

# Introduction

## *A Jewish Childhood in Translation*

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But in having to translate everything, they ended up transforming themselves. In other words, the act of translation changed both the object to be translated and the subject doing the translating.

—DANIEL MESGUICH, “NO, NOT JEWISH; ISRAELITE”

His name is Ahmed; he’s my best friend. He is seven years old, just like me. I know that his parents are Muslims, he knows that mine are Jews. On our street in Beirut, everyone knows that. But you think that’s a problem for kids who want to play marbles?

—YVES TURQUIER, “THE BAKER’S SON”

*A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean* is a collection of autobiographical stories and essays curated by Franco-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar. Originally written in French, the stories collected here provide a window onto a bygone world marked by the complex history of Judeo-Muslim cohabitation in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>1</sup> By turns nostalgic and bitter, familiar and improbable, explicit and elliptical, the childhoods captured here are undeniably Jewish, but they are also Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, Egyptian, Lebanese, and Turkish. While each story testifies to the multicultural, multilingual, and multi-faith

1. For reasons having to do with their schooling and life trajectories, two of the authors preferred to write their stories in English. Although Roni Margulies’s parents spoke French with him at home, growing up he spoke Turkish and was schooled in English and American establishments in Istanbul before attending college in England. Similarly, Moris Farhi grew up in a multilingual environment in Ankara and eventually moved to England for university. The original French version of *A Jewish Childhood* contains translated versions of their stories; here, we have reproduced their original English-language texts.

communities into which its author was born, when taken together, the essays articulate ambivalent histories of proximity and distance, solidarity and suspicion, sameness and difference.

The contributors are Jews who came of age in the Muslim Mediterranean—that is, in places where Islam was the majority religion, and at a moment when their everyday routines were inflected, albeit to different degrees, by the politics and policies of French imperialism. The lives of the authors, all of whom were born between 1935 and 1955, were also undeniably impacted by the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Moreover, between 1948 and 1970, many of the lands of the Mediterranean would bear witness to a veritable exodus of their Jews. While departures were broadly motivated by a sense of political uncertainty and ongoing experiences of persecution, they were also prompted by specific events, such as the Second Arab-Israeli War (1956), or the demise of colonial regimes that heralded a turn toward pan-Arabism. (Morocco and Tunisia became independent in 1956; Algeria in 1962.) For many, the lure of the Zionist project was also a factor in the decision to leave. As a result, by the early 1960s, most of the region's Jews had left their respective homelands for new lives in exile (primarily in Israel and France, but also in England, the United States, and Canada).<sup>2</sup> It is telling that, of the thirty-four authors featured in this volume, only one still makes her permanent residence in the country where she was born.<sup>3</sup>

Prompted by Sebbar to reflect on their childhoods, these writers gesture to universal themes such as language, difference, family, memory, and history, while also shedding light on the idiosyncrasies of Jewish experience, both within the Muslim Mediterranean and beyond. For if the authors brought together in *A Jewish Childhood* have in common a religion, a region, a language, and, ultimately, the experience of exile, their stories reveal significant differences in both content and form. Indeed, from the details and anecdotes selected for inclusion to the mode of self-representation deployed, the authors display an array of attitudes toward their childhood experiences, the impact of geopolitics, and of their sense of identification with the French language, with Judaism, and with their native communities.

Some, like the Algerian-born historian Benjamin Stora, favor a triumphant narrative filled with detailed reportage, facts, and dates. Others approach the

2. Migration patterns over the course of the twentieth century shifted as a function of geopolitics and policy, making the emigration of Mediterranean Jews difficult to systematize. Of the approximately nine hundred thousand Jews living in Arab lands in 1948, approximately two-thirds emigrated to Israel, while the remainder moved to France and the United States. If the North African Jews tended to move to France in greater numbers, early emigrants from Morocco, for example, preferred Israel. The Jewish Virtual Library's section on Jews in Islamic Countries provides useful statistics on demography and migration, broken down by country. See <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jews-in-islamic-countries>.

3. Lizi Behmoaras has remained a resident of Istanbul. It is also worth noting that Roni Margulies returned to Turkey after living in England for more than thirty years, and André Azoulay spends a great deal of time in his homeland of Morocco and continues to hold Moroccan citizenship.

autobiographical genre with impressionistic brush strokes: the Egyptian actress, dramaturge, and writer Rita Rachel Cohen sets forth a fragmented tale that reproduces the instability of memory and the teetering experience of departure. Algerian psychoanalyst Roger Dadoun manages to tell his own story while scrupulously avoiding the use of the pronoun “I.” Some writers describe a rupture with their origins: Rosie Pinhas-Delpuech, born in Istanbul, writes of her desire to “become another, to be reborn in French, in France”; others, like Ida Kummer, who now lives between France and the United States, ends her story with a defiant declaration of alliance: “Tunisian I am; Tunisian I remain.”

The convener of this collection, Leïla Sebbar, is a novelist and essayist of significant renown in the francophone world. Sebbar was born in 1941, in Algeria, to Mohammed Sebbar (an Algerian Muslim) and Renée Bordas (a French woman from the Dordogne region)—both of whom were teachers in a French school near Tlemcen. The Algeria of her early childhood was multicultural, multi-confessional, and plurilingual. It was also, at the time, a French settler colony, having been conquered in 1830 and then annexed to mainland France as a set of three overseas *départements*, or administrative regions, in 1848. This meant that Algeria was considered as an extension of French territory and subject to the laws, regulations, and governmental structures of mainland France, all of which were administered, locally, by French bureaucrats.

Citizenship, however, was one key exception in the application of French law in Algeria. Whereas Sebbar’s mother was French by birthright, and thus able to pass her nationality to her children, Sebbar’s father was a French *subject*, not a French *citizen*. Like all indigenous Arabo-Muslim Algerians, he was considered an FMA, or *Français musulman d’Algérie* (French Muslim of Algeria), a novel category of legal belonging that ascribed some of the rights of nationality to the indigenous population, while simultaneously denying them many others.<sup>4</sup>

Sebbar was educated in French schools in Algeria until the age of seventeen, and she describes both her schooling and her upbringing as secular and very much francophone. Her adolescence coincided with the beginning of the Algerian War for Independence, the experience of which would compel her to acknowledge the plurality of her own identity.<sup>5</sup> Although she does not speak Arabic, Sebbar would come to view her bicultural and biracial background as foundational to

4. Questions of citizenship and nationality under colonial regimes were complex—notoriously so in French-ruled Algeria, where ethnicity, religion, and even past military service impacted eligibility. For more on this topic, see Patrick Weil, “Le statut des musulmans en Algérie coloniale. Une nationalité française dénaturée,” *Histoire de la justice* 16, no. 1 (2005): 93–109. For a more general overview of citizenship and North Africa, see Jessica Marglin, “Citizenship and Nationality in the French Colonial Maghrib,” in *Routledge Handbook of Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Roel Meijer, Zahra Babar, and James Sater (London: Routledge, 2021): 45–60.

5. Danielle Marx-Scouras, “The Mother Tongue of Leila Sebbar,” *Studies in 20th-Century Literature* 17, no. 1 (1993): 46–47, <https://newprairiepress.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1311&context=sttcl>.

her identity and to her writing practice, noting, “difference, or alterity, makes me write, I preserve it, I seek it out everywhere where it can inspire me to write.”<sup>6</sup> She attended university in France, married a Frenchman, and made her life in Paris, where she taught high school, and where she still resides today. Yet her complex relationship to Algeria and to Arabic remains the dominant motif in her writing, as demonstrated in recent autobiographical texts.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it was this longing to find inspiration in difference that compelled Sebbar to undertake the project that would become *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean*. After all, she stands apart from the company she has gathered together to meditate on Jewish childhood insofar as Sebbar herself is not Jewish. Yet her vision for this project—her reason for taking up what she calls a “collective, creative archeology”—seems to be rooted in memories of shared subjugation and an unexplained sense of common rejection. In her preface, she writes of understanding, as a child, that it was “bad to be an Arab [ . . . ] bad to be Jewish,” at a time when she didn’t even know what the words “Jewish” and “Arab” meant. She goes on to wonder: “Why was it bad? Nobody ever said. Did I believe it? I don’t know.” *A Jewish Childhood* is Sebbar’s attempt to grapple with these questions, to carve out a literary space for an encounter “that brings together those so often separated by colonial history.”

Ultimately, the experience of cohabitation described herein is idiosyncratic, and the reader looking to put her finger on the “truth” about the experience of cohabitation between Jews and Muslims, to establish once and for all a narrative of tolerance or rejection, will find that this collection raises more questions than it answers. Some authors claim that, as children, they didn’t even know they were Jewish (or different from their Muslim neighbors); others speak of an early, and very clear sense of difference and even rejection (and those who do often use the word anti-Semitism); others, still, reflect an awareness of the complexity of the situation, with its tacit rules and implicit boundaries—both of which were policed instinctively and often unconsciously. Rather than attempt to establish or reinforce a unified story about Jewish childhood in the Mediterranean, the reader would do well to pay attention to *how* these writers figure their own identities, how they describe or produce impressions of difference or sameness, and how they interpret, post facto, the experiences of their formative years.

This introduction, which is a supplement to the original volume, seeks to provide the reader with some crucial historical and cultural signposts, and to engage

6. Soheila Kian and Leïla Sebbar, “Une entrevue avec Leïla Sebbar: l’écriture et l’altérité,” *French Review* 78, no. 1 (October 2004), 130.

7. See, for example: *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (2003); *L’Arabe comme un chant secret* (2007) [*Arabic as a Secret Song*, translated by Sklyer Artes, afterword by Mildred Mortimer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015)]; and, completing what is now known as her autobiographical trilogy, *Lettre à mon père* (2021). Excerpts of this last title have been translated into English by Marilyn Hacker and are available at <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/27706>.

some of the big questions prompted by this work as a whole, questions that revolve around religion and politics, to be sure, but also around memory, representation, and the slippery genre of autobiography. Given that no such contextual information was deemed essential to the French version, one might argue that its inclusion here is superfluous, or that it risks overdetermining the reader's experience; after all, the task of the translator is certainly not to *explain* the original. Moreover, since many of the essays take it upon themselves to provide historical and cultural detail, readers can readily situate individual stories against a broader backdrop, even if they are not well versed in the micro politics of a given region.

But I would suggest that while each essay contains its own world of experience and complexity, and each can be read on its own merits, it is the collection of these worlds—as they work in synergy, contradict, and unsettle one another—that produces complexities and ambiguities to challenge our thinking and received ideas. And so, by drawing attention to and historicizing some of the polemics that hum in the background of this book, and by providing a suggestive road map to interpretation, I aim neither to explain nor to clarify the contents, but rather to make legible the contradictions and ambivalences at the heart of *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean*. References to relevant scholarship are provided along the way, should the reader wish to delve more deeply into a given history, terminological debate, or literary quarrel.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE MUSLIM MEDITERRANEAN: A PLACE, AN IDEA

The Mediterranean is said to contain a multiplicity of worlds; it is, to borrow a familiar trope, a “mosaic” of cultures. Yet despite the fact that from the Middle Ages until the sixteenth century the majority of world Jewry lived in the Mediterranean basin, the region is not always readily associated with Jews and Judaism.<sup>9</sup> Of course, many readers will be aware of the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, which led to the dispersion of some two hundred thousand Spanish Jews across North Africa and the Ottoman empire. However, the history of Jewish presence in the region prior to the expulsion is perhaps less well known. Indeed, the countries in question—Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey—all lay claim to Jewish communities whose existence predated the common era. In North Africa, Jewish settlements in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia can be traced to the Roman Empire (27 BCE), predating even the Muslim conquest of the region in the seventh century. At the very beginning of the common

8. A list of further reading, including scholarship and creative work available in English translation, is provided at the end of this volume, in an appendix organized by country.

9. See Jane Gerber, “History of the Jews in the Middle East and North African from the Rise of Islam until 1700,” in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, eds. Reeva Spector Simon et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 3–5. See also Georges Bensoussan, *Juifs en pays arabes, le grand déracinement 1850–1975* (Paris: Tallandier, 2012), 41.

era, Anatolia (whose borders resembled those of modern-day Turkey) was known as a haven for Byzantine and Hellenistic Jews. In Biblical times, the world's most ancient Jewish communities were found in Egypt and the Levant.

For centuries, then, Jews constituted a robust minority in the broad swathe of territory identified here as the Muslim Mediterranean. Their dim visibility in the region is thus a complex phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Beginning in the Middle Ages, Jews of Muslim lands lived as *dhimmis*, or protected non-Muslim subjects.<sup>11</sup> *Dhimma* status ensured that Jews were guaranteed some protections, including the freedom to practice their religion, but they were nevertheless subjected to a number of discriminatory regulations (including specific taxation and laws governing their clothing). At the same time, in many places, Jewish communities were granted a significant degree of autonomy and permitted to preserve their own courts. While some Jews experienced poverty and other forms of marginalization, they were never prohibited from practicing the professions of their choice, and Jews became active participants in commerce, spoke multiple languages, including Arabic, and were key figures in the scientific, intellectual, and cultural achievements of the Golden Age of Islam.

By the end of the seventeenth century, however, the populations of Jews in Muslim lands had decreased sharply and, by the nineteenth century, the center of gravity of the Jewish world had been firmly repositioned in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Today, in demographic terms, Ashkenazim (the Jewish subgroup that settled in central and eastern Europe in the Middle Ages) make up three-quarters of world Jewry; their stories have tended to dominate those of the Sephardim (Jews from the Iberian peninsula) and Mizrahim ("eastern" Jews—or Jews from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia).

The story of Jewish childhood in a place called the "Muslim Mediterranean" thus requires a backstory about a particular region of the world and the history of Jewish existence therein. The Mediterranean is, to state the obvious, a body of water—technically a sea but so nearly landlocked as to have been baptized "the

10. For more on the long history of Jews and the Mediterranean, see Fred Astren, "Jews," in *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, eds. Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita (Chichester/Malden/Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.): 392–408. See also Mattias B. Lehman and Jessica Marglin, "Jewish History in the Mediterranean, the Mediterranean in Jewish History," in *Introduction to Jews and the Mediterranean*, eds. Lehman and Marglin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020): 1–29.

11. *Dhimmi* means "protected person." *Dhimma* status is an historical feature of Muslim law that offered certain forms of protection to "people of the book" (namely, Jews and Christians) living in Islamic lands. While *dhimmis* had fewer rights than Muslims, the existence of this category nonetheless provided guarantees of some state protections.

12. See Gerber, 18; Astren, 403; and Norman A. Stillman's preface to *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Sourcebook* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979). The displacement of the center of world Jewry from the Mediterranean to Europe is reflective of the general shifts that accompanied the Mediterranean's decline as a center of the global economy and the rise in standing of Europe as a dominant, imperial world power.

inner sea” (*mediterraneus* is Latin for inland), and nicknamed, by different peoples at different points in history, “the middle sea” or “the inland sea.”<sup>13</sup> “Mediterranean” is also the proper name given to the region composed of twenty-one countries that have coastline along that sea, and thus it unifies territories that are linguistically, culturally, and politically diverse. It is a place that has long been a site of exchange, encounter, conflict, and conquest.<sup>14</sup> And of course, “Mediterranean,” as an adjective, has come to be identified in contemporary parlance with a certain kind of lifestyle made possible by a particular climate and geography.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding the relative ease with which one can identify the place on a map, and despite the dominant imagery it conjures, the Mediterranean is complex, and the use of the term—even as a toponym—nearly always seems to point up problematic amalgams or omissions that require further explanation. The Mediterranean exceeds its meaning as a delineated geographical area and resists its reputation in the popular imagination as a place of “Sea, Sex and Sun” (as French singer-songwriter Serge Gainsbourg crooned), or its construction as one big neighborhood where neighbors pass olive oil from one balcony to the next (as the francophone Algerian writer Maïssa Bey lamented).<sup>16</sup> It has come to be understood as a symbolic space, an idea, a construct, and as a site of scholarly inquiry.

Scholarship, particularly since the publication of Fernand Braudel’s foundational work *La Méditerranée* in 1949, has done a great deal of work to establish the Mediterranean as a unitary category of analysis while also unsettling notions of regional cohesiveness.<sup>17</sup> In the past twenty years, “Mediterranean”—as a new

13. See New World Encyclopedia, “Mediterranean Sea,” [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mediterranean\\_Sea](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mediterranean_Sea).

14. Countries and regions officially considered part of the Mediterranean include Europe (Spain, France, Monaco, Italy, Malta, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Greece); Asia (Turkey, Syria, Cyprus, Lebanon, Israel); Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco). Noncontiguous countries (such as Portugal and Serbia) are often grouped together with “the Mediterranean,” even though they do not touch the sea; they are understood as sharing in a similar climate, flora and fauna, and cultural affinities.

15. Here, we might think of the “Mediterranean diet,” fusion music, and even the origins of the resort chain Club Med, conceived as “vacation colonies” situated in Spain and Italy.

16. The bad boy of French *chanson* Serge Gainsbourg (1928–1991) sang about the “Med” in his hit single “Sea, Sex, and Sun” (1978). In her preface to the collection “Pourquoi la méditerranée?” (Why the Mediterranean?), written for a collection of transcribed radio interviews with French-language authors from the Mediterranean, Algerian writer Maïssa Bey articulates a certain skepticism about the grouping: “One might wonder why writers are brought together in a collection based on the mere fact that they are neighbors and that they could, from one shore to another, one balcony to another, pass each other the salt and the pepper, and above all that they could pass each other the olive oil so dear to the hearts of all Mediterranean people, and which guarantees their health and longevity.” In *La langue française vue de la Méditerranée*, eds. Patrice Martin and Christophe Drevet (Lécherelle, France: Zellige, 2009), 7. [Our translation.]

17. Braudel’s magnum opus was the first to conceive of the “inner sea” as a principal actor in history. His work would set the stage for numerous key concepts in the social sciences, including the idea of *la longue durée* and the importance of geography to the study of history, politics, and



“area studies” subject and as a heuristic tool—has become a major trend in the Humanities, no doubt in part because of its natural affinity with interdisciplinarity. This is perhaps most obvious and fruitful in Medieval Studies, where historians and literary scholars trained in national paradigms have found common ground in the Mediterranean as a proto-national, multilingual space. But it has also found purchase in Postcolonial Studies and its subfields, insofar as the deployment of the Mediterranean—understood in its capacity to “displace the nation as the default category of analysis”<sup>18</sup>—offers a welcome alternative to worn binaries such as metropole/colony, north/south, center/periphery.<sup>19</sup>

If the cohesion offered by the Mediterranean concept has both intellectual and disciplinary advantages, the region’s plurality and fragmentation are legendary and cannot be discounted.<sup>20</sup> After all, the area is home to some of history’s most intractable ethnic conflicts—between Greeks and Turks; Turks and Armenians; Jews and Arabs; and among Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians. Given the multiple worlds contained within the Mediterranean—the Arab world and divisions thereof (the Mashreq, the Maghreb);<sup>21</sup> the Middle East and its contested territories; Europe (the meridional Europe of Spain, Italy, and Greece, but also France, with its dual claims to “northern reason” and “southern passion”)—it stands to reason that while “Mediterranean” functions as an efficient unifier, critical discussion of it necessitates a qualifying term. Hence, in both political discourse and academic work, we

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economics. See *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1995).

18. Sharon Kinoshita, “Mediterranean Literature,” in Horden and Kinoshita, 314.

19. Numerous literary scholars, in particular, have heralded the usefulness of the Mediterranean as an alternative category of analysis. See Claudia Esposito, *The Narrative Mediterranean: Beyond France and the Maghreb* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, *The Transcontinental Maghreb: Francophone Literature Across the Mediterranean* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); and *Critically Mediterranean: Temporalities, Aesthetics, and Deployments of a Sea in Crisis*, eds. yasser elhariry and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

20. See Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000); and Christian Bromberger, “Towards an Anthropology of the Mediterranean,” *History and Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2006): 91–107.

21. The Arabic terms *al-Maghrib* (Maghreb) and *al-Mashriq* (Mashreq) are spatial designations that correspond to notions of “west” and “east,” respectively. Mashreq, etymologically derived from the word “shine, illuminate,” indicates the place where the sun rises, or the “east”; it thus refers, geographically, to the countries of the Middle East (including Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, etc.). Maghreb, derived from the Arabic for “to set,” describes the “west” and generally includes Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania, the Western Sahara, and Morocco, whose name in Arabic, “al-Maghrib,” denotes its status as the western-most Islamic-ruled land. Libya is considered to be split between the two. In certain academic disciplines, however, the designation “Maghreb” often refers only to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, the three lands that came under French rule during the colonial era. For an excellent discussion of the politics of cartography and toponyms, see Abdelmajid Hannoum, *The Invention of the Maghreb: Between Africa and the Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).



find recourse to more limited subsets of the Mediterranean, defined by cardinal points (the Eastern Mediterranean, referring generally to the Levantine Basin, for example, or the Northern Mediterranean, referring to Europe), but also by periods and peoples, as in the case of the Roman, Hellenic, or Ottoman Mediterranean.

It is worth noting that, in selecting the title for the collection, Sebbar avoided the expression “Arab Mediterranean,” despite the fact that it describes a territory nearly identical to the “Muslim Mediterranean” and is far more widely used, having found purchase in both administrative and geopolitical contexts, as well as in scholarly discourse on history, literature, and culture.<sup>22</sup> The decision is clearly demographic and factual: the inclusion of authors from Turkey—a country that belongs to the Muslim world but cannot be considered an Arab land—makes the designation “Arab Mediterranean” false. Yet it is impossible not to notice that avoiding the word “Arab” in the title also allows the collection to skirt the potential political landmines associated with “Jews and Arabs.” (See the following section for a longer discussion of the politics of the volume.)

Notwithstanding its apparent specificity, the notion of a “Muslim” Mediterranean—the term chosen by Sebbar to describe the origins of the childhoods on display in this volume—may risk eliding important differences between countries of the region where Islam is the dominant religion. A Jewish childhood in Muslim Turkey, for example, would have been subjected to different political, cultural, and linguistic pressures than a Jewish childhood in Muslim Algeria. Sebbar’s articulation may ultimately be a solution of convenience; after all, to speak only of the Mediterranean would be far too broad; to speak of only the Western or Levantine Mediterranean would eliminate important units of comparison; and to speak of the Francophone Mediterranean produces more definitional problems than it solves (countries like Turkey and Egypt, for example, have very different relationships to French colonial influence than do the countries of North Africa).<sup>23</sup> The notion of a Jewish childhood in a place called the Muslim Mediterranean, as encapsulated by the title of the collection, thus sets up a binary opposition that functions as a shorthand for the tensions—religious, cultural, linguistic, and political—inherent in the region but also in the representations of the life experiences of a religious minority.

The importance of the Mediterranean as a geographic and cultural frame for this collection is somewhat self-evident, and the reader will readily recognize tropes of Mediterranean-ness across the various portraits—swimming at the beaches of Algiers (Bahloul); descriptions of whitewashed walls and blue doors and shutters

22. See, for example, Karla Mallette, *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean: Toward a New Philology and a Counter-Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

23. The notion of a “Muslim Mediterranean” appears rarely and has not been rigorously theorized in scholarship. For an example that does engage with the term’s implications, see David Abulafia, “The Norman Kingdom of Africa and the Norman Expeditions to Majorca and the Muslim Mediterranean,” *Anglo-Norman Studies* 7 (1985): 26–49.

(Bouganim); laundry hung out to dry on sun-drenched terraces (Toubiana); the hammam (Stora); and, ubiquitous, olives, mint tea, and pastry with dates, honey, and almonds. In the end, very few of the authors use the designation “Mediterranean,” or even make reference to the region or the sea as a source of identity. But it is worth nothing that those who do refer to the region explicitly are acutely aware of its ambivalent “optics”: Ida Kummer, for example, writes of “coming to the painful understanding that despite the picture-perfect life often ascribed to our supposedly easygoing Mediterranean world, my Tunisian Jewish identity would involve both joys and sorrows.” Indeed, notwithstanding their production in this volume as a kind of Mediterranean chorus, the individual stories of *A Jewish Childhood* have in common a decidedly “local” flavor to their memories and descriptions; their worlds are not broad transnational swathes—they are cities, neighborhoods, apartments, streets, gardens, and courtyards.

### THE FRENCH CONNECTION

The fact that these Jewish writers chose to recall their childhoods in French, rather than in Hebrew, Arabic, or any other of the many languages used throughout the region, may come as something of a surprise. It is true, of course, that many of the authors moved to France at a young age—Tunisian Chochana Boukhobza, for example, relocated from Sfax to Paris when she was four—and that nearly all the contributors pursued higher education in France and eventually made their homes there. Yet these factors are not, in and of themselves, satisfactory explanations for the authors’ preference for French. Rather, patterns of migration and ultimate destinations participate in a larger story about empire, the politics of culture, and the tentacular reach of the French civilizing mission into the lands of Islam.<sup>24</sup> It is worth, then, exploring the dynamics that contributed to the production of this heretofore unmapped Jewish *francophonie*, born in the Muslim Mediterranean.<sup>25</sup>

The dynamics in question were undoubtedly driven by colonization and its various permutations. While this global phenomenon of political-economic conquest and exploitation had already been at work for centuries in other parts of the world, beginning in the nineteenth century several Western powers—namely England, France, and Italy—turned their attention to the Middle East and North Africa.

24. The civilizing mission has its origins in the European Middle Ages, and came to serve as the justification for the West’s colonization of indigenous people the world over. For a discussion of the civilizing mission in the context of France’s imperial endeavors, see Alice Conklin, “The Civilizing Mission,” in *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*, eds. Edward G. Berenson, Vincent Duclert, and Christophe Prochasson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011): 173–181.

25. It is worth noting that, with the exception of Iraq (thanks to the unusual circumstances of a Jewish intelligentsia literate in Arabic) and Tunisia (where there was a lively Judeo-Arabic publishing scene), Jewish writers of the MENA region have typically preferred to write in languages other than Arabic. Moreover, while one might reasonably presume that most of these Jewish writers had at least a passing knowledge of Hebrew, that language is rarely used in literary expression outside of Israel.

Deploying different methods and with varying results, these European nations began to acquire and consolidate power under the banner of modernizing and civilizing the putative Orient. France, with a presence in the area dating to 1789, and with influence that would span the width of the Mediterranean basin from Morocco to Turkey, was easily the most dominant Western influence in the region.

From the Maghreb to the Mashreq, and even within each subregion, the quality and nature of French colonial intervention varied. Of the countries represented in this volume, Algeria—a settler colony invaded in 1830 and officially attached to France in 1848—was undoubtedly the one most tightly sutured to the mainland in terms of administrative structure. Neighboring Tunisia and Morocco (occupied in 1881 and 1912, respectively) were governed as protectorates and, as a result, local governments maintained direct rule and some degree of autonomy, even as France exercised significant economic, political, and cultural power.<sup>26</sup>

The situation in the Mashreq, or the Middle East, was somewhat different. While France never formally colonized or annexed Egypt, Lebanon, or Turkey, it was nonetheless an important power broker in the Ottoman Empire, where it exercised diplomatic, economic, and cultural influence.<sup>27</sup> Napoleon Bonaparte's occupation of Egypt (1798–1801) was relatively short lived, but French culture and education would have a long-lasting impact on Egyptian society, and its legal system would leave a clear mark on Egyptian law. In the first part of the twentieth century, France occupied the zone that would later become Lebanon and Syria, an area it ruled under a League of Nations mandate from 1920 to 1946. The post-World War I mandate system prevented European nations from annexing and colonizing (to the degree seen in North Africa, for example), yet French presence and rule would nevertheless shape the region's administrative structures, cultural politics, and even geographical borders.<sup>28</sup>

As scholar Aron Rodrigue has observed, the “modern encounter” between Europe the Jewish communities of the Muslim “decisively marked the last century of Jewish existence in the lands of Islam.”<sup>29</sup> This seems to have been especially true for the Jewish communities in lands controlled or highly influenced by France. Compared to England and Italy, for example, France held a more significant sway over the region's Jews, who were generally considered to be assimilated, to some degree, into French culture. But if, in the twentieth century, Istanbul, Cairo, Tunis,

26. Morocco maintained its monarchy, for example, with the sultan (or king, beginning in 1957) remaining the official figurehead, even as the French exercised broad control over most aspects of government. The situation was similar in Tunisia, where the former Ottoman ruler, or bey, retained his position of symbolic authority while the French controlled all aspects of the administration.

27. The Ottoman Empire lasted more than six hundred years (from 1300 to 1922) and, at its height, controlled a large swathe of southern Europe and the MENA region.

28. Indeed, the partition that would yield the present day Republic of Lebanon was largely made possible by French relationships with the Lebanese Maronite community.

29. Aron Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims: Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Modern Times* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 4.

and Beirut were places where Jews were “raised up” by the politics and policies of the French civilizing mission and given access to education and other forms of social mobility, this only rarely took the form of official state policy. The lone exception to this was Algeria, where the Jews were granted French citizenship under the Crémieux Decree in 1870.<sup>30</sup>

Rather, Jewish acquisition of French cultural capital or, at the very least, the acquisition of competency in the language, was the direct result of the project undertaken by what would today be called an NGO (nongovernmental organization): the Franco-Jewish philanthropic organization known as the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU). Founded in Paris, in 1860, by Adolphe Crémieux and other members of the Franco-Jewish elite, the AIU saw the Jews of Muslim lands as “a poor, benighted lot, ‘backward’ and ‘obscurantist,’ and in dire need of help from their brethren in the West to rejoin ‘civilization.’”<sup>31</sup> The group’s founding statutes articulated the following main goals: (1) to work throughout the world for the emancipation and the moral progress of the Jews; (2) to help effectively all those who suffer because they are Jews; and (3) to encourage all publications designed to achieve these results.<sup>32</sup>

The sentiments of solidarity—and even of equality—inscribed in the group’s motto, “All Jews are responsible for each other,” lose some of their credibility when read alongside language like “backward” and “obscurantist.” The same might be said for the AIU’s recourse to Enlightenment ideology, as evidenced in its quest for the “moral regeneration” of the Jews of Muslim lands. But if the vocabulary and the paradigms that undergird it are unsettling to a modern reader, it is nonetheless important to place them in their historical context: the AIU’s doctrine was calqued on the French *mission civilisatrice*, which attempted to rationalize colonization in the name of modernization and social uplift. According to Jules Ferry, the French statesman whose name is synonymous with both *laïcité* (secularism) and colonial expansion: “the higher races have a right over the lower races,” and the “superior races have a right because they have a duty . . . to civilize the inferior races.”<sup>33</sup>

30. The *décret Crémieux*—named for Adolphe Crémieux, a Jewish French lawyer and politician who was also a strong proponent of the AIU—was a blanket decree that granted French citizenship to the vast majority of Algerian Jews. The decree was summarily revoked in 1940 under the anti-Jewish laws enacted by Vichy, then reinstated in 1943, as the tide of the war was turning. For more information, see Benjamin Stora, “Prologue: The Crémieux Decree,” *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations*, eds. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013): 286–291.

31. Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey 1860–1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xii.

32. Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims*, 8.

33. Lia Brozgal and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Colonial Tunisia from the Gutter Up,” Introduction to Vitalis Danon, *Ninette of Sin Street*, translated by Jane Kuntz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 5. For an English version of Ferry’s speech, see Modern History Sourcebook: Jules Ferry (1832–1893): “On French Colonial Expansion,” <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1884ferry.asp>.

While the AIU's activities included diplomacy and various forms of social work (including assistance to emigrants), it was primarily through education that the organization accomplished its version of the civilizing mission, thus making a lasting mark on the Jews of Muslim lands. Motivated by the belief that European-style, secular education in French would best serve their "oriental" brethren, the AIU founders set about creating a network of schools throughout North Africa and the Middle East. The first school was opened in Tétouan, Morocco, in 1862; it was quickly followed by schools in Tunisia (1863), Baghdad (1864), and in various cities in the Ottoman Empire. By 1913, the AIU educational system had reached its zenith, with 43,700 students attending 183 schools, spread out across all major Jewish centers of the Muslim Mediterranean.<sup>34</sup>

Across the region, all AIU schools offered a fairly complete elementary education covering subjects like history, math, sciences, and geography, with some emphasis on Jewish subjects—although the intent was never to provide the type of Hebrew education found in the Talmudic establishments. If anything, the AIU was keen to wrest the pedagogical reins from the local rabbis and to modernize the curriculum. Beyond this basic commonality, however, the level of education offered and the curricula varied somewhat across the region: some schools, for example, were able to extend their training to middle- or secondary-school level classes. In certain schools, training in a "language of practical application" (such as Spanish, Arabic, or Turkish) was integrated into the curriculum.

Even as the AIU occasionally recognized the importance of other, local languages, the hallmark of the school system was, of course, its devotion to the French language. The use of French as the language of instruction in all classes also differentiated the AIU from other Jewish schools throughout the Mediterranean, which were primarily religious in orientation and where the focus was on Hebrew. As Rodrigue has pointed out, "In an age when the French language had become the *lingua franca* of trade and commerce in the Levant, the acquisition of French was first and foremost of practical utility for the Jews of the area."<sup>35</sup>

Despite the undeniable practicality of mastering the French language (which was still, at the time, the language of international diplomacy), the primary goal of the AIU was not utilitarian in nature. Instead, its goal was nothing less than emancipation—from stagnant traditional values, from religious dogma, from social foreclosure. And to this end, it is crucial to underscore that the AIU offered not just an *education in French*, but rather *a French education*, with curricula and pedagogical methods that were replicas of those on offer in schools in mainland France. This ideal symbiosis of content and form guaranteed the transmission of

34. Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims*, 13–14. For a complete list of schools in the Muslim world, including city, type of school, and date of founding, see 15–21.

35. Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims*, 27.

Enlightenment principles and the doctrine of natural, universal, and inalienable rights to the young Jews of Islamic lands.

There may be a temptation to read *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean* as something of a tribute to the AIU's success in creating a secular elite by "raising up" the Jews of the Orient through exposing them to the light of the West (to borrow an expression from historian Georges Bensoussan).<sup>36</sup> Despite having grown up in multilingual environments—many authors recall speaking different languages at home, at school, at play, and at the market; some also mention the number of languages practiced within a single family—all, or quite nearly all, of the contributors to *A Jewish Childhood* have ultimately found themselves "at home" in French.<sup>37</sup> "Becoming Francophone" is certainly a byproduct of French colonial policy, but it was also the direct result of the AIU's intervention in Muslim lands—as is most obvious in places like Turkey, where French rule was never established.

It is doubtful that any of the authors begrudge the role played by the AIU in their ascension to the ranks of a certain, perhaps proverbial, elite. However, it is difficult to imagine that the characterization of their cultures of origin as "backward" would go unnoticed by those who are at pains to valorize and reconcile their multiculturalism, to put together pieces that "don't match"—as historical and contemporary discourse would have us believe. Joëlle Bahloul, for example, writes with some bitterness about recovering the "Arab culture of her homeland" only later in life, as an adult, and she laments the colonial interference that cleaved apart her Jewishness and her Arabness. Similarly, Aldo Naouri, despite having fled first Libya for Algeria, then Algeria for France, claims: "I am, and I remain, culturally Arab." If *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean* is a paean to the good works of the AIU, then it is also worth noting that through its secular, French education of "oriental" Jews, the AIU also produced—however inadvertently—the instruments for its own critique.

#### NEITHER "JEWS AND ARABS" NOR "ARAB JEWS"

While none of the stories in *A Jewish Childhood* could be mistaken for political screeds, questions regarding Jews, Arabs, Zionism, Islam, and colonialism leave few readers indifferent. Yet the original version of this collection may have been conceived with an eye to muting its potentially polemical content: in addition to its alphabetical organization by author, which flattens regional hierarchies, the French version contained no historical or contextual apparatus. The introductory material consisted of a brief preface penned by Leïla Sebbar and written in her characteristically unadorned style featuring simple syntax and plain language.<sup>38</sup> Her stylistic choices, coupled with an insistence on shared suffering, produce a Sebbar who

36. Georges Bensoussan, *L'Alliance israélite universelle (1860–2020). Juifs d'Orient, Lumières d'Occident* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, Collection "Présences du judaïsme," 2020).

37. See Note 1.

38. Sebbar's preface is included in this volume.

appears unwilling to engage with the obvious *political* aspects of her venture. It is impossible not to notice, for example, that she scrupulously avoids the trope of “intractable enmity”—mentioning neither historical nor contemporaneous conflicts between Jews and Muslims—preferring instead to imagine the two groups standing together before what she calls the “illusion” of the ideal French republic.

Most notably, perhaps, Sebbar sidesteps two key expressions—“Jews and Arabs” and “Arab Jews”—both of which have been produced by and instrumentalized in scholarship and political discourse, and both of which carry significant political baggage. Since the mid-twentieth century, when the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa emerged as a subject of inquiry, scholarly discourse has tended to position the Jews of the region as existing in relationship to “Arabs.” This formulation is most widespread in writing on the Israel-Palestine conflict (for example, *Intimate Enemies, Jews and Arabs in a Shared Land*, by Meron Benvenisti, or David K. Shipler’s *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*), and it continues to be used in the media. However, we also find this articulation (or versions thereof) in more broad-ranging historical studies, such as S. D. Goitein’s *Jews and Arabs: A Concise History of Their Social and Cultural Remains*—one of the first accounts of the Jewish presence in what Goitein might well have called the “Arab” Mediterranean; or in works like Norman Stilman’s *The Jews of Arab Lands* and Georges Bensoussan’s multivolume *Juifs en pays arabes*, where the distinction between the two peoples is articulated in terms of geographical dominion.

At first glance, the expression “Jews and Arabs” hardly seems polemic, much less divisive—after all, the conjunction “and” functions to bring entities together. Paradoxically, however, this formulation has produced and reinforced separation rather than union. To be clear, the implication of “Jews and Arabs” (and related expressions such as “Jews in Arab lands”) is that to be a “Jew” and to be an “Arab” are two different things; more to the point, at stake here is the notion that one cannot be both.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of one’s political, philosophical, or cultural investment in this matter, the logic is faulty insofar as the terms of the binary are not parallel. “Jew” is a *religious* marker; Jews hail from any number of different ethnic origins and speak different languages. “Arab,” however, is a *linguistic* marker; notwithstanding variations in dialect and accent, Arabs are bound by language even as they hail from any number of national backgrounds and may have different cultural and religious practices.<sup>40</sup> Further complicating matters are the ways in which religious

39. For examples of scholarship that explore the complexity of this issue, see: Ella Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and other Displacements* (London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 2017); Emily Gottreich, “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 433–451; Lital Levy “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the ‘Mashriq,’” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 452–469; Levy, “The Arab Jew Debates: Media, Culture, Politics, History,” *Journal of Levantine Studies* 7, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 79–103; and Jonathan Marc Gribetz, “‘To the Arab Hebrew’: On Possibilities and Impossibilities,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (2014): 589–592.

40. Certainly, while the majority of those who identify as Arab are also Muslim, not all Arabs are Muslim, and not all Muslims are Arab: most of the world’s Muslims are in Indonesia, for example;



designations have become racialized. Indeed, in France, in the United States, and elsewhere, the term “Arab”—and diffuse notions of “Arabness”—have come to be deployed as racialized markers, producing a dangerously limited understanding of what it means to be an Arab, or a Muslim.<sup>41</sup> The dyad “Jews and Arabs” has thus become a form of shorthand, standing in for and describing irreconcilable differences, if not an intractable enmity, between two peoples.<sup>42</sup> And, like all forms of efficiency, the expression smooths out critical nuances and ultimately forecloses the possibility of complex identities.<sup>43</sup>

The question of compound, hybrid identities brings us to the second term not used by Sebbar: Arab Jews. This formulation uses “Arab” as an adjective to describe people of a certain religion, and therefore allows us to conceive of “Jews” and “Arabs” not as separate, but rather as potentially overlapping forms of identity. Many of the contributors to this volume fall, at least nominally, into this category; those who do often explicitly evoke their “Arabic” cultural heritage and claim Arabic as one of their first languages. Yet “Arab Jew” is ultimately no less polemic than “Jews and Arabs,” and potentially far more politically fraught and affectively freighted. It is precisely because the “Arab Jew” incarnates both “Arab” and “Jew” in a single figure that it threatens the stability of the enmity discourse, potentially undoing an entrenched narrative that has significant political capital, particularly in the Middle East.

Opinions—including those of the very people who might call themselves Arab Jews, as I hinted earlier—do not coalesce around the accuracy of the category. Those who embrace it, such as the Iraqi-born Jew and critical theorist Ella Shohat,

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Turks and Iranians practice Islam, but are not Arabs; and, of course, there are significant Jewish and Christian minorities throughout the Arab world.

41. The story of the racialization of Arabs and Muslims is a function of specific histories and geopolitical contexts. In the United States, for example, the racialization of Muslims in public discourse and even in jurisprudence acquired a particular force after 9/11. In France, this phenomenon has roots in colonial history, particularly in policies enacted in Algeria. On this, and on the question of race and religion in France, see Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam*, translated by George Holoch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). There is a large and growing body of scholarship on the racialization of Arabs, and of Islam; see, for example, the special forum of the online journal *Lateral*, edited by Rayya El Zein and titled *Cultural Constructions of Race and Racism in the Middle East and North Africa/Southwest Asia and North Africa (MENA/SWANA)*. Of particular relevance to this conversation is the piece by Muriam Haleh Davis, “Incommensurate Ontologies? Anti-Black Racism and the Question of Islam in French Algeria,” <https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/cultural-constructions-race-racism-middle-east-north-africa-southwest-asia-mena-swana/>.

42. See S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: A Concise History of their Social and Cultural Relations*. First publication: New York: Schocken Books, 1955, under the title *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages*.

43. Gil Anidjar has also argued that this usage has the effect of ethnicizing religion, and, ultimately, racializing both Jews and Arabs. See Anidjar, *The Jew, The Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). See also, “The Jew, The Arab: An Interview with Gil Anidjar,” <https://asiasociety.org/jew-arab-interview-gil-anidjar>.

consider it a natural, if syncretic, category that reflects the lived and historical reality of a Jewish people who have spoken Arabic for hundreds of years; one in which her grandmother, for example, saw Jewishness as inextricable from Middle Eastern-ness.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Moroccan political activist and dissident Abraham Serfaty steadfastly claimed his identity as an Arab Jew, and railed against the negation of Arab Judaism by the Zionist project.<sup>45</sup> Numerous Jewish writers from the region, including Hélène Cixous (Algeria), Edmond El Maleh (Morocco), and Albert Memmi (Tunisia) use or have used the term “juif arabe” to describe themselves, although not always with the same aplomb as Shohat or Serfaty.<sup>46</sup>

When thinkers like Shohat refuse the idea that the notion “Arab Jew” constitutes a “logical paradox” or an “ontological subversion,” they are responding directly to the views put forward by those who reject the formulation.<sup>47</sup> Some opponents, like Edith Haddad Shaked, oppose the term on historical grounds, arguing that Jews of Arab lands would have never considered themselves “Arabs” (despite the fact that most Jewish writers from the Maghreb, including many of those whose autobiographical portraits appear in this volume, manifest a deep attachment to their Arabness).<sup>48</sup> Others refuse it on the basis of its contemporary links with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where it specifically refers to Jews who sympathize with the Palestinian cause and espouse left-wing, anti-Zionist views. Still others, like Sami Smooha and Sasson Somekh, argue that Arab Jews perform an idealized, essentialist, and thus inauthentic, recuperation of Arabness.<sup>49</sup>

44. Shohat, “On Orientalist Genealogies: The Split Arab/Jew Figure Revisited,” in “Genealogies of ‘Jews’ and ‘Muslims’: Social Imaginaries in the Race-Religion Nexus,” eds. Yolande Jansen and Nasar Meer, special issue, *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, nos. 1–2 (2020): 118–159.

45. Serfaty wrote: “Être arabe juif, c’est être juif parce que arabe, et arabe parce que juif.” [To be a Jewish Arab is to be Jewish because Arab, and Arab because Jewish.] See “Pour Abraham Serfaty et ses camarades,” June 30, 1975. <https://matzpen.org/english/1975-06-30/pour-abraham-serfaty-et-ses-camarades>. See also, Abraham Serfaty, *Le Judaïsme marocain en Israël* (Mouvement Internationale de Lutte Anti-Raciste, 1971).

46. The Tunisian-born Jew Albert Memmi, for example, is somewhat ambivalent and self-contradictory on this topic, particularly when compared to his robustly anti-Zionist peers Serfaty and El-Maleh. I refer readers to *The Albert Memmi Reader*, eds. Jonathan Judaken and Michael Lejman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020); and to Olivia Harrison, “Portrait of an Arab Jew: Albert Memmi and the Politics of Indigeneity,” *Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in the Era of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

47. See Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew*; see also Shohat, “Reflections by an Arab-Jew,” *Bint Jbeil*, August 28, 2016, <https://www.hsje.org/SecondExodus/Reflections%20By%20An%20Arab%20Jew%20-%20Ella%20Shohat.pdf>. Shohat calls for an end to the “simplistic charting of Middle Eastern identities.”

48. Shaked argues this in a conference paper titled “From Orient to Occident: the Jewish identity & community in Tunisia, 1881–1967,” presented at the 19<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Historical Sciences in Oslo, Norway (August 2000) and self-published on Research Gate, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280805878>.

49. As observed and referenced by Levy in her thoroughgoing discussion of the criticism of the term “Arab-Jew,” (see Levy, “The Arab Jew Debates,” 82–83). Gottreich complicates the term’s contemporary links to the Israel-Palestine conflict, arguing for a recuperation of historical moments of

The authors of *A Jewish Childhood* use a variety of terms to describe their own identities and to demarcate themselves from others. In keeping with what Shohat describes as the active categories used by Middle Eastern Jews to describe their neighbors—"the operating distinction had always been 'Muslim,' 'Jew' and 'Christian,' not Arab *versus* Jew"—in their contributions to this volume, writers like André Azoulay (Morocco) and Stora (Algeria) refer only to "Jews and Muslims," never to "Arabs." On the other hand, Patrick Chemla (Algeria), distinguishes between his co-religionaries and "Arabs" but historicizes his usage, acknowledging that "the term Muslim was not used at the time." In writing about "an Arab family" who rented a house from her grandfather, Alice Cherki (Algeria) recalls not knowing "whether they were originally from Kabylie, or the Aurès region, or from Algiers itself, since they all got lumped together under the same 'Arab' label." Her use of quotation marks and her observation regarding the imprecision of the term suggests an awareness of the way usage morphs over time.

The two Lebanese writers contributing to the collection scrupulously avoid the word "Arab": Lucien Elia uses specific, denominational vocabulary (Shia and Sunni) to distinguish between himself and his Muslim friends, whereas Yves Turquier refers to "Jews and Muslims," but also simply to "*goys*," as a way of naming all non-Jews. Only one of these writers is explicit in her adoption of an Arab Jewish identity; the Egyptian Mireille Cohen-Massouda writes, "I was born in Cairo, in Egypt, into the oldest and most important community of Arab Jews." The specificity of Cohen-Massouda's adult language takes on an ironic hue in light of the fact that, as a child, she spent several years refusing to speak at all.

In refusing to frame *A Jewish Childhood* in terms of "Jews and Arabs," and in denying the reader the convenience of the "Arab Jew," Sebbar may not, in fact, be skirting the political. Rather, she may be provoking it, albeit in a fashion that compels the reader to reckon with the highly idiosyncratic portrait of Jewish identity that emerges from the collection. If the essential ambivalence of the hybrid subject position of the "Arab Jew" is not fully announced in Sebbar's preface, it is nonetheless strongly implied and interrogated in nearly all of the portraits (again, even though only one author explicitly identifies herself as an "Arab Jew"). Moreover, when it comes to "Jews and Arabs," it is worth noting that hardly any of the authors in *A Jewish Childhood* situate themselves within this specific dichotomy.<sup>50</sup> Instead of reifying this binary, exclusionary divide, and rather than exaggerate stories of tolerance and identification, *A Jewish Childhood* produces an ambivalent discourse, one that suggests that the distinction between "Jew" and "Arab" is at once meaningful and meaningless, authentic and artificial.

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"Arab-Jewishness," and calling for greater historical consciousness. According to Gottreich, this would allow us to "restore lost histories," to understand the term as "not simply a reaction to recent political marginalization," and as "not simply folkloric." See Gottreich, "Historicizing the Arab Jew in the Maghreb," 451.

50. Of course, it bears mentioning that the four Turkish authors are not impacted by this paradigm, in part because Turkey is has never been considered an Arab country.

## WRITING CHILDHOOD, WRITING FRENCH

Youth and upbringing are clearly leitmotifs in Leïla Sebbar's corpus: among her major contributions to francophone literature is a series of edited volumes on childhood, whose titles include: *Une enfance algérienne* (An Algerian Childhood), *Une enfance outre-mer* (An Overseas Childhood), *L'Enfance des Français d'Algérie avant 1962* (Childhood of the French of Algeria before 1962), *Une enfance dans la guerre—Algérie 1954–1962* (A Childhood in War, Algeria 1954–1962), and *Une enfance d'ailleurs* (A Childhood from Elsewhere).<sup>51</sup> All of these works follow a format similar to that of *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean*, with Sebbar curating the contributions and framing the collection with a brief introductory essay. In those volumes, as in this one, Sebbar declines to engage in explicit theorization of childhood as a site, a state of mind, or a literary artifact, preferring, instead, to let the texts produce theory and allow their readers to do the work of interpretation.<sup>52</sup>

While Sebbar's interest in childhood has allowed her to carve out a niche within literary studies, she has not written her own autobiography of childhood. Although the majority of her books grapple with transparently personal topics and she has written long-form autobiographical essays (notably *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* [I Don't Speak My Father's Language]), Sebbar does not often write explicitly about her childhood growing up in Algeria. An obsession with collecting others' stories, however, may reveal "a particularly strong and insistent urge to trace origins."<sup>53</sup> In the end, it may be through compiling the stories of others that Sebbar produces her own: "Perhaps I write my autobiographical texts through collective stories of childhood."<sup>54</sup>

The self-portraits collected in this volume are all examples of short-form autobiography, and while they take different forms (ranging from reportage to the epistolary, to the anecdotal), none of them self-consciously play with the conventions of life-narrative (with the exception, perhaps, of Roger Dadoun's "Kaddish for a Lost Childhood," which is recounted entirely in the third-person). The basic authenticity of these autobiographies is not in question—all the writers lived the experience of growing up Jewish in the Muslim Mediterranean. But, as with any form of representation, and particularly in the case of childhood recollections,

51. Of these four volumes, only the first—*An Algerian Childhood: A Collection of Autobiographical Narratives* (St. Paul, MN: Ruminator Books, 2001)—has appeared in English.

52. For a general study of the *topos* of childhood in francophone postcolonial literature, see Maeve McCusker, "Small Worlds: Constructions of Childhood in Contemporary Postcolonial Autobiography in French," *Romance Studies* 24, no. 3 (2006): 203–214. Although McCusker discusses a number of Sebbar's "childhood" volumes, the present book was not yet published at the time of the article. McCusker is quite critical of Sebbar's production of exoticism, or what she calls her "domestication of a wide range of Algerian experience" (206).

53. McCusker, 212.

54. Sohelia Kian and Leïla Sebbar, "Une Entrevue avec Leïla Sebbar: l'écriture et l'altérité," *French Review* 8, no. 1 (October 2004), 134.

certain aspects may be amplified or reinterpreted in the process of recounting. There are authors who assert something like “total recall,” putting forward a confident narrative that brooks no possibility of mis-recollection (this is the case, for example, in Stora’s essayistic self-portrait). Others, however, self-consciously probe the complexity of memory (and of their own memories), while problematizing the stability of the self, of childhood, of writing: Daniel Mesguich describes childhood as a foreign country that he can’t enter without visa; Chochana Boukhobza admits, “I don’t know if I write to remember, or if I write to produce memories.”

Autobiography is a complex literary universe identified by a variety of names (life writing, life narrative, memoir, ego documents), practiced in any number of generic forms (fiction, essay, graphic novel, journal, film), and subject to a particular set of interpretative demands. A survey of titles of autobiographical works reveals the dizzying array of subject positions (categorized by gender, ethnicity, age, nationality) and experiences (war, trauma, grief, illness, abuse, addiction, displacement, internment, class struggle, career) that structure self-writing projects. Subcategories are as specific as slave and conversion narratives; autobiographies of childhood, colonialism, war, illness; and the mixed-race memoir, the bilingual or mixed mother tongue memoir, the political memoir, or the language memoir.<sup>55</sup> The list could well go on and, of course, none of these categories are mutually exclusive.

Regardless of its label or its specific content, self-writing as a literary production carries with it certain critical burdens that fiction typically does not. Readers seem to take a distinct interest and pleasure in exploring the lives of “real people” (famous or unknown)—the popularity of autobiography and memoir in the contemporary literary marketplace testify to this. But this particular investment in the real means that readers of autobiographical stories tend to view authenticity and truthfulness as key elements of a work’s value.<sup>56</sup>

To understand the stakes of the real, one need only look to the scandals that dogged “fake memoirs”—texts that advertise, and then are revealed to have broken, their pact with the reader.<sup>57</sup> Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* (1996), a prize-winning Holocaust memoir exposed as a hoax, incited what would come to be called the Wilkomirski Affair, prompting deeper critical inquiry into the ethics of Holocaust literature and the responsibility of writers, readers, and critics,

55. There are many resources for autobiography and its permutations. See, for example Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) and its appendix, “60 Genres of Life Narrative.” See also, *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2019).

56. G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012).

57. The notion that books and authors establish a “pact” with readers (based on paratextual information and other material) originated with Philippe Lejeune in *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), published in English as *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, translated by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

particularly in the case of representations of historical trauma.<sup>58</sup> Such debates have also taken place in the realm of popular fiction, notably in the United States, where questions of appropriation are especially fraught. The scandal that ensued after James Frey's "addiction memoir," *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), was revealed to be a hoax, has become emblematic of this phenomenon.<sup>59</sup>

Readers may deplore the craven recuperation of another's suffering for personal gain (as has been the case with numerous fake memoirs), or may simply be disappointed when a book, whose ostensible subject is the life of the author (or an episode of that author's life), turns out to misrepresent, or invent, "facts." But notions of authenticity and historical veracity are less stable than they may appear; moreover, even the most earnest autobiographers may misremember, and thus misrepresent, aspects of their own life stories. In certain cases, then, what may be interpreted as a lack of authenticity is in fact a symptom of the complexity of memory's structures, recall, and representation.

At least since the postmodern turn (if not before), literary critics have theorized the difficulty in distinguishing between fact and fiction (for readers and writers alike), arguing for a more complex understanding of self-representation and rejecting the notion that truth and authenticity are essential to the genre of self-writing.<sup>60</sup> Writers, too—practitioners of both autobiography and fiction forms like the novel—have implicitly theorized the impossibility of producing an accurate portrait of the self. Algerian writer Assia Djebar, in her generically hybrid *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (part novel, part memoir, part historical reckoning), observes: "My fiction is this attempt at autobiography . . ."<sup>61</sup>

While a given author may decide to fashion her life narrative by consciously drawing on elements both factual and fictional (as Judeo-Tunisian writer Albert Memmi explained about his own process of self-representation, "I used some personal facts, of course, but I also borrowed others . . ."), the emergence of memory studies (in the Humanities as well as in the sciences) has played an important role in making visible the complexity of recall and representation, even when it comes to personal life experiences, and especially in the case of childhood memories. The notion that memory can be inaccurate is, of course, not new: already in the early twentieth century, Freud suggested that childhood memories were wrong

58. On the Wilkomirski hoax, see Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Problems of Memory and Factuality in Recent Holocaust Memoirs: Wilkomirski/Wiesel," *Poetics Today* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 543–559.

59. There are numerous illustrative examples of "appropriations" and the polemics that unfold in their wake. For an interesting study of the phenomenon of the literary hoax in the French-language tradition, see Christopher L. Miller, *Imposters: Literary Hoaxes and Cultural Authenticity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018).

60. There is a large bibliography on this topic, but Paul de Man was one of the first to advance a more idiosyncratic conception of autobiography. See "Autobiography as De-facement," *MLN* 94, no. 5 (December 1979): 919–930.

61. Assia Djebar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, translated by Dorothy S. Blair (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993). Original title: *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Paris: JC Lattès, 1985).

more often than not, as a result of psychological (and possibly biological) processes; British psychologist Sir Frederic Bartlett called memory an “imaginative reconstruction.”<sup>62</sup>

In recent years, however, the hunches of psychology and the hermeneutical instincts of literary theorists have been productively reanimated by advances in neuroscience and brain imaging.<sup>63</sup> Memory is now understood as a set of complex processes and constructs; the notion of “autobiographical memory” recognizes both the psychological and neurological elements at play when calling up and attempting to represent memories of one’s self, with various factors contributing to type, quantity, and quality of recall. Summarizing the work of neuroscientists, Michael Stanislawski writes that autobiographical memory appears to function “by extracting the meaning of what we encounter, not by retaining and then accessing a literal record of it.”<sup>64</sup>

While questions of memory, form, and the representation of childhood are useful and appropriate analytical frameworks for thinking through the self-portraits of this collection, it bears noting that autobiographical writing produced by both Jews and Muslims in the Mediterranean emanates from a particular cultural context. In pointing up this regional specificity, I by no means espouse the idea, put forward by Georges Gusdorf and others, that autobiography is a distinctly European genre.<sup>65</sup> Given the variety of forms of self-writing we find in the Middle East and North Africa (beginning, perhaps with Ibn Khaldun’s work), and given an understanding of autobiography as a highly protean form, claims that the genre is “not found outside of our cultural area” (i.e., Europe) or that “autobiography expresses a concern peculiar to Western man” appear dated, if not dangerously essentialist.

It is true, however, that for the Muslim and Jewish communities of the Mediterranean, writing in the first person—embracing the “I”—has not always been an organic operation. Indeed, the two groups have in common a certain resistance to revealing the self. In *Return to Childhood*, Moroccan writer Leïla Abouzeid observes that “the life of a Muslim (man or woman) is considered an *awra* (an

62. Sigmund Freud, “Screen Memories,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 3 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 3; and Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 213.

63. For more on this, see Hans Markowitsch and Angelica Staniloiu, “Brain Research and Neuroscience” in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, 18–29.

64. Michael Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews: Essays in Jewish Self-Fashioning* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004): 16–17.

65. See Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” translated by James Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980): 28–48; and James Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).



intimate body part”); as such, it must always be hidden.<sup>66</sup> Algerian writer Wadi Bouzar suggests that in Maghrebi writing there is “a disgust for introspection, confession, and more generally for the ‘exposure of the self.’”<sup>67</sup> A similar distrust of individualistic acts, including writing one’s autobiography, exists among the Jews of the region. As Guy Dugas reminds us, any act of revelation that would set a person apart from the group is met with skepticism; this even more poignantly true when it comes to writing, and self-writing, which is viewed with suspicion, as “an attempt at self-exile, a desire to step outside of the group.”<sup>68</sup>

If writing about the self in this particular cultural matrix is a complex operation, the language of self-expression—that is, the choice to write in French—is also anything but neutral. The politics of writing in the “colonizer’s language” have long dogged postcolonial literatures on a global scale; however, polemics surrounding the literary works produced by writers from the former French empire (and other zones of significant French influence) are especially lively. In both scholarship and in the public sphere, discussions about literary categories, terms, and how to identify certain writers have crystallized around concepts like “la Francophonie” and “une littérature monde en français” (a world-literature in French).<sup>69</sup> At bottom, both are attempts to wrestle with the naming of a literary production in French emanating from writers who may or may not be French—and, of course, embedded therein are questions of legal belonging, recognition, and diversity.<sup>70</sup> At stake here are not simply labels (even if we know that words matter) but rather visceral questions of identity, the politics of culture, and the perpetuation of the colonizer-colonized binary.

66. Leïla Abouzeid, *Return to Childhood: The Memoir of a Modern Moroccan Woman*, translated by Abouzeid and Heather Logan Taylor (Austin: University of Texas at Austin Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1998). Originally published in Arabic as *Rujû ilâ al-tufûla* (1993).

67. Wadi Bouzar, *Lectures maghrébines* (Paris: Publisud, 1984).

68. Guy Dugas, *La Littérature judéo-maghrébine d'expression française* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990): 106–107. See also Brozgal, “Writing Back to Whom? Novel Strategies of Ambiguity and the ‘Mark of the Plural,’” in *Against Autobiography: Albert Memmi and the Production of Theory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014): 37–70.

69. The “world-literature in French” manifesto launched, in 2007, a long running series of debates and conversations about the identity of French-language literature and the payoffs and pitfalls of “la Francophonie” as a category with colonial links and implications. See “Toward a ‘World-Literature’ in French,” translated by Daniel Simon, *World Literature Today* 83, no. 2 (March–April 2009): 54–57. Translated from “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français,” *Le Monde*, March 16, 2007. Although it is difficult to parse the implications of this fact, only one francophone Jewish author signed the manifesto (the Israeli writer Esther Orner); Albert Memmi, for example, noted that he was not invited to participate.

70. For a valuable exploration of questions of literary value, institutional recognition, and francophone authors, see Kaoutar Harchi, *I Have Only One Language, and It Is Not Mine: A Struggle for Recognition*, translated by Alexis Pernsteiner (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2021). Original title: *Je n'ai qu'une langue, ce n'est pas la mienne* (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 2016).

While francophone Jewish writers have occasionally participated in these conversations and, at times, even been foundational to them—Memmi, for example, was one of the first to embrace the idea of a Maghrebi *francophone* literature—there has not yet been sustained, systematic attention to the ways in which francophone Jewish writers, those from the Arab world in particular, theorize questions of language.<sup>71</sup> As a people whose historical situation has often been one of organic multilingualism, the Jews of the Muslim Mediterranean may be in a strategic position when it comes to propelling us beyond the questions that have characterized these debates and that leave us at something of stalemate.<sup>72</sup> Rather than continue to probe the putative denial of one's mother tongue, the use of the colonizer's language, and the choice of French, these authors generate (both explicitly and implicitly) questions that are at once more fundamental and more constructive: what constitutes a *native* language when one grows up speaking one language with one's parents, another with one's grandparents, and yet another in school? Is it possible to have more than one mother tongue? Why would the French language be the exclusive property of the colonizer? Might French also be an African language? A Middle Eastern language? And, finally, how does one choose a language, and is it possible to say that writing in French even constitutes a *choice*?

. . .

I would be remiss in concluding this introduction without saying a word about translation. *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean* is, on the one hand, a straightforward work of interlingual translation—that is, a translation from one language to another. With the exception of the stories by Moris Farhi and Roni Margulies—Turkish writers who grew up speaking French but preferred, as adults, to write their childhoods in English—all of these autobiographical portraits were originally written in French. But the act of translation embodied by the publication of this collection is not limited to its linguistic transfer from French to

71. Much scholarly attention has been paid, of course, to Jacques Derrida's interrogations of language in *The Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). In that essay, the Algerian Jew and theorist articulates the linguistic aporia unique to the Jews of colonial Algeria: "Je n'ai qu'une langue et elle n'est pas la mienne" (I have but one language—yet that language is not mine). Algerian-born Jew Hélène Cixous also theorizes, however implicitly, her particular relationship to language in works like *Reveries of the Wild Woman: Primal Scenes* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006). Egyptian-born Jewish writer and psychoanalyst Jacques Hassoun also explores questions of language in his correspondence with Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatibi, published as *Le même livre* (Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 1985).

72. "The Jews are perhaps the longest-standing case of a group whose self-definition was always a part of a multicultural context. For much of Jewish history, what it meant to be a Jew was to be multilingual and multicultural and never to live in splendid isolation from interaction and struggle with other cultures." David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel, "Introduction: The Dialect of Jewish Enlightenment," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Oakland: University of California Press, 1998), 8.

English; rather, embedded in these stories are the traces of translation as a quotidian lived experience.

The word translation is rarely, if ever, uttered by these authors; yet their life-narratives are saturated with—and sometimes even structured by—translation. Like so many other aspects of these stories, reflections on multilingualism vary: Lizi Behmoaras drops Turkish words into her tale because there are purportedly no French equivalents; Guy Sitbon reflects on how, even as an expatriate and an adult, he still speaks Arabic with the accent of Monastir. Some mention speaking Arabic so well that they pass for Muslim; others ruminate on how their Jewish accents singled them out for taunting and discrimination. Mesguich's observation (featured *en exergue* of this introduction) is one of the few direct references to the act of translation in this collection. In suggesting that translation enacts a change not just on language, but on the person performing the translation, Mesguich effectively—and poignantly—theorizes both the work of translation and its impact on multilingual subjects. Regardless of whether they speak about language directly, all the authors evince an awareness that, even as they write French, they may write with an accent, and they are already translating their childhoods.

In her work on the region, Karla Mallette observed that “the most fundamental cultural rift in the Mediterranean is the breach between language written from left to right, and language written from right to left.”<sup>73</sup> The English version of *A Jewish Childhood* is organized by country, from Turkey to Morocco, that is, from east to west, geographically, or from right to left, conceptually. This symbolic gesture—of crossing writing from left to right with a directional movement from right to left—nods to that fundamental rift and makes a small attempt to suture it.

73. Mallette, “Boustrophedon: Towards a literary theory of the Mediterranean,” in *A Sea of Languages: Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, eds. S. C. Akbari and K. Mallette (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013): 254–255.