

## Traveling Anxieties

A graduate of the University of Paris with an advanced degree in hydroelectric engineering from Rome held a position as chief engineer for Azienda Electra in Milan. Sometime between the fall of 1938 and the spring of 1939, the engineer was dismissed from his job. In presenting his credentials to a prospective employer in Cairo, the multilingual, out-of-work engineer, speaking in Arabic, described his experience in Italy as follows: “One day, a law was passed that prohibited foreigners from working in the professions. They began to eliminate all non-Italian employees in manufacturing and commerce. Of course, the law pertained to me, like everyone else.”

The events that I mention above are from neither a memoir nor an oral history. Nor, despite the conclusions one might credibly draw, is the engineer a Jew. The protagonist is, rather, an Egyptian Muslim named Ahmad Khalid, a fictional character in a feature film, *Layla mumtira (A Rainy Night)*, first screened in at the Cinema Cosmograph in Alexandria on March 9, 1939.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there are no Jewish characters in the film. However, the character Ahmad and the scenario described are the product of the imagination the Egyptian Jewish filmmaker Togo Mizrahi.<sup>2</sup> The film features a rising musical star, Layla Murad, also an Egyptian Jew, in her second role on-screen.

Yusuf Wahbi, an actor and theatrical impresario, played the role of Ahmad in the film.<sup>3</sup> In the 1930s Wahbi, already the director of the Ramsis theater troupe, expanded into cinema—as an actor, director, producer, and screenwriter. In 1936 Yusuf Wahbi, in collaboration with his brother Isma‘il, a lawyer by training, opened a studio in Giza.<sup>4</sup> In 1939, when Togo Mizrahi decided to relocate his operations to the capitol, he rented out Studio Wahbi. Mizrahi produced two films in which the studio is identified as Studio Wahbi: *A Rainy Night*; and the comedy *Salafini 3 gineh (Lend Me Three Pounds, 1939)*. Mizrahi continued operating out of the location in Giza as Studio Mizrahi.<sup>5</sup>

Yusuf Wahbi and Togo Mizrahi did not know one another before working together on *A Rainy Night*. In the program for the film, Yusuf Wahbi relates that he was initially reluctant to work with Togo Mizrahi because he had a reputation as a stubborn perfectionist. But their collaboration changed Wahbi's mind about Mizrahi, whom he calls a "first-class gentleman." Wahbi praises Togo Mizrahi for his clarity of vision and the strength of his perception. Wahbi also describes the strong bonds of friendship he forged with Mizrahi over the course of filming, and expresses his hopes that they will work together again. Mizrahi returned the compliments, calling Wahbi, "the greatest actor I have worked with in the cinema."<sup>6</sup>

Yusuf Wahbi and Togo Mizrahi collaborated on three more films over the following four years. Wahbi played opposite Layla Murad in two additional musical melodramas, both released in 1941: *Layla bint al-rif* (*Layla the Country Girl*) and *Layla bint madaris* (*Layla the Schoolgirl*.)

The pair's fourth collaboration, *Al-Tariq al-mustaqim* (*The Straight Road*, 1943), featured a script by Wahbi based on Mizrahi's scenario. But when Mizrahi was preparing to start shooting, Wahbi was under contract with Nahas Films. The competing studio was still upset that Mizrahi had previously refused to loan them Layla Murad for a picture. So Nahas Films initially refused to grant Wahbi permission to appear in *The Straight Road*.<sup>7</sup> The drama over Wahbi's participation in the film fueled the gossip columns for months. Mizrahi contracted with Mahmud Dhu al-Faqar to play the lead, and then broke the contract when Nahas Films relented.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, Wahbi starred in the film. Dhu al-Faqar sued Mizrahi for breach of contract and won the case.<sup>9</sup>

In the musical melodrama *The Straight Road*, Wahbi plays a bank executive, Yusuf Fahmi. Fahmi falls in love with a singer who bilks him out of his wealth. In the film's climax, Yusuf, en route from Cairo to Beirut, drives his car off a cliff along the Palestinian coast; presumed dead, he loses his identity.

Although *A Rainy Night* and *The Straight Road* lack explicitly Jewish content, in this chapter I tease out how they reflect distinctly Jewish anxieties of belonging in Egypt. In *A Rainy Night*, an itinerary from Milan to Cairo to Omdurman both counterposes rising fascism in Europe with Egypt's Levantine and multiracial society, and serves to unsettle the boundaries of the nation in light of Egypt's colonial designs on Sudan, even as British troops continued to occupy Egypt. *The Straight Road*, I argue, reveals Egyptian Jewish anxieties about the impact of Zionist efforts in British Mandatory Palestine on the Jewish future in Egypt.

Following the call of Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite in their article "The Possibility of Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought," I seek to unpack ways Togo Mizrahi's films position themselves within a distinctly Middle Eastern cultural milieu while also engaging in dialogue with European political and cultural developments.<sup>10</sup> My analysis focuses on the ways Togo Mizrahi's films represent a particularly Egyptian idiom inflected with Jewish concerns.

Both *A Rainy Night* and *The Straight Road* send Egyptians beyond the borders, into other Arabic-speaking countries. However, rather than seeking an extraterritorial Pan-Arabism, these itineraries, I argue, serve as a way of testing the boundaries of the nation. Due to censorship regulations, Togo Mizrahi could not take a stand on British colonialism in Egypt. However, as I demonstrate, these two films explore the ambivalences of Egyptian-Jewish identity within and through colonial institutions. My discussion of the films proceeds along three itineraries: Egypt-Italy and Egypt-Sudan in *A Rainy Night*; and Egypt-Palestine-Lebanon in *The Straight Road*. Through my analysis, I examine the films' articulation of Egyptian-Jewish anxieties— anxieties about the place of Jews within the Egyptian nation.

#### ITINERARY I, EGYPT-ITALY: A RAINY NIGHT (1939)

The salacious plot of *A Rainy Night* nearly prevented the film from being released at all. Government censors ultimately relented, following extensive pressure from the local press.<sup>11</sup> In the opening scenes of *A Rainy Night*, Saniya (Layla Murad), a young woman from a wealthy family, falls for a crook, 'Ali (Stephan Rosti), whose primary interest lies in extorting her father's wealth. 'Ali flees the country when the police close in on him, leaving a pregnant, unwed Saniya in a difficult position. Saniya's servant finds a suitable match for her with Ahmad (Yusuf Wahbi), the only son of an ailing mother and deceased father. Ahmad's family, once wealthy, has fallen on hard times. Ahmad trained in Europe as a hydroelectric engineer, but can find no work in Egypt. When he discovers that his mother needs an operation he cannot afford, Ahmad agrees to marry Saniya.<sup>12</sup> Saniya's father prohibits Ahmad from seeking employment, but Ahmad eventually rejects his father-in-law's patronage and finds work as an engineer. When Saniya's pregnancy becomes public knowledge, Ahmad asks for immediate transfer to a project in Sudan. After Saniya gives birth to a baby boy, Ahmad is called back to Cairo for business. He discovers that 'Ali has also returned and is trying to blackmail Saniya. Ahmad confronts 'Ali. The police arrive to arrest 'Ali, and he is killed in the scuffle. Back at home, Ahmad overhears Saniya expressing her love and respect for him, and he reveals his feelings for her. At the end of the film, Ahmad and Saniya can begin their life together.<sup>13</sup>

My analysis of *A Rainy Night* focuses on the portrayal of Ahmad as a means of accessing the films' construction of Egyptian subjecthood. Ahmad's physical mobility from Milan to Cairo to Omdurman indexes a mobility of identity, and its attendant anxieties—here termed "traveling anxieties." I argue that the various forms of mobility in *A Rainy Night*—and the anxieties they provoke—reflect a particularly Levantine-Jewish sensibility. Through my analysis of the character Ahmad, I aim to access the film's mobile construction of Egyptian subjectivity that subverts the binaries of native and foreign, Eastern and Western, working-class and elite.

The film establishes a stark contrast between the moneyed elites and Ahmad's debased circumstances. Near the beginning of the film, on the sun-drenched grounds of a country estate, smartly dressed members of the elite celebrate Shamm al-nasim—the spring festival Mizrahi favors (as mentioned in chaps. 1 and 4). In the shade of a manicured arbor, 'Ali, the criminal, masquerading as a respectable member of the elite, uses sweet talk and lies to insinuate himself with Saniya. By contrast, in the following scene Ahmad makes his first appearance dressed in his auto mechanic's uniform, walking purposefully down the street of a lower-class district after dark. Along the way he greets a pair of Nubian men, as well as two modestly dressed women standing in the doorway to a building. After he disappears into the building, one of the women identifies him as the hardworking, devoted son of their ailing neighbor, Shafiq.

The viewer's initial impression of Ahmad, then, is that of a working-class craftsman. But the apparent binaries established by these two back-to-back scenes do not hold up for long: our initial assumptions about Ahmad's place in the Egyptian social hierarchy are almost immediately called into question when we see him take a seat at a drafting table and begin drawing. A visit by a prospective employer, the director of an engineering firm, elicits Ahmad's education and employment history (related in the opening paragraphs above). The flashback sequence that accompanies this narration depicts Ahmad at his post in Italy, wearing a suit, overcoat, and hat, discussing a project in Italian with one of his employees. He is visually transformed from a member of the Egyptian working classes to a cosmopolitan, European-educated member of the elite professions (fig. 34).

The following scene continues to illustrate the ways that Ahmad straddles two social positions—the one he currently inhabits, and the one he previously occupied. After the director of the engineering firm leaves, Shahata ('Abd al-'Aziz Ahmad), the family's former servant, who has found work as a greengrocer, arrives delivering fresh vegetables. Upon seeing the drafting tools on the table, Shahata implores Ahmad to accept his new station and give up on his dreams of finding work as an engineer.

Rebuffing Shahata's advice, Ahmad shows him the plans for a waterworks project he is designing: "a great engineering project to light up the country and the villages using the power of the waters of the Nile to generate forty thousand horsepower." Ahmad promises a technological revolution to lead the modern Egyptian nation out of darkness into light—out of the darkness of poverty (an apartment lit by kerosene lamps, a crowded alley) into the light of modernity, development, and economic opportunity. Read this way, Ahmad's vision—enabled by his European education—follows a Western narrative equating technological development with enlightenment.<sup>14</sup> Ahmad fits the profile of the interwar Wafd intellectual described by Albert Hourani: a European-educated admirer of Western civilization who seeks to modernize Egypt.<sup>15</sup> In this way, *A Rainy Night* can be read as what Lucie



FIGURE 34. A collage, entitled “The Story of a Self-Made Man,” shows Ahmad (Yusuf Wahbi) in his many guises: devoted son (center left); engineer at a firm in Italy (center right); mechanic (lower right); and engineer for colonial project in Sudan (upper left). Pressbook for *A Rainy Night* (Togo Mizrahi, 1939). Courtesy of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library, American University in Cairo.

Ryzova calls an effendi narrative—a narrative that becomes even more popular in Egyptian cinema during the following decade.<sup>16</sup>

Typical of effendi films, *A Rainy Night* is not a narrative about class mobility; rather, the film maps the restoration of an Egyptian social order disrupted by external forces. Ahmad was of a privileged background and lost his status, but he gets his break when he marries into an elite family. We learn that Shahata’s family had served Ahmad’s family for generations, and that Ahmad and Shahata were raised together “like brothers.” Although the class and educational differences remain—Ahmad promises his benevolence to Shahata once he secures employment as an engineer—Ahmad’s association with this simple, good, honest, plainspoken *ibn al-balad* grants him, by extension, the native authenticity that Shahata embodies.

Ahmad’s difficulty in finding work is never explained; in the flashback sequence documenting his employment history, we are shown only a series of doors closing before him.<sup>17</sup> The Egyptian economy had taken a hit from the global depression. An unknown engineer whose family connections were lost with the death of his father might have a difficult time getting a foot in the door. We also see, in another scene, how Ahmad’s foreign credentials become a source of suspicion rather than providing an advantage.

When Ahmad is working as an auto mechanic, a British customer comes into the garage and asks for him. The customer explains the problem in broken, heavily accented Arabic, and Ahmad responds, reassuringly, in English. A longtime employee of the garage storms into the manager's office and objects that the new employee is attracting all of the customers. He threatens to quit unless Ahmad is fired. The manager summons Ahmad and dismisses him on the grounds that "there is little work and our expenses are high." As Ahmad collects his pay, the disgruntled mechanic quips, "Go back home and work as an engineer."

Ahmad's multilingualism and his education—his training as an engineer—clearly threaten the garage hierarchy. But the particular language of the mechanic's rebuke demands closer examination. The Arabic phrase "*fi baitkum*" ("your home") utilizes the second-person plural, indicating a collective home to which Ahmad is being commanded to return. The collective to which he is presumed to belong remains unstated, but I propose we read this interaction as an echo of Ahmad's previous job loss under the Italian racial laws. In Ahmad's words: "One day, a law was passed that prohibited *foreigners* from working in the professions. They began to eliminate all *non-Italian* employees in manufacturing and commerce. Of course, *the law pertained to me, like everyone else* [my italics]." Fascist anti-Jewish laws promulgated in Italy between September and November 1938 excluded Jewish pupils from state schools, placed limitations on Jewish ownership of enterprises and property, and ordered the expulsion of foreign Jews.<sup>18</sup> Although Ahmad describes the laws as directed against "foreigners," the Italian racial laws were directed only at Jews. When we read these scenes together, we recognize the slippage between "foreigner" and "Jew," and identify the collective with which Ahmad is identified. We are asked, in other words, to read Ahmad's displacements as articulations of Jewish anxieties in the face of the rise of European fascism.

I am not arguing that *A Rainy Night* reflects anti-Jewish sentiment in Egypt. To the contrary, I believe the film, like Mizrahi's preceding works, endorses the liberal ideal of a pluralist Egypt. *A Rainy Night* renders visible—and universal—the threat of fascism, but locates the threat outside its borders. Instead, Mizrahi's art reflects his vision of the nation he inhabits, just as he creates within his films the pluralist nation he wants Egypt to be.

#### ITINERARY II, EGYPT–SUDAN: *A RAINY NIGHT* (1939)

In *A Rainy Night*, Ahmad escapes his complicated domestic arrangement by requesting assignment to a project in Omdurman, Sudan. Shahata, as promised, has accompanied him on the voyage as a personal assistant. The two dress in the garb of British explorers and work out of a hut with drafting tables and files (fig. 35).

Mizrahi's portrayal of Sudan under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium romanticizes the colonial enterprise. Borrowing from common tropes in the metropole, Ahmad's journey from emasculated poverty to effendi masculinity<sup>19</sup> is effected





FIGURE 35. The bottom left image in this collage shows Ahmad (Yusuf Wahbi, left) and Shahata ('Abd al-'Aziz Ahmad, center) in Omdurman; also pictured, Ahmad dressed as an effendi (top right) and Saniya (Layla Murad, bottom right). Pressbook for *A Rainy Night* (Togo Mizrahi, 1939). Courtesy of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library, American University in Cairo.

through the trials of labor in the colony. The portrayal of Sudan in this albeit uncritical colonialist idiom problematizes the widespread political acceptance in interwar Egypt of Egypt's right to rule Sudan (as discussed in chap. 5). The Egyptian experience in Sudan is rendered through a British colonial lens—raising, but ultimately not answering, questions of colonial legitimacy, sovereignty, and territoriality of nation and state. I have been arguing that *A Rainy Night* attempts to define the boundaries of what it means to be Egyptian. The Sudan itinerary, I argue, serves to problematize the definition of Egypt's geographical boundaries.

According to the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of 1899, Sudan fell under joint British and Egyptian administration. In 1924, following the assassination of Sir Lee Stack, the governor-general of Sudan and the commander in chief of the Egyptian Army, Egyptian troops were ordered out of Sudan, and other Egyptians working in Sudan followed.<sup>20</sup> Although Egypt's military involvement in Sudan was effectively terminated in 1924, Egypt's political and economic designs on Sudan remained in force.<sup>21</sup> The 1929 Nile Waters Agreement codified "the natural and historic rights of Egypt to the waters of the Nile," and set a fixed amount Sudan would be permitted to withdraw.<sup>22</sup> Under the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, negotiated and ratified in 1936 and signed in Montreux, Switzerland, in 1937, Britain agreed to terminate its occupation of Egypt, with the exception of

the Suez Canal zone. Two outcomes of the treaty are relevant for the discussion of this film: first, the agreement—never implemented—to reinstate Egyptian troops in Sudan; and second, the abolition of the Capitulations, which had granted special privileges to foreign nationals living in Egypt. Both of these developments raise questions about the boundaries of Egypt—the geographical boundaries of the state and the ethnonational boundaries of the nation—that I maintain are addressed in this film.

In *A Rainy Night*, Ahmad's employment in Sudan reflects Egyptian designs on Sudan and on the waters of the Nile. The location of Ahmad's project in Omdurman, on the west bank of the Nile across from Khartoum, places it near the important and economically successful Al Jazira (Gezira) Project, the centerpiece of which was the Sannar Dam, completed in 1925. The project's network of irrigation canals transformed the region into Sudan's agricultural center.<sup>23</sup> In 1932 the Egyptian parliament agreed to fund the construction of the Jabal al-Awliya' Dam south of Khartoum based on the understanding that "the increased water supplies were designated for [Egypt's] use only."<sup>24</sup> Construction of the dam was completed in 1936, it was first utilized in 1938, and the reservoir reached capacity in 1943.<sup>25</sup> In 1938, an Egyptian, 'Abd al-Qawi Ahmad, was appointed head of the Sudanese Irrigation Service.<sup>26</sup>

But it is pure cinematic fantasy that an Egyptian engineering firm would be contracted on a dam- or canal-building project in Sudan in 1939, or that an Egyptian engineer, even one with European (but not British) credentials like Ahmad, would be tapped to oversee such a project. The British designer of the Al Jazira project was Sir Murdoch MacDonald, who had previously served as adviser to the Egyptian government's Public Works Ministry, and in that capacity was also responsible for the construction of the Aswan Dam in 1921. The engineer overseeing the Al Jazira project, O.L. Prowde, was also British, and the construction was carried out by the British-owned Sudan Construction Company.<sup>27</sup> The Jabal al-Awliya' project was constructed by the firm of Gibson and Pauling.<sup>28</sup> Even during the renewal of waterworks projects in Sudan in the 1930s, according to David Mills, "Egyptian construction companies probably did not possess the requisite technical expertise for such a project at the time."<sup>29</sup>

As discussed in length in chapter 3, one of the characteristics of Mizrahi's Levantine cinematic idiom is a pluralist aesthetic. In order to achieve an inclusive vision of the expanded boundaries and racial identity of the nation, *A Rainy Night* carefully constructs visual parallels between the scenes set in Cairo and those set in Omdurman. There are two dancing scenes in the film that each occupy a different space in the narrative, but that share obvious visual parallels. In the first scene, a dancer (Tahiya Carioca) in a Cairo cabaret of 'Ali's is instructed to distract a Sa'idi patron whom 'Ali wishes to avoid; the camera cuts between the dancer's gaze and that of the male viewer (fig. 36). The second dance sequence takes place in the worker's encampment at the construction site that Ahmad is overseeing in





FIGURE 36. Dancer (Tahiya Carioca) in a Cairo nightclub. Screenshot from *A Rainy Night* (Togo Mizrahi, 1939).

Sudan. When a telegram arrives announcing that Saniya has given birth to a boy, Ahmad's Sudanese workers break into a spontaneous celebration featuring local instruments and a dancer (fig. 37). During the dance, the camera cuts away twice from the dancer (Zaynab al-Sudaniya) to show a male celebrant similarly pleased at watching this second dancer. The dancers wear similar costumes, adorned with shimmering discs. In these scenes, *A Rainy Night* foregrounds cultural practices shared between Cairo and Omdurman.

The camera does, at times, also cast an othering, Orientalist gaze upon Ahmad's Sudanese workers. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mizrahi's films reflect a somewhat ambivalent racial politics. Just as in *Seven O'Clock*, released two years earlier, the inclusion of black actors playing Nubian and Sudanese characters in *A Rainy Night* is somewhat problematic. The Sudanese characters are employed in physical or domestic labor. In one scene, a woman who later breaks into dance brings Ahmad a pot of tea and then sits docilely on the floor next to Ahmad's chair as they watch a camel train pass. Yet, unlike other Egyptian films of the era, where an occasional Nubian actor is cast as a servant, Mizrahi makes an effort to bring groups of Nubian and Sudanese actors to the screen. The Sudanese scenes in *A Rainy Night* are shot at Studio Wahbi in Giza, and the characters are played by Sudanese or Nubians living in greater Cairo. As Eve Troutt Powell notes, "The



FIGURE 37. Dancer (Zaynab al-Sudaniya) in worker's camp in Omdurman, Sudan. Screenshot from *A Rainy Night* (Togo Mizrahi, 1939).

Egyptian colonial experience in the Sudan was an encounter that took place in two territories: in the Sudan and in Egypt itself.”<sup>30</sup> In *A Rainy Night*, the interplay on race asserts a pluralist Egypt as a counterpoint to Italian fascism.

Historians have noted the parallels between racial laws imposed in Italy's African colonies in 1936–37 and the promulgation of racial laws directed against Jews in Italy in 1938.<sup>31</sup> The primary distinction was that the fascist laws in Italy were directed against citizens rather than colonial subjects.<sup>32</sup> In contradistinction to the xenophobia of Italian fascism, Togo Mizrahi, in his pluralist idiom, adopts an Anglo-Egyptian colonial imaginary but utilizes it to render visible racial diversity in the Egyptian metropole.

*A Rainy Night* explores the limits of the Egyptian nation and Egyptian national identity. The itinerary from Milan to Cairo to Omdurman exposes traveling anxieties that I argue should be read in the context of political developments in and between those locales. The Milan itinerary exposes Jewish anxieties about fascism, whereas the Omdurman itinerary raises questions about Egypt's colonial entanglements while simultaneously asserting a multiracial Egypt in contradistinction to the fascist threat. *A Rainy Night* offers reflection on key issues animating Egyptian intellectuals in the 1930s: the film explores the contours and boundaries of Egyptianness; counters the threats to the Egyptian nation posed by fascism; and

renders visible Egypt's colonial designs on Sudan. The film's antifascist sentiment is inflected with a particularly Jewish perspective. The film integrates these Italian-Jewish anxieties into its exploration of the limits of Egyptian identity.

ITINERARY III, EGYPT-PALESTINE-LEBANON:  
THE *STRAIGHT ROAD* (1943)

*The Straight Road* is a melodramatic morality tale tracking a wily female performer's corruption of an upstanding male citizen. While Jewish concerns effectively frame the narrative in *A Rainy Night*, the Jewish anxieties in this 1943 film are presented as an embedded allegory, and play out more in the visual realm than in the script.

The protagonist of *The Straight Road*, Yusuf Fahmi (Yusuf Wahbi), a bank executive, is portrayed as an honest man of moral fiber—stern with his children and strict with his employees. The melodramatic plot maps Yusuf's fall. Contemporaneous critics noted the film's similarities to Josef von Sternberg's *Blue Angel* (1930).

In honor of his promotion to general director, Yusuf throws an extravagant party at the Semiramis Hotel. Early in the evening, he bumps into a beautiful, well-dressed woman and spills her drink. He soon discovers that she is no guest. Rather, she is Suraya (Fatima Rushdi), the singer who is performing that night. In cahoots with her manager and lover, Ibrahim (Stefan Rosti), Suraya ensnares Yusuf in a plot to bilk him of his wealth. Once Yusuf's accounts are depleted Suraya breaks off relations with him, leaving him broke and devastated.

Yusuf, compelled by the bank's board of directors to personally deliver a large quantity of gold to the branch in Beirut, succumbs to temptation: he invites Suraya to run away with him. En route, in the height of a rainstorm, their car veers off a cliff along the coast of Palestine. News of the accident reaches Cairo. Although Yusuf's body is not recovered from the scene of the accident, he is presumed dead. His family and former colleagues mourn his loss.

Meanwhile, Yusuf has made his way to Beirut with Suraya and Ibrahim. The gold is stolen from his room, and he is forced to take a series of increasingly demeaning jobs at the theater where Suraya is booked to perform. Suraya and her entourage leave Yusuf behind when she tours the Levant. Upon their return several months later, a completely debased Yusuf overhears a conversation between Suraya and Ibrahim that reveals the full extent of their deception. Yusuf exacts his revenge and then flees back to Cairo, where he, too, meets his fate.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the banking industry was an economic sector in which the national anticolonial drama was playing out. Muhammad Tal'at Harb, the founder of Studio Misr, the major player in the film industry when *The Straight Road* was released, had founded Bank Misr in 1920, in the midst of the nationalist fervor following the 1919 Revolution.<sup>33</sup> As Joel Beinin has noted, "Tal'at Harb staged his business career as a nationalist drama, portraying himself as the promoter of

national economic development.”<sup>34</sup> A nationalist agenda was inscribed in Bank Misr’s charter, which permitted only Egyptian citizens to purchase shares and serve on the board of directors. Under Harb’s directorship, the bank invested in new companies to compete with the interests of foreign capital and diversify the Egyptian-owned sectors of the economy.

As discussed in chapter 1, under Harb, Bank Misr offered itself as the nationalist alternative to foreign financial institutions and those representing interests of the foreign-minority elites protected by the colonial administration, such as Al-Bank al-ahli al-misri, also known as the Egyptian National Bank, founded in 1898 by Sir Ernest Cassel in partnership with *mutamassir* (Egyptianized) capitalists, chief among them the Greek Constantine Salvagos from Alexandria, and members of the Jewish Suarès family from Cairo.<sup>35</sup>

In *The Straight Road*, Yusuf is employed by a fictional bank called Al-Bank al-watani al-misri. I have chosen render the name of this bank as “the Egyptian Nationalist Bank,” to distinguish it from the actually existing Egyptian National Bank (Al-Bank al-ahli al-misri). This somewhat over-the-top translation—calling the former the “nationalist bank”—also highlights my claims about the pluralist nationalist agenda reflected in Togo Mizrahi’s films.

In 1939 the outbreak of World War II prompted a run on banks, and Bank Misr faltered. Tal’at Harb was forced to resign as the bank’s director, and in the subsequent decade the overtly nationalist rhetoric and public posturing decreased. Suspicions swirled that the “British and the Bank’s Egyptian enemies used the temporary embarrassment of the Bank to oust the nationalistic minded Tal’at Harb and his supporters and to replace them with more amenable leaders.”<sup>36</sup> Although scholars have debunked this conspiracy theory, both Harb’s mystique and Bank Misr’s nationalist symbolism remain intact. Robert Vitalis has demonstrated that, in practice, Bank Misr was no more a promoter of nationalization of the economy than its primary competitors, and all were navigating the intricate play of interests among political parties, the palace, and the British. He writes: “Business and politics in this key period in Egyptian history prove to have been more complicated than capitalists lining up in a tug of war over economic development, one side pulling the economy toward independent industrialization, the other straining to keep the economy locked in the grips of foreign capital.”<sup>37</sup>

In other words, in 1943, when *The Straight Road* was released, the banking industry was a site where the interests of the foreign minorities, colonial powers, and Egyptian nationalists were seen to be in conflict. This unfolding drama will, then, serve as our portal into the lobby of Mizrahi’s fictional “Egyptian Nationalist Bank.” As Yusuf’s driver enters the bank to make a delivery, we see him step into a wide hall with a tiled floor featuring a large Star of David in the center (fig. 38).

The presence of the Star of David is cryptic, since there is no evidence that we are to view this bank as a Jewish enterprise. Jews played actual and imagined



FIGURE 38. Lobby of “The Egyptian Nationalist Bank.” Screenshot from *The Straight Road* (Togo Mizrahi, 1943).

roles in the banking industry (in Egypt and globally). Jews were involved in the founding of both the Egyptian National Bank and Bank Misr: the Suarès family was among the founders of the former, and Joseph Aslan Cattaoui, a Jewish Egyptian citizen, was a founding investor in the latter. But according to Robert Vitalis, by the time this film was made, the influence of Jewish and other minority capitalists was already on the decline.<sup>38</sup>

Mizrahi had previously depicted an explicitly Jewish-owned bank in his 1937 comedy *Al-‘Izz bahdala* (*Mistreated by Affluence*, discussed in chap. 4). Two impoverished friends—Chalom, a Jew; and ‘Abdu, a Muslim—receive a windfall and decide to found a bank, which they call Bank Chalom. The film’s humor rests on the ways the pair are socially, linguistically, and professionally unprepared for their meteoric rise. Ultimately, the market crashes, the bank fails, and the two characters to return to their humble origins. In the 1930s, as discussed in chapters 3 and 4, Mizrahi directed three comedies starring the actor Chalom (Leon Angel) as a lower-class Egyptian Jewish character of the same name. Although both Mizrahi’s comedies and his melodramas tend to revolve around plots of mistaken identity, playing on the shape-shifting nature of Levantines, markers of difference are transparent and factor into the plots of the comedies, but not the melodramas. Angel and his wife, Esther Cohen Angel (screen name: ‘Adalat), retired from cinema in

1937.<sup>39</sup> Along with Chalom's departure from the screen, the overt representation of Jewish characters in Mizrahi's films disappeared.

In Mizrahi's films, difference or diversity is usually signaled by codes other than religion, such as ethnic names or foreign accents. For example, in *A Rainy Night* Ahmad sells his overcoat to a Greek used-clothing dealer: a multilingual sign identifies the merchant as George Mostakinopolo, and he speaks Arabic with a Greek accent.

The characterization of Yusuf in *The Straight Road* bears no distinctive religious markers; his first name is ambiguous, but in the absence of markers of difference, he is presumed Muslim. When Yusuf meets Suraya, she offers him a drink, and he demurs, claiming that he doesn't drink alcohol. Yusuf's moralizing—toward a wayward employee, and toward his family—is drawn from shared cultural values rather than specifically Islamic teachings.

But, by contrast, *The Straight Road* makes a point of explicitly identifying the members of the board of directors at the Egyptian Nationalist Bank as Muslims. In one of the most overt markers of religion in Mizrahi's oeuvre, when the senior executive who sent Yusuf on the mission to Lebanon learns of his protégé's death, he utters the Muslim statement of faith, the *shahada*. As a counterpoint, at a moment of crisis in *A Rainy Night*, Saniya prays for divine intervention to save her from 'Ali's blackmail. Her generically deist entreaty "*Ya rabb. Ya 'adl. Ya qadir 'ala kul shai'. Usturni, ya rabb* [O Lord. O Just One. O All Powerful. Protect me, O Lord]" could be uttered by an Egyptian Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim. In *The Straight Road*, the bank's owners are explicitly marked as Muslim.

How, then, do we understand the presence of a Star of David in the lobby of the bank? In the absence of Jewish characters, I maintain that the Star of David in *The Straight Road* visually signals the embedding of Jewish concerns in the narrative. Recall that Mizrahi is credited with the scenario, and Wahbi wrote the script. Mizrahi employs his creative license in the staging and shooting of the scenes.

Through the bank's entryway one can arrive at an allegorical reading of Yusuf's accident. Yusuf drives the car through torrential rain while Suraya tries to wipe condensation off the windshield. They can't see where they are going, and the car careens off a cliff. The only witnesses are the owners of a small seaside tavern, Abu Elias and Umm Elias, and their employee, Shukri.

Just as one cannot ignore a Star of David in the entry hall of a bank in the film of a Jewish director during World War II, one cannot ignore the significance in 1943 of Palestine as the radical rupture in the itinerary between Cairo and Beirut. The only planned stop along the itinerary depicted on-screen is the customs house in Isma'iliya. Directional signs just beyond the customs-house gate note the distances to Cairo and to the border of Palestine as the camera pans from the former, the point of origin, to the latter (fig. 39). The sign, notably, does not include the distance to their destination, Beirut.





FIGURE 39. Bilingual directional sign near the customs house in Isma‘iliya indicating the distance to Palestine. Screenshot from *The Straight Road* (Togo Mizrahi, 1943).

The accident conveniently provides cover for the later loss of the gold. A telegram sent to the Egyptian Nationalist Bank states that the driver’s body was not found but that a bag and a wallet belonging to Yusuf Fahmi were recovered. The article from the newspaper *Al-Jumhur* that Ibrahim reads out loud in Suraya’s dressing room in Beirut notes that no trace of the body or the gold has been found. The two pieces of news, delivered in Cairo and Beirut, bracket the absence in Palestine, and grant it signification: on the one hand, news of Yusuf’s presumed death, and on the other, revelation of Yusuf’s survival but the demise of his identity.

Exchanging one identity for another, the character formerly known as Yusuf assumes the identity of a successful merchant (*tajir*), ‘Abd al-Rahman Salim. The family name Salim, meaning “safe” or “whole,” underscores the irony of Yusuf’s predicament; he may be “safe”—uninjured, protected from the law—but he is not “whole.” A member of Suraya’s entourage reminds him that now he is a common thief—that if he were caught, he “would lose [his] name and honor.” And Ibrahim assures him, “Yusuf Bey Fahmi died honorably. Then you became someone else. Who will recognize you?”

The only words that Yusuf utters in the scene are “I am uneasy.” This uneasiness is an expression of unarticulated anxiety—the anxiety expressed by some Egyptian

Jewish and other Arab Jewish intellectuals about the role of the Zionist efforts in Palestine to build a Jewish state, and of the growing conflict between Jews and Arabs there, in unsettling their future in their home countries. In one notable example, Rene Qattawi (Cataoui), head of the Sephardi community of Cairo from 1943 to 1946, opposed Zionism and, along with the vice president of the Alexandria Sephardi community, sent a letter to the 1944 World Jewish Congress detailing the grounds for his opposition.<sup>40</sup> *The Straight Road*, through its interrupted itinerary, reveals an anxiety that Palestine is the cliff that Jews may drive off, causing Egyptian Jews to lose their homes, their jobs, and their identity.

#### CODA: LAYLA BINT AL-BALAD

In 1941 Yusuf Wahbi and Layla Murad appeared together on-screen for the second time, in *Layla bint al-rif* (*Layla the Country Girl*). Following the formula of *A Rainy Night*, *Layla the Country Girl* is a musical melodrama featuring a remarriage plot. Yusuf Wahbi plays Fathi, a Cambridge-educated surgeon (*sic*) turned playboy, who returns to his village in Upper Egypt and is pressured into marrying his cousin, Layla (Layla Murad). Upon their return to Cairo he ignores her, going out every night to parties with his friends, and continues carrying on with his mistress, a nightclub dancer.

But Layla's frumpy looks are deceiving. Just as she is about to request a divorce and return to the country, a friend from school—where they received a European-style education—discovers that Layla has returned to Cairo. The friend helps Layla update, modernize, and urbanize her look to turn Fathi's head. Layla—dressed in a ball gown and speaking French—surprises Fathi at an elegant party. Her plan to win Fathi's affections is foiled by the evil 'Izzat (Anwar Wagdi), who has his eye on Layla's substantial inheritance. Fathi falls prey to 'Izzat's deception and ends up divorcing Layla. Fathi later performs emergency surgery on 'Izzat, without knowing the identity of his patient. Grateful to Fathi for saving his life, 'Izzat comes clean and provides evidence of Layla's innocence. The film ends as Fathi races up to the village to proclaim his love to Layla before she is married again. In the final scene of the film, Fathi sweeps Layla off her feet to take her back to Cairo. Layla protests, "First, let me change out of my peasant clothes." Fathi responds, "I have only now understood the value of these clothes."

Layla Murad's character "Layla the Country Girl" is a true native daughter. *Layla bint al-rif* is *Layla bint al-balad*: Layla the country girl is Layla the true Egyptian girl. If an image of Layla in her peasant dress coupled with a sketch of a felucca on the Nile gracing the cover of the film's program (fig. 40) were not sufficient, Mizrahi drives the point home in the concluding scene. Fathi's car comes to a screeching halt in front of Layla's family home, where people are gathered to celebrate her wedding to another man. Before Fathi races inside, the camera captures



FIGURE 40. Pressbook for *Layla the Country Girl* (Togo Mizrahi, 1941). Courtesy of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library, The American University in Cairo.

the decorations. The front of the house is adorned with a string of Egyptian flags. In the shot of Fathi's arrival, a scene that anticipates the couple's happy reunion, the top of the screen is dominated by the repeated image of the Egyptian crescent and three stars. *Layla the Country Girl* thus begs to be read as national allegory. As Eyal Sagui-Bizawi writes, Layla "wins Fathi's heart and shows him the light, demonstrating how it is possible to act according to the 'Western' codes but also to remain loyal to the 'Eastern' Egyptian mores."<sup>41</sup> Egypt, according to the logic of the film, can embrace modernity, French education, and European style and still remain true to what is authentically Egyptian. Layla Murad, the Jewish singer who, like her character, received a European-style education, becomes the face of the modern, authentic Egyptian.

Layla Murad appeared in a series of "Layla" films. Following *Layla the Country Girl*, Layla again costarred with Yusuf Wahbi in another Togo Mizrahi production, *Layla bint madaris* (*Layla the Schoolgirl*, 1941), in which she once again played a young, innocent, and naive character, a girl. Layla Murad's popularity and star power grew exponentially over the course of her collaboration with Togo Mizrahi. In the following chapter, I explore the nature of female stardom in two of Togo Mizrahi's musicals: *Layla* (1942), starring Layla Murad, and *Sallama* (1945), starring Umm Kulthum.