Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History
Journal of Fondazione CDEC

Issue n. 4, November 2012
Issn 2037-741X

Memory and Forgetting among Jews from the Arab-Muslim Countries. Contested Narratives of a Shared Past

by *Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Piera Rossetto*

Summary

FOCUS

Memory and Forgetting among Jews from the Arab-Muslim Countries. Contested Narratives of a Shared Past

by *Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Piera Rossetto*

Introduction[1]

"Zouzef Tayayou has left Nedroma *(Algeria)*. He did, however, hold on for a long time, like a child who refuses to be weaned and separated from his mother. In the end, he gave in, following the footsteps of the numerous others that went before him in their exodus. What did he and the others leave behind in the city that sheltered them for centuries? Perhaps they left their homes and their shops; certainly, they left a little of their style of living; but especially, they left, many memories, for these "people of the book" remain a part of the collective memory of this city and the surrounding area."

Belkacem Mebarki, "Zouzef Tayayou (Joseph the Tailor): A Jew from Nedroma, and the Others", in *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa*, eds. Emily Benichou Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, 340).

In this issue we examine themes which are linked to memory studies and which have witnessed significant development in recent decades due to the strengthening of multiculturalism in the 1980s. The former, demanding equal respect for the various cultures making up a society and pursuing the aim of promoting and preserving cultural diversity, has contributed to a challenging of mainstream historiography and to a re-evaluation of memories considered "minor." This explains how new spaces have developed to allow a counter-memory to challenge the dominant narrative. In Israeli society this has meant re-appraising the Zionist master narrative and giving expression to the different histories that are a part of the collective memory of the Jews of Arab Islamic countries, those who arrived in Israel[2] from the end of the 1940s, but also to the histories of Palestinian Israelis.[3]

---

[1] Emanuela Trevisan Semi is the author of the "Introduction," Piera Rossetto of the "Overview."

[2] There is a vast literature in this regard. Among the most significant works see Yehouda Shenhav, *Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse*, (New York-London: New York University Press, 2001); Aziza Khazzoom, *Shifting Boundaries and Inequality in Israel, or how the Polish Peddler became a German Intellectual* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East /West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

[3] See for example Daniel Bar-Tal and Yona Teichman, *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict: Representations of Arabs in Israeli Jewish Society,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005);

Memory studies have flourished in particular due to the rediscovery of the works of Maurice Halbwachs,[4] to the publications of *Les lieux de mémoire* by Pierre Nora[5] and especially thanks to the re-visiting, debate and further study conducted by Paul Ricoeur on the themes dealt with by Halbwachs and Nora,[6] all authors who will be the principal theoretical points of reference in this issue. In the task of memory re-construction, literary works can function as memory archives and contribute to a deeper and more greatly diversified understanding of the past, especially if there is access to a vast literary corpus, as is that constituted by the Jews originating from the Arab Muslim countries. The use of a literary corpus allows the re-integration into historiography of a memory which the history written by those holding power has marginalized or erased. The *Mizraḥim* protagonists and what they write has had the effect of putting what was once on the margins at the very centre of the writing of history, with a re-appropriation of their own history. Thanks to literary narration, to the novel and to poetry, those who have been marginalized can make an addendum to the official historiography; the voice of the underdogs can be heard and integrated into the master narrative.[7]

Another tool that has showed itself to be useful in re-constructing migratory paths between memory and oblivion is the use of life stories corresponding to a biography in the form of narration, where the subject gives a particular significance to their own life story or conduct.[8]

In this issue we use various terms to define Jews originating from Arab-Islamic countries: *Mizraḥim* (Orientals), *edot ha-mizraḥ* (Oriental communities) and *Sefardim*, but other terms still could be used, such as Arab Jews.[9] We are dealing here with words which have a history and which refer to categories requiring specification. The use of these terms has often sparked off lively debates and they are rarely used in daily life by the ordinary members of these communities, although political and intellectual debate may well lay claim to them.

Two academics in particular, Ella Shohat and Yehouda Shenhav, have used and discussed the term Arab Jews, which the writer Albert Memmi had already employed in the 1970s. Ella Shohat used this term, explaining that by " 'Arab Jew' I refer to people of Jewish faith historically linked to the Arab Muslim world"[10] while Shenhav, who will entitle his own essay precisely *The Arab Jews*, reminds us that the term " 'Arab Jews' (rather than *Mizraḥim*, which literally means "Orientals") challenges the binary opposition between Arab and Jew in Zionist discourse, a dichotomy that renders the linking of Arabs and Jews in

---

Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geography of the Displaced,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

4 Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective,* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997, I ed. 1950) and Id., *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire,* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994 , 1 ed. 1925).

5 *Les lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1986).

6 Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli,* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

7 See Ktzia Alon, *Oriental Israeli Poetics,* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad, 2011) [Hebrew].

8 See Daniel Bertaux, *Les récits de vie,* (Paris: Nathan, 1997).

9 See the essay by Yehouda Shenav with this title, see note 2.

10 Ella Shohat, "The invention of the Mizrahim", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29/1 (1999): 5-20, 5.

this way inconceivable"[11] and notes that such a term, used by Zionist emissaries and state functionaries,[12] is "a splicing together of two categories whose relations are at best ambivalent, given the long history of rupture between them. As a viable option of practice and discourse in Israeli society, 'Arab Jews' was short-lived, and the label was edited out by historical circumstances, particularly the rise of Jewish and Arab nationalism."[13] It is a term therefore with blurred outlines,[14] chosen by Shenhav also to show his criticism of what he defines as the binary opposition between Jews and Arabs and which often inflames debate. Albert Memmi must be cited in these discussions as it was he who publicly made use of the term,[15] only to then deny the possibility of using it.[16]

The term *Sefardi/m* refers to the Jews originally from Spain and the northern Mediterranean, and thus should strictly be used only when referring to the descendants of that population but its use is often improperly widened to the extent of including Jews from Arab countries who have never set eyes on Spain.

The term *Sefardim* has been replaced by *edot ha-mizraḥ* and *Mizraḥim*, usually translated into English as "Oriental Jews" or "Easteners". They stand for those Jewish communities that immigrated into Israel coming from an area stretching from North Africa to India, also including Ethiopia. We are dealing with a grouping that has been invented, as has been amply demonstrated by Ella Shohat. It is a category distinguished above all by a connotation in opposition to Ashkenaziness: "Mizrahim…condenses a number of connotations: it celebrates the Jewish past in the Eastern world; it affirms the pan-Oriental communities developed in Israel itself; and it evokes a future of revived cohabitation with the Arab Muslim East."[17] The term *Mizraḥim* often takes on connotations of claiming identity and of ethnicisation, used as it is by intellectuals and artists to lay claim to a sort of *Mizraḥi* pride. As Arnold Lewis has remarked,[18] basing himself on a field study conducted on a city of 3500 inhabitants with partly North African origins (Kurdistanis, Tripolitans and

---

11 Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*, XI.

12 Ibid., *The Arab Jews*, 9.

13 Ivi.

14 For a deeper analysis and discussion of this term, see Emily Benichou Gottreich, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98/4 (2008): 433-451.

15 Albert Memmi, "What is an Arab-Jew?", in Albert Memmi, *Jews and Arabs,* (Chicago: J. Philip O'Hara, 1975, translated from *Juifs et Arabes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

16 In a recent conference ("Genre, Ethnicité et Religions: Le cas des migrations maghrébines comparées France-Quebec de 1945 à nos jours", Paris 17-18, April 2012) attended by one of the authors of this introduction (Emanuela Trevisan Semi), Albert Memmi, invited as guest of honour, returned to the use of the term Arab Jews, maintaining that since it is his custom to use concepts pragmatically, he could re-employ such a term.

17 Shohat, "The Invention of the Mizrahim", 14.

18 Arnold Lewis, "Phantom Ethnicity: « Oriental Jews » in Israeli Society", in *Perspectives on Israeli Anthropology*, eds. Esther Herzog et al., (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 57-72.

Tunisians), the ethnic category of Oriental Jews held little importance for most of these people. In fact the various groups who consider themselves chiefly Israelis defined themselves on certain occasions as Kurdistanis, Tripolitans and Tunisians but never as *Mizraḥim*. In a research that one of the authors of this introduction is presently carrying out on the ethnic Moroccan museums in Israel,[19] the same phenomenon has been observed in the course of interviews conducted with the planners of these museums. These never used the term *Mizraḥim* but rather *yoẓei Morocco* (originating from Morocco), *yoẓei arẓot Arav* (originating from Arab countries), *yoẓei arẓot Islam* (originating from Islamic countries), *yehudei Maghreb* (Jews from the Maghreb) and *yehudei Islam* (Jews of Islam). However in literature and music the term *Mizraḥi* have become widely used.

More specifically in this issue we propose to consider the shared and unshared memory of Jews from the Arab-Muslim countries of the Diaspora and of those Jews from the Arab-Muslim countries who have found themselves on the edge of the master narrative of the new State of Israel and the memories that are unshared or contested in the narratives of Jews and Palestinians. In the case of Morocco, the memory that Muslims have of the Jews who lived among them has also been taken into consideration.

Aleida Assman, in her essay[20] where she mentions de-legitimisation, one of the characteristics of the functions of memory, has written that it is easier for the winners to forget history than for those who have been defeated: the winners can afford to forget while on the other hand the defeated – those who are not resigned to their fate and are forced to go back and rethink how it could have been – cannot.

We know how this has been relevant for the Jewish people, characterised by an excess of memory (compared to others who have too little memory), as has been pointed out by Paul Ricoeur. In fact Judaism has developed a system of ritualized memory of its founding events, thanks to the cyclical feasts and celebrations that occur every year and to the use of very elaborate mnemonic techniques that allow Jews to continue to pass down from generation to generation the memory of what they think took place once upon a time and that can be summarized by the very famous sentence "you must remember not to forget what Amalek did to you."

In other words we propose to reconsider the voices of actors who were not winners and the history of the State of Israel and of nation building from the perspective of non-hegemonic groups.

The memory of non-hegemonic groups can be recovered, as stated above, through literary sources, oral histories and images but also from photographs, films and documentaries; it may also be representative of different forms of resistance. Aleida Assman mentions several examples of resistance that are

[19] Emanuela Trevisan Semi.

[20] Aleida Assman, *Ricordare*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), 154 (*Erinnerungsräume. Formen und des Wandlunger kulturullen Gedächtnisses*, 1999).

carried forward by the defeated and the oppressed performing a function of de-legitimisation against a system which is deemed as oppressive.
It is in the light of the interpretation of memory as a form of resistance to different systems of power in the Middle East that we wish to publish the articles in this issue. It is an issue that will deal both with shared and unshared memory and with selective oblivion, which means the possibility to select memories.
Paul Ricoeur[21] points out that not every track is considered worthy of being followed and then stored away in order to be organised later in the official history and that the oblivion that occurs during this phase of storage may be the subject of memory of second degree, a history of the memory of oblivion.
The forgetting that did not enter into the official history and that gave rise to primary and secondary narratives will become also a matter of particular relevance in this issue.
The memory that is recovered through interviews focused on personal memories enhancing the emotions and tied to memories. We appreciate that the subjectivity of the interviewee could also emerge in the papers of this issue, a subjectivity that will be "re-introduced in the story," propelling the reconstruction not of the history but of a multitude of stories.[22]
Lucette Valensi and Nathan Wachtel[23] argued about the potential that individual memories located between the individual and the collective have in that may maintain and cultivate a sense of the past and each story is fed by subjective emotions.
The emotions that can emerge in both literary texts and in interviews underlie the feature of irrefutability that emotional memories have: "they cannot be correct, we cannot agree, because they are produced and dissolve with the vivacity of impressions connoted affectively."[24]
Collective memory that depends on the ways in which individual memories are kept, transported and stabilized by the social groups to which the individual belongs, generates a current of thought that maintains that the past can still continue to live within the group that holds it. These memories provide the specificity and consistency of the group especially when facing major historical changes. Through the transmission of symbols and places of memory that are felt as shared, the individual participates and maintains its collective memory, a memory that is still alive in the individual memories and is part of a broader set of memories. Knowing that societies have always arranged their own representations of the past on the basis of the present and knowing that today it is primarily through the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that the representations of Jews who lived in Arab countries or Israel / Palestine are formed, we must try also to understand the place this past occupies in the

[21] Paul Ricoeur, *Ricordare, dimenticare, perdonare*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004), 106-7 (*Das Rätsel der Vergangenheit. Erinnern-Vergessen-Verzeihen,* Göttingen, 1998).
[22] Assman, *Ricordare*, 301.
[23] Lucette Valensi and Nathan Wachtel, *Mémoires juives*, (Paris: Gallimard-Julliard, 1986).
[24] Assman, *Ricordare*, 304.

construction of these representations. In fact in this issue we do not intend merely to preserve glimpses of the history of the Jewish communities in Arab-Muslim countries or in Israel or of the Palestinians in Israel through memory, but more to consider the influence of the representations and the self-representations in the discourse that has built up today both in Israel and in the Arab-Muslim countries.
In this issue we will take into account the work of construction and reconstruction of identity such as in moments of great historical changes and in this regard we will consider literary and the historical sources as well as oral testimonies, knowing that the little stories or the individual cases help to form the greater history.

Overview[25]

"And so, little by little, language melted into language, landscape into landscape, and culture into culture. The years brought changes, small and large, and Iraq somehow seemed now close, now faraway. But the stars that flickered over our Baghdad rooftop are the same stars I can still see-on a cloudless night- from my balcony in Tel Aviv."
Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday. The Making of an Arab Jew* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2007, 186).

The essays presented in this issue have been written by established scholars and young researchers, concentrating on different thematic areas within the broad theoretical framework of memory studies outlined by Trevisan Semi's introduction to the issue. Almost all of them deal with history, memory and (self-) representations of the so-called "*Mizraḥi* Jews," with all the nuances, distinctions, and debates that this term entails.
The author of this overview[26] proposes to analyse and group the essays according to some shared key themes/research methodology, trying to highlight what is shared among them and what links articles that clearly arch over time and space in a truly remarkable way. Being a personal interpretation of the texts, this section presents the author's view on the contributions and does not, of course, intend to replace the contributors' arguments and conclusions. To the reader is left the task – and the pleasure – of scrutinising them by exploring the issue.
A first group of essays by Cohen-Fournier, Cohen and Messika, and Trevisan Semi, deals with memories as recollected by individuals, Jews and non-Jews alike, about Jewish life in North African and Middle Eastern countries, mainly in the second half of the twentieth century. That was the time, starting with the end of the 1940s and carrying on into through the 1950s and 60s, in which the major waves of emigration of Jews from the North Africa and the Middle East drastically reduced and almost put an end to the Jewish presence in these

[25] If not indicated with a reference in a footnote, quotation marks will be used to introduce terms or expressions used by the author of the essay considered in that particular section of the overview.
[26] Piera Rossetto.

countries. All three articles are based on interviews and life stories, which means oral sources, collected in different countries, both of origin and of arrival after emigration, such as Morocco, France, Israel and Canada. These sources are particularly valuable since they convey "not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did."[27] They open the floor to subjectivity, in the same way as they provide an example of how "the organization of the narrative (subject to rules which are mostly the result of collective elaboration) reveals a great deal of the speakers' relationship with their own history."[28]

The first two articles mentioned above focus on a limited number of life stories, which are part of the project *Life stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide and human rights violation,* CURA-Concordia, 2007-2012.[29] Cohen-Fournier, herself an interviewer in the sub-group *Holocaust and Other Persecutions Against Jews Research Group*,[30] introduces the project by pointing out that "a few hundred interviews were collected in different community groups, using a methodology of oral history to explore the social memories of trauma and displacement through individual experiences."

In her contribution to this issue, Cohen-Fournier tackles the question of how the departures of Jews from their countries of origin, in the context of a post-Shoah and post-colonial migration, have been represented by individual memories within the collective experience of uprooting. In particular, the researcher examines the narratives of four people from different countries: Algeria, Egypt and Iraq. These narratives, the researcher states, "allow for glimpses of personal comprehension in the realm of history" and reveal a paradigm present in certain individuals, where alongside the constant presence of feelings of fear, anger and discontent, an "ability to maintain agency over their own trajectory" is also found. A "sudden sense of agency" is inextricably bonded to the moment of the departure, the need to react to the worsening situation and to act in order to overcome it. Leaving is presented as a personal choice and decision. Indeed, the interviewees do not present themselves as victims but rather they show a strong form of resilience, thus granting their departure a strong sense of legitimisation. This represents a construction of the individual memory that contrasts with the collective one, creating a conflict between shared and unshared memories. Not sharing their personal memories in public might represent "a way of reconstructing their own histories, of coping with a reality only known to themselves, and of ignoring history," affirms the author. If this should be the case, it is at this crossroads of personal and collective memories where the main question proposed by the author also lies, that of whether "this state of denial could help them individually or collectively," or not.

---

[27] Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History", *History Workshop* 12 (1981): 96-107, 99-100.

[28] Ibid., 100.

[29] See: http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca.

[30] See: http://lifestoriesmontreal.ca/en/holocaust-working-group.

In the same framework of a post-Shoah and post-colonial migration, Cohen and Messika investigate the memories hold by Jews about life in their country of birth (mainly Morocco and Tunisia) and the motivations to leave. The aim of the research is to question the constitution of a shared memory and of a group memory. The authors analyse the shared and unshared memories of departures and depictions of colonial society as they are found in different social groups, choosing two peculiar perspectives: the generational perspective and the affiliation to one of the sectors into which colonial Moroccan society was divided, sectors based on ethnic, religious and gender lines, as the authors rightly point out. Articulating questions related to education, culture and language allows Cohen and Messika to consider the different discourses about emigration and departure. Some key elements emerge from the different narratives, delineating a sharing of memories based on age group and social group: those who were influential in the decision of leaving; the issue of children's education; the absence of a future in their countries of birth, a common perception by the westernized sector for instance; the role of French culture in influencing the direction of emigration and its outcome in the receiving country. The difference in narrative is quite striking between those who left Morocco or Tunisia in the immediate aftermath of the foundation of the State of Israel (1948) and those who left in the fifties, mainly after the independence of the countries (1956). In their discourses, the authors claim, the rationalization of their departure seems to stem from an individual or family decision, even though the feeling that "they had to leave" is also conveyed. By way of conclusion to their contribution, Cohen and Messika state their "attempt to better understand the cognitive and commemorative processes of some of the people who have experienced these migrations, mainly from the Westernized sector," as their interviews were conducted in Paris and Montreal. Indeed the authors call for "a vast project (…) to better understand the memories of people of other sectors who have migrated elsewhere to get a more nuanced and complete picture of this moment." The essay by Trevisan Semi also contributes to enlarging this picture by including the point of view of Muslims on Jews' emigration from Morocco in the same period of time considered by the previous articles.

Trevisan Semi's essay takes its cue from research conducted by the author in Meknès with Hanane Sekkat Hatimi (from 2005 through to 2009). The research included nearly three hundred interviewees: mainly people who had met Jews in Morocco, but also university students and Jews from Meknès. As for Cohen and Messika, in this research the generational factor and the affiliation with one sector of the Moroccan society are also relevant perspectives, together with gender, to enquire about the memory of Jewish presence and history in Morocco. Trevisan Semi underlines that one peculiar feature of the country, in comparison to other Arab-Muslim countries, is "the continuity of past Jewish presence both in terms of places and items." This continuity is clearly manifested every year by the presence of thousands of Jews of Moroccan origin from Israel, France and Canada arriving in the

country to attend *hillula*, visit cemeteries or friends still living in Morocco. According to the scholar, this continuity "allows a historical memory to be cultivated" and "to be constantly updated through the streams of memory stemming from and involving these visitors." Nevertheless, Trevisan Semi recognises that Morocco too is not exempt from what Aomar Boum defines as "a post-colonial historiographical silence."[31] As a consequence of this, the researcher proposes to go beyond the silence of official historiography and to engage with some fundamental questions: Are there traces left of the memory of the past in which Jews played a crucial role? Is there a nostalgia for that past? Do we still today perceive the absence of such an important part of Moroccan history as the Jewish one has been? And how is it eventually perceived? What are the points of sharing and of "unsharing" of memories between Jews and Muslims in the Moroccan case? Indeed, memories are not only part of what constitutes one's own personal story, but they also nourish and fuel collective expressions, such as self-representing narrative strategies. These issues might represent the common ground for a second group of essays, which includes articles by Moreno, Gilzmer, and to a certain extent Rossetto.

Moreno's essay opens by recalling some key passages of the academic literature produced in Israel over past decades about the *Mizraḥim*: from the "melting pot" harmony-oriented ethos (1970s) to the post-Zionist/post-colonial critique on the subject (1990s), passing through projects of "ethnic restoration" (e.g. the Shas party) aimed at "bringing the silenced *Mizraḥi* voice to light." Among such projects, Moreno discusses the history, role and scope of the "Mabat" association, founded in 1979 as "the principal émigré association of Spanish-Moroccans in Israel." According to the researcher, the association follows a parallel process of ethnic restoration among the community of Jews of Tangier in Israel and has since then promoted self-representing narrative strategies aimed at contesting "the general representation of Moroccans as *Mizraḥim* with the sense of 'their own' Moroccan ethnic history."

Moreno bases his argumentation on interviews he recently conducted in Israel with Tangier's Jews and on the analysis of the content of circulars and other publications by Mabat. Self-representing narratives by Tangier Jews included stressing the value of their own cultural and historical heritage (e.g. the language used, Hakitia, or their way of celebrating religious feasts such as Mimouna) in contrast with the general representation of Moroccans in Israel, "with which they had dissociated." Indeed, as stated in a publication of the association, "the 'dissatisfaction' with the emerging stereotype of Moroccans, as well as its counter self-representation, invoked the initiative among Mabat's initiators." As a result, while "the celebration of the ritual in pre-migration Morocco had little significance for the majority of local Jews, and even less so

[31] Aomar Boum, "Southern Moroccan Jewry between the Colonial Manufacture of Knowledge and the Postcolonial Historiographical Silence", in *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa*, eds. Emily Benichou Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 73-92.

among the westernized sector. In post-migration Israel, such symbols played a new role in shaping migrants' collective identity and became imperative tools in the self-representation of their absolute history." As a conclusion to his contribution, Moreno maintains that the process of Sephardic revival as it is found among Tangier Jews ought to be read in a "context of new identities formation, which was more oriented towards harmonic cohesiveness in the multi-ethnic social context in Israel."

Self-representing narrative strategies are found not only in groups but also on a personal level. The essay by Gilzmer aims to appraise "the construction of memory by North-African Jews in the Diaspora." The author makes her point by presenting the works and comparing the approaches of two Jewish women artists, one living in France and the other living in Quebec, both of North African origin: Eliette Abécassis and Michka Saäl. In so doing, Gilzmer intends "to show how the past is used for identity (de-) construction." This point is preceded by two other well- documented parts: the first is devoted to tracing the history and historiography of Jews in Arab countries; the second explores the concept of "Sefardic Jews." Gilzmer's perceptive scrutiny of Eliette Abécassis's novel "Sépharade" (2009) makes a motivated critique of what appears to be the novelist's concept of "identity": a "stable and persisting" thing, that has been frozen at a certain moment in time and cannot undergo change. This concept stands in sharp contrast to the reality of "a world characterized by migration and cultures intermingling," where "identities are constantly in flux, creating new forms and new identities," as Gilzmer rightly suggests. By contrast, the documentary "L'Arbre qui dort rêve à ses racines" (1992) by Michka Saäl presents "the experience of migration and the relation to the others" through a number of interviews with immigrants, a "kaleidoscope" that, according to Gilzmer, successfully conveys the complexity of issues of identity, integration, assimilation and cultural difference, without neglecting others, such as "the traumatic experience of migration and the loss of evidence and identity." Aware of the fact that her work lies at the "intersection of history and literary studies," the scholar makes it immediately clear that in this essay she does not intend to consider literary and film as historical sources, but rather as "memory archives and subjective representations of the past." As a counterpoint to this, the author of this overview (Rossetto) explores literary works written by *Mizraḥi* authors about the experience of transit camps (*ma'abarot*) in Israel in the 1950's. Rossetto claims that these literary representations can be rightly considered as valuable sources for history. As Aleida Assman has pointed out, through their imaginary literary supplement to historical memory, literary writers might fill the gaps in historical records and archives: gaps that can be considered as "the wounds in the memory itself, the scar of trauma that resisted representation

and can only belatedly, long after the deeply destructive events, become articulated in the framework of a literary text."[32]

After a brief historical introduction on the *ma'abarot*, Rossetto has chosen to analyse a literary corpus in Israeli literature, called "*Sifrut ha-ma'abarah*" (transit camp literature) and to interpret it as a "place of memory" and a "narrative place." The essay is based on existing studies on the topic of the Israeli transit camps, a subject on which there is an increasing scientific literature published both in English and Hebrew. At the same time, Rossetto makes use of long quotations from various novels in order to allow the reader to access the texts immediately and "to be immersed" in the experience of the place. In this sense, the author suggests different "literary declensions" through which *ma'abarah* might be interpreted and in particular as a narrative place of defiance, resistance, and exile.

The combination of historical and literary works on *ma'abarot* has the precise aim of highlighting how the two fields of research might mutually benefit and, in the case of *sifrut ha-ma'abarah*, it means to show how this literature is a valuable source for writing history from the point of view of the non-hegemonic group, the *Mizraḥi*, within Israeli society, led by the Ashkenazi elite at the time of mass emigration to Israel from Arab-Muslim countries.

A crucial concept presented in the essay is that of "space/place" as seen from the humanistic geography perspective. This concept has been associated with that of memory, suggesting theoretical elaborations such as Nora's "lieux de mémoire," or Ricoeur's interpretation: "Ces lieux de mémoire fonctionnent principalement à la façon des *reminders*, des indices de rappel, offrant tour à tour un appui à la mémoire défaillante, une lutte dans la lutte contre l'oubli, voire une suppléance muette de la mémoire morte. Les lieux «demeurent» comme des inscriptions, des monuments, potentiellement des documents."[33]

Indeed, "place" represents a concept not only charged with theoretical interpretations, but also fraught with very concrete consequences, as it is demonstrated when from the realm of literature we move to the reality of the land of Israel and Palestine.

Bonds between memory, space and representations constitute the object of study in Esu's essay, which opens with the clear observation that Israel and Palestine, "over the course of their historical conflict, have created a complex patchwork of memory narratives dealing with different representations of the same landscape."

In order to explore the intertwining of memory, landscape, territory and its representations, Esu grounds her argumentation on theoretical concepts such as that of mythscape (Bell), those found in ethnic and nationalism studies (Smith, Anderson, Hobsbawm, Gellner), and memory studies (Halbwachs, Nora, Assman). Aware of the indelible traces left on the ground and on the

[32] Aleida Assman, "Canon and Archive", in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 97-107, 106.
[33] Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 49.

people by the 1948 and 1967 wars, the author expresses her thoughts by tackling the question of how Israel and Palestine "have used space as a temporal-spatial tool to practice the remembering of lost land and to elaborate an imaginative geography?" It is in respect to this question that the different case studies considered in the article should be appraised.

When discussing the topic of "remembering and practicing the rhetoric of return," Esu choses to analyse the relevance of the memories of Kfar Etzion fallen defenders. The author's purpose is to focus "on space-territory meanings and implications deployed in the outcomes of the 1967 war." According to the scholar, in this case the continuity and the evolution of meanings related to space transformation are undoubtedly relevant in order "to understand space as a temporal-spatial tool to elaborate national narrative." On the other hand, the master narration on the Palestinian side is the memory framework of Al-Nakba, the "marker that defines the *before* and the *after* of the tragedy, "a remembrance of the exodus also fluctuates between the difficulty of representing the event oneself, and the exemplarity of one's experience." In this case, projects of oral history preservation, collections of pictures, or virtual space dedicated to host recorded interviews become the tools "to transform the loss in a living locality."

Both narratives find a common space under what the author has termed "imaginative geography," that is to say the reassertion of the "implicate relations" between society and space and between Israelis and Palestinians. Both, Israelis and Palestinians, concludes Esu, "following different paths and historical times, were/are engaged in keeping the land alive. If the 'next year in Jerusalem' is a liturgical memory revoked every year around the Jews Seder table all around the world, the Palestinian oral remembering rises as a secular symbolism."

Esu's essay introduces to the issue the argument of the "contested land," thus granting the readers a "linking-term" – "contested" – that leads us to the last two articles of this focus section. If land can be contested, as we have just seen, in the intertwining of memories and representations, historical narratives can also be contested or at least put into question. This is what the contributions by Wagenhofer and Miccoli highlight by examining two specific study cases: the contemporary debate on Mohammed V and the Moroccan Jews under the Vichy regime and the case of Jews and the study of history in Egypt between the wars (1920s-1940s).

Wagenhofer's essay examines "current debates on the fate of Moroccan Jews under the Vichy regime and the attitude of the sultan towards his Jewish subjects" as they are expressed in the new media, such as internet platforms, chat rooms and blogs.[34] According to the author in fact, the web has certainly had an important impact on Arab societies, thanks to its "powerful ability to tackle issues that are considered taboo and to question established points of

[34] On the relevance of web platforms see also, Ella Shohat, "By the Bitstream of Babylon. Cyberfrontiers and Diasporic Vistas", in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy, (New York and London, 1999), 213-232.

view." It could be argued that virtual sources like the internet lack reliability since the identity of those who take part in the debate is not known or is not known with certainty. Regarding this observation, it might be useful to consider the discussion about "credibility" with reference to oral sources. As rightly suggested by Portelli in discussing the relationship between written and oral sources, "the credibility of oral sources is a different credibility."[35] In this case, what is important to take into account is that "they [written and oral sources] have common characteristics as well as autonomous and specific functions which only either one can fill (or which one set of sources fills better than the other); therefore they require different and specific interpretative instruments."[36]

I propose to interpret the contribution by Wagenhofer in a similar way; rather than sources to "reconstruct" history, debates about Moroccan history on web platforms can be interpreted as useful instruments "to shed light on Moroccan self-image today" and "on tendencies towards liberalisation and political change in Moroccan society." They are sources with specific functions and have the potentiality of addressing specific questions.

In the wider frame of the relationship between modern media and memory, this article shows how "new media technologies (…) allow new forms of remembrance for the individual."[37] Indeed, it contributes to addressing "the question of how societies deal with their past in the media system of the present."[38]

An example of complementarity between sources is prompted by Miccoli's essay, both regarding the methodology and the content of his article.

Miccoli chooses in his essay to put into question the often argued narrative that "Egyptian Jews did not participate much in the cultural and political life of monarchical Egypt," by taking into consideration the development of Egyptian historiography in the 1920s and by analysing the case of Maurice Fargeon, "a journalist and amateur historian, and an active member of the Jewish Community of Cairo."

The first part of the essay, in which Miccoli examines the "involvement of Egyptian Jewish notables in the historiographical revival promoted by King Fu'ad in the 1920s", is a fully-documented analysis of the origin, aims and protagonists of the project of "national history (re-)writing" promoted by King Fu'ad. This project included the development of a royalist historiographical school around the royal palace of 'Abdin.

The second part of the essay is devoted to discussing the two main books by Fargeon on the history of Egyptian Jewry, written at a time when "the so-called Egyptian *liberal age* slowly entered into crisis", because of the "spreading

[35] Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History", 100.
[36] Ibid., 97.
[37] Martin Zierold, "Memory and Media Cultures", in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 399-407, 404.
[38] Ibid., 406.

of more radical nationalist and Islamic movements." Miccoli recognises that Fargeon's books are known to and "cited by all scholars who have dealt with the history of Egyptian Jews," but they have not been analysed as historical sources. The aim of the researcher is then "to read[ing] them as an attempt to forge a historical memory which connected Egyptian Jews and non-Jews, combining both historical facts and fictitious elements so as to produce a charming – yet partly *imagined* – past." This element of innovation introduced by Miccoli allows us a fascinating excursus through Fargeon's *oeuvres* and helps us to better unveil the different interpretations they might suggest as well as the limits they carry with them.

As a final remark in this overview, we should underline the inter-disciplinary approach adopted in this issue dedicated to shared and unshared memories among Jews and non-Jews from Arab-Muslim countries in Israel and the Diaspora. This approach means to stress the complex structure of the object of our inquiry both in terms of subjects involved and historical settings considered. The different disciplines to which the contributors to this issue relate as their framework of reference show the multiplicity of voices needed to explore the matter in a setting of plurality, complementarity and mutual inspiration, while aware of the specificity that each discipline and approach brings with it.

How to quote this article
Emanuela Trevisan Semi, Piera Rossetto, *Memory and Forgetting among Jews from the Arab-Muslim Countries. Contested Narratives of a Shared Past*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n. 4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/index.php?issue=4

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

by *Sara Cohen Fournier*

Abstract

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

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

Introduction

Under history, memory and forgetting.
Under memory and forgetting, life.
But writing a life is another story.
Incompletion.
Paul Ricoeur [1]

Incompletion reveals the openness of our being, the provision for interpretations of human narratives through the 'imaginary' construction. As individuals celebrate events or reduce their narratives to omit elements, stories become dependent on the perception of the individual. Indeed the boundary between the events that happened, and the impressions left within the individuals' realm are often blurred by the individual's memory. Intertwined, these stories become personal 'truth,' also known as 'shared imagination.'[2] Through the study of narratives, the shared or unshared memories reflect the historical materialism that each individual shape, which influences their

[1] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 506.
[2] Alessandro Portelli, "What makes oral history different", in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 2nd ed, (London: Routledge, 2006), 37–38.

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

In the four decades following World War II, Muslim-Arab countries were emptied of their Jewish communities. Once prosperous and ingrained in the landscape for centuries, Jews from Muslim-Arab lands came to settle in various countries. Mapping the specifics of this exodus led to several findings.[3] However, the question remains as to how this displacement occurred and how individuals now living in Montreal share and tell these memories. In 2007, I was approached by the project *Life Stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocides and human rights violation* to interview individuals from this community, a community to which I belong, that calls itself the Montreal Sephardic community (CSQ). Having been raised by a Jewish Moroccan mother, who had brought us many times back to her country of origin, Morocco, I was interested in the reason of their departure from this beautiful country for the snowy Montreal. I wanted to know what was told within their narratives and how was formulated their identity. I also wanted to compare their migration to the one of Jews from the Middle East, who were present in Montreal in some numbers, particularly at the synagogue I attended, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue.

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

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

[3] Norman M Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands In Modern Time*s, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society,1991); Michael M. Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century, The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria*, (New York: New York University Press, 1994); *Le monde sépharade*, ed. Shmuel Trigano (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2006).

Jewish Moroccan nationality.[4] Nevertheless, triggered by a feeling of insecurity, well-documented now by historians,[5] their departure took place and was spread over four decades, beginning with their mass migration to Israel in 1948, through the 1970s and 1980s when the last contingents arrived in Canada. These stories tended to emphasize the interviewees' freedom to choose their destination, sometimes underestimating the violence of the environment. In this sense, the plurality of migratory trajectories is quite significant. In this article, I will not touch upon the narratives of Moroccan displacement (which is mentioned here to inform my own position, as well as the existence of a debate around the migration of Jews from Arab Muslim lands). Rather, I will concentrate here on how some perceived their migration as forced departures. I will raise the question on how four individuals represented their departure from Iraq, Algeria and Egypt? Are there some similarities in the construction of their narrative? And can we speak of individual resilience or a collective denial of their particular history in the creation of these stories?

In the midst of a massive displacement, when almost a totality of a group migrates, many individuals, and not the collectivity, might have difficulty considering the departure as chosen. Instead the departure is seen as imposed, or even forced.[6] However within our interviewees' narratives, the stoic bearing of difficult departure is perceived as a powerful force sustaining continuity and coherence.[7] This process is exemplified in the narratives below. The ability to avoid becoming a victim of events allow for a legitimization of departure, and not a victimization of the individual.[8] This narrative allows them to construct and reconstruct their history. By the dint of memory, the opposition between shared, and unshared memory can be identified.[9] And the unveiling of these emotions still present from the unshared memories could allow reconciliation of individual's past and the collective's history.

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

---

[4] Daniel Rivet, *Le Maghreb à l'épreuve de la colonisation*, (Paris: A. Fayard, 2010).

[5] Michel Abitbol, *Histoire du Maroc*, (Paris: Perrin, 2009).

[6] Salman Akhtar, "The Immigrant, the Exile, and the Experience of Nostalgia", *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 1/2 (1999): 123-130.

[7] Rickva Tuval-Mashiach et al., "Coping with Trauma: Narrative and Cognitive Perspectives", *Psychiatry* 67/3 (2004): 280-293.

[8] Didier Fassin and Richard Retchman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 114.

[9] Allan Young, "Bruno et le fou sacré : Mythe, mimesis et la transmission des mémoires traumatiques", *Évolution Psychiatrique* 71/3 (2006): 485-504.

The Context of the Research

Through the project *Life Stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide and other human rights violations*, a few hundred interviews were collected in different community groups, using a methodology of oral history to explore the social memories of trauma and displacement through individual experiences.[10] This project aimed at understanding the meaning of mass violence and displacement within the migrants' social world, the narration of stories within their new adopted country and the expansion of this history to educate the larger public.

Within the *Holocaust and Other Persecutions Against Jews Research Group,* the collection of stories embroiders other persecutions against Jews as focusing resources to gather Sephardic Jewish stories that might have been ignored by previous oral history projects. The life stories were collected with Jews who were born in Muslim-Arab countries and are now settled in Montréal. These interviews were conducted usually by other members of the Sephardic community of Montréal, very openly. The interviews did not have time frame or constrictions other than that of the interviewee, who could stop the interview at anytime and decide to respond or not, to mention or not certain elements. The interviews thus analyzed in this article are narratives composed by the interviewee, in a shared authority mindset.[11]

The oral history methodology involves a discrepancy between the various oral sources and the different interpretations given by social sciences for the same events.[12] Indeed as these sources are created, the interviews are shaped by: the individual being interviewed, the moment of the interview in time, as well as the direction given by the interviewer. The subjectivity and narrative forms of these sources allow for an analysis of these testimonies within their "orality." The narratives become dependent on the perception of the individual, and the boundary between the events that happened outside, concerning the group, and the impressions left within the individuals' realm.[13] Thus we become more interested in the meaning behind the events that took place, in order to shed a new light on the individuals' perception of events that framed their lives. This research does not necessarily aim to be generalized, but rather shows the

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

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

[12] Luisa Passerini, "Italian Working Class Culture between the Wars: Consensus to Fascism and Work Ideology", *International Journal of History* 8/1 (1980): 4-28.

[13] Portelli, "What makes oral history different," 37–38.

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

Anonymity: Unshared Collective Memories

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

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

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

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

past is still felt very vividly forty years after he/she arrived in Montreal; and how the "unsharing" of memories could potentially protect him/her.

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

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

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

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

[14] Gil Anidjan, "Muslim Jews", *Qui Parle* 18/1 (2009): 1-23.
[15] Mikhael Elbaz, "Les héritiers. Générations et identités chez les Juifs sépharades à Montréal", *Revue européenne de migrations internationales*: *Trajets générationnels – Immigrés et « ethniques », France et Québec*, 9/3 (1993): 13-34.
[16] Abraham Ben-Yaacob, Nissim Kazzaz, Hayyim J. Cohen and Avraham Yaari, "Baghdad", Encyclopaedia Judaica, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, 2nd ed.), Vol. 3., 55-59.
[17] Moshe Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq, 1948-1951*, (London: Frank Cass, 1997).
[18] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 77.

collective representation, from 'Arab' to 'Jew.'[19] This moment signals the beginning of an otherness, where certain elements of the history will be presented to reinforce the decline of the Jewish population in Baghdad. Indeed, with the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the inauguration of official policy of repression, the number of Jews rapidly declined to null. However, in the construction of memory, the story begins with a nostalgic past. Even though the Jewish community had already been targeted, Sandy starts with a beautiful description of her early years in Baghdad.

Sandy was born in Baghdad in October 1958 in a wealthy family.[20] She describes her childhood: "It was just wonderful. It was a lot of fun all the time. My parents always looked beautiful. I remember nice homes." Sandy starts her interview with her memory of her hometown, Baghdad, as an Edenic paradise. She talks of a peaceful and wonderful life, filled with guests, receptions, beauty and delight. She remembers her vast home, her little garden and a happy family. Her memories are nostalgic, holding dear these souvenirs as vignettes illuminating her early years. However, her description of space changes as feelings of confinement are being remembered and the difference it made:

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

At this moment in the interview, Sandy changes her tone. She is no longer innocently living, enjoying her surrounding, but she feels the confinement, restriction and otherness settling in because of her religious difference. She remembers this particular night waiting for her dad at home. Her narrative is then immediately followed with the story of the killing of a known relative. At this point she says: "Still even after all these years it's still very powerful in my heart and it's very, it's very stressful for me to talk about it." The interviewee is then asked to describe the events of January 27th, night of the public hanging of 11 Jews.[21] Her narrative from the Eden wonders go into a "terrible fear, really scared, it was just awful, a lot of black." The interviewee was just a child then, and she cannot find the words to express her anxiety:

---

[19] Ibid., 21-24.

[20] Her father sold cars and spare parts, and her mother came from a highly educated background (born in Palestine, she went to the American University in Lebanon). They were very involved in their community, both religious and geographical.

[21] In the night of January 27th, 1969, 11 Iraqi Jewish men were hanged publicly in Baghdad. Having been identified as "spies", the hanging brought the Jewish community to realize their days were counted. See, Kanan Makiya, *Republic of fear: the politics of modern Iraq,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

> Everybody was always fearing for their lives all the time. It was. It was just a dark cloud all the time. And then people had to find a way out. It was just a matter of time basically. You just knew your days were numbered; there was no way out, there was no way out. You could not get out of… Baghdad itself. You were not even allowed to leave Baghdad itself. So, I mean [nose running] we were also under surveillance. There was nothing they did not know all the time.

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

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

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

The departure became crucial, leaving no room for interrogation or doubt. It became imperative to leave, as Handlin showed for the Irish, the question was "leave or die."[22] The tale of the forced migrant takes shape, here, in its fullest form where death is the only other option. Furthermore, in the setting of the post-world war II turmoil, the fate of the Jews in Europe and the Holocaust loomed over them, finally grasping their mind that the worst that you could ever imagine had already arrived in European countries.

---

[22] Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002, 2nd ed.), 31.

This sudden sense of agency is underlined by the well-known Iraqi Jewish writer, Naïm Kattan,[23] who had left Iraq in 1948, before the creation of Israel with a scholarship to study literature in France: "Personally, I always say the best that happened to us was to be driven out and that we left… because we are all alive." He marks the point after telling the story of a bomb put in front of a Synagogue. He makes the insinuation that the bomb was placed by an undefined group of Iraqi Jews who were trying to force the departure of the Jewish population.

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

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

Robert: I am a Jew from Egypt

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

[23] Naïm Kattan, a writer and literary critic, was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 26 August 1928. Kattan migrated to Paris on a scholarship to study literature at the Sorbonne. He then left to Montreal in 1954. He is well-known for his fictionalized memories of the years in Baghdad: *Adieu, Babylone* (1975) and *Les Fruits arrachés* (1977).

stories collected outline the importance of the question of denaturalization. Laws in this direction were applied to Jews between 1950 and 1956, provoking their departure from Egypt.[24] For those who did not hold dual citizenship with another country, becoming stateless was a central element in their experience.
Robert was born in Alexandria, in a post World War II Egypt. His family arrived in Egypt, Alexandria under Napoleon and he recounts his family's departure of Alexandria in 1940 when the Germans began bombarding. His story is woven by a very strong presence of angry souvenirs, of bitter feeling towards the country as he describes it being "a somewhat bitter pill for an exodus from Egypt, Exodus Two as they say, the second exodus, extremely painful and distressing."
He left Egypt when he was only 17, in December 1962. Even as he talks today, 50 years latter, he cannot forgive his native country. His dad had died a few years before, and his mother got colon cancer that could only be treated in France. His mother, his sister and himself hence asked for the government's administration permission to leave the country. But it was only after one long year that they were granted the papers. His description of the departure is composed of very vivid imagery.

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

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

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

[24] Ruth Tolédano-Attias, "La dénaturalisation des Juifs d'Egypte", in *La fin du judaïsme en terres d'Islam*, ed. Shmuel Trigano, (Paris: Denoël, 2009), 51-87.

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

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

His story is entrenched with memories that he calls "indelible" and forever branded. The only material possession that he has been able to keep from Egypt was his Bar Mitzvah ring, one that he wears daily, the only ring he has on his hands during the interview, showing the presence of his youth anchored by his only material possession allowed out. The ring becomes a "linking object," crystallizing the self within an unfinished forgiving.[25] Svetlana Boym describes, in Russian immigrants, diasporic souvenirs as "transitional objects that reflect multiple belonging", "a cipher for exile itself and for a newfound exilic domesticity."[26] These objects are the descriptive units of their stories, tying the relations from there to here in a material presence. They allow the past to continuously inhabit the present in an everyday manner.

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

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

[25] Vamik D. Volkan, "After the Violence: The internal world and linking objects of a refugee family", in *Analysts in the Trenches: streets, schools, war zones*, eds. Bruce Sklarew, Stuart W. Twemlow, Sallye M. Wilkinson, (Hillside, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2004), 77-102.

[26] Svetlana Boym, *The future of Nostalgia,* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 336.

He makes a distinction between being Egyptian and being a Jew from Egypt. Within the schism of being denied the right to be a citizen of Egypt, he was put in a liminal state. But instead of keeping his statelessness as his identity, he transforms his narrative to shape his discontent. Indeed he states ownership over his non-belonging. By cherishing these memories personally, he has the power and agency over his former country. He thus denies the shared belonging with other Egyptians, but rather he acknowledges his birth land as a simple land and not as marker of his identity.
He reveals at one point of the interview that difficulty in grasping with the events: "we must have been guilty somewhere for the simple fact of being Jewish at fifteen, sixteen…" This is the only part of the interview where he talks about the possible presence of one's responsibility. Found in the construction of the rest of his narrative is the place of *the other*, the presence of "Egypt" as the anti-thesis of the hero, the force creating hardship: the "Barbarians in costumes," or "this country," or the "Egyptian government." Indeed that view of a mastermind Egypt reigns in the description Robert makes of his departure. He reaffirms at the end that there will be no peace for him "there will be no, there will be no, uh of peace for me until there is not a recognition from the Egyptian government of what happened but I'm sure I would never see that day." We can hear in his speech the breach between the collective ability to reassess history, and the individual difficulty to tell his story. His narrative is anchored in this construction of a government dedicated at torturing the last memories of his country. And while his narrative is unveiled by the interviews, there is no dialogue that has been present between the Jews of Egypt and their native country. There exists no place collectively for the reconciliation where the silenced-displacement would allow for its inclusion in a global narrative, the only hope for an eventual forgiveness that could only take place collectively. Through the collective representation of forced displacement, Robert could maybe see the possible construction of an individual's closure of the past.

Pierre: my feeling is angst

Pierre was born in Algeria in 1945, as he describes: "from a French father, Jewish, from old tradition of Algerian and Algiers in particular, and a Belgian mother, uh Polish ancestry, Lodz specifically." The two having spent the Second World War in France, where they met, Pierre did not keep good memories of France, nor of its former colony Algeria, then a department of France. When the Algerian war of independence broke in 1960, almost 2 million French citizens left the colony in flames to be repatriated in metropolitan France in less than a year. Amongst them, most of the Jews born in Algeria, who had been granted French citizenship by the Crémieux Decree

of 1870, left also Algeria, albeit in different material conditions.[27] His description is presented as a terrific, horrible experience, where the Jews were unwanted and trapped everywhere they would go. He goes into a description of his childhood in a 'reflective nostalgia' to borrow the term from Svetlana Boym:

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

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

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

[27] "Even after Algerian Jews were naturalized by the Crémieux Decree of 1870 and many of them embraced Western habits as a means of distinguishing themselves from the Muslim masses, they remained integral to local Maghribi culture, especially in the world of music", in Emily Benichou Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter, *Jewish Culture and Society in North-Africa*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011): 16.

[28] Joshua Schreier, *Arabs of Jewish Faith, the Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria,* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 20-21.

involuntary ones,[29] Pierre internalizes this feeling as related to his own personality:

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

Psychological studies have shown that migration, forced or voluntary, experienced by older adolescents (Pierre was 17 years old) bring an increase in internalized anxiety.[30] Describing the events in a fragmentary manner during the interview, this anxiety becomes angst. He described the fear of living during the war in Algeria in the years 54 and 62

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

This fear of death and the constant danger indeed shows exposure to traumatic events, and their impact on memory. These impacts are not physical but psychological. The experience of events that bring intense emotions left an indelible impact. Pierre Janet showed, almost a century ago, that the separation of traumatic memories (fixed ideas) from the ordinary consciousness in individuals result in that the memories become automated.[31] These elements of memory connected to strong emotions create fragmentation in the continuity and coherence of the past. Here's an example in Pierre's narrative:

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

---

[29] Maria Eastmond, "Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced migrations Research", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20/2 (2007): 248-264.
[30] Elizabeth Batista-Pinto Wiese, "Culture and Migration: Psychological Trauma in Children and Adolescents", *Traumatology* 16/4 (2010): 142–152.
[31] Pierre Janet, *Psychological Healing: a historical and clinical study,* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1925).

Pierre links directly two ideas: one was to move above a dead body, and the other was the fear of finding his father in that state. This sense of loss of security is clearly demonstrated in this passage where the fear of death turns into feelings of anxiety and belonging to otherness. Security becomes impossible, especially confronted to the maid, the creation of the other: 'the Arab.' Indeed, this change of status and exclusion leads to the estrangement from his own country of origin, and the essentiality for him to leave. In addition, it creates a mythologizing of this event when he follows his narrative by: "I'm not ready to forget these hours, of anguish particularly."
When we talk about fear, if we follow the philosophy of Herbert Spencer, fear is the memory of pain, this memory can be passed either by experience or heredity.[32] Here, Pierre describes this anxiety as an inability to forget, but also something deeply internalized. The angst is transmitted within the interview, and we can wonder how will these memory be transmitted to future generations as his experience becomes the heritage he will give to his children, students etc.

Conclusion

In a post-Shoah era, where the universalization of the trauma and the supreme victim is based on the experience of Jews in Europe,[33] the space for expression of Sephardic Jews' memories of their displacement was relegated to the background. Indeed, the mass exodus was not accompanied by comparable massacres, leaving the displacement in silence. However, the presence of deep dislocations are heard when the space is created by the political and social context and to collect life stories. Indeed when we look carefully at the crafted stories told within the interviews presented here, we can see the agency that is presented by the individuals, where even as they were engaging in difficult situations, the story they share is one of 'active player,' bringing forward that collective notion of exile as a choice.
The memories, holding the social identity of a group displaced from different countries, have been transformed into personal reconstruction. Selection of these memories, far from being randomized, is created in order to forget certain elements. This particular mechanism of remembering however might not address the existing conflict between the emotions of fear, anger or dislocation, and the reconstructed story founded on decision-makers and denied-loss. These elements might allow for the community to be built in a state of being that is proud and has chosen the path taken, instead of one of dislocation and dismemberment. Indeed a key shift in the narratives is the

[32] Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2.
[33] Barbara Tint, "History, Memory, and Intractable Conflict", *Conflict Resolution Quaterly* 27/3 (2010): 239-256.

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

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

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

---

[34] Yolande Cohen and Linda Guerry, "Mariages et parcours migratoires: Juifs nés au Maroc et mariés à la Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue de Montréal (1969-1981)", *Studies in Religion/Etudes religieuses* 40/2 (2011): 297-317.

[35] *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 8.

[36] Kevin Avruch, "Truth and reconciliation commissions: problems in transitional justice and the reconstruction of identity*", Transcultural Psychiatry* 47 (2010): 33-49.

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

How to quote this article:
Sara Cohen Fournier, *Sharing and Unsharing Memories. Life stories of Jews from Muslim-Arab countries: fear, anger and discontent within a silenced displacement*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n. 4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=310

Sharing and Unsharing Memories of Jews of Moroccan Origin in Montréal and Paris Compared

by *Yolande Cohen and Martin Messika*[1]

Abstract

This text explores the memories of Moroccan Jews who left their country of origin to go to France and to Canada, through their life stories. By questioning the constitution of a shared memory and of a group memory, it stresses the interest to adopt a generational perspective to better understand the migration of this population. While some interviewees emphasize the rationalization of their departure, the younger ones, consider their leaving as a natural step in their many migrations. These distinctions are central to show how the memory of the departures and the depiction of the colonial society are shared by members of a group, and unshared with the larger Moroccan society.

Post-colonial migrations raise many questions regarding the conditions that have lead several millions of people to leave their countries of origin to construct new lives elsewhere. For the Jews who have left the colonial and national spaces of North Africa for Israel, for cities in metropolitan France and somewhat later for Canada, especially Montreal, Quebec, the question of their mass migration in a relatively short period of time gives rise to divergent interpretations.[2] The emigration of Jews from Morocco to Israel, in particular, is the subject of intense debate amongst historians. For some, it signals a real displacement of populations achieved by Israeli Zionist organizations in need of a labor force to populate the new State.[3] For others it is an exodus, encouraged by the international Zionist organizations, but which was rooted in the desire of these Jews to escape the humiliations and abuses committed against them in the name of the *Dhimma*.[4] For our part, we consider these migrations as part of a period of mass movement, situated in a post-colonial and post-Holocaust era, that radically transformed the complex relationships

[1] The authors wish to thank Myriam Chebat for her apt translation of this text from French to English. Our thanks are also extended to the Montreal life stories project.

[2] Nearly 20,000 North-African Jews emigrate to Canada mainly of Moroccan origin, 12,000 Jews of Algerian origin, 65,000 from Tunisia and 55,000 from Morocco settled in France according to Jacques Taieb's estimates "Immigrés d'Afrique du Nord: Combien? Quand? Pourquoi?", in *Terre d'exil, terre d'asile, Migrations juives en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, ed. Colette Zytnicki (Paris: Editions de l'Eclat, 2010), 149-154.

[3] Sami S. Chétrit, *The Mizraḥi Struggle in Israel: 1948-2003*, (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 2004) [Hebrew].

[4] Yigal Bin-Nun, "Psychosis or an Ability to Foresee the Future? The contribution of the World Jewish Organizations to the Establishment of Rights for Jews in Independent Morocco, 1955-1961", *REEH* 10 (2004): 25-67.

between the different ethnic and religious communities of these countries. In these recent historiographical debates, the stakes, in terms of politics and of memory that this history represents to the different protagonists is essential. Because the parameters of this history are still largely shifting,[5] and that the knowledge of the conditions in which these populations lived remain incomplete,[6] we have attempted to fill a gap in this historiography by soliciting the memories of some of the individuals concerned.

The work of Maurice Halbwachs has enabled the distinction between the two notions of individual memory and group memory.[7] For this sociologist, individual memory cannot be constructed without group memory.[8] At the end of the twentieth century, the themes of memory and remembrance were again questioned by Paul Ricoeur, in the perspective of studying what could be a "true memory." The foundation for his endeavor is marked by a political concern concerning memory.[9]

The migration of North African Jews does not, to the best of our knowledge, appear to be the object of commemoration and does not seem to be invested with symbolic meaning or a particular tradition. If the story of the exodus from Egypt is the object of ritual commemoration during the Passover holiday, nothing similar exists for the actual migrations experienced by these individuals.[10] Thus, it is difficult today to represent the different elements that nourish the memory of the Jewish populations originally from Morocco, the memories of their lives in their country of birth, and the motivations which have lead them to leave.

Through life stories, this text aims to explore these memories by questioning the constitution of a shared memory and of a group memory. Thus, the

---

[5] We were able to realize this during the Essaouira conference "Migrations, Identité et Modernité" which brought together many reseachers active in this field, and where the debates between historians, Moroccan, Jewish and and Muslim, Israeli and from the rest of the world testified to the intensity of the issues. For more information regarding this conference: http://sites.google.com/site/migrationsidentitemodernite/ (accessed 7 November 2011).

[6] See the now classic works of Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands In Modern Times*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991); Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa during the Second World War,* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); Michael M. Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century, The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria*, (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Mohamed Kenbib, *Juifs et Musulmans au Maroc*, (Rabat: Université Mohamed V Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, 1994). See also the more recent studies published under the direction of Shmuel Trigano, *La fin du judaïsme en terres d'Islam* (Paris: Denoël, 2009).

[7] Danielle Hervieu-Léger and Jean-Paul Willaime, *Sociologie et religions*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001).

[8] Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, (Paris: Mouton, 1976), 38.

[9] Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2000), 1. On this aspect: Barash Jeffrey Andrew, "Qu'est-ce que la mémoire collective? Réflexions sur l'interprétation de la mémoire chez Paul Ricoeur", *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 50/2 (2006): 185-195.

[10] Laurence Podselver studied the reconfiguration of practices of pilgrimage of Jews originally from Tunisia, in France: Laurence Podselver, "Le pèlerinage de Maarabi à Sarcelles, un pèlerinage transposé du judaïsme tunisien", *Pardès* 28 (2000): 205-217.

delineations within the group will be explored through individual life stories. Is the common experience of migration enough to create a collective memory of the departure? In order to answer this question, we will explore the ways in which the different groups that compose the colonial world of the Protectorate are described. At the heart of this analysis, the depictions of the decision to leave by the participants provide us with much insight. Is it the subject of an exchange with people outside of the family group (neighbors, friends, acquaintances)? Is it with non-Jews and people who do not belong to the same religious group? By analyzing the mental map of the groups in Morocco and the conditions in which they made the decision to leave, we can bring forth the characteristics of their memories of departure.

Different groups can carry collective memory: the family, members of a religious group and social classes. The historian Yaron Tsur highlights the very strict segmentation that existed between the different sectors of the French colonial society in Morocco.[11] Thus, the nature of the relationships between the different populations on the French colonial territory depends on multiple variables; gender, social, religious and national categories. The foremost factor is that of the affiliation to a sector: the Western sector composed of Europeans and colonists, the Native sector (the local Arab or Berber cultures) and the westernized sector. The latter group is composed of people that have adopted the Occidental culture.

We wish to add the generation variable, which seems complementary but is seldom taken into account. Indeed, the age at which they migrated and the period pre and post independence during which they were educated seems to have shaped their way of approaching the question of memory. For some of them, migration was part of an academic training strategy that must be analyzed specifically as it might show different visions of their future within different sectors. In this respect, the first wave of migration, mostly to Israel in 1948, is different with those which took place at the end of the 1950s and especially after the independence of Morocco.

Thus, to analyze more closely the decisions that have prompted these families to make choices regarding their children's schooling illustrated the perceptions of danger of staying in Morocco, of the necessity of departure and the choices of migration. Schooling leads to the affiliation of these individuals within a particular sector in which shared memory is constructed.

The acute separation between members of different communities and their dire ethnicization is a definite character of the colonial regime, which is immediately present in the memories of the migrants. More than a stigma, the colonial division of Moroccan society into sectors based on ethnic, religious and gender lines is present in every aspect of the memories that we are now

[11] Yaron Tsur, "The Brief Career of Prosper Cohen : A Sectorial Analysis of the North African Jewish Leadership in the Early Years of Israeli Statehood", *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 22 (2007): 67-72.

gathering. Their shared and unshared aspects also depended largely on the social position occupied by the interviewees.

We will distinguish two different ways to share and 35nshared those memories: in the westernized sector, the French speaking interviewees will share some memories with the people, who could be both of Muslim and Christian faith, at their school and in the sector they leave in and were raised. There are some slight differences between them whether they studied at the Jewish school (*École de l'Alliance Israélite*) or at the French school (*École de la mission française*).

The persons raised in the *Écoles de l'Alliance*, who speak Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, tend to remain within the Jewish community, albeit with a wish to access to the westernized middle class; whereas the more westernized (educated entirely in the French system) will tend to be illiterate in Arabic and Hebrew, and therefore feel that their fate/future depended entirely upon their belonging to the French culture and society. The cases of the students we have been interviewing in Montreal and Paris show a continuum between those two forms of westernized education albeit with a few differences that our research will outline.

A second group, which is represented in our interviews by the older generation, hardly speak French but rather Judeo-Arabic and share a lot with their Muslim neighbors, even if their religious separation implies that the sharing happens precisely during those periods of Jewish and Muslim high holidays. Certainly there is a paradox in sharing some very important dates in the religious calendar with their Muslim neighbors while not sharing more intimate decisions such as the departure of the whole family. But paradoxes are many in a colonial setting. And in order to understand the complexities of this web of relations, and the process of constructing a collective memory, we will try to unveil the ways in which the people we interviewed perceive it now. We will use the more neutral term of migration to characterize their departure from Morocco, and to let them explain how they saw it, then and now.[12]

This study draws on oral history interviews collected in Montreal and in Paris with individuals who are native of Morocco. Moreover, in the sample interviewed in France, it is relevant to compare the discourse of the natives of Morocco, to that of the natives of Tunisia. These two countries had, in fact, the same status of "French Protectorate" and the dates and the circumstances of the migration of these Tunisian and Moroccan participants are close enough to be compared.

---

[12] We find similar difficulties in caracterizing the departure of Jews from Morocco in other studies devoted to them: Bédard speaks of arrival and departure in a more neutral tone, Jean-Luc Bédard, *Identité et transmission intergénérationnelle chez les Sépharades à Montréal*, PhD thesis in anthropology, (Québec: Université Laval, 2005). Shmuel Trigano speaks of "exclusion" for the Moroccan Jews and of expulsion for the Algerian Jews, Shmuel Trigano, introduction to *La fin du judaïsme en terres d'Islam* (Paris : Denoël, 2009). Michael Elbaz speaks of uprooting and transplantation: Michael Elbaz, "Parias, parvenus et rebelles. Juifs marocains et Marocains juifs" in *L'insoumis. Juifs, Marocains et rebelles*, eds. Abraham Serfaty and Michael Elbaz (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001), 23-65.

Various samples were constituted in order to map the memories according to an axis that would take into consideration the generational issue. For the older generation, the interviews were conducted at two different moments in time. The first ones were done with six older migrants that arrived in Montreal in the 1970s and collected in the 1980s. The second group had been recently interviewed within the Montreal Life Story Project (*Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and other Human Rights Violations,* CURA-Concordia, 2007-2012).[13] We will present the stories of six people, interviewed in the project in 2009 and 2010, born in Morocco and that arrived in Montreal at several moments of their lives: three women and three men born in the 1920, 1930 and 1940.[14] In both cases, we wanted to better illustrate the different levels of explanations given for their departure from Morocco. Through the life stories they shared with us, they have told us their memories of the events that were the cause of their departure, thus signaling their representations of the inter-community relationships and of the relationships they had with their neighbors. In both cases, we see a very selective memory, often rehashing some of the more common clichés but yet indicating the difficulty of representing the Other, may he or she be French/Catholic or Moroccan/Muslim in a detached way. Regardless, the emotions that are presented in the interviews help us to understand the extent to which these relations were charged and often not made explicit for the interviewers themselves. Did they really share their preoccupations with their neighbors?

To study the memory of the younger populations, we rely on the analysis of 14 interviews conducted in France and in Quebec. The interviewees must have had left their country of birth when they were in high-school or when they were about to attend college after receiving the French *baccalauréat*. Nine interviews were conducted in France,[15] with five men and four women, and five were conducted in Montreal with four men and one woman. All of the interviewees in Montreal were from Morocco, five of the interviewees in France were from Morocco, and the four others were born in Tunisia. The departures of these informants took place in the 1950s (three of them),[16] the 1960s (seven of them),[17] and the 1970s (four of them).[18]

To consider these discourses in terms of sharing or not sharing memories implies articulating questions related to education, culture and language.

---

[13] For an overview of this vast project of collecting life stories : http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca

[14] Henri (born in 1926), his sisters Annette (born in 1930) and Marguerite (born in 1934); Freha (born in 1940); Léon (born in 1942) and Jacques (born in 1937).

[15] Seven in Paris and two in Lyon.

[16] Sam (left Morocco in 1955), Yvette (left Morocco 1956), Pierre (left Tunisia in 1958).

[17] Albert and Gerard left Tunisia in 1964 and in 1967. David (in 1966), Harry (in 1965), Sarah (in 1964), André (in 1968), and Haim (in1969), left Morocco.

[18] Elsa, Solange, and Margot left Morocco in 1973, 1975 and 1970.

1. A Truncated Memory: When Home is no more, the Rationalization of a Migration

We have found that their control of the French language (as opposed to Judeo-Arabic or Ladino) and their time and age of departure have been essential variables in the shaping of the particular memory of the individuals we interviewed. Nostalgia of a past (often mythologized) impregnated their narratives with both a sense of loss of that conviviality with their neighbors as well as a rationalization of their departure from the land of their ancestors.[19] We noticed then that it was very difficult to get them to talk about particular historical events or the specific causes that precipitated their departure. For many, the previous departure of members of their family to Paris or Montreal determined their own. We were quite taken by their profound disengagement from their own life, as if their belonging to the Jewish community (which was an extension of their family, their clan or their sector) represented their connection to the outside world. In fact, we noted already how much their cultural capital was the principal determinant to their migration to the French speaking world.

None were too eager to emphasize this aspect of their migration, as they considered it as something quite "natural" for the generation that grew into the French colonial system. The younger generation (the baby boomers, who grew up when Morocco succeeded to get its independence from France) were the principal actors of the decision to migrate. In some cases, they were old enough to decide for themselves and the family followed suit; for others, their future (jobs, alliances etc.) were the reason their parents gave for moving their family away. In many cases, as was shown by Emanuela Trevisan Semi,[20] and confirmed by our interviews, their departure took place most often in silence, hiding from their neighbors and friends whether Muslim or Christian. In one of the stories told to us, all the moving of the furniture was done at night, exclusively by the members of the family, during Ramadan, when everyone else (including the maid) was busy partying until late into the night. The furniture were brought to Casablanca into a container that was rented by a European family, while other cheaper furniture replaced the old one in the house, staging a normal life till the night of migration.

---

[19] In a previous research, we have been able to outline that the generational as well as gender variables had a decisive impact in the way the interviewees recalled their recent departure from Morocco. The collection of oral histories of men and women that just arrived in Montreal showed how imbedded they still were in the Moroccan way of life and of thinking, Marie Berdugo-Cohen, Yolande Cohen et Joseph Lévy, *Juifs marocains à Montréal : témoignages d'une immigration moderne* (Montréal: VLB, 1987).

[20] Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Hanane Sekkat Hatimi, *Mémoires et représentations des Juifs au Maroc, Les voisins absents de Meknès,* (Paris: Editions Publisud, 2011).

Defining the collectivity

To ask the question regarding the sharing of memories implies to question how the interviewees define the group to which they belong. Thus, the stories collected in this study highlight a complex geography of relations between the different groups within colonial society. The relationships between the French, the Arabs and the Jews during the colonization of Morocco left lasting traces in their memories. The answers are rather contrasted concerning everyday life in Morocco and the social relations between Jews, the French and Arabs. Were they considering them potentially as an incentive to leave? The conviviality of these relations is first emphasized.

Friendship between Jews and Arabs is often mentioned, in particular within work relations. Henri notes that the French were "dominant" which could explain according to him the proximity between Jews and Arabs. Freha notes that only the men were implicated in relationships with the Arabs; the women were often kept away from them, as their families feared that their daughters would get married to Muslims (marriages with Catholics being more tolerated). She considers that her parents actually left because an Arab was courting their daughter. Many interviewees mention the protection of Jews by the king of Morocco under the Vichy regime. This protection could explain a kind of gratitude towards Morocco expressed in the interviews, and as a result the story of this protection has been transmitted between the generations within Freha's family for instance. The anti-Semitism of the French is often emphasized, in Morocco but also in France. Henri remembers the anti-Semitism of the French in Morocco, notably under the Vichy regime (*numerus clausus* in the educational institutions). Jacques notes that during the Second World War, the building where he lived with his family (which also housed other Jewish families) was marked with a cross. He was told that this was to target the families during an eventual raid. He also remembers that at school (in the European quarter), he sat in the back of the class because he was Jewish. Jacques notes that he never had any particular problem with the Arabs, unlike his brother. In fact it was after his brother's fight with an Arab that his father, who had already taken all the steps towards emigration to Canada and whose hair salon business was in rapid decline decided to leave, six months after the independence of Morocco.

Class also played a role in the relations with the other groups (French and Arab) but also within the Jewish community. Léon evokes the bad memories that his father kept of Morocco, notably of being relegated, because of his poverty, to the back of the synagogue by the wealthier Jews. His father also had, according to Léon, the memory of having been mistreated by the Arabs and was rather happy of the French presence.

Several "small events" and "small things" are evoked concerning the relations with the French and the Arabs in the long term. The comparison is also often made with the other Jews of Europe during World War II, leading the interviewees to minimize what happened to them (stones being thrown, raids in the *Mellah*). Admittedly, the memory of the abuses suffered, whether small daily humiliations, rarely some major public events, are relegated to a hazy memory but are evoked spontaneously by the informants.

In the midst of their interviews, these memories resurface. Thus, Marguerite remembers an attack, which took place the day of *Kippur* in Meknes, during the years immediately after the war. It is equally akin to an anti-Semitic attack against the Jews of the *Mellah* (forced to retreat on their terraces to protect themselves from the projectiles) to a petty strike of a gang of thugs who were seeking to cause them fright. The memory of this event apparently marks a notch in the process of detachment that they had to undertake with their neighbors. The indifference and even the non-intervention of the French during these moments of tension between Jews and Arabs are also mentioned. Henri suggests that this attitude was intentional, in order to "divide and rule."

However these relationships change with the independence of Morocco in 1956, since the French have no more direct authority over inter-community relations. Freha says that the Jews "were afraid to be in the middle"(between the French and the Arabs) and that they "were in the middle" during the independence of the country. She adds: "we never spoke politics" and mentions an "invisible repression." She notes that her father, who owned an appliance store, saw the number of his clients plummet after independence, his clientele for the most part composed of the French. Thus, political change lead to an economic change that motivated their decision to leave. As for Jacques, he notes that after the independence of Morocco, the future seemed bleak for Jews, especially for those without much money. The struggle of Moroccans for independence strongly marked Jacques, who was very shocked by the explosions of bombs in Casablanca. These events disturbed him, troubled his "laid-back" life and prompted his departure. A rumor also reinforced his desire to leave: in 1957, it was said that the Jews would be enrolled in the Moroccan army and he did not see himself serving and was scared of being drafted to combat against Israel.

The awareness of international tensions stemming from the Arab-Israeli conflict reveals potential conflicts between neighbors. The Middle-Eastern conflict, which spans several decades, thus played an important part in the shifting of social relations between the Jewish and Arab communities in Morocco. Léon remembers that in the mid 1950s, then aged 13, he went to visit his uncle and was taking a stroll on the *Jemaa El Fnaa* square in Marrakesh. His panicked uncle came to fetch him for fear that something would happen to his nephew. Léon relates this fear to the events in the Middle-East. The Six Day War in 1967 is also mentioned by Henri: "The Six Day War fell on our heads overnight." This had, according to him, troubled work relationships: "but in a few months, it was settled." Henri and his family would leave seven

years later. After the independence, he mentions the fact that the Arabs suspected the Jews of sustaining, even financing Israel, which created certain tensions (surveillance, ransoms) and a "heavy atmosphere."
The memory of a divided society marked memories and complies with a rewriting of the past in a post- immigration period.

Leaving for Israel: Zionism and fragmented memory

It's interesting to find out when and how our informants felt that they were no longer at home in their own country. This perception happened for most of them long before their actual departure. For Henri and his sister Anna, the family atmosphere was already filled with the Zionist ideal of going to Eretz Israel. Since the 1920s, their father, a very religious and observant Jew, had been trying to convince the British Consulate to give his large family a visa to enter Palestine. They have not only the memory of those discussions, but also a copy of the letter that he wrote in 1923 to that effect. As their father died, his dream became his family's. It was his eldest son's fate to carry it on, as he managed to depart with his own family of 7, plus his two youngest sisters in 1948. Like many of his brothers and sisters, Henri who was the youngest of them and just married, left Meknes also to join them in Israel, but stayed longer in a refugee camp near Marseille, before going back finally to Meknes where his wife still had relatives. So Zionism is certainly one of the most important official motivations of their departure to Israel; one that had been identified both by the historiography and by our informants to explain their decision to leave Morocco in that period. The realization of their Zionist ideal explains the breaking up with their own siblings, family and their own land. In this context, the rupture with their immediate environment is brutal: everyone in the family should keep the secret of a clandestine departure. The unsharing of this particular event becomes a secret that will haunt them later. For Anna and Marguerite, who were brought to Israel like "a package in their brother's luggage," by flight to Marseille and by ship to Haifa where they settled while only 13 and 15 years old, this story is all but a nice memory! They still resent this departure from their home, with little or nothing at all, and their harsh transplantation in a country totally unknown to them. Their memory of Morocco is therefore totally enshrined in a veil of fear, the only thing now that could have justified their sudden exile.

Family: unshared memory and common paths

For all six informants in this study, their departure took place in clandestinity. Each one remembers some element of the story. Freha recalls that her father had sold half of his property before leaving, but that he could not get his money safely out of the country. So he had a friend, a French colonel, do the transaction on his behalf, with all the risks related to that. Herself, when she departed the second time, she was hiding her money in her baby's diapers! Henri remembers his mock departure *"we left the house in order, as if we were leaving for the holidays!"* Crossing the border into Spain, his car packed with all kinds of

stuff, with all the family in it, he considers himself lucky that the border officer let him go (even after wondering out loud why his son took his school bag, whereas they were leaving for a holiday).

Hiding from their neighbors that they were leaving for good was not easy, as it implied unsharing essential aspects of their lives. In many cases, they went to great lengths in order to hide it carefully. Who were they hiding from is interesting to ask? Were they equally frightened by the local authorities as their Muslim neighbors were? Were they suspicious of their neighbors, who might report them? They obviously were afraid, even in the 1970s when the administration was giving out the passports more easily (with some "*bakchich*" or intervention from well placed friends or business relations). None of them talked really about it. There is a sense of emergency in the packing of their things and in their departure. Even if their decision to leave took a long time to mature, as they say that they had been thinking about it for quite a while, the actual departure happened when there was an opportunity or when they thought that the situation had been deteriorating.

There is a striking difference between the individuals in the first wave who had to depart precipitously to an imposed destination, mostly in Israel in 1948, and those who participated in the second wave of migrations which took place in the 1950s. In their discourses, the rationalization of their departure seems to stem from an individual or family decision. Their memory of their parent's continuous administrative hassle to seek the notorious papers (visa, administrative authorization, and sometimes passports) to depart is quite vivid. Jacques evokes therefore his departure for Canada in January 1957, with his father and brother, who obtained their visa from the British Consulate in Casablanca, after a job offer in a newspaper advert. His mother and sisters, who stayed behind to liquidate their assets, joined them later. The unshared memory of the departure becomes here a job offer that necessitates the quick departure of the men of the family. Leaving the women behind could be interpreted as a way to signal to the others (the administration, the neighbors, the friends?) that it was not a definite departure, but only a (temporary?) job-motivated migration. For her part, Freha said that she first left Morocco to join her husband who was studying medicine in Paris in 1961. Her parents, who went also to France with two of her sisters, finally migrated to Montreal in 1964. She came back two years later, as her husband decided to do his residency in a Moroccan hospital in Casablanca where his parents lived; only to move back again to Paris, at the birth of her first son, and then to Canada in the 1970s and then to the US, in Arizona where her husband settled with their family of 4. Finally, when she divorced from her husband, she left the US to join the rest of her siblings who were established in Montreal.

It is striking to see the succession of departures and returns, alone, with or without her family during this period of Post-independence of Morocco. Many other interviewees explain these migrations as family-bound, or simply to study or work, as if it were a natural move. It seems as if there were no other causes for their departure, or at least they were erased from their memory. They also

insist that they had the choice of their destination and their going back and forth from Morocco, freely, is a witness of their ability to decide whether or not they will leave. Canada is the foremost choice, for it is far and away from colonial France and newly independent Morocco. In the midst of the fierce political battles that were conducted by international Jewish organizations to "save the Jewish community of Morocco," many felt that they had to leave. Their itineraries are complex, as they move from one place to another (Israel, France, Canada, and USA); they stop for some time in one country and return to Casablanca, and finally leave Morocco completely. Their families are dispersed along the road in different destinations and eventually gathered in one place. As an example, in Henri's family, amongst the 10 children, some went to Israel, others to France, some stayed longer in Morocco, or came back after a bad experience in Israel and Henri went finally to Canada. Leon's parents left Morocco for Israel in 1946 (after 6 months spent in a camp in Marseille), came back to France in the 1950s and left again for Israel in 1965 with their younger children only to come back in the 1960s again in France and then to Montreal in the 1970s. Their migrations resemble a patchwork of the eternal migrant (or wandering Jew). Once they left their country of origin, they did not find a place to stay long enough to call it their home!

In these interviews, one gets a sense of loss, but it is not explicit. They are in a survival mode, so the relationships with the others are secondary, not important, not worth recalling. They do not even tell us if they discuss the decisions to leave within their own family. The overall impression is one of a quick departure, with no one really in charge of taking care of such details as the destination of the family migration and the explanation of the cause of their departure.

The essential role of the eldest son in those two family stories shows how much they are influential in the decision to move the family in one direction or another. In Henri's family, the oldest son decides to bring with him his two younger sisters to Israel, after their parents died and just when the state of Israel is founded, in the summer of 1948. He even rented a house in Marseilles for all of them to wait for their papers. In Léon's family, as the oldest son of a family of 9, he worries about the education of his younger brothers, and help them emigrate to Canada. Around him, the family will finally reunite in Montreal. So the preoccupation is inward, within the family unit, not with the outside world, which is perceived as malevolent, scary and not to be trusted.

After many more interviews, the same feeling of powerlessness pervades their memory of those hard times. Even if they identify a-posteriori one factor that triggered their own departure and their family's, there is also a general atmosphere in the community that had played a major role in their decision to leave. Their segregation from the rest of the Moroccan people in the *Mellah*, and their subtle exclusion from the Western world, even when some of them moved away to live in the westernized city ("ville nouvelle"), brought on a strong feeling of alienation. They indeed did some business with the other communities, some even went to the same French schools, but the strict

separation between those different sectors was quite efficient to keep them at bay from mixing with each other. They quickly learned to keep their stories to themselves and not to share the more intimate questions about their lives with anyone else. Even within the Jewish community, the sharing of the information was not open and the rumors replaced it.
For instance, the clandestine work of the Zionist organizations was not acknowledged openly, but the rumors of the help they provided to people who wanted to leave was known. We saw that in cities like Meknes or Casablanca, where our informants lived, the Zionist ideology and organizations were the main rationalization given for their departure to Israel. For Henri's family, we saw that it was their father's dream that the son's family realized. For Léon's parents too, the Zionist's network helped them make their first departure and leave. Even if his family had quit the *Mellah* for the Ville Nouvelle where his father was a hairdresser for the French, and that he does not assimilate his fate to the poor Jews of the *Mellah*, the Zionist organization was crucial to their being able to leave Morocco as a family.
These events are but a back-story behind the factor often cited as determining their departure, that is to say that their parents saw little future for their children in Morocco. Even if their economic situation is considered flourishing by Henri, the decision to leave "for the children" takes over. Some children, for that matter, left for Paris to study (the older girl in Henri's family, Freha's husband) before their parents' departure. We can also notice that within families, there is a concern for the education of girls who can leave home (and change countries) for this reason.
As the issue of the children's education is often cited as one of the reasons justifying the family's departure, we wanted to focus more specifically on this aspect of student migration to see what echo this preoccupation may have had on their particular perspectives.

2. Student Memories: "Leaving is a word I always heard" (Solange)

In the narratives that recall life before migration, we find the dividing lines of the colonial world. Each one of these young people composed with the French, Jewish and Arab-Muslim cultures in unequal and different ways. The analysis of these narratives allows us to distinguish several different levels: that of the practices (schools and migration) and of the memory shaping a life story, of which several traits are shared in our sample. In this shared memory, the educational experience plays a central part in the acculturation process and especially in the way of considering migration.

French education and Jewish education: a tension?

The narratives shed light on the centrality of the French culture and education for the interviewees. Their educational pathways testify of this aspect. Indeed, the participants have received their education in two structures that existed in

North Africa: the French schools and the Jewish schools of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. One of our informant, amongst the fourteen people interviewed, told us having received part of his schooling in Tunis in the Arab high school of Alaoui. He later joined the *lycée Carnot* where he finished high school and got his degree.[21] The narratives highlight the importance of the schools of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. In 1956, the institution enrolled nearly 33,000 students [22] in Morocco. It held a role in the transmission of Jewish and French educations. Present also in Tunisia, the Alliance occupied however a less important position. In addition, the Jews of North Africa attended French schools; this is the case in Morocco with the dense network of institutions of the French lay mission and in Tunisia, in particular the *lycée Carnot* of Tunis.[23] Finally, we must indicate that our sample does not include people who received a religious education in the Talmud Torah schools, similar to those studied by Yaacov Loupo,[24] whose officials objected to the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*.

If the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* is a Jewish institution, it was considered to be a vector of westernization and the life stories collected show an existing tension between traditionalist families and the institution. This is the case for Elsa's mother, who, in the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, received her education in a school of the Alliance and *"for these very observant Jews […] it was secular, it was practically secular, they were Jewish schools, but..."* The distinction between the education received in the French schools and the education received in the schools of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* is not as clear-cut. The life stories of the participants from Morocco report several transfers from one school to the other and it is common to receive a part of one's education in a school of the Alliance and to pursue it in a French *lycée*. The high quality of the French *lycées* seemed to have drawn the parents to enroll their children. Born in 1955, Elsa attended elementary school at the Alliance and then joined the *lycée* Victor Hugo in Marrakesh; it is also the case of Yvette who was born in 1938 and who joined the Mangin *lycée*. Both of their narratives present different modalities by which the traditional Jewish culture took the French school into consideration. In the case of Yvette, granddaughter of the Chief Rabbi of the town of Safi, her narrative highlights the tensions regarding her schooling in a French, non-Jewish institution: *"This was, by the way, a great transgression that we were, the two granddaughters of the Chief Rabbi in the foreign school […] it was the great transgression, we began to stop eating Kosher. As it happens, it soured the relations with my father's family."* Elsa's arrival at the French *lycée* of Marrakesh could have been a

[21] *Les lycées français du soleil: creusets cosmopolites du Maroc, de l'Algérie et de la Tunisie,* eds. Effy Tselikas and Lina Hayoun, (Paris: Éd. Autrement, 2003).
[22] *Histoire de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle***,** eds. André Kaspi and Valérie Assan, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010).
[23] This *lycée* held an important place in the memories of the Jews of Tunisia, see *Les lycées du Soleil.*
[24] Yaacov Loupo, *Métamorphose ultra-orthodoxe chez les juifs du Maroc,* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006).

problem for her family, which she defines as "very observant;" in fact, at the *lycée* Victor Hugo, classes are held on Saturdays, obstructing the practice of Shabbat. However, she indicates that *"these were very observant circles, but very tolerant."* The way in which these stories play down the existing tension between Jewish and secular education give an indication of the attractiveness of French culture. Thus, David of Tangiers seems to resolve these difficulties of conciliating the practice of Judaism and French education: *"[when I went] to the French lycée, I went to class on Saturdays, it was a problem for me at first but after that, I thought 'well, it's the price to pay to have a good education. But I'm paying it, right, that's it.' "*

One of the central aspects of this experience is the possibility given to these young people to navigate within several school systems. The study of David's trajectory testifies to this. He began his education at a school of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* then, due to his good grades, he was sent to the *Lycée Français* "*and then I entered into a different world; I went from a sheltered Jewish environment where the majority of us were Jewish to a French lycée that was, let's say, international, that belonged to the French government."* One year before completing his *baccalauréat,* he decides to go work as an assistant accountant in Tangiers. Seeing his high school friends leave for France to study at the university he thinks to himself: " '*Why should they know more than I?' But still, I didn't have the degree to go to university yet'*." Not wishing to return to the *Lycée Français*, he went back to school and was accepted at the *École Normale Hébraique* of Casablanca to complete his *baccalauréat*. The institution of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*[25] represented, in this case, more of a zone of passage than an exclusively religious training center.

"*Our ancestors the Gauls*"[26]

The narratives provide evidence of the importance that French culture held for the interviewees. The centrality of the French culture constitutes a shared experience for all the respondents, even if it is mentioned in a different way by each of them. This issue takes on a particular importance for Morocco, where the French presence was the most recent in North Africa and where the colonial society was still organized around the communities.[27] Certain narratives on French culture reflect the idea of a possible emancipation and of a possible rupture with the traditional world. This may take a gendered dimension. Indeed, the women emphasize their mother's or grandmother's will for them to pursue their education.

Yvette and Elsa, of whom we mentioned the educational trajectories, belong to two different generations. They were both born Moroccan, the former in Safi in 1938 and the latter in Marrakesh in 1955. They arrived in Paris after their

[25] Michel Abitbol, "École Normale Hébraïque de Casablanca", in *Histoire de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, eds. Kaspi and Assan, 391-393.

[26] Claude Liauzu, "L'école du colonisé", in *Dictionnaire de la colonisation française*, ed. Claude Liauzu, (Paris: Larousse, 2007), 259-263.

[27] Daniel Rivet, *Le Maghreb à l'épreuve de la colonisation*, (Paris: Hachettes, 2002).

baccalauréat to attend medical school but one in 1956 and the other in 1973. In their life stories, the issue of education and schooling is associated with women. Yvette says: *"our mother instilled in us well that we had to have independent professions, wow, that... she said 'what I suffered' she was a feminist before her time. No, no, she insisted that her children... that they would pursue a higher education, an independent education."* For that matter, it was because it didn't seem possible for her to study in Israel that Yvette gave up her project of making *aliyah* and opted for Paris. For her part, Elsa indicates that she had: *"a mother who […] had understood right away when the French arrived that culture, schooling, education, were fundamental and she fought a bit, in inverted commas, with my father for […] her girls to go to school, that's to say that her girls would go to the Alliance school that was there."* These narratives give us insight into the family and gender dynamics that were expressed during the confrontation with the French educational institutions. For the men we interviewed, attending school was not accompanied with the same militant character.

All of interviews emphasize the importance of the French culture; however, in the narratives of the people interviewed in Montreal, this issue is particularly stressed. The idea that "our ancestors [were] Gauls," a recurring theme of the colonial educational project, is repeated by two of the participants. David, who left Morocco for France in 1966 and lives in Montreal since 1977, states: *"I was educated under the French system from a tender age that our ancestors were the Gauls... to the principles of the Republic, 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.' It's important that I say it, because until now I feel very imbued by this French culture. I suckled the milk of the French secular schools very, very young."* It's interesting to note that David makes a shortcut in his educational trajectory: he first attended a school of the Alliance before leaving for a secular French school. The theme of the "Gaulish ancestors" appears also in Sarah's discourse. She received her education, as early as 1951, in the schools on the French mission in Casablanca: *"I was at the schools of the French cultural mission and I would say that our ancestors were Gauls, right."*

For Harry, who left Morocco with his family directly for Montreal, his narrative reflects the centrality of the French culture. Talking about his father whose mother tongue "must have been" Arabic, he states *"He went to the Universal Expo [sic] in Paris in the thirties and came back with a certain image of French grandeur."* Concerning the environment in which he lived, he states: *"we always lived amongst the French. Myself, I don't speak Arabic."* In the interviews collected in France, the impregnation with French culture seemed like a given fact and was not further detailed by the participants. When it was mentioned, it was in terms of a globalizing "we", as exemplified by Paul's narrative, *"Nearly all of the Jews, it's the Alliance Israélite, it's evolution, It's [...] the French culture which is completely inside of us."* Thus, the motives identified in the life stories of the Montreal interviewees seem to testify to the will of these people, who do not live in France but in Quebec with a high emphasis on the French language, to insist on their francization.

A shared memory of departure

The French culture and the educational institutions shaped the stories of departure. Indeed, for these interviewees, the act of leaving the country signifies pursuing their education. Thus, their arrival in France or in Canada is described as a natural movement that is linked to the absence of a future in North Africa.

Two different modalities of departure are expressed: where the student leaves alone to study, this is the case of 10 of the 14 interviewees; and that where he or she leaves with members of his or her family. In the latter case, the life stories bring forth the fact that the parents waited for their child to complete the *baccalauréat* to leave the country. This is the case for Paul, from Tunis *"My father had considered that we'd leave when it would be time [for me] to go to university in France."* Elsa's mother leaves Morocco at the same time as her daughter is preparing to attend medical school in Paris.

If these experiences are different, the narratives conjure the idea that these departures are natural and are part of a "normal" course of things. Elsa states: *"after high school, it was the normal route, it was the normal path, we'd finish high school and we'd come to France to study, and then stay there."* Sarah remembers her departure from Casablanca in 1963 in the following way: *"but really, I left in June, it was 'hurray, I graduated from high school, I'm going to Paris to study' […] it wasn't a rift."* The absence of difficulties or suffering related to the departure is an aspect that is present in all the life stories of former students. Firstly, in the case of large families, the departure of siblings to France to pursue their education seems to have sensitized the interviewees to this emigration. Furthermore, the people interviewed do not justify their departure with a particular cause or phenomena. The life stories do not emphasize isolated difficulties that these individuals originally from Morocco and Tunisia may have faced as Jews or as young people suffering economic hardships: they highlight the absence of a future in their countries of birth. Margot, who had received and turned down a scholarship from the University of Casablanca, states: *"Life in Morocco for young people… we had no future so all the young people were leaving Morocco as soon as they'd finish their studies. After high school, it was total emptiness."* Paul, who left Tunis in 1972, draws the following parallel between the departure of young Jewish students and that of young people living outside of French cities and who leave to pursue their studies: *"I don't want to compare, but just to give you an idea: you go to provincial France, they tell you 'if I don't go to the city, I have no future'. [...] We were in a province, we didn't have a future, and in addition, the France that was our country was in a way gone. And what were we going to stay for, if they were gone?"* While staying close to Tunisia, as we will see, Paul emphasizes the absence of a future *"but obviously, for the Jews that leave, they are leaving a place where they have no economic future, they have no cultural, intellectual, social future, they leave."*

Once in France, these interviewees report of the economic hardships they faced, housing problems they had to struggle with or even the harshness of the studies, like Yvette in medical school. However, none of the interviewees reported culture shock; as Elsa states: *"I don't have the impression of having been integrated or not having been integrated, but I felt in my element, really... In fact, no... To not*

say anything [sic] I had the impression that coming from Morocco, I came to France and it was where I belonged, that was where I was, that I was well and it was... it went really well." Sarah adds: *"it wasn't a rift, I didn't live it as an uprooting, I wasn't particularly disoriented in France."*

The life stories collected from those Jews who left Tunisia and Morocco shed light on a shared memory within this population who left their countries of birth when they were teenagers, on a period spanning 15 years. In these stories, the French culture is central and the departure is perceived as the pursuing of one's education and not a migration. More than isolated elements that would have led these young Jews to leave their countries, it is a sense of a lack of future that is at stake. The "horizon of expectation" is constituted of France, not of the life in the country of birth.[28] But amongst these shared experiences, what is the place given by the interviewees to the Arab-Muslim society?

"I thought I was living in France": ethnicization and social relations

The majority of the stories collected seem to follow the existing social and community separations of the colonial world. In these narratives, the Arab-Muslim world is absent and the interviewees focus on evocations of the family, or of the French culture, as we have seen. Even Gerard's life story, who received part of his schooling at the Alaoui *lycée* of Tunis, does not emphasize the relations with the non-Jewish populations. His arrival at this institution is motivated by the fact that he was permitted, contrarily to the *lycée Carnot* of Tunis, to miss class on Saturdays, day of the Shabbat. So it should be noted that the permissiveness of the Tunisian (arab) *lycée* to accommodate the Jewish religious traditions is greater than in the French *lycée*, which took its secularism very seriously.

This distinction is accentuated by social considerations. The course taken by Sarah underlines this aspect: *"We lived in neighborhoods where there were French people, Christians, Europeans, there were practically no Muslims in our environment […] I thought I was living in France."* It is in France that she befriends non-Jewish Moroccans and learns Arabic. *"I discovered a bit more the Muslim community in Paris because I spent a lot of time at the Maison du Maroc,"* where she lived during her student years.

The theme of fear emerges from Elsa's life story. *"In Morocco, I experienced the '67 war... The Yom Kippur war [in 1973], I experienced the attacks against the King where we were particularly attacked... where we hid each time... every time we felt threatened"*and keeps a *"not so pleasant memory of those times."* However, fear is seldom present in the narratives of the people interviewed and who left their countries when they were younger, in contrast to the interviews conducted with older Moroccans Jews that had a professional activity and had children.[29]

---

[28] To use Reinhard Kosselleck's term, in the sense used by André Loez to underline "the relationship of men with their future." André Loez, "La Bataille avant la bataille : Imaginer et deviner l'offensive", in *Le Chemin des dames, De l'événement à la mémoire*, ed. Nicolas Offenstadt, (Paris: Stock, 2004), 179-186.

[29] This is the case for other interviews conducted in the course of the *Montreal life stories* project.

Due to the social stratification and the ethnicization of relations within colonial society, the Arab-Muslim society is a seldom-quoted motive in the narratives of the former students. David's narrative is one of the only ones evoking this issue in a perspective of conviviality and he focuses on the specificity of the city of Tangiers, which seems to have been conducive to interactions between Jews and Muslims: *"So, it was very normal that I would be invited to eat at the houses of Muslim friends, and that these friends would be invited at my house. And we would talk, we would argue, but they were children's quarrels. It was... something... we didn't feel... it was... I have to say that Tangiers was a pretty unique city. The international character of the city really helped this."* However, if the motive of the Muslim-Arab society is seldom present in the narratives, the evocation of the returns to the countries of birth bring forth the terms of a shared memory.

Returning to the country: a shared memory?

Considering the situations of the returns of the interviewees to the countries of birth implies the study of their migratory patterns and of the narratives justifying these. This perspective leads them to envision their first departure as a non-definitive departure. Indeed, the interviewees largely considered their departure as a natural movement to pursue their education; thus, some of them go on several back-and-forth journeys. This is the case for 8 people[30] out of the 14 interviewed. Sam, who arrives in Paris in 1956, states: *"I went back home [Casablanca] on vacation. Yes, I remember having spent a few summers at the beach."* This motive for the back-and-forth journeys depends on the presence of family in the country of birth. In the case of Sam, this summer migration ceases when his mother leaves Morocco in 1959.[31]

Pierre's case is unique amongst our sample. Born in 1938 in Tunis, he joined an engineering school in 1958 and lives in student housing until 1960. Contrary to the other people interviewed, he returns to Tunisia in 1960, where he works until 1963 before going back to France. How should this return be explained? Is it a desire to pursue a career in Tunisia after having received a French diploma? The analysis of Pierre's narrative shows that his logic is relatively close to that which we have seen in the previous cases (back-and-forth). Indeed, his return wasn't planned and can be explained, according to his narrative, by the recruiting process of the information technology company, IBM. *"I really didn't think I'd go back to Tunisia. It was when I had meetings with Human Relation managers from IBM […] they called me to say 'listen, since you're Tunisian, we have a position in Tunisia, would you be interested?'. I had family in Tunisia, so I said why not."* This is not a common experience, but it illustrates to the extreme, during the years that follow the (first) arrival in France, the existence of a migratory space in which these young people navigated. The occasion of a return to Tunisia does not seem to inscribe itself in a long-term project but is linked to an exceptional chain of events and of an open attitude of this young

[30] This question could not be posed to two of the interviewees.

[31] And the death of his father.

graduate ("Why not?"). Finally, it is the presence of Pierre's family that incites him to return to his country of birth.

In another category of life stories, the interviewees expressed their distance with their country of birth: they did not go there during their studies, which is generally linked to the fact that they left with their parents. This is the case for Elsa, who left Morocco with her mother and her two brothers and states only having returned ten years later. *"I didn't have a mad desire [to go back] to Morocco, I didn't keep an untarnished memory of Morocco."* David returned to Morocco in 1989 *"I wanted to see my city again, as a tourist, which was really hard. I was at the Club Med, it was... it was pretty funny."* This holiday village comes up in other interviews as if to remind of a certain distance between the interviewee and the country of birth, that he or she visits as a tourist in a French hotel structure. But the rest of David's story brings up a duality between the denial of nostalgia and a practice that seems close to it: *"I […] tried to limit as much as possible this notion of nostalgia. […] I went back to see the house where I was born. And... I found something magnificent. […] And I went in and I knocked on the door of the house where I was born. And I said: 'I was born in this house' now, it's Moroccans who live here. And the people opened their door to me, it was fabulous."*

Finally, a small minority of the interviewees discussed their relationship with their country of birth: in two cases, with Tunisia, and one case with Morocco. These stories allow us to see how the interviewees formalize an active relationship with the country they left when they were students. Paul is a manager of an important Jewish institution in France. He left Tunis with his family in 1972, after having received his *baccalauréat.* After starting medical school in Paris, he studied Business Administration and opened up his own business. His narrative presents, as we have seen, the departure of the Jews from Tunisia as a natural movement and at the same time he states his proximity to Tunisia: *"I go back often, it's a country that I am very attached to, a country where I feel at home"* and *"I am happy to see that my children, who were born in France, have this same sensitivity."* This attitude leads him to take position in the debate on the Tunisian government's attitude towards the departure of Jews from North Africa. Thus, Paul responds to the accusations made by some that the Tunisian government had hostile policies towards the Jews. *"Were they forced out? No, wrong, completely untrue. So, you'll meet someone who'll tell you that he had some possessions, that he was despoiled, yeah, of course, you'll find exceptions. In France, the conflicts with the French administration, you'll find many people who consider that they were mistreated by the French administration. But there was no real policy. It's not Egypt, it's not Syria, and it's not Iraq."*

As for Sarah, who left Casablanca in 1964 where she lived in a French and European environment, it is in Paris where she learned Arabic, and it is in Montreal where she lives and works as a CEO that has operations in Africa and the Middle-East: *"I have a professional life which brings me back to Morocco every month, so finally, I really appreciate Morocco more than I ever did when I lived there, because I wasn't looking. I didn't know that there were Art Deco architectural treasures like those in*

Casablanca... ." These two trajectories represent two modalities by which they have kept in contact with their countries of birth.

3. Conclusion

The life stories collected from the natives of Morocco and Tunisia who left their countries to pursue their education reveal the way in which a shared memory is constituted. The existence of an educational melting pot in which these young people were trained offers a common frame of reference. Moreover, the lack of perspectives for the future and the emigrational projects of the parents allow the departure from the country of birth to be a step that doesn't appear to be a painful rift. The generational approach that covers the analysis recommended by Yaron Tsur on "sectors" shed light on the dynamics of group memory. The question of memory also allows us to map the relations between the different groups of the colonial world. Thus, the departures are inscribed both in the collective and family dynamics, but are organized in secret, away from the gaze of the others, particularly that of non-Jewish neighbors. It is the dimensions of these silences that we have attempted to analyze in a comparative perspective: in terms of countries of destination and of generation. The life stories studied, call for another comparative study of theses Jewish and non-Jewish memories.

As we have seen, our informants' stories show several aspects of sharing and unsharing the memories of their lives before their migration. Their belonging to a sector of the colonial world, while still prevalent in most of their consciousness, seem to be blurred by another aspect of post-colonial life in Morocco mostly, that is the education question. It changes drastically the ways in which each one perceives his or her future life. We can thus see a common perception by the westernized sector: soon after the independence of Morocco or Tunisia, the future of those who consider themselves a part of it, appears suddenly blocked. The educational strategies of the parents that went through French or westernized schools of Morocco or Tunisia have to be transposed to the metropolis. Thus, after obtaining their *baccalauréat*, young men and women leave "naturally" to pursue their academic studies in France. As we have seen, this moment is a defining step in the migration process, not only for these young people, but for their somewhat extended families. Perceiving the acquisition of a higher education in the metropolis as a sure way to guarantee social mobility for oneself and for the siblings, these families bet on migration as a means of improving their lot. Paradoxically, these behaviors shared at first by people in the westernized sector rapidly spread within all of the Jewish community. Driven by a preoccupation regarding the younger generations, migrations rapidly become the norm. The destinations differ according to the sectors: Israel for the non-occidental majority sector; France and Canada for the francisized sector; Latin America for the Hispanic sector. Also noteworthy is the difference in the temporality of the migrations: after the migrations of

the mainly French and Christian colonial towards their country of nationality, the Jews migrate in the 1950s through the 1970s and more massively than their Muslim counterparts, who migrate in turn from 1980 to 2000. All of these migrations, which are in the millions of people, did not lead to a shared memory of migration, far from it. We have here attempted to better understand the cognitive and commemorative processes of some of the people who have experienced these migrations, mainly from the Westernized sector, as our interviews were conducted in Paris and Montreal. A vast project remains to better understand the memories of people of other sectors who have migrated elsewhere to get a more nuanced and complete picture of this moment.

Yolande Cohen is Full Professor (Professeure Titulaire) of Contemporary History at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). She was executive director of the Centre de Coopération Interuniversitaire Franco-Québécoise, in Paris (2004-2007) and was Visiting professor in many universities in France and North America. Yolande Cohen is a specialist in of women's history and in in post colonial migrations especially those from the Jews of Morocco. Her most recent publications include, "The Migrations of Moroccan Jews to Montreal: Memory, (oral) history and Historical narrative", Journal of Modern Jewish Studies, 10:2, 2011, p. 245-262 and with Jean-Claude Lasry and Joseph Lévy the joint publication *Identités sépharades et modernité* (Laval : Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 354 p, 2007) ; with J.Y. Lévy, *Les Juifs marocains à Montréal*, (Montreal : VLB, 1987).

Martin Messika is a PhD student in History at Université Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne and at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He is working under the supervision of Yolande Cohen and Patrick Weil. His dissertation (under preparation) is a comparative analysis of Jewish North African migration to France and to Canada. He graduated from University Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne.

How to quote this article
Yolande Cohen, Martin Messika, *Sharing and unsharing memories of Jews of Moroccan origin in Montréal and Paris compared*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n. 4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=311

Shared Memories and Oblivion: Is Israeli Jews' Nostalgia for Morocco Shared by the Muslims in Morocco?[1]

by *Emanuela Trevisan Semi*

Abstract

In this article we debate whether nostalgia for an idyllic past such as that left in the memory of Israeli Jews of Moroccan origin, a past denied by official Jewish narrative and now re-surfacing in the creativity of second generations, is shared by the Muslims who have stayed in Morocco. In the face of Morocco's post-colonial historiographical silence, it has been questioned how much has remained in the collective memory of Morocco, given a Jewish presence evidence of which continues to be found in Morocco in the form of spaces, objects and places of ritual. The article discusses the results of research carried out in 2005-2009 in the city of Meknes, in the course of which were interviewed both those who frequented Jews, especially until the 1960s-70s, when Jews were still numerous, and also young people who had barely the opportunity to meet them. In particular we highlight the aspects of such memories shared by both Jews and Muslims as well as the divergences.

The Morocco "Paradise", the Jews of Morocco in Israel and the End of Auto-Censorship

I would like to stress that the Jews of Moroccan origin in Israel, those who have become over the years a group with no history, no past and also Orientalised because they have been included in the *mizraḥi*/oriental category,[2]

[1] This article takes its cue from research conducted in Meknès with Hanane Sekkat Hatimi (begun in 2005 through to 2009) and leading to the publication of *Mémoire et représentations des Juifs au Maroc : les voisins absents de Mekhnès* (Publisud: Paris, 2011).
The research is based on a survey carried out using interviews of various sectors of the Meknes population (both men and women). Elderly people were interviewed who had met Jews and young people who had not, including students, high school pupils, university students and young workers in the souk. In all 180 people who had met Jews were interviewed: artisans and traders in the souk, inhabitants of the *mellah* (old and new), artisans who had learnt their trade from Jews or persons who had worked for Jews (maids, seamstresses), big and small traders, civil servants, free-lance professionals, high-school teachers and university intellectuals. Sixty-four university students and twenty-eight people from the Meknes Jewish community (more than a third) were interviewed. Other interviews were conducted, exclusively by the author of this article, of Jews originally from Meknes but emigrants to France (10) and Israel (14), in particular intellectuals, artists, writers and association representatives.

[2] The category of *mizraḥim* (Orientals) includes widely different Jewish groups, from Jews from North-Africa to those of Iraq and Yemen but also Indian Jews. It is a category which serves to define particularly those who do not belong to the Ashkenazim and cannot be incorporated among the Sephardim. For an analysis of the origin and development of this category, see Ella Shohat, "The Invention of the Mizrahim", *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 29/1 (1999): 5-20.

experience strong feelings of nostalgia for the "Eden Paradise" past enjoyed in Morocco. Their past is one which began to re-surface especially among those belonging to the second generation, starting at the end of the 1980s[3] and in many different ways, ranging from new creative forms, like the re-running of works from the Jewish-Moroccan tradition and to the presence of Morocco in Israeli public space.[4]

In literature similar feelings of nostalgia can be found, above all in the work of Sami Berdugo and in particular in *Zeh ha-devarim*,[5] the last novel by the writer of Moroccan origin. This work may be considered a clean break from the background of *mizraḥim* literature insomuch as this author was able, as few other writers have succeeded in doing, to restore a voice to a generation, that of the fathers, which had been deprived of one. Similar nostalgic sentiments can also be found in the poems of Shimon Adaf, who sings of the world of Israel's outskirts where most Moroccans were forced to go and live. What is more, in developing cities there are active theatre groups who put on works in Hebrew-Moroccan, drawing also on classical repertory and orchestras, with concerts of Andalusian-Moroccan music. In today's Israel it is possible to listen to musicians who, having been able to benefit from meeting Muslim Moroccan artists (thanks to periods spent learning in Morocco), play the classical repertory of Andalusian-Moroccan music, even succeeding in introducing innovations. For example, Shelomo Bar, a singer-song writer and musician who left Morocco for Israel at five years of age, has succeeded in renewing traditional ethnic music and has brought on new generations of singers.[6]

---

[3] For an analysis of the movement between history and memory of three generations of Jews who emigrated from Morocco to Montreal, see Yolande Cohen, "The Migrations of Moroccan Jews to Montreal: Memory, (Oral) History and Historical Narrative", *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 10 (2011): 245-262.

[4] See Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "The End of Self-Censure and Diasporism among the Israeli *Mizrahim*: Sara Shilo e Ami Bouganim", (paper presented at the Conference of Unione delle Comunità ebraiche, Rome, February 9-12, 2009) (forthcoming).

[5] S. Berdugo, *Zeh ha-devarim* (That is to Say) (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad, 2010). In Berdugo's latest novel the protagonist decides to go and fetch his illiterate mother who is in a retirement home and bring her back to the old house where they had lived together; here the protagonist wishes to teach her mother the Hebrew alphabet so that she can finally integrate into Israeli society and become partially independent. The mother accepts, on the condition that the time they must share together will be equally shared between the learning of the Hebrew alphabet by the mother and the son's listening to her story, from her time as a Jewish child in Morocco until her arrival in Israel. A handful of letters of the Hebrew alphabet are taught by force but set against the lure of a narration in the original, broken and hybrid Hebrew language of an immigrant from Morocco, rich in authenticity and suspense. The son's narration alternates with and is set against that of the mother, an illiterate immigrant from Morocco. She forces her son to listen to her story so that he can become aware that the world is much bigger than that "little country" which is Israel and which he believes mirrors the whole world.

[6] See Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, *Popular Music and National Cultural in Israel*, (Berkely-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004) 191-200.

Morocco in Israeli Public Space

In Israeli public space feelings of nostalgia towards Morocco have found various forms of expression, starting as early as 1986, when a statue was unveiled to Mohammad V in Ashkelon, a city with a significant Jewish-Moroccan presence. However, it was in the year 2000 that Israeli public life began to set up places of remembrance connected with Morocco.[7] André Levy has written that it is as if the Jews had never left Morocco, at least as far as the unbreakable bonds binding them to the king of Morocco are concerned.[8] The Moroccan flag flies next to the Israeli flag in the pamphlets published by the National Committee for the Memory of Hassan II, a body formed three days after the king's death (on 23rd July, 1999) and whose office is in Jerusalem. The committee has set up an association whose aim is to further the memory of the king of Morocco in Israel by giving the name of Hassan II to seventy Israeli public places such as squares, roads, shopping centres, parks and gardens.[9] The museum of the Jews of Morocco (*Centre mondial du Judaïsme d'Afrique du Nord-David Amar*) located in the middle of an Oriental/Andalusian garden (in the ancient Moghrabi quarter of Jerusalem) is in strict Morocco style. The "Moroccanisation" of Israeli public life continues with the re-establishment of the worship of those saints already celebrated in Morocco by Jews and Muslims together. Netivot, the place of residence of the charismatic leader Baba Sali, has become a new centre of Moroccan religiosity while Baba Sali's son has had a sanctuary built in memory of his father's death in Moorish style. Netivot has then became one of the country's principal religious centres, a place where genealogies of Moroccan saints have been revived.[10]

The Memory of a Jewish-Muslim Past in Morocco

The first question we may ask is whether the memory of a Jewish-Muslim past exists, a memory characterised by relationships based on shared solidarity with Muslims in Morocco even if such relationships were clearly not without ambivalence. Further to this, we should ask how much of that memory has been conveyed to young Moroccan generations. We know that memory of the

---

7 See Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "La mise en scène de l'identité marocaine en Israël: un cas d'« israélianité diasporique »", *A contrario* 5/1 (2007): 37-50.

8 André Levy, "Ethnicity in the journeys of Jews of Moroccan origin towards their own home country", MA thesis, Ben Gurion University, 1989, 108 [Hebrew].

9 In honour of Hassan II there is a street in Kyriat Ekron (near Rehovot), a park in Bet Shemesh and in Ashdod (where out of 200,000 inhabitants, 70,000 are Moroccan), a square in Sderot and in Petah Tiqva, and a promenade in Kyriat Gat (where out of 51,000 inhabitants, 25,000 are of Moroccan origin).

10 See Yoram Bilu, *The Life and Death of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000) and Yoram Bilu, "The Santification of Space in Israel, Civil Religion and Folk Judaism", in *Jews in Israel, Contemporary Social and Cultural Patterns*, eds. Uzi Rebhun and Chaim Waxman (Hanover-London: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 371-393.

past is read in the light of present-day events and in this particular case it can be interpreted through the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, however, we may ask whether there is nonetheless some trace of an influence of what has been cemented in collective memory.

We may also ask how much of that past finds expression in the official narrative. This is a complex question which Aomar Boum, who has dealt with Jewish-Muslim relations in southern Morocco, has tried to answer by speaking of a post-colonial historiographical silence.[11] Boum denounces the silence of official Moroccan narrative concerning the Jewish presence in southern Morocco which has been justified by the fact that both local narrations are absent and that other sources are biased as they come from colonial narrations. He claims that not only is it possible but only right to use all kinds of narration available, including travelogues of the 19th and 20th centuries dripping with colonial attitudes and certainly biased, stating that these, if properly decoded and critically appraised, represent in any case usable information: "I consider that *all* sources written on Jewish-Muslim relations in rural and urban Morocco can provide an explanatory piece of the puzzle, no matter how biased the writer is."[12] In particular, Boum points out how in his great work of reconstructing the social history of the Sous region (part of the Souss-Massa-Draa region), Muhammad al-Moukhtar al-Susi has totally ignored the Jews of Souss and their relationships with the Arabs and Berbers.[13] Therefore, if we hypothesise that the memory of and perhaps nostalgia for that past have in any case left traces beyond the silence of official historiography, traces which somehow linger, might these be a useful tool in retaining the awareness of the distinction, which we know to be so difficult even where there are no conflicts, between the Jews of Morocco and those of Israel? In other words, can the memory of shared daily life, just as Jewish Muslim life appeared to be in Morocco, today still represent a useful starting point for further interpretations or at least grant us greater independence from those media influences which so greatly affect contemporary representations, especially in the Arab-Islamic world?[14] To put it yet another way, do we still today perceive the absence of such an important part of Moroccan history as the Jewish one has been and, if that should prove the case, how is such an absence experienced? We need to clarify a few points before beginning to answer the issues that have been raised above.

---

[11] Aomar Boum, "Southern Moroccan Jewry between the Colonial Manufacture of Knowledge and the Postcolonial Historiographical Silence", in *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa*, eds. Emily Benichou Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 73-92.

[12] Boum, "Southern Moroccan Jewry between the Colonial Manufacture of Knowledge and the Postcolonial Historiographical Silence," 83.

[13] Ibid., 87-88.

[14] See Mark R. Cohen, "Modern Myths of Muslim Anti-Semitism", in *Muslim Attitudes to Jews and Israel*, ed. Moshe Ma'oz (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Pres, 2010), 31-47.

Doing Research in Meknes

The research on which this study is based was carried out in an urban environment, in Meknes, a city in Morocco situated on the hills in the south of the Rif and whose university contains a large number of *amazigh* (Berber) students coming from the south-east of the country. The differences between urban and rural settings in Morocco are great, as are those between coastal cities and those of the interior, and indeed between the various coastal cities which underwent Spanish or British influence. Meknes is a city which counted 15,842 Jews in 1947[15] (out of a population of 122,522 Muslims[16]) and now has around eighty (in Morocco there were 258,141 Jews in 1947 or 270,000 according to other sources[17]). It is unusual in that it has two *mellah* (the Jewish quarter), one old (from 1682) and one new, built in the 1930s and lying outside the walls but next to the old *mellah*. The building of a new *mellah* during the colonial period can be explained by the fact that the Jewish community of Meknes was very traditionalist and observant of rites and during French colonisation it did not wish to leave the old *mellah* in order not to run the risks of assimilation and loss of social cohesion, which is what happened to the wealthy Jewish classes of other Moroccan classes who moved to the *ville nouvelle*. In Meknes, the preference was for a modern new Jewish quarter to be built alongside the old. This is an important factor because it meant that when the Jews left their dwellings in the old *mellah*, these were occupied by rent-paying Muslim tenants who then found themselves living in the same courtyard and in the same tenement as working-class Jews and hence there was a much greater sharing of open space than elsewhere. However we must remember that not all Moroccan cities had a *mellah* and that a certain degree of residential segregation, which gave rise to the existence of the *mellah*, was not the rule in Morocco, above all in the South and in rural settings. A further important sharing of space was offered by the area of the *souk*, the place where artisans and shopkeepers, Jews and Muslims, spent most of their days and most of their lives.

The research was conducted chiefly through interviews of members of the Jewish community who stayed in Meknes and of the Muslim population, both young people who had never met Jews and that part of the population which had known the Jews when they made up a large community. Other interviews

---

15 André Chouraqui, *La condition juridique de l'Israélite marocain*, (Paris: Presses du livre français,1950) , 211.

16 Muhammad Kenbib, *Juifs et musulmans au Maroc 1859-1948*, (Rabat: Faculté de lettre et des sciences humaines, 1994), 666.

17 There were 258,141 according to Chouraqui, *La condition juridique*, 211 while there were 270,000 according to Daniel Rivet, *Le Maghreb à l'épreuve de la colonisation,* (Paris: Hachette, 2002), 53.

were conducted in Israel and France among Jews who emigrated from Meknes.[18]

It should be noted straightaway that while on many points Jewish and Muslim memories coincide or contain few discrepancies, on one issue in particular the gulf between the two memories is wide and that concerns the reasons lying at the heart of Jewish emigration.[19] We must not forget that the great waves of people leaving Morocco took place in 1948, the birth of Israel, and in1956, the date of Moroccan independence[20]and then between 1961 and 1964 when *Mossad* was active.[21] Other significant waves of emigration occurred after the Six-Day War.[22]

While historians concur that in the years 1940-1950 political, social and religious factors were less important when deciding if to leave than economic or nationalist concerns, the debate surrounding the following decade remains open and its history has still to be written. Zionism, a religious-messianic Zionism, brought its influence to bear particularly on the rural population in the years 1940-1950, as Yaron Tsur has pointed out.[23] This trend accelerated when the interaction between national identity and religion became problematic and when distinctions between Zionism, Israel and indigenous Jews became less clear with uncertainty about the future growing.[24] From 1960 to 1970 the influence of Zionism slowed (*Mossad* was active until 1964) while the difficulties facing the integration of Moroccan Jews into Israel were becoming common knowledge. While a part of the Jews who left Morocco was made up of the poor and the marginalised, it is nonetheless true that from that time the elites too began to emigrate. Michael Laskier has picked out three groups of Jewish-Moroccan elites in the post-independence period: the Jews influenced by French culture, those educated in the Alliance schools and partially influenced by Zionism, and finally those believing in a Jewish-Muslim

---

18 See note 1.

19 Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Différents récits sur le départ des juifs du Maroc dans les années 1960-1970", in *La Bienvenu et l'adieu* 3 (Actes du colloque d'Essaouira, March 17-21 , 2010), eds. F. Abécassis, K. Direche, R. Aouad (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 67-97.

20 Between 1948 and 1956 90,000 Jews left Morocco, see Mohammed Kenbib, *Juifs et musulmans au Maroc 1859-1948*, 708.

21 Between 1961 and 1964 18,000 Jews left, see Michael M. Laskier, Eliezer Bashan, "Morocco", in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, eds. R. Spector Simon, M.M Laskier, S. Reguer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 471-504, 501.

22 There were 60,000 Jews before the Six-day war in July 1967 and 53,000 in November 1967, see Victor Malka, *La mémoire brisée des Juifs du Maroc*, (Paris: Editions Entente, 1978) 71.

23 Yaron Tsur, "The Religious Factor in the Encounter between Zionism and the Rural Atlas Jews", in *Zionism and Religion,* eds. Sh. Almog, J. Reinharz, A. Shapira (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 312-329 , 325.

24 Aomar Boum, "From 'Little Jerusalems' to the Promised land: Zionism, Moroccan Nationalism, and Rural Jewish Emigration", *Journal of North African Studies* 15/ 1 (2010) 51-69, 66.

entente, among whom there were left-wing Jews, communists and others more moderate.[25] Of these three groups, the first emigrated to France or Canada,[26] the second to France or Israel[27] and the third stayed in Morocco.[28]

Jewish and Muslim Memory of the 1960s and 1970s

In the Jewish memory of those who left in the 1960s and 1970s, there remain inklings of fear, the recollection of single events (from the murders of Petit Jean/Sidi Kasem in 1954[29] to those carried out in Meknes in 1967), daily harassment and casual violence, uncertainty about the future and about the individual's role in a new society (more Arabized and Islamized than before) and the sensation of being caught up in a historical process too strong for individuals alone to resist. In contrast, the Muslim recollection of those who stayed behind retains the idea that the Jews left because they were too scared, because they were victims of Zionist machinations, because the men were tricked by their own wives or children, or else because they were either simply ungrateful or else traitors, devoid of national sentiment. The fault line between the two collective memories surrounding this issue grows fairly wide and forgetting becomes widespread, to the extent that we may think of this as a traumatic experience yet to be overcome and as a mourning yet to run its course.[30] However, we shall return to this point below.

One feature of Morocco compared to other Arab-Muslim countries is the continuity of past Jewish presence both in terms of place (synagogues, schools, museums, cemeteries, tombs of saints and the conservation of *mellah* houses once inhabited by Jews and kept intact by their new Muslim residents in terms of their Jewish character) and of items (Jewish ritual items still sold in

---

[25] Michael M. Laskier and Eliezer Bashan, "Morocco", in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times,* eds. R. Spector Simon, M.M. Laskier, S. Reguer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 471-504, 501.

[26] According to note 2 of Yolande Cohen and Martin Messika in this issue, 20,000 North-African Jews emigrated to Canada, mainly of Moroccan origin and 55,000 from Morocco settled in France.

[27] Between 1948 and 1970, 230,000 Jews reached Israel, see Laskier and Bashan, "Morocco", 502.

[28] In Morocco there are still 3000/5000 Jews, see Simon Lévy, "Il y a encore des Juifs au Maroc", in *La Méditerranée des Juifs*, eds. P. Balta, C. Dana, R. Dhoquois-Cohen, (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2003), 195.

[29] Yaron Tsur has pointed out that the riots and the murders in Petit Jean caused the suddenly departure of 200 people for Israel, see Yaron Tsur, *A Torn Community: the Jews of Morocco and Nationalism, 1943-1954*, (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 2001), 399-400 [Hebrew].

[30] Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Double Trauma and Manifold Narratives: Jews' and Muslims' Representations of the Departure of Moroccan Jews in the 1950s and 1960s", *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9 (2010) 107-25; Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "How Muslims Remember the Departure of the Jews in Contemporary Morocco (The case of Meknes)", Paper presented at the Conference on Remembering War, Genocide and Other Human Rights Violations: Oral History, New Media and the Arts. Concordia University Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, November 5-8, 2009.

markets, music, food, liqueur, sayings, proverbs, handicrafts and goldsmith's working). Even demons, the Jewish *jnun*, still circulate in Morocco and are still present in people possessed (in exorcist practices the last demon to abandon the one possessed is always the Jewish *jinn*).

What is more, every year thousands of Jews of Moroccan origin from Israel, France and Canada come to attend the *hillula*, the pilgrimage to the tombs of the saints, the visiting of cemeteries or friends and relatives still living in Morocco. This tradition allows a historical memory to be cultivated and thank to this to be constantly updated through the streams of memory stemming from and involving these visitors, as Halbwachs has ably shown.[31] These features are specific to Morocco and have contributed to the uniqueness of the country.

Shared Nostalgia

Shared nostalgia pivots around the memory of socialisation, beginning with food. Even though it is remembered that the Jews ate different foods and had dietary rules to follow – still known among Muslims as *kasher* – the dishes of traditional Jewish cuisine were in any case customary to Muslims and there was the sharing of meals (still today there are Muslims in the *souk* who can recite the prayers said before meals and this bears witness to the sharing of food). One celebration, the *Mimuna*,[32] demonstrates this shared partaking of food. During *Mimuna*, which closes the week of *Pesah*, Muslims offered Jews those foods, such as bread and wheat, that were denied them in the previous seven days, while Jews gave Muslims the unleavened bread and dried fruit they had left over. The Muslim authorities would visit families who were either wealthy or well-connected and orchestras played Andalusian-Moroccan music. Celebrations contained typical carnival features such as the exchange of roles – the Jews dressed up as Muslims and men as women. Muslim disguises played a role in eliminating every difference between Jew and Muslim so that they could celebrate, at least for one day, a time of shared conviviality and exchange of food.

Still today people remember details of vegetables known to have been introduced by the Jews and also ways of preserving fruit and vegetables which the Moroccans recall learning from the Jews, while the memory of the delicacy of Jewish cake-making remains a *leitmotiv*. The *mahya*, the liqueur once produced by the Jews, continues to be made by Muslims, although they admit that it cannot reach the heights of that produced in the past by the Jews. The handicraft talents in the fields of clothing and goldsmith working still crops up in daily conversation and people recognise that the Jews were unbeatable in

31 Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997).

32 For an analysis of the *Mimouna* celebration, see Harvey E. Goldberg, "The Mimuna and the Minority Status of Moroccan Jews ", *Ethnology* 17/ 1 (1978): 75-87.

this field and lament the disappearance of the products and the Jews who made them. Memory has also persisted of mutual connivance, with Muslims able to drink *mahya* in the *mellah* and in Jewish houses and Jews being able to smoke on Saturdays in Muslim houses.

People still regret today not being able to indulge in those light-hearted verbal exchanges which characterised daily relationships between Jews and Muslims. In Meknes irony and invective were widespread in inter-personal relations and this was a way of re-jigging asymmetrical power relationships. Jews, for example, took the liberty (thanks to variations in Arabic pronunciation or their own way of pronouncing the "s") of insulting or railing against Muslims,[33] all dissembled as parody and clearly shared by both parties under a banner of jest and of the relief afforded by laughter, which serve to discharge tensions between the two communities.
The act of pilgrimage to the tombs of Jewish saints with recognised miraculous powers is still practiced. However, the attribution of magical powers to the Jews extended to other events, such as the expectations attached to the powers of Jewish prayers during the *Sukkot* celebrations to grant rain at the end of summer. There were also expectations of ritual Jewish objects, such as the *kippah*, which was said to have the power to re-establish family harmony in Muslim families, and in amulets made by Jews with special powers. There is also nostalgia for the great devotion to and observance of Jewish religious practices. Indeed Jewish attachment to their religion's rites was recognised, respected and admired. However praises are chiefly sung of the *mellah* when it was still a Jewish quarter. In the collective memory it was the place where one could buy the best goods at the lowest prices and where the shared living when it was inhabited by both Jews and Muslims was a model of harmony, where female solidarity found concrete expression in the mutual breast-feeding of babies when the mother could not be present.

Hostility versus Nostalgia

Certain sectors of the population, however, do not fit into this framework of shared nostalgia but rather nurse feelings of hostility or blatant antisemitism. This is especially the case of those women who in reality had no opportunity to frequent Jews in the past and who consequently have only experienced ideological representations of Jews. Another sector of the population sharing the same attitudes is the upper-middle classes , particularly business people who did not frequent the *souk* (where the stalls of Jews were cheek by jowl with those of Muslims) or the world of the *mellah*. This stratum of the

[33] For example, when they were forced in an ingratiating tone to turn to a Muslim and supposed to say *sidi 'l-muslim* (My Muslim Master), they would actually say *jdi 'l muslim* (Billy-goat of a Muslim).

population had not even been influenced by that other source of socialisation *par excellence*, school life, because Jews generally attended the Jewish schools of the Alliance. The social strata of the upper-middle classes underwent to a greater extent the anti-Semitic influence of French colonialism and, what is more, saw in the Jewish Moroccan bourgeoisie a formidable economic competitor, given the networking and international contacts at the latter's disposal.

Memories of the past are missing in recent generations. There has been no communication of the past between generations and the young (both the young workers of the *souk* and university students) hardly even know where the *mellah* is, given that Moroccan Jews make up an ephemeral and superficial presence in Morocco today. The young think that Jews abandoned a country heedlessly, making themselves seem ungrateful and craven. The stereotypes evoked when the Jewish presence in Morocco is spoken of lead us to dwell on the influence that the media and Islamist-leaning popular literature has been able to wield on this sector of Moroccan society, devoid of any direct experience of the Jewish presence in Morocco.

One exception to this are the Berber students attending Meknes University. Given the fact that inter-generational information transfer in a rural context (such as that of the Berbers in south-east Morocco) and in a culture where an oral tradition like the Berbers' is greater than in a non-Berber city environment subject to greater mobility, students have held on to a greater memory of the Jewish presence in the south of Morocco. Through their words and memories handed down by their families, there emerge still well-preserved proverbs, traditions, events and stories, together with feelings of nostalgia for a time which has now become a myth. These are memories that are also reinforced when Moroccan Jews make pilgrimage to the tombs of the saints, attend the cemeteries where the members of their own families are buried or when they go to see the houses they have abandoned. These students, often belonging to radical Berber associations, also seem to admire and identify with those Jews who left for nationalist reasons.

A Fracture in the Sharing of Memory

If so far we have drawn a picture of a generally shared nostalgia, with the exception of young people, Arab students, women who had no opportunity for contact with the Jews and lastly the wealthier classes, memories do not coincide and are no longer shared when we refer to the reasons why the Jews of Morocco departed. This removal from memory concerns in particular the killing of two youths in the new *mellah* of Meknes at the outbreak of the Six-

Day War,[34] murders which the Jews who stayed and those interviewed in France and Israel remember well but which have fallen into oblivion for Muslims. This occurrence, as has been very well explained by Avishai Margalit, is understandable, for reasons of personal implications in the processes of memory. In this regard, Margalit has quite rightly pointed out that blacks in the United States have a detailed memory of the killing of Martin Luther King while the opposite is true when it is a question of remembering the assassination of John Kennedy.[35]

There is a clear fracture in memory when the time comes to recall why the Jews left. The narration of those events differs according to whether it is performed by Jews or Muslims, although for everyone in any case we are talking of memories marked by trauma, whether it be on the part of those Muslims remaining, those Jews who left but also of those Jews who stayed. The latter are often denied a specific narrative, one taking into account the particular trauma of seeing most of one's own family and a whole community disappear. Families have split up and dispersed, and over the years have developed a kind of regret surrounding their inability to resist what at the time was considered an unavoidable event.[36] It has been remembered that

> Since Independence they knew that they could not and would not be able in the future to stay in Morocco. However, with all their strengths and with all the power of their secular memory, they resisted the idea of the departure. ..Shaken and terrified by what they called " the events", those of them who were able made some exploratory trips…[37]

For Muslims, it is a trauma due to the sudden and essentially unexpected disappearance of a component of their own history, a sort of unforeseen bereavement still to take its course. The "Muslim" narrative of the Jews' departure denies their bearing responsibility for Jewish emigration, a fact which can be traced back to a number of causes: the responsibility of *Mossad* and

---

[34] They were Joseph Elhyani, 18, and Elie Torjman, 28, both buried in Meknès cemetery. On their graves, sited beside the area where lie the six victims of the massacre of Petit Jean (Sidi Kassem) in 1954, it is specified that they were murdered. The adjacency to the Petit Jean massacre victims' graves is both concrete and symbolic, revealing the clear intention of the Jewish community to include the two latest victims in the same category as victims of massacre.

[35] Avishai Margalit, *L'etica della memoria* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006), 50.

[36] See Nicole Elgrissy Banon, *La renaicendre : mémoires d'une marocaine juive et patriote* (Casablanca: Afrique orient, 2010).

[37] Anny Dayan Rosenman**,** "Ciné-Casa", in *La Méditerranée des Juifs. Exodes et enracinements,* eds. P.Balta, C. Dana, R. Dhoquois-Cohen (Paris: l'Harmattan , 2003), 213. " Depuis l'Indépendance, ils savaient qu'ils ne pouvaient pas, qu'ils ne pourraient pas rester au Maroc. Pourtant de toutes leurs forces, et de toute la puissance d'une mémoire séculaire, ils refusaient l'idée d'un départ… Ébranlés, effrayés par ce qu'ils appelaient « les événements », ceux d'entre eux qui le pouvaient faisaient des voyages exploratoires…"

Zionists more generally, the economic crisis and the greater competition of those times, migratory patterns linked to years of crisis, the essentially unpatriotic attitudes of Jews who were to leave at a time of crisis in the country, the weakness and lack of virility of men forced to depart by their own wives, who in turn thought only to follow their offspring. In the interviews importance was attributed to the theme of weakness and obstinacy of the men who should always have been the last to leave (cases were also related of husbands who had returned to Morocco but were then forced to leave for ever under family pressure). In the Moroccan film *Où vas-tu Moshé?,* by Hassan Benjelloun (2007) there is again the same kind of model insomuch as the protagonist, Moshe, tries to resist the pressure of his wife and initially gives up the idea of leaving, preferring that only his wife and daughter depart. It may be that the action of *aliyat ha-noar* (Youth Aliyah, the organisation for youth emigration, fairly active in Morocco), which organised departure to Israel's kibbutz of 12- to 16-year olds, who were only joined much later by their parents,[38] had a particular effect on those Muslims seeing buses depart loaded with young Jews whose parents stayed behind. Although there can be no doubt that the young were first in line for emigration and that in Israel in the 1950s there was a policy favouring emigration at a young age, we must remember that many husbands were the first to leave so as to find lodgings and a job, to be joined subsequently by their families. There were even incidents of departing husbands who abandoned their former wives. These cases tally with the fact that from the 1950s onwards the *ketubbah* (the Jewish marriage contract) of the Moroccans carried the photos of the spouses in order to stop the man emigrating to Israel with a new wife who was not his rightful one (a custom which has no equivalent in other communities).[39]

Yet in the Muslim narration we hear only and obsessively of the reluctant husband, as if to say that anyone wishing to leave belonged to a weak, feminised community lacking virility; this is done so as to remove Muslims from all responsibility for what happened and to hinder a critical appraisal of events.

In the "Jewish" narrative, however, we find reference to a climate of fear and uncertainty, to constant minor harassment, to the fear of an increase in mixed marriages and conversions to Islam as well as the difficulty of seeing one's own future projected onto a society which was becoming more nationalist and heading towards ever-greater tendencies towards Arabization and Islamization,

---

[38] The role of this organisation in recruiting in India children and young Jews to be sent to Israel and on the obstacles placed in the path of parents wishing to join them subsequently is dealt with by Maina Chawla Singh, *Being Indian, Being Israeli*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2010), 90-118. In this regard it would be interesting to compare the policy of *aliyyat ha noar* with regards the case of Morocco and that of India.

[39] Moshe Ammar, " Wedding Orders and the *Ketubba* Text among Moroccan Jews since the XVIth Century", in *The Jewish Traditional Marriage in Morocco*, eds. J. Chetrit and others, (Haifa: University of Haifa and the Ministry of Education , 2003), 107-185, 182 [Hebrew].

with little room for self-expression and sense of representation granted to a non-Muslim minority. The background to all this was a feeling of unavoidability which brooked no resistance to events perceived as world-changing and standing above the choices made by mere individuals, often making those choices obligatory. According to the definition given by a number of interviewees, everything was *maktub*, already decreed by destiny.

In the "Jewish" narration of those emigrants to Israel, the decision to leave also meant difficult living conditions in the initial years, a denial of their own past and history, reduced to a few pages in school textbooks, as well as the devaluation of their own language and culture. This lack of recognition led to the trauma of their former identity being erased but which has nonetheless given rise to a recovery and re-affirmation of their own past over a number of decades, as we pointed out at the beginning and which goes on today against a background of great nostalgia.

Conclusion

To conclude, the shared memory of a past, recalled in everyday detail, continues still today both in Israel, where it gave birth to the myth of an idyllic past experienced in Morocco, and in Morocco itself. In the latter country, memory has been preserved untouched by the influence of the media, particularly so within the closed walls of the *souk*,[40] where Muslims enjoyed shared space and festivities with their Jewish neighbours, in contrast to the middle and upper classes who experienced less daily life with Jews, were possible commercial rivals and had been more greatly influenced by anti-Semitic colonial circles, by colonial policy and by media discourse. A different argument needs to be enlisted on the subject of women. There is significant difference between women of the *bourgeois* class who were friends or had contact with Jewish women (the former still today regret the departure of their female Jewish friends and acquaintances) and those who never had the opportunity to associate with Jewish women. Middle-class Jewish women had in fact had access to education before their Muslim counterparts and were the first agents of emancipation in patriarchal Moroccan society, opening a door to the possibility of changing the status of Moroccan women as early as the 1950s and 1960s; their departure was regretted by their female Muslim contemporaries. On the other hand, Muslim women who had no contact with the Jews formed an image filtered through radical Islam and make up that part of Moroccan society most influenced by ideological and fanatic Islamic discourse and by anti-Semitism. They show no feelings of nostalgia (in fact they were the only ones who even refused to be interviewed on this subject).

[40] The inhabitants often remained ignorant of the media's claims because the Arabic used in the media was unintelligible to them because the language they spoke, *derrija*, is far removed from the media code.

Here we are dealing with memories shared within a society which, although greatly differentiated in its constituent parts and spaces, allows us nonetheless to see a close network of relationships between Jews and Muslims. Even though these relationships have been ignored by official historiography, they still remain and intersect with fractured memories referring to issues removed or biased or to loss of memory. These serve to cover the trauma caused by the departure of the Jews, a fracture in the social history of Morocco which still requires analysis and re-consideration.

Emanuela Trevisan Semi is Professor in Modern Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in Italy. Her main areas of research concern marginal groups in contemporary Jewry (Karaites, Ethiopian Jews, Oriental Jews in Israel, Judaising movements, Moroccan Jews).

How to quote this article:
Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *Shared memories and oblivion: Is Israeli Jews' nostalgia for Morocco shared by the Muslims in Morocco?*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n. 4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=312

De-Westernizing Morocco: Pre-Migration Colonial History and the Ethnic-Oriented Self-Representation of Tangier's Natives in Israel

by *Aviad Moreno*

Abstract

The article presents and analyzes the self-representing narrative strategies through which westernized Jewish immigrants from Tangier (Morocco) de-westernize their personal pre-migration colonial history in the context of the ethnic conflict in Israel. By so doing, the article challenges from a new perspective the general post-Zionist notion according to which ethnic revivals among Moroccan Jews in Israel came about in opposition to the European-oriented national narrative; A narrative that had distorted their authentic Mizraḥi culture and history, often in the form of de-Arabization. In an attempt to explain the motivations for de-westernization, the article further implies that not merely did the ethnic revival of Tangier's natives not match the general post-Zionist notion, but moreover that it had often formed shape in the course of contrasting it. Only through de-westernized self-representations, could Tangier's natives contest the general representation of Moroccans as Mizraḥim with the sense of "their own" Moroccan ethnic history.

Since the founding of Israeli statehood, Moroccan Jews in Israel constituting a major part of the broad population of *Mizraḥim,*[1] have been negatively stereotyped by the hegemonic Ashkenazi-dominated core of Israeli society.[2] The group has been ranked, both in terms of cultural discourse and resources allocation, at the bottom of the social and economic ladder.[3]

The related academic literature as well as the general popular discourse considerably altered throughout the history. Principally, until the late 1970s, the predominant national school of thought perpetuated a "melting pot" harmony-oriented ethos, promoting the notion of "the negation of exile" in the course of attaining equality and unity among Jews in their new nation-state.

---

[1] "Orientals" in Hebrew; It is a widespread term used by several scholars and in the local popular language in Israel for describing the non-Ashkenazi social components; mostly Jews of Middle Eastern, North African and Central Asian origin. While the term '*Mizraḥim*' is confusing and oversimplifies the cultural and historical variedness of the entire population, I employ the term throughout the study in order to position my argument in the accurate context of discussion.

[2] Yaron Tsur, "Carnival Fears: Moroccan Immigrants and the Ethnic Problem in the Young State of Israel", *Journal of Israeli History* 18 (1997): 73-103; Mikhaël Elbaz, " 'Exile from Within': Moroccan Jews and the Reinvention of Tradition in Israel", in *Herméneutique et Bricolage; Territoires et Frontières de la Tradition dans le Judaïsme*, Actes du Colloque de Bucarest, 27-28 Octobre 2006, ed. Mădălina Vârtejanu-Joubert (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 206-209.

[3] Moshe Lissak, *The Mass Immigration in the Fifties: The Failure of the Melting Pot Policy*, (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1999); Shlomo Swirski, *Israel: The Oriental Majority* (London: Zed Books, 1989); Elbaz, "Exile from Within", 209-214.

The notion was led by a concept of *regenerization* especially with regards to the *Mizrahi* collective which were perceived as a backward element. Consequently, socio-economic and socio-political inequalities between *Ashkenazim* and *Mizrahim* in Israel were attributed to the exilic reminder of the latter.[4]

Beginning in the 1970s, the harmony-oriented national narrative was deemed invalid in explaining the apparent ethnic-based discrimination in the young State of Israel. The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a form of *Mizraḥi* counter-acculturation. This revival was comprised of several reinvented rituals including *"muzika mizraḥit" (*Oriental music), "*Bourekas*" films[5] and carnival-style festivals, such as the national parks *Mimouna*.[6] The shift also mostly manifested itself in the political swing of 1977 that was described as an accumulative reaction to the discrimination by the secular, Ashkenazi-dominated Labor Party elite. The creation of the political religious party *Shas* in 1984 marked the most influential link between the socio-political struggle and the process of bringing the silenced *Mizraḥi* voice to light.[7]

A parallel process of ethnic restoration took place among the community of Jews of Tangier origin in Israel at the time. In 1979, *Mabat*, Hebrew initials for "*Mifgash Bnei Tangir*"- the Reunion of Tangier's Natives, the principal émigré association of Spanish-Moroccans in Israel, was founded predominately by the Jews of Tangier. The declared purposes of the organization were fourfold: a) to sustain contact between the natives of the former Spanish Zone, b) To preserve, "before it is too late", the cultural, religious and folkloric patrimony, c) to collect cultural material, and d) to preserve the dialect of *Hakitia* (A Judeo-Spanish dialect commonly spoken among the Jews of Northern Morocco until the 19th century).[8] At least 769 members from across dozens of cities and towns in Israel had joined this organization by the year 1985.[9]

In the academic sphere, a new generation of scholars with a polemic post-Zionist (based on a broad postcolonial) orientation exposed the 'innate' ethnic-based inequality that had characterized the Zionist melting pot notion, according to their own observation. Through their revisionist perspective, the broad tendency was to depict the *Mizraḥim* (simultaneously with Arab Muslims), as the victims of the Eurocentric Zionist project. The population of

---

[4] Elbaz, "Exile from Within", 209; Yaron Tsur, "The Israeli Historiography and the Ethnic Problem", in *Making Israel*, ed. Benny Morris (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 233-236.

[5] A genre of popular movies in Israel mostly during the 1970s and early 1980s. The genre addressed the ethnic tension generally between *Mizraḥim* and *Ashkenazim*

[6] A traditional North African Jewish celebration held the day after Passover.

[7] Elbaz, "Exile from Within," 214-215.

[8] Mitchell M. Serels, *A History of the Jews of Tangier in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New-York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1991), 177.

[9] Based on a telephone numbers' list of Mabat's members in Israel (the number of subscribed members ought to be higher as the figure does not include spouses that had similar phone numbers. The list is found at a private collection in Bat Yam (Israel) owned by Sidney Pimienta and Gladys Pimienta (hereinafter referred to as PPC). I am grateful to them for allowing me access to this valuable material, as well as to other materials in their private collection.

Mizraḥim was seen as pawns that played no autonomous or pro-active role in the development of Zionism and were utilized by the Ashkenazi elite.[10] Furthermore, in the light of the Zionist-Arab nationalist conflict, understanding the Arab exilic reminders of the *Mizrahim* comprised a critical double paradox in the mind eyes of the Ashkenazi-dominated harmony-oriented perception: first for its exilic reminders, but moreover, for the structured denial of the right of this population to return to their countries of origin embedded in their 'Arabness.'

Central works are the ones of Ela Shohat and Yehouda Shenhav. The latter argued in general that the Zionist hegemonic discourse invoked the de-Arabization (in a number of forms including Judaized Orientalization) of the historical identity of the *Mizraḥim* as part of their forced marginalized incorporation into the Jewish state's national collective memory. In this context, post-Zionist scholars often replaced the term *Mizraḥim* by "Arab Jews", which was aimed at reflecting their more authentic historical identities.[11] The shared approach that was often used, mostly amongst westernized middleclass *Mizrahim*, which correlated with the harmony-oriented Eurocentric national narrative were therefore generally seen as imposed reconstructions formed in the Israeli socio-cultural and socio-political landscape dominated by the Ashkenazi elite.[12]

The establishment of the "*Mizrahi* Democratic Rainbow Coalition" during the 1990s brought together a number of notable scholars and activists promoting a process that may be referred to in general as the self-re-Orientalization of the genuine *Mizraḥi* identities in Israel. In the context of shifting bon-tons and hegemonic discourses, manifestations of ethnic revival among the *Mizraḥim* were perceived as part of the ongoing struggle to express the authentic *Mizraḥi* voices that had been silenced and distorted by the Ashkenazi-dominated European-oriented national bon-ton.[13]

While historians tend to refute or attest this post-Zionist notion vis-à-vis historical evidence,[14] I refute the general notion through a long-term historical

---

[10] Tsur, "The Israeli Historiography and the Ethnic Problem", 159.

[11] Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1989); Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006). As claimed by Shenhav, the Orientalization of *Mizraḥim* embedded within the process of their de-Arabizing Judaization.

[12] Elbaz, "Exile from Within," 206-212; Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[13] Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, 207-240; Elbaz, "Exile from Within," 214-220. Sami Shalom-Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Sami Shalom-Chetrit, *The Mizrahi Struggle in Israel: Between Oppression and Liberation, Identification and Alternative, 1948–2003*, (Am-Oved, 2004) [Hebrew].

[14] Several works traced the historical Arabic or Levantine affinities of *Mizraḥim* while other works emphasized on the other hand their pro-Zionist tendency. Compare, Nissim Kazzaz, *Jews in Iraq in the Twentieth Century* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1991) and Esther Meir-

discussion concerning the interaction between pre-migration histories and their following post-migration representations. Focusing on the case of Tangier, I suggest that the ethnic voice of this group of Moroccan Jews was generated throughout a process of the de-westernization of their westernized history. I propose that the motivations for de-westernization in fact formed shape vis-à-vis the general stereotype and self-representation of the *Mizraḥim* and in particular Moroccans in Israel, with which they had disassociated. Through the self-ethnicization of their Moroccan past, rather than emphasizing their historical colonial past, the group formed their ethnic self-representing Moroccan narrative in a harmony-oriented way.

My principal theoretical point-of-departure is that ethnic boundaries are maintained through balanced processes of exclusion and incorporation during the interface with other ethnic groups in space. The association of individual "actors" with an ethnic group therefore depends on their ascription by others and their simultaneous self-ascription in the sense that "they use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction."[15]

This study is based on six depth-interviews conducted among first-generation migrants during the years 2009-2010. All the informants immigrated to Israel beginning in the 1960s and became registered members of Mabat. My analytic approach is inspired by the narratives' analysis approach, paying particular attention to the motivations of self-representing storytelling and to the means by which it is adjusted to the listener.[16] In particular, I am influenced by the impression that the narratives of first-generation migrants include "ready-made" strategies that form new identities *vis-à-vis* the culture of the country of destination.[17] Over the course of self-representation and personal narration, immigrants may often accentuate elements in their past while corresponding with stereotypes regarding their country of origins, common among the absorbing society.

In this context, I am myself as an Israeli outsider observer that represents the absorbing society, turn the interviewer-interviewee dynamics into an arena of ethnic identity formation. To base the informants' self-narratives within a broader social framework, I cross-read them with earlier parallel expressions published on the circulars of Mabat circulated during the 1980s and a main publication published in 1990 marking the tenth anniversary of Mabat.

The focus of this study on westernized immigrants from one of the most westernized communities of Morocco will be productive in supporting my

---

Glitzenstein, *Between Baghdad and Ramat Gan: Iraqi Jews in Israel* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi Publishers, 2009) [Hebrew].

15 Thomas Fredrik Weybye Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969), 9-16.

16 Nilli Diengott, *Narrative: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Raanana: The Open University of Israel, 2010) [Hebrew], 95-100; For a broader discussion on narrative analysis see, Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush, *The Remembering Self : Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1994).

17 Brigitte Boenisch-Brednich, "Migration and Narration", *Folklore. Electronic Journal of Folklore* 20 (2002): 64-77.

aims to trace the self-representations in ethnic-oriented narratives among first-generation migrants. The term "westernized" refers to individuals that oriented the center of their modernization aspirations and cultural affinities towards the colonial cultural sphere of pre-migration Moroccan society, rather than the Judeo-Arabic Judeo-Spanish or Zionist spheres,[18] as shall be elaborated upon in the following paragraphs.

Jews in the Extra-Ethnic Colonial Spheres of Tangier

In 1912, a Spanish Protectorate was declared over a belt along the Moroccan northern coast (commonly referred to as Spanish-Morocco). The city of Tangier, located at the northwestern point of the northern coast on the strategic point of the Stairs of Gibraltar had been a center of interest for many Western powers, resulting in its declaration as an International Administration under the rule of a number of European powers. Tangier operated under this extraordinary political status during the period between 1923 and until Moroccan independence in 1956, with the exception of a phase between 1940 and 1945 during which Spain annexed the city to the bordering zone of Spanish Morocco.[19]

Tangier's geopolitical history is manifested in several noticeable demographic changes. Tangier turned into a center of European attraction beginning in the mid-19th century. In 1912, some 80% of the European population in Morocco resided in the city.[20] The process of Europeanization reached its peak towards the 1950s. In 1927, the foreign citizens in Tangier's International Administration represented some 17% of the city's population. In 1952, no less than a quarter of the entire population was registered as foreigners, amongst which the vast majority were Europeans.[21] Additionally, tourism reached its peak during the year 1952 as 100,000 tourists (mostly westerners) visited the city of Tangier, while its Muslim population did not exceed over 105,000 at the time.[22] In the colonial context, the European population quickly acquired an inflated sense of power and control over the center of economic and cultural life.

Consequently, amongst the first indicators of modernization under colonial rule was the adaptation of European languages by locals. Whereas French, and to a smaller extent other European languages, gained great prestige as a *lingua franca*, it seems that for the city of Tangier, and especially among Judeo-Spanish

---

[18] Yaron Tsur, "The Brief Career of Prosper Cohen: A Sectorial Analysis of the North African Jewish Leadership in the Early Years of Israeli Statehood", *Sephardic Jewry and Mizrahiyim Jews: Studies in Contemporary Jewry* XXII (2007): 67-68.

[19] Lotfi Sayahi, "Aqui Todo El Mundo Hablaba Espanol: History of the Spanish Language in Tangier", *The Journal of North African Studies* 9 (2004): 37.

[20] Serels, *A History of the Jews of Tangier*, 82.

[21] Sayahi, "Aqui Todo El Mundo Hablaba Espanol," 37.

[22] Serels, *A History of the Jews of Tangier*, 169.

speaking Jews, the modern standard Spanish language was most influential.[23] A local tour guide wrote in 1947, two years after the International Administration had resumed: "[…] in fact, beside the Arab part of town, Tangier is a Spanish city as for its language, its religion, its character and the widespread use of the Spanish Peseta […]."[24] In addition, most of the foreigners were in fact Spaniards. The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) tripled the number of Spanish speakers in the city as thousands of Republican expatriates arrived, where the number of Spaniards in Tangier rose from 11,703 in 1935 to 18,618 in 1941.[25]

The common language spoken amongst the indigenous Jews of the region until the 19th century was an ancient local Judeo-Spanish dialect called "*Hakitia*". Dissimilar to the French Zone of Morocco, the encounter of local Judeo-Spanish Jews in the Spanish Protectorate Zone and Tangier with the Spanish language was an unprecedented phenomenon in colonial history. For the first time, the language of the colonizers paralleled with great similarity to the language of the colonized indigenous population, giving a different meaning to the term westernization. Jews in the region shared a common linguistic background with the colonial elements, and their embracement of the colonial language and its by-product of cultural assets was smoother than ever.

In fact, many viewed it as the revival of their own ancient ethnic idiom and thus abandoned their previous way-of-speaking. In an article published in 1945, Benishu remarked that the "dialect or great parts of it, is no more than a mere memory, which continues to exist only among the older generation." The Hakitic ethnic dialect was rapidly vanishing during the 1900s as it was undergoing a rapid and vast process of re-Hispanization.[26]

Furthermore, in pre-colonial Morocco, the Arabic language was a critical economic component and gained "market value" among many Judeo-Spanish speaking Jews interacting with the extra-ethnic world. In the colonial context, socio-economic mobilization correlated with trends of westernization. The local middleclass began associating *Hakitia* and the extra-ethnic Arabic with the older indigenous economic order, including the generation born approximately around 1900s.[27]

Many of Tangier's middleclass Jewish youngsters developed different modernization aspirations. Among the new generation born during the colonial era, many acquired professions that included constant contact with the colonial sphere. Statistics on emigration to Israel during the 1960s illustrate the unique rates of expansion in the Northern region. The percentage of people holding white collar and free professions among immigrants from the region

---

[23] Sayahi, "Aqui Todo El Mundo Hablaba Espanol," 42.

[24] Antonio J. Onieva, *Guía Turística De Marruecos : Plazas De Soberanía, Protectorado Español, Tánger* (Madrid: Artes Gráficas Arges, 1947), 317.

[25] Sayahi, "Aqui Todo El Mundo Hablaba Espanol," 39.

[26] Yaakov Bentolila, "The Study of Moroccan Judeo-Spanish (Hakitia)," *El Presente: Studies in Sephardic Culture* 1 (2007): 160.

[27] Ibid., 162; Alegría Bendelac, *Mosaics: A Jewish Girl Grows in Tangiers* ([Jerusalem?] Center for Programming, Department of Development and Services, W.Z.O, 1987?), 10.

(28.6) was almost as double than the national Jewish Moroccan percentage (17.6) and higher than in other central metropolises such as Casablanca or Rabat. Similarly, the percentage of artisans, which represent traditional occupations of the region, was relatively smaller overall.[28]

Another indication arises from the spatial perspective. Within this specific context of modernization, many Jews started to select their place of residence in the city according to the colonial-based socio-economic preferences and not necessarily according to ethnic-based trends. According to telephone directory of Tangier in 1959 Jews scattered around 170 streets out of the 434 streets listed in the directory. Along these streets, they obviously had constant contacts with their non-Jewish counterparts, who were in general Europeans or westernized locals.[29]

An open letter published in the first communal bulletin ten years earlier protested against the degeneration in the field of communal education, denouncing the habits of local Jews to attend the extra-communal European schools during the Shabbat.[30] While the writer may mirror a common view among many local Jews, the subtext of this letter reflects and stems from a historical reality. For other Jews, those pupils who used to attend the non-Jewish schools, as well as their parents who sent them, it had became a common extra-communal and extra-ethnic way of life that often clashed with the ethnic one.

Jewish children from the local middleclass attended in great numbers the prestigious non-Jewish schools located in the city, while the local Jewish educational institutions deteriorated.[31] The webpage "Tangerinos," a virtual community of Tangier natives around the world, illustrates in retrospect the extent of the phenomenon. 274 out of 435 Jewish subscribers (learned by sorting the local Jewish names from the list) that mentioned their school, mentioned non-Jewish schools, mostly the "Lycée Français" schooling system (in its variety of names and levels of study: Régnault, Perrier, Saint Aulaire, Berchet, Ibn Batouta).[32]

Some 546 Europeans that stated their schools mentioned the same Lycée Français Schools. An additional number of 250 Muslims attended the same French educational institutions. While the figures do not provide accurate information, they indeed replicate the notion about crucial parts of the pre-migration typical daily life of many of the future migrants. For some

---

[28] Simha Aharoni, *Aliyat Yehudei Maroko: taḥkir klali le-yovel ha-ashor*, (Yerushalayim: ha-Soḥnut ha-Yehudit,1973), 36, 113.

[29] Telefonica de Tanger S.R., "Anuario Telefonico- Tanger," 1959. (The calculation indicates only the numbers of local inhabitants who had telephone services and is based on typical Jewish names).

[30] Comunidad Israelita de Tanger, Boletin Oficial (Tanger: Editions Internationales, 1949),13.

[31] Tangier budget for the first half of 1955- American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC), AR Geneva: Morocco-budget-finance 1947-1954, file C56.301, The AJDC Archives, Jerusalem, Israel; Comunidad Israelita de Tanger, *Boletin Oficial* (Tanger: Editions Internationales, 1952), 15.

[32] http://tangers.free.fr/email/annuaire/annu_a.php, accessed on 1 May 2010.

youngsters at school age that would later became the core of migrants' society in 1980s Israel, school, where they had spend much of their daily life, was a field for constant inter-ethnic encounters.

In the context of colonization, extra-ethnic networks exposed growing number of Jews to Christian habits. Amongst local Jews, the Christmas holiday was marked in some way, mainly through their participation in parties at their work places or schools, which correlated with an emerging European-oriented culture of leisure. Alegria, a young girl from Tangier who attended the French Lyceum, reflects the tension between the ethnic and extra-ethnic sphere, in her memoir. Despite her father's objection, her mother used to buy her a small present at Christmas time and hand it to her at a special ceremony. She did so since she did not want her daughters to feel deprived in front of their non-Jewish classmates.[33]

An indication to the level of exposure to this extra-ethnic European culture is clearly defined in a recording of Mabat's organized trip to Tangier in 1987. Sitting in a café at the heart of their former hometown, the former residents spontaneously recalled and sang along joyfully a Spanish Christmas song, which was stopped only because the rabbi had been noticed by them.[34]

For many youngsters of the westernized middle class, extra-ethnic activities played a key role in shaping their identity despite standing in contrast to their immediate domestic-communal sphere. Alegria's words are again instructive:

> "As we grew up and became more independent of family life, going out with friends of all circles, having dinner at their homes, meeting them for drinks or meals at one of the cafes or restaurants in town, we gradually gave in to the temptation of sharing a ham omelet or going to the beach on one of the nine days of Av…we usually kept quiet about our transgressions as we did not want to upset our parents."[35]

Thus, the transformation between the *Hakitia* and the modern Spanish language (as well as other European languages and in particular the French language) only symbolized the broader transformation from an ethnic-oriented way of life (i.e. Jewish life) towards an extra-ethnic westernized routine in the colonial spheres of Tangier. The transformation had a versatile quality and varied in its impact from one individual to the next. Many of the westernized Jews still experienced ethnic life, but it had become only one element of their complex modern identity and life style. Such manifestations are embedded in the informants' personal memories and are highlighted at certain points throughout their narratives.

---

33 Alegría Bendelac, *Mosaics: A Jewish Girl Grows in Tangiers*, 43.

34 "Todos llevan al niño", "La virgen lavaba", recordings of Mabat's organized trip, File: Y 05696-f, The National Library of Israel- Sound Archive, Jerusalem.

35 Bendelac, *Mosaics: A Jewish Girl Grows in Tangiers*, 43.

The Judaization of Morocco

In its opening pages, Mabat's main publication, circulated in 1990, stated that Jews had been natural inhabitants of Morocco much earlier than Arabs had. A map of the Jewish communities of the Magreb preceding 750 BC, the date of Arab conquest, was attached to support this notion. The following essay, titled "Where did we come from?" further reinforced the tendency to Judaize the history of Morocco using the legend of Jewish settlement in the city of Tangier and its surroundings during the biblical period.[36]

In response to my question regarding his memories from Jewish holidays in Tangier, Carlos[37] declared in an explaining intonation, "Look, Tangier was a city of Jews! During *Yom Kippur* all the cinemas and cafes were shut down!" Such reference to his history astonished me as several moments earlier when I had invoked a discussion on his school years he had mentioned his contact with non-Jewish friends at the Lycée Français on daily basis. In this context, he even had mentioned that the private lessons of Hebrew at home were the only practices really attaching him to his Jewish identity, stating "I have never been religious, never went to the synagogue and even did not know how to daven."[38]

The irony in Carlos's words ought to be read in an accurate context. Questions regarding Jewish aspects in Tangier repeatedly invoked a tendency to narrate a collective story with an idealized sense of shared past. For instance, in response to a similar question about her way of celebrating the Jewish holidays as an adolescent in Tangier, Ruth replied: "I remember my grandmother giving charity to the needy on Purim." This memory was accompanied by an elucidation, where "This was our unique costume in Morocco; we the Jews of Tangier knew how to give…"[39]

At first glance, it seems that the belief regarding the broad tendency of Moroccan Jews to adjust and merge their pre-migration *Mizraḥi* history into the national ethos in order to assimilate seems to appear vividly in the self-described narratives of Tangier's Jews in Israel. Yet, in this case, in contrast to the general post-Zionist notion it seems that harmony-oriented ethnic self-representations are specifically designed with aims of silencing the modern colonial elements in one's biography and personal memory, rather than any historical Arab-oriented *Mizraḥi* element.

Many visual elements in Mabat's publication may serve as an example. Next to the map of pre-Islamic Maghreb, the editors attached a portrait of the English

---

[36] Mabat Revista 1989-1990 (Vol.1, 8-9, 40), PPC, Bat Yam Israel.

[37] Unless a reference to a published source appears, all first names have been changed to pseudo-names for the sake of protecting the privacy of the informants.

[38] An interview held on 30 September 2009.

[39] An interview held on 18 November 2009.

port of Tangier during the 17th century.[40] In a number of images portraying the atmosphere of Jewish education in the region, a photograph of AIU Tangier School in 1950 appeared next to a portrait of Jewish philanthropist, Sir Montifiore, who had donated to the modern efficient schooling system in the city during 19th century.[41] In the "visitor's notes" proceeding Mabat's trip to Tangier during the late 1980s, the attached photograph showed of a Jewish women mourning at the Tetuan's (a city neighboring Tangier) Sephardic Jewish cemetery at the end of the first decade of the 20th century.[42]

In this context, despite clear personal memories from the colonial spheres of Tangier, many tended to manifest the non-Arabic origins of their history in Spanish Morocco through unambiguous ethnic-oriented collective memories that often preceded their lifetime or referred to the period of their earlier childhood. The sense of Jewish collective history was often granted with a sense of personal history.

According to Monique, her mother initiated the first private Jewish school in Tangier. "I have a picture", she explains.[43] In response to my question about her memories of Jewish immigrants in Tangier, she stated:

> "Well, the community absorbed, out of its own choice, Jewish refugees from Europe during World War Two. All families in the city used to donate charity each week and during the holidays. We children used to fight over the privilege to give the needy his coin. In Morocco we learned how to give!"

Subsequent to this question, I further asked if people used to remit from abroad for that matter. She replied:

> "Yes, the heads of the community used to write to wealthy people like
> Rothschild [the 19th century well-known Jewish philanthropist] …but most of the time poor people from Morocco used to write to Tangier….they had heard that Tangier is an 'el Dordo'…they came. This used to be an example for community management for the mankind [para toda la gente]!"[44]

It seems that the tendency to focus on earlier elements in the history of Tangier contributed much to the ability of these individuals to refer to their pre-migration history in collective terms of idealized-nostalgic ethnic past rather than through their complex personal memories.

---

[40] Mabat Revista 1989-1990 (Vol.1, 6), PPC, Bat Yam Israel.
[41] Ibid., 28.
[42] Ibid., 99; See other example: Ibid., 6, 21-23,25 27, 34, 37.
[43] An interview held on 30 September 2009.
[44] An interview held on 30 September 2009.

The Value of Self-Representing Narratives

> "There is no such a thing as an '*edah* (ethnicity, in the Jewish and mainly Israeli context) without mores and I'd like [Israeli] people to realize that!… You cannot tell one, 'you have nothing'… it reminds me of what one lady [referring to Golda Meir] once said, 'You used to live in caves'.' I have it recorded on tape and I will never ever erase it!...This is why I find it important to collect all this material…"[45]

In these words of resentment, Alberto, a Tangier's native who had acquired engineer training in Morocco and France and who had referred to his experience in the colonial sphere of Tangier, explained the reason for his intensive preoccupation in the commemoration of Spanish-Moroccan ethnic heritage in Israel.

Deliberately voiced in front of an Israeli interviewer conducting research destined to be published, the ethnicization trend ought to be reassessed in the context of self-representation in front of existing stereotypes. For instance, in continuation to the nostalgic recollection of Jewish habits in Tangier, Monique referred to wedding ceremonies in the following words:

> "Weddings were not like here [Israel]…that was something; there was a *hiba* [decorum]! The *henna*[46] that we had in Tangier was respectful, wonderful… the first time I went to a wedding ceremony here in Israel, I said to myself 'What is this? A circus?' The bride had not arrived yet and people were already seated around the table eating like pigs…our matrimonies took place in the synagogue. There was a choir and the bride used to be carried to the synagogue with a great deal of respect […]."[47]

Ruth's idealized image of internal Jewish immigration to Tangier reflects another message she had intended to voice:

> " […] many Ashkenazim came to Tangier during World War Two. We only knew they were Jews, that's all. In Morocco I was not familiar with the term 'Ashkenazim.'[…] Here on the other hand, you should know, I have seen harsh racism. For example my sister had to marry a guy of Russian origin and his parents, upon hearing that she was Sephardic, could not accept it …eventually he had left my sister and married a 'goya'…it is shocking! I have seen that in the land of Israel…incredible."[48]

---

[45] An interview held on 14 June 2009.

[46] A traditional celebration among Afro-Asian cultures usually preceding the wedding ceremony.

[47] An interview held on 30 September 2009.

[48] An interview held on 18 November 2009.

In response to my question regarding his celebration of Jewish holidays, Carlos who had stated earlier that he had been detached from religious ethnic life, replied:

> "Well, I used to celebrate them like everybody else. Listen! That was the most beautiful way to be Jewish. It was a simple and intelligent form of Judaism. Everybody observed the holidays, many went to the synagogue but still went the cinema right after, or take the car to go on a trip on Shabbat. I always say it used to be the most correct form of Judaism." [49]

His intonation, and the subtext of his words, illustrate that he had reconstructed the image of Tangier with aims of contrasting the binary approach towards Jewish religion common in Israeli orthodox-oriented religious concepts. The traditionalization of his past had a self-representing message - being conformist while staying attached to tradition symbolizes in his eyes his Moroccan identity in the forefront of the present image of Israeli Judaism.

In correlation, Clarice admitted in the context of discussion, that in Tangier she used to feel more French than Jewish and had felt alienated while attending a synagogue.[50]And yet, a question regarding her way of celebrating holidays later on evoked the following nostalgic representation, "During *Purim* we had special little cakes, one for each member of the family [to hand us *mishloaḥ manot*], today [in Israel] we really have nothing!...*Purim* here will not be like it was there...in Tangier everybody felt our holidays very strongly."[51]

It seems that ethnic-oriented representations of their past, especially among westernized migrants, enfolded much more into them than mere references to their past. The self-representing quality of the narratives presented here aimed at self-acculturation into the Israeli national narrative from an upper-hand standpoint, rather than at challenging it altogether. Monique's criticism about the tacky Israeli wedding mores was followed by the point that her exilic past ought to play a greater role in the foundation of Israeli renewing Jewish civilization.

> "You know sometimes I think 'Jerusalem' was there, not here. Here **we** have lost all proportion…this is hurting me. I say Judaism is disappearing. All the beautiful things that were beautiful in our Torah [literally, the first five books of the bible, meaning the religious tradition], are vanishing. This is the reason that I tell you that I have plenty of disappointment…**we** are losing the beauty, what has unified **us** as Jews for generations. You should know that **we** are becoming

[49] An interview held on 30 September 2009.
[50] An interview held on 14 June 2009.
[51] Ibid.

> worse than the gentiles. **We** must change and never forget our past…"[52]

Her choice to offer a collective moral lesson by referencing to the Moroccan past, especially by employing a first person plural tense (We), illustrates the value of her self-representation and gives meaning to its overstated Jewish orientation. Other immigrants expressed this idea differently:

> "The Israeli society expects you to assimilate, be like everybody. It is impossible after so many years. After 2000 years we had been there, and besides, I am sorry, but it is an asset, not something we should renounce, or be ashamed of…the Israelis have a lot to learn from us [Tangier's natives] about being a prosperous Jewish society."[53]

Through the emphasis on the collective ethnic elements in her Moroccan past, Ruth classified it as a valuable asset that the Israeli society foolishly overlooks. Mabat's publication directly articulated this notion, where one of the few paragraphs in the Hebrew language in Mabat's publication are the opening lines:

> "The state of Israel has yet to crystallize a culture that can be identified as her own. Hence, this is the reason for the significance of our activity [in Mabat], which is to try to implant among the nation the notion that they ought to take into account our heritage, our history, our culture, our habits, our melodies, our *piyutim*, our songs etc. many first signs are testifying that it is possible, and that our level of efforts will be a critical factor, **of our ability to contribute to the Israeli culture**..."[54]

The fact that these opening words appear in Hebrew (and do not repeat themselves in a Spanish translation) invokes the notion that the Mabat co-ethnic organization established at the midst of ethnic tension in Israel, was intended to facilitate the assimilation of Tangier's immigrants into the nation state's sense of cohesiveness through the ethnicization of their shared history.
The idea that Israel needs the Jewish elements in Moroccan past in order to establish itself culturally is traced several times throughout Mabat's publication. For instance, the publication states, "We cannot pretend that everything works well for our Israel." In addition, the essay concludes by stating, "Israel needs its [Diasporas'] assistance and its *aliyah*."[55] The same idea was repeated five years earlier in a circulation that dealt with the *raison d'être* of Mabat organization.[56]

---

[52] An interview held on 30 September 2009.
[53] An interview held on 18 November 2009.
[54] Mabat Revista, 3.
[55] Ibid., 100, 104.
[56] A letter circulated among Mabat's members, 19 September 1985, PPC, Bat Yam Israel.

The ethnic-oriented publication focuses on success stories among the community in Israel. Such are the artists David Sousana or Jacob Salama (later converted to Yavin) described as "The boy from the *juderia* (the Jewish quarter)" that had turned into a thriving industrialist (Mabat 1990, 85-86). The climax is expressed in an interview with the member of the *Knesset* Daniel Levy who had succeeded mostly in the mission to bring pride to the community in Israel. A facsimile containing a number of newspaper items visually confirms this notion.

In this context, the manifestation of pure stable Zionism may appear. In Monique's reference to the refugee episode in Tangier she chose to contrast Tangier's Jews with the Ashkenazi refugees fleeing to the city. According to Monique, after the war, most of the Ashkenazi guests in Tangier chose to go to Argentina or Canada, whereas Tangier's Jews came to Israel with love and passion. "They came out of the fact that we all used to read each year in the *Haggadah*: 'Next year in Jerusalem,' Jerusalem was our dream," she concludes.[57] This statement obviously does not correlate with her own complex choice to immigrate to Israel during the 1970s after few years in Spain and France, nor does it explain the broader history of a community that did not begin to vanish until the 1960s,[58] where many of its residents chose western destinations. It simply serves as a rhetoric tool of self-representation in certain context of narration oriented towards the harmonic narrative.

Accentuated Sephardicness and the *Mizraḥi* Revival

The revival of the Sephardic ethnic component should be understood within the context of similar self-representing narratives that are made to incorporate the narrators into the harmony-oriented discourse. In an attempt to contrast the emerging image of Moroccans, "their own" contextualized Moroccan habits were brought to life.

The celebration of the annual ritual of the Mimouna, one of the symbols of *Mizraḥi* cultural revival in Israel, led to an internal reaction among many of Tangier's Jews across the country. The main initiator of Mabat, Dr. Avital, testified overtly in Mabat's main publication that her initiative to found the *émigré* organization took shape vis-à-vis the costumes of celebrating mass Mimouna by the mob of *Mizrahim*. The "dissatisfaction" with the emerging stereotype of Moroccans, as well as its counter self-representation, invoked the initiative among Mabat's initiators.[59] A more constructive example is the declaration on Mabat's circular from 1988, depicting its *raison d'être*:

---

[57] An interview held on 30 September 2009.

[58] During 1972 some 4,000 Jews still documented as Tangiers's residents (See, Aharoni, 55, 102).

[59] Mabat Revista, 105; A similar testimony is found in a letter distributed among Mabat's members on 25 May 1988, PPC, Bat Yam, Israel.

> "We certainly have the obligation to increase the awareness of the Israeli public to the fact that not all Jews of Moroccan origins are of a *Maghrebi* [North African] culture…"[60]

The celebration of the ritual in pre-migration Morocco had little significance for the majority of local Jews, and even more so among the westernized sector. In post-migration Israel, such symbols played a new role of in shaping migrants' collective identity and became imperative tools in the self-representation of their absolute history. David's reference to the costumes strongly enforces this idea. David told me about the first time he initiated a Mimouna celebration in Israel during the 1980s:

> "The costume was pretty common in Israel and my friends asked me, 'Well you're Moroccan why don't you celebrate it'? I reply: that is a Mimona?, I will show you what the real Mimona is…. I told them it is not what you see here, the hopping monkeys in the parks…our Mimona is much more profound."[61]

In this context, the Hakitic pronunciation of the word "Mim**o**na," rather than *Mimouna*, was a linguistic nuance that gained new meaning per se in Israel. An attempt to refer to the costume with the common non-Hakitic pronunciation "Mim**o**na," usually resulted in a decisive correction.

As mentioned above, the modern Spanish mother tongue of Tangier's natives was the result of a vast process of linguistic transformation between the ethnic dialect of the *Hakitia*, and the extra-ethnic colonial Spanish beginning in the 1800s. The *Hakitia*, that had been defined by philologists as a "dead" dialect during the mid-1900s, was later revived. For example, Mabat mentioned the preservation of *Hakitia* as one of the four main fundamental goals of the organization.[62] Mabat's members were encouraged to recollect Hakitic expressions that they had presumably grasped in Morocco. For example, as part of a traditional recipe contest organized by Mabat, participants were asked to narrate anecdotes referring to the dish and to recall the occasions in which the dish was eaten, all while encouraged to use Hakitic terminology rather than the anticipated authentic Spanish phrasing. [63]

Quite surprisingly, the section dedicated to Hakitia on Mabat's publication began with a statement in the Hebrew language. The chair of the Sephardic association *Sefarad* stressed that despite the geographic distance, the Jews of Spanish Morocco have a lot in common with the Judeo-Spanish communities of the Mediterranean Basin.[64]

Other forums that enabled self-representation with an academic aura were also substantially employing the word *Hakitia*. For example, the "Gaon Center for

---

[60] Ibid.,5.

[61] An interview held on 13 February 2010.

[62] See footnote 9.

[63] A letter circulated during 1990 [day and month are not stated], PPC, Bat Yam, Israel.

[64] Mabat Revista, 67.

the Culture of Ladino" organized folkloric events with Spanish-Moroccan orientations, which were titled "Hakitia Evenings." The word *Hakitia* further symbolized non-academic events organized by the migrants themselves aiming at the ethnicization of their shared memory. Such was the 2008 "Journée Hakitia," French for "Hakitia day," organized in Ashdod by Soly Anidjar who was born and raised in Casablanca but originated in the town of Larache next to Tangier.[65]

Particularly remarkable in this context is the fact that some of the participants in this Hispanic-oriented discourse as a result of internal migration had spent most of their lifetime in the Arabic- oriented regions of Morocco, which had become even much more so after Morocco declared independence in 1956. They saw an advantage in cultivating their Tangerine or Spanish-Moroccan heritage, which back in Morocco was strictly confined to their domestic or narrowed Jewish communal milieu.

This self-representation perhaps motivated many to rethink the harsh denouncing of the dialect and other costumes by their parents and themselves in colonial Morocco. They began to grasp *Hakitia*, which became a semantic emblem, as their own cultural asset.[66] The process took place across the Spanish-Moroccan (mainly Jews originated in Tangier, Tetuan and Larache) émigré communities in the world,[67] and ought to be analyzed within different frameworks of discussion that also take into account the new mentality of networking in the process of ethnic-oriented self-representation.

Yet it seems that the overstated reference to Hakitic origins had exceptional meaning in the Israeli context. Monique, for example emphasized her non-Arabic origins. She referred to the words used by the official from the Ministry of Absorption in Israel, who offered her an apartment:

> "He gave me [an apartment] amongst all the Moroccans that spoke Arabic… I went to protest. I said, 'Why do you give me [an apartment] there?' The official replied, [aberrantly imitating an Israeli accent] 'We gave you with your people, you are a Moroccan? No?!" …I said, "Listen, I don't know Arabic, neither did my forefathers

---

65 http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?50,234289, accessed on 11/11/10.

66 Bentolila, "The Study of Moroccan Judeo-Spanish (Hakitia)", 162.

67 Several works concerning the dialect were composed by first-generation migrants following their migration. See for instance: Alegria Bendelac., *Los Nuestros: Sejina, Letuarios, Jaquetia Y Fraja: Un Retrato De Los Sefaradies Del Norte De Marruecos a Traves De Sus Recuerdos Y De Su Lengua* (1860-1984) (New York P. Lang, 1987); Amram Benarrosch, *Palabras De Allà* : *Un Sabor De Haketia: En Memoria De Rachel* (Rehovot: Impr. Ya'il, 2004); Gladys Benaim Bunan, *Tu Boca En Los Cielos: El Judeo-Español De Los Nuestros - La Haketía De Menashé Y Alfonso* (Beverly Hills: Laredo Publishing, 2007); Esther Cohen Aflalo, *Lo Que Yo Sé* (Madrid: E. Cohen Aflalo, 2000); Isaac Benharroch B., *Diccionario De Haquetía: Guía Escencial Del Dialecto De Los Judíos Del Norte De Marruecos* (Caracas: Ediciones Asociación Israelita de Venezuela: Centro de Estudios Sefardíes de Caracas, 2004). Additionally, Prof. Yaakov Bentolila, a first-generation immigrant from Tetuan in Israel, dedicated most of his academic career to the study of the dialect. Other Israeli scholars of Spanish-Moroccan origins who focus in their research on the dialect of *Hakitia* are Nina Pinto-Abecassis and Isaac Guerson.

> ….we never spoke Arabic in Tangier. Our language was completely different, Hakitia…"[68]

Hakitia was only an emblem in the process of the group's ethnic revival, which included other manifestation supported by academic fields such as linguistics, folklore, musicology and historiography.[69] Ruth's reference to my question regarding her associations with non-Jewish Spaniards in Tangier is another instructive example to the ethnicization of colonial history within the self-representing ethnic narratives. I asked: "How did they [your Spanish friends] relate to the fact that you were Jewish?" Her answer was: "With no special significance…we were just like them, nothing different. Now that I'm here [in Israel] I have been studying a lot about the *Anusim* [*Conversos*] and the Expulsion from Spain…I now think that they were the decedents of *Anusim*…."[70] Ruth, who had been very involved at the non-Jewish social milieu of Tangier decided to depict her natural bond with Modern European Spaniards through a narrative that gave ethnic meaning to her extra-ethnic affiliations, implying that it was an outcome of post-migration retrospectives.

Alberto narrated angrily how he had received a letter from the *merkaz klitah* (absorption center for new immigrants) in which he was informed that he would have to leave regardless of the fact he had no other place to go to at the time. "That was on the day of *Tishah be-Av*!,"[71] he said, "I was outraged, **I** was expelled from Spain on the day of *Tishah be-Av* [referring to the 1492 incidents] and now on the same historical date, I am being expelled again in the Land of Israel?!"

I should be clear that it is not my intention to question the historical authenticity of such cultural differences between the Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Arabic populations of Morocco. In fact, such an attempt would be historically misleading. The Hakitic term "forasteros" referring to Arabic-speaking Jews in Morocco (literally meaning strangers), should reflect the notion of a well-fixed pre-migration self-perception as Sephardic.[72] Yet, it seems that by emphasizing

---

[68] An interview held on 30 September 2009.

[69] Reflected clearly in Mabat's publication and circulars. See for example, Mabat Revista, 43-72, 89-95, see also the musicological field work conducted among Mabat's members, Weich-Shahak Susana, *Judeo-Spanish Moroccan Songs for the Life Cycle* [Sound Recording] (Jerusalem: Jewish Music Research Centre, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1989). See also the publication proceeding Mabat's exhibition, *Jewish Communities in Spanish Morocco* (Tel Aviv Beth Hatefutsoth, The Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, 1983), 1-44.

[70] An interview held on 18 November 2009.

[71] A annual mourning day in the Jewish calendar.

[72] Susan Gilson-Miller, "Kippur on the Amazon: Jewish Emigration from Northern Morocco in the Late Nineteenth Century " in *Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture in the Modern Era*, by Harvey E. Goldberg (Bloomington Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 192. Simon Levy, "José Benoliel et Abraham I. Laredo: érudits Tangérois," in *Tanger Espace Imaginaire* (Rabat et Tetouan: Université Mohammed V, Rabat et l'Ecole superieure roi Fahd de traduction de Tanger, Université Abdelmalek Es-Saadi, Tetouan, 1992), 77-79.

.

the Hispanic ethnic origins these historical differences gained new self-representing meanings. Perhaps it was aimed at clarifying to the Israeli listener in a relatively harmony-oriented way that their European-oriented Moroccanness does not overlap with the "artificial" Europeanization of other *Mizraḥi* francophone Jews, but rather is supported by their own "authentic" ethnic heredity. In this context, is not surprising that the circulars and publication of Mabat used the Spanish language exclusively rather than the prestigious French language, common among many of the immigrants, graduates of the French schooling system and the former citizens of a Cosmopolitan city as Tangier.

Concluding Discussion

Clearly, the ethnic voice of Tangier's natives in Israel should further pound the "dead horse" representing the utopic phantasm depicting a melting pot society in Israel. It may also support the common notion regarding the uneven power relations between various groups of *Mizraḥim* and the Ashkenazi-dominated power elite in Israel including its manifestations in the ethnic-based "traditional" uprising.

Yet, as it appears clearly throughout the research, amongst such voices of ethnic revivals, many contribute to the growing criticism about the overbearing and generalizing post-Zionist approach towards their justification; An approach that often reduced ethnic voices of Moroccans to the level of a broad socio-cultural struggle between the European-oriented Ashkenazi-dominated national power elite and the marginalized non-European components of Israeli society.

Whenever there arose an opportunity to discuss their ethnic past, many of Tangier's natives in Israel tended to narrate their narrative in collective terms, aimed at shaping their ethnic self-representation in the context of the ethnic tension in Israel. By so doing, many westernized Tangier's natives were in fact de- and re-constructed major parts of their authentic complex memory from Colonial Morocco. Nevertheless, the process of de-westernization did not correspond with the trend of the "official" self-re-Orientalization process that have taken shape in Israel since the 1970s, and has been overemphasized in the public and academic discourse, but in fact quite the contrary.

Natives Jews of Tangier attempted to exclude themselves from this typecast of *Mizraḥi* ethnic revival. Only through the means of ethnic-based self-reconstructed representation, the Jews of Tangier in Israel could truly revitalize their unique self-representation. Merely via ethnic-oriented narratives, they could contest the general depiction and self-representation of Moroccans in Israel with an aura of "their own" collective ethnic Moroccan identity. The process of their Sephardic revival, including the linguistic recovery of the *Hakitia*, therefore ought to be read in this context of new identities formation, which was more oriented towards harmonic cohesiveness in the multiethnic social context in Israel.

The focus on the westernized elements amongst Tangier's natives is only a reminder to the numerous particular histories within the large group agglomerated under the term '*Mizraḥim*.'[73] In closing, I have no intention to dismiss any manifestations of Arab affinities among the population of Jews originated in Arab countries, nor do I undermine the fact that many amongst them employed narrative strategies of re-Arabization in the context of their ethnic identification. I rather suggest employing extra sensitivity to such elements that accurately reflects their long-terms history as more complex, variable and uniquely contextual. In this context, further attention to patterns of social gathering among immigrants in the new country of destination should be part of the analysis.

Subsequently, post-migration self-representations of the past should not be (dis)regarded by historians only in terms of historical erroneousness or authenticity. Only through long-run spectacles, Moroccans alongside with other groups of immigrants agglomerated under the term '*Mizraḥim*' shall truly appear as active historical agents in the history of Israel, rather than pawns in a generalized story of unequal power-relations between two civilizations.

Aviad Moreno is a PhD student in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Beer-Sheva, Israel). The author is currently writing a dissertation about the role of migration networks in the emigration process of Spanish Moroccan Jews to Israel, Europe and Latin America during the 20th century.

How to quote this article:
Aviad Moreno, *De-westernizing Morocco: pre-migration colonial history and the ethnic-oriented self-representation of Tangier's natives in Israel*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n. 4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=313

[73] The cases of the immigrants' communities from the neighboring Spanish-Moroccan cities would be the first to resemble the examined case.

The Memory of North African Jews in the Diaspora

by *Mechtild Gilzmer*

Abstract

In the following contribution, I will approach in three steps the construction of memory by North-African Jews in the Diaspora. I will first trace the history and historiography of Jews in Arab countries and point out their characteristics. This will lead me to look more precisely at the concept of "Sephardic Jews," its meaning and application as a key-notion in the memory building for Jews from Arab countries in the Diaspora nowadays. As literature and filmmaking hold a crucial role in the perception and transmission of memory,[1] I will then present the works of two Jewish women artists, one living in France and the other living in Quebec, both with North African origins. I will try to show how they use the past for identity (de-)construction and compare their approaches. I choose the two examples because they illustrate two extremely opposed positions concerning the role of cultural identity. Standing in the intersection of history and literary studies, my interdisciplinary work considers literary and film as memory archives and subjective representations of the past not as historical sources. In referring to Jews in Arab countries this means in my article more precisely to look at the North-African Jews. That is why my article treats the following aspects:

1. Jews in Arab Lands. A Historiographical Overview

In 1975, the Tunisian writer Albert Memmi asked the rhetorical question: "What is an Arab Jew?" He answered himself with a clear rejection of an overly idealistic vision of Jews and Arabs living in close proximity:

> Ah, what a lovely term! It even made us secretly nostalgic; yes, of course we were Arab Jews, or Jewish Arabs, in our customs, our culture, our music, our cooking … I have said so often enough in writing, but must one remain an Arab Jew if that means having to tremble for one's life and the future of one's children? If it means being denied any existence of one's own? (…) All right, I can see I'll have to put it more bluntly: the supposedly "idyllic" life led by Jews in Arab countries is all a myth! The truth – since I am being forced to say it – is that we were, first of all, a minority in hostile surroundings and, as such, we had all the fears and anxieties of the overly weak, their constant feeling of precariousness.[2]

[1] As to the theoretical background and the relation of history, memory and literature, see Aleida Assmann, *Cultural memory and Western Civilization. Arts of Memory* (Cambridge, 2011).
[2] Albert Memmi, *Jews and Arabs*, (Chicago: O'Hara, 1975), 20.

In a footnote to his text, Memmi points out that the term "Jewish Arabs" or "Arab Jews" is wrong, in so far as it supposes the simultaneous existence of the Jews in one country with a mainly homogeneous Arab population. But Jews were in these countries long before the Arab invasion. The term Arab is no more accurate, applied to such a diverse population, including those who call themselves, and believe themselves to be, Arabs.
One can distinguish different periods concerning Jewish presence and existence in the part of the world now under Arab and Muslim influence. Before the existence of Islam, Jews already lived in the Mediterranean area and in North Africa. The exact dating of their first presence in North Africa is unclear, but we find traces of Jews living there under Roman domination, as evidenced by Hebrew funeral inscriptions on stones among the ruins of Volubilis, near Meknès, in Morocco.
The historiography of Jews in Arab lands was first chronicled by French historians and it reflected Western cultural perceptions and ideology. As an example: in order to find the real roots of the Berber-Arab conflict, French historians stressed the myth of the Berber-Jewish princess Kahena who successfully resisted Arab invaders over a long period. "While it is not at all certain that al-Kahina was actually Jewish, this story plays an important role in shaping the historical experience of the Jews of the Maghreb in modern times," because it "granted legitimacy to the feeling of alienation felt by many Jews of the colonial period toward the Arab population – an attitude that accorded with the anti-Arab orientation of French colonial policy and historiography."[3] From the Muslim conquest onward, the vast majority of Oriental Jews lived under Islam, which was established at one time or another in almost all Arab countries.

As Michel Abitbol shows in his overview of the historiography of Jews in Arab lands, not all European studies written about Jews during French colonisation were inspired by extraneous or non-professional considerations. Among them were French Jewish as well as non-Jewish scholars. In general, it appears that the non-Jewish scholars of the Maghreb were most interested in Moroccan Jewry. The quality of these works is uneven. In 1965, Hayim Zeev Hirschberg published his comprehensive two-volume historical study of North African Jewry. But it was first published in Hebrew and therefore had only a limited audience before it was translated into English.[4]

Since then, an increasing number of scholars from English-speaking countries, Israel, and the Maghreb have been attracted to the historical study of North

[3] Michel Abitbol, "Jews of Muslim Lands in the Modern Period: History and Historiography", in *Sephardic Jewry and Mizrahi Jews*, ed. Peter Y. Medding (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52. See also for this topic, Daniel Schroeter, "La découverte des juifs berbères", in *Relations judéo-musulmanes au Maroc, perceptions et réalités*, ed. Michel Abitbol (Paris: Stavit, 1997), 169-187.
[4] Hayim Zeev Hirschberg, *A history of the Jews in North-Africa*, (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

Africa in general, and Jewry in particular. But as Abitbol resumes in his article, contemporary Israeli scholars and some of their colleagues abroad, both Jews and non-Jews have differed sharply:

> non-Israeli scholars tend to paint Jewish-Muslim relations in terms of 'coexistence' or a 'symbiosis', some of them going so far as to attribute all of the anti-Jewish outbursts occurring in the Maghreb over the past hundred years to external factors such as imperialism, colonialism, and Zionism. Israeli scholars, for their part (even those not diametrically opposed to that view), emphasize the fact that during the modern period, the Jews, for a variety of political and cultural reasons, ceased to regard themselves as an integral part of the history of the lands in which they had lived for centuries. Thus, in their view, in not participating in their home countries' struggle for independence, the Jews distanced themselves from the fate of the North African peoples and, subsequently, willingly departed from the Maghreb along with the colonial powers that had ruled the region since 1830.[5]

As Abitbol also points out, historians in western countries and in Israel today focus on issues that colonial historiography has played down or ignored, such as the Algerian Jews' lack of enthusiasm for French citizenship, for example. On the other hand, the Arab historiography of the Jewish history in Arab lands is also quite obviously influenced by historical context, when it was written, and the author's ideological visions. That is the reason why

> the rise of Zionism and the emergence of the state of Israel, the modern and contemporary era is by far the most thoroughly discussed topic among Arab historians of Judaism. […] the Jews are depicted as the *deus ex machina* of a vast global plot, a people who, since the end of the 18th century, have sought to destroy Islamic civilization by any and all means, whether on their own or in collusion with the Christians.[6]

2. A Special Case: "Sephardic Jews"

Abitbol's article shows very clearly the mechanism which rules the construction of historiography on each side, be it reconstructed by non-Jews, Jews or Muslims. Events are explained through the mirror of self interest and perception frames. This also concerns the way Jewish Diaspora is represented. For Mark Cohen, the "World Jewry can be divided into two parts, "the Jews of

[5] Abitbol, "Jews of Muslim Lands," 55.
[6] Ibid., 57.

Islam" and "the Jews of Christendom," or to Jews living 'under the crescent' and Jews living 'under the cross.' As he himself remarks, this distinction overlooks that the Sephardic Jews of Spain are historically related to the Jews of Christendom, since they descend from those expelled from Catholic Spain in 1492. That is why Mark Cohen considers that, "In terms of the crescent-cross scheme, the Sephardim constitute a third entity, bearing similarities to both the Jews under the crescent and the Jews under the cross."[7]
Shmuel Trigano opposes the *Sephardic world* to the *Ashkenazi world* because of the different context in which the Jews lived.[8] For Shmuel Trigano, Jewish civilization has been marked most strongly during the Sephardic period. This influence transformed the Sephardic identity and opened it to the European North. When they where persecuted, some decided to emigrate to the north, to Western Europe (Holland and England, but also to Germany), while others went to the Ottoman Empire.

In order to find distinguishing elements that characterize the "*Sefarad*," Trigano comes to a contradictory result. If it is true that each exile situation transformed and marked the exiled, we can no longer refer to 'a Jewish identity' which is culturally or religiously homogeneous. It is more accurate to refer to each situation and look at the differences instead of stressing a homogeneity that does not exist. Behind the vision of a unit "*la civilisation sépharade*" stands a concept of cultural identity which creates a sharp contrast to the Ashkenazi Jews. By comparing, one creates a hierarchy and the differences in historical experiences are taken as absolute. But in the same way that Jews who were expelled from Spain and then settled in Greece were transformed by their experience, others who went through different experiences were transformed in another way.

The notion of "Sephardic identity" suggests the idea of unity, of resemblance within an ethnic group. Even if we distinguish a religious and cultural existence and say that it is the religious aspect (let us call it the specific Sephardic Jewishness) which remained stable during the Diaspora, the reality is much more complicated, as Peter Medding observes:

> For example, prior to their immigration, were Sephardic Jews in the Asian-African countries religiously and culturally Jewish? Or were they religiously Jewish and culturally something else, be it Moroccan and/or French and/or western, as the case may be? Or indeed, were they, as some would argue, religiously Jewish and culturally Arab? And subsequent to their settlement in Israel, were they religiously and

[7] Mark R. Cohen, "The Origins of Sephardic Jewry in the Medieval Arab World", in *Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry. From the Golden Age of Spain to Modern Times,* ed. Zion Zohar (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 24.
[8] I refer to the article of Shmuel Trigano, "Introduction. Faire l'histoire du monde sépharade", *Le monde sépharade I, Histoire*, (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 13.

> culturally Jewish? Or where they religiously Jewish and culturally something else, be it Israeli and/or Moroccan and/or Arab? Or indeed, were they religiously and culturally, something else, say, humanistic, secular, and democratic?[9]

As these questions demonstrate, the Diaspora is characterized by a complex process as a result of migration and the specific historical situation leading to religious and cultural transcultural modification and hybridism. That does not mean that there are no resemblances in the differences and no hierarchies, but they are the result of concrete historical and socio-economic situations that can be described and analysed in a critical spirit. For example:

> In general, it is admitted, that Jews in Arab lands enjoyed greater security and a higher level of political and cultural integration than Jews living under the cross did. […] The living under the crescent in the Arab-Muslim world, notably in Muslim Spain, was strikingly different from that of the Jews under the cross. In the Arab-Muslim world of the Middle Ages, German-Jewish historians found tolerance, acceptance of Jews as peers…[10]

It was the modern academic discipline of Judaic studies in nineteenth-century Germany, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, with their founding fathers – Leopold Zunz, Moritz Steinschneider, Abraham Geiger, Salomon Munk, and Heinrich Graetz – who created the notion of "the Golden Age of Spain," because "they were particularly impressed by the rich and original literature in poetry and philosophy produced by Andalusian Jews. They were also struck by the Sephardim's high degree of cultural assimilation."[11]
As Ruth Tolédano-Attias shows us in her article about how Jewish historians in the 19th century perceived the "*Sefarad*," this understanding of the past was largely influenced by the 19th century concept of an imagined union of ideological forces which in fact were divided. Or to quote Toledano-Attias : "in order to encourage the emancipation and regeneration of the German and Occidental Judaism, the European Jews invoked the Sephardic cultural heritage in order to reconnect the European Judaism to the history of the Sephardic Jews in the middle ages in a moment when the two groups in fact had no real contact."[12]

---

[9] Medding, *Sephardic Jewry and Mizrahi Jews,* x.
[10] Cohen, "The Origins of Sephardic Jewry," 25.
[11] *New Horizons in Sephardic Studies*, eds. Yedida K Stillman and Georges K. Zucker, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 1.
[12] "Dans leur lutte pour l'émancipation et la régénération du judaïsme allemande et occidental, le patrimoine culturel sépharade a été invoqué par les intellectuels juifs européens pour 'redorer le blason' du judaïsme européen et l'amarrer à l'histoire du judaïsme sépharade du Moyen Age au moment même où les deux fractions du judaïsme n'avaient pas de contact conséquent." Ruth Tolédano-Attias, "Les Sépharades dans le regard des historiens juifs européens du XIXe siècle", in Shmuel Trigano, *Le monde sépharade II, Civilisation,* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 671.

This movement has to be seen in the 19th century context: in order to form arguments in favour of their integration into society, as well as their emancipation and also in reaction to the spread of anti-Semitic and nationalist ideology in that time, German Jewish intellectuals used the Sephardic paradigm to prove that they are part of a people which has shown, in the past, that it was able to integrate and assimilate very well and, what's more, that it could contribute to the scientific and cultural revival of the society in which they lived. Therefore, the parallel the German Jews made between themselves and Sephardic Jews aimed to promote a fruitful exchange between Jews and Germans. The mystification of the past has inherent reasons linked to the concrete situation of German Jews, who were in fact not fully interested in the real situation of "Oriental" Jews. Looking at the German historiography of that time, Tolédano-Attias remarks that in the first book presenting Jewish history, written by Issak Jost, one finds only ten pages about "*Die Sefardim,*" which refers only to Spanish Jews. African and Oriental Jews are ignored.[13] This dominant interest for the "Golden Age," the period of the so-called medieval "*convivencia*" and the lack of interest in all other periods of Jews and Arabs living together characterizes German Jewish historiography up to today. This can partially be explained by the dominance of Shoah studies, but is also has to do with a certain lack of interest outside of Europe in Sephardic history. The same process of using the past to stimulate interest is at work in the creation of the "myth of Sephardic supremacy" used by Sephardic Jews. According to this view, the most admirable Jews in history were those living first in Arab, and then in Christian, Spain. Rational and cultured, these Jews were integrated into Gentile society. They were superior to the irrational, ultra-religious, insular Ashkenazi, or Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe. This historiographical construct corresponds to the self-perception of some Sephardic Jews even today. Let us therefore have a look at France.

3. Jews from Arab Lands in the Diaspora

Literature as "lieu de mémoire"[14] of Sephardic identity in France

In a very clear analysis of the recently observed process of Sephardic Jewish identity construction in France, Solange M. Guénoun points out that there is a tendency of Jews who left Muslim countries after the end of colonisation and came to Western countries to auto-define themselves as "Sephardic Jews." She is right to characterize this as a very complex, strange and surprising process which needs to be looked at more precisely. The notion or concept of "*sepharadité*" denominates, on the one hand, Jews from the Iberian Peninsula

[13] Tolédano-Attias, "Les Sépharades dans le regard des historiens juifs," 679.

[14] "Lieu de mémoire" refers to Pierre Nora's multivolume series "Les lieux de mémoire" (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992), which consists of essays by prominent historians and cultural commentators which take, as their points of departure, Lieux de memoire, a site of memory used to order, concentrate, and secure notions of France's past.

who settled in the Ottoman and Balkan regions after their expulsion from Spain. On the other hand, she refers to a wider community, a sépharade world which goes back to ancient times and covers very different exile experiences.

Guénoun shows that the so-called Sephardic Jews living in the French Diaspora (and this is the same for the francophone Québec), realize that, in order to know more about their own history and "identity," they have to go through historical, sociological, and ethno-anthropological works written in Israel and in Hebrew. This means relying on translations and mediators such as Esther Benbassa and Shmuel Trigano. Following Guénon, their works are not free of ideological orientations. She criticizes the tendency to highlight the differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, as well as between Jews with Spanish origins who lived in the Balkans to those who lived on the other side of the Mediterranean in Arab lands.[15] And she complains that no serious study on Sephardic Jews in France exists. And finally there is the conflict between the Arab and Jewish descendants of postcolonial migration from the Maghreb, regardless of whether or not they have the experience of French colonization in common. What makes it difficult for the Maghreb Jews and Muslims to share a common history is the fact of their mutual humiliation. On the one hand, Jews have been dominated by the Muslim majority and treated as "*dhimmi*" throughout the centuries but, on the other hand, their status changed with French colonization at the end of the 19th century. The French Jews created a network of schools, and the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* beginning in Tétouan in Morocco in 1860, aimed at improving their situation through education and the French language. That gave them a better status and supported their economic and political influence, such that the relation between the two groups was transformed. With the idea of Jewish emancipation and political integration as it was practised in Europe, the former "*dhimmis*" could profit by adopting the French language and culture. Victims of racism and discrimination by the French colonial system, their Muslim neighbours went through experiences Jews had known in the past. But the experience of what it means to be dominated did not necessarily contribute to more solidarity.

Instead of being aware of their shared historical experience as subjects of French colonial politics, they have perceived each other as enemies. Whereas the second or third generation of Muslim immigrants claim the status of victims and this is reflected through literature, films and other media, the specific Jewish experience is not yet visible in the same way. For the Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated to France, Sephardic Jews are "Oriental" and uncivilized, coming from a barely civilized region of the south.

[15] Solange M. Guénoun, "Accueils et écueils identitaires-communautaires en France Post-coloniale: 'Ils disent que je suis sépharade…'", *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 11/2 (2007): 219.

> The postcolonial designation 'sépharade' has two significations depending on how you look at it. This denotation evokes two bodies which are separated but also united: on the one hand the Maghrebian Jew who is not really Sephardic (in the classical meaning of being of Spanish origin), and the Sephardic Jew who is not really 'Maghrebian' (which means immigrant with Arab-Muslim origins). In both cases this reflects a genealogical and hierarchical, neo-colonial view of the 'European' Jew, looking down on the Arab-Jews (or oriental, 'Masrahi' in Hebrew), who never left Africa or the Middle East, or on the Africans and Arabs in general, who missed a revolution, an emancipation.[16]

On the other hand, and partly in reaction to that negative image, there exists a self-perception of the Sephardic Jews as being the original, real and true Jews. The novel "Sépharade" from the French writer Eliette Abécassis is the most evident illustration of a literary attempt to re-construct Sephardic identity and an elitist vision of Moroccan Jews living in France today.[17]

The example of Eliette Abécassis novel "Sépharade"

Published in 2009, it is a family saga in which Esther Vital, a young woman born in France and living in Strasbourg, pursues her identity. This is embedded in the story of different generations of Moroccan Jews from Meknes, Fes and Mogador, all representing different aspects of Moroccan Jewish history and life. The novel is divided into two parts and several books (thereby imitating the structure of holy texts). The first book introduces the plot: we witness Esther Vitals family, her sentimental life, and as she prepares for marriage. The second part of the book evokes, in an artificial and constructed way, the history of Sephardic life as experienced by different family members, as well as in the personal experiences of Esther Vital. The narrator combines individual and collective history, going back to when the Jews lived in Spain during the so-called "Golden Age." As Esther Vital gets married with Charles Toledano in Tel Aviv, this is an occasion for family members to meet and reveal many hidden family stories. This narrative construction frames the plot. In the second part of the novel, each chapter presents another family member whose story is linked to the general story of Sephardic Jews and to the rest of the family. We learn hereby that there is a magical familial bond: during the night

---

[16] "L'habit sémantique 'Sépharade' postcolonial fonctionne ainsi de deux manières, selon le regard que l'on pose sur lui. Sous cette parure sémantique unique, on hallucine en effet deux corps à la fois séparés et unis : celui du Juif maghrébin qui n'est pas vraiment sépharade (au sens ancien d'Espagnol), et celui du Juif sépharade qui n'est pas vraiment 'maghrébin' (c'est-à-dire immigré arabo-musulman). Mais dans les deux cas toujours sous l'effet d'un même regard néo-colonial, généalogique et hiérarchique, de Juif 'européen', posé sur les Juifs-arabes (ou orientaux, 'Masrahi' en hébreux), censés n'avoir jamais quitté l'Afrique ou le Moyen Orient, ou sur les Africains et les Arabes, tous bien entendu en retard d'une révolution, d'une émancipation." Ibid., 221.

[17] Eliette Abécassis, *Sépharade*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2009).

preceding the wedding of both Esther's mother and grandmother, some dramatic event causes the cancellation of the marriage. By introducing this superstitious and irrational element in the novel, the author refers to cultural elements which are specific to Moroccan Jewish culture. The belief in witches and demonic forces such as "*djinns*" and the "sad eye," both still frequent in Morocco, are remnants of archaic practices still shared by Jews and Arabs.

In some respect, the description of Esther Vital's family confirms all the stereotypes about Sephardic Moroccan Jews, such as the burden of tradition and of patriarchal structures. The family-clan's interference in her life is another obstacle for Esther as she searches for an autonomous life, or her "identity," as she calls it. Trying to find an appropriate partner, Esther meets various men. Artificial literary creatures, these characters have no other value in the novel than to illustrate their being far from the remarkable exclusivity of Sephardic Judaism; it is impossible for Esther to have a relationship with any of them. There is (in the order of their appearance): a French Ashkenazi Jew from Alsace, who sings much too loud and expressively on Shabbat; a French secularized Jew who rejects religion; a left-wing Israeli; a much too German "*Yekke;*" and a French Orthodox Jew who tries in vain to radicalize her. Before meeting Charles Toledano (the right one, as he is Sephardic), she passes through other love affairs no less burlesque, including one with Paul Sebbag, who turns out to have a non-Jewish mother and is therefore no longer a contender for her heart and another one with a "*goy*," who is unacceptable because he criticizes Israeli politics. Her last experience with an American Ashkenaze from New York, reported in a whole chapter entitled "Ashkenaze," also ends in drama and reveals to her that the differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews are simply too great. Over two pages, Esther gives a detailed list of the differences that divide them, using a couple of stereotypes to disadvantage the Ashkenazi Jews:

> She told herself that Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews could never understand each other. They did not have the same conception of life. […] The Ashkenazi Jews could hardly express and even feel their emotions. They were intellectual, cold and rational. The Sephardic Jews were very emotional and switched constantly from laughter to tears, from tenderness to drama, if not psychodrama. The Ashkenazi Jews were not affectionate, the Sephardic, melted in feelings and sensations like oriental sweets under the sun and everything was an argument for sentimental confessions. The Ashkenazi did not like to eat […] they were avaricious […] solitary…[18]

[18] "Elle se dit que les ashkénazes et les sépharades ne pourraient jamais s'entendre. Ils n'avaient pas la même conception de la vie. […] Les ashkénazes avaient du mal à exprimer leurs émotions et parfois même à les ressentir. Ils étaient intellectuels, froids et rationnels. Les sépharades au contraire étaient émotifs, et passaient sans cesse du rire aux larmes, de la tendresse au drame, voire au psychodrame. Les ashkénazes n'étaient pas tendres, les sépharades, tels les loukums sous un soleil brûlant, dégoulinaient de sentiments et de

The striking exaggerated generalization, including even the anti-Semitic cliché that Jews are avaricious demonstrates the central failing of the novel. It becomes obvious that the author follows the idea that there is something to be proved: the superiority of Sephardic Jews. Furthermore, the text shifts from chatty passages obviously based on historical research to more fictional but no less redundant stories. During a trip to Spain, in Toledo, Esther meets Pedro Alvarez, a Spanish scholar specialized in Spanish Jewish history. He identifies her spontaneously and only by looking at her as a descendant of the Spanish Jews. Her physical appearance proves her Spanish Jewish origin. Referring to her name, he tells her the story of the biblical Queen Esther who - in order to save the Jews - revealed to her husband, the Persian King Assuerus, that she was herself a Jew. For Esther Vital, this confrontation with the historical Esther's story is crucial. The story of hidden identity and the definite positioning on the side of the persecuted both echo her own difficulty of knowing where she belongs. In the novel's prologue, her father Moïse Vital meditates on identity and its multiple aspects. For him, identity is the result of historical and geographical factors; it exists through transmission and is determined by tradition. It is also in this way that Esther Vital interprets the story of Queen Esther. She stands for the founding myth of the Jewish people, and is the incarnation of Jewish faith. Bearing the same name, Esther takes this concordance as a sign from destiny and views it too as legacy:

> Esther is the ancestor of all Jews to come, between mask and truth, between life and death, between the proud of belonging to this nation and being ashamed, between assimilation and faithfulness. That was the destiny her parents had chosen for her more or less consciously by naming her Esther.[19]

Pedro Alvarez also tells the story of persecution and forced conversions, the existence of crypto-Jews and their migration throughout Europe. Among their descendants, there were luminaries as Montaigne, Spinoza and Therese d'Avila, who all contributed to European culture. They are presented in the novel as origins of European identity: "Because the genius of the "Marranos" inspired the European identity; the Marranic movement has been in the beginning of the universal and humanistic thinking of Montaigne. […] You are 'Marranos' until today, said Pedro Alvarez, Spanish without homeland."[20]

---

sensations, et tout était pour eux prétexte à épanchement. Les ashkénazes n'aimaient pas manger […] étaient avares […] étaient solitaires….", Abécasssis, *Sépharade*, 274 sq.

[19] "Esther est l'ancêtre de tous les juifs à venir, entre masque et vérité, entre la vie et la mort, entre la fierté d'appartenir à ce peuple et la honte, l'assimilation et la fidélité. Telle était la destinée à laquelle ses parents avaient, plus ou moins consciemment, consacré Esther en la nommant ainsi." Ibid., 290, sq.

[20] "Car l'âme marrane est la source de l'identité européenne; le marranisme, en se laïcisant, a été à l'origine de l'universalisme et de l'humanisme chez Montaigne. […] Jusqu'à aujourd'hui,

For Esther, everything seems determined through her origins and is influenced by destiny and other invisible forces. At the end of the novel, she rejects marriage to Charles Toledano. The significance of this spectacular turn in the novel is unclear. The incredible story of her sexual relationship to Noam Bouzaglo - a cousin who turns out to be her brother – in the night before her wedding, is far-fetched. The end is quite as fabulous and dramatic, evoking the imminent demise of the Sephardic world and is spoken in the voice of Esther's grandmother: "Today we are in danger …. We are all threatened of losing ourselves. This is the moment of the end of our world, the end of our culture. Everybody is responsible, we especially. We are the last one, Moïse, we are the last Sephardic!"[21]

Behind this vision we find a very old-fashioned but nevertheless much en vogue concept of identity. It is looked at as something stable and which will persist. But the Jews living in Spain added new elements to their former identity and they were thereby transformed. In the same way, Jews who found exile in Morocco after 1492 added other elements to their identity (take the example of the "*haketia*," a linguistic transformation of the Judeo-Spanish into a new and specific Moroccan language). All this contributed to a rich cultural diversity. Why then claim to fix a certain moment in history (now) and freeze identity, pretending that this final status must be preserved? In a world characterized by migration and cultures intermingling, identities are constantly in flux, creating new forms and new identities.

The nostalgic lament for a lost "paradise" of well-defined identity can be found in many texts of Sephardic francophone writers, be it in France, Israel or in Québec. There is a striking difference between them and the older generation, such as the Tunisian author Albert Memmi or the Moroccan Edmon El Maleh, who seem to be much more aware of identity's complexity and the interconnection of Arab and Jewish culture. This evolution can be partially explained by the conflict between Arabs and Israel in the Middle East, which seems to affect and radicalize literature. That could explain the tendency in many novels written by Jews in Diaspora to prove through the evocation of historical events and myths the legitimacy of the existence of the State of Israel. This is the country of all hopes, desires and projections. For Esther Vital, in search of identity, it is the final destination: "In France she felt weightless. In Israel she was in her place in some way. Her roots were in Europe, in Africa, in Morocco, but it had been the vicissitudes of life that had

---

dit Pedro Alvarez, même si vous l'ignorez, vous êtes des marranes, des Espagnols sans patrie." Ibid., 307.

[21] "Aujourd'hui, nous sommes en danger… Tous ici, nous sommes en danger de nous perdre. Ce temps est celui de la fin de notre monde millénaire, la fin de notre culture. Chacun en est responsable. Et nous, en particulier. Nous sommes les derniers, Moïse, nous sommes les derniers sépharades!" Ibid., 456.

brought her to her veritable origin, Israel, land of the ancestors, her ancestors. In Israel she felt at home."[22]

During her stay in Israel, she visits the archeological site of Massada, the most important symbol for Jewish revolt against Roman occupation. The story of the courageous resistance of a minority of Jewish rebels against an overwhelming majority of Roman soldiers constitutes one of the basic myths of the modern Israeli state: "Massada was the symbol of Israel, country fortress, besieged of all parts by those who waited only for its fall – or its collective suicide."[23] Here, as in the rest of the novel, Eliette Abécassis insists on the conflicts and the differences. It seems evident that there is no possible dialogue or understanding between members of different groups. There is no discussion about opposed views; Arabs do not even appear in her novel.

Identity trouble in Québec : Michka Saäl's film "L'arbre qui dort rêve à ses racines" (1992)

Among the approximately 300,000 Jews who lived in Morocco in the first half of the 20th century, the majority went to Israel after 1948. The exile movement corresponded to different historical periods and events, such as the creation of the state of Israel in 1948; the independence of Morocco in 1956; and the Israeli-Arab wars in the 1960s. In Israel, Moroccan Jews were generally considered a backward people by the dominant Ashkenazi Jews. The process of stigmatisation recalls partially what we already observed within the French context. They were labelled "*Mizraḥi*," or Oriental Jews, which reflects the general negative stereotype perception of them resembling to the Arabs they had left behind. Their social and economic situation was poor and they often were victims of discrimination and exploitation, causing many to leave Israel for a second exile. Whereas the Algerian Jews were treated as French citizens and therefore could leave Algeria (following independence) and settle in France in the same way French "*pied-noir*" did, Moroccan Jews did not have this option. As the *aliyah* to the Holy Land turned out to be a nightmare for many of them, the first generation of Moroccan immigrants in Israel radicalized both politically and religiously.

About 100,000 Jews live today in Québec, the francophone province of Canada which counts 7 million inhabitants. The majority of these Jews are Anglophone and Ashkenazi (like the Jews in the rest of Canada); the Sephardic minority has about 20,000 French-speaking citizens. Eighty per cent are of Moroccan origin, and the rest come from Egypt, Lebanon, Iran and other

[22] "En France, elle était en apesanteur. En Israël, d'une certaine façon elle était à sa place. Ses racines étaient en Europe, en Afrique, au Maroc, mais c'étaient des vicissitudes de l'existence qui devaient l'amener vers sa véritable origine, Israël, terre des ancêtres, de ses ancêtres. En Israël elle était chez elle." Ibid., 154.

[23] "Massada était le symbole d'Israël, pays forteresse, assiégée de toutes parts par ceux qui n'attendaient que sa chute – ou son suicide collectif." Ibid., 158.

Middle Eastern countries. In the last twenty years, the Moroccan Jewish community began to develop a particular self-image emphasizing their unique heritage in contrast to other minorities as well as to the Quebecers' of French origins.

To understand the specific nature of Québec, we have to consider its particular status as a francophone "island" in the Anglophone Canadian "Ocean." As a result of the wars between France and Great Britain in North America, Québec is the only state in the Canadian federation where French is the official language and with Catholicism as the corresponding official state religion. In order to avoid being swallowed by Anglophone Protestant Canada, Québec's government welcomes and encourages immigration from other French-speaking nations in order to increase their numbers. That's why the francophone Maghreb Jewish minority is valued by political leaders. Because of this political impact, the Moroccan Jews chose the French camp and not the English. Paradoxically, this means that they relate to the colonial part of their linguistic and cultural heritage and neglect the more complex Arab, Berber and Spanish origins and influences. They use the term "*Sefarad*" above all to distinguish themselves from other Jews, the Ashkenazi. As to the Spanish influence in their Moroccan past, there is only a small community of Moroccan Jews in Québec who try to maintain cultural elements such as the *Haketia*, the Judeo-Spanish language transformed through Moroccan influence and a particular literary form, the *romancero*.[24]

Nevertheless, adopting French culture and thereby embracing the idea of emancipation, modernisation and integration means a certain schizophrenia for the Moroccan Jewish Community, as it was the French Vichy-Regime which failed these principles by persecuting them. But as we have already seen, self perception and identity construction is linked to external factors and it corresponds more to how a group wants to be perceived and how it perceives itself rather than to reality.

By going in exile, cultural patterns and customs can be transformed and a new identity can be developed. But in the case of Moroccan Jews in Québec, who live mostly in Montréal, we observe the tendency of fossilisation and "folklorisation" of their culture, instead of a transformation. They try to find affirmation in an identity which is nothing other than a projection into the past. And this past is discovered or imagined once in exile as the writer Bob Oré Abitbol shows in his novel *Le goût des confitures*:

[24] See for more information: Mechtild Gilzmer, "La mémoire de la vie juive méditerranéenne au Québec", in *Neue Romania 40. Judenspanisch – Judéo-espagnol XIII,* eds. Ulrich Reich and Margarete Zimmermann, (Berlin: Institut für Romanische Philologie der Freien Universität Berlin, 2011), 77-93.

> Naturally, there were similarities between us, a very oriental way to see things, to feel them. But we were not really Moroccans; we became Moroccans later, in other countries, under other skies. There we had to assume an identity which had never been ours. At home we had been Jews of Morocco. In Québec we became Moroccan Jews, des 'sépharadistes.'[25]

This quotation illustrates very well that our identity is always the result of a relationship to others and that one eternal identity does not exist. In looking back to the past, we define life and reconstruct our identity in a certain way. We use memory in order to confirm our vision.
But this is not written in stone, as the process can also be an opportunity to be aware of errors, to correct our perception and to transform our beliefs. That demands that we see, understand and respect other positions. In the context of what interests us here, the memory of Jews in Arab lands, it means to understand the historical context which determined the Arab-Jewish relationship today. There are some artists of Sephardic origin in Québec who practice this approach, in contrast to the mainly nostalgic tendency. Among them, we find a Tunisian Jewish filmmaker, Michka Saäl, whose film "L'arbre qui dort rêve à ses racines" (1992)[26] stands out among the artistic works of North African Jews living in Québec. Her film is outstanding in so far as she perceives and describes a shared Arab-Jewish past.

It is difficult to find more details on the life and work of this film director. Born in Tunisia in 1949, Michka Saäl arrived in Québec in 1979. There, she studied filmmaking at the University of Montreál. In 1992, she made her first documentary "L'arbre qui dort rêve à ses raciness," produced by the *Office National du Film* (ONF) and presented at several festivals in Europe and in the Middle East. In the standard work on Québec's cinema, Janis L. Pallister presents it as a film about Jewish life and "notably as a film of unusual beauty by a new guard, neo-Canadian woman director."[27]
Her first film "La position de l'escargot", a co-production with France, was shown in Québec and in France before being presented in Europe and Asia. There are some recurring themes which link the films of Michka Saäl: travelling in space and time, between the present country and the memory of

25 "Il y avait bien sûr entre nous des affinités, une manière bien orientale de voir les choses, de les ressentir. Mais nous n'étions pas vraiment Marocains. Nous le sommes devenus bien plus tard, dans d'autres pays, sous d'autres cieux. Ailleurs, nous avons dû assumer une identité qui n'avait jamais vraiment été la nôtre. Là-bas, nous étions des Juifs marocains. Ici nous sommes devenus des Marocains juifs, des Québécois 'sépharadistes." Quoted according to Najib Redouane, "L'aventure collective des voix littéraires sépharades au Canada", *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 7/1-2 (2004): 57. The expression "sépharadistes" is an ironical allusion to the Québecer independantists, the "separatists".

26 One can see the film on the website of the *Office National du film Canadian* (ONF): htttp://www3.onf.ca/acrosscultures/cinema_texte.php?id=2000&mediaid=663088&full.

27 Janis L. Pallister, *The Cinéma of Québec. Masters in Their Own House,* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), 414-415.

the past. Her documentary, "Zero tolerance" (2004) deals with the relationship between Montréal's police and young male immigrants – the film director tries to treat the different cultures in Québec society "from a feminist, pacifist, and humanistic viewpoint."[28] Her last film "Prisonniers de Beckett" (2006), a French-Canadian co-production was selected by the independent cinema association in 2007 for the Cannes festival and received the "Gemini Award" from Anglophone Canadian television.

"L'Arbre qui dort rêve à ses racines" shows the difficulties of two young immigrant women in Québec: Nadine Ltaif, a poet of Lebanese origin and Michka Saäl, the Tunisian film director. Their friendship is explored here in terms of how one can transcend the insurmountable conflicts between Jews and Arabs. The film begins with an epilogue: the story of the origins of the two people as it is told in the Old Testament. Abraham had two sons: Ismail with Agar, the Arab servant of his wife Sarah, and then Isaac with Sarah, who first seemed infertile. The film tells the story of immigration to Québec through individual examples. The filmmaker presents her own painful experiences. She is the main character of her film and appears in front of the camera, talking directly to the audience. She relates how she was interviewed by an immigration service agent. In doing so, she creates a very personal and intimate atmosphere as she speaks to the viewer as a friend.[29]

The film's main subject is the experience of migration and the relation to the others. The shock provoked by migration is illustrated by the contrast between images of the filmmaker's peaceful childhood in Tunisia among family members and the winter in Québec with mountains of snow on the Mont-Royal in Montréal. Michka Saäl presents immigrants from different origins: she shows interviews with a German woman, a Tunisian Arab, a couple of North African Jews, all men and women from the first and second generation, who tell stories of identity, integration, assimilation and cultural difference. This kaleidoscope of witnesses is supplemented by very poetic images which demonstrate the cultural diversity of Québec's society without neglecting complex issues, namely the traumatic experience of migration and the loss of evidence and identity. These questions are treated very concretely and poetically in interviews using a special aesthetic form and particular images. There are no simple answers. Immigrant relations in Québec among immigrants are portrayed in all their complexity.
The main focus of the film concerns the relationship between Michka Saäl and Nadine Ltaif and their situation as immigrant women. At first, we see them looking at personal documents and photos. Whereas Michka Saäl remembers her happy childhood on the Tunisian seaside, for Nadine Ltaif looking back means remembering war in Lebanon. We see the traumatic consequences of

[28] Johanne Larue, *Séquences*, 158, (June 1992): 47-48.
[29] http://www3.onf.ca/acrosscultures/cinema_texte.php?id=2000&mediaid=663088.

the past, and the panic they suffer. It seems that their friendship and their connection to the past and present (they are women artists who deal with their life through their work) can spark the possibility for cohabitation. The tree with its silent power, "l'arbre qui rêve à ses racines, même s'il dort," becomes the symbol of their friendship and their new life in Québec. At the end of the film, the two women sitting at the bottom of a tall tree confess to one another how they had grown up amid the hatred of an imagined enemy: for Michka Saäl it was the Arab, for Nadine Ltaif it had been the Jew. It was only by emigrating that they could transgress this mutual hatred and discover one another without prejudice. The last image of the film refers to the epilogue but gives it another significance: the two branches mentioned in the Book of Genesis, the sons of Abraham, are transformed and represented now by the two women who reconcile the past in a third space,[30] which is the exile. Living in the diaspora (exile) gives them the opportunity to discover and to accept the other in its diversity and cultural difference.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this contribution, the way historiographers and artists present and comment the coexistence of Jews living in Arab lands depends on the historical and political context and it is always related to their ideological visions and positions. I therefore tried first to "deconstruct" the reasons for the differences in the historiography on each side: be it Jews or Arabs, Western historians or other. As I showed, the idealization of the coexistence of Jews and Muslims living together in "Al Andalus" served for example in the 19th century to push the European project of Jewish assimilation. The same process of using the past for ideological purpose is at work in the nowadays creation of the "myth of Sephardic supremacy" by Jews in the French Diaspora. According to that view, the most admirable Jews in history were those living first in Arab, and then in Christian, Spain. This self-perception of "Sephardic Jews" as being the original, real and true Jews is largely developed in the novel "Sépharade" by the French writer Eliette Abécassis that I analyzed. The novel is a literary attempt to re-construct "Sephardic" identity and gives an elitist vision of Moroccan Jews living in France today. There is no possible dialogue or understanding between members of different groups, especially between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. Arabs do not even appear in the novel. Esther Vital, the main character of the novel, finally links her identity with the history of Israel. The nostalgic vision of a lost paradise and its literary reconstruction can be found in many texts of "Sephardic" Francophone writers, be it in France, Israel or in Québec. There are only few examples where the coexistence of Jews and Arabs is treated in all its complexity that means in its

[30] See for the notion of "third space" Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

historical context. This is the case in the film "L'arbre qui dort rêve à ses racines" of the Tunisian filmmaker Michka Saäl, that I therefore choose to present. The film describes the shared Arab-Jewish past through the metaphor of a tree which is the symbol of their common origin. Reconciliation and a new vision of the Arab-Jewish past seem possible in the third space of exile.

Mechtild Gilzmer is Professor for French and Francophone literature at the TU-Berlin (2002 – 2011), she worked on French and Francophone contemporary literature and history, especially on the relation of history and memory in literature, monuments and film. She published several articles about sephardic authors living in Québec.

How to quote this article:
Mechtild Gilzmer, *The Memory of North African Jews in the Diaspora*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n.4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=314

Space of Transit, Place of Memory: *Ma'abarah* and Literary Landscapes of Arab Jews

by *Piera Rossetto*

Abstract

The Sifrut ha-ma'abarah (transit camp literature) represents a narrative space where contemporary Israeli authors of Middle Eastern origin tell the stories forgotten, considered insignificant, and often repressed of the "oriental Jews" (Mizraḥim),[1] who emigrated to Israel from North Africa and the Middle East during the 1950's and the 1960's.
After a brief historical introduction on the ma'abarot (transit camps), I aim to unravel the experience of the ma'abarah as a "place of memory" and a "narrative place." My reflections are based on the concept of "space/place" as conveyed from a human geography perspective. In this framework, I suggest different "literary declensions" through which ma'abarah might be interpreted, and in particular as a narrative place of defiance, resistance, and exile.

En Route towards *ma'abarah*

When exploring the relationship between history and memory, national narrative and personal *mémoires*, it is difficult to sketch a map of the inextricably connections that bind them together, and draw the blurred boundaries of a complex reality, which asks us to repeatedly ponder on the location of a memory within history and of a history within memory.
In the case of Jewish mass immigration from Arab countries to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, I choose to explore the relationship between history and memories, in respect to *ma'abarot*, through the perspective of literature and autobiographical texts written by first and second generation immigrants. This perspective highlights the point of view of the non-hegemonic group, as conceived in postcolonial and subaltern studies, within the history of State building and nation building processes in Israel as portrayed by official narrative.

[1] Different terms have been used to identify the protagonists of mass immigration to Israel, adding more than one element of complexity to the academic discussion about it: *Sefardim*, *Bnei edot ha-mizraḥ*, *Levantinim*, Oriental Jews, *Mizraḥim*, Arab Jews, to quote the most widespread along with national affiliation such as Moroccan Jews, Iraqi Jews, etc. In this essay, I will use different terms, in accordance with the source and period of time I am referring to, though I am aware of the peculiar nuances of each of them. For a discussion of the terms see, Ella Shohat, "The Invention of the Mizrahim", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29/1 (1999): 5-20; Ella Shohat, "Rupture and Return. Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab Jews", *Social Text 75* 21/2 (2003): 49-74; Lital Levy, "Reorienting Hebrew Literary History", *Prooftexts* 29/2 (2009): 127-172.

In addition to this, I suggest reading the texts through the prism of space/place concept, as explored from a human geography perspective, since it has proved to be a key-concept in disclosing the full potential of literature as a "mediator of memory," as I shall demonstrate in this essay.

> It was after midnight when the plane landed at Lod, the doors opened and a youngster entered holding a special gadget and sprayed an acid smelling substance into the already thick and heavy air within. Four hours of flying in a cargo plane equipped with narrow and flimsy seats made from steel and cloth, had left me exhausted and disoriented. The seats were tightly packed one in front of the other, so much so that those who were travelling in front of me for the short duration of flight vomited continuously and dirtied my trousers. I don't remember when they sprayed us with DDT, but it was sometime after we had left the plane and I remember clearly the tasteless, lukewarm tea and the thin piece of black bread that they gave us. In my naivety I actually thought it was a piece of chocolate cake. Basically these are my memories of that long night and the early hours of the 24 June 1951, the day in which I became a citizen of the State of Israel.[2]

When Shimon Ballas, Israeli author of Iraqi origin, published in 2009 these *mémoires*, his autobiography, almost sixty years had passed since the foundation of the State of Israel and the waves of mass immigration of thousands of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East to Israel.

Ballas arrived to Israel from Iraq in June 1951 together with his family: his mother, brother and sister. They arrived carrying with them only one tin suitcase each, according to the Iraqi law which granted the Jews freedom of emigration in exchange for renouncing their Iraqi citizenship.[3] Once in Israel, they were assigned a precarious tent in Migdal Bet, one of the three *ma'abarot* (transit camps) on the outskirts of Ashkelon.

It was only many years after that experience, that literature "gave back" to the wider public of readers the stories of these new immigrants who arrived to Israel full of expectations, illusions, and steeped in a culture deeply "other"/different from that which was imposing itself as the Israeli mainstream culture. For many, the impact was traumatic.

---

[2] Shimon Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, (s.l.: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2009), 5 [Hebrew]. Shimon Ballas has been professor of Arab literature at Haifa University. In 2009 he published his autobiography, *Be-guf rishon* (*First Person*). I thank the author for the pleasure I had in meeting him in Tel Aviv last September 2011. If not otherwise indicated, this and all the other translations from Hebrew are mine. I thank Tsipora Baran for her supervision on them. I wish to thank also Anna Waite for the help in translating the text from Italian to English.

[3] In March 4th 1950, the Iraqi Senate approved a bill allowing the Jews residents in Iraq to leave the country. On their part, the Jews that wanted to leave had to renounce their Iraqi citizenship. The law did not specify means or routes of transportation, neither had it been clear what they could carry with them. Eventually, they were allowed to carry one suitcase each. See: Sadok H. Masliyah, "Zionism in Iraq", *Middle Eastern Studies* 25/2 (1989): 216–237.

In its official website, under the title "Ingathering of the exiles," the Jewish Agency states: "During the first four years of its existence, while struggling for survival, the country absorbed over 700,000 immigrants!
The need for temporary housing resulted in the establishment of ma'abarot or transit camps."[4]
This description fails to recognise that the arrival in Israel was, for many immigrants, far from being a "homecoming." Samir Naqqash, Israeli author of Iraqi origin, sums up with great efficacy: "They get us on lorries, like cattle, like cows and donkeys, to take us into a barren land, covered with bushes (…) It was like an endless awful nightmare."[5]
The mass immigration that took place in Israel between the end of the 1940s and the first half of the 1960s represents a complex phenomenon, as confirmed by the following data: in the first three years following the foundation of the State of Israel (1948-1951), the Jewish population of the country (about 650.000) doubled due to the arrival of about 685.000 new immigrants. At the beginning of the Sixties, the population almost tripled due to further waves of immigration, especially from North Africa.
In a very short period of time, different types of hosting facilities were created to accommodate the new immigrants: immigration camps, transit camps, labour camps, quarantine camps.[6]
The turning point was determined in 1950 by Levy Eshkol, at that time head of the Settlement Department of the Jewish Agency, who established the first *ma'abarot*. These facilities were conceived as a planning instrument within the first national master plan, adopted by the Israeli government in 1951, and in particular as a necessary transitional stage while new development towns were constructed in different parts of the country, mostly along its surrounding borders.[7]
Besides this aspect linked to territorial planning, the *ma'abarah* was also marked by a peculiar government system that affected the status of "citizen" for

[4] http://www.jafi.org.il/JewishAgency/English/About/History, accessed 04/10/2011.
[5] *Forget Baghdad*, directed by Samir (Switzerland, 2003).
[6] It could be argued that the State of Israel, before and immediately after its declaration, was going through such hardships that there were no many other options to "absorb" so many thousands of immigrants arriving to the Country than by placing them in these precarious hosting facilities. Nonetheless, I am of the opinion that the most controversial issue in this respect is not the outcome (e.g. the *ma'abarot*) of the choice, rather the choice in itself to bring to Israel so many thousands of immigrants, following the idea of the "One Million Plan" unveiled by Ben Gurion in 1944. For a discussion of this topic in relation with the history of Jews from Arab countries see, for instance, Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, *Zionism in an Arab Country: Jews in Iraq in the 1940s*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Maurice Roumani, *The Jews of Libya. Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement*, (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008).
[7] Arieh Sharon, "Planning in Israel", *Town Planning Review* 23/1 (1952): 66-82; Roy Kozlovsky, "Temporal States of Architecture. Mass Immigration and Provisional Housing in Israel", in *Modernism and the Middle East. Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 139–160.

ma'abarah's residents,[8] for instance in regards to freedom of movement and equal access to employment opportunities, thus leading to an ethnic based division of labour and created relationships of dependence between the two major groups constituting the Israeli society: the veterans, of Ashkenazi origin and the new immigrants, mostly from Arab countries.[9]

Living in ma'abarot

Dvora Hacohen provides us with interesting details about the living conditions in the *ma'abarot*.[10] Initially *ma'abarot* were made up of tents, then canvas huts (a wood structure with canvas walls) or tin cabins, and finally wooden shacks of about 16m² for each family, or 25m² in the case of a large family. The 1950-1951's winter was particularly severe, with heavy snow falls across the country, and these temporary structures didn't protect the people from the cold. Ballas remembers that time:

---

[8] Ibid., 139. Roy Kozlovsky speaks of the "suspension of the status of citizen". In a personal conversation with Kozlovsky, I asked the author to further explain this concept. The scholar pointed out that what he meant to argue in his essay was that while of course being citizens with equal rights on a formal level, immigrants were not equal in the power they held, one can be equal in terms of civil and political rights, while still being marginal and unable to enter civic society on an equal level with others. In practice, new immigrants were more easily used by the state for its project of population dispersal, because they were intentionally put in a temporary housing and living situation so they could be later sent to another place according to a preconceived plan. In practice, they did not have the ability to live where they wished, although they had this "legal" right. (29 August 2010, personal conversation with the author). In a time were location (center or periphery) revealed to be crucial for the outcome of the immigration, Aziza Khazzoom underlines the fact that objective limitations existed to the right of freedom of circulation in the country: "Movement of the immigrants was sometimes also controlled after they had been placed. Indirect control occurred through food coupons. There was a shortage of food from about 1949 to 1952, and individuals were issued food coupons. These coupons could be redeemed however only in the area of residence". See Aziza Khazzoom, *Shifting Ehtnic Boundaries and Inequality in Israel. Or, How the Polish Peddler Became a German Intellectual*, (Stanford Univesity Press, 2008) 23.

[9] Deborah Bernstein, "Immigrant transit camps – the formation of dependent relations in Israeli society", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 4/1 (1981): 26-43; Deborah Bernstein and Shlomo Swirsky, "The Rapid Economic Development of Israel and the Emergence of the Ethnic Division of Labour", *The British Journal of Sociology* 33/1 (1982): 64-85; Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, "Class, Ethnicity, and the Rise of Immigrant Leadership; Beer-Sheva in the Early 1950s", *Israel Studies* 5/2 (2000), 78-106. As we have seen earlier, freedom of movement was indirectly limited and controlled. Only immigrants who had family members in the areas of major economic development (Tel Aviv and central areas of the Country), able to support them through the black market, could afford to leave their place of residence and count on their hospitality. This would result in facilitating the process of getting a job where it was much easier to find it. Needless to say that this was the case mainly of immigrants of Ashkenazi origin who had more connections with Ashkenazi veterans. In very few cases this was possible for Mizrahi immigrants, as it was for Shimon Ballas: see Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 51-52.

[10] Dvorah Hacohen, *Immigrants in Turmoil*, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 129-161. Dvorah Hacohen is professor of Modern Jewish History at Bar Ilan University.

> To stay in a *ma'abarah* was like being catapulted into a new world. A world where humans lose their private spheres and expose every aspect of their lives to the eyes of the others, whether it be in a tent, inside a shack or outside (…) Initially, when we lived in a *ma'abarah* our tent flapped in the wind at the start of the storms. After a while we lived in a wooden shack without electricity and water. Living conditions in our *ma'abarah* were no different from the other camps and I tried to adapt to my new way of life and gain some satisfaction from the on-going political action.[11]

Water was supplied through central taps, with constant problems regarding quantity and quality. Cold water showers were shared by the residents, and although there should have been one shower for every 16 residents, the facts were that only a few worked. There were also problems also over sanitary conditions: "The toilet 'fixtures' were sewage pits, which were often quite shallow and filled up very rapidly creating mud, filth and stench. On average there were four families per pit, but in many large ma'abarot there were as many as 100 people per 'toilet'."[12] *Ma'abarot* were without electricity, kerosene lamps were used in tents and huts, thus leaving *ma'abarah* mostly in the dark. Poor maintenance of the roads and insufficient public transport set *ma'abarah* in a condition of isolation from the nearby villages. Several commissions of inquiry were appointed to investigate living conditions in *ma'abarot* and a report from 1955 stated: "In Tel Yeruham there is no phone and the nearest doctor is 53 kilometres away…garbage is collected once every two weeks…in Tira an average of 5.5 people live in one room, in Kurdania 336 people share one shower, in Karkur there is one toilet for 53 people."[13]

Burocracy and isolation

The burocratical apparatus set up to provide the residents of the *ma'abarot* with the different services needed, was inefficient and disorganised, often marked by the internal competition and rivalry, rather than by the mutual cooperation among the different bodies operating in the camps. It was by then clear that managing services in the camps, also meant exerting a sort of power on the immigrants themselves, this social distortion was also evident during later waves of immigration to the country.[14] Despite the attempt to demonstrate

---

[11] Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 40–42.

[12] Bernstein, "Immigrant transit camps – the formation of dependent relations in Israeli society," 29.

[13] Kozlovsky, "Temporal States of Architecture. Mass Immigration and Provisional Housing in Israel," 151.

[14] Esther Herzog, "The Bureaucratic Absorption of Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel: Integration or Segregation?", in *Between Africa and Zion. Proceedings of the First International Congress of the Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry,* eds. Steven Kaplan, Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi, (Jerusalem, 1995), 189-202. For a more detailed and in-depht study of dependence relations close to those that had been created in the 1950's see also: Esther Hertzog, *Immigrants and Bureaucrats: Ethiopians in an Israeli Absorption Center*, (Berghahan Books, 1999).

that positive relations were established between burocrats and new immigrants,[15] actual competition and rivalry among the services providers had a detrimental effect on immigrants, making it even more difficult to find a solution to their problems.

A further frustrating fact was that the new immigrants felt themselves isolated and lonely in respect to the *Yishuv* and the residents of the villages that, although located not far from the camps, were in fact out of reach for them. Immigrants complained that nobody from the veteran residents were visiting them and showing interest in their living conditions, as it was observed and reported by the social workers on duty at the camps. The following passage is taken from a social worker's report to the Jerusalem Post on 14.05.1950:

> There is a feeling of loneliness and isolation among many of the newcomers, and this, in addition to the hardships of insufficient housing and unemployment, tends to make them bitter and suspicious towards the settled community. I have often in my visits to the districts housing the new immigrants looked in vain for the old resident of the *Yishuv* who might have come out to see for himself how his homecoming brother is faring. There are of course many organizations that have extended their activities to the new places of settlement, but I should like to see any effort on the part of the individual citizen to come and help them start (…).[16]

Deborah Bernstein reports that by the end of 1950, approximately 40 *ma'abarot* were established, increasing to 127 by the end of the following year, home for about 250.000 residents.[17] In 1951, 75% of their residents were "oriental Jews," a percentage that reached 83% in 1952. This data clearly proves that the vast majority of those who experienced living in *ma'abarot* were Arab Jews.[18]

---

[15] Elihu Katz and Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, "Some Sociological Observations on the Response of Israeli Organizations to New Immigrants", *Administrative Science Quarterly* 5/1 (1960): 113-133.

[16] Henry Brian Megget Murphy, "The Resettlement of Jewish Refugees in Israel, with Special Reference to Those Known as Displaced Persons", *Population Studies* 5/2 (1951): 168. There were some positive exceptions to this lack of interpersonal relationships. An example is represented by *Shurat ha-mitnadvim*, an organization of volunteers, founded by members of MAPAI students' circle at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem between 1951 and 1952. See, Paula Kabalo, "Mediating Between Citizens and a New State: The History of Shurat ha-mitnadvim", *Israel Studies* 13/2 (2008): 97-121.

[17] Bernstein, "Immigrant transit camps – the formation of dependent relations in Israeli society," 28–9. Deborah Bernstein is professor at Sociology Department at Haifa University.

[18] For a discussion of the term Arab Jews see: Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). For a discussion of the term "Arab Jew" in comparative historic perspective see also: Emily Benichou Gottreich, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98/4 (2008): 433-451; Lital Levy, Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Mashriq", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98/4 (2008): 452-469. In his autobiography, Ballas recalls the sensation caused by his statement in several interviews in 1991. The author affirmed to define himself as an Arab Jew that had taken on the Israeli identity and started to write in

When Iraqis arrived to Israel, about 125.000 people between 1950 and 1951, were faced with the reality of *ma'abarot* as their new horizon, as "the place where the open sky of the Promised Land sunk to the height of the canvas walls of the winter rain-soaked tent."[19]
In many respects, Ballas's biography coincide with some of the most relevant stages of the mass immigration to Israel and bears witness to the deep changes that affected Israeli society at different levels. The peculiarities of the so called "*edot ha-mizraḥ*" (the oriental communities), contributed to form a framework of social complexity that encompassed issues of politics, economics, identity and culture.

***Sifrut ha-ma'abarah*, a Narrative in Transition**

> The rays of sun, spread lazily here and there on the ground. A strong wind blew the dry leaves and the rubbish. It whistled through the *badonim*, banging creaky bathroom doors and whipping up the corrugated iron sheets above the showers. The wind brought with it sounds from afar of car horns and the racket of the noisy city.[20]

While the mass immigration years were framed in pictures, newspapers articles and reportages that up to now witnessed eloquently the precarious conditions of life in *ma'abarot*, there were no personal witnesses left by the immigrants themselves, written at the time of the events. The main reason can be traced to the fact that most immigrants did not know Hebrew when they arrived to Israel, and coping in the harsh living conditions forced them first and foremost to try and meet basic needs for survival, such as finding a job to support the family.
In the following years, however, the experiences lived by immigrants in *ma'abarot* eventually found a way to be expressed, albeit from different perspectives. Literature represents one of the ways for such expression, so that it is possible to identify, in Israeli literature, a corpus of literary works sharing similar aspects, known as *Sifrut ha-ma'abarah (*Transit camp literature).[21]
Nancy Berg maintains that the definition of *Sifrut ha-ma'abarah* encompasses literary works written by authors, mostly of Iraqi origin emigrated to Israel, that aimed to depict living conditions in *ma'abarot*, starting from their own

---

Hebrew, but still deeply rooted in Arab culture. While the affirmation of a Jewish Romanian, Jewish Russian, or even Jewish German identity did not cause any sensation, Ballas underlines how unnatural, contradictory, and senseless appeared at that time the combination of the two terms, Arab and Jew, in a single identity. See: Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 130.

[19] Ruth Tsoffar, "Forget Baghdad: Roundtrip to the Promised Land", *Anthropological Quarterly* 79/1 (2006): 137.

[20] Ballas, *Ha-ma'abarah*, (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1964), 61-62 [Hebrew].

[21] In 1964, Shimon Ballas published his novel *Ha-ma'abarah*, up to now considered the work that influenced, inspired, and started the *Sifrut ha-ma'abarah* (Transit camp literature).

personal experiences.[22] Three novels are considered to be the most representative works of this corpus: *Ha-ma'abarah (The Transit Camp),* by Shimon Ballas (1964); *Shavim ve-shavim yoter (All Men Are Equal, But Some Are More)*, by Sami Michael (1974); *Tarnegol kapparot (Scapegoat)*, by Eli Amir (1983).[23]

Although *mémoires* of personal or family experiences might be affected by time passing by, and distort the true historical events that had generated them,[24] nevertheless they represent an essential piece needed to reconstruct the "*milieu humain et culturel*" in which the events took place.

Principally, literature seems to be asked to provide events with a meaning, to heal traumas, to create a space in which it might be possible to bring together divided memories. In this respect, the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* appears like the narration of personal and collective stories that are so deeply human, that they go beyond the boundaries of geography, culture, history, and religion. This is the reason why, in this essay, I intend to devote my attention to the works that voiced the memories bound to *ma'abarah*.[25] Nevertheless, I will concentrate not only on the first generation of *Mizraḥi* authors, but I will also include narrative voices from the second generation, those who might have heard of *ma'abarah* within their family circle.[26]

***Ma'abarah*: from space to place**

In her compelling essay about the history of Israeli Literature, Lital Levy points out the need to draw a new "map" of Hebrew Literature tracing "geographical-

---

[22] Nancy Berg, *Exile from Exile. Israeli Writers from Iraq,* (State University of New York Press, 1996), 67.

[23] Shimon Ballas, *Ha-ma'abarah,* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1964); Sami Michael, *Shavim ve-shavim yoter,* (Tel Aviv: Boostan, 1974); Eli Amir, *Tarnegol kapparot,* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984). See: Nancy Berg, "*Sifrut HaMa'abarah* (Transit Camp Literature): Literature of Transition", in Kevin Avruch and Walter P. Zenner, *Critical Essays on Israeli Society, Religion, and Government. Books on Israel, Volume IV,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 189-190.

[24] In Ballas's autobiography, for instance, the author refers to an article he read on the *National Geographic Magazine* while he was working as junior assistant at the office of Senate member Ezra Menachem Daniel in Baghdad (See, Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 12). Ballas remembers the poignancy of the article, a reportage complete with photographs, about *ma'abarot* in Israel and the regret of not having shown it to his mother before she decided to emigrate with him. I retrieved the article, discovering that, actually, it did not deal with *ma'abarot* in Israel, but with Palestinian refugees' camps in Jericho. See: Maynard Owen Williams, "Home to the Holy Land", *The National Geographic Magazine*, 98/6 (1950): 707-746.

[25] Beyond this reason, it is worth noting that there are no English (or other Western languages) translations from Hebrew of the oldest novels, thus limiting the readers' access to them.

[26] For a comparison between first generation and second generation *Mizraḥi* authors, see: Shmirit Feld, "Nicus, hitnagedut ve-toda'ah ba-yizug ha-mizraḥiut ba-sifrut ha-israelit", *Meḥkare' Yerushalaim be-sifrut 'ivrit*, Yerushalaim 38 (2009): 321-328 [Hebrew]. The essay is a review of Batia Shimoni, *'Al saf ha-geulah – sipur ha-ma'abarah: dor rishon ve-sheni* (Universitat Ben-Gurion ba-Negev, 2008)[Hebrew]. Among the authors of second generation *Mizraḥi* we can enlist: Ami Bouganim, Ronit Matalon, Tova Murad Sadka, Dorit Rabinian.

literary coordinates" that will include the heritage of the literary, poetic, and journalistic productions of Arab Jews from various countries of the Middle East. This claim introduces geographical terms in an essentially literary discourse,[27] an approach that doesn't appear to be uncommon, when considering the fruitful tradition of dialogue between geography and literature. It remains an interesting prism through which historical experiences of mass immigration and *ma'abarot* can be read, both at an individual and a general level.

In considering the notions of space and place, I decided to turn to the contribution given to this field of studies by geographer Yu Fu Tuan, considered to be one of the most influential scholars in humanistic perspective within humanistic geography.[28] In a particularly effective synthesis, the scholar maintains: "When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place."[29] What at the beginning is an undifferentiated "space," continues Tuan, becomes a "place" as we get to know it better and endow it with value. Space remains a rather abstract concept until, through experience, we "bind" ourselves to that space thus transforming it into "a meaningful location."[30]

Investigating more deeply the concept of "experience," Tuan explains:

> Experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality. These modes range from the more direct and passive senses of smell, taste, and touch, to active visual perception and the indirect mode of symbolization. (…) Experience thus implies the ability to learn from what one has

---

[27] Lital Levy, "Reorienting Hebrew Literary History: The View from the East", *Prooftexts* 29/2 (2009): 133-137.

[28] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977). Key concepts such those of space and place have been analised and explored from several perspectives, suggesting different anthropological, sociological, and cultural interpretations of these notions (see for instance the works of H. Lefevre, Michel de Certau, M. Augé). In this essay, I priviledged the perspective on space/place as conveyed by "humanistic geography," a new approach developed by geographers like Yi-Fu Tuan, Anne Buttimer, and Edward Relph. Notwithstanding the fact that their oeuvres need to be reconsidered after so many years have passed since their first publication, it is also undisputed that they still offer plenty of meanings and insights. See: David Seamon and Jacob Sowers, "Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph", in *Key Texts in Human Geography*, eds. P. Hubbard, R. Kitchen, and G. Vallentine (London: Sage, 2008, 43-51). Since its publication, Yi-Fu Tuan's essay *Space and Place* has confirmed to be an essential point of reference in the discussion about space and place. The author considers how people perceive and conceive space, how they create connections with their house, neighborhood, nation, and how much perception of space and place is influenced by the sense of time. Humanistic geography aims at studying territory in a perspective that places the "subject" at the core of every territorial representation. In this respect, territory is analysed from the point of view of how human beings perceive, live, and interpret it.

[29] Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, 73.

[30] According to the definition of "place" given by Tim Cresswell, professor of Social and Cultural Geography at Wales University. Tim Cresswell, *Place. A short Introduction,* (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 7.

> undergone. To experience is to learn; it means acting on the given and creating out of the given.[31]

In this framework of concepts, the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* might be interpreted as one of the possible instruments that permit us "to know" and thus "to experience" the *ma'abarah*, although historically it is an experience that belongs to the past. Whether we are considering personal *memoires* of first generation immigrants or reported *mémoires* by second generation immigrants, in both cases literature collects these historical experiences of *ma'abarah* and it becomes an essential instrument giving readers an insight into an otherwise "far" experience.

The *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* as Place of Memory[32]

In her stimulating work on cultural memory, Aleida Assman suggests considering "writing" and "places" as "mediators of memory," among those elements that "establish and facilitate cultural memory providing it with a sound support and interaction with our human memory."[33] On one hand, as Assman maintains, both in literature and in poetry the mediation of "writing" shares the project of an eternal lasting (*eternamento*), considered since ancient times, the act of "writing," the most reliable mediator of memory.[34]
On the other hand, suggests the scholar, we refer to "memory of places" in an evocative way, without making it clear if this expression relates to places enriched with an immanent memory or more simply to the fact that places themselves are the object of memory.[35] However, as Assman affirms, "Memory of places is completely different from places of memory. In fact, while memory of places is deeply rooted in a place and cannot be parted from it, places of memory are characterised by their intrinsic capacity of transmission."[36]
Weaving together these insights, I propose to interpret *ma'abarah* as a "place of memory" due to its capacity of transmitting, through the mediation of writing, the peculiarity of an experience lived out in a place that no longer exists. The mediation of writing goes beyond the limits of the memory of place, as it is no longer possible to access it. It represents a writing that reconciles the past and

---

[31] Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, 8-9.
[32] Using the notion "place of memory," I am aware of the foundamental contribution given to the subject by Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, most notably by elaborating the notions of "*mémoire collective*" and "*lieux de mémoire*". Nevertheless, in this essay I shall try to elaborate a different frame of reference for the notion of "place of memory," based on the combination between Tuan's concept of place and Aleida Assmann's notion of memory.
[33] Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare. Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale,* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2002), 21, translated from the original text: Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, (München: Beck, 1999).
[34] Ibid., 201.
[35] Ibid., 331.
[36] Ibid., 348.

the present without "mediating", namely compromising those aspects of disappointment and contradiction that marked the arrival to Israel.
The following passage is taken from Sami Michael's novel *Shavim ve-shavim yoter*. There is no doubt that one of the most appalling and strongly remembered event of those days is represented by the DDT spraying, that "welcomed" the new immigrants on their arrival at the airport in Israel. Part of the personal and collective memory, this event surrounds the main character of Michael's novel marking the symbolic end of his father as "a man both respected and influential within the Baghdad community." After his arrival to Israel, his father, together with his entire world, disappears, swallowed up in a white cloud.

> Despite my father's expectation, Shaul was not there to greet us on the runway. There weren't even beautiful air hostess to welcome us, instead from under the air stairs a group of employees all dressed in grey made their way towards us. My father paused a moment at the top of the air stairs and then with a dignified walk he slowly descended…we knew that he concealed his bitter disillusion only because it was an important moment. It was an impressive, yet futile effort. It took about five minutes for the new homeland to transform my father from an energetic man in peak form into a helpless, afflicted wreck. While he descended the air stairs we were all excited and anxious to feel the appeal of Israel that we had dreamed of. Suddenly the grey group appeared and one of them produced a large piece of equipment, poised ready to spray. Before we knew what was happening – a white cloud of DDT enveloped Abu Shaul, a man both respected and influential within Baghdad community. Through this cloud we saw my father lift his hand towards the spray gun; it was a silent protest. Hair, moustache and eyebrows turned white. The silk tie, the starched shirt and his elegant suit instantly changed into dusty rugs. After that humiliating moment and them treating him like the head of a herd of animals, I saw my father, silently, try to maintain his dignity by refusing to sneeze. Tears streamed from his eyes, his face muscles contorted like a tormented mask…and everything seemed disfigured, ugly and revolting. The spasms lasted only a few moments but my father had won, he hadn't sneezed. There and then I witnessed the last victorious moment of Abu Shaul's life. The creature that later left the airport was no longer my father, all that remained was his pride. My mother supported my father as he got into the truck, he was exhausted from the incident. We travelled for only two hours, but the journey seemed endless. Madeleine clung to me the whole time, her body shaking against my arm, but I was indifferent as my eyes were only for my father. It's like this, we all have our idols and my father was ours, but after that humiliating moment, we felt ourselves lost.[37]

[37] Michael, *Shavim ve-shavim yoter*, 18-19.

Ma'abarah as Narrative Place

The place, remembered and revisited through memory or eventually physically in reality, becomes the starting point for the narration, it "starts to talk," firstly to the author that visited it, giving light and life back to the memories bound to it. For many *Mizraḥi* authors, going back to their homeland became impossible almost from the very first day of their immigration to Israel. As highlighted by Ballas, as author he was able to keep alive the memory and links between the homeland and his childhood city, to such an extent that years later he illustrated on a piece of paper the topography itself. In this respect, it could be argued that literature in general and *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* in particular, plays a significant role also in keeping alive the imagined community of origin.

> Perhaps the two houses where I grew up still exist today! A young Iraqi friend I met in Paris, showed me a typical tourist map of the city (Baghdad, TN). I found myself looking at streets, gardens, marketplaces, bridges and building blocks built on the outskirts of the city. "I have another map" I told him, "a map of lanes that turn and crisscross each other. I could sketch it onto a piece of paper; every curve, every niche, every arch, every window, and the sharply protruding walls of the houses, acute angles where men of the night stop and urinate. I remember them all." "Many areas were destroyed, yours could be one of them," answered my friend. Destroyed or not, my neighbourhood was still there, in its place. The world of our childhood goes beyond time, it is an entirety of experiences that cannot be dismantled or exhausted by words. The world of childhood experiences cannot be retold without paying the price of imprisoning them in time frames, and at the cost of binding them to a taut chain of cause and effect. At the end of the day our childhood stories are just stories.[38]

In the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah*, it is the *ma'abarah* itself, with its tents and shacks, that acts as a narrative place. Not space but place, because even the most common and apparently insignificant daily acts were charged with intense feelings for those who lived in *ma'abarot,* no matter how much time they had spent there, years or weeks.

The short novel *The Croassroad* by Tova Murad Sadka, opens with the description of the arrival to the *ma'abarah* of a new group of immigrants. Naiim, the main character, is present when they arrive and this sight reminds him of his own arrival to the country from Iraq. In the course of time, he managed to leave the *ma'abarah* and gain a better social position opening a business, a small grocery. Nevertheless, he couldn't remain indifferent as the image of this difficult arrival and the anticipation of hard times ahead, times

[38] Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 38.

already known to him. Together with him, the reader is involved in a mixture of sadness, at the sight of the contrast between the silk dresses and the heavy luggage, and of pity for the new comers that, in their *naïveté*, had just began to measure the distance between Baghdad and Israel.

> "New immigrants!" someone called, and everyone rushed out to look at the newcomers. Naiim and the Shullmans followed.
> The new immigrants, forty men, women and children, approached slowly. They looked lost and bewildered. The men wore tailored suits; the women silk dresses, nylon stockings and dainty high-heeled shoes. Naiim smiled sadly. He remembered his own emigration. He remembered the scorching heat at Baghdad's airport verandah, with policemen and guards alla round. Since clothes were all one could take and the weight allowance was so limited, he, like his fellow immigrants, had carried his coat and jacket over his arm. As he stood looking aimlessly about, a policeman shouted at him. "You sit down, you with the coat. Trembling from cold, for sure."
> The immigrants struggled with their luggage. Feet sinking in the sand, they bent down and pushed the heavy trunks, their coats and jackets dragging along. Reaching the tents, they stopped to catch their breath and were amothered by relatives, friends and acquaintances.
> "Where are your beds and blankets?"
> "We left them on the road," the immigratns said. "Too heavy to carry. We'll sleep on the ground…or the trunks…."
> "Oh, no. You'll get sick. This is Israel, not Baghdad. It's damp and chilly at night. We'll go back with you and help you get them"
> (…) The grievances began pouring on Naiim and the Shullmans, in Arabic and mostly in broken Hebrew: The immigrants were being dropped far off from the Maabarah; they were given narrow folding steel beds, thin straw mattresses, flannel blankets and then left to themselves. Most of them had small children and it was an ordeal to carry the luggage, the bedding and the children too.
> The Maabarah was practically in the desert; scorpions and snakes were in the deep sand. "So we have to carry the children on our shoulders all the time," the mothers and grandmothers said. "And they keep crying. They're used to the cradles in cool basements with electric fans." Meanwhile, the necessities of everyday living were not available: the milkman, the bread man, the waterman and the gasman came if and when they pleased, and if one needed something in between one had to take that long walk to the bus station and then wait and wait for the bus. Getting rations from the grocery was as bad. The grocer had only one song: "No delivery yet." Whether it was true or whether he was a swindler, the immigrants had to go back and forth for their rations.[39]

[39] Tova Murad Sadka, *Farewell to Dejla. Stories of Iraqi Jews at Home and in Exile,* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2009), 114-5. Tova Murad Sadka was born in Baghdad and emigrated with her family to Israel in 1951, and from there to Usa in 1967.

The *ma'abarah* represents a narrative place, namely a space that become familiar also to those who had not experienced it personally. The public debate that developed in Israel at the beginning of the 1980's regarding the position of *Mizraḥim* within Israeli society contributed also to this familiarity. This debate involved a wider public, to which the harshness, difficulties, and troubles that the immigrants underwent during mass immigration were disclosed.
The *ma'abarah* became a narrative place and the stories took on tones and nuances much more complex than those, merely vindictive, assumed by some Israeli literary critics.[40] As a matter of fact, the *ma'abarah* appears like a narrative place composed by a variety of complex elements, among them: defiance, resistance, and exile.

"Literary declensions" of *ma'abarah*

Narrative place of defiance

In the following text, taken from Eli Amir's novel *Scapegoat*, Nuri, the main character, travels from the kibbutz where he lives to the *ma'abarah* to visit his family. Approaching the tents, he describes them a "surreal mosaic" made up of faded colours. The tailor-made suits worn by the immigrants were almost a living witnesses of the decline of these people, the Iraqi suits seemed to regret the time when a fresh flower peeped out from the button-hole of their lapel.

> Next to the tents people were setting on crude stools knocked together from broken boxes or planks, or on vegetable and fruit crates which had found their way here from a nearby citrus grove or kibbutz yard. Others sprawled on beds pulled half-way out of their tents, getting in the way of passers-by and contemplating the chickens or a goat nibbling at the vegetable leaves. The men wore striped Iraqi suits of a faded blue, brown, or black, with ridiculously wide lapels and buttonholes that remembered many a carnation. There were no carnations in the buttonholes now, and the big patches on their knees and elbows spoke louder than words of the decline of these elegant suits and of their owners, who had lost everything. Here and there, like a sign of things to come, khaki shirts and trousers were putting in an improbable appearance and merging with the colour of the tents and barren ground.[41]

Something else struck Nuri's look. Patches of vegetables were threaded between the tents, small portions of life that immigrants strove to cultivate.

[40] According to Ghershon Shaked, late important scholar and critic of Israeli literature, the works by authors immigrated from Arab countries had to be separated from the rest of Israeli literary production, set a part in a kind of "subgenre" of minor literary value. See: Ghershon Shaked, *Modern Hebrew Fiction,* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 184-5.
[41] Eli Amir, *Scapegoat*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 210-211.

And yet, they would have never succeed not even in approaching the abundance of Baghdad's markets, where Nuri's thoughts run: piles of fruit and vegetables, rich and juicy, rising up like small hills on the stalls. No doubt the immigrants were also aware of this disparity, yet nevertheless they decided to engage in the struggle of gaining, not only from the desert, but just tiny signs of victory.

> I rushed towards the tents. They disappeared behind the bends in the road and reappeared again, row upon row of them with their tent poles, pegs, washing blowing in the wind. So different from the tents of our summer camps in the woods next to the kibbutz. So many tents, and so similar to each other. Where was my family's tent? Patches of vegetables were threaded between the rows of tents like a green spotted snake. Mint and parsley, with here and there a few tomatoes and marrows in the pitiful beds. They would never be able to resurrect the markets of Baghdad here. They would never approach the abundance of fruit and vegetables in Baghdad, not even on the kibbutz. Pile upon pile, rich and juicy, rising as high as hills, behind which Nabil and I would play hide-and-seek, running to and fro among them until darkness fell, when the amount of food abandoned in the market-place would be enough to feed an entire *ma'abara*. And here my fellow Iraqis were trying to grow themselves a few pathetic tomatoes![42]

In some respects, this experience recalls that of "defiant gardens," as defined by Kenneth I. Helphand, professor of Landscape Architecture at Oregon University: "(…) gardens created under extreme or difficult environmental, social, political, economic, or cultural conditions or situations. They all represent acts of adaptation to their challenging circumstance, but they can also be viewed from other perspectives, as sites of assertion and affirmation."[43] In this context, the term "gardens" encompasses both gardens and vegetable plots, usually associated with circumstances of political and social stability, rather than to extreme conditions as those explored by Helphand. As observed by Reuben Rainey, professor at Virginia University's School of Architecture, defiant gardens "(…) exist not in harmony with their settings but stand in opposition to them, calling attention to their existence and almost demanding response from their human visitors. They are catalysts that empower humans to survive by subverting and defying dehumanizing situations (…)."[44]

---

[42] Ibid., 210.

[43] Kenneth Helphand, "Ghetto Gardens. Life in the Midst of Death", in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place,* eds. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt and Alexandra Nocke (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 84. See also: http://defiantgardens.com/, accessed 04/10/2011.

[44] Reuben Rainey, "Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime," review of *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime,* by Kenneth Helphand, *Site/Lines* 2/2 (2007): 17-18.

I do not mean to compare *ma'abarah* to a "war context," and yet life conditions were so extreme, tough, and humiliating that I would argue that the act of cultivating vegetable plots, against all odds, near to the tents might be interpreted as an act of defiance: firstly, against the harsh life conditions themselves, and secondly, against the Israeli authorities that had placed immigrants in *ma'abarot*.
In this extremely precarious setting, also keeping one's own traditional food could be seen as an act of "daily defiance," not only considering the food shortage at that time and the difficulty in obtaining the food people were used to. More significantly, food itself became the symbol of a culture, in this case the Arab culture, that had to be relinquished in order to embrace the Western one, a more "modern" and advanced also as far as food was concerned.[45]

> As Naiim approached the huts, he smelled red-poached eggs.[46] There must be some Iraqis in the Maabarah; who else cooked eggs that way? With all the hardships and the scarcity of eggs, they managed to maintain their traditional Sabbath morning meal. Naiim remembered with regret the lavish Sabbath winter brunches back in Baghdad. The red poached eggs, the chicken, its skin stuffed with meat, its soup cardamom-flavored, all with the special taste of overnight cooking on low heat; while here was the aura of deprivation; deprivation of food, clothing, housing; even the air smelled of deprivation.
> "Good morning," Esther's father greeted Naiim and let him into the four-by-five wooden hut. Three narrow high risers were set against its walls, with a steel trunk under each one of them. At the entrance, by the tiny window, wooden shelves were set on bricks, serving as counter for a few dishes, two pots and a kerosene lamp. A small wooden table and two chairs stood in the middle.[47]

Narrative place of resistance: (dis)continuity and (dis)contiguity

Hanan Hever depicts the *Mizraḥi* immigration to Israel in terms of territorial contiguity and cultural continuity combining the countries and cultures of the immigrants origins. This point of view adds further geographical-literary coordinates to the interpretative framework in which reading the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah*. Ballas's novel *Ha-ma'abarah* opens with the sign, written in Arabic, of a café set up in a shack of the *ma'abarah* and unfolds with the description of its owner Shlomo Khamara, a Jew from Baghdad, and his idea of starting off the business. The place is even more meaningful to the author if we think of the well long established tradition of cafes in Baghdad and the important place

---

[45] Ella Shohat recalls the humiliation experienced as a child in school because, to her classmates, the snack she brought with her from home "stank" of the typical Arab spices. See: *Forget Baghdad*, (2003).
[46] Many Jewish families eat *Cholent* or *Chamin* for lunch on Shabbat. It is prepared on Friday and allowed to cook at low temperature all night long. Recipies vary according to the different traditions.
[47] Murad Sadka, *Farewell to Dejla. Stories of Iraqi Jews at Home and in Exile*, 123.

given to this location in Ballas's autobiography, as well as in other Iraqi authors' biography.[48] Having to find a name for the café, Khamara choose for "Victory Café" (in Arabic), actually the name of a café in Baghdad, owned by Hajj Hassein A-Na'imi, most probably a Muslim friend of him.

> "*Maqhā an-Nassr li-sāhibihi Šlomo Hamara*" (Shlomo Khamara's Victory Bar). These words hang above the front of the wooden shack which sits near to the tarmacked road leading to the *ma'abarah* of Oriah. They invite you to sit on one of the stools, scattered in front of the door. You can listen to songs flowing from the radio and restore your soul with a small glass of tea or a cup of steaming hot coffee. Shlomo Khamara stands near to the door, smiling warmly and feeling very proud of himself as he awaits those arriving from Tel Aviv. The coach stops, the doors open wide and the travellers tumble out carrying their baskets and bags – a lively and varied line follows the route, its sides glistening as their feet move forward down the road. The crossroads is near the café and once there, they scatter down pathways and separate out in every direction of the *ma'abarah*. Khamara greets the passer-by with one hand on his chest, sometimes adding on a nickname. Chatting with the people, asking about work, the house and children and generally how they were keeping. Some would stop and chat, then carry on their business. Shlomo enters in the shack and he glances over the people sitting down and asks if anybody wants anything. He then walks towards the back door and pushes aside the curtain and enters in his house. Khamara's house is identical to the other houses in the camp, made from black cloth and unrefined, it's known as a *badon* (shack, TN). Surrounded by oil burning stoves, buckets, saucepans and dishes his wife Lulu sits on a low and narrow sofa. She's busy cooking and preparing the drinks for the clients in the bar, as she does every day. "*Wa Allah*, do you know what happened?" he asks her and without looking up, she repeats the question "What happened?", prompting him to tell her all that he had heard and seen from the travellers on the street. Khamara knows

[48] See also: Naïm Kattan, *Adieu, Babylone. Memoires d'un Juif d'Irak,* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1975). From a more contemporary perspective, Ella Shohat adds further insights by reflecting on cyberspace and its implication in postcolonial and diaspora studies, centring on the experience of a cyber cafe. Shohat describes the Gawat Izzawi (Izzawi's Cyber café), of which she is a member, and which refers to an actual popular café in Baghdad: "The electronic-mail café name functions as a chronotope, expressing nostalgia for both a place and a period, since Iraqis from diverse religious backgrounds and ethnic communities used to socialize in the physical Gawat Izzawi. Exilic nostalgia is freely exercised in the "private" public sphere of the electronic Gawat Izzawi, a community of intimate strangers." See: Ella Shohat, "By the Bitstream of Babylon. Cyberfrontiers and Diasporic Vistas", in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy, (New York and London, 1999), 213-232. In addition to this aspect bound to memory and nostalgia, Shohat underlies the possibility for people otherwise separated by both physical and ideological borders, to meet and interact: "Therefore, Iraqis, Iranians, Moroccans, and Egyptians who grew up in Israel and never had the possibility of meeting peoples inhabiting their countries of origin now engage via the Net". Ibid., 229.

everything about the residents of the camp; their desires and deepest emotions. His need to feed his curiosity pushes him to ask questions, investigate and scrutinise the affairs of those around him. The wooden shack that acted as the café was built about one year ago and made from old planks of wood from a packaging crate. He had nurtured the idea to open a café during his first days at the camp, but it had been impossible to fulfil his dream after the accident left him bedridden. At that time, he had worked like many other immigrants on a farm, but one day a heavy load from one of the machines fell onto him, breaking his ribs. He was hospitalised for eight months after which he was unable to lift heavy loads. Weak and depressed, he stayed at home and reflected upon the questions that weighed heavy in his heart. How to make money? How to build the bar? He spoke to his friends and the well informed amongst them encouraged him by saying it really wasn't a problem. It was just necessary to get the authorisation from the director and within a few days the shack would be up. The packaging crates could be bought from *Tnuvah* and then the supporting roof beams could be attached to the tent poles. The stools and tables were only a question of sawing and screwing them together, so generally it wouldn't cost a lot of money or time! Eliahu 'Ini was amongst the important and influential people of the *ma'abarah*, he took out of his pocket150 *lirot* and gave it to Khamara saying "Pay me back when you can." He then went to ask for the authorisation for the shack from the director. The shack was built quickly and once finished and furnished inside, Khamara leaned towards his wife and with an emotional whisper:
"What shall we call it?"
His wife stared in amazement.
"What name?"
"I think…*an-Nassr*", he said stroking his beard. "Why call it *an-Nassr*?"
Quietly, immersed in his thoughts he lowered his head.
Eventually, he spoke as if speaking to himself.
"Do you remember Hajj Hassein A-Na'imi a Bāb-Lagā? It was *an-Nassr*. There were few men like Hajj Hassein. God will remember him. He told me "Ya Abu Fuad, don't go as you will regret it!"
The Arab letters were hand painted on the face of the shack the day after and all thanks to his friend, Meir the local barber. That same day Khamara leaned once again towards his wife and whispered "Have you seen the sign? *An-Nassr…bi-idān Allāh intassarna*! (With the help of God we have won!)"[49]

As Hever notes, the building of the café in the *ma'abarah* signifies, on one hand, taking a clear stand, gaining a foothold in the Zionist space. On the other hand, it means placingan Iraqi place on the Zionist soil, even assigning to

[49] Ballas, *Ha-ma'abarah* , 7-9.

it an Arab name.[50] As a result, the final exclamation of victory could certainly point to the fact that Khamara and his friends managed to find, thanks to the café, a source of income that will restore their dignity and offer them a way to integrate into the new country. At the same time, it could also refer to the pride of having established, in a hostile environment, a small piece of Baghdad where it was possible to somehow feel "at home." The café represents a symbolic space, imbued with the cultural and traditional heritage of the Arab world, the origins of the immigrants, and in this sense its presence in the Israeli space challenges the implicit request within the Zionist project of "building the new Jew:" to free all Jews from the negative legacy of existence in diaspora.[51] It also challenges the Zionist discourse of a barren, deserted, and unpopulated land that had to be reclaimed, regenerated, and repopulated by bringing back home Jews from the diaspora dispersion. Before the arrival of the Jews from the diaspora, the 1948 war, and the arrival of the pioneers, the original inhabitants of the land, the Palestinians, made their mark upon the territory and some are still visible. Ballas is not afraid of integrating them in his writing, as if to signify that the Baghdadi café is not a foreign body in its place because of its "Arab origins." On the contrary, that space was already "Arab" and the café could represent a kind of "alternative space" to the polarization between Jewish space and Arab space.[52]

> Ballas makes no effort to erase, obscure or conceal these remains, and he can discern no contrariety between the Palestinian village and the *ma'abara*. (…) the *ma'abara*'s space can comprehend the former existence of what stood there before, of the Arab space and the Palestinian village that were violently eradicated, for this historical Arab presence does not threaten the new space.[53]

---

[50] Hanan Hever, "Lo banu min ha-yam: kavim le-giyografia sifrutit mizraḥit", *Teoria u-vikoret* 16/16 (2000): 190 [Hebrew].

[51] Trevisan Semi has recently demonstrated the impact of such a discourse by sionist narrative and practice in the case of Moroccan Jews in Israel. The scholar focuses on two main points: on one hand, she considers the steps taken by Zionism in order to deny and erase the culture of origin of *mizraḥim*; on the other hand, she articulates the question of "hégémonisation du fait juif" either as a consequence or a possible drift of the process of negation of the socio-cultural context of origin. See, Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *Porosité des frontières et le contexte oublié: quelques réflexions à partir d'une recherche sur « l'absence » des juifs au Maroc*, paper presented at the international conference *Les judaïsmes: une socio-anthropologie de la diversité religieuse et culturelle*, Toulouse 26-29 October 2010, http://www.akadem.org/sommaire/parcours/module_9506.php (accessed 21/11/2011).

[52] In this sense, it could be possible to interpret the café in the *ma'abarah* through the prism of "third space" as elaborated by Homi Bhabha, thus enhancing its role of "alternative space" between Zionist space and Arab space.

[53] Hanan Hever, "We Have Not Arrived from the Sea: a Mizrahi Literary Geography", *Social Identities* 10/1 (2004): 48.

As a result of this vision, Ballas embodies in the novel the description of the remains of a Palestinian house that was used, after 1948 war, as an office for the employment bureau.

> A few hundred metres away from the shack on the east side of the road heading towards *ma'abarah*, there was a low stone house with arches. It was the employment office, surrounded by an unstable wall, bushes and a pile of stones. It had once been a large house until one day during the war it was reduced to just one small room. The room had two windows, the one facing the forecourt was dotted with rocks and thorns and crisscrossed with barbed wire. It was closed from the inside and the thick roller shutter was lifted half way up, just enough to see the employee inside. The second window faced a vegetable plot but was blocked by a grey block of cement. If you stood in the forecourt of the stone house, the road stretched out in a straight line and glistened from behind the rocky and thorny landscape. In the opposite direction, a field full of vegetables dominated the landscape, it belongs to the nearby *moshav*, their red roofs visible across the carpet of swaying vegetables.[54]

In a context perceived as hostile to them, new immigrants felt the need for a place that could make them feel "at home" and where they could finally develop a "sense of place" and a sense of belonging. It is worth noting that this need permeated also the religious sphere, as it is witnessed by the acts and practices of cult adopted by North African Jews in the area of *ma'abarot* and new development towns.[55]

Narrative place of exile: between issues of levantinism and gender

Commenting on Yitzhak Gormezano Goren's novel *Kayẓ Alexandroni*[56] (*An Alexandrian Summer*) (1978), Ghershon Shaked maintained that the novel was "Another nostalgic-folkloristic novel (…) Alexandria is for Goren what

---

[54] Ballas, *Ha-ma'abarah*, 169.

[55] For a discussion of the topic see, Eyal Ben-Ari and Yoram Bilu, "Saints' Sanctuaries in Israeli Development Towns. On a Mechanism of Urban Transformation", in *Grasping Land. Space and Place in Contemporary Israeli Discourse and Experience*, eds. Eyal Ben-Ari and Yoram Bilu, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 61-83; Yoram Bilu, "Reconfigurer le sacré: le culte des saints juifs marocains en Israël", *Archives Juives* 38/2 (2005): 103-123; Haim Yacobi, "From State-Imposed Urban Planning to Israeli Diasporic Place. The Case of Netivot and the Grave of Baba Sali", in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, eds. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt and Alexandra Nocke, (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 63-80; Doron Bar, "Mizrahim and the Development of Sacred Space in the State of Israel, 1948-1968", *Modern Jewish Studies* 8/3 (2009): 267-285.

[56] Yitzhak Gormezano Goren is an Israeli author of Egyptian origin. For a discussion see: Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Israele come diaspora ed Egitto come centro nella trilogia alessandrina di Y. Gormezano Goren", in *Il mio cuore è a Oriente, Studi in onore di Maria Luisa Mayer*, eds. Francesco Aspesi, Vermondo Brugnatelli, Anna Linda Callow and Claudia Rosenzweig, (Milano, 2008), 759-769.

Aleppo is for Shamosh. Although his literary technique is more complex and interesting, here too the standard Zionist narrative is set against a secret wish to return to the native land."[57]

In her essay on Gormezano Goren's works, termed as "Alexandrian trilogy,"[58] Emanuela Trevisan Semi considers the experience of *ma'abarah* lived by the author and his family who emigrated from Egypt to Israel when he was ten years old. In *Ba-derekh la-iẓtadion* (*The path to the Stadium*) (2003), defined by Trevisan Semi as "a kind of biography of the father and an autobiography of the author disguised by the author's freedom of inventing," for Robi, the son, the time of *ma'abarah* represents,

> the golden time of infancy and adolescence because, even if they were without electricity, water, and *comforts*, to Robi, a ten years old boy, the *ma'abarah* signified the freedom to run about in the fields, discovering trees and nature. As a matter of fact, Gormezano made a film from this experience, and the opening scene shows seven couples dancing a tango in a shack to the music of Julio Iglesias (…) Indeed Gormezano, with a fine sense of humour, delightfully describes the Egyptian immigrants, filled with joy of living, that they managed to create a 'middle-class lifestyle in the shack', despite the hostile harsh conditions.[59]

Some important elements can be highlighted in this description of *ma'abarah*: a stinging irony, a will of not resigning oneself to present conditions, a sense of defiance in the struggle to recreate that particular Levantine world left behind in Egypt, at least physically speaking. In addition to this, Ronit Matalon provides the Levantine experience of *ma'abarah* with further nuances, as she describes it in her novel *Ze im ha-panim eleynu* (*The One Facing Us. A Novel*) (1995).[60]

Particularly striking is the comparison between the two figures, the father and the mother, and, in a broader sense, the contrast between the masculine and the feminine. Father and mother, man and woman, living the immigration experience in general and yet particularly that of *ma'abarah* in a completely different way. It might be argued that a gender difference could be identified in their approach to the same experience.

The father is represented as the symbol of the Levantine world, a complex universe that escapes definition but nevertheless evokes language and culture crossings, besides the unique middle-class lifestyle of the Jewish community in

---

[57] Shaked, *Modern Hebrew Fiction*, 185.

[58] Trevisan Semi refers to *Kayẓ Alexandroni* (1978); *Blanche* (1986) and *Ba-derekh la-iẓtadion* (2003).

[59] Trevisan Semi, "Israele come diaspora ed Egitto come centro nella trilogia alessandrina di Y. Gormezano Goren," 766-767.

[60] Ronit Matalon was born in Gane' Tikvah (Israel) to a family of Egyptian descent. For a discussion of the novel's themes see: Itzhac Levtov, "Kismah shel ha-opẓya ha-levantinit", *Davar*, April 28, 1995: 27-28 [Hebrew].

Egypt.[61] In those years, all immigrants arriving to Israel experienced a sense of displacement that took on a particular connotation in the case of the Egyptian community, as Hochberg points out, as they left the old home, which was never a homeland but was home (Egypt), for the new homeland, which was never home (Israel).[62]

> He (the father) had come to Israel grudgingly, following Mother, who had followed Uncle Moise and Edouard and Aunt Marcelle and Nona Fortuna, who, in turn, had not been thrilled about coming but had accepted it. They stuck him on Uncle Moise's kibbutz, where he was supposed to work in the fields. Within a week, though, he went back to wearing his suits and raw silk handkerchiefs. He wanted to be the kibbutz secretary or something like it.
> "You haven't even begun to understand how the place works," Uncle Moise said. "What's the big hurry?"
> "I'm not interested in understanding," Father answered.
> He moved to the city, leaving Mother behind. She didn't hear from him for a year. She darned the kibbutz members' socks until her eyes nearly fell out and downed meal after meal of beans and rice. "If you'd shot those things from a rifle, they'd have hit the wall and bounced right back," she said.
> He reappeared one day out of the blue, bringing gleaming ripe mangoes, fine soap, marzipan, and a yellow fox stole with a pointy nose and erect triangular ears.
> "Where am I supposed to wear this?" she asked. "To the dining hall?"
> "We're leaving," Father said. He had found a place.
> Uncle Moise was sceptical. "Just what kind of place?"
> Father explained at great length, in flawless Hebrew. For three months he had devoted himself to learning the language. He had devoured the Bible and the newspapers and now spewed forth the Hebrew that would one day fill his political pamphlets, a mixture of low journalese, clichés couched in biblical syntax, and verses from the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah.[63]

Feeling deprived of her Levantine identity and forced to engage with a new one in order to survive, the mother clings to the house, where she can somehow recreate her world and master it as a "queen," even if it is only a shack:

> He took them to a *ma'abarah*, a tent camp for immigrants. Within two weeks, theirs was a "model tent." To Father's astonishment Mother

[61] On the levantine question see the illuminating essay of Gil Hochberg, " 'Permanent Immigration': Jacqueline Kahanoff, Ronit Matalon, and the Impetus of Levantinism", *Boundary 2* 31/2 (2004): 219-243.
[62] Ibid., 229.
[63] Ronit Matalon, *The One Facing Us. A Novel* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998): 170-171.

> hung bright curtains, arranged flowerpots, sewed her own lamp shades, and weeded, hoed, and planted, taming the surrounding plot of earth and threatening "the bastards who throw their garbage everywhere."
> "It's only a tent, Inès," he said, trying to reason with her.
> She did not want to hear. "It may be a tent, but for the moment it's our home."[64]

Conclusions

Not long ago, I was given a yellowish copy of Sami Michael's novel *Shavim ve-shavim yoter*, a copy found in a used books flea market in Tel Aviv. In the first page, I discovered a hand written dedication in Hebrew:

> "June 1978
> To Shlomo, this book describes well what we also went through. I hope you will find the time to read it and will enjoy it, Menashe and Bina."

In a nutshell, this dedication embodies the reason for choosing Literature as a source for unravelling history, with a specific emphasis on a "first person" perspective, the very title Ballas choose for his autobiography. Like Menashe and his friend Shlomo, many others will also identify themselves in the writings of Ballas, Michael, Amir and the many other authors that succeeded in conveying the experience of *ma'abarah* with richness of nuances, tones, and perspectives.
Indeed, the richness of nuances, viewpoints, and insights characterising the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah*, earns the right of place it inside and not on the margins of the canon of Israeli literature. Allowing us, as readers, the opportunity to become familiar with the experience of mass immigration and life in *ma'abarot*, this literature allows us a closer look at the cultural, social, and religious traditions that formed the common heritage of entire communities, a heritage that struggled to survive once transplanted in a different context.
It could be certainly inferred that the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* portrays history as pictured from the point of view of "the other," the history of State building and nation building seen from the perspective of the non-hegemonic group. Furthermore, it embodies the history of a glorious past lived in diaspora and ended up wrapped in a cloud of DDT, as symbolised, in Michael's novel, by the son that watches helplessly his father's decline.
It is worth noting that history pictured from the point of view of "the other" is a recurring theme in Ballas's works, such as *Ve-hu aḥer* (*He is Different*) (1991) or the short novel *Iya* in *Otot Stav* (*Signs of Autumn*) (1992), where the author describes the Jews leaving Iraq from the perspective of a Muslim housemaid.

---

[64] Ibid., 171.

As a final remark, I would argue that this reflection on *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* belongs to the stream of postcolonial studies, and in particular of subaltern studies that aim at providing readers with what Edward Said defined an "integrative knowledge," capable of filling in the gaps of a history portrayed by the hegemonic group.[65]

Indeed, this remark open a wider field of research in which it would be worth comparing the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* and other "subaltern" literatures in the world, trying to point out what is specific (or not) to Israel.

It could be discussed, for instance, if Ballas's novel might be ascribed to what Barbara Harlow defines as "Resistance Literature," but the context in which this literature developed (the movements of national liberation in the so called "Third World") seems not to encourage such ascription.[66] The *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* has certainly given voice to the humiliation suffered by the Mizrahim and have somehow claimed the existence and value of the historical, social and cultural past of the so-called *edot ha-Mizraḥ* (Eastern communities). However, it did not this calling for the "destruction" of what was certainly perceived as the dominant component of the company (in this case the Ashkenazi one), as it is found in other examples of "Resistance Literature."[67] It could also enrich the discussion to draw a line of comparison between the *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* and the works written by immigrants to Europe in the 1950's and 1960's. Albert Memmi and Franz Fanon represent but two essential examples. Nonetheless, this reflection would lead us beyond the aim of this essay and should instead deserve a further elaboration of its own.

In the frame of Israeli cultural context, I would maintain that *sifrut ha-ma'abarah* represents an "integrative knowledge," able to fill in the gaps of a history made by the hegemonic European Ashkenazi group and dovetails with the contribution of the "new historians" to the revision of Israeli historiography. As recently shown by Trevisan Semi, history pictured from the point of view of "the other" has proved to be an interesting perspective when interpreting also the history of Moroccan Jews.[68] Amongst others, it has the advantage of including a plurality of voices otherwise left at the margins of a canon not only literary.

In this respect, is undoubted that the appeal towards the emergence in Israeli literature of what could be termed as "*Mizraḥi* geographical-literary coordinates" is, on one hand, a call to bring back to the core of Israeli literature those works that have been kept for a long time at its margins, and

---

65 See the entry "Subaltern Studies", by Alessandra Di Maio in: http://www.culturalstudies.it/dizionario/lemmi/subaltern_studies.html, accessed 04/10/2011.

66 Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, Methuen, New York, 1987.

67 Ibid., 30.

68 Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Double Trauma and Manifold Narratives: Jews' and Muslims' Representations of the Departure of Moroccan Jews in the 1950s and 1960s", *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9/1 (2010): 107-125.

on the other, a call to acknowledge, without hesitation, the world they come from, the Arab world.

Piera Rossetto first graduated in "Lingue e Culture dell'Eurasia e del Mediterraneo" at Ca' Foscari University in 2008, with a research on the history of the Jewish community of Baghdad between the 1920's and the 1950's and a translation from Hebrew of Sami Michael's novel "Storm among the palm trees." In 2011, she obtained her second level degree in "Asia Meridionale e Occidentale: Lingue, Culture e Istituzioni" at Ca' Foscari University with a research on mass immigration to Israel from Arab countries between the 1940's and 1960's and a particular focus on Transit camp literature (*Sifrut ha-ma-abarah*). She is currently PhD candidate at the same university with a research on Libyan Jewish Diaspora (1948-67) and enrolled in a doctoral co-tutorship with EHESS (Université Toulouse II – Le Mirail).

How to quote this article:
Piera Rossetto, *Space of Transit, Place of Memory: Ma'abarah and Literary Landscapes of Arab Jews*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n. 4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=315

Memories, Myths and Representations of a Contested Land

by *Aide Esu*

Abstract
Israel and Palestine, over the course of their historical conflict, have created a complex patchwork of memory narratives dealing with different representations of the same landscape. The article examines how the two peoples have elaborated their narratives of national identity by practicing a pre-modern repertoire to shape a modern identity, and by knitting together their collective, multiple visions of the land. Israelis and Palestinians have used space as a temporal-spatial tool to practice the remembering of lost land and to elaborate an imaginative geography. Attention is focused on the relations created by the process of dreaming/imagining space, and on the intricacies, denials, oblivion and ambivalence related to memory construction.

Introduction

Throughout the endless conflict, Israelis and Palestinians have created different memory narrations, sewing a complex patchwork by re-examining and absorbing the past of "a land of many stories."[1] The high-handed territory narratives of the three monotheistic religions hold strong idealistic and religious connotations inspiring political ambitions and popular memories. This article analyses how Israelis and Palestinians relate their different representations of the same place by focusing on different narratives and multiple visions of territory. In this land, probably more than any other, space and memory are intrinsically bound together. Space is a catalyst for the survival of memory,[2] and, being subject to continuous transformations, exacerbate the sense of belonging and identity. Israel and Palestine, in their two different visions, are mental laboratories in Nora's sense of memory: "the places of memory (are) those in which memory is elaborated."[3]
The concept of *mythscape* introduced by Bell[4] clarifies the understanding of collective memory intricacies for Israelis and Palestinians. The *mythscape* is a temporal-spatial dimension, a battlefield for the control of memory and

[1] Edward Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*, (New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 2001), 152.
[2] Joëlle Bahloul, *The Architecture of Memory: A Jewish-Muslim Household in Colonial Algeria 1939-1962*, (Cambridge: Editions de la Maison de Sciences de l'Homme and Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom of Places*, (Alburquerque: University of New Mexixo Press, 1996).
[3] Pierre Nora, (sous la direction), *Les lieux de mémoire*, (Paris: Gallimard,1984), X.
[4] Daniel Bell, "On Memory, mythology, and national identity", *The British Journal of Sociology* 54/1(March 2003): 63-81.

shaping myths. In time, memory is subject to continuous elaboration, during which it is debated, forged, transmitted, reconstructed and questioned, proceeding to a deep reconstructive praxis.[5] In an intractable conflict like the Israeli-Palestinian one, a culture of conflict and a psychological repertoire of conflict have developed. This repertoire includes ethos, emotional orientation and collective memory, which all sustain and reinforce the conflict.[6] My purpose is to focus attention on both narratives adopting Bar-Tal's view: "Israeli society represents a mirror image of the Arab societies, particularly of the Palestinian society (…) both societies shared beliefs and mutually held social representations."[7]

The case of the Israeli and Palestinian memories raises many questions; however, I wish to limit the discussion to the relationship between dreamt/imagined space in the Diasporas memories, and the entanglements related to loss and claims of return. In this case, we definitely observe a crucible of meanings and practices of land conflicts, involving efforts to legitimate acts of space appropriation. Meron Benvenisti opens the introduction of his book, *Sacred Landscape*, by quoting Simon Shama: "landscape is the work of the mind.... its scenario is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers and rocks [...]. Jewish space exists on a different planet, totally separate from the Arab landscape. Only those who have experienced the dichotomous environments of Sarajevo, Beirut or Belfast can truly comprehend the phenomenon of white patches on the mental maps carried around in the heads of Jews and Arabs of Eretz Israel and Palestine, which cover the habitat of the other."[8] Benvenisti's quotation focuses on the crucial points and the meanings related to geography and memory in Israel and Palestine. I wish to stress the idea of Israel and Palestine as "different planets", where the two peoples extend and elevate their identity narratives, and knit collective memory referring to the conflicting intricacies of the same space. Ethnic and nationalism studies (Smith, Anderson, Hobsbawm, Gellner) have suggested that space, land and territory are core narratives nurtured through remembering policies to strengthen identity and belonging. Israelis and Palestinians are certainly no exception to this rule. Space is the master narrative in the background, providing national myths to foster modern identities assuming a pre-modern repertoire; they "tell a history to clarify the present through the light of the past."[9] Assmann's assessment reveals the entanglements of past, present and imagined future. The time line does not follow a unified, progressive chronology. A temporal dialogue keeps memory

---

[5] Jan Assmann, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis. Shrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hockkulturen*, (München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Oscar Beck, 1992), 17.

[6] Daniel Bar-Tal, "Societal beliefs in times of intractable conflict: The Israeli case", *International Journal of Conflict Management* 9 (1998): 22-50.

[7] *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict. Representations of Arabs in Israeli Jewish Society*, eds. Daniel Bar-Tal and Yona Teichman, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), 14.

[8] Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred landscape*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 2000), 1.

[9] Assmann, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis,* 26.

alive, but the past is not simply "preserved." Rather, "tout semble indiquer qu'il ne se conserve pas, mais qu'on le reconstruit en partant du présent."[10]
In the identity narratives of Israelis and Palestinians, space is the imagined land. Looking at the spatial dialectics, firstly we observe how the results of the 1948 war dramatically changed the relationship to the land. Political Zionism fulfils for "people without land", the Jews of the Diaspora, the dreamed-of homeland. However, it is a dream achieved with political ambiguity, which entails the negation/removal of the Palestinian people: "...in the mental maps carried by the young Jewish and their parents alike, the Arab communities were white patches – terra incognita."[11] The uprooting from the homeland is the focal point of Palestinian national identity. This antithetical relationship to the land has had deep implications for the elaboration of their memory and for the elements that have nourished their narratives: ambivalence, rough living conditions, political arena, space, images and objects.[12] The exodus is a central problematic crux in Palestinian identity, since the dispersed people, the land, and the dream to return is the pivotal issue of national identity. As a people in exile, their narrative is entwined with those of the host countries, often identifying with "the other," and thus rising to spurious incoherent construction.[13] The 1967 defeat marked the failure of Nasser's Great Arab nation political agenda. The Palestinian disenchantment regarding the Arab nations opened up a new opportunity: the intelligentsia undertook to renew the national discourse and revive cultural identity.
The collective memory construction cannot be separated from cultural memory. Regular and recurrent social practices and ceremonies have nurtured shared experiences, create and maintain collective identity. In human history, no other people, more than the Jews of the Diaspora, have focused their secular existence on the narration of the "self." They have weaved the notion of "remember where we come from" into everyday life practices.[14] In the Seder ritual, the mandatory rule "preserve and remember" performs a liturgical memory activating a social imagination through spatial de-localization. The wish, "next year in Jerusalem," conveys the dream and the will put an end to the Diaspora. It is a *here* imagined in a time and space elsewhere. The "somewhere," Zion, takes political form in Herzl's utopia and like any other nationalist movement, projects the present into a future imaginary, which carries images, stories and legends.[15] Places were constantly re-evoked and integrated in the rituals maintaining alive the wish for a return.

---

[10] Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, (Paris: Albin Michel Ed., 1994),VIII.
[11] Benvenisti, *Sacred landscape*, 56.
[12] Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire,* XIX.
[13] Nassar Issam, "Reflections on Writing the History of Palestinian Identity", *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture* 8 (2002): 24-32, 26.
[14] The continuation of the Israelites communities in the Diaspora is fixed in the mandatory rule "Shamor ve-zakhor be-dibur eḥad", "preserve and remember", celebrated in the Saturday song Lekáh dodí. J. Assmann*, Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis.*
[15] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, (London: Duke University Press, 2004), 37.

Researchers have demonstrated how cultural memory rituals, in the case of Israel, have forged identity, and how they have supported the endurance of the Jews to survive during the Diaspora.[16] Nation, identity and religion, according to Heller, strengthen cultural memory and States have always used them as a powerful tool.[17] When, like the case of Israel, building and preserving cultural memory becomes a significant commitment for the State, accomplished through the mobilization of intellectuals, the ideological substance changes into mythological form. For the Jews of the Diaspora, even for the most geographically distant and dispersed communities, the confluence of collective memory into religious practices fortifies the ties with the motherland.

The Palestinians do not possess such a clear-cut narrative framework, despite that; their building process of collective memory testifies to a captivating, rich expressiveness. Al-Nakba is *par excellence*, the celebration of Palestinian collective memory, preceded twenty years before by the celebrations of Land Day that are the prelude to the Al-Nakba remembrance lost land. Land Day is crucial for the Palestinians of Israel, that massive social protest thrusting into the limelight of the Israel political arena the infringement of their rights. This later became "a Palestinian-Israeli civil national day of commemoration and a day of identification with Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, to be marked by yearly demonstrations and general strikes."[18] The protesters overcome the traditional passiveness springing on the Palestinian communities peaceful political action, fertilizing the Palestinian political arena for the celebration of the lost homeland.

The institutional celebrations of Al-Nakba are truly recent; they became popular with the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary and they have had a low impact because of the wide dispersion of the refugees. The limited budget and the resources invested left room primarily for individual memories and oral narrations. All generations were called to contribute to narration by activating a national inter-generational live archive. For the dispersed nation, popular culture is the medium entrusted to unify national identity. Songs and poetry evoke and celebrate the idea of a *lost paradise*; the hopeless condition of the refugee prefigures the promise of a triumphant return. Over time, the poetry of Mahmud Darwish has been crucial for founding and preserving collective memory. His prolific poetry is the main voice reminding international public opinion of the rights of a dispersed nation. In a speechless national voice, Darwish's lyrics stimulated the awaking narratives of collective imagination, which condemn the uprooting and despoliation of the Palestinian people. Through his symbolic world, he expresses the hope for a life that deserves to be lived in the homeland. Recently, new technologies have been used to foster

---

[16] Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[17] Agnes Heller, "A tentative answer to the question: Has civil society cultural memory?", *Social Research* 68/4 (2001): 1031-1040, 1033.

[18] Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, *Palestinians: the making of a people*, (London: Free Press, 1993), 196.

a 'virtual' national unity. Al-Nakba web sites with their rich photographic documentation have helped to restore a sense of national physical unity, shaping a new memory body: "the imaginative geography."

Memory and Zionism: Building the National Identity

In the past decade, memory studies have flourished following a rediscovering of Maurice Halbwach's[19] writings and Pierre Nora's work on *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984). As Olick and Robbins have pointed out, the rising interest comes from a multiculturalism that considers mainstreaming historiography as a source of cultural domination.[20] The intellectual environment opened up a space for a counter-memory to challenge the dominant discourse,[21] impacting Israeli academics, particularly on the topic of the Zionist narrative memory.[22] According to Michel Feige, studies on memory are articulated in three cycles corresponding to the most significant moments of Israel's history. The first corresponds to the period of state building. The collective memory is shaped by drawing from the Diaspora experience in which Jews have strengthened the spirit of national greatness until the return to the land of their fathers. It is, therefore, an exceptionally long path that Michel Feige[23] defines as being soaked with sacrifice and heroism. Within this framework, the Zionist narrative reaches its zenith in the period from the British Mandate to the early years of State formation. The hegemonic narrative, created, maintained and reproduced, was accepted as objective, an absolute truth. Any pioneer, *sabra*, facing the hardships of everyday life with dedication and spirit of sacrifice to build the nation, embodies the national collective memory. The *sabra* represents the ideal-type of a new man. He transformed the space with dedication and courage. He "*makes the desert bloom,*" strengthening the ownership of the land, He "Zionised" the land, a perfect example of farming to be followed by the Palestinian *fellah*. Spirit of sacrifice and a sense of absolute truth were the pillars for the new State. The *sabra* established political leaderships, and his loyalty, constantly, feeds the base of the Zionist narrative.[24] In his research on the myth of Masada, Nachman Ben-Yehuda[25] deconstructs

---

[19] Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.

[20] Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From Collective Memory to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices", *Annual Review of Sociology* 24(1998): 105–140, 108.

[21] Ibid., 126.

[22] Israeli Studies published in summer 2003 an issue dedicated to collective memory.

[23] Michel Feige, "Introduction: Rethinking Israeli Memory and Identity", *Israel Studies* 7/6 (Summer 2002): V-XIV, VI.

[24] Yael Zerubavel, "The "Mythological Sabra" and Jewish Past: Trauma Memory, and Contested Identities", *Israel Studies* 7/2 (Summer, 2002): 115-143.

[25] To withstand the siege of the Romans guided by General Flavius, Eleazar ben Jair, the Masada commander decide on a collective suicide, as an extreme act, to defend the fortress. The myth of Masada has been impressed in the Israeli consciousness as a symbol of resistance.

the narrative, showing how the story of the defeat has been transformed into the legend of national patriotism through different media products: rewriting textbooks, creating children's literature and developing media materials and tourist propaganda. The myth of Masada deploys a narrative transformation in which death and defeat are reconfigured according to Israeli nationalist ideology.

Social sciences contributed to the State building through total acquiescence and so the institutionalization of sociology and State consolidation has several convergences.[26] Social sciences have played a key role in the construction of social reality and the Zionist consensus. Despite the fact that they are disciplines mastering methodologies and paradigms useful in highlighting the complexity of nation building entirely done by migrants, the sociologists were not immune, according to Kimmerling's severe criticism, to subjectivity and distortion of reality. The master narration of statist Zionism, the moral, symbolic and material *unicum*, is perfectly coherent with the Parsonian social system paradigm, which depict society as an integral entity. For the so-called "Jerusalem School of Sociology", strongly influenced by Eisenstadt, the main concern of social research was "the integration (or indeed assimilation) of "new immigrants" into Israeli society. It was assumed that the immigrants should shed their traditional identity and that once they did so, they would be absorbed as equals in Israeli society."[27] This way of looking at the social reality was instrumental in building the myth of the Zionist State and the internal dominant hegemonies.

The second cycle takes place in the transition period of post-Zionism with the decline of the pioneer generation and the growing new waves of '*aliyah* out of the pioneers' world. Nevertheless, the main narrative was strengthened by inventing new places of remembrance, like the kibbutz museums charged with portraying the epic Zionism conquests, and enhancing the narrative with media materials and historical texts. The year 1977, following the first electoral defeat of the Labour party since 1948, marked a turnaround. Michael Feige[28] defines it as a break with the hegemony of the Zionist narrative. A new generation of social scientists, better known as the revisionist, historians and sociologists opened a review and a critical debate about the "accepted truth" of the founding myths. They took a step back from the one-sided accounts and integrated the pioneers' oral memoirs with the documented archival materials. The flourishing inquiries broke with past narration and opened a new heuristic to understand the social and cultural construction of Israeli identity. They

---

Each year the recruits climb onto the fortress top to take the oath: "*Masada shall never fall again*." Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

[26] Kimmerling Baruch, "Sociology, Ideology, and Nation-Building: The Palestinians and their meaning in Israeli Sociology", *American Sociological Review* 57 (1992): 446-460, 447.

[27] Uri Ram, *Israeli Nationalism. Social Conflicts and the Politics of Knowledge*, (London, New York: Routledge, 2011), 52.

[28] Feige, "Introduction: Rethinking Israeli Memory and Identity", VII.

introduced a new ontology, the Weberian opposition between the enchanted world (myth) and the disenchanted world (critical history).[29]

The third cycle marks a break with the main narrative and the revisionist discourse. The impacts of the Intifada tremendously affected the routines of everyday life. Fear and insecurity sped up the processing of memory, activating an endless re-framing process. Collective memory explored new domains, like the symbolic transliterations of Palestinian experience (Jeningrad) into negative connotations of the Holocaust memory. New places of memory proliferated through the construction of family memorials within bombed areas or through commemorations on the web. New social actors and practices reject State celebration hegemony and move the celebrations into the private sphere. Increasingly, memory took shape in private, shifting from collective to individual memory. The commemoration of private pain prevailed over the heroic public event, generating "memory fragmentation," a concept adopted by Vinitzky-Seroussi relating to the commemoration practices of Rabin's assassination. In this case, time and space are separated, and different narratives were created and performed by several actors.[30] The media, especially television, became the main mnemonic place for the broadcasting of historical reports, assassination investigations, public debate and people's reaction to assassination.[31] Tel Aviv and Jerusalem were an outstanding example of distinct mnemonic communities as the two main expressions of Israeli consciousness, the secular and the religious. This spatial distinction is reflected in the practices of commemoration (Tel Aviv) and counter-commemoration (Jerusalem) that were united by television as a new field of memory.[32]

Remembering and Practicing the Rhetoric of Return

Commemorations and memorials for fallen soldiers are one of the most common practices, from democratic systems to totalitarian regimes. No matter who are the fallen, or where the events have occurred, nations, especially new nations, need this kind of unifying tradition to be created. By tradition, we refer to Hobsbawm's and Range's definition, "a set of practice, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition."[33]

---

[29] Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory,* (Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[30] Vered Vinistzky-Seroussi, "Commemorating a difficult past: Yitzhak Rabin's memorials", *American Sociological Review* 67/1 (2002): 30-50, 32.

[31] Yorav Peri, "The media and collective memory of Yitzhak Rabin's remembrance", *Journal of Communication* 49/3 (1999):106-124, 119.

[32] Ibid., 122.

[33] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

The Kfar Etzion fallen defenders memories[34] represent an "invented tradition" in which a locality memory rises to a national myth. In mentioning the Kfar Etzion myth at this stage of our discussion we do not intend introduce a comparative scale between Israeli and Palestinian memory narrations; rather, the purpose in citing this case focuses on space-territory meanings and implications deployed in the outcomes of the 1967 war. The Kfar Etzion myth, in relation to the entanglements of loss and claims of return, reveals meaningful explanations of the "implicate relations", and the socio-spatial intricacies of conflict intractability. We might say that this myth represents a hinge between the state-building Zionist narrative and the Neo-Zionism. The rhetoric of loss and the right to return to the land of fathers is not simply a locality remembrance or a war-heroes memory. The discourse and the following political actions have transformed the myth into a driving force for the national strategy of "creating facts on the ground."[35] The return to Kfar Etzion transcends the resettlement in the symbolic locality. The settlement project foresees expansion into the whole West Bank, through ground action and symbolic achievements to improve the sacred belonging to the Holy land, like renaming the West Bank as Samaria and Judea. Thus, the orphans of Kfar Etzion pioneered the settlement process, challenging "themes, both cultural and religious, that have broad resonance within Israel."[36]

The kibbutzim orphans played a relevant role in the public sphere of the new born State, being at the core of social practices relating to dispossession, expulsion, loss and the right to be back in the sacred land. Remembering is a way to fulfil and legitimise the resettlement in the Holy land. What is relevant in terms of our scrutiny of space as a temporal-spatial tool to elaborate national narrative is the pivotal role played by the orphans in the rise of new meanings related to space. The Kfar Etzion orphans and, later, the Gush Emunim, seized the opportunity to appropriate and renew the original pioneering ethos by acting out an aggressive display of settlement planning and fulfilling the messianic dream. What is relevant in terms of political and religious contamination discourse is that the settlement policies are mainstream Zionism, in the sense underpin by Kimmerling, "when the frontier was reopened to Jewish settlement, the settlers inherited the role of the pioneer, and Gush Emunim was the entire Zionism: nationalist, destructive, and

[34] On 12th and 13th May 1948 the kibbutzim of the 4 religious kibbutz (Kfar Etzion built in 1943, Maasout Yitzchak built in 1945, Ein Tzurim built in 1946 and Revadim built in 1947) fought against the Arab Legion. 163 adults and 50 children lived in the 4 kibbutz located half way between the holy cities of Hebron and Jerusalem. Shortly before the battle the women and children were evacuated to Jerusalem.

[35] Ram, *Israeli Nationalism. Social and the Politics of Knowledge*, 36.

[36] Robert H. Mnookin and Ehud Eiran, "Discord 'Behind the Table': The Internal Conflict Among Israeli Jews Concerning the Future of Settlements in the West Bank and Gaza", *Journal of Dispute Resolution* 11 (2005): 1-34, 31.

ethnocentric, completely ignoring the rights of another community settled in the same land."[37]

Lets me summarize some key questions. The extraordinary chronology of the Kfar Etzion battle and the State declaration made it a perfect myth of origin for the new nation; an ideal narrative setting for the memory of the 1948 war to preserve and celebrate heroism and martyrdom.[38] The orphans of the fallen combatants channelled the epic veterans memory, their infancy was committed to celebrating the lost land, forming a tight link between the celebration of loss and the desire for future redemption. Between 1948 and 1967, they were the pioneers of a *memory policy,* playing a public role in commemorative events in order to build up a common secular past of the Zionist State and a secular myth of return.[39] Also, a *memory community*[40] was created where the orphans of Kfar Etzion were in charge of keeping the memories alive through various media, retelling the constitutive narration of the fallen fathers and reaffirming the belonging to historical identity. They embody the symbolic meaning of *sabra* sacrifices (the Etzion Bloc lacked water and had poor soil) and their claims and wishes to be re-established in the area. The Six Day War outcomes make the dream a tangible reality. The orphans driving force come from twenty years of crafted symbolism; Kfar Etzion resettlement come three months after the end of the war. They pressured the Government to put an end to the orphans' exile. "The Labour movement adopted the Etzion Bloc and transformed it into one of those "security settlements" that, unlike "political settlements", were embraced by the consensus and profited from the generous public funding that derived from its status."[41] The orphans' wish to restore the former glory came to reality; the settlement was rebuilt on the old kibbutz ruins.[42] Being back at the four kibbutzim locations meant for the orphans of Kfar Etzion, reunifying the Zionist narrative time-space; the guardians of the Zionist memory were back home, in the land of their fathers, and the original secular myth of return promptly turned to redemption discourse. The myth of return slipped into religious contamination and opened up to the meta-narrative of the messianic return to Zion. A new epic began. They opened a new period of Neo-Zionism, grounded in religious

---

[37] Baruch Kimmerling, "Religion, Nationalism and Democracy in Israel", *Constellations* 6/3 (1999): 339-363, 356.

[38] On May 14th 1948, during the State of Israel declaration, Ben Gurion commemorated the fallen fighters: "the people of Jerusalem owe a debt of thanks ….first of all to those who fell at Kfar Etzion. Their sacrifice saved Jerusalem more than the entire war effort". In David Ohana, "Kfar Etzion: The Community of Memory and the Myth of Return", *Israel Studies* 7/2 (2002): 145-174, 148.

[39] Ohana, "Kfar Etzion: The Community of Memory and the Myth of Return", 145.

[40] Olick and Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From Collective Memory to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," 122.

[41] Akiva Eldar and Idith Zetal, *Lords of the Land: The War over Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-2007*, (New York: Nations Books, 1997) 37.

[42] Yossi Katz and John C. Lehr, "Symbolism and Landscape: The Etzion Bloc in the Judean Mountains", *Middle East Studies* 31/4 (1995): 730-740.

fundamentalism, to sanctify the land of Israel and raise "sharpening divisions between the religious and secular segments of Israeli society."[43] Hanan Porat, the orphans' leader who had easily succeeded in the resettlement strategy, facilitated the Rabbi Levinger action in Hebron to open the doors to religious settlement based on the biblical claim of Eretz Yisrael.[44]

Transforming the Loss into a Living Locality

People with no land have not honour
(*Palestinian proverb*)

The 1948 war is for Palestinians the Al-Nakba,[45] or the catastrophe that brought about exile and the loss of the homeland. It is the beginning of their long journey into the imagined or dreamt land, the focal point of their national identity and collective memory. The Al-Nakba is a historical marker that defines the *before* and the *after* of the tragedy, "a remembrance of the exodus also fluctuates between the difficulty of representing the event oneself, and the exemplarity of one's experience"[46] For Palestinian historiography, it represents: "(the) loss of the homeland, the disintegration of a society, the frustration of national aspirations, and the beginning of a nasty process of cultural destruction."[47]

Al-Nakba is a memory framework, the master narration that frames the interrupted nation-building process, ruling class dissolution and the disintegration of urban life. According to Palestinian historians, the missing process of crafting modern national identity was caused by the 1948 war. Of this original nationalism, so radically quashed, there survived a coexistence of different loyalties that variously have contributed to form contemporary

---

[43] *The Shaping of Israeli Identity, Myth, Memory and Trauma*, eds. Robert Wistrich and David Ohana, (London: Frank Cass, 1995), XI.

[44] Israeli settlers number 311,431 located in the West Bank and 190,425 in East Jerusalem (B'Tselem, 2011). Manookin and Eiran estimate that the settlers are made up of three groups: a quarter are religious nationalists whereas half of the total move to the settlement to improve the quality of life, motivated by generous government subsidies; the third group is made of ultra-orthodox Jews.

[45] The extent of the Palestinian exodus following the defeat in 1948 is still an object of discussion among historians. It is estimated that the Palestinians under British Protectorate numbered about 1,300,000 inhabitants. According to Arab sources, the population evacuated had been roughly between 700,000 and a million. For Israelis, it had totalled 520,000 persons. The British put the figure at between 600,000 and 760,000 (Kimmerling and Midgal, *Palestinians: the making of a people*, 2002, 185).

[46] Nadine Picaudou, "The Historiography of the 1948 Wars", *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*, (2008) SciencePo, Pdf Version http://www.massviolence.orgPdfVersion?id_article=143,4.

[47] Ahmad Sa'di, "Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakba as a Component of Palestinian Identity", I*srael Studies* 7/2 (2002): 175-198, 175.

Palestinian identity.[48] The uprooting from the homeland became the memory narration developing a collective imagination. In Palestinian Diaspora, national identity is a melting pot of complex social stratifications: refugees with international status as political refugees; minorities still living in Israel known as Arab-Israelis and citizens of Israel but, de facto, socially and politically alienated; the Palestinians who stayed in the West Bank under Jordanian law who were referred to as "the Jordanians", and those who stayed in the Gaza Strip under Egyptian law. For all of these "new identities" the lost land carries a rhetorical and unifying function, framing public and private discourses and shaping the refugees' new identity.

According to Picaudou, Palestinian reactions to Israeli counter-memory took a different path, following the emerging oral history paradigm. The pioneering work of Thompson in oral history shows different ways to tell the history. Oral history represents for Palestinian historians a way to bypass the absence of an archive, a challenge "for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry (…) it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place."[49] Since the end of 1970, Thompson's work influenced the first research on the Palestinian Diaspora refugees. A decade later oral history contributed to launch a challenging project – the re-making of inventories in towns and villages destroyed in 1948. Rochelle Davis collected, in ten years of field work, 120 village memorial books, a mnemonic archive of social history that records the "evidence that these villages existed and were more than just a place once on the map."[50]

In the Palestinian Diaspora individual memories and oral history are crucially involved in the remembering process. Every patriarch and matriarch kept the keys to their lost home and bear witness to the exodus story from Palestine. A mnemonic socialization is set up and the *humula* story is fed by the memory of concrete things[51] (the key) to strengthen the sense of belonging. The Al-Nakba generation tells the exodus to the youngest, they celebrate the lost land in order to strengthen the firm determination to return: "we teach them that Palestine exists, and we have to go back there. Even if this will happen in thousand years, we will carry on and on, generation after generation."[52]

---

48 Nassar Issam, "Reflections on Writing the History of Palestinian Identity", 28.

49 Paul R. Thompson, *The voice of the past: oral history*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

50 Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories, Geography of the displaced*, (Stanford: Standford University Press, 2010), XVII.

51 Assmann, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis. Shrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hockkulturen*, XVI.

52 Testimony by an old Palestinian man in the documentary *Identity* (2003), by E.Awad, A.Pizzalunga, A.Zimbelli, recorded in the refugee camps of Sabra, Chatila, Beddowi, Jerash, Beq'a, Tiro.

The loss and the exile are threats weaving the Palestinians' collective identity narration. The individual oral stories are assembled in a chorus of scattered voices; from the refugee camps dispersed in the Middle East to the Diaspora around the world, they tell the collective trauma of the lost homeland. Indeed, we may remark that the Israelis' collective memory is structured within the coherent frame of Zionism, while the Palestinian memory is a joint effort of a regressive reconstruction of fragmented voices. The trauma of the loss is "the vacuum" that carries with it different meanings. It is a collective memory constructed along a painful and contradictory path. For the generation who experienced the 1948 war, the relationship between memory and oblivion became the laboratory for making the collective subject; "the people of Palestine". Remembering the loss creates a community of experience that inspires the dream and the ambition of return. The nostalgia for the lost homeland is the lifeblood to cope with harsh everyday life in the refugee camps. Autobiographical and historical memories are built upon different layers in an endless dialogue of denials, repression, exaltation and oblivion; a relentless action that moves forward and backward in which biographical memory feeds the history of a people.[53] It took fifty years from the events of Al-Nakba to bring together all the individual stories and frame them in a common public awareness. Single experience, publicly remembered, is transformed into historical memory "extend[ing] the scope of these memories by incorporating information about the world that goes beyond one's own experience."[54] In the first official celebration, private memories became collective public memory. A stream of voices coursed into the pages of the daily newspaper al-Ayyam: "as if an entire generation had started to remember crucial events of its life and wanted to testify them openly in public."[55] It is a patchwork of autobiographical remembrance and historical accounts in which the burden of traumatic recollections and the inter-subjective experience produced a dissonant chorus composed of myriad voices: a collective outpouring that narrated the story of a nation.

Photography clearly plays a primary role in the villages' memories. Photos compensate the loss, a memory delay in time and space. Memory needs images to provide focus for the evidence of existence, to demonstrate a past society symbolically represented by the home key. Over time, the key embodies their state of mind, which unveils a complexity of meanings: sense of loss, the existence of an organized social life in the village, the dream of return, and the desire for a normal life.[56] Dubravka Ugrešič, referring to the former Yugoslavia conflict, says "refugees are divided in two categories: those with photos and

---

[53] Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.

[54] Robert A. Wilson, "Collective memory, group minds, and the extended mind thesis", *Cognitive Process*, (2005), DOI 10.1007/s10330-005-0012-z, 4.

[55] Rema Hammami, "Gender Nakba and Nation", in *Across the wall: narratives of Israeli-Palestinian history,* eds. Ilan Pappé and Jamil Hilal, (London: IB Tauris & Co*,* 2010), 235-268, 241.

[56] Sa'di, "Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakba as a Component of Palestinian Identity," 186.

those with none."[57] For all refugees around the world, photos provide a direct link to the past, an anchor to hang on to, a tangible remembrance to reflect the image of the self in time and space. Even when oblivion is imposed on memory, photography testifies that the past cannot be overwhelmed by deception or mystification. Still, it is also a past that re-evokes pain and suffering, fixes cruel images that cannot and do not wish to be remembered. Photographs do not only focus attention on pain, but for the Palestinians, it is photography that records their past in the lost homeland as a collecting of evidence of the existence of places cancelled by the "Judaisation of the land."[58] Photography is what certifies a past and helps to put together the fragments of a national identity scattered in the refugee camps of Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. Photographs bring not only testimony to the existence of villages and places, but record a past society in these places and testify to the destruction of social life. They provide evidence of how there was little social differentiation before Al-Nakba and how public life was dominated by the collective destiny of the Palestinians. Photographs create an emotional and cognitive space, weave pathos and knowledge, engender compassion, evoke pain and strengthen identity and belonging of the "one nation" in exile.

More recently the Nakba myth shows some interesting practises in the use of new media as a performing tool to process memory. The project Palestine Remembered matures in this context, transforming private remembrance into a public memory by making an exhaustive inventory of towns and villages destroyed in 1948. The *All that remains*, the first historical attempt by a Palestinian scholar to document the destroyed Palestinian villages, has inspired the project.[59] The web site Palestine Remembered, a virtual home built for friendly use, creates an environment that exhibits memory by using oral history, images, photographs, films and documentaries, with different degrees of reading complexity. This attempt to recreate a virtual nation through the use of new media represents a cyber-application of what Nassar, referring to Al-Nakba, has defined as the acceleration of the Palestinian character: "something much more complex than an old community and much more symbolic than a society (…) the Al-Nakba is not the end of an era but the beginning of a radical rhetoric turn."[60]

The Palestine Remembered project has collected the Al-Nakba survivors' memoirs, from 2003 to 2010, recording 530 interviews (2,531 hours of recording) from 291 different villages. The web site is designed as an interactive tool not only to stage the stories but also to allow virtual village tours with geographical-reference maps enriched by in-depth statistics (historical and contemporary), documents and photographs. It encourages visitors to be active by collecting information concerning the villages not yet registered and to update the website. The forgotten Palestine has c0me alive

[57] Ugrešič Dubravka, *Il museo della resa incondizionata*, (Milano: Bompiani, 2002), 21.
[58] Benvenisti, *Sacred landscape*, 200.
[59] Walid Khalidi, *All that remains*,(Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).
[60] Nassar Issam, "Reflections on Writing the History of Palestinian Identity," 165.

again, attesting to the existence of ruined villages, enabling the dispersed community to be virtually reunified and to overcome the Israeli ban on visiting the ruins. The web site shows a private memory in a public frame, in which the "neutrality" of the documents sometimes follows a blurred narrative frame. New technologies enable the young and the old alike to make virtual journeys into the lost land.[61] Electronic memorial sites of Al-Nakba with their rich photographical documentation restore a picture of physical unity. For a dispersed nation, the virtual reality of place may be a surrogate of identity.

The Imaginative Geography: Cancelling, Renaming and Remembering the "topòs"

> "…I discovered that the earth was fragile , and the sea light; I discovered that language and metaphor are not enough to provide a place for the place. The geographical part of History is stronger than the historical part of geography. Unable to find my place on earth, I tried to find it in History. And History cannot be reduce to a compensation for a lost geography". (*Mahmoud Darwish*)[62]

The imaginative geography engendered by electronic mnemonics reasserts the "implicate relations" between society and space and between Israelis and Palestinians. The socio-spatial intricacies of the Israeli and Palestine memories are the cornerstone of the intractability of this conflict, and, to use the words of Portugali, are the active player in the conflict. "...(S)patial dialectics were the process thought which Europe Jews were driven into an identity crisis when their (spatial) Ghetto wall disintegrated and thus became conscious of their nationalistic-political identity. And it is this process through which several decades later the Arabs in this country were forced into an identity crisis and became conscious of their Palestinian identity, once the Zionism have defined the boundaries of their future Jews State. It is also the process through which Israelis and Palestinians became engaged in implicate relations."[63]
Space is in continuous transformation, devastated by the forces of war or by the action of conflicting groups. Changing space is associated with the transformation of topography, not only to mark the acquisition of land but also to cancel memory and any possible record as a potential source of legitimacy. The practices of cartographic design are at the core of the institutional non-belligerent strategy of land acquisition. Possession of land is seen not only in terms of physical conquest but involves a more complex set of actions that legitimise ownership. The new-born Israeli State had invested huge resources in cartography and correlated sciences. Benvenisti, quoting Harley and Woodward, authors of the History of Cartography, stresses that:

---

[61] On the webpage www.alnakba.org 425 destroyed villages are registered. There is a description of what exists today and what used to be there, with photographic documentation.
[62] Mahmoud Darwish, "Mahmoud Darwish", *Boundary 2* 26/1 (1999): 81-83, 81.
[63] Juval Portugali, *The implicate relations. Society and Space in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, (Dortrecht, Netherlands: Kluver Academic Publisher, 1993), XIII.

"mapmaking was one of the most specialized weapons by which power could be gained, administered, given legitimacy and codified."[64] In June 1948, a group of nine academics, cartographers, archaeologists and geographers in the Israel Exploration Society (IES)[65] founded the Committee for the Designation of Place Names in the region of Negev. After ten years' work, they completed the Jewish map of Israel, generating military, political and symbolic claims to the Jewish people's legacy. The creation of a map, according to Benvenisti, was extremely significant, no less important than the building streets or the creation of new settlements. The making of the Jewish map engenders a process of *Judaisation* of the land."[66] "The mixing of authentic ancient names with synthetic, pseudo-biblical names was done, of course, to provide a basis for our rightful historical claims."[67] The adoption of place names with theological semantic references is inscribed in the praxis of Zionists' historical narration. It reconstructs a lineage of continuity and identification with antiquity. For the Jews of the Diaspora, the (biblical) landscape was "*the work of mind,*" constructed first in their minds and thereafter, following the return to Israel, transferred, adopted and modified according to their own needs and preferences.[68] Generations of Israelis and Palestinians in Israel have grown up without knowing that the new topography was the outcome of a reconstruction process.

Nationalistic narratives often refer to the "motherland" as a metaphor for the genealogical legacy to the homeland. Very often, women are viewed as the natural trustees for collective memory.[69] Palestinian collective memory policies stress women's role in creating memory bonds. The names of the destroyed villages are preserved by naming newly-born females with the village name. The names of the places enter into family genealogy, recreating indivisible connections between generations so that the lost land represents an ideal renaissance of the motherland. "Place possesses history and narrative. When place is gone, it is recovered in two ways: naming the daughter and telling a story."[70] Hence, little girls are at the same time narrative and embodiment of collective history, regenerating the force of the *humula,* or village solidarity. "The name of the original village replaced the name of the *humula*, and the relationship among persons who belonged to the same original village was

---

64 Benvenisti, *Sacred landscape*, 13.

65 The declared aim of IES that acted under the aegis of the Royal Geographical Society, was "to develop and to advance the study of the Land, its history, and pre-history, accentuating the settlement aspect and the socio-historical connection between the people of Israel and Eretz Israel" (Ibid.,12).

66 The classification made by Nurit Kliot marks 770 settlements in the area within the borders before June 1967 of which 350 have biblical names. Ibid., 34.

67 Ibid., 20.

68 Ibid., 7.

69 Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe,* (Cambridge Massachusetts and London England: Harvard University Press, Paperback, 2002).

70 Susan Slimovic, "The Gender of the Transposed Space", *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture, East Jerusalem* 9/4 (2002): 110-117, 115.

similar to that of *humula* solidarity. *Humula* did not disappear or weaken, but instead some of its functions were transferred to the wider kinship structure based on locality."[71]

Terra Incognita, the Implicate Relations

The intricacies of Israeli and Palestinian relations create, albeit with many distinctions in terms of power, use of force and geopolitical conflict enlargement, a process of remembrance useful to keep their identity alive as peoples. Memory narrations of Israelis and Palestinians are targeted on events built in the national constituency; they are expressed through cultural media in their most classical forms: poetry, literature, photography, documentaries and public discourse. The idea of otherness, the Palestinian or the Israeli, are always explicitly absent, but pervasively present in a kind of mute narration, projected, perceived and imagined, as a *white patch,* that permeates every story. The "other" is, in this context, the exact antithesis of a national self, strictly defined. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, otherness raises not only problems of identity, but also of "history and legitimacy."[72]
Both, Israelis and Palestinians, following different paths and historical times, were/are engaged in keeping the land alive. If the "*next year in Jerusalem*" is a liturgical memory revoked every year around the Jews Seder table all around the world, the Palestinian oral remembering rises as a secular symbolism. Thus, oral memory is a community of memory that processes images, voices, and data to conceptualize a new frame of memory. For a nation with *mobile borders*, the virtual destroyed Palestine became an "espace de représentation, c'est à dire l'espace vécu à travers les images et les symboles (…) C'est l'espace dominé, donc subi, qui tente de modifier et d'approprier l'imagination."[73]

Aide Esu teaches Sociology at the Political Science Faculty, since 2004 she coordinates an international co-operation project: The ***@gorà project,*** **an** interdisciplinary project between the University of Cagliari, the University of Tel Aviv and the University of Al Quds Jerusalem, aiming to reframe the concepts of "*reconciliation*" and "*co-existence*". She participates to several international conference (Jerusalem, London, Gotheborg, Budapest, Barcelona, Paris) presenting papers on the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

[71] Ibid., 114.
[72] Eds. Pappé and Hilal, *Across the wall: narratives of Israeli-Palestinian history,* 14.
[73] Henri Levebvre, *La production de l'espace*, (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1981), 49.

How to quote this article
Aide Esu, *Memories, myths and representations of a contested land*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n. 4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=316

Contested Narratives: Contemporary Debates on Mohammed V and the Moroccan Jews under the Vichy Regime[1]

by *Sophie Wagenhofer*

Abstract

This paper examines current debates on the fate of Moroccan Jews under the Vichy regime and the attitude of the sultan towards his Jewish subjects. Due to wide-ranging contributions by the media and via the internet, these debates are not confined to political or intellectual circles but also involve 'non-professionals'. My aim is to examine to what extent discussions about the Second World War are relevant in contemporary Morocco, to shed light on how established narratives are challenged by new questions, and to understand the meanings such debates have for the way Moroccans see and position themselves in contemporary Moroccan society.

1. Introduction

"There are no Jews in Morocco. There are only Moroccan subjects." This oft-quoted statement, attributed to Mohammed V, sultan from 1927 and Moroccan king between 1957 and 1961, has become legendary.[2] It represents the protective position of the sultan towards his Jewish subjects during the period of the Vichy regime and became a synonym for tolerance and the peaceful coexistence of Jews and Muslims in Morocco. However, under the influence of the Vichy government, which held power in North Africa from July 1940 to November 1942, two anti-Jewish laws were promulgated in Morocco. The first was signed on 31 October 1940, the second on 5 August 1941. The laws applied to all Moroccan Jews by faith as well as those who were defined as being Jewish by the racist standards of the National Socialist *Judenpolitik*, for example those who had at least three Jewish grandparents. The restrictions imposed by the two *dahirs* (decrees) primarily affected employment opportunities: the number of Jews working in certain professions was limited, while others became completely off-limits to Jews. The *dahir* of 1941 forced Jews, for example, to move back to the traditional Jewish quarters, the so-

[1] This article was written as part of the joint research project SFB 640 "Representations of Changing Social Order" at Humboldt University Berlin, financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG). If not otherwise indicated, translations from French, Hebrew and Arabic are mine.

[2] See for example 'Moroccan Jews pay homage to "protector"', *Ha'aretz*, 30 January 2005; '"L'éternelle reconnaissance" des juifs du Maroc envers Mohammed V', *La Gazette du Maroc*, 14 February 2005; Amale Samie, 'Etre juif au Maroc aujourd'hui', *Maroc Hebdo International*, 10 February 2005.

called *Mellah*. According to historian Michael Laskier, it is difficult to assess the impact of the laws and the degree of their implementation, though he does not doubt that the laws were at least partially applied.[3]

The image of Mohammed V as a protective ruler during the Second World War seems to be incontrovertible in Morocco. Even though the sultan himself put his seal under the *dahirs*, he is still remembered and idolized as someone who opposed the anti-Semitic laws of the Vichy regime. In historical research, this ambivalence has not been picked out as a central question so far. However, it is not the aim of this article to discuss this ambivalence in the sultan's behaviour towards his Jewish subjects from a historiographical perspective. Instead, I turn my attention to debates on the role of Mohammed V that are held outside the academic field in contemporary Morocco. Even though the Second World War is still a marginal issue in Moroccan academic research as well as in the Moroccan education system,[4] we can observe an increasing interest in the war and in the Vichy regime, in Muslim-Jewish relations and in the sultan's attitude towards the Moroccan Jews. Due to new media and online debates, the discussions are not confined to political or intellectual circles; rather, people of various backgrounds show their interest and express their opinions.

This paper describes how the persecution of Jews, which is widely considered to be a European issue, is remembered in Morocco and how this memory relates to contemporary discourses on identity. I intend to show how established narratives of the past are defended or called into question, and what particular arguments reveal with regard to a Moroccan self-image of today. By investigating Moroccan debates on the past, I seek to shed light on tendencies towards liberalisation and political change in Moroccan society, a continuing process since the late 1990s.[5]

2. History, Historiography, and the New Media

---

[3] See Michael Laskier, "Between Vichy Anti-Semitism and German Harassment: The Jews of North Africa during the Early 1940s"', *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991): 348–49. For concrete examples of such laws being applied see Mohammed Kenbib, *Juifs et musulmans au Maroc 1859–1948*, 1st ed. (Rabat: Publication de la faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, 1994), 607–610. See also David Cohen, "Ofen yiumah shel ha-teḥikah ha-anti-yehudit be-maroko be-tekufat mimshelet Vichy al-pi mismakhim ḥadashim mi-misrad ha-ḥuz ha-zorfati", *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Vol. II* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), 125-128.

[4] See Abdelmajid Benjelloun, "Maroc et la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale", in *Neue Forschungen zum Zweiten Weltkrieg,* ed. Jürgen Rohwer (Koblenz: Bernard & Graefe, 1990)*,* 310–12.

[5] See for example, Daniel Zisenwine, "From Hassan II to Muhammed VI: Plus ça change?", in *The Maghrib in the New Century,* eds. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 132-149; Bensadoun, Mickael, "The (Re)Fashioning of Moroccan National Identity", in Ibid., 13–35.

Agents of social groups who have until recently been marginalised now actively participate in debates on Moroccan national identity and on the remodelling of the process of political decision-making. Thus, various issues considered taboo for several decades, such as human rights abuses under the reign of Hassan II, are nowadays discussed by a broader public. However, this process also leads to new conflicts, as new voices challenge the established elites and their representations. The new media and party-independent magazines and newspapers become powerful tools in this struggle over meaning.

New media such as the internet open debates to people from various backgrounds and different countries, allowing them not only to share comments and questions with a wider public, but also to express criticism and introduce alternative perspectives. According to the Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy, who is researching the internet's impact on Arab society, '[it] has given a voice to the voiceless.' She stresses the internet's powerful ability to tackle issues that are considered taboo and to question established points of view.[6] Even though freedom of speech in Morocco has increased over the last decades, asking overtly critical questions - especially ones concerning the royal family - can still lead to severe consequences. The internet offers a way to express one's opinion anonymously and in a relatively censor-free space, thereby providing an opportunity for the emergence of new perspectives on established narratives and official historiography.[7] On the one hand this anonymity allows a researcher to get an insight into very open and free debates that one might not experience in face-to-face interview situations. On the other hand it is also a bone of contention. I myself was confronted with objections by historians who were sceptical of applying discourse analysis to debates held via internet platforms, chatrooms and blogs, as due to the anonymity of contributors no one can establish the identity of the speakers. However, especially in the case of Morocco and other states known for their limited freedom of speech, online debates should be and have been taken seriously and explored as part of broader discourses.[8] Of course, not all

---

[6] Mona Eltahawy, "Generation Facebook - How Blogs and Social Networking Sites are Changing the Arab World" (speech given at the Peace University in San José, Costa Rica, 25 September 2008) http://www.upeace.org/podcast/index.cfm, accessed 17 April 2012.

[7] According to the ONI testing results, internet access in Morocco is more open and liberal then in other Arab countries like Tunisia and Libya. However, some websites such as *Google Earth*, *Livejournal* or *YouTube* are temporarily blocked. The question of freedom of speech and censorship in the internet was recently widely discussed after the imprisonment of Fouad Mourtada in February 2008. The 26 year old blogger was sentenced to three years in prison for creating a false profile of the Moroccan prince Moulay Rashid on Facebook. For further information see the website of the *OpenNet Initiative,* www.opennet.net; See also Sami Ben Gharbia, "Morocco: Stop Internet censorship" (interview with Mohamed Drissi Bakhkhat), *globalvoicesonline.org*, 29. October 2007.

[8] On the development of the internet and internet practice in Morocco see, Ines Braune, *Aneignung des Globalen: Internet-Alltag in der arabischen Welt. Eine Fallstudie in Marokko,* (Bielefeld: transkript 2008). See also Mohamed Ibahrine and Bouziane Zaid, "Mapping Digital Media:

internet-based communication is oppositional and can be understood as a counter-public; rather, online media platforms are a space where different standpoints are encountered.[9] The internet allows its users not only consumption but production; everybody regardless of gender, age, or profession who has access to the internet is able to contribute to these debates.

Following media scholar Andreas Dörner, I understand popular culture as a relevant field of social and political practice and therefore I place popular culture and internet debates in focus for the analysis of negotiations of social norms and values.[10] Still, an objection ever and anon brought forward when it comes to an analysis of popular culture and discussions in new media is the 'non-professionalism' of the contributors; statements of non-historians in debates on the past are often not considered as serious and qualified. However, even in academic historical writing, the relevance of those narratives produced and promulgated by 'non-professionals' is taken into account. Paul Ricœur, for example, rejects the categorical distinction between history and memory. He argues that both the analysis offered by historians as well as the memory culture of individuals and social groups have to be understood as attempts at the reconstruction and interpretation of the past and to make sense in the present.[11] While Pierre Nora distinguishes between history and memory, he is yet stressing that 'the historian has become no longer a memory-individual but, in himself, a *lieu de mémoire*.'[12]
Even though 'history is a representation of the past' that is 'always problematic and incomplete,'[13] the '*legitimising role* of history is immense.'[14] As in many other societies, also in Morocco agents in political discourses often refer to academic knowledge in order to render their arguments 'true.'[15] The media play a crucial role in the diffusion of academic knowledge into various fields of the society –

Morocco", in *Mapping Digital Media,* eds. Marius Dragomir et al. (London: Open Society Foundations, May 2011).

[9] See for example Sarah Jurkiewicz, "Blogging as Counterpublic? The Lebanese and the Egyptian Blogosphere in Comparison", in *Social Dynamics 2.0: Researching Change in Times of Media Convergence,* eds. Nadja-Christina Schneider and Bettina Gräf (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2011).

[10] Andreas Dörner, "Respekt im Regenwald: Über Inszenierung und Aneignung von gesellschaftlichen Ordnungsmustern im Unterhaltungsfernsehen", in *Strategien der Visualisierung. Verbildlichung als Mittel politischer Kommunikation,* eds. Jens Hack and Herfried Münkler (Frankfurt: Campus, 2009).

[11] Paul Ricœur, *History, Memory, Forgetting,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[12] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", *Representations* 26 (1989): 18.

[13] Nora, "Between Memory and History," 8.

[14] Benjamin Zachariah, "1857 in the Nationalist Imagination", in *Uprisings of 1857: Perspectives and Peripheries*, ed. Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 2009), 112.

[15] With regard to the MENA region such a process has been described, for example, by Andrea Fischer-Tahir, "'… to exterminate the Kurdish nation': The concept of genocide as part of knowledge production in Iraqi Kurdistan", in *Writing the history of Iraq: historiographical and political challenges,* eds. Jordi Tejel et al. (London: World Scientific Publishing and Imperial College Press, 2012).

a process discussed broadly in the social sciences since the 'invention of the knowledge society.'[16] In the process of the popularization of academic/scientific knowledge – to speak with Michel Foucault – knowledge is transformed, organized and selected as a strategy to appropriate a specific discourse. These processes, where knowledge and power are intertwined, are to be understood as struggle for meaning and truth.[17] From this it follows, according to media scholar Tanja Maier, that media discourses do not merely reproduce academic/scientific knowledge in a simplified manner. Instead, practices within such discourses are part of knowledge production and compete with academic/scientific discourses for truth, knowledge and reality.[18]

Against this background, I will be concentrating on online debates in my article. The focal point of my analysis is the Moroccan-Jewish website *dafina.net*. This portal, which has been online since June 2000, provides information on history, genealogy and traditions of Moroccan Jews and supplies links to other websites, with recipes or photographs. Moreover, it offers a dating platform and a discussion forum where registered members debate various issues related to Moroccan Judaism. Aside from *dafina.net* I also refer to three international platforms, namely the English website of *Ha'aretz*, the English version of the Israeli website *Ynetnews* and the website of the American-Jewish daily *Forward*. I define these three websites as international, as they are much more widespread and the user base is much broader than that of *dafina.net*. They do not focus exclusively on Moroccan-Jewish topics, address more general political, social or economic issues and thus attract a wider variety of users. By comparing the discussions of a predominantly Moroccan setting to those held within a wider context, it becomes possible to trace certain specifics of the Moroccan debate.

Besides online media, investigative journalism also plays a decisive role when it comes to questioning established historical narratives. Moroccan weeklies such as *TelQuel, Le Journal Hebdomadaire* or the arabophone *Nishan* (both of which ceased publication in 2010) but also dailies address historical topics. A reaction to the rising interest in the country's history, especially in approaches that are marginalized or tabooed within the official historiography, was the foundation of Morocco's first historical magazine *Zamane* in November 2010.[19] As the following examples will demonstrate, it is exactly the dialogue between print

---

[16] Peter Weingart, *Die Stunde der Wahrheit? Zum Verhältnis der Wissenschaft zu Politik, Wirtschaft und Medien in der Wissensgesellschaft,* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2001); *Zur Kritik der Wissensgesellschaft,* Dirk Tänzler et al. (eds.), (Konstanz: UVK, 2006).

[17] Michel Foucault, *Dispositive der Macht* (Berlin: Merve, 1978).

[18] Tanja Maier, "Wahrheit, Wissen, Wirklichkeit: Poularisierungsprozesse in Wissenschaftsmagazinen", in *Medien und Kommunikation in der Wissensgesellschaft*, eds. Johannes Raabe et al. (Konstanz: UVK, 2008), 130-132.

[19] See Abdelahad Sebti, "Zamane, le magazine d'histoire du Maroc" (interview with Ziad Maalouf), *Atelier des médias. Web-émission participative pour la communauté des médias et réseau social de rfi*, 22 July 2011, http://atelier.rfi.fr/profiles/blogs/zamane, accessed 23 Novembre 2011.

and online media that leads to critical and controversial debates: whereas the former often launches discussions by revelations, the latter offers a space to the readers for further discussions.

3. Discussing the King, History and Identity in Morocco

The narrative of the 'tolerant sultan': historiographical debates

Towards the end of 2006 a new publication, Robert Satloff's book *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands,* ignited a debate over the sultan's role in the events of the 1940s and his behaviour towards the Jewish minority.[20] Satloff's aim was to find Arab rescuers of persecuted Jews in North Africa. He proposed naming the Tunisian Khaled Abd Al-Wahab a *Righteous among the Nations* in Yad Vashem.[21] To date about 50 Muslims, most of them from Turkey and the Balkans, have been honoured as *Righteous*, yet there is not a single Arab among them.[22] The potential nomination of the first Arab and the question of whether there were more Arabs who had helped their Jewish fellow citizens, gave rise to the idea that the former Moroccan king Mohammed V be also honoured as *Righteous*.

In July 2007 André Azoulay, the Moroccan royal councillor, and Serge Berdugo, head of the Moroccan Jewish Community, visited Israel to discuss this idea with Israeli president Shimon Peres.[23] It is difficult to estimate whether this nomination had serious chances of success or not. Yad Vashem's requirements of who is to be declared as righteous or not are clear:

> The Yad Vashem Law went on to characterize the Righteous Among the Nations as those who not only saved Jews but risked their lives in

[20] The book was published by Public Affairs, New York, and caused various discussions not only in the United States but also in Europe and in Arab countries such as Egypt where Satloff presented his research. Although the publication got many good reviews, Satloff's approach to make 'Arabs see the Holocaust as a source of pride, worthy of remembering' by telling 'the story of a single Arab who saved a single Jew during the Holocaust' is debatable. Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 6.

[21] The Tunisian landowner Khaled Abd al-Wahab, who died in 1997, was hiding a Tunisian Jewish Family that was expelled from their home on his land. Anne Boukris, daughter of the family and then aged 11, confirmed that al-Wahab offered not only a hiding place but also stopped a German officer from raping her mother. See the description in Satloff, *Among the Righteous*, 122–27.

[22] See for example, Gershman Norman, *Besa. Muslims who saved Jews in World War II*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

[23] Ed. Yad Vashem, *Le lien francophone,* 24 (2007), 2. http://www1.yadVashem.org/about_yad/friends/world_wide/france_img/iton_24fr_06.pdf.

> doing so. This was to become the basic criterion for awarding the title.[24]

With regard to sultan Mohammed V, the historical sources consulted so far do not allow for an ultimate decision. In 1985 a telegram entitled 'Dissidence' was discovered in the Archive of Foreign Affairs in Paris – a document referred to by historians in favour of a narration rendering the sultan *Righteous*. The Moroccan historian and linguist Haim Zafrani presented this document for the first time in December 1985 to members of the *Académie du Royaume du Maroc* in Rabat.[25] The telegram was a report to the Vichy government, dated to 24 May 1941. It reported that the sultan had invited – for the first time – members of the Jewish community to the official celebration of the anniversary of his crowning. Within this context the sultan is said to have stated his objection to the discriminatory measures targeting the Moroccan Jews. To quote from the document:

> Credible sources inform us that relations between the sultan of Morocco and the French authorities have become much more tense since the day the French authorities put into application the decree on the 'measures against the Jews' despite the explicit opposition of the sultan. The sultan refused to make differences amongst his subjects, who were all 'loyal' as he said. Offended to see that his authority was overtaken by the French authorities, the sultan decided to demonstrate publicly his disapproval of the 'measures against the Jews'. (…) For the first time, the sultan invited to the banquet the representatives of the Jewish community to whom he offered ostentatiously the best places next to the French officials. He declared to the French officials, who were surprised by the presence of Jews at this meeting: 'I absolutely do not approve of the new anti-Semitic laws and I refuse to associate myself with a measure I disagree with; I reiterate as I did in the past that the Jews are under my protection and I reject any distinction that should be made amongst my people.[26]

This document reveals that the sultan did not conceal his disapproval regarding the anti-Jewish policy of the Vichy regime. However, this document can neither be taken as proof of concrete actions in favour of the Jews, nor does it hint at a threat to the sultan's life or his status. Definitely, this important source requires further critical contextualization and evaluation, taking up a couple of open questions. Firstly, the antagonism between the sultan's statements in favour of the Jews and the fact that he signed the racist laws is

---

[24] Quoted from the website of Yad Vashem http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/faq.asp.

[25] Haïm Zafrani, *Deux mille ans de la vie juive aux Maroc,* (Casablanca : Editions Eddif, 2000), 296. See also Cohen, "Ofen yiumah shel ha-teḥikah ha-anti-yehudit be-maroko be-tekufat mimshelet Vichy al-pi mismakhim ḥadashim mi-misrad ha-ḥuz ha-zorfati".

[26] Quoted in Zafrani, *Deux mille ans,* 297.

not resolved or explained by this document. Secondly, the question remains open if the sultan had the power to protect the Moroccan Jews in case of concrete genocidal persecution. Thirdly, the quote from the telegram suggests that the sultan's protective behaviour is not only the result of a particular affinity towards his Jewish subject but strongly relates to issues of power struggles, as the anti-Jewish laws 'insulted the sultan's generations-old role as descendant of the Prophet and 'Commander of the faithful.'[27]

The historiography of Morocco and beyond does not provide satisfactory answers to these questions. Moroccan historian Mohammed Kenbib, for example, points in his thesis on Jewish-Muslim relations to the contradiction between the monarch's concern for his Jewish subjects and his declaration of loyalty towards the Vichy regime. Yet, at the end he describes, in a very cautious manner, the sultan's situation as 'particularly delicate.'[28] In a similar way other researchers stress the sultan's good will to help the Jews, but at the same time admit his inability to resist the Vichy regime, without giving an explanation for this contradictory behaviour. In a similar way, Algerian historian André Charouqui states: 'Morocco finally, despite the good sovereign, could not entirely prevent German contamination.'[29] Robert Assaraf, a Moroccan-French researcher and writer, explains the sultan's failure to resist the promulgation of the anti-Jewish laws in terms of his lack of experience and his youth. According to Assaraf, he signed the *dahir* 'with the conviction that this wouldn't cause any irremediable damage for his Jewish subjects.'[30] David Cohen who presented the above quoted telegram at the end of 1985 at a conference in Jerusalem came to the conclusion that even though the sultan opposed the anti-Jewish laws, his ability to prevent them was small. Interestingly, Cohen instead points at the Vichy-friendly general Charles Noguès, who was appointed High Commissioner of Morocco in June 1941, as someone who constantly tried to hinder the implementation of the anti-Jewish laws in Morocco.[31] Rita Aouad-Badoual, historian at *Centre d'Études Arabes* in Rabat, pointed out the difficulties in breaking with the myth of Mohammed V

---

[27] Within the concept of *dhimma* (lit. protection) it is the Islamic ruler who is responsible for the security of the non-Muslims (mostly Jews and Christians) living in his territorial domain. The failure to protect them was a sign of weakness, and violence against *dhimmis* was often meant and understood as direct attack against the regime. See Daniel Schroeter, "From Dhimmis to Colonized Subjects: Moroccan Jews and the Sharifian and French Colonial State", in *Jews and the State. Dangerous Alliances and the Perils of Privilege*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 104-123; Kerstin Hünefeld, *Imām Yaḥyā Ḥamid ad-Dīn und die Juden in Sanʿā',* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz 2010).

[28] Kenbib, *Juifs et musulmans*, 626.

[29] Satloff, *Among the Righteous*, 110. See also André Chouraqui, *Les Juifs d'Afrique du Nord entre l'Orient et l'Occident*, 1st ed. (Paris: Etudes Maghrebines, 1965), 22.

[30] Robert Assaraf, *Mohammed V et les Juifs du Maroc à l'époque de Vichy*, 1st ed. (Paris: Plon, 1997), 128.

[31] Cohen, "Ofen yiumah shel ha-teḥikah ha-anti-yehudit be-maroko be-tekufat mimshelet Vichy al-pi mismakhim ḥadashim mi-misrad ha-ḥuz ha-zorfati", 228.

as protector of the Moroccan Jews. As part of a commission reforming history books for French schools in Morocco she tried to find a rather unadorned version of the events of 1940:

> In the period when Morocco was under Vichy the Moroccan Jews were afraid of their situation. Anti-Semitic laws were enacted in the country […]. But the hesitation of the Sultan, the compromises, derogations and exceptions opposing their application, and finally the landing of the Americans spared them the terrible destiny of their European fellow believers.[32]

It has to be mentioned that the state of sources concerning the sultan's behaviour towards his Jewish subjects is problematic. A closer look reveals that there are mainly oral accounts ascribed to possible eyewitnesses, and their reproduction. Statements that are attributed to the sultan by eyewitnesses are reproduced as direct speech and adopted *tel quel* without critical reflections on the sources.[33] Since the historiographical work with regard to Mohammed V and the Moroccan Jews is not very clear in its narration and the validation of the sources, it is not surprising that facts, rumors and legends are intertwined. Thus, there is still the need for a fresh look and critical analysis of the sultan's acts towards the Jews during the Vichy period, his intentions and the consequences of his behavior. At the same time it is exactly this lack of clarity that opens the space for countless interpretations, legends and myths, as I want to elaborate below by the aid of discourse fragments taken from the media.

The narrative of the 'tolerant sultan': media debates

A factor contributing towards the persistence of the image of the righteous sultan is the media coverage of this issue as well as official statements by the authorities and representatives of the Jewish community.[34] The incumbent king

---

[32] Rita Aouad-Badoual et al., *Histoire. Le Maroc de 1912 à nos jours*, 1st ed. (Rabat: Centre d'Etudes Arabes, Ambassade de France, 2000), 60. See also Samir Ben-Layash and Bruce Maddy Weitzman, "Myth, History and *Realpolitik*: Morocco and its Jewish Community", in *Muslim Attitudes to Jews and Israel: The Ambivalences of Rejection, Antagonism, Tolerance and Cooperation*, ed. Moshe Ma'oz (Eastbourne: Sussex Academia Press, 2010), 34.

[33] Satloff, for example presents direct quotations ascribed to Mohammed V along with paralinguistic aspects (e.g. 'in a voice loud enough for Vichy officers'), based on Assaraf, *Mohammed V et les Juifs,* 129-133 and 161. However, Assaraf himself presents quotations ascribed to eyewitnesses or taken from newspapers or documents without giving comprehensible references. Satloff, *Among the Righteous*, 111 ; see also Cohen, "Ofen yiumah shel ha-teḥikah ha-anti-yehudit be-maroko be-tekufat mimshelet Vichy al-pi mismakhim ḥadashim mi-misrad ha-ḥuz ha-zorfati", 228.

[34] See, for example, the paragraph on Moroccan history on the official website of the Moroccan government, where it reads : 'During the war his majesty king Mohammed Ben Youssef (Mohamed V), Sultan of the cherifien kingdom since 1927 and protector of all his

himself, Mohammed VI, often refers to his grandfather's position towards the Jewish community in the 1940s. On the occasion of the inauguration of the Place Mohammed V in Paris in December 2002 he stressed that his grandfather's refusal to apply the anti-Semitic laws was a decisive example for other countries.[35] In a similar vein, at the 50th anniversary of Moroccan independence he underlined the 'courageous and memorable position [Mohammed V] adopted on the side of the free world vis-à-vis Nazism and Fascism.'[36] Among representatives of the Jewish community the former king Mohammed V is celebrated almost as a cult figure. On the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, for example, Serge Berdugo, president of the Moroccan Jewish community, expressed his 'eternal gratitude' to Mohammed V.[37] This statement found its way into various Moroccan newspapers and magazines and was also quoted in Israel, France and Germany, where the newsletter of the Moroccan embassy published a short article about the commemoration day.[38] The Moroccan newspaper *La Gazette du Maroc* quoted Berdugo:

> When all Jews in the world were being surrendered to the hands of the Nazis, transferred to the death camps and exterminated, the Moroccan king stood up to oppose the Nazi forces. This was an enormous display of courage. The late Mohammed V attached great importance to his role as Commander of the Faithful, which he understood to include all of the People of the Book.[39]

Berdugo made similar statements in 1998 in a publication of the *Conseil de Communeautés Israélites du Maroc*, declaring that 'the Moroccan Jews will never forget the courageous attitude of his majesty Mohammed V, who protected them from the racist laws of Vichy and Nazi-persecution.'[40] André Azoulay, well known as the king's advisor, also spreads the image of the sultan as protector of the Jews on official occasions. In Washington D.C. he participated in a panel together with Robert Satloff and 'discussed King Mohammed V's

---

subjects, defended the Moroccan Jews pertinaciously against the Vichy regime.' Quoted from the French version of *Portail du Maroc*, www.maroc.ma, accessed 15 April 2012.

[35] Speech of king Mohammed VI on the occasion of the inauguration of the Place Mohammed V in Paris on 20 December 2002, quoted from the website of the Moroccan Foreign Ministry, http://www.diplomatie.ma/articledetails.aspx?id=2776, accessed 10 March 2012.

[36] Speech of Mohammed V on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Independence, 16 November 2005, quoted from the website *Portail du Maroc*, www.maroc.ma, accessed 10 March 2012.

[37] See for example, " 'L'éternelle reconnaissance' des juifs du Maroc envers Mohammed V", *La Gazette du Maroc*, 14 February 2005; Amale Samie, "Etre Juif au Maroc", *Maroc Hebdo International*, 10 February 2005.

[38] See *Marokko Aktuell. Informationsblatt der Botschaft des Königreiches Marokko in Berlin*, 1 (2005); "Moroccan Jews pay homage to 'protector'", *Ha'aretz*, 1 January 2005.

[39] 'L'éternelle reconnaissance', *La Gazette du Maroc*.

[40] *La communauté juive marocaine,* ed. Conseil des Communautés Israélites du Maroc, (Casablanca, 1998), 10.

heroic efforts to protect Moroccan Jews from the repressive anti-Semitic policies of the French Vichy colonial government.'[41]

However, as stated before, the debate on Mohammed V and his behaviour towards the Moroccan Jews is not any more confined to historians or politicians alone. In May 2007 an article in the francophone Moroccan weekly *TelQuel* cited a report on concentration camps in Morocco, promising 'other revelations about the secret history of the Moroccan Jews under Mohammed V.'[42] Starting from the idea of admitting Mohammed V among the *Righteous* in Yad Vashem, two Moroccan journalists tried to investigate the role he played for the Jewish community in the 1940s. Previously, in November 2006, the magazine *Maroc Hebdo International,* also a francophone weekly, had taken up the issue of concentration camps in Morocco and the sultan's responsibility as a reaction to an article written by Robert Satloff on the role of Arab *Righteous* during the Second World War which had been published in the *Washington Post* in October 2006.[43] While *TelQuel* questioned the official narrative of the heroic king, the article in *Maroc Hebdo International* rather confirmed the established image:

> Mohammed V opened an enormous royal protection shield that spared the Moroccan Jews from the genocidal verdict of Nazi-Germany and its authorized executors, the Vichy regime. […] As a consequence of his commitment no Moroccan Jew was interned in a camp![44]

It is therefore not surprising that the reactions and discussions following the publication of the critical *TelQuel* article were far more numerous than in the aftermath of the first report on concentration camps in *Maroc Hebdo International*. 'Mohammed V, 'Righteous among the Nations': reality or myth?' is the provocative question *TelQuel* poses at the end of the article. The estimation of the authors that 'the love-story between Mohammed V and the Moroccan Jews is tormented, complex and not at all as idyllic as one would like it to be' directly challenges established narratives.[45] While there was only one direct reaction to the article published by *TelQuel,*[46] it was widely disseminated

[41] The discussion was organized by the American Moroccan Institute, 14 December 2007. Quoted from the website of the American Moroccan Institute, http://www.amius.org/events/past/event_121406.htm, accessed 26 April 2012.
[42] Karim Boukhari and Hassan Hamdani, "Des camps de concentration au Maroc", *TelQuel,* 274 (May 2007).
[43] A similar article is to be found for example in the weekly *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* by Majda Fahim "Mohammed au pantheon des Justes?", 2 January 2008.
[44] Abdellatif Mansour, "Des camps de concentration nazis au Maroc", *Maroc Hebdo International*, 721 (November 2006).
[45] Boukhari and Hamdani, "Des camps de concentration".
[46] The letter came from Raizla Fuks, Casablanca, and was printed in *TelQuel*, 275 (May 2007).

and discussed in various online forums.[47] Although participants maintain their anonymity, their usernames usually indicate their gender. Moreover, some users provide direct or indirect information about their nationality, place of origin, profession and religion.

Central to the discussion on the Moroccan-Jewish website *dafina.net* is the dichotomy between 'old-school-historians' and 'non-professionals.' The former are represented by a user introducing himself as '*Professeur*', who by referring to 'his students' indicates that he is a lecturer at a Moroccan university. *Professeur,* who attempts to exhibit a certain authority by choosing this particular username, not only questions the 'revelations' of *TelQuel,* he also describes them as spiteful and criticises the authors' sensationalism, greed and imprudence.[48] Without reading the article ('I forbade myself to read this journal' and 'I refuse to read this pseudo-article'[49]) *Professeur* totally rejects the existence of concentration camps in Morocco: 'Altogether, there have never been concentration camps in Morocco!'[50] The other participants, all presumably 'non-professionals', are not satisfied with *Professeur*'s position. Even if they do not oppose the narrative of the 'righteous king', they demand the right to investigate historical narratives. *Souri*, who posted the article on *dafina.net*, expresses her dismay over the fact that *Professeur* is reacting without having read the text. She demands the right to pose critical questions and to check other perspectives on historiography:

> Everyone knows about the firm and noble attitude of the Sultan Mohamed V who refused to hand over his Jewish Moroccan subjects to the claws of the Nazis. Still, it is necessary to accept the history of one's country. […] Hence before accusing me of spreading 'spiteful things', take note of the documents, the facts and the analyses. This is the minimum one can demand from a professor.[51]

Support for her demand comes from *FoX*, who argues for weighing up the different perspectives before rejecting them: 'Do not give a judgement about

---

[47] The article was for example diffused and commented on the Moroccan site *Wladbladi,* Forum Maroc, http://www.wladbladi.com/forum/showthread.php?t=35811; *Dafina*, Le Net des Juifs du Maroc, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737; the Moroccan site *Bladi*, http://www.bladi.net/forum/102361-camps-concentration-maroc/index5.html, the websites of the French TV channel Forum France 2, http://forums.france2.fr/france2/jtfrance2/histoire-originaires-maroc-sujet_26700_1.htm. The article was also published on the following websites: *Le Site de Sindbad*, Site d'information et de résistance la propagation de la pensée néo-conservatrice en France et dans la Monde, http://sindibad.fr/spip.php?article150; *PorTail Du MaRoc*, Actualité et Journal du Maroc, http://www.portaildumaroc.com/news+article.storyid+3502.htm, all accessed 26 March 2012.

[48] Comment by *Professeur,* 21 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1

[49] Comment by *Professeur,*22 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1

[50] Comment by *Professeur*, 28 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=3

[51] Comment by *Sourie*, 21 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1

something you have not read. Make an effort, read it.'[52] *Nicht* criticises *Professeur*'s 'derisive view' whilst at the same time attributing to him a certain 'naivety'. He poses the question: '[…] do you still believe that there is a country that spreads peace in the world without searching for personal interests?'[53] An even harsher criticism of *Professeur* comes from *Lio* who adds to *nicht's* comment: 'More than naive; I would say that a researcher is sceptical and critical by definition, and therein lies the secret of success in this profession.'[54]

Professeur understands the article not only as a misinterpretation of historical facts, but considers the approach taken by *TelQuel* as a direct offence to the 'real values' of Moroccans.[55] He describes the article in *TelQuel* as an 'insult vis-à-vis our collective memory'[56] and a 'defamation and insult to all Moroccans, Jews and Muslims alike!'[57] He questions the reliability of the sources and points to the danger it carries for Moroccan historiography: 'Altogether I bet that the journalist in question will present us as his only source one sole reference, this Robert Satloff who spent one or two years in Morocco and now wants us to change our history!'[58] It seems that by defending 'Moroccan history,' *Professeur* is trying to defend and protect Moroccan identity and what he sees as its valuable character:

> To all the people there I say: The Moroccans do not have superpower, or a super economy, or petrodollars… but we have super values with which we write history. We do not need written proof: the fact that a million Israelis are of Moroccan origin is the best and most reassuring proof that Morocco was spared from the human madness of the Second World War. When a Jew remembers Morocco and his eyes are filled with tears, this is our best emotional proof that Morocco lingers in a part of his heart.[59]

And later he adds: '[…] when I am defending this point of view about the scientific character of the sources it is not to annoy you! It is for the sake of us all!'[60]

In his defence of Moroccan history, *Professeur* relies on established narratives and perspectives. However, new questions arise and the discussants demand the right to challenge these narratives. In contrast to the very inflexible opinion

---

[52] Comment of *FoX*, 22 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1
[53] Comment of *nicht*, 23 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1
[54] Comment of *Lio,* 23 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1
[55] Comment of *Professeur,* 22 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1
[56] Comment of *Professeur,* 22 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1
[57] Comment of *Professeur,* 28 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=3
[58] Comment of *Professeur,* 24 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=2
[59] Comment of *Professeur*, 26 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=2
[60] Comment of *Professeur*, 24 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=2

of *Professeur*, the other participants seem to have more questions than answers, voicing considerable doubts as well. In this way, the internet serves as a platform to negotiate not only various views of the past, but also the right of knowledge production. *Sourie* criticises *Professeur* for his holier-than-thou behaviour:

> To Professeur: It seems that you overestimate the 'scientificity' of human science in general and of history in particular. One of my professors of history [...] insisted always on an essential quality of historians: modesty.[61]

In a condescending manner, *Professeur* replies that he did not refer to 'amateurism' in a negative sense and that he too considers himself an amateur (even though he clearly demands interpretative authority throughout the entire discussion).[62]

By the end of the discussion *Professeur's* standpoint has been accepted. He is able to convince the other participants of the unreliability of the sources used by the *TelQuel* journalists. With the help of authoritative arguments and frames of reference *Professeur* overcomes the questions and doubts of the other discussants.[63] The debates mirrors what the Moroccan historian Mostafa Bouaziz described in the following terms: 'Today all questions are allowed but not all answers.'[64] However, this debate shows that there is also a growing interest among non-professionals in discussing the past, more specifically the impact of Nazi politics and persecution on Moroccan society. By questioning established viewpoints and opening up new perspectives, the discussants participate in negotiating present-day issues in Moroccan society.

4. From Mohammad V to the Middle East Conflict

The sultan's attitude towards his Jewish subject in the 1940s was not only discussed within a predominantly Moroccan context but also in the international press as a response to various media reports. These debates were launched by the question whether Mohammed V should be granted the title *Righteous Among the Nations* in Yad Vashem or not. The American Jewish weekly *Forward* published an article about the possible honouring of Mohammed V

---

[61] Comment of *Sourie*, 27 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=3

[62] Comment of *Professeur*, 28 May 2007, http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=3

[63] *Souri* posts: 'To Professeur: I yield to your argument and accept that I bought into Tel-Quel's affirmations on the concentration camp in Boufara too hastily. The picture that illustrated the article appeared to show a concentration camp located in Morocco. However, the author of a personal website on voil.fr declared firmly that the picture shows Boufara in Alergia. Thus, I was wrong and mislead, and I do accept your caution and reservation concerning the credibility of Tel-Quel.'

[64] Interview with Mostafa Ouaziz in the radio feature of Ziad Maalouf, "Zamane, le magazine d'histoire du Maroc".

titled 'An Arab King Righteous among the Nations?'[65] Two days later the English edition of the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* printed the same text under the title 'Stealth campaign under way to name late Moroccan king as righteous gentile'.[66] The Israeli website *Ynetnews.com* also took up the topic.[67] In January 2007 the idea of the sultan's nomination had already come up in the *Ha'aretz* internet forum as a reaction to the honouring of Abd al-Wahab.[68] One participant suggested: 'If there was a great Arab that deserves a connotation as a Just it should be the King of Morocco during the World War, under the Vichy regime.'[69] These texts provoked extensive debates, all of them in English, with discussants from different countries and backgrounds.[70] Even though the initial question was whether Mohammed V should be nominated as *Righteous*, none of the contributions to the debate explicitly refers to Yad Vashem's respective guidelines.

Unlike on the Moroccan website *dafina.net*, in this international context the narrative of the sultan's tolerance is directly challenged by the participants. By some, this is done in a more subtle way, for example when one discussant notes that 'the story about the Moroccan king (like the Danish king) offering to wear a yellow star of David appears to be apocryphal […].'[71] Others, however, are harsher, such as *Tarshisha* who claims that 'Muhammad V was connected with Nazi intelligence and [was a] sympathizer of Hitler.'[72] At another point the question is asked why, if they had had such a good and safe status in Morocco, 'most of the Jews had to flee the country clandestinely without their goods or money in the late forties and fifties.'[73]

Judging by their names and their use of specific phrases, the majority of supporters of Mohammed's nomination as a *Righteous* on the forums are almost certainly of Moroccan origin. The only exception is *Joseph*, whose standpoint is rather critical:

---

[65] Marc Perelman, "An Arab King Righteous Among the Nation?", *Forward*, 12 December 2007.
[66] Marc Perelman, "Stealth campaign under way to name late Moroccan king as righteous gentile", *Ha'aretz,* 14 December 2007.
[67] Itamar Eichner, "Moroccan king nominated for Righteous Among the Nations title", *Ynet,* 20 July 2007, http://www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3427804,00.html, accessed 15 April 2012.
[68] Amiram Barkat, "Holocaust researcher asks Yad Vashem to recognize first Arab Righteous Gentile", *Ha'aretz,* 23 January 2007. Even though this article does not pick up the idea of nominating Mohammed V in Yad Vashem it comes up in the following discussion. For this reason the text will also be considered here.
[69] Comment of *BenAbuzaglo* on Amiram Barkat, *Ha'aretz*, 23 January 2007.
[70] I adopted the quotations with all spelling mistakes and case insensitivity. Only in some cases I did correct minor typing errors to facilitate the readability of the quotations.
[71] Comment of *Jake* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 15 December 2007.
[72] Comment of *Tarshisha* on Marc Perelman, *Forward*, 13 December 2007.
[73] Comment of Marcel Hodak on Marc Perelman, *Forward*, 17 December 2007.

> It saddens me that we, Jews, should continue to perpetuate this lie. […] That we should continue to believe that a king without power or influence saved the Jewish community of Morocco. There is no truth to this. We, the Jews of Morocco, should put an end to this romantic myth.[74]

The other Moroccans, Muslims and Jews alike, discuss the sultan's attitude and the coexistence between Jews and Muslims in a very positive way. A post on *Ynetnews.com* by a user in London reads: 'The king Mohammad V was a great king to all. We were happy to be Moroccan […].'[75] *Semsem* from New York writes: 'This fact is well known: that the King saved the Jews of Morocco.'[76] However, due to the fact that a number of critics of the sultan and the idea to nominate him in Yad Vashem are particularly harsh, it is not sufficient to state that the sultan was a righteous man. Moreover, the discussants supporting the king's positive image are required to produce arguments, proofs and references to back up their standpoint.

One participant, for example, refers to historians as authorised specialists by stating: 'It is well known to historians that the king Mohamed V has replied to Vichy when he was asked to deliver Moroccan Jewish leaders to the Nazi regime as followed: 'There are no Moroccan Jews, but only Moroccans.'[77] Another user invokes personal experience as evidence for the sultan's protective attitude: 'Sultan Mohamed V should be a righteous gentile. […] ask any jew from casablanca, rabat, marrakesh or fes. we owe him big. he was a good man. a very good man [*sic*].'[78] Others refer to the past, more precisely to the Middle Ages, in order to show that tolerance towards the Jews has a long tradition and is therefore something inherent in Moroccan society: 'For centuries, Arabs offered refuge to Jews fleeing from pogroms, inquisition, and discrimination.'[79] A discussant named *Historian* states: 'Please don't forget that during the Spanish Inquisition many Jews fled Christian Spain and found a safe shelter in Muslim North Africa.'[80] Some discussants also try to support their points of view by quoting from written sources. A special authority seems to be ascribed to religious texts such as the Koran or the Torah.[81]

At this point the discussion turns away from the initial question of whether Mohammed V was a *Righteous*. More general issues are raised, such as the coexistence of Jews and Muslims in Morocco, which is highlighted as a particularly Moroccan value in both the past and present: 'A culture of

---

[74] Comment of Joseph on Marc Perelman, *Forward*, 13 December 2007.
[75] Comment of *A V* on Itamar Eichner, *ynetnews.com*, 20 July 2007.
[76] Comment of *Semsem* on Itamar Eichner, *ynetnews.com*, 20 July 2007.
[77] Comment of *Moroccan* on Marc Perelman, *Forward*, 15 December 2007.
[78] Comment of *benabou* on the article, *Ha'aretz*, 24 January 2007.
[79] Comment of *1 state solution* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 14 December 2007.
[80] Comment of *Historian* on Amiram Barkat, *Ha'aretz*, 23 January 2007.
[81] For example *Jake* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 15 December 2007 or *Faress* on Marc Perelman, *Forward*, 17 December 2007.

tolerance in Morocco has still endured and there are still Moroccan Jewish [*sic*] living in Morocco occupying even important positions in the economical and political arena in the country.'[82] Moreover, Morocco seems for them to be proof of a more general Arab or Muslim tolerance. In this context the honouring of Mohammed V acquires a wider dimension: 'It will prove that few Muslims are like Ahmadinejad [*sic*], and that Moroccans are proof of that.'[83] Another participant states: 'The King's actions are a fine example of Arab chivalry and the best of Islamic morality.'[84] Besides referring to the morals of Arabs and Muslims, some discussants also point out the responsibility of European and Christian countries in the persecution of the Jews. *Historian*, for example, posts:

> Muslims have always been closer to Judaism, religiously and culturally, than we are made to believe by modern Judeo-Christian countries who were the perpetrators of the Holocaust against their own Jewish citizens.[85]

Aman makes a similar comment:

> Through history, Arabs were the only people sympathetic to the Jews and they coexisted and offered them asylum from the crusaders of Europe (Spain, Germany, France, etc.). Europeans have always killed and abused the Jews till WW2 but Arabs and Muslims offered them shelter. Until Zionism came and ruined this relationship.[86]

Europe's responsibility is stressed by various participants, for example *1 state solution*, who writes:

> Jews have lived, and continue to live everywhere from Algeria to India including Syria and Iran. Christians conducted pogroms and inquisitions while Arabs offered sanctuary. In fact, that's why 4% of the Palestinian population was Jewish when Zionism raised its ugly head in the 1890s. When European Zionists turned to violence and ethnic cleansing to create Israel it set in motion all the wars to follow, and those still yet to happen. Please take responsibility for your own wrong doing rather than blaming Arabs who were minding their own business when European Jews were fleeing the Nazis. If you want to hate, hate those who killed Jews for no reason – the Nazis – not the Arabs that are merely fighting back to get their homes back.[87]

---

[82] Comment of *Moroccan* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 15 December 2007.
[83] Comment of *1 state solution* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 14 December 2007.
[84] Comment of *Danite* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 14 December 2007.
[85] Comment of *Historian* on Amiram Barkat, *Ha'aretz*, 23 January 2007.
[86] Comment of *Aman* on Itamar Eichner, *ynetnews.com*, 21 July 2007.
[87] Comment of *1 state solution* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 15 December 2007.

By referring to the persecution of Jews in Europe and their good and safe status in Arab countries, the discussants argue against the image of Arab anti-Semitism. This leads to another central point that is tackled in all the forums dealing with Mohammed's proposed honouring as a *Righteous,* namely the present-day relationship between Jews and Arabs and the Middle East conflict. One of the participants asks: 'If Jews were persecuted again, do you think Arabs and Palestinians would help them – now after all Israel had done?'[88] *Amin* from Paris expresses the wish 'to see the day where a YV [Yad Vashem] honouring Jews who defend Pals [Palestinians] rights will be built. Hoping that day less racism and islamophobia will be among jews Israelis [*sic*] too.'[89] When it comes to the situation in Israel and Palestine, some articles become very emotional. A discussant named *Nabil* calls Israel's policy 'apartheid.'[90] He argues that Israel does not respect other religions, that 1.5 Million people in Gaza have no right to travel freely even inside Gaza, that the inhabitants of the West Bank are hindered by the wall and numerous checkpoints, and finally that Arabs have no right to own land in Israel. The response by *Jake* is very impetuous:

> Gazans [*sic*] cannot move around freely in Gaza? That's a good one. […] How about facing up to some facts on your own side that you Arabs were not as nice to the Jews as you like to believe. […] That your peaceful Morocco was fighting against Israel on the Syrian front on Golan Heights during their vicious attack on Israel on the holiest Jewish day of the year in 1973.[91]

Since we are dealing with discussion forums hosted on the websites of newspapers, we can assume that the responsible administrators removed comments that were too impertinent, illicit and offensive, as well as those that glorified violence. Nevertheless, some of the contributions clearly demonstrate the sensitive nature of the issue and the extent to which the conflict between Israel and Palestine still influences thinking about the past. The question of whether an Arab leader should be honoured for rescuing his Jewish subjects cannot be discussed without keeping the conflict in mind. Hence the discussion about Mohammed V thus inevitably touches upon the political situation of today. The matter of how others - first and foremost 'the West' - perceive 'the Arabs' is central. Emanating from the question of the 'righteous monarch,' the debate rapidly shifts its focus to the relations between Jews and Arabs or Jews and Muslims. Besides stressing the historical tradition of good relations between Arabs and Jews, some participants – predominantly of obvious Arab-Muslim origin – point to the European responsibility for the Shoah, especially the persecution and killing of Jews under the National

[88] Comment of *1 state solution* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz,* 14 December 2007.
[89] Comment of *Amin* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz,* 19 December 2007.
[90] Comment of *Nabil* on Itamar Eichner, *ynetnews.com*, 20 July 2007.
[91] Comment of *Jake* on Itamar Eichner, *ynetnews.com*, 21 July 2007.

Socialists. By referring to the past, the present-day situation is explained and justified, particularly with regard to positions towards and within the Middle East conflict.

5. Conclusion

Was the Mohammed V a 'righteous monarch'? Was he a *Righteous* in terms of Yad Vashem? Such questions are not only discussed by historians and journalists inside and outside of Morocco; instead, a wide range of individuals who meet each other in the realm of social media take a stand on this issue. In consequence new perspectives are introduced and the thematic scope of historical narratives is broadened. My analysis makes it clear that the contributions and discussions among the internet users are not limited to historical events. Rather they touch on questions of identity, politics and power. The past serves as the creator of a sense of values in the present and is referred to in order to explain certain current developments in Morocco. In various ways, participants of the internet debates either defend or challenge not only established narratives but also the rules of negotiating meaning. As I have shown in this article, the initial debate – the sultan's behaviour towards the Jews during the Vichy regime – was appropriated in order to negotiate wider issues such as Jewish-Muslim relations, the Middle East conflict, and 'the Arabs and the West'. In this regard, there is hardly a difference between actors outside and inside the academic field; the latter also construct their historiographical narratives in order to make sense of the present.

However, when it comes to the perception and evaluation of knowledge produced by historians and non-historians, it seems to make a big difference who is speaking and in what context. The material discussed here mirrors this polarisation between established historians and those 'who are simply interested in history.' Thus, various statements in the internet debate indicate a strict distinction between 'historical truth' represented by scientific researchers and the supposed biased and amateurish access to the past by 'non-professionals'. However, other statements reflect the struggle for having the right to question an alleged historical truth and to present alternative narrations. The frequent presentation of historical topics in Moroccan media and the launch of the popular historical journals *Zamane* show that there is an increasing demand to discuss topics neglected so far or new approaches to the past. The emergence of social media enables the active participation of a wide range of interested parties in debates about historical topics and therefore it leads to a democratization of knowledge production.

Even if we cannot accurately measure the impact of these debates on each and every Moroccan, we can observe that official representatives feel forced to

react to alternative narratives circulating on the internet.[92] In an interview with *The Jewish Chronicle* Serge Berdugo tried to dispel doubts by referring to the 'historical documents [that] prove Mohammed V had refused to treat Moroccan Jews any different from Muslims.' To the reproach that honouring the sultan would be based on legends, he answered that 'historians are working very seriously on this issue and [that] there is no doubt King Mohammed saved lives.'[93]

Sophie Wagenhofer studied History, Jewish Studies and Islamic Studies in Vienna and Berlin. She wrote her PhD on the Jewish Museum in Casablanca and its social and political functions, and is currently a research fellow at Humboldt University Berlin.

How to quote this article
Sophie Wagenhofer, *Contested narratives: contemporary debates on Mohammed V and the Moroccan Jews under the Vichy regime*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n. 4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=317

---

[92] On the influence of internet debates on established views and taboos see Mona Eltahawy's speech "MySpace, HerSpace: Women and Alternative Media in the Middle East" (paper presented at Georgia State University, 8 October 2008). Compare also her discussion of Impact of blogs on the Arab World at University of Delaware, 28 February 2009; both accessible on http://monaeltahawy.com/, accessed 17 April 2012.
[93] Shirli Sitbon, "Was this king a righteous?", *The Jewish Chronicle*, 9 August 2007.

Moses and Faruq. The Jews and the Study of History in Interwar Egypt 1920s-1940s[1]

by *Dario Miccoli*

Abstract

It is often argued that Egyptian Jews did not participate much in the cultural and political life of monarchical Egypt. Even though this is partly true in comparison to other Jews in the Middle East such as the Iraqis, one should not forget that from the 1920s on middle and upper class Egyptian Jews wrote historical books and promoted cultural activities centred on Egyptian (Jewish) history, following the historiographical revival promoted by King Fu'ad. Such interest in history continued during King Faruq's reign, when the Cairo Jewish journalist Maurice Fargeon published two important historical monographs, Les juifs en Egypte (1938) and Médecins et avocats juifs au service de l'Egypte (1939). Considering the nation as an imaginative space and not just a political entity, the aim of my essay is to investigate the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in interwar Egypt, so as to explain how back then the binary oppositions Jews/Muslims and Jews/Arabs were not as rigid as they later appeared. To the contrary, many Jews attempted to forge a shared memory that connected their history to that of modern Egypt or – as Fargeon wrote – the prophet Moses to King Faruq.

Introduction

Up until the mid-nineteenth century, about 5,000 Jews lived in Egypt. They formed a small and traditional Jewish community, mostly concentrated in the old *harat al-yahud* (in Arabic: "Jewish quarter") of Cairo and in a few small centres of the Nile Delta. Following the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) and the boom in cotton exports that Egypt experienced in the 1870s, many Jews from the surrounding areas of the Ottoman Empire and from Southern Europe migrated to the country. This immigration substantially increased the Jewish population, which in 1897 had grown to more than 25,000 and in 1917 to about 60,000 people.[2]

The Jews – together with Egyptian Muslims and Copts, Greeks, and European residents – soon became part of a new urban elite, which played a crucial role in the local business and commerce, reshaping both the economic and socio-

[1] I warmly thank Frédéric Abécassis (*Ecole Normale Supérieure*, Lyon) and Jozefien De Bock (European University Institute, Florence) for commenting an earlier version of this article.

[2] See, Jacob Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, (New York: New York University Press, 1969); Gudrun Kraemer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914-1952*, (London: Routledge, 1989) and Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry. Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

cultural arena of Cairo and Alexandria. This was possible thanks to a highly porous notion of *Egyptianness* and a not so rigid distinction between *foreigners* and *locals* that prevailed throughout the colonial and early monarchical eras.[3]
Despite the fact that the presence of a consistent Jewish community in Egypt was relatively recent in comparison with the Iraqi or Moroccan cases for example, and that Egyptian Jews did not seem to have a very homogeneous memory of the past, many Jews conceived themselves as an inherent component of modern Egypt. From the 1920s, one way to reinforce this claim was by writing historical books and promoting cultural activities centred on Egyptian Jewish history and the links that the Jews had with this country. More specifically, several Jewish writers and (amateur) historians *re-invented* the Egyptian Jewish past so as to unite the *Land of the Pharaohs* with the *People of Israel*. Mixing historically grounded data and fictitious narrations, they elaborated novel interpretations of what being Egyptian and Jewish meant and of how the Jews' past could be historicized.

In the first part of the essay I will describe the involvement of Egyptian Jewish notables in the historiographical revival promoted by King Fu'ad in the 1920s. This revival led to the publication of historical books and journals and – in the case of the Jews – to the foundation of the *Société d'Etudes Historiques Juives d'Egypte* in 1925, which was to serve as a forum for discussions on the history of the Jews in Egypt in both modern and ancient times.
From the mid-1930s, Egypt entered into a new political phase that gradually led to a radicalization of the socio-political arena. This was mainly due to the spreading of political movements such as the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (in Arabic: "Muslim Brotherhood") and *Misr al-Fatat* ("Young Egypt").[4] The beginning of King Faruq's reign in 1936 – as well as the signature of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in that same year and the worsening of the conflict in Palestine – all contributed to modify the self-perception that the Jews had vis-à-vis Egypt. In order to illustrate this complex and problematic shifting, in the second part of the essay I will introduce two historical books published in the late 1930s by the Cairo Jewish journalist Maurice Fargeon: *Les juifs en Egypte* (1938) and *Médecins et avocats juifs au service de l'Egypte* (1939). These texts, by blending feelings of *Egyptianness*, Jewishness, and *Pharaonism*, constituted a very significant attempt to face the changing Egyptian reality of the late 1930s and were a way to find a solution to the impasse in which the Jews lived.
The goal of the essay is to underline, from a Jewish perspective, how in interwar Egypt a particular kind of historical narrative became consolidated, especially among the middle and upper middle classes. According to this kind

[3] On this, Will Hanley, "Foreignness and Localness in Alexandria, 1880-1914", (unpublished Ph.d dissertation, Princeton: Princeton University, 2007); Michael Gasper, *The Power of Representation. Publics, Peasants, and Islam in Egypt,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
[4] *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* is a radical Islamic movement founded in 1922 by Hasan al-Banna. *Misr al-Fatat* was instead a rightist nationalist Islamic group that developed in Egypt from 1933.

of narrative, being Egyptian did not mean only – or simply – to have Egyptian nationality, but to feel bonds of affection and loyalty to the land and its rulers. Considering the nation as an *imaginative* space and not just a political entity, this essay will investigate the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in Egypt before the 1950s and the massive migration of the Jews to the State of Israel, Europe, and the US. In doing so, I will explain how in 1920s and 1930s Egypt the binary oppositions Jews/Muslims and Jews/Arabs were not as rigid as they later appeared, and I will show that during the interwar era a creative and nowadays largely forgotten space for "a poetics and a politics of the possible" still existed.[5]

The Jews and the Development of Egyptian Historiography in the 1920s

Modern Egyptian historiography emerged around the late nineteenth century, when new conceptions of time, space, and subjectivity – inspired by the European ones – first appeared in the works of local scholars, putting aside traditional Islamic chronicles (in Arabic: *khitat*) and elaborating a novel way of history writing.[6] These new historical reconstructions concentrated on Egypt's enduring Pharaonic heritage, on the Ottoman era, and finally on Muhammad 'Ali (1796-1849) and his successors.[7] The latter were at times regarded as the glorious founders of modern Egypt and as foreign rulers that, together with Great Britain, had not allowed the birth of a fully independent Egyptian nation-state. In fact, the unilateral declaration of Egyptian independence by Great Britain and the foundation of King Fu'ad's constitutional monarchy in 1922 – in the aftermath of popular upheavals known as the *1919 Revolution* – had only formally ended the British colonial influence over the country. In reality, Britain still had a very significant role to play, for instance regarding the Suez Canal and the status of minority groups.[8]

In order to strengthen his authority and give new impulse to the dynasty he belonged to, in the 1920s Fu'ad initiated a vast-scale project of national history (re-)writing. The research and publications that the king promoted were almost

[5] Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs. Remaking Levantine Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1993), 284. On the imaginative characters of nationhood consider at least: B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1991) and *The Invention of Tradition,* eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Renger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[6] A similar shifting can also be traced for other disciplines, such as ethnography and demography. See, Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory. Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

[7] For a novel interpretation of nineteenth century Egyptian Ottoman history, Malcom J. Reimer, "Egyptian Views of Ottoman Rule. Five Historians and Their Work, 1820-1920", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31/ 1 (2011): 149-163.

[8] Until the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, Britain maintained control over the Suez Canal, the Sudan and was in charge of the protection of foreigners and local minorities (e.g. Jews and Copts). See, Peter Mansfield, *The British in Egypt,* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971) and Charles W. R. Long, *British Pro-Consuls in Egypt, 1914-1929. The Challenge of Nationalism,* (London: Routledge, 2005).

all based on documents available at the Royal Palace of 'Abdin, which emerged as *the* place where historical research on modern Egypt was to be carried out and, in theory, as the first *modern* Egyptian archive. 'Abdin was in fact explicitly controlled by the Royal House. Because of the work of a selected pool of Egyptian and foreign archivists and scholars – such as the French Gabriel Hanotaux, the Italians Eugenio Griffini and Angelo Sammarco, and the American Pierre Crabités – and because of specific policies that regulated the admission to the archive and the documents available for consultation, the archive ended up being a way to reinforce the monarchy's role in the making of modern Egypt more than anything else.[9]

A *royalist* historiographical school soon consolidated around 'Abdin and between the 1920s and the early 1930s, the scholars involved in it published several books in Arabic and French. These studies intended to present a new, pro-monarchist image of Egypt to Egyptian readers on the one hand and to those Egyptian residents who could not read Classical Arabic – many of the Jews, but also the Greek and Italian communities – and to a European public on the other. For the latter, French, which was at the time the main language of culture and international communication in Egypt and in the Mediterranean region, seemed the most logical choice.[10] Additionally, the fact that many works were written in French points to a connection with that French *Egyptomanie* started in 1798 with Napoleon's expedition to Egypt – envisioned as a mythical nation to be re-awakened by the encounter with France – that in the course of the nineteenth century had contributed to popularize this country as a major source of inspiration for European artists, diffusing among scholars a great interest in Egyptian antiquities.[11]

---

[9] Yoav Di Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past. Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 11-13. Consider also: Anthony Gorman, *Historians, State and Politics in Twentieth Century Egypt. Contesting the Nation*, (London: Routledge, 2003).

[10] On the diffusion of French in colonial and monarchical Egypt, Daniel Gerard, "Le choix culturel de la langue en Egypte", *Egypte-Monde Arabe* 27-28 (1996): 253-284; Frédéric Abécassis, "Approche d'un champ: l'enseignement étranger en Egypte, 1921-1952", *Egypte-Monde Arabe* 18-19/ 2 (1994): 169-194 and Id., "La France, précepteur de l'Egypte indépendante? Rivalités franco-britanniques et structuration du système scolaire national égyptien dans les années 1920", *Actes du colloque international "Langue, statuts et usages pendant la période coloniale",* Tunis, Centre d'études et de recherches économiques et sociales, 24-25-26 April 2008, available at, http://perso.enslsh.fr/fabecassis/Frederic_Abecassis_fichiers/Articles/Tunis2008.pdf,43 [accessed 22 October 2011].

[11] See, Juan Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt. Invading the Middle East*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). On nineteenth-century Egyptomania consider for example: *L'Egyptomanie à l'épreuve de l'archéologie*, ed. Jean-Michel Humbert (Paris: Editions du Gram, 2004); Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities. Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) – which focus on architecture, archaeology, and the beginnings of Egyptology – and Edward Said's discussion of Egypt in Verdi's opera *Aida* in: *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Knopf, 1994), 111-131.

Among the men who gravitated around 'Abdin was Joseph Cattaoui (1861-1942), one of the greatest personalities of Egyptian Jewry during the monarchical era. Cattaoui was born into an old Cairo Jewish family, known for its involvement in local commerce and banking. Besides participating in his family's businesses, he was very close to the Royal House and one of the few Jews involved in Egyptian domestic politics. In fact, Cattaoui was a member of the Egyptian Senate, economic advisor for the 1921 Egyptian delegation to London, and in 1924 and 1925 minister of Finance and of Communications in two cabinets of Ahmed Ziwar *pasha* (1864-1945). Last but not least, he acted as the president of the *Société Royale de Géographie* and of the Jewish Community of Cairo from 1925 until his death in 1942.[12] During his long career, Joseph Cattaoui published several books on Egyptian history: *Le régime des Capitulations en Egypte* (1927), *Coup d'oeil sur la chronologie de la Nation égyptienne* (1931) and *Le khedive Ismail et la dette égyptienne* (1935). His son René (1896-1994), deputy of Wadi Kom Ombo from 1938 to 1953 and president of the Jewish Community of Cairo from 1943 to 1946, wrote *Le règne de Mohamed Aly d'après les archives russes en Egypte* (1931-1936), a study in four volumes. Joseph's younger brother Adolphe (1865-1925), vice-president of the *Société Royale de Géographie*, was the author of several books on Egyptology, such as the 1918 *Champollion et le déchiffrement des hieroglyphes*.[13]

In November 1925 Joseph Cattaoui was among the promoters of the Cairo-based *Société d'Etudes Historiques Juives d'Egypte*. He was in fact executive president of the *Société*, whereas the Istanbul-born Chief Rabbi of Cairo Haim Nahum (1873-1960) acted as honorary president. In the *comité d'honneur* of the society sat the most important Cairo Jewish businessmen and professionals, such as Abramino Menasce – who in 1926 founded the city's *Hôpital Israélite* – and Salomon Cicurel, owner of the famous *Grands Magasins Cicurel & Oreco*. In the following years, the *Société* promoted the publication of books on Egyptian Jewish history, organized lectures on Jewish and non-Jewish topics and contributed to the reorganization of the library of the *Temple Sha'ar ha-Shamayim* (in Hebrew: "The gates of heaven") – the main synagogue of Cairo, located in the area of Isma'iliyyah – and to the cataloguing of hundreds of documents from the Cairo *genizah*, whose systematic study had begun in the mid-1890s.[14] Until then – with the notable exception of the Cairo Jew Ya'qub Sannu' (1839-1912), who played an important role in late nineteenth century Egyptian

[12] Kraemer, *The Jews*, 94-97 and Beinin, *The Dispersion*, 45-47. On the *Société Royale de Géographie*: Donald M. Reid, "The Egyptian Geographical Society: From Foreign Laymen's Society to Indigenous Professional Association", *Poetics Today* 14/3 (1993): 539-572.

[13] Some of these books are cited in, Gorman, *Historians*, 18 and Di Capua, *Gatekeepers*, 119 and 183. All the texts are available at the *Jewish National Library* of Jerusalem.

[14] Kraemer, *The Jews*, 170. See also, "Société d'Etudes Historiques Juives d'Egypte", available at: http://www.farhi.org/genealogy/index.html [accessed 26 May 2012] and, as an example of the themes covered by the journal, consider the 1947 issue digitalized by the American-based *Historical Society of Jews From Egypt*, available at: http://hsje.org/docs/revuejuive1947.htm [accessed 26 May 2012].

journalism and nationalism – virtually all texts written by Egyptian Jews had been traditional rabbinical studies on Jewish customs and rites such as *Neveh Shalom* ("Abode of peace") published in 1893 by the Chief Rabbi of Alexandria Elie Hazan (1846-1908) or the 1908 *Nahar Miẓrayim* (in Hebrew: "The river of Egypt") of the Chief Rabbi of Cairo Rafael Bensimon (1891-1920).[15] One should also mention the works of two Syrian-born Jewish intellectuals – Hillel Farhi (1868-1940) and Shimon Moyal (1866-1915) – who lived and worked in early twentieth century Cairo. In 1917, Farhi edited quite a successful version of the Jewish prayer book – known as *Siddur Farhi* – and an Arabic-Hebrew annotated version of the *Haggadah* of *Pesach*. Shimon Moyal on the other hand published an abridged Arabic version of the *Talmud* in 1909.[16] Even though these books did not focus on the history of Egyptian Jews, it is still worth keeping them in mind when thinking about the intellectual arena to which the *Société* and Cattaoui would also contribute.

The texts by Cattaoui did not refer specifically to the Jews and their ethno-religious heritage, but dealt with Egypt and its long and complex history as a whole. The same can be argued for the activities and works sponsored by the *Société*, which were not only destined to a Jewish audience, but to a wider Egyptian one. Through the books of Cattaoui and the lectures of the *Société*, the Jews – and the Jewish upper class in particular – took part in the cultural and national rebirth of Egypt and confirmed their improving status and social visibility within the local arena. I argue that this kind of history writing should be considered not just as a branch of an Egyptian national culture in-the-making, but as something connected to a wider field of late Ottoman and Egyptian bourgeois sociability and communication whose origins went back to the late nineteenth century.[17] Moreover, as Colette Zytnicki wrote, it was precisely in the period under study that North African and Middle Eastern Jews entered the *bibliothéque coloniale* and that their origins became a very

[15] On the Egyptian rabbinical literature in the turn-of-the-century, Landau, *Jews,* 93-114. See also: Shlomo Zalman-Havlin, "Ha-yeẓirah ha-ruḥanit" ("Intellectual activities"), in *Toldot yehudei Miẓrayim ba-tkufah ha-'otmanit* ("The Jews of Egypt in Ottoman times"), ed. Jacob Landau, (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim, 1988), 245-309 [Hebrew] and Zvi Zohar, "Ha-yeẓirah ha-halaḥtit ve-ha-toranit shel rabbanei Miẓrayim ba-meataim ha-shanim ha-aḥronot" ("The halaḥik literature and Torah commentaries of the Egyptian rabbis in the last two hundred years"), *Pe'amim* 86-87 (2001): 175-213 [Hebrew].

[16] On Farhi: Nahem Ilan, "Le-mi no'edet Haggadat Farchi? La-dmutam shel-yehudim ba-Miẓrayim ba-maḥaẓit ha-rishonah shel-ha-meah ha-'esrim" ("For whom was the Farhi haggadah intended? On the image of Egyptian Jews during the first half of the twentieth century"), *Jewish Studies Internet Journal*, 4 (2005): 35-59, available at, http://www.biu.ac.il/js/JSIJ/4-2005/Ilan.pdf [Hebrew, accessed 18 May 2012]. For an analysis of Moyal's *At-Talmud*, see, Jonathan M. Gribetz, "An Arabic-Zionist Talmud: Shimon Moyal's *At-Talmud*", *Jewish Social Studies* 17/1 (2010): 1-30.

[17] Michael E. Gasper, *The Power of Representation. Publics, Peasants, and Islam in Egypt*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 30.

important scholarly and political issue for Jews and non-Jews alike.[18] This further explains why the *national* status of Jews and their centuries-old history became such interesting themes to be debated in Egypt.

Maurice Fargeon and the Re-Invention of the Egyptian Jewish Past

In 1936, in the aftermath of King Fu'ad's death and the beginning of the reign of his son Faruq, and because of the spreading of more radical nationalist and Islamic movements, the so-called Egyptian *liberal age* slowly entered into crisis. The Arab-Jewish revolt in British Palestine which took place that same year further fuelled anti-Jewish feelings all over the Middle East and in Egypt and, as a reaction to that, contributed to the diffusion of Zionism among Jews. One year later, the 1937 Montreux Convention abolished the system of the Capitulations, which had until then granted several fiscal and legal privileges to foreigners and to those members of minority groups who were foreign *protégés* – as was the case for many Jews.[19]
Considering all this, it is not surprising that Maurice Fargeon decided to publish two books on the history of Egyptian Jews precisely then. Fargeon was a journalist and amateur historian, and an active member of the Jewish Community of Cairo – for which he worked as *sécretaire de la taxe communale* from 1938 to 1942. Since the early 1930s he wrote for various newspapers and magazines and edited *Kadima* (in Hebrew: "Eastward/forward"), a monthly journal published in Cairo and sold together with the Zionist daily in Arabic *Al-Shams* (in Arabic: "The sun").[20]

Fargeon's first piece of writing seems to have been an anti-Nazi pamphlet published in 1934, *Le tyran moderne: Hitler ou la verité sur la vie du Fuehrer*, for which he was taken to court by German citizens living in Egypt who accused him of slander.[21] His first historical monograph was published in 1938: *Les juifs en Egypte depuis les origines jusqu'à ces jours* (henceforth, *Les juifs en Egypte*). It was followed one year later by a collection of biographies, *Médecins et avocats juifs au*

[18] Colette Zytnicki, *Les Juifs du Maghreb. Naissance d'une historiographie coloniale*, (Paris: PUPS, 2011).
[19] For a more detailed analysis of 1930s Egypt I refer to, Afaf L. Al-Sayyid Marsot, *A Short History of Modern Egypt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and Panayotis J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Modern Egypt From Muhammad Ali to Mubarak*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991).
[20] See, Maurice Fargeon to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 26 April 1936, file Egypte III B Archives of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, Paris and the issues of *Kadima* available at the Jewish National Library of Jerusalem. On *Al-Shams*, founded in 1934 by Sa'd Malki, Victor Nahmias, "'Al-Shams'. 'Iton yehudi be-Miẓrayim, 1934-1948" (" 'Al-Shams'. A Jewish newspaper in Egypt, 1934-1948"), *Pe'amim* 16 (1983): 128-141 [Hebrew].
[21] Bat Ye'or, "Zionism in Islamic Lands: the Case of Egypt", *The Wiener Library Bulletin*, 43-44/30 (1977): 27 and Kraemer, *The Jews*, 135. I am not considering this pamphlet, as well as the 1946 *Encyclopédie populaire juive*, since they go beyond the goal of my analysis.

service de l'Egypte. In 1942 and 1943 he published the *Annuaire des juifs d'Egypte et du Proche-Orient* – a kind of Egyptian Jewish *Who's Who* – for which he wrote short biographical profiles of the main Egyptian Jewish entrepreneurs and professionals, together with a description of the most important things that had occurred to Jews all over the world.

Despite being cited by all scholars who have dealt with the history of Egyptian Jews, Fargeon's books have not been analyzed as historical sources, except by Joel Beinin who very briefly discussed Fargeon's *Annuaire des juifs d'Egypte et du Proche Orient*. Beinin described the book as an attempt to dispute on one side the ideologies of *Misr al-Fatat* and the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, "who were […] antagonistic to the Jewish presence [in Egypt]", and on the other "the Zionist goal of 'negation of the diaspora.' "[22] Over the next pages I will introduce *Les juifs en Egypte* and *Médecins et avocats juifs au service de l'Egypte,* reading them as an attempt to forge a historical memory which connected Egyptian Jews and non-Jews, combining both historical facts and fictitious elements so as to produce a charming – yet partly *imagined* – past.

Les juifs en Egypte was the first comprehensive study dedicated to the history of Egyptian Jews written according to the principles of modern historiographical prose.[23] The book was divided in two parts, one dedicated to ancient, medieval, and early modern times and one to the modern period. It was dedicated to "His Majesty Farouk 1st King of Egypt", as the king was for Fargeon the one to be thanked for the Jews' prosperity: "How can I publish a book that talks about a community [*contrée*] over which you rule so wisely, […] without paying you a tribute?"[24] By interpreting biblical sources and citing numerous historical and theological studies, Fargeon underlined the special meaning that Egypt had in the history of the Jewish People: "…every time they have been oppressed […], the Jews took refuge in Egypt, where they were sure to find the most cordial and fraternal reception."[25] Despite the fact that the Jews had been enslaved in Egypt, from where they escaped after the ill-famed Ten Plagues, Fargeon underlined how: "Entered into Egypt as seventy fathers [*péres de famille*], the sons of Israel came out as a people, becoming a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."[26]
According to Beinin, his explanation of the ties between the People of Israel and Egypt re-elaborated some of the theories of the famous *Histoire du peuple d'Israël* by Ernest Renan (1823-1892), a very popular text amongst

[22] Beinin, *The Dispersion*, 34.
[23] A few years earlier, Bension Taragan had published an historical monograph that was concerned with Alexandrian Jews only, see, 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).
[24] Fargeon, *Les juifs*, 2. These and all other citations from Fargeon's books are my translations of the French original version.
[25] Ibid., 23.
[26] Ibid., 26.

Francophone Jews in the early twentieth century.[27] As Renan, Fargeon thought that ancient Egyptian beliefs had an influence on the Jewish practice of circumcision and the Ten Commandments – which apparently resembled the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Further, following a linguistic theory which had been formulated already in the 1835 *Hebrew Characters Derived From Hieroglyphics* of the English John Lamb and gained great success over the course of the nineteenth century, he believed the Hebrew alphabet to have originated from Egyptian hieroglyphs.[28]

Additionally, Fargeon connected modern Egypt to the Pharaonic era: the true cradle of the *eternal* Egyptian nation. For him, Egyptians were not Arabs but *arabisés*: "The Egyptian of today […] is the same as that one of a thousand years ago."[29] This idea echoed the so-called *Pharaonism*, an Egyptian cultural and political movement that reached its peak of popularity in the 1920s. According to this movement, Egypt had always had a unique national identity that since the time of the Pharaohs distinguished it from its neighbouring countries.[30] Even though it is true that by the time Fargeon published his books *Pharaonism* had been partly dismissed in favour of a more Arab-Islamic interpretation of the Egyptian past, the 1930s – as recently pointed out – should be interpreted as a decade of *gradual* political radicalization characterized by deep cultural and ideological diversity.[31]

Fargeon was one among many intellectuals and historians that continued to elaborate ways to interpret the Egyptian past, so as to give their readers present-oriented and articulated lessons of history. His books, especially when representing Fu'ad and Faruq as *modern* and enlightened Pharaohs, should be situated *on the margins* of royalist historiography and were influenced also by European – mainly French – publications on ancient Egyptian history such as those of Hanotaux and Renan.

Fargeon historicized some of the most controversial aspects of the history of Egyptian Jews, like the fact that many of them did not have Egyptian but

---

[27] Beinin, *The Dispersion*, 33.

[28] In any case, it seems that Fargeon did not read Lamb's text, as the symbols contained in the *tableau comparatif* of Hebrew letters and hieroglyphics of *Les juifs* are very different from those of *Hebrew Characters Derived From Hieroglyphics*. See, Fargeon, *Les juifs*, 75 and John Lamb, *Hebrew Characters Derived From Hieroglyphics. The Original Pictures Applied to the Interpretation of Various Words and Passages in the Sacred Writings and Especially of the History of the Creation and Fall of Man*, (London: Parker, 1835), IV-VI.

[29] Fargeon, *Les juifs*, 61.

[30] On *Pharaonism*, Donald M. Reid, "Nationalizing the Pharaonic Past: Egyptology, Imperialism, and Egyptian Nationalism, 1922-1952", *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, eds. James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 127-149; Id., *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War One*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), esp. 258-286 and Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs: The Search For Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[31] Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt: Dictatorship Versus Democracy in the 1930s*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

foreign, often European, nationality. Throughout the Ottoman era and until the Egyptian Nationality Law of 1929, "…the Jews, […] tried to escape from an arbitrary government [i.e. the Ottomans] thanks to the protection of one of the Capitulations' powers, thanks to which they carried on their businesses smoothly." Therefore, it was only in order to conduct a peaceful life that many Jews had acquired foreign nationality – a trend that the local authorities at the time did not oppose and which did not imply that the Jews did not feel at home in Egypt.[32] This was especially true of those Jews who migrated to Egypt from *within* the Ottoman Empire between the late nineteenth century and the 1920s, a time when moving from Thessalonika to Alexandria surely did not have the same *imaginative* and *national* meaning it would have in the 1940s. Moreover, even though many Jews were not Egyptian nationals, from the early twentieth century and under the reigns of Fu'ad and Faruq, they did play a significant role in the making of modern Egypt: "Thanks to the new regime and all the changes that it brought about, the Jews living in this country feel the mission they have to accomplish as loyal subjects [*sujets fidèles*] of a unified and proud nation."[33] But how could the Jews be loyal subjects of the Egyptian state, if not all of them had an Egyptian passport? And then, who exactly were Egyptian Jews?

Fargeon answered these questions in his following publication, *Médecins et avocats juifs au service de l'Egypte* (henceforth: *Médecins*). As *Les juifs en Egypte*, *Médecins* started by going back to biblical times and to Moses, "the veteran of Egyptian Jewish doctors," who had combined Jewish religiosity with the medical knowledge learnt while living at the Pharaoh's palace.[34] Fargeon also discussed some of the Jewish dietary laws from Leviticus, showing their validity and ultimately their *modernity*. For example, Leviticus 3, 17 ("It shall be a perpetual statute for your generations throughout all your dwellings, that ye eat neither fat nor blood") was explained by saying that "everybody knows that the fat is hard to digest, especially where the climate is hot." He also wrote that thanks to these prohibitions diseases like syphilis and tuberculosis were less spread among Jews than among any other ethnic group.[35]
As Hart demonstrated, starting from the mid-nineteenth century the ideas of Jews as the founders of modern science, of Jewish dietary laws as inspired by hygienic and salutary norms, and finally of Moses as the forerunner of modern doctors and biologists, gained popularity among many Jewish and non-Jewish

[32] Fargeon, *Les juifs*, 166. See, Simon Shamir, "The Evolution of Egyptian Nationality Laws and Their Application to the Jews in the Monarchy Period", *The Jews of Egypt. A Mediterranean Society in Modern Times*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 33-67.
[33] Fargeon, *Les juifs*, 187, my emphasis.
[34] Maurice Fargeon, *Médecins et avocats juifs au service de l'Egypte*, (Cairo: Lencioni, 1939), 16-17. I will only deal with the volume dedicated to the Jewish doctors as I could not find the one on lawyers in any of the libraries and archives that I consulted in France, Israel, and Italy.
[35] Ibid., 18-19.

intellectuals and scientists, first in Central Europe and in the US.[36] Considering that – as I will now explain – many doctors of German and Eastern European origin migrated to Egypt in the 1920s and 1930s, it is very likely that Fargeon reframed their ideas in his text.[37]
This, together with *Les juifs en Egypte*'s indirect quotation of Renan, highlights how Fargeon did not write entirely novel narrations, but blended different theories and ideas that served his purpose. Such intellectual *hybridization* is in fact a common feature of the beginnings of many non-European historiographies, and more generally of the processes of *modernization* undergone by colonial and semi-colonial countries. In fact, this process often implies the translation and adaptation of originally *foreign* ideas and concepts to contexts where they can sometimes take new meanings – as was the case for Fargeon's Egyptian Jewish *national* interpretation of Renan.[38]

The historical excursus of *Médecins* continued with a list of all Jewish doctors that had lived in Hellenistic and Byzantine Egypt, ending with the beginning of Arab domination over Egypt. Among the renowned Jewish doctors of medieval Egypt was Maimonides (1135-1204). Besides being one of the most illustrious Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, Maimonides was a keen physician and in 1198 had been nominated personal doctor of El-Afdal, Salah-al-Din's son.[39] Fargeon dropped dozens of names of Jewish doctors citing sources that went from the travelogue of Rabbi Ovadiah from Bertinoro (ca. 1450-1516) to the 1897 *Essai sur l'histoire des Israélites de l'Empire Ottoman* of Moïse Franco. His investigation argued that throughout the Ottoman era Jewish doctors abounded in Egypt, "first of all thanks to the favour that the Ottoman rulers showed for the Jews of Egypt" – a statement that openly contradicted the negative judgement on the Ottomans formulated in *Les juifs en Egypte*.[40]
Fargeon indicated two physicians, the Italian Elia Rossi bey (1816-1891) and the Russian Serge Voronoff (1866-1951), as the initiators of a modern genealogy of Jewish doctors. The fact that neither of them was strictly speaking an *Egyptian* Jew did not seem to bother him. The *Médecins juifs au service de l'Egypte* were for him all Jewish doctors who happened to live in the country, whatever their nationality or place of birth. The book title itself stressed how

---

[36] Michael B. Hart, *The Healthy Jew. The Symbiosis of Judaism and Modern Medicine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
[37] Among the possible intermediaries between Fargeon and these theories might be Max Meyerhof, a German doctor and a renowned expert in the history of Oriental and Islamic medicine, who migrated to Cairo in 1903 and is cited in *Médecins*, 41.
[38] On this, Di Capua, *Gatekeepers* and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[39] Fargeon, *Médecins*, 22. It should be noted that the eight centennial of Maimonides' birth had been celebrated in 1935. See, *Cahiers juifs – Maimonide sa vie son oeuvre son influence*, 15-16 (1935) – a special issue of a Jewish magazine published in Alexandria and edited by the Italian David Prato, Chief Rabbi of the city from 1927 to 1936.
[40] Fargeon, *Médecins*, 26.

these doctors had decided to work for the sake [*au service*] of the Egyptian nation and its advancement. The Jews were a *special* minority group, which was also highlighted by the fact that many Jewish doctors did not have Egyptian nationality, deeply rooted in the country's past and present. As Fargeon was aware that Zionism only interested a minority among Egyptian Jews, he opted for a vague blending of *Egyptianness* and *Jewishness*. In other words, the author proposed to his reader quite neutral models of conduct that explained how to be at the same time good Jews *and* loyal Egyptians.[41]
More than half of *Médecins* consisted in the biographies of fifty-two Jewish doctors from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. With the exception of thirteen doctors actually born in Egypt (eight in Cairo, three in Alexandria, and two in Tantah), all the others were born in European countries. Most of them were Russian, Eastern European (seventeen doctors) or German Jews (eight doctors) who had migrated to Egypt in the early twentieth century. Given the differences in terms of geographical origin, language, academic background, and political orientation, it is difficult to consider these doctors as members of a coherent *national* professional category. Furthermore, some worked for Egyptian hospitals, some for foreign ones, and many of them had come to Egypt (only) as a consequence of social and political circumstances and not because of an innate *affection* for the Egyptian nation. For instance Dr. Herman Engel, born in Hamburg in 1886, migrated to Cairo because "Hitler's regime abruptly ended the advancement of his career."[42]

The presence of foreign professionals – doctors, but also architects, engineers, and archaeologists – was in many respects a common feature of colonial and monarchical Egypt.[43] For doctors, be it sufficient to cite the case of Antoine Barthélemy Clot *bey* (1793-1868), a French physician at the court of Muhammad 'Ali and founder of the first Egyptian *School for Midwives* in 1827.[44] This is why the Jewish doctors of Fargeon are to be considered not merely as foreigners living in Egypt, but as members of a *trans-national* milieu that since

41 The embrace of ideas of Jewish national rebirth and Egyptian nationalist stances was not unique to Fargeon. In fact, most Egyptian Zionists throughout the 1930s and early 1940s shared this approach. See, Gudrun Kraemer, "Zionism in Egypt, 1917-1948", in *Egypt and Palestine. A Millennium of Association (868 - 1948),* eds. Amnon Cohen and David Baer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 348-366.
42 Fargeon, *Médecins*, 35.
43 On the medical doctors, Amira El Azhary Sonbol, *The Creation of a Medical Profession in Egypt, 1800-1922*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 109-112 and Donald M. Reid, "The Rise of Professions and Professional Organization in Modern Egypt", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16/1 (1974): 24-57.
44 The history surrounding the *School of Midwives* has been interestingly discussed by: Khaled Fahmy, "Women, Medicine, and Power in Nineteenth-Century Egypt", in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 35-72. For a more general overview, Nancy Gallagher, "Writing Women Medical Practitioners into the History of Modern Egypt", in *Re-Envisioning Egypt 1919-1952*, eds. Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy J. Johnson, Barak A. Salmoni (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 351-370.

the mid-nineteenth century saw Egypt as a possible place to start their life and professional career anew. They were a foundational part of urban Egypt, that – especially before 1936 and the end of the system of the Capitulations – embodied a sort of Mediterranean *borderland*, which had not yet defined its national identity and ethno-cultural boundaries in a precise way.[45]

Elia Rossi *bey* (1816-1891) was perhaps the quintessential example of how a *foreign* doctor could in a few decades become *local*, thanks to his professional activities and, last but not least, marriage alliances. Dr. Rossi was born in Ferrara from an Italian Jewish family. Once in Egypt he became the personal physician of Prince Halim (1831-1894), one of the sons of Muhammad 'Ali.[46] He had moved there in 1838, working as a military doctor for the *Khedive*. Dr. Rossi was the author of several medical treatises, including a *Geografia medica dell'Egitto*. His social position was further strengthened by the marriage of his daughter Ida with Moise Cattaoui – the paternal uncle of the above-cited Joseph.[47]
Other doctors – caught in the midst of the European anti-Semitic politics of the interwar period – had instead chosen Egypt as the ultimate *homeland* where they could live a peaceful Jewish life. This was the case of the renowned gynaecologist Carlo Pinto, an Italian national born in Alexandria in 1877. Pinto had a part in the foundation of the Italian *Ospedale Benito Mussolini* of Alexandria, and was an "Officer of the Crown of Italy, Commander of the Order of the Nile, Commander of the Order of Ismail and… Cavaliere del Lavoro, one of the highest Italian awards!…" Until the promulgation of the Fascist racial laws of 1938, Pinto – as other Alexandrian Jews holding Italian citizenship – had been a fervent Fascist, but that event made him turn "toward his brothers [i.e. the Jews], starting to work in their service for free."[48]

The special connection between Egypt and the People of Israel thus extended from the time of Moses to that of King Faruq, and highlighted how this country was and had always been a place where the Jews lived happily.

---

[45] On the notion of *borderland*, Gloria Anzaldùa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, (San Francisco: Ann Lute Books, 1999). Specifically on Egypt: Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
[46] Fargeon, *Médecins*, 27-28. See also, Moisé L. Finzi, *Biografia di sua eccellenza il signor dott. Elia Rossi di Ferrara ora in Egitto Kaimacan Bey membro di molte accademie scientifiche e letterarie e medico personale di S. A. Reale il principe Halim pascià governatore generale del Sennar*, (Rovigo: Minnelli, 1861). An exhibition on the life and works of Elia Rossi has been held from April to June 2012 at the *Museo Civico di Storia Naturale* of Ferrara, see, http://storianaturale.comune.fe.it/index.phtml?id=506 [accessed 21 May 2012].
[47] Samir Raafat, "Dynasty: The House of Yacoub Cattaui", *Egyptian Mail*, 2 April 1994, available at, http://www.egy.com/judaica/94-04-02.shtml [accessed 22 May 2012]
[48] Fargeon, *Médecins*, 43. On the connection between Fascism and Alexandrian Jews holding Italian nationality, see, Kraemer, *The Jews*, 157-158 and Anouschka Lazarev, "Italiens, italianité et fascisme", in *Alexandrie 1860-1960. Une modèle éphémère de convivialité,* eds. Robert Ilbert and Ilios Yannakakis, (Paris: Autrement, 1992), 92-104 and also Anna Scarantino, "La comunità ebraica in Egitto fra le due guerre mondiali", *Storia contemporanea* 17/6 (1986): 1033-1080.

Although he was not – at least in the first place – a historian, Fargeon followed what Di Capua defined "the professional ethos of the *effendi* historian": a belief in what the author presumed to be historical objectiveness and the pursuit of a research based on a rich bibliography and prolonged archival fieldwork.[49] As Fargeon very emphatically stated in the introduction to *Médecins*: "We did our best, [doing research] in the Library of Cairo, in that of Alexandria, and in private collections, verifying the authenticity of each and every document, visiting the *guenizah* and the cemeteries."[50]

His books can be interpreted as a means to incline Egyptian Jews towards an understanding of history not in terms of biblical generations and tales, but as a *modern* field of study that could help to clarify their identity and their *national* status. On the other hand, by putting together very different ideologies and topics, and by mixing historical data with more disputable events and narrations, the books of Fargeon epitomized the ambiguous socio-cultural and national status in which many Egyptian Jews lived in the monarchical period.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have reconstructed the relation between Jews and the study of history during the Egyptian constitutional monarchy. I have first analyzed the beginnings of a Jewish interest for history, contextualizing it within the historiographical revival promoted by King Fu'ad and pursued by scholars who worked at the Royal Palace of 'Abdin. The activities of the *Société* and the books written by Joseph Cattaoui clarified how at that time the Egyptian Jewish upper class presented itself as an inherent component of an urban elite of professionals and entrepreneurs that contributed to the socio-economic and cultural advancement of the newly born Egyptian monarchy. In the 1930s, a renowned Cairo Jewish journalist and Zionist sympathizer, Maurice Fargeon, proposed instead a more clearly *Jewish* interpretation of the Egyptian Jewish past, which underlined the special connections that the Jews had with Egypt and its rulers. *Les juifs en Egypte* and *Médecins* re-narrated the history of the Jews by mixing biblical motifs and the Pharaonic past, Jewishness and Egyptian national ideals.

Initially, history was for the Jews a way for taking part in the cultural life of monarchical Egypt and an intellectual field thanks to which they could publicly display their status in the country. But from the mid-1930s onwards, it increasingly became a self-narration vis-à-vis a rapidly changing political scenario, and a way to reinforce the idea that Egyptian Jews and non-Jews alike were crucial components of modern Egypt – conceived as a quasi-mythical

[49] Yoav Di Capua, "The Professional Worldview of the *Effendi* Historian", *History Compass* 7/1 (2009): 316 onwards.

[50] Fargeon, *Médecins*, 14. The presumed objectiveness and historical accuracy of this book was further reinforced thanks to a preface written by Israel Wolfenson, a prominent scholar of Semitic languages and philology at the time professor at the University of Cairo.

space that had profoundly influenced the Jews' lives and beliefs since the Pharaonic era.
As Alcalay has suggested, to claim that during the first half of the twentieth century Jews and non-Jews lived aside in the Middle East "is not to imply that these groups lived in some […] idealised harmony […] *but that they recognized each other*, implicitly and explicitly."[51] This applies also to the Egyptian case, where through the narration of old and new historical traditions it was possible to forge a complex and multi-faceted feeling of *Egyptianness* that lasted for decades. The authors and books that I have cited can be considered as the most visible expressions of a largely *shared memory* that aimed at connecting the Jews to Egypt, at a time when this nation could still be imagined in multiple and shifting ways. Furthermore, they are texts that also point out the crucial place that Egypt and its enduring presence in world history had for many early twentieth century non-Egyptian intellectuals and historians, which in turn influenced their Egyptian counterparts. All this continued up until the 1940s, when more rigid and less inclusive definitions of Egypt and of *Egyptianness* slowly emerged, in which very little, if any, space for the Jews and all other non-Muslim minorities was left.

The imagination and the remembrance of an Egyptian (Jewish) past advanced by people like the members of the *Société* and by Fargeon might appear as a failed project. From an Egyptian point of view, texts such as those cited above nowadays are nothing but a marginal and distant project that cannot be contained anymore within the national historiographical canon.[52] But for Fargeon, as well as for many others of his Jewish and non-Jewish contemporaries, thinking of a shared Egyptian Arab and Jewish historical memory did not seem such an impossible challenge. It was instead one of the ideas along which a modern and *secular* Egyptian national identity and its urban bourgeoisie could be envisioned.[53]
That said, one should acknowledge that Fargeon's mixture of Jewishness, *Egyptianness*, and bourgeois ambitions did not propose any concrete solution to the problems that many Jews faced in 1930s and early 1940s Egypt – among the most important the issue of the Jews' nationality – and resulted in a fascinating, yet also illusory narration of the past. Such re-writing of Egyptian Jewish history can therefore mainly be read as part of a complex cultural and emotional imaginary, where the Jews could find traces of their enduring, proud presence in the history of Egypt, connecting the Pharaonic era to the constitutional monarchy and the prophet Moses to King Faruq.

---

[51] Alcalay, *After Jews*, 21.
[52] Beinin, *The Dispersion*, 1-7 and Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 136-142.
[53] On the meanings of *secularism* in early twentieth century Egypt Egypt, Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 205-255.

Dario Miccoli is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Modern Hebrew and Jewish Studies at the Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa Mediterranea of the University of Venice. He holds a Phd in History and Civilization from the European University Institute of Florence, where he discussed a dissertation entitled *The Jews of Egypt: Schools, Family, and the Making of an Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s-1950s*. His research interests are the cultural and gender history of the modern Middle East – with a special focus on Egypt and Israel – and Israeli literature by Jews from Arab countries. Among his publications: "Le sue parole, le nostre voci: tradurre David Grossman tra Israele, Europa e Stati Uniti d'America", *Rassegna mensile d'Israel*, forthcoming and "La pace dei corpi", *Limes*, 5 (2007), 231-239.

How to quote this article:
Dario Miccoli, *Moses and Faruq. The Jews and the study of history in interwar Egypt 1920s-1940s*, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", n.4 November 2012
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=319

Art Spiegelman*, MetaMaus. A Look inside a Modern Classic* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), pp. 299 & DVD.

by *Federico Damonte*

MetaMaus: a contemporary *midrash*

Why *MetaMaus*?

Pay attention to the look and feel of any book by Art Spiegelman: a lover of books as objects, a typographic enthusiast who used to run his own press in his apartment together with his wife Françoise Mouly, also an expert on printing and publishing, he once befuddled a whole party of well-known authors by asking them whether they preferred three-piece or one-piece binding. Of course, none of them knew what he was talking about[1]. His books always have their own specific typographical personality, from the exact replicas of his sketchbooks in *Be a nose!* to the out of size cardboard pages of *In the Shadow of no Towers*[2].

MetaMaus introduces itself to us with a prominent hole in the hard cover, right in the place of the only visible eye of the well-known image of Spiegelman as a chain-smoking mouse. The hole reveals a swastika with a Hitler's cat face on the first page of the book, which in turn fills the hole at the centre of the accompanying DVD, tucked inside the back of the cover. Impressive as it is, the ingenious piece of publishing craftsmanship is not the most important, or rather revealing, aspect of *MetaMaus*: just by a quick browsing – which should always precede the actual reading – one notices that at the end of the book the pages are published on a different, darker, paper, and that the text is formatted differently. This section has no pictures, as opposed to the extensive visual documentation of the preceding chapters. This section contains the transcript of the long interviews that the author had with his father, Vladek Spiegelman, and that form the basis of the story in *Maus*. It is this stratification, I argue, that gives us a key to the understanding of *MetaMaus*.

Because *MetaMaus* is not an easily classifiable book. It is definitely *not* a "critical companion" to *Maus,* and while it is incredibly rich in information is also very difficult to navigate as a reference book. Spiegelman says that the publisher, Viking, was not able to write the back cover description, and his wife Françoise had to do it[3]. Furthermore, its usual place on bookshop shelves, next to *Maus,* raises a rather obvious question: why another book by Spiegelman about *Maus*? Is not everything one needs to know about *Maus* explained in *Maus* itself?

---

[1] Interview with *Publishers Weekly*, available at http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/book-news/comics/article/49046-art-spiegelman-on-the-future-of-the-book.html

[2] Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Viking, 2004; *Be a Nose!*, McSweeney's, 2009.

[3] Interview with *The Comics Journal*, available at http://www.tcj.com/an-art-spiegelman-interview/.

Remember that *Maus* contains *two* different stories: a story in the 'past' about how Vladek survived Auschwitz, and a story in the 'present', in which 'Artie' interviews his father about his war-time experiences. The 'present' story-line provides ample commentary about memory, representation, trauma and its transmission, and other unescapable problems related to the narration of life in the death camps. It is one of *Maus* great merits that it discusses in depth its own goals and methods while at the same time providing the reader with a thoroughly engaging narration. More generally, no other modern graphic novel has less need to justify or explain its existence: like other books about the Holocaust, its goal is to bear witness, and by universal consensus *Maus* does so in a way rarely achieved in the literature about the death camps. In this sense *Maus* is indeed a modern classic. So, again, why a book about *Maus* by the author of *Maus*?

The stated answer to this question is found (in cartoon form) right of the beginning of the book: according to it, Spiegelman saw this book as an opportunity to provide conclusive answers to the recurring questions thrown at him every time he is asked about *Maus*: why the Holocaust? Why mice? Why comics? I, for one, am not entirely convinced by this explanation: these obvious questions have been repeatedly addressed by Spiegelman himself in numerous interviews, and extensively discussed in a critical literature which by now is so vast it is difficult even to survey[4]. I propose a more far-ranging reason: *MetaMaus* is the attempt by the author of *Maus* to explain and defend the ways in which he dealt with the fundamental problems posed by telling a story about Auschwitz. These can be reduced to the problem of how not to betray history, *that* history, by narrating it in an artistic form, the problem posed by Adorno in his famous dictum that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"[5]. As Spiegelman says in several interviews, *MetaMaus* is his effort to be as honest and transparent as possible about his goals, reasons and methods, to provide the ultimate answer to those who objected to, for instance, the mice and cats metaphor, or the very use of comics as a medium to tell the story of a death camp survivor. In the author's words, *MetaMaus* aims at showing all the constituent elements of *Maus,* so that the reader can go and make his own *Maus*[6].

In this, MetaMaus cannot but be regarded a complete success: this has to be the most exhaustive and in-depth examination of a graphic novel ever produced. It reaches its goal by focussing strictly on the creative process behind *Maus*, and by producing all the visual and historical evidence needed to understand that process. Such a vast material is organised in an amazingly simple way: the book consists of a long interview with the author by Hilary

[4] The reader is referred to Geis, Deborah R. (ed.) *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's tale" of the Holocaust*, University of Alabama Press, 2007 and the references quoted there.

[5] The relevance of this quote to *Maus* is discussed by Chute in an essay on the accompanying DVD: *The Shadow of a Past Time*.

[6] See for instance the interview quoted in fn. 3.

Chute, divided into three chapters, corresponding to the three questions mentioned above: why the Holocaust? Why mice? Why comics? This is all the structure there is to such a wide-raging collection of material. Credit must be given to Chute's lucid and thorough questioning and to Spiegelman's thoughtful and well-argued answers to provide a coherent and interesting discussion. The text is illustrated by all the visual material mentioned in the interview, and more. As mentioned above, the book includes transcripts of Spiegelman's taped conversations with his father Vladek, and interviews with the members of his family: his wife Françoise, his son Dash and his daughter Anja. On the DVD we find a complete version of *Maus,* with each page and panel hyperlinked to sketches, notes and passages of Vladek's narration. True to its aim of presenting all constituent elements of *Maus*, the DVD rounds off all this material with a vast *genizah* (the DVD itself calls it a *midrash*) of *Maus* documents: the audio files of the interviews with Vladek, the home-made film of the Spiegelmans' research trip to Auschwitz, the first reviews of the (then still on-going) *Maus* series, and essays by Chute and Spiegelman himself.
By now the reader might well suspect that all this extra material is just useless filler for comic book fans, but that conclusion would not be justified. The heterogenous documents presented in *MetaMaus* do add up to a single, coherent, reading experience, but one needs some directions to navigate it without getting lost. The starting point are the transcripts of Vladek's interviews, found at the end of the book. The next logical step is to listen to the recorded interviews on the DVD, and be awed by the assured sound of Vladek's voice, and his authoritative broken English[7]. Finally, one has to go back to *Maus*, and rediscover it through the hyperlinked pages on the DVD. To say that the process adds to our understanding and enjoyment of *Maus* would be an understatement. The whole experience really does make the reader feel he is witnessing the creation of Maus before his own eyes. What is missing from this experience is the actual process of bringing *Maus* into existence, a lonely, laborious, 13-year long task. This is most effectively reconstructed in the interview.

What does it take to write a *Maus*?

Any "meta" book aspires to give us an insight into the creative process, and *MetaMaus* succeeds exceedingly well in it. In particular, this books healthily corrects the distorted view that literary works have a life of their own and can be explained by discussions about genres influences and literary aims. *MetaMaus* reminds us of the degree of commitment and dedication necessary to produce a work of the complexity and length of *Maus.* Spiegelman invites us to write our own *Maus*, but what did it take *him* to write *his*?

[7] This fundamental aspect of *Maus* is easily overlooked. For an insightful analysis, see A. Rosen, "The Language of Survival: English as Metaphor in Spiegelman's Maus", *Prooftexts: a Journal of Jewish Literary History*, 15-3, (September 1995), pp. 249 – 262.

The list is fairly impressive: first, a steady job, drawing trading cards for the *Topps* bubble-gum company. Then, personal stability, and therefore a wife – yes, Spiegelman publicly says that he married in order to have the stability needed to focus on his creative work[8]. Clarity of purpose: according to Françoise, his world view was fully formed when she met him in 1976[9]. Sheer determination: his previous book, *Breakdowns*[10], had no sales or reviews, and *Maus* was rejected by many publishers before being accepted by Viking[11].

The actual writing procedure is no less impressive: six steps from the recorded interviews to the finished page, each one requiring a decision about what to say, what to elide and how to say what is being said. Just imagine all the work and effort needed to turn a single first-person narrative into short dialogues written in small balloons. All this while striving to concentrate as much information as possible in every single page. As important as the working process, though, was the awareness that the author of such a story has to be in complete service to the story itself: Spiegelman explains that a recurring problem was not to overwhelm the story with displays of graphic and story-telling ability. A clear example is discussed on p. 143, which shows an impressive study into scratchboard technique. That experiment was abandoned, though, because "it insisted on my superiority to the reader". This conclusion is even more compelling if we think that it comes from a cartoonist well-known for his radically experimental approach to comics.

But being inservice to the story does not always mean taking away, it also means adding, most importantly, adding the 'present' story-line to show the whole working process behind the story, the very act of remembering and analysing those memories, without which the story would have been "fraudulent" (p. 208). Vladek is not telling his story directly, and it is important that this is made clear to the reader. Throughout *MetaMaus* Spiegelman repeats that "the subject of *Maus* is the retrieval of memory and ultimately, the creation of memory". Because the story of *Maus* is not that of a death-camp survivor having problems with his son, but "it's about a cartoonist trying to envision what his father went through" (p. 73)[12].

Writing *Maus* also required a huge amount of research, in a time where there was no internet, and non-academic material on the holocaust was not so common as now. Furthermore, as Spiegelman explains, the fact that *Maus* was

---

[8] *MetaMaus*, p. 91.

[9] *MetaMaus*, p. 92.

[10] Nostalgia Press, 1977.

[11] See the collection of rejection letters reproduced on p. 76 – 78.

[12] Even today, the importance of memory and authorship in writing about the Holocaust is far from being universally understood. A clear example among graphic novels is *Auschwitz: Une bande dessinée*, by Pascal Croci (Editions du Masque, 2000). In this book a past story about Auschwitz is framed by a present storyline set in modern-day war-torn Yugoslavia, and explicit parallels are made between the two stories. Needless to say, the decision to add a second, different, and fictional story on top of an equally fictional story about Auschwitz goes into exactly the opposite direction of Spiegelman's choice to dismantle and reveal the whole authorial process behind *Maus*.

written in cartoon form obliged him to look for visual references of all the places and buildings mentioned in the story. It is perhaps the most overlooked factor in the working process behind *Maus*. Spiegelman quotes an academic paper about the perils of oral history that supposedly pointed out a factual mistake: the toilets in Vladek's cabin are drawn like real water-closets, with plumbing, and not like long wooden planks, the image universally associated with the death camps. But Spiegelman – who travelled all the way to Auschwitz when that required getting a visa from a communist country – can answer that Vladek was in Auschwitz I, which used to be a barracks in World War I, and there the toilets were real toilets with plumbing (p. 58). It is not often that a "popular culture" item (whatever that is) like a comic book *corrects* our collective image of reality, instead of blindly following it.

What came before *Maus*?

More generally, Françoise Mouly is correct in saying that today *Maus* seem "inevitable", but back in the 70s was basically unthinkable (p. 93). From the point of view of comics history, what is most striking is how removed *Maus* is from the underground comics scene with which Spiegelman is usually associated. That scene was the product of the 60s counter-culture. Underground comics were self-published or small press comics books quite unlike mainstream superhero comics: they were irreverent and provocative in content, with a focus on the social and cultural issues of the day, especially, of course, sex and drugs. They were usually sold in "head shops" (euphemism for places where you could buy soft drugs) and even if they did not circulate much, their style and content – and attitude - was also found on the covers of LPs, posters, leaflets and so on. In short, they were part of the "visual language" of the era. Today, those comics have been canonized as the source from which modern, mature, alternative comics sprang. The name to know and revere is Robert Crumb, R. Crumb for comics *connoisseurs,* whose satirical, subversive – and sometimes wilful racist – comics painted a very bleak picture of both mainstream and "alternative" America.

The scene was based in San Francisco, and Spiegelman lived and worked there in the early 70s, right at the end of the whole counter-culture movement. He worked (and was friends with) R. Crumb and many other underground cartoonists. He edited his own underground comic book *Arcade,* together with Bill Griffith, another counter-culture hero from the 60s who still writes his own alternative (*very* alternative) comic strip *Zippy the Pinhead*[13]. Even the relationship between *Maus* and underground comics is a very close one: the first incarnation of the story (also titled *Maus*) appeared in an underground comic book called *Funny Animals*, edited by Justin Green[14]. That short 3-page

[13] It can be read online at http://www.zippythepinhead.com/.

[14] Green is the author of one early graphic novel, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (Last Gasp Eco Funnies, 1972), about the psychological problems associated with his catholic upbringing. Spiegelman has repeatedly declared that *Binky* showed him that autobiographical

story is usually considered crude compared to the much longer *Maus*, but it contains all constituent elements of the larger book: the cats and mice metaphor, the attention to historical detail, even the present storyline framing the story in the past[15]. The crucial point is, that even that early story does not look like anything else that had been done before in underground comics. One only need to look at the story R. Crumb contributed to *Funny Animals* to measure the distance: the story is about a sexy female anthropomorphic chicken being followed by two little fox boys who lure her into a bedroom and eat her. *These* were the stories that readers of underground magazines appreciated.

The pattern repeated itself when Spiegelman moved back to New York. There in 1980 he and Françoise launched their own highly influential "graphix magazine" *RAW*. The magazine is usually described as continuing the tradition of underground comics, leading straightly into contemporary "alternative comics". In my view, the magazine was Spiegelman's official declaration that "underground comix" were dead, and that the "scene" needed to open up. Printed with their own press in their apartment, the magazine was highly experimental both in format and content, and it drew heavily on foreign cartoonists and artists from Europe, Japan and even Africa. The result could not have been more different from the "classic" underground magazines of the 60s[16].

Spiegelman used *RAW* to publish his own *Maus* in instalments, but once again *Maus* looked completely out of place in its pages. The typographical format underlined that distance: *Maus* chapters were published as small booklets bound together with the magazine as inserts. Remember how typographical decisions are always significant in Spiegelman's books? This is no exception: the small size format was inspired by some booklets about the persecution of the Jews and the death-camps published in Poland immediately after the war[17]. They belonged to Spiegelman's mother Anja, and besides being an important source of information for *Maus*, they are the real cultural and ethical antecedent of *Maus*.

No similar connection can be found between the chapters of *Maus*, and the experimental, avant-guarde, in some cases frankly cerebral comics published in *RAW*. Much like the early short story *Maus* in that underground magazine, the longer, far more ambitious *Maus* was alone. And so was its author, Art Spiegelman: he says he received more support and appreciation from his boss at Topps bubble-gum company, who did not care for "alternative comics" at

---

comics were possible, and that "without *Binky*, there would be no *Maus*" (from Spiegelman's own introduction to Justin Green, *The Binky Brown Sampler*, Last Gasp, 1995).

[15] The story is reprinted in *MetaMaus*, p. 105 – 106.

[16] The contrast is even starker when we compare *RAW* with *Weirdo*, the magazine R. Crumb's published from 1981 to 1993. It continued steadfastly in the same visual and graphic mould as the old underground magazines, while the content exacerbated the nihilist critique typical of the 60s – but without the hope of a revolution (of any kind) to make up for it.

[17] *MetaMaus* (pp. 16 – 17) shows the covers of those old booklets side by side with those of the instalments of *Maus*.

all, than from his cartoonist friends, to whom *Maus* was "invisible" (p. 43). In *MetaMaus* (pp. 189 – 203) Spiegelman quotes all the possible influences on *Maus* he can honestly quote, even going as far as to mention as important influences old strips like *Dick Tracy* and *Little Orphan Annie*[18]! But in my view these claims only underline how *Maus* stands on its own.

MetaMaus*: a contemporary *midrash

MetaMaus also stands alone. Spiegelman himself said in several interviews that the book "earned a life of its own", and I cannot but agree. It is an immensely rewarding read, even if you know *Maus* from just one quick reading. The authors have tried to put everything in it, and it does repay the reader in many ways, but what I think sustain it as a work with its own dignity and purpose is not its wealth of material, but rather its clear moral message. It is not by chance, I think, that the collection of material about *Maus* in the DVD is called a *midrash*. What keeps that tradition of biblical commentary – and commentary on the commentary – alive today if not the implicit trust that *that* story can keep speaking to us? There is a question Chute does not ask Spiegelman in *MetaMaus,* namely whether he thought people would want to hear such a story. I do not think that question remain unasked by mistake: *MetaMaus* shows clearly that there was never any doubt in Spiegelman's mind as to the fact that *that* story could be told, and that it could speak to many people. Spiegelman repeatedly says he was surprised by the success of the *book*, but he never says he had any doubts about the *story*. We know now that that basic trust was an act of intellectual courage in itself, a much welcome one, in this age when representation is by definition in crisis, at least according to some literary theorists.

But something similar is also true, at a larger level, for *MetaMaus*: this book is also a great *midrash* that trusts that the cultural and historical connections behind *Maus* can project a much larger picture, and that these connections can indeed reach us. If many feel that Holocaust stories are per definition heavy, depressing – punitive reading better left to schools - *MetaMaus* replies through its endless references to comics, novels, movies and people, that that story is still alive and is indeed relevant to us all. The Elie Wiesel quote that "after Auschwitz we are all jews" does not sound rhetorical after reading *MetaMaus:* this books shows in how many ways the memoir of a single death-camp survivor can reach us: emotionally, psychologically, through words, through pictures, through their endless associations that extend into the future[19].

In an interview Spiegelman says of MetaMaus that "it's probably also useful in how to deal with what's urgent in your own life by trying to assimilate it and

[18] If you are not familiar with this classic American strip, its own title is a fairly good description.

[19] The relevance of that quote for Spiegelman's understanding of the Holocaust is discussed by Spiegelman's himself in his essay *Looney Tunes, Zionism and the Jewish Question* (1989, reproduced in the accompanying DVD).

make it into something."[20]. Not all of us have 13 years to spare to create a long detailed narrative, but what is important here is the moral message implicit in that invitation: that *your* story is also worth telling, that *your* witness will also find a place in this vast, collective, *midrash*,
MetaMaus the object travelled with me extensively while I was reading it for this review, and survived in excellent conditions, its pages still nicely bound, a beautiful object, with a beautiful message.

[20] From the interview quoted in fn. 3.

Art Spiegelman*, MetaMaus. A Look inside a Modern Classic* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), pp. 299 & DVD.

by *Ranen Omer-Sherman*

At the end of the day, does *MetaMaus* constitute more than a mere vanity project, a self-congratulatory attempt to wheedle more manna out of the artist's painful family history? To answer that, one must obviously grapple with the question of whether this tome succeeds in deepening our understanding of the complexity of the original work. From the outset, it must be immediately acknowledged that the new work adds highly significant detail to what we learned earlier about the family's pre-war lives, their religious faith, domestic routines, and work. The working process of *Maus* itself is of course the main attraction and both the book (which includes a thorough index and chronology tracing pivotal events in the Spiegelman family history) and here I should note at the outset that the accompanying DVD provides an extraordinary repository of draft sketches, private notebooks, and historical documents in addition to later comics originally published in the New Yorker and other venues. It deepens the original work with substantial layering (offering hundreds of sketches and designs, audio and video features and will be hard to surpass in terms of the presentation of digital comics) and the entire package adds up to a complex, richly textured and sometimes surprisingly intimate statement about the inheritance of trauma and its transformation into art.

For those familiar with the peculiar challenges faced by those sometimes identified as "second generation" which began to be addressed in the late eighties in Helen Epstein's groundbreaking *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (Penguin, 1988) and a decade later by scholars such as Alan Berger, Aaron Hass, Ilany Kogan, and others, it is useful to see how well Spiegelman's experiences can be aligned with those of numerous others who felt the constant, oppressive pressure of a trauma never voiced. He recalls a childhood in which both the individuals closest to him and the culture at large were complicit in a silence well known to others (I have heard the children and grandchildrenof survivors describe their struggle with that taboo knowledge variously as "secrets more taboo than sex," a "locked black box in your household" and a pervasive sense of "alienation" and "suffocation"). For example, at home, "as a kid, I can remember my friends asking my mother about the number on her arm, and her saying it was a phone number she didn't want to forget" while the massive, authoritative tomes about the war seemed to conspire in a similar withholding: "I had been shocked when…I looked at the definitive, two-volume picture history of World War II with text by Winston Churchill, published by Time-Life Books in 1959…It was one of the heaviest things in the house: over six hundred luxuriously oversized pages…It was filled with sumptuously printed war photographs and color war paintings

but the reference to Jews and concentration camps was a damn cameo—less than a footnote—mentioned in passing among other victims of 'Nazi Barbarism' on one spread. Churchill's war seemed to have very little to do with he one my parents went through. The Holocaust wasn't part of the public conversation" (43-44). But that was Art's childhood; emerging into young adulthood he recalls Vladek's readiness to tell his story "like it was my birthright to know these things" (14). At that time he was also a painful witness to his mother's relatives refusal to listen to any of the horrific details of what they experienced. That too, was something Art's parents shared with other survivors in that time.

He traces the origins of his prodigious research to the 1970s, a time when he voraciously devoured both historical works and literary witnessing: Raul Hilberg's magisterial *The Destruction of the European Jews* and Lucy Dawidowicz's *The War Against the Jews* but also Primo Levi ("the most profound work I read by any survivor") and Tadeusz Borowski's caustic short fiction, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (44-45). Over the years, one has become accustomed to Spiegelman's generous assessments of his peers and precursors in comic art but I cannot recall much reflection on other narrative forms. However, not surprisingly, even here it is the "visual" or descriptive aspect of language that he most values. For instance, speaking of Borowski's language, Spiegelman praises its "hard-boiled style…though it makes Chandler and Hammett look like romantic wimps. There was a detailed objectivity to his prose, as if his eye was a camera trained on a world that stopped at the barbed wire fence, and it gave me some indispensable help in trying to envision life in a death camp" (46). While these and other historical and literary works were undoubtedly profound influences, it is manifestly evident that the greatest influences on his struggle to artistically render Vladek's story were the precious and few collections of art drawn by those who perished in the camps.

Spiegelman memorializes this aesthetic legacy: "Those drawings were a return to drawing not for its possibilities of imposing the self, of finding a new role for art and drawing after the invention of the camera, but rather a return to the earlier function that drawing served before the camera—a kind of commemorating, witnessing, and recording of information—what Goya referred to when he says, 'This I saw.' The artists, like the memoirists and diarists of the time, are giving urgent information in the pictures, information that could be transmitted no other way, and often at great risk to their lives. For someone like me, who was trying to visually reconstruct what they lived through—or didn't—their images were invaluable" (49-50). Spiegelman also admiringly invokes classic films such as Alain Resnais *Night and Fog* (1955) and Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour epic *Shoah* (1985); of the latter, he remarks simply that "its sobriety and respect for what could be shown and what couldn't had a very strong impact on me" (54). In other ways, Spiegelman's restraint invites admiration; he has firmly rejected countless highly lucrative offers to turn *Maus* into a film (and seems to agree with his wife Françoise's remark that "Next to making Maus, your greatest achievement may have been

not turning *Maus* into a movie" [74]). As for the inspiration to narrate Holocaust trauma through the images of mice Spiegelman (who has declared that Hitler was his "collaborator" on *Maus*, cites the influence of yet another film, the infamous 1940 *The Eternal Jew*, in which Jews in the stifling conditions of the ghetto were juxtaposed with scenes of rodents with title cards proclaiming Jews as the "rats" or "vermin" of mankind. Thus, from the very beginning, the artist realized his project was to grapple with and subvert the dehumanizing forms of representation ("The idea of Jews as toxic, as disease carriers, as dangerous subhuman creatures, was a necessary prerequisite for killing my family….It's amazing how often the image still comes up in anti-Semitic cartoons in Arab countries today" [115, 116]).

For readers with an appetite for such, there are more painful revelations about the apparent sheer impossibility of meaningful communication between Art and Vladek outside of the Holocaust story. In that context (in a book brimming with many other forms of candor and incisive speculations), there are numerous instances where *MetaMaus* is distinguished not merely by the way it illuminates the composition of *Maus*; often it is the lessons Spiegelman gleans from other survivors' children that prove most indelible, especially when they broach the enigma of survival itself: "I know a survivor's son who told me about his father who survived very specifically because he was part of a whole group taken to the camps from his small village at the same time. They stuck together throughout the entire camp experience and they all kept each other alive. That's a way of making it through that is in some ways counterintuitive to the American notion of the individual who triumphs. There really was a kind of identification with their whole group that got them through, and insofar as I can glean anything from the clues about Anja, that was how she survived" (21). Such revelations obviously maks for a telling contrast to what we learn in *Maus* about Vladek's own individualist, self-sufficient strategies throughout the war years and camp experience.

Given his famously difficult relationship with Vladek (and what often seems a softer appraisal of his mother's role in his life), it may be startling for some readers to encounter Art's stark and decidedly reluctant moment of clarity recognizing that he could fully identify with his father's character and, arguably obsessive, coping strategies, during the period of his institutionalization in Binghamton State mental hospital (a chilling episode portrayed in *Maus*). Musing on his uncomfortable realization of their similarity, Spiegelman confesses that:

> I'm sure that's at the center of what made our relationship so fraught. Being rebellious and resistant to Vladek, but finding aspects of him well embedded into my character formation…when I was incarcerated…back in my psychedelic days, wandering around the dayroom, gathering up pieces of string or something, just to have something to do and, in that sense, unconsciously reenacting the kinds of scavenging Vladek always did reflexively: 'Oh, this piece of paper could come in handy sometime; this scrap on the ground,

> maybe I could use it as toilet paper.' There were so many ways in which I didn't want to model myself after Vladek; it was very hard for me to acknowledge aspects of myself when I'd see him acting out in exasperating ways. (33)

There have always been readers more than a little tone-deaf to the sharp self-criticism that Spiegelman directs toward his own behavior throughout *Maus*; here that inherent humility and self-judgment (even as his portrayal of his prickly father is relentlessly unsparing), is even more apparent: "I try to understand how I function as a parent to my kids and I'm positive I've done some things that are equally god-awful" (33).

For readers interested in broader aspects of his creative career, Spiegelman is also engaging when he reflects on his artistic origins; even today he expresses gratitude for his sticker-designing days for Topps Bubble Gum, which he calls his "Medici." As for *Maus's* critical reception (recent years have seen the rapid growth of a formidable industry of scholarly books and journal articles devoted to it) it is worth noting Spiegelman's assessment of his critical interlocutors; he particularly cherishes Ren Weschler's critical delineation of the book's "crystalline ambiguity" (33). For Spiegelman, that coinage artfully embodies his artistic struggle: "ambiguities had to just be presented without being spun for the sake of catharsis—that was essential. All kinds of elisions and ellipses and compressions are a part of any shaped work, and my goal was not to betray what I could find out or what I heard or what I knew but to give a shape to it" (34). As even the most casual reader of *Maus* will recognize, Spiegelman was ever self-conscious of the constant risk of betrayal and distortion of a fundamental, underlying reality. In that context, Spiegelman's honest admission of the frailty of memory itself is profoundly illuminating. There has been growing awareness of the problem of the witness's memory, ever since the appearance of Geoffrey Hartman's nuanced and sophisticated discussion in *Holocaust Remembrance: the Shapes of Memory* (1993) and Spiegelman grapples with the implications of conclusions similar to what Hartman (who, while empathic, pragmatically assesses the frequent appearance of Mengele in a suspiciously vast number of survivor anecdotes to be a kind of unreliable trope of traumatic memory) posits: "Memory is a very fugitive thing. And I was aware of it at the time as part of the problem and part of the process….it was obvious to me, doing my homework, that Vladek's memory didn't jibe with everything I read. I knew I had to allude to that somewhere. And for awhile that was troublesome to me…do I just correct errors based on other people's authority? Or do I ignore other people's authority and go strictly with Vladek's memory as if it was n objective correlative that could be drawn?" (29-30). Even today Spiegelman seems anguished about meeting this challenge but the strategies he employed seem admirably nuanced and judicious. Acknowledging that he "wrestled with it for a long time. In matters of firm historical record…I tended to triangulate the event and allow his memory to be subsumed in the grander memory. But if there was any kind of personal reason for him to remember

differently – because it was something he specifically says he saw, or because of the importance and weight it seemed to have in the conversation—then I went with is version…The closer it came to his personal story, the less I would interfere" (30). In a work saturated with such thoughtful reflections on the processes of collective and individual memory, it is also rewarding to find the artist searching for his earliest recollection of encountering his father's tormented past. The latter seems to be "[t]he anecdote where Vladek is almost caught by Polish children calling him a Jew when he was in hiding…a source of nightmares for me. It was vivid for me even before I drew it—one of those places where I could enter into Vladek's story and feel it viscerally. The vulnerability of being the other, that made even little children lethally dangerous" (28).

One of the most powerful and disturbing effects of *Maus* is its refusal of the kind of redemptive responses other popular Holocaust narratives such as Spielberg's *Schindler's List* have encouraged. For many readers that resistance is especially visible in the tormented and tormenting figure of Vladek. In *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman often revists his struggle "to avoid despair or cynicism without becoming fatuous" (70). A constant touchstone seems to have been a remark made by a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto uprising: "I you could lick my heart, it would poison you" in response to which the artist says simply: "To find a tone that could be informed by that bleakness and not be an inevitable prescription for suicide was difficult" (70).

Some of the more surprising features in *MetaMaus* include the very candid reflections of family members on the impact of *Maus* and Spiegelman's repute on their lives (At times *MetaMaus* resembles a sort of family album with its bountiful photographs and clippings). While some readers may be taken aback by that choice, it is impossible to read young Nadja Spiegelman's (Art's daughter) and not be stirred once again by the intergenerational resonance of the Holocaust. And one is reminded once again that *Maus* itself is, above all, a meditation on the inter-generational transmission of trauma. Indeed, the current edition of *Maus* is dedicated to Nadja and her brother Dashiell (a burden she feels is symbolically intended for her entire generation and "a lot to carry forward" [84]). Accordingly, one is chilled by this unanticipated echo: "My grandparents were this secret that I didn't know anything about. My dad never talked about his parents, and I knew that it was for a reason. I sensed that he had shut the difficult things into this book…it scared me to read it" (84). Given her father's own struggle with reverberating silence, there is a palpable, poignant irony here. As for Françoise's musings, it is fascinating to learn about the remarkably strong rapport she developed with Vladek (she happily converted solely for his sake over Art's own vehement objections), in contrast to Art who only grew more impatient over time. As for their wedding, the most memorable memento seems to be a photo which she says features "Vladek looking in one direction, very happy, and Art looking the other way, and they're at polar opposites of each other" (98). Issues of intergenerational reception also surface in an extensive section where Spiegelman addresses the

fraught history of publishing his work in Poland and Germany. While Spiegelman has been resolute on insisting on the same cover, lettering, and format in each of the book's foreign editions (roughly thirty languages to date), the German publishers initially refused to use the usual cover exhibiting the swastika due to a national law forbidding its display (eventually the German government granted permission). Spiegelman also recalls the extraordinary intensity attending the book's launching at the 1987 Frankfurt Book Fair. On one occasion, Spiegelman relates that an aggressive reporter shouted " 'Don't you think that a comic book about Auschwitz is in bad taste?' I liked my response. I said, 'No, I thought Auschwitz was in bad taste'" (155).

In terms of Spiegelman's post-Maus endeavors, MetaMaus highlights often seems like an increasingly restless reinvention. In that context it is illuminating to learn that his ideal model of an artist was always James Joyce, who "had three or four different incarnations of himself, each represented by works that were stylistically, thematically vaguely related to each other, but were almost the works of different creatures….I had this notion that my first collection of work, *Breakdowns*, was going to be a fractal, a paradigm of what I wanted to do in longer, larger terms. The pieces [including the famous three-page version of "Maus" as well as "Prisoner on the Hell Planet"] were all there in *Breakdowns*" (104). Today he sounds decidedly rueful about the dreams of his younger self to produce a work as complex and textured as *Ulysses*.

Today it is hard to grasp just how the Pulitzer-winning *Maus* came to be rejected by over twenty publishers (as Spiegelman ruefully recalled on one occasion "sometimes really gruffly and perfunctorily, and sometimes with soul-searching agony, because an editor really liked it but couldn't figure out how on earth to put such a book out"). Most entertainingly, a number of these are included here for posterity, in all their apologetic, convoluted, rationalizing, and devastatingly clueless glory. Even for those long familiar with the fact that Spiegelman fashioned *Maus* on the foundation of hours of audio interviews with his father Vladek, many of the details of this arduous process (in which other family members and friends were also consulted) in which he struggled to capture his cadences and speech pattern in the reduced medium of captions and balloons, as well as other research efforts to corroborate his father's story are beyond compelling and *MetaMaus* will enthrall anyone who wishes to come closer to understanding the mysteries of the artistic process of discovery and invention.

Ranen Omer-Sherman
University of Miami

Maurice Samuels, *Inventing the Israelite. Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France,* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 323.

by *Catherine Fhima*

With *Inventing the Israelite. Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France,* Maurice Samuels proposes to explore the ways in which obscure, even unknown and today forgotten, 19th century French Jewish writers responded to the challenges posed by modernity by writing literary fiction as French Jewish citizens. He thus intends to show the emergence of an innovative literature, characterised by a wide variety of viewpoints, which places the search for a balance between the Jewish and French identities at the heart of its literary project. The authors studied are hence identified as the inventors of a new Jewishness, working towards the formulation of an original and specific typology in the European landscape, that of the "Israelite", as the title, *Inventing the Israelite*, suggests. The book consists of five chapters of more or less equal importance, some of them drawn from articles in reviews or collective works. A significant introduction outlines the structure of the book while a conclusion, more like an additional chapter, dealing with Marcel Proust, creates a link with the 20th Century. Maurice Samuels thus concludes his demonstration with the pre-existence of a self-aware minority literature, disposed towards proposing solutions to all the dilemmas posed by the Jewish identity in modernity. The authors whose works are examined in this book are: Eugénie Foa (1796-1853), Godchaux Baruch Weil, alias Ben-Lévi (1806-1878), Alexandre Créange under the pseudonym Ben Baruch (1791-1872), Alexandre Weill (1811-1899), Auguste Widal, alias Daniel Stauben (1822-1875) and David Schornstein (1826-1879) who sometimes signs as Georges Stenne. Using case studies and concentrating on an essentially literary analysis grid, Maurice Samuels chose to work on a corpus of texts consisting solely of novels and short stories with Jewish themes. A chapter is dedicated to each author, apart from the last one, which includes both Daniel Stauben and David Schornstein.
Several lines of enquiry are suggested, emphasising the original nature of these literary experiments. Thus, to start with, this first emancipated generation produced accounts of the French Jews' living conditions, during the period from the Restoration until the beginning of the Third Republic. However, expressing themselves as Jews was no easy matter. French modernity, intrinsically hostile to all forms of collective specificity, placed difference under constant stress. Each of the authors studied provided different and varied answers forged in a literary context that borrows its writing codes, either from the sentimental or Romantic novel (Eugénie Foa), or from Balzac (Ben Levi) or George Sand's realism (Stauben). All of them, however, tried to develop the idea of Jewish uniqueness as being complementary to emancipated France's universal values, despite the dangers assimilation posed to the fine balance

between specificity and universalism. They unanimously acknowledged the breakdown of the social structure of traditional Judaism.
Confronted with secularisation, the authors examined methods of perpetuating Jewishness within a modernity, which politically was still struggling to establish itself in a Republican context. As a result, according to Maurice Samuels, these authors became "theorists", proposing eminently French works in which they suggested responses to assimilation or paths towards an aggregation with the majority. Some expressed themselves in religious terms. Thus Godchaux Weill alias Ben Levi promoted reformed Judaism in the form of short stories that were published essentially in the *Archives israélites*. He adopted a political and ethical position. Deeply committed to the notion of citizenship and convinced that Judaism can adapt to historical circumstances, he interceded in favour of its religious modernisation in order for it to arrive at a universal morality. His rival, Ben-Baruch (Alexandre Créange) proposed contrasting religious alternatives. Published in the conservative newspaper, *l'Univers israélite*, his edifying stories sought to show how traditional Jewish values were compatible with the values of emancipation. In his writing he encouraged a return to ancestral traditions and developed his concerns with social justice. The religious question inspired him to adopt other positions, linked to a political and patriotic commitment. The same can be said of Alexandre Weill who was Fourierist, Legitimist and Republican in turn. He invented the literary genre of "Village tales" that George Sand, who was herself inspired by this genre qualified as a true "democratic novel" p. 168, and in which he displayed the range of Alsatian Jewish traditions in a resolutely realistic style. This prolific author fiercely attacked the Talmudic Judaism he was brought up on while inaugurating a unique manner of preaching universalism by encouraging Moses' biblical religion: for him adapting Judaism to modernity was a political necessity in order to gain access to the universal. Then, there were others who situated the Jewish identity at the level of historical fiction writing rather than religious controversy. Thus, Eugénie Foa, said to be the inventor of the Jewish historical novel, used the past to deal with the Jewish condition, evoking the position of women, marriage, divorce, mixed marriages, a subject that was still taboo. *In fine*, touching upon conversion (also her own personal trajectory), she was the writer who followed the path of assimilation the furthest. For their part, in a clearly nostalgic mode, with their stories of a genre that Samuels qualifies as ghetto nostalgia, Daniel Stauben and David Schornstein, made use of the past as a literary tool to explore the Jews collective future. The 1848 Revolution and the violence against the Jews changed the context of the production of works by writers of this period. The feeling of a loss of Jewish social cohesion led these two writers to dream of the return to childhood traditions, which they revived through literature. Nonetheless, it is with a view to constructing the present that these authors used the past, with its proximity to tradition, in an attempt to situate the trajectory of the Jews in a continuity both of memory as well as historical: history replaced religion and messianism.

Inventing the Israelite fills a gap in literary studies. Until now, there was no far reaching study of French Jewish writers of this period, following the lineaments of the Jewish identity through specifically French literary forms. We must thank Maurice Samuels for having led the way towards a re-evaluation of the varied literary responses to what it signified to be Jewish, through the interesting careers of forgotten authors from post emancipation modernity until 1870.

We must nonetheless express certain reservations. The usage of certain categories and concepts raises important socio historical problems. Thus, Samuels claims that these Jewish authors invented the category of ethnic fiction in French (p. 17 and p. 35). This idea is as audacious as it is problematic in the French context of the early 19th century, still little affected by theories of "race" . It would have benefitted from being suggested as a line of investigation, rather than being formulated as an assertion. In addition, to accuse the writers of the following generation of having voluntarily done away with their predecessors is debatable. In fact, rather than adopting an ethical and psychologistic stance, (the anti assimilation criticism addressed to writers whom the author also seems unfamiliar with) it would have been more productive to elaborate an epistemological approach. This would imply distinguishing two types of historically constituted "literary spaces" which would allow us to discern the evolution of expressions of Jewish identity. By further situating his authors in a socio-cultural configuration of circulation (Jewish or non Jewish literary trends, publications, reviews, places of social interaction, instances of consecration, analysis of the reception they received), Maurice Samuels would have revealed the marked differences between the two periods. He would, in particular, have better evaluated the change in paradigm provoked by the Dreyfus affair, which affected the areas of interrelations between the Jews and the other groups in French society. It also had an impact on the literary value of works and of the Jewish identity, which we must recall is itself a category of analysis developed with modernity. Eugénie Foa and Daniel Stauben's generation did not form a Jewish literary movement. However, from 1905 onwards, it was with poetry that a specific collective type of literature was inaugurated: "the Jewish Renaissance". In fact, Samuels does not take these incontrovertible transformations into account. He uses the Jewish identity as an element unaffected by historical discontinuity, arguing that a literary and identity based guiding principle connects Ben-Lévi to Proust. He thus presents their works at the same level, as a "*laboratory to invent new possibilities for Jewish identity"*, p.259. This is in itself even more problematic than his justification based on the family relationship connecting the great uncle, an obscure and "non professional" writer to his grand nephew, an author recognised for a major work. All the more so, as by concluding with Marcel Proust, Maurice Samuels is guilty of the same error he criticises: he neglects far more significant works of fiction like …*Et Compagnie* by Jean-Richard Bloch[1]

[1] Jean-Richard Bloch, …*Et Cie,* Paris, éditions Gallimard, 1918.

with which he could have drawn a far more pertinent parallel in terms of a "laboratory" .
Thus, by insufficiently constructing his object, i.e considering "French Jewish writers" in a relationship to the majority otherness[2], Maurice Samuels exposes his work to a major epistemological risk, which threatens any study of the Jews and Jewish identity in France. Not only does he paradoxically contribute to further marginalising the authors and their works (and to having them forgotten a second time), but at a wider level, by not confronting the relationships of otherness and domination, nor mentioning the mobility between elements of the society, in all likelihood we contribute to perpetuating the isolated position of the Jews in the historiographic space as well as in the French social sciences of this type. The dual specific/universal tension subsists within contemporary thought in the social sciences: we would be wrong to underestimate its wealth and to ignore it.

Catherine Fhima, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris
(Text translated from French by Renuka George)

[2] The illustration by Alphonse Lévy, « Le Rabbi » (1886) which appears on the book jacket, is part of this problematic « Judeo-centrism ».

Renée Poznanski, *Propagandes et persécutions. La Résistance et le "problème juif" 1940-1944*, (Paris: Fayard, 2008), pp.785

by *Michele Sarfatti*

Renée Poznanski investigates how French Resistance dealt with the issue of the so-called "Jewish Problem" and she presents the results of her research in an essay, almost 800 page long. The length of the book is, on the one hand, exaggerated, making it a very demanding reading: on the other hand, however, it makes easier to understand events and the author's narrative, as the reader comes in touch with long quotes from newspapers and documents of those times. Since the research goes into the details of one among the main certitudes of post-war Europe (Resistants' "anti-anti-Semitism"), this immersion in contemporary texts enables ready and willing readers to set aside preconceived ideas and examine the event in its own development. This structure of the book reminds me of Theodore S. Hamerow's study, *Why we watched. Europe, America and the Holocaust*, published in the same year (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), even if he made a more limited use of quotations. Both set out to understand and make us understand what used to be thought and written about Jews, on their conditions and the acceptance they received in the society as a whole or in a specific part of it.

During the Thirties, in France, anti-Semitism had seen some increase, in partial connection with the growth of xenophobia. Between the anti-Semitic and the non-anti-Semitic fields, there was a section of people who shared stereotypes and prejudices about the Jews, or at least about foreign Jews (at times, anyway, using the expression "Jewish Problem"). At the end of the decade, as the war approached, in some sections of pacifism and even in some socialist circles, words were written and spoken against "*la guerre juive*" (i.e. the war that, according to them, was supported by French and immigrant Jews in order to protect their coreligionists in Germany).

In the long years between 1940 and 1944 – as the French defeat was followed by German occupation and the partition of the country (with the establishment of the Vichy government), further German and Italian occupation and, finally, gradual liberation – "Free France" and "Resistant France" expressed themselves on the radio (from London), on newspapers secretly printed in the Hexagon, in internal documents of the various organizations, in pages of private diaries and in other places and forms. All of these sources are considered carefully by the author. In general terms (and without taking into account here the peculiar case of press, either in Yiddish or in French, produced by Communist-oriented foreign Jews), Poznanski emphasises that public condemnation of anti-Jewish persecution had been discontinuous, that this was more often criticized as being "alien and adverse to Catholicism" rather than wrongful *tout court*, that references to the destiny of the persecuted (inequality, then impoverishment, then assassination) were sometimes present

and sometimes absent. A noteworthy instance of the latter is the lack of a mention of the Jews in a list of the main victims of Nazi occupation, of Vichy and of the war, made by De Gaulle in November 1941.
In general the author highlights a disproportion between intensity of persecution and intensity of attention from anti-Nazi and anti-Vichy forces. On several occasions, the scholar describes this with the word "*discrétion*", leaving undefined the exact meaning with which the term is used and the real motivations and purposes of the key players. The background against which this term is used, i.e. the whole of the narrative, warns the reader that, for her, it has quite a grave meaning. Some statements made by Poznanski challenge a certain Resistance myth; the sources presented by the scholar show how within the ranks of the various anti-fascist forces the positions concerning the "Jewish problem" were sometimes ambiguous. For instance a flyer distributed in Marseille in March 1942 by a group of Jews (both French and recently immigrated) addressed the whole of the population saying that: "your silence is no more enough for us" (p. 213). The text seems to testify to condition of solitude or marginalization, the absence (at least in that moment) of a counter-propaganda and defence from persecution. In the following months, the growing number of arrests and the obligation to wear the yellow star provoked widespread protests. After a short time, however, the word "*déportation*" started being used mostly with reference to the destiny of many arrested workers, while the press and the radio news reduced in general their references to anti-Jewish persecution on French soil. In February 1944 the combative newspaper "Droit et Liberté" reminded the Committee of National Liberation that Jews demanded to be taken under its protection as all the Resistants and all the victims (p.544) – a request highlighting a problem. At another level, it is possible to recapitulate that people hit by anti-Jewish persecution were more often described as victims to be rescued rather than "citizens" for whom to fight; even if this didn't have a significance as far as solidarity was concerned, it was important as to the civic foundations of the fight.
According to the author, in the first years of war this was due to bias or anti-Semitism in several sectors of society, including some of those who opposed the Vichy regime and the occupation and, in particular, many of those that De Gaulle and the *maquis* wanted to attract. Since Germans and the men of Vichy accused the Resistance to be subject to Jewish interests, the latter used the instrument of partial silence in order to counter this image. From the end of the year 1942, another complex motivation arose (and Poznanski is right in highlighting it): the slow approaching of liberation put more and more to the fore the issues of future reintegration of Jews in their jobs and the restitution of their properties that had been allotted to non-Jewish Frenchmen. Thus for some the re-establishment of equality could bring negative consequences.
In conclusion, besides many important specific features that the volume reconstructs, I wish to emphasise a remark made by the author in the Introduction: even within the Resistance ambiguities were present; the opposite would be unusual: Resistants were human beings inheriting ways of

thinking and cultures. Therefore it is not unjust or offensive towards those who sacrificed their life to study the Resistance with its imperfections (p.19).

Michele Sarfatti, director of Fondazione CDEC
(Text translated from Italian by Rita Paolini)