This Story is Far from Over

“In *Esperia*, a portrait of a forgotten artist and a former secret service agent is interlaced with a personal narrative depicting the filmmaker’s relationship with her fading grandfather.” Hakim Bishara reviews Haidi Motola’s new film revealing her grandfather Jacques Motola’s double identity as an Israeli painter and secret service agent in Egypt.

A single artwork / Hakim Bishara October 30, 2018

In 1953, Egypt was still constituting itself as a new republic, in the wake of a military coup that overthrew its monarch, King Farouk, the year before. The Free Officers Movement, which took over the government under the leadership of Generals Gamal Abdel Nasser and Mohammed Naguib, carried the flag of Arab-nationalism and anti-imperialism and announced major modernization reforms in the country. All the while, tensions were ratcheting up with Israel in a lead-up to a second war between the two countries in 1956 (The Suez War).

In Cairo, a 33-year-old Frenchman by the name Pierre Lamothe was working as a radio salesman on behalf of the New York company Gemac Industries. The dark-haired, debonair man was fluent in Arabic, English, and secretly, Hebrew. One day, while entering his apartment building in the city, Lamothe noticed two men loitering around the staircase and peering at him suspiciously. Once inside, he peeped through his door’s keyhole to see the two men, who turned out to be Egyptian Police detectives, interrogating a person about whether the radio salesman was an Israeli. Realizing that his cover has been blown, Lamothe rushed to hide a jar of invisible ink inside a small radio device, careful not to leave behind any trace of the real purpose of his stay in Cairo. Just when the detectives were about to raid his apartment, he stormed out of the door, distracting them with his impeccable Arabic, and disappeared into a taxi that happened to be passing by. At the Cairo airport, Lamothe was nearly apprehended, but managed to slip by and make his way to Paris. From there, he flew back to his hometown of Haifa, in Israel, and returned to his life as a painter under his real name: Jacques (Yaakov) Motola.

This dramatic scene is revealed for the first time in a climactic moment in *Esperia, Part I: Last Day in Cairo* (2018,) a film by the protagonist’s granddaughter, artist Haidi Motola, which debuted last August at Forum Box Gallery in Helsinki, Finland. Shot at his apartment in Ramat Gan, Israel, the film features 98-year-old Motola reading poetic fragments from his diaries, in French, unfolding his adventures as an agent of *Ha’Mossad La’Aliya Bet* in Cairo before becoming a recognized painter in the 1950s.

motola.jpg



[1]Still from Haidi Motola's Esperia: Last Day in Cairo, Part I (2018, 29 MIN, HD)
Courtesy of Haidi Motola

The film opens with shots of the mediterranean sea as a backdrop to Jacque's voice describing a dream he has had, in which he discusses his mortality with God. In the dream, Jacques tells God that he wishes to be carried to him by boat after his death. "Fine," says God, "when you're done with your stupid breathing, I will bring you to me by boat. You will have a nice trip for a few months, and then you'll arrive to me." That promised final journey across the sea is symbolic of Motola's biography.

Born in Port Said, Egypt, and raised in the multicultural city of Alexandria, Motola is an Egyptian Jew who has immigrated to Palestine in 1935. In 1947, he travelled to France to study art at the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris, under the tutelage of the cubist painter Andre Lhote. When the 1948 war broke between the newly founded State of Israel and its neighboring Arab countries, 28-year-old Motola was called to work for *Ha'Mossad La'Aliya Bet* ("The Organization for Aliya Bet," colloquially known as *Ha'Mossad*, a name now attributed solely to the Israeli intelligence agency), at its Marseille post, where Jewish immigrants were boarded onto ships and sent off to Palestine. At that point, *Ha'Mossad* had moved its headquarters from Athens to Paris, and it was in need of French speakers like Motola. In Marseille, Motola met his wife Genya, and the two decided to settle in Haifa at the end of 1948.

Upon returning to Israel, the artist was called again by *Ha'Mossad* to serve in Algiers and Morocco, but his service there didn't last for long. "He quit in dismay after he saw that *Ha'Mossad* was separating families by leaving the elderly behind," says the filmmaker in a conversation with Tohu Magazine. Later on, she adds, Motola was contacted once more about a mission in Egypt. "Having trouble finding a job in Haifa, he decided to take the post." His mission lasted only for a year before it ended in failure and marked the end of his secret service career. In the following years, Motola became a successful modernist painter, featured in galleries alongside famous contemporaries like Chaim Soutine and Marc Chagall. Motola's works from the period blend his Paris School education with the style of Social Realism that characterized Israeli art in the 1950s. Many of his paintings feature people in everyday situations like riding the bus or bathing at the beach. Now, decades past his prime, Motola is a Sunday painter who uses Sharpie pens to draw the trees outside his window,

as seen in one of the scenes in the film.

Jacques Motola, Dance, date unkown..jpg **[2]**



[3]Jacques Motola, Dance, date unknown
Courtesy of Haidi Motola

Jacques Motola, Haifa, date unkown..jpg **[4]**



[5]Jacques Motola, Haifa, date unknown
Courtesy of Haidi Motola

Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet was created in 1939 by the *Haganah* [6] organization—a Jewish militia that operated during the British Mandate rule in Palestine—to execute clandestine immigration operations of Jews to Palestine. The term "Aliya Bet" refers to the illegal migration of Jews to the country in defiance of the British 1939 White Paper [7], which limited the number of Jewish newcomers to Palestine in an attempt to appease the Arab delegations at the London Conference [8] that year. During WWII, Ha'Mossad's activity slowed down, focusing primarily on rescuing Jews from Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Arab world. After the war, the organization intensified its operations and arranged dozens of sea voyages to carry tens of thousands Ma'apilim ("ascenders"), the term given by the Hagana for Jewish migrants by sea to Palestine. The spy tactics and the top-secret style of operations that Ha'Mossad has employed (e.g., fake passports and invisible ink) suggest that the organization had been more than just an emissary of the Jewish immigration project. That proved to be true when *Ha'Mossad* used its ships to smuggle weapons to Palestine in preparation for the 1948 war. When it had finally been dismantled in 1952, Jewish immigration from Arab countries was handled by several state agencies, including the Israeli Mossad, less known by its full name, "the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations."

jacques.jpg **[9]**



[10]Still from Haidi Motola's Esperia: Last Day in Cairo, Part I (2018, 29 MIN, HD)
Courtesy of Haidi Motola

lamothe_2.jpg **[11]**



[12]Still from Haidi Motola's Esperia: Last Day in Cairo, Part I (2018, 29 MIN, HD)
Courtesy of Haidi Motola

Motola was not the first Paris-educated Israeli artist to be recruited to the Israeli secret service. In his video work, *Art Undercover* [13] (2017), artist Tamir Zadok reimagines the story of Shlomo Cohen Abarbanel, a painter and a former Mossad agent who served in Egypt in the 1950s under the assumed identity of a French painter named Charduval. Abarbanel's cover was so convincing that he was given a solo exhibition at Museum of Modern Art in Cairo. The similarities between Abarbanel's story and Motola's are not incidental. The two became close friends after they met at Lhote's studio in Paris, years before they had served together in Egypt. Unlike Motola, Abarbanel kept climbing the ranks of the Israeli Mossad until he became the organization's deputy-director. Motola, apparently, was a lot less driven: "I travelled to Egypt for the adventure... they couldn't find someone in Israel who would agree to do it", he says in the film, insisting that he had joined the service mainly for the sake of "action." A moment before that, he lists his catalogue of nationalities (French-Algerian-Egyptian-Palestinian,) but leaves his Israeli one out. When asked by the filmmaker if he identifies himself as an Israeli he says, "No. It's weird, I don't feel that I'm an Israeli," and leaves it at that.

The Man in the Suit, Digital print, Tamir Zadok 2017 .JPG **[14]**



[15]Still from Tamir Zadok's Art Undercover (2017, video, 27 MIN)
Courtesy of Tamir Zadok

Born to Jacques' Israeli son and a Finnish mother, Haidi Motola adds another layer of mixed backgrounds to the cluster of identities she had inherited from her grandparents. Educated at Minshar School of Art in Tel Aviv and the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, her work constantly shifts between the two places. This last film is particularly interesting in light of her years of activism as as a member of the left-leaning photography collective Activestills [16]. After spending a few years in Marseille, a landmark in Jacques' story, Motola decided to return to Israel for a last chance to learn the truth about her grandfather's Zionist endeavours.

In Esperia, a portrait of a forgotten artist and a former secret agent is interlaced with a personal narrative depicting the filmmaker's relationship with her fading grandfather. We see the filmmaker sharing moments of daily life on camera with her grandfather: hanging his old paintings, serving him an Arak drink, and listening to his thoughts about colors in conversations that shift between French, Hebrew, and Arabic. In some of the film's graceful moments, we hear her raising her voice, as one does with the elderly, to impart directorial instructions to Jacques from behind the camera. But above all, Motola's camera listens. Her documentation of Jacques' life is thoughtful and meditative and her presence on camera is subtle. Artful cuts to old photos, sketch books, paintings, and items that Jacques had kept from his time as a secret agent (most notable, his business card as Pierre Lamothe), lead us with him down memory lane.

"Voilà, mademoiselle," says Jacques affectionately to his granddaughter ("That's it, mademoiselle"), as the film wraps up, although the story is far from being over. The choice of the title "Esperia" for the film remains a mystery, leaving something to look forward to in the upcoming chapters.

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Links

[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/motola.jpg
[2] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/jacques-motola-dance-date-unkownjpg-0
[3] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Jacques%20Motola%2C%20Dance%2C%20date%20unkown._0.jpg
[4] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/jacques-motola-haifa-date-unkownjpg-0
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