



ABDELWAHEB BEN AYED THE TUNISIAN

Memories

The Extraordinary Destiny of an Extraordinary Entrepreneur

AC Editions



«Manage your time
down to the second»

ABDELWAHEB BEN AYED

THE TUNISIAN

AC Editions

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10 rue 8612 impasse N° 5 - Z.I La Charguia 1 – Tunis, Tunisie

afrique_culture@yahoo.fr

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Preface

According to his last wishes, Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed wanted me to write the preface to his memoirs. It is an honor that filled me with emotion and pride.

I have vivid memories of the times we spent together when I was ambassador in Tunis. I had visited him in his offices, and, in the summer, under the foliage of the *Résidence de France*, we had exchanged more personal words, about his childhood, his studies in France, his dyslexia, and the value given to rules and merit, to work, and to the ambition to do well.

I had been struck by the simplicity, and the loftiness of views that made this modest, hardworking man so attached to Tunisia, a man whom one can be proud of having met. His memoirs are a reflection of this personality and a testimony to an era that has passed away, or that is fading away; a narrative that is not only lucid and analytical – the fruit of his training in engineering - but also emotionally charged.

He paints the portrait of a Tunisia that is steeped in morality and in a sense of family and respect for others, a Tunisia that is both proud of its identity and its achievements, particularly the liberating exercise of democracy, a Tunisia that is worried about an uncertain future and demands that are difficult to satisfy if the spirit of compromise and social innovations fail.

In the last days of his life, just as he did in times of adversity and suffering, Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed remained confident in man, in his responsibility and his sense of measure. In fifty years of hard work, mobilization and training of thousands of employees, often thanks to the support of his friends, Poulina's boss has created a group of

108 subsidiaries, active in eight different sectors. This is an expression of the place he has taken in the Tunisian economic scene, one that goes beyond the ordinary, as evidenced by the book devoted to him by the French Development Agency.

He was able to impose himself, thanks to his managerial qualities, and to his attachment to spreading the understanding of history, of his history, that everyone carries in his project, a history that was so dear to him, that of The Medina of Hammamet.

Abdelwaheb leaves behind him a trace that is rich in feelings and lessons.

Written in all sincerity, without false detours, following the thread of the pen and the memories that came to the surface, his memories can but move those who knew him and who esteemed him, while at the same time enlightening those who did not have this chance, but who will make a lesson out of the life of a builder and a man of integrity.

Abdelwahab, thank you for this beautiful lesson in living and in hoping.

Serge DEGALLAIX

Foreword

Why my memoirs?

I wrote them to leave my message to everyone: that dreaming is necessary, that work pays, that honesty, thoroughness, and merit are the keys to discovering our possibilities, and that these possibilities are endless,

that poverty, difficulties, ignorance are not fatal, and that anything is possible if we believe in our dreams.

It is also so that history will remember all these men, my friends, who accompanied me in my adventure, and who allowed my dreams to become a reality,

so that history keeps track of the difficulties and the magic of Tunisia in the sixties, a country that started from nothing and that, thanks to the work and self-sacrifice of its children, was able to develop a modern industry, capable of competing with the industries of the most developed countries.

It is to shout out my pride in being Tunisian, and to shout out that my dream was to raise our country's industry to the highest places.

It is finally for all those who knew me, especially, for my children, my grandchildren, and those who will follow, so that they never forget that it is possible to dream.



Part I

MY YOUTH

Our eyes are on the future, a future of prosperity, fulfilment and achievement, a future by young people and for young people.

A. Ben Ayed

My Childhood in Tunisia under Colonialism

My Childhood in our *Jnen* in El Oued, Sakeit Eddayer (Sfax)

I will tell the memories I keep of my childhood in detail, for the sake of collective memory: because most of those memories have disappeared from our lived experiences.

I was born in April 1938, in a modest family like all Sfaxian families of that time. My most distant memories are from when I was five years old, the year was 1943, in the midst of World War II. At that time, we lived in a *jnen*.

A *Jnen* is a piece of land in the center of which stands a house, surrounded by fruit trees. This house is called a *borj*, because it is fortified to be protected from thieves. *Borjs* were dwellings with identical architecture and appearance, regardless of the social background of its inhabitants; the only difference is the quality of the building materials. The little people used makeshift materials with some clay inside, while the better-off could afford more noble materials such as marble, ceramics, carved wood, etc. That was the only difference between the *borj* of a wealthy family and the *borj* of a middle-class family, like mine.

The *borj*, our big house, had a big room in the center called *wist el borj*, which was our living room. It was surrounded by three or four rooms where the grandfather of the family, the patriarch, the sons of the patriarch, and the grandsons lived: one room per family.

We were three or four families in the same *borj*. Each room was built more or less identically: a large space that was about three by four meters for the children to sleep next to one another, and the *srir el ali*, literally "the high bed," which was about two meters by two, and a meter and a half high, intended to preserve the privacy of parents. The *srir el ali* ended with a staircase on which the mother of the family kept, in a large box called *sandouk el-ers*, her trousseau, of which she preciously took care.

Under the parents' bed, there was a small storage space. In the bedroom, each family kept their food reserves, which were called *el mouna*, and which included couscous, *mhamas*, dates that are usually dried, *kentichi*, olive oil, etc.

Thus, the whole family lived in this large room which had, in principle, one or two small windows but which were three and a half meters up from the ground, and could only let in some air in summer or some light in the winter.

The three or four bedrooms were practically identical and each had a single opening leading to the center of the covered *borj*, which itself led to a large kitchen, and to the uncovered *houch*. The latter, in order to protect the house from thieves, could only be accessed through one large door.

In the kitchen, there were as many cupboards as there were families. Each family mother prepared her food in front of her cupboard, where there were kitchen utensils and condiments.

In my day, we used oil stoves. To cook, each family had its kerosene stove and its kitchenware in the cupboard. The rest was brought from the half-cellar, *el mouna*, which they had in their room. In the kitchen, there was also a large wood burning fireplace, where the water was heated for the baths.

Every morning after breakfast, the kids were sent to the garden so that the mother could go about her business: preparing food, cleaning, etc. In the garden, the children, left to their own devices, kept themselves busy as best as they could, having fun, or arguing at times. With three or four families, we were a beautiful tribe of about fifteen children.

The garden was something primordial, vital. A particular space was reserved for market gardening, but we did not consume a lot of vegetables because we lacked water. We used to irrigate it with almost salty water, loaded with three to four grams of salt per liter. We also had a lot of fruit trees, and, of course, we weren't doing any chemical treatment back then. In good years, we had plenty of good fruit, and in bad years, we had less. In any case, and most of the time, we only ate fruits from the garden, which were mostly figs that we had picked and dried. Sometimes we added to that a few gifts from relatives who had better harvests than us. Other than that, my father only bought dry dates that could stand the test of time.

As a habit, we ate a little fish every night. The pataclelets, commonly called *Sbares*, were the essential element of our meals. We used to prepare this little fish in four or five different ways. So, each evening, we had a different dish: couscous, *borghol*, *mhamas*, barley bread sauce, etc.

Fishing was mainly coastal. It was done by fishermen who had a kind of fixed cages set up by the sea, the *drina*. These were used to catch fish, which could enter the cage but couldn't get out of it.

At sunrise, around five o'clock, the fishermen would discover their spoils: sometimes there were a few, sometimes a little more, and on bad days, nothing at all. The traders would buy the fish from the fishermen, then bring it to the place of sale at *el merkez* in Sakeit Eddaier. Basically, the trader would pick a maximum of thirty kilograms of different types of fish, and, fairly early, start selling them in the *Merkez*. Fish prices would go down when the sun went up, because there were no ice cubes and, of course, no cooling equipment. By late morning, the trader would either have nothing left to sell, or he would give the rest to poor people waiting nearby.

For our family, the sacred task of buying fish was done by one person, usually an uncle of mine. My grandmother, whom we called Ya, divided the fish into four small shares, since we were four families. Each family took their share of the fish and made their own dinner.

The men went out in the morning to work, and they did not come back until the evening. At noon, in their absence, we contented ourselves with vegetarian menus, because meat was rarely bought, once a fortnight or once a month.

At the time, only the richest could afford to buy meat once a week. Apart from that, on at least five out of seven days, we practically had small fish, sometimes larger fish, either sea bream or sea bass.

In principle, we all dined in *wist el borj*, each family in front of their door. *Wist el houch* was most of the time used for laundry. However, once a year, in August, it would house *el oula*: the annual provisions of couscous, *m'hames*, *borghol*, ground red pepper, etc. For this

occasion, the wheat was cleaned and then sent to the mill. The flour was then stored in the reserves.

Wist el houch communicated with the outside only through the chicane, called *skifa*. The *skifa* served as a buffer zone: it was made in a way that allows women to work comfortably without being seen by the men outside.

Wist el houch also led directly to the *erroi*, that is the place where the animals were kept. Each family had a donkey or a mule, and sometimes a horse-drawn carriage suitable for three or four people. The animals' food, consisting of barley and bran, was stored in a small enclosure in the *erroi*.

In the *erroi*, we always had about 10 chickens. Each of us knew his hen because from an early age my brothers and I used to raise chickens. Selling eggs allowed us to pay for our small school supplies, a notebook or a pencil, as well as to make ends meet during the weekend.

The house was protected by two doors: a door which closed the *borj*, and a door which closed *wist el houch*. Another small door, which was called *bab el khoukha*, opened onto a terrace which was used to collect rainwater, so as to make water reserves in cisterns dug in the ground called *majels*. We had two *majels* to have water all year round. Their capacity hardly exceeded 20 cubic meters for the whole family. In difficult years, when it didn't rain enough, we had to buy one, two or even three very expensive water tanks to supply the *majels*. The water of those *majels* was used only for drinking or preparing food. On the other hand, for our bath and our toilet, we used water from the well, which was salty and undrinkable. We washed using *tfaï*, which was compatible with the well's salty water.

If I am telling all these details, it is because the way we used to live is almost completely forgotten today in Tunisia.

In this regard, I would also like to mention the way utensils were made, for example, glasses. My father would bring empty wine or beer bottles that we filled with about ten centimetres of water and half a centimetre of oil. Then, we would take a small piece of fabric that we soaked in oil. This piece was then wrapped around the bottle at the dividing line between the water and the oil. As the oil spread heat over its entire surface, while the bottom of the water-filled bottle remained cold, the bottle broke at the level of the surface heated by the oil. Then, all we had to do was scrape the edges of the broken part on a cement surface, to smooth out the gaps and homogenize the surface. This is how we made glasses. Likewise, many other utensils were made by us, the children, such as knives from pieces of iron, spoons from pieces of wood. There were a few utensils that needed to be purchased, but they weren't many. We all ate from a large plate and there was no question of eating from smaller individual ones. In fact, each family had a maximum of two large plates and a few smaller ones.

All of this was happening, of course, in a time of war. That period was extremely difficult, but we were children; we were not aware of the hardships. I only saw the war occasionally, when the planes of The Allies launched flares into the sky to distinguish houses from camps.

We would run to our trench under the *tabia*, which served as our refuge whenever we saw approaching planes. It was covered with a few planks and branches of trees that had been pruned.

Moreover, it was this same wood that would also allow us to make bread. Oftentimes, it was not enough for us, for the whole year, and since it was not something that can be bought and sold, we would

go around the garden looking for twigs that are a few centimetres long to bring back to the house in order to prepare food.

We also had a cat, a dog, and often a lamb for Eid: the children took care of them.

One of the characteristics of the time was the fact that nothing was thrown away. I don't recall seeing anything in the garbage other than a jug, a broken glass, or a piece of iron that was no longer of use. Just so that people today realize it, I would point out that, back in the days, the weight of our garbage was hardly more than a kilo per year per person. This is how, in those years, we lived in harmony with nature. We weren't talking about the environment or the harmful effects of plastic and cardboard, which were not part of our waste.

My father worked in a small transport company. He had a goat in the garage that gave him milk. He regularly brought us one to two liters, which allowed us to have a good breakfast with milk coffee or *sohleb* (made of sorghum) in winter.

My mother was a real household fairy. With little means at her disposal, she managed to fend for herself, and meet all of our needs in a satisfactory manner. Of course, like all the other women, she didn't go to school, but she was extremely smart and wise. She also knew how to sew, and she was of service to everyone by making them dresses. When we had to buy fabric to sew one, we would buy an extra fifty centimetres to patch up the old ones, because in those years, there was no question of throwing away a garment because it had a hole in it. All that was needed was to add a patch to it, even if it was very visible, it didn't bother anyone. It was only for Eid that we allowed ourselves to make, or even buy, new clothes. Other than that, everyone would patch up their old clothes to give them new

life, and even if we put on some weight, we had the option of readjusting the outfit.

My grandfather was a barber, and, at the same time, he practiced traditional medicine: bloodletting, circumcision, wound care, fractures, etc. He always had a small wooden crate that contained tools and first aid supplies. He passed away in 1945. I knew that he didn't like me very much because I was very rowdy and I occasionally disturbed him in his sleep, unlike my grandmother who loved me so much. She was extremely kind. Oftentimes, when she didn't want to spend the night with my grandfather, she would apologize and use the pretext of having to take care of me. This made my grandfather furious: "Do you like this little rascal more than me?"

These are, more or less, my childhood memories up to 1946.

My Father's Principles of Education: Do or Die!

Unlike his brothers, my father didn't have the chance to go to school.

My eldest uncle did decent studies in French, and the youngest had even had the Arab diploma, the equivalent of the third year of secondary education, more or less. It was, at the time, an extraordinary thing. Not having the same level of education, my father had a humbler job than his brothers. He was a storekeeper in a small transport company that belonged to the two Zatas brothers, Greeks of Orthodox faith. The youngest was in charge of purchases and sales, and the oldest, Panayotis, was a mechanic. There was also a Jewish accountant in the company.

My father, an excellent employee, was the man to trust with storekeeping. I remember that during olive harvest season, he would often spend the night at work to wait for the trucks to come back and do their check-in. Apart from rare gestures of tenderness, my father raised us the hard way. He used to beat us for the slightest misbehavior. He absolutely wanted us to succeed in our studies and did not tolerate any weakness. “Do or Die!” was his watchword. He sometimes sent me back to school sick, feverish, and even with tuberculosis. We were very afraid of our father.

Among the anecdotes that marked my childhood, I remember this one: it was claimed that the soap used for the ablution of the dead had magical virtues, including that of hitting the person using it with fatigue and softening the work of their hands. So, sometimes my mother would bring some home for the same purpose.

My father had a *falqa* that he used to beat us up. He would also make us suffer with insults and annoyances, and call us names. The only thing that mattered to him was our success in school, whatever the price. To be honest, at that time, this way of educating children was commonplace.

There are sectors in which we are carried by the wind, we just have to spread our wings.

A. Ben Ayed – 1985

My Childhood in Sfax City, my Dyslexia, and my School Years

In 1946, we moved into a three-bedroom house in Sfax with my two uncles and my grandmother.

Unlike the *borj*, the center of this new dwelling was covered. My grandmother had really aged, and her main role was now to scale the fish or to babysit the kids. I remember her meticulous cleanliness: after taking care of the fish, she would always ask us to go get her orange leaves to rub her hands and dispel the smell. We called her *Ya*, never by her real name, Hafsa. She was our refuge, and our love for her was unconditional. My mother, we called her *Ommi*, my father, *Bouya* and my grandfather, *Oubbay*.

The house in Sfax was infested with fleas. My father sometimes took days off, specifically to kill those fleas that were hiding in the interstices of the walls and the wooden doors and cupboards. He used kerosene for the wood and the kerosene blowtorch for the walls.

All school-age children were enrolled in the modern Koranic school *Echabbab*, which initially was a basic Koranic school, but to which two more years had been added to teach French. Thus, our elementary school studies were spread over seven years and not five as in public school.

Most of the teaching in the first grades was based on the Koran and on religious sciences: *Koran*, *taouhid*, *fikh*. Regarding the French language, the classes were mainly focused on reading and dictation which were taught in the last grades.

In Sfax, I started my second year of elementary school in this establishment in 1946. I was a dunce. I was almost ranked last because I had a very bad first year of elementary school, of which I completely lost memory. I remember being ranked 81st out of a class of 82 students.

In the classroom, there were four students sitting at each table, and the rest of us were on our knees on the teacher's platform. I remember one day, coming back from the bathroom, I was struck by the smell of the classroom. I abruptly stopped at the entrance; the air was so unbreathable: over 80 rascals in a room of about 24 square meters with two windows that they never opened because it was freezing in winter.

My difficulties in school were due to my dyslexia which will not be diagnosed until much later, at the age of 50. Mr. Mezgheni, the teacher, was very hard on all of us. He only dealt with us through his baton. At all times, baton blows would fall on the palms of our hands, the tips of our fingers, and sometimes our ribs. As a matter of fact, in those years, no one could diagnose dyslexia, and I was classified as a bad student. I made a lot of spelling mistakes, and I was unable to learn a verse from the Koran. I could spend two hours repeating the same verse without remembering it. With the inability to understand the learning difficulties, my seven years of elementary school were a pure ordeal.

Almost five days a week, I received the punishment on the soles of my feet, the *falqa*, because I hadn't learned my lesson. Each time I

presented my report card to my father at the end of the month, I would always take off a number from my ranking by erasing it. So, when I was ranked 42nd, I would remove the 2 and become 4th, and when I was 81st, I would magically become 8th. As my father wasn't cunning enough to realize it, he didn't see through that! Still, it was a daily pain, and I was in real dismay because I was always bad at school. I would repeat my lessons for hours, but in vain; I wouldn't remember anything.

In 1947, my father bought an old house in Bab el Kasba. He converted it into a cute two-floor little house. The ground floor was made of the living room and my parents' bedroom. On the first floor, there was a room for my older brother who was starting to become a handsome boy, liked very much by my father since he bore his name. I shared the second upstairs bedroom with my three other brothers. As for my four sisters, they slept in the living room.

My older brother, Mohamed, had suffered from the effects of the war like all the young people of his age, and he failed at school. However, my father didn't want to hear any of that because his children had to excel, do well, and hold great positions in public administration.

Mohamed could not meet my father's expectations. The latter hoped that, through his son, he would be able to take revenge on life. He was getting harder and harder on us, and the corrections, of which I received plenty, were getting more frequent. By the way, my father, his friends, and a few teachers would boast to each other who had the best punishment technique. We were really dealt with through the baton.

Unlike my older brother and myself, my younger brothers Moncef, Abderrahmane and Ridha, were spared. Indeed, they were better students and that's how they escaped our father's wrath.

Mohamed was too old to sit for the secondary school entrance exam. As for me, I was also a few months past the maximum age. Luckily, and out of the blue, the school administration granted me an age waiver. I failed the June session, but miraculously, if I may say so, I got accepted in October. I was ranked second to last on the list of those who succeeded in the exam. My rank gave me access to the Houmet-Essouk secondary school in Djerba because there was no more room at the Sfax secondary school.

It was a real exam! Moreover, at that time, the bey exempted those who succeeded it from military service: a privilege for future young executives.

For my father, my success was unexpected. Finally, Mohamed Ben Ayed's son passed the secondary school entrance exam. It was a real celebration! "It doesn't matter that it is in the October session, that you are the penultimate on the list, and that you're going to Djerba: my son, you made it."

I was the first in the extended family (we were a hundred cousins) to achieve this feat. Yet, I opened the door to many others: After me, several cousins of mine graduated.

Following this, my father contacted an entrepreneur that he knew. This entrepreneur had a construction site in Djerba. Then, on a beautiful morning in October 1953, he drove me to the man's house and he put me, with my suitcase, in a van that was leaving for Djerba. I only had 500 old francs in my pocket for my small expenses for the whole semester.

My father, who had been extremely severe until I was admitted to secondary school, became friendly and sympathetic to me. The more I moved forward in my studies, the more pleasant his manners

and language became. Other than, of course, a few mood swings that spared no one, I no longer experienced the unpleasant effects of his wrath. We can say that from that moment on, I started to see his good side. Later, when I returned from my university studies, he went so far as to sell the family house to finance my project and allow Poulina to start up.

Life in Djerba was extremely difficult; the headmaster rented me a place in a five-bedroom traditional house, *dar arbi*. Each student was entitled to a cot, *branda*, in the form of two crossed planks covered with tarpaulin on which we slept, with neither mattresses nor pillows. To be honest, those were the regular beds of the time. I shared a room with three other people. We each had more or less three-square meters of personal space, and we shared a kitchen with about 30 people.

I had only spent one year in Djerba: luckily, Sfax Secondary School had an opening.

My academic performance had remarkably improved as the work required consisted less and less of memorization, and more and more of solving logical problems.

The Encounter with the Woman of my Life

At the age of 18, through my friend Mohamed Amine Kammoun, I met, for the first time, his sister Amina who was 14 years old. Her charm and her personality immediately won me over. We have had a great relationship. Back then, the equivalent of an engagement was to make a commitment by giving your word, which I did, after I passed the baccalaureate and before I left for college. The wonderful Amina will later become my wife, with whom I still am.

The Baccalaureate Year

During my baccalaureate years, one day in the fall of 1958, I suddenly had a severe pain in my left lung. I was feverish and had difficulty breathing. My mother, who usually treats me with olive oil, lemon and honey, immediately understood that this time was serious, and strongly insisted that my father take me to the doctor. I admit that it was on this occasion that I had my first medical consultation. The physician was called Doctor Khayat. He auscultated me on X-rays with his brand-new radioscope, one of the very first in Sfax. He informed us that I had a very serious illness, tuberculosis. He prescribed me some medicines, a long rest, and plentiful, rich food. I was then treated to special meals consisting of meat, eggs, etc. My mother deprived herself to feed me well. As for the medicines I had to take, they were repugnant and disgusting, but I had to consider myself lucky because they had only arrived in Sfax a few months earlier.

A week later, I was still very weak, but my father absolutely wanted me to go back to school. He was really angry; he thought I was being lazy. So, during the three months of my recovery, every morning, I was treated to five or ten minutes of insults of all kinds. It was also during this period that I got to know Hédi Brini, a friend of my brother Mohamed, who used to bring me yogurt that he made himself. Hédi and I have been great friends ever since; he was one of the first shareholders and board members of Poulina.

I eventually recovered, and even landed the first part of the baccalaureate in the October session of the same year. However, my relationship with my father was still tense. It only improved the following year, when I passed the baccalaureate. I don't think I had ever seen my father as happy as he was that day. My success was a sort of revenge for him. He even invited me to accompany him to

the fish market to buy what was needed for the party, and, of course, to receive the congratulations.

Another Health Problem

In that summer, during a trip to Bizerte organized by the Destourian youth to celebrate the success of Tunisian secondary school graduates, I had to experience another unfortunate episode which also almost took my life. I had a high fever that nothing could contain, I was rushed home, then hospitalized at the Bardo pneumo-phthisiology hospital; the doctors thought that the tuberculosis had come back. However, despite all the antibiotics I was given, my temperature was still high. I went through hell because of this disease, I weighed only 47 kg. One of my cousins who came to visit me had this thought: "But it's over for him!"

It was then that the young Doctor Gharbi, thinking it might have been Pott's disease, decided to attempt a surgery on my spine, while warning me that the chances of success were only 50%. Yet, upon reading the complementary tests he had ordered before the surgery, he exclaimed: "But this is atypical typhoid fever!" He explained to me that my tuberculosis history had oriented him to an infection of the intervertebral disc. He added: "You have finally conquered the disease, you don't need any more medicine, you can go home." Since that day, Doctor Gharbi has been a friend. Twenty years later, his son, Riadh, married my adopted daughter, Olfa Kallel.

My recovery was rapid and at the start of the school year, in perfect health, the young secondary school graduate that I was, was able to leave for Toulouse, for my higher education.

Each time someone insults Arabs, my reaction is to double my efforts. There is an extraordinary energy emanating from me, which prompts me to take up challenges.

A. Ben Ayed – 1984

My University Years

It was the first time I left my country. I realized that our idea of the outside world was biased, and that the Arab nationalist propaganda, broadcast by *Sawt el Arab* radio, was far removed from reality. Our civilization was completely behind compared to the western civilization. I couldn't help thinking that my former French teacher, whom I had denounced when I was in secondary school, said something that was not completely wrong: "You are the descendants of camel-riders."

My first years in France were extremely difficult. They weren't any different from the years I spent in Sfax, devoting almost all of my time to my studies. I never set foot in a café bar. I was working hard; it must be said that all my friends were doing the same. Apart from a few trips to the parks, and a few visits to Andorra, where products were zero-rated, we had no entertainment.

Because I didn't have a clear idea of my professional project, I decided to study everything related to agronomy, biology and chemistry. So, I obtained about ten certificates which allowed me to have several degrees, in addition to my diploma in agricultural engineering. I even got a certificate in oenology in case I ever needed it.

Interest in Industrial Poultry Farming

The idea of going back home to serve the country had been within me since the beginning of my university studies in France. However, despite a bright future as a senior engineer in the public administration, I kept thinking about an alternative in the private sector. Yet, the only business examples that I really knew in my hometown of Sfax were the oil mills and the alfa processing factories. I also was familiar with the fish canning factories that were based not too far away, in Mahdia.

In France, it was the era of the “glorious thirty,” *Les Trente Glorieuses*, in which the country was committed to massive industrialization. Back then, Industrial poultry farming was a new trend. Brought about by the Americans during World War II, it has started to establish its long-term presence in the country, and therefore caught my attention. Chicken consumption at that time did not exceed one chicken per week per family, and was not really part of the eating habits of the French. This situation was similar to that of Tunisia, where lamb meat was the first choice of Tunisian palaces, and fish that of coastal towns; chicken didn't sell in the country. That's because raising chickens used to be a Bedouin activity, carried out by rural women and children who would sell their chickens in the weekly markets. I had done it myself when I was a child, like all my brothers. In other words, raising chickens was far from being a noble and rewarding activity in Tunisia.

In the 1960s, even in France, there were no specialized magazines devoted to poultry farming. Yet, this didn't stop me from doing research and reading everything I could find about this field of activity. The idea of setting up an industrial chicken farm in Tunisia, like those getting started in France, was beginning to find its way. In particular, with the cost of living getting higher after independence, Tunisians were increasingly unable to afford meat.

In addition, due to forced collectivization, entire herds of sheep had been decimated; the owners preferred to slaughter their animals than to deliver them to the cooperatives.

At the height of collectivization in the late 1960s, the pressure on the sales of livestock got so tense that public authorities had to force butcher shops to open only three days a week. Yet, this project that haunted my mind was still merely an idea because of the lack of funding. Indeed, all those to whom I explained my industrial poultry farming project in Tunisia, listened to me politely but did not respond to my requests to participate in the financing of such a project.

The Gene of an Organizer

In Toulouse, the board of the association of engineering students' representatives had to be elected. I ran in the elections and made it, but I was ranked last. I was therefore entrusted with the management of the library which was the least important activity for the association. So, I created a kind of cooperative and was able to get important reductions from the suppliers. I started with books, then ended up supplying students with all kinds of products like shirts and even bicycles. I managed to obtain very good prices, hence the success of the cooperative. Gradually, my field of activities widened; I also took care of the organization of Saturday night parties, the famous booms, and even the big end of year party, the *agro* party.

At the end of the year, I got more discharge than all the other members of the student association board, and I was given two congratulatory motions. I realized that I was working for others, and that I actually liked it. Some have reproached me for this afterwards: they do not understand that by serving others, we are helped by them when we need them, and that life is full of accidents!

A Decisive Encounter

It was at the end of 1965, in Paris, that I completed my higher education, which had begun in Toulouse in 1959.

I spent six years in France: five years in Toulouse and then one year in Paris. I got married at the end of 1964, which allowed me to spend my last year in the new and beautiful residence reserved for married students in Montigny-le-Bretonneux. It was a very pleasant year; my training was almost over; my wife Amina was with me; life was not very expensive. My student grant allowed us to live well; it must be said that both of us weren't very demanding.

In the Paris of 1965, when we were a young couple of Tunisian students, I received a compatriot while he was on his honeymoon, Mohamed Bouzguenda. He was in the French capital with his young wife, Wahida Affès, whose family I knew because she was our neighbor in Sfax. The dinner was delicious, the singer Mohamed Jamoussi was there, the atmosphere was relaxed, and the discussions on the future of our young country Tunisia were going well. Newly independent, Tunisia was then committed to a new battle, that of economic development. At that time, this new battle was fought on several fronts, under the leadership of the first president, and historical activist, Habib Bourguiba, and the young, fiery, and charismatic super-minister Ahmed Ben Salah.

The evening continued in the streets of Paris. A new and solid friendship developed between the two of us, although everything seemed to separate us. Indeed, I was born into a middle-class family of nine children, who experienced the harshness of life, as well as struggle and deprivation under war and colonization. Mohamed Bouzguenda, on the other hand, was an entrepreneur who aimed to continue the development and modernization of his family's business. He was sincerely seduced by my speech. At that

time, I was an avid socialist; I only dreamed of coming back to my country, and of contributing to making it an important player in the game of nations. Add to that a touch of Arab nationalism, at a time during which Nasser inflamed the crowds, and Bourguiba gave his famous speech to Palestinians in Jericho. We were carried away by the enthusiasm of an open future in which everything seemed possible. Great Western powers, scarred by the war, had not yet established their hegemony over the world, while Arab nations dreamed of a union to be found. It is in this context that we, young Tunisians, were remaking the world.

One is in a stable situation when one is the arbiter and not the master.

A. Ben Ayed – 1984

My Take on Politics

The Political Small Aside in Toulouse

Being a Tunisian scholarship holder, I was not only engaged in soil engineering studies, but also in various other related specialties in which I earned a number of certificates. My goal was to become a senior engineer in the public administration. At that time, Tunisia was following the path of strong nationalism. All the young graduates who went back home put themselves at the service of an omnipotent public sector that organized and managed the life of a country under construction. Ben Salah's speeches glorified collectivism as the supreme value and the only means to promote solidarity. He found, among us, those belonging to the young generation, a very favorable echo. Naturally, our stay in the country of liberty and human rights, coupled with Ben Salah's speeches, only fuelled our determination to return home, to our country, and raise the living standards of a poor and enslaved Tunisian population, and hoist it to the rank of a rich and developed people.

In fact, the student life of young Tunisians in France was deeply marked by the political ideologies of the 1960s. I was quickly noticed and contacted by the leadership of the Socialist Destourian Party, *Parti Socialiste Destourien* (PSD). Party member Hédi Chaker, in an attempt to reduce the influence of the perspectivists of the time,

called me to ask me not to let Moncer Rouissi take the leadership of this movement. "It will be done," I replied.

Very quickly I organized meetings with the Destourian students and succeeded in seizing power with the agreement of all members. However, I have always maintained a sincere friendship and a deep respect for Rouissi, whose verve and charisma I admired.

I also participated in the elections of the General Union of Students of Tunisia, *Union Générale des Étudiants de la Tunisie* (UGET), and I managed to have the position of chairman. Unlike the PSD, the members of the UGET are elected by all the students.

The UGET congress was to be held in the summer, in Carthage, and representatives from Toulouse had to be sent. It was then that I was contacted by the PSD leaders who gave me a list of those they wanted to see represented in this congress. I informed them that the representatives must be democratically elected; It was then that a member of the PSD leadership told me: "Then make sure that these people are democratically elected and present at the congress." At that point, I understood that I was not made for politics, and that I will never do politics again in my life, despite all the proposals that were going to be on my path.

My Take on Bourguibism

Not only do I believe in it, but I think that it is Bourguibism that will win in the end. I was born with Bourguibism! When I was twelve, my grandfather had a kiosk in the medina of Sfax.

At home, we had neither radio nor newspapers. I used to go to his kiosk to read *Le Petit Matin* and *Assabeh*, secretly, without my father knowing about it. This introduced me to politics. In the early fifties, I learned the foundations of Bourguibism. Like everyone else, I was of course captivated by the character: A leader on his white horse, returning home after years of prison and struggle, and saluting the people who shouted his name. He had the charisma of a great actor and a great orator. His famous speeches are absolutely inimitable. He could manage to talk about almost everything, including the intimate details of his married life with Mathilde, his physiognomy and his daily life.

Years later, I attended some of his lunches myself. I remember we always ate really fast to keep up with him.

In fact, he could eat only liquid food. After finishing his meal, Bourguiba would look us in the eyes and start talking. We then would witness a real theater scene. I also remember one particular meeting: there were a dozens of us around the table when Bourguiba suddenly began talking about the circumstances of the assassination of Ben Youssef. He explained that he never directly ordered the murder of Ben Youssef, but that the latter was probably executed because he publicly expressed his grievances against Bourguiba. He gave an extraordinary twenty-minute speech at the table, brilliantly ending it by raising his arm and saying: "What I am telling you here is for history." Certainly, he was a master of words.

One day, when Bourguiba was on his way to Mornag Palace, he stopped in front of one of our first buildings that was still under construction; we were therefore quick to show him around. He obviously appreciated it! He even mentioned Poulina two or three times in his national assembly speeches.

I remember that when he was mentioning us on TV, Bourguiba stumbled over the name and hesitantly said "Pou... Pou..." The people present with him would discreetly prompt him: "Poulina!" However, beyond the myth, Bourguiba revealed his limits, as he was human like everyone else. History has revealed that he has his own weaknesses: these weaknesses will lead him to do, or let others do, the exact opposite of what he had announced.

I keep of Bourguibism its values, which I certainly share. Bourguiba had a sense of the state and its supremacy. In his speech on The Bey's dismissal, he himself explained the need to put our trust in institutions and not in men, because personal power inevitably leads to abuse.

Later, in the nineties, I used his words in one of the newsletters where I spoke about Poulina's management. I asked my staff to put their trust in the rigorous procedures that I had developed, and the institutions that I had anchored, and not in myself, who may be subject to the drifts of age.

Bourguiba imposed respect on all nations, on an international level, starting with neighboring countries. Not a single official would have dared to meet Bourguiba without wearing a tie. He would have been immediately reprimanded. In this regard, I remember that one day, during an awards ceremony, where he was going to offer a prize to a young poet, he noticed that the latter didn't have a tie on, and he caused a scandal. The results of the achievements that Bourguiba has offered to the country in a very short period of time are extraordinary. However, Bourguiba made some mistakes like that of the Bizerte war which resulted in a bloodbath. Moreover, he was influenced by the intrigues of the court that marked the end of his reign. It is important to stress that the first president of the young Tunisian republic stayed poor all of his life, and until he died. "When

I die, I will only bequeath my wardrobe.” This was the phrase he loved to repeat and to which he remained faithful. A few days before his death, it is said that he withdrew his small savings and distributed them to his staff. What we today call ksour Bourguiba are absolutely not palaces built for him as the name might suggest. These were dwellings of former settlers that became state domains, lightly furnished and intended to honor the regions he visited. That way, Bourguiba would be at home wherever he was in Tunisia. He never sought to enrich himself, or let his family do so, at the expense of the people. We grew up proud of our homeland.

Bourguibism is also essentially about the Tunisian exception, or the uniqueness of Tunisia, not only in the Arab-Muslim region, but also in the world. We are not like the others; decidedly, we are different. I am above all Tunisian and I embody an absolutely unique model. When people ask me about what defines me the most as a person, in terms of my thinking, my convictions, my faith or my vision of history and of the future, I respond: simply call me Ben Ayed the Tunisian.

My Take on Nour's Economic Policy

Hédi Nour is known for being the one who brought about the reversal of the Tunisian economy from collectivism to liberalism, saving the country from an inevitable bankruptcy. However, the man was much more complex than that. He was deeply socialist and humanist. Indeed, although he supported private initiatives, he always took measures which limited the formation of a very rich social class. He also wanted to avoid the geographic isolation of the population's different categories, favoring, therefore, the creation of wealthy neighborhoods alongside more working-class neighborhoods. The markers of these choices are still visible in

contemporary Tunisia, where the different social classes often live next to each other. It is also to him that we owe the development of a true middle class which has enabled Tunisia's economy to grow through consumption. Carrying out this policy was very delicate. The various measures had to be balanced in order to promote enrichment through entrepreneurial initiatives, and also, albeit to a lesser extent, through salaried work. The benefits granted to entrepreneurs encouraged risk-taking and innovation, but the level of wages also allowed the emergence of a middle class that could live comfortably. A clever mix that has made successful, not only Tunisia's economic model, but also its social model, enabling it to withstand various shocks, including the most recent one, that of 2011.

This is how, swimming against the alarming discourse denouncing the brain drain that marked the post-revolutionary situation, I have always insisted that the Tunisian diaspora is our one and only chance to be integrated into Europe.

Let's send a million experts to Europe; they will give us the benefit of new knowledge and, the day they come home, they will bring back an address book that is likely to multiply our capacities tenfold: this is the only way to bridge the gap between ourselves and civilization.

Part II

ABDELWAHEB THE VISIONARY

I knew that it was a futuristic project because it was going to meet a need that wasn't there yet, but that was going to manifest itself soon.

A. Ben Ayed – 2017

The Homecoming

Like all Tunisians benefiting from the Bourguibist social ladder, I had become a staunch socialist and Arab Nationalist. By the end of 1965, it was easy for me to let go of my entrepreneurial dream to join the ranks of the Tunisian public administration as a senior soil engineer. I had absorbed Ben Salah's fiery speeches. However, I soon realized that there was a huge gap between the tenor of those fine words and the reality of a working class that was ill-prepared for the spirit of cooperatives. Bourguiba, who dreamed of making Tunisia Africa's leading power, was already weakened by his health problems. He thought that he had found in Ben Salah the young and dynamic leader he could no longer be for his country. He gave him a carte blanche to transform young Tunisia. Ben Salah harangued the crowds and promised lasting prosperity for the poor and all those this land has forgotten.

Responsible for creating soil maps, I spent three to four days a week traveling through the country to visit the cooperatives. I was faced with a whole different reality when I saw the nonchalance and the lack of discipline of the workers, who were unable to stick to a schedule. The unreasonable aspect of the organization of the work shocked me. For example, the costs of transporting the barley crop from one depot to another exceeded the value of the crop itself. The levels of agricultural production were plummeting because workers

did not know how to plan and manage the activity of the cooperatives under their responsibility.

The country was beginning to experience its first shortages. Despite this, and afraid of being sanctioned by their superiors, officials continued to apply the policy of collectivization, turning a blind eye to the disastrous results they observed on the field. My young colleagues and I, as engineers, condemned this policy. It was sheer madness! We were heading straight for disaster with this collectivism; I kept repeating it to my colleagues, but no one dared to say out loud what we were whispering to one another.

It only took a year for me to feel completely cramped in my clothes of a collectivist state official. I was suffocating! Disillusioned, I watched my country walking towards an inexorable decline with a socialist dictatorship that is ravaging the economy. I therefore decided to write a letter to Ben Salah, to explain the catastrophic effects of his policies. Once again, my colleagues strongly dissuaded me from doing so. "Showing your opposition to the almighty Ahmed Ben Salah will be met with the harshest punishment," they warned me.

Poulina's Genesis

In my heart, I further realized that the country could not feed these future generations that are getting more and more numerous. The birth rate was significantly higher than that of agricultural production. The gap was only getting wider. That's when the idea of poultry farming got resurrected. Developing a good-quality, available, and affordable protein was a great project. I talked about it to anyone who could potentially help me fund it. They listened to me with a distracted and amused ear, including those who later became shareholders in the group. An engineer who returns home

after many years of studying in France to raise chickens. What a funny idea! Faced with many closed doors, I decided to leave the country to go to Canada where I had just landed the position of professor of pedology, and where my wife was going to be able to continue her medical studies.

Around this time, in December 1966, I met Abdelhamid Bouricha and Mohamed Bouzguenda at a party. The latter had not forgotten the warm welcome I had given him in Paris during his honeymoon. I told them about my decision to go to Canada which is due to the absence of funding for my project.

It was then that Mohamed Bouzguenda told me: "You're not leaving the country! No way! How much do you need for this project?" I told him that the sum of 15,000 dinars could allow me to launch the business.

Out of friendship and not wanting to see me go to the other side of the world, Mohamed Bouzguenda offered to give me a part of the sum, simply telling me: "Give us a farm, so that we can pick some fruits, and then raise chicken or whatever you want." It's because at that time, even fruits became scarce in Tunisia due to the consequences of the collectivization of land. Eating an apple became a luxury.

Abdelhamid Bouricha, who was among the first Tunisians to graduate from the High Commercial Studies Institute (IHEC) in Tunis, was immediately won over by my idea of industrial chicken farming, and also decided to contribute to the initial investment. Open-minded, attracted by innovations and new ideas, he truly believed in the viability of my project.

They kept asking me questions throughout the whole evening. In my head, the way to go was clear. Thus, the more I developed my

vision of the project, the more they seemed convinced. I was finally in front of two people who were really interested in my idea. It was a miracle; I came to this party to announce my departure, I returned home with two business partners and a deal. It was the involvement of these first two partners, out of friendship and interest in the project, that eventually convinced other future shareholders to contribute to the initial investment.

Despite the mentality of those times, for which poultry farming was a Bedouin activity, I was able to convince a group of friends to join the adventure, and I went for it! Back then, I couldn't rely on the help of the state, nor that of the banks. I was faced with two choices: give up, or fight to make my dream come true. The desire to make my dream come true was the strongest; I therefore put all my energy into concretizing it.

In order to allow me to pay my share, my older brother, Mohamed, got help from a mutual friend, Hédi Brini, to convince my father to sell the small family house in Sidi Ilyes (Sfax) for 3000 dinars. The first round was thus completed, allowing the formation of half of the required capital, 7,500 dinars. The adventure has begun!

In 1967, when I undertook the first official steps to launch Poulina, I was still working as an official. In fact, my hierarchical supervisor, Lassaad Ben Osman, the director of heavy-duty works at the Ministry of Agriculture, refused my resignation. He explained to me: "It's like the military here, we trained you to serve your country, we won't let you start your own business."

To convince him, being a young state official, I explained to him that my project was that of a cooperative, standing therefore in line with the country's policy. However, he was uncompromising; he held on to his position and did not allow me to resign to run the cooperative. Losing my calm, I replied: "In any case, I will leave, even if it was to

sell glibettes and offer them to you when you go to the municipal theatre with The Mrs.”

So, I had to register Poulina in my wife’s name, who thus became its first CEO or manager. The financial collector in charge of my file did not hide his astonishment; he openly told me: “It’s been a long time since I saw someone come and register a new company, I’ve only seen closures for a while. Are you sure of your decision?” The following year, in 1968, I finally managed to leave the Ministry of Agriculture and take the lead of Tunisia's first industrial chicken farm, Poulina.

Humble Beginnings

The beginnings were very humble. I bought a piece of land in Mornag to start the farming business, and quickly had a house built there to be able to be on the spot all the time. My wife dropped out of medical school to study for a bachelor's degree in biology and become a high school natural sciences teacher. I taught her the basics of bookkeeping and she started managing the first records. I did everything: I was the architect, the concrete engineer, the administrator, etc. I was investing in trades that did not exist at all in Tunisia.

Everything was to be imagined, created and built: buildings for the chickens, their food, breeding equipment, slaughter system, etc. The devices we used to have were rudimentary. For example, we used to have a cart that transported 120 chickens, in cages, to the slaughterhouse. When we compare it to our current trucks which allow the transport of 6,000 to 8,000 chickens, we can easily see how far we’ve come.

I read documents, I researched, I learned how to do the job, and, then, each time, I trained someone else to do it to meet the needs of the company. Thus, I taught an apprentice mason the trade of chicken farming; I trained a driver in customs clearance, etc. Some, like Abdelaziz Guidara who joined us when he was only 18 in 1968, are still working with us. There were also no suitable veterinary drugs; we would therefore take human drugs, extract the active ingredient, and adapt them to treat chickens. My wife has helped us a lot in this department. Poulina's strategy, born out of those years when conjecture was difficult, was to create any product that is needed for the growth of the business. Once Poulina had established itself, I applied this method to various products I discovered during my various trips: metal construction, cold meats, detergents, margarine, earthenware, and packaging. As for tourism, that's another story; the birth of The Medina is my cultural dream: to see the history of my country brought together in the same small town so that the world can discover Tunisia by walking in the same space.

Because in my head the way to go was clear, in the second year of Poulina's existence, vertical integration started to take place; we installed a workshop to build the breeding equipment (feeding and drinking troughs, heating, etc.).

The canteens of public structures such as schools or hospitals were our first customers. They were seduced by the idea of a constant and regular supply of protein, which was then provided by Poulina's chickens and eggs. At that time, refrigeration equipment was scarce and expensive. We therefore had to deliver all of our products in the morning.

Having a scientific background, I didn't have a lot of knowledge in management and finance. I had the honor of meeting four particular people, who supported me in this department. This is how I was

able to have what I call a comprehensive training. I dedicate the following sections to these people to express, from the bottom of my heart, how grateful I am to all of them.

The first is Abdelhamid Bouricha, one of the first Tunisian accountants and also one of our first shareholders. His advice was golden. He was a real source of knowledge, continuously training and guiding me.

The second is Taoufik El Kalaï, the former director of tax, then director of customs, then director of the UIB bank. At the time, he was embroiled in a dark financial story. In my opinion, his collaborators must have manipulated him because he didn't master computer tools. He was put in jail, in an absolutely unfair way. It is certain that those who made mistakes must face trial, but someone like him couldn't have harmed Tunisia. He is a patriot who has dedicated his career to serving his country; I'm sure he did nothing of what he was accused of.

The third is Sadok Bahroun, former Director of Planning, then CEO of the Tunisian-Saudi Bank. He was a real builder who participated in the building of Tunisia. He was the chairman of the finance committee of which I was a member. Sadok knew that many of our members didn't understand financial matters. To make it easier for us, he gave us skill sets of exceptional quality. It was as if we were at university. Personally, I took the time I needed to gain an in-depth understanding of financial concepts, taxation, and government affairs, which are subjects covered in the skill sets. He was a real teacher!

Finally, the fourth is Ahmed Abdelkefi, a businessman specializing in the financial sector. He taught me a lot about finances. I have fond memories of the discussions that we carried on for hours as

we walked around. He loved to build. So, both of us had the same needs, but in different sizes.

The Formation of a Team of Poulina's Pillars

Until 1972, growth was at 300% per year. To support this growth, we had to recruit. The main problem we faced was that young graduates were in no hurry to come and work in a little-known low-value industry such as industrial poultry farming. Some of our recruits did not tell their families that they worked for us, a company that sells chickens, for fear of being taunted by those around them! In addition, at that time, there was a great demand for young Tunisian executives by the public administration to replace foreigners who were returning to their countries of origin in waves.

It was then that someone called Mohsen Kallel applied to join Poulina. He was an elementary school teacher by training who became CEO of the Regional Transport Company of Sfax (SORETRAS, which resulted from the nationalization of the former Greek transport company where my father used to work). I accepted his candidacy and he resigned from the public service. Mohsen was getting more and more exasperated with a union that was giving him a hard time. However, as I said, raising chickens was hardly rewarding back then.

In Sfax, every morning, workers would gather at the entrance area to *Bab Il Jebli*, the terminal bus stop. The first days after his resignation, when Mohsen Kallel passed through *Bab Il Jebli*, SORETRAS workers would shout "*cluck cluck cluck, the eggs, the eggs!*" referring to the street sale of eggs in the weekly souks of Tunisian towns and villages.

It would have taken much more than that to discourage Mohsen Kallel who took up duty, by my side, to manage, with the calm and rigor of old school teachers, the administrative aspects relating to the purchase and sale, basic accounting, and Poulina's overall finances. Mohsen was committed to his new role day and night. His methods breathed new life into Poulina.

Since he came along, I have been able to devote myself to what I do best: technique, innovation and development. In the beginning, I was also fortunate to have the assistance of Abdelaziz Guidara. One of Poulina's first employees, he perfectly made concrete all of the sketches of poultry equipment that I had conceived. The company would therefore experience a new impetus that will lead it to the highest paths of growth.

Mohsen Kallel was a brave fighter. He traded his position as CEO of a large public transport company for managing a poultry company, which was really incongruous. It is always with great emotion that I recall the journey of my friend Mohsen Kallel, who left us suddenly, and too soon, with his wife, in a car accident.

At his funeral, the extended Kallel family reunited. One of his brothers came to me and asked if I could take care of his children. I immediately accepted this honor in memory of my late friend Mohsen Kallel. I became the legal guardian of his two daughters, Olfa and Fayrouz, and of his son Maher, until they all got married. It was I who gave the two daughters away on their wedding and accompanied Maher to ask for the hand of his bride.

I will say of the late Mohsen Kallel that he was a fierce fighter for the independence of our country, which led him to spend his 20th birthday in a French prison and earned him a death sentence. It was actually thanks to the independence that he got released.

After Mohsen Kallel in administrative affairs, I found in Moncef Kriaa the man to lead the design office. Having landed at SNCFT, the National Company of Tunisian Railways, after studying at the Polytechnic School in Milan, he found himself in charge of the library, due to an anti-conformism that was not to the taste of his superiors. When I asked him to join Poulina, he had one condition: maintaining the level of salary he received at SNCFT, which I did.

Therefore, in 1975, with the arrival of Kriaa, Poulina found itself endowed with a real expertise in civil engineering and in steelwork, which allowed the construction of the infrastructure and equipment that paved the way for the progressive modernization of the company. To complete this task, we also called on the best technicians from the workshops of SNCFT where Moncef Kriaa had worked. As these workshops only operated in the morning, Moncef Kriaa made the technicians work part-time in the afternoon, calling on their skills to develop our many construction sites.

The team was further strengthened, notably with the creation of a position for the front office. I ended up training a man of easy contact who relieved me of all the tasks relating to administrative authorizations, which are often long and complex in our country. Abdelmajid Fekih, an old elementary school friend, and a former physics teacher in Kairouan, also joined Poulina's ranks to manage the food sector. These reinforcements allowed me to fully focus on technical activities and innovation.

From the start, despite the lack of training and adequate experience of the majority of those who joined us, I managed, through personalized supervision, to instil in them the necessary technical and managerial skills that allowed them to run enterprises within the group. This practice is still relevant today, which makes Poulina the first skill incubator in Tunisia.

It was never a blind imitation, but rather an intelligent adaptation of modern techniques to the economic and human realities of our country.

A. Ben Ayed – 1984

Modernizing the Business

The Ransom of Early Success

The early years of the young Poulina company, which was a victim of its own success, were not easy. We had barely blown our 5th candle, when the blows of our competitors started to fall. I am specifically referring to an Italian company selling poultry equipment which had just set its foot in Tunisia. Despite the quality of its products, not a single client was won over. To destabilize us, its local representative made an irresistible offer to four of my main collaborators. The offer tripled the salary they were receiving in Poulina, and included tempting benefits: accommodation, a car, a new suit, and a Samsonite briefcase.

As they liked and respected me very much, the four of them came to talk to me about it, asking me to allow them to leave. I told them, "You are free to go!" Three of them immediately decided to leave and resigned; the oldest in the job, Abdelaziz Guidara, asked for my advice. I openly told him my opinion: "If you leave, you make a mistake, but your future lies in your own hands, I don't want to influence you." He was ultimately the only one who stayed and saved his career. The others, without the guidance and organization

of the Poulina system, were unsuccessful, and ended up being fired by their new employer.

Often referred to as a school of executives, for the quality of our organization, the rigor of our procedures, and the modernity of our management methods, Poulina has always constituted a recruitment pool for other Tunisian companies. I have to admit that it has always been a great source of pride for me.

« It is normal that several employees and executives conceive of Poulina as a school and a signature brand in their CVs. That's the essence of Poulina's existence. »

The Secretary of State for Training and Employment, 2001.

Even if some of those who chose to leave have had successful careers, several individuals that stood out for their excellence while working for Poulina have been very disappointing elsewhere. I think that this situation is explained by the fact that Poulina is a well-oiled machine, in which each element shines through the specific function it is given.

Each company has its own culture, its own context and its own ecosystem. When an employee leaves Poulina, he puts at risk the support that allowed him to fully deploy his skills, and he loses the unique and special character of his contribution. I would like to point out that in Poulina, each of our employees owes their place and all the resulting advantages to their expertise and their skills. This is one of the basic recruiting rules in Poulina: No family members of the company's shareholders are recruited as employees. I have

only made very few exceptions, due to the merits of the people involved.

I think this is one of the main keys to our company's success: the prevention of conflicts of interest between shareholders and employees.

The Disappearance of Mohsen Kallel

The distribution of tasks, among Kallel as an administrator, Kriaa as a builder, and Ben Ayed as a developer, constituted Poulina's first success. The untimely death of Mohsen Kallel was a real disaster for the company; Kallel left the entire administrative and organizational department of Poulina completely dysfunctional.

As I am used to reading everything, to learn and evolve, this time, I had to immerse myself in management and accounting books.

At that point, a book that would revolutionize the way I think about management came into my hands: *High Output Management*, by Andrew Grove, CEO of Intel. In 1985, the book received the Harvard Grand Prize for Management Book of the Year. I was then strongly inspired by the principles laid down by this American captain of industry to revolutionize Poulina's management methods. In particular, I drew from it the precept that every collaborator needs a system to orient him and a scale to evaluate him. Throughout my career, I have continued to draw on ideas from the American school in the areas of management, finance, marketing, human resources, etc.

Paradoxically, the economic crisis in which the country was at that time, in the mid-1980s, provided an opportunity for the recruitment of senior executives in Poulina. Indeed, in 1986, Prime Minister Mzali made the decision to no longer automatically recruit new

university graduates into the public sector. As the state could no longer afford to recruit them, many of them accepted to work for the chicken farmer. With this new wave of recruitment, I quickly noticed the fierce resistance of some of my collaborators. I decided therefore to create a separate Research and Development Unit in a rented apartment near the head office.

I can say that the launch of this team was a turning point for the company. Until then, due to the unavailability of skills on the market, I had always relied on my instincts in developing Poulina. I therefore took this opportunity to form our first R&D team, in order to deepen our methodologies and modernize our approaches.

The new R&D team was led by Maher Kallel, who arrived in Poulina with degrees from the *École des Mines* in Paris and MIT in the USA. He took these young executives under his wing and started work to implement my new Andrew Grove-inspired vision of management. The isolation of these new recruits allowed them to work freely, and thus, to offer innovative solutions to modernize the accounting and management methods that Poulina was relying on back then.

It should be noted that keeping rudimentary managerial methods was impossible due to the growth and diversity of the group.

A Revolutionary Management

The implementation of the new management system didn't make the elders happy; many of them did not accept this questioning of their old ways of doing things. In the face of the wave of modernity that was overwhelming the company, many of them gradually jumped ship. Poulina has often been criticized for letting its executives slip away after a few years spent in its ranks. I admit that the Poulina system is demanding, and that not everyone can adapt

to its philosophy. It is therefore normal for some to leave it after having tried to hold on to it. It is also with pride that I say this: We are training all these young people for the sake of Tunisia!

The end of the 1980s was a time of transformation for Poulina, using key tools like clear dashboards and transparent accounting. I had very quickly imposed this work methodology in my company, even before the advent of the new Tunisian chart of accounts, issued at the end of the 1980s, which definitively instituted it. These changes were not easy to make, as Poulina was often a pioneer, and as the internal teams did not always understand their necessity. Despite the resistance I had been met with, I kept moving forward, and the future, oftentimes, proved me right. In the meantime, the fiercest opponents of these changes were leaving, giving way to younger, more educated, and often more open-minded executives. This permanent steady march towards modernity has enabled Poulina to maintain a fairly young age structure in its ranks. The company was getting older, but not its executives, who were constantly renewed, based on the natural selection induced by the high standards I had imposed.

I don't hide my joy for having managed to summarize the consolidated results of the activities of the entire Poulina group in one dashboard. Setting up our database took years and years of work. This dashboard system made it easier for us to find any information about the group or any of its subsidiaries. I would often have fun with it, even challenge my friends and employees by saying, "Ask me about any information and I'll get it for you from this one board." I have never hesitated to share these novelties, especially with young people. In fact, I recall an anecdote; during a conference talk given at IHEC in 1993, to impress my audience, I tried to show them the detailed workings of my famous one-page dashboard, but the university's server wasn't powerful enough, and the demonstration couldn't take place. This reveals the

technological backwardness that our prestigious universities showed.

The Place of the Human Being and the Place of Procedures

I conceive of these years as fantastic, especially because the company was more and more structured around its human and social axis. This made me particularly happy, because I was convinced that social peace was necessary to make a community function harmoniously.

From my many readings in psychology and sociology, as well as from the observations that I made over the years on the way employees operate, I have drawn several deep convictions, including the following:

- Man doesn't like to submit to the authority of others and if he does, it's out of fear.
- Man doesn't like having a direct boss who controls and follows him everywhere.

In order to remedy this, impersonal procedures, where the authority of the leader gives way to that of the rule, must be put in place. One might challenge a leader's decision by simply talking to him, but one can only comply with a procedure.

Accordingly, I built my managerial policy around the establishment of a set of rules, rites, habits, procedures, democratically adopted by the employees, who must naturally abide by them. For example, so as not to take forever to make a decision, if a proposal presented by one of the group's collaborators does not receive an objection

within a timeframe previously agreed upon, it automatically becomes a procedure or a decision.

In addition, taking these reflections as a starting point, an entire operating system centred around meetings was also born. Indeed, I noticed that the executives were not used to expressing themselves in groups and in public, even though it is very important. To remedy this, I came up with the idea of setting up meetings at all levels of the company.

At the beginning, I would push employees to speak for a predetermined period of time by going around the table, respecting a certain order. I taught them to speak their mind clearly, without being aggressive and without interrupting each other. It was a real learning experience!

Starting with the legendary Wednesday meetings, which bring together all of the group's leaders, they have been held for nearly fifty years in an unchanging manner. A true institution, the Wednesday meeting is reserved for major decisions. On a weekly basis, the results of one of the group's activities are examined in minute detail. The meeting would start just after working hours. It often extends into the evening, punctuated by a dinner which gives all the managers of the subsidiaries the opportunity to meet and talk. I conceive of this communication as essential, because I sincerely believe that it makes professional relations between the executives of the different structures more fluid. The first Wednesday meetings would last until 1.AM.

As for the specific day choice, Wednesday was chosen because at the time, the evenings for executives, who were mostly French-speaking, were organized according to the broadcasts of *Antenne 2*. For them, *Antenne 2* was a real breath of fresh air in the very limited audiovisual environment of the 1980s and 1990s. Tuesday

was sacred, because it's the movie-of-the-week night on Armand Jammot's show *Les Dossiers de l'Écran*. The same goes for Thursday, with the show *Au Théâtre Ce Soir* which was also very popular. Also, by excluding Monday, the already busy start-up day, and Friday, the last day of the week when fatigue sets in, the choice of Wednesday was obvious.

Wednesday meetings have gradually become more professional. Nowadays, the management control office at the head office assists the director of the subsidiary, who is responsible for presenting, for an hour and a half, the activity of his structure. Management controllers verify the compliance of the presented figures, which helps prevent errors and omissions. Many think that this is just a presentation meeting. Yet, this meeting has become an opportunity for a real training of the senior executives in public communication. This system also makes it possible to institute a polyvalence of skills. Each one of the present employees discovers a new activity every Wednesday, a new technical or managerial function.

The importance I have always given to communication led me to institute, within each department of each of the group's entities, a weekly meeting, every Tuesday afternoon. As for the directors of each of these entities, they meet with their heads of departments every Thursday afternoon. The goal is to always promote permanent relations between the employees of each structure. In this regard, meetings are a favorable framework for sharing and communication. They should make it possible to resolve, through discussion, most of the problems the company may face. In addition, laborers and workers were no longer excluded from these sharing opportunities.

Inspired by the Minorange Companions, instituted by the French group Bouygues, I also created Poulina's Companions, to bring together the remarkable employees, who have distinguished

themselves by their exemplary behavior and dedication to the company. Various benefits and advantages would then be granted to the deserving employees. A real hierarchy with its rites of progression and its social assistance system has been established.

Poulina's First Internal Newsletter

In 1990, Poulina published what was to be considered one of the first internal corporate newsletters in Tunisia. Entitled *Poulina Info*, the first issue appeared in July 1990, 23 years after the group's launch. I myself wrote the editorial, and gave it the title *Bâtir*, "Build." In it, I outline my vision of work, effort and the need to build, in order to leave a trace, a work, to last after I'm gone. On the following pages, the company's managers, one by one, talk about training programs, present their backgrounds, etc. There is even a section that deals with the virtues of good nutrition. This newsletter also contains a summary of all the assignments carried out by company executives, their duration, their purpose, and even their cost. In one of the issues, there even appeared an unauthored article entitled "Beware of my old age," which alluded to the risks of dictatorial drifts felt at that time. A few years later, in 1993, this great initiative came to a halt, due to the storms the group had to endure.

For 34 years, we have not ceased to cultivate this principle of action because we believe, as proved by experience, that there is no success better than that of honorable men and women recognized as such by everyone.

A. Ben Ayed – 1998

The Decade of Curbed Ambitions

Faithful to my principle of not getting involved in politics, I stayed away when Zine El Abidine Ben Ali became the strongman of the country in November, 1987. As a Tunisian businessman, the best way to serve my country, what I did best and what I was successful at, was work and innovation. I therefore continued to do everything in my power to develop a modern group of companies, like those I encountered when visiting the world's major international fairs.

To assert my apolitical stance, I made sure to give off implicit messages to show that I had no problem with those in power. Despite this, the pressure built up to the point where I had to put more effort into protecting the group. This is why I renamed Poulina's Companions, to become the Companions of Change, referring to the change of the 7th of November. I also made the decision to hold the general assembly of the group on November 7 of each year. I also helped finance the campaigns and festivities organized by the ruling party.

All these precautions are also due to the persistent rumors claiming that the Sfaxians were seeking to seize power. These rumors were sent to the ears of the President of the Republic by some envious souls who were carefully cultivating them. They were utterly unfounded, especially that it is common knowledge that Sfaxians

are good at doing business, but have no interest in politics. A withdrawal, and a preference, which, I think, go back to the fight against French colonization.

Sfaxians had represented the fiercest resistance against the implementation of the Bardo Treaty of 1881 which established the French protectorate in Tunisia. This resistance led the city and its inhabitants to suffer severe sanctions thereafter. I would later immortalize this moment of our national history in a wall mural that can be admired in The Medina of Hammamet; it shows brave Sfaxian youth courageously opposing the French fleet.

The Story of the Sfaxian Plot

Outside observers were watching Poulina more and more. Everything that was done there was interpreted as participation in a conspiracy against those in power. Thus, the organization of Poulina's Companions was seen as an attempt to form an "army" that is wholly committed to the will of its leader and supposedly ready to help overthrow the regime. It was even compared to certain secret societies such as the Freemasons.

Despite these various intimidations, we continued our development, mainly in IT. With particular interest, we were up to date with the technological trends, as well as the various software which appeared on the international market. At the time, we discovered a financial software that had advanced capabilities allowing the optimal cash flow management of a group of our size. More specifically, the software allowed us to jointly manage the cash flow of all the accounts of the group's subsidiaries. Thus, we could immediately detect which ones had a cash surplus and which ones needed financing. This allowed us to optimize our financial management. Transfers between surplus subsidiaries and loss-

making subsidiaries were made transparently, via our banks, between the accounts of the relevant subsidiaries. We were proud of this achievement.

One day, while walking a guest around our offices, I proudly introduced him to our new approach to financial management. While explaining it to him, I used a metaphor; I said: "I created a small internal bank which allows the beneficiary subsidiaries to compensate the loss-making subsidiaries of the group." That was enough for the accusations of creating a state within a state to come from all sides.

In addition, the presence of the majority of Sfaxians in key sectors of the primary needs of the population, such as semolina, pasta, meat and oils, fuelled the rumor that this hegemony was part of a well-woven strategy consisting in monopolizing a sensitive sector for citizens. This monopoly would create a shortage of essential products in the country and would aim to create a climate that is favorable to riots, and to the revolt of a starving people who would want to overthrow the regime.

That's how the conspiracy theory gloriously spread, conveyed by all kinds of people, and even by officials at the helm of large national institutions such as the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA). I confess that in recounting this episode, I have the impression that I am describing a Hollywood scenario! Yet, it is the sad reality that we had to endure. The final blow was to come from what has come to be known as the Mansour Moalla affair, which made of Poulina the number one enemy. The story began in 1992. Back then, Moalla was CEO of the International Arab Bank of Tunisia (BIAT). Faced with the wave of privatization and liberalization of the Tunisian economy, undertaken under the diktat of the IMF and the World Bank, Mr. Moalla, fearing that all this mass of new cash would go into the coffers of foreign banks, suggested

to several of his friends, including myself, to create a new investment bank to bring together capital from the various regions of Tunisia. We were excellent BIAT clients, and besides, I couldn't say no to my friend Mansour Moalla. However, it was an embarrassing situation for those in power. I decided therefore to participate with a symbolic amount of money, and I sent someone to represent me during the inaugural meeting of the bank. Likewise, I kindly refused to be a board member. This, however, did not prevent us from suffering, starting from 1993, the wrath of the administration, in the wake of BIAT and Moalla. These episodes coincided with the rise of a parallel power following the President's marriage.

Hostilities were made public with an article published in the Tunisian daily *La Presse* on June 5, 1993. The article said that some people were threatening the security of the country, that they had created an organized companionship for this purpose, that they met with balaclavas on their heads in obscure basements, engaging in illegal activities and swearing on the Koran, and that they were very powerful and even owned a bank. We were the only ones who had an organization for companionship, but what this article was about was so absurd that I didn't want to believe it. It was so far from our state of mind. One of my associates, Abdelhamid Bouricha, called me in worry. A few days later, another newspaper reproduced the same article, then a third one, then a fourth. We therefore understood that the war was on and that we had to prepare for retaliation.

The rumors of the so-called Sfaxian alliance against the regime did not cease, finding pretexts in the events that were taking place. The fact that Ben Ayed gave two talks, one at IHEC in 1993 and the other at ISG in 1994, was interpreted as an attempt to make the country's youth rally to this imaginary alliance. This idea would never have occurred to me; my only motivation was to share my

experience, but the reality of things hit me hard and I had to decide to be more discreet. It wasn't long before things that I had anticipated happened, and my troubles with the tax authorities started. They kept me busy for quite a while.

The Adjustment that Almost Put an End to Poulina

At the beginning of 1993, Poulina was notified of an imminent tax audit. This is how the group was invaded with tax inspectors who spent months scrutinizing the accounts of all the subsidiaries. At one point, there were more tax auditors in our premises than employees. They checked everything: personnel records, building permits, bank accounts, etc. Our banks told us that our business was clean, that we had nothing to worry about. This would have been the case if we didn't consider the ingenuity of certain inspectors, and the bad faith of those in the shadows. This is how, in the conclusions of their report, they decided to consider cash transfer transactions between the group's subsidiaries as commercial transactions that should have been accounted for. The verdict is in. The group owes the government 104 million dinars! It was an amount that we obviously didn't have and which quite simply meant the end of Poulina.

As we didn't have the required sum, we had no choice but to challenge the tax authorities' decision in court to claim our rights. The men in the shadows were pulling all the strings: it was clear that Poulina had very little chance, but we didn't have any other options. Following our legal action, several arbitration meetings were held between the judge, the Tax Department and our representatives. Miraculously, we stumbled upon an honest judge. He quickly understood the bottom line of the story, and ordered the inspectors to reassess their conclusion by treating the transfers as loans and

to impose a charge on the uncollected interest. An agreement was finally concluded: Poulina will have to pay 4 million dinars with interest, which amounted to 5 million dinars. The agreement was formalized in the meeting minutes. However, it didn't last long, because a month later the company was informed that the agreement had not been accepted in high places, and that if the 100 million dinars were not paid, the court would follow up the case.

The twists and turns of this story lasted for years. Two of my main executives, Slaheddine Langar and Mohsen Toumi, were arrested at their workplace for gruesome cases of corruption that were mounted against them. Some staff members started to jump ship. The partners were getting more and more distant. This period was very difficult; I was convinced that there was nothing more to do, and that Poulina was going to disappear. Verdicts started to fall one after the other. Yet, I kept going to work as usual; my associates and staff were astonished by my attitude. I was nevertheless relieved when my two executives were released, once again, thanks to a judge of integrity who was able to resist the various pressures exerted on him.

An Unhoped-for Denouement

One Sunday, in September 1997, Mohamed Ghenima, who knew me because we were both members of the municipal council of the city of Ezzahra, called me to tell me that the President of the Republic wanted to meet with me on Tuesday, September 27, at Carthage Palace. This surprised me a lot because I never requested an audience. It goes without saying, however, that I went to the palace on Tuesday. When I arrived, the Chief of Protocol warned me: "Just say Yes Mr. President, don't make any comments, and you will be fine."

The audience was courteous. The president and I spoke about many things, ranging from computerization to Ottoman sultans. The President praised my qualities and said that if there were three men like me, the country would have gotten rid of underdevelopment. He also told me: "I spent the whole day reading your file, you are very unique." Then, he assured me that he was going to wipe out a part of our tax adjustment and added, "even if you have to pay more, consider it a contribution to the country." Following the instructions of the Chief of Protocol, all I could do was to accept, and to thank him.

Coming out of this audience, I felt like I had moved from hell to heaven. I hastened to call my associates and my collaborators. We were then convinced, in view of the cordial audience that I had been granted, that it was the men in the shadows who were at the origin of all of our misfortunes. What was considered the most serious external incident in Poulina's life was fortunately over. However, the group lost a lot of feathers, as it cannot be denied that what remained of the tax adjustment represented a significant amount of money in that time.

In Poulina, we believe that it is with empowerment and confidence that people evolve; we constantly develop and encourage behaviours and attitudes that are based on transparency. To do so, all resources are involved, from the bottom to the top of the structure and across the whole group.

A. Ben Ayed – 1999

From Hell to Heaven

While the future of the company had seemed compromised, the day after my meeting with the President, all the doors reopened. The banks gave us solutions to end the crisis and pay the amount of money agreed upon with the head of state.

Therefore, a flourishing period started for the Poulina group. Investments resumed starting from 1998, and what made the situation even more remarkable is the fact that, at that time, there was very little investment from the other economic actors.

It was therefore enough for Poulina to take control of the development of its activities to quickly reap the benefits.

However, the men in the shadows, who were still prowling around, did not fail to glean, on multiple occasions, a few million dinars under various pretexts, including the 2626-Fund (the National Solidarity Fund account number, for which donations were almost compulsory), as well as many other works associated with them. In order to protect the group from the vagaries of politics, the company complied. We did it transparently with bank checks.

For example, each time we participated in the 2626-Fund, we would collect the contributions of all our subsidiaries in order to pay them by checks. This precaution later proved invaluable, when, after the revolution, we had to account for money transfers made from our companies to accounts affiliated with the old regime.

This passage through bank checks ensured the transparency of the transfers that had been made. When I was asked about the reasons behind these often-generous contributions, I simply replied that it was the only way to keep them at bay.

Way out: Poulina's Stock Market Listing

The Poulina group's decision to venture into the stock market in 2008, by opening its capital up to 10%, surprised many observers at the time. Since its creation in 1967, the company had been owned by the same six families who had always managed the group's activities in harmony. The public objectives of the operation were mainly to consolidate Poulina's growth and finance its activities in the Maghreb, which had become important. Yet, our real motivation was to escape the appetites of the men in the shadows. Indeed, the transparency and visibility of a listed company protect the company from abuses that could threaten it.

At the same time, the group slowed down its enthusiasm for investment and became more and more discreet. We avoided the acquisition of new land, which might suggest that we were putting in place new projects. We stopped embracing new professions and we limited ourselves to an average rate of growth, which simply allowed us to maintain the sustainability of the group. We knew that all these precautions wouldn't be enough, and we waited, with trepidation, for the next incident.

By the end of the decade, I was no longer invited to the great ceremonies organized by the palace, to which the main Tunisian industrialists went; I no longer received decorations for the various economic and cultural achievements, however numerous, that we had initiated. Gradually, the doors were closing.

In the early days of 2011, a representative of the ruling party called me to inform me that the National TV news wanted to do a short documentary on my company, to use it as an example, or a model, of the success of Ben Ali's regime. He added that this would help silencing the protests. However, events were faster to occur: A few days later, the men in the shadows fled Tunisia, and the revolution took what was left of them!

All this to say that in Poulina, the revolution was greeted as a true relief. The situation today is difficult, and sometimes, business is much more complicated, but it is definitely not the same: today we can talk, find solutions, and move forward. The group has never been this much into investing. The banks are called upon, and the teams are getting back to work.

Through our company GIPA, we market ice creams under the brand name Selja. It is customary in this sector for manufacturers to provide refrigerators that are free of charge to distributors (cafés, grocers, supermarkets, etc.). The name of the brand is always put on these refrigerators in the form of a sticky covering. In 2007, we were informed that the manager of the Tunis-Carthage Airport café, a relative of the ruling family, was asking for a large amount of money for the presence of one of our refrigerators. I called him to understand the reasons for his request, he replied: "By agreeing to put your refrigerator at the airport, I'm offering you publicity." I had never seen anything like this! My hierarchy refused to pay and asked me to restore the refrigerators. A few hours after we informed him of our decision, some men showed up at the company, and we had to pay. Something like this cost us 150 thousand dinars. To give you an idea, that's 10 times the refrigerators' revenues.

[Former GIPA Sales Representative (GIPA stands for Générale de l'Industrie des Produits Alimentaires, a subsidiary of Poulina ice cream and dairy products)]

I believe that we need a lot more rigor in the way we think, live and work. It is only this rigor that can make our entry into the 21st century successful.

A. Ben Ayed

Poulina 4.0

It is with relief that I evoke the Tunisian revolution of 2011 which came at the right time, when the group had fallen into a new turmoil, and was threatened to be dismantled by the ferocious appetite of the time's men in the shadows and their allies. It is true that there is still corruption in the country, but it is incomparable to the practices that prevailed in the past. This should not be forgotten.

Some of my collaborators, like many Tunisians, were very optimistic in the aftermath of the revolution. They believed that the group was on a highway to development, and that many opportunities would open up before it. They were very enthusiastic! During the first meeting organized after January 14, 2011, my long-awaited words, due to their measured and cautious tone, surprised all my colleagues. I told them: "We have to be careful, because today we don't know where we're headed." I knew for a fact that it was a revolution, that there would be disorder, and that the future would prove me right.

However, my vision for the future is deeply optimistic. Despite the current difficulties, I am convinced that Tunisia is on the right track. We should take into consideration the few differences that exist between Tunisians, the absence of tribal culture, and above all, the existence of an educated class of executives that is capable of leading the country and of picking up the burden. The present is certainly conflictual; however, I think that our future will be calmer,

and that our differences will gradually fade away. Look at how far we've come in more than 60 years of independence.

The first months of 2011 were not easy. After the first wave of brotherhood that the whole country had embraced, a tornado of social movements unleashed everywhere. We immediately accepted most of the demands and, like other companies, granted new benefits to our employees, especially those of the working class. Despite this, I was aware of the deteriorating social climate and the risks that were threatening the continuation of our activities. I anticipated the problems that could arise by duplicating certain strategic factories. History proved me right: the demands did not calm down. Representatives of the UGTT (the General Union of Tunisian Workers) initially supported the protests of their colleagues. Yet, when we gave in, and agreed upon the main points, while respecting the law and always trying to favour our workers, the UGTT representatives sided with us, and tried to reason with the workers. Nevertheless, some were set in their ways, organizing wildcat strikes that go so far as to block access to factories and sabotage production. At that point, we reluctantly decided to close the factories where there were too many problems.

There could be no way of reopening them until the law was respected and the troublemakers and perpetrators of sabotage were dismissed for serious misconduct. Despite the closures, their colleagues often tried to support them. The standoffs sometimes lasted more than a month, but we held on, and kept doors closed in the protesting factories.

After a while, the employees requested a meeting with Poulina's management where we were able to bring to the table the problems caused by the sabotage. Convinced that their colleagues had drifted, the participants decided to return to work.

In some factories, the situation was more complicated, and the group was forced to close some units and dismiss the leaders of the wildcat strikes. Out of gratitude, we have placed the employees that were not involved in the sabotage in other subsidiaries of the group. The region of Sfax had particularly been the main stage of the hardest and longest social problems. Decreased productivity, quality problems, untimely shutdown of production at the slightest pretext, and sabotage, were all on the menu!

I think that those who were working in these factories were working people from the poorest governorates, people who have suffered for generations all kinds of injustice. They had to leave their land to go and work in the better-off coastal towns. For other people, the revolution - of which they feel the genitors since it had originated in their hometowns - had to repair all the humiliations they had been experiencing. One could say that they were seeking a sort of revenge on society and on history. I understand this frustration, but let's not forget that we have factories to run and, above all, many families to feed.

A year later, Poulina was finally able to get back to its normal pace, thanks to a triple strategy: duplication of strategic factories, closure of the most problematic units, and dismissal of anarchist employees who didn't respect the law and sabotaged production. Everything was carried out quickly, rigorously, firmly, and with strict respect for the law.

Even if the crisis could well have been managed with as little damage as possible, my observation in this regard is bitter: For Tunisia, the era of factories employing hundreds of workers is over. It is my most intimate belief. Moreover, if we look through history, we can see that the behaviour of the Tunisian is not very inclined to submission and obedience to other people. He is not a rebel either,

but rather an independent man who prefers to work and live in an autonomous environment.

We almost forgot it under Ben Ali's reign; during this period a real lead blanket fell upon the country, and, under the effect of fear, the Tunisian complied with all the requirements of the dictatorial regime, and didn't dare to claim his rights.

Now that speaking and acting have been freed, it becomes difficult to maintain the discipline and the motivation of the teams which tend to revolt against their hierarchy. Any order becomes the object of contestation; the legitimacy of the leaders is questioned and the advantages (bonuses, salary increases, promotions, etc.) are criticized and deemed insufficient, unfair, and badly distributed.

My Take on the Future of the Industry

The solution, in my opinion, would lie in certain formulas. The oldest one, which we were pioneers in adopting and generalizing within the group, is the status of self-employment. Thus, whenever a position can be occupied by an independent and a self-employed individual, Poulina adopts it. This is the case for all porters and drivers in the group; even my driver works for his own account. The company vouches for the acquisition of a vehicle from a leasing company to be used by the driver, who is provided with a long-term contract. The driver thus becomes the owner. He is paid according to the volume of work he performs and he is responsible for the maintenance of his own vehicle. That way, he becomes careful, in relation to driving, and economical, in relation to fuel consumption.

Yet, since it is not possible to apply this formula to all positions, and since the working-class problems are exacerbated in our country, I am convinced that we will have to adopt the concepts of Industry

4.0. My vision of the industry of the future includes training, upgrading, and valuing all socio-professional categories. Poulina will thus continue to provide jobs for managers and supervisors in its factories. As for working-class employees, Poulina mentors them, trains them, and helps them set up on their own while continuing to provide them with work. This industrial transformation is progressively starting to be applied in the group, wherever technology allows it. Furthermore, I am convinced that industrial transformation is necessary to fight against higher prices for the end consumer. Adopting Industry 4.0 concepts in our factories is necessary to pull the local industry up and to remain competitive on an international level. Otherwise, our products will no longer find outlets on the market. The digital transformation also has many advantages such as improving product quality, and controlling production costs including, above all, that of energy consumption.

It is also in this context that the group has just acquired a new brickyard, in partnership with the Germans and the Italians. This new, ultra-modern plant incorporates cutting-edge technologies that optimize its operation and achieve between 50% and 60% in energy savings.

It is worth mentioning that for more than ten years, the group has been investing in photovoltaic installations. It is one of the first industrial producers of this energy, and I am convinced that starting from 2020 Poulina will be selling photovoltaic energy to the Tunisian Electricity and Gas Company (STEG).

After more than 50 years at the head of Poulina, I feel a lot of serenity and I am confident in the future of the group. I would like to point out that the investment strategy for the next ten years has already been established. It is centred around the development of energy-intensive activities. Indeed, over the years, Poulina has put in place systems that allow the good management of the life cycle

of its materials and its equipment. In addition, Poulina has developed an expertise in the techniques meant for optimizing energy consumption in its industries.

An Administrative Ecosystem

In this regard, I am lucid about the many pitfalls that companies that want to develop in Tunisia must face. While everyone is encouraging us to invest, we realize that to overcome administrative procedures and obtain the necessary authorizations, we have to go through a real obstacle course. The laws are old and the procedures are long. Complying with them takes a lot of time and requires the mobilization of staff to ensure follow-up. Our administrative services really represent the biggest obstacle to unleashing the energies of private investment in our country. The salaries of officials should be improved through putting in place a system of performance bonuses, which will encourage them to improve their productivity. Like developed countries, we should also speed up the implementation of digitization in our administration.

On the other hand, the informal economy represents another threat. I would cite the ceramics sector as an example: we have a 35% market share but we represent 70% of tax revenues in the sector...

For me, this is a devastating observation that illustrates, not only the weight that the informal sector is representing in our country, but also the shortfall in revenues for the entire national community. We must also show firmness when facing anarchic social demonstrations and not tolerate abuses.

**As dreamers, they went in search of the city,
they did not find it but they found each other.
They decided to build a city like the one in their
dream, so that it doesn't escape from them.**

Preface to the Book of the Medina

A. Ben Ayed

The Medina: Realizing A. BEN AYED's wildest dream

For me, The Medina Mediterranean was an extremely serious project. I really enjoy it because I have realized a dream that has been living inside me for a very long time. Yet, what motivates me the most is the honor it brings me. I am proud; and pride cannot be measured with money. I carried out a project with a national scope, because I am Tunisian, because I am Muslim, and because I belong to an entity that I would like to present in the highest fashion and with the greatest pride.

I, who am so proud of my Tunisia and its history, have always dreamed of designing a cultural achievement that enhances its image, and that evokes its rich heritage and the ups and downs of its long history. I was also often embarrassed in front of my guests, clients, and foreign suppliers in Tunisia, when I didn't have much to show them, especially when thinking of the well-preserved heritage that I had visited with amazement in their countries.

The genesis of The Medina of Hammamet came about precisely after I had visited The Pueblo Español in Barcelona, which consists of a reproduction of typical Spanish villages.

This project was a crazy gamble. I had the ambition to reconstruct important typical monuments of the Mediterranean such as Jemaa

el-fna in Marrakech, Bab el-diwan in Sfax, or Il skifa el-kahla in Mahdia. With my architect friend Tarek Ben Miled, ten years were necessary for us to be able to give shape to this project: ten years of pure joy!

Unfortunately, no bank agreed to finance this project which they didn't understand. The vice-governor of the central bank objected to it; he told me: "It's not up to you to do this, it's up to the state. What if it's not profitable?" Actually, no one ever believed in the profitability of the project. I even think that several of my friends and collaborators never dared to tell me so, and that they joined the project out of friendship, or out of wanting to please me.

As I conceived this project just after 1997, the year in which the President of the Republic ended up easing the heavy fiscal penalty which had hit the group and threatened its survival, some claimed that it was at this price that I had obtained the presidential pardon. Others whispered that I was megalomaniac, and that my Medina would meet the same fate as The Mohammedia Palace built by an Ahmed Bey who dreamed of a Tunisian Versailles.

It was under these circumstances that I found an ally in Ahmed El Karam, a banker with a particular cultural savvy. He was up to the challenge by committing the Amen Bank to the construction of The Medina; the one that will have to remain when all the others will have disappeared. Indeed, in view of the state of disrepair in which several Tunisian medinas are, I fear that they will not stand the test of time. I only felt the importance of reproducing a Medina that recalls, more than ever, the charm of ancient alleys, and the breathtaking nature of the Arab-Andalusian style of ancient houses.

The success was immediate, so much so that The Medina, through its many attractions, has become the keystone of the entire seaside resort Yasmine Hammamet. Tourists and Tunisians flocked to The

Medina for romantic walks in the shade of the buildings that seem to come straight out of past centuries.

The number of visitors reached one million per year, and contrary to what most observers predicted, the project has turned out to be a real commercial success and an economically profitable endeavour.

My only regret is that although many visitors flock to The Medina, few of them grasp its cultural and historical dimension. All the murals that adorn the walls are in fact reproductions of actual events that tell parts of our millennial history. However, only a handful of eyes linger on them. Likewise, the audio book written by Raja Farhat, which provides a guided tour of The Medina, with explanations of the origin of each of the reproduced monuments, is neglected. Finally, few grasp the significance of the broken ramparts which recall the brave and relentless resistance of Sfaxians during the invasion of their city by the French army. This disinterest in our history, expressed by visitors, especially Tunisians, slowed down my desire to quickly activate the other cultural dimensions of the project. It will certainly be done, but slower than expected.

It is true that The Medina is the greatest cultural work that I have produced, but I have also always supported the writing of beautiful books by editing numerous collections for several years. However, in this case as well, faced with Tunisians' disinterest in reading, I abandoned this path and limited myself to giving an award to a newly published book each year.

**Innovation and creativity, of course, but also,
a lot of rigor and organization.**

A. Ben Ayed – 1985

The Poulina System

The Poulina School

Since day one, training has been the top rule of the company. When we started, there were two trainings: a targeted technical training, and a general training focused on good citizenship and the rules of participation in meetings. I conducted these meetings myself; I managed to bring about peace, tranquillity and understanding. As for specialized and technical meetings, they were much easier because they didn't require a lot of philosophy. For the other meetings, I tried by all means to install in the participants the values of courtesy and respect. I would tell my interlocutors that before speaking, it is better to count to three, three times! This practice decreases tension, and allows us to express ourselves more calmly. This saved us at least 30% of the time that we could have wasted in disorderly and confused interventions, which would often lead us to finding ourselves in a chaotic atmosphere: we no longer hear each other; we can say nonsense or insult each other; and, finally, we can no longer understand each other. In meetings that involve a large number of participants, another more rigorous technique is applied. It is the clockwise movement: the chairman of the meeting gives the floor to the first on his left, then to his neighbour, and so on. Anyone who has an untimely reaction, or who doesn't have enough arguments, ends up talking to himself. This situation forces him either to be silent or to

think carefully in order to argue clearly. In addition, of course, this technique obliges each speaker to wait their turn.

“Poulina is a school!” We often hear this sentence from people talking about the Poulina group. They often praise our full investment in training young recruits. According to 2017 statistics, the group has devoted more than 20,000 days to training its employees, allocating a budget of 3.6 million dinars, which represents 1% of the group's turnover. This places the group in the top one position in terms of executives' training, both for its own needs and for the needs of the entire Tunisian economy. Indeed, with a turnover of 11%, a number that we refrain from hiding, I quickly did the math: 4,000 of the executives we have trained since the launch of our group have gone elsewhere. They are in high demand by our competitors because they have experience working on innovative projects with pioneering methods. In fact, upon leaving, many of them send us letters of thanks for having trained them and raised them to the level they have reached. This fairly high rate of departures allows us to constantly rejuvenate our workforce. Either way, we have no choice. I say that I serve my country. Sometimes it hurts a little more, especially when it's the “pillars” who are leaving, but that's how it is; there is nothing we can do about it.

In the aftermath of the revolution, I wanted to concretize my broad vision of training across the country, by thinking of establishing an American-style university campus in the area of Soliman. However, the campus never saw the light due to the lack of authorizations. I had to fall back on a much less ambitious project, that of introducing young people to information technology while in university.

The project consists of selecting dozens of young people each year and providing them with a high-quality university course which allows them to obtain, in addition to their university degree, certifications and a higher diploma from a foreign university, for

example, a German one. It is particularly in IT that these trainings are organized, in SAP certification. The Poulina Academy is in its third year.

Poulina and Banks

It is with pride that I say that we are rated AAA by our banks, and that we have managed to obtain this rating because we have always honored our commitments. The banks know they can count on us. This is why they grant us exceptional advantages and conditions which allow us to obtain numerous gains. We also qualitatively monitor the attitudes and behaviours of our clients and their ability to honor their commitments in order to avoid the risk of non-payment.

The Poulina Culture

Starting from scratch and with very little start-up capital, the founding shareholders and I had from the start the ambition to create a large group of companies which, like large international groups, would have its own specific culture. Since most of us were Sfaxians, the tendency was to recruit, during the first decade, people from the region of Sfax, because of the personal and professional networks which linked us to the people coming from this region. However, starting from the 1980s, a policy of positive discrimination started to be implemented in order to make Poulina a group that represents the whole of Tunisia. Thus, for each recruited Sfaxian, a non-Sfaxian had to be recruited. This is how the group started to gradually overcome regional considerations and built a corporate culture around a few values: honor, anti-xenophobia, anti-sectarianism, anti-clannism, anti-cronyism, and the Base 0 Balance Sheet, which means that we do not talk about the past, but about the present and the future.

In fact, I have very bad memories of a strike that was organized in one of the group's companies in the 1990s. Following a serious incident, three employees were dismissed for serious professional misconduct. During a family celebration, they met other employees of the same company who were also members of their extended family. Encouraged by alcohol, they all vowed to support their colleagues and to go on strike until they were reinstated. The following day, the company's managers were surprised at this unforeseen solidarity which led to a very tense social conflict. On this occasion, we noticed that the group's factories included, in their workforce, several members of the same family, the same neighbourhood, the same school, etc. It was this proximity, and these personal relations, that led employees to support their colleagues, even when they were wrong. Likewise - we hadn't noticed it either - many evaluations were biased, because a phenomenon of family complacency had established itself inside our companies. Since then, a test that we called the Human Resource Test has been put in place in each company of the group. This test assesses the degree of proximity of each new candidate to other employees, a proximity whose criteria extend to include sports teams supported by this candidate.

The aim is to prevent people from the same regional, local, academic, athletic, etc. origins from being in the same company, which could create significant conflicts or unhealthy favouritism that comes from the outside and that could one day go against the interests of the company and of the group.

Human Management According to Ben Ayed

There is another conviction, which I have instilled in myself thanks to my many readings on human psychology: People do not like to be evaluated by other people. This is why Poulina has always put its efforts in developing an automated and impersonal evaluation system made up of objective and reliable indicators, calculated mechanically, which closely follow the performance, in quantitative and qualitative terms, of each of the group's collaborators.

By building a strong corporate culture around demanding values, I knew that many would not be able to adapt. This is why Poulina has two types of collaborators. First, there are those who are employees of the company, currently numbering 14,000, and who represent 50% of the total workforce; and those who have the “self-employed” status, such as drivers or managers of Mazraa stores, who represent the other half of our staff.

We can even say that we have adapted the systems of human management to the activity of each of the group's divisions. So, for IT, after Aster's direct experience in computer assembly, Poulina turned more towards equity participation in the IT field. This participation is shared fifty-fifty with the managers of the companies Poulina supports. I explain this choice by the fact that in the field of services, value is essentially based on the know-how of the staff. The fact that a staff member is more like a shareholder in the company, and not simply an employee, guarantees his loyalty, and protects the company against the departure of its main contributors. In the same regard, Poulina uses the swarming technique. For instance, one of the information technology companies in which Poulina recently participated with 50% of the capital, is managed by two young people internally trained, in Poulina's own academy.

The Principle of Double Hierarchy

A few years ago, the French Development Agency (AFD) devoted a book to Poulina entitled: *Poulina, A Tunisian Management*. It was done for a good reason; it was done because Poulina has developed a unique system that is neither the cold and rational management of multinationals, nor the paternalistic management of other Tunisian companies. Let me say it once again; our system is inspired by the book of Andrew Grove, the CEO of Intel, *High Output Management*. Yet, we only drew inspiration from it, because the principle that we have implemented in Poulina does not exist elsewhere. It is in fact a system of double authority, materialized through the matrix of organizational structures, which is particularly found in holding companies. However, whereas in holding companies, the operational authority is usually represented by the director of the subsidiary and the functional authority by the central support services (accounting, finance, HRM, IT, purchasing, marketing, etc.), in Poulina, a different and almost opposite system is in force.

Thus, from within the holding company, the operational manager directs and distributes the work and controls its execution at the level of the specialty that is relevant to his work, while the functional manager takes care of the daily supervision of the subsidiary's teams.

For example, the accountant of a subsidiary of the Poulina group works on a daily basis under the orders of his functional manager, but he is trained and evaluated by his operational manager who is located at the head office. The latter must ensure that he is in permanent contact with the functional managers and their employees in the various subsidiaries, not only during the training sessions but also beyond them. Information and management

meetings must therefore be organized with each of the subsidiaries at least once a year.

The operational authority is the real management keystone in Poulina. Indeed, it is considered to be the very extension of the executive management. The operational managers are also the experts that the subsidiaries often refer to. They are therefore responsible, each in their field of activity, for the implementation of the general policy of the group, compliance with procedures, communication and management of crises and unforeseen developments that may arise. They are also mandated by the head office to carry out missions within the subsidiaries.

Thus, operational managers exert a sort of control over functional managers. However, as outlined by another principle that is in effect in Poulina, trust in functional managers and their collaborators is the rule; control is there only to confirm and reinforce this trust. Moreover, it is specified that the missions must absolutely take place in an atmosphere of mutual respect, and that the operational staff should be able to have access to any document they wish to consult. If the managers of the subsidiaries think that operational managers have exceeded their prerogatives, they can request arbitration from the group's executive management. According to the memo which explains the functioning of the double hierarchy, the goal is to develop a climate of collaboration between the head office and the subsidiaries.

The Poulina Organization

It was in 2008, after its stock market listing, that Poulina went through a process of restructuring to become a holding group, thus formalizing the separation that had always existed between, on the one hand, the founders and shareholders of the group and, on the other hand, the managers of the company. With this new structure

of our organization, I outline one of my most cherished principles: each position in the company is acquired through merit and competence; personal and family ties do not interfere with it.

Since 2016, a management committee has been set up by the board of directors of Poulina Group Holding, to serve as a support structure for the board. This committee is made up of at least five directors from the group who are responsible for overall management. It is currently composed of eleven members. As a collegial decision-making entity, the CoDir is chaired by me as Chairman of the Board of Directors, but without exercising the right of veto. In fact, strategic decisions are first subject to a confidential and anonymous voting system. Then, they wait for the validation of the Board of Directors. It was also during the same year that we set up an appointment and remuneration committee for managers, thus allowing directors to have a say in appointing individuals in strategic positions within the group.

Poulina's Committees

In my opinion, meetings should always be privileged as a management method. We have created and implemented them at all levels of Poulina. Far from having an acute mania for meetings, these encounters are made formal thanks to the specific objectives and the intervention frameworks that are attached to them. First, there are the famous Wednesday meetings which have been held for more than 50 years and which bring together the directors of all the group's subsidiaries, currently numbering 108. Since 2016, these meetings have been alternating with those of the management committee.

During these meetings, the heads of the divisions or subsidiaries take turns reviewing their activities and sharing the figures and the statuses of the various projects that are relevant to their work.

This participatory management at the top of the structure is shared at all levels of the holding company with weekly meetings at the level of each subsidiary, as well as at the level of each department within these subsidiaries. The goal here is to bring up any difficulties, as quickly as possible, in order to resolve them and move forward more quickly.

PHOTO ALBUM



A. Ben Ayed (second from left) with family



The year of the Baccalaureate



Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed studying in France



Mrs Amina Kammoun Ben Ayed – 1960



Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed's first house – 1974



Habib Bourguiba's visit to the factory, with (from left to right) Mr. Mohsen Kallel, Mr. A. Ben Ayed and Mrs Amina Ben Ayed – 1975



Habib Bourguiba's visit to the GAN Company – 1975



Habib Bourguiba's visit to the GAN Company



Mohamed and Majida Ben Ayed, father and mother of Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed 1980



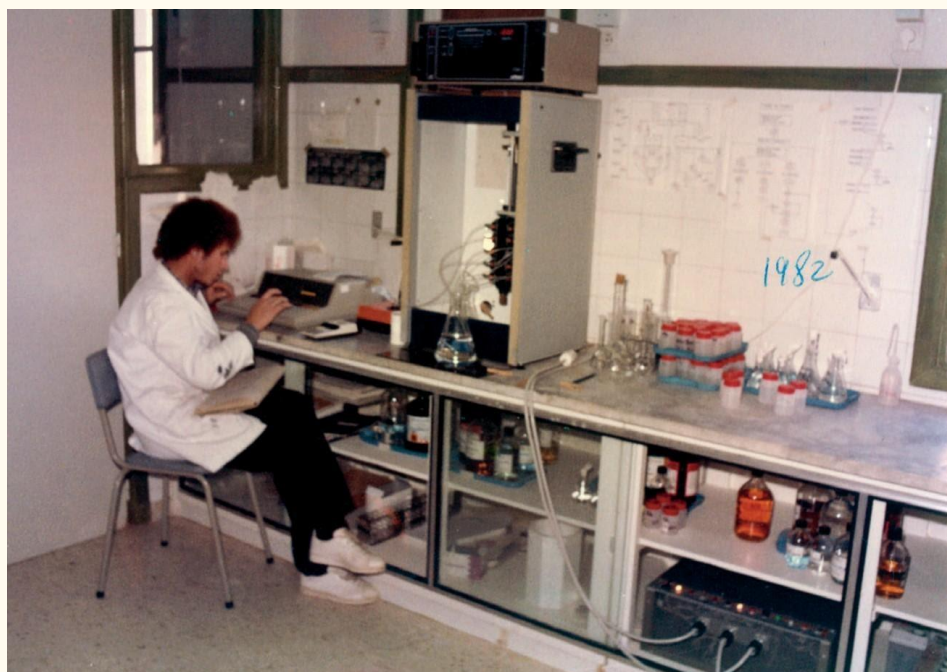
Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed at the Presidential Palace of Carthage – 1982



President Abdou Diouf visiting the factory – 1982



A. Ben Ayed in his office – 1982



1st Food Laboratory – 1982



Mazraa Slaughterhouse – 1998



Awarding of the “Poulina Companions” prize to staff – 1987



Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed with Abdelhamid Bouricha, Mohamed Bouzgenda and Taoufik Ben Ayed.



Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed with Hédi Brini.



Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed, during the construction of the Medina of Yasmine Hammamet – 1998



The Medina of Yasmine Hammamet



Awarding of the literary prize in honor of the late Jilani Ben Haj Yahya September 2010 in the presence of his son, the attorney-at-law Faik Ben Haj Yahya.



**Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed with Chedly Ayari and Taoufik Jlassi,
May 2014 at Villa Didon**



Meeting with students on January 18, 2015, Manouba's University Campus



Mrs Amina Ben Ayed, Director of the poultry laboratory

**The key to success: love for all stakeholders
in the system, customers, employees,
managers, workers.**

A. Ben Ayed – 2017

Poulina's Lifeline

In 50 years of existence, Poulina has grown from a small poultry company to a holding company of around 100 subsidiaries, organized into eight sectors (real estate, timber and equipment, consumer products, packaging, steel processing, trade and services, building materials and poultry integration).

I am often asked how each of these subsidiaries came to be, whether each creation was thought out, studied, and maturely evaluated by market studies; I always smile and give the same uplifting example: "It only took me an hour to decide to make turkey."

But Let's Start at the Beginning...

Poulina was born in 1967, with only 15,000 dinars, consisting mainly of personal contributions, those of my family and friends.

Starting with raising chickens, the idea of developing related activities quickly became a reality with the creation of Dick in 1992, which hosted the first incubators and all the activities related to hatching eggs. This is also where the slaughtering took place, in appropriate premises which kept getting modernized.

At the beginning, this vertical integration of activities was not a strategic choice, but rather a necessity, since these different professions simply didn't exist in Tunisia. Each time, I acquired information, learned the job while doing it, then passed on my knowledge to my employees, whom I trained.

This is how we started building workshops to manufacture poultry equipment, which wasn't available on the market.

It was mainly with the help of young recruits, who managed to manufacture the equipment I had imagined that I was able to build all the equipment necessary for the establishment of an industrial poultry farm (troughs, drinking troughs, heaters, transport equipment, etc.). This activity became a new full-fledged business in 1975, structured under the name *Les Grands Ateliers du Nord* (G.A.N.).

However, this *success story* was denigrated by the condescending gaze of the various Tunisian economic players. Indeed, despite my creative spirit, the development of our activities, and the added value that we brought to Tunisian economy, Poulina was still a peasant's chicken farm in their eyes.

It was in 1973 that the company had to find the opportunity to emerge as an innovative industrial enterprise in its own right. It was thanks to the late Abdelhamid Bouricha, who was asked about this at a party once. One of his friends told him about the problems related to the availability of detergents in Tunisia. This sector was internationally controlled by a few behemoths, particularly OMO, which largely dominated the Tunisian market. At that time, OMO was in the midst of a battle with the Ministry of Trade, which imposed price levels that did not correspond to the brand's strategy. Thus, products were getting out of stock more frequently, leading

the Tunisian consumer to be the victim of this arm wrestling which lasted a while.

When my friend Abdelhamid came to tell me about it, I knew nothing about detergents but the chemical formula I had studied at university, but as they say, one has to ignore everything in a field to be able to get involved in it, because if we knew how the final destination looks like, we would give up on the journey!

Thus, with the help of the first poly-technician joining Poulina, I went from knowing the chemical formula to building a factory of detergents. This was the launch of Nadhif, the fruit of our new subsidiary ALKI and the first 100% Tunisian detergent. Later, in 2010, the group was to withdraw from this activity by selling the business to Henkel which had more technical skills to maintain and develop it.

At that time, the case of Nadhif was exceptional, because the development of Poulina was done mainly through operations that integrate activities upstream or downstream of our core business, which is industrial poultry farming.

This strategic vision of development has enabled us to control not only all production costs, but also the quality of the various inputs and semi-finished products throughout the value chain. This is why, in the mid-1970s, we became interested in animal feed, which was then a state monopoly: The Office of Cereals imported corn, soybeans and other components, then resold them in the local market. Back in the days, the creation of the *Société de Nutrition Animale* (SNA), the first private animal feed company, was a real feat and a surprising skill that we managed to demonstrate. Indeed, the law liberalizing the import of animal feed was dragging on; the state feared that the private sector would impose a price increase in this sector that is vital for agriculture, and especially for farmers.

In this difficult context, our subsidiary GAN won a tender for the construction of silos, launched by the Tunisian Office of Cereals. Simultaneously, I was lobbying to push for the liberalization of animal feed import, arguing that in all cases, no private investor was ready to receive tons of animal feed as all the silos were owned by the state. Thus, the law got promulgated! It was then that the Office of Cereals withdrew from its contract with GAN because of technical differences that occurred during construction. Poulina, far from contesting this termination, recovered its silos and sold them to the SNA. This is how the SNA acquired its first storage silos. A few weeks later, the first shipment of cereal supplies destined for a private company arrived. The bet is won!

It is with emotion that I point out that, in the early days, Poulina had a production capacity of five tons per hour, which grew over the years to reach over three hundred tons per hour. Nowadays, knowing that a 7th processing plant has been built, the group is the market leader, serving a large number of industrial farmers in Tunisia and in the world.

Poulina's secret is to have always used, and to have efficiently employed, the advantages granted by the Tunisian State and by international funds in the development of our projects. For example, in the early 1970s, Poulina called on FOSDA, the Special Fund for the Development of Agriculture, which finances agricultural projects through endowment, investment, and study grants.

As part of our policy of development and popularization of poultry business and poultry related occupations in Tunisia, and in order to continue to benefit Tunisian agriculture from these funds, Poulina called on owners of agricultural land. We took the time to share our experience with them by offering them our support in order for them to become professional chicken farmers. To encourage them, Poulina offered to provide them with all the necessary facilities,

such as chicks, animal feed, veterinary products, and any other ancillary services. It also guaranteed the purchase of all their chicken production. This is how Tunisia witnessed the birth of a large network of independent chicken farmers who made sure all Tunisians can put on their tables an affordable protein.

Since its creation, Poulina has never ceased to be an organism that is commensurate with the financial resources it could generate, either through loans or through its own funds. I will never forget that the late Abdelhamid Bouricha and Mr. Mohamed Bouzguenda had to mortgage their homes to guarantee the payment of the first loans that had been granted to us.

The thoroughness of our work, and the honesty that we have consistently respected over the years, and kept at the heart of all of our endeavours, made it clear to our entire surroundings, that we were serious people who could be counted on and that, when we take a loan, we commit to paying it. To this day, this is still the hallmark of our group, which has never failed to fulfil its commitments.

In line with our integration policy, in 1979, Poulina began manufacturing the welded tubes it needed in its work, and created PAF, *Produits Acier et Fer*, its metal processing subsidiary. As always, production is primarily at the service of the group's activities. Yet, it also supplies other companies in the sector thanks to its competitiveness and to the expertise that we rapidly developed. Steel processing has become such a success that the turnover of the steel division, which is made up of nine companies, now exceeds two hundred million dinars.

The extension of Poulina's activities to other sectors and professions that are equally different from each other does not distract it from developing its core business. This development is a

quantitative one; the company went from having two incubators, which were entirely imported in 1968, to fully manufacturing its own hatcheries (currently seven), which allows the company to produce more than one hundred million chicks per year. This development is also a qualitative one; the last hatchery, the one in Saouef, commissioned in 2016, is equipped with the latest cutting-edge technologies in the field. For example, vaccination is done in the bud, which reduces by six times the amount of vaccine needed for inoculation, relieving therefore the chick from the stress of vaccination. The whole process is fully automated and carried out in a clean room, aligning us with the concepts of Business 4.0. It is with great pride that I underline the crossing of this industrial threshold which aligns us with the highest international standards.

We also find, throughout Poulina's development, one of my principles, which is to always be economical, a principle that I have never hidden.

This principle is also a lifestyle that I have instilled into the Poulina group's corporate culture. Thus, several companies created by us find their *raison d'être* in a personal anti-waste way of thinking.

For the record, I cite the example of the subsidiary called *Générale de l'Industrie des Produits Alimentaires* (GIPA). Faced with an overproduction of eggs at the end of the year 1979, and bearing in mind that as a child I had seen ice cream made with egg yolk, I decided to create GIPA, which was to specialize in ice cream production. However, once the company was established, I discovered that industrial ice creams do not actually have eggs in their composition; eggs are replaced by other more affordable ingredients. Yet, originally, it was my concern for cost-efficiency that led me to create GIPA. Nowadays, with its famous Selja ice creams, the company is the leader in the Tunisian market. The company has also expanded into manufacturing cakes and yoghurts.

On another note, although turkey is currently part of the eating habits of Tunisians, it has not always been the case. In fact, when Poulina introduced it in 1978, for the first time in the country and on an industrial scale, its consumption was still insignificant. It was during a visit to the Paris International Agricultural Show that I was won over by the very low cost of this meat. Everything is good in turkey, and every part of it can be of value. Once out of the show, I made the decision to implement industrial turkey farming in Tunisia, and to offer this new product to Tunisian consumers. This was another very successful bet for Poulina who was the only producer of turkey in Tunisia for seventeen years. The competitiveness it had acquired was pushing back potential competitors who, when doing their calculations, could not figure out how to make this business profitable. This low-price policy was a deliberate strategy in this turkey business, because our goal was to create a barrier to entry with our very competitive prices, which allows us to provide Tunisians with a cheap protein. We earned so little selling turkeys that we were left alone for a long time in the market. With its attractive prices, turkey meat quickly established itself in Tunisian menus, especially in fast food.

Success has not always been the outcome of project launches carried out by Poulina. Yet, I am unbothered, despite the sometimes considerable losses caused by some project failures. This was the case, for example, with the foie gras that Poulina wanted to produce in Tunisia and export to France. For this purpose, we put in place a duck farm and undertook the whole process of making foie gras. However, the export proved to be very problematic because customs procedures in France were so complicated that the group gave up on the project and terminated it by selling the ducks at a loss in the Tunisian market.

One should be able to discover the unusual stories behind the genesis of each company by reviewing each one of them. Oftentimes, it all starts with an idea that sprouts in my mind.

I usually start a business when I think I've discovered a good idea, but what is a good idea? Quite simply, I trust my instincts! I am in touch with society; I'm a good listener which makes me think that I can understand the needs of those around me. Then, one must find a good profile to develop the business. This is the factor that I conceive of as the most critical, the one that has been at the root of most of the group's divestment decisions. Finding the right person who can lead with firmness and humanism is the most difficult thing. If the business grows, it will join one of the existing divisions, or be at the origin of a new division, otherwise, it is sold or converted into another existing business. The size of the group still makes it possible to redeploy staff, or to retrain them in another subsidiary. I believe that the life of a group like Poulina is made up of business creation, and business closures, in the event of failure. I prefer to take the risk of starting a new project, at the risk of failing, then to miss an opportunity by taking a long time to study its profitability. I support the new project, give it a chance for success, and periodically assess its relevance, to quickly make the decision to develop, adapt or discontinue it.

The case of Aster Informatique illustrates the philosophy of managerial agility that I have implemented. The year is 1982. Poulina is still labelled as a "chicken farm," even though the company is internally way ahead of its time in terms of IT. It was indeed the first to introduce mechanography, and the first IBM 36 and IBM 34. We therefore decided to make this asset a new subsidiary by taking over the representation of IBM in Tunisia. Shortly after this, upon noticing that the parent company took all the profits and left only crumbs for its Tunisian representative, Aster Informatique, under the leadership of Maher Kallel, moved on to the

assembly of PCs with components imported from Taiwan, creating a new brand, OVA. As technology changes are always accelerating, assembling computers became obsolete, and Aster is transformed into a technology services company, a specialty it continues to develop to this day. More broadly, Poulina is now a shareholder in four IT companies, several of which are abroad.

Most of Poulina's subsidiaries were created from scratch. However, the group sometimes decides to take over certain companies put up for sale. Here again, it is not a deliberate strategy, but rather a combination of circumstances which results in the group finding itself having a new production unit. This is how, by chance, Poulina found itself doing packaging, which did not prevent it from becoming a leader in this sector 30 years later. It was a difficult start, however, and the business almost came to an end because the group could not find a good manager to restart Teck, the packaging company that had just been bought. It took us four years to find a leader to put things in order and redress the situation. Since then, the packaging business has developed so well in the group that it became a full-fledged division with companies like Sud Pack and Nord Pack. At the beginning of 2011, a new unit was even about to be created in Libya, but the revolution in this country led to the urgent relocation of the new company, Linpack, to Monastir. These factories manufacture corrugated fibreboard, which is used by the other divisions of the group. The integration strategy was also put to the test in this division with the creation of Tpap, a company specializing in manufacturing the raw material necessary for the production of corrugated fibreboard. This is how the group found itself working in recycling through the creation of centers that collect and process used paper.

There is a constant element that I am proud of; each time Poulina gets involved in an activity, and decides to keep doing that activity, it becomes a leader in it, at least in the local market, and does not

hesitate to compete with foreign players by positioning itself on an international level. This practice is valid not only for the historical core business of the group, namely industrial poultry farming, but also for the sectors in which Poulina didn't particularly have any advance or any particular expertise. This is how Poulina created Carthago Ceramic in 1989, which allowed the group to become the leading producer of ceramic tiles in Tunisia within a few years. The company came at the right time to support a booming real estate sector, which led to its quick acclaim. The success story continues.

A few years earlier, El Mazraa was born, a name that is known to all Tunisians, because there are more than a thousand stores located in all regions of the country, only selling products that are manufactured by Poulina. It was in 1985 that the group launched a form of distribution that is rather innovative in Tunisia: the franchise. True to my conviction, that a man never works as well as when he is his own master, I have created a new supply chain based on free management in which managers are assisted in starting their business. We provide them with advice and training at first, then it is up to them to grow their business while respecting the terms of their contract with Poulina.

Poulina also tried another retail experiment with the acquisition of the *Le Passage* supermarket chain in 1989. However, like several other buyouts carried out by the group, the business did not prove to be very successful. The company was therefore sold to the Mabrouk group in 2003, allowing it to broaden its supermarket chain already made up from Monoprix and Touta stores.

It is often ignored, but Poulina is also an international company with around twenty subsidiaries abroad, mainly in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, France, Senegal and China. Also, many of its activities were created from partnerships with various companies around the world. While some have been really successful, allowing Poulina to invest

in other markets, expand its product lines, and quickly acquire certain technologies, others have experienced abnormal developments.

The story of this partnership concluded in 1993 with Mr. Mossini, an Italian businessman, and his son-in-law to build a company in Tunisia specializing in the manufacture of highway barriers, can be used as an example. The son-in-law presented contracts he had allegedly concluded with Italian highway companies, and firmly ordered hundreds of kilometres of highway barriers. Later, everything turned out to be fake. However, the factory was there. Confused by his stepson's scam, Mr. Mossini, who in the meantime became my friend, helped Poulina save this investment and turn it into a unit specializing in the design and manufacture of gas cylinders, as well as in the galvanization of several types of materials allowing the manufacture of support systems for construction sites and even prefabricated building foundations. The company, called Mossini Gas Cylinders, was taken over by the group, which turned it into a successful company that is still operational, distributing hundreds of thousands of gas cylinders each year in Tunisia and in several European countries.

Despite some disappointments, I have always believed in the need to expand Poulina beyond the borders of the Tunisian market, which is a limited market. I particularly believed in Maghreb integration, and especially in the potential of the Libyan market. On the eve of the revolution in this country, the Poulina group had no less than seven companies and 1,200 employees, who were urgently repatriated when the war broke out. The group suffered enormous losses at that time, especially in one of the companies in partnership with the Libyan state, where some tribes confiscated the equivalent of fifty million Tunisian dinars as spoils of war. The group is still waiting to be compensated after having launched a formal case.

In fact, discovering the histories of the different companies, one can see that each one of them has had a unique and specific journey. There is no classic pattern of creating or developing a new business in Poulina; we just walked along, seizing the opportunities that I encountered on my path. There is of course the original division, that of poultry farming, around which I created a set of units to support it: the SNA, as an upstream unit, and El Mazraa, as a downstream unit.

The group has also tried to develop cattle farming, an adventure that we tried to embark on with 1200 dairy cows, for which we rented a piece of state land to create a modern European farm with straw slopes and milking parlors. Yet, I quickly realized that it was impossible for me to achieve effective results with workers who were doing it the old-fashioned way, and who did not adapt to the level of requirements and performance of the group. I therefore preferred to withdraw from the business and lose my stake rather than continue to rack up losses year after year.

Poulina was often the first to introduce self-manufactured products to the Tunisian market. This was the case for industrial chicken, turkey, cold cuts, and also margarine, with its brand Jadida.

It was during a trip to Canada in the late 1980s that I discovered this product. I initially thought that it was butter, because of its taste and its texture. Back in the days, in Tunisia, margarine was traditionally made, most often from fish oil which gave off a foul odor as soon as you put it in the pan. So, I thought that with this new margarine recipe, we could capture the entire market. When I got back, I contacted one of my bankers who informed me that a Tunisian margarine factory had already been set up. Convinced that there was no room for two operators in the Tunisian market, added to the fact that my goal was not to break a competitor, I gave up on the idea. One day, my banker came to tell me that COTUGRAS, the

Tunisian margarine factory, was for sale. I received its owner, Mr. Mohamed Hassine, a great gentleman who had made a very nice production unit in partnership with the Swiss but couldn't manage the business. I immediately accepted his financial proposal. I don't like to haggle when someone is selling his property; it's hard enough for him to lose it. The deal was concluded, but the new subsidiary was to experience some hiccups in its marketing at the beginning. Indeed, its first brand name, Zabadi, was refused by the trade office because it risked misleading consumers into believing they were eating butter. In the meantime, the Zabadi stamped packaging was already printed, so I asked for permission to sell this first stock. Despite special authorizations, several batches of the product got seized and withdrawn from the market. Everything ended up going back to normal with the new name, Jadida; the company took off in the Tunisian and international market.

I know that this is not enough to explain to you the tremendous success of my group, the first private employer in Tunisia, and one of the largest capitalizations of the Tunisian stock market.

One constant element probably allows us to grasp the common thread of this success story: innovation.

Our eyes are on the future, a future of prosperity, fulfilment and achievement, a future by young people and for young people.

A. Ben Ayed

Poulina through my Family History

When I returned to Tunisia in 1965, the Medjerda office granted me a real castle as official accommodation: the previous owner had decorated it with mosaics that he had brought from Spain. It was magnificent; it had an Andalusian architectural style and a lovely swimming pool with water jets whose source came from the mountains. I only spent a year there because the owner had managed to regain his rights and get his property back, but only for a short time, because the house was seized again, for reasons I ignore.

After this episode, I moved to Bardo. I was newly married and my wife was in medical school. A year later, as she entered her third year, she got pregnant and was unable to reconcile her education with her pregnancy. At the end of 1967, she gave birth to a wonderful baby, a little girl she called Malika. At that time, she only dreamed of having a girl to whom she could give this name that she loved so much. After that, my wife told me that she no longer wanted to be a doctor, and that she wanted to devote herself to the education of our child because she found it too hard to raise a child while studying. No longer having to be close to medical school, we decided to quickly build a very small house in Boumhel next to our first chicken farming building. I would like to point out that, out of

affection, my house still exists and is now part of the veterinary analysis laboratory of one of our companies.

Upon moving in this house, my wife resumed her studies in another specialty, natural sciences, to be able to teach; that's how she became a teacher in Ezzahra secondary school.

At that time, Poulina had just been launched. As I was still a state official, I appointed my wife Chief Executive Officer. I taught her record keeping, so that she can at least keep track of income and expenses. This is how the company started in the years 1968-1969.

Our daughter was absolutely wonderful. She was the first child in the extended family because I had been the first to marry in a family of nine siblings; she was the first daughter of the new generation. She was easy going, smiling, pleasant, cheerful and only spoke to say kind words. She was the sweet child of the whole family. Her name, Malika, was on everyone's lips; she really was everyone's joy.

A few months later, my wife got pregnant again, and gave us a lovely baby boy. As with our daughter, whose first name she had chosen, she was convinced from the start that it would be a boy, and had already chosen the name Slim for him.

Unlike Malika who was never sick, Slim was rather puny. He had a very difficult childhood with an interminable vitamin deficiency that could only be cured with horse meat fillet juice, which we gave him to drink.

From an early age, Slim could not remember workers' names, unlike Malika who had a strong memory and remembered all of them.

I didn't take this seriously because I was also born with a difficulty to remember people's faces and names; I found it therefore quite normal for him to be a bit like me.

While Malika was brilliant in her studies, at all levels and without any effort, Slim, on the other hand, struggled with learning words, recitation, and dictation. This gave him a lot of pain. Yet, back in the days, it wasn't known that there were people like this, and that this condition was called dyslexia. It was found out much later. I am dyslexic, and so is my son.

His early years were very difficult, because he needed to reach a certain level in his reasoning capacity. Reasoning and understanding, rather than photographic memorization, were what mattered most to his learning experience. Indeed, our dyslexia is related to fixed memory. We have an extremely reduced capacity in this type of memory; we have difficulty remembering names, faces, places and other things of the same nature. This is a quite natural condition that affects roughly 5% of the world's population.

My wife has a very special character. She is a private person. She respects people and expects to be respected in return. It was for this reason, and to avoid problems, that she moved further and further away from people, to live an almost secluded life.

Back in the days, every Sunday, at 7 am, everything was ready for a getaway in Cap Bon. We would spend the day visiting hotels and farms, enjoying a picnic, or staying in a hotel. In those fantastic years, every Sunday, we went out as a family. This lasted until 1975.

In fact, if most of our poultry facilities are located in Cap Bon, it is above all because I spent every Sunday there with my little family,

walking around in this magnificent region, one of the most beautiful regions in Tunisia, with its mild climate, landscapes, beaches, and amazing hotels.

We made our trips absolutely worthwhile. Every Sunday I would spend half of my time having fun with my family. As for the other half, I would leave my wife and kids at the hotel, and take a quick look at one of our farms to see how things were going.

At that time, my father had just retired and had opened a small hardware store in Sfax. He was starting to have a less responsive memory, which was causing him to lose a lot of money. My older brother speculated that dishonest people around him were causing his misfortune. Indeed, he had started with a good capital, and, despite my regular contributions to equip the store, he was never able to cover his expenses. I didn't care about the losses; I just wanted to make him happy!

He often came to my house, and sometimes spent days in my office. I would task my assistant to take care of him as much as possible. She liked him very much because he was extremely polite. He was a coffee lover; she would serve him more than ten coffees a day. He took great pleasure in watching me work. For him, it was a dream come true to see his son sitting in a large office and giving orders to many people. He would smile each time he saw that some of his former bosses are now part of my staff.

In the end, I don't think he was ever made for trade, but it was impossible to tell him so. We couldn't ask him to close his store because it was his main occupation after his retirement. In addition to the store, he devoted himself to his second passion, agriculture, for one hour, each morning. He would kneel and dig under the trees, but couldn't do more. So, for him, the store was where he could meet people, where he could talk and have conversations.

Then, my wife insisted that we have a new home away from the premises of the company, even though it was more convenient to live there, considering all the services offered by the company: surveillance, security, etc. This is why we built our beautiful villa by the sea in Ezzahra.

Five years later, my wife, again, wanted us to move into a bigger house, even farther away from our company, where she wouldn't receive any professional visits. Her propensity for isolation grew more and more; she only looked after her work and her small family. She wasn't very social, and she participated very little in the outings of the people of her generation. To please her, I chose a very distant piece of land in Ouezra, 22 kilometres west of the company, a beautiful place on the side of Jbel Rsas, where I built a house that met all of her criteria.

Poulina does not rely on one man, but on the effort of each of its employees.

A. Ben Ayed – 2017

My Take on Happiness

To the question “Are you a happy man?” I would answer, without hesitation, that I am a happy man. I would even say that I have always been a happy man. A few years ago, I came across a survey with the topic, “What would make you happy on earth?” Each of the interviewees answered with a wish: to get married, start a family, succeed in the baccalaureate, pursue a career, etc. Then, they were asked about what would make them the unhappiest; losing a parent and failing were among the most common answers. The analysis of the results of this survey, which was carried out over the period of a year, has shown that a person of a melancholic nature who has experienced a moment of happiness by achieving his dream, becomes unhappy again once the curve goes downward, while a happy person who has hit rock bottom in the face of tragedy, eventually regains a sense of balance and serenity.

Without claiming to be a psychologist, I can say today that being happy, for an adult man, is a state of mind, an attitude towards life, and a way of being that does not depend on circumstances. Therefore, I think that I was born happy, that my mother birthed me happy. It is a way of being that is part of who I am as a person, regardless of what I may go through or experience, whether it is failure or success. I define myself as a positive mind. I remember that when I got my driving license in Toulouse in 1960, I barely knew

how to drive a car. I had paid a lump sum and the volume of hours I was given wasn't enough to prepare me for the exam. However, I made it, and got my license with flying colors. I got my driver's license without actually learning how to drive. I admit that the more pressure I have and the more critical the circumstances are, the more positively, and calmly, I think. I remained calm when I lost my mother, then my father. I no longer count the circumstances or the trials on which my phlegm saved me. In the 1990s, one of Poulina's slaughterhouses was completely destroyed by flames. Out of panic, some employees found themselves destroying everything, throwing everything away. It was heart-breaking to see that all this goodwill was in vain to put down the flames. I stepped back a few feet from the hustle and bustle, and stood in front of the fire, thinking, as I watched the scene. It was after all a beautiful fire that had broken out! I surrounded myself with my main collaborators and I immediately started to develop a strategy to guarantee the continuity of our activity starting from the following day. I was thinking about tomorrow! My employees were amazed. By the time they came to their senses, I had found the solution. I quietly left the scene to go to bed, realizing that it was very difficult to bring dozens of distraught people back to their sanity. Generally speaking, I think it is pointless and unproductive to succumb to panic and mindless violence. My men and the neighbours who came running should have stopped for a few minutes, and taken time to choose a leader who could think and organize their efforts. I have never fled from danger. Don't you think that I would've made an excellent Army General? The next day, thanks to the quality of my collaborators, our deliveries went normally.

I don't think I have any regrets. It's true that I haven't won all the wars, but I have no regrets. To talk about it in a few words, in 1980 I designed an avant-garde chicken coop, where I placed new designs: The D-80, with D standing for *Défi*, which meant "the challenge of the year 80." I was very enthusiastic about the project.

Twist of fate: everything was ravaged by an epidemic. My challenge went wrong and I lost everything. Still, I didn't give in to pessimism. This failure wasn't due to a flaw in the design, but rather to circumstances that were beyond my control. I have always refused to be a defeatist, or let myself be defeated by failure. My happiness and positivity are firm and deliberate. One of the keys to my happiness is surrounding myself with collaborators who have become sincere and loyal friends. Inclined to hang out with people who share my optimism and my energy, I have always avoided defeated and negative people.

You would be surprised at how many friends I hang out with. It is true that I don't always have time to see them, but to remedy this, I have always organized big parties at my house. What a joy to see that when I invite a hundred, a hundred and twenty show up to the party! Warmth and good mood are always present, and I'm proud to say that I'm lucky for receiving more than giving. As soon as I could, I built a big house in the countryside, specially designed to accommodate everyone: friends, business partners, and collaborators. Yet, over time, my wife, who had shown me unconditional support, could no longer bear this lifestyle. I ended up understanding her, and, unfortunately, hotels replaced my house.

Since then, I have been spending every Sunday in Hammamet: in the morning, in The Medina to supervise the development of our tourist and leisure activities, and, starting from 2 p.m., at the hotel where all my friends can join my table. From time to time, I gather around forty family members for a nice reunion.

Here we are, forty years later. We also set up a restaurant for the staff: for more than twenty years, I've sat down with my collaborators for lunch.

I have always loved to build. I think God made me a builder. I spent my life in construction sites, until the group exceeded a million square meters of buildings. Building, developing projects, creating jobs for thousands of families, enabling thousands of households to live with dignity thanks to their labor: on a daily basis, this vocation nourishes me with happiness that is certainly stronger than any opium.

Yes, we can say that I'm a happy man.

Poulina will always remain strong because it does not depend on people, but rather on structures, values, and ideas.

A. Ben Ayed – 2017

An Iron Will

At 80 years old, I still work seven days a week, and even when I tell you that I spend my Sundays in Hammamet, it is not to relax, but to assess the week with the leaders of the structures of The Medina. Days off and official annual leaves are also working days for me. During the holidays, I very often take only one day off. This is why, in Poulina, coffee and lunch are still served on holidays. A few years ago, after having had prostate surgery, I left the clinic after 48 hours driving my car directly to my office.

Nothing predestined me to this physical resistance, though. Indeed, as I said when I spoke of my youth, I was a fragile child who remained puny until I was 22 years old. Much more than my friends, I caught all the endemic diseases which came with each season; not a winter without a good virulent angina, not an autumn without an inflammation of the eyes, not a summer without a heat stroke. My youth was especially marked by tuberculosis and typhoid fever. These diseases, which I was the only one in my family to catch, were serious, with very low chances of recovery at that time.

At the beginning of my student life in 1961, I had to have my tonsils removed to avoid repeated anginas. I went to the hospital alone on my Solex. 24 hours later, after the surgery, I went back home alone, still on my Solex, without notifying anyone.

Since 1961, and until my prostate surgery in 2014, apart from a few banal ailments, I never spent more than three days in bed. Thanks to the doctors I was surrounded by, including one of my adopted daughters, Dr. Fayrouz Kallel, and thanks to my studies in biology and to the help of my wife, I was able to take care of myself without taking time off work.

I would like to point out that Dr. Fairouz Kallel, whom I nicknamed Mother Teresa, watches over the health of all of Poulina's staff, as well as that of their loved ones! She is always available when need be.

To explain this iron will, I would say: The love of work! To continuously imagine projects makes my body surpass itself so that I can achieve my goal: Tunisia's development, which is my purpose in life.

I had a feeling of frustration, especially when I invited foreigners to show them around the country. I wondered then how I, Tunisian, Arab and Muslim, should act to contribute a little to the alleviation of this disorder.

A. Ben Ayed – 1984

My Take on Religion

Sfax is the only city that did not recognize the protectorate treaties signed by The Bey. It opposed, with arms, the entry of French warships. As the sea wasn't deep, the French couldn't approach the city. It took them more than two weeks to overcome ramparts and silence the few old Turkish cannons.

Hundreds of Sfaxians and a few dozen French soldiers were killed. Thus, wounded in their flesh, defeated by these foreigners, the Sfaxians felt betrayed by their bey. They curled in on themselves, on their history, and on their religion, and refused to mingle with the conquerors. Accordingly, they developed their Koranic schools where the students sat on mats and where mainly the Koran and its teachings, the *taouhid* and the *fikh*, were taught. This education was the responsibility of the parents. Then, in order to follow the course of history, Sfaxians created modern Koranic schools; the students were seated, in groups of three or four, at school desks.

Of course, as a good Sfaxian, I attended a modern Koranic school. There was also the *kotteb* where my wife was educated. When she was eleven, she had luckily moved on to the Franco-Arab school, where she overcame the 5 classes of elementary school in just three years, skipping one class each year.

Unlike me, she was very talented, and always ranked among the best; she scooped up awards and prizes.

My mother's family was very pious. I still have vivid memories of my maternal grandfather who was a *sheikh*. He led the Friday prayers at the Grand Mosque.

He never swore or cursed at anyone. Oftentimes, gently, he lectured my father, whose behavior was quite different. On my father's side, except for my grandparents, we were less observant. In all cases, my uncles and my father never missed prayer on religious holidays. The children were even less observant. I was almost the only one in my surroundings who practiced religion.

The fifties were marked by the success of Radio *Sawt-Al-Arab*, to which everyone listened. It was the voice of truth, that of the oppressed, and the oppressed are always right, aren't they? Back in the days, I was a staunch nationalist, very pious, and often close to religious activism. Everything changed when I left Tunisia for France. It was then that the veil started to fall, and my eyes started to open. *Sawt-Al-Arab* was pure propaganda. The truth was very far from the one proclaimed on its airwaves. While I still practiced religion, the change in me was gradual, but also deep and reasoned. I was becoming more tolerant, closer to all my classmates, regardless of religion or race. By the end of my studies, I had gradually become a tolerant Muslim.

One day, when I was with a very pious family, I witnessed a scene, in which a man who was deemed to be pious behaved in a manner that showed great wickedness. I was hurt and my beliefs were shaken. Indeed, whenever the opportunity presented itself, I fervently defended Islam and the great revolution it made in the world by bringing equality and freedom to the oppressed. Since that day, however, my vision of religion has come down to the words of

the saint who argues that “religion, in a nutshell, is to do good.” When religion leaves the dwelling of the heart, when it is no longer a private matter, it becomes dangerous. All my life I have done my best to do only good.

However, during Poulina's first years, I saw fit to set up, for the young people I had recruited and who often were with no training or education, a prayer room where I myself sometimes preach during Friday prayers. It must be said that I had a very advanced training in religious sciences, psychology and human sciences, and that I knew how to say the right words.

My many trips to the Orient and my many friendships with people coming from the Orient made me discover, with surprise, the strong divide between their religious practice and their behavior. Very often, this religious practice comes down to a pure mechanical exercise that is inherited or imposed. The behavior is often different from one person to another, and does not refer to any of the precepts of Islam that I was taught and that I deeply respect. One day, I attended a fight between two groups with my father: the first group argued that during prayer, the arms must be kept alongside the body, the other group argued that the arms must be crossed over the stomach! This divide struck us: we didn't see the point of this nuance at all. My father looked at me and explained to me that religion should remain a matter of personal choice, and that otherwise, it inevitably leads to abuse.

Since that day, I have always preferred to do my prayers alone and avoid group prayers.

Poulina was built around a handful of self-made men, many of whom had no diplomas, and the majority of whom had no previous experience in business management. Yet, they shared a common vision, the desire to succeed and to develop the industrial economy of their country, which gradually forged their management system and their culture.

A. Ben Ayed – 2001

Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed and Money

My everyday life is simple without being austere. I am content with a comfortable lifestyle that does not go into the excesses which my financial situation could largely allow. This perception of life dates back to my childhood, which I spent in our little house in the Hamilcar Barca impasse near the Kasbah in Sfax. Reading was my main activity during my childhood and my youth, since my father forbade me and my brothers to go out and play in the street. When I couldn't manage to distract his attention, which was quite often the case, I stayed at home. My natural inclinations gradually oriented me towards books of psychology, humanities and social sciences. Thus, early in life, I was led to reflect on the great values of justice, freedom, respect, human behavior, its motivations, etc.

These are readings that I have never stopped doing. They have allowed me, I, a man of action, to keep having this dimension of reflecting upon what is really important in life, what is really valuable. They have allowed me to put into perspective the race towards ownership and appearance, which dominates our modern consumer society.

I have an almost religious respect for money. I don't hesitate to pick up even a small coin from the floor, but, paradoxically, I have

enormous disdain for money when I see what some people are ready to do to have it.

I will tell you that money is a means of living, supporting people, self-development, developing one's country, carrying out works that stand the test of time, etc. Yet, I am horrified by people who use money to enslave other people, to do harm, or to show that they are the best in everything: driving the best car, living in the best villa, etc.

Once, I was looking for marble for my country house, and a friend of mine who is fond of luxury goods asked me why I don't look at the more expensive products. I told him, "I don't want anyone to say this is a rich man's villa, because that's not who I am." I simply asked the decorator to make me a pretty villa, with quality products, but without ostentatious signs of wealth.

I'm a frugal person, it's no secret. This can even be seen in my daily habits. For example, when driving from my home to my office, I like to do it at a constant speed, without using the brakes too much, for the sake of seeing how much fuel I have saved every day. I accurately assess these savings on my car's speedometer. For me, the observation is simple: in extrapolation, for a truck driver, these small savings would exceed a thousand dinars per month, which is often higher than his salary. When we multiply that by the number of drivers in a group of Poulina's size, we can see the savings we can make. If we want to go even further, nationwide, these savings would reach a billion dinars. It is this reflection that later led to outsource transport in the form of independent work: a hire-purchase car for each driver with guaranteed full employment. Suddenly, our former drivers have become suppliers, and, by explaining to them the savings they could make each month, their way of driving has improved. Indeed, when the individual sees that making savings allows him to earn more, he adheres to it more

easily. Our next goal is to buy driving simulators to allow our drivers to learn good driving practices and adopt them in their daily lives.

In fact, money doesn't make sense on its own, it's what we do with it that makes sense. The most important thing is knowing how and where to use one's money. Thirty years ago, I went for the first time to the trading room of the Tunis Stock Exchange. With two of my collaborators, we were there to buy a lumber business. When the price exceeded our estimate of the company's value, we stopped the bidding. Next to us, there was a gentleman, in his forties, covered in sweat, who had Tachycardia, as I was told. He was only bidding up, again and again. It was fun seeing him put himself in this state for a company that wasn't worth the amount of those bids. I even tried to gently warn him. Yet, nothing helped. He finally bought it at an exorbitant price. A few years later, he lost everything... especially his health. The company was bankrupt and he owed the banks a lot of money. All this to say that when it comes to money, we shouldn't let our arrogance get the best of us, but we should respect the value of things.

For a very long time, I only travelled in economy class, and it was difficult for my partners and collaborators to persuade me to switch to business class. They also had to insist that I buy myself a nice car. When I think about it, I admit that they must have been right, because most people did not understand the gist of my behavior. I am embarrassed by the apparent signs of wealth, and I want to stay close to the people, and to the middle class, with which I identify. By the way, my wife is like me; she doesn't like anything that seeks attention. In fact, I believe that people who flaunt their wealth care little for the reactions of ordinary people. In my case, I am proud of my simple life, and my mid-range car... It makes me much more respected when I drive through working-class neighborhoods. I remember that in the 1990s, a lot of people were shocked to see me traveling in economy class or driving a car that is smaller than

those of my collaborators. It made me laugh inside. I would often reply: "If I refuse to drive a more luxurious car, it's because I want the inhabitants of Sabbelet Mornag, that I drive through every day on my way to work, to be less jealous of me when they see me pass by. Likewise, if you walk past my house, you can't say that it's a rich man's house." These are the values of my generation which have been passed on to us. I owe them to my mother and I fortunately found them in my wife, whose humility and modesty have always been exemplary.

I have lived through the history of modern Tunisia; I have lived through the period of the protectorate, and I have suffered from the presence of the French army and the French police. Afterwards, I studied in France where I understood the suffering of an underdeveloped individual in a developed country, especially for someone who's Arab, and Muslim. I wish that all those who experience suffering react positively, and only think of building their country, because that is the only way to be proud and to raise their heads high.

A. Ben Ayed – 2003

The Gifts of Fate

I strongly believe in luck, because if it hadn't been for luck, Poulina would have never been able to stand on its feet.

The first time luck manifested itself was in 1969, about two years after starting our first industrial farming experience, when the state was trying to keep farming businesses within the framework of the cooperatives.

Representatives of the Socialist Destourian Party, retired police officers and retirees from the public administration came to my house to ask me to prepare inventories in order to bring our farms into a cooperative. I invited them all to my living room for a chat. I particularly remember one old person in a djellaba, wearing a straw hat and using a cane. After they explained the purpose of their visit, I told them that I would only agree to join the cooperative if they came with a written court verdict, or if they brought law enforcement. The old Bedouin who had come in a djellaba and who had returned with me to the living room to retrieve his hat, took my hand and begged me to defend their rights because they knew nothing and they were surpassed by the ruling power. I told him that we were in the same boat and that I would do my best to save my properties and theirs. Yet, they never came back, simply because Ben Salah was dismissed from his position a few days later, just before the

next meeting we had scheduled. You could say that luck was on my side because, by pure chance, the whole story unfolded in a few days.

The second time luck manifested itself was following the case of 1994. One morning, while I was having breakfast with my wife in the southern suburbs of Tunis, in the countryside, completely in a desperate situation, thinking that my work with Poulina was done, and that my company was lost, I received this call from a person who was very close to the Palace and who informed me that the President would like to receive me the following Tuesday at 10 a.m. It was absolutely an unexpected stroke of luck!

Luck smiled on us again after the revolution, when all our factories were in the throes of strikes, and experienced absolutely abnormal shutdowns. The animal feed sector cannot stand a rupture: in a farm, you cannot ask an animal to stop eating! Actually, during this period, we also witnessed a deliberate poisoning of turkey feed, which caused us losses of several hundred thousand dinars. There was absolutely nothing we could do during that time of turmoil.

We had to comply with all the pay raises the workers demanded, which were beyond the requirements of the law and of collective agreements. Despite this, the trade unionists were never happy; they kept repeating to the workers that they deserved more. Moreover, the multiple meetings held with the governor failed to lead to any solution.

The last meeting was the last straw; UGTT representatives tried to calm the excesses of factory workers and unionists by telling them that they had obtained more than 30% of their maximum rights, but to no avail. The response from the trade unionists in the company was very clear: they asked the head of the UGTT to remain out of

the matter because they claimed to know how to defend their interests better than the national union.

Although the UGTT representatives did not leave the room after these untimely and unpleasant words, they did not intervene. This is why, and even thanks to this, we were able to execute an employer strike.

Luckily, we were already working day and night in another governorate to build a new generation plant with a capacity that is greater than that of the *Société de Nutrition Animale*. In this situation, we waited day after day for the start-up of the new factory to survive the walkouts and wildcat strikes that were the daily life of the SNA.

It was under these conditions that Poulina initiated its first employer strike. After 15 days of strike, our employees asked to meet with us. We therefore had a meeting with them and explained the reality of the demands of the factory's trade unionists. They told us that they didn't understand the situation, that they were just poor workers, people for whom life is hard, people who wanted to earn more but who didn't know the law. We simply demanded the resignation of the factory's union, which had been the source of wildcat strikes, walkouts, and especially, the poisoning of turkey feed.

Within a week, we received the resignation of all the members of this union and work peacefully resumed in the factory, in an atmosphere of respect and brotherly feelings. We haven't had an extreme case like this ever since.

What we did at SNA was an exceptional external rescue case. In reality, we were at the limit of food production, and during this period, we were obliged to buy much of our needs from the outside.

Much of our business was going to be severely affected if we had not finished building the new factory which took over from SNA, and made it possible to resume work in case we were faced with new risks of wildcat strikes.

Our principle, and we are really proud of this, is to never discuss the rights of our workers; we systematically try to study them, grant them and even improve them, but we never challenge them.



APPENDIX

SOME TESTIMONIALS

FAYROUZ KALLEL

(Adopted daughter of Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed)

Mr Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed, who doesn't know this name?

This great figure who has left his mark on Tunisia and whom I always compare to Bourguiba is my foster father. I lost my parents when I was 23 and I am 60 today: I have therefore spent more time with him than with my own father.

He took my brother, my sister and me under his wing. His little family became our family. My brother's wedding ceremony was held at his house in Ouzra.

He is an exceptional man for me and his memory will forever be engraved in my heart.

One last point that makes uncle Abdelwaheb a legend: his fight against illness. He never gave up. He would come to the office with his chemotherapy vial, even with all the complications that arose. He called his close colleagues for meetings as soon as he had some strength.

He was a living example of energy and faith. His doctors saw hundreds of similar cases, but no one was like him. All of them had the same comment: exceptionally endearing.

CHADLI DZIRI

(Professor and husband to Dr Fairouz)

Whatever the weather, whether it rains, whether there is a revolution, political instability or not, Si Abdelwaheb keeps working morning, noon and night. Si Abdelwaheb, as his collaborators called him, is a locomotive that does not stop, tirelessly pulling wagons along. Si Abdelwaheb held work as a value. For him, work was a pleasure, even when he was asleep he dreamed of work. Si Abdelwaheb was precise in his interventions, clear and brief. His concern was to be efficient. Si Abdelwaheb was loyal, very close to his collaborators, he developed a relationship that gave them pleasure to persevere and to excel. Si Abdelwaheb was a role model in the ways of work and success.

This success has had positive repercussions, but it has sometimes created jealousy. Evil forces sought to destroy Si Abdelwaheb. Unable to reach him directly, they attacked his institution and his collaborators. Audits followed one another for six long years. The auditors basically lived in his institution. Eventually, they found a reason to charge Si Abdelwaheb, allegedly because of a 'bribe' paid to two of his close collaborators. The latter were placed in police custody in appalling conditions; one of them had health problems which were not taken into account. They were even told to claim that Si Abdelwaheb was behind all the "bribes" if they wanted to be released quickly. The two collaborators, loyal to Si Abdelwaheb, refused. They were given "special" treatment while awaiting the verdict.

Of course, being just is a divine value that is difficult to attain in absolute terms. But some human beings seek to achieve this value. The president of the court of justice and his judges, appointed for this urgent case, took their time to study the case properly. The interventions of some envious, powerful and influential people were increasing day and night. The judges, despite the pressure and stress, proved that the complaint was unfounded. The verdict said that the case be dismissed and Si Abdewaheb's collaborators were finally released.

HICHEM ELLOUMI

(Vice President of UTICA and President of the Coficab Group)

Humble, joyful and humane... All those who have met him can testify to this. But this is not all. Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed, as I knew him, is undoubtedly one of the leaders of modern Tunisia in his field, a pioneer of Tunisian industry and, above all, a visionary in terms of both economic development and management of human resources.

His edifice, Poulina Holding, covers today almost all the economic activities, from poultry integration to mass consumption products, processing of metals, packaging, real estate, tourism, information technologies, wood and capital goods, building materials and even trade and services...

He was the first to introduce turkey farming in 1973 in Tunisia and North Africa, and among the first to launch the manufacture of detergents in 1975, ice cream in 1976, processed meat products in 1978, and ready meals in 1980...

But in my eyes, Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed is, and will remain above all, a master in management, governance and economic development. It is thanks to him that the spin-off, as a business development model, took root and had its first success stories in Tunisia. The El Mazraa brand, now present throughout the country, is a good example of this.

His approach to the management of human resources is also a model to follow. Thanks to his human and entrepreneurial qualities, he did not hesitate to encourage his managers and staff to outsource and create their own companies.

His sense of leadership, his taste for innovation, his addiction to work and his perseverance, have enabled him to be ranked at the top of the list of business leaders who built Tunisian industry.

Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed was also a patriot who loved his country in his own way and spared no effort to contribute to the development and growth of the national economy. It is enough to know that Poulina is today the first Tunisian private employer, with more than 15,000 direct employees and an average of 1,100 new recruits each year, in order to confirm this.

Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed has accumulated, after more than fifty years as head of the Poulina group, rare knowledge and polyvalent expertise.

In a word, he was a true developer capable of doing everything to make his dreams come true.

May Allah have mercy on his soul!

MOHAMED FESSI

(Certified Accountant)

I first met Mr Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed at Poulina's headquarters in Ezzahra in April 1997. Three months earlier, I had led a seminar on the accounting system for companies, which had just come into force, and I was invited by the head of training - at the time - to make a presentation to the group's senior executives, in the middle of their weekly Wednesday.

I quickly realised that Poulina was ahead of the game in terms of setting up tools for steering its activity (management dashboards and other forms of decision-making). I was also attracted by the clarity of Mr Ben Ayed's vision and his pragmatic approach to things. Twenty years have passed since then. Twenty years during which I have had the pleasure of watching Mr Ben Ayed at work. As I am one of those who believe that in life everything has an explanation, success as well as failure, I took the time to reflect on the causes which, despite a sometimes - not to say often - hostile business environment, allowed Mr Ben Ayed to succeed in what he had undertaken more than half a century ago: to build one of the largest groups in Tunisia. A group composed of more than a hundred subsidiaries operating in various sectors, and which, in my opinion, is one of the most spectacular in the Tunisian economy.

In my opinion, Poulina's success is based on four pillars: vision, ambition, a keen sense of business culture and exceptional human qualities.

MONCEF BOUZOUIA

(National School of Veterinarians)

I agreed very spontaneously to write this testimony to pay homage to a person who has carried the colours of Tunisia aloft, a person whom I am proud to know, a true captain of industry or what the Asians call a "tycoon".

I would first like to make it clear that talking about Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed or the Poulina group is the same thing: those who knew the person or those who dealt with the group know that the two are inseparable.

Personally, I am proud to have known Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed, to have met him, to have worked with him, essentially in the poultry sector, the heart of his profession and of the Poulina group, but also to have exchanged with him in many other fields where he was often a visionary and a pioneer such as tourism, new technologies and many others since the Poulina Group or Poulina Group Holding (PGH) includes today more than 100 companies led by Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed. Indeed, the Holding operates in various fields such as poultry farming, food processing, industry, ceramics, packaging and real estate, in Tunisia, China and in several African countries.

In the field of poultry at the national level

At a time when the quota was very strict, obtaining, maintaining and developing a quota was very difficult, because it depended on a Bonus-Malus system, based on a rating of the different operators

and which led to an annual revision of the quotas. Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed and the Pouline company were always among the most successful, the most regular in communicating their results, and in participating in market regulation operations: early reform of flocks, storage of eggs or meat to meet the particular needs of the month of Ramadan, etc. All of this allowed them to obtain the best results possible. All this allowed them to obtain rights to quota increases each year. But Si Abdelwaheb, a member of the board of directors of the Interprofessional Group for Poultry Products (GIPA), told me: "Give my share of the increase to the others; we don't want to monopolise production.

When Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed was offered the presidency of the board of directors, which was done by co-opting the members of the board of which he was a member, he replied: "If there are other candidates, I'm not running.

In the international poultry business

In my activities as an international consultant, I have often cited technical or marketing approaches developed by Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed that have often been copied or at least served as an example to operators in different countries. Some even asked me to arrange a meeting with Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed: after these meetings, everyone was struck by the stature of this man.

In tourism

I remember the genesis of the Medina of Hammamet which I visited several times at different stages of its conception and construction. I can testify that Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed was, with the professionals around him, architects, engineers, decorators, artists and craftsmen, the linchpin of this very beautiful achievement. It has since become the hub of tourist activities in South Hammamet as it includes hotels, apartments, villas, shops, cinemas and an amusement park. I testify that the Medina would not be what it is

today without the genius of this man who wanted, with this beautiful achievement, to "make a child's dream come true".

In new technologies

I still remember the passion he had when he told me about his new data centre. He was very proud to have created the first state-of-the-art data centre and he saw the future of Tunisia in value-added services for new technologies.

In addition to all the contributions of Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed and the Poulina Group to the Tunisian economy, there are other contributions that are much less known:

- The training of experts in all fields and at all levels who, reproducing the group's operating methods, have sometimes spread out to serve other structures: one can truly speak of a "Poulina school";
- Patronage and, in this respect, I cannot fail to mention the equipment of the amphitheatre of the veterinary school of Sidi Thabet: as soon as I asked Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed if he could take charge of this action, he did not hesitate to give his agreement without any limitation in funds. The result was a very beautiful room equipped with the latest video-conferencing technology, which opened the school to the world.

I cannot talk about Si Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed without mentioning the great lady who is Mrs Ben Ayed. She was part of this epic from the beginning. She took care of the laboratory, the key to the group's quality approach, which had to rely on a very good laboratory, and, over time, concentrated all the new technologies there. All those who have worked with the group in general and the laboratory in particular recognise her great involvement in what she has undertaken: to make the group's laboratory a benchmark in its field.

SOUAD DZIRI

(Granddaughter of Mohsen Kallel - founding shareholder)

My first memories go back to my childhood, when I was waiting impatiently in Chadlia's office to have my little glass bottle of coca cola while my mother was having her meetings with Uncle Abdelwaheb.

He is for me the grandfather I never knew, he tells me their stories, their friendship, their beginning in Poulina ...

He influenced in a direct or indirect way some of my choices, especially in my professional life.

He always said: "Work is not an obligation but a pleasure". Thanks to him, this is the path I have chosen: to make my work my passion. He also said: "Earning money should not be your priority".

Before leaving to France, I asked him for his opinion and he told me: "Go, live your experience, and do not return before your 32 years. Learn but go back, Tunisia is your country".

During the last ten years, every time I came to Tunis, I tried as best as I could to stop by to give him a kiss: he always received me, even during his meetings with his colleagues. Always optimistic and smiling, for him Tunisia was the most beautiful country in the world and the one where life is very good. He anchored in me this patriotic spirit. We had the opportunity to go to Paris together. As we walked through the streets, he went back in time, evoking memories of his youth. We shared exceptional dishes: the dish we both was Ezzoghma.

During the last ten years, every time I came to Tunis, I tried as best as I could to stop by and kiss him: he always received me, even during his meetings with his colleagues. Always optimistic and smiling, for him Tunisia was the most beautiful country in the world and the one where life is very good. He anchored in me this patriotic spirit.

We had the opportunity to go to Paris together. As we walked through the streets, he went back in time, evoking memories of his youth. We shared exceptional food: our common point was Ezzoghma and we laughed to tears!

FAÏEK BEN HADJ YAHIA

(Lawyer)

There are people that chance reveals to you and who mark you for life.

Of all the people I have met, Si Abdelwaheb is the one who stands out the most. He is this humble and kind man who receives people with his legendary smile before the handshake or the embrace he gives to his guests. Often the welcome was accompanied by an invitation to a tea, a coffee or an herbal concoction of which only he knew the secret. After a little chat, he would decide to end it and invite the audience to address the subject of the meeting with particular attention. Sometimes we would also ask him to arbitrate on other issues. What I remember from these meetings is the swiftness of his decisions and the soundness of his judgement whenever he was called upon to arbitrate on a case or to decide on a matter. Each time, he would amaze the audience by the speed with which he assessed the issues and made a decision.

It was through my brother and dear friend, Taïeb Ketari, that I met Si Abdelwaheb. I was a student and we came close for professional reasons. It was an honour and a privilege to be with him. He displayed no aloofness, no prejudice. What mattered to him was the ability to provide a relevant and convincing answer. Once you have gained Si Abdelwaheb's trust, he treats you like a son or a little brother, a member of the family. His wife and companion, Mina, a great, discreet and caring lady, and his children, Slim and Malika, do the same.

Another trait that made Si Abdelwaheb a true visionary was his great capacity to project himself into the future and to anticipate the major investments that would result from it. He outlined them with passion and acuity. When he outlined his future projects, his pedagogical qualities and his rigour could not help but attract the support of his interlocutors.

Each exchange with Si Abdelwaheb, never stingy with information and always animated by the spirit of sharing, was an opportunity to learn and share knowledge, which naturally improved us. Sometimes we teased him about his reverence for work. When we mentioned travelling to exotic places and suggested that he take a holiday in the Bahamas to relax, he would reply that his Bahamas were in Jnène Ben Ayed, in Mornag, and that we were welcome there. "When I'm working, I'm having fun," he would add.

One of the most trying ordeals that Si Abdelwaheb had to face was the thorough tax inspection, with strong political and regionalist overtones, that Poulina was subjected to. This audit was provoked by some envious people to destabilise, or even bring to its knees, the jewel of the country's industry and poultry farming. The record amount of ex officio taxation imposed on it was so large that it threatened the survival of the group. In addition, a criminal complaint was filed against Si Abdelwaheb's two main collaborators, Si Slah Langar and Si Mohsen Toumi: on the basis of fallacious accusations and a case without any legal basis, they were arrested and put on trial. Si Abdelwaheb felt helpless in the face of the distress and panic of his collaborators' families: he took all measures to relieve them by ensuring that all necessary legal and other forms of assistance were provided.

This episode affected this great man deeply. Nevertheless, it provided an opportunity for all the directors of the group and Si Abdelwaheb's close circle to give their support and show their solidarity. All of them did their best, each one according to his or her connections or address book, to help find a solution to this thorny

and painful situation that the group and the families of the two employees were experiencing.

The case was resolved with the help of a few kind people. Once the tax audit was closed and the employees were released, Si Abdelwaheb quickly applied an austerity regime to the group by eliminating waste and implementing a draconian programme of energy saving and product management in order to improve results and reduce expenses. For example, he demanded that all business travel be in economy class for all staff, including himself.

During this episode, a few bank presidents showed support for the group and others remained aloof. It was only after this affair was resolved that all the bankers found their way back to Ezzahra... Si Abdelwaheb did not hold it against any of them.

A vast programme of computerisation, rationalisation of the management of the group's accounts and treasury as well as the implementation of new procedures were adopted and implemented. It is in this context of reorganization and modernization of the group that urgent signals were given for Si Abdelwaheb to start the works of the tourist projects in the area of Yasmine Hammamet Sud on the lands acquired for this purpose.

This was an opportunity for Si Abdelwaheb to take up his role as builder with a devouring passion and an excitement that led him to examine all the details and give instructions as if he were piloting the work in person: no detail eluded him. He made sure that the final plans were in line with his vision of the project, which he wanted to be unique and innovative in all its components: accommodation, shops, crafts, restaurants, entertainment, leisure and culture.

I cannot summarise the innumerable qualities of Si Abdelwaheb but I can say that this exceptional man has left an indelible mark on me and I consider myself lucky to have benefited from his friendship and his father-like affection.

Tarek BEN MILED

(Architect)

I met Abdelwaheb through a mutual friend more than 25 years ago, and I was immediately won over by the man. His modesty first of all, his intelligence and his extreme rationality. With an exceptional ability to listen, he had the gift of always getting to the point. He told me that during his engineering studies, he never learned a course by heart. He would first try to understand the idea and the rest was self-evident.

Respect also for the man who started with almost nothing and created the biggest group in this country.

He once took me to visit the first chicken coop he had built with his own hands (with the help of Mina, his wife), pushing the wheelbarrow and doing the labour. The first water tank built of breeze blocks, completely rotten, is still there, as a witness of the beginning of this saga. Thereafter, it was a long common journey of work and friendship, always in good humour, mutual trust and experimentation. Even if at the beginning the plan might seem banal, Abdelwaheb knew how to push you to go to the limit and make this project exceptional and unique. He always went as far as possible in the research, while remaining anchored in reality. If you get stuck, he would always say that you should try to benefit from the experience of others.

It is said that the success of a project is not only thanks to the architect. You also need a good client. It is not enough that they trust you. You also need them to fuel your imagination and push you to do your best. And this was definitely the case.

People always say that Poulina is a school, and that people work very hard here, which is true, but it was never under pressure. It was this passion and esprit de corps that the boss managed to instil in his employees, with whom he had a very personal relationship. For example, he had a small stock of medicines in his office. Whenever one of his employees was ill, he would give him a remedy to make him well again.

What also amazed me about this man who runs so many companies at the same time was the calmness with which he received everyone. I never saw him stressed, never. Except perhaps when Ben Ali and his henchmen decided, for some obscure reason, to break up Poulina. I think that was a very difficult moment for him. If you were to compare him to someone, I think you would have to think of the Swedish or Finnish politicians, or the CEO of Ikea who used to take the bus to work.

It is true that Abdelwaheb had a big car, but I testify that it was because of the pressure of his employees. They said he had to conform to the local practice of big businessmen. In fact, he ended up buying a small 4x4.

At lunchtime, his table in the group restaurant was always open. And one was always received with great friendliness. Here too, experimentation was the order of the day. There was often a new way of seasoning the turkey, but always healthy. You would meet very important people, but also simple employees, so as to end a meeting in a friendly way.

I did several projects with Abdelwaheb. I say Abdelwaheb and not Poulina, because I always considered it a personal engagement with him. And they were almost always iconic projects, difficult to do but so exhilarating, not counting the meetings I had with him. For the Medina alone I counted, apart from the site meetings and the Sundays that I systematically spent on the site with him, two hundred and twenty meetings.

We met every Thursday at 6pm in the meeting room on the ground floor of the headquarters. There would be between five, and twenty of us. We went out between 10 and 11 pm. At that time, the last Poulina employees would go home. They say that this is how it is done in Japan. I've never seen anyone complain about working too hard. That's the miracle of Poulina.

In these meetings, always in an extremely friendly atmosphere, everyone expressed themselves in the freest and spontaneous way, from the most experienced engineers to the trainees, and of course the guests from all walks of life and all specialities: the kitchen expert, the advertising executive, the artist, the economist, the journalist, etc. These were fascinating debates, but they never got out of hand, because the boss was there, listening and with his feet firmly on the ground. He always said: "The advisors are not the ones who pay".

Personally, I had a great deal of creative freedom, but I had to constantly find rational and functional justifications and come up with something reasonable. This is a difficult exercise because the artist always tends to want to satisfy his ego. This multidisciplinary and participatory approach always puts the project before the people.

We have done several projects together, but the three most important are:

- A housing complex on almost an entire street in Sidi Bou Saïd,
- The rehabilitation of Dar Hamouda Bacha on Sidi Ben Arous Street,
- The Medina of Yasmine Hammamet.

Three iconic projects, one might say. The first project required the construction of several houses in an incomparable historical site on a very steep slope with extremely unstable ground, which required technical prowess.

For the second project, we had to restore and adapt to contemporary use a beautiful palace that was almost in ruins.

The third, of course, is the Medina of Hammamet Sud.

Three projects which are in truth a real gift for an architect, but also a great risk for me and for the promoter who trusted me. And I say this especially for the first project because at that time, I hardly knew my promoter.

It's especially in such cases that you give it your all.

In the first case, we had a real structural problem. The clay soil and steep slope caused several engineers to block out. We even called in the university. But guess who found the solution, which was obvious by the way? Mr Ben Ayed!

The second project was my idea, because it is not Poulina's vocation to restore historical monuments. However, I had no trouble convincing Abdelwaheb, who considered the operation as a patronage. Moreover, his associates in the group did not want to support him.

We started the project without knowing where it would lead us in terms of investment. Once again, he took the risk and we can say that from an architectural point of view it is a real success.

For the Medina, it started in the most unlikely of ways.

Abdelwaheb had a plot of land at the exit of Hammamet Nord. He wanted to set up a shopping centre dedicated to handicrafts, but the site was not at all convincing.

In the meantime, the Hammamet Sud Tourist Development Plan appeared, at the heart of which was a plot of land for a Medina. I spoke to Abdelwaheb about it one evening at a friend's dinner party and presented him with a sketch of about twenty centimetres square (which I still have). He jumped at the chance and within a week we had the plot. But what were we to do? The concept was completely new. We immediately got to work. Ideas were thrown around and immediately translated into drawings.

The back and forth went on for a year before we presented a sketch to the technical commission of the ONTT.

They really gave us a free hand. Indeed, nothing corresponded to the usual codes with which tourism projects were programmed.

The studies lasted three whole years before the call for tenders. But we continued to refine the programme during the four years of construction. For four years, a team of architects and engineers continued to produce drawings right up to the end of the project. And the most extraordinary thing is that, until the end, nobody asked us for an account. So we were only allowed to build once the project was finished.

Of course, it was not a smooth ride. There were a few tense moments, but so few. The whole adventure lasted eight full years, and it was an exciting adventure in every respect.

For me it was the project of a lifetime and a life lesson. For that alone I say: "Thank you, Abdelwaheb".

Maher Kallel

(Strategy Consultant)

« Nothing great will ever be achieved without great men, and men are great only if they are determined to be so. »

Charles de Gaulle

To my spiritual father,

I grew up in the vicinity of the current PGH headquarters from the age of fourteen. I watched this beautiful plant develop and develop Tunisia in the process. In the evening, at midnight, your office was often lit, you were in the company of my late father laying the foundations of this great group. You did not dictate to me how to develop and succeed in a project, you were content with just doing it and let me look at it to pick up some of the seeds and draw on this wealth. You were generous and liked to share your knowledge, so much so that you created the culture of the learning company.

At a very young age, you dreamed of creating a modern company whose management and technology would rival the largest European companies. You were able to bring together a disparate but united team around this dream. You said that the challenge would be to respond to those who considered Tunisians to be underdeveloped. Your hard work and dedication will bring the group up to the same level or even higher than those same European companies. The challenge was taken up by more than fifteen thousand people.

You believed in your dreams and always ended up making them come true. You saw the Medina Mediterranean as a place that would celebrate the richness of our country, an anchor for Muslims, Christians and Jews, and today hundreds of thousands of people admire this work that will always bear your imprint. You had this exceptional ability to develop high-level strategies and to shape this vision that you liked to call the helicopter vision, while examining every detail in all its aspects: physical, chemical, mechanical and energetic, without forgetting the managerial and financial side. You had this art of switching easily, like a gymnast, from the strategic to the operational. This genius often stunned your interlocutors and I remember in particular the CEO of Shell whom you had destabilised during a courtesy visit by giving learned details on capillary forces and their impact on the lubrication of Shell products. He was taken aback and capitulated by admitting that he had no expertise in the field and urgently called his technical director!

To me, you personified the values of the group: meritocracy, integrity, anti-baronism, awareness of the value of time and money. You were an example in your professional and family life. You will always have a special place in our hearts. You are gone, but your work, like that of all great men, is there, and we will all strive to perpetuate it through the generations.

Letter from Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed

to the employees of Poulina on the eve of the first democratic election in Tunisia.

23 OCTOBER 2011 VOTE

Dear collaborators,

I take this unique and historic opportunity to congratulate the Tunisian people. Today, the most important thing are the values that should bring us together and unite us: maturity, civic-mindedness, discipline and the commitment of Tunisians to build a true democracy, a democracy that reflects the truth of the people. Only the truth of the ballot box counts, a truth that reflects the reality of the people's aspirations. There is no point in living with our eyes closed to our environment.

However, nothing is set in stone; let those who believe they can do better for Tunisia mobilise, show their capacity to act, while respecting others, and the ballot box will always be there to decide the trends as judged by our fellow citizens.

May all Tunisians be proud of this day of October 23, 2011, when for the first time each of us moved, lined up in discipline with the hope of making our aspirations triumph. Thus, little Tunisia has brilliantly demonstrated to the world, and this is a first in the Arab world, that democracy is not incompatible with Islam.

The results will be announced tomorrow. We will have to live up to the objectives of democracy by accepting, with all the necessary discipline, the verdict of the ballot box and by accommodating

ourselves to the policies of the government that emerges from this vote.

In any case, the challenges ahead are enormous. The country, regardless of the government that will be at its head, will need all the good faith and all the energy to meet them. We will therefore have to be rigorous, hard-working, efficient and disciplined.

The Poulina Group will do its utmost to contribute to meeting these challenges, and as such, I am counting on you to make all the necessary efforts.

Best regards

Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed

Poulina Group Holding

24/10/2011

SOME ABBREVIATIONS

BIAT: Banque Internationale Arabe de Tunisie, Arab International Bank of Tunisia

Fund 26-26 : Fonds de Solidarité Nationale sous son numéro de compte postal : 26-26, National Solidarity Fund with its postal account number : 26-26

GAN: Grands Ateliers du Nord, The Great Workshops of the North

GIPA: Générale de l'Industrie des Produits Alimentaires, filiale de Poulina glaces et produits laitiers, General Company of the Food Products Industry, subsidiary of Poulina's ice cream and dairy products

IHEC : Institut des Hautes Études Commerciales de Carthage, Carthage High Commercial Studies Institute

SNA : Société de Nutrition Animale, Animal Feed Company

SNCFT : Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Tunisiens, Tunisian National Railway Company

STEG : Société Tunisienne de l'Électricité et du Gaz, Tunisian Electricity and Gas Company

UGTT : Union générale Tunisienne du Travail, Tunisian General Labor Union

UIB: Union Internationale de Banques, International Union of Banks

UTICA : *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat*, Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts



Why my memories ?

I wrote them to leave my message to everyone: that dreaming is necessary, that work pays, that honesty, rigor, merit are the keys to discovering our possibilities and that these are endless.

That poverty, difficulties, ignorance are not inevitable and that everything is possible if we believe in our dreams.

It is also so that history remembers all these men, my friends who accompanied me through my adventure and who made my dreams come true.

This is so that history will keep track of the difficulties and the magic of Tunisia in the sixties, of a country that started from nothing and which, thanks to the work and self-sacrifice of its children, was able to develop a modern industry, capable of competing with that of the most developed countries.

It is to shout my pride in being Tunisian and that my dream was to raise the industry of our country to the highest peaks.

Finally, it is for all those who knew me and especially for my children, my grandchildren and those who will follow so that they never forget that their dreams are possible.