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FEATURES

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The second Jewish exodus from Egypt

TOP STORIES

Today Jews recount the miraculous exodus from Egypt. In Israel, thousands of Egyptian-born Jews, recall their expulsion from that country during the last century.

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Egyptian immigrants to Israel adapted quickly to their new country. Although today they look back with nostalgia, many will not visit the land of their youth. "The Jewish community in Egypt during the 20th century was the most modern of all the Mid-Eastern communities," says Prof. Nahem Ilan, an expert on Jewish communities in the Middle East who is currently editing a book on the history of Egyptian Jews in the modern era for the Ben Zvi

Institute in Jerusalem. "It is actually a diverse community made up of migrants. The community grew from 7,000 in the 19th century to 80,000 - an increase caused by migration." The reconstructed Suez Canal, inaugurated in 1869, had a dramatic effect on world trade. Thousands of migrants from European countries opted for Egypt to improve their financial situation, and Jews also realized that Egypt was a land of opportunity to earn a living. They came primarily from Mediterranean basin countries such as Greece, Italy and Turkey. Iraqi and Syrian Jews from Damascus and Aleppo found a home in Egypt. Yemenite Jews en route to pre-state Israel remained in Egypt where they were stranded. Jews found Egypt a haven from persecution in Russia. Jewish residents in pre-state Israel were expelled by the ruling Turks during World War I. Many went to Alexandria, including the Ambaches, parents of former first lady Aura Herzog and her sister Suzy Eban. Prof. Arie Schlosberg, who heads the Tel Aviv-based Center for the Studies of Jewish Heritage from Egypt, was born in Alexandria where he lived until he was 20. In 1910, his grandparents left Russia for Neveh Zedek where his mother was born, but as Russian citizens they were expelled to Alexandria by the Turks during Hanukka 1915. By the 1940s, 35,000 Jews lived in Alexandria, comprising 10 percent of the city's population. Many Ashkenazim were among those expelled from pre-state Israel. "Being an Ashkenazi in Alexandria wasn't an issue. Only after coming to Israel did we become aware of this," says Schlossberg, a psychiatrist, noting that even a thriving Yiddish theater existed in Cairo. The Schlossbergs were connected to pre-state Israel and would visit twice a year by train. "I was raised in a Hebrew-speaking home. My father, a physician in General Allenby's army, spoke nine languages. Because Alexandria is cosmopolitan, everyone knew by 'osmosis' at least three languages." About 95% of the Jewish population lived in Cairo and Alexandria, with the rest scattered in Port Said and other towns. Most Jews were middle class, with the wealthy wielding influence in the government and business sectors. Egyptian cinema was created by a Jew, Jacob Sanua. About

5,000-7,000 of Egyptian Jews were Karaites, who reject the rabbinic interpretation of the Torah, as opposed to Rabbinic Jews. The Karaites have their own code of laws. "Today there are nearly 30,000 Karaites in Israel, with almost all descended from Egyptian Karaites," says Prof. Ilan. "Although there have been attempts in Egypt to solve the prohibition of intermarriage between both groups, notably that of Karaite Mourad Farag, it was not successful." In Israel, Karaites live in Ramle, Ashdod, Ofakim, Bat Yam, Beersheba, Kiryat Gat and Jerusalem. Two Egyptian Jews from these communities are buried near each other in Jerusalem's Mt. Herzl cemetery: Shmuel Azar was Rabbinic, and Dr. Moshe Marzouk was Karaite. Operatives for Israel in Egypt, they belonged to the spy ring that triggered the Lavon Affair (that caused political upheaval in Israel and forced Defense Minister Pinhas Lavon to resign), and were executed by the Egyptians in 1954 for their espionage activities. Ilan is saddened by the fact that while the Karaites were so occupied by disputes with the Rabbinic Jews, they did not develop a cadre of researchers about their heritage. "All the researchers of the Karaites are Rabbinic Jews," he notes. With industrialization, the Jews moved from villages to the cities. "The Jews went through a process of modernization and secularization like in Western Europe," explains Ilan. "Although modernization

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reached other places, in Egypt the secularization process was quicker and more profound than elsewhere. At the end of the 19th century, many Jewish children did not know Hebrew." In addition, from the 18th century onwards most of the rabbis serving the Rabbinic community were not native Egyptians. "All the chief rabbis were imported," says Ilan. "The local population failed to develop spiritual leadership due to the weak structure of the community." For example, Rabi Rafael Aharon Ben Shimon came from Jerusalem in the late 19th century, after his father founded Jerusalem's Mugrabi neighborhood. Rabbi Rafael Della Pergola was an Italian rabbi in Alexandria. His grandson is Prof. Sergio Della Pergola of The Hebrew University, a foremost demographer of the Jewish people. In the late 1940s, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef came from pre-state Israel to teach at the Ahava V'Achva yeshiva at the request of Rabbi Aharon Choueka (see sidebar). Sara Rossano, nee Goldring, the administrator for the Union de Juifs D'Egypte (Organization of Egyptian Jews), is the youngest of six children and the only one born in Egypt. Her siblings were born in Sudan where her maternal grandfather was chief rabbi. Rossano's father fled to Egypt from pogroms in Odessa. She matriculated in English. "We felt good as Jews in Cairo. My family was well-off and lived in a neighborhood with non-Jews, mainly Copts," she recalls. Following the Sinai Campaign in 1956, British and French citizens were expelled. Most of the Jews were expelled because they had no citizenship, recounts Rossano. "Two policemen came to the house claiming we held documents connected to Israel. The building's guard and the grocer were shocked by this and wanted to sign that we had no such documents. We were told to leave the following week. My sister managed to buy the last tickets available to sail from Alexandria." Everything was left behind. Parting from their neighbors and longtime maid was difficult. The Goldrings were humiliated during searches for money and gold. "My brother was a silversmith, so our coats were taken apart. They even rummaged through my mother's medications," she recalls. The family went by

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boat to Naples, and finally in Israel they were met by a brother and sister who had made aliyah in the early 1950s. Rossano has no inclination to visit Egypt. "Although it is an individual decision, many choose not to visit," she says, "yet some former Egyptians do organize tours to Egypt." About half the Egyptians in Israel are over the age of 60. "It is important for us to interest the next generation, too. We hold monthly lectures about our heritages, as well as two annual events," says Rossano. The organization published a cookbook, "Dishes of Egypt," and has dedicated a corner of its headquarters in Tel Aviv to the memory of Egyptian-born spy Eli Cohen. "Pessah for Egyptian Jews in Israel is when we adapt to each other," says Arie Ohanna, chairman of the Union de Juifs D'Egypte. "We are accustomed to adapting ourselves to every framework. Our children are married to Jews from all backgrounds, and our Seder reflects this." Ohanna helps his grandchildren with school papers on their roots. "Just like the Haggada tells the story of the Israelites and the Exodus, my grandchildren hear my story of living in and leaving Egypt," he says. Ohanna's father, Rabbi Bezalel Ohanna, was born in Tiberias. In 1923, he was sent to Alexandria to serve as rabbi in the Anzarut synagogue. Ohanna would often visit the Eliyahu HaNavi synagogue which had many Torah scrolls and seated 1,000 people, where choirboys - called mizamrim - enhanced festival services. "All Alexandria synagogues were connected to Eliyahu HaNavi since it was the center of religious services," he says. Ohanna recalls seeing King Farouk traveling on Fridays along the coast in his Rolls Royce followed by an entourage of motorcycles. "He got along very well with the Jews, although this was done in a clandestine way." Jews came to Israel during the 20th century in waves, usually following the wars between the two countries in 1948, 1956 and 1967. Previously, Egyptian Jews came to pre-state Israel not necessarily as active Zionists, but for a place to escape anti-Semitic sentiments. "The Zionist movement was peripheral until World War II," notes Ilan. "Unlike their European brethren, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict did not cause the Jews to become Zionists."

"Zionist awareness was next to nothing in those days," recalls Rossano. "When things were going well for the Jews they didn't worry and were not involved in Zionism." The Jews felt so comfortable in the past century that until the 1930s some even had dual loyalties - they were Zionists and also members of the Egyptian National Movement. Many abandoned their dual loyalty in the 1930s due to the rise of the Nazis and the Arab revolt in 1936. The Center for the Studies of Jewish Heritage from Egypt headed by Prof. Schlosberg works together with the Department of Middle Eastern Studies in Tel Aviv University. Its purpose is to perpetuate the heritage and culture of Egyptian Jews from ancient times by teaching in academic frameworks and schools, and by granting scholarships. "We give scholarships to high-school students and university students learning for all academic degrees," says Schlossberg. Currently, the center is trying to reconstruct historical documents left behind in Egypt by interviewing former Egyptians. To date the center has documented the life histories of 48 individuals. "As with other communities, the second generation is not so interested, but the third generation is showing an interest in their heritage," says Schlossberg. About Egyptian Jews' absorption into Israeli society, Ilan says: "Their attitude was realistic and modern. They looked forward to integrating into Israeli society. They didn't play the ethnic card. The identity of these immigrants as Egyptians is not as strong as other communities towards their native country." An artist's Haggadah rooted in Egypt Artist Ya'akov Boussidan was born in Port Said, at the northeastern tip of Egypt near the Suez Canal. A cradle of various cultures and a medley of tongues, the city bustled with monks and nuns, Arabs and muezzins, Christians and Europeans. Jews had to find their niche and were often denounced by the non-Jewish society. Because it was a popular harbor city, Port Said's small Jewish community was made up of Europeans, native-born Egyptians and Jews from Aden (near Yemen). Boussidan's maternal grandmother left Aleppo for Egypt where his mother Nazli (Mazal) was born. His biological father was

European and active in the underground bringing Jews to pre-state Israel, but died when Boussidan was only two years old. Mazal married a second time, to Alexandria-born Moshe Boussidan. "I didn't have a mother-tongue," recalls Ya'akov Boussidan. "We spoke English, French, Arabic and Hebrew. In addition I picked up Italian from the merchants who came to the port." As a child, he learned in a heder in the Great Synagogue located in the Jewish Quarter. Boussidan recalls that the Port Said Jewish community had its share of poor people as well as successful businesspeople, among them the owners of the city's large stores. "Although we were poor, my mother helped other poor people. She was a seamstress for wealthy people and would ask them to help the poor. In exchange, they helped me learn Hebrew." In her later years in Israel, Mazal Boussidan eventually became a sculptress. In the 1940s, the Jewish community was blamed for spreading cholera among the city's population. The Jews were spared this disease because of their hygiene and kashrut regulations. Young Boussidan was witness to the slaughter of a cow in the synagogue, as thanksgiving to God for saving the Jews from the cholera plague. Moshe Boussidan was caught as he attempted to smuggle kosher meat from Alexandria to local Jews, and the family had to flee Egypt within 24 hours. They left for Israel in 1949, a few years before the majority of Egyptian Jews fled in the wake of the 1956 Sinai campaign. His sisters Rina and Yehudit were born in Israel. Ya'akov Boussidan, who never returned to Egypt, maintains that King Farouk was a puppet figure controlled by other government officials. "There were both similarities and differences between the situation of the Israelites and our situation as the Jews of Egypt. We compared the ruling government to Pharaoh. Our dream of freedom was to go to Jerusalem." He now lives with his wife Ruth in Kiryat Ono, where he has a studio. He also has a workshop in London, where he created a unique hand-printed Haggadah in the 1970s. "The beginning of this Haggadah design stems from a childhood memory, the origin of which is rooted in my community and my family in Egypt." The

entire work, including the Hebrew calligraphy and English translation, is etched and hand-printed on Buckram-Green from plates prepared in the artist's workshop in London. Boussidan worked on the Haggadah for seven years, along with 30 students who worked in shifts around the clock. His Haggadah received international acclaim and it is featured in the Encyclopedia Judaica. It has been exhibited worldwide in places such as at the New York Public Library, and most recently at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and the Jewish Museum of London. An artistic masterpiece, the Haggadah includes various strands of philosophical thought. It starts with the Six Days of Creation and the Covenant between God and Abraham (Brit Bein Ha-B'tarim), and ends with a luminous painting of Jerusalem in warm orange hues. Jews conclude the Haggadah with "Next Year in Jerusalem," and the impact of Jerusalem is emphasized in Boussidan's multi-technique work which includes calligraphy and digitalized paintings, in addition to painting with oil, ceramics and photography. He recently published "Jerusalem - Names in Praise," based on extensive research and depicting 391 names for Jerusalem and the Temple through calligraphy and artwork, with explanations in both Hebrew and English. Spiritual sustenance in Cairo The unique Ahava V'Achva study center in Cairo was so beloved that its former students founded congregations in Israel and the Diaspora named for it. Founded in 1929 by Rabbi or Chacham Aharon Choueka (pronounced Shweka) to thwart assimilation, it closed down in 1956 due to the flight of Jews from Egypt during the Sinai Campaign. "It is hard to describe Ahava V'Achva in a word," says Prof. Ya'acov Choueka, the son of the founder. "It was a combination of a yeshiva, synagogue, school and a community center. My father established Ahava V'Achva with the purpose of creating a Jewish spiritual center for both school-age students and working people who wanted to study Torah in the evenings after a day's work." Chacham Choueka was born in Aleppo, Syria and came to Cairo as a child in 1910. His father, Rabbi Menachem Choueka, left Aleppo at the beginning of the 20th

century for financial reasons. Cairo's Jewish population was more homogenous than the cosmopolitan Alexandria, made up of Egyptian and Aleppo Jews, with a smattering of Ashkenazis and Karaites. Egyptian Jews integrated well in local society. Influenced by Western culture, they were in danger of abandoning their tradition and the ensuing assimilation. Chacham Choueka realized that the only way to stem the tide of assimilation was to found a learning center to attract Jews from all walks of life. Author Rabbi Chaim Sabato, grandson of Chacham Choueka, describes in Aleppo Tales a figure based on his grandfather who was a revered scholar. Ahava V'Achva was open nearly around the clock. In the morning it functioned as a synagogue with a few minyans. During school vacations, young students flocked to the center also in the morning hours. The rest of the year they came after school from 4 pm to 7 pm. Adults came in the evening hours and burned the midnight oil. Services were held on Shabbat with classes throughout the day. Rabbis were hired after intensive testing for their Torah erudition. Following a request for a teacher from Eretz Yisrael, Chacham Choueka interviewed and hired a young scholar with an extensive range of knowledge - Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who taught in Ahava V'Achva from 1947 to 1950. "Other scholars who taught me during my 15 years there were Rabbis Chaim Douek, Saadia Munir and Yosef Pinto," recalls Prof. Choueka. "The curriculum was planned according to levels. The beginner level learned to read Hebrew. Then we learned about prayers and the weekly Torah portion. Advanced students learned Talmud." Most of the teachers volunteered, and students attended without payment. Prof. Choueka was active in Ahava V'Achva as head of the education community. In the library he bound books and created catalogues. Perhaps this was a precursor to his profession of creating the methods for indexing and digitalizing information. In the late 1960s he joined Prof. Aviezri Fraenkel, founder of Bar Ilan's Responsa Project (the world's largest database of ancient and modern Jewish texts in Hebrew), and headed the project from 1974 until 1986. The project

will receive the Israel Prize on Independence Day. In the 1950s, the Egyptian secret service, the Muhabarat, suspected the Chouekas of Zionist activity after the Egyptians intercepted correspondence to a son studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Finally, in 1954, Chacham Choueka received word that he would be arrested as head of Ahava V'Achva. "The authorities didn't differentiate between teaching Judaism and Zionist activity. In reality though, part of teaching Torah is about Israel," says Prof. Choueka. He recalls the night his father fled on a nearly unattainable flight to New York. Two hours after he left, the police came to arrest him. Chacham Choueka spent a couple of years in New York, and after an extensive tour of South America joined his family in Israel in 1960. Ahava V'Achva synagogues founded by Egyptian immigrants in the 1960s are located in Bat Yam, Ashdod, Ramat Gan, Holon and elsewhere. Other congregations exist in New York and Mexico City. Today they function mainly as synagogues that are attended by other communities, as well as the elderly Egyptian founders and some of their descendants. "The founders hoped to import the same idea of a spiritual center like Ahava V'Achva in Cairo. But in Israel the religious learn in their school systems, and the secular are not attracted to such places," concludes Prof. Ya'acov Choueka.