

Preface

It Would be the Same Story

Leïla Sebbar

I can hear the young girls from the Colony: “Sebbar . . . Sebbar . . .” They intone names and patronymics with the sounds “s,” “e,” or “a,” “b” . . .

Back then I didn’t know these were Jewish names. I didn’t even know what “Jewish” meant. At the house next to the school where my father taught, near Tlemcen in Algeria, my father and mother never called people “Jew,” “Christian,” “Muslim.” I would learn these words later, outside the protective walls of Little France, beyond the confines of the ideal republic that my father and mother painstakingly created, where *tolerance*, *justice*, and *equality* were key words, before the end of the illusion.

Later, I would learn: “it is bad to be an Arab, to be the daughter of an Arab; it is bad to be Jewish.” Why was it bad? Nobody ever said. Did I believe it? I don’t know. I think this is why I decided to begin a long march toward childhood, a journey made through books that try to bring together people who were so often separated by history in the former colonial empires. This childhood recounts a particular place, a geography, a plural memory, all without bald nostalgia. This is childhood as a collective, creative archaeology.

It is from my position in exile that I explore, with and through other writers in exile, a cosmopolitan southern Mediterranean, a Jewish and Muslim Mediterranean that is, today, orphaned of the Jews who lived there before Islam. The history that tells this story is sometimes joyful, sometimes cruel. Personal stories remember another time.

Another time where childhood is a country, a beloved land with ancestors, with neighbors strange and familiar, the sacred language of prayers and books, languages, language of the home, of school (French public school and the Alliance



FIGURE 1. Leïla Sebbar, left, with her brother Alain and her sisters, Lysel and Danièle, in front of the Hennaya School in Algeria, in the 1950s.

Israélite Universelle), the other language of the elders, of servants, of the street, of childhood friendships, of music. Inside outside, questions and silences. The comfort of a traditional dish, the violence of insults. Why do they insult me? Whispers of a clandestine escape. To what exile? Little pleasures, big pain. Wandering. Scattering.

Jacques Hassoun reminded us: “The law of the country is my law.” Maxim of the minority, whatever his status may be.

Homeland left lost.

The voice of languages spoken, recited, sung, dreamed, the voice of letters and books . . . we think we’ve forgotten them but they are there, in these voices, in the pages of writers in exile and in the childhood of the last generation of this history. In mine as well.

—*Translated by Lia Brozgal*