

SWISS CLUB OF ALEXANDRIA

So, tell me...

Renée Turk

Memories of a life between Valais, Geneva and Egypt

INTERVIEW RECORDED IN ALEXANDRIA · AUTUMN 2025

Testimony. Transcript of an interview with Renée Alexandre, née Turk, recorded in French in Alexandria, at Nénette's home, in autumn 2025. The text has undergone a light typographical revision to make it easier to read, while preserving the tone and spontaneity of the spoken words.

“So, tell me a little about where you were born...”

A childhood between Valais and Italy

So, my father had the shop in Muraz, near Sierre. He got married, then lost his first wife, Mariette's mother. A few years later - I don't remember exactly - he met my mother and they married.

My mother wanted my father to sell the shop. And my father made the big mistake of selling that shop in Muraz, which was doing very well. He moved to San Remo because at the time many people were moving to Italy, especially to that area.

He bought a house and started growing flowers. But after two years, he no longer liked it and missed Valais. So he came back.

In 1926, he bought the first garage in Sierre, the Trivério garage, in Glarey. Cars were just beginning to become widespread. It was the first garage in Sierre. We had a Chevrolet, a chauffeur and a magnificent house. That is where I was born, in 1926. There you go.

There was my sister Madeleine, my brother Alexandre, then my sister Dédée. I was the youngest. I also had a half-sister, Mariette, born from my father's first marriage.

On Sundays, we would visit my grandparents by car, with the chauffeur. We went to Leukerbad, because my mother's parents lived there, next to the church.

The loss of her parents

My parents unfortunately died very young. My father died at forty from tuberculosis, which he had contracted from his first wife. My mother also caught tuberculosis from my father. She died at thirty-six. There you go. That is how I was adopted by Aunt Catherine.

Studies, England and first jobs

I attended business school. Then I worked for a year at the Municipality of Sierre, but I did not want to stay there. I worked for a while in Sion, a while in Martigny, a while in Lausanne, then I left for England.

In England, I obtained my diploma in business English, a very good diploma. I spent the winters there. In the summer, because I was fragile, they sent me to work at Mrs Carlen's bazaar, which ran the shop at the Rhône Glacier. It was like home, like family. I returned to that bazaar at the Rhône Glacier for three summers and, in winter, I went back to England.

After I returned, there was no work in Sierre. At that time jobs were scarce and everyone went to Geneva to work. With Mémé Catherine, we went to Geneva and looked in La Tribune. There was only one small advertisement, with a telephone number.

I called and presented myself. It was a factory making motor cultivators, owned by the Dufour family. I got the job. It was a miracle, can you imagine? One small advertisement in the newspaper, and I had got the job! I stayed there for three years.

Then I worked at Société Générale de Surveillance, at Place des Alpes.

Twenty-seven years at Procter & Gamble

At that time, American companies were beginning to set up in Geneva. A friend who worked at Union Carbide said to me: "Oh, I've found a good job with the Americans!"

Then I saw an advertisement in the newspaper from Procter & Gamble, which was looking for employees. I called, got an appointment, and then the job. I was happy because we did not work on Saturdays. I spoke English well and, at the time, few people did. I stayed at Procter & Gamble for twenty-seven years.

How I met Ahmed

Oh yes! I told you that I had worked at the Rhône Glacier, with the Carlen family. The owner, Miss Carlen, lived in Geneva. At the time, everyone rented out rooms.

Ahmed arrived in Geneva from Egypt with his two suitcases, first by boat, then by train. When he arrived, he stayed in a hotel near the station. One day, as he was walking down the street, a man called out to him: “But where are you from? Are you from Egypt?” Ahmed said yes. The man spoke to him in Arabic and asked where he was staying.

Because Ahmed was paying a lot, the man told him about a hotel very close to the station that cost less. Ahmed moved there. Later, friends told him that he could rent a room.

He then got the address of Mrs Carlen, my friend, who rented out a room - the one I live in now. He took it. One day Mrs Carlen invited me to dinner. I went to her place and met Ahmed in the apartment. She said to me: “Here he is, my tenant. Let me introduce you to my tenant, who has just arrived from Egypt.” So: hello, hello, how are you?...

The following week, Mrs Carlen told me that her tenant would like to see me again. I came back a second time. We had dinner and he asked me to marry him! It was quick: the second time he saw me.

He spoke a little French, but not very well. I helped him practise it. That is how we started going out together.

We did not get married until seven years later. In the meantime, Nasser had forbidden Egyptian students from marrying foreigners. So we remained engaged for several years before we could marry.

“And then we stayed together for fifty years.”

Interview recorded and shared by René-Pierre Antille.