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Vital papers proving Jewish identity held back by Egypt



A delegation of Egyptian Jews and a representative of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) are heading for Cairo at the end of April to talk to the country's Ministry of Culture about the one-time Jewish community's cherished life cycle registers.

Scores of bound volumes, containing every detail of the births, marriages and deaths of Jews from Alexandria and Cairo, which date back to the middle of the 19th century, were once kept in the two main synagogues in each city. But, last year, without prior warning, government officials arrived at the synagogues and took away the registers, which are now stored in the Egyptian National Archives.

Rabbi Andrew Baker of the AJC said: "For many Egyptian Jews these are the only formal records which might otherwise be inscribed in civil records. And there are cases where they are very important in proving a person's Jewish identity, for burial or for marriage".

One of the leaders of the Nebe Daniel organisation, Yves Fedida, who is part

of the forthcoming Cairo delegation, said that the scattered community of Egyptian Jews — some of whom depend on the information in the registers to prove their Jewish status — had been trying to persuade the government for more than 12 years to allow copies to be made of the contents of the registers.

At first, the government resisted, saying that there was a chance that Jews outside Egypt would use the information for compensation claims. But this was dismissed by the Egyptian Jews as stonewalling, because the registers did not contain details of property ownership.

“Then came the Arab Spring and there was no hope of persuading anyone in the government when the Muslim Brotherhood were in charge”, Mr Fedida said.

Once President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took power, however, there was new optimism, but so far there has been no response either to direct pleas or to a change.org petition to the president.

Rabbi Baker said that although “one problem has been solved by taking the registers into the National Archives, where they will be kept in better physical conditions”, in fact it meant another problem.

“The registers are not just written in Arabic, but in French, Ladino, Hebrew, and even a form of Rashi’s script. So the records cannot be easily read by a National Archives official even if someone applies for his or her family’s details.”

Under the Egyptian Antiquities law, the registers belong to the country — an attitude originally supported by the leader of the tiny remaining Jewish community, a handful of Jews led by Magda Haroun. She made it clear in various TV appearances that her intention was to leave the assets of the Jewish community to the government.

Ms Haroun initially agreed with the government's position, but appears to have had a change of heart in the last year. She has helped to revive a former Egyptian Jewish charity, A Drop of Milk, and turned it into a heritage NGO whose aim is to curate the remaining Jewish communal assets with the approval of the Ministry of Culture. Plans are in place to transform the former Heliopolis Synagogue in Cairo into a national Jewish museum, with the hope that the precious registers will be available for consultation there.

Mr Fedida said: "We have lost our biggest treasure with the registers. They include, beside the precious records of births, marriages, and deaths, halachic rulings by Egyptian rabbis , who were said to be among the most pragmatic and least dogmatic of all those in the Mediterranean area."

Most Egyptian Jews left the country in two waves, after 1948 and again after 1967. The biggest ex-pat Egyptian community is in Israel, but there are groups in France, Canada, the US, Brazil and the UK. Mr Fedida, who today lives in France, said: "It is a real injustice if we are not allowed access to the registers. We owe it to our parents and our grandparents to do whatever we can to persuade the Egyptian government to do the right thing".

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