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The last Jews in Egypt

NOW talks to Magda Haroun, head of the Cairo Jewish Community



To be a minority in the Middle East is exasperating. With the growing sectarian conflict and spread of extremism, minorities usually slide into the background and are either forgotten or forced to pay the price of conflict. But to be an Egyptian Jew is beyond challenging. It is like a scar, marked on your ID, indicating a history of burdened identity and strenuous struggle for belonging. It is like being trapped in an endless conflict between your perception of yourself, your identity, and the box everyone wants you to stay in. Being an Egyptian Jew is a state of constant struggle for survival and belonging.

Magda Haroun, the head of the Cairo Jewish Community, knows a lot about this struggle. She

has lived her life trying to reconcile her Jewishness with her Egyptian identity. She cannot say she has entirely succeeded, but she has no choice but to keep trying.

Talking about the history of the Jews of Egypt with Haroun in Beirut was not a common or nonchalant conversation. Lebanon also lost its Jewish community between 1967 and the civil war in the 1970's. There are now no more than a 100 Jews living in Lebanon. The changes both Egyptian and Lebanese societies underwent had a negative impact on minorities, but for the Jews it was especially horrific in both cases.

There were 80,000 Jews in Egypt before the 1950s, when the general population of Egypt was 20 million. "Today we are seven old women in a population of 90 million Egyptians," Haroun tells NOW during an interview in one a hotel lobby in Beirut.

With the growing nationalism in 1956, the situation became more difficult for the Egyptian Jews. President Jamal Abdel Nasser started a mass expulsion of Egyptian Jews in which some Jews were issued one-way travel documents, while others were stripped of their property and pressured to leave the country. Several Jews were arrested and Jewish businesses were seized by the government. Jewish bank accounts were confiscated and many Jews lost their jobs.

The few hundred that stayed after this campaign were subjugated to a serious crackdown in 1967. They were given the choice of leaving Egypt or remaining in prison. Most of them went straight to the airport, but Madga Haroun's family was one of those very few who decided to stay. She was 15 in 1967, and her father was arrested along with all Jewish males between the ages of 18 and 60. "My father was Egyptian, and he did not do anything wrong. He shouldn't have left and I am happy we stayed."

Haroun, her sisters and a few other women in the community ended up marrying non-Jews. "There were no male Jews left to marry," Haroun says with a cynical smile, but, she continues "my first husband was a Muslim, and so are my daughters. My current husband is a Catholic, so in a way, we are the only house in Egypt where the three religions are living under one roof."

Haroun herself is not particularly religious and she did not raise her daughters to be religious but she did ensure they learned about all three religions equally. They didn't really have problems growing up with a Jewish mother, except when Haroun's father died. "My daughters went to a French school, and nobody asked any questions until my father died. People started reading about it in media, so the parents of the students at school were aware that my daughter's mom is Jewish. One day, she came to me and told me she hates me. I asked her

why. She said, because you're a Jewish whore." For Haroun, that was the most painful moment and her first reaction was anger and aggressiveness. "I had to control myself and calm down so I could sit her down and talk to her about religions until she came around. It all went well afterwards, but it wasn't an easy time."

Many Egyptians are not aware that there is a Jewish community in Egypt, or that there ever was. "Sometimes when I say 'our – or my – country' during media interviews, the host will ask which country I mean. Can you believe it?" Haroun said that she is always faced with people thinking that she is Israeli, although she speaks Egyptian and has lived in Egypt all her life. "Once, the bank teller asked me to get the embassy's approval [referring to the Israeli embassy] and my answer was: so Egypt now has an embassy inside Egypt, too?"

But Haroun recognizes this as mere ignorance, not antagonism. "Things are changing now. We are being mentioned more in the media and people are starting to hear about us, as Egyptian citizens. For the first time since the 1950s, the Jewish religion is again mentioned in the constitution." According to Haroun, the change started during the rule of the Muslim Brothers, when Issam al Arian, deputy head of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and an adviser to Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, called on Egyptian Jews expelled by Abdel Nasser to return to Egypt. "This statement brought us to the news and to my first TV appearance. When I was asked about this statement, I thanked Al-Aryan because he opened a Pandora's box." Right after that, film director Amir Ramsis released his documentary about the Jews of Egypt in the theaters. "Many young Egyptians came to see it and it was extended for a third week, although the government was planning to ban it. The attention it received helped against the ban."

The community started to become more visible and, despite its very small size, they felt the support of the young generation who wanted to see a more tolerant and diverse Egypt. "When my predecessor died, many came to the condolences at the Synagogue," Haroun says with obvious excitement. "Yes, I am hopeful that things will be better, because I see how these young Egyptians are trying to change."

Her biggest concern is their heritage. There are 12 Synagogues in Egypt, 10 of which are under the umbrella of the Ministry of Antiquities, in addition to a vast amount of Torah scrolls and records. "We cannot practice our religion because there are no rabbis," she says. When her sister died last year, Haroun had to invite a rabbi from France. "During holidays, we get together, cook and invite friends over. I am 63 years old and I am the youngest. We are seven old women, who are not very demanding, but we do not want to lose our heritage."

Haroun has asked for help many times, and many International Jewish organizations have

offered help, “but help always came with a price,” she says with a note of desperation. Most of the organizations wanted to take the scrolls and records. “These scrolls are Egyptian heritage and should stay in Egypt, as part of its diverse history. There is no way I am going to let them out of my country.” Haroun doesn’t really have other options. The Ministry of Antiquities doesn’t have enough funds now to restore Jewish heritage. “This ministry is supported by tourism, and now our tourism sector is in very bad shape. Things are changing and they do want to help us now, but they don’t have the resources.”

The remaining seven Jews in Egypt are no longer threatened by government expulsion or other punitive measures, but little can be done to reverse the community’s waning heritage or impending extinction. Haroun is very much aware of this, but she cannot stop dreaming and trying.

“There is one old Synagogue in Misr El-Gedida that is not covered by the government. I wish I could turn it into a cultural center before I die. I want to see it as a hub for all Egyptians from all religions and sects, where they can come to enjoy literature, music and cinema.” But she needs funds to restore it, and the support of the ministry to move the scrolls and records to one of its rooms, so for now, this is just a dream.

Another dream is to restore the Jewish cemetery in Cairo. The cemetery dates back to the 9th century, and according to Haroun, is the second oldest Jewish cemetery after that of the Mount of Olives. It is in a very bad shape. “It is today surrounded by densely-populated slums and cannot be saved unless we develop the area around it. It is indeed a huge and expensive project, but it is worth it.”

Haroun knows that sooner than later, the Jewish Egyptian community will vanish entirely. There’s nothing she can do about it. But she still has hopes of saving the heritage, preserving the records and scrolls in a safe place, restoring the synagogues, opening a cultural center and renovating the cemetery.

“I need help, but I will not give up our scrolls or records in return. We are going to end soon as a community, but our heritage should not end, and it has to stay in Egypt to remind the coming generations that we were here.”

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