

As a start, please tell us something about your family.

I was born in Cairo, where I have now returned to live and have recently bought a flat. My father was a timber merchant. My mother, who is still alive, now lives in Spain, and I visited her last week. I have a younger sister who lives in America. My son **Tariq** used to live in Montreal but he has also come to live in Cairo, so I see more of him now. He has been married three times, to a Jew, a Roman Catholic, and now a Muslim! I have a grandson from his first marriage, who lives with his mother in Montreal, and I went to his Bar Mitzvah last year.

I know from your bridge that you have a good brain. Did this show at school?

Yes. I went to an English public school in Cairo, *Victoria College*, and did well academically, particularly at maths, physics and French. I was so good at maths that the headmaster told my parents I was a genius! I was President of the



Debating Society, head boy and, of course, acted in the school plays from the age of 12.

I know you also did well at sport.

At school I was captain of both football and cricket, but after school I concentrated on football. I won one cap for Egypt, playing right back in the 1952

national team against *The Wanderers*, a team of famous football players which had Stanley Matthews and Tom Finney in the team.

Did you work in your father's firm?

No! I did not want to do that, and I started in film work at the age of 21, which soon took over from football as my main interest, particularly as I was smoking, drinking, and womanizing, which was not good for my football.

How did you start in bridge?

I was filming in Alexandria, and there was much time wasted sitting around, and I happened to pick up a dusty old book - was it Goren's? - and read it. I was fascinated at once by the game. There were no bridge players at the film set, but when I got back to Cairo I contacted the main bridge club.

I started with rubber bridge, but soon played in the duplicate. It was a very good standard club. **Benito Garozzo**, who also lived in Cairo, played there, and players like **Kenneth Konstam**, **Pierre Schemeil**, **Yallouze** and **Awad** were visitors.

By the time I did *Lawrence of Arabia* in 1961, I was a competent player, and when I visited London used to play rubber

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bridge at the *Hamilton Club* with players like **Rixi Markus**. I lost money at first, but enjoyed it, and was soon able to do alright.

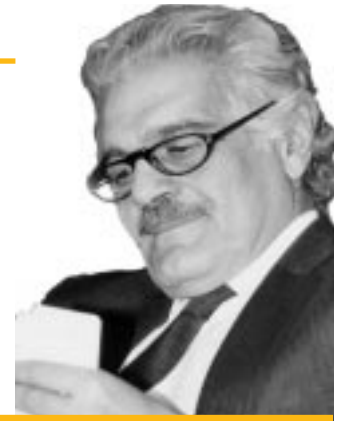
You represented your country at bridge, I think.

Yes. It was the 1964 World Team Olympiad in New York. I partnered **Marcel Zanani** in

the team called the *United Arab Republics*. We beat some of the best teams: France, United States and Great Britain, full of famous players, but did not do well enough against the weaker teams, and

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Interview by **Patrick Jourdain**



finished in the middle of the field.

By now you had left Egypt?

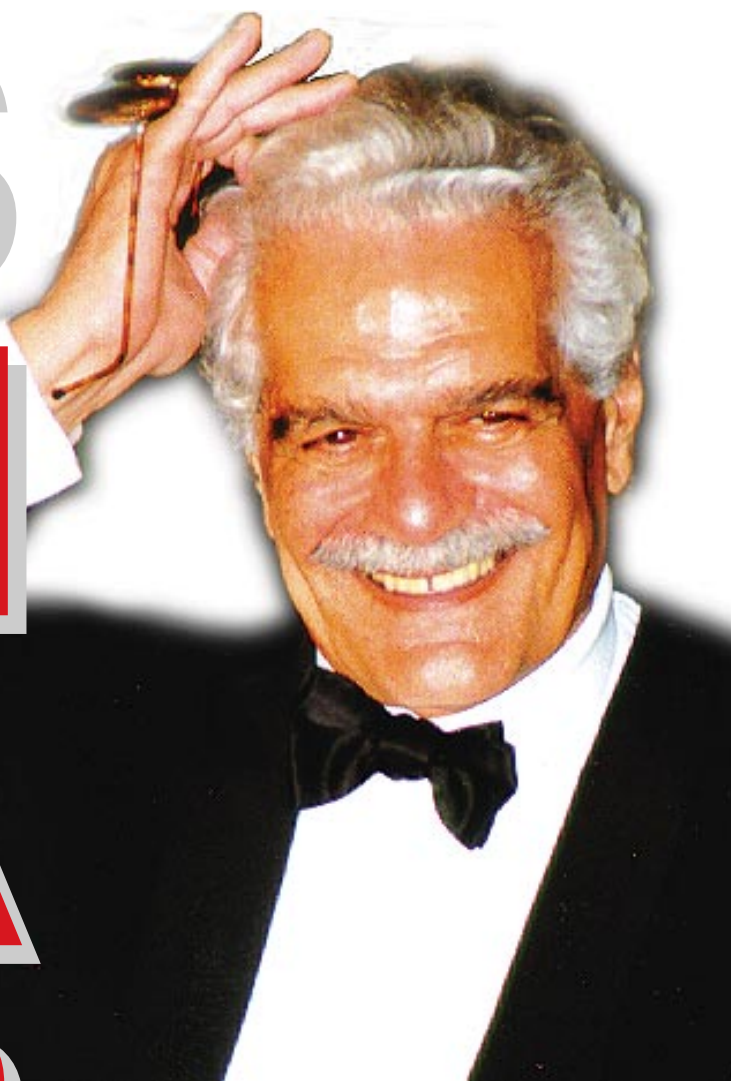
Yes. I went to live in Hollywood but then moved to Paris. There I had the most wonderful bridge training. A group of top bridge players, (they are nearly all of them now world champions) used to play duplicate bridge almost every night for money, so much per IMP. We all had to play the same system, and changed partners regularly. I am sure this is why France has done so well. Because everyone was playing the same system any error you made was much more obvious and the players soon learned to make fewer mistakes.

But then you started the *Bridge Circus* with the Italians?

Yes. I knew and enjoyed *Blue Club* partnering Garozzo. Together we made several improvements to the system which have now become standard. The system was a big success when the opponents were vulnerable and did not interfere, but I now think standard methods like the French are better overall. If it was allowed you would probably do best playing natural methods except at favourable vulnerability when *Strong Club* is



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best. However, I approve of moves to restrict systems in events like the *GENERALI* and the *MACALLAN*. It makes bridge more understandable. Also, I am now not wanting to try new things so much!

All bridge players find it difficult to concentrate if people are taking photographs and the like. This must be a big problem for you?

It is not so much the photographers. They affect my opponents more than me. What I dislike and find very difficult is that I have no moment to relax between rounds or sessions. Everyone wants autographs, interviews, to make arrangements for this and that. I feel an obligation to do it, as that is often why I have been invited; but all I want to do is to relax

for a time and discuss the hands like the other bridge players.

Was bridge in the Arab countries helped by having the World Championships in Tunisia?

You must understand that the standard of bridge with the top players is already high, though bridge is not widely played, and it may help there. There is a good sign in that I see quite a few young players in Cairo. Our major tournament in

February attracts between 150 and 200 tables with many players from Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and so on.

If you had a magic wand and could change something about bridge you don't like, what would it be?

I wish some players did not take everything so personally! It is a wonderful game, and everyone makes mistakes. I certainly want a competitive partner, but one who is gentle towards me. Many of our opponents seem quite unnecessarily aggressive towards their partner. They would do far better if they were more relaxed, and we would all enjoy it more.

Have you a bridge tip for the many ordinary bridge-players who read the *EBL Review*?

The basis of declarer play is counting tricks, but you must count both your winners and your losers. They do not necessarily add up to 13. This will often give you a clue to the right line.

In conclusion please tell us what you enjoy outside bridge.

I have finished with casinos, but I still enjoy watching horse racing very much. I like music and opera, and good meals, but I am very happy during the meals if we are discussing bridge hands at the same time!

We are very grateful for your time, Omar. Thank you.

'I wish some players did not take everything so personally!'

