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Khokha Synagogue inMahala Al Kobra- The photo taken on Sept.7, 2017- Egypt Today/Ahmed Hussein

Fallen from Grace: Rabbi Hayyim El-Imshati Synagogue

By: Samar Samir Sat, Dec. 30, 2017

CAIRO - 30 December 2017: Walking in through the two-meter-wide entrance, you will find in the semi-demolished ramshackle and stumble across a big cement block and a corridor leading to a rickety staircase leading to the second floor, which is now collapsed and filled with an acrid smell. A few hundreds years ago, this place was a Fatimid-Caliphate era synagogue filled with supplicating

people; now it is left to turn in to ruins.

Around 150 kilometers away from Cairo, at the Mahala Al Kobra's Souk al-Labn in the Delta, stands the ruins of Rabbi Hayyim El-Imshati Synagogue.

The synagogue is also known as Synagogue of Khokhet El Yahoud, Ostad Synagogue and Rabbi El-Imshati Synagogue. The history of Khokha makes it a good candidate to be part of the Ministry of Antiquities' future plan of developing and restoring the Egyptian Jewish heritage. The ministry has started on a big project to restore Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria, and has also registered Alexandria's Menasce Synagogue as an antiquity, giving it further protection and potential restoration privileges.



Khokha Synagogue in Al-Mahala Al-Kobra. The photo was taken on September 7, 2017- Egypt Today/Ahmed Hussein

Khokha Synagogue, however, is unregistered as an antiquity, an obstacle that stands in its way to restoration or being preserved.



Cracks in Khokha Synagogue in Al-Mahala Al-Kobra city in Gharbia governorate. The photo was taken on Sept. 7, 2017- Egypt Today/Ahmed Hussein

A few weeks before leaving his position last month, Saeed Helmy, former head of the Islamic, Coptic and Jewish Antiquities sector at the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) told Egypt Today that a committee will be formed to assess registering Khokha as an antiquity.

“I have been there and saw the remains and the walls,” he says. “However, the ministry of antiquities has plans to rebuild it.”

Mohamed Mahran, the head of the Jewish Antiquities section at the SCA, however, has a different view. “It is hard to register Khokha [as an antiquity] due to its bad condition,” he says adding that it has “turned into ruins”. “There is no artistic value to push for the registration...The ministry has no money to restore it.” He adds that the ministry did not register the synagogue on its heritage list before being ruined because the government started registering Jewish monuments in the 1980s, after the synagogue was already ruined.



A part of Khokha synagogue's building in Al-Mahala Al-Kobra city in Gharbia governorate- Egypt Today/Ahmed Hussein.jpg

The Egyptian Jewish Community is constantly demanding that the synagogues are registered as antiques so avoid squatting by local residents. Over two years ago, in March 2015, Mahran himself had attended a meeting held upon a complaint from Guardian of the Egyptian Jewish Community Magda Haroun against the Ministry of Antiquities over neglecting the restoration of Khokha Synagogue. In an exclusive interview, Haroun explains to Egypt Today that she has asked the ministry to register it, but the ministry's officials refused, saying they cannot list ruins. “I do not know what the Law of Antiquities stipulates concerning such cases,” Haroun adds. The 64-year-old lady says that she is in contact with the ministries of foreign affairs, culture, and antiquities concerning the Jewish heritage. She adds that any money provided would be prioritized towards “building a fence around the 1200-year-old Jewish cemeteries in Bassatine, Cairo, which is considered the second oldest Jewish cemeteries in the world.”

The ministry also has no pictures to show the original building of the Synagogue before being ruined, Mahran says, but adds that in case the ministry decides to restore it, they will ask the Jewish community for information and pictures.

Khokha Synagogue Historical Significance

The synagogue was established around 346 AH (1044), under the Fatimid Caliphate, the head of Al-Mahala Antiquities El-Dsoky Mansour tells Egypt Today. Al-Mahalla Al-Kobra, which is known for its spinning and textile industry, was a “flourishing” place for Jews. Khokhat al-Yahud was a quarter where Jews’ shops and property were suited. In 19th Century, the number of Jews hit 300

Jewish families (1,500 to 2,000 Jews) as it was stated by one testimony; but in 1864, there were 20 Jewish families in Al Mahalla Al-Kobra; the number of Jewish families declined to 10 families in 1937 due to going to Alexandria and Cairo, said Jacob M Landau in his book *Jews in Nineteenth-Century.*

Over the following eight centuries, the synagogue fell into decay, but was rebuilt and renewed in 1280 AH (1863) on the same site, Mansour recounts. He adds that the synagogue itself was covering an area of 240.25 square meters, and with its annexes covered 1,269 square meters before being squatted by local residents.

Before being ruined, Khokha al-Yahud had consisted of two stories. The first floor had three corridors divided by two rows of marble supporting the arches above; in the middle of second corridor, there was the Torah ark, which was made of red bricks, Mansour adds. This ark turned now to a chipped rock between two leaning marble pillars. There was a room beneath the stairs, Mansour says.



Torah ark made of red bricks and locate between two leaning marble pillars- the photo was taken on September 7, 2017. Egypt Today/Ahmed Hussein

The synagogue had also included a room for reciting the Torah verses by religious students and a room for documents of a geniza (a storage area in a synagogue or Jewish cemetery for worn-out Hebrew-language books and papers, particularly papers bear the name of God),while the guard room was located in the eastern south area. The upper floor had had a library, which does not exist anymore.

El-Imshati Synagogue has sanctification by Jews mentioned in the Cairo Geniza. It was named after Rabbi Hayyim (Abu Fadil) bin Hananel bin Abraham El-Imshati, who dedicated an ancient inscription of Torah scroll, which Jewish pilgrims had flocked on the new moon of Iyyar month, said

historians Shelomo Dov Goitein and Mordechai Friedman in their book *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from Cairo Geniza* that published in 2008. Rabbi Hayyim El-Imshati was a member of the Palestinian community formed by Jewish immigrants from Palestine in the 10th century.

The synagogue was a sacred place where the Jews went on pilgrimage for 15 days to see the Torah Scroll, which was written- as it was believed- by a pure holy man of God. The Jews also believe that the scroll has many miracles of healing the sick and redeeming prisoners, the book added, noting that this scroll was donated first to the Synagogue of Jerusalemites (Ben Ezra Synagogue), located in Fustat (Old Cairo), by Imshati. The Geniza document also revealed that Imshati left Fustat in the wake of a huge fire that was set in the city by Egypt's Minister Shawar to prevent it from falling into his enemies' hands in 1168. Then Imshai went to Mahala and dedicated the Torah Scroll to the Synagogue.



Celebrations in Khokha Synagogue in the period between 1958 and 1959- photo courtesy of Bassatine News



Jews celebrating their fest in Khokha Synagogue in the period between 1958 and 1959- photo courtesy of Bassatine News

“In 2002, the Jewish community tried to restore the synagogue but nothing happened since then, and it was neglected,” Mansour adds. Haroun herself says that all properties and objects of the synagogue were stolen, adding that she has talked with a Mahala parliamentarian to clean and use the synagogue as a cultural theater for the local residents instead of being left in ruins as long as it was not registered in the ministry of antiquities.



Collapsed stairs of Khokha Synagogue in Al-Mahala Al-Kobra city in Gharbia governorate- the photo was taken on Sept. 7, 2017- Egypt Today/Ahmed Huseein

Neither the Ministry of Antiquities nor Haroun knows when exactly the synagogue closed to the Jewish pilgrims from all over the world; However, Bassatine website published photos for celebrations inside the synagogue between 1958 and 1959. Later, it has been abandoned as the Egyptian Jewish community was dwindling. Most Egyptian Jews left the country in the 1950s, and of those who remained, the majority officially converted to Christianity or Islam.

Squatters' tales

Residents in Souk al-Labn believe that the Khokha Synagogue was named after the Rabbi's wife, although a Jewish neighborhood in rural areas is called the Jewish Khokha (peach) or a Jewish Mount, according to book Egypt's *Jews...from the prosperity to the diaspora* by Mohamed Abu el-Ghar.

Resident Abdel Rahman Ali Zalat, a blacksmith, says that when Khokha (allegedly El-Imshati's wife) wanted to buy this piece of land, she said that she would choose an area equal in measurements to her wool shawl's length. However, she pulled the thread of the shawl and drew a square with the length of the thread. "The square area was determined for the synagogue. It was a very large area," Zalat adds.

Ibrhaim Semmia, owner of a shop for electricity devices, tells Egypt Today that he owned 130 square meters of the Synagogue's land after purchasing it from the Jewish community, a claim that Haroun denies.

"I remember when I was young a group of people from the Jewish community and police personnel came here in 1990s to restore it," says A who refused to mention his name due to security reasons. He adds that one of the group members said that if a piece of synagogue's land taken to renew an adjacent mosque, it is fine but it is not allowed for anyone to take a piece of the synagogue land [for other purposes]. A. adds that he personally hopes the synagogue is rebuilt and turned into a tourist place.

Khokha al-Yahoud is not the only synagogue in need for restoration; four other synagogues are indeed in need for restoration, namely Haïm Capucci Synagogue, Nessim El Ashkenazi Synagogue, Synagogue Kreim, and Hayim Synagogue (Hanan Synagogue), according to Mahran, who adds that Egypt has 11 synagogues registered as "antiquities."

Haïm Capoussi Synagogue

The synagogue was closed by the government when a group of squatters tried to steal it after

January 2011 Revolution. It was established in the beginning of the 19th century in Haret El-Yehud and was named after Rabbi Haim Capucci who died in 163. The synagogue was registered as an antiquity in March 1986.

Information on Rabbi Haim Capucci is very rare, says Mahran, adding that the ministry wants to register his tomb, which is located in Bassatine cemetery, but no information is available on the rabbi.

The Nessim Ashkenazi synagogue

The synagogue was registered as an antiquity in 1995 as per a decree by the prime minister. Located on Kuwah street at al-Dhaher district in Al-Waili neighborhood in Cairo, the synagogue was established by Yacoub Ashkenazi in 1913, although the Jewish Community in Cairo's website says the it was built in 1890s and considered one of the oldest synagogues in the region.

It consists of two floors. The entrance is located in the southwest corner of the façade overlooking Al-Kawa Street.

Pahad Itzhak Synagogue (also known as Kreim)

It is located on Bin Khaldoun street in Al-Waili and is also known as Kreim synagogue as it was named after Zaki Kreim who supervised its building in the period between 1925 and 1932.

The square-shaped synagogue's entrance has a round window covered with glass with an hexagonal star. Meanwhile, the ark lies in the eastern corner; it is made of marble and has three steps; it included Hebrew texts of the Ten Commandments but has no Torah or Talmud Scrolls.

Ets Hayim (aka Barukh Hanan synagogue)

The synagogue dates back to 1900; it is located on Qantara Ghamra Street, Army Square in Al-Zaher in Al-Waily District in Cairo.

The synagogue and its annexes are located on 3,500 square meters, surrounded by a stone wall. It has three entrances; the main one locates in the middles of the wall and leads to a Yeshiva (a religious school) inside it. The second entrance of the western side overlooking Qantara Ghamra Street, while the third one is in the south west corner and leads to an open corridor with a stone staircase leading to the second floor, where the women's balcony.

The interior area of the synagogue is rectangular and covers 400 square meters; it is divided into

three corridors via two rows of marble pillars. The Torah ark lies in the center f the middle corridor.

Yeshiva was established in the synagogue in 1947 and was renovated in 1952. The importance of this temple boils down to its Jewish modern architecture.

New Antiquities

Recently, Egypt's Ministry of Antiquities has put Jacob Menasce Synagogue in Alexandria, on its list of heritage. "The Ministry of Antiquities is keen to register all the Egyptian monuments regardless its ideological affiliation," said head of the Islamic, Coptic, and Jewish Antiquities at the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), in a statement on Sept. 27.

The decision to list the synagogue was taken immediately after the examining the reports submitted by Alexandria Antiquities Sector to the SCA. According to the reporters, the synagogue is in a good condition.

The ministry says that the synagogue was built in 1860 by Baron Jacob de Menasce (1807-1882) in Alexandria. However, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914-1952* book by Gudrun Kramer says it was built in 1973.

The synagogue was named after sephardic Jacob de Manesce seems that he came to Egypt via Palestine and Morocco in the 18th Century. The book adds that he started his career as banker in Cairo, then he became the private banker of Khedive Ismail. Later, he and Jewish Jacob Qattawi opened a banking house called J.L Menasce et Fils. The house also expanded to have branches in Manchester and Liverpool, then in London, Marseille, Paris and Istanbul.

Menasce was appointed as the baron of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with a Hungarian citizenship. In 1854, the Jewish Community in Alexandria came under the Austro-Hungarian protection; however, most of Jews renounced the protection which resulted in its end by 1915, according to *Alexandria was our Destiny... Based on the Memories of Marie-Luise Nagel,* which is published on the Bibliotheca Alexandria website. In 1869, Menasce and Qattawi were presidents of the Cairo Jewish community, and in 1971, he moved to Alexandria.

Listing the synagogue in Egypt's heritage came after the government started restoration for Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria. The synagogue is one of the oldest Jewish temples in Egypt; it was established in 1354, but was desecrated when Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign shelled it to create a French military base in the Ottoman territories. However, it was rebuilt in 1850 under the Muhammad Ali Dynasty. It has been closed off by the Egyptian government after a partial collapse in the upper place for women worshippers.



Eliyahu haNavi Synagogue, Nabi Daniel Street, Alexandria, Egypt-- CC via Wikimedia/Roland Unger

Jews were in Alexandria since its establishment, but at the end of 19th century, their number reached 4,000 Jews and increased to 18,000 in the beginning of 20th century. In 1948, however, the number rose to 40,000 people, says Egyptian historian Mohamed Abu el-Ghaar in his book *Jews of Egypt... from prosperity to diaspora,* published in 2012.

At the end of the 19th century, thousands of Jews escaped Russia's October Revolution (Bolshevik Revolution) to Egypt, while in 1930s, other Jews immigrated from Austria, Hungary, Poland, and the city of Thessaloniki in Greece to Egypt, escaping the rise of Nazism in Germany. Most of Jews in Alexandria were craftsmen and have small and medium trades, Abu el-Ghaar adds.

The Ministry of Antiquities is working now on listing three other synagogues in Cairo on its heritage list, including Vitali Madjar Synagogue in Heliopolis, Meir'enaim Synagogue in Maadi in southern Cairo, and Adah Synagogue in Hadayek el-Kobba, Mahran says.

Cairo only has 12 synagogues; some of them including Sha'ar Hashamayim Synagogue, Ben Ezra, and Maimonides are open to the public, while visits to other synagogues have fixed times, Haroun says.



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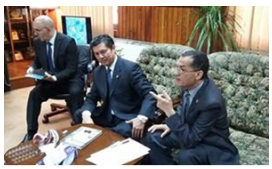
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