

Moses and Faruq. The Jews and the Study of History in Interwar Egypt 1920s-1940s¹

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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: *khitaṭ*) 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 Ranger, (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 Ziwār *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’œil sur la chronologie de la Nation égyptienne* (1931) and *Le khédive Ismaïl et la dette égyptienne* (1935). His son René (1896-1994), deputy of Wādī 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 hiéroglyphes*.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 Beinun, *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 Mizrayim* (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 Zytnecki wrote, it was precisely in the period under study that North African and Middle Eastern Jews entered the *bibliothèque 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-yezirah ha-ruhanit” (“Intellectual activities”), in *Toldot yehudei Mizrayim 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-yezirah ha-halakhit ve-ha-toranit shel rabbanei Mizrayim ba-meataim ha-shanim ha-ahronot” (“The halakhic 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-Mizrayim ba-mahazit 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 *secrétaire 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 vérité 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 Zytznicki, *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-Mizrayim, 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’Égypte. In 1942 and 1943 he published the *Annuaire des juifs d’Égypte 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’Égypte 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 Égypte* and *Médecins et avocats juifs au service de l’Égypte*, 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 Égypte 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 [*pères 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 Éditions Juives d’Égypte, 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 Beinun, *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'Égypte* (henceforth: *Médecins*). As *Les juifs en Égypte*, *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'Égypte*, (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 Anzaldúa, *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 Cattai”, *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 Beinín, *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, Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 205-255.

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