"From Egypt and Back": Alternative Collective Memories among Egyptian Jews in Israel

by *Alon Tam*

Abstract

An analysis of the content and membership profile of the Facebook group "From Egypt and Back," one of the biggest and most active groups of Egyptian Jews, in or out of social media, reveals the alternative that it has created to the dominant narrative in Egyptian Jewish collective memory, particularly in Israel. Whereas the dominant narrative has glorified the bourgeois, Frenchified, urban life of Egyptian Jews, "From Egypt and Back" has given voice to lower-middle-class and lower-class Jews and their experiences of Cairo, in particular. Its members have created a different mental map of Cairo that features its non-bourgeois neighborhoods, immersed in Egyptian-Arabic culture. This has generated high feelings of nostalgia, whose role as an emotion that affirms identity and cultural heritage, one that connects group members to their parents and family, and creates a community, will also be explored.

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Fig. 1. Illustration by Zohar Gannot, 2025.

Introduction

This article offers a deep analysis of the Facebook group "From Egypt and Back" (Yetzi'at Mitzraim ve-be-Hazarah, in Hebrew, which can also be translated more literally as "The Exodus and Back"), including an analysis of its content, membership profile, and operation. With more than 10,600 registered members as of September 2024, it is one of the biggest groups of Egyptian Jews, in or out of social media. It is also one of the most active groups dedicated to Egyptian Jews on social media, with sometimes more than a dozen posts each day, thus justifying our attention.[1] Based on the posts and comments in this group, as well as on interviews with its creator and administrator, I will argue that it has created an alternative to the dominant narrative in Egyptian Jewish collective memory, as it has developed since the middle of the twentieth century, particularly in Israel. Whereas the dominant narrative has glorified the bourgeois, Frenchified, urban life of Jews in Cairo or Alexandria and their contributions to Egypt, as a backdrop to their expulsion, "From Egypt and Back" has given voice to lower-middle-class

[1] "From Egypt and Back," https://www.facebook.com/groups/1528403684101271. All references to Facebook pages and posts in this article were last accessed on September 15, 2024.

and lower-class Jews and their experiences of Cairo, and to a lesser extent, also Alexandria. Its members have created a different mental map of Cairo that features its non-bourgeois neighborhoods, immersed in Egyptian-Arabic culture. This alternative mental map and the attachment to the Arabic language, and even to contemporary Egyptian culture, also manifest and generate high emotions. As a salient feature of "From Egypt and Back," I will explore the role of nostalgia as an emotion that affirms identity and cultural heritage, that connects group members to their parents and family, through space and custom. This analysis will rely on heavily contextualizing the contemporary activity of "From Egypt and Back" in the social and cultural history of Jews in Egypt.

This article, then, aims at contributing to several scholarly conversations, first and foremost, to the study of Egyptian Jews. There are only a handful of works that examine Egyptian Jews as a diasporic community, or its collective memory. Joel Beinin's classic monograph on the dispersal of Jews from Egypt also traces the social history of those who settled in Israel and the United States during the first years after migration, and Racheline Barda did the same for Egyptian Jews in Australia.[2] Much more relevant to the present study are Dario Miccoli's and Michèle Baussant's works. Miccoli's recent monograph *A Sephardi Sea* compares three diasporic Jewish communities, from Egypt, Algeria, and Libya, who settled in Israel, France, and Italy. It focuses on these communities' nostalgia literature, associational life, and internet activity, and expertly examines them together as *lieux de mémoire*, using Pierre Nora's famous concept.[3] Baussant's articles tackle such issues as the links between autobiographical and historical memory, refracted through the experience of migration and displacement, or heritage making among Egyptian Jews in the diaspora, from an ethnographic and anthropological point of view.[4] Both Miccoli and Baussant focus primarily on Jews who came from

[2] Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Racheline Barda, *Egyptian-Jewish Emigres in Australia* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011).

[3] Dario Miccoli, *A Sephardi Sea: Jewish Memories Across the Modern Mediterranean*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022).

[4] Michèle Baussant, "'Seeing the voices': Egyptian Jews from one shore to another," *Conserveries mémorielles* 25 (2022); Baussant, "'Who Gave You the Right to Abandon Your Prophets?' Jewish Sites of Ruins and Memory in Egypt," *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC*, no. 16 (2019), doi: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/1298; Baussant, "Heritage and Memory: The Example of an Egyptian Jewish Association," *International Social Science Journal*

bourgeois families in Egypt and the kinds of memories that they have produced, as well as the role that those memories have played in building a diasporic community and identity, either in France or in Israel. Although very much aware of their bourgeois background in Egypt, Miccoli and Baussant have not focused on social class as a force, as a category of identity, that shaped their commemorative narratives after migration, and they have not considered alternative narratives produced by Egyptian Jews from lower-class background who did not participate in the major commemorative activities organized by bourgeois-background Egyptian Jews in the diaspora. By focusing on lower-class Egyptian Jews, their memories, the mental maps of the places that they left, and the emotions that they expressed, this article both builds on, and fills in, the gaps in Miccoli's and Baussant's groundbreaking works.

A brief note on terminology, theory, and methodology is warranted here. First, in the long and rich scholarly debates on the definition of social classes, I adhere to the view that social class is defined by *both* economic criteria, *and* cultural practices, or habitus, as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed it. I also acknowledge that the category "middle-class" had, in historical reality, many gradations within it, and therefore I use the term "bourgeoisie" to refer to the "upper-middle-class," and especially to the urban culture, or habitus, that it dictated, and that many of the lower classes aspired to, or tried to emulate. In particular, I make the distinction between the bourgeoisie, or upper-middle-class, and the lower-middle-class, since most members of the Facebook group which is the focus of this study, belonged to that lower-middle-class, or even to the lower, or working, class.[5]

62, no. 203-204 (2011): 45-56; Baussant, "Aṣlak Eh? De Juif En Égypte à Juif d'Égypte," *Diasporas* 27 (2016): 77-93; Baussant, "Un territoire disparu: quels acteurs en gardent la mémoire ? L'exemple des Juifs d'Egypte" in *Ethnographie de la mémoire, de Villeurbanne à Valparaiso: Territoires, terrains et échelles d'observation,* eds. Michèle Baussant, Marina Chauliac, Sarah Gensburger, and Nancy Venel (Nanterre: Presses de l'Université de Paris Ouest, 2018), 153-170.

[5] For a pioneering study of the Egyptian middle-class: Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). I differ, though, from Ryzova, who defines the middle-class solely in cultural terms, in that I highlight the intersection between cultural and economic factors. Alon Tam, "Between 'Ḥarat al-Yahud' and 'Paris on the Nile': Social Mobility and Urban Culture among Jews in Twentieth-Century Cairo," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 28, no. 2 (2023): 203-237.

Second, in the long and rich scholarship about collective memory, this article follows the idea of competing memories promoted by historians such as John Bodnar, while highlighting the intersections between such competitions and social class, as defined above. In so doing, I offer here a distinction between *official memory*, *hegemonic memory*, and *alternative memory*. All these concepts build, of course, on the understanding reached by sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs, and others, that individuals remember, organize, and interpret memories only in a particular social context, and that such memories transform a social group into a *memory community*.[6] Later historians have acknowledged the existence of several collective memories in a single memory community, and asserted that different groups within a single community develop different and sometimes competing collective memories that perceive that community's past, traditions, heritage and heroes in different ways. These dynamics, in turn, result in a struggle to achieve hegemony for one of the collective memories, or narratives, while marginalizing or even "forgetting" others. There is a direct correlation between the success of one group to propagate its collective memory, and its central position in the cultural and/or political power structure. But whereas Bodnar associated official memory with the commemorative acts of the state, and vernacular memory, to use his term, with the commemorative acts of non-governmental organizations, I extend this idea almost entirely to the non-governmental level.[7] I consider the commemorative narratives produced by bourgeois-background Egyptian Jews through their associations, events, publications, and websites, to be the *hegemonic collective memory* of Egyptian Jews, and the memories told by members of "From Egypt and Back," who come from a lower-class background, to be an *alternative collective memory*. I contrast and compare them, and also discuss their interactions with the official memory promoted by the State of Israel. Thus, I complicate Bodnar's bifurcated theoretical model that focused only on state and non-state actors, by exposing the existence of a marginalized memory community within a larger one, that in itself is not a state actor, but is in constant process of negotiation with the state, sometimes echoing the official memory it

[6] Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

[7] John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

promotes, and sometimes countering it. The same process of negotiation repeats itself within the Egyptian Jewish memory community, where the bourgeois one becomes the hegemonic memory, and the lower-class one becomes the alternative memory. Since Halbwachs taught us that the collective memories of the past are always about the concerns of the present rather than the accuracy of historical realities, I will also contextualize the memory that "From Egypt and Back" produces within the socio-economic realities of its members, both in the past and in their present. By contrast, a full description of the official (state's) collective memory, and of the hegemonic (bourgeois) one among Egyptian Jews, is beyond the scope of this article, especially as they have been studied by Miccoli, Baussant, and others.

Third, as a salient feature of "From Egypt and Back," I also explore the relationship between, or intersection of, the emotion of nostalgia, and collective memory work. How has this Facebook group generated nostalgia? What was its role in creating this Facebook group, and what role does it have in the social bonds formed between members of the group? What role does nostalgia have in shaping the collective memory created by them? As historian Agnes Arnold-Forster recently showed, nostalgia has a long medical history: it once was considered by European medical establishments as a life-threatening mental illness, affecting, for example, homesick soldiers.[8] But even today, when nostalgia is no longer commonly associated with mental illness, and is even co-opted to sell goods and policies, it still often harbors a negative connotation of longing to a past that is no longer there, and perhaps never was, a notion of being stuck in the past, unable to move on. This article, however, shows how the particular collective memory created by "From Egypt And Back" has produced nostalgia as an affirming emotion, one that brings solace and even joy to its members, an emotion that builds community, and connects people to places and culture.

Finaly, this article is informed by methods used in the burgeoning field of digital ethnography, although it is not one as such. Methodologically, it is based more on a textual analysis that aims to examine the narrative created in the collective memory of "From Egypt and Back." To do so, I analyze the posts and comments by members of this group, in their aggregate. I have been following this group

[8] Agnes Arnold-Forster, *Nostalgia: A History of a Dangerous Emotion* (London: Picador, 2024).

closely since 2018, and for this article, I also performed research on its content since its creation in 2015. It is set as a "visible" but "private" group on Facebook, which means that anyone can find it, but can only see posts and participate if their membership application is approved by its administrators. I, therefore, do not cite the names of members who post in this group, in order to protect their expectation of privacy, and I describe the kinds of different content posted in the group only on the aggregate. In special cases, I describe, without quoting, specific posts by date, as representative examples of the content in the group. In addition, I interviewed Doron Sakal, the creator of the group, and Levana Levi, its administrator, in August of 2024, in order to gain insight into the operation and profile of the group. It should also be noted that the very nature of the platform makes its content ephemeral: posts and comments can be deleted, either by their authors, the group administrators, or Facebook itself, which can also make it difficult to retrieve posts. Such a close reading of this content is aimed at contributing to the growing scholarly interest in social media as a major actor in collective memory and heritage making, and in community and diaspora building.[9]

In what follows, I will first offer a brief account of the social and urban history of Jews in Egypt, particularly in Cairo, of their dispersal, and the making of what I call their hegemonic collective memory, in order to give context to the following content analysis of "From Egypt and Back."

[9] On digital ethnography, see: Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (London: Sage, 2010); Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2000); Arturo Escobar, "Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture [and Comments and Reply]," *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 3 (1994): 211-231. On digital diasporas: Anna Everett, *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009); Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). On collective memory and social media: Jowan Mahmod, "New Online Communities and New Identity Making: The Curious Case of the Kurdish Diaspora," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019), 34-43; Bruno Góis, "Connected Colonial Nostalgia: Content and Interactions of the Retornados e Refugiados de Angola Facebook Group" in *The Retornados from the Portuguese Colonies in Africa: History, Memory, and Narrative,* ed. Elsa Peralta (London-New York: Routledge, 2021), 284-304; Tamar Ashuri, "(Web)sites of Memory and the Rise of Moral Mnemonic Agents," *New Media and Society* 14, no. 3 (2011): 441-456.

City, Social Class, Dispersion, and Collective Memory among Egyptian Jews

Although boasting millennia-worth of history, the Jewish community in Egypt as we know it in the middle of the twentieth century was only about a century old. According to conservative estimates, some 5,000 Jews lived in Egypt in 1840. A century later, by 1947, that number had skyrocketed to 65,639.[10] This 13-fold increase was the product of a large-scale Jewish migration from across the Middle East, North Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe. The motives were mostly economic: Egypt's economy grew exponentially (albeit not in a linear way) since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the success of its cotton industry, and foreign investment fueled by the arrival of British colonialism in the 1880s. Jews also belonged to a major population shift that accompanied Egypt's urbanization. Economic growth and state consolidation prompted large-scale migration from the countryside to Egypt's two main cities, Cairo and Alexandria. As a result, Jewish communities in smaller towns and villages across the Nile delta were all but gone by the interwar period, when about 90 percent of Jewish Egyptians lived in either Cairo or Alexandria.[11]

Most Jewish immigrants to Egypt, as well as Jewish internal migrants, succeeded in integrating into the country's emerging middle class. Historians estimated that as much as 60 percent of the Jewish community in the interwar period was middle class, while some 10 percent were elites, or very rich, and the rest were lower class or poor (lumpenproletariat). Middle-class Jews were mostly merchants or commercial agents, retailers, bureaucrats, administrators, salespeople, craftsmen, and professionals. To reach the middle class, many Egyptian Jews took advantage of the favorable investment and business climate facilitated by British colonialism, though only a few profited directly from it. Egyptian Jews deemed modern education, especially in French, to be paramount for upward mobility. Jewish

[10] Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914–1952* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), 10, table 1. The number for 1840 is an estimate, while the one for 1947 is from the Egyptian census. Most experts agree that this is an undercount, and that Jewish Egyptians in the middle of the twentieth century numbered around 80,000; members of the community put that number at 100,000. Be that as it may, it is clear that their numbers grew exponentially during that century, due mostly to mass immigration rather than natural growth.

[11] Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt*, 8-68.

families and the organized community invested great resources in education, the ticket to securing coveted administrative jobs (*employé*). This was all the more important since even one middle-income salary could provide a middle-class lifestyle for an entire family. But as crucial as education, bureaucratic employment, and business were, Egyptian Jews also relied on other social and cultural strategies to gain entry into the Egyptian middle class.[12]

One of those major strategies was internal urban migration from old neighborhoods to the new and modern ones that had been rapidly constructed around them since the middle of the nineteenth century in all major cities around the Middle East. In Cairo, Khedive Ismail (r. 1863-1879) is usually credited with initiating a building spree following the economic boom of the 1860s, and with building a "new city" outside the "old" one that would be nothing less than "Paris on the Nile." Thus, the new neighborhoods he commissioned west of old Cairo were fitted with wide, straight boulevards, squares, French and Italian architecture, a park, a modern opera house, theaters, even a circus. Another wave of urban expansion, even greater in scale, took place between the 1890s and 1920s. The new neighborhoods created new social realities. One was class division: whereas rich and poor lived together in old Cairo, the city's westward expansion created a playground for the aristocracy and the rich. But Egypt's economic boom also allowed the emerging middle-class to move into these neighborhoods, while the upper class relocated farther west toward the Nile, eventually skipping over to its western bank, now known as Giza. By the 1920s, class division was inscribed onto Cairo's new map: the old city was inhabited by the lower classes and the poor, many of whom were recent migrants from around the country, while new neighborhoods were populated by the middle class. The upper class built their villas on the banks of the Nile or in other suburban areas.[13]

Data from the Egyptian national censuses of 1907, 1937, and 1947 reflect geographic trends in the distribution of Jews in Cairo in the first four decades of the twentieth century. First, they show that the total number of Jews living in

[12] Ibid., 36-58; Dario Miccoli, *Histories of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s-1950s* (London-New York: Routledge, 2015).

[13] Jean-Luc Arnaud, *Le Caire, mise en place d'une ville moderne, 1867–1907: des intérêts du prince aux sociétés privées* (Arles: Sindbad-Actes Sud, 1998); Mercedes Volait, "Making Cairo Modern (1870–1950): Multiple Models for a 'European-Style' Urbanism," in *Urbanism: Imported or Exported?*, ed. Joe Nasr and Mercedes Volait (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2003).

Cairo more than doubled between 1907 and 1947, from 20,281 to 41,860, respectively (the latter being around 63 percent of Jews living in Egypt at the time, according to conservative estimates). Second, the data show where Jews in Cairo were concentrated: while the Jewish population in Cairo's old neighborhoods shrank, it increased in intermediate neighborhoods and grew exponentially in new ones. These numbers include both Jews who moved out of old Cairo and Jewish immigrants who settled in the city's new districts from the start. In old Cairo, Jews had been concentrated in Ḥārat al-Yahūd (the Jewish Quarter, in Arabic), the only Jewish neighborhood popularly identified as such. Until the late nineteenth century, most Jews, rich and poor, lived there, where most synagogues were located. Like other main urban areas of old Cairo, Ḥārat al-Yahūd was not separated from Muslim and Christian quarters and, consequently, was never exclusively Jewish.[14]

As for the new neighborhoods, census data show that by 1947, around half of all Jews living in Cairo were concentrated in the districts of al-Wayli and ʻAbdīn. Al-Wayli bordered old Cairo to its west and included the well-known neighborhoods of Daher and Abbasiyah, home to most Jews in the district. Most new synagogues, built in the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, were located there, as were new Jewish schools, yeshivot, community offices, and the Beit Din. The new district of ʻAbdīn was located farther southwest of old Cairo, toward the Nile, and not only did it include its namesake, the new Khedival palace of ʻAbdīn, but also parts of the swanky ʼIsmaʻiliyyah neighborhood, later known as Downtown Cairo, or Wusṭ al-Balad in Arabic. Dominant narratives in the collective memory of Egyptian Jews usually invoke Downtown Cairo or the richer suburbs of Heliopolis to the northeast of the old city, and Maʻādī to the southwest. But census data clearly show that the Jewish population in new neighborhoods was split almost evenly between ʻAbdīn and al-Wayli, meaning that there were at least as many Jews living in lower middle-class Daher and ʻAbbasiyah, closer to Ḥārat al-Yahūd, as there were Jews living in the upper middle-class Bab al-Luq in Downtown Cairo, for example.[15]

[14] Tam, "Between 'Ḥarat al-Yahud' and 'Paris on the Nile'."

[15] Ibid.

The sharp dichotomy between Ḥārat al-Yahūd, Daher and Abbasiyah, and the even more affluent neighborhoods and suburbs, was central to the ways that Cairo's Jewish middle class imagined its own middle-classness. In the Jewish Egyptian press of the 1930s and 1940s, both in French and in Arabic, middle-class writers described Ḥārat al-Yahūd in classist and bleak terms, in order to move middle-class readers to action on behalf of the Ḥārah and its poor inhabitants. These newspapers described it as poor, backward, dilapidated, diseased, smelly, and religiously traditional. Such descriptions were later repeated in personal memories of Jews from the bourgeois neighborhoods even after they migrated to Israel and elsewhere.[16]

Jews were forced to leave Egypt, in one way or another, in waves that followed three major wars between Egypt and Israel, in 1948, 1956, and 1967, the most significant of which occurred in 1957. About half of them eventually settled in Israel, while the other half dispersed all over the globe, with France, the United States, and Brazil being the most significant destinations.[17] One could assume that the memory of this dispersal—indeed dubbed by some as the "Second Exodus"—would mar the memory of Jewish life in Egypt before it, as happened with other displaced communities, including Jewish ones. But with very few exceptions, this has not been the case. Invariably, Egyptian Jews in Israel, the United States, and France, have been remembering Jewish life in Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century as a "Golden Age," or "La Belle Époque." This narrative motif has served to emphasize how abrupt, and shocking, was "the expulsion," as they have termed it, rather than a natural climax of a history of oppression and escalating tensions between Jews and Muslims.

In that framework of collective memory, expressed through memoirs, fiction, magazines, exhibitions, and conferences, Egyptian Jews have emphasized their various contributions to the Egyptian economy, culture, and social life. But most of all, they have produced memories of a very bourgeois life, a dolce vita. They

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[16] Ibid., 216-220. For the persistence of such descriptions of Cairo in the memory of Egyptian Jews in Israel: Liat Maggid-Alon, "The Jewish Bourgeoisie in Egypt in the First Half of the Twentieth Century: A Gender and Family Perspective" (PhD diss., Ben Gurion University, 2018) [in Hebrew].

[17] Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*; Michael M. Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt, 1920-1970: In the Midst of Zionism, Anti-Semitism, and the Middle East Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

have remembered the modern new neighborhoods that were built in Cairo and Alexandria in European style; shopping at the high-end Cicurel or Chemla department stores; frequenting famous coffeehouses like Groppi and La Parisiana; or going to French schools like the Lycée Français. They have reminisced about social or sports clubs, from very elite ones, such as the Maʿādi Sports Club, to middle-class Jewish ones, such as the Maccabi clubs (sports were a very middle-class, and new, leisure activity). They have remembered going to the cinema, and watching French, American, and Egyptian films in Arabic; and they recalled summer vacations on the Mediterranean, especially at the high-end Ras al-Barr resort.[18]

All of these places are located in the new neighborhoods of Cairo (and Alexandria); Ḥārat al-Yahūd has not been featured among them in the hegemonic collective memory of Egyptian Jews after their dispersal. This is not a coincidence, of course: it is evident that those who have been doing the remembering came from the same social group—namely, the Jewish bourgeoisie—that while still in Egypt had depicted the Ḥārah as a "dump" in a discursive way that established their own, newly achieved, social status. Only when asked about it, bourgeois Jews in Israel would again emphasize how removed they were from the Ḥārah: they asserted that they usually had not set foot in it—except maybe to buy matzos for Passover—or that they had nothing in common, socially or culturally, with the "people from the Ḥārah," and would not mix with them.[19]

As collective memory always serves the interests of the present rather than truly depicting the past, there was another reason for emphasizing the bourgeois life back in Egypt, even after they left it. Starting life all over again, essentially as refugees, meant a sharp downward mobility for most middle-class Jews from Egypt, wherever they ended up at, especially in Israel. Therefore, emphasizing middle-class social and cultural capital, in the absence of real economic one, was a way to assert self-worth in face of adversity, to build collective identity, and to

[18] Miccoli, *A Sephardi Sea,* 64-120.

[19] Maggid-Alon, "The Jewish Bourgeoisie in Egypt in the First Half of the Twentieth Century."

mark future life goals, especially for the younger generations. It was one strategy among several to regain that middle-class social status.[20]

The advent of social media platforms helped to democratize the public discourse around Egyptian Jewish collective memory, and enabled the denizens of Ḥārat al-Yahūd to finally have a voice. With very few exceptions, they have not usually participated in the traditional ways of manufacturing collective memory, such as writing books, making films, creating exhibitions, or even participating in activities of communal associations, such as the Association of Egyptian Jews in Israel, and similar organizations in France and the United States. Therefore, social media platforms such as Facebook provided them with an outlet for their memories, which have hitherto been confined to oral storytelling among family and friends.

The plethora of Facebook groups are a relatively new actor on the collective memory scene: at least a dozen groups of Jewish Egyptians have been active since the 2000s. Some of them are associated with existing groups and associations outside of social media, and members of other groups clearly come from the Jewish Egyptian bourgeoisie. They have reproduced the same hegemonic bourgeois narrative of La Belle Époque through posting vintage photographs and short videos of streets and buildings in the (now old) "new" neighborhoods of Cairo: stating that they remember those places associates them with European-style bourgeoisie. Such images also underscore the fact that the world depicted in them is "frozen in time," belongs to a bygone era: by the twenty-first century, those streets and neighborhoods, such as Downtown Cairo, have fallen themselves into disrepair, and are now considered old and outdated, remnants of a European colonial past. Those bourgeois Jews, now living in France or Israel, are content to identify with those places, in order to distance themselves from Arab culture and identity.[21]

"From Egypt and Back": Memories from Below

[20] Liat Alon, "Class Performativity, Modernity and the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi Divide the Jewish Urban Middle Classes of Egypt in Israel 1948-1967," *Journal of Israeli History* 40, no. 1 (2022): 43-60.

[21] Miccoli, *A Sephardi Sea*.

Doron Sakal, an educator and independent researcher of Egyptian history, created "From Egypt and Back" in 2015. Born in Egypt in 1954, he left it for Israel, with his family, in 1965, because his Egyptian-born mother (whose family migrated to Egypt from Jaffa) also held a Tunisian passport, and was ordered to leave Egypt, along with all Tunisian citizens, when the two countries broke relations. His Egyptian father, whose ancestors migrated from Syria, had a button workshop and a button store in the Mūskī, an intermediate area between the old and new neighborhoods of Cairo, and he was also the gabbai in the Pahad Yitzhaq (Kraim) synagogue, located in the Sakākīnī area of Daher, where the family also lived. Socio-economically then, the Sakal family was a lower-middle-class family at best. Although Doron studied at French schools (which included Arabic classes), by the 1950s he grew up in an Arabic-speaking home and environment. Overall, Sakal has unusually vivid memories, for his young age at migration, and very fond ones, of his home and school, the synagogues in Daher and Abbasiyyah, the shops in the Ḥārah, and the streets of those neighborhoods. He remembers growing up with other Jewish friends and families, saying he was not aware at the time that most of the Jewish community in Egypt had already left.[22]

Levana Levi, the administrator of "From Egypt and Back," was born in Cairo's Ḥārat al-Yahūd in 1960, and lived there until she left Egypt with her family in 1970. Her father and uncle had a variety shop in the Ḥārah, and their ancestors migrated to Cairo from the town of Banhā in the Nile Delta, where they had lived for generations. Although Banhā is a city, it is nestled in the rich Delta farmland and has historically been known for crafts and the cultivation of attar, and Levi described her father as a "fallāḥ," (peasant in Arabic). Her mother, on the other hand, was born and raised in Daher to a family of migrants from Lebanon with an Italian/Greek and Sephardi backgrounds: she was educated in French schools, and spoke Ladino with one of her older relatives. Levi says that her mother suffered from the social downgrade she had to endure when moving from Daher to the Ḥārah upon her marriage. She endeavored to teach her children French, and she took them to visits and excursions through Daher, the swanky neighborhoods of Cairo, and the Mediterranean. Overall, however, Levi's socioeconomic

[22] Interview with Doron Sakal, by the author, August 28, 2024.

background can be determined as lower-class. Her father was imprisoned for almost three years when the 1967 war with Israel broke out, like all Jewish men in Egypt, and it hit her mother and siblings hard economically: they had to get by on the gains from selling her father's shop. The family left for Israel soon after his release. Levi does not remember many other Jews in the Ḥārah, or a bustling Jewish life, when she grew up there, not even within her own family. She does remember her family being harassed by non-Jewish neighbors when the 1967 war started. But her most vivid and fond memories are the sights, smells, and sounds of the Ḥārah streets, and the fun she had with her mother on the excursions out of the Ḥārah.[23]

Sakal created "From Egypt and Back" as a way of serving his parents' memory, of satisfying his growing interest in the Jewish history and culture of Egypt, and of preserving Jewish Egyptian heritage for future generations. For Levi, who is also an administrator in other Facebook groups of Egyptian Jews, "From Egypt and Back"—which is her favorite group—is a way to rekindle and relive her childhood memories, to reconnect with Egypt, and to find community.[24] Sakal shared his thoughts about the purpose of the group in a post from 26 September 2021, and the group members who commented on it agreed with him enthusiastically, while expressing Levi's feelings as well. They emphasized that even though they left Egypt, Egypt has not left them. They expressed great nostalgia for their childhood's Egypt, as well as pride in their Jewish Egyptian heritage, identity, and customs. They also emphasized the importance of recording their memories as a way to transfer that heritage to their children.[25]

Sakal and Levi have a strict "no politics of any kind" policy, not Israeli, not Egyptian, nor any other politics. They do not allow any offensive discourse that involves racism, misogyny, any other kind of hatred, or personal attacks, and they also do not allow any posts or comments that are not relevant to the topic of Jews in Egypt. These policies are aimed at keeping "From Egypt and Back" as a non-toxic space, and a welcoming, enjoyable, one. Sakal and Levi do not pre-approve posts in the group, but they do monitor every one of them and remove any post

[23] Interview with Levana Levi, by the author, August 27, 2024.

[24] Interview with Sakal; Interview with Levi.

[25] "From Egypt and Back," September 26, 2021.

that they deem to be against their policies; occasionally they also removed members from the group, whom they felt crossed the line repeatedly.[26]

Sakal made explicit efforts in the past to enlarge the membership of the group: in a post from 23 November 2020, when the group already had around 7,000 members, Sakal called on them to invite more: members responded that they already invited their families and friends—including friends who regularly meet in a little Israeli coffeeshop (Kiosk)—and that they also publicized the group on their own personal Facebook pages. They emphasized how much they enjoyed the group, though some cautioned against preferring quantity over quality of members. Others wished for in-person meetings, and someone mentioned a large and successful meeting that took place in Bat Yam around 2015, an Israeli city south of Tel Aviv where many Egyptian Jews had settled. In March 2021, one member even suggested an organized trip to Egypt. Although when interviewed, Sakal and Levi said that regular, large, organized, in-person meetings have not yet materialized, they did say that they personally knew some of the members, and that small personal meetings must occasionally occur.[27]

The posts mentioned above certainly indicate a continuum from the virtual to the real world, and an eagerness to make real-world connections and experiences. "From Egypt and Back" has certainly provided a platform to make such connections: a post from 26 October 2020 about someone who was trying to assemble their family tree garnered some 230 comments, in which group members found family ties to one another, or other connections based on a shared origin, such as family hailing from Banhā. In another post from 14 February 2016, one member told how he found family ties based on Sakal's father's connection to the Kraim synagogue in Daher. His story prompted enthusiastic comments about finding personal connections and roots through a Facebook group: one member even wondered, poignantly (and rhetorically), where was this Facebook group when she needed it most after migrating from Egypt to Israel. She continued by posting a poem she wrote in Hebrew about her feelings of uprootedness upon migration, about her feeling of belonging to Egypt but not being wanted there, and about feeling estranged in Israel.[28]

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[26] Interview with Sakal; Interview with Levi.

[27] "From Egypt and Back," November 23, 2020; Interview with Sakal; Interview with Levi.

[28] "From Egypt and Back," October 26, 2020; "From Egypt and Back," February 14, 2016.

It is evident that most active members in "From Egypt and Back" share Sakal's and Levi's background. A post from 14 December 2020 asked explicitly about the geographic origins of group members, assuming that most were from Cairo or Alexandria: 144 comments confirmed that assumption, specifying that most came from the Cairene neighborhoods of Ḥārat al-Yahūd, Daher, or Abbasiyyah; other members stated they came from the smaller cities of Banhā, Ismailiyah, Port Said, or Ṭanṭā. These and other comments also indicated that group members were barely teenagers when they left Egypt with their families, but that they did so after the principal wave of migration in 1957, like Sakal and Levi. It is also evident that most members migrated and settled in Israel, not only from the stories that they share, but also from the sheer fact that the "working language" of "From Egypt and Back" is Hebrew. I will elaborate below on how this shared geographical, chronological, and linguistic background differs from the one shared by the hegemonic voices in Egyptian Jewish collective memory, and how it produces alternative narratives.[29]

These differences, which are ultimately class-based, are also manifested in the real-life attitude of group members toward the Association of Egyptian Jews in Israel, the principal vehicle for Egyptian Jewish hegemonic collective memory in Israel. Posts about the annual meeting ("congress") of the Association, that Miccoli had investigated, have usually elicited congratulations and interest from group members, but also surprise at not hearing about it in advance ("was it a secret meeting?!," exclaimed one commenter).[30] This reveals the limits of the Association's outreach, which are partly caused by practical issues, such as the management of its outreach, which is based on a voluntary mailing list, or the practical difficulties of older and less mobile Egyptian Jews who do not live in central Israel to commute to those meetings. But there are other obstacles as well: Sakal mentioned rivalries between the Tel-Aviv-based Association and other, non-formal, groups of Egyptian Jews in other cities in Israel; he also expressed some disappointment—not entirely merited—from the limited scale of the Association's activity in promoting Egyptian Jewish heritage compared to similar associations of other Jewish communities from the Middle East and North Africa.

[29] "From Egypt and Back," December 14, 2020.

[30] "From Egypt and Back," June 22, 2023.

Moreover, Levi also indicated a certain feeling of social uneasiness in meetings of the Association, a feeling that people like her do not belong there.[31]

The social and cultural background of the administrators and members of "From Egypt and Back" shapes its content as well. Its most conspicuous feature is its immersion in, and great affection for, spoken Egyptian-Arabic language and culture, even though the "working language" of the group is Hebrew. Both its administrators and members frequently post questions about the meaning of specific phrases and proverbs in spoken Egyptian Arabic of the mid-twentieth century, badly transliterated in Hebrew characters.[32] Conversely, they also ask how would one say something in Arabic.[33] Moreover, respondents often insert many Arabic phrases in their Hebrew-language comments. Posts in written Arabic exist but are rare, and use of Modern Standard Arabic (fuṣḥa) is even rarer. These posts about, or with, Egyptian spoken Arabic are highly popular, and garner enthusiastic and loving responses, judged by the tenor of the comments and emojis.

This interest, and use, of spoken Egyptian Arabic are a very powerful contrast to the hegemonic collective memory of Egyptian Jews. The latter highlights French language and culture, both in the language used in most Facebook groups of Egyptian Jews, as well as in their stories and memories told in gatherings, and even in families. This linguistic divide is, of course, class-based: these were bourgeois Jews, or Jews aspiring to be bourgeois, who studied in French-speaking schools back in Egypt, who spoke French with friends and family, and took part in the Frenchified urban culture of Cairo or Alexandria. By contrast, Jews who have remained immersed in Arabic language and (urban) culture came from lower-middle-class socioeconomic background at best, and/or left Egypt in the 1960s, when Arabization and Egyptianization (in terms of driving all those deemed as "foreigners" out of the country) were already in full swing. To be sure, bourgeois Egyptian Jews have also been attentive to a few aspects of Egyptian-Arabic culture, mainly to film and music, and they do post samples of it in their Facebook groups. But this affinity only emphasizes the fact that privileging French—to the point of often falsely denying knowing Arabic—has been a performative act designed to be

[31] Interview with Sakal; Interview with Levi.

[32] Post on "From Egypt and Back," September 21, 2024.

[33] Post on "From Egypt and Back," February 20, 2024.

considered bourgeois, both back in Egypt, and more importantly, after their migration to Israel, where Egyptian Jews faced an anti-Arabic cultural and social environment.[34] By contrast, the Egyptian-Arabic culture of "From Egypt and Back" raises the alternative voice of those Egyptian Jews who were not thoroughly Frenchified and bourgeois, and is also a part of the alternative mental map of "the other Jewish Cairo or Alexandria." Nowadays, already settled in Israel for decades, and not having to worry anymore about an anti-Arabic cultural bias, members of "From Egypt and Back" are comfortable voicing their visceral love for Egyptian-Arabic culture. It also enables them to reconnect with contemporary Egypt more easily, as we shall see below.

Another salient feature of "From Egypt and Back" is the specific neighborhoods that have been conjured in its posts. These are dominated by Ḥārat al-Yahūd, Daher, and Abbasiyyah in Cairo. In a typical post from 5 December 2016, group founder Sakal coaxed its members to recall businesses in the Ḥārah: in 86 responses, they enthusiastically and affectionately remembered small shops and artisans, such as the ironer, the baker, a Fūl (fava beans) and Taʿmiyyah (Egyptian falafel) itinerant seller, or a variety store, while naming specific streets, stores, and people.[35] Similar posts had group members recalling a specific fruit tree where they used to play as children, or the Odesh (an Egyptian-Arabic pronunciation of the Hebrew word Qodesh, meaning a sacred endowment), which was the special Social Center that the Cairo Community Council opened in the Ḥārah in 1945.[36] Other posts had group members reminisce about schools, and of course, about the synagogues, which their families frequented regularly, usually coming from

[34] On the bourgeois, Frenchified, hegemonic collective memory of Egyptian Jews in Israel, promoted through the Association and other platforms: Miccoli, *A Sephardi Sea*; Maggid-Alon, "The Jewish Bourgeoisie in Egypt in the First Half of the Twentieth Century"; Alon, "Class Performativity." For a study of a Jewish Egyptian association in France (Association Pour la Sauvegarde du Patrimoine Culturel Juif Égyptien): Baussant, "Heritage and Memory." For a description of the use of French among bourgeois Egyptian Jews vs. Arabic among lower-class Egyptian Jews: Deborah A. Starr, "Sensing the City: Representations of Cairo's Harat al-Yahud," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 26, no. 1-2 (2006): 138-162.

[35] "From Egypt and Back," December 5, 2016.

[36] "From Egypt and Back," September 28, 2015. On this particular Social Center and its role in the social history of Cairo's Jews: Alon Tam, "Sephardi Jewish Philanthropy in Cairo during the First Half of the 20th Century," *Diasporas: Circulations, Migrations, Histoire* 42 (2023), https://journals.openedition.org/diasporas/14396.

nearby Daher or Abbasiyah. These two neighborhoods frequently come up on their own right in the various posts of group members, often accompanied by old, or recent, photographs.[37] All these posts, it should be noted, are about outdoor places, or exterior of buildings: descriptions of interiors, and one's emotional attachment to them, are rare in Egyptian Jewish memory work, both in this Facebook group, and in general. One unusual post, however, from 6 January 2018, shared a well-written text, previously published in print, reminiscing about the author's childhood home in the Mūskī, longingly describing every room in great detail, including smells and sounds.[38]

Group members also post and comment enthusiastically about their itineraries in the city, such as the way in which they used to walk to school, or the different tramway lines and routes that they used to take, with their itinerant sellers. For example, in a post from 27 April 2016, one group member asked—in the present tense—what people thought about taking a stroll through Cairo, as if they were back in school again, exams were over, and the Passover and Shām al-Nissīm holidays were about to start. He suggested walking through the Azbakiyyah Gardens, going for a picnic in al-Qanāṭir (a day trip north of Cairo where a few branches of the Nile meet), or taking the train to Cairo's Zoo. He also suggested going to the movies in Cinema Realto, Victoria, Rivoli or MGM; going to Giza and the pyramids; or just walking around the famous Qaṣr al-Nīl Bridge, on foot or in a horse drawn buggy. Enthusiastic responders added more recreational destinations in Cairo and its environs, such as al-Asmāk Gardens, or the suburb of Helwan, and reminisced about the food they had eaten on such excursions.[39]

The mental map created by such posts and memories stand in sharp contrast to the one crafted in other Facebook groups, websites, or *lieux de mémoire* of Egyptian Jews. The latter usually highlight the more affluent and swankier neighborhoods (for the mid-twentieth century) of Downtown Cairo, Maʿādī, or Heliopolis, as well as the high-end coffeeshops like Groppi, or department stores like Cicurel, the sporting clubs, and the Mediterranean resort of Raʾs al-Barr. They rarely mention the Ḥārah, Daher, or Abbasiyyah, and rarely from personal experience: for example, a post from 30 August 2024 about the Ḥārah in the

[37] "From Egypt and Back," May 9, 2021.

[38] "From Egypt and Back," January 6, 2018.

[39] "From Egypt and Back," April 27, 2016.

Facebook group "Jews of Egypt" gave a well-written informational text about it, but it was clearly based on some encyclopedic source.[40] In sum, the focus of "From Egypt and Back" on the other, lower-class, neighborhoods and places in Cairo is an obvious outcome of the different socio-economic origin of the group's active members. Their memories create an alternative, fresh, spatial imagination of Jewish Cairo in the middle of the twentieth century, one that differs in its social class and urban culture. There does not seem to be, however, differences in the level of emotional attachment to places between the two groups, if such things are measurable at all.

Members of "From Egypt and Back" seem to seek a connection to contemporary Egypt. A post from 27 August 2024 shared a short video titled, in Arabic, "Tram Station al-Qāʿid Ibrahim, June 2024" from another Facebook group called, in Arabic, "Alexandria, My Beloved." It was shot on 17 June 2024, in an obviously spontaneous way by a private person, with no professional editing. The video was shot on a train leaving from al-Qāʿid Ibrahim tram station, showing a beautiful boulevard in the romantic twilight hours, with people laughing and smiling on the train.[41] This video, and others like it posted in this Facebook group about Cairo or Aswan, stand in contrast to the usual postings in other Facebook groups and other websites, in several ways. Usually, Egyptian Jews have posted still photographs of places in Cairo or Alexandria, which were mostly original black and white photographs from their own personal or family collections, dating mostly to the 1940s and 1950s. The places photographed were either interiors or exteriors of homes, schools, synagogues, clubs, or just iconic buildings in either city.[42] They also posted stock photographs of iconic buildings or street scenes from that time.[43] Such photographs are quintessential memorabilia that conjure an image of a grand past, frozen in time, a bygone era that will never return. By contrast, videos and photographs such as the train video, or, for another example, a Youtube video posted on 12 August 2024 of a guided tour through the contemporary Cairene neighborhood of Heliopolis (Maṣr al-Jadīdah) with its

[40] "Yehudey Mitzraim" [Jews of Egypt, in Hebrew], August 30, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1977349779216211.

[41] "From Egypt and Back," August 27, 2024. A video shared from the Facebook group "Iskandiriyyah Habibti" [Alexandria my Beloved], https://www.facebook.com/alexhabebti.

[42] See, for one example, a post on "Yehudey Mitzraim" from February 2, 2024.

[43] See, for one example, a post on "Yehudey Mitzraim" from February 4, 2024.

mosque, church and synagogue, are not only distinguished by their movement, and by their colored vivacity, but also by their contemporality.[44] The image they conjure is not of an "Egypte d'Antan," Egypt of Yesteryear (a name of a well-known website which had professionally curated such images), but of contemporary, living, Egypt.[45] The Facebook group members are expected to recognize the places depicted, the tram station and the boulevard in Alexandria, or the neighborhood streets and monumental buildings in Heliopolis, and reconnect to Egypt. This is not a nostalgic connection, but rather a rekindled, living, (re-) connection to Egypt.

Other examples of the group's interest in contemporary Egypt are posts of viral videos or memes, recently produced by (Muslim) Egyptians, in Arabic. To be sure, "From Egypt and Back" has its fair share of posts about film or music stars from the 1940s and 1950s, such as singer and actor Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ or comedienne Mary Mounib, complete with extracts from films or shows, in still or video form.[46] Such posts are very common in other Facebook groups of Egyptian Jews as well, which is a testament to a shared culture between all classes and groups of Egyptian Jews, and between them and non-Jewish Egyptians. However, in "From Egypt and Back," it is common to see posts with performances of lesser-known singers from mid-twentieth century like Fatma Eid, and more importantly, posts with recent viral videos or memes from Facebook, Instagram or even TikTok.[47] These might be about women taking Arabic singing classes, female beauty care, recipes, and most commonly—jokes, especially of the husband-wife variety.[48] They are all in contemporary Egyptian Arabic, even in slang, and they are obviously produced by young non-Jewish Egyptians for a non-Jewish Egyptian audience. Such posts indicate a continued interest and even immersion in contemporary Egyptian culture, which is not typical to other online groups and websites of Egyptian Jews; it is not typical of immigrants in general, whose cultural immersion tends to be frozen, or cut, at the point of migration.[49]

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[44] "From Egypt and Back," August 12, 2024.

[45] "L'Egypte d'Antan," accessed July 10, 2025, https://egyptedantan.net/egypt.html.

[46] For example: "From Egypt and Back," March 14, 2023.

[47] For example: "From Egypt and Back," August 22, 2024.

[48] For example: "From Egypt and Back," November 29, 2023; "From Egypt and Back," July 6, 2024.

[49] "Yehudey Mitzraim."

This interest in, or affinity to, contemporary Egyptian culture also put the migration stories of members of "From Egypt and Back" in another perspective. The narrative in the Egyptian Jewish hegemonic collective memory in Israel has emphasized the "Golden Age" of Jewish life in Egypt in order to stress the abruptness of the community's expulsion under Nasser, highlighting the mass arrests, property sequestrations, and deportations. They also belabor the successes and contributions of Egyptian Jews in Israel after settling in it, while sidelinin—though not erasing—the difficulties of migrating and integrating into Israeli society. This has been a strategy aimed at entering the Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli middle class, thus regaining the social status they had in Egypt.[50] By contrast, members of "From Egypt and Back" have posted and commented about their memories of daily harassment by their Muslim neighbors when tensions between Egypt and Israel flared, or wars, especially the 1967 one, broke out. They tell of shouting and cursing in the streets and schools, usually calling them "Ṣahyūnī" (Arabic for Zionist) as a curse word, which, as children, they were not even sure what it meant. They tell of fellow Egyptians shouting "Ṣahyūnī" in front of their parents' shops, or even throwing garbage or rocks at them, warning passers-by that the Jewish shopkeepers will send their money to Israel. Few also mention physical attacks on Jews in the streets, as well as the mass arrests in 1967, which were much bigger in scale, longer, and harsher than the arrests in 1957 or earlier.[51] While it is impossible to extrapolate from a number of posts in a Facebook group about the true scale and pattern of such events in historical reality, the members of "From Egypt and Back" still give a voice to the historical phenomenon of everyday, low-level, violence that is usually absent from the hegemonic collective memory of Egyptian Jews, and, indeed, from the historiography about them. It might be that everyday violence against Jews had increased around and after 1957—this needs further research—which might explain why Jews who left Egypt later remember it more prominently; but it also attests to the great proximity of Jews in the Ḥārah, Daher, or Abbasiyah to Muslims and Christians. Be that as it may, narrating this kind of violence in twenty-first-century Israel is also enabled by the official collective memory that the Israeli state has been pushing in the past couple of

[50] Miccoli, *A Sephardi Sea*; Maggid-Alon, "The Jewish Bourgeoisie in Egypt in the First Half of the Twentieth Century"; Alon, "Class Performativity."

[51] For example: "From Egypt and Back," February 25, 2024; "From Egypt and Back," May 24, 2016.

decades, the one that highlights Muslim violence and expulsion of all Jews from the Middle East and North Africa.[52] It by no means constitutes a reason to doubt the veracity of individual testimonies about everyday violence, but it does point to the complex relationship between official and hegemonic collective memories, and individual, or alternative, ones.

A few posts and comments in "From Egypt and Back" also describe the migration process out of Egypt. They do not discuss why their families had stayed in Egypt for longer than most of the community, perhaps because, as children, they were not privy to their parents' considerations in this regard. Nevertheless, they all consider it to be an involuntary uprooting from Egypt, like those who had to leave Egypt before them. Leaving after 1957 apparently meant that those Jews had some more time, usually weeks, to organize for departure, and could take with them some more personal effects than was previously allowed. One group member told the story of her departure at age seven in a post from 6 August 2016: she remembers her parents' preparations for leaving, usually consisting of arranging papers, selling property, packing, and saying goodbye to Jewish friends only. The routes of migration were the same as before: her family took a ship to Greece—in 1957, Jews leaving Egypt took ships to either Greece or France—and she remembers seeing the white and blue flag, not of Israel, but of Greece, when the ship approached the shore. She also remembers her elation when finally arriving in Haifa on another ship from Greece.[53]

Other posts and comments in "From Egypt and Back" also discuss the difficulties of settling in Israel after migration. Sakal himself sometimes prompts group members using his own experiences: in a post from 1 March 2016, he asked members about changing their names to Hebrew ones after migrating to Israel; in another post from 27 June 2016, he asked members how their parents adjusted to new everyday technologies after arriving in Israel—many responded that they were better off materially, or had more conveniences, in Egypt than in Israel. One group member in particular, with a literary talent and obvious writing experience, posts about the hard time she had in adjusting culturally and socially in Israel, and

[52] Menashe Anzi and Lior Sternfeld, "Leaving with No Return? Memory and Historiography in Israeli Society," *Dvarim* 14 (2021), 97-104 [in Hebrew].

[53] "From Egypt and Back," August 6, 2016.

talks about her identity crisis, and feelings of being uprooted from Egypt.[54] Migrating to Israel in the 1960s usually meant that these Egyptian Jews escaped the notorious experience of the immigrant transit camps (Maʿabarot, in Hebrew), but many were still settled in the low-income, socioeconomic and geographic periphery of Israel: Levi's family, for example, was settled in a lower-income neighborhood of Beer Sheva, then only a developing city. She remembers her neighbors in the building, Frenchified Moroccan Jews, looking down on her family, considering them "fallāḥīn" (peasants, in Arabic), thus replicating the same attitude that Ashkenazi Jews had toward Moroccan and other Middle Eastern Jews.[55] Beyond the anecdotal memories, however, in general discussions, members of "From Egypt and Back" usually express their gratitude and happiness about migrating to Israel, stating it was the best decision, even compared to other Egyptian Jews who migrated to other countries and made fortunes there, since those Jews just exchanged one Exile (Galut, in Hebrew) for another. While there is no way, or need, to cast doubt on the genuineness of such broad statements, they do echo standard Israeli and Zionist meta-narratives, which are also shared with all groups of Egyptian Jews in Israel. In contrast, the more personal, isolated and unscripted, anecdotal memories discussed above reveal more nuanced experiences of integrating into Israeli society.

What do the fond memories of growing up in Egypt, the proximity to lower-middle-class, or even low-class, Muslim Egyptians, the immersion in Egyptian Arabic culture, and the interest in contemporary Egypt, all mean for the possibility of going back to Egypt? After all, the very name of this Facebook group is From Egypt—and Back? Sakal says he has been asked many times about his unusual choice for a name—most similar Facebook groups have generic names, such as "Jews of Egypt"—and what he meant exactly by "... and Back." He says that by "Back," he meant a trip down memory lane, not a physical return, although he, and many Egyptian Jews, have returned to Egypt as tourists at least once.[56] In March of 2021, one group member even tried to organize a trip to Cairo. Many responded to that post with an enthusiastic interest, while many others had

[54] "From Egypt and Back," March 1, 2016; "From Egypt and Back," June 27, 2016; "From Egypt and Back," April 8, 2022; "From Egypt and Back," October 4, 2015.

[55] Interview with Levi.

[56] Interview with Sakal.

practical reservations: some still had concerns about the COVID situation in Egypt, others had safety concerns, and many pointed out that Egypt has stopped issuing tourist visas, in recent years, to most Israeli passport holders who were born in Egypt, with no official explanation. Only a few rejected the idea of going back to Egypt, stating that this chapter in their lives is closed, or that Egypt has radically changed for the worse, indicating that they were only interested in revisiting their childhood utopia.[57] Levi, however, has been living, breathing, and loving all things Egyptian, and actual trips to Egypt are a must for her: there are days, she says, that her spirit is in some place or another in Egypt. Her attachment to Egypt is a whole body and spirit experience: when she travelled back there, the first thing she did was to breath in Egypt's winter smell. For her, going back was not only about visiting her childhood places, but also all the touristic places she has never been to. To those who still harbor reservations, she says that she had simply forgiven the Egyptians for what they did to her father—not forgotten, but forgiven; she still loves Egypt, despite, or even with, all its flaws and changes for the worse. She admits, though, that her passion for Egypt is not mainstream: even her siblings do not share her attitude. For her, she says, even going back to live permanently in Egypt is not completely out of the question, given the right circumstances.[58] In any case, most, if not all, active group members were very happy with the virtual trip down memory lane that the group has been offering.

Conclusion

The Facebook group "From Egypt and Back" has created a different mental map of Jewish Egypt from the one usually evoked by the hegemonic voices in the collective memory of Egyptian Jews in Israel. The latter highlight the swanky modern neighborhoods of Cairo and Alexandria, their grand, European-style, coffeehouses and department stores, the colonial-style sports clubs, the Lycée Français, the new and big synagogues, or the Mediterranean resort of Ras al-Barr, a favorite summer vacation spot for bourgeois Egyptian Jews. By contrast,

[57] "From Egypt and Back," March 29, 2021.
[58] Interview with Levi.

members of "From Egypt and Back" have reminisced about the old streets of Ḥārat al-Yahūd and its environs, with their little shops, itinerant peddlers, and old synagogues, or about the newer streets of lower-middle-class Daher and Abbasiyah. They remember the Jewish community schools, the city's parks, and bridges over the Nile, where they used to picnic or stroll. They remember a lot of movement, walking around, or taking the tramway around the city. Their Cairo is immersed in Egyptian-Arabic language and culture, not a French, or even Franco-Arab, one. Some have even noted Egyptian cities and towns other than Cairo or Alexandria as where their families originated from.

The different mental maps are class-based. It was important for bourgeois—or bourgeois-aspiring—Jews in Cairo and Alexandria to immerse themselves in the modern, bourgeois, urban culture of the early to mid-twentieth century, often dubbed as cosmopolitanism, in order to claim their newly achieved social status. It was no less important for them to advertise, sometimes embellish, that past, once they had to migrate to Israel and endure a socioeconomic downgrade. This socio-cultural construct entailed a process of othering directed at "our poor Jewish brethren" in Ḥārat al-Yahūd, Daher, and Abbasiyah, who became targets of rescue missions, but also kept at a social distance. Some subaltern Jews protested this image of the Ḥārah once they settled in Israel, stating the obvious fact that by the 1940s it was already fitted with modern amenities as well, and was never a closed ghetto, but others, like Levi, agreed with that image and reiterated the social hierarchy even between the Ḥārah and Daher.[59] In any case, once in Israel, lower-class Egyptian Jews did not have a real chance to speak about their Cairo in the platforms managed by formerly-bourgeois Egyptian Jews. It was only the advent of online social media in the twenty-first century that opened a space for them to remember their own Egypt, thus democratizing Egyptian Jewish collective memory. To be sure, "From Egypt and Back" did not overhaul the narrative advanced by the Association, and did not turn the social power structure within the Jewish Egyptian community in Israel upside down, because the group members lack the financial means, the manpower, the organizational knowhow, and the connections to do what the Association does. But its creators do espouse

[59] Maggid-Alon, "The Jewish Bourgeoisie in Egypt in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," 52-53; Interview with Levi.

the same vision as the Association, namely to remind, collect, and preserve Jewish Egyptian heritage, and to pass it on to the next generation. This makes "From Egypt and Back" a space for an alternative collective memory, a platform where the proverbial subaltern can speak, and hence its invaluable importance.

In practice, "From Egypt and Back" also provides a great emotional outlet for its members. The nostalgia for their childhood's Egypt, as well as the discovery of contemporary Egyptian culture, give them a palpable joy, which they repeatedly and explicitly express in their posts and comments. This nostalgia is a way to reconnect with their parents who passed away, and to seek comfort and affirmation of their identity and cultural heritage. They also share traumatic memories of being harassed and driven out of Egypt, which are somewhat different in content from the ones retold in the hegemonic Egyptian Jewish collective memory. So far the volume of such traumatic memories does not outweigh the amount of fond childhood memories or interest in Egyptian Arabic culture. This indicates, then, that the Israeli state's drive to focus the collective memory of Middle Eastern Jews on the trauma of the expulsion from Arab Lands has not yet shifted the focus of the collective memory of the "From Egypt and Back" membership, as it did the Association's efforts, although most members would probably agree, if prompted, with the narrative promoted by the state.

The nostalgia stirred by "From Egypt and Back" has not yet led to any political action. It is impossible to discern any prevailing political opinions in the group, or make any connection between the kinds of memories and emotions expressed by group members and their political stances, precisely because the group administrators ban and expunge any political discussion. A random anti-Ashkenazi comment that escaped the vigilant editorial eye of the group administrators might be an indication where some members stand in the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi historical strife within Israel, but it is impossible to draw any general conclusions from it. The group and its members are even absent from the politics of the Egyptian Jewish diaspora: they have not been involved in the public attempts of Association leaders to pressure the Israeli government to secure compensation for their lost property in Egypt; and they have not taken any action or express any opinion regarding the efforts to preserve and renovate synagogues and cemeteries in Egypt, as leading Egyptian Jews in Israel, France, and the United States have. A couple of posts about these issues indicate the lack of interest, and

perhaps even lack of sufficient knowledge, about them among group members. Of course, the prohibition on political discussion is a political act in itself, which is aimed at providing a safe space for the production of collective memory. However, as discussed above, this lack of involvement and interest even in Egyptian Jewish politics is also an outcome of social and political marginalization of members of "From Egypt and Back" in Israeli society generally, as well as an outcome of their estrangement from the Association and its activities. The kind of nostalgia, then, expressed and produced in "From Egypt and Back" is not the kind that undergirds any political action, or political critique, but is rather nostalgia as emotion, one that produces and affirms a sense of identity, cultural heritage, and comfort.

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