Histories of the Jews of Egypt

Up until the advent of Nasser and the 1956 War, a thriving and diverse Jewry lived in Egypt – mainly in the two cities of Alexandria and Cairo, deeply influencing the social and cultural history of the country.

Histories of the Jews of Egypt argues that this Jewish diaspora should be viewed as ‘an imagined bourgeoisie’. It demonstrates how, from the late nineteenth century up to the 1950s, a resilient bourgeois imaginary developed and influenced the lives of Egyptian Jews both in the public arena, in institutions such as the school and in the home. From the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Cairo lycée français to Alexandrian marriage contracts and interwar Zionist newspapers – this book explains how this imaginary was characterised by a great capacity to adapt to the evolutions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Egypt, but later deteriorated alongside increasingly strong Arab nationalism and the political upheavals that the country experienced from the 1940s onwards.

Offering a novel perspective on the history of modern Egypt and its Jews, and unravelling too often forgotten episodes and personalities which contributed to the making of an incredibly diverse and lively Jewish diaspora at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East, this book is of interest to scholars of modern Egypt, Jewish history and Mediterranean history.

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Histories of the Jews of Egypt
An imagined bourgeoisie, 1880s–1950s

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This book is the end of a voyage begun eight years ago when, as a graduate student, I came across the novels of an Israeli writer of Egyptian Jewish origin named Yitzhaq Gormezano Goren. Since then, my thoughts very often wandered between the corniche of Alexandria, the classrooms of Cairo’s lycée français and the noisy trains that went from Egypt to ‘Eretz Israel. During this long voyage, I have asked myself, as have countless others, why I decided to study this particular subject. I still have not come to a definitive answer, or perhaps I have too many answers that yet do not fully explain why I fell in love with the Jews of Egypt. Having completed the book, I can only say that I enjoyed writing it and now that my voyage has reached its final stage, I feel both relieved and strangely sad.

Histories of the Jews of Egypt is largely based upon my doctoral dissertation, defended in July 2012 at the Department of History and Civilisation of the European University Institute, Florence. As anyone familiar with academic life knows, the completion of a PhD involves long periods of lonely reading and writing. At the same time, it is an occasion to meet new people and travel to many different places. Much of this would not have been possible without the financial support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European University Institute, the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, New York. At the EUI, my supervisor Giulia Calvi read and discussed every step of my dissertation with patience and kindness: this book would not have been the same without her guidance and suggestions. I would like to thank Anthony Molho, who encouraged me with enthusiasm since the very beginning and showed deep interest in the research. Deborah Starr kindly accepted to be part of my jury and since then has generously shared with me her knowledge of Egyptian Jewish history and culture: here, I would like to express all my gratitude to her.

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I dedicate this book with infinite love to my late grandmother Andreina Ilva Gabrielli Furia, non per essere ammirata ma per essere ricordata.

Dario Miccoli
Florence/Aix-en-Provence, February 2015
Introduction

‘As we are dealing with the country called Egypt’

It might naturally be supposed that, as we are dealing with the country called Egypt, the inhabitants of whom the statesman and the administrator would have almost exclusively to take into account would be Egyptians. Any one who is inclined to rush to this conclusion should remember that Egypt [...] is the Land of Paradox. [...] Who, in fact, is a true Egyptian? [...] Let any one who has a general acquaintance with the appearance and physiognomy of the principal Eastern races try if he can give a fair ethnological description of the first ten people he meets in one of the streets of Cairo. The first passer-by is manifestly an Egyptian fellah who has come into the city to sell his garden produce. [...] The eighth must be a Jew, who has just returned from a tour in Asia Minor with a stock of embroideries, which he is about to sell to the winter tourists.

(Lord Cromer, *Modern Egypt*)

According to Lord Cromer, first British Consul-General of Egypt from 1882 to 1907, if someone were to describe the first ten people encountered in one of the streets of turn-of-the-century Cairo, he would have to enumerate at least: a fellah, a Bedouin, a Copt, a Turco-Egyptian pasha, a Circassian, a Muslim shaykh, a Levantine, a Greek and ‘a Jew, who has just returned from a tour in Asia Minor with a stock of embroideries, which he is about to sell to the winter tourists’.1 What struck Cromer most about this country was, in fact, its very diverse population, to the point that it was difficult, if not impossible, to discern whom a true Egyptian was. From his words also emerged the idea that the Egyptian Jew was an industrious man that moved from one place to the other, and had a special connection with foreigners, such as tourists.

Although I do not intend to follow the path of Lord Cromer – nor do I aim to adopt any of the Orientalist stereotypes that can be traced throughout *Modern Egypt* – a careful and between-the-lines reading of his quote can bring to the surface some of the underlying themes of my book: Egypt as a heterogeneous national and cultural space; Egyptian Jews as the reconfiguration of an Ottoman Jewish mercantile and entrepreneurial milieu and a group of people whose history encompasses the Ottoman Empire, Europe and the Mediterranean.

Egypt is undoubtedly the country in the Middle East that has the longest history of territorial identity, as well as the first one to have encountered European
modernity already in 1798, with the expedition of Napoleon. At the same time, the history of Egypt during the nineteenth century is that of a territory formally still part of the Ottoman Empire, yet increasingly independent in many respects. The beginning of the domination of Muhammad ‘Ali in 1805 and the reforms undertaken during his khedivate (‘viceroyalty’) – from the health system and the regulation of prostitution, to the army and the management of the poor – inaugurated a new epoch and sanctioned the birth of modern Egypt. The successors of Muhammad ‘Ali, that ruled the country in the mid- and late nineteenth century, have now been assessed as rulers, during whose domination subsequent sociopolitical evolutions were first delineated. It was, in fact, under the khedivate of Tawfiq that the 1881 revolt of ‘Urabi pasha took place in Alexandria, something which – together with other factors – led to the beginning of the British colonial domination (1882–1922, the protectorate being proclaimed in 1914). From then and up to the monarchical era, European influence on Egyptian society and economy became more and more relevant.

On the other hand, it was still in the colonial era that national ideas – culminated in the Revolution of 1919 – started to be intensely discussed. Despite its failure in obtaining an immediate and full independence, the revolution, together with the local impact of the First World War, made Great Britain declare Egypt a constitutional monarchy in 1922 under the rule of Fu’ad, the seventh son of Khedive Isma’il. The first two decades of the monarchical era, which coincided with the kingdom of Fu’ad, came to be known as the liberal age. In those years, notwithstanding the persistent influence of Great Britain on different aspects of Egyptian politics, Wafd – the liberal-nationalist party of Sa’ad Zaghlul, the father of modern Egypt – dominated the political scene. Things changed significantly during the reign of Faruq, which began in 1936. The 1930s and 1940s have, in fact, been interpreted as a period of radicalisation of the political and social arena, when Islamic radicalism and right-wing nationalism started to play a more evident role. That said, it was only after the Second World War and with the Free Officers’ Revolution of 1952 – and then the 1956 War, which found Egypt opposed to France, Great Britain and Israel – that a new and different Egypt finally appeared.

Bourgeois modernities across the Mediterranean

Thanks to the economic boom that followed the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and the development of the cotton industry and the port of Alexandria among other things, Egypt also became a privileged place of migration for people from all over the Ottoman Empire, Eastern and Southern Europe – especially Greece and Italy – and the Maghreb. A great many of these migrants were Jews who soon increased the local communities in a substantial way who soon increased the local communities in a substantial way. In fact, up until the mid-nineteenth century, only about 5,000 Jews lived in Egypt. This number made up a small and rather poor Jewry that had been in the country – mainly in the old harat al-yahud (‘Jewish quarter’) of Cairo – already for several centuries. The
Figure I.1 Map of Egypt in 1912 (source: The Cambridge Modern History Atlas, eds. Sir Adolphus William Ward, G. W. Prothero, Sir Stanley Mordaunt Leathes and E. A. Benians (London: Cambridge University Press, 1912)).
Jewish population, however, rapidly increased to 25,200 in 1897 and to nearly 60,000 in 1917, reaching a peak of approximately 75,000–80,000 in the late 1930s/early 1940s. In fact, even though official statistics counted only 65,000 Jews at that time, scholars tend to agree that this figure is not realistic.6

As was happening in many urban centres of the region, the migrations – together with other factors, such as the system of the Capitulations and the status of many Jews as foreign protégés, together with the enduring benefits of the Ottoman Hatt-ı-Hümayun (‘Imperial reform edict’) of 18567 – facilitated a rapid improvement of their socio-economic status.8 In turn, this overlapped with the formation of a larger bourgeois milieu in the two main Egyptian urban centres of Alexandria and Cairo, which were also the places where the vast majority of the Jews resided, and led to the diffusion of a great deal of diversity among those leading the country’s commercial and entrepreneurial activities. This is further signalled by the fact that, from the early twentieth century and even more after the First World War, most Jews went to live in new residential neighbourhoods also inhabited by other minorities, such as, for instance, Zamalek, Cité-Jardin, Héliopolis, Giza and Isma’iliyyah, but also Daher and Sakakini in Cairo – where, however, some poor Jews continued to reside in the harat al-yahud – or Muharram Bey, al-Manshiyah and Ramleh in the case of Alexandria.

It should be noted that, whereas the vast majority of Jews concentrated in Alexandria and Cairo, small communities also existed in the Delta region – for example, in Tantah, Mansourah and Khafr al-Zayyat – as well as in Port Said and Suez. Finally, a small though ancient Karaite community and a group of Ashkenazi Jews, who migrated from Eastern Europe and Russia at the turn-of-the-century, were also present – mostly in Cairo.9

Up until now, almost all studies on Egyptian Jews largely concentrated on sociopolitical and economic analysis. Even given its publication more than forty years ago, Jacob Landau’s Jews of Nineteenth-Century Egypt continues to be the most comprehensive account of the life and society of nineteenth century Egyptian Jews.10 The Jews in Modern Egypt by Gudrun Krämer started where Landau’s work ended, giving an in-depth portrait of the social and political history of the Egyptian Jews during monarchical times and contextualising it within the Egyptian and international political arena.11 By conjugating the tools of a more

<table>
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<th>Alexandria</th>
<th>Minor cities</th>
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</table>

Sources: Krämer, The Jews, 10, Table 2; Ilan, Mitzrayim, 34, Table 1.
traditional historical analysis with those of cultural studies, Joel Beinin’s *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry* instead addressed the late monarchical years and the post-migration context, selecting hitherto neglected topics, such as: the evolution of an Egyptian Jewish identity both before and after the migration from the country and Egyptian Jewish émigrés in France and the US.\(^\text{12}\) Michael Laskier’s *The Jews of Egypt* offered yet another perspective. His is a detailed study of the diffusion of Zionism and anti-Semitism in Egypt, and of the impact that the Arab–Israeli conflict had at a local level, which seems to have overemphasised the role of Zionism that was actually not so relevant at least until the late 1930s.\(^\text{13}\)

*Histories of the Jews of Egypt* aims to shift the focus of the analysis from the sociopolitical to the cultural and familial dimensions, interpreting Egyptian Jews as a milieu characterised by a complex and multifaceted bourgeois imaginary – from Westernised education and Eastern Mediterranean reconsiderations of Jewish religious traditions to novel notions of gender respectability, moral behaviour and feelings of (trans)national belonging – that helped them to find a space of their own in modern Egypt. Looking at schools, family life, gender, sociability and how all this interweaved with processes of social and cultural change that invested the urban societies of Egypt and the Middle East, I will thus demonstrate that the history of this community was linked to a complex process of subject formation, itself indebted to different and, at times, contrasting traditions and legacies, as well as to the local translation of ideas of Western and colonial modernity.\(^\text{14}\)

Economic and political factors alone, in fact, do not fully explain why, notwithstanding their different personal characteristics and identities, so many Jews – entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, bank clerks, journalists, small tradesmen, teachers, housewives, students and so on – shared a set of values and customs connected to a bourgeois model, which they all tried to embrace and reframe. By saying so, I do not mean to minimise the importance of the works that have been mentioned above and of those by economic historians, which demonstrated to what extent Jews and other minority groups contributed to the consolidation of an Egyptian commercial and entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, as well as to the development of a national banking sector.\(^\text{15}\) Yet, what I would like to show is that for Egyptian Jews being bourgeois depended ‘less on objective standards of wealth than on a systematic adherence to patterns of behaviour and presentations of self’.\(^\text{16}\) Besides economic factors, social identity is, in fact, also a question of knowledge, and although class ‘only rarely carries anything approaching the emotional power of the nation, it can be similarly conceptualized (along with race, gender, ethnicity, and other forms of social identity) as an effect of certain social practices’.\(^\text{17}\)

As far as the Middle East is concerned, from at least the second half of the nineteenth century, the urban centres of the region witnessed the passage from a traditional class of notables to one influenced by a Westernised educational system and willing to embrace those aspects of European everyday life – from clothing and housing to leisure activities and so on – that seemed to be crucial
symbols of progress. From the imperial capital Istanbul to provincial centres such as Thessalonika, Aleppo and Alexandria, changes in the economic arena, the impact of colonialism and colonial modes of production, but also, for instance, the emergence of a modern press, brought about a general reshaping of the society and its internal structure. The new emerging milieu consisted of a reconfiguration, at times radical and at times barely visible, of pre-existing middling groups that – under various forms and names – had already been present in Middle Eastern societies in previous centuries. Taking Aleppo as a case study, Keith Watenpaugh in Being Modern in the Middle East thus told the history of what he defines as an Arab middle class: a term that ‘is more than a neutral economic category, but rather constitutes an intellectual, social, and cultural construct linked to a set of historical and material circumstances’ and that – in his view – avoids ‘the potential confusion that might ensue’ were one to think of the bourgeoisie as primarily connected to the means of production or the accumulation of wealth.

Bourgeoisie is, indeed, a much-disputed term, and its different translations in European and non-European languages are symptomatic of its complexity. Franco Moretti, in The Bourgeois, argues how in the English language and literature, middle class and bourgeoisie originally ‘indicated exactly the same social reality’ and only later acquired a different political and social connotation, which eventually favoured the usage of the term middle class:

[O]nce placed ‘in the middle’, the bourgeoisie could appear as a group that was itself partly subaltern [...]. And then ‘low’, ‘middle’ and ‘upper’ formed a continuum where mobility was much easier to imagine than among incommensurable categories – ‘classes’ – like peasantry, proletariat, bourgeoisie, nobility.

For Peter Gay, bourgeoisie is an inherently fluid milieu that in nineteenth century Europe comprised not only industrialists, but also liberal professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and clerks. Thus, there cannot be a predefined difference between the bourgeoisie and the middle class, or middle classes, especially when considering that in order to historicise the terms, one would have to acknowledge dozens of different meanings according to time and space. Moreover, besides these terminological differentiations, the men and women who belonged to these middling sectors of society ‘generated common styles of thinking’, that referred to principles and values such as respectability, self-restraint, probity in the professional and, more broadly, social realm and so on.

With regard to Egyptian Jews, it is arguable that from the late nineteenth century they gradually shifted from the model of the Ottoman millet to a more Westernised identity model, while retaining aspects of both. At the top of Jewish society were a few important families, who also gained prestigious positions within Egyptian society. For instance, the Aghions contributed to the development of the cotton industry, the Cattaouis took part in the foundation of the national Banq Misr and the Suarès in that of the Société Générale des Sucreries.
et de la Raffinerie d’Égypte. According to Krämer, in the first half of the twentieth century, the majority of Egyptian Jews – about 65 per cent – belonged to the middle and lower-middle class, 20–25 per cent of lower class and finally 10 per cent of individuals belonging to the elite. 25 At the core of this book will be both the bourgeoisie stricto sensu to which the Cattaouis and de Menasces belonged and the larger Jewish middle strata that, for instance, attended the lycée français and took part in the various charitable initiatives sponsored by local Jewish institutions. This is due to the acknowledgement that although from a purely economic point of view only a minority of Jews belonged to an entrepreneurial and capitalist bourgeoisie, “it was this affluent, educated, and cosmopolitan middle and upper class […] that shaped the image of Egyptian Jewry as a whole”, both from an external and internal perspective. 26 By this, I mean that not only did Egyptian Jews come to be identified with this milieu, but that many Jews ended up imagining themselves as part of a social and cultural world that referred to a multilayered European(ised) model of bourgeoisie, which may here be viewed as an ultimate sign of modernity, yet was also something else. This was largely due to the spreading of an imaginary that, as will be explained over the course of the chapters, shows to what extent Egyptian Jews interacted with Europe as well as with their Egyptian Muslim counterparts, borrowing and imitating numerous practices and ideas that led to the formation of an imagined bourgeoisie. 27 More over, the emphasis on, and the numerous cultural projections of, being bourgeois also showed the laborious yet hopeful search for one’s (Jewish) identity in the context of an unfinished Egyptian national and social arena. 28

In saying so, I elaborate on Antoinette Burton’s idea of colonial modernities as an ‘unfinished business’ and a resilient process of identity formation that could lead in unexplored and unforeseen directions. 29 With modernity, I do not only refer to ‘commercialization, bureaucracy, industrialization […] fiscal and legal reform and the adoption of Western cultural practices, filtered as they were by the local societies’. 30 Modernity should be viewed as a tortuous set of practices and ideas and a sort of itinerary along which one could find a space of his/her own in a rapidly changing Egypt. Furthermore, although Europe had a relevant influence in the making of modern Egypt, the former was not a tabula rasa, but a vibrant and dynamic milieu, full of histories that ‘[had] already been imbibed […] through certain shared dispositions, skills, competencies, and sentiments’ by those who inhabited it. 31 The history of the complex and long-lasting encounter between Egypt, Egyptian Jews and modernity – a concept that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty stated, is ‘easy to inhabit but difficult to define’ 32 – might then highlight the dialogic and dynamic nature of (post-)colonial societies, shedding light on disruptions in the hierarchical relations between Europe and the so-called East. 33

It is worth noting how the history of the late Ottoman and post-Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean is often viewed as characterised by a high degree of intercommunal and interethnic coexistence that, however, should be neither idealised nor dismissed. In the last few years, this led to a reappraisal of the notion of Levant – originally a geographical category denoting the area that extends from
Introduction

Egypt to the Anatolian Peninsula and Greece and, later on, a term that indicated
the European communities living in this area and those non-Europeans that
adopted Europeanised habits and lifestyle. Following Alcalay, the Levant has
been reconsidered as a sociocultural category that encompasses national borders
and nation-states and ‘forces [us] to think beyond the reality of the nation, […]
to look at “stories with no citizenship”’, contributing to a more nuanced inter-
pretation of the history of the Eastern Mediterranean and its inhabitants in the
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Pushing this interpretative trend further, Histories of the Jews of Egypt
inscribes the Egyptian Jewish past within an even broader framework that goes
beyond the Levant and its port cities, unravelling its trans-Mediterranean and
global connections and clarifying possible ruptures and continuities with earlier
periods. As Fernand Braudel wrote, the Mediterranean could be, in fact, defined
as ‘not a landscape, but innumerable landscapes. Not a sea, but a succession of
seas. Not one civilisation, but a series of civilisations stacked on each other.’
The book will look at this sea as a performative space within which goods,
people, but also ideas, news and habits circulated and whose history can only be
a multilayered one. However, as opposed to the very macrohistorical dimen-
sion that Braudel favoured, I will focus on details and events that occurred at a
more micro level, paying attention to practices, discourses and feelings dissemi-
nated along the history of modern Egyptian Jews. All in all, Histories of the Jews
of Egypt intends to demonstrate that in both the colonial and monarchical eras,
Egyptian society was based upon very powerful socio-economic, cultural and
gender hierarchies and that the portrayal of those epochs as the harmonic prede-
cessor and counterpart of Nasserist times very often erases the reality of a more
complex past. For this and other reasons, the study of Egyptian Jews and of the
worlds which they inhabited should then be integrated into a narrative that
reconceptualises the notions of centre and periphery, attesting to the existence of
histories that traversed the Mediterranean and moved at times freely, and at
times with difficulty, between Europe, the Middle East and beyond.

Education, family and the power of the imagination

In the course of the book, I will often refer to the social imaginary as the frame-
work through which Egyptian Jews envisioned their lives and the ideas and images
that underlay them, and as a set of notions and values that helped to construct and
maintain a social and moral order among those who shared them. More generally,
the social imaginary can be regarded as a debatable space continuously constructed
and deconstructed, affected by different socio-economic, political, cultural and,
last but not least, emotional constraints and upheavals. Already in the 1960s,
Cornelius Castoriadis was one of the first to talk about the social instituting imagi-
nary as a symbolic network of functional and imaginary components that are indis-
pendable for the creation of a socio-historic reality. Since then, the significance of
the term, both in a national and transnational sense, has been profoundly revised.
Anderson, in his classic Imagined Communities, wrote that any nation is socially
constructed and based on imaginary horizontal linkages between its members. Appadurai further clarified how all humanity live in the midst of multiple imagined worlds constituted by ‘the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe’. Among the factors and agents that contribute to the birth of a social imaginary, the first one I chose to focus on is school. From a contemporary Western perspective, school and the educational model that it proposes have been regarded as a body of practices concerned with the formation of the child as a future citizen of the state. It is, in fact, in school that ‘a transition from private to public, from the world of the locality and the family to that of the nation’ occurs. But what about the modern Middle East? How did local traditions of teaching and learning combine and/or clash with Western education and the impact of colonialism?

Apart from religious education and schooling – for example, in the forms of the Islamic kuttab or the Jewish Talmud Torah – already before the advent of colonialism the Ottoman state had started to implement reforms of its educational system, especially in Istanbul and other imperial centres. Similarly, in Egypt since the 1860s, a broad restructuring of schools along European lines had begun. To these initial attempts, one should add colonialism and the schools founded in the region from the late nineteenth century by the European powers and cultural institutions. In the colonial and monarchical periods, a great many Egyptian Jews—but similar things could be said for affluent Muslims and Christians all over the Middle East—thus attended French, British, Italian or missionary schools. The role of France and the importance of its cultural policies in the colonies and in territories dominated by other European powers, such as British Egypt, has been the subject of various publications centred on the country’s mission civilisatrice and on institutions such as the Mission Laïque Française (henceforth, MLF). Two chapters of the book will therefore be dedicated to the study of two French educational institutions—the Alliance Israélite Universelle (henceforth, AIU) and the MLF—and the roles that they had in the cultural history of the Egyptian Jews.

Whether the Egyptian experience of the AIU remains largely unknown—especially when compared to the many studies on locations such as Turkey or Morocco—the MLF of Cairo and Alexandria has already been investigated from a social historical perspective by Abécassis, who highlighted its importance for the history of the Egyptian minority groups. In the book, I will concentrate on what kind of educational curricula the schools proposed for pupils, how the teachers interacted with the children and their families, which social and cultural activities surrounded their lives and so on. In addition, school will be interpreted as a space that allowed for both ruptures and continuities vis-à-vis gender ideas and representations.

Youth movements and Zionism as an ideology that appealed mainly, though not only, to youth will also be considered. Zionist youth associations and the Jewish Boy Scouts, as well as the Communist movement from the 1930s onwards, constituted significant spaces where novel models of social and gender
interaction between the younger generations could be experimented.\textsuperscript{51} It is worth mentioning how, in recent years, scholars have started to discuss the existence of a global model of youth, and particularly of girls, that emerged in the interwar period and was then appropriated or criticised at a local level.\textsuperscript{52} In the case of Egyptian Jews, transnational notions of youth and modernity surely had an impact on the younger generations and interconnected with local nationalisms. All this made middle- and upper-class Egyptian Jewish youth modern not only since they were part of an increasingly global world – as, indeed, they were – but also because of more regional or local factors, such as the diffusion of Zionism and Communism.

As concerning the family, already in the late Ottoman era it is possible to trace, at least among the urban upper classes, a passage from the idea of the family as an extended network of people and generations and as a household, to a nuclear model.\textsuperscript{53} These changes were accompanied by intense public debates on ideas of motherhood and parenthood, on childrearing and so on.\textsuperscript{54} One could even argue that the emergence of Egyptian nationalism, and consequently of the Egyptian nation-state, interwove with the shifting of ‘the ideals of modern motherhood both inside and outside the home in order to assure the nation’s success’.\textsuperscript{55} Similar things can be said for men and male identity, as discussed in the work of Jacob and Ryzova on the so-called effendiya – the new Egyptian middle class of the interwar years.\textsuperscript{56}

Although in most cases Jews did not seem to have greatly participated in Egyptian national discussions on, for example, the status of women, this, of course, does not mean that they did not reflect upon these issues, or that they did so in totally different and opposing ways. Notions of motherhood and fatherhood, as well as ideas on marriage, female respectability and gentlemanliness, were deeply relevant issues at stake for them. By focusing on these issues, I therefore aim to contribute to the field of Middle Eastern Jewish history in a familial perspective – something, until now, scholars often disregarded.\textsuperscript{57}

My usage of gender as an analytical category will be mostly confined to the cultural and domestic realms, showing how school and family contributed to regulate and narrate the life of Egyptian Jewish men and women, and how this also impacted on children and youth.\textsuperscript{58} With regard to the history of the Egyptian Jews from the late nineteenth century to the 1950s, gender and the family will result as longue durée categories that did not undergo dramatic changes in this time span and were not always influenced in an evident fashion by external factors and socio-political events. This was due to the fact that for Egyptian Jews, politics was not such a crucial space of social interaction and self-representation, and political events impacted on Jewish family life and gender in a more direct manner only from the 1940s onwards, with the spreading of Zionism and Communism on the one hand, and the impact of events such as the Second World War and the birth of the State of Israel on the other. This does not, however, imply that issues connected to domestic and international politics will not be touched upon. Such worries were far from absent in schools attended by Jewish children living in colonial Alexandria, in speeches given by the Jewish philanthropists that inaugurated
the Hôpital Israélite in 1920s Cairo, let alone in the memories of Egyptian Jews
who migrated to Israel in the 1950s.

By focusing on public discourses on education, gender, family and their
domestic representations, I intend to show how all this pointed to a larger social
arena that went beyond the home or the school, and that referred to many dif-
ferent ideologies and challenges in the lives of men and women. As Paula
Hyman and others discussed, a focus on the domestic realm, on middle-class
domesticity and on the ways in which men and women acted at a cultural and
family level can help to gain a better understanding of Jewish history tout
court.59 Besides, the Egyptian Jewish family is not a unicum, but a model in-
between Europe and the Middle East, strictly connected to both spaces, as well
as to specific Jewish values and family patterns. This attests to the circulation of
narratives that connected different people and milieus across the Medi-
terranean.60 Lastly, in order to understand these issues, it is necessary to consider men
and women, models of masculinity and femininity, as they are all essential to
obtain a broad picture of gender and its narrations. Finally, an attentive reading
of Middle Eastern Jewish models of male identity is incumbent upon scholars,
particularly given that men wrote many of the sources at our disposal and that
they were often the ones in charge of portraying a public image of Egyptian
Jews.

Histories in the archive

The book is divided into four chapters, each of them covering almost the entire
period that I am dealing with. Each chapter can be considered as an independent
yet interconnected section, which – when juxtaposed with the others – provides
a comprehensive picture of the cultural and family history of the Egyptian Jews.
By forcing the reader to sometimes go back and forth along the period between
the 1880s and the 1950s, I wish to highlight how that of the Egyptian Jews – and
of Egypt at large – is a history constellated by ‘multiple displacements occa-
sioned by the persistence of older patterns, dramatic ruptures, or slow-moving
changes’, acknowledging the numerous encounters between East and West,
Jews, Muslims and Christians and the non-linear temporalities that they
entailed.61

The first chapter looks at the activities of the AIU from the 1890s up to the
monarchical period. Focusing on the AIU schools of Cairo, Alexandria and
Tantah, I reconsider the hitherto neglected history of this educational institution,
explaining why it is an interesting point of entry for shedding light on the lives
of the Jews in the early twentieth century. I begin by examining how the AIU
teachers described turn-of-the-century Egypt as a space that was neither Euro-
pean nor Oriental, but as something much more ambivalent and strangely famil-
iar. The idea of Egyptian Jews as an imagined bourgeois milieu is explained
through the social and legal controversies that in the late colonial period opposed
the AIU to the Cairo Jewish leadership, and then the example of the École des
filles of Alexandria between 1900 and 1919. Lastly, the school of Tantah is taken
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as a case study for clarifying how the AIU attempted regulating processes of cultural modernisation in the context of this provincial town of the Delta region, where a much poorer and more easily controllable Jewish population lived.

In the second chapter, I continue to explore the formation of an Egyptian Jewish bourgeoisie, although in a larger sense and in connection to notions of cosmopolitanism and transcommunal interaction. I delineate the history of how Jews elaborated a not always shared set of ideals and values, starting from debates on urban solidarity and anti-Semitism in colonial and early monarchical Alexandria, with reference to two cases of ritual murder accusation that occurred in 1881 and 1925. In the second and third parts, I move to the study of the MLF of Cairo in the 1930s, unravelling the ambivalent ties that this French educational institution had with Jews and how the school wished to both increment and control its students and their identity. The former and their cultural worlds are also looked at by reading documents produced by students themselves, like articles from school magazines and a personal diary. The last section of the chapter analyses three books published by the Cairo Jewish journalist and Zionist sympathiser Maurice Fargeon between 1938 and 1943, seeing how the cultural, historical and political relations between Egyptian Jews and Arabs were narrated and re-imagined in a moment of political and social shifting.

Stemming from the idea of Egyptian Jewry as living in a moral laboratory, the third chapter concentrates on how different actors – both in the public and domestic spheres – discussed issues connected to religion, family and gender. I begin with an analysis of Alexandrian Jewish marriage contracts and the systematisation of the local minhag put forward at the turn of the century by Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan. I then focus on interwar models of gentlemanliness and bourgeois morality as they emerge from the writings and social endeavours of members of the Cairo Jewish upper class – especially in connection to the figure of the effendi. In the third section, I introduce a more domestic analysis of the family on the basis of some of the stories that can be found in memoirs and personal testimonies of Egyptian Jews. Their writings on family life and traditions, and on cases of conversions, mixed or interclass marriage, confirm how from the early twentieth century up to the Second World War the Jews managed to adapt to modernity without losing what they thought to be the most important aspects of Jewishness. Instead, a rather different picture emerges from the writings of the Italian-born David Prato, Chief Rabbi of Alexandria between the 1920s and mid-1930s, whose analysis allows an external perspective on Alexandrian Jews as caught in the midst of almost immoral habits and ideologies.

The last chapter reconsiders the roles that Zionism and the Land of Israel had in the history of the Egyptian Jews, and to what extent they impacted on or, on the other hand, were reframed by this imagined bourgeoisie. First, I analyse the arrival of thousands of Zionist Jewish refugees from Palestine to the First World War Alexandria, and the philanthropic endeavours as well as the clashes that their encounter with the city’s Jewish elite provoked. The impact of Zionism in 1930s Egypt is then assessed, reading articles from one of the most important Jewish magazines of the time, La Tribune Juive, and trying to see how ideas on
women and youth were articulated and adapted to the Egyptian context. The two
following sections focus on Israel and the migration of Egyptian Jews to that
country after 1948 and in the 1950s. I first explain how the newly born State of
Israel and its press urged Egyptian Jews to leave a country that was allegedly
becoming more and more similar to Nazi Germany, and where the Jews could
not feel at home. In the very last part, I introduce how the memories of Israelis
of Egyptian Jewish descent have been preserved and narrated and describe my
encounter with some of the last exponents of this imagined bourgeoisie during a
reunion of Egyptian Jews that took place in the Israeli holiday resort of Eilat –
only a few kilometres from the Egyptian border – in spring 2014.

Histories of the Jews of Egypt is based upon a variety of sources: teachers’
letters and reports, marriage contracts, rabbinical literature, diaries, communal
publications, a pamphlet, newspaper articles, novels and interviews. All these
documents came together to create my own archive, and it is thanks to this
archive that I was able to reconstruct the history of the Egyptian Jews.

Starting from Derrida’s *Mal d’archive*, a vast literature on the limits, as well
as the artificial borders, of archives has, by now, been produced. One of the
underlying claims of this trend is that any archive, because of its founding logic,
is to some extent the repository of a past that cannot be fully recovered, as histo-
rions possess a limited amount of sources upon which to base their work. The
archive is then the site of a reciprocal struggle between, at least, the researcher
who reads and interprets the sources, those who wrote them and the sources
themselves. Furthermore, Carlo Ginzburg noted, a historian should always
keep in mind that ‘every representation is constructed in accordance with a pre-
determined code’ and ‘to gain direct access to historical reality [...] is impos-
sible, by definition’, whilst at the same time acknowledging the fact that ‘any
analysis of representation cannot overlook the principle of reality’. If what I
have written cannot be the history of the Egyptian Jews, could it then be viewed
as a set of histories?

By this, I mean a collection of overlapping episodes that can be forged into a
multifaceted yet coherent and historically grounded narration. Using the plural
form histories, I wish first to point out a connection between (a) history and a
story and to underline the narrative power and meanings that historical events
entail, and second to highlight the importance of including literary texts inside
the archive upon which historians elaborate their works. The notion of histories
implies that – as already emphasised – the Egyptian Jewish past is a plural and
mobile one that cannot be comprehended only within the boundaries of the
modern Egyptian nation-state, and whose cultural coordinates in many ways go
beyond the Middle East.

In conclusion, at the core of *Histories of the Jews of Egypt* is the idea that
from the late nineteenth century up to the last phase of the monarchical era, a
resilient process of bourgeois formation and (self-)imagination developed and
influenced the lives of Egyptian Jews, both in the public arena, in a crucial social
institution such as the school and last but not least in the home and all that con-
cerned family life. This kept together, in complex and sometimes contradictory
ways, Europe and European bourgeois identities, colonial influences, modernity and its local adaptations, multiple models of Jewishness and Egyptianness, as well as Ottoman and Eastern Mediterranean legacies. It was characterised by a great capacity to adapt to the sociocultural and economic evolutions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Egypt, but later deteriorated vis-à-vis an increasingly strong Egyptian Arab nationalism and the political upheavals that the country, and the Middle East as a whole, experienced from the 1940s onwards. Still, it did not vanish completely, and it is now upon us to try to rescue it through archival documents and other forms of historical testimony, reconsidering the past of Egyptian Jews in a way that accounts for its richness and complexity. Their history, as any other, obviously cannot return. We can at least try to imagine it.

Notes

1 On transliteration: In this book I follow a simplified system of transliteration from Hebrew into English, loosely based on the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* ‘General’ transliteration rules: ‘ ’ stands for ‘ayin, ‘ ’ for ‘alef, ‘v’ for vav, ‘h’ for both heh and het, ‘kh/k’ for kaf, ‘q’ for qof, ‘tz’ for tzade, the sign ‘–’ between two or more words indicates the construct case. With regard to Arabic words: ‘ ’ stands for ‘ayin, ‘ ’ for ‘alif, ‘h’ for both hāʾ and ḥāʾ, ‘kh’ for khāʾ, ‘q’ for qaf and ‘k’ for kaf. The emphatic letters (e.g. sād, ḍād) are not distinguished from the non-emphatic ones.


should add that during conversations that I had with Egyptian Jews, many argued that the figure of 80,000 might be an underestimation, as the number of Jews in the 1940s could have been a bit higher.

7 The Capitulations were bilateral acts between the Ottoman Empire and foreign (i.e. European) powers, thanks to which a person protected by one of these foreign powers enjoyed particular economic and juridical rights. The Hatt-i-Hümayun (or Islâhat Fermand) of 1856 was an imperial decree promulgated by Sultan Abdülmecid I that granted numerous concessions to members of non-Muslim communities, such as the right to be judged by special tribunals known as the Mixed Courts.


10 landau, Jews.


12 Joel Beinin, The Dispersion.


14 A similar and equally complex process of identity-making was shared by Eastern Mediterranean Jewish societies of the late Ottoman and early post-Ottoman period as a whole, as explained by: Julia Phillips Cohen, Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Imperial Era (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).


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19 For example, think of the work on early modern entrepreneurs by Nelly Hanna, *Artisans Entrepreneurs in Cairo and Early Modern Capitalism* (1600–1800) (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011).


32 Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, XIX.


37 By saying that the Mediterranean is a performative space, I mean that it is a space continuously constructed and discussed by the people who inhabit it, based upon...
different discourses and ideas that change over time and depend on one’s status, gender, geographical location and so on.


40 I am here referring to Martha Nussbaum, Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 88.


51 Beinin, The Dispersion, 121–126.


58 On gender as a category of historical analysis, it is unavoidable to refer to Joan Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988).


1 In a bizarre country
The Jews of Egypt and the Alliance Israélite Universelle

‘On the 17 of the month of Heshvan 5734 [November, 7 1873]’, a Muslim boy was found ‘thrown in the street with his phallus cut’ in Damanhur, not far from Alexandria, which hosted a small Jewish community and was mainly known for its annual pilgrimage to the tomb of the Moroccan-born Rabbi Abu Hatzirah. The parents of the boy first admitted that the injuring was due to a dog bite, but soon changed their minds: ‘finding themselves in a state of great misery and thinking that they could profit from it’ and under the insistence of a certain Bassiouni Bechara, they declared that Moise Salomon – the local Jewish ritual slaughterer – had stabbed their son. Consequently, the authorities started an investigation against Salomon, which ended soon after when the moudir (‘governor’) decided not to prosecute him. Three years later, in 1877, a young girl also disappeared from her house and the same Beshara again spread the rumour that the Jews had taken her. A crowd of Turcs indigènes ‘gathered and entered in the synagogue, hit the Jews who were there and broke the cupboard where the Holy Law is, searching for the girl’, who was in the end found alive a few hours later in one of the fields surrounding the town.

As the investigations were rather slow and in the meantime the local authorities were doing nothing to protect the Jews, Moise Solomon and the Rabbi Moise Seroussi decided to ask for the help of two Jewish notables: Jacques Menasce Cattaoui of Cairo and Ibrahim Piha of Alexandria. Despite their promises to follow the affair, neither of them did anything, ‘because everyone only thinks of his own interests and not of the common one’. At this point, Solomon and Seroussi decided it was time to appeal to the AIU – a French Jewish institution known for its educational and philanthropic activities all over the Middle East and North Africa. The two called for the help of the Alliance, ‘since the local authorities never stop questioning us […] about these issues and we cannot stand such barbaric acts anymore in Egypt, that nowadays can be considered to be part of Europe’. Despite a number of grammar and spelling mistakes, Solomon and Seroussi managed to write in French to authoritative coreligionists living in a country, France, where they thought such barbaric acts did not happen. They also explained how Egypt, at the time ruled by Khedive Isma’il and formally still part of the Ottoman Empire, was for them almost part of Europe. But what did that
mean? Did the two refer to the increased Egyptian involvement in global commerce and exchange that followed the opening of the Suez Canal? Was theirs just a rhetorical statement meant to impress the AIU in Paris?

Be that as it may, this letter subtly introduces one of the recurring traits of the description that AIU teachers would soon start to give of Egyptian Jews and that, in turn, the latter would often give of themselves: neither stereotypical Orientaux nor proper Europeans, but a community in the middle of multiple worlds and legacies. Although until now the Egyptian experience of the AIU has been viewed as scarcely relevant – first, because of the briefness of its presence in Egypt – in this chapter I will argue that it is, on the contrary, an interesting point of departure for better understanding the history of the Egyptian Jews and the processes of social and cultural change that they underwent. By looking at the Egyptian schools of the AIU and the activities that surrounded them, I will uncover important aspects of Jewish communal and cultural life in early twentieth-century Egypt. Moreover, I will also demonstrate how it was through, and against, this institution and its schools that the Jews gradually started to negotiate for themselves a multifaceted imaginary that tried to keep together European modernity and local traditions, Judaism and bourgeois ideals, a long-lasting tradition of Mediterranean transcommunalism and twentieth-century nationalisms.

Neither Eastern, nor Western: turn-of-the-century Egyptian Jews and the teachers of the Alliance

The AIU is a philanthropic institution founded in Paris in 1860 by a group of French Jews, with the aim of educating and emancipating their non-European coreligionists, bringing them French civilisation and the positive effects this was supposed to entail. An institution coming out of the nineteenth-century French Jewish milieu, the AIU greatly underlined both its universal and Jewish character. Through its schools and vocational ateliers, it wanted to instruct the so-called Oriental Jews, rescuing them from what seemed an innate laziness and backwardness. The main factors that led to the foundation of this institution were the Damascus affair on the one hand, and the Mortara case on the other. The former refers to Edgardo Mortara, a young Italian Jewish boy secretly baptised in 1858 by a servant working for his family and taken away from his parents by papal decree in order to be raised as Catholic. This event caused great shock amongst European Jews and had a great impact on relations between them and the Catholic Church. The Damascus affair, on the other hand, is the story of the disappearance of a Catholic missionary in 1840 Damascus and the subsequent ritual murder accusation of a Jew. It is thus evident that the AIU was from its foundation highly concerned with problems relating to the education of Jewish children, both boys and girls. Moreover, the Damascus affair allowed for speculation on the necessity of ameliorating the socio-economic situation of Middle Eastern and North African Jews, as well as fighting against local anti-Semitism.

The AIU opened its first school in Tetouan, Morocco, in 1862 and its first Ecole des filles again Tetouan in 1868. Schools were soon founded all over the
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Maghreb, in Thrace and Asia Minor, in Syria, Iraq and Iran. The majority of them were primary schools, although in some cities, such as Volos (1872) and Smyrna (1874), vocational ateliers for boys and girls were also created, thus fostering the consolidation of local Jewish handicap. Finally, an agricultural school, Miqveh Israel (‘the hope of Israel’), was also founded in 1870 in what was at the time Ottoman Palestine.

According to Narcisse Leven, President of the AIU from 1898 to 1915 and author of the first monograph on this institution, the AIU aimed not only at improving the educational status of the Jews, but also at transforming the local Jewish communities. The AIU, in fact, greatly contributed to the reshaping of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish identity, leading to the reorganisation of the qahal (‘community’), as well as to a change in the Jews’ self-perception vis-à-vis Arab Muslim societies, spreading the French republican model of identity all over the territories of the former Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb.

The schools’ curricula were inspired by the French ones, and included subjects such as French language and literature, Hebrew, biblical and post-biblical Jewish history, geography and history (both locale and universelle), maths and sciences. The girls were also offered classes in sewing and travaux des femmes. Emphasis was placed on the teaching of a language useful in the country in which the school was located, such as, for example, Arabic and English in the Egyptian case. Schooling lasted around four years, from the quatrième to the première, although in some cases additional classes were added. Last but not least, morality and hygiene were amongst the main concerns of the teachers, who wished to correct the habits of the Oriental ‘weak family’, conjugating in a positive synthesis ‘the universalism of the Western spirit and the profound humanism of biblical tradition’. The schools for boys, according to an 1865 appeal, ‘will forge a generation of men capable to fill all roles of society, [becoming] useful citizens’, whereas the ones for girls were to forge future mothers and wives capable of ‘influencing the habits, of directing the first education [of the offspring]’. Besides the basic educational curricula, the AIU school was interested in regenerating Middle Eastern and North African Jews through Western models of conduct, maintaining at the same time Judaism and universal notions of morality at the core of one’s identity. Kol Israel ‘arevim zeh la-zeh: ‘all Israel is responsible for one another’, as the AIU Talmudic motto declares.

As the number of schools increased and the AIU gained greater popularity, the institution became more and more organised at a bureaucratic and organisational level. A central committee headed by the AIU President controlled the institution’s activities from Paris through the reports and letters that the teachers were asked to write on a frequent basis. Inspectors and emissaries were sent to visit the schools, which were also described in the yearly Bulletin de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle, published from 1860 to 1913, together with other publications such as the Revue des Ecoles.

The teachers, given the scarce availability of French Jews willing to spend years in the Maghreb and the Middle East, were generally recruited from AIU former students chosen by the institution itself and sent to study at the Ecole
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Normale Israélite Orientale in Paris – founded in 1868 – where they would earn the brevet d’enseignement. Girls, on the other hand, initially attended private Jewish colleges in Paris, or the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale des jeunes filles after its foundation in 1922. As Rodrigue has shown, the teachers supplied the AIU with information concerning the schools, but also with in-depth descriptions of the life of local Jewries. Both missionaries of the French Jewish model of emancipation and pioneering ethnographers, the teachers negotiated between the local communities and their habits, the lure Westernisation had on many Jews and the colonial milieu with which they often had to come to terms. Eastern Jews themselves, they often struggled between reconciling the education they had received and the familiarity the East had for them, constructing complex networks with local communities, as well as with other AIU and non-AIU teachers. This institution was for them a foster family – a role enhanced by the fact that the AIU strongly encouraged marriage between the teachers, as well as the recruitment of their sons and/or relatives, leading to the creation of transgenerational dynasties of AIU employees. But how and when did the AIU arrive in Egypt? And in which ways was this country and its diverse Jewish population described?

Egypt is, in many respects, an anomalous case in the history of the AIU. The briefness of the AIU presence in the country, which with the exception of the schools of Tantah lasted only about twenty years, from the 1890s to the 1910s, and its seemingly unsuccessful encounter with Egyptian Jews overshadowed the interesting aspects that this history entails and that can tell us something about both the AIU and Egypt. Adolphe Crémieux, one of the future presidents of the AIU, and the well-known British Jewish philanthropist Moses Montefiore first thought of founding Jewish schools in Egypt in 1840. While on mission to Muhammad Ali immediately after the Damascus affair, Crémieux visited a very traditional Talmud Torah in Cairo, which was apparently the only educational institution for Jews. There, wrote a shocked Crémieux, ‘the boys study only Hebrew by chanting, and girls do not study at all, but sit or lie around’. Crémieux and Montefiore managed to establish a school in Cairo, which lasted only until 1842, probably because of a lack of funds.

The AIU, surely keeping in mind the pioneering experiment by Crémieux, opened its first school in Cairo in 1896. The main reason for its creation was, as in the case of Alexandria, the acknowledgement of the fact that the Jews lacked a well-organised communal educational system, and therefore too many children had to attend congregational schools. The Cairo branch was soon to become the most important one, as a school for girls was also founded in 1898, and in 1902 a second building was inaugurated in the neighbourhood of ‘Abbasiyah with two more schools, one for boys and one for girls. In 1897 the Alexandrian school was inaugurated, followed three years later in 1900 by the Ecole des filles. Lastly, in 1905 the branch of Tantah – a city of the Delta region about 90 km north of Cairo – also started operating. Due to financial constraints and the competition with other educational institutions, the Cairo schools closed around 1914, whilst those in Alexandria closed in 1919. Those of Tantah, on the other hand, continued until 1957.
Almost all the reports that the teachers wrote contain a few lines on the hygiene standards in the schools and show their perpetual worry about the health conditions of children. Many depicted Egypt through typical Orientalist stereotypes utilised for many other locations as well: the heat, the immoral character of the Jews. For example, the Alexandrian school for boys as opposed to the magnificent congregational schools, wrote Léon Benveniste in 1901 shortly after his arrival in town, seemed ‘one of those caravansaries that the traveller encounters along his route [. . .]. Old and ruined, on the point of falling down’, the children had to study in an environment characterised by ‘the most unfavourable hygienic conditions’. It was no surprise – concluded Benveniste – that local families would opt for schools other than the AIU.25 The teachers also complained about the climate: the unbearable heat of Egyptian summers, and humidity – which often caused them health problems. Esther Carasso in June 1914 was diagnosed with insomnia and lack of appetite and the doctors therefore suggested ‘a permanent change of climate’.26

If these few samples reiterate usual Orientalist motifs, some others present a more dynamic interpretation of Egypt, a place that ‘is not the Orient’, but ‘an exceptional country’, and Cairo a city not so dissimilar to Paris, at least considering the expenses one had to confront: ‘life here is very expensive; some say it is even more expensive than in Paris’.27 Quite interestingly, Egypt comes out as a strange entity that was almost European, but not quite, Léon Bassan, after taking up his post in 1905 Cairo, emphatically depicted Egypt as ‘a bizarre country [. . .], where all sects and all beliefs meet [. . .], a place where civilisation reversed and the pious of yesterday are the atheists of today’.28 Alexandrian cosmopolitanism and ethnic diversity stunned a teacher working in that city:

Be it Thessalonika, Tangiers, Andrinople, Damascus, Choumla or Mogador, there the population is pretty homogeneous. There is no such thing in Alexandria [. . .]. A cosmopolitan milieu par excellence, our city hosts a very diverse population, where people of the most diverse origins cross…29

Moreover, Egyptian Jews were often described as different from all other Jewries the teachers had encountered in their careers. For Henry Benrey, who wrote from 1920s Tantah, Egyptian Jewry ‘has nothing of Eastern, or of Western Judaism’. The Jews did not seem particularly attached to their religious identity, nor did they show the solidarity that the AIU always underlined as one of the most important aspects of being a Jew: ‘the Egyptian is Jewish only nominally [. . .]. The Egyptian Jew remains indifferent to all that happens to our brothers [. . .]. Straight-faced, he continues to take care of what will increase his affluence’. The main causes of this situation were for the teacher ‘the richness and, as one might easily guess, “the lack of Jewish education”.30

Egyptian Jews were presented either as ignorant Orientals or, on the other hand, as snobbish individuals who did not care about their children’s religious and moral upbringing. Again, Léon Bassan wrote that his students did not go to the synagogue, nor did they fast on the Ninth of Av simply ‘because they did not
know what the Ninth of Av was’. Not only boys but girls as well seemed involved in more mundane preoccupations. According to Berthe Commercero, her fillettes looked with disdain at any kind of practical activity, because ‘in Cairo a young and respectable girl prefers to die of starvation, rather than do a paid job’. This way of thinking, she wrote, was primarily due to the parents of the children and the models they embodied. The mothers – as I will show analysing the Ecole des filles of Alexandria – were, in fact, depicted as salon ladies that cared only about their toilettes and not about their children’s morality.

The letters of the teachers construct a shared view of Egyptian Jews as interested mainly in their own well-being, largely ignorant of religious duties, of how Jewish men and women should behave in everyday life and living in a country where epidemics, lack of hygiene and cosmopolitanism lived strangely together. As the AIU teachers looked at Egyptian Jews as another – albeit peculiar – Jewry to civilise, the Jewish inhabitants of this country also had their own ideas about the AIU and its functionaries. Whereas the teachers’ letters were often produced according to the institution’s bureaucratic standards so as to satisfy the central committee’s expectations, what will now follow is, at times, a more dynamic account of Jewish life in turn-of-the-century Egypt that also highlights a higher degree of negotiation between different exigencies and opinions, and the role of the AIU.

As seen earlier, already in the 1870s the Jews of Damanhur appealed to the AIU after a case of ritual murder accusation occurred. For them, the AIU represented not so much an agent of education, but rather an institution capable of rescuing their endangered lives – as opposed to the selfishness they accused the Egyptian Jewish elite of thanks to its multiple connections with diplomats and international authorities. Yet, Egyptian Jews did not appeal to the AIU only in such dramatic circumstances. Some thought this institution could solve problems that had to do with their daily life and the well-being of their offspring. An interesting example is Victor Boccara, a Cairo Jew who had been working in the city’s Ecoles gratuites israélites and in the Ecole du commerce Cattaoui. Boccara wrote to the AIU in 1892 asking ‘if it is true that you admit with no charge the sons of poor Jewish families as boarders in your school for boys’. As the man was unemployed and living in the old Jewish quarter of Cairo, he could not pay for the enrolment of his son in any school and was thinking of sending him to a Jewish school in Paris funded by the AIU. By attending such a school, his son would probably have the chance of eventually becoming an AIU teacher and the budget of his family back in Egypt would have also profited.

Based on the available documentation, it seems that many of the parents asking to admit their sons to an AIU school were former or unemployed teachers. It is interesting to note that more than a few of the petitions asking for communal charity found in the Cairo genizah, and referring to the early modern era, were also written by destitute teachers. This might be due to the fact that teachers were more at ease with the practice of writing than other poor Jews. Second, these petitions should be interpreted – both in the early modern and contemporary context – as ‘supplications to patrons, known or unknown’ written not
by the chronically poor, who would have probably been the recipients of a more organized communal or public charity, but mainly by ‘members of the “working poor” or people [...] who’, like Victor Boccara, ‘had temporarily fallen on bad times’.37

Not only the lower classes but the upper strata as well had their own visions of the AIU. Jewish elite families looked at this institution mostly as a mean for enhancing their status vis-à-vis their coreligionists, helping it through funding and bequests. More than one well-off family considered the AIU and its teachers as interlocutors and possible collaborators to their projects of communal reshaping. The period reaching from the end of the nineteenth century to the late 1910s was, in fact, a crucial moment for laying the foundations of a more coherently organized Egyptian Jewish communal structure. At the same time, it was also an epoch when many Jews were migrating to Egypt, something which made the opening of institutions like schools and hospitals a pressing need.

For example, the de Menasces of Alexandria – one of the most renowned Jewish families of the city, who dominated local Jewish life for decades – founded in 1885 a school for boys, the *Ecole Fondation de Menasce*.38 The Baron Ya’qoub had decided before dying that ‘the plot of land [...] of the school and the money of the school should remain as “Wakf” with an eternally inalienable right, under the sole administration of the older male descendant of the family’.39 By creating a *waqf*, the baron aimed at ensuring that his will would not be altered by his descendants and, second, he was forever linking his name – and that of his family – to that of a highly respectable institution, as the school was. What is interesting to underline is that the first headmaster of the school was an AIU teacher, Abraham Leon.40 Although the de Menasces sent their children not to an AIU school but to foreign colleges, they nonetheless acknowledged the ability of the AIU staff and their pedagogical methods. The connection between the de Menasces and the AIU was, in fact, to continue for decades, as another AIU teacher, Elie Antébi – who had worked in the *Ecole des garçons* of Alexandria – would head the *Ecole Fondation de Menasce* in the mid-1920s.41

Considering how the AIU looked at and described the Jews of Egypt at the turn of the century, it is arguable that it was in that period of time that the image of this community as characterised by a certain affluence, a scarce interest in Jewish religious observance and a vaguely defined cosmopolitan aura started to emerge. Local Jews, for their part, understood this institution either as an agent of solidarity and help, or – in the case of the richer members and/or families of the community – as a possible ally with regard to local authority and power. Egypt – or, more accurately, the two cities of Alexandria and Cairo – eventually emerged as a modern and thriving space at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East, where, however, the AIU could still play a role when it came to Jewish education and moral upbringing. What remained to be seen was to what extent the Jews would allow for the AIU to interfere in their communal affairs at a time such as the early 1900s and the 1910s, when their educational and welfare prospects started to rather rapidly improve.
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Between millet and bourgeoisie: the Alliance and the Jews of Cairo, 1890s–1920s

Given the importance that early twentieth-century Cairo had in the trans-Mediterranean socio-economic arena and considering its growing Jewish population, it was there that the AIU decided to open its first Egyptian schools. In 1896 an Ecole des garçons was founded, followed in 1898 by the Ecole des filles – both in the area of Daher/Gameh-el-Banat. In 1902 the AIU opened two more schools, one for boys and one for girls, in ‘Abbasiyah – where many Jews resided. As the Cairo schools were founded, all the teachers diligently started to send letters and reports to the AIU central committee in Paris. Initially, many of them were happy to notice how even though Egypt had been under British colonial domination since 1882, French seemed to be the most utilised foreign language. It was ‘almost the official language of the country’, wrote Albert Benaroyo in 1908, and was indispensable for any kind of commercial activity and business: only the Jews who could speak it ‘enjoy sufficient material prosperity’. As for those who did not speak French, the Alliance in those years ‘has been capable of educating a great part of the Jewish population of Cairo’, and its schools therefore proved to be extremely useful, especially for the Jewish lower and lower-middle class – as one could see considering the number of former AIU students who had gained ‘good positions in banks, enterprises, administrations. And they know that they could reach those ranks thanks to the education received in our school’. Yet, things were about to change soon.

Having concentrated on the Alliance in general terms and how its teachers interacted with Egyptian Jews and vice versa at the turn of the century, I will now describe how from the mid-1910s social and legal struggles between the Cairo Jewish notables and this institution emerged. A close look at these struggles can, in fact, clarify how – as opposed to what some argued – it might be more appropriate to consider the late colonial upper class coming out of a minority group like the Jews, not – as it has been claimed – as a social group on the point of passing from the model of the Ottoman millet to that of a Europeanised bourgeoisie, but as one that managed to maintain aspects of both and refashion them in a local manner.43

From the late 1900s, the School Committee had been engaged in a project of reorganisation and amelioration of the educational system. The success of the comité is shown by the increase in the number of pupils attending the communal schools, which rose from 500 in 1908 to 1,361 in 1914, and in the funds collected for the schools: from 28,530 francs in 1908 to 36,995 in 1914.44 Even though one year earlier, in 1913, the direct involvement of the AIU over Cairo Jewish students had ended, this institution wished to keep an eye on them ‘taking as point of departure the fusion of our schools with those of the [Jewish] Community, so to make them un tout indivisible’, as the AIU President Narcisse Leven wrote in a 1914 letter to the President of the Cairo Jewish Community, Moise Cattaoui. Leven also offered his support to ‘gather those sectors of the
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population [i.e. of the Jews of Cairo] that because of snobbery or poverty get lost or are corrupted in congregational schools’. From the words of Leven, it seems that the AIU and the Cairo communal leaders were rather smoothly interacting with one another for the benefit of their coreligionists. This view was also shared by some of their contemporaries, such as the writer and journalist Maurice Fargeon, who in his 1938 *Les juifs en Egypte* wrote how the School Committee since 1913 ‘took up the task’ of running the former AIU schools, especially thanks to its president, Moïse Cattaoui, who ‘devoted 40 years of his life to the destiny of the Jewish schools’.

As the communal schools improved, and congregational and secular colleges also increased their student population, the AIU found itself more and more on the margins of the local educational arena. This, together with the financial constraints that the First World War imposed on the AIU, led to the decision to shut down the branch of ‘Abbasiyah in 1912. One year later, the schools of Daher were also closed or, more accurately, their management was passed on to the School Committee. Yet, the headmaster of the Cairo branch Saul Somekh was very sceptical in trusting the communal leaders’ willingness to pursue the development of a modern educational system. In a passionate thirteen-page letter sent to the AIU President, he explained all the merits the AIU could claim for its twenty years’ presence in Cairo: ‘the youth educated in our schools – they are a legion – can be found everywhere. […] I am not talking of those who, pushing their studies forward, have become pharmacists, lawyers or commissioners’, but also ‘the first telephone operators were recruited among our girls…’. Somekh thus suggested to merge the schools with those of the Jewish Community only once the former ‘has given unequivocal proof of its viability and that they fully merit our inheritance’. Notwithstanding all this, the AIU closed the schools and rented the Daher buildings to the Jewish community. The decision was, for Somekh, rather unexpected and provoked ‘astonishment’ and ‘a painful feeling’, besides also causing a curious mishap with the School Committee.

In fact, on 15 August 1914, the headmaster sent a pressing telegram to 45, rue Labruyère, siege of the AIU in Paris: ‘Defend my honour which is yours. Unforgivable aggression requires exemplary consequences.’ Somekh had just received a visit from three people: V. Hanan, Jacques Mosseri and a lawyer named Green – the last two being members of prominent Jewish families long established in Cairo. The men wanted to inspect the buildings that they said the Community had rented from the AIU ‘to do the necessary works’. However, Somekh stated that since he had not received any information from Paris, he could not authorise them to enter unless they showed him a signed contract. This caused the harsh reaction of Green, who – Somekh wrote – started to insult him: ‘How’, he screamed furiously, ‘dare you doubting our word…?’ […] I tried to keep calm and only told him that it was not fair to come and insult someone in his own house […] I did not manage to say anything else as he hit me on the chest with his stick.
Somekh explained that the aggression was totally unjustified, given that he had answered Green in a very polite and civilised manner. Thus, he urged the AIU to do something in order to defend not only him, but also the honour of the institution to which he belonged.52

As far as Somekh was concerned, such aggression sauvage was an indicator of the community’s greed, its lack of interest in establishing a respectable educational system and the notables’ – especially President Cattaoui’s – lack of good manners and politeness: ‘By sending me unknown delegates, [Moise Cattaoui] must have had a hidden goal’.53 I would also say that this episode can be read as a (not so) symbolic duel between Somekh, the AIU and the Cairo Jewish leadership with regard to competing notions of honour, gentlemanliness and respectability. Honour was surely a central feeling at stake and what both parties were ready to fight for. This notion had always been a crucial one amongst Ottoman (Sephardi) Jews, as it was connected to both family lineage and one’s behaviour and wealth.54 In our case, the honour and manliness of the former AIU headmaster was endangered by Green’s attack and his unwillingness to show Somekh the contract. Only after reading the document could this AIU-educated Iraqi Jew trust the words of a stranger.

Besides sharing a common Middle Eastern origin, Somekh felt that these men had no idea whatsoever of what it meant to be civilised. All the details that Somekh gave in the letter sent to the AIU President were thus intended to impress the addressee, who – despite the outbreak of the First World War and all the turmoil it entailed – did not remain indifferent to the cries of the headmaster, who since the early 1900s had been highly valued by the AIU central committee.55 At the top of the letter, one can, in fact, read a pencilled comment that states: ‘Somekh merits . . . satisfaction . . .’.56 On the other hand, Green and his two companions viewed the headmaster as an arrogant foreigner, who caused a breach in their generally uncontested status as notables. The incident, then, underlines that the relationship between the AIU and the local elite, in Cairo as elsewhere, was often precarious, given the fact that this educational institution was creating ‘a parallel network of power and influence to that of the community’.57

Somekh’s forecast about the future of the Daher schools, however, proved accurate, as the School Committee was not only late in the payment of the rent, but it was also not taking care of the buildings. In 1918 the headmaster wrote to the local Département de l’Hygiène Publique about ‘the deplorable conditions of the outhouses of the communal schools’ and the danger it caused to both the pupils and those living in that area.58 Although the headmaster might have exaggerated the actual situation – not least as he was living next to the school – it is undoubted that the communal schools were living through an impasse, mainly due to an internal struggle that opposed the old leadership of Cattaoui and a new group of wealthy Jews who had migrated to Egypt in the previous decade, such as Moreno Cicurel and Isaac Benaroio. The latter, in order to express their opposition to Cattaoui, refused to pay their contribution to the communal schools, causing serious financial problems.59 In 1916 some of these new leaders
In a bizarre country – headed by Isaac Benaroio – decided to found the *Oeuvre de la Goutte de Lait*, which soon became a highly efficient educational and philanthropic institution: ‘few Eastern communities have a similar institution’, the AIU teacher Avigdor admitted. The *Goutte de Lait* included an orphanage, a school, an *oeuvre de chaussure et d’ habillement* and provided hundreds of children each day with a *petit déjeuner* of ‘bread and a bowl of hot milk’, kindly distributed by a group of Jewish women. The AIU thus seemed to present these new notables as a modern and civilised counterpart of the older elite of Cattaoui, which instead still embodied the remnants of an Ottoman Jewish oligarchic elite. Yet, what happened next in this story clearly explains how wrong this conception was.

Soon after the incident, Somekh – in his role as representative of the AIU – prosecuted the Presidency of the Jewish Community. On 20 September 1921, the bailiff of the Mixed Courts of Cairo, Lo Jacono – since ‘without any right the schools of the Jewish community occupy’ the buildings of the AIU – summoned Joseph Cattaoui, *sujet local* and President of the School Committee, and his uncle Moïse, *sujet Autrichien* and President of the Jewish Community of Cairo, asking for ‘the evacuation of the spaces occupied by the schools […], that will otherwise be evacuated forcibly’. Sectors of the local Jewish press – namely, the weekly *Israël* – immediately accused the AIU of selfishness, and launched a public petition against ‘the evacuation of the building of Gameh-el-Banat occupied by the communal schools’, something which contrasted ‘all Jewish traditions and goes against the principles formulated by the founders of the Alliance…’. It is worth noticing that *Israël* was a well-known Cairo Zionist magazine – published in French, Hebrew and Arabic – that supported both the birth of a Jewish national home in British Palestine, as well as the improvement of Jewish-Muslim relations in Egypt at a time when very few local Jews actively supported Zionist activities. Its petition against the evacuation of the schools was, then, both a way of expressing genuine concern about the uncertain future of the communal schools, and also of going against the AIU, which was known for its opposition to Zionism.

Somekh was, in any case, sure that the President of the School Committee, Joseph Cattaoui, was orchestrating an irrational protest against the AIU, together with the editor of *Israël* Albert Mosseri – cousin of Cattaoui – and obviously ‘Maurice [sic!] Pasha Cattaoui, the immovable president of the Community’. As if all this was not enough, Joseph Cattaoui was also in contact with the highest echelons of the Egyptian political arena and, as financial advisor, member of the 1921 Egyptian delegation to London, which discussed the status of Egypt vis-à-vis the British Empire, following the anti-British riots in the country in previous years.

A final solution to the problems that the communal schools were going through was reached when in 1920 Moïse Cattaoui donated the building where the *Ecole Moïse de Cattaoui Pasha* was to be installed by the Jewish Community. The school was situated in the area of Ghamrah and, despite the previous disagreement between Cattaoui and the AIU, it employed a few former AIU teachers and followed curricula very similar to the AIU ones. A school for
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In a bizarre country, girls, the Ecole Marie Suarès, was also opened thanks to a donation by Félix Suarés. Some years later in 1927, Joseph Cattaoui and other notables launched a subscription that led to the construction of ‘a wonderful building’ where the new communal schools were finally lodged. The AIU buildings of ‘Abbasiyah were instead sold in 1923 to a Cairo Jewish businessman, Moise de Levi Benzion. Somekh protested until the very end not only against the local Jewish leaders, but even against the AIU itself, which – in his eyes – ignored the efforts he had made during all the years he had worked in Cairo. On the other hand, from the AIU documents it also emerged that in 1924 Somekh was summoned by the AIU, as he was accused of having exceeded in his role as fondé des pouvoirs of the institution, earning more money than expected for the transaction with de Levi Benzion. Finally, one could add that in 1928 an Amicale des anciens élèves et professeurs de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle en Egypte was established with a ceremony at the Hotel Continental of Cairo. Its president was Samuel Avigdor, former teacher and headmaster of the AIU, whilst the patro- 
age committee was headed by none other than “H.E. [Joseph] Catta[o]ui Pasha”. In 1931 the Amicale counted only 284 members (207 from Cairo, sixty-eight from Alexandria and five from Tantah), whose involvement was often nominal, as many of them did not pay the membership fee. But then, Avigdor stated during the 1931 general assembly at the Cercle de l’Association de la Jeunesse Judéo-Espagnole, the goal of the Amicale was not to make a profit: ‘we will recompense your efforts [...] with a sincere and cordial thanking [...]’. That is, I know, a not so useful currency, but in our eyes it is of great value. This trend continued throughout the years, as a 1938 call for subscription to the AIU bulletin Paix et Droit was a complete failure: after a year’s free distribution of the bulletin to 100 ‘selected persons belonging to the bourgeoisie’, none of them subscribed to it.

The history of the relationships between the AIU and the Cairo Jewish notables illustrates the difficulty of this educational institution to come to terms with such a diversified and fragmented Jewish milieu. It highlights the struggles between AIU teachers and local leaders concerning the realm of education, and in relation to opposing powers and authorities over coreligionists. The episodes that have been described also confirmed that, as already argued, the basic principles upon which the ideology of the AIU was based ‘were fine with such notables, as long as the social and commercial institutions and conventions that supported their continued prominence and leadership were maintained’. From my reconstruction, the 1910s ultimately emerged as the period when old and new elites struggled, asserting their own power against the external influence of the AIU. An apparently extravagant episode, the aggression against Saul Somekh by Green, proved to be just the most visible moment of a much larger narrative that concerned local Jewish communal politics, power and bourgeois identity, as well as the financial and emotional difficulties that closing a school meant for the AIU and for the teachers who had actively worked in it. By underlining honour as a central component of the aforementioned incident, I intended to show how the reciprocal attitudes of the AIU and the Cairo Jewish notables were
driven by sentimental reasons that ultimately pointed to more practical problems, such as the management of the schools and of the AIU legacy and the weakening of the old leadership of Cattaoui.

Furthermore, whereas the headmaster Somekh argued that the Alliance had contributed to the birth and consolidation of a deeply new and modern Jewish bourgeoisie, in opposition to older notables like the Cattaouis, the boundaries between these two groups were much more porous and at times barely visible. The struggles between old and new elite did not reveal entirely contrasting conceptions of identity – the millet on the one side and the bourgeoisie on the other – but a complex and multilayered social arena within which the Mixed Courts, early Zionist ferments, Egyptian politics and bourgeois-like philanthropy managed to coexist.

In order to further investigate such blending of elements, which the AIU often tried to reorientate, and understand how not only men and upper-class notables but also women and young girls resented it, I will now move to Alexandria and the AIU Ecoles des filles founded in 1900.

**Women of valour? Class, gender and Jewishness in Alexandria, 1900–1920**

Following an appeal launched by a few Jewish families that lamented being obliged to send their children to congregational schools, in 1897 the AIU decided to open its first school in the city of Alexandria. This seemed a timely decision, given the substantial growth of the Alexandrian Jewish Community and the fact that the communal schools could not host more than 300–400 students. Because of this restriction, the pupils who could not attend them or other Jewish schools, such as the Ecole Fondation de Menasce, had to opt for the Christian missionary ones. This sometimes posed a threat to the children’s Jewish upbringing, as cases of conversions and congregational schoolteachers’ anti-Semitic accusations show. Two years later, in 1900, the school for girls was also inaugurated.

Looking at the statistics published in the Bulletin de l’AIU, one can see that the school had a quite remarkable increase in female students from its opening up to the 1910s: from fifty-six in 1900 to 158 in 1903, then stabilising at around 130 girls per year. The majority of the families could afford the school fees, even though the teachers’ reports give the impression that the girls mainly came from middle and lower-middle class families, and very rarely from the upper strata of the community.

In fact, as Rachel Danon – headmistress of the school from its foundation until its closure in 1919 – took up her job in Alexandria where her husband Joseph already headed the boys’ school, she soon realised that Jewish notables and families such as the de Menasces, Rolos and Aghions generally opted for private tutors or for congregational schools such as the Mères de Dieu and the Notre Dame de Sion. According to her, these schools – which combined usual subjects (e.g. French, maths, history) with leisure activities such as drama classes, tennis courses and so on – aimed at forging ‘worldly women, who know
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how to shine in a salon and gracefully receive guests, rather than at inculcating basic moral principles and giving the pupils an elementary education. It is worth noting as many of the Jews that lived in Egypt, in contrast to other Middle Eastern and North African Jewries, had already encountered forms of Westernisation before the AIU arrived in the country. As already mentioned, some of them were, for instance, Jews who had migrated from the Balkans and Italy to Alexandria at the turn of the century, when Egypt underwent a period of rapid growth due to the boom in cotton exports and the development the port of Alexandria experienced thanks to the proximity with the newly inaugurated Suez Canal. Some others came instead from urban centres of the Eastern Mediterranean – such as Thessalonika, Istanbul, Rhodes and Smyrna – where the AIU had started to open schools, and to operate at various levels of society, already in the 1870s. This led to the birth of a highly heterogeneous and quite well-off Jewish milieu, whose centrality, however, should not be overstated. One should, in fact, remember that quite a few lower class and poor Jewish families were also present. The AIU thus wished to rescue the middle and upper-middle classes from the risks they faced in congregational schools, but also tried, on the other hand, to give poor Jews a Westernised Jewish education that would allow for a consistent improvement in their socio-economic status.

As seen, the teachers often described Alexandria as the cosmopolitan city par excellence. Rachel Danon wrote how it hosted Jews whose mother tongue was ‘for some Arabic, for some others Italian, or Greek, Yiddish or Judeo-Spanish’. This made the teachers’ task more difficult than ever, as they had to balance between different languages and cultures and at the same time promote the French language and civilisation as the main vehicles of acculturation and emancipation. English was to be taught as well, as Egypt was at the time under British colonial occupation. The headmistress’ perception of Alexandrian Jews was often based upon the somewhat patronising gaze of a French Jew who wished to improve the status of backward Oriental coreligionists. However, Danon was also quite surprised to realise how bourgeois and secularised the Jews seemed. Alexandrian women were, to her, frivolous, snobbish and very attentive to their beauty and physical appearance, thus not adhering at all to the motherly figure she wanted to promote.

These ideas were not Danon’s, but over time they had become a cliché in the teachers’ reports. For instance, AIU teachers working in Thessalonika also lamented local women’s vanity, although – as Annie Benveniste noted – (Jewish) middle class women of Paris or Vienna would probably not have behaved much differently than their Eastern Mediterranean counterparts. This is to say, the teachers’ derogatory comments might have to do more with Orientalist biases and their willingness to instil in their students ‘the sweetness, the simplicity of the outfit, the desire to shine other than because of ridiculous display of jewels and frills and flounces’, rather than the actual reality. But let us go back to Alexandria and see how Rachel Danon organised her personal mission civilisatrice.

The first months after she took up her job were, as basically every AIU teacher wrote, characterised by a great disorganisation of the school and the
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students’ lack of discipline. Moreover, the Alexandrian fillettes, coming from families that had not instilled in them even a single drop of Jewish morality and brought up by mothers who had often attended congregational schools, were totally ignorant of the maternal role they should be prepared for:

[T]he issue of the bride and mother is completely neglected…. With a similar education, do you think that the mothers are willing to give us their daughters? Not at all! First, because we are – to speak frankly – not enough chic for them…

The headmistress not only had to contend with the scarce appeal her school had for Alexandrian Jews; the girls who attended were also not as diligent as she would have hoped. Many of them arrived late to class, ‘you ask to see homeworks: only ten out of twenty did them, and they are not well written, [but] badly copied on a torn notebook that should only be used for draft copies’. The headmistress confessed: ‘I never stop to look after them from morning to evening’. In addition to this, while Danon was a French-born Jew, most of the teaching staff had initially been recruited in Alexandria. For the headmistress, these teachers seemed to share many of the negative characteristics attributed to the pupils, and Rachel Danon’s ultimate shame was the fact that the school gained ‘a reputation of immorality’ as a consequence of the presence of two Alexandrian adjointes; ‘a girl and a woman whose shameful habits are well-known’. Besides that, more concrete problems occurred a few years later in 1911 in concurrence with a general financial crisis that hit Egypt. Because of the crisis, parents started asking for reductions in the fees and many fillettes ‘stayed at home with their mothers to take care of the house; some started working and finally some others went to other schools for financial reasons’.84

The École des filles – as basically all the schools of the AIU in Egypt – had suffered from great economic distress since its foundation. In order to attract the richer members of local Jewry, Danon in 1902 thought of substituting the hours dedicated to post-biblical history with ‘a watercolour class, or a dancing class, we could even add tennis to our programme…’. This, she wrote, would be the only possible way to win the support of Alexandrian mothers and of the local bourgeoisie in general: ‘In this country of snobbish people, the practical and utilitarian side of life is wholly ignored’. In doing so, the deficit of the Alexandrian branch would diminish as well, allowing the schools to move to buildings better than the modest ones the AIU had chosen and which contrasted greatly with the magnificent congregational colleges.85

Her proposal tells us something about the extent to which an AIU woman teacher felt entitled to participate in the institution’s organisation and structure. Thanks to their instruction, these teachers attempted to go beyond the traditional gender role they were meant to exemplify, and which was deeply rooted in nineteenth-century stereotypes of the woman as mother-educator and angel of the house.86 Although the greatest portion of the reports and letters that the women teachers sent to Paris regarded stricto sensu schooling and not – as is the
case for men – politics and current affairs, one can see that these women wished to be listened to and considered as equal to their male colleagues. Rachel Danon wrote at length on social aspects of Alexandrian Jewry and became deeply involved in the organisation of a school for the Jewish refugees from Palestine and Syria that landed in Alexandria during the First World War. Together with her husband she built connections with local Jewish notables – the family of the Baron de Menasce in particular – and with the religious establishment.

Rachel Danon was a committed daughter of the AIU, who felt that the institution’s honour and reputation in Alexandria resided in her hands. One of her recurrent concerns was the fact that it was mainly lower and lower-middle class girls who attended her school. Despite having expressed her disapproval of the local Jewish elite, she knew that only through the elite would her school gain prestige and make her the ideal headmistress in the eyes of the AIU central committee. It was thus with true enthusiasm that only one month after having complained about the vanity of Alexandrian Jewish mothers, she wrote of ‘new elements, belonging to familles choisies, arrived during the last semester, the girls are dressed more prettily, with more dignity and their classmates started to imitate them – without us saying anything [to them]’.87

The contradictory logic that made Danon lament Alexandrian frivolousness while promoting her pupils’ interest in fashion, signals the fact that the AIU was willing to support bourgeois models of womanhood only when they were created from scratch by the institution itself. The already existing Alexandrian Jewish middle class, on the contrary, posed a threat to the AIU’s mission, as it showed that such a milieu could come to life without necessarily passing through the institution’s regulatory efforts. In addition to this, one should note how the boundaries between what was and what was not proper in terms of femininity and gender roles was something that the AIU teachers could continuously shift and reshape according to the local situation, which underlined the necessity of the teachers’ presence in the country.

This is clarified by the ceremony of initiation des jeunes filles, which first took place in Alexandria in 1901. Eliyahu Hazan, Chief Rabbi of Alexandria from 1888 until his death in 1908 and a prominent Sephardi thinker, first proposed introducing such a ceremony to the city. His desire was mainly driven by the fact that many girls ‘are unfortunately obliged to attend schools where they do not learn our holy language, or our history, or the principles of our holy religion’ and were not prepared for the ‘beautiful role of the Jewish woman: Eshet hayil [‘woman of valour’]’.88 The AIU school was one of the few that could offer a Jewish education, including the teaching of Hebrew. The girls who attended the congregational schools, to the rabbi’s despair, were largely ignorant of Judaism and could not utter a single Hebrew word. The ceremony was so designed to attract these girls in particular and was organised as a religious yet social event that would endow Alexandria with a Parisian-style initiation, as Rachel Danon diligently wrote in her report.

The ceremony mimicked the bat mitzvah many European Jewish girls had started to celebrate since the late nineteenth century, even though this term was
never utilised in Alexandria and the city’s rabbis always referred to it as *initiation religieuse*, *maggiorità religiosa* or, in Hebrew, *hag hinukh dati* (*celebration for the religious education [of the girls]*). While the boys’ *bar mitzvah* was centred on the reading of a portion of the Torah from the pulpit, the girls’ newly invented ceremony consisted of the recitation of some prayers and answers to questions dealing with religious issues. The ceremony was a symbol of these girls’ emancipation and, in the Alexandrian case, underlined the willingness of local religious leaders to try promoting the idea that Judaism was a traditional belief system that, nonetheless, could play a central role even in modern times.

Danon was asked by Rabbi Hazan to help organise the ceremony, and soon after his request she started working on this engaging project: ‘I put myself at his disposal, I gave him the programme of the ceremony as it is performed in Paris, as well as the texts of different prayers…’. Rachel Danon’s enthusiasm convinced her entire *prémieière classe* – attended by girls who were between ten and twelve years old – to take part in the ceremony, which not only involved learning the required prayers, but also being able to afford the outfit the girls should wear during the celebration: ‘it consisted in wearing a white dress and to buy a veil, gloves etc.’.

Despite all efforts, the ceremony, for her, was a complete disaster and a typical example of the Oriental inability to behave properly: ‘no flowers, no carpets, despite what we had agreed, no reserved seats for the notables, the temple was assaulted’. Luckily, Rachel Danon’s girls were amongst the few praised for their conduct, which was clearly inspired by ‘our teaching […] methodical and given by European teachers’. Although she might have exaggerated her criticism of the ceremony, the event undoubtedly did not gain in popularity the level expected by the AIU and Rabbi Hazan. The Jewish elite did little to support it, and the AIU school in general viewed the ceremony as mainly destined to engage the lower classes. Notwithstanding all this, from then on this ‘touching ceremony’ of *initiation religieuse* was gradually incorporated into local Jewish rites. This might signal a less reluctant attitude of the families in subsequent years, although I would say that the ceremony’s resilience was first due to the emphasis placed on Jewish education by Rabbi Hazan and his successors, Moïse Ventura and, even earlier, the two Italian Chief Rabbis Della Pergola and David Prato. Della Pergola and Ventura also compiled two manuals of religious instruction in which the *initiation* feature prominently.

Clearly, the activities of the school were not only influenced by the local scenario and the interaction with local actors, but also by national and international politics. Even in this case, however, gender was used as a powerful tool for orientating the girls’ behaviour. For instance, during the First World War, all the schools were shut down for some time – wrote Mademoiselle Danon, adjointe of the school and daughter of Rachel. As will be explained in the fourth chapter, even that city, until then known for its joyful atmosphere, ‘takes up an image of wartime, when the sun goes down’, as curfew was imposed on entire neighbourhoods, which ‘are very gloomy, especially considering that before [the war] they had been so joyful and full of lights’. The war and the teachers’
descriptions of what was going on in Europe and France in particular greatly impressed the young girls. Mademoiselle Danon wrote that the students collected money for ‘[French] war filleuls’ to whom they sent many items, including pipes and tobacco: ‘Imagine the happiness of those children’, continued the teacher, ‘upon receiving the grateful letters that arrived from the front’. Not only French soldiers, but also Jewish prisoners were the recipients of the charitable endeavours of the girls, who supported them by sending money to the Chief Rabbi of Geneva.94

The war was surely a watershed in both the history of the Egyptian Jews and Egypt as a whole, as soon after the British colonial domination would formally come to an end with the 1919 Revolution and the birth of King Fu’ad’s monarchy in 1922. At the same time, the First World War had very negative consequences on the finances of the AIU. Many schools were closed, and in 1919 the central committee decided to shut down the whole Alexandrian branch. The living expenses in Alexandria had always been very high and the schools never reached the position the AIU had hoped. An agreement between the AIU and the Jewish Community of Alexandria enabled some teachers to get new posts in the communal schools, thus indirectly confirming the validity of the AIU and its methods.95

Together with her adjointes, Rachel Danon wanted to spread an idealised notion of the Jewish woman as mother and educator. On the other hand, many of the Jews belonging to the middling sectors of Alexandrian society seemed to opt for a model of identity that paid attention to Europeanised everyday practices of sociability and leisure more than Jewish moral and religious traditions or synagogue life – innovative as this may be. If Alexandrian Jewish women were at times perceived by the AIU as almost too Europeanised, it is also true that this institution, together with Rabbi Hazan, ultimately contributed to the spreading of novel approaches to female religiosity, as exemplified by the initiation des jeunes filles and its interweaving of traditional Jewish beliefs and modern Western rituals. That this ceremony eventually succeeded is surely another indicator of how, similarly to the Cairo Jewish leaders seen in the previous section, Alexandrian Jewish women also opted for an identity that was neither modern nor traditional and that showed how the models of the biblical woman of valour and that of a Parisian-like salon lady were, for them, not as in opposition as Rachel Danon thought.

Provincial modernities: the Jews of Tantah, 1905–1939

The analysis of the AIU experience in Cairo and Alexandria revealed that this institution and the local Jewish upper class entertained highly controversial relationships within the context of complex urban social arenas. The case of Tantah, which I will now introduce, underlines instead that in minor centres – where the Jewish elite was much smaller and weaker – the AIU operated in a more effective and durable manner. The AIU arrived in Tantah, a city of the Delta region located between Cairo and Alexandria, in 1905, founding a school that
continued to function up to 1957. By presenting the history of the Jews of Tantah and their encounter with the AIU, I will explain the ways in which this institution intended to regulate and modernise local Jews in various aspects of their life. Second, I will show to what extent the AIU experience in Tantah points out how European models and habits affected the Jews in terms of social practices and habits, as well as their sense of belonging.

Tantah is to be taken as an example of a broader provincial context that, in different yet equally compelling ways, also experienced modernity – intended here as a construct and an organising trope of a new Egyptian social order – and the changes that Egypt was undergoing during the colonial and monarchical eras. At the same time, the stories that I reconstruct underline how the AIU and Tantah Jews mutually interacted, borrowing and imitating rituals and ideas that – when performed at a local level – undermined the dichotomous opposition between localness and foreignness, tradition and modernity, paving the way for a much more messy yet creative hybridity. This case study also can serve as a reminder of how, even though the majority of Jews lived in Cairo and Alexandria, some also populated smaller cities, where a slightly different history took place: one that resonated the influence of the bigger urban centres, yet was also attached to a local dimension that has so far often been neglected by historians.

The city of Tantah had been known for centuries mainly for hosting the tomb of the Moroccan-born shaykh and founder of the Ahmadiyyah Sufi order Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi, who died in Tantah in 1276. However, under the khedivate of Isma'il, Tantah was transformed into a modern centre, siege of the mudiriyah ('governorate') of Gharbiyya, reorganised and regulated according to Westernised ideas of urban planning. Such a change was linked to the fact that Tantah was the main marketplace for the cotton grown in its surroundings, which was then sent to the major Egyptian centres via quite an efficient network of railway lines.

Although the AIU arrived in Tantah in 1905, already in 1903 Joseph Danon – headmaster of the Ecole des garçons of Alexandria – while commenting on the impossibility of creating a school in Mansourah, a small town north of Cairo, suggested that it might be worth founding one in a more active centre such as Tantah. In fact, in previous years, many Jews from Morocco and Algeria, such as the Benzakeins – one of the most prominent families of the city – had migrated to Tantah, increasing the local Jewish population up to circa 1,000 individuals. When the AIU arrived in 1905, the Jews were then experiencing a period of demographic and economic growth. Having said that, a large part of the community was still made up of poor Jews, who appeared to the teachers as extremely ignorant and narrow-minded.

From the very beginning, Tantah Jewish notables were involved in the organisation of the school through a committee that collected funds for the school buildings. The inauguration took place on 2 November 1905, and it was attended by many personalities, such as: ‘H.E. the Moudir and the sous-moudir, the English and Italian consuls, the chief rabbis of Alexandria and Cairo, the local judges and functionaries, the lawyers of the local bar…’. The first goal of this
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1 ceremony was obviously to advertise the work of the AIU, explaining why
2 Tantah and its Jews needed such an educational institution. The headmaster,
3 Léon Benveniste, also wanted to establish a fruitful collaboration with the Jewish
4 communal leaders, underlining at the same time the school as an autonomous
5 entity, subject only to the AIU. Benveniste, in fact, regarded some members of
6 the School Committee as ‘not very enlightened and wholly incompetent with
7 regards to teaching’, and thus as possible obstacles to the school’s activities.104
8
9 Despite the headmaster’s fears, the school was highly successful from the
10 very beginning. In 1905 it already counted 227 students. Considering the fact
11 that around 1,100 Jews in total lived in Tantah in that year, it is arguable that
12 almost all Jewish children were enrolled in the AIU bâtiment scolaire. The
13 school included, as usual, an Ecole des garçons, an Ecole des filles and an asile
14 enfantine and was located ‘in the middle of the countryside’ close to ‘the ever-
15 green plain that surrounds it endlessly’.105 In the following years the student
16 number was to stabilise at around 200–220 per year, with a considerable
17 decrease immediately after the First World War and then a recovery in the
18 1920s. Throughout the decades, the ratio of non-paying students was consider-
19 ably higher than in Cairo and Alexandria, something that underlines the different
20 character of Tantah Jews in terms of economic status.
21
22 The success of the AIU is further clarified by a party celebrated in July 1910
23 shortly before the closure of the school for the summer vacation, which was
24 attended by a crowd of more than 1,000 people. As the programme of the event
25 shows, the school acted as a stage where young Tantah Jews were called to inter-
26 pret France and French culture as their own. Their interpretation of a Guérison
27 de Pierrot and an Arabic translation of Un bourgeois gentilhomme by Molière
28 were undoubtedly means through which the AIU confirmed its civilising role.
29 However, they also expressed the sensibility of a local Jewish middle class
30 trying to negotiate its way to modernity.106 ‘All the local Jewish, Muslim, Copt,
31 Greek and Syrian notables responded to our invitation’, the headmaster of the
32 school proudly wrote, noting how such a heterogeneous crowd was mirrored in
33 an equally heterogeneous show, which included ‘acts of tragedies and comedies,
34 monologues and dialogues in Arabic, French and English’.107 The social life of
35 Tantah Jews was to be (partially) reorganised through ceremonies that tried to
36 make the students and their parents familiar with what the teachers considered a
37 universal model of civilisation.
38
39 The success of these events was destined to continue over time. David
40 Chochani, a young teacher working in Tantah in 1939, described in vivid detail a
41 social gathering known as the bal juif, which took place on a yearly basis and
42 attracted many Jews, Muslims and Christians: ‘people start talking about it three
43 or four months in advance; they try their dinner jacket or the dress that they are
44 going to wear’.108 Given that, for Chochani, this was the only social event spon-
45 sored by the Jewish Community during those years, it is interesting to note the
46 extent to which these events had become part of the community’s habits, even at
47 a time of such great social and economic distress as the 1930s. In fact, after the
48 bal juif ended, the teacher admitted that the only occupation left to Tantah Jews

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and to the women in particular, was to try ‘killing time […]', families often meet at each other’s place'.

This portrayal of Tantah Jews, in other words, allows us to understand the ephemeral character of these events and of the imaginary they produced, which often clashed with the harsh reality of everyday Tantah. Already from the mid-1910s, an increasing number of Jews had started to leave the city for Cairo and Alexandria, in the aftermath of a more general financial crisis that was affecting Egypt and its provincial centres in particular. The Jews who remained in Tantah were those who belonged to the elite, together with the poorest ones. This might explain the centrality attributed by the AIU to Jewish charitable activities, as the following cases exemplify.

In 1911 a group of Tantah Jewish women established a Société des Dames, which helped poor pregnant women and pupils on a financial level and through a sewing atelier annexed to the AIU Ecole des filles. The president of the association was Gohara Cohen, presented as the quintessential Jewish woman of valour, who, for the bar mitzvah of her son, did not hesitate to offer enough money to dress forty poor children. According to the headmaster Joseph Alphandary, all these were clear signals of the spread of AIU ideology amongst Tantah Jews. Although this might be partly true, it seems much more likely that the AIU only accelerated the gradual shift in already existing practices of charity. Family celebrations and religious holidays had, in fact, always been the occasions for special gifts to be given to the needy in pre-Ottoman times, in both Jewish and Muslim communities. The kind of charity described by Alphandary in his letter mixed older forms of Jewish benevolence with more clearly European ideas (e.g. the creation of a sewing atelier), and represented a way for Tantah Jewish notables to enhance their status vis-à-vis the Jewish Community and the city as a whole. Apart from that, charitable activities were of the greatest importance for poor Jews of the region at a time of decline, as demonstrated by the migration of many indigent Jewish families from smaller centres of the Delta region – such as Damanhur and Mansourah – to Tantah, ‘attracted to our city because of the lowness of life, but most of all because of its benevolent societies'.

Another example of the shift from traditional forms of charity to a regulated Westernised philanthropy is the bequest of Chemtov Barcilon – one of the founders of the school of Tantah. Thanks to his bequest, in 1915 thirty-five girls and fifty-five boys were able to receive free clothes, which were distributed during a ceremony attended by ‘a selected public’, among which was the daughter of Barcilon. The distribution was preceded by a religious commemoration by the Chief Rabbi of Tantah and a speech read by a pupil of the school. Not only Jewish children but ‘all those who are worthy of some interest, with no distinction of race and religious belief’ were to be the recipients of Barcilon’s charity. The Barcilos seem to have been amongst the most generous donors, as the family’s charity continued at least until 1938, when – as one can read in the AIU bulletin Paix et Droit – Robert Barcilon, grandson of Chemtov, attended the annual distribution of clothes and contributed to establishing a 1,000 volume library and the purchase of a piano for the school.
Older practices of charity, which were also assertions of communal authority, were regulated through the mediation of the AIU and transformed into modern and respectable bourgeois philanthropy. This was surely a consistent change in terms of the rituals through which charity was performed, which needs to be contextualised as part of a much longer process of rationalisation and regulation of the Egyptian Jewish welfare system along Western lines that, for Krämer, was to continue until the 1940s. In addition to this, it should be kept in mind that this was itself part of a broader Egyptian context, where ‘the practice of poor relief in the nineteenth and early twentieth century reflected a hybridity’, which comprised religious obligations and communal strategies, as well as Ottoman and, last but not least, European and colonial influences.

Such a hybridity was to be found not only in daily aspects of Jewish life, like the events that took place at the AIU school or the charity activities described above; at a deeper level, it also influenced the sense of belonging that the younger generation felt for the city of Tantah, for Egypt and for France. Especially from the 1930s onwards, the teachers described Tantah as a harmonious city, where Jews and Muslims shared the same spaces and where ethnic and class prejudices seemed non-existent. The AIU had from the beginning stressed the fact that the school of Tantah – as, theoretically, any other school this institution founded – was not only destined to teach Jews, but ‘to the spirits of all classes and all religious beliefs’. Interestingly enough, and in opposition to the scarce success of the AIU in Alexandria and Cairo, this school – besides hosting almost all of the Jewish children – when visited by the Chief Rabbi of Alexandria, David Prato, in 1931 counted ‘on a total of 212 pupils […] 50 Muslims and 22 Christians’. Furthermore, in an article published in 1937 in *Paix et Droit*, one can read that a group of Jewish and Muslim Boy Scouts had gathered in the Tantah state-run secondary school, where in front of ‘a huge bonfire’ they shared ‘some tea, fruits and all kind of sweets’. The author of the article highlighted that this was the first ‘manifestation of companionship between Muslim and Jewish educational institutions’. One year later, in 1938, *Paix et Droit* proudly stated that a great many Muslim students, ‘belonging to the best families in town’, had been enrolled at the school, ‘despite the strong nationalist wave and the passions religieuses that are present in Egypt’.

It is undoubted that a relevant number of Muslims and some Christians too attended the school. However, as Abécassis showed, this might be due to the fact that the AIU was, at the time, the only French non-Catholic school in the city. As some affluent Tantah Jews attended the school of the *Pères de la Mission Africaine* – according to what the former AIU headmaster Saul Somekh found during his inspection of the school in 1921 – it is therefore not so surprising that some Muslims and Christians attended the AIU school. Concerning the Boy Scouts’ activities, I would like to direct attention to the AIU bulletin’s label of the state-run *Grande Ecole secondaire* of Tantah as Muslim, instead of simply Egyptian. This, in fact, might say something not about the city’s transcommunalism, but on the contrary about the role religion and the declaration of one’s religion had in 1930s Egypt and the interpretation that the AIU gave to Egyptian
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public education. Although Tantah was said to be a harmonious microcosm, for
the AIU the Jews (and even a few non-Jews) should be educated only in its own
school. More precisely, it was only within the walls of the school that the stu-
dents could find shelter from the rising waves of Egyptian nationalism and its
passions religieuses.

The regulation of Egypt’s passionate approach to politics and religion was to
be mainly promoted through the depiction of France as the ideal nation-state. If
as far as literature and culture were concerned, Molière and Racine – as lauded
in the school’s inauguration – ideally represented the French nation, the AIU’s
ideas about nationalism and national identity were presented to the pupils
through the study of history, but also thanks to the encounters that the children
had with French diplomats. From the documentation collected, it seems that
Tawfik Halil, Consular Agent of France in Tantah, visited to the school on a fre-
cquent basis. In addition to him, the French Consul General in Alexandria, de
Reffye, and other diplomats also visited Tantah. Of particular interest is a visit
that the new French Consul General in Alexandria, Rabineau, together with the
consulier d’ambassade Frédéric Nobel and the consular agent, paid to the school
on 5 December 1939 – shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War.

As soon as Consul Rabineau and Nobel arrived in Tantah, the headmaster and
the Jewish Community ‘in its entirety’ greeted them. Garlands and festoons had
been carefully hung in all the classrooms and in the main hall, where a choir of
young girls sang the Marseillaise, ‘listened [to] in a moving silence by all the
attendees’. The set piece of the visit was the speech pronounced by Odette
Benrey – the daughter of the headmaster Henry Benrey – on behalf of her
schoolmates. This text was a summa of the teachings the AIU instilled in its
pupils, especially concerning their sense of national belonging. The girl started
by saying that she was ‘a young Egyptian with a French soul’, educated in a
school that although ‘small and simple [. . .] is a French home, a centre for propa-
gating liberal and humanitarian ideals’. Egypt was the cradle of one of the most
ancient civilisations and therefore the ideal counterpart to France, ‘both mothers
of sublime and generous ideas’, especially now that Egypt was ruled by ‘our
beloved sovereign H.M. King Farouk Ist’.

The AIU had taught Odette and her classmates that they were Egyptians with
a French soul, thus adding a highly ungraspable and emotional connotation to
their sense of national belonging. This rhetoric greatly resembled, as we shall
see in the next chapter, that of another French educational institution, the
Mission Laïque Française. The Egypt these educational institutions were
evoking ideally connected the present times to the Pharaonic era, underscor-
ing the historical experience of Egyptian Jews under Ottoman rule – a trend shared
by many Egyptian intellectuals since the late nineteenth century, and that led to
the so-called Pharaonism in the 1920s. Having said this, the transcommunal
character that Egyptian society largely preserved until the 1930s was slowly
decaying under the pressure of a more rigid notion of the nation-state and Egyp-
tian national identity. In 1937 the Montreux Convention abolished the Capitulations and this, together with the radicalisation of the political arena in connection
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with a broad Islamic revival as well as the worsening of the Arab–Jewish conflict in British Palestine, was starting to cause serious economic and social distress to many Jews. As the Second World War approached, young Tantah Jews were left with a very problematic feeling of (trans)national belonging between France, Egypt and the Levant, which mixed an imagined Egyptian Jewry à l’âme française with an equally imagined Pharaonic grandeur.

Through the narration of the encounter between the AIU and the Tantah Jews, I have thus reconstructed different aspects of Jewish social life and culture in early twentieth-century Tantah. As novel practices and habits spread throughout Egypt, the AIU tried to reshape them, regulating to its own benefit an already ongoing process of (Jewish) modernisation. This is evident when looking at the characteristics of social events such as the 1910 fête scolaire, as well as Jewish charity. Despite the fact that the AIU argued that its school and the city of Tantah as a whole were harmonious locations where Jews and Muslims lived together peacefully, a more careful reading of the AIU documentation allows for a partial rethinking of this scenario. In the end, the AIU educational ideals also contributed to the gradual marginalisation of the young Jewish generation of Tantah, especially as far as the pupils’ cultural and national imaginary was concerned. Often unaware of the shifts of Egyptian politics and nationalism, these children were to envision the school as the only homeland they would forever long for. When looked at from this perspective, the history of the AIU in Tantah explains how Egyptian Jewish modernity and the imaginary it entailed should be seen as a complex yet also deeply ephemeral construct that allowed for both the Jews’ social improvement and, later on, their national marginalisation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed how the AIU and Egyptian Jews interacted from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. By doing so, I intended to show the multiple connections the AIU established with them, underlining how it was also thanks to, and against, this institution that a modern Egyptian Jewish identity and a local Jewish bourgeoisie emerged. Investigating the schools of the Alliance and the worlds that surrounded them allowed for an unravelling of hitherto little known episodes in Egyptian Jewish history, such as the introduction of the initiation des jeunes filles in colonial Alexandria. From a wider perspective, it showed that from the early colonial era, and even in the years that preceded it, Egyptian Jews were viewed – and oftentimes viewed themselves – as a milieu that was neither Oriental nor European. The analysis of the Jewish elite of Cairo and its struggles against the AIU in the final years of the schools – circa the mid-1910s – explained how this social group changed and evolved, looking backward to the Ottoman millet and Jewish oligarchic communal structure and forward to European (French) bourgeois models. This was also clarified by looking at the Ecole des filles of Alexandria (1900–1919) and the intertwining of class, gender and Jewishness that characterised it. The study of this school, its
students and their families offered, in fact, an understanding of the gendered dimension of the AIU curricula that could not always be applied in Alexandria. The last part focused on the AIU school of Tantah. There, I concentrated on social events and forms of Jewish sociability and charity, assessing the influence of the AIU and its attempt at regulating Jewish social life. The teachers’ desire to reshape their students’ sense of national belonging was finally taken into account, contextualising the AIU and its teachings vis-à-vis late 1930s Egypt and its novel ideological stances.

Even though the AIU experience in Egypt was not a complete failure, it is undeniable that this was one of the very few not so accomplished projects in the history of the Alliance, which found itself surrounded by a peculiar and uncontrollable Jewry. However, this not only depended on the rigidity of the AIU curricula, but also on local factors difficult to be fully perceived at the time. The period that extends from the end of the nineteenth century through the 1920s – that is, the decades when the AIU was most active in Egypt – was the time when new forms of Egyptian Jewish identity came into being. In this epoch the newly born Jewish upper classes of Alexandria, Cairo and, to an extent, Tantah collaborated and fought against the institution, seeing it as an ally and ‘a parallel’ – that is, competing – ‘network of power and influence to that of [their own] community’.

One could perhaps say that Egyptian Jews and their educational politics – which in many ways resembled those of other Mediterranean Jewish communities – were crossed by several invisible and overlapping borders: Judaism and its legacies, their urban identity, a broader and unclear feeling of being Egyptian and, last but not least, their class consciousness. It was through and against this complex interweaving – and thanks to the not so visible yet relevant influence of the AIU – that a modern Egyptian Jewish identity and an urban Jewish bourgeoisie came into being and gradually consolidated.

Notes
1 See: Landau, Jews, 42–43.
2 Moise Salomon and Moise Seroussi to the AIU, 15 September 1878, Archives de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle, Paris (henceforth, AIU) Egypte I.C.I.
3 Jacques Menasce Cattaoui should be identified with Ya’qoub – which is the Arabic for Jacques – Cattaoui, founder of the Cattaoui dynasty, whose second name was, in fact, Menasce (or Menashe) and who had been nominated Baron of the Habsburg Empire – not to be confused with the Alexandrian de Menasce family (see: Gudrun Krämer, The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914–1952 (London: IB Tauris, 1989), 88). The Cattaoui and the de Menasce were nonetheless to become in-laws a few years later.
4 Moise Salomon and Moise Seroussi to the AIU, 15 September 1878, AIU Egypte I.C.I. The French text of the letter is followed by a shorter Hebrew version signed also by other Jews and bearing a stamp of ‘M.[oshe] Pardo Rabbino Maggiore Alessandria’. The document is also reproduced in Landau, Jews, 199–200.
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13 Hebrew was mainly taught for religious purposes and not as a language one could actually speak, as the AIU was in opposition to the Zionist Hebrew revival started in the late nineteenth century. Girls were to gain only basic knowledge of the language, since it was mainly boys who were supposed to need it in their religious lives. For a discussion of the teaching of Hebrew in the AIU Egyptian schools: Jacob Landau, ‘Manuscript Materials on the Teaching of Hebrew in Egyptian Schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle’, in Doron. Hebraic Studies. Essays in Honor of Professor Abraham I. Katsh, eds. I. T. Naamani, D. Rudavsky and C. F. Ehle (New York, NY: National Association of Professors of Hebrew in American Institutions of Higher Learning, 1965), 26–36.


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17 Talmud, tractate Shavuot 39a.
18 The Bulletin’s publication was interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War. Another publication, Paix et Droit, replaced it in 1920.
22 The only studies on the subject can be found in: Landau, Jews, 85–91; Landau, ‘“Riv-ha-leshonut” ba-chinukh ha-yehudi be-Mitzrayim ha-chadashah’ (‘“Multilingualism” in Jewish Education in Modern Egypt’), in Sefer ha-shanah shel Bar-Ilan (‘The Bar Ilan Yearbook’), vols. Dalet-Heh (Jerusalem: Qiryat Sefer, 1967), 220–233 (Hebrew), and Landau, ‘Manuscript Materials’.
23 Adolphe Crémières, cited in Landau, Jews, 73.
25 Léon Benveniste to the AIU President, 11 January 1901, AIU Alexandrie (henceforth, Alex) I.E.18.
26 Medical certificate by Dr. A. Torello (?), 22 June 1914, AIU Alex I.E.33.
27 Henri Cohen to the AIU President, 9 October 1897, AIU Caire V.E.80.a.
28 Léon Bassan to the AIU President, 10 May 1905, AIU Caire V.E.83.
31 Léon Bassan to the AIU President, 10 May 1905, AIU Caire V.E.83. In Judaism, Tisha be-Av (ninth day of the month of Av) is an annual fast day, which commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples of Jerusalem.
32 Berthe Commercero to the AIU President, 10 May 1906, AIU Caire V.E.103.
33 I have not found any other reference to this Ecole du commerce nor in other AIU documents, nor in any published research on Egyptian Jews.
34 Victor Boccara to the AIU President, 17 June 1892, AIU Caire V.E.90.
35 For example: Elie Boudi to the AIU President, 16 July 1893, AIU Mansourah XIII.E.184; M. Coen to the AIU President, 12 May 1896, AIU Caire V.E.98 and Victor Politi Argi to the AIU President, 22 April 1914, AIU Alex IV.E.36.
36 The genizah is the storeroom of a synagogue used specifically for worn-out Hebrew-language books and papers on religious topics that were stored there before they could receive a proper cemetery burial, it being forbidden to throw away writings containing the name of God. The best-known genizah is that of the Ben-Ezra Synagogue of Cairo, which was discovered in 1864 and contained almost 280,000 documents dating roughly from 870 to the nineteenth century.
39 Bension Taragan, Les communautés israélites d’Alexandrie. Aperçu historique depuis les temps des Ptolémées jusqu’à nos jours (Alexandria: Les Editions Juives d’Egypte, 1932), 100–102. The waqf is an Islamic legal institution generally denoting a building or plot of land destined to fulfil religious or charitable purposes.
Although the Jewish law provides an institution very similar to the waqf – that is, the hekdesh – Jews sometimes opted for the former when it seemed to offer more guarantees vis-à-vis the state. In any case, non-Muslims are permitted to create a waqf only when its purpose does not contrast with the principles of Islamic law. See: Amy Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 99; Yaron Ben-Naeh, *Jews in the Realm of the Sultan. Ottoman Jewish Society in the Seventeenth Century* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 285–288; Ron Shaham, ‘Christian and Jewish “Waqq” in Palestine during the Late Ottoman Period’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 54/3 (1991): 460–472; Randi Deguilhem, ‘The Waqf in the City’, available at: www.jhfc.duke.edu/disc/events/.../WaqfCityIslamicWorldi.pdf (this and all other websites cited in the book were last accessed on 25 November 2014); Leah Bornstein-Makovetzky, ‘Ha qehillah ve-mossadoteah’ (‘The Community and its Institutions’), in *Toldot-yeheudei-Mitzrayim ba-tqufah ha-‘otmanit* (‘The Jews of Egypt in Ottoman Times’), ed. Jacob Landau (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim, 1988), 189–191 (Hebrew).
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56 Saul Somekh to the AIU President, 16 August 1914, AIU Caire XII.E.182.e.


58 Copy of a letter from Saul Somekh to the Directeur du Département de l’Hygiène Publique, 7 November 1918, AIU Caire XII.E.182.m.

59 Krämer, The Jews, 93.

60 Samuel Avigdor to the AIU Secretary, 27 April 1916, AIU Caire VI.E.80.a. See also: Oeuvre de la Goutte de Lait (Fondation I. Benaroio) – Compte de l’exercice du 1er janvier au 31 décembre 1918, AIU Caire XII.E.182.m, and Fargeon, Les juifs, 219–220.


63 From the text of the Protestation published on Israël, circa 20 July 1921, AIU Caire XII.E.182.m.


65 Saul Somekh to the AIU President, 22 July 1921, AIU Caire XII.E.182.m. The reference to Maurice Cattaoui pasha as President of the Cairo Jewish Community seems a mistake, as in that year the Community was headed by Moise Cattaoui, who kept that post for about forty years, from 1883 until his death in 1924. A Maurice Cattaoui, nephew of Joseph Aslan pasha, seems instead to have been the engineer in charge of the construction project of the Temple Sha’ar Ha-Shamayim, the main synagogue of central Cairo in 1898. See: Hanna Taragan, ‘The “Gate of Heaven” (Sha’ar Hashamayim) Synagogue in Cairo (1898–1905): On the Contextualization of Jewish Communal Architecture’, Journal of Jewish Identities, 2/1 (2009): 34.

66 This at least what Albert Oudiz, who attended the Ecole Cattaoui in the 1930s, states in his testimony ‘L’école de mon enfance’, available at: www.hsje.org/lecole_de_mon_enfance.htm.

69 See the biography provided by Maurice Fargeon, Annuaire des Juifs d’Egypte et du proche-Orient (Cairo: Société des Editions Historiques Juives d’Egypte, 1943), 295 – where Levi de Benzion is said to be the ‘proprietaire de la Maison Benzion; Adr. [esse]: Gameh El Banat; Le Caire’.

70 Saul Somekh to the AIU President, 3 October 1924; Adolphe Green to the AIU central committee, 14 October 1924; and Saul Somekh to the AIU President, 30 April 1925, all in AIU Egypte III B.
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71 Compte-rendu of the Réunion du 26 janvier 1929 à l’occasion du 1er Anniversaire de la Fondation de l’Association Amicale des Anciens Élèves et Professeurs de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle en Égypte, Cairo, 1929, 9, AIU P1627DO.

72 Compte-rendu of the Assemblée Générale du 12 Avril 1931 et du 3 Avril 1932 de l’Association Amicale des Anciens Élèves et Professeurs de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle en Égypte, Cairo, 1932, 4, AIU P1627DO.

73 Maurice Dabbah to Samuel Avigdor, 10 May 1938, AIU Caire VI.E.80.c.


75 Taragan, Les communautés, 103. Taragan talks about an appeal published in the French Jewish newspaper L’Univers Israélite on 12 September 1896. In the AIU archives are two earlier letters sent to the AIU President by a group of Jewish families of various descent, ‘Russes, Polonais, Espagnols, Corfiotes, et autres’, calling for the AIU’s intervention in Alexandria. See: Israélites d’Alexandrie to the AIU President, 3 June (?) 1896, AIU Egypte I.C.3 and La Colonie Israélite d’Alexandrie to the AIU President, 21 June 1896, AIU Egypte I.C.7 (this document also talks about a letter sent to the Chief Rabbi of France Zadoc Kahn).

76 Rachel Danon, née Braun, (1875–?), educated at the École Bischoffsheim, started her career as adjointe (‘assistant’) at the AIU school for girls of Tunis in 1891, then moving to Baghdad, Alexandria and Beirut, where she ended her career in 1923 (AIU Fiches 100–1–46/15). Her husband, Joseph Danon, was born in Smyrne in 1864. His father and brother were also AIU headmasters and teachers. After attending the École Normale Israélite Orientale, he started teaching in Bulgaria, then Sousse, Tunis and Baghdad. He married Rachel in 1894, moving to Alexandria in 1900 to become headmaster of the school for boys (AIU Fiches I00–1–46/14).

77 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 7 February 1902, AIU Alex III.E.36.


79 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 19 January 1911, AIU Alex I.E.33.


82 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 7 February 1902, AIU Alex III.E.36.

83 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 8 June 1900, AIU Alex III.E.35.

84 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 19 January 1911, AIU Alex I.E.33.

85 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 7 February 1902, AIU Alex III.E.36. The idea of Alexandrian Jews as snobbish is not a novelty. One might argue it is a cliché that many memoirs and autobiographies written by Egyptian Jews also report, especially in opposition to the supposedly more understated attitude of Cairo Jewry. See, for example: Gini Alhadeff, The Sun at Midday. Tales of a Mediterranean Family (New...
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86 Paula Hyman, Gender and Assimilation.

87 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 7 March 1902, AIU Alex III.E.36, my emphasis.

88 1901 Appeal of Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan to the Jewish Community of Alexandria, AIU Alex III.E.36. Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan, born in Smyrna from a prominent Sephardi rabbinic family, had already faced the very same issue while Chief Rabbi of Tripoli from 1874 up to 1888. Hazan’s responsum to the problems of secular vs. religious education had then been that ‘the study of secular knowledge should take place under religious auspices’, Jews had to study the language of the country they lived in, so that ‘the nations of the world would be impressed with the great wisdom of the people of Israel’; see David Angel, Voices in Exile. A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History (New York, NY: Hoboken-Ktav, 1991), 184–186. On Rabbi Hazan, see also: Landau, Jews, 97–99. The expression ‘eshet hayil comes from the Bible, see Proverbs 31, 10–11: ‘Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil’ (this and all the subsequent biblical citations are taken from the 1769 King James’ Bible).

89 The bar mitzvah (‘son of the commandment’) indicates:

both the attainment of religious and legal maturity as well as the occasion at which this status is formally assumed for boys at the age of 13 plus one day […]. Upon reaching this age a Jew is obliged to fulfil all the commandments.

As far as bat mitzvah (‘daughter of the commandment’) is concerned,

it is not until the 19th century that indications of ceremony or public recognition come from Italy, Eastern and Western Europe, Egypt, and Baghdad. These acknowledgements of female religious adulthood include a private blessing, a father’s aliyyah to the Torah, a rabbi’s sermon and/or a girl’s public examination on Judaic matters.

See Zvi Kaplan and Norma Joseph, ‘Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah’, in Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 3, eds. Michel Berenbaum and Fred Skolkin (Detroit, MI: MacMillan, 2007), 164–167. The Encyclopaedia Judaica also states that Rabbi Hazan held a celebration for Alexandrian bat mitzvah girls in 1907, whereas all the documents found in the AIU archives refer to 1901 as the year in which the ceremony was first performed.

90 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 31 May 1901, AIU Alex III.E.36. The obligatory white dress is also mentioned in a footnote of the appeal by Rabbi Hazan: ‘N.B. Les initiées doivent etre vêtes de blanc’.

91 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 31 May 1901, AIU Alex III.E.36.


93 Léonie Danon to the AIU President, 5 January 1917, AIU Alex I.E.32. On Egyptian Jewish reactions to the First World War: Krämer, The Jews, 116–120.

94 Léonie Danon to the AIU President, 5 January 1917, AIU Alex I.E.32.

95 Joseph Danon to the AIU President, 8 October 1919, AIU Alex IV.E.35.m.

96 I will, however, stop in 1939 – that is, before the outbreak of the Second World War – as I am here only concerned about the changes that occurred to Tantah Jews in the
In a bizarre country... colonial and early monarchical era. Moreover, the study of the 1940s and 1950s would have also required an analysis of the ideological restructuring of the AIU during and immediately after the Second World War, enlarging the scope of my analysis too much. On this, I therefore refer to: Catherine Nicault, ‘Dans la tourmente de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale – 1939–1944’, in Histoire de l’Alliance, ed. André Kaspi, 295–330 and Laurent Grison, ‘L’Alliance Israélite Universelle dans les années noires’, Archives juives, 34/1 (2001): 9–22.


98 The city of Tantah is today the site of an annual pilgrimage celebrating al-Badawi’s mawlid (‘birthday’). The celebration lasts about eight days and includes a renowned fair, which had already been described by many late nineteenth-century European travellers as a quintessential component of Egyptian folklore. On Badawi: Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, Al-Sayyid Ahmad Al-Badawi: Un grand saint de l’Islam égyptien (Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1994).

99 Mitchell, Colonising, 67–68.


102 For an overall picture of Tantah Jews in the early twentieth century: Landau, Jews, 40–42.

103 ‘L’école de l’Alliance Israélite à Tantah’, La Réforme, no date, AIU Tantah XIII.E.199.

104 See: Léon Benveniste to the AIU President, 15 October 1905, AIU Tantah XIII.E.199.

105 Saul Somekh to the AIU President, 7 July 1921, AIU Caire XII.E.182.m. Because of financial constraints, classes mixtes were first introduced in 1920–1921. Furthermore, from the AIU statistics, we know that boys and girls merged in an école mixte from 1931 to 1939.


107 Joseph Alphandary to the AIU President, 6 July 1910, AIU Tantah XIII.E.192.

108 David Chochani to the AIU President, 5 May 1939, AIU Tantah XIII.E.202.

109 David Chochani to the AIU President, 5 May 1939, AIU Tantah XIII.E.202.

110 Joseph Alphandary to the AIU President, 8 March 1911, AIU Tantah XIII.E.192.

111 Mark R. Cohen, ‘Feeding the Poor’, 413.

112 Joseph Alphandary to the AIU Secretary, 21 September 1915, AIU Tantah XIII.E.192.

113 By juxtaposing charity with philanthropy, I am not saying the two are oppositional categories, but that they should be seen as two interacting notions of giving to the poor, which entailed religious, as well as more secular and humanitarian connotations. On this, see: Singer, Charity, 1–29.

114 Joseph Alphandary to the AIU President, 25 March 1915, AIU Tantah XIII.E.192.


117 Krämer, for example, explained how in the mid-1940s the Cairo Jewish Community promoted the definitive replacement of ‘the traditional system whereby wealthy families supported certain hara families, supplemented by food and money distributed by the community on the Jewish high holidays, by a modern system of cards entitled the owner to a fixed and regular allowance…’, noting how, in any case, the old system survived until the 1950s (Krämer, The Jews, 104).
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119 Inaugural speech of the school of Tantah by Léon Benveniste, 5 November 1905, AIU Tantah XIII.E.199.

120 ‘L’œuvre scolaire de l’Alliance Israélite’, *Paix et Droit*, January 1931, 10. The data given in the article contradict the AIU statistics, which says that in 1931 the school of Tantah counted 264 students.

121 ‘Le courrier des écoles’, *Paix et Droit*, February 1937, 10.


124 Saul Somekh to the AIU President, 7 July 1921, AIU Caire XII.E.182.m.

125 Joseph Alphandary to the AIU President, 8 March 1911, AIU Tantah XIII.E.192.

126 Henri Benrey to the AIU President, 8 December 1939, AIU Tantah XIII.E.198.b.

127 Compliment addressé par l’élève Odette Benrey à M. le Conseiller d’Ambassade de France à Alexandrie, 5 December 1939, AIU Tantah XIII.E.198.b.


129 I am here echoing the remarks by Frances Malino in her essay ‘“Adieu à ma maison”: Sephardi Adolescent Identities, 1932–36’, *Jewish Social Studies*, 15/1 (2008): 131–144.

130 Rodrigue, *French Jews*, 70.

131 In this, I follow Barbara Armani when she argues that:

> modern Jews have multiple options in order to define the quality and to map their collective relationships. What comes out is therefore a multifaceted identity, constantly renegotiated within a well-defined context of both cultural and material limits and resources. Moreover, one should not underscore the role that internal social stratification plays in carving out different kinds of identity.

2 Cosmopolitan imaginaries

Urban life, schools and feelings of belonging

When Baron Jacques de Menasce – President of the Jewish Community of Alexandria, a renowned philanthropist and member of one of the most important families of the Egyptian Jewish elite – died in 1916, his funeral ceremony gathered ‘a huge crowd, in which all ranks were confused and where all nations seemed to form one same family, mourning one of its chiefs’ and ‘one of the best among the true Egyptians’.1 Hundreds of cars followed the coffin, together with students from the École de Menasce, the École Aghion, the École des Arts et Métiers, not to mention notables like the Governor of Alexandria Ahmed Ziwar pasha, the Minister of Education Adly pasha and various diplomats. The newspaper La Réforme seemed to agree with what an AIU teacher had written a few years earlier: Alexandria – but similar insights could be drawn for Cairo as well – was the cosmopolitan city par excellence and a place where different ethno-religious groups lived together. But were Jews and Muslims, poor and rich, Egyptians and foreign nationals really part of one same family?

Having reconstructed the history of the Alliance, in this chapter I will explore the making of a modern Egyptian Jewish identity through the lens of cosmopolitanism and focus on the ways in which relations between Jews and their surrounding worlds were described and envisioned at an urban level, in schools and in relation to politics and nationalism during colonial and monarchical times. I will look at ideas of transcommunal relations and see how these were mobilised in the formation of what might be called a social imaginary – that is, the ways in which people imagine their existence, the notions and images that underlie their life and, in other words, ‘the cultural elements from which we construct our understanding of the world’.3

Cosmopolitanism has become by now a much-debated category for the analysis of modern Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean. According to Fuhrmann, the term indicates:

(1) a publicly visible diversity; (2) an ability of individual or collective agents to navigate between different coded spheres; (3) an active practice of sociabilities that cross community borders; and (4) a belief and a policy of enhancing cohesion without a monolithic base.4
For Ilbert, it refers to the discrete coexistence of groups, languages and origins in a given urban sphere. In *Remembering Cosmopolitan Egypt*, Starr also places emphasis on how cosmopolitanism in the Eastern Mediterranean was, by and large, a by-product of colonialism and should be analysed keeping in mind its specific historical context. Analysing the case of Alexandria, Mabro and Fahmy further argue that the evocation of a vanished cosmopolitan past in opposition to today’s sectarianism often hides Orientalist nostalgia for a period in which ethno-national and class cleavages were far from absent. Finally, in order to understand the term in a more nuanced manner, Hanley elaborates upon the notion of *vulgar cosmopolitanism*: a ‘low, plain, unrefined (but not obscene) cosmopolitanism’ that goes beyond the elite and unravels the history of those lower-class and subaltern individuals hitherto underscored by historiography. Similar insights come out of the research by Khuri-Makdisi on anarchists and radical political activists in the Eastern Mediterranean or, partly, by Santilli on Italian prostitution in colonial Alexandria.

Taking cue from Starr’s and Hanley’s insights, I will interpret cosmopolitanism as a mental framework based upon which the Jews constructed for themselves a multilayered cultural, social and political imaginary in order to navigate amidst a heterogeneous social arena and across the many ethno-religious and national cleavages that existed in Egypt. In ways that partly remind us what could be found in the early modern Tuscan port city of Leghorn, that of the Egyptian Jews was a communitarian and self-contained form of cosmopolitanism that evocated a transnational and transcommunal rhetoric, while at the same time being firmly rooted, on the one hand, in a semi-colonial Egyptian context in which European interference – in a political, economic and cultural sense – was still very relevant, and on the other in those specific sectors of the Cairene and Alexandrian upper and middle classes from where many Jews came. This, in the end, both protected and estranged the Jews, who were among the most affected by the changing Egyptian scenario of the 1930s and the crisis of that liberal system, which had prevailed during much of Fu’ad’s reign up to the mid-1930s. But let us now start to look at all this in more detail, going back to fin-de-siècle Alexandria and its thriving harbour.

**Anti-Semitism, cosmopolitanism and the making of an Alexandrian Jewish elite, 1880s–1920s**

From the second half of the nineteenth century, Alexandria – which together with the rest of the country was on the verge of being occupied by the British – underwent a period of great social and economic expansion. It is during those years that its harbour was integrated into ‘the country’s external economic orientation’, becoming one of the most vibrant of the entire Mediterranean region. Alexandria became, wrote the Alexandrian-born Frédérique Banoun-Caracciolo in her family memoir, a magnet for people from all over the region and a city that seemed to offer everybody a chance to improve their lives. Thousands of Jews migrated from Southern Europe and the Ottoman Near East, contributing to
a rapid growth of the local Jewish population: from 9,831 Jews in 1897, to 14,475 in 1907 and 24,858 in 1917.\(^{14}\) This brought about the birth of a heterogeneous Jewish community, actively involved in the city’s commercial and entrepreneurial activities. At the same time, waves of migration of different ethno-religious groups also augmented social and urban unrest and a more general spatial fragmentation. The misrule of Khedive Tawfiq and the growing interference of the European powers further increased this sense of discontent, which would lead in 1882 to the ‘Urabi uprising, starting with the attacks against foreigners and Copts by Muslim rioters in Alexandria and ending with the British bombing of the city.\(^{15}\)

Among the thousands of migrants who arrived in Alexandria in the late nineteenth century were two families who lived in the *okella Muro*,\(^{16}\) a modest building situated between the headquarters of the city’s police and *rue de la Douane*. These were the Baruks, Jews from Corfu – most of them Greek nationals – and the Fornarakis, a Greek Orthodox family from Crete with Ottoman citizenship. On 18 March 1881, a nine-year-old boy named Vangelis Fornaraki, ‘fatherless and whose mother was said to be morally objectionable, disappeared from his house; after the due research, a rumour had it that the boy had been sacrificed by the Jews for recondite religious purposes’.\(^{17}\) Soon after the disappearance of Vangelis, the police – based on accusations by the child’s grandfather – interrogated and arrested several of the Baruks:

Jacoub, his wife Stella, their daughter Nina, their son-in-law Elia René, the former’s stepdaughter Consola Betteli, Diamantina e Josué René (these last two were minors), a two year-old daughter named René, the sons of Jacoub Baruk, Giulia [sic] and Vita Baruk.

The Baruks were accused of ritual murder, an anti-Semitic denunciation according to which Jews killed Christian children in order to use their blood for ritual purposes.\(^{18}\) As mentioned in the previous chapter, even though the first newsworthy case of blood libel in the Middle East in modern times – the *Damascus affair* – dated from 1840,\(^{19}\) ritual murder accusations in Egypt started to spread mainly in the 1880s in Alexandria and in cities such as Damanhur and Port Said. The principal reason behind the Egyptian blood libels is found in the critical sociopolitical atmosphere of 1880s Egypt, especially in the aftermath of the ‘Urabi uprising. Second, the fact that the majority of these complaints occurred in Alexandria underlines a possible connection to the Greek and Syrian Christians that had migrated to the city in those years. These two groups were most often the propagators of such allegations and, perhaps not coincidentally, they were also the economic and commercial rivals of the Jews.\(^{20}\)

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

Moreover, the Italian Consul in Alexandria, Machiavelli, explained to the Italian Ambassador in Cairo that the death of Vangelis provoked many hostile reactions, particularly of some ‘rascals, amongst which are a number of jobless Greek smugglers […] ready to fish in troubled waters’, suggesting that (some of) the attacks against the Jews might not have been directly linked to the accusation of ritual murder, but to the actions of petty criminals and robbers. The Greek Consul admitted to Machiavelli that even ‘the family of the Cretan boy is trying to take advantage of this tragedy’, and ‘[the Greek Consul] wants to make a collection among his fellow nationals in order to pacify [the family of Vangelis]’. Members of some upper-class Greek families were also accused of inciting the crowd against the Jews and, last but not least, anti-Semitic articles began to appear in local Greek newspapers.

As the affair was causing such great distress, the Egyptian authorities decided to create a commission formed by several local and foreign doctors in order to investigate the incident and the causes of the child’s death. After twenty-three autopsies on the corpse of Vangelis, the commission concluded that the child had died after drowning at sea. Only the two Greek members of the commission contested this final statement and decided to resign. This led to more riots during Vangelis’ funeral, which was attended by 4,000 people and officiated by the Greek Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria, His Beatitude Sophronius IV. The crowd moved from the house where the child lived with his mother, now ‘terribly sorrowful’, and her second husband. The woman was depicted by local newspapers as on the verge of hysteria, and incapable of being a proper mother for her children.

According to a local newspaper, the house where the Fornarakis lived was situated in ‘a damp and dark alley where no ray of sunshine ever arrives […]. one cannot help but ask how human beings can live in such a place’. In this same okella the Baruks also lived, and Vangelis was frequently seen playing with young Diamantina Baruk. This Jewish family was, according to some of their Greek neighbours, ‘scrupulously pious’ and ‘there had often been violent fights amongst members of the family’ during which knives had been thrown’. Further, the journalist seemed to link the unfortunate affair to the perils of the city of Alexandria, where children should not be left ‘wandering in the street or by the sea at such a young age’. The article concluded with an appeal to parents – that they keep a watchful eye over their sons, especially considering the dramatic changes that life in Alexandria was undergoing in the fin-de-siècle, and the dangers hidden in its streets.
Soon after the beginning of the anti-Semitic riots, the Alexandrian Jewish leaders petitioned local authorities and the municipality complaining about the former’s inability to protect them. Second, the Jewish notables of foreign nationalities asked for the help from their consular authorities, provoking a chaotic exchange of letters and a frenzy of meetings between almost all the foreign consuls present in Alexandria, their national governments and the khedivial representatives. Furthermore, the Jewish communal leaders sought the support and solidarity of a larger network of allies, including the Chief Rabbi of Corfu, the AIU and various European Jewish newspapers. The AIU was already following the event, publishing articles in its Bulletin, including relevant correspondence between the Ecumenical Patriarch of Costantinople, His Sanctity Joachim III, and a well-known Jewish doctor and philanthropist, Moïse Allatini of Thessalonika. The Jewish Chronicle, the most important Jewish newspaper in Great Britain, published dozens of articles on the affair and followed the event in great detail, from the first attacks on the Baruk family through January 1882.

This is an indicator not only of the impact that the Fornaraki affair had on European Jews, but it also shows the extended network to which the Alexandrian Jews belonged. In this way, the scandal and the outrage it provoked reveals a transnational community that extended from Alexandria to Thessalonika and beyond, within which not only goods and money, but also ideas and news could easily circulate. Finally, one can see how more traditional forms of (Jewish) communication, such as letters written to coreligionists in other cities around the Mediterranean, fruitfully interacted with a modern press system that allowed for this event to be followed by a much larger audience.

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

Summarising the history of blood libels and citing its most famous case – that of Simon of Trent (1475) – the Alexandrian Jewish leaders underlined their pride in belonging to a modern world where ‘advancing civilisation and true justice’ would ultimately prevail over ‘a silly yet unfortunately baneful calumny’. The authors of the letter wished to demonstrate the Baruks’ innocence through a critical discussion of biblical sources and religious prohibitions, underlining that ‘abhoring blood is not just a biblical obligation but […] a deep feeling among
the Jews’. Second, they emphasised their faith in modern science, fully embracing the findings of the inquiry commission.\textsuperscript{39}

It is arguable that the various images and discourses assembled by the different actors – as in almost all cases of blood libel – allowed for ‘the fabrication of the event […] out of diverse fragments of social reality’.\textsuperscript{40} The scandal was the product of a series of attitudes, emotions and phenomena: the poverty of migrant families and their fears over their children’s fate; the socio-economic rivalries between Greeks and Jews; the resilience of age-old anti-Semitic prejudice and so on. As in other cases of blood libels, the reasons beneath this accusation depended on both local contingencies and more general anti-Jewish sentiments. However, in this specific case, the prompt reactions of the Jews, of the local and foreign authorities and of many newspapers showed that this allegation could be circumscribed and finally rejected. The affair thus underlined the precarious and delicate balance of ethnic, national and religious communities in Alexandria, but at the same time also showed the willingness of all these actors to behave as rational and modern individuals – a sort of \textit{bourgeoisie éclairée}, to use Ilbert’s phrase. In the end, the greater community of Alexandria preferred to make amends with the Jewish population – so crucial to the commercial prosperity of the city – and to reject slander and schism for the sake of economic and diplomatic relations.\textsuperscript{41}

This said, the local Jewish elite still appeared as very fragmented, especially vis-à-vis its national and international positioning, and the problems it posed in times of turmoil. It should be remembered that from 1872 until 1918 the Jewish Community of Alexandria enjoyed the protection of the Habsburg Empire. The statutes of the community – written in Italian – stated that all Jews residing in the city belonged to the community with no distinction of origin and/or nationality. This statement was, however, little more than a declaration of intent, given that the Jews’ different national belonging openly contradicted it. Nonetheless, through the strengthening and modernisation of its communal structure, and in finding a balance between the secular leaders and religious authorities, the Alexandrian Jewish elite aimed at presenting itself as a paternal figure who could speak on behalf of all the Jews, uniting everyone under the magic of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism.\textsuperscript{42}

This idealised transcommunalism was to continue throughout the monarchical era, despite other incidents and cases of interethnic and interreligious conflict. In fact, another accusation of ritual murder occurred in 1925: a Jesuit father and teacher at the French Ecole Sainte Catherine, frère Léonce – citing a presumed case of blood libel in Port Said around 1912 – during one of his lessons accused the Jews of killing Christian children in order to take their blood. A few newspapers in Alexandria and Cairo published articles complaining about the incident, and the city’s municipality officially asked for explanations from the school’s headmaster. The Jewish Community Council, headed by Alfred Tilche, called for frère Léonce’s removal, which eventually occurred, although the Sainte Catherine’s headmaster claimed that it was due to the teacher’s personal choice and not to an official decision by the school.\textsuperscript{43}
Shortly after, another similar incident took place at the Ecole du Sacré Coeur, affiliated to the Sainte Catherine. A teacher distributed to his Jewish students ‘a drawing representing a genealogical tree with on the top “Secular education” [...] on the branches instead of fruits were the seven capital sins – and also some other words, such as anti-patriotism, anti-militarism etc.’, and to his Catholic students ‘a two-pages paper [...] that illustrated and narrated the history of ritual murder as in the images d’Epinal’. All these texts came from France and contained illustrations of the most famous cases of blood libel – from Simon of Trent to Andrew of Rhine and Dominick of Val – underlining their supposed historical truth through the citation of a number of ‘sources consulted: Acta Sanctorum, by the Grands Bollandistes [...] Vie des Saints de Franche-Comté, by a group of professors of the Petit Séminaire of Besançon, t. IV...’.

According to Rachel Danon – former headmistress of the AIU Ecole des filles of Alexandria – the local authorities were stuck in a difficult negotiation between the Jews’ protests against the anti-Jewish prejudices of the missionaries and the French Consul-General’s desire to come to terms with these (French) Catholic missionaries. The headmaster of the Ecole de Menasce, Elie Antebi, expressed his sorrow at ‘seeing educators [...] spreading calumnies against an entire Race, accusing a Nation [...] an entire people’ and asked with disbelief how this was possible ‘in Egypt, a cosmopolitan country par excellence, where all nations live in perfect harmony’.

Whether the Fornaraki affair revealed a microcosm dominated by poverty and the estrangement of migrant families, this case opposed the Jewish leadership to a French missionary school, which had until then been considered a respectable and prestigious institution. As many Jewish children attended congregational schools, the Jewish Community Council was unwilling to stigmatise the Sainte Catherine as a whole, to the point that some communal leaders attended a party organised at this school, confirming that ‘nothing will damage the good relations that the Collège entretains with the Community’. This was most probably due to the fact that the Jews needed congregational schools, considering that at that time no proper Jewish secondary school existed in Alexandria. On the other hand, the fact that the pamphlets attacked the enseignement laïque and its presumed ill-omened consequences also explains how congregational schools were afraid of losing terrain vis-à-vis the secular ones – namely, the lycée of the MLF, which since its foundation in 1910 had gained enormous popularity among Alexandrian Jews.

Considering all this, the Community Council kept a low-profile position, accepting the apologies of the school and dismissing the incident as another exceptional event, which had only temporarily disturbed Alexandrian harmony. Some Jewish notables, however, embraced a less conciliatory position. According to the Alexandrian lodge of the Bnei Brit, the time had come to stop sending Jewish children to non-Jewish schools and create a proper Jewish secondary educational system. The lodge Eliahou Hanabi (‘the prophet Elijah’) had been founded in 1891 and counted amongst its members some of the most important Jewish entrepreneurs and professionals, such as: Baron de Menasce’s younger
brother Alfred, his son Charles and Joseph Elie de Picciotto bey, who headed the lodge from 1917 to 1925, and was also Vice-President of the pro-Zionist philanthropic association Comité Pro Palestina, a sympathiser of the Wafd – the nationalist-liberal party founded by Sa’ad Zaghlul in 1919 – and from 1924 a senator of the Kingdom of Egypt. The lodge was not the counterpart of the Jewish Community Council – considering that people like de Menasce and Picciotto were involved in both – but a lobby which operated in those realms where the council was, for various reasons, more feeble. Second, the lodge paralleled, from a Jewish perspective, the well-developed Egyptian Freemasonry, which from the mid-nineteenth century had functioned as a crucial political and social catalyst for the country’s elite. The Bnei Brit thus sponsored the foundation of a Lycée de l’Union Juive pour l’Enseignement, which, despite its name, also included a kindergarten and a primary school. Located in rue Valensin pasha in the residential neighbourhood of Ramleh, it followed curricula similar to the French schools and was attended by Jews, Muslims and Christians ‘in perfect intelligence and good companionship’. Most of the students of the Lycée de l’Union Juive were, in any case, said to come from the lower strata, testifying once more that as far as the upper class was concerned the choice of school depended more on class consciousness and imagined feelings of prestige attributed to an institution, rather than on one’s ethno-religious origin.

Considering the episodes that I have reconstructed, it seems that – as opposed to what narratives on cosmopolitan Egypt frequently reiterate – cleavages between Jews, Christians and Muslims, upper class and lower class and even within one same ethno-religious community did exist in Alexandria. Moreover, the worries over children’s futures and about the communal educational system seem to have been some of the most crucial issues at stake, as demonstrated by analysing the Fornaraki affair and the foundation of the Lycée de l’Union Juive pour l’Enseignement.

It is arguable that the image of Alexandria as a cosmopolitan city and siege of a transcommunal bourgeoisie éclairée was first and foremost spread by the local elite in order to self-promote its identity and activities, putting aside all those who did not belong to it, such as the migrant workers and the poor. Living in Alexandria, or being part of its Jewish community, did not automatically imply belonging to an idealised environment that went beyond one’s ethno-religious origins. At the same time, the resilience of ideas of cosmopolitanism communicates to what extent this was, indeed, a powerful category that – disseminated through newspaper articles, pamphlets, schools and the display of specific models of behaviour – permeated the cultural life of the Jews and other Alexandrians. If it is true that a closer look at the social and cultural intersections between the Jewish upper and lower classes unravels how Alexandria was much less extraordinary as often thought, then one should not put aside cosmopolitanism altogether. As I shall now demonstrate, the idea of living in a deeply harmonious and pluralist space in fact not only helped the Alexandrian Jewish bourgeoisie to assert its role during colonial times, but also contributed to the affirmation of the Mission Laïque Française as the most crucial educational
institution for new generations of modern and well-educated Egyptian Jews during the monarchical period.

‘Being fused but not confused’: the Mission Laïque Française in interwar Cairo

The 1930s were years of transition for modern Egypt. Beside from traversing a moment of financial distress as a consequence of the 1929 global crisis, the country also witnessed a radicalisation of the political arena in a more inherently Arab–Islamic sense and a weakening of the so-called liberal system. However, such changes were for some people little more than street noises that only momentarily disrupted – as happened for the incident at the Ecole Sainte Catherine – a rather calm and well-protected world. Among them were a great number of young Jewish boys and girls that attended a very popular French educational institution, the Mission Laïque Française (henceforth, MLF).

Founded in Paris in 1902 by a group of people headed by Pierre Deschamps – who had been working in Madagascar as head of the French colonial teaching services – the MLF aimed at propagating secular education in the so-called France extérieure, the French colonies and more generally in the East, hoping to gradually substitute the many (French) congregational schools spread throughout these territories. As the name stated, it was composed of secular missionaries, an apparent oxymoron that, in the eyes of Deschamps, indicated people capable of spreading the principles of the French société laïque – that is, those derived from the French Revolution. The MLF, Deschamps said, aimed at ‘perfecting the indigènes by harmonising the two cultures and respecting the indigenous one through a deep understanding of the French culture’. This institution was to become one of the pillars of French cultural and educational politics in the Middle East, also thanks to the ideological and financial support provided by the French Government, especially from 1905 onwards, after the approval of the law on state secularism. In fact, in 1906, the French Foreign Minister Louis Bourgeois auspicated the coming of ‘the day when France will propagate in the East not anymore […] Catholicism […], but the principles of 1789’ – that is, what the MLF intended to do through its schools and teachers. In 1906, the MLF founded its first lycée in Thessalonika. Three years later, in 1909, the lycées of Cairo and Beirut were also inaugurated, followed in 1910 by that of Alexandria.

Prior to the arrival of the MLF and starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, secular schools were founded in cities of the Ottoman Empire, although the majority of them proved to be rather ephemeral experiments on the initiative of single individuals. In addition, the Ottoman state, too, from the Tanzimat period (1836–1876) onwards had tried to modernise its public educational system. The MLF, however, was the first institution that managed to accomplish a more durable project of secular education, a success that was undoubtedly connected to its overlapping with French colonialism. Notwithstanding all this, it always stressed that the teaching of the French language and civilisation should not put aside local history and traditions. This institution
encouraged the teaching of local languages, recognising the importance of educating the students in a way that would not lead to estrangement from the place where they lived. This can also be clarified by looking at the numerous articles published in the institution’s journal, the Revue de l’Enseignement français à l’Etranger (henceforth, REF), and dedicated to, for example, Arabic literature and folklore and so on. Because of this, and as a consequence of the ethno-religious diversity of its students, the MLF came to symbolise Eastern Mediterranean cosmopolitanism and its presumed harmony. But what did attending a school where Jews, Greeks, Copts and Muslims mingled mean on a daily basis? Which were the linkages that united this school, the students and their families and how did the Egyptian Jewish middle and upper classes collaborate with the MLF?

The MLF opened its Cairo lycée in 1909. Egypt was at that time under British colonial occupation and French education had partly lost terrain vis-à-vis the English – a situation that was soon to change. A secular school, the Collège Esnault, had been active in Cairo since the beginning of the twentieth century and the MLF began by supporting this institution and then took it under its wing. After a halting initial phase, the MLF gained a remarkable place within the city’s educational system. Its students came mainly from the religious minorities’ upper strata (Jews and, to a lesser extent, Copts), the Greek and Italian communities and, lastly, the French community. The lycée was hosted first in the palace of Mazloum pasha, the former Egyptian Minister of Education, and then from 1931 onwards in ad hoc buildings in rue al-Hawayati, near Bab al-Luq. It comprised a petit lycée et jardin d’enfants, a lycée des filles, a lycée des garçons and an Ecole française de commerce. In the area of Daher was also another section of the MLF, the Collège français, which prepared students for the Egyptian certificat d’études supérieures. Finally, in 1937, a lycée franco-égyptien was opened in the residential suburb of Héliopolis.

By the late 1920s, the lycée hosted an average of 1,200–1,400 students and offered many different classes. With regards to languages, besides French, Arabic and English, the school had optional classes in Greek (both Ancient and Modern), Hebrew, Italian, German and Latin. Chemistry laboratories, a very well-equipped library and a gym were among the facilities that the students could enjoy, together with movie sessions hosted in the school’s theatre and lectures given by foreign and Egyptian writers and journalists. Since 1925, the headmaster appointed by the MLF central siege for the lycée was Adrien Berget – former headmaster of the lycée of Aix-en-Provence, Directeur de l’Instruction publique in the French colony of Réunion and member of the conseil d’administration of the MLF. The school employed mainly French teachers, except for the teaching of languages such as English, Greek or Hebrew for which local or foreign teachers were employed. Finally, a consistent non-teaching staff also worked at the school. In 1933, this included administrative employees, three porters, a gardener, a cook, a cleaning lady, a nurse, a carpenter and a few others. Based on the available lists of personnel, it seems that the non-teaching staff were recruited from among the lower-middle strata of foreign communities such as the Italians and from the Muslim lower classes.
This very hierarchical ethno-national structure was absent in the classes of the school, where Jews, Greeks, Muslims, French, Italians and so on all mixed together. The Jews were the most relevant group of students, something that highlights the preference increasingly accorded to the MLF by Jewish families, but also the absence of a proper Jewish secondary educational system in Egypt. In addition to this, an efficient network of solidarity connected the MLF to Jewish notables, associations and schools. This is testified by the dozens of letters sent by parents, philanthropists and rabbis asking for the admission of poor pupils to the MLF – a phenomenon that became very visible during the post-1929 financial crisis that affected Egypt.

Although the families could apply directly to the school, local notables and communal leaders very often acted on their behalf. For example, in June 1930 the headmaster of the Jewish communal schools asked for the help of the Union Laïque – a philanthropic association which gave grants to indigent students and was headed by Henri Cattaoui, nephew of the President of the Cairo Jewish Community, Joseph – in order to fulfil the wish of one of his teachers, Madame Béhar, a ‘widow with 3 children’, who wanted to enrol her son Léon, ‘an excellent pupil’, in the section commerciale of the MLF.65 A few months later, in October 1930, Madame V.ve (‘widow’) Victor Mosseri – widow of a businessman who belonged to another well-off Cairo Jewish family66 – sent a card from Villa Mosseri, 60 rue de Guizeh to the headmaster Berget, asking for the admission ‘as demi-boursier of my protégé Jack Halou’, a ‘good boy’ that needed the support of the MLF in order to continue ‘raising in the good direction’.67 Also, the Chief Rabbi of Cairo, Hayim Nahum Effendi, wrote to Berget ‘so to intervene in favour of four or five young boys, students or perspective students of the lycée’. Nahum’s proteges included the son of a poor rabbi, two orphans living with an old relative and finally a boy from a well-off family going through a period of great financial distress.68 The exchange of letters between these people can be seen as a way to cement the connection between the MLF and Cairo Jews, according to well-established formulas of politeness and epistolary habits.69 This meant, for example, sending an official letter bearing the Hebrew-French heading of the Batei-ha-sefer shel ha-‘edah ha-‘ivrit be-Qahir/Ecoles de la Communauté Israélite du Caire, or – as Madame Vve. Mosseri did – writing a few lines on a small yet authoritative card draped in black.

The great number of boursiers admitted to the MLF led the central siege to invite the Cairo branch to put an end to this trend, a request to which Berget answered, explaining that Egypt was undergoing ‘a terrible crisis’ and it was not the moment for the MLF to close its doors in front of families, ‘especially among Jews, [that] prefer to deprive themselves of everything rather than not to give an education to their children’.70 The headmaster also added that whereas during its very first years the school had been mostly attended by children from elite families, it had now become an institution for a much larger middling sector of the population, ‘a new social class that is assaulting our schools […] a petty bourgeoisie in the making, especially thanks to a Francophone education’.71 The close relationship of Cairo Jews with the MLF also becomes evident when one
considers the visits of Jewish leaders to the school – for instance, that of Rabbi Nahum and the Vice-Presidents of the Jewish Community, Abramino Menasce and Isaac Nacamuli, in November 1930. On that occasion, the hosts listened to a speech by the school’s headmaster, which connected the work of the MLF to that of the AIU, which since its foundation in 1860 ‘[had] propagated the French language all over the Eastern Mediterranean’, giving thousands of Jewish children the primary education that they needed in order to attend a secondary school such as the MLF lyceé. Such a glorification of the activities of the AIU greatly impressed Rabbi Nahum, who since his early rabbinical career in Istanbul had always been very close to this institution. The rabbi thus proudly responded, affirming that French was the language of humanity, concluding that ‘it is here, on these desks, that all religions, all nationalities and all races live together’.

Nonetheless, in some cases the MLF had to face the competition from local Jewish schools, such as an Ecole Herzl, founded in the area of Daher in 1932 by Angèle Modiano, former headmistress of the Jewish communal schools for girls of ‘Abbasiyah and – on the basis of the woman’s claim – of the AIU school for girls of Thessalonika. Although the MLF looked with disdain at this small improvised school, it also signalled two reasons that might contribute to its fortune and explain why 400 students were ready to attend it: the first was the low fees the families were asked for; second, ‘if the crisis will come to an end’, the possibility of transforming the Ecole Herzl into a Zionist and increasingly hebraïsante school – as the name itself, which commemorated the founder of Zionism Theodore Herzl, suggested. ‘And there it is: the Jewish lyceé of Cairo!’, concluded a saddened Berget, probably thinking about a possible Cairo version of the already existing Lycée de l’Union Juive pour l’Enseignement, founded seven years earlier in Alexandria.

The financial crisis of the early 1930s thus led to the strengthening of the relationship between the MLF and local Jews, especially thanks to philanthropic institutions like the already mentioned Goutte de Lait and the local lodge of the Bnei Brit. At the same time, the crisis and the spreading of Zionism and sentiments of Jewish nationalism also paved the way for new experiments in Jewish education in Cairo, which caused a breach in the MLF’s quasi-monopoly. The Jewish upper strata, together with the communal leaders, were, however – with very few exceptions – rather far from Zionism and its ideals. The MLF and its neutrality, both from a religious and national point of view, was the key element that contributed to its success in Cairo. In fact, despite the crisis, the MLF preserved its role and did not lose too much terrain to other educational institutions, nor did it suffer greatly from the increasing role of the Egyptian state in the educational arena.

Among the factors that made the MLF so successful was the fact that it symbolised a model of identity and civilisation – that is, France. Parties and official receptions were the principal events at which the school’s models of conduct, and the role of France, were displayed. In order to maintain its religious neutrality, the religious holidays celebrated at the MLF included virtually all
from the Jewish New Year and Purim – the ‘Jewish Mardi Gras’, as Berget wrote – to Christmas and Ramadan. Almost all the civil celebrations instead emphasised what France, and Europe more generally, could teach Egypt – to which only a limited space was assigned.

For instance, in April 1932, the annual party of the lycée français, under the patronage of King Fu’ad, was said to have been ‘the most brilliant success’. The party took place in the hall of the theatre Kursaal Dalbagni of Cairo and its revenues were destined to fund an Aide Scolaire for destitute children. Young pupils from the MLF school performed scenes from French plays and from Magnoun Leilah (‘Mad for Leilah’) – one of the classics of Arabic literature, here probably in the late nineteenth century dramatised version of Ahmad Shawqi. Finally, a cosmopolitan quintet formed of ‘Mlles Lily Rotschild, Esther Bigio and Lily Cacomanoli, MM. Okosdinsian and Antoine Rambeau’ played Le printemps, an operetta set in China. Looking at the programme and at the photographs of the event published in local newspapers, it seems evident that the event was designed in order to portray the children as Franco-Egyptian pupils at ease in eighteenth-century robes that echoed the splendour of the French court, but that did not despise reciting a masterpiece of Arabic literature and folklore such as Magnoun Leilah.

The same principle of turning Egyptians into Frenchmen is to be found in sport competitions, which were another key moment of sociability. On 20 March 1932, a sporting event was organised at the Stade de l’Union Sportive Héliopolitaine of Heliopolis. Far from being mere physical activity, it consisted of a Défilé des Athlètes, followed by a leçon de culture physique and various exercices d’ensemble done by the students: from pole vaulting to fencing. The athletes of the Garde Royale also took part in the competitions, in which these ‘stars of Cairene athletics’ mixed with ‘a group of promising [MLF] athletes’. In Cairo as in Alexandria, this kind of event celebrated the success of the lycée français and its internationalism: ‘All friendly nations were there’, wrote the Revue de l’Enseignement, commenting on another sporting event that had been organised in 1923 by the lycée of Alexandria. The event and the others that followed were to be for the spectator, sitting ‘under this admirable and springy Egyptian blue sky’, a fête de la jeunesse that went far beyond the MLF and its schools. From the 1920s onwards, in fact, Egypt – under the influx of European colonialism – started to envision sport as an arena of national and political rebirth, and an agent of modernisation for the younger generations. The competitions organised by the MLF seem to go in this direction, celebrating the vitality and youth of its pupils, who were confronted with values that could make them a regenerated and viable generation of Egyptians, part of a future national elite.

All these motifs, which united France with Egypt and its diverse population, reached a peak in one of the most important events hosted by the Cairo MLF during these decades. Whereas the AIU school of Tantah in 1938 celebrated the Egyptian monarchy in front of a French diplomat and local authorities, on 4 April 1932 King Fu’ad himself and his family visited the lycée français. This
reception sanctioned the role played by the school in the making of an Egyptian elite, and also the educational efforts undertaken in order to increase its popularity among Egyptian Muslims. The ties between the Egyptian royal house and the MLF were further clarified, considering that M. de Comnène, sous-directeur of the Collège français of Daher, had been the tutor of young Prince Faruq. 86

As Fu’ad arrived at the lycée, the school’s headmaster, the Egyptian Prime Minister, the Presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and of the Senate, a few ministers, the French Ambassador and other dignitaries – including the President of the Jewish Community Joseph Cattaoui – greeted him. Two students, a girl from the lycée des filles and a boy from the lycée des garçons, read two speeches in French and Arabic, respectively. 87 The MLF envisioned this visit as a chance to present itself as a French school deeply embedded in Egyptian culture and history, as further shown by the fact that the king attended a history lesson accidentally dedicated to his ancestor Muhammad ‘Ali. 88 The parallel between France, Egypt and their glorious past was also reinforced through the display in the school’s library of the portraits of Muhammad ‘Ali and Khedive Isma’il, significantly surrounded by those of ‘three generations of great Frenchmen that distinguished themselves for the sake of Egypt’. 89 Although the event was originally conceived so that the king could visit the school’s new buildings, it was transformed into an occasion for reaffirming the role of the MLF in the country, at a time when – as Abécassis showed – the possible side effects of the intimate connection entertained by French educational institutions, and the MLF in particular, with minority groups started to be disclosed. 90 It was, then, with great joy that Berget wrote to the MLF central siege that King Fu’ad ‘seemed very interested’ in the school and its activities, wishing the lycée to prosper ‘for the Glory of France and most of all for the sake of Egypt’. 91

But what did this elite-in-the-making look like and to what extent did the Jews take part in the MLF’s educational project? According to the Statistique des Elèves par Religion of November 1930, diligently compiled by the headmaster, the MLF consisted of, from the kindergarten up to the lycée, 1,334 students: eleven freethinkers, fifteen Christian Armenians, seventeen Orthodox, thirty-seven Copts, 101 Catholics, 166 Protestants, 198 Muslims and 789 Jews. 92 Parallel to this, the Statistique des Elèves par Nationalité in the same year counted: six Austrians, eight Germans, eleven Palestinians, eighteen Syrians, twenty Ottomans, twenty-eight Armenians, thirty-four Russians, thirty-seven Britons, seventy-six divers, 121 Italians, 133 Greeks, 137 French and 654 Egyptians. 93 While distinguishing between Jews, Copts and Muslims was quite an easy task, understanding, for instance, who the French, Greeks and the Italians were was more complicated. In fact, although only seventeen students were Orthodox, there were 133 Greek nationals – a figure most probably including Jews holding Greek citizenship. The same applies to the Italians: out of 121 Italian nationals, the school hosted only 101 Catholic students – a number which, in any case, included not only Italians, but also French, Austrian and possibly even a few of the divers. Also, in this case, Jews should be included in the total number of Italians.
The students’ diversity is even more evident when one looks at the composition of single classes, such as, for example, the Classe Seconde of the lycée des garçons of the year 1932 to 1933. On the basis of family names, it seems that the class was formed of circa twenty Jewish pupils (e.g. Aghion, Carmona, Cohen, Harari), followed by six Greeks (e.g. Charitopoulo, Lappas), two Muslims, four French and an Armenian.94 The many registers and statistics produced by the MLF, far from being dry figures, therefore show its efforts to classify the students, assigning them a specific religion and nationality even when the former only reflected the student’s passport. In this regard, the Jews were perhaps the most difficult group to manage, given the different nationalities that they shared, which, in some cases, seemed nonsensical to the MLF.

‘A peculiar historical anomaly is the persistence of 51 Spanish Jews (Judeo-Spanish or Sephardis) that maintain this nationality for an irrational habit’, given that the country – Berget wrote on the back of the November 1930 Statistique des Elèves par Religion – was ‘the most clerical of Europe’. The headmaster told the story of a former MLF student who he had commended for a post in a governmental office, convinced that the young man was an Egyptian national. When he discovered that the student was Spanish, and therefore did not fulfil the job requirements in terms of nationality, Berget asked him why he had not applied for Egyptian citizenship. The answer seemed absurd to Berget: ‘Because of a habit of my parents!!’ The story ended with the headmaster suggesting to him...
that he acquire not Egyptian but French citizenship – advice that the former MLF pupil seemed willing to embrace: ‘I shall return to France’, where he had studied at the *Ecole des Travaux Publics*, ‘and ask for French nationality’. This peculiar episode synthesises in a very vivid manner the ambivalent meaning that nationality could have for the Jews – indeed, not only for them – at least until the interwar period. It shows, in fact, that even after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the decay of the *millet*, the identity of the Jews was still, by and large, based upon different relational systems that, although implying duties and loyalties, were never perceived as totalising.

As already noted, the MLF’s difficulty in classifying its students and the problems of regulating different national sentiments were also connected to the spread, from the early 1930s onwards, of more radical forms of Egyptian nationalism. For instance, in March 1931, domestic politics entered the walls of the *Collège français* – the Arabic section of the MLF in Daher – when two students arrived at school wearing ‘Egyptian-made clothes, in line with the Manifesto of the Wafdist Youth’ – the youth organisation of the *Wafd* party – instead of the regular school uniform. A few days before, the daily *Le Réveil* had published an article about the birth of a committee for economic independence under the aegis of the *Wafd*, aiming at the development of local industries and manufacturing.

These protests were inscribed in a larger political agenda, calling for the birth of an Egyptian (i.e. Muslim) economy, the end of the foreigners’ and local minorities’ alleged economic predominance and also the signature of a treaty between Egypt and Britain, formally ending the latter’s political and economic influence on the country. Considering this situation, the headmaster of the *Collège* vehemently reprehended the students, who were taking part in one of the first organised youth protests in modern Egyptian history. His harsh reaction, however, was stigmatised by both Berget and the MLF central siege, signalling the institution’s willingness to maintain a strict neutral position as far as Egyptian domestic politics was concerned: ‘We shall not get involved in these issues of domestic politics and, most of all, not support or contrast anything related to issues of Egyptian nationalism’.

A second episode occurred in 1933, when, following anti-German demonstrations organised by a group of Cairo Jews, ‘our external walls’, wrote Berget, ‘were stained with different graffiti […] such as a caricature of Hitler and also a “Long live Germany, down with France”’. Two months later, a German student from the *lycée* was accused of being the author of the anti-French graffiti and other ‘Hitlerian inscriptions’. His behaviour might have been prompted by the boycott of German products organised by a group of Egyptian Jews affiliated to the *Ligue Internationale contre l’Antisémitisme Allemand*, which in Egypt counted more than 1,000 members. The boycott, Berget noted, did not solve what was, for him, another historical anomaly, which is the fact that some Jews were maintaining Austrian citizenship, notwithstanding the growing anti-Semitism of that country and its increasing closeness to Nazi Germany.

Apart from these small incidents, the headmaster’s monthly reports depict the life of the students as calm and generally far from politics. The *lycée* of Cairo
was portrayed as one of the cradles of Egyptian cosmopolitanism, where students from different backgrounds could ‘fuse without being confused’ – as the school’s brochure advertised in 1912.\textsuperscript{106} The 1920s and early 1930s were surely a period of social and political transition, when different national ideas circulated and numerous debates about the future of the Egyptian nation and the role of minority groups took place. It was also for this reason that, even though the Jews played a prominent role in the history of the lycée of Cairo and established durable and viable relationships with its teachers and as part of a local bourgeoisie, the MLF was at times both proud and hesitant of its Jewish student population.

Thanks to the MLF, many Jews envisioned themselves as part of a local elite, which was, however, extremely close to Europe and shared its most crucial points of reference and many social habits. Such transnational feelings and imaginary had also been nurtured by the fact that early twentieth-century Egypt was connected to the West not only from a political and economic point of view, but also as far as information, communication networks and commodities were concerned.\textsuperscript{107} This global connection, however, did not erase the fact that the Jews also had to face the social and political shifting of 1930s Egypt. Meanwhile, the younger generations in particular started to feel more and more out of place, as if they were moving between such contrasting spaces and identities that even a universalistic and secular institution like the MLF did not always manage to harmonise. In the next chapter, I will thus investigate the cultural world of the MLF Jewish students and explain how cosmopolitan imaginaries, colonial legacies, Jewish sense of belonging and Egyptian nationalism could there coexist and be narrated.

\textbf{From Cairo to Paris and beyond: Jewish students of the \textit{Mission Laïque Française} in the early 1930s}

Exploring how history was taught in Egyptian schools during the constitutional monarchy, Baraka Salmoni argued that documents such as school magazines and student diaries are historical sources that are very difficult to handle: quite often the teachers directed these texts and therefore ‘evaluating student reception of the pedagogical message [of the school] remains a precarious enterprise’.\textsuperscript{108} Although one can only agree with Salmoni’s \textit{caveat} about the mediated nature of these documents, this should not lead to a complete renunciation of trying to see what a student diary or a school magazine convey. When doing so, one should not, however, start searching for pupils’ lost voices, questioning if the student 
\textit{can speak} or not, as this would undoubtedly be a precarious enterprise to say the least.\textsuperscript{109} A student’s diary will not enable one to know what the student who wrote it really thought. Nonetheless, it can still help to grasp how the ideas and notions circulating within and around the school were narrated, what the student felt entitled to tell and what instead was left out of the picture. The texts that I will now look at – student essays and a diary – cannot speak for the entirety of Egyptian Jews, but at the same time they are not exceptional narrations to be...
referred to their authors only. Rather, they can be seen as clues of larger events and attitudes that enable us to get a glimpse of what studying at the Cairo MLF meant during the interwar years and therefore unravel hitherto little known aspects of Egyptian cultural history.110

Let us start by examining the students’ magazine, *Le lycéen*, published in Cairo in the early 1930s. Based upon the issue of January 1933, we know that *Le lycéen* was edited by a small group of students, half of them – based on their family names – Jews. This *feuille satyrrique* contained articles mocking the teachers and describing aspects of the school’s everyday life, vignettes and jokes such as *Les Dix Commandements de la M.L.F.*: ‘1. Before eight in the morning, you will enter in the Lycée/2. You will kindly talk to your teachers/3. You will not smoke in the courtyard of the Lycée . . .’.111 The magazine was conceived as a space of regulated freedom that the school gave the students, and a temporary way out of the otherwise rigid school life. Besides this, what is interesting in *Le lycéen* is a short story written by a young Jewish pupil, Ninette Adereth, titled *À quoi pense une jeune égyptienne* (‘What Does a Young Egyptian Girl Think?’). This text was originally written for the *Tournoi des Jeux Floraux d’Egypte* – a literary competition between schools – where it gained the third prize. The story describes a young peasant girl moving from her small village in the Nile Valley to the city of Cairo, where she immediately started longing for her home and her family. The girl had come to Cairo after her father’s death and in order to attend a school, as women – so she said – were no longer ‘the slaves of the man, […] the passive and obeying object of an implacable master’ as they had been in ancient times. Despite all this, the young *fellaha* (‘peasant’) felt lost in the modernity of Cairo, where she saw cars, ‘those funny beasts’, for the first time in her life and could not help feeling homesick, crying while she walked along the Nile River at night, ‘full of fears, lonely, in this darkness suddenly become so thick’.112

This stereotyped yet moving portrayal of an imaginary *fellaha* underlined the charm and perils of the city: a space populated by modern commodities such as cars, but where a young girl felt lonely and was afraid to walk at night. The city and the countryside were seen as opposing spaces, each one having its positive and negative characteristics, although ultimately the city of Cairo was presented as the only place where the girl might improve her ‘simple life’. The *fellaha* – who should also be read as the *alter ego* of Ninette Adereth and of the emotions this adolescent felt at the time – was presented not merely as an uneducated *indigène*, but, in line with a humanitarian and paternalistic perspective common also to 1930s French colonial propaganda, as a fellow national struggling to improve her life.113

One might even consider this text – written by a Jewish *jeune égyptienne* for a students’ competition – and the discourses and notions underlying it, as an indirect depiction of what has been termed *effendification* – that is, the social and historical process leading to the creation of a new national middle class, whose identity was rooted in the figure of the Egyptian peasants, ‘repositories of eternal Egyptian truths’, who could improve their status primarily thanks to education.
and schooling.\textsuperscript{114} By this, of course, do not mean Adereth deliberately narrated this phenomenon as a social scientist or a historian would do, but that she was nonetheless describing the world that surrounded her, and the changes it was undergoing, from the perspective of an educated, middle-class girl, who – putting aside her own Jewish identity – romantically imagined and identified with the \textit{jeune égyptienne} par excellence: the peasant.

Adereth’s narrative and her wish to find a balance between the \textit{fellaha}'s previous life and the modernity of Cairo could be linked to the ideas developed by the MLF’s founder, Deschamps, such as that of the \textit{deux langues, deux cultures}. Deschamps, in fact, did not auspicate the assimilation of the pupil into French culture, but the union between that and local cultures. What mattered to him was to give the student ‘what he can assimilate without stopping to be himself’\textsuperscript{115} – a very ambitious project that the MLF tried to bring about, albeit in often contradictory and ambiguous ways. In fact, the students’ imaginary was much more linked to France and its culture than to Egypt, as the school’s library and the books chosen for the pupils will now further demonstrate.

The library of the lycée of Cairo was a well-equipped one, as proved by the frequent shipping of books and magazines from France to Egypt. The school’s headmaster was in contact with the main publishing houses and libraries of his motherland: from Gallimard to Hachette, from the \textit{Bibliothèque Nationale} of Paris to the \textit{Musée du Louvre}. For example, in November 1929, Berget ordered a collection of chalcographies to be hung on the walls of the school. They included portraits of \textit{Napoléon avant la Bataille des Pyramides}, Foch, Poincaré, King Louis XIV, Molière, Racine; pictures representing the Rosetta Stone, the city of Thebes, the Sphinx, the Suez Canal, the mosque of Sultan Hasan in Cairo, a view of the city in 1800 and so on.\textsuperscript{116} Amongst the books ordered for the library in 1930 were, instead, classics of French literature and philosophy: from the fairy tales of Lafontaine – to be read by the children of the petit lycée – to works by Voltaire, Corneille, Descartes, Chateaubriand, Fénélon, Hugo, Dickens and various texts of French and Egyptian history, of French literature and grammar. The students who studied Arabic could also choose between a masterpiece of Arabic literature, like the tales of \textit{Qalila wa-Dimna}, and a selection of Arabic grammars and textbooks.\textsuperscript{117} In the same year, the lycée also subscribed to dozens of local and foreign newspapers and magazines, such as the \textit{Journal du Caire}, \textit{La Bourse Égyptienne}, \textit{Le Réveil}, the \textit{Revue Économique et Financière} and the magazine of the \textit{Alliance française}.

Although it was clearly France that inspired the teaching of the MLF, since Jews were a consistent component of the student population, the headmaster did not hesitate to offer them a Hebrew class and lectures on Jewish history. This move was dictated by Berget’s willingness to attract those families until then probably choosing congregational schools, and who might now start to consider the MLF as a possible educational option for their children. A local Jewish teacher, named Alfié, was in charge of the Hebrew class. Considering the texts assigned to the students for their final exams, it seems that the language was taught not just for prayer, but also as an idiom that one could actually speak.
This attitude contrasted with that of the AIU, which usually envisioned Hebrew as a language to be utilised for religious purposes only. Although the texts to be translated by the students during the final exams were usually centred on episodes derived from either the Bible or the Talmud, or about Jewish personalities from the past such as the medieval Iberian poet Yehudah Ha-Levi, the students also had to write short essays answering questions such as: ‘Why do the people of Israel love their land? Write the names of cities you know in the Land of Israel...’.

In another case, the pupils were to translate a text entitled The Old Man and the Young Boy, which narrated the encounter of an old rabbi with an orphan, who ended up becoming a student of the Torah, explaining ‘what is the moral that we learn from this story...’. Unfortunately, it is not clear how many students attended this class. Most likely, only a minority studied Hebrew, considering the uselessness that the language had in a future professional life in Egypt and, more generally, the fact that Hebrew was classified together with Latin, Ancient Greek, German and Italian as a supplement for which the families had to pay an extra fee.

Nonetheless, the fact that the school thought of organising a Hebrew course and lectures on Jewish history suggests that there was a demand for it by (some of) the families. Furthermore, before setting up this course in 1929, Berget had consulted with local Jewish leaders, and asked for the advice of the AIU Amicale of Cairo with regard to the books to be chosen. Amongst them were some of the most important works on Jewish history also utilised by the AIU in its schools, such as the famous Gabriel Aïn’s Histoire juive depuis les origines jusqu’à nos jours. The former AIU teacher and President of the AIU Amicale Samuel Avigdor then wrote to the AIU central committee, applauding Berget’s idea and explaining that the headmaster ‘enjoys sincere relations of esteem and sympathy with the Community of Cairo’. For Avigdor, the Cairo lycée ‘more than that of Alexandria, is attended by Jews, who constitute 90% of its student population...’, an exaggerated figure that nonetheless shows how the lycée was identified with the city’s Jewish population.

An interesting example of how one’s ethno-religious identity could be virtually erased in favour of a more cosmopolitan and laïque one is to be found in a text written by another Jewish girl, named Josette L., who attended the Cairo lycée in the early 1930s. The Cahier de voyage that she wrote was originally a school assignment that described a trip to France that she had made together with other students, visiting the country and the Exposition Coloniale Internationale (henceforth, ECI) in Paris in August 1931. The trip was not directly organised by the MLF, but by the Union des français à l’Etranger. Through the minutes of a professor’s meeting of the lycée of Alexandria from March 1931, one knows that the Union was organising a trip to Paris ‘at incredibly cheap conditions’ for students willing to visit the ECI. One month later, in April 1931, the headmaster of the Cairo MLF reported that nineteen boys and ten girls from his school had subscribed to the trip: some had paid and others were funded by...
grants allocated by the Union des français à l’Etranger and the French Chambre de commerce.\textsuperscript{126} Among the students who took part in the trip was Josette L., at the time attending the sixième B of the Lycée des jeunes filles.\textsuperscript{127}

On 1 August 1931, Josette departed from the port of Alexandria and started her voyage to France. After a few days, during which they passed near the ‘very picturesque shores of Italy and Sicily’, the ship docked in Marseille, where the city’s mayor greeted the students.\textsuperscript{128} On 6 August they finally arrived in Paris and started touring the capital. Although Josette visited many cities in France – from Marseille to Reims and Dijon – it was Paris that struck her most: ‘everything amazes us now, everything dazzles us’, the girl wrote a few days after her arrival. Be it the Magasins Lafayette – ‘a feast, so many windows, so many clothes, now we do understand what fashion is’ – the Panthéon or the Louvre, everything seemed to her marvellous and almost unreal: ‘we are transported to the land of dreams’.

The students were hosted at the Maison des Lycéennes and their trip had been meticulously organised by the Union: they were greeted by authorities, interviewed by journalists and attended official receptions. For example, on 7 August, Les Temps published a short article entitled ‘Arrival in France of the Students of the Mission laïques of the Levant’. The journalist wrote that 106 students had arrived in Paris from le Levant.\textsuperscript{129} They were almost all French citizens – although, as said, this did not imply being of French origin – but some of them ‘belonged to different nationalities’ and ‘are enrolled in the French secular schools’ and also in other colleges. The pupils were to meet the President of the Republic, Paul Doumer, on 13 August and then start a tour of France, from ‘Versailles and Fontainebleau, to Reims and the Loire castles’.\textsuperscript{130} Two days later, on 9 August, another article appeared in Le Figaro, ‘The Young French of the Orient at the Bois de Boulogne’, where it was said that MLF students from Egypt, Greece and Syria enjoyed a reception with diplomats and Parisian socialites. Amongst them were ‘H.E. the Egyptian minister of Foreign Affairs and Mmme Yéhia pasha’ and ‘a number of Parisian socialites belonging to the worlds of politics, commerce and industry’.

Josette wrote at length about the monuments she saw, commenting how moving it was for a young Egyptian girl like her to be in place de la Concorde, where she had ‘a moment of reverence toward the obelisk of Luxor, so far away from its birthplace’. Her writing is littered with this kind of emphatic expression, which was surely due to her educational background, and intended to please her demanding teachers. Many of the things that she wrote repeated what her teachers said – for instance, when Josette explained in detail that the floor of the king’s dining room in the Palace of Fontainebleau was made of ‘fifteen kinds of wood in the same model of the ceiling’, whereas the salon was renowned for ‘its chandeliers of pure rock crystal’.

In addition to this, her depiction of the differences between boys and girls and of the world as a rigidly gendered space echoed the school’s ideology and, more generally, that of the middle-class milieu to which she belonged. The mothers, to whom Josette briefly referred at the beginning of her cahier, could only be sentimental women who saluted their children in Alexandria ‘in the midst of cries
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and fluttering handkerchiefs’. Josette and her girlfriends were young ladies amused by the fashionable items of the Magasins Lafayette and, on the other hand, boys were braggarts and noisy young men, who managed to keep silent only when admiring the splendour of Notre Dame, ‘its decorations and its pinnacles of ancient levity. […] nobody makes noise, not even the boys’. Yet, what interested them most was clearly the guided tour of the Etablissements Citroën, since ‘mechanics is mostly meant to attract boys’.

These expressions and rhetorical statements should not be viewed as something that underscores the value of this text and its historical utility. On the contrary, it is precisely because of them that it is possible to see how Josette envisioned her own experience, finding a suitable way of sharing it with those around her. By following predetermined rhetorical and even linguistic strategies, Josette was not giving space to her intimate feelings, but ‘brush[ing] an interior space’, leaving the readers with a shared ‘tightly constrained vision’ of things and a very selective gaze over the world. The cahier, besides being a repository of happy memories, thus became a text that connected the girl to her school and family, and which says something about how emotions could be expressed and controlled by teachers, families and by Josette herself.

The set piece of Josette’s trip was undoubtedly the visit to the French colonial exhibition. The ECI had been scrupulously supervised by the maréchal de France Hubert Lyautey, former résident général of Morocco, Minister of War during the First World War and one of the greatest personalities of French colonial bureaucracy. Lyautey envisioned the ECI as ‘a great lesson of practical action, a moment of practical teaching’ that would demonstrate all of the goals achieved in the French colonies and the fruitful relations between these territories and the metropole. The exhibition was inaugurated on 6 May 1931 and went on for about six months until 15 November. By that date, about eight million people had visited the more than 200 pavilions, which extended for 110 ha in the Bois de Vincennes. Besides the French colonies, the ECI also hosted pavilions sponsored, for instance, by Belgium, Italy, Denmark, Portugal and various Christian missionary organisations. The suq of Tunis and the Great Mosque of Djenné, in what is now the Republic of Mali, were reproduced, as well as the Buddhist temple of Angkor in Cambodia, at the time part of French Indochina. The exhibition was well-equipped with cafés, restaurants and bars, where one ate surrounded by real elephants, camels, zebras and – last but not least – African and Asian sauvages wearing traditional clothes and entertaining visitors with folk dances and songs.

Josette found the exhibition a very realistic reconstruction of the East that she inhabited: ‘even myself, that I live in an Oriental country, I was surprised by the diversity and the accuracy of this exhibition’. While admiring the achievements of French colonialism over ‘these half-barbaric indigènes’, the ‘routes built’ and the ‘railways constructed’, Josette also visited the rather familiar Tunisian pavilion and its suq: ‘I compared the Tunisian souks to ours in Cairo. The cafés, the shops, the perfumes, the bracelet and ring-makers, the pottery and the tapestry’. Josette moved from one pavilion to the other, as if she were travelling through
the various countries reproduced at the ECI: ‘Lebanon then appears in front of us with its green mountains and its warlike Druzes [. . .]. In Annam, the annamites, with their slanting eyes, work silver’. Josette’s visit to the ECI reminds us of the Ottoman Jews that walked through the Turkish Village at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago or of the Egyptian delegates to the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris. However, in this last case, the colonised Egyptians walked around the Egyptian pavilion – which was instead not present at the ECI, as in 1931 Egypt was officially an independent constitutional monarchy and not a colony any longer – disgusted by the presence of donkeys and by how Egypt’s modernity had been completely erased in favour of an artificial Orientalist fantasy, where the mosque ‘had been set up as a coffee house, where Egyptian girls performed dances [. . .] and dervishes whirled’.134

The ECI was instead, for Josette, exactly what the organisers had hoped: a real voyage and le tour du monde en un jour – as one of the exhibition’s slogans advertised. In addition to this, the ECI was also a space where Josette explored her own feelings for France, looking at the differences between an imaginary Western us and the Orient – two spaces to which, in some ways, she felt she equally belonged. Although Josette – both because of the nature of the text and because of her age – does not say much about herself as an Egyptian Jewish girl visiting a colonial exhibition, one could speculate that the MLF and an experience such as the voyage to France contributed to develop a sense of displacement amongst the pupils. The latter were, in fact, embedded within a very problematic form of colonial mimicry, perceiving the Orient – now made visible, even though from the sole perspective of the coloniser, in the exhibition’s pavilions – as other from them. At the same time, the MLF teachers saw their Egyptian students as almost the same, but not quite their French counterparts135 – for instance, underlining the unbridgeable distance that separated the Egyptian families and children from the French ones when it came to female education: ‘Egyptian families do not feel the necessity of obtaining a diploma [for their daughters], that is instead the pride of French families’.136

The MLF tried to control and balance the various models the pupils found in-between the school, the family and the spaces that they inhabited: the fellaha described by Adereth, the self-portrayal of Josette L. as a jeune fille rangée who travelled from Cairo to Paris, French literary masterpieces, Jewish historical books and the teaching of Hebrew. Reading Josette L.’s Cahier de voyage or Ninette Adereth’s essay, however, shows very clearly that the MLF always remained embedded in French cultural imperialism. As the Cairo-born Israeli essayist Jacqueline Kahanoff – who attended the lycée français in the interwar period – wrote:

We did not know how it happened that Jewish, Greek, Muslim, and Armenian girls sat together to learn about the French Revolution. […] surely they [i.e. the teachers] must have known that we could not really become French, they did not want us to be their equals or their sisters, in fact we ended being nobody at all.137
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Yet, despite the pessimistic tone that Kahanoff infused in her autobiographical essay, these Jewish pupils were there, moving from Cairo to Paris, between Judaism and laïcité, and they found in the MLF and its ephemeral and troubling cosmopolitanism a powerful emotional community in which to identify. In doing so, and in the quasi-impossibility of finding a durable balance between their multiple affiliations and feelings, this generation of Levantines – as Kahanoff termed them – traversed the turbulences of interwar Egypt.

‘Two branches of a same tree’: Maurice Fargeon and the relations between Jews and Muslims, 1938–1943

So far, we have looked at early twentieth-century Alexandria and at the MLF of Cairo and its influence in the spreading of a social imaginary at the crossroads of Europe and Egypt, French secularism, Jewish specificities and a vaguely defined cosmopolitan ideal. So, to get a more comprehensive understanding of how notions of cosmopolitanism could be evoked, I shall now analyse a series of works published between the late 1930s and early 1940s by the Egyptian Jewish journalist Maurice Fargeon, looking at how the relations between Jews and Muslims were there described.

Fargeon was a journalist, amateur historian and an active member of the Jewish Community of Cairo. Since the early 1930s, he wrote for various newspapers and magazines, also as the editor of Kadima (‘Forward, Eastward’), a monthly magazine published in Cairo and sold together with the Jewish daily in Arabic, Al-Shams (‘The Sun’), which tried to decline Zionist sympathies in a local, Egyptian way. Fargeon’s political activism included the publication of an anti-Nazi pamphlet in 1934, Le tyran moderne: Hitler ou la vérité sur la vie du Fuehrer, for which he was accused by Germans living in Egypt of defaming Hitler and was taken to court. Between 1938 and 1942 he published several books and acted as secrétaire de la taxe communale for the Jewish Community of Cairo. Though extensively cited by all the scholars who dealt with the history of the Egyptian Jews, the books by Fargeon have not been analysed per se as possible sources of historical knowledge, with the exception of Joel Beinin, who briefly discussed the Annuaire des juifs d’Egypte et du Proche Orient.

By reading three of his works – Les juifs en Egypte (1938), Les relations entre Egyptiens et Juifs (1939) and the Annuaire (1943) – I will argue that Fargeon, in the hope of influencing the political and social atmosphere of the late 1930s and early 1940s and spreading a more positive image of Arab–Jewish relations, attempted to educate his readers by underlining the great importance that Jews had in the making of a modern Egyptian nation. With these books, Fargeon evoked past and present Egyptian transcommunal interaction, in order to contrast a rapidly changing context, characterised – as we already started to see – by the crisis of the liberal political system and the emergence of more radical political movements.

Les juifs en Egypte depuis les origines jusqu’à ce jour. Histoire générale suivie d’un aperçu documentaire consisted of two parts: the first one dealing
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with ancient, medieval and early modern times and the second one focusing on
the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fargeon’s investigation of the
history of the Egyptian Jews had been preceded in 1934 by the book Les com-
munautés israélites d’Alexandrie by Bension Taragan, who had taught for
several years in the Alexandrian Jewish communal schools.142 In addition to this,
in 1925 a Société d’Etudes Historiques Juives had been founded in Cairo, where
from 1929 it published a Bulletin de la Société d’Etudes Historiques Juives
d’Egypte, and organised lectures on Egyptian Jewish history.143 Finally, the Pres-
ident of the Jewish Community of Cairo, Joseph Cattaoui, from 1927 published
a few books on nineteenth-century Egyptian history and economy that were part
of the royalist historiographical project fostered by King Fu’ad.144 Fargeon’s
attempt was therefore inscribed in a larger Egyptian Jewish historical revival,
which, in turn, had been preceded by the Arabic texts of two Syrian-born Jewish
intellectuals – Hillel Farhi and Shimon Moyal – who lived in early twentieth-
century Cairo, and published most of their books while in that city.145 Les juifs
en Égypte was the first comprehensive historical study dedicated to this com-

munity and written according to the principles of modern historiographical
prose, putting aside the traditional rabbinical studies on Jewish customs and
rites, such as, for example, Nahar Mitzrayim (‘The River of Egypt’) and Tuv
Mitzrayim (‘The Good of Egypt’) by Rabbi Rafael Bensimon.146

Fargeon dedicated the book to ‘His Majesty King Farouk 1st, King of
Egypt’, as the king was, for him, the one to be thanked for the Jews’ current
prosperity: ‘could I publish a book on a land over which You rule so wisely
[…] and not paying You homage?’147 Fargeon provided his readers with a
historical excursus, starting with the first encounter between the Jews and the
land of Egypt in biblical times. Interpreting biblical sources and citing numer-
ous historical and theological studies, Fargeon underlined the special symbolic
value that Egypt had in the history of the Jewish people: ‘… every time they
were oppressed […], the Jews sought refuge in Egypt, where they were sure to
find a cordial and brotherly reception’.148 Despite the fact that the Jews had
been enslaved in Egypt, from where they escaped after the ill-famed Ten
Plagues, Fargeon also explained that: ‘Entered in Egypt as seventy fathers of
family, the sons of Israel went out of it as a people, so to become a kingdom of
priests and a holy nation’.149

His explanation of the ties between the people of Israel and Egypt also
acknowledged the possible influence of ancient Egyptian beliefs on Judaism –
for instance, on the practice of circumcision and the Ten Commandments, which
apparently resembled the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Finally, the Hebrew
alphabet, following a linguistic theory in vogue in the early twentieth century,
was said to have originated from the Egyptian hieroglyphs.150 Similarly to what
Egyptians at large and a minority group such as the Copts had been saying in
previous decades, Fargeon connected modern Egypt and the Egyptian Jews to
the Pharaonic era, the cradle of the eternal Egyptian nation.151 According to him,
Egyptians were, in fact, not Arabs, but Arabised: ‘The modern Egyptian […] is
the same man as that of more than a thousand years ago’.152 This echoed ideas
about the exceptionality of Egypt vis-à-vis the rest of the Middle East and North Africa – a theme that had been debated in Egypt for years.

It is true that by the late 1930s the so-called Pharaonism was being put aside and substituted with a more Arab and Islamic-oriented nationalism. However, at the time he was writing *Les juifs en Égypte*, Fargeon reiterated still well-spread ideas that united the Pharaohs to King Faruq, in order to communicate present-oriented lessons of history from an Egyptian Jewish perspective. The author not only presented to his coreligionists a coherent, although largely fictitious, historical narrative, but also justified some of its most controversial aspects, such as, for example, the issue of nationality. Fargeon explained how many Jews, who had been living in Egypt for generations, were nonetheless foreign nationals. This should not lead to considering them as foreigners and not belonging to the Egyptian nation, since it was due to a specific historical circumstance: ‘the Jews […] tried to keep afar from an arbitrary government [i.e. the Ottomans] and to be protected by a capitulary power under which they could quietly take care of their businesses’. It was just in order to conduct a peaceful life that many Jews acquired foreign citizenship – a trend that, in any case, the local authorities at the time were not against this trend. This is how Fargeon’s explanation tried to rationalise an issue that had by then become very controversial in Egypt, as demonstrated through analysing the MLF students of Cairo.

Despite their different nationalities – Fargeon wrote – from the early twentieth century, under the rule of Fu’ad and then Faruq, the Jews prospered and took part in the rebirth of the Egyptian nation: ‘Under the new regime, all Jews living in this country feel […] the task awaiting them as loyal subjects of a united and proud state’. Fargeon went on to cite a speech pronounced by the Egyptian Foreign Minister Wassef Ghali pasha – himself a Copt – in a 1937 assembly of the Society of Nations about the hospitality Egypt had always guaranteed to the Jews, protecting them from their enemies. But how could the Jews be loyal subjects of Egypt, if only some of them were Egyptian nationals? And how could the relations between Jews and Muslims be envisioned in the post-1936 era?

Fargeon answered these questions in 1939 in a pamphlet published under the pseudonym of Tewfik Soliman Abou Heif: *Les relations entre Egyptiens et Juifs*. The pamphlet explained with several examples why Jews and Egyptians were brothers and should collaborate for the sake of their country. But if so, why did Fargeon choose a pseudonym and why did he make a clear-cut distinction between Egyptians and Jews, rather than Muslims and Jews? Concerning the usage of a pseudonym, Fargeon explained in 1947 that:

> the name of Tewfik Soliman Abou Heif is an imaginary name […]. This book was written by myself. The pseudonym was chosen mainly to give more relevance to the arguments developed [in the book] and in the hope of making this attempt of rapprochement more effective…

Considering that *Les relations* was published only one year after *Les Juifs*, it becomes clear to what extent the latter was based upon an imagined cosmopolitanism
that probably appealed to Fargeon’s readers, but did not fully correspond to reality
– especially when one considers that the author felt it better to utilise a
pseudonym.

Tewfik Soliman Abou Heif, presented as a graduate of the Ecole Normale
Supérieure and professor at the Université Egyptienne, explained how the book
was dictated by his desire to respond to ‘nonsensical attacks against my Jewish
compatriots that appeared on the Arabic press’. In modern Egypt, the time had
come to proclaim that ‘the Jews are our brothers and our cousins. They work for
the sake of the homeland; they put their fortunes and their experience at its
service. Muslims and Jews are two branches of a same tree’. The author went
on, arguing that ‘the aspirations of the Jews are the same of all true Egyptians.
[. . .] the Jews of Egypt desire only one thing: to live peacefully and safely, in
freedom and fraternity’. The Jews were among the most active members of
Egyptian commerce and industry, and it was ‘thanks to them, [that] the East has
nothing to envy the West for’.

The late 1930s were the moment when the cosmopolitan and pluralist imagi-
nary that consolidated in fin-de-siècle Alexandria, and continued up until the
interwar years in spaces such as the Cairo lycée français, was more explicitly
called into question. However, this did not imply the immediate passage to a
strictly nationalist and radical perspective. These years were, rather, character-
ised by ‘shifting narratives’ – from resilient transcommunal images to Pharao-

ism, from Fascism to radical Islamic ideology – that it was often difficult to fully
express and assess. Still, Tewfik Soliman Abou Heif worried about the future
of the Jews and felt the need to underline the positive sides of a centuries-old
Arab–Jewish coexistence. At the same time, if on the one hand he explained that
anti-Semitic prejudices could be found in some Egyptian newspapers, he was
ready to admit that they were mainly due to ‘foreign propaganda’, since

the Egyptian, whichever class he belongs to, is a sweet and considerate man.
His nature does not know hatred and even less meanness. The Jews live in
Egypt since the time of the Pharaohs [. . .]. They have never betrayed us, we
will not betray them.

Notwithstanding these words, even the title of this book – Les relations entre
Egyptiens et Juifs, rather than a more neutral entre Juifs et Arabes or entre Juifs
et Musulmans – signals that by the time Fargeon published it the Jews were not,

at least not always, considered fully Egyptian and that the category of Egyptian-
ness had, indeed, acquired a stricter nationalist dimension than it had in colonial
and early monarchical years. On the other hand, the fact that he wrote in
French makes one wonder whom his readers were. As said, this book – as all the
others by Fargeon – resented the vast scale project of national history rewriting
initiated in the 1920s by King Fu’ad and based on documents available at the
Royal Palace of ‘Abdin and 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.
Their 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 – some of the Jews, but also the Greek and Italian communities – and to a European public on the other. French, which was the main language of culture and international communication in the Mediterranean region at the time, thus seemed the most logical choice.\textsuperscript{166} The usage of French points to a connection with that French Egyptomania started in 1798 with Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt, which over the course of the nineteenth century had contributed to popularising the country, diffusing among scholars and artists a great interest in Egyptian antiquities.\textsuperscript{167} Furthermore, one should keep in mind how in the early twentieth century North African and Middle Eastern Jews entered the bibliothèque coloniale and it was then that their origins became a very important scholarly and political issue for Jews and non-Jews alike.\textsuperscript{168}

Similar principles animated Fargeon in writing the \textit{Annuaire des Juifs d’Egypte et du Proche Orient} (henceforth, \textit{Annuaire}). This book was conceived as an Egyptian Jewish \textit{Who’s Who?}, and functioned as a yearbook of the most relevant events that had occurred to Jews all over the world. Fargeon published two editions of the \textit{Annuaire}, in 1942 and 1943.\textsuperscript{169} The \textit{Annuaire} was preceded by a historical introduction on \textit{Les juifs à travers le monde}, from Europe, to the USSR, US, North Africa and China and in a part dedicated to Middle Eastern Jews, which, however, only dealt with Zionism and the Jews living in British Palestine. Following this, Fargeon focused at length on the Jewish communities of Egypt, their structure, the various Jewish associations, hospitals and so on. The author then devoted the last section of the book to the \textit{Notices biographiques des principaux notables israélites d’Egypte}. The \textit{Annuaire} underlined the boundaries of a specific milieu, clarifying who those who belonged to it were. Whereas his previous book \textit{Médecins et avocats juifs au service de l’Egypte} dealt with very specific sectors of the Jewish bourgeoisie, the \textit{Annuaire} dealt at length with members of the most prominent Jewish families of bankers and entrepreneurs, such as the de Menasces, Cattaouis, Hararis, Cicurels, Mosseris, Rolos and Suarès.\textsuperscript{170} Fargeon proudly portrayed this group of notables as a vanguard of local modernities and an indispensable component of a pluralist Egyptian nation.

Two brothers, Clément and Ernest Harari – ‘son of the late Ibrahim’ – were listed amongst the most important lawyers of Cairo. Both had studied at the Ecole des Frères of Cairo, and then at the Faculty of Law at the University of Paris. Clément was a delegate of the \textit{Conseil de l’Ordre des Avocats Mixtes d’Egypte}, Vice-President of the \textit{Comité de l’Hôpital Israélite du Caire} and acted as a judge of the rabbinical court. His brother Ernest – who specialised in commercial and civil law – held similar posts: Vice-President of the \textit{Comité de l’Oeuvre d’Enseignement Limoud}, member of the communal \textit{Comité des Ecoles} and judge of the rabbinical court.\textsuperscript{171}

The Mosseri family, one of the most important of Cairo Jewry, included various members engaged in diverse activities, from banking to agriculture and movie distribution. For instance, Maurice N., son of Nessim bey, a graduate from the Central Technical College of London, was in charge of the family’s
Banque Mosseri. He was also Chief Executive Officer of the Société Egyptienne des Tuyaux, Poteaux et Produits en ciment armée, of The Alexandria & Ramleh Railways Co. Ltd., of the Société Générale Immobilière d’Égypte and many other firms. In addition to that, he acted for years as Vice-President of the Jewish Community of Cairo. Joseph V. bey was the son of the ‘late Vita’, and one of the most successful Egyptian film distributors. He had studied at the Ecole des Frères and the Ecoles anglaises and started his career working in the family’s bank. In 1915 he founded the Josy Films Agency, which established and ran a number of movie theatres all over Egypt, amongst them the Kléber, Majestic, Bosphore, Chantecler, Mohamed Ali, Isis and Ambassadeurs. In 1929 he also started to import foreign movies, and in 1932 he created a cinematographic studio in order to produce movies in Arabic. I should mention here that Joseph Mosseri was not the only Jew that contributed to the development of Egyptian cinema. In fact, the most important film director of the 1940s was the Jew Togo Mizrahi and the diva of the 1940s and 1950s Egyptian celebrities was Layla Murad – born into a Jewish family and converted to Islam in 1946.

After the Mosseris, the Rolos were presented as another influential dynasty of bankers and entrepreneurs. Robert J. Rolo, son of the ‘late Jacques’, started his career in the banking system in Britain, then returning to Alexandria in order to take charge of his family’s business. In addition to being administrator of various enterprises – e.g. the Banque Belge and the Port Said Salt & Soda Co. – he was also President of the Jewish Community of Alexandria from 1934 (and until 1948). Sir Robert S. Rolo, son of the ‘late Simon’, was instead a lawyer and businessman, having followed ‘the road traced by his late father’, and who had been one of the founders of Banq Misr. According to Fargeon, Robert Rolo was not only a successful businessman, but also one of the most eminent members of the ‘Anglo-Egyptian community’.

The type of biography that Fargeon ideated was very concise and limited to two aspects: professional activity and then the honorary titles and social tasks a man might have. The only reference to the families to which they belonged was the initial fil du feu…, plus eventual remarks about family companies and firms. The pictures that accompanied some of the biographies aimed at giving a very official and, ultimately, static image of this group as a firmly established class, composed of respectable men wearing elegant suits, their moustaches finely clipped, in some cases – namely, the portrait of Félix N. Mosseri – pictured working busily at their desk, surrounded by all kinds of papers and accounts books. Given that Zionism played a minor role in Egyptian Jewish politics, the new, rejuvenated and muscular Zionist man did not constitute, for the majority of local Jews, a very appealing model of identity: the model of the Jewish man as a paternal notable and philanthropist was still the dominant one in Egypt. Finally, Fargeon, in this last book, put aside the issue of nationality, creating a specific category, the notables israélites d’Égypte, and explained their Egyptian-ness in terms of what these men had done for the country’s advancement. Moreover, rather than simply reiterating past Arab–Jewish interactions and harmony as he had done in Les Juifs en Égypte, in the Annuaire Fargeon partly tinged his
Egyptian Jewish Pharaonism with a more explicitly Arab dimension, in line with the contemporary Egyptian intellectual atmosphere, explaining that, ‘in fact, Jews are Arabs’.175

All in all, Fargeon’s books represented ways of reassuring the Jews about their present and future belonging to Egypt. 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 national status. On the other hand, by combining very different ideologies and topics, and by mixing historical data with more disputable narrations, they epitomised the ambiguous sociocultural and national status which many Egyptian Jews held during the monarchy. Fargeon’s mixture of cosmopolitanism, Zionism, Egyptianness and bourgeois ambitions did not propose any concrete solution to the problems that the Jews faced in 1930s and early 1940s Egypt – first and foremost, the issue of nationality – resulting in what nowadays might seem a fascinating, yet largely illusory, re-envisioning of their historical experience. Yet, for Fargeon as well as for some of his Jewish and Muslim 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 inter-communal bourgeoisie could be envisioned.176

Conclusion

This chapter looked at ideas of cosmopolitanism and transcommunal interaction and how they influenced the making of a social imaginary amongst Egyptian Jews from the late nineteenth century to the early 1940s. From what has been said, one could say that a Jewish bourgeois identity in Egypt was very often constructed along highly evocative lines and paradigms of identity – first and foremost, the idea that Egypt and its urban centres were modern and thriving locations characterised by fertile relations between different ethno-religious groups and within the Jewish community itself. Yet, this did not always correspond to reality.

Focusing on the evocation of urban coexistence as the main feature of colonial Alexandria and analysing two cases of blood libel that occurred in 1881 and 1925, I then reconsidered the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as the formative period of a Jewish cosmopolitan imaginary, which seems to have often been utilised in order to hide social and economic cleavages between Jews, Muslims and other ethno-religious groups as well as within the Jewish community itself, and that was destined to be utilised in the years to come, especially in the 1930s. In order to shed light on that decade, I took the MLF of Cairo as a case study, investigating the relationships between the school and the Jews at a moment of economic and social turmoil. I analysed aspects of the school’s life and its activities, and also the efforts by the MLF for classifying and regulating its Jewish students. The former and their trans-Mediterranean imaginary were at the core of the third part, where texts written by students – and other documents
concerning the teaching of Hebrew in the lycée of Cairo – were read as clues to larger narratives that might help us to understand the ideological stance of the school concerning the students’ national belonging, Judaism, as well as gender and family and how students reframed all these notions. Lastly, I moved to a more political dimension and analysed three books published in the late 1930s and early 1940s by the Cairo Jewish journalist and Zionist sympathiser Maurice Fargeon, showing how Arab–Jewish relations and dialogue – as well as the underlining of the importance that Jews had in Egyptian society and economy – could be historicised and publicised vis-à-vis, and despite, an increasingly radical Egyptian nationalism and the diffusion of Zionism.

Cosmopolitanism seems to have been first and foremost an imaginary category that did not necessarily reflect the everyday life of Jews and the changes that Egypt underwent during the monarchy. Furthermore, beneath it often lay a very ephemeral form of transcommunal interaction, which largely depended on a semi-colonial context – exemplified by the resilient presence of the system of the Capitulations and the Mixed Courts or by the relevance of foreign educational institutions like the MLF – in which minorities and foreigners had, in a sense, prospered. Still, one must also underline that, even though positive relations between different ethno-religious and social groups did exist and at times flourished, they never fully erased class, national and ethno-religious cleavages. The life of Egyptian Jews could be said to have been constellated not by one cosmopolitan imaginary, but by several parallel imaginaries – from that which sprang up in the MLF, to the vulgar cosmopolitanism of the Baruks and Fornarakis, to the more political one evoked by Fargeon – that, even though overlapping with one another and projected onto the whole of Jewish society, largely rotated around one’s small world. It is to some of these small worlds and their moral and familial vicissitudes that I shall now turn.

Notes

1 ‘Les funérailles du baron Jacques de Menasce’, La Réforme, 5 June 1916, AIU Alex IV.E.35.E. See also: ‘La mort du baron Jacques de Menasce’, La Réforme, 3 June 1916, AIU Alex IV.E.35.3.
2 Léon Benveniste to the AIU President, 20 May 1904, AIU Alex I.E.18.
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11 In her study on Sephardi merchants in early modern Leghorn, Francesca Trivellato utilises the category of communitarian cosmopolitanism to refer to ‘the familiarity with strangers common to the least and the most privileged strata of the population of Livorno as well as the logic that defined and enforced corporate identities’; see- Francesca Trivellato, The Familiarity of Strangers: the Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period (Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 73.


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

17 The Jewish Community of Alexandria to the AIU President, ‘Succinto dei fatti e circostanze referentesi al processo intentato nel 1881 contro una famiglia israelita imputata d’avere immolato un ragazzo greco, per nome Vangeli Fornaraki, con recon- dito scopo religioso’, 15 September 1881, AIU Egypte I.C.3.

18 Po-Chia Hsia, The Myth of Ritual Murder.

19 Frankel, The Damascus Affaire.


21 The Jewish Community of Alexandria to the AIU President, ‘Succinto’, 15 September 1881, AIU Egypte I.C.3.

22 The Jewish Community of Alexandria to the AIU President, ‘Succinto’, 15 September 1881, AIU Egypte I.C.3.


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26 The Jewish Community of Alexandria to the AIU President, ‘Succinto’, 15 September 1881, AIU Egypte I.C.3.

27 ‘Alexandrie. La disparition d’un enfant’, clipping from an unnamed newspaper, around 3 April 1881, AIU Egypte I.C.3.

28 L’affaire Fornaraki, 82.


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


34 See the articles that appeared in the Jewish Chronicle on 9 September 1881, 14 October 1881, 18 November 1881, 9 December 1881 and 6 January 1882, available online at The Jewish Chronicle Archives: www.thejc.com/.

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

36 The Greek consular authority had ordained the arrest of the two Baruks who were sudditi elleni. The two were jailed in Corfu and finally released on 4 January 1882. See: ‘Divers – Affaire Fornaraki’, Bulletin de l’AIU, January 1882, 28–29.

37 The Vice-President of the Jewish Community of Alexandria to the Chief Rabbi and Jewish Community Council of Corfu, 9 August 1881, AIU Egypte I.C.3.


39 The Vice-President of the Jewish Community of Alexandria to the Chief Rabbi and Jewish Community Council of Corfu, 9 August 1881, AIU Egypte I.C.3.

40 Po-chia Hsia, The Myth, 22.

41 Ilbert, ‘L’exclusion’, 184 and onwards.

42 On this: Landau, ‘Changing Patterns’.


44 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 8 June 1925, AIU Egypte I.C.16. The images d’Epinal are images and lithographs of religious and historical subjects first printed in the French town of Epinal by Jean-Charles Pellerin in 1796 and destined for a rather illiterate public.

45 From the hagiography of Saint Richard de Paris, enfant martyr, AIU Egypte I.C.16.

46 Rachel Danon to the AIU President, 5 June 1925, AIU Egypte I.C.16.
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47 Elie Antebi, ‘A Alexandrie’, 384, my emphasis.


49 Krämer, The Jews, 81.

50 The Bnei Brit (‘brothers of the covenant’) is a Jewish humanitarian association founded in New York in 1843 by a group of Ashkenazi Jews. Although adopting the ideals of humanism and philanthropy of the Freemasonry, they did not share its critical attitude toward religion.

51 Krämer, The Jews, 84. Other lodges were founded in Cairo (Maimonides lodge in 1887 and the Sephardi lodge in 1911), Tantah (Ohel Moché lodge in 1921), Mansourah (Magen David lodge in 1923) and Port Said (1924), operating up to circa the end of the 1940s. On the Comité, whose main activity consisted of sending money to Jewish institutions in Palestine – for instance, the Shaarei Tzedek hospital and the Orphelinat Zion (Blumenthal) of Jerusalem: Comité ‘Pro Palestina’ d’Alexandrie, Rapport sur sa gestion du 13 Août 1918 au 30 Novembre 1927 (Alexandria: Fratelli Ventura, 1928), Yad Ben-Tzvi Institute for the Study of the Jewish Communities of the East of Jerusalem (henceforth, YBZ), XIV B 1716.


53 Taragan, Les communautés, 106. One should add that this school is said to have later on become a leftist educational institution, as some of its teachers were close to Marxist Zionism (Beinin, The Dispersion, 51). This is also what David Harari of the Association des juifs originaires d’Egypte told me, defining the Lycée de l’Union Juive as ‘un foyer des gauchistes’ (Interview of the author with David Harari, Paris, 19 March 2010).

54 Al-Sayyid Marsot, A Short History, 90 and onwards.

55 Pierre Deschamps, cited in André Thévenin, La Mission Laïque Française à travers son histoire, 1902–2002 (Paris: Mission Laïque Française, 2002), 18. Written by a former MLF teacher for the MLF’s centennial, this is today the most comprehensive study dedicated to this institution.

56 In 1905, the French Chamber of Deputies approved a law on state secularism (Loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Eglises et de l’Etat). The law proclaimed the neutrality of the state, the freedom of religious exercise and put an end to all forms of state subsidy to any religion.

57 Thévenin, La Mission, 69.


59 Deringil, The Well-Protected Domains.


61 Thévenin, La Mission, 92–99.

62 From the 1931 booklet of the Lycée français du Caire, Fonds Mission Laïque de France of the Archives Nationales of Paris (henceforth, AN), 60 AJ 55.

63 ‘En Egypte’, REF, December 1925, 461.

64 List of the personnel domestique of the Lycée français du Caire, August 1933, AN 60 AJ 57.

65 The headmaster of the Ecoles de la Communauté Israélite du Caire to the Secretary of the Union Laïque, 27 June 1930, AN 60 AJ 55.
66 Victor Mosseri was a large landowner involved in the cotton business, corresponding member of the Agricultural Academy of France and technical advisor to the Royal Agricultural Society of Egypt. See: Ellis Goldberg, ‘The Historiography of Crisis in the Egyptian Political Economy’, in Middle East, eds. Israel Gershoni, Amy Singer and Yakan Hakan Erdem, 205, n. 29.

67 M.me V.ve Victor Mosseri to Adrien Berget, 23 October 1930, AN 60 AJ 55.
68 The Chief Rabbi of Cairo to Adrien Berget, 24 October 1930, AN 60 AJ 55.
70 Adrien Berget to the MLF Secretary General, 25 November 1930, AN 60 AJ 55.
71 Adrien Berget to the MLF Secretary General, 27 November 1930, AN 60 AJ 55, my emphasis.
72 ‘… et le Grand Rabbin’, Journal du Caire, 16 November 1930, AN 60 AJ 55.
75 Berget states that the woman was a former teacher of the Ecole Universelle. The 1932 Ecole Herzl’s leaflet declares that Angèle Modiano ‘has been […] headmistress of the School of the Alliance Israélite Universelle of Paris, in Thessalonika’ (see the leaflet of the Ecole Herzl, AIU CAire VI.E.80.6). However, according to the AIU Fiches du personnel, no woman called Angèle Modiano was ever employed by the AIU in Thessalonika or any other school.
76 Adrien Berget to the MLF President, January 1933, AN 60 AJ 57.
77 Lycée français du Caire – Rapport Mensuel du 1er au 28 Février 1931, AN 60 AJ 55. Purim is a Jewish holiday that commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people living in the Persian Empire from a plot to exterminate them, as told in the biblical Book of Esther. The holiday is characterised by exchanging gifts, public celebrations and, from a more recent epoch, masquerading.
78 Magnoun Leilah is one of the most ancient stories of Arab literature and popular culture dating back to early medieval times, describing the romance between Leilah and a man who became mad (in Arabic: magnun), when Leilah’s father did not allow her to marry him. The story has many variants and versions all over the Arab world, Iran and India. It is worth noting that Shawqi – one of the most famous Arabic playwrights of the time – had been educated at the University of Montpellier and that French authors such as Molière and Racine heavily influenced his works. I thank Deborah Starr for commenting on this issue.
79 ‘Mondanités’, Images, April 1932, 9, AN 60 AJ 56.
80 Lycées et Collège français du Caire – Programme de la fête scolaire donnée le vendredi 15 Avril 1932, AN 60 AJ 56.
82 Fête sportive du Lycée français, 30 March 1932, AN 60 AJ 56.
83 ‘Fête sportive du Lycée français’, unnamed and undated newspaper, AN 60 AJ 56.
84 ‘Lycée français d’Alexandrie (Fête sportive)’, REF, July 1923, 329 and 331, my emphasis.
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87 ‘A la cour – Au palais d’Abdine’, La Bourse Egyptienne, 9 April 1932, AN 60 AJ 56.
88 ‘Visite de S.M. Fouad 1er au Lycée Français’, clipping from an unnamed newspaper, 5 April 1932, AN 60 AJ 56.
89 ‘La visite de Sa Majesté le Roi au Lycée Français’, Liberté, 5 April 1932, AN 60 AJ 56.
91 Adrien Berget to the MLF Secretary General, 5 April 1932, AN 60 AJ 56.
92 Lycée français du Caire – Statistique des Elèves par Religion, November 1930, AN 60 AJ 55.
93 Lycée français du Caire – Statistique des Elèves par Nationalité, November 1930, AN 60 AJ 55.
94 Classe Seconde of the Lycée du Caire, Etat Trimestriel des Elèves, Année Scolaire 1932–33, 1er Trimestre, AN 60 AJ 57.
95 Commentary by Adrien Berget on the back of the Statistique des Elèves par religion, November 1930, AN 60 AJ 55.
97 Adrien Berget to the headmaster of the Collège français, 17 March 1931, AN 60 AJ 55.
101 The MLF President to Adrien Berget, 15 April 1931, AN 60 AJ 55, my emphasis.
102 Lycée français du Caire – Rapport mensuel du 1er au 31 mars 1933, AN 60 AJ 57.
103 Krämer, The Jews, 128–139.
104 Lycée français du Caire – Rapport mensuel du 1er au 31 mai 1933, AN 60 AJ 57.
105 This is also what Deguilhem found when analysing the Syrian schools of the MLF: Deguilhem, ‘Turning Syrians’, 453.
106 From the 1912 booklet of the Lycée français du Caire, AN 60 AJ 56.
109 Gayatri C. Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313. Another, though not less problematic, option to let the
students *speak* would obviously be oral history. For the case of the French colonial *lycées*, see, for example: *Les lycées français du soleil. Creusets cosmopolites de la Tunisie, de l’Algérie et du Maroc*, eds. Effi Tsélkas and Lina Hayoun (Paris: Autrement, 2004) – which, however, does not include Egypt.


111 ‘Les Dix Commandements de la M.L.F.’, *Le Lycéen*, January 1933, 13, AN 60 AJ 57. This is the only issue of the magazine that I have found.


116 Adrien Bergot to the MLF Secretary General, 6 November 1929, AN 60 AJ 54.


118 The difference between the AIU and the MLF, as far as the Egyptian schools are concerned, is also connected to the fact that in the 1900s and 1910s, when the AIU operated in the country, Modern Hebrew was less developed than in the 1930s.

119 ‘Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi’, Hebrew text of the *Fin d’Études Supérieures de Commerce*, June 1932, AN 60 AJ 57. The original text is: ‘Madua ‘am-isra’el ‘ohveh ‘et-ha-arzo? U-ktav ‘eizeh shemot me-’arim-ha-’aretz she-’atah makir…’.

120 ‘Ha-zaqen ve-ha-na’ar’, Hebrew text of the *Cértificat d’Etudes Secondaires*, June 1931, AN 60 AJ 56. In Hebrew: ‘Eizeh musar lomdim mi-sippur ha-zeh…’.

121 From the 1931 booklet of the *Lycée français du Caire*, AN 60 AJ 55.


123 Based on the *Statistique par Religion* of November 1929, the lycée counted 760 Jewish pupils out of a total of 1,310, which is about the 58 per cent of the student population, see: *Lycée français du Caire – Statistique des Elèves par Religion*, November 1920, AN 60 AJ 54. I should, however, say that many former Jewish students of the Cairo MLF still remember it as a school attended almost exclusively by Jews (Conversation of the A. with members of the *Association pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel des Juifs d’Egypte*, Paris, 15 March 2014).

124 In fact, it was the reading of Josette L.’s touching *Cahier de voyage* that led me to study the Egyptian schools of the MLF.


127 List of the students enrolled in the 6me B J.[eunes] filles in the *Etats trimestriel des Elèves* for the year 1930–1931, AN 60 AJ 55.
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128 All the citations by Josette L. are taken from her manuscript Cahier de voyage, now kept by the Association des Juifs Originaires d’Egypte of Paris, whose president, David Harari, kindly allowed me to utilise it. I have changed the name for privacy reasons.

129 The word is here to be intended in its strictly geographic meaning, roughly indicating the area from Turkey to Egypt.


135 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 86.

136 The MLF Secretary General to Adrien Berget, 17 November 1930, AN 60 AJ 55, my emphasis.


142 Taragan, Les communautés.

143 Krämer, The Jews, 170.


145 In 1917, Hillel Farhi edited a renowned version of the Jewish prayer book, known as Siddur Farhi, and an Arabic-Hebrew commentary version of the Haggadah of Pesah, analysed by: Nahem Ilan, ‘Le- mi no’edet Haggadat Farhi? La-dmutam shel-yehudim be-Mitzrayim ba-mahazit ha-rishonah shel-ha-me’ah ha-esrim’ (‘For


150 Fargeon, *Les juifs*, 75. According to Beinin, Fargeon was also re-elaborating what Ernest Renan had written in his 1882 essay *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?* (see: Beinin, *The Dispersion*, 33).


156 Fargeon, *Les juifs*, 188.


159 Abou Heif, *Les relations*, 17.


161 Abou Heif, *Les relations*, 42.


169 My analysis is based on the edition published in 1943.


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173 Fargeon, *Annuaire*, 312–313. Robert Rolo was also legal advisor to King Faruq and allegedly a link between the Egyptian court and the British throughout the monarchical era. His wife, Valentine, was First Lady-in-Waiting to Queen Nazli, the second wife of King Fu’ad, in the early 1920s. See: Krämer, *The Jews*, 78–79.


175 Fargeon, *Annuaire*, 111.

3 A moral laboratory

Religion, family and social respectability

In order to explore the process of *embourgeoisement* that Egyptian Jews underwent in a more familial and domestic dimension, I will now consider debates and writings on marriage and the family, religiosity, social respectability and gender. Mine is an attempt to expand in a cultural and gender historical sense the idea of Egyptian society as a laboratory as delineated in Omnia El Shakry’s *The Great Social Laboratory*. Focusing on the works and intellectual debates of pioneering Egyptian sociologists and anthropologists, El Shakry argued that the colonial era, and then the interwar period, marked “the formulation of ‘society’ itself as an entity – an object of scientific study, social control and management”.¹

Bearing this in mind, I will explain how Egyptian Jews might be seen as living in a *moral laboratory*, by which I mean a space where the Jewish social body was discussed and a complex set of notions and ideals circulated, and were then explained, regulated and sometimes re-envisioned. While continuing the analysis of what I have called the social imaginary, I will now also discuss how underlying it were often a multiplicity of ideas and values, which had to do with different sectors of local societies – for example, the religious authorities, the Westernised elite and foreign observers – that envisioned the life of the Jews according to their own positioning and thought, and to the sociopolitical circumstances of the time. In doing so, the history of the Egyptian Jews will emerge as a diachronic voyage punctuated by ‘multiple displacements occasioned by the persistence of older patterns, dramatic ruptures, or slow-moving changes’, thus acknowledging the numerous encounters between East and West, Jews and Muslims, religious and secular and the non-linear chronologies that they sometimes entailed.²

Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan and the regulation of the Jewish marriage in turn-of-the-century Alexandria

In 1893, the Chief Rabbi of Alexandria Eliyahu Hazan published *Neveh Shalom* (‘Abode of Peace’), a study dedicated to the description of the *minhag* (‘usage, rite’) of Alexandria, including the marriage ceremony and the ‘religious formalities related to divorce and *halizà*’, as the Italian subheading stated.³ In the next few pages, I will read and contextualise a few passages of the book vis-à-vis the
Alexandrian ketubah (lit. ‘written instrument’) and the modifications it underwent between the 1880s and the 1920s. In doing so, it will become evident how Rabbi Hazan viewed the changes that Alexandrian Jews were undergoing at the time – from the recent migration of thousands of Jews to the city to the gradual consolidation of a more secularised middle and upper class – as an opportunity to systematise local Jewish customs. In order to respond to what he felt was a disruption of the traditional Jewish social order and following a flexible interpretation of the halakhah – the Jewish law – common to many late Ottoman Jewish scholars, Hazan interpreted marriage and its regulations as a set of ancient traditions that could also be valid in modern times, as they constituted the most durable abode of peace that the Jews could inhabit.

The ketubah is the Jewish marriage contract that regulates the rights and responsibilities of the couple and the conditions upon which the marriage is stipulated. According to Littman, the early modern Egyptian ketubah did not differ in any significant way from the typical Sephardi one, except for four conditions:

1. the obligation for the woman to bath in a miqveh (the Jewish ritual bath), in which there was at least forty se’ot of water (pl. of se’ah: a halakhic unit of dry measure which equals c. 7.33 litres);
2. the obligation for the man not to marry a second wife without the approval of the first;
3. the condition that when the childless wife died, the husband should divide between her heirs what was left of her entire inheritance and not just the nedurya (‘dowry’);
4. the condition according to which ma’aseh yadeah ‘al-‘atzmah u-kesutah ‘al- ha-ba’al, that is: ‘all her handiwork belongs to her and the husband is responsible for keeping her clothed’.

The first condition was abandoned during the nineteenth century for practical reasons; the third one – which had to do with the inheritance law – was modified in the seventeenth century; the last one – that was shared, although in slightly different phrasing, by other Middle Eastern Jewries – was also changed at least before the nineteenth century, and substituted with the more usual phrasing ma’aseh yadeah lo u-kesutah ‘alav (‘all her handiwork belongs to him and he is responsible for keeping her clothed’).

For what concerned its visual representation, the Alexandrian ketubah did not entail a particularly high artistic value or personalised style, as opposed to what happened in other Jewries. Furthermore, from the 1910s onwards, the contracts were printed in series, with blanks to be filled in with the names of the groom and the bride, the exact amount of the dowry and so on. The writing was – as customary amongst Sephardi Jews – in Rashi characters until the early 1940s, when the square Hebrew characters were adopted. Whilst until circa the 1890s, the ketubah was handwritten and decorated in various ways, very often with flower festoons, from the late nineteenth century a more sober style was adopted,
with pillars and an architrave recalling the huppah – the marriage canopy. From at least 1886, at the head of the marriage contract were always two popular citations from the Book of Proverbs: ‘Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour from the Lord’ (Proverbs, 18: 22) and ‘House and riches are the inheritance of fathers: and a prudent wife is from the Lord’ (Proverbs, 19: 14). In 1897, a third sentence from Qohelet was also added: ‘Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest’ (Qohelet, 9: 9). In addition, two verses from the Book of Psalms were added from around the late 1880s on the left and right side of the ketubah, and inscribed inside the pillars of the drawing of the marriage canopy: ‘Thy wife shall be like a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table’ (Psalms, 128: 3)

In the top left corner of the marriage contract was the numero, the serial number, followed by the Arabic numerals. After 1919, it started to be used with the Hebrew word mispar (‘number’), and followed by Roman numerals and the date according to the Gregorian calendar. In the top right corner was instead the trilingual Hebrew/French/Arabic stamp of the rabbinical court. A second stamp and a revenue stamp were added at the end of the contract from the late 1930s.9 Finally, one should note that the rabbinical court provided a French translation of the ketubah.10 All these details underline the relevance of the ketubah as a legal document that regulated the life of the couple according to the principles of Jewish law. They show how, in the late nineteenth century, the Jewish marriage contract had to conform to modern notions of communal organisation and taxonomy influencing the Jews and Egyptian society at large.11 From this perspective, even apparently secondary details, such as the revenue stamps or whether the ketubah was handwritten or printed, acquire a much deeper significance and can be read as steps in a process of social change.

But let us now look more specifically at the text of the ketubah, and see to what extent it reflected the social changes that occurred to Alexandrian Jews. The first lines of the contract contained the date according to the Hebrew calendar and the place, Alexandria, which was always indicated through the old periphrasis No’-'Amon yiagen ‘aleah ‘Elohim de'al kef yama' raba' motva, which in Aramaic means: ‘No’-'Amon may God protect it which sits on the shore of the Great Sea [i.e. the Mediterranean].12 The names of the groom and the bride then followed, and attached to them were the names of their respective fathers, eventual honorific titles and the specification detailing whether the bride was or was not a virgin. This detail was very important, since the mohar (‘price’) – that is, the amount of money given by the groom to the bride’s father – depended on it. If the bride was a virgin, the mohar was of 200 zuzim, whereas if she was a convert to Judaism, a divorcee or a widow, it was reduced to 100.

This last case can be seen in an 1886 ketubah stipulated between Menahem Nifussi ben (‘son of’) Yitzhaq and the widow Rachel bat (‘daughter of’) Haim Piperno,13 or in another one from 1918 between Shemtov ben Aharon Abadi and the widow Rahel bat David Azulai. The second ketubah also included at its very end the obligation for the husband to sustain the two children that the woman had with her deceased husband ‘until they will be grown-up’.14 This kind of
Figure 3.1 Frontispiece of the 1893 edition of Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan’s Neveh Shalom.
clause was common to almost every ketubah stipulated between a man and a woman who already had offspring from a previous marriage, and wanted to safeguard these from possible misdeeds of the new husband.15

The marriage contract then dealt with the ketubah money, possibly its most crucial aspect. Generally speaking, the ketubah money is formed by the nedunya, the dowry provided by the bride’s family, the tossefet (‘additional monies’), which is declared by the husband and the above cited mohar.16 As not all families could afford a proper nedunya for their daughters, since 1863 in Alexandria there operated the Mohar ha-betulot (‘the [bride] price of the virgins’) – a communal institution that provided a dowry for needy girls.17 From the analysis of a sample of Alexandrian ketubot, one can see that the nedunya and the tossefet were generally the same amount – as is almost always the case in Judaism.18 In Neveh Shalom, Hazan also explained that in his times in Alexandria, it was customary

to write in the ketubah only the money [ma’ot be-‘ayin, lit. ‘the actual moneys’) received by him [i.e. the groom], to which he added the double or one third and so on. And only when one gives a small amount of money, [in that case] they write that he received money so and so, and clothes so and so, and tossefet so and so. But also in this case, they do not write cloth by cloth, but they take all the clothes [and make] a total so and so. And the custom, as the Maran [in Aramaic: ‘our master’, i.e. rabbi Yosef Caro] wrote [. . .], is to estimate how much they [i.e. the clothes] value now [i.e. at the time of the marriage] and [then] increase the ketubah [money] according to how much they value when [the ketubah] is paid . . . 19

In simpler words, Alexandrian Jews followed the Sephardi custom of not declaring each and every item of the dowry, but calculated a total amount.20 However, as this usage often caused problems in connection to the assessment of the ketubah money, Hazan specified that when the wife came to collect it if, for example, her husband had died, one should increase or decrease the initial amount according to the difference in value of the items after a certain period of time, or because of inflation.

Up to this point, the text of the late nineteenth-century Alexandrian ketubah not only is identical to the early nineteenth century one, but, more generally, is also very similar to any Sephardi marriage contract. However, if one moves to the analysis of the tnaim – the conditions upon which the marriage was to be based – a few alterations can be noted. The tnaim started with the statement that ‘all her handiwork belongs to him and he is responsible for keeping her clothed’, and continued by clarifying that ‘the living goes in accordance with the Law of the Torah, and the inheritance follows the rite here of Alexandria which is the same as that of Damascus and as if [it is] for the eternity, with God’s protection’.21 After the publication of Neveh Shalom in 1893, the last part of the sentence was modified to read: ‘the inheritance [is] in accordance with the rite of this city of Alexandria explained in the book Neveh Shalom’.22 The issue at stake
here was what one meant by the rite of Damascus, and the consequences this had on the inheritance law. In fact, as Lamdan showed, many Eastern Mediterranean rabbis thought that the custom of Damascus was the same as that of Toledo, even though the two differed consistently.23 In Neveh Shalom Hazan thus clarified that

[in Alexandria] they used to write in the ketubot that the inheritance follows the custom of Damascus. But [what is] the custom of Damascus is not clear [...] and therefore we started to write that the inheritance follows the Law of the Torah and the custom and enactments of this city as set forth in the ledger of the rabbinical court.24

What led Hazan to clarify this detail was, first and foremost, his desire to put an end to a centuries-old rabbinic misunderstanding between the two customs.25 However, the rabbi also felt that such a clarification was incumbent upon him at a time when Alexandria was becoming a very important Jewish centre, where the mingling – and therefore the intermarriage – of Jews from all over the Mediterranean and Southern Europe could bring about even greater confusion of rites and traditions.

The potential for problems that the making of a new and heterogeneous Alexandrian Jewry had is confirmed by a 1901 enactment by Hazan and the Chief Rabbi of Cairo, Rafael Bensimon, against qidushin prati'im ('private betrothal'). According to these Egyptian rabbis, many young Jewish men who migrated to Egypt from Europe or from Westernised centres of the Eastern Mediterranean celebrated qidushin prati'im with Egyptian Jewish girls, as this was the only way a girl would consent to engage in sexual activity with them. Moreover – as Zvi Zohar explained – it seems that although the local girls would probably have agreed to regular, public betrothals, the men were unwilling to do so. One could then argue that the private betrothal was the least the girl was willing to settle for, and the most the man was willing to. However, if the man left Egypt or simply lost interest in the girl, the latter – who had been halakhically betrothed – became according to Jewish law an 'agunah – that is, a deserted wife – and therefore could not remarry unless her (prospective) husband granted her a divorce. As most of these men were nationals of countries that did not permit divorce, or that did not recognise a Jewish betrothal as legally binding and equivalent to marriage, the men could not be compelled to divorce and thus these girls remained in a sort of juridical limbo.26

In order to solve the problem, Egyptian rabbis ruled that a betrothal was valid only with the permission of the city’s chief rabbi, when celebrated in the presence of ten Jewish men – including a delegate of the rabbinical court – and if an engagement deed (sheter ketubat 'erusin) was simultaneously stipulated.27 This rabbinical enactment shows that socio-demographic changes had a considerable influence on the sexual habits of local Jews, and on the relations between men and women in particular. It also shows that sexual intimacy between unmarried men and women was already common in the late nineteenth century, although
only agreed to by the women when connected to a marriage – even if a private
one, which was, however, halakically equivalent to a regular marriage. This is
further confirmed by a passage from Neveh Shalom, where Hazan explained that
in Alexandria ‘it had been customary to declare the match [le-shaddekh] and
immediately celebrate the qidushin, and then after a long or short period of time,
enter the huppah’ – which symbolises the final step of the marriage, the nisu’in
– ‘and I realised that it was not correct to behave like this . . .’. The concern here
was that there might be cohabitation and/or sexual intercourse between the
groom and the bride before the nisu’in, and also that something might happen in
the interim between the bride, who had already acquired the status of ‘eshet-’ish
(‘the woman of a man’ – i.e. a married woman), and other men. The solution to
this problem, which had already been common in other Jewish communities in
early modern times – for example, amongst Istanbul Romaniot Jews28 – was that
‘one should celebrate the qidushin only and precisely when [the groom and the
bride entered] the huppah’ – that is, to celebrate the qidushin and the nisu’in in
immediate sequence, thus making such problems impossible.29

Another example of how processes of cultural modernisation impacted on the
regulation of marriage and on the text of the ketubah is the condition regulating
polygamy and divorce. Until around the 1890s, the husband was obliged not to
‘marry or betroth or arrange a match with any woman in addition to his wife
unless she has lived with him for ten years and, God forbid, did not bear him any
viable offspring’.30 From the beginning of the twentieth century, the clause
became: ‘[the groom] vows solemnly [. . .] that he would not marry or betroth
any woman but his wife and that he would not divorce her against her will
except with the permission of the rabbinical court’.31 This condition reflected the
Talmudic view, according to which the sterility of the woman is ground for
divorce. At the same time, it corresponded to what Hazan had written in a local
correction formulated when he was Chief Rabbi of Tripoli and contained in his
1877 book Ta’alumot Lev (‘The Mysteries of the Heart’), where he had
explained that a man could take a second wife only if he had been married for
ten years without having children and the first wife agreed to the second
marriage.32

However, this last possibility was by the late nineteenth century quite remote,
at least in Alexandria. Whereas amongst early modern Ottoman Jews it was not
uncommon to obtain the first wife’s consent to the second marriage of the
husband, either because of the pressure imposed on her by the husband or by the
promise to increment her ketubah money,33 in Neveh Shalom Hazan stated that:
‘Alexandria is a place where it is customary to have only one wife’. The only
exception was, as in the case above, a man who after ten years of marriage still
had no children

and if the wife is a divorcée or a widow, we say five years. But there are
European men [‘anshei-’Eropah] living here that do not like this condition
to be written and [in this case] we only write that he [i.e. the groom] would
not marry any other woman without the permission of the rabbinical court.34
A moral laboratory

Not only was polygamy practically non-existent in late nineteenth-century Alexandria, but Hazan also argued that some European Jews living in the city perceived the condition that allowed a second marriage in case of sterility as inappropriate, and did not want it to be included in their ketubah. As from at least 1902, none of the ketubot that I consulted included this condition, it is likely that although taking a second wife because of the first wife’s sterility remained halakhically admissible, it nonetheless became very uncommon and socially unacceptable. In the case of a childless marriage, divorce was the only solution left to Alexandrian Jewish men.

Finally, from more or less the same period — at least from 1906 — after the condition regarding polygamy, one reads that the bride vowed to “behave properly with her husband and to do what was imposed on her by the Law of Moses and Judith [kedat Moshe ve-Yehudit].” Whilst dat Moshe refers to the Mosaic Law in general, the expression dat Yehudit stands for the modesty rules and customs shared by Jewish women that can vary depending on the location, the time period and rabbinical regulations. Although it is not so clear why the sentence appeared only at that time, it might be connected to what has already been explained above: that is, the need for the rabbinical authorities to specify — even by simply referring to a general standard of modesty — what was proper and what was not, at a time when processes of social and cultural modernisation were deeply impacting on the life of Alexandrian Jews.

The other tnaim, the concluding section of the ketubah, the signatures of the couple and the witnesses and so on do not present any significant variation over time, or any peculiarity vis-à-vis the normative Ottoman Sephardi marriage contract. That said, it is clear that the marriage ceremony was not just limited to the ketubah, and did not only involve monetary and legal issues. In fact, Rabbi Hazan acknowledged that the marriage also entailed many other non-halakhic aspects that were central for the overall success of the ceremony. An example was the exchange of the rings:

Here in Alexandria, they instruct the groom and the bride to take off their gloves at the time of the qidushin. It seems that [this is because] they are concerned [...] that there should be no separation between the finger and the ring. But I found no ground for such a concern, which seemed strange to me. But I did not protest with them because there was nothing bad [in this custom]...

Furthermore:

The usage is to put the ring from the right hand of the groom to that finger of the bride’s right hand which is the closest to the thumb. And if the groom makes a mistake, and he puts the ring in the left hand of the bride, or if he puts it on the finger which is not the closest [to the thumb], there should be no worry or doubt [...] on whether the bride is fully married.

Many studies showed to what extent the act of giving a ring, both in Jewish and non-Jewish culture, symbolised the couple’s commitment to the marriage.
Moreover, other Jewries also exchanged rings through rituals and gestures, which sometimes deviated from, or contrasted with, the requirements of the halakhah. What Hazan wrote in the case of Alexandria is therefore an example of a lasting tendency in Jewish popular culture to partly reshape steps of the marriage ceremony, deviating in harmless ways from the halakhah. This said, besides such ancient yet enduring Jewish popular customs, the turn of the century involved technological innovations that could affect the life of the Jews vis-à-vis the halakhah. With regard to the get, the divorce, Hazan explained, for instance, how a divorce via mail – *posta*, as he called it – should be regulated, given that the postman would probably be a gentile. The part dedicated to the get is also interesting because the rabbi presented every single step of the divorce procedure in Hebrew, Italian, Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Arabic – something that once more testifies to the multilingualism of Alexandrian Jews at the time, but also, on the other hand, the fact that despite their ethnic and linguistic diversity, all Jews living in the city should follow the same minhag.

Hazan then dealt with one last aspect related to marriage and its regulations: the levirate marriage. According to Jewish law, when a husband dies childless, his brother (*levir*) is required to marry the widow (*yevamah*) through a ceremony known as *yibum*. However, if the *levir* for various reasons chooses not to marry the *yevamah*, he is required to perform the ceremony of *halitzah*, and this ceremony frees the woman from having to marry her brother-in-law. In Europe, *halitzah* became the norm from the Middle Ages, but in Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa, *yibum* generally prevailed until contemporary times. In fact, Hazan wrote that:

> [T]he custom here in the city of Alexandria is usually to perform *yibum*, and not *halitzah*. This is what I heard from the elders and the sages. [...] And what is written in the book *Simhah Ha-Lev* in the section ‘Even Ha-’Ezer responsum no. 27, that the usage here in Alexandria is to perform *halitzah* and not *yibum*, is groundless.

This said, it seems possible that in the following years *yibum* became more unusual among Egyptian Jews. For example, a 1931 *responsum* by Rabbi Ya’aqov Toledano – at the time the President of the Rabbinical Court of Cairo – spoke of a man who ‘hesitated [...] to celebrate *yibum*’ with his sister-in-law ‘until he died’. This does not mean that the man would ultimately have released the woman through *halitzah*, but it might nonetheless signal his uneasiness towards *yibum*. In addition, the Chief Rabbi of Alexandria Rabbi David Prato talks about another case that occurred in January 1934, when a man named Laniado

refuses to give the *halitzæ* to his sister-in-law under the pretext of wanting to marry her, even though he knows that the widow is 30 years younger than him and is not willing to marry him [...]. Our tribunal tried everything to induce Laniado to accomplish its duty [i.e. *halitzah*], but with no results.
In this case, there was obviously a problem – the great age difference between the man and the woman, but also the fact that the woman absolutely refused yibum – and therefore halitzah was considered the most suitable option. Thus, one could conclude by saying that even though, according to Hazan, yibum was the norm, the two cases cited above might point to an increasing sense of uneasiness towards this practice as time went by. This tendency – that I am only suggesting, as more evidence is still needed in order to clarify the issue – would be confirmed by the fact that, as polygamy was no longer the norm among Alexandrian and, more generally, Egyptian Jews, halitzah would be possible (almost) only if the levir was either unmarried or a widower.45

The analysis of a corpus of turn-of-the-century Alexandrian ketubot demonstrated that these – and the marriage practices at large – experienced some interesting changes, especially as far as polygamy and the levirate marriage were concerned. Reading the ketubot in connection with Neveh Shalom demonstrated to what extent the Alexandrian minhag resembled the usual Sephardi one. At the same time, the comments by Hazan acknowledged the existence of a local Jewish folklore and symbolism, which had long been preserved by Alexandrian Jews and that Hazan, in some cases, viewed as harmless. Hazan was surely one of those late Ottoman Sephardi scholars that showed an awareness of modern lifestyles, interpreting the halakhah in a normative yet flexible way.46 That said, one should not turn the halakhic flexibility of these rabbis into a historiographical myth. The approach that Hazan had towards the Jewish law was, in fact, due not so much to an a priori halakhic flexibility, but also to the contingencies of the Alexandrian situation.47 His main goal in systematising the Alexandrian minhag and the text of the ketubah was first and foremost a kind of rappel à l’ordre, and a reassertion of the guiding role that the religious authorities had traditionally held in local Jewish societies, at a time when the Egyptian Jewry was passing from a small community of a few thousand members to a very diverse milieu made up of people from all over the Mediterranean, and when the traditional role of rabbis was being increasingly eroded by a more secularised Jewish elite.48 It is to this milieu and its moral world that I shall now turn.

‘The ambition to be an honest man’: Jewish gentlemen in Cairo, 1919–1927

Starting from the late nineteenth century, the influence of European models of conduct and education and their reception by the upper strata of Egyptian society, stimulated novel narratives about how men and women should behave in the family and in the outside world, and according to which principles. Whereas many scholars already discussed aspects of Egyptian history vis-à-vis women, shifting notions of femininity and motherhood and the birth of feminist activism in the colonial period, only in the past few years have the Egyptian male identity and the so-called effendi come to the forefront of historical analysis.49

In modern Egypt, the Arabic term effendi – originally a honorary title used throughout the Ottoman Empire, which could be translated as ‘lord, master’ –
referred to a man who belonged to an urban, educated, middle class of bureaucrats, professionals or merchants, but also to employees and students. At a deeper level, it symbolised a way of being Egyptian and modern that implied a set of sociocultural performances that were not the mere imitation and translation of European masculine ideals, but were inscribed in both a colonial and metropolitan ‘field of hegemonic masculinity within which and against which particular national identities vied for definition, status, and influence’. The effendi, as opposed to the fellah, the peasant, developed new forms of sociability and technology, such as cultural and welfare associations, a modern press and so on. Moreover, similarly to what happened in other colonial contexts, the effendi strove to be different from the imperial power but modern, and in doing so contributed to the birth of an independent Egyptian nation-state.

For the Jews, the idealised model of manhood in the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere had traditionally been that of the talmid hakham (‘scholar’): a pious man who studied the Bible and the Talmud and scrupulously followed the Jewish religious obligations and moral principles. However, processes of cultural and social modernisation, together with the impact of the AIU over the local communities, had by the early twentieth century modified, and in some cases disrupted, this model. Many Jews all over the Eastern Mediterranean region were looking at Europe and European culture as a means through which to foster their acculturation and emancipation and become modern. In the next few pages, I intend to show how the Egyptian Jewish gentleman could be regarded on the one hand as parallel and interrelated to the effendi, but also on the other as more directly linked to a European bourgeois ideal and, last but not least, to specifically Jewish moral principles and formulas. To do this, I will analyse Pour mes enfants, a book published in 1919 by Joseph Cattaoui, as a text that sheds light on the model of masculinity to which upper-class Jews referred, centred around the figure of the honnête homme and his education. Second, I will describe how the moral values and the model of gentlemanliness of Pour mes enfants could be put into practice, taking as an example the activities of the Société des Oeuvres Israélites de Bienfaisance of Cairo and the role of its members in the foundation of the city’s Hôpital Israélite in 1925–1926.

Joseph Cattaoui was born in 1861 into a family of the Cairo Jewish elite that claimed residence in Egypt from around the eighteenth century. He studied at the prestigious Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées in Paris, soon becoming one of the most prominent Egyptian businessmen and entrepreneurs. He was a founding member of Banq Misr in 1920 and sat on the boards of the main local enterprises. Together with the renowned late nineteenth-century nationalist, journalist and writer Ya’qub Sannu’/Abu Naddara and the lawyer Léon Castro – who was a close friend of Sa’ad Zaghlul and, in the 1930s, president of the Egyptian branch of the Ligue Internationale Contre l’Antisémitisme Allemand – Cattaoui was one of the few Jews personally involved in Egyptian domestic politics.

Named pasha in 1912, he acted as financial advisor of the 1921 Egyptian delegation to London, which discussed the status of Egypt vis-à-vis the British Empire, following the anti-British riots in the country in the previous years.
Joseph Cattaoui was also a member of the Egyptian Parliament from 1922, Minister of Finance and then Minister of Communication in the 1924 and 1925 anti-Wafdist cabinets of Ahmed Ziwar pasha and President of the Jewish Community of Cairo from 1925 until his death in 1942. Due to his close connections with the royal house, he was appointed senator in 1927, while his wife – Alice Suarès, herself heiress of another prominent Cairo Jewish family – was First Lady-in-Waiting to both Queen Nazli (wife of King Fu’ad) and Queen Farida (wife of King Faruq), as well as being a renowned philanthropist. As seen when dealing with Fargeon’s interwar publications, in 1925, Cattaoui had been one of the promoters of the Société d’Etudes Historiques Juives d’Égypte. During his long career, he also published several books on Egyptian history and economics, such as: Le régime des Capitulations en Égypte (1927), Coup d’œil sur la chronologie de la Nation égyptienne (1931) and Le khedive Ismail et la dette égyptienne (1935).

Pour mes enfants was a different and more intimate text than the others he would subsequently write. The book was published in 1919 in Paris, but the author explained within the first pages that it was based upon an unpublished version written in 1905, which only circulated among relatives and friends. That Pour mes enfants was published abroad should not come as a surprise, given the many business and cultural ties that united the author, as well as other members of the Egyptian (Jewish) elite, to France. It should also be noted that 1919 was the year of the liberal revolution – the countrywide protest against the British protectorate that, together with other factors, would subsequently lead the British to recognise Egyptian formal independence in 1922. Writing Pour mes enfants, Cattaoui might then have positioned himself as one of the elite fathers of the future Egyptian nation and thus contributed to a still marginal, but yet increasingly visible, involvement of the Jews in the Egyptian national arena in the post-1919 period.

That said, the book did not speak about Egyptian Jews or Egypt in any explicit way. It was conceived as a collection of moral advice – based on the example of great personalities of the past and on what the author had found ‘a bit everywhere, in books and while talking to people’ – written for an imaginary young reader about to enter ‘in the great battle of life’. The main objective of Pour mes enfants was to explain how to avoid the difficulties of life, and how to become a wise and respectable man. According to Cattaoui:

[T]he ambition to be a honest man perhaps does not offer the sparkling attractions of success, fame, honour, power, etc. but it gives a great deal of peace and serenity to the man who places it on top of everything.
As opposed to the largely biblical and Talmudic culture of the Ottoman Jewish scholar, the gentleman depicted in *Pour mes enfants* reads European (French) writers such as Montaigne, Fénélon and Madame de Staël. Cattaoui’s words on the *honnête homme* were largely modelled on an idealised figure of man that French writers like Charles de la Rochefoucauld and Jean de la Bruyère among others had described already in the seventeenth century. These authors – which in many cases coincide with the ones to be read more or less in the same years by the students of the MLF of Cairo – were the essential intellectual background of the Egyptian (Jewish) upper class, and clarify the great cultural influence of France in early twentieth-century Egypt, even though this country was then under British colonial administration. It was through the reading of these works – a solitary habit to be indulged in the cosiness of the home, and involving not a group of Jewish scholars and sages, but at most the family or a few intimate friends – that a man would consolidate his *vie intérieure*, understood in a quasi-Romanticist manner as ‘the unassailable citadel at the foot of which all noise from outside will be halted’.

As Mosse argued for the European case, the man was the symbol of ‘the moral universe of the middle-classes with its emphasis upon chastity, earnestness, and self-control’. This can be also seen in Cattaoui’s words on family life and domesticity. The father was, for him, ‘the uncontested leader. He has the double duty of ensuring the welfare of all and, through the example more than his words, of protecting the dignity of the house’. On the other hand, the mother represented ‘the soul of the house. She is the angel guardian who organises and governs with wisdom and devotion. She is the most beautiful part [of the house]. She is the tutelary goddess of the hearth’. Finally, ‘as for children, their mission is to build the future’. The domestic sphere – as many studies on Victorian culture have shown – should therefore be regarded as an integral component of bourgeois masculinity, denoting ‘a pattern of residence, or a web of obligations’ and also ‘a profound attachment: a state of mind’.

In the case of the Middle East, already in the late Ottoman era it was possible to trace, at least among the urban upper classes, a passage from the idea of the family as an extended network of people and generations and as a household to a nuclear family model. The emergence of Egyptian nationalism and subsequently of the Egyptian nation-state then interwove with changes in ‘the ideals of modern motherhood both inside and outside the home in order to assure the nation’s success’. Although in most cases the Jews did not seem to have participated in Egyptian nationalist discussions on, for example, the status of women, this, of course, does not mean that they did not reflect upon these issues, or that they did so in different and opposing ways. In fact, *Pour mes enfants* highlights that notions of motherhood and fatherhood, as well as ideas on female respectability and gentlemanliness, were relevant issues also at stake for Egyptian Jews and especially for one of the most prominent members of the Cairo Jewish elite, Joseph Cattaoui.

Cattaoui’s reflections on the family were also linked to his ideas about society and the outside world, which was, for him, an ordained but heterogeneous group
of people, and a sort of extended family. Despite ideological or even religious differences – which, in any case, were for Cattaoui ‘a powerful factor of progress’ – all humanity shared the most important value: the principle of solidarity. This principle had been taught by Socrates, the Sage des Sages; by the Prophètes de la Lumière Moses and Muhammad, ‘because in struggling to raise this hitherto obscure awareness, they managed to accomplish the ideal of solidarity they had been drawn to in their dreams’; and by Jesus, who ‘has enriched the moral heritage of humanity with an incomparable diamond’. Erasing any trace of his Jewish origin, Cattaoui here positioned himself as an educated gentleman sharing a form of liberalism common to a great part of the Eastern Mediterranean middle class in the early twentieth century, which, in this case, resulted in a mixture of religious ecumenism with European literary and philosophical models.

Even before the publication of Pour mes enfants, Jewish intellectuals living in turn-of-the-century Cairo had tried to renovate the local cultural arena. Leaving aside traditional rabbinical studies – such as Neveh Shalom by Rabbi Hazan – I should again mention the nationalist writings of Ya’qub Sannu’ and the works of the Syrian-born Jews Hillel Farhi and Shimon Moyal. Additionally, during the 1920s and 1930s, a few members of the Egyptian Jewish middle- and upper-classes published books of poetry, pamphlets and theatre plays in French: for instance, Joseph Cattaoui’s nephew Georges Cattaoui – a diplomat and literary critic, who later converted to Catholicism – the lawyer Emile Mosseri and the journalists and Zionist activists Lucien Sciuto and Albert Staraselski. Others frequently wrote for magazines and newspapers, such as La Bourse Egyptienne or Le Progrès Egyptien.

Pour mes enfants did not aim at being a sociopolitical text, but was primarily the philosophical divertissement of an educated gentleman – an ‘Egyptian of Jewish faith’, as Cattaoui saw himself – at ease both in the nationalist circles of interwar Cairo and in a bourgeois salon of Paris. As I found no reference to Pour mes enfants in any of the sources or in any published research on Egyptian Jews, it is hard to say something about its reception in Egypt or elsewhere. Such a generalised amnesia might indicate that it did not encounter much success, or simply that the book – as sometimes happens in history – quickly fell into oblivion. Be that as it may, I would still argue that the moral teachings presented in Pour mes enfants were not the intellectual speculations of Cattaoui alone, but they represented an idealised portrait of the sociocultural milieu to which the author belonged: a semi-colonial and polyglot bourgeoisie operating, and living, between the Levant and Europe, local arenas and the world economy. At the same time, this transnational (Jewish) bourgeoisie should not be interpreted as something completely new, but as a milieu that re-envisioned the role of mediator that the Jews had often had throughout Ottoman history. Pour mes enfants thus showed how family, morality and the values that one cultivated in life were believed to be universal notions shared by civilised men living on both shores of the Mediterranean and that referred – to paraphrase Jacob – to ‘a virtual community’ of French-speaking ‘bourgeois subjects simultaneously inhabiting national, colonial and diasporic space’.
A moral laboratory

So as to further engage in my discussion on bourgeois manhood and morality, I will now introduce the activities of the Société des Oeuvres Israélites de Bienfaisance (henceforth, Société) headed by Abramino Menasce, and the role it had in the foundation of Cairo’s Hôpital Israélite of ‘Abbasiyah in 1925–1926, showing how the moral advice contained in Pour mes enfants could be put into practice. The case of the Hôpital Israélite seems particularly pertinent, since, as pointed out by many, the creation of a modern health system in the Middle East as elsewhere not only had a medical and scientific purpose, but it also entailed a deeper therapeutic implication: to cure the body and give relief to the needy was a way – the way – to cure the moral illnesses of society and of the nation. This discourse was, by the 1920s, fairly common to the Eastern Mediterranean bourgeoisie, which from the mid-nineteenth century had also constructed its urban cultural identity around medicalised notions of modernity, respectability and public morality.

Menasce had founded the Société in 1916, and in the same year opened a Jewish polyclinic in the fashionable neighbourhood of Cité-Jardin. He was an exponent of a group of Jewish businessmen and entrepreneurs, all of whom had migrated to Egypt one or two decades before and who were trying to renovate the Cairo Jewish social arena, founding new associations and welfare organisations. Besides the Hôpital Israélite, it is worth remembering, for example, the Oeuvre de la Goutte de Lait founded by Isaac Benaroio in 1916, which – as seen when discussing the AIU schools of Cairo – soon became a highly efficient philanthropic and educational institution. By doing this, these men also wished to reduce the power of old elite families, such as the Cattaouis and Mosseris, and the formers’ alleged mismanagement of the communal structure and funds.

Apart from these initial struggles, in the subsequent years the cleavage between old and new elite would diminish – as shown by the fact that in the 1930s Menasce served as Vice-President of the Jewish Community of Cairo – leaving space for an image of communal unity and fraternity, further exemplified by the events that surrounded the founding of the Hôpital Israélite.

On 26 April 1925, the foundation stone of the hospital of ‘Abbasiyah was laid, with a religious ceremony performed by the Chief Rabbi of Cairo, Hayim Nahum, together with the representatives of the Jewish Community Council and of the Société. It was followed, in the afternoon of the same day, by an official inauguration that attracted around 4,000 people gathered under ‘a huge tent made of Arab tapestries’ located in the area where the hospital was to be built. Three ministers, the Governor of Cairo, a representative of the British High Commissioner, various consular authorities, ‘the elite of the Jewish population of Cairo’ and delegates of the Loge Eliahou Hanabi of the Alexandrian Bnei Brit attended the ceremony and listened to the fanfare Juive performing both the Egyptian national anthem and the Jewish Ha-Tiqvah.

Menasce gave a long speech explaining the process that had led to the foundation of the hospital, underlining the values and sentiments shared by all the men involved in the project. He spoke ‘with deep emotion and a feeling of real happiness’, and thanked everybody, from the bien aimé King Fu’ad to the civil and...
religious authorities present at the ceremony. His joy was due to the fact that he had accomplished ‘a long cherished dream’, which was also a ‘duty of humanitarian solidarity’.89 This had only been possible thanks to the usual generosity of Cairo Jews: ‘we know that one never addresses their good hearts in vain, and that no misery knocks on their door to no avail’. Amongst these benefactors were a few chers disparus, such as the uncle of Joseph Cattaoui, ‘H.E. Moïse de Cattaoui Pacha’, who had acted as President of the Jewish Community for forty-two years ‘with wisdom, love, and dedication’.90

That Menasce and other notables had tried in many ways to counter the power of Moïse Cattaoui was, by then, a fading memory, definitively put aside on a day of communal fraternity. All affluent Cairo Jews, and the members of the Société in particular, could only be praised for the foundation of the hospital. Women were almost totally absent from the scene, as well as from the Société itself, whose members – except for a few ladies cited as membres beinfaiteurs – were a tiny group of Jewish gentlemen that were now asked to ‘bring a little mortar and a small brick to cement and consolidate this building of philanthropy’, which would be like ‘a perpetual title of gratitude on the part of the poor and the sick’ that, in turn, ‘will bless their generous benefactors in eternity and God will reward you, as well as your dearest ones’.91 This circular vision of charity as the source of future reward in the world to come echoed, I would argue, the notion of tzedagah (‘charity’) depicted in many texts of Ottoman Jewish moral literature: ‘a pragmatic measure for relief of the poor and world stability’ and a way to promote social peace.92 What had changed was, then, so much the inner moral and religious meanings of caring for the poor, but rather the rituality through which it was displayed and the language utilised to describe it, now largely connected to a more Westernised and secularised model of philanthropy.

Older practices of charity, which were also assertions of communal authority, were transformed into modern and respectable bourgeois philanthropy. In addition, this was itself part of a broader Egyptian context, where the practice of poor relief in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries comprised religious obligations and communal strategies, as well as Ottoman and European colonial influences.93

About one and a half years later, in December 1926, Menasce gave an almost identical speech to celebrate the official opening of the Hôpital Israélite. The members of the Société had finally given birth to a son, the hospital, born out of their charitable spirit and which would bear their names for eternity: ‘two half-pavilions [...] have found their noble godfathers. There is just one orphan pavilion left. May it too, like its lucky brothers, find a tender foster father’.94 Such familial metaphors – connected to a transnational idea of bourgeois paternalism – were common to 1910s and 1920s Egyptian philanthropy: acting as good fathers of the poor and orphans meant being respectable and honourable fathers of the entire Egyptian nation.95 Moreover, if it is true that the initial phase of Egyptian nationalism was due to ‘a new elite formation of Egyptian professionals, like lawyers, doctor, and engineers’ – whose ideology was based not on a religious discourse, but on quite a secular one – it might then be argued that
Egyptian Jews, too, especially upper-class men involved in the local economic and social arena like Abramino Menasce and his comrades, were part of such a milieu or, in any case, resented its national rhetoric, behaving like the fathers not (just) of poor Jews, but of all the inhabitants of the city.96

This is confirmed by the fact that the hospital was conceived as a philanthropic institution destined to serve the Cairo population in its entirety. Ninety ‘free 3rd class’ beds out of a total of 160 had been reserved for the poor, ‘with no distinction of religious belief, nationality, or country of origin’. The rest of the beds were divided between ‘16 beds of 1st deluxe and 1st class, 22 beds of 2nd [class], 32 of paying 3rd class’.97 In 1925 and 1926, the non-paying patients made up 70 per cent of the total. The situation changed in 1927, when the non-paying patients made up about 51 per cent. However, this was also due to the fact that, as Dr Elie Naggiar – head of the Section Chirurgie ‘B’ et Pavillon Ginécologie – explained, in that year the hospital had increased the number of beds, and more paying patients could be admitted.98 That said, and despite what Menasce claimed, the vast majority of the patients were Jews: c.90 per cent in 1925 and 1926, and 67 per cent in 1927.99 The figures for the period from 1925 to 1927 underline that the Hôpital Israélite, at least in its initial phase, functioned as a polyclinic not for the whole of the Cairo population, but mainly for the Jewish lower classes. This could be linked to various factors, such as: the presence of other hospitals in other areas of Cairo, the number of beds at their disposal, changing admission policies adopted by the hospital and so on and so forth or, more probably, a combination of them all. Be that as it may, what an analysis of the foundation and initial years of the Hôpital Israélite confirmed is that even in a non-European setting such as Cairo, the hospital functioned as a fundamental stage, where the illnesses experienced by the poor became a way for the bourgeoisie to display its power and social status through philanthropy and to better define its ideas of public morality and respectability.100

Starting with the moral principles enunciated by Joseph Cattaoui in Pour mes enfants, in the previous pages I demonstrated how a new model of Jewish manhood was consolidated in interwar Egypt. Cattaoui imagined it through the figure of the honnête homme: a wise father, involved in the society that surrounded him and who never lost his inner ‘love for truth’ and ‘critical spirit’.101 Similar principles inspired the members of the Société, founded by Abramino Menasce in 1916, and that ten years later would contribute to establish the Cairo Hôpital Israélite. The model of bourgeois masculinity embodied by Cattaoui and his fellows was clearly not the only one present in Egypt at the time, not even among the Jews. Nonetheless, it became the hegemonic one by virtue of its proponents’ social and cultural influence, setting up a stereotype to which virtually everybody was expected to conform.102 Interwar Cairo Jews, so as to reframe their social personas, creatively picked up aspects of the bourgeois gentilhomme, the effendi and the Jewish talmid hakham, re-imagining themselves as members of a quintessentially harmonic and civilised milieu. It was also through novel forms of communication such as Pour mes enfants and the speeches of Abramino Menasce, as well as with the ceremonies sponsored by the Société, that the
Jewish gentlemen displayed their identity, transcending the boundaries of the Jewish community and contributing to the making of an effective public sphere, between the communal and the national, the moral and the political.\textsuperscript{103}

Conversions, interclass marriages and the quest for a noble past, 1920s–1940s

We have seen how the men who composed the Egyptian Jewish middle and upper class often depicted themselves as wise gentlemen and fathers of a respectable social milieu. Their discourses and the reasoning of Rabbi Hazan as it came out of Neveh Shalom all described the family and how it should function, yet they did not allow one to fully understand its more intimate and quotidian dynamics. To do so, one needs to connect more institutionalised archival sources with family memoirs and autobiographical testimonies, as it is there that this kind of information is to be found.\textsuperscript{104} As Burton demonstrated in the case of colonial and post-colonial India, memorial literature can be considered as ‘an enduring site of historical evidence and historiographical opportunity in and for the present’, and a space thanks to which a more inclusive reading of the past can be initiated.\textsuperscript{105} Looking at some of the memoirs published by Egyptian Jews over the past few years and reading them against the grain of the archive, I will thus ask what being Jewish meant for a family belonging to the middle and upper-middle strata, and which were the events considered as particularly worrying or crucial for its well-being. Were conversions to another religious faith and mixed marriages perceived as a menace to the existence of a Jewish family? Or did they have to face other, apparently less threatening, problems? What about interclass unions and the shift from arranged to love marriages? Were the latter slowly becoming the norm or not? And how did family lineage and notions of social distinction influence the choice of a future husband or wife?

Conversions were possibly the most threatening event that a family, and an entire community, could encounter. It was, then, with great anxiety that in 1914, the Jewish Community of Cairo announced that twenty-two Jewish boys who attended congregational schools had converted to Christianity. In reality, most of them were to return to Judaism soon after, and the city’s rabbinate made some sign documents stating that they had embraced Christianity ‘in a moment of mental insanity’. However, this episode shocked the Cairo Jewish leaders, who decided to create a special commission headed by H. Guetta in order to survey the issue.\textsuperscript{106}

A few days after the commission was established, Guetta wrote: ‘Nazli M.me Isaac Léon, a local subject, has come to my office with her thirteen-years-old son Victor Léon, who insisted that he wanted to become a Christian, since Christians do good things whereas Jews only do evil’.\textsuperscript{107} Victor attended the Ecole gratuite des frères of Faggala, Cairo – an institution that his mother had chosen for him and for one of his brothers, as she could not afford to pay for her children’s education. Her husband Isaac, an ‘Austrian national’, had left Cairo for...
Europe two years before, leaving Nazli alone with four children, supported by the very little money that the woman earned working as a tailor. Soon after Victor started to attend the *École gratuite des frères*, Nazli noticed that he had changed ‘his way of thinking’ and, according to what the boy said when answering his mother’s repeated questions, ‘the father Grégoire’ – one of his teachers – ‘promised him 50 [Egyptian] pounds if he became a Christian, and he is willing to become one’. The schoolteacher was apparently trying to take advantage of Victor’s young age and his family’s precarious economic status. But his mother’s prompt reaction, together with the help of the Jewish Community Council, managed to prevent the conversion.

Analysing the case of a Jewish girl who converted to Catholicism in 1929 Cairo, Abécassis argued for the overall invisibility of the Jewish mother and the primary role the father and the Jewish Community Council had:

> [T]he mothers of converted do not speak [...] , they do not have such right, that is to say they do not have the legitimacy and, most of all, because of their education they do not have access to a discourse capable of enunciating it.

Even though the case of Victor Léon was not strictly speaking a conversion, it is still possible to say that Nazli was instead an active actor, who contrasted the schoolteacher’s proselytism. Left alone by her husband – something that was not so infrequent in the Mediterranean region – Nazli had acted in his place and, faced with what she perceived to be a deeply troubling event, asked for communal help, asserting the public role that even a lower-class woman and mother could acquire in specific circumstances.

Let us now move to a different scenario. In mid-September 1932, *le tout Alexandrie* was shaken by the arrival in town from Rome of Pierre de Menasce, son of Félix de Menasce – a well-known businessman and one of the few upper-class Egyptian Zionists of the time. To the despair of his parents, Pierre had converted to Catholicism in 1926 and joined the Dominicans in the 1930s, changing his name to abbé Jean-Marie. Virtually all newspapers, from the Revisionist Zionist *La Voix Juive* to the non-Jewish *Le Phare Egyptien* and *Goha*, lamented the fact that he was going to celebrate Mass in Alexandria, and that far from hiding his civil personality [...] as it is common when one enters a religious order, [he] utilised [...] in addition to his father’s name that of his mother, putting public shame on two honourable families against their own will.

In fact, ‘a crowd of mostly Jewish curious’ followed each of his public appearances and this – *La Voix Juive* wrote – was a sign of ‘the lack of tact’ of Pierre de Menasce, because of whom ‘one went to church as if to a show’. Pierre de Menasce came from one of the most important Alexandrian Jewish families, which had given their sons a secular and open-minded education,
nurtured by long years of study in foreign colleges and universities. In this case, the conversion was not related to the proselytism of local congregational schools, but had matured after years of studies in Europe, where Pierre had come into contact with great Catholic intellectuals and particularly with Louis Massignon and Jacques Maritain. Catholicism was, for Pierre, a synonym for Europe and for that European culture which this ‘genial anti-conformist, a bit of an enfant terrible’, as his nephew Pietro remembered him, so deeply revered. Finally, the conversion was born out of his uneasiness at experiencing a very privileged socio-economic position, together with the attention ‘for the needs of the destitute’ and for ‘the most unconventional social engagement’. Whereas his relatives expressed their social engagement by, for example, financing charitable institutions such as the Ecole Fondation de Menasce or the Alexandrian Jewish hospital, Pierre converted to Catholicism and became a priest, thus acting in a much more radical manner.  

A similar story to that of Pierre de Menasce is that of Salomon Lagnado, a Cairo Jew who converted to Catholicism in the late 1910s and was also ordained as a priest, adopting the name of Jean-Marie. Salomon left his family in 1914 and lived most of his life in a Benedictine monastery in Jerusalem. As opposed to Pierre, he came from a conservative Cairo Jewish family originally from Aleppo, Syria. Of all the Jewish migrants arriving in Egypt in the late nineteenth century, the Syrians were probably those who were most attached to religious practices and traditions. His mother Zarifa, for example, even in Cairo, ‘insisted on following the ways of “Halab” [i.e. Aleppo], always wearing a black robe that covered her hair and body when going out of the house’. None of the members of the family – including his brother, Léon – spoke to Salomon for decades after he converted, as he had brought nothing but dishonour to a family that prised its good name above all. In the close-knit neighbourhood of Ghamra, all the neighbours knew about his apostate brother, and as Léon walked to temple each morning, […] our neighbours would shake their heads in sorrow that someone as devout as the Captain [i.e. Léon] would be forced to endure such a tragedy.

Salomon’s mother, Zarifa, never understood how ‘her most promising child, the one who had caught the eye of all his teachers at the Collège des Frères’ could have done such a thing to her and to ‘the Lagnados of Aleppo, […] one of the most illustrious rabbinical dynasties [of Syria]’. Even when, in the 1940s, Salomon came to visit her for the first time after twenty years, Zarifa still waited for him to say that ‘it had all been a mistake, that he had never intended to stray so far, and that he was […] returning to the faith of his ancestors’. As in the case of Victor Léon, Salomon also attended a congregational school for economic reasons. However, there was no immediate link – at least, judging from his family’s comments – between the conversion and the fact that he had attended the Collège des Frères. The conversion of Salomon seemed instead a
decision that had emerged out of nowhere, and that not only his mother and 
brother, but, according to them, the entire neighbourhood viewed as a shameful 
event that could not be explained in any rational way.

These three récits de conversion can be taken as different paths toward this 
event and of facing its possible consequences. The case of Victor Léon – as well 
as similar cases that occurred in Egypt and elsewhere – was not successful, 
because of the quick reaction of his family – namely, the mother – and then of 
the Jewish Community. Thanks to the documents produced by the latter, it was 
possible to reconstruct the incident, which should also be contextualised within 
the struggles that opposed the Jewish communal leadership to congregational 
schools in the mid-1910s, when the AIU had just closed its schools and the 
Jewish communal educational system was being restructured, as discussed in 
the first chapter. In the two later, successful cases of conversion to Catholicism, 
the converted were also ordained as priests. This detail might hint to the fact that 
conversions to Catholicism should be viewed as unusual events that, when they 
occeded, were primarily due to intimate, almost existential reasons very difficult 
for historians to discern, and that were rarely linked to specific sociopolitical cir-
cumstances of the interwar period. As explained in the last chapter, the only 
significant episode that goes in this direction seems to be the conversion of a 
group of Communist Jews to Islam in the late 1940s, in the aftermath of the birth 
of the State of Israel and the consequences this had for Egyptian Jews – espe-
cially for those personally involved in the Communist movement, which strongly 
opposed Israel.

Concerning women, the cases that have been recorded were generally either 
young girls that were proselytised while attending congregational schools – as 
with the one investigated by Abécassis116 – or women that wished to convert to 
Islam in order to marry a Muslim. This was, for instance, the case of a certain 
Regina Mizrahi, who converted to Islam in Alexandria in 1928: ‘We have tried 
…but with no results’, wrote the Chief Rabbi of Alexandria, David Prato, in his 
diary, describing what painful events the conversion and the mixed marriage 
were for her parents.117 From all this, one could perhaps also discern a gendered 
dimension of the conversion: whereas men converted following very individual 
processes, some women seem to have found in the conversion – and the 
dynamics that it provoked – a space for obtaining a greater degree of public visi-
bility and/or autonomy vis-à-vis the family or the marriage. This was true for 
Victor’s mother, and also for Regina Mizrahi – who converted to Islam even 
though her family and the local religious authorities tried every possible means 
to stop her doing so. On the other hand, congregational schools do not seem to 
have had a great role in the conversions of either men or women.

The case of Regina Mizrahi also introduces a second very interesting theme, 
hitherto not given much attention – that is, mixed marriages. According to the 
Egyptian censuses, throughout the entire monarchical period – roughly from the 
1920s to the 1950s – no more than around thirty marriages between a Jew and a 
Muslim per year – that is, 5 to 6 per cent of all marriages contracted by the Jews 
were registered.118 This is not a totally irrelevant figure, but it is still far from
Rabbi Prato’s frequent complaint of the ‘plethora of peculiar mixed marriages!’
that allegedly took place in Alexandria in the interwar years. Moreover, the
figure cited above does not indicate if the non-Jewish partner converted to
Judaism or vice versa and which religious faith they chose for their (eventual)
offspring. At a purely theoretical/juridical level, one might speculate that mar-
rriages between Jews and Muslims should refer to a Jewish woman who married
a Muslim man – as according to Islamic law, a Muslim woman cannot marry a
non-Muslim.

Quantifying the number of marriages between Jews and Christians is a rather
thorny issue, on which it is hard to find precise figures – also considering the fact
that many Jews and Christians, be they Greeks or Italians, were not Egyptian
nationals. The fact that many memoirs by Egyptian Jews mention cases of
Christian-Jewish marriages means that these events did occur and that the families
perceived them as a vivid threat. This is further confirmed when considering
that, as will be discussed in the subsequent chapter, interwar Jewish newspapers
also wrote about mixed marriages as a very dangerous menace to the unity of the
family. The evidence assigned to marriage between Jews and Christians could be
explained by the fact that oftentimes Jews, Greeks, Italians and other Europeans
attended the same schools and lived in the same neighbourhoods.

Obviously, most of the recorded cases of conversion occurred either in Cairo
or Alexandria, as it was there that the vast majority of Jews resided. Those who
lived in minor centres, however, were not wholly exempt from the risks of mis-
sionary proselytism and conversion to Christianity, as testified, for instance, by
the worried letters that, in 1893, Giacomo De Semo – an Italian Jew and chan-
cellor of the Agenzia consolare d’Italia – had sent to the AIU from Mansourah –
a small town 100 km north of Cairo, where at the time fifty Jewish families lived.
According to De Semo, due to the lack of Jewish schools, many boys and girls
are obliged to attend the schools of the frères, the Franciscan schools and
those of the Anglican mission [...], and I often happen to see children who
take back home images of saints and of the Virgin Mary that teachers give
them and [the children] know very well the Christian prayers...

But these, apparently, were the most harmful consequences that the attendance
at the schools implied, and the parents did not pay too much attention to them, as
opposed to De Semo, for whom the parents ‘even though religiously conserva-
tive, are ignorant and, thinking that these are only innocuous habits that chil-
dren learn, laugh about them’. If only a minority among Egyptian Jews did experience conversion or mixed
marriage, it was the marriage tout court – an event common to virtually every
body – that was perceived as almost equally threatening. Given the importance
attributed to class by many Jews in both Alexandria and Cairo, one would think
that ‘interclass unions were not all that common in [the] early twentieth-century’
– as Hanan Kholoussy showed in a study dedicated to the history of the Egyptian
Islamic marriage. But, as opposed to the Muslim case, the examples that I will
now introduce go in the complete opposite direction, as interclass unions seem to have been quite common among Jews.

When David Del Burgo – in late colonial Cairo – announced that he intended to marry a poor girl named Simha Molko Negrin, whose family had migrated to Egypt from the Greek city of Ioannina a few years earlier, his father warned him that ‘we absolutely cannot relate with a family from such a milieu!’ David did not change his mind, ‘married Simha and […] was rejected by his family and disinherited’. In another case, the grandfather of Fortunée Dwek came from a well-to-do Cairo Jewish family and married a girl from the lower-middle class ‘against the will of his own family who dreamed a better match for the little boy of the family, a match that would be more appropriate to their social status’. Similarly to the previous cases, the marriage of Berthe Tilche and Silvio Pinto in 1923 Alexandria was considered a mésalliance, since ‘the Pintos were at the periphery of […] society’, as opposed to the Tilches, who were instead part of the Egyptian Jewish elite, together with ‘the Rolos, the [de] Menasces, the Cattaouis. […] La société was very close and very snobbish’. Last but not least is the case of Lucette Lagnado’s maternal grandmother – born into a wealthy Alexandrian Jewish family – who in 1921 married Isaac Matalon, ‘a womanizer with a mysterious income […] from Cairo’, against the wishes of her parents, who did not even attend the wedding ceremony and, ‘disappointed at Alexandra’s choice of a husband’, cut her off completely.

So as to prevent these kinds of incidents, the families of the groom and the bride usually organised an encounter between them, the entrevue:

That is to say a meeting between the people in charge of the two families, generally in a neutral space. The perspective groom and bride could thus meet, see how the other was and then express their feelings to the parents.

For instance, the entrevue – which then led to the marriage – of Isaac Chalem and Mathilde Benattar in the early 1920s took place in the fashionable Café Groppi, one of the most renowned patisseries of central Cairo: ‘On that day’, recounted their nephew Roland Bertin, ‘my father, who acted as the entremeteur maison, together with my mother and their servant, made up the escort. The Chalem, on their part, had sent as delegates the eldest brother of uncle Isaac, Victor Chalem and his wife Victorine’. Moreover, when Léon Delburgo, the son of the above cited David, fell in love with his neighbour Annette Cohen, he asked his widowed mother ‘to go to […] Léon Cohen [i.e. Annette’s father], and ask on his behalf the hand of Annette’. Since Annette’s father consented to the marriage, ‘the day after Léon Del Burgo arrived […] with a bunch of flowers and a modest engagement ring’. In other words, as Ines Toussieh Escojido – born in Cairo in 1910 – noted, ‘marriages were sometimes negotiated’, but ‘there were love marriages. My sister Fortunée’s marriage had been the result of love at first sight’, even though she belonged to the middle class, whilst her future husband came from a renowned family of the Jewish elite, the de Picciottos.
As Bahloul wrote in her ethnographic account of a Judeo-Arab house in colonial Algeria, ‘the narration of family memories becomes a complex process of social and cultural identity’ and ‘a way to express one’s identity’. The information that I gathered, derived from various memoirs and interviews by Egyptian Jews at a distance of several decades since these events took place, obviously entail an individual reframing of the past, and thus some of the details might not have happened exactly as they were narrated. However, there is still a clear underlying theme upon which historians can elaborate: interclass marriages did occur, even when they implied that either the groom or the bride had to break away from their family. As said for conversions, interclass unions were also probably due to a combination of socio-economic and intimate factors. For the first one, upward social mobility through marriage is a possible explanation, and a phenomenon that can be found in many societies. The small size of the Jewish population and the tendency to marry between Jews surely made this kind of marriage more frequent in the absence of better-suited candidates. Furthermore, from a more cultural point of view, the diffusion from the lower-middle class to the elite of a quite similar educational and cultural background – that is, of a shared social imaginary – made it easier to marry outside one’s immediate circle.

That a marriage occurred even when the family was against it, and the fact that people from different social levels intermarried, might be taken as signals of a transition from arranged to love marriages. The changes brought about by a Westernised educational system and the idea of romantic love that one could find, for example, in widely read European novels and in the women’s press.
allowed for the spreading of novel ideas of the couple and family life from the
early colonial period. Moreover, based upon a sample of almost 200 marriage
certificates delivered by the Chief Rabbinate of Alexandria in the year 1934, one
knows that the groom was on average five years older than the bride. The
couple were thus almost coetaneous who presumably shared similar values and
life projects. Although this does not provide a definitive statistical analysis –
especially in the absence of similar data for earlier periods – it could be inter-
preted as an additional proof of the spread, at least in the monarchical period, of
a more romantic and modern idea of marriage and of the couple.

Yet, the family and its moral obligations did not disappear from the picture. A
very vivid description of the important role that the family still played can, in
fact, be found in a short story by the Cairo-born Jacqueline Kahanoff, who in
1945 wrote of a girl that, in interwar Egypt, did not want to accept the groom
that her mother was proposing to her:

‘Mamma, how can you want me to marry without love?…’.
Mrs Hakim cried, ‘But habibi, ma chérie, in my time girls got married
that way. […] What’s different with you?’.
‘We weren’t brought up that way. That’s the difference’.
Mrs Hakim became angry. ‘God curse those French schools! We send
our children there to be educated and they come back with the crazy modern
ideas and turn against us, their parents, who have sacrificed everything for
them!’

All this, together with practices such as the 
entrevue, call for greater attention in
defining what was an arranged marriage and what was not, underlining to what
extent – as has been demonstrated in the case of early republican Turkey – in the
first decades of the twentieth century ‘the line between arranged marriages and
love marriages was often not […] clear’.

A similar hybrid approach, neither modern nor traditional, can be found in the
families’ ideas of social distinction, which had to do with feelings of bourgeois
respectability, but also with centuries-old notions of Jewish honour and pride.

Many Egyptian Jewish families envisioned their history and ancestors through a
process of embellishment and ennoblement of the past, parallel to that seen in Far-
geon’s Les juifs en Égypte. Family ancestors were often said to have traversed the
Mediterranean, from Sefarad to Italy, Greece or the Ottoman Empire, to finally
find refuge in Egypt. More than a few, in fact, claimed Sephardi ancestry and
proudly commemorated Spain and the important roles played by their families
before and after the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula. For instance, the Del
Burgos ‘descended from an important family, that came from the town of Burgos,
in Spain. A doctor from this family’, in order to escape from the anti-Jewish perse-
cutions of the Spanish Inquisition, moved to Leghorn in the fifteenth century. ‘At
that time, the Pope in Rome was seriously ill. Several doctors were called to cure
him’, but only ‘doctor Burgo […] could make him feel better. As a sign of grati-
tude, the Pope honoured him by conferring the noble particle “Del”’.
The discovery of a shared background was something that immediately made people think that they belonged to the same family, opening up possibilities of marriage between the respective offspring. The grandmothers of André Aciman became friends while shopping ‘in a small marketplace in Alexandria’ in the early 1940s, even though they had already known each other for years:

‘But why didn’t you ever speak to me?’ […].
‘I used to think you were French’ […].
‘French? And whatever made you think I was French? Je suis italienne, madame’ she added, as if that were a far greater distinction.
‘As am I!’.
‘Yes? Are you? But we are from Leghorn’.
‘But so are we!’[140]

The Alexandrian businessman Silvio Pinto even wrote a manuscript on the history of the Pinto family, to both describe and celebrate his family’s past and ensure its transmission to the future generations:

The Pinto family came to Livorno in 1500. In 1800, the Pintos had a factory in Livorno for the production of coral objects. […] They also owned many buildings on one street, and there was a saying, ‘These houses are not dipinte’, painted, ‘but di Pinto’, belonging to Pinto.[141]

On the other hand, Clairette Fresco, born in Cairo in 1927, was told that her family left Spain during the time of the Inquisition. […] They travelled through the Mediterranean and eventually ended up in Constantinople. I have a great-grandfather who became a financial advisor to the Sultan […]. When the Turks conquered Egypt, they needed somebody to take care of the finances. They sent my great-grandfather…[142]

These family narratives are generally not precise, but located in a vague and always-distant time and space, and entail legendary episodes told from generation to generation. This was the case of the Gattegnos, an Alexandrian Jewish family whose ancestors had lived in Zaragoza and Thessalonika: ‘In Egypt, Albert Gattegno founded a construction and electrical enterprise’, wrote his granddaughter Laura,

he was the successful man who always wore white linen suits, Panama tie and jackets […]. Nobody remembers where exactly he was born […]: ‘Que veux tu, je ne me rappelle pas de tous ces particuliers … Faut que tu saches que nous étions tous en Espagne au XVI siècle.’ […][143]

The same was true for the Lagnados, who, as already mentioned, belonged to an ancient rabbinical family from Aleppo. Zarifa, Lucette Lagnado’s paternal grandmother,
loved to say how in Syria, the family had dined with kings. She never elaborated, and it wasn’t clear if there had actually been monarchs in her social circle in Syria or if she was simply referring to the family’s illustrious past […] . Though Aleppo was long ago, its culture still exerted powerful, almost mystical hold on all those who traced their origins there […] . To be a Halabi Jew meant obeying a set of social and religious conventions that dated back centuries and almost never changed with the times.\textsuperscript{144}

Finally, even though Paolo Terni – who came from an Alexandrian Jewish family – knew for sure that ‘great-grandfather Michelangelo’ had been ‘the founder of the Egyptian branch of the family’ and that Michelangelo’s wife was named ‘Linda Coronel, daughter of a Portuguese ship owner’, he could not deny that things became incredibly complicated ‘if to all that I add Ottoman Joanina where my maternal grandfather was born and my grandmother’s nineteenth-century Leghorn’, to the point that in the end he was hardly ‘able to imagine’ what his family history as a whole looked like.\textsuperscript{145}

The often imaginary remembrance of \textit{Sefarad} or Aleppo thus distinguished one family from another, becoming ‘a castle in a distant haze, a golden age, a nobility to offset fallen mundane realities’ or, to the contrary, to strengthen the family’s socio-economic success.\textsuperscript{146} It constituted a re-articulation of the notion of \textit{limpieza de sangre} (‘blood purity’) and of Ottoman Jewish ideas of personal and family honour.\textsuperscript{147} At the same time, it blended with novel and more secular ideas of bourgeois respectability, as those seen in Cattaoui’s \textit{Pour mes enfants}. Interestingly enough, virtually all the narratives that I have come across refer to male ancestors and not to women, who are only mentioned as more contemporary and real mothers or grandmothers. This confirms that – as Cattaoui wrote in his pamphlet – men were the undisputed chefs de famille and that if notions of patriarchy surely evolved over time, they nevertheless still exercised great influence, even in monarchical times. On the other hand, what allowed for a greater visibility for women were often, though not always, issues regarded as typically feminine, such as marriage and its arrangement – as seen in the quotes from Kahanoff and Aciman.

Throughout the late colonial and monarchical era, Egyptian Jewish families tried to reorganise themselves according to different ideals and legacies. From what has been said, it seems that conversions to other religious faiths were, on the whole, quite rare. When they occurred, they had to do with very personal reasons, rather than external factors, such as the attendance at a congregational school. Mixed marriages were equally unusual events. On the other hand, inter-class unions and an ambivalent yet recognisable transition from arranged to love marriages started to occur.\textsuperscript{148} The family not only had a role in the organisation of the marriage – for example, through a practice such as the \textit{entrevue} – but also elaborated on and shared partly imagined genealogies that distinguished one family from another and that constituted an integral part of one’s identity.

As Krämer noted, the family always remained one of the spaces where an Egyptian Jewish specificity was maintained.\textsuperscript{149} Although this is undisputable if
one considers, for instance, the low number of conversions and mixed marriages, at a cultural historical level the situation is a bit more complicated. Egyptian Jews, indeed, abided by rules and logics that depended on Judaism and its religious-legal framework. But at the same time, these rules also referred to a wider moral world that reflected the diversity of early twentieth-century Egyptian urban societies. This brought about the consolidation of a hybrid identity similar to those adopted by other Eastern Mediterranean middle classes: an identity always in the making, which reflected the numerous paths and negotiations that, since at least the late Ottoman era, Egyptian Jews experienced in their complex and unfinished itinerary at the crossroads between tradition and modernity.

‘A community that goes to pot’: Rabbi David Prato and the Jews of Alexandria, 1927–1936

The writings of Hazan on the one hand and Cattaoui on the other, together with a number of family memories, showed how Egyptian Jews lived in a complex and heterogeneous society not always easy to traverse and understand. This is even truer if one considers what an external observer, yet one deeply involved in local Jewish affairs – the Italian David Prato, Chief Rabbi of Alexandria between 1927 and 1936 – thought and wrote. Looking at the Jews of Alexandria from the perspective of Prato can give us a more nuanced understanding of the interwar period, showing how difficult it was for a Jew coming from the northern shores of the Mediterranean to understand the Egyptian Jewish model of identity in its fullest terms.

In order to explain Prato’s arrival in Alexandria, it is to be remembered how, from the early nineteenth century until at least the Libyan War (1911–1912), Egypt had a privileged connection to Italy. Moreover, until the end of the nineteenth century, Italian had been the main language of communication in Alexandria and in the Eastern Mediterranean at large. In those decades, thousands of Italians migrated to Alexandria, where they often worked as artisans and small entrepreneurs, becoming a relevant component of the city’s socio-economic arena. Many of the city’s Jews had – or claimed to have – Livornese ancestry, and a number of them held Italian nationality. The tie between Italian Jews and Egypt had first played a role in the appointment of the Italian Raffaello Della Pergola as the city’s chief rabbi from 1910 until 1922. As Fascist Italy wished to increase its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean region in the late 1920s, the appointment of another Italian as chief rabbi was not only a way to confirm the role historically played in the city, but also something that could cement the cultural and political linkages between the new Italian Government, Egypt and the Jews living in the two countries.

At the end of 1926, Enzo Sereni – President of the Italian Jewish Community Council – formally asked the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Angelo Sacerdoti, if he wanted to become Chief Rabbi of Alexandria, as the city’s Jewish Community Council had suggested his name. Sacerdoti dismissed the proposal, ‘both because
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of the difficulty of leaving my job in Rome and for family reasons'. A few months later, in February 1927, David Prato – born in Leghorn in 1882, a former disciple of the renowned rabbi and cabbalist Elia Benamozegh, hazan (‘cantor’) of the synagogue of Florence and head of the Talmud Torah of the Jewish Community of that city – decided to accept the ‘flattering offer’ made in the meanwhile by Alexandrian Jews, and left Italy for Egypt with his wife. The rabbi arrived in Alexandria to ‘take his part of responsibility in the life of this Jewish generation’ and in order to ‘live in an environment where Judaism takes place more naturally […] perhaps because of those flashes of Oriental nostalgia that came out of my life in the ghetto of Leghorn’. Prato would remain in the city for ten years, traversing what in 1931 he would describe as ‘painful years […] or perhaps painful is too much, I would say difficult years’, during which he would face many professional and personal difficulties and encounter a Jewry far from the romantic Oriental character he had fantasised about.

When in Alexandria, Prato was, in fact, surrounded by ‘a community that goes to pot from a spiritual point of view’, led by Jews educated in congregational schools, who seemed to him uninterested in Jewish rites and religious observance. In one of the first speeches that he gave in 1927, the rabbi thus said that even though he bowed to ‘the banking and commercial competence of the councilmen’, the latter should ‘bow to the competence of the Rabbi’ – that is, his religious and moral authority. The Jewish Community Council had ‘the duty of letting me work. I do not want that this environment transforms me, I rather want to try transforming it’. A few years later, in 1931, Prato explained more clearly how he intended to enact this transformation: the main efforts should be for the youth, ‘to educate it in a secure way’, and then for the previous generation of Alexandrian Jews, ‘so that it does not go away and most of all so that it corrects its idolatry in pure Judaism’. This should take place within pertinent spaces and institutions: ‘the school, […] the Rabbinate and the Synagogue, […] la Yeshibà [sic!] and […] also the Youth Circle and the Zionist Organisation’.

As clear by now, Egyptian Jews at the time lacked a proper Jewish educational system and very often attended congregational or secular colleges. Nonetheless, Jewish schools – funded by the Jewish Community Council or private philanthropists – existed in both Alexandria and Cairo. Besides the communal schools, Alexandria hosted the girls’ Ecole Chadai-Yaazor, founded in 1892 thanks to a donation by Jacques de Menasce; the Ecole Etz Haim, founded in 1911; the already cited Ecole Fondation de Menasce; the Ecole Della Pergola, established in 1919 and named after Rabbi Della Pergola; and the co-ed secondary school Lycée de l’Union Juive pour l’Enseignement, funded by a group of Jewish notables affiliated to the Bnei Brit. In addition, there was also a kindergarten, vocationa schools and various œuvres pro-scolaires, such as the Amélée Torah and the Enfance Hereuse. Most of these schools shared a similar educational programme, which was – according to Prato – inspired by that of the AIU. Although the rabbi knew that by the 1930s the AIU, except for the school of Tantah, did not operate anymore in Egypt, he was convinced that ‘its memory [still exists] in the spirit and soul of many headmasters and teachers of our schools’.
Prato was surely thinking about former AIU teachers employed in local Jewish schools, such as Elie Antebi – headmaster of the Ecole Fondation de Menasse. Visiting this school in January 1928, Prato found it ‘tired’ and dominated by a ‘relaxed Jewish spirit’. Antebi, moreover, was said to be a free-thinker, who wanted to make the pupils ‘future members of his lodge’, the French Freemasonry. This impression would not change over the following years, during which Prato continued to monitor the school’s activities, and, of course, the headmaster, described in 1934 as no less than a ‘former rabbi, atheist, secular, president of the French freemasonry, […] a dishonest tradesman and usurer’. Through Antebi and the Francophile education the pupils received in this and other schools, Prato therefore got ‘an idea of the work that mamlakhat Tzarfat [‘the French government’] is doing in the Community’. Prato also bitterly stigmatised the lax attitude of the de Menasce family, urging the ‘poor devils’ Georges, Charles and Edmond de Menasce to increase the family’s funding and solve the financial problems that the school had.

Very harsh criticisms were reserved for the MLF and all Jews who supported its activities, first and foremost the Chief Rabbi of Cairo, Hayim Nahum, whom Prato knew previously, as they had both been involved in the early twentieth-century European Jewish interest for Ethiopian Jews. Prato considered ‘a disgrace’ the fact that Nahum was in very good relations with the MLF – a school where the Jewish pupils ‘are forced to desecrate the Shabbat and […] the name of the Eternal’. As opposed to the tight links that Nahum had with the Cairo MLF, the headmaster of the MLF of Alexandria viewed Prato ‘like wool over his eyes’. However, the rabbi could not deny that this institution had accepted his suggestion of not teaching classes on Saturday afternoon, and that, as in Cairo – the Alexandrian lycée français organised a Hebrew language course. In fact, as the case of interwar Cairo discussed in the previous chapter demonstrated, the MLF always maintained quite a balanced approach towards the Jews – first, because the former constituted a great portion of its student population, but also because the institution’s secular ideology reflected a religious neutrality that seldom resulted in explicit feelings against any religious belief. Even the congregational schools so vehemently reprehended by Prato – for whom they had ‘destroyed the souls of two generations’ of Alexandrian Jews, leaving them with ‘a soul shaped in hypocrisy’ – had rarely tried to proselytise their Jewish pupils.

The rabbi’s comments confirm the enduring difficulty for Egyptian Jews to establish a comprehensive and effective educational system and the appeal that European schools had on them. Second, they highlight that the Alexandrian Jewish leaders did not always regard schools and the construction of a durable Jewish cultural and educational arena as crucial vis-à-vis more profitable and instant socio-economic activities. In order to contrast such a lack of Jewish conscience, Prato – who had studied and lived in Florence, the main centre of Italian Zionism in the early twentieth century – then intended to spread this ideology and, at the same time, to reinforce traditional religious beliefs and practices.

Zionist ideas already started to circulate in Egypt in the late nineteenth century, attracting a very small minority of the Jewish population. Despite the
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fact that a few Zionist associations and youth movements existed both in Cairo and Alexandria, most of the Jews, and the Jewish middle and upper classes in particular, were not actively involved in them and only supported the migration of Jews to Palestine indirectly and through occasional funding. In Alexandria, with the notable exception of Félix de Menasce, an ardent Zionist and a friend of Hayim Weizmann, almost all the other Jewish leaders opposed this ideology and the Zionist endeavours of Prato. Alfred Tilche, Vice-President of the Jewish Community Council and President of the communal School Committee, was, for example, extremely worried about ‘the competition that Zionism here does (but is it really so?) to local affairs’, and in 1928 threatened to resign if Prato continued to manifest Zionist ideas.

Despite this, the rabbi never hesitated in openly propagandising Zionism, not even in front of King Fu’ad, whom he met in September of that same year. For the rabbi, Fu’ad was ‘always misinformed, [with the] usual prejudices’ about Zionism, and ‘sure of the impossibility’ of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. According to the sovereign, the Jews should instead try to ‘obtain rights there where [. . .] they are denied and more practically start to migrate towards Argentina’. Prato replied that the Jews had a ‘historical right’ over Palestine, and that Zionism stood carefully upon a ‘balance between reality and dream’. The king’s opposition to Zionism was due not only to international politics and the role that he had in the Muslim world, but also – Prato wrote – to the misinformation of people like the President of the Cairo Jewish Community, Joseph Cattaoui, and Rabbi Nahum. In 1931, Nahum apparently convinced Fu’ad that ‘Zionism being a synonym for Communism, those Egyptian Jews who promote it are also guilty of Bolshevik propaganda’.

As the research by Krämer confirmed that Cattaoui and Nahum did view Zionist activities as a potential danger to the Jews’ sociopolitical stability, Prato was right, from his point of view, in feeling rather isolated vis-à-vis the Egyptian monarchy and his Cairo Jewish counterparts. In reaction to such a feeling, but also because of an inner sense of Italianness, Prato tried to strengthen the link between Alexandrian Jews and Italy, which, in previous decades, had been weakened by the growing relevance – both from a cultural and political point of view – of Britain and France. As previously noted, the Italian Government regarded the appointment of Prato as Chief Rabbi of Alexandria as a crucial step for Italy’s penetration into the Eastern Mediterranean region, in some cases overestimating the rabbi’s influence on local Jews. The solid relations between Prato and the Italian Government is confirmed by the hearing that Benito Mussolini gave him before the rabbi left Italy for Alexandria, and by a second one in August 1927, shortly before Prato took up his job. During this second meeting in Rome, Prato and Mussolini discussed juridical problems that the Italian nationals living in Egypt had, and also more inherently Jewish topics, such as the rabbinical college created in 1926 in Rhodes – at the time part of the Italian Dodecanese – and the situation of Italian Jews in Thessalonika, in the Italian East Africa and, of course, in Egypt. Prato suggested that Mussolini create an office for Jewish affairs within the Italian Foreign Ministry, as he believed that
the already existing office for the Levant was not prepared to cope with the problems that the Jews had in the Eastern Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{179} The collaboration between Prato and Fascism continued throughout the 1930s, and in 1934 the Italian Consul General in Alexandria wrote to the Italian Ambassador in Cairo that Prato was ‘a good Jew [...] and a good Italian. [...] his Zionism does not mean the disowning of Italian nationality’, but only aimed at ‘rebuilding in the cradle of Israel a hearth of renovated and more vivid religious faith’.\textsuperscript{180} Yet, the support given by Prato to Fascist foreign politics should not be overstated, but rather inscribed in the strategy adopted during those years by many Italian Jewish leaders, whom – Toscano explained – ‘foresaw Jewish collaboration in a Fascist Mediterranean policy without sacrificing their dignity or Zionist aspirations’, something which would continue until the Fascist racial laws of 1938.\textsuperscript{181} This is very evident from what the rabbi wrote after the 1927 hearing with Mussolini. If, on the one hand, Prato admitted that Mussolini had positively impressed him because of his ‘clear vision, iron will’, the rabbi was also relieved by the fact that ‘we did not end talking about the situation in Ere[z]Israel, otherwise I would have been very embarrassed’.\textsuperscript{182}

Knowing his connections to Italy and the Fascist government, the Egyptian Jewish leaders soon started to gossip about the political positioning of Prato. In 1931, a rumour had it that the rabbi was a ‘Fascist spy’ and that he had hung a portrait of Mussolini in his office in Alexandria, throwing away that of King Fu’ad.\textsuperscript{183} What is true is that Prato maintained a very negative opinion of the Jews involved in the Egyptian political arena, and was sure that ‘to let a dozen of Jews have a ministerial job [...] is not such a great advantage when compared to far-removed dangers’.\textsuperscript{184} After taking part in the funeral of King Fu’ad in 1936, Prato was, in fact, convinced that ‘Jews and Italians only have to worry [...] about the changes that will follow his death’, and he auspicated that the Jews would now be ‘prudent and that we maintain a strict political neutrality’. His hope was immediately contradicted during the elections for the Egyptian Chamber of Deputies, which took place over those very same days. The Wafd eventually decided not to put forward any of the ‘Jewish candidates’, who had already started ‘grabbing each other by the hair [...] in order to get a seat’. On the other side, some political opponents attacked a group of Jewish Wafdist sympathisers in a Cairo polling station. Prato was convinced that the people to be blamed for the incident were Rabbi Nahum and all the Jews who followed his ‘insolent exhibitionism of love and prostitution for the Egyptian nation. Buon appetito!’\textsuperscript{185}

As I will later explain, acts of anti-Semitism did increase in 1930s Egypt, mainly as a consequence of the Palestine situation.\textsuperscript{186} However, in this specific case, the attack was probably due to the fact that those Jews were supporters of the Wafd, and not due to their religious beliefs. In addition, the Chief Rabbi of Cairo – whom Prato, that always maintained Italian citizenship, accused of prostitution for the Egyptian nation – could be said to be simply supporting his country, Egypt, at a time of international and domestic difficulty. Besides the growing interference of radical Islamic movements such as the Ikhwan al-Muslimun, or
more concrete problems like the country’s overpopulation, a few months after the elections Egypt and Great Britain signed the so-called Anglo-Egyptian Treaty. With the treaty, Britain recognised the independence of Egypt and withdrew its troops from throughout its territory, except for the Suez Canal. The agreement also put an end to the Ottoman system of the Capitulations, which had until then granted juridical and economic advantages to minority groups, including the Jews. All in all, the path indicated by Prato – that is, an unclear mix of Italianness and Zionism – seems to have largely disregarded the importance of this new political context, whilst overestimating the impact of Egyptian nationalism on the Jews. Moreover, from this, it also becomes clearer how Prato very often looked at Egyptian Jews through Orientalist and quasi-colonial eyes, similarly to what the AIU teachers had done about two decades earlier. As for them, as well as for Prato, Egypt was other from Europe: ‘The things I learnt here in two years, I would not have learnt them in twenty years in Italy. What a country!’

Similarly to his failure in the political realm, Prato did not achieve all the results that he hoped for, even when addressing the Jews’ religious education and the activities of the synagogue. Since his arrival in Alexandria, he had felt that the Jews needed to be guided towards a more scrupulous and solemn kind of Judaism. First, the rabbi lamented the spread of mixed marriages, citing various cases that occurred in Alexandria, such as the following one from 1928: ‘Clandestine marriage: the son of Abramino Benlassin [has come to my office] with his cousin. He wants to marry a Christian Italian ready to convert’.

The European and congregational schools were, for Prato, the spaces where the first interaction between the future groom and bride most often occurred: ‘Today, I came across two certificates of single status of two young women about to marry two Protestant English. To my usual question, that is where they studied, they answered: at the Scottish college’. From what has been established in this chapter, however, one can argue that mixed marriages were rather uncommon, that the attendance of congregational schools rarely had an impact on one’s sense of Jewishness and only in a few cases did this lead to mixed marriage or conversion. The complaints of Prato should therefore be understood in the framework of his own approach to Judaism and his rigorous adherence to the Jewish law, which seem to have eventually led to an overestimation of these events.

Prato also complained about the number of divorces, arguing that they were due to the ‘absolute lack of solemnity with which weddings had so far been celebrated’, apparently not considering all the regulatory efforts that had been enacted by Rabbi Hazan only about thirty years earlier. Even the music performed in the synagogues seemed inappropriate to him, and he asked the choirs to perform more lively tunes, hoping this ‘might help to give some energy to these numb people’. One year later, in 1928, during a session of the Jewish Community Council, Prato further explained that he wished to ‘ennoble the Synagogue services’ and ‘establish a severe exam for the Maggiorità of both males and females [i.e. the bar and bat mitzvah]’.
In the case of the *initiation des jeunes filles*, Prato followed the steps of his predecessors, assigning to it a central role in the education of the girls, although the rabbi confessed that ‘except for few rare and laudable exceptions, the bourgeoisie and the so-called aristocracy kept afar from it and the ceremony’, as had always been the case, ‘is attended almost exclusively by the students of the communal schools, the daughters of the people [le figlie del popolo]'. Speaking to the ‘dearest daughters’ who participated in the ceremony in 1929, Prato explained that the *initiation* sanctioned ‘the passage from the light-heartedness of a life without obligations […] to a life made of obligations, […] of the precepts of our Law’. To each of these girls, whose ‘little heart beats hard, hard because of the emotion’, the ceremony would show what it meant to be ‘holy, fearful of God’ like the Four Mothers of Israel or, in simpler terms, ‘no pride, […] no coquetry’. One of the novelties that Prato introduced in Alexandria was a boys’ *yeshivah* – a religious school – which he founded in 1928. For the rabbi, it was a space in which ‘the spirit of Moscé Rabbenu [i.e. the prophet Moses]’ wafted and where the Jewish religious texts would be studied in-depth. The *yeshivah* was, for Prato, one of the most rewarding experiences of his Alexandrian years, as thanks to it ‘several trembling souls were recuperated […], a few conversions were notoriously avoided’ and finally ‘a certain intimacy started to spread among the participants’. Moreover, the school became a crossroads of Jewish personalities from all over Europe, such as the French writer Edmond Fleg, the poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, the Zionist leader Menahem Ussishkin, the painter Marc Chagall and many others. In 1929, Prato also founded a French-Hebrew magazine dedicated to Jewish culture, philosophy and religiosity, *L’Illustration Juive*, which was followed in 1933 by the *Cahiers Juifs*. From all this, one could, in many respects, state that Alexandria was a nodal city not only for international commerce or, as Khuri-Makdisi showed, for the making of global radicalism, but also for its being an important Jewish centre, where – in this case thanks to the impulse by Prato – many European Jews on the road to Palestine passed through.

These accomplishments notwithstanding, the difficulties that Prato faced in Alexandria, together with his worries about the situation of Italian Jews and for ‘the health of my dear and beloved wife’, convinced him to go back to Italy in 1937, where he replaced Angelo Sacerdoti – who had just died – as Chief Rabbi of Rome. Prato had already been on the verge of leaving Alexandria around 1933, but in the end he had decided to stay a few more years and ‘to try again’ to accomplish his project of communal transformation. One of the last accomplishments of the rabbi was to be a project that he had cultivated for many years: the creation of a Jewish orphanage. This had been, for him, a constant preoccupation, and its foundation in 1934 constituted, for Prato, a final gratification before leaving the city. The orphanage was made possible thanks to a donation of 20,000 Egyptian liras – ‘just the amount I had asked him’, Prato noted in his diary – from Jacques Aghion, an affluent Alexandrian Jew. It started by hosting twenty-five orphans, with the hope of soon increasing the number of children
admitted, thanks to other private and communal donations. That Prato was so enthusiastic for the foundation of a Jewish orphanage was due to the interest that the rabbi had always had with regard to the upbringing and religious education of the younger generations and probably also due to the fact that he himself had become an orphan at an early age. On a more general level, the foundation of a Jewish orphanage might have been a reaction to the fact that in the previous decades – as Beth Baron found out – Jewish orphans had occasionally been hosted in institutions run by Christian missionaries, such as the American Fowlers’ Presbyterian Orphanage of Cairo, with the risk of being eventually converted to Christianity.

Upon leaving the city in 1937, Prato thus had ‘the feeling of having given Alexandria and Egypt all that I could’, and felt ‘not to be able to continue […] fighting against the inertia and the misunderstandings of the Council [of the Jewish Community]’. So to avoid finding himself trapped in the post-1936 Egyptian politics, the rabbi opted for Italy, ‘another environment, more suitable to myself’, where he could work for the sake of Italian Jewry and ‘to avoid the spreading of anti-Semitism in Italy’.

The encounter between the Alexandrian Jews and Prato was undoubtedly riddled with reciprocal misunderstandings, worsened by his very strict and often disparaging approach towards the city’s Jews and their moral behaviour. The many troubles that – according to the rabbi – the Jews had, were at times overemphasised and reinterpreted through his Italian Jewish eyes. Still, it would be unfair not to recognise that, in many cases, they also reflected concrete problems that afflicted the lives of Alexandrian Jews, such as the excessive power of the communal leaders and the inefficiency of the communal schools. Seen from the perspective of this rabbi, the interwar period was not the golden age of Egyptian Jews, but an era during which they were caught in the midst of opposing nationalisms and contrasting sociocultural legacies: ‘Arab, Franco-Jewish, English and Italian schools!! An Arab nationalism made of bread and ambition!! The so-called religion reduced to a mass of idolatric habits […]!! A plethora of peculiar mixed marriages! Conversions! What a soup!’

Alexandrian Jews emerged as a Jewish community at ease in the ephemeral cosmopolitanism of that city, but endowed with very fragile models of identity, lost at the crossroads of Europe and Egypt, between the allure of a French education and bourgeois-like practices and, last but not least, the contingencies of Egyptian politics, especially after 1936. On the other hand, David Prato emerged as a central figure of the interwar years, who tried in various ways to renovate the cultural and religious life of the Jews, and who was probably the last personification of the long-lasting and nowadays largely forgotten historical connection between Italy, Egypt and the Jews.

**Conclusion**

In 1893, the Smyrna-born Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan published *Neveh Shalom*, the text that would become the definitive summa of the Alexandrian *minhag*. Through a reading of this book vis-à-vis a corpus of *ketubot* dating from the
1880s to the early 1900s, I demonstrated how Hazan regulated Jewish family life, better defining issues such as polygamy, the laws of inheritance and the levirate marriage. The rabbi also aimed at reasserting his guiding role and religious authority at a time when an increasingly secularised Jewish leadership was surfacing. This new elite has been analysed in the second section of the chapter, which described the moral world of the interwar Cairo Jewish gentlemen. There, taking as a reference point the book of moral advice *Pour mes enfants* published in 1919 by Joseph Cattaoui and the foundation of the *Hôpital Israélite* of Cairo in 1925–1926, I argued how in the late colonial and early monarchical era, the Jewish upper class elaborated on and disseminated a model of manhood in between the *effendi* and the European bourgeois gentleman that was destined to last for several decades.

Such interweaving of different models can also be traced when looking at the family and its dynamics. Thanks to the information derived from memoirs and interviews with Egyptian Jews, I thus explained how a sense of Jewishness was not only preserved by trying to avoid conversions to another religious faith or mixed marriages. In fact, Egyptian Jewish families more often faced less perilous yet nonetheless worrying issues, such as interclass unions and changing ideas of the couple at a time when the transition from arranged to love marriages was very much in the making. This led to the consolidation of a complex familial identity at the crossroads of Jewish religious traditions, Sephardic heritage and colonial modernities that resembles that of other Jewish Diasporas of the Eastern Mediterranean region and shows how the process of *embourgeoisement* of Egyptian Jews never came to an end, but rather adapted to multiple shifts.

This said, when one looks at Egyptian Jews from an external perspective – namely, that of the Italian Rabbi David Prato – things change significantly. Prato, who was Chief Rabbi of Alexandria from 1927 to 1936, found the Jews uninterested in religious practices and observance, and living in an almost immoral condition. So, to counter this, he embarked on a project of reorganisation of the Alexandrian Jewish sociocultural arena, giving new impulse to the activities of the synagogue, as well as to the Zionist groups and Jewish life in general. Even though the rabbi only achieved limited success, his is nonetheless an interesting and hitherto little known perspective from which to understand Alexandrian Jews at a crucial time of their history, and in order to understand their connections with Europe and Italy in particular.

That of the Egyptian Jews was not a linear voyage from tradition to modernity, but a more ambivalent one, in which the late Ottoman rabbinical tradition, the modern gentleman, the Italian and Zionist Rabbi Prato, the sick, the bourgeois family and a quasi-mythical *Sefarad* intertwined. This is why, together with a careful usage of the notion of modernity, a more nuanced reading of tradition is required, so as to understand the latter not as ‘the inheritance of an unchanging cultural substance from the past’, but a present-centred category and a living force within Egyptian Jewish society.²⁰⁶ By examining the aforementioned historical narrations and focusing on crucial categories like religion, gender, family and social respectability, Egyptian Jews emerged as if living in a
moral laboratory: a space in which traditions and ideas were experimented with vis-à-vis a rapidly changing Egypt and in order to acquire and maintain a relevant role within the trans-Mediterranean arena that the Jews were part of.

It is, then, fair to say that a shared Egyptian Jewish identity – connected to the model of a Western(ised) bourgeoisie, yet also attached to local habits and values – consolidated and was interwoven with an equally multifaceted Egypt. The multiple connections that the Jews had with the wider Egyptian society regarding, for instance, gender models and identity, practices of philanthropy and sociability, are in this sense a reminder of how, at least until the late 1930s, Egypt was still a nation-state whose imaginative boundaries were continuously changing and to whose definition Jews also participated.

Notes

1 El Shakry, The Great Social, 8.
2 Clancy-Smith, Mediterraneans, 16.

Alexandrian ketubot dating from 1834 to 1952. All the ketubot, which come from different private collections and museums, have been digitised by the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem and are available at: http://dlib.nli.org.il/R/GN2U6JL456V1QRXEKN19RRRGD8M81TDR34UYSGB2I2N7BB1CQB-01011?func=collection-results&collection_id=13172.
8 Until at least July 1936 (see Ketubah 1936: http://dlib.nli.org.il:80/R/9/funct=dbin-jump-full&object_id=NNL01000302929jpg&silo_library=GEN01), the revenue stamp was not required. I would suggest that it was introduced after the abolition of the system of the Capitulations, more precisely after October 1937, when the Convention of Montreux was ratified. Unfortunately, Ketubah 1938 (available at: http://dlib.nli.org.il:80/R/9/funct=dbin-jump-full&object_id=NNL0100030371jpg&silo_library=GEN01) is torn in the left corner.
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No’-‘Amon (‘the city [of the god] ‘Amon’) is the name always used for Alexandria in the Talmud and all rabbinical texts. Most probably, the name did not originally indicate Alexandria but the ancient Egyptian city of Thebes, which is also mentioned in the biblical Book of Nahum, 3: 8: ‘Art thou better than populous No, that was situated among the rivers, that had the waters round about it, whose rampart was the sea, and her wall was from the sea?’


Epstein, The Jewish Marriage, 274.


Landau, Jews, 65, where the author also specified that the dowry was provided only to those girls who could prove that they were born in Alexandria. The issue of the dowry has been remembered in: Levana Zamir, ‘Religion, Leisure Time, Culture, and Women’s Status Among the Jews of Egypt’, in History and Culture of the Jews of Egypt in Modern Times. Proceedings of the World Congress of the Jews From Egypt, eds. Ada Aharoni, Aimée Israel-Pelletier and Levana Zamir (Haifa: WCJE, 2008), 189–191.

Epstein, The Jewish Marriage, 102. Out of nineteen ketubot from 1880 to 1951, only in five of them did the nedunya and the tossafet differ.

Hazan, Neveh, נ (Hebrew). The Marar Yosef Caro was a sixteenth-century Sephardi rabbi and scholar, author of the Shulhan ‘Arukh, which is still considered the most authoritative compilation of the Jewish law since the Talmud.


The Damascus custom stipulated that when the wife died the husband inherited everything; if they had no children, the husband was to divide with the wife’s relatives only the nedunya and not the nikhsei-melog – i.e. the wife’s private estate, of which the husband only had usufruct during the marriage. The Damascus custom was thus closer to the biblical law. On the other hand, according to the Toledo custom, ‘irrespective of whether the wife died childless or not, the husband had to share her inheritance’ – that is, both the nedunya and the nikhsei-melog – with her offspring or relatives, see: Lamdan, A Separate, 233–239.

Hazan, Neveh, נ (Hebrew).
This misunderstanding apparently led Landau to state, in his otherwise very accurate *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, that most Ottoman Jewish communities and the Egyptian one as well “in matters of inheritance” followed “a uniform law, based on the Tulitula [‘Toledo’] (sometimes known as the Damascus) Decree”, see: Landau, *Jews*, 105, my emphasis.


27 Zohar, ‘Mishnatam’, 75.


29 Hazan, *Neveh*, 1 (Hebrew). Hazan also states that this solution had already been enacted in the previous years in both Jerusalem and Cairo. See also: Giorah Fuzailov, *Hokhmei-vehudei-Mitzrayim* (‘Jewish Sages in Egypt’) (Jerusalem: Misrad ha-hinukh ha-tarbut ve-ha-sport, 1998), 194 (Hebrew).

30 See, for instance: Ketubah 1886; Ketubah 1889. All the nineteenth-century *ketubot* that I consulted included this clause. A *ketubah* from 1882 indicated nine years instead of ten, as the time span after which a childless man could divorce. Ten years is generally considered the period after which a childless wife can be considered sterile, see: Epstein, *The Jewish Marriage*, 208.

31 Ketubah 1902. Consider that, amongst Syrian Jews – many of whom migrated to Alexandria in the second half of the nineteenth century – it had long been common to ask for the woman’s consent when a man wished to divorce; see Yaron Harel, *Syrian Jewry in Transition, 1840–1880* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), 41. In Morocco, the *ketubah* of the *megorashim* (lit. ‘the exiled’ – i.e. the Jews arrived from Spain) generally stated that a man could take a second wife only after the dissolution of the first marriage or if the first wife was declared sterile, whilst in that of the *toshavim* (lit. ‘the inhabitants’ – i.e. the indigenous Jews) this condition did not exist. See: Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Hannane Sekkat Hatimi, *Mémoire et représentations des Juifs au Maroc: les voisins absents de Meknès* (Paris: Publisud, 2011). One should finally mention the case of Algerian Jews, who were prohibited from practising polygamy in 1870, when the Crémieux decree granted them French citizenship and made them subject to French law. Research has shown that many Algerian Jews tried to contest the shift from polygamy to monogamy, see: Joshua Schreier, *Arabs of the Jewish Faith. The Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 143–176.

32 Zvi Zohar, ‘Ha-yetzirah ha-halakhtit ve-ha-toranit shel rabbanei-Mitzrayim ba-me’ata’im 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): 202 (Hebrew). According to the Jewish law, a woman cannot ask for a divorce – which is a unilateral act of repudiation by the husband – except in some specific cases when she might appeal to the rabbinical court.


34 Hazan, *Neveh*, 75 (Hebrew).

35 Whether Jewish polygamy was common in Egypt before the nineteenth century is disputed. Littman argued that it had always been very rare (Littman, ‘Ha-mishpahah’, 230–231), whereas Lamdan – based on various rabbinical *responsa* and court records – showed that, at least until the sixteenth century, polygamy was fairly
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common in the region (Lamdan, A Separate, 151). As opposed to what happened in the Middle East and North Africa, European Jews followed the rabbinical corrections of rabbenu Gershon of Mainz (circa 960–1040), which around 1,000 prohibited polygamy.


37 Ketubah 1906, זי (Hebrew).

38 For example, Italian Jews – probably under the influence of local Christian societies – considered the ring not so much as a gift to be given during the wedding ceremony, but as one of the many personal gifts (sivlonot) offered at various stages of the betrothal to the intended bride. See: Roni Weinstein, Marriage Rituals Italian Style. A Historical Anthropological Perspective on Early Modern Italian Jews (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 378–379.

39 Hazan, Neveh, טנ onwards (Hebrew). For the Egyptian response to modern technologies, from trains to telephones, consider instead: Barak, On Time.

40 Hazan, Neveh, וע and onwards (Hebrew).

41 Menahem Elon and Louis I. Rabinowitz, ‘Levirate Marriage and Halizah’, in Encyclopaedia Judaica, eds. Berenbaum and Skolkin, vol. 12, 725–729. According to Deuteronomy 25: 5–10, the halizah consisted of a public ceremony that culminated with the widow loosening the shoe of the brother-in-law, spitting in his face and reciting a prescribed formula that freed her from the obligation to marry him.

42 Hazan, Neveh, טנ (Hebrew).
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50 Gershoni, Redefining, 7–15.
51 Jacob, Working Out, 90–91; Ryzova, The Age of the Efendiya.
54 Lehmann, Ladino Rabbinic, 103–120. Even though, in different ways, a shift from the traditional talmid hakham to the modern Jewish model of manhood also occurred amongst European Jews from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. Consider, for example: Daniel Boyarin, Unheroic Conduct. The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
57 On Banq Misr: Deeb, ‘Bank Misr’.
59 The delegation, headed by the Prime Minister ‘Adly Yakan pasha, was a total failure, given that the British were not willing to fulfil the conditions proposed by ‘Adly and did not want to lose control of the Suez Canal. On this: Long, British Pro-Consuls.
61 To get an idea of the vast géographie spirituelle gravitating around the Cattaoui (and their cousins, de Menasce of Alexandria), see: Pietro Lazagna, ‘Spazi geografici, percorsi familiari’, Mediterranei, eds. Luisa Rossi and Luca Cerretti (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2010), 256–269, kindly given to me by the author, who is a descendent of the Cattaoui family.
63 With reference to this, Ziad Fahmy explained that – according to a report of the British Foreign Office – some Jews took part in a public demonstration held in Cairo on 9 April 1919 to celebrate the release of Sa’ad Zaghlul from exile in Malta, ‘carrying the Jewish flag [i.e., a flag with the Star of David] attached to the Egyptian Flag and the Rabbi made several speeches which were loudly cheered’. Fahmy also quoted an article published on the Washington Post on 25 June of the same year, where it is said that ‘a Jewess, a[n Egyptian] nationalist’ was among the speakers of a public assembly held at the mosque of Al-Azhar; see Ziad Fahmy, Ordinary Egyptians.

65 Cattaoui, Pour mes enfants, 90.
66 Cattaoui, Pour mes enfants, 102.
67 Cattaoui, Pour mes enfants, 78–79.
71 Cattaoui, Pour mes enfants, 129–130.
74 Pollard, Nurturing, 14.
75 Cattaoui, Pour mes enfants, 42.
76 Cattaoui, Pour mes enfants, 144–145.
77 Waterpaugh, Being Modern, 67.
79 Krämer, The Jews, 95.
80 I, very much accidentally, came across Pour mes enfants while searching the catalogue of the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem in December 2011. Since then, the English translation of excerpts of Pour mes enfants was included in the anthology Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought: Writings on Identity, Politics, and Culture, 1893–1958, eds. Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013), 80–86.
83 I will not consider the Hôpital Israélite of Alexandria, which was founded around 1890, thanks to a donation from the de Menasce family. Anyhow, the things I will say also apply to that case study, see: Hôpital Israélite (Fondation B. de Menasce) et Services Sanitaires de la Communauté Israélite d’Alexandrie – Rapport du Comité pour l’année 1918 (Alexandria: Fratelli Ventura, 1919), CAHJP Egypt Inv./7494; the eulogy by Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan, Tehila le David in riconoscenza al compianto Barone Behor David Levi Menasce il dì 31 Dicembre 1890 inaugurandosi
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87 The Istanbul-born Rabbi Hayim Nahum was a key figure of Egyptian Jewry from 1925, when he was nominated Chief Rabbi of Cairo, until his death in 1960. Before that, he had acted from 1909 until the 1920s as the last Hahambaşı (‘chief rabbi’) of the Ottoman Empire. See: Esther Benbassa, Un grand rabbin.


93 Ener, Managing Egypt, 14–15, my emphasis.


96 Hibba Abugideiri, Gender and the Making of Modern Medicine in Colonial Egypt (London: Ashgate, 2010), 234 and onwards.


100 Michel Foucault, Naissance de la clinique (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 85–86.

101 Cattaoui, Pour, 78–79.

102 One can only agree with Jacob when he argued that ‘a multitude of laboring bodies – women, khawal [i.e. male cross-dressers, and more in general homosexuals], peasant’ was – and due to lack or paucity of sources might continue to be – absent from debates on nation, modernity and gender: Jacob, Working Out, 179–185. On


104 For the case of the Jews of Egypt that moved to Israel, interesting information can be found in the ethnographic study by: Liat ‘Alon, ‘Nashim, migdar u-mispahah ba-qehillah ha-yehudit be- Qahir ve- ‘Aleksandriah, 1930–1956’ (‘Women, Gender and Family in the Jewish Communities of Cairo and Alexandria, 1930–1956’) (MA diss., University of Beer-Sheva, 2012) (Hebrew).


106 Copy of the statement of F. Lévy to the Chief Rabbi of Alexandria Raffaello Della Pergola – *Registre Beit Din IV page 119*, 29 May 1914, AIU Egypte I.C.15. On this episode, see also the documents reproduced in: Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times* (New York, NY: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 245–249. The idea that conversions might be due to mental disorder and/or nervous breakdowns is a *cliché* that can also be found in many other case studies, such as, for example, that of Greek Orthodox converts to Islam in early republican Istanbul. I thank Konstantina Andrianopoulou for supplying me with information on this issue. For an Ottoman perspective, consider: Eyal Ginio, ‘Childhood, Mental Capacity and the Conversion to Islam in the Ottoman State’, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 25 (2001): 90–119.

107 H. Guetta to the President of the Jewish Community of Cairo, 19 May 1914, AIU Egypte I.C.15.

108 H. Guetta to Joseph E. Piciotto, 10 May 1910 (?), AIU Egypte I.C.15. The document is dated 1910, but it seems to be a typing mistake, as the ones that precede it and the stamp of approval all refer to 1914.


110 As Liana Funaro noted, the Mediterranean Sea was an arena in which we find young boys leaving the city, […]. We read of husbands leaving their families only with the consent of their wives. The Jewish women were given a *certain degree of power inside their families according to religious and traditional law*… See Liana E. Funaro, ‘A Mediterranean Diaspora: Jews From Leghorn in the Second Half of the 19th Century’, in *L’Europe méditerranéenne/Mediterranean Europe*, ed. Marta Petricioli (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2008), 106, my emphasis.

111 ‘L’exhibition provocatrice – Un rénegat juif célébre la messe au maître-autel’, *La Voix Juive*, 22 September 1932, 1, AIU Egypte I.C.17, my emphasis.


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116 Abécassis, ‘Entre logique’.
117 David Prato, 1 October 1928, CAHJP P 177/25.
118 Krämer, The Jews, 229.
119 David Prato, 10 December 1927, CAHJP P 177/24. It should be noted that Prato was also referring to marriages between Jews and Christians, which were not counted in the census.
120 In any case, if the couple had children, for the Egyptian law – in accordance with the shari’a – it was the (Muslim) father that established the religion of the child; see: Hanan Kholoussy, For Better, For Worse: the Marriage Crisis that Made Modern Egypt (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 111.
121 In one of his autobiographical novels, the Egyptian-born Israeli writer Yitzhak Gorneman-Goren talks about an Alexandrian Jewish girl, who – against the will of her family – had a ‘shameful relationship’ with a Greek man in the interwar years: Yitzhak Gorneman-Goren, Blansh (‘Blanche’) (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘Oved, 1986), 85 (Hebrew). A Copt-Jewish love affair that took place in 1950s Cairo is instead at the centre of the memoir by the Copt Waguhi Ghali, Beer in the Snooker Club (London: Deutsch, 1964).
129 Delburgo, Come ladri, 36.
130 Inès Toussieh Escojido, cited by Liliane S. Dammond with Yvette M. Raby, The Lost World of the Egyptian Jews. First-person Accounts from Egypt’s Jewish Community in the Twentieth Century (New York, NY: iUniverse, 2007), 266. Elie de Picciotto was a prominent Alexandrian businessman and one of the founders of the Lycée de l’Union Juive pour l’Enseignement; Joseph de Picciotto bey was instead a pro-Wafidist activist and member of the Egyptian Senate since 1924 (Krämer, The Jews, 83–84).
132 On this, and on the alleged misrepresentation of colonial and monarchical Egypt put forward by many of these memoirs and autobiographies, consider the very critical stance taken by: Mabro, ‘Nostalgic Literature’.
133 This has also been noted by Zohar, when analysing cases of marriage between Rabbanite Jews and Karaites in early twentieth-century Cairo: Zvi Zohar, ‘Lowering the Barriers of Estrangement: Rabbanite-Karaite Intermarriage in Twentieth-Century Egyptian Halakha’, in The Jews, ed. Shimon Shamir, 143–168.
The data were originally collected by Mathilde Taggiar of the Association Nebi Daniel, based on the marriage certificates delivered by the Chief Rabbinate of Alexandria in 1934, and they are available at the website of the Association: www.nebidanield.org registres.php?lang=fr. An extensive statistical analysis of this kind goes beyond the goal of my study. I thank Alessandra Vannini for helping me in the statistical analysis of the marriage certificates.

Jacqueline Kahanoff, ‘Cairo Wedding’, in Mongrels or Marvels. The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff, eds. Deborah A. Starr and Sasson Somekh (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 90–91, my emphasis. This short story – whose protagonists belong to an undefined Cairo upper class family that could be either Muslim, Jewish or Copt – was originally published in 1945 in the American literary journal Tomorrow.


Consider the seminal work by Pierre Bourdieu, La distinction (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979).

Delburgo, Come ladri, 14–15.

André Aciman, Out of Egypt (New York, NY: Picador, 1994), 44.


Clairette Fresco Kriger, cited by Dammond, The Lost World, 165.

Laura Barile, Il resto manca. Storie mediterranee (Turin: Aragno, 2003), 36–37, my emphasis.


It is important, here, to bear in mind that, as Reddy argued, ‘almost always, one or more features of Western romantic love will turn up in non-Western cultural arenas. But identification of (some) common features does not warrant the conclusion that romantic love is universal’; see William Reddy, ‘The Rule of Love. The History of Western Romantic Love in Comparative Perspective’, in New Dangerous Liaisons. Discourses on Europe and Love in the Twentieth Century, eds. Luisa Passerini, Liliana Ellena and Alexander C. T. Geppert (New York, NY: Berghann, 2010), 35, my emphasis.


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première guerre mondiale; vecteurs et formes d’une construction communautaire entre mythe et réalités’ (PhD diss., Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3, 2013).

152 On Fascist cultural diplomacy: Francesca Cavarocchi, _Avanguardie dello spirito. Il fascismo e la propaganda culturale all’estero_ (Rome: Carocci, 2010).


155 Prato, _Cinque anni di rabbinato_ (Alexandria, 1932), vol. 1, 1, my emphasis.

156 Prato, 24 June 1931, CAHJP P 177/28 (the date always refers to the day the citation is found. However, since Prato used his agendas both as daily planner and personal diary, the things he described did not necessarily take place on the day on which they happen to be written).

157 Prato, 11 April 1927, CAHJP P 177/24, my emphasis.

158 Prato, 31 March 1931, CAHJP P 177/28.


160 Prato, 12 July 1930, CAHJP P 177/27.

161 Prato, 14 January 1928, CAHJP P 177/25.

162 Prato, 31 October 1928, CAHJP P 177/25.

163 Prato, 11 July 1934, CAHJP P 177/30.

164 Prato, 4 July 1928, CAHJP P 177/25. Prato often inserted Hebrew words in his Italian, mostly when talking about religious issues, but also in other circumstances. In this case, the usage of Hebrew might be explained by the fact that Prato did not want other people to understand what he was talking about or that he simply wanted to emphasise his argument. The idea that the AIU acted as a _longa manus_ of France amongst Middle Eastern Jews, contrasting the aspirations of Italy, was shared by other Italian rabbis at the time, see: Sarfatti, _Gli ebrei_, 71.

165 Prato, 14 May 1934, CAHJP P 177/30.

166 Nahum, who completed his studies in Paris, had always been very close to the AIU, and in 1908 conducted a mission on its behalf among the _falashas_, which ended with his denial of their Jewishness. On the other hand, in 1907 the Chief Rabbi of Florence, Shmuel Margulies, together with other Italian Jews founded a _Comitato Pro-Falasha_ that supported the Jewishness of the _falashas_, based upon what the Polish-born Jacques Faitlovitch had found in his missions to Ethiopia. The activism of the Italian rabbis was also driven by the Italian colonial interest in the area that would later become the Italian East Africa. See: Benbassa, _Un grand rabbin_; Trevisan Semi, _Jacques Faitlovitch_; on the hospitality given by Prato to an Ethiopian Jew in Alexandria: Trevisan Semi, ‘From Wolleqa to Florence. The Tragic Story of Faitlovitch’s Pupil Hizkiah Finkas’, in _The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on Ethiopian Jews_, eds. Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Tudor Parfitt (London: Curzon, 1999), especially 25–28.

167 Prato, 21 August 1930, CAHJP P 177/27.

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169 Prato, 12 April 1927, CAHJP P 177/24.
171 Gudrun Krämer, ‘Political Participation’.
172 Weizmann was one of the most important Zionist leaders, President of the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency and first President of the State of Israel from 1948 until his death in 1952.
173 Prato, 6 June 1928, CAHJP P 177/25.
174 Prato, 3–4–5 September 1928, CAHJP P 177/25. Argentina as a potential destination for Jewish migration had been first considered by the Jewish thinker Leo Pinsker (1821–1891) in his 1882 pamphlet Selbstenanzipation, and then by Herzl himself in his 1896 Der Judenstaat. The idea was definitively abandoned in the 1920s in favour of Palestine.
175 Prato, 2 August 1931, CAHJP P 177/28.
176 Krämer, The Jews, 98.
177 For example, De Felice cited a document of the Regia legazione d’Italia in Egitto, in which the Alexandrian Jewish community was described as ‘largely under the moral and spiritual influence of Italian Jewry’, see: Renzo De Felice, Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo (Turin: Einaudi, 1988), 181. Consider also: Anouschka Lazarev, ‘Italiens, italianité et fascisme’, in Alexandrie 1860-1960, eds. Robert Ilbert and Ilios Yannakakis, 92–104.
178 De Felice, Storia degli ebrei, 93.
180 The Italian Consul-General in Alexandria to the Italian Ambassador in Cairo, paper ‘rabbino Prato’, 8 May 1934, ASMAE, Egitto, envelope 10, photocopy available at the CAHJP, IT/COLONIE-16, my emphasis.
182 Prato, 26–27–28 August 1927, CAHJP P 177/24. The attitude of Fascism towards Zionism goes beyond the scope of my study, I therefore refer, once again, to: De Felice, Storia degli ebrei, 159–188.
183 Prato, 2 August 1931, CAHJP P 177/28.
184 Prato, 17 June 1931, CAHJP P 177/28.
185 Prato, 2–3 May 1936, CAHJP P 177/32. The absence of any Jewish candidate for the Chamber of Deputies at the 1936 elections is confirmed by Krämer, The Jews, 171.
189 Prato, 7 December 1929, CAHJP P 177/26.
190 Prato, 1 October 1928, CAHJP P 177/25.
191 Prato, 21 February 1929, CAHJP P 177/26.

192 Besides being an old-age preoccupation for the Jewish families and religious authorities, mixed marriages were a debated theme for the turn-of-the-century Italian rabbis and in the Italian Jewish press. Moreover, Prato’s first mentor, Elia Ben-amozegh, in 1881 published a pamphlet entitled *Sui matrimoni misti*. See: Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti, *Fare gli ebrei italiani. Autorappresentazioni di una minoranza (1861-1918)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), 51–101.

193 Prato, 13 April 1927, CAHJP P 177/24.
194 Prato, Notes de Juin 1928, CAHJP P 177/25.
195 Prato, *Cinque anni*, vol. 1, 160, my emphasis.
198 Prato, vol. 2, 159.


200 Prato, 31 August 1936, CAHJP P 177/32.
201 Prato, 30 October 1933, CAHJP P 177/29.
202 Prato, 17 November 1934, CAHJP P 177/30.


204 Prato, 31 August 1936, CAHJP P 177/32. Prato started to have a more cautious approach towards Fascism in his last years in Alexandria, although in 1937 – that is, one year before the promulgation of the Fascist racial laws – he still felt quite confident of the ‘traditionally benevolent attitude towards the Jews of Italy’ shown by the regime, and which had been explicitly confirmed to him by the Italian Foreign Minister and son-in-law of Mussolini, Galeazzo Ciano, in a private meeting on 3 June 1937; see: Prato, cited by Amos Luzzatto, ‘Autocoscienza e identità ebraica’, in *Storia d’Italia*, ed. Corrado Vivanti, 1839. Nonetheless, in 1938, the Fascist newspaper *Il Tevere* accused Prato of anti-Fascism. In order to avoid worsening the already tense relations between Italian Jews and Fascism, Prato resigned from his job as Chief Rabbi of Rome and migrated to Tel Aviv, where he remained until 1945. In that same year he returned to Italy, serving again as Chief Rabbi of Rome and Director of the Italian Rabbinical College until his death in 1951. On the migration of Prato to Palestine: De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei*, 422–423, and Arturo Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere. Gli ebrei italiani e l’emigrazione in Palestina prima della guerra (1920-1940)* (Milan: Marietti, 2003), 135. I thank Arturo Marzano for giving me a copy of his book.

205 Prato, 10 December 1927, CAHJP P 177/24.

206 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 222.
4 Extremely close and incredibly far

Egypt, "la Palestine", Israel

In April 2014, a group of Egyptian Jews now living in Israel, Europe and the US gathered at the Israeli holiday resort of Eilat in order to take part in the Fifth World Congress of Egyptian Jews. Eilat is best known for its beaches and coral reef, and for being a place where Israelis enjoy the sun and heat of the Red Sea. Anyone familiar with the history of this community would, however, immediately think that even from Eilat, situated only 9 km from the border between Israel and Egypt, Egypt appeared close, yet incredibly far. In fact, if it is true that Egyptian Jews can visit the country where they were born, they still cannot really go back to their Egypt: Zionism, the dynamics of the Arab–Israeli conflict and, last but not least, internal changes of the Egyptian sociopolitical arena made Egypt very different from the one they knew.

In the previous three chapters, I portrayed aspects of the history of the Egyptian Jews in the colonial and monarchical eras, explaining how it was then that a bourgeois identity – based on a shared education, as well as on differing feelings of what being Jewish and Egyptian meant – emerged and consolidated. Although Egypt was at the centre of the narration, other national and imaginative spaces emerged, such as, for instance, Europe and France – suffice it to think of the students of the AIU and MLF – but also what in Judaism is known as ‘Eretz Israel’ (‘the land of Israel’), which is the area that roughly corresponded to Ottoman and then British Palestine, which, after 1948, became the State of Israel.

This last chapter will look at the manifold connections that Egyptian Jews had with ‘Eretz Israel’ before and especially after the consolidation of Egyptian Zionism and the birth of the State of Israel. In doing so, I wish to explain how ‘Eretz Israel’ – or ‘la Palestine’ as Egyptian Jews more often called it before 1948 – was a distant yet always present and familiar space, which over time acquired different cultural, religious and political meanings. Except for the first section, which will take us back to the First World War Alexandria, the chapter will mostly deal with the period that extends from the 1930s to the 1950s – that is, when Zionism started to spread in a more evident manner, both in Alexandria and Cairo. This said, my aim is not to write a history of Egyptian Zionism per se, but to reconsider the manifold meanings that being an Egyptian Jew has had and still has vis-à-vis this national ideology, looking at various events that interlinked with it from the First World War to the Suez War and, last but not least,
how Zionism stimulated at times the reformulation, and at times the weakening,
of an Egyptian Jewish bourgeois identity.

Jews and other Jews: Zionist refugees in the First World War Alexandria

As Maurice Fargeon wrote in his books in the 1930s, immemorial linkages united the Jews to Egypt, as well as to ‘Eretz Israel. Apart from the Bible, from a historical point of view, one could say that throughout the centuries, Egypt had constituted a crossroads through which many Jews on the road to Palestine passed and that commercial and sociocultural connections between these two neighbouring spaces had always existed. However, things started to change with the foundation of Zionism. For the founder of this ideology, the Vienna-born journalist and essayist Theodore Herzl, the Land of Israel was to become what he named der Judenstaat (‘the state of the Jews’). According to Zionism, Jews should migrate to what was the biblical Promised Land, and in so doing end their centuries-old exilic life through the foundation of an independent nation-state. This challenged the traditional Jewish contrariety to the migration en masse to the Land of Israel. Basing themselves upon the Talmud, both European and non-European rabbis had, in fact, generally agreed that mass migration to the Land of Israel was not to be incentivised and that Jews should not hasten the advent of the Messiah, or rebel against gentile nations. As a consequence of the anti-Semitic persecutions faced by Jews especially in Eastern Europe and in Czarist Russia, and thanks to its momentous connection with nineteenth-century European nationalisms, Zionism gained popularity among large sectors of European Jews. Soon after, this ideology started to spread amongst North African and Middle Eastern Jews, although with more limited success.

Although the birth of Egyptian Zionism is conventionally situated in 1896, when the Istanbul-born Marco Barukh founded the Bar-Kohba Society in Cairo, until the mid-1930s Zionism had a very marginal impact on the country. Until that time, it was regarded as an ideology that mainly interested the less fortunate Jews of Eastern Europe and in whose final project Egyptian Jews were not to take part, if not through forms of communal charity and inter-Jewish solidarity.

The first significant encounter between Egyptian Jews and Zionism occurred in 1914, when hundreds of Zionist Jews from Palestine landed in Alexandria. In the next few pages, I will introduce this event, seeing how their arrival impacted on Alexandrian Jews – particularly the upper classes – and what kind of social and cultural activities the former organised to help their fellows. Finally, I will explore the cleavages and struggles that emerged between the Zionists from Palestine and the Jews of Alexandria.

As one can read in the minutes of the Comité d’Assistance aux Réfugiés Israélites: ‘on December 18, a telegram […] to Mr. A. M. Petroff, Consul of Russia, announced the imminent arrival in Alexandria of about 700 Russian Jews, expelled from Palestine. This first group of people was soon followed by many others’. In fact, by the end of 1915, a total of 11,277 refugees had arrived
in the city from Syria and Palestine: most of them were Zionist Ashkenazi Jews with Russian passports, who had been expelled from the Ottoman Empire, which was at war with Russia. Aside from the refugees, one has to remember that Egypt at the time hosted the greatest British military base outside Great Britain and France, and throughout the First World War saw the arrival of thousands of soldiers, especially from India, and then also from Australia and New Zealand. The war thus posed numerous problems in terms of social order and urban unrest, although it eventually brought about novel ideas and models of identity that would contribute to disrupting the colonial order.

Upon arrival, the refugees – who were ‘in a state of complete misery: no shoes, no clothes, no beddings’ – were first lodged in the area of Hamamil and subsequently in the more spacious buildings of the *Ancien Gouvernorat*. A group of Jewish women headed by the headmistress of the AIU *École des filles*, Rachel Danon, together with the wives of foreign diplomats and other prominent Alexandrians, immediately organised a drive for the distribution of clothes and food. Their main concern was naturally for the children and the improvement in their living conditions during this ‘forced exile’ in Alexandria. Rabbi Della Pergola’s wife, for example, was ‘no less devout than her husband’ and spent all her time ‘consoling the refugees, relieving their downhearted morale’. The Baroness de Menasce ‘did many things for the refugees’, distributing bread and clothes and also stimulating ‘the generosity of her numerous friends’. Mademoiselle Rolo, who came from one of the most important Alexandrian Jewish families, was said to visit ‘our refugees’ every day, ‘asking about...
their necessities and satisfying them discretely, using her own money and giving them what the Committee could not always provide'.

The minutes and letters sent by Rachel Danon highlighted the willingness of the Jewish elite to present itself as a highly responsive social group, easily mobilised for the sake of their less fortunate coreligionists, especially in times of crisis. In this very first phase, the men and women that resided in Wardian and Mafrouza were not seen as Zionist activists, but mainly as nos réfugiés – that is, as needy fellow Jews to whose relief Alexandrian Jews should contribute. The latter’s prompt reaction and active involvement in various philanthropic activities confirm, once again, the shift from traditional forms of communal charity to a more modern philanthropy, which had been cultivated among the Egyptian urban elite since the second half of the nineteenth century. Not only women but also men played a significant role in the war relief efforts. For example, Jack Mosseri – scion of a renowned Jewish family from Cairo – presided over a School Committee that opened a school in the area of Wardian around November 1915, mainly supported by the Anglo-Jewish Association and the British Government. A Jewish woman of English origin, Miss Landau was asked to head this school – previously headed by Baroness de Menasce. It counted around 400 students from four to twelve years old. The boys were to be taught ‘13 hours of English, 13 hours of Hebrew and 4 hours of Arabic per week’; the girls would follow the same curricula except for Arabic, which was substituted with a sewing class.

In addition to this, Madame Danon established in the Ancien Gouvernorat a school funded by the French Government and the Egyptian authorities. It was initially nothing more than ‘a modest kindergarten, that was created with the idea of letting children breath a less fouled air’ than that of the crowded buildings where they resided in Hamamil. As this school held classes in French and Hebrew, it was less popular among the refugees and hosted only 126 students in 1916. However, despite the fact that none of the boys and girls could initially speak French, Madame Danon wrote that after some time all were able to ‘write short but very correct sentences, they can solve problems, answer questions about simple scientific topics’.

Although the arrival of the refugees undoubtedly brought about a consistent wave of charitable operations in Alexandria, the local Jewish bourgeoisie seemed willing to fulfil its social and Jewish duties only insofar as the presence of the refugees did not interfere with its socio-economic positioning in Alexandria. On the other hand, the refugees were not just the weak and sick children depicted in the leaflets of the Comité d’assistance. Among them were combative Zionists, very critical of the Egyptian Jews’ attitude towards Zionism and Judaism in general. In 1916, Joseph Danon, husband of Rachel and headmaster of the AIU Ecole des garçons, had to admit that the refugees ‘are still causing us problems’. A week earlier, a few of them had assaulted the siege of the Comité d’assistance, breaking the glass of the windows and some furniture. Danon auspicated a severe stigmatisation of this incident, so as not to compromise the activities of the committee and also in order to better control the activities of the refugees.
Some of these had, in fact, organised small trades and commercial activities, both inside and outside the refugee camps. Their business was, however, severely limited by W. C. Hornblower, the British delegate for the Administration of Refugees in Egypt, who – through an official notice written in both French and Hebrew and presumably hung inside the camps – prohibited ‘street commerce, without a permit of the police’. Only a small number of old men and children would be allowed to start such businesses, a limitation that reminded all the refugees that they were only temporarily hosted in Alexandria and therefore should not interfere too much with the local economy and society.

The most significant incident – known as the *affaire des azymes* – occurred in April 1916, shortly before Pesah. In the weeks preceding the holiday, an American charitable organisation had sent 20,000 kgs of *matzot* to be distributed to the Jewish refugees from Syria and Palestine. However, the communal council gave part of the *matzot* to poor Alexandrian Jews, even though ‘the needs of the community had already been satisfied’. The refugees thus protested and assaulted the office of Joseph Picciootto, the member of the Jewish Community Council in charge of the distribution of the bread. This affair led to the publication of articles in local newspapers, lamenting the greed of upper-class Alexandrian Jews and of the Community Council in particular, which since the day the refugees had landed in the city ‘showed animosity’ towards them and had been unwilling to utilise much of its funding to help them. A local (Jewish) newspaper therefore rhetorically asked if ‘the funds of the Jewish Community are in such a bad state’ that the needs of poor local Jews had to be satisfied with *matzot* sent from the US. For the author of the article, the Alexandrian Jewish leaders should not privilege local Jews, since ‘the raison d’être of the Jewish Community is to help the poor’, which, in this case, were to be primarily identified with the refugees from Palestine.

The more politically active among the refugees, for their part, felt that the local Jewish leaders ‘are good Jews, but good Jews only in the Diaspora sense’, and that few understood their national aspirations. For example, Yosef Aronowitz, a journalist involved in the Zionist youth movement *Ha-Po’el Ha-Tzair* (‘The young worker’), in the only issue of the refugees’ journal *Ba-Nekhar* (‘In Foreign Lands’), protested against the ‘superficial Judaism’ practised by Egyptian Jews: ‘For twenty years now the Jewish community has been stagnating spiritually, the Tora[h] is being forgotten or perhaps has already been forgotten, and the imprint of the Jewish soul is fading’. Some others, so as to try to contribute to the war efforts and revive their Jewish national spirit, took part in the foundation of the *Zion Mule Corps* (henceforth, ZMC) – a Jewish auxiliary unit of the British Army – in Alexandria in March 1915. In this Jewish military brigade were the 562 Jews, including a few Egyptian Jews, who fought vigorously in the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915. Behind the idea of creating the ZMC were two young refugees destined to become notable figures in the history of Zionism: Joseph Trumpeldor and the founder of Revisionist Zionism Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky. For them and for all the refugees, as one would recall in an article written for the Cairo Zionist magazine...
Extremely close and incredibly far

Israël in 1938, fighting in the ZMC was also a way to react to their exile in Egypt, ‘associated to a distant past that came out of some biblical verses, painful to their heart’. With the decision to set up a Jewish brigade, ‘a new life began in the refugee camps. [...] Those who until the day before had been humiliated beggars, now felt they had again become like princes’.21

The episodes cited above and the criticisms formulated by Aronowitz all show that the Egyptian sojourn was, for the refugees, a way of finding a temporary relief to their problems. However, there also emerged some friction, due to different religious and political inclinations, and also, more generally, to the unequal relationship between dependents, the refugees and benefactors – that is, Alexandrian Jews.22 Furthermore, the refugees’ understanding of Alexandrian Jewish life was clearly influenced by their own Orientalist prejudices, especially when they spoke about the decline of religious life in the city. Even though it is true that religious observance was not so strict especially among the upper classes, this should not lead one to overlook the efforts that, at the turn of the century, Egyptian Jewish rabbis such as Eliyahu Hazan and Rafael Bensimon – as I already illustrated – had put into the reorganisation of the communal life and its halakhic regulation.23

This said, the refugees found a very supportive ally in the city’s new chief rabbi, the Italian-born Raffaello Della Pergola. Della Pergola – who was already an ardent Zionist supporter in Italy – actively encouraged the ZMC.24 According to John Henry Patterson, a British officer who was assigned to be the commander of the ZMC, a few days before the soldiers’ departure in April 1915, they all had a last big parade, and marched from Wardian Camp [...] to the Synagogue, to receive the final blessing of the Grand Rabbi. The spacious Temple, in the street of the Prophet Daniel, was on this occasion filled to its utmost capacity.25

A few months later, on Yom Kippur 5676 (18 September 1915), the rabbi organised a collective Prière pour la paix/Tefillah be’ad-ha-shalom at the Temple Eliahou Hanabi. The text of the prayer is an interesting example of how Della Pergola responded to the consequences that the First World War was posing to Alexandrian Jews. Furthermore, it can help us to grasp the emotional effect that this event generated in those attending the ceremony.

The Hebrew incipit included usual Jewish formulas: ‘Oh Lord of the World we are Your people the House of Israel, the people You created so that Your glory could be praised, Your sons and sons of Your companion, the seed of Your beloved Abraham’.26 The prayer incorporated several biblical citations – for instance, Leviticus 26: 6: ‘And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will rid evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land’.27 The French text was then more explicit and directly connected to the reality of the war: ‘A terrible war broke out. The evil spirit has brought it to us. Civilisation is regressing. [...] Oh good God! May you give wisdom to those who are in charge of guiding the people’.28
All in all, this prayer can be considered an example of how Alexandrian Jews and their leaders tried to address the problems the war imposed on them, re-elaborating on transnational modern Jewish practices at a local level. In fact, this kind of ceremony was not elaborated on ex nihilo in Alexandria. European influence was crucial – a fact that, in this case, was emphasised by Della Pergola being Italian – and it is noteworthy that this kind of commemorative activity had first gained popularity among European Jews and soon after arrived in Alexandria.29

For the lay communal leaders, the war and the activities of the ZMC were an occasion for displaying their authority and prestige, rather than something that stimulated inherently Jewish sentiments. Edgard Suarès, a member of a family of Jewish bankers and businessmen and president of the city’s Jewish Community Council from 1914 to 1917, shared the rabbi’s compassionate response to the First World War.30 In 1916, Suarès gave a speech in front of a monument erected by the ZMC with the support of the Jewish Community Council and the municipality to commemorate Jewish soldiers enlisted in European armies and killed in combat: ‘Here rest the heroes of the world’s independence’, men who fought ‘with a sublime style, [...] to defend the shared heritage of humanity: freedom. [...] Brothers, may you rest in peace. [...] Soon we will come and tell you that the radiant dawn of justice has risen’.31 Such a ceremony, with its connections to Western bourgeois rituals, was utilised by Suarès to clarify what it meant to be a modern (Alexandrian) Jew, and it was also a way of asserting his position and authority within local society.32 Moreover, the blessing of the ZMC by Rabbi Della Pergola, the commemoration of the dead soldiers by Suarès and the mixture of biblical citations and patriotic motifs once again show how dichotomies such as tradition/modernity, religious/secular, local/foreign are often too narrow and misleading when applied to modern Mediterranean Jewish societies.33 Last but not least, the ceremony signalled the distance of the city’s Jewish upper classes from Zionist national aspirations, and their support for less politicised feelings of universal stability and peace.

In conclusion, among the consequences of the First World War on Alexandrian Jews was first and foremost the troubling encounter with the Zionist refugees and their novel model of Jewish identity and political activism.34 As soon as the refugees started to be repatriated in 1919, the Jews of Alexandria could, however, claim that they had done their best to help them. For their part, the refugees did not succeed in the expansion of Egyptian Zionism. Yet, it is likely that it was also under the influence of what he had seen and heard while working with the refugees, that in 1917 Jack Mosseri founded the Fédération des Sionistes d’Egypte. Still, the Fédération proved to be very disorganised and incapable of uniting even the few hundreds of Egyptian Zionist sympathisers. Furthermore, the members of the Jewish upper class – the sole milieu that could have allowed for a significant impulse of the Zionist activities – seemed to be uninterested in Zionism, if not openly against it as in the case of the Cairo Jewish leader Joseph Cattaoui.

As for the religious authorities, from his appointment in 1925 the Chief Rabbi of Cairo Hayim Nahum maintained a rather ambivalent approach, seeing Zionism
as an ideology that should not directly interest Egyptian Jews, to the point that in 1930 he banned all fund-raising for the *yishuv* (lit. ‘settlement’ – i.e. the Jewish settlement in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel). On the other hand – as has been said – Alexandria was led by three pro-Zionist rabbis, starting with Della Pergola, and then Prato and the Smyrna-born Moise Ventura, who had been trained at the Italian Rabbinical College of Rhodes. But nonetheless, even in that city, the hope of the refugees and of the few local Jews involved in Zionism that this ideology would attract a greater number of people remained largely unrealised until the late 1930s.

‘A bit of Palestine already coming towards us’: women, youth and Zionism in *La Tribune Juive*, 1936–1948

With the Arab revolt in Palestine in 1936 and the radicalisation in an anti-Jewish sense of part of the Egyptian sociopolitical arena, a more significant number of Jews started to become interested in Zionism and to worry about the situation of Jews in Palestine and – because of the dramatic news that arrived and thanks to the activities of a group like the *Ligue contre l’Antisémitisme Allemand* – in Europe as well. Various Zionist newspapers published in Egypt since the early twentieth century also played a major role in the diffusion of this ideology. These newspapers were generally written in French, and less frequently in Hebrew, Arabic – as was the case for *Al- Shams* (‘The Sun’) – or Ladino, like the short-lived *La vara* (‘The Stick’) founded by Avraham Galante in 1905. The most important ones were *La Revue Sioniste* – published by the above cited *Fédération des Sionistes d’Egypte* – and *Israël*. *Israël* was published in Cairo from 1920 to 1939 by Albert Mosseri and his wife Mathilde in a trilingual French/Hebrew/Arabic version. However, after Mosseri’s death and the migration of his wife to Palestine, the newspaper ceased its publications and the initially Alexandrian-based *La Tribune Juive* (henceforth, *Tribune*) – founded in 1936 by Mendel Klakstein, but soon taken over by Jacques Rabin, a friend of Mosseri – took its place. In this section I will introduce the *Tribune* and investigate the impact of Zionism on Egyptian Jews from 1936 to 1948, concentrating first on the representation of women and second on youth and the Zionist youth movements. The space given to women and youth in the pages of the *Tribune* shows that they were regarded as two social groups that could greatly contribute to a partial reshaping of gender roles and moral values. By looking at Zionism through these two groups, one can understand more clearly that the Egyptian branch of this movement did not propose an abrupt change in the life of the Jews. Quite to the contrary, it sometimes maintained pre-existing gender representations – especially concerning women – as well as a complicated and parallel sense of belonging to the Egyptian nation.

As I just said, the *Tribune* was founded in Alexandria in 1936 and continued its publications until 1948. The newspaper – which was not officially affiliated to any Zionist group – followed a generalist approach to Zionism, aiming at representing the movement’s entire ideological spectrum from the Socialists to the
Revisionists. It appeared on a weekly basis and was divided into a main section dedicated to domestic and international news, followed by pages on various cultural and more frivolous topics. From its first issues, the newspaper had a women’s column that appeared on an irregular basis and under various names. This is surely an indicator of the increasing female readership of newspapers, also suggested by the number of advertisements for beauty products and perfumes to be found in the Tribune. The first women’s column – dating back to 1937 – was called Pour madame. It did not touch upon political themes connected to Zionism, or the sociopolitical conditions of the Jews in Egypt, but instead talked about issues considered interesting and appropriate for women, such as la mode, la table, beauté du corps.

The column also included a letters section, Le courrier de Dianelle, where a journalist named Dianelle answered questions that her readers posed. Another journalist, who signed her articles with the pen name L’Esthète, taught women how to do ‘a bit of gymnastics’ in order to lose weight:

There are two cases to be considered: (1) in the case obesity is concentrated in the arms […] (2) in the case obesity is more upward. 1st exercise, – Keep standing, straight and with your legs spread. Lift your arms ten times over the head . . .

One last section, dedicated to cookery, presented à la page recipes that represented the taste of a sophisticated Parisian middle-class woman more than that of a frugal Zionist pioneer: ‘Cheese cocktail: take a piece of white Roquefort […], a piece of Camembert, two very fresh Gervais […], Add some paprika […] to go [with] a cup of tea or a Martini dry’. That said, the recipes strictly followed Jewish dietary laws, and when – because of a typographical error – the Tribune published a recipe that required ‘a slice of ham’, in the subsequent issue the editor apologised to the readers.

A column like Pour madame was not a novelty for the literate Middle Eastern (Jewish) reader. Ottoman Jewish periodicals in Ladino like El Instrktor and El Amigo de la Familiya, published in Istanbul in the 1880s, already discussed issues such as female hygiene and housekeeping. Similar things could be found in Arabic women’s magazines published in Egypt since the 1890s, which dealt with childrearing and the need to educate Egyptian women to be good and civilised wives and mothers, both in a domestic and national sense. In its first years of publication, the Tribune thus followed a well-established form of female journalism, leaving aside any Zionist connotation. This newspaper preferred to adhere to familiar gender stereotypes, creating a column in which its female readers found light-hearted yet presumably popular articles and learned how to be attractive women and perfect housekeepers.

It was only in the post-war period that a Zionist column for women was created: Notre foyer – Hana vous parle…. This column lasted about five months from October 1946 to January 1947. Although Notre foyer also included short articles on fashion and cookery, the new columnist, Hana, mainly wrote about
the sociopolitical situation of the Jews in Egypt, as well as in Europe and Palestine. That the name of the journalist was no longer the French Dianelle, or the coquettish L’Esthète, but the Jewish Hana already tells us something about the new direction that the column had taken. That said, it is difficult to know who Hana was, and whether this was her real name or, more probably, a pen name. In any case, the impression that one gets reading the articles of Hana vous parlez... is that of a middle-class woman and mother, who, while from the outside embodied a rather traditional model of (Egyptian Jewish) femininity, was also a committed Zionist activist.

In her very first article, Hana engaged in a political discussion on what had happened to European Jews during the Second World War: had she been one of them, ‘I would have already breathed my last breath in a gas chamber and my children [...] would be orphans’. Such an evident shift in the themes covered by the Tribune’s women’s section is, of course, to be explained with the events that occurred between the late 1930s and 1947: first, the local consequences of the Second World War and then the impression that the Shoah and the news from Europe had on Egyptian Jews. The latter had experienced moments of deep anxiety, especially in 1942, when – before the defeat of Germany and Italy in the battle of El Alamein – many thought that the Nazi army was on the point of reaching Alexandria. Last but not least, one should remember what happened in November 1945, when during a gathering held in Cairo on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration by the Ikhwan al-Muslimun, Misr al-Fatat (‘Young Egypt’) and the Young Men’s Muslim Association, unidentified rioters attacked shops owned by Jews and set fire to the Ashkenazi Synagogue of Muski. Bearing all this in mind, Hana argued that the Jews in Egypt and throughout the rest of the Arab world needed to react immediately to prevent what ‘a new Hitler or a new Goering has in store for our children [...] the same destiny’ as European Jews. Even when talking about international politics, Hana never gave up her maternal role. Hers was an attempt to utilise familiar language in order to direct her women readers towards topics until then largely left to their husbands and male relatives. Hana underlined that the task of a Jewish and Zionist woman was to look after her family and, by doing so, contribute to the moral and social advancement of the entire Jewish people in times of such profound difficulty.

In addition to these political articles, Hana also dealt with family and societal problems affecting the lives of the Jews. Marriage – and mixed marriage in particular – was one of the topics that worried her most. As seen before, this issue had been an enduring preoccupation for Egyptian Jews and for the whole of Egypt during the colonial era, when, for example, Egyptian Muslim intellectuals complained about the risks of marrying a foreigner – i.e. a non-Muslim. In an article published at the end of 1946, Hana argued that every woman from the sales assistant, the fitter, the typist, the secretary, the tailor to the school teacher, feel the need of meeting people in order to exchange ideas, to have fun, [...] and simply to relax’. But given that it was the Zionist youth movement, ‘surely laudable but that perhaps does not interest everybody’, that organised
most of the Jewish recreational activities, where else could a Jewish girl go out in the evening and on the weekend?

The answer was provided by the story of Rachel, a fictional Jewish girl, who ‘was very bored’ and aimlessly ‘wandered in the streets’. A Christian colleague of hers, significantly called Christiane, convinced her to attend a party at the Young Women’s Christian Association. There Rachel met a boy, Pierre, and ‘without taking into consideration the difference in religious belief and education’ and though her parents, ‘desperate, tried to make her think but in vain’, she decided to embark on what would soon prove to be a very unhappy marriage. What Hana then called for was the development of a Jewish – though not necessarily Zionist – social arena, as only through this would Egyptian Jews stop attending non-Jewish associations and clubs.52

However, whereas within the articles of Notre foyer Hana expressed her convictions in quite a rigid way, underlining what was right or wrong for her, in the letters section – where she was faced with the everyday reality of Jews – she adopted a more conciliatory position. To Bernard S., who wanted to marry a non-Jewish girl ready to convert to Judaism, Hana replied that ‘if you are sure of her feelings […] do not hesitate’. Answering the reader Esther B. – who explained that her children had to go to class on Saturday, as they attended a non-Jewish school – Hana wrote that ‘the best of course would be to enrol your children in a Jewish school’, but in Egypt this ‘unfortunately is not always possible’.53 Acting as a fair housekeeper and mother, and her readers’ best friend, Hana dispensed advice on almost everything, from how to cook gelfiltefish – one of the most typical dishes of Ashkenazi cuisine – to bizarre marital distress:

Elvire – My husband and my sister very much love each other. My sister’s husband and I fondly love each other. […] What to do, my dear Hana?

Answer: – […] Why not thinking about your children, for the sake of whom one generally sacrifices everything?54

Another interesting aspect of the articles published by Hana is the fact that they were sometimes based upon the personal experiences and encounters of Hana herself or of other Egyptian Jewish women. For example, a woman who signed her article as M. Y. A. visited Palestine in 1947 in order to see what life was like in the yishuv, possibly thinking of a future migration. In contrast with the long sea travels of European Zionists, she merely had to take a train from Cairo to Tel Aviv via Kantara, a city on the Suez Canal. However, even though Palestine was physically close to Egypt, going there meant entering a very different and spiritually distant country: ‘The train that departed from Cairo was similar to any other train. But after Kantara a bit of Palestine is already coming towards us’. For M. Y. A., the voyage was a continuous surprise: the soufragui (‘waiter, butler’) who served tea and coffee to the passengers on the train, the sight of the desert and the ‘fresh morning air’, the Bedouins with their ‘dark goats’, the orange trees ‘full of fruits already ripened under the sun’.
Extremely close and incredibly far

As opposed to the heat always lamented by Ashkenazi Jews that migrated to Palestine, a friend of M. Y. A. back in Cairo suggested she should take a coat and several sweaters, since ‘it is cold in Palestine at this time of the year’. Moreover, when she checked in at her hotel in Tel Aviv, the receptionist did not seem so happy that someone had come to Palestine from Egypt, where a cholera epidemic had just erupted: ‘Why did they allow you to come here? Did you vaccinate?’ But M. Y. A. was so happy at what she saw that she did not care about this minor incident. She happily strolled along the seaside of Tel Aviv, mesmerised by ‘the children of Palestine [who] are […] like works of art. Healthy, beautiful, smart and full of life, they put joy in all hearts’. As Biale showed in Eros and the Jews, ‘a curious combination of female liberation and the return of women to their traditional role as wives and mothers was to characterise much of the Zionist thought’. This sentence perfectly applies to the new woman embodied by M. Y. A. and Hana: at times a good mother and a busy housekeeper, but also an attentive analyst of Egyptian Jewish society, and a conscientious Zionist activist. For them, being a Zionist did not mean abandoning the traditional role to which most (Egyptian) Jewish women were accustomed – that of mother and angel of the house – but instead to infuse it with a national Jewish meaning.

The importance that the Tribune assigned to women was accompanied by an even deeper concern for youth. Let us begin by looking at an article published in 1937 and centred around Sarah, a fictional 26 year old Jewish girl who had been working in a Cairo department store since her teens, the age when a jeune fille generally ‘opens her big eyes […] toward new horizons’, and wears ‘heels of five centimetres, a tuft to keep in her bag and silk stockings’ for the first time. As Sarah was fatherless and lived with her sick mother and two younger sisters, after a long day at work, she gave evening lessons of knitting, and as a result always returned home very late at night. Still, nobody worried about her dangerous habits. Sarah’s socio-economic problems deeply affected her morality: the girl smoked, and this was clearly the sign of ‘a relentless illness’ of the soul, tormented by the thought of ‘her sick mother and her two younger sisters who could not do without her!’. Such a negative view of women smokers seemed to have become a cliché utilised by both the Jewish and non-Jewish press, as confirmed by what Shechter argued in the case of attitudes to smoking in interwar Egypt, and especially how a respectable woman should only smoke alone – that is, not together with a man – and only inside her own house. Instead of cultivating modest yet realistic expectations for the future, Sarah dreamt of becoming an actress. She had just met an impresario that had promised to take her to Paris, where she would play ‘a small role to begin with’. For Lebsohn, Sarah embodied all those lower-class girls, who because they often worked outside the home and were exposed to the dangers of the city, ended up being like her: ‘full of illusions, their soul haunted by a possible future success’.

This article curiously echoes what a few years earlier, in 1933, a Jewish girl attending the Cairo lycée français had written in an essay for a school literary competition. As illustrated in the second chapter, that girl pitied an imaginary
fellaha who felt lost in the noisy streets of Cairo, not knowing what to do to improve her existence. Although the fellaha and Sarah are two very different figures, both lived in a world populated by symbols of a disorienting and illusionary modernity. Both were, one might say, the Egyptian Jewish version of an archetypal modern girl highly debated by the press of the interwar period in locations as different as Bombay, Berlin, Johannesburg and New York. For Sarah, the cigarette, the cinema, the department store and the café where she sat and drank were all places and commodities that did not contribute at all to her moral improvement, but instead made her life more miserable. Through this article – and others that followed, each dedicated to a Jewish girl ‘selected in every social class and in different sectors of society’ – the Tribune highlighted an issue that had been, and would continue to be, under public scrutiny for many years within the Jewish community, both in an educational institution such as the MLF and in Egyptian society at large: the moral character of youth.

For the Tribune, the opposite of Sarah were clearly all the boys and girls involved in Zionism and its youth groups. Since its beginnings, this ideology had placed great attention on youth and its spiritual and bodily regeneration as an integral part of the process of constructing a Jewish nation-state. From the 1910s onwards, Eastern European Jews founded what would soon become a very important component of Zionism: the youth movements Ha-Shomer Ha-Tzair (‘The Young Guard’), He-Halutz Ha-Tzair (‘The Young Pioneer’; henceforth, He-Halutz), Betar (acronym of Brit Trumpeldor, ‘The Trumpeldor Covenant’) and Bnei ‘Aqiva (‘The Sons of ‘Aqiva’). As far as Egypt is concerned, Ha-Ivri Ha-Tzair (‘The Young Hebrew’) was founded in Cairo in 1932 and soon affiliated with the Palestinian Ha-Shomer Ha-Tzair; He-Halutz was instead established in 1933, first in Cairo and in the subsequent year also in Alexandria. The Egyptian He-Halutz acted as a generalist youth association, and its Cairo branch was also part of the Jewish Boy Scout movement Maccabi, which after 1938 joined the Egyptian Boy Scouts. Thanks to its character, it became the most popular association amongst young Jews at least until the late 1940s, when the more radical Ha-Ivri Ha-Tzair increased in popularity. The success of He-Halutz is not surprising, since this association came to embody the Zionist youth movement par excellence in other locations as well, in some cases becoming ‘a brand for the existing Zionist youth circle’.

In the Tribune one could read articles and news concerning all these groups, mainly in special columns for youth: Le Coin du Haloutz, Chez les jeunes and La Tribune des jeunes. For instance, the Tribune of 16 March 1937 told its readers that the youth group Betar was organising a trip to Mariout, a salt lake on the Nile Delta, where ‘a chalet has been booked so to allow the day trippers to devote themselves, during the afternoon, to the cult of Tersichore [i.e. the ancient Greek muse ruling over dance] with the most entertaining music’. A few months later, in December 1937, a Cairo Jewish cultural association named Moadon Haivri (‘The Hebrew Circle’) was said to have ‘celebrated […] Hanouka with dignity’, lighting the hanukiyah – the nine-branched chandelier utilised for this holiday – and then listening to Rivca Picciotto, who sung a
Extremely close and incredibly far

Hebrew song ‘written by a haver [‘comrade’] from Beth Alpha for the 15th anniversary of the colonisation of the Emek’.67

Another initiative brought about by the Zionist youth movements were the hakhsharot (pl. of hakhsharah, ‘preparation’), the preparatory camps where the young would be trained and learn a job before migrating to Palestine.68 In the late 1930s, two camps were active in Egypt: the Hehaloutz of Dessouk, a city a few kilometres from Alexandria, and the Kiboutz Hakhsharah of Siouf, in the outskirts of Alexandria. The camps were situated on a farm owned by Gustave Aghion and on the lands of Joseph Adda and Raphael Toriel, all members of wealthy Alexandrian Jewish families.69 The hakhsharot grew and continued their activities for years, becoming a very visible component of the Egyptian Zionist youth movement.70 This is, at least, the impression that one gets when reading the bitter judgement that, in 1944, the President of the Jewish Community of Cairo, René Cattaoui – who in 1943 had took up the office of his father Joseph – had of the camps. The hakhsharot were, for him, ‘liable to undermine paternal authority and to do great harm to the sacred institution of the family’, and second – and this was probably what mattered to Cattaoui most – these kinds of Zionist activities could ‘seriously compromise the official relations between our community and the [Egyptian] national authorities which have always been excellent’.71

Whilst the representation of women in the Tribune changed explicitly after the Second World War, that of youth remained more stable, as it had been a more radical and explicitly Zionist representation from the beginning. Still, the war could not pass unnoticed, even for the Jewish boys and girls of Egypt. In a 1945 article titled ‘Plus que jamais! Pensons à notre jeunesse’, the Tribune explained, for example, how the social activities organised during the war by the Jewish communities for foreign Jewish soldiers based in Egypt had contributed to the spread of ‘a sweet atmosphere of intimacy and homeliness’. All this, ‘when the soldiers will be gone’, should be fruitfully redirected in favour of youth, now ‘scattered a bit everywhere’. What the young people needed were clubs and places to meet in a wholly Jewish atmosphere – ‘ardent hearths of Jewish education’ – and this was also in order to avoid mixed marriages.72

Notwithstanding all this, the Zionist youth movement as a whole remained very fragmented, and this did not allow for the formation of a well-developed social arena for young people. A letter published in the Tribune in 1946 stigmatised the fact that in Alexandria four different Jewish Scout groups existed, ‘having more or less all the same ideals […]’. Scouting groups have given excellent results everywhere, so why is it that the Community does not take care of them?’73 About one year later, on 29 January 1947, the column La Tribune des jeunes published another article that lamented how there had been numerous attempts at establishing a unified youth movement, but without success. Although the article articulated a kind of agenda for youth – i.e. to minimise the ideological cleavages between the various groups, to be involved in the communal institutions, for example through the organisation of cultural activities, or in the ‘propaganda for the Arikha [i.e. the Jewish communal tax], in the fight against poverty . . .’ – it did not change the overall situation.74
The popularity obtained by the Zionist youth movement, despite its fragmented character and the fact that Zionism as a whole attracted only a minority of Egyptian Jews, underlines that the young boys and girls who joined *He-Halutz* or *Ha-Ivri Ha-Tzair* in the 1930s and early 1940s were often driven, as Krämer wrote, more by ‘non-political motives such as friendship or quite simply the wish to get away from home and to meet young people’ than by deep political convictions. The youth movements functioned as a catalyst for broader processes of change concerning gender and social interaction between the sexes, at a time when youth was a central category of the Egyptian sociopolitical arena. Whether the Egyptian Muslim youth could participate in the activities of the Egyptian Boy Scouts – first founded in Alexandria in 1914 by Prince ‘Omar Tusun, a member of the Egyptian royal house – or, when more politically radical, become affiliated with a movement like *Misr al-Fatat*, the Zionist groups appeared to many young Jews as one of the most viable agents of social (and political) interaction.

That the Jews were not directly involved in the Egyptian Boy Scouts – or at least not in a significant way – was most probably due to the fact that the Egyptian scouting movement had from its beginnings been characterised by an Arab nationalist connotation and, second, the majority of the Boy Scouts were recruited from amongst the students of state secondary schools, which often were not so popular among Jews. Jacob also noted how, from the early 1930s, the Egyptian Boy Scouts became increasingly politicised, conducting, for example, a trip to British Palestine in 1933, during which some of them undertook propaganda work amongst the Arab villagers against ‘the evils of transferring lands to Jewish buyers’.

Still, in 1938, the Jewish scouting movement *Maccabi* – which the Cairo *He-Halutz* was part of – became affiliated with the Egyptian Boy Scouts, clarifying that at least before the Second World War there was a certain reciprocal acknowledgement between Jewish and non-Jewish youth movements. By saying this, I do not mean to minimise the Zionist connotations that *He-Halutz* and the other groups described in the *Tribune* had, but to underline how being a young Egyptian Zionist did not mean fully rejecting a sense of belonging to the Egyptian nation. In a much more ambivalent manner, Zionist aspirations coexisted with deep cultural and emotional ties to Egypt, and this is why the *Maccabi* and *He-Halutz* could live side – although not together with – the Egyptian Boy Scouts, ultimately sharing a similar goal centred on the improvement of the social and physical well-being of youth: ‘If you want to serve Egypt … If you want to serve the Jewish cause … […] The Jewish youth must be healthy and strong’, as a 1938 advertisement in the *Tribune* declared.

My analysis of a sample of articles dedicated to women and youth published by the *Tribune* from 1936 to 1948 showed to what extent this newspaper presented them as two indispensable components of Egyptian Zionism. In the case of youth, this portrayal was easily embraced from the very beginning, surely also because many Zionist activists belonged to the younger generations. On the other hand, the *Tribune* was initially more reluctant to describe women as political
activists and committed Zionists, perpetuating a more familiar female imaginary. However, the consequences that the Second World War had on the Jews, together with the worsening of the Palestine situation, and the repercussions that all this had in Egypt brought about a novel and more politicised female stereotype that substituted the fashionable Dianelle with the more combative Hana.

Furthermore, even though, undeniably, Zionism actively involved a minority of the total Egyptian Jewish population, it was still one of the most organised Jewish sociopolitical movements in the late 1930s and 1940s – together with Communism, another ideology that, as I will explain in the subsequent part, attracted many. Yet, for most Egyptian Zionists, Zionism did not imply an immediate \textit{aliyah} (‘ascent’ – i.e. the Jewish migration to the Land of Israel), which only began in significant numbers after 1948. In that year, precisely in June 1948, the \textit{Tribune} was forced to close by the Egyptian authorities because of its no longer acceptable Zionist stances.\textsuperscript{80} Whereas until the mid-1940s Hana and the young boys and girls of \textit{He-Halutz} and \textit{Ha-Ivri Ha-Tzair} could easily go from Cairo to Tel Aviv and back, literally embodying ‘a bit of Palestine already coming towards us’, they now had to choose between Egypt and Israel. The Jews had just entered an era of great turbulence and uncertainty, whose outlines suddenly seemed very difficult to decipher.

\textbf{‘Strangers in our own land?’: Zionism, Communism and the public representation of Egyptian Jews, 1948–1954}

1948 was marked by the war between a coalition of Arab states formed by Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan and Iraq and on the other side the State of Israel, after the latter declared its independence on 14 May. The war, which resulted in a defeat of the Arab states, had enormous consequences not only for the future asset of what was until 1947 British Palestine and its population, but more generally for the new post-colonial Middle East that had come out of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{81} As concerned the Egyptian domestic consequences, one should remember that the Egyptian monarchy and its political system had entered a period of crisis from the late 1930s. King Faruq, whose role and authority was threatened by the growth of Communism and radical Islamic activism, was further weakened by the Egyptian defeat of 1948, considering also that the sovereign had been the one that had pushed most forcefully for the country to enter the coalition.\textsuperscript{82}

Nineteen-forty-eight clearly had many repercussions for the lives and socio-political positioning of Egyptian Jews, too. On 20 May 1948, five days after the proclamation of the State of Israel, the British daily \textit{The Times} published a short article that explained how ‘hundreds of Jews in Egypt have been arrested during the last few days, and many of them have been expelled from the country’.\textsuperscript{83} In fact, in the aftermath of the proclamation of the State of Israel, the Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmud al-Nuqrashi – a member of the Sa’adist party, which had been founded in 1937 by former Wafdist politicians – decided to arrest hundreds of Zionists and Communists, in large majority Jews, and a number of other
political opponents, including Islamic activists affiliated to the Ikhwan al-Muslimun. This and other restrictive measures that I will later describe led to the migration of 23,000 Jews out of a total population of circa 80,000 between 1948 and 1955. Around 14,000 of 23,000 went to Israel. In addition to these, between 1956 and 1966, 16,500 more Egyptian Jews migrated to Israel, so in the end one could estimate that almost 40 per cent of them made 'aliyah.

The aim of this section is to see how from around 1948 to the Lavon affair and the 1956 War, a new public representation of the Egyptian Jews and their history – in which Europeanised bourgeois identities and values suddenly became a heavy burden to be rapidly dismissed – emerged not only from Egypt, but also the State of Israel. My analysis will be mainly based upon articles published between 1948 and 1954 in three Israeli newspapers that represented different political positions of society – Ma'ariv, Davar and Hed ha-mizrah – and described the past and present history of the Egyptian Jews, as well as the migration of some of them to Israel. So, to better understand the changing sociopolitical scenario and what it implied for the Jews, I will also introduce personal memories of Egyptian Jewish Zionist and Communist activists and, finally, I will refer to how and if the European press narrated the new Egypt that gradually emerged. In so doing, I argue that despite the ambivalent attitudes toward the Jews that – as Beinin showed – can be traced throughout the last years of the monarchical era and the first years of Nasser’s regime; from 1948, Egypt and its Jewish population entered a very different sociopolitical and cultural phase, which would see the opposition of ‘new forces and ancient traditions’, as an Italian journalist wrote in the daily La Stampa in January 1950 – that is, of a long-lasting yet rapidly fading Egyptian transcommunal model and new, less inclusive national ideas.

In May and June 1948, al- Nuqrashi’s government arrested many Jews and others accused of anti-Egyptian activities. Although the arrests were not conducted in a pervasive way – for instance, many members of Ha-‘Ivri Ha-Tzair were classified as nothing more than Boy Scouts and thus not arrested – at least 1,000 Jews were arrested and detained in three prison camps: Huckstep, near Cairo, Abu Kir, near Alexandria, and El Tur, in the south of the Sinai Peninsula. The Cairo Jew Edouard Bitty was arrested a few days after the proclamation of the State of Israel, even though his Zionism was limited to a few documents that only proved the ‘ownership of plots of land bought in the yishuv through the mediation of the Keren Kayemet le-Israel’. Edouard remained in Huckstep until July 1949. His family was allowed to visit him every two weeks, and sent him letters ‘hiding a bakchiche [‘tip’] in the boot of one of the officers of Huckstep that went back and forth’. His daughter recalled how difficult this period was, mostly because ‘most of our relatives kept at a distance, no one wanted to compromise himself with “the Zionists”, for fear of the secret services.

Arlette Fishman Busnach, who was arrested in Cairo on 15 May 1948 and remained in one of the city’s prisons until June 1949, remembered that ‘there was the fear […] of not knowing, not knowing how long we would be there […].
The physical conditions were appalling’. However, when she got a mouth infection, she was allowed to go to hospital accompanied by some army officers: ‘One of them was very nice and said to me “I know that you are engaged to be married. Do you want to see your fiancé?”’ and so ‘he stopped in front of Izzy’s shop and allowed us just to hug’.91 Albert Guetta, who was part of the same Zionist group as Arlette Fishman, was also arrested on 15 May and interned in Abu Kir. When he recounted the year he spent there and compared it to the Shoah:

I realised that I had been in a resort rather than in a concentration camp. The Egyptians were very sweet, poor fellows […] we would feed our guards. Our families would send us mountains of food. […] It was a very rich year, rich in human experience.92

As opposed to these descriptions – which underline the difficulty of being in prison, but also the fact that not all Egyptians had suddenly become brutal soldiers – the articles published at the time in the Israeli press gave a different picture. For the Israeli Socialist daily Davar, the Egyptian Government was acting in a barbaric way, and this was not surprising, given that a Nazi spirit possessed the Egyptian police already during World War Two. The foundation of the State of Israel only served as a pretext for the violent explosion of this Arab-style Nazi wind. [...] On the eve of 15 May 1948, at 2 a.m., […] hundreds of Jewish houses were circled, the police conducted meticulous searches and, based upon a black-list, took [the Jews] to different concentration camps [mahanot-rikuz]. The prisoners were treated in a savage way without distinguishing between old and young, and with no respect for the public and social position of some of them.93

As if that was not enough, during the same months, a series of attacks on Cairo Jewish properties and neighbourhoods occurred: in June, a bomb exploded in the Karaite quarter, and a month later ‘the entire city of Cairo was shaken by the explosion’ of the Jewish-owned Grands Magasins Cicurel et Oreco. Later, in September, a bomb killed nineteen Jews in the harat al-yahud.94 The Grands Magasins Cicurel et Oreco was a deeply significant target, as it symbolised – together with stores like the Grands Magasins Hannaux or Adès – the more cosmopolitan and modern side of Egypt, as well as the role that Jews played in its economy. Initially, the Egyptian Government blamed an Israeli airplane for the accident, but a few days later the local authorities admitted that unknown people, probably the Ikhwan al-Muslimun, had placed the bomb outside the building. Salvator Cicurel – owner of the department store and President of the Jewish Community of Cairo since René Cattaoui’s resignation in 1946 – managed to partly reopen the Grands Magasins a few days afterwards, ‘because a store that has been there for sixty years will survive despite any attack’.95
Israeli historian Idith Zertal has argued that since 1948, in Israel ‘there has not been a war […] that has not been perceived, defined, and conceptualised in terms of the Holocaust’, utilised as a blueprint for domesticating all kinds of anti-Jewish, and anti-Israeli, feelings. The transformation of Egypt into a small Nazi Germany was, then, the way that the Israeli establishment developed to make the stories coming from Egypt more familiar to a still predominantly Ashkenazi Israel and, at a more general level, to explain the rationale of the Israeli military actions against Egypt.\textsuperscript{96} That said, parallel to the Nazification of Egypt was also a more locally focused analysis of the Jews’ past.

For instance, in 1949 \textit{Hed ha-mizrah} published a few articles on the history of the Egyptian Jews, ‘the most prosperous of all the Jewish communities of the Arab world’, second only to the Iraqis. The Jews had been ‘without exaggeration, the founders of modern Egypt’ and yet ‘many of them are stateless, even though the overwhelming majority descends from families that have been living in the Land of the Nile already for generations’. Up until the mid-1930s, they lived in peace and quietly took care of their businesses. The chief rabbi of Cairo Hayim Nahum effendi [firstly] met King Fu’ad (who was then still a prince) before the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and became a good friend of the sovereign, who consulted and deeply respected the rabbi. \textit{That was the golden era of Egyptian Jews.}

In those decades, all Jews ‘worked for the sake of their homeland’, and many of them even ‘participated in the national movement of Sa’ad Zaghlul pasha and in the 1919 Revolution’. \textit{Hed ha-mizrah} continued, stating that in the 1930s, with the decline of the Egyptian liberal system, ‘anti-Semitism was not explicit but nevertheless slowly emerged, and the Jews for the first time in many years felt in danger’. The strengthening of Egyptian Islamic nationalist ideas in the 1940s eventually clarified that the Egyptians had become similar to all anti-Semites, and that ‘the problem with the Land of Israel […] was for them only an excuse’ to get rid of the Jews; indeed, ‘history has shown that in such circumstances the Jews always act as scapegoats’.\textsuperscript{97}

This historical \textit{excursus} mixed accurate data and figures with more controversial ones. For example, very few Jews – except for Cattaoui and some others – were involved in Egyptian domestic politics during the monarchy. As for the 1919 Revolution, the Jews do not seem to have played such a great role in it, even though it is true that some were close to Sa’ad Zaghlul – namely, Léon Castro.\textsuperscript{98} Moreover, what the journalist termed the ‘golden era of Egyptian Jewry’ had been – as I showed in the previous chapters – a much more complex and ambivalent period, which saw both moments of exchange and fruitful interaction, as well as clashes between Jews and Muslims.

The idea that Egyptian Jews were living under a Nazi-style regime soon spread to other Israeli newspapers, and was further confirmed by what some of those who migrated to Israel declared. One confessed to the rightist daily \textit{Ma’ariv} what an Egyptian army officer had told him: ‘you should thank the Israeli army if you are
not dead. Had we won against Israel [in 1948], none of you would have come out of the camps still alive'.99 However, the press could not completely erase the fact that few Egyptian Jews were Zionists and that the prison camps were profoundly different to the Nazi concentration camps. Another Egyptian Jew, who authored an article published again in Ma'ariv in September 1950, explained that while interned in one of the camps, he was allowed to celebrate Shavuot with the other prisoners.100 While they were all praying and singing ‘[songs] about Zion and Jerusalem’, a non-Zionist Egyptian Jew who acted as head of the camp came to them and asked: ‘Have you not yet caused enough damage to us? Even here, you continue with that Zionism of yours, and who knows where this will lead us to!’ But soon afterwards, as the news that the Israeli Army was winning over the Arab states spread to the prison camp, the ‘Nazi fellow Jews’ – as the author bitterly defined the man and his friends – decided to embrace Zionism.101

Besides such rhetorical accusations, some Jews in Egypt did think that Zionism, the State of Israel and the Arab–Israeli conflict in general had worsened their living conditions. This is what the Egyptian Jewish communal leaders and Rabbi Nahum believed when they declared that ‘their religion was Judaism, their homeland Egypt, and their nationality Egyptian’.102 But while it was true that Nahum and Cattaoui were Egyptian nationals, many Jews – though they might feel part of the Egyptian nation – were stateless or foreign nationals. The nationality issue, which until the 1930s had not been so central, now became an insurmountable obstacle to the Jews’ national and socio-economic reintegration – perhaps more than the Arab–Israeli conflict itself, at least immediately after 1948. It should, here, be remembered that in 1936 the system of the Capitulations had already been abolished; second, in July 1947, the Company Law ruled that there should be ‘a minimum 75 per cent of [Egyptian] salaried employees, 90 per cent of the workers, 51 per cent of paid-up capital of joint stock companies’. The final blow arrived in 1949 when the Mixed Courts were also abolished.103

Although the main factors that lay behind the juridical reforms cited above had first to do with the country’s economic restructuring in the aftermath of the Second World War and the presumed meddling of too many foreigners – be they locals holding a foreign passport or real Europeans – these measures eventually had profound consequences for the Jews. Hed ha-mizrah explained that some of them temporarily fled the country, although they now had to return to Egypt, since ‘the Egyptian government declared that their capitals would be nationalised were they not “to return to their homeland immediately”’. Others ‘found an easier way to solve their problems’ and, claiming that they never had any connection whatsoever to Judaism, they converted to Islam, although they do not know if this ‘medicine’ will eventually work with a government that has decided to strip even those Jews who betray their fathers’ faith.104

Hed ha-mizrah was referring to those Communist Jews who converted to Islam as an ultimate demonstration of Egyptianness in the aftermath of 1948.
The Jews had played a relevant role in Egyptian Communism since its beginnings, contributing substantially to its development throughout the entire monarchical era. For example, Henri Curiel was one of the main leaders of Egyptian Communism and of *Al-haraka al-misriya lil-taharrar al-watani* (‘Egyptian Movement of National Liberation’), and Hillel Schwartz had instead founded the Communist group *Iskra/al-Sharara* (‘The Sparkle’). But in the context of the post-war period and the Egyptian domestic turbulences, Communism – which had, indeed, become quite popular among the young Egyptian Jews that attended schools like the Alexandrian *Lycée de l’Union Juive* or the Cairo *lycée français* – ended up being perceived as similar or even more dangerous than Zionism, notwithstanding the contrariety of the Communists to the establishment of the State of Israel. In fact, the accusation of engaging in Communist activities sometimes overlapped with that of Zionism, eventually diffusing the idea that most Jews were in one way or another implicated in anti-Egyptian political struggles. In the end, whereas Zionism at least offered the Jews an immediate solution – the migration to Israel – Communism and its universalistic ideals turned out to be an even more problematic choice. As the Cairo Jewish Communist activist Victor Segré asked: ‘Will be always be like strangers in the country where we were born [...]? Did not our clandestine life have a purpose, now that we realise that we are not wanted in this country [...]?’

These questions – which highlight the difficulty for many Jews in coming to terms with such radical political and cultural shifts – were absent from the Israeli press. For *Davar*, notwithstanding the 1948 War, most Egyptian Jews were still said to ‘enjoy their shallow fleshpot, and, for the moment, the Egyptian diaspora [*golah*] will not come to an end’. But, according to *Ma’ariv*, Egyptian Jews should always keep in mind that Egypt was nothing other than the place where their ancestors had been enslaved under the Pharaoh and from where they escaped guided by Moses – as written in the biblical Book of Exodus. The migration of Egyptian Jews to the State of Israel was therefore to be the *yetziat-Mitzrayim nussah 5710*, ‘the 1950-style exodus from Egypt’. *Davar* added that:

> [T]he exodus from Egypt – the great ancient myth told from generation to generation – nowadays assumes a new connotation for the exiled Egyptian. The ‘*olim* from the Land of the Nile, now scattered all over Israel [...] in the night of the *seder* [of *Pesah*] will remember their own exodus from Egypt.*

According to a very different historical interpretation from that provided by Maurice Fargeon, Pharaonic Egypt was no longer the earliest moment of interaction between Egypt and the Jewish people, but the first episode in a much longer history of Egyptian anti-Semitism. The Jews could prosper in Egypt during colonial and monarchical times only thanks to the role played by the Western powers and the foreigners who lived in the country, wrote ‘a Jew who
succeeded in fleeing from Egypt’ in an article published by Hed ha-mizrah in 1949. ‘We can say without any doubt’, he explained, ‘that the foreigners, and not the Egyptians, built modern Egypt’ and that all the enlightened and modern Egyptians ‘were educated in foreign schools’. As for the Jews, ‘as the Jew of any other country, [the Egyptian Jew] was a loyal and industrious citizen, who loved and always supported his homeland’. So unconditional was the love of the Jews for Egypt that they were stunned – though according to the newspaper they should not have been – by the 1949 declaration of Prime Minister Nuqrashi pasha that ‘all Egyptian Jews are nothing other than supporters of the Zionist gangs’. According to Hed ha-mizrah, Egyptian Jews were doing almost nothing in reaction: like all Diaspora Jews, they were weak and passive individuals, almost always unable to act against anti-Semitism, as the European case had dramatically demonstrated.

It is true that foreign professionals and members of the minority groups holding foreign nationalities played a role in the modernisation of Egypt both before and after the birth of the constitutional monarchy. However, these men had, in many cases, been considered foreign residents who worked for the sake of Egypt together with their Egyptian peers, at a time when there was yet no rigid definition of Egyptianness as referring only or mainly to a juridical category or to a specific ethno-religious affiliation. Because of the 1948 War and the difficult political situation of Israel vis-à-vis the Arab world, the Israeli press unsurprisingly viewed this new trend in very negative terms. On the other hand, the European newspapers in some cases adopted a more conciliatory position, clarifying to what extent the same event could be evaluated in different terms, based on different ideological premises. For instance, the Italian Communist daily L’Unità in an article published in 1951 praised ‘the progress made in the last seventy years [by the Egyptians] from being subjected to the English up to the movement of liberation from the imperialist yoke’. L’Unità also cited a passage from the unpublished novel In quattro tempi by Fausta Cialente, an Italian novelist who had lived in Alexandria with his family from 1921 to 1947. The protagonist of Cialente’s novel – an Alexandrian girl of Italian origin – narrated how her grandmother, ‘racist and ignorant’, had warned her against the anti-British stances of late 1940s Egypt: ‘Who knows what would have been of this country, where we would all be, had it not been for the English’. But for the girl, the Egyptians were fighting for the birth of a new Egypt, as the Italians had during the Risorgimento. For too long beneath Alexandria’s cosmopolitan aura had there been hidden profound social and economic injustices, exemplified by the fact that, for example, ‘when in the strollings of elegant people along the Mahmudieh canal [the grandmother] came across the carriages of Céline, Rosalinda and Mirella’ – three very rich Jewish contemporaries of hers – ‘[they] turn[ed] away their face’.

As these lines – written by a well-known Italian of Egypt in the daily of the Italian Communist party – showed, the political tensions of late 1940s and 1950s exacerbated the perception of the Jews as affluent foreigners, eventually connecting them closely to the European colonial powers. When one looks at the
local situation a bit more carefully, it becomes evident that these tensions did not impact only on the Jews, but also on the Italians, the Greeks and the Egyptians more generally. In fact, in January 1952, large parts of the modern quarters of Cairo were burnt down by a still unspecified mob – probably the radical Islamic *Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* or the extreme rightist movement *Mīsr al-Fatat* – protesting against the killing of forty Egyptian policemen in Isma‘īliyyah, a city near the Suez Canal. A few months later, on 23 July, a group of young army officers, led by Gamal ‘Abd-al-Nasser and Muhammad Naguib, seized power and, one year later in 1953, officially abolished the monarchy and declared the birth of the new Egyptian Republic. Nasser immediately pointed out that Egypt’s main enemy was British imperialism, which he blamed for having contributed to the flourishing of Zionism and subsequently the State of Israel in Palestine. Again, while the Israeli press viewed this change as yet another dramatic event that further deteriorated the already precarious Middle Eastern situation, the French *Le Monde* interpreted Nasser’s coup d’état as a momentous opportunity for Egypt. However, although *Le Monde* explained that ‘a new era opens up in Egypt’, it also admitted that ‘nothing can now predict if there will be even more revolutionary changes’. For the time being, one could only appreciate the fact that ‘the twilight of the pashas’ and of Faruq’s reign had finally begun.

Interestingly, no article specifically dedicated to Egyptian Jews seems to have been published at the time of Nasser’s Revolution of 1952. This might signify that the press – at least, the three newspapers that I selected – was interested in the fate of this community only when it implied significant waves of migration to the State of Israel, as happened between 1948 and 1951. On the other hand, it also confirms that – as already said – at that time the Egyptian authorities continued to avoid explicitly targeting the Jews. Since the mid-1940s, the Egyptian Arabic press had, on the contrary, published several articles and correspondences on the Shoah, interpreting it as ‘the most repulsive human tragedy’. It was only after 1948 that a more clear-cut distinction between Jews and Zionists started to emerge and then replace the former sympathetic attitude.

But even then, one should remember how in 1952 the new President of the Egyptian Republic, Muhammad Naguib, visited the Temple Sha‘ar ha-shamayim, Cairo’s main synagogue, on *Yom Kippur* and a few weeks later the Karaite Synagogue of ‘Abbasiyah. Although these were public ceremonies that do not reveal much of the deeper ideological convictions of Naguib and Nasser at the time, they nonetheless constituted important ways to reassure the Jews and their positioning in the new Egyptian state. It was only with the Suez War that a more visible change occurred and the politics and ideology of Nasser’s regime, as well as the equation Jews = Zionists = enemies, were definitively clarified.

The only article on Egyptian Jews published in the Israeli press between 1952 and the *Lavon affair* was an interview with five Cairo Jews that had migrated to kibbutz Bror Hayil in northern Negev around 1948. This article, titled *Yotzei-Mitzrayim be-yemeinu* (‘Today’s Exiled from Egypt’), appeared on 16 April 1954 in *Davar*, more precisely in the weekly supplement *Davar ha-shavua‘*, and was part of a series of articles that aimed at presenting the lives of Jews who had...
migrated to Israel from the Arab world. All the interviewees belonged to the
Egyptian Zionist youth group He-Halutz. Dan, ‘a mechanic’, confessed that he
had never felt ‘any connection to Egypt and to the Arab culture. I was born and
bred into French culture and, as far as I am concerned, the history of Egypt stops
at the Pharaonic era’. He was among the founders of Bror Hayil, and remem-
bered that in the beginning

there was not yet the kibbutz as nowadays, but only a commanding position.
There [during the 1948 War], an Egyptian army officer was caught [by the
Israeli army] and I happened to talk to him. We talked in English, I did not
tell him that I was born in Egypt. It is strange, but it was in Israel that I
spoke to an Egyptian soldier for the first time.

His wife Miryam, ‘mother of three children’, who was now responsible for the
kibbutz’s children’s house, migrated in 1949. However, she had already visited
the country three times before the establishment of the State of Israel, together
with other comrades of Ha-shomer Ha-tzair:

The last visit in 1944 […] deeply impressed me, and definitively convinced
me that I wanted to make ‘aliyah. Back home, I struggled with my parents,
who did not want me to come here. But in the end I convinced them and we
all came to Israel. My parents now say that sometimes one should follow
the young, even when they have no experience.

Vicky, the only other woman interviewed by Davar, was the gardener of the
kibbutz. She was born in Cairo, where her father owned a perfumery, and before
making ‘aliyah in 1949 attended French and British schools. When she thought
about her years in Egypt, only painful memories came to mind:

You ask me if I remember? I think that I will never forget. Those were harsh
times. The police had closed all youth groups. Many [Jews] were taken to
the concentration camps […]. The soldiers […] waited for the Jews in the
street. […] Every two or three weeks there was a small pogrom.

Dov, who back in Cairo had been an engineering student, vividly remembered
the attacks on the harat al-yahud in 1949. The day after, in order to commemo-
rate the dead and protest against what had happened, he had arranged, together
with his comrades of He-Halutz, that Ha-tiqvah – the Jewish national anthem –
be sung in one of Cairo’s synagogues after praying, ‘but the man who was sup-
pose to begin to sing the song, never started. We were all bitterly disappointed’.
Shortly afterwards, he migrated to Israel, where ‘he soon found something to
do’, becoming the security guard of the farm of Bror Hayil and taking care of the
animal forage.121

All these Egyptian ‘olim more or less deliberately interpreted the Egyptian
policemen as Nazi officers, Huckstep and Abu Kir as concentration camps and
the bombs and attacks on Jewish properties as small pogroms. Events that had previously been considered not as Zionist but as simple declarations of Jewishness, such as the performance of *Ha-tiqvah* – played during many Jewish public celebrations throughout the monarchical era, even in the presence of Egyptian authorities, as, for instance, during the 1925 inauguration of the *Hôpital Israélite* of Cairo – after 1948 assumed a different and inherently political meaning, to the point that some Jews were afraid of singing it. The *‘olim* fully embraced the Jewish-Zionist symbolism and historical narrative that had come out of the Second World War, re-envisioning their Egyptian past and carefully selecting the episodes that could be compared to the persecutions suffered by the Jews of Europe.

Reading the article today, one should emphasise that this kind of historical re-narration first and foremost shows – as Shenhav noted in the case of the Iraqi Jews – ‘the deep desire’ of the new migrants ‘to be admitted in the Israeli civil religion’ and, in so doing, to demonstrate their loyalty to a Zionist dream to whose diffusion and accomplishments most of them had only marginally participated. It is also important to remember that the Nazification of Egypt continued in the subsequent years, first during the 1956 War and then in the 1960s, with the depiction of Nasser as another Hitler who was ready to ‘throw the Jews into the sea’. On a wider level, the comparison between Hitler, Nazism and contemporary Arab regimes became a common trend in the Israeli public discourse that has continued more or less until today. Lastly, on another level of analysis, it is worth underlining how the gender representation of the *kibbutznikim* was the one common to 1950s Israel: strong, combative men and determined yet also maternal, caring women that had risked their lives for the sake of their old/new homeland.

By looking at how three Israeli newspapers represented Egyptian Jews in the aftermath of the 1948 War, one can thus see to what extent the newspapers’ narrations constituted a novel and more restrictive way of imagining and historicising Egyptian Jews vis-à-vis Egypt, Zionism and the Arab–Israeli conflict. The sociopolitical changes of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the 1948 War, brought about the diffusion – first and foremost in Egypt and Israel, and to a lesser extent in Europe – of an underlying feeling of uncertainty about the future lives of the Jews and other minorities. In the case of the Israeli press, this becomes very evident when one looks at the heavily charged words and expressions used by journalists: *pogrom*, *mahanat-rikuz* (*concentration camp*), *yetziat-Mitzrayim* (*exodus*), *se’ir la-‘azazel* (*scapegoat*) and so on. Although the 1948 War and the advent of Nasser did not immediately lead to the end of the Jewish presence in Egypt, these events produced and diffused a much less inclusive national imaginary within which the Jews – be they Zionists or Communists – did not fit.

These shifts were greatly emphasised and reinterpreted by the Israeli press through the filter – or perhaps one should say the distorted mirror – of Nazism and the *Shoah*. In line with what the Zionist refugees of the First World War had already written, the Israeli press viewed Egyptian Jews as a not-so-Jewish and
affluent milieu very far from Zionism and that did not have a real connection
with Egypt. Those worth listening to were, then, the Zionist activists and kibbut-
znikim, such as the founders of Bror Hayil, who were the only ones to under-
stand how – Hed ha-mizrah wrote in September 1948 – ‘the destiny of Egyptian
Jews [was now] connected to the destiny of the State of Israel’. In fact, the
newspaper was quite right: for both Zionists and non-Zionists, the 1948 War –
Together with the many other political upheavals that followed – marked the
beginning of the decline of the Egyptian Jewry.

‘Each of us is a story’: Israelis of Egyptian Jewish origin and
their memories

Between 1948 and the late 1950s, about 40 per cent of Egyptian Jews migrated to
the State of Israel. The rest went to France, the US and other destinations, such as
Australia, Great Britain, Italy and Brazil. According to the historiography, the
upper echelons of Egyptian Jewish society tended to migrate to Europe or the US,
whereas the middle- and lower-middle classes – and obviously the Zionists – opted
for Israel. However, this last statement does not seem to be sufficiently corrobo-
rated by quantitative data and is, in any case, based on problematic figures. For
instance, personal testimonies of Egyptian Jews now living in Israel show that at
least some of those who made ‘aliyah, especially in the immediate aftermath of
1948, were considered jobless only because they were very young and therefore
still without a professional specialisation. A few also recall how their fathers were
classified as jobless and/or poor as a consequence of a curious linguistic misunder-
standing. Upon their arrival in Israel, when asked about their miqtsa’ (‘job’),
these mostly middle-class professionals answered that they had none, as the term
was apparently translated to them with the French métier – that is, a manual labour,
which many of them had, indeed, never done.

Moreover, even if one were to agree with the figures given by the Mossad le-
‘Aliyah (‘Agency for the Migration’), why did many Egyptian ‘olim – as evident
from memoirs, novels, movies and personal testimonies – view themselves as
members of a cultivated and cosmopolitan bourgeois-like milieu? And then, con-
sidering that only a minority of Egyptian Jews moved to Israel, why is it from
there that a rearticulated Egyptian Jewish identity seems to emerge? Before
answering these questions, I shall briefly return to the early 1950s and examine
how the advent of Nasser’s regime impacted on the Jews.

As already mentioned, the first years after the Free Officers’ Revolution were
characterised by the absence of explicit anti-Jewish policies, notwithstanding the
opposition between the Egyptian Arab Republic and the State of Israel. Things
started to change in 1954 with the Lavon affair, also known as Operation Susan-
nah or ‘eeq ha-bish (‘mishap’). In the summer of that year, a group of Egyptian
Jews affiliated with Zionist youth movements and coordinated by an Israeli
emissary were arrested in Cairo and accused of committing acts of espionage
and sabotage on behalf of the State of Israel, including firebombs in the Amer-
ican libraries of Cairo and Alexandria. As the saboteurs were arrested, Israel
declined any involvement in the event – which had instead been organised by the Minister of Defense, Pinhas Lavon, without informing the Israeli Prime Minister Moshe Sharett. The arrested men were tortured, two committed suicide in prison and the trial ended with the execution of two others: Shmuel Azar and the Karaite Moshe Marzuq. The Lavon affair resulted not only in a political disaster in Israel itself, but it also led to a downward spiral with Egypt that culminated with the 1956 Suez War – a major turning point for the history of the entire Middle East. After Nasser’s decision to nationalise the Suez Canal in July 1956 – and the subsequent closure of the strait of Tiran to all Israeli shipping – Britain, France and then Israel decided to respond to what they felt was a violation of international agreements, entering into war against Egypt. The war ended with the military victory of Israel, but also fostered the advent of new power relations in the Middle East and its relations with the West, leading to the collapse of British and French influence in the region. As regarded Egyptian Jews, from late October 1956 thousands of Jews holding Egyptian and European nationalities were arrested or expelled, and about 460 Jewish enterprises were confiscated. One month later, a new Nationality Law imposed very restrictive criteria for obtaining Egyptian nationality, and deprived anyone accused of Zionist activities of the right to become an Egyptian citizen. Between 1956 and 1959, 19,000 Jews left Egypt, and from 1960 to 1966 about 4,500 more Jews moved out of the country. By then, about 90 per cent of Egyptian Jews had migrated to Europe, the US or Israel.

The majority of Egyptian Jews that moved to Israel settled in Tel Aviv and its surroundings, particularly Bat Yam and Holon. As many other migrants from the Middle East, the Egyptian ‘olim – classified as members of the ‘edot ha-mizrah (‘the Eastern ethnicities’) and later as mizrahim (‘Orientals’) – had to spend the first months after the ‘aliyah in ma’abarot (pl. of ma’abarah, ‘transit camp’), which were temporary barracks designed to accommodate the new migrants. According to Shohat, these spaces marked the beginning of a double process of de-socialisation from the migrants’ previous environment and subsequent re-socialisation within Israel. In many ways, Egyptian migrants faced socioeconomic problems and social marginalisation similar to those of, for instance, the migrants from Iraq or Morocco. Considering the closeness of many of them to European bourgeois culture, most Egyptians also felt far from the Socialist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Migrants to the State of Israel</th>
<th>Migrants to other destinations</th>
<th>Total of migrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948–1955</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>23,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956–1959</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>34,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960–1966</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30,500</td>
<td>32,500</td>
<td>63,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ilan, Mitzrayim, 37, Table 3.
ideology that dominated the Israeli public arena in the 1950s and 1960s, and from the social and cultural values of the kibbutz and its communitarian lifestyle. This said, in the history of the ‘aliyyot from the Middle East, Egyptian Jews – as opposed, for instance, to the Iraqis – usually feature less prominently, both because of the limited size of the community and the fact that, thanks to high levels of education, many adjusted rather rapidly to the new Israeli environment.

Literature and life-writing were the most significant fields in which l’Egypte d’antan started to be narrated. The first memoir published by an Egyptian Jew in Israel was the 1965 Dramaḥ be-‘Aleksandriah ve-shnei hrugei malkhut (‘Drama in Alexandria and Two Martyrs’) by Shlomo Kohen-Tzidon and dedicated to the Lavon affair. It was preceded by the journalistic and autobiographical essays of the Cairo-born Jacqueline Kahanoff, published from the late 1950s mainly in the literary journal Qeshet, where an excerpt of the memoir Mitzrayim shelī (‘My Egypt’), published in 1968 by Rahel Maccabi, also appeared. It was, however, from the late 1970s, especially after the signing of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979, that Egyptian Jews started to commemorate their history more freely and publicly. Think of the novels Qaitz ‘Aleksandroni (‘An Alexandrian Summer’, 1978) and Blanche (1986) by Yitzḥaq Gormezano Goren, the 1979 memoir Mi-piramidot la-Qarmel (‘From the Pyramids to Mount Carmel’) by Ada Aharoni and the short story Joe ‘ish Qahir (‘Cairo Joe’, 1989) by Orly Castel-Bloom. This coincided with a wider process of social and cultural shifting that involved the mizrahim, as well as Israeli politics and society at large:

[T]he technocratic revolution of the 1960s […] and especially the passage to a capitalist kind of. […] The ‘ideological loss of impetus’ and the weakening of traditional parties […] Lastly, the ‘re-Judaisation’ of Israeli society […] in the aftermath of the Eichmann process, the Six Days’ War […] and that of Kippur.

In that same period, Egyptian Jews in Israel and Europe also created associations in order to commemorate and preserve their heritage: this is the case of the French Association pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel des Juifs d’Égypte, founded in Paris in 1979 by Jacques Hassoun among others, or of the Israeli Hitahdut ‘Olei Mitzrayim (‘Union of Egyptian Migrants’) and earlier than that the ‘Irgan nifgei ha-radifot ha-anti-yehudiot be-Mitzrayim/Association des ex-victimes des persecutions anti-juives en Egypte, whose honorary president was the former Chief Rabbi of Alexandria, Moise Ventura. Since the 1990s, more novels and (semi-)autobiographical memoirs have appeared. Confining myself to the Israeli case, I shall mention Me-ha-Nilus la-Yarden (‘From the Nile to the Jordan’, 1994) and Qiruv ha-levavot (‘Bringing Hearts Together’, 2010), again by Ada Aharoni, Zeh ‘im ha-panim ‘eleinu (‘The One Facing Us’, 1995) and Qol Tze adenu (‘The Sound of Our Steps’, 2007) by Ronit Matalon, Ha-molokhiya shel ‘ima (‘Mother’s Molokhiya’, 2006) by Nissim Zohar, Bo’i

What all these cultural products and, as I will now show, oral testimonies underline is that among the defining characteristics of Egyptian Jews were: cosmopolitanism and the many cultural and linguistic connections that Egyptian Jews had with Europe and France in particular; a certain aloofness from Zionism and, last but not least, the insistence on bourgeois patterns of identity and sociability.\(^{141}\) Basing upon my own ethnographic encounter with Israelis of Egyptian origin and focusing on the activities of the Tel Aviv-based *Hitahdut ‘Olei Mitzrayim* (‘Union of the Egyptian Migrants’), I will now further explain this and attempt to understand why they are still so important at a distance of several decades.

As Efrat and Goldberg argued, heritage associations are spaces where both past and present memories can connect, especially for communities that have been uprooted from their original milieu:

> [The associations] are oriented to the past, seeking to preserve a historical, cultural and religious heritage and transmit it to the next generation. […] On the other hand, they are focused on the present. They promote friendship, network and mutual support among their members.

The main goal of the *Hitahdut ‘Olei Mitzrayim* – nowadays the most important Israeli-based Egyptian Jewish heritage association – is to preserve the history and cultural heritage of Egyptian Jews and to promote various kinds of activities connected to it. The association publishes a yearly magazine called *Bnei Ha-Ye’or* (‘Sons of the Nile’), partly in Hebrew and partly in French, which contains articles on the activities of the association, historical essays, as well as poems and short stories by Egyptian ‘olim. Aside from that, its members gather on a monthly basis in its siege in central Tel Aviv for book presentations and lectures.\(^{142}\) There, one can also visit a permanent exhibition of objects, historical documents and photographs about life in Egypt from the time that is now remembered by many as the *tor ha-zahav* (‘golden era’) of the Egyptian Jews.

The most important event organised by the *Hitahdut* is surely the World Congress of Jews from Egypt. The association has so far organised five international meetings, the first having been held in Tel Aviv in 1983 and the most recent in Eilat in 2014. About fifty people attended the Eilat congress, most of them Egyptian Jews now living in Israel, even though delegations of Egyptian Jewish associations from Brazil and the US were also present. Throughout the three
Extremely close and incredibly far

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days of the conference, a joyful atmosphere pervaded, as if Egypt had suddenly come back, thanks to the happy memories that they were eager to share: the ice-creams of the Cairene Café Groppi, the bains de mer in Stanley Bay and Ras el Bar, the dishes that mothers used to cook.\textsuperscript{143} The conference brochure proudly stated that:

[N]inety percent of Jewish families in Egypt could afford to go on holidays for two months in the summer, people had at least a housemaid – if not two – […] [they] had a mostly bourgeois culture, in the positive sense of the term, they loved going out, dancing, taste the best chocolate ice-creams.\textsuperscript{144}

These details are, indeed, what, according to all, even nowadays distinguish the Egyptians from other Middle Eastern and North African Jewries: ‘Everyone has always asked me’ – a person who made ‘aliyah immediately after 1948 shared – ‘what was the defining trait of the Egyptians [Jews], now I know: having a good life, belonging to some sort of middle-class…’.\textsuperscript{145}

That these impalpable and imaginative characteristics survived is even more significant when one considers that most of the people who wrote memoirs and novels, or that gave a great impulse to the activities of heritage associations, left Egypt when they were children or adolescents and thus remember it through the stories that their parents told. This country is, for them, the metaphor of a vanished
Extremely close and incredibly far

youth and of an epoch when almost everything seemed possible. This also explains why schools occupy such an important space: ‘At school, my best friends were a Muslim from an aristocratic family and a Christian. We were like a trio. Can you imagine that?’ – a woman recalled – ‘And this is not just my own experience. C’est l’histoire de nous tous!’ Episodes of missionary proselytism, which during colonial and monarchical eras repeatedly worried Egyptian Jewish rabbis and communal leaders, now seemed little more than funny episodes situated in one’s far away childhood: ‘Do you remember the images that they gave to us at school? The Virgin Mary, the saints … I attended the school of the Italian nuns in Abu Kir, c’était triste les quitter’.

By highlighting their Francophone and rather Westernised education, people distance themselves from other, less educated Egyptians. Still, many wish to clarify how their world and that of the fellahin were not entirely disconnected: ‘I was sick, so my mother went to this Arab woman who cured me with some herbs. Ma mère était moderne, she did not know these things. But the Arabs, oh … they knew better than us’. Recurring characters of many life stories are also the domestiques, often Sudanese or Egyptians who came from the countryside, and who cried when the families for whom they worked had to leave Egypt:

When we left in 1947, I was only a small child and dad told me we were going on a holiday to Cyprus. But our domestique Ahmed started to cry and so did I. If we were going on holiday why was Ahmed not coming with us?

Others remembered with great affection the bawwab (‘porter’) of the buildings where they lived: ‘He was always sitting there at the entrance of our building, on a sort of carpet. Whenever I passed by, he always gave me a bit of his ful’.147 Egypt is a quasi-magical place where ‘even if you were not rich, still you could have a maid. Everyone enjoyed a good life’. Given the insistence on bourgeois patterns of identity and the fact that most people remembered their families as well-off, it is perhaps not coincidental that the attendees of the Eilat conference were particularly interested in the discussion concerning the recuperation of lost or sequestered assets: ‘We left so much in Egypt. We all left something: houses, properties, money’. A man underlined how: ‘Until they left, the Jews owned so many businesses. You know, the years before Nasser … now in Egypt they call them ‘the time of el yahud’, of the Jews!’

Understandably, much of the discourse of the ‘olim present at the conference focused on the last months in Egypt and the moment of migration itself. Listening to some of these voices might also explain why it is in Israel that the remnants of Egyptian Jewish identity can still be traced: not only for obvious reasons and Israel being a state with a predominantly Jewish population, but also since this migration trajectory has in many ways been more difficult and painful than those to France or the US. As other mizrahim, ‘who came to young Israel from such modern cities as Baghdad [….] Algiers, Casablanca, Tangiers, Tehran’ – and for whom migration to Israel was not always due to deep Zionist convictions – some of the Egyptians were ‘shocked to discover the technological and
economic backwardness of the Jewish nation’ and the fact that they had to leave a generally comfortable life and settle in a transit camp. This said, all acknowledge how they could not have stayed in Egypt: ‘Every night the phone rang, we answered but there was nobody on the other side’. One added that:

In 1948 my uncle was arrested, his assets sequestered and he was kept in prison for two months. They said he was a Zionist but it was not true: Egyptian Jews of his age were not Zionists ... some young people were but not the generation of our parents. Then they let him go but he had to leave immediately with all his family, including my parents and me. We could only take one suitcase: une valise chacun et partir, during the night ... as if we were thieves.

Even in telling such dramatic moments, small and moving details come to mind:

I do not know how, but we were allowed to take a huge chest and my mother put all her trousseau inside. It was made of wood and bronze and the interior was in red velvet. We took it with us to Bat Yam and my mother always looked at it: that was all she had of her life in Alexandria. Then we moved and I do not know where it ended.

All agreed in saying how difficult the ‘aliyah was for their parents and especially for their fathers, who suddenly lost much of their paternal authority and prestige: ‘My father ... all his life he felt nostalgia [for Egypt]. He spoke an excellent Arabic. When he left, he lost his homeland [terre natale], his identity’.

This echoes what Ronit Matalon, born in Israel in 1957 from Cairene Jewish parents, narrated in her novel Qol tze’adenu (‘The Sound of Our Steps’, 2007). In this novel, the mother Lucette, now transformed almost into a man, was the one who worked and supported the family, as opposed to her absent husband Maurice:

‘What is wrong with bringing home bread as all men do?’, she cried.

[... ] After a while he answered in French: ‘Are you saying that I am not a man? Ya’ni [in Arabic: ‘I mean’], is that what you are trying to say?’

‘Ya’ni’. According to the Zionist ideology, the migration to ‘Eretz Israel was to be the way for the weak Diaspora Jew to become more manly and stronger, both in physical and psychic terms. Contact with the land was to regenerate the Jew and forge a new, healthy Zionist generation. For Maurice and Lucette, as well as for many others, however, the opposite was happening. Maurice felt estranged from his new homeland and emasculated by his wife’s more active response to the daily problems that the family faced. The migration therefore contributed to a partial disruption of the gender hierarchies, if not so much vis-à-vis the state, at
least within the home – as studies on Yemenite and Iraqi Jewish migrant women in 1950s and 1960s Israel also demonstrated.153

The ‘aliyah seemed to have brought them to another world, whose coordinates they did not know:

I slept the entire journey and when we got in Jaffa my father woke me up: ‘Wake up, Isabelle! C’est la maison!’ so I woke up and as I heard people talking in Arabic, I thought we were back in Cairo! At that time, my name was Isabelle. But when I went to the kindergarten, the teacher could not understand what kind of name that was: ‘What is this Isabelle? This is not a Jewish name. Let me think: Isabelle, Belle… We will call her Yaffah [‘nice, pretty’].’ So everybody started to call me like that but I never answered. The day after my mother told the teacher that the name Yaffah was not good. In the end, my mother decided that I should be called Yehudit: ‘That is enough of a Jewish name, I suppose’. And since then everybody calls me Yehudit. But when I think of myself as a child, I am still Isabelle.

The novelist Yitzhaq Gormezano Goren, born in Alexandria in 1942 and migrated to Israel as a child in 1952, similarly portrayed the surprise felt when his name, Robert, was not considered an appropriate one by his schoolteacher, who decided to call him by his second name, Yitzhaq – until then used only for religious purposes:

‘Roby stands for Re’uven!’, the teacher Mr. Yosef Levine insisted. ‘It’s not Re’uven’ Roby cried ‘My name is not Re’uven!’: [. . .]

Roby explained that his parents had chosen for him the name Robert, when they saw a movie with the actor Robert Taylor. However, his grandfather made them add Yitzhaq, as that was the name of his own father. Yossi the teacher nodded with satisfaction, as in the end the Jewish tradition and the miqrah had won over Hollywood.154

The issue of the changed name is a recurring theme throughout the stories of many mizrahim. It signals in a very vivid manner how once in Israel many ‘olim had to abandon their previous identity and homogenise themselves to a more rigid identity model. At the Eilat conference, people sometimes called each other their old names – echoing a forgotten Levantine and Francophone Jewish world populated by many Sylvies, Lilies and Joes. France was their ‘eretz muvtahat (‘Promised Land’), as Moshe Sakal, born in Tel Aviv in 1978 and grandson of Egyptian Jews, wrote in his 2011 novel Yolandah.155 The French language and the idea of France as a cultural motherland still exists in the minds of the ‘olim, even though when some of them did go to France, the encounter was not as dreamy as it had been for the MLF lycéenne Josette L. in 1931. One mentioned how after 1948 her family first went to France, as they were French nationals:
I was happy to go there: I knew the language and then, *la France c'était la culture*. But then we arrived and France was a refugee camp! After a while, my parents decided to make *aliyah*. We did not know that Israel could be worse than Marseille! When we arrived here they put us in a *ma'abarah*, I mean... at the beginning we were in a tent! Imagine that! And I remember one night it rained and there was so much wind that at one point it flew away! Now I am laughing about it, but back then... It was hard, especially for my parents. If I think of the house we had in Cairo...

Another woman remembered that:

A few days after we arrived, my father searched for some help in *Sha'ar ha-aliyah* but when they saw him, a man wearing an elegant suit, they thought he was some rich man. So they pushed him away... He always used to dress like that in Egypt, yet we were not rich!

Similar experiences were recalled by Ada Aharoni, a well-known Israeli writer and peace activist of Cairene origin:

When the boat approached the coast [of Israel], all the Egyptians started to dress up... Then someone told them they were going to the Negev and a woman asked her husband: ‘But where is this Negev?’ and he replied: ‘For sure, it must be close to Tel Aviv’. When they arrived, in the middle of nowhere, they did not even want to get off the bus!156

Upon leaving Egypt, many feel that they had suddenly become refugees. Acknowledging the disputed nature of this definition, some explain how they were, indeed, given a *cértificat de refugié* by the United Nations: ‘We are refugees. So, what is it they have to decide? What are they talking about?’ Even though, as we have seen, bourgeois identity did not always depend upn one’s upper-class status, virtually everybody present at Eilat talked about what their families were forced to leave in Cairo and Alexandria. They argued that beneath the difficulty to get their properties back, first and foremost lay the Arab–Israeli conflict and the consequences that labelling the Jews from the Middle East as refugees might entail vis-à-vis the rights of Palestinians.157 Yet, the discussion on Jewish property claims against Egypt, far from being a purely economic and political matter, also has to do with emotional and deeply personal concerns: ‘My father owned three buildings in Cairo, three entire buildings. He was a jeweller, a very rich one. And myself, here in Israel I have to work hard to make a living. Is this fair?’, a woman asked me.

The lost Egyptian homes are transformed into a symbol of a lost life: ‘I mean... now I am happy, all my family lives in Israel but Egypt... that was something else’. Another person further claimed that nowadays ‘*l’Égypte pour nous c’est un musée*’ and even though ‘some people I know did come back [to Egypt], I do not want to. They told me Cairo is so different, so crowded. I do not want to
see all that’. The Egypt they knew, and that they narrated to their children and grandchildren, does not seem to exist anywhere but in the words and habits that they try to preserve: ‘My granddaughter calls me nonna [‘grandmother’] like we used to in Egypt, not savta [‘grandmother’]. This is how it has to be!’; ‘I love eating the molokhiyah, even though I do not know how to make it’.158 If it is true that vanished homes and the memories that surround them – as Bahloul noted for the Algerian Jews – are ‘a micro-cosmos through which the imaginary reconstructs an exploded geography in its entirety’,159 it is this géographie éclatée that one can trace through the stories of the Egyptian ‘olim: the corniche of Alexandria, Arabic and French words, half-forgotten motifs of Egyptian music, the sweets of the Patisserie Athineos.

Although ultimately – considering their relatively small number – the Egyptian ‘olim settled in their new Israeli environment more smoothly than other Middle Eastern Jewries, Egypt remains an unforgettable and haunting presence. What can be found in memoirs, movies and oral testimonies is similar, yet also other from that of pre-1950s Egypt, as it also reflects the ‘aliyah and the vicissitudes of the mizrahim, as well as the dynamics of the Arab–Israeli conflict. For instance, as if to counter the stereotypical views of the mizrahim as coming from rather backward communities, many Egyptian Jews seem to stress in very evident ways proximity to Europe and a modern lifestyle as the characteristics that still define them. By this, I do not mean to say that these characteristics were not there before the ‘aliyah – as, indeed, they were – but that before the migration they were most often taken for granted and not considered as something special that needed to be preserved. Picking up microscopic details of their past, the ‘olim and their descendants thus ‘generate a multiple memory that gives to [Egyptian] Jewish identity in our time a foundation that is both ancient and renewed’.160 Individual memories came together to recreate a collective sense of identity and community, so as to preserve the Egyptian Jewish past: ‘Kol ‘ehad sippur, each of us is a story’, as one of the people at Eilat stated.

Conclusion

In 1914, thousands of Zionist Jews of Russian origin expelled from Ottoman Palestine arrived in Alexandria. There, the city’s Jews helped them to organise temporary schools for the children and collect clothes among other things. While doing so, the Jews of Alexandria nonetheless expressed a very different view of what being Jewish meant, largely rejecting Zionism and insisting on their support of a much less politicised model of identity. The refugees, for their part, viewed the local Jews as not-so-Jewish individuals that were only interested in socio-economic rather than moral advancement. It is fair to say that until the late 1930s, the vast majority of Egyptian Jews remained distant from Zionism – probably, one should say, from politics tout court. It was only with the new phase from the beginning of Faruq’s reign in 1936 that more people, especially among the younger generations, became involved in Zionist activities. In the second section of the chapter, I have therefore analysed articles centred on
women and youth published in the Zionist magazine *La Tribune Juive* from 1936 to 1948. From them, it was possible to trace changing gender ideas and norms, and how Zionism resulted in an ideology that could, to a limited extent, be adapted and transposed to the Egyptian and, more broadly, Eastern Mediterranean context.

In the third part, I followed the war that led to the birth of the State of Israel in 1948 and its repercussions for Egypt and Egyptian Jews. Through examining articles published in three Israeli dailies between 1948 and 1954, it was possible to see how there emerged a new way of representing Egyptian Jews as endangered fellows living in a quasi-Nazi country. Similar remarks were also given by the first few Egyptian Jews that migrated to Israel. What comes out of all this is that the birth of the State of Israel impacted greatly on the lives of Jews and on their changing representation from a cosmopolitan urban bourgeoisie to foreign Zionist/Communist activists.

Despite all this, only about 40 per cent of Egyptian Jews migrated to Israel in the 1950s. Many more went to Europe or the US. Still, this migration trajectory is probably the most fascinating from a cultural-historical perspective. In the last section, I focused on the memories of Israelis of Egyptian Jewish origin as they emerge from books, movies and the activities of heritage associations. In doing so, I explained how Egypt became a sort of distant homeland, where a faded and partly imagined bourgeois existence was located, and a quasi-magical place to counter the harsh reality of the migration and its immediate after-effects.

Clearly, Zionism never gained the support of the majority of Egyptian Jews. In fact, even after the *aliyah*, some of them tried to find a way to preserve the Egyptian Jewish in-betweenness within the Israeli national model of identity. If so, why dedicate this chapter to the linkages between Zionism, the Land of Israel and Egyptian Jews? My answer would be that despite its failures and weaknesses vis-à-vis Egyptian Jews, Zionism is still to be regarded as a very important phenomenon for understanding and explaining their historical trajectories. This is surely less evident when thinking of the colonial and early monarchical times, but it is undoubted that Zionism, the Arab–Jewish conflict over Palestine and the subsequent birth of the State of Israel deeply shaped the course of Egyptian (Jewish) history from the 1930s onwards. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that Zionism entered the life of the Jews – and of Egypt – at a time, the 1930s, when the circumstances that had contributed to create the so-called cosmopolitan Egypt were already being altered by internal sociopolitical upheavals.

By this, I did not aim to argue that their history was the way it was because of Zionism and Israel. In order to understand the relations between Egyptian Jews, Zionism and Israel, it is, in fact, important to pay attention to the different meanings that Zionism could have, at times going beyond its normative definition. When it comes to Egyptian Jews, Zionism thus did have an impact, both in a political and sociocultural sense, yet also remained an ideology and a national project that many – even some of those who later migrated to Israel – saw as other than everything they had ever known, embodied in a land that was at the same time extremely close and incredibly far.
Notes

1 According to several quotes from the Bible (e.g. Judges 20: 1), the boundaries of the Promised Land should go ‘from Dan to Beer-Sheva’. Other quotes and interpretations extend it to the Euphrates River and to Lebanon. See as an introduction to this vaexata quaestio and its social and political repercussions: Eliezer Schweid, *The Land of Israel: National Home or Land of Destiny* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1985).


4 For an Ottoman rabbinical perspective: Lehmann, *Ladino Rabbinic*, 156–172. It should be mentioned that there were also a few prominent rabbis – such as the German Zvi Kalischer and the Serbian Yehudah Alkalai – that justified and explained from a Jewish theological perspective the migration to the Land of Israel before the advent of Zionism. See: Arthur Hertzberger, *The Zionist Idea* (New York, NY: The Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 102–140.


9 *Compte-rendu du Comité d’Assistance aux Réfugiés Israélites de Syrie et Palestine* (Alexandria: Société des Publications Egyptiennes, 1916), 2, AIU Alex IV.E.35.m.


11 *Compte-rendu*, 51–52.


13 ‘Procès-verbal de la séance du Comité scolaire tenue le lundi 15 Novembre 1915, au Rabbinat, à 4 heures pm, sous la présidence de M. Jack Mosseri, président’, AIU Alex IV.E.35.e.


15 Joseph Danon to the AIU President, 10 October 1916, AIU Alex IV.E.35.e.

16 *Avis/Moda’ah* by Horace C. Hornblower, no date (but 1916), AIU Alex IV.E.35.e.

17 ‘L’affaire des azymes. Une sérieuse bagarre’, clipping from an unnamed and undated newspaper (Spring 1916?), AIU Alex IV.E.35.m.

18 Nurit Govrin, ‘The Encounter of Exiles from Palestine with the Jewish Community of Egypt During World War I, as Reflected in their Writings’, in *The Jews*, ed. Shimon Shamir, 183.


20 Joseph Trumpeldor is mostly known for having died defending the Jewish settlement of Tel Hai in Palestine in 1920, while – according to a standard account –
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pronouncing the phrase: ‘It is good to die for our country’ (in Hebrew: tov lamut be’ad ‘artzenu).


23 For an overview: Zohar, ‘Mishnatam’ (Hebrew).

24 Raffello Della Pergola was born in 1877 and studied at the Rabbinical College of Florence. He was Chief Rabbi of Gorizia from 1903 to 1910. He then moved to Alexandria, where he acted as chief rabbi until 1922 and died in the Tuscan village of Faella Valdarno in 1923. For brief biographical sketches: Taragan, Les communautés, 59, and Angelo Mordekhai Piattelli, ‘Repertorio biografico dei rabbini d’Italia dal 1861 al 2011’, Rassegna Mensile di Israel, 1–2/76 (2010): 204.

25 John H. Patterson, With the Zionists in Gallipoli (London: Hutchinson, 1916), 45.

26 Prière pour la paix/Tefillah be’-ad ha-shalom (Alexandria: Mizrahi, 5676/1915), κ, AIU Alex IV.E.35.e.

27 Prière pour la paix, ∃.

28 Prière pour la paix, 3–4.


31 ‘Une pieuse cérémonie’, clipping from an unnamed newspaper, 5 March 1915, AIU Alex IV.E.35.e.

32 Watenpaugh, Being Modern, 22..


35 More on Nahum and Zionism, keeping in mind the rabbi’s connections with the anti-Zionist AIU while he was Chief Rabbi of the Ottoman Empire in: Benbassa, Un grand rabbin.

36 Krämer, The Jews, 182–204.


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In those same years, women columns also started to acquire more visibility in Syrian and Lebanese Arabic newspapers: Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 217–223.

L’Esthète, ‘Pour Madame … Beauté de corps’, La Tribune Juive (henceforth, LTJ), 16 March 1937, 8, YBZ VI 1306.

Dianelle, ‘Pour Madame … La table’, LTJ, 16 March 1937, 8, YBZ VI 1306.


The last Notre foyer – Hana vous parle… that I have been able to locate in the Tribune appeared on 14 January 1947. I could not find out why the column was suspended.

“Notre foyer – Hana vous parlez…” LTJ, 30 October 1946, 3, YBZ VI 1306.


Such an approach is, of course, not unique to Egyptian Jewish Zionist women, but was common to Zionism in general. For a comparison with Zionist women writing in the European Jewish press, consider, for instance: Monica Miniati, Le “emancipate”. Le donne ebree in Italia nel XIX e XX secolo (Rome: Viella, 2008), especially 233–245.


‘Hana vous parlez – Notre courrier’, LTJ, 18 December 1946, 3, YBZ VI 1306.


68 Whereas in the Jewish case, such debates seem to have been based on very general and non-scientific moral advice, from the late 1930s medical doctors and psychologists played a pivotal role in disseminating new scientific notions of youth and adolescence in the Egyptian Arabic press and among the Muslim reading public. See: Omnia El Shakry, ‘Youth as Peril and Promise: The Emergence of Adolescent Psychology in Postwar Egypt’, International Journal of Middle East Studies, 43/4 (2011): especially 595–598.

69 ‘Le Héhaloutz d’Alexandrie’, LTJ, 6 July 1937, 8, YBZ VI 1306. The camps are also mentioned in: Laskier, The Jews, 47.
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71 René Cattaoui, cited by Krämer, The Jews, 202. René Cattaoui was clearly motivated by his personal opposition to Zionism.


73 Gazelle Habile, ‘Scoutisme Juif’, LTJ, 8 May 1946, 3, YBZ VI 1306.


78 Jacob, Working Out, 121 (and, more generally on the Egyptian scouting movement), 92–124.

79 ‘Force et santé’, LTJ, 1 November 1938, 7, YBZ VI 1306.

80 Yeroushalmy, ‘Ha-’itnut ha-yehudit’, 122 (Hebrew).


85 These figures are taken from: Sergio Della Pergola, ‘Ha-demografiat’ (‘The Demography’), in Mitzrayim (‘Egypt’), ed. Nahem Ilan, 37, Table 3 (Hebrew). Slightly different numbers can be found in: Laskier, The Jews, Tables 6.1, 6.2, 186–187, and Beinin, The Dispersion, 70–71.


87 I have surveyed three Israeli newspapers (Davar, Ma’ariv and Hed ha-mizrah), the British The Times, the Italian La Stampa and L’Unità and the French Le Monde. The newspapers were chosen because of their different national and ideological positions and – especially in the case of Davar and Ma’ariv – for their being relatively mainstream publications. In the case of the Israeli, British and Italian newspapers, I searched in their digital archives for articles containing the keywords ‘Egypt, Jews’
and ‘Egyptian Jews’. In total, I found eighteen articles in the Israeli press (seven in Davar, four in Ma'ariv and seven in Hed ha-mizrah), one in The Times, two in La Stampa and two in L'Unità. For Le Monde, I consulted the issues that came out in May 1948 and at the time of the 1952 Revolution (July–October 1952). I found only one article dedicated specifically to Egyptian Jews and, so as to give a concise idea of Le Monde’s approach to the events, I eventually decided to cite two articles published in 1952, even though they do not explicitly refer to the Jews. The Israeli newspapers are available online at the Historical Jewish Press digitisation programme of the National Library of Israel of Jerusalem: www.jpress.org.il/viewenglish.asp. For The Times, I instead consulted the online digital archive available as part of the Gale Cengage Learning programme at: www.gale.cengage.com/. Finally, La Stampa and L’Unità have open-access digital historical archives: www.archivio-lastampa.it/, http://archivio.unita.it/. For Le Monde, I consulted MIC 14.6-14.7, Microform Collection of the Library of the European University Institute, Fiesole.


90 Liliane Bitty-Beressi, ‘L’arrestation de mon père’, Souvenirs d’Egypte par Albert Pardo, available at: http://albert.pardo.free.fr/temoignages.htm#pere. The Keren Kayemet le-’Israel (‘The Jewish National Fund’) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1901 at the fifth Zionist Congress, which originally aimed at purchasing land in Palestine, and is nowadays mainly concerned with planting trees and creating national reservoirs and parks in Israel. Since its foundation, the Keren has been one of the main recipients of the charity of Diaspora Jews.


92 Albert Guetta, cited by Dammond with Raby, The Lost World, 159.

93 ‘La-goralah shel ha-yahadut Mitzrayim’ (‘The Destiny of Egyptian Jewry’), Davar, 25 January 1949, 2 (Hebrew). Mahanot-rikuz (pl. of mahanot-rikuz) is the Hebrew word that is also utilised for the Nazi concentration camps. Davar (‘The Word’), founded in 1925, was the official daily of Mapai – the Labour party – and served the ideology of the Israeli political establishment, at the time dominated by the Socialist Zionism of David Ben-Gurion.

94 ‘A. Ben-’Avraham, ‘Goral-yehudei-Mitzrayim’ (‘The Destiny of Egyptian Jews’), Hed ha-mizrah, 4 November 1949, 10 (Hebrew). See: Beinin, The Dispersion, 68–69. Hed ha-mizrah (‘The Echo of the East’) was a weekly published in Jerusalem on an irregular basis from 1941 to 1952 by Middle Eastern (Sephardi) Jews. Very interested in the life and society of the Jews living in North African and Middle Eastern countries, this newspaper adopted a moderate view towards the Arab–Israeli conflict and served as a forum for discussions about the Arab world.

95 Ben-’Avraham, ‘Goral-yehudei’ (Hebrew).


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1949, 2 (Hebrew). Ma’ariv (‘evening’, but the term also refers to the Jewish evening prayer service) was a privately owned tabloid established in 1948, and reflected a rightist-nationalist orientation, especially for what concerned foreign politics.

100 Shavuot (lit. ‘weeks’) is the Jewish holiday that commemorates the anniversary of the day when God gave the Torah to the people of Israel on the Sinai, after the exodus from Egypt.


102 From a 1948 article of Al-Ahram, cited by Krämer, The Jews, 213.


104 A. ‘Avieli, ‘Mitzrayim mitpakehet . . .’ (‘Egypt Unveiled . . .’), Hed ha-mizrah, 14 February 1949, 12 (Hebrew). See: Beinin,


Krämer,

In the same years, Iraqi Jews were also accused of Communist-Zionist activities, although, as in the Egyptian case, the two ideologies very rarely overlapped. See, for instance, Naim Kattan, Adieu, Babylone (Montréal: Poche Québec, 1975), 235–236:

‘The situation for the Jews became more dangerous every day. [...] Behind the barricades, Zionists and Communists, who had been fierce adversaries, were accused on the same crime: Communist Zionism’.

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109 ‘Yetziat-Mitzrayim nussah 5710’ (Hebrew).

110 ‘Yetziat-Mitzrayim’ (Hebrew). ‘Olim (pl. of ‘oleh, lit. ‘he who ascends [to Zion]’) are all the Jews who migrate to the State of Israel. During the seder – i.e. the dinner – of Pesah it is customary to read the haggadah (‘story’) that recalls the exodus from Egypt and the passage to the Land of Israel via the Red Sea.

111 ‘A. Ben-‘Avraham, ‘Goralam shel ha- yehudim be-Mitzrayim’ (‘The Destiny of the Jews in Egypt’), Hed ha-mizrah, 23 September 1949, 16 (Hebrew).


117 From a 1945 article of Al-Ahram, cited by Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, From Empathy to Denial. Arab Responses to the Holocaust (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 26, but see also 23–57.

118 Beinin, The Dispersion, 75. Yom Kippur (‘the day of atonement’) is the most solemn day of the Jewish year, characterised by communal repentance and prayer. Observant Jews should also observe the holiday with twenty-five hours of fasting.


120 On kibbutz Bror Hayil – which from 1952 became the main place of migration for the Brazilian branch of the Zionist youth movement Ha-bonim, and is nowadays known as the Brazilian kibbutz of Israel – see: Ze’ev Vilnai, ‘Bror Hayil’, in ‘Ariel – Enziqlopediah li-yedi’at ‘Eretz-Isra’el’ (‘Ariel – Encyclopaedia of the Land of Israel’), vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: ‘Am Oved, 1976), 1024–1025 (Hebrew), and the kibbutz’s website: www.brorhail.org.il/.

121 ‘Yotzei-Mitzrayim be-yemeinu’ (‘Today’s Exiled From Egypt’), Davar, 16 April 1954, 17 (Hebrew).


123 For the 1956 War, see: Beinin, The Dispersion, 94–99. See also: Zertal, Israel’s Holocaust, 98–103. For other cases, consider at least the famous line by Prime Minister Menahem Begin at the beginning of the 1982 war with Lebanon: ‘The alternative is Treblinka, and we have decided that there won’t be another Treblinka’.


127 Interview of the A. with Levana Zamir, Tel Aviv, 9 April 2014. See also: Levana Zamir, The Golden Era of ‘The Jews of Egypt’ and the Mediterranean Option for a United Middle East (Tel Aviv: Kenes Hafakot, 2008), 47–51.

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132  These figures are only indicative, as the sources on which they are based are characterised by great discrepancies, especially when one considers the difficulty in finding reliable data on the total Egyptian Jewish population in the late 1940s. Slightly different and less complete figures can be found in: Krämer, *The Jews*, 10, Table 2; Beinin, *The Dispersion*, 286, n. 30, 288, n. 30; Laskier, *The Jews*, 186–187.

133  A notable exception were the Egyptian Jews affiliated to Ha-Shomer Ha-Tzair and He-Halutz that founded *kibbutz* Nahshonim and *kibbutz* Bror Hayil, respectively. See: Beinin, *The Dispersion*, 126–129. On Nahshonim – whose name derives from Nahshon ben ‘Aminadav, the first Israelite who, according to the Mi’drash, crossed the Red Sea during the Exodus from Egypt – read also: Rita Shemtob, ‘Nahshonim’, in *Nahar Misraim: Bulletin de liaison de l’Assemblée des Juifs d’Égypte*, June 2004, 5–6.

134  Khazoom showed that the Egyptian ‘olim were generally better treated than other migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, because of their Westernised education and habits, see: Aziza Khazoom, *Shifting Ethnic Boundaries and Inequality in Israel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 76–80, 139. On the contributions of Egyptian Jews to modern Israel: Levana Zamir, *Trumot ve-hishgeyhem shel-yotzei-Mitzrayim be-Isra’el ba-50 shanot ha-medinah 1948-1998* (‘Achievements and Contributions of Egyptian Jews in Israel in Its First Fifty Years’) (Hitahdut ‘olei-Mitzrayim be-Isra’el’; Tel Aviv, 2003 (Hebrew)).

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140 The documentary _Taqasim_ focuses on the activities of Jewish musicians and singers in Egypt and Israel – a subject studied by Inbal Perlson, who also features in the documentary, in: ‘Musicians between the Hegemonies’, _Journal of Levantine Studies_, 2/2 (2013): 63–91. On these movies, see: Yaron Shemer, _Identity, Place and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel_ (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013). I should add that, as of June 2014, an Italian producer has begun to realise a documentary on the memory of Egyptian Jews now living in Israel, Europe and the US.

141 Similar – though sometimes less evident – characteristics can also be found in the case of those who moved to Europe and the US, as one can read in memoirs and novels by Egyptian Jews and their descendants that now live in places like Italy, France and the US. I am thinking, for example, of _Out of Egypt_ (1994) by the Alexandrian-born André Aciman, the novels published in France from the 1980s by Paula Jacques, the memoir _Il chilometro d’oro_ by Daniel Fishman (2006) and many others. In turn, all these texts are part of a larger nostalgic memorial literature by Egyptian Muslims, Copts, Greeks and Italians. See: Starr, _Remembering Cosmopolitan_; Roger J. Porter, _Autobiography, Exile, Home: The Egyptian Memoirs of Gini Alhadeff, André Aciman, and Edward Said_, _Biography_, 24/1 (2001): 302–313; Mabro, _Nostalgic Literature_.

142 Interview of the A. with Levana Zamir, Tel Aviv, 9 April 2014.

143 This and all other quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are my transcription of conversations and/or testimonies by Egyptian Jews present at the conference.

144 From the ‘Thèmes du congrés’ of the brochure _Hitahdut ‘Olei Mitzrayim be-‘Israel_, _Ha-gongres ha-olami ha-hamishi shel Yehudei-Mitzrayim_.

145 Unless otherwise indicated, this and all other quotations are my transcriptions of conversations and testimonies of people present at the Fifth World Congress of Egyptian Jews, Eilat, 12–14 May 2014.

146 Leila Sebbar, _Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane_ (Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule: Bleu autour, 2012), 12.

147 The _ful_ is a very popular Egyptian dish made of cooked and mashed fava beans served with oil, cumin, parsley, onion, garlic and lemon juice.

148 It is worth noting that, according to oral testimonies, the wage of a maid in pre-1950s Egypt was very low, and in some cases only implied providing her with lodging and food. I thank Liat Alon for this remark.
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150 I should mention that the memoir of Carolina Delburgo, a Cairo Jew now living in Italy, is entitled exactly *Come ladri nella notte ... la cacciata dall’Egitto* (*Like Thieves in the Night ... The Exodus from Egypt*).


156 Interview of the A. with Ada Aharoni, Haifa, 26 May 2014.


158 The *molokhiyah* is a soup made of Jute leaves, garlic, coriander and generally with the addition of some meat. Together with ful, it is considered among the national dishes of Egyptian cuisine.

159 Bahloul, *La maison de mémoire*, 45.

Final remarks

In his autobiographical novel, *Qaitz ‘Aleksandroni*, the Alexandrian-born Israeli Yitzhaq Gormezano Goren depicts the fictional encounter between the author and the *bawwab* (‘porter’) of the building on the *corniche* of Alexandria where the protagonist’s family had lived until the 1950s:

The Arab porter looks at me with suspicion: ‘Who are you, *monsieur*?’. […] You would like to tell him that yes, once I used to be Robert. That was twenty years ago. Now, after twenty years I have come back, but I will not bother anyone […]. I only wish to tell a story…

Even though not so many years had passed since the migration when, in 1978, Gormezano Goren wrote these lines, many things had changed irremediably: his name was no longer Robert Gormezano but Yitzhaq Goren, in Alexandria and Cairo resided a Jewish population which only counted a few dozen people and the rest of the once thriving Egyptian Jewry was scattered all over the world, from Israel and France to Australia and Brazil. Still, the author explained, the goal of his book was simply to tell the story of his last summer in Alexandria. Among the many reasons that led me to write *Histories of the Jews of Egypt* was a desire similar to that of Gormezano Goren to tell a story that had Egyptian Jews as the main characters. Since I am not a novelist but a historian, I could not invent anything, and all that I wrote was based upon sources and documents that, though subject to interpretation, are not like fiction. At the same time, it is not possible to say that I have finally discovered how Egyptian Jews really lived and what they really thought: this was not – as explained in the introductory remarks – the history of the Egyptian Jews, but rather some of their histories.

As clear by now, following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the economic expansion that Egypt underwent during the following decades, thousands of Jews from all over the Ottoman Empire and the Eastern Mediterranean region – especially Syria, Asia Minor and the Greek islands, but also the Balkans and Southern Europe – migrated to Cairo and Alexandria. Over a few decades, the Egyptian Jewry shifted from a small community, which in the 1840s only counted about 5,000 people, to one of about 40,000 in the 1900s, then stabilising at around 75,000–80,000 in the 1940s. Most of the Jews rapidly improved their
socio-economic status working as small entrepreneurs, businessmen, employees in various kinds of enterprises and commercial firms, doctors, lawyers and so on. A few of them even managed to reach the upper echelons of Egyptian society, becoming among the most influential businessmen of the country – for instance, the Cattaouis, the Suarès, the Aghions and the Cicurels.

Except for those that had already been living in Egypt for some time, more than a few Jews could not speak or write Arabic and often only knew the Egyptian dialect. In the family and at home most of them spoke French, in some cases Italian, Ladino or a mixture of these and other languages. Many attended foreign schools and were in love with novelists such as Dumas and Balzac. The younger generations often longed for an imaginary Europe and for Paris, which they imagined to be the quintessence of modernity and civilisation, even though few of them – only the very rich, or a lucky girl such as Josette L. – actually went there.

Despite the fact that many of the Jewish families had only been living in Egypt since the turn of the century, they felt that Cairo and Alexandria were their homeland, as it was there that many of their hopes and expectations for a better future were realised. Still, from a purely juridical point of view, one should remember that according to the first census of the monarchical era – that of 1927 – only around 33 per cent of the Jews were said to be Egyptian nationals. The rest were either stateless or holders of a European passport, generally obtained thanks to the system of the Capitulations, as only in some cases families actually had European ancestry. According to a slightly earlier survey dating back to 1922, the number of Jews with European nationality was even higher, about 60 per cent, if one considers only the upper strata of Jewish society.

In any case, when one remembers that the legal category of Egyptian nationality was only systematised in 1929, and the Capitulations abolished in 1936, it is clear that for at least three or four decades this legal circumstance alone could not compromise the social positioning of the Jews, let alone the sense of belonging to the place that they inhabited. This was especially true for those who migrated to Egypt from within the Ottoman Empire between the late nineteenth century and the 1920s, considering that moving, for instance, from Thessalonika to Alexandria surely did not have at that time the same imaginative and national meaning it would have today. Lastly, even though several Jews were not Egyptian nationals and few were personally involved in Egyptian politics, Zionism also only appealed to a minority. In other words, the majority of Egyptian Jews kept away from politics tout court and opted for a quieter life, taking care of their businesses and their homes.

In Egypt, the Jews significantly contributed to the social and economic development of the country, especially of the two urban centres of Alexandria and Cairo. Not only did they found banks, sugar refineries, department stores and newspapers, but they also, for example, played a key role in the birth of the Egyptian movie industry and opened a number of schools, hospitals and orphanages. Though primarily destined to serve the needs of the Jewish communities, these institutions were frequently open to all Egyptians ‘without any distinction
of rite, nationality or country of origin’ – as seen with the Hôpital Israélite, established in Cairo in 1925. Although this was clearly a rhetorical expression that intended to please an audience formed of both Jews and Muslims, it can also be taken as evidence of the fact that the Jews – at times embedded in Egyptian society, especially with regard to their socio-economic activities and networks – maintained an in-between position that made them both locals and foreigners, and contributed first to their fortune and then to their final demise. They managed to maintain such a position through the formation and continuous reframing of a complex imaginary that looked at European bourgeois models of sociability, education and family life, but also at Jewish traditional beliefs and, last but not least, late Ottoman translations of what being modern meant. But if their imagination played such a great role, what is it we are talking about when referring to an Egyptian Jewish bourgeoisie? ‘Is there a class in this text’, as Maza asked herself in *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie*?

A final, though not definitive, answer would be that from a socio-economic point of view, there was not a coherent class of bourgeois, but rather a number of social groups that could be understood as belonging neither to the working class, nor to a capitalist elite. Granted, the underlying idea of my book was that in addition to economic factors, social identity is also a question of knowledge, and although class ‘only rarely carries anything approaching the emotional power of the nation, it can be similarly conceptualised (along with race, gender, ethnicity, and other forms of social identity) as an effect of certain social practices’. I thus showed that Egyptian Jews could be interpreted as a complex and multilayered milieu, whose identity largely rested upon imaginative and cultural traits – an *imagined bourgeoisie* – that made it different, yet at times very similar, to other middling sectors of society present from late Ottoman times in the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean, from Thessalonika to Smyrna and Beirut. This is to say that the Egyptian Jewish can be seen as another case study in the history of Middle Eastern modernities. With regard to this, it seemed therefore important to connect the Jews of Egypt to their Muslim and Christian neighbours, as well as, of course, to Jews living in other areas of the Middle East and North Africa, explaining how their respective experiences of modernity and *embourgeoisement* overlapped, yet sometimes collided.

In fact, Egyptian Jews did have some local characteristics that distinguished them from others. For example, the degree of secularisation and aloofness from religious observance shown by a great many Jews of Cairo and Alexandria was probably higher than in neighbouring Jewish communities. A similar aloofness and neutrality can be found in the realm of politics, where, as said above, very few ventured – the most notable exception being the late nineteenth-century nationalist and journalist Ya’qub Sannu’. Only from the late monarchical period, a more significant number of young Jews became affiliated with the Communist movement or, in other cases, to Zionism. However, this book demonstrated that the intellectual and political narratives that circulated in colonial and monarchical Egypt also indirectly influenced the Jews: from Joseph Cattaoui and Abramino Menasce to the students of the lycée français of Cairo.
Final remarks

*Ex post*, it would be easy to argue that the Jews could not have stayed in Egypt after the birth of the State of Israel, and that their ambiguous national positioning would have sooner or later made them ‘strangers in our own land’, as the Communist activist Victor Segré wrote in his memoir. But from the perspective of their own times, the history of the Egyptian Jews was not as odd as it seems today, faced as we are with a Middle East where rigid national borders and interethnic and interreligious clashes have become two of the region’s *leitmotifs*. This is not to say that in the early twentieth century Middle Eastern Jews and Muslims lived in a state of ideal harmony. Just looking at the Egyptian case, it is clear that episodes of intercommunal tension and anti-Semitism already occurred during the colonial period – for example, the *Fornaraki affair* in 1881 Alexandria – even though it is true that they were quite isolated events that did not have significant repercussions on the lives of the Jews. What I wanted to show with this study was, however, that the idea of pre-Nasserist Egypt as a cosmopolitan, idyllic place to live should be very carefully historicised. Beneath an image of urban harmony, in fact, were often hidden deep socio-economic rivalries, colonial and nationalist tensions and the difficulty of finding a durable balance between the omnipresence of a resilient tradition, the perils – as well as the appeal – of modernity and the numerous meanings that these two terms could have.

In order to investigate the construction and gradual consolidation of an Egyptian Jewish imagined bourgeoisie, I studied schools and the family as two fundamental spaces where different models of identity were proposed and displayed. The extremely rich archival material on the schools of the AIU and the MLF allowed me to focus on hitherto understudied or unknown episodes: from the 1901 *initiation des jeunes filles* to the legal controversies that opposed the AIU to the Jewish Community of Cairo, the ambivalent relationship between the MLF and its Jewish students in the interwar years to the writings of Josette L. and her schoolmates.

Moreover, in the course of the chapters, I placed emphasis not only on how this bourgeois identity was built, but also on the ways in which it came to be displayed and understood in the public realm in connection to a broader national dimension and the controversies that there might emerge. I also focused on the public activities of Jewish notables and religious authorities, reading in a cultural and family historical sense a variety of sources, from a selection of turn-of-the-century Alexandrian *ketubot* to the 1919 moral pamphlet *Pour mes enfants* by Joseph Cattaoui, the diaries of the Italian-born Rabbi Prato in interwar Alexandria to the historical monographs that Maurice Fargeon wrote between 1938 and 1943.

All this brought me to a definition of the imaginary that the Jews forged as a sort of ‘framework [...] to order things, but also to circumscribe and exclude’ those who did not share it. At the same time, this imaginary was based upon a body of practices, values and habits that left a mark not only on those who actually constructed it, but also – through forms of public display such as those cited above, the impressions that they left on the viewers and then thanks to the
sharing of a similar educational background – on a larger middling sector of
society that came to identify with it.

This has been demonstrated, for example, when analysing the ceremonies
organised in the 1910s at the AIU school of Tantah, or when noting the diffusion
of interclass marriages during the interwar period. Similar insights emerged from
studies on lower and lower-middle class workers in monarchical Cairo, which
demonstrated how the spread of modern commodities and lifestyles impacted far
beyond the elite and facilitated the interaction between Muslims and Jews.11

Those who were more distant from this imaginary were almost only part of the
Karaite community and the poor Jews who lived in the harat al-yahud.12

By considering the bourgeoisie mainly as an imaginative category, Histories of
the Jews of Egypt opted for a versatile and open definition of the term that would
have been inconceivable had I used it in a purely economic historical sense. Also
in the case of Zionism, I opted for a loose and open understanding of its history
vis-à-vis Egyptian Jews. Although my analysis confirmed that this movement did
not gain the support of the majority of the Jews, it also showed the sometimes
dynamic, sometimes very rigid, relationship that they had with la Palestine. After
1948, in comparison with other Middle Eastern Jews, the Egyptians migrated to
Israel in less significant numbers, however – as said in the last chapter – those who
migrated to that country generally earned a better socio-economic position than
other mizrahim.13 Even though this depended on many factors, one could say that
their versatile identity model and capacity to adapt to new scenarios did play a
role. Zionism and the ‘aliyah to Israel also allowed for what might be the last re-
imagining of the Egyptian Jewish bourgeoisie, and for the transposal of the Egyp-
tian Jewish past from the realm of history to that of memory.

In conclusion, Histories of the Jews of Egypt explained how a group identity
– and the numerous ways in which it has been, and still is, being constructed and
imagined – can be powerful, pervasive, but also contradictory and ambivalent,
depending on different sociocultural, familial and political circumstances.
Coming back to the introduction, it is arguable that every time ‘we are dealing
with the country called Egypt’ – as Lord Cromer wrote – and the Jews who
inhabited it, there is a need to acknowledge the dozens of meanings that Egypt
and Egyptianness can have, as well as the different ways of being an Egyptian
Jew, depending on whether one was a man or a woman, a rabbi or a student of
the MLF, a poor man of the hara or a businessman, if one lived in 1890s Alex-
andria instead of 1930s Cairo or, lastly, 2014 Israel.

Considering the trans-Mediterranean past embodied by early twentieth-
century Egypt and its Jews and – on a very different level – the sociopolitical
upheavals that this country has gone through since the fall of Hosni Mubarak’s
regime in 2011, one could think that ‘in the longer run, free of the constraints of
the nation form, we may find that cultural freedom and sustainable justice in the
world do not presuppose the uniform and general existence of the nation-state’.14
But then, the aim of this book was not to exalt Egypt’s pre-Nasserist past. Were
there a moral to this story, it would be a more modest one. It would be an invita-
tion to complicate too often taken for granted assumptions and paradigms and
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pay greater attention to the cultural and imaginative intersections between Europe and the Middle East, Jews and Arabs, going beyond – but not ignoring – the borders of the nation-state, and unravelling an archive of histories that are very much worth narrating.

Notes

1 Yitzhaq Gormezano Goren, Qaitz ‘Aleksandroni (‘An Alexandrian Summer’) (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘Oved, 1978), 8 (Hebrew).
2 Krämer, The Jews, 10, Table 2.
5 ‘Discours prononcé’.
6 Maza, The Myth, 2.
7 Lockman, ‘Imagining the Working Class’, 159, my emphasis.
8 Watenpaugh, Being Modern.
9 Segré, Un aller sans retour, 192.
10 Mitchell, Colonising, 33.
13 Beinin, The Dispersion, 208.
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