

Margaret Marcus, Ex-Jew, USA (part 2 of 5)

Description: Margaret discusses how a fellow Jewish classmate accepts Islam, and later accepts Islam herself.

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Category: [Articles](#) > [Stories of New Muslims](#) > [Women](#)

It was in Professor Katsh's class that I met Zenita, the most unusual and fascinating girl I have ever met. The first time I entered Professor Katsh's class, as I looked around the room for an empty desk in which to sit, I spied two empty seats, on the arm of one, three big beautifully bound volumes of Yusuf Ali's English translation and commentary of the Holy Quran. I sat down right there, burning with curiosity to find out to whom these volumes belonged. Just before Rabbi Katsh's lecture was to begin, a tall, very slim girl with pale complexion framed by thick auburn hair sat next to me. Her appearance was so distinctive, I thought she must be a foreign student from Turkey, Syria or some other Near Eastern country. Most of the other students were young men wearing the black cap of Orthodox Jewry, who wanted to become rabbis. We two were the only girls in the class. As we were leaving the library late that afternoon, she introduced herself to me. Born into an Orthodox Jewish family, her parents had migrated to America from Russia only a few years prior to the October Revolution in 1917 to escape persecution. I noted that my new friend spoke English with the precise care of a foreigner. She confirmed these speculations, telling me that since her family and their friends speak only Yiddish among themselves, she did not learn any English until after attending public school. She told me that her name was Zenita Liebermann, but recently, in an attempt to Americanize themselves, her parents had changed their name from "Liebermann" to "Lane." Besides being thoroughly instructed in Hebrew by her father while growing up and also in school, she said she was now spending all her spare time studying Arabic. However, with no previous warning, Zenita dropped out of class, and although I continued to attend all of his lectures to the conclusion of the course, Zenita never returned. Months passed and I had almost forgotten about Zenita, when suddenly she called and begged me to meet her at the Metropolitan Museum and go with her to look at the special exhibition of exquisite Arabic calligraphy and ancient illuminated manuscripts of the Quran. During our tour of the museum, Zenita told me how she had embraced Islam with two of her Palestinian friends as witnesses.

I inquired, "Why did you decide to become a Muslim?" She then told me that she had left Professor Katsh's class when she fell ill with a severe kidney infection. Her condition was so critical, she told me, her mother and father had not expected her to survive. "One afternoon while burning with fever, I reached for my Holy Quran on the table beside my bed and began to read and while I recited the verses, it touched me so deeply that I began to weep and then I knew I would recover. As soon as I was strong enough to leave my bed, I summoned two of my Muslim friends and took the oath of the "Shahadah" or

Confession of Faith."

Zenita and I would eat our meals in Syrian restaurants where I acquired a keen taste for this tasty cooking. When we had money to spend, we would order Couscous, roast lamb with rice or a whole soup plate of delicious little meatballs swimming in gravy scooped up with loaves of unleavened Arabic bread. And when we had little to spend, we would eat lentils and rice, Arabic style, or the Egyptian national dish of black broad beans with plenty of garlic and onions called "Ful".

While Professor Katsh was lecturing thus, I was comparing in my mind what I had read in the Old Testament and the Talmud with what was taught in the Quran and Hadith and finding Judaism so defective, I was converted to Islam.

Q: Were you scared that you might not be accepted by the Muslims?

A: My increasing sympathy for Islam and Islamic ideals enraged the other Jews I knew, who regarded me as having betrayed them in the worst possible way. They used to tell me that such a reputation could only result from shame of my ancestral heritage and an intense hatred for my people. They warned me that even if I tried to become a Muslim, I would never be accepted. These fears proved totally unfounded as I have never been stigmatized by any Muslim because of my Jewish origin. As soon as I became a Muslim myself, I was welcomed most enthusiastically by all the Muslims as one of them.

I did not embrace Islam out of hatred for my ancestral heritage or my people. It was not a desire so much to reject as to fulfill. To me, it meant a transition from parochial to a dynamic and revolutionary faith.

Q: Did your family object to your studying Islam?

A: Although I wanted to become a Muslim as far back as 1954, my family managed to argue me out of it. I was warned that Islam would complicate my life because it is not, like Judaism and Christianity, part of the American scene. I was told that Islam would alienate me from my family and isolate me from the community. At that time my faith was not sufficiently strong to withstand these pressures. Partly as the result of this inner turmoil, I became so ill that I had to discontinue college long before it was time for me to graduate. For the next two years I remained at home under private medical care, steadily growing worse. In desperation from 1957 - 1959 my parents confined me both to private and public hospitals where I vowed that if ever I recovered sufficiently to be discharged, I would embrace Islam.

After I was allowed to return home, I investigated all the opportunities for meeting Muslims in New York City. It was my good fortune to meet some of the finest men and women anyone could ever hope to meet. I also began to write articles for Muslim magazines.

Q: What was the attitude of your parents and friends after you became Muslim?

A: When I embraced Islam, my parents, relatives and their friends regarded me almost as a fanatic, because I could think and talk of nothing else. To them, religion is a purely private concern which at the most perhaps could be cultivated like an amateur hobby among other hobbies. But as soon as I read the Holy Quran, I knew that Islam was no hobby but life itself!

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