



**HAL**  
open science

# My landscape is mute: artefacts lost and left behind by Egyptian Jews

Michèle Baussant

► **To cite this version:**

Michèle Baussant. My landscape is mute: artefacts lost and left behind by Egyptian Jews. *Mobile Culture Studies - The Journal*, 2022, The Materialities of Be-longing: Objects in/of Exile across the Mediterranean. halshs-03506883

**HAL Id: halshs-03506883**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03506883>**

Submitted on 26 Dec 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



## “My landscape is mute”

### Artefacts lost and left behind by Egyptian Jews

Michèle Baussant

**Abstract** This article focuses on artefacts lost and left behind by Egyptian Jews after their departure from Egypt. It shows how these material artefacts and their preservation, especially those with a collective dimension such as synagogues or objects of worship, play a key role in the forms of continuity of the Jews of Egypt in the diaspora. Like a ‘phantom limb’, they often take on more importance and space than the objects carried into exile. The article also aims to grasp why the Jewish past sticks to the present, inside and outside Egypt, seemingly more than the Greek, Italian or Shawam (Syro-Lebanese) ones. This persistence is due to a double dynamic: one, the eagerness of certain Egyptian Jews to maintain this heritage in situ and to gain recognition for the Jewish contribution to Egyptian culture and history, and two, the diverse, asymmetrical interests, often resulting from different if not opposite aims, which lead to the valorisation of this heritage in Egypt. To highlight this dynamic, I will refer to an event in Alexandria two years ago, which reveals contradictory forces, diverse interests and convergences, and the central role of the objects and materials left behind in this process.

**Keywords** Egypt, Jews, memory, heritage, silence

**DOI** 10.25364/08.7:2021.1.8



Many years ago, when I began studying Egyptian Jews, I was struck by how they portrayed their life in Egypt coming to an end and the dwindling of their population there. People I met referred, of course, to the political contexts that had shaped their destiny and the vanishing of the multi-millennial Jewish presence in Egypt: 1948 and the creation of the state of Israel, 1956 and the Suez war, the Jews' involvement in communist movements that led to their expulsion, the sequestration of their property and the loss of jobs. Most striking, though, was their depiction of a world where their families and friends disappeared suddenly from one day to the next, usually leaving everything behind: flats full of objects but devoid of people, half-empty schoolrooms, closed offices, streets that changed their demographic composition, shops with different owners.

A world that was once seen and then no longer seen, but which has left behind some traces, such as buildings, objects and pictures. What has gone missing? Is it that those who have disappeared no longer exist? Or have they just vanished from view? No longer being or not being seen are two ways of being absent. However, absentees can still resurface and return, unless they are only ghosts whose stories we would no longer remember were it not for the traces and artefacts they left behind.

Materialities are often viewed as points of stability and frames of memory. Studies of immigrants frequently emphasise what they take with them, such as the emblematic symbol of the house key kept by the Palestinians. They give a specific value to these kept objects, although they sometimes stem not from a specific form of attachment but from pragmatic considerations. Most conclude that they reveal a form of continuity in an interrupted human life and that ‘living matter and its history bestow on the object a presence, which activates its entire surroundings’ (Borcherdt 2021). The objects left behind are of little concern, seldom examined by research scholars who focus on what is taken when people have to flee a country. However, as Maurice Halbwachs (1941) pointed out, these too can turn into powerful forms of attachment, memory and belonging. These objects sometimes constitute the *topoi* of memory, especially when they relate to evocations of the house and intimate spaces: they convey, as in Elias Khoury's book *Bab el Shams* or Jacques Hassoun's texts, the feeling that ‘everything had remained as it was, each thing had remained in its place. Even the clay pitcher...everything had remained precisely in its place, except that these people arrived and took our places’ (Khoury and Samara 2000).

#### Coming back to the apartment on Fouad Street

You arrive at this apartment on Fouad Street (what do they call it today? They told you, but you forgot), and you recognise everything. Your mother's family used to live in a place like this. Yes, you recognise everything. The broken-down elevator, the need to go through the next building (we used to say next door) to the roof (the terrace), to go down one floor under the guidance of the janitor (doorman), an old man who is almost blind. You enter what will be your home for a week. Everything is there. The furniture protected by slipcovers. The Venetian chandeliers. The succession of salons. And in the kitchen...you make a stunning discovery: a Frigidaire brand fridge. A real one. You are overwhelmed. You are really back home. And your uncle Joseph and your Nona Giulia didn't die in Milan. They just went away for a while. —Jacques Hassoun (Hassoun 2001, 60).

This contribution focuses on these lost and left behind materialities<sup>1</sup>. But not just any objects: a bronze plaque on a synagogue bench, a tombstone with a name endorsing the physical location of the person who is there but no longer there, a name in a Ketubah or a Mohel book. A name that we carry with us, that we give and pass on. A plaque or a stone with a name that marks the presence of an absence, related to a constellation of objects – identity papers and photos – left behind or taken with us. These leftover objects embody and identify a specific person and community belonging, both personal and collective. They bind individuals to what and who they are.



Image 1: Bronze plaque bearing the name Youssef Ades in the Vitali Madjar Temple in Cairo, February 2020, Egypt. © Michele Baussant

I took this picture of a bronze plaque on a deserted synagogue bench bearing the name and surname of an Egyptian Jew in February 2020, in the Vitali Madjar Temple, one of the few remaining synagogues in Cairo. I have never met Youssef Ades, nor Vita Habibi Pacha, Nissim Rasson, Herman Hornenstein, Aboud Tabouch, or any of those whose names, sometimes half-faded, remain on the benches of the synagogues that still exist in Alexandria and Cairo. Maybe Youssef Ades is still alive. Perhaps his name is written on a bench in a synagogue in Brooklyn, Milan, or wherever, duplicating his trace and presence in his many paths of exile: I like to imagine him travelling from Syria to Egypt and then somewhere in Europe or North America. These plaques display the name of the donor who reserved the seat, often men from prominent families. They also recount another history of displacement to Egypt, and of the former belongings of those *halabi* Jews, *urfali* Jews, *uthmani* Jews or ‘Schlecht’ who came to the

1 This work was funded by the French Ministries of Europe and Foreign Affairs and Higher Education, Research and Innovation and the Convergences MIGRATIONS Institute, led by the CNRS, under the reference ANR-17-CONV-0001.

country between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They reveal the sedimentation of migrations and exiles, bearing witness to the genealogies and circulation of Jewish families in Egypt, the Ottoman empire and beyond. There are also anonymous benches, silent on the fate of those who have not sat there for decades. And there is nothing about the women, either.

Anyone entering the synagogues today is confronted with the presence/absence of the Jews whose names on the benches embody the ghosts of a bygone era in Egypt. Often located in the heart of urban areas, these material traces of Jewish presence, one of the country's stable identities, stand as faded monuments to the country's ancient Jewish history or remain invisible, hidden or blurred into the landscape over the long term. Their access is closely controlled, if not entirely blocked.<sup>2</sup> As a result, they are seldom accessible to the Egyptian population and the Egyptian Jews in the diaspora. In fact, walking the streets of Cairo or Alexandria today, it is almost impossible to imagine that more than 80,000 Jews lived in the country only a few decades ago. Indeed, the end of British imperial domination over Egypt produced a reduction of histories and cultures and led to the absence of whole segments of peoples, social spaces, languages, religions and relationships in a few decades. Jews almost disappeared from Egypt, and the landscape they had shaped was reinvested, transformed or destroyed after their departure, which has been described as neither totally voluntary nor wholly forced. As a result, it is barely recognisable to those who attempt to come back for a visit, eroding the tangible connections with the country the Jews once claimed as their own.

However, the Jews in the diaspora still find it challenging to separate the country from themselves. They came out of Egypt, but they have been unable to take Egypt out of themselves. This chiasmic relationship between them and the country makes the idea of their history being totally forgotten more painful, without it being clear what this forgetting means: absence of memory, lack of discourse, absence of knowledge or indifference, or perhaps apathy. However, the prolonged absence of concern over the Jews' departure, or even representations of it in the public sphere, does not mean forgetfulness or a complete void, as evidenced by the resurgence today of crossed and parallel social constructions of the presence and absence of the Jews, both in Egypt and abroad: on social media and in newspapers, cinema, official heritage initiatives, publications and exchanges between Egyptians and Egyptian Jews on the internet and via Facebook. People whose voices had been silenced – notably the Jews in the diaspora or Egypt – and others who were silent for reasons other than the coercion of remembrance – such as the younger Egyptian generations – are showing curiosity in the few remaining Jewish traces and artefacts in Egypt. Some voices decry the abandonment and neglect of Jewish heritage, invoking the anti-Israeli feelings of the Egyptian population. At the same time, other Egyptian monuments, Coptic and Muslim or related to the other groups of the contemporary period (such as the Greeks, the Syro-Lebanese people, the Italians...), have also deteriorated and been abandoned or destroyed. Others express nostalgia for a past time seen through the critical lens of the present, before the abdication of King Farouk, when 'Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together' and 'they were all Egyptians': a 'cosmopolitan' Egypt which accepted the other, whatever their colour, religion or nationality.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the silence also turned into a vehicle of memory used by various groups for different purposes.

2 Before 2011, during my fieldwork in Egypt, one required a passport and the agreement of the president of the Jewish community to enter a synagogue, which was kept locked if a member of the community was not present.

3 <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/767392> (accessed 26 February 2022)..



I could address the Jewish past and its legacy in Egypt and in the diaspora in many ways. Nevertheless, this article stems from issues I observed during my extensive fieldwork,<sup>4</sup> which I did not understand at the time. I have some specific questions in mind here: why does the Jewish past stick to the present, inside and outside Egypt, seemingly more than the Greek, Italian or Shawam (Syro-Lebanese) pasts do? Why is this heritage reduced to synagogues, buildings, religious (mostly Rabbanite) artefacts and cemeteries? And why is it defined only as a ‘cultural heritage’ that shapes a narrow picture of Jewish identities and contributions to Egyptian culture?<sup>5</sup> How has this past become something that different people want and can relate to?

The current concern about the Egyptian Jewish past involves a double dynamic: one, the eagerness of certain Egyptian Jews to maintain this heritage in situ and to gain recognition for the Jewish contribution to Egyptian culture and history, and two, the diverse, asymmetrical interests, often resulting from different – if not opposite – aims, which lead to the promotion of this heritage in Egypt. To highlight this dynamic, I will refer to an event in Alexandria two years ago, which made me realise that the long-noted silence on the Jews was not a void, but a fragile surface. It reveals contradictory forces, diverse interests and convergences, and the central role of the objects and materials left behind in this process.

## I A Place Where the *Nefesh* ‘Blows’ Again

In mid-February 2020, as part of my fieldwork, I followed an official delegation of Jews of Egyptian origin<sup>6</sup> from at least ten different countries, including Israel but mainly from Europe, who travelled to Alexandria and Cairo under the auspices of the Association Internationale Nebi Daniel, which works to preserve Jewish sites in Egypt. There was also another smaller delegation of fifteen people from Israel, linked to the first one, but organised by an Israeli association, the International Association of Jews from Egypt. This delegation was initially composed of 35–40 people from Israel, but more than half of them were denied visas to enter Egypt.

Both delegations came to perform the Hanukat Habayit (rededication) ceremony of the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue on 14 February;<sup>7</sup> the synagogue had undergone an extensive renovation costing US\$4 million after its roof collapsed in 2016. Accompanying the two Jewish delegations were people such as ambassadors and consuls (from the US and France), Rabbi Andrew Baker of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), Roberto Marini, the current president of the Alexandria Jewish Community, Rabbi Yosef Nefoussi, son of the last chief rabbi of Alexandria,

---

4 This article is based on multi-sited fieldwork conducted in Egypt and in the various places where Egyptian Jews have settled. However, I have to point out the asymmetry of the data collected during my fieldwork. I met many Jews from Egypt in the diaspora (France, Italy, the UK, Switzerland, Canada, the US, and even Turkey) and in Israel. Fieldwork in Egypt around this issue was more complicated, especially among the Egyptian population.

5 Is it a statement made by the Egyptian Jews themselves, or the Egyptian state, which links culture and religion to preserve its national heritage?

6 Approximately between 165 and 180 people, depending on the source.

7 In Egyptian newspaper articles announcing the rededication, the synagogue was presented as dating back to the fourteenth century, before being destroyed by the French in 1798. The current Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue was built in the nineteenth century and could once accommodate 1,000 people. The complex also used to include ‘a school (currently leased to the city), community offices (including the Rabbinate), and a social hall (now sold), as well as apartments and stores rented out for income’. A full description is available at <http://archive.diarna.org/site/detail/public/49/> (accessed 16 September 2021).



Rabbi Avraham Dayan, of Egyptian descent and chief rabbi of Livorno, Rabbi Bueno, a hazan of Tunisian descent, and Ariel Cohen, the director of the Israeli orchestra Firqat al Noor.<sup>8</sup>

No Egyptian officials attended the Hanukat Habayit. In fact, on Friday 10 January 2020, the Egyptian government held an inauguration ceremony for the synagogue separately from the Jews and with no official Israeli representative present – a ceremony designed as a ‘patrimonial’ event. The Egyptian minister of tourism and antiquities, Khaled al-Anani, officially opened the temple after two years of restoration and renovation in the presence of Magda Haroun,<sup>9</sup> the former minister of antiquities and Egyptology and the deputy minister of antiquities for engineering affairs. The Egyptian newspapers reported that this first ceremony was attended by around 20 ambassadors and 20 ministers.<sup>10</sup> Some of the newspaper articles, some of which appeared in the ‘tourism’ section, praised the vastness of the temple, which could host 700 worshippers. They provided rather approximate information on the existence of between 50 and 63 ancient copies of the Torah, which were of ‘great religious and archaeological value’, and a collection of books ‘dating from the 15th century AD’. They provided a detailed description of the building’s interior: the two floors with the women’s section, the library, the marble boxes for collecting donations and the private offices that formerly supplied services to community members. There was no mention of the community archives that the synagogue had housed only a few years ago. The articles also repeatedly stated that the synagogue would ‘no longer be a place of worship’ because there were hardly any Jews left in Egypt.

The delegates stayed in Egypt for a week. Group tours were organised under high security from the hotels where they were staying – mainly the Cecil Hotel, the Metropole Hotel and the Windsor Hotel in Alexandria. They moved under police and sometimes military escort, with masked and heavily armed men, as well as snipers posted on the surrounding rooftops, controlling all movement. The members of the delegation had received several internal guidelines before their visit: do not post anything on social networks until Saturday evening for Alexandria and until Tuesday evening for Cairo; do not cluster together when walking in groups of more than four people; exit the synagogue in small groups; and wear a cap or a hat outside, rather than a kippah. Each event was accessible only with a personal badge provided by the organisers.

The high level of security made other visits, such as visits to their former neighbourhoods, homes and Egyptian friends, difficult, but not impossible. Fateen, who was an engaging guide, took care of families’ and individuals’ requests to identify specific graves in cemeteries.

The delegates who arrived on Wednesday night were able to start their visit as ‘ordinary’ tourists with visits to the Shawkafa Catacombs, the Roman Amphitheatre, the Abou El Abbas Mosque, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Patriarchate Museum, accompanied by English and French guides. On Thursday evening, members of the delegation (except those following the Kashrut) met for dinner at the Greek Yacht Club. On the morning of Friday 14 February, buses and minivans carried all the visiting delegates to Alexandria’s two main Jewish cemeteries, Chatby and Mazarita, which were poorly maintained despite six full-time gardeners being

8 The two-day tour encompassing the various events organised in Alexandria, including the ceremony, were subject to the payment of fees, covering contributions to the cost of the Mezzuzot, the commemorative Kippot, the rabbis’ fees and travel expenses, the invitation of special guests, coaches for the Cairo synagogue tours, meals and synagogue fees levied by the Cairo community.

9 Represented by the press as ‘the head of the Jewish community in Egypt’.

10 <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1456194> (accessed 20 February 2021)



on the community's payroll. Several weeks before the visit, and thanks to donations and financial assistance by members of the Egyptian Jewish community worldwide, the cemeteries had been cleaned up. Some 40 tonnes of rubbish were removed from the two Jewish cemeteries in Alexandria, revealing the extent of the damage there: smashed or stolen marble, many graves unrecognisable, indecipherable or with erased names, and covered with dog excrement. The morning of 14 February was busy: on arrival at the Chatby Cemeteries, and afterwards at the Mazarita Cemetery, a rabbi said a collective Kaddish prayer. Then people looked for their loved ones' graves, wandering through the paths, some of which were impassable, shouting when they happened upon a familiar name or family member, commenting, cleaning, taking pictures, becoming silent, stopping to light a candle, and praying. The cemetery was theirs, albeit surrounded and protected by numerous police and military personnel.

Then at 2.30 pm, the delegation went under escort to the synagogue for the rededication ceremony. Although the synagogue is in a popular shopping area, the street on which it stands and those adjacent to it were closed to traffic, with police strictly controlling access to them. Even so, the delegates had to line up at the entrance of the synagogue and submit to a security check and high-security procedures to enter. Once in the courtyard, they only had to look up to see the snipers posted on the roofs around them.

Rabbi Andrew Baker of the American Jewish Committee, who has been involved with restoring Jewish sites in Egypt for the past ten years, started the official Nebi Daniel rededication ceremony by attaching a new mezuzah to the synagogue door as people crowded around to watch. Full of emotion, they then followed the procession of men moving forward under a tallit with 12 of the Torah scrolls remaining in the synagogue. People then moved inside the synagogue, which they had only been able to see in passing before the beginning of the ceremony: the benches had been moved and some of them placed in a circle; holes had been drilled in the ground and covered with transparent glass to allow visitors to see the foundations, as in a museum or archaeological site. The lights and colours evoked images of some oriental churches, while on the women's first floor, the layers of paint had been applied too quickly and the wall already sported damp spots. Some lamented the changes and the lack of 'soul'. Others were moved, marvelling at the lively atmosphere. And others looked at the names on the wooden benches, hoping to find those belonging to their relatives.

The ceremony that took place before Shabbat had several highlights: Roberto Marini, the new president of the Alexandria Jewish Community, greeted those assembled there in both Arabic and Italian; the attendant (of Nubian origin) of the synagogue received a medal for his service from the Egyptian government; one of the founders of the Nebi Daniel Association performed the Shehecheyanu blessing; Levana Zamir, president of the Union of the Jews from Egypt in Israel, read a Bracha in Hebrew for the state of Israel; and the orchestra Firqat al Noor played mizmorim (liturgical songs) accompanied by a classical Arabic violin.

At 5.25 pm, the Kabbalat Shabbat started. After the service, those not strictly observing the Shabbat laws were taken to a dinner at the Fish Market. The following day, on Saturday, the Shabbat service started at 9.30 am, and men were requested to bring their Tallits and prayer books. Then the delegates were taken for lunch at a famous and popular former Jewish restaurant Binyamin, now named Mohamed Ahmed. In the afternoon, at 2.30 pm, the French consul invited the French nationals in the delegation for ice cream and coffee at the French consulate,



while the others went to visit their former homes. On Saturday evening, a few of the delegates left the country; most others joined the Cairo programme, escorted by police and army personnel, all masked and heavily armed.

## II A Still-Vivid Memory in the Silence

In Cairo, except for those who decided to visit family and friends, the delegation was drawn into a never-ending series of visits to synagogues and cemeteries: the synagogue and yeshiva of the Rambam (Moses ben Maimon), the Moussa Dar'i synagogue (Karaites), the Hanan synagogue (also known as Etz Hahaim), the Shaar Shamayim (also known as the Adly Street synagogue), the Ben Ezra synagogue, the Bassatine Cemetery, the Meir Einayim or Meir Biton synagogue in Maadi and the Vitali Madjar synagogue in Heliopolis, a Karaite cemetery restored as part of an international programme, amidst buildings and self-constructed spaces, all guided by an Israeli professor of Middle-Eastern studies. Once again, we could walk between the benches of the synagogues, which were opened specially for us, and read the names, sometimes half-erased, on the wood. But neither in Alexandria nor in Cairo were we allowed access to the community archives, which had been given to the Egyptian government by the current president of the Jewish community in Cairo.

None of the synagogues 'came back to life' during the tour as on the Shabbat in Alexandria, where many might believe the Nefesh had never left the place. Nevertheless, the visits often provoked joy, sharing of memories, curiosity, especially in the Karaite synagogue with which most people were not familiar, and religious activities: the Rambam synagogue and yeshiva (Moses ben Maimon) provoked many memories of travelling and sleeping there to make a vow to the Rambam as children. When visiting the Ben Ezra synagogue, the only synagogue open to tourists, and which hosts the Cairo genizah, some group members started to perform a collective prayer, singing in the synagogue in front of the Egyptian visitors and other tourists. Surprised and amused, the visitors filmed the scene, much to the embarrassment of the Egyptian police, who responded promptly by asking people to turn off their phones and to evacuate the place. Sometimes guards accompanied individuals and timidly pointed out architectural elements. Others who had lived during the Jewish presence spontaneously joined the delegation in singing Jewish religious songs in the synagogue's courtyard. However, the tour also aroused astonishment, weariness and dissatisfaction among some Jews who wondered why they were visiting so many religious buildings which, in the past, they had frequented only during the main holidays.

During the trip, the Jews witnessed the abandonment and degradation of the Jewish and Egyptian sites, and their transformation or erasure from the landscape. Many were speechless in front of the desolation of the Bassatine Cemetery, which is known as the second-oldest Jewish cemetery after the Mount of Olives,<sup>11</sup> and where very few Jewish graves remain.

Nevertheless, the rededication ceremony was a way of reaffirming the Jews' long history in Egypt. Although many were traditionalists in Egypt, they took advantage of this tour to revive

---

11 Only around 1,200 graves remain at the Bassatine Cemetery, and most of these bear only partial names, available at: <http://bassatine.net/bassamap.php> (accessed 16 September 2021). See also Aaron Kiviat's indexing of 1,683 names and 252 partial names at the Bassatine Cemetery, available at: <http://blog.teamwarneford.co.uk/> (accessed 28 February 2022).



the life and soul of the community – both living and dead – whose only visible traces are now associated with these places. They formed a minyan for the cemeteries and synagogues where they prayed. Thus, reinstating a Jewish presence in Egypt for even this short time allowed a substantial equivalence to be recreated between Egypt and the Jewish community.

Being in Egypt also provided an opportunity to speak with Egyptians and to remember together. However, the delegates were often disappointed that so few remembered this past despite it being so recent; that the Jewish presence in Alexandria or Cairo, which rose from 2 million inhabitants in 1947 to more than 10 million in 2016 (out of a total city population of 20.5 million), had been so quickly forgotten. Sometimes they expressed surprise that their long absence had not even registered with the people of Egypt, but they were even more surprised when they were recognised. They interpreted it as a recognition of their Egyptian belonging and a still-vivid memory shrouded in the silence about their past life in Egypt and the disappearance of their community from the country.

They therefore often had to rely on inhabitants both young and old, evoking souvenirs and sentences in Arabic, to find a building or street that often did not exist anymore on current maps or that had been renamed.

After we visited the cemeteries in Alexandria, I went through the city with Elie and his grandson. We hailed a taxi in front of the cemetery entrance; the driver was immediately stopped by the police. The police officers took a picture of his driving licence and ID and asked for his mobile phone number. Only after these security procedures were completed could we get into the car and visit the places Elie wanted to show his grandson. The driver, who was of a certain age, made various comments in Arabic, pointing out spots of so-called cosmopolitan Egypt – Le Salon Vert (a department store), the 'Sporting Club', the Saint-Marc college and the Rio cinema. We were looking for rue Belzoni, where Elie had lived and which no longer exists on the map. This street had been the subject of a lively debate between us for at least two years while discussing Elie's 'mental' map of Alexandria. It was impossible to locate this street on any current maps of the city. Elie could remember no landmark other than the people who had lived there until he remembered the existence of the Kanis al-Yahud synagogue on the street. The driver still did not know where we wanted to go. However, after several unsuccessful attempts, people on the streets, sometimes even children, guided us to the former rue Belzoni. Elie finally recognised his street but could not find any synagogue there. He seemed utterly lost, even disoriented. He could not identify anything, not even the taxi driver who had parked the car further ahead and came to meet us. I ended up asking two men who came out of a house, intrigued, and they confirmed that we were on rue Belzoni and that the synagogue had been destroyed many years ago and replaced with a new building.

### III A Past that Still Matters

For both the Jews of Egypt and those in the diaspora, speaking about and keeping a Jewish presence in Egypt alive facilitates remembrance through exchanges with the Egyptians and among themselves and thus gives this memory something tangible. However, not all Egyptians



were welcoming: the military escorts and blocked streets attracted attention and sometimes hostile glances and mistrust, particularly in neighbourhoods where the residents feared the Jews would reclaim their homes. But there was also curiosity, and occasionally, manifestations of empathy.

For a few years now, an association called Drop of Milk<sup>12</sup> has been working with the government to preserve some parts of the Jewish heritage in Cairo and Alexandria. The Drop of Milk association has opened up some of the synagogues and turned them into cultural places for classical concerts or cultural discussions for Egyptians and into Egyptian symbols of tolerance. In an uneasy context, and driven by a deep attachment to the country, they work to raise awareness among Egyptians, whatever their religious affiliation, to the history of the Jews and the Jewish history of Egypt. According to the association, synagogues should be ‘open to all...places that feed the mind and the soul’. Talking with members of this association, some also emphasised that the restoration and preservation of Jewish heritage must be accompanied by improvements and concern for today’s residents: one should not preserve traces of the past without taking care of the present.

For the authorities in Egypt, which has relations with the United States and thus with Israel, neglecting the country’s Jewish heritage could be politically costly. In addition, talking about a Jewish past currently constitutes a political resource at an international level. It is ‘a message to the world that the Egyptian government is committed to the Egyptian heritage of all religions’, branding Egypt as a ‘superpower’,<sup>13</sup> a symbol of tolerance since antiquity. Highlighting the Jewish part of Egypt therefore reveals wider international political interests – in particular those concerning Egypt’s relations with the United States or Egypt’s efforts to campaign for major positions at UNESCO. This heritage is integrated into the Egyptian national heritage all the more readily since there are almost no Jews left in the country.

However, at a local and national level, this past remains controlled and is treated ambivalently. The noise around specific events like the synagogue’s renovation is tantamount to muting or ignoring certain aspects of the past while favourably highlighting other aspects. In particular, this narrative of tolerance rebuilds the image of a community whose essential features are religious and belong to the past. It is defined by an absence not so much of the evocation of the Jews but of knowledge about them – what remains are only empty symbols that often mean nothing to Egyptian people today. It reinforces a silence about the fate of the Jews and other minorities, past and present, as seen in the capture of the Jewish community archives – religious and civil documents<sup>14</sup> – in the Egyptian National Archives. These archives are now totally inaccessible.<sup>15</sup> The Nebi Daniel Association also aims to digitise all the Alexandria Jewish cemeteries, comprising around 20,000 tombs, as the death registry is also inaccessible to the

12 The Drop of Milk association was set up by the last Jews in Egypt, some from communist and nationalist families.

13 Available at: [https://www.masrawy.com/news/news\\_egypt/details/2020/1/9/1702796/%D8%A3%D8%AB%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-](https://www.masrawy.com/news/news_egypt/details/2020/1/9/1702796/%D8%A3%D8%AB%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-) (accessed 8 September 2020).

14 Until 1956, the millet system devolved civil and religious status to the rabbinic authority for internationally recognised legal documents. Some—like Ketubot—have been stolen from communities or are preserved in the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem or the Yeshiva University in New York.

15 Jaimie Lehmann Memorial Collection Records of the Jewish Community of Cairo, 1886–1961. This is one of the few archives that are still accessible.



general public. One of the reasons advanced for the sequestration of the community archives is the fear that the documents might contain information on financial assets. The Jews from Egypt point out that the documents serve above all as proof of their Jewish identity. When the issue of preserving archives in Egypt, and the likelihood of their disappearing, is raised, the notion of tolerance thus takes on another meaning: to admit or suffer the presence of people, and thereby mark their alienation and their marginal status.

This discourse of tolerance at an international level and the fact the government needs to articulate it with caution at a national and local level also shows that the Egyptian state is entangled in logics of hierarchies and domination over which it lacks control. While it has to present its political openness by acknowledging the historical existence of a 'Jewish Egypt' (but with almost no Jews there anymore), it has to manage this discourse internally by keeping silent about the reasons for the departure of the Jews and by continuing to interpret it according to the same reductive and dissonant narrative. Articles in the Egyptian press covering the rededication of the synagogue repeatedly mentioned this story: '[T]he history of the establishment of the Jewish temple in Alexandria goes back to the historical period when Alexandria was home to the Jewish community, as studies have indicated that the number of Jews in Alexandria was estimated to be about 4,000 in the ninth century. ... Their number reached 18,000 at the beginning of the twentieth century. It rose to 40,000 in 1948, after which the Jews began to leave Egypt for Israel after its establishment.'<sup>16</sup>

For the Egyptian population, and particularly the youth, speaking about their Jewish past allows them to discern the extent to which Egyptians and Jews are carrying part of the collective memory. However, the Jewish past also becomes a specific resource for some, telling not a story of tolerance but intolerance. Indeed, the history of the Jews in Egypt serves as a symbol of a tolerance and co-existence that no longer exists. In this case, talking about the Jews also involves talking about something else: the country's current political, social and economic situation, the multiple forms of discrimination experienced by the Egyptian populations in Egypt and by minorities such as the Copts. Nevertheless, this specific narrative often tends to silence a part of the history of the Jews portrayed as relatively homogeneous, focusing mainly on the Egyptian nationalists and communists driven out of the country by Israel and Zionism. On social networks, Facebook groups that link Egyptian Jews and other minorities that left the country in the 1950s and 1960s and exchanges between the younger and older generations are often in Arabic, more rarely in other languages, allowing the construction of intersubjective representations of the past. As I found during my fieldwork, there is indeed a renewed interest in the history of the Jewish presence, especially among young Egyptians. Some ask to visit synagogues, discuss the history of the Jews with Egyptian Jews in the diaspora through social media, and post pictures of old cosmopolitan places or Jewish families, or of themselves lighting candles and praying in a synagogue. These posts sometimes stimulate rather lively discussions between Egyptians. For example, a photo was posted on Facebook depicting the departure of Jewish families in 1956 by an Egyptian man who wrote that he regrets the absence of Jews in the country today. The argument and discussion that followed were heated; here is a sample of the arguments put forward: 'Why don't you understand what happened? Then the Jews left,

---

16 Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/ar/contents/articles/originals/2020/01/egypt-opens-eliyahu-hanavi-synagogue.html#ixzz76WPZvV9C> (accessed 8 September 2021).



and most of them went to Israel, and I see what is going on in Palestine; and ‘Why do you sympathise with the Jews? Although most of them were spies for the benefit of Israel, not all of them, of course, because we did not oppress anyone’.

These three elements – the image of openness towards the Egyptian Jewish presence in the past, the absence of Jews at present, and the preservation of their memory through the patrimonialisation of religious elements emptied of content, life and stakes – rely on the same very equivocal idea of tolerance: a notion that means both an attitude of openness and empathy and a form of patronising, of having to put up with people we cannot avoid or believe we should not avoid. This idea is challenged by the exchange of lay memories between the Egyptians and the Jews, and the diasporic heritage of an Egypt carried, among others, by the Jews, which exceed the time and space of a page of revolving history. These exchanges and the visible/invisible religious traces and objects in their current uses reveal crossed and parallel social constructions of the presence and absence of the other and the self, both among the Egyptian people and the Jews from Egypt. They challenge the binary identifications framed by nationalisms, proposing ways out of the painful alternative of ‘remembering everything’ and/or ‘forgetting everything’.

Today, many of the social and architectural spaces are vanishing or have already disappeared. Others are turning into relics of a past recomposed for a re-encharmed present, but not open for everyone. However, even in their erasure, these traces challenge us. They reflect multiple interpretations of spatialities and historicities and reveal dense and loose points of identification (Rossetto 2014; Rossetto 2018) and relationships – even conflictual ones – to different territories. They urge us to face up to what we share in the present and for which we can assume responsibility: a heritage of which we are not just ‘passive receivers’ (de l’Estoile 2008), neither totally a vestige of the past nor solely a resource of the present to demand its impossible repair (or healing of the present?). They compel us to better grasp what the present does to the past and what the past does to the present.

While writing these lines, I asked myself several times: what about cemeteries as traces and places of a heritage that can neither be reappropriated nor transformed into a cultural place or a symbol of tolerance? Can we consider them as a heritage? Who are the heirs? I thought of the people I met in Paris, Istanbul, Milan, Tel Aviv, New York, Montreal and London. I remembered their trembling hands lovingly cleaning the graves of their mothers or fathers on that cloudy Friday morning in Alexandria. Their haggard, mournful and resigned faces as they lost themselves hopelessly in the untrimmed alleys, unable to bring back the memories. I thought of those plaques on the benches that speak only of a few and leave all the others, especially women, in a bottomless silence. I thought of the heirs of this Egypt without a place, in a grey suburb of northern Paris or elsewhere, and their places in Egypt without heirs. I wondered about the old Egyptians who made history and whose voices are so little heard and listened to. Do we know what they have to say about this past, the Jews and other minorities? And I thought of the young Egyptians who seek the presence of the Jews through their absence and imagine another, better world, reflected in the frosted bronze of a synagogue bench, desolate, if not in ruins. And I thought of one name among others: that of Youssef Ades.



### Bibliography:

- Borcherdt, Gesine. 2021. ‘Book Review: Byung-Chul Han: How Objects Lost Their Magic’, *ArtReview*, 11 August, available at: <https://artreview.com/byung-chul-han-how-objects-lost-their-magic/> (accessed 26 February 2022).
- De l’Estoile, Benoit. 2008. ‘The Past as It Lives Now: An Anthropology of Colonial Legacies’, *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 16 (3), 267–279.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. 1941. *La topographie légendaire des Evangiles en Terre Sainte* (Paris: PUF).
- Hassoun, Jacques. 2001. *Alexandrie et autres récits de Jacques Hassoun* (Paris: L’Harmattan).
- Khoury, Elias and Samara, Rania. (2000). ‘La Porte du soleil (titre provisoire)’, *La pensée de midi*, Vol. 2, no. 2, 162–73.
- Rossetto, Piera. 2014. ‘Juifs de Libye: Notes pour une “cartographie” des lieux migratoires’, *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo*, 16 (1), 87–99.
- Rossetto, Piera. 2018. ‘Dwelling in Contradictions: Deep Maps and the Memories of Jews from Libya’, *Ethnologies*, 39 (2), 167–87.

### Author’s affiliation

**Michèle Baussant** is a social anthropologist, Director of Research at the French National Center of Research (CNRS) and currently based at CEFRES (French Research Center in Humanities and Social Sciences) in Prague. She has published extensively on the issues of migration, memory and cultural heritage and has worked four years in Israel at the French Center of Research in Jerusalem (CNRS/MEAE).

CNRS - CEFRES

Email: [michele.baussant@cnrs.fr](mailto:michele.baussant@cnrs.fr)

