

**Moving histories.**  
**The Jews and Modernity in Alexandria 1881-1919**

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**Abstract**

*This essay will investigate the history of Alexandria from 1881 to 1919, proposing a re-definition of modernity vis-à-vis the city's Jews. In the first part I will introduce a case of blood libel that occurred in 1881, the Fornaraki affair, and the consequences it had for the making of an urban (Jewish) bourgeoisie and the spreading of a modern social imaginary in-between Egypt and Europe. I will then consider the École des filles founded in Alexandria in 1900 by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, exploring how French secularism, bourgeois femininity, and Jewish religiosity coalesced in this school – as exemplified by the history surrounding the 1901 initiation des jeunes filles. Lastly, I will look at World War One and the philanthropic activities and public commemorations this event engendered in Alexandria, especially following the arrival of Jewish refugees from Palestine in 1914. Focusing upon these historical narrations, I will attempt to interpret modernity as a dynamic blending of tensions and exchanges in-between Jews and non-Jews, Egypt and Europe, local knowledge and foreign ideas.*

**Modern Alexandria and the Jews**

From the second half of the nineteenth century, Alexandria underwent a period of great social and economic expansion due to a boom in cotton exports and to the growing importance of the city in trade routes after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. It was during those years that Alexandria and its harbour became integrated into “the country’s external economic orientation,” becoming one of the most vibrant cities in the Mediterranean region.<sup>1</sup> This is also clarified by looking at its heterogeneous population and the important presence of minority groups and foreign communities in local commerce and business from the second half of the nineteenth century.

At the same time, various waves of migrations to the city from all over the Mediterranean also aggravated social tensions and inter-ethnic conflicts. The misrule of *Kbedive* Tawfiq (1879-1892) and the growing interference of the European powers further increased social and political unrest, culminating in the so-called ‘Urabi uprising in 1882. The

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<sup>1</sup> Malcom J. Reimer, “Colonial Bridgehead: Social and Spatial Change in Alexandria, 1850-1882”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20/4 (1988): 539.

revolt, which began with Muslim rioters attacking foreigners and Copts, was eventually quelled by British bombs.<sup>2</sup>

The Jews were surely an important component of the city's socio-economic and cultural life. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, thousands of Jews had migrated from Southern Europe – mainly Greece and, to a lesser extent, Italy – and the Ottoman Near East to Alexandria. The most visible consequence of these migrations was of course the rapid growth of the local Jewish population: from 9,831 Jews in 1897, to 14,475 in 1907 and 24,858 in 1917.<sup>3</sup> This led to the birth of a heterogeneous milieu and a great deal of diversity among those leading the city's commercial and entrepreneurial activities.<sup>4</sup>

The growing Jewish community of Alexandria should be located within the much larger Eastern Mediterranean bourgeoisie – deeply influenced by colonialism – and which also included Muslims and members of other minority groups.<sup>5</sup> With the term *bourgeoisie* I intend a social reality whose identity is based not only upon economic status, but also on “an attributed quality [...], a form of social status or prestige” that *distinguishes* its members from the rest of society.<sup>6</sup>

From the second half of the nineteenth century, Egypt – and Alexandria in particular – witnessed the shift from a traditional elite of urban notables to one deeply influenced by the Western educational system and

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<sup>2</sup> This goes beyond the scope of my analysis. A brilliant study of the 'Urabi uprising is: Juan R. Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's 'Urabi Movement*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1999). See also: Ottavia Schmidt di Friedberg, “Il processo di Arabi Pascià e le fonti italiane”, in *Islam, culture, migrazioni*, ed. Annalisa Frisina, (Bologna: Il Ponte, 2007), 13-35.

<sup>3</sup> The figures are taken from: Jacob Landau, “Changing Patterns of Community Structure, with Special Reference to Ottoman Egypt”, in *Jews, Turks, Ottomans, A Shared History Fifteenth through the Twentieth Century*, ed. Avigdor Lévy, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 80.

<sup>4</sup> I here refer to the three fundamental studies on Egyptian Jews: Jacob Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, (New York: New York University Press, 1969); Gudrun Kraemer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt 1914-1952*, (London: IB Tauris, 1989) and Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry. Culture, Politics and The Formation of A Modern Diaspora*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that forms of exchange and interaction between Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean region already existed before the colonial era. Consider for instance: Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *Living in The Ottoman Ecumenical Community*, eds. Vera Costantini, Markus Koller, (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Fred Ringer, “Education, the Middle Classes and the Intellectuals: the Social Field in Modern France and Germany”, in *Fields of Knowledge. French Academic Culture in Comparative Perspective, 1890-1920*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 88. The notion of *distinction* clearly refers to Pierre Bourdieu's study of the French bourgeoisie and his *La distinction*, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979). An introduction to the notion of *bourgeoisie*, in European perspective, is given by Raffaele Romanelli, “Borghesia/Buerkertum/Bourgeoisie. Itinerari europei di un concetto”, in *Borghesie europee dell'Ottocento*, ed. Jurgen Kocka, (Venice: Marsilio, 1989), 69-94.

willing to *westernize* especially those aspects of everyday life (e.g. clothing, housing, leisure activities etc.) that seemed to be crucial symbols of modernity.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the fact that early twentieth century Alexandria has often been portrayed as a modern urban centre and the cosmopolitan city *par excellence*, historians are still debating the meaning(s) of these concepts. According to Gekas, *modernity* in the Eastern Mediterranean meant, first and foremost, “commercialization, bureaucracy, industrialization [...], fiscal and legal reform and the adoption of Western cultural practices, filtered as they were by the local societies.”<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, Watenpaugh argued that these processes – although based upon a presumed universal notion of *being modern* – implied the adoption of a mutable corpus of (Western) ideas and practices that were often utilized “for their own ends and in a way that went far beyond resistance or collaboration with the West.”<sup>9</sup> Alexandria and its inhabitants, in fact, did not experience a single and uniform understanding of modernity, but rather a plurality of dynamic *modernities* connected to many factors, such as gender, ethno-religious identity, and social status.<sup>10</sup>

The Jews seem to be a particularly relevant case study, not only because of their close business relationships with many European powers and the privileges that they often enjoyed under the system of the Capitulations<sup>11</sup> and as foreign *protégés* – but also because of the social and educational efforts undertaken by Western Jewish philanthropic institutions such as

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<sup>7</sup> Fatma Goecek, *Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demise of Empire. Ottoman Westernization and Social Change*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). More specifically on Alexandria: *Alexandrie 1830-1930. Une modèle éphémère de convivialité*, eds. Robert Ilbert, Ilios Yannakis, (Paris: Autrement, 1992); Robert Ilbert, *Alexandrie 1830-1930: histoire d'une communauté citadine*, (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Anastasios Gekas, “Class and Cosmopolitanism: the Historiographical Fortunes of Merchants in Eastern Mediterranean Ports”, *Mediterranean Historical Review* 24/2 (2008): 96.

<sup>9</sup> Keith D. Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East. Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 17, my emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> This is why even though my essay will mostly deal with the middle and upper strata of Alexandrian Jewish society, I will try to include the lower and lower middle class, keeping in mind how modernity and cosmopolitanism can be interpreted also *from below*. See: Will Hanley, “Foreignness and Localness in Alexandria, 1880-1914”, unpublished PhD dissertation, (Princeton: Princeton University, 2007); Id., “Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies”, *History Compass* 6/5 (2008): 1346-1367.

<sup>11</sup> The system of the Capitulations was the Ottoman legal framework thanks to which members of certain minority groups and of foreign communities could enjoy particular economic and juridical rights, such as being judged by their communities' courts. In Egypt, the Capitulations were abolished in 1937 after the signature of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty, whilst the *tribunaux mixtes* lasted until 1949. See: Nathan J. Brown, “The Precarious Life and Slow Death of the Mixed Courts of Egypt”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25/1 (1993): 33-52.

the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (henceforth AIU) and the *Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden*.<sup>12</sup> Aside from this, one should keep in mind that the history of Jews in the Mediterranean was characterized by the ability to live *in-between* several worlds, languages, and cultures.<sup>13</sup> Many of them managed to be at once *insular* and *cosmopolitan*, *local* and *foreign*, thereby avoiding long-standing dichotomies such as traditional/modern and religious/secular.<sup>14</sup>

In this essay, I will reconstruct the Jewish encounter with modernity in Alexandria from 1881 to 1919, focusing on three different moments and reconstructing three specific *histories*. Using sources from the *Archives de l'AIU* of Paris, I will first look at a case of blood libel that occurred in Alexandria in 1881 – the so-called *Fornaraki affair* – showing how this event shed light on inter-ethnic urban rivalries and class differences, and ultimately allowed for the consolidation of a shared view of what being modern meant for upper class Alexandrian Jews and non-Jews alike.

I will then investigate the AIU's *École des filles* of Alexandria (1900-1919), looking at the interweaving of class, gender, and Judaism which informed the teachers' educational efforts and their attempts to forge modern Jewish girls, and thus regenerate the Jewish population in Alexandria on the whole. The difficult quest for modernity, and for a viable balance between past and present Jewish models of identity and acculturation, can also be seen in the last event I will analyze: the arrival of Jewish refugees from Palestine during World War One (henceforth WWI) and the reactions of Alexandrian Jews in terms of philanthropic activities and public commemorations.

My aim is to clarify how the adoption of modern practices and habits by Alexandrian Jews was not always easy or smooth, although it was often characterized by episodes of fruitful exchange and interaction. By acknowledging such inner complexity, it might be possible to reach novel definitions of what being modern, and living in cosmopolitan Alexandria, meant.

### **Jews, non-Jews, and the perils of modernity in 1881 Alexandria**

Among the thousands of migrants who arrived in Alexandria in the late

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<sup>12</sup> I will return to the AIU in the next pages. On these two institutions consider: Eli Bar-Chen, (with a comment by Aron Rodrigue), "Two Communities with a Sense of Mission: the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden", in *Jewish Emancipation Reconsidered*, eds. Michael Brenner, Vicki Caron, Uri R. Kaufmann, (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 111-128.

<sup>13</sup> On *in-betweenness* I obviously refer to: Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> I take these oppositions respectively from: Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 270 and Hanley, "Foreignness".

nineteenth century, were two families who lived in the *okella Muro*,<sup>15</sup> a modest building situated between the headquarters of the city's *zaptieh* (in Ottoman Turkish: “police”) and *rue de la Douane*. These were the Baruks, Jews from Corfu – most of them Greek nationals – and the Fornarakis, a Greek Orthodox family from Crete with Ottoman citizenship. On March 18th, 1881, a nine year-old boy named Vangelis Fornaraki, “fatherless and whose mother was said to have been morally objectionable, disappeared from his house; after the due research, a rumour had it that the boy had been sacrificed by the Jews for recondite religious purposes.”<sup>16</sup> Soon after the disappearance of Vangelis, the police – based on accusations by the child’s grandfather – interrogated and arrested several of the Baruks: “Jacoub, his wife Stella, their daughter Nina, their son-in-law Elia René, the former’s stepdaughter Consola Betteli, Diamantina e Josué René (these last two were minors), a two year-old daughter named René, the sons of Jacoub Baruk, Guilia [*sic!*] and Vita Baruk.”

The Baruks were accused of ritual murder, an old anti-Semitic denunciation according to which Jews killed Christian children in order to use their blood for ritual purposes – namely to make the *matzot*, the unleavened bread eaten during *Pesach*, the Jewish Passover.<sup>17</sup>

Although the first newsworthy case of blood libel in the Middle East in modern times – the *Damascus affair* – dated from 1840,<sup>18</sup> ritual murder accusations in Egypt started to spread in the 1880s, mainly in Alexandria and in cities such as Damanhur and Port Said. The principal reason

<sup>15</sup> The *okella* (from the Arabic *nikala*, lit. “agency”: a traditional Islamic building which included a hostel for merchants and warehouses) were modern multi-storey buildings, which usually hosted shops at the ground level and residential flats on the other floors. See: M. F. Awad, “Le modèle européen: l’évolution urbaine de 1807 à 1958”, *Revue de l’Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 46 (1987): 97.

<sup>16</sup> The Jewish Community of Alexandria to the AIU President, “Succinto dei fatti e circostanze referentesi al processo intentato nel 1881 contro una famiglia israelita imputata d’aver immolato un ragazzo greco, per nome Vangeli Fornaraki, con recondito scopo religioso”, 15 September 1881, file (henceforth f.) Egypte I.C.3, Archives of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, Paris (henceforth AIU). All citations from AIU sources are my translation from the French or Italian original version.

<sup>17</sup> See as an introduction: Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder. Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany*, (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1988); R. Taradel, *L’accusa del sangue. Storia politica di un mito antisemita*, (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affaire, “Ritual Murder”, Politics, and the Jews in 1840*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Julie Kalman, “Sensuality, Depravity, and Ritual Murder: The Damascus Blood Libel and Jews in France”, *Jewish Social Studies* 13/3 (2007), 35-58. It should be noted that cases of ritual murder accusation had occurred in the Ottoman Empire already in the sixteenth century, however none of them had the resonance or the consequences of the *Damascus affair*, see: Amnon Cohen, “Ritual Murder Accusations Against the Jews during The Days of Suleiman the Magnificent”, *Journal of Turkish Studies* 10 (1986): 73-78; Yaron Ben-Naeh, *Jews in The Realm of the Sultans*, (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 131-132.

behind the Egyptian blood libels is found in the critical socio-political atmosphere of 1880s Egypt, especially in the aftermath of the 'Urabi uprising. Secondly, the fact that the majority of these complaints occurred in Alexandria underlines a possible connection to the Greek and Syrian Christians that had also migrated to the city in those years. These two groups were most often the propagators of such allegations and perhaps not coincidentally, they were also the economic and commercial rivals of the Jews.<sup>19</sup>

The day before Vangelis' disappearance, rumours started to spread that strange noises had been heard coming from the Baruks' house, where the child had allegedly been invited to eat. Both before and after the Baruks' arrest, many Jews – almost all of foreign (mainly British, French and Italian) nationalities – were attacked by Greek and Muslim rioters. This provoked formal protestations on the part of various consular authorities to the Governor of Alexandria.<sup>20</sup> Finally, five days later “according to what a boatman called Di Palma had said, the corpse of [Vangelis] Fornaraki – who had apparently drowned [...] – was found by Mahmoud Capitan, one of the harbour masters.” This caused more unrest between the Greeks and the Jews, and the situation was brought under control by the arrival of two infantry battalions from Cairo – as suggested by the British consul.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the Italian consul in Alexandria, Machiavelli, explained to the Italian ambassador in Cairo that the death of Vangelis provoked many hostile reactions, among which were some “rascals, amongst which are a number of jobless Greek smugglers [...] ready to fish in troubled waters,” suggesting the idea that (some of) the attacks against the Jews might have not been directly linked to the accusation of ritual murder, but to the actions of petty criminals and robbers. The Greek consul admitted to Machiavelli that even “the family of the Cretan boy is trying to take advantage of this tragedy” and “[the Greek consul] wants to make a collection among his fellow nationals in order to pacify [the family of Vangelis].”<sup>22</sup> Members of some upper class Greek families were also accused of inciting the crowd against the Jews and, last but not least,

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<sup>19</sup> To the best of my knowledge the only studies dedicated to Egyptian blood libels are: Jacob Landau, “Ritual Murder Accusations in Nineteenth-Century Egypt”, *Middle Eastern Themes*, (London: Frank Cass, 1973), 99-142 and Robert Ilbert, “L'exclusion du voisin: pouvoirs et relations intercommunautaires, 1870-1900”, *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 46 (1987): 177-186 – which deals with the *Fornaraki affair*, although basing on different sources.

<sup>20</sup> The Jewish Community of Alexandria to the AIU President, “Succinto”, 15 September 1881, f. Egypte I.C.3, AIU.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> From a letter of the Italian consul in Alexandria cited in Landau, “Ritual Murder”, 120 and 122.

anti-Semitic articles had begun to appear in local Greek newspapers.<sup>23</sup>

As the affair was causing such great distress, the Egyptian authorities decided to create a commission formed by several local and foreign doctors in order to investigate the incident and the causes of the child's death. After twenty-three autopsies on the corpse of Vangelis, the commission concluded that the child had died after drowning at sea.<sup>24</sup>

Only the two Greek members of the commission contested this final statement and decided to resign. This led to more riots during Vangelis' funeral, which was attended by four thousand people and officiated by the Greek Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria, His Beatitude Sophronius IV.<sup>25</sup> The crowd moved from the house where the child lived with his mother, now "terribly sorrowful," and her second husband. The woman was depicted by local newspapers as on the verge of hysteria, and incapable of being a *proper* mother for her children.

According to a local newspaper, the house where the Fornarakis lived was situated in "a damp and dark alley where no ray of sunshine ever arrives [...], one cannot help but ask how human beings can live in such a place."<sup>26</sup> In this same *okella* the Baruks also lived, and Vangelis was frequently seen playing with young Diamantina Baruk. This Jewish family was, according to some of their Greek neighbours, "scrupulously pious" and "there had often been violent fights [amongst members of the family] during which knives had been thrown."<sup>27</sup> Further, the journalist seemed to link the unfortunate affair to the perils of the city of Alexandria, where children should not be left "wandering in the street or by the sea at such a young age."<sup>28</sup> The article concluded with an appeal to parents – that they keep a watchful eye over their sons, especially considering the dramatic changes that life in Alexandria was undergoing in the fin-de-siècle, and the dangers hidden in its streets.<sup>29</sup>

Soon after the beginning of the anti-Semitic riots, the Alexandrian Jewish leaders petitioned local authorities and the municipality complaining about the former's inability to protect them.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, the Jewish

<sup>23</sup> For example: "O Alithis – Fanatismos" (in Greek: "The truth – Fanaticism"), *Tilegrafos* ("Telegraph"), 15 March 1881, f. Egypte I.C.3, AIU.

<sup>24</sup> *L'affaire Fornaraki à Alexandrie. Rapport de la commission d'enquête publié par l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, (Paris: Maréchal & Montorier, 1881), 42.

<sup>25</sup> The Jewish Community of Alexandria to the AIU President, "Succinto", 15 September 1881, f. Egypte I.C.3, AIU.

<sup>26</sup> "Alexandrie. La disparition d'un enfant", clipping from an unnamed newspaper, around 3 April 1881, f. Egypte I.C.3, AIU.

<sup>27</sup> *L'affaire Fornaraki*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> "Alexandrie. La disparition...", f. Egypte I.C.3, AIU.

<sup>29</sup> Consider: On Barak, "Scraping the Surface: the Techno-Politics of Modern Streets In Turn-of-Twentieth-Century Alexandria", *Mediterranean Historical Review* 24/2 (2009): 187-205.

<sup>30</sup> On the role of the *municipalité* in Alexandria and its relevance for local elites, consider: Steve Rosenthal, "Urban Elites and the Foundation of Municipalities in Alexandria and

notables of foreign nationalities asked for the help from their consular authorities, provoking a chaotic exchange of letters and a frenzy of meetings between almost all the foreign consuls present in Alexandria, their national governments, and the khedivial representatives.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the Jewish communal leaders sought the support and solidarity of a larger network of allies, including the chief rabbi of Corfu, the AIU, and various European Jewish newspapers.

The AIU was already following the event publishing articles in its *Bulletin*, including relevant correspondence between the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, His Sanctity Joachim III, and a well-known Jewish doctor and philanthropist, Moïse Allatini of Salonika.<sup>32</sup> The *Jewish Chronicle*, the most important Jewish newspaper in Great Britain, published dozens of articles on the affair and followed the event in great detail, from the first attacks on the Baruk family through January 1882.<sup>33</sup> This is an indicator not only of the impact that the *Fornaraki affair* had on European Jews, but it also shows the extended network to which the Alexandrian Jews belonged. In this way, the scandal and the outrage it provoked reveals a transnational community that extended from Alexandria to Salonika and beyond, within which not only goods and money, but also ideas and news could easily circulate.<sup>34</sup> Finally, one can see how more *traditional* forms of (Jewish) communication, such as letters written to coreligionists in other cities around the Mediterranean, fruitfully interacted with a modern press system that allowed for this event to be followed by a much larger audience.

Despite the social and economic contingencies that – as we have seen –

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Istanbul”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 16/2 (1980): 125-133.

<sup>31</sup> The consuls involved were Greek, Italian, French, British and Swedish – the former being the doyen of the consular body in Alexandria. All of them wrote to their colleagues in Cairo and also to their foreign ministries. They met several times with the Governor of Alexandria and once with the Egyptian Minister of War, who had come to the city along with the infantry troops. See the documents reproduced in: Landau, “Ritual Murder”, 111-124.

<sup>32</sup> “Israélites d’Egypte”, *Bulletin de l’AIU*, January 1881, 66. On Allatini: Henri Nahum, “Charisme et pouvoir d’un médecin juif. Moïse Allatini (1809-1882), ‘le père de Salonique’”, *Médecins et ingénieurs ottomans à l’âge des nationalismes*, eds. Meropi Anastassiadou-Dumont, (Paris : Maisonneuve & Larose, 2003), 49-62.

<sup>33</sup> See the articles appeared on the *Jewish Chronicle* on 9 September 1881, 14 October 1881, 18 November 1881, 9 December 1881, and 6 January 1882, available online at *The Jewish Chronicle Archives*: <http://www.thejc.com/> [accessed 24 February 2011].

<sup>34</sup> A similar capacity to engage in trans-national (intellectual) networks and public debates was shared by sectors of Egyptian non-Jewish society in the fin-de-siècle. See: Ziad Fahmy, “Francophone Egyptian Nationalists, Anti-British Discourse, and European Public Opinion, 1885-1910: The Case of Mustafa Kamil and Ya’qub Sannu’”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28/1 (2008): 170-183. While acknowledging this, one should also note that the Egyptian nationalist and journalist Ya’qub Sannu’ was himself a Jew, whose paternal family migrated from Leghorn to Cairo in the first half of the nineteenth century.



lay behind the affair, the letters sent by the Jewish Community to the AIU and to various Jewish personalities make no reference to them. In a letter sent to the chief rabbi of Corfu – the island the Baruks came from and where the two members of the family holding Greek passports had been temporarily jailed<sup>35</sup> – the leaders of the Alexandria Jewish Community talked instead about the emotional and irrational behaviour of many Greeks. The former were described as having attacked the Jews with an age-old anti-Semitic slander, even after evidence of the Baruks' innocence had been corroborated by some of the “most distinguished Egyptian doctors.”<sup>36</sup> The response – which was for the *British Medical Journal* “a victory of science” against ignorance and religious prejudices – was also endorsed by “M. Brouardel, the well known professor of medical jurisprudence,” to whose arbitration the Jews had appealed after the two Greek doctors' contestation.<sup>37</sup>

Summarizing the history of blood libels and citing its most famous case, that of Simon of Trent (1475), the Alexandrian Jewish leaders underlined their proud belonging to a modern world where “advancing civilization [*progrediente civiltà*] and true justice [*buona giustizia*]” would in the end prevail over “a silly yet unfortunately baneful calumny.” The authors of the letter wished to demonstrate the Baruks' innocence through a critical discussion of biblical sources and religious prohibitions, underlining that “abhorring blood is not just a biblical obligation but [...] a deep feeling among the Jews.” Secondly, they emphasized their faith in modern science fully embracing the findings of the inquiry commission.<sup>38</sup>

It is arguable that the various images and discourses assembled by the different actors – as in almost all cases of blood libel – allowed for “the fabrication of the event [...] out of diverse fragments of social reality.”<sup>39</sup> The scandal was the product of a series of attitudes, emotions and phenomena: the poverty of migrant families and their fears over their children's fate; the socioeconomic rivalries between Greeks and Jews; the resilience of age-old anti-Semitic prejudice and so on. As in other cases of blood libels, the reasons beneath this accusation depended both on local contingencies and more general anti-Jewish sentiments. However, in this specific case the prompt reactions of the Jews, of the local and foreign authorities, and of many newspapers, showed that this allegation could be circumscribed and finally rejected. The affair thus underlined

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<sup>35</sup> The Greek consular authority had ordained the arrest of the two Baruks who were *sudditi elleni*. The two were jailed in Corfu and finally released on 4 January 1882. See: “Divers – Affaire Fornaraki”, *Bulletin de l'AIU*, January 1882, 28-29.

<sup>36</sup> The Vice-President of the Jewish Community of Alexandria to the Chief Rabbi and Jewish Community Council of Corfu, 9 August 1881, f. Egypte I.C.3, AIU.

<sup>37</sup> “A Victory of Science”, *British Medical Journal*, January 1882, 128.

<sup>38</sup> The Vice-President of the Jewish Community of Alexandria to the Chief Rabbi and Jewish Community Council of Corfu, 9 August 1881, f. Egypte I.C.3, AIU.

<sup>39</sup> Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth*, 22.

the precarious and delicate balance of ethnic, national and religious communities in Alexandria, but at the same time, it also showed the willingness of the aforementioned actors to behave as *rational* and modern individuals – a sort of *bourgeoisie éclairée*, to use Ilbert's term. In the end, the greater community of Alexandria preferred to make amends with the Jewish population – so crucial to the commercial prosperity of the city – and to reject slander and schism for the sake of economic and diplomatic relations.<sup>40</sup>

### Modern “women of valour”: the *École des filles* of the Alliance Israélite Universelle 1900-1919

In fact, the socio-economic centrality of the Jews in Alexandria continued to grow in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This is evident if one looks at the advancements in the fields of education and charity. In 1885, a few years after the *Fornaraki affair*, the de Menasce – one of the most renowned Jewish families of the city – founded a school for boys: the *École Fondation de Menasce*.<sup>41</sup> In those same years, a few charitable associations were established, soon followed by hospitals and, later on, by a variety of cultural and literary circles. In addition to these institutions and associations, a more efficient communal structure resembling European models – which limited the rabbis' power while increasing that of the communal council – was created in 1872.<sup>42</sup>

These changes reflected the double legacy of the local Jewish upper class, *in-between* the Ottoman *millet* and European bourgeois ideals and practices. In fact, the communal and philanthropic associations were not created *ex nihilo*, consisting in a renewal of traditional values and obligations – for example education, welfare, and caring for the poor.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, it was also through the AIU and its educational and social activities that Alexandrian Jews could express their *in-between* positioning in more obvious ways.

The AIU is a philanthropic association founded in 1860 by a group of French Jews, with the aim of educating and emancipating non-European Jews, bringing to them French civilization and the positive effects it was thought to engender. An institution coming out of nineteenth century

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Ilbert, “Le pouvoir”, 184 and onwards.

<sup>41</sup> Kraemer, *The Jews*, 76-77.

<sup>42</sup> Landau, “Changing Patterns”, 82-84 and Id., *Jews*, 54-57. For Landau, the European influx was possibly due to the fact that amongst the compilers were Jews of European – namely French – descent, and/or because the Jewish statutes imitated those of the Egyptian Italian community.

<sup>43</sup> On this: Esther Benbassa, “Associational Strategies in Ottoman Jewish Society in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”, in *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Avigdor Lévy, (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1994), 457-484.

French Jewish milieu, the AIU greatly underlined its universal *and* distinctly Jewish character, promoting a French articulation of the *Haskalah* – the Jewish Enlightenment.<sup>44</sup> According to Narcisse Leven, president of the AIU from 1898 to 1915, the AIU not only aimed to improve the education of North African and Middle Eastern Jews but also and more broadly, to transform the Jewish community as a whole.<sup>45</sup> In fact, through its numerous schools – the first of which was founded in 1862 – the AIU contributed greatly to the reshaping of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish identities, leading to a reorganization of the *qahal* (in Hebrew: “community”). The efforts of the AIU also produced changes in the self-perception of Middle Eastern Jews vis-à-vis Arab Muslim societies, ultimately spreading the French republican model of identity all over the territories of the former Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb.<sup>46</sup>

The AIU initially opened a co-ed school in Alexandria in 1897, following an appeal launched by a few local Jewish families that lamented being obliged to send their children to congregational schools. The school of the Jewish Community – which also resembled European models of education – in fact could not host more than 300-400 students and therefore those who could not attend it or other private Jewish schools, such as the *École Fondation de Menasce*, had to opt for Christian missionary schools.<sup>47</sup> Potentially this posed a serious threat to the children’s Jewish upbringing, even though it appears that cases of

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<sup>44</sup> See: André Chouraqui, *L’Alliance Israélite Universelle et la renaissance juive contemporaine. Cent ans d’histoire*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965); Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition. The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle*, (Portland: University of Washington Press, 2003); *Histoire de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle de 1860 à nos jours*, ed. André Kaspi, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Narcisse Leven, *Cinquante ans d’histoire. L’Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860-1910*, vol. 2, (Paris : Alcan, 1920), 38.

<sup>46</sup> Aron Rodrigue, “L’exportation du paradigme révolutionnaire. Son influence sur le judaïsme sépharade et orientale”, in *Histoire politique des juifs de France*, ed. Pierre Birnbaum, (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1990), 191.

<sup>47</sup> Bension Taragan, *Les communautés israélites d’Alexandrie. Aperçu historique depuis les temps des Ptolémées jusqu’à nos jours*, (Alexandria: Les Editions Juives d’Egypte, 1932), 103. Taragan talks about an appeal published in the French Jewish newspaper *L’Univers Israélite* on 12 September 1896. In the AIU archives I found two earlier letters sent to the AIU President by a group of Jewish families of various descent, “Russes, Polonais, Espagnols, Corfiotes, et autres” calling for the AIU intervention in Alexandria. See: *Israélites d’Alexandrie to the AIU President*, 3 June (?) 1896, f. Egypte I.C.3, AIU and *La Colonie Israélite d’Alexandrie to the AIU President*, 21 June 1896, f. Egypte I.C.7, AIU (this document also talks about a letter sent to the chief rabbi of France). On the history of education in turn-of-the-century Egypt: James Heyworth-Dunne, *An Introduction to the History of Education in Modern Egypt*, (London: Frank Cass), 1968; Mona Russell, “Competing, Overlapping, and Contradictory Agendas: Egyptian Education Under British Occupation, 1882-1922”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* XXI/1-2 (2001): 50-60; Catherine Mayeur, “Le Collège de la Sainte-Famille dans la société égyptienne”, *Annales Islamologiques* 23 (1987): 117-130.

proselytism, conversion, and anti-Jewish propaganda by congregational schoolteachers were quite rare.<sup>48</sup>

The school for girls of the AIU was inaugurated in 1900 with 56 girls. Looking at the statistics published in the annual *Bulletin de l'AIU*, one can see that within only a few years there was a remarkable increase in the students' population: from 56 students in 1900 to 158 in 1903, then stabilizing at around 130 girls per year. The majority of the families could afford the tuition – even though the teachers' reports give the impression that the girls mainly came from middle and lower-middle class families, and very rarely from the upper strata of the community.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, when Madame Rachel Danon – headmistress of the school from its foundation until its closure in 1919 – took up her post in Alexandria where her husband Joseph headed the boys' school,<sup>50</sup> she soon realized that Jewish notables and families such as the de Menasce, Rolo and Aghion generally opted for private tutors or for prestigious congregational schools such as the *Mères de Dieu* and the *Notre Dame de Sion*. According to Madame Danon, these schools – which combined the usual subjects in French, mathematics, and history with leisure activities such as drama and tennis – aimed to form “worldly women, that would learn how to shine in a salon, and to receive guests in a very graceful manner,” rather than to inculcate basic moral principles or to give pupils an elementary education.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The most relevant cases of missionary anti-Jewish propaganda seem to have occurred at a later epoch. Consider for example the incident at the *Ecole Sainte-Catherine* of Alexandria in 1925, when a teacher accused the Jews of practicing ritual murder. In this case, the protests of many Alexandrians, both Jews and non-Jews, led to the firing of the teacher. A few days later the school also officially apologized with the leaders of the Jewish Community (see: E. Antebi, “A Alexandrie”, *Le Bulletin. Organe de l'Association Amicale des Anciens Élèves de l'Ecole de Menasce*, 8/50 (1925): 382; Bension Taragan, *Les communautés*, 105; Gudrun Kraemer, *The Jews*, 81). For the case of a Jewish girl attending a missionary school and converting to Christianity in 1930s Cairo: Frédéric Abécassis, “Conversion religieuse et identités nationales en Egypte dans la première moitié du XX siècle”, in *Conversions islamiques, identités religieuses en Islam méditerranéen*, ed. Mercedes Garcia-Arenal, (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2002), 259-299.

<sup>49</sup> See the *Bulletin de l'AIU* for the period 1900-1913. The bulletin ceased its publication when World War One broke out, and because of this reason I could not find reliable figures for the period 1913-1919.

<sup>50</sup> Rachel Danon, née Braun, (1875-?), educated at the *Ecole Bischoffsheim*, started her career as *adjointe* (“assistant”) at the AIU school for girls of Tunis in 1891, then moving to Baghdad, Alexandria and Beirut where she ended her career in 1923 (Fiches du personnel Moscou (henceforth Fiches) 100-1-46/15, AIU). Her husband Joseph Danon was born in Smyrna in 1864. His father and brother were also AIU headmasters and teachers. After attending the *Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale*, he started teaching in Bulgaria, then Sousse, Tunis and Baghdad. He married Rachel in 1894, moving to Alexandria in 1900 to become headmaster of the school for boys (Fiches 100-1-46/14, AIU).

<sup>51</sup> Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 7 February 1902, f. Alex III.E.36, AIU.

The headmistress's perception of Alexandrian Jews was largely based upon the patronizing gaze of a French Jew who wished to improve the status of her *Oriental* coreligionists. However, Madame Danon was also quite surprised to find how bourgeois and secularized Alexandrian Jews were. Alexandrian women were – in her view – frivolous and snobbish, very attentive to their beauty and physical appearance. These impressions were not unique to Madame Danon; by that time they had become a something of a commonplace in the AIU teachers' reports from Salonika to Constantinople and Tunis.<sup>52</sup> In her earliest observations and comments, Madame Danon lamented a lack of discipline among the students and great disorganization within the school itself. Her feelings are echoed in many of the teachers' letters dating from this period and even prior to it. Moreover the *fillettes*, coming from families that had not instilled in them even a single drop of Jewish morality, and brought up by mothers who had often attended congregational schools, were ignorant of the maternal role for which they should be prepared. Madame Danon remarked, "all that concerns marriage and the family is not taken into consideration [...]. With this kind of upbringing, would you think the mothers are willing to send their daughters to our school? No! Firstly, because we are not, frankly speaking, chic enough for them...."<sup>53</sup>

It was mainly through the innovative *initiation des jeunes filles* – first organized in 1901 – that Madame Danon hoped to improve the status of her school by attracting upper class girls and their families. The history surrounding this ceremony is surely a fascinating one, as it underlines the commingling of cultures that characterized the Alexandrian Jewish community at the time. It also shows how local Jewish religious authorities mediated between traditional knowledge and practices and the effects of processes of modernization on society.

It was Elie (Eliyahu) Hazan (1846-1908), a prominent Sephardi scholar and Chief Rabbi of Alexandria from 1888 until his death, who first proposed transplanting the ceremony to the city. His desire was mainly driven by the fact that many girls "are unfortunately obliged to attend schools where they do not learn our holy language, our history, and the

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<sup>52</sup> Annie Benveniste, "Le rôle des institutrices de l'Alliance Israélite à Salonique", *Combat pour la Diaspora* 8 (1982): 21. Schools for girls and the AIU women teachers have been the object of quite a few studies. I shall here confine myself to: Esther Benbassa, "L'éducation féminine en Orient: l'école des filles de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle à Galata (1879-1912)", *Histoire, Économie et Société* 4/4 (1991): 529-599 and for a general overview: Frances Malino, "The Women Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1872-1940", in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith R. Baskin, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 248-269.

<sup>53</sup> Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 7 February 1902, f. Alex III.E.36, AIU. Danon herself underlined the word 'chic' in her manuscript letter.

principles of our holy faith” and were therefore not prepared for the “beautiful role of the Jewish woman: *’Eshet chayil* [in Hebrew: “woman of valour”].<sup>54</sup>

In actuality, the AIU school was one of the few in Alexandria that could offer a proper Jewish education, including the teaching of Hebrew. The girls who attended the congregational schools, to the rabbi’s despair, were largely ignorant of Judaism and could not utter a single word in Hebrew. The ceremony was designed so as to attract these girls in particular, and was organized as a religious and social event that would endow Alexandria with a Parisian-style *initiation*, as Madame Danon wrote in her report.

The ceremony mimicked the *bat mitzva* many European Jewish girls had begun to celebrate in the nineteenth century. Like the boys’ *bar mitzva*, which is centred on the reading of a portion of the Torah from the pulpit, the girls’ newly invented ceremony consisted in the recitation of some prayers and a few questions dealing with religious issues.<sup>55</sup> The ceremony was a symbol of these girls’ emancipation and, in the Alexandrian case, it underlined the desire of local religious leaders to promote the idea that Judaism was a traditional belief system which could also play a central role in modern times.

Madame Danon was asked by Rabbi Hazan to help organize the

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<sup>54</sup> Appeal of Rabbi Elie Hazan to the Jewish Community of Alexandria, May 1901, f. Alex III.E.36, AIU. Rabbi Elie Hazan, born in Smyrna from a prominent Sephardic rabbinic family, had already faced the very same issue while chief rabbi of Tripoli from 1874 up to 1888. Hazan’s *responsum* to the problems of secular vs. religious education had then been that “the study of secular knowledge should take place under religious auspices,” Jews had to study the language of the country they lived in, so that “the nations of the world would be impressed with the great wisdom of the people of Israel” (David Angel, *Voices in Exile. A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History*, (New York: Hoboken – Ktav, 1991), 184-186). On Rabbi Hazan see also: Landau, *Jews*, 97-99. The expression *’eshet chayil* comes from the Bible, see *Proverbs* 31, 10-11: “A woman of valour who can find? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, and he hath no lack of gain.”

<sup>55</sup> The *bar mitzva* (in Hebrew/Aramaic: “son of the commandment”) indicates “both the attainment of religious and legal maturity as well as the occasion at which this status is formally assumed for boys at the age of 13 plus one day [...]. Upon reaching this age a Jew is obliged to fulfil all the commandments.” As far as *bat mitzva* (“daughter of the commandment”) is concerned, “it is not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that indications of ceremony or public recognition come from Italy, Eastern and Western Europe, Egypt, and Baghdad. These acknowledgements of female religious adulthood include a private blessing, a father’s *aliyah* to the Torah, a rabbi’s sermon and/or a girl’s public examination on Judaic matters” (Zvi Kaplan and Norma Joseph, “Bar mitzva, bat mitzva”, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 3, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolkin (Detroit: MacMillan, 2007), 164-167). The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* also states that rabbi Hazan held a celebration for Alexandrian *bat mitzva* girls in 1907, whereas all the documents I found in the AIU archives refer to 1901 as the year in which the ceremony was firstly performed.

ceremony, and soon after his request the woman started working on this engaging project: “I was at his complete disposal, and I gave him the programme of the ceremony as it is performed in Paris, as well as the text of all the various prayers....” Madame Danon’s enthusiasm convinced her entire *première classe* – attended by girls who were around ten or eleven-years-old<sup>56</sup> – to take part in the ceremony which, as the teacher noted, not only implied learning the required prayers but also being able to afford the outfit the girls were to wear during the celebration. Among the required elements were a white dress, a veil, and a pair of gloves – all fitted for the occasion.<sup>57</sup> Despite her efforts, the ceremony was for Madame Danon a complete disaster: “no flowers, no carpets, despite what we had decided, no reserved seats, and nobody to greet the notables, the synagogue was assaulted.” Luckily, Madame Danon’s *fillettes* were among the few praised for their conduct, clearly inspired by “our methodical instruction [...] given by European teachers.”<sup>58</sup>

Although Madame Danon’s criticism of the event may have been exaggerated, the ceremony failed to gain the popularity expected by the AIU and Rabbi Hazan. Such scarce success underlines the AIU’s failure to garner the support of the local Jewish elite which, in turn, viewed this school as an institution for the lower classes. As for the ceremony itself, the rabbi’s appeal did little to persuade those parents who saw a woman’s religious role as exclusively domestic.<sup>59</sup>

Despite its initial lukewarm reception, the *initiation* was thereafter incorporated into local Jewish religious rites. Its adoption may signify a less reluctant attitude on the part of Jewish families in subsequent years, but more likely the ceremony’s resilience was due to the emphasis placed on Jewish education by Rabbi Hazan and his successors, the two Italian chief rabbis Raffaello Della Pergola (from 1910 to 1923) and David Prato

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<sup>56</sup> The AIU schools started with the *quatrième* – attended by pupils around six-years-old – and generally ended with the *première*, although in some cases additional classes were added. On the structure of the schools, see: *Instructions générales pour les professeurs*, Paris, Siège de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1903, esp. 26 onwards.

<sup>57</sup> Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 31 May 1901, f. Alex III.E.36, AIU. The obligatory white dress is also mentioned in a footnote of the appeal by Rabbi Hazan: “N.B. Les initiées doivent être vêtues de blanc.”

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> On the *domesticity* of women’s Judaism, consider the seminal study by Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History. The Roles and Representations of Women*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995). For an introduction to Middle Eastern Jewish women’s roles: Rachel Simon, “Between the Family and the Outside World: Jewish Girls in the Modern Middle East and North Africa”, *Jewish Social Studies* 7/1 (2000): 81-108.

(from 1927 to 1936).<sup>60</sup> This hypothesis is supported by Prato's own words, when in a speech given at the 1929 *initiation des jeunes filles*, he lamented that “a few laudable exceptions notwithstanding, the upper class Jewish families keep their distance [from the *initiation*] and the ceremony is attended almost exclusively by the pupils of the communal school, *le figlie del popolo*.”<sup>61</sup>

Local processes of social and cultural change that preceded the arrival of the AIU in Egypt surely underscored the model the AIU wished to instil in its female students and the appeal it might have on the girls' families. At the same time, the AIU faced very practical problems such as competition from numerous other schools, and an ever-increasing financial deficit.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless this institution helped to circulate and diffuse new approaches to female religiosity, as the case of the *initiation des jeunes filles* exemplified. Finally, the AIU also contributed to the re-organization of the local Jewish social arena by helping to construct a network of relationships that extended from local authorities to foreign powers. This last contribution would become particularly evident during WWI, as I will now show.

### **Philanthropists, refugees, and the quest for (Jewish) modernity in World War One Alexandria**

Although WWI would eventually lead – together with other factors – to the closure of the Alexandrian branch of the AIU, the war proved to be an event during which the Jews had to confront the novel problems that their being *in-between* Europe and the Middle East posed. In order to investigate these issues, I will look at the arrival of Jewish refugees in Alexandria in 1914 and the reaction of local Jews to this event.

As one can read in the *compte-rendu* of the *Comité d'Assistance aux Réfugiés Israélites*, “on 18 December 1914 a telegram to Mr. A. PETROFF, Consul of Russia, announced the arrival of about 700 Jews expelled from Palestine. This first group was soon to be followed by many others.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Rabbi Della Pergola was also the author of the volume *Chag chinukh dati le-banot-Isra'el: ne'erakh 'al-yedei chevrat-'amalei-Torah, choveret makbilah me-'amarei-musar ve-roshit darkei-hadat, ne'esfu 'al-yedei ha-rav ha-gadol Rafael D. Della Pergola/Recueil pour l'initiation religieuse des jeunes filles israélites fait par S.E. le Prof. R. Della Pergola Grand Rabbin*, (No' 'Amon/Alexandria: Va'ad ha-'edah ha-isra'elit, 5682/1922), [Hebrew].

<sup>61</sup> David Prato, *Cinque anni di rabbinato*, (Alexandria, 1933), 160, my translation.

<sup>62</sup> This, together with the financial constraints that the AIU suffered in the aftermath of WWI, led to the closure of the Alexandrian branch of the AIU in 1919. See: Joseph Danon to the AIU President, 8 October 1919, f. Alex IV.E.35.m, AIU.

<sup>63</sup> *Compte-rendu du Comité d'Assistance aux Réfugiés Israélites de Syrie et Palestine*, (Alexandria: Société des Publications Egyptiennes, 1916), 2, f. Alex IV.E.35.m, AIU.



By the end of 1915 a total of 11,277 refugees arrived in the city from Syria and Palestine: most of them were Zionist Ashkenazi Jews with Russian passports that had been expelled from the Ottoman Empire, which was at war with Russia.<sup>64</sup>

Upon arrival in Alexandria, the refugees were first lodged in the area of Hamamil and subsequently, in the more spacious buildings of the *Ancien Gouvernorat*. A group of Jewish women headed by Madame Danon, together with the wives of foreign diplomats and other prominent Alexandrians, immediately organized a drive for the distribution of clothes and food. Their main concern was naturally the children and the improvement of their living conditions during this “forced exile” in Alexandria.<sup>65</sup> Rabbi Della Pergola’s wife, for example, “is as devout as her husband” and spent all her time “comforting the refugees and giving them some relief.” The Baroness de Menasce “showed a special predilection for educational issues,” whilst Mademoiselle Rolo was said to visit the refugees every day, “giving them her own money when the Committee could not help them.”<sup>66</sup>

The *compte-rendu* and the letters sent by Madame Danon highlighted the willingness of the local Jewish elite to present itself as a highly responsive social group, easily mobilized for the sake of their less fortunate coreligionists, and especially in times of crisis. The *compte-rendu* also proffered a rather different image of local Jewish women from the one previously given by Madame Danon, which had depicted them as snobbish and frivolous. Alexandrian Jewish women were now seen in a very positive light, as exemplified by the work of the Baroness de Menasce and Mademoiselle Rolo. This underlines the importance that the AIU assigned to such philanthropic endeavours, something that did not however depend directly, or at least not exclusively, on the institution’s efforts. In fact the prompt reaction of Alexandrian Jews and their active involvement in various philanthropic activities was due to a shift from traditional forms of communal charity to a more modern philanthropy, that had been cultivated among the Egyptian urban elite since the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> On this understudied episode of Egyptian Jewish history see: Nurit Govrin, “The Encounter of Exiles from Palestine with the Jewish Community of Egypt During World War I, As Reflected in Their Writings”, in *The Jews of Egypt. A Mediterranean Society in Modern Times*, ed. Simon Shamir, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 177-191 and Deborah A. Starr, *Remembering Cosmopolitan Egypt. Literature, Culture and Empire*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 114-119.

<sup>65</sup> Rachel Danon, “Rapport sur l’Ecole des Réfugiés de l’Ancien Gouvernorat”, November 1916, f. Alex I.E.33, AIU.

<sup>66</sup> *Compte-rendu*, 51-52, f. Alex IV.E.35.m, AIU.

<sup>67</sup> See: Mine Ener, *Managing Egypt’s Poor and the Politics of Benevolence, 1800-1952*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2003. Consider also: Tomer Levi, “Qavim

Not only women but also men played a significant role in the war relief efforts. For example, Jack Mosseri – scion of a renowned Jewish family from Cairo – presided over a *comité scolaire* that opened a school in the area of Wardian around November 1915, mainly supported by the *Anglo-Jewish Association* and the British government. A Jewish woman of English origin, Miss Landau, was asked to head this school, which counted around four hundred students from ages four to twelve. Classes were held in both Hebrew and English, with additional lessons of Arabic and sewing.<sup>68</sup> Madame Danon established a second school in the *Ancien Gouvernorat* funded by the French government and the Egyptian authorities. A hundred and twenty-six students attended this school, which – since classes were in French and Hebrew – was less popular among refugees who in most cases could not speak French.<sup>69</sup>

Although the arrival of the refugees undoubtedly brought about a consistent wave of charitable operations in Alexandria, the local Jewish bourgeoisie seemed willing to fulfil its social and *Jewish* duties only insofar as the presence of the refugees did not interfere with their socio-economic positioning in Alexandria, thus partly dismissing the AIU Talmudic motto *Kol Isra'el 'arevim zeb-la-zeb* (in Hebrew: “All Israel is responsible for one another”).<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, the refugees were not just the weak and sick children depicted in the leaflets of the *Comité d'assistance*. Among them were combative Zionists, very critical of the Egyptian Jews' attitude towards Zionism and Judaism in general, and willing to take advantage of the months they had to spend in Alexandria to spread Zionist ideas through the newspapers,<sup>71</sup> and – on a more practical level – to organize small trade and commercial activities inside and outside the refugee camps.<sup>72</sup>

The most significant conflict between the refugees and local Jews, known as the *affaire des azyms*, occurred in April 1916, shortly before *Pesach*. In

rishonim la-dmutah shel-filantropiah yehudit mizrach tikhonit: yehudei-'Aleksandriah 1840-1914” (“The beginnings of a Mediterranean Jewish philanthropy: the Jews of Alexandria 1840-1914”), in *History and Culture of the Jews of Egypt in Modern Times*, eds. Ada Aharoni, Aimée Israel-Pelletier, Levana Zamir, (Haifa: WCJE, 2007), 99-109 [Hebrew].

<sup>68</sup> “Procès-verbal de la séance du Comité scolaire tenue le lundi 15 Novembre 1915, au Rabbinate, à 4 heures pm, sous la présidence de M. Jack Mosseri, président”, f. Alex IV.E.35.e, AIU.

<sup>69</sup> Rachel Danon, “Rapport”, November 1916, f. Alex I.E.33, AIU.

<sup>70</sup> *Talmud*, tractate *Shavuot* 39a.

<sup>71</sup> Govrin, “The Encounter”, 183-186. For example Yosef Aronowitz founded in 1917 *Ba-Nekhar* (in Hebrew: “In Foreign Land”), a short-lived Hebrew newspaper, aiming at *revivifying* local Jewry.

<sup>72</sup> Horace C. Hornblower, British delegate for the Administration of Refugees in Egypt, “Avis/Moda'ah”, no date (1916?), f. Alex IV.E.35.e, AIU.

the weeks preceding the holiday, an American charitable organization had sent 20,000 kilos of *matzot* to be distributed to the Jewish refugees from Syria and Palestine. However, the communal council initially gave the *matzot* to Alexandrian Jews, even though “the needs of the Community had already been satisfied.” The refugees thus protested and assaulted the office of Joseph Picciotto, the member of the Jewish Community Council in charge of the distribution of the *matzot*. This affair led to the publication of articles in local newspapers, lamenting the greed of upper-class Alexandrian Jews and of the Community Council in particular, which since the day the refugees landed in the city “showed animosity” towards them and had been unwilling to utilize much of its funding to help them. The articles emphasized that Jewish leaders should not differentiate between local and foreign Jews, since “the *raison d’être* of the Jewish Community is to help the poor,” whether they be Alexandrian Jews or refugees from Palestine.<sup>73</sup>

Apart from these clashes, WWI also strengthened the connections between Alexandrian Jews, their Jewish brothers and sisters in other areas of the Middle East and Europe, and world politics. Even though Alexandria had long been a crucial *nodal city* where goods, men, and ideas could easily circulate, the war accelerated this trend and projected Alexandria definitively into the global arena.<sup>74</sup> This is clear when considering the city’s Jewish leaders, their attitude toward WWI, and the role they determined Jews could play in it. In addition, the *Zion Mule Corps* (henceforth ZMC) – a Jewish auxiliary unit of the British army – was founded in Alexandria in March 1915. In this Jewish military brigade were the 562 Jews – including a few Egyptian Jews – that fought vigorously in the battle of Gallipoli in 1915.<sup>75</sup>

The local chief rabbi Raffaello Della Pergola – who was also an ardent Zionist supporter – actively encouraged the ZMC.<sup>76</sup> According to John Henry Patterson, a non-Jewish member of the ZMC, a few days before the soldiers’ departure in April 1915, they all “had a last big parade, and marched from Wardian Camp [...] to the Synagogue, to receive the final

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<sup>73</sup> “L’affaire des azymes. Une sérieuse bagarre”, clipping from an unnamed and undated newspaper (Spring 1916?), f. Alex IV.E.35.m, AIU.

<sup>74</sup> On the notion of *nodal city*: Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 26-29.

<sup>75</sup> This topic obviously goes beyond the scope of my essay. As an introduction, see: T. Preschel, “Zion Mule Corps”, in R. Patai (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Zionism and Israel*, (New York: Herzl Press, 1971), 1282.

<sup>76</sup> Raffaello Della Pergola was born in 1876 and studied at the rabbinical college of Florence. He was chief rabbi of Gorizia from 1903 to 1910. He then moved to Alexandria where he acted as chief rabbi until his sudden death in Gorizia in 1923. For a brief biographical sketch: Bension Taragan, *Les communautés*, 59.

blessing of the Grand Rabbi. The spacious Temple, in the street of the Prophet Daniel, was on this occasion filled to its utmost capacity.”<sup>77</sup>

A few months later, on Yom Kippur 5676 (18 September 1915), Della Pergola organized a collective *Prière pour la paix/Tefillah be'ad-ha-shalom* at the *Temple Eliabou Hanabi*. The text of the prayer is an interesting example of how Rabbi Della Pergola responded to a *side effect* of modernity such as WWI. Further, the text can also help us to grasp the emotional effect that this event generated in those attending the ceremony. The Hebrew *incipit* included the usual Jewish formulas: “Oh Lord of the World we are Your people the House of Israel, the people You created so that Your glory could be praised, Your sons and sons of Your companion, the seed of Your beloved Abraham.”<sup>78</sup> The prayer incorporated several biblical citations, for instance Leviticus 26: 6: “And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will rid evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land.”<sup>79</sup> The French text was even more explicit and directly connected to the reality of WWI: “A terrible war broke out [...]. Civilization is regressing. [...] Oh Lord, may you grant wisdom to those who lead the nations....”<sup>80</sup>

This prayer – when compared with previous events such as the 1881 calls for “the advancement of civilization and true justice” during the *Fornaraki affair*, or the 1901 *initiation des jeunes filles* – can be considered as another example of how Alexandrian Jews and their leaders tried to address the problems the modern world imposed on them. It shows their response to necessity and their willingness to adjust their religious practices to historical contingencies. As I have already said, the European influence was crucial – a fact that, in this case, was emphasized by Della Pergola’s having been Italian. It is noteworthy that this kind of commemorative activity had gained popularity first among European Jews, signalling their very active involvement in the war.<sup>81</sup>

Edgard Suarés, member of a family of Jewish bankers and businessmen and president of the city’s Jewish Community Council from 1914 to 1917, shared the rabbi’s compassionate response to WWI.<sup>82</sup> Suarés gave a

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<sup>77</sup> John H. Patterson, *With the Zionists in Gallipoli*, (London: Hutchinson, 1916), 45.

<sup>78</sup> *Prière pour la paix/Tefillah be'ad-ha-shalom*, (Alexandria: Mizrahi, 5676/1915), **N**, f. Alex IV.E.35.e, AIU.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, **λ**

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>81</sup> For the Italian case see: Mario Toscano, “Religione, patriottismo, sionismo: il rabbinato militare nell’Italia della Grande Guerra (1915-1918)”, *Zakhor* 8/8 (2005) and Ilaria Pavan, “‘Cingi al fianco, o prode, la spada’. I rabbini italiani di fronte alla Grande Guerra”, *Rivista di Storia del Cristianesimo* 2/2 (2006): 335-358.

<sup>82</sup> On Suarés: Kraemer, *The Jews*, 41.

speech – probably around June or July 1916<sup>83</sup> – in front of a monument erected by the ZMC with the support of the Jewish Community Council and the *municipalité*, to commemorate Jewish soldiers enlisted in European armies and killed in combat. “Here rest the heroes of the world’s independence,” men who fought “with great enthusiasm, [...] to defend the shared heritage of humanity: freedom. [...] Brothers, may you rest in peace. [...] We will soon come and tell you that the glorious dawn of justice has risen.”<sup>84</sup>

Surely such a ceremony, with its connections to Western bourgeois rituals, could be utilized by Suarés to clarify what *being modern* meant, but it was also a way of asserting his position and authority within local society.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, the blessing of the ZMC by Rabbi Della Pergola, the commemoration of the dead soldiers by Suarés, and the mixture of biblical citations and patriotic motifs, all show how dichotomies such as tradition/modernity, religious/secular, local/foreign are often too narrow and misleading when applied to modern Mediterranean Jewish societies.<sup>86</sup> What we need then is to map the trans-Mediterranean interplay between all these categories, opting for a broader definition of modernity that underlines its changing and unfinished character.<sup>87</sup>

WWI in Alexandria can be seen to encompass multiple rivalries and conflicts. The opposition between *localness* and *foreignness* – which, as shown by recent studies, was understood in multiple ways in early twentieth century Alexandria<sup>88</sup> – implied contrasting feelings of Egyptianness and Alexandrianness, class consciousness and, last but not least, a supra-national Jewish ethno-religious belonging which the AIU took pains to reinforce.

### **Moving histories: a conclusion**

This paper aimed to illustrate the multiple encounters between the Jews of Alexandria and the onset of modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I first examined the *Fornaraki affair*, a case of blood libel that occurred in 1881, which shed light on how modern practices and habits were reframed and adjusted to resolve local inter-ethnic

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<sup>83</sup> See the brief article on the ZMC available at: <http://www.bassatine.net/bassa11.php>, *Bassatine News – Jewish Community of Cairo* [accessed 27 June 2011].

<sup>84</sup> “Une pieuse cérémonie”, clipping from an unnamed newspaper, 5 March 1915, f. Alex IV.E.35.e, AIU.

<sup>85</sup> Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 22.

<sup>86</sup> See: Julia Philips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Sephardic Scholarly Worlds: Towards a Novel Geography of Modern Jewish History”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100/3 (2010): 349-384.

<sup>87</sup> On this consider: Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean*, 161-171.

<sup>88</sup> Hanley, “Foreignness”.

rivalries and class conflicts. In the subsequent pages I looked at the AIU's *École des filles* and its activities, such as the 1901 *initiation des jeunes filles*, in which ideas of femininity, Judaism, and class interacted. Finally, I considered WWI and the response of Alexandrian Jews, arguing that the war enabled the diffusion of a more modern, global consciousness of what living in this city meant.

I deliberately chose to narrate three rather different *histories*, as it is only by considering such a broad context of cultural practices and historical events that one can begin to acknowledge the complexity of turn-of-the-century Alexandria and its modernity. The former should be intended as a kind of toolbox Alexandrian Jews employed “for their own ends and in a way that went far beyond resistance or collaboration with the West.”<sup>89</sup> The Jews – together with other sectors of local society – tried to construct alternative paths towards their socio-economic and cultural emancipation, without renouncing to their fruitful history of Mediterranean trans-communalism, mixing Jewish traditional knowledge and secularist ideas, economic realities and a diverse *social imaginary*.<sup>90</sup>

I would argue that there was no clear-cut *Jewish* approach to modernity in Alexandria, but rather we find histories and events that distinguished most of the Jews from their surroundings and highlighted possible specificities in terms of social practices, religiosity, and so on. The events I looked at can also illuminate hitherto underscored meanings of cosmopolitanism in colonial Alexandria, going beyond nostalgic and static understandings of the term and interpreting it in a more flexible manner, which includes upper and lower class individuals, external actors such as the AIU teachers, migrant workers and refugees. Finally, what all this suggests is that we consider the encounter(s) between the Jews and modernity in Alexandria as a set of *moving histories*,<sup>91</sup> by which I intend historical narrations entailing a strong emotional and imaginative connotation, destabilizing national and ethno-religious boundaries, reframing class and its distinctions, and finally showing the diversity of

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<sup>89</sup> Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, 17, my emphasis.

<sup>90</sup> On the notion of social imaginary: Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie. An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Imaginary: Creation in The Social-Historical Domain”, in *World in Fragments. Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and The Imagination*, ed. David Ames Curtis, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3-18 and Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>91</sup> See: Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, “Introduction: The Politics of Intimacy in an Age of Empire”, in *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire*, eds. Tony Ballantyne, Antoinette Burton, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 1-28. Consider also the seminal essay by James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures”, *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96-112.

modern Alexandria and its Jewish population.

In conclusion, this essay aimed to re-imagine the history of Alexandrian Jews vis-à-vis the concept of modernity – which was and still is “easy to inhabit but difficult to define.”<sup>92</sup> Modernity should not be viewed as a linear corpus of practices and ideas, but rather, as a blending of fragments and events connecting the past with the present, and vice versa: a mobile *itinerary* through which Alexandrian Jews could find a space of their own in a rapidly changing city. Furthermore, although Europe had a crucial role in the making of modern Alexandria, one should remember that the former was not a *tabula rasa* but a vibrant and dynamic milieu, full of *histories* that “[had] already been imbibed [...] through certain shared dispositions, skills, competencies, and sentiments” by those who inhabited it.<sup>93</sup> The histories that I reconstructed might then help to deepen our understanding of modernity in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, with regard to the Jews, I have tried to show their encounter – sometimes a *clash* – with modernity, and their mediation between different traditions and ideas, highlighting the dialogic and dynamic nature of local societies and shedding light on possible disruptions in the hierarchical relations between Europe and the *Orient*.<sup>94</sup>

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**How to quote this article:**

Dario Miccoli, *Moving Histories. The Jews and Modernity in Alexandria 1881-1919*, in “Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC”, N. 2 October 2011  
*url*: [www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=223](http://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=223)

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<sup>92</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity. Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), XIX.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, XXIII.

<sup>94</sup> On this: Ballantyne and Burton, “Introduction”, 3 and onwards.