Sharing and Unsharing Memories.
Life Stories of Jews from Muslim-Arab countries: Fear, Anger and Discontent within a Silenced Displacement

by Sara Cohen Fournier

Abstract
As a massive exodus drained the Jewish communities from Muslim-Arab countries, starting just after World War II a large number of them migrated in cosmopolitan Montréal. This paper offers a new perspective on their displacement, inquiring on individual narratives of their reconstruction of shared and unshared memories. In this post-Shoah and post-colonial migration, how have these departures been represented within individual memory? What are the elements that have been shared and others hidden? And what are the consequences of uprooting within the individual realm?

Using an oral history methodology, the life stories of Sephardic Jews reveal a paradigm present in certain individuals of an ever-present fear and emotional burden, as well as an ability to maintain their agency over their own trajectory. Through the sharing of memories enabled by the project Life stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide and human rights violation, I will look at four narratives from four individuals that demonstrate these lingering emotions of fear, anger and discontent. By engaging with usually unshared memories, information is revealed on the personal significance of massive displacement and hopeful for future reconciliation with a fragmented past.

Introduction

Under history, memory and forgetting.
Under memory and forgetting, life.
But writing a life is another story.
Incompletion.
Paul Ricoeur

Incompletion reveals the openness of our being, the provision for interpretations of human narratives through the ‘imaginary’ construction. As individuals celebrate events or reduce their narratives to omit elements, stories become dependent on the perception of the individual. Indeed the boundary between the events that happened, and the impressions left within the individuals’ realm are often blurred by the individual’s memory. Intertwined, these stories become personal ‘truth,’ also known as ‘shared imagination.’

Through the study of narratives, the shared or unshared memories reflect the historical materialism that each individual shape, which influences their

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identity. Temporal and incomplete, always evolving, and reflective of an instant, narratives allow for glimpses of personal comprehension in the realm of history.

In the four decades following World War II, Muslim-Arab countries were emptied of their Jewish communities. Once prosperous and ingrained in the landscape for centuries, Jews from Muslim-Arab lands came to settle in various countries. Mapping the specifics of this exodus led to several findings. However, the question remains as to how this displacement occurred and how individuals now living in Montreal share and tell these memories. In 2007, I was approached by the project Life Stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocides and human rights violation to interview individuals from this community, a community to which I belong, that calls itself the Montreal Sephardic community (CSQ). Having been raised by a Jewish Moroccan mother, who had brought us many times back to her country of origin, Morocco, I was interested in the reason of their departure from this beautiful country for the snowy Montreal. I wanted to know what was told within their narratives and how was formulated their identity. I also wanted to compare their migration to the one of Jews from the Middle East, who were present in Montreal in some numbers, particularly at the synagogue I attended, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue.

Analyzing their migrations from the Middle East and those from North Africa shed light on two types of displacement, while the presentation of their narratives is similar. In the first case, departure is perceived as an expulsion. Strong emotions are still present in recollections of the events. Fear and angst reveal a possible sense of insecurity of the present, as well as a continuation of anger that could affect a possible reconciliation with their own past. Hence, it becomes essential to try to identify the factors of denial or forgetting. This aspect is a central element in the interviews our group collected and some interviewees, particularly those from Egypt or from Iraq, emphasized the forced dimension of their departure.

In the second case, interviewees refused to consider their departure as an expulsion. Before the commencement of the interviews, Moroccan interviewees were particularly reluctant to assent to the terminology of the project. They considered themselves neither as displaced “by war” nor by “other violations of their rights.” Some professed that their departure stemmed from their own will, or was linked to another aspect (familial or professional) bearing no relationship to some form of coercion. Indeed, the situation of Jews in Morocco was entirely different of those from Egypt. Moroccan independence in 1956 did not lead to discriminatory measures concerning

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Jewish Moroccan nationality. Nevertheless, triggered by a feeling of insecurity, well-documented now by historians, their departure took place and was spread over four decades, beginning with their mass migration to Israel in 1948, through the 1970s and 1980s when the last contingents arrived in Canada. These stories tended to emphasize the interviewees’ freedom to choose their destination, sometimes underestimating the violence of the environment. In this sense, the plurality of migratory trajectories is quite significant. In this article, I will not touch upon the narratives of Moroccan displacement (which is mentioned here to inform my own position, as well as the existence of a debate around the migration of Jews from Arab Muslim lands). Rather, I will concentrate here on how some perceived their migration as forced departures. I will raise the question on how four individuals represented their departure from Iraq, Algeria and Egypt? Are there some similarities in the construction of their narrative? And can we speak of individual resilience or a collective denial of their particular history in the creation of these stories?

In the midst of a massive displacement, when almost a totality of a group migrates, many individuals, and not the collectivity, might have difficulty considering the departure as chosen. Instead the departure is seen as imposed, or even forced. However within our interviewees’ narratives, the stoic bearing of difficult departure is perceived as a powerful force sustaining continuity and coherence. This process is exemplified in the narratives below. The ability to avoid becoming a victim of events allow for a legitimization of departure, and not a victimization of the individual. This narrative allows them to construct and reconstruct their history. By the dint of memory, the opposition between shared, and unshared memory can be identified. And the unveiling of these emotions still present from the unshared memories could allow reconciliation of individual’s past and the collective’s history.

Studying the representation of these collective events in personal light, drawing parallels between the lives of three individuals from Mashreq and Maghreb, allows to present the construction of a similar narrative, revealing resilience in the face of displacement. As these individuals leave their native land during their youth, certain elements of collective history are transformed, shared and unshared to reflect their change in identity.

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The Context of the Research

Through the project *Life Stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide and other human rights violations*, a few hundred interviews were collected in different community groups, using a methodology of oral history to explore the social memories of trauma and displacement through individual experiences. This project aimed at understanding the meaning of mass violence and displacement within the migrants’ social world, the narration of stories within their new adopted country and the expansion of this history to educate the larger public.

Within the *Holocaust and Other Persecutions Against Jews Research Group*, the collection of stories embroiders other persecutions against Jews as focusing resources to gather Sephardic Jewish stories that might have been ignored by previous oral history projects. The life stories were collected with Jews who were born in Muslim-Arab countries and are now settled in Montréal. These interviews were conducted usually by other members of the Sephardic community of Montréal, very openly. The interviews did not have time frame or constrictions other than that of the interviewee, who could stop the interview at anytime and decide to respond or not, to mention or not certain elements. The interviews thus analyzed in this article are narratives composed by the interviewee, in a shared authority mindset.

The oral history methodology involves a discrepancy between the various oral sources and the different interpretations given by social sciences for the same events. Indeed as these sources are created, the interviews are shaped by: the individual being interviewed, the moment of the interview in time, as well as the direction given by the interviewer. The subjectivity and narrative forms of these sources allow for an analysis of these testimonies within their “orality.” The narratives become dependent on the perception of the individual, and the boundary between the events that happened outside, concerning the group, and the impressions left within the individuals’ realm. Thus we become more interested in the meaning behind the events that took place, in order to shed a new light on the individuals’ perception of events that framed their lives. This research does not necessarily aim to be generalized, but rather shows the

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10 The project emerged from an ambitious cooperation between universities and communities throughout the greater Montreal to document and provide archives of Montrealers that had lived through twentieth century perpetraions. See: http://lifestoriesmontreal.ca/en/holocaust-working-group.

11 Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, (New York, 1990), xx: “what is most compelling about oral and public history is a capacity to redefine and redistribute intellectual authority, so that this might be shared more broadly in historical research and communication rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy.”


necessity for a dialogue to emerge between the individuals, their story and history, where stories of the past can be heard.

Anonymity: Unshared Collective Memories

In the working group on Jews of Sephardic rite of practice, we interviewed 34 people between 2007 and 2010, with 14 women and 20 men. The average age of the interviewees was 70. The majority (21) came from Morocco, six came from Egypt, three from Lebanon, two from Iraq, and one from Algeria.

A few individuals (n=7) decided to remain anonymous; and 5 other individuals chose to maintain confidentiality showing a reluctance to share openly their stories. Another individual refused even to release any content of the interview. In total 13 people, more than one third, of the individuals interviewed by our group decided to remain anonymous. The nature of this anonymity is different than the one encountered by other groups of the Life Stories project where members of the Rwanda or Cambodian communities for example could lose their status of asylum from discord between stories.

Here, the presence of anonymity shows, for a number of these individual, the desire to literally hide their faces and names, staying still within the confinement of unknown stories, of private life, of collectively unshared memories. They did not see the benefits in their testimony, both for them and for a greater audience. In our interviews’ mind these stories were not to be exchanged nor disseminated for the community. Furthermore, some of them feared the unknown consequences that these stories could bring. The location of this project within Concordia University increased their doubts. According to some, the presence of a very strong pro-Palestinian movement and the events of 2002, where the president of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, was prevented from giving his speech at the university, would make these interviews ‘fall into wrong hands.’ This perception shows the uncanny world many interviewees still live in: still anticipating personal sorrows and hatred for what they think or do now. For many interviewees who chose to remain anonymous, their ancient fear led them to “unshare” their memories. The anonymity of their testimony provided a way to talk from a de-identified perspective.

We started our interviews with the explanation of the project, and a very detailed informed consent. These elements of discussion are not recorded per se in the interviews. Having interviewed an important number of individuals from this group (n=15), I witnessed the difficulty many had in telling their story. For instance, one anonymous interviewee thought that revealing his/her name could cause retaliation from the Moroccan government. Indeed he/she expressed his/her concern that the interview could fall into the hand of the “Moroccan Police,” and he/she could then be denied entry if he/she decided to eventually make a trip back to Morocco. This is just one example of how the
past is still felt very vividly forty years after he/she arrived in Montreal; and how the “unsharing” of memories could potentially protect him/her.

Anonymity was one way of representing the lingering emotions surrounding the sharing of memories. However other interviewees were happy to share their stories through the open lenses.

I will analyze here the interviews of four individuals, not in comparative terms but rather in the context of the study of the population that in Montreal has been reclaiming the denomination of “Sefardim.” Referring to the old cartography of 1492’s Spanish inquisition, the term “Sefarad” has functioned as an important marker of identity.14 Now in a new country, where representation involves another dichotomy of self-presentation, individuals have used the term “Sefarad” to construct their identity as to de-stigmatize their belonging from their “Oriental” background, while distinguishing themselves from their Ashkenazi neighbors.15 However this does not mean that the individuals who are portrayed in this article are part of a cohesive network of individuals, rather they are a glimpse into the vast and complex web of Jews that have migrated from Muslim-Arab lands in several waves that span time and space, and to draw, when they apply, parallels in their stories.

Sandy: Always this fear! Naim: But we are still alive!

Baghdad had been the home of Jews from the foundation of Iraq in 762 under the Abbasid dynasty. Living mostly in the Jewish Quarter, Dar al-Yahudim,16 their number was close to 77,000 individuals in 1940, forming a third of the population of the capital. During that time, Jews felt Jews by religion and Arabs by nationality.17 In the Iraqi constitution of 1925, they were considered equals with other Iraqis, regardless of religion, nationality or language. When the British left in 1932 and with the independence of Iraq,18 Zionism was outlawed, and the Iraqi Jews entered a liminal space of belonging and non-belonging. Furthering the difficulty of expressing individual values, the events that happened during the Second World War increased the instable position of the Jewish community in Iraq. While the officials in power did not endorse the Nazi party per se, the pogroms that occurred in 1941, the farhud, left the Jewish community in a deep state of anxiety, creating an identity shift, at least in their

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collective representation, from ‘Arab’ to ‘Jew.’ This moment signals the beginning of an otherness, where certain elements of the history will be presented to reinforce the decline of the Jewish population in Baghdad. Indeed, with the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the inauguration of official policy of repression, the number of Jews rapidly declined to null. However, in the construction of memory, the story begins with a nostalgic past. Even though the Jewish community had already been targeted, Sandy starts with a beautiful description of her early years in Baghdad. Sandy was born in Baghdad in October 1958 in a wealthy family. She describes her childhood: “It was just wonderful. It was a lot of fun all the time. My parents always looked beautiful. I remember nice homes.” Sandy starts her interview with her memory of her hometown, Baghdad, as an Edenic paradise. She talks of a peaceful and wonderful life, filled with guests, receptions, beauty and delight. She remembers her vast home, her little garden and a happy family. Her memories are nostalgic, holding dear these souvenirs illuminating her early years. However, her description of space changes as feelings of confinement are being remembered and the difference it made:

We could not think of anything could go wrong. Well. They started like, in 1963, was the last time I traveled with my mom. We used to travel every summer with my mom to go visit my grandparents to Beirut. They did not allow Jews to travel no more. We had no more passports. Jews never thought it could be so bad. We just continued. Life was going on, everything was abundant and wonderful. Always this fear somehow, always this fear.

At this moment in the interview, Sandy changes her tone. She is no longer innocently living, enjoying her surrounding, but she feels the confinement, restriction and otherness settling in because of her religious difference. She remembers this particular night waiting for her dad at home. Her narrative is then immediately followed with the story of the killing of a known relative. At this point she says: “Still even after all these years it’s still very powerful in my heart and it’s very, it’s very stressful for me to talk about it.” The interviewee is then asked to describe the events of January 27th, night of the public hanging of 11 Jews. Her narrative from the Eden wonders go into a “terrible fear, really scared, it was just awful, a lot of black.” The interviewee was just a child then, and she cannot find the words to express her anxiety:

\[19\] Ibid., 21-24.
\[20\] Her father sold cars and spare parts, and her mother came from a highly educated background (born in Palestine, she went to the American University in Lebanon). They were very involved in their community, both religious and geographical.
\[21\] In the night of January 27th, 1969, 11 Iraqi Jewish men were hanged publicly in Baghdad. Having been identified as “spies”, the hanging brought the Jewish community to realize their days were counted. See, Kanan Makiya, Republic of fear: the politics of modern Iraq, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
Everybody was always fearing for their lives all the time. It was. It was just a dark cloud all the time. And then people had to find a way out. It was just a matter of time basically. You just knew your days were numbered; there was no way out, there was no way out. You could not get out of... Baghdad itself. You were not even allowed to leave Baghdad itself. So, I mean [nose running] we were also under surveillance. There was nothing they did not know all the time.

The images of darkness are overwhelming. She does not remember the exact events, but remembers the atmosphere that was in the air. Her narrative is saturated with unfinished sentences, expressing, unshared memories revolving around fear. Sandy’s story unveils the wounds left by past events, and their presence, linking those memories to an uncontrollable flow of emotions. “I can never stop crying every time I tell these stories. It is unbelievable. It is 40 years later and it is still goes on. Crying. Anyways, … [Pause].” She immediately tries to push these emotions aside. Using the word “Anyway” and a [pause], she marks the unnecessary sharing of these memories. She continues in her story telling, as if there was no reason to explore this situation further. All that there was in the past was to make a decision and the decision was to leave.

This very idea of having to escape the overgrowing threat reflects the problem-focused style of adaptation. Instead of dwelling on the past events, the problem is resolved. The presence of the in Baghdad was seen as no longer possible; their quick departure was their only option. Instead of lamenting over one’s fate, the interviewee exposes the problem as a moment where one has to take a decision. Within the interview of Sandy, the community and individuals at this point are faced with the same dilemma: life or death. Nothing else:

Um, so People had to, like, you know, had to be smart and find a way. And so eventually, people started to escape, and they were taking chances, honestly it was taking a chance with your life it’s life or death, that is it, you know you either wait and slowly die unless a miracle happens or you just take a chance, try to escape, and if you are caught you are dead, if you are not, oh well good for you (movement with hands) slowly, slowly they started leaving, the Jews.

The departure became crucial, leaving no room for interrogation or doubt. It became imperative to leave, as Handlin showed for the Irish, the question was “leave or die.” The tale of the forced migrant takes shape, here, in its fullest form where death is the only other option. Furthermore, in the setting of the post-world war II turmoil, the fate of the Jews in Europe and the Holocaust loomed over them, finally grasping their mind that the worst that you could ever imagine had already arrived in European countries.

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This sudden sense of agency is underlined by the well-known Iraqi Jewish writer, Naïm Kattan, who had left Iraq in 1948, before the creation of Israel with a scholarship to study literature in France: “Personally, I always say the best that happened to us was to be driven out and that we left... because we are all alive.” He marks the point after telling the story of a bomb put in front of a Synagogue. He makes the insinuation that the bomb was placed by an undefined group of Iraqi Jews who were trying to force the departure of the Jewish population.

The departure became urgent, from the Iraqi’s government side that was monitoring and watching the Jewish community, looking for spies and traitors (communists or agents of Israel), and from the community itself too (posing bombs): “Because we did not want to repeat what German Jews had made ... because German Jews .... did not leave quickly. And .... we had to leave it.” He does not care from which side came the threat. In his case, departure is presented as survival. Sharing the memory of forced departure is what he wants to tell, rather than showcase the actual roles of individuals, groups or government in encouraging this massive exodus. His early arrival in Paris allowed him insight to the Shoah's reality. He sensed that the next step for Iraqi Jews was going to be extermination. Processing this information intellectually, and having written numerous books on Baghdad and the Arab culture he mastered, Naïm Kattan had transformed his experience of his departure into a positive memory, one where the collective exodus enriched his community. In his mind, he is the demonstration of a successful migrant and so is this displacement.

This expression and transformation of departure as a positive memory shows the gratitude of being alive but eventually removes the idea of being ‘survivors,’ or even possible self-perpetrators. All lived. There is no need to recall the memory of those lost, or of who really put in the bombs to make people leave, to bring these collective understanding as absolute truth. Rather, the testimony creates the migrant's story: the necessity to leave, silencing the difficulty in the pauses and the tears that flow within the construction of this story.

Robert: I am a Jew from Egypt

Of the 50,000 Jews living in Egypt before World War II, 40,000 left the country in 1956-1957, and another 5,000 of them had departed by 1967. Many factors were at play in the disappearance of Egypt’s Jewish community, and the

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23 Naïm Kattan, a writer and literary critic, was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 26 August 1928. Kattan migrated to Paris on a scholarship to study literature at the Sorbonne. He then left to Montreal in 1954. He is well-known for his fictionalized memories of the years in Baghdad: Adieu, Babylone (1975) and Les Fruits arrachés (1977).
stories collected outline the importance of the question of denaturalization. Laws in this direction were applied to Jews between 1950 and 1956, provoking their departure from Egypt. For those who did not hold dual citizenship with another country, becoming stateless was a central element in their experience. Robert was born in Alexandria, in a post World War II Egypt. His family arrived in Egypt, Alexandria under Napoleon and he recounts his family’s departure of Alexandria in 1940 when the Germans began bombarding. His story is woven by a very strong presence of angry souvenirs, of bitter feeling towards the country as he describes it being “a somewhat bitter pill for an exodus from Egypt, Exodus Two as they say, the second exodus, extremely painful and distressing.” He left Egypt when he was only 17, in December 1962. Even as he talks today, 50 years latter, he cannot forgive his native country. His dad had died a few years before, and his mother got colon cancer that could only be treated in France. His mother, his sister and himself hence asked for the government’s administration permission to leave the country. But it was only after one long year that they were granted the papers. His description of the departure is composed of very vivid imagery.

It was a beautiful system well developed to get rid of its Jewish community and cause a maximum of damage without killing… or assaulting people. That is, the customs when we arrived at Cairo airport to leave, my mother had colon cancer, suffering greatly, was in a wheel chair, receiving 3 injections of morphine per day to control the pain. Well, these Barbarians in costumes imposed a complete physical search, and I will not go into details, I heard her scream in pain when they made the search um to verify if she hadn’t hidden jewels in, in her body. It is, it was really underneath all that Egypt has always been presenting itself as a tolerant country that attacked a widow, cancerous, sick, for um…to show that we offend her to the depths.

His memories are very strong, even though intellectually reconstructed. Robert explains the system, in very definite sentences, which brings him to explain the way he comprehends the departure of the Jews and the nature of Egypt’s new nationalist politics. He understands his attack at the airport as a personal offense to him and to his family, continuing the state of disgrace the Jews were put in (as they were considered as thieves of national properties, spies working for Israel, or communists). He continues on describing the search he was subjected to:

I, my-self, was searched in a similar way, and my sister too… so vexatious to the end [he starts listing on his fingers] they withdraw

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your citizenship, they give you a few dollars, and when you leave they
brand you with this indelible memory of molestation to search you
for the jewelry and money. All they left me leave with is my Bar
Mitzvah ring [shows his ring] and that’s it…. And, and bye bye. We
left with a deep disgust from the country where we lived for
centuries, and even our ancestors have been happy for a period.

His last memory of Egypt is bitter: he felt completely humiliated and
psychologically assaulted. These souvenirs became a fixed idea, in which his
memory is anchored. He becomes an orphan by this humiliated lost of his
mother nation. And he is voided of his identity, forced to become an unknown
citizen of the world, and to live with this “otherness” – one who does not
belong any more to his native country. His mother dies one year after their
arrival in Paris. And he is orphan of a family, of which he blames the historical
context. He tells the story of this non-direct violence imposed on his
surrounding as he talks about his uncle who had been imprisoned for 5 years
in an Egyptian prison for a so-called treason, and who left after for Israel,
where he died a couple of months later. So his recollection of the departure of
the Jews from Egypt is associated with the infliction of death, not direct but
directed.

His story is entrenched with memories that he calls “indelible” and forever
branded. The only material possession that he has been able to keep from
Egypt was his Bar Mitzvah ring, one that he wears daily, the only ring he has
on his hands during the interview, showing the presence of his youth anchored
by his only material possession allowed out. The ring becomes a “linking
object,” crystallizing the self within an unfinished forgiving.  
Svetlana Boym describes, in Russian immigrants, diasporic souvenirs as “transitional objects
that reflect multiple belonging”, “a cipher for exile itself and for a newfound
exilic domesticity.” These objects are the descriptive units of their stories,
tying the relations from there to here in a material presence. They allow the
past to continuously inhabit the present in an everyday manner.

Robert mentions many times the inability he has to make peace with his
country, still holding very deeply the emotions, cherishing in a sense these
memories as they are part of his self, his identity.

I do not have fond memories of my homeland and I hate to say that I
am Egyptian [sign in quotes]. I say that I am a Jew of Egypt, and
that’s all. I have not made my peace with this country because this
country has never apologized for what they did, what they did to my
family. I did not intend to forget these abuses.

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25 Vamik D. Volkan, “After the Violence: The internal world and linking objects of a refugee
family”, in *Analysts in the Trenches: streets, schools, war zones*, eds. Bruce Sklarew, Stuart W.
He makes a distinction between being Egyptian and being a Jew from Egypt. Within the schism of being denied the right to be a citizen of Egypt, he was put in a liminal state. But instead of keeping his statelessness as his identity, he transforms his narrative to shape his discontent. Indeed he states ownership over his non-belonging. By cherishing these memories personally, he has the power and agency over his former country. He thus denies the shared belonging with other Egyptians, but rather he acknowledges his birth land as a simple land and not as marker of his identity.

He reveals at one point of the interview that difficulty in grasping with the events: “we must have been guilty somewhere for the simple fact of being Jewish at fifteen, sixteen…” This is the only part of the interview where he talks about the possible presence of one’s responsibility. Found in the construction of the rest of his narrative is the place of the other, the presence of “Egypt” as the anti-thesis of the hero, the force creating hardship: the “Barbarians in costumes,” or “this country,” or the “Egyptian government.” Indeed that view of a mastermind Egypt reigns in the description Robert makes of his departure. He reaffirms at the end that there will be no peace for him “there will be no, there will be no, uh of peace for me until there is not a recognition from the Egyptian government of what happened but I’m sure I would never see that day.” We can hear in his speech the breach between the collective ability to reassess history, and the individual difficulty to tell his story. His narrative is anchored in this construction of a government dedicated at torturing the last memories of his country. And while his narrative is unveiled by the interviews, there is no dialogue that has been present between the Jews of Egypt and their native country. There exists no place collectively for the reconciliation where the silenced-displacement would allow for its inclusion in a global narrative, the only hope for an eventual forgiveness that could only take place collectively. Through the collective representation of forced displacement, Robert could maybe see the possible construction of an individual’s closure of the past.

Pierre: my feeling is angst

Pierre was born in Algeria in 1945, as he describes: “from a French father, Jewish, from old tradition of Algerian and Algiers in particular, and a Belgian mother, uh Polish ancestry, Lodz specifically.” The two having spent the Second World War in France, where they met, Pierre did not keep good memories of France, nor of its former colony Algeria, then a department of France. When the Algerian war of independence broke in 1960, almost 2 million French citizens left the colony in flames to be repatriated in metropolitan France in less than a year. Amongst them, most of the Jews born in Algeria, who had been granted French citizenship by the Crémieux Decree
of 1870, left also Algeria, albeit in different material conditions.²⁷ His
description is presented as a terrific, horrible experience, where the Jews were
unwanted and trapped everywhere they would go. He goes into a description
of his childhood in a ‘reflective nostalgia’ to borrow the term from Svetlana
Boym:

And we were living by the sea, and I had this very profound nostalgia
from the view I had from my room, and of the sea, it was something
that I… that stayed deeply marked in my memory. We lived close to
this beach that was called the Two Camels beach, eh, it’s … pretty
folklorick [laughs]. There were.. two camels, well, it was really… two
rocks. And [laughs], we would go, when we were learning how to
swim, to the first rock, and then you had to go to the third rock. But
that was a whole difficult passage, it was like, how to say, an initiation
ritual. And when you would dive from the first rock and swim to the
second, everyone from the beach would look at you, and then you
would arrive at the second rock, you looked like [silence, laughs]. So
this was my childhood, this was my childhood and my adolescence,
and it was a childhood… a happy childhood.

His memory of his childhood is composed of happiness and ease. He describes
his neighborhood as a ‘micro cosmos’ where he was able to play with kids that
were Árab, Kabil, French and Jewish. In his description, he is aware of his own
distinction. Not only Jewish, he has also the French nationality. Indeed he
exposes his father’s ambition for him, that led him to enter and study at École
Polytechnique, one of the top French Grandes Écoles, as an additional mark of his
French identity. Granting the French nationality to Algerian Jews by the
Crémieux by-laws established a strong division between the Algerian of
Muslim faith (indigènes) and the western sector to which the Jews were
associated to, but not part of. Moreover, French-Jews had installed
Consistories to make North African Jews in their image, in which they hoped
to civilize them according to their views.²⁸

Pierre left Algeria for France in 1962 hidden in the trunk of his father’s car,
departing with his parents left behind; and then to Montreal in 1968. He
describes his departure from Algeria as a “tragedy.” The memory of the events
leading to his departure from Algeria during the interview is related to a
recurrence of Pierre’s “overriding feeling that was anxiety.” Although anxiety is
an affect well characterized in the narratives of migration, especially in

²⁷ “Even after Algerian Jews were naturalized by the Crémieux Decree of 1870 and many of
them embraced Western habits as a means of distinguishing themselves from the Muslim
masses, they remained integral to local Maghribi culture, especially in the world of music”, in
Emily Benichou Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter, Jewish Culture and Society in North-Africa,
²⁸ Joshua Schreier, Arabs of Jewish Faith, the Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria, (New Brunswick:
Rutgers University Press, 2010), 20-21.
involuntary ones. Pierre internalizes this feeling as related to his own personality:

And when my father would go to work, I was not sure to see him at night, I... it... it contributed to my propensity to anxiety attacks because I was prone to violent attacks, they were pretty... they were quite common.

Psychological studies have shown that migration, forced or voluntary, experienced by older adolescents (Pierre was 17 years old) bring an increase in internalized anxiety. Describing the events in a fragmentary manner during the interview, this anxiety becomes angst. He described the fear of living during the war in Algeria in the years 54 and 62

Pierre: No, these were years of... anxiety...
Interviewer: anxiety...
Pierre: ... of angst itself. That is to say that... the idea of finishing my life in separated pieces uh... it was an idea... a constant idea.

This fear of death and the constant danger indeed shows exposure to traumatic events, and their impact on memory. These impacts are not physical but psychological. The experience of events that bring intense emotions left an indelible impact. Pierre Janet showed, almost a century ago, that the separation of traumatic memories (fixed ideas) from the ordinary consciousness in individuals result in that the memories become automated. These elements of memory connected to strong emotions create fragmentation in the continuity and coherence of the past. Here’s an example in Pierre’s narrative:

Pierre: But one day returning from school [cough], I had to step over a corpse, who took a bullet in the head, and in that period then, uh... there was an incident... tragic. The maid arrived, distraught, saying, “We murdered your father.” [pause]. For two hours, I believed her, but he was not dead. But we had murdered not Robert X but George X And uh... George X was a man who was considered, whether true or not, as very left, right, as an accomplice of the Arabs, and he took a shot in the head.
Interviewer: He was the member of the Communist Party in your family?
Pierre: Oh no no, we were not directly parent with him, but [he crosses his arms, cough] the maid knew it was not my father. In other words, she had scared us, deliberately. The maid was Arabic eh.

Pierre links directly two ideas: one was to move above a dead body, and the other was the fear of finding his father in that state. This sense of loss of security is clearly demonstrated in this passage where the fear of death turns into feelings of anxiety and belonging to otherness. Security becomes impossible, especially confronted to the maid, the creation of the other: ‘the Arab.’ Indeed, this change of status and exclusion leads to the estrangement from his own country of origin, and the essentiality for him to leave. In addition, it creates a mythologizing of this event when he follows his narrative by: “I’m not ready to forget these hours, of anguish particularly.”

When we talk about fear, if we follow the philosophy of Herbert Spencer, fear is the memory of pain, this memory can be passed either by experience or heredity. Here, Pierre describes this anxiety as an inability to forget, but also something deeply internalized. The angst is transmitted within the interview, and we can wonder how will these memory be transmitted to future generations as his experience becomes the heritage he will give to his children, students etc.

**Conclusion**

In a post-Shoah era, where the universalization of the trauma and the supreme victim is based on the experience of Jews in Europe, the space for expression of Sephardic Jews’ memories of their displacement was relegated to the background. Indeed, the mass exodus was not accompanied by comparable massacres, leaving the displacement in silence. However, the presence of deep dislocations are heard when the space is created by the political and social context and to collect life stories. Indeed when we look carefully at the crafted stories told within the interviews presented here, we can see the agency that is presented by the individuals, where even as they were engaging in difficult situations, the story they share is one of ‘active player,’ bringing forward that collective notion of exile as a choice.

The memories, holding the social identity of a group displaced from different countries, have been transformed into personal reconstruction. Selection of these memories, far from being randomized, is created in order to forget certain elements. This particular mechanism of remembering however might not address the existing conflict between the emotions of fear, anger or dislocation, and the reconstructed story founded on decision-makers and denied-loss. These elements might allow for the community to be built in a state of being that is proud and has chosen the path taken, instead of one of dislocation and dismemberment. Indeed a key shift in the narratives is the

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change in identity from ‘belonging’ to ‘otherness.’ They are no longer part of their accepted country of origin. This becomes the turning point in their stories, where things start to accumulate and the necessity to leave becomes imminent. The transformation of their identity plays an important role in the reconstruction of the story. Indeed as they come to Montreal, they encounter a new form of belonging and otherness, one that is tied to religious continuity. For instance, institutions such as the Spanish and Portuguese thrived with the arrival of Jews from Muslim-Arab countries.34

The difficulty to recollect these stories can be seen as a sign of individualized fragmented understanding of the past. Many individuals do not feel that their memories are worth any information, nor have they any value in being recorded. Some still have fear of the consequences that this truth could have in the general public. One withdrew the interview, falling in these memories that their own mentioning induced deep emotional chaos. Through the anonymity found within the group, the reluctance of individuals are signs of a still-present fear of disclosure, wanting to remain silent, staying within the darkness of omission, and continuing the period of latency. For Cathy Caruth, there is a lapse of time where forgetting traumatic events is inevitable.35 For our interviewees, the “unsharing” of their memories in public becomes a way of reconstructing their own histories, of coping with a reality only known to themselves, and of ignoring History. Could this state of denial help them, individually or collectively?

Until very recently, the non-association of Jews from Arab countries with victimized-status was both detrimental and beneficial. By denying the adherence to a status of victims, they tried to keep away from the impact of the events on them. Instead the memories of a problem-based decision making were cherished, leaving the discourse of forced migration and uprooting within an a-historical narrative, making many historians still to wonder why exactly made the Arab Jews leave. As we worked for the sharing these memories, by collecting them and publishing them, our interpretation is that it could present an opportunity for certain Jews from Arab countries to find an idea of forgiveness. The ability to share their memories within a general historical framework could allow for some acceptance of loss and grief. We have seen, for example, within reconciliation commissions, the abreactive release that transformed stories from memories into never forgotten truths.36 In these cases, the telling of the story becomes part of a public domain, the academia and larger, allowing for a public record of individual memories, and for the telling of another truth, that could become history.

Sara Cohen-Fournier is currently finishing a Master in Oral History, researching resilience and transmission of memory within a Vietnamese-American community. For the past 4 years, she has been working as an interviewer, and group coordinator of the community-based project *Life Stories of Montrealeans Displaced by Wars, Genocide and Human Rights Violations*. From this research, a new project evolved looking at the place of food, recipes and transmission of traditional knowledge in first and second generation migrants, a project called *Dishing up the past* [http://rootsandrecipes.wordpress.com/](http://rootsandrecipes.wordpress.com/) . She will be starting medical school in the fall, to continue pursuing her understanding of memory and resilience.

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