SCRIPT: “Educational Journey: From Qena to Cairo”

Reem Elmaghraby

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Lead in: This audio feature is about Reem Elmaghraby’s grandfather’s path to education as someone who grew up in Upper Egypt. The purpose is to document his life and to tell the story of many other children who had to overcome various obstacles to achieve an education.

*IBRAHIM ELMAGRABY (IE): “So Thursday night, he go back to home, and then he turn and then come after five days so this is a process. It was suffering. But he was just like keen to be educated.”(:10s)*

*MUSIC: Desert Caravan by Aaron Kenny (ENTER COLD)*

That's my father, Ibrahim Abdel hakim Elmaghraby and he’s talking about my grandfather Abdel hakim who I call Gedo, the Arabic word for grandpa. What you heard might come off as a shocker. I mean imagine moving out at a young age to get an education. But that was the harsh reality of many Egyptian kids back in the days.

I'm Reem Elmaghraby and I'm going to be telling you about my grandfather's story and possibly the story of many other kids from Upper Egypt who had to struggle to get an education.

*MUSIC: Desert Caravan by Aaron Kenny (FADE OUT)*

*IE: “He was actually a great man you know. If you talk about someone who was born in 1928, and he's born in Qena in Saeed in Egypt, which is like actually so far from Cairo, to start his education in 1934.”(:16s)*

*MUSIC: Mirage by Chris Haugen (FADE IN)*

Just to give you an idea of where Qena is on the map, it’s around 577 km away from Cairo and it’s quite close to the famous touristic destination, Luxor. I've never been to Qena, but I could imagine what it might've felt like. Whenever I'd go visit my grandma and my seven uncles and aunts in Nasr city in Cairo, We'd all gather around a tabla, a low table where we'd have to be seated on the floor and eat meats and vegetables, that my grandmother got from the village, with our hands and bread. The sound of heavy Saeedi accents, the dialect spoken in upper Egypt, and laughter was all around me.

It was really easy to forget that we were in Cairo.

*NAT: Bekia guy*

up until you could hear the bekia guy screaming for customers to come.

But back to my grandfather.

*IE: “At this time, there is only one school, which is in Qena itself. So there is no other schools in the village, at all. And he was living about like, maybe like eighty kilos away from Qena. So, and this time it was difficult to move.” (:12s)*

And so at the young age of 14, Gedo decided to move to an apartment near the only school in Qena. He lived with four of his cousins and stayed in the same building as his uncle who was a teacher there. All this in preparation to study at Al-Azhar University.

What is Al-Azhar you might ask. I talked to Yosra Ali, a researcher at AUC and who studied Al-Azhar and its history to find out more.

*YOSRA ALI (YA): “Al-Azhar is a religious institution for education. It was established in 1920. And it started as a school, and a mosque, and it continued to do so in the different ages, until now.” (:14s)*

Almost everyone in the Arab world knows what Al-Azhar is and getting in wasn’t really an easy task.

*IE: “During this time actually to join Al-Azhar, you should, you should actually memorize the whole Quran, and some of ahadith, and what we call it Alfiat Ibn Malek. And this is just learn you naho, you know, just like the grammar of Arabic. So, he took about ten years to finish this.” (:18s)*

But getting an education wasn’t the only reason my grandfather memorized the Quran, the Islamic Holy book.

*IE: “And because he was hafez Quran, you know, he's exempted from the military service, because this is the rule at this time.” (:06s)*

The age-old tradition of escaping military service. A struggle that thankfully I don’t have to go through but with three brothers it's one that I'm quite familiar with.

So after ten years of studying, and then spending an extra four years in an institute in Qena, Gedo was finally ready to move to Cairo and attend the famous Al-Azhar University in hopes of becoming a teacher.

*MUSIC: Mirage by Chris Haugen (FADE OUT)*

*NAT: Cairo traffic*

But that didn’t really go according to plan.

*MUSIC: Al Kandil by Naif Sager (FADE IN)*

*YA: “Earlier, they had different jobs for different grades or classes of honors you graduate with. So if you were like highest honors, of course I'm using terms that didn't exist. But like, if you’re highest honors, you became an affiliate of Al-Azhar and you teach there but if you were a little bit lower, you’re a judge. If you're from the very lowest rank, you're just an Imam anywhere.” (:25s)*

Despite graduating with high grades, he wasn’t assigned as a teacher. Instead, they gave him a job as an Imam, a person who leads prayers in a mosque.

*IE: “So he was upset, and they went to complain, he and a few of his friend to the Sheikh Al-Azhar, or the great Imam. And actually the great I mam, you know, during this time just to complain it's considered unpolite. So the Imam- ten of them, they went to complain to him, he decided actually to give him a job in Aswan as a punishment. So he was crying at this time and then everyone telling him that if the Imam sign actually that you should go to Aswan, you have no option.” (:34s)*

I would’ve cried too. Imagine going through studying a bunch of difficult materials and moving away from your family at a young age only to have your dreams shattered. But what was my grandfather's solution? More education.

*MUSIC: Al Kandil by Naif Sager (FADE OUT)*

He was approached by a friend of his uncles with this solution. Start preparing for a master’s degree and since the only university where he could obtain a master's degree at the time was in Cairo, he'd be relocated there.

*MUSIC: Mirage by Chris Haugen (FADE IN)*  
  
And that's exactly what he did. But he loved studying so much that he decided to take a PhD as well and eventually became a professor in Al-Azhar.

We're not sure why Gedo wanted to be a teacher, but here’s what I think. I think he wanted to give back, to keep that cycle of learning and teaching going and he did that through being a professor.

He also kept that in mind while building his house in Cairo. He left the first floor open to relatives and students who wanted to learn but needed a place to stay.

*MUSIC: Mirage by Chris Haugen (FADE OUT)*

*IE:” We have few maybe five or six now actually student. Students that are actually there right now. Some of them in medical school, some of them in pharmacy, some in engineering.” (:09)*

*MUSIC: Desert Caravan by Aaron Kenny (FADE IN)*

My Grandfather’s Quest for education has trickled down organically and positively impacts everyone in my family. This love of learning is now generational.

My father, who’s a doctor, also teaches new doctors and is a lover of literature and history. He installed the love of reading in me and my four siblings and encouraged us to learn what we love. My older brother, a future mechanical engineer. My younger brother who’s following in the footsteps of my parents and just started med school in the exact same university my dad went to. My two youngest siblings, still in school figuring things out and me a future journalist and writer.

We all owe this to one man. Gedo.

Who knew that after starting his education 86 years ago, he’d still be inspiring his family and I’m sure he’ll continue to do so for many generations to come.

This audio feature was produced by Reem Elmaghraby for the Audio Production course at The American University in Cairo, taught by Professor Kim Fox in the Spring semester of two-thousand-twenty. Special thanks to Ibrahim Abdel hakim and Yosra Ali for their insightful interviews and Naif Sager, Chris Haugen, and Aaron Kenny for music. All NAT Sounds were gathered by me.

*MUSIC: Desert Caravan by Aaron Kenny (FADE OUT)*