Lucette Lagnado is the winner of the 2008 Sami Rohr Prize for her book *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, which describes her family's life and 1950's exodus from Egypt, focusing on her father. She now has a follow-up memoir, *The Arrogant Years*, which appealingly enrights the story of three generations of women with their depiction of Jewish life in Egypt. I found *The Arrogant Years* as arresting as Jung Chang's memorable *Wild Swans*, which deals with three generations of Chinese women. However, Lagnado's focus is less on politics and more on recapturing the thriving Jewish community in Cairo and the circle of worshippers at the shield of Young David, the Orthodox synagogue Lagnado attended in New York.

Lagnado starts her story in New York during her arrogant years, which she defines as "that period in a young woman's life when she feels — and is on top of the world." The 10-year-old Lagnado's ambition was to grow up to be like the secret agent Emma Peel in "The Avengers." She was spirited and rebellious and wanted to challenge the rule that placed the females in her synagogue behind the mehitza. She came up with a ploy and persuaded some of the other girls to cooperate with her. They placed chairs outside the entrance to the women's section, and over a period of time kept advancing their position until they were within the sight of the men — until the teenage boys and the men yelled at them to return. The cantor's wife, a forbidding woman who considered Lagnado to be a bad influence, remained angry and silent. Later, the act of transcending the divider becomes a metaphor in the novel for escaping into the men's world. We are intrigued by the girl who posed a threat to the chauvinistic traditions of the synagogue.

Lagnado shifts her story to Cairo in the 1920s and 1930s, when traditions and barriers were broken. In 1923, the leading feminist of Cairo tore off her veil at a train station. "Hoda's friends who came to greet her were stunned by her action, but then they, too, yanked the veils from their faces and cast them aside in solidarity and, voila, a liberation movement was born among the least liberated women in the world." The social changes that swept the country led to tolerance; Jews and Muslims and Christians mingled freely. The Jews rose to the top in every sector, and some were given the titles "pasha" (the greatest honor) and "bey" (the second greatest honor) by the king. When Europe was swept up by anti-Semitism, Egypt embraced Jews.

We learn about the Jewish pasha who wielded the most influence over King Fouad and, later, his son King Farouk. The wife of the pasha, officially the lady-in-waiting to the queen, was Madame Alice Cattau Pasha. There is a portrait of her in the book, looking regally at the camera. Madame Cattau, one of the most powerful women in the city, took an interest in the Jewish schools. It was in the L'Ecole Cattau, where she was a benefactress, that she met Lagnado's mother, Edith, a teacher at age 20. Madame Cattau bestowed on Edith the key to the library in her residence, an honor the girl (who had read all of Proust by age 15) would cherish then and much later in life when she remembered her own arrogant years.

Edith had much to be proud of — she was beautiful and stylishly dressed, intelligent, a teacher, and she had access to the Villa Cattau's library. The pasha entrusted her with the important job of organizing a library for the school by selecting books that might be available only in Europe and America. Edith was the emotional support for her mother, Alexandra, who was an abandoned wife, reduced to begging money from her relatives. Edith also cared for her younger brother, since her mother had escaped from reality into a world of books and cinema. We don't see Alexandra in her arrogant years. The sole snapshot of her in the memoir shows a tired-looking melancholic woman, whereas we see the shift in Edith from re-splendence to a worn-out appearance through several pictures. Mother and daughter were close and spent much of their time together. Alexandra's pride was her daughter.

Edith's life seemed to take on a fairy tale quality when she wed a man who had it all outwardly — social status, money, a stylish mode of dressing. However, it soon became apparent that the marriage would be difficult for the bride, 22 years younger than her bridegroom. In addition to giving up her teaching job and the privilege of entry to the library, she had to live with her mother-in-law. It wasn't merely the objections of her husband that stopped Edith from having a job, but also the law in Egypt that made it impossible for most married women to work. Through her mother's life, Lagnado shows us how marriage can frustrate a woman by prematurely ending her arrogant years.

The charmed existence of Jewish life in Cairo began to be threatened. Mobs incinerated foreign quarters. Lagnado laments the destruction of the department store, Shephard's, which epitomized the empire and was
the place where her father announced his engagement to her mother. Soon after the fires, the military, led by General Muhammed Naguib, forced King Farouk to abdicate in 1952. The Jews lost their confidence since the king had been their protector. The reassurances of Naguib didn’t assuage their fears. The hostile attitude of the regime included policy changes that led to the arrest of Jewish leaders and elimination of the titles pasha and bey. Most Jews resettled in other countries.

Alexandra immigrated to Israel, where her son had gone years earlier. Lagnado’s immediate family went to France, then to Brooklyn in 1964. She brings alive the people who worshipped at her synagogue and their culture. Her personality as a thinker and rebel is developed in those pages. Though she also writes about her siblings and her father, the spotlight is mainly Lagnado and her mother, who was “so convinced I had it in me to realize her dreams.” Every now and then she reminds us of her passion to be an agent like Emma Peel. Nor does she let us forget the divider that kept the females in their place.

Edith never recaptured her lost glory. However, the changed family circumstances and life in America enabled her to have a job in the Brooklyn Public Library, which let her indulge in her passion for books again.

Lagnado’s arrogant years ended tragically due to illness, leaving her unable to have any children, but she fulfilled her dream of becoming an Emma Peel of sorts through her work as an investigative reporter.

Concluding The Arrogant Years, Lagnado revisits the characters who peopleed her memoir and even returns to Cairo and gives us sad glimpses of Madame Cattau. Our emotions are stoked the most at the end when she tries to reconnect to her dead mother. The last paragraph transmits her yearning to the reader very touchingly. “As I fingered each volume, I felt a need to remove them from the shelf and hold them. I kept asking myself: Was this a book Edith had purchased for the pasha’s library? Was this a novel she had selected? Had she leafed through this collection? Had she enjoyed that anthology? Brushing over the soft leather jackets, I felt as if I were touching my mother’s hand, exactly as if I had as a little girl when she would not let me go, she would not let me go.”

The Arrogant Years is brilliantly conceived and executed. Its 400 pages chronicling Lagnado’s Jewish heritage and personal and familial history make for a spellbinding read. She has depicted an era in Cairo that the world shouldn’t forget.

— Tara Menon

Ben-Gurion: A Political Life

By Shimon Peres with David Landau

New York: Nextbook/Schocken

224 pages, $25.95

Throughout his life, Ben-Gurion often said, “We are a nation with a wealth of prophets but a dearth of statesmen,” Shimon Peres tells journalist David Landau in this intimate political biography of Israel’s first prime minister. As the youngest member of Ben-Gurion’s inner circle, Peres shares personal glimpses of the man who mentored him for more than three decades. He also explains why Ben-Gurion is considered Israel’s first and greatest statesman.

This slim volume is surprisingly comprehensive in telling the story of the Zionist movement in pre-state Israel and Ben-Gurion’s critical role in leading its fractious parties to statehood. “I truly believe that without Ben-Gurion, the State of Israel would not have come into being,” Peres asserts. As a 24-year-old delegate to the Zionist Congress held in Basel in 1946, Peres witnessed Ben-Gurion, then chairman of the Jewish Agency (the pre-state governing body of Palestinian Jews), taking two of his most historically significant stands: first, to establish an independent state “at once”—putting him in direct conflict with Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Organization, who still argued at this late date for a “gradualist” approach with Britain; and second, to accept a partition plan (a proposal to divide Mandatory Palestine into two states, for Jews and Arabs, recommended by the Peel Commission in 1937)—if it would result in immediate independence. His stand on partition evoked fierce opposition at both ends of the political spectrum, and even from some members of Mapai, his own Labor Zionist party.

It was clear to Ben-Gurion that the essential first step toward statehood was to force the British to leave Palestine. Britain had ignored the recommendations of the Peel Commission when it adopted the 1939 “White Paper” as its official policy, severely restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine before and during World War II. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Britain continued to blockade its ports to prevent ships filled with survivors from entering. In response, Ben-Gurion ordered the Haganah (the military defense organization of Jewish Palestine) to launch an armed uprising against the British. Their mission was sabotage—cutting railroad lines, damaging British ships, and blowing up bridges linking Palestine to neighboring countries. One month later, he created the Hebrew
The Arrogant Years is a lovely book, sad and hilarious by turn, written with love of life, and an enormous affection for language. You will love it too. (Malachy McCourt, New York Times bestselling author of A Monk Swimming). In the radiant presence of Lucette Lagnado herself—and in The Arrogant Years, her moving and unsparingly revelatory second memoir—we have honesty as purity of style, and lucidity as burning emotion, and history as an enduring hymn to resilience. (Cynthia Ozick). Affecting…Lagnado writes with great affection and compassion for her mother, and she describes displacement and the urgency of memory. Readers of Sharkskin will again be moved. It is also a portrait of awe-inspiring caregiving by a loving daughter. (Jewish Week). Perhaps the stories in The Arrogant Years were weak because she had already told her story in the first book? Almost enough motivation to make me pick up the first book and find out. Almost. In The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit, Lucette Lagnado offered a heartbreaking portrait of her father, Leon, a successful Cairo boulevardier who was forced to take flight with his family during the rise of the Nasser dictatorship, and of her family’s struggle to rebuild a new life in a new land. In this much-anticipated new memoir, Lagnado tells the story of her mother, Edith, coming of age in a magical old Cairo of dusty alleyways and grand villas inhabited by pashas and their wives.