

WHAT THE MELLAH WAS

Imagining the Moroccan Jewish Quarter

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Neither the word nor the concept *ghetto* was born in the Arab Muslim world. This does not mean, however, that forms of urban segregation for the Jews—as well as for other minority groups—were alien to the region or that Jewish quarters did not exist in this part of the world. Of course, such quarters had different characteristics and names from those of early modern Europe: the most significant and best-known example is the Moroccan *mellah*. Initially the name of a Fès neighborhood where salt—in Arabic, *milh*—was stored, the word “mellah” came to identify any Jewish neighborhood in Morocco where Jews were forced to live beginning in 1438.¹ In other North African countries, the term *hara* (neighborhood) was utilized, which referred to all Jewish quarters in general. The word “ghetto” has a similar story: at first it was the name of the Venice quarter where a foundry (*geto*) was located; then it came to signify and label every Jewish quarter in the West; and in time, it referred to all neighborhoods inhabited by any marginalized or excluded minority, to the point where the term has become synonymous with exclusion. In the globalized world of the twenty-first century, however, we do not speak of “mellahization” or “haratization” but rather of ghettoization, and the term *mellah* remains largely unknown, except to experts in the field. This might be because Jewish ghettoization was far stricter and more repressive in the West

ant center for trade and cultural exchange during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and therefore we might postulate that an important local term of Venetian origin could be more readily globalized and pass into common usage. But how did the mellah begin? Further, what are the origins of its contemporary incarnations and the state of its memorialization, when only some of its ancient vestiges remain in the cities of Morocco and all the Jews have left for such disparate places as Israel, France, and Canada?

In this chapter, we are interested in the examination of the Moroccan mellah insofar as it is reimagined and reenacted through literature produced by the Jews who have left Morocco since the 1960s and today live in Israel or the Western world, writing in languages such as Hebrew, French, or English. Reconstructing a space through the imagination, so as to fill the gaps in history and memory, is something that many Jewish, as well as non-Jewish, writers share; that seems of particular significance in an age of diaspora and migration like the twenty-first century. Think of the Egyptian-born André Aciman, who in his numerous novels and essays imagines Alexandria in ways that go well beyond the assumed reality of that Mediterranean city, or of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), set in an imaginary shtetl whose contours reflect the author's fantasy more than anything else, an attempt to resurrect the vanished world his ancestors came from. In the case of Morocco, since the second half of the twentieth century, the space of the mellah has changed and lost not only its Jewish population but also some of its tangible markers, like street signs. Thus, literature has stepped in as an important repository for the collective memory of neighborhoods that once existed. It has become a cartographic catalog that allows us to re-create and then preserve the past in original ways: a narrative of the mellah might be presented from a positive perspective (the mellah as a familiar and intimate quarter) or from a negative one (the mellah as a space of exclusion and closure), depending on the author's personal point of entry and life story. The mellah becomes a metaphor that represents an entire bygone world brought to an end by Jewish migration—one that resurfaces through literature or, as we shall see in the conclusion of this essay, thanks to various kinds of heritage-related activities that in recent years have begun to take place in Morocco.

THE JEWS OF MOROCCO AND THE MELLAH

The Jews historically formed a very important sector of the Moroccan population and had resided in the country since ancient times: they were the so-called *toshavim* (inhabitants/residents). During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Jews of Sephardic origin, the *megorashim* (expelled), arrived from the Iberian Peninsula, which led to the birth of a heterogeneous yet well-integrated diasporic population. Even though until 1438 no mellah existed, the Jews were already subject to an Islamic charter that governed minorities (*dhimmi*). This discriminatory status granted some rights and protections to the so-called People of the Book (Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians) while simultaneously imposing limitations on activities that ranged from riding horses to building new places of worship to matters of inheritance. This charter did not lead to the complete marginalization of the Jews, however, who managed to navigate between Islamic law and the *halakhah* in original and creative ways.² As for urban segregation, Islam does not explicitly prescribe the segregation of non-Muslims living in the *dar al-Islam*. On the contrary, some Islamic jurists and theologians even argued that daily contact and cohabitation could induce them to convert.³

In Morocco, until the onset of colonialism, the Jews shared a traditional societal structure with their non-Jewish neighbors, at the top of which stood the *shaykh al-yahud* (head of the Jews/Jewish community), who oversaw the relations with the Makhzen, the Moroccan royal household. The local rabbis and rabbinical tribunals further regulated Jewish life, particularly in areas such as family life and personal status law. Since the Jews lived in villages situated in regions such as the Atlas Mountains and in the urban centers of southern and northern Morocco, they were an integral part of the entirety of Moroccan society and occupied a significant position in many sectors, including craftsmanship and goldsmithing.⁴

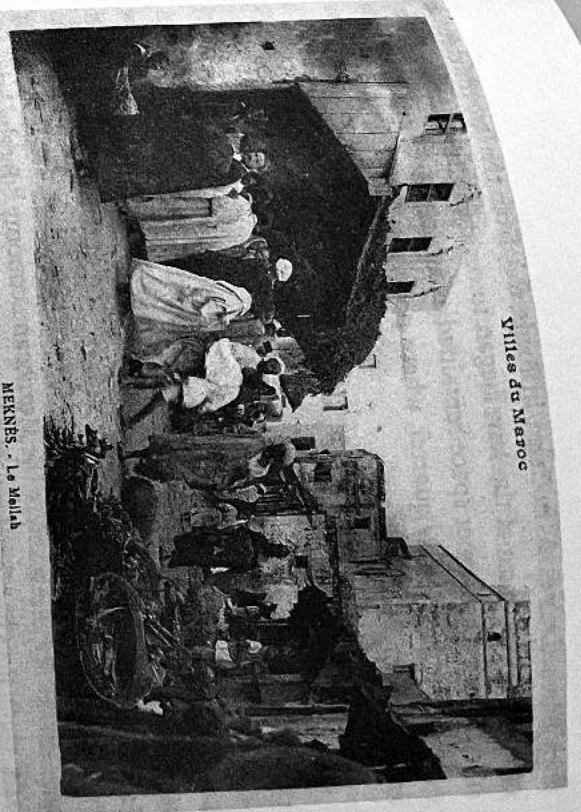
The mellah originally formed a part of the largest and most important Moroccan *medinas*, the neighborhoods that structured the complex architectural and ethno-social fabric of the city. Its history is directly connected to that of the Moroccan rulers: the first Jewish quarter was established in Fès in 1438 by the Marinid sultan, while the second—the mellah of Marrakech—was built by the Saadians when that city became the capital (1672–1727) then ordered the creation of the mellah in

his capital, Meknès. Lastly, the mellahs of cities like Tetouan, Rabat, and Essaouira (also known as Mogador) were established in 1807 following Moulay Slimane's decree, an act generally attributed to his pro-Wahhabi ideas.⁵ On the other hand, some cities, like Tangier and Safi, never had a mellah. In the case of Fès or Meknès, the proximity of the mellah to the casbah simplified the collection of the *jizyah* (the Islamic poll tax paid by non-Muslims) and the provision of royal protection in return. But, as Emily Gottreich explains, "the origins of the *mellah* are also connected to many of the broader historical themes of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean world. A general rise in population, the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain and the gradual institutionalization of the walled Jewish quarter" were all elements that further contributed to the concept of the mellah's diffusion from Fès to Marrakech and beyond.⁶

Although until the colonial period only Jews and European visitors resided in the mellah, Muslims and others always had been a visible presence during the day, when many went there to buy and sell goods, to collect rent—as in Marrakech, in whose mellah Muslims could own buildings but not reside—or to drink alcohol, gamble, and visit Jewish prostitutes. The mellah was traditionally locked at night, but this hardly meant that it was a space wholly estranged from the rest of the city. Even from an architectural point of view, walls encircled only some of the Moroccan Jewish quarters, such as in Fès.⁷ As Daniel Schroeter writes, "At night, the Jews would shut their shops in the *medina* and return to their private residences, like all other inhabitants of the town. Jews were able to maintain their distinctiveness precisely because the division between the world of family and religion and the world of business was so clearly demarcated in the wider urban context."⁸ The world of family and religion revolved around the mellah, maintaining the boundaries deemed necessary by both Muslims and Jews.

JEWISH QUARTERS (HARA) IN THE ARAB MUSLIM WORLD

Just as in Morocco, in most of the other Arab Muslim countries until the colonial period, Jews tended to concentrate in a specific quarter of the city, known as the *hara* or *harat al-yahud* (the Jewish neighborhood). However, the *hara*'s origin was not connected to ad hoc legislation as in the case of the mellah, and even non-Jews could live there. The *hara* of



Ylles du Maroc

MEKNÈS - Le Mellah

FIGURE 11. The Mellah of Meknès in a 1919 postcard.
—Wikipedia, https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Le_Mellah-Meknès_1919.jpg.

Cairo, for instance, existed beginning in the Fatimid period and by the early twentieth century was known as one of the poorest areas of the old city, where less than 8 percent of the local Jews still lived. Divided into a Rabbanite and Karaite section, it has been described by the twentieth-century Arabophone Jewish writer Maurice Shammas as "my birthplace" and "the source of my deep-rooted Egyptianness"—an area where Jews and Muslims lived and worked together.⁹ This image remains even today in Egyptian popular memory, as is testified by the television series *Harat al-Yahud*, broadcast with great success in Egypt during the month of Ramadan of 2015.¹⁰ That said, for a middle-class Egyptian Jew, like the writer Jacqueline Kahanoff, the *hara* constituted a faraway space inhabited by Jews in need of help and lacking education, one that contrasted with modern neighborhoods like Abbasyah, Garden City, and Zamalek where many had resided since the early twentieth century.¹¹

The *hara* of Tunis originated at the time of the Almohads, around the end of the tenth or the beginning of the eleventh century. As in Egypt, the Tunisian *hara* did not have clear-cut or fixed boundaries and—from an urban perspective—could be considered a quarter just like any other in the old *medina*. What distinguished this (and any other) *hara* was the presence of synagogues and other Jewish-related buildings, as well as

Jewish-owned stores. As in Cairo, in Tunis, too, from the late nineteenth century onward, most of the Jews began to reside and buy houses outside the hara. The former space remained as a traditional and generally overcrowded lower-class quarter, where poor Jews, as well as Muslims and Christians, lived.¹²

THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY MELLAH

The disruptions of the early twentieth century that decentered the Moroccan mellah as the center of Jewish life began with the onset of French colonialism and its accompanying social and economic changes. There were also shifts internal to Jewish society (such as the migration of rural Jews to the cities) and to the Moroccan economy.¹³ By the interwar years, many Jews had left the mellah; the more affluent ones especially had moved to the modern neighborhoods of Marrakech or Fès. In the 1950s, most Moroccan Jews did not live in the mellah, except in the case of Meknès, where a new, more modern, and spacious mellah had been founded in 1912 to host affluent members of the Jewish population.¹⁴

The history of cohabitation between Jews, Arabs, and Berbers halted only in 1948 when, after the foundation of Israel, the first Jewish migratory waves occurred. From that period and throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the vast majority of the roughly 250,000 Jews who lived in Morocco left the country for Israel and other destinations such as France, Canada, and the United States owing to the worsening regional political situation and the community's deteriorating living conditions.¹⁵

Those Jews who emigrated to Israel faced social and urban segregation, first in transit camps and then in development towns often situated in the north or south of Israel. As in the case of many other *Mizrachim* (Eastern Jews), this situation often led to an idealization of the lost Moroccan homeland and the development of resentment toward the Israeli state and its establishment.¹⁶ This is evident both in political movements—think of the protests that occurred as early as the 1950s and 1960s or the development of *Ha-panterim ha-shehorim* (Black Panthers) in the early 1970s—and in nostalgic cultural production by Moroccan migrants and their descendants. In addition, in the case of Moroccan Jews who emigrated to other countries in the Diaspora, the migration was a difficult and sometimes traumatic process. Beginning in the

1980s, the experience was frequently described in literature and autobiographical writings, as well as represented in museums and through the activities of heritage groups.¹⁷

CONTEMPORARY MOROCCAN JEWISH LITERATURE

Here, we focus on literature, particularly self-writing, so as to examine representations of the mellah—and the creation of an imagined mellah—by contemporary Jewish Moroccan writers who left Morocco as early as the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁸ We deal particularly with authors who left Morocco as children or adolescents and emigrated to Israel, France, and the United States. Fifty years later, these writers are returning through memory to the neighborhoods where they grew up or which they have come to know intimately only by thinking of them as their homeland in miniature. All of these authors share a similar migration story and can be said to belong to what Susan Rubin Suleiman, a scholar who has dealt with post-Holocaust literary writing, calls the “1.5 generation,” people writing about experience they lived directly as children or adolescents, thus producing a particular kind of memory in which imagination and creativity play a greater role.¹⁹ With the exception of Carlos de Nery, all of the authors we discuss left Morocco for Israel, France, or the United States at a young age between 1950 and 1960 but generally began to write and publish as adults at a temporal distance of decades, during the 1990s or later. Some of them emigrated more than once, first from Morocco and then, for instance, from France to Israel (Haim Shiran) or Israel to France (Mickaël Pariente). After the migration, the majority of these writers moved back and forth, returning to Morocco only for short periods of time.

In this section, we specifically examine Gabriel Bensimhon, Erez Biron, Ami Bouganim, Shlomo Elbaz, David Elmosnino, Uziel Hazan, Mickaël Pariente, and Haim Shiran, who emigrated to Israel; Daniel Sibony, Marcel Bénabou, and Pol-Serge Kakon, who emigrated to France; and finally Michel Emile Bensadon and Ruth Knafo Serron, who emigrated to the United States. Depending on the country in which they reside, some of them write in French, some in Hebrew, and others in English. These writers left Morocco during a period of profound political and social turmoil that witnessed the birth of the State of Israel; the end of the French colonization and protectorate; the economic crisis

that followed the departure of the French; the development of Moroccan nationalism, the Arabization of the country and consequent feelings of insecurity; and the attraction felt by many Jews to France and its culture thanks to the education received in the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle.

Writing the Mellah, 1950s to Today

The mellah was both a place of protection and of privilege, as it was often built next to the sultan's palace. Rather than a place of marginalization, it was an integral part of the city and an extension of the Muslim area. Last but not least, it was seen as a place of exchange and socialization, allowing Jewish society to preserve its own social and traditional life,²⁰ and so even in the literature of contemporary Moroccan Jewish writers, the mellah is represented as both a place of protection and intimacy, as well as of marginalization.

Before expanding on this contradiction, we wish to begin with Carlos de Nesry's 1950s description of the Casablanca mellah. It is to de Nesry—a significant figure of the 1940s and 1950s, described by the Jewish press of the time as the Albert Memmi of Morocco—that we owe some of the finest pages devoted to the Casablanca mellah.²¹ Those pages, written by a Jew hailing from Tangier, a city where no mellah existed, are of interest not so much because of the style (though it is remarkable) but because of the fact that they were written in medias res, as a sort of documentary. Even today they are, so to speak, a documentary charting a time of great change, from political transformation (the end of the French Protectorate and the return of King Mohammed V, exiled by the French, to Morocco) to changes in identity (the long years of colonialism and French influence) to social shifts (the twentieth-century migrations of Moroccan Jews).

The Case of Carlos de Nesry

Carlos de Nesry wrote his text in one afternoon toward the end of Shabbat while at the Place de France in Casablanca, next to the mellah. He was clearly struck by the comings and goings of the local populace. The mellah he describes, which he interestingly calls the "ghetto," fascinates him first and foremost because of its atemporal dimension: "Coming from a city with no ghetto, I have always been fascinated by this world beyond time," a world that can give a "sensation of immutability"

(10, 9). He is particularly struck by its spatial dimension, placing the mellah at the intersection of two worlds and two ages, between past and present, the elderly and the young. The area of the mellah seems to him sacred, to the extent that he defines it as "a kingdom of God," protected by frontiers (12). The mellah of de Nesry, above all, was able to preserve its traditions, local color, and ancestral customs, described by de Nesry as *aravistic*, even during the great crisis that marked the 1950s, when the book was written. It is a world with its own inner fissures, particularly between the older and younger generations, with the latter influenced (or emancipated, to use the author's terms) first by France and then the United States through their cinema—he mentions Marlon Brando's hairstyle—and soldiers parading arm-in-arm with the splendid girls of the mellah. The older generation, with its "happy-in-their-own-way Diogenes" and "long beards, dark *djellabas* and opprobrious skullcaps," seems far from de Nesry's preoccupations (10, 11).

Indeed, his most pressing concerns were with the massive Jewish emigration from Morocco and Jewish integration into that country's new social and political reality. De Nesry dwells on the language of conversions ("I hear the same popular, guttural, resonant Arabic") and on the bilingualism of young people who "walk by, mixing French and Arabic speech" (9, 16). He was struck by the atmosphere of Shabbat that persisted among the older generations: "The holy day will get them through to evening, enveloping them in its warm protective weave. You would surprise them by talking of other worlds and joys. Theirs suffices. I understand that they feel out of their element even in Israel" (11). Yet he worries about the younger generation, one he defines as a hybrid, fearing that "the children of the ghetto have disowned the *mellah* and its symbols. They have disowned by the same token its virtues and timeless values" (13).

The impact of this remark is mitigated by his idea that one cannot divest oneself so easily of the "aravism" of the mellah, which "persists tenaciously under a pseudo-modern cloak . . . it lasts in a certain way of thinking, speaking and behaving" (13). The writer trusts that the lessons of "modesty and discretion peculiar to the *mellah*" may be preserved for the future. De Nesry closes his remarks optimistically, noting the charm of the feminine beauty circulating in the mellah, which for an instant takes him to any *alameda* of northern Andalusia and makes him exclaim: "Where are the problems set by the new Morocco, the dramatic issues of our destiny in this country? Where are the questions of conscience we

would expect the Jews to debate in this country? For a community which said it was threatened and which some believed to be in grave difficulty, what a proud admission of vitality!" (16)

For Carlos de Nesry, the mellah is, above all, a place able to protect, preserve, and perpetuate a traditional culture and the society living there, with all its fissures, hybridity, and contradictions. It is a place of vitality, a generator of morality, and a symbol of modesty and discretion may lead us to think of issues linked to the lasting status of dhimmi in Moroccan society). His secular viewpoint takes in a space which he believes to be sacred because it is unchangeable, a little realm of God that he describes as outside time and ahistorical. It is a condition that de Nesry seems as much to wish for as to fear. The mellah is therefore a quarter conceived of as a place of contradictions and conflicting visions, just as we find it to be in the autobiographies of today.

MOROCCAN JEWISH WRITERS: DIFFERENT ATTITUDES TOWARD THE MELLAH

Many of the Moroccan Jewish writers that we study lived and grew up in the mellah, a quarter that has become a metaphor for home and that has been turned into a space of intimacy, family affection, and identity formation. Other authors we examine write of the site without ever having lived there, either because there was no mellah (as in the case of Tangier) or, as in the cases of de Nesry and Marcel Bénabou, because they come from a wealthy family background. The wealthy did not tend to live in the mellah, a place of exclusion that produced differences in identity within Moroccan Jewish society itself.

Daniel Sibony warns us against considering Moroccan Judaism as a uniform entity even within a single city; it was riven by profound contrasts. For example, Sibony writes that in Marrakech, the distance of the mellah from the world of Jewish notables was so great as to create widely differing identities among the same Marrakech Jews. In the Jewish space of that city, the mellah was just one part. Michel Emile Bensadon speaks of the stigma attached to living in the mellah and explains that when his family suddenly became poor, the organization of his bar mitzva ceremony had to be drastically modified: "Would my entry into manhood

resemble that of the poorer Jews of the mellah, the squalid Jewish neighborhood we were forbidden to frequent?"²²

positive Views of the Mellah

It is Shlomo Elbaz who describes the mellah of Marrakech as a substitute for Jerusalem, both a state within a state "and first and foremost that warm, familiar enclosure, like a mother's breast: the *mellah*... an autonomous kingdom, a bubble cut off from the rest of the town."²³ To anyone raised in the mellah, that quarter could be a maternal breast, warm and protective, but also an autonomous, independent realm.

Marcel Bénabou knows the old mellah of Meknès only because he used to go there to buy kosher meat with his mother and to see his old Aunt Zaira. He describes the layout of his aunt's house, a courtyard with a well overlooked by three musty, windowless rooms. This aunt was also famous for her delicious cakes and the mysterious practices she engaged in, of which all the women of the family took advantage, "more or less magic remedies, gestures and formulae adapted to life's most diverse circumstances."²⁴ Hence Bénabou's mellah was an unknown place, full of allure and mystery.

In a poem entitled "Simhah ba-mellah" (*Joy in the mellah*), written in Moroccan Arabic and Hebrew, the Israeli poet Erez Biton celebrates the joy and cheer associated with the scale of the libations—the spiky olives and the hallah (Shabbat bread) with cinnamon washed down with *tanja*.²⁵ David Elmosnino paints us a familiar picture of the mellah of Essaouira in "The Day of the Couscous": "If the Muslims had not had the idea of building the *wellahs* . . . the tradition of the 'day of the couscous' could not have been born and I would not have had the chance of learning how to know better the people and their thoughts."²⁶ The mellah has also been depicted as a living theater full of humor in which strange characters move. Fools, madmen, wizards, sorcerers, and rabbis both holy and bizarre acted on the stage where folkloric and traditional rituals took place, such as is found in the pages of *Récits du mellah* by Ami Bouganim or in *Rica la vida* by Pol-Serge Kakon.²⁷ The warmth, protection, magic, joy, good cheer, traditional dishes, and familiar climate of intimacy—all this is represented by the mellah.

Negative Views of the Mellah

The mellah also meant poverty and discrimination. For Mickael Parienté, who, unlike Bénabou, actually lived in the old Meknès mellah, this

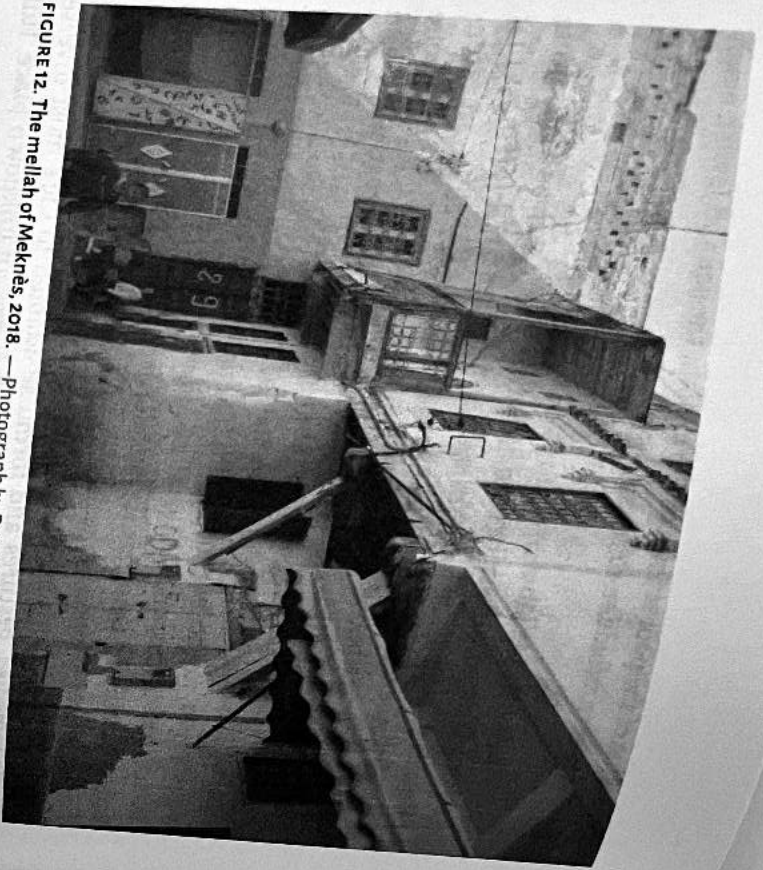


FIGURE 12. The mellah of Meknès, 2018. —Photograph by Emanuela Trevisan Semi.



FIGURE 13. House interior in the mellah of Meknès, 2012. —Photograph by Emanuela Trevisan Semi.

quarter produced a stigmatized identity. Parienté tells of how in less than a decade, he moved from the mellah of Meknès, which he describes as “a miserable, primitive village,” to a modern prosperous city (Geneva), having spent years on a kibbutz.²⁸ Parienté associates the mellah with his father, who, next door to the mellah’s entrance, had a small shop that made ice and lemonade, a business he later built up to become the mellah’s supplier of fish.²⁹ Nonetheless, for this writer, who lives between Israel and France, the mellah remains primarily a synonym for poverty and precariousness, a stigmatized place par excellence. “In Morocco I was just a Jew from the *mellah*,” he writes, one of the many indistinct Jews stigmatized simply because they were inhabitants of that quarter, “while in Israel I was taken for a Moroccan. In France, on the other hand, I feel myself first and foremost Israeli.”³⁰ According to Parienté, he suffered unfair treatment and stigma for the rest of his days.

Ruth Knafo Setton experienced a similar situation even in the absence of a mellah. An emigrant from Tangier to the United States, she writes that between Jews and Muslims there was a barrier even with no mellah, a wall both real and symbolic: “In Tangiers, Jews and Arabs lived side by side, but still, there was the wall—always the wall between them.”³¹ Later, Knafo Setton dwells on the figure of Lalla Suleika, the Jewess from Tangier kidnapped by a Muslim—who then fell in love with her and sent to her death because she would not deny her Judaism: “Suleika was a trespasser. She crossed from the Jewish world to the Arab world. In those days there was no *mellah* in Tangiers, but still the separation was distinct, an invisible wall. I used to wonder how long it takes to cross from the Jewish house to the Arab house. An eternity. Or a second. A breath, and you’re there, in the other world.”³² In this passage, the mellah works metaphorically, the space representing the everyday systems of cross-cultural exchange.

AN AMBIGUOUS AND POROUS SPACE

As Gabriel Bensimhon tells us, the mellah was grey, but its inhabitants, full of invention, gave it color through the space of their imagination. A search for the color green, part of a school assignment in Israel, reminds the protagonist of the lack of green in the mellah, where “colors were missing and everything was grey; however, even if green were missing, imagination made up for that.” In the mellah, neither trees nor flowers

would grow, but even if the color green was lacking this was made up for by imagination.³³ For Ami Bouganim, a Francophone Israeli author of Moroccan origin, the mellah of Essaouira gives us the opportunity to reflect on Israel, to which he emigrated: "We did not barter the dusty worm-eaten ghettos and *mellahs* for a supreme ghetto-*mellah* where unreason more than political reason, to the extent that Israel has no more moral lessons to give anyone either in terms of state and messianic social justice."³⁴ He remembers the mellah as a space of human clarity or horrified to find himself in another, pejorative version of this space.

A number of authors dwell on who closed the doors of the mellah, monumental doors made of iron or wood. It is one thing to imagine a mellah being closed in the evening by its own inhabitants; it is quite another if it was closed from the outside by the Muslims. Whether locked from the outside or the inside, they offered shelter and safety. Elmossino recalls that the doors of the Mogador mellah were closed by the inhabitants if that the "only entry to the *mellah* was defended by the inhabitants so which was carefully bolted and padlocked at sunset with iron cross bars set into the sides of the double doors, from one *mezuzah* to the other with the result that all entry and exit was forbidden."³⁵

According to Uziel Hazan, the closing of the mellah's doors in Casablanca was carried out by Muslims: "At midnight the Rue du Paro doors of rotten wood were padlocked. The Muslim watchman fired the cross members into their slots and secured a heavy padlock to them. Then he lay down on his flea-ridden straw mattress and fell asleep."³⁶ In the description of the Meknès mellah, Haim Shiran speaks of a "protected and confined citadel" and conveys the notion of protection by evoking the doors of the quarter. Shiran mentions the monumental door closed every evening in defense against the Aissaus, a confraternity that organized its violent rituals, whose sanctuary was near the doors of the mellah, and whose very mention made one shiver.³⁷

CONCLUSION

Considering these descriptions and the emotions that they convey, what remains of the Moroccan Jewish quarter today? Has the mellah become a *lieu de mémoire*, deprived of a proper history, filled only with contrasting

memories scattered across the Diaspora, Israel, and Morocco? Has it been forgotten altogether, except by those Jews who experienced it directly and who now write about it?

It is undisputed that in the cities of Morocco, where hundreds of thousands of Jews lived until not so long ago, from Meknès to Marrakech, the mellah has been transformed into a quarter like any other in the medina. The memories of its Jewish inhabitants did not vanish, however; elders still remember a time when Jewish tradesmen lived and worked there. Since the 1990s, though, the Moroccan authorities have begun to be interested in the restoration and preservation of Jewish heritage, from synagogues and cemeteries to the mellahs themselves, an interest only strengthened by the promulgation of the Moroccan constitution in 2011. Even though these projects did not involve all Moroccan cities, they nonetheless led to the creation of small museums and the restoration of several buildings from Essaouira to Fès and Casablanca, often with an eye toward attracting tourists and the many Moroccan Jews living in Israel or in the Diaspora who might visit their homeland.³⁸ This contrasts with the previous period, from decolonization until the 1980s, when there was a general lack of information about the mellah, at least at a public and official level; in the case of the two mellahs of Meknès, even the street names were changed. The new names referred to Palestine or to Muslim personalities: Rue Petahia Berdugo became Rue Salah el-Din and Rue de Jérusalem was transformed into Boulevard al-Quds (the Arabic name for Jerusalem).³⁹

When it comes to literary production, though not all of the texts examined contain Moroccan memories or regrets in the style imagined by Carlos de Nesry, Shlomo Elbaz, or other writers, most of the writers concur in remembering the mellah as a symbol of vitality. It is a space surrounded by an atmosphere of protection and intimacy, even if colored gray. These narratives contribute to the creation of an imagined mellah for new generations of individuals who do not know the Jewish quarter as their forefathers did but, based on these authors, can fantasize about it as a way of finding connection to and meaning for their own identities—often in ways that shift traditional notions and discourses of the Jewish Diaspora. Given the absence of (or perhaps too limited space assigned to) the memory of Jewish Morocco in Morocco as well as in the Jewish world, literature may therefore constitute more than a privileged *lieu de mémoire* where the past can be reconstructed and reinvented.

Self-writing ends up producing a mellah that is both fictional and real where the reminiscences of the past intermingle with the present lives of the authors who live in the Western world or in Israel.

Without idealizing or presenting it too rosy, the descriptions of the mellah and European ghettos. The proliferation of closed Jewish quarters in Europe since the establishment of the Venice Ghetto in 1516 was not mirrored in the Arab Muslim world. In a context where the idea of a closed Jewish neighborhood was not infrequent, the history of its Jews, its cities, and the ways in which various ruling dynasties managed to assert power over them.

That said, in Morocco, just like in Venice, the Jewish quarter was established not for religious reasons—as was the case of the ghetto of Rome, and governing a (useful) ethno-religious group that lived in the city perhaps were more porous than those between the mellah and the outside world and the city that surrounded them. Nonetheless, in both cases, today we notice a shared tendency to remember the Jewish quarter as a familiar space where, as Salo Baron famously argued, aside from segregation and episodes of violence, “Jewry was enabled to live a full, rounded life, kind of territory.”⁴¹ If the Jew, indeed, had in effect a nation were the main factors that brought about the opening of the European ghettos, in the case of the mellah, we would attribute this opening to the effects of colonialism and the changes that occurred in the socioeconomic structure of Morocco in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This shifting Jewish identity, along with the abrupt migration of the Jews from Morocco in the 1950s and 1960s, explains why what was originally a space of urban segregation like the mellah metonymically came to symbolize an entire Moroccan (Jewish) landscape of familiar faces, smells, and sounds that were eventually lost. In other cases—think of Ami Bouganim—the mellah is also a metaphor for the experience of marginalization felt by many Moroccan Jews after their migration to Israel. Beneath these metaphorical readings lies the idea of the mellah

as a “memory space that travels” and that today binds together several generations of Moroccan Jews who live in countries as different as Israel, the United States, and France but who still feel a sense of nostalgia, or at least affection, for a world that some experienced for only a short period of time or, in the case of the younger generations, know solely through the stories of their parents and grandparents.⁴² In other words, a physical place like the mellah structures and becomes a hub for memories both real and imagined, leading to the production of a rich memorial literature by the Jews of Morocco—an extraordinary way to pay homage to a bygone world in which they had lived for centuries.

NOTES

This chapter was written jointly by Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Dario Miccoli. Miccoli is the author of the sections “The Jews of Morocco and the Mellah,” “Jewish Quarters (Hara) in Arab Muslim World,” “The Twentieth-Century Mellah,” and the conclusion; Trevisan Semi is the author of “Contemporary Moroccan Jewish Literature,” “Moroccan Jewish Writers: Different Attitudes toward the Mellah,” “Positive Views of the Mellah,” “Negative Views of the Mellah,” and “An Ambiguous and Porous Space.” The introduction was written collectively by the two authors.

1. However, according to Muhammad Al-Manuni's *Civilisation Méridionale*—which quotes the fourteenth-century Arabic chronicle *Rawd al-Qiyas*—some Jews were living outside the old city from a much earlier epoch: “In the 677 hijra [1278 AD] the Jews were moved to the mellah next to *Res el-gaidi* (New Res) and so were banished from *Res Idrissyya*, after they had been relieved of their goods and a large number of them had been killed.” See Al-Manuni, *Civilisation Méridionale* (n.p.: Kulliyat al-Adab bi-al-Kabat, 1996).
2. See Jessica Marglin, *Across Legal Lines: Jews and Muslims in Modern Morocco* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016). As an introduction to the history of the dhimma, see Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), esp. 21–66.
3. Emily Gottreich, “Jewish Quarters,” in *Encyclopaedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman A. Stillman (Leiden, Brill, 2010), 3126.
4. Shlomo Dushan, *The Mellah Society: Jewish Community Life in Sharifian Morocco* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
5. Mohammed Kenbib, *Jiffs et Musulmans au Maroc* (Paris: Tallandier, 2016), 24–35, and Daniel Schroeter, “How Jews Became ‘Moroccans,’” in *The Sephardic Experience East and West: Essays in Honor of Jane S. Gerber*, ed. Federica Francesconi, Stanley Mirvis, and Brian Smoller (Leiden, Brill, 2012), 224. We should note that even after the establishment of the local mellah, some affluent Jewish families in Essaouira were allowed to live in the casbah. See Daniel Schroeter, *The Sultan's Jew: Morocco and the Sephardi World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).
6. Emily Gottreich, *The Mellah of Marrakesh: Jewish and Muslim Space in Morocco's Red City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 38.
7. Emily Gottreich, “Reclaiming the ‘Islamic City’: from the Perspective of Jewish Space,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11, no. 1 (2004): 18–46. See also Susan Gilson Miller and Mauro Berragato

- eds, *The Architecture and Memory of the Minority Quarter in the Muslim Mediterranean City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
8. Daniel Schroeter, "The Jewish Quarter and the Moroccan City" in *New Horizons in Sephardic Studies*, ed. Yedidah K. Stillman and George K. Zuckler (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 73.
 9. Maurice Shamma, *Yazza, Hafidat Nifritih* (2003), quoted in Deborah Starr, "Sensing the City: Representations of Cairo's Harat al-Yahud." *Prologues* 26 (2006): 146. On the Jews of Egypt, consider Jacob Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (New York: New York University Press, 1969); Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews of Modern Egypt, 1914–1952* (London: IB Tauris, 1989); and Dario Miccoli, *Histoire of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Boyhood*, 1880–1930 (London: Routledge, 2015).
 10. Among the many reviews that appeared in newspapers at the time, see for example Noha Khalaf, "Cairo Soap Opera Casts Islamists as the Bad Guys," *Financial Times*, July 1, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/2db517e8-1fd9-11e5-ab0f-6bb9974f52d0> (no longer available); and Eyal Sagui Bizaw, "How 'The Jewish Quarter' Became the Talk of Cairo," *Ha-Aretz*, July 5, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/life/television/premium-how-the-jewish-quarter-became-the-talk-of-cairo-1.5375242>. On Jews and cinema in post-Nasserist Egypt, see Yaron Shemer, "From Chahines Al-Iskandarinya . . . leh to Salata Baladi and An Yehud Masr: Rethinking Egyptian Jews' Cosmopolitanism, Belonging and Nostalgia in Cinema," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 7, no. 3 (2014): 351–75.
 11. Jaqueline Kahanoff, "Europe from Afar," in *Movings or Marvells: The Lamentable Writings of Jaqueline Shohet Kahanoff*, ed. Deborah Starr and Sasson Somekh (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 100–113.
 12. Paul Sebag and Robert Arral, *Évolution d'un Ghetto Nord-africain: La harat de Tunis* (Paris: PUF, 1959).
 13. Susan Gilson Miller, "The Mellah of Fez: Reflections on the Spatial Turn in Moroccan Jewish History" in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, ed. Julia Brauch, Anna Liphard, and Alexandra Nocke (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 113.
 14. Michel Abitbol, "De la Tradition à la Modernité: Les Juifs du Maroc," *Diasporas* 27 (2015): 30. See also Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Hanane Sekkar Hatimi, *Mémoire et représentations des Juifs au Maroc. Les Voisins Absents de Meknès* (Paris: Publisud, 2011).
 15. Consider Haim Zafrani, *Deux Mille ans de Vie Juive au Maroc* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1998); André Lévy, *Il Était une Fois les Juifs Marocains* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995); and Yigal Hin-Nun, "La Négociation de l'Évacuation en Masse des Juifs du Maroc," in *La Fin des Juifs en Terres d'Islam*, ed. Shmuel Trigano (Paris: Denoel, 2009), 303–58.
 16. Sami Shalom Chertif, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (London: Routledge, 2010).
 17. Orit Quakine-Yekutieli and Yigal S. Nizri, "My Heart Is in the Maghrib: Aspects of Cultural Revival of the Moroccan Diaspora in Israel," *Hesperis-Timuda* 51, no. 3 (2016): 165–94. d'Iraélianité Diasporique," *A Contrario* 5 (2007): 37–50. On Francophone Maghribi Jewish literature, see Ewa Tarrakowsky, *Les Juifs et le Maghreb: Fonctions Sociales d'une Littérature d'Exile* (Tours: Presse Universitaires François Rabelais, 2016).
 18. We use the term "self-writing" to refer to a wide range of texts, not just autobiographies, but also memoirs, semiautobiographical novels, and the like.
 19. Susan Rubin Suleiman, "The 1.5 Generation: Thinking about Child Survivors and the Holocaust," *American Imago* 59, no. 3 (2002): 277–95.
 20. Trevisan Semi and Sekkar Hatimi, *Mémoire et Représentations*, 295–303.
 21. Carlos de Nesity, *Les Israélites Marocains à l'Heure du Choix* (Tangiers: Editions Internationales
- 1988), <http://library.jalrkedu/rabatgeniza/project/items/show/325> (no longer available). Further references to de Nesity's text refer to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
 22. Daniel Sibony, *Marrakech, le Départ* (Paris: Odele Jacob, 2009); Michel Emilie Bensadon, *Where the Wind Blew: A Boyhood Lost in Tangier* (New York: Lillibooks, 2013), 199.
 23. Shlomo Elbaz, *Marrakesh-Jerusalem: Patrie de Mon Ame* (Neuchâtel: Avant-Propos, 2012), 107.
 24. Marcel Bénabou, *Jacob, Méhem et Mimoun une Épopée Familiale* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 91–92.
 25. Ezer Biron, *Séfer ha-nana* [The mint book] (Tel Aviv: Eked, 1979), 32–53.
 26. David Elmosnino, *Palais et Jardins* (Ashdod, Israel: Bit Kodesh, 2008), 14.
 27. Ami Bouganin, *Récits du Mellah* (Paris: Lantès, 1981); Pol-Serge Kakon, *Riva la Vida* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1999).
 28. Michaël Parienté, *Rue de la Grande Chamrière* (Montrouge, France: Starmet, 2011), 51.
 29. Michaël Parienté, interview by Emanuela Trevisan Semi, May 16, 2013, Paris.
 30. Parienté, *Rue de la Grande Chamrière*, 177–78.
 31. Ruth Knafo Sertou, *The Road to Fez* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), 119.
 32. Knafo Sertou, *Road to Fez*, 118.
 33. Gabriel Bensimhon, *Ne'arah be-hulzah kehulah* [The girl with a blue shirt] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2013), 20.
 34. Ami Bouganin, *Es-Sawira de Mogador* (Maastricht: Louwen, 2013), 242.
 35. Elmosnino, *Palais et Jardins*, 15.
 36. Uziel Hazan, *Ammaná* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1982), 121.
 37. Haim Shitran and Fabienne Bergmann, *Le Rocher d'Origine* (Paris: La Compagnie Littéraire, 2013), 92, 59.
 38. Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Entre lieux de mémoire et lieux de l'oubli au Maroc: Quelle politique et quels acteurs pour la mémoire juive?," *Ethnologias* 39, no. 2 (2017): 65–80. On Moroccan Jewish memory tours, see Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Revenir pour écrire: Le livre d'or, un nouvel espace de communication dans le pèlerinage des Juifs au Maroc," *Diasporas* 8 (2006): 153–61.
 39. Yolande Cohen and Noueddine Harrami, "From Synagogue to Mosque: My Grandfather's House in the Old Mellah of Meknès," in *HomeLand and Diaspora: Perspectives on Jewish Culture in the Mediterranean and Beyond*, ed. Dario Miccoli, Marcela Simoni, and Giorgio Focorini (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2018), 36. More generally on the current Moroccan attitudes toward the country's Jewish past, see Aomar Boum, *Memoirs of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).
 40. See Marina Caffero, *Storia degli Ebrei nell'Italia Moderna* (Rome: Carocci, 2014).
 41. Salo W. Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation," in *The Memoirs Treasury: Harvest of Half a Century*, ed. Leo Schwartz (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1964), 55.
 42. On the case of second- and third-generation Mizrahi writers, see Lital Lévy, *Pestic: Tresspass Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), esp. 238–84; Yochai Openheim, "Be-shem ha-'av: Edipalytic ha-sippur ha-mizrahi shel ha-dor ha-sheni" [In the name of the father: Oedipal themes in second-generation Mizrahi literature], *Tovrah u-vivvot* 40 (2012): 161–84; and Dario Miccoli, *La generation Mizrahi: Normalité, identité, Mémoire degli Ebrei del Medio Oriente e Nord Africa* (Florence: Giuntina, 2016), 69–96.