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Alexandria's Jews: 20 Women and 3 Men

Yoav Stern | Sep 17, 2006 12:00 AM

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ALEXANDRIA - Nabi Daniel Street was once the center of this cosmopolitan city. Elegant people dressed in clothes of every type and religion used to walk here. They made their way from the beachfront promenade, through Saad Zaghloul Square, inward to the city center - passing by the grand facades of the skyscrapers of that era, four to five stories high.

A few dozen meters back from the street, at number 69, stands the main synagogue of Alexandria, named for the prophet Elijah. It was completed in 1884, and it greatly resembles European churches of

the time. All seats were filled by dues-paying members. From the dais to the back row, the dozens of seats are affixed with metal plates bearing members' names.

The array of names is staggering: Jews of Ashkenazi descent sat here alongside those born in Arab lands. Jews from throughout the world, locals and strangers, Arabic and French speakers, filled the hall on holidays. One community member, Nanda Hagar, recalls the women's section on the second floor was also filled to capacity: "My mother told me, when we came on the holidays, that we must pay or else we would not have seats," she said.

Today the congregation numbers 20 women and three men, and is headed by its eldest member, Dr. Max Salame, who is around 90. His deputy is Ben Gaon, 52, divorced with no children. The women make occasional appearances there. Some are married to Muslims; others are widowed. All their children have emigrated or else do not consider themselves part of the Jewish community. Those present plan to celebrate Rosh Hashanah with a fish dinner, accompanied by apples and honey, at the synagogue.

Hagar, like member Luli Saad, who visited the synagogue last week, are among the youngest women in the community. They were not asked their precise age, but they appear to be at least 70. With their coiffed hair and tailored suits, one could picture them living in any European city - or alternatively, in a community of Egyptian immigrants in Israel. They converse with visitors in a variety of languages. Hagar's English is slow but solid, her Egyptian Arabic is lightening quick, and her French is pronounced with a proud and correct accent. She is current with today's means of communication, from text messaging on her mobile phone to Skype. "What's your username?" she asks in parting.

But Hagar and Saad represent a dying generation. Their parents and grandparents came here in the 19th and early 20th centuries from Europe and countries in the region. The city was in its prime then, and drew many immigrants. Things changed when Israel was founded in 1948, which created constant tension between the community and the regime that had fought to forestall it. In 1956, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized Jewish property and revoked Jews' citizenship. Only an estimated 5

percent of the community managed to preserve its Egyptian citizenship. Many in Alexandria were left with no assets and had to leave the country. Dr. Salame, it is said, used to be the Nasser family's dentist.

Last week he received visitors at his modest office, and his deputy, Ben Gaon, served light refreshments. On the wall hung a picture of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in his youth. The congregation was hoping for a complete minyan at the holiday prayer services, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee had decided to help, and last Thursday a JDC representative visited Alexandria with the president of the Jewish Community Council of Cairo, Carmen Weinstein. The small delegation was headed by the Israeli ambassador to Egypt, Shalom Cohen, who was joined by Israel's Consul General in Alexandria, Eli Entebi. The conversation in Dr. Salame's office was conducted in fluent French.

"I came to say Shana Tova on behalf of the government of Israel," Cohen said. Entebi promised to attend Yom Kippur services, thereby increasing to four the roster of Jewish men present on the holiday. What will be next year? "God only knows."



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