

**“Who gave you the right to abandon your prophets?”
Jewish Sites of Ruins and Memory in Egypt**

by Michèle Baussant

Abstract

This article is dedicated to the cultural heritage of Jews from Egypt,¹ that worked to reaffirm a collective Egyptian Jewish history and identity by preserving Egyptian Jewish architecture, primarily religious buildings, which were falling into disrepair, most often through lack of maintenance, abandonment, sale or damage. This “patrimonialisation” is driven by various actors, who nowadays constitute, in Egypt and in various diasporas, the diffracted constellations of vanished worlds and promote their “dormant” buildings and religious artefacts as living traces of a past that can no longer be associated with current practices performed by any social group in Egypt. These actors, however, do not share a same vision of how to preserve, in the short or in the long term, these emblematic sites of diasporic Judaism, witnessing both the disappearance of a world and the possibility, through the presence of its material traces, of identifying part of a past that can still be written and evoked. This paper explores the paradoxical trajectory of Jewish heritage in Egypt, between promotion, co-option, abandonment, forgetting and rejection. Caught between diverse interests and intertwined stakes, heritage became a concrete trace of the physical exclusion of the Jews (expelled from the country) and at the same time an emblem of their symbolical inclusion, given Egypt’s claim of tolerance of its many communities.

Introduction

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The Spaces of Egyptian Judaism

¹ The title of this paper is inspired by a short talk about the Jews of Iraq by Edwin Shuker.

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Introduction

During the first half of the 20th century, economic, political and social changes in Egypt gradually redefined the place of the so-called foreign, *mutamassirun* (Egyptianized) and local people departing the country in the course of more than two decades (with peaks in 1948 and the late 1950s). Although they were part of the overall Egyptian population, which grew from 4.5 million in 1800 to 24 million in 1957, these groups were largely discarded from the imagined Egyptian community designed by the nationalist movement in the 1950s.² Some of these groups had only lived in Egypt since the 19th century, but others, including the local Jewish communities, had been there much longer. These Jewish communities, “still fairly homogeneous” and relatively small at the beginning of the 19th century, underwent profound transformations due primarily to a large influx of migrants, mainly between 1860 and 1920.³ The new arrivals

² It is not my intention here to enter the historical debate about the status of the Jews as foreigners in Egypt. I am mainly interested in the process leading to their “extraneity,” which reveals the fragility of their social relationships and of their condition of belonging, seen here as a process rather than as a permanent status. This process is linked to the way in which political entities define their foreigners and “the inventory of these different figures makes it possible to cover a very wide world and reconstitute the characters of the various political communities which are thus drawn.” Simona Cerutti, *Etrangers. Etude d'une condition d'incertitude dans une société d'Ancien Régime*, (Paris: Bayard, 2012), 16. My aim is not to discuss Egyptian Jewish identity prior to the departure from Egypt, nor whether Egyptian Jews were perceived as foreigners before the emergence of the nationalist movement that reshaped narratives about minorities in Egypt. I am rather focusing on the effects that these narratives and imaginary constructs have yielded in the present.

³ Following the takeover by Muhammad Ali (1769-1849) and later under his heirs, Egypt welcomed different populations, including Jews. The strong presence of the colonial powers (the British and the French), the new forms of the capitulatory order via the mixed courts, which were

considerably changed the makeup of these communities, making them more heterogeneous. This diversity found its expression in religious rites – Sephardic, Eastern, Ashkenazi or Karaite⁴ – and in community history and origins,⁵ as well as in the languages, cultures, legal⁶ and socio-economic status, and national backgrounds making up these Jewish communities. Egypt was at the same time a land of opportunity for some and of relegation for others, but still far from the image cultivated among Jews both in Israel and outside it, according to which the Jews of Egypt comprise one of the oldest Jewish communities in the Middle East. Described by my interviewees as a “fool’s paradise,”⁷ Egypt serves as a matrix of sorts for the space-time of British rule and protectorate among populations with divergent interests.

The series of wars following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 (the Suez Canal crisis in 1956 and the Six Day War in 1967) were largely the reason for the near end of the centuries-long presence of a Jewish minority in Egypt; it has been reduced to a handful of individuals living in Alexandria and Cairo today. Those living outside Egypt at present form a reversed diaspora of sorts,⁸ with Egypt as

better linked to the world economy, the economic boom, notably with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and Mediterranean globalization made the country attractive to immigrants.

⁴ We do not precisely know the origin of the Karaites, who came either from a group established in Baghdad in the eighth century, or from a Sadducean branch that had survived the destruction of the Temple. The Karaites adhere only to the Written Law (the Hebrew *Tanakh*) and not the oral tradition (consisting primarily of the Talmud) nor any other rabbinical interpretations and exegesis. See Emanuela Trevisan-Semi, *Les caraites, un autre judaïsme*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992).

⁵ From areas such as the Ottoman Empire (Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Istanbul, Smyrna, Salonika, among others), North African countries, Greece, Portugal, Spain, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Romania, Russia, Poland, Italy, France, and England. Some came as a result of anti-Jewish measures, pogroms and persecutions that intensified in certain countries including Russia and Romania or in regions such as Morocco, Greece, and Syria at the beginning of the 19th century. Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab lands in Modern Times*, (Philadelphia-New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991).

⁶ Legal status, in particular of those defined as *musta'min* and *dhimmi*, changed when the *jizya* was abrogated by Khedive Sa'id in 1855 in Egypt. See Güdrün Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989) and Benjamin Lellouch, “Les juifs dans le monde musulman: VIIe siècle-milieu XIXe siècle,” in *Les juifs dans l'histoire*, eds. Antoine Germa, Benjamin Lellouch, Evelyne Patlagean, (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2011), 261-290.

⁷ This ethnological work is based on long-term research on Egyptian Jews, including several fieldwork projects in France, the United States, Israel, Italy, Great Britain and Egypt. It combines interviews and observations with material from archives and various other written sources.

⁸ Tom Trier, “Reversed Diaspora. Russian Jewry, the Transition in Russia and the Migration to Israel,” *The Anthropology of East Europe Review* 14/1 (1996): 34-42.

their cultural homeland.⁹ However, the closing of the 1970s, with the signing of the Camp David accords in 1978 and the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty signed on March 26, 1979, set the stage for two concomitant developments. The first was the return of some of Jews from Egypt, in groups or individually. In Egypt once more, they found their community spaces transformed or even destroyed, while the social milieu that had given meaning to these spaces had disappeared.¹⁰ The second development was the emergence of associations of Jews from Egypt, notably in France and in Israel.¹¹ These organizations set out to reaffirm a collective Egyptian Jewish history and identity by promoting the Egyptian Jewish cultural heritage and by preserving surviving Egyptian Jewish architecture, primarily religious buildings, which were falling into disrepair, most often through lack of maintenance, abandonment, sale or damage.

But not everyone shared the same vision of how to preserve this heritage in the short or in the long term in a country that had become, or was perceived, like many other places where Jews had been expelled or wiped out, as an “unquiet place.”¹² should these cultural and religious traces be abandoned? Should they be preserved *in situ* as objects to be visited again and again, promoted as part of Egypt’s national heritage, at the risk of infringing upon their primary religious function? Or would it be better to export this heritage out of Egypt whenever possible? Besides, to whom do this heritage belong? To the few local Jews? A Rabbinical authority outside Egypt? To the Egyptian state? How, finally, can Jewish heritage be symbolically included in Egypt’s national heritage and history without evoking the circumstances that accounted for the progressive expulsion of Jews from Egypt?

This article explores this movement toward “patrimonialization,” driven by various actors¹³ who nowadays constitute, in various diasporas, the diffracted

⁹ Eftihia Voutira, *The “Right to Return” and the Meaning of “Home.” A Post-Soviet Greek Diaspora Becoming European?*, (Berlin: Verlag Lit., 2011).

¹⁰ Michèle Baussant, “Un nom éternel qui ne sera jamais effacé. Nostalgie et langue chez les Juifs d’Égypte en France,” *Terrain* 65 (2015): 52-75.

¹¹ Such as the Association for the Safeguarding of the Cultural Heritage of the Jews of Egypt founded in 1979 in Paris, the Association for Israeli-Egyptian Friendship in Tel Aviv, and the Union of Egyptian Jews in Haifa.

¹² Erica Lehrer, *Jewish Poland Revisited. Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013).

¹³ For a broader view of the complex processes involved in the definition, production and consumption of heritage and its material culture in the Middle East, as well as the multiplicity of actors concerned, see Rami Daher, Irène Maffi, *The Politics and Practices of Cultural Heritage in*

constellations of disappeared worlds and promote their dormant buildings and religious artefacts as living traces of a past that can no longer be associated with current practices performed by any social group in Egypt. This last is particularly true of synagogue buildings, embodiments of a central institution with many different functions – ritual, secular, social and cultural – that reinforce a sense of belonging. Paradoxically, in interviews with many Jews from Egypt, most of them traditionalists, few spontaneously mention these places when they remember their past lives in Egypt. However, frequenting these sites (and their memory) cannot be taken as the only indicator of Jewish religiosity and affiliation with Judaism, especially given the significant part of Jewish religious practices and rites performed within the home.¹⁴

But their rare evocation in the narratives collected leads us to question how, once the Jews dispersed outside the country, they could have become emblematic sites of diasporic Judaism, unifying the very diverse community of Jews from Egypt in memory and history. The synagogues witness both the disappearance of a world and the potential, through the presence of its material traces, to identify a place “where the heritage is passed on, where the song still rings sweet to the ear, where it could succumb to the embrace of nostalgia. And this place, even when demolished, even when in ruins, even though it is part of a past that has gone forever, can still be written and evoked.”¹⁵

Out of Egypt: The Creation of an Egyptian Jewish Diaspora

Jews left Egypt in three successive waves (1948, 1956 and 1967). Like a great many other foreign or “Egyptianized” populations, their departure came at a time of Egypt’s gradual redefining of its national identity and experiencing a series of upheavals affecting society as a whole.¹⁶ But the Jewish minority was especially vulnerable, as in 1948 half of them had the status of stateless local subjects. In addition, there were about five to ten thousand Jews who had acquired Egyptian

the Middle East: Positioning the Material Past in Contemporary Societies, (London-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁴ Régine Azria, *Les lieux du judaïsme*, (Paris : Le cavalier bleu, 2013).

¹⁵ Jacques Hassoun, “Juifs d’Egypte. Entre Orient et Occident”, in *A la recherche des Juifs d’Egypte* (mimeographed document, unnumbered pages, 1978).

¹⁶ Frédéric Abécassis, Jean-François Faï, “Le monde musulman. Effacement des communautés juives et nouvelles diasporas depuis 1945,” in *Les juifs dans l’histoire*, 815-840.

nationality and thirty thousand more who were foreign nationals.¹⁷ Unrest and difficulties of various kinds preceded these three waves of departure and after the first conflict following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, in which Egypt participated, some Jews were suspected of being Zionist sympathizers and were arrested.¹⁸ In 1948, more than 1,300 of them – men and women, Zionists, communists, community leaders, businesspeople and individuals with no specific political involvement – were interned in four Egyptian camps, including Aboukir in Alexandria. Whatever assets they had were seized by the state. Once they were released in 1949, some of those with foreign nationality were expelled or asked to return to their official country of origin. The first wave of departures took place between 1949 and 1950: 20,000 Jews, nearly three-quarters of whom settled in Israel.¹⁹

The 1952 *coup d'état* had no immediate repercussions on Jewish communities.²⁰ Nasser's rise to power was primarily associated with reducing European influence. With the October 1956 Suez Canal crisis, some people with foreign origins or other nationalities, as well as Egyptian Jews, were expelled. These people were forced to give up their Egyptian nationality.²¹ Between November 1956 and 1957, an estimated 20,000 Jews departed, having to leave all their belongings behind.²² The 1956 expulsions primarily affected those who had French or English nationality, regardless of their religious affiliation. Their personal and professional property was confiscated. The situation for stateless Jews was even more precarious: at least five hundred received an expulsion order, resulting in the departure of all members of their families²³. Others, having lost their jobs, decided to follow. Some were deported for other reasons after having been imprisoned. In addition, provisions were made to make it easier to strip a person of his or her nationality.²⁴ 17,000 to 19,000 Egypt Jews gradually left the

¹⁷ Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry, Culture, Politics and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Michael Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt, 1920-1970*, (New York & London: NY University Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Gudrun Krämer and Alfred Morabia, "Face à la modernité, Les juifs d'Égypte aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles," in *Histoire des Juifs du Nil*, ed. Jacques Hassoun, (Paris: Minerve, 1990), 86-87.

²⁰ Alexandre De Aranjó, Jean-Michel Rallières, "Les Juifs d'Égypte," *Hommes et migrations* [En ligne], 1312 (2015), accessed June 6, 2016, <http://hommesmigrations.revues.org/3524>

²¹ Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, 582-583.

²² Abécassis, Faï, "Le monde musulman," 824.

²³ Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, 256.

²⁴ Emile Gabbay, "Les juifs d'Égypte et la nationalité égyptienne," *Nahar Misraïm* 45 (2011): 16-20.

country before the Six Day War in 1967. Following this crisis, 450 Jews²⁵ were sent to prison and, unlike previous internments, some were tortured or otherwise physically mistreated.²⁶ Those who had foreign nationality spent between six months to one year behind bars, while for stateless persons imprisonment lasted for two years. Thanks to the intercession of Spain, they were released from prison under Spanish protection.²⁷ Jews who were Egyptian nationals were imprisoned for three years, after which they were expelled from the country as stateless persons.²⁸

These families dispersed throughout Europe, Israel, the United States, South America, even Australia. With their first trials of resettlement behind them (this sometimes took place in stages in several countries) and after the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, some Egyptian Jews turned again to their cultural heritage. To renew that bond, some also decided to visit the places where they had grown up and lived in the past.

Coming Back: A World Rediscovered, Turned Upside Down, Lost

They returned to Egypt alone, with their families, or as part of tourist, cultural, or reunion trips organized by associations linked to Egypt, such as *Amicale Alexandrie Hier et Aujourd'hui* or *l'Association de sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel des Juifs d'Égypte*. For some, these trips enabled them to meet with family members who had remained in Egypt or former Egyptian friends and professional contacts. They returned to their neighbourhoods and public spaces (schools, cinemas, and restaurants...). They knocked on the doors of their former homes and visited sites they had never seen before (pyramids, Al Alamein, and so on.). These return trips were tolerated as long as they took place with some discretion, as evidenced by the cancellation in 2008 of a trip organized by members of the *World Congress of the Jews from Egypt*. The purpose of this trip, which brought together a group of Jews from Egypt, some of them from Israel, was twofold: to return to their roots and to attend the First International

²⁵According to Yves Fedida, the Jews in Egypt numbered approximately 2,500 in 1967 (personal communication with the Author).

²⁶ Maurice Mizrahi, *L'Égypte et ses Juifs. Le Temps révolu, XIX^e et XX^e siècle*, (Geneva: Imprimerie Avenir, 1977).

²⁷ Tad Szulc, *The Secret Alliance. The Extraordinary Story of the Rescue of the Jews since World War II*, (New York: Farrar-Straus & Giroux, 1991).

²⁸ Gabbay, “Les juifs d'Égypte et la nationalité égyptienne.”

Conference of Jews from Egypt in Cairo. At the last moment, the hotel cancelled all the reservations and no other hotel agreed to accommodate the group, who were suspected of planning to start a legal campaign to obtain compensation for their seized property.²⁹

For the descendants of emigrants who had not known Egypt and for those who had left very young, these trips created images that were added to words (or to the absence of words) through visits to places of family memory and collective spaces associated with Judaism, such as cemeteries, synagogues, and others. As they had never – or almost never – known these places, the returning visitors could not assess the transformations which had taken place in these spaces. The trips focused on generic symbols of Egyptian Judaism, which were not always connected with the parents' lived experience, or were but one element of that experience among others. Yet those who were older when they left Egypt were directly confronted with the changes in places they had known or the difference between these spaces and their memories of them. Some noted the disappearance of a social milieu that was still alive when they left. Marc³⁰ found a city “empty because the people who were supposed to be there were not there. They were full, full, full of people, but not the right ones. They weren't the right ones...”. Those who remained were isolated and increasingly older individuals.

The sense of the disappearance of the community was central to Marc's experience; it became even stronger following the death of his parents. For him, everything started with Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. First driven by an individual quest, Marc returned to the door of his former apartment, looking for “images in stone... an image of yourself, your mother, your father, in a place, standing, lying or moving in such and such an environment.” Then he visited cemeteries, synagogues, shops he had visited with his parents, restaurants, and the office where his father had worked. As he began to build his genealogical history, he discovered that although he had easy access to documents dating from the 15th century in Portugal, he could only obtain information about twentieth-century Egypt with great difficulty. With a few Egyptian Jewish friends, he then

²⁹ See the program on <http://www.ajoe.org/X-New-MEP/congr.htm>. See also Al-Aahram weekly, first published in 2008, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/0/133825/Egypt/o/Jews-of-Egypt-Remembrance-of-things-past.aspx>, consulted June 16, 2017.

³⁰ Born in Alexandria in 1945, he left Egypt in 1956, returned in 1959 and left for good in 1960. Interview of the A., Paris region, 2009.

transformed his quest into a collective project on Jewish material heritage in Egypt:

...it is important that this memory... not disappear, and therefore our association fights for that...we left behind graves, we left people in the graves, and we left... traces in the sand in a certain sense (...) This marked Egypt, and that's what I left. But it doesn't belong to me, it belongs to Egypt.³¹

Marc, Jacques, Raymond, Zaki, and Armand, later joined by David, Joseph, and André,³² founded the Nebi Daniel Association in February 2003. Its objective is “the preservation of and continuity in the management of the religious and cultural, financial and built heritage of the community as well as the civil and religious registers of the Jewish community of Alexandria and by extension, the Jewish community of Egypt, in respect of Jewish traditions.”³³ The founders all belong to the same generation and some of them were already working to preserve the histories of Jewish communities in the East, through *Sephardi Voices*³⁴ and *Fleurs d'Orient*,³⁵ which store the genealogies of Sephardic families in the Ottoman Empire and beyond. Like a large number of Jews from Egypt I met, these people remain very attached to certain Jewish traditions, following the

³¹ Interview of the A., Paris region, 2009.

³² The names have been changed. Jacques was born in Alexandria in 1933 and attended English schools. In 1950, he left for London, where he became an engineer. Raymond, originally from Alexandria, was educated at the Jewish Union, left in 1959, and completed his studies in electronics abroad. Zaki, born in Cairo in 1929, studied at the French High School; in 1950, he received a grant from the Egyptian government to study to become a chemical engineer. He left for Montpellier before joining the French Rubber Institute in 1952. Armand was born in Alexandria in 1943. He left Egypt in 1956 and studied engineering in Switzerland and then in London, where he became a senior manager at a multinational IT company. Joseph was born in Alexandria in 1934. In 1956, his departure from Egypt forced him to interrupt his medical studies. He left for Italy before settling in Australia. David, born in Tanta in 1931, attended the Jewish Union of Alexandria. He left Egypt in 1955 for France, where he became a textile engineer at the C.A.M.P. Finally, André, born in Cairo in 1944, studied at the French High School of Bab al-Louk in Cairo. He left Egypt in 1961 and settled in France, where he became an engineer. He is the founder of the genealogical website *Les fleurs de l'Orient*. He currently lives in the United States. All are men, which contrasts with other situations such as in Israel, where the main Egyptian Jewish association still active was founded and continues to be run by a woman, Levana Zamir.

³³ <http://www.nebidaniel.org/>.

³⁴ <http://sephardivoices.com/>. Organization dedicated to recording the stories of Middle Eastern and North African displaced Jews.

³⁵ <http://www.farhi.org/genealogy/index.html>

practices that ritually structure the Jewish year and life cycles based on Jewish precepts.³⁶

The Association's mission is to implement "in strict compliance with Egyptian law, a solution for the preservation of the heritage that is exclusively that of the community, whether that heritage was imported or created during the development of the former community,"³⁷ by coordinating actions and establishing a legal, lasting, and legitimate structure identifiable by the Egyptian authorities. The mission has five stated objectives: make copies of the community documents, financed by the Association and to be kept in the charge of one or more Chief Rabbis, since the information in the registers is covered by the law protecting personal data; preserve *in situ* the remaining built heritage of the Jewish Community of Alexandria; ensure continuity of religious services in synagogues for resident or visiting Jews; allow free access to civil registers for the individuals concerned and researchers, under the aegis of a dual authority recognized in Egypt and abroad; and enable exhibits *in situ* and abroad of religious objects not being used for religious services.

Preserving Heritage *in situ*: Finding their Place

For the Egyptian Jewish associations, the emphasis in the late 1970s was on defining and identifying their intangible cultural heritage, which they reconstructed through memories, linguistic expressions in various languages, religious and cultural "traditions," photographs and archival documents.³⁸ Only later were steps³⁹ taken to preserve the material heritage of the Jewish community, partly supported by the tiny Jewish communities still living in Egypt. This occurred in a certain context: during the radical drop in Jewish

³⁶ Such as birth, circumcision, redemption of the firstborn, religious majority, marriage, and mourning. Ernest Guggenheim, *Le judaïsme dans la vie quotidienne*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992). However, they do not always follow all the prescriptions of *Halakha* (observance of all the rules of the Sabbath, keeping kosher, the commandment of *tefillin* for men, and more).

³⁷ <http://www.nebidaniel.org/>

³⁸ From the first definition of this heritage in 1978 by ASPCJE. See Emile Gabbay, "En matière d'introduction," *À la recherche des Juifs d'Égypte*, (mimeographed document, unnumbered pages, 1978).

³⁹ In particular, the preservation of cemeteries or the restoration of certain synagogues. Thus, the ASPCJE, the World Sephardic Federation in Switzerland and the Hassoun group in France helped to build an enclosure wall in the Bassatine cemetery in Cairo. For more on this, see <http://www.nebidaniel.org/cimetieres.php?lang=fr>.

presence in Egypt,⁴⁰ the progressive effacing of its built spaces (primarily due to the high demand for real estate and the lack of funds to maintain the extant buildings), and peace between Israel and Egypt. The communities in Cairo and Alexandria managed to maintain some of their buildings and religious activities through locally raised funds and foreign aid. The Egyptian authorities also allowed them to administer their own affairs. Yet this did not prevent the disappearance of numerous synagogues in Suez, Tanta, Mamoura, Ismailia, Port-Said, Kafr al-Zayat, and Damanhur, which contained documents and *Sifrei Torah* [Torah scrolls]. Some synagogue buildings were sold by the communities.⁴¹ Rabbinic law permits the sale of such buildings only in those rare cases in which the proceeds are to be used for restoring and maintaining other synagogues. Some buildings were also sold by the community to fund charity, health needs, or maintenance of other synagogues and cemeteries. Some commercial properties were kept, while other buildings, such as schools, were leased to the state. These buildings provided a source of income for the communities of Cairo and Alexandria, especially since rental payments from commercial property and the like could be freely renegotiated every time a lease was renewed.

From that point on, a key priority for the Association has been to preserve this built heritage – synagogues and cemeteries – along with certain religious and community artefacts (registers, *Mohe*/books,⁴² *Sifrei Torah*, and so on) in Cairo and Alexandria.⁴³ The goal is to identify and then manage the preservation project through “a specific, internationally recognized joint foundation, whose financing is ensured in a transparent and certified manner, by local rental income and by charitable donations.”⁴⁴

The process through which these buildings came to be seen as heritage sites to be protected has two characteristics, which also impact attempts to protect their cultural-religious status: first, the centrality of their Jewish function, which was

⁴⁰ The exact number of Jews currently living in Egypt is not known, the figure varying according to different sources, primarily the media, whether Egyptian or foreign. Some eighteen to twenty people, mainly women, is the statistic most often provided. The issue of children is rarely mentioned with children accordingly left uncounted.

⁴¹ See the Nebi Daniel website, which lists the latter.

⁴² The person who performs ritual circumcision.

⁴³ Based on the fact that in Egypt today, Jews remain in these two cities. In Cairo, some of the civil registers (Karaites, Ashkenazi) have been dispersed or lost.

⁴⁴ Association Nebi Daniel, 2006-2007.

not always linked to rigorous religious observance; and second, the several-thousand-year-old roots of the Jewish community in Egypt. In Egypt, affiliation with Judaism was primarily social and political; people were *de facto* considered part of the Jewish community, seen as a social institution⁴⁵ in which culture and religion were closely linked. In the past, this framework directly affected the daily lives of individuals through a network of institutions: synagogues, schools, hospitals, charitable institutes, orphanages and homes for the elderly, and study groups.

The official classification of this heritage sometimes triggered problems and tensions, revealing ambivalence; it was perceived, coveted and promoted in different ways by the various actors involved. Their strategies and tactics varied as well. Three actors were involved: the Egyptian state, the Jews remaining in Egypt, and the diaspora of Jews from Egypt, to which we must add the Jews from Egypt in Israel (who define themselves as Jews from Egypt but do not consider themselves a diaspora).

The Spaces of Egyptian Judaism

Of primary significance are the synagogues of Alexandria and Cairo, some of which have been placed under the protection of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA).⁴⁶ The only cases of external intervention and funding were the restoration of the Fostat synagogue by the Bronfman family of Canada and a preliminary restoration of the Sha'ar Hashamayim synagogue by Nessim Gaon.

⁴⁵ On the Jewish community framework, see Yves Fedida, *Shem et Shemot, Registres communautaires en Égypte*, Nebi Daniel website, 2006, accessed 5 march 2009, <http://www.nebidaniel.org/index.php?lang=fr>. In Alexandria in 1907, there were fourteen non-Muslim communities: “Latins (indigenous and European), Copts (Catholic and Orthodox), Greeks (Catholic and Orthodox), Armenians (Catholic and Orthodox), and Maronites, Protestants (German and French mixed, English, Scottish), and Israelite (indigenous and European).” Robert Ilbert, *Alexandrie 1830-1930. Histoire d'une communauté citadine* (Le Caire: Édition IFAO; Paris: Nouvelles Éditions de l'Université, 1996), 414-415. These recognized groups each managed their own civil registers, succession problems, marriages, and internal conflicts.

⁴⁶ The association identified about fifteen Jewish monuments. In Egypt, Jews opted either for Jewish law, which provided for the status of *hekdesb*, comparable to the case of *waqf*, or for the *waqf* when that seemed to offer more guarantees vis-à-vis the state. The creation of a *waqf* by a non-Muslim was permitted when its purpose did not conflict with Islamic law. See Dario Miccoli, *Histories of the Jews of Egypt. An Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s-1950s*, (London-New York: Routledge, 2015).

After Sadat, restoration work became a national prerogative. In 1987, the SCA created the Jewish Department of Antiquities that organized a committee to identify and assess the historical, religious, and architectural importance of synagogues in Egypt. This led the country to examine the Jewish religious heritage preserved within its borders as a whole and to determine its historical importance according to Egypt's own criteria, an assessment done in coordination with various actors with divergent interests and expectations.⁴⁷

In Alexandria, the Nebi Daniel Association identified twelve synagogues, built between 1381 and 1937, and eight oratories (prayer halls) in various districts. Of this group, only two still exist and have been registered as heritage sites: one is Menasce, in the Mancheya district; built in 1860 and opened in 1863, it remains closed and cannot be visited. In 2017, it was added to the national list of Islamic, Coptic, and Jewish monuments. The other is Eliyahu Hanavi in Nebi Daniel Street, built between 1836 and 1850 by Italian architects on the grounds of an ancient synagogue that had been completely destroyed by Bonaparte's artillery. This temple housed the Jewish court and contained more than fifty ancient *Sifrei Torah* as well as a collection of rare fifteenth-century Jewish books and manuscripts, registered as part of Egypt's archaeological heritage. Declared a historical monument in 1987 by the Minister of Culture, the synagogue until 2012 held religious services on the major holy days, led by an Israeli rabbi of Egyptian origin, Avraham Dayan. Small groups came to pray with the community in Alexandria to constitute a *minyan*,⁴⁸ with the help of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. They did so until the 2011 revolution. In August 2008, when the leader of the Jewish community of Alexandria, Max Salama, died, no Kaddish⁴⁹ could be recited for him because no *minyan* was able to gather. In 2012, the synagogue was closed for political and security reasons. In 2017, following the collapse of the roof, the restoration of the synagogue started.

⁴⁷ <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/1999/446/tri.htm>

⁴⁸ Quorum of ten adult men necessary to enable the recitation of key parts of the traditional Jewish liturgy.

⁴⁹ Lit., "Sanctification of God's Name," pronounced during a public service by mourners during the mourning period and then every year on the anniversary of death. The wording of Kaddish does not suggest a prayer for the dead, but leads to a public affirmation that faith has not been shaken by grief. It has been interpreted as attesting to the continuity of the chain of tradition, assured despite the rupture caused by death.

In Cairo, what remains of the community has managed to maintain a larger number of synagogues. However, only four of these have been restored, under the supervision of the SCA. In 1994, the American Research Center in Egypt⁵⁰ launched two projects: work on the Haim Kapucci, an Italian synagogue dating from the late 17th century,⁵¹ and on Maimonides Synagogue, with its adjacent yeshiva, in the Harat El-Yahud, (the building originally constructed in the 10th century; the present building dates from the 19th century). These projects were discontinued for lack of clear government plans as to their future use (tourism, place to house cultural events or exhibitions?): “No one could figure out what to do with historic Jewish buildings in modern-day Cairo.”⁵² The Maimonides Synagogue was the first to undergo beginning restoration work. It had already been renovated several times: at the beginning of the 20th century by the Egyptian Jewish community, then twice in the 1980s,⁵³ when the temple was reinvested by members of the Chabad community who celebrated the completion of their study of the *Mishne Torah*.⁵⁴ The synagogue then collapsed in the 1992 earthquake. The SCA launched a plan to drain the land supporting the building, and the synagogue was restored in 2010. The presence of this community is probably thanks to the existence of a small contingent of Israeli tourists. The second is the Ben Ezra Synagogue located in Fustat, in Old Cairo. The original synagogue was destroyed in 1012, rebuilt around 1039, and underwent numerous renovations over the centuries since.⁵⁵ It was here that the documents known as the Cairo Genizah⁵⁶ were found. The synagogue lay in ruins until the early 1980s; the Canadian Archaeological Center began restoration work in 1982. But the synagogue was then damaged in the 1992 earthquake, and its restoration was not be completed until 2007. A small museum – a modest-sized exhibition, rather – dedicated to the Genizah opened near the synagogue, which itself reopened in 2016 after five years of closure. The third is Sha’ar

⁵⁰ The Center commissioned two reports out of the fifty projects that it supported.

⁵¹ Yoram Meital, *Atarim Yehudiyim Bemitzrayim*, (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1995).

⁵² <https://womenslens.blogspot.com/p/second-exodus.html>, accessed September 15, 2010.

⁵³ Following the collapse of the ceiling in 1969. Both restorations were financed by a Parisian banker of Egyptian origin.

⁵⁴ Code of Jewish law composed by Moses Maimonides between 1170 and 1180.

⁵⁵ David Cassuto, “Ben Ezra Synagogue,” in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman Stillman, (Leyden: Brill Online, 2014).

⁵⁶ The Cairo Genizah contains some 200,000 documents written in Hebrew, Arabic, Judeo-Spanish and Yiddish and dating from 870 to 1880, which trace the daily life and religious history of different Jewish communities. Today, most of the documents are at Cambridge, with the majority in digital format and accessible to the public.

Hashamayim Synagogue on Adly Street, built in 1899⁵⁷ (Rafaat, 1999). It remains active and is also a tourist attraction in central Cairo. In 2010, it was targeted by a bomb attack but suffered no damage.⁵⁸ The last is the Moussa al-Dar‘i (or Moshe al-Dar‘i) synagogue in the al-‘Abbasiyah quarter,⁵⁹ named after the 13th-century Karaite poet Moshe Dar‘i. It was built during 1925-1933, after most of the Karaite Jews had left the Jewish quarter (Haret el-Yahud) and moved to the new suburbs.

It has been more difficult to have cemeteries and tombs classified as national heritage sites. In some cases, their future remains a bone of contention, sometimes due to high demand for real estate and urban development projects. Some of the areas have been damaged, while others have been used for the construction of temporary, ramshackle living quarters. What classification as a heritage site might mean for preservation remains uncertain. Alexandria is home to three Jewish cemeteries, which are guarded but require regular maintenance. One of them, because of its central location in the city’s Mazarita district, was considered endangered for a time, although the tomb of Chief Rabbi Amram is located there. In order to preserve it, the governorate took charge of repairing the external walls and required the Jewish “community” of Alexandria to plant massive trees inside to hide the funerary monuments from the view of surrounding buildings. If they would not, the remains of the deceased were threatened with a transfer elsewhere, as had already been done at the Tanta cemetery, which became “a simple plaque over a mass grave.”⁶⁰ For the other two cemeteries in the Chatby area, where Muslim, Coptic, and Catholic cemeteries are also located, Nebi Daniel had freehand plans drawn up in 1994 and 1995, and more formal plans were made in 2005. Since 2007, the Association has also undertaken the renovation of the lateral and transverse aisles of the large Jewish section of the Menasce Monument in the Chatby 2 Cemetery. In 2017, these three cemeteries were registered as heritage sites by the Ministry of

⁵⁷ Hana Taragan, “The ‘Gate of Heaven’ (Sha’ar Hashamayim) Synagogue in Cairo (1898-1905). On the Contextualization of Jewish Communal Architecture,” *Journal of Jewish Identities* 2/1 (2009): 31-53, and Samir Rafaat, “Gate of Heaven,” *Cairo Times*, September 2, 1999, <http://www.egy.com/landmarks/99-09-02.php>

⁵⁸ “Bomb Hurlled at Main Synagogue in Cairo; No Casualties,” *Haaretz*, February 21, 2010, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5033172>

⁵⁹ According to Yves Fedida (personal communication). I have found no information concerning the restoration of this synagogue.

⁶⁰ Association Nebi Daniel, <http://www.nebidaniel.org>

Antiquities. Nevertheless, some Jews from Egypt still report that cemeteries in Chatby are nowadays poorly maintained.⁶¹

In Cairo, the al-Bassatine cemetery, dating from the 9th century, has suffered damage.⁶² During a project to build a bypass road through the cemetery in 1988, the Egyptian government agreed to preserve some 300 graves. With the financial contribution of the *Association Pour la Preservation du Patrimoine Culturel Juif d’Egypte* and of the *World Sephardic Federation*,⁶³ Carmen Weinstein⁶⁴ succeeded to build a 3-meter high, two-kilometer long wall around two-thirds of the cemetery, encompassing about 35 feddans, more than half the cemetery. A survey of Jewish graves was carried out in the wake of an anti-Jewish campaign launched by some Egyptian newspapers after the 1994 Hebron massacre perpetrated by Baruch Kopel Goldstein. Nevertheless, before 2011, the cemetery was only partially protected and was still occupied by people who had built housing above the tombs, although paradoxically, visiting the cemetery still requires special authorization. Although several headstones have been classified by the SCA, in 2013, an article in *L’Arche* about the burial of the president of the Cairo “community” still deplored the “sad situation, the vast majority of marble headstones have been stolen and wild dogs wander between the graves among

⁶¹ Apparently, there are six full-time gardeners on the payroll of the community and according to the guides at the Chatby cemeteries they never go there.

⁶² This cemetery comprised 120 feddans, divided equally between the Rabbinical and the Karaite Jews. The part belonging to the Karaites has almost completely disappeared except for two large vaults. According to Bassatine News, “After 1967, most of the marble slabs covering the individual graves were stolen. Most of the vaults, some of the land without graves and some with graves, were squatted on by the migrants from Upper Egypt as well as by destitute Cairenes. (...) In 1978, Carmen Weinstein took upon her own responsibility the task of recuperating what could be saved of the cemetery. Yet in spite of her worldwide appeals through the media and the enlisting of various personalities, she met with lukewarm response and indifference...” <http://www.bassatine.net/bassar.php>, consulted March 30, 2018.

⁶³ Other organizations such as Ahava Ve Ahva Congregation in New York and the United Synagogue Youth USA participated as well in the completion of the cemetery wall.

⁶⁴ Carmen Weinstein was born in Cairo, on October 10, 1931, and was a longtime communal activist before holding an official position as President of the Cairo Jewish Community in 2004. Her work on the preservation of Egyptian Jewish artifacts and buildings began in 1975, when she launched “a struggle on behalf of the Bassatine Cemetery, thought to be the world’s second-oldest Jewish cemetery (after the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem).” See Callie Maidhof, “Weinstein, Carmen,” in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman A. Stillman. Consulted online on 29 June 2019.

piles of rubbish.” In the end, Carmen Weinstein was not buried in the family tomb, as it had been “invaded by waste and muddy sewage water.”⁶⁵

Objects of Religion, Objects of Covetousness, Objects of Discord: Identification and Histories

While some synagogues have been classified heritage sites, other spaces and objects reveal more starkly the paradoxes in the treatment of this Jewish Egyptian heritage. Some react with covetousness or refusal, some with rejection, some co-opt the situation for their own ends—and all of this against a backdrop of tensions linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and internal relations among Egyptian Jews.

The tomb of Ray Abu Hassira (born in Morocco in around 1807 and died around 1880 in Damtiouh, a small village south of Damanhur)⁶⁶ is a place of worship contested by some Egyptians. The only *moulid*⁶⁷ dedicated to a Jew in Egypt and located in Izbet Damtiouh⁶⁸, it draws thousands of Jews from Israel and around the world, mostly Jews from Morocco, every year (on the 19th of Tevet, the date of his death according to the Jewish calendar). The pilgrimage was prohibited in 1956 by Nasser following the Suez Canal crisis and was then authorized again in 1979. Since then, the festival has been the subject of several law suits by certain inhabitants and political activists, in connection with the rituals performed by the pilgrims⁶⁹ and the security measures taken to protect them.

⁶⁵ <https://larchemag.fr/2013/04/20/669/mort-de-carmen-weinstein-presidente-de-la-communaute-juive-degypte/>, consulted March 30, 2018.

⁶⁶ See Voir El Youssef, *المعتقدات الشعبية عن الأضرحة اليهودية: دراسة عن المولد يعقوب أبو حسيرة في محافظة البحيرة* (Cairo: Ain Publishers, 1997), quoted by Yasmine Hussein, *Sacred Places and Popular Practice in the Mediterranean*, (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2009), 200.

⁶⁷ http://www.lemonde.fr/m-actu/article/2015/01/07/en-egypte-les-pelerins-juifs-ne-sont-plus-les-bienvenus_4550873_4497186.html, accessed April 10, 2017. Other narratives give him the name of Yaakov Ben Massoud, now Abu Hassira, whose boat is said to have sunk on his journey to Jerusalem. He was reported to have then been miraculously saved by clinging to his straw mat, his only possession.

⁶⁸ It is surrounded on three sides by 89 Jewish tombs. Hussein, *Sacred Places*, 200.

⁶⁹ In the area in front of the tomb, a large tent is erected and long tables are arranged inside. Small tents are set up for selling leather products, food, bottled water and paper plates. Some vendors located next to the tent sell different types of Jewish candlesticks while others walk around carrying various pictures of Rabbi Jacob Abu Hassira. At the beginning of the ceremony, there is an auction to decide who will be the first person to enter the tomb and the first person to

Objectors point to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and wanted to see the tomb moved. In 2001, the State placed the tomb under the authority of the SCA as an archaeological site, in the hope of easing tensions. Pilgrims then had to buy a ticket to enter the site and could no longer perform certain rituals, such as kissing the tomb and lighting candles. But this decision only made inhabitants angrier, as they feared the site would be invaded by “Israeli tourists” all year round, instead of once a year. Some of them also claimed that Abu Hassira was, in fact, a descendant of Tarek Ibn Ziad, the conqueror of Andalusia and a devout Muslim. That year, the pilgrimage was cancelled and groups of pilgrims from Israel were refused a visa to enter Egypt. The pilgrimage was again cancelled in 2004⁷⁰ by the decision of the Alexandrian court, excluding it from official festivities of the three religions recognized under Egyptian law, and again in 2009 during the Israeli Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip. The site was renovated in 2008 with funds from Moroccan Jewish donors,⁷¹ but pilgrimage has been suspended since 2011, when the administrative court of Alexandria stated that “violations of morality and public order had been committed” during previous pilgrimages, without further specifying the nature of these violations. Considering that “Jews had had no particular impact on Egyptian civilization,” the judge ordered that the site be removed from the list of national monuments and antiquities.⁷² Israel asked Egypt, through the intermediary of UNESCO, to transfer the mausoleum to Jerusalem, but this request was rejected by the judge in Alexandria as contrary to Islamic principles that prohibit the excavation of tombs. Others claim that Abu Hassira belongs to Egypt: “Abu Hassira is a product of Arab-Islamic culture and consequently, he is ours.”⁷³

light a candle for the holy man. The pilgrims take the water placed on the tomb and clean their faces with it. Some of the men stand in a corner and pray; some of them read from a prayer book; others light candles for Abu Hassira. Women place biscuits on top of the tomb before offering them to those present. They also place coins on the tombs before donating. After the celebration, the participants leave the tomb; some of the Jews approach other tombs to obtain a handful of earth. Then the pilgrims begin to queue around the buffet where there are various types of food.” See Youssef, quoted in Hussein, *Sacred Places*, 200-201.

⁷⁰ <https://dafina.net/gazette/article/l'egypte-annule-le-pelerinage-juif-sur-la-tombe-de-abou-hassira>, consulted April 10, 2017.

⁷¹ See <http://jewishrefugees.com>.

⁷² https://www.lemonde.fr/m-actu/article/2015/01/07/en-egypte-les-pelerins-juifs-ne-sont-plus-les-bienvenus_4550873_4497186.html, consulted April 10, 2017.

⁷³ <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2001/516/eg5.html> consulted April 10, 2017.

Religious artefacts such as *Sifrei Torah* have also become objects of covetousness and dispersion, as evidenced by attempts at their illegal export and their unknown fate thereafter. Some of these objects, which are more than a hundred years old, are covered by the Egyptian law on antiquities. At least a third are probably less than a hundred years old, but, as the years go by, they, too, are eventually covered by the law on antiquities. An inventory was made in February 2004 by the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt for the Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue: fifty-six boxes containing *Sifrei Torah*, fourteen *Sifrei Torah* without boxes, and three boxes without *Sifrei Torah*. There are also *Kandils* (lanterns); *Ner Tamids* (eternal lamps of silver, of different sizes and patterns); *Rimonim* (Torah ornaments); *Yads*⁷⁴ (silver book pointers); 62 *parochets*⁷⁵ in Alexandria; and Hanukkah menorahs. In addition to these religious objects, there are also *Ketubbot* (marriage contracts), *Mohel* books, as well as archives, books and photos in the community's possession, many of which have become collector's items.⁷⁶ For the synagogue of Alexandria, the community archives (schools' and *Bet Din* archives, and more) proved to be unusable. Some books are in libraries abroad, while manuscripts can be found at universities mainly in the United States and Israel.⁷⁷ Some of the items have disappeared, such as the Megillat (Scroll) of Esther.⁷⁸ Nebi Daniel also made an inventory of the *Sifrei Torah* in Cairo.

The debates over community registers between the Egyptian Jews in and outside Israel, the Jews in Egypt who preserve the registers, and the Egyptian government reveal another issue raised by this heritage, which is in some respects embarrassing given the rather "cold" peace between Egypt and Israel. The registers, which track the diversity of life histories in Egypt's Jewish communities, do not relate to a distant past; in fact, the documents concern individuals who are sometimes still alive and their descendants. Today, this heritage can be found in the archives of communities of Cairo and Alexandria. In Alexandria, these

⁷⁴ To protect the scrolls, *Sifrei Torah* are provided with wooden handles, minimizing physical contact. The use of a *Yad* has the same aim.

⁷⁵ Embroidered curtains placed before the Holy Ark (in Sephardic and Eastern synagogues, the *Heykhal*) and the lectern (the *Bimah* surmounted by the *Tevah*).

⁷⁶ For a view of these *Ketubbot*, particularly those from Egypt, see: <https://web.nli.org.il/sites/nli/english/collections/jewish-collection/ketubbot/pages/default.aspx>, consulted August 11, 2009.

⁷⁷ The Jewish National and University Library and the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem, and Yeshiva University of New York.

⁷⁸ *Megillat* Esther, or the Scroll of Esther, is part of the Hebrew Bible. Handwritten on parchment, its text is traditionally read every year during the feast of Purim.

records⁷⁹ date back to the Ottoman Empire, starting in 1830 as the beginning date of the history of the Jewish minority of Alexandria. The records were created by the Jewish community of Alexandria, which recorded the names of persons wishing to obtain official documents. Births, marriages, divorces, deaths, and conversions were recorded until 1956. According to the Nebi Daniel Association, there are two hundred and fifty-five registers comprising some sixty thousand pages of information that covers the entire city and extends to the contemporary period. No copy of this has been made to date.⁸⁰

One of Nebi Daniel's objectives is to digitize these registers, which remain difficult to access. The Association is confronted, on the one hand, with the refusal of the local Jewish communities, who maintain that they require governmental authorization to allow a complete copy to leave the country. On the other hand, the Egyptian government has not intervened or responded in any way; the official stance is that the communities are the sole arbiters of the fate of the registers. Although the documents do not concern personal property, the government is apprehensive that they might be used to bring charges of spoliation of property, a fear reinforced by rumors of attempted theft in late 2011 of 1.7 million documents dating from the 19th century.⁸¹

The Association also denounces the fact that there is a charge for making copies of documents in Alexandria, while in Cairo the documents are not accessible at all. According to the Association, the registers are important sources for documenting heritage; they also pose a problem of authenticity, insofar as the Jewish authorities in Alexandria and Cairo no longer have "a religious mandate at present to confer an official seal on the certificates issued."⁸² Indeed, there is no rabbinical authority in Egypt able to validate the certificates. In addition,

⁷⁹ These are partly manuscript documents, sometimes including photographs, which contain information recorded either on the day of the event or subsequently, and used in particular for issuing certificates (*Chehadat*) for local or foreign civil and religious authorities. These documents are written in several languages: French, Hebrew, Arabic, and Italian.

⁸⁰ Fedida, *Shem et Shemot*.

⁸¹ This is undoubtedly an invention by Egyptian propaganda reproduced by the Israelis. The building that burned down during the revolution could not have housed Jewish property titles because all properties, Jewish and non-Jewish, form one confused hodgepodge in the Egyptian cadaster to this day. The Jewish documents were allegedly stolen during the December 2011 riots from a research institute in Cairo and then seized while they were on their way to Israel via Jordan. See <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-ownership-documents-confiscated-by-cairo-on-national-security-grounds/>, consulted on March 14, 2014.

⁸² <http://www.nebidaniel.org/registres.php?lang=fr>

according to the Association, no legal decision or statement has been made on what will happen to community effects after the demise of the last of its remaining members in Egypt.

In fact, the archives constitute the “only legal proof of civil and religious identity,”⁸³ in particular, of Jewishness as defined by *Halakha* for Jewish marriage, genealogy, or burial. The documents also furnish proof of nationality, divorce settlements, or inheritance and constitute a record reflecting 150 years of community life in Alexandria. They are especially valuable because, in many cases, foreign archives are incomplete despite consular registration, which did not affect all Egyptian Jews. Finally, the registers enable us to fill in lacunae in the histories of families that have been destroyed and dispersed.

This quarrel over community registers has been partly sealed by their transfer to the national archives, highlighting the dispute between the different actors involved. According to one of my interviewees from Nebi Daniel Association, in 2016,

Magda Haroun heard about the international multilingual petition to President Sisi that Nebi Daniel had launched and which had been signed by all the associations. She immediately contacted the Ministry of Culture to pick up all the community registers. (...) Unfortunately, she also convinced Ben Gaon in Alexandria to accept when the Minister of Culture approached him immediately. This is a great disaster. They now lie in the depths of the national archives. We were unable to see them. We contacted the previous Minister of Culture, who said that he had no objection to a copy but that the Minister of Foreign Affairs should sign to take it abroad. Since then, nothing. Sisi has publicly said that we would have a copy... but when? Our interventions with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and embassies receive only dismissive silence as an answer.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Inside or Outside Egypt: Contrasting Views

Preserving the traces of an Egyptian Jewish presence *in situ* necessarily raises different issues for the various actors involved – Jews from Egypt and Jews in Egypt, Egyptians – in a context in which there are Jews still in Egypt and Jews from Egypt in the diaspora and in Israel (who do not perceive themselves as in a diaspora). The fragility of the Jewish community in Egypt, long affected by internal tensions,⁸⁴ makes the community closely dependent on the state and probably, at other levels, on the help of Egyptian Jews in the diaspora and in Israel. This guardianship “from the outside” is all the more important for the community from a financial, social, and historical point of view because the very presence of the community is occasionally contested. This community is perceived by some as the *shamash* (servant, guardian) of the Jewish presence and heritage in the country, and its few members as the last to close the door and the lights of the synagogue. But there are ambivalent views about the community, as certain Jews from Egypt in the diaspora or in Israel suspect it of assimilation (in particular because of mixed marriages), and so of abandoning all or part of its Jewish identity. Others regularly level a series of charges at the presidents of the would be communities of Alexandria and Cairo: diverting sales of community goods for their own benefit, converting to Islam, and so on.⁸⁵ The continuity of Egyptian Judaism has been preserved, in the eyes of these critics, thanks to the Jews’ departure and the re-establishment of traditions in Israel and elsewhere. From the point of view of these external critics, it is they who represent the real Jews of Egypt and not those who remained in the country, that instead see their legitimacy and rights to community property challenged.

In this configuration, the Egyptian government becomes an arbiter of sorts: against the communities when they try to obtain access to documents and religious objects or attempt to export them out of the country, or in support of the communities when classifying their artefacts as part of Egypt’s national heritage. But this classification, as the site of Rav Abu Hassira shows, is also debated among Egyptians, who no longer co-exist – and have not co-existed for nearly sixty years – with any Jewish minority. Recognizing Jewish history as part of Egyptian history therefore runs up against the conception of Jews as exogenous to the country. This view is, moreover, often linked with the

⁸⁴ Particularly concerning the management and sale of community properties.

⁸⁵ http://www.hsje.org/mystory/Victor_Balassiano/presalexandria.html, consulted on April 2, 2018.

pejorative associations of labels such as “Jew,” “Israeli” and “Zionist.” This representation is passed on implicitly or explicitly by the media, films and television series.

Some Egyptian Jews in the diaspora favor *in situ* conservation in accordance with Egyptian law and agree with the position of the Jews in Egypt that taking ancient documents out of the country is not only illegal but also denies their Egyptian historical character – these documents are not solely Jewish.⁸⁶ This is the view of Nebi Daniel’s members. While including certain synagogues in tourist circuits of Cairo is not one of its direct objectives, the aim does not contradict the Association’s goals. The Association also seeks to include the restoration and conservation of certain synagogues in the Jewish Heritage Program (run by the World Monument Fund), an initiative that reveals the sometimes sensitive situation of the Association:

We did indeed intervene with the WMF for the restoration of Eliyahu Hanavi because of the critical state of the synagogue, at the time of Morsi. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood no longer wanted to do anything and we wanted to broaden the interveners’ impact. Unfortunately, our request did not succeed because the WMF had no one in Egypt to take up this commitment. We renewed the request after the collapse of the roof... and this time it was accepted. Although we kept the Minister of Antiquities informed of our approach, the Egyptians took the Synagogue’s listing as an endangered site badly because they had just allocated one month before the sum for the restoration, which is still in progress.⁸⁷

Yet not everyone shares the same approach. In Israel, some argue for permanently exporting from Egypt all community documents and religious objects, including *Genizah* documents, and for selling community buildings, thus expressly opting to sever links with Egypt. In the 1990s, Jews from Egypt in Brooklyn asked the Jewish community in Egypt to give up its *Sefarim* (traditional books containing liturgy or texts for study), arguing that in Egypt Jews would inevitably become extinct. This request led Carmen Weinstein, to take action with the Egyptian government to classify the objects as Egyptian

⁸⁶ <http://www.wmforg/jewish.html>.

⁸⁷ Interview of the A. with Marc, Paris region, 2019.

antiquities. Magda Haroun⁸⁸ succeeded her and in 2016 together with Samy Ibrahim founded anew the Drop of Milk Association,⁸⁹ whose objective is to maintain synagogues. The latter are reshaped as places of memory, community and artistic centers, open to all and reconfigured in tourist items as witnesses to a past of interfaith tolerance and harmony.⁹⁰ The association relies in particular on social media and uses the tricks of tourist merchandising, including an Internet campaign to sell tee-shirts and sweat-shirts (between 35 and 65 dollars) that sport the Association's logo in the shape of papyrus (palm tree, according to the association) decorating the walls of synagogues in Cairo. It regularly makes the headlines of national and international newspapers praising this mixture of tourism, memory and peace against the backdrop of the disappearance of living people while architecture remains to commemorate Jewish life in the past. Being keen to merge the two communities of Alexandria and Cairo, the Association has also struck a deal with Abercrombie and Kent for organising a tour of Jewish Cairo. This leads to some reactions such as those of the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt, which contacted the American Ambassador in Egypt in late 2017 to protest against the Cairo Jewish community's holding events of a so-called "non-Jewish nature" at synagogues: "Our synagogues are houses of worship and must be used only for religious functions. They are not social clubs."⁹¹

Despite what some describe as "the government's unwillingness to engage with Egyptian Jewry,"⁹² the government has in fact taken several decisions in favor of the preservation and classification of certain Jewish heritage sites and objects that, once classified, should be recognized in the same way as the Coptic and Islamic heritage have been.⁹³ Some of these very old synagogues have been included in a tourist circuit marked out with signs in old Cairo⁹⁴; others have not. In January

⁸⁸ Daughter of Chehata Haroun, a lawyer and member of the Egyptian Communist Party, which was known to be opposed to Israel. For a discussion of Chehata Haroun's personality, his beliefs, and to what extent the Jewish community and its heritage constitute a part of the Egyptian social and cultural fabric, see Yoram Meital, "A Jew in Cairo. The Defiance of Chehata Haroun," *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 53/2 (2016): 183-197.

⁸⁹ First founded in 1921 to help the needy.

⁹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/pg/D.O.M.Egypt/about/>

⁹¹ <http://jewishrefugees.blogspot.com/2018/01/egyptian-synagogues-are-not-social-clubs.html>, consulted January 6, 2018.

⁹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/06/egypt-to-repair-middle-east-biggest-synagogue-elyahu-hanavi-alexandria>, consulted December 1, 2017.

⁹³ <http://www.drhawass.com/wp/the-restoration-of-the-shaar-hashamayim-synagogue/> consulted April 3, 2018.

⁹⁴ Primarily Maimonides Synagogue, Ben Ezra Synagogue and Sha'ar Hashamayim.

2017, a meeting between the Director of International Affairs of the American Jewish Committee, Rabbi Andrew Baker, the Nebi Daniel Association, and the Egyptian Minister of Antiquities, Khaled El-Enany, led to the allocation of £5 million for the restoration of the Alexandria Synagogue.⁹⁵ These efforts were then tied to a strategy to make Farouk Hosny, Minister of Culture, become head of UNESCO, and then appoint Moushira Khattab as Director General. They also bear witness to an effort to transform the Jewish heritage into a symbol of different faiths' historical coexistence in the country, in a fragile and difficult present for the minorities still there, such as the Copts.

Conclusion: Symbolic Inclusion versus Physical Exclusion

Composed of community archives, religious artefacts and built places, the material heritage of the Egyptian Jews is grounded in central urban spaces both historically and symbolically. At the same time, this heritage is marked by the now marginalized, although not forgotten, history of Jewish presence in Egypt. While this marginalization occurred in a broader context affecting a number of minorities who shared a similar fate, for the Jews this process featured specific element, such as the long history of Jews in Egypt and the creation of the State of Israel. Paradoxically, it is perhaps these specific elements that also explain the efforts of the most recent Egyptian governments to maintain Jewish heritage *in situ*, which they can do all the more easily because the members of the community are no longer there, a situation common in other Jewish communities in Islamic countries, as well.⁹⁶ The safeguarding and preservation of this heritage is sometimes the subject of bitter debate between Jews from Egypt in the diaspora, those in Israel, and Jews still in Egypt; with the Egyptian State often playing the role of arbiter. The debates reveal the asymmetry in expectations, customs, and commitments concerning the history of Jews in Egypt. The fragile position of the Jews still in Egypt, the criticism and suspicion to which they are subjected, even the way that some people (locally or elsewhere) have taken advantage of the community's disappearance and inability to claim ownership of its heritage and its future in order to dissociate it from its integral Egyptian Jewish character and to insist on its purely Jewish - or purely Egyptian,

⁹⁵ The responsibility of the Jewish community according to Article 30 of the Law 117 from 1983 on the protection of monuments.

⁹⁶ Susan Gilson Miller, "Sensitive Ruins. On the Preservation of Jewish Religious Sites in the Muslim World," in *Synagogues of the Islamic World. Architecture, Design, and Identity*, ed. Mohammed Gharipour, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

or even purely “Arab-Muslim” – nature, are key to understanding the issues involved in preserving this Jewish heritage in Egypt. These issues are debated among three main actors: the Egyptian government, Jews from Egypt, and Jews in Egypt. Some of them sponsor or seek financial and political support to preserve this heritage *in situ* while others, closing the door to the discussions, try to transport that heritage elsewhere by any means. But Jews from Egypt and Jews in Egypt both seem to agree in recognizing these cultural artefacts and architectural remains as unitary symbols of their Egyptian Jewish history and belonging, revealing the dialectic between identification (with Judaism) and the various uses of its central places-institutions, including the synagogue. They became new emblematic sites of contemporary Judaism, sometimes places of desolation, ruins and memory, where some individuals hope to reconnect with their “origins” and “where a modality, hitherto unprecedented among Jews, of the relationship to the past is experienced, at the same time as a modality of belief that is no longer that of the established tradition.”⁹⁷

However, in this “game,” there is a fourth actor, Israel, whose specific relations with its Egyptian neighbor leave a clear mark on the paradoxical trajectory of the Jewish heritage in Egypt, between promotion, co-option, abandonment, forgetting and rejection. This heritage thus became ironically, in and outside Egypt, a concrete trace of the physical exclusion of the Jews (expelled from the country) and at the same time, in Egypt, a symbol of their symbolical inclusion (for Egypt to claim its tolerance of multiple communities). The destruction of sites and artefacts is not alone in leading to the erasure of the history of Egyptian Jews. The production and the preservation of their heritage might also support the creation of silences, in and outside Egypt and in the shade or fully lit up by Israel. As M.R. Trouillot pointed out, history begins with bodies and artefacts.⁹⁸ The bigger and the more visible the material traces are, the more they embody the ambiguities and tension of history, enabling us to touch it and inspiring the illusion of sharing it and the impetus to imagine “lives behind the mortar.” But they do not let us recognize, despite or due to their monumental materiality and their multiple uses, “the end of a bottomless silence”⁹⁹ about the very complex

⁹⁷ Régine Azria, “Lieux juifs: solitude du Mont, rumeurs du monde”, *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 4 (2005): 557-572.

⁹⁸ Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 28.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

past of those who had to abandon their prophets and, perhaps more than others, have sunk into history.¹⁰⁰

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¹⁰⁰ Bernard Malamud, *The Fixer*, (New York: Farrar-Straus & Giroux, 1966); consulted by the author in French translation as *L’homme de Kiev*, (Paris: Rivages Poche, 2015).