Remaining Jews in Egypt Want Relics to Stay Put

By STEPHEN J. GLAIN Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

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CAIRO -- The second Jewish exodus from Egypt began a half-century ago, the result of decades of Arab-Israeli strife. But a dispute rages over its legacy -- and it is not the cry of "Let my people go."

It is the lament of a few dozen Jews who have remained in Egypt, declaring, "Let our Torahs stay."

Moses parted the sea when he left the first time; this dispute is dividing Jews oceans apart.

A Modern Diaspora

Most Jews fled Egypt after Israel's creation in 1948, leaving behind a trove of Jewish holy books, registers and artifacts in the synagogues where they worshipped. From the outside, this looked like a pressing issue to Jews worried about a vanishing heritage. Much of Egypt's Judaica has disappeared -- sold to collectors, stolen, or simply lost -- and the diaspora want to recover what is left. Members have taken their case to both the Israeli and Egyptian governments, with little success, and are poised to drag in the U.S. Congress.

"We can't just keep still," says Desire Sakkal, secretary of the Brooklyn-based Historical Society of Jews from Egypt.

But the remaining Jews of Egypt aren't so eager to see their temples emptied. True, they are a community in name only; most are in their 70s and 80s. Because all but a few are women, they are unable to form a minian, or prayer group, which requires at least 10 Jewish men. There are no rabbis, no kosher butchers, and the synagogues are open only on special occasions to tourists.

But Jewish patrimony in Cairo and Alexandria synagogues, say the holdouts, is as much a part of Egyptian history as the pyramids. Cairo's main synagogue is attracting a growing number of tourists, and Jewish leaders are negotiating with a U.S. company to introduce a "Millennium Tour" of Cairo's Jewish sites. Recent visitors at Cairo's Ben Ezra Synagogue, which dates back to 606 B.C., include Hillary Clinton, who toured the temple last spring.

Instead of denuding Egypt of its Jewish heritage, they say, the diaspora should be helping to restore what's left. "Stop sending these insensitive letters, referring to our 'inevitable extinction,' " wrote Esther Weinstein, president of Cairo's Jewish Community Council, in response to a communique from the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt. "Our heritage is staying in Egypt where it belongs."

Sentimental Treasures

On the other side of the dispute are people like Avner Assel, who left Egypt in 1949 after spending 15 months with other suspected Zionists in a detention camp outside Alexandria. He was given only a few hours to say goodbye to friends and family before he was hustled off on a one-way voyage to the new state of Israel.

Mr. Assel left his Torah behind. He has spent years trying to get it back with no luck, despite pleas for help from Israel's Ministry of Religion and the Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv.

"We must have something to leave our children and grandchildren," says the 73-year-old Mr. Assel, now a retiree in the northern Israeli port of Haifa.

The dispute intensifies as the circle of Egypt's surviving Jews draws tighter; in October, Cairo lost one of four of its remaining Jewish men, Robert Nahman. The service was held at the Bassatine Cemetery -- second to Jerusalem's Mount of Olives as the world's oldest Jewish gravesite. The mourning party included the wife of U.S. Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer and a delegation of foreign, fellow Jewish males, to allow for a minian.

International relations are at stake; the Brooklyn-based Historical Society of Jews from Egypt and its supporters believe the Egyptian government is holding the artifacts hostage for some future negotiation with Israel, which has avoided the dispute. The society in November sent a letter to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, requesting his support for "evacuating" Judaica from Egypt.

Mr. Mubarak has yet to reply, according to the society. A Foreign Ministry spokesman in Cairo says the fate of Egypt's Jewish heritage is up to the Jewish community to decide; his Israeli counterpart says the matter can be settled only in Egyptian courts.

A Sad History

The wrangle over who owns Egypt's Jewish past is a sad postscript to what was once the oldest and most prosperous Jewish society in the Arab world. The Ben Ezra synagogue is thought to stand on the spot where Moses was plucked from the Nile; its Torahs are hundreds of years old, and stored in wooden cases embellished with traditional Hebrew icons like the pomegranate, the symbol for longevity.

As late as the mid-20th century, Egyptian Jews advised kings and served as pashas. In the salons of Maadi, an affluent Cairo suburb, gossip, policy, and intrigue found expression in a mix of Arabic, French, English and Hebrew.

The rise of Zionism and the birth of Israel stoked Arab nationalism and unleashed a backlash against Jews throughout the Middle East. Egypt's community of about 85,000 Jews began to evaporate in an exodus that accelerated with each war or crisis.

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Today, Egypt's synagogues are kept under 24-hour guard by details of military police. The Torahs are kept under lock and key, and are taken out only on special occasions. Several years ago, Daniel Goshen, the head of Haifa's Association of Egyptian Jews, returned to his native Alexandria, where he visited his old synagogue. After examining his family's Torah, he asked one of the guards why a holy temple required such heavy security.

"He told me this was a government place," Mr. Goshen says.

For Jews -- "the people of the book" -- the Torah is a vital symbol of religious identity. The registers have a more prosaic value. The Egyptian rabbinate was a civil administration unto itself; all births, weddings and deaths were recorded at the synagogue before they were entered by any municipal authority. Without a register, the progeny of Egyptian Jews don't know when they should recite the kaddish -- the prayer for the dead -- which is traditionally said at the exact time of an ancestor's passing; many Egyptian-Jewish spouses have no proof of their marriage because their marriage certificates are locked away in Egypt.

That's exactly what happened in the family of Laurence Abensur-Hazan, a genealogist with the Sephardi Genealogical and History Society in Paris. When her aunt, a former Egyptian Jew, died a few years ago in France, "my uncle couldn't prove to the municipality that the woman he had been married to for 37 years was his wife," she says.

Proposals to build a Jewish museum in Egypt where the Torah and other artifacts could be preserved have languished. Besides, say diaspora leaders, sealing prayer books behind plate glass would mean little to the families who left them behind. The Cairo Jewish community does respond to inquiries about birth, death and marriage certificates, but requests for copies of the registers have yielded nothing so far, say Mrs. Abensur-Hazan and Mr. Sakkal.

Ms. Weinstein declined to be interviewed. Her daughter, Carmen, would agree to a brief meeting at her print shop in downtown Cairo, where she limited her comments to frustration with what she says is the diaspora's neglect of a once-great Arab-Jewish culture.

Friends say the Weinsteins and their co-religionists have taken up the burden of restoring key holy places largely by themselves. The Bassatine Cemetery, in particular, would have been overrun by squatters had they not raised enough money to pay for a protective wall.

The community frequently circulates a list of sites in need of restoration, along with a plea for donations; funds trickle in, but not enough to repeal time.

"Ask the Jews of the world," Ms. Weinstein says, "why they won't help the last Jews of Egypt?"

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