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Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher • David Clayman, Executive Editor

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JEWS IN EGYPT - 1983

Ernest Stock

With less than 300 souls (in a country of more than 40 million) the Egyptian Jewish community is surely one of the world's numerically insignificant. But since the conclusion of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, this tiny remnant of a flourishing community has been thrust into the limelight in a manner totally unrelated to its numbers. The opening of the borders has led to a poignant encounter between its members and the Israelis who are either stationed in Egypt on official missions or visiting the country as tourists; it has permitted the community to resume contact with world Jewish organizations; and it has inspired the few hard-pressed but dedicated men who constitute its leadership to carry on with the task of preserving the concrete monuments to a more resplendent past that are in their custody.

For at best, this handful of men is carrying on a valiant holding operation. With almost no young people or families with school-age children remaining, all the signs point to continuing attrition of the remnant and eventual disappearance of Egypt's Jewish community.

On a recent Friday evening, services in the imposing Shaarei Shamayim Synagogue on Adly Street, in the heart of Cairo's commercial district, attracted considerably less than a *minyan* of worshippers: three local men (of whom one was a member of the community's Executive Committee, in charge of the synagogue), two Israeli visitors, and a European woman tourist with her three daughters. With neither rabbi nor cantor officiating, the retired former ritual slaughterer read portions of the service in a barely audible voice. The next morning things were hardly better: some American tourists left disappointed when there was no one to read the Torah portion, and the scrolls in their glittering silver cases remained mutely in the Ark. The emptiness of the synagogue was the more striking as it has only recently been completely renovated after years of decay, through a \$700,000 gift of Nissim Gaon of Geneva, President of the World Sephardi Federation.

The historic Ibn Ezra Synagogue, famous as the site of the discovery of the Geniza, is also being restored to its former state through private

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12 Moshe Hess St., 94185 Jerusalem. Tel: (02) 225874, 249441

philanthropy (in this case by members of the Bronfman family). No services are being held there, but a caretaker will admit interested visitors.

The situation is similar in Alexandria, which only a few decades ago boasted a community of more than 20,000, widely admired as a model of community organization. Except that here the magnificent Eliyahu HaNavi Synagogue was in no need of restoration: the Committee under Chairman Clement Setton managed to maintain both exterior and interior through the lean years as though ready for *Yom Kippur* crowds, even when there was not a *minyan* in sight.

Demographic Characteristics

According to the best estimates, there were about 66,000 Jews in Egypt in 1947, of whom 42,000 were in Cairo, 21,000 in Alexandria, and the rest in provincial cities (Tanta, Port Said, Mansoura, Ismailia). Of the Cairo Jewish population, 30,000 were Sephardim, 5,000 Ashkenazim, and 7,000 Karaites. Cairo's present Jewish population is given as 150 and the precise figure in Alexandria is 133. These figures do not include members of the Karaite sect, never part of the mainstream community, of which another 2-300 are estimated to remain. In the provincial cities which formerly had organized Jewish communities, no Jews remain.¹

No less melancholy than these statistics on the size of the Jewish population is its demographic make-up: the overwhelming majority are older people, many of them chronically ill. In both Cairo and Alexandria women far outnumber men, and the number of nuclear families can be counted on the fingers of one hand. There are no children to fill the classrooms of the Jewish school buildings, where Muslim children are now being taught. In what was once Cairo's teeming Jewish quarter, nine Jewish inhabitants remain, infirm and supported by the community. Another six live in the community's old-age home, which is badly in need of repair, in suburban Heliopolis. The Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) has offered to pay half the \$50,000 cost of renovation, but the community professes to be unable to raise its share.

Organizational Dynamics

In spite of their vestigial nature, with almost every day bringing signs of further decline, both communities have managed to preserve a functioning structure. It is as though in a sinking ship the bridge, serving as the vessel's command post, remained afloat long after the hull had gone under. A strong sense of personal responsibility for somehow keeping the ship afloat appears to animate the men in charge in both cities. The President of the Cairo community, Advocate Joseph Dana, sent all of his five children to boarding schools in Israel; he stays behind because he fears that his leaving might precipitate the end of Cairo Jewry's long history. The community still owns fifteen synagogue buildings as well as four schools, but Mr. Dana feels that his (lay) committee is not entitled to sell the religious buildings. Some years ago, when a financial crisis forced its hand, the committee first sought - and obtained - permission from a religious authority, Chief Rabbi Jacob Kaplan of France, to sell one site. For the school buildings there is no market, as the government has them under long-term lease for a nominal sum.

A major part of the community's annual budget of 50,000 Egyptian pounds (about \$60,000) goes for aid to welfare cases; the balance is spent on salaries and maintenance of the synagogue buildings and offices. In earlier days, the members paid a tax to the community, but this source of income has dried up, and the JDC now covers about half of the budget. A member of the JDC's European staff visits the two communities periodically to discuss financial matters and offer consultation on social problems.

The JDC connection provides one important link with the Jewish world at large, even though some of the leadership does not feel comfortable about seeing their once proud communities cast in a role of dependency. By contrast, affiliation with the World Jewish Congress (sanctioned by the Egyptian government) has the symbolic significance of providing entree to world Jewish gatherings on the basis of equality.

Recent History

It need hardly be pointed out that this freedom to associate with outside Jewish communities dates back only to President Sadat's peace initiative. For a whole generation before that - from the U.N. vote on partition in November 1947 to Sadat's visit to Jerusalem thirty years later - Egypt's Jews found themselves subject to many kinds of pressure, including internment after the 1956 war, expulsion, and confiscation of property. Where in the past the two-thirds of Egypt's Jews who were foreign nationals had enjoyed special privileges, along with all foreigners, after 1956 they were faced with expulsion orders. The same fate awaited those without any nationality, while those holding Egyptian citizenship were liable to arrest and imprisonment if suspected of Zionist sympathies.

Of the 50-60,000 Jews still in Egypt just before the 1956 Sinai Campaign, some 40-50,000 subsequently left, voluntarily or involuntarily. Even apart from the harsh anti-Jewish measures provoked by the Sinai war, Jewish businessmen were hard hit by the general nationalization policy adopted by the Nasser regime. Concurrently, new legislation aimed at providing jobs for Egyptians deprived foreign nationals of the right to work and exercise their professions. Yet Egyptian citizenship, once despised, was vitually unobtainable through naturalization.

All of this combined to reduce the Jewish poulation to a mere 1,500-3,000 by the time the 1967 war brought another wave of anti-Jewish feeling and policies, prompting further emigration. When Anwar Sadat came to power after Nasser's death the situation improved radically, but by that time the number of Jews had shrunk to a mere few hundred. The 1973 war signalled no new deterioration in their status; then Sadat's peace overture triggered a mood of euphoria among those remaining.

Euphoria is hard to sustain under any conditions; the recent freeze in the normalization process has also brought about a much more somber mood among Egypt's Jews. Nevertheless, the continuing Israeli presence infuses the remnant with a kind of pride and self-confidence that would have been unthinkable a few short years ago. An example: when Israel's Interior Minister Dr. Yosef Burg participated in Sabbath services at the Adly Street Synagogue, just about the entire Jewish population attended. There wasn't a dry eye in the house, least of all the Minister's. Last *Rosh HaShana* the newly appointed Consul General in Alexandria, Shaul Bar-Haim, held a reception in his home; more than half of the city's Jewish population came, including some who had not been seen at a Jewish function for years.

Since the last rabbi left Egypt in 1971, the community has been without spiritual leadership; now the Chief Rabbinate in Jerusalem sends an Israeli rabbi twice a year. In the fall, a group of Moroccan Jews from Israel organized a pilgrimage to the tomb of one of their sainted forebears near Alexandria; this promises to become an annual event, with the local community lending logistical support.

A solid contribution to Egyptian-Israeli understanding is being made by the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo. Sponsored by a consortium of Israeli institutions of higher learning, the Center facilitates visits by Israeli scholars, promotes contacts between academics from both countries, conducts seminars, and assists Egyptian students studying aspects of Israeli politics and society. Professor Shimon Shamir, the Tel-Aviv University orientalist who directs the Center, has acquired considerable expertise on the Jewish community, past and present. About the future, he is by no means optimistic (this would be difficult). But he sees in the presence of the Israeli colony in Egypt a possible catalyst for revival. There are now about 100 Israelis (including families) in the country; once normalization resumes, their number will increase. Although most of them live in suburban Ma'adi some distance away from the institutions of the community, there have been initiatives at mixed functions at holiday observances and other occasions. In the meantime, it should be noted that visits to both communities by Jewish tourists, of whatever nationality, have a tonic effect on the local Jews and make for an instructive, and sometimes moving, experience for the visitor.

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Note:

1. Gudrun Kramer, *Minderheit, Millet, Nation? Die Juden in Agypten 1914-1952*, Wiesbaden, 1982, p. 26.

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Dr. Ernest Stock, a Vice-President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, currently teaches in the Department of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan. Prior to that, Dr. Stock was the Director of the European Council of Jewish Community Services headquartered in Paris.