***Without Return: Memoirs of an Egyptian Jew 1930–1957* by Jacques Sardas**

**TOPIC ATTRIBUTION FROM THE BOOK**

**EARLY INFLUENCES**

My mother would rub my dad’s back at night, and he would tell her in Greek that he had had a tough day “fighting the lions.” When I was four or five, I believed that he actually fought real lions, so I developed a deep fascination with them. Mom used to read me stories from an illustrated children’s Bible, and I repeatedly asked her to read the story of Samson killing the lion. To me Dad personified Samson. I could visualize him spreading the lion’s jaws wide open with his strong bare hands. (page 14)

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One day my mother created an amazing metamorphosis within me. . . . That day changed my life. I was around six, and after playing in our street, I rushed home, crying and bleeding from badly scraped knees. My mother asked what happened. I explained that I had fallen while chasing the boys who were teasing me about my birthmark. . . . Mom smiled and stood me in front of her. I found comfort inhaling her sweet lavender scent as she wrapped her arms around my shoulders. “Jacob, my son,” she said. “You got the mark because you’re exceptional—because you’re smart. It is a good sign that God gave you. You must be happy that God has chosen you among all the other boys to be the marked one.” (page 27)

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**DIFFICULT CHILDHOOD**

When my father had money, he gave my mother enough to prepare dinner for that particular evening. Most of the time he had no money, and we waited for him to bring home the food. If my father was late, we all went to the streetcar station in Ibrahimieh to wait for him. Sometimes we were too tired and went to sleep without any food. (page 13)

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When I was about five or six, my father took me with him to work. . . . Before we entered the building, Dad stopped and told me, “You know, you have to be nice to this doctor we are going to visit now. We haven’t sold anything today, and we have to bring some food home.” . . . It was past office hours; the doctor sat behind his desk. . . After looking at some fabrics, [he] selected two pieces and decided to buy one. When the doctor reached for his wallet to pay, my father pushed me forward and told me in Greek, “Kiss his hand.” My pride wounded, I was nearly in tears. I took the doctor’s hand and raised my head to look at him, but I could not kiss his hand. Dad was angry. He grabbed me by my shoulder. The doctor stopped him and asked, “Where is that other fabric you were showing me in the beginning? I want to buy it, too.” (page 13)

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One day . . . when I was alone with [my mother] at home, she could not hide her tears. That day a truck stopped by our house, and a group of men knocked on our door. My parents had fallen behind on the rent. The men had come to inventory and appraise all our furniture. If we did not pay by a certain deadline, they would seize our furniture and evict us. While the men moved from room to room, my mother, one hand over her mouth, could not hold back her tears. I moved close to her. She hugged me and kept saying, “Don’t worry, it will be all right.” I felt despair at seeing her distraught and tried to kick the man closest to me, but she stopped me. (page 23)

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A movie theater, La Gaîté, was located on Ibrahimieh Street, not far from our house. On Saturday afternoons when I was seven or eight, I often walked to the theater and spent a long time looking at the posters on its walls—I did not have enough money to buy a ticket. By scrutinizing the faces of the actors, I created my own version of the movie. After a couple of hours I returned home satisfied, as if I had actually attended the film. (page 45)

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On Saturday, September 7, 1940, a few days before my tenth birthday, we woke up early. We had not slept well the night before, both because we were excited about Mom’s return [from the hospital] and because a long raid had kept us awake with bombs exploding close to our neighborhood. . . . As Dad prepared to go to the hospital and bring Mom home, the doorbell rang. My father opened the door and found Madame Schultz standing there. She pulled him outside and whispered a few words in his ear. My father screamed, “No! No! Oh, God, why?” . . . We had no phone, so the hospital had called Madame Schultz; our mother had died early that morning. During the raid another patient in Mom’s room had needed help. Mom got out of bed to help the patient but fell to the floor after taking a few steps. According to what the Greek patient told Madame Schultz, Mom repeatedly whispered in Greek *Khano ton kosmo* (“I’m losing the world”) as she lay on the floor. She died of a pulmonary embolism. . . . I heard the neighbors ask my brothers if I was aware of what had happened. No one could understand what I felt. They thought that I was too young to realize the extent of our loss, yet I fully understood that the death of my mother had destroyed my childhood and my innocence. That day I lost my faith. Fairy tales and miracles were just stories; the world was unfair, tough, and cruel. (page 55)

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My grades qualified me to pursue my studies tuition-free at an Egyptian university. However, this was not to be. Just after I received my exam results, my father had a heart attack, which was caused by his clogged arteries, and it traumatized our whole family. For several weeks, his life was in danger. It took him a long time to recover, and we all thought that he would not be able to resume his work. Because of the country’s political situation it was not safe for me to attend an Egyptian university, and with my father’s illness, long-term plans were not realistic. On the day I should have been celebrating my good grades, I felt depressed. My dream to become a doctor had been shattered. Moving up the social ladder seemed impossible. (page 120)

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I told Etty that I was not ready to hop on the marriage train. . . . I did not want to have a family who would suffer as mine had when we were kids. I knew I had to end our relationship because I believed it was moving us toward a life full of pain and misery. . . . “Etty, I love you; I really do,” I told her. . . . “I saw my family suffer for lack of money. We went to bed many nights without eating. I saw my mother crying when a truck came to our home to pick up our furniture because we could not pay our rent. I saw her work like a slave, cleaning, washing, cooking, and working the whole day to take care of us because my father could not provide for our needs. . . .There is no way that I’m going to take you and our children down that same path.” (page 170)

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**WORLD WAR II**

Late one night during a raid . . . Denise entered our completely dark bedroom. She looked through the window and started screaming, “I can see the German plane! And now I can see the bombs falling!” We all laughed and made fun of her. Léon pushed her aside to see what was going on, ready to prove her silly. He opened the window a bit wider and kept imitating Denise: “Yes, I can see them; now they are throwing some banana peels and some oranges—” He was interrupted by a huge explosion that shook our entire house. The window from which my brother had been watching was blown away. Fortunately, it burst outward. Had it imploded, he would have died instantly. He escaped with a superficial scratch on his forehead. We never again watched raids from the windows. The war grew fiercer. The Germans and Italians bombed Alexandria more heavily and more frequently. The Italian army, already present in Libya, was preparing to invade North Africa, starting with Alexandria. (page 52)

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**DIVERSE FRIENDSHIPS**

Running greatly helped me alleviate my frustration and endure the shock of my mother’s death. I often went to the Ibrahimieh Sporting Club, next to the Corcous’ house, to run on its oval track, which surrounded a basketball court. I was surprised one day to see a young Arab boy also running on the track. This was unusual, because the Greek community owned the club and we always played with Greek children. This boy, Ahmad, was nice. We raced around the track and played soccer and basketball. We had fun challenging each other and rapidly established a good friendship. (page 60)

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Every team in the top league represented a different ethnic group. The Maccabi team represented the Jewish community; Keravnos (“thunder” in Greek), the Greek community; Ararat, the Armenians; Palestra, the Italians; and a Maronite team represented the Syrian and Lebanese communities. The Egyptian police and army teams mainly represented the Muslims. Although it mostly served Christians, the YMCA was used by a mixture of nationalities and religions. (pages 83–84)

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I thought back to the “without return” exit visa on my passport and couldn’t manage to summon up my outrage anymore. The only thing I felt was regret. True, I had some tough times in Egypt, especially as a child in Alexandria; however, this was my country, the country where I was born and where I had spent every single day of my life. Even though the government rejected, hated, and persecuted the Jews, we still belonged to this land, and we still loved its people, the real Arabs, like the Bedouins we met in the Sahara Desert, those spared from the venom spread daily by politicians and religious extremists. I thought of the honest, decent, and reliable Muslims like Haj Abdou and his two sons, who defended us from our nasty neighbors in Cairo, the Hawaras. I recalled the Palestinian trader who returned all the wealth that my father-in-law had entrusted to him when the Germans were about to invade Egypt. I thought of the friends of my father-in-law who helped us at customs. (page 218)

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**PREJUDICE**

One evening I heard Dad telling Mom about an Englishman who had been about to buy a piece of fabric but changed his mind when he found out that my father was Jewish. The man turned his back to my father and declared, “I never buy from Jews. I don’t trust them.” My father still fumed as he related the story to Mom. He said that he almost punched the Englishman, but Abdul Meguid had pulled my father away. (page 14)

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One evening, a big bearded man in a white robe and a black turban came up to us. He looked at [my friend] Ahmad and told him in Arabic, “This boy is a Jew—he is not allowed to be here.” Then, staring at me with piercing eyes, the man declared, “This is a Muslim club. You cannot come here anymore.” The Ibrahimieh Sporting Club, as I later found out, had been sold to the Muslim Brotherhood, an extremist group. Along with the loss of my mother and my faith, I discovered the painful feeling of being discriminated against by an adult because of my religion. (page 60)

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One morning my father-in-law asked me to stop by the bank and cash a check for him. “I have to start withdrawing some of my money gradually and keeping it at home,” he said. . . . I took a briefcase and headed to the bank. . . . [After cashing the check,] I left the bank and quickly headed home. A few minutes later . . . a man grabbed my arm. He showed his identification as a secret police officer. He said in a low voice, “You are a spy, and I’m taking you to the police station.” Taken by surprise, I replied, “Why do you say that I’m a spy? What did I do?” [He said,] “You’re carrying secret documents. Give me your briefcase and follow me to the police station.” We both stood on the sidewalk close to a building. “I’m not going to give you my briefcase here. I’ll give it to the officer at the police station,” I insisted, [adding,] “I’m a basketball player and a very good friend of Captain Albert Fahmy Tadros and Officer Hussein Kamal Montasser. I’ll ask them to come to the police station. They know who I am.” [The officer’s] face turned pale, and he seemed completely confused. He certainly knew these two famous players; they were popular celebrities. . . . [But] the last thing I wanted was to go to the police station with all that money in my briefcase. Tadros and Montasser would have hastened to condemn me. . . . “All right,” he said. “Give me some money, and I’ll let you go.” The only money I had in my pocket was the equivalent of thirty or forty cents. . . . I put my hand in my pocket and handed him the coins. . . . He took the money and disappeared. I sighed with relief. I found out that the same thing had happened to many others who withdrew large sums of money in preparation for their departure. Secret police officers would wait in front of the banks. They followed their prey and used the same approach as the man who stopped me. Many victims were not as lucky as I was. (pages 195–197)

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**DETERMINATION**

I stayed in school; I wanted to continue my studies and was determined to learn as much as I could. I knew that, thanks to Tante Marie’s negotiation skills, my studies did not cost much, so I could continue. My dream was to become a doctor. To me doctors were knowledgeable, respected, and helped people who were suffering. Doctors were wealthy, their families were never short of money, and their children did not go to bed without food. So I stayed in school. (page 72)

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After a few minutes of play it was clear that we were heading for an overwhelming defeat. . . . We lost by a large margin. . . . I was disheartened and stayed in the middle of the court with my head bowed. The captain of the opposing team walked up beside me. I thought he was going to shake my hand after our defeat. Instead he leaned toward me and whispered, “You are a bunch of losers!” I didn’t react; I had only one thought in mind. I wanted to talk to my teammates before they went home discouraged. I pleaded with them to stay a few more minutes. I looked at them and said: “This was a horrible disaster.” They looked at me with worn-out and confused faces, as if to say, “You wanted us to stay so you could state the obvious?” . . . “It was indeed a complete collapse,” I went on. “This is our first and worst game—and this defeat may be the best thing that could have happened to us. We will have to play better from now on. You know, if we work hard and stick together, soon we’ll be able to beat this team.” I could see my teammates listening and absorbing my words. “Determination and teamwork will be the key to our future success. Let’s go and take a good hot shower to wash away our defeat,” I said and headed to the locker room. (page 80)

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As soon as the game started, our opponents found themselves playing a team completely different from the one they had trounced a year earlier. We had gotten much better while they had stagnated—at least, that was how we felt. We scored almost every time we had the ball, and our defense worked even more efficiently. The game was tight and memorable. The lead changed hands often until the last five minutes, when our team summoned all its energy and determination. We won. Our dream had finally come true. We were the champions. (page 84)

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My relatives seemed resigned and even happy with their positions in life. Although they tried to improve their situations as much as possible, they knew all too well that they could go only so far. I would hear them say that they had to play the cards they had been dealt. They claimed that, in Egypt, you can never rise above the social caste to which you were born. I did not agree. I wanted to break the mold and be the first in our family to get to a higher caste. I wanted to change the destiny of our family and future generations. I did not want any of our relatives to go to bed at night without food, as I did when we lived in Alexandria. For me, my studies were the only means I had to reach my dreams. I could not let the environment and conditions that surrounded me decide my destiny. I dreamed of becoming a doctor. (page 101)

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**THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICAL FITNESS**

Monsieur Moline . . . was adamantly opposed to having the school sponsor a basketball team. According to Monsieur Moline, basketball would distract the students from their studies. . . . I knew Monsieur Moline was completely wrong. I was not about to accept his no as a final answer. . . . A few days later, I was asked to meet with representatives of the school’s board of directors. . . . I asked permission to speak . . . and told them my side of the story. “Messieurs, I believe in sports. Sports do not have a negative impact on studies; on the contrary, *Mens sana in corpore sano*” (“A sound mind in a sound body”). . . . The group whispered among themselves. Finally the men said, “We’ve agreed that the school will have a basketball team next year. Mr. Moline will discuss this matter with your gym teacher.” . . . When he saw me the next morning, Monsieur Moline came to me and said, “Sardas, you’ll become a bum when you grow up—you’ll spend most of your life in prison.” (pages 74–79)

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I exercised and played sports without my father’s knowledge for a long time. For him, exercise was a way to expose the body to infectious diseases. He believed that taking a bath and going out afterward was a sure way to get sick. . . . One evening he confronted me when I got home. A friend of his had just told him that he had seen me playing basketball at the YMCA. Shocked and angry, Dad launched into a long tirade about how sports were bad for my health. “You have to stop doing those crazy things. You’re not built for these kinds of activities!” he yelled. I was upset and could hardly contain my anger, but I could not interrupt him. When he stopped, I yelled: “Dad, I know you want to protect us. But I like sports and will not quit! Cattaui has a basketball team now, and we are participating in a tournament. I am the captain of the team, and I am a good player. I play sports, perspire, take showers, and feel great.” My father grew unusually quiet. My determination and my clandestine participation in sports surprised him. I also sensed that he was proud that his son was the captain of the team. (page 82)

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**EXODUS**

Soon enough Nasser implemented his plan to purge Egypt of what he considered to be undesirable residents. He ordered Jews suspected of being Zionists to be imprisoned in detention camps. The wealthiest families were specially targeted so that their property and assets could be seized. Nasser ordered hundreds of Jews, along with all British and French citizens, to leave Egypt on short notice, carrying only their clothing and twenty Egyptian pounds, the equivalent of one hundred American dollars at the time. . . . The few Jews who were born in Egypt and held Egyptian citizenship were denied their nationality and became stateless. . . . Then Nasser decreed that all non-Egyptians had to quit their jobs at major institutions, such as banks, insurance companies, utility companies, and government offices. where Jews held many important jobs. Large groups of eager believers gathered in the streets and in coffee shops to listen to fiery anti-Semitic denunciations. . . . Jews were at the mercy of any angry neighbor or jealous business rival. An anonymous letter or a verbal complaint was enough to imprison or exile any Jew without due process. . . . By the end of the summer of 1956, all our relatives were prepared for exile. . . . Our plan called for the departure of our whole family within the following twelve to eighteen months. (pages 192–194)

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I looked closely at my passport. There was the exit visa: the stamp showed my name, Iacovos Raphael Sardas; the date, June 3, 1957; and the amount of money I was to take with me, twenty Egyptian pounds, which I had been given—minus 10 percent tax—in traveler’s checks by American Express. But there below the ink of the rectangular stamp were the handwritten words that caused me to stop in my tracks: *Moughadra nihaëya bedoun awda*—“Departure definitive, without return.” It struck me for the first time that this meant I would never be able to come back to the country where I had lived all my life. This would be the last time I would ever see the country of my birth. I was surprised, because we were leaving the country of our own free will. We were not among those who were expelled. In addition, our Greek passports mentioned very clearly that they were valid for traveling, *with* return privileges, to Greece, Egypt, Brazil, and western Europe. Yes, I wanted to leave Egypt because of its hostility toward foreigners and especially toward Jews. I thought the decision to emigrate was one I had to make to secure the future and safety of my family. It was the right decision, but I did not know it was considered irrevocable. When I was getting the exit visa, it didn’t occur to me to check whether the Egyptian authorities would allow me to come back— they didn’t mention it, and I didn’t ask. At the time I didn’t care. I just had one thought in mind: leave Egypt. But when I saw the words “without return,” I felt their finality in my heart. (pages 210–211)

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When you are aware that you are doing something for the last time, every sense becomes heightened. Your emotions are sharper, more intense. You try to physically absorb the sights and sounds so you can carry them with you in your mind. I began to commit to memory all the things that were dear to me about Egypt, a country I would never see again. (page 211)

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A couple of days before our departure . . . I took the streetcar to the cemetery in Shatby, where my mother was buried. I stood at her grave, took a deep breath, and thought about my years at her side. . . . My mother had only a few happy days in her short life. I remembered the old days, and I sobbed, tears falling down my face. When she died, I could not cry; anger, despair, and emptiness had replaced tears when I was a child. Now that I was a married adult, I cried like a little child. . . . I left the cemetery knowing that I would never be able to visit her at this place again. (page 213)

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My family’s departure from Egypt—with no return— was also an exodus. As our ancestors did, we left everything behind to flee persecution and oppression. The only things we kept were our memories. I’m sure the ancient Jews felt the same anxiety and sadness we felt when we left the place that had captured our hearts and souls. But in the end, just as we did, they chose freedom over the ephemeral comfort of a painful, dangerous, and degrading life. (page 264)

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**REFUGEE**

Many Egyptians who had immigrated to Brazil and France complained bitterly about the way they were treated by HIAS. What did they expect? Despite the bad conditions at the immigration center, Etty and I will remain forever grateful for the help HIAS provided us while we were struggling to start a new life in Brazil. (page 233)

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As I had in my jobs in Egypt, I tried to accomplish my assignment with zeal and dedication. . . . While I stayed at the [immigration] center, I took Portuguese lessons three times a week after work. (pages 231–232)

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I decided to contact the chamber of commerce and obtain lists of the American, British, and French companies that were members. I drafted a job application letter in French, and I used dictionaries to translate it into English. Etty, who had a better command of English, helped me edit it. We sent nearly three hundred letters, all written by hand in English and French. I stayed up late at night, writing as many letters as I could. Etty wrote most of them during the day; I gave her a thick pen and asked her to write with strong strokes. If they submitted the letter to a handwriting analyst, I wanted them to conclude that a strong, determined man had written it. (pages 233–234)

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**IMMIGRANT**

I now speak seven languages with various degrees of fluency, but always with a pronounced foreign accent. I have lived in many countries, and after living for more than forty years in the United States, I feel I am American. But when people listen to me speak, they often ask where I am from. I always take a while to answer, because in truth I do not know. Sometimes people say, “Well, the answer is easy. You are from the place you were born—where was that?” I sometimes hesitate and reply, “Egypt.” “So you are Egyptian.” No; I do not feel Egyptian. (pages 69–70)

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Even the Egyptians did not consider me one of them; I was a *khawaga*, a term, indicating respect, reserved for people of European descent. The Egyptian authorities denied me citizenship and deemed me an *apatride*, which meant that I had no *patrie*, no country—I was stateless. To avoid being called Egyptian, and to avoid having to give lengthy explanations, I would usually lie and say that I was born in Greece. Even though I had never lived there, I was raised as a Greek by a Greek father. But when I was in Greece or among Greeks, if someone asked me about my origins, I would answer that I was originally from France, thinking that being the son of a mother who had lived in France would justify it. But now that many years have passed, I no longer need to lie or use subterfuge. I have adopted the most convenient answer, which I give without further explanation: “I’m American.” (page 70)

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**BUSINESSMAN**

I knew I had to improve my language skills, so I enrolled at the English Institute in São Paulo for a two-year course. I took six lessons a week—Portuguese lessons on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and English lessons on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. After the Saturday lessons I dedicated the rest of the day to writing my weekly reports for Goodyear and completing my homework. My workday was about sixteen hours, six days a week. (page 240)

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As time went on, I increased my value to the company by accepting assignments that were not part of my job—assignments that others turned down because they were unwilling or too busy to perform them. . . . Once again I redoubled my efforts. . . . It was my springboard to successive important promotions at Goodyear. (pages 244–245)

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That evening I stayed in the office long after everyone else had left. I walked around the halls, looked at the empty offices, and read the names of the managers on each door. I walked to the factory, where the night-shift workers recognized me and gave me an *abraço*, the traditional Brazilian hug. I took a piece of rubber from the extruder and chewed it as I would a piece of gum. I took a deep breath, inhaled the smell of the rubber around me in the plant, and savored the piece in my mouth. A deep feeling of comfort warmed my body. I belonged to this company. I was part of it; I would not let anyone separate me from it. (page 243)

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One day I went to the [Sudbury] office, walked through the front door, and saw everyone standing up. I looked around. The walls were covered with large computer-printed banners and large cardboard letters that spelled out just do it! On the walls of the conference room the staff had added: we did it, we liked it, let’s do it again! I had a great feeling of satisfaction. I had a motivated office staff rallying behind me. And in August of 1992, just seven months after seeking court protection, Sudbury officially emerged from bankruptcy. (page 252)

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I introduced a culture based on customer satisfaction; it emphasized quality, employee involvement at all levels, and continuous improvement. We established ambitious objectives while offering substantial rewards. We tied managers’ compensation to the performance of each business unit and each business area. Good short-term results meant attractive bonuses. For long-term achievements employees were awarded equity participation in the form of stock options. (page 254)

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To strengthen Dal-Tile’s foundation we asked every employee to establish objectives for their individual responsibilities that would help achieve corporate goals. This way, each of our employees knew what he or she had to accomplish to ensure that the company would have a long and successful future. We created a trifold leaflet small enough to fit in a shirt pocket or a wallet; on it were printed Dal-Tile’s corporate vision and its guiding principles and objectives. It also had space in which the department heads could outline their objectives and strategies and in which the employees could write down their own. Each employee received a leaflet. I was surprised but happy to learn that implementing a quality culture isn’t terribly difficult; the employees welcomed it. Everything depended on the good faith of the head of the corporation. (page 256)

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Many people have asked me how I managed to live a successful life as a businessman and family man in spite of my humble beginnings. My answer is only four words long: determination and hard work. The world is full of highly educated people—many of them geniuses—who have failed because they lack determination and they don’t work hard enough. (page 251)

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I asked him a question that had intrigued me for many years. “Why did you hire me, Chuck?” He thought for a minute, then he looked at me with a familiar grin. . . . “You know, everyone makes mistakes!” he said. This was the Chuck I’d always known, the Chuck of the good old times. But then he smiled, leaned over, and squeezed my arm. “Because you were a determined young man!” (page 253)

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**INTERGENERATIONAL WISDOM**

[My grandson] Jake was asking me to write the book not for myself but for my family and future generations. . . . He put his hand on my shoulder, the way I usually do whenever I give him advice. “Jacky,” he said, “you always tell us that determination is the key to success.” I smiled. How could I refuse? “I’ll do my best,” I said. (preface)

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[The cantor said,] “It will be a great mitzvah, a good deed, if you celebrate your second bar mitzvah with your grandson David.” . . . I was determined not to do it. . . . When we got to our home, David, who had been quiet throughout the meeting at the synagogue, said to me, “Please, *please* have your bar mitzvah with me—it will be really cool.” My resolve began to erode, but I still did not want to give in. . . . David put his arms around my shoulders. Staring at me with shining eyes, he said, “You always tell us that we can accomplish anything if we put our minds to it. This is very important to me. Please just put your mind to it.” His words decimated all my resistance. “I’ll do it,” I whispered. David and I embraced for a long time. (page 259)

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If each generation did not take seriously its responsibility to pass along its traditions and stories to those who follow, where would we be? It is in that spirit that I offer this tale of a young man, born and raised in Egypt, whose first bar mitzvah in Cairo was suffused with gloom, uncertainty, and despair and whose second bar mitzvah, in his eightieth year, was suffused with happiness, safety, and hope. (page 265)

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MEDIA CONTACT

Jennifer A. Maguire

Maguire Public Relations, Inc./Your Expert Nation

Jen@maguirepr.com

917-596-5136

[https://withoutreturn.com](https://WithoutReturn.com)