

EDITOR'S NOTE



In the spring of 2003 I received an unexpected phone call from the Director of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Dr. Meir Zadok, who asked to meet me in my academic working environment. A few days later we spent a day at the Weizmann Institute of Science, talking about the various arcana of my scholarly work – matters like the chemical composition of ancient

metals, and the reconstruction of ancient technologies, the application of modern metallurgical analysis to the findings of archaeological excavations in the field – that is, the methods I use to gain insights into long-“dead” human cultures.

At the end of his visit, Dr. Zadok asked me if I would be willing to drop it all for three years to serve as the ninth director of the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo. I said yes, and with that began the most exciting and rewarding three years of my life.

I arrived in the “Land of the Pharaohs” in August 2003, to be joined shortly thereafter by Shuli, my spouse. For the next three years (2003–2005), we enjoyed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – in the form of a reasonable budget, a beautiful working environment facing the Nile, and, above all, a devoted Egyptian staff – to embark upon a love story with Egypt and its people. In return, we were asked to overcome fears and sometimes institutional hostility as well, to create closer relations between Egyptian and Israeli academics. That, in a nutshell, was our situation in Egypt.

The Egyptians with whom we came into contact embraced us with open hearts. We endeavored, in turn, to address the needs of the students and scholars who used the Center and

to obtain the materials they required. Our work was made possible by the endless care and support of the Center’s Egyptian staff members, Amre, Hussein, Hisham, Doah and Nadia, while a dedicated Israeli staff, headed by Ruth Hanuka and Amazia Halevi, took care of finding and sending academic books and articles to us in Cairo. We were also welcomed by the Cairo Jewish community and its president, Ms. Carmen Weinstein, and were able to do some restoration and documentation work in the synagogue libraries.

The publication of issue no. 27 of the *Bulletin* caught us in the midst of being sucked back into intensive lives at home in Israel, with Shuli reconstructing her late grandparents’ farmyard in Rosh Pinna and me putting together a new, state-of-the-art laboratory for the analysis of archaeological materials at the University of Haifa. That this issue, whose contents were collected while we were still in Egypt, is being published at all is due to the persistence of Managing Editor Deborah Greniman.

The contribution of this Editor’s Note gives me a much-appreciated opportunity to revisit, for a short while, those three fascinating years in Cairo. The six papers in the issue’s English section, each from a different discipline, represent a small sampling of the broad and diverse range of academic lectures and cultural events, over eighty in number, which took place at the Center during our three years there.

The interdisciplinary paper by archaeologist, philologist and art historian Irit Ziffer, curator at the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv, describes social, archaeological and artistic aspects of the threshing floor and its typical vehicle, the threshing sledge (Egyptian *nūrag*, biblical *mōrag*), in the ancient and traditional cultures of the Near East.

My own paper is the first publication of a small case study in the use of scientific

methods of analysis in authenticating an object created by a medieval craftsman for a Jewish notable.

The third paper, by historian Miriam Frenkel of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, discusses how scholars are reconstructing the biography of Cairo's most renowned medieval Jewish citizen, the revered philosopher, scientist, scholar and communal leader Maimonides (known in Hebrew as the Rambam).

Sociologist Henriette Dahan Kalev of Ben Gurion University writes in her contribution about the struggle of Mizrahi feminists – those of Arab-Jewish background – for recognition in modern Israel.

In the fifth paper, biologist Rachel Galun presents a detailed study of the tsetse fly – carrier of both “sleeping sickness” (trypanosomiasis), a disease deadly to

humans, and *nagana*, deadly to domestic animals and beasts of burden – and how it influenced Africa's history.

Last but not least, we present two short stories, both located in Alexandria, by Israeli actor, director and writer Nessim Zohar. These follow his presentation at the Center of his play “The Maluhia of My Mother,” based on his own Alexandrian childhood.

I hope you will enjoy reading this issue of the *Bulletin* and that it will enable you to catch a whiff of the unique atmosphere of the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo, which we had the honor and the privilege to serve.

Sariel Shalev