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HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF JEWS FROM EGYPT
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August 26, 2002

Members of the United States Senate

Members of the House of Representatives

Honorable Members

We, the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt, are writing to solicit your help in getting the Government of Egypt to transfer our Jewish religious artifacts and copies of our community records to an institution in the United States, and make future US aid to Egypt contingent upon such action. These records and artifacts belong to us, they are our heritage and our history, and we want them available for use, consultation and research at a location closer to where most of us Jews from Egypt live today.

In the attached letter, the Egyptian Ambassador to the United States tells us that:

1. These artifacts belong to the Egyptian Jewish community, and

2. They are registered with the Egyptian Antiquities authority, are subject to Egyptian law protecting the Egyptian national heritage, and therefore cannot be sent abroad.

Regarding his first point, the synagogues in Egypt are closed, except for one or two that are opened only for rare special events. Most are in poor condition, and their contents are not available for use, inspection, or even inventory. We tried many times to contact the President of the Jewish Community in Egypt, Mrs. Esther Weinstein, and her daughter, Miss Carmen Weinstein, but we never received a reply. People requesting official documents they need (for example, certificates of birth, death or marriage) are generally ignored, even though they are critically important for legal reasons. It appears to us they are unable to run the affairs of a rapidly dwindling and aging community numbering no more than a dozen souls, let alone fulfill requests from abroad. From personal experience, we also do not believe they speak freely - they only echo government policy and provide propaganda value.

Regarding his second point, we CATEGORICALLY reject the notion that our religious articles, which only a generation ago were used in daily rites and religious services, should now be labeled “antiquities”, on a par with the Sphinx or the Pyramids. These religious articles were privately donated to the community by individual families for specific religious purposes, not as “antiquities”. They were to be used during synagogue prayers at certain times. They are meaningful only to people of the Jewish faith. They must be restored to their original purpose.

We asked for a detailed list of Jewish community assets, but have not been successful. This list must exist, since the Ambassador stated that these items have

already been catalogued by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities.

You are doubtless aware of the uprooting and dispossession of the vibrant community of Jews from Egypt, which was 100,000 strong in 1948. We cannot accept the final pilfering of what little is left of our cultural heritage. We cannot acquiesce to the word game of calling religious articles by the name “antiquities” for the purpose of xpropriating them. We cannot expect a country that expelled its Jews solely because they were Jews to have the genuine desire to safeguard the heritage and culture of these same Jews for posterity.

We Jews from Egypt have suffered much since 1948. We did not leave Egypt voluntarily. The authorities ran a vicious propaganda campaign against us, harassed us, made us live in fear, denied us equal opportunity, denied us citizenship even though we were born in Egypt, confiscated our property, threw many of us in jail even though we committed no crimes, and finally forced us to leave the country, frequently by simply expelling us. Before leaving, we were forced to pledge that we would never return, and that we were voluntarily forfeiting all our assets.

We are the Middle-Eastern refugees no one ever talks about, hears about, or knows about. To call actions by their proper name, the Egyptian government stole, from the Jewish community as a whole and from individuals of the Jewish faith in particular, assets amounting to BILLIONS of dollars, for no reason whatsoever. Our only crime was being Jewish. Not a penny has ever been returned to us. We all had to rebuild our lives from scratch in foreign lands.

And now, more than fifty years later,

1. Egypt still has not made any restitution to its Jews for confiscated assets, as the free world has done with other Jewish communities;

2. Egypt still has not apologized for its past evil treatment of its Jews, as the free world has done with other Jewish communities;

3. Egypt still has not officially recognized the great contributions Jews have made to their country of birth, as the free world has done with other Jewish communities; and, incredibly,

4. Egypt is currently trying to pilfer what little is left of the Jewish heritage in Egypt

While we respect Egypt, we can no longer remain silent while our heritage is languishing in dusty rooms alongside ancient Egyptian mummies. As the last generation of Jews that lived in Egypt, we sincerely propose to find a way to link again Egyptian Jews and their descendants with Egypt. Our proposal of moving the religious articles and copies of the Jewish Community records to an institution in the United States will benefit Egypt
as well. Millions of people, Americans and non-Americans, Jews and non-Jews, will visit it, providing an excellent foothold for Egypt in the United States. It could become a sort of “embassy” of which Egypt can be proud. Many of its visitors may decide to extend their knowledge by visiting Egypt itself, thereby helping the Egyptian tourism industry. By contrast, no benefit will come to Egypt from leaving these religious articles in dusty cases or shelves in the Antiquities Authorities, or in closed synagogues containing religious articles that can’t be used. It is a win-win proposition for all concerned.

We ask for your help in getting Egypt to return what little is left of our heritage before it’s lost forever.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely yours,
The HSJE committee and its Regional Officers

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Joseph E. Mosseri
Secretary

Desire L. Sakkal
President

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In accordance with the Privacy Act of 1974, you and your staff are hereby authorized to freely discuss any and all aspects of the Historical Society of Jews From Egypt situation.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF JEWS FROM EGYPT, a nonprofit organization, with a provisional charter from the Board of Regents of the State of New York.