

CHAPTER SIX

Morocco

Country Snapshot

The origins of Morocco's Jews are difficult to pin down: while certain historical sources contain references to myths that would place Jews in Morocco as early as the eighth century BCE (the result of some of the lost tribes of Israel having wandered west), most historians concur that the oldest evidence of Jewish presence (in the form of engravings and architectural ruins) dates to the third century CE. There is certainly no doubt that Jewish communities were already well established at the time of the Muslim conquests in the seventh century, with the largest concentrations situated in the Atlas Mountains, in the southern part of the country. Over the centuries, the composition of Moroccan Jewry changed, growing to encompass Sephardic Jews migrating from Spain to North Africa in the sixth century and again in the wake of their expulsion from Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; Ashkenazi Jews fleeing persecution in Europe; and converts to Judaism. Until the twentieth century, Moroccan Jewry constituted the largest non-Ashkenazi Jewish community, more than double the size of any other Jewish population in the Islamic world.

With few exceptions—the most notable being the reign of the Almoravids, the eleventh-century Muslim Berber dynasty that was notably intolerant of Jews—Moroccan Jews were historically integrated into the larger community. The majority spoke Arabic, although some of the Northern Jewish communities spoke Haketia, a dialect of Judeo-Spanish carried south from Iberia by Spanish Jews. Jews occasionally held positions in court, serving as advisors, diplomats, and conducting official business, and lived in various locations, in both the *mel-lah* (Jewish quarter) in bigger cities, as well as in smaller communities along trade routes that connected Morocco with Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. After the French protectorate was established in Morocco in 1912, many of Morocco's approximately 110,000–120,000 Jews (2.5 percent of the overall population) began to migrate to larger cities.



MAP 7. Morocco. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

Although France did not officially establish its colonial protectorate in Morocco until the early twentieth century, significant French influence had been exerted in Morocco since the mid-nineteenth century. In 1862, the Paris-based Jewish philanthropic organization Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) founded its first school in Tetouan. Over the course of the next century, Morocco would go on to have the most significant AIU presence of any country in which the organization was active, with over eighty schools providing elementary and vocational education to thousands of students. As a result, the education level of Moroccan Jewry rose, spurring upward mobility and encouraging many rural Jews to relocate to urban areas. These changes brought about the existence of a new Moroccan Jewish elite, a significant portion of whom benefited from extraterritorial rights and protégé status, especially that of France and Spain. The majority of Moroccan

Jews lived as *dhimmis*, however, and remained under the legal jurisdiction of the Moroccan sultan.

Unlike many other midcentury nationalist movements of the Islamic world, Morocco's nationalist movement envisaged Jews as part and parcel of the nation in the making, a feeling shared by many Moroccan Jews themselves. During World War II, for example, Moroccan Muslims were by and large disinterested in Nazi propaganda and the Vichy government's anti-Semitic agenda, and Moroccan Jews benefitted from the protection of the sultan—although the extent of this protection is debated by historians. Nonetheless, a trifecta of factors—the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, a burgeoning Zionist movement, and the concern that independence from France would create difficult conditions for the Jews—combined to produce a mass exodus, and between 1948 and 1951 some twenty-eight thousand Moroccan Jews emigrated to Israel.

For many Moroccan Jews, the future they wished for was not one in the new nation of Israel, but rather at home in Morocco, a future in which they would be granted full rights as citizens, as opposed to their historical status as *dhimmis*. Throughout the war years and into the 1950s, Moroccan Jews by and large remained loyal to the sultan, who had become a symbol of both colonial resistance and national unity for Jews well as Muslims during the Vichy period. This loyalty was not unfounded; following Morocco's independence from France in 1956, the sultan, henceforth recognized as King Mohammad V, guaranteed full rights to Morocco's Jews in his first speech after his return from an imposed exile, and in the postwar cabinet, the prime minister included several Jewish appointees.

Yet the situation in newly independent Morocco was anything but settled. The economy was in crisis and Jewish emigration was severely restricted. Following Morocco's entry into the Arab League in 1958 and the Arab Postal Union in 1959—a move that curtailed postal correspondence with Israel—many Moroccan Jews began to think more critically about their place in the new nation. Between 1956 and 1961, some 66,500 Moroccan Jews emigrated with help from the Jewish Agency, a nonprofit organization founded in 1929 to support the immigration of diaspora Jews to Palestine, and following the ascension of Hassan II to the throne in 1961 and the subsequent easing of restrictions on emigration, many more followed in their footsteps. It is thus that, in the almost thirty-year period of 1962–1990, approximately 130,640 Moroccan Jews left the country, migrating not only to Israel but to Europe and North America. Today, there are approximately nine hundred thousand Moroccan Jews living abroad, while fewer than three thousand remain in Morocco, living mostly in cities, especially Casablanca.

Despite the dwindling number of Moroccan Jews living in Morocco, the country has the most active Jewish cultural presence of any country in the Islamic world. In 1985, the World Union of Moroccan Jewry was founded in order to foster loyalty to Morocco and to maintain the heritage of Moroccan Jews. The Moroccan

Jewish community is headed by the Conseil des Communautés Israélites du Maroc (the Board of Moroccan Israelite Communities), and is recognized by the king. Jewish and Muslim intellectuals study and promote Moroccan Jewish culture, both at home and abroad, and the country welcomes thousands of Jewish tourists every year.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*

Essaouira/Mogador

For Other Tomorrows?

André Azoulay

I must have been twelve or thirteen, and nevertheless, more than half a century later, there is an image, a furtive instant, a few seconds of light that I faithfully keep present in my mind as if it were yesterday, with the same emotion, the same power, and the same singularity, abundantly rich in its exceptionality.

An image, an instant, a light that will have kept me company all my life, giving my rootedness in a Muslim, Berber, Arab, and Jewish society, the society of my country, Morocco, a depth and a legitimacy that will triumph over all the vicissitudes of the moment. Over all the doubts, as well, and the dizziness of amnesia which, for too long, have undermined and made fragile the cultural, historic, and human space that Muslims and Jews created and shared for nearly a millennium in the Maghreb and Middle East.

It was an autumn evening in the 1950s, in my father's office, at the end of a little street in the kasbah of Essaouira-Mogador.¹ A friend of the family, whom we called Hajj the Imam, had just come in and, after the ritual greetings, had taken out from the folds of his *djellaba* a little beige-colored bag full of earth that he delicately put in my father's hands, saying:² "This is for you and your family. I just returned from my pilgrimage to Jerusalem and, since it is impossible for you to go there, I came to share my prayers with you and to bring you some of this holy land that belongs to both of us."

1. The city was long known as Mogador, a word whose derivation is uncertain. It may be a deformation of the name of the city's patron saint, Sidi Mogdoul; it may have etymological links to the Arabic word *mogdoul*, meaning fortress; or it may have been imported by the Portuguese, who occupied the port city for centuries and may have named it after the Portuguese town Mogadouro. Regardless, upon Moroccan independence from France, Mogador was renamed Essaouira. Writers evoking the city's past often maintain the older name or use the two interchangeably.

2. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women.



FIGURE 29. This parade in the heart of Essaouira-Mogador, on the square called Moulay Al Hassan, took place the day of the proclamation of Morocco's independence, in 1955. Given that organized Moroccan military forces (army, police, etc.) did not yet exist, it was the city's Boy Scouts that paraded to symbolize the reconquering of national sovereignty. André Azoulay (on the right, just out of the ranks), then fourteen years old, was chosen to lead them.

It was much later that I understood the full extent of what I had just witnessed and the character—which today seems utterly surreal—of this scene. Its depth, its modernity, and its truth took on all the more texture and complexity in light of the fact that, for the child that I was—and for my father and his friend—this spontaneous and fraternal sharing of the sacred was nothing exceptional. For the three of us, it fit in naturally with the everyday social relations between Muslims and Jews in Essaouira.

This is, as everyone will understand, much more than an anecdote, and it is this sudden revelation of what is possible that I deliberately chose to single out in order to give true meaning to the evocation of my childhood and my lived experience as a Jew in a Muslim land.

Almost at the same time—this must have been in 1953–1954—without anything to prepare me or give me the idea, I remember having once again, very naturally, joined my Muslim friends to protest every night at dusk, chanting slogans calling for the end of the French Protectorate and the return to the throne of Mohamed V, who had been exiled to Madagascar by the French authorities.

There was nothing heroic about this. We were all roughly twelve years old, we ran through the narrow Souiri streets calling for the independence of Morocco and for freedom in our country, chased—but without much conviction—by the

auxiliary troops of the day, and this ritual lasted for several months, to the great displeasure of our parents, who worried about their progeny.³

This, for example, this could be a mere anecdote, but I still ask myself today about what could have prompted a twelve-year old child, a student of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the French school system, to spontaneously identify with the Moroccan national movement, when everyday he sat at his school bench and was taught that his ancestors were Gauls and that his past, like his future, began and ended with France.⁴

It was only after the fact that the answer to this question naturally occurred to many of us, when we consciously reappropriated this Jewish-Muslim capillarity, constructed and maintained by both groups, whose depth and permanence are found in the expression of the truest and most typical gestures of our everyday existence, thus determining—and more so than any other rhetoric or theory—our essential choices and our most fundamental behaviors.

This chronicle of the lived annals of Muslim and Jewish children in Mogador-Essaouira, I revisit it today with yearning and delight.

In evoking it here, I nevertheless have a strange and almost guilty feeling of lifting the veil on something unsayable, something to be handled with care and according to instruction, because history—the one with a capital H, the History of textbooks, of research, and of literature—had only begun to open its doors to us, and because, in the interval, all manner of cliché and fantasy had rushed in to fill the vacuum.

By default, and also out of ignorance, suspicion reigns supreme, hovering over everything, provoking doubt and sometimes worry at the mention of this soul-searching that has the audacity to assert itself against the grain of a single and dominant logic.

A thought that, at best, would have condemned me to amnesia and denial, and, at worst, to the complicit silence at the side of those who have, in the end, gotten used to seeing their identity and their history reconstructed or rewritten according to nothing more than the whims of the moment.

The profoundly Moroccan celebration of the last day of *Pessach*, Passover, takes on, in this perspective of resistance to forgetting, a dimension at once emblematic of the art of all possibilities, and above all incredibly symbolic of the degree of

3. Souiri is the adjectival form of Essaouira.

4. The author's comment about being taught that his ancestors were Gauls is a reference to the expression "nos ancêtres les Gaulois," an abbreviation of the now notorious first line of the preeminent history manual written by Ernest Lavisse in 1870. Promulgated in French schools under the Third Republic (1870–1940), the phrase was nothing less than a declaration of doctrine, brandished in service of national unity and republican identity. The exportation of the expression—along with the history books that contained it—to colonial schools has become one of the great ironies of French pedagogy, as pupils clearly not of European extraction were required to learn the phrase by heart. See Eugen Weber, "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois," *My France: Politics, Culture, Myth*, chap. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 21–39.

spiritual and cultural affinity and proximity that Muslims and Jews have expressed and preserved in Morocco over the centuries.

In Essaouira-Mogador, and throughout the kingdom, Mimouna—the name of this popular holiday—took place once a year for centuries with an air of carnival, with its parades and its bonfires.⁵ The festival witnessed the city coming together to form one long Judeo-Muslim cohort, hand in hand, singing the same songs and celebrating the freedom and the happiness of being together with the same fervor.

In the streets of Essaouira and on the market square, transformed for the occasion into an extravaganza of joyous fraternity, the festivities began at dusk and would last for hours: there was an unceasing wave of dancers, musicians, and families in their Sunday best, embracing each other, congratulating each other, and exchanging the traditional formula for good wishes and solidarity in dialectal Arabic: *Terbah . . .* (May you flourish and your year be prosperous . . .).

Prior to this particularly moving spectacle, Muslim families would go to Jewish houses in the city. Beginning at sunset, their doors were open wide to their Muslim neighbors and friends who arrived with armfuls of trays loaded with milk, honey, butter, stalks of wheat, and flowers to celebrate this moment of grace that commemorated the exodus of the Jews from Egypt and the end of their enslavement.

This history of Jewish life in the Muslim world, which has yet to be written, is not that of a fiction staged out of deference, or in service of the cause of those with whom I identify, and who fight so that Palestinians and Israelis live in peace each in their own state, each accepting that the other has the same duties and the same rights to dignity, to justice, and to sovereignty.

On the contrary, the moment has come to say, to write, and to make known through our testimonies that our respective religions, cultures, and histories must no longer serve as alibis or as disguises for political realities that require political responses. Between Jews and Muslims today, the contentious subjects are not religious, cultural, or historical. They are political, and our spiritualities have very little to do with them.

Long awaited and hoped for by many among us, a trend is finally appearing in the Muslim Mediterranean for the recognition and reconstruction of the cultural and spiritual diversity that has shaped and greatly determined our societies. This recovery is legitimate in and of itself, but it can also be decisive in bringing about another dynamic, particularly between Jews and Muslims.

What was true yesterday can illuminate the modernity and universality of the values our societies must reappropriate.

Morocco has understood this clearly in enshrining in the preamble of its new Constitution, approved by popular vote in 2011, the founding role and deep roots

5. Mimouna is a traditional Moroccan Jewish festival, celebrated at the end of Passover. It is characterized by lavish food preparations, including special breads, pastry, and other foods that are forbidden during Passover. While the practice was recorded as early as the eighteenth century, its name and origins are a subject of dispute.

of the Berber, Jewish, and Andalusian civilizations in Moroccan society, and in the identity of the Moroccan people.

I maintain, for my part, that whatever the deviations, lapses in memory, or errors of the moment, history always catches up with us to impose the certainty of its facts.

This little bag of earth, brought back more than a half-century ago from Jerusalem, then under Jordanian control, by a Muslim Moroccan to his Jewish Moroccan friend, has lost nothing of its importance, its exemplary nature, and its truth.

That was, of course, several decades ago; I was the witness, and my father and his friend Hajj the Imam were the actors. None of us three, in the magic of that exciting moment of shared fraternity, would have imagined that this real history would one day find its succession in the preamble to the new Constitution proposed to the Moroccan people by King Mohamed VI.

Of course, the joyous and shared spectacle of the feast of Mimouna no longer occupies the market square in Essaouira, but it is again in Essaouira that, for close to ten years now, Jewish and Muslim poets, singers, and musicians get together to celebrate the Festival of Atlantic Andalusian Music, and share with music-lovers from all over the world the words and music embroidered and woven from a common heritage sung alternately in Arabic and Hebrew.

History, it is true, has often stumbled in its laborious and uncertain bid to recover the lost splendor that is the sum total of our combined cultures.

But, as should be clear, my Jewish life in a Muslim land is not simply a nostalgic childhood memory, and it is not only written in the past.

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

The New Ghetto, Meknes

The Ocean in a Carafe

Marcel Bénabou

Evoking my Moroccan childhood is a fairly familiar exercise for me. I began doing it early on and have hardly stopped. It is as if my memory wanted to ensure that it never missed a chance to call up this curious period of my life. Of course, I knew that childhood memories are all too often skewed, sometimes even completely reconstructed in order to paint ordinary people, things, and places in an ideal light, to give them more or less mythical proportions. But I had persuaded myself that my memory, however selective or partial it might be for certain things, remained unassailable when it came to my youth. Unlike other peoples' ever-changing childhoods, my own was unfailingly consistent; the traces it left are not easily erased. Certain impressions, sensations, emotions, and beliefs were inscribed in me with such detail and precision that they influenced many of the choices I made as an adult. It is precisely these traces that are worth calling up here. It would be impossible, in these few pages, to paint a vast fresco in which each episode of my life would find its rightful place.¹ To do so would be "to try to fit the entire ocean in a carafe," to quote Flaubert.² But it is not without a pang of regret that I have decided to forego here a lengthy description of the seductive powers of the unparalleled landscapes, the striking colors, the exotic delicacy of tastes and smells. . . .

1. Author's note: An example of an attempt at this type of exercise can be found in Nessim Sibony's *Enfance juive au Maroc. Paradis perdu?* (Los Angeles: JT Productions, 2003): it took him no less than 420 pages. I've tried my own hand at this type of remembering in a few of my books, notably in *Jacob, Ménahem et Mimoun, Une épopée familiale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995) and in *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres* (3rd ed; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2010). (Editors' note: the titles by Bénabou are available in English translation: *Jacob, Ménahem and Mimoun: A Family Epic* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998] and *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996].)

2. Author's note: Flaubert is quoted as saying this in the Goncourt brothers' *Journal* (Feb 11, 1863).

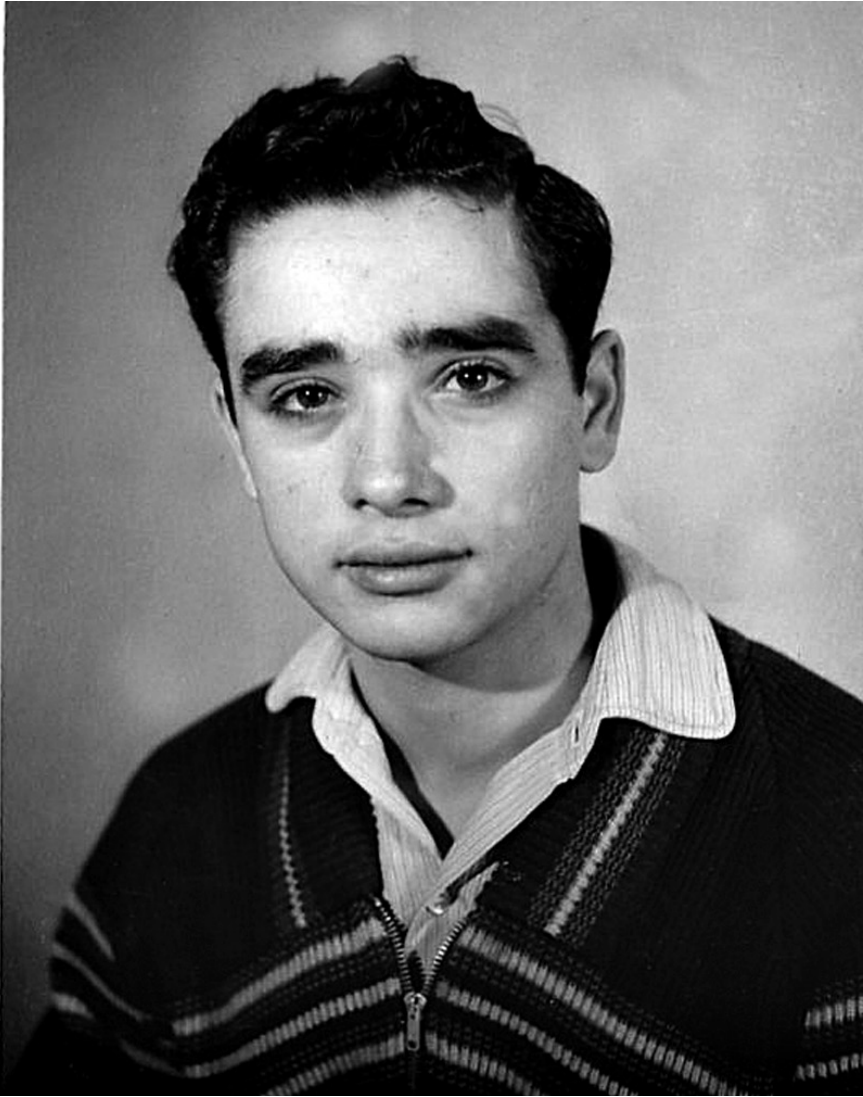


FIGURE 30. Marcel Bénabou, adolescent in Meknes.

From my birth in 1939 until my departure for Paris in 1956, I lived in Morocco, where French colonial domination took the form of a “protectorate”—with the highly differentiated and hierarchical social structure that came along with it.³ I was born in Meknes, the city where my family had always lived. My childhood lasted until I was at least thirteen—the age of adulthood in religious terms,

3. Author’s note: Morocco became independent in March 1956.

celebrated by the solemn rite of the bar mitzvah—and in those thirteen years I believe it is possible to identify three principal stages, each of which contributed in its own way to the forging of a different aspect of my identity.

The first of these stages covers the very first years of my life, during which I slowly and progressively discovered the little world that constituted my immediate surroundings: my parents (who, in their forties, were considered relatively old); my three big brothers; my three big sisters (I was the seventh child in a family of eight); the family house that was too small to hold us; the neighbors' houses filled with children my age who would, along with a few of my cousins, become my inseparable playmates; and, finally, the neighborhood, the "the new mellah," entirely inhabited by Jews, as the name suggests.⁴

Inside this tiny little world—which was, for me, *the* world—daily life was utterly subordinated to the rhythms imposed by the Jewish calendar. First and foremost was the strict distinction between ordinary days and Saturday: every Friday I would watch as my mother struggled to get through the thousands of cooking and house cleaning tasks that were essential to the Shabbat celebration. Then it was the well-organized cycle of high holidays, which gave each year its unshakeable structure. I quickly understood that every holiday had its own particular form of celebration. Both at home and at the synagogue, each holiday had a particular atmosphere: grave and solemn for Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) or Yom Kippur; relaxed and joyful for Purim or Hanukkah. Each had a specific, delicious menu, the ingredients for which had to be procured in advance, occasionally with some difficulty. But most of all, every holiday had its own prayers written in old and precious books that my father only took out of the cabinet on these occasions: this is certainly why I was convinced, early in life, that there existed an intimate link between the book and the sacred, between reading and praying.

I should admit that, at this particular point in my life, I was especially sensitive to a few very concrete details that I found both odd and exciting: the apple dipped in honey at Rosh Hashanah that guaranteed a year full of sweetness; on Yom Kippur, the final flailing of the many chickens (one for each member of the family), whose throats were slit by a rabbi right before our eyes, in accordance with traditional ritual, and whose deaths were supposed to carry away our sins; the week of Sukkot, during which our meals were to be eaten in a hut covered with reeds set up at the back of our yard; the masks worn by all of the children of the neighborhood on Purim; and the large copper plate bearing symbolic foods that my father held up over our heads on Passover. I could go on and on, but I must move on to the second stage. This one is linked to the early years of my education, which took place in two utterly different realms: one French, the other Hebraic.

4. Author's note: In Moroccan cities, "mellah" was the name of the Jewish quarter. At the beginning of the 1920s, in Meknes, a brand-new neighborhood bearing the name "new mellah" was constructed right next to the old mellah, which dated from the end of the seventeenth century and the reign of Moulay Ismaël.

In October 1945, I began school at the Alliance, where I spent five years.⁵ I have to insist here on the seductive effect that the place had on me, right from the start. From the vast, verdant, almost always sun-dappled playground full of pepper trees, to the classrooms: the dais with the wooden teacher's desk; the inkwells full of deep violet ink; the boxes of colored chalk; the damp rag gliding over the chalkboard; the huge, brightly colored maps that hung on the walls; and the etchings that recounted the major events in the history of France. My first days as a pupil were not easy, but my older sister, who was a teacher, helped me immensely, and I made fast progress, particularly in French, a field in which I was found to be unusually gifted. I did it all well: dictation, grammar, essays . . . but what I loved most of all was that with each passing school year I entered more deeply into a universe that I discovered through reading, a universe that was as strange as it was fascinating. As soon as I could get a hold of that special textbook made up of selected readings, I would go straight to the last section of the book, the part made up of short tales and stories, only a few pages each. This was my first encounter with fiction, and it gave me delicious shivers I had never known before, sensations so intense that, sometimes, I would take up the stories and rewrite them in my own way.

At the same moment in time, I had a very different relationship with the Talmud Torah, the rabbinic school that I had to attend during the summer months and where I felt very ill at ease. Nothing about the school inspired me: not the place itself (a squat building stuffed to the gills with students); not the teachers (bearded old rabbis whose teaching techniques were fairly archaic); and not my fellow students (most of whom were already teenagers with whom I had little in common). Notwithstanding all of this, my compulsory education at this institution had a few positive effects: it allowed me to complete my religious training so that I could have a bar mitzvah, and to work on my Hebrew, which I had started learning with my mother. It was at this point that my intense interest in language and language games began to manifest. I had access to three different idioms: French, which came in first; dialectal Arabic, which we still used fairly frequently; and Hebrew. But I discovered rather quickly that, in our way of talking, all three could be combined together in ways more or less complex to form a kind of "sub-language." We were careful to adapt our "sub-language" to our interlocutors, and each one had its own proper lexicon, syntax, and pronunciation. These linguistic gymnastics were both fun and intellectually stimulating.

This exercise carried over into the final stage, the phase of my secondary education. Shortly after we moved into a beautiful new house, big enough to comfortably hold our entire family, I began junior high—a decisive moment in my childhood.

5. Author's note: The Alliance is the abbreviated name of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a French institution created in the nineteenth century and which developed a vast network of schools for Jewish children in various countries of the Mediterranean.

For the first time, as an eleven-year-old student at the Poeymirau High School, an institution in the “new city,” I found myself outside the almost exclusively Jewish cocoon in which I’d grown up.⁶ To get to school, I had to walk through the medina, an area I hardly knew. At high school, I discovered new teachers and new classmates: Christians, who made up the majority, and Muslims (although only a few), with whom relations were sometimes strained. But I also had access to new knowledge. Wearing the mantle of “good student” that I’d had since the end of primary school, I devoured all learning with an insatiable appetite. I was pleased to learn new languages—English, and especially Latin. The summer before I started junior high, one of my sisters had decided to teach me the basics of Latin grammar, which she had very cleverly presented as a game. A fun game based on rigorous logic: I loved it right away. The seed that would lead me to later specialize in the study of Roman civilization was planted then and there.

But this apparently beneficial and decisive turn didn’t come without a few bumps in the road. I had to learn to conform to new rules and values without forgetting the old ones. In other words, I had to accept to live every day in two more or less discordant realms, to lead a double life. With schooling, the gap between the two grew larger every year: I learned a history that had no link with my people’s past and a geography that did not correspond whatsoever to the actual environment in which I lived. Slowly but surely, everything I had known lost all value, and this fostered a permanent feeling of nostalgia and frustration, and a childhood that ended with all of the symptoms of what we might now call an identity crisis. But this, of course, is another chapter of my story . . .

—Translated by Lia Brozgal

6. Author’s note: The term “ville nouvelle” (new city) was used to designate the European part of the city, built at the start of the Protectorate and distinctly separated from the “medina,” or the Arab quarter.

Essaouira of Mogador

God's Cradle

Ami Bouganim

It is impossible to elude the nanny's lullaby, impossible to shy away from her gestures and from the dreams in which she envelops us and that she continues to conjure through the divine echo of her voice. The lullaby's solicitude is never lost; it is impossible to forget without committing a sacrilege. We carry our cradle within us and are buried with it. We take it everywhere, in our journeys across the world, from one dwelling-place to another, transported by waves, from one port to another. I had a Berber cradle, with three rounded legs. It rocked to the rhythm of the sea that dampened the delicate and vulnerable ramparts of Essaouira of Mogador, situated on a peninsula in southern Morocco. When I returned there for the first time, thirty-five years after having left, the whole town felt like a cradle to me. The wintery warmth, the movement of the waves, the unvarying Berber chants. I no longer inhabited it; it inhabited me.

Mogador was a town made of lace that trembled when the wind kicked up. In the morning, seagulls unfurled the light of day; in the evening, gannets rolled it up again. On all sides, waves crashed against the rocks in a vain attempt to move them or get around them. The pine trees, majestic and imperturbable, replayed their old Patagonian roles; the rubber plants, disheveled and scruffy, no longer knew where to spread their branches; the palm trees pondered their nostalgia for the desert. Merchants offered grilled grasshoppers in jars and acorns boiled in cisterns. Crunchy meringues and melt-in-your-mouth pralines. Powder for all types of ink and herbs for all kinds of pain. Dried butterflies and lizard tails to bring good luck. In the shops, since converted into art galleries, almond sorters gave their seasonal concert. The call of the muezzin, the sound of bells ringing and the clock's toll bounced off the rammed earth of the ramparts, the white lime walls, the blue doors and shutters. The sea spray saturated itself with the black incantations of the Gnawas and the soft insinuations of swallows, the murmurings



FIGURE 31. “Bouquet of Brotherhood,” given by Ami Bouganim who has no photographs of himself as a child.

of soothsayers and the litanies of beggars.¹ Mogador was in a trance, and we joined the incessant procession that shook the city from the porte de la Marine to the porte de la Prairie and from the porte des Lions to the porte du Destin. Nostalgia is a sickness of the senses, the stomach, and the heart, more so than of the head. Everyone has their paradise lost, and Mogador is mine. I am forever longing for her. Yearning to receive her liturgical waves—whether at the foot of the Wailing

1. The Gnawa are an ethnic group in Morocco and Algeria of Western African origin. Traditional Gnawa music consists of ancient African Islamic ritual songs.

Wall or at Sacré-Coeur. Longing to make out her subdued voices in muffled memories and illuminated visions, to reconstitute with a rare precision her décor and her sites in my dreams. I left my childhood self in Mogador; I remain from there. The price of emigration, but also its compensation, is the cocoon whose caterpillar never became a butterfly and that remains the safe place where my memories are preserved.

As soon as I could walk, I was placed in the care of Rabbi Pinchas who ran a nursery school at his house. He was a devout man, dressed in a black djellaba, his head covered by the blue veil with white polka-dots worn by the sages of North African Judaism.² He lived on a somber street that connected Chaïla Square to the rue du Destin in the old casbah. We were a large flock of children, aged two to four, who repeated the letters of the Hebrew alphabet drawn on an old slate that the rabbi held against his chest. A litany that mixed Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic intonations—incomprehensible, senseless, indelible. It meant nothing; it meant everything. It was brazen; it was wise. It was deafening. Then each child was invited to identify the letter pronounced by the rabbi. When one of us got it wrong, our errant finger was placed between the rabbi's pincers, and he pinched so hard that he extracted a cry of penitence from the culprit.

It was the Divine Presence in all its fullness—candles flickering in the half-light, sobs caught in the throat, the feeling of abandonment—that was prisoner of this dingy and squalid street, which we hurried to cross in order to regain the reassuring light of day. But the Presence would remain there, a misty divinity, deaf and blind, waiting to be liberated from its imprisonment. When I went back for the first time, the caretaker of the cemetery showed me into a chamber with a tomb in the center. It was my old master. The first and last. The one and only. He had merited the distinguished honor of not being buried with common mortals. The caretaker handed me a skullcap and a prayer book. The kaddish didn't come to my lips.³ It's meaningless if not enlivened by the echoes of ten or more people. Instead, what came to mind was one of Kafka's apologues, which I had to look up in my notes: "Here I am before my old master. He smiles at me and says, 'How can this be? You left my class such a long time ago. If I didn't have an inhumanly faithful memory of all my pupils, I would not have recognized you. But, as it is, I recognize you very well, yes, you are my pupil. But why have you come back?'"⁴ Rabbi Pinchas left neither great works nor progeny. Years later, I would try to make up for his oppressive severity by devoting a story to him, in which I posit myself as his spiritual heir and lend him a copy of *The Kabbalah Unveiled*. I had him recite a

2. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women.

3. The kaddish is the Hebrew prayer for the dead.

4. Author's note: F. Kafka, *Récits et fragments narratifs*, La Pléiade, Vol. II, Gallimard, 1980, 411. (Editors' note: Unofficial English translation.)

quote from *The Book of Splendor*, which he spent his days reading: “The tohu-bohu are residues of ink that stick to the tip of the reed pen.”⁵

From Rabbi Pinchas’s nursery school, I moved up to the rabbinical school where I experienced the rich assortment of abuses dished out by the teachers there. God had momentarily left la rue de la Prison only to end up in the slum that was the mellah. It was the most squalid, overcrowded environment; deprivation at its extreme. It was humanity in transit, heading somewhere else, late for everything, stalled in its anticipation of the Messiah. In sordid secrecy, merely existing, raging against the wind. The roads were pitiful, as were the buildings, the streets, the faces; the prayers were insistent, whether uttered by cantors, beadles, or beggars. It was the pitiful people of God weakened by two thousand years of exile who chanted their chosenness and their degradation. Their deaf resistance was as seductive as it was repugnant. It was a human swamp that gave off a liturgical stench and nobody asked themselves if there was a God to listen to them. That was where I was taken, day after day, to receive His word.

Then we moved from the House of Wells in the medina to the cracked house of the casbah. The glass panes of the roof, tormented by the wind, shattered and smashed in the courtyard. The doors and shutters slammed incessantly, making the whole building shake. Mice and cats entered freely under the door. Swallows, in search of an emergency exit, bashed themselves against the walls. Flies, bees, and cockchafers fluttered around us until they wound up caught in one of the numerous cobwebs that laced the corners. And yet, it was paradise. The windows looked out onto the ramparts, the clock, and the porte des Lions, which was guarded by two minuscule bronze canons that we straddled under the vigilant eye of our mother, watching us behind the glass.

From then on, we were situated halfway between the Hebrew school and the colonial school. My father renounced the rabbinic ambitions he had entertained for me; my mother pushed me toward the secular classroom. It was a real school, complete with a courtyard planted with oak trees and poplars, a covered playground and . . . a weathervane knocked about by the wind. There was almost no longer any question of God. The Hebrew teacher contented himself with teaching us Hebrew grammar, in the best of the Spinozan traditions upheld by the Alliance. The Arabic teacher was the only one who unfailingly added “the prophet” every time he invoked Allah. We wore overalls and brandished our slates; colored chalk and white chalk were mixed together; and whereas at the rabbinical school the ink was black, at the Alliance it was purple.

On another return visit, I let myself be led by a colleague to consult a Gnawa fortuneteller. She had prepared everything—the tray of earthenware pottery, the blazing fire, and the incense. She completed her ritual. Then, when the moment

5. Author’s note: *Le Zohar* 30a, Tr. C. Mopsik, Éditions Verdier, Vol. I, 1981, 172. (Editors’ note: Unofficial English translation.)

came for her to speak, she withdrew, explaining that she had a migraine, which prevented her from practicing divination. She refused to speak, despite my insistence and that of my colleague. I've often asked myself what she saw or felt that made her refuse to share her predictions with me. Maybe she detected the influence of Aïcha Kandisha on me and did not want to expose her fears.⁶ Out of discretion, out of hospitality . . . out of fear of the great Muquadama of the region.⁷ Since then, I have fantasized incessantly about having a home in Mogador. Marquetry furniture, curtains with tassels, and mosaic tiles with Berber tones. Bay windows looking out onto the ocean, walls of glass to resist the wind and make it sing, a bedroom resembling the hold of a boat. Wrapped up in a lovely and intimate warmth, cradled by the waves, visited by seagulls, watched over by gannets, lost at home, ready to make the leap into the great silence. An extraterritoriality of body and soul, free from illusions of grandeur or ambition. To hide away behind the closed shutters to watch the ballet of the waves, unbeknownst to them. Then, from time to time, to cross paths with the Wind who, returning to Kafka, "plays with light existences, prolongs the life of the falling leaves,"⁸ and which, in *The Kabbalah Unveiled* of Rabbi Pinchas, embodies and symbolizes God . . .

—Translated by Rebekah Vince

6. Aïcha Kandisha is a figure of Moroccan legend. Some stories hold her to be a mythical figure—a fairy, or even an ogress—and a great beauty who would prey on single men at night. Other stories classify her as an historical heroine who fought to push back the Portuguese invaders of Morocco.

7. *Muquadama* (typically spelled *muqadama* and usually transcribed as *mqadma* in Moroccan Arabic), signifies "leader." In this context, it refers back to Aïcha Kandisha.

8. Author's note: F. Kafka, *Lettre à Franz Werfel*, Décembre 1922, La Pléiade, Vol. III, 1202. (Editors' note: Unofficial English translation.)

Boulevard d'Anfa, Casablanca

Flecks of Memory

Anny Dayan Rosenman

Childhood in Casablanca is a film in color. It's a coproduction in Technicolor and in stereo sound, with many extras. Everything there is colorful, musical. Everything there is double, divided, multiple, split; the places, the holidays, the first names, the languages, and even the dreams.

Then, there is the world of parents.

It is the outside world. We give them our hand, and we walk up the large avenues that cross the city, punctuated by palm trees. We hear the noise of the palms in the wind, and when we lift our heads, we see them shake their disheveled heads. We stroll on the rue Blaise-Pascal, on Saturday afternoons, when Jewish families flow in peaceful streams along the boulevard lined with fashion boutiques, and stop to introduce their future grooms and their eligible young women. In winter, we go by car for coffee on the Corniche and watch the sea, waiting for summer. In summer, we spend long days at Fedala, on the beach, and we don't come back till nighttime, drunk with sun and skin burnt with salt.

Our family ritual is to go to the cinema on Saturday night. Once we have walked up or down all the steps of the great temple, when the heavy red-velvet curtains with golden fringes have slowly pulled back, the Metro Goldwyn Mayer lion roars, again and again, to greet us, because he recognizes us as well.

Time is punctuated by family celebrations. For a marriage, there are almost always two parties. The first night, the bride wears a velvet dress, embroidered with gold, with gauzy sleeves; we are told that this is the great dress that belongs to the whole family, that it comes from Spain, and that we too—my female cousins and I—will wear it later. The women put henna on the palms of their hands as they sing, accompanied by the Andalusian musicians. The women have raucous voices that are unfamiliar to us.



FIGURE 32. Anny Dayan Rosenman, age nine, at Studio Marty (photographer), in Casablanca.

There are organs at the Algerian synagogue, just like in church. The beadle, who is the caretaker but also the master of ceremonies, wears a tri-corner hat and a coat festooned with golden chains; the children march after him shouting "Napoleon!" When the benediction is pronounced, there are festive but timid ululations, and the bride's mother cries with emotion under a great wide-brimmed hat of organza.

The little girls wear white bobby socks, polished shoes with mother of pearl buttons, and petticoats that make their embroidered English dresses swell like flowers. Their male cousins wear tuxedos that make them look like little penguins.

Next, the bride dances with her father, while the musicians in red jackets play tangos and paso dobles. Around them, all the couples of the family move to the beat. The children find this very funny. They besiege the dance floor; they chase each other with loud cries; they weave between the couples and dive under the tables covered in sumptuous dishes. Old women catch them mid-flight and hold them close, just long enough to bless them, in Arabic, in Hebrew, in Spanish, and to prophesize a future marriage as beautiful as this one. These elderly women are all our aunts, and we have to call them "*signora*."

When it isn't a marriage, it's a bar mitzvah. In our world, we didn't say "bar-mitzvah" but rather "communion," even "first communion." The same musicians, the same dancers, the same blessings, the same discreet tears.

At home, it's the world of the grandmother, an enclosed world. Its borders are the walls of the villa. Time is marked by Jewish holidays whose cycle does not challenge the other calendar, but rather duplicates it and intensifies it. The children and grandchildren respect the time over which the grandmother presides and of which she is the keeper, all the while bringing it into harmony with what she calls "French time."

For Christmas, we get presents and are photographed with a nice old man who has a cotton-wool beard. We dream of snow, a snow that none of us has ever seen and that will fall in big flakes, just like in the movies. But at almost the same time, at home, Hanukkah, the emotional festival of lights, brings us together at nightfall, around a song sung from night to night and before a lamp for which my grandmother has prepared long wicks soaked in oil.

And at almost the same time as Carnival, for which we were bought masks and party favors in the joke and novelty store owned by an Italian behind the place de France, there was Purim, which brought together all her grandsons and granddaughters around an immense children's table.¹ For the occasion she made strange breads in the shape of faces, with two round, white eyes—two eggs imprisoned in a little pastry lattice that looked at us with an empty and terrifying gaze. These eyes, she told us, were Haman's. For dessert, we also had Haman's ears: rosette pastries dipped in honey. Before this cannibalistic dinner, she told us of the beauty of Esther, the courage of Mordechai, and the perversity of Haman who wanted to kill all the Jews. The children were much more moved by these stories than by the incomprehensible prayers that accompanied the meal, and it was with conviction that they banged their spoons on the table, each time the name of Haman was said. One of the uncles didn't miss the opportunity to name a contemporary Haman: it

1. As recounted in the book of Esther, the holiday of Purim celebrates the Jews' escape from the evil Persian official Haman, who sought their destruction.

was Hitler, or Nasser, who threatened Israel, or an irascible neighbor, or even the most boisterous of the male cousins.

Everything was shared, festive, all mixed up together. Yes, that was it. To be a Jewish child, at that time and in that place, was perhaps to have the happy awareness that worlds, rituals, layers of memory could be overlapping, superimposed, mixed up in a joyous incoherence. But it was also to hear a secret feminine voice talking of another time in the orphaned language that had found refuge in my grandmother. For my grandmother spoke the other language, the despised one, and she shared the dreams and words of her exiled language with the youngest granddaughter, the one who was too little to go to school. The others, the brother and the sister, only lived in the world outside, the world in French. They knew how to read and were bought copies of *Spirou*, *La Semaine de Suzette*, and *Mickey Mouse*.² But as soon as the villa was invaded by the huge mauve shadows of dusk, the grandmother would make the little girl sit next to her, on a little wooden bench, and without ever turning on the light, she told stories. The child waited without speaking, so as not to frighten away the words.

Kan ma kan.³ Everything always began this way. On her neck, the little girl felt the shiver of beginnings. The tales took place in a city, always the same, with terraces and fountains, guarded by one hundred Black slaves. Veiled in blue, his silver dagger at his side, Haroun al-Rashid strolled through the city every night without escort.⁴ He stopped before his subjects' windows to hear their confidences, their complaints, and their dreams. He granted the wishes of some, punished others. In the other language, the voice made itself elegant to describe the way that the king's wives were perfumed, that they were massaged with essence of sandalwood, amber, and musk. The voice made itself mysterious to evoke the tortures inflicted on wrongdoers. They were killed, said the voice in a strange formula, "hair by hair."

But most often the tales celebrated the lofty deeds of miraculous saints. The little girl understood that the saints had established a sort of direct communication with God. It was like a telephone call, but one that took place at night, in their dreams. As soon as they closed their eyes and they fell asleep, they saw the place where treasures were hidden or victims buried, they saw who was guilty of unsolved crimes. They were told of dangers to come and they sometimes warned

2. *Spirou* was a francophone Belgian comic magazine that published weekly comics, including some of the best-known serials such as *Lucky Luke* and *Les Schtroumpfs* (forerunners of *The Smurfs*). *La Semaine de Suzette*, a bi-weekly French magazine whose target audience was young French Catholic girls, is notable for having created the character Bécassine, a simple young girl from Brittany.

3. A variation of the Arabic expression *kan ya ma kan*, which is used in a similar way to the English expression "once upon a time"; its literal meaning is "it was or it was not" or "it happened or it did not."

4. Harun al-Rachid was an historical figure, a legendary Abbasid caliph who reigned in Baghdad (763–809), during which time the city reached a cultural apex. Al-Rachid signifies "the just," the upright, or the "rightly guided." He is the subject of many legends and tales; certain episodes from *One Thousand and One Nights* are based on Harun and his court.

the grandmother through signs that she knew how to recognize and interpret. When they didn't dream, they cared for and cured the daughters of the king, and these women would then treat the Jews with goodness. They rode lions, they hid in caves subsisting only on dates for years, sometimes they made giants out of terracotta, and on their foreheads, they wrote the word "*emet*," which means "truth."⁵

Soon, too soon, one would hear the sound of the big entry gate and then the key in the lock, and the child felt as though torn. Her mother, as soon as she arrived, would turn on all the lights in the villa. She spoke loudly, hammered the floor with her high heels, and she chased away the shadows, the signs, and the dreams. Then the child blinked her eyes, dazzled, deafened by these shouts, before running, delivered and relieved, toward her mother, as though she had escaped from some danger. Ungrateful, without a care for the grandmother, she took her distance from the twilight world. She wasn't aware that it had dug paths within her, woven its weft deep in her soul, installed voices that would call out to her at night in her sleep, that would call her from beyond space, exile, and forgetting, toward the matrix language and toward the time that existed before that of Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood.

But try as she might to respond to their call, she could never reach them. Even in her dreams, the film of childhood is henceforth a silent movie in black and white, from which the actors have disappeared and whose surface is crisscrossed with silver streaks that mark the place where the image of memory has been touched and corroded.

—Translated by Robert Watson

5. *Emet* means "truth" in Hebrew.

Place des Ferblantiers, Marrakesh

Mamada

Lucette Heller-Goldenberg

I was born in 1942 in Marrakesh. My place of birth protected me. If I had come into the world in Europe, I would perhaps have met the same fate as my grandmother Lisa Goldenberg-Goldenzweig, in Auschwitz.

On my father's side, we were stateless, like so many Jews to whom Romania refused to grant nationality, thereby depriving them of any identity papers. We didn't become French until 1947. On my mother's side, I was a Moroccan Jew of Berber origin, from Oufrane, which my ancestors left first to go live in Mogador, as merchants for the King, and then in Marrakesh.

In this North African land, my family name sounded so strange to everyone that people always butchered it. We weren't the Goldenbergs, but the Gudambers, the Gautembers, the Goldinberges, the Goldambergers, and sometimes even the Gutenbergs. A mere pronunciation problem? No, rather the rejection of a foreign identity. No effort was ever made to assimilate us under the same label as the Duponts and the Durands, the Levys and the Cohens, or the Fatmas and Mohameds. Where were we to fit in all that?

It is true that during the Protectorate, Morocco lived in the most hermetic form of separatism. Marshal Lyautey, the country's first resident general, in an effort to protect each community's particularities, deemed it appropriate to segregate these groups that existed side by side in Moroccan cities.¹ This noble decision led to a formidable partitioning. There were no bridges between the Muslim medina, the

1. The resident general was the official appointed to oversee the French administration in Morocco during the protectorate (1912–1956). In the eyes of international law, Morocco remained a sovereign state and the Sultan (later, the King) retained his status as its symbolic leader. In practice, however, the French exerted an enormous amount of power and influence over nearly all aspects of life.

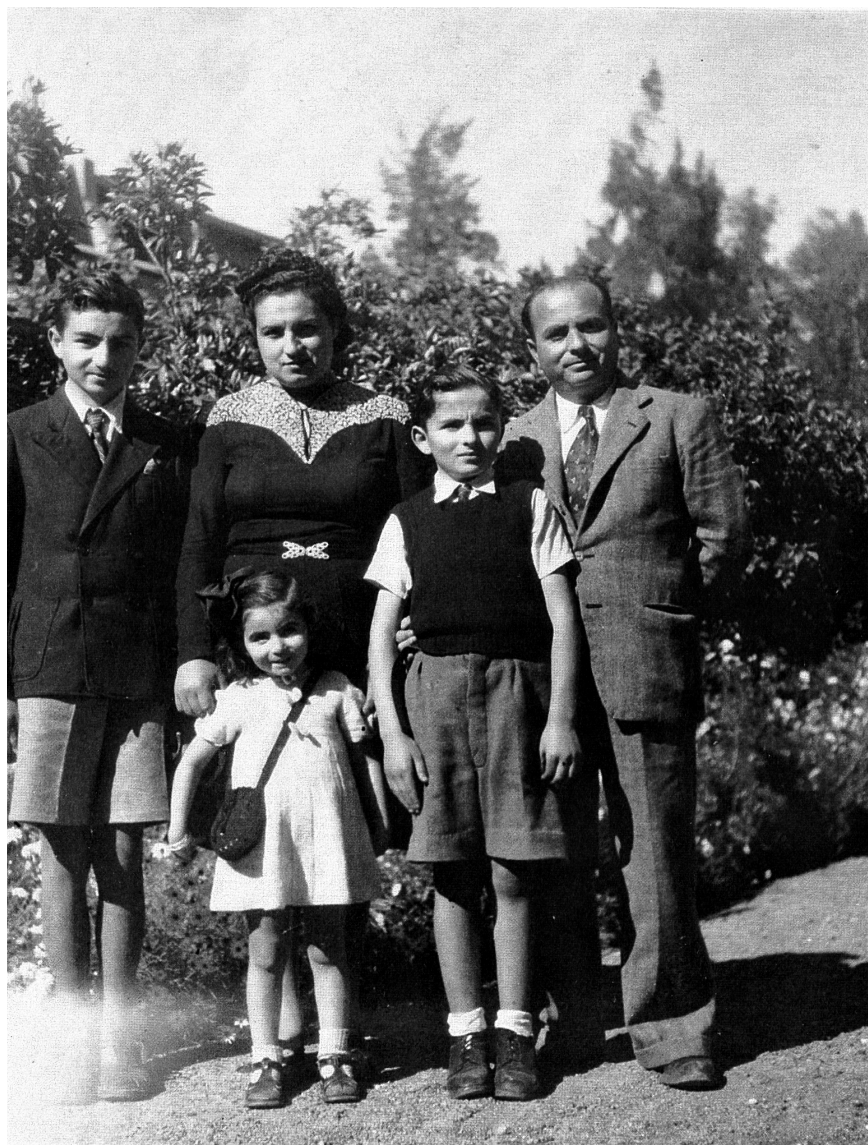


FIGURE 33. Lucette, the young girl in front, surrounded by her family, in the Mamounia Gardens in Marrakesh in 1946.

Jewish mellah, and the new European town, which together formed Dante's three circles of hell.²

Case in point: the Marrakesh swimming pool was reserved for Muslims on Friday, for Jews on Saturday, and for Europeans on Sunday, when the pool would be drained and refilled for them prior to opening. I didn't go to the Marrakesh pool. Which day would have been mine? And throughout my first eighteen years spent in Morocco, I never once crossed the threshold of a Muslim or European home, even though I had Christian and Muslim classmates.

I was Jewish, but we were not the practicing sort, and what's more, my father was Ashkenazi, while the Moroccan Jews were highly religious and Sephardic. As a teacher in the Alliance Israélite Universelle, my father was greatly esteemed by the local Jewry, but with his blue eyes and Parisian looks, he was not considered one of their own. And consequently, nor was I, whom they took to be a French girl, and who therefore never crossed a Jewish threshold either. On the other hand, in the eyes of the French, I was a Jew, since I didn't attend catechism or Mass and had a name that was hardly Catholic.

So, although I was kept very much at its margins, the Moroccan Jewish world is the one I'm recalling here. This world, which has practically disappeared since nearly all of the four hundred thousand souls that made up this community have sought exile in Israel, France, Canada, or the United States, was also mine, a legacy of my maternal grandmother, Mamada. However charmed I am by this twilight world's evocation of a bygone time, my main concern here, as a custodian to the legacy it represents, is to enrich and safeguard its memory.

My grandmother was very observant. She would spend hours in the kitchen preparing sumptuous dishes in terracotta tagines that simmered on *mezmers*, or small charcoal-fed grills. She refused to go modern. Her slow-cooking method gave these delicacies a very particular flavor that came to shape my gustatory memory. Nor would she have anything to do with refrigerators, insisting that cold water made her sick. Nothing was better than water stored in a clay jar sealed with a stopper made of dried grass, to keep the bugs out. This was the only water that could quench her thirst—cool, healthy, and natural. Mamada knew how to blend spices and other ingredients, while keeping an impeccably kosher kitchen.

Her cooking involved the kind of insider knowledge to which few were privy. When I would ask her about even the simplest orange salad with garlic, black olives, and red chili pepper seasoned with argan oil, or about the special way she grilled chili peppers (I never ventured into the intricacies of her more elaborate dishes like stuffed cardoons, lamb with *tavras*,³ celery and meatballs, stuffed artichokes, or her turnovers—delicate little triangular pastries stuffed with meat), she would give me advice as to how best to prepare them, but I could never reproduce

2. The author may be confusing here Dante's three categories of sin with his nine circles of hell.

3. *Tavras* are known in standard Arabic as *terfass*, translated into English as white truffles, or desert truffles. The dish in question is commonly known as *rfisa* or *trid*, which can be made with chicken or lamb, but which always includes lentils and fenugreek.

her exquisite results. I'd go back to her. Perhaps she had forgotten to include a key ingredient? "No," she'd tell me, laughing, "you just don't quite have the touch!"

At Mamada's, daily life harked back to biblical times. Mouchi, a trusted servant with the wizened face of a Rembrandt elder—as Elias Canetti noted in his *The Voices of Marrakesh*⁴—would sit and tell the stories of Rachel, Esther, and Abraham as if he'd just run into them in the marketplace. Jews lived among Biblical characters as a matter of course.

Her whole life was organized around timeless rituals; I was naïve enough to believe that things would stay that way forever, as they had thus far.

The calendar year was punctuated by a series of feast days, and we always went to Mamada's to celebrate them, since she was our family's faithful guardian of purest tradition. Rosh Hashanah was associated with her seven-vegetable soup, and Sukkot with the meal eaten beneath a sukkah built of braided reeds. Simchat Torah evokes the memory of seeing the normally dour Jewish elders dancing in jubilation right there in the synagogue, holding the sacred scrolls in their arms, head and shoulders draped in their fringed tallits.⁵ On Hanukkah, we proceeded to light our tinplate Hanukkiah, which people sometimes made out of old sardine cans decorated with pieces of colored glass. What remains etched in my mind from Purim is the endless megillah reading.⁶ I was also dazzled by the sumptuous Jewish bridal gowns worn by the girls who played the role of Esther in the plays performed at my father's school. I can recall walking to the communal oven to pick up the bread that Mamada had kneaded into a fine loaf for her two little grand-daughters, a bread made with anise seeds, turmeric, and a whole egg tucked beneath a lattice of thin dough strips, which we called Haman's eye, that I would take pleasure in breaking to avenge ourselves of this fabled traitor.

On the first night of Passover, the whole family would gather around my aunt's table to read the Haggadah.⁷ When my uncle told of the ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians as punishment for seeking to exterminate the Jews, we would all pound on the table with the backs of our spoons, crying "*dayenou*" ("it would have been enough")—with each beat. I also recall the tiny glasses of sweet wine from Morocco's Demnat region; the bland, unleavened matzah that went along with the maror; the bitter herbs to be dipped in haroset, a sweet confection of dates, figs, nuts, and rose petals. When mealtime came, I was always perplexed by the

4. A Nobel-prize winning writer best known for his work in German, Elias Canetti (1905–1994) was a Bulgarian-born Jew whose mother tongue was Ladino. *The Voices of Marrakesh* is based on Canetti's three-week stay in the city in 1954, and stands as one of the most important travelogs written about that city, first published in German in 1967.

5. A *tallit* is a fringed prayer shawl worn primarily by Jewish men in more observant traditions.

6. *Megillah*, here, refers to the Book of Esther, read on Purim.

7. The Haggadah is the text that contains the story of the Jews' enslavement in Egypt, and their redemption. The Seder is organized around the reading of the Haggadah, which prescribes the stages of the ceremonial meal.

enigmatic empty chair left for the prophet Elijah whose place was always set at the Seder table. We were at last rewarded after all those lengthy prayers with a fresh fava bean soup and a lamb tagine with tavras. Then, at Mimouna, we'd pay visits to family and neighbors, where we would sample their bercok, pearl couscous served with whey, and crepe-like mouffletas.⁸ It was always a joy to return to making these yeast-based foods that tradition forbade us to eat during the previous eight days.

On Saturdays at noon, we would go to Mamada's to have some of her srina, which she would have sent to the communal oven to simmer for twenty-four hours.⁹ It was a treat every time. We would feast on eggs and roasted potatoes browned from being cooked so slowly in their unctuous chickpea broth. And I can't talk about food without mentioning Mamada's sweet-and-savory meat stuffing.

We would then take the time to sip a glass of tea made either with mint or shiba.¹⁰ Out the living-room window, we could see street performers who'd come over from the Jemaa el-Fna Square to entertain the Jews, who would give them a few coins in return. The clowns would have their trained monkeys imitate the Jew digesting his srina. The animal would stretch out on its back, one forepaw behind his head, and pretend to be taking a long snooze.

All those flavors have disappeared forever, as have the moments of family joy, the jokes and stories, the laughter and emotion, shared in Arabic and French, with a few words in Hebrew added for blessing the bread and wine at the start of the meal. Though we did not respect Shabbat, we were always happy to share in the fervor of this meal that meant so much to Mamada. She knew that we drove our car, and went to school, but she took no offense.¹¹ She understood that the demands of our way of life were different from hers. These two worlds existed side by side, and would occasionally merge, then separate once again, always seamlessly, never colliding. This was the image of 1950s Judaism in Morocco: a mixture of East and West, of tradition and modernity, where Jews wearing both traditional djellabas and three-piece suits all spoke to one another in both Arabic and French.¹²

I left Marrakesh when I was 18, after earning my *baccalauréat*, and headed to France to attend university. I used to love returning to my home in January, to

8. Mimouna is a traditional Moroccan Jewish festival, celebrated at the end of Passover. It is characterized by lavish food preparations, including special breads, pastry, and other foods that are forbidden during Passover. While the practice was recorded as early as the eighteenth century, its name and origins are a subject of dispute.

9. *Srina* is likely a deformation of *skhina* (also called *dafina*), one of the best known North African Jewish dishes. It is a slow-cooked stew served typically for Shabbat.

10. *Shiba* (also written *chiba*) is absinthe; in Morocco, tea with absinthe is typically consumed in fall and winter.

11. In observant Jewish traditions, people refrain from doing any work on Shabbat, including driving or using other machinery.

12. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women.

my town in the snow-covered Atlas Mountains set against the bluest sky and the fiery red sunsets that highlighted the fine silhouette of palm trees. I was aware I was living my life at two speeds, with one foot in the swirl of intellectual discovery that was forging my personality as I traveled the world in search of answers to my existential questions, and the other foot planted firmly in Moroccan Judaism, from which I'd long been emancipated, though it remained as familiar as always.

When I left Marrakesh at the end of January 1965, I never sensed it would be forever. Like a migrating stork, I thought I'd always have a cozy nest to come home to, unchanged, at the end of my wanderings. But there is no more Jewish life in Morocco, just like all the other Muslim countries that have been emptied of their Jews. All that's left is memory.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Imin Tanout, Morocco

Crossing an Invisible Distance

Nicole S. Serfaty

Oh, to walk once again down those narrow lanes, along the tiny stone paths where our clumsy feet once trod! In Imin Tanout, that cheerful Middle Atlas village where my consciousness was awakened, I find myself once again before the rusty old clock placed at the village's sole crossroads at the behest of a debonair inspector general during the Protectorate.¹ It lists dangerously to one side, and hasn't kept time for decades. But this broken clock never ceases to enliven my rebellious spirit, emerging like a demon from my memory—which is already full to the brim—every time someone has the audacity to utter that treacherous phrase: “We have watches, but they have time.”²

Since the beginning of time, my village has never pegged its existence to the hands of a clock. In order to keep pace with the rest of the world, the inhabitants would observe the sky, the clouds, the winds, the trees, the animals, their relatives, their children, and their traditions. Now, this same village continues its trajectory without us, indifferent to our definitive separation, leaving it to Moroccan history to inscribe two thousand years of cohabitation between Berbers and Jews in its records, and to nuance the story of the Jews' emancipation from their so-called immutable seclusion.

Of the interactions between the two neighboring societies that we formed, I retain a few small secrets mixed with a myriad of impressions, sensations altered by time, minuscule gray zones. The memory that I have of these interactions

1. We have opted to retain the author's spelling of her hometown in two words (Imin Tanout) even though its rendering as a single word (Imintanout, sometimes Imintanoute) is the most internationally recognized spelling. It is worth noting, however, that the town's name is also rendered certain Berber languages as Imi n Tanut, meaning “well” or “abundant water source.”

2. The proverb in question typically reads: “You have the watches, we have the time.” It isn't clear here whether or not the author's revision of this saying is intentional or not.



FIGURE 34. Nicole S. Serfaty with her father and her brother in 1956, the year Morocco gained independence, on the boulevard de la Gare, Casablanca.

cannot possibly be authentic, since it seems to me that my memory cheats a bit. So what? Those songs of joy and the ululations that escape from the forest of cedars neighboring Mogador where I've returned on vacation, those women in ceremonial dress, sitting in the shade around a cradle, with pastries and teapots at their feet, cannot be reduced to mere bedazzlement. This scene seems infinitely far off and intimately close at the same time. It was described to me on countless occasions through snippets, in the form of anecdotes, by my mother, my aunts, their close female relatives, and the young Berber teenagers who served them and who were present at every family ceremony.

I draw closer to the group and to the baby, who is enthroned in a wicker cradle and dressed in an elegant white caftan embroidered in gold. I am immediately convinced, though I have no proof other than vague memories of family stories, that in the past my young cousins slept in the very same cradle, and that the songs had barely changed since. "It's a little girl," my mother tells me. "Her name is Itto!" I feel a slight pang; Itto is the Berber diminutive of my first name, Esther. When I was a little girl, everyone called me that, apart from my mother, who called me Tittote, and my brothers, who made my name rhyme with "tête de linotte."³

The young mother spontaneously invites me to join the group of women and, while I make myself comfortable on the Berber rug, under a stand of trees, propped up by cushions covered in embroidered silk, she explains to me that the birth of a girl deserves to be celebrated as much as that of a boy. The women in my family thought and acted no differently, singing the midwife's praises in the same way:

*O midwife! O gentle one!
Bringer of good fortune, of luck!
You who predict happiness shall receive her reward!
I'll give you a gift to be admired!*

This cheerful song returns to my memory little by little. My voice joins the chorus, without an accent, or rather, *with* the local accent of this cozy region where I was born. I reconnect with the intonations of my mother tongue before these women who are intrigued by my perfect command of Moroccan *darija*.⁴ They must be thinking, "Maybe she's from here, but surely from somewhere else. One of those MRE, no doubt!"⁵ The eldest among them moves closer to whisper in my ear that she had lots of Jewish friends back in the day—Yamna, Fiby, Rachel, and Jamila—that they had shared moments of intense happiness together, but that these friends had left surreptitiously for Israel, without saying goodbye, without turning back, without a word, fifty years ago now . . .

At that time, the airwaves of Radio Maroc spoke of the puppet regime and the press violently railed against the new Zionist state whose name we no longer

3. The French expression *tête de linotte* means "bird brain."

4. Author's note: dialectal Arabic.

5. Author's note: MRE—*Marroccain résidant à l'étranger*. (Editors' note: Moroccan residing abroad.)

uttered. Instead, we just said “Canada,” with a subtle wink only caught by those in the know. Endless departures, ruptures, separations, farewells, tears, worries, long debates over which country of exile to choose, the agony of impending upheaval, the hiding of our escape to the Holy Land or to a country that had recognized it as a Jewish homeland, as the state of Israel. Could we hand over everything as it was to our Muslim neighbors, with whom we shared neither the aspiration for national independence nor solidarity with other Arab countries?

That woman with the kind eyes who utters the name “Israel” as though it were the most natural thing in the world cannot ignore that it had taken almost a half-century to assuage her country’s hostility toward that country and to dissolve the climate of suspicion and distrust that would gradually and durably erode the interactions between Jews and Muslims here.

The next day, on the hairpin bends of the road that leads me to Imin Tanout to have lunch at the house of Caïd Ben Al-Mamoun—loyal friend to my uncles and father—I realize the extent to which this historical episode and these migratory movements tainted and poisoned my teenage years. It really is an invisible distance that has always separated us from our Muslim neighbors and that, together, we could no longer maintain. Since then, we’ve convinced ourselves that we had no option but to move elsewhere, to seek refuge under what were supposedly more merciful skies. So that’s how, as I gloomily watched the rows of olive trees go by, I realized that a situation of compromise, patiently maintained over time, had disintegrated before my childhood eyes. The secular lifestyle shared on the same soil, the linguistic, traditional, artistic, and culinary affinities, could no longer hold up. For this reason, all this shared history and culture could no longer serve as an excuse to look beyond that unspeakable barrier that is otherness.

Before arriving at my host’s place, I pass by the cave-dwellings of the Jews of Imin Tanout. The day after independence, my village was already unrecognizable, almost entirely emptied of its Jewish population, which had been illicitly transported to a transit camp in Marseille, then to Haifa, aboard leaky old boats. Just like the synagogue, the hammam, the communal bread oven, and the movie theater, the little school of Imin Tanout had been locked up. On the door frames of certain caves, you can still make out, on the right-hand side, the hole left by the mezuzah spirited away in the humble baggage of God’s tenants, who liked to say that their modular housing was on divine loan without interest!⁶

For us, it became urgent to move to Marrakesh, where a few family members were resisting the call of the sea and where others were biding their time, waiting for the travel restrictions imposed on Jews to be lifted and their passports to be issued. We had moved to the ramparts of the red city not only in an attempt

6. Author’s note: *mezuzah* is the Hebrew name given to the small metal case that holds a handwritten biblical text. (Editors’ note: the name derives from the Hebrew word for doorpost, which is where the object is affixed in Jewish homes.)

to reestablish a life regulated by school, work, and the numerous Jewish festivals that punctuate the year, but also because my parents were attentive to the wise and caring advice of Caïd Ben Al-Mamoun, who had perceived the villagers' new-found hostility toward the few Jewish families awaiting their imminent departure to Israel.

We had all become migrants, within the country or beyond its borders, finding ourselves once again, and in spite of ourselves, in a situation of profound and deep-rooted precariousness. But if life had observed us at that time, it would have no doubt seen us reduced to silence, detaching ourselves from times gone by, without any meaningful soul-searching, as we resigned ourselves entirely to our mektoub!⁷ This dazzling city had offered me a site of games and discoveries far more exciting than Monday's souk, the small oued, and the single sloping road of my village.⁸ The end of our confined familial way of life also allowed me to meet and mix freely with the children of the mellah, whose family trees my parents could no longer recall.⁹

I share Daniel Sibony's sense that our exile was made up of small, uncertain homes that were delightful, festive, radiant havens.¹⁰ Exile—the word might seem excessive. Since our departure from Imin Tanout, and knowing that other moves would follow, I had a vague premonition that I was entering a period of initiation. It seemed to me that after having made it through several steps—or different exiles—I might finally be able to put these weightless roots down again.

In the humble riad where we lived, situated between the mellah and the medina, family dinners with my parents, my two brothers, and I were lively, and the topics of conversation were always the same.¹¹ In the background, the monotonous voice of the Radio Maroc announcer went over the day's events: the minute details and gestures of the sultan, Mohamed V, and of the crown prince, Moulay Hassan, the palace visits, the droughts, the swarms of grasshoppers. We heard it without listening; our problem would not find its solution on the radio waves. The vast majority of the French had returned to metropolitan France. But what about us? Should we follow them or stay put, deprived of our family, so as to finally become good Moroccan citizens? We considered all possible capital cities where cousins, uncles, and aunts had gone before us, but the news of their living situations was not only unappealing, it was even alarming; this dismayed us and slowed down all our plans of escape.

7. Author's note: That which is written, our destiny or fate.

8. A *souk*, or *souq*, is a market or a bazaar; a *oued* (sometimes written *wadi*) is a small river- or stream-bed (in a valley or ravine) that is usually dry, flowing with water only during heavy rains.

9. Author's note: The name given to the Jewish quarter in Morocco.

10. Author's note: *Marrakech, le départ* (*Leaving Marrakesh Behind*) (Odile Jacob, 2009), p. 15.

11. A *riad* (or *riyad*) refers to a traditional style of Moroccan or Andalusian architecture in which a domicile (a house or a palace) features an interior courtyard or garden.

For my brothers and me, passionate about the Hollywood movies and musicals that we went to see in the original English on Thursday afternoons at the Renaissance Cinema, our future was written in bright letters in one place only: not New York or Manhattan, but Broadway! As for my father, he saw himself, heart brimming with pride, living in the holy city of Jerusalem so that he could pray every morning at the foot of the Western Wall and fulfill the secret wishes of his rabbi father.¹²

In turn, my mother would share with us her dream of going to France and the careers that she would have us pursue; then she'd put an end to our verbal jousting and our emotional outbursts by sending us to bed. When the school year came to an end in 1965, for a whole week she displayed a restlessness that had nothing to do with the heat wave that was pervading the town and scorching its inhabitants.

Then one evening, she announced, with a firm, determined voice and a fixed gaze, as though lured by a mirage, that, *In Chaa Allah*, we would soon be entering Paris, just as one enters Paradise!¹³

—Translated by Rebekah Vince

12. The Western Wall (*le mur occidental*, in French) refers to what is more commonly known in English as the Wailing Wall, one of the holiest sites in Judaism due to its proximity to the Temple Mount.

13. A phonetic rendering of *inshallah*, an Arabic expression that means “if God wills it.”

Marrakesh, Morocco

In the Medina

Daniel Sibony

In my memoir, *Marrakech, le départ* (*Leaving Marrakesh Behind*), I described what might be called an ordinary childhood.¹ What struck me, once I had written the book, was the immediate, even necessary, shift from the story of one particular human being—an insignificant little Jewish boy who lived between the medina and the mellah from 1942 to 1955 (the date he left for France)—to the tale of the grand universal phenomena that shake the world today: clash or meeting of cultures; coexistence, natives and foreigners, modernity, return to origins; identities shattered, half-open, or intensified, conserved; existential questions; and the list goes on. *Marrakech* is something of a novel, but it even finds connections with the current financial crisis by way of a childhood memory in which a young boy of ten, proudly arriving at the entrance of a bank to exchange a dollar that an American tourist has given him, contemplates the building from which he is immediately rebuffed and imagines those who manage all those wads of cash, taking them out in the morning to do their business and bringing them back in the evening, keeping the profit, returning a month later, or perhaps never.

It also struck me that writing is a form of salvation, the writing of life, buttressed between the writing of the original Book and that of everyday life. This aspect of a broader notion, which I once conceptualized elsewhere as “in-between,” played out in the interaction between two languages, two ways of life—ours in the medina and the one that we dreamed about: far-off.² This idea of in-betweenness, which went on to permeate many of my texts, comes from there, from this childhood.

1. None of Sibony's books have been translated into English; translations of the titles are provided, in parenthesis, for informational purposes.

2. Author's note: See *Entre-deux. L'origine en partage* (*In-Between: Shared Heritage*) (Paris: Seuil, 1991).



FIGURE 35. Derb Djama' Street where the birthplace of Daniel Sibony is situated (third door on the right) in the Bahia neighborhood of Marrakesh. He has no photographs of himself as a child.

I love this childhood and the town where it unfolded, but with no desire to return there or to rediscover this “lost time” (!).³ I appreciate this place precisely because, throughout my time there, it inspired me to leave. One can love a place for this, for the very reason that it inspires, through its most minute details (be they carnal, sensual, or reflective), the desire to be elsewhere. And so we owe something to that place, because this desire, which matured over the course of our time there, later takes the form of an instinctive acuity, compelling us to break out of the cage in which others confine us and refuse to be reduced to that existence. Instinctively, we delegate a part of ourselves to go elsewhere.

Why was I so keen to leave? Starting in 1950, when I was eight years old, my father was often away in France preparing our arrival, which took five years to come to fruition. But a father's departure is in itself only a symbol; in any case, we had to get ready to leave. In the mind of an alert child who might be insulted or attacked by young people in the medina at any given moment—and who also knew that the Muslim adults who formed this large crowd might impulsively

3. The exclamation point is undoubtedly the author's self-conscious way of noting his reference to Marcel Proust's multivolume literary opus *In Search of Lost Time*.

utter the word “*iheudi*” (“Jew”) accompanied by the word “*hashak*” (“with all due respect”), as if they had just uttered an obscenity—the contempt was clear, but it existed alongside a conviviality, a sort of serene encounter between *iheud* and *mslimine* who after all, the forces of life being what they are, could not always be at each other’s throats when they crossed paths. There were friendships, convivial gestures, notably during ritual festivals, and that must have had an effect on certain Jews, given that recently in Paris I heard one such Jew declare that Moroccan Judaism was “buoyed” by the Islamic *ummah*.⁴ That too, this fluttering between vindictiveness and conviviality, would later become precious to me.

But at the time, I couldn’t work out the origin of this negative passion directed toward us, which mixed so well with convivial gestures. I had a vague impression, impossible to put into words: they despise us and they esteem us; or, better: they despise us because we are estimable. But as I didn’t have the means to reflect deeply on this, because I didn’t have the “facts”—including access to the Qur’an, as we spoke Arabic but didn’t know how to read it—I contented myself, in a primitive way, with scorning their scorn, a position I believed to be justified because it was motivated by the very contempt shown to us, which seemed to come from another time, far beyond even them. Much later, I caught a glimpse of the reason: we were deeply embedded in their sacred Text. What were we doing there? It is from their Text that we should be driven out, but that’s impossible, because without us, the Text wouldn’t hold up. This contradiction, unsolvable to this day, explains how, wherever they reign, we must leave.

I’ve said elsewhere what I think of the Andalusian “golden age.”⁵ And I’ve come to understand why, as soon as it was possible, we nearly all disappeared from their space. I even thought to myself one day that a country without Jews, that is, a country that had them in the past and didn’t know how to hold onto them, is a condemned country. A country like that would be too mired in a war with itself to tend to an existential rift . . . a rift that it would project onto others if only in order to push it away. But that rift will forever come back to haunt it.

But the child that I was had found a fairly good balance between these two forms of contempt, which opened up a path to run, play, dream about departure, and drink in the modern culture that would perhaps help us get out of this hole. This desire for an “exit,” for departure, is inscribed on the walls of Marrakesh for me, and I love them for that.

This is to say that my novel does not exude nostalgia, in the sense of aspiring to rediscover a time and places that were characterized by happiness. We were not lacking in happiness, and when I think back to that time and those places, I think more about what could have been. Nostalgia is the desire to rediscover the initial

4. *Ummah* means “community” in Arabic, and generally is used to refer to the world community of Muslims.

5. Author’s note: See my *Trois monothéismes* (*Three Monotheisms*) (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

acuity of the desire that belonged to those days; the desire to leave, yes, but filled with that memory, those traditions, those textures, those convivial-aggressive clashes, that serene roughness, that desire to live by casting the widest possible net over the field of opportunity.

One day I presented my novel in Marrakesh to a Moroccan audience who was charmed because I opened the book at random and commented on a few points in a humorous fashion that recalled “those days.” Not long afterwards, I received a letter from a French-speaking Moroccan teacher that said, “Having read your book, I see that you bit the hand that fed you: we welcomed you, and you failed to recognize that.” I smiled, seeing that she herself was acknowledging that we Jews weren’t “at home” in Morocco, that we had received the immense gift of hospitality from those who welcomed us, we who were there before the arrival of the Arabs. This hospitality itself signified that we were foreigners in our own land. And that is the most vivid feeling that I have of Marrakesh: being exiled at home, in our own origins. Consequently, to leave that place, to go to Paris, was not an exile. The novel describes the difference between our exile and that of an immigrant who, for his part, can always return to his country, or at least imagine such a return. For us, this initial exile could only yield “returns” elsewhere. I love Marrakesh because it was there that my poetics of return was sown—not a return to Marrakesh, the so-called place of origin, since my origin is merely a feeling—but a return to what I would later call “the points of love in being,” or that which, in being, shows us signs of compassion, everywhere, signs of gratitude.

I was fairly sure that, in the modern neighborhood of Gueliz, Muslims and Jews (at least those who were well-off or modern) lived alongside one another more peacefully, and that the children of the medina wouldn’t go there to throw stones at them. I later understood that the French served as a third party; it was necessary to maintain the appearance of a certain dignity for them—no insults, no vulgarity. Incidentally, it was when I was returning from Gueliz one day, passing by the library that was located in the town hall, that I was attacked, next to the Koutoubia: on the border between the two neighborhoods, in the passage between modernity and tradition. But I felt that the *mslmines* of the medina were more authentic than their counterparts living in wealthy neighborhoods. They expressed the truth of this large “Arab” mass of people that surrounded us with its violent ambivalence.

Although we were of modest means, we had Muslim employees (*khddamat*, workers) and our interactions with these women were utterly simple, without the smallest trace of aggression. In this case, it was work that served as an intermediary.

Later, I calmly asked myself why this ambient hostility didn’t make us a little paranoid. In my case, the reason appeared simple: the connection to writing, a multifaceted connection, with numerous branches and creases. We had our own universe, bathed in the waves of the sacred Text, itself contradictory and inviting contradiction, interpretation, questions, and dreams about its contents. That text served as a boundless goldmine for writing; other writings took their place

next to it: letters, for example, written in Hebrew-Arabic by the boy who played scribe between absent men and women, between mother and father, Morocco and France, the tradition confined to the medina and the imagined European world perceived to be inaccessible. Books too, the third thread of my tapestry, nourished me; I devoured them voraciously without asking myself if they were “good”; they were quite simply to be read. So I was “saved” by writing, before even deciding that one day I would write. I felt myself to be part of the community of “scribes,” though not like those who, in a corner of place des Ferblantiers (the *seufrim*), wrote out marriage contracts and divorce certificates, agreements and complaints . . . I felt that I was holding on to another thread of writing. In any case, when one is taken up in this textual whirlwind, one finds in his apparently stodgy identity a plethora of folds, corridors, and sinuous paths that lead to more habitable dwelling-places, places where one feels completely at home, out of harm’s way. In the novel, this takes the form of a mat on the scorching hot patio that has just been washed down with cool water so that I can sit and have a cup of tea, with a book in hand and a square of blue sky above, dreaming of departure. I don’t know if others were waiting, like me, for a liberating letter sent from afar, from France or America, inviting them to leave. Some Jews stayed until 1970 or 1975, but the fact is that of the original three hundred thousand, less than two thousand remain today. A sort of silent murder perpetrated by foolishness.

Later, we realize that the opaque aspects of one’s life, which sometimes become painful, are only illuminated when taken up in the thread of writing. I am thinking in particular of my childhood fascination with the *djama*’ (mosque) on the street where I lived. I would furtively pass in front of its door. If I happened to stop, people would shout insults, but when there was no one there, I would stop and examine the door, as if it would reveal to me the secret of what happened there; I was sure that their feelings about us could penetrate the door. Is it the memory of this door that, years later, would be my entry point into the Qur’an, in Arabic, to find out what it was all about?⁶ As though this enigma, conserved in my memory, had just knocked on my door to ask that I elucidate this mystery through the written word. But the majority prefer to remain in the dark, unperturbed, meaning that this door to the *djama*’ on that street from my childhood exists in millions of Western memories, locked up for years to come.

I must add that, in spite of my mischievousness, I was at that time swaddled in complete naivety when it came to women: I don’t know through which of the multiple sources the idea was inscribed in me (but I wasn’t the only one) that women transcended sex, that they had nothing to do with this vulgar thing that is exclusive to men, who should not broach this obscene subject at the risk of shocking them. In the novel, I did not draw out the consequences of this peculiar idea,

6. Author’s note: I recount this in two books: *Les Trois monothéismes* (*The Three Monotheisms*) (Paris: Seuil, 1992) and *Nom de Dieu* (*For God’s Sake*) (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

but I addressed it in order to shed light on the repression that dominated both Jews and Muslims (Europeans were still out of reach for me). In any case, the boy in the novel comes to the conclusion that, “If these loose women [prostitutes] give themselves to everyone, that must mean that real women give themselves to no one.” To seek the causes of this idiocy would take us further than we have space for here. But I’m sure that this is what united us, both “them” and “us,” in measure beyond words.

—*Translated by Rebekah Vince*

Inner Anfa, Casablanca

Living between the Lines

Ralph Toledano

The first time I traveled by airplane was in July 1953. I had just been born in Paris; my parents were returning to Casablanca with me. We lived for two years at my paternal grandparents' place. It was on the boulevard named after the French capital, a vast art deco apartment whose atmosphere and décor turned their back on Morocco. I can see myself lying in my dad's old room, my cot placed between a sofa surrounded by bookshelves and a wardrobe with sliding doors. Like a spinning top, a cat that thinks it's a person turns in circles in the darkness, creating an electric crackling sound that terrorizes me. I cry for help. Dad, Mom, and my grandparents are all having dinner in the 1930s-style dining room. Footsteps resound in the hallway. Behind the door, a serious conversation begins between the three who are in favor of consoling me, and Dad, who claims the prerogative of discipline. I hear Grandfather's plea, uttered in his soft, deep voice in the only language I understand, Spanish: "Don't keep him waiting, he's afraid of being alone in the dark." Dad's response, in French, is unintelligible to me, but his firm tone needs no translation: the door doesn't open, despite my intensified crying. This was how, very early on in my life, French came to be associated with a strictness indifferent to the only kind of reason that will ever matter to me: the reason of the heart. Then, emboldened by my grandmother's insistent pleas, Mom turns the door handle. Jewish compassion prevailed over the principles of French education. Yet the end of the colonial era was adrift in cultural confusion. It would take me years to see that this merciful intrusion of four loved ones into my room was not just the Iberian way of doing things.

For the time being, all that appears fragrant and tender, like Grandfather's handkerchiefs or Grandmother's lingering perfume, carrying the echo of Spain. I live in a bubble of Castilian romances, its musical iridescence peopled with knights and besotted princesses who, for almost five centuries, have accompanied me through



FIGURE 36. Ralph Toledano, nearly two years old, in Casablanca.

an exile that I don't even feel. The world in which I grew up, protected by the walls of our houses and the love of their inhabitants, is a reassuring kingdom. In Tangiers, where from a young age I would spend lengthy vacations, all that is Hispanic reigns supreme. Radio Seville plays operettas on a continuous loop punctuated by the rhythm of castanets. On Sundays, breakfast is accompanied by the sound of Mass, whose call and response are familiar to all. Rarely does the monotonous flow of French tarnish the chant of Latin tongues. In the early years of my life, I lived not in Morocco but in an idealized Spain. In the servants' quarters, instead of Luisas, Petras, or Marias, Moroccan maids busy themselves in silence. In Tangiers, they speak a gravelly Spanish with a Rifian lilt.¹ In Casablanca, Grandmother addresses them in a jargon dominated by Castilian.

One summer morning in Casablanca, the Muslim maids take me up to the roof. It's laundry day. They hang up white sheets on the washing lines. Household staff from the other apartments join them. These Moroccan women laugh in the dazzling reflections on the whitewashed ground; linens and walls unite with the light. One of them takes me in her arms, speaking to me in Arabic. I say nothing. She teaches me how to say "hello" and "goodbye" in her language. Her friends stop what they're doing for a moment and make a circle around us, caressing my fair hair. Up until the age of ten, I would know only a handful of words in Arabic. And then, on the heels of a string of Spanish maids, Habiba bursts into the house, carrying the words and perfumes of a North African land that brushed past me like a shapeless ghost. The exuberant personality of the new Moroccan cook, her sensitivity (she makes a racket with her pots and pans so as not to hear my younger sister cry when she gets punished), and her ignorance of languages ("*jnafo*" is her only French expression, inspired by slang to signify indifference),² plunge me into a Morocco of excess, an African Morocco. For many years, this is what will define my perception of the country. Thanks to Habiba's love; to the devotion of the handyman Brahim trailing his short, ebony silhouette from one of our houses to another—carrying a tray of pastries or some kind of utensil; and to the humor of the chauffeur Smaïn who drove us to school, teaching us risqué Arabic songs on the way, I make my way into Morocco, little by little. And yet my sense of belonging to the country remains hazy, as its masses furtively brush up against my reality.

Grandfather often tells me that we are Sephardim, chased from the Iberian Peninsula by Catholic kings. Yet, on Sundays, he hums the *Salve Regina* in Latin, with feeling. It seemed to me that Sephardic identity was only incidentally Jewish, a privileged way to be Castilian, as reflected by our family name, whose significance

1. The adjective Rifian refers to the Berber-speaking people of the Rif, a region of northern Morocco bordered by Algeria to the east and the sea to the north. The term is said to derive from the Berber (or Amazigh) word *arrif*, which means coast or edge.

2. *Jnafo* is a Moroccanized version of the French expression "je m'en fous," which indicates total indifference. The English rendering would be something akin to "I don't give a crap."

my Grandfather taught me from a very young age. Yet for me, the rabbinic dignitaries scattered throughout our family tree are completely abstract. I retain only their prestige. For a long time, Toledo would prevail over Israel in my heart. We were the lifeblood of Spain. I lived in its sublimated reality, its lilting poetry. My life was undoubtedly enriched by any number of unnamed Jewish values, but Judaism itself remained practically foreign to me.

Like some young couples, my parents cultivated few traditions belonging to their race, preferring the company of Proust, Simone de Beauvoir, and Virginia Woolf to anything sacred. For them, Jewish ritual consisted of two annual appearances at the synagogue. The first took place after the last prayer of Yom Kippur, the *Ne'ila*, during which the sound of the ram's horn made my brother and I tremble with a mysterious feeling as we sheltered under Grandfather's silk prayer shawl. The second took place the day after Sukkot, when the women in the gallery who had come to celebrate Simchat Torah would shower us with sweets from above.³ One day, I would come to know that this means "Joy of the Torah." My occasional visits to the synagogue were characterized by a mixture of tenderness, bound up with the presence of the beloved grandparent, and intense boredom. My brother and I read Hebrew poorly, so we were unable to follow the prayers, while the participation of the young boys educated in Jewish schools intimidated us. Certainly for the *goyim* we were Jews, but for the Jews we were strange.⁴ The young Hebrew teacher who was hired to prepare my brother for his bar mitzvah couldn't tell us apart. During the lesson, wafts of Gregorian chants emanated from the living room. He was surprised to hear such melodies at our house. Embarrassed, I told him that it was just what happened to be on the radio. At the next lesson, the same Benedictine intonations of the Solesmes Abbey filled the air (Mom was infatuated with this music). The young rabbi asked in a sneering tone, "Has it ever occurred to you to get a new radio?"

The religion of our house was essentially a culinary one. At my parents' place, in harmony with their literary tastes, the menu included roasts followed by glazed carrots with cheese soufflé; our children's dinners typically consisted of mashed potatoes with minced ham mixed in for good measure. But Friday night dinner was at Dad's parents' place, and Saturday afternoon lunch was with Mom's parents, at their house. Both meals were preceded by blessings.

At our mom's parents' home, despite the décor that consisted of Chinese vases, Venetian mirrors, dressers made of dark sculpted wood, and mahogany seats next

3. *Yom Kippur* is the Day of Atonement. Considered the holiest day in Judaism, it is observed by a twenty-five-hour fast and intensive prayer, usually in late September or early October. Similarly, *Sukkot*, known as the Festival of the Tabernacles and also the Harvest Festival, takes place in the Fall season. The holiday lasts eight days, and the final day is called *Simchat Torah*, which means "rejoicing with the Torah."

4. *Goyim* is the plural form of *goy*, which in both Hebrew and Yiddish refers to a gentile, or a non-Jew. Although sometimes considered pejorative, the word itself simply means "nation."

to glass cases filled with figurines made of Sèvres china, the atmosphere was less European. In contrast to my paternal grandfather's place, furnished in 1930, in which prestige and order prevailed, and where Raquel the Spanish-speaking Jewish housekeeper insisted on serving the women first, my mom's parents' home bustled with activity and the improvised table service was often chaotic. The *adafina* delivered by the baker's boy arrived from the public oven to the echoes of slamming doors and gates, while we ate hors-d'oeuvres seasoned with argan oil.⁵ For my grandfather, slow-cooking the stew in the wood-burning stove overnight from Friday to Saturday was the only way to give it the desired flavor. From the large cooking pot placed on a stool at the corner of the table, Grandmother piled up brown eggs, caramelized potatoes, roast beef, and dumplings on a platter held by a servant. In a dizzying whirl of aromas saturated by the heat of the dish, the traditional stew was passed around while Grandmother, with an archeologist's keen eye, continued to extract treasures from the bottom of the barrel: "There you go, the gelatin for my brother, the marrow bones for the children . . . Does anyone want any chickpea broth? The small potatoes must have dissolved, I thought there were more."

The independence of the Kingdom had given way to the neocolonial era. There was a status quo where the ethnic and cultural stratifications of the country contemplated each other with respect. However, the end of every school year saw a large contingent of our classmates from the French schools "return" to France, as the Arabization of our environment gained ground. The exodus of colonial settlers accentuated our Jewish identity. No longer confused with Nazarenes, we went back to being Moroccan. Following our grandparents' successive deaths, Mom returned to our religious traditions, reading the sacred texts. The meals on feast days took place in our own home. The soufflé trend gave way to a disappointing return to Jewish menus. But the end of the 1960s was marked by the lure of Moroccan heritage: Pastilla with pigeon and lamb tagine with prunes, typical Muslim dishes, replaced the roast beef. We traveled to the south of Morocco, the Israeli-Arab War of 1967 momentarily interrupting our rapprochement with the Cherifian empire.⁶ The illusion of reconciliation was an air played on Andalusian lutes. Would we turn out to be more Judeo-Arabic than European? The idyll was fragile, the paradox uncomfortable. We picked up snippets of references to a national project but the Arabization of the country put us face to face with

5. *Adafina* is the sabbath stew of the Jews of Spain; a similar dish is called *hamin* in the Sephardic tradition and *cholent* in the Ashkenazi tradition.

6. The war in question is known as the Six-Day War, the June War, the Third Arab-Israeli War, and, in Arabic, as *an-Naksah*, or "The Setback." The conflict lasted June 5–10, 1967, and was waged between Israel and Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. The reference to the Cherifian (or Sharifian) Empire is a nod to Morocco's historical designation, as the dynasties that would come to constitute the modern nation-state were led by rulers who claimed to be Sharifian, or descendants of the prophet Mohammed.

Judaism. Was the latter compatible with Islam? The French had abolished the status of dhimmis, emancipating us from the Crescent.⁷ I entertained a dream some mornings, surrounded by the fragrance of fresh mint mixed with the aroma of grilled rye bread: to be entirely Moroccan, with Judaism as a defining feature. At dinner, Dad told us about an incident at a Jewish community council meeting that shattered my dream. The future of Jews in Morocco would be a precarious one, oscillating between attachment and disillusionment. I would leave to pursue my studies in Paris, returning only for vacations.

The day after my baccalaureate exams, the attempted Skhirat coup d'état rapidly transformed the lullaby into a death-knell.⁸ A Morocco without a monarchy would be a dictatorship of colonels hostile toward minorities. The obvious corruption of the Palace had betrayed the promises of independence. Once again, we returned to our wandering in search of more tolerant latitudes. My childhood was over; I had just become a Moroccan Jew.

—Translated by Rebekah Vince

7. *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 and protections than Muslims, the existence of this category nonetheless provided guarantees of some state protections. (See Introduction for more detail.) “The Crescent” refers to Islam.

8. A failed putsch, the Skhirat *coup d'état* took place on July 10, 1971. It was the first attempt by the military to overthrow King Hassan II. While the king survived the attack, more than one hundred people were killed.