

CHAPTER THREE

Egypt

Country Snapshot

Egyptian Jewry was composed of multiple denominations with varying beliefs and practices, which were often separated into two main groups, Karaites and Rabbanites. Karaites, who base religious law on the written Torah alone, constituted a significant minority Jewish community in Egypt for centuries. Most Egyptian Jews, however, were considered Rabbanites, meaning that they belonged to denominations such as Ashkenazim and Sephardim, who accept the authority of the Talmud and oral law. Within the Rabbinite majority, Sephardi Jews comprised the bulk of the Egyptian Jewish community and its elite. Ashkenazi Jews, whose presence in Egypt can be primarily attributed to the arrival of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish refugees, were often looked down upon by the Sephardic majority.

A heterogeneous group with roots and connections that extended across the Mediterranean and into Europe and the Middle East, Egyptian Jews were rarely monolingual. In addition to Arabic, Sephardic Jews often spoke Ladino, Italian, Turkish, and Greek, whereas Ashkenazi Jews frequently spoke Yiddish, Polish, and Russian. Arabic was the primary language of the Karaite Jews, as well as of the Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews who immigrated to Egypt in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. French was spoken, to some degree, in all Egyptian Jewish communities; over time it became the common language that united the diverse Jewish communities of Egypt, whose children were often educated in either Alliance Israélite Universelle schools or those of the Mission Laïque Française, and whose language of instruction was most commonly French or English.

Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1789–1801) is often considered to be the country's first encounter with Western modernity. Although Napoleon lost to the British and Ottoman armies, he did pave the way for French influence in Egypt, as Governor Muḥammad 'Alī (1805–1848) would subsequently turn to France for the financial and technical knowledge that he would need to modernize Egypt. Influenced by the French ideal of *laïcité* (or secularism), Muḥammad 'Alī outlawed



MAP 4. Egypt. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

explicit manifestations of xenophobia toward minority religions, including poll taxes, and clothing and social restrictions. The living conditions of Egyptian Jews further improved in 1882, when the Egyptian viceroy put an end to Jews' status as *dhimmis* and declared total civil equality.

Although many of Egypt's Jews were autochthonous inhabitants of the region, a significant proportion of Egyptian Jews sought out and obtained foreign nationality—most often French or Italian, although some obtained British nationality as well—as the legal protections accorded to foreigners were advantageous for religious minorities living as *dhimmis*. Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the British occupation, the possibility of acquiring Egyptian citizenship was extended to Egyptian Jews via the Egyptian Nationality Law of 1929. Few Jews chose to apply for Egyptian nationality, however, as it was a complicated and expensive legal process that required documentation many simply did not have, and those who had succeeded in obtaining foreign passports by and

large chose to keep them. However, as British imperial control waned and Egypt took more steps toward self-governance, what was once a boon soon became the exact opposite, as those native Jews who held foreign passports came to be seen as foreigners in their home country, and the decision not to obtain Egyptian nationality was looked upon with suspicion by the country's growing Arab nationalist movement.

In terms of education, upper- and middle-class students frequently attended AIU schools or the Mission Laïque schools in Alexandria and Cairo for instruction in French, or one of the numerous renowned British private schools, such as Victoria College. Egyptian Jews were overall an educated community, boasting literacy rates of over 80 percent in 1947. No doubt due to their higher levels of education and knowledge of multiple languages, Egyptian Jews as a whole were an upwardly mobile group that contributed to numerous important industries, such as the cotton and sugar trade. In addition, many Jews worked in finance, law, and medicine.

Part of the Egyptian Jewish community supported Egyptian nationalist movements during the early years of the twentieth century, finding common ground with their Muslim neighbors in their struggle against British imperialism. Tensions began to rise in the 1920s and 1930s, however, particularly after the foundation of the fundamentalist Society of Muslim Brothers in 1928. During the 1930s, the situation deteriorated as Egyptians struggled with their lack of sovereignty, continued British influence, the situation in Palestine, and the rise of fascism. In 1938, the Egyptian fascist movement Young Egypt, along with the Society of Muslim Brothers, targeted Jews in violent demonstrations in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tantah. Hajj Amin al-Husseyni, the Palestinian mufti exiled in Cairo, also encouraged anti-Jewish demonstrations.

These rifts were further exacerbated by the events of World War II, as Egyptian nationalists hoped for a British defeat, which would allow them to finally rid themselves of imperial domination and become a fully independent nation. This was in stark contrast to the Egyptian Jewish community, who were staunchly pro-Ally. Following the Nazi defeat in 1945, unemployment rose, as did the resentment of Egypt's "foreign" Jews. The Society of Muslim Brothers capitalized on these negative feelings toward Jews and encouraged violence against them, which culminated in the November 2–3, 1945, riots, in which Jews were looted and attacked, and the Ashkenazi synagogue in Cairo was set on fire.

Although a significant percentage of Egyptian Jews were able to return to some measure of pre-war stability, the fallout of World War II continued to drive a wedge between Egyptian Jews and the Muslim majority. The 1947 Company Law decreed that 40 percent of all boards of directors, 75 percent of administrative workers, and 90 percent of all other workers must hold Egyptian nationality. This dealt a serious blow to the Jews, many of whom had retained foreign nationality. To complicate things further, following the establishment of Israel in 1948, it became practically

impossible for Jews to obtain Egyptian citizenship. Civil unrest, martial law, the sequestration of Jewish assets, and the expulsion of several hundred Zionist and communist detainees led to the emigration of more than fifteen thousand Jews between 1949 and 1951, primarily to Europe and Israel.

For all intents and purposes, the 1950s spelled the end of the Jewish presence in Egypt. On January 26, 1952, the Cairo Fire—also known as Black Saturday—burned the capital city, while hundreds of buildings were looted in anti-British riots. Several months later, the Free Officers Revolution of July 23, 1952, compounded the country's precarity, fomenting the Revolution of 1952, which overthrew the Egyptian monarchy. Two years later, the Lavon Affair, in which Egypt foiled a false flag operation organized by Israeli military intelligence and carried out by Egyptian Jews, inflamed tensions even more, as public discourse conflated Jewishness with Israeli Zionism, rendering it incompatible with "Egyptianness." In 1956, as Arab nationalist Gamal Abd-el-Nasser was elected president and led Egypt to victory over Israel in the Suez War, approximately twenty-five thousand Jews left Egypt for the Americas, Australia, Europe, and Israel. By 1967, there were only around twenty-five hundred Jews still living in Egypt, and by the 1980s, there were fewer than five hundred, mostly members of the older generations, living in Cairo and Alexandria. As of 2020, that number has dwindled to a handful.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*

Chatby, Alexandria

Jo and Rita

Rita Rachel Cohen

O to hear: “Hi Rita, what’s new with you?”

My brother. It’s you, here, not so long ago. On the phone. At home, my house. In the street. Everywhere.

Then we’re off! Laughter, our laughter: one of us would say a word, setting off an endless stream of giggles. You, tears rolling down your face like rain; me, the sound carried away my wet eyes; our faces lit up, our bodies caught in the joy of being together again, of being with each other, of joking around, *la nokta . . .*¹

Our laughter brought us together. It was just the two of us in that private moment, alone at that precise time, just the two of us in the world. Our laughter made us feel like we were on the boat once again but this time going in the other direction: from Marseille to Alexandria, from Alexandria to Cairo, from Cairo to Maghagha in Upper Egypt, to Mansourah perhaps, in all its gardens, riding in your go-kart, in carriages, sea-saws made of iron, meandering through the country of our childhood, by the seaside and in the interior, the mother-land, *Dounia*, our world, Egypt.²

Rachel, the name you gave me, father. Your mother’s name.

Rita, the name you gave me, mother.

Rita the African, the Italian, the South American, the Indian. Rita didn’t hear Rachel in Egypt. Rachel, “little sheep” in Hebrew; Rachel the Egyptian didn’t know that Rachel was Rita. In Egypt, in France, in Switzerland, in France, she was Rita.

1. Author’s note: Egyptian argot for “joke”.

2. Author’s note: The World, the Universe, Life. Examples: *dounia tayeba*, life is good; *dounia hellouah*, life is beautiful. (Editors’ note: the author appears to be playing with the multiple meanings of *dounia*. *Dunya* [as rendered in standard transcription] means life, or world, whereas the expression *Umm al-Dunya* is a metaphorical reference to Egypt.)



FIGURE 9. Jo and Rita (Jacques Choua, aka Joé, and Rachel, aka Rita) at the seaside neighborhood of Shatby in Alexandria, summer 1956.

She was Rita, until one day in France Rita decides to hear Rachel. She was sixteen years old.

Rita for Rita Hayworth—of course. 1952. The cinema. Your movies, mother. The ones you made in Egypt for a little while, your Egyptian movies on your boat, your theater—a little wink at Rachel, the other one—with a pitcher balanced on your head, traditional gown, an ankle bracelet.

I can hear my mother:

“Rrrita, *rohi*, eat . . .”³

Rita with at least three r’s . . .

Rohi, my soul!

I hear you singing, in Greek, in Italian, in Egyptian. I don’t remember you singing in French in Egypt.

And we’re off! Your body started moving. Dance. Dance. Oriental.

And laughter, and . . .

“Eat!”

I didn’t want to eat. There were pots and pans on the beach in Alexandria. Me, I was at Chatby.⁴ That was *my* beach. I wanted to be in the water, that’s it.

I rediscovered Chatby in 1993. Without the pots and pans.

Now there is no Chatby. But there is this photo. Jo and Rita. And it is precisely these tears and these peals of laughter that created our lives, that were the ritual baths of our childhood. In the language-s, the singular language plural: in French, I hear language through and from Egyptian. I write the musical score in French.

“It’s great!”

From your mouth, my brother, I hear the word “great,” in other words: “open sesame.” I see you. Your little boy’s eyes glisten with wonder, curious about everything, about the tiniest thing. Glistening eyes. Egyptian eyes. That look like glistening eyes. Indian eyes.

And, in one single sentence, there’s some “it’s great” and some “it’s a catastrophe.” That’s how Egyptian Jews speak French: “It’s great. It’s a catastrophe.”

Brother of mine, in France I often heard you say: “It’s a catastrophe.” What was? To have left? To have been made to leave?

For me, since I’ve been back home in Egypt, my childhood has come bubbling up to the surface. The lid is off the teapot. Aladine’s lamp.⁵

3. Author’s note: an Arabic word with a powerful meaning: “my soul.”

4. Author’s note: a seaside neighborhood in Alexandria. (Editors’ note: Known in English as Shatby, this upscale area is the site of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a library and cultural center commemorating the ancient Library of Alexandria. It is also home to the Lycée Français d’Alexandrie [French High School of Alexandria], founded in 1909 and operated today by the Mission Laïque Française.)

5. Author’s note: stress on the second syllable, the -dine, that’s why I added an “e”; so, it should be pronounced Aladine, not Aladin, like in French. (Editors’ note: the author wants the word to sound like AlaDEEN [with a long “e” sound] rather than like AlaDAN [which is how the nasal “i” sounds in French—one might think of the word “vin” in the dish known as “coq au vin.”])

The light, brother of mine. The smells. The *foul*, the little beans that we eat on bread, in the street, the poor man's meal, the sacred dish of Cairo, cooked in huge iron pots.⁶ *Bamia*, *gombos*, in Mansourah, the city where you were born, father of mine.⁷

Orange blossom water. The *kanaka*, that little coffee pot for Turkish coffee made with green cardamom and orange blossom water. In the Egyptian way.⁸

Boghhour, the incense from Lebanon and Egypt that you would burn, mother of mine, in a the little *kanoun*, the hollow little pot made of earth that you would take from room to room, making the wisps of perfumed smoke do arabesques above our heads while you murmured: "hmm . . . may this cleanse," "hmm . . . may this smell good," "hmm . . . may this protect," "hmm . . . may this protect from the evil eye." The evil eye could be everywhere.⁹

It was only through leaving and coming back that I rediscovered, differently, the hinterlands of the country where I was born, the country of my childhood, the childhood of my country that composed the musical score of my mother tongue, the Egyptian language that makes me dance, makes me dream, that opens my heart, that brings me joy in motion with the special quarter-tone that belongs to "oriental music" (as they say).

My score is short but dense. It is written in few notes. Words come out of my mouth like I'm four years old—sometimes clear, sometimes strange. The musical phrases aren't written in my head; the word makes the music itself.

And then in Egypt my ears heard the music of the French language spoken, pronounced with the diction particular to Egyptians who speak French in a way that leaves words and phrases slightly unresolved, like that quarter-tone with its half-step more or less that gives a note of freedom, fantasy, and opening. And that peculiar pronunciation of Egyptian Jews who'd roll their r's as though they were taking in fresh air along the cliff road in Alexandria. Today they still roll their r's but there is no more cliff road.

And the ritual words, my father, in Hebrew, for the holidays, for prayers. *Hag sameach* May the holiday be joyous, with no other punctuation, no full stop or no exclamation.

My journey in this memory of Jewish childhood in Egypt is from memory: at home my parents spoke Egyptian, French, and, or more specifically, an other

6. Author's note: In Egypt, in the street, we eat *foul* on oriental bread called *chami*, a Syrian bread similar to Greek pita. (Editors' note: *Foul* or *ful*, is a dish made of fava beans cooked with lemon, garlic, and cumin.)

7. Editors' note: *Bamia* is a Middle Eastern stew made with okra, tomato, and meat; *gombos* is okra.

8. Author's note: Small coffee pot made out of brass or white metal.

9. Author's note: *Boghhour* is incense made from resin; a *kanoun* is a small, hollow stove or heater where burning charcoal is placed in order to burn the resin. (Editors' note: *Boghhour* is often transliterated as *bukhoor* or *bakhoor*.)

language: *l'égyptienne*, a language filled with French words and names, and expressions like “it’s half past five plus five.” My parents loved to get together with family, friends, sometimes the neighbors, to chat with joy and with difficulty in Egyptian and the other language. My father said the prayers in Hebrew at holiday time. My brother would tell me stories in the other language. When my father had guests at home, the jokes and poetry were in Egyptian, the elegance was in French, and all was embroidered with little dashes of Aramaic, a zest of Libano-Syrian, a word of Turkish. On the phone with colleagues from work, he sometimes spoke English. I heard my mother singing, her voice, in Egyptian, Italian, and Greek, with a tiny hint of Armenian. I recorded my mother’s voice singing in Egyptian, Italian, and the structure of these languages moves me. As for Greek, I remember the polyphonies, the music. From Upper Egypt, my ears took in the Gypsies of the Nile, those women who sing in a shrill voice like they do in India, like they do in Corsica, plugging the left ear with the left hand in order to hear only out of the right ear—that is, their own sound, while the right hand draws the movement of the voice, pulling it up from the navel through the sternum and beyond. And for me in Egypt, and in France too, there is a very old, doubly absent voice, two sides of a coin buried along the shores: Spanish, and its reflection, Portuguese.

I can’t hear myself, I can’t hear the sound of my own voice, not in Egyptian, not in French, not in the other language. And yet I know that in Egypt, the little girl I used to be spoke Egyptian. In my knapsack, I took with me a few words and the movement of the language. I also spoke French because when I arrived in Marseille on December 22, 1956, the French language was not completely foreign to me. I spoke it. In Egypt, the two languages traveled together. And the other language was the lingo of the day. Egyptian was for telling, for recounting, for being happy or not, for dreaming, for speaking in music, for being together, for watching cartoons, for poetry, for the joy of the senses, for dancing, for singing, for playing, for inventing.

Amareldin.¹⁰ The Syrian delicacy. Apricot paste. No, the sheet of apricot paste that the merchant Sidi Effendi would roll¹¹—and it is my four-year-old self who is saying this—he’d always roll it with a smile that made his teeth twinkle like gypsum and with a little saying that I’m inventing right now: “May your life be always like this carpet of *mech mech*, may it continue to unfold forever, may it be sweet and taste of orange, like the fruit, like the flower, may it have the good smell of apricots . . .”¹² And at home I would read the book of *mech mech* as my

10. Author’s note: *lamareldin*—literally “faithful moon”—refers to a sheet of apricot paste typically produced in Syria. (Editors’ note: This might be best understood as “apricot leather.”)

11. Author’s note: *Sidi*, in Arabic, means Mister, or Sir; *Effendi* (or *effendy*) is an honorific title of Turkish origin. Comparable to “lord” or “master”, it is completely inappropriate to use it when addressing a shopkeeper, but not as far as the little girl speaking is concerned.

12. Author’s note: *Mech mech* is Arabic for apricot. (Editors’ note: The transcription of the vowels of this word varies, but the ending consonant sound is “-ish,” as in “wish.”)

mother rolled out the sheet of apricot and let us rip off a bit of the page. It was *The Book of the Apricot, The Book of Mech Mech*.

Whenever I would hear “*mech mech*,” my tongue would hang out of my mouth; I’d drool with joy; excited, I would tell myself all the stories in the world; I’d read it like an open book that contained the history of the book written in *mech mech*. It was the Book. The sacred Book because I could take a piece, eat it, savor it, and tell myself all the stories. And when it was done there would be another sheet of *mech mech*, whole, and I would tell myself that *The Book of Mech Mech* was still there, that I could look at it, smell it, and take a bite out of it. I would eat *The Book of the Apricot*, I would eat *The Writing of the Mech Mech* and it would nourish me with flavor and words. And I could tell all the stories of all of the apricots. Today, the *Amareldin* that I find in little rolls at Ramadan time in Khan el-Khalili in Cairo were the stuff of Rosh Hashanah, the new year, in Maghaga, in Cairo, in Alexandria.¹³

The person who can take the *Book of Apricots* away from me has yet to be born. No one can snatch the story of the *Book of Mech Mech* from my hands. Because “*bokra fel mech mech*” literally means “tomorrow in the apricots!” In other words: never!

—Translated by Lia Brozgal

13. Author’s note: it is a Muslim custom to eat *amareldin* to break the Ramadan fast; at home, we ate it primarily at Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New year. Khan el-khalili is a famous *souk* in Cairo. (Editors’ note: A *souk*, or *souq*, is a market or a bazaar.)

Antikana Street, Cairo

The Blue Muslims

Mireille Cohen-Massouda

To my grandfather Lieto Khadr Massouda

I was born in Cairo, in Egypt, into the oldest and most important community of Arab Jews.¹ It was in this community, called the Blue Muslims, that I grew up. Arabic was the language spoken at my grandparents' home. It was a language I experienced as forbidden.

In the 1940s, when I was just four years old, two of my uncles and I were stricken with typhoid. In the evenings after seeing his own patients, Uncle Farid, a doctor and the brother of my maternal grandfather, would come by our home. Going to the hospital was not an option. At the hospital, one could only die. Tenacious, and thanks to contacts in England where he had studied, he succeeded in obtaining penicillin for us. Relapse after relapse, I remained bedridden for six months. My mother had lost ten kilos (twenty pounds), and I had to relearn how to talk and to walk. Later, she would say that I was "like a child released from the camps." In addition to the specter of death, the main ghost haunting my life was the limping silhouette of Sister Rose, who would tie a tourniquet around my arm and put me on an IV drip.

As long as my great grandmother, Setti, was alive, all the Jewish holidays took place at my grandparents' house.² Every year, at *Pesach*, Passover, each granddaughter got a new dress.³ The house was cleaned from top to bottom. The rooms were closed up, one after the other, and we all—well, all the girls—ended up in

1. Author's note: They were called Muslims because they take off their shoes and prostrate themselves during their prayer; blue because of the blue threads woven in the fringes of their prayer shawls, their *tallitot*. (Editors' note: *Tallitot* is the plural of *tallit*, a fringed prayer shawl worn primarily by Jewish men in more observant traditions.)

2. Author's note: *Setti*: madam, in Arabic. This is what we called our great-grandmother. She did not know how to read or write, but she knew how to count and watch over us.

3. Author's note: The celebration of Karaite Passover consists of a Hebrew reading from the Torah about the exodus from Egypt.



FIGURE 10. Four-year-old Mireille Cohen-Massouda, called "Mira," Alexandria, September 1945.

the same room, on the eve of the much-anticipated day. The preparations in the kitchen were lavish. That evening, the prayers lasted a long time, and hunger seized our stomachs; we had to arm ourselves with patience. We, the children, promised to be serious, but it was a holiday so excitement was high. Not understanding anything of what was being read so solemnly quickly made us lose our composure.

Bursts of laughter spurted out. Scowling, our mothers stared daggers at us. Neither grandfather's incantation from underneath his tarboosh, nor our father with his *kippah* on his head pretending to read surprised the young girls that we were.⁴ These girls knew full well that, despite his serious look, this father was just playing along, that he was only there because of custom and all he wanted was for the ceremony to end so he could meet up with his gambling buddies, with whom he played cards every night and into the early morning. Nothing escaped those girls who, because they were girls, had been denied any religious education. For them, Hebrew really was Hebrew.

I will always remember the Passover of my tenth year. I had been forbidden from following Setti into her den, to which she alone had the key. When she allowed us to follow her, the girl who entered left drunk with pleasure. The aroma of spices, bottles of all colors, jars of jam from rose petals, apricots, bitter oranges, sweets prepared for days on end all haunted us. On important occasions, Setti, Madame, took out the most beautiful dishes, the silver cutlery, and the crystal glasses. I will never forget the holiday evening that year. I found myself alone, far away from the other children, at a separate table, in front of an everyday plate and place setting, served by Mohamed, the servant. I got up, and without a word, left the table. I shut myself up in the room I shared with Helene, the cook. Mohamed, like all servants, was a man and a Muslim; he was part of the house, and knew the customs. This was the saddest Passover of my life. God only knows how long the exodus from Egypt was for me, that night. Not one of the women, mother, aunt, grandmother, great-grandmother, had thought to alert me to what was coming. They had forgotten to tell me that a woman who was on her period was *négsa*, impure, and had to be kept apart.

Coming from a Karaite family of eight children, luck and the love of his mother had allowed my father to become a *khawaga*, a *doktor*.⁵ He spent close to twenty years in Paris where he had gone to study dentistry. At the end of 1938, on the advice of a Russian Karaite dentist who was well-informed about the Nazi threat, he left France and went back to Egypt. This was also "to marry the wife that was destined for him."⁶ If he granted his mother's wish by marrying a Karaite woman, he nonetheless refused to wall himself off within the Jewish community and instead settled in the heart of the city, in the Groppi building on Suleiman

4. A tarboosh (or *tarbush*), is a close-fitting brimless felt hat. Conical in shape with a flat top, it is worn by men throughout the Muslim Mediterranean, and resembles the better-known fez.

5. Karite refers to Karaism (sometimes written *Qaraism*), a Jewish religious movement founded on a strict interpretation of the Torah. The term *khawaga* means "master"; derived from Persian, it is an ambivalent designation for a foreigner of some means. After the rise of Egyptian nationalism, the term became increasingly pejorative and was used to refer to the class of Levantines and Europeans accused of stealing the country's wealth and oppressing indigenous Egyptians. Finally, the Arabic adaptation of the term "doctor" refers here simply to an educated person, not necessarily a medical doctor.

6. Author's note: The Karaites of Egypt were in close contact with those in Crimea, where they would go to find wives.

Pasha Square.⁷ He had opted for a place frequented by the upper-middle class, whether Christian, Jewish, Coptic, or Muslim, whose language of choice was French. Arabic, the language of his ancestors, the language of his brothers—the ones who had worked to pay for his studies—became the language of the street, the language of servants. He prided himself on having gotten his brothers out of the Hara.⁸ The youngest, Habib, converted to Islam out of love and kept the family name Cohen.⁹

I never found out why, in this immense apartment covered in Genoa velvet and French furnishings, I was relegated to the other side of the door that separated my parents' universe from the servants'. That's where my room was, the one I shared with Hanem.¹⁰ And it was there, every Wednesday, that Youssef the ironer set up for the day. I would see him coming and going from the primus stove to his ironing table.¹¹ With a precise gesture, he would take a burning iron out of the flames, put one that had cooled back into the fire, and then spurt a powerful stream of water right from his mouth directly onto the laundry to moisten it. Once ironed, the sheets, tablecloths, and shirts were placed on my bed next to me. The ever-hotter atmosphere would become stifling and the bursts from the kerosene stove deafening. I would leave the room.

In 1948, when the state of Israel was created, my father received an order to leave Egypt within forty-eight hours. He had to get the King, host of his nightly gambling circle, to intervene and have it annulled.

In 1949 he decided to take us, my brother Elie and I, on vacation to Europe. It was our first trip outside of our native land. I was nine, my brother, four. A certain Maurice Cohen—also my father's name, was suspected of being a Zionist spy, and thus was on the blacklist. At customs, we were all subjected to rather invasive body searches.

When I was ten, after two attempts at private lessons,—one at schooling in English, the other in French—the director of the school called in my parents to tell

7. Author's note: founded by Swiss, Groppi was the name of the chickest tearoom in the capital. On January 26, 1952, along with many other apartment buildings and bourgeois establishments in Cairo, it was ransacked and torched.

8. In Cairo, historically, the *hara* was simply the basic social unit of the city, generally inhabited by homogenous ethnic or occupational groups. In the twentieth century, the *hara* has come to be associated with social deviance and poverty (akin to the notion of a ghetto). The Egyptian usage of the term is not specifically associated with poor Jews (as in the case in the *hara* of Tunisian cities).

9. Author's note: for the Karaites, Jewish religion is passed on through the father.

10. Author's note: Hanem (which means "woman" in Arabic) was a young Karaites woman who was fifteen when I was nine and who had been "entrusted" to our family to take care of the children and build up a dowry; many Jewish women in the Hara were similarly "entrusted" to wealthy families. (Editors' note: *Hanem*, a word of Ottoman origin used to designate the wife of a dignitary, is today generally used as a synonym for "lady" or "Madam" in Egyptian Arabic. The author's understanding of *hanem* may be particular to francophone Egyptians.)

11. Author's note: Name of the portable stove designed by Swedish mechanic Frans Wilhelm Lindqvist and industrially produced beginning in 1892.

them that she could do nothing for a child who refused to speak. I found myself in Boulak, at the Lycée Français of Cairo, in a remedial class, mainly with Muslim girls who were much older than me.¹²

I remember the violence with which I slapped one of those girls when, as a way of expressing her exasperation at our difference and my general indifference to her, called me *yahoudeya* (dirty Jew). We were both punished.

On the traditional subject of a childhood memory, I remember that year the fate of my first doll. A chiffon doll, black, with big eyes that frightened me terribly. No matter how much I tried to get rid of it by throwing it out the window of the fourth floor, someone always brought it back to me. I finally cut it up into bits with kitchen scissors. Thanks to the doll and the teaching of Madame Algoud, I was able to enroll in the regular track at school.

The world that surrounded me was peopled by men. Sometimes, in the corner of the kitchen or the hallways, at prayer times, I would see a rug unfold and a shadow bend down. A shadow hung over me wherever I was.

Beginning when I was still a little girl, once night fell and my parents had left for their gambling circle, as soon as I could I would take my bag and leave for Garden City, where my maternal grandparents lived. Crossing Cairo on foot, dodging the crazy cars in the chaos of the city, crossing the immense Tahrir Square was nothing next to the glacial silence of that luxurious apartment inhabited by shadows. I was welcomed quite naturally, without a word, into this cloaca heavy with silence.

We spent every summer in Alexandria, at my grandparents' villa. For Yom Kippur, the women and the children stayed at home in a peaceful atmosphere, perfect for reflection. The men disappeared for the day. At sunset, the children pushed and shoved one another on the terrace overlooking the sea. The one who saw the first star had the pleasure of announcing the end of the fast to anyone who would listen. Big pitchers of lemonade prepared by Mohamed or Abdou would be waiting for us on the big table in the dining room.

It's only as an adult that I understood why, as a child, I often saw my grandfather, the lawyer Khadr Massouda, absorbed in reading the Qur'an. In the *mehkemehs*, he—a Jew—argued in Arabic to defend his Muslim clients in accordance with Qur'anic law.¹³ Man of the Law, my grandfather was also a man of peace. I don't know how to untangle what I lived from what I heard. Yet I feel resonating in me the sirens that pushed us all into the cellars, sheltered from the bombings. I still feel the heat of the blanket and the arms that surrounded my body as a child. I see the silhouettes of my grandparents, their ears stuck to the radio, listening to Radio London.

12. *Boulak* refers to Bulak, a gentrified neighborhood of Cairo. Today called Zamalek, it remains one of the sites of the Lycée Français du Caire, the French high school of Cairo.

13. Author's note: Tribunals. (Editors' note: *Mehkemehs* are Islamic religious courts, responsible for cases involving personal status, marriage, inheritance, and guardianship, and relying on the Qur'an for their decisions.)

Despite all the internal quarrels concerning the matches or mismatches between Karaites and Rabbanites, the war had brought my grandfather together with Grand Rabbi Nahum.¹⁴ Organizing aid for the Jews of Europe was their first objective.¹⁵ In his capacity as president, Maître Khadr Massouda registered the Rabbanites as members of the Karaite community—false certificates for real lives. It was to him, president of the Karaite community of Cairo, that the members of the Jewish community turned in 1948, upon the creation of the state of Israel, and in 1952, when Cairo burned and Colonel Naguib came to tell the Karaites that they were at home in Egypt and had nothing to fear.¹⁶ I have a precise memory of January 26, 1952. My brother Elie and I had been kept home from school. As the day wore on, the streets darkened with people, the brouhaha of the street turned into shouts, into howling. The hateful slogans were loud enough for us to hear. Cairo burned.¹⁷

For a long time, I resented my grandfather for having told the Karaites who went to Israel on his advice that, as Jews, they had no future in Egypt. They were the first Jews sought out, but ultimately not recognized as Jewish, in this land of refuge. For the others, those who left for France, England, the United States, or Canada, and probably for the many living in Israel today, history proved him right.

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

14. Author's note: In Egypt, Jews were divided into only two groups: Karaites and Rabbanites. It was only in Europe that I discovered the distinction between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. In Israel, the Karaites are not considered Jews. As Josy Eisenberg said so well in the four radio shows he devoted to them in 1988, they are "the Jews of the Jews."

15. Author's note: The Nazis didn't succeed in identifying the Karaites as Jews until 1944, which allowed some of them to escape extermination.

16. Author's note: Rumor had it that colonel Nasser had a Karaite wet-nurse.

17. See Country Snapshot: "Egypt." See also Nancy Y. Reynolds, *A City Consumed: Urban Commerce, the Cairo Fire, and the Politics of Decolonization in Egypt*. (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012.)

Cairo

Jour de fête

Tobie Nathan

He was covered in a turban with complex ties that gave him the look of a fifteenth-century Arab merchant. A long beard, white and silky, came down to his chest. An imposing figure! A powerful man, no doubt, and one who respected tradition, of course! Five thirty in the morning. He adjusted his outfit in front of the mirror in the entryway and then went out to his little study, on the other side of the garden. In the Cairo sky, kite birds, those formidable little eagles, are as numerous as pigeons in Paris. He had gotten up very early, as he did every morning, an hour before sunrise. He savored these moments when the city was troubled only by the cock's crow imitating the muezzins' calls to prayer. In these moments of solitude, he could consult the books that he would have never left in the hands of just anybody. In silence, the rabbi read an unpublished manuscript entitled *La Beauté du saphir*. The author, Ya'akov Ibn Habib, was his great-great-great . . . grandfather, one of those masters of the past, from the time of Arab splendor in Spain.¹ The rabbi gazed intently at the text written with chameleon's blood, the very sight of which made the hand that held it tremble. He looked at this same page, explored it, read it again. He knew that the sultan would decide the next day on his nomination to the post of Grand Rabbi of Egypt. The horizon began to glow. The rabbi put on his prayer shawl and pronounced the first blessing out loud, standing up facing the rising sun. The robissa Marième, his wife, entered without a sound, carrying a breakfast tray with coffee, Arab bread, and some black olives, which she put down on the windowsill where he liked to sit every morning,

1. Ya'akov Ibn Habib (also Jacob ibn Habib) was an historical figure, a Spanish Talmudic scholar, born in Zamora circa 1460. Following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, Ibn Habib settled in Salonica (Thessaloniki, Greece), where he died in 1516. He left behind only one published text, *En Ya'akov*, a popular work of religious instruction (which was, in fact, only compiled posthumously, by his son).



FIGURE 11. Tobie Nathan, age three, 1951, on the beach in Ras El Bar (Egypt).

attentive only to the voices of silence.² She left without a sound, leaving the old man to his prayer. It was just then that a great sound split the sky, a strident howl, like the cry of a child. The rabbi did not flinch, continuing his *Shema Yisrael*, the words of love to God.³ It was possible to make out the distinct sound of wings beating powerfully. From way up in the sky, quick as a sunbeam, the kite bird plunged toward the window, stealing the bread in a single movement. Then: silence. Not even the murmuring of the credo could be heard. When he had finished his prayer, Yom-Tov approached the window and gazed up at the sky. He only saw a black feather that drifted down slowly toward the tray. He grabbed the kanaka, the still-steaming little coffee pot, and poured his coffee *sokar zyada* (with lots of sugar). He said another blessing before bringing the cup to his lips. Then he delicately picked up the feather abandoned by the bird, dipped it in brown ink made from a mix of soils and copied on a fragment of parchment the word that had caught his attention when reading his scroll: *dan* in Hebrew (“the judge”). He carefully folded the paper and slipped it next to his chest, next to his skin, under the flannel of his prayer shawl.⁴ And he sat on the chair, closing his eyes for a long moment. His close assistants entered without knocking. They thought he was sleeping.

That day, there was an animated discussion. Was one allowed to carry a handkerchief when going to the synagogue, given that on Shabbat it is forbidden to carry anything? Levi Tantaoui, the rabbi’s favorite assistant, maintained that yes, it was permitted to carry a handkerchief, that the handkerchief was the same as a piece of clothing. Would one go to the synagogue naked in order to respect the prohibition? The rabbi, on the contrary, affirmed that no, the handkerchief should not be considered an item of clothing but, rather, as baggage, and that carrying it was equivalent to work. The discussion continued for a long time. Soon the hour of the service had gone by. The rabbi hurried toward the synagogue, some minutes from his house. The other rabbis had begun the psalms while waiting for the master.

“What happened, Rabbi? Did you forget to get up?” asked one of the notables in the community who never missed an occasion to criticize the rabbi.

They were impertinent, the Jews of Egypt, as impertinent as in the time of the Exodus, when they called out to Moses. Maybe these Jews had never left Egypt, for that matter . . . Not even in the time of Moses . . .

The rabbi remained silent, opening his wide, surprised eyes, as if he did not understand the question that was asked of him.

“But Rabbi, it’s been at least thirty minutes that we have been waiting for you to do the Shabbat prayers!” insisted another.

“Thirty minutes?” wondered Yom-Tov. “How could you say such a thing? The sun is barely showing its first rays. Did you all get up in the middle of the night?”

2. *Robissa*, from the Hebrew, refers to a rabbi’s wife.

3. Known in English often as simply the Shema, this important Jewish prayer is recited twice daily by observant Jews.

4. The French refers to “un petit châle de corps” (a shawl worn close to the skin), undoubtedly the *tallit katan*, or the “little tallit,” the T-shirt with tzitzit worn under clothing by traditional Jewish men.

“It’s true!” exclaimed the usher who had remained near the main door. “It isn’t yet day.”

The faithful rushed to the windows. They had to face the facts. The day was barely beginning . . . Time, of course, does not go backward. Yet, not a half-hour before, the sun had shone like a candle! Yom-Tov smiled, mockingly.

After that, the faithful who had attended this Shabbat prayer, on the 15 of Elul of the Hebrew year 5647, swore to whomever would listen that the old man had reversed the course of the sun, just so as not to have to admit being late.⁵ They compared him to Moses or Joshua—except that Joshua stopped time to win a war. Perhaps Rabbi Yom-Tov did not know how to reverse the course of the sun; perhaps he only knew how to blur the vision of the faithful. The next day, Sunday, September 16, 1866, the Sultan signed a firman appointing him grand rabbi of Egypt.⁶ As it is said: “Rabbi Yom-Tov Israel Sherezli judged Israel in Egypt from 1867 to 1891.” I carry the first name of this man, who came to visit my mother during her pregnancy to taste her jam and drink her coffee. He was me, living 120 years earlier; I was him, appearing 57 years after his death. I would love to have stayed him. My name is Tobie because my name is Yom-Tov, like him. I was born in Cairo, in Egypt, in 1948, the year of the creation of the state of Israel. Second child, second boy; since my brother took the first name of my father’s father, I should have, according to tradition, taken that of my mother’s father. I should have been named Isaac, or at least Zaki, a first name that had the advantage, in those troubled days, of passing as Arab. But my mother had fought with her father. She had just lost her mother and Zaki had decided to remarry after barely six months, without waiting for the traditional year of mourning to end.

“What do you expect?” he would say by way of excuse. “I eat meat. I can’t remain a widower.”

For him, meat provoked sexual desire—did flesh not call to other flesh?—and nothing was worse than losing his sperm while sleeping.

My mother asked Aunt Engela for advice; she responded without hesitating:

“Make a scene! You must make a scene . . .”

“Make a scene?” asked my mother. “But how?”

“Throw yourself on the ground, cry, tear at your clothes, hit your face, tear your skin . . .”

And that is what she did. One afternoon, when her father had invited himself over to eat *ful wa ta’meya*, the traditional dish of fava beans and falafel, no sooner had he opened the door than she’d torn her dress and fallen to the ground in the entryway of the apartment in ‘Abasseya. She wailed, slapping herself with both hands, cried, suffocated with rage, nearly fainted. My grandfather, Zaki *el agzagui*

5. The Jewish religious calendar is a lunisolar calendar, used to mark religious holidays. It is also the official calendar of the state of Israel.

6. A *firman* is a decree by or in the name of a Middle Eastern ruler; in this period, an Ottoman sultan.

(Zaki the pharmacist), lifted his eyes to heaven. She rose like a fury, shoved him, pounding his chest with her fists, and threw him out the door. It had been a good two years since she'd last spoken to him. So, now that she was pregnant, was she going to honor him by giving his name to the child she felt moving in her belly and who was, she was certain, a boy?

Thus passed my first months in the world, in the womb of a mother who did not know how to avoid the name of her father. In the fifth month of her pregnancy, she had a lucky dream. The grandfather of her father, the rabbi Yom-Tov Israel Sherezli, the famous Grand Rabbi of Egypt and her ancestor, appeared to her. He stood upright in front of her, in a long white gallabeya.⁷ He first demanded a cup of coffee. What more do you require, *ya geddi* (O grandfather)? He then asked to taste her fruit preserves. And when she presented him with those she had just made, her date preserves, her coconut preserves, her bitter orange preserves, the ancestor added: "I am going to settle here in your house."

Afterward, she would not stop telling her dream to her aunts, Engela, Sarina.

"You see, Ranou, my dear (Ranou, that was my mother), you see, there's no doubt."

"No doubt?"

"A hundred percent, dear . . ."

The old women had no trouble interpreting the dream, in fact. The rabbi had come to announce that he was going to settle in with our family. He had asked for preserves because he was going to bring sweetness and pleasure with him. This is how, well before the delivery, my mother learned that the son she was waiting for would be a reincarnation of Rabbi Yom-Tov Israel Sherezli. And when I was born, a few months later, no one hesitated on the choice of my first name; it was decided to give me his. Yom-Tov, this is what I would be called.

Family legend has it that my father carried my older brother on his shoulders when he went to register my birth. Caught in a riot in an uproarious Cairo, the crowd chased him with cries of "*Dabba'h el yahoud*" ("Cut the Jew's throat"). It was 1948. The Middle East was born that year, with a scar right in the middle: Israel. Or maybe it was a gaping sex, swallowing up the fantasies of the generations. Standing before the birth registry clerk, my father did not have the courage to say a Jewish name. So he decided to translate my name into Arabic. In Hebrew, Yom-tov means *jour de fête*, meaning a Jewish holiday or festival, of course, like Yom Kippur or Pesach. In Arabic, it becomes 'Eid, the diminutive of Eïd el Kébir, the festival of the sacrifice. So it was decided! For the birth registry, I would not be named Yom-Tov but Eïd. I had passed, according to the politics of the state, from the scapegoat of Yom Kippur to the sacrificial lamb of Eïd el Kébir.⁸ On my identity papers, I

7. Usually spelled *galabeya*, or *jalabiya*, this is the Egyptian equivalent of the North African *djellaba* (or *jillaba*), a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn by both men and women.

8. Typically spelled Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha (sometimes simply Aïd or Eïd), the Festival of the Sacrifice—one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over—commemorates Abraham's

was thus called Eïd, unpronounceable in French. At home, everyone called me Tobie; that was my name. It has remained my name. In 1969, twenty-one years later, in Paris, during naturalization, I asked to change my first name. I was hoping to rectify my identity.

“Tobie?” exclaimed the commissioner of police, “What kind of name is that? Come on . . .”

I insisted. “Tobie, you know, Tobie . . . it’s in the Bible.”

“We don’t care about the Bible, you need to choose a first name from the calendar. (In those times, Tobie did not yet appear on the calendar.) Can’t you choose a first name like everyone else . . . Maurice or Marcel?”

I thought about it for a week. I wanted to hold on to the initial, at least . . .

“Théophile! That’s the name that I have chosen! I will be called Théophile . . .”

“Bah,” sighed the commissioner. “You obviously don’t want to be like everyone else . . .”

My name is Yom-Tov so as not to be called Isaac or Zaki; my name is Tobie so as not to be called Yom-Tov, perhaps because one does not take the name of a saint in vain. I was for a long time called Eïd so as not to have a Jewish name in a country at war with the Jews. I am now called Théophile because a police commissioner who was overly faithful to the Republic didn’t know the Bible. Théophile, in the end, is a name I love because I chose it myself, that I translate as “he who loves God.” Which is true for me. I would have liked to be called “beloved of God,” of course, but one can’t decide everything.

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy.