

Topic of a talk given by Racheline Barda, at the Sydney Jewish Museum, on 10 April 2006, based on her doctorate thesis, ‘The migration experience of the Jews of Egypt to Australia, 1948-1967: a model of acculturation’

THE ‘SECOND’ EXODUS OF THE JEWS OF EGYPT, 1948-1967

Thank you Prof Kwiet for you kind words. I also want to thank everybody at the Jewish Museum, particularly Margaret Gutman for organising this event and for giving me the opportunity to talk to you about the Jews of Egypt and their ‘Second Exodus’.

Since we are in a Holocaust Museum in Sydney Australia, I think it is appropriate to remember that if the Jews of Egypt were spared the horror of the Holocaust, it was thanks to the valour and sacrifice of **Australian soldiers** who, together with the British, New Zealanders and South Africans, pushed back the formidable Rommel and his Africa Korps, at the battle of El Alamein, just 100kms from Alexandria between the 23 October and 4 November 1942. If it wasn’t for those brave soldiers. I would not be here today talking to you about the Jews of Egypt.

It seems that the Germans were so close that they were broadcasting to the Egyptian population, offering them liberation from British rule and asking for their help in identifying the residences of prominent Jews (including my husband’s grandfather who, as an Italian national, had publicly denounced Mussolini’s fascist policies), promising them that Jewish property would be theirs for the picking once the German army was in charge. The Jewish population was panicking. The more privileged Jewish families were loading their cars, ready to flee towards British Sudan or Kenya. Others moved to Cairo to escape the nightly bombardments in Alexandria. The British administration was burning all its records and was also preparing for a retreat towards Sudan. On the 4 November 1942, the Allied victory at El Alamein changed the course of the North African campaign, and the Axis forces were forced to retreat back to Tunisia. It was indeed a

close call for the Jews of Egypt particularly as it has just been revealed that there was a special SS force – the infamous Einsatzgruppen - attached to the Africa Korps whose task was not only to eliminate the Jewish national home in Palestine once Egypt was conquered but also to eliminate the Jews of Egypt.¹

I also want to acknowledge all the people I interviewed for my research. They are the ‘oral historians’ of the Jews of Egypt. Some of them are present here today and some are no longer with us. To all, I say thank you for sharing your experience with me. I feel privileged to have known each and every one of you.

The significance of Pessah for the Jews of Egypt in modern times:

In two days’ time, the Jews all around the world will be celebrating Pesach, the festival of liberation from slavery. We will be commemorating the exodus from Egypt, which was in fact the defining moment when the ancient Hebrew tribes became a nation. Jews, wherever they live, will gather around the table and read the Haggadah where it is said: ‘In every generation each individual is bound to regard himself as if he [or she] personally had gone forth from Egypt’. For the Jews of Egypt in the twenty-first century, Pesach has a very personal connotation. You see, about fifty years ago, these particular Jews have literally ‘gone forth from Egypt’, expelled, pushed out for one reason or another, in fact, forced to undertake a ‘second exodus’. On the eve of the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, they were about 80,000; some sources even say 100,000. In Egypt today, all that is left of that community is literally a handful of individuals, both in Alexandria and Cairo, mostly aged, handicapped and destitute and bound to disappear in the very near future, without any sign of a viable Jewish community being revived. It is the first time in over twenty-five centuries of continuous Jewish presence in Egypt that the Jewish population has been reduced to such an extent.

How did this ‘second exodus’ occur, how long did it take for Egypt to become nearly ‘judenfrei’ and what were the fundamental reasons for their forced emigration, apart from

¹ ‘Beseitigung der jüdisch-nationalen Heimstätte in Palästina’, Davonstadt: WBG, to be published in May 2006 in a special volume, edited by Klaus-Michael Mallman & Martin Cüppers.

the obvious one, i.e. the establishment of the state of Israel? As a member of the last generation of Jews from Egypt, I propose to tell you a little bit about that community and describe to you what it was like to live in Egypt as a Jew before and after 1948, based on my academic research, my personal experience as well as on the oral testimonies of all the Jews of Egypt that I interviewed, in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney as well as France, Britain and the United States.

Make-up of Egyptian Jewry in modern times:

Although the connection between Egypt and the Jews goes back to Biblical times, the majority of modern Egyptian Jewry was the product of recent waves of immigration from the Middle East, the old Ottoman Empire, North Africa, Western and Eastern Europe. In fact, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 that established new trade routes, and the strong presence of two colonial powers, Great Britain and France, Egypt became a country of immigration offering great economic opportunities. It attracted people from different ethnic, religious, and professional background from all over the Mediterranean basin and beyond, including Jews. Since Egypt was technically a province of the Ottoman Empire until 1914, when it became a British Protectorate until 1922, it was relatively easy for its subjects to move from one province to another. British domination from 1882 consolidated a climate of security and political stability that encouraged foreigners to establish themselves in Egypt, create trade links with Europe and develop new industries. They were protected by a preferential regime called the **Capitulations and the Mixed Courts**. This regime ensured that foreign nationals were not subjected to Egyptian legislation in criminal, civil, commercial and fiscal matters and were only accountable to their own courts of law.

The population of Egypt in general (Muslim, Christian and Jewish) was traditionally defined along religious lines. Until 1952, the personal and religious status of Jews was regulated by an autonomous Jewish community, according to the Ottoman system of **the millet** pertaining to non-Muslim minorities (legally protected religious minority).

Most of the Jewish migrants were **Sephardim** (originally from Spain). They came from places such as Istanbul, Smyrna (modern Izmir), Salonika, Aleppo and Damascus. They also came from Morocco where Jews were still suffering from persecution and widespread abuse and lived confined to their mellah.² For instance, my grandparents on my father's side migrated from Morocco and Algeria while on my mother's side, they came from Aleppo in Syria at the beginning of the 20th century.

Egypt also provided a safe haven for hundreds of **Ashkenazi** Jews escaping pogroms and persecution in Russia, Rumania and Poland, particularly after the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, and avoiding military service in the Russian army ('Cantonists').

The Jews from the Greek island of Corfu also found refuge in Egypt, escaping riots from the Greek population after the blood libel accusations of 1898.

Jews were also migrating from Italy and France. I had one case whose family came from Holland, in the 1840s, invited by Mohammed Ali, (the vice-roy of Egypt), because of their financial expertise. The grandfather of another respondent came from Livorno to sell trains to the ruling Khedive Ismail and ended up settling in Egypt. Families such as the Suarez, Mosseri, de Menasce, Aghions, were active in banking, in transport and in the sugar and cotton business; the family Hannaux founded the prestigious department store Magasins Hannaux, in Alexandria (I had the privilege to interview both the son and the grand daughter of Gabriel Hannaux).

The face of the small indigenous Jewish community of 5-7,000 at the beginning of the 18th century, was therefore dramatically altered by the newcomers' diverse ethnic

² Ben Sasson, H. H., ed., *A History of the Jewish People*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976, pp. 813-69, wrote that from about 1825, in countries such as Tsarist Russia, Rumania and Poland, anti-Jewish measures were intensified. Jews were subjected to forced conversions, expulsions, pogroms and residence restrictions, and fled in their thousands to America, Western Europe and the region of Palestine. As for Morocco, Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*, Philadelphia- New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991, pp. 99-107, reported that 'Moroccan Jewry, ...lived under one of the most oppressive *dhimma* systems of the later Islamic Middle Ages', a system which 'remained in force for most of the nineteenth century', under which Jews suffered persecution and widespread abuse. In 1863, the British philanthropist and Jewish leader Sir Moses Montefiore, paid a visit to the Sultan of Morocco and with the support of the British government, tried in vain to obtain from him some measure of protection for his Jewish constituency. The emancipation of Moroccan Jewry did not happen for another fifty years

backgrounds and was gradually transformed into a multicultural and multilingual mosaic. As a matter of fact, the Jews of Egypt's main characteristic was their diversity, diversity in culture, ethnic origins, nationalities, rituals and languages.

Thus, on the eve of the 1948 war with Israel, the Jewish community was made up *grosso modo* of three different ethnic groups, each with their own customs, language and rituals

1) a core of indigenous Jews with a Judeo-Arabic culture, divided by two different religious traditions, **the Rabbanites and the Karaites**, belonging mostly to the lower socio-economic strata, apart from a small privileged elite. **Their mother tongue was Egyptian Arabic** whereas immigrants from the other Arab countries (Syria, Morocco, Irak, Lybia) spoke their own Arabic dialect.

There are two theories about the origins of Karaism: one theory is that it was a Jewish sect established in 8th century Bagdad by a Jew called Anan Ben David, as a rebel movement against the Babylonian Exilarch, The other theory is that Karaism was a continuation of the Sadducean tendency that survived the destruction of the Temple and therefore predates the arrival of the Arabs in Egypt. The latter is based on a claim that 'the Karaite community in Egypt had in its possession, until the end of the 19th century, a legal document stamped by ...Amr Ibn al-As, the first Islamic governor, in which he ordered the Rabbanite community not to interfere in the way of life of the Karaites.... This document is dated 20. A.H. (641 A.D.)'³

The Karaite Jews (literally Readers of the Scriptures), contrary to the Rabbinic tradition, only follow the Written Law (the Torah) and do not accept the authority of the post biblical tradition incorporated in the Oral Law (Talmud) and latter rabbinic interpretations of Hebrew Scripture.

In Egypt, they were mostly involved in the gold bullion and silver business. Karaites and Rabbanites did not usually mix. Although both groups recognised each other as Jews, mixed marriages were accepted with great difficulty. The Karaite Jews I interviewed both

³ Mourad El-Kodsi, *The Karaite Jews of Egypt 1882-1986*, Lyons, N.Y.: Wilprint, 1987, p.2.

here and overseas confirmed that they had their own synagogues and their own schools where the language of tuition was Arabic. One of them even attended a government public school – which was very rare for Jews in Egypt - because his father wanted him to learn Arabic properly, since it was the national language. A Karaite woman in Paris told me that her grandfather was a barrister at the Islamic Courts, had studied the Koran and spoke the purest form of Arabic.

2) the second and largest group: **the Sefardim** (literally from Spain), included different ethnic clusters. They initially **spoke Ladino but were also familiar with French, Italian, Turkish, and Greek** depending which part of the old Ottoman Empire they came from (were invited by the Sultan to settle there after their expulsion from Spain in 1492).

Sephardim were divided into:

- **a small upper class, considered the aristocracy of the community, westernised and educated, provided all the prominent leaders of the community, with connection in high places.** The prominent families (the Cattawis, Suarez, De Menasce, Piccioto, Mosseri, Rolo, Cicurel) were like dynasties and the communal positions were often passed on from father to son. They even had their entries at the royal court, particularly in the days of King Fuad I, father of the last king of Egypt Faruk (the lady in waiting of the Queen was a Jewish woman). **They contributed enormously and out of proportion to their numbers to the economic development and industrialisation of Egypt** (public transport and trains, cotton industry, sugar refinery, banking, department stores, real estate developments, agriculture)
- **A large middle and lower middle class** made up of professionals, employees, accountants, shopkeepers, teachers, merchants. They were educated, hard working and upwardly mobile.

3) **Third group: The Ashkenazim** (about 6000 in the interwar period) from Eastern Europe plus a small cluster who came from Germany just before WWII. Spoke **Yiddish**,

Polish, Russian, German. Although they had difficult beginnings due to their different culture, language and customs, the second generation was already well integrated and had entered the liberal professions. [At the beginning of the First World War (between 1914 and 1916), over **eleven thousand Russian & Polish Jews were expelled from Palestine on the pretext that they were enemy subjects**, and found refuge in Alexandria, Cairo and Suez.⁴ Most of them returned to Palestine after the war]. In most cases, the relationship between Ashkenazim and Sephardim was harmonious but there were instances where Sephardim, who, as I said earlier, considered themselves the aristocracy would look down upon the Ashkenazim. (Interestingly enough, quite a few of Sephardim in Australia complained to me about the superior attitude of the Ashkenazim towards them)

Apart from these three categories, there were other smaller categories – not strictly Sephardim or Ashkenazim - such as:

- **The Italian Jews** (8 to 10,000), originally from **Leghorn sometimes via Lybia. Spoke Italian. Felt very close to the mother country until Mussolini enacted the Racial Laws in 1938.** They were well established in business and financial sector and belonged to **the upper and middle class. Some of them had no Ladino or Sephardi tradition.** My husband's family for instance could trace its origins back to Livorno in Tuscany in the early 1800s and had been in Egypt for four generations, and still maintained the use of Italian at home.
- **A small group of Greek Jews or Romaniot** from mainland Greece or from the old Ottoman Empire, still **spoke Greek** and did not always have a Sephardi tradition. (said to be descendants of Hellenised Jews)
- **The Corfiote Jews (from the Greek island of Corfu),** who spoke a **Venitian dialect (Corfu had been under Venitian domination for centuries before passing onto French and then British and then Greek domination).** My mother-in-law's family,

⁴ Michael M., Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt, 1920-1970*, New York & London: New York University Press, 1992, p. 7.

for instance, migrated to Egypt from Corfu at the beginning of the 20th century, because of a growing number of antisemitic incidents.

All these different ethnic groups were mostly educated in French, English or Italian private schools (secular and religious). Those who could not afford private schools sent their children to the Jewish communal schools where the main language of tuition was French apart from Arabic and Hebrew. Within my thesis, I have dealt with the topic of the various schools in Egypt, the role of the Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Egyptian government's efforts to egyptianise the education system, but of course I cannot go into it today.

By the beginning of the 20th century, French had become the lingua franca for all non-Muslim minorities, replacing Italian, (Jewish community records were kept in French) and everybody spoke it at different levels of proficiency.⁵ English was used in some middle and upper class families only in business and official situations. The attraction of western culture was such that the use of Arabic was gradually abandoned by the Jewish community as it was generally perceived to be the language of the poor and uneducated Jews. A basic knowledge of colloquial 'kitchen' Egyptian Arabic was sufficient to get by in everyday situations.

In fact, the Arabised underprivileged Jews represented 20% of the community. They still lived in the traditional Jewish areas. 10% of Egyptian Jewry belonged to a francophone elite and the rest to a mobile middle class mesmerised by Western culture, particularly the French culture.

Nationality issue: Apart from the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, **the Jews of Egypt also held diverse nationalities.** The issue of nationality in Egypt is very complex and I cannot go into it in great details at this stage. I will just mention that, at least **until**

⁵ Gudrun, Krämer in *The Jews in Modern Egypt*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989, p.27, stated that 'in the late nineteenth century (it) was mainly Italian, which until 1876 served as the language of administration and until 1905 as the chief language of instruction in the (Jewish) community schools of Alexandria. By that time, French had become the lingua franca of the local foreign minorities and the Turko-Egyptian elite alike.'

1947, having a foreign nationality was a highly desirable asset for the non-Muslim minorities in Egypt because it meant that they had the protection of a foreign power and the privileges of the Capitulations and Mixed Courts regime. For the Jewish minority in a world pre 1948 (prior to the establishment of the state of Israel), it was particularly important to have that protection. British citizenship was the most difficult one to obtain. **Great Britain, being the dominant power in the country, was very selective** and only families originally from Gibraltar, Malta or Cyprus were considered eligible.⁶ As a general rule, it seems that the British granted passports mainly to leading Jewish families, who could serve them politically by acting as intermediaries between them and the local rulers or as a recompense for services rendered (volunteering in the British armed forces during WWII for instance). **I had quite a few cases of British citizens in my sample group.** One of them, Meyer Harari, who lives in Melbourne told me that his family was granted British citizenship because they had given sanctuary to the British consul in Damascus during a anti-British riot.

On the other hand, **France and Italy**, keen to inflate the size of their respective colonies in order to have a bigger representation at the Mixed Courts, acceded to the demand of protection more readily. In fact, on the basis of the **Crémieux Decree of 1870, the French welcomed into their ranks any Jew who could prove even a loose Algerian descent.**⁷ I had a few such cases amongst my respondents, including my own family.

⁶ Krämer, *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷ Michel Abitbol, *Le Passé d'une discorde*, Paris: Perrin, 1999, pp.161-66. The man responsible for the French naturalisation of Algerian Jews was Adolphe Crémieux (1796-1880), a prominent member of the French Consistoire, a deputy under Napoleon III and Minister for Justice under the government of Gambetta. The Crémieux decree read as follows: '*Les israélites indigènes des départements d'Algérie sont déclarés citoyens français; en conséquence, leur statut réel et leur statut personnel seront, à compter de la promulgation du présent décret, réglés par la loi française; tous droits acquis jusqu'à ce jour restent inviolables. Toutes disposition législative, décret, règlement ou ordonnance contraires sont abolis.*' While this decree granted French citizenship to the indigenous Jewish population of Algeria of about 37,000, it did not grant it to the Muslim population. This seemingly preferential treatment was apparently due to the fact that the Jews had agreed to be ruled by French law, relinquishing their communal religious status. According to the French sociologist, historian and political commentator, Raymond Aron (1905-1983), the legislation known as *Senatus-consulte* dated 14 July 1865 had granted the status of French 'subjects' to the indigenous Muslims, with the option of becoming French citizens, if they accepted to be ruled by French civil and political laws instead of Koranic laws but the majority rejected that offer.

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 in at the end of the nineteenth century significantly facilitated the procedure. As late as 1956, one of my respondents said that he was able to buy an Italian passport for himself and his family for £500.

‘There was hardly a prominent Jewish family in Egypt whose head was not a foreign national’ noted the historian Jacob Landau. Leading families such as the Suarez and the Mosseri families were Italian subjects while the Cattaoui and the de Menasce were Austro-Hungarian before WWI.⁸ Some were even granted titles of nobility for services rendered to foreign legations such as the Baron de Menasce.⁹] It is interesting to note that having an official foreign status did not prevent a lot of those Jews from considering themselves as an integral part of Egypt.

You might ask, what about **the Egyptian nationality? Another complex question** that would need to be dealt with separately. Suffice it to say that, with the rise of a pan-Arab/Islamic nationalism, it became more and more difficult for Jews to obtain Egyptian nationality.

In fact, only **25 to 30% of the Jewish community were Egyptian subjects and 25% had a foreign nationality**. Over **40% were stateless**. The issue of nationality eventually led to the stigmatisation of the whole of Egyptian Jewry as a foreign and alien element in the Egyptian political discourse of the 1950s.¹⁰

Political involvement: It is fair to say that the majority of the community was apolitical. The Jewish establishment believed in a secure future in Egypt and did not want to appear disloyal to the Egyptian state by displaying openly Zionist sympathies.

Middle class Jewish youth were attracted by political Zionism. They joined Zionists

⁸ Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth Century Egypt*, p.21.

⁹ Mizrahi discussed the credentials of these families in *L’Egypte et ses Juifs*, pp.62-71. See also Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt*, pp.38-46.

¹⁰ Regarding the nationality issue, see Shimon Shamir, ‘The Evolution of the Egyptian Nationality Laws and their application to the Jews in the Monarchy Period’, in Shimon Shamir, *The Jews of Egypt – A Mediterranean Society in Modern Times*, Boulder & London: Westview Press pp.33-67.

youth movements and even went on aliyah prior to 1948 (Operation Passover). **Others were more attracted to communism** and joined or formed communist cells (**Henri Curiel**, son of a Sephardi banker, headed the first Egyptian Communist party).

Religious observance: Egyptian Jews defined themselves as traditional (observed the main holidays). The less privileged classes were generally more observant whereas the upper classes tended to be more lax.

Leisure time: Egyptian Jews led a **privileged lifestyle** in many ways. Their leisure time was spent going to the movies (European and American), family gatherings, parties, outings at the beach. The more privileged were members of exclusive private clubs, went to the Opera (famous company of the Scala di Milano had its Egyptian season every year), to the theatre (illustrious theatre companies such as the Comedie française were regular visitors), concerts and recitals by foreign performers, to cultural events organised by institutions such as the French *Atelier* or by the Italian *Dante Alighieri* or the British Institute. (I remember going as a child regular to see visiting circuses). They travelled to Europe every summer. A lot of families moved to Alexandria or other beach resort for the whole summer, with maids in tow, while the husbands commuted every weekend.

This was truly a golden age for the Jews of Egypt who enjoyed a position that was among the best in the Muslim world. By 1948, Egyptian Jewry was indeed a rich, diverse and vibrant community. It had built in Cairo and Alexandria an extensive network of communal institutions caring for the old, the sick and the needy ‘from the cradle to the grave’, as well as primary and secondary schools, synagogues, excellent hospitals, cultural organisations and thriving sports clubs.

The first signs of trouble: April 1938 after the Arab rebellion in Palestine, anti-Jewish demonstrations in the streets of Cairo by university students, the Muslim Brotherhood (fundamentalist movement) and ‘Young Egypt’ (‘fascist’ nationalists), shouting ‘Down with the Jews’ ‘Throw the Jews out of Egypt and Palestine’ (Laskier, 69). These troubles subsided during WWII, as the British ruled Egypt with an iron fist.

After WWII, things started to go downhill very quickly for Egyptian Jewry. On 3 Nov 1945, violent anti British and anti Zionist/Jewish demonstrations broke out on the occasion of the 28th anniversary of the Balfour demonstration. The rioters broke into shops bearing Jewish names, looting and burning. They burned down the only Ashkenazi synagogue in Cairo. According to the historian M. Laskier (p.87) 400 cases of injuries were reported. This was again the work of fundamentalists and ultra-nationalists (the Muslim Brothers, Young Egypt). It is true that the government tried, somewhat ineffectively, to stop the rioting and even apologised to the Jewish community.

Exodus from Egypt: As a general rule, the Jews left Egypt in three successive waves, after each of the three Arab-Israeli Wars in 1948, 1956 and 1967. I have labelled these wars ‘the trigger events’.

The 1948 War triggered their first exodus, forced or otherwise. In fact, the Jewish Agency records showed that 20,000 Jews, a sizeable 25% of the total Jewish population of about 75000 to 85,000¹¹, left between 1949-1950 of whom 14,299 settled in Israel.¹² The second and major wave left in the wake of the second trigger event, the 1956 Suez War, when, in the space of just four months, between November 1956 and March 1957, another 14,102 Jews departed (23%). Jewish emigration of another 17,000 to 19,000 continued steadily until the outbreak of the 1967 Six-Day War, leaving only between 2,500 to 7,000 Jews in Egypt.¹³ The third Arab-Israeli War brought about the nearly total depletion of Egyptian Jewry.

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War:

On 14 May 1948, as Ben Gurion announced the creation of the state of Israel. ‘a royal decree...imposed martial law throughout Egypt’.¹⁴ On the same night, recalled one respondent, ‘the Egyptian police raided Jewish homes all over the country. Small units

¹¹ Estimates taken from the WJC records, 1971:25.

¹² Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, p.187.

¹³ Those figures are quoted by Beinon, in *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p.87, taken from the records of the WJC. Laskier in *The Jews of Egypt*, p.290, quoted only 2,500.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.126.

composed of one officer and two policemen carrying rifles burst into the houses and arrested Jewish residents'. Up to 1300 Jews were detained, including Zionists, Communists, Community leaders and wealthy businessmen as well as Jews with no political involvement.

They were incarcerated in four different internment camps. Egypt was apparently the first and only Arab state to use internment camps against its Jewish citizens. In Cairo: men were detained in Huckstep, an old American military camp, and the women at the Prison for Foreign Residents (Prison des Etrangers). In Alexandria, the Abukir camp – an old British Airforce military camp - held both men and women. The fourth site was the prison of El Tor on the Red Sea coast in Sinai. It was the most isolated and dreaded of the camps.

The authorities particularly targeted all Zionists activists and sympathisers, even though Zionist youth groups were tolerated up to 1948 and operated semi-legally in Egypt. They also targeted anybody suspected of being a communist or associated with a communist. [As Jewish youth was heavily implicated in the Egyptian communist party, it meant that a great number of them were arrested. Upon their release, they were all expelled. (The majority went to France, where I interviewed a few of them.)

In fact, anyone deemed 'prejudicial to the safety and security of the state', was a potential target.¹⁵ The experience related by one Respondent (#46) was particularly significant as it demonstrated the arbitrary nature of those arrests. He was a student at the Faruk University, in his last year of Engineering. He was not a Zionist but politically he was more of a nationalist leaning towards the left. In April 1948, members of the Muslim Brothers Society tried to stop him from entering the grounds of the university on the pretext that 'they did not want Egypt to help the enemies of Islam'. When he tried to force his way in, they physically assaulted him. The dean of the faculty, who did not want any problem with the powerful Muslim Brotherhood, worked out a compromise where the Jewish student collected his lecture notes from friends without attending

¹⁵ Ibid., p.126.

classes personally. This arrangement was short-lived as, on 15 May 1948, the day Egypt and the other Arab states declared war on Israel, the authorities formally arrested him. He related to me the exact circumstances:

The guy from the secret police was there and he said: ‘the Egyptians on one side and the foreigners on the other side.’ I went towards the Egyptian side because that is what I thought I was. He said: ‘you are not an Egyptian, you are a foreigner, you are a Jew’. Until then, I had never been impressed by the arguments of the Zionists. This is when I realised that it was not going to help to try and integrate in Egypt because they were never going to accept us. That was the turning point for me. I started to study Zionism and Hebrew while I was in prison.¹⁶

He was subsequently interned for fifteen months with other Jewish students in the Abukir camp.¹⁷ Their treatment in the hands of Egyptian authorities was apparently fair, and they were not subjected to any trial or even lengthy interrogation. Paradoxically, during his time in prison, this particular respondent together with other students in the same predicament, appealed to the Prime Minister of Egypt, al-Nuqrashi Pasha - the same one who had declared repeatedly to the British Ambassador in Egypt that ‘all Jews were potential Zionists but that anyhow all Zionists were Communists’ - to allow them to sit for their final examinations. Strangely enough, they were granted permission to do so, albeit separately from the rest of the student body. The respondent recalled that his diploma was delivered to him in the internment camp together with a signed picture from the King, in recognition for his outstanding performance in the examination. ‘This was Egypt, it couldn’t have happened anywhere else’, remarked this respondent. Eventually, the covert efforts of the Jewish Agency and Mossad Le’Aliya helped secure his release from prison together with other detainees and they organised immediate travel arrangements to Israel through Naples.¹⁸

¹⁶ One of my contacts in Israel was also interned in the Abukir camp at the same period as Respondent #46. He recalled that, while in prison, this particular respondent, from a totally anti-Zionist stand, turned into a fervent Zionist and migrated to Israel when he was released. Six years later, due to family pressure, he left for Australia, and settled at first in Hobart before moving to Melbourne.

¹⁷ It was an old British air force military camp with hangars where the internees were lodged during the summer and then transferred to wooden shacks in winter.

¹⁸ The work of these two organisations was amply documented by Laskier in *The Jews of Egypt*, pp.164-83.

People were often arrested for no particular reason. There were quite a few cases of mistaken identity. Interviewee #35 was put under house arrest and given one month to leave the country, because he was mistaken for a Zionist activist bearing the same name. Another case was the Rabbi of the Port Said community, arrested as a suspected Zionist sympathiser, held in solitary confinement for forty-four days then shipped out with his family.¹⁹ One could be arrested just for a perceived empathy with the enemy.

Often it was the sudden and unjustified arrest of a brother or an uncle that galvanised them into leaving as testified by this interviewee:

We could see our stay in Egypt was coming to an end. My cousin M. [who used to do land valuations] had been arrested because the police had found maps of the farms he was supposed to value and thought they had a Zionist spy on their hands.²⁰

Apart from the fear of being arrested, the Jews also had to contend with daily harassment in the street. They felt threatened by the anti-British street demonstrations because as one said, ‘invariably, at the end, they turned anti-Jewish’.²¹ One respondent claimed he was beaten up twice by a group of young Egyptians and treated to a variety of insults both as a Jew and as a foreigner. In 1951, he decided that ‘enough was enough’. As a British citizen, he had no problem getting a landing permit to Australia. He made some enquiries about Australia from the Australian Ambassador at the time, Sir Roden Cutler, and landed in Sydney in September 1951.²²

¹⁹ This respondent who was only ten years old when her father was arrested, has never forgotten how the whole family was waiting on the boat for his liberation. They proceeded to Singapore where the Jewish community needed a rabbi.

²⁰ This case study was a British subject and he had served in the British Army in Cairo during the war. He chose Australia because he wanted to be as far as possible from the Middle East.

²¹ This respondent said he remembered the anti-Jewish riots of 1929 when he saw his father take a pistol and put it in his pocket. Laskier, in *The Jews of Egypt*, pp.18-9, wrote about the anti-Zionist riots of April and May 1938, when ‘Muslim youth paraded through Cairo’s and Alexandria’s centres, shouting, “Down with the Jews” and “Throw the Jews out of Egypt and Palestine”’.

²² This interviewee was British and did not need a landing permit for Australia in those days. Earlier on, his brother had been arrested in 1948 as a Zionist, although he was more of a Communist, and, since the family had British nationality, had been deported to England. The whole issue of identity in relation to the Jews of Egypt seems to be encapsulated in that one case: Jewish, second generation Egyptian-born, in possession of a British passport, arrested being a Zionist when he was really a Communist.

The growing climate of distrust towards the Jewish population was another disquieting feature. The Jewish families, who lived too close to so-called sensitive areas, were 'advised' to move. Needless to say, they could not disregard the so-called advice. Such was the case of one respondent who reported that after 1948, the family were forced out of their apartment because it was considered too close to the royal Palace of Abdin in Cairo, where King Faruk resided.

Another debilitating measure imposed on a number of Jews after the 1948 War was the government sequestration of their assets, as explained by Laskier:

On 30 May [1948] Proclamation N26 subjected to sequestration the property of any person who was interned in Egypt and of anyone residing outside Egypt whose activities were deemed "prejudicial to the safety and security of the state as well as of those who had merely been placed under surveillance". Since there was no legal barrier to placing people "under surveillance", the proclamation could be, and was, applied indiscriminately.²³

Considering the fact that the government targeted the business assets and properties of 'the most celebrated figures of Egyptian society and of Jewish communal life', it is obvious that the motivation for this proclamation was not just a question of national security.²⁴ In fact, Respondent #20 whose father, an Egyptian national, was 'one of the pillars of the textile industry in Egypt' as well as the Vice-President of the Cairo Jewish community, attested that, around 1949, the government unilaterally sequestered everything the family owned and their apartment was seized. At the same time, her brother, who had a key position with a foreign company, found himself barred from his office. There was no other avenue left for them than to leave the country for good. One of the Karaite Jews whose family owned a very successful bullion business related to me that, in 1952, while his parents were travelling overseas for business, their work premises, properties and bank accounts were seized, without prior warning. A warrant was issued

²³ Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, p. 126.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

for his father's arrest, charging him with tax evasion while other members of the family were imprisoned.²⁵ His father never returned to Egypt and lost everything he owned.

As a result of the economic difficulties and political uncertainties prevailing in Egypt, many Jews wanted to leave and settle in Israel. Apart from the true Zionists, they were mostly from the poor, lower middle and middle class. As I said before, between May 1948 and summer 1950, 20,000 Jews left Egypt for Israel and Europe, of whom over 14,400 went to Israel via Europe. The Zionist underground apparatus, the Jewish Agency and various emissaries played a major role in the aliya of stateless Jews, assisted by funds provided by communal leaders both in Cairo and Alexandria. A nominated travel agency in Cairo - the Setton Travel Agency, owned by Menasce and Setton - took care of the visas, provided emigrants with falsified passports, arranged for their transportation.

The position of the Egyptian authorities regarding the aliya of the Jews of Egypt is quite complex. According to Laskier, there was wide consensus that the authorities knew a great deal about the aliya organisation, since they were keeping the Setton travel Agency under surveillance; yet they did not overreact as long as these activities were not too obvious. The understanding seems to have been that Jews would not be prevented from leaving, as long as the arrangements for their emigration were kept discreet and low key.

²⁶

Things started to settle down after 1950. Some Jewish properties were even returned to their owners and businesses were de-sequestered. The Jews were starting to believe that their situation in Egypt was not yet one of total despair.

The Cairo fire on 'Black Saturday', 26 January 1952, was a seminal event in Egyptian political history as it preceded the military coup that toppled the monarchy of King Faruk.²⁷ Contrary to the other three 'trigger' events, the Arab-Israeli wars, this was an internal matter, **a so-called 'spontaneous' uprising against the hated British and their indiscriminate killing of 40 policemen, and the corruption and mendacity of King**

²⁵ Testimony of a Karaite Jew now living in San Francisco.

²⁶ Laskier, *the Jews of Egypt*, p. 175 and p.177.

²⁷ Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt*, pp. 219-20. Beinun, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, p.48.

Faruk's rule. Although it was not directly aimed at the Jews, the excesses and the violence displayed on that day seem to have shaken the community to its core, and according to the testimonies of my Cairene respondents, played a significant role in their decision to leave the country more or less urgently. This is how one respondent recalled that day:

I witnessed many demonstrations and riots because we lived in the centre of Cairo. The one that is the most vivid in my mind is when they burned Cairo down in 1952. They were burning people alive. We could see the Shell building from the back of our flat and we could see the people being torched alive as they were trying to get out of the building. I was terrified.

A second respondent was so traumatised to see the frenzied mob, totally out of control, burning and looting systematically every symbol of Western presence, in particular British and Jewish, that he decided there and then to leave Egypt immediately. One week later, he was in Italy with his son. Another informant who worked for the British Institute in Cairo was luckily away from his office on that day, as the whole building was torched and a lot of people were hurt. Although he had already been considering leaving Egypt since 1947, this particular event caused him to hasten his preparations and he left the country within a few months.

Even for the respondents who did not witness those nightmarish scenes of January 1952, their significance was compounded when they were followed in July of the same year by the Free Officers coup that overthrew the ailing monarchy of King Faruk. A climate of uncertainty and fear generated first by the violence in Cairo and by the change of regime permeated the Jewish community. The rise of Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser as the new leader in 1954 consolidated those fears even deeper, which was understandable, according to the historian Joel Beinin:

There were good reasons for Jews to be alarmed when a group of unknown army officers overthrew the monarchy and seized power on July 23, 1952. The army had no social or political links to the Jewish community.²⁸

²⁸ Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, p.85.

Furthermore, the economic situation of the Jews was becoming precarious. The Jews had always played an active role in the Egyptian economy but since 1947-48, the egyptianisation of the labour market had considerably diminished their participation. Egypt's economy in 1953 was not in good shape,

The Suez War of 1956

On the political front, things between were reaching boiling point. In 1956, Egypt blocked the entrance to the Gulf of Akaba, an act which was meant to prevent the free passage of Israeli shipping.

The Americans refused to finance the Aswan Dam. In reaction, Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal in July 1956. France and Britain, the two main shareholders of the Compagnie du Canal, began to plan military action against Egypt and asked Israel to join them. The combined attack of Britain, France and Israel on 29 October 1956 sealed the fate of the Jews in Egypt. Although the military campaign was a success, their troops were ordered to leave Egyptian territory and a cease fire was imposed by the U.N..

As a result of the Sinai campaign and Anglo-French-Israeli collusion against Egypt, the Egyptian government promulgated a series of decrees, establishing a state of siege, and imposing strict censorship. Harsh measures taken by the military government in retaliation to this attack 'directly and radically affected the rights, status, and very existence of many Jews in Egypt'.²⁹ They were subjected to arbitrary house arrest, imprisonment, sequestration of their businesses and assets, expulsion from the country and denaturalisation. Those who emigrated so-called 'voluntarily', did so because they feared more repercussions from the political situation or because they believed that Jews had no place in the new Egypt. One can safely state that in fact, the majority of the Jews of Egypt faced forced emigration.

As enemies of the state, the British and the French were immediately expelled.

Amongst the Jews, those who were French or British nationals were doubly targeted for

²⁹ Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, p.253.

expulsion and sequestration by the authorities. The story as related by one British Respondent, expressed the fear and disarray that Jews were experiencing:

The expulsion of the French and the British started. As a British subject, my mother was expelled, her shop seized and she had to leave within three days with only E£10. I was also expelled and was supposed to leave without my family but was saved by the Dutch Consulate who gave me a false passport declaring I was Dutch since my marriage. It was a very difficult time. We were living in fear of our servants who were brainwashed every day, during their prayers at the mosque or by loudspeakers in the streets. They were coming back to work with hate in their eyes. I remember walking along the streets and hearing some Arabs yelling ‘we will cut your throat’.

The general procedure was for the authorities to detain one member of each British or French Jewish family and then issue an order of immediate expulsion for all the family. The prisoner would be released on the condition he would leave the country immediately and was brought directly to the ship to join his family. Such was the case of the fiancé of Respondent #51 who was arrested for being British and Jewish and imprisoned for a month before being deported to Britain. At the same time, the family business was sequestered and all the rest of his family left with nothing except for their clothing and the allowed sum of E£10 per person.³⁰

The six French nationals within my group of oral historians reported they were immediately served with expulsion orders after being kept under house arrest. House arrest meant no communication with the outside, therefore they were not allowed to have a radio or use the telephone.³¹ Deliberate intimidation and bullying was also used to further demoralise them. ‘The doors had to remain wide open. We had no right to close them and anyone could come in and take anything they wanted’, recalled one respondent who, together with her parents, husband and one week-old child, was given notice to leave the country within three days. On the other hand, it seems that the strict enforcement of the expulsion orders varied from case to case. Interviewee #9, who had been under house arrest for over two weeks, was given 24 hours to leave the country after

³⁰ The Egyptian Pound (E£) was equivalent to one Pound Sterling (£Stg)

³¹ Laskier, in *The Jews of Egypt*, p. 254, confirmed that Jewish families were held in confinement at their homes, ‘under surveillance by building concierges invested with police authority to control Jewish tenants under confinements’.

being woken up at midnight and taken to the police station with her husband and baby. Her husband pleaded and managed to obtain an extension on health grounds, but the rest of the family was not granted any such reprieve.³² As with the British nationals, the business and personal assets of all the expelled French nationals were sequestered under Military Proclamation No.5, and they left the country with little else than their clothes.³³ It is important to note that these measures particularly affected the British and French Jews since they were not true expatriates with assets in their mother country. Their home was Egypt and in most cases, those Jews had never set foot on French or British soil except maybe on holiday. Everything they owned or built, whether on a large or modest scale, physically and metaphorically, was rooted in that country. When they were forced out of their familiar surroundings, they experienced not only the material loss of their possessions but also the emotional loss of the only home they knew.

It was to be expected that, in the context of the Suez crisis, the **Zionists**, real or imagined, would bear the brunt of the emergency laws. I had the case of a Greek national, was arrested by the *mukhabarat* – the Egyptian secret police - on charges of espionage for Israel because of his past activities in Zionist youth organisations. His brother was also arrested for good measure and they were both kept at the infamous Tura prison in Cairo together with common criminals.³⁴ As the authorities did not have enough evidence to convict them, and upon intervention from the Greek Consulate, the two brothers were taken from prison straight onto a ship bound for Greece and had to remain handcuffed until the ship was out of Egyptian territorial waters.

Furthermore, any connection with known Zionist activists, however tenuous, was considered suspect and acted upon. Such was the case of a doctor who was arrested and interned for months at the Huckstep prison near Cairo, just because he used to work in the

³² In spite of that reprieve, the whole episode was very distressful for this interviewee. When the hostilities had first erupted, the whole family had left their apartment, to avoid a repetition of what happened to them during the 1952 Cairo fire, when the insurgents torched the building and her parents had to flee from the roof top. This time, they had taken refuge at the home of relatives when they heard 'a radio announcement that anybody harbouring French or British citizens would be considered an enemy of the state.' Not wishing to endanger the relatives, they decided to go back home, where they were put under house arrest.

³³ Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, p.254.

³⁴ The common procedure was for the secret police to arrest any male member of the family, when they could not find the particular one they were looking for.

same hospital as Moshe (Mussa) Marzuk, the Karaite Jew, hanged in 1954 for his part in a conspiracy to commit acts of sabotage against Egypt on behalf of Israel.³⁵ Again, no charges were laid but the doctor and his wife and child were issued with an immediate expulsion order.

The Suez War was also a wake-up call for the Karaites Jews. Beinun claimed that 40 percent of them departed between October 1956 and March 1957, although there were still one thousand Karaites in October 1966, out of an overall Jewish population of about seven thousand on the eve of the 6-Day War.³⁶

The French, the British and the Zionists were not the only besieged groups. **Egyptian and stateless Jews as well as Jews of other nationalities were also targeted** and saw their properties and businesses seized under Military Proclamation No.4.³⁷ It was very clear that the largest and most important Jewish-owned ventures were the prime objectives of the sequestration policy. For example, my husband's family was Italian. They were well-respected and prominent and they owned a large enterprise dealing with cotton ginning and export. Their offices were occupied by a military appointed sequester, the ginning mills seized and the bank accounts frozen unilaterally. They were barred access to their premises and finally expelled from the country within a few days with nothing except a few suitcases of clothing. The husband of another Respondent, an Egyptian national who was very well connected to people in government, was manufacturing and supplying uniforms for the Egyptian army. His privileged connections did not prevent him from being eventually arrested, his business sequestered and subsequently

³⁵ Dr. Marzuk was one of the thirteen conspirators involved in *Operation Susannah* or '*The Mishap*'. Eleven were arrested. Dr. Moshe Marzuk and Shmuel (Sammy) Azar were the only ones condemned to death. See Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, pp.205-48.

³⁶ Beinun, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, pp.181-203. His estimate of 7,000 Jews seems to be based on the work of Mourad El-Kodsi, *The Karaite Jews of Egypt, 1882-1986*. Laskier, in *The Jews of Egypt*, p.290, quoted a much smaller number: 'Egypt's defeat in 1967 created problems for the remaining twenty-five hundred Egyptian Jews.' See also Tad Szulc, *The Secret Alliance - The Extraordinary Story of the Rescue of the Jews Since World War II*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991, pp.280-3, where it was stated that: 'In 1967, at the start of the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, the Egyptian government imprisoned approximately 500 Egyptian Jewish males between the ages of eighteen and fifty-three. They belonged to a Jewish enclave of some 2,500 people...'

³⁷ Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, p.255.

nationalised. The couple was forced to leave the country with only a few of their personal belongings, having lost everything.

It is clear from these examples, that neither being a foreign national nor an Egyptian national, guaranteed Jews immunity from harassment, sequestration or expulsion. The situation was even more precarious for stateless Jews, as noted by the historian Michael Laskier:

It is estimated that as early as the end of November 1956, at least five hundred Egyptian and stateless Jews had been expelled from Egypt...Because in most cases the individual served with a deportation order was responsible for supporting his family, all members of the family had to leave the country.³⁸

Within my research, the stateless refugees represented about a third of the total group. They equally attributed their departure to expulsion, loss of livelihood and a hostile environment. They also experienced the erratic enforcement of the emergency laws. Censorship opened all private correspondence and if anything sounded suspicious, the author of the letter would be brought in for questioning and incarcerated for a few days.

It stands to reason that the closure of major Jewish, French and British owned businesses meant the loss of jobs for a large section of the Jewish community even if they did not suffer directly from expropriation or expulsion. My own father, who was the accountant of a large French company whose Jewish managing director had been arrested then expelled, was ordered to stay at his post until he had shown all the financial records to the military administrator. As soon as his work was completed, his employment was terminated. Without a job or a possibility to find another one as nobody would employ a Jew, he applied for a landing permit to Canada, sponsored by his sister, who had emigrated straight after World War II. Other respondents recalled they were just asked not to come to work anymore, without any explanation given, although they guessed the true reason. One said to me: 'We were stateless. When my husband was fired from his job like all the Jews, we had to leave Egypt'.

³⁸ Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, p.256.

Small business owners were facing continual obstructions created by arbitrary government regulations. As a result, they had to close down or relinquish their share of the business to Muslim Egyptians for next to nothing. For instance, one respondent, who had been running a prosperous customs agency for years without any restriction, suddenly found himself barred from entering the Egyptian customs area because it had been declared out of bounds for Jews. Since he could not continue working under those conditions, he had to close down and found himself deprived of his livelihood. Until that time, he had never considered leaving Egypt.

According to Laskier, there was a deliberate policy by the Egyptian authorities to get rid of its Jewish population, using ‘more subtle, potent techniques of intimidation and psychological warfare against the Jewish population as a whole’, as well as a ‘simultaneous economic harassment of Jews’.³⁹

While it is true that not all Jews were expelled or stripped of their property or even made jobless, all my informants testified to the atmosphere of panic that overtook Egyptian Jewry in the days and months following the Suez War:

The people in Cairo were in such a panic. Every time I went to my shop, I noticed that all my [Jewish] neighbours who had shops were leaving one by one, going all over the world. We used to meet in my house with friends, we would look at the map and one would say, ‘I am going to the Belgian Congo’, another one, ‘I am going to Argentina’. They all had different destinations. I decided to come to Australia.

The scenes at the offices of the Jewish community, both in Cairo and Alexandria, at various consulates, embassies and travel agencies, were, in a small way, reminiscent of the pictures of the Jews of Germany trying desperately to flee after the events of Kristallnacht in November 1938. Of course, there was no comparison whatsoever with the extent of violence experienced by the German Jewish community during the Nazi pogrom.

³⁹ Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*, p. 256.

The fact that the government was engaged more or less overtly in a policy of ‘encouraging’ Jewish emigration did not mean that the Jews were free to pack their bags and go. **They first had to obtain exit visas which were equally compulsory for foreigners, Egyptian and stateless Jews.** Those who were Egyptian nationals were stripped of their nationality once they applied for an exit visa.⁴⁰ They had to leave the country as stateless with a *laissez passer* marked as valid for only one one-way trip, ‘*valable pour un seul voyage sans retour*’.⁴¹ The procedure to obtain those visas was often capricious, time-consuming, and onerous as public servants were notorious for their venality.⁴² The experience of the next ‘oral historian’ encapsulated the general feelings of exasperation, frustration and panic:

I was stateless. I had to go to the authorities to obtain an exit visa. They gave me a visa but said that my son, a newly born baby, had to stay back because he was born in Egypt, therefore he was Egyptian. I took my son and went to the offices of the Red Cross and told them I wouldn’t move until they got me an exit visa. There were thousands of other women in the same predicament. The Red Cross eventually obtained permission for us to leave. It was the worst time in my life. I left in a great hurry and I didn’t take anything with me.

As a matter of fact, most of the respondents who left at that time said that, according to regulation, they were only allowed to take their personal belongings such as clothes and household linen plus E£10 or E£20 and E£50 worth of gold per person.⁴³ They had to dispose of all their larger possessions such as furniture, cars, and household goods, at prices well below their true value. Profiteering was rife in those desperate circumstances. Often, the Jews just closed their doors and departed, leaving everything behind.⁴⁴ One particular informant said ‘I didn’t get one penny for my house. I had to give everything away. I left without telling anybody.’ When he tried to sell his car, he had to reveal his

⁴⁰ This respondent stated: *Nous sommes partis en tant qu’apatrides bien que mon mari était Egyptien. Il a du renoncer à sa nationalité.*

⁴¹ This interviewee still had in his possession a copy of that document, with the inscription in French and Arabic.

⁴² Beinun, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, p.73.

⁴³ Some stated they were allowed to take £20 per person.

⁴⁴ This interviewee who was thirteen at the time, came from a very affluent family. The family owned a jewellery shop and she remembered vividly the day of her departure: ‘we closed the door of the apartment and left it as is. The shop was also left. I didn’t even know we were going on that day. My mother didn’t trust me.’

religion to the prospective buyer, who then proceeded to pay him a quarter of what he was asking.

Once they reached the point of departure, which was usually the port of Alexandria or the airport in Cairo, the customs inspectors were ruthless in their searches and confiscated arbitrarily any items considered to be too valuable and my respondents recalled the humiliating body searches they had to endure, particularly in the period immediately following the outbreak of the Suez War.⁴⁵ Here is what one of my respondents remembered:

We had to pack in six days. We were putting boxes after boxes in the basement for my uncle to take care of. The porter saw what was happening and although we had given him money to appease him, he denounced my mother to the authorities, saying that she was putting diamonds in the suitcases. The day that we left, we just closed the house as if we were coming back. Our ship was delayed because we were all bodily searched. They didn't find anything and finally they let us aboard.⁴⁶

A handful of interviewees reluctantly revealed, that they were so desperate at the idea of leaving the country empty-handed that they took the huge risk of smuggling out some money, either personally or through the black market by conceding a hefty percentage.⁴⁷ 'I converted all my money in gold ingots', said one informant, 'my brother made some wooden boxes with a double cavity big enough to fit the gold. I bribed a guy £50 to look after our luggage.' If caught, they would have faced years in prison.

In some cases, they entrusted small amounts to Egyptian friends who arranged somehow for the money to reach them once they were on board, without exacting a share of that money. My husband recalled a particularly colourful and touching episode. His father, whose business had been sequestrated and bank accounts frozen, had managed to gather about E£800 from the sale of personal items. He entrusted that amount to one of his most loyal Egyptian employees, who promised to find a way to get the money to him. The ship was ready to depart without any sign of the man or the money. As the ship's gangway

⁴⁵ There were several such cases including myself.

⁴⁶ This was just one case but there were many others.

⁴⁷ This participant said he transferred his money to Switzerland through the black market, at the rate of 87 piastres per US\$ when the official rate was 24.

was being removed, the employee suddenly appeared, running up to the gangway, sobbing and screaming, to hug his boss one last time and, in the ensuing confusion, slip into his pocket the money that had been entrusted to him. Another interviewee reported that all his mother's jewels were passed through customs clandestinely by an Egyptian friend and were mysteriously delivered directly to his cabin on the ship.

Nevertheless, these cases were more the exception than the rule and taking into account all the testimonies, it is fair to say that most of the respondents were more or less forced 'Out of Egypt' – as per the title of André Aciman's colourful memoir that some of you might have read- with little more than a few suitcases full of clothes.⁴⁸

Between November 1956 and 1958, 23 to 25,000 Jews are estimated to have left Egypt (6,000 stateless). From November 56 to October 57, Israel admitted nearly 13,500 Egyptian refugees. Again the Jewish Agency assisted those who went to Israel while The American Joint and HIAS helped those who migrated to Latin America, the US, Canada and Australia as well as those who wished to remain in Europe

The last trigger event: the 1967 War

In the interim years between 1956 and 1967, Jews were increasingly pushed out of the workforce and the private sector was eliminated through a campaign of widespread nationalisation. The Jewish community gradually lost all of its prominent members who had previously held positions of leadership in the various Jewish institutions. The few cases that I encountered who stayed on after 1956 till the early 1960s did so mainly for economic reasons. They claimed they were still making a good living from their on-going businesses and were reluctant to leave the country empty-handed.

The consequences of the Six-Day War in 1967 for the remaining Jews in Egypt proved to be catastrophic. At least 425 Jewish males between the age of 18 and 53 were rounded up as soon as the war started. The seventy-five who were foreign nationals were taken from

⁴⁸ André Aciman, *Out of Egypt*, Canada: HarperCollins, 1994. Aciman was born in Alexandria. He is currently Professor of French literature at Princeton.

prison directly on board a ship to be deported. However, the Egyptian and stateless Jews remained in prison, some for over three years and they suffered untold indignities. They were only released upon intervention from foreign governments and international agencies. It was mainly thanks to HIAS' 'secret diplomacy', the unpublicised cooperation of the Spanish government and the vital role played by Spain's ambassador in Cairo, Angel Sagaz, that all the Jewish prisoners were eventually freed and allowed to leave Egypt.⁴⁹

The only first hand testimony I have of someone who remained in Egypt until 1967 was obtained from an informant in England, an Italian national, who stayed behind for economic reasons. He was arrested in June 1967 and spent six traumatic months in prison before being expelled. He witnessed some horrific incidents but he claimed they were caused by the sadistic and brutal initiatives of the prison guards rather than by official directives from the Egyptian government regarding the treatment of its prisoners.

The scarcity of testimonies post 1967 is proof enough of the fact that the Jewish presence in Egypt had already declined dramatically by 1967 and continued its downward trend until today, when it has been reduced to meagre proportions.⁵⁰ Jewish life in Egypt has shrunk to such an extent that the few remaining Jews cannot even form a *minyan* or quorum of ten male Jews, which is the minimal number required to conduct the traditional service in the two remaining synagogues of Cairo and Alexandria.

Through the testimonies of my respondents, I have tried to tell you the story of the community they represented before their forced emigration and dispersion. Like the bulk of Egyptian Jewry, they led a tranquil and mostly privileged life under the protection of the foreign powers. Until 1948, most of them considered Egypt as home. In the space of less than twenty years, Egypt was emptied of its Jews, a population whose dominant

⁴⁹ Szulc, *The Secret Alliance*, pp.280-3.

⁵⁰ The gender component of the remaining Jewish community contributed to the surprise election of Esther Weinstein, the first woman president of the Jewish Community of Cairo (JCC) at an impromptu meeting of the board of the Adly Street synagogue in 1996, when a unanimous motion was passed 'allowing women on the board of directors for the first time in the history of the 1,000 year-old community'. This event was reported both in *The Egyptian Gazette* by Samir Raafat, August 23, 1996 and in the JCC Newsletter, *Bassatine News*, Volume 1, Issue 3, September 1996.

characteristics were its ethnic, religious, cultural and national pluralism, Western-style education and multiple language skills. How did they fare 'Out of Egypt', when they suddenly became refugees looking for a new home? How prepared were they for their new lives? Apart from Israel, who took them in and why? Why did some of them choose to come to Australia? If you are interested, you can read about it in my thesis. In the meantime, I will finish by reading to you a bitter-sweet Passover story written by a Jew from Egypt, Teddy Nahmias who now lives in London, and published in the British quarterly magazine of Jewish culture called *Jewish Renaissance*:

Photo courtesy of Teddy Nahmias



The marriage of Doris Nahmias to Sabino Gesua at the Alexandria Hanabi Synagogue of Eliahou Hanabi in 1941. Teddy Nahmias (see article below) is the little boy in his father's arms in the third row, near the right of the picture. The rabbi (with the white beard) is Haham Maimon Benatar

A LEAVENED PASSOVER

T E D D Y N A H M I A S

Following the unfortunate events of 1956 and the Suez Canal Crisis, hundreds of Jewish families packed their belongings and left Egypt, most boarding ships sailing from Alexandria, bound for European Mediterranean ports.

My family chose Italy, my father's dream land. As a Corfiot he felt Venice was his cultural home, so we were on our way to Venice and Trieste. The vessel was the *M/S Enotria* a smaller version of the famous *M/S Esperia* of Adriatica fame, those white luxury liners that rode the Mediterranean with the Lion of Venice watching over from the yellow chimneys.

We took the lift down from our fifth floor flat in Mazarita for the last time. Some of our neighbours opened their front doors and stood in silence on the landings to watch us go. Muhammed, our imposing Sudanese *bawab* (porter) was sobbing like a child. There was no coming back. The emotion was high and my mother could not stop her tears. Dad became tense as we went through

customs and police clearance, but felt more comfortable as he walked the steps to the deck. After all, he was already on Italian soil. As for myself, I was in a daze, feeling that something irreversible was taking place, but too young to realize the implications. I was probably hoping to find another group of youngsters at the other end that would recreate the rock and roll fun-loving crowd I had left behind.

As the ship started to move away from the dock and head for the high seas, we all waved goodbye, and slowly turned our heads from the land that we were not to see again for perhaps half a century.

I noticed a few young people around my age and naturally was drawn to them. My parents by now were in conversation with other Jews who were on their way to Canada. Others were due to catch a ship from Trieste to Australia.

Suddenly, someone said "but tomorrow night is *Pesach*, it's the first *Seder* night. Shouldn't we mark the occasion somehow?" A charming and understanding officer decided we could use a section of the dining room, and I recall about 25 of us sitting around a number of tables assembled to form one big long table. To top it all, as a gift from the Captain, a beautiful cake was placed in the centre of the table with the compliments of the Chef, the crew and the officers. How embarrassing; no *matzah*, no *harosset*, no *maror*, but instead

a massive *chametz* torta to celebrate the festival of the unleavened bread. I remember my father laughing and I also remember a discussion on who would officiate. A *Haggadah* was found. I cannot remember whether or not the cake was eaten. We were Jews leaving Egypt, celebrating Jews leaving Egypt. Had we fallen into a mysterious time warp? Although not realizing it at the time, we had gone through a unique experience never to be repeated. This time the bread had risen. ■

After leaving Egypt Teddy Nahmias lived with his family in Italy and France. In 1971 he came to England where he has worked in the textile industry



Another 1956 emigrant, Mark Cohen, who now lives in New York

Photo courtesy of Historical Society of Jews from Egypt