

20 YEARS OF THE ISRAELI ACADEMIC CENTER IN CAIRO: FORMER DIRECTORS REMEMBER

SHIMON SHAMIR (1982–1984)



The idea of the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo was born at the same time that the initiative for an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty got under way – namely, when President Sadat made his historic journey of peace to Jerusalem. It so happened that on the day of his arrival, Israeli peace supporters were holding a large-scale conference in a Tel Aviv hotel, sponsored by the dovish monthly *New Outlook*. Exhilarated by the news of Sadat’s arrival, the conference

sent him a cable of welcome and support for his mission. The president responded with a magnanimous gesture, inviting a delegation of conference participants to an audience with him in his suite at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

As a member of that delegation, I arrived at the appointed time at the hotel, which was in a turmoil created by the security people. They led me for some time by a roundabout route through corridors and passages, bringing me to a room where, suddenly, I found myself alone with the President. I was naturally rather abashed, but I mustered sufficient presence of mind to initiate a conversation on a subject that was on my mind at the time and was not likely to be raised by the other delegates when they joined us. “Mr. President,” I said, “I am confident that the political leaderships of our two countries will manage to bring this peace initiative to a successful fruition, but a political peace will remain shallow and fragile, without cultural depth. Academics can help in providing this dimension. Once peace is concluded, why don’t we establish two centers – an Egyptian one in Israel and an Israeli one in Egypt – where academics will engage in joint scientific research and learn about each other’s cultures?” Sadat reflected on this for a moment,

puffing on his pipe, and then said, “It is a good idea, but it cannot be implemented before the last Israeli soldier leaves Sinai.”

In the subsequent months, interest in the idea picked up within the Israeli academic community and especially in the Israel Oriental Society. Some of us – notably the late Professor Gabriel Baer, a renowned social historian of Egypt – were inspired by the model of Western academic centers operating in such cities as Istanbul, Teheran, Cairo, and Athens, providing useful infrastructures for archaeologists, orientalists, social scientists, art historians, and other academics who come to those metropolitan cities to pursue their research interests. Beyond that, we were considering the potential of such centers for serving students, scholars, and intellectuals in general who might be interested in the society of the other land and wish to learn more about the literary, educational, scientific, historical, linguistic, and religious aspects of its culture. We hoped that as a by-product of such scholarly exchange, a genuine intellectual dialogue might develop between Egyptians and Israelis on the essential issues of their relationship.

Backed by the major Israeli universities and the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, we started dispatching detailed proposals to the Israeli leaders and diplomats who were discussing various bilateral agreements with their Egyptian counterparts. No response came from Cairo, and we were beginning to reconcile ourselves to the realization that Sadat’s initial consent was nothing more than a polite rejection.

The breakthrough occurred early in 1982, on the eve of the completion of the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai. Participants in a high-level meeting in Alexandria were exploring ways to create a more positive atmosphere towards the withdrawal, and the proposal for establishing academic centers happened to be in the Israeli dossier.

It was put on the table, and the Egyptian side promptly accepted it. After that meeting, a protocol was signed between the two states, specifying, *inter alia*, the Center's function as "a channel of contacts between the Egyptian and Israeli educational and scientific institutions." News of the green light for establishing the Center reached me at Cornell University, where I was spending a sabbatical. I flew directly to Cairo and presented myself to the relevant Egyptian authorities. Activities began on April 25, which, intentionally or not, was the day the last Israeli soldier left Sinai – just as Sadat, whose tragic assassination deprived him of witnessing that day, had predicted.

The work of establishing the Center – undertaken by me, my wife Daniela, and a small Egyptian staff – faithfully followed the basic terms of the agreement. Israeli scholars from a variety of disciplines began arriving, and the Center provided them with accommodation, reference material, contacts with colleagues, and, wherever possible, access to archives, libraries, museums, and research institutes. Most of the visitors were also recruited to lecture in the Center's

seminar room, to audiences whose size grew or shrank according to the level of interest in the subject or the prevailing political climate at the time. A relatively large library was established, reinforced by access to Israeli university libraries, and it well served its Egyptian users, mostly students, doctoral candidates writing their dissertations, and university lecturers interested in Hebrew, Israel, and Judaic studies. It was gratifying to see Egyptians and Israeli visitors conversing on subjects of common interest.

But there was also resistance. Many Egyptians preferred to see the Center as a "normalization" ploy rather than a bridge that benefits both sides. There were newspaper columnists who told their readers that the Center represented a dangerous "cultural assault" on Egyptian identity and culture – revealing a curiously low level of confidence in both, if they could be threatened by such a modest enterprise. The Center saw no choice but to ignore this unfair criticism and proceed with its endeavors, inspired by the ideas on which it was constituted – the universality of scholarship, respect for the culture of the other, the imperative of dialogue, and the merits of mutual enrichment.

GABY WARBURG (1984–1987)



In the fall of 1984, my wife Rachel and I arrived in Cairo to undertake the directorship of the Israeli Academic Center. Following the tradition established by Daniela and Shimon Shamir, it was to be a joint venture, which we viewed as both a challenge and an opportunity. We had been waiting for many years for a chance to use our academic and other skills to contribute to the Egyptian–Israeli peace process. Furthermore, as a

student of the modern history of Egypt and the Sudan, my term of office in Cairo was to provide me with an opportunity to sit back and contemplate. My book *Historical Discord in the Nile Valley*, published a few years later, was greatly influenced by this period, in which I learned about

Egypt at first hand, met with Egyptian scholars, and added an ongoing involvement with Egyptian culture and society to my previous academic knowledge.

The activities of the Center at the time may be divided into four general areas. First, we provided academic assistance as well as accommodation at the Center to many Israeli scholars, most of them young post-graduate students, who stayed with us for periods ranging from a few weeks to several months. Up to July 1985, some 65 Israeli academics stayed at the Center, pursuing their research with our help. Many of them also lectured at the Center's monthly seminars. Secondly, we provided academic guidance and help to many Egyptian undergraduates and post-graduate researchers, who regularly used our library while pursuing their studies of Hebrew literature and Jewish history at Egyptian universities. Many

of them were also provided with scholarly assistance in their fields of interest by Israeli scholars and universities. In 1986–1987 we granted scholarships to several Egyptian graduate students, enabling them to undertake intensive advanced Hebrew studies at Ulpan Akiva in Netanya. Thirdly, we continued the task of sorting and cataloging the thousands of books, mainly on Judaica, which had been left behind in Cairo's synagogues. This project led to the establishment of the Jewish library at Sha'ar Hashamayim Synagogue in Adli Street, which was completed during our term of office, with the close cooperation of Mr. Nabawi Serag, Director of the Jewish

Section at the Egyptian Department of Antiquities (*Idarat al-Athar*), and of Mr. Yusuf Dana, head of the small Jewish community in Cairo. Last but not least, both the center and our apartment in Zamalek became a second home for many Israeli, Egyptian, and other guests who have remained close friends ever since.

When we rather reluctantly left Egypt in April 1987, both Rachel and I knew in our hearts that despite some difficulties and frustrations, our joint directorship of the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo had been the most fulfilling experience we ever shared.

ASHER OVADIAH (1987–1989)



When I assumed my position as the Center's third director in March 1987, I had few expectations. It was a time of political ups and downs, expressed in alternating periods of calm and of mounting tension. The circumstances were far from easy, but we maintained our belief that ongoing dialogue would deepen the understanding and strengthen the ties of friendship between the Israeli and Egyptian peoples. We hoped that

more Egyptian scholars and professors would take an active role in the scientific-academic activities of the Center and contribute to them from their own research. This, we believed, would surely yield greater mutual understanding, recognition, and cross-fertilization among the intellectuals and within the scientific-academic communities of both countries.

I was equipped with a certain amount of information gleaned from previous visits to Egypt, during which I had endeavored to enrich and deepen my perception of the country in matters relating to art history and archaeology, my own academic fields. I now found myself fascinated by the day-to-day life and customs of modern Egypt and by its contemporary history, art, and architecture. Though I approached my new task with a measure of trepidation, I tried,

with the help of the smile and good humor that I soon adopted from the Egyptians themselves, to learn from my hosts and achieve a degree of understanding based on mutual respect.

My term of office, which lasted through September 1989, was one of light and shadow, tranquility and turbulence, accomplishments and frustrations. I did my best to maintain the structure handed over to me by my predecessors and to add my own layer to the edifice. I saw it as my task to create and preserve a pleasant atmosphere for the Center's visitors, and I strove to protect its reputation as a worthy, apolitical, independent representative of the State of Israel within the academic community in Egypt. I remain convinced that dialogue is an essential ingredient in human relations. It opens the way to solving complex problems, bridging gaps, and diminishing or even erasing enmity, conflict, and hatred between peoples and nations.

A particularly memorable experience was the inauguration of the Library of Jewish Heritage in Egypt, on January 24, 1989. I hoped that the library, by providing a solid basis for research on Judaism and rabbinic literature, would form the basis for a broader project with the goal of documenting and preserving the glorious past of the Jewish community in Egypt. In itself, the library is silent evidence of the magnificent spiritual heritage of the Jews of Egypt.

JOSEPH GINAT (1989–1992)



The period in which we directed the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo, from September 1989 through October 1992, was one of the most interesting chapters in our lives.

Working with students and lecturers from the various universities in Cairo and elsewhere, such as Alexandria and Al Minya, was a unique, unforgettable experience. With the help of Ruth Hanukah at the Israel Academy of

Sciences and Humanities in Jerusalem, we provided virtually all the literary material they required for M.A. and doctoral theses related to Israel and Judaism. We also spent many hours sitting with beginning students of Hebrew, helping them decipher texts and conversing at length to help them gain a fluent command of the language.

Following the tradition established by Shimon and Daniela Shamir, we hosted lecturers from Israel every other week. Some of these were writers and poets, who discussed their literary work, while others were academics who gave lectures in their fields of expertise – literature, biblical research, history, archaeology, or the geography of Israel. Most spoke in Hebrew to audiences composed of Egyptian students of Hebrew and their teachers and professors. Some also lectured in English on special evenings to which we invited writers, journalists, foreign diplomats, staff from the various embassies, and directors of cultural and research institutes from different countries. The many Egyptians who attended these lectures showed an avid interest in Israel and Israeli culture.

Other get-togethers with writers, poets, or academics from Israel, for informal conversation and, usually, a festive dinner, were held in our home. On these occasions, we forged warm friendships with a number of Egyptians. They reciprocated by inviting us to their homes, to which we soon became frequent visitors, and our ties with them have remained strong to this day.

Some of the most fascinating meetings we had were with the writer Naguib Mahfouz, who divided his time between Cairo and Alexandria

during the summer months. Through the intermediacy of the late Egyptian writer Naim Takla, to whom we were introduced by Professor Sasson Somekh, Professor Emanuel Marx's successor at the Center, we were invited to gatherings that Mahfouz held in Alexandria in the courtyard of a hotel by the sea, where he was surrounded by young writers and intellectuals. Notwithstanding their respect for him, the conversations were very down-to-earth and spiced with that unique Egyptian humor in which most of the jokes are at the expense of the Egyptians themselves, at once self-critical and forgiving.

The peak of our sojourn in Cairo was the party celebrating the Center's tenth anniversary, which took place at the Hilton Hotel and was attended by over four hundred Egyptian, Israeli, and international guests, coming from as far away as Ismailiyya to the east and Luxor to the south and including several distinguished persons who had previously held political office in Egypt. We had arranged for the special delivery of Elite chocolates and desserts from the Strauss Dairy in Nahariyya to serve up on the tables of the Cairo Hilton, so that the guests got a taste of both the spirit and the flavor of Israel. The folksinger Shoham Einav, renowned for her renditions of Mediterranean and Arabic songs, provided the entertainment, so captivating our audience that she was called back for one encore after another. As the party went on into the wee hours of the night, we broke spontaneously into Israeli folk dances.

We never tired of observing the many elements that make up Egyptian society, in Cairo and in other parts of the country. On our tours of the Egyptian countryside, we were especially enchanted by the unique geological, archaeological, and human features of the western desert and its oases. These trips, in which both Israelis and Egyptians participated, proved to be a real forge for personal relations.

It is my fervent hope that a comprehensive and just peace in the Middle East will soon be attained, so that we will be able to hold a 25-year jubilee celebration for the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo – in which the staff of an Egyptian Academic Center in Israel will be able to participate as well.

EMANUEL MARX (1992–1995)



For many years before my appointment as Director of the Israeli Academic Center, I had nursed a desire to spend a year in Cairo. As a student, I had studied the economy and history of Egypt, and in the 1970s I had done anthropological fieldwork among the Bedouins of southern Sinai. However, the idea of actually living in an Arab country seemed absurd. Egypt and Israel were still at war, and all the experts declared peace beyond

reach. Following President Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, however, the impossible happened, and the two countries made peace. When I finally got my first glimpse of Cairo in the 1980s, as a tourist, I was overwhelmed by the size, bustle, and splendor of the city. Nevertheless, the possibility of living there seemed as unrealistic as ever.

Late in 1991, out of the blue, I received an offer from the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities to head the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo. I was delighted by the sudden opportunity to realize my dream, and my gut reaction was to accept straight away. Knowing the complexities of academic politics, however, I expressed some hesitations and made my consent conditional upon the agreement of my wife, Dalia, who spoke little Arabic at the time. Dalia did hesitate, but my predecessor, Prof. Joseph Ginat, dealt very efficiently with this problem by inviting us on a tour of the oases of the Western Desert. That trip convinced my wife that she needed to see more of Egypt.

The reality turned out better than the dream. The three years that we lived in Egypt, from 1992 to 1995, were a period of hard, unrelenting work, but, for both of us, they were the best years of our lives. Work and pleasure together contributed to our sense of wellbeing.

My four predecessors had set the parameters of my job at the Center, which was kept busy serving the needs of Egyptian university staff and students specializing in Hebrew language and literature and in Jewish history. Since we were most easily accessible to scholars from the universities in Cairo, particularly al-Azhar, Cairo

University, and Ein-Shams University, we spent the greater part of our time working with them. However, we also fulfilled requests for assistance from provincial universities, such as al-Minya and Assiut, and from government ministries, the Broadcasting Service, and even the Coptic monasteries of Wadi Natrun.

Most of these requests concerned books and articles published in Hebrew or in Israel, or documentation about Israeli writers. Our Egyptian colleagues deal with every level of the Hebrew language, including biblical Hebrew, the language of the Mishnah and the Talmud, and the writings of the Golden Age of Andalus. There was also a keen interest in modern Israeli literature, and academic theses were being prepared on almost every major Israeli author. During my term at the Center I learned a great deal about Hebrew and made the acquaintance of many Israeli professors of Hebrew language and literature, including colleagues from Tel Aviv University, my home institution, whom I met for the first time. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my Egyptian friends for guiding me into this complex field of study.

An important sideline was the procurement of Hebrew typewriters. These had become hard to obtain even in Israel, where they had by then been superseded by computers, but Egyptian scholars needed them in order to insert Hebrew passages into their writings. We managed to persuade an Israeli bank to donate typewriters that they had placed in storage, and these gradually found their way into numerous scholarly work rooms.

The Center's library grew rapidly, both through systematic purchases of relevant books and through donations from readers and visiting Israeli academics. The Center also administers the impressive library at Sha'ar Hashamayim Synagogue in Adli Street, which keeps books found in Cairo's synagogues, and two new libraries that opened during my tenure. One is in the Karaite synagogue in Abbasiya, which contains rare books and journals published by Karaites in Egypt and elsewhere. The other library is in the splendidly refurbished Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, whose geniza yielded a unique collection of medieval documents. The

latter has become an important tourist site.

Joint Egyptian-Israeli research projects are still few in number and narrowly concentrated in the areas of agriculture, astronomy, veterinary science, and geology. My efforts to extend the range of scientific cooperation had moderate success, yielding a five-year collaborative study of the whitefly, an insect that damages cotton and tomato plants.

I do not wish to create the impression that our life was all work. Cairo is a metropolis comparable perhaps only with London and New York in its inexhaustible, wide-ranging offering of cultural activities. It was hard to keep up with the number

of new theater performances, films, exhibitions, lectures, and books. Every two to three weeks, the Center would add its own small share to this abundance by hosting lectures by visiting Israeli academics. On almost every other evening, however, Dalia and I attended performances and shows, often at the new Opera House, which is not far from the Center. We also toured many parts of the country, from Abu Simbel to Siwa and Sinai, and met a great variety of wonderful people. What they all had in common were warmth, friendliness, and courtesy. Ever since we left Egypt, we have been eager to return.

SASSON SOMEKH (1995–1998)



When I arrived in Cairo in September 1995 to take over the directorship of the Israeli Academic Center from my good friend Professor Emmanuel Marx, I was no stranger to that great city. Since 1980, when it first became possible for Israeli citizens to visit Egypt, I had come to Cairo frequently to meet with writers, academics, and friends from many spheres of life. One of the first places I would visit on each of these short “hops” was

the building housing the editorial offices of *Al-Ahram* on al-Gala Street. There, on the fourth floor – the “writers’ floor” – I met with some of Egypt’s foremost writers, including Tawfiq al-Hakim, Naguib Mahfouz, Husayn Fawzi, Ihsan Abd al-Quddous, Yusuf Idris, and Lutfi al-Khouli. But I didn’t spend all my time in Cairo inside buildings or in smoke-filled coffee shops on the banks of the Nile. More than anything else, I would go for long walks around the city’s neighborhoods and streets. These places were familiar to me, as it were, by way of the modern literary works that I taught in my courses at Tel Aviv University. On these strolls, even more than I gazed at buildings old and new, I enjoyed observing the faces of the city’s dwellers, with whom I took the opportunity, as far as time permitted, to share snatches of conversation.

By 1995, most of the writers I had known, with the exception of Mahfouz and Ali Salem, unfortunately had gone to their eternal rest. I made new friends, in both the academic and the artistic worlds. However, the most memorable experiences of my time at the Center consisted in the many hours I spent in the company of the Egyptian students who frequented its reading room. It was a pleasure to be around these young Cairenes, many of whom were specializing in Hebrew language and literature, and our talks also helped me understand many of the uncertainties and hopes of the younger generation of our neighboring land. In times when the political atmosphere between our two countries was bright, the number of students pouring in to hear the lectures given at the Center by Israeli scholars, speaking in Hebrew, English, or Arabic, would swell appreciably. Irrespective of political ups and downs, however, any given day found students in our reading room who had come to do their coursework or research.

My conversations with these Egyptian students went beyond their educational and social value. Unlike my daily encounters at my home university in Tel Aviv, where I have been teaching Arabic literature for over 35 years, this contact between an Israeli professor and Egyptian students also had a symbolic character (or at least, so I felt). It opened the way to dialogue on a personal level between two cultures which only recently

had been totally alienated from one another, and which, moreover, have not yet fully plumbed the potential of this interchange. In these conversations, conducted in Arabic – my own mother-tongue as well as theirs – my young friends in Cairo presented me with a wide range of questions about Israel and its denizens. They would ask about the pace of life, about socio-linguistic issues, and about the status of Israelis born in Arab lands. I came to realize that many of their assumptions about Israel, even those unrelated to the Arab-Israeli conflict, consisted of sweeping generalizations and were based on deficient information. One of the points on which they were misguided was their assumption that contemporary Israeli society may be described as comprising two groups: the Arab Jews (speakers of Arabic, as it were), and the European Jews (speakers of Yiddish or “Ashkenazi Hebrew”). They had never heard about how prevalent “mixed” marriages are in Israeli society, both between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi (Oriental) Jews and among Mizrahi Jews whose parents hail from Arab and non-Arab lands (for example, between Iraqi and Turkish Jews or between Moroccan and Yemenite Jews). All these couples share no “original” common language, and their offspring cannot identify with any single land of parental origin. To be sure, some third and fourth-generation Israelis have begun to feel nostalgic for the ancestral heritage of the various diasporas, including the tongues once spoken by their grandparents, but this has never developed into a serious desire to study these “former languages” with a view to using them in everyday conversation.

On my part, I used to question my young conversation partners about their way of life and their hopes for the future. Some of them spoke of housing and employment problems, but my impression was that the atmosphere in their

homes was supportive. I never heard of a student’s parents opposing their son’s or daughter’s university studies, despite the extra economic burden they placed on the family.

As for the future, my young friends put their trust in peace, which, if only it would become firmly rooted, would guarantee a better future. Peace with Israel seemed to them a desirable reality, even if they did not always agree with the actions of the Israeli government.

As an Israeli who has had the pleasure of living in Cairo and experiencing the daily marvels that it offers its residents, I send my fond greetings to all my young friends and to those who are no longer so young. Having been raised on Arabic culture and loved its literature since childhood, I experienced my prolonged stay in Cairo, the capital of contemporary Arabic culture, as a time of personal exhilaration and enrichment. I learned a great deal from my meetings with Egyptians at the Center, on Cairo streets, in the “casinos” (as Cairenes call the open-air cafes on the banks of the Nile), and sometimes in the homes of dear Egyptian friends. Since returning to my students at Tel Aviv University after my term in Cairo was done, I have devoted a lot of time in my courses to teaching novels, short stories and plays that dwell on the inner world of modern Egyptians and how they cope with the changing reality around them. I have been reconfirmed in my appreciation of the greatness of Naguib Mahfouz, composer of the magnificent Cairo trilogy, in conveying the extent to which the psyche of Cairo’s people is shaped by the landscape of their city and native land. I find this an excellent opportunity to extend my warmest congratulations to Mahfouz, incomparable writer and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, on the occasion of his 90th birthday, which fell last year. Many happy returns!

YOSSI AMITAY (1998–2001)



When I first heard that the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities had nominated me to replace my dear friend and colleague Sasson Somekh as Director of the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo, I thought it was some kind of practical joke. Only when the proposition was reconfirmed several times did I start accommodating myself to the idea that the appointment was for real, and a new phase in my life

was about to begin.

My acquaintance with the Center had commenced long before. I became aware of the Center's existence and mission almost from the day it was inaugurated. As a peace-oriented Israeli, I had been monitoring the implementation of the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord, of which the opening of the Center was part and parcel. Furthermore, Shimon Shamir, the Center's founder and first Director, had taught me at Tel-Aviv University. I admired him greatly, and I was curious to see what kind of mission he had undertaken and how he would meet the challenge. So whenever I was in Egypt, I never missed an opportunity to drop by the Center and have a chat with whoever was running it at the time, from Shimon Shamir on, thus becoming more and more acquainted with what the Center was all about. I thought of it as a small wonder, or perhaps I should say a shrine, in which academic and simply human encounters between Israelis and Egyptians were taking place. Bearing in mind the bloody wars in which Israelis and Egyptians had been embroiled less than a decade before, the very presence of an Israeli Academic Center in the heart of Egypt's capital city seemed to me nothing short of a miracle.

I should add that over the last two or three decades, as both student and scholar, my principal academic concern has been with topics related to Egypt's modern history and particularly to the history and political thought of the Egyptian Left. In this context, I have made frequent visits to Egypt over the years and established a network of friendly relations with Egyptian counterparts,

whose wisdom and integrity I cherish. So when the directorship of the Center was offered to me, I felt that I was getting back to a place I had known and loved.

I realized, however, that getting to know a country by way of brief visits and random social meetings is one thing, while living there and being intensively involved with people on a day-to-day basis is quite another. I was also aware of the difficulties that lay ahead of me as the representative of an official (albeit purely academic) Israeli institution, particularly in view of the sensitivities that often prevail in the relations between Egypt and Israel.

I arrived in Cairo to take up the post of Acting Director of the Center in September 1997 with all these hopes and apprehensions in mind. In retrospect, having been with the Center for a full four years, I can attest that most of my fears proved unfounded. This is not to say that my mission was devoid of hardship. The Center is apolitical by definition, but our interactions with the relevant official Egyptian agencies inevitably were affected by the political atmosphere dominating the bilateral relations between Egypt and Israel and by regional political realities at large. Like all my predecessors, however, I managed to establish a *modus operandi* based on mutual trust and respect with our Egyptian counterparts at the Ministry of Higher Education.

The Israeli Academic Center in Cairo set out expressly to fulfill three major functions. The first is to be at the disposal of Egyptian students and scholars seeking to study intensively or acquire knowledge about subjects relating to the Hebrew language, Judaism, or Israel – an objective facilitated by the Center's library, with its projected 20,000 volumes. The second is to assist Israeli students and scholars seeking to carry out research in Egypt, for which purpose the Center serves as a link between Israeli applicants and the relevant Egyptian institutions. The third function is to present the fruits of Israeli scholarship to Egyptian audiences by inviting Israeli academics to deliver lectures at the Center.

I very soon realized that beyond these, we have a fourth function, namely, to establish a network of informal relations with Egyptians from all

walks of life. This does not necessarily have anything to do with politics; the objective is for Israelis simply to make friends with people in Egypt, for the purpose of getting to know one another. I believe that by making such connections and pursuing an ongoing dialogue on all possible levels, we can acquire a better understanding of the minds and self-image of Egyptians. This kind of understanding belongs to the very *raison d'être* of the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo.

Looking back on my four-year term in Cairo, I think that by and large we have been successful at this mission of connecting people, talking and listening to them, sensing their good will and

humanity and helping them sense ours. I am confident that many people in Egypt have learned that the Center at 92 Nile Street is a place where they can find openness, warmth, and willingness to help. As for myself, I learned that if you respect others and deal with them equitably, they will reciprocate, irrespective of the political circumstances. Relationships of this kind are an asset to the Center and embody its spirit.

The Center is now celebrating its twentieth anniversary. My term there was definitely the most meaningful period in my life. I am very grateful to all the Israeli and Egyptian friends whose paths crossed mine in the course of this very unique experience.



Gaby Warburg (right) at the opening of the Cairo International Book Fair, 1985.



Yossi Amitay with Egyptian thinker Milad Hanna, author of *Acceptance of the Other* (Cairo 2001).