

Jewish Presence in Egypt

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Egyptian Jewry from Biblical Times to the Modern Era
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1. The Biblical period

The Egyptian Diaspora is probably the oldest Jewish Diaspora next to the Babylonian one. Through the biblical narrative of Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and, most importantly, Moses and the Exodus, the bond between Egypt and the Jews has acquired mythical and universal dimensions. The symbolism of "Letsiyat Mitsraim", "the going out" of Egypt, has come to represent not only liberation from slavery but also a point of reference in the Jewish national consciousness, the prodigious forging of a nation. Right through the centuries, during the reading of the Haggadah – the story of the Exodus - on Passover night, each Jew, whatever his or her background, is commanded to think of him or herself as personally having experienced the Exodus. In the Jewish psyche, the Exodus from Egypt symbolises the archetype of future exodus, wherever and whenever they occurred across the centuries.

Archeological evidence of a Jewish presence in Egypt has been documented as far back as the Assyrian period, thanks to the famous discovery of Aramaic papyri and ostraca on the Island of Elephantine, near Aswan in Upper Egypt (http://www.hebrewhistory.info/factpapers/fp019-3_africa.htm). These documents, dealing with legal, economic and religious issues, revealed the existence of a Judean military colony presumed to have lived there for two hundred years, from ca. 650 BCE, even before the conquest of Egypt by the Persians in 525 BCE. According to those papyri, the Jews of Elephantine worshipped in a 'temple dedicated to the Yahu, that is, the God of Israel, where sacrifices were offered' (Ben-Sasson, A History of the Jewish People, 1976, pp.179-80). They maintained close ties with the Temple of Jerusalem as shown by the numbers of letters asking for guidance and assistance (Bezalel Porten, The Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Colony, 1968). Through the examination of the various exchanges of correspondence, there is also evidence of other Jewish communities established in the north-eastern border. It is assumed that those Jewish centres were dispersed in the course of conflicts between the Egyptians and the Persians in the third century BCE.

2. The Greco-Roman Period

The Jews reappeared again in Egypt in greater numbers with the conquest of Alexander the Great, in 331 BCE. They came as liberated slaves, refugees from Palestine or as captives from Jerusalem under Ptolemy I. They settled mainly in the new Greek city of Alexandria. Again, the discovery in Egyptian soil of innumerable papyri of the period confirms the existence of a golden Diaspora, where Jews constituted the second largest ethnic group after the Greeks. Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE-50 CE) estimated the Jewish population of Egypt to be about one million, perhaps as much as a seventh of the total population of Egypt. Alexandria had the largest Jewish population with the Jews occupying two out of the five quarters of the city. Even the Palestinian Jews looked to the Alexandrian Jews for guidance. They were free to live according to their ancestral laws and grew into a prosperous and pluralistic nation. Strongly attracted by Greek civilisation, they gradually adopted its language and culture. However, in spite of the social and linguistic integration, the Egyptian Diaspora under Greek rule remained essentially Jewish in the private and communal domain and very close to its religious heritage (J.R. Bartlett, Jews in the Hellenistic World, 1985, pp.20-1).

With the decline of the Greek Empire and internal wars tearing apart the Egyptian kingdom, the situation of the local Jews deteriorated gradually and ugly conflicts erupted with the Greek section of the population. These conflicts intensified with the arrival of the Romans in Egypt in 30 BCE, as a consequence of their contestation of the Jews' civil rights granted to them by the previous rulers. For the first time in history, antisemitic material was being promulgated. Heavy and humiliating taxation was imposed on the Jews by the Roman authorities, especially after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. The merciless crushing of the Jewish revolt of 115-117 CE in Alexandria, combined with the defeat of the Jews in the land of Israel under the leadership of Bar Kokhba in 135 CE, constituted the final blow to a decimated, demoralised and pauperised Jewish population.

During the next five centuries under Byzantine rule up to the Arab conquest, a shrunken Jewish community closed its ranks while slowly mending its fences. According to the few papyri sources of the period available today, the preoccupations of the Jews of Byzantine Egypt tended to gravitate around their communal and religious life, as they became more orthodox in their practices and closer to their tradition.

3. The Medieval period under Arab rule

By the time of the Arab conquest in 641, the Jewish community had grown to forty thousand strong according to the report of Amr Ibn-al-As general of the caliph Omar 1st. In spite of the scarcity of literary and other sources covering the period between the seventh and tenth century, it is generally recognised that the Jews of Egypt - as in most countries under Arab rule - generally fared better than their coreligionists in Europe. Notwithstanding the social restrictions placed upon them as dhimmis, the Jews enjoyed 'extensive communal autonomy' since the Muslim State 'did not care what they did so long as they paid their taxes, kept the peace and remained in their place' (Norman A Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, 1979, p.39).

By the end of the ninth century, Jewish life in Egypt had reached such a high spiritual and intellectual level that a Torah scholar of the stature of Saadia Gaon (882-942) emerged from its ranks. One of his great achievements, the translation of the Bible into Arabic using Hebrew script, would have been most appreciated by the Oriental Jews who had adopted Arabic for written and oral communication. Apart from the needs of the scholarly and intellectual elite, it was probably very important to the average Jew, who, although unfamiliar with the language of the Bible, still attended synagogue regularly and wished to read and understand the biblical text.

The picture becomes clearer from the tenth century onwards thanks to the plethora of documents discovered in the Genizah of the ancient Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fostat, (Old Cairo), the unparalleled importance of which was recognised by the rabbinic scholar Solomon Shechter in 1896 (Stefan C Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo...*, 2000, p.12). It is revealed through these documents that Jews lived through a golden age in Fatimid Egypt, comparable to the one in Moslem Spain. An emerging Jewish bourgeoisie held high positions in government administration and the intellectual elite enjoyed special privileges denied to ordinary dhimmis. Prestigious Talmudic schools were established and Egypt became a pole of attraction for Jews from other lands. This was where Maimonides, the most important Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, fleeing persecution from the Almohades in Spain, found refuge in 1165. He subsequently settled in Fostat, where he wrote his famous *Guide to the Perplexed* and the *Mishneh Torah*. Highly regarded all over the Jewish world as demonstrated by his huge legacy of invaluable responsa, he was also the physician of Saladin, the Sultan of Egypt and Maimonides' descendants held the position of nagid or leaders of the Jewish community continuously for one and half century.

Unfortunately, from the thirteenth century onwards, Islamic rule went on the defensive everywhere due to the loss of Spain, the Mongolian invasion and the Portuguese raids on North African lands. In Egypt, political instability reigned both at home and abroad, due to inner struggles between rival clans. In the wake of the country's generalised state of economic and social decline resulting from continual violence and lawlessness, the Jewish population entered a dark age under the feudal, fanatical and intolerant regime of the Mamluks. A much stricter implementation of the regulations concerning the official status of dhimmis led to growing discrimination and put severe stress on the local Jewish communities who dwindled into insignificance. The Jews of Egypt welcomed the arrival of the Ottomans in 1517, seeing them as their liberators from the tyrannical rule of the Mamluks.

4. The Ottoman period

At first, the new rulers were remarkably tolerant of religious minority groups and remained so as long as favourable economic conditions prevailed within the whole of the Ottoman Empire. Their policy towards minorities was based on Islamic law, which recognised both Christians and Jews as a separate millet or nation. The different millets enjoyed an astonishing degree of religious and legal autonomy. They operated as a self-governing religious community and were allowed to deal with issues of personal status, such as marriage, divorce, burial and inheritance without outside interference. They were governed by their own laws and headed by a religious leader who was responsible to the central authorities for the payment of taxes and for the internal security of the millet community.

The first flow of Jewish refugees from Spain, Italy, Sicily and North Africa from the end of the fifteenth century onwards helped to renew an anaemic Egyptian Jewry. It was further revitalised by the immigration of more refugees fleeing the flames of the Spanish Inquisition after the expulsion of 1492. The majority of the new immigrants were more skilled and more educated than their Egyptian brethren. Very quickly, they asserted themselves and dominated the local Jewish institutions. The Ottoman rulers very wisely used their skills as merchants, bankers and financiers by putting them in charge of state finances, tax farming, money changing and the mint. Once more, the Jews of Egypt enjoyed a period of

prosperity and relative security. However, this happy interlude was short lived. The privileges bestowed upon the Jews did not serve them well in the long run as those privileges created a deep divide between them and a long suffering indigenous population overburdened with taxation and plagued by epidemics. There were some instances of leaders of the Jewish community, known as chelebis, being put to death arbitrarily by those same governors who had earlier granted them high positions in the country's administration.. From the seventeenth century, a growing tendency towards religious conservatism in Egypt added to the general decline and corruption endemic to the Ottoman Empire. That trend contributed to an overall cultural, social and economic degradation of the Jewish communities in the whole of the Levant.

According to modern scholars of Egyptian history, there was a brief episode of a semblance of order under the rule of the Mamluk, Ali-Bey (1760-66) and his successor Muhammad Bey (1772-75). During their reigns, those two Sultans apparently endeavoured to strengthen commercial ties with Europe by encouraging trade and attempting to open the port of Suez to European shipping. However, there is no evidence that this early trend impacted favourably on the Jewish population. On the contrary, the Syrian Christians had managed to displace Jews from their traditional positions as customs officials and tax farmers. Furthermore, in order to subsidise his wars against the Sultan, Ali-Bey is said to have levied heavy contributions on the Jews, a measure that would have severely affected an already disadvantaged Jewish community (Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayid Marsot, Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali, 1984, pp.5-12).

By the end of the eighteenth century, Egypt stood ravaged by internecine wars between the local Mamluk rulers, trying to throw off the yoke of the Ottoman Sultan. Inefficiency and disorder were widespread and the country was plunged into anarchy. From about 1780, the quasi-permanent state of civil war led to a severe financial crisis. Epidemics and famine were decimating an already destitute general population. Economically and culturally, Egypt was in a state of total degradation. Various sources mention a depleted Jewish community of about six or seven thousand, subjected 'to the whim of the local rulers, who maltreated them and confiscated their property' (Marsot, p.18). For the most part, the Jews lived in extreme poverty, confined to restricted quarters, working as small artisans, pawnbrokers and moneychangers. From the above picture, one can conclude that, until the modern era, Egyptian Jewry experienced cycles of golden and dark ages, of prosperity and decline, of honour and degradation. These cycles were repeated under every known ruler, whether Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Ottoman or Mamluk. The Jewish condition often mirrored the general political, economic and social situation prevalent at the time. The relationship between the Jews and 'the other' was mostly one of symbiosis, although on a different plane. In spite of the numerous vicissitudes it endured, the community succeeded in maintaining its Jewishness while espousing outward signs of the dominant culture. Under medieval Islam, in a society that was mainly defined by religion, Jews remained marginalised as dhimmis, protected but nevertheless second-class citizens, alienated from mainstream society but at the same time strengthened in their identity as Jews.

5. The Modern Period - The French Expedition of 1798-1801 and Muhammed Ali

This was the situation Napoleon Bonaparte was confronted with when he landed in Egypt in 1798, wearing the mantle of liberator of the oppressed. The French invasion has traditionally been viewed by historians as the catalyst that first exposed Egypt to modernity and Western influence. Although the motivation behind it was obviously Franco-British rivalry and the desire to impact on Britain's trade with India, the new France needed to invoke a much more noble ideal to justify its occupation of Egypt, namely the republican ideal of a mission civilisatrice and régénératrice. In fact, an array of scientists – 167 altogether – had joined the French army of 54,000 men embarking from the port of Toulon on the 19 May 1798. They included orientalist scholars, engineers, administrators, mathematicians, zoologists, astronomers, draughtsmen, architects, printers, interpreters, health officers and even musicians.

The French forces landed in Alexandria with great fanfare, after succeeding to escape British naval surveillance. In spite of an initial military victory against the Mamluks at the Pyramids, the entire French fleet was destroyed by the British at the bay of Aboukir on the 1 August 1798 and the whole of the French army was left stranded in Egypt. A year later, because of the urgency of the political situation back in France, Napoleon was forced to flee the country secretly, leaving behind the bulk of his forces, under the command of General Kléber. The new commander tried in vain to negotiate with the Ottomans and the British an honourable repatriation of his men. His successor, General Jacques Menou, a French convert to Islam and an able administrator, attempted to focus on some of the early objectives of the Expedition, such as instituting land and tax reforms. However, his plans did not come to fruition due to the surrender of the French forces after the Anglo-Ottoman invasion of 1801. He ended up overseeing the evacuation of the humiliated French troops on board British ships as well as the confiscation by the British of most of the treasures gathered by the French scientists. Amongst those treasures, was the famous Rosetta Stone which later proved to be the key to the deciphering of the hieroglyphs.

In spite of the military debacle, the French scholars and scientists pursued their avowed task of discovering Egypt and revealing it to Europe, while bringing Western savoir-faire and civilisation to what they considered a backward part of the world. Their achievements were numerous. The French were responsible for introducing in the Middle East the first Arabic and French printing press. The Institut d'Égypte was created in August 1798, modelled on the famous Institut de France. This is where the embryo of the encyclopaedic work *Description de l'Égypte*, was born. It was published in 1809. Undeniably, the most important French contribution was in the field of archaeology with the deciphering of the hieroglyphs by the orientalist Jean-François Champollion in 1822.

From the British perspective, analysts seem to agree that in spite of the utter military failure of the French Expedition, it had far reaching consequences both for the future of Egypt and for the penetration of European influence and trade in that part of the world. The British historian, Henry Dodwell stated that 'French occupation of Egypt came to an inglorious end. But it had been far from fruitless. It had shaken Mamluk power; it had fully awakened English minds to the strategic importance of a country placed midway between East and West; it had illustrated Turkish incompetence; and incidentally it had brought to Egypt an Albanian adventurer, Muhammed Ali' (H. Dodwell, *The Founder of Modern Egypt*, 1977, pp.9-21). This so-called Albanian adventurer, who first set foot in Egypt in 1801 with the Anglo-Ottoman expeditionary forces and who had 'no cultural identity other than the Ottoman one', ended up ruling the country and founding a dynasty that would endure until 1952.

As far as Egyptian Jews were concerned, their first contact with modernity embodied by the French invaders was not altogether positive. In his usual autocratic way, Bonaparte ordered them to organise themselves on the same basis as the Jews of France, and form an institution called the Consistoire, headed by two rabbis (Grands Prêtres de la Nation Juive) and seven Councillors (Conseillers). This body would be responsible for the whole of the Jewish community, in case of any disturbance or reprehensible behaviour. There is no evidence that this order was followed after Bonaparte's departure. One document, dated 17th September 1854, written in Arabic, outlines the statutes of the Alexandria Jewish Community and they do not appear to follow the Napoleon model (Jacob Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth Century Egypt*, 1969, pp.161-5).

Bonaparte is also reputed to have ruthlessly bombarded a synagogue that stood on the present site of the Eliahou Hannavi Synagogue in Alexandria, on the pretext that it was obstructing the operation of his cannons. The real reason is thought to have been one of retaliation for the non-payment of a heavy monetary imposition on an impecunious Jewish community. However, in spite of the victimisation of Egyptian Jews by the French invaders at the time, and in view of the privileged role French culture has played in Egypt from thereon, especially vis-à-vis the minorities, it is clear that the French expedition, albeit indirectly, deeply affected the future destinies of Egyptian Jewry.

Muhammed Ali's reign over Egypt spanned nearly half a century, from 1805 to 1849 and proved crucial for the development of the country. During the first years of his rule, he established his authority by ruthlessly eliminating any opposition and massacring his sworn enemies, the Mamluk beys. He was then free to fully occupy himself with his plans of modernising Egypt's socio-economic base. According to the historian Al-Sayyid Marsot, he firmly believed 'in the value of specialists. He searched them out, learned from them and made use of that knowledge.' Where did he find them? Firstly amongst ethno-religious minority groups such as the Armenians who served as 'translators, interpreters and high officials in the bureaucracy' or the Syrian Christians, regarded as experts at tax levying and astute merchants. However, it was mostly towards France that Muhammed Ali turned for financial and technical expertise to help him realise his ambitious plans of administrative and economic reforms. From as early as 1805, the French had recognised that he was the only possible ruler for Egypt and their local agents cultivated privileged relations with the Pasha. He used the skills of the French technocrats who had come to Egypt with the French army and others, mainly Saint-Simonists 'who flocked to Egypt in search of jobs when Napoleon's Empire collapsed and the army disbanded.' (Marsot, p.77) For instance, in 1825, in an effort to raise the dismal standard of public health, Muhammed Ali sought the services of a French physician, Antoine Barthélemy Clot, who became known as Clot-Bey and set out to establish a military hospital in conjunction with a medical school. It was the first time that the study of a language other than Arabic - in this case French - had been introduced as part of the official curriculum of a government institution.

The Pasha's reforms also targeted the military, in view of his obvious need for a strong army. By enrolling the services of French and British officers, he transformed his troops from an unruly and potentially dangerous amalgamation of mercenaries and foreigners, into a more professional army 'following European discipline, formed on the European mode of organisation' (J-J. Luthi, *Introduction à la littérature d'expression française en Égypte*, 1974, p.40). He instituted a new order of practice called *nizam jadid* and established barracks, training camps and training schools for military cadres. From 1844 to 1849, Egyptian students from the social elite were sent to a school in Paris, set up by the Egyptian

government and run by the French Ministry of War, where the motto was order and obedience. Egypt became the first province of the Ottoman Empire to have an army trained and organised along these lines. The objective of Muhammed Ali was obviously not only to train the bodies of his subjects but also to shape their minds into a Western mould.

In the domain of public administration, Muhammed Ali again did not hesitate to send to France, at his expense, a number of handpicked young Egyptians to be trained in that field. His ultimate aim was to displace the Turks who had a monopoly on that sector of government. In addition, a number of technical schools were created locally, under French and Italian initiative and Egypt was reputed to have been 'the first oriental country in which anything like a regular system of westernised education was established' (Dodwell, pp.238-9).

6. The impact of modernisation on the Jewish population of Egypt

Eventually and inevitably, the wide programs of reform and westernisation instituted by the Egyptian ruler impacted very significantly and very favourably on indigenous non-Muslim minorities. However, as far as the Jews were concerned, their lot did not improve dramatically during the early part of Muhammed Ali's reign, although the new laws protected them better than under the previous administration. Contemporary observers such as Edward William Lane, who has written extensively on that period of Egyptian history, confirmed the oppression Jews were still subjected to and how both Muslims and Copts hated them and treated them with great contempt. Lane reported they were still bearing the burden of the Jizya tax – which was only abolished in 1855 - plus a community tax, in addition to the other heavy taxes imposed on the general population. Jews could still be 'arbitrarily arrested and only released upon payment of a heavy fine', which explains why they were apparently very careful not to show any exterior sign of wealth (Landau, 1969, pp.148-50).

Nevertheless, most Jews remained very devout although apparently undistinguishable from the rest of the indigenous population, apart from the colour of their turbans. Depending on their socio-economic status, they worked either as hawkers, small traders, artisans and shopkeepers or as moneychangers – saraf - and general merchants. As with all dhimmi communities, the division between Jews and other ethnic groups was drawn on religious lines and they lived segregated and alienated from the Muslim majority.

The Jewish community of those days consisted mainly of two religious groups: a minority of Karaites who only accepted the authority of the Written Law , and a majority of Sephardi Rabbanites, who followed both traditions, the Oral and the Written Law. Their exact number in the first half of the nineteenth century is very difficult to ascertain, as there were no censuses taken at the time. From local accounts or those made by travellers, it is assumed to hover around six or seven thousand. The Karaites had been living in Egypt for over 1,000 years and except for their religious practices, most of them were totally assimilated into the indigenous Egyptian culture. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the Karaites and the Rabbanites lived and functioned separately from one another although their differences were more on issues of religious practices and calendar rather than dogma and faith. However, European colonial penetration and the influx of Jews from Europe 'made the Karaites even less significant than before, compelling them to cooperate ever more intensely with the Rabbanites' (Michael Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, 1992, pp.6-7). A definite rapprochement occurred between the two communities under British rule as a consequence of its policy of recognising only the Sephardi Rabbanite community as the sole representative of all the Jews of Egypt vis-à-vis the authorities, a policy which more or less forced the Karaites under the umbrella of the Rabbanites. As for the Sephardim, they initially came to Egypt in the aftermath of the Christian Reconquista of Muslim Spain and their subsequent expulsion from Spain and Portugal in 1492 and 1497 respectively. They were only marginally integrated in their Muslim context and had retained their particular language - Judeo-Spanish or Ladino – as well as a number of traditions they brought with them from their country of origin. There was also a small group of Ashkenazim who were in Egypt since the sixteenth century and their numbers had been reinforced by the arrival of refugees from the Ukraine, escaping persecution by the Chmielnicki Cossacks in 1648.

The living conditions of the minorities gradually improved as Muhammed Ali's successors continued to display even more partiality to the West, wishing 'to direct the country's economy towards the European world market' (Marsot, 1984, p.256). Their laissez faire policy opened the door to an increasing number of foreign nationals who started to flock to Egypt, set up shop, form colonies and gain influence. They were particularly encouraged by the special status granted to foreigners under the so-called 'Capitulations' regime www.britannica.com/eb/topic-94037/capitulation. Originally intended to protect foreign merchants residing in the Ottoman Empire, this regime had grown to allow all foreign nationals to enjoy special economic and legal privileges. Apart from guaranteeing their lives and property, freedom of religion and exemption from the jizya, it also exempted them from local taxation and placed them under the jurisdiction of their own local consuls and away from the Muslim courts.

Muhammed Ali, with a view of attracting foreign trade and investments, decreed that all outward manifestations of xenophobia towards non-Moslems were to be suppressed. Distinctive clothing and social restrictions were abolished. Foreigners were to be protected as per the spirit of the Capitulations, which was further reinforced by the clout of the Mixed Tribunals set up from 1875. This new institution completely shielded any foreign national from the local powers of law and order. Not only the Egyptian police did not have the right to arrest Europeans, it could not even interfere in any altercations between them and indigenous Egyptians. It is obvious that, for reasons of personal safety, economic privileges and social standing, the status of foreigner became a very desirable commodity and Jews and non-Jews alike sought it very actively.

With Western powers gaining more and more of a foothold in the country, Egypt gradually became a very attractive destination for Greeks, Italians, Syrian, North African and Armenians. According to Jacob Landau's figures, a large proportion of the immigrants were Jewish, coming from the rest of the ailing Ottoman Empire and the Mediterranean basin, upon the outbreak of the Greek-Turkish War in 1821. In 1840, Muhammed Ali had even encouraged such Jews to settle in the country. It is important to realise that at the time, 'the Ottoman authorities did not prevent travel within their empire, and Jews from Iraq and elsewhere emigrated to Egypt to benefit from a government that ruled more leniently than those in other parts of the empire' (Landau, 1969, p.25). The immigrants were coming from places such as Corfu, Salonika, the Aegean archipelago and Italy. The Ashkenazi Jews from Russia, Rumania and Poland also sought refuge in Egypt in their hundreds towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly after the Kishinev pogrom of 1903.

7. The Colonial Period

Underlying all of the above, it was the combination of three crucial elements which transformed Egypt into a new Eldorado and brought Egypt into the international market economy:

- a) the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869
- b) the British occupation of the country in 1882
- c) the development of the cotton industry

The opening of the Suez Canal proved to be critical to the development of modern Egypt as it opened up the country to the world and created fresh opportunities for local and foreign entrepreneurs. The Viceroy Muhammed Said Pasha – son of Muhammed Ali - awarded the construction of the Canal to the French Saint-Simonist engineer, Ferdinand de Lesseps, in 1854. Initially, France had provided about half the capital together with the technical expertise while Egypt contributed the balance plus the necessary manpower. The construction proceeded under conditions described to have been very close to slave labour and is said to have costed the lives of between 100,000 to 125,000 Egyptian workers. The two governments agreed that the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez was to run the Canal for 99 years, after which time its ownership would revert to Egypt. The inauguration of the Canal in 1869 by the Empress Eugenie of France, was a lavish affair, organised on a grand scale by the extravagant Khedive Ismail, and attended by numerous European heads of state as well as the elite of Egyptian society. As part of the celebrations, Ismail undertook a huge building program. Luxurious hotels, such as the Gezira Palace Hotel – still operating today - were built to host the prestigious guests and their retinues. A new road between Cairo and the Pyramids was constructed especially for the visitors. Furthermore, Ismail, who saw himself as a great patron of the arts, announced plans to build a new 850-seat opera theatre in Cairo. He even commissioned Verdi to compose the opera Aida for its opening but, due to various delays, the opera only had its premiere in Cairo in December 1871, in front of a predominantly European audience.

In fact, the Khedive Ismail, a fervent francophile steeped in Western culture, wanted his country to become part of Europe at all costs. Due to his extravagant lifestyle, he squandered Egypt's reserves in the process and was forced to sell all his shares in the Compagnie du Canal to the British in 1875. On the edge of bankruptcy, Egypt was compelled to hand over the control of its treasury to a Franco-British Commission. In 1882, on the pretext of protecting the interests and safety of foreign nationals, British troops landed in Egypt to squash a military rebellion led by Colonel Orabi Pasha. The latter was trying to impose a nationalist government on the Khedive, free from foreign interference under the slogan 'Egypt for the Egyptians'. From then on, Great Britain effectively ruled Egypt until the end of WWII and its presence on Egyptian soil was maintained until the Suez War of 1956. Under the British Protectorate, Egypt entered an era of

political stability and economic growth. The climate of economic liberalism and legal privilege fostered by British rule, while favouring the Egyptian elite, also raised considerably the status of the non-Muslim minorities who 'welcomed with considerable enthusiasm French and British colonial penetration' (Laskier, 1992, p.1).

The third element of the equation was the development of the cotton industry and the introduction towards the end of the nineteenth century, of the finest variety of cotton, the long-staple (i.e. long fiber) cotton. Because Britain needed a regular supply of that particular type of cotton for the textile factories of Manchester and Leeds, and since the American Civil War had interrupted cotton exports from the Confederacy, high demand for that raw material brought Egypt into the world commodity market. Agriculture was transformed, infra-structure widely expanded, and demand for credit and capital soared' (Gudrun Kramer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt*, 1989, p.37). The advent of scientific agriculture and genetic selection enabled many scientists to develop numerous varieties of long staple cotton that attracted high demand in Europe. Egyptian revenue from cotton rose dramatically and by 1914, cotton exports accounted for ninety-two percent of the total export sector. In Alexandria alone, out of some forty-five cotton export companies, twenty-five of them belonged to Jews (Maurice Mizrahi, *L'Egypte et ses Juifs - Le Temps Révolu*, 1970, p.74).

At the same time, political and social upheavals occurring in different parts of the Jewish world were impacting on the ethnic make-up of Egyptian Jewry. Widespread pogroms and persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe and Morocco in the second half of the nineteenth century had already brought to Egypt a significant number of refugees in need of asylum. Additionally, between 1914 and 1916, on the pretext that they were enemy subjects, 'over eleven thousand Ashkenazi Jews expelled from Palestine by Jemal Pasha, the Ottoman commander of Syria and Palestine, fled to Alexandria, Cairo and Suez' (Laskier, 1992, p.7). The number of Jews in Egypt reached thirty thousand by 1882 and doubled by 1918. The last census conducted by the British in 1947 indicated a Jewish population of about seventy to seventy-five thousand, which constituted 0.4% of a global Egyptian population of nineteen million. Laskier's study found that 'there were approximately six thousand Ashkenazim, at least thirty-five hundred Karaites, and ten thousand indigenous Jews, the rest being Orientals and Sephardim who were recent emigrants, or their descendants.'

The newcomers' diverse ethnic backgrounds dramatically altered the face of the indigenous Jewish community, which emerged as a multicultural and multilingual mosaic. The Karaites spoke Egyptian Arabic whereas immigrants from the other Arab countries spoke their own Arabic dialect. Both those groups were therefore comfortable with the Arab culture, and lived apart from other Jews from different ethnic origins. The rapprochement occurred gradually, as mentioned earlier, as a result of outside forces and from the internal dynamics of the Jewish community.

The Sephardim conversed in Ladino but were also familiar with French, Italian, Turkish, and Greek. They constituted the majority group and it is from their ranks that the social elite of Egyptian Jewry rose to occupy all the leadership positions until 1956. The Greek Jews or Romaniot spoke Greek (some spoke Corfiote, a mixture of Greek, Italian and Hebrew); the Italian Jews spoke Italian and the Ashkenazim spoke Yiddish, Polish and Russian. After World War I, most Jews gradually adopted European languages – first Italian and then French - to communicate between themselves and with other minority groups. English was used in some middle and upper class families only in business and on official occasions. Even the Jewish communal records were kept first in Italian and then in French. Arabic remained the language of the poor and uneducated Jews. For most non-Muslim minorities, a basic knowledge of colloquial Egyptian Arabic was sufficient to get by in everyday situations. This Levantine cosmopolitanism was widely practised and served the Jews well up to the end of 1947.

The Issue of Nationality

Traditionally, the Jews living in Egypt had always been defined by their religion rather than their ethnic origin. In the new 'world order' ushered in by Muhammed Ali's reforms and the protection they afforded European nationals, they saw the possibility to forge a better future for themselves by acquiring a foreign national identity. After having been subjected for generations to the inferior status of dhimmis and the various restrictions it entailed, they suddenly found the way of ensuring their physical and financial security while promoting their social and economic advancement. They still suffered periodically from blood libel accusations or attacks from sections of the Greek or Muslim population. By adopting the citizenship of countries such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy, France and to some extent, Great Britain, the Jews of Egypt could enjoy the privileges of the Capitulations and the protection of the Mixed Tribunals. In view of the fact that the distribution of the judges' posts in the Tribunals was done on a pro-rata basis, depending on the size of the foreign colonies, the countries concerned were often more than willing to offer their protection and grant their nationality.

Great Britain, being the dominant power in the country, was more selective than others. Only families originally from Gibraltar, Malta or Cyprus were considered eligible. Furthermore the British granted passports sparingly to leading Jewish families, who could serve them politically. On the other hand, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, France and Italy, keen to inflate the size of their respective colonies, acceded to the demand of protection more readily. In fact, on the basis of the Crémieux Law of 1870, the French welcomed into their ranks any Jew that could prove even a loose Algerian descent. The French Prime Minister went as far as declaring in 1930 that the 'Jewish community is one of the most important and most French groups in Egypt; a possible reduction in our influence on them could not leave the government indifferent' (Kramer, 1989, p.32). Italian citizenship was also relatively easy to obtain, especially if one was prepared to pay for it. The fact that all the municipal records of the town of Livorno had been destroyed in a fire at the end of the nineteenth century significantly facilitated the procedure. In fact, 'there was hardly a prominent Jewish family in Egypt whose head was not a foreign national' (Landau, 1969, p.21). Prestigious families such as the Suarez and the Mosseri were Italian subjects while the Cattawi and the Menasce were Austro-Hungarian. Some were even granted titles of nobility for services rendered to foreign legations such as the Baron de Menasce. The ambiguity of their official foreign status did not prevent those Jews from considering themselves as an integral part of Egypt.

Nevertheless, only about twenty-five percent of the Jews of Egypt held a foreign nationality. Over forty percent were stateless or *sujets locaux* and twenty-five to thirty percent were Egyptian subjects. In spite of the reality of those figures, the issue of nationality eventually led to the stigmatisation of the whole of Egyptian Jewry as a foreign and alien element in the rising nationalistic and pan-Arabist discourse of the 1950s.

8. Education

With the longing for a foreign national identity came the longing for Western culture and its perceived superiority over the local culture. In the prevailing climate of westernisation, from 1840 onwards, the Egyptian authorities had encouraged the establishment of foreign language and missionary schools. Elite schools, founded by foreign nationals for their respective colonies, provided Western style education to whoever could afford it. From 1844, in Alexandria and later on in Cairo and some provincial towns, Christian religious schools for boys run by French missionaries were dispensing an excellent education both in French and Arabic. In 1845, the nuns belonging to the Mission des Sœurs de Saint-Vincent de Paul undertook girls' education, the language of tuition being mostly French and Italian. Upper and middle-class Jews from Alexandria and Cairo began sending their children to French, British, German or American missionary schools. Until then, Jewish boys had traditionally been educated in the *heder*, a religious elementary school, whereas girls were not given any formal education.

From 1854 onwards, free Jewish community schools were established in Alexandria to provide a more modern education to the underprivileged, thanks to the concerted efforts of a number of prominent families such as the Aghions and the de Menasces. The syllabus of the Aghion schools – as they were popularly referred to – included the teaching of Hebrew, Arabic, French and Italian simultaneously. Girls were also catered for in those schools. Their language of instruction was at first Italian because of its popularity amongst the Jewish community and later switched to French when the latter displaced the former as the *lingua franca* of the community.

For the Jewish urban middle and upper class who could afford school fees but resented the missionary activities of some Christian schools, the new French schools known as *Lycées de la Mission Laïque française* - sponsored by the French government - offered an excellent secular education, complete from kindergarden to matriculation or *baccalauréat* in both Alexandria and Cairo. Furthermore, a Jewish primary and secondary dayschool called *Lycée de l'Union Juive pour l'Enseignement* provided a non sectarian education, along the lines of the French secular schools. It was established in 1925, under the stimulus of a prestigious member of the B'nei Brith Lodge of Alexandria, Maître Félix Benzakein, together with the philanthropist, Baron Alfred de Menasce, both outraged by the latest blood libel accusation emanating from a Catholic school in Alexandria. It seems that a priest of the College Sainte Catherine in Alexandria, Brother Léonce, in the course of his Easter sermon, had accused the Jews of killing Christian children at the time of Passover, according to the so-called Jewish tradition of mixing the blood of a Christian child to unleavened bread.

On the other hand, with British rule, English had become the language of power and its teaching was promoted as the ultimate key to Western culture, both in government and private schools. Anxious to ensure an even better future for

their children, some Anglophile Jewish families enrolled them at prestigious British private schools such as Victoria College, where they sat on the same benches as Egypt's elite. This elite included members of Egypt's royal family, personalities such as the future King Hussein of Jordan, as well as members of upper crust Egyptian society.

However, in spite of the prestige associated with English culture, especially amongst the minorities, English never succeeded in dislodging French as the preferred language of the Westernised urban centres of Egypt. It is important to remember that until the late 1950s, French remained the second official language of Egypt after Arabic. A good knowledge of French was essential in the legal, professional and business sectors as well as in all social situations. It was also the nominated language at the Mixed Tribunals, which followed the Napoleonic Code. The result was an unusual situation whereas, within an Oriental milieu, a major section of the more or less educated population communicated in a foreign language such as French, at different degrees of proficiency, across the barriers of ethnicity, religion and nationality.

For the Jewish community, the desire to acquire French culture did not rise solely from within. It was reinforced from without, through the action of the Jews of France, imbued with the principle of the superiority of Western civilisation. Their aim was to educate and 'regenerate' their Eastern brethren by promoting French culture which would usher them into modernity. The Jews of the Middle East had captured the attention of French Jewry on the occasion of the so-called Damascus affair of 1840, a blood libel accusation levelled against the Jewish community of that town. The leaders of the community had been arrested and tortured into confessing their alleged crime. Adolphe Crémieux, the French Jewish leader and statesman together with the great British philanthropist, Sir Moses Montefiore, came on a mission to Egypt to meet with Muhammed Ali, then ruler of Syria, and successfully pleaded for the release of the prisoners and their full exoneration.

During that visit, Crémieux had been appalled by the state of Jewish education, and appealed to Egyptian and French Jewry to help establish a boys and girls school in Cairo and later in Alexandria. Due mainly to lack of funds, those schools were closed two years later. However this endeavour was not to be a total failure. Not only did it motivate local Jewish philanthropists, as mentioned earlier, to establish more community and vocational training schools in Alexandria and Cairo, it also paved the way for the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) to come to Egypt in 1868 and open up new schools in the cities and the countryside.

It is well known that the AIU's mission civilisatrice was to bring French culture to the uneducated Jewish masses in the Middle East and North Africa. The Alliance had already been instrumental in bringing French education to the Jews of Algeria who had come under French rule in 1830. In Egypt, the situation was different and the decision to open AIU schools was apparently taken 'to halt the flow of Jewish children to non-Jewish and, in many cases, to Christian missionary schools...(as these) schools tried to convert their Jewish pupils' (Landau, 1969, pp. 86-91). As late as 1911, the AIU was still reporting to its central office in Paris antisemitic incidents such as blood libel accusations in Alexandria, in the village of Damanhur and in Port-Said. However, the Jewish community possessed enough clout with the local authorities to obtain justice in nearly every case. In 1919, the AIU considered its mission accomplished and transferred back to the community all its schools of Cairo and Alexandria except for one in the small town of Tantah, that continued to function until World War II. By 1947, the rate of literacy reached by the Jews of Egypt was as high as 82.2% overall, with a gap between males at 89.7% and females at 75.9%.

Until 1945, all these various scholastic institutions operated independently of local government interference and could, therefore, establish their own curriculum and pursue their own priorities. The type of education promoted by these foreign institutions, whether French or English, Jewish or Christian, secular or religious, was fundamental in the shaping of a new generation of Jewish and Christian Egyptian-born young men and women. The privileged ones had even attended foreign universities whether in France, Britain or Italy and then returned home to practise their chosen profession.

That up-and-coming generation, proficient in many languages except maybe in formal Arabic, steeped in Western culture, equipped with Western values, inevitably looked at the world through Western eyes. As a consequence, it experienced a growing sense of alienation from its Middle Eastern background. Furthermore, in the atmosphere of relative liberalism prevalent in the interwar period, young Jews were exposed to other ideologies such as socialism,

communism and Zionism. Some even joined the Egyptian Communist Party, which was illegal at the time. They started to distance themselves from the strict religious observance of their parents, while still retaining a strong Jewish identity. Nevertheless, all Jewish festivals were still scrupulously observed by most of the Jewish community and the consequences of it were often felt in the non-Jewish world. For instance, on Jewish festivals, the Stock Exchange was closed, in addition to the numerous Jewish owned businesses and department stores.

9. The Jews of Egypt and the Liberal Age

At the beginning of WWI, in 1914, the British had declared Egypt a British Protectorate, thereby ending officially Ottoman suzerainty over Egypt. In 1918, a group of Egyptian politicians led by the nationalist Saad Zaghloul (1860-1927), formed a delegation or Wafd, wishing to represent the national aspirations of the Egyptian people at the Versailles Peace Conference. The Wafd advocated a secular concept of a liberal territorial nationalism. Their subsequent arrest and deportation to Malta by the British led to a national uprising of 1919 which forced the British to liberate Saad Zaghloul and his companions. In 1922, in reaction to a growing resentment against British occupation, Britain finally granted Egypt a quasi-independence and the Sultan Fouad (1922-1936) became king of Egypt. The later Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of Alliance of 1936 secured more concessions from the British but did not put an end to their presence on Egyptian soil. Britain retained much of its influence on Egyptian politics and the national aspirations of the various Egyptian interest groups remained to be fulfilled. On the economic front, a 'rising class of Egyptian entrepreneurs was gradually forced to abandon the aim of full independence as they entered into ever closer cooperation with the foreigners and minorities dominating the local economy' (Kramer, 1989, p. 119 & p.122). Nationalism continued to be the major preoccupation of Egypt's political scene during the interwar period.

By then, Egyptian Jewry had reached an extremely privileged social and economic rank. Symptomatic of the new conjuncture arising from European domination, a solid Jewish upper-mobile middle class was emerging, entering the workforce in great numbers to fill the new administrative positions as clerks and bank employees. Jews were also very prominent in the textile trade and the free professions of law, medicine and journalism. The more fortunate ones were engaged in banking, industry, export and property development, and left the traditional neighbourhoods for more exclusive suburbs in Cairo and Alexandria. The new national bank, Bank Misr, established in 1920 in an attempt to create an independent banking system and industry, had amongst its founders, two prominent Jews of Egyptian nationality, Joseph Aslan Cattaoui and Joseph Cicurel. Thanks to the generosity of its more affluent members, the Jewish community was able to establish its own institutions which, apart from the various schools already mentioned, included hospitals, retirements homes, and shelters for the underprivileged.

On the political front, a small number of Egyptian Jews were attracted to the Egyptian nationalist movement, because of its declared 'principle of national unity over and above all ethnic and religious boundaries' and were represented in the various parliamentary institutions. The heads of the leading Jewish families enjoyed very close relations with the King Fouad and the royal family. In 1925, the president of the Jewish community of Cairo, Joseph Aslan Cattawi Pacha, was named Minister of Finance then Minister of Communications. He was appointed to the Senate in 1927. His wife held the prestigious post of chief lady-in-waiting to the Queen Nazli, wife of King Fouad. Writers such as Maurice Mizrahi and Samir W. Raafat, who wrote from different perspectives, seem to agree on the substantial contribution of 'Egypt's leading Jewish families in the development of the sugar and textile industries, the banking system, railway lines, public utilities, international trade and housing projects.' (www.sephardicstudies.org/contributions-jews-egypt.html).

However, in the context of an emerging independent Egypt, the issue of nationality took on a new dimension. New questions were raised, such as who is and who is not an Egyptian national, essentially meaning who belongs and who does not. Initially, the decree law number 19 of 1929 very liberally recognised as Egyptian nationals:

- a) all those whose families had resided in the country without interruption since 1 January 1848 [the proof of which, however, was very difficult to provide given the absence of proper registration]
- b) those former subjects of the Ottoman empire who made their "habitual residence" in Egypt on 5 November 1914 and had stayed there since.
- c) children of foreigners, born and residing in Egypt, provided they gave up their foreign citizenship and anybody who had resided in the country for ten years, knew Arabic adequately and had no criminal record.

The scene seemed to be set for Jews to be counted as equal citizens of the modern state of Egypt. Again opposing forces were at play and as always, the reality on the ground was different from well-meaning high principles. On the one hand, most of the Jews did not react immediately to the offer of Egyptian citizenship. The reason for their reticence could have been apathy or convenience. Most upper and middle-class Jews, like other minorities, still preferred to retain the special privileges of a foreign passport.

Another possible reason for that reticence was probably economically based. For disadvantaged groups, 'the fee of five Egyptian pounds that had to be paid in order to obtain a certificate attesting to their new nationality was an inhibiting factor' in itself (Laskier, 1992, p.9). Besides, in those days, such a certificate would not have been considered essential since Jews were still living under the control of their autonomous communal courts as far as their personal status was concerned. The regime of religious autonomy applied to all religious communities in Egypt, including the majority Muslim population, based on the Ottoman millet system. The Muslim Shari'a courts fulfilled the same functions for their coreligionists as the rabbinical tribunals, similarly free of state intervention until their closure by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1955.

The 1937 Treaty of Montreux between Egypt and the capitulatory powers stipulated the end of the Capitulations regime and the abolition of the Mixed Courts to take effect from 1949, constitutes a watershed for Egyptian Jewry. This is when the balance of power started to shift. The foreign protections were being phased out while the process of Egyptianisation was intensified. Egyptian nationality became essential for employment in banking and for any business dealings with government institutions. At the same time, the Egyptian administration was gradually making it exceedingly difficult for non-Muslims and especially Jews to gain citizenship. The reason is generally attributed to the rise of an Arab/Islamic type of nationalism. There were several cases of Jews who complied with the new laws and renounced their foreign nationality in view of naturalisation but were ultimately rejected. This was especially true for the poorer and less educated Egyptian Jews, even though in principle, they were legally eligible. For the most part, this particular group remained stateless.

10. Recapitulation

It has been demonstrated how culturally, socially and ethnically diverse the Egyptian Jewish community was in its golden age. In the nineteenth century there were several communities living in the Delta region and Upper Egypt, away from the two main metropolis. From the beginning of the twentieth century, Egyptian Jews had become more and more urbanised and concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria, the centres of economic and administrative activities. The level of their religious observance was, for the most part, inversely proportionate to their socio-economic status and access to western style education. The perpetuated Ottoman regime of the millet regulated their communal lives, their lay leaders being their sole representative vis-à-vis the government and their rabbis solely engaged in religious duties. Most of the time, Egyptian Jews used the languages of power, English and French and sent their children to European schools if they could afford it. The issue of foreign nationality has also been raised to explain why about one quarter of the Jewish population had managed to obtain Egyptian citizenship whereas another quarter held foreign passports and the rest were stateless. In the early days of a secular brand of territorial nationalism and under the protection of the British, Egyptian Jewry had strived and attained great heights in the socio-economic sphere as well as in the political arena. Apart from a few blood libels accusations, the relationship with the dominant Muslim and Coptic majority was generally harmonious, especially between members of the upper echelons of society. Furthermore, the acquisition and wholesale adoption of foreign culture reinforced the privileged status of the Jews, while at the same time multiplying the degrees of separation between them and the Egyptian culture and milieu. This is where the Jews stood before 1937, at their apex, astonishingly comfortable in their multicoloured coat, their eyes turned towards the West but their feet firmly planted in the East.

The Decline and Eventual Demise of Egyptian Jewry (1937-1967)

1. Response to Rising Arab Nationalism

With the benefit of hindsight, if one were to pinpoint the start of the downhill process for Egyptian Jewry, it would have to be the period from the late 1930s onwards, even if that process was imperceptible to the people concerned. The chain of events that were put into motion at that time gathered their own speed, which could only signify the end of the road for the Jews of Egypt, long before the end actually happened. Notwithstanding measures such as the abrogation of the Capitulations at the Montreux Convention of 1937 and the planned closure of the Mixed Courts in 1949, new elements were being keyed into the emerging political picture. Ideologies such as pan-Arabic nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, Communism, political Zionism and Fascism were all fighting for a significant place under the Middle Eastern sun. Egyptian Jewry was fundamentally affected by the clashing agendas of those rising ideologies, as history has demonstrated. How did the Jews of Egypt respond, when confronted with new challenges? How did the evolving political climate impact upon them and were they actors or merely 'extras' in the chain of the events that brought about their final demise?

The main concern of the nationalist leaders of 1919 was to abolish British rule and to create a sovereign Egyptian state, free from foreign control and influence. The emphasis being on unity irrespective of religion or ethnicity, leading members of the Jewish community such as Yusuf Cicurel Bey and Yusuf Aslan Cattaoui Pasha, like many of their

Muslim and Coptic compatriots identified with and supported the Egyptian nationalist movement, (Krämer, 1989 and Bein, 1998). Reciprocally, the dominant trend among literate liberal Egyptians was to regard Egyptian Jews as 'full members of the nation'. Some prominent Jewish figures such as the journalist Leon Castro and Maître Felix Benzakein did not see any contradiction in equally supporting both the Egyptian nationalist movement and the Zionist movement. In those early days, the national struggle overrode any involvement in foreign affairs including the Palestinian conflict and the British were perceived as the common obstacle to the fulfilment of both nationalist dreams.

By the late 1930's, the limited character of national independence achieved in 1922 was increasingly eroding the secular and strictly territorial concept of nationalism, promoted by those early liberal nationalists. This erosion was the consequence of a number of underlying factors both from within, such as the considerable power still exerted by the British in collusion with the monarchy, and from without, such as the intensifying Arab-Zionist conflict in Palestine and the rise of Fascism and Communism in Europe.

The combination of all these elements led to the rearticulation of a more militant and more xenophobic form of nationalism embracing an exclusively Arab-Islamic worldview. New players, such as paramilitary youth groups and Islamic movements appeared on Egypt's political stage in opposition to the traditional power triangle of the monarchy, the British and the Wafd party. The radical Society of the Muslim Brothers, founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, gradually overshadowed other Islamic groups and developed into a major political force. The Muslim Brothers believed in a fundamentalist view of Islam as the basis and guide for all aspects of life. They 'did not see national liberation as an end in itself, but only as a first step on the way to the restoration of the Islamic umma (nation) transcending all boundaries of nation, state and ethnicity' (Kramer, 1989, pp.141-2). Therefore, they embraced and promoted the Palestinian cause as a Muslim and Arab cause. On the home front, they were also highly critical of what they considered a corrupt political establishment and were actively pushing for economic and social reforms. Their stand gained them widespread respect and popularity among the urban lower and middle classes. This brand of nationalism, based on the restoration of an ideal Islamic society and on a deep hatred of the British occupiers and their lackeys, was advocating a new political reality. Both the Muslim Brothers and the paramilitary movement 'Young Egypt' or Misr-al-Fatat excluded Jews from membership either because they were not Muslims or because they did not consider them 'real Egyptians'. By definition, the make-up of the new Egypt as they saw it, would provide fewer chances of integration and participation for non-Muslim minorities, particularly the Jewish one.

2. Impact of the Palestinian Conflict

After King Fuad's death on 28 April 1936, the advent to the throne of his sixteen-year old son, Faruk (1921-1965), was perceived as a new beginning in Egyptian politics. Firstly, the new Anglo-British Treaty of Alliance of August 1936 granted more independence to Egypt, followed by the Convention of Montreux of May 1937, which signified the end of the privileged regime enjoyed by foreign nationals. Consequently, local minorities lost the protection of the colonial powers and for the first time, Egypt was free to involve itself in foreign affairs. It was inevitable that the growing Palestinian conflict between the Arabs and the Yishuv, resulting with the outbreak of the Arab revolt in 1936, would attract the Egyptian public's attention and ultimately, dramatically affect the status of the local Jewish community. In fact, 'as a result of this growing involvement in the Palestine question, the second half of the 1930s witnessed the first attacks on local Jewry as the fifth column of Zionism' (Kramer, 1989, p.146).

During the Arab revolt of 1936-39, attacks in the Egyptian Islamist and pan-Arab press, were not only anti-Zionist but also vehemently anti-Jewish. These attacks had a very distinct racial flavour, consistent with the Fascist discourse of those days. Led by the Muslim Brothers and the fascist-style group 'Young Egypt', violent student demonstrations broke out in May 1938, against Jewish residents in Cairo, Alexandria and Tanta, and the police had to intervene to protect the threatened Jewish population. Antisemitic publications such as the Arabic translations of Mein Kampf, and The Protocols of the Elders of Zion were distributed at various political gatherings where 'Egyptian Jews were denounced as sympathisers with Zionism, exploiters of the Egyptian masses, and elements dangerous to their host peoples' (Kramer, 1989, p.147).

The leaders of Egyptian Jewry did not underestimate the potential gravity of the situation and reacted by using their extensive network of contacts with the Egyptian hierarchy and foreign diplomats to try and stop the wave of anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish propaganda. On the other hand, as duly pointed out by Kramer, they also pressured the 'local Jewish associations, notably the Zionist ones, to end all overt activities that might cast doubt on the loyalty of the Jewish citizens of the state of Egypt.' The mot d'ordre from the top down was 'to remain as inconspicuous as possible, keeping a low profile in order not to draw attention to the existence of a Jewish minority in the country, let alone a national movement in its midst.'

Not all Egyptian Jews advocated a 'lie-low' attitude in the face of such attacks. The Jewish press and principally the leading pro-Zionist newspaper *Israël*, which appeared in three languages – French, Arabic and Hebrew - not only reported meticulously the events in Palestine but was also very vocal in its criticism of the British Mandatory administration in Palestine and of Palestine's radical Arab leaders. The mere fact that *Israël*'s editorials were allowed to voice their criticism and appeal for solidarity with the Yishuv, is proof enough of the extraordinary freedom of expression Egyptian Jews still enjoyed in the 1930s, as opposed to the strict censorship of the 1950s.

3. Response to Nazism:

Another example of Jewish communal activism manifested itself in 1933 when, in reaction to the Nazi takeover of Germany, the Jewish leaders lobbied extensively to enlist the support of non-Jewish minorities in expressions of protest against German antisemitism. An association of all the Jewish institutions of Egypt created the *Ligue contre l'antisémitisme allemand* to defend itself against pro-Nazi activities on Egyptian soil. It later joined the international branch of that same organisation, *Ligue internationale contre l'antisémitisme* (LICA), with the prominent lawyer and journalist Leon Castro as its vice-president. Its goal was to put pressure on the local press against publishing Nazi

propaganda material as well as to promote the boycott of German goods and films. According to Maurice Mizrahi, during the war years, LICA provided useful information to the Allies about any breaches of the maritime blockade. It was reported that when Fascist Italy declared itself an ally of Germany, a number of prominent Italian Jews in Egypt, who had fought for their country in World War I, returned their passports in protest and wrote outraged open letters to the newspapers. Young members of LICA even formed picket lines to prevent Jews from attending the performances of the visiting Italian Opera Company.

It is important to remember that, at the time, the sympathies of the intellectual and nationalist Egyptian circles were strongly anti-British and by ricochet, pro-Nazi. Furthermore, anti-Jewish propaganda was being promoted by Palestinian-Arab political exiles such as the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Mohammed Amin al Husseini, who was inciting youth groups and university students to carry out anti-Jewish demonstrations.

4. Response to Zionism

Whereas Egyptian Jewry's response to the spread of fascist ideology was unified and decisive, its response to Zionism was much more fragmented. Such response was 'inflected by differences of class, ethnic origin, religious rite, educational formation, political outlook, and personal accident' (Beinin 1998, p.32). Zionist activity in Egypt was no different from what was happening in most other Jewish communities in the Islamic world. At first, it was mainly confined to philanthropic fundraising on behalf of the Keren Kayemet le-Ysra'el (henceforth, the Jewish National Fund) and the Keren Hayesod (henceforth, the Palestine Foundation Fund). After the Balfour Declaration of 1917, 'Zionist federations were created in Cairo and Alexandria as an initiative of Ashkenazi emigrants and several local Sephardim' (Laskier, 1992, p.10). It has been argued that the reason why the Ashkenazis were more involved than their Sephardi counterpart in the Zionist cause was because most of them were relatively recent arrivals in Egypt from Palestine after their expulsion on the eve of World War I. The assumption is that they had not yet formed any deep attachment to their country of residence and never intended to stay on.

During World War II, Zionist activities were stepped up with the arrival of emissaries from Palestine, promoting emigration and youth education through various pioneer youth movements. The movement *he-Halutz ha-Tsa'ir* was founded in Cairo in 1933 and in Alexandria in 1934. The Kibbutz movements *ha-Shomer ha-Tsa'ir* and *B'nei Akiva* were founded in 1932. As indicated by Laskier, 'the Zionist pioneer movements in Egypt enjoyed a legal or semilegal status as "scouting organisations"' until the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the outbreak of hostilities (Laskier, 1992, p.134). Revisionist Zionists also operated in Egypt but were banned after November 1944 when two members of the Revisionist Stern/Lehi Gang assassinated Lord Moyne – the Minister Resident in the Middle East - in Cairo, in protest against British rule in Palestine and the implementation of the White Paper policy.

However, Zionist activism was not predominant in the community and it is true to state that in the interwar period, the Jewish establishment in Egypt displayed a lukewarm reception to Zionism as a political and national movement. Most of the influential economic elite of Egyptian Jewry remained opposed to Zionism for various reasons. Firstly, they did not think the whole issue of a homeland for the Jews concerned them since their own situation in Egypt seemed so secure. It was more of a solution for European Jews, in view of their precarious situation, Nazi persecution, and later the horrors of the Holocaust. Secondly and most importantly, the Jewish leaders did not wish to stir any anti-Jewish feelings or be accused of dual loyalty. They were still hoping for a negotiated settlement of the Palestinian conflict with the Yishuv. It appears there was even a dialogue between Egyptian politicians, Zionist representatives and local Jews during the interwar period and even during World War II, in an effort to mediate in the Arab-Zionist conflict. However, it seems that the British discouraged those initiatives, as they were not prepared 'to welcome an Egyptian role in the search for a comprehensive settlement of the Palestine conflict' (Kramer, 1989, p.153).

5. World War II and its immediate aftermath

At the onset of World War II, from September 1939, the Egyptian government had to honour its obligations under the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of Alliance of 1936, in spite of the secret sympathies of both the King and the nationalist parties for the Axis powers. It imposed strict press censorship and declared a state of siege. On the political level, the British were practically pulling all the strings, controlling the nomination of political and military leaders. Egypt was the regional base for the British army and allied troops. Nevertheless, while the Egyptian government interned or expelled all residing German citizens except German Jews and interned a great number of its Italian citizens, except Italian Jews and known anti-Fascists, it did not formally declare war on the Axis powers until February 1945.

On the other hand, the Jewish community openly sided with the Allies in the looming conflict. Not only did local Jews of British, French and Greek nationality fight with their armies on various fronts but also 'wealthy members of the community donated large sums of money to the British war effort and established clubs for Jewish soldiers in the British army stationed in Egypt. Some Jews collaborated in the Egyptian branch of the France Libre movement led by General de Gaulle' (Kramer, 1989, o.157). Therefore, they felt very threatened in 1942, when the victorious Germans were advancing in North Africa. According to the Jewish Agency reports, thousands fled Alexandria for Cairo and further South. Others tried desperately to obtain entrance visas to places such as Chad, Congo or Syria. By 29 June 1942, cash withdrawal from banks in Alexandria was reported to have exceeded two million pounds. Many Jewish merchants who had invested heavily in merchandise, found themselves trapped, due to shortage of funds. The lower middle class Jews who did not have the financial means to go anywhere, felt even more vulnerable than their more privileged coreligionists. Anxiety subsided only when the British defeated the Germans sixty kilometres from Alexandria, at El-Alamein, in November 1942. It is obvious that the Jewish community as a whole rejoiced in the final victory of the Allies in 1945.

Actually, not everybody in Egypt was rejoicing. The after-effects of the war on Egyptian society were manifold. The many industries and companies that employed 200,000 to 245,000 employees in wartime had to dismiss them when the war ended. As a result, the gap between the privileged and the disadvantaged grew considerably, creating even more resentment against the foreign presence on Egyptian soil and against the privileged supporters of that presence. For Egyptian Jewry, problems rose again towards the end of 1945. On 2 and 3 November 1945, date of the twenty-eight anniversary of the Balfour declaration, a number of Islamic associations called for a general strike. After being harangued by the leader of the Muslim Brothers, near the royal palace of Abdin in Cairo, the demonstrators were so fired up that they marched on the Jewish quarter and attacked bystanders, shops and synagogues. Jewish youth, who had been trained in self-defense in Zionist youth groups, managed to repel their assaults by setting up barricades. However, the rioting and the looting continued and spread to European sections of Cairo and Alexandria. 'Six people were killed, several hundred were injured, and dozens of Jewish, Coptic, and Muslim-owned stores were looted.' The only Ashkenazi synagogue of Cairo was set afire. This was 'the first indication that there might be a popular base in Egypt for militant anti-Zionism spilling over anti-Semitism' and that the riots of 2 and 3 November exposed 'the vulnerability of the Jewish community to the consequences of the conflict over Palestine' (Beinin, 1998, pp.64-5).

6. The Post War Period - Policy of Egyptianisation

As mentioned earlier, the privileged status of the Jewish community had already been weakened by the Montreux Convention of 1937 because of its planned phasing out of all the privileges enjoyed by foreigners and non-Muslim minorities. Furthermore, a deliberate policy of Egyptianisation, long advocated by both nationalists and Islamists, started to be implemented. It inevitably impacted on the business activities of European businessmen and their agents. For instance, from the early 1940s, in an effort to alleviate growing unemployment amongst the highly politicised educated youth, and to counteract the predominant role of foreign languages in business dealings, the use of Arabic was made compulsory. This measure forced the shop owners and businessmen who could not read and write Arabic, since they had been educated in foreign schools, to take on additional Egyptian personnel.

The process of Egyptianisation also targeted the education system in foreign schools where the teaching of Arabic was made compulsory and Egyptian related subjects, such as Egyptian history and geography, were introduced into the curriculum. It is important to remember that, until the Suez War of 1956, 97,000 students were enrolled mainly in French and British elitist schools. As pointed out earlier, until 1945, these various scholastic institutions operated independently of local government interference. After the Suez War of 1956, their importance waned considerably as all private and foreign schools were sequestered by the government and the British and French teachers expelled. By 1960, the number of students had declined by more than half. The subsequent nationalisation of foreign schools led to a sharp drop in the quality of education due to overcrowding and paucity of funds devoted to education by Gamal Abdel Nasser's government.

Another blow to the status of foreign nationals and stateless minorities was the enactment of the Company Law of 29 July 1947. It required all companies and subsidiaries of foreign companies to maintain a staff of Egyptian nationals comprising 75 percent of total salaries and their board of Directors to be 40 percent. The new law also 'obliged all firms concerned to submit detailed lists specifying the nationality and the salary of their employees.' Evidently all these measures were meant to favour Egyptian nationals and applications for naturalisation rose dramatically, especially from a Jewish lower and lower-middle class fearing a massive loss of jobs. However, as previously mentioned, the authorities showed a growing reluctance in dealing with these applications, especially coming from Jews and, 'by 1948-49, hundreds of decisions were still pending, with many applications having already been rejected' (Krämer, 1989, p.207).

7. The 1948 War and its consequences for Egyptian Jewry

Upon the birth of the State of Israel, and the start of hostilities between the new state and its Arab neighbours, the whole Jewish population of Egypt was implicitly implicated. In May 1948, martial law was declared and censorship established. No one, not even foreign nationals, could leave the country without a special exit visa. The official reason was to prevent Jews from flocking to Israel. At the same time, Zionist youth movements were declared illegal and some went underground while the emissaries from Israel fled to avoid being caught. In May 1948, hundreds of Jews were arrested as suspected Zionists or as communists and thrown into prison, the estimated number of Jewish detainees at any one time being 700 to 800. Although hostilities ceased in January 1949 followed by a cease fire agreement between Egypt and Israel on 24 February 1949, there were still 250 Zionist and 60 Jewish communists interned in July 1949, throughout the various detainment centres. Most of the detainees ended up being expelled after a period of incarceration of six to twelve months. Their families were given a few days to settle their affairs in order to be ready to join the prisoners directly on the departing ship. The majority of those departures were bound for Israel, via Europe, with the help of the Jewish Agency and the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee (JDC). It has been estimated that about 16,000 Jews, mostly from the underprivileged class, immigrated to Israel between 1949 and 1951.

In addition, during the summer and autumn of 1948, Jews and their property were attacked repeatedly, in retaliation to the bombing of a Cairo suburb by the Israelis. The main suspects were the Muslim Brothers. It has been suggested that although the authorities did not actually encourage such attacks, they did not wish to undermine their tenuous hold on power by defending the Jewish community against the powerful Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, their response was often inept and disingenuous. Thanks to the prevailing censorship, no mention of excessive violence perpetrated against Jews was allowed to appear in the press.

The enactment of emergency decrees had enabled the Egyptian government to sequester indiscriminately the property of any person or take over the assets of any enterprise deemed prejudicial to the safety and security of the State. Wholesale sequestrations of the assets of prominent Jewish individual and companies, active in vital sectors of the Egyptian economy, were carried out until the spring of 1949.

As an obvious consequence to the arbitrary detentions, sequestrations and attacks to which Egyptian Jewry was subjected, a feeling of insecurity permeated the whole community, from the humble employee to the successful businessman. The Wafd return to power in January 1950 and the lifting of martial law improved somewhat the community's predicament. The sequestration of Jewish assets was halted, most of their possessions were returned, and many Jews were released although only on condition they leave the country immediately. Some interpreted the change as a return to normalcy and were lulled into believing they could resume their comfortable and privileged lives as before. For others, emigration became for the first time a viable option.

Apart from Israel, approximately 6,000 Jews went to Europe or other destinations. Bein's study of the dispersion of Egyptian Jewry, charted the various trends of this population movement. For instance, except for the minority of committed Zionists, the less privileged families tended to go to Israel while the wealthier and more educated ones chose to go elsewhere. The younger members of the community were more inclined to emigrate than the older ones. The Ashkenazim, who were more likely to have connections in Israel or in the West, emigrated more readily than the Sephardim, who had closer ties with Egypt. Some of those trends were replicated in the course of the next exodus of 1956.

As a general rule, the community emerged from that difficult period somewhat diminished in stature and numbers but superficially mended, contrary to the dramatic decline Egyptian Jewry experienced after the 1956 and 1967 wars with Israel. Although their public presence was more subdued, the remaining 50,000 Jews continued to work in their chosen professions and conduct their social and religious activities relatively freely. Jewish community institutions, such as hospitals, schools, sports clubs, functioned normally although the communal schools were placed under close supervision of the Ministry of Public Education.

In spite of the appearance of normality, the signs of alienation were growing between the Jews and the Muslim majority. After 1948 and perhaps even earlier, 'it had become quite difficult for Jews to attend local universities in significant numbers. Very few were accepted in 1949 into the universities of Fuad I and Faruq' (Laskier, 1992, pp.143-44). In addition, the increasing difficulty for Jews in obtaining citizenship papers highlighted the vulnerability of their legal and political status.

In the emerging social and political climate of radical nationalism and fundamentalist Islam, the label 'Egyptians', 'in common or even legal parlance, came to signify in fact Muslims, or possibly Muslims and Copts, to the exclusion of all others.' When the 1947 Company Law was promulgated, it stipulated that 'Egyptians' be given a majority share in large companies, fixing 'the minimum percentage of Egyptian administrative employees at 75 percent, and of Egyptian workers at 90 percent' (Shimon Shamir, *A Mediterranean Society in Modern Times*, 1987, pp.54-5). A great number of stateless and even foreign Jews tried to secure their jobs by applying for Egyptian nationality. It was already too late and 'some forty thousand stateless Jews were declared foreigners' (Shamir, 1987, p.59).

After the 1948 war with Israel, it became practically impossible for Jews to acquire Egyptian citizenship. The first amendment in September 1950 to the 1929 Nationality Law dealing with the withdrawal of Egyptian nationality 'from any person involved in actions in favour of states that were at war with Israel', was clearly aimed at the Jewish minority. The new Nationality Law (No. 392) of 1956 was even more blunt, by specifically excluding Zionists. For most of those holding Egyptian nationality, an automatic denationalisation took place once they applied for an exit visa from Egypt.

8. The Cairo Fire of January 1952

To the nationalists and critics of the regime, the Egyptian defeat of 1948 revealed the rampant incompetence and the extent of corruption among political and military leadership. Furthermore, the struggle against British military presence was intensifying and developed into guerrilla-like warfare in the Canal region. A mass demonstration against the British in reaction to their indiscriminate killing of 40 local policemen in the course of a bloody confrontation in a small Canal town, Ismailia, developed into full-scale rioting. On what has since been labelled 'Black Saturday', 26 January 1952, an enraged and unspecified mob burned and looted, unabated, large parts of modern Cairo. The riots were mainly directed against British, Jewish, Greek and Armenian establishments and also against the ruling elite. It is self-evident that, once more, the local Jews felt targeted and vulnerable as a non-Muslim minority having benefited from British rule and protection. Those who witnessed the rioting, the burning and the brutality of the event, were quite traumatised by its sheer horror. The fire of Cairo was seen as forerunner to the overthrowing of the monarchy by the Free Officers, six months later, on 23 July 1952.

It was only natural for Jews to feel even more insecure under a regime with which they had no social or political connection and vice-versa, in spite of the show of good will towards non-Muslim minorities expressed by Muhammed Naguib, the first president and prime minister. As pointed out by Bein, 'several of the Free Officers had backgrounds in the society of Muslim Brothers or Young Egypt organisations that did not view Jews as authentic Egyptians' and were very embittered by their humiliating defeat at the hands of the new fledgeling state of Israel. Naguib's demise in March

1954, in favour of the hardliner nationalist, Gamal Abd-el-Nasser, marked a further downturn for the Jews, who felt more excluded and alienated. With the deterioration of the economic situation in Egypt from 1953 onwards, the Jewish community position grew even more precarious. Although it is true that most Jews faced no special restrictions, the Egyptian secret police kept a close tab on the activities of several Jews. They were arrested in increasing numbers during the second half of 1954, accused of involvement in both communist and Zionist activities and of plotting against the regime.

9. The Lavon Affair (1954)

Another critical blow to the standing of the whole Jewish community was the 'Lavon Affair', which resulted in the arrest in July 1954 of an underground network of Egyptian Jews, accused of spying on behalf of Israel. Their mission was to launch minor acts of sabotage against British and American institutions, which would be blamed on the religious fundamentalists and/or Egyptian nationalists. The ultimate aim was to discredit Nasser's regime and undermine Egypt's relations with the USA and Britain. According to Beinín, the whole unfortunate affair 'provided an excuse to treat the entire Jewish community as potential subversives' (Beinín, 1998, p.86)

10. The 1956 Suez War and its aftermath

The situation between Egypt and Israel was becoming increasingly volatile and Egyptian Jews were again caught in the middle of the turmoil. The coup de grâce to their security and to their lives as they knew it, was the outbreak of the Suez War in October 1956. In view of the British-French-Israeli concerted attack on Egypt, the Jews were made to bear the brunt of the government's anger. A series of government decrees established a state of siege and strict censorship, allowing expulsion, mass arrests, confiscation of property, sequestration and denaturalisation. Although these measures also affected all French and British nationals and to a lesser extent some other minority communities, the worse hit were obviously the Jews, whether they were citizens, stateless or foreign nationals. The exit visa issued to them upon leaving Egypt, either 'voluntarily' or under expulsion orders, stated emphatically that they would not be permitted to return and that they renounced all claims against Egypt. Beinín found that 'about 1,000 Jews were detained, more than half of them Egyptian citizens. Thirteen thousand French and British citizens were expelled from Egypt in retaliation for the tripartite attack, among them many Jews. In addition, 500 Jews not holding French or British citizenship were expelled. Some 460 Jewish-owned businesses were sequestered. Many Jews lost their jobs. The government nationalised the assets of all British and French citizens, and Jews holding those nationalities were affected in that capacity... When the hostilities were over, Egyptian Jews were subjected to overt pressure to leave Egypt and renounce their citizenship. According to the World Jewish Congress, between November 22, 1956 and March 15, 1957, 14,102 Jews left Egypt... Most of them abandoned the great bulk of their assets in Egypt and came to Israel as impoverished refugees' (Beinín, 1998, p.87). For those who were imprisoned both after the 1948 and the 1956 wars, living conditions inside their camps - which the majority called 'concentration camps' - were just bearable once they overcame the initial shock of being arrested, interrogated, and deprived of their liberty, often without any specific charges brought against them. There were few cases of systematic physical mistreatment, contrary to what happened after the Six-Day War in 1967.

Nevertheless, the Egyptian government seems to have pursued a systematic policy of ridding the country of its Jewish population 'by expulsion and through "voluntary" emigration' (Laskier, 1992, pp.256-7). What was left of Egyptian Jewry was subjected to the usual humiliation, intimidation and harassment techniques not always reported in history books. Entire families were consigned to house arrest and suffered continuous surveillance, false denunciations, or arbitrary midnight visits by the Egyptian Secret Service.

It is, therefore, easy to understand how the combination of official government policy, economic hardship due the loss of jobs and inability to regain employment caused a 'flight hysteria' amongst the Jews, a flight that was later referred to as 'the Second Exodus'. Thousands of people flocked to the offices of the Rabbinate and various consulates and embassies, seeking assistance and means of escape. By 1958, twenty-three to twenty-five thousand Jews had emigrated, 'including six thousand (until June 1957) who left on ships chartered by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)...with funds provided by the United Jewish Appeal'(Laskier, 1992, p.257). The Jewish Agency directed the immigration to Israel via European ports while the United HIAS Service handled the immigration to Brazil, Argentina, the United States, Canada, Australia, and other regions again via European centres of transit.

In the meantime, the dust had started to settle in Egypt by mid-1957, and there was evidence of a certain relaxation of the pressure exerted upon the Jewish community. Some Jews who had been expropriated at the height of the crisis, although they were not British or French, and who were still in the country, had their property returned to them. However, it was all too late for the viability of Jewish communal life in Egypt under such an unstable political climate, deprived of its lay and religious leaders. The emigration of the Jews continued, albeit at a slower pace. The migrants of the later wave were economically better off than the earlier ones and preferred other destinations such as Europe or the Americas rather than Israel, considered to be a harder option. The following years saw a growing degradation of a dramatically shrunken Jewish community. On the eve of the Six-Day War in June 1967, Laskier claimed 2500 Jews were left in Egypt out of the 80,000 living there before 1948. It is important to note that by then, the other religious minorities such as the Greeks, the Armenians, the Lebanese and the Syrians had also been hit hard by various nationalisation decrees, as the Nasser regime seized the assets of some 820 'capitalist reactionaries'. Therefore, they were also feeling excluded and undesirable and were looking for new shores to settle on.

11. The 1967 Six-Day War and its tragic consequences for remaining Jews

The outbreak of the third Arab-Israeli War in June 1967 and the subsequent defeat of the Arab coalition sealed the fate of the few remaining Jews of Egypt. Most of the male Jewish population was rounded up and imprisoned. Some remained incarcerated until May or June 1970. Upon the intervention of the Spanish Embassy that issued them with

Spanish passports, instigated by HIAS, the rest was gradually allowed to leave on condition that they renounce their Egyptian nationality, leave all their assets behind and pledge never to return. Laskier estimated that by the end of July 1970, there were about 300 Jews in Cairo and 250 in Alexandria. These numbers could only have dwindled since then as there is no evidence of any Jews migrating back to Egypt, even after the signing of the peace accord between Israel and Egypt in 1979. One can assume that this era marked the closing chapter of the long and rich history of the Jews of Egypt.

12. The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry

As one can see, in twenty odd years, a vibrant, well established and respected community suffered a complete reversal of fortune. The Jews of Egypt responded with a diversity of voices to the challenges that modernity and its long list of 'isms' brought in its wake, capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, fascism, antisemitism, nationalism, pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, and Zionism. They embraced some and fought for them, rejected others and fought against them but they were indifferent to most. By the 1950s, whether they were Egyptian, foreign nationals or stateless, Zionist or anti-Zionist, orthodox or liberal, Francophone or Arabophone, their status was fatally compromised. In an environment where they were not perceived as 'real Egyptians', they were seen as having actively or passively profited from colonialism. Therefore, they were implicated as agents and collaborators of the hated British and of the Zionists. They were seen as potential enemies of the state and in Joel Beinin's words, they 'were transformed from a national asset into a fifth column overnight.' They were expelled or 'willingly' left their native land as they felt they had no other option. Apart from a privileged few, most of them were unable to take any of their material possessions and left Egypt destitute, with the help of international Jewish charity organisations.

The usual question that has been raised by many historians is whether the creation of the State of Israel was the catalyst in the final demise of the Jewish communities of the Arab world or was this demise inevitable. It is undeniable that Israel was a determining factor in the disintegration of all the Jewish communities of the Arab world but it remains only one of the factors. It is also true that the Jews of Egypt, by distancing themselves from their cultural and national roots, by sending their children to foreign language schools and by preferring French and English to Arabic, had already heavily mortgaged their future in that country. However, the 'inevitability' thesis is just as valid since one cannot deny that even if Jews had remained politically and culturally close to their Middle Eastern milieu, even if the Palestinian conflict had not erupted when it did, one element of the equation remained unchanged. Their primary condition as Jews in an Arab-Muslim world, with nationalism and fundamentalism on the rise, would have sooner or later become untenable. The reality is that, from the late 1930s, the situation on the ground for Jews in Egypt had gradually deteriorated, for a number of internal and external reasons, until they became persona non grata in their own land. Transformed into refugees, they dispersed all over the world, in search of a new home and a fresh start. The point is to understand how the Jews of Egypt navigated in the midst of the political upheavals of the times, by trying to define what made them who they were, as a community and as individuals. A more pertinent question would be: what kind of intellectual, cultural and ethical baggage did they take with them that helped them respond to the difficult challenges of expulsion, exile, separation, immigration, rebuilding, integration, reacculturation and redefinition of self identity?