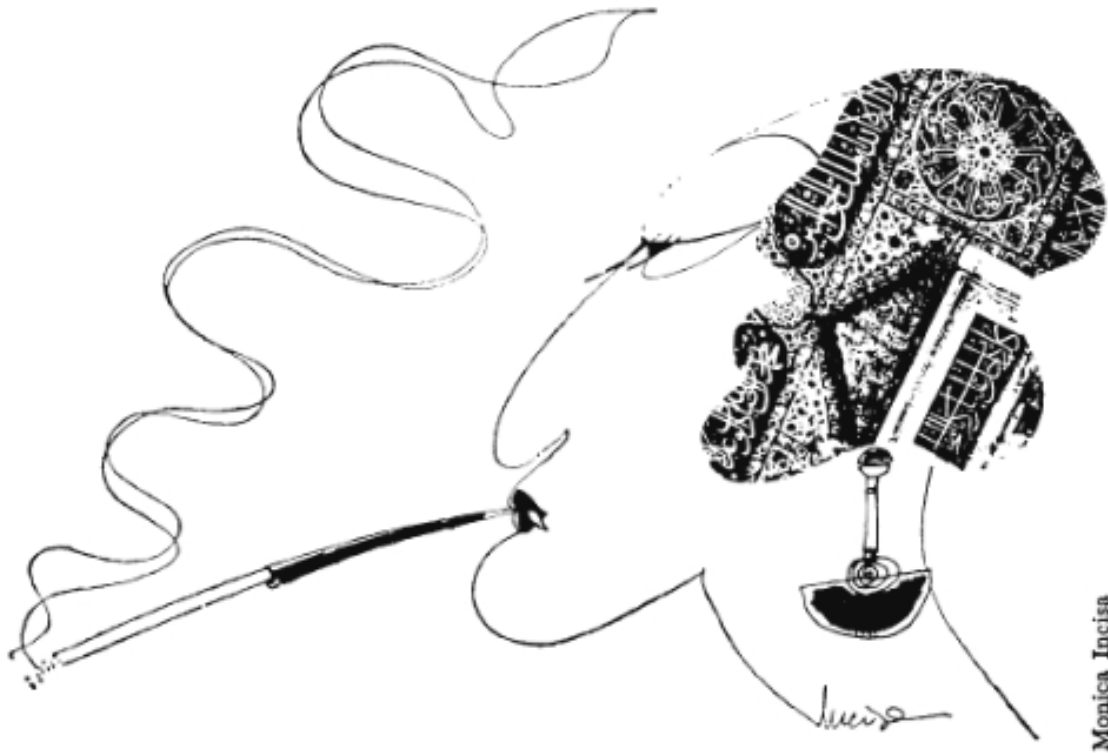


THE RIDDLE OF ASMAHAN

Philip Mansel



Monica Incisa

During the Second World War, a beautiful princess spied for Britain, sang like an angel, danced naked in the King David Hotel and died in a mysterious car accident. Her name was Asmahan.

She was a Druze, a member of a secretive offshoot of Islam founded in Cairo a thousand years ago by the Caliph al-Hakim bi Amr Allah. His followers thought he was God, and he persecuted Muslims, Jews and Christians with ferocity. The Druzes, now concentrated in Lebanon, Syria and Israel, are different from other Muslims. They believe in reincarnation, can have only one wife at a time and do not pray in the direction of Mecca. The secrets of their faith are enshrined in seven holy books (two are missing, believed to be in England) which can be read only by "the initiated."

Druze women possess more rights than Muslim women.

They can be "initiated," can inherit property to the exclusion of equally qualified males and are less easy to divorce. Sitt Nazira, known as "the veiled lady of Moukhtara," led the powerful Druze clan of Jumblatt in Lebanon from 1921 until 1943. Asmahan was to have an even more unconventional career.

To one of her British admirers, she was "just a Druze peasant," but she was born into the powerful family of the Al-Atrash in 1912: her real name was Emilie (in Arabic, Amal). Her father, the Emir Fahd Farhan al-Atrash, came from the black volcanic region south of Damascus, called the Jebel Druze, or Druze Mountain, because so many Druzes live there. The al-Atrash were Jebel Druze leaders, and in 1925 Asmahan's cousin, Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, who fought with Lawrence of Arabia, became a hero throughout the Arab world when he led a Syrian revolt against the French occupation. The French, who twice bombarded Damascus in order to recover control, regarded the Druzes as mercenaries fomented by the British, France's traditional rivals in the Middle East: Britain did indeed supply arms to the Druzes, who received shelter in British-occupied Transjordan after the failure of the uprising. The Druzes had been pro-British since the 1840s, when a pro-Druze British agent, Colonel Charles Churchill, regarded them as honorary Protestants. Thus Asmahan came from a background which was distinctive, pro-British and favorable to female initiative.

Passion affected Asmahan's life as much as politics. Her Lebanese mother, Aliya, fled from Beirut to Egypt in 1923 with Amal and Amal's brothers, Fouad and Farid, rather than rejoin her unfaithful husband in the Jebel Druze. Fouad al-Atrash remembers the shock of going from a palace to one room, in a Syrian quarter of Cairo called Zaher. They were so poor that their mother had to work as a servant.

After a difficult education (French schools expelled her because of her family's anti-French record), Amal began to sing in 1929 at the age of seventeen, in Madame Badia's Opera Casino, a popular music hall owned by Badia al-Masabni, another woman who had come from Lebanon to seek fame and fortune in Cairo. Amal used the

name Asmahan (the name of a pre-Islamic singer who died tragically young). Her first song was called "the fire of my heart and the light of my eyes." For a Druze girl of her class, such a career was outrageous. But Amal was young and poor, and her mother, who sang at private parties to earn money, may have encouraged her. Moreover, Cairo was not Syria. It was relaxed, cosmopolitan and the entertainment capital of the Arab world. Why not?

In 1931, Hassan al-Atrash, hereditary emir (or prince) of the Jebel Druze, came to Cairo, met his second cousins and was bowled over by Asmahan. Equally shocked by her poverty and her career as a public singer (and supported by her conservative brother Fouad, the guardian of "the family honor"), he chose her as his seventh wife; although he was only twenty-six, he had already divorced six times. He took her back to the Jebel Druze. For six years she lived the life of a Druze princess, surrounded by servants. She bore a daughter, Camelia.

There is a saying that once you have tasted the waters of the Nile, you have to return. Suffocated by life in her own community, Asmahan yearned for the bright lights of Cairo. A chance meeting with a Cairo record producer, Dr. Michel Beida, while choosing records in a shop in Damascus, was decisive. Her daughter Camelia was sent to Cairo to see her grandmother, and Asmahan said she wanted to follow. The Emir Hassan loved her but could not persuade her to stay. After violent rows, he agreed to a divorce, provided that he raise their daughter.

When Asmahan returned to Cairo, her brother Farid had already become a famous singer and lute player, as popular in the Arab world as Frank Sinatra in the West. Asmahan herself began to make records—a more respectable, because less public, career than singing in a music hall. She had a good contract because Dr. Beida was in love with her. She then turned to the cinema.

Cairo was Hollywood on the Nile. There were eighteen studios, making films for the entire Arab world: stars earned more, in proportion to the film budget, than in America. At first, for the sake of respectability, Asmahan was the voice-over for other actresses. In 1938, she became

famous overnight when she appeared and sang in *The Triumph of Youth*, an autobiographical film about a brother and a sister coming to Egypt from Syria and defying convention by winning fame as musicians. It is one of those Egyptian films, Arab in cast and music yet Western in presentation and style, which confirms that Cairo under King Farouk—who in 1938 was still handsome, popular and full of good intentions—was more modern compared to the rest of the world than it is today. Asmahan told Mohammed Tabi'i, a brilliant Egyptian journalist who had fallen under her spell, "My family will kill me if I appear in a film." But she was seduced by fame, money—and Ahmed Bedrkhan, a writer and film producer with the largest studio in Egypt, Studio Misr, who fell in love and married her. The wedding night, according to another Egyptian director, Henri Barakat, was a disaster. The marriage was dissolved after forty days.

What was Asmahan's secret? Why did Egyptian film producers, Druze princes, and soon French and English generals, fight for her company? She was not conventionally beautiful: she had a prominent nose, a hard chin, short legs and "that pudding face some Druzes have," in the words of Princess Fevzi Osmanoglu. However, her films reveal that she also had the flowing, sleepwalker movements and cold, alluring face of the 1940s siren. In her films she looks like the Marlene Dietrich of the Arab world; she even brandishes a long cigarette holder. In the memoir Mohammed Tabi'i wrote about the love of his life, he admitted she was not beautiful. "But her eyes, her eyes, that was enough. In her eyes were magic, secrets and fascination. They were dark green, with a bit of blue [others claim they were black with a greenish tinge]. Asmahan, God bless her, knew how to use her eyes when necessary." A future Governor-General of New Zealand, General Sir Bernard Fergusson, emphasized another attraction: "Of course, the most remarkable thing about Asmahan are her *dents de loup*. She looks like Dracula's granddaughter."

Asmahan's voice was as unforgettable as her eyes, and because of it she remains a household name in the Arab world today. Passionate, deep and sad, her songs mixed

Arab and Western techniques: one of her most famous songs, about dancing by night in Vienna, has a waltz rhythm. Some Arabs believe that with time and training, Asmahan's voice would have surpassed that of the more traditional Umm Kulthoum, the most popular singer in the Arab world: "Asmahan was an aristocrat, with the finest voice in Egypt. Umm Kulthoum was a peasant in comparison."

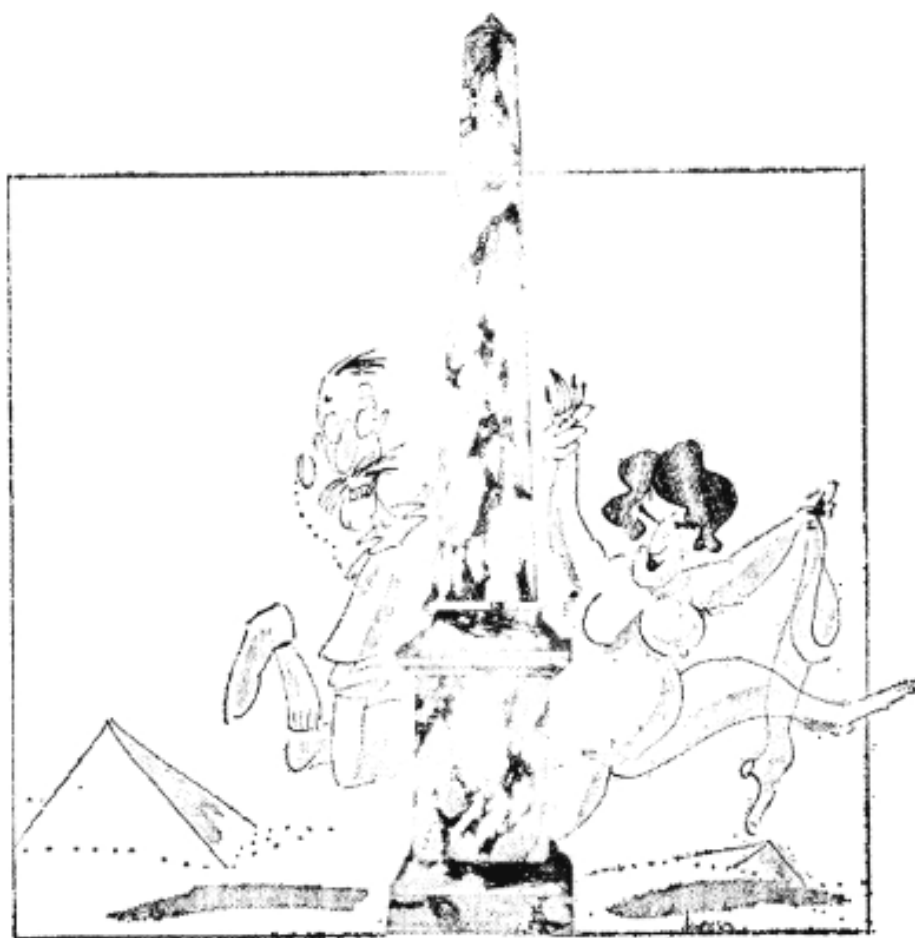
Asmahan's is the voice of a woman who ignored barriers of class, sex, race and faith in order to lead her own life: the voice of Cairo in the '40s, when it was one of the most enthralling cities in the world, at a crossroads of cultures and empires. At the same time, Cairo was the site of British headquarters in the Middle East, capital of Egypt, the center of the new forces of Arab nationalism and Muslim fundamentalism and, in the words of British novelist Olivia Manning, "a bureau of sexual exchange." While princesses gave balls for a thousand, peasants lived like animals on the royal estates.

Asmahan's heart-rending voice, searchlight eyes and gale-force personality made her irresistible. Leila Doss, daughter of a prominent lawyer, remembers Asmahan's visits to the family house in Cairo: "She was one of those people you never forget. She was very capable, very intelligent and very charming. No one could ever control her. Princess Shivekiar offered her a thousand pounds to sing at one of her parties. She refused, saying she was tired, and sang in the Café des Pigeons on the Nile instead. All the men would flock around her."

One of those who flocked was Ahmed Hassanein Pasha, First Chamberlain of King Farouk, the crucial link between the Palace and the British Embassy, the hero of a hundred political intrigues, the explorer of the lost oases of the Egyptian desert with Rosita Forbes, a famous British lady traveler of the 1920s. Hassanein was so charming that many ladies in Cairo were a little in love with him; but he was the lover, or morganatic husband, of King Farouk's mother, Queen Nazli. Tabi'i introduced him to Asmahan in 1940 or 1941 and claims that Asmahan loved Hassanein until she died. King Farouk played her records at full volume in the gardens of Abdine Palace to

tease his chamberlain. His mother was less amused. One day Hassanein telephoned Asmahan from the palace, saying, "Is it true that I visit you, Madame Atrash? Is it true that you visit me in my house? Thank you, Madame Atrash." She was delighted at the thought of the Queen Mother jealously listening to her denials. Rather than a *coup de foudre*, her marriage to Bedrkhan may have been a tactical move to obtain an Egyptian visa (often refused to foreign entertainers) and prevent her expulsion from Egypt by a government eager to please Queen Nazli. Hassanein's frequent visits to her at the Mena House Hotel beside the Pyramids surprised everyone who knew this normally discreet courtier.

One of Asmahan's greatest allies in extracting the most out of life was Amina al-Barudi, beautiful, uncontrollable (she jumped into the Nile in a fur coat when her lover forgot to kiss her) and rich. She tried to reconcile Asmahan and Ahmed Bedrkhan, but he was unjustly convinced



Monica Incisa

that Amina and Asmahan were lovers: "I am not an imbecile! I have eyes in my head!"

Indeed, despite the number and ardor of her male admirers and her apparent devotion to Hassanein, Asmahan may have preferred women: there were rumors of a close relationship with a black servant. Her mother, however, said that she was fundamentally hard and loved no one but herself. And forty years later, after the war, drinking gin and tonic in the Travellers Club in Paris, a British officer remembers: "I don't think there were many orgasms in her life. . . . Not much purpose in life, you know. She loved to have a table of friends sitting around her, and to be the center of attention, naturally."

Although courtiers might be gossiping about the First Chamberlain's visits to the Mena House Hotel, most people in Cairo had other topics of conversation. In May 1941, the kings of Yugoslavia and Greece also moved into the Mena House Hotel: their countries were now occupied by the German army. Britain was alone against the Axis. German and Italian troops were advancing on Cairo from the western desert, and many Arabs were praying for their victory. A shared hostility to the British and the Jews, and the brilliant *Greet the Arabs* radio programs broadcast from Berlin, convinced Arabs that Hitler ("Abu Ali") was a friend. A popular song that year went:

No more Monsieur, no more Mister!
Go away, get out of here!
We want Allah in heaven and Hitler on earth.

A pro-German government came to power in Iraq on April 1, 1941. The entire British position in the Middle East was in the balance. Would Syria and Lebanon, still occupied by French forces loyal to the pro-German Vichy government, be the next to go? Rahn, a redoubtable and charming German agent who flew into Aleppo in northern Syria on May 9, persuaded or ordered General Dentz, the French commander-in-chief in Syria, to allow German planes to refuel on Syrian airstrips and to dispatch massive quantities of French munitions to Iraq. Britain, hav-

ing recovered control of Iraq by the end of May, decided to invade Syria.

Britain needed the Druzes for their military prowess and for their geographical position—on the route of any force invading Syria from British-occupied Transjordan in the south. John Glubb, commander of the Arab Legion in Transjordan, and Alec Kirkbride, British minister in Amman, distorting official British policy, offered money and, ultimately, independence from the French if the Druzes helped Britain. On May 20, General Archibald Wavell, the British commander-in-chief in the Middle East, reported that Druze and native troops “have declared willing to act as advanced screen to advancing Free French forces to avoid attacks by native population” (the last phrase confirms German propaganda’s success in Syria).

The British authorities in Cairo feared that the excellent German spy network in Syria, controlled by a Gestapo representative called Roser and his assistant, Paula Koch, might convince or bribe the Druzes—who had recently been given considerable autonomy by France—to oppose the British. Mohammed Tab’i went to the same nightclub as a British officer and introduced him to Asmahan. Such a direct link to the leader of the Jebel Druzes had to be exploited. Brigadier Iltid Clayton of British Military Intelligence decided to use Asmahan to convince or bribe the Emir Hassan to support Britain against the Vichy French. On May 24, Asmahan told Tab’i, laughing, that she was being paid £40,000 to go on a secret mission to Syria: “You always thought I was useless. Now I will show you. I am serving my country. Hassan al-Atrash still loves me and often adopted my opinion when I was his wife. I do not think it will be difficult to convince them.”

She thus added the roles of British spy and Syrian nationalist to her already impressive array of personalities: Druze princess and Egyptian film star, defenseless orphan and *femme fatale*. She was able to play so many parts in so few years because the normal code of behavior of her class, race and sex meant nothing to her. Believing the fortune-teller who had told her that she would die at the age of thirty-two, she wanted to break all the rules and push life to the limits.

In the next weeks she did more than most people manage in a lifetime. Claiming she had been expelled from Egypt for holding gambling parties, she moved to Jerusalem, where Churchill's niece Anita Leslie found her singing to Arab chiefs and Free French officers and establishing extremely close relations with her British liaison officers, Major Aly Khan (there were many Ismaili followers of his father, the Aga Khan, in Syria) and Major Randolph Churchill. Like Lawrence of Arabia in the First World War, she worked for a special intelligence unit called the Arab Bureau, which was set up in Jerusalem on May 26. In Amman, Kirkbride, the British minister, was appalled by Asmahan, "laughing vivaciously" in badly cut riding breeches, and refused to be seen in the same car. He wrote in his memoirs that her presence was "entirely unnecessary." However, he did take her to meetings on the frontier, where he noticed that the moment an elderly Druze sheikh appeared "Asmahan became a Druze woman again, kissed his hand and retired in silence into the background."

On May 28, only four days after leaving Cairo, she drove to the Orient Palace Hotel in Damascus, where she met the Emir Hassan, who once more fell under her spell, divorced his current wife, Hind Alameddine, and remarried Asmahan. The quantities of gold sovereigns she distributed helped to silence Druze doubts about her morality and win Druze support for Britain. She used discreet encounters at the bar of the Orient Palace Hotel to meet Druze and Syrian leaders. Lieutenant Karkoutly, then in French Military Security, remembers that she made secret journeys back to Jerusalem to report on the opinions of Syrian politicians and the state of French defenses, slipping through the Golan Heights disguised as a black slave. She used her sexual freedom as a weapon, placating an inquisitive soldier by sleeping with him. She helped to ensure that the Druzes did not fight for the Germans and Vichy—as did other Syrians such as the legendary anti-British guerilla leader Fawzi al-Kaoukgi.

In the middle of the hottest summer for fifty years, on June 8, 1941, without a declaration of war, British, Commonwealth and Free French troops invaded Syria—the

last occasion in history when French and British armies fought each other, and one of the less glorious campaigns of the modern British army. Large Vichy French forces were posted to northern Syria to deter Turkish plans of expansion, and news of increased German demands on occupied France had arrived. Nevertheless, the Vichy troops fought ferociously, in Rahn's opinion better than the British. The promised rallying of Vichy troops to the Free French did not occur; indeed, clashes between the forces of Pétain and de Gaulle were especially vicious. The British were grateful for the help of a Druze legion raised in Palestine and of the irregular Druze cavalry—one of the last cavalry forces to operate in modern warfare.

Finally, on June 21, allied troops entered Damascus—one day before German troops swept into Russia. Wearing the dazzling white *mandil*, the cloak of the Atrash ladies, and clutching a goatskin bag of gold sovereigns, Asmahan made a sensation at the victory parade through Damascus on July 3. An armistice, strangely lenient for the Vichy French, was signed on July 14. It says much about French feelings and prospects of a British victory that, in July 1941, only 5,668 of 37,736 French soldiers in Syria chose to join the Free French and fight beside the British. Most preferred to be shipped back to their families in rationed, defeated, German-occupied France.

Having defeated the Vichy French, the British and the Free French turned on each other. The head of the British mission to the Free French in the Levant was General Louis Spears. Witty, ambitious, speaking perfect French, as Churchill's personal representative in the dark days of the fall of France he had selected de Gaulle as the officer most likely to help the allied cause and flown him to England. The Middle East has the power to envenom and dramatize any relationship, and that between Spears and de Gaulle and their forces was no exception. The Druzes were at the center of the row.

The Jebel Druze was still controlled by Colonel Bouvier, a Pétainiste who used it to divide the British and the Free French. There was a British plan (and there had been British promises) to separate this traditionally independent and pro-British region from Syria. Emir Has-

san and Emira Amal helped to persuade Bouvier and his forces to leave without fighting on July 24; British troops were welcomed with joy, and the Union Jack was raised on the French Residency in Suweida, capital of the Jebel Druze. To de Gaulle it seemed that the British were taking advantage of the Second World War to dismember the French Empire. Free French forces marched on Suweida from Damascus and surrounded it on July 29. A battle appeared inevitable. In the end, the British backed down and evacuated the area of the Jebel Druze. Their dreams of Druze independence (or union with Transjordan) were foiled.

Once, in the words of an officer on Spears's staff, "an important element in our political plans," Asmahan was now dispensable: the Free French remained in Syria until their final departure in 1945, after many clashes with the British and the Druzes. In 1941, Anita Leslie found Asmahan looking rather pathetic in her husband's house in Suweida, filled with Waring and Gillow furniture. Her only joy came from a cocktail bar she had had installed, where she mixed the drinks herself: she was reputedly able to drink any man under the table.

However, Asmahan still had sex as a weapon. In one of the most romantic passages in the memoirs of a modern British general, Spears wrote: "She was and always will be to me one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. Her eyes were immense, green as the color of the sea you have to cross on the way to paradise. . . . She bowled over British officers with the accuracy and speed of a machine gun" (*Fulfillment of a Mission*, 1977). At a tea party given at Ain Sofar in the mountains above Beirut in August 1941, an officer on Spears's staff wrote: "Among those there, looking extremely beautiful in an Arab headdress, was the Emira al-Atrash." There was a dramatic contrast between the decorous party and the vicious feuds smoldering among the British, French and Arab guests. Asmahan, who had been divorced for the second time by Emir Hassan, was escorted by her superior in the Arab Bureau, Air Commander Buss, who was both her paymaster—she received £400 per month—and her lover. They wore each other's hats. She lost her lover and

her salary at the same time when Oliver Lyttelton, British Minister of State in the Middle East, expelled Buss from Syria for indecorous behavior. At dinner with General Spears, Asmahan told a British officer: *Je déteste ma vie*.

A friend from these days in Beirut, Madame de Serres, remembers Asmahan often returning from parties completely drunk: "She had an enormous appetite for power and luxury. She was all woman, she knew how to manipulate men." Asmahan was so confident of her ability to manipulate men—and governments—that, like many Arabs, including the future President Sadat (and the Druze leaders Shakib and Adil Arslan), she turned to Germany. The British authorities learned that she had obtained a visa for neutral Turkey, where there was an extensive German spy network. In September 1941 she slipped out of Beirut in the boot of a car belonging to a fat and charming pro-Vichy American journalist called Mr. Violette (the United States was still neutral). The British let her leave in order to draw out pro-German agents who might help her journey; the Syrian railways and the Levant Express Trading Company of Beirut were full of them. However, just as Sadat, then fanatically anti-British, was prevented from reaching the Germans when his plane crashed, so Asmahan was arrested at the Turkish frontier by a British officer while the engine on the Taurus Express going from Aleppo to Ankara was being changed. He claimed, falsely, that there were British troops behind the hills surrounding the train, and she must leave.

"She bit me on the arm, she kicked me for quite a long time. She was with Georgette Cafoury, a cowardly little Lebanese who peed in her pants whenever anything went wrong." In the end she believed the Briton's story. Such was her magnetism that, although she had been planning to betray British secrets to the Germans, she was entertained that night by her British captors in the Cercle d'Orient in Aleppo: she was seen as an independent agent and "it never occurred to us to be angry." Lieutenant Karkaoutly remembers that the party was also used to extract the last secrets, before his execution, of a German agent called Jelal Latifeh.

For a time Asmahan endured *résidence forcée* in Beirut, in a villa whose rent was shared by the British and the Free French. An Armenian merchant gave her another villa in the mountains out of gratitude for help with a problem over an import licence. She could still mow down men. Among her admirers were General John (known as Jack) Evetts, commander of the Sixth Division, so besotted that he had to be sent back to England; "Sim" Feversham, a Lord in Waiting to King George VI and an officer in the Household Cavalry; Major Hope, head of British Military Security in Damascus; and Brigadier Buller of the Transjordan Frontier Force. General Georges Catroux gave her her own Druze *garde d'hon-*



Monica Incisa

neur, which was enlarged for parties. Officers enjoyed going to see her (the higher their rank, the warmer their welcome), but often had the feeling that there was one man hidden behind the door, another in a cupboard and

a third under the bed. British ladies called her not Princess al-Atrash but Princess Trash. They blamed her success on the lack of competition, and are said to have sent a written request to the military authorities to stop their husbands' seeing her.

Jerusalem, then the pleasant cosmopolitan capital of undivided Palestine, was her next home. She lived in a suite above GHQ in the King David Hotel. Amina al-Barudi came from Egypt to keep her company, and they shared the same room. "Having breakfast with those girls was quite an experience. . . . My God, they were wonderful company. They had an extraordinary dovetailing effect. They set each other off." Another visitor to the King David Hotel was Asmahan's rival, Queen Nazli—to whom she lent her suite. Spears was told that Asmahan presided over orgies. "She would do a strip-tease act and, when a state of complete nudity had been achieved, would dance with specially selected British officers."

Such license when so many Druzes lived nearby was very bold. As Robert Benton Betts writes in his excellent study, *The Druze* (Yale University Press, 1988): "It is not unknown even today for a Druze woman who has shamed her family to be murdered by her nearest male relative." Asmahan's husband and other relations were said to have agents at the Lebanese frontier, waiting to kill her.

While in Jerusalem she was offered a splendid contract by Ahmad Salim, a director of Studio Misr, and husband of the most famous belly-dancer in Cairo, the beautiful Tahiya Carioca (known as "Gypsy Tummy"). Asmahan's goatskin bag of British sovereigns was beginning to feel rather light; she was being dropped as an embarrassment by her British admirers; so she signed. In order to gain an Egyptian passport to fulfill her contract, she married Ahmad Salim. She liked him because he teased her and did not treat her as a Druze princess. Tahiya Carioca returned to Jerusalem from a tour in Syria to find she had lost her husband.

Back in Egypt, Asmahan was given £3,000 and a villa next to the newly opened nightclub, the Auberge des Pyramides—unprecedented rewards for an actress. She began work on her best film, *Love and Vengeance*, about

a fatal love for a beautiful singer. Her separate lives continued. She was taken to fashionable restaurants in Cairo and Alexandria such as Le P'tit Coin de France or Pastroudis by Hussein Said, director of the Alexandria tramways, or Victor Simaica, a celebrated man about town. Like most Egyptians, Simaica was unimpressed by her Syrian background and adventures. He remembers: "She was an attractive woman, but there were so many in Cairo in those days. She always struck me as a nice girl, simple, direct. She had the flat head of the Syrians. No one took her seriously as a princess." Asmahan, who rarely went to grand private parties ("She was never admitted to any part of Society"), used to sing at charity fetes in the presence of King Farouk, from a white marble platform in the middle of the pool in the dreamlike Ottoman Italian palace of Shoubra, on the edge of Cairo.

Although Asmahan applied to the conduct of her marriage the skills learned as a spy in Syria, the marriage soon deteriorated. Ahmed Salim, a great *coureur de femmes* himself, who had been tried for supplying the Egyptian army with defective helmets, refused to let her come home at three in the morning and made a scene if she put the phone down when he entered the room. One day he saw her leave Hassanein's house and demanded an explanation. The First Chamberlain, always suave, said: "Ahmed, you are my son, and your wife is like my daughter. I am fascinated by her voice like everyone else." Asmahan said, "I visit whom I like when I like. If you don't agree, divorce me." There were rows, gun shots, he tried to strangle her. She called the neighbors, the police and a local imam. She screamed at her husband, "I can't live with you because you want my money for gambling."

One of the mysteries of Asmahan is that she appears independent and alluring in retrospect, but seemed aimless and awkward to her friends. She would shut herself up in her room and cry for hours, or visit graveyards and talk to the dead. Worried by the impending breakup of her marriage, she decided to go for a rest to Ras al-Bar, a resort on the Mediterranean where fashionable Egyptians relaxed in villas made of straw. (The beaches of Alexandria were closed for the duration of the war.)



Monica Incisa

She left on July 14, 1944, with her companion Marie Glada and Ahmed Salim's chauffeur, not in the elegant white Cord given to her by Emir Hassan but in a car from Misr Studios. In a small village between Talha and Mansourah, the car sped off the road and sank in the water—on a spot where a similar accident had almost happened to her four years earlier. She and Marie Glada were drowned; the chauffeur, Mohammed Fadlalah, survived. Her funeral was attended by a crowd of celebrities; *Love and Vengeance* was changed to incorporate a fatal car accident as its climax.

Most people believed, and Spears (who visited the scene of her death) implies in his memoirs, that the chauffeur was paid to fix her death by one of the forces competing for control of Egypt: the King, the British or, in the shape of her own husband or family, traditional religion. Were British agents so alarmed by the contract she had signed with an American publisher to write her memoirs that they arranged for a quiet liquidation, like that of the inconveniently pro-Pétain Admiral Darlan two years before, in Algiers? Did she know too much about the private life of the Egyptian royal family? Did she go too far for the Druzes? One of the most famous journalists in Egypt, Mustafa Amin, disagrees. Sitting in the office whence he still controls his newspaper *Al Akhbar* at the age of eighty, he says: "It was an accident. I investigated the incident. . . . The car jumped into the canal."

Since Asmahan's death, her world has disappeared. The British Empire in the Middle East is a distant memory. The cosmopolitan Levantine cities where Asmahan danced and sang have been made unrecognizable by nationalism and fanaticism. Beirut has been destroyed. Jerusalem seethes with hate. Much of central Cairo, including Madame Badia's Opera Casino, was burnt on Black Saturday, January 26, 1952, by infuriated nationalistic crowds (Madame Badia retired to the Lebanese countryside, where she was said to dance in front of her cows to get them to produce more milk). Six months later, a military *coup d'état* overthrew King Farouk and ushered in the age of Nasser and nationalism. Hassanein, who might have prevented the King's degeneration, had also died in a car crash in 1946. Barriers between religions and communities are stronger than ever in the Middle East today. Asmahan's world and friends have taken refuge in the last strongholds of the Levant: London and Paris.

The power of the Al-Atrash has been broken by a series of brutal Syrian governments. The Jebel Druze is now called the Jebel Arab; the al-Atrash mansion in Suweida is the local headquarters of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist party. Only in Lebanon does Druze power survive, in a semi-independent state south of Beirut, with its own port and army, dominated by Walid Jumblatt, a nephew of the Emir Hassan. The Emir Hassan, after a tempestuous political career, died from the effects of a time in prison in 1977: his ninth and last wife had been murdered by unidentified gunmen the year before. His daughter by Asmahan, Camelia, is happily married and leads as quiet a life as is possible in modern Lebanon: she rarely talks about her mother.

Her brother, Farid al-Atrash, made thirty-one films and died in 1974, at the height of his fame. The surviving brother, Fouad, lives in a flat overlooking the Nile, with Arabesque ceilings and with walls and cupboards overflowing with framed photographs, including one of General de Gaulle looking unusually relaxed beside Asmahan. Fouad is slightly ashamed of his sister, but occasionally

pride and nostalgia triumph: *"Nous sommes une famille royale, une famille royale! Nous sommes pour tout le monde. Elle était grande amie avec les anglais . . ."*



Monica Incisa