

Petit à Petit Production presents

May God be with you

A film by Cléo Cohen



à petit à petit
production



RÉGION
SUD
PROVENCE
ALPES
CÔTE D'AZUR

Région
Occitanie



INSTITUT
FRANÇAIS

ARDECHE IMAGES

Scam*

tènk



ANGOA

PROCIREP



I wonder if I have to choose between being French, Jewish or Arab. I visit my four grandparents, Jews from Algeria and Tunisia, who took up exile France in the 1960s. I want to discuss with them the meaning of these seemingly contradictory legacies they have left me. Unfortunately, my distress isn't really contagious.



Director's statement



I've often been torn between my Jewish last name and my "Arabic face". I feel like I belong to both Judaism and the Arabic world, like I belong to two universes which make me who I am, and in which I've been immersed. This is what I have in common with my grandparents, what constitutes our family link, our bigger or smaller intimacy. My grandparents will die soon, and I want to ask them about their life from before, in Algeria for a couple of them, and in Tunisia for the others. I want to ask them about their exile, and about their life in France, which has always seemed to me so melancholic. Choosing to film this attempt, is for me a way to truly meet them, past the Sunday small talk. But it's also looking for an answer to the questions which torment me. My attempts at talking about their trajectory and their exile are often unsatisfactory, aborted, or even turn into arguments. Approximations, oversights, lies, denial... They never stop telling different versions of the same story. I am both exasperated and amused. Born in the middle of the debates on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, immersed in media and popular speeches that suggest that the "Jews" and the "Arabs" could not co-exist, the story of my Jewish grandparents in Arabic lands makes me wonder.

Flavie and Richard, my grandparents on my father's side, left Algeria in a hurry during the spring of 1962. Denise and Daniel, my mother's parents, left Tunisia in 1967, and none of the four of them has ever seen their country again. I am today the same age that my grandparents were when the departure happened. The arrival in France marked a radical rupture. These lives cut in two have always seemed to me like they were haunted by a repressed nostalgia, never expressed as such. My grandparents seem to have lived this way: never ever say being in France hurts, since we're so lucky, since France has saved us. This pain, the one that comes with exile, but also with colonization, was never pointed out, named: it stays unthought, like a giant hole in the family history.

I feel like I have, strangely enough, inherited the nostalgia of these countries I have never seen. A bottomless nostalgia which radiated throughout my whole body, even though I didn't know how to give it a meaning, how to explain it. My grandparents' melancholy, their silence about their first life, their way of pretending that the past is buried - worries me and angers me. To me, it always seemed obvious that my grandparents came from elsewhere and that the weight of their exile, of their heartbreak, was always mine.

The first time that I filmed "Mamé", in June 2018, it was to tell her that I was going to travel to Tunisia, looking for her first life over there. I thought she would be delighted to learn that her granddaughter was interested in her history, in the Jewish-Arabic heritage which she gave to me. She got angry and said terrible things about the "Arabs". I discovered the extent of her identity tension: her fears, her contradictions pertaining to her Judaism, her denial of her Arabity that is yet so defining of her. This first confrontation led to a short movie, "Avant le départ".

To tell the story of "May God be with you", the story of my relationships with my four grandparents, with their complicated identities - Jewish, French, Arabic - I use humor and self-mockery. I choose self-mockery because it's the only way for me to be able to confront this story. What I'm looking for with each of my grandparents, who had such different lives in France - so lonely -, is to meet them: what have you passed down to me? What important things do you have to tell me? I never stop asking; in his retirement home, to Richard who almost doesn't talk anymore; in his cave, to Daniel who I'm meeting for the first time this year; in her country house in Normandy, to Flavie who still talks about Algeria in the present tense; in Toulouse, to Denise who is obsessed with one thing: the fear that I end up with an "Arab".



It's as if between "Jewish", "Arabic", and "French", they thought they had to choose. That these identities were prohibitive of one another. Blockages, tensions, gaps: it's this complicated heritage which pushes me to keep on visiting them, in order to understand. I carry inside myself the weight of these contradictions, and shining a light on them in the film becomes a way to go beyond them, to let go of them.

In the film, I pay visits to my grandparents, again and again. I sometimes ask them to tell me about what was life like over there. An ambiguous relationship to space and time becomes clear then, something off-camera. They always talk about their youth in the present tense, refuse to tell their schoolmates' secrets – though they were told more than fifty years ago; and it's as if, since they left, they had lived hanging, taut, waiting for some form of conclusion to the pain of the exile. But I also talk to them about their relationship to Judaism, to their arabity, to France; I ask them to talk about themselves, but I also talk about myself. I try to place myself in relation to them, to tell them about my doubts, my wonderings – and more often than not, nothing comes out of it. I ask them about love, but would I dare to tell them that if I ever had a love story with an "Arab", I would be scared that they wouldn't love me anymore because of it? I ask them about their relationship to God, but would I dare to tell them that I have never been a believer? I ask them about their relationship to France, but would they understand that I feel like they were victims from the colonial history without even noticing it, blinded as they were by the "greatness" of the Republic, and petrified by their fear of "Arabs"?





What show through my visits and from my point of view, are four stories about the old age, and as many ways of placing themselves in relation to me: the grandchild asking for transmission.

In this quest to clarify the story that they have passed down to me, the contradictions, the heartbreak of exile and its consequences; it's also their point of view on religion, on love, on freedom which is being told, as well as our agreements and disagreements. The film is for me the opportunity to update their personal mythologies, but also to put to the test my own myths: why is this acknowledgment of our double identity so important to me? What makes me suffer so much in this truncated story that I've been given, which says that Jewish people and Arabic people are doomed to live apart?

This nose-dive in the family intimacy is deeply political to me: the history of the North African Jews suffers from many stereotypes. They're often put together with the "pied-noirs", with the French people; without dwelling too much on their journey, nor attempting to understand the life they knew in the Arabic lands, were they often had been living for centuries. In fact, my grandparents' trajectories also tell a part of colonial history too often forgotten. Questioning these multiple, disrupted, mixed identities, and adding complexity to the stereotypes, seems to me deeply necessary in a political context where the topic of "identity" is more and more central.



Cléo Cohen

Cleo Cohen was born in 1993. She studied French literature at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS). She then followed an exchange program at the Columbia University Film School in New York, where she studied documentary filmmaking. Back in France, she entered the Documentary Film School of Lussas and directed her first documentary, *Avant le départ*, 26', selected in several festivals in France and abroad. She is the author of two radiophonic series produced by France Culture, *Dans le jus d'Orange*, and *Une saison en campagne dans le jus d'Orange*. She directed in 2021 her first feature film, *Que Dieu te protège* (May God be with you), 77', produced by Petit à Petit Production.



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