young, and were engaged in academic fields (as elaborated in Chapter III).

To Maya, too, translation is part of her daily life. She works at a German foundation in Cairo where she sometimes has to translate. Maya elaborates saying: “I sometimes translate at work from and into English, Arabic and German. I am good at it; especially in translating with sensitivity to cultural contexts. Translation is not
about finding the right word, but the right meaning.” Maya graduated from the Faculty of Commerce and Business Administration at Cairo University, and when I asked her about the choice of her studies she told me:

Although I thought I would be studying in a field related to art, to realize this hope I had two options: one was to study engineering, without a guarantee that I would end up studying interior decoration; the other option was to enroll at the Academy of Arts, but I was advised, career-wise, against graduating from an institute. As for the Faculty of Fine Arts, most of the professors there were Father’s acquaintances, so I felt that their evaluation of my work could depend on their relationship with Father, which was something I didn’t want. So I decided to choose a very pragmatic study, like commerce, majoring in business administration – rather than accounting or insurance as the majority at that time did. I did not want to work neither in a bank nor in accounting, and I wasn’t interested in insurance companies.

Maya works at a German foundation, her work involves a lot of travel to different governorates throughout Egypt. She told me the following when I asked her about the nature of her work:

It is ironic, Father traveled a lot during his youth to different cities in Egypt; and although I never expected to follow the same path, my work too involved a lot of traveling throughout Egypt. I remember that when I would return from different cities I would share with him my impressions of the place and the people I met. He would give me a cultural or historical background of the area that could be of relevance to my work, especially in remote areas. Although my work is in the development field, I would sometimes meet people in different regions of Egypt who would have met my father sometime during his visits to those regions. I remember I met someone in Luxor who had met my father forty years earlier during his fieldwork there. Others would have heard him in conferences in which he continued participating across different governorates.

When talking with Maya about her work at a German foundation here in Cairo I asked her about the way Mother and grandmother, who was still alive at the time she started working there, reacted to her decision to work with the Germans, taking into consideration the history of war between Poland and Germany. Maya tells me:

When I was offered this job, I called my grandmother in Warsaw and asked her if she approved that I work at a ‘German’ foundation. I still remember her telling me that I should not be living in the past, that this was part of her past not mine. I remember her adding that as long as the work itself is meaningful and interesting she would support my choice. Mother had the same position, especially because the field of
work itself was in development, which she considered a meaningful thing.

I was intrigued by the part in which Maya told me about grandmother’s reaction – telling her that the history of war between Germany and Poland belonged to grandmother’s past not Maya’s. I asked Maya if indeed she felt that it was a past that had gone by and did not affect her in any way. I have specifically asked about her learning German language, and if in any way she finds that the stories she has heard from Mother and grandmother are invoked in her everyday dealings at work. She told me the following:

I never thought I would intentionally learn German, I had Italian and Spanish on my list. But when I joined this German foundation where I work now, I had to learn the language I speak; especially when a German colleague of mine said in German a bad joke about me being Polish, counting on the fact that I did not speak German at that time. I also find myself remembering Mother and grandmother’s stories about the harshness of the Germans during WWII. I frequently remember both Mother and grandmother telling me about the German expression “ordnung muss sein” which they would frequently hear from Germans during the occupation, which means “there has to be order”. I often relate to this phrase when I see at work that more effort is put in the system itself rather than the output. On the other hand, I also remember that Mother and grandmother used to say that apart from the German stereotype of harshness and coldness there were also noble German officers who dealt with Polish officers in captivity with dignity. I can relate to the idea that many people in Germany were against the Nazi and were killed or persecuted and had to flee. Thinking of it, when I meet Germans, I still find myself categorizing their behavior according to those examples in Mother and grandmother’s stories.

Maya still invokes the stories that Mother and grandmother used to tell her from their memories of WWII and the German occupation of Poland in her work. As Connerton suggests about how memory works, “our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past” (1989, 2); and in this case, even when this past was not witnessed, but heard of. This is an example of a fusion between collective memory and a personal reality. The stories Maya had heard from Mother and grandmother fused the past and the present; her framework of analyzing her
German co-workers was affected by the experiences that Mother and grandmother had gone through even though this took place long before Maya was even born.

I remember one day, while I was working on the computer at my office, drinking tea from my mug which has a Polish folk drawing, placing it on my coaster with the Polish colorful folkloric design, one of my colleagues came into my office and commented that my earrings must be Polish, as they had the same Polish folkloric flowers design which matched my coasters, mouse-pad and mug. I had not realized that I had so many Polish motifs in my office. I, currently, work at a global organization. Prior to this job, I worked at the Polish Embassy; they requested me to apply to work there because the Ambassador, at that time, needed to employ at the embassy someone familiar with both Arabic and Polish languages and cultures. Before that, I worked at the Cairo office of the Hungarian Airlines. I did not have an earlier background in aviation as I had graduated at the Faculty of Arts, the Department of English, at Cairo University. When being interviewed to work at the airliner company, all the interviewers came from Hungary. During the interview, once they knew that my mother was Polish, we started sharing common Polish/Hungarian sayings and the interview changed into a very friendly atmosphere. I remember them making reference in the interview that Hungarian and Polish people share similar cultural traits. I believe that one of the strong reasons that made them choose me for that job was my Polish linkage.

Thus, each one of us was affected by our parents’ pasts in different ways in the manner in which we chose our education and careers. We made our decisions by bringing in different elements from our parents’ past experiences. I find Maya’s example the most intriguing one in the way the past is invoked to make sense of the present; as Maya internalized experiences that Mother and grandmother had gone through during WWII. Connerton elaborates that the past and present are intertwined because the present factors influence the way we recollect the past, as well as the past factors influence the way we experience the present; and that this process “reaches into the most minute and everyday details of our lives” (1989, 2). Connerton’s ideas truly offer a very accurate analysis of the way in which the past is recreated and influences our present.
Rituals and Commemorations Bringing the Past into the Present

In the lines below, I start with commemorations as one of the elements where the past is brought into the present by certain celebrations, which break the linearity of time. Through unpacking the aspects that make us celebrate certain occasions in a certain manner I delve into mapping the different ways in which our everyday is negotiated. Throughout the previous chapters I have been mapping elements of our grandparents and parents’ social environments; linking memories with their social milieux, giving a glimpse of the socio-political and economic contexts at these times. Paul Connerton suggests that “our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past” (1989, 2). He further suggests that “commemorations” and “bodily practices” are ways that convey images and knowledge of the past (1989, 40). The process of the past and present being intertwined and forming different constellations happens through memories infiltrating our everyday. The memory of different pasts invoked in our present is one of the main elements that make us reassemble our social lives: “memory derives its interventionary force from its very capacity to be altered—unmoored, mobile, lacking any fixed position” (de Certeau 1984, 86). With these qualities of memory, it easily flashes up, infiltrates and plays a major role in the possibilities of reassembling peoples’ social realities.

“Do you have endless celebrations at home, or what!?” I remember my friends jokingly making this comment, particularly when they would ask me to join them on an outing while I would tell them that I could not due to a family celebration. At home we always celebrated different events and festivals, such as Christmas, Easter, the Sacrifice Feast, Ramadan, and the Fast-breaking ‘Id, as well as Mulid al-nabi, ‘Ashura, our birthdays, Name-Days, and both Egyptian and Polish Mother’s Days. Since my parents passed away, we have kept the tradition of celebrating most of these feasts.

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70 Sacrifice Feast is called in Arabic ‘Id al-addha, which means the Sacrifice Feast. It is a Muslim feast celebrated among Muslims worldwide, marking the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca.
71 Ramadan is considered a holy month by Muslims. They believe it is the month of the revelation of the Quran. It is observed as a month of fasting.
72 Fast-breaking Feast, is called in Arabic ‘Id al-fitr. It is the feast following the end of the month of Ramadan.
73 Mulid al-nabi is the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday
74 ‘Ashura is the tenth day of the Hijri month of Muharram. It is a day of fasting among Sunni Muslims in Egypt. For Shite Muslims, it is the day of commemorating the death of al-Hussein, Prophet Mohammad’s grandson. In Egypt, this day is marked by eating a special kind of sweet pudding with wheat. For more information go to: http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/560759
My sisters and I remember having these occasions celebrated since our childhood years in Kuwait, as well as after moving to Egypt in 1984. At home, here in Cairo, we have dozens of photo albums that go back to our years in Kuwait from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, depicting Christmas celebrations throughout those years. Starting from black and white photographs of Father and Mother with both Aida and Maya as toddlers beside a big decorated Christmas tree at their home in Kuwait, up till colored photographs that have my sisters and me as an almost five year old child with other children and family friends along with Santa Claus, next to a big Christmas tree at our home in Kuwait.

These pictures made me remember how Mother used to tell us that at her home, while her grandmother read them different books, Mother would be making different Christmas decorations and hanging them on the tree inside their home. She would also tell me that outside their home, they would have another Christmas tree, decorated with different kinds of food for wild forest animals so that they would also have their Christmas Eve dinner. The pictures also invoked my own memories about Christmas. As a child, Mother would help me write letters to Santa Claus asking him for specific gifts, then folding the letter and leaving it in the balcony for him to pick it up. While in the background we would be listening to Polish Christmas Carols, which Mother would play from the vinyl discs.

I still remember the smell of the special Christmas cakes which Mother would have prepared the night before – a mixture of butter, vanilla, chocolate, clove-buds, ginger and cinnamon. We would wait for the first star in the sky, and then sit down for dinner. We would have a special Polish soup called barszcz which Mother would prepare, made of beet, with dumplings stuffed with mushrooms, called uszka. We would eat fish according to the Polish Christmas Eve tradition together with an Egyptian component of rice and different salads. I would decorate the Christmas tree, and place beneath it the greeting cards we had received from our family and friends in Poland and the States, surrounding the nativity scene at the center below the Christmas tree. Before sitting to dinner, Mother would bring out the oplatek – the Christmas wafer which my grandmother would send us from Poland with the Christmas postcard. The oplatek is a one layered white wafer, with an image of Virgin Mary and baby Jesus carved in it. Mother would hold a small plate placing this delicate wafer on it, and would start delicately breaking pieces of it and sharing them with each one of us, wishing us the best that the world could offer. Then each one
would take a bite and keep a peace to share with each other consecutively. After exchanging our Christmas wishes, we would sit together at the table and start having our dinner. After finishing dinner, we would go and open our gifts which were placed under the Christmas tree, and eat the cakes Mother had baked. Late at night, Mother would go to Church for the midnight mass. Since Mother did not drive, either Father would go with her, or when my sisters started driving, one of them, mostly Aida, would go with Mother, as Maya usually went to sleep early.

Our Christmas Eve, which we continue celebrating, represents one of the moments of ‘constellations’, where the past and present are blended. We invoke the Christmas celebration rituals that Mother followed, by listening to Polish Christmas Carols, Maya going through Mother’s Polish recipe book, in our grandmother’s handwriting, for the cake and biscuits she bakes, Aida preparing the traditional Christmas cake, and me getting Christmas gifts and wrapping them, then decorating with my nephews the Christmas tree. I would take my nephews when they were little to the balcony, looking for Santa travelling on his sledge with reindeers in the sky, just as my sisters used to do with me when I was a child.

On Easter we had a similar celebration; Mother would boil eggs a night earlier, and would place red onion peel to boil the eggs in. The eggs would acquire a nice brown reddish color, then she would hold delicately the egg she was going to decorate, and start carving with precision polish folkloric designs on it with a needle or the tip of a very thin knife. We still have eggs with Mother’s carving that are over thirty years old. We would take these eggs, which also have my sisters’, my nephews and my carvings and drawings; the old ones placed with the new ones in a porcelain plate on the dining table with some decorations around it of small chicks. These displayed eggs would stay for almost a week; then we would take them back into a box until the next year comes. Mother used to go to church early in the morning to attend Easter Mass, taking along a small basket with a piece of bread, a boiled egg, cold cuts and lettuce, which the priest would bless. When she came back we would have an Easter breakfast, having set the table with different kinds of cheese, cold cuts, and sausages. But before sitting to the table, Mother would cut the blessed egg into small pieces for us all to share. The egg was placed on a small plate, and we had tiny forks with colorful handles; each one of us would hold this fork and a small plate and go to Mother, have a piece of the egg, and exchange warm wishes.
After Mother passed away we kept the traditions of celebrating both Christmas and Easter according to the Polish calendar. Yet, we discontinued the ritual of sharing the piece of Christmas wafer and the blessed Easter egg. For the three of us, this ritual was always connected to Mother. Only she could give this ritual its emotionally charged meaning. It was particularly about Mother blessing us and our home; none of us could perform this role on her behalf. It has always been out of question for us to miss any of these feasts, and we did not plan travel on those occasions.

Recently, Aida invited us to have lunch together on the first day of ‘Id al-‘addha. She made the traditional lunch meal of fatta with grilled lamb meat, as well as pieces of meat in tomato sauce and garlic, following Father’s recipe of the dish he used to prepare on that occasion. He would go into the kitchen and cook meat and fatta, while Mother would do the gullash. Although Father followed the rituals connected with the Muslim feasts, in this case, he usually skipped the slaughtering part and used to buy beef and lamb meat. On that day, as we were having lunch at Aida’s, we remembered how we used to wake up in the morning to the smell of meat being cooked with onions and garlic in the early morning. Father would make sure we were all awake by ten in the morning for our ‘Id breakfast, so we would sit at the table before noon, and eat meat and fatta. We would get the ‘idiya from Father, and I would get the ‘idiya from my sisters as well. The first day was always a family day, we would spend it together at home. My sisters and I keep the habit of having lunch together, meat, fatta and gullash, while my nephews get the ‘idiya from us.

Last year, Adam was in Warsaw and could not spend ‘Id with us. I remember Maya packing traditional Egyptian bread and Egyptian rice to take along to Warsaw last year as she decided to spend the ‘Id with Adam. I reminded her recently of this incident, to which she responded saying: “when I arrived in Warsaw I bought meat and I cooked for him fatta with meat on the first day of ‘Id, and gave him ‘idiya just as we do at home.” When we travel to Adam on vacations coinciding with Mulid al-

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75 *Fatta* is a traditional Egyptian meal eaten on Sacrifice Feast lunch. It consists of layers of rice and bread seasoned with garlic and vinegar and covered with pieces of meat.

76 *Gullash* is an Egyptian dish eaten on ‘Id al-‘addha. It consists of layers of puff pastry with minced meat. (It is different from the Hungarian dish Goulash.)

77 ‘Id, the Arabic word equivalent to feast.

78 ‘Idiya is money given by older family members mainly to children on the occasion of the feast.


*nabi* we take along a box of *halawit al-mulid.* In keeping these practices we are not actually celebrating them as religious events, but as traditional events that we have maintained practicing at home as rituals. We are keen on keeping them, especially since Adam does not have social circles in Warsaw that keep the same traditions. Similar to the way in which Mother did not want her rituals to be subsumed due to living in Arab countries, the case is now reversed. Maya and I are keen that our rituals kept at home by Father would not get forgotten by Adam and subsumed due being within a ‘Polish’ social environment.

In practicing these rituals, we are not commemorating a religious feast for its religious symbolism. Rather, it becomes a ritual kept with the purpose of preserving family tradition. As Halbwachs suggests, families borrow from society certain rituals, interpret them in their own manner, and the memory is further enriched by these recollections (1992, 83). As mentioned earlier, Father, being a folklorist, and Mother’s interest in sociology, made them appreciate these rituals for the way they saw them holding ‘cultural’ meanings. Both Mother and Father were always engaged in all those feasts. During these celebrations, we suspended our daily routine in respect to these occasions. Father would ensure that he would not have any appointments on such days; he never missed any of those celebrations, although he always had a busy schedule. Maya and I take 24 December off, although it is a regular day of work; but to us it is a day of celebration. In accordance with the Polish Catholic tradition, Mother used to hold Christmas Eve dinner in the evening of 24 December. Among our Egyptian Catholic friends, the general family get-together is on the next day (25 December). As for Easter, here too we follow the Polish calendar. Recently, when Adam was unable to be present on Christmas Eve, and could only join us a couple of days later, we simply postponed the Christmas celebration to 26 December to ensure that all of us would spend it together.

Thinking of it now, I realize that these religious feasts have been turned into familial occasions. They mark moments when we break away from the hegemonic dates and rituals assigned to these festivities, where we observe those dates and feasts but recreate their rituals. In other words, we take out the religious meaning and preserve it as an act of remembrance and a continuation of Mother’s tradition. The same applies to Islamic feasts regardless of whether they are celebrated in Cairo or in

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79 *Halawit al-mulid* are special sweets made on the occasion of Prophet Mohammad’s Birthday, they are mainly made of different kind of nuts and sugar.
Warsaw with Adam. We do not practice the religious rituals related to those occasions. But we maintain the rituals which Father has kept at home. Here again, the celebration marks memory and continuity. These commemorative ceremonies, as Paul Connerton suggests, are re-enactments of the past, which preserve versions of the past (1989, 72).

On those occasions, food becomes a crucial element of blending the past with the present, the material with the immaterial. The smells and the tastes recreate a time that seems to have passed; “taste and smell are so useful for encoding the random, yet no less powerful, memories of contexts than, say, vision or words” (Sutton 2001, 102). Recipes from the past conjure up the memories of food; they bring the past to life (Bardenstein 2010, 161).

These re-enactments of the past, which were for Mother part of home-making in different geographic locations, carry an additional meaning for my sisters and me as they represent acts of commemorating Mother’s memory; they were and continue to be non-tactical acts. These reenactments of the past do hold in them a nostalgia to a past that is altered due to the changed circumstances in the present. Yet, as Pickering and Keightley suggest nostalgia cannot be limited to yearning to the past, but it can be seen in light of the present and the future. They suggest that this nostalgia can show how the past “can actively engage with the present and the future” (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 920); which leads to acts of recreating the present and future in different ways. As Pickering and Keightley further suggest, nostalgia is not only about longing to the past and wanting to return to it, but the concept is used as a way to recognize aspects in the past and see in them possibilities for renewal in the future (2006, 921).

When looking analytically at the rituals we keep, which have a nostalgic aspect, I can see that they eventually create for Adam a sense of familiarity, since his childhood, with the rituals that are common in Polish society. These rituals have been internalized, and from my observation, are among the reasons that have familiarized him with Polish social interactions that constitute part of his social life now in Warsaw. This mixture of different elements in his everyday, and most likely their internalization, lead eventually to his movement from one geographic location to the other, and blending in easily within the social communities and performing the same rituals.
Mapping Aspects of the Everyday

The way Adam has been able to reassemble his social reality, regardless of whether he is living in Cairo or in Warsaw, can be connected to aspects in our everyday life since childhood. Different elements throughout time lead to particular transformations at certain points in time. Scott McCracken suggests that Walter Benjamin’s notion of connecting awakening with remembrance can help understand our relation to the everyday (2002, 156). McCracken proposes that in the practices of the everyday “the promise of the past is to be found” (2002, 157). He further suggests that the everyday is the threshold between “what is and what might be” (McCracken 2002, 163). I find these words enlightening in my analysis when linking the everyday to the past and future. Indeed in everyday practices, elements from the past form constellations that shape and reshape the present and the future. In the following lines I attempt to map aspects in my sisters’ and my everyday since childhood that offer insights into the elements that form ‘constellations’ in the present time, which reassemble the social in various ways.

One day, during the course of my research, I decided to open a door of a bookshelf at our home in Cairo. It is a compartment in a big black wooden bookshelf that holds dozens of albums. Many of them are from the years spent in Kuwait, depicting aspects of our social life there. The photographs are mainly from my sisters’ and my birthday parties, Christmas celebrations, outings in the desert or at the beach, as well as of my parents at social gathering, and what looks like cocktail parties. I had not opened these albums for years. Some photos are black and white, while the rest are mostly colored pictures. There are also albums from vacations spent in Egypt with Father’s family and other albums with photos from summer holidays spent in Poland with Mother’s family. My sisters were raised in Kuwait, I was born there, where I spent the first five years of my life. I have some recollections from our life in Kuwait, but otherwise I have lived all my life in Cairo. We stayed in Kuwait till 1984, then moved to Cairo for good.

Throughout my interviews with Aida and Maya, I sometimes would show them a couple of pictures, or make them go through the photo albums with me, then either immediately afterwards or a day or a couple of days later I would start asking them questions about their everyday since childhood. I would use these photographs as a tool that helps in flashing out their memories. As discussed in Chapter II and III, photographs have been among the sources I rely on in reconstructing memories, and
helping the past to flash. I noticed, especially with Maya, that her memories were much more detailed after going through those old photograph albums, while in the case of Aida, the photographs helped her better remember the dates of events.

I was sitting at home with Maya during the weekend, I had showed her in the morning a newspaper clipping of herself with other children from a Mother’s Day celebration at the Egyptian Embassy in Kuwait in the early 1980s. Later on, at noon, both of us were having tea – Maya drinking her herbal tea with berries, I was drinking tea with milk in a mug that my parents had bought when we were in Kuwait: a white mug, with the inscription “Kiss me I am Polish” in red. I had my notebook and started asking Maya about her memories from our years in Kuwait and our family’s social environment; she took a sip of her tea, then started telling me:

I remember both our parents were keen on attending embassy events in both the Egyptian and Polish embassies in Kuwait. We didn’t find much in common with the sons and daughters of Egyptian families there, but at the Polish embassy in Kuwait we would play with the children there, we knew common Polish games, and sang together Polish songs. We felt affinity with the children whose mothers were Polish and fathers were Arabs: Palestinians, Lebanese, Sudanese and Iraqis. It was enjoyable to play with them as we knew common games. Mother would tell us many stories since we were children about Poland, and would teach us Polish games, so we had things in common with children whose mothers were Polish. There was a group from those mixed families with whom we would go on picnics to the desert or to the sea, and celebrate occasions such as Christmas or New Year’s Eve together. At school, the majority of students were Palestinian; there were also Lebanese, Egyptian and some Iraqi students, but very few Kuwaiti students. Most of my friends at school were Palestinian, my best friend and neighbor was also Palestinian. I did not have Kuwaiti friends at all. I guess the Kuwaitis would keep more to themselves.

When I asked Aida about her account of her childhood and teenage years, and how she perceived that period in light of her social milieu at that time, similarly to Maya, she told me that most of her friends were Palestinian, and that they had friends who were from mixed Polish-Lebanese, Polish-Jordanian/Palestinian and Polish-Sudanese families. At school, they did not have many Kuwaiti students, and these would usually make friends with other Kuwaitis. There were hardly any Kuwaiti teachers as well, they were also either Egyptian, Palestinian, Syrian or Lebanese. She further told me:

I remember that we used to go the beach every weekend. This was not a typical thing among my schoolmates. We would go to the beach with
the mixed Polish-Arab families. Also at home, Mother would always have different genres of music playing, whether her vinyl discs with Polish songs, or classical music, or pop music like the ABBA at that time or the Beatles. Maya and I would play in our block’s courtyard, which was left empty and was surrounded by the building’s fence. It was not at all typical, especially for girls, to play outdoors. We would play football, go around in our roller-skates, and ride bicycles or scooters. I remember that I had a red scooter, no one had scooters among our friends; to me it was a very Polish thing, especially that I got it as a Christmas present. Other neighbors seeing us play, would start to come and play with us. I think it was in the early 1980s that we started going to a private sports club. I do not remember seeing any Kuwaitis there; it had mainly European members. I also remember that having a dog at home was not typical, it was mainly something foreigners did, otherwise dogs were kept by Kuwaitis for security reasons; but dogs were not popular as pets. We were the first among our parents’ friends to have a dog as a pet at home. As you might remember from the stories, our dog was a wild desert dog, found as a little motherless puppy in the desert. You know how Mother loved animals, so she could not refuse taking him home and giving him shelter.

The above accounts give a glimpse of Aida and Maya’s everyday as children in the Kuwaiti society. As seen from their accounts, even though they lived in Kuwait their interactions with Kuwaitis were minimal. From the little details above, it appears that throughout their childhood they were socialized within an Arab-Polish community. They mostly played the games which Mother taught them or brought along from Poland. Thus, their social tools of interaction with other children were mainly acquired from Mother who was keen on keeping elements from her homeland in the way she brought up her children. This explains why my sisters always referred to the move to Egypt as a difficult experience, and how they felt alienated in the Egyptian society. In Kuwait, my parents had few Egyptian families as friends; most of their close friends were of mixed Polish Arab marriages. My sisters did not watch Egyptian movies nor Egyptian comic theatrical shows, which increased their feeling of alienation as they did not have different sources of being up to date with Egyptian pop-culture. My sister’s knowledge of Egypt was mediated by Father, the events that they used to attend at the Egyptian Embassy in Kuwait, and the annual summer visits to Egypt that were mostly spent with our family here in Cairo.

My memories of my early childhood years spent in Kuwait are mainly in the form of snap shots of me with my family at home, or at the club; I still remember the smell of the French fries at that club, and the taste of the cocktail juice which Father
used to buy me when we went out together. I also remember our big green tent on the
beach, and swimming in a calm sea with no waves. I do remember a couple of friends
from Kuwait whose mothers were Polish, with whom I played at the amusement park
or at the Christmas parties we used to have at home. We left Kuwait when I was
around five years old, this is the reason why my memories are limited to the above
sensory snapshots.

I asked Aida about her memory of the reasons behind the decision of returning
to Egypt, she told me:

Besides Father’s work at the Kuwaiti Center of Folklore under the
Ministry of Information, he was also teaching at the Theater Institute
and the Arabic Music Institute in Kuwait. Father used to travel to
many countries for different conferences, and used to represent Kuwait
in these conventions. And from what I know, after Camp David in
1978, Father did not express in Kuwait anti-Egyptian government
sentiments. At that time, I remember there were riots in Kuwait against
Camp David and the Peace Treaty with Israel. The riots were against
Egypt in particular. I remember discussions at our home in Kuwait
where Father would be agitated that he was being pressured to drop the
Egyptian nationality and take up the Kuwaiti nationality; which for
him was out of the question. This gradually led to his eventual
decision to leave Kuwait. He was encouraged by Samha El-Khouly’s
suggestion that he should come back and teach at the Institute of
Folklore at the recently established Academy of Arts in Cairo. As far
as I can remember, she was appointed Director of the Academy of Arts
at that time.

I wanted to know if Maya remembers the same regarding our move from Kuwait to
Cairo, and to see if her memory carried different details. She told me:

I cannot remember the exact reason behind us leaving Kuwait; but it
felt like an abrupt decision by Father. It was related to his work as far
as I can remember. When he returned to Egypt he wanted to revive the
Center of Folklore, he also joined the Institute of Folklore at the
Academy of Arts, he felt he had given enough to Kuwait and it was
time to give back to Egypt in the field of Folklore.

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80 Camp David Peace Treaty: Camp David Accords, agreements between Israel and Egypt signed on
17 September 1978, that led in the following year to a peace treaty between those two countries, the
first such treaty between Israel and any of its Arab neighbors. For more information check:
https://www.britannica.com/event/Camp-David-Accords
81 Samha el-Khouly, Professor of Music, and Former President of the Academy of Arts. Born in 1925,
died in 2006. For more information check: http://egyptartsacademy.kenanaonline.com/posts/99869
82 I found among Father’s letters, a letter addressed to him from Dr. Samha el-Khouly sent in 1980
referring to discussions she was having with others in the field to have Father return to Egypt. Another
postcard is sent from one of his colleagues in Egypt, telling Father that the field of Folklore in Egypt
needs the people who truly believe in it to rise with it again.
I was too young to remember the reasons behind our move. But I remember from later years that Father used to say that he felt a moral obligation to return, as his colleagues from the field in Egypt were urging him to return and continue his path in Folklore in Egypt. It might have been that all circumstances got compiled together. At the same time, Aida and Maya were in their high school years and Father always said that he wanted them to study at Cairo University, which he regarded as a solid educational institution.

In an earlier interview with Aida, she referred to the anti-Egyptian sentiment which she remembers witnessing in Kuwait:

There was a strong sense of Qawmiya ‘Arabia (Arab Nationalism) in Kuwait; and the Palestinian crisis was very much felt. In 1978, I was still in primary school, but I remember that the Egyptian teachers at school came and took all Egyptian children into the big arts classroom at school, as there were demonstrations in the street against the Camp David Treaty, and a general anti-Egyptian sentiment prevailed. This moment was perhaps one of the moments when I realized my sort of ‘Egyptian identity’. In general, I had the feeling of being Arab and Polish, but did not have particular affinity to Egypt. My friends at school were mainly Palestinian or from the Levant, and my Arabic accent was a bit affected by the Palestinian accent, to the extent that some people thought that I was from the ‘Kamal’ family (dar Kamal) in Gaza. Now to go back to that day of anti-Egyptian demonstrations, it was a horrible day, and it made us feel as though we ourselves had committed a crime.

I wanted to know how Maya remembers this incident, and compare it to Aida’s account. She told me:

Now that you mention this incident I remember. There was a mish mash. Teachers were very anxious and wanted to take Egyptian students and hide them somewhere. I remember my friends gathered around me telling the teacher “leave her with us, she can speak in a Palestinian dialect, no one will know that she’s Egyptian.” It was a very stressful situation.

This memory which both Aida and Maya share from their childhood, gives a glimpse of their first encounter with their ‘Egyptian citizenship’, at a moment of an anti-Egyptian sentiment. (I will elaborate on categories of identification and the role of state in creating a subject later in this chapter.) However, the above lines also reflect the way in which they were socialized; when the Palestinian crisis was at the heart of the socio-political scene as both of them were growing up in Kuwait – most
of their friends being Palestinian, and even speaking with an accent that was more Palestinian than Egyptian.

**Negotiating Subject Position within Everyday Practices**

In this autoethnography I focus on elements related to memory and the past that play a role in the shaping of the subjectivities of individuals within their societies. Foucault considered the subject as interconnected to disciplinary power. For Foucault, 'power' is disbursed:

> [P]ower applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. (Foucault 1982, 781)

Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos, in opposition to Foucault, suggest that disciplinary power follows people who escape it rather than produce subjects to be tamed (2008, 51). I tend to lean towards the latter understanding of the relation between power and the subject, where there exist possibilities to renegotiate the power which subjugates individuals, allowing them to create alternative paths. In his analysis of the everyday, de Certeau suggests that memory has the ability to escape power, memory can cause a challenge and a change of both order and discourse. He further elaborates that both the collective and individual memory have the potential to cause reverse and change power, as he suggests "[w]e find a subtle manipulation of 'authorities' in every popular tradition. Memory comes from somewhere else, it is outside of itself, it moves things about" (1984, 87).

I reflect on these lines in light of our family, where memory brings elements that reassemble the present, causing changes in the way the social life is reassembled, which allows negotiating power. For example, regarding citizenship, lately when I traveled from Cairo to Warsaw, I was flying via Amsterdam. When I arrived to Amsterdam there was a sign for EU citizens to go right and non-EU to go left. The Egyptians who were with me at the Cairo airport gate, with whom I had chit chatted a bit when we were still in Cairo, went to the left side to stand in the long queue where they had to pass through an officer who checked their documents. The EU citizens, on
the other hand, went to the right side and passed through an electronic gate where one placed one’s passport to be scanned electronically, without any officers nor queues. I pondered upon this distinction that has suddenly been made travelers, based on the passports they hold.

The distinction that emerged, at the moment of crossing borders, brought to my mind the memory of Father, holding an Egyptian passport, yet being able to drive his car safely, on a leisurely trip, throughout a route that started from Kuwait and ended in Poland. Not only that, but his journey offered him possibilities of making friends on the way with strangers who would invite him to their homes for dinner or tea. From my parents’ letters before getting married, they were referring to a trip that they would take by car from Kuwait to Poland after their marriage, to get the chance to go on a tour around different countries together. They eventually took this trip, twice, by car, from Kuwait to Poland. The first time was after Aida was born, as they celebrated her first birthday in Vienna in 1969. Aida remembers being told that they spent the morning of her birthday in Vienna, and at the end of the day, they arrived in Budapest. Mother was pregnant with Maya during that trip. When they finally arrived in Warsaw, I gather it was in July 1969, Mother stayed in Warsaw and gave birth to Maya. Father continued the trip by car on his own, aiming to reach Scandinavia.

There are letters sent by Father to Mother from Stockholm in August 1969, where he tells her about the museums he had visited, and that he had some work-related appointments. He might have returned to Poland as he was referring to milk which he found and brought for Aida, as well as a gift for little Anna, our cousin living in Poland at that time. Then there is another letter sent by Father from Sofia, Bulgaria, in September 1969, where he tells Mother that he has crossed the Polish, Romanian and Bulgarian mountains, and is about to cross the Turkish mountains on his way back to Kuwait. In another letter he mentions that he sent Mother postcards from Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania, in which he told her about the violin music disc records he bought her. I found the card he had sent from Debrecen, Hungary, where he mentions that he met a Hungarian doctor, and was invited to his home, and that his wife made them supper. In a letter sent from Bucharest, he mentions that he would be attending a folkloric show at their opera house. There is also a card sent from Istanbul, then a letter sent from Ankara, where he visited Turkish friends. In another card he told her that he drove through Aleppo, Syria, then from Mosul to Baghdad in Iraq and finally reached Kuwait. This thread of letters
starts from Stockholm, Sweden on 5 August 1969 and ends with the card informing Mother that he reached Kuwait on 8 September 1969.

My parents took the same route on their trip when Aida and Maya were a bit older. Aida remembers that it was 1973. I asked her about her memories from this trip, she tells me:

I have some vague recollections of this tour that we made when I was a child. When I went to Syria in 2010, and entered the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, I felt I had a memory of it, as if I had been there before. It must have had roots from travelling there as a child. I remember sitting somewhere in Damascus, waiting for Father, and singing with Mother a Polish children’s song about Damascus. From the trip by car, I have a memory of us sitting in the car for long periods of time, and seeing a lot of desert and mountains which I found quite scary. I can also remember the many packs of cigarettes that Father was smoking, but also used to distribute them throughout the road as a tip to people who offered help. Mama was holding the maps and a thermos with coffee for Father. I remember people playing the violin near a river; it must have been in Budapest. I got this flashback when I was in Budapest a few years ago. I remember how Father used to say the story that at the Turkish borders, when the officer checked our Egyptian passports, he was very friendly and referred to me as “Aida Hanum” and to Maya as “Maya Hanum”. Father said it could have been due to our family name “Kamal” which is a popular Turkish name.

Since Maya is younger than Aida she could not remember much about this trip, she tells me:

I was may be six years old, but I am not sure, I remember eating apples with honey in Italy, and remember sitting comfortably in the car. I also remember that our parents brought for Aida and me candy with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. We passed by many countries, I remember being in Syria, listening to a Syrian song.

This story, besides bringing back the interplay between memories and material traces, mainly sheds light on the easy mobility of Father, an Egyptian citizen, during a journey by car, throughout different Arab and European countries, without any hindrances. The only hindrance, which Father mentioned in one of his letters to Mother, was the difficult drive alone through the Alps on a narrow and steep road.

I remember that in the early years of the new millennium, I was planning to travel to Prague and Paris with a friend of mine who holds an Egyptian passport, and I remember asking Father at that time if it was difficult for him to get visas with his Egyptian passport for all the countries through which he had travelled. I was intrigued
because my friend was going through a complicated process of issuing her visa. I remember Father briefly saying that it was “normal”; you just applied and got the visa. I still remember how he talked about it very casually, he did not refer to any hindrances. The only hindrance which I remember him mentioning was Mother’s Polish passport, and how he always kept it at the very bottom when he was showing his, Aida’s and Maya’s Egyptian passports.

Categories of classification are not only applied by state apparatuses; they also occur in different social settings, where different discourses are internalized by people. Accordingly, as Foucault has described, we have witnessed the way in which discourses emerge as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (2004, 54). During the January 2011 Revolution in Egypt, there was a general sense of hostility towards non-Egyptians. This was a consequence of the prevailing discourse initiated by the state apparatus, at that time, that the revolution was being fueled by ‘foreign agendas’. Haphazard accusations of espionage were being directed to non-Egyptians, so whenever my sisters and I would be together on a march or at a sit-in at Tahrir Square, we would consciously avoid speaking in Polish together. My sisters are very often taken for foreigners in Egypt, probably due to their fair skin, light colored hair and casual attire. In my case it depends, when I am with them I am taken for a foreigner as well. A couple of times when my sisters and I were together at Tahrir Square during the sit-ins, people around us would say “there are foreigners here” with suspicion, so we would immediately reply in Egyptian dialect so as not to enforce the idea of a foreign-lead revolution. I remember that before one of the marches, Maya wrote on a placard which she held Ihna masriyat mish agendat (We are Egyptian women not foreign agendas).

When the revolution broke out, with all the turmoil, violence and long phases of despair, neither I, nor my sisters considered leaving the country. I remember some of my acquaintances, who were against the revolution and knew that I was joining the marches and the sit-ins, would allude to the fact that I had a Polish passport so I could easily leave the country whenever I wanted; and that I would not bear the consequences. I also heard a similar reaction from one of my acquaintances telling me “you as Muslims” would not pay the price but “we Christians” would. These statements were not individual statements; there was a prevailing discourse at that time underlining these positions. As mentioned in Chapter I, there are xenophobic discourses in Poland that are not in favor of Arabs. These discourses can be traced in
sayings such as “when you buy a kebab you are settling an Arab,” which some people use to discourage buying food from Arab restaurants in Poland.

Holding a Polish passport creates of me a Polish subject not only in the eyes of the Polish state, but also in the eyes of my acquaintances. Being a Polish citizen at the moment of crossing borders facilitates for me the process. Yet, in other situations, when I do not ‘use’ my Polish citizenship I get perceived as a ‘non-Egyptian citizen’; like for example in the context of the revolution in Egypt where I could get placed in either the category of ‘danger’ connected to ‘foreign powers’ or a position of ‘privilege’, having the possibility to live different social realities in different contexts and without ‘bearing the consequences’ of my actions. Moreover, I suddenly become identified as a ‘Muslim’, which was not the case ever before. So, at the moment of the revolution and the fear it stirred in those who were against it, and knew I supported it, I became ‘othered’. In other words, I suddenly became the ‘different’ and the ‘threatening’. I suddenly became the ‘Polish’ ‘Muslim’ with a different set of privileged frameworks.

These situations are examples of how states and societies impose on individuals certain categories of identification. As Brubaker and Cooper suggest, the modern state, with its powerful and authoritative institutions, has been the main agent in external identification of people applying “formalized, codified, objectified systems of categorization” (2000, 15). They further elaborate that “[i]dentification can be carried more or less anonymously by discourses or public narratives” (2000, 16).

After the revolution that erupted in 2011, I started to analyze the reasons that lead my sisters and me to be supporters of the revolution and drove us to join the marches and sit-ins, although in our circles of friends we had many others who were not supportive of it. I believe that among the reasons that made my sisters and me supporters of the revolution, was that Mother always went back to her memories of WWII, and how the people’s will to resist, even if at a high cost, was the right stance. The stories my sisters and I heard from Mother and our relatives in Poland, about the Polish Solidarność (Solidarity Movement) in the 1980s, which led to the Polish

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83 According to Encyclopedia Britannica the Solidarity Movement is the Polish Solidarność, or the officially Independent Self-Governing Trade Union ‘Solidarity’ known as the Polish Niezależny Samorząd Związków Zawodowych ‘Solidarność’. It is the Polish nationwide trade union that in the early 1980s became the first independent labor union in a country belonging to the Soviet bloc. In 1989 to become the first opposition movement to participate in free elections in a Soviet-bloc nation since
The statue is in commemoration of the 1940s. Solidarity subsequently formed a coalition government with Poland’s United Workers’ Party (PUWP), after which its leaders dominated the national government. For more information check Encyclopedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Solidarity

In Warsaw’s Old Town, there is a famous statue called Maly Powstaniec (the Little Insurrectionist). The statue represents a young boy wearing a helmet too large for his head and holding a gun. The statue is in commemoration of Polish children who fought and died during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.

state’s independence from the Soviet rule in 1989, was also a point of reference to my sisters and me during that time. I remember how all these stories to which I used to listen, sometimes with interest and at other times with boredom, flashed up and were recognized at a moment of danger (Benjamin 1968, 255).

Mother witnessed times where governing powers were shifting narratives. Her memory of WWII, as well as her years living in Kuwait and having friends who were Palestinian must have affected the way she analyzed the political conflicts. I remember how Mother always used to refer to examples of the Polish people’s resistance during WWII when talking with our Polish cousins whenever the issue of the Palestinian crisis was raised. Some of my cousins, who were born in the 1960s, would usually refer to Palestinians as terrorists, Mother would go into debates with them reminding them of the Polish people’s resistance of its enemies and occupiers. She would remind them of the young Polish boys who lost their lives during the resistance due to their heroic acts, for whom statues were erected in Poland. I still remember her repeatedly telling them “how could anyone call young Palestinians, using stones as weapons against the occupation, terrorists!” She tried to make them see the similarities of the cause. Yet, throughout the years, my sisters and I, and now my nephew Adam continue having the same debates with them. It is interesting to see the way our cousins are immersed in discourses spread by the media where the word Palestinian connotes terrorist, that even when they make jokes amongst themselves they would use a saying “don’t act like a Palestinian terrorist.” Currently, similar discourses are being propagated in media against Syrian refugees, and Arabs in general. Interestingly enough, the discourses we hear used by our cousins in Warsaw, regarding Palestinians or Syrians, are similar to the discourses we hear in discussions with some of our acquaintances in Cairo.

Throughout my ethnography, I map the elements of the fused exposure to different social memories, social environments and non-homogenous historical narratives which disrupt the coherence of the homogenous discourses to which we are subjected. This fusion of memories, social environments, and narratives, which we
are part of and subjected to, offers the potential to construct our social world in a way that has a constellation of elements that allow us to reassemble some of the categories of identification in our social environments. From the above examples, I find that being subjected to different discourses and meta-narratives opened windows for us to evade internalizing one hegemonic discourse. It rather opened a possibility of having various elements from different pasts from which we reassembled our views and actions in relation to our social world. In this light, Michael Jackson suggests that the way the particular is related to the universal “is one of the most ubiquitous and persistent questions in human life” (1998, 2). Jackson further explains that using the notion of “intersubjectivity” is of high value for ethnographic analysis. He elaborates this point saying:

[Intersubjectivity helps us unpack the relationship between two different but vitally connected senses of the word subject—the first referring to the empirical person, endowed with consciousness and will, the second, to abstract generalities such as society, class, gender, nation, structure, history, culture, and tradition that are subjects of our thinking not themselves possessed of life. (Jackson 1998, 8)

Throughout my autoethnography, and specifically in this chapter, I have looked at the elements that create the subject. I am interested in the interplay between the subject as subjected to power in Foucault’s sense and the subject’s ability to renegotiate his/her social existence. In the above example, I show how in our case we have been subjected to a certain political discourse; and I move within the public and private, not as two different realms, but as interconnected arenas that explain the creation of the subject with different elements of the past, that are reconstructed in the present creating routes taken in the everyday. In giving the above example, of our position towards the January 2011 Egyptian Revolution, I establish connections between Mother’s experience of WWII, and her convictions of the right of people to defend their rights and land at all costs. I also make linkages to our perceptions of the anti-communist revolution in Poland in 1989, and connect our positions to the socio-political environment within which my family lived in Kuwait, where the Palestinian crisis was always present through my sisters’ many Palestinian friends. I juxtapose this to the different dominant discourses on state levels at particular moments and history, and my observation leads me to deduct how these different exposures makes a person able to be critical towards the hegemonic narratives and create a different stance.
Conclusion

Adam at the end of September 2016, was at home in Cairo packing his suitcase returning back to Warsaw after spending the summer holidays with us in Cairo. Maya was helping him to pack. Aida, Farid and Nabil passed by to spend some time together before Adam leaves. I took a couple of photographs of Adam and Farid in front of a big arabesque mirror, with its two side wooden towers. This mirror has always been central at our home in Cairo. My sisters and I were under the impression that this mirror was at our paternal grandmother’s home. It is an antique, and it stands in the background of some old black and white pictures that go back to the 1960s. When going through my parents’ letters I saw a drawing of it in one of Father’s letters to Mother, going back to 1966, where he describes it to her, and tells her that he had bought it as the first piece of furniture for their home in Cairo when they get married. It is a big mirror surrounded by a wooden frame carved in arabesque style. It has on both sides small wooden side towers with shelves and drawers. The shelves now carry different photographs, some are black and white: one is of our parent’s wedding, another is of Father as a young man during one of his fieldwork trips, and a portrait picture of my maternal grandfather. There are other colored pictures of my sisters and nephews. This piece of furniture remains a material trace of Father’s profession and passion for folklore, and of Mother’s respect and fascination with what constituted for her Arabic culture. It has now gained an added meaning when I got to know that Father had bought it for Mother as their first piece of furniture. It is a site of memory, as Paul Connerton suggests:

We conserve our recollections by referring them to the material milieu that surrounds us. It is to our social spaces – those which we occupy, which we frequently retrace with our steps, where we always have access, which at each moment we are capable of mentally reconstructing – that we must turn our attention, if our memories are to reappear. Our memories are located within the mental and material spaces of the group. (1989, 37)

Farid knows that this old delicate piece of furniture, which has some old photo albums of his mother when she was a child, and where he keeps his chess, cards and backgammon games, belonged to Giddu, whom he knows as having had a sense of humor and being a great backgammon player, and to Babcia, who had the kindest heart and was an animal lover. As he gets older, the stories will change; we will
invoke different memories about his Giddu and his Babcia, ones that would also be recognizable for him, so that these memories would remain lingering in his present and reshaping his future.

To conclude, memories are a hub where the present and future intertwine. It also presents how elements from the past infiltrate the present, causing the present to be reassembled. Elements like commemorations and language play a role in keeping aspects of the past, and continue shaping the present. These elements also play a role in infiltrating the everyday, and hence reassembling the social, offering ways of renegotiating the categories of identification which societies and states impose.

Throughout this chapter I aimed at bringing together the different elements that were presented in the previous chapters. The concept of remembrance, which I presented in Chapter II was continued in this chapter when giving a glimpse of our commemoration rituals. I also built my analysis here on the concept of the sites of memory, presented in Chapter III, in my reflections on the material traces such as photographs, letters, Easter and Christmas decorations as well as a piece of furniture, or which constitute part of our everyday. And finally, in this chapter, I attempted to bring all these elements together forming constellations which are premised on merging elements from the past, present and future, and the way the subject is formed and negotiates the social realities. I shed light on the possibilities of reassembling the social which at the end is at the heart of my research.
Reaching the final stage of my research, I stop to reflect on the whole process. Having chosen to zoom in into my family to understand the larger social issues taking place on the socio-political and economic levels, made me adopt autoethnography as the most suitable approach to my research. As mentioned earlier, my decision of looking inward came at a moment following the eruption of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. The Egyptian society seemed to me to be undergoing a massive process of ploughing – on multiple levels: political, economic and social. Living in Egypt at that time, I could not escape a personal sense of ploughing. I felt the need to ‘turn it all up’ and dig out my perceptions and positions, bringing them to the surface, the way the soil is turned up during ploughing; and similar to the condition of the Egyptian society at its revolutionary height. It was a moment that marked my realization that both the personal and the social are integrally interconnected. Looking inward into my own family history seemed to offer me the way toward a deeper understanding of the societies I inhabit, and my position within them.

My journey started at a moment of what I considered an intersection of the public with the private. It was a moment that coincided with Adam’s decision to travel for studies in Warsaw while the Egyptian society was witnessing times of major political transformation – a moment that raised various sets of questions in my mind. I came to realize that the private and public realms do not actually intersect, but are interwoven. Then came my decision to open Mother’s suitcase with the letters that went back to the late 1950s. I read hundreds of letters packed in this suitcase, and traced other letters that were kept elsewhere, at our home in Cairo and in Warsaw. I saw in this personal process a symbolic representation of the mess of the social world. Pieces, fragments, telegraphs, cards, memories, drawings, photographs, newspaper clippings, emotions, historic events, dreams, hopes, assumptions, descriptions, fears, disappointments and decisions erupted seeking my attention and reflection. I found myself wanting and having to deal with all of this entangled and immense weight, and facing the central question of where should I start?!
I decided to deal with my sources as “plateaus,” borrowing Deleuze and Guattari’s expression, in the sense in which plateaus have no beginning and no end, and where the plateaus are multiplicities connected to other sets of multiplicities (1987, 21). In the case of my research the plateaus have endless spheres of possibilities, where time, space, people, ideas, traces, and accounts are interconnected and entangled. What I have been weaving has, also in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense, a “rhizomic” structure, as the essence of the rhizome, according to them, is to “intersect” and “merge” roots (1987, 13). So even if my autoethnography has a chronological aspect, I constantly intersect this chronology by moving backward and forward in time, zooming inward and outward. This process emerged organically, where the theoretical concepts emerged and merged with my sources. I have various sources, material and immaterial, seeking to create a dialogue between conventional sources and my unconventional sources in the process of autoethnographic writing. The outcome to me is a work that reflects my dialogue with members of my family, dialogues among them across time and place, as well as dialogues with thinkers and writers.

My sources include letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, magazines, parents’ notebooks, publications by and about my parents, official documents, oral histories, and memories. I moved between different temporalities and geographic locations, both physically and symbolically. I collected many traces from our home in Cairo as well as from our home in Warsaw. I moved between the two collecting and connecting pieces together. I would find a letter from the early 1960s in Mother’s suitcase in Cairo sent from her to Father, then I would find Father’s reply in a little box among other letters placed in a bookshelf at our home in Warsaw. I brought all these letters and postcards with me here to Cairo, and started to create a jigsaw, collecting threads and following them. Even when weaving together threads, still gaps would appear.

Throughout my research and writing process, I found myself dealing with these fluid positions and concepts: story, academic writing, researcher, subject, material, immaterial, public, private, past and present. These concepts and positions formed diagonal and intertwined connections. All these concepts were like a dancing group, changing partners, coming sometimes to the foreground then residing to the background interchangeably.
Throughout this autoethnography, I aimed at discussing the mundane from a sociological and anthropological perspective. Autoethnography presented itself as the tool enabling me to use academic research in handling personal memories, and showing the way in which the public and private are intertwined. Carolyn Ellis and Anand Pandian’s approaches to their research encouraged me to perceive my family as a symbol, a social unit and identify the way in which its stories represent the process through which the social is constructed and connected.

Writing is not an easy task, in writing one’s thoughts, part of our self gets exposed. In my case, I found the process even harder, besides conveying my thoughts I also had to write about myself, and my own family. Looking in retrospect and analyzing my decision of having my research premised on a very personal ‘case study’, has been informed and affected by several influences. One was at the very beginning of joining the MA program, when a professor told us that we had to be prepared that the research topic we chose would be part of our everyday. It would be living with us day and night. This geared my thoughts towards a topic that would be meaningful to me. The other thing that influenced my choice were different readings which underlined that meaningful fieldwork had no beginning and no end. It is a continuous process that the researcher immerses herself/himself in. I wanted to research and write about something that is connected to my personal life, not simply a profession-related research. The third thing, which was an unsettling factor, was the power relation between the researcher and the subject. I wanted to evade it. I mistakenly thought I could evade it by inserting myself within my research, assuming that this position would flatten the power relations in a research process, in the sense that what applied to my interlocutors applied to me; especially since from the very beginning I knew that I wanted to delve into the personal realms of the social.

All these factors remained at the back of my mind when choosing my research topic. Opening ‘Mother’s Suitcase’ with letters going back to the 1950s was the starting point for a process of reconstructing the past and starting to recognize methods for assembling knowledge, merging the past, present and future, dealing through memory with the (im)material, and realizing that the public and private are integrally interconnected. These letters were the ‘flash’ that inspired me to start writing a ‘story’. I might have been influenced by John Law’s approach in his book *After Method* where in the introduction he says, “[n]ovels are ends in themselves, worth reading in their own right. Academic writings are means to other ends” (2005,
11). I am by no means suggesting that what I wrote is a novel, yet it is a story, a story made out of different elements, and of different voices offering an interpretation of events and practices. As a story, I find it serving both approaches; readable for its own right, and as an academic writing, it serves to analyze aspects of the social.

My case study being my family, which is a Polish-Egyptian family, made me move between different temporalities and geographic locations, both physically and symbolically. I collected many traces from Cairo and Warsaw. I had open-ended interviews done in both locations with family members and acquaintances with whom I connected during the course of my research. I also practiced participant observation. I started to be alert and sensitive to the mundane practices, observing them analytically. It was sometimes a challenge to shift my gaze and look with fresh analytic eyes at my family’s and my own everyday ‘mundane’ practices. My fieldwork included searching for, then collecting and weaving together, different research sources, whether material or immaterial. I moved between locations, and among the different sources. My sources include letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, magazines, parents’ notebooks, publications by and about my parents, official documents, oral histories, and memories. I was collecting and connecting pieces together. I would find a letter from the early 1960s in Mother’s suitcase in Cairo sent from her to Father, then I would find Father’s reply in a little box among other letters placed in a bookshelf at our home in Warsaw. I saw in this personal process a symbolic representation of the mess of the social world. I brought all these letters and postcards with me here to Cairo, and started to create a jigsaw, collecting threads and following them. When weaving together threads, still gaps would appear.

One of the most significant things that unraveled throughout my research was the way in which multiple narratives of the same incident or event were remembered and narrated. Some of the narratives were being said with great assertion, but when I went back to my sources and documents I would be surprised to find very different details. Also, when juxtaposing narratives, different versions would emerge. I could also see the way the current views and concerns of the narrator would emerge in the way the memory was being narrated. The significant outcome is that this personalized family story emerges as an integral part of wider issues related to the outward social world, with all its complexities. If, in our own family, various versions of ‘historic incidents’ occur, the positions of narrators emerge, the way their present lens affects the way they recollect their memories, then how can there be an assumption that there
is one truth or only one interpretation to events or historic accounts on the public level. Indeed, as John Law argues, we as people are “sets of partial connections”. I have, personally, experienced Law’s statement that “[t]here is no gold standard. No single reality” (2004, 69).

One of the main challenges I faced during the process of writing was selection, and the questions it involved: what should I keep, omit, foreground, and what should be kept in the background. Moreover, my interviews presented another challenge, as I ended up with an immense amount of stories, details and reflections. Again, I was faced with the same sets of concerns about how to filter those interviews: should I keep them in direct speech form, or should I paraphrase them. I became aware of my power position as a researcher, the position I have read many critiques about; and I, therefore, thought that by including myself in the research, through choosing autoethnography as my method, I would minimize these power politics. Yet, I found myself faced with being in a power position regarding which story to tell, and which to subsume. In the process of my selection I decided to preserve my interlocutors’ voices by quoting them, I would cluster their answers to my questions for the sake of brevity. I also used some quotations from letters, articles, and notes to give my parents voice in this autoethnography.

What was specifically challenging was dealing with the analysis of the everyday. The everyday has endless details, and each detail has a meaning and can be reflected upon in multiple ways. My pivoting and changing weights while keeping my balance was not always an easy endeavor. I had to revisit what I wrote, to create a balance in my narrative and analysis. Regarding the immense details of the everyday, which I observe, and the overwhelming details in interviews, letters, photographs, documents, written documentation, I decided to focus on the relation of the past to the present, highlighting the elements that create constellations bringing the past and present together. I also found myself focusing more on Mother’s narratives. When I noticed this pattern, I wanted to balance these narratives with Father’s, but then took the decision not to, and kept the narrative the way it unraveled. This decision was influenced by the idea of bringing to the forefront the untold stories. Father had his work published, many interviews throughout the years where recorded with him and transmitted on the radio and television or published in newspapers or magazines. I felt that Father had already much material traces out there that could be followed and collected, which reflected the way in which a subject could assemble his social
reality. I made a point to refer to his notebooks since the late 1940s, and some aspects of his childhood and early youth as this is something that is not publicly available and thus untraceable in the outside world.

On the other hand, Mother assembled and reassembled her social realities; the elements she had brought from her past to our lives are available to us so we continue to play around with them in reinventing our social realities. Although she too had published some of her work, yet Mother never talked about herself. Writing an autoethnography gave me the opportunity to talk about parallel untold stories of how realities can be imagined and created. Michael Jackson’s following words, in commenting on the way Walter Benjamin describes the molding that happens when retelling stories, sum up, in a beautiful image, my own experience: “Walter Benjamin observed (1968:92), stories are like vessels shaped from wet clay under a potter’s hands. While each pot conforms to the stylistic and utilitarian conventions of a single society at a certain moment in time, it simultaneously bears the tell-tale traces of an individual potter’s hands” (Jackson 2002, 231).

Throughout this autoethnography, I aimed at discussing the mundane from a sociological and anthropological perspective. Autoethnography presented itself as the tool enabling me to use academic research in handling personal memories, and showing the way in which the public and private are intertwined. It has also empowered me in perceiving my family as a symbol, a social unit, and identifying the way in which its stories represent the process through which the social is constructed and connected. In my research I was particularly influenced by Walter Benjamin’s view of history and memory. His profound statement that the past remains dormant until it flashes up at a moment of recognizability (1968, 255) has inspired much of my research inquiries and constitute an underlying theme of my narrative.

I have been following these flashes, and through them I have analyzed aspects of the present with its complexities. My quests, as well as the concepts that emerged throughout my research, will remain lingering, and will continue being shaped and reshaped as my social realms keep changing; while, I will continue reassembling paths and continue inferring meaning out of the altering constellations.
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Editors. *ITD Ilustrowany Magazyn Studencki (ITD Illustrated Students Magazine)*, 22 (393), 5.


APPENDIX A

TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

In transliterating Arabic words into English, I use the AUC Press transliteration system as shown in Table No. I below. As for Polish letters and clusters which do not have an equivalent in English, their phonetic equivalent is reflected in the below Table No. II, which is based on the Collins Polish-English Dictionary transcription table.

Table No. I: Arabic into English Transliteration\textsuperscript{85}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonants</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ء</td>
<td>‘ (ordinary apostrophe)</td>
<td>ma’dhana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ا</td>
<td>a, i, u, depending on foll. vowel sound</td>
<td>Ahmad, Iman, Usama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ب</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>baraka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ت</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>kitab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ث</td>
<td>th</td>
<td>thuluth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ج</td>
<td>g in a northern Egyptian context; j otherwise</td>
<td>Faggala, Hijaz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ح</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>mihrab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>خ</td>
<td>kh</td>
<td>naskhi</td>
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<tr>
<td>د</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>dar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ذ</td>
<td>dh</td>
<td>madhhab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ر</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>madrasa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ز</td>
<td>z</td>
<td>ziyada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>س</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>sabil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ش</td>
<td>sh</td>
<td>mashrabiya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ص</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>qasr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ض</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>Ramadan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ط</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>mastaba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ظ</td>
<td>z</td>
<td>zuhr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ع</td>
<td>‘ (reversed apostrophe)</td>
<td>maq’ad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>غ</td>
<td>gh</td>
<td>maghrib</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ف</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>malqaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ق</td>
<td>q</td>
<td>qibla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ك</td>
<td>k</td>
<td>kuttab</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ل</th>
<th>l — liwan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>م</td>
<td>m — manzil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ن</td>
<td>n — maydan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ه</td>
<td>h — shahada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ء</td>
<td>a when not linked — madrasa at when linked — Madrasat Sultan Hasan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>و</td>
<td>w — waqf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ي</td>
<td>y — ziyada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ئ</td>
<td>a — mustashfa -iya — mashrabiya</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Geminated consonants are shown double – kuttab, hammam.
Definite article al- (invariable; capitalized only at beginning of sentence) — al-Ghuri

**Vowels**

Short vowels: a, i, u — darb, dikka, funduq
Long vowels a, i, u — bab, sabil, maqsura
Diphthongs ay, aw — bayt, hawsh

Table No. II: Polish into English Phonetic Transcription86

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ż, rz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>si, ś</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zi, ź</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dż, drz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ci, ć, dż</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dzi, dž</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ni, ń</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>h, ch</th>
<th>Hook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vowels</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>pronounced like the beginning of the diphthong in ‘eye’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>Neat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>Bit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>Ten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>caught (<em>but shorter</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ū</td>
<td>boot (<em>but shorter</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ɛ</td>
<td>nasal vowels, phonetic symbol [ɛ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ą</td>
<td>nasal vowels, phonetic symbol [õ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C
MATERIAL TRACES

Figure 1: Google Map representing the location of al-Sakakini square and al-Dhahir (el-Zaher) districts in Cairo, reflecting the distance between them. Google 2016.

Figure 2: Google Map of Poland showing the country’s borders with its neighboring countries. The arrows show Mother’s birth place “Zrębice” in Częstochowa, as well as Poland’s capital, Warsaw.
Figures 3 & 4: Witold Pfabe, grand-uncle’s name carved on a marble plaque at Warsaw University for Technology (WUT). His name is listed among other WUT students who lost their lives during WWI.
Figure 5: The handwriting in Polish says “The parachute which saved Captain Orliński’s life on 12.X.1931.”

Figure 6: Polish Army Aircraft (recognized by the Polish Air Force checkboard symbol) crashed at the forest. The handwriting at the back of this picture in my grandmother’s handwriting mentions “Orliński’s accident in Zrębice.”
Figure 7: A painting of Mother’s childhood home in Zrębice which was burnt down by the German occupation during WWII. The painting was drawn by my grandfather’s sister. It is hanging on the wall at our home in Warsaw.

Figure 8: Picture from the year 1931 with grandfather (second person sitting on the second row from the left side). In the background is a fragment of Mother’s childhood home in Zrębice.
Figure 9: Grandfather’s identification card of belonging to the Forestry Trade Union. It states his date of birth 3.12.1899 and membership in the Union since 1925.

Figure 10: Grandmother’s Public Transportation Card, issued on 30.12.1959, stating her professional affiliation to the Ministry of Agriculture, Veterinary Institute.
Figure 11: Mother’s library card during her studies in Paris which was valid till 1964. It also states her address in Paris at that time.

Figure 12: Father’s Railway Transportation Pass, issued in 1964. Its pages show the train trips taken by Father and Mother during Mother’s visit to Egypt in the Fall of 1964.
Figure 13: Fragment of my different material sources.

Figure 14: Mother’s suitcase during the process of reading, sorting and finding threads in different letters and post cards.