Coming Home to the Legation



“Irina, could you run down to the kitchen to fetch some paper towels, please?” my mother called out from the other side of our upstairs living quarters.

“No Mum, I can’t!”, I yelled back angrily. Unable to hold back the heavy tears which began rolling down my cheeks, “I have no idea where the kitchen is.”

It was August 1989. I had just arrived from America a few days earlier with my older brother, Josh, who would spend the rest of his summer in Tangier before returning to boarding school in New England. For me, attached to my mother, Elena, there was no going back.

We were embarking on her new life as a recently divorced single mother, who with gusto and style, had been sifting through fragments of her life – past and present –

moving from Paris, to Boston, Mexico, and New York looking for a way to feed and shelter us. Finally, it happened. Through luck and hard work, Mummy was hired as the new Tangier American Legation Museum director.

“Tan-where?”, I grumbled getting on the plane in Boston. Once arrived, the unabated question grew stronger with each of Bab Merican’s steps Josh and I climbed to reach the nearest entrance of the Legation in the medina.

What a more beautiful and wonderous place to arrive to! Looking up at the United States of America’s seal from the street, serendipity would have it that the Legation had been an important childhood feature and place of work for four generations of my family starting from the 1920s. Sixty years later, once more, the legation opened its doors to us. I was 12 years old.

The place was both amazing and intimidating. Stretched over four stories, and built on either side of the Zankat America, it was grand, mysterious, and terrifying. Of course, the ball room, the secret rooms, the library, the galleries, and the Moorish wing tested my sense for adventure. Nevertheless, in those first days, my emotional upheaval was great. I felt lost in this alien place and as far as I knew, we were here to stay and perhaps this time forever.

Despite the museum’s enticing displays, I struggled. The place was too big; it was all too much. I retrenched to my room which overlooked the courtyard at the main entrance of the Legation, hoping this was all going to go away. All the same, as life has taught me, fighting inevitability is a futile pursuit. The strength of time which flowed through the hallways and rooms eventually revealed an exciting twentieth century family history binding me to the place.

Tangier and the Legation were the stories of my forebears, yet soon as days turned into weeks, it was now becoming part of my story. I learned about my lineage to the legation, Tangier and North Africa through my mother’s and grandmother’s connections with the place. It was here that Mummy’s mother, Katya Doolittle, a half Russian, half American, 11-year-old girl, had arrived in 1933 when her father, the American diplomat, Hooker Doolittle, served as Consul General. I wondered whether she had been braver than me.

When Katya returned to visit us in November of 1989, word got out. “The Doolittles were back”, people said. Almost like magic, surviving childhood friends emerged from black and white photos. They shared joyful anecdotes of Tangier’s international

era and brought to life stories about my great-grandparents. Even my headmaster at the Lycée Regnault, Katya's alma mater, knew about Doolittle and his diplomatic work in Morocco and Tunisia.

And there was more. Here was a place where Mummy had spent childhood summers visiting her grandparents who had retired to Tangier from the 1950s on. Here was the place where she eventually met my father at the age of 17 years old. Here was the place where my great-great uncle, Carleton Coon, put the Caves of Hercules on the map and would later help plan the American landings from the secret rooms behind mirrored closets on a mezzanine floor…

"Are you going down there or not?" she retorted "I understand this is very new, but it'll still be good for you to find out where it is", she said prodding me into action.

My anger morphed into shame over my cowardness. I pulled myself together too embarrassed to be asked again. She was right, it was time to go explore.

Stepping out on the landing of the third floor, I ran down the service staircase as fast as I could to dodge polite conversation with the guards whose little rest room was directly across the kitchen's back door. In taking that first step, I inadvertently sealed my fate to that of my predecessors leading me to a future life working, studying and living in the Middle East.

The Legation was letting me know I had come home as it quietly connected paths from the past to the present and perhaps that was where its real power lies.

Irina Prentice

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Note: Irina Prentice is the daughter of Elena Prentice, Tangier-based artist and publisher, who served as director of the Tangier American Legation Museum from 1988-89. Elena is the granddaughter of Hooker Doolittle, who served as Consul at the Legation in the 1930's and early 1940's, and the niece of noted anthropologist Carleton Coon who served at the Legation with the Office of Special Services, during World War II, described in his book: A North Africa Story: The Anthropologist as OSS Agent 1941-1943. Elena's cousin Carleton Coon, Jr served as Deputy Chief of

Mission at the US Embassy in Rabat in 1976, and was extremely helping in helping the Legation transition into a museum honoring US Moroccan friendship.