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ANOTHER HISTORY: FAMILY, NATION AND THE REMEMBRANCE OF THE EGYPTIAN JEWISH PAST IN CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI LITERATURE

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In this article I will focus on how Egyptian Jews who migrated to Israel after 1948 and their descendants remember Egypt and how they situate themselves vis-à-vis Israeli society and culture. I will base my analysis on three semi-autobiographical novels published between 2003 and 2011 by Israeli writers of Egyptian descent belonging to three subsequent generations: Baderekh la’itztadion by Yitzhak Gormezano Goren, Kol tze’adenu by Ronit Matalon, and Yolanda by Moshe Sakal. By analysing specific passages from these books, I will argue that even after the decline of the Jewish presence in Egypt in the 1950s, the cultural and social worlds to which their families belonged did not vanish completely but, rather, struggled for survival at a very intimate level. This ultimately produced a multifaceted archive in which the written narrative of the family’s past became an alternative homeland where historical memories and fictional details are inextricably blended.

The Jews of Egypt: memory, history and literature

It is in and through the well-protected domain of the family that the past is first preserved and then transmitted ledor vador, a much-cited Jewish phrase to indicate traditions passing from one generation after another. Yet, the past is also inextricably linked to the outside world and to that of places and nations that we inhabit(ed). As Maurice Halbwachs (1992, 83) wrote, even though family memory, as any other kind of memory, always functions within a collective context, it is in fact “made of notions that are singular and historic,” which “resemble those of the general society” but “are nevertheless distinct.” The transition of memory—which in La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli Paul Ricoeur (2004) understands as the only resource to the past—from the individual to the collective, thus becomes one of the links between memory and history. In the case of the Jewish people, one also has to consider that its history, perhaps more than others, since the very beginning was based on an imperative to remember (Yerushalmi 1982). However, this does not mean that all Jewish memories were granted the same relevance in the historical narration of the past.

For example, in modern Israel the Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, nowadays mostly known as mizrahim, were long silenced and kept at the margins of the national historiographical, as well as literary, canon (Alcalay 1993; Behar 2009;
After moving to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, most of them spent the first months after the ‘aliyah in ma’abarot (transit camps), which were temporary barracks designed to accommodate the new migrants. According to Ella Shohat the transit camps thus marked the beginning of a double process of de-socialization from the migrants’ previous environment and their subsequent re-socialization within Israel (Shohat 1988, 1999; Shenhav 2006).

In the history of the ‘aliyot from the Middle East, Egyptian Jews as opposed, for instance, to the Iraqis or Moroccans, usually feature less prominently, perhaps because of the limited size of the community and the fact that many adjusted quite rapidly to the new Israeli environment thanks to high levels of education (Khazoom 2008, 76–80, 139). Moreover, the history of Egyptian Jews counters, in a particularly striking way, many of the usual assumptions about the mizrahim as a backward and conservative milieu.

The history of modern Egyptian Jewry began in the mid-nineteenth century when, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the economic expansion that Egypt underwent, thousands of Jews from all over the Ottoman Empire, the Eastern Mediterranean and Southern Europe migrated to Cairo and Alexandria. In a few decades many of them improved their socioeconomic status, creating a relatively well-off and modern community that flourished more-or-less up until the 1940s, when it numbered around 80,000 people (Krämer 1989, 10; Miccoli, forthcoming).

With the outbreak of the 1948 War and then the Free Officers’ Revolution (1952) led by Gamal ‘Abd-al-Nasser, a first wave of migration, took place (Beinin 1986, 70–71; Laskier 1992, 186–187). However, most of the Jews migrated, or were expelled, in the aftermath of the so-called Lavon affair (1954) and the 1956 Suez War. By the early 1960s only around 2500 Jews remained in Egypt. All the others had settled in Europe, mainly France but also the UK and Italy, the USA, a few in Australia and Brazil (Barda 2011; De Aranjo 2013), and last but not least, in the State of Israel, to where in the end around 30,000 Egyptian Jews migrated (Della Pergola 2008, 37).

According to Joel Beinin, the first memoir published by an Egyptian Jew in Israel was the 1965 Drama be’Aleksandria veshnei harugei malkhut (Drama in Alexandria and two martyrs) by Shlomo Kohen-Tzidon (1986). 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 Keshet, where an excerpt of the memoir Mitzrayim sheli (My Egypt), published in 1968 by Rahel Maccabi, also appeared (Beinin 1986, 52–55, 113–117; Aharoni 1987; Ohana 2006; Starr and Somekh 2012).

A more complex portrayal of the Egyptian ‘aliyah emerged, however, only in texts published from the late 1970s, such as the novels Kayitz’ Aleksandroni (An Alexandrian Summer, 1978) and Blansh (1986) by Yitzhak Gormezano Goren, the 1979 memoir Mipiramidot laKarmel (From the pyramids to Mount Carmel) by Ada Aharoni, the short story Joe ‘ish Kahir (Cairo Joe, 1989) by Orly Castel-Bloom. Later noteworthy texts include Zeh ‘im hapanim ’eleinu (The one facing us, 1995) by Ronit Matalon, Hamolokhiya shel ’ima (Mother’s molokhiya, 2006) by Nissim Zohar, Bo’i haruah (The wind comes), published in 2008 by Hayyim Sabato, some of the poems by the late feminist activist and scholar Viki Shiran, and recently Yolanda (2011) by the young writer Moshe Sakal (on some of these writers: Starr 2009; Cohen Muller 2009).

Four of these authors—namely Zohar, Gormezano Goren, Sabato and Shiran—were born in Egypt and moved to Israel during childhood or as young adults, whereas the
others—Castel-Bloom, Matalon, and Sakal—were born in Israel to families of Egyptian Jewish descent.

Broadly speaking, all these works can be connected to those of other Israeli writers of Middle Eastern and North African origin. Beginning with the 1960s and 1970s sifrut hama’abara (transit camp literature) by Iraqi-born Shimon Ballas, Eli ’Amir and Sami Michael, the literature by authors of mizrahi origin has by now evolved into a heterogeneous and complex field, to be analysed while bearing in mind the differences between generations and the position of each author on the Israeli literary scene (Hever 2004; Oppenheimer 2014).

Despite stylistic differences and even though they do not form a coherent literary stream, such writers provide the opportunity to acquire a comprehensive overview of how three generations of Israelis of Egyptian descent remember their family history. Furthermore, they also show how the process of social integration of the mizrahim can be narrated and reconstructed in literary texts (Watson 2011; Elridge 2012), which eventually became an alternative homeland, in which to seek refuge and express one’s most intimate feelings. Similarly to Antoinette Burton’s analysis of women’s memoirs and diaries from late colonial India, novels and semi-autobiographical texts in the case of the mizrahim can also be read as an archive for clarifying aspects, such as family and gender, hitherto marginalized in more traditional historical sources (Burton 2003, 4–30). Even though these texts have a very individual value, they also have an emotional and narrative content that places them in dialogue with one another, allowing for the emergence of another kind of narration, that “is not based on the juxtaposition between ‘true’ and ‘invented’, but on the integration […] of ‘reality’ and ‘possibility’,” and that ultimately points to the need to connect literary studies and history more fruitfully (Ginzburg 2012, 57).

In this article, I will discuss three semi-autobiographical novels published between 2003 and 2011, two by renowned Israeli writers of Egyptian origin—Baderekh la’itztadion (The path to the stadium) by Yitzhak Gormezano Goren and Kol tze’adenu (The sound of our steps) by Ronit Matalon—and Moshe Sakal’s Yolanda. These authors belong respectively to the first—or, as Gormezano Goren migrated to Israel as a child, to what Rubin Suleiman (2002) calls the “1.5 Generation”—second and third generation of Israelis of Egyptian descent. The novels have been chosen for this reason and also because each underlines a different yet equally crucial concern: the textuality of the Jewish experience for Gormezano Goren; the bending of time and gender through the lens of immigration for Matalon; the recovery of a cosmopolitan ideal for Sakal. Moreover, each book has a family member at its core: that of Gormezano Goren focuses on the protagonist’s father Albert; Matalon’s on the mother Lucette and finally Yolanda on the grandmother.

According to Yohai Oppenheimer, the family, and particularly the father, is a crucial category through which second-generation mizrahi literature can be interpreted. Through an identification with the father, the second generation is able to connect to the Arab past, which the parents had put aside in the years immediately after their ’aliyah, leading to what Oppenheimer (2014, 153–160), defines as a negative Oedipal complex. The Egyptian Jewish case seems, however, to suggest that the identification with the father, or with a member of the previous generation, is apparent in authors belonging to different generations, such as the three who I am analysing. This might signal the emergence of a broader inter-generational mizrahi memory, “deeply inhabited
by history” and “burdened under its weight” (Nora 1992, 958), that can only express its full potential through an inextricable mixture of fictional and historical details.

“More European than the Europeans”: The Levantine memories of Yitzhak Gormezano Goren

Let us begin with Baderekh la ‘itztadion (henceforth Baderekh) by Gormezano Goren. Gormezano Goren was born in Alexandria in 1942 into a middle-class family that migrated to Israel in 1952. He has published several novels and plays, and since the 1980s has tried to make the so-called Oriental Jewish worlds more popular in Israel by founding a theatre, Bimat Kedem and, in 2000, a literary journal, Hakivun mizrah, centred on Middle Eastern and North African Jewish cultures.

Baderekh, published in 2003, is the third and last volume of the Trilogia Aleksandronit (Alexandrian trilogy), which the author dedicated to the city of Alexandria and its Jews. The first two novels, Kayitz Aleksandroni (1978) and Blansh (1986), told the story of an Alexandrian Jewish family from the perspective of the young child Roby/Yitzhak, an alter ego of the author. Even though partly based on the author’s family history, these two novels are largely fictional and describe the lives of the family on the eve of their migration to Israel in the case of Kayitz Aleksandroni, and from the 1940s to the 1950s in the case of Blansh (Abramovich 2008; Trevisan Semi 2008).

Baderekh is a complex work, partly a novel and partly a family memoir, in which Gormezano Goren describes his father Albert’s life in 1930s Alexandria, and then his own in 1950s and 1960s Israel. In the book, the author explains that he based the story on his father’s diaries, which Albert started to write after retiring in the early 1960s and were accidentally found by his son years later. However, Gormezano Goren also acknowledges that he modified and rewrote:

Does someone still believe it was Albert who wrote these words? For God’s sake, I stopped translating my father’s story long time ago and I started “betraying” him. […] I am not a witness, I invent stories. […] All the lies that I wrote are the truth. That is it. You ask whether it happened or not? Of course, it did happen, yet it did not. (Gormezano Goren 2003, 253)

For Gormezano Goren, describing Egypt as it was represents a difficult task, as he is “not a witness.” The unwillingness to remember everything, despite the fact that, having lived in Egypt for 10 years, Gormezano Goren is to some extent a witness, leads to a partly fictionalized version of the past. This is a crucial facet of Gormezano Goren’s entire literary production that is also present in the two previous parts of the Trilogia Aleksandronit (my interview with Yitzhak Gormezano Goren, Tel Aviv, 11 July 2007). His family’s memory, and that of the Egyptian ‘olim more broadly, are for Gormezano Goren connected to a transnational space, the Levant, that cannot be encapsulated within any national boundaries. The memory of Egypt cannot be based upon “a sharp distinction between an ‘actual’ here and a ‘nostalgic’ there” (Hever 2004, 50). It is, instead, connected to a much more intimate and barely visible world that the author reconstructed, for instance, through the books that Albert Gormezano loves:
Were I to live on a desert island, what would I take with me? It is hard to say, but clearly I would take all the books by Zola, the “Grand-Larousse” […] Anatole France, Pierre Loti, Paul Burgess, Balzac, Hugo, Dumas … Oh, those good old books published by Nelson, the British publishing house in French named after the admiral who beat Napoleon […] Of all the stuff I took with me to Israel in 1952, much has disappeared, but the books stayed with me, and will soon pass to my sons. (Gormezano Goren 2003, 67–68)

Books are not just the companions of Albert’s life, they are the only homeland he could claim both before and after his departure from Egypt:

Which is the land I long for? No, I do not long for an old village in Turkey, nor do I long for Sefarad, Sweden or Egypt, the countries where my family happened to live. My homeland [moledet] is not a country [‘eretz]. It is not a land [adamah] of any sort. Today I know that my homeland is made of letters, letters that make books. Books are my homeland. (16)

It is difficult to determine whether it is Albert or Yitzhak who loves these books so much. What is clear is that Gormezano Goren is arguing that Egyptian Jews live at the crossroads of different worlds that vanished after the migration: only books remained. In this sense, the Egyptians’ case is not unique. In fact, for centuries Jews shared a literary culture and books still create the idea of “Jewish continuity as primarily textual” (Oz and Oz-Salzberger 2013, 2). What is interesting is, however, that the books to which Gormezano Goren refers are not part of any Jewish canon but are, instead, related to very personal choices that reflect his father’s taste and his own, and the cultural world in which he and many other Egyptian Jews lived.

As the Gormezanos migrated to Israel in 1952, they first settled in Shfaram, a ma‘abara in Galilee. Yet, as opposed to the usual depictions of the harsh living conditions in the transit camps (see: Bernstein 1981; Khazoom 2005; Kozlovsky 2008), for instance in the 1960s novels Hama‘abara and Mul hahomah (In front of the wall) by Shimon Ballas, Gormezano Goren remember it with affection and nostalgia. For the child Roby/Yitzhak, Shfaram was and is remembered as a magical place surrounded by trees, as opposed to the crowded and noisy streets of Alexandria to which he was accustomed. While in the ma‘abara, his parents tried their best to continue their life as usual, for example organizing small parties in the barracks:

You should have seen them, especially during winter, wearing elegant dresses, my father in a suit and my mother with a low-cut dress of taffeta, very à-la-mode in the 1950s. But then they also wore Wellington boots, all covered in mud. There were no street lamps in the ma‘abara, to tell you the truth there were not even streets. You had to walk in the mud, keeping the shoes in your hands. […] an Iraqi policeman, Menashe, […] played the guitar and a friend of his, Nagi, another Iraqi, played the violin. […] and all the couples danced “cheek to cheek.” (Gormezano Goren 2003, 107–112)

This simple social gathering organized by the ‘olim signalled the way in which his parents and the other migrants tried to “recreate a ‘middle-class lifestyle in the shack’, despite
the hostile harsh conditions” (Trevisan Semi 2008, 767). By saying this, Gormezano Goren not only presents the mizrahim as modern and secularized men and women, but also transforms the transit camp into a lieu de mémoire, the category first coined by the French historian Pierre Nora (1984). They are full of hope and expectations for a better future, living in a place that, decades after he and his family had left it, can be regarded with irony.

Aloofness from Zionism can be traced in another episode that describes the different way of thinking that separated Roby/Yitzhak from many of his schoolmates in 1960s Israel. Many of the boys, “sabras of Ashkenazi origin, sons of the first settlers of the town,” seem to him only to be interested in the Zionist youth movements rather than in school: “To the well-educated young boy that I was (educated in the Alexandrian-European way), they seemed like a tribe of ignorant and uncivilized Asians” (Gormezano Goren 2003, 165). What interests me here is that in the 1960s a young Egyptian migrant could feel estranged from his peers because he felt “more European than the Europeans” (Koren n.d.). This apparently paradoxical statement is not at all surprising considering, on the one hand, the middle-class identity shared by many Egyptian Jews since the early twentieth century and, on the other, the core traits upon which Israeliness was to be based. There were (Socialist) Zionism and the figure of the combative and frugal Jewish pioneer, Hebrew as the only legitimate code of expression, and the adoption of a specific idea of Jewishness which selected episodes and values in the history of the Jewish people to the detriment of others and maintained quite a negative view of the history of the diaspora (Kimmerling 2001, 89–111).

Once in Israel the Egyptian ‘olim had to abandon much of their previous identity and adapt themselves to a more rigid model. In this sense, a text such as Baderekh can help to elucidate some aspects of this process of nationalization. For instance, Gormezano Goren portrays the shame felt when his schoolteacher did not consider his name, Robert, to be appropriate and decided to call him by his second name Yitzhak, 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 spontaneously ‘Not Re’uven!’.

[ … ]

Roby explained that his parents had chosen the name Robert for him when they saw a movie with the actor Robert Taylor. However, his grandfather made them add Yitzhak, as that was the name of his own father. Yossi the teacher nodded with satisfaction, as in the end the Jewish tradition and the mikrah had won over Hollywood. (Gormezano Goren 2003, 24–25)

The same happened to the family name Gormezano which, as in the case of many other ‘olim, was changed to a phonetically similar yet more Hebrew Goren, and it is for this reason that the author decided to adopt both his original family name and the Israeli one when he started publishing his work. As Gormezano Goren imagines coming back to his family’s old house in Alexandria, he thinks that the Arab porter will not recognize him not only because many years had gone by, but because his name had changed:

You say your name that in the meanwhile, because of the Israel of the 1950s, has become more Hebrew […] But the porter obviously cannot detect the similarity
between the old name and the new. Your foreign name might be Greek, Turkish, Italian, Maltese, Armenian, French, English or perhaps even American. Alexandria is the centre of the world and a cosmopolitan city. (Gormezano Goren 1978, 7–8)

For Gormezano Goren, the only way to recapture the complexity of Alexandria and of the Egyptian Jewish past, and to find a space of his own within Israel, is connected to the act of writing. By writing and through identifying with his own father, Gormezano Goren is able to confront his Egyptian legacy, blurring the boundaries between Egypt and Israel, past and present.

A family and the nation: Kol Tze‘adenu by Ronit Matalon

With her semi-autobiographical novel Kol tze‘adenu (henceforth Kol), published in 2008, Ronit Matalon, another Israeli writer of Egyptian descent, also underlines the difficulty of going back to Egypt, and the problems faced by her family in trying to find a space within Israel. Matalon, who belongs to the second generation of Egyptian ‘olim, is a well-known Israeli novelist and literary critic, born in Ganei Tikvah, near Tel Aviv, in 1959. It is worth remembering one of her previous novels, Zeh ‘im hapanim ’eleinu, with which she started to reflect on her family’s past between Egypt and Israel, and its troubling legacy (Starr 2009, 134–146; Hever 2007, 329–344; Tsal 2010). Kol tells the story of a girl called Toni—although it is not clear if that is her real name—more often referred to as hayaldah (the child), who lives in a government-owned tenement in Hatikvah, a suburb of Tel Aviv, together with her family of Egyptian origin. The narration flows from the 1950s and 1960s to contemporary times, concentrating on various episodes of the protagonist’s life and the lives of her relatives. The novel draws particularly on the life of her mother Lucette, who works as a cleaning lady for the family of a well-off rabbi, and also her grandmother Fortuna, her sister Corinne, her brother Sami, and her father Maurice.

Kol is partly a memoir and partly a novel, but even more it is a book of family remembrance in which Matalon mixes personal memories, family sayings, quotations from books, descriptions of drawings and photographs, excerpts from her father’s political writings and so on. According to Avraham Balaban, this fragmented structure resembles an arabesque and thus attests to the Egyptian legacy of the protagonist’s mother (Balaban 2010). Additionally, this blending of words, objects and even silences can be interpreted as an expedient through which to illustrate how Lucette and her relatives—similarly to other migrant women—“construct a new space for themselves,” parallel and yet deeply intertwined with the national one (Nagar-Ron and Motzafi-Haller 2011, 660).

As opposed to Gormezano Goren, who puts his father Albert at the centre of the narration, in Kol the main character is the protagonist’s mother, Lucette, who migrated to Israel a few years after the foundation of the state. Lucette’s journey is said to have been not a ‘aliyah but a hagirah (migration), during which all the good memories of the past disappeared. Lucette also admits that the migration was not induced by strong Zionist beliefs, and that her husband Maurice “did not want to come to Israel. I wanted to migrate because my brothers were all here, and so he agreed” (Matalon 2008, 110). Once in Israel the family experience years of great economic difficulty,
also because Maurice dedicates all his time to leftist political activism in favour of the mizrahim instead of searching for a job to sustain his family. The only thing Lucette does besides working, is fantasize about life before the migration. However, similar to the partly imagined genealogies that many Egyptian Jews described in their memoirs and autobiographies (for example: Alhadef 1994, 169–170; Barile 2003, 36–37; Dwek 2006, 37; Lagnado 2007, 130–131; Terni 2008, 53–54), Lucette

… used to say “when we arrived”, omitting all the rest. “When we arrived”, full stop. She did not specify any date: her year of birth, the month, the day, they were all covered under some kind of fog […] . She was attached to Livorno, as that was the hometown of her father: “We are from Livorno, that is our origin [hamotza’ shelanu]” […] What was important to her was not being from the Middle East or from Europe, but “our origin.” (Matalon 2008, 46)

Neither Europeans nor Middle Easterners, the Egyptian ‘olim seemed stuck in the midst of a world beyond rigid coordinates and ethno-national boundaries and that instead referred to an intimate and deeply familiar past. Moreover, as in Baderekh, the characters of Kol point out the linguistic difficulties faced by Egyptian Jews after their ‘aliyah. Lucette has always had difficulties with the Hebrew language and is ashamed of

her writing incapacity […] The separation between the letters, the white space that she anxiously left between them, that was her way of saying to what extent that language was foreign to her, it was her declaration of foreignness. (Matalon 2008, 193)

Even in Israel, the woman always remains attached to the reading of her youth, and to the Francophone education received in Cairo. One book in particular, La dame aux camélias by Alexandre Dumas, fils (1848), is for Lucette an almost holy text, to the point that she often speaks of the book’s main character, Marguerite Gautier, a troubled courtesan who in Lucette’s eyes is “beautiful and pure [levanah, i.e., the Hebrew name of Lucette] as an angel, poor thing” (Matalon 2008, 78).5

Her husband Maurice is, on the other hand, a voracious reader and writer. This voraciousness is, however, connected more to a compulsion than an unconditioned and absolute love of words. Together with a group of friends, the sohba (Arabic: company), Maurice writes articles and essays mainly, if not only, to denounce what he called the Bengurionism, the Bengurionitzim, and the problems of the ‘edot hamizrah (the Eastern ethnic groups) in modern Israel. But the man, who is modelled on Matalon’s father Félix, never finds a proper space to declare his ideas and always feels rejected by the Israeli establishment. This is why his activism in the end becomes a very personal struggle that isolates him not only from his family, but also from the nation (Matalon 2002, 2009).

The incapacity to speak a correct Hebrew is to be understood as a fundamental trait that defines Lucette and her husband as being on the margins of the Israeli nation-state. As the new Israeli citizen replaced the old diaspora Jew, the Hebrew language became one of the markers of this new identity and the only legitimate code of expression (Schely-Newman 2010, 198). This monolingualism—which was a problem for all Jewish migrants—was deeply resented by polyglot Jews like the Egyptians, who in
most cases continued to speak their various languages, mainly, if not only, in the domestic sphere. It is at home that Lucette and her relatives can speak their family language, a set of words and expressions that echo those of the family memoir *Lessico famigliare* (Family Sayings, 1963), by the half-Jewish Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg, whose literary work Matalon greatly admires (Gluzman 2001, 240). It was an idiom full of peculiar words and expressions from the French *à mon seul désir* (Matalon 2008, 218), to the ambiguous usage of the words *sham* (there) (100), *layamim* (in those days) (258), ‘*el ‘alam* (Arabic: the world) (311), including vivid expressions such as the description of Maurice’s sister “as beautiful as Layla Murad” (110)—referring to one of the most famous actresses of the Egyptian cinema of the 1940s.

Matalon also underlines the bodily consequences of the ‘*aliyah* on her family. Lucette bears all the traumas and conflicts that not only she, but Israel and Egypt at large, had experienced since 1948. According to the nonna, while in Cairo Lucette’s hands had been “so perfect, almost unreal: they were so white, without a freckle, as if they had been covered in flour,” but once she moved to Israel they became “the hands of a worker [*po’el*], not of a woman worker [*po’elet*], a man.” Nonna Fortuna also told her granddaughter that:

The true and sweet Lucette, I left her in Egypt […] The mouth she has now, and the loquacity she has, she was not like that before. There was no such thing, she did not used to speak out. She learnt it here in Israel. [In Egypt] she was like a doll, she was pretty as a doll and with honey on her tongue […] : yes Mummy, of course Mummy, just like this […] Something terrible […] had happened in her eyes in the process of migration [*hamaslul hahagirah*], in the very geography of the migration. (Matalon 2008, 27–28)

The migration can be interpreted as a rite of passage that negatively impacted on the life of Lucette who accepted moving to Israel despite her aloofness from Zionism. The migration also subverted long-enduring gender paradigms. Lucette, now transformed almost into a man, is the one who works and supports the family, as opposed to her absent husband Maurice:

‘What is wrong with bringing home the 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 [Arabic: I mean], is that what you are trying to say?’

‘Ya’ni’. (Matalon 2008, 265)

According to Zionist ideology, the migration to *Eretz Israel* was to be the way for the weak diaspora Jew to become more manly and stronger physically and mentally. Contact with the land was to regenerate the Jew and forge a new, healthy Zionist generation (Biale 1992, 176–203). In the case of Maurice and Lucette, however, the opposite is shown to be happening. Maurice feels estranged from his new homeland and emasculated by his wife’s more active response to the daily problems the family faces. 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 Iraqi and Yemeni migrant women in 1950s and 1960s Israel have demonstrated (Sharaby 2004; Khazoom 2002). From a literary point of view, Benhabib (2002) noted similar things
analysing the novels Shavim veshavim yoter (Equal and more equal) and Pahonim velahomot (Tin shacks and dreams), published in 1974 and 1979 by Iraqi-born Sami Michael. Also in these novels, while women responded to the migration and its difficult aftermath in quite a reactive manner, men were represented as weak and passive.

This also helps explain the distance felt between life before and after the ‘aliyah, which represents a watershed in the history of Lucette and Maurice, not because of deep Zionist convictions but because of the traumatic impact of the migration process on their lives and bodies. Their past can be preserved mainly within the home, but even there it cannot be fully understood by their sons who struggle to integrate in a nation they identify as both foreign and close. For example, during the Six-Day War, Sami, the protagonist’s brother who, while drafted into the army had pretended to be mentally ill and unable “to sleep without his mum,” is suddenly ashamed to be “the only man on a bus full of children, women, and the elderly.” But it is too late, and an army officer tells him that only “if the Arabs come to Petah Tikvah, will we take you [to fight in the war]” (Matalon 2008, 381), meaning that he will not be drafted.

Considering the profound relevance that the army has always had in the formation of Israeli national identity (Ben-Eliezer 1998), it is clear to what extent not being part of it was, for Sami, an indicator of his own marginality vis-à-vis the nation. So although Israel is for the protagonist and her brothers the only homeland they have ever known, their sense of national belonging is threatened by liminal memories and counter-narratives, that, as Homi Bhabha has noted, often “disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (Bhabha 1990, 300).

Whereas Gormezano Goren could count on his own memories of childhood in Egypt, Matalon’s Egypt had to pass through the painful Israeli experience of her parents. Lucette, and—in different ways—her husband Maurice, are then presented as people whose body and languages suffered a severe trauma which, in turn, also impacted on their Israeli-born children (on the mizrahi body: Oppenheimer 2010). The integration of the Egyptians, as that of many other Middle Eastern and North African Jews, was, therefore, a process filled with conflict which, as I will now explain analysing Yolanda, was destined to last for several generations.

Promised lands: cosmopolitanism and Israeliness in Yolanda by Moshe Sakal

Yolanda, a semi-autobiographical novel published in 2011 by the Israeli writer Moshe Sakal, is an example of how the grandson of an Egyptian migrant might reframe his family’s past and its resilient legacies. Sakal, born in Tel Aviv in 1976, comes from a family of Egyptian and Syrian origin. Besides Yolanda, he has published four other novels and a collection of stories and contributes to the cultural section of the daily Ha’aretz. Yolanda tells the story of Momo, a young Israeli who lives between Tel Aviv and Paris where he pursued a degree in French, and of his grandmother Yolanda, who migrated from Cairo to Israel shortly before the 1948 War. Interconnected with this story is a second one that is said to have been written by Georges, Momo’s grandfather and Yolanda’s former husband. This second story is set in Cairo during the inter-war period and concentrates on the love affair between an Italian widow and a Cairo Jew.
Many members of Momo’s maternal and paternal families appear in the book, such as Yolanda’s sisters and Momo’s paternal grandmother Nur, originally from Syria. In addition, significant roles are also given to Beth and Lolita, the Filipino home health aides of the two grandmothers, and to Momo’s partner Shauli. Sakal’s book is, in fact, not only about how Egypt was and is remembered, but also explores contemporary issues such as the status of non-Jewish migrant workers and sexual minorities in modern Israel.

More evident than in the cases of Albert Gormezano and Lucette, Yolanda’s national and cultural views not only shift between Egypt and Israel, but also include another space to which she feels deeply attached: France. Yolanda spends hours with her grandson Momo reading aloud some of the classics of French literature and dreaming about Paris, a city where “I have never been but still I feel that I know every street of it. Would you say it is possible to know a city even without having been there? I think I can even imagine how it smells” (Sakal 2011, 106). Paris is Yolanda’s first Promised Land and remains so for her entire life. In 1948, when Yolanda “jumped on a train and moved to Palestine,” she could have chosen to go elsewhere,

… to Belgium, to France, to Brazil. Had she migrated to Belgium, as her cousin Jacqueline did, her life would have been like a diamond, and it would have tasted like chocolate […] Had she migrated to France, as her friend Yvonne did, in 2000 we could have walked together in the Champs Elysées eating an ice cream. (177)

But instead Yolanda went to Israel, fell in love with a soldier who was to die in the 1948 War, and then met her future husband Georges. In the course of time she learns to love Israel and becomes a strenuous supporter of the country. Yolanda eventually finds her homeland in Israel, and in Tel Aviv in particular, as that is the place where her beloved family lives. And this is why she cannot fully understand why her grandson wants to visit Cairo or go and study in Paris:

At first, she did not say a word. But then she whispered: “This is your country [‘eretz’]. She said it more firmly, and for a third time she cried: “This is your country!” I could see that she was starting to get angry. Yolanda did not even ask whither I was going: she knew already. She guessed that I was going to her Promised Land, where she had never been. (130)

Despite all this, Yolanda is eager to know what her Parisian ‘eretz muvtahat (Promised Land) looked like, asking numerous questions when speaking on the phone with Momo:

Have you visited the Eiffel Tower?
Not yet. We will go there tomorrow.
And the Moulin Rouge?
No.
Do you speak French with the people in the street?
Yes, I do.
And do they answer you in French? (114)
Yolanda’s fascination with Paris confirms the importance of French as the *lingua franca* of Egypt and the entire Eastern Mediterranean region up to the 1950s, and also the extent to which the French language and, more generally, the European educational institutions, left a mark on Egyptian Jews (Abécassis 2008). It is worth noting that the chapter from which the two abovementioned passages are taken is entitled *galut* (exile), a Hebrew term bearing quite a negative connotation and referring to the physical and psychological condition of being uprooted from one’s homeland. This leads one to ask whose *galut* Sakal is talking about: is Yolanda living an exilic existence in Israel, or has Momo perhaps started a new kind of exile in Paris? And then, from which national and/or imaginative spaces are Yolanda and Momo being exiled?

*Yolanda* poses questions for the reader that go beyond the Israeli case and point to the idea that all human beings are living a diasporic existence while simultaneously belonging to different diasporas (Levy and Weingrod 2005). Considering this, the literary narration of the Egyptian Jewish past can serve as a positive historical antecedent that helps “de-territorialising the boundaries of the Sabra Hebrew language, culture, and place” (Lavie 1996, 67) and in so doing articulates new perspectives for Israeli literature.

Language is also a crucial issue in the book. Once he has migrated to Israel Momo’s grandfather Georges, misses the cosmopolitan atmosphere and multilingualism of Cairo, where “there were men and women from all over the world, also from Europe. And they spoke many different languages. It was not like here, where everyone only speaks Hebrew” (Sakal 2011, 64). Whereas Matalon stressed the difficulty of learning Hebrew, Sakal—probably also because of his personal interest in French culture and literature—chose to comment on how Momo’s family spoke French, a language that “travelled all the way from France to Cairo, and then from Cairo to Tel Aviv” (Sakal 2011, 64). Theirs was a global yet deeply familiar and vernacular French, characterized by many expressions and family sayings, and by the alveolar sound of the letter *r*, as opposed to the uvular one of standard French.

As with Gormezano Goren’s father and Matalon’s mother, Momo’s grandparents also loved European literary texts. Georges even regarded some of the greatest French writers of the nineteenth century as members of his own family:

In our family, as opposed to all other people, we do not call that great French writer “Balzac”, but “uncle Honoré”. In parallel to the many uncles and aunts on my grandma Yolanda’s side, I also had uncles from my grandpa’s side and heard a lot of stories about them. For example, [I heard about] the voyage that uncle Gustave [Flaubert] made to Egypt a few years before writing “Madame Bovary”; the pastries that uncle Marcel [Proust] deeply loved, and of course uncle Honoré and his “Comédie humaine”. (Sakal 2011, 43)

The cultural background of this educated Egyptian Jew did not vanish or stay in Egypt, but followed him to Israel and was then preserved within the walls of the home. Like Albert Gormezano, Georges also feels that books are his ultimate homeland, easily transported from Cairo to Tel Aviv. It is thanks to books that they are able to forge many parallel lives, to counter the socioeconomic difficulties they have to face in Israel, and the feeling of estrangement that this new condition provokes. Despite the fact that they migrated or were born in Israel, Georges, Yolanda and Momo are still *wandering Jews*, similar to the protagonists of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-
century Yiddish literature, which Sakal cites as one of his sources of inspiration. For a number of reasons, they are not only Israeli citizens, but belong to different communities that refer, among other things, to their family origin or, in the case of Momo, to their sexual orientation (my interview with Moshe Sakal, Tel Aviv, 23 June 2013).

More than in the previous two novels, in *Yolanda* Egypt is represented as a quasi-magical place. This is, to a large extent, due to the fact that Sakal belongs to the third generation of Israelis of Egyptian origin, and thus experiences his family’s past through the stories that the grandmother has told him during childhood. The Cairo remembered by Yolanda and her sisters is a cosmopolitan city, with at its centre the fashionable *Café Groppi* that has been portrayed in numerous memoirs and autobiographies as one of the symbols of pre-Nasserist Egypt:

“It was a magical place”, aunt Giséle said, “My sisters and I sat there wearing the most elegant dresses: we were going to a party, of course with our brothers. Who did not go to Café Groppi? All the actors and actresses, the politicians, the journalists, and even King Faruq: they were all there. But we did not talk to the king, we were afraid”.

Why were you afraid?
Because aunt Odette was such a beauty! How do you remember her? A beautiful woman, right? Now multiply her beauty by a hundred, by a million times. She was as pretty as Brigitte Bardot, but with dark hair. And because she was beautiful, we feared that King Faruq would go after her. He had a very bad reputation. (Sakal 2011, 93)

It is worth remembering that in the aftermath of the 1952 Free Officers’ Revolution and then two years later during the Lavon affair, several articles appeared in the Israeli press presenting Egypt as a country possessed by a Nazi-style spirit (Beinin 1986, 94–99; Miccoli 2012, 205–219). As opposed to these dramatic stories, Giséle and her sisters were afraid of King Faruq only because he was said to be a womanizer. Many years had passed since Giséle’s ‘aliyah and by then Egypt had become a space onto which she projected affection for a lost world and for a bygone youth.

As opposed to what Matalon wrote about Lucette, in the case of Yolanda only the good memories remain after migration, something that underlines the importance of analysing these life trajectories in a very individual manner, instead of producing an univocal history of the Egyptian ‘olim. Moreover, whereas in *Baderekh* and *Kol*, the parents feature prominently, in *Yolanda* they are almost absent. As the most traumatic aspects of the ‘aliyah have now faded, for Sakal, similar to other writers of the third generation of *mizrahim*, such as Almog Behar whose grandparents came from Turkey and Iraq, going back to his grandmother’s past becomes an “unavoidable step in the making of one’s identity and in order to understand one’s place in the world” (Mordehai 2011; see also: Shoemelof, Shemtov, and Baram 2007).

But does this mean that eventually “all hopes were fulfilled,” as the second ‘aliyah pioneers sang? For Sakal the answer would probably be a negative one. This is why Yolanda and Momo look at Israel with fondness yet also some perplexity, “with an eye still gazing toward the diaspora” (Mordehai 2011). If throughout the years Yolanda developed a strong attachment to her new nation, hers is always a disenchanted gaze, as the Philippine caregiver Beth tells Momo after his grandmother’s death:
you know, before I came to Israel I always thought that this was a very religious
country, the Holy Land. But your grandma laughed at me and said: No, Beth. It
is the land that is holy, not the people. (Sakal 2011, 183)

None of the Egyptian ‘olim encountered in these three books ever sacralizes the Land of
Israel, which to them is just another, perhaps not the last, place where they live follow-
ing a long sequence of cities and countries that, based upon their family histories and
genealogy, included Sefarad, the Ottoman Empire, and Egypt. As Joel Beinin claimed,
the exile of Egyptian Jews did not end with the ‘aliyah, but was, rather, replaced by
a new and less visible kind of exilic existence. When in Cairo, Yolanda longs for
Paris and for a Europe where she would never go, and once in Israel she begins to
miss Cairo, ending up living a galut kefulah (double exile) (my interview with Moshe
Sakal, Tel Aviv 23 June 2013; Beinin 1986, 1–7).

Another history

In this article, I have analysed three novels by Israeli writers of Egyptian descent, exam-
ing how they remember Egypt and how they situate themselves vis-à-vis Israeli culture
and society. From the analysis, it is clear that for Gormezano Goren, Matalon, and Sakal
remembering Egypt, the ‘aliyah, and all that their parents and grandparents faced is
much more than an exercise in nostalgia.

The three authors establish original connections with their families in different
ways. By identifying with previous generations, their memory of the past can emerge
and acquire greater visibility. As mentioned above, taking second-generation mizrahi
writers as a case-study, Oppenheimer (2014, 153–160) explained this process of identi-
fication through the Freudian concept of negative Oedipus. One should, however, note
that it is not only writers who belong to the second generation stricto sensu—as, in
our case, Matalon—but also those born in Egypt who migrated to Israel as children,
like Gormezano Goren, or members of the third generation like Sakal who can write
the story of a member of his/her family, mixing it with his/her own memories.

With the exception of the very first mizrahi writers of the 1960s and 1970s, I view
the model of negative Oedipus as an interpretative framework valid for different gener-
ations, which points to a widely-shared wish not to forget and to recuperate much-
loved family traditions and heritage.

This said, some inter-generational (and individual) differences can still be traced.
Whereas for Gormezano Goren the Egyptian past never went away, not even in the dif-
cult years of the ma’abara, for Matalon it is harder to think of life before the ‘aliyah:
Lucette and her children experienced too many traumas, to the point that nonna
Fortuna confessed that “the true and sweet Lucette, I left her in Egypt” (Matalon
1995, 266). Thanks to the passing of time, Sakal can, instead, fantasize about his grand-
mother’s magical past and eventually consider her as the forerunner of a new, global
generation of Israelis who, like Momo, feel at home both in Tel Aviv and Paris.

What the three novels seem to agree upon is the fact that—from the early twentieth
century up until the 1950s—the Jews of Cairo and Alexandria forged a complex social
and cultural imaginary that in some ways survived despite the ‘aliyah. This brought
together Europe and European colonial influences, multiple models of Jewishness,
Ottoman and Eastern Mediterranean legacies, and so on. When in Israel the Egyptian 'olim tried to preserve and transmit this complex model of identity, reiterating what they understood to be their main characteristics: cosmopolitanism and the many cultural and linguistic connections they had with Europe and France in particular; a certain aloofness from Zionism and from the radical demands of the mizrahi emancipatory movements of 1960s and 1970s Israel and, last but not least, the insistence on bourgeois patterns of identity and sociability.

Taking all this into account and mixing historical details and literary fiction in inextricable ways, Gormezano Goren, Matalon, and Sakal thus produced an archive of memories in which to preserve their family’s many senses of belonging and homelands. Faced with the oblivion of their family’s past from the national canon, these writers decided to “correct and rewrite” it (interview of Emanuela Trevisan Semi with Ronit Matalon, Venice, 20 September 2013) through (semi-) autobiographical narrations, ultimately expressing in novel and compelling ways the centrality of remembering and writing in Jewish history. By doing so, literature became “an enduring site of historical evidence and historiographical opportunity in and for the present” and a space thanks to which a more intimate and inclusive reading of the past can be initiated (Burton 2003, 5). And this, of course, is another history.

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Notes

1. The molokhiyah is a soup made of Jute leaves, garlic, coriander and generally with the addition of some meat. It is considered among the national dishes of Egyptian cuisine.
2. To these authors one should add the Cairo Karaite Jew Maurice Shammas—who, however, published in Arabic, even after ‘aliyah (Starr 2006).
3. All these novels and memoirs should also be contextualised in a larger Egyptian Jewish memory revival that goes beyond Israel and which, starting in the 1980s and 1990s, prompted the publication of texts in French, English, Italian and other languages. 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. Consider also the memoirs and novels written by Egyptian Muslims, Copts, Greeks and others, all centred on the so-called cosmopolitan Egypt (Porter 2001; Mabro 2002).
4. I use this category in a broad sense, keeping in mind that with it Rubin Suleiman (2002) referred to child survivors of the Holocaust.
5. La dame aux camélias, either in the original French version or in Ladino translation, was a very popular novel among late Ottoman Jews (Borovaya 2003).
6. Since then, the comparison between Nazism and contemporary Arab regimes has become a common trend in the Israeli public discourse (Zertal 2005, 98–103).
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