

# Egyptian Jewry - why it declined

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*In order to illustrate the particular problematic of Middle Eastern Jewries, we shall try to give a short historical outline of the Jews who lived in Egypt for 2,000 years, held important positions in the civil service, were rarely exposed to racial persecution and spoke the language of the people. Their culture, customs and way of life were such that no problem of integration or participation in the revolutionary struggles of the Middle Eastern peoples ought to have arisen. Yet, in Egypt as elsewhere in the Mashreq, the Jewish population, with rare exceptions, has left the country.*

*Why? We shall try to explain how this happened.*

The presence of the Jews in Egypt goes back further than that of any of the other communities of the Diaspora except, perhaps, the Jews in Babylon. We find traces of Jewish presence in Egypt - a country of political asylum - in the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles: Jeroboam went there to escape the fury of his father King Solomon; also refugees from Jerusalem abandoned Judea during the Babylonian invasion in order to join the Jewish colonies already in Upper and Lower Egypt.

There is still in existence a documentary record of this very early presence; the papyrus of Elephantine, which dates from the year 27 of the reign of Darius I (494 BC), and which mentions the existence of two Judean garrisons in Upper Egypt and of a temple dedicated by these colonies to Yeho (Yahve), built in Elephantine in 525 BC.

The-history of the Jews in Egypt can be divided into four periods:

1 The pre-Hellenic period.

2 The Hellenic period, when Alexandria became the most important Jewish intellectual centre of the Diaspora - and also the least Judean one.

3 The Arab period.

4 The period beginning in the nineteenth century with the reign of Mohammad Ali and ending in 1956 with the expulsion, or more or less spontaneous departure, of virtually the whole of Egyptian Jewry.

We shall discuss the last two periods, as they enable us to understand the situation of the Jews in the Arab countries. What are the main features? It is well known that until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Jews, far from concentrating in the urban centres only, were spread all over Egypt. From the oasis of Fayum to Damiette, the Jews were in almost all small towns and villages, where they were civil servants or agents of the state: tax collectors, treasurers, economic intermediaries, astronomers, agronomists and state physicians. They were also craftsmen, merchants, peddlers, and **peasants**. Lying as it does across the trade routes between North Africa and the road to India, between Europe and Asia, Egypt was visited by many travelers from Spain, France and the Balkans. [1] In the disputes about ritual between Babylonians and the Judeans, the travelers sided with the academies of Palestine. It was in this capacity that the academies of Egypt attracted many scholars of the Talmud, [2] and eventually became a religious authority in their own right.

At the same time, merchants and scholars went from Egypt to penetrate and conquer the unexplored markets of Yemen and Aden, and the warehouses of Asia Minor, where Jewish communities lived under the yoke of the Byzantine Empire in its final decline. Intellectual and economic life flourished from the time of the Tulunids (middle of the tenth century) up to the Ottoman conquest of 1517. The tolerance of minorities was such that there survived in Cairo until the seventeenth century a strong Samaritan colony, and several hundred Karaite families lived there up to the twentieth century, among whom were the grammarians and Masorettes of the Ben-Asher dynasty.

Thus, the Jews felt on one hand the tolerance, and on the other, the 'ritual' humiliation which is the lot of the Peoples of the Book (Christians, Jews and Mazdeans) under Islam. However, the positions they occupied gave them a socially enviable status.

Being irreplaceable intermediaries and civil servants, they were also the first to feel the impact of urban uprisings which followed a vacuum in administration or a change of regime or dynasty. The Cairo community suffered periods of crisis, or temporary humiliations during its long history. There was the imposition of the yellow turban, the temporary closing of synagogues, and the ban on engaging in commerce. But these oppressive measures were abandoned as the regime strengthened and the economy was stabilised. The rural communities, on the other hand, enjoyed fifteen centuries without any harassment. Living in a country where no peasant revolts occurred, these communities, such as those of Ziftah, Mehallah, Damiette or Mit-Ghamr, were the backbone of Egyptian Jewry's resistance to all foreign influence on their cult, from Spanish Jews arriving there from the fourteenth century onwards. Thus, until 1950, there were Jewish peasants from the Wahba clan in the province of Gharbieh, in the villages of Kuesna, Sinbu and Khelwet el-Ghalban, and travelers like Saphir in the nineteenth century mention Jewish workers in the salt pans of Rashid and Damiette, and peasants in the province of Dakalieh.

It was with the beginning of the Ottoman Empire's decay and the economic deterioration of the Arab East - left out of the great international trade routes - and with the rise of a competing Armenian and Greek petty and middle bourgeoisie, and the emergence of Egyptian merchants, that the situation of the Jews - who drew their strength from the exclusivity of their position - began to deteriorate.

From the end of the seventeenth century, following the violent mystical and political movements created by Shabetai Zvi and Nathan of Ghaza, Egyptian Jewry entered an era of profound economic and intellectual decadence - this after having produced scholars and charismatic leaders like Isaac Luria (ARI) in the seventeenth century or H. I. D. Azulay (HIDA) at the end of the eighteenth century. Being reduced to the role of money changers and money lenders - of intermediaries - the Jews survived with difficulty within the Jewish quarters (the Hara), where, with the approach of the night, they barricaded themselves in. Very religious and dogmatic, they were as ill-prepared as they could be for the events that would change the face of Egypt: the invasion of Napoleon, the opening up of Egypt to Europe, the Saint-Simonian intervention and the craving of the new state power elite for everything European.

Once at the centre of economic and social power, they now became dependent on the knowledge and power of others. They sought rabbis in Italy and the Balkans. They looked for elders in Europe, who would undertake to 'civilize' them, that is, to westernize Egyptian Jewry.

From now on, the Jewish community in Egypt was divided intellectually, physically and emotionally. One part clung to a struggle, which quickly became a rearguard battle to maintain its Egyptian identity. The other part, succumbing to foreign influences, gradually identified itself with

foreign powers and thus contributed to its own material and intellectual liquidation.

Here is a description of what was happening, in a letter written by a Jew from Cairo, dated 1897: 'I have the feeling that the Jews in Egypt will one day wake from a bad dream . . . Most of them (have become) . . . French subjects. Since 1796, the coming of Napoleon, France employs them in the same way as they are employed by Madragia, Poland, Moscovia - as conscious, willing or unwilling agents of its influence; of French influence. The Jesuits, though, are busy enough at it. The Jews unconsciously help the Jesuits. France is not satisfied with the subjects it has already; it is trying to acquire new ones every day . . .'[3] Thus, within several decades, Egyptian Jewry - 'reinforced' by European and Balkan elements, turns towards Eurocentric fascination, and plays the same game as the state power itself, that is, collaboration with the western powers, and systematic spoliation of Egypt.

Let us take the extreme case of the community of Alexandria. Here two irreconcilable clans of notables came into being: on the one hand those gathered around the Baron de Menasce - an Austrian subject - and on the other hand the last handful of the old Egyptian community. The Egyptian government, as arbitrator in the conflict, advocated reunification, and placed the community of Alexandria under the protection of the Austrian government, whereas the notables adopt a code of rules copied from that of the Consistoire de Paris and written in Italian, a language that only an infinitesimal part of Alexandrian Jewry could understand. Most Jewish children in Alexandria went to the schools of the Alliance Israelite Umverselle (of Paris) Even so, there were petitions demanding that European Jews be allowed to open their own schools, so that their children might go to institutions other than those used by the 'scum of Arabised Jews'

In Cairo the situation is similar, though the conflict is less pronounced; and the same also in Tantah, Mansurah or Port Said. Little by little the 20 per cent of Egyptian Jews who are of foreign origin[5] impose their way of life on the autochthones, who, at first by the hundreds and later by the thousands, strive to acquire the comfortable position of comprador bourgeoisie.

Within two or three generations, most Egyptian Jews were acculturated: they spoke French, Italian, Greek, Ladino and English; they left traditional Jewish studies (the Talmud and especially the Zohar) to the poorest among them, to the sub-proletariat, and became neo-urbanised and strangers in their own country and their own culture alienated, torn between two cultures, and stateless.

Even though in Cairo and in the Nile delta, Arabic remained the language of the majority, and in Alexandria Arab studies became fashionable during the 1840s, the petty bourgeoisie imitated the elites they had chosen, or that were forced on them, and plunged with all their cultural heart and economic body into collaboration with the foreign powers.

'Enrichissez-vous. Copy Europe. Be ashamed of your Arabic language ' These became the slogans of the well-to-do, followed by the most disinherited - with disgust but nevertheless very quickly, under the pressure of economic and political realities.

Still opposition to this Europeanisation appeared from the end of the nineteenth century. First, within the synagogues, or rather the meeting places of the locality, where rabbis and Talmudists fought with vigour against any innovation from abroad. There were also some intellectuals who sided wholeheartedly with the Egyptian people and its struggle. Yaacoub Sanu'a, known as Abu-Nadara, for instance was a Jewish Egyptian nationalist who was exiled by the British and who carried on the anti-colonial struggle by his writings from Paris. Back in Egypt, he was the first to launch the slogan 'Egypt for the Egyptians! Egypt for all Egyptians, during a large mass meeting in front of the pyramids. Later on, from the beginning of the 1940s Jewish intellectuals were to

join the ranks of the Egyptian Communist Party or of the MDLN (Mouvement Democratique de Liberation National - Ha De To), whereas Karaite groups from the Jewish quarter of Cairo were to found their own communist group (Etoile Rouge). Zionism, as a matter of fact, was almost unheard of, if not despised. Here is what a member of the group 'Ahavat Zion' wrote bitterly from Cairo: 'The Jewish population of Cairo is divided into three distinct communities amounting to a total of 30,000 or 40,000 people; the majority is composed of Sephardim or Karaites who constitute a compact block who are living in our country for many years; and due to this ancient implantation in the midst of the Egyptian people they have a very limited notion of all the sufferings of the Jewish masses (in Europe) during recent times, and are also completely unaware of what Zionism has created for the last ten years. To the extent that Egypt has done anything for Zionism, this is the doing of the minority, the Ashkenazi Jews, who arrived in the country some 30 years before. The Ashkenazi community, incapable of assimilating itself to the native style, has formed its own group and all its endeavours to create a Zionist way of life come to nothing mainly because of the Sephardic opposition to it. The head of the sephardic community, M. Cattai, had reacted with irony to the idea of the creation of a Jewish state according to the principle that Dr Herzl himself explained to him.' [6]

During this period a newspaper called *Mizraim* written in Judeo Arabic, [7] was published in Cairo, and another Jewish paper, written in standard Arabic, was published in Alexandria (1880). It was also during this period that there occurred accusations of ritual murder (Damanhur, Tantah, Alexandria, Port Said, Cairo), followed by lynching of Jews. In all of them, the accusers were Greek-Orthodox or Maltese. Eager as always to please the western world, leading Jewish citizens in most cases avoided the issue. In 1902 a Cairo Jew by the name of Kahana was accused of ritual murder. While the trial was on, the chief rabbi Ben-Simon found it convenient to visit Lebanon for a month, and the community could only find lawyers who abandoned the case. Finally, only a Karaite lawyer, a jurist and the 'decision maker' of his community, Murad Faraj, accepted the defence of Kahana.

It was also during this period that, exasperated with 'the degrading tyranny' of the leading citizens (letter of Somekh, dated 15 July 1908) Jews reacted violently against the Jewish pashas and beys (Cattai, Mosseri) and launched a vigorous campaign of pamphlets written in Arabic in the Haret el-Yahud (a pamphlet called *Tyqz al-Umma al-Israyilia*).

But these were mere rearguard struggles, as also were those waged in the 1950s by anti-zionist Jews gathered in the 'movement of Egyptians of Mosaic confession'. Egyptian Jewry more and more overtly took up the cause of the West. In one wave after another Egypt's Jews left, between 1947 and 1956, without hope of return to the country where they had been rooted for 25 centuries. Less than a third (the poorest, the most religious, the least westernised, the most disinherited) went to Israel. The rest were to disperse in Europe, North and South America or Australia.

#### What conclusions can one draw from this glance at history?

- 1 The Jews of Egypt, socially part of the state apparatus from the period of the Califate until the end of the reign of King Farouk, were essentially attached to a dynasty. Thus, they were to suffer during their long history in Egypt merely from court upheavals, from changes of regime or from invasions bringing about a redistribution of economic and political functions.
- 2 Until the middle of the nineteenth century, they were integrated within the rural population. This enabled them to keep their traditions and links with the population surrounding them. With the penetration of the West, dividing lines appear very quickly. A minority continued to keep the

traditional way of life, but very soon it found itself either in the situation of a sub-urbanised sub-proletariat, or it joined the ranks of the petty and middle bourgeoisie, serving as a link between the big companies (producing sugar and cotton) and the countryside. Very quickly, within two generations, the leading citizens of the villages became the representatives of foreign companies, and they acquired the nationality of these companies. The system of capitulation - introduced in 1882 - moreover bestowed on them, as citizens of the foreign powers, exorbitant economic and legal privileges.

- 3 Rarely exposed to persecutions, the Jews of Egypt suffered from physical and economic brutalities with their elevation in the world of trade and finance. In direct competition with the other minorities, they became - after several centuries - victims of Christian anti- Semitism, from the second half of the nineteenth century.
- 4 Whatever may have been their social impact and the extent of their intellectual influence for hundreds of years, the Jews lived the history of Egypt as a separate minority. Overtly used as scapegoats for centuries, their situation deteriorated with the decline of the monarchy. Branded as strangers and as loyal to the court and to Zionism, they were objects of every kind of provocation, whether on behalf of the political police or of the ultra-reactionary fringe represented by the Muslim Brothers. Unhappily integrated within a revolutionary movement dominated by Stalinism, they drifted towards zionism - virtually against their will - a Zionism of no option' a religious zionism, rather than a political Zionism, to which they were total strangers,[8] and which had never had many followers in Egypt except a few within the fringe of the Ashkenazim and Italian and Balkan Jews.
- 5 Thus, conscious and unconscious collaborators of western penetration, excluded from history, being 'objectively' in the position of exploiters (alienated) - they vanished from the Egyptian scene (together with the Greek, Italians, Maltese, Armenians and the old Copt and Muslim bourgeoisie) while a new bourgeois class took their place.
- 6 At the risk of moving towards political prescriptions, we venture to say that we are obliged to put forward once more the prospect of a revolutionary movement, and a struggle incorporating the whole spectrum of ethnic strata, and based on class divisions, as the only solution of the Jewish problem (and those of all other ethnic minorities) in the Middle East.

## References

- [1] See letter no 72 of the Gueniza, in *Toledoth ha-Yehudim be-Mizraim ou-ve-Suria*, by E. Strauss-Ashtor; written in Judeo-Arab, and mentioning the arrival in Alexandria of Jewish merchants from Marseille, the letter dates from 1229 or 1235.
- [2] Sa'adia Ibn-Youssef al-Fayumi, from Fayum, who became 'Exilarch' of Babylon in the ninth century; and David Ben-Daniel, 'Gaon' of the Jews from Egypt, Palestine and Syria in 1089 are two well-known names.
- [3] In *Jews in nineteenth century Egypt*, by Jacob Landau, NY University Press.
- [4] See *Petition des juifs corfiotes, espagnols, russes, polonais et roumains d'Alexandrie adressee a l'AIU*, of 3 July 1896 and the report of S. Benedict sent by the AIU to Alexandria in 1903.
- [5] From the Maghreb, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Italy; and Ashkenazim from Eastern Europe, according to Maurice Fargeon, *\*Les Juifs en Egypte\**, Cairo, 1938.

In 1946 there were 70,000 Jews, of whom 20 per cent were of foreign origin; possession of a foreign passport did not necessarily mean foreign origin. Thus, quite a number of Egyptians had the most diverse nationalities, (French, Greek, Italian, British, Panamanian, Ecuadorian, etc), while many newly arrived people acquired Egyptian nationality. As a matter of fact, most Egyptian Jews were stateless, a result of their being on the waiting list (Egyptian nationality did not really exist before the 1920s). Apart from the 70,000 Jews there were 8-9,000 Karaites, completely identified with the Egyptians, but who shared the lot of the Jews and followed the same evolution (but with some 'delay'). Nowadays 450 Jews live in Egypt.

[6] Letter of 21 December 1910, sent to the Zionist Office in Cologne; in *Jews in nineteenth century Egypt*, op cit.

[7] The language of this paper was Judeo-Arabic and not Ladino as stated in the Encyclopedia Judaica. It should be noted that during the second quarter of the twentieth century many writings were published in Arabic, some on Jewish liturgy (Siddur Farhi, Siddur Ezra), as well as poetry (Murad Faraj), apologiae or polemical books (Faraj, Farhi, Mallul, Castro .. .) all on subjects of the 'Jewish heritage'.

In order to complete the picture, one must mention that besides the French-speaking (or, for some time, Italian) Jewish lycees, there were also those which prepared for the Arab baccalaureat. But these non-paying schools, subsidised by the community, carried over the ideology of the leading citizens, and: A) only children of craftsmen, the poor and the petty bourgeoisie were admitted; B) those lyceens mostly played the role of trend- setters for the following generation, towards French or English education.

[8] Various letters of Somekh, responsible for the education of the Jews, express the violence of anti-zionist sentiments of Egyptian Jews. He considers zionism a handicap of the Jews as Jews and Egyptians. Again and again he mentions in his letters the role of the Ashkenazim and Sephardim in the destructive work undertaken by 'confused warrior minds' against the project of emancipation within the country taking shape among a section of Egyptian Jews (of the urbanised middle class) at the beginning of the century.