

Sephardic Jewish Heritage Across the Mediterranean

Migration, Memory and New Diasporas

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Abstract The chapter discusses processes of heritage-making by Jews of Algerian and Egyptian descent that migrated to France and Israel respectively, focusing on migrant associations and the activities that surround them. By looking at how these two diasporas frame a post-migratory heritage, I explain that despite the differences, both point to the existence of a process of postcolonial rediasporisation that puts together Jewishness, the Arab past, Europe and Israel. Moreover, this process brings about the formation of new Sephardic diasporas that cut across the two shores of the Mediterranean, in which selected memories of the past are memorialised to confront challenges of the present.

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Keywords Sephardic Jews. Memory. Mediterranean.

1 Introduction

Following the birth of the State of Israel (1948) and the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli conflict – as well as the process of regional restructuring in the aftermath of decolonisation and the emergence of more radical forms of Arab nationalism – most North African and Middle Eastern Jews left or were expelled from their countries of birth and migrated to Israel, Europe, the US, Latin America and elsewhere (Simon, Laskier, Reguer 2003). In many cases, these men and women had been living in the Middle East and the Maghreb since ancient times, making Judaism an essential component of the region's heritage. However, especially since the advent of colonialism many embarked on a process of cultural rapprochement with Europe and the European Jews (Chouraqui 1965; Rodrigue 1990, 2003; Bar-Chen 2003). This could be seen in aspects of everyday life such as clothing and material culture, but also in new approaches to religiosity and schooling. By the time the Jewish mass-migration began, their heritage then had become a multifaceted one in which local habits and languages blended with

European influences and persistent Jewish traditions.¹ Such heritage was to face still other challenges when the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa resettled in the Western world and in Israel and were confronted with new national contexts. While this initially meant the silencing or the relative oblivion of the pre-migratory identity, over the last three decades a Sephardic identity² revival started to occur (cf. Ben-Ur 2009; Trevisan Semi, Miccoli, Parfitt 2013; Linhard 2014; Miccoli 2016, 41-49), showing the vitality of these diasporas and the willingness to transmit heritage from one generation to the other.

As regards the Jews of Algeria and Egypt, whereas in the '60s almost all of the former, around 140,000 people, resettled in France (Allouche-Benayoun 1994; Sussman 2002), the Jews of Egypt dispersed over several countries: from France (Baussant 2015) and Italy to Brazil, the US and last but not least Israel - where the largest post-migratory Egyptian Jewish community came about (Miccoli 2015, 167-176; also: Beinin 1998, 70-72). These trajectories depended on the historical vicissitudes that the two communities had gone through since the nineteenth century. The Jews of Algeria, on the one hand, had lived in that country for centuries but in 1870, forty years after the beginning of the French colonial rule, were naturalised French with the so-called Crémieux decree (Schreier 2010; Allouche-Benayoun, Dermenjian 2015; Charbit 2015). This provoked the distancing of the Jews from the Muslim majority, which was further accelerated by a process of cultural and social 'Frenchification'. Even though the Jews never were completely estranged from the Algerian Muslim context and in the '50s and '60s some even got involved in the anti-colonial struggle (Le Foll Luciani 2015), the Algerian War (1954-1962) determined their departure for France together with the French settlers, the *piets-noirs* (Stora 1993; Jordi, Temime 1996). The Jews of Egypt, on the other hand, in the '50s were around 80,000 and for the most part descended from people migrated for economic reasons, in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, from the Eastern Mediterranean, Southern Europe and the Balkans (Landau 1969; Krämer 1989). A largely Francophone and middle-class community (Beinin 1998; Miccoli 2015), they did not experience historical ruptures as traumatic as the Algerian War or anti-Semitic measures similar to those enforced in French Algeria during the Vichy years (1940-1944). Nonetheless, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Nasser Revolution (1952) and the Suez War (1956)

1 This reflects a wider process of post-Ottoman modernisation that invested North African and Middle Eastern societies as a whole (Watenpaugh 2006) and not just the Jews.

2 For reasons of brevity and as customary in the literature, I utilise the term Sephardic - which in a narrower definition indicates only the Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in the sixteenth century and their descendants - to refer to the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa as a whole.

increasingly put them at the margins of the national arena. Their juridical and political status was made further problematic by the fact that many did not have Egyptian citizenship but were either stateless or protégés of European powers (Laskier 1992; Shamir 1986).

Keeping this in mind, the chapter discusses processes of heritage-making by Jews of Algerian and Egyptian descent that migrated to France and Israel respectively, focusing on migrant associations and the activities that surround them. By looking at how these diasporas frame a post-migratory heritage, I explain that despite the differences, both cases point to the existence of a shared process of postcolonial Jewish ‘rediasporisation’ (Valensi, Wachtel 1991; Bordes-Benayoun 2002; Linhard 2014) that puts together Jewishness, the Arab past, Europe and Israel. This brings about the formation of new post-migratory Sephardic diasporas that cut across the two shores of the Mediterranean, and in which selected memories of the past are preserved in order to confront challenges of the present (Harrison 2013, 166-202; Sather-Wagstaff 2015).

2 An (In)tangible Heritage? Egyptian Jewish Associations in Israel

Migrant associations have long been regarded either as spaces that lead to further social segregation or, on the other hand, mediating institutions that ease the process of integration into a new national context (Moya 2005). In the case of Israel and in the aftermath of the ‘*aliyot*³ from the Middle East and North Africa, some sociologists believed that “when the gaps in income or education [between *mizrahim* and *ashkenazim*] are eliminated, ethnic associations or expressions will also cease” (Weingrod 1985, XVI). Yet, this assumption proved to be incorrect, as showed by the resilience of Israeli associations and museums that refer to the *mizrahim*⁴ (Shohat 1988; Shenhav 2006; Miccoli 2016, 16-22), as well as to other diasporas that have been better-integrated in the national narrative and for longer than the Middle Eastern Jewish migrants. Think, for example, of the museums founded in northern Israel by German- and Hungarian-speaking Jews (Katriel 2013, 11-14). So, even though expressions of *mizrahi* identity and heritage surely have to do with the enduring marginalisation of the *mizrahim* and the socio-economic cleavages between them and the *ashkenazim*, more generally they reflect the limits of the Israeli *mizug galuyiot* (melting pot) ideology, according to which the diasporic past and identities were to be put aside to forge a new and unified Jewish-Zionist nation (Ben-Rafael

3 Pl. of ‘*aliyah*, lit. ‘ascent (to Zion)’, therefore ‘migration’.

4 Pl. of *mizrahi*, lit. ‘Oriental’, that are the Israelis of Middle Eastern or North African descent.

1982; Ben-Rafael, Peres 2005; Shuval 1963).

As regards the Egyptian Jewish associational culture, in 1958 a group of people among which was the former chief rabbi of Alexandria Moshe Ventura founded the 'Irgun nifga'ey ha-radifot ha-'anti-yehudiyot be-Mitzrayim (Association of the victims of anti-Jewish persecutions in Egypt). Its goals were:

- 1) to assist members of the Organization in order to facilitate their integration in Israel and their settlement in the country. 2) to represent members at the central Government Institutions [...]. 3) to act in order to obtain [...] organization for the moral and material damages [...] suffered in Egypt.⁵

At the time, a Jewish community of around 9,000 people still lived in Egypt. On the other hand, the Israeli Egyptians counted about 28,000 individuals (Della Pergola 2008, 34 table 1 and 37 table 3).⁶ As opposed to the Algerian Jews that settled in '60s France, and were faced with a French *ashkenazi* Jewry largely made of Holocaust survivors going through a moment of profound reshaping (Hobson Faure 2013; Schpun 2012), the Egyptians were among the thousands of Oriental and European Jewish migrants arriving in the newly-born Israel for a variety of reasons that went from Zionism, to the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Arab countries or the wish to leave post-war Europe. It is therefore unsurprising that many saw themselves both as '*olim*'⁷ eager to integrate and take part in the construction of the state, and refugees worried about the properties and assets left in Egypt (Shenhav 2006, 136-83; Zamkanei 2016). Among the 'Irgun's activities were the celebration of the *bar mitzvah* of indigent Egyptian Jewish boys, the assignment of student scholarship and the organisation of hikes aimed at improving the younger generation's *yediyat ha-'aretz*⁸ (Duah leshnat 1971, 'Tqasey bar-mitzvah', 62). Even though the 'Irgun primarily was a mutual aid society to support the Egyptian '*olim*, the association also intended to spread knowledge of the culture that the Egyptian Jews had brought to Israel, as well as to highlight the role some of them had played as members of the Zionist movement (Krämer 1989, 182-204; Miccoli 2015, 148-9).

As time went by and especially from the '80s, the 'Irgun and other simi-

5 Archive of the Yad Ben-Tzvi Institute, Jerusalem (henceforth YBZ) XIV B 1701.9, 'Irgun nifgaey-ha-radifot ha-anti-yehudiyot be-Mitzrayim: Duah leshnat 1971/ Association des ex-vic-times des persecutions anti-juives en Egypte (henceforth Duah leshnat 1971), 'Memorandum'.

6 The numbers are indicative, as there are great discrepancies in the figures available.

7 Pl. of '*oleh*: 'Jewish migrant to the Land of Israel'.

8 Lit. 'knowledge of the Land of Israel'. [YBZ XIV B 1701.9](#).

lar mutual aid societies shifted towards the cultural domain and more or less transformed themselves into associations devoted to the preservation of the Egyptian Jewish heritage. But “why only now?”, asked in 1985 one of the very first issues of the *‘Alon moreshet yahadut-Mitzrayim* (Bulletin of the heritage of the Jews of Egypt), published in Haifa by the association *Goshen* (Beinin 1998, 216-7). The answer was that “the difficulties of the migration, the time of the integration, the worries over earning an income, building a home in Israel, the daily commitments of working and bringing up children, all this did not leave us time to think”, but “now, thirty-seven years after the independence of Israel in her homeland, we want to pass the heritage of the Jews of Egypt to this generation”.⁹ At a distance of twenty years since the *‘aliyah*, the bitter moments and the socio-economic difficulties that the Egyptian migrants – like all other *mizrahim* and not only – had gone through, were put aside for celebrating their contributions to Israel and remembering the good old days spent in Cairo and Alexandria. Thus, *Goshen* asked its readers “to contribute with texts, comments and portrayals of how life in Egypt was, so as to enrich our testimonies and our magazine”.¹⁰ Since the ‘80s, the bulletin – written half in Hebrew and half in French – has published autobiographical essays, poems and letters by Egyptian Jews living in Israel and in the Diaspora. In its pages, the Egyptian Jewish heritage is presented as characterised by multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism and, sometimes nostalgically, as the remnant of a quasi-magical world (Starr 2009, 1-28; Halim 2013, 1-55), come to an end with the advent of Nasser and the migration of the Jews and foreign communities like the Greeks and Italians. Egypt was a country characterised by “the joie de vivre, [...] even when two world wars were putting Europe on fire”.¹¹ For *Goshen*, that bygone Egypt can be reconstructed through the preservation of a both tangible and intangible heritage made of written memories, recipes, photographs and old objects that bespeak the rich identity of the Jews of Egypt.

In addition to what has been said above, the increased emphasis placed on the cultural realm depends on the ideological and societal shifting that Israel underwent since the late ‘70s: from the gradual weakening of Socialist Zionism following the victory of the rightist party Likud in 1977, to the increased participation of the *mizrahim* in the political sphere and the reappraisal of ethnicity as something to be valorised. This can be seen in the success since then encountered by novelists, musicians and filmmakers of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish origin (Mendelson Maoz 2014; Miccoli 2016, 41-49). At the same time, studies showed that the

9 YBZ VI 68, *Goshen*, September 1985, 1.

10 YBZ VI 68, *Goshen*, September 1985, 1.

11 YBZ VI 68, *Goshen*, December 2002, 1.



Figure 1. Front page of an issue of *Goshen – 'Alon moreshet yahadut-Mitzrayim* (Archive of the Yad Ben-Tzvi Institute, Jerusalem)



Figure 2. Cookery column of *Goshen – 'Alon moreshet yahadut-Mitzrayim* (Archive of the Yad Ben-Tzvi Institute, Jerusalem)

socio-economic problems of the *mizrahim* and the cleavages between them and *ashkenazi* Israelis are not yet solved (Haberfeld, Cohen 2012; Dahan 2013). This, together with the echoes of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, can be noted by looking at the case of the Hitahdut 'Olei Mitzrayim (Union of Egyptian migrants).

The Hitahdut, which is the more or less direct continuator of the 'Irgun, is based in Tel Aviv, where its members gather on a regular basis for book presentations and lectures and is the largest among the Egyptian Jewish heritage associations. In its siege, one can visit a small exhibition of memorabilia, historical documents, paintings and photographs about life in Egypt from the time that is remembered as *tor ha-zahav* (the golden era) of the Egyptian Jews. The Hitahdut also publishes a magazine called *Bney Hayeor* (Sons of the Nile) and organises World Congresses of Jews from Egypt.¹²

12 Interviews of the Author with Levana Zamir, President of the Hitahdut 'Olei Mitzrayim, Tel Aviv, 9 April 2014 and 13 December 2015.



Figure 3. The World Heritage Centre for Egyptian Jewry, Tel Aviv (photo by Dario Miccoli)

Similarly to *Goshen's* bulletin, also *Bney Hayeor* – which subsequently changed its name into *Yetziat-Mitzrayim shelanu* (Our exodus from Egypt) – consists of texts informing on the activities of the association, articles, short stories and poems by the association's members. Here and in other texts and autobiographies by Egyptian Jewish Israelis (Miccoli 2014a), heritage is evoked both through monuments and places, as well as feelings: “the Kasr-El-Nil bridge [of Cairo], the Japanese garden, the Café Groppi on the corner, the Pyramids where we went every week [...] the pleasant life, the happy youth, the dynamic and cosy family life, [...] the exotic perfumes, the sound of Eastern music...” (Azriel 2014, 30-31). As in the case of other diasporas (Bahloul 1983), cookery seems to be an essential component of the community's heritage, as it allows reconnecting to lost flavours and memories of domestic life. So, the Hitahdut's president published a book entitled *Mi-ta'amei Mitzrayim* (The flavours of Egypt), dedicated “to my mother [...] who taught me not just the taste of good food, but also the substance, beauty and essence of life. And to my two *sabra* [i.e. Israeli]

daughters [...] who love their mum's Egyptian food" (Zamir 2004, 1).¹³

The most important activity organised by the Hitahdut is the World Congress of Jews From Egypt. The congress is a way to keep in contact with people living in different parts of the world, but also acts as a platform for the economic and legal demands that the *'olim* and their descendants have. Property claims, far from being a purely economic matter, also bespeak emotional and personal concerns: "My father owned three buildings in Cairo, three entire buildings. He was a jeweller, a very rich one. And myself, here in Israel I have to work hard to make a living. Is this fair?", a woman asked at the congress held in Eilat in 2014.¹⁴ There, several people argued – reiterating an assumption shared by other *mizrahim* – that beneath the difficulty to get their properties back, lay the Arab-Israeli conflict and the political and economic consequences that labelling the Jews from the Middle East as refugees entails vis-à-vis the rights of Palestinians (Fishbach 2008; Miccoli 2015, 175). During the 2014 Congress, members of the Hitahdut also discussed the issue of the Jewish buildings still extant in Egypt: from the cemetery of Bassatine and the Sha'ar ha-shamayim synagogue in Cairo, to the Nebi Daniel synagogue of Alexandria. In the last years, such issues triggered various initiatives, for example a 2016 appeal to the Egyptian President Al-Sisi, sponsored by French-based Egyptian Jewish associations and also signed by Israelis of Egyptian origin, asking for the authorisation to:

1. digitise the Jewish archives, particularly the civil and religious status registers [located] in the synagogues [...]. 3. the restoration of the extant synagogues and cemeteries [...]. 5. the creation of a Jewish heritage museum inside one of the extant synagogues... (Appeal "Allow Implementation and Preservation of Jewish Heritage", *Collectif des Associations Nationales des Juifs d'Egypte* 2016)¹⁵

On the whole, the case of the Jews of Egypt shows the manifold identity connections that exist between Israel and the Diaspora, the Arab past and the Israeli present, tangible heritage and intangible yet incredibly vivid

13 Other Egyptian Jews wrote cookery books or include recipes in their memoirs: for example – as noted by Naguib (2006) – the Cairo-born Claudia Roden since the late '60s has written a dozen of books on Mediterranean (Jewish) cuisine, whereas Colette Rossant in 1999 authored the memoir *Apricots on the Nile: A Memoir with Recipes* and Nissim Zohar the autobiographical novel *Ha-molokhiyah shel 'ima'* (Mother's molokhiyah, 2006).

14 Interview of the Author to an attendee to the 2014 World Congress of Jews From Egypt, Eilat, 13 May 2014.

15 <https://www.change.org/p/president-sisi-allow-implementation-and-preservation-of-jewish-heritage-autorisez-la-mise-en-oeuvre-de-la-pr%C3%A9servation-du-patrimoine-juif> (2017-12-15).

memories and feelings. It also sheds light on the inextricable relation between politics and the outside world on the one hand, and the home on the other, as aspects that altogether come to create a new post-migratory identity, which becomes visible on the pages of the associations' publications or during the congresses organised by the Hitahdut and to which Egyptian Jews living in different parts of the world participate. This, and the difficulty of distinguishing clearly the tangible dimension from the intangible one (Pratt 2013; Violi 2014, 101), points to the existence of a heritage that always is 'on the border' of contrasting spaces and times and that, in order to be transmitted and lived, first has to be remembered. If so, what happens when the past from where such heritage originates is perceived as being a 'difficult' one, characterised by traumas that involve not just a community, but an entire nation?

3 The Jews of Algeria and the 'Difficult Heritage' of Postcolonial France

The Jews of Algeria are said to be *à cas apart* among the Jews of the Arab Muslim world and those subject to French colonialism. Due to the specificities that Algeria had in comparison to all other territories of the French Empire, the Jews that lived in the country faced a process of cultural Frenchification and juridical and social emancipation that - for example - differs from that of the Jews of Morocco or Tunisia. In the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, most adopted "a 'French identity' [...] that coexisted up to their departure for France [in the '50s and '60s] with their 'religious identity'" (Allouche-Benayoun 2015, 17). However, after the migration, Algerian Jews rediscovered a very multifaceted heritage which includes different memories and pasts: "French citizens, they cultivate their Jewishness within a Sephardic context, that is permeated of *Berber-Arab* culture, and they share with the other Algerian repatriates their feelings for a past, today largely idealised" (Allouche-Benayoun 2015, 17; see also: Allouche-Benayoun, Bensimon 1989). Moreover, whereas in Israel the Egyptian Jews reconstruct their heritage vis-à-vis issues such as Zionism, the *mizrahi* question and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, here one finds a different scenario dominated by the memory politics of contemporary France and by two events in particular: the Algerian War and the Holocaust.

As said, in the '60s almost all of the Algerian Jews settled in France, mostly in Paris and its region or in the *Midi* (Allouche-Benayoun, Bensimon 1989, 337). As regards associational culture, the first French-based Algerian Jewish association - the Association des Juifs Originaires d'Algérie - was founded in 1962, as a successor to the Comité Juif Algérien d'Études Sociales. Established at the beginning of the Algerian War, it maintained

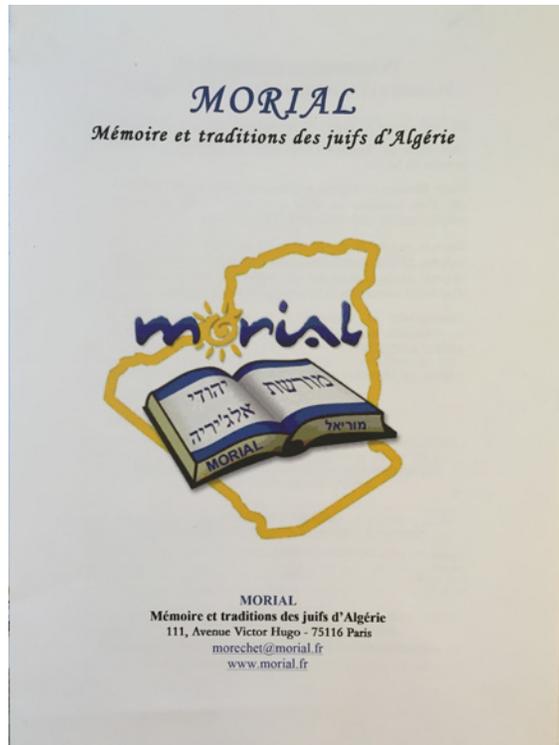


Figure 4. Brochure of Morial- Mémoire et traditions des Juifs d'Algérie (courtesy of Didier Nabet)

neutrality by both expressing gratitude to France and underlining the bonds between Algerian Jews and Muslims. After the migration to France, the Association embraced a less conciliatory position. This brought about a collective memory that, according to Ethan Katz (2015b), is based upon two overarching historical narratives: that of “*progrès et patriotisme*” under French patronage, and of “*violence et vulnérabilité*” – both due to Muslim anti-Jewish feelings, think of the infamous Constantine riots of 1934, and *pieds-noir* anti-Semitism.¹⁶

Morial-Mémoire et traditions des Juifs d'Algérie nowadays is one of the most active among the French Algerian Jewish heritage associations. The goal of Morial (which stands for the Hebrew *Moreshet yehudei Algeria* ‘the heritage of the Jews of Algeria’) is “to preserve and transmit the cul-

¹⁶ The Constantine riots (often called *pogrom*) occurred in 1931 in the city of Constantine, in Eastern Algeria, when a Jewish man insulted a group of Muslims near a mosque. This prompted riots against the Jews that lasted for several days and in the end caused the death of twenty-five Jewish men, women and children and the destruction of around 200 Jewish-owned properties (Dermenjian 2015, 116-121; cf. Cole 2012, for an analysis of the socio-political motivations that triggered the violence).

tural and traditional memory of the Jews of Algeria".¹⁷ Founded in 1995 under the impulse of the twin Israeli association Moriel, it has around 400 members and 2,000 sympathisers. It is not the only Algerian Jewish association: suffice here to mention the Association des Juifs de Constantine, the Association des Israélites d'Oranie en France or the Association de l'Exode des Français Juifs d'Algérie.

In its brochure, Moriel presents the Algerian Jews' heritage as a complex one connected to the many spaces where they lived: "our ancestors [...] came from Cyrenaica, Judea or Spain. [...] They lived together with Berbers, they had moments of happiness and despair. Oftentimes, they bent their back under the yoke of the law of the 'dhimmi' [...]. And France arrived [...] the homeland of the 'droits de l'homme'. But then, the 'déchirement'. [...] We are the last generation of the Jews of Algeria that knew and loved this country" (undated brochure of Moriel). Similarly to the Hitahdut, also this association organises lectures and conferences on cultural heritage and history. As said, the identity of the Algerian Jews is described as a blending of the Arab-Berber tradition and the French-driven process of emancipation begun in the nineteenth century. The latter is generally viewed in positive terms as something that improved the status of Jews, without taking into account the 'longue durée' consequences that it had: first and foremost, as Mandel (2015) and Katz (2015a) showed, the progressive estrangement from a juridical and political point of view between Jews and Muslims in colonial Algeria. This led to differences in the process of postcolonial integration of Algerian Jewish and Muslim immigrants to France: whereas the Jews were 'rapatriés' and members of "a 'religion', compatible with French citizenship, [...] to be Muslim was a 'nationality', thus necessarily foreign" (Shepard 2006, 243). As regards the relation to the *pieds-noirs*, in the first phase after the migration there had been a sort of 'piednoirisation' of the Jews of Algeria that highlighted precisely their being French repatriates (Bordes-Benayoun 2012). On the other hand, nowadays the connection between the two groups is downplayed by evoking "the anti-Semitism of the *pieds-noirs*, the racism", or is limited to folkloric aspects, like cookery and music.¹⁸ The Jewish ethno-religious component became dominant, and this made the memory of the Algerian Jews closer to that of all other French Jews - for example when it comes to the centrality assigned to the Holocaust (Lambert 2016).

The legacies of the Algerian War and the Vichy period - during which the Jews of Algeria, as those of metropolitan France, were deprived of French nationality - surely embody France's most 'difficult heritage': "a past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and

17 <http://www.morial.fr/index.php/l-association/presentation-de-l-assoc> (2017-12-15).

18 Interview of the author with Didier Nabot, President of Moriel, Paris, 23 March 2016.

awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity” (MacDonald 2009, 1). This makes the Jews of Algeria the protagonists of “a carnal and visceral relation to the *Terre*, its environment, [...] but also [of] subsequent shocks, coexistence and, oftentimes, fierce withdrawals and ancestral concerns”.¹⁹ As a result, this diaspora – similarly to the *mizrahim* in Israel or to non-Jewish French colonial repatriates – initially silenced its identity, which began to be expressed more freely from the '80s (Zytnicki 2005, 97). From then onwards, dozens of books were published by professional and amateur writers such as Albert Bensoussan and Jean Cohen (Watson 2012; Eldridge 2012; Tartakowsky 2016), and singers like Enrico Macias set to music the theme of Algeria as a vanished *pays du soleil*: “I left my country | I left my home | [...] Oh sun! Sun of my lost country | of the white cities I loved | of the girls I once knew”. A process of identity remaking took place and led to the emergence of a new French Sephardic diaspora (Siney-Lange 2001), a label that nowadays comprehends the whole of North African Jews. This parallels what happened in Israel where the specificities of the Middle Eastern and North African *'olim* were put aside to invent the *mizrahim* (Shohat 1988): a new Oriental collective opposed to the Israelis of European descent.

The acknowledgement of the Algerian Jewish heritage as an important component of French Jewishness continued through the years, reaching a peak in 2012 – year of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Algerian War. 2012 saw the organisation of many activities, as for example the exhibition *Juifs d'Algérie* at the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme of Paris, where one could see historical documents and objects, from *ketubot* (Jewish marriage contracts) to family portraits, religious items from the Algerian synagogues and listen to pieces of Jewish traditional music (Hoog 2012). The exhibition had the goal of “understanding [...] what Algeria represented” for the Jews, and showing “how they resent, in France, both the disappearance of the Jewish community *là-bas* and the ruptures and echoes of the difficult history between France and Algeria”.²⁰

To mark the commemoration of the mass-migration, Morial organised a *Grand concours national* for children and adolescents between eleven and sixteen years old around the theme *Papy, mamy, racontez-moi votre Algérie*. Students with an Algerian Jewish background were asked to write a short story that took cue from the family memory. The winner of the competition was a sixteen-years-old girl that told the story of her grandfather, born in the city of Constantine:

19 Brochure of Morial's conference *L'Algérie: l'Amour de la Terre Natale*, 2014.

20 “Dossier de Presse” of the 2012/2013 exhibition *Juifs d'Algérie*: <http://www.mahj.org/documents/dossier-de-presse-Juifs-d-Algerie.pdf> (2017-12-15).



*Grand concours national
destiné aux enfants
de 11 à 13 ans et de 14 à 16 ans*

1962 - 2012
morial
Cinquantième
de notre
Exode d'Algérie

Papy, Mamy, racontez-moi votre Algérie...

Pour participer au concours, demande à tes grands-parents de te raconter un moment marquant de leur vie en Algérie. Ecris-nous cette histoire sur 4 pages d'écolier manuscrites maximum.
Envoie ton texte à :

Morial Concours
4 bis Bd Anatole France
92100 Boulogne Billancourt

avant le vendredi 28 septembre 2012.

Règlement complet et informations :
www.morial.fr - morechet@morial.fr
MORIAL - Mémoire et traditions des Juifs d'Algérie -

Figure 5. Brochure of the *Grand concours national* "Papy, Mamy, racontez-moi votre Algérie..." (courtesy of Didier Nabot)

For sixteen years, I have been listening to stories, anecdotes. All brighten his face with a precious flame [...]. Others sadden him, still others make him laugh [...]. And it is because of all these happy memories that, for his seventieth birthday, my grandfather went back to Algeria. But he could not recover this kind of moments and it is perhaps upon reading about them, that he will be able to live them again. (Brochure of *Papy, mamy, racontez-moi votre Algérie*, 2012)

As in some of the poems published on the Egyptian Jewish bulletins, here one finds the nostalgia for a joyful past tinged with the sadness of exile, the longing for a very immaterial heritage lost forever and that bears little resemblance with what remains in today's Algeria.

In fact, when it comes to the Algerian Jewish heritage sites, the president of Morial talks about "a catastrophe [...]: lost properties, synagogues transformed into mosques or shut down" and underlines the difficulty for

the association to go back to Algeria on an official mission.²¹ So as to find a solution to that, the internet becomes an alternative tool to preserve what remains of the community's heritage. The website of *Morial* hosts sections on history, literature, folklore, gastronomy and a *musée virtuel* with photographs that portray cities, street life and families, with the aim of "finding and preserving material testimonies of the period when the Jews lived in Algeria".²² The section *Patrimoine* instead includes descriptions of folkloric rites – such as throwing a glass of water on the ground when someone leaves on a journey – and preserves the everyday vocabulary of the Jews of Algeria:

Baracallah! Blessed be the Lord, it expresses satisfaction, for example after a meal. [...] *Ya Khashka!* Ah! That was long ago! The number of exclamation marks depended on the level of nostalgia! The past of Algeria, before the exile, so nice [...].²³

One may argue that such interaction could open up spaces of contact between the Franco-Algerian Jews and Muslims, showing what they and their descendants still share and "undermining any attempt to maintain absolute [North African] Jewish distinctiveness", at least when it comes to heritage and popular culture (Arkin 2014, 212-4). Yet, reading the comments left on the website guestbook, the Algerian Jewish heritage emerges as a divisive and traumatised component of one's identity:

I was born in Lavayssière (near Tlemcen) and spent my adolescence in Oran, my beloved city. You are right in evoking this drama [of Algeria], all religions included, so as not to forget our tragic history. We need to insist and spread the knowledge of this 'genocide'; a thousand times thank you for making me cry upon reading the sayings that my parents and grandparents back in Algiers often utilised.²⁴

As in the case of the Jews of Morocco or the *pieds-noirs* (Miccoli 2014b; Sciolto-Zürcher 2012), the internet functions as a tool for virtually going back to a world that is no more and for countering the hardships of the present:

all that remains of Algeria are cooking recipes, grandmothers walled in their silence that refuse to transmit their memories, which they buried

21 Interview of the author with Didier Nabot, President of Morial, Paris, 23 March 2016.

22 <http://www.morial.fr/index.php/musee-virtuel> (2017-12-15).

23 <http://www.morial.fr/index.php/communautes-et-traditions/89-dialecte> (2017-12-15).

24 <http://www.morial.fr/index.php/livre-d-or?limitstart=0> (2017-12-15).

in the traumas of exile and are unwilling to dig up [...]. And I, a young 'française juive algérienne' I do not know who I am, where I come from.²⁵

In comparison with the Egyptian Jews, the Algerians share a more difficult history, exacerbated by the impact in France of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Debrauwere-Miller 2010) and recent acts of anti-Semitism, often committed by French citizens of North African Muslim origin. Yet, the Algerian Jewish heritage, which aims to rescue lost threads of the past, seems to still bring with it:

the tenacious certainty that it is possible to be at the same time French and Jewish, 'républicain' and sympathetic toward religious rites, Western-oriented but forever marked by the East, by Algeria. (Stora 2006, 182)

4 Heritage as Borderland

As migrants that - due to a series of historical constraints - cannot return to a homeland that is no more and that often do not possess many tangible 'things' from the past, the heritage of the Jews of Egypt and Algeria nowadays is a largely imaginative construct, in which processes of individual and collective remembrance play a key role (Sather-Wagstaff 2015). If a degree of re-imagination of the past as time goes by, may "facilitate new forms of dialogue" between members of ethnic or national groups that experienced historical traumas (Guedj 2012, 153), it can also lead to biased approaches to history. In relation to this, one could argue that the Jews of Egypt tend to idealise pre-Nasserist times and, putting aside the social and national hierarchies that there existed, oppose that epoch to post-1950s Egypt, perceived in negative terms as a different country in which the Jews cannot fit. The Jews of Algeria, on their part, are inclined to skip the *longue durée* consequences of the Crémieux decree and the negative impact that colonialism had on their relations with the Muslim population. Evoking and overemphasising cosmopolitanism or Frenchness as inner components of the pre-migratory heritage helped the two groups to gain space in the respective post-migratory national arena, be it the predominantly *ashkenazi* Israel of the '60s or postcolonial France. At the same time, a more clearly Egyptian or Algerian (Jewish) heritage seems to emerge particularly in relation to an 'everyday multiculturalism', characterised - as already observed for other migrant communities (Colombo, Semi 2007; Schmoll, Semi 2013, 388) - by selected ethnic elements perceived to be politically neutral and more easily accepted by the

25 <http://www.morial.fr/index.php/livre-d-or?limitstart=0> (2017-12-15).

host society: for example food and music.

Surely, the heritage of the Jews of the Arab world is a multi-layered one, accumulated in the course of the centuries and subject to different social and political constraints: think of the identity shifting between the categories of *'olim*, refugees and *mizrahim* in Israel, or between *pieds-noirs*, Sephardis, French Jews in France. By looking at these two case-studies, heritage comes out as “our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations”:²⁶ a landscape in which past and present intermingle and that changes depending on whether we are looking at it from the perspective of today’s Israel or ’70s France, if one belongs to the first, second or third generation of Egyptian or Algerian Jewish migrants.

This shows the importance of conceiving the Sephardic Mediterranean as a composite ‘borderland’ (Balibar 2014), where old and new memories, objects and feelings are preserved. Finally, what comes out of this borderland are new post-migratory diasporas, in which divergent cultural and national affiliations and half-forgotten memories of a shared Arab-Jewish past can be found – as if to remind us to what extent the Mediterranean heritage, and the history that lays beneath it, ruptures and continuities, frontiers and entanglements.

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