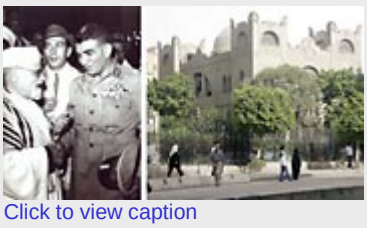
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Features

Remembrance of things past

This week's arrangement, and then cancellation, of Cairo's first conference on Egyptian Jews has stirred up memories that some would prefer to forget, writes **Dina Ezzat**

"This is something from the past. Today, I am an Egyptian Christian who lives peacefully in Cairo with no other interest than looking after my daughter and my grandchildren. I am no longer a Jew. In fact, I cannot say I ever really was one because my father converted to Christianity when I was only a few years old," says Georges, who insists on being identified only by his first name and is not willing to share more on his past as a member of Egypt's Jewish community.



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Chief Rabbi Haim Nahum with first president of Egypt's republic Mohamed Naguib; the Abbasiya synagogue

Georges is in his late 50s and lives in Misr Al-Qadima, not very far from the heart of what was once the quarter of the not so economically well- off Egyptian Jews, the better off living in the upscale neighburhoods of Heliopolis, Maadi and Zamalek. He runs a small business and sits in his favourite spot outside his small store, where a painting of the Virgin Mary hangs on the wall opposite one of the area's remaining synagogues. Georges looks across at the synagogue as he speaks.

Georges was born and brought up in the neighbourhood and has always lived there. However, his initial reaction was simply to refuse to answer questions about the lives of the Jews who once lived in the area, or questions about the relations between Jews, Muslims and Christians in this neighbourhood that was once home to some 30,000 to 50,000 of Egypt's then 70,000 Jews. Even those Jews who term their leaving Egypt an experience of "coerced uprooting" never call the area a ghetto, instead insisting that "in Egypt Jews, Christians and Muslims were all best of friends and neighbours."

The censuses of the time were never accurate, especially about the number of Egyptian Jews who did not register themselves as Egyptians following the 1928 citizenship law, in order to enjoy privileges granted to foreigners by the captulation laws. Subsequently, they failed to qualify under the 1945 citizenship act since they could not prove they were Egyptians and not foreigners.

But "this is something from the past," Georges repeats. "There is no point talking about it now. I have nothing to say. I am an Egyptian Christian who was born here and who will die here."

In many ways it is true that Egypt's Jews are something from the past, perhaps in the same way that Egypt's purportedcosmopolitanism is merely a memory of bygone times. Jews lived and flourished in Egypt under the monarchy, as they did in many other Arab states and as they had from the period of the Islamic Middle Ages until the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948 and even afterwards to 1967 and the Israeli invasion and occupation of Arab territories.

However, this week there was an attempt to bring back at least a glimpse of that past, when the "First International Conference of Jews from Egypt" was scheduled to open in Cairo last Sunday. As part of the conference, a group of elderly Jews, mostly those who left Egypt for Israel in 1948, almost one third of the nation's Jewish community, or afterwards up to 1967, along with their children and grandchildren, was planning a four-day visit to Egypt. Organisers, who are members of the World Congress of the Jews from Egypt (WCJE) say that the group consisted of only 45 people, though Egyptian authorities have suggested that it could have reached 200.

According to information posted on the Internet the purpose of the conference was to allow the group to return to places they had once lived in, to visit synagogues in which they had once worshipped, and perhaps even to enjoy the Egyptian recipes they had once cooked on Jewish holidays.

"This was supposed to be a 'roots trip'," said Levana Zamir, chairwoman of the Egyptian-Israeli Friendship Association and an organiser of the visit-conference.

However, the conference was cancelled on Thursday when the five-star hotel that was to host the gathering and some of its meetings "sent its apologies" to the organisers, saying that it would be too difficult to host. Other major hotels in the city also turned down requests to host the group, Zamir told the *Weekly* in a telephone interview. As a result, "the whole thing was cancelled," she said.

Official sources in Egypt said that the government had not interfered "directly" with the hotel's decision, but said that it had been made clear to the hotel that hosting the conference at this juncture might not be advisable.

According to one government official who spoke to the *Weekly* on condition of anonymity, making security arrangements for the conference would have required a great deal of effort, especially in view of the anti-Israeli sentiments that have come as a result of Israeli aggression against the Palestinians.

The present was also a very "sensitive" time for such a conference, he added, as it would have coincided with the anniversary of the *Nakba* in 1948 and public frustration over the failure of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. A source at the hotel, who also spoke confidentially to the *Weekly*, argued that in the light of the "campaign" launched against the conference in the media the hotel "did not want the hassle."

Last Wednesday, television presenter Amr Adib on his widely viewed talk show *Al-Qahira Al-Youm* on the Orbit Satellite Channel expressed concern over the intentions behind this conference. Among other things, Adib was particularly critical of the fact that the timing of the trip coincided with the celebration of Israel's 60th anniversary, which was insensitive to the misery of millions of Palestinian refugees. Adib was also sceptical about the "real intentions" of this group who had "fled Egypt for Israel" in the 1940s and 1950s.

Adib's remarks prompted wide attention, putting the hotel that was supposed to host the conference in a difficult position. According to the source at the hotel who spoke to the *Weekly*, the hotel had never intended to host the conference as such, and nor had it been asked to do so by the trip's organisers.

Instead, the booking had been made for an Israeli group like any other, many of which stay in the hotel during visits to Egypt. Indeed, no "announcement" of a conference was made: only a hall was booked. Ultimately, the hotel's management decided that it would rather cancel the reservation than have its name implicated in an event that could backfire.

According to Zamir the Jewish group has no intention of rescheduling the visit and conference. "No, we are not re-scheduling," she said. "It was already very disappointing for us to have to cancel just days before we were supposed to fly to Egypt and at a time when people had arrived from the US to join us," Zamir said, speaking fluent Arabic with an impeccable Egyptian accent.

TAREK HEGGY, a researcher on the history of Egypt's Jews "from an Egyptian perspective" who is currently finishing a book on the Jews of Egypt and who has been in close contact with some of the organisers and participants in the conference during recurrnet visits to Israel in the past ten years, also lamented the hotel's 'decision'.

"I am not opposing it as such," he said. "But the point is that if the authorities suspected that having this group of people here would be problematic, they should have said that earlier, rather than wait to the eve of their arrival." Moreover, Heggy added, since Egypt receives dozens of Israelis and other Jews every day as tourists, "why was it difficult to have this group come and pay their respects to Egypt? This was a nostalgia trip. Nothing more and nothing less," he said.

Heggy has participated in previous meetings of Egyptian Jews, both in Israel, the destination of the not so economically well-off, and in Europe -- particularly in Switzerland and Belgium -- the destination of the larger Jewish families, or in the US where most of Egypt's middle-class Jews emigrated.

Members of the WCJE held two conferences at Haifa University in 2006 and 2007, with the participation of an envoy from the Egyptian Embassy in Israel. Each lasted for about a week and attracted Jews from Israel, Europe and the Americas. In March this year, a one-day event was also held at the University of Maryland.

According to both Heggy and Zamir these were mostly linking-up opportunities -- an account that is contested by some, including some Jewish and Israeli historians, as well as by Egyptian government officials who have suggested that last week's cancelled trip-conference was ultimately, even if not directly on the part of the organisers, part of a wider campaign to encourage Egyptian Jews to claim compensation for property left behind in Egypt.

Professor Yoram Meital, an Israeli historian with close knowledge of the history of Egyptian Jews, laments the fact that many Egyptian Jews in Israel and the US, and to an extent also in Europe, are now making demands for compensation not just for past property but also for the property of today's dwindling Jewish community still in Egypt. "They say the properties [including synagogues and other historic buildings] should be sold, or [in the case of documents and artifacts] be taken out of Egypt to Tel Aviv or New York. This is very unfortunate," Meital told the *Weekly* in a telephone interview.

Meital argues that members of the group planning this week's trip-conference to Egypt were not associated with the compensation campaign. However, he acknowledges the inevitable shadow this campaign throws on such a trip.

Meital also regrets the fact that voices within Egyptian Jewry inside and outside Israel who defend the idea that Jewish property in Egypt is an inseparable part of Egyptian history have been drowned out by voices that say that "these are our properties, and they should come to us". Especially subject to these demands are the Cairo Geniza documents, an accumulation of some 200,000 Jewish manuscripts written from about 870 AD to as late as 1880.

Heggy, however, argues that it would be wrong to confuse a trip undertaken out of "a group feeling of nostalgia for a homeland from the past" with the issue of compensation for former

Jewish property in Egypt. "This group was not after anything," he said, "except perhaps for some families who wished to get compensation for properties [sequestrated in the 1960s], and the cancellation of the present conference will not stop them in this."

Sooner or later, Heggy said, the issue of the sequestrated properties of Egyptian Jews will arise. "We just have to deal with it in the same way that Israel is dealing with seized Palestinian properties. We will have to talk about it," he said.

However, Egyptian officials told the *Weekly* that the issue of "these properties" was "certainly" on the agenda of the cancelled conference. "The fact that they did not talk about it does not mean that it was not there," one source said. According to this source, many of the areas the members of the group were planning to visit included what they called "sequestrated property."

"Nobody is denying the element of nostalgia, the desire to exchange recipes for *Molokheiyah* and *Keshk*, and the desire to return to old houses and villas and lament the fact that many of them have been demolished. However, this is not the only thing that was at stake in the trip. We are well aware of the growing campaign in relation to property," the source said.

THE ISSUE OF JEWISH PROPERTY in egypt is not absent from literature circulated by associations of Egyptian Jewry in Haifa and Tel Aviv either, though Zamir would probably argue that talking about a house that a family once owned does not mean that there is an intention to get compensation for that house. The issue is certainly not absent from the websites of some 20 organisations across the world that link former Egyptian Jews inside and outside Israel. Indeed, according to the language and tone of material circulated by the US-based Justice for Jews from Arab Countries campaign, the issue is set to gain more attention in the future.

While the Israeli Embassy in Egypt has kept its distance from the matter, according to Egyptian diplomatic sources the campaign has been building up over the past few years in several western capitals, particularly Washington. In these sources' assessment, the campaign has been prompted by the Israeli government, which "wants to use the issue of Jewish properties, not just in Egypt but in all Arab lands, when the time comes to talk of a final settlement between Israelis and Palestinians and in relation to discussion of compensation for Palestinian properties," said one diplomatic source.

From the official perspective a cornerstone of the campaign was established in April 2008 when the US House of Representatives adopted a bill that called on the administration to pursue the right of Jews from Arab lands to compensation for properties they had left behind, allegedly in order to end an injustice that resulted from the fact that the "Palestinian refugee issue has received considerable attention from the countries of the world, while the issue of Jewish refugees from the Arab and Muslim worlds has received very little attention."

The resolution says that "850,000 Jews have been displaced from Arab countries since the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948" and demands that the issue of "Jewish refugees" and their property be incorporated into any final settlement of the Arab- Israeli struggle, as agreed in the Memorandum of Understanding signed by former US president Jimmy Carter and former Israeli foreign minister Moshe Dayan in October 1977. This states that Palestinians have rights and "Jewish refugees...have the same rights".

The issue of "compensating Jewish refugees who were displaced from Arab countries" was also brought up by former US president Bill Clinton, who suggested in July 2000 the establishment of an "international fund" financed by western and Arab states that would provide compensation for all, including "Israelis who were made refugees by the war [of

1948] who [had] lived in Arab countries [and] who came to Israel because they were made refugees in their own land."

For Zamir at least the issue is clear. "It is true. We were refugees. We were forced out of Egypt," she said. In Israel, she added, she and many other Egyptian Jews who had once lived in nice apartments, even if on the less elegant side of town, were taken to tents and tin huts where they "led a miserable life".

In January 1957 -- Arab diplomats argue as a result of western pressures -- the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees gave Jews leaving Arab countries the status of refugees. In addition, according to the resolution adopted in 2008 by the US House of Representatives the reference to refugees in UN Security Council Resolution 242 -- an incontestable reference for the settlement of the Arab- Israeli struggle -- is not strictly to Palestinian refugees alone, and therefore should also include Jews. Accordingly, "an international campaign is proceeding in some 40 countries to record the history and legacy of Jewish refugees from Arab countries."

The issue of "Jewish refugees", "their property" and "their right to compensation" is also the theme of blog posts expressing the views of formerly Egyptian Jews. However, there does not seem to be agreement on whether or not the pursuit of compensation is the right thing to ensure the memory of their once integrated community, these posts speaking of Muslims, Copts and Jews once living on the same streets in Egypt and in the same buildings.

The Egyptian government has also been looking into this issue over the past few years and has been discussing it with Israeli and US officials. It knows that the issue is bound to gain increased attention when the remaining Egyptian Jews -- mostly very old -- die. At that point, government sources acknowledge, the issue of what to do with the property of a community that has become extinct will arise again, especially of what to do with the wealth of documents -- civil and religious -- that exist. Even if these were registered as antiquities by the Egyptian government, they would still be eyed by many in Israel and in the Jewish community elsewhere as strictly Jewish property.

Not long ago, the Egyptian government signed a deal with Patricia Metzger, heir of Albert Metzger, an Egyptian Jew who once owned the Cecil Hotel in Alexandria that was nationalised along with other institutions owned by non-Egyptians. Metzger received close to US$10 million before selling the hotel, remembered for its famous international guests, to a French company for much more. The deal has set a precedent that the government knows will create future demands.

This is because the property of the Jews in Egypt -- whether sequestrated or simply left behind -- included major businesses and real estate. It also included small apartments, stores and even cars.

However, according to Nadia Kamel, director of the controversial documentary film *Salata Baladi* (Egyptian Salad), "the label 'properties of Jews' should be broken down. Most of Egyptian Jews were not rich owners. Some, including my own grandfather, an electrician, left nothing behind, and some simply had very modest material property."

Kamel's film, released earlier this year, examines her family's mixed Muslim-Christian-Jewish roots. For her, society's sensitivity about the issue of the property of Jews in Egypt is part and parcel of a much more complex difficulty in dealing with the issue of Egyptian identity. "The issue of identity is complex, and it has many details that need to be taken on board. The Jewish component is only one," Kamel said, adding that "the time has come for us to reflect and reclaim our complexity."

Kamel's grandfather, a Roman Catholic convert, she recalls, had only his bitter sweet memories to take with him when he left Egypt, cherishing these even when he died alone in a small Italian village that was the birthplace of his Italian Catholic wife, who herself had little choice but to leave with him after living in Egypt for 40 years. "Israel as a Zionist project, and an occupation force, is based on discrimination, but while trying to face this injustice we are falling into the trap of self-discrimination," she said.

According to Kamel "only by tackling the complex truth including (but not only) the issue of property of Egyptian Jews would it be possible to deconstruct the Israeli fallacy that Jews were simply one eternally homogenous and persecuted community in Egypt and therefore (another fallacy) a Jewish state (Israel) was and will always be their only refuge."

For its part, the Egyptian government defends the nationalisation-sequestration decrees adopted in the 1950s and 60s, saying that these did not target Jews or force them to leave the country. They explain that after the 1956 Suez War, the Egyptian government applied restrictive measures against all those cayrring British and French passports in their capacity as "enemy aliens". In the 1960s, they add, sequestration was part of a wider effort to address social inequality, which was certainly overlooked under the monarchy.

According to many historians it was not until the involvement of Egyptian Jews in acts of espionage and sabotage on behalf of Israeli intelligence, including the Operation Susannah (also known as the Lavon Affair in reference to the then Israeli Defense Minister Pinhas Lavon) in 1954, that Jews, whether sympathetic or opposed to such Zionist affiliations and behaviour, started to feel unwelcome in Egypt to the point of wanting to leave the country.

Historians acknowledge "individual assaults" against Jews in Egypt in the wake of the 1948 war, but they also point to the fact that during the early decades of the 20th century several Jewish papers were printed in Egypt, and until the 1950s there was a Yiddish programme on Egyptian state radio.

While most Jews left Egypt between the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the 1956 Suez War, a good few thousand stayed on and lived in the face of growing signs of hostility. This had previously been unknown according to accounts by Egyptian Jews, these having previously been the most immune of all Jews in Arab countries to recruitment attempts by the Jewish Agency.

According to the 1987 memoirs of the Egyptian Jew Shehatah Haroun, a well-known leftist, the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the consequent emigration of hundreds of thousands of Arab Jews to the new state and the parallel beginning of the Arab-Israeli struggle led to Arab governments -- Egypt's included -- changing their attitudes towards Jewish populations that had previously been perfectly accepted like any other citizens.

While Haroun lamented this change in attitudes, he also saw its rationale. Following the establishment of the state of Israel and that state's actions against the Palestinians, Haroun recalled the beginnings of "anti-Jewish sentiments that were completely different from the anti-Semitism" that brought about the Holocaust against the Jews in Europe. In Egypt, he wrote, "the perception and image of a Jew was greatly affected by the appearance of the Zionists".

And Haroun -- still celebrated by Egypt's dwindling Left -- felt bitter about being rejected by the Egyptian army at a time when he, like other patriotic and mostly secular Jews, wanted to do what every other Egyptian man was doing, namely fighting Israel. In his memoirs he states that his identity, not necessarily shared by other Egyptian Jews especially after the

declaration of the state of Israel, was that of a Jew and a Leftist, but also and "above and before everything else, an Egyptian".

According to Haroun's count, shared by many historians and official Egyptian records, after the 1967 defeat there were no more than 300 Jews remaining in Egypt. However, he was determined to be one of them, whether for better, as is demonstrated by his sympathy for his fellow Egyptians, or for worse, as Egyptian Jews were becoming increasingly subject to harassment from the security services at the time.

IN EGYPT TODAY THERE ARE no more than 70 Jews. Mostly consisting of elderly women and no more than two men, the Jewish community of Egypt today perceives itself as "an empty nest with no young members."

In order for full prayers to take place, especially for a funeral, there must be ten men present. Consequently, the community often invites Jewish members of the Israeli, American and other western embassies to sit for prayers. To help catalogue the information contained in the Jewish cemeteries at Bassatine in Cairo, the community has also called on the help of volunteer students of Hebrew at Egyptian universities.

This meagre presence offers only a tiny glimpse of the multilayered presence Egyptian Jews once had in the country, when they were part and parcel of every echelon of society. Rich Jews, with well- known names like Rolo, Cattawi, Menashe, Suares and Mosseri who are known to have demonstrated patriotism in the face of British colonisation and less well-known ones like Leon Castro, lived in the upscale neighbourhoods of Cairo and Alexandria and contributed to the cultural, economic and political activities of Egypt. Poorer Jews lived among the rest of the economically disadvantaged Egyptian population, while preserving their distinct religious identity.

In his book, *Jews but Egyptians* published earlier this year, Sulimane al-Hakim pays tribute to the many contributions Egyptian Jews made to the country at the time, particularly to the arts, cinema and press of modern Egypt.

The singer and actress Laila Mourad, for example, a Muslim convert, and Neigumah Ibrahim, who died a Jew, are both praised by the author for their patriotic attachment that bypassed any religious affiliation. On the other hand, Rakiyah Ibrahim, a movie star, is criticised by al-Hakim for "leaving Egypt to join the Israeli diplomatic mission to the UN" in the wake of the establishment of Israel. For al-Hakim the difference in the behaviour of Laila Mourad or Neigumah Ibrahim and Rakiyah Ibrahim was typical of splits within the Egyptian Jewish community upon the establishment of the state of Israel and the beginning of Israel's wars against Palestinians and Arabs.

"The community of Jews [in Egypt] before 1948 was very complicated; part was Rabbanite and part was Karaite; part was wealthy and prominent, and part was poor and Arabised. And in this community Zionism was present, but only as a very small phenomena," says historian Joel Beinin, author of *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, a book that offers a panoramic account of the culture, politics and lives of Egyptian Jews, especially after 1948.

For Beinin, however, a group of Israeli citizens with Egyptian roots holding a conference in Cairo is not the best way to recall the heyday of Jews in Egypt, especially in view of the associations that some of the organisers have with Zionist currents.

The first edition of Beinin's work appeared, in English, ten years ago, and last year it was translated into Arabic amid a growing interest in the issue of Egyptian Jews that Beinin himself finds somewhat unexpected.

This sudden interest has prompted Cairo bookstores to cater to an increasing demand, going beyond researchers and historians, for books on the lives of Jews in Egypt.

Assistants at two leading Cairo bookstores told the *Weekly* that the interest in Egyptian Jewry was part of a growing interest in the recent past of Egypt in general, which they argued had been triggered by Alaa Al-Aswany's hit novel *The Yacoubian Building*. This instigated a wave of nostalgia, further emphasised by last year's widely acclaimed Ramadan soap-opera, "Farouk," which offered an alternative view of the life of Egypt's last king who, rightly or wrongly, was demonised in the minds of the post-revolutionary generation.

While this interest is more in the Egyptian monarchy than it is in Egypt's Jews, there is still more interest in the Jews than there is in Egypt's Armenian community, for example, which is still vibrant in comparison.

Along with the books by Beinin, Haroun and al-Hakim, Cairo bookstores have been stocked with other titles on Egyptian and Arab Jews over the past few years, including Mohamed Aboulghars's *Egypt's Jewry: From Prosperity to Diaspora* and an Arabic translation of Jacques Hasoun's *L'histoire des Juifs du Nil.*

Most recently, there has been the publication of Lucette Lagnado's 2007 book *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, which examines the "lavish" lifestyles of Egyptian Jews living "en ville" when "Cairo was a place of pleasure," and where Jews on the eve of Shabbat would walk "in elegant suits... to the temple [carrying] their prayer shawls, prayer books and skullcaps." This was a Cairo in which King Farouk would send a representative to celebrations of Jewish holidays, and where a Jewish businessman enjoying a good reputation could do business on a gentleman's agreement, not needing any "signed documents or pre-arranged credit." All this characterised the lives of prosperous Jewish families in Egypt until the early 1950s when "any sense of security [became] illusionary" as "the Jews of Egypt were now seen as the enemy in the same way that Israel was the enemy."

According to Zamir, there is a similar mood of nostalgia in Israel. Having published her mother's memoirs on living in and leaving Egypt a few years ago, Zamir has recently published her own book on *The Golden Era of the Jews of Egypt*, which has appeared in both Hebrew and English.

For Meital, most of the literature that has been appearing on the Israeli side bears witness to the lives of comfort and even splendour that the Jews of Egypt enjoyed before they left, despite complaints about how Jews were treated in Egypt in the years between the 1948 and 1967 wars. This comfort is made all the more stark by comparisons to the hardships such Jews faced during their first decades in Israel, not just as a result of the construction of the new state, but also because they were Sephardic and not Ashkenazi and therefore were the object of discrimination.

In Zamir's view the need to acknowledge the past experience of Egyptian Jews, both by the Jews, whether they stayed or left, and by the rest of the Egyptian population, is way overdue. The "historic visit of Sadat to Jerusalem and the establishment of the precious Egyptian-Israeli peace 30 years ago" should have opened the door to such recognition, she argues.

However, judging by the sensitivity that Egyptian society demonstrated towards the participation of some leading cultural figures in last year's centenary of the synagogue on Adly Street in Cairo, and the equal sensitivity that was shown this week to the holding of a conference on Egyptian Jews, it seems that the politics of the Arab-Israeli struggle will continue to haunt the history of the Jews in Egypt.

Indeed, Egypt's remaining Jews, who once tried to mediate between Nasser, and later Sadat, and Israel, are now steering clear of politics.

Carmen Weinstein, for example, the tight-lipped president of the Egyptian Jewish community is unwilling to discuss anything even remotely connected to politics. Due to these restrictions and to other restrictions on how and when she conducts interviews, Weinstein would not comment on the news of last week's cancelled conference, leaving for an overseas trip just days before the scheduled opening date.

The dozens of elderly Jews still living in Cairo and Alexandria did not receive the news of the conference warmly, fearing that such a gathering would only put the community in the spotlight at a time when Jews, due to the seemingly never- ending Arab-Israeli struggle, are no longer always welcome members of society.

The precise nature of this week's cancelled conference on Egypt's Jews was called into question earlier this week when a note appeared on the Website of the Cairo Jewish Community Council (JCC) to the effect that the JCC board and members "refuse to have anything to do with this pseudo-Congress."

"It has accidentally come to the attention of the Cairo JCC that Mrs Ada Aharoni and Ms Levana Zamir of Israel are organising what they dub a 'tour of Cairo and Alexandria by the Congress of Jews from Egypt'... with the Israeli Academic Centre in Cairo which will host 'a full-day session at the Academy,'" the note read.

However, it said that the head of the Israeli Academic Centre, Professor Rosenbaum, had denied all involvement. "There won't be any talks or meetings with Egyptian personalities; neither will there be a 'full day of conferences', as advertised by the promoters of the said Congress." The advertised tour of the Cairo synagogues including a visit to the Geniza exhibition preceded or followed by prayers at the Shaar Hashamaym Synagogue "cannot take place since both the Cairo JCC board and its members refuse to have anything to do with this pseudo-Congress."

The JCC note finished with the words that, "this notice is published by the Cairo and Alexandria Jewish Community Councils, so that those who choose to participate in the proposed Congress tour will know what to expect."

Today, walking through Egypt's old Jewish quarters, or passing the upscale buildings that well-off Jews once occupied, visitors will see few remaining signs of the past. Only the synagogues -- mostly poorly preserved, like many other Coptic and Muslim monuments -- and the old Jewish school in Al-Abbasiya in Cairo remain. The later building now partly serves as a community centre for Egypt's remaining Jews, and volumes of religious, civil and historical documents are kept there, though these are off limits even to Jewish researchers.

Indeed, "what is the point of all this?" asks Albert Arié, an Egyptian Jew who converted to Islam in 1966 in order to marry the woman he loved. "The Jews were here. They lived here, and then they left. Some stayed, but this is a world that has gone."

Arié still lives in the downtown Cairo flat that he first entered as a five-year- old over 70 years ago with his father Jacques Arie whose initials are still on the door. The latter died in Egypt in 1959, and Albert Arié's mother left Cairo to join a sister in France -- France, but definitely not Israel -- in 1965 at a time of serious concern over the fate of the Jews in Egypt, no matter how traditionally secular the Ariés were.

Arié, however, does not hang on to the past. "The past is not coming back," he says. "The end of Egyptian Jewry happened, and that is that."