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Remembering the 'second exodus from Egypt'

By Amiram Barkat

They were born in Egypt in the 1930s and 1940s, and grew up in bourgeoisie families in a multicultural and multilingual Jewish community. In the 1950s, they left the land of the Nile. Some were expelled from their birthplace with one day's notice and arrived penniless in Israel or the West. For years, they had been used to hearing their parents uttering the sentence "Ili faat maat" (the past is dead) every time a return visit to Egypt or doing something to preserve the community's legacy was suggested. Today, now that they are in their 70s, they feel that whatever remains of their glorious past may disappear along with them.

Three hundred and twenty of the last Jews born in Egypt arrived from 15 countries last week to attend the first World Congress of Jews from Egypt that was held in Haifa 50 years after "the second exodus from Egypt." Many of the participants reported having an unusually intense emotional experience: elderly women from Israel, Britain and Brazil who were in the same class at the English Mission school in Cairo's Heliopolis neighborhood reconnected after more than 60 years, ate traditional Egyptian dishes, and sang the Ladino and French-Arabic chansons they used to sing when they were kids.

Amid all the excitement, a young Egyptian diplomat sent by the Egyptian embassy observed from the sidelines. He said he was very surprised to find that many of the Egyptian-born Jews do not even speak Arabic. The organizer and chairman of the congress, Prof. Ada Aharoni of Haifa, acknowledged that only recently did she start learning Arabic. "My parents didn't want to speak Arabic at home," she said. "It was not only due to snobbism, but also to protest the fact that we were treated as foreigners, and didn't receive Egyptian citizenship."

Aharoni's family fled to France in 1949. Soon thereafter, her father died of a heart attack after hearing that the Egyptians had nationalized the family's entire savings. "We never wanted to talk about our Nakba [catastrophe]," Aharoni said. "It seemed like a blow to our self-esteem."

The congress devoted a session to personal recollections. Several participants spoke for the first time about the trauma of leaving. One of them was Lilian Abda, who lives in Haifa. Abda, a native of the city of Suez, talked about being arrested in 1956 by Egyptian soldiers, while she was swimming leisurely in the canal. Abda was charged with trying to relay information to Israeli forces advancing across the Sinai Peninsula. "I was brought in my bathing suit to the police station, and I was questioned until they extracted a confession from me," she said. "The next day they expelled me and my entire family from the country. In the papers, they called me the Mata Hari of the canal."

The process of eliminating the Jewish community in Egypt began after World War II, and lasted around 20 years. Of the 80,000 Jews who lived there in 1948, 34,000 immigrated to Israel and the rest went to France, Brazil, the United States, Australia, and Canada.

A recent survey of native-born Egyptians in Australia found that each one speaks an average of 4.5 languages, with no distinction between the wealthy and the poor. The survey's author, Dr. Racheline Barda of the University of Sydney, believes that knowledge of languages enabled the Egyptian natives to be easily absorbed in the West. But due to their successful integration, their Egyptian identity was lost and not transmitted to their children.

Barda's research revealed the diverse ethnic mosaic from which the Egyptian community was comprised. Only 15 percent of the survey's respondents were born to families that had lived in Egypt for several generations. Over 80 percent were children or grandchildren of immigrants who had arrived in Egypt following the economic boom created by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Half of the Jewish immigrants arrived in Egypt from across the Ottoman Empire, and the other half came from Europe. The overwhelming majority of the community underwent a secularization process in the 1930s. Inter-ethnic marriages were widespread. Professor Vivianne Schinasi-Silver of Toronto said that her grandparents had come to Egypt from Turkey, Lebanon, Russia and Spain.

Professor Nahem Ilan, who lectured at the conference, said the fact that the Egyptian Jewish community was comprised of immigrants is unique among Jewish communities in Arab countries. Immigration, economic prosperity and the multicultural reality in Egypt transformed the community into a more modern one than most European Jewish communities, he added.

Joe Barda, Dr. Racheline Barda's husband and a native of Alexandria, donated \$25,000 to endow a chair, and will try to raise another \$500,000 in the coming year.

Ilan has high hopes for the endowment. "The research done so far was to a large extent slanted toward the Zionist component," he said. "Today we know that Israel and the Zionist movement were a marginal factor in the life of the community. Only recently has there been serious research into the Jews' contribution to economic, political and intellectual life in Egypt. Unique subjects such as the feminist revolution in the community at the turn of the 20th century or the relationship with the Karaite community have not been studied at all."

Meanwhile, the researchers have encountered numerous difficulties in their efforts to access information sources on the community, for which they primarily blame Carmen Weinstein, the president of Cairo's Jewish community. Weinstein has rejected all requests to photocopy documents from the community's central archive in the Abasiya neighborhood. On the other hand, the same researchers acknowledged, she managed to stop or at least slow down, the uncontrolled and illegal wholesale sell-off of the community's assets.

Among Egyptian-born people around the world, there has been a dramatic turnaround

in recent years in their attitude toward the issue of communal and private property left behind in the old country. For years, militants, such as Desire Sakal, the president of the Historical Society of Jews of Egypt located in New York, dictated the tone. Sakal sought to forcibly remove the valuables that remained in Egypt. ***A new organization called Nebi Daniel has recently been advocating a more moderate and rational approach.*** The issue of returning private property has been dropped from the agenda, and instead efforts are focusing on saving Torah scrolls and preserving the synagogues and cemeteries that have survived. ***The congress approved an initiative by Nebi Daniel members to set up a non-governmental organization that would coordinate negotiations with the Egyptian government.***

One matter that did not come up on the agenda during the four-day congress was "the unfortunate affair" - the 1950s incident in which the Egyptians uncovered a cell of Egyptian Zionist Jews operated by the Israel Defense Forces intelligence branch. The "episode" is still an open wound for many Egyptian Jews who are upset with Israel "for forgetting" to ask for the release of the underground cell members in the 1956 prisoner exchange deal.

Aharoni said that two members of the cell, who live in Israel today, were invited to the congress, but refused to come as an act of protest. "They are also angry at us, because we didn't organize demonstrations to obtain their release. We told them that in those years, no one knew what was happening, and no one dared to come out against the government, but they aren't ready to forgive."