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## Questions about jewish migrations from Morocco

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**Internationale Zusammenarbeit der Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften in  
Wissenschaft und Forschung – “Union für das Mittelmeer”  
New – Hybrid Diasporas  
Diasporas im Zeitalter der Globalisierung  
Inter-/Transidentität – Inter-/Transnation**

**Teilprojekt: *QUESTIONS ABOUT JEWISH MIGRATIONS FROM MOROCCO  
"OPERATION MURAL" (SUMMER 1961): RETURN FROM DIASPORA OR  
FORMATION OF A NEW DIASPORA?***

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*QUESTIONS ABOUT JEWISH MIGRATIONS FROM MOROCCO  
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FORMATION OF A NEW DIASPORA?*

## **1. PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

This project is at its very beginning. It deals with the illegal emigration to Israel of 530 Moroccan Jewish children during the summer of 1961. It is mainly a project about social history, but in a political context which needs to be precised. Moreover, it raises the question of the interactions between politics and society, and the pretension of politics to shape society. Taking these 530 children as a sample, it is my intention to study the sociology of their families and to reconstruct their migratory path all their life.

David Littman, one of the organizers of what he, like many others, considers as a rescue operation, recently provided testimony on the conduct of this operation, which code name for the Mossad was "Opération Mural". Most of the information about this operation comes from Littmann himself. The story of Operation Mural was first recounted by Shmuel Segev in a full-page 1984 article in Maariv and in a chapter of his book, *Operation Yakhin*, which has been added to the book after Littman gave his 1962's report to Shmuel Segev in 1983. This led to a public recognition by President Chaim Herzog at an official presidential reception, followed in 1986 by the Mimouna award which Gisèle and David Littman received in Jerusalem from the then Prime Minister Shimon Peres.

In 2006, David Littman went back to Morocco with two Mossad agents, pretending to be ordinary retired persons, and they made a film in Casablanca on the very site where their action had taken place. The film was completed and shown on the Israeli First channel in 2007. On June 1st, 2008, a special commemorative ceremony was held in President Shimon Peres's Jerusalem residence and one year later, David Littman received from the Israel Intelligence and Commemoration Center the citation to the 'Hero of Silence' Order. David Littman died in May 2012, but his daughter will soon publish the book she was helping him to write before his death, telling his version of the operation in which he and his wife were involved. His wife is a famous historian, known as Bat-Ye'Or (Daughter of the Nile in Hebrew), and she is interested in helping me in this project, giving her own testimony, showing me some archives and providing me with the contacts that I need.

David Littman was not himself a member of the Mossad. In 1961, he was 28 years old, came from a wealthy Jewish family and was a graduate of prestigious Anglican schools. About a year earlier he had married Giselle Orebi, the daughter of an Egyptian

jewish family that had immigrated from Egypt to Britain after the Suez crisis. He did not even know that he was working for the Mossad:

In November 1960, as a British citizen, I was newly established with my wife in Lausanne, Switzerland, where I began reading William Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. It led me to ask the following questions: "What could a Jew, living in a neutral country like Sweden or Switzerland during World War II, have done to help Jews?" "What can I do for Jews in distress right now?"

I knew of the plight of Jews in Arab lands after the birth of Israel, when hundreds of thousands were forced—or felt obliged—to leave their native countries. Like 25,000 others, my wife, Gisèle, had fled Egypt a year after the Suez War in the wake of the Free Officers' Revolt.

I volunteered my services to all international Jewish organizations in Geneva, but there was no enthusiasm until I reached my last door. There, Professor Jacques Bloch, the director of an organization for Jewish children (OSE), had received a visit two days earlier from the Jewish Agency's representative, Naftali Bargiora, who was looking for a volunteer to arrange Swiss holidays for Jewish children from Morocco—and from there to Israel. After meeting Bargiora, I quickly accepted this fascinating mission, to be called Operation Mural (after my code name, "Mural"). (Littman, 2011:575)

Littman's mission took place at a crucial moment. 1961 was a pivotal year in the history of the migration of the Jews from Morocco. From 1948 to the independence of Morocco, during all of the years in which the Jewish Agency's Qadima organization functioned in Morocco, approximately 110,000 Jews had left the country (Bin-Nun, 2010). Since 1956, soon after Morocco's Independence, the gates for emigration were closed: Zionist activity was forbidden, and it became more difficult for a Jew to get a passport to travel abroad. There was a consensus among the Moroccan authorities against the departure of the Jews, whether by refusal to strengthen the Israeli population, by fear of weakening the Moroccan economy or in a will to build a liberal and modern country with equal rights for all citizens. Between 1957 and November of 1961, when the government began to permit Jews to leave under collective passports, slightly less than 30,000 people had left Morocco, and about a third of them through various paths of illegal emigration organized by the Israeli security services. The community itself was divided. The departure of the French officials had represented for many of them a favorable environment and opportunities for promotion, especially in the administration. But in October 1960, receiving a delegation from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Secretary of the Council of Jewish Communities, David Amar, drew a pessimistic picture of the community. According to him, nearly 80% of the 240,000 members of the community wanted to emigrate; 60% wanted to leave immediately, and needed help to realize their project. The remaining 20% still hoped to stay there, but did not exclude the possibility of a departure (Yigal Bin Nun, 2009)

In 1961 the chain of events seemed to precipitate the choice for Moroccan Jews: on January 3rd, Gamal Abdel Nasser came to Morocco to attend the Arab League

conference in Casablanca. His visit sparked a wave of incidents which increased the anxiety of the community. On January 11, the boat *Pisces* (Egoz) charged with emigrants sank with 45 people on board. This shipwreck highlighted the dangers of illegal emigration and led to a wave of international protests. A month later, on the occasion of the memorial of their disappearance, leaflets were distributed against the authorities, which led to several arrests and the collapse of the Israeli clandestine network in Morocco, *the Misgeret*. On February 26th, King Mohammed V died just days after receiving the community leaders to listen to their concerns and reassure them. His son Moulay Hassan was crowned king in his place.

Since 1960, indirect talks had been initiated between the Israeli authorities and the heir to the throne, and even with the leftist leader, Mehdi Ben Barka (Bin-Nun, 2008). According to Yigal Bin Nun (2009), the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs was progressively convinced to consider financial compensation to the departure of the Jews, as it had been done in Iraq and Romania. In early May 1961, Isser Harel, the Director of the Mossad, decided to entrust to Alex Gatmon, chief of the *Misgeret* in Morocco, the mission to contact Jewish intermediaries to start negotiations with the Moroccan authorities. By the end of July, with the collaboration of Sam Benazeraf and Dr Isaac Cohen Olivar, he was negotiating with Abdelkader Benjelloun (Minister of Labour) and Moulay Ali Alaoui (the King's cousin and brother-in-law) and came to a compromise agreement. An economic clause was planned: half a million dollars would be paid as a down payment for the emigration of 50,000 Moroccan Jews to Europe, and then, 100\$ per capita (250\$ after the 50,000th). A humanitarian association, The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) would be the façade for the Israeli emissaries. The Moroccan authorities demanded that the Jews leave Morocco as entire families and not as single and selected migrants, as was the case since 1953. Furthermore, Alex Gatmon refused to dissolve his network "*Misgeret*" in Morocco, and clandestine emigration kept on until the end of the negotiations. Raphaël Spanien, the HIAS representative in Morocco, negotiated with colonel Oufkir collective passports issue by the Ministry of Interior. By the end of November 1961, Operation Yakhin had begun. From then till 1964, 97,005 Jews left Morocco with the tacit agreement of the Moroccan authorities.

Operation Mural took place during the negotiation of Operation Yakhin. Let's go back to Littman's narrative:

Contacts by the Mossad with the new king's representatives were only beginning when I reached Casablanca on March 16, 1961, as a delegate of an international children's organization, OSE, renamed OSSEAN [Oeuvre Suisse de Secours aux Enfants de l'Afrique du Nord]. [...] I arrived in Casablanca on March 16 and Gisèle on the 31, and in early May I brought out our five-month-old daughter, Diana. Our family "cover" as a normal Christian family was now complete, with me as OSSEAN's emissary. We stayed at the Anfa, the city's prime hotel, and I soon developed contacts with key people in administrative circles, among them a senior official in Morocco's security services. Concurrently, I had clandestine meetings with my "contacts," Gad Shahar and Pinhas Katzir, and, on the last evening of Operation Mural, July 23, 1961, with the head of the Mossad

in Morocco, Alex Gatmon. I also worked with members of the *misgueret*, young Jews recruited to help their community to immigrate to Israel.

Our goal was clear: to obtain government authorization for any Moroccan children to attend summer camps in Switzerland. With the assistance of the *misgueret*, I began drawing up lists for collective group passports as the Moroccan authorities preferred, rather than for individual child passports (as preferred by the Jewish Agency). The authorities agreed to prepare a list of Muslim children from families of the Martyrs of the Moroccan independence. Between June 26 and July 24, 1961, 530 Jewish children, some as young as seven, left for Switzerland in five convoys and later reached Israel.

Operation Mural was soon followed by Operation Yakhin, in which nearly 100,000—entire families, the young and the old—reached Israel between 1962 and 1964, using the same agreed system of “collective passports,” this time with the king’s approval, after negotiations with the Mossad.” (Littman, 2011:577-578)

### **1.1 Object of project research**

A great deal of mystery still surrounds Operation Mural, and not only because it was a matter of secret services. Of course, one of my first tasks will be to reconstruct the scenario of the operation, to collect and examine the archives and the different testimonies and accounts of its various actors - if such documents exist or if these actors are still alive - in order to understand the exact role played by each one, and what he knew or ignored about the operation in which he or she was involved. Furthermore, the simultaneity between negotiations with the Moroccan authorities on the one hand, and the progress of operation Mural on the other hand, which seemed to have been conducted under the authority of a single person, Alex Gatmon, raises further questions about the connections between them. And from that point of view, the reconstruction of the actors' strategies may be more difficult.

As Yigal Bin Nun asserted, the pursuit of illegal immigration during the negotiations was, for the Mossad, a sign of defiance towards the Moroccan authorities. Could it have been a way to exert pressure on them? could it have been a way to prove the determination of the families, ready to send their own children with the risk of not seeing them again for a long time? or was it, if the negotiations failed, to make the Moroccan authorities responsible for the prolonged separation of families once the children were abroad? The Moroccan authorities could have feared an international campaign on the subject of the freedom of movement such as the one which was launched after the sinking of the *Pisces*.

Moreover, the Moroccan authorities were perhaps more aware of what was going on than Littman thought, and it would be interesting to try to reconstruct what was known or suspected, and at which level. In the film, Litman admits that there was a moment when he was very afraid when Si Aloui Tajeddine, khalife of Casablanca’s first district (including the Mellah), on seeing the names of the children, recognized Jewish names, and suspected some kind of conspiracy. Littman attributes to a personal relationship that he had established with Muhammad D’Khissy, an

official at Casablanca's prefecture, the fact of having been protected, but it is not impossible that the order came from above: Muhammad D'Khissy was in fact a senior official in the internal security apparatus. Could this operation have been a way, both for the Mossad and for the Moroccan authorities (but on separate tracks), to check the reactions of Moroccan civil servants (from the Ministry of Interior to the border police) to what looked like a semi-clandestine emigration? Was it a way of testing procedures such as collective passports which would then be established for Operation Yakhin? That's what Littman suggests in his last paragraph.

But the most important issue is to try to understand what the families knew about this operation, what they had been told and what they believed. Were the parents aware that they were sending their children for a long-term emigration to Israel, and not to a summer camp in Switzerland? It is highly probable, because they received the registration fees from the Misgeret the day before they had to pay for them. But for security reasons, complete silence was required concerning the real destination of children. As for the children themselves, it is quite certain that they did not know very much about their real destination, nor the fact that their journey was supposed to be permanent. Some of them might be questioned by the police - as it happened indeed - and they were not even to think of the word Israel, in order not to pronounce it. And this point is perhaps the most important blind spot of this history, because we have to imagine the fears behind this deep silence and at the same time the confidence it implied towards the institutions which organized the migration and were in charge of it.

In that sense, Operation Mural could have been a means of legitimizing Operation Yakhin before the Jewish public opinion, or at least before the leaders of the community, who were still divided. The project of a collective migration to Israel became necessary because Operation Mural proved that some Jewish families from Morocco were insecure to the point that they saw no future but outside the country, and that they were ready to defy the Moroccan authorities by leaving it secretly, assuming the risks of clandestinity for their children and for themselves. What was the real cause of these fears? The sociological survey might reveal the existence of a feeling of a changing attitude towards the Jews in Morocco and anxiety about the future in that country, the repercussions of the extermination of the European Jewry could have made the Moroccan families realize that the worst was possible; it might also reveal the role of young European and Zionist agents in the diffusion of those fears. It could also point out the desire to escape from the common misery, which was true of many Moroccans at that moment, especially in the countryside and in the Atlas. Operation Mural would give the children an opportunity to a better life than their parents; operation Yakhin would allow them to join a migratory path at a moment of great economic transformations in Morocco, and of mistrust of the ability of the regime to face them. The confidence in the organizers of Operation Mural also had a political meaning, which perhaps the families didn't realize at the moment, but proved later to be a transfer of allegiance.



## 1.2 Research goal, methodology and theoretical approach

This research would be a way of getting out of the debate on the push-pull factors in migrations, and of putting the migration projects of the families at the center of the analysis. It would also be a way to take their strategies and their migratory histories (before and during the 50 years following Operation Mural) as a starting point, and to analyze the Jewish migrations from Morocco as a social fact and not from an ideological point of view. As one of the organizers of a big conference in Essaouira in 2010 on the Jewish and Muslim migrations in the Maghreb, (Abécassis, Dirèche, Aouad, 2012), I was able to realize that this history was an extremely sensitive one, still dividing historians and witnesses of that period between those who considered these migrations as an opportunity to realize the old dream of coming back from diaspora to Eretz Israel, and those who regarded them as an uprooting, the latter group looking for responsibilities either in the way of the Arab nationalism, or of Zionist activism. This history is too often written from an external and overlooking point of view, neglecting the actors and trying to legitimate or otherwise to denigrate the actions of the politicians.

It is my intention to take into account the social variables of this sample, such as residence, social background, education level, gender, in order to understand who were these children and their families. Mrs Littman - Bat Yeor - told me that they had kept lists and addresses of all of them, which could be the starting point of this inquiry - Geneva is not so far away from Lyons. But this survey will also have to ask questions about what has become of these children. David Littman tells that “[In 1986], a meeting was arranged in Tel Aviv for us to meet 120 of “our” children. It was an incredibly moving experience” (Littman, 2011:575). This means that at least a quarter of the sample stayed in Israel. Would it be possible to pick up the trail of the rest of the children and to reconstruct their trajectories? Where did they settle in Israel? Was Israel a final destination or a step in a world-wide migration ? The survey will have to combine a statistical approach with life narratives, focusing on the migration projects, the conditions of the departure, how the families were able to regroup in Israel, on the sense of belonging and construction of identities.

In linking up the political and the social levels, this work could be the extension of the reflection engaged in my previous works on the community building process in contemporary Egypt and the emergence of nation-states in the Middle East. It also raises issues that are central to any Diaspora: the exercise of the monopoly of legitimate violence, the ways of building communities, national groups and their norms, the break in transmission induced by modernity and resilience.

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