

Alma Rachel Heckman, *The Sultan's Communists: Moroccan Jews and the Politics of Belonging* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), pp. 344.

by Orit Ouaknine-Yekutieli

The title Alma Heckman has chosen for her book “The Sultan’s Communists” hints at the title *Tujjār as-Sultān*—“The Sultan’s Merchants”—a group of Jewish traders who operated in the service of the sultan of Morocco and under his protection, mainly from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.¹ The intended allusion is that like those Jewish merchants had a special link and dependence on the monarch of Morocco, so the Jewish Moroccan communists—the protagonists of this book—acquired a similar status. The allegory seems odd at first, since the notion of monarchy represents almost the opposite of communism. Nevertheless, as Heckman demonstrates, the small group of Jewish Moroccan communists, who due to their political choice were pariahs of their country and community in the 1960s-1980s, became favorites of the Moroccan court at the turn of the twenty-first century, joining the circle of iconic national figures. Heckman’s book seeks to explain the process that created this peculiar situation, setting it within a broader range of events.

The book is an outstanding study, which is based on intensive research of a wealth of information that the author gathered in archives, interviews, the contemporary press and scholarly books. She brings all these data together and analyzes it brilliantly. Accordingly, the book is an essential contribution to the historiography of Moroccan Jewry.

The volume includes an introduction, five chapters ordered chronologically from the interwar years to the present, and a conclusion. The choice of chapters’ titles reflects Heckman’s analytic perspective, which traces several stages in the history of Moroccan Jewish Communists and their broader milieu. The first chapter, “Choices,” examines the political associations, including communism, that Moroccan Jews had access to under the French protectorate in Morocco during the interwar years. This period saw antisemitism and fascism rising in the

¹ Michel Abitbol, *Les Commerçants Du Roi: Tujjār Al-Sultan: Une Élite Économique Judéo-Marocaine Au XIXe Siècle* (Paris: Maisonneuve-Larose, 1998); Daniel J. Schroeter, *The Sultan’s Jew: Morocco and the Sephardi World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

metropole, and the consolidation of a liberation movement in Morocco. The second chapter, “Possibilities,” focuses on the Second World War period. It analyzes how the French betrayal of Moroccan Jews during the Vichy period affected their belief in France as a protecting power, and their trust in the Moroccan King. The third chapter, “Tactics,” concentrates on the actions of Jewish and Muslim members of the Communist Party during the struggle for Moroccan independence, and examines their strategies to create a space for inter-confessional national activity. The fourth chapter “Splinters” underlines the disappointments during the first years after independence, and the rise of the Moroccan authoritarian state. It discusses the oppression of the Communists as well as other leftist parties, and the simultaneous mass emigration of Moroccan Jews while in faraway Palestine the Arab-Israeli conflict reached its peak. The fifth chapter, “Co-optation,” begins with the imprisonment and exile of the book’s protagonists during the reign of Hassan II, and goes on to examine their subsequent release and return to Morocco under Mohamed VI. Within these settings, it analyzes their inclusion in the national narrative under the new King, and this inclusion’s connection with Morocco’s relationships with the USA, Israel, and some large Jewish organizations.

The book’s approach is micro-historical and biographical, as it utilizes the life stories of five main individuals in order to discuss the overall history of Jews in the Moroccan Communist party, the history of the Moroccan Jewish community and its mass emigration, and the history of Morocco at large.

The main characters of the book are Léon Sultan, Simon Lévy, Abraham Serfaty, Edmond Amran al-Maleh, and Sion Assidon, with short references to some of their close family members and political associates. This small group matured in the Moroccan communist party and held key positions in its leadership. They all held anti-Zionist views and pledged their co-religionists to fully integrate into Moroccan social and political life. As time passed, and following the stages that Heckman delineates in her chapters, their political trajectories diverged. Each found a personal path within the larger body of Moroccan leftist movements, and each suffered special harassment, from imposed or self-exile, to torture and imprisonment due to resisting governmental policies they deemed unjust. In old age, their routes converged again when they returned to Morocco and became a symbol of Moroccan Jewish patriotism. Four of them lived into the twenty-first

century (Léon Sultan died in the Second World War), but as fate would have it, three of those four passed away over the course of one year—between November 2010 and December 2011. Serfaty was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Rabat, Lévy in the Jewish cemetery in Fes, and Elmaleh in the Jewish cemetery in Essaouira.

Heckman makes the point that although this was a very small group within the Jewish community, its members became some of the community's most well-known representatives in recent Moroccan discourse. This occurred as their current public depictions construct them as symbols of Moroccan patriotic inter-confessional diversity and coexistence, a feature which is often presented as part of the so-called "Moroccan exceptionalism."

The difference between the size of the group and the disproportionate attention to it appears also in Western historiography. This is due to their unique stand, on the one hand resisting Moroccan governmental policies in the 1960s-80s, and on the other rejecting the perspective of the greater part of their Jewish community, which chose Zionism and emigration over staying in Morocco. In this respect, those figures who preached for continued Jewish life in their home country were part of a larger phenomenon of communist Jews in Muslim countries who held the same views (e.g., in Iraq,² Egypt,³ and Iran).⁴ Some of the latter had very similar experiences to those of these Moroccan Jews; Henri Curiel in Egypt, for example, was arrested several times and sent into exile in France due to his activities, much like Heckman's protagonists. However, unlike them, the end of his life was much more unfortunate. Curiel was murdered in France in 1978 while he was involved from afar in political events in Egypt, as well as attempts to bring about Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.⁵ All these Jewish communists struggled against colonialism during the colonial era; after decolonization, they fought for the rights of oppressed groups in their countries and made personal sacrifices for their struggle. Being at odds with the larger part of their Jewish communities that chose

² Orit Bashkin, "Red Baghdad: Iraqi Jews and the ICP, 1941–51," in *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2012), 141-182.

³ Joel Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There? : Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel 1948-1965* (London: Tauris, 1990).

⁴ Lior B. Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁵ Gilles Perrault, *A Man Apart: The Life of Henri Curiel* (London: Zed Books, 1987); Curiel Henri, *On the Altar of Peace* (Tel-Aviv: Mifras, 1982) [In Hebrew].

to leave, they became a symbol of the politically outcast Jewish figure, the pariah in Arendt's terms,⁶ which in the last few decades has been the object of considerable academic research within the realms of postcolonial and subaltern historiographies.

However, the pariah stage is over as regards the Moroccan group. The current commemoration of the Jewish communist leaders in Morocco is exceptional, as Heckman describes in her concluding chapter. The main intellectual depositories of the Moroccan state—the national archives, the national library, and the Mohamed V University—hold their personal archives and arrange events to commemorate them. This attitude has spread to other domains. For example, at its seventieth anniversary in 2013, the current reincarnation of the communist party, the PPS (Le Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme), launched a webpage that commemorated its founders. That webpage included Léon Sultan, his spouse Fortunée Sultan, Simon Lévy, and others.⁷ Some of the group's members also appear in current Moroccan cultural production sites such as Muḥammad Sa'īd Aḥajjīūj's 2020 book *The Riddle of Edmond Amran El Maleh*, in which El Maleh's life story and literary production are the topic and inspiration.⁸

Reviewing and analyzing this unique group Heckman's book presents a very well-written and detailed history. Some special highlights in the volume include pamphlets of diasporic Moroccan students' organizations in France which demanded the release of political prisoners in Morocco and especially Abraham Serfaty, and banners of Simon Lévy from his election campaign for Casablanca's municipal council. On top of this rich data, Heckman also adds a personal touch to her writing, like describing the special atmosphere during her multiple interviews with Incarnation—Simon Lévy's widow. In this latter regard, it would have been excellent if more material and observations had been made on the

⁶ Hannah Arendt and Ron H Feldman, *The Jew As Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (New York: Grove Press, 1978).

⁷ “70 Sana fi Khidmat al-Waṭan wa-al-Sha'ab,” Bayanealyaoume, accessed July 4, 2023, <http://bayanealyaoume.press.ma/1943-2013-5/.html>

⁸ Muḥammad Sa'īd Aḥajjīūj, *Uḥjīyat Idmūn 'Umrān al-māliḥ* (Bayrūt: Hāshīt Anṭwān, 2020).

women in this group, who also operated a unique women's movement,⁹ but as Heckman notes, unfortunately, there is almost no record about them.

In summary, the book is very important, it adds a new perspective to scholarship about modern Jewish history in Morocco. It is an excellent resource for researchers, students, and laypersons interested in the history of Morocco and its Jewish community, and is certainly worth an in-depth reading.

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⁹ Orit Ouaknine-Yekutieli, "Jewish Women in Intercommunal Political Movements in Colonial Morocco," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18, no. 2 (2019): 227-244.