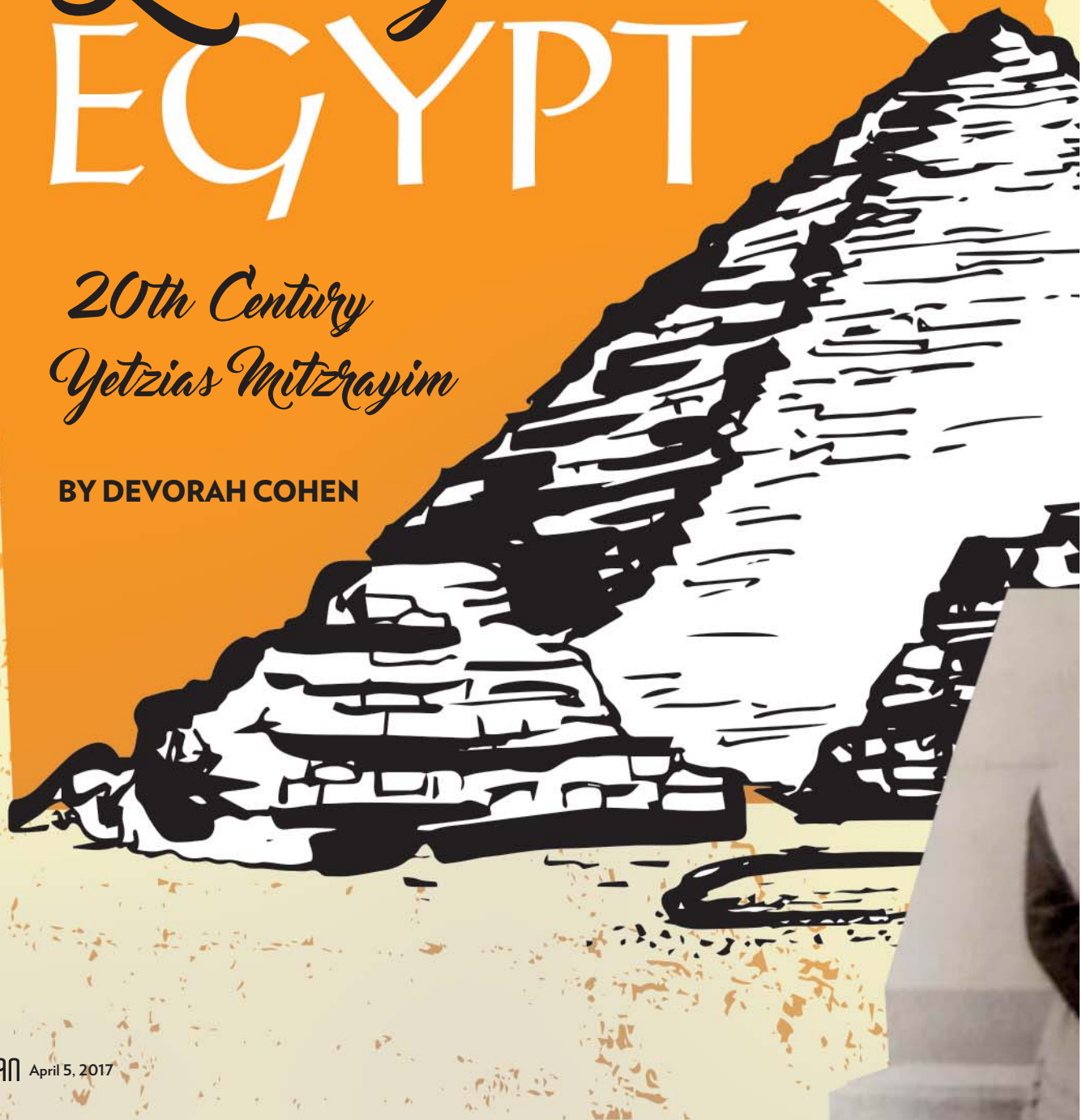
Leaving EGYPT

20th Century Yetzias Mitzrayim

BY DEVORAH COHEN



"'In every generation a person is obligated to see himself as if he personally went out of Egypt.' I can see that very clearly, and I can truly feel it," says Rabbi Albert Gabbai, originally from Cairo. "Every year when we would read the Haggadah we'd say to ourselves, 'What are we doing here in Egypt? We're supposed to be out of Egypt!' Every year we said, 'This will be our last year; we'll go to Jerusalem.' But even though they hated us, they made it hard for us to leave."



Jews in Egypt

Like their Biblical forerunners, the Egyptians of the twentieth century temporarily played host to the Jewish people — close to 80,000 of them by the early 1940s.

And like their Biblical ancestors, the Jews of Egypt eventually left the country in a hurry, though without the great wealth and miraculous wonders that had accompanied their nation over 3,000 years earlier.

Here *Inyan* presents a kaleidoscope of proud *shomrei Torah u'mitzvos* who share memories of their lives in Egypt and the modern-day exodus they experienced.

Upper-Class Society

Calling them "Egyptian" is almost a misnomer, as the Jews of Egypt were in fact an amalgam of immigrants from Middle-Eastern countries like Syria, Turkey, Iran and Morocco. They spoke French at home, or even Ladino; Arabic was the language of the street.

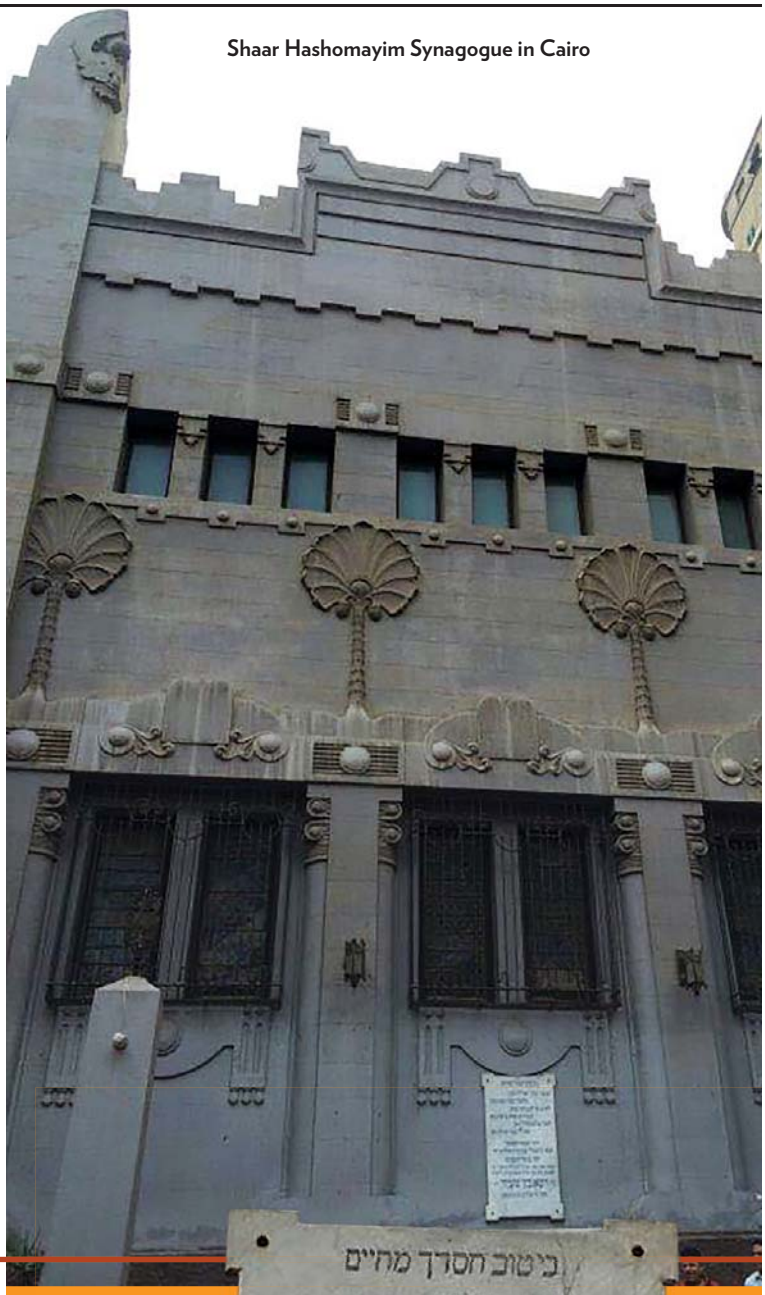
Most of these families settled in Egypt for only a generation or two, some to escape army service in their motherlands, others for more practical reasons: The Suez Canal provided trade opportunities, allowing them to make a comfortable living.

And indeed the Jews of Egypt prospered. They lived in

> *"I was born in Egypt. My mother was from Syria, my father from Iran — they met in Palestine. After World War I, my father had left Iran, although his family stayed. He needed to make a living — there was no money, no food and no work in Eretz Yisrael. He worked in Egypt to send money to his family. In 1920 he wanted to get married. His mother told him, 'Lo tikach ishah miMitzrayim.' So he came to visit his mother and got in touch with an uncle who had a sister ... and so he met my mother. He married her on condition that they live in Egypt. Her parents lived in Palestine, so my father promised his mother-in-law that every year his wife would go to visit and stay with them for two months. For many years she would go with the children — and her parents would come to Egypt and stay with her when she gave birth."*
>
> —Mrs. Adele Shwekey, from Cairo, now living in Lakewood, NJ



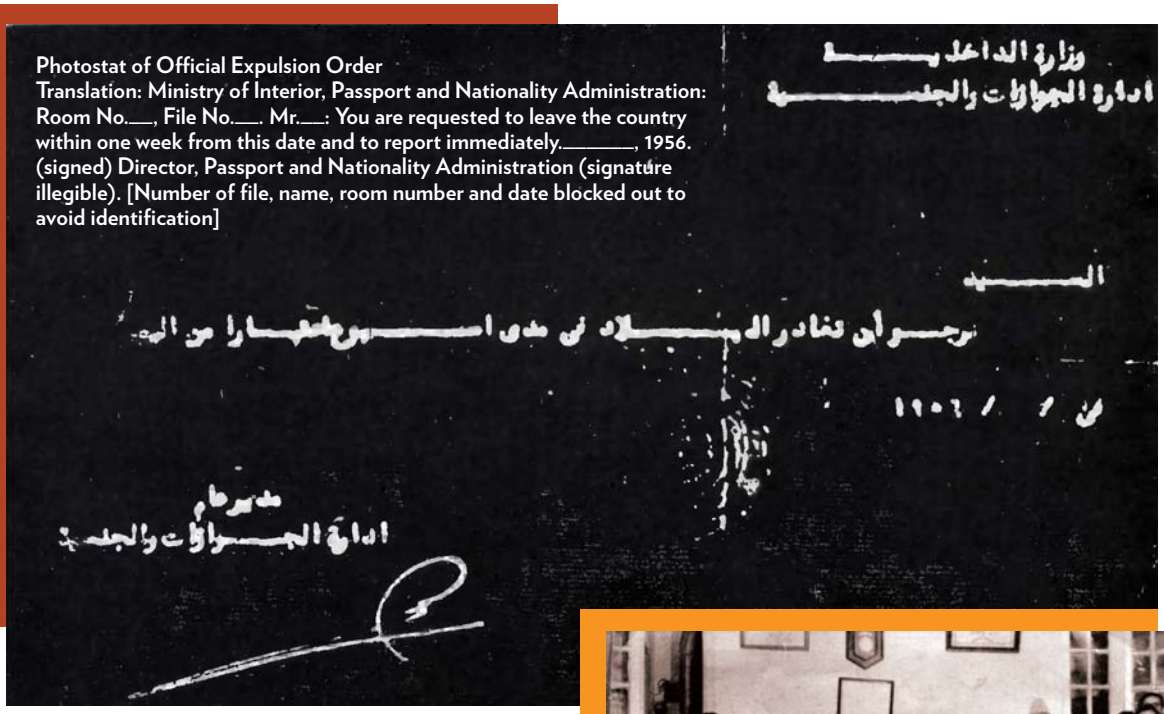
Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue in Cairo





Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue in Cairo





Photostat of Official Expulsion Order
Translation: Ministry of Interior, Passport and Nationality Administration: Room No.___, File No.___. Mr.___: You are requested to leave the country within one week from this date and to report immediately._____, 1956. (signed) Director, Passport and Nationality Administration (signature illegible). [Number of file, name, room number and date blocked out to avoid identification]



Cairo Egypt 1947 Yeshivat Ahaha Vehava. The bearded man in the middle is Hacham Ovadia Yosef.

luxurious apartments among Europeans and wealthy Egyptians.

"Jews were upper-class citizens. We lived in Cairo, in the city, where it was very affluent," says Chaim, who left Egypt at age 9 and now lives in Queens, New York.

The Jews ran businesses and were largely responsible for Egypt's successful economy. They owned factories and provided jobs.

"The Arabs were very poor and primitive," recalls Rabbi Shmuel Choueka, who left Cairo at age 7 and now is a Rav in Long Branch, NJ. "The kids ran around barefoot. Their favorite pastime was finding old tires and pushing them around the street with sticks."

"For us, life was beautiful," attests Rabbi Choueka's sister, Mrs. Sara Malka, who left Egypt at 17 and now lives in Brooklyn. "There was an abundance of household help because that's how it is in Arab countries — the help is very cheap. We had beautiful stores, and we went to tailors to get [our clothes] custom-made. The Jews made Egypt very European. France would send their ballets and classical plays to Cairo and the Jews attended these."

"Egypt had a lot going for it, says Shlomo of Cherry Hill, New Jersey, who was 12 when his family left Egypt. "A good economy, low cost of living, great produce, live-in maids. We used to spend the summers on the Mediterranean, at a town called Abu Qir. Imagine Jewish families vacationing on the Mediterranean, kids playing on the beach, parents playing Bingo, cases of mango and sacks of pistachios."

When his uncle decided to leave Egypt in 1945 because he no longer wanted to live among Arabs, "My dad said, 'Are you out of your mind? You're going to leave this lush life?'"

Religious Institutions

While Jewish schools existed on and off in Egypt, the quality of their Jewish education was not high. Most were run by the French Alliance, which was affiliated with the Haskalah movement, although many of the Egyptian Jews weren't aware of that. The curriculum emphasized Zionism, and the students learned Hebrew, basic *Chumash*, the *siddur*, and Jewish history. The handful of Arab children who also attended were sent to play during the Jewish studies.

"I remember [when] we were learning the *siddur*, we would cover the books, [as if] the Arabs weren't allowed to see our *siddur*," says Rabbi Shmuel Choueka. In the Alliance school they also learned to read and write Arabic.

It was not unusual for Jewish children to attend the private French schools, some of which were Catholic. Victor Mayo, who left Egypt at 13 and now lives in Karmiel, Eretz Yisrael, recalls, "When I started going [to the Catholic school] I was young. All the kids went to the chapel to pray. I came home on Sunday and told my parents about my day — I went to pray in the

Name plaque in Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue in Cairo.
Inset: schedule of *tefillos* from Rosh Hashanah 1958 in Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue.

chapel. They said, 'No, no, don't do that! You are a Jew!' While the Christians learned Catechism, the Arabs and Jews had a separate nonreligious class of '*mussar*,' how to behave nicely."

A minority of Jewish children, like Mrs. Malka, were fortunate enough to have private tutors at home who taught them *Chumash*, Rashi and *dikduk*.

For most of the first half of the twentieth century, religion was practiced openly in Egypt. Each neighborhood had two or three large shuls, with smaller congregations existing as well. Shlomo remembers "synagogues a block long, [with] beautiful marble, and *chazzanim*."

Rabbi Albert Gabbai, today the Rabbi of one of America's oldest synagogues, Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, recalls the Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue in Cairo, which was built in 1905. "There was a choir, we led the prayers... It was very elaborate — it would rival synagogues anywhere. It has since been renovated, and that's the only part of Egypt I would want to go back to see."


الطائفة الاسرائيلية بالقاهرة
COMMUNAUTÉ ISRAÉLITE DU CAIRE
קק שער השמים
Grand Temple d'Ismilia
CHAAR HACHAMAIM
זמני התפלות בראש השנה לשנת התשי"ט
مواعيد صلوات رأس السنة لعام ٥٧١٩
الموافق ١٥ و١٦ سبتمبر ١٩٥٨
Prière de Rosh Hashana 5719
15 et 16 Septembre 1958

	Heure	Minute	
Arbith 1er soir	6	—	ערבית ליל ראשון
" 2e. "	6	—	ערבית ליל שני
Chahrith	7	30	שחרית
Yotsér	8	15	יוצר
Séfarim	9	30	מצר
Moussaf	10	50	מוסף
Min'ha	5	30	מנחה

ליל כפור
SOIR DE KIPPOUR

Mizmor	6	30	לך אלי
Petiha	7	—	פתיחה
Kol Nidrei	7	10	כל נדרי
Arbith	7	45	ערבית

Religious Life

Shlomo's father closed his shop on Friday afternoons, and he recalls accompanying his mother to buy a chicken, which they brought to the *shochet* for slaughter; his mother did the salting. But many of the Jews in Egypt, although traditional, were not grounded in Torah, Mrs. Malka says. The influence of the Haskalah from the French was strong.

Although the class difference between Arabs and Jews ensured that intermarriage was virtually nonexistent, many families were not *shomer Shabbos* and did not keep kosher, or kept *kashrus* only in the home. The nondenominational French schools

> *"L'maaseh, we would have lost our Yiddishkeit very quickly there. Even though we were shomer Shabbat, kept kosher — al pi hadin we got on very well. But the light of Yiddishkeit was absent. Before the tensions [erupted] between Egypt and Israel, my uncles went to Yeshivat Porat Yosef in Eretz Yisrael. They went by train — it was a four-hour trip — and came home for Pesach. Our grandfather knew Shas and Shulchan Aruch by heart at the age of 17. My father was learned, but not as much as his brothers. I knew less, and what would my children have known?"*
>
> —Mrs. Sara Malka, from Cairo, now living in Brooklyn


Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue in Cairo



Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue in Cairo

> *"We had a department store called Les Grands Magasins Cicurel, owned by the Jewish Cicurel family. When the store burned down, King Farouk called Mr. Cicurel in and told him to rebuild the store and he would contribute 50 percent because that's where he did his shopping."*
>
> —Shlomo from Cairo, now living in Cherry Hill, NJ

that the children attended were open on Shabbos. "We went to school on Shabbat, but we did not write," says Mrs. Malka. But most children did.

The Jews of Egypt were very cultured, she says, but the movies, the Sunday trips to the pyramids, the clubs where they played tennis and swam — it was a secular culture that they enjoyed. There was no Jewish music — they listened to classical or French. "Life was devoid of the soul of *Yiddishkeit*," Mrs. Malka says, "because you need an example to learn these things from. My father had his father from Syria, but my generation didn't have that."

Her mother, Mrs. Adele Shwekey, now a nonagenarian, who lived in Egypt until she was 34, reflects, "There was no Torah, no yeshivot in Egypt, so a lot of people assimilated. It wasn't a strong community — the family was the stronghold and each person kept his own *minhagim*. *Baruch Hashem*, by us it was strong."

Pesach

Pesach in Egypt was much like it is all over the world. The houses were cleaned thoroughly and repainted as well. Mrs. Malka remembers that the preparations included opening the quilts and mattresses to restring the cotton and wash the outsides.

Nearly all the food was made at home from scratch, including jams, syrups for juice and even wine. And a hot climate and minimal refrigeration (Shlomo remembers having an ice box only in his later years there) meant that cooking had to be done as close to the holiday as possible. The large round matzos were bought from the communal bakery overseen by the Rabbinate, and came in bamboo baskets wrapped in paper. Before 1948 matzos were also imported from Palestine.

Charoses recipes varied depending on the country of origin of each family. "People from Baghdad made it with dates and silan," recalls Rabbi Gabbai, whose father had been born there. "Those from Turkey had a different recipe."

The well-known Sephardic *minhag* took on a special poignancy in Egypt. "Our father would dress us like the Jews traveling in the desert," recalls Rabbi Gabbai. "We would have a stick, a belt and a robe — a bathrobe. He would ask, 'Children of Israel, where are you coming from?' and we'd answer, 'Mitzrayim.' 'Where are you going?' 'Yerushalayim.'"

Relations With Their Neighbors

"Life was good," remembers Mrs. Shwekey. "The Arabs had *derech eretz*. They treated you well if you treated them well." King Farouk, who ruled until 1952, was kind to the Jews, and his subjects followed his example.

"The adults and kids got along with the Arabs. It was very friendly — no one was taught to hate Jews," Chaim adds. "We lived among them in Cairo." Right across the street from his apartment was a mosque where prayers were held five times a day — very loudly. "At one point, I knew most of it by heart," Chaim laughs.

> *"Our last name sounded Turkish, and my father wore a fez and spoke classical Arabic. He respected the sheikhs and got along with everyone. He used to do kiruv with the Arabs. They would come to him and tell him they wanted to 'go straight' [i.e., earn an honest living] and he would give them merchandise on credit. I remember going downtown with my father and seeing a young boy bring him his wallet. Another pickpocket had taken it, but the first one told him, 'You can't steal from this man,' and they returned it."*
>
> —Shlomo from Cairo, now living in Cherry Hill, NJ





Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo

"There was no hate up to the end, but then it went downhill very fast," Chaim remembers.

After 1948, when Israel became a state, tensions increased for the Jews as the Egyptians expressed their resentment. "The men never wore *yarmulkes* in the streets — they wore a fez," says Mrs. Malka. "You didn't antagonize the Arabs with your Jewishness. You could have been lynched."

Sometimes policemen or detectives would come to check their houses. "You couldn't own any Judaica," Mrs. Malka recalls. "We didn't light the *menorah* near a window or even own a *menorah*. We lit eight glasses of equal height and a tall one for the *shamash* in a niche in the dining room."

But it was the Sinai War with Israel in 1956 that changed life in Egypt most drastically for the Jews. Gamal Abdel Nasser became the president of Egypt, and as a former military general, he encouraged nationalism — and anti-Semitism.

Overnight, Jews became the enemy.

The Egyptians were paranoid about Israel, fearing the Jews would spy on its behalf. "They didn't differentiate between Judaism and Zionism," explains Mrs. Malka.

"There was propaganda everywhere," recalls Rabbi Gabbai — "loudspeakers, newspapers: 'Throw the Jews into the sea!' You wouldn't acknowledge that you were a Jew in the streets. If they heard you say '*Shema Yisrael*,' the word *Yisrael* would set them off and they'd put you in a prison camp and interrogate you and ask, 'How are you spying? Who are you in contact with?'"

Once, in a train station, Arabs accosted Victor Mayo and his siblings, screaming, "Zionists!" "They didn't know to say Jews," Victor says. "They called us Zionists." During the Sinai War, Victor recalls people yelling up to their apartment building at night, "Cohen family, turn off the light!" "They didn't want us signaling to Israeli pilots."

"We had to cover our windows at night — blackout conditions," Rabbi Choueka remembers. "We had a radio with a little light and we'd hover over it to make sure the light didn't show. [During the Sinai Campaign] everyone had to observe the blackout, but they targeted the Jews much more."

> *"I was 12 years old. We had a big boulevard not far from our house. Nasser used to hold victory parades there after the Sinai War — he lost that war but paraded himself as a hero. I remember watching. I had an urge to yell something loudly about Israel just to be a smart aleck. Thank G-d, I didn't — who knows what would have happened to my family!"*
>
> —Victor Mayo from Helopolis, Egypt, now living in Karmiel, Eretz Yisrael

"We couldn't listen to Israeli news on the radio," says Victor. "My father had a brother who had left Egypt for Israel in the late '40s and we were very careful not to talk much about it. We never said the word 'Israel,' we would say '*chez nous*,' 'by us,' meaning 'in our country.'"

"They once took my father in for questioning," Chaim recalls. "They claimed he was signaling to Israeli pilots, something ridiculous like that. He had a friend in the police force, so he was able to get out of it."

But incidents like those became more common. There were cases of arson at Jewish businesses. When Victor was coming home from school one day, three teens jumped on him and stuffed sharp, thorny fruit down his shirt.

"I was crazy about playing soccer — what they called 'football,'" says Shlomo. "If I missed, they called me a name that meant 'foreigner.' Towards the end, you felt like you were being persecuted; it was in the atmosphere. People were worried about Israel, worried about their future." His teenage cousins participated in sports leagues that played against Arab teams. "There was some sort of dispute and they came home and said, 'We gotta leave.'"

> *"During '56 they took my father and imprisoned him for a night or two. Then they released him with an order to leave Egypt in two weeks. He had good Egyptian friends who said, 'If you want to stay we'll help you.' But my mother wanted to leave. Thank G-d, my parents thought that way; thank G-d Nasser threw us out. Otherwise we'd still be in Egypt."*
>
> —Victor Mayo from Helopolis, Egypt, now living in Karmiel, Eretz Yisrael

Leaving Egypt



Although in 1956 some Jews left on their own, sensing impending trouble, Nasser made it official for the rest. Those who were citizens of other countries were





Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo

declared foreigners and expelled, including the French who ran the schools. "Overnight we had no more schools, no more recreation, shuls were closed," says Mrs. Malka. "Jews who had been born in Egypt and held Egyptian passports could stay, but their businesses were seized. Someone came in and took over and the Jewish owner had to work for him."

"My father had a business in a very big business district called the Muski," says Shlomo. "They would go in and put red tape on any Jewish business and go to the owners' homes and tell them they had 24 hours to leave the country."

"Nasser sent us a notice that we had to leave," recalls Chaim. "We took just a suitcase. We had to leave everything — money, possessions.... They even searched us to make sure we hadn't taken anything. There were never any reparations for everything we left behind."

Some families were trapped in Egypt, despite wanting to leave. "We were waiting for an opportunity to go; we had no one outside [the country]," says Mrs. Shwekey. The remnants of the community were confined by a strict curfew. With the French schools closed, the children had nothing to do. So unofficial schools, were established and Mrs. Malka, a teenager, became the teacher of 30 children assembled on benches in someone's home.

"My father was studying the production of rubber and had a factory producing pastel-colored beach shoes for women. There was an Arab taking most of the product from the factory, and in the end, he didn't pay. When a Jew went to court against an Arab he had no chance, so my father lost a lot of money. In the end, he just wanted his family out of there; he didn't want anything to stop us from leaving. He liquidated his business for pennies on the dollar — they sacrificed so we would have a future."

—Shlomo from Cairo, now living in Cherry Hill, NJ

"My sister lived in an apartment directly across from an Arab family. When both front doors were open, the Egyptian woman could see right into their apartment. She made my sister's life miserable. She'd say, 'I want your carpet.' It was a Persian rug. When they were forced to go, they had to leave everything there. The neighbor took the carpet."

—Mrs. Adele Shwekey, from Cairo, now living in Lakewood, NJ

This was when Harav Avraham Kalmanowitz, *zt"l, Rosh Yeshivah* of the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn, entered the picture. Through HIAS he negotiated a "*Kindertransport*" of sorts, assuring the American government that he would provide for the nearly 25 Sephardic *bachurim* who agreed to leave their families and travel to New York on student visas. Mrs. Malka's brother was one of them. He was 14. "Everyone sent their sons, but they thought they would never see them again," she says.

However, Rabbi Kalmanowitz was working tirelessly on behalf of the families, negotiating, begging and raising money. In an ingenious scheme, he went to the U.S. Senate and arranged that quotas which had been opened for Hungarians fleeing the communists after the Hungarian Revolution could be filled by any refugees fleeing harassment. In 1958 Mrs. Malka and her family left Egypt for France, where they stayed for over a year, eventually obtaining visas to the United States.

They remember their maids crying when they left, even wanting to accompany their Jewish employers. "They knew no one else would treat them so well," says Mrs. Malka. "My

grandmother would serve the maids meals in their quarters before we ate."

"My mom used to send the maids home with food and clothing," adds Shlomo, who left in 1961. "I think people were not happy to see us leave. The Jews ran the business, the finance. When they kicked us out, the country lost that — people were starving."

"They offered us good deals to stay," recalls Mrs. Shwekey. "They said they would give us food, and so on, because they wanted us to rebuild Egypt."

The Jews left by ship from the port of Alexandria. They were not able to go directly to the United States or Israel, but were sent to destinations such as France or Italy.

The Remaining Jews

Those who didn't leave immediately — either because they didn't want to abandon their families, businesses and assets, or simply because they didn't know where to go — didn't have it easy. By the mid-1960s "there was really no *mamashut* for life. Anyone who stayed was on his own because there was no society left," Mrs. Shwekey states. "They were not welcome. There was no *shochet*; the Rabbinate closed." All incoming and outgoing mail was censored, so they had to take precautions in their correspondence with relatives who had left Egypt — otherwise the letters wouldn't be delivered and the police would take the family for questioning. "They stayed, but it was to their detriment," Mrs. Shwekey adds. "In the end, they were forced to go and leave everything behind anyway."



Ahaba VeAhva shul in Flatbush

Rabbi Gabbai was one of those few. His family was planning to leave in 1967, but before they could do so, the Six Day War broke out. "I was in high school. They came with a submachine gun and said, 'You follow me.'" The Egyptians rounded up most of the Jewish men, around 350 in total, and put them in prison camps not far from Cairo. "The cells were made for 30, 40 people. We had 70 in each," Rabbi Gabbai recalls. They were held there for three years.

"In the beginning it was very bad, and then after six months they let us do whatever we wanted," he remembers. "My family was very observant. In the prison camps some Jews ate whatever they were given, but we didn't touch anything but vegetables." Eventually the women and children were allowed





"My parents got tourist visas to come visit the U.S. in 2008 for my first child's birth. While they were here, we got asylum papers. They were rejected twice — despite the fact that in Egypt they couldn't provide freedom of speech and religion for their children! A big firm took over the case for the last deportation hearing, and we had witnesses who were influential figures from the American community in Egypt who knew my parents and had been helped by them there. In the end they were able to stay. They came with only a couple of suit bags; they left everything behind."

—Racheline Mayer from Alexandria, now living in Boston



Harav Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*, in the Ahaba VeAhva shul in Flatbush

to come visit, and his mother brought them kosher meat and chicken.

The women wrote letters to the Red Cross and to other governments, pleading for help. After three years the men were taken to the airport one day and flown to Paris. Their mothers, wives and children followed a few weeks later.

Egypt Today

And what of Jewish life in Egypt after the mass exodus of the Jews?

Racheline Mayer and her sister were the last two Jewish girls from Alexandria, living there until 2001, when they were in their late teens. As Jews, life was difficult — and dangerous. "Our *mezuzah* was inside the door, not outside. At home we had Torah; outside the house our identity was a secret." As a preschooler, when her teacher was dividing the class into Muslims and Christians for religious studies, Racheline spoke up and said, "I'm Jewish." The other children made fun of her, and her father had to explain to her that their Jewishness was not something she could publicize.

As Racheline grew older, the incidences of anti-Semitism were far less innocuous. "My neighbor would complain to our faces about the Jews and Americans, and say they should be put in fire; [we] couldn't respond." At her sister's college there was nearly a riot when word of their Jewish identity got out. Students lit fires and threatened her sister's life.

"We were very lucky," Racheline says, describing her emigration. "I don't take it for granted."

Mrs. Sheila Kurtzer, wife of diplomat Daniel Kurtzer, an observant Jew who served as U.S. ambassador to Egypt during the Clinton administration, lived in Egypt for a total of six and a half years, leaving last in 2001. Her memories are of a Jewish community that had almost completely died out. "All the men had passed away. The elderly Jewish women would meet at the Shaar Hashomayim shul — not to *daven*, just to get together. The only time there were services was when the Israeli Embassy decided to hold them.

"We'd see elderly Jewish women who would bring along a daughter, but their daughters came alone because they'd married Egyptians. The next generation had slowly intermarried because there was no one left."

Racheline says that activists from Jewish communities around the world are now trying to get Alexandria's communal records and 42 *sifrei Torah* — all in hand-engraved solid silver cases — out of Egypt.

"My brother went back with his wife to Alexandria," Shlomo relates. "He said they destroyed everything. They even took down the Jewish cemeteries in order to develop [the land]. " He reflects, "They were able to take away our possessions, but they weren't able to take what's in our heads. The Sephardim moved on and succeeded elsewhere."

"I never wanted to go back," says Mrs. Malka, "even when I had a stopover there once on the way to Eretz Yisrael." When she attended Jewish boarding school in France after leaving Egypt, she was amazed to see *Yiddishkeit* displayed so openly. "It was not hidden or second class," she marvels. "It was a beautiful experience. I remember the first time I heard everyone *bentching* together out loud, I had tears in my eyes! When we celebrate *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, we really celebrate it: leaving the desert of Egypt to come to real *Yiddishkeit*." ■



"I went back to Egypt in 1997. My wife studied anthropology in the United States. She wanted to visit the pyramids. My main thought was not to see the pyramids and museums, because I had seen them as a kid in school. I wanted to go to the big zoo at Giza. Our last day there I said, 'I want to go visit the shul of the Rambam.' It's in an Arab neighborhood. I got a driver at the zoo and told him where I wanted to go, and he took me to Cairo to find me a Jewish person to take me to the shul. We found a Jewish woman named Levy, a very old woman who lived in one room. She took us to the shul. It was a disaster. Everything was broken; the Arabs had destroyed it. A few years ago, the United States gave a large sum of money to Egypt to renovate the Rambam's Shul. I have problems walking now, and I'm not in good health, but I would love to go see that shul."

—Victor Mayo from Helopolis, Egypt,
now living in Karmiel, Eretz Yisrael