



# A JEWISH CHILDHOOD IN THE MUSLIM MEDITERRANEAN

*A COLLECTION OF STORIES CURATED BY LEÏLA SEBBAR*

EDITED AND ANNOTATED BY  
LIA BROZGAL & REBECCA GLASBERG

TRANSLATIONS BY  
LIA BROZGAL, JANE KUNTZ, REBEKAH VINCE & ROBERT WATSON

Luminos is the Open Access monograph publishing program from UC Press. Luminos provides a framework for preserving and reinvigorating monograph publishing for the future and increases the reach and visibility of important scholarly work. Titles published in the UC Press Luminos model are published with the same high standards for selection, peer review, production, and marketing as those in our traditional program. [www.luminosoa.org](http://www.luminosoa.org)



THE S. MARK TAPER FOUNDATION  
IMPRINT IN JEWISH STUDIES



BY THIS ENDOWMENT  
THE S. MARK TAPER FOUNDATION SUPPORTS  
THE APPRECIATION AND UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE RICHNESS AND DIVERSITY OF  
JEWISH LIFE AND CULTURE

The publisher and the University of California Press Foundation  
gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the  
S. Mark Taper Foundation Imprint in Jewish Studies.

A Jewish Childhood in the  
Muslim Mediterranean

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SERIES IN JEWISH HISTORY  
AND CULTURES

Edited by

Todd Presner, Michael and Irene Ross Professor and Chair, Department of European  
Languages and Transcultural Studies, UCLA

David Myers, Professor and Sady and Ludwig Kahn Chair in Jewish History, UCLA

In partnership with University of California Press's Luminos program, the University  
of California Series in Jewish History and Cultures publishes cutting-edge scholarship  
in Jewish studies, with a particular ability to highlight work that relies on digital media.

The series promotes interdisciplinary work that opens new conceptual and  
methodological horizons and has the potential to make a broad impact on diverse  
fields of study.

1. *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema*, by Deborah A. Starr
2. *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean: A Collection of Stories Curated  
by Leïla Sebbar*, edited and annotated by Lia Brozgal and Rebecca Glasberg;  
translations by Lia Brozgal, Jane Kuntz, Rebekah Vince, and Robert Watson

# A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean

*A Collection of Stories Curated by Leïla Sebbar*

---

*Edited and Annotated by*

Lia Brozgal and Rebecca Glasberg

*Translations by*

*Lia Brozgal, Jane Kuntz, Rebekah Vince, and Robert Watson*



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

University of California Press  
Oakland, California

© 2023 by The Regents of the University of California

Originally published as *Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane*,  
© 2012 Éditions Bleu autour.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA license.  
To view a copy of the license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses>.

Suggested citation: Brozgal, L. and Glasberg, R. (eds.). *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean: A Collection of Stories Curated by Leïla Sebbar*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.155>

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sebbar, Leïla, editor. | Brozgal, Lia Nicole, 1972– editor, translator. | Glasberg, Rebecca, 1986– editor. | Kuntz, Jane, translator. | Vince, Rebekah, translator. | Watson, Robert J. (Robert Jay), 1983– translator.

Title: A Jewish childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean : a collection of stories curated by Leïla Sebbar / edited and annotated by Lia Brozgal and Rebecca Glasberg ; translations by Lia Brozgal, Jane Kuntz, Rebekah Vince, and Robert Watson.

Other titles: Enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane. English | University of California series in Jewish history and cultures ; 2.

Description: Oakland, California : University of California Press, [2023] | Series: University of California series in Jewish history and cultures ; 2 | “Originally published as *Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane*, © 2012 Éditions Bleu autour”—Title page verso. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022047655 | ISBN 9780520393394 (paperback) | ISBN 9780520393400 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Jews—Mediterranean Region—Biography. | Jewish children—Mediterranean Region—Biography. | Jews—Islamic countries—Biography. | Jewish children—Islamic countries—Biography. | Jews—20th century—Biography. | Mediterranean Region—Ethnic relations.

Classification: LCC DS135.M43 E5413 2023 | DDC 305.23089/92401822—dc23/eng/20221018

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022047655>

Manufactured in the United States of America

30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Introduction: A Jewish Childhood in Translation, by Lia Brozgal</i>	xiii
<i>Note on Translation and Transcription</i>	xxxix
<i>Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Map</i>	xlii
Preface: It Would be the Same Story	
<i>Leïla Sebbar</i>	1
CHAPTER ONE: TURKEY	
Country Snapshot	
<i>Rebecca Glasberg</i>	7
<i>Matzah, Simit, and White Cheese</i>	
<i>Lizi Behmoaras</i>	11
Mamma Sultana's Unicorns	
<i>Moris Farhi</i>	16
A Non-Jewish Turkish Jew	
<i>Roni Margulies</i>	23
Her Name Was Dursineh	
<i>Rosie Pinhas-Delpuech</i>	29

CHAPTER TWO: LEBANON

Country Snapshot

<i>Rebecca Glasberg</i>	37
The Dead-End Alley	
<i>Lucien Elia</i>	41
The Baker's Son	
<i>Yves Turquier</i>	46

CHAPTER THREE: EGYPT

Country Snapshot

<i>Rebecca Glasberg</i>	55
Jo and Rita	
<i>Rita Rachel Cohen</i>	59
The Blue Muslims	
<i>Mireille Cohen-Massouda</i>	65
Jour de fête	
<i>Tobie Nathan</i>	71

CHAPTER FOUR: TUNISIA

Country Snapshot

<i>Rebecca Glasberg</i>	79
Nothing about Childhood	
<i>Chochana Boukhobza</i>	83
A Triple Coexistence	
<i>Annie Goldmann</i>	88
Of Wings and Footprints	
<i>Hubert Haddad</i>	93
The Broken Bargain	
<i>Ida Kummer</i>	100
Open Letter to my Grandchildren Adrien, Élie, Raphaël, and Anna	
<i>Nine Moati</i>	106
The Jewish Boy from Monastir	
<i>Guy Sitbon</i>	111

CHAPTER FIVE: ALGERIA

Country Snapshot

<i>Rebecca Glasberg</i>	119
Excellent Frenchmen	
<i>Jean-Luc Allouche</i>	123
Diar-es-Saada	
<i>Joëlle Bahloul</i>	129
Djelfa, My Beloved	
<i>Albert Bensoussan</i>	133
Between Agony and Delight	
<i>Patrick Chemla</i>	140
An Algiers Girlhood	
<i>Alice Cherki</i>	145
Kaddish for a Lost Childhood	
<i>Roger Dadoun</i>	151
Like a Slap in the Face	
<i>Line Meller-Saïd</i>	158
“No, Not Jewish. Israelite”	
<i>Daniel Mesguich</i>	165
With All Due Respect . . .	
<i>Aldo Naouri</i>	174
The Hammam, and Afterwards	
<i>Benjamin Stora</i>	178
The Courtyard	
<i>Dany Toubiana</i>	184

CHAPTER SIX: MOROCCO

Country Snapshot

<i>Rebecca Glasberg</i>	193
For Other Tomorrows?	
<i>André Azoulay</i>	197
The Ocean in a Carafe	
<i>Marcel Bénabou</i>	202

God's Cradle	
<i>Ami Bouganim</i>	207
Flecks of Memory	
<i>Anny Dayan Rosenman</i>	212
Mamada	
<i>Lucette Heller-Goldenberg</i>	217
Crossing an Invisible Distance	
<i>Nicole S. Serfaty</i>	223
In the Medina	
<i>Daniel Sibony</i>	229
Living between the Lines	
<i>Ralph Toledano</i>	235
<i>Further Reading</i>	241
<i>List of Contributors</i>	247
<i>Index</i>	259

## ILLUSTRATIONS

### MAPS

1. Middle East and North Africa *xlii*
2. Turkey 8
3. Lebanon 38
4. Egypt 56
5. Tunisia 80
6. Algeria 120
7. Morocco 194

### FIGURES

1. Leïla Sebbar with her brother Alain and her sisters, Lysel and Danièle 2
2. Lizi Behmoaras, Şişli Square, Istanbul, early 1950s 12
3. Moris Farhi, age three or four in Ankara, 1938 or 1939 17
4. Roni Margulies, Istanbul, 1960 24
5. Rosie Pinhas, age three, Taksim Garden, October 1950 30
6. Rosie Pinhas, Turkish primary school diploma, received 1957 33
7. Lucien Elia, age seven 42
8. Yves Turquier, photo taken from the balcony of the family apartment in Beirut 47
9. Rita Rachel Cohen and brother Jo, Alexandria, summer 1956 60
10. Mireille Cohen-Massouda, Alexandria, September 1945 66
11. Tobie Nathan, age three, Ras El Bar (Egypt), 1951 72
12. Chochana Boukhobza with her little sister, Sfax, 1963 84

13. Annie Taïeb-Goldmann, five or six years old, Mateur 89
14. Hubert Haddad, approximately three years old, La Goulette 94
15. Ida Kummer, Villa Zirah, Tunis, 1956 101
16. Nine Moati and family, Verdun Square, Tunis, 1943 107
17. Guy Sitbon, age fourteen, Monastir 112
18. Jean-Luc Allouche, class photo, Aumale High School of Constantine, 1960–1961 124
19. Joëlle Bahloul, class photo, Diar-es-Saada School for Girls, Algiers, 1958 130
20. Albert Bensoussan, class photo, Gautier High School, Algiers, 1948 134
21. Patrick Chemla, six years old, and family, Bergère-sous-Montmirail (Champagne) 141
22. Alice Cherki, three years old, photographer's studio, Algiers 146
23. Roger Dadoun and family, circa 1943 152
24. Line Meller-Saïd, class photo, Lavigerie Preschool, Blida, 1936–1937 159
25. Daniel Mesguich and mother, central post office, Algiers, 1960 166
26. Aldo Naouri, around ten years old, Orléansville, circa 1948 175
27. Benjamin Stora with father, age five, place de la Brèche, Constantine, 1956 179
28. Dany Toubiana, six years old, École Sévigné, Guelma 185
29. André Azoulay leading parade, Moulay Al Hassan Square, 1955 198
30. Marcel Bénabou as a teenager, Meknes 203
31. Image “Bouquet of Brotherhood.” 208
32. Anny Dayan Rosenman, age nine, Studio Marty, Casablanca 213
33. Lucette Heller-Goldenberg and family, Mamounia Gardens, Marrakesh, 1946 218
34. Nicole S. Serfaty with father and brother, boulevard de la Gare, Casablanca, 1956 224
35. Daniel Sibony's childhood home on Derb Djama' Street, Bahia neighborhood, Marrakesh 230
36. Ralph Toledano, two years old, Casablanca 236

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This particular task of translation has been nothing if not a group effort. Our gratitude goes, first and foremost, to Leïla Sebbar, for her ongoing commitment to telling nuanced, complex stories from parts of the world too often shrouded in stereotype, and for entrusting us with the project of bringing these stories to an even larger readership.

Our appreciation also goes to Patrice Rötig, founder and editor-in-chief of Éditions Bleu autour (the publishing house responsible for the original French version of this volume), for his permission to translate this work. We also thank his co-editor, Emmanuelle Boucaud, for her prompt replies to so many administrative queries.

A small team of translators are at the heart of this project, animated by a sense of mission and, as is unfortunately too often the case, for no financial gain of their own. And so we are indebted to Jane Kuntz, Rebekah Vince, and Robert Watson for their linguistic skill, their cultural acumen, and for their good will.

Numerous scholars and experts in the field responded generously to various calls for help. We are grateful to Aomar Boum, Nouri Gana, Ali İğmen, Jean-Claude Lalou, Jessica Marglin, Aron Rodrigue, Brady Ryan, Marc Sounigo, Jessie Stoolman, and Yasemin Yildiz for their help in clarifying so many linguistic, historical, and cultural details.

The publication of this translation would not have been possible without the UCLA Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies, which provided the financial support necessary for the acquisition of the rights to the original manuscript. Many thanks to Todd Presner, Sarah Abrevaya Stein, and the Leve Center team—Vivian Holenbeck, Chelsea White, Reina Chung—for making this possible. Moreover, this project was supported, at critical stages, by grants from the Center for European

and Russian Studies, the Faculty Research Grant Program, and the Department of European Languages and Transcultural Studies (all at UCLA).

The introduction to this collection benefitted immeasurably from feedback received in different venues and from a wide variety of experts. Lia would like to thank the Faculty Working Group at the UCLA Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies for reading the original proposal and providing insights on how to best frame this collection for an English-reading audience. She would also like to thank Neetu Khanna, Olivia Harrison, and Jessica Marglin of the USC writers' group, for opening the door to a "Bruin" and rigorously workshopping the introduction's penultimate version, as well as Sara Kippur and Josh Lambert, who read and commented on various iterations of both the proposal and the introduction. The entire manuscript also benefitted from the expertise of the UC Press's peer-review team (Jessica Marglin and one anonymous reviewer). All of these readers helped to produce a final product that is as clear and as rigorous as possible. Any lingering errors or political missteps are the editors' own.

This volume has been enhanced by a set of custom-designed maps, provided by cartographer and graphic designer Bill Nelson. We are indebted to the meticulous work of our copy editor, Lynda Crawford, and of our indexer, David Robertson. A special thanks to Ashley Gallo, Senior Fund Manager in the Department of European Languages and Transcultural Studies, for her skill and patience in helping us organize vendors and finances. Finally, we would like to express our appreciation for the professionalism and expertise of the entire team at UC Press Luminos—Eric Schmidt, LeKeisha Hughes, Jessica Moll, Lynda Crawford, and Teresa Iafolla—for their commitment to bringing this project to the world.

# Introduction

## *A Jewish Childhood in Translation*

Lia Brozgal

But in having to translate everything, they ended up transforming themselves. In other words, the act of translation changed both the object to be translated and the subject doing the translating.

—DANIEL MESGUICH, “NO, NOT JEWISH; ISRAELITE”

His name is Ahmed; he’s my best friend. He is seven years old, just like me. I know that his parents are Muslims, he knows that mine are Jews. On our street in Beirut, everyone knows that. But you think that’s a problem for kids who want to play marbles?

—YVES TURQUIER, “THE BAKER’S SON”

*A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean* is a collection of autobiographical stories and essays curated by Franco-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar. Originally written in French, the stories collected here provide a window onto a bygone world marked by the complex history of Judeo-Muslim cohabitation in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>1</sup> By turns nostalgic and bitter, familiar and improbable, explicit and elliptical, the childhoods captured here are undeniably Jewish, but they are also Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, Egyptian, Lebanese, and Turkish. While each story testifies to the multicultural, multilingual, and multi-faith

1. For reasons having to do with their schooling and life trajectories, two of the authors preferred to write their stories in English. Although Roni Margulies’s parents spoke French with him at home, growing up he spoke Turkish and was schooled in English and American establishments in Istanbul before attending college in England. Similarly, Moris Farhi grew up in a multilingual environment in Ankara and eventually moved to England for university. The original French version of *A Jewish Childhood* contains translated versions of their stories; here, we have reproduced their original English-language texts.

communities into which its author was born, when taken together, the essays articulate ambivalent histories of proximity and distance, solidarity and suspicion, sameness and difference.

The contributors are Jews who came of age in the Muslim Mediterranean—that is, in places where Islam was the majority religion, and at a moment when their everyday routines were inflected, albeit to different degrees, by the politics and policies of French imperialism. The lives of the authors, all of whom were born between 1935 and 1955, were also undeniably impacted by the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Moreover, between 1948 and 1970, many of the lands of the Mediterranean would bear witness to a veritable exodus of their Jews. While departures were broadly motivated by a sense of political uncertainty and ongoing experiences of persecution, they were also prompted by specific events, such as the Second Arab-Israeli War (1956), or the demise of colonial regimes that heralded a turn toward pan-Arabism. (Morocco and Tunisia became independent in 1956; Algeria in 1962.) For many, the lure of the Zionist project was also a factor in the decision to leave. As a result, by the early 1960s, most of the region's Jews had left their respective homelands for new lives in exile (primarily in Israel and France, but also in England, the United States, and Canada).<sup>2</sup> It is telling that, of the thirty-four authors featured in this volume, only one still makes her permanent residence in the country where she was born.<sup>3</sup>

Prompted by Sebbar to reflect on their childhoods, these writers gesture to universal themes such as language, difference, family, memory, and history, while also shedding light on the idiosyncrasies of Jewish experience, both within the Muslim Mediterranean and beyond. For if the authors brought together in *A Jewish Childhood* have in common a religion, a region, a language, and, ultimately, the experience of exile, their stories reveal significant differences in both content and form. Indeed, from the details and anecdotes selected for inclusion to the mode of self-representation deployed, the authors display an array of attitudes toward their childhood experiences, the impact of geopolitics, and of their sense of identification with the French language, with Judaism, and with their native communities.

Some, like the Algerian-born historian Benjamin Stora, favor a triumphant narrative filled with detailed reportage, facts, and dates. Others approach the

2. Migration patterns over the course of the twentieth century shifted as a function of geopolitics and policy, making the emigration of Mediterranean Jews difficult to systematize. Of the approximately nine hundred thousand Jews living in Arab lands in 1948, approximately two-thirds emigrated to Israel, while the remainder moved to France and the United States. If the North African Jews tended to move to France in greater numbers, early emigrants from Morocco, for example, preferred Israel. The Jewish Virtual Library's section on Jews in Islamic Countries provides useful statistics on demography and migration, broken down by country. See <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jews-in-islamic-countries>.

3. Lizi Behmoaras has remained a resident of Istanbul. It is also worth noting that Roni Margulies returned to Turkey after living in England for more than thirty years, and André Azoulay spends a great deal of time in his homeland of Morocco and continues to hold Moroccan citizenship.

autobiographical genre with impressionistic brush strokes: the Egyptian actress, dramaturge, and writer Rita Rachel Cohen sets forth a fragmented tale that reproduces the instability of memory and the teetering experience of departure. Algerian psychoanalyst Roger Dadoun manages to tell his own story while scrupulously avoiding the use of the pronoun “I.” Some writers describe a rupture with their origins: Rosie Pinhas-Delpuech, born in Istanbul, writes of her desire to “become another, to be reborn in French, in France”; others, like Ida Kummer, who now lives between France and the United States, ends her story with a defiant declaration of alliance: “Tunisian I am; Tunisian I remain.”

The convener of this collection, Leïla Sebbar, is a novelist and essayist of significant renown in the francophone world. Sebbar was born in 1941, in Algeria, to Mohammed Sebbar (an Algerian Muslim) and Renée Bordas (a French woman from the Dordogne region)—both of whom were teachers in a French school near Tlemcen. The Algeria of her early childhood was multicultural, multi-confessional, and plurilingual. It was also, at the time, a French settler colony, having been conquered in 1830 and then annexed to mainland France as a set of three overseas *départements*, or administrative regions, in 1848. This meant that Algeria was considered as an extension of French territory and subject to the laws, regulations, and governmental structures of mainland France, all of which were administered, locally, by French bureaucrats.

Citizenship, however, was one key exception in the application of French law in Algeria. Whereas Sebbar’s mother was French by birthright, and thus able to pass her nationality to her children, Sebbar’s father was a French *subject*, not a French *citizen*. Like all indigenous Arabo-Muslim Algerians, he was considered an FMA, or *Français musulman d’Algérie* (French Muslim of Algeria), a novel category of legal belonging that ascribed some of the rights of nationality to the indigenous population, while simultaneously denying them many others.<sup>4</sup>

Sebbar was educated in French schools in Algeria until the age of seventeen, and she describes both her schooling and her upbringing as secular and very much francophone. Her adolescence coincided with the beginning of the Algerian War for Independence, the experience of which would compel her to acknowledge the plurality of her own identity.<sup>5</sup> Although she does not speak Arabic, Sebbar would come to view her bicultural and biracial background as foundational to

4. Questions of citizenship and nationality under colonial regimes were complex—notoriously so in French-ruled Algeria, where ethnicity, religion, and even past military service impacted eligibility. For more on this topic, see Patrick Weil, “Le statut des musulmans en Algérie coloniale. Une nationalité française dénaturée,” *Histoire de la justice* 16, no. 1 (2005): 93–109. For a more general overview of citizenship and North Africa, see Jessica Marglin, “Citizenship and Nationality in the French Colonial Maghrib,” in *Routledge Handbook of Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Roel Meijer, Zahra Babar, and James Sater (London: Routledge, 2021): 45–60.

5. Danielle Marx-Scouras, “The Mother Tongue of Leïla Sebbar,” *Studies in 20th-Century Literature* 17, no. 1 (1993): 46–47, <https://newprairiepress.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1311&context=sttcl>.

her identity and to her writing practice, noting, “difference, or alterity, makes me write, I preserve it, I seek it out everywhere where it can inspire me to write.”<sup>6</sup> She attended university in France, married a Frenchman, and made her life in Paris, where she taught high school, and where she still resides today. Yet her complex relationship to Algeria and to Arabic remains the dominant motif in her writing, as demonstrated in recent autobiographical texts.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it was this longing to find inspiration in difference that compelled Sebbar to undertake the project that would become *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean*. After all, she stands apart from the company she has gathered together to meditate on Jewish childhood insofar as Sebbar herself is not Jewish. Yet her vision for this project—her reason for taking up what she calls a “collective, creative archeology”—seems to be rooted in memories of shared subjugation and an unexplained sense of common rejection. In her preface, she writes of understanding, as a child, that it was “bad to be an Arab [ . . . ] bad to be Jewish,” at a time when she didn’t even know what the words “Jewish” and “Arab” meant. She goes on to wonder: “Why was it bad? Nobody ever said. Did I believe it? I don’t know.” *A Jewish Childhood* is Sebbar’s attempt to grapple with these questions, to carve out a literary space for an encounter “that brings together those so often separated by colonial history.”

Ultimately, the experience of cohabitation described herein is idiosyncratic, and the reader looking to put her finger on the “truth” about the experience of cohabitation between Jews and Muslims, to establish once and for all a narrative of tolerance or rejection, will find that this collection raises more questions than it answers. Some authors claim that, as children, they didn’t even know they were Jewish (or different from their Muslim neighbors); others speak of an early, and very clear sense of difference and even rejection (and those who do often use the word anti-Semitism); others, still, reflect an awareness of the complexity of the situation, with its tacit rules and implicit boundaries—both of which were policed instinctively and often unconsciously. Rather than attempt to establish or reinforce a unified story about Jewish childhood in the Mediterranean, the reader would do well to pay attention to *how* these writers figure their own identities, how they describe or produce impressions of difference or sameness, and how they interpret, post facto, the experiences of their formative years.

This introduction, which is a supplement to the original volume, seeks to provide the reader with some crucial historical and cultural signposts, and to engage

6. Soheila Kian and Leïla Sebbar, “Une entrevue avec Leïla Sebbar: l’écriture et l’altérité,” *French Review* 78, no. 1 (October 2004), 130.

7. See, for example: *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (2003); *L’Arabe comme un chant secret* (2007) [*Arabic as a Secret Song*, translated by Sklyer Artes, afterword by Mildred Mortimer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015)]; and, completing what is now known as her autobiographical trilogy, *Lettre à mon père* (2021). Excerpts of this last title have been translated into English by Marilyn Hacker and are available at <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/27706>.

some of the big questions prompted by this work as a whole, questions that revolve around religion and politics, to be sure, but also around memory, representation, and the slippery genre of autobiography. Given that no such contextual information was deemed essential to the French version, one might argue that its inclusion here is superfluous, or that it risks overdetermining the reader's experience; after all, the task of the translator is certainly not to *explain* the original. Moreover, since many of the essays take it upon themselves to provide historical and cultural detail, readers can readily situate individual stories against a broader backdrop, even if they are not well versed in the micro politics of a given region.

But I would suggest that while each essay contains its own world of experience and complexity, and each can be read on its own merits, it is the collection of these worlds—as they work in synergy, contradict, and unsettle one another—that produces complexities and ambiguities to challenge our thinking and received ideas. And so, by drawing attention to and historicizing some of the polemics that hum in the background of this book, and by providing a suggestive road map to interpretation, I aim neither to explain nor to clarify the contents, but rather to make legible the contradictions and ambivalences at the heart of *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean*. References to relevant scholarship are provided along the way, should the reader wish to delve more deeply into a given history, terminological debate, or literary quarrel.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE MUSLIM MEDITERRANEAN: A PLACE, AN IDEA

The Mediterranean is said to contain a multiplicity of worlds; it is, to borrow a familiar trope, a “mosaic” of cultures. Yet despite the fact that from the Middle Ages until the sixteenth century the majority of world Jewry lived in the Mediterranean basin, the region is not always readily associated with Jews and Judaism.<sup>9</sup> Of course, many readers will be aware of the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, which led to the dispersion of some two hundred thousand Spanish Jews across North Africa and the Ottoman empire. However, the history of Jewish presence in the region prior to the expulsion is perhaps less well known. Indeed, the countries in question—Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey—all lay claim to Jewish communities whose existence predated the common era. In North Africa, Jewish settlements in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia can be traced to the Roman Empire (27 BCE), predating even the Muslim conquest of the region in the seventh century. At the very beginning of the common

8. A list of further reading, including scholarship and creative work available in English translation, is provided at the end of this volume, in an appendix organized by country.

9. See Jane Gerber, “History of the Jews in the Middle East and North African from the Rise of Islam until 1700,” in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, eds. Reeva Spector Simon et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 3–5. See also Georges Bensoussan, *Juifs en pays arabes, le grand déracinement 1850–1975* (Paris: Tallandier, 2012), 41.

era, Anatolia (whose borders resembled those of modern-day Turkey) was known as a haven for Byzantine and Hellenistic Jews. In Biblical times, the world's most ancient Jewish communities were found in Egypt and the Levant.

For centuries, then, Jews constituted a robust minority in the broad swathe of territory identified here as the Muslim Mediterranean. Their dim visibility in the region is thus a complex phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Beginning in the Middle Ages, Jews of Muslim lands lived as *dhimmis*, or protected non-Muslim subjects.<sup>11</sup> *Dhimma* status ensured that Jews were guaranteed some protections, including the freedom to practice their religion, but they were nevertheless subjected to a number of discriminatory regulations (including specific taxation and laws governing their clothing). At the same time, in many places, Jewish communities were granted a significant degree of autonomy and permitted to preserve their own courts. While some Jews experienced poverty and other forms of marginalization, they were never prohibited from practicing the professions of their choice, and Jews became active participants in commerce, spoke multiple languages, including Arabic, and were key figures in the scientific, intellectual, and cultural achievements of the Golden Age of Islam.

By the end of the seventeenth century, however, the populations of Jews in Muslim lands had decreased sharply and, by the nineteenth century, the center of gravity of the Jewish world had been firmly repositioned in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Today, in demographic terms, Ashkenazim (the Jewish subgroup that settled in central and eastern Europe in the Middle Ages) make up three-quarters of world Jewry; their stories have tended to dominate those of the Sephardim (Jews from the Iberian peninsula) and Mizrahim (“eastern” Jews—or Jews from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia).

The story of Jewish childhood in a place called the “Muslim Mediterranean” thus requires a backstory about a particular region of the world and the history of Jewish existence therein. The Mediterranean is, to state the obvious, a body of water—technically a sea but so nearly landlocked as to have been baptized “the

10. For more on the long history of Jews and the Mediterranean, see Fred Astren, “Jews,” in *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, eds. Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita (Chichester/Malden/Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.): 392–408. See also Mattias B. Lehman and Jessica Marglin, “Jewish History in the Mediterranean, the Mediterranean in Jewish History,” in *Introduction to Jews and the Mediterranean*, eds. Lehman and Marglin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020): 1–29.

11. *Dhimmi* means “protected person.” *Dhimma* status is an historical feature of Muslim law that offered certain forms of protection to “people of the book” (namely, Jews and Christians) living in Islamic lands. While *dhimmis* had fewer rights than Muslims, the existence of this category nonetheless provided guarantees of some state protections.

12. See Gerber, 18; Astren, 403; and Norman A. Stillman's preface to *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Sourcebook* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979). The displacement of the center of world Jewry from the Mediterranean to Europe is reflective of the general shifts that accompanied the Mediterranean's decline as a center of the global economy and the rise in standing of Europe as a dominant, imperial world power.

inner sea” (*mediterraneus* is Latin for inland), and nicknamed, by different peoples at different points in history, “the middle sea” or “the inland sea.”<sup>13</sup> “Mediterranean” is also the proper name given to the region composed of twenty-one countries that have coastline along that sea, and thus it unifies territories that are linguistically, culturally, and politically diverse. It is a place that has long been a site of exchange, encounter, conflict, and conquest.<sup>14</sup> And of course, “Mediterranean,” as an adjective, has come to be identified in contemporary parlance with a certain kind of lifestyle made possible by a particular climate and geography.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding the relative ease with which one can identify the place on a map, and despite the dominant imagery it conjures, the Mediterranean is complex, and the use of the term—even as a toponym—nearly always seems to point up problematic amalgams or omissions that require further explanation. The Mediterranean exceeds its meaning as a delineated geographical area and resists its reputation in the popular imagination as a place of “Sea, Sex and Sun” (as French singer-songwriter Serge Gainsbourg crooned), or its construction as one big neighborhood where neighbors pass olive oil from one balcony to the next (as the francophone Algerian writer Maïssa Bey lamented).<sup>16</sup> It has come to be understood as a symbolic space, an idea, a construct, and as a site of scholarly inquiry.

Scholarship, particularly since the publication of Fernand Braudel’s foundational work *La Méditerranée* in 1949, has done a great deal of work to establish the Mediterranean as a unitary category of analysis while also unsettling notions of regional cohesiveness.<sup>17</sup> In the past twenty years, “Mediterranean”—as a new

13. See New World Encyclopedia, “Mediterranean Sea,” [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mediterranean\\_Sea](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mediterranean_Sea).

14. Countries and regions officially considered part of the Mediterranean include Europe (Spain, France, Monaco, Italy, Malta, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Greece); Asia (Turkey, Syria, Cyprus, Lebanon, Israel); Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco). Noncontiguous countries (such as Portugal and Serbia) are often grouped together with “the Mediterranean,” even though they do not touch the sea; they are understood as sharing in a similar climate, flora and fauna, and cultural affinities.

15. Here, we might think of the “Mediterranean diet,” fusion music, and even the origins of the resort chain Club Med, conceived as “vacation colonies” situated in Spain and Italy.

16. The bad boy of French *chanson* Serge Gainsbourg (1928–1991) sang about the “Med” in his hit single “Sea, Sex, and Sun” (1978). In her preface to the collection “Pourquoi la méditerranée?” (Why the Mediterranean?), written for a collection of transcribed radio interviews with French-language authors from the Mediterranean, Algerian writer Maïssa Bey articulates a certain skepticism about the grouping: “One might wonder why writers are brought together in a collection based on the mere fact that they are neighbors and that they could, from one shore to another, one balcony to another, pass each other the salt and the pepper, and above all that they could pass each other the olive oil so dear to the hearts of all Mediterranean people, and which guarantees their health and longevity.” In *La langue française vue de la Méditerranée*, eds. Patrice Martin and Christophe Drevet (Léchéelle, France: Zellige, 2009), 7. [Our translation.]

17. Braudel’s magnum opus was the first to conceive of the “inner sea” as a principal actor in history. His work would set the stage for numerous key concepts in the social sciences, including the idea of *la longue durée* and the importance of geography to the study of history, politics, and

“area studies” subject and as a heuristic tool—has become a major trend in the Humanities, no doubt in part because of its natural affinity with interdisciplinarity. This is perhaps most obvious and fruitful in Medieval Studies, where historians and literary scholars trained in national paradigms have found common ground in the Mediterranean as a proto-national, multilingual space. But it has also found purchase in Postcolonial Studies and its subfields, insofar as the deployment of the Mediterranean—understood in its capacity to “displace the nation as the default category of analysis”<sup>18</sup>—offers a welcome alternative to worn binaries such as metropole/colony, north/south, center/periphery.<sup>19</sup>

If the cohesion offered by the Mediterranean concept has both intellectual and disciplinary advantages, the region’s plurality and fragmentation are legendary and cannot be discounted.<sup>20</sup> After all, the area is home to some of history’s most intractable ethnic conflicts—between Greeks and Turks; Turks and Armenians; Jews and Arabs; and among Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians. Given the multiple worlds contained within the Mediterranean—the Arab world and divisions thereof (the Mashreq, the Maghreb);<sup>21</sup> the Middle East and its contested territories; Europe (the meridional Europe of Spain, Italy, and Greece, but also France, with its dual claims to “northern reason” and “southern passion”)—it stands to reason that while “Mediterranean” functions as an efficient unifier, critical discussion of it necessitates a qualifying term. Hence, in both political discourse and academic work, we

---

economics. See *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1995).

18. Sharon Kinoshita, “Mediterranean Literature,” in Horden and Kinoshita, 314.

19. Numerous literary scholars, in particular, have heralded the usefulness of the Mediterranean as an alternative category of analysis. See Claudia Esposito, *The Narrative Mediterranean: Beyond France and the Maghreb* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, *The Transcontinental Maghreb: Francophone Literature Across the Mediterranean* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); and *Critically Mediterranean: Temporalities, Aesthetics, and Deployments of a Sea in Crisis*, eds. Yasser Elhariry and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

20. See Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000); and Christian Bromberger, “Towards an Anthropology of the Mediterranean,” *History and Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2006): 91–107.

21. The Arabic terms *al-Maghrib* (Maghreb) and *al-Mashriq* (Mashreq) are spatial designations that correspond to notions of “west” and “east,” respectively. Mashreq, etymologically derived from the word “shine, illuminate,” indicates the place where the sun rises, or the “east”; it thus refers, geographically, to the countries of the Middle East (including Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, etc.). Maghreb, derived from the Arabic for “to set,” describes the “west” and generally includes Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania, the Western Sahara, and Morocco, whose name in Arabic, “al-Maghrib,” denotes its status as the western-most Islamic-ruled land. Libya is considered to be split between the two. In certain academic disciplines, however, the designation “Maghreb” often refers only to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, the three lands that came under French rule during the colonial era. For an excellent discussion of the politics of cartography and toponyms, see Abdelmajid Hannoum, *The Invention of the Maghreb: Between Africa and the Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

find recourse to more limited subsets of the Mediterranean, defined by cardinal points (the Eastern Mediterranean, referring generally to the Levantine Basin, for example, or the Northern Mediterranean, referring to Europe), but also by periods and peoples, as in the case of the Roman, Hellenic, or Ottoman Mediterranean.

It is worth noting that, in selecting the title for the collection, Sebbar avoided the expression “Arab Mediterranean,” despite the fact that it describes a territory nearly identical to the “Muslim Mediterranean” and is far more widely used, having found purchase in both administrative and geopolitical contexts, as well as in scholarly discourse on history, literature, and culture.<sup>22</sup> The decision is clearly demographic and factual: the inclusion of authors from Turkey—a country that belongs to the Muslim world but cannot be considered an Arab land—makes the designation “Arab Mediterranean” false. Yet it is impossible not to notice that avoiding the word “Arab” in the title also allows the collection to skirt the potential political landmines associated with “Jews and Arabs.” (See the following section for a longer discussion of the politics of the volume.)

Notwithstanding its apparent specificity, the notion of a “Muslim” Mediterranean—the term chosen by Sebbar to describe the origins of the childhoods on display in this volume—may risk eliding important differences between countries of the region where Islam is the dominant religion. A Jewish childhood in Muslim Turkey, for example, would have been subjected to different political, cultural, and linguistic pressures than a Jewish childhood in Muslim Algeria. Sebbar’s articulation may ultimately be a solution of convenience; after all, to speak only of the Mediterranean would be far too broad; to speak of only the Western or Levantine Mediterranean would eliminate important units of comparison; and to speak of the Francophone Mediterranean produces more definitional problems than it solves (countries like Turkey and Egypt, for example, have very different relationships to French colonial influence than do the countries of North Africa).<sup>23</sup> The notion of a Jewish childhood in a place called the Muslim Mediterranean, as encapsulated by the title of the collection, thus sets up a binary opposition that functions as a shorthand for the tensions—religious, cultural, linguistic, and political—inherent in the region but also in the representations of the life experiences of a religious minority.

The importance of the Mediterranean as a geographic and cultural frame for this collection is somewhat self-evident, and the reader will readily recognize tropes of Mediterranean-ness across the various portraits—swimming at the beaches of Algiers (Bahloul); descriptions of whitewashed walls and blue doors and shutters

22. See, for example, Karla Mallette, *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean: Toward a New Philology and a Counter-Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

23. The notion of a “Muslim Mediterranean” appears rarely and has not been rigorously theorized in scholarship. For an example that does engage with the term’s implications, see David Abulafia, “The Norman Kingdom of Africa and the Norman Expeditions to Majorca and the Muslim Mediterranean,” *Anglo-Norman Studies* 7 (1985): 26–49.

(Bouganim); laundry hung out to dry on sun-drenched terraces (Toubiana); the hammam (Stora); and, ubiquitous, olives, mint tea, and pastry with dates, honey, and almonds. In the end, very few of the authors use the designation “Mediterranean,” or even make reference to the region or the sea as a source of identity. But it is worth nothing that those who do refer to the region explicitly are acutely aware of its ambivalent “optics”: Ida Kummer, for example, writes of “coming to the painful understanding that despite the picture-perfect life often ascribed to our supposedly easygoing Mediterranean world, my Tunisian Jewish identity would involve both joys and sorrows.” Indeed, notwithstanding their production in this volume as a kind of Mediterranean chorus, the individual stories of *A Jewish Childhood* have in common a decidedly “local” flavor to their memories and descriptions; their worlds are not broad transnational swathes—they are cities, neighborhoods, apartments, streets, gardens, and courtyards.

#### THE FRENCH CONNECTION

The fact that these Jewish writers chose to recall their childhoods in French, rather than in Hebrew, Arabic, or any other of the many languages used throughout the region, may come as something of a surprise. It is true, of course, that many of the authors moved to France at a young age—Tunisian Chochana Boukhobza, for example, relocated from Sfax to Paris when she was four—and that nearly all the contributors pursued higher education in France and eventually made their homes there. Yet these factors are not, in and of themselves, satisfactory explanations for the authors’ preference for French. Rather, patterns of migration and ultimate destinations participate in a larger story about empire, the politics of culture, and the tentacular reach of the French civilizing mission into the lands of Islam.<sup>24</sup> It is worth, then, exploring the dynamics that contributed to the production of this heretofore unmapped Jewish *francophonie*, born in the Muslim Mediterranean.<sup>25</sup>

The dynamics in question were undoubtedly driven by colonization and its various permutations. While this global phenomenon of political-economic conquest and exploitation had already been at work for centuries in other parts of the world, beginning in the nineteenth century several Western powers—namely England, France, and Italy—turned their attention to the Middle East and North Africa.

24. The civilizing mission has its origins in the European Middle Ages, and came to serve as the justification for the West’s colonization of indigenous people the world over. For a discussion of the civilizing mission in the context of France’s imperial endeavors, see Alice Conklin, “The Civilizing Mission,” in *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*, eds. Edward G. Berenson, Vincent Duclert, and Christophe Prochasson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011): 173–181.

25. It is worth noting that, with the exception of Iraq (thanks to the unusual circumstances of a Jewish intelligentsia literate in Arabic) and Tunisia (where there was a lively Judeo-Arabic publishing scene), Jewish writers of the MENA region have typically preferred to write in languages other than Arabic. Moreover, while one might reasonably presume that most of these Jewish writers had at least a passing knowledge of Hebrew, that language is rarely used in literary expression outside of Israel.

Deploying different methods and with varying results, these European nations began to acquire and consolidate power under the banner of modernizing and civilizing the putative Orient. France, with a presence in the area dating to 1789, and with influence that would span the width of the Mediterranean basin from Morocco to Turkey, was easily the most dominant Western influence in the region.

From the Maghreb to the Mashreq, and even within each subregion, the quality and nature of French colonial intervention varied. Of the countries represented in this volume, Algeria—a settler colony invaded in 1830 and officially attached to France in 1848—was undoubtedly the one most tightly sutured to the mainland in terms of administrative structure. Neighboring Tunisia and Morocco (occupied in 1881 and 1912, respectively) were governed as protectorates and, as a result, local governments maintained direct rule and some degree of autonomy, even as France exercised significant economic, political, and cultural power.<sup>26</sup>

The situation in the Mashreq, or the Middle East, was somewhat different. While France never formally colonized or annexed Egypt, Lebanon, or Turkey, it was nonetheless an important power broker in the Ottoman Empire, where it exercised diplomatic, economic, and cultural influence.<sup>27</sup> Napoleon Bonaparte's occupation of Egypt (1798–1801) was relatively short lived, but French culture and education would have a long-lasting impact on Egyptian society, and its legal system would leave a clear mark on Egyptian law. In the first part of the twentieth century, France occupied the zone that would later become Lebanon and Syria, an area it ruled under a League of Nations mandate from 1920 to 1946. The post-World War I mandate system prevented European nations from annexing and colonizing (to the degree seen in North Africa, for example), yet French presence and rule would nevertheless shape the region's administrative structures, cultural politics, and even geographical borders.<sup>28</sup>

As scholar Aron Rodrigue has observed, the “modern encounter” between Europe the Jewish communities of the Muslim “decisively marked the last century of Jewish existence in the lands of Islam.”<sup>29</sup> This seems to have been especially true for the Jewish communities in lands controlled or highly influenced by France. Compared to England and Italy, for example, France held a more significant sway over the region's Jews, who were generally considered to be assimilated, to some degree, into French culture. But if, in the twentieth century, Istanbul, Cairo, Tunis,

26. Morocco maintained its monarchy, for example, with the sultan (or king, beginning in 1957) remaining the official figurehead, even as the French exercised broad control over most aspects of government. The situation was similar in Tunisia, where the former Ottoman ruler, or bey, retained his position of symbolic authority while the French controlled all aspects of the administration.

27. The Ottoman Empire lasted more than six hundred years (from 1300 to 1922) and, at its height, controlled a large swathe of southern Europe and the MENA region.

28. Indeed, the partition that would yield the present day Republic of Lebanon was largely made possible by French relationships with the Lebanese Maronite community.

29. Aron Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims: Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Modern Times* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 4.

and Beirut were places where Jews were “raised up” by the politics and policies of the French civilizing mission and given access to education and other forms of social mobility, this only rarely took the form of official state policy. The lone exception to this was Algeria, where the Jews were granted French citizenship under the Crémieux Decree in 1870.<sup>30</sup>

Rather, Jewish acquisition of French cultural capital or, at the very least, the acquisition of competency in the language, was the direct result of the project undertaken by what would today be called an NGO (nongovernmental organization): the Franco-Jewish philanthropic organization known as the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU). Founded in Paris, in 1860, by Adolphe Crémieux and other members of the Franco-Jewish elite, the AIU saw the Jews of Muslim lands as “a poor, benighted lot, ‘backward’ and ‘obscurantist,’ and in dire need of help from their brethren in the West to rejoin ‘civilization.’”<sup>31</sup> The group’s founding statutes articulated the following main goals: (1) to work throughout the world for the emancipation and the moral progress of the Jews; (2) to help effectively all those who suffer because they are Jews; and (3) to encourage all publications designed to achieve these results.<sup>32</sup>

The sentiments of solidarity—and even of equality—inscribed in the group’s motto, “All Jews are responsible for each other,” lose some of their credibility when read alongside language like “backward” and “obscurantist.” The same might be said for the AIU’s recourse to Enlightenment ideology, as evidenced in its quest for the “moral regeneration” of the Jews of Muslim lands. But if the vocabulary and the paradigms that undergird it are unsettling to a modern reader, it is nonetheless important to place them in their historical context: the AIU’s doctrine was calqued on the French *mission civilisatrice*, which attempted to rationalize colonization in the name of modernization and social uplift. According to Jules Ferry, the French statesman whose name is synonymous with both *laïcité* (secularism) and colonial expansion: “the higher races have a right over the lower races,” and the “superior races have a right because they have a duty . . . to civilize the inferior races.”<sup>33</sup>

30. The *décret Crémieux*—named for Adolphe Crémieux, a Jewish French lawyer and politician who was also a strong proponent of the AIU—was a blanket decree that granted French citizenship to the vast majority of Algerian Jews. The decree was summarily revoked in 1940 under the anti-Jewish laws enacted by Vichy, then reinstated in 1943, as the tide of the war was turning. For more information, see Benjamin Stora, “Prologue: The Crémieux Decree,” *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations*, eds. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013): 286–291.

31. Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey 1860–1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xii.

32. Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims*, 8.

33. Lia Brozgal and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Colonial Tunisia from the Gutter Up,” Introduction to Vitalis Danon, *Ninette of Sin Street*, translated by Jane Kuntz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 5. For an English version of Ferry’s speech, see Modern History Sourcebook: Jules Ferry (1832–1893): “On French Colonial Expansion,” <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1884ferry.asp>.

While the AIU's activities included diplomacy and various forms of social work (including assistance to emigrants), it was primarily through education that the organization accomplished its version of the civilizing mission, thus making a lasting mark on the Jews of Muslim lands. Motivated by the belief that European-style, secular education in French would best serve their "oriental" brethren, the AIU founders set about creating a network of schools throughout North Africa and the Middle East. The first school was opened in Tétouan, Morocco, in 1862; it was quickly followed by schools in Tunisia (1863), Baghdad (1864), and in various cities in the Ottoman Empire. By 1913, the AIU educational system had reached its zenith, with 43,700 students attending 183 schools, spread out across all major Jewish centers of the Muslim Mediterranean.<sup>34</sup>

Across the region, all AIU schools offered a fairly complete elementary education covering subjects like history, math, sciences, and geography, with some emphasis on Jewish subjects—although the intent was never to provide the type of Hebrew education found in the Talmudic establishments. If anything, the AIU was keen to wrest the pedagogical reins from the local rabbis and to modernize the curriculum. Beyond this basic commonality, however, the level of education offered and the curricula varied somewhat across the region: some schools, for example, were able to extend their training to middle- or secondary-school level classes. In certain schools, training in a "language of practical application" (such as Spanish, Arabic, or Turkish) was integrated into the curriculum.

Even as the AIU occasionally recognized the importance of other, local languages, the hallmark of the school system was, of course, its devotion to the French language. The use of French as the language of instruction in all classes also differentiated the AIU from other Jewish schools throughout the Mediterranean, which were primarily religious in orientation and where the focus was on Hebrew. As Rodrigue has pointed out, "In an age when the French language had become the *lingua franca* of trade and commerce in the Levant, the acquisition of French was first and foremost of practical utility for the Jews of the area."<sup>35</sup>

Despite the undeniable practicality of mastering the French language (which was still, at the time, the language of international diplomacy), the primary goal of the AIU was not utilitarian in nature. Instead, its goal was nothing less than emancipation—from stagnant traditional values, from religious dogma, from social foreclosure. And to this end, it is crucial to underscore that the AIU offered not just an *education in French*, but rather *a French education*, with curricula and pedagogical methods that were replicas of those on offer in schools in mainland France. This ideal symbiosis of content and form guaranteed the transmission of

34. Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims*, 13–14. For a complete list of schools in the Muslim world, including city, type of school, and date of founding, see 15–21.

35. Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims*, 27.

Enlightenment principles and the doctrine of natural, universal, and inalienable rights to the young Jews of Islamic lands.

There may be a temptation to read *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean* as something of a tribute to the AIU's success in creating a secular elite by "raising up" the Jews of the Orient through exposing them to the light of the West (to borrow an expression from historian Georges Bensoussan).<sup>36</sup> Despite having grown up in multilingual environments—many authors recall speaking different languages at home, at school, at play, and at the market; some also mention the number of languages practiced within a single family—all, or quite nearly all, of the contributors to *A Jewish Childhood* have ultimately found themselves "at home" in French.<sup>37</sup> "Becoming Francophone" is certainly a byproduct of French colonial policy, but it was also the direct result of the AIU's intervention in Muslim lands—as is most obvious in places like Turkey, where French rule was never established.

It is doubtful that any of the authors begrudge the role played by the AIU in their ascension to the ranks of a certain, perhaps proverbial, elite. However, it is difficult to imagine that the characterization of their cultures of origin as "backward" would go unnoticed by those who are at pains to valorize and reconcile their multiculturalism, to put together pieces that "don't match"—as historical and contemporary discourse would have us believe. Joëlle Bahloul, for example, writes with some bitterness about recovering the "Arab culture of her homeland" only later in life, as an adult, and she laments the colonial interference that cleaved apart her Jewishness and her Arabness. Similarly, Aldo Naouri, despite having fled first Libya for Algeria, then Algeria for France, claims: "I am, and I remain, culturally Arab." If *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean* is a paean to the good works of the AIU, then it is also worth noting that through its secular, French education of "oriental" Jews, the AIU also produced—however inadvertently—the instruments for its own critique.

#### NEITHER "JEWS AND ARABS" NOR "ARAB JEWS"

While none of the stories in *A Jewish Childhood* could be mistaken for political screeds, questions regarding Jews, Arabs, Zionism, Islam, and colonialism leave few readers indifferent. Yet the original version of this collection may have been conceived with an eye to muting its potentially polemical content: in addition to its alphabetical organization by author, which flattens regional hierarchies, the French version contained no historical or contextual apparatus. The introductory material consisted of a brief preface penned by Leila Sebbar and written in her characteristically unadorned style featuring simple syntax and plain language.<sup>38</sup> Her stylistic choices, coupled with an insistence on shared suffering, produce a Sebbar who

36. Georges Bensoussan, *L'Alliance israélite universelle (1860–2020). Juifs d'Orient, Lumières d'Occident* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, Collection "Présences du judaïsme," 2020).

37. See Note 1.

38. Sebbar's preface is included in this volume.

appears unwilling to engage with the obvious *political* aspects of her venture. It is impossible not to notice, for example, that she scrupulously avoids the trope of “intractable enmity”—mentioning neither historical nor contemporaneous conflicts between Jews and Muslims—preferring instead to imagine the two groups standing together before what she calls the “illusion” of the ideal French republic.

Most notably, perhaps, Sebbar sidesteps two key expressions—“Jews and Arabs” and “Arab Jews”—both of which have been produced by and instrumentalized in scholarship and political discourse, and both of which carry significant political baggage. Since the mid-twentieth century, when the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa emerged as a subject of inquiry, scholarly discourse has tended to position the Jews of the region as existing in relationship to “Arabs.” This formulation is most widespread in writing on the Israel-Palestine conflict (for example, *Intimate Enemies, Jews and Arabs in a Shared Land*, by Meron Benvenisti, or David K. Shipler’s *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*), and it continues to be used in the media. However, we also find this articulation (or versions thereof) in more broad-ranging historical studies, such as S. D. Goitein’s *Jews and Arabs: A Concise History of Their Social and Cultural Remains*—one of the first accounts of the Jewish presence in what Goitein might well have called the “Arab” Mediterranean; or in works like Norman Stilman’s *The Jews of Arab Lands* and Georges Bensoussan’s multivolume *Juifs en pays arabes*, where the distinction between the two peoples is articulated in terms of geographical dominion.

At first glance, the expression “Jews and Arabs” hardly seems polemic, much less divisive—after all, the conjunction “and” functions to bring entities together. Paradoxically, however, this formulation has produced and reinforced separation rather than union. To be clear, the implication of “Jews and Arabs” (and related expressions such as “Jews in Arab lands”) is that to be a “Jew” and to be an “Arab” are two different things; more to the point, at stake here is the notion that one cannot be both.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of one’s political, philosophical, or cultural investment in this matter, the logic is faulty insofar as the terms of the binary are not parallel. “Jew” is a *religious* marker; Jews hail from any number of different ethnic origins and speak different languages. “Arab,” however, is a *linguistic* marker; notwithstanding variations in dialect and accent, Arabs are bound by language even as they hail from any number of national backgrounds and may have different cultural and religious practices.<sup>40</sup> Further complicating matters are the ways in which religious

39. For examples of scholarship that explore the complexity of this issue, see: Ella Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and other Displacements* (London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 2017); Emily Gottreich, “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 433–451; Lital Levy “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the ‘Mashriq,’” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 452–469; Levy, “The Arab Jew Debates: Media, Culture, Politics, History,” *Journal of Levantine Studies* 7, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 79–103; and Jonathan Marc Gribetz, “‘To the Arab Hebrew’: On Possibilities and Impossibilities,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (2014): 589–592.

40. Certainly, while the majority of those who identify as Arab are also Muslim, not all Arabs are Muslim, and not all Muslims are Arab: most of the world’s Muslims are in Indonesia, for example;

designations have become racialized. Indeed, in France, in the United States, and elsewhere, the term “Arab”—and diffuse notions of “Arabness”—have come to be deployed as racialized markers, producing a dangerously limited understanding of what it means to be an Arab, or a Muslim.<sup>41</sup> The dyad “Jews and Arabs” has thus become a form of shorthand, standing in for and describing irreconcilable differences, if not an intractable enmity, between two peoples.<sup>42</sup> And, like all forms of efficiency, the expression smooths out critical nuances and ultimately forecloses the possibility of complex identities.<sup>43</sup>

The question of compound, hybrid identities brings us to the second term not used by Sebbar: Arab Jews. This formulation uses “Arab” as an adjective to describe people of a certain religion, and therefore allows us to conceive of “Jews” and “Arabs” not as separate, but rather as potentially overlapping forms of identity. Many of the contributors to this volume fall, at least nominally, into this category; those who do often explicitly evoke their “Arabic” cultural heritage and claim Arabic as one of their first languages. Yet “Arab Jew” is ultimately no less polemic than “Jews and Arabs,” and potentially far more politically fraught and affectively freighted. It is precisely because the “Arab Jew” incarnates both “Arab” and “Jew” in a single figure that it threatens the stability of the enmity discourse, potentially undoing an entrenched narrative that has significant political capital, particularly in the Middle East.

Opinions—including those of the very people who might call themselves Arab Jews, as I hinted earlier—do not coalesce around the accuracy of the category. Those who embrace it, such as the Iraqi-born Jew and critical theorist Ella Shohat,

---

Turks and Iranians practice Islam, but are not Arabs; and, of course, there are significant Jewish and Christian minorities throughout the Arab world.

41. The story of the racialization of Arabs and Muslims is a function of specific histories and geopolitical contexts. In the United States, for example, the racialization of Muslims in public discourse and even in jurisprudence acquired a particular force after 9/11. In France, this phenomenon has roots in colonial history, particularly in policies enacted in Algeria. On this, and on the question of race and religion in France, see Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam*, translated by George Holoch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). There is a large and growing body of scholarship on the racialization of Arabs, and of Islam; see, for example, the special forum of the online journal *Lateral*, edited by Rayya El Zein and titled *Cultural Constructions of Race and Racism in the Middle East and North Africa/Southwest Asia and North Africa (MENA/SWANA)*. Of particular relevance to this conversation is the piece by Muriam Haleh Davis, “Incommensurate Ontologies? Anti-Black Racism and the Question of Islam in French Algeria,” <https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/cultural-constructions-race-racism-middle-east-north-africa-southwest-asia-mena-swana/>.

42. See S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: A Concise History of their Social and Cultural Relations*. First publication: New York: Schocken Books, 1955, under the title *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages*.

43. Gil Anidjar has also argued that this usage has the effect of ethnicizing religion, and, ultimately, racializing both Jews and Arabs. See Anidjar, *The Jew, The Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). See also, “The Jew, The Arab: An Interview with Gil Anidjar,” <https://asiasociety.org/jew-arab-interview-gil-anidjar>.

consider it a natural, if syncretic, category that reflects the lived and historical reality of a Jewish people who have spoken Arabic for hundreds of years; one in which her grandmother, for example, saw Jewishness as inextricable from Middle Eastern-ness.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Moroccan political activist and dissident Abraham Serfaty steadfastly claimed his identity as an Arab Jew, and railed against the negation of Arab Judaism by the Zionist project.<sup>45</sup> Numerous Jewish writers from the region, including H el ene Cixous (Algeria), Edmond El Maleh (Morocco), and Albert Memmi (Tunisia) use or have used the term “juif arabe” to describe themselves, although not always with the same aplomb as Shohat or Serfaty.<sup>46</sup>

When thinkers like Shohat refuse the idea that the notion “Arab Jew” constitutes a “logical paradox” or an “ontological subversion,” they are responding directly to the views put forward by those who reject the formulation.<sup>47</sup> Some opponents, like Edith Haddad Shaked, oppose the term on historical grounds, arguing that Jews of Arab lands would have never considered themselves “Arabs” (despite the fact that most Jewish writers from the Maghreb, including many of those whose autobiographical portraits appear in this volume, manifest a deep attachment to their Arabness).<sup>48</sup> Others refuse it on the basis of its contemporary links with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where it specifically refers to Jews who sympathize with the Palestinian cause and espouse left-wing, anti-Zionist views. Still others, like Sami Smooha and Sasson Somekh, argue that Arab Jews perform an idealized, essentialist, and thus inauthentic, recuperation of Arabness.<sup>49</sup>

44. Shohat, “On Orientalist Genealogies: The Split Arab/Jew Figure Revisited,” in “Genealogies of ‘Jews’ and ‘Muslims’: Social Imaginaries in the Race-Religion Nexus,” eds. Yolande Jansen and Nasar Meer, special issue, *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, nos. 1–2 (2020): 118–159.

45. Serfaty wrote: “ tre arabe juif, c’est  tre juif parce que arabe, et arabe parce que juif.” [To be a Jewish Arab is to be Jewish because Arab, and Arab because Jewish.] See “Pour Abraham Serfaty et ses camarades,” June 30, 1975. <https://matzpen.org/english/1975-06-30/pour-abraham-serfaty-et-ses-camarades>. See also, Abraham Serfaty, *Le Juda isme marocain en Isra el* (Mouvement Internationale de Lutte Anti-Raciste, 1971).

46. The Tunisian-born Jew Albert Memmi, for example, is somewhat ambivalent and self-contradictory on this topic, particularly when compared to his robustly anti-Zionist peers Serfaty and El-Maleh. I refer readers to *The Albert Memmi Reader*, eds. Jonathan Judaken and Michael Lejman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020); and to Olivia Harrison, “Portrait of an Arab Jew: Albert Memmi and the Politics of Indigeneity,” *Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in the Era of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

47. See Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew*; see also Shohat, “Reflections by an Arab-Jew,” *Bint Jbeil*, August 28, 2016, <https://www.hsje.org/SecondExodus/Reflections%20By%20An%20Arab%20Jew%20-%20Ella%20Shohat.pdf>. Shohat calls for an end to the “simplistic charting of Middle Eastern identities.”

48. Shaked argues this in a conference paper titled “From Orient to Occident: the Jewish identity & community in Tunisia, 1881–1967,” presented at the 19<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Historical Sciences in Oslo, Norway (August 2000) and self-published on Research Gate, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280805878>.

49. As observed and referenced by Levy in her thoroughgoing discussion of the criticism of the term “Arab-Jew,” (see Levy, “The Arab Jew Debates,” 82–83). Gottreich complicates the term’s contemporary links to the Israel-Palestine conflict, arguing for a recuperation of historical moments of

The authors of *A Jewish Childhood* use a variety of terms to describe their own identities and to demarcate themselves from others. In keeping with what Shohat describes as the active categories used by Middle Eastern Jews to describe their neighbors—"the operating distinction had always been 'Muslim,' 'Jew' and 'Christian,' not Arab *versus* Jew"—in their contributions to this volume, writers like André Azoulay (Morocco) and Stora (Algeria) refer only to "Jews and Muslims," never to "Arabs." On the other hand, Patrick Chemla (Algeria), distinguishes between his co-religionaries and "Arabs" but historicizes his usage, acknowledging that "the term Muslim was not used at the time." In writing about "an Arab family" who rented a house from her grandfather, Alice Cherki (Algeria) recalls not knowing "whether they were originally from Kabylie, or the Aurès region, or from Algiers itself, since they all got lumped together under the same 'Arab' label." Her use of quotation marks and her observation regarding the imprecision of the term suggests an awareness of the way usage morphs over time.

The two Lebanese writers contributing to the collection scrupulously avoid the word "Arab": Lucien Elia uses specific, denominational vocabulary (Shia and Sunni) to distinguish between himself and his Muslim friends, whereas Yves Turquier refers to "Jews and Muslims," but also simply to "goys," as a way of naming all non-Jews. Only one of these writers is explicit in her adoption of an Arab Jewish identity; the Egyptian Mireille Cohen-Massouda writes, "I was born in Cairo, in Egypt, into the oldest and most important community of Arab Jews." The specificity of Cohen-Massouda's adult language takes on an ironic hue in light of the fact that, as a child, she spent several years refusing to speak at all.

In refusing to frame *A Jewish Childhood* in terms of "Jews and Arabs," and in denying the reader the convenience of the "Arab Jew," Sebbar may not, in fact, be skirting the political. Rather, she may be provoking it, albeit in a fashion that compels the reader to reckon with the highly idiosyncratic portrait of Jewish identity that emerges from the collection. If the essential ambivalence of the hybrid subject position of the "Arab Jew" is not fully announced in Sebbar's preface, it is nonetheless strongly implied and interrogated in nearly all of the portraits (again, even though only one author explicitly identifies herself as an "Arab Jew"). Moreover, when it comes to "Jews and Arabs," it is worth noting that hardly any of the authors in *A Jewish Childhood* situate themselves within this specific dichotomy.<sup>50</sup> Instead of reifying this binary, exclusionary divide, and rather than exaggerate stories of tolerance and identification, *A Jewish Childhood* produces an ambivalent discourse, one that suggests that the distinction between "Jew" and "Arab" is at once meaningful and meaningless, authentic and artificial.

---

"Arab-Jewishness," and calling for greater historical consciousness. According to Gottreich, this would allow us to "restore lost histories," to understand the term as "not simply a reaction to recent political marginalization," and as "not simply folkloric." See Gottreich, "Historicizing the Arab Jew in the Maghreb," 451.

50. Of course, it bears mentioning that the four Turkish authors are not impacted by this paradigm, in part because Turkey is has never been considered an Arab country.

## WRITING CHILDHOOD, WRITING FRENCH

Youth and upbringing are clearly leitmotifs in Leïla Sebbar's corpus: among her major contributions to francophone literature is a series of edited volumes on childhood, whose titles include: *Une enfance algérienne* (An Algerian Childhood), *Une enfance outre-mer* (An Overseas Childhood), *L'Enfance des Français d'Algérie avant 1962* (Childhood of the French of Algeria before 1962), *Une enfance dans la guerre—Algérie 1954–1962* (A Childhood in War, Algeria 1954–1962), and *Une enfance d'ailleurs* (A Childhood from Elsewhere).<sup>51</sup> All of these works follow a format similar to that of *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean*, with Sebbar curating the contributions and framing the collection with a brief introductory essay. In those volumes, as in this one, Sebbar declines to engage in explicit theorization of childhood as a site, a state of mind, or a literary artifact, preferring, instead, to let the texts produce theory and allow their readers to do the work of interpretation.<sup>52</sup>

While Sebbar's interest in childhood has allowed her to carve out a niche within literary studies, she has not written her own autobiography of childhood. Although the majority of her books grapple with transparently personal topics and she has written long-form autobiographical essays (notably *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* [I Don't Speak My Father's Language]), Sebbar does not often write explicitly about her childhood growing up in Algeria. An obsession with collecting others' stories, however, may reveal "a particularly strong and insistent urge to trace origins."<sup>53</sup> In the end, it may be through compiling the stories of others that Sebbar produces her own: "Perhaps I write my autobiographical texts through collective stories of childhood."<sup>54</sup>

The self-portraits collected in this volume are all examples of short-form autobiography, and while they take different forms (ranging from reportage to the epistolary, to the anecdotal), none of them self-consciously play with the conventions of life-narrative (with the exception, perhaps, of Roger Dadoun's "Kaddish for a Lost Childhood," which is recounted entirely in the third-person). The basic authenticity of these autobiographies is not in question—all the writers lived the experience of growing up Jewish in the Muslim Mediterranean. But, as with any form of representation, and particularly in the case of childhood recollections,

51. Of these four volumes, only the first—*An Algerian Childhood: A Collection of Autobiographical Narratives* (St. Paul, MN: Ruminator Books, 2001)—has appeared in English.

52. For a general study of the *topos* of childhood in francophone postcolonial literature, see Maeve McCusker, "Small Worlds: Constructions of Childhood in Contemporary Postcolonial Autobiography in French," *Romance Studies* 24, no. 3 (2006): 203–214. Although McCusker discusses a number of Sebbar's "childhood" volumes, the present book was not yet published at the time of the article. McCusker is quite critical of Sebbar's production of exoticism, or what she calls her "domestication of a wide range of Algerian experience?" (206).

53. McCusker, 212.

54. Sohelia Kian and Leïla Sebbar, "Une Entrevue avec Leïla Sebbar: l'écriture et l'altérité," *French Review* 8, no. 1 (October 2004), 134.

certain aspects may be amplified or reinterpreted in the process of recounting. There are authors who assert something like “total recall,” putting forward a confident narrative that brooks no possibility of mis-recollection (this is the case, for example, in Stora’s essayistic self-portrait). Others, however, self-consciously probe the complexity of memory (and of their own memories), while problematizing the stability of the self, of childhood, of writing: Daniel Mesguich describes childhood as a foreign country that he can’t enter without visa; Chochana Boukhobza admits, “I don’t know if I write to remember, or if I write to produce memories.”

Autobiography is a complex literary universe identified by a variety of names (life writing, life narrative, memoir, ego documents), practiced in any number of generic forms (fiction, essay, graphic novel, journal, film), and subject to a particular set of interpretative demands. A survey of titles of autobiographical works reveals the dizzying array of subject positions (categorized by gender, ethnicity, age, nationality) and experiences (war, trauma, grief, illness, abuse, addiction, displacement, internment, class struggle, career) that structure self-writing projects. Subcategories are as specific as slave and conversion narratives; autobiographies of childhood, colonialism, war, illness; and the mixed-race memoir, the bilingual or mixed mother tongue memoir, the political memoir, or the language memoir.<sup>55</sup> The list could well go on and, of course, none of these categories are mutually exclusive.

Regardless of its label or its specific content, self-writing as a literary production carries with it certain critical burdens that fiction typically does not. Readers seem to take a distinct interest and pleasure in exploring the lives of “real people” (famous or unknown)—the popularity of autobiography and memoir in the contemporary literary marketplace testify to this. But this particular investment in the real means that readers of autobiographical stories tend to view authenticity and truthfulness as key elements of a work’s value.<sup>56</sup>

To understand the stakes of the real, one need only look to the scandals that dogged “fake memoirs”—texts that advertise, and then are revealed to have broken, their pact with the reader.<sup>57</sup> Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* (1996), a prize-winning Holocaust memoir exposed as a hoax, incited what would come to be called the Wilkomirski Affair, prompting deeper critical inquiry into the ethics of Holocaust literature and the responsibility of writers, readers, and critics,

55. There are many resources for autobiography and its permutations. See, for example Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) and its appendix, “60 Genres of Life Narrative.” See also, *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2019).

56. G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012).

57. The notion that books and authors establish a “pact” with readers (based on paratextual information and other material) originated with Philippe Lejeune in *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), published in English as *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, translated by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

particularly in the case of representations of historical trauma.<sup>58</sup> Such debates have also taken place in the realm of popular fiction, notably in the United States, where questions of appropriation are especially fraught. The scandal that ensued after James Frey's "addiction memoir," *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), was revealed to be a hoax, has become emblematic of this phenomenon.<sup>59</sup>

Readers may deplore the craven recuperation of another's suffering for personal gain (as has been the case with numerous fake memoirs), or may simply be disappointed when a book, whose ostensible subject is the life of the author (or an episode of that author's life), turns out to misrepresent, or invent, "facts." But notions of authenticity and historical veracity are less stable than they may appear; moreover, even the most earnest autobiographers may misremember, and thus misrepresent, aspects of their own life stories. In certain cases, then, what may be interpreted as a lack of authenticity is in fact a symptom of the complexity of memory's structures, recall, and representation.

At least since the postmodern turn (if not before), literary critics have theorized the difficulty in distinguishing between fact and fiction (for readers and writers alike), arguing for a more complex understanding of self-representation and rejecting the notion that truth and authenticity are essential to the genre of self-writing.<sup>60</sup> Writers, too—practitioners of both autobiography and fiction forms like the novel—have implicitly theorized the impossibility of producing an accurate portrait of the self. Algerian writer Assia Djebar, in her generically hybrid *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (part novel, part memoir, part historical reckoning), observes: "My fiction is this attempt at autobiography . . ."<sup>61</sup>

While a given author may decide to fashion her life narrative by consciously drawing on elements both factual and fictional (as Judeo-Tunisian writer Albert Memmi explained about his own process of self-representation, "I used some personal facts, of course, but I also borrowed others . . ."), the emergence of memory studies (in the Humanities as well as in the sciences) has played an important role in making visible the complexity of recall and representation, even when it comes to personal life experiences, and especially in the case of childhood memories. The notion that memory can be inaccurate is, of course, not new: already in the early twentieth century, Freud suggested that childhood memories were wrong

58. On the Wilkomirski hoax, see Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Problems of Memory and Factuality in Recent Holocaust Memoirs: Wilkomirski/Wiesel," *Poetics Today* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 543–559.

59. There are numerous illustrative examples of "appropriations" and the polemics that unfold in their wake. For an interesting study of the phenomenon of the literary hoax in the French-language tradition, see Christopher L. Miller, *Imposters: Literary Hoaxes and Cultural Authenticity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018).

60. There is a large bibliography on this topic, but Paul de Man was one of the first to advance a more idiosyncratic conception of autobiography. See "Autobiography as De-facem?" *MLN* 94, no. 5 (December 1979): 919–930.

61. Assia Djebar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, translated by Dorothy S. Blair (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993). Original title: *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Paris: JC Lattès, 1985).

more often than not, as a result of psychological (and possibly biological) processes; British psychologist Sir Frederic Bartlett called memory an “imaginative reconstruction.”<sup>62</sup>

In recent years, however, the hunches of psychology and the hermeneutical instincts of literary theorists have been productively reanimated by advances in neuroscience and brain imaging.<sup>63</sup> Memory is now understood as a set of complex processes and constructs; the notion of “autobiographical memory” recognizes both the psychological and neurological elements at play when calling up and attempting to represent memories of one’s self, with various factors contributing to type, quantity, and quality of recall. Summarizing the work of neuroscientists, Michael Stanislawski writes that autobiographical memory appears to function “by extracting the meaning of what we encounter, not by retaining and then accessing a literal record of it.”<sup>64</sup>

While questions of memory, form, and the representation of childhood are useful and appropriate analytical frameworks for thinking through the self-portraits of this collection, it bears noting that autobiographical writing produced by both Jews and Muslims in the Mediterranean emanates from a particular cultural context. In pointing up this regional specificity, I by no means espouse the idea, put forward by Georges Gusdorf and others, that autobiography is a distinctly European genre.<sup>65</sup> Given the variety of forms of self-writing we find in the Middle East and North Africa (beginning, perhaps with Ibn Khaldun’s work), and given an understanding of autobiography as a highly protean form, claims that the genre is “not found outside of our cultural area” (i.e., Europe) or that “autobiography expresses a concern peculiar to Western man” appear dated, if not dangerously essentialist.

It is true, however, that for the Muslim and Jewish communities of the Mediterranean, writing in the first person—embracing the “I”—has not always been an organic operation. Indeed, the two groups have in common a certain resistance to revealing the self. In *Return to Childhood*, Moroccan writer Leïla Abouzeid observes that “the life of a Muslim (man or woman) is considered an *awra* (an

62. Sigmund Freud, “Screen Memories,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 3 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 3; and Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 213.

63. For more on this, see Hans Markowitsch and Angelica Staniloiu, “Brain Research and Neuroscience” in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, 18–29.

64. Michael Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews: Essays in Jewish Self-Fashioning* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004): 16–17.

65. See Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” translated by James Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980): 28–48; and James Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

intimate body part”); as such, it must always be hidden.<sup>66</sup> Algerian writer Wadi Bouzar suggests that in Maghrebi writing there is “a disgust for introspection, confession, and more generally for the ‘exposure of the self.’”<sup>67</sup> A similar distrust of individualistic acts, including writing one’s autobiography, exists among the Jews of the region. As Guy Dugas reminds us, any act of revelation that would set a person apart from the group is met with skepticism; this even more poignantly true when it comes to writing, and self-writing, which is viewed with suspicion, as “an attempt at self-exile, a desire to step outside of the group.”<sup>68</sup>

If writing about the self in this particular cultural matrix is a complex operation, the language of self-expression—that is, the choice to write in French—is also anything but neutral. The politics of writing in the “colonizer’s language” have long dogged postcolonial literatures on a global scale; however, polemics surrounding the literary works produced by writers from the former French empire (and other zones of significant French influence) are especially lively. In both scholarship and in the public sphere, discussions about literary categories, terms, and how to identify certain writers have crystallized around concepts like “la Francophonie” and “une littérature monde en français” (a world-literature in French).<sup>69</sup> At bottom, both are attempts to wrestle with the naming of a literary production in French emanating from writers who may or may not be French—and, of course, embedded therein are questions of legal belonging, recognition, and diversity.<sup>70</sup> At stake here are not simply labels (even if we know that words matter) but rather visceral questions of identity, the politics of culture, and the perpetuation of the colonizer-colonized binary.

66. Leila Abouzeid, *Return to Childhood: The Memoir of a Modern Moroccan Woman*, translated by Abouzeid and Heather Logan Taylor (Austin: University of Texas at Austin Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1998). Originally published in Arabic as *Rujû ilâ al-tufûla* (1993).

67. Wadi Bouzar, *Lectures maghrébines* (Paris: Publisud, 1984).

68. Guy Dugas, *La Littérature judéo-maghrébine d'expression française* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990): 106–107. See also Brozgal, “Writing Back to Whom? Novel Strategies of Ambiguity and the ‘Mark of the Plural,’” in *Against Autobiography: Albert Memmi and the Production of Theory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014): 37–70.

69. The “world-literature in French” manifesto launched, in 2007, a long running series of debates and conversations about the identity of French-language literature and the payoffs and pitfalls of “la Francophonie” as a category with colonial links and implications. See “Toward a ‘World-Literature’ in French,” translated by Daniel Simon, *World Literature Today* 83, no. 2 (March–April 2009): 54–57. Translated from “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français,” *Le Monde*, March 16, 2007. Although it is difficult to parse the implications of this fact, only one francophone Jewish author signed the manifesto (the Israeli writer Esther Orner); Albert Memmi, for example, noted that he was not invited to participate.

70. For a valuable exploration of questions of literary value, institutional recognition, and francophone authors, see Kaoutar Harchi, *I Have Only One Language, and It Is Not Mine: A Struggle for Recognition*, translated by Alexis Pernsteiner (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2021). Original title: *Je n'ai qu'une langue, ce n'est pas la mienne* (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 2016).

While francophone Jewish writers have occasionally participated in these conversations and, at times, even been foundational to them—Memmi, for example, was one of the first to embrace the idea of a Maghrebi *francophone* literature—there has not yet been sustained, systematic attention to the ways in which francophone Jewish writers, those from the Arab world in particular, theorize questions of language.<sup>71</sup> As a people whose historical situation has often been one of organic multilingualism, the Jews of the Muslim Mediterranean may be in a strategic position when it comes to propelling us beyond the questions that have characterized these debates and that leave us at something of stalemate.<sup>72</sup> Rather than continue to probe the putative denial of one's mother tongue, the use of the colonizer's language, and the choice of French, these authors generate (both explicitly and implicitly) questions that are at once more fundamental and more constructive: what constitutes a *native* language when one grows up speaking one language with one's parents, another with one's grandparents, and yet another in school? Is it possible to have more than one mother tongue? Why would the French language be the exclusive property of the colonizer? Might French also be an African language? A Middle Eastern language? And, finally, how does one choose a language, and is it possible to say that writing in French even constitutes a *choice*?

. . .

I would be remiss in concluding this introduction without saying a word about translation. *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean* is, on the one hand, a straightforward work of interlingual translation—that is, a translation from one language to another. With the exception of the stories by Moris Farhi and Roni Margulies—Turkish writers who grew up speaking French but preferred, as adults, to write their childhoods in English—all of these autobiographical portraits were originally written in French. But the act of translation embodied by the publication of this collection is not limited to its linguistic transfer from French to

71. Much scholarly attention has been paid, of course, to Jacques Derrida's interrogations of language in *The Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). In that essay, the Algerian Jew and theorist articulates the linguistic aporia unique to the Jews of colonial Algeria: "Je n'ai qu'une langue et elle n'est pas la mienne" (I have but one language—yet that language is not mine). Algerian-born Jew Hélène Cixous also theorizes, however implicitly, her particular relationship to language in works like *Reveries of the Wild Woman: Primal Scenes* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006). Egyptian-born Jewish writer and psychoanalyst Jacques Hassoun also explores questions of language in his correspondence with Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatibi, published as *Le même livre* (Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 1985).

72. "The Jews are perhaps the longest-standing case of a group whose self-definition was always a part of a multicultural context. For much of Jewish history, what it meant to be a Jew was to be multilingual and multicultural and never to live in splendid isolation from interaction and struggle with other cultures." David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel, "Introduction: The Dialect of Jewish Enlightenment," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Oakland: University of California Press, 1998), 8.

English; rather, embedded in these stories are the traces of translation as a quotidian lived experience.

The word translation is rarely, if ever, uttered by these authors; yet their life-narratives are saturated with—and sometimes even structured by—translation. Like so many other aspects of these stories, reflections on multilingualism vary: Lizi Behmoaras drops Turkish words into her tale because there are purportedly no French equivalents; Guy Sitbon reflects on how, even as an expatriate and an adult, he still speaks Arabic with the accent of Monastir. Some mention speaking Arabic so well that they pass for Muslim; others ruminate on how their Jewish accents singled them out for taunting and discrimination. Mesguich's observation (featured *en exergue* of this introduction) is one of the few direct references to the act of translation in this collection. In suggesting that translation enacts a change not just on language, but on the person performing the translation, Mesguich effectively—and poignantly—theorizes both the work of translation and its impact on multilingual subjects. Regardless of whether they speak about language directly, all the authors evince an awareness that, even as they write French, they may write with an accent, and they are already translating their childhoods.

In her work on the region, Karla Mallette observed that “the most fundamental cultural rift in the Mediterranean is the breach between language written from left to right, and language written from right to left.”<sup>73</sup> The English version of *A Jewish Childhood* is organized by country, from Turkey to Morocco, that is, from east to west, geographically, or from right to left, conceptually. This symbolic gesture—of crossing writing from left to right with a directional movement from right to left—nods to that fundamental rift and makes a small attempt to suture it.

73. Mallette, “Boustrophedon: Towards a literary theory of the Mediterranean,” in *A Sea of Languages: Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, eds. S. C. Akbari and K. Mallette (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013): 254–255.



## NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

This English-language translation attempts to render the French of the original texts as faithfully and as idiomatically as possible. While the work of translation is always a delicate balancing act of technical skill, poetic flair, and interpretation, the task of turning these particular works into English was complicated by their existing multilingual nature. Indeed, nearly all of the authors insert words and expressions from the languages of their childhoods into their French memories. Our translators, then, had to make decisions not only about rendering French into English, but also about how to navigate non-French words in the texts. To leave words and expressions in Arabic, Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, and Turkish untranslated—that is, as they appeared in the original French—would likely create frustration for our readers; however, to translate those same expressions into English would flatten the multilingual spirit of the original.

By the same token, over the course of our work editing these pieces, what emerged was not only a recognition of these childhoods as intrinsically multilingual, but also a profoundly variegated portrait of how the writers in question negotiate their own polyglossia. It is not always clear, for example, that a given writer understands the inclusion of Arabic words as a linguistic shift; indeed, given contextual clues and phonetic renderings, one often has the sense that the writer's childhood self simply integrated non-French words into his or her vocabulary, blending them into a single idiom.

In preparing their texts for a francophone readership, some authors clearly anticipated that certain words, expressions, or even concepts would prove impossible to understand, and thus sought to assist their readers by including definitions in endnotes. Marcel Bénabou, Rita Rachel Cohen, Ida Kummer, and Nicole

Serfaty all adopt this didactic, even scholarly, approach. Others opted to integrate definitions of non-French words in the body of the text, oftentimes naturalizing them by using French grammatical structures. For example Jean-Luc Allouche writes about “le *‘haram*, le péché, la *‘hchouma* ou le *‘eïb*, la honte, la pudeur, voir la pudibonderie . . .,” a phrase we have translated as “the values of *‘haram*—taboo, sin, and *‘hchouma* or *‘eïb*—shame, modesty, or even prudishness.” While our translation retains Allouche’s representation of Arabic words in italics, with definitions integrated directly in the text, what is more difficult to render is the way in which his attachment of French definite articles to Arabic nouns (*le ‘haram*; *la ‘hchouma*) effectively incorporates Arabic into French and vice versa. Some writers—Albert Bensoussan, Chochana Boukhobza, to name just two—use a combination of techniques, sometimes offering translations directly in the text, other times leaving words and expressions to be understood only through context clues, if at all. Finally, a few of our authors, such as Hubert Haddad, sprinkle Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and Hebrew expressions throughout their texts without providing any information as to their meaning.

Notwithstanding this wide variety of approaches to definition and translation across the texts, all authors tended to romanize, or transcribe non-Latin words, meaning that Arabic and Hebrew words are rendered in Latin characters, using spelling that mimics the French pronunciation of those words. In terms of indicating foreign words through typography, there was no standard practice across the original volume: sometimes non-French words were italicized and placed in quotation marks; sometimes they were simply italicized; occasionally they were indistinguishable from the rest of the text.

This variety of linguistic representation is fascinating insofar as it complicates perceptions about how the writers may have negotiated the multilingual world in which they grew up; moreover, it provokes questions about how the writers, as adults, perceive a francophone readership’s attitude toward “foreign” words in a text. At the same time, however, the authors’ heterogenous approaches to the languages of their childhood provided our editorial team with a number of challenges. For example, did we have an obligation to adopt a policy that would handle these questions uniformly across all the texts, even if that meant eliminating the variety found in the original? When authors romanized Arabic words using a French transcription system (*Yahoud*, for example, which is Arabic for Jew), was it incumbent upon us to provide a more standard, English transcription system (in this case, *Yahud*)? How were we to handle moments where authors reproduced non-French words and expressions phonetically and idiosyncratically, thus introducing nonstandard transcriptions (*In Chaa Allah*, for example, instead of the more universally recognizable *Inshallah*)? Were we to standardize words rendered in local dialects, or reproduce regional pronunciations? Where would we situate the boundary between the reader’s need for clarity and the author’s production of ambiguity—intentional or not?

We ultimately adopted the following strategy:

- In cases where the authors used words in languages other than French, without providing translation or explanation, we kept those words in the original language and provided explanations and definitions in footnotes.
- Rather than standardize the representation of non-French words (words in Arabic, Hebrew, etc.), we have opted to reproduce the techniques employed by the authors. This means that the texts vary in their presentation of words in Arabic, Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, Turkish, and occasionally, Spanish. In our translations, as in the original French, sometimes these words and expressions are italicized, sometimes they appear in italics and quotation marks, other times they are not typographically distinct from the rest of the text.
- When authors have used French transcription systems to render Arabic expressions, we have retained their original versions, providing further explanation, and alternative forms of romanization, in footnotes as needed. One notable exception to this is the word Qur'an: typically written *le Coran* in French, we have opted here for the standard romanization required by UC Press.
- Wherever we felt it appropriate, we added editors' notes to provide additional historical, cultural, or linguistic information. These appear as footnotes in the text.
- When our authors included their own notes in the original text, we have preserved and translated these. Like our editors' notes, these appear in footnotes, but they are clearly labeled "Author's note." We occasionally found it necessary to add information to the author's notes; in these cases, our interventions appear in parentheses following the author's note, and are labeled "Editors' note."

Finally, a note on our editors' notes: respectful of our readers—many of whom, we hope, will be students—we endeavored to find a balance between providing information essential to a basic comprehension of the text and the more subjective space of interpretation. In other words, our goal is to provide facts and insights that allow a given text to speak clearly to the reader, while, at the same time, remaining vigilant not to "speak for" the texts themselves.



MAP 1. Middle East and North Africa. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

# Preface

## *It Would be the Same Story*

Leïla Sebbar

I can hear the young girls from the Colony: “Sebbar . . . Sebbar . . .” They intone names and patronymics with the sounds “s,” “e,” or “a,” “b” . . .

Back then I didn’t know these were Jewish names. I didn’t even know what “Jewish” meant. At the house next to the school where my father taught, near Tlemcen in Algeria, my father and mother never called people “Jew,” “Christian,” “Muslim.” I would learn these words later, outside the protective walls of Little France, beyond the confines of the ideal republic that my father and mother painstakingly created, where *tolerance*, *justice*, and *equality* were key words, before the end of the illusion.

Later, I would learn: “it is bad to be an Arab, to be the daughter of an Arab; it is bad to be Jewish.” Why was it bad? Nobody ever said. Did I believe it? I don’t know. I think this is why I decided to begin a long march toward childhood, a journey made through books that try to bring together people who were so often separated by history in the former colonial empires. This childhood recounts a particular place, a geography, a plural memory, all without bald nostalgia. This is childhood as a collective, creative archaeology.

It is from my position in exile that I explore, with and through other writers in exile, a cosmopolitan southern Mediterranean, a Jewish and Muslim Mediterranean that is, today, orphaned of the Jews who lived there before Islam. The history that tells this story is sometimes joyful, sometimes cruel. Personal stories remember another time.

Another time where childhood is a country, a beloved land with ancestors, with neighbors strange and familiar, the sacred language of prayers and books, languages, language of the home, of school (French public school and the Alliance

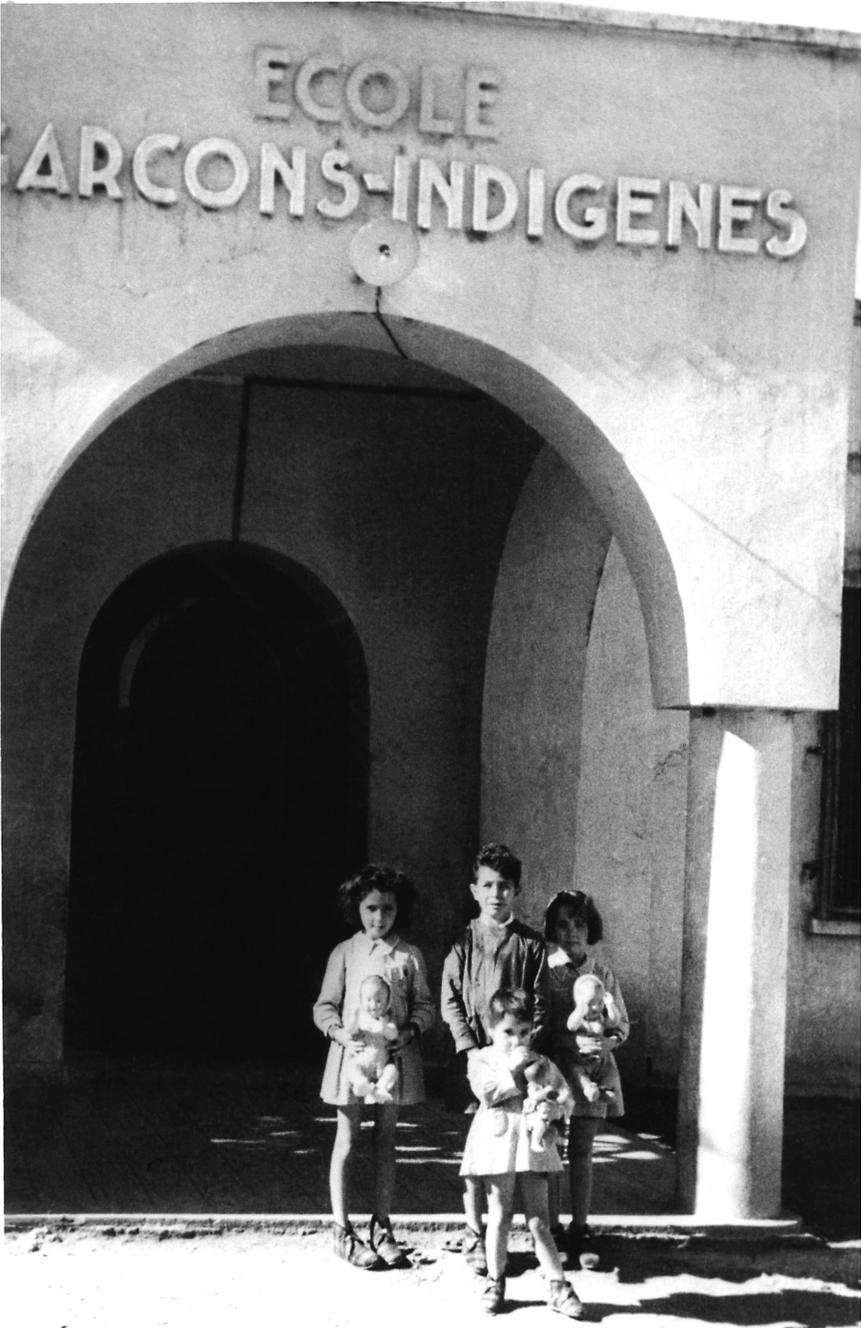


FIGURE 1. Leïla Sebbar, left, with her brother Alain and her sisters, Lysel and Danièle, in front of the Hennaya School in Algeria, in the 1950s.

Israélite Universelle), the other language of the elders, of servants, of the street, of childhood friendships, of music. Inside outside, questions and silences. The comfort of a traditional dish, the violence of insults. Why do they insult me? Whispers of a clandestine escape. To what exile? Little pleasures, big pain. Wandering. Scattering.

Jacques Hassoun reminded us: “The law of the country is my law.” Maxim of the minority, whatever his status may be.

Homeland left lost.

The voice of languages spoken, recited, sung, dreamed, the voice of letters and books . . . we think we’ve forgotten them but they are there, in these voices, in the pages of writers in exile and in the childhood of the last generation of this history. In mine as well.

—*Translated by Lia Brozgal*



CHAPTER ONE

Turkey



## Country Snapshot

The Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), a sprawling political body whose territory spanned from modern-day Algeria to Iraq and from Saudi Arabia to Hungary, was a major Jewish material, spiritual, and cultural center. Home to both Judeo-Greek speaking Romaniote Jews in the eastern Mediterranean and Karaite Jewish communities in what would become Egypt and Syria, at various times over the course of its existence, the Ottoman Empire welcomed waves of both Ashkenazi immigrants from Europe and Sephardic refugees from Spain. Given the sheer volume of Jewish immigrants who arrived in the years following their expulsion from Spain in 1492, the Sephardic Jewish population increased so much that it became the main Ottoman Jewish community into which the native Romaniote communities assimilated. Ashkenazi Jews, assimilating at first to the majority Sephardi customs, began to form their own communities as their numbers increased over time.

Under Ottoman rule, Jews lived in relative autonomy as part of the *millet* system, which allowed religious minorities to maintain their own courts, in accordance with their own confessional laws, in exchange for paying a poll tax, or *cizye*. The midcentury Tanzimat, or Ottoman Reforms (1839–1871), affected Jewish life by improving overall material conditions and modernizing the empire, while simultaneously eroding the autonomy from which religious minorities, including Jews, had previously benefitted. Despite these reforms, however, Jews were not pressured to assimilate to Ottoman norms.

Benefitting from the network of state schools, schools run by the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), and Western philanthropic organizations, many Ottoman Jews were able to climb the rungs of the social hierarchy, which resulted in the establishment of a Jewish middle class by the end of the nineteenth century. Likely as a result of the creation of this burgeoning literate bourgeoisie, Jewish journalism gained momentum in the early part of the twentieth century, particularly after the Young Turks Revolution (July 1908), with newspapers being published in a variety of languages including French and Ladino, among others.



MAP 2. Turkey. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

Jews also began to participate in political life following this move to a multiparty system. Concentrated in urban areas, Jews were very active in the world of business, administration, and the liberal professions, and on the whole, did well for themselves economically.

The years following the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923) and the subsequent establishment of the Turkish Republic affected the Jewish communities of the newly independent nation. Following the 1923 signing of the Treaty of Lausanne and ensuing establishment of the Turkish Republic, Jews opted to forego the privileges they had been accorded as a religious minority under the Ottomans, which resulted in the end of the *millet* system of governance. In addition, the Turkification process of the mid-twentieth century affected the linguistic landscape of Turkish Jewry through its emphasis on Turkish as the national language. Although the Jewish elite often spoke French and the lower-class Jews Ladino, as the twentieth century progressed, many Jews learned Turkish for business reasons, and it was increasingly spoken in the home. Turkish also gained significant ground as a result of the 1924 language law, which dictated that minority students be taught in Turkish or their national language—which Turkey deemed to be Hebrew for the Jews, despite the fact that few Turkish Jews spoke the language—and the 1926 Unification of Education Act, which forced all AIU schools to close. Over the generations, as Turkish Jews became fluent in the national language, fluency in heritage languages began to erode, and the Jewish community's former multilingualism

gave way to monolingualism. Yet not all Turkish Jews decided to assimilate into more hegemonic ways of life. Toward the mid-twentieth century, for example, many poorer Jews chose to immigrate, particularly to France, the newly founded state of Israel, and to Latin America, where the linguistic similarities between Spanish and Ladino facilitated their integration into their new surroundings.

On the whole, Jews living in the Ottoman Empire, and subsequently in the Republic of Turkey, coexisted in relative peace with their Muslim and Christian counterparts, although they did occasionally face animosity from Christians, with whom Jews competed for government contracts and jobs. In addition, Jews faced little to no state-sanctioned anti-Semitism, and what anti-Semitism they did encounter was often at the hands of their fellow Christian minority, not the Muslim rulers. This relatively peaceful coexistence was threatened on several occasions after the turn of the twentieth century. The Balkan Wars (1912–1913) stirred nationalist sentiments, leaving Jews, who on the whole did not profess nationalist desires, in the uncomfortable middle ground between separatist nationalist aspirations and Ottoman patriotism. During World War II (1939–1945), Turkey was officially neutral, and granted asylum to thousands of German Jewish refugees, including many intellectuals and academics who would go on to shape the modern university system. However, as the vandalization of Jewish homes and businesses by Turkish Nazi sympathizers in the 1934 Thrace riots demonstrate, the absence of state-sanctioned anti-Semitism did not necessarily mean a lack of anti-Semitic violence. In addition, the November 1942 *Varlık Vergisi* (Capital Tax), which was ostensibly enacted to raise funds in the event Turkey were to enter World War II—but whose main goal was to financially decimate non-Muslim minorities in order to bolster economic Turkification—was especially burdensome for minorities, including Jews, as the taxes it levied on them were up to ten times those levied on Muslim Turks. Although short-lived, the onerous burden of paying this tax was a major motivating factor for Jewish emigration, particularly among the lower classes.

The second half of the twentieth century saw significant waves of Turkish Jewish immigration to Israel, particularly after the law barring Turkish Jews from immigrating there was lifted in 1949. However, Zionism was only one of many motivating factors; given the number of poorer and lower-class Jews who moved to Israel, it is clear that economic concerns played a significant role. Indeed, political Zionism had not held much sway among Ottoman and Turkish Jews, who on the whole lent their support to the Ottoman and subsequently Turkish authorities, preferring to integrate themselves into the society in which they lived rather than move to what was said to be their national homeland. On the whole, this loyalty was repaid by governments that permitted Jews to live together freely and with security, and to participate in the economic life of the country.

The Jewish community still exists in Turkey, although small and on the decline: approximately twenty thousand of Turkey's 75 million citizens are Jews, and migration—combined with a stagnant to declining birth rate—have kept these numbers

low. Located mostly in Istanbul and Izmir, Turkish Jews of the twenty-first century retain a collective identity based more on shared historical and cultural consciousness, and less so on religiosity, despite the relatively recent increase in affirmations of religious identity in the face of the growing presence of political Islam. Turkish Jews celebrate the High Holy Days and Passover, take care of their synagogues and cemeteries, and are by and large an integrated part of their nation's landscape.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*

Şişli, Istanbul

---

## *Matzah, Simit, and White Cheese*

Lizi Behmoaras

“He is a brother to all of you, in a certain sense,” the teacher said. “Because he’s a little Muslim.” She is talking about the Shah of Iran’s son who was just born, a birth that provoked, God only knows why, the enthusiasm of the entire class at the primary school where I’m enrolled. I know intuitively that the baby in question isn’t *my* brother, nor is he Jacky’s, Victor’s, Corinne’s, Tony’s, or Becky’s . . . in fact, he’s not the brother of any of the other Jews in our class.

For us, being Jewish in class is first and foremost about being distinguished from the “Turks,” since the implication is that only Sunni Muslims are “really Turkish.” Contrary to theirs, our family names are redolent of Spain and our first names sound English or French. On the subject of my own name, mother loves to relate at literary salons that it was inspired by . . . Sartre. She wanted at all costs to modernize my paternal grandmother’s name, Elisa, which, according to Sephardic tradition, I was supposed to inherit. It was while reading *The Respectful Prostitute* that the idea of Lizi came to her.<sup>1</sup> But since the first year of school, the teacher hasn’t gotten used to my name, which she butchers: with knitted brows and in an hesitant voice, she mutters “Sissi.” Being Jewish also means not going to the religion classes which, despite being optional, are attended by all the other students.

One must also avoid admitting that one speaks French or Judeo-Spanish at home, even if one gets tripped up, as I do by lack of habit, on certain Turkish words.<sup>2</sup> Turkish is the language of school and the street. Of the *dolmuş* too, since the diktat of the 1940s, “Citizen, speak Turkish!” is still in place and most drivers turn around, furious, when a foreign word escapes the lips of one of their

1. *The Respectful Prostitute* (original title: *La putain respectueuse*) is a play by Jean-Paul Sartre, written in 1947 and first performed in 1948. The main female character is named Lizzie.

2. Judeo-Spanish likely refers to Ladino; however, we have opted to retain the author’s terminology (judéo-espagnol).



FIGURE 2. Lizi Behmoaras in Istanbul on Şişli Square, in the early 1950s. Behind her, a woman with a headscarf, a *simit* vendor who she half blocks in the picture, and a mustachioed man.

passengers.<sup>3</sup> It's also the language everyone speaks at home to the maid and to my little brother, "so that he, at least, assimilates better," whereas my parents, my maternal grandmother, and I communicate in French. It's an Istanbulite French, warmly sing-songy, peppered with picturesque expressions: we swear "on my life";<sup>4</sup> the telephone, the washing machine, and the car do not break down, but rather "spoil"; a dish is called an "eating"; and we abuse the present subjunctive: "That I tell you! That I go, or not?" My paternal grandmother, from a more conservative family, was not lucky enough to learn the fables of La Fontaine during her childhood. When she visits us, we speak to her with a touch of condescension in the medieval Spanish laced with Turkish and Hebrew that is Judeo-Spanish. Mother, brought up in an environment that emphasized French over and against this "jargon," had to get in the habit of speaking it after her marriage. She calls her mother-in-law *Mama* and addresses her in third-person singular, according to custom, which makes my brother and I snicker. There is also Hebrew, reserved for prayers, totally incomprehensible for us, but whose monotone cadence rocks us to sleep in my father's voice on Passover nights, while we eat *matzah*.<sup>5</sup>

The Shah's son, therefore, is not my brother. I carry the first name of one of Sartre's heroines, I read the texts of the Countess of Ségur, Tintin, and Bécassine. I have two languages at home, a third for the street and school, a fourth for religious holidays. In fact, not totally mastering any of them, I need all of them at once. My halting Turkish does not stop me from composing and reciting tremendously nationalist poems. Any occasion is a good excuse: the anniversary of Atatürk's death, Republic Day, Youth and Sports Day. At some point, overtaken by my patriotic spirit, I evoke in one of my masterpieces, "our glorious flags, red and white stains against the blue sky." The teacher, pallid, then rips the sheet on which I wrote my poem into the tiniest of pieces: "But you are crazy to use the words flag and stain in the same sentence. One could deduce that our flag is—God save us—dirty. Never again! Especially not one of you!" she cried. Especially not one of us, noted . . .

We live in an apartment on the Şişli Square where my first memories are those of a scrawny kid who spent hours at the window, shield and screen erected between her and the world, protecting her from the perils outside. Just across, under an immense verdigris dome, stands the Şişli Mosque, for me a source of infinite distraction from the moment I stopped fearing the muezzin's strident call and the incomprehensible words that he pronounces five times a day in Arabic. In the summer, I spend my days watching the cotton-candy and *simit* vendors leaning

3. Author's note: *Dolmuş* are collective taxis.

4. Here, the author makes an admittedly subtle distinction between the standard French expression "jurer sur la vie de quelqu'un" (to swear on *someone else's* life) and a French rendering of the Ladino expression which has one swearing on "mi vida" (or on *one's own* life).

5. Author's note: *Matzah* is unleavened bread.

against the wall of the mosque and baking in the sun.<sup>6</sup> They are often joined by the knife grinder, the tinsmith, and the bear-handler, whose bells break the torpor of the afternoon. Throughout the year, in the interior courtyard of the mosque, military funerals begin with the sound of Chopin's funeral march that the band plays with relative accuracy. "They are massacring it for me!" laments my grandmother.

During Ramazan, the cylindrical minarets are decorated with lighted crowns that enchant me.<sup>7</sup> Ramazan is also about *pide*, cakes drenched with melted butter as they come out of the oven and served with rose petal jam, white sheep's cheese, *kasar* (another cheese) and olives, all served at *iftar*, the breaking of the fast. I find it very amusing to get up with the maid for the *sahur*, the last meal before dawn, and to watch her do the *namaz*, prostrating herself on her prayer rug. Next we share the *pide*, this time reheated, the olives and the jam, and then she sends me quickly back to bed, fearing reproaches from *Madam*.

The titles of *bey* or *hanım*, although officially eliminated upon the proclamation of the Republic, continue, despite everything, to be the most common forms of address, except for the minorities, which are basically the Armenians, Greeks, and Jews. The maid thus addresses my parents as *Madam Jacqueline* and *Müsstü Nessim*.<sup>8</sup> For her part, this has no pejorative connotation and simply means that we are not like her. However, a Muslim woman would be profoundly offended to be addressed in this way and would respond with anger: "I am not a *madam*!"

Same window, same spot. In 1960, I bear witness to the beginnings of a military coup d'état (the first of my life, two others will follow, at ten-year intervals). Students protest against the government and demand the resignation of Prime Minister Menderes.<sup>9</sup> My grandfather is fretful: "They want the Deaf Man to come back!" In the coded vocabulary of Turkish Jews, "the Deaf Man" designates the President İsmet İnönü, who is notoriously hard of hearing, whereas "the Great" is Atatürk, and "the Greens" are Turks, undoubtedly in memory of the Ottoman period during which they alone had the right to wear green.

In the 1940s, the Deaf Man decreed an arbitrary and anti-democratic *varlık vergisi* (wealth tax) that applied only to minorities and provoked the ruin of certain families. Businessmen, merchants, and artisans incapable of paying the exorbitant sums demanded end up condemned to forced labor, east of Anatolia, near the border with the USSR. My grandmother seizes every occasion she can to mention the goods formerly possessed and now disappeared, such as rugs, a piano, Lalique lamps, crystal, silverware, etc., an inventory that invariably and melancholically ends with these words: "Then the *varlık* came and took everything from us . . ." *Varlık* is thus the terrifying ogre of my childhood, he who shows up unannounced,

6. Author's note: *Simit* is a circular roll covered with sesame seeds, sold in Turkey by street vendors.

7. Ramazan is the Turkish word for Ramadan.

8. The spelling "Müsstü" mimics the maid's pronunciation of the French word *Monsieur*.

9. Adnan Menderes was Prime Minister of Turkey from 1950–1960.

confiscates all goods, piles them up in immense trunks, and sends the master of the house away under military escort, to go break stones. Why? We don't really know. Where? In Askale, in a tiny village, I saw it in my atlas. The life of my grandparents is thus divided into a before and an after, which they laconically designate *varlık* . . .

From the proclamation of the Republic until the 1960s, discriminatory measures aimed at the non-Muslim minorities (such as the infamous *varlık*) are implemented, one after the next, at a disconcerting pace. Despite this, religion seems hardly present, at least in Istanbul, at least in the neighborhoods where we live. The Islamic veil does not yet exist. Working-class women cover their head with a scarf loosely knotted over the top of their chest, and which slips constantly, revealing their hair. The black *çarşaf* placed on top of one's clothes, covering the head as well as the whole body, is only worn by peasants recently arrived from central, eastern, or south-east Anatolia, in other words, from the edge of the world, from another world.

For a long time, like any minoritarian, I would only know the Turkey of Istanbul, and of Istanbul only the zone commonly called the "Şişli, Nişantaş, Etiler Triangle," neighborhoods on the European shore mostly inhabited by Jews, who also reside, during summer vacations, on two of the Prince Islands, across from the city on the Marmara Sea: Burgaz and "our island," Büyükada, literally the Big Island. In this cosmopolitan microcosm, it is with the Turks, paradoxically, that we share the sentiment of being a minority, because everywhere in the streets bordered by laurels and bougainvillea, at the grocer's or the fishmonger's, one hears Greek being spoken. In general, we "go up" to Büyükada around the month of June, when the mimosas are in bloom, and we "go back down" to the city for the beginning of the school year, when the storks are migrating.

The Istanbul where I live today is no longer exactly the city that I knew as a child, but one still lives it as intensely as before, in the same brouhaha, with perhaps other dreams, other preoccupations. As Mevlâna said, "Everything that belongs to the past, oh my soul, has gone away with the past. We must now speak of other things."<sup>10</sup>

—Translated by Robert Watson

10. Mevlâna refers to the thirteenth-century Muslim saint and Anatolian poet, Mevlâna Jelaleddin Rumî, known in the English-speaking world simply as Rumi.

Ankara

---

## Mamma Sultana's Unicorns

Moris Farhi

I am a member of an exclusive club.<sup>1</sup> As clubs go it's tiny and has no links with the cabals of power. But we are such an ethnic mix that we can claim to epitomize Turkey's racial, religious, and cultural mosaic. This New Year's Day, 2012, we are merely eight men and fourteen women, aged forty-three to seventy-one. In our heyday, in 1981, we numbered 123: fifty-six men and sixty-seven women, not counting the twenty-eight who, lamentably, had passed away.

We named our club *Mamma Sultana's Unicorns*.

I, Jak, a Jew, was one of the founders. The others were the three scions of Baybars: Defne, Remzi, and Perihan; Agop, an Armenian; Yorgo, a Greek; Ümit, a Kurd; and Nikolay, a White Russian.<sup>2</sup>

The inauguration took place in Ankara, in 1962, during the banquet celebrating both Remzi's twelfth birthday and his circumcision. The idea to create the club was advanced by Murat Paşa, the Baybars paterfamilias, a descendent of the seventeenth-century Ottoman Grand Vizier, Köprülü. Only those wet-nursed by Sabbatina, our "*Mamma*," were eligible for membership.

Exclusive clubs need exclusive titles. At first we wanted to feature the word, "*Meme*," which in Turkish means "breast." It would have been the perfect honorific for Sabbatina. But, sadly, the expression had been tainted by smutty slang. We decided on *Mamma* when, during our deliberations, poor circumcised Remzi,

1. A reminder to readers that this essay is one of the two in this volume that were originally written in English (UK).

2. Baybars I (full name: al-Malik al-Zāhir Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Bunduqdāri) was one of the most eminent Mamluk sultans. In the thirteenth century, he reigned over areas corresponding to present-day Egypt and Syria. He was said to have given refuge to scions of the 'Abbāsīd family, thus allowing the reestablishment of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate after its overthrow in 1258. "White Russian" refers to a person from Belarus.



FIGURE 3. Moris Farhi, age three or four (1938 or 1939), in Ankara.

seeking deliverance from the ache in his penis, entreated not Allah nor his mother, Zeynep, as would be expected, but his wet nurse, Sabbatina, calling her *Mamma*, as she was called by her own children. After all, we reasoned, as milk-siblings, we were effectively Sabbatina's children, too. Besides, we asserted, in Muslim lore wet nurses are regarded as members of the family, often more constant than blood relatives.

The appendix, *Unicorns*, was my idea. Unicorns, I maintained, not only possess the grace of the horse which we Turks revere as soulmates, but also symbolize the purity of spirit that humankind had lost and which, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, we were seeking to reclaim. Sabbatina's potent milk would provide us with the fortitude to achieve that aim. (We were idealists then, not the disillusioned beings we are now.)

The regal epithet *Sultana*, "Empress"—the crux of this reminiscence—was coined by Murat Paşa himself.

In 1946, Murat Paşa, a widower for three years, agreed to remarry and thus allay the concerns of his children about his welfare. He wed Zeynep, the only daughter of his estate's foreman.

Ankara, still a fledgling capital in those days where everybody knew everybody, rejoiced. For Murat Paşa, an altruist and model landowner, a bulwark to friends and family, was much loved as a man made "in Atatürk's image." Indeed, his sobriquet, Paşa—the Ottoman rank of field marshal—denoted the reverence accorded him. His protestations that, though he had partaken in the War of Independence, near-fatal wounds in the battle of Sakarya had ended his military career when still a major, fell on deaf ears.

And Zeynep, kindhearted, intelligent, humble, and entrancing like an orange blossom, had instantly captured people's hearts.

But, perversely, Murat Paşa had a delusion: a fervent belief in the immaculacy of Turkish blood. This foible did not engender the slightest prejudice toward any of the minorities—in fact, his best friends and drinking companions were, in the main, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, like my father Vitali. Yet, on matters of lineage, blood had to be pure and none was purer than that which swelled Turkish sinews.

Within the year, Murat Paşa and Zeynep's nuptials were blessed with the birth of a daughter, Defne. Woefully, their felicity soon spiraled into anguish. Zeynep developed mastitis; nursing her baby became torturous. Doctors as well as healers reputed to have magical powers failed to find a remedy. Zeynep was advised to wean Defne and feed her pasteurized milk. She refused. "My child needs breast," she contended. "Not cow's udders! And breast she'll have—come what may!"

Soon Fate intervened. Defne, having struggled for days to draw milk from her mother's lacerated nipples, stopped suckling. Zeynep became even more fraught. She pleaded, cajoled, prayed, wept, and threw tantrums. But Defne not only continued to spurn her mother's bosom but also, tormented by hunger, threw her own heartrending tantrums.

When news of Zeynep's ordeal spread, my parents hastened to help.

While my mother, Paloma, ensconced herself with Zeynep, my father dragged Murat Paşa off for a drink.

Whereas in the past "a drink" meant several glasses of raki, this time they could only indulge in tea.<sup>3</sup>

Murat Paşa confided his fears: his baby faced death—malnutrition invites fatal diseases. If Defne died, so would Zeynep—of a broken heart. And if Zeynep died too, he would not be able to go on living, not even for the sake of his other children, much as he loved them. He clutched my father's hands. "A miracle, Vitali! That's our only hope."

My father tried to soothe him. "Miracles happen every day. Often they're lying around, waiting to be gathered."

"Don't humor me, Vitali."

"I wouldn't presume, Murat Paşa. God is my witness: Paloma and I prayed for just such a miracle. And there it was, tugging at our sleeves."

Murat Paşa started weeping. "Please! No dishonesty between friends, not even in consolation."

My father wiped Murat Paşa's tears. "Listen, please listen . . . When my son, Jak, was born, Paloma developed abscesses and was unable to nurse him, just like Zeynep. Look at Jak now: three already and built like a wrestler."

Murat Paşa stared at my father. "I didn't know . . . How . . . what did you do . . .?"

"We sought help . . . Friends suggested a wet nurse."

"I believe wet-nursing is fine . . . But . . .?"

"And none finer than Sabbatina. We went to her."

"Carpenter Italo's wife? The Levantine?"<sup>4</sup>

"Yes."

"She's Christian . . . Another blood. How could you, a Jew . . .?"

"What's the difference?"

Murat Paşa shook his head. "I . . . I can't do that! Not even if Zeynep . . . no, I can't allow it! However, if there are Turkish wet nurses . . ."

"I expect there are. But we might not find one close by or able to nurse straight away. Whereas Sabbatina lives in the neighborhood. She is healthy, strong, and has a soul like clear water. Most importantly—Paloma verified this—she has recently given birth and is lactating. In fact, we're told that having wet-nursed many, she has never stopped lactating. She'll be your miracle, Murat Paşa."

"But she's not a Turk!"

"Levantines are Venetians from Byzantine times. They've lived here for centuries. They're as Turkish as anybody in the country!"

3. Raki, also written *rakı*, is an anise-flavored liquor found throughout the MENA region and the Balkans. Also known as *arak*, it is similar in flavor to ouzo and pastis.

4. The noun or adjective "levantine" generally refers to the Levant, a geographical designation that derives from the French "soleil levant" (rising sun). When applied to a person or group of people, it refers to non-Muslims of the MENA region.

Murat Paşa hauled himself up. “Not Turk-Turk, Vitali! Sabbatina’s milk won’t be of pure Turkish stock!”

As he rushed out, my father ran after him. “Blood is blood, Murat Paşa. Wholesome! No matter whose!”

“No! There is pure blood. And there is the rest.”

My father grabbed Murat Paşa’s arm, by Turkish conventions a discourteous behavior toward elders. “Forgive me for saying this: would you have Defne die for lack of pure Turkish blood or live with ordinary blood?”

Etiquette prevented Murat Paşa from hitting my father. He scurried home.

My mother fared better. Advancing my father’s reasoning—more delicately, as was her way—she advised Zeynep that the only way to ensure Defne’s well-being was to entrust her to a wet nurse.

At first, Zeynep demurred. She was not averse to the idea of wet-nursing; it was quite prevalent in the countryside where she grew up. But weren’t wet nurses mainly feeders? Could they be as loving as mothers? Besides, given Murat Paşa’s obsession with purity of blood, could one be found suitable enough?

My mother disregarded the notion of pure blood. Instead, she reassured Zeynep that when a woman nurses, she becomes Mother Earth; all babies become hers. Sabbatina was such a Mother Earth; so nourishing was her milk that the many heavenly darlings she had suckled, her son, Jak, included, were now gambling like cubs.

That decided Zeynep. She plucked Defne from her cot and asked my mother to take them to Sabbatina.

That afternoon, Murat Paşa and Zeynep had their first—and reportedly, their only—quarrel.

Regaining home after leaving my father, Murat Paşa found the house empty. Since even Fatma, his faithful servant of countless years, was nowhere to be seen, he thought that something terrible had happened to Zeynep and Defne. Frantically he called friends, neighbors, and the emergency services. No one could give him any news.

He was about to rush out and scour the streets, when Zeynep appeared with Defne sound asleep in her arms and Fatma in tow.

Murat Paşa, blind to Zeynep’s smiling, radiant face, bellowed. “Are you alright? Where have you been?”

Zeynep, ignoring his anger, went up to him. “Look, look at Defne!”

Murat Paşa cast a cursory glance at his daughter. “You haven’t answered me: where have you been?”

“You’re not looking! Take a good look! What do you see?”

Murat Paşa mellowed. “She’s asleep.”

“Yes, and not crying!”

“You sedated her?”

“No. She fed. Ravenously!”

Tears of joy filled Murat Paşa's eyes. "You mean . . . your breasts . . . you can nurse now?"

"I took her to a wet nurse. To Sabbatina."

Murat Paşa's joy turned to fury. "You didn't! You shouldn't have! She . . . she's a Christian! How could you?"

And they quarreled.

Murat Paşa blazoned his belief that only Turkish milk contained pure Turkish blood while Zeynep argued that in order to save Defne she'd feed her anybody's milk, whether Christian, Chinese, Eskimo, or the she-wolf that had nursed Romulus and Remus.

Murat Paşa remained adamant.

Zeynep offered a new argument: given the blood of the countless peoples Turkey had absorbed for millennia—from Hittites to Greeks to Armenians to Jews—she herself was bound to be of mixed blood hundred times over. Therefore, she couldn't be a Turk-Turk, nor, by the same token, could Defne be.

Murat Paşa dismissed her logic as speculative.

This time Zeynep brought up Murat Paşa's primogenitor, the Grand Vizier, Köprülü: illustrious by all accounts, yet of Albanian origin—a fact that, in mindless xenophobia, he had chosen to suppress much of his life, but one which attested that he, too, was not pure Turk-Turk, but crossbred, like everybody else.

The indisputability of that truth desolated Murat Paşa. He collapsed onto his chair. Sheepishly, even as he grieved for the loss of his precious belief, he acknowledged that he had been aberrant in believing in the purity of blood.

Zeynep, tenderhearted as ever, hugged him. "Sabbatina will nurse Defne again in an hour. Come and see."

. . .

Murat Paşa went along. And as he watched Defne imbibe Sabbatina's milk naturally and happily, an auroral peace cocooned him.

When Defne, satiated, fell asleep and Zeynep removed her from Sabbatina's lap, Murat Paşa, tears running down his cheeks, dropped on his knees and kissed Sabbatina's feet. "You are a *Sultana!* Our Sultana! May Allah and your God and every God in heaven preserve you!"

#### POSTSCRIPT

Mamma Sultana lost count of the children she nursed. What is common knowledge is that she lactated well into her sixties averaging about five sucklings a year for some forty years. But there were many others. For during such calamities as earthquakes, fires, etc., she always availed her breasts, like the legendary wet nurses of history, to orphaned babies. (Alas, we could not track down these milk-siblings to induct them into our club.)

Inconceivably, when the urban bourgeoisie reneged on baby-farming as antediluvian and embraced artificial baby milk for its “Western modernity,” Mamma Sultana found herself less in demand. Eventually, however, parents with good sense realized that prodigious wet nurses cannot really be replaced, that breast milk, whether it gushes from the mother or from a wet nurse, is not ersatz but Nature’s gift to humankind. For these parents and for the many unfortunate mothers who—whether for health reasons or because malnourishment prevented them from producing enough milk—the Mamma Sultanas have remained heaven-sent.

I am sure many fathers, too, worshiped their children’s wet nurses, probably as pruriently as I did. For I should confess, when I watched Mamma Sultana—in her fifties at the time—cradle my newborn daughter, Alegra, I kept wanting to bury my face in her still wondrous and bountiful breasts.

Mamma Sultana died in 2002, aged seventy-six. My mother and Murat Paşa (the latter almost centenarian by then), who had been at her bedside for weeks, both swore that, as she took her last breath, she proffered Death nipples that were as frothy as when, in her prime, she had nursed her “Unicorns.”

Istanbul

---

## A Non-Jewish Turkish Jew

Roni Margulies

My Jewish childhood in Istanbul was not a very Jewish childhood.<sup>1</sup> At least, not for me.

It was a joyful, carefree time of innocence and bliss, but few of its bright, lively colors had a Jewish tint, few of its wonderful, loud, and varied sounds carried a Jewish tone.

We were, of course, Jewish. No one doubted that. A long line of East European rabbis and dentists on the Ashkenazi side of the family, and an equally long list of Eastern Aegean doctors and small traders on the Sephardi side, an endless succession of Aarons and Bohors, Cecalias and Esmeraldas, and birthplaces as far removed as Grodno, Tattenitz, İzmir, and Tire all bore impeccable witness to the unsullied Jewishness of the family.

In later, less innocent and blissful times, I would taunt Turkish chauvinists with the fact, no doubt true but utterly unimportant to me, that in a land built on the remnants of a multiethnic empire where races and religions had freely mingled, danced, and procreated with each other for many centuries, I was one of a very small number of people who could claim with any certainty to be “of pure blood!”

So, Jewish we were, but I was fortunate enough to be brought up without any particular stress on exactly how Jewish I had to be.

There were, I think, two main reasons for this. One to do with the heroes of this story, my parents and grandparents, and the other with the time and place in which the story was set.

The jewels in the crown of my youth were my two grandfathers.

Joseph Margulies, “Yuzek” to his wife, “Dyeda” to me, had moved to Turkey in 1925, at the age of twenty-seven, out of pure coincidence. When he left Vienna

1. A reminder to readers that this essay is one of the two in this volume that were originally written in English (UK).



FIGURE 4. Istanbul, 1960. Roni Margulies is holding a ball, on the right. He's with his grandfather and his cousins. Behind him, wearing sunglasses, is his mother.

University as an engineer after having fought as a young lieutenant in the Austro-Hungarian army, his uncle Wolf found him work in Berlin. The company he went to work for exported machinery, followed by an engineer on a one-year assignment to help the locals set the machines up. He was given the choice of Japan, Hungary, and Turkey. There had just been an earthquake in Japan, he knew and disliked the Hungarian importers, and so chose Turkey. He married my grandmother in Grodno, they caught the train to Constanza, and from there a boat to Istanbul. They came for a year and stayed forever. Thus was I born a *Turkish Jew*.

Joseph was Polish, but at home they spoke my grandmother's native tongue, not his. He had learned Russian when they first met, better to court her in her mother tongue. And in addition to the Russian words I was to learn when I became a socialist—"tovarich," "iskra," "rabochnik"—I still know that "daimi klutch" means "give me the keys," because she would ask him for the room keys several times a day on our family winter holidays in a hotel by a Northern Turkish mountain lake near the Black Sea coast.<sup>2</sup> In the afternoons, all six of us, two grandparents and their four grandchildren, my sister, my two cousins, and I, would go walking around the steel-blue waters of the lake, along forest paths through pine trees weighed down by snow. I do not know if there is a Jewish heaven—I was never interested enough to look into the matter—but if there is, I came as close to it on those walks as I ever will.

On my mother's side, my grandparents spoke Ladino, the language which the Jews brought with them from Spain when they arrived in the Ottoman Empire half a millennium ago. This was the language Moise and Elda Danon spoke with each other; to me they spoke in French, as did my parents. I answered them all in Turkish. I learned no Russian, little Ladino, and much French, but together with Turkish in the streets and English at school, these languages were all part of my aural universe before I could write even a single line of poetry in any one of them.

None of these people, all of whom played a part, difficult to describe but very real nonetheless, in making me who I became, were religious in any formal sense. Some, mostly the women, believed in some sort of God, no doubt a Jewish one, but not a very strict one. Some believed in no such thing. Some were Zionists, in rather a vague, emotional way, not very concretely, and all felt some bond with Israel, though again, not very actively or very meaningfully, but only in a strangely Platonic way.

Thankfully, this strange collection of people who had converged on Istanbul in the 1920s through a series of odd coincidences were all very relaxed about their Jewishness and none felt it to be the core of their lives or the determining feature of their personal identities. The family would come together for dinner on Jewish

2. These Russian words are neither explained nor translated in the original: *Tovarich* (comrade); *iskra* (spark or sparkle; also the title of a revolutionary communist newspaper founded by Lenin in 1900); *rabochnik* (likely a deformation of *rabotnik*, meaning worker).

holidays, but such dinners were only differentiated from others by the gefilte fish and chopped liver cooked by one grandmother or the shore rockling (*gaidropsarus mediterraneus*)—a fish to which Ottoman Jews seem to have given pride of place on festive tables, though I doubt that it has any such place in the Old Testament—cooked by the other. Nothing overtly religious took place on these evenings, and I still cannot tell *Pesach* and *Yom Kippur* apart. I only know they exist because my mother rings to wish me happy holidays, knowing full-well that I will make gentle fun of her and she will have to join me in the laughter.

And yes, I *did* have a bar mitzvah. I know of no Jew in Turkey who has not. As my thirteenth birthday approached, a young man was employed for one or two evenings a week to teach me Hebrew, or at least enough Hebrew for me to recite the necessary prayers during the ceremony at the synagogue. To give credit where it's due, he very quickly realized that I had no interest in the matter and was unlikely to be cajoled into it. We agreed that I could simply memorize the prayers, I quickly did so, and the lessons ended prematurely.

Boring as prayers in an obscure language were for a thirteen-year-old, the bar mitzvah presents made it well worth it. For my twelfth birthday I may have received a leather football, some books, and clothes from close relatives. For the thirteenth, tradition required that rather more serious presents be given by all relatives, as well as my parents' many friends invited to the synagogue. My father, whose pride in my supposed "coming of age" seemed to be no greater than mine, wrote a mock-prayer, in Turkish, not Hebrew, asking guests to leave the presents by the entrance and requiring those who had brought none simply to leave. The Mont Blanc fountain pen and the silver letter opener on my desk, not far from my computer, date from that ceremony where, perhaps I should add, I recited "*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam . . .*" rather than the prayer penned by my father.<sup>3</sup> What the words mean, I still don't know!

Beyond the festive dinners and the bar mitzvah, there is not a great deal of specific Jewishness I remember from my early years. When I look back now, I can see that until the age of fourteen, when I started at Robert College, the American lycée on the banks of the Bosphorus, *all* my friends were Jewish. They were not *chosen* as friends and they were certainly not chosen because they were Jewish. We just happened to be the children of parents who were friends and so we were at the same places at the same time. A few are still my friends. Davut Kohen, the ophthalmologist; Irvin Schick, the mathematician and lecturer in cultural studies; Elio Ancel, the manufacturer of handkerchiefs. Now we know, but then we were just kids and did not think we were different from any of the other kids around, at school, in the streets, or anywhere else. Istanbul in the 1960s was still a considerably multicultural, multiethnic city. I do not remember ever giving a single

3. This formula, "Blessed art thou, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe . . ." is found at the beginning of most Jewish liturgical blessings.

thought to the fact that my friends included Armenians, Greeks, and Turks, as well as Jews.

I did not know until much later—when, for political reasons, in order to write against anti-Semitism and other forms of racism, I began to take an interest in the community—that there are and always have been Jewish schools, newspapers, sports clubs, youth clubs, old peoples' homes, and a whole network of community organizations. As a child and a young man, I knew nothing of this network. This cannot have been my own choice, it must have been chosen for me by my parents and grandparents, and for this I am forever grateful to them. I hate religious, ethnic, or any other particularism now, and I would like to think that I would have hated it then.

I owe it to the heroes of this story that no such particularism was imposed upon me at a time when I was most impressionable. The reason it was not had to do partly with who they were, but partly also with the time and place in which the story was set.

In September 1955, just a few months after I was born, the shops, homes, and holy places of non-Muslim minorities in Istanbul were attacked and ransacked for two days by mobs organized clandestinely by the secret services.<sup>4</sup> No one died, but the trauma was severe. Only thirteen years previously, during the Second World War, the state had imposed a one-off wealth tax which was effectively only levied on the minorities.<sup>5</sup> Those who could not pay were sent to labor camps in the godforsaken eastern part of the country, where they stayed in atrocious conditions until the tax was quietly shelved after about a year.

These and similar inhumanities throughout Republican times, since 1923, had nothing at all to do with religion. They were all planned, prepared, and perpetrated by a vicious nationalist state, not by any spontaneous street crowds, and not only against non-Muslims. And the scars never healed fully; the traumas were never completely overcome.

In such a country, it was always felt by the minorities to be safer not to appear too Jewish, or Greek, or Armenian. The Jewish community, in particular, did its utmost to remain as silent and publicly invisible as a community of more than twenty thousand people can be. No one ever told me this, but I suspect it may have been one reason why none of the Margulies or Danon children were brought up to be too religious. This is not to imply that all Jews in Turkey are atheists on the verge of complete assimilation; far from it. I would guess that only a small handful would be nonbelievers, and anyway, even the most ardent assimilationists would be banging their heads against a brick wall.

4. Known as the Istanbul Pogrom, on the night of September 6, 1955, organized special forces launched attacks targeting primarily the city's Greek population. The city's other minorities, Jews and Armenians, also fell victim to the violence, which was primarily directed against shops and offices.

5. See Country Snapshot: "Turkey."

It was also true, when I was growing up, that the walls separating the many ethnic and religious communities of Istanbul had become weaker and much more porous than they had been even in my parents' youth. And they crumbled and collapsed completely in the years when I traveled the distance between being a child and a young man. My Sephardi grandparents, and certainly their parents, had spent most of their lives behind those invisible walls. I was free to wander.

At Robert College I was suddenly old enough to choose my own friends. And none were Jewish. What we had in common were middle-class families, insatiable intellectual curiosity, an interest in all things cultural, mainly Anglo-Saxon and very rarely Turkish, and an utterly undeserved sense of superiority. This did not mean that we were to be found reading French novels and discussing our existential angst between lessons. Most of my school days were spent playing football, or sitting on stone benches on the edge of the campus watching the boats glide along the Bosphorus.

Those were without any doubt the happiest days of our lives.

Then the country changed, and the world changed, and we changed.

But we had already become who we are now, and the survivors are still my closest friends.

Harbiye, Istanbul

---

## Her Name Was Dursineh

Rosie Pinhas-Delpuech

It was at the end of the 1950s, during the February holidays. It was still very cold and we were traveling through Anatolia in a drafty old Jeep, surplus from the American army. The father of my childhood friend was a stateless German Jewish refugee; he loved to explore the interior of the country where his engineering work often took him. At the time it was rare: city folk didn't venture into the villages, unless they had family in the provinces, which was the case neither of Jews nor of Christians. Outside of the cities, Turkey was a vast country unknown to urbanites. With its high mountains, its large rivers, its frozen lakes, and its arid plains, it was as beguiling for me as nearby Russia or faraway America. This vast national space was tied together by the maids who came to work in the city to make some money that they then gave to their lord and master: the husband. They talked of the village; the simple cuisine based on flour, eggs, and dairy; the animals; the forced marriages to old men; the wedding night in all its crudeness; the sheet brandished at the window the following morning in front of everyone; the secret lover they never married; the goats and the sheep they led into the pastures; the wolves that came down from the mountains. They smelled of yogurt and sheep's cheese. They were the Anatolia that still makes me dream today.

One of them was named Dursineh, she was tall and beautiful, upright in body and soul. I imagined her as a descendant of the Turkmen; she knew how to ride a horse, she was proud, independent, fair as the water from the stream, but chained by law and custom to her old man. We spoke of her at night at the dinner table, comparing her either to Tartuffe's Mariane (as the name is spelled in Molière's play) or to Chimène, whom I discovered in middle school. In Turkish, the tyrannical hypocrites had a name: they were called "yobaz" and they did not have much currency in the public opinion of the 1950s. On Fridays, at the end of her day of housework, Dursineh would wash herself, change her headscarf, and tie a long,



FIGURE 5. Rosie Pinhas, age three, in October 1950 with her paternal grandmother in the Taksim Garden.

luminously white batiste veil around her red-cheeked and blue-eyed face; then, in the corner of the living room facing east, on the edge of the big rug, in knit socks and a long flowery skirt, she would say her *namaz*, her prayer. I've known the word forever, since I learned how to speak. As a little girl, I had asked my grandmother about it, and she told me about Ishmael, Mohamed, and Allah; it was sad, obscure, and friendly. Later, at the secular, compulsory public primary school—where I was the only Jewish girl among seventy-two students—I attended the weekly hour-long Muslim religion class on Islamic religion given by our teacher simply because there was nowhere else for me to go. The words of the Qur'an were long, the students mumbled, tripped over them, the teacher made me read their credo, "*Lâ ilahe illallah Muhammed'in res'ul Allah,*" the same as our "*Shema Isra'el,*" as the "Our Father."<sup>1</sup> I came back to the house and practiced reciting it. My family encouraged me. We tolerated not a hint of proselytism, neither from Dursineh nor the school. Gifted with a vivacious synchronic memory, my grandmother told me of the conversions "we" had suffered through, the holy water thrown on "our heads" from up on the stands erected in the public squares of Spain and Portugal. Forced conversion was a haunting, a trauma never erased despite the centuries. I grew up in its shadow. These converts were called "*anusim*" in Hebrew, derived from the word "*ones,*" or rape; the term means "the violated," or "the coerced."

That evening in February, we spent the night at the inn of one of those villages that Dursineh's stories made me dream about. The rooms smelled of soap and firewood; we slept underneath huge, quilted blankets called *yorgan*. The first cock crowed; I opened my eyes; the stove glowed; it was dark. Outside there was a huge explosion followed by a round of gunfire, as if it was war, a word still on the tip of the adults' tongues. We turned on the lights, and people came to reassure us: it was the drum of Ramazan announcing the dawn meal before taking up the fast again until the next sunset.<sup>2</sup> In the explosive violence of the drum there was something that evoked Dursineh's stories. Something frightening, something constraining and collective, like the soiled sheet exhibited for all to see after the membrane had been pierced. But at the same time, Ramazan in the village had an archaic and reassuring dimension: united around a belief, humans stayed warm together, slept under their down quilts, someone kept watch, kept away the ghosts of the night and woke the others up for a communal celebration. I had a kind of primitive nostalgia for this impossible "keeping warm together."

1. The prayer known as the Shahada, transcribed as *lâ 'ilâha 'illâ-llâh, muḥammadur-rasûlu-llâh* (meaning: there is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God), is the declaration of the belief of the oneness of God and the acceptance of Mohammed as God's messenger. Recitation of the Shahada, "with sincerity and conviction," is also the sole requirement for conversion to Islam. The author's comparison to the Jews' Shema Yisrael or the Christian Lord's Prayer, is apt, insofar as all three prayers are the most commonly recited statements of faith of their respective religions.

2. Ramazan is the Turkish word for Ramadan.

Fifty years later, during a stay in the city of Edirne, I often woke up with the cock's crow, accompanied a few seconds later by the muezzin's call. Between night and dawn, in this moment of fluctuation and angst, as if the sun might not rise, the coughs might not cease, the fevers might not fall, as if death could come for us, there is this human voice that lifted up toward the sky. In my childhood, it was *a cappella*, modulated, sinuous, humane. Then the metallic loudspeaker came to the neighborhoods, overwhelming everything with its recorded, screeching voice.

The local mosques were modest and functional. Passing by, one could glimpse men in the middle of the courtyard washing their feet. The prayer hall was masked by a wooden door or a leather hanging. My recollection is of an immense brightness, of numerous windows through which light flooded in, of the simple curve of the dome, of the sensation of soft rugs underneath bare feet or socks, of the smell of soap mixed with that of clean feet. In the city, there was no beating drum; rather it was the aromas wafting out of bread ovens that gave rhythm to Ramadan. At sunset, they began churning out aromatic flatbreads and large platters of lamb and vegetables that families would return to the baker in the morning. Once again, the memory is that of snow and winter, strings of lightbulbs in merchants' shops, of the effervescence of evening, of those who hurried back home to break the fast. Mixed in with this are memories of the Catholics' Christmas, of the smell of brioches with bergamot, of bells that rang in the night, of the Orthodox Epiphany. Of children with lanterns coming to knock on our doors, singing in Greek "*Aghios Vassilis erkheté*" ("Saint Basil is here") and asking for coins or candy.

In the island of my childhood, Greek churches were open all day. They were dark, without windows, illuminated only by many candles and the golden sparkle of the icons. Incense burned in the censers, the Virgin was delicate and beautiful, Jesus looked at you right in the eyes and one felt immediately transported into the space of fiction, with characters and a plot. The Catholic churches were another story: Saint Anthony, on Pera Street in Istanbul, also remained open all day. My ballet professor, a Polish woman, took me there one day. It was my first time, and I watched the graceful gesture of the wrist, the fingertips grazing the surface of the holy water, the sign of the cross on the body, the elegant genuflection before the altar. The Catholic church was the place of great theatrical performance and fascination, which, according to the dictionary, means "charm and enchantment," capturing of the gaze. There one mostly saw women, silent, in prayer. Sometimes one heard the organ; there were exuberant bouquets in front of the altar. The Polish woman was a flamboyant lover, full of grace and culture; her body married the space of the church and eroticism circulated between the two. The adolescent girl I had become felt as though she had entered the temple of extreme elevation where everything was luxury, calm, and delight.<sup>3</sup> I had turned my back on stockinged feet and on the prostrations of the *namaz*.

3. The author is citing a famous line from Baudelaire's *Invitation au voyage* (1857), or *Invitation to a Journey*, which has many different English translations. We've opted to preserve here a version very close to the original French, which reads "luxe, calme, et volupté."

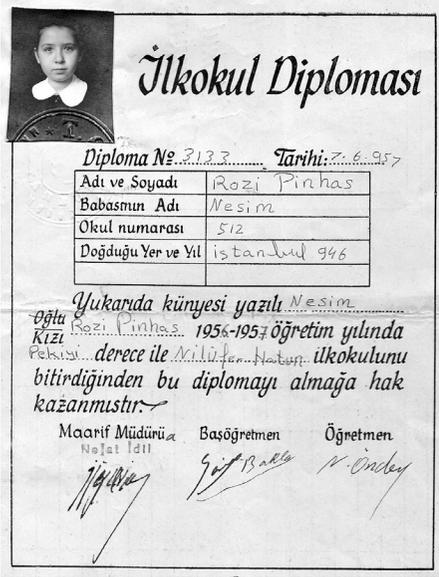


FIGURE 6. Turkish Certificate of Study, or Turkish primary school diploma, received in 1957 from the Nilüfer Hâton school in the Nişantaşı neighborhood.

In the forest of signs, which I interpreted step by step as I made my way forward, those of Jewish culture were the most discrete, invisible, and hushed. The synagogues, far from the residential neighborhoods, were difficult to enter and always closed, except for marriages and burials, two contrasting events: one all in white, the other all in black, both equally distressing. There was nothing to see, nothing to do, except to look at the backs of men rocking back and forth in their prayer shawls. My father did not know how to pray; he passed his reticence on to me. And after the war, after the discriminatory measures taken against minorities and from the founding of Atatürk's secular Republic, Jews were advised to be discrete, to keep a low profile. Like in France. To forget, to be forgotten after what had happened.

To be forgotten. I asked for nothing more. To become another, to be reborn in French and in France. To the point of no longer knowing who I was, to the point where the Hebrew of prayers and the streets brings me back to the stories of my grandmother drawn from our Book, to the synagogues without images, to the humble light of the mosques.

—Translated by Robert Watson



CHAPTER TWO

Lebanon



## Country Snapshot

The most religiously diverse country in the Middle East, Lebanon is home to Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians of a wide variety of denominations, Druze, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus, and has been home to Jews since biblical times. Although the community nowadays numbers fewer than thirty, during the first half of the twentieth century, Lebanon boasted a robust Jewish population of approximately fourteen thousand members, most of whom lived in Beirut.

Between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the composition of Lebanese Jewry diversified as migrants and refugees from surrounding countries arrived and settled in Lebanon. In the early eighteenth century, Andalusian and Maghrebi Jews fleeing persecution sought refuge in the country's Shouf region south of Beirut; a century later, accusations of blood libel drove scores of Jews from Damascus out of Syria and into Lebanon, their neighbor to the west. In addition to these earlier waves of migration, in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Lebanon again welcomed a significant influx of Jews from neighboring Syria and Iraq, making it the sole Middle Eastern country whose Jewish population increased after the state of Israel was founded in 1948. In large part due to these influxes of migrants, the Jewish population of Lebanon almost tripled in size between 1948 and 1960.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Lebanese Jews began to consolidate geographically as they welcomed these waves of immigrants from surrounding countries. Following the Druze-Maronite War (1860), Jews from the Shouf relocated to Beirut to escape sectarian violence in their home regions. As Beirut transformed from a tranquil port town into a major industrial center, the city absorbed still more migrants, as Jews from smaller municipalities arrived in search of economic opportunities and to escape civil unrest. This internal migration was such that, during the first half of the twentieth century, the Jewish communities of Hasbaya and Tripoli all but vanished. In 1940s Tripoli, in particular, violence perpetrated by the Sunni community, who were displeased by the developments in Palestine, drove Jews to pack their bags and remake their lives in Beirut. More specifically,



MAP 3. Lebanon. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

in November 1945, fourteen Tripolitan Jews were killed in riots, and, in 1948, the town saw even more attacks, first in the wake of the Deir Yassin massacre, in which Jewish forces invaded the Palestinian town of Deir Yassin and killed between 100 and 250 of its residents, and then following the establishment of the state of Israel.

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and its ensuing dissolution, both the political and communal government of the Lebanese Jewish community shifted. As to the former, Lebanon was placed under the administration of the French, who, in 1920, created the State of Greater Lebanon out of both Lebanon and Syria. Around the same time, the elected Jewish council of Beirut, which had been created through a series of reforms several years previously, became the *de facto* representative of Lebanese Jewry as a whole due to the consolidation of Lebanese Jewish life in that city. As Beirut had become the nexus for Jewish life in Lebanon, the communal council of the city transformed into a communal body representing all Lebanese Jewry, and thus went on to serve as such in dealings with both the government and in interethnic and interreligious relations. In the years following World War I, Lebanese Jews had recognized civil status and, as such, lived as equal citizens. It was at this time that the Lebanese

Jewish bourgeoisie came into its own, with many Jews working in banking and finance. As for poorer Jews, they worked most often as merchants, or in the clothing, soap, and glass industries.

The Lebanese Jewish community had several schools, which served the different social classes of Lebanese Jews in a variety of languages. The Tiferet Israel boarding school, which was in operation during the latter quarter of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth, attracted well-to-do Jewish pupils from across the Middle East and North Africa as it taught five languages and the language of instruction was Arabic. After the turn of the century, upper-class families frequently chose to send their children to French schools. Middle class families often sent their children to the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools, the first of which was established in Beirut in 1869, or the Mission Laïque Française, which was founded in 1909. Poorer Jewish children often attended the École Talmud Torah Selim Tarrab, which was founded in 1926. In addition to French and Arabic, many Lebanese Jews were literate in English, and Lebanese Jews published magazines and journals in all three languages.

Overall, the Jews of Lebanon maintained good relations with their Muslim and Christian neighbors, and did well for themselves as a minority religious community living in a majority-Muslim state. Lebanese Jews were an apolitical group who shared the vision for an independent, multi-confessional nation with their Christian and Muslim neighbors, and had congenial relationships with their national government, which had become sovereign in 1943 following the end of the French mandate. Although some Lebanese Jews did turn to Zionism after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (1922), they typically preferred to remain in their native homeland, rather than move to what would become the Jewish state. This loyalty was reciprocated by the Lebanese government, which protected the Lebanese Jewish community from Arab nationalist threats and from certain Palestinian groups whose ideologies equated Jewishness with Zionism. As opposed to what transpired in most other Middle Eastern nations, neither the 1967 Arab-Israeli War nor the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel, more broadly, had a strong effect on the Lebanese Jewish community. Indeed, Lebanese Jews both considered themselves and were considered by their fellow citizens to be part of the Lebanese national community. As such, they were somewhat less concerned by conflicts in which their country was not intimately involved.

The erosion and eventual dissolution of the Lebanese Jewish community was primarily a result of civil conflict, rather than of antagonistic international or intercommunal relations between Jews and their neighbors. The first major wave of Jewish emigration from Lebanon occurred following the 1958 civil war, in which many of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees who had immigrated the decade prior fled the infighting between Lebanese Christians and Muslims. Following the Six Days' War (1967), the Jewish community ceased to have a public presence. Most of the remaining Jews left as a result of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), as they

were literally caught in the middle: the Jewish Quarter of Wadi Abu Jamil was located on the green line and as a result, Jews, who were themselves not necessarily involved in the unrest, were inextricably caught up in the violence. Most chose to emigrate and settle among other Lebanese Jewish expatriate communities in Paris, Montreal, São Paulo, and New York. The communal decline of the Lebanese Jewish community continued its downward trend in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, there are only about two dozen Jews left in Lebanon.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*

Beirut, Lebanon

---

## The Dead-End Alley

Lucien Elia

First, there was that house in a dead-end alley on the edge of the Jewish Quarter, an architectural aberration, a graceless cube of reinforced concrete, a freezer in winter, an oven in summer.

Early every spring, we would hire a Shiite laborer to whitewash the rooftop terrace so as to shield us against the savage rays of the summer sun. When the work was done, he'd climb down from the blazing white rooftop inferno, a wild look in his eyes, crazed, as though drunk. After paying him for the work, Mother would hastily dismiss him—he reeked of sweat—with the words: “God be with you, and we’ll see you next spring.” And off he’d go, in a clamor of clanking buckets and cans, sorry he hadn’t inflated his price a little. Our dreary house overlooked a lush garden surrounded by rusty iron fencing that guarded the home of our Muslim landlords.

The setting—the exuberant vegetation where date palms mixed with citron, orange, and sumac trees, and the landlords’ stately marble house with its hewn stone patio and vibrant red tile roof—contrasted sharply with our ugly, colorless block where we either shivered with cold or marinated in the 80 percent humidity of high summer.

For three decades, a simmering conflict pitted my family against our trio of landlords, a group of pachyderms whose enormous thighs rubbed together as they walked: the eldest, Rachid Behyum, never without his garnet-red fez cocked insolently to one side, and his two sisters Khadija and Aisha, dressed in dull, tent-like robes that concealed the mountains of flesh beneath.<sup>1</sup> Rashid owned several apartment buildings in town, in addition to parking lots and other land holdings.

1. A fez, also known as a tarboosh, is a felt hat shaped like a cylinder, with a flat top. Fezes are typically red, and indeed the name comes from the Moroccan city of Fez, where the crimson-colored dye was produced.



FIGURE 7. Birthday portrait of Lucien Elia, age seven. Taken in December 1944 in Mr. Hratch's Armenian studio. His shoes squeaked as he went back and forth on the set.

Our entire neighborhood belonged to him, in fact, including our putrid alley where a dozen boisterous Jewish families lodged. Screaming children, blaring radios—usually tuned to shows featuring French singers: “This one goes out to Rina from Mimo, and from the Three Musketeers to their cousin Riro. And now, the great André Claveau, singing “*Insensiblement*”—the clanging of kitchen utensils, cross-balcony conversations: “So Rebecca, what’s for lunch today?” All this came together in a dissonant symphony, punctuated by a chorus of cooing doves over in the landlords’ garden. The tremendous threesome posed an alimentary enigma, for we never once saw them returning from the market with provisions. The most we ever glimpsed was a random rib of celery emerging from the brown paper bag Rashid used when making his rounds to collect rent. We used to imagine that there was a tunnel that snaked under our alley and somehow came out on the main street of the town that led to the marketplace. We also thought there was something strange, almost unseemly, about the three unmarried siblings; we imagined them fornicating to their heart’s content in a monstrous jelly roll of tangled flesh. Who knows. They never had guests over, they never had parties, never celebrated anything, unlike the alley folks, who would prepare a feast for every conceivable occasion: circumcisions, bar mitzvahs, birthdays, religious holidays. And still they grew fatter, oh yes, with every passing year.

The Sunni trio, richer than Croesus, was tightfisted and intolerant beyond all measure, and sprang into action whenever the alley overstepped its boundaries.<sup>2</sup> So we children couldn’t play on the graveled area leading up to our house without the Monuments erupting from their terrace and shouting at us to get off their “territory,” even though it was actually public property. Whether we were playing street soccer, tag, or hide-and-seek behind the perpetually un-rebuilt ruins of their collapsed wall, we would be interrupted by an avalanche of insults, which we thought were hysterically funny: “You trash! You little pimps! Go back home to your stinking mother! You Jews, oh you Jews!” On more than one occasion, our soccer ball would sail over their wrought-iron fence in a perfect arc, the purpose of this deliberate kick being to provide an excuse to go into their garden and recover it, while bringing back as many fallen oranges and citrons as we could gather. For the Three Sea Elephants, this was an unspeakable offense. This was *their* fruit! The fruit of *their* trees! For free? How dare we?

Once a year, the Alpha Male would come to our house to collect the rent. He would make his pompous entrance, sneering contemptuously as he settled into a chair in the front room and made himself at home, legs spread, paunch draped over his thighs, his shrewd ears protruding from his thick skull. He would doff his fez, revealing the contrast between the bald whiteness of his scalp and his tanned

2. Croesus was King of Lydia (an area corresponding to the western provinces of modern-day Turkey) whose legendary wealth is the stuff of Greek and Persian tales. The expression “as rich as Croesus” (used in both English and French), thus refers to this historical figure.

face. A nervous tic made his ankle switch back and forth, producing a squeak from his patent leather shoe. My mother's face was a map of absolute reluctance as she offered our guest Turkish coffee and *maamoul*—little pistachio-stuffed cakes shaped like Aztec pyramids, which the Warthog would decline, no doubt out of fear that she had dipped them in some biblical poison. He and my father would then exchange platitudes about the weather, local politics, and the price of lemons, which had risen again, before the greedy collector—his ankle vibrating even faster at this point—would make some scarcely veiled reference to Israel's latest moves near its border with Lebanon.

As it happens, in May 1948, date of the creation of the Jewish state, a ragtag horde poured into our alley bellowing a belligerent yet catchy chant, which the Three Ponderal Heavyweights repeated in chorus from up on their terrace: "Palestine is our country, and the Jews are our dogs." It was funnier in Arabic, since the two lyrics rhymed: *Falastine bladna, woul yahoud klabna*.

Ten years later, a younger brother turned up from out of the blue and took up residence in the marble house of the Three Ponderous Ones. His kitchenware business in Saudi Arabia having failed, he had come begging for room and board after years of epistolary silence. He must have had some schooling, for on warm nights in late spring, when he would sit on the terrace strumming his guitar, the songs he crooned to the starry sky were always in French. His elder brother would then burst onto the scene and order him back inside: "If you keep this up, I'm going to make kindling out of that instrument of yours." On some evenings, one of our lady neighbors, Vivy the Vile (*El Bich'aa*), still unmarried at twenty-five and a huge Edith Piaf fan, would echo back the lyrics of our failed kitchenware salesman in sharp trills punctuated by gasps each time she took a new breath. Her mother would mock: "Get back inside and die in your own bed, you old maid."

By June, the heat inside our cube was unbearable. Apparently, the whitewashing job on the roof wasn't doing the trick, despite my mother's orders to our Shiite painter: "If you give me three layers for the price of one, God will provide . . ." So, we'd head for the mountains. A motley pickup truck would park right at the foot of our staircase, despite strict orders from the Three Fatsos not to do so. The four Muslim movers and a driver that we hired for the trip were able to reason with the Apoplectics: a Sunni accord was quickly reached, whereby we could park for two hours, but not a minute more, by God! Under the withering gaze of the Three Deadweights, who looked on while our private effects paraded by, we quickly loaded our bed frames and mattresses, frying pans, and hastily knotted bundles of clothing. And off we went, our parents squeezed together in the passenger seat, and my sister, my brother, and me in the back, along with the muscle-bound movers, perched atop the pyramid of baggage and furniture. The Blubbers wished us a good trip, in their inimitable way: "Go on, off you go, and may your path be strewn with insurmountable obstacles." It was a three-month respite in the fresh mountain air. The alley would soon recede into distant memory, though we

couldn't help but picture the landlords reigning over the deserted neighborhood, adrift in their marble chambers in the Lebanese heatwave, for they were loath to spend good money on a summer house in the mountains, even though two-thirds of the city did just that. We would return in September with the first rains, back to the squabbles over parking, the hubbub of the Alley, the sad ballads of the former kitchenware salesman, and the passionate Piaf impersonator warbling her husbandless blues for all to hear.

When I turned eighteen, a heated family meeting involving a dozen uncles and aunts arrived at the decision that I should somehow be sent to France to attend university. "Why bother? He'll just skip all his classes and spend his time in cafés, and he'll come back with a *goy* in a short skirt who'll make fun of our cuisine and customs."<sup>3</sup> But I did leave, in the end. It was an October day, a relentless rain soaking the alley. From their verandah the Three Potbellies, rising above us like evil totems from beneath their vast black umbrellas, audibly expressed their hope that my boat would sink as soon as it had left the bay of Beirut.

. . .

I returned thirty years later, just to have a look around.

Seventeen years of intercommunal war had annihilated the alley, leaving not a single trace of the concrete cube or the marble mansion. All that remained was the citron tree that still struggled to bear fruit in the thick shadow of ostentatious apartment buildings, row upon row, gleaming white against the cerulean Mediterranean sky.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

3. In both Hebrew and Yiddish, *goy* refers to a gentile, or a non-Jew. Although sometimes considered pejorative, the word itself simply means "nation."

Beirut, Zaituna

---

## The Baker's Son

Yves Turquier

His name is Ahmed; he's my best friend. He is seven years old, just like me. I know that his parents are Muslims, he knows that mine are Jews. On rue Rizkallah, in Beirut, everyone knows that. But you think that's a problem for kids who want to play marbles?

In 1947, I was five. I thought that all children were Jewish. It was very simple—they had a mother and a father like me; they went to school like me; they ate like me; they slept in their bed like me. I thought: they must certainly go to the synagogue like me.

I was bored at the synagogue. I fell asleep while the prayers, chanted by the adults, floated up into the air. To keep me entertained, my father rented *rimonim* for me, those small cylinders with bells and silver sleeves that ornament the Tablets of the Law. I was proud to show off my bells to my friends who had none. Alas, after ten minutes, the sexton took them back from me. What to do?

Lots of children played in the courtyard of the synagogue. They were violent, pulling each other's hair or slapping each other. Sometimes, they jumped on top of me, shouting "*khabissa!*" ("squash!"). They'd throw me on the ground, pummel me with their fists, and pile up on my back with the stern intention of beating me to a pulp. At the Alliance Jewish school, *khabissa* was the favorite recess game. I was quiet and timid. Off to one side on a bench, I would eat my bread, alone, while they had fun. Yet I wanted to be their friend. Sometimes, I would approach them, get hit, and cry—and that, that was the worst, because they made fun of me.

Ahmed, the baker's son on my street, never hits me, never pulls out my hair. When my mother says: "Don't stay glued to my legs, I'm cooking!" I race down the stairs, and when Ahmed sees me he jumps in the air, cries "Whoa!" and, five minutes later, we're galloping on our horses in the little street in the neighborhood.

One day, I get an idea.



FIGURE 8. Yves Turquier, who has no photos of himself as a child, is the author of this one, taken from the balcony of the family apartment on rue Rizkallah in Beirut. On the left, a hundred feet away, a bakery.

“Mama, can we take Ahmed to the synagogue?”

My mom, she is very pretty, she’s tall and she loves me. But I must have said something senseless, she makes a strange face.

“So, can we?”

“No, we can’t.”

“Why can’t we?”

“Because Ahmed is Muslim.”

“So what?”

“So what, Muslims don’t go to the synagogue.”

“Where do they go?”

“They go to the mosque.”

“What’s a mosque?”

“It’s a kind of synagogue for Muslims.”

My project had failed. But I never lacked resources.

“So then, can I go with Ahmed to his synagogue?”

“No, you can’t.”

“And why?”

“Because you are Jewish.”

I said: “Oh, ok.”

Now I’m seven, Ahmed is still my best friend, but I have learned about religion. In our street, the shopkeeper Khawaja Farid is Maronite, the grocer Jawad is Muslim, the dry cleaner Ali is Muslim. Angèle Malhamé, our neighbor, is Christian, Madame Raftopoulo and her husband the pharmacist are Christians, the baker is Muslim, the old Russian Olga Limansky who strolls in her beautiful garden, well, she’s a painter.

When my friend isn’t at home, I go look for him at the bakery. His father, Muhammad Ali, is the best baker in the neighborhood. Aromas of warm bread, thyme flatbreads, and meat pizzas waft from the back of the shop. Arab breads, round and flat, are lined up on the long pieces of wood; they are slid onto the burning brick where they quiver, rise, and then blow up like soccer balls. Ahmed piles the cooked bread in wicker baskets. Sometimes he steals one and we eat it together behind the store.

My family lives in Zaituna, very close to the sea. From time to time, my parents chat during meals. They speak of “us” and they speak of “them.” Us, are the Jews, the *b’nai emunah*, the sons of our people. Them, they are the *goyim*, the non-Jews. We watch them, we scrutinize their actions, their words. “They can become dangerous,” says my mother. Even though I’m only seven years old, I feel that my parents are afraid.

In our street, the fruit and vegetable sellers, the copper polishers, the mattress carder, and the housecleaners are all Muslims. But you mustn’t say that in front of them; they don’t like that. In this case, we have to use the secret code and speak

French: Muslims become “the Muses.”<sup>1</sup> “They are very kind,” says my mother. “They are generous, but not all the time. Sometimes, they listen to the radio, and then they give us a funny look.” My father says that it’s because of Falasteen.<sup>2</sup> I don’t really know what that is. One day my parents say to me:

“We’re going to live with your grandparents for a while.”

“Why?”

“Because there are some troubles.”

“What troubles?”

“Go play,” says my mother. “I’m packing the suitcases.”

But why move to my grandmother’s house? Our neighborhood is quiet. I don’t feel in danger. Ahmed is my friend; every morning my mother buys her bread from their bakery. She is welcomed with a smile and the habitual formulas: “Welcome, *Ya Madaame*, we are at your service, how many today? Eight, as usual? Your wish is our command, would you like something else? Thyme flat-breads? Some pastries? No? Very well, may your morning be brightened . . . Go in peace.”

So why go live at my grandmother’s house? I finally understand—it’s about the mezuzah.<sup>3</sup> The mezuzah is a little wooden cylinder which holds a tiny scroll of the Law. It’s attached to the door frame outside the house. It’s necessary. It’s for divine protection. Except that today my mother doesn’t agree.

“Our mezuzah, clearly visible on the landing, doesn’t protect us at all! It puts us in danger!”

“What are you talking about?” says my father. “It’s not visible from the street.”

“Yes, but ‘they’ can come look for it in the stairwell. And ‘they’ can find us.”

“But there aren’t enough beds at my parents’ place to house five people.”

“You really are oblivious to danger! Carefree and careless! We have a boy and two babies. I’d rather sleep on the floor, but I won’t stay here a minute longer.”

I may only be seven years old, but I already know that my mother always wins. We spend a month at Téta’s and Dédé’s. Upon our return, our house hasn’t moved and Ahmed is still there. I missed him. I’m bored when he isn’t around. He asked me: “Where were you?” and I answered that I was at my grandmother’s house. He smiled at me and said, “Me too, sometimes, I sleep at my grandmother’s,” and that’s it. We started to play together again like always. Of course, I didn’t tell him the story of the mezuzah. I know already that you can’t talk about that with “the Muses.”

1. The French pronunciation of “muses” resembles that of the first syllable of *musulman*, or Muslim.

2. This phonetic spelling is intended to render the pronunciation of the word “Palestine” in Arabic, which has no equivalent of the “p” sound.

3. The word mezuzah itself derives from the Hebrew word for doorpost, which is where the object is affixed in Jewish homes.

One day, my mother says:

“Did you hear an enormous explosion early this morning?”

“No, what happened?”

“Someone put a bomb inside your school. It exploded at seven o’clock. The school was destroyed. Today, you aren’t going to class.”

I say to myself, “What a break!” I have grammar homework and recitation that I hadn’t worked on—I’m saved. But is it for certain? The Alliance school is five minutes from our house; I run. In the street, I come across Ahmed who says to me:

“I heard your school exploded . . .”

“Yes, I’m going to check it out!”

“I’ll come too!”

Around the enormous crater, the whole neighborhood is there. Neighbors, friends, classmates, simple passersby have gathered; they gesticulate, get angry, shout. Others are dazed, despondent, absent. Some men try to contain the crowd; they yell: “Careful, don’t get any closer, there might be another bomb!” The fire-fighters’ sirens tear up our eardrums. Helmeted men rush to the scene. They begin to pick through the rubble; they move the scraps of metal, the wooden planks, blackened blocks of stone. I hear: “Make way, make way, hurry, they found someone!” It’s Abdallah, the school’s concierge. He’s stuck under a girder. Slaloming through the bystanders, I manage to slip into the front of the crowd. The school has vanished. In its place, I see a pile of smoking ruins. I look up. What remains of the old building is our blackboard hanging from a piece of the wall, and the door to my classroom opens out over a void. Now there is a crowd. My school has become the neighborhood attraction. Everyone speaks loudly, everyone expresses their opinion. I hear: “May God curse them, they attack innocents, children. Thankfully, the bomb exploded at seven in the morning. At eight, there would have been 500 pupils there.” Who are “they”? No one says it in public, it’s too dangerous. A big, helmeted firefighter says to us:

“Get out of the way, the ambulance has to come through.”

“Did they find any wounded?” asks a bystander.

“Two, a man and a woman, but they are gravely injured.”

Two stretcher-bearers emerge from the rubble, staggering. Around me, the exclamations rise:

“Ahh . . . they’re carrying a wounded woman! God save her. Does anyone know who it is?”

“Not at all, but we’ll find out.”

Waiting for the ambulance, the medics lay down their burden right at my feet. It’s pure chance, just like that. I open my eyes; I see a sleeping woman. She has blood on her face like in the cowboy films. She’s sleeping, but I don’t understand, her eyes are open. Suddenly, I recognize her. It’s our school director, Madame Penso. She whom I passed every day in the schoolyard. She who came to congratulate

us, she who scolded us when we had done poor work. She whom I dearly loved because she was protective. I was also afraid of her because she was stern.

The crowd was silent, as if petrified. Behind me, an old man murmured:  
 “She’s dead, that woman. May God have pity on her.”

All of a sudden, I don’t know what’s happening. Like a razor blade, emotion seizes me in the throat, I tremble from head to toe. I can barely breathe. It’s the first time I’ve seen death. I hear myself cry. I don’t want to be there anymore.

Looking up, I see my friend Ahmed. He, too, stares open-mouthed at this unmoving woman. He’s stunned like me. We don’t say anything; this lasts for a while. He asks:

“This woman, you know her?”

“She was the director of the school.”

He doesn’t say anything. He looks at me. His eyes are full of tears.<sup>4</sup>

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

4. The bombing of the AIU school in Beirut took place on January 22, 1950, when Turquier would have been about nine years old.



CHAPTER THREE

Egypt



## Country Snapshot

Egyptian Jewry was composed of multiple denominations with varying beliefs and practices, which were often separated into two main groups, Karaites and Rabbanites. Karaites, who base religious law on the written Torah alone, constituted a significant minority Jewish community in Egypt for centuries. Most Egyptian Jews, however, were considered Rabbanites, meaning that they belonged to denominations such as Ashkenazim and Sephardim, who accept the authority of the Talmud and oral law. Within the Rabbinite majority, Sephardi Jews comprised the bulk of the Egyptian Jewish community and its elite. Ashkenazi Jews, whose presence in Egypt can be primarily attributed to the arrival of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish refugees, were often looked down upon by the Sephardic majority.

A heterogeneous group with roots and connections that extended across the Mediterranean and into Europe and the Middle East, Egyptian Jews were rarely monolingual. In addition to Arabic, Sephardic Jews often spoke Ladino, Italian, Turkish, and Greek, whereas Ashkenazi Jews frequently spoke Yiddish, Polish, and Russian. Arabic was the primary language of the Karaite Jews, as well as of the Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews who immigrated to Egypt in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. French was spoken, to some degree, in all Egyptian Jewish communities; over time it became the common language that united the diverse Jewish communities of Egypt, whose children were often educated in either Alliance Israélite Universelle schools or those of the Mission Laïque Française, and whose language of instruction was most commonly French or English.

Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1789–1801) is often considered to be the country's first encounter with Western modernity. Although Napoleon lost to the British and Ottoman armies, he did pave the way for French influence in Egypt, as Governor Muḥammad 'Alī (1805–1848) would subsequently turn to France for the financial and technical knowledge that he would need to modernize Egypt. Influenced by the French ideal of *laïcité* (or secularism), Muḥammad 'Alī outlawed



MAP 4. Egypt. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

explicit manifestations of xenophobia toward minority religions, including poll taxes, and clothing and social restrictions. The living conditions of Egyptian Jews further improved in 1882, when the Egyptian viceroy put an end to Jews' status as *dhimmis* and declared total civil equality.

Although many of Egypt's Jews were autochthonous inhabitants of the region, a significant proportion of Egyptian Jews sought out and obtained foreign nationality—most often French or Italian, although some obtained British nationality as well—as the legal protections accorded to foreigners were advantageous for religious minorities living as *dhimmis*. Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the British occupation, the possibility of acquiring Egyptian citizenship was extended to Egyptian Jews via the Egyptian Nationality Law of 1929. Few Jews chose to apply for Egyptian nationality, however, as it was a complicated and expensive legal process that required documentation many simply did not have, and those who had succeeded in obtaining foreign passports by and

large chose to keep them. However, as British imperial control waned and Egypt took more steps toward self-governance, what was once a boon soon became the exact opposite, as those native Jews who held foreign passports came to be seen as foreigners in their home country, and the decision not to obtain Egyptian nationality was looked upon with suspicion by the country's growing Arab nationalist movement.

In terms of education, upper- and middle-class students frequently attended AIU schools or the Mission Laïque schools in Alexandria and Cairo for instruction in French, or one of the numerous renowned British private schools, such as Victoria College. Egyptian Jews were overall an educated community, boasting literacy rates of over 80 percent in 1947. No doubt due to their higher levels of education and knowledge of multiple languages, Egyptian Jews as a whole were an upwardly mobile group that contributed to numerous important industries, such as the cotton and sugar trade. In addition, many Jews worked in finance, law, and medicine.

Part of the Egyptian Jewish community supported Egyptian nationalist movements during the early years of the twentieth century, finding common ground with their Muslim neighbors in their struggle against British imperialism. Tensions began to rise in the 1920s and 1930s, however, particularly after the foundation of the fundamentalist Society of Muslim Brothers in 1928. During the 1930s, the situation deteriorated as Egyptians struggled with their lack of sovereignty, continued British influence, the situation in Palestine, and the rise of fascism. In 1938, the Egyptian fascist movement Young Egypt, along with the Society of Muslim Brothers, targeted Jews in violent demonstrations in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tantah. Hajj Amin al-Husseyni, the Palestinian mufti exiled in Cairo, also encouraged anti-Jewish demonstrations.

These rifts were further exacerbated by the events of World War II, as Egyptian nationalists hoped for a British defeat, which would allow them to finally rid themselves of imperial domination and become a fully independent nation. This was in stark contrast to the Egyptian Jewish community, who were staunchly pro-Ally. Following the Nazi defeat in 1945, unemployment rose, as did the resentment of Egypt's "foreign" Jews. The Society of Muslim Brothers capitalized on these negative feelings toward Jews and encouraged violence against them, which culminated in the November 2–3, 1945, riots, in which Jews were looted and attacked, and the Ashkenazi synagogue in Cairo was set on fire.

Although a significant percentage of Egyptian Jews were able to return to some measure of pre-war stability, the fallout of World War II continued to drive a wedge between Egyptian Jews and the Muslim majority. The 1947 Company Law decreed that 40 percent of all boards of directors, 75 percent of administrative workers, and 90 percent of all other workers must hold Egyptian nationality. This dealt a serious blow to the Jews, many of whom had retained foreign nationality. To complicate things further, following the establishment of Israel in 1948, it became practically

impossible for Jews to obtain Egyptian citizenship. Civil unrest, martial law, the sequestration of Jewish assets, and the expulsion of several hundred Zionist and communist detainees led to the emigration of more than fifteen thousand Jews between 1949 and 1951, primarily to Europe and Israel.

For all intents and purposes, the 1950s spelled the end of the Jewish presence in Egypt. On January 26, 1952, the Cairo Fire—also known as Black Saturday—burned the capital city, while hundreds of buildings were looted in anti-British riots. Several months later, the Free Officers Revolution of July 23, 1952, compounded the country's precarity, fomenting the Revolution of 1952, which overthrew the Egyptian monarchy. Two years later, the Lavon Affair, in which Egypt foiled a false flag operation organized by Israeli military intelligence and carried out by Egyptian Jews, inflamed tensions even more, as public discourse conflated Jewishness with Israeli Zionism, rendering it incompatible with "Egyptianness." In 1956, as Arab nationalist Gamal Abd-el-Nasser was elected president and led Egypt to victory over Israel in the Suez War, approximately twenty-five thousand Jews left Egypt for the Americas, Australia, Europe, and Israel. By 1967, there were only around twenty-five hundred Jews still living in Egypt, and by the 1980s, there were fewer than five hundred, mostly members of the older generations, living in Cairo and Alexandria. As of 2020, that number has dwindled to a handful.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*

Chatby, Alexandria

---

## Jo and Rita

Rita Rachel Cohen

O to hear: “Hi Rita, what’s new with you?”

My brother. It’s you, here, not so long ago. On the phone. At home, my house. In the street. Everywhere.

Then we’re off! Laughter, our laughter: one of us would say a word, setting off an endless stream of giggles. You, tears rolling down your face like rain; me, the sound carried away my wet eyes; our faces lit up, our bodies caught in the joy of being together again, of being with each other, of joking around, *la nokta* . . .<sup>1</sup>

Our laughter brought us together. It was just the two of us in that private moment, alone at that precise time, just the two of us in the world. Our laughter made us feel like we were on the boat once again but this time going in the other direction: from Marseille to Alexandria, from Alexandria to Cairo, from Cairo to Maghagha in Upper Egypt, to Mansourah perhaps, in all its gardens, riding in your go-kart, in carriages, sea-saws made of iron, meandering through the country of our childhood, by the seaside and in the interior, the mother-land, *Dounia*, our world, Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

Rachel, the name you gave me, father. Your mother’s name.

Rita, the name you gave me, mother.

Rita the African, the Italian, the South American, the Indian. Rita didn’t hear Rachel in Egypt. Rachel, “little sheep” in Hebrew; Rachel the Egyptian didn’t know that Rachel was Rita. In Egypt, in France, in Switzerland, in France, she was Rita.

1. Author’s note: Egyptian argot for “joke”.

2. Author’s note: The World, the Universe, Life. Examples: *dounia tayeba*, life is good; *dounia hellouah*, life is beautiful. (Editors’ note: the author appears to be playing with the multiple meanings of *dounia*. *Dunya* [as rendered in standard transcription] means life, or world, whereas the expression *Umm al-Dunya* is a metaphorical reference to Egypt.)



FIGURE 9. Jo and Rita (Jacques Choua, aka Joé, and Rachel, aka Rita) at the seaside neighborhood of Shatby in Alexandria, summer 1956.

She was Rita, until one day in France Rita decides to hear Rachel. She was sixteen years old.

Rita for Rita Hayworth—of course. 1952. The cinema. Your movies, mother. The ones you made in Egypt for a little while, your Egyptian movies on your boat, your theater—a little wink at Rachel, the other one—with a pitcher balanced on your head, traditional gown, an ankle bracelet.

I can hear my mother:

“Rrrita, *rohi*, eat . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Rita with at least three r’s . . .

*Rohi*, my soul!

I hear you singing, in Greek, in Italian, in Egyptian. I don’t remember you singing in French in Egypt.

And we’re off! Your body started moving. Dance. Dance. Oriental.

And laughter, and . . .

“Eat!”

I didn’t want to eat. There were pots and pans on the beach in Alexandria. Me, I was at Chatby.<sup>4</sup> That was *my* beach. I wanted to be in the water, that’s it.

I rediscovered Chatby in 1993. Without the pots and pans.

Now there is no Chatby. But there is this photo. Jo and Rita. And it is precisely these tears and these peals of laughter that created our lives, that were the ritual baths of our childhood. In the language-s, the singular language plural: in French, I hear language through and from Egyptian. I write the musical score in French.

“It’s great!”

From your mouth, my brother, I hear the word “great,” in other words: “open sesame.” I see you. Your little boy’s eyes glisten with wonder, curious about everything, about the tiniest thing. Glistening eyes. Egyptian eyes. That look like glistening eyes. Indian eyes.

And, in one single sentence, there’s some “it’s great” and some “it’s a catastrophe.” That’s how Egyptian Jews speak French: “It’s great. It’s a catastrophe.”

Brother of mine, in France I often heard you say: “It’s a catastrophe.” What was? To have left? To have been made to leave?

For me, since I’ve been back home in Egypt, my childhood has come bubbling up to the surface. The lid is off the teapot. Aladine’s lamp.<sup>5</sup>

3. Author’s note: an Arabic word with a powerful meaning: “my soul.”

4. Author’s note: a seaside neighborhood in Alexandria. (Editors’ note: Known in English as Shatby, this upscale area is the site of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a library and cultural center commemorating the ancient Library of Alexandria. It is also home to the Lycée Français d’Alexandrie [French High School of Alexandria], founded in 1909 and operated today by the Mission Laïque Française.)

5. Author’s note: stress on the second syllable, the -dine, that’s why I added an “e”; so, it should be pronounced Aladine, not Aladin, like in French. (Editors’ note: the author wants the word to sound like AlaDEEN [with a long “e” sound] rather than like AlaDAN [which is how the nasal “i” sounds in French—one might think of the word “vin” in the dish known as “coq au vin.”])

The light, brother of mine. The smells. The *foul*, the little beans that we eat on bread, in the street, the poor man's meal, the sacred dish of Cairo, cooked in huge iron pots.<sup>6</sup> *Bamia*, *gombos*, in Mansourah, the city where you were born, father of mine.<sup>7</sup>

Orange blossom water. The *kanaka*, that little coffee pot for Turkish coffee made with green cardamom and orange blossom water. In the Egyptian way.<sup>8</sup>

*Boghhour*, the incense from Lebanon and Egypt that you would burn, mother of mine, in a the little *kanoun*, the hollow little pot made of earth that you would take from room to room, making the wisps of perfumed smoke do arabesques above our heads while you murmured: "hmm . . . may this cleanse," "hmm . . . may this smell good," "hmm . . . may this protect," "hmm . . . may this protect from the evil eye." The evil eye could be everywhere.<sup>9</sup>

It was only through leaving and coming back that I rediscovered, differently, the hinterlands of the country where I was born, the country of my childhood, the childhood of my country that composed the musical score of my mother tongue, the Egyptian language that makes me dance, makes me dream, that opens my heart, that brings me joy in motion with the special quarter-tone that belongs to "oriental music" (as they say).

My score is short but dense. It is written in few notes. Words come out of my mouth like I'm four years old—sometimes clear, sometimes strange. The musical phrases aren't written in my head; the word makes the music itself.

And then in Egypt my ears heard the music of the French language spoken, pronounced with the diction particular to Egyptians who speak French in a way that leaves words and phrases slightly unresolved, like that quarter-tone with its half-step more or less that gives a note of freedom, fantasy, and opening. And that peculiar pronunciation of Egyptian Jews who'd roll their r's as though they were taking in fresh air along the cliff road in Alexandria. Today they still roll their r's but there is no more cliff road.

And the ritual words, my father, in Hebrew, for the holidays, for prayers. *Hag sameach* May the holiday be joyous, with no other punctuation, no full stop or no exclamation.

My journey in this memory of Jewish childhood in Egypt is from memory: at home my parents spoke Egyptian, French, and, or more specifically, an other

6. Author's note: In Egypt, in the street, we eat *foul* on oriental bread called *chami*, a Syrian bread similar to Greek pita. (Editors' note: *Foul* or *ful*, is a dish made of fava beans cooked with lemon, garlic, and cumin.)

7. Editors' note: *Bamia* is a Middle Eastern stew made with okra, tomato, and meat; *gombos* is okra.

8. Author's note: Small coffee pot made out of brass or white metal.

9. Author's note: *Boghhour* is incense made from resin; a *kanoun* is a small, hollow stove or heater where burning charcoal is placed in order to burn the resin. (Editors' note: *Boghhour* is often transliterated as *bukhoor* or *bakhoor*.)

language: *l'égyptienne*, a language filled with French words and names, and expressions like “it’s half past five plus five.” My parents loved to get together with family, friends, sometimes the neighbors, to chat with joy and with difficulty in Egyptian and the other language. My father said the prayers in Hebrew at holiday time. My brother would tell me stories in the other language. When my father had guests at home, the jokes and poetry were in Egyptian, the elegance was in French, and all was embroidered with little dashes of Aramaic, a zest of Libano-Syrian, a word of Turkish. On the phone with colleagues from work, he sometimes spoke English. I heard my mother singing, her voice, in Egyptian, Italian, and Greek, with a tiny hint of Armenian. I recorded my mother’s voice singing in Egyptian, Italian, and the structure of these languages moves me. As for Greek, I remember the polyphonies, the music. From Upper Egypt, my ears took in the Gypsies of the Nile, those women who sing in a shrill voice like they do in India, like they do in Corsica, plugging the left ear with the left hand in order to hear only out of the right ear—that is, their own sound, while the right hand draws the movement of the voice, pulling it up from the navel through the sternum and beyond. And for me in Egypt, and in France too, there is a very old, doubly absent voice, two sides of a coin buried along the shores: Spanish, and its reflection, Portuguese.

I can’t hear myself, I can’t hear the sound of my own voice, not in Egyptian, not in French, not in the other language. And yet I know that in Egypt, the little girl I used to be spoke Egyptian. In my knapsack, I took with me a few words and the movement of the language. I also spoke French because when I arrived in Marseille on December 22, 1956, the French language was not completely foreign to me. I spoke it. In Egypt, the two languages traveled together. And the other language was the lingo of the day. Egyptian was for telling, for recounting, for being happy or not, for dreaming, for speaking in music, for being together, for watching cartoons, for poetry, for the joy of the senses, for dancing, for singing, for playing, for inventing.

*Amareldin*.<sup>10</sup> The Syrian delicacy. Apricot paste. No, the sheet of apricot paste that the merchant Sidi Effendi would roll<sup>11</sup>—and it is my four-year-old self who is saying this—he’d always roll it with a smile that made his teeth twinkle like gypsum and with a little saying that I’m inventing right now: “May your life be always like this carpet of *mech mech*, may it continue to unfold forever, may it be sweet and taste of orange, like the fruit, like the flower, may it have the good smell of apricots . . .”<sup>12</sup> And at home I would read the book of *mech mech* as my

10. Author’s note: *lamareldin*—literally “faithful moon”—refers to a sheet of apricot paste typically produced in Syria. (Editors’ note: This might be best understood as “apricot leather.”)

11. Author’s note: *Sidi*, in Arabic, means Mister, or Sir; *Effendi* (or *effendy*) is an honorific title of Turkish origin. Comparable to “lord” or “master”, it is completely inappropriate to use it when addressing a shopkeeper, but not as far as the little girl speaking is concerned.

12. Author’s note: *Mech mech* is Arabic for apricot. (Editors’ note: The transcription of the vowels of this word varies, but the ending consonant sound is “-ish,” as in “wish.”)

mother rolled out the sheet of apricot and let us rip off a bit of the page. It was *The Book of the Apricot, The Book of Mech Mech*.

Whenever I would hear “*mech mech*,” my tongue would hang out of my mouth; I’d drool with joy; excited, I would tell myself all the stories in the world; I’d read it like an open book that contained the history of the book written in *mech mech*. It was the Book. The sacred Book because I could take a piece, eat it, savor it, and tell myself all the stories. And when it was done there would be another sheet of *mech mech*, whole, and I would tell myself that *The Book of Mech Mech* was still there, that I could look at it, smell it, and take a bite out of it. I would eat *The Book of the Apricot*, I would eat *The Writing of the Mech Mech* and it would nourish me with flavor and words. And I could tell all the stories of all of the apricots. Today, the *Amareldin* that I find in little rolls at Ramadan time in Khan el-Khalili in Cairo were the stuff of Rosh Hashanah, the new year, in Maghaga, in Cairo, in Alexandria.<sup>13</sup>

The person who can take the *Book of Apricots* away from me has yet to be born. No one can snatch the story of the *Book of Mech Mech* from my hands. Because “*bokra fel mech mech*” literally means “tomorrow in the apricots!” In other words: never!

—Translated by Lia Brozgal

13. Author’s note: it is a Muslim custom to eat *amareldin* to break the Ramadan fast; at home, we ate it primarily at Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New year. Khan el-khalili is a famous *souk* in Cairo. (Editors’ note: A *souk*, or *souq*, is a market or a bazaar.)

Antikana Street, Cairo

---

## The Blue Muslims

Mireille Cohen-Massouda

*To my grandfather Lieto Khadr Massouda*

I was born in Cairo, in Egypt, into the oldest and most important community of Arab Jews.<sup>1</sup> It was in this community, called the Blue Muslims, that I grew up. Arabic was the language spoken at my grandparents' home. It was a language I experienced as forbidden.

In the 1940s, when I was just four years old, two of my uncles and I were stricken with typhoid. In the evenings after seeing his own patients, Uncle Farid, a doctor and the brother of my maternal grandfather, would come by our home. Going to the hospital was not an option. At the hospital, one could only die. Tenacious, and thanks to contacts in England where he had studied, he succeeded in obtaining penicillin for us. Relapse after relapse, I remained bedridden for six months. My mother had lost ten kilos (twenty pounds), and I had to relearn how to talk and to walk. Later, she would say that I was "like a child released from the camps." In addition to the specter of death, the main ghost haunting my life was the limping silhouette of Sister Rose, who would tie a tourniquet around my arm and put me on an IV drip.

As long as my great grandmother, Setti, was alive, all the Jewish holidays took place at my grandparents' house.<sup>2</sup> Every year, at *Pesach*, Passover, each granddaughter got a new dress.<sup>3</sup> The house was cleaned from top to bottom. The rooms were closed up, one after the other, and we all—well, all the girls—ended up in

1. Author's note: They were called Muslims because they take off their shoes and prostrate themselves during their prayer; blue because of the blue threads woven in the fringes of their prayer shawls, their *tallitot*. (Editors' note: *Tallitot* is the plural of *tallit*, a fringed prayer shawl worn primarily by Jewish men in more observant traditions.)

2. Author's note: *Setti*: madam, in Arabic. This is what we called our great-grandmother. She did not know how to read or write, but she knew how to count and watch over us.

3. Author's note: The celebration of Karaite Passover consists of a Hebrew reading from the Torah about the exodus from Egypt.



FIGURE 10. Four-year-old Mireille Cohen-Massouda, called "Mira," Alexandria, September 1945.

the same room, on the eve of the much-anticipated day. The preparations in the kitchen were lavish. That evening, the prayers lasted a long time, and hunger seized our stomachs; we had to arm ourselves with patience. We, the children, promised to be serious, but it was a holiday so excitement was high. Not understanding anything of what was being read so solemnly quickly made us lose our composure.

Bursts of laughter spurted out. Scowling, our mothers stared daggers at us. Neither grandfather's incantation from underneath his tarboosh, nor our father with his *kippah* on his head pretending to read surprised the young girls that we were.<sup>4</sup> These girls knew full well that, despite his serious look, this father was just playing along, that he was only there because of custom and all he wanted was for the ceremony to end so he could meet up with his gambling buddies, with whom he played cards every night and into the early morning. Nothing escaped those girls who, because they were girls, had been denied any religious education. For them, Hebrew really was Hebrew.

I will always remember the Passover of my tenth year. I had been forbidden from following Setti into her den, to which she alone had the key. When she allowed us to follow her, the girl who entered left drunk with pleasure. The aroma of spices, bottles of all colors, jars of jam from rose petals, apricots, bitter oranges, sweets prepared for days on end all haunted us. On important occasions, Setti, Madame, took out the most beautiful dishes, the silver cutlery, and the crystal glasses. I will never forget the holiday evening that year. I found myself alone, far away from the other children, at a separate table, in front of an everyday plate and place setting, served by Mohamed, the servant. I got up, and without a word, left the table. I shut myself up in the room I shared with Helene, the cook. Mohamed, like all servants, was a man and a Muslim; he was part of the house, and knew the customs. This was the saddest Passover of my life. God only knows how long the exodus from Egypt was for me, that night. Not one of the women, mother, aunt, grandmother, great-grandmother, had thought to alert me to what was coming. They had forgotten to tell me that a woman who was on her period was *négsa*, impure, and had to be kept apart.

Coming from a Karaite family of eight children, luck and the love of his mother had allowed my father to become a *khawaga*, a *doktor*.<sup>5</sup> He spent close to twenty years in Paris where he had gone to study dentistry. At the end of 1938, on the advice of a Russian Karaite dentist who was well-informed about the Nazi threat, he left France and went back to Egypt. This was also "to marry the wife that was destined for him."<sup>6</sup> If he granted his mother's wish by marrying a Karaite woman, he nonetheless refused to wall himself off within the Jewish community and instead settled in the heart of the city, in the Groppi building on Suleiman

4. A tarboosh (or *tarbush*), is a close-fitting brimless felt hat. Conical in shape with a flat top, it is worn by men throughout the Muslim Mediterranean, and resembles the better-known fez.

5. Karite refers to Karaism (sometimes written *Qaraism*), a Jewish religious movement founded on a strict interpretation of the Torah. The term *khawaga* means "master"; derived from Persian, it is an ambivalent designation for a foreigner of some means. After the rise of Egyptian nationalism, the term became increasingly pejorative and was used to refer to the class of Levantines and Europeans accused of stealing the country's wealth and oppressing indigenous Egyptians. Finally, the Arabic adaptation of the term "doctor" refers here simply to an educated person, not necessarily a medical doctor.

6. Author's note: The Karaites of Egypt were in close contact with those in Crimea, where they would go to find wives.

Pasha Square.<sup>7</sup> He had opted for a place frequented by the upper-middle class, whether Christian, Jewish, Coptic, or Muslim, whose language of choice was French. Arabic, the language of his ancestors, the language of his brothers—the ones who had worked to pay for his studies—became the language of the street, the language of servants. He prided himself on having gotten his brothers out of the Hara.<sup>8</sup> The youngest, Habib, converted to Islam out of love and kept the family name Cohen.<sup>9</sup>

I never found out why, in this immense apartment covered in Genoa velvet and French furnishings, I was relegated to the other side of the door that separated my parents' universe from the servants'. That's where my room was, the one I shared with Hanem.<sup>10</sup> And it was there, every Wednesday, that Youssef the ironer set up for the day. I would see him coming and going from the primus stove to his ironing table.<sup>11</sup> With a precise gesture, he would take a burning iron out of the flames, put one that had cooled back into the fire, and then spurt a powerful stream of water right from his mouth directly onto the laundry to moisten it. Once ironed, the sheets, tablecloths, and shirts were placed on my bed next to me. The ever-hotter atmosphere would become stifling and the bursts from the kerosene stove deafening. I would leave the room.

In 1948, when the state of Israel was created, my father received an order to leave Egypt within forty-eight hours. He had to get the King, host of his nightly gambling circle, to intervene and have it annulled.

In 1949 he decided to take us, my brother Elie and I, on vacation to Europe. It was our first trip outside of our native land. I was nine, my brother, four. A certain Maurice Cohen—also my father's name, was suspected of being a Zionist spy, and thus was on the blacklist. At customs, we were all subjected to rather invasive body searches.

When I was ten, after two attempts at private lessons,—one at schooling in English, the other in French—the director of the school called in my parents to tell

7. Author's note: founded by Swiss, Groppi was the name of the chicest tearoom in the capital. On January 26, 1952, along with many other apartment buildings and bourgeois establishments in Cairo, it was ransacked and torched.

8. In Cairo, historically, the *hara* was simply the basic social unit of the city, generally inhabited by homogenous ethnic or occupational groups. In the twentieth century, the *hara* has come to be associated with social deviance and poverty (akin to the notion of a ghetto). The Egyptian usage of the term is not specifically associated with poor Jews (as in the case in the *hara* of Tunisian cities).

9. Author's note: for the Karaites, Jewish religion is passed on through the father.

10. Author's note: Hanem (which means "woman" in Arabic) was a young Karaites woman who was fifteen when I was nine and who had been "entrusted" to our family to take care of the children and build up a dowry; many Jewish women in the Hara were similarly "entrusted" to wealthy families. (Editors' note: *Hanem*, a word of Ottoman origin used to designate the wife of a dignitary, is today generally used as a synonym for "lady" or "Madam" in Egyptian Arabic. The author's understanding of *hanem* may be particular to francophone Egyptians.)

11. Author's note: Name of the portable stove designed by Swedish mechanic Frans Wilhelm Lindqvist and industrially produced beginning in 1892.

them that she could do nothing for a child who refused to speak. I found myself in Boulak, at the Lycée Français of Cairo, in a remedial class, mainly with Muslim girls who were much older than me.<sup>12</sup>

I remember the violence with which I slapped one of those girls when, as a way of expressing her exasperation at our difference and my general indifference to her, called me *yahoudeya* (dirty Jew). We were both punished.

On the traditional subject of a childhood memory, I remember that year the fate of my first doll. A chiffon doll, black, with big eyes that frightened me terribly. No matter how much I tried to get rid of it by throwing it out the window of the fourth floor, someone always brought it back to me. I finally cut it up into bits with kitchen scissors. Thanks to the doll and the teaching of Madame Algoud, I was able to enroll in the regular track at school.

The world that surrounded me was peopled by men. Sometimes, in the corner of the kitchen or the hallways, at prayer times, I would see a rug unfold and a shadow bend down. A shadow hung over me wherever I was.

Beginning when I was still a little girl, once night fell and my parents had left for their gambling circle, as soon as I could I would take my bag and leave for Garden City, where my maternal grandparents lived. Crossing Cairo on foot, dodging the crazy cars in the chaos of the city, crossing the immense Tahrir Square was nothing next to the glacial silence of that luxurious apartment inhabited by shadows. I was welcomed quite naturally, without a word, into this cloaca heavy with silence.

We spent every summer in Alexandria, at my grandparents' villa. For Yom Kippur, the women and the children stayed at home in a peaceful atmosphere, perfect for reflection. The men disappeared for the day. At sunset, the children pushed and shoved one another on the terrace overlooking the sea. The one who saw the first star had the pleasure of announcing the end of the fast to anyone who would listen. Big pitchers of lemonade prepared by Mohamed or Abdou would be waiting for us on the big table in the dining room.

It's only as an adult that I understood why, as a child, I often saw my grandfather, the lawyer Khadr Massouda, absorbed in reading the Qur'an. In the *mehkemehs*, he—a Jew—argued in Arabic to defend his Muslim clients in accordance with Qur'anic law.<sup>13</sup> Man of the Law, my grandfather was also a man of peace. I don't know how to untangle what I lived from what I heard. Yet I feel resonating in me the sirens that pushed us all into the cellars, sheltered from the bombings. I still feel the heat of the blanket and the arms that surrounded my body as a child. I see the silhouettes of my grandparents, their ears stuck to the radio, listening to Radio London.

12. *Boulak* refers to Bulak, a gentrified neighborhood of Cairo. Today called Zamalek, it remains one of the sites of the Lycée Français du Caire, the French high school of Cairo.

13. Author's note: Tribunals. (Editors' note: *Mehkemehs* are Islamic religious courts, responsible for cases involving personal status, marriage, inheritance, and guardianship, and relying on the Qur'an for their decisions.)

Despite all the internal quarrels concerning the matches or mismatches between Karaites and Rabbanites, the war had brought my grandfather together with Grand Rabbi Nahum.<sup>14</sup> Organizing aid for the Jews of Europe was their first objective.<sup>15</sup> In his capacity as president, Maître Khadr Massouda registered the Rabbanites as members of the Karaite community—false certificates for real lives. It was to him, president of the Karaite community of Cairo, that the members of the Jewish community turned in 1948, upon the creation of the state of Israel, and in 1952, when Cairo burned and Colonel Naguib came to tell the Karaites that they were at home in Egypt and had nothing to fear.<sup>16</sup> I have a precise memory of January 26, 1952. My brother Elie and I had been kept home from school. As the day wore on, the streets darkened with people, the brouhaha of the street turned into shouts, into howling. The hateful slogans were loud enough for us to hear. Cairo burned.<sup>17</sup>

For a long time, I resented my grandfather for having told the Karaites who went to Israel on his advice that, as Jews, they had no future in Egypt. They were the first Jews sought out, but ultimately not recognized as Jewish, in this land of refuge. For the others, those who left for France, England, the United States, or Canada, and probably for the many living in Israel today, history proved him right.

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

14. Author's note: In Egypt, Jews were divided into only two groups: Karaites and Rabbanites. It was only in Europe that I discovered the distinction between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. In Israel, the Karaites are not considered Jews. As Josy Eisenberg said so well in the four radio shows he devoted to them in 1988, they are "the Jews of the Jews."

15. Author's note: The Nazis didn't succeed in identifying the Karaites as Jews until 1944, which allowed some of them to escape extermination.

16. Author's note: Rumor had it that colonel Nasser had a Karaite wet-nurse.

17. See Country Snapshot: "Egypt." See also Nancy Y. Reynolds, *A City Consumed: Urban Commerce, the Cairo Fire, and the Politics of Decolonization in Egypt*. (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012.)

Cairo

---

## Jour de fête

Tobie Nathan

He was covered in a turban with complex ties that gave him the look of a fifteenth-century Arab merchant. A long beard, white and silky, came down to his chest. An imposing figure! A powerful man, no doubt, and one who respected tradition, of course! Five thirty in the morning. He adjusted his outfit in front of the mirror in the entryway and then went out to his little study, on the other side of the garden. In the Cairo sky, kite birds, those formidable little eagles, are as numerous as pigeons in Paris. He had gotten up very early, as he did every morning, an hour before sunrise. He savored these moments when the city was troubled only by the cock's crow imitating the muezzins' calls to prayer. In these moments of solitude, he could consult the books that he would have never left in the hands of just anybody. In silence, the rabbi read an unpublished manuscript entitled *La Beauté du saphir*. The author, Ya'akov Ibn Habib, was his great-great-great . . . grandfather, one of those masters of the past, from the time of Arab splendor in Spain.<sup>1</sup> The rabbi gazed intently at the text written with chameleon's blood, the very sight of which made the hand that held it tremble. He looked at this same page, explored it, read it again. He knew that the sultan would decide the next day on his nomination to the post of Grand Rabbi of Egypt. The horizon began to glow. The rabbi put on his prayer shawl and pronounced the first blessing out loud, standing up facing the rising sun. The robissa Marième, his wife, entered without a sound, carrying a breakfast tray with coffee, Arab bread, and some black olives, which she put down on the windowsill where he liked to sit every morning,

1. Ya'akov Ibn Habib (also Jacob ibn Habib) was an historical figure, a Spanish Talmudic scholar, born in Zamora circa 1460. Following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, Ibn Habib settled in Salonica (Thessaloniki, Greece), where he died in 1516. He left behind only one published text, *En Ya'akov*, a popular work of religious instruction (which was, in fact, only compiled posthumously, by his son).



FIGURE 11. Tobie Nathan, age three, 1951, on the beach in Ras El Bar (Egypt).

attentive only to the voices of silence.<sup>2</sup> She left without a sound, leaving the old man to his prayer. It was just then that a great sound split the sky, a strident howl, like the cry of a child. The rabbi did not flinch, continuing his *Shema Yisrael*, the words of love to God.<sup>3</sup> It was possible to make out the distinct sound of wings beating powerfully. From way up in the sky, quick as a sunbeam, the kite bird plunged toward the window, stealing the bread in a single movement. Then: silence. Not even the murmuring of the credo could be heard. When he had finished his prayer, Yom-Tov approached the window and gazed up at the sky. He only saw a black feather that drifted down slowly toward the tray. He grabbed the kanaka, the still-steaming little coffee pot, and poured his coffee *sokar zyada* (with lots of sugar). He said another blessing before bringing the cup to his lips. Then he delicately picked up the feather abandoned by the bird, dipped it in brown ink made from a mix of soils and copied on a fragment of parchment the word that had caught his attention when reading his scroll: *dan* in Hebrew (“the judge”). He carefully folded the paper and slipped it next to his chest, next to his skin, under the flannel of his prayer shawl.<sup>4</sup> And he sat on the chair, closing his eyes for a long moment. His close assistants entered without knocking. They thought he was sleeping.

That day, there was an animated discussion. Was one allowed to carry a handkerchief when going to the synagogue, given that on Shabbat it is forbidden to carry anything? Levi Tantaoui, the rabbi’s favorite assistant, maintained that yes, it was permitted to carry a handkerchief, that the handkerchief was the same as a piece of clothing. Would one go to the synagogue naked in order to respect the prohibition? The rabbi, on the contrary, affirmed that no, the handkerchief should not be considered an item of clothing but, rather, as baggage, and that carrying it was equivalent to work. The discussion continued for a long time. Soon the hour of the service had gone by. The rabbi hurried toward the synagogue, some minutes from his house. The other rabbis had begun the psalms while waiting for the master.

“What happened, Rabbi? Did you forget to get up?” asked one of the notables in the community who never missed an occasion to criticize the rabbi.

They were impertinent, the Jews of Egypt, as impertinent as in the time of the Exodus, when they called out to Moses. Maybe these Jews had never left Egypt, for that matter . . . Not even in the time of Moses . . .

The rabbi remained silent, opening his wide, surprised eyes, as if he did not understand the question that was asked of him.

“But Rabbi, it’s been at least thirty minutes that we have been waiting for you to do the Shabbat prayers!” insisted another.

“Thirty minutes?” wondered Yom-Tov. “How could you say such a thing? The sun is barely showing its first rays. Did you all get up in the middle of the night?”

2. *Robissa*, from the Hebrew, refers to a rabbi’s wife.

3. Known in English often as simply the Shema, this important Jewish prayer is recited twice daily by observant Jews.

4. The French refers to “un petit châle de corps” (a shawl worn close to the skin), undoubtedly the *tallit katan*, or the “little tallit,” the T-shirt with tzitzit worn under clothing by traditional Jewish men.

“It’s true!” exclaimed the usher who had remained near the main door. “It isn’t yet day.”

The faithful rushed to the windows. They had to face the facts. The day was barely beginning . . . Time, of course, does not go backward. Yet, not a half-hour before, the sun had shone like a candle! Yom-Tov smiled, mockingly.

After that, the faithful who had attended this Shabbat prayer, on the 15 of Elul of the Hebrew year 5647, swore to whomever would listen that the old man had reversed the course of the sun, just so as not to have to admit being late.<sup>5</sup> They compared him to Moses or Joshua—except that Joshua stopped time to win a war. Perhaps Rabbi Yom-Tov did not know how to reverse the course of the sun; perhaps he only knew how to blur the vision of the faithful. The next day, Sunday, September 16, 1866, the Sultan signed a firman appointing him grand rabbi of Egypt.<sup>6</sup> As it is said: “Rabbi Yom-Tov Israel Sherezli judged Israel in Egypt from 1867 to 1891.” I carry the first name of this man, who came to visit my mother during her pregnancy to taste her jam and drink her coffee. He was me, living 120 years earlier; I was him, appearing 57 years after his death. I would love to have stayed him. My name is Tobie because my name is Yom-Tov, like him. I was born in Cairo, in Egypt, in 1948, the year of the creation of the state of Israel. Second child, second boy; since my brother took the first name of my father’s father, I should have, according to tradition, taken that of my mother’s father. I should have been named Isaac, or at least Zaki, a first name that had the advantage, in those troubled days, of passing as Arab. But my mother had fought with her father. She had just lost her mother and Zaki had decided to remarry after barely six months, without waiting for the traditional year of mourning to end.

“What do you expect?” he would say by way of excuse. “I eat meat. I can’t remain a widower.”

For him, meat provoked sexual desire—did flesh not call to other flesh?—and nothing was worse than losing his sperm while sleeping.

My mother asked Aunt Engela for advice; she responded without hesitating:

“Make a scene! You must make a scene . . .”

“Make a scene?” asked my mother. “But how?”

“Throw yourself on the ground, cry, tear at your clothes, hit your face, tear your skin . . .”

And that is what she did. One afternoon, when her father had invited himself over to eat *ful wa ta’meya*, the traditional dish of fava beans and falafel, no sooner had he opened the door than she’d torn her dress and fallen to the ground in the entryway of the apartment in ‘Abasseya. She wailed, slapping herself with both hands, cried, suffocated with rage, nearly fainted. My grandfather, Zaki *el agzagui*

5. The Jewish religious calendar is a lunisolar calendar, used to mark religious holidays. It is also the official calendar of the state of Israel.

6. A *firman* is a decree by or in the name of a Middle Eastern ruler; in this period, an Ottoman sultan.

(Zaki the pharmacist), lifted his eyes to heaven. She rose like a fury, shoved him, pounding his chest with her fists, and threw him out the door. It had been a good two years since she'd last spoken to him. So, now that she was pregnant, was she going to honor him by giving his name to the child she felt moving in her belly and who was, she was certain, a boy?

Thus passed my first months in the world, in the womb of a mother who did not know how to avoid the name of her father. In the fifth month of her pregnancy, she had a lucky dream. The grandfather of her father, the rabbi Yom-Tov Israel Sherezli, the famous Grand Rabbi of Egypt and her ancestor, appeared to her. He stood upright in front of her, in a long white gallabeya.<sup>7</sup> He first demanded a cup of coffee. What more do you require, *ya geddi* (O grandfather)? He then asked to taste her fruit preserves. And when she presented him with those she had just made, her date preserves, her coconut preserves, her bitter orange preserves, the ancestor added: "I am going to settle here in your house."

Afterward, she would not stop telling her dream to her aunts, Engela, Sarina.

"You see, Ranou, my dear (Ranou, that was my mother), you see, there's no doubt."

"No doubt?"

"A hundred percent, dear . . ."

The old women had no trouble interpreting the dream, in fact. The rabbi had come to announce that he was going to settle in with our family. He had asked for preserves because he was going to bring sweetness and pleasure with him. This is how, well before the delivery, my mother learned that the son she was waiting for would be a reincarnation of Rabbi Yom-Tov Israel Sherezli. And when I was born, a few months later, no one hesitated on the choice of my first name; it was decided to give me his. Yom-Tov, this is what I would be called.

Family legend has it that my father carried my older brother on his shoulders when he went to register my birth. Caught in a riot in an uproarious Cairo, the crowd chased him with cries of "*Dabba'h el yahoud*" ("Cut the Jew's throat"). It was 1948. The Middle East was born that year, with a scar right in the middle: Israel. Or maybe it was a gaping sex, swallowing up the fantasies of the generations. Standing before the birth registry clerk, my father did not have the courage to say a Jewish name. So he decided to translate my name into Arabic. In Hebrew, Yom-tov means *jour de fête*, meaning a Jewish holiday or festival, of course, like Yom Kippur or Pesach. In Arabic, it becomes 'Eid, the diminutive of Eïd el Kébir, the festival of the sacrifice. So it was decided! For the birth registry, I would not be named Yom-Tov but Eïd. I had passed, according to the politics of the state, from the scapegoat of Yom Kippur to the sacrificial lamb of Eïd el Kébir.<sup>8</sup> On my identity papers, I

7. Usually spelled *galabeya*, or *jalabiya*, this is the Egyptian equivalent of the North African *djellaba* (or *jillaba*), a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn by both men and women.

8. Typically spelled Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha (sometimes simply Aïd or Eïd), the Festival of the Sacrifice—one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over—commemorates Abraham's

was thus called Eïd, unpronounceable in French. At home, everyone called me Tobie; that was my name. It has remained my name. In 1969, twenty-one years later, in Paris, during naturalization, I asked to change my first name. I was hoping to rectify my identity.

“Tobie?” exclaimed the commissioner of police, “What kind of name is that? Come on . . .”

I insisted. “Tobie, you know, Tobie . . . it’s in the Bible.”

“We don’t care about the Bible, you need to choose a first name from the calendar. (In those times, Tobie did not yet appear on the calendar.) Can’t you choose a first name like everyone else . . . Maurice or Marcel?”

I thought about it for a week. I wanted to hold on to the initial, at least . . .

“Théophile! That’s the name that I have chosen! I will be called Théophile . . .”

“Bah,” sighed the commissioner. “You obviously don’t want to be like everyone else . . .”

My name is Yom-Tov so as not to be called Isaac or Zaki; my name is Tobie so as not to be called Yom-Tov, perhaps because one does not take the name of a saint in vain. I was for a long time called Eïd so as not to have a Jewish name in a country at war with the Jews. I am now called Théophile because a police commissioner who was overly faithful to the Republic didn’t know the Bible. Théophile, in the end, is a name I love because I chose it myself, that I translate as “he who loves God.” Which is true for me. I would have liked to be called “beloved of God,” of course, but one can’t decide everything.

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

---

willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tunisia



## Country Snapshot

Present in Tunisia for centuries, the first Jews likely arrived in the area prior to the Roman victory over Carthage in 146 BCE. Over the years, Jews lived under many different political regimes and adapted to life under the Phoenicians, the Roman Empire, the Vandals, Arab invaders from the Levant, the Ottoman Empire, and the French. World events affected the original Jewish population of Tunisia, as both Sephardic Jews fleeing persecution in Spain and Levantine Jews from the Middle East made their way to settle in the area, known in the Middle Ages as the province of Ifriqiya. By the tenth century, the city of Qayrawan (Kairouan) had become a significant religious and academic center for both Jews and Muslims, and from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, Tunis was an important hub for Jewish life, religion, and culture. Tunisian Jews made their living in both the artisanal trades and in agriculture, and worked closely alongside their Muslim counterparts, despite keeping to their own residential areas, known colloquially as the “hara.” In addition to mainland Tunisia, Jewish communities also established themselves on the island of Djerba, living mainly in the Hara Kebira (large Jewish Quarter) and the Hara Seghira (small Jewish Quarter).

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, many Livornese Jews moved to Tunis in the hopes of capitalizing on the city’s prime location for trade. The massive influx of European Jews resulted in the creation of two separate Jewish communities in the city of Tunis: the Twansa, or indigenous local Jews, and the Grana, or those Jews of Livornese descent. Despite sharing a common religion, the two communities differed in significant ways from one another: the Grana benefitted first from Italian protégé status, and then, later, from Italian citizenship, whereas the Twansa lived as *dhimmis*, subject to Ottoman rule. The Twansa and the Grana constituted two distinct legal entities, prayed at separate synagogues, observed different religious rituals, and were buried in separate cemetery locations. There was little to no intermarriage, and the two communities generally occupied separate



MAP 5. Tunisia. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

economic spheres, with the Twansa working as merchants, peddlers, smiths, and artisans, and the Grana working in international trade and commerce.

Jewish life in Tunisia changed significantly over the course of the nineteenth century. The Tanzimat, or Ottoman reforms, which occurred between 1839–1876, vastly improved living conditions of *dhimmis* throughout the empire, including Tunisian Jews. Despite the improvement to their living conditions, however, the Twansa remained subjected to the *dhimma* statute until 1857, when the execution for blasphemy of Jewish coachman Batto Sfez led to an international outcry, the pressure of which resulted in the abolition of Tunisia's *dhimma* statute on September 10 of that year. The establishment of the French protectorate in 1881 further

improved the situation for indigenous Tunisian Jews, who increasingly began to work in the liberal professions as doctors, lawyers, and journalists. While rapprochement of Tunisian Jews to France and French culture did not necessarily sow discord between the Jewish and Muslim populations, it did result in a relative cooling of Jewish-Muslim relations. In the 1930s, the polemics around Palestine, Zionism, and the possibility of Israel started to drive the wedge between the two even further. Tunisia was the only Arab nation to be occupied by the Nazis during World War II. Although the protectorate had been subject to Vichy's anti-Jewish legislation since shortly after the armistice (1940), the situation took a dire turn in November 1942, when the Nazis invaded the North African nation. During the six-month Nazi occupation, approximately 5,000 Jews were pressed into service for the Germans, and many were forced to toil in labor and internment camps under horrific conditions. Despite Nazi efforts to divide the Jewish and Muslim populations, relations between the two communities remained rather stable during the occupation, and there were significantly fewer instances of Muslim violence toward Jews than reported in other parts of the Arab world, where Nazi propaganda was more readily accepted. The first Arab ever nominated for Yad Vashem's Righteous Among the Nations distinction was a Tunisian, Khaled Abdel-Wahab, who was dubbed the "Arab Schindler" for his heroic actions saving Jews from Nazi persecution.

The relationship of Tunisian Jews to France was irremediably damaged by the events of World War II, and following Tunisia's liberation on July 7, 1943, many Tunisian Jews began to reassess their options. They began to turn away from the colonial power in significant number, and to look increasingly toward Zionism, communism, and Tunisian nationalist movements. Although many Tunisian Jews were able to imagine a future in Tunisia after World War II, the same could no longer be said of the situation following independence from France in 1956. The incremental dissolution of Tunisian Jewish institutions, coupled with the 1961 withdrawal of French troops from the port of Bizerte, a military presence that had eased the minds of many Tunisian Jews living in the newly independent, Muslim-majority state, prompted many to emigrate; between 1960–1965, over thirty thousand Tunisian Jews left the country, most never to return. More Tunisian Jews followed suit in the aftermath of the Six-Day War in 1967, and the majority of those who remained emigrated in the early 1980s, following the transfer of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters and the Bureau of the Arab League to Tunis. Currently, there are approximately fifteen hundred Jews living in Tunisia, residing mostly in Tunis and on the island of Djerba, whose El Ghriba synagogue welcomes hundreds of pilgrims and tourists every year.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*



Moulinville, Sfax

---

## Nothing about Childhood

Chochana Boukhobza

It lives on endlessly in me and yet, in truth, the traces of it are long gone.

Since they have disappeared, been swallowed up by memory, I'll spare you a tale about the sun, whitewashed houses, the sea, and the scent of jasmine.

I don't know how to tell that story. I can't.

It's been erased.

Just as my adult memories, very recent ones, are erased as quickly as I write them down. I can't tell whether I'm writing to remember or whether I'm writing to create memories for myself.

And yet Sfax is in my memory.

I was born there, in that seaside town, as were seven generations of my kin, poor folks, true believers, or as the locals say in Arabic, *hayfen rabi*, God-fearing people . . .

I was four when my parents left Sfax to go live in Paris. They didn't want to leave. They liked their *zenka*, their neighborhood, the people around them; they delighted in the land's bounty. The flavor of olives never left their lips, nor did the taste of fresh fish still wriggling in the fishermen's nets.

When they talk about Tunisia, my parents recall a time when time meant something and weighed nothing. Then they never fail to add that, ever since they got to France, they haven't stopped "running." Early on, they would always repeat: here in Paris, unless you keep running, you're a loser, *mchyam*, done, dead.

Gradually, they began to sense that time itself had gone awry since their exile; that time flew by faster than before, as if swept by the wind; that days and nights ran together; that months melted into years, and years vanished. In short, they realized that time had left them, along with their dreams, in the dust.

In fact, since they've been in Paris, everything seems more difficult, harder to manage. They made a long list of reasons to explain this mystery. Reason number



FIGURE 12. Chochana with her little sister in 1963, in Sfax.

one, the most serious: there is no sun in Paris, no real light, the white kind that stings your eyes and sucks the sweat from your pores, the kind that separates day from night and marks the horizon. Reason number two: the city is huge, and to get from one place to another, you have to take the metro, the bus, sometimes both. Reason number three: the more you work, the more you spend, and the

more you spend, the more you work. In other words, there's no more time to take your time. Before, at least, even though we were poor, we savored life.

I listened to them talk.

Their words fell into me like stones into a well. Their words filled the well of my childhood. Each utterance had its own weight, and each produced emotional impact. The words resonated with each other. And they still resonate because, bizarrely, the well of my childhood can never be filled. The more words pour in, the more it demands. The more details it records, the thirstier it is to hear more.

I was four years old.

I should remember quite a lot.

And yet I can recall nothing.

The land of my birth is disembodied.

I know—because I've been told—that I must have been a very precocious little girl, since at the age of three I ran away from home, fleeing my father's house during the siesta to go to my grandfather's. Alone. On my chubby little legs. I crossed one sidewalk, then another. I went past the Simca garage. No sooner had I arrived, proudly, at my grandfather's doorstep than he scooped me up by the waist, sat me on the handlebars of his bicycle, and pedaled me right back home to my parents, who had been searching for me high and low. They had alerted the neighbors, scoured the narrow streets nearby, gone up to the rooftops, all in the hopes of finding me.

As a child, I loved hearing them tell the story of my escape.

This escape became a symbol.

Of an entire past that had been severed.

Though only a child, I understood that we'd been uprooted. Understood that on one side, there was the tree, the family tree that sought to regain its verticality, its balance, and that on the other, there was a hole, the place where our roots had once thrived, a gaping hole, over there, far away.

Why?

Because they didn't want Jews in Muslim lands anymore?

Because there was Israel?

Because we had become Westernized?

Because the arrow of history was pointing in a different direction?

I'm fifty years old today.

I'm constantly creating questions and answers for myself. I'm constantly constructing images for myself.

This way, sometimes I feel like I'm "seeing" my grandfather's synagogue. I feel like I'm "seeing" myself playing in the street, I feel like I know the Sfax seaside where, according to my grandmother, sailors from the four corners of the world would make stopovers. I am steeped in old, yellowed photographs, mostly in black and white.

Another thing.

The Bourguiba government had prohibited Jews from taking their assets with them when they left. So as not to leave their entire fortune behind, the Jews bought

objects. My parents had blankets woven for themselves in Gafsa, blankets that were heavier than carpets, so heavy that we felt crushed beneath their weight. Even better, our cousins had hundreds of drums of olive oil shipped to Paris, a stock that took years to consume, whose empties then served as tables and chairs.

We had left Tunisia, but Tunisia didn't want to leave us. As my father used to say, as he headed out to Belleville every Sunday to meet up with Tunisians, to buy a sandwich overflowing with harissa, to bring back a box of *zlabias* and a pack of pistachios: the lion left the forest, but the forest is still in the eye of the lion.<sup>1</sup>

From circle to circle, we tried to reach the center, to recover the core of existence, to rest our heads on the breast of the lost land and hear its beating heart.

The truth is, mine is a strange people, torn between a lost country—a country for living, marrying, working—and a promised land. A strange people caught between the past, the present, and prophecy.

At what point did I realize that something irreversible had taken place?

I have to admit that we were swimming upstream, unwilling transplants in a society where we had no choice but to adapt.

We were here and there at the same time.

We tried to change, to blend in, to naturalize, but the old ways die hard.

My grandfather roamed around the house in his saroual and *kabouch*.<sup>2</sup> We ate couscous, *halelem*, *pkila*, *nikitouche*, *merguez*, *hasbana*, *koukla*, and *akoud*.<sup>3</sup> No pot-au-feu at our place, no cassoulet or foie gras, no tarts or crepes.

And everything we did during our first years in Paris was almost, dare I say, suspicious.

Some examples?

Here's one I took years to shake off.

Back in Sfax, my grandfather performed animal sacrifice. He slaughtered chickens, hens, sheep, and cows for the butcher, in accordance with the laws of Moses. Naturally, he brought his sharp knives and whetstones with him when we moved to France.

Our very first week in Paris, my mother walked the length and breadth of the city to find a live chicken to purchase for Shabbat.

1. A typical Tunisian sweet, *zlabia* (sometimes *zalabia*, or *zylabia*) is a fritter: dough is sweetened with some combination of sugar, honey, and rose or orange-blossom water, and then deep fried in oil. The dish is found, with slight variations, throughout South and West Asia, and in North and West Africa.

2. *Saroual* (*sarwal*) are baggy, dropped-crotch trousers that gather at the ankles; a *kabouch* (*kabbous* or *kabous*) is a hat similar to a fez.

3. *Halelem* (*hlalem*): a handmade pasta used in a spicy soup; *pkila* (*pkaila*): an aromatic stew of beef, white beans, and spinach, often served on Rosh Hashanah; *nikitouche* (*nikitoosh*): homemade pasta, commercially called Israeli couscous, traditionally served in broth; *merguez*: spicy lamb sausages; *hasbana* (*osbana*): a traditional sausage using sheep intestines as casing and stuffed with lamb, chickpeas, parsley, and spices; *koukla* (*kookla*): semolina-based egg dumplings spiced with harissa and dried mint; *akoud* (*akood*): a spicy, tripe-based stew.

She finally bought one down on the quays.

Outrageously overpriced.

We kept the bird for a few days under the sink in the kitchen of our tiny apartment on rue de la Roquette. It crowed at dawn. Our curious neighbors searched the entire building for the rooster. They questioned my mother: had she heard a rooster crowing? No, she answered, suddenly gripped by fear, and, as soon as the door was shut, she turned to my grandfather: “Kill the bird, and make it quick, so I can cook the thing and be done with it. In this town, they send the police after people who keep live chickens in their apartments.”

At the age of fifty-eight, my grandfather ended his career in animal sacrifice with this rooster.

But we still made our own harissa at home.

I remember those summers when the peppers would be drying in the sun, when my eyes and throat would burn as my grandmother pounded the dried peppers in her bronze mortar and pestle.

And while other people’s balconies were brightened with pots of geraniums, ours was piled high with basins, buckets, cardboard boxes full of Passover dishes—because we had three sets of dishes, one for meat, one for milk, and the one that never came in contact with bread, and which was used only one week per year. And for years, we dried meat in the sun on a line. We call it *kadid*: first it marinates in oil, cumin, and cayenne pepper; then, once it’s dry, we steam it for serving.

In our building, they called us the Tunisians.

One day, it occurred to me suddenly that we were foreigners.

I realized then that we had been ejected from a country, like someone ejected from a plane, without a parachute.

What my eyes saw, I’m unable to recover. What my skin felt, I can’t bring back to life.

But Sfax draws a little closer every time I speak in Arabic, every time I say *filamen*, *tmenik*, *malaraha*; every time I leave one of my children with a “*rabi maak*”; every time they sneeze and I murmur a “*tahich*,” or when they hurt themselves and, I say “*smalla*” . . .<sup>4</sup>

I’m from there. From Sfax.

It’s written on my ID.

Born in.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

4. *Filamen*: see you later; *tmenik*: you’re kidding!; *Malaraha*: good riddance!; *rabi maak*: Godspeed; *tahich* (from the Arabic *ta’ish*): may you live long; *smalla* (an abbreviation of *bismillah*): may God protect you.

Mateur, Tunisia

---

## A Triple Coexistence

Annie Goldmann

It's market day in Mateur, the little city in the north of Tunisia where I spent my childhood. Starting at dawn, I can hear the scraping of the carts on the pebbly ground of the main street; the barking of stray dogs, excited by the herds of sheep and goats; the shouting, in Arabic, of the peasants, farmers, sharecroppers, and market gardeners who hurry to take their place in the corral reserved for the impassive and disdainful camels (dromedaries in fact). Mateur is an important market town located in the center of the principal grain-growing region in Tunisia. If the rainy season, September and October, had been bad, all the growers—small-time peasants, Arab farmers, Italians, small-time French settlers—awaited the moment of the harvest with foreboding. From my window, I can see the store of one of the two grain merchants who purchase harvested wheat and put up money for future sowing. They evaluate the quality of the grains, compare them, debate. I'd go there often, drawn by the enormous old-fashioned scales on which the jute bags are weighed. Uncle Raoul and his brother Émile would kindly explain to me the difference between the qualities of wheat. They are not my uncles, but I have always called them that, out of familiarity. Every year I went to their house for the Passover celebration.

My father, a devoted secularist, did not practice any religion. At home, Jewish holidays were only marked by the appearance of special dishes prepared by my mother: *msouki* with matzah bread for Passover, cakes for Purim and Rosh Hashanah, stuffed chicken for Yom Kippur.<sup>1</sup> It is only during the seder that my singularity is explained to me—and with a good deal of solemnity—by Uncle Raoul who would translate the texts for me and repeat over and over: “We were all at Mount Sinai when Moses received the Torah from God's hand. All of us, you

1. *Msouki*, sometimes also rendered *msoki*, is a spring lamb stew with vegetables made by Jews from Tunisia and Algeria.



FIGURE 13. Annie Taieb-Goldmann, five or six years old, in Mateur.

understand?” “Me too?” “Yes, you too.” How strange, something unique happened on an unknown mountain, and I don’t remember it. Yet this something is part of me, without my knowing it or being able to explain it. For the word “Jew” was never spoken in front of me, no more so than “Muslim” or “Christian”—these words were all undertones. By implicit deduction, I knew that I was Jewish, but my education “à la française,” my parents’ culture, which did not include Arabic, my father’s years of pharmacy studies in France, my mother’s baccalaureate at the French lycée in 1920, and, most of all, her sister Juliette’s prestigious status as the first female lawyer in North Africa, situated me on the side of the French language.

In Mateur, where one found Arabs, Italians, French, Maltese, Jews, and even two Russian families who escaped the Revolution of 1917 all living together, everyone knew everyone, and everyone, at some point, would end up stopping by my father’s pharmacy to ask for guidance, advice, or help. Nothing stayed a secret here: family

relations, money problems, the precarious situation of some, the relative wealth of others, French bureaucrats but also shopkeepers and craftsmen, plumbers, tailors, Jewish jewelers, Italian mechanics . . . And then there were the engineers and specialized technicians from France who inspected and directed the mines in the area: my father would invite them to lunch in an impromptu way and they'd bring my mother the prizes from their hunts, without worrying about kosher laws.

My only Arab friend, Beya, was the daughter of the grocer whose store occupied the ground floor of our apartment building. She was two or three years older than me; we played hopscotch on the sidewalk; she spoke French haltingly. One day, she disappeared. When I asked her father if she was sick, he answered me in a very serious tone: "Beya will no longer come play here; she's a young woman now; she has to stay at home." Intrigued, I turned to my parents for an answer. My father had no comment. Tacitly, I understood that Beya would never go to school, and that was the way of life for Arab families, period, end of story. It was understood that everyone has the right to live as they please.

I had no contact with Arab women outside of the market, the only place where veiled women could go out, even those who veiled discreetly. While French and Jewish homes welcomed me with open arms, it was completely impossible for me to enter the houses of Arab families. There was only exception, which came about thanks to Tahar, my father's employee and a young man who had apprenticed with him since he was fifteen years old. Tahar found it amusing to teach me how to write my name and that of my parents in Arabic letters and—surprisingly—from right to left (in the same direction as Hebrew, a language I'd never heard of). So Tahar invited us to a party held in honor of his sister's marriage. First element of surprise: women and men are separated, and the bride is absent. Slipping into the next room, I discover in half-darkness, sitting on a chair, away from the hubbub and the guests, the bride, waiting passively. The door finally opens and a man, wearing a jacket and dress pants with a *chéchia*<sup>2</sup> like the Arabs in the city, slowly approaches, lifts the veil, contemplates for a few seconds the face of the woman whose eyes are cast downward, and then leaves. It was the husband. This scene, obviously unlike the marriages I had attended with my family in Tunis, awakened in me a certain anxiety. How would this woman be able to live with a man that she was seeing for the first time? A taboo question that I refrained from asking Tahar . . .

Another experience would also bring me into contact with very different customs. When my parents would leave Mateur to spend the night in Tunis—to attend a party or a wedding—they would sometimes leave me in the care of one of the young women who worked at the pharmacy, either Jewish or Italian, since young Arab women did not work outside the home. It was a chance for me to live

2. A *chéchia* (often transliterated as *sheshia*) is a soft skullcap worn by many Muslim men, particularly in North Africa. In certain regions, it was also worn by Jewish men and boys.

for a couple of days with a different family, and so to learn to know and respect others, in accordance with my parents' educational principles. This was how I went one evening to stay with Myriam. In her modest building, where Jews and Arabs lived together, there were two young women who shared the same apartment in the midst of a swarm of children. They asked us, laughing, if it was true that "outside," men and women danced together. So Myriam and I improvised an unconvincing tango. In high spirits, the two young women, who couldn't believe their eyes, kept repeating one after the other: "Really, so close to each other?" They lived together, almost cloistered, with the same husband. When I told my parents about my evening away, my father, once more, remained silent.

We lived in a peaceful state of coexistence governed by implicit rules: avoid conflicts, abstain from any references to religion (even if loud curses sometimes escaped from certain mouths), respect the lines of demarcation (geographic if not linguistic, since the same language, Arabic, was spoken in both the Arab and Jewish quarters), live together harmoniously, and get along with the neighbors. Thus, for me—as a Jew who attended Passover—it was natural that I wait for my Catholic friend on a bench while she went to confession at church. But even a good kid like me had to be careful not to stray, even absentmindedly—something I would learn the hard way.

Here is the story. Mahmoud, the fairly elderly caretaker of our building, a handyman happy to do the renters' bidding, had the habit of teasing me by blocking the way in the stairwell. But one morning, when I was late for school and he did it again, laughing, I callously pushed him back. Upon my return four hours later, my mother greeted me coolly: "Come here, you" she said with a stern look. "Is it true that you called Mahmoud an idiot?" "Well . . . uh . . . I don't know." "Yes or no?" "I don't remember." "Very well, he hasn't forgotten, and you're going to apologize to him; he's waiting at the door." Indeed, Mahmoud was standing there, looking intimidated. "Apologize to him! Apologize to him!" ordered my mother in an implacable tone. Unaffected by my tears, she insisted: "On your knees!" I cried even harder. Then Mahmoud, even more upset, and sorry about the scale the scene had taken on, spoke: "It's alright, Madame Taïeb, it's alright . . ." After he left, my mother told me: "I won't tell your father about this, but remember that you are privileged, that you aren't superior to anyone, and that you have to respect everyone equally." A magnificent lesson, never forgotten . . .

Some time later, I became truly aware of this fact: for others, I was Jewish. War was on the horizon. I saw my father called up for service for the first time, in uniform. Then demobilization and his return home made life even more stressful.<sup>3</sup> When a Frenchman made openly antisemitic declarations, my father became incensed and, in a stormy telephone conversation with the Civil Controller in

3. Here, demobilization likely refers to the fact that, following the armistice signed between Germany and France in June 1940, Marshal Pétain agreed to demobilize the French Air Force.

Bizerte (the prefect, in short) who oversaw Mateur, demanded a public retraction. The person in question came to the pharmacy to apologize in front of the staff. The visit of the Resident General to Mateur provoked another incident.<sup>4</sup> As school-children, we were called upon to stand along the road with little signs featuring Pétain's picture.<sup>5</sup> When I told my mother, she refused outright, and thus I was deprived of what we students considered a fun outing: "But what will I say to the teacher?" "She will understand," my mother said. Indeed, the next day, when the principal, surveying the ranks of girls, stopped in front of me and I told her that I wouldn't be coming, she calmly responded: "I know." What did she know? But that was nothing compared to what followed: how was I to understand, in effect, that I was forbidden access to the French high school because I was Jewish, and that I had been accepted, instead, into a Catholic girls' school?<sup>6</sup>

In November 1942, German tanks entered our dumbfounded little town. Then came the requisition of our apartment, the closing of the school, and, above all, my father's enlistment in the Jewish labor camps set up in the area around Mateur and Bizerte to establish decent sanitary conditions and ensure regular food supplies—as American bombs fell around them. All of this highlighted certain divisions and reinforced the feeling of belonging to a separate community, between the French families who invited us over to listen to the BBC and an Arab population that remained neutral, of belonging to it and sharing its fate.

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

4. The resident general was the official appointed to oversee the French administration in Tunisia. The resident general effectively ran the country, despite the legal fiction of indigenous administration under the Beys of the Husainid dynasty—the hereditary monarchs who reigned during the Ottoman Empire.

5. Marshal Philippe Pétain was a WWI hero who collaborated with Nazi Germany and became the leader of Vichy (or non-occupied) France from 1940–1942. He was convicted of treason after the war and died in prison in 1951.

6. The application of Vichy's Jewish status laws in Tunisia in May 1941 would result in quotas (*numerus clausus*) limiting the number of Jewish students in French secondary schools to 20 percent of the total student population.

La Hara, Tunis

---

## Of Wings and Footprints

Hubert Haddad

The wind loses the key to the wind.<sup>1</sup> There is no such thing as rooted identity; one is born Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, just as water from the sky runs into rivers or seas. My sole lasting image is the outline of Djebel Boukornine peeking through the blue mists of the Gulf of Carthage, like Vesuvius in the Bay of Naples. Childhood is a volcano that buries you inch by inch in the trembling ash of oblivion. I recall four elements only: the ochre earth, the hundred azure layers of sea, the stunningly fragrant air, the fierce sun drenching all creation. Air, wind, and fire are beyond our grasp: elusive, the realm of djinns and spirits has no earthly grounding. Humans, poor creatures, are bound to the land, where we live and perish, like flowers and cities.

A child of La Goulette<sup>2</sup> on my mother's side (her maiden name was Guedj), and of the Hara, the Jewish quarter of the Tunis medina, on my father's side, I don't recall any notable differences between my family and our Muslim neighbors in our lively continuum of language, shared tastes, and pace of life; amid the heady fragrance of spices, ripe olives, jasmine and orange flowers; in the blue-hued shade of the giant eucalyptus trees of the municipal garden where we used to stroll; or down on the shores of the gulf, or on the hill in Sidi Bou Said. Back in the Hara, the grandfather would wear a *chéchia*, and the grandmother, a long,

1. The title of this story is a reference to a line from a poem by the Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias titled "Mis huellas son esmeraldas de agua," published in the collection *Clarivigilia primaveral* (1965). The line reads: "The earth feeds on footprints, the sky feeds on wings."

2. La Goulette is the port of Tunis, in the northern suburbs of the capital, and a popular seaside spot for Tunisia's Jewish community.



FIGURE 14. Hubert Haddad, approximately three years old, at La Goulette (Tunisia).

multicolored housedress and a headscarf that she would chew at one end.<sup>3</sup> What child could possibly comprehend the peculiar phenomenon that aggregates people into families and tribes, and, in doing so, distances them from others? The Abrahamic religion of Islam conquered, subjected, and converted the Berbers, whether

3. A *chéchia* (often transliterated as *sheshia*) is a soft skullcap worn by many Muslim men, particularly in North Africa. In certain regions, it was also worn by Jewish men and boys.

animist, Christian, or Jewish, Arabizing them in the process. Down through the centuries, dhimmified indigenous Sephardic Jews,<sup>4</sup> freshly arrived from Spain after the Reconquista, and native Muslims that dynastic wars caused to scatter and intermingle all across Ifriqiya and Morocco into the far-off lands of the Levant and even Mauritania<sup>5</sup> (before the eventual fall of the Ottoman Empire and the colonial invasions), never ceased to merge, by will or by force, to blend their arts and customs, to piece together that mosaic of common manners and beliefs, to share the same essential tastes, harmonies, superstitions, and enchantments.

In this civilizing patchwork, of which the Mediterranean is so rightly proud, the Jews of North Africa themselves are made up of more than one ethnic group (if the term “ethnic group”—less loaded than “race”—makes any sense). For instance, nothing could be further from the deeply Arabized paternal branch of the family than the Guedjs, who were originally from Constantine, the city of suspension bridges, where Judeo-Arab Andalusia, expelled from its gardens of contemplation and its ethereal architecture, was able to take root and thrive.<sup>6</sup> My maternal grandmother Baya, née Harrar—a forceful woman who was one of the first in Algeria to demand the right to divorce, at the risk of her life—could neither read nor write, but was a happily bilingual storyteller. Though born into Arabic, she spoke in a delightful French to us children, who were destined for expatriation. Remarried to a railroad employee who was gassed at Verdun and died in the 1930s in Sfax, where his company had assigned him after stints in Tunis and Gabès, Baya made a first attempt at immigration to the metropole, all her children in tow, my adolescent mother being the eldest. This was in 1939. When the Nazis invaded Paris, some good souls showed them the way out. After a lifesaving stay with a family of Catholic peasants in the Yonne region, Baya managed to get everyone back to Tunis via Marseille, where she opened a little business to keep her *smala* alive.<sup>7</sup>

It was in the early 1940s that a somewhat turbulent young man from the medina, working odd jobs as a stonemason, a porter, or a small-time cook, first crossed paths with the too delicate Miss Alice, nicknamed *la Parisienne* because of her permed light-brown hair. He fell head over heels in love, as the story goes, and swept her into wedlock. Her bearings already compromised following the recent death of her father, *la Parisienne* was quickly disillusioned with the

4. The original invents a French version of the Arabic term *dhimmi*; the translation attempts to render a similar neologism in English. *Dhimmi* means “protected person.” *Dhimma* status is an historical feature of Muslim law that offered certain forms of protection to “people of the book” (namely, Jews and Christians) living in Islamic lands. While *dhimmis* had fewer rights and protections than Muslims, the existence of this category nonetheless provided guarantees of some state protections. (See Introduction for more detail.)

5. *Ifriqiya*, derived from the Latin for Africa, has historically referred to the coastal region of North Africa that encompasses today’s eastern Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya.

6. Constantine is a city in northeastern Algeria.

7. *Smala* is an Arabic term that refers to the tents sheltering the extended family of a clan leader. It may also mean a large following, usually family members, who accompany the leader whenever he changes location. Colloquially used, even in French, to refer to a large family or a metaphorical tribe.

marriage. Right around that time, the Germans had just invaded Tunisia and were going about constructing a concentration camp for suspicious people and Jews.<sup>8</sup> Khamous, Alice's husband, would be incarcerated there for several months before being liberated by the Americans. They nicknamed their firstborn "Jimmy" in a gesture of gratitude.

Confronted with a situation of crushing poverty long before the events that would force the ancestral Jewish community to abandon its beloved, sun-drenched Tunisia, my parents, my elder brother, and myself (not counting the child who had died) found ourselves like exiles in our own country, in transit from our very existence, in the utter confusion caused by those moments of deep-seated parental disagreement that suddenly emerge, leaving artfully patterned cracks in their offspring. In the East, whether Middle, Near or further afield, Abrahamic tradition yokes father to son: the ancients assumed and assuaged the obviated sacrifice of Isaac or Ismaël, holding back the sacrificing hand by the long tradition of temperance and internalization of this violent initiation, of which circumcision is but one manifestation. We had no symbol-bearing ancestors, Jewish or Muslim, in our household, only a lapsed father who brandished the bladeless knife of disunion and a mother driven mad with disappointment, her dreams dashed. Perhaps it was inevitable: when an entire population is threatened by upheaval linked to decolonization and feverish nationalist identity politics, exile might end up preventing the breakup of a structurally unsound family adrift in the world. The fact is that the legacy of Baya's world was simply too distant from the paternal world of the *chéchia*-wearing patriarch; her side of the family's emphatic use of Arabic was interpreted in a variety of ways within a context dramatized by independence wars and invasion.

We dream today of returning to a golden age, an era that was never anything but a product of our fervent imagination, no doubt: Jews and Muslims will all be Tunisians together on our shared ground, from the moment that we democratically defend the common homeland, its memory, its children, and the prodigious unity of its riches, both material and spiritual. Everyone knows Tunisia's timeline of successive invasions and dependencies: Phoenician, Roman, Arab, Ottoman, Franco-Ottoman, before sovereignty was at last recovered with Bourguiba, who proclaimed in resounding Republican tones: "Out of a smattering of people, a jumble of tribes and clans, all bent beneath the yoke of resignation and fatalism, I have forged a citizenry." Poor among the poor back then, their line of descent now more or less assimilated everywhere in the world, the ancestral Jews of the medina might well have rightfully belonged to that citizenry, that people. In an Islamized land, under the French Protectorate, we were children like any other, just barely aware of the torturous conflicts haunting the world of adults.

8. See Country Snapshot: "Tunisia."

Born in the nineteenth century, Baya had forgotten nothing of the anti-Jewish riots that broke out long before the 1934 pogrom in Constantine—incited by the anti-Semitic forces of Second- and Third-Republic France, by way of the Second Empire—and that Adolphe Crémieux, a descendant of the Pope’s Jews, attempted to curb with his eponymous decree of 1870.<sup>9</sup> Against a backdrop of economic crisis and clashing identities, the decree’s unfortunate consequence would be to definitively isolate Jewish Algerians from their Muslim compatriots. On the paternal side, family lore tells of a rebellious act on the part of the grandfather who, sabered by one of the Dey’s soldiers, in turn knocked the soldier off his horse—which might explain why his children and grandchildren had such a hard time obtaining their naturalization after the war.<sup>10</sup> And, on May 20, 1941, the maternal family was probably living in Gabès, where seven Jews were massacred on the square right outside the synagogue.

We children had no notion of our parents’ anxious memories. How did the idea of exile suddenly take hold, once and forever? I remember the Arabic of speech and song from my earliest years. We must have understood it, bathed as we were in its intonations. Then, from one day to the next, at the dawn of the 1950s, the adults stopped speaking to us in Arabic. Our banishment was sealed with this self-imposed embargo. Poor folks cut their most essential ties with their own offspring by ceasing to speak to them in the native tongue, though they would continue, backs turned, to talk among themselves in Arabic, in what looked like a plot to sever us from our origins, leaving us with only the French language in common. And that is how I was born to French in the programmed oblivion of the ancestral language.

Still, since then, music has remained a bridge to our deepest history. Music is always first, in a way, since we are all born blind; while in the womb, sound takes precedence over vision. In the phonic universe of my early years, it is Arab music that stands out: it was Farid el Atrache, Mohamed Abdel Wahab, and Abdel Halim Hafez that we heard in cafés, in the street, whether in Tunis or Belleville, and similarly, the dirge-like strains of sacred music sung and murmured in mosques and synagogues. My grandmother Baya’s hand-cranked phonograph never left her side. Small local orchestras in the working-class neighborhoods of Tunis would play popular songs by Oum Kalthoum and Asmahan, classical Egyptian music, and you could even detect inflections of highbrow Arab-Andalusian harmonies in Algerian *chaâbi* tunes, or in the rumbas of Lili Boniche.<sup>11</sup>

9. “The Pope’s Jews” refers to Jews living under the restrictive rule of the Avignon popes in fourteenth-century France. See Country Snapshot: “Algeria” for more on the Crémieux Decree.

10. Dey is an Ottoman honorific term meaning “uncle.” During the Ottoman rule of North Africa, it was also the title given to the rulers of the various regencies.

11. *Chaâbi* (also *chaabi* or *sha-bii*) is Arabic for “folk,” and refers to the popular roots of this North African musical genre. Songs are sung in local dialects, rooted in the Andalusian tradition, but with new rhythms. Born in the Casbah of Algiers to a Sephardic family, Lili Boniche (1922–2008) was

Jews and Muslims had the same passion for the Arab-Turkish maqâm, the system of special intervals between notes in the melody that makes the music sound so organically improvised. The eastern melodic line is the stuff of time itself vibrating in our memory, an overwhelming nostalgia, a longing that is renewed with every listen.

Today, how am I supposed to cull two or three memories of my Tunisian childhood when everything is tangled together between the sinuous black and white passages of the Tunis medina and the alleyways of Ménilmontant in Paris, where we landed quite naturally in a neighborhood that was practically a carbon-copy of our old one, with its cheap restaurants and hovels? What I have kept close to my heart are the faces of women, Muslim and Jewish, grandmothers and aunts, neighbors, companions in the tiny gestures of exchange that our proximity asked of us, a closeness that revealed more complicity than dissimilarity. From those women, without ever being taught, I learned how to make real Berber couscous with its twenty side dishes and salads, the exquisite *mouloukhia* made from malva leaves, and all sorts of holiday sweets, like *makrouds* with almonds or dates, and *zlabiyas* soaked in honey.<sup>12</sup> Most especially, I learned how to see the ancestral mercy of the Orient in something as simple as a smile. Childhood is borne by the search for those faces of women, young or old, tilted ever so slightly. What secrets are hidden behind their stately languidness? The precious intertwining of birth and death would be my guess, back there as here, from one shore of the Mediterranean to the other, in the endless loop of disremembered origins.

Not too long ago, on a return visit to the beaches of La Goulette, looking a little lost perhaps, I walked around the old, dilapidated casino that was slated for demolition. A very old man, in *chèche* and *djellaba*,<sup>13</sup> looking like the local

---

one of mid-century Algeria's most famous singers. He performed across Europe and North Africa, in both French and Arabic.

12. A soup made with chicken and vegetables, *mouloukhia* (or *mulukhiya*) takes its name from the Arabic for its main ingredient, malva leaves, which are sometimes called Jew's mallow or Nalta jute, and have the consistency of okra when cooked; *makrouds* are diamond-shaped North African cookies made with semolina flour and filled with dates, figs, or nuts; *zlabiyas* are fritters: dough is sweetened with some combination of sugar, honey, and rose or orange-blossom water, and then deep fried in oil. The dish is found, with slight variations, throughout South and West Asia, and in North and West Africa.

13. A *chèche* (known as a *lithâm* in Arabic and as a tagelmust in English) functions as both a veil and a turban. Worn primarily by the Tuareg Berbers, the *chèche* is a single, long piece of cotton, usually dyed blue and wound around the head and the lower part of the face, to protect the mouth and nose from sand and dust. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women. It is interesting to note that, unlike with the food words in note 12, the author does not italicize *chèche* or *djellaba* in the original French. While this could be a simple omission, it is more likely a reflection of the ways certain Arabic words have become naturalized in the French language.

muezzin, called out softly, a trace of irony on his lips. “*Ya hasra!*”<sup>14</sup> he said as he passed—the good old days!—as if I somehow stood out for him in this timeless place, in a kind of implicit recognition. Like Vesuvius looming over Pompeii, smoke always seemed to be rising out of Djebel Boukornine as it stood above the Gulf of Tunis—but it was only the sea’s haze rising into the shimmering sunlight.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

14. The word *hasra* in Arabic means “heartbreak,” and the expression *ya hasra* can be translated as “what a shame” or even “poor thing.” Given that it is typically uttered at the sight or memory of something ancient or old and no longer seen, and that it is generally nostalgic, we’ve opted to imagine the elderly man regretting “the good old days,” rather than pitying the author.

Belvedere, Tunis

---

## The Broken Bargain

Ida Kummer

Growing up in Tunisia, I always knew I was Jewish, even though my minimally observant family mingled with the well-to-do members of other religions and cultures. Segregation made no sense at my maternal grandparents' house, where the whole cultural mosaic of what is now a bygone Tunisia would gather on Friday evenings to play music, warmed up by a few bottles of boukha.<sup>1</sup> "Muslim" was not a word in my childhood vocabulary, at least not in French; the term in use back then was "Arab." Was this a vestige of colonial times, or a sign of the era's relative lack of emphasis on all things religious?

Still, where did those early inklings of difference come from? I had no country but Tunisia in those days; yet, as far back as I can recall, I always had the uncanny feeling of claiming the country as my own without really belonging to it. I was somehow mismatched, my identity slightly out of joint. Wasn't I always hearing the grown-ups lowering their voices to a whisper whenever they uttered the word "Israélite"? ("Jew" would have been in bad taste!) Were the Jews right to speak in hushed tones, or was this just a habit passed down over centuries of exodus, now woefully etched into our cultural DNA? Why, for that matter, even bother speaking about oneself in a low voice, since after all, everyone in Tunis grew up knowing exactly which families were Jewish, Muslim, or Christian?

In Tunisia in the sixties, even in secular families you were either a secular Jew or a secular Muslim!

Caught between family lore and the forward march of local history, I came to the painful understanding that despite the picture-perfect life often ascribed to our supposedly easygoing Mediterranean world, my Tunisian Jewish identity would

1. Author's note: A distilled beverage made from figs, originating in Tunisia where most of it is still produced.



FIGURE 15. Ida in her bedroom at the Villa Zirah, Tunis, 1956.

involve both joys and sorrows. My mother, who had a way with words, dubbed our situation at the time “*bey’aa mkata’a*”—a broken bargain.<sup>2</sup>

The first crack appeared with an early childhood incident that I can no longer recall precisely. Various family members have told their versions of events which, when blended into my own reconstruction of the story, make it difficult to extract the actual facts. In 1957, I was briefly kidnapped from the Villa Zirah garden, on avenue de la Liberté. Legend has it that I followed an individual on a bicycle who took me all the way to the gates of Belvedere Park. I was then “saved,” it seems, by a young American who lived nearby, also riding a bike, and who must have realized that something was amiss. Who was the kidnapper? There was much conjecture as to his identity: an Algerian freedom fighter seeking a ransom for his cause? A Seraglio janissary? A highway robber? I have no memory of the man, but what I do recall with great clarity is that neither my grandfather nor my father sought to press charges, an exercise in futility, they said . . . I would relive this richly opaque episode in my own private theater, as if I were seeing a banner headline in the local news, or reenacting it as a photo-novella: sometimes I would fall madly in love with my kidnapper, other times I would become a warrior, like Kahena, defending one of the world’s many lost causes.<sup>3</sup> Could this young American who reportedly brought me home safe and sound have unwittingly played a role in my life choices, decades later?

The news reels of the time were full of Tunisia’s struggle for independence from France, but for non-Muslim Tunisians, the overwhelming majority of whom were Jews, it was a confusing period of self-scrutiny. The nascent Tunisian republic, despite a few early steps in the right direction, would make very little room for its largest minority, in the end.

My father, a Tunisian national but of Italian extraction, a senior surgeon who had trained many young physicians, was compelled to step down from his position at the Libération Hospital in favor of one of his former students—his favorite, in fact. The latter, deeply disturbed by the injustice of this lofty promotion, did take over direction of the unit, though he would continually apologize to his mentor. From that day forward, my father began to plan how we would leave the country. Rumor had it that there was no longer a “future” for us. For the child that I was, the word had little meaning: if we had a past and a present in Tunisia, how was it that we had no future? I didn’t realize that tomorrow had already been written yesterday.

As the specter of departure hung in the air, the nuts and bolts of it were spoken of in discreet whispers, and I sensed an atmosphere of urgency; and yet, my daily routine changed very little. The government authorized bank withdrawals,

2. Author’s note: literally, a “torn up sale,” an unkept promise to sell something—an expression used to designate bad deals in general.

3. La Kahena (also spelled Kahina; known as Dihya in Berber) was a Berber queen of the Aurès region, who lived from 688–703 and is credited with bringing unity to the Maghreb. Some historians have suggested that she may have been Jewish.

but would not allow these funds to leave the country, hence the not-so-subtle sobriquet for the trendy Abu Nawas Beach in Gammarth, renamed “frozen assets beach.” The word “container” was often murmured in conversation between my parents. What they were referring to, I figured out, was the only way we could ship our furniture, which was by putting it into the container of a Frenchman, a Corsican, or an Italian. The port authorities would look the other way as they opened their pockets when it came to the country’s worst kept secret: the Tunisian Jews were leaving!

As if to forestall the looming storm, I became even closer friends with Latifa, an Arab neighbor five years my senior, whom I’d known for forever. Our family’s secret weighed on me, but I kept it to myself, obeying their rule to never mention our departure to anyone.

The meals at Latifa’s were exquisite, so like our own, but much tastier, spicier, more potent. Our couscous *boulettes*, a couscous made with meat-stuffed vegetables,<sup>4</sup> a particular specialty of my grandmother’s, seemed doughy and greasy compared to theirs, which was more fragrant and less saucy. My taste for the hot-and-spicy has stayed with me ever since, and it all started at Latifa’s, with their fried peppers smothered in harissa, which we’d sneak into the kitchen to gobble up.

I felt I was her confidant, instead of the other way around. We always spoke to each other in Arabic, which I was proud to say I spoke very well, even though Latifa’s French was excellent. We grew close through the play of language. One day, to tell her I didn’t feel like doing something, I said, “*ma andich el gana*,” an expression I often heard used by my grandmother (who perhaps didn’t often feel like doing things!). My friend understood the first part of my sentence, but for her, *el gana* wasn’t Arabic.<sup>5</sup> Many years later, as I came to learn Spanish, I figured out how to unpack those hybrid expressions whose bits and pieces came from a variety of languages and gave ours its special flavor. This was long before Judeo-Arabic had become a topic for university lecture halls. Which might soon be the only place you’ll hear it, since the authentic language communities are disappearing.

Latifa loved to tell stories. I would sit and listen, dumbfounded, to various tall tales told at the hammam, such as the one about young virgins getting pregnant from just sitting on the stone slabs of the Turkish baths (you never knew what those boys were up to when it was their day at the baths, she said), or the saying that, at birth, girls look like their future mother-in-law. I cherished these moments all the more since I knew they were numbered. In this friendship clouded by secrecy, I sometimes felt I was betraying Latifa, and Tunisia as well, for that matter, even though the country pretended it wanted us to stay. Without knowing it,

4. Author’s note: in Tunisia, Jewish couscous differs from Arab couscous in that the Jews add stuffed vegetables, which they also call “boulettes.”

5. Author’s note: Probably borrowed by Ladino from Spanish, *no tengo ganas* means “I don’t want to.”

Latifa is the one who reset the balance between us when she announced that her parents had married her to a young man she'd never met . . . She seemed glad about it. Thus, we were each chased out of childhood at the same time: her by an early marriage, and me by our departure.

Speaking Arabic was indisputably one of my great pleasures. In that respect, I was somewhat at odds with the young Tunisian Jews of my generation who came from bourgeois families whose scant use of Arabic was for strictly utilitarian purposes. Linguistic markers were such that, in the low-income bracket that included my maternal grandparents, speaking Arabic was too Jewish, while on my father's side, speaking Arabic was too Arab.

I used Arabic as both a weapon and a shield. During the winter months, my maternal grandparents lived on rue Zarkoun, on the edge of the old medina, where my mother and I often went to buy fabric. I loved walking through those vaulted alleys, the beating heart of the city of Tunis, in my view. An excitingly rich world, but one that proves uncomfortable for "light" women like my mother and me.<sup>6</sup> Mistaking us for tourists, or at least, non-Muslims, boys would whistle and make comments, sometimes even grope us. I figured out early on that a well-placed "*ahcham a la ruhek*,"<sup>7</sup> pronounced with a perfect Arab accent, not a Jewish one (yes, you could learn how to do that!), would not only have them running in the opposite direction, but would gratify us with an apology: "*semhini ya okhti*."<sup>8</sup> Even as I felt empowered by this little deception, something about it disturbed me: language helped me turn a situation to my advantage, but it also implied I was denying some part of myself. To get out of a sticky situation, I had to become someone other than who I was. At a different level, these episodes were also my way of setting myself apart from my mother, who would pretend she hadn't seen or heard anything, as was customary for women of her generation. Which meant that, in another reversal, I was the one intimidating my mother, who was uncomfortable with my boldness.

Over at "frozen assets beach," where bank accounts weren't the only thing that was paralyzed, another drama played out: the implicit social constraints that separated the young people of the two communities. How were we supposed to not notice the good-looking guys on the beach? Especially the dark-complexioned ones—I could never get so tan, even when I slathered myself with that mixture of olive oil and mercurochrome said to produce a copper glow. Like a pod of dolphins, the boys leapt and splashed and chased each other in the warm Mediterranean water, while the "frozen assets" girls, without taking their eyes off the boys for a minute, pretended to be looking languorously out at the horizon, absorbed by

6. Author's note: This was, in fact, the term used. (Editors' note: The original French expression, "des femmes 'claires,'" refers to women with fair skin.)

7. Author's note: in Arabic, literally, "be ashamed in your soul," meaning: "You should be ashamed of yourself to talk that way to a girl."

8. Author's note: in Arabic, "So sorry, my sister!"

the open water. Each of us imagined our personal love story or adventure tale. In our imaginations, everything was possible, since in reality, nothing actually was.

Despite the wrenching experience of departure, and unlike present generations, I was able to experience the great richness of a multicultural Tunisia, the country that made me who I am today, the one I still carry in my heart, wherever I roam.

Tunisian I am; Tunisian I remain.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Place Jeanne d'Arc, Tunis

---

## Open Letter to my Grandchildren Adrien, Élie, Raphaël, and Anna

Nine Moati

The other day, you asked me what my happiest childhood memory was. I answered without missing a beat: the war years! The confused looks I got from my older grandchildren made me realize that I'd said something wrong. They already knew all about the war! I owe you an explanation. Here it is:

I was born in Paris, just before the war. Why Paris, you might ask, when I've become the symbol of your beloved Tunisia? It was simply because my father, Serge Moati, journalist and French politician of Tunisia—the land where his Italian forbearers had settled—was demanding more freedom and independence for Tunisians. The country was a French protectorate back then, almost a *département*.<sup>1</sup> For the resident general, my father's stance in this matter was an outrage, and he was deported to France, soon to be joined by his wife and eldest son, Yves.<sup>2</sup> His socialist friends greeted him with open arms, and he went to work as a journalist for *Le Populaire*.

1. *Départements* are administrative areas in France, akin to communes or counties. In certain cases, departmental status has been given to French overseas holdings: currently, for example, the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe hold *département* status, which means they are considered a part of the French state despite their distance from the mainland. During the colonial period in Algeria, from 1870 to 1962, the northern portion of the country was divided into three *départements* that were administered not as colonies, but rather as non-contiguous French territories. Moati, here, is suggesting that while Tunisia was technically a protectorate, certain aspects of colonial administration were similar to those practiced in *départements*.

2. The resident general was the official appointed to oversee the French administration in Tunisia during the protectorate (1881–1956). The resident general effectively ran the country, despite the legal fiction of indigenous administration under the Beys of the Husainid dynasty—the hereditary monarchs who reigned during the Ottoman Empire.



FIGURE 16. Nine Moati, surrounded by her mother and her brother Yves, on the patio outside her grandparents' apartment building, Verdun Square, Tunis, 1943.

I was born on the eve of the war, as the Nazi threat was gaining momentum. Paris was occupied. The exiles flooding in from Germany, Austria, and Poland urged us to return to Tunisia. We took refuge for a short time in Normandy, then made our way to Marseille, and caught the last boat to Tunis, where we were given a hero's welcome. Imagine! An entire family had escaped the clutches of the Nazis!

As soon as we stepped off the boat in La Goulette, my life was utterly transformed. Carriages, cars, and family friends were waiting at the dock, shouting our names in greeting. They drove us back to the city, honking their horns the whole way. What a welcome! I'd never seen so many people. I was passed around, receiving kisses from total strangers. I was a little heroine, the princess of Paris.

I was finally able to meet my grandparents, to hear their laughter, to experience their warmth and *joie de vivre*. They immediately spoiled me with tenderness and honey-soaked pastries. My parents managed to find a refugee apartment in Passage Grammont, an alley connecting avenue de Londres and avenue de Madrid. We all squeezed in, including my other grandmother, but we were so happy together! My mother would have her friends over, who all still smelled of fancy Parisian perfumes, my father worked, and I played out in the street with the neighborhood kids.

It wasn't long before the Germans brought that carefree life to a halt. War cast a dark pall over my sunny country.

Starting in November 1942, my father began to disappear every evening. My grandmother and mother waited up all night for his return. They didn't ask questions, but I could tell they were proud of what he was doing during those absences, which must have signified something glorious.

One day, Mohamed B., my Muslim godfather—who would become the Tunisian ambassador to Egypt after independence—came over to discuss something with my parents. We immediately started packing our bags. From that point on, we were to sleep in a different place every night. My father was wanted for his resistance activities. One night at Aunt Livia's, another at Olga's, two or three in the casbah at my godfather's, and so on. I have to admit that this wanderer's life was much to my liking. One night when we were at a cousin's, the sirens went off. Whenever that happened, we would rush down into the basement, but that night, my brother and I refused to go. We didn't want to huddle in darkness and fear anymore. My parents gave in, and we sought shelter in a nearby trench. This childish intuition saved our lives: a bomb fell on our building, killing several people.

My parents finally decided that *mektoub* was *mektoub*, and that there was no use changing location every night.<sup>3</sup> Still, they gladly accepted a friend's offer to take up lodgings in an out-of-service hammam on avenue de Londres. The place had one extraordinary advantage: its service entrance backed onto an old, long forgotten Jewish cemetery, where protective trenches worthy of Verdun had been dug and covered over with corrugated sheet metal. At the slightest alert, everyone would make a dash for cover.

This little utopian community, living between a bathhouse and a graveyard, provided me a haven of happiness in the midst of the war. Several Jewish families whose villas had been requisitioned by the Germans found refuge there. Each family took up residence in one of the little compartments, probably the places where bathers used to rest and cool off after their session in the steam room. All four of us slept in the same tiny compartment, and I got to sleep in my parents' bed. What a treat! The atmosphere was calm during the day. Women went about their normal chores, cooking over camp stoves, making their regular couscous, tagines, and *makrouds* . . .<sup>4</sup> My friends and I played in the trenches, where we found the bones of rabbis buried centuries ago, rats, mice, pigeons without feathers, and fragments from bombs that could have been dropped the day before. We would return "home" with our trophies, and our mothers would either sigh in despair, beat their breasts, or yell at us for taking such risks.

At night, Marius, the household dog, was our personal alarm system: he would sense danger and bark, and his flair saved many a life. When that happened, everybody—old folks, children, women, and men—would grab the first thing they

3. The expression *mektoub* signifies "it is written," meaning that whatever happens is fate, or destiny.

4. *Makrouds* are diamond-shaped North African cookies made with semolina flour and filled with dates, figs, or nuts.

could find to cover their heads, whether a skillet, a saucepan, or a stock pot, and run for the trenches. Thanks to Marius, we always had the best spots.

Every Friday night was a party. Women set up trestle tables to serve their famous couscous, with melt-in-your-mouth meatballs and broth, and not a single salad or condiment was ever missing, I swear. We feasted while the bombs fell all around us. What else could we do—it was mektoub! We'd then clear the dishes and fold up the tablecloth, so that the table could be used for card games. The men would play skouba and poker until the break of dawn.<sup>5</sup> In bad weather, everyone would stay inside and a fiddler would play us well-known tunes by Habiba Messika, Raoul Journo, or Ali Riahi. Women would dance, swinging their hips and undulating their bellies. I tried to do likewise.

One night, a knock came at the front door. My father simply said, "That's for me." The French police, on Pétain's orders, had come to arrest him for his role in the resistance. My brother burst into tears. A Tunisian collaborator reassured us: "We're not Nazis. Your father will be back, don't worry." My father gave me a big hug and told me to take good care of my mother, who would soon be spending all her waking hours in various offices and departments trying to discover my father's whereabouts, but to no avail. Then one day, she found out that a plane was transporting prisoners to Germany. My uncle André wanted to take her to the airfield, but the road was bombarded and they had to get out of their car and take shelter in a ravine. My mother watched as the airplane carrying her husband to a German concentration camp flew over her head.

Life from that day forward was less gay. Everyone had a missing person to mourn, a brother sent to a work camp, or an uncle swept up in a raid. For my mother, it was her husband. I would venture out alone now, into the trenches and beyond, figuring I had nothing left to lose. One time I really did get lost. Adults speaking Arabic came to help me, but I was unable to explain to them where I lived. I started crying. Suddenly, arms wrapped around me, tears flowed, hugs and kisses, words of comfort, *Heure bleue* perfume: it was her; my mother had found me.

In May 1943, Tunisia was at last liberated from the Germans. All of Tunis was gathered on avenue de Londres, us hammam-dwellers in the front row, to greet the Americans. People threw confetti and flowers as they passed, singing "It's a Long Way."<sup>6</sup> My mother could not hold back her tears and I reassured her: "Don't worry, he'll be back." I toured the town in the Jeep of an African-American serviceman who gave me chewing gum, the first in my life. In his company, we liberated Tunis in a haze of euphoria.

5. *Skouba*, often transliterated as *la chkobba*, is derived from the Italian card game known as *la scopa*. It was introduced into Tunisia by Italian immigrants, but the game is played, with variations, throughout the Mediterranean.

6. Moati refers here to "It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary," a British music-hall song written in 1912 that became popular with British troops as a World War I marching song.

The hammam was instantly deserted. Those whose villas had been impounded by the Germans were able to go home, and we too got our old apartment back, though it wasn't the same without my father. As always, my mother didn't let it get her down, and started working so as not to depend on anyone. She got the idea to start manufacturing mules. I went with her to the souks to purchase raffia for the soles; fabrics in satin, velvet, and moiré; yards of swan feathers; and, of course, sequins in every conceivable color.<sup>7</sup> Our living-room was transformed into a workshop. Many American servicemen bought her irresistible oriental mules for their wives or girlfriends. This is how my mother kept the home fires burning until the return of my father from the camp where he'd been deported, Sachsenhausen, near Berlin.

He came back in September 1944 after the Liberation of Paris, in which he took part. An enormous crowd awaited his arrival. He didn't recognize me among all the other children who were jostling to get close to him. His friends, the ones with more obviously Jewish names—Levy, Cohen, or Hadria—were never to return. They died at Auschwitz. The Nazis had taken my father for an Italian, and that saved him. He went back to his job as journalist and politician. And we moved into a lovely villa near place Jeanne-d'Arc, in the Belvédère neighborhood.

My dears, you know how the rest of my life story has unfolded . . .

Thanks to the love of my parents and my country, Tunisia, whenever I return, it's like coming home. To see the women's smiles, how caring and gentle and affectionate they are, to rediscover the beauty of Boukornine, the sea, the cypress trees, the scent of jasmine, the magenta bougainvillea that pours over the whitewashed walls, yes, those are the reasons why Tunisia will always be the country of my heart.<sup>8</sup>

And that's why you three big boys call yourselves Tunisians. And what should we think of Anna, only three and a half, who told me the other day, "Mamie, I had a wonderful dream: the two of us were there in your golden bed and we were doing *la halai* (cuddling), drinking *masar* (orange blossom water), and watching a movie for grown-ups." In a word, the perfect "kif."<sup>9</sup>

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

7. A *souk*, or *souq*, is a market or a bazaar.

8. Boukornine (sometimes called Mount Bou Kornine or Jebel Boukornine) is a 576-meter (1,890-foot) mountain situated just south of Tunis, along the coast, overlooking the Gulf of Tunis.

9. *Un kif* refers to something fun and pleasurable. Now very common in French (including in its verbal form *kiffer*—meaning "to enjoy"), the word is a deformation of the Arabic *kif*, which is associated with the pleasurable state brought on by smoking cannabis or hashish. Its use in French is generally unrelated to drugs, however.

Monastir, Tunisia

---

## The Jewish Boy from Monastir

Guy Sitbon

Not all families took part in the commemorative celebration of Rabbi Shémeoun. My mother Juliette solemnly swore to do so once during a typhoid fever epidemic that was decimating the town, and from which my sister Daisy made an almost miraculous recovery. The celebration involved a rite in which children and adolescents had to walk in procession through Monastir, carrying lit candles and chanting in Hebrew all the way to the synagogue. The ceremony took place at dusk, when the souk shops were still open and the cafés were teeming with customers.<sup>1</sup> People out in the street, all Muslims, watched unsurprised as our cortege passed. They knew our traditions by heart, and would even offer a match to relight our candles when the breeze blew them out.

On Moulèd and Aïd el-Kebir, the town transformed, as if by magic, into a kind of fairground, with a merry-go-round, swing-sets, fakirs, snake charmers and fortune-tellers setting up their stalls in streets and squares.<sup>2</sup> The air vibrated with the drumming of darboukas, bendirs (tambourines), and the strident notes of the *zokra*, a kind of goatskin bagpipe, as hearts danced with joy.<sup>3</sup> The Muslims would

1. A *souk*, or *souq*, is a market or a bazaar. In the original, the author used the word without italics, suggesting its incorporation into everyday French vocabulary.

2. Moulèd (also Mawlid or Mawlid al-Nabi al-Sharif), is the celebration of the birthday of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha (sometimes simply Aïd or Eid), is the Festival of the Sacrifice—one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over, it commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy.

3. A *darbouka* (also spelled *darbuka*, or *darabukka*), sometimes called a goblet drum, is an ancient Middle Eastern percussion instrument. Shaped like an hourglass and with an animal skin stretched over its widest end, the *darbouka* is played by hand. Similarly, the *bendir* is also a traditional

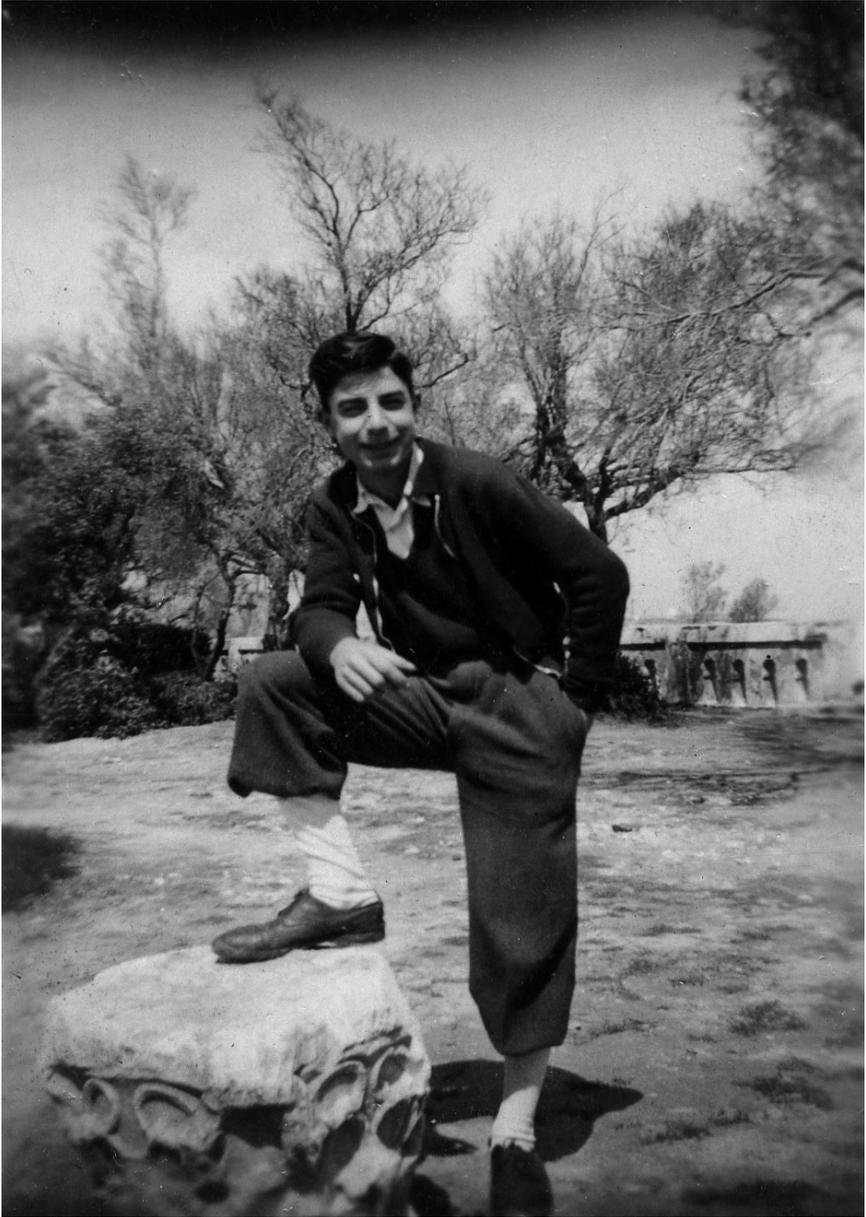


FIGURE 17. Guy Sitbon in Monastir, age fourteen.

wear their Sunday best, but we would not; still, the festival atmosphere sent vibrations through the whole crowd. It was many years later that I learned the real meaning of Moulèd (the feast of the birth of Prophet Mohamed), which I had always thought was just a big Monastirian street party.

During the colonial era, the French attitude toward Monastir was largely dismissive. They set up three elementary schools with a half-dozen teachers (we should give them our blessing, by the way), a post office, a town hall, a tax bureau, and nothing else. I remember only three or four French families in town. The church was attended mostly by Sicilians and Maltese who, like us, spoke fluent Arabic. They had immigrated to the country long before the protectorate was imposed. There were barracks outside town that housed a dozen or so French soldiers whom we never laid eyes on. The police station was run by three civil servants, usually Tunisians. The town was administered by a *caïd*, a handful of *cadis* (judges), a few *ouzirs* (notaries), a sharia court, and an *amine*, who kept order in the local marketplace.<sup>4</sup> In the town prison, a big barn of a place, some one hundred square meters large, with impressive barred windows, you might find two or three drunks picked up off the street the previous evening. Apart from the “Christian foreigners,” the native population had been divided into two parts since the dawn of time: on the one hand, some twelve thousand Muslims, and on the other, my people, a hundred and fifty Jews. Even though we were a tiny minority, we had a very high profile in the town.

Businessmen, manufacturers like my father, who opened the first soap factory—still today called *mèkinet saboun* (the soap factory)—shoemakers and hairdressers: we had an obvious presence in the souk, and our celebrations, like the feast day of Rabi Chameoun, never went unnoticed.<sup>5</sup> This is the way it had always been, and no one suspected it would ever be otherwise.

Not a single house had a bathtub or shower. Everyone went to the hamman once a week to wash. After my eleventh birthday, I started going in the morning with my father, but prior to that, I would go in the afternoon, with the women. The sight of all those mostly naked women didn’t trouble me in the least. Only Faïza made my heart skip a beat. I decided I must be in love with Faïza. In the only novel I had ever read, *Les Mystères de Marseille*, by Émile Zola (God knows how I got my hands on it), I learned that boys were supposed to fall in love with girls. And mine was Faïza Mzali, with whom I shared a bench in our last year of elementary school. She always wore the same calf-length green dress and black lace-up

---

North African hand drum, but it features a much larger head (striking surface), and thus a deeper tone. The membrane is stretched over a wooden frame.

4. Sitbon is inconsistent in his choices about which words to define for the reader. Definitions in parentheses are his; we provide the following: a *caïd* is a leader (in this case, similar to mayor); Sharia courts, which were abolished in Tunisia in 1956, administered Islamic law; an *amine* is an administrator or custodian.

5. *Mèkinet* (or *makinet*) *saboun* literally means “soap machine.”

patent leather shoes, and always wore her black hair in braids. Her compositions (in French, naturally) were better than mine, but mine weren't so bad either. We never put it into so many words, but we were both proud of each other. During recess, she didn't play with the others, but just stood in a corner by herself, still as a statue. I didn't dare invite her over to play with the rest of us, for I understood that as the only Muslim girl in the whole school of thirty pupils, she probably felt uncomfortable. Nor did the two or three French boys mix with the Jewish and Maltese ruffians that we were. Faïza's parents could have easily enrolled their daughter in what was called the *École des filles musulmanes*, just as the Muslim boys attended the *École franco-arabe* run by Mr. Pétèche, where my father had studied for four years.<sup>6</sup> But the Mzali family, the wealthiest in town, thought it more appropriate that their daughter be schooled just like the French were in France.

In rue Gabriel-Médina, we were the only Jewish family. I wasn't aware of this "isolation" until much later—until just recently, in fact, now that everyone seems to be into ethnic anthropology. Back then, it would never have occurred to me that there was anything unusual about where we lived. We lived in a house; that's all I knew. And walking from the market back home, you'd pass by Dar Trimeche (the Trimeche family home), Dar Kalala, Dar Bchir, Dar Rokbani, and Dar Aghir. Apart from the Trimeche olive oil factory, our soap works, the Fondouk (a kind of inn, or caravansary), and my father's three houses, there were no other buildings. After Dar Aghir, you were at the edge of town, and our unpaved street continued into the countryside as a path for camels and burros, lined on either side by bushes of prickly pear cactus, bearing the most divine fruit. It goes without saying that we knew all our neighbors, and no family event ever escaped our notice. Births, weddings, illnesses, and deaths were shared by the whole neighborhood.

My mother would sometimes visit the women next door. As a child, I was allowed access to the women's quarters, so I would tag along. Juliette, my mother, was sought out by all the ladies of the town for her inimitable singing voice. She had a large repertoire of popular tunes, and could sing ballads and laments by all the greats, from Abdel Awab to Saliha, even better than the original.<sup>7</sup> After tea and cakes had been served, and all the gossip circulated, the lady of the house would invariably beg Juliette: "Sing us something. Whatever you want, Juliette, your choice." My mother would coyly demur, but after much coaxing, would sit up on her ottoman and launch into "Les bateliers du Nil," in a voice that still gives me goosebumps.<sup>8</sup> Her audience would swoon with pleasure. Sitting at the feet of the performer, I felt like the king of the world.

6. The School for Muslim Girls, and the Franco-Arab School, respectively.

7. Abdel Awab is most likely a phonetic spelling of Mohamed Abdel Wahab (1901–1991), the revered Egyptian composer, singer, musician, and actor. Saliha, or Salouha Ben Ibrahim Ben Abdelhafid (1914–1958), was a famous Tunisian singer.

8. "Les bateliers du Nil" (ferryman of the Nile River) does not refer to a single song but, rather, to ancient chants (traditional work songs) sung by boatmen on the Nile to set the rhythm for their labor.

One day in late 1942, I was almost nine at the time, the German army occupied Monastir. The Jews knew they had the most to fear, while the Arabs thought they stood to gain. The fleet of the only three automobiles in the whole town consisted of share taxis (*louages*) that shuttled between Monastir and Sousse, the closest large town. Seemingly overnight, all three had portraits of Hitler on their windshields. One of the vehicles, belonging to Douik, went so far as to brandish a Nazi swastika on its splash guards. Everyone seemed to think that this was in the normal course of events. I, for one, was frightened. We didn't talk about it at home, but I'm sure my parents were terribly worried. My father, along with all other Jewish adult males, was sent to a work camp in Sousse, where his job consisted of clearing the rubble from the port that had been bombed by the Americans. In his absence, the most senior worker at our soap factory, Salah, took over operations and made sure that production continued smoothly. Salah was one of the family.

We didn't have any friends in Monastir. We had cousins (Jews, all related) or neighbors (Muslims). Still, I was friendly with one neighbor: Hachmi Bchir. He was the youngest child in the house next door, just my age. I could already read the newspaper, so I would tell him all about the war between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. When the Jews were winning, I was happy, but he was not. We were eleven or twelve, we had no idea what the fighting was about, but we didn't agree. Though no one ever mentioned it in my family, I got the impression that in his home, his father, a man given to serious pronouncements, made his opinion known. None of this stopped us from playing together in the street, where no automobile had ever ventured. Camel caravans, yes; horse-drawn carts, naturally; but never a car.

Jews and Arabs, like Aragon and Elsa, lived "apart together."<sup>9</sup> The word "Jew" was (and remains) an insult. Even today, I am not comfortable telling people in Tunisia that I'm a Jew. I feel guilty. The Gaza Strip, Palestinian refugees, finances, and so on and so forth. The word Muslim, in Arabic, has a completely different meaning from the same word in French, or any other language, for that matter. In French, Islam is a religion. In Arabic, *mislim* denotes first and foremost membership in a universal community, an ethnicity, a nation, a family, a block. *Mislim* is good, *Youdi* is bad.<sup>10</sup> We coexisted for thirteen centuries without ever feeling that we were part of the same group. Until the French arrived, we spoke the same language, shared the same Arab-Muslim civilization; we traded, helped each other out when we could; but let's not delude ourselves—we were foreigners to one another.

On a recent visit back to Monastir, some children accompanied me in the street, the way they often escort tourists. I spoke to them in the local Monastir dialect, the inimitable Arab accent of Tunisia's eastern coast that any kid can spot immediately.

9. French surrealist poet Louis Aragon and French-Russian writer Elsa Triolet were one of the most famous literary couples of the twentieth century. The expression "apart together" is a line from one of Aragon's poems, in which he describes their tumultuous relationship.

10. The words *Mislim* and *Youdi*—in italics in the original—refer to Muslim and Yehudi (or Jew), respectively. The particular spelling renders the local dialect and pronunciation.

They were stunned. How could you be both a tourist and Monastirian? I told them I was born in Monastir, just like them, that I had lived there for almost thirty years, and that I was a Jew. The peals of laughter that I set off must still be resonating on the city ramparts. They weren't buying it, not for a minute! To think I could make them believe that the enemy had lived in Monastir, that I was Bluebeard, or a child-eating ogre! I'll bet they're still laughing today.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

CHAPTER FIVE

Algeria



## Country Snapshot

Jews have lived in Algeria since antiquity, with the first evidence of Jewish life dating to the late Roman era. Although the exact origins of Algerian Jewry remain somewhat unclear, what is known is that over the centuries, the Algerian Jewish population grew as a result of several waves of migration. It is thus that Algerian Jewish life, which had been decimated by the Berber Almohad dynasty in the twelfth century, began to thrive again in the thirteenth century following an influx of Jews from Spain. The Algerian Jewish community would grow yet again over the course of the next two hundred years, as waves of Jews arrived from Spain in 1391 and again in 1492. These Spanish Jews served as links to Iberia and facilitated trade, particularly between North Africa and the Kingdom of Aragon. As a result, the northern Algerian cities of Tlemcen and Constantine became important Jewish centers during the early modern period.

In the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire established a regency in Algeria, which put the area under nominal Ottoman control all while allowing it a significant level of autonomy. Two centuries later, the Ottomans extended their reign further west, taking control of the northern city of Oran in 1792, which had been under Spanish rule since the sixteenth century. Following the withdrawal of the Spanish, the Bey established a Jewish community, which helped to repopulate the area and breathe new life into the city. The resettlement of Jews in Oran was just one of many episodes of Jewish migration that characterized the Ottoman period; just as in neighboring Tunisia, Algeria welcomed the immigration of Livornese Jews in the seventeenth century. As opposed to the case of Tunisia, however, where Jewish migrants from Livorno kept to themselves and established separate communities from the indigenous Jewish population, over time, the Livornese Jews who settled in Algeria mixed with the native population.

The French invasion of 1830 marked the start of several significant political, civil, and cultural shifts that would irrevocably transform the lives of Algerian



MAP 6. Algeria. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

Jews. Even as the French were in the process of establishing their grip on Algeria, the colonial powers began to break down the traditional power structures that had governed Jewish life in Algeria for centuries. Rabbinical courts were dissolved, and the power of the *muqaddams*, or traditional Jewish leaders, was eroded as the French sought to bring Algerian Jews under tighter control. In 1847, the French created Jewish consistories, or administrative bodies, in Algiers, Oran, and Constantine. These consistories, modeled after the ones created under Napoleon in mainland France, were civil bodies that oversaw the administration of the Jewish communities. Despite these attempts to strengthen French control over Algerian Jews, the community by and large resisted the imposition of French Jewish systems onto their ways of life.

This changed significantly with the passing of the Crémieux Decree in 1870. Named after Jewish statesman Adolphe Crémieux, the eponymous decree

bestowed French citizenship upon the overwhelming majority of Algerian Jews *en masse*, irrevocably separating them from Algerian Muslims, who remained colonial subjects. Following the decree, Algerian Jews began to assimilate into French culture at a somewhat steady pace, attending French schools alongside their European peers. Within a couple of generations, French had become the language of the community, and Algerian Jews were climbing the ranks of the social ladder, forming a new middle class and moving from the poorer Jewish Quarters into European neighborhoods. Jews took up different professions, working as artisans, civil workers, and teachers, as well as in the military and liberal professions. It is important to note, however, that the majority of Algerian Jews remained in the lower classes, and that adoption of French language and culture was not uniform across the country. The Jews of Constantine, for example, were less quick to adopt new ways of life, as were rural Jews, and those living in the south.

The Crémieux Decree, while it opened the door for Jewish upward mobility, also stoked the fires of anti-Semitism. European settlers, who were loath to see the entire population of native Jews become their civic equals overnight, were quick to react. Thus in 1871, the year following the decree, Algeria saw the establishment of its first anti-Semitic league, and over the course of the next two decades, anti-Semitic riots occurred in Tlemcen (1881 and 1883) and in Algiers (1884 and 1885). The Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906) in mainland France only added fuel to the fire of intolerance, spurring the creation of more anti-Semitic leagues, and resulting in riots in 1897 in Mostaganem and Oran.

European violence toward Algerian Jews was to rear its ugly head yet again some forty years later, when the Nazi-allied Vichy government came to power in France. Vichy anti-Jewish statutes were applied in both mainland France and Algeria, stripping Jews of their right to work and to own business and property. Furthermore, in 1940, Pétain's government abrogated the Crémieux Decree, thus denying Algerian Jews their French citizenship and rendering them stateless. Algerian Jews remained in this state of legal limbo until 1943, when the decree was reinstated and their rights restored.

Despite the traumatic experiences of World War II, Algerian Jews by and large envisioned their future as intimately linked to France. A small minority even went so far as to join the Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS), a far-right French paramilitary organization whose sole aim was to keep Algeria French—by any means necessary. Although some Jews went the opposite route and fought for the pro-independence Front de libération nationale (National Liberation Front, or FLN), on the whole, Algerian Jews were rather disinterested in nationalist movements—be they Algerian or Zionist—and were thus caught in an uncomfortable middle as the tensions between the colonized population and the colonial power came to a head in the violent Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962). In the aftermath of Algerian independence from France, thousands of Algerian Jews

relocated to France, along with the vast majority of the so-called “pieds-noirs,” or European settlers who had established themselves in the colonial territory. Approximately five thousand Jews remained in Algeria following the 1962 exodus. Today, there are barely a handful of Jews in Algeria, although there is a significant Algerian Jewish diaspora in mainland France, and a sizable minority population in Israel.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*

Bellevue Bel-Air, Constantine

---

## Excellent Frenchmen

Jean-Luc Allouche

My last photo from back then: school year 1960–1961; sixth grade, A5; Aumale High School in Constantine (today called Réda Houhou High School). Have a look at the last row in the back. The second from the right, that's me: little rooster with bangs brushed to one side, ears sticking out, a bit of a show-off. The first boy in the same row, standing right next to me, the towhead, that's Pierre Zerbib. My eternal rival ever since elementary school. I systematically outclassed him, to the great joy of my parents, and to the bitter disappointment of his. That year, I swept all the prizes (except for the ones in PE, drawing, and music: nobody's perfect!). You'll excuse my retrospective vanity, but it should be said that our teachers and parents had a certain idea of excellence, and that they placed the bar very high.

Thirty-six pupils on the threshold of their high school years. Fifteen in ties. A few in more or less properly fitting jackets. Hair combed and side-parted. I've forgotten the names of most of my classmates. But I can unerringly identify their "ethnic" background: twenty-one Muslims, or "natives," as we said back then, nine Jews, and six Christians. A fairly representative breakdown of the town as a whole. Please, spare me the anachronistic cries of protest at my "divisive" gaze, as they say today, which doesn't get caught up in politically correct niceties, but rather takes the pulse of a de facto "diversity" that had no need for sugar-coated slogans! That's just the way it was in colonial society; we identified ourselves first and foremost by our origins and by our family culture (religious, culinary, etc.). No getting around it. But that didn't mean all these children decked out in their Sunday best couldn't be turned into "excellent Frenchmen," as the Maurice Chevalier song went, though with reference to very different circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

1. The author refers here to a popular song by Maurice Chevalier, "Ça fait d'excellents français" (literally: that makes excellent Frenchmen), released in 1939 and whose goal was to rouse the patriotic

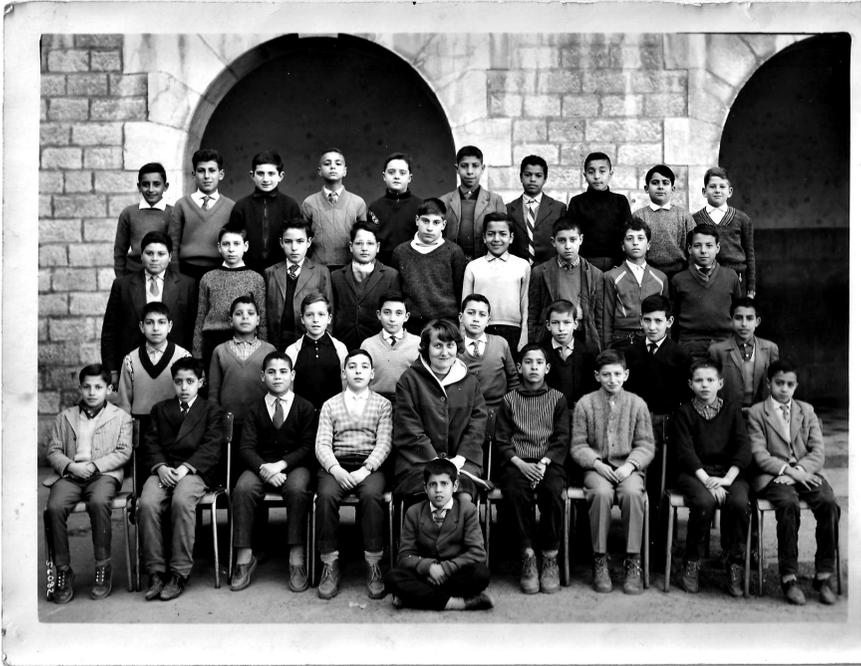


FIGURE 18. The sixth grade, class A5, Aumale High School of Constantine, 1960–1961 school year. Jean-Luc Allouche is the second from the right in the top row.

Excellent Frenchmen? Really? Well, at least in the minds of our schoolmasters. Will I ever forget Mr. Fassier, our French and Latin teacher that year, and his tireless effort to steep us in the beauty of Molière, the subtleties of *rosa, rosa, rosam*, the joys we would soon discover in the Gaffiot?<sup>2</sup> Even back in elementary school, the memory of Mrs. Guedj, Mr. Lounis, Mr. Hassoun, Mrs. Vallée, and Mr. Elbeze, my teachers at the Jean-Jaurès School in the Bellevue neighborhood, remains deeply rooted in my psyche.

For they all had a lofty idea of their own vocation: to raise this unruly band of rascals, more accustomed to brawling on the soccer field and in battles à la *taouat* (makeshift slingshots consisting of a bit of leather and two rubber bands) than to the harsh reality of multiplication tables. Whether we were raggedy *douar* dwellers, or lower middle-class sons of equally lowly office clerks, or well-to-do offspring of local Arab notables, doctors, or merchants, we were all bound by the

---

spirit of young men who had just been drafted into the army to defend France during the early days of World War II.

2. Refers to French philologist Felix Gaffiot, whose name became synonymous with his 1934 publication, the *Illustrated Latin-French Dictionary*.

same school dress code and civics lessons, the same regular hygiene reviews (fingernail inspections were among the more humiliating).<sup>3</sup> On occasion, the teacher's steel ruler on our curled fingertips came to settle disputes that would otherwise have disturbed the smooth operation of that virtuous republic of learning.

Our lessons included a semblance of Algerian history (from Jugurtha to Emir Abd el-Kader, by way of Sidi Okba), but without much emphasis.<sup>4</sup> And believe me, it took a while to convince us that we were the proud progeny of Vercingetorix, Charles Martel, Joan of Arc, Bayard, Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Pasteur. Excellent Frenchmen, I'm telling you! Those "hussards noirs" of education were waging a much more worthy war than the one launched by the paras against the mechtas.<sup>5</sup>

Still, my secular and compulsory instruction was coupled with a Jewish education, no less compulsory. I would see quite a few of my classmates in the photograph on Thursdays, Sundays, and during all school holidays at the Talmud-Torah (the "Alliance") on rue Thiers, all under the watchful eye of my father, who was just as concerned about my assimilating our ways and traditions, as he was about my school grades.<sup>6</sup> For, when it came right down to it, the Jews of this town, unflinching upholders of their religious heritage, were no less dazzled by their French citizenship, may Adolphe Crémieux be praised.<sup>7</sup> (It was only much later that I began to reflect upon what was at stake in the Crémieux decree, and what its real consequences were.) But, look, didn't our grandfathers fight in World War I? My own father served in 1939, before being interned in a Foreign Legion work camp once the Vichy regime's anti-Jewish laws went into effect.<sup>8</sup> None of that prevented this "indigène Israélite," or "native Jew" as his military record stated, from fighting at Monte Cassino, then landing in Provence and fighting alongside his fellow Algerian infantrymen and Moroccan auxiliaries. "*C'est nous les Africains . . .*"

3. *Douar* refers to a group of tents or huts that encircle an open space.

4. Jugurtha (160–104 BCE) was Numidian military leader who fought against Rome; Emir Abd el-Kader (1808–1883) was an Algerian religious and military leader who spearheaded the struggle against the French invasion of Algeria in the nineteenth century; Sidi Okba (622–683), or Okba ibn Nafi, was the Arab general who began the Arab conquest of North Africa in the early years of Islam.

5. The *hussards noirs* were dark-uniformed elementary schoolmasters who began teaching when education became compulsory in France in 1881. The term itself, which builds on the word *hussard*, or military horseman, was coined by the French writer Charles Peguy (1873–1914). *Paras* is an abbreviation of *parachutistes*, and refers to a specialized French military unit. *Mechtas* refers to rural villages in North Africa.

6. See Introduction.

7. See Country Snapshot: "Algeria."

8. Under Vichy, according to the first Jewish status law of October 3, 1940, Jews were forbidden from civil service jobs, including teaching; nor could they serve in or work for the military, or participate in any political activities. The law of October 7, 1940, expanded the initial law, abrogating the Crémieux Decree and thus causing Algerian Jews to lose their French citizenship altogether. The following year, in July, under the second Jewish status law, Jews were barred from the financial sector, and were no longer allowed to own businesses.

you know, the marching song of the First African Army . . . And no, it actually wasn't the OAS.<sup>9</sup>

All of that to say that my patriotic education was no less intense than the other two. But here's the thing: there were also my Muslim classmates. I had the feeling they weren't quite so convinced they'd be exemplary Frenchmen any time soon, or French at all, for that matter. One day, a neighbor girl I'd befriended—actually, in the hormonal effervescence of adolescence, I lusted after her—left suddenly for the *maquis* to join the freedom fighters. Other friends took part in the unrest, as the struggle for Algerian independence reached a fever pitch. I understood the intolerable injustice they were all experiencing; but I knew that their freedom would come at the price of another injustice, the inexorable exclusion I would suffer.

The day I discovered that the Muslims in my class, ten-year-olds just like me, were the only ones required to carry ID cards, I knew I could never take a hard-line position against them, though sometimes it wasn't easy. In addition, my immediate family, unlike some of our more pro-OAS uncles and cousins (though we did have some Communist relatives), never cultivated any strong nationalist feelings. This was probably due to the fact that my father had many Muslim colleagues, whom he held in high esteem, and who reciprocated that respect, and these mutual feelings extended well beyond Algerian independence. But most especially, we had become very close to our Muslim neighbors. The Kesranis were my second family; my sister was practically raised by Mrs. Kesrani; their son Faouzi was my best friend, and we have kept up our friendship over the years, despite the geographical distance and the intervening decades of separation.

Even though Constantine was an historically pious center of Qur'anic teaching (the birthplace of Ben Badis, after all), the Islam practiced there was actually fairly relaxed, and it never really seemed foreign to me, certainly not exotic in any way.<sup>10</sup> That said, the "events" caused us to avoid places like place des Galettes in the heart of the old Arab medina, where we used to spend Passover at my aunt's house.<sup>11</sup> This Islam was undoubtedly less demonstrative than what we see today, based on what I have witnessed during recent visits to Algeria, where a proliferation of garish mosques, long beards, and hijabs have forgotten the modest beauty of what was once everyday Islam. I grew up in the shadow of the Sidi El Kettani mosque,

9. The author refers here to the song "Le Chant des *Africains*" (The Song of the Africans), whose refrain is "C'est nous les Africains, qui arrivons de loin" (We are the Africans, who arrive from afar). Originally composed and sung as "We are the Moroccans" after a show of bravery by Moroccans in World War I, the lyrics were eventually modified to include all "Africans"—ironically, perhaps, referring primarily to descendants of white settlers who identified as French. The song was adopted by partisans of French Algeria during the Algerian war for liberation. The OAS (*Organisation de l'armée secrète*) was an extreme paramilitary wing of the movement that sought to keep Algeria "French."

10. Abdelhamid Ben Badis (1889–1940) was a prominent religious scholar and Algerian Islamic reformer. He is best known for having founded the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema (1931).

11. Throughout the long struggle for Algerian independence, and even until the end of the twentieth century, France continued to refer to the conflict not as a war, but rather as the "events" in Algeria.

in a Turkish-style Arab house, amid the muezzin's calls to prayer, the firing of the canon to signal the beginning and the end of the Ramadan fast, the enticements of merchants in the Souk el Asser (*Ya madam, tichri laïdam?* Over here, Madam, some eggs for you today?) and most importantly, the Arabic language, spiced with Hebrew, which we spoke at home (*Ya mou'olam, sidi*, my mother would be constantly imploring a male authority figure). All sorts of Arabic expressions graced our daily joys and woes: '*Hachek* (All due respect), *La'adek* (May you be spared!), *Ta'ych* (May you live! said after someone sneezes), *Maya gzéra* (What a misfortune! It took me a while to figure out that *gzéra* is actually Hebrew), *Harani kabara lik* (May I be your atonement!), and here again, *kabara* is none other than the Hebrew word *kabara*, with the same meaning). Who still uses these expressions today, I wonder?

Oh sure, I would sometimes chuckle when I saw a barber use his rusty blade to slaughter a sheep on Eid, where our ritual butchers seemed like real experts, deploying razor-sharp knives that they would check between every animal they sacrificed, making a tiny cut on their own fingernail.<sup>12</sup> The youthful braggadocio of a young man already a bit bewildered about the grimly uncertain future we were facing. I can still picture scenes from the eve of Passover, when Arab merchants would make sure to stock the requisite ingredients for our holiday season: kosher salt, the '*hout cha'abi*, and so on.<sup>13</sup> I can still see the unforgettable sight of a cheikh dressed all in white who would come to the synagogue founded by my great-great-grandfather to hear the recitation of the Ten Commandments in the unadulterated Arabic of Saadya Gaon (alias "Al-Fayoumi," the brilliant ninth-century Egyptian rabbi). Even today, on the occasion of Chavouot (Pentecost), Jews of the Constantine diaspora recite his homilies, without always understanding them.<sup>14</sup>

Do I need to remind you of Malouf, the music that was the veritable soundtrack of our childhoods?<sup>15</sup> At home, my parents were constantly bickering over who, in their opinion, was the greatest singer. For my father, it was Raymond Leyris; for my mother, Fergani. The languorous melodies of this Arab-Andalusian music, with the local inflections of my native town, have stayed with me ever since. Naturally, they accompanied my son's wedding, even though he has never been to my homeland.

12. *Eid*, which here refers to Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha, is the Festival of the Sacrifice—one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over; it commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy.

13. '*Hout cha'abi* (also rendered '*hout sha'abi*) likely refers to a kind of meatball made with sardines.

14. The Jewish holiday known in English as Shavuot falls fifty days after the second day of Passover, just as Pentecost is celebrated on the 50th day after Easter Sunday.

15. Malouf is a type of music that came to North Africa from Andalusia. Typically played by small orchestras composed of violins, drums, sitars, and flutes, its lyrics are based on forms handed down from classical Arabic poetry. The term itself, *ma'luf*, means "familiar" or "customary."

Practically speaking, we were immersed in an amniotic symbiosis with Arab culture: the values of *‘haram*—taboo, sin, and *‘hchouma* or *‘eib*—shame, modesty, or even prudishness, determined the social confines of our lives, both Jewish and Muslim, more effectively than any barbed wire that enclosed our neighborhoods during curfew. One more image: my mother, alongside the Arab neighbor women, inspecting the sheet soiled with the blood of a young bride, Malika, proving to the city and the world that her honor had been preserved until her wedding night.

For we were all steeped in this same obsession with honor, women’s honor, it goes without saying. And there was no worse offense than insulting the virtue of someone’s mother, sister, or aunt. I dare not repeat here the loud, colorful, terribly virile insults we used to hurl at each other, like ancient Greek warriors before battle.

All of that is dead, but not yet buried. When I bring up this childhood in front of my own children, they’re often surprised: “We get the impression that you had a wonderful childhood, despite the war.”

Well, I guess I did, then. If they say so.

But what will be left for my grandchildren?

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

Alger

---

## Diar-es-Saada

Joëlle Bahloul

My class picture from 1958, taken during my second year of elementary school at the Diar-es-Saada School for girls, speaks volumes about my childhood. We were forty pupils, a mix of French and Arab girls. To take this shot, they had us assemble in the school courtyard, in three rows, in front of the big classroom windows. Most of the girls were Arabs. There were only French girls seated in the first row. I'm right in the middle, next to the school mistress's daughter, my rival for the top rank in our class. The second and third rows are made up of mostly Arab girls, all standing, with a French girl here and there. Does this arrangement of pupils correspond to an "ethnic" ranking of Algerian society? More than a half-century after the fact, that is how my memory interprets the picture.

Perched high above the city of Algiers, Diar-es-Saada is an apartment complex built in the early 1950s by the architect Ferdinand Pouillon. In 1957, my parents, sister, and I moved there, into a brand-new three-room unit. Most of the people in the neighborhood were French. A few well-to-do Algerian Arabs also lived there, including our neighbors, the Mekachtalis. During my four years of elementary school, most of my Arab classmates lived in shanty towns on the outskirts of the city, in dilapidated dwellings that utterly lacked the modern conveniences of our apartment. I never ran into any of those girls outside of school; their world was light-years from mine and from the living standards of most French girls.

And so it was that I grew up in the glorious Mediterranean capital of Algiers during the waning days of colonialism. An unbridgeable gap separated me from my Arab classmates, in both our social life and our everyday culture. Arabic was their language; French was the language imposed, the language of the colonizer. We Jewish girls, unlike our "ethnically French" classmates, had a long family and community history in North Africa, and French was the language of our emancipation, our Europeanization, the language we had to master perfectly in order to



FIGURE 19. Second grade class, Diar-es-Saada School for Girls, Algiers, 1958. Joëlle Bahloul is in the first row, fifth from the left.

demonstrate our full-fledged belonging to the French nation. Arabic (or Judeo-Arabic) was the language of our grandparents, a relic of the past that our parents wished to put behind them, and not to pass down to the next generation. French was the language of our compulsory success, a point driven home by my father's particular investment in my performance on French dictation exercises, the stakes of which were nothing less than an historical reckoning.

He tolerated not a single spelling mistake. One or two slip-ups, and I was the shame of the household. I had to get perfect grades just like my sister, five years my senior, whom my parents considered the model pupil. But I also had to outperform the daughter of our schoolmistress. Little Frédérique made my home life miserable. Every month, I had to bring home a victorious report card that declared me first in the class. As a Jew, my father had been interned by the Vichy government at the Teleghma work camp from 1942 to 1944.<sup>1</sup> His two daughters' high achievements at a school that embodied the same country that had so brazenly stripped him of his citizenship amounted to a kind of revenge. By earning

1. Teleghma was one of two internment camps in Algeria where Algerian Jewish soldiers were held during World War II. The decision to intern the Jewish soldiers was initially taken by the Vichy government as part of the October 1940 anti-Jewish legislation (which also abrogated their French citizenship), and was enacted in March 1941 when the order for demobilization and internment was given. The second camp was located at Bedeau. In both camps, the Jewish detainees were primarily given humiliating, useless, and physically demanding work tasks to perform, such as breaking rocks.

better grades than the school mistress's daughter, even more than a decade after my father's internment, I helped erase his years of disgrace. It was as if, as a Jewish girl, I was claiming victory for France for the second time, via the French language. And so it was that at the Diar-es-Saada elementary school, Frédérique and I alternated between first and second place in our class. Coming in second was not acceptable for my father, however, and whenever my report card showed I'd dropped out of first place, even when my teacher's comments were full of praise, the mood back home would be tense. Especially compared to my sister who, my parents never ceased to remind me, had always managed to be first in her class. In their view, the fact that my rival also happened to be the daughter of our school-mistress was no excuse.

I was completely unaware, of course, of the historic dimension of my personal experience as a young Jewish girl in colonial Algeria. And even if I did hear adults saying that Jews sided neither with the colonizer nor with the FLN, I sensed very deeply how much effort my parents put into joining the ranks of the community of French citizens. In the minds of Algerian Jews, this integration carried enormous symbolic weight, as it represented a veritable decolonization. Apart from the tensions of my classroom rivalry, I have only the vaguest memory of my school friendships with French girls, and the only one I do recall is Hélène Delestan, whose family lived right below us. There were very few Jewish girls in my class, and my Algerian childhood was not characterized by a profound connection with the Jewish community of Algiers. My family did not attend synagogue with any regularity, mostly just for weddings, and our Judaism was expressed mainly within the family circle, when we would perform the domestic rituals of the Hebrew calendar.

Of this Algeria in the time of colonial war, I remember more than just the moments of violence. Certainly, we lived in fear of bombings, Arab street demonstrations, and reprisals by the French army, especially in 1960 and 1961. My mother was particularly vulnerable to this constant state of anxiety and dread. Right up until our move to France in the summer of 1961, my father continued to go out fishing every Sunday morning with his brothers in a little boat they kept docked at the Algiers marina. On certain Sundays in that terrible year of 1961, his passion for fishing might well have turned deadly: to reach the marina, he had to go through Arab neighborhoods that were in full revolt. As my mother stood on the balcony all morning awaiting the return of the *pater familias*, my sister and I would try, but usually fail, to distract her from her deep apprehension. To earn forgiveness for his tardy return and to calm my mother's reprimands, he would produce the bounty of the day's catch and demand that we clean and fry the fresh fish at once. Ever since, lunches that include fresh fish have come to symbolize, for me, a sense of relief and of families reunited.

During the final years of French Algeria, the word "war" was never pronounced. It was censored from all adult discussion. In its place, the euphemism

“events” came to designate any manifestation of violence, which historians were later to describe as integral features of the war for independence. My memory has retained some of these “events” more clearly than others, especially the numerous bombs that went off on those summer nights of 1961. Unable to sleep, we ended up counting the explosions, all the while hoping that they would go off as far from our neighborhood as possible.

But a few days before our (definitive) departure for France, a bomb exploded on the doorstep of the apartment building opposite ours. By then, my parents had been saying for a while that it was high time we got ourselves out of that hellish situation, despite the deep grief they felt at the idea of abandoning the land of their childhood and their history.

Until the violence had finally spread to the large coastal cities, my Algerian childhood had been marked by joyous family gatherings on Sundays in spring and summer, picnics in the forests of Sidi-Ferruch, and days spent swimming at the beaches around Algiers. The women would fry that morning’s catch right there at the picnic spot. My aunt Germaine would make pizzas and her famous *cocas* (pastry stuffed with tomatoes, fresh peppers, and onions). The Castel family, whose father was a close childhood friend of my father, would join the gathering of cousins, uncles and aunts, and grandparents, and always bring their delicious contribution to the picnic meal: Mrs. Castel’s caramel flan, more delicious than any flan I have tasted since.

From my Mediterranean childhood in late colonial Algeria, I also prefer to retain my sensory memories of the fragrance of jasmine and eucalyptus, of the glorious colors of bougainvillea, and of the taste of fresh loquats and calentita (a dense chickpea bread) sold by the slice outside the school gate after class.

It was only later in Paris, where I was a student in the 1970s, that I learned the history of the Algerian war for independence, and discovered the Arab culture of my native country, a part of my own culture erased by my experience of a dying colonialism.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

Djelfa

---

## Djelfa, My Beloved

Albert Bensoussan

During my teenage years, once a month on a Friday, I used to go down to the Messageries on Amiral-Pierre Boulevard, between Bresson Square and Government Plaza, to pick up a package that had come up on the southern bus line, the Djelfa-Boghari-Medea-Blida-Algiers route.<sup>1</sup> It was a heavy box that contained, we would discover after untying it, an entire sheep, quartered, a gift from Israel Khalfa, our dear friend and my sister's father-in-law.

Djelfa, the Gateway to the Desert, as it was known, was a relatively affluent little garrison town whose principal source of wealth was the military installation established by General Yusuf (who was made French by Napoleon III). French troops kept close watch over this promising Saharan territory that would soon be awash in black gold. Mr. Khalfa ran one of the two grocery stores in town—the other belonged to the Agous, the second most important family in Djelfa, and rival to the Khalfas. His vast establishment was several stores rolled into one: a grocer's, a fine tea shop, a chocolate shop, a bakery, and, last but not least, a strictly kosher butcher shop. This explains why, once a month, Israel would have the *chochet* (ritual slaughterer) certify the butchering of a few animals from the flock, one of which would be reserved for us—a token of his close friendship with my father, going back to when he was an adjutant-major at the Orleans barracks adjacent to the Algiers Kasbah, and young Israel was a private, working as a medic. The meat would last us two to three weeks, in the form of grilled chops, lamb collar with potatoes, *mequena* with brains, saddle of lamb with green peas, trotters for the *lou-bia*, tripe and other bits of offal for the cumin-spiced *shkemba*, and all the mince-meat, mixed with rice, that we used to stuff the delicious *hasbane*, the crowning

1. *Messageries* refers to state-run shipping or courier services.

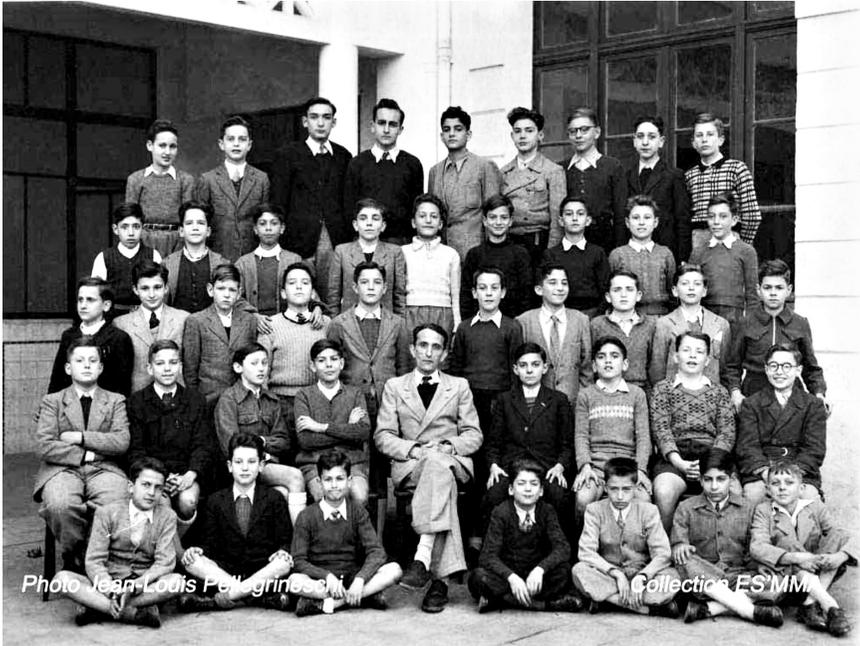


FIGURE 20. Gautier High School, Algiers, 1948. Albert Bensoussan is the third from the left in the second to last row.

glory of our couscous.<sup>2</sup> So, whenever Israel spent Shabbat with us—he came up from Djelfa on a regular basis to settle business matters in the big city—he would wolf down first one plateful, then a second; he'd drool over the tripe, devour the stuffed artichokes and the white beans with lamb trotters that my mother called *tchraa* (sorry, my Arabic is the worst), at which point he would sit back and push his plate away. Then, lo and behold, he'd gallop down the four flights of steps of our apartment building, climb up the Telemly slope, take the path of the Aqueducts all the way over to Sept-Merveilles, only to return to the table a half-hour later to finish off the copious banquet my mother had prepared for him, for she knew he was a jovial food-lover who carried his one hundred extra pounds of flesh well. And so that my mother wouldn't ever skimp on his portions of all that fine, spicy fare, he always said to her: "Someday, my dear Aïcha, I'll pay you back for all this." But my mother, who didn't appreciate being reminded of the name she was given at birth, back in Nedroma, would head back into the kitchen, muttering: "It's Alice, remember? Alice . . ." And that's just how it was.

2. *Meguena* refers to a type of omelet or frittata; *loubia* is a stew with white beans; *shkamba* is a stew made with tripe; *hasbane* (sometimes transcribed as *osbane*, or *osbana*) is a traditional sausage made using sheep intestines as casing and stuffed with lamb, chickpeas, parsley, and spices, which is sometimes referred to as "the haggis of Algeria."

One spring afternoon when I was just five, I was horsing around with my older brother—we were trying to spin a chair on one of its legs, with me sitting on it—and our little circus act ended in catastrophe. I fell, catching my leg on a cross-bar and fracturing my young femur, and my thigh immediately doubled in size. And who was there at the time, sipping cinnamon coffee in the kitchen with my mother? None other than Israel Khalfa. This sturdy giant of a man picked me right up and ran all the way to the Laverne Clinic on avenue de Pasteur, down the hill from where we lived, where the physician put my thigh bone back in place and hoisted it in the air with a pulley so that the fracture could mend; and there I was, lying flat on my back with my leg in the air for forty days, not one less. And when that time was up, the same Israel Khalfa, medic extraordinaire, who served the 9th Zouaves at the Orleans barracks, came to pick me up at the clinic exit. He loaded me into the front seat of his sedan and, six hours and some 185 miles later, I finally discovered Djelfa, at the intersection of the roads from Laghouat, the oasis that was home to the Khalfa family's Mozabite ancestors; from Aflou, where Leïla Sebbar was born right around the time of my Djelfa arrival; and from Bou-Saada and the Ouled Nail mountains, birthplace of Israel Khalfa's beautiful wife—slender figure, little white feet in her *kabkab* that clicked along the tile floors, and oh! those intensely Prussian-blue eyes that you sometimes find among the ladies of Algeria's deep south.<sup>3</sup>

During that time, I walked with a cane, dragging my left leg, the one that had been patched together, and for an entire month, I followed a strict diet of semolina and dates that helped me put on weight, regain my strength, and return to Algiers a little less fragile and a little more rebellious. Absolutely aghast, my mother, who used to enjoy speaking in a secret language with my father at night in bed, could not believe that I was now speaking Arabic like a native-born Djelfan. I got my education in three main places there. First, the market, where twice a week I would tag along with my protector's older brother, the one we called Ammi Bahé—nickname, need I mention, for Abraham, or rather, for Brahim—who practiced the profession of tooth-pulling.<sup>4</sup> I would sit on a mat spread out on the sandy ground and admire how adroitly he handled the dental forceps. The second place was the antechamber of the synagogue, where the local rabbi would crack the whip over those of us who were preparing for the bar mitzvah (actually, over all the boys of that age), sitting on the ground and muttering in Hebrew. And last, but far from least, the courtyard of the house where I played with Nessim, the master's nephew who was a head taller than me, and his little sister Rivka, who loved to brandish my cane, which she pretended was Abd el-Kader's saber, *ya ouilli*.<sup>5</sup>

3. Most likely of Ottoman origin, *kabkab* (sometimes rendered *qabqab* or *qab qab*) are platform clogs made of wood, often carved and decorated somewhat ornately.

4. *Ammi* is a variation on the Arabic word for uncle. In this case, it is an honorific title, rather than a reference to a blood relative.

5. *Ya ouilli*, typically transliterated as *ya wili*, is an expression of astonishment.

It wasn't a cane that the rabbi wielded, but a long switch that he waved over our heads as we crouched on the floor mats, barefoot, all wearing *chéchias*, as was proper for boys who had to learn Hebrew and read all the holy texts.<sup>6</sup> I had trouble following, since he only spoke in Arabic, just like all the kids. *Ya Daoud, kelb ben kelb!*<sup>7</sup> he shouted at the class dunce who, if he talked back, would be grabbed by the two biggest boys in the group and laid on the floor, legs lifted high so that the rabbi could aim for the soles of his feet with the switch, causing the unruly boy to scream in pain with every blow. During this, I busied myself with my chalk and slate attempting to trace the tricky architecture of the aleph: the slanted bar, the upper and lower horns—which the earliest scribes designed based on the head of an ox.

“What did you learn today?” Rivka would ask, shaking her henna-dyed purple curls.

But since she was asking me in Arabic, I just shook my illiterate head, and she shrugged her shoulders in return. We would sit on a little bench next to two baskets filled with semolina and crushed dates, where she would dip her cupped hand, first in one, then in the other. Next Thursday, or maybe Sunday, she would accompany her mother, Lalla Ralia, to the foyer of the synagogue where we boys would be droning our *Aleph-Beth-Gimel-Dalet*, signaling that it was time for our ten o'clock snack—those soft, crumbly balls that would fill out the cheeks of the rabbi's entire brood.<sup>8</sup> What were they called, that special treat? I used to know, but I've forgotten everything; I'll tell you why.

And since I was sitting there watching Bahé on that Monday or Wednesday, market day, with all the *fellahs* and Djelfa notables crowding around the various stalls, the tooth-puller let me hold the forceps, the tool of his trade.<sup>9</sup> It was the only pair he had. He set a goblet and a bottle of Phénix brand anisette on the ground—sometimes, it was the anisette more than the toothache that attracted customers. Ammi Bahé was a gentle person; you never heard anyone scream in pain as he did his work, as was often the case back in Algiers, where patients' cries pierced the adjacent walls of the waiting room of our bona fide dentist, whose name must have determined his vocation, Dr. Machtou.<sup>10</sup> “*Babata*,” said Bahé, moving slowly; but since I had such trouble understanding the old man's Arabic, I

6. A *chéchia* (often transliterated as *sheshia*) is a soft skullcap worn by many Muslim men, particularly in North Africa. In certain regions, it was also worn by Jewish men and boys.

7. The expression *Ya Daoud, kelb ben kelb* contains both an address (the equivalent of “Hey David”), and an insult (“son of a dog”—literally, here, “dog, son of a dog”).

8. *Aleph-Beth-Gimel-Dalet* are the first letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and so the expression indicates that the pupils are reciting their “ABCs.”

9. *Fellahs* are peasants or farmworkers.

10. The irony of Dr. Machtou's name derives from the fact that there is a common dental instrument referred to as a *machtou* (a type of plugger, or tamp). The instrument was certainly named after its creator, world-renowned endodontist, Pierre Machtou, who would not have been a household name at the time of the author's childhood. The irony is thus likely a product of the author's adult life.

thought he said *batata*, or potato, and I couldn't understand what a potato had to do with someone getting a tooth pulled.<sup>11</sup> But it hardly mattered, and in less time than it took for me to repeat "potato" to myself, the tooth had been removed and the cupful of anisette had been swished around and swallowed. Djelfa knew no pain, woe, or agony. And that's just how it was.

I would return occasionally to Djelfa for an entire month in the summer, laughing again at the bad boys getting foot-whipped at the synagogue (it was a way for me to feel I belonged). Since I was already kind of grown up, Mr. Khalfa, whose shop was closed on the Sabbath, woke me up early on Saturdays and took me to the hammam, at the time of day reserved for men only. This was something he'd always done with his own son (who would later marry my sister), but who was now away at boarding school in Medea, so at synagogue I would take his place beside his father, who was so proud of his lineage, and whose *talet* would cover my forehead during benediction.<sup>12</sup> But before any of that, we had to be purified in the incredibly stifling humidity of the public bath. I turned my body over to the expert hands of the masseur, who used not only his oiled fingers to loosen our joints, but also his feet, as he stood on us with his full weight, massaging our backs with each step as we lay listlessly by the pool of steaming water. We would then cool off in a different room, lying on mats where we would be served piping hot tea, whose taste and fragrance put me in a state of euphoria I have never experienced since.

Back home after prayer, the women were awaiting our return, and Simha, the beautiful German-eyed wife (everyone remarked on it, since in this part of the world, most people were dark-skinned, or even black), brought in the wine and lamb croquettes for the Sabbath benediction. Little Rivka was always there, ready to slip the tiny mound of semolina and date paste that she'd patiently confectioned the previous evening into my hand. And as always, as she poured something for me to drink, she made me pronounce the word that was so difficult in my "European" throat, *kakhra*—which means bottle, right? Yes, the hardest word to pronounce in Arabic, and she would laugh out loud at my gaping mouth and my impotent glottis, proceeding to call me *khmar*, which means something like idiot, or nincompoop.<sup>13</sup> But now Rivka had grown up, and I couldn't see her unless she was veiled, because Jews in this southern region were more modest than their city sisters, especially in Algiers, where they always went to parties on Sundays at the Jewish Student Union on rue Nocard (a cul-de-sac off rue Michelet), a fertile terrain for husband hunters and the starting point of many an endogamous union.

11. *Babata* is likely a deformation of the Arabic word *belbata*, which is related to waiting and patience; in this context, we might understand Bahé as enjoining his patient to "be patient."

12. A *talet* (or *tallit*, in English) is a fringed prayer shawl worn primarily by Jewish men in more observant traditions.

13. The author's *khmar* is likely a phonetic rendering of a certain pronunciation of *hmar*, which means donkey in Arabic.

Back to Djelfa again, and for the last time—long before the rebels had locked down the town with their campaign of terror. It was one afternoon during a *Hana* celebration.<sup>14</sup> Make sure you pronounce *ha* all the way in the back of your throat, more like *kha*, because this ceremony involves animal sacrifice. Nessim was getting engaged to Israel's youngest niece—maybe she was also called Aïcha, a name still common among our mothers and girls back then. I was eighteen at the time, and had come down especially for the event. The old Salmson that had driven me to and from Djelfa in the past had long since given up the ghost, and we now took the far more convenient Inox, as it was nicknamed, a little aluminum-clad train that ran on a narrow-gauge track between Blida and Djelfa, taking (only) five hours. You had to catch the regular train between Algiers and Blida, then change platforms at the Rose du Sahel station to get on what felt like a toy train, which would often catch fire on the high plateau in summer, in the heat of the day. The Muslims on board would take advantage of the necessary stop to get off, unroll their prayer rugs on the sand on either side of the train, and pray for God's mercy, while the others snored away in their compartments, sweat dripping from their brows.

That evening, in the stately villa of the elder Khalfa, the betrothed were ushered in: Nessim, surrounded by his companions who had already circled the house seven times, as prescribed by ritual, and Aïcha, the fiancée, flanked by her mother and godmother, a cloud of transparent tulle surrounding her head. In the center of the ceremonial room, a large tray bore the pyramid of henna paste, topped by a date as a sign of fertility and happiness. That night, we danced late into the night to the strains of traditional *nouba*, but also to the daring *pasos dobles* that groaned out of a brand new Teppaz turntable brought straight from the merchant's store.<sup>15</sup>

Rivka was displaying some daring behavior, despite the presence of her two brothers who, I can still see them now, were sitting to her left and right on chairs pushed up against the wall. She had let down her copper-colored curls (because of the dye), and her ripe throat let loose hoarse ululations at each dip and bow of the fiancée, whose henna-dyed hands bore a starry pattern that she would wave before the dazzled eyes of Nessim, cupping his face as they danced together. It was then that Rivka got up—I'm sure this is exactly how it happened—and, imitating her cousin, came over and surrounded my face with her chubby hands. Oh yes, she had grown quite a bit in those teen years. And we danced, first Arab-style, each holding one end of a scarf that separated us, then drawing closer; but we also danced French-style, for even in remote places like Djelfa, we knew how to be modern, and I could feel her shapely waist between my hands, which were

14. The *Hana* or *henna* ceremony refers to the practice—common among Muslims, throughout the Middle East and South Asia, but also among Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews—of applying henna paste to the hands of brides and grooms in a gesture of protection and benediction.

15. Found throughout the Maghreb, *nouba* (or *nūba*) is a musical form with Arabo-Andalusian origins.

trembling slightly because I knew that everyone, including her brothers, were watching us. A bit later, as there was still a little henna left from the pyramid, she took the flat stick and dipped into the supply, removing a tiny amount the size of a date, and tucked it into the palm of my hand, completing the gesture by wrapping a gauze ribbon around my hand, tying it in a bow. And then she asked me to do the same to her. Was I really so clumsy? I smeared a turd-like ball of the henna paste into her open palm, which I then wrapped in a fine piece of lace. After that, we danced the night away!

The next day brought the return rail trip, and I rode home barely able to hold my head up from lack of sleep, my left hand (or was it the right?) still enclosing the doubloon-shaped bit of henna, which I discovered the next morning when I finally unwound my bandaged hand and saw the perfect circle of rust-colored dye. During the entire trip home, I thought of Rivka who was so grown up, so filled out, probably from eating so many semolina-and-date balls, whose name I had on the tip of my tongue, but have managed to forget in the interim. For as soon as I got back to the house, the phone rang and it was Israel Khalfa:

“So, Benyamine,” he shouted through the receiver. “It seems you got engaged last night?”

“Wh . . . wha . . . what?” I stammered, unable to speak, my throat in a knot with all those Arabic words that were even more unpronounceable than usual.

“Yes, little Rivka’s brothers were looking for you this morning. So, what do you say, *yabné*, my son, tell me, *yabné* . . .?”<sup>16</sup>

Dumbstruck, I hung up the phone—yes, I was incapable of uttering a single word—and at that moment, all the Arabic words that Rivka had so patiently taught me since my awkward age of five were blown away in a deadly gust of simoom wind. And that’s how it came to pass that I learned nothing, and forgot everything.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

16. *Yabné*, typically transliterated *yabni*, means “my son.”

Rue Joséphine, Bône

---

## Between Agony and Delight

Patrick Chemla

I know how wrenching the experience of exile was for my parents. I know that my mother had to practically drag my father away, as he couldn't accept the idea of leaving, of quitting his clerical job. For him, this forced departure felt like he was running away from something, and indeed, he was: after independence, as a "European" in Algeria, he found himself abruptly cast as representing the boss, as somehow symbolizing France and, as such, subjected to pressures and threats that, once in France, sent him into a psychic tailspin from which he was never to fully recover.

My brother, eighteen years my senior, used to tell me what it was like growing up poor. A relative poverty, to be sure, since the apartment where we lived had been purchased by our grandmother with the insurance money she got when her husband, a railroad worker, was killed in an accident. This apartment was located on the edge of the place d'Armes, which back then was synonymous with the Arab quarter. The place name itself immediately calls to mind a paradoxical proximity and distance, for just one street—rue Joséphine—stood between us and a world we would have to leave behind in order to gain access to the better European neighborhoods. As it happened, the Arabic-speaking part of our family still lived in the Arab quarter.

My brother was a child during World War II. His loss of French nationality during the Vichy regime scarred him for life. The whole family underwent a period of intense anxiety. But after Liberation and the lifting of the anti-Jewish measures, his only desire was to move beyond that dark chapter of history and to rebuild a new life, a future that would necessarily be Algerian.

What also emerged from my brother's narrative was a happy life with robust friendships among his adolescent peers of all religious origins. Unlike my sister, four years his junior, whose carefree childhood included no memory of contact



FIGURE 21. On the left, six-year-old Patrick Chemla, on summer vacation in Bergère-sous-Montmirail (Champagne). He is accompanied by his mother, his older brother, his older brother's wife, and their child.

with Arabs, boys like him could circulate freely and defy the invisible boundaries among the confessional communities. Even today, he is still proud of his friendships with Arabs—the word “Muslim” was not in use back then—and in particular, with those who would become local leaders in the FLN. Having gone to France for college, he came back in the summer of 1960, wife and children in tow, and was greeted at the dock by his best friend, an Arab. But even though he planned to settle back in Algeria, whose independence he fully supported (to the great disapproval of our parents), he soon came up against the harsh realities of a country steeped in hatred. Everyone around him strongly recommended that he stop seeing his FLN friend, who himself was the first to urge my brother to go back to France, in what proved prophetic terms, as “there was no future for Jews in this country.” And with that, he decided to take me with him to France when I was nine years old, leaving behind our parents, whose friends assured us they’d do everything they could to see that they remained safe.

As for me, my childhood was marked by war (I was three when it started), but also filled with maternal love. I learned very early that we were Jews, and that Arabs were not to be trusted, even though they were our closest neighbors, with whom my mother traded cakes and cookies on the religious holidays that gave rhythm to the calendar. Sometimes, in exchange for delivering the goodies, I’d

get rewarded with a delicious *kesra* that the neighbor cooked over her *kanoun*.<sup>1</sup> As French became my native language, I assimilated a whole colonial vocabulary, while my parents spoke to each other in Arabic when they didn't want me to understand. This is why I learned no Arabic from them, nor did I have the chance to pick it up from the neighborhood, since the sectarian threat that loomed over the city meant I wasn't allowed to go out. It was only once I got to school that I was able to make friends with a few Arab kids. But we would naturally part ways as soon as we left the school grounds, and the only friends I was allowed to invite over were Jewish.

One day when some school chums came over for a birthday party, I was hurt and embarrassed by their contemptuous looks and snide remarks when they saw where I lived. I suddenly became painfully aware of our poverty, the stray cats that left a strong stench of urine in the stairwell, everything that made up the ordinary existence of Algeria's working-class Jews. I knew full well that there was such a thing as rich Jews—whenever I'd ask for some expensive treat my father would respond, "I'm not a Rothschild"—but we didn't socialize with any. And yet, I always had the impression—an accurate one, it turned out—that we were not poor, and that I could get whatever I wanted "if I worked hard at school." It was impossible to overemphasize the importance of school; a fanatical belief in emancipation through learning and cultural betterment prevailed among families of our social rank.

Of course, there was also the beach during summer vacation, and I still have fond memories of the warm waters of the southern Mediterranean. I especially recall how we'd go out for our evening stroll on *cours Bertagna*, the big square where families would all gather after dinner. The adults spoke in hushed tones of the barbarous acts committed by the *fellaghas*, their whispers reaching my ears as I enjoyed a lemon sorbet, the famously fragrant *créponné* that you can't find anywhere today.<sup>2</sup> Agony and delight were thus inseparable, leaving a lasting impression on me. Most of the time, once school let out for the day, I would hole up at home where I had unfettered access to my sister's book collection. This library was where I learned about Greek and Latin mythology, but it also gave me a chance to read my father's detective novels on the sly, along with other, more licentious works. The pleasure of reading has stayed with me ever since, as well as a love of language, and undoubtedly, a love of republican, secular France. I knew very early that what was being presented to me as fact didn't add up: on the way to the market, when I would ask my mother why the "natives" we'd pass were all barefoot, I never believed it was because they couldn't stand wearing shoes. As for acknowledging that Jews were also "natives," that my family name was that of a Berber

1. *Kesra* is a savory Algerian flatbread cooked in a frying pan or on a griddle; a *kanoun* is a charcoal brazier used for cooking, generally made from terracotta.

2. *Fellaghas* refers to armed militants fighting for Algerian independence.

tribe long ago converted to Judaism, it took me a very long time to excavate that repressed historical truth. However deeply anchored in their Judeo-Arab culture, my parents strove to be recognized as French, and so denied their Arab identity. They even invented a genealogy linking us to Sephardic aristocracy, as if to erase any suspicious indigenous heritage.

They were also profoundly religious, but they practiced their faith in a paradoxical fashion: although we did eat kosher, as a rule, I was to keep it a secret from the rabbi that I would occasionally indulge in a ham sandwich. My mother, although she had never read a word of Lacan, knew full well that forbidding anything only makes it more desirable, and she was not about to deprive her children! And so, shrimp and other delectable seafood often made an appearance in our Judeo-Arab dishes. I have to say that our table was always bountiful, open to all, and that both the constraints and the pleasures of oriental hospitality provided ample excuses to feast. And all that without alcohol, apart from a very watered-down anisette: an odd taboo surrounded the consumption of wine, which we linked to our experience with an alcoholic uncle, but which likely had more to do with our close proximity to Islam. And then, at each year's Passover celebration, we would sacrifice a sheep. The two Jewish families in the building would pitch in to purchase the animal, which would then be kept on the rooftop terrace for a while before the holiday, as if we'd adopted the thing, until the fateful day when the rabbi, whose hand I had to kiss, would show up to perform the ritual slaughter. To say that this scene made an impression on me would be a massive understatement, such was the holy terror it struck in my soul, even while the rest of the household experienced it as a festive event. Perhaps I was already marking my distance from a world that would vanish overnight once I arrived in France, where such unlawful bloodletting would naturally be out of the question. And many years later, when I did some research into the matter, I found that official Judaism now completely avoids any reference to animal sacrifice, even though it had been an annual ritual throughout my early childhood. It was as if this obvious link to Aïd attached itself to us even in our exile on Christianized shores, making it necessary to deny both its existence and the significance of our common Abrahamic heritage.<sup>3</sup>

. . .

Forty years later, I felt the need to go back to Bône, which had since become Annaba, and revisit the sites of my childhood. The apartment was occupied by my mother's former maid. She welcomed my wife and me warmly. She asked after each member of the family whose every secret she had come to know. She wept over the death of my mother, who was her friend and used to translate French for

3. Aïd, which refers here refers to Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha, is the Festival of the Sacrifice— one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over, it commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy.

her. In the background, I saw a photograph of her husband in his ALN fighter's uniform.<sup>4</sup> This was all the confirmation I needed to understand how much they had protected my parents, how strong their friendship must have been despite the racism that reigned in colonial Algeria. Truth be told, I'd already known about our guardian angels, from the time my father barely escaped an assassination attempt in a back alley: he sensed he was being followed, and a shouted warning from one of our neighbors, a fishmonger, saved his life.

What has stayed with me from my war-torn Jewish Algerian childhood is the traumatic memory of unremitting terror in the face of horrors described to me in only the most veiled terms. This trauma has a lot to do with my political activism, and with my turn to psychotherapy. But this same trauma is also, for me, an anchor in the Judeo-Arabic culture of my youth—a culture that is a source of abundance, and of openness to a world that I persist in envisioning as cosmopolitan.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

4. ALN refers to the *Armée de libération nationale*, or the National Liberation Army. The ALN was the military wing of the political movement known as the FLN (*Front de libération nationale*, or National Liberation Front).

La Marine, Algiers

---

## An Algiers Girlhood

Alice Cherki

Coming up with a photo of me as a child has been quite a feat, my dear Leïla. And it's not only because so many of our books, furniture items, and picture albums, as well as my teenage diaries, were never forwarded after my parents' hasty post-1962 departure, and thus ended up in the cellar of our house in Hydra, but also because it was uncommon back then to have one's picture taken other than by a professional in a studio. That's how I ended up, finally, unearthing a studio photo taken with my older brother. I'm decked out in one of those classic smocked dresses that inevitably characterized my childhood, and my hair is cut in a short Louise Brooks bob, with bangs that lay flat over my ears, a style I revolted against as a teenager to liberate my lighter-colored, naturally curly locks.

I was born and raised in Algiers, capital of colonial Algeria, far away from the southern deserts or the mountains of Constantine. Capital of colonial Algeria, but also capital of free France between 1942 and 1945, which lends my childhood a different tone from that of my cousins and friends who lived in Laghouat, Setif, or Tlemcen. The most pervasive image of my earliest years is that of my paternal grandfather's villa. "The villa," as we used to call it, was located in upper Algiers; not in the chic European neighborhoods of Hydra or El-Biar, where mixing with non-Europeans was rare, but just beyond Bab-el-Oued, across from the cathedral of Notre-Dame d'Afrique, more commonly called "Notre-Dame l'Afrique."<sup>1</sup> Getting there was quite a hike: the tram took you as far as place des Trois Horloges, and then the trolley got you only as far as Maillot Hospital. After that, you had to walk, or rather, climb, since the slope was very steep, and once you reached the villa gate, you still had to go up a long flight of flat, wide steps. Halfway up the staircase, there lived an "Arab" family, tenants of my grandfather's, I believe, though I was

1. The English name for Notre Dame d'Afrique is *Our Lady of Africa*; the author explains that the cathedral was often called, mistakenly, *Our Lady Africa*.



FIGURE 22. Three-year-old Alice Cherki at the photographer's studio in Algiers.

never really sure. Nor did I know whether they were originally from Kabylia, or the Aurès region, or from Algiers itself, since they all got lumped together under the same “Arab” label. We’d say hello as we passed, most often in French, or mumble a *salam aleikoum*, as we made our way up the stairs that led to the rusty doorway of our grandfather’s villa. We went to visit the paternal grandparents fairly often, for all Jewish holidays and sometimes on the Sabbath. Occasionally, my brother and I would even stay over for a few days at a time.

He was an imposing man, this grandfather, with steely gray eyes, a short beard, *gandoura*, and *tefillin*.<sup>2</sup> In the morning, he’d shut himself in the kitchen and talk to some invisible person I couldn’t identify. I was later to learn that he’d been a real tyrant with his children. Having forced nearly all his daughters into endogamous marriages, he also “arranged” my father’s marriage to the daughter of a man who was Jewish, but in a manner different from his own—an agnostic, in fact—but whom he held in high esteem nonetheless. The girl was a beauty, and my father was handsome. From what I’ve heard—I wasn’t there, obviously—it was a grand civil and religious wedding ceremony, complete with steam bath, a henna party, and all those traditions that I’ve pretty much forgotten, I must admit. It was like what the Muslims did, different and the same all at once. At the hammam, which we called the Moorish baths, the mother-in-law and all her daughters sized up the body of the future bride, which they all agreed was a bit on the skinny side. And the girl, already seventeen and brought up in a less traditional way than most, felt a bit awkward, but said nothing. For she had chosen her husband-to-be; she hadn’t said “yes” under pressure. She’d been introduced to him, found him very much to her liking, but had felt perfectly free at the time to refuse the suitor, if such had been her wish, as she enjoyed telling people many years later.

Grandfather spoke fluent Arabic, and could read in Hebrew and in French, the lingua franca of all business transactions. He spoke to his grandchildren in French as well, though it was a French sprinkled with incomprehensible words, probably borrowed from the Judeo-Arab dialect, which I took to be terms of endearment meant exclusively for me. Even though I was a girl, he used that dialect to call me “strong-willed” or “inquisitive.” My maternal grandfather also spoke perfect Arabic, the language he would use with the dock workers down at the port, or with the homeless and destitute, whom he’d try to help out, much to his wife’s displeasure. My father also spoke colloquial Algerian Arabic. He had co-workers who were called “Muslim natives,” with whom he had the most cordial relations, full of mutual respect and, at times, a knowing complicity.<sup>3</sup> There was a real solidarity

2. A *gandoura* is a long, light-weight, loose-fitting long tunic, worn by both men and women in North Africa; *tefillin* (also called phylacteries) refers to small black leather boxes containing verses from the Torah and designed to be strapped around the arm and forehead during prayer—a practice usually reserved for men in highly observant Jewish communities.

3. Translated here as “Muslim natives,” the original expression “indigènes musulmans” belongs to a particular colonial vocabulary whereby non-European and non-Jewish inhabitants of Algeria were

between him and his employees, established in that curious Franco-Algerian mash-up of a language.

My father always spoke about a friend and colleague of his with a patently Arab-sounding name who, during World War II, allowed him to use his name as proxy so that he could continue working under the Vichy laws, which banned Jews from a wide range of jobs. My brother had a good friend, a Muslim, at his high school, the Lycée Bugeaud, now Abd el-Kader High School, a boy who grew up to become a medical doctor. My ninety-three-year-old aunt still remembers her classmates, girls from well-to-do Muslim families, all very pretty and more brazen than she. And she talks about Suzanne, the daughter of a marine engineer, who ended up marrying Jean Amrouche, as if this were the most natural thing in the world.<sup>4</sup> “We were in the same class together,” she said, “from middle school through graduation.” She’d go on about how different the two sisters were, with the elder Suzanne more intellectual with a stocky build, while her younger sister was slender and supple, and a bit scatterbrained.

Still, these friendships never went further than the threshold of our homes. That’s just the way it was. I don’t recall there ever being a Muslim at our table, even on those Seder evenings when tradition has us leave one seat empty for an outsider in need. And the only little girl to enter the family home was a friend from grade school whose father was a teacher, a Kabyle Muslim whose French wife was most likely raised Christian but, like her husband, was agnostic. Granted, we were in Algiers, which is hardly representative of the entire country. Yet, even in Orléansville, the town of the first earthquake, or Ain Basnam in the Chelif valley, children and teens alike made friends exclusively with peers from their own religious group, whether Muslim, Jewish, or Christian. And even among Christians, I believe that Catholics and Protestants did not mingle much. We lived in worlds, or rather, in spheres, that were foreign to each other. On the school playground, I would speak French with my friends Fatiha, Nadjma, and Khedija as we played jump-rope. But they never invited me over. Their world was a mystery to me; I wasn’t allowed in. A tacit understanding, a mystery safeguarded. The situation was different with the Catholic girls, however, for I knew from a very young age that they wanted nothing to do with me. I would have to wait until I went away to college before making friends with them and discovering common ground with those who were then called progressive Christians. It was also at university that I met up with old Algerian friends, whose causes I had come to espouse.

To each his God, even for the nonpracticing, even for the nonbelievers. But when I look back on all of that today, I have to say that when it came to my particular

---

referred to as *indigènes* or indigenous, and governed by exclusionary legislation known as the *Statut juridique des indigènes d’Algérie* (the Indigenous Algerian Juridical Statute).

4. Jean Amrouche (1906–1962), also called Jean el Mouhouv Amrouche, was an Algerian poet and journalist of Kabyle origin, whose family had converted to Catholicism. He is one of Algeria’s earliest French-language writers.

group of family and friends, there was never even a hint of racism. Never in my grandfather's villa, nor in my own home, did I ever hear a disparaging word against Muslims as a group. Speaking for myself, racial slurs were simply not present in my upbringing. Toward the end of World War II, my mother was active in the Union of Algerian Women, which was allied with the Communist Party of Algeria, and she volunteered at a mother-and-child social service called *La Goutte de lait*.<sup>5</sup> At the neighborhood market—between Lycée Bugeaud (a school for boys, except for the college prep classes, which admitted girls, most notably Assia Djebar), and the Nelson Beach House, sandwiched between the Lazergues Middle School (today Frantz Fanon High School) and the ice cream vendor Grosoli (a sumptuous Italian *gelateria*)—the fruit and fish vendors knew who my mother was, and recognized her immediately as “the blue-eyed Jewess,” her affectionate nickname. I walked, or rather, trotted alongside her, silent but steeped in the smells and sounds, the burst of voices in that Franco-Algerian dialect that I was too young to identify as such, but which was so natural to my ear. And especially, based on my “experience” of rejection at the state-run French nursery school, I was keen to absorb the complexity of the adult world.

I've lived a long life, and every moment bears the trace of this world where I was born and raised. The sounds of the Arabic language, the way people greeted one another with those interminable “*salam aleikum*.”<sup>6</sup> The muezzin's call—and it was a live voice in those days—was like a pleasant soundtrack humming in the background. And the music, too—Arab-Andalusian, Judeo-Andalusian, who could tell?—whose melodious strains mixed with Brahms concertos, Beethoven symphonies, or Edith Piaf crying over Marcel Cerdan. And all the words having to do with pain: “Where does it hurt? Your heart? Your head? *Ouin youjaa fik? rasik, galbik??*”<sup>7</sup> And our maid Aïcha, who helped my mother around the house in the late 1940s, and who would forbid me from entering when the tile floor was still wet from her mopping. She was a big, beautiful woman, but I especially remember that she had what was called a “sleeping child.” Back then, even after my little brother came into the world, I had only the vaguest notions about all things sexual, but the idea that Aïcha was carrying inside her, now and forever, a sleeping child, was something that both perplexed and awed me for the longest time.

Do you know where the most trivial details of lost memory reside? For me, I have to confess, they come to land on the beignets of Algiers, those airy sugar-powdered fritters they sold down at the foot of the Casbah or on rue Michelet,

5. *La Goutte de lait*, which literally means “the drop of milk,” is a French-based nonprofit organization devoted to helping new mothers feed and care for their infants.

6. The Editors observe that the author uses two different transcriptions of this greeting (*aleikoum* and *aleikum*). We have maintained this inconsistency, which may be the result of a simple editing error, but might also be the result of the author's own indecision as to how best to render in written French the oral Arabic expressions that were such an important part of her childhood.

7. Standard transcription would be “*Ween yujaa fik?*”

today's rue Didouche. The sight of the dough puffing up as it hit the hot oil used to fascinate us as children. It was my favorite treat, far more delicious, in my view, than those pastries stuffed with almond paste and dripping in honey that our mothers, Jewish and Muslim alike, were so adept at confectioning. Years later, and for a short time only, I would find those same beignets in Paris on rue Saint-Séverin or rue des Écouffes. I've been searching in vain ever since for those long-lost vendors. Even in Algiers.

Another trace of the past, this one less anecdotal, is the remarkable understanding, the immediate empathy that I feel with regard to young Muslim women, whether born in Algeria or in France, several decades my junior. I can guess what they're going to say when they talk about their childhoods, the stern fathers, the strict mothers who won't befriend their daughters and who sometimes, just sometimes, seem to want them to suffer the same fate as they did; and the brothers, oh yes, the brothers who set themselves up as the guardians of their sisters' virtue. Even today, it is difficult for me to decide whether this strange familiarity is a function of our shared cultural traditions, or whether it is the result of the way those traditions have been changed by the other world, and by the perilous navigation back and forth between one world and the other.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Rue de Vienne, Oran

---

## Kaddish for a Lost Childhood

Roger Dadoun

Which way, left or right? Sea breeze out of the West, or arid inland wind, Arab desert realm? Stage left, domestic inferno with no exit, or stage right, a garden they call Eden? Going up or going down? Once outside the gate of the low-slung house with its interior “patio”—nothing but a wretchedly miniscule courtyard—the child, left to his own devices, hesitates. A tiny, motionless wavering: “Where to?” Might it be here, in this pause, in this lapse, that his primordial childhood is anchored: the pivot—the blind spot of the whole city—*Wahrān*? Because, quite simply, the street where the child will venture, the street he’ll soak in, fear, and get drunk on—*eh borracho!*—is a smooth street with a gentle, almost imperceptible slope, just enough to make soccer balls and marbles lose their way and end up in a sewer drain, helpless before the pull of gravity.<sup>1</sup> It’s a street that grants our *carricos*, makeshift race cars built of wooden boards, scrap iron, and ball bearings, the honor of hurtling all the way down to the line of horse-drawn carriages stationed along the dingy square down below—that is, provided our scrappy little pavement-level vehicles are not confiscated by infuriated merchants or concerned parents.

Everything located upstream holds still for just a fraction of a second, long enough for infinite childhood vibrations to resonate. From this median point in space and time, at the center of the world, gate, street, mosaic of neighborhoods, sprawling city, nearby ocean, and lofty lands are broken down into concatenated concentric waves, a boundless double horizon. Just as he prepares to make it his

1. *Wahrān*, is an approximation of *Wahrān*, the standard romanization of Oran (Dadoun’s birthplace). *El borracho* means “the drunkard” in Spanish. The coastal city of Oran was deeply influenced by Spanish culture; Spain ruled the city and its surrounding area for more than 250 years (1509–1708; 1732–1792).



FIGURE 23. The Dadoun family, around 1943. From left to right, in back: the father, Juda, the mother, Camille, and Roger. In front: Roger's little brother George and little sister Andrée.

own, to incorporate it, the city swoops down on him, inhabits his mind, a light head made heavy with arrows pointing him in all directions. Oran is a rotating disc, a tectonic plate in (e)motion with fragments drifting off course, dancing and crashing back onto themselves, a movable knot of anxiety, coated in tenderness, a puzzle, each piece of which, however familiar, harbors a mystery, an iridescent opacity imprinted on the soul.

A swarm of things, marquery of one's being-there, this Oran, *Ouahran*, with its dog's bark of a *wha*;<sup>2</sup> it's the still-Chaldean reed-pen of an *Ur*; it's the *Urbs* knocked off its orbit, torn apart, shredded into many, teetering just a mere *clina-men*, whatever crops up there bunches together, branches, and rows, sweating the here and now, *hic et nunc*, as the erudite pataouète might say,<sup>3</sup> swirling around in this still boyish head—all of that, miraculous wonder, I say, is by grace alone, the only inclination of an imperceptible urbanistic elevation that creates a memorable arrow out of an otherwise prosaic commercial artery (“native fabrics,” “colonial groceries”), which, in this pure, fleeting instant seizes a child's soul, bobs, O fragile wobble! first to the right, *chouiïa*, then to the left, *chouiïa*, making fine adjustments until he imagines himself the *axis mundi*.<sup>4</sup>

#### DESCENT, MOTHER, *MARE NOSTRUM*

As if the echo of a *Shema Yisrael* recited beneath the *mezouza* at dawn's first light continued to resound within him, two calls duel within the boy, puffing him up: the incoming guard (paternal) and the outgoing guard (maternal).<sup>5</sup> Outgoing, on the downswing: from the mother, for the mother, down to the “low” neighborhoods, opening onto the sea, an oblation—turn right, little guy. Incoming, on the upswing: that's the father's business, it's for the father, rising all the way to the Village Nègre, losing itself as it meanders the parade grounds and the Jewish cemetery—to your

2. Here Dadoun refers to the city using the French transcription of its Arabic name, Ouahran (sometimes spelled Ouahrane), where the first syllable is pronounced “wah,” in English. Note that the author uses a variety of different spellings for the city's name: Ouahran, but also Oran (standard spelling, in both French and English), and Wahrān (standard romanization of the Arabic name).

3. *Pataouète* is the name given to the French dialect of the Algerians of European origin, more common among the working class, heavily inflected by Arabic, Spanish, and Italian, full of local color and popularized through novels and plays that used it to comic effect. In and of itself, the word has no other meaning; it is likely the result of a deformation of the pronunciation of Bab-el-oued, a densely populated working-class neighborhood of Algiers.

4. *Chouiïa*, or *shwaya*, is Arabic for “just a little.” The word was used even by non-Arabic speakers in colonial Algeria and is still used today in metropolitan France.

5. Known in English often as simply the Shema, the *Shema Yisrael* is an important Jewish prayer recited twice daily by observant Jews. *Mezouza* (or *mezuzah*) is the Hebrew name given to the small metal case that holds a handwritten biblical text. The name derives from the Hebrew word for doorpost, which is where the object is affixed in Jewish homes.

left, kid.<sup>6</sup> And here, at this tiny little meeting point, a large gap, *urbi et orbi*, cleaves open the child's gaze: all the races of creation, all the puzzle pieces gathered and keeping watch among themselves, an immemorial rallying point.

When he doesn't accompany his mother on her pre-Sabbath Friday shopping excursions, the child is off on his own, fluttering here and there. He goes down rue de Vienne on his right, crossing in front of the wide boulevard Magenta (view from above: Grand Synagogue, bus depot, Maison du Colon), quickly turning left onto the coarse paving stones of a short, dark, and almost surreal alleyway that leads to the busy rue de la Révolution, which runs parallel to another main thoroughfare, the somber rue d'Austerlitz, known as "Jews Street."<sup>7</sup> Here he is, smack in the middle of the Jewish Quarter, which is nothing like your typical mellah or ghetto, and which some call in Judeo-Arabic, "Rappolione," a distortion of Napoleon, in honor of France's emperor Napoleon III, who deigned to set his imperial metatarsus there during his 1865 visit: he was on his way to a nearby theater to see a play in Spanish, which he had the good grace to applaud.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the picturesque "multicultural" neighborhood met with the goateed Emperor's approval, since it confirmed his liberal policy based on the principle of "perfect equality among natives and Europeans," a policy undermined and eventually gutted by colonials and soldiers. For the child, "Rappolione" is that endlessly winding, multicolored reptile of a street, whose scaly back consists of innumerable food vendors pushing their carts through streets bordered by woefully dilapidated houses (called "gourbis," the mother says), ideal for baroque circumambulations among gunnysacks full of spices and crates brimming with fruits and vegetables, to the rhythm of shouts and cries, taunts and teases of Jewish, Arab, and Spanish merchants, all vaunting their displays of good eats in a French spiced by their respective language, or the reverse. A tiny headed odyssey worthy of Joyce, excellent *gana* (luck, in Spanish, as opposed to *kerce* in Arabic, a jinx—the child sees them as the two poles of life: to have *gana* or to have *kerce*?), of a movable feast that leads down to the fresh marine breath of the fish market, where the child stares in fascination at the Spanish or Arab fishermen's deft and friendly handling of the slimy fish parts that they pack into crates and wicker hampers.

Beyond the fish market, at the steep turn of the Valès ramp, Oran's tectonic plate tilts suddenly toward the port and the sea. If he and his friends dare descend the nearly vertical staircase leading down to a favorite swimming hole, to "take a dip" in water shimmering with motor oil and carpeted with floating slabs of

6. The *Village Nègre* (literally, the Negro Village) was a settlement for indigenous Algerians of various tribes established in Oran 1845 after the colonial military authorities had razed their homes for strategic and security reasons.

7. La Maison du Colon was built in 1930; the three-story structure housed various agricultural offices (cooperatives, farmer's unions, cattle inspection services, and the like).

8. *Mellah* is the name given to the walled Jewish neighborhoods in Morocco and in Algeria.

tar, the child will inevitably cross paths with a procession of Arab dock workers, exhausted and coated with the dust blown in by the sea winds from all four corners of the world, who pick their way uphill to their scattered hovels or their modest houses in the Village Nègre.

#### ASCENT, FATHER, SOLID GROUND

Climbing up to the Village Nègre—change of direction, change of setting. Tectonics of the city: slow upward rise. Drifting out to sea now, beyond the jetty, beyond the lighthouse, in an archipelago lurching beyond the harbor, the trawlers and steamers of the boy's dreams. Gates announce the Arab Quarter: cantaloupe and watermelon vendors have set up their boxy tents chock full of luscious globes, where the father will stop on his way home to feel, smell, weigh in one hand what will be the crown jewel of that evening's meal. He walks up boulevard Joseph Andrieu, hemmed in on either side by two imposing barracks, where "tirailleurs" (including, perhaps, some "Senegalese") sound their trumpets and work through their exercises.<sup>9</sup> Beggars, most of them blind, sit cross-legged against the high outer walls, holding empty tin cans to the rare passerby, moaning the same haunting refrain in Arabic, the same rhyme and rhythm ("*a waouldi/al wallidi*") that will throb in his head until he reaches the paternal "shop" on the corner of rue Tagdempt—two resolute syllables that resound with the prestige of the Emir Abd el-Kader who made this western Algerian city his capital, lively sonorities that reassure the boy as he passes in front of a miserable hovel of a barbershop where he meets the piercing gaze of the bearded Arab barber, Mephistopheles in the flesh, busily placing his cupping glasses on the base of his clients' skulls to pump their blood and relieve their pain.<sup>10</sup>

In his modest shop reigns the father: oasis, treasure island, den of discovery, joy of play, utopia's promise, smelling of leather, pitch, and glue. The child in his element, the heir apparent. Whenever an Arab client arrives on the scene, greeting the father with a sonorous *Salem ah-lek*, the child feels like the entire shop is sucked into that massive burnous, quickly settled on a small stool.<sup>11</sup> The man removes his shoes, worn paper-thin. With a quick look, the father assesses the man's shoe size; out of the glass-doored display case, he takes several pairs of superb loafers that would have been the envy of the fine Italian bootmakers of the Via del Corso. His

9. The word *tirailleurs* refers, simply, to infantrymen, but the *tirailleurs sénégalais* were a corps of infantrymen recruited in the French colonies, originally in Senegal but later from other territories. The expression is synonymous with colonial subjects pressed into service in the defense of France.

10. The beggars are addressing the children in Algerian Arabic, calling out to them, "oh, my son, oh my children." The author's transcription of the Arabic is unusual, with the vocative *ya* replaced simply by *a*, likely reflecting local pronunciation.

11. A *burnous*, sometimes spelled *burnoose*, or *bournous*, is a long woolen cloak with a hood, worn by men in North Africa.

client cautiously tries them on for size; other pairs follow in rapid succession as the father watches for subtle signs that reveal the man's peculiar likes and dislikes. He argues for the indestructible soles, the soft pliability of the uppers, and then finally, in the bold light of day, he presents the fruits of his own labors, the product of his expert and faithful hands, unequaled *objets d'art*.

The sales talk hobbles along, fueled by mint tea and verses of the Qur'an articulated in a singsong Arabic. The name of Allah shuttles back and forth between the two protagonists—one to lower the price, the other to justify it. The endless back-and-forth shows no sign of concluding, and the child goes out to buy himself a piece of *chemyia*, a favorite honey-soaked semolina confection. He wends his way through the Arab quarter—a mixture of calm and unknown, a universe at once familiar and wholly other: a different pace, slower and more muffled; different shapes traverse the space: burnouses; djellabas; haiks; baggy, white sarouel pants; bolts of brightly colored silks and velvets; veiled faces and turbaned heads; other sounds (Arabic and Berber, studded with popular French expressions, Judeo-Arabic music polluted with refrains of the occasional French or Spanish pop song); other gazes (hospitable or hostile, wary or friendly, piercing or evasive, indifferent or attentive).<sup>12</sup>

An other world (*unheimlich*) that, at the same time, never tires of trying to make itself "domestic" (*heimlich*), with daily visits by Arabs to the family home: the itinerant pots-and-pans vendor who comes to swap his wares for used clothing items; peddlers of water, eggs, honey, and chicken; even an official incense dispenser who perfumes the house in no time; and the indispensable "Shabbat Arab," brought in from the street to "light the fire" (unlawful for Jews on the Sabbath)—essential for the morning coffee; and the entire family of Arabs that staff the hammam, who make the best breads and cakes, and the Saturday *tafina*—and that's not even including the supplier of amulets (*khlizez*) or the healer who does house-call exorcisms.<sup>13</sup>

At the far end of the Arab Quarter, where it widens out and disperses, all is calm. The city opens down below onto a limitless marine horizon, and up here, as if in a gesture of symmetry, it expands into a vast plateau, empty most of the time: the military parade grounds, the Jewish cemetery. His Aunt Zari is the guardian. It is closed on Saturdays, Sabbath rest. It's a visit day: the child accompanies his mother in a horse-drawn carriage. Tea, *tornos*, phonograph records (for the teens), and conversation (for the mothers).<sup>14</sup> Passing before the abundant *schéol*,

12. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women. A *haik* is a traditional outer garment, made up of a single large swathe of cloth wrapped around the body and worn by women in North Africa.

13. *La tafina* is a typical Sephardic Shabbat dish. Usually made with meat and vegetables, it resembles a French *pot-au-feu* or a Spanish *cocido*.

14. *Tornos* (also called *halwat tabaa*) are Algerian tea cookies, typical of the Oran region.

frozen, petrified with tombs, he contemplates the cemetery that seems to extend to infinity, a gigantic wart atop the city.<sup>15</sup> For him, this is where *Ouahran* comes to an end. Beyond is terra incognita, nothingness. The endless checkerboard of stones laid down for eternity reverberates into a spotless azure with the beats of *paso doble* and tango.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

15. *Schéol* is the French rendering of the Hebrew noun *sheol*, which designates a realm similar to Hades, insofar as it is a place of darkness, reserved for the dead.

Rue d'Alger, Blida

## Like a Slap in the Face

Line Meller-Säid

It was a Friday, an icy winter evening. Blida was hunkered down in its seasonal hibernation mode. I was nine years old. In rue Coulougis, a small crowd was gathered around a stall selling hot peanuts. Basket in hand, woolen scarf around my head and shoulders, feeling small and fragile among these jostling adults, I was suddenly pushed up against another woman's back. She whipped around, furious: "Hey, stop your shoving, Fatma!"<sup>1</sup>

The contempt behind these words was stinging. I was stunned and outraged. First of all, how could anyone believe that I, shy little mouse that I was, would have shoved someone just to get ahead in the queue? But even worse, that "Fatma" came at me like a slap in the face. I've often thought back to that scene and to the indignation I felt. It was a long while before I was able to make sense of my anger. That woman, confusing my scarf with an Algerian haïk, had taken me for a little Mauresque.<sup>2</sup> I wasn't a little Mauresque. And I didn't speak Arabic. But I wasn't a little French girl either. Surprisingly, these words come back to me today, expressing the paradox of my status back then: I was indeed French, yes, and I spoke only French, but I didn't consider myself a "little French girl." What was I, then? It seems to me that if I'd had to ask myself this question way back then, I wouldn't

1. Fatma is a common Arabic first name for a woman; in certain contexts, however, it is used by non-Arabic speakers as a generalized term for all Arabo-Muslim women or girls, and thus as an insult.

2. A *haïk* is a traditional outer garment, made up of a single large swathe of cloth wrapped around the body and worn by women in North Africa. The term *mauresque* comes from the French word *maure*, which means "Moor" and refers to the Muslim inhabitants of North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. As an adjective, the term has some technical value—Moorish architecture, for example, designates a certain building and decorative style found in the Maghreb and in southern Spain. Its use in this text has a racialized and pejorative connotation.

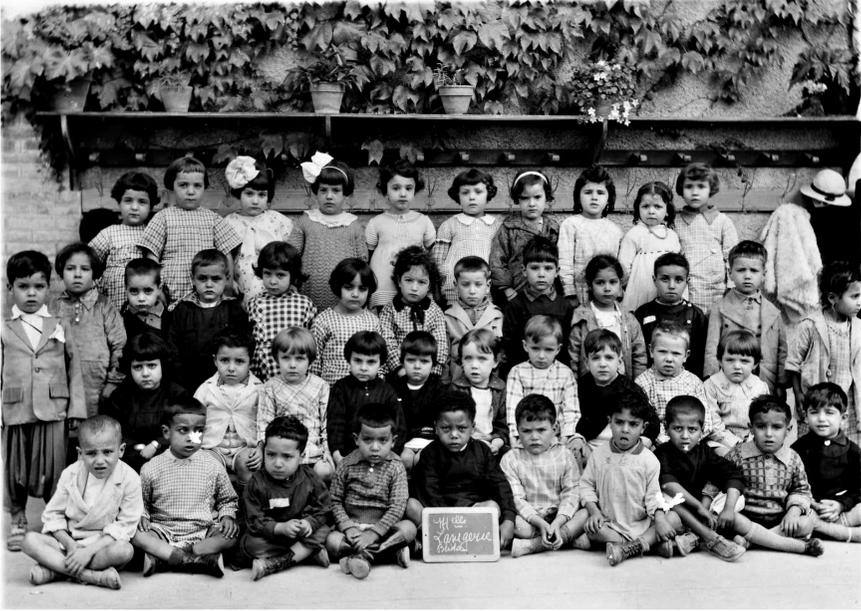


FIGURE 24. Lavigerie Preschool, Blida, 1936–1937. Line Meller-Said is the fifth from the left in the last row.

have been able to define myself in any way other than in strictly negative terms with regard to others.

Of course, I knew I lived in a family that followed Jewish traditions; my father would occasionally go to synagogue with my grandfather on Shabbat, while women kept the religious roots alive at home in the kitchen, where they made holiday dishes and sweets. But at the time, I don't think I'd reached the stage of introspective self-definition where I could consider myself a "little Jewish girl." It was more like a nebulous intuition than a categorical identity.

Still, I did experience one brief but searing incident when a young Muslim girl from the neighborhood hurled an insult at me as she passed in the street: "Filthy Jew!" I've often wondered about where that hateful impulse might have originated. To be sure, there were phrases so embedded in the language that they had almost (well, almost "almost") lost their sting, such as when a donkey driver would try to get his stubborn animal to move by shouting: "Get going, *yehoud!*"<sup>3</sup> Or when a disgruntled shopper in the midst of a quarrel would call the shopkeeper a "Jew." But where could a child have picked up such an ugly expression, if not at home? I found the whole incident deeply troubling.

3. *Yehoud* is a phonetic rendering of the Algerian pronunciation of the Arabic word for Jew, *Yahud*.

Fatma was our housemaid's name. Because I was still so little, she would walk me to school, which I started very young—I must have been around two and a half years old. I used to love sitting next to her in the courtyard to watch her preparing the *diouls* she used to make *bestels* stuffed with ground meat.<sup>4</sup> She'd dip her hand into a salad bowl full of a semi-liquid batter, scooping up just a bit, and then with a supple flick of the wrist, she'd spread it quickly over the surface of a convex skillet heated on the *kanoun*.<sup>5</sup> Then, with the point of a sharp knife, she'd carefully loosen the round, paper-thin sheet and lift it off, adding it to the stack. I'd gobble up the pieces that fell from the edges. The way she'd grill peppers over charcoal used to fascinate me, too. Oh, that smell of roasting peppers! Beyond the confines of time and space, that smell is the talisman of childhood memory.

One day, the neighborhood was vibrating with the sound of a brass pestle drumming frenetically on its mortar, then another, and still another, and soon a veritable concert of these implements, so familiar in Muslim and Jewish kitchens, filled the air with their disturbing metallic clang. Fatma pointed to the sun, which was veiled in a perfect circular haze: "It's the djinns. If we pound hard enough, they'll go away."<sup>6</sup> It was a long time before I understood that what I had witnessed was a solar eclipse, a terrifying phenomenon for simple folk.

Blida, literally "little city," earned its name back then. You could get around with ease. Whenever she needed something, my mother would send my brothers or me out to "do errands." More than anything else, we feared the fateful words upon our return: "Take this thing back!" Because the merchant would grumble and protest, before finally agreeing to take back the faulty item. (Decades later, I can still see my mother, in France, becoming incensed when a neighborhood grocer refuses to offer her credit when she is just a few pennies short on her purchases.)

The whole extended family lived within a relatively circumscribed area. My aunt Reinette, our supplier par excellence, bargained for the choicest produce at the Arab market. Vegetables "straight from the mountain slopes," baskets of woodsy-smelling mushrooms from Chréa, she knew where to go and how to haggle, taking as long as she needed to get the price she wanted: "Madame, you're exaggerating, you're cutting out all my profit margin," the seller would protest, but in a colorfully accented French typical of Arabic-speakers. Both sides had learned their scripts to perfection.<sup>7</sup>

4. *Dioul* refers to phyllo dough; *bestels* are savory pastries that use phyllo dough stuffed or layered with meat or other fillings. Similar to *brik* in Tunisia, *burak* in other parts of Algeria, or *bourekas* in Turkey.

5. A *kanoun* is a charcoal brazier used for cooking, generally made from terracotta.

6. *Djinn* are genies, or demon spirits.

7. The original French, "*Ya Madame, ti xagères, ti coupes li binifice*," phonetically reproduces the Arabic accent of Algerians, and includes the Arabic vocative prefix *ya*, used to signify direct address. (O Madame . . .)

I wish Fatma hadn't always spoken to me in French, and that goes for the shopkeepers, too. It seemed natural at the time, and it meant that I never needed to learn any other language. My parents had no trouble speaking in the local vernacular, which got sprinkled with a few Judeo-Arabic expressions when spoken by my grandparents, who were as fluent in this dialect as they were in the French they'd learned as children. My brothers picked up all the local street expressions when they played outside, especially the bawdy trash-talk of the soccer pitch. I'll never forget the resounding slap my mother delivered to my older brother when he called his younger sibling "*oueld el qah'ba*" (son of a whore), an insult to the mother as well as the son.

During endless gab sessions out on the balcony, as their agile fingers prepared *rechta*, *caoua*, or other types of pasta, my mother and aunts would exchange secrets that were not for all ears.<sup>8</sup> Their Arabic proved very practical when it came to keeping children from discovering stories they were never meant to hear.

Outside the family compound, female gossip found a home away from home at the hammam. The hot, moist stuffiness of the place muffled the sound in impenetrable steam. A woven fiber bath mitt rubbed over a big cake of Marseille soap guaranteed the perfect scrub. One day, a girl sitting next to me asked how old I was. "Oh, you're too young, don't look!" She was in the process of removing her pubic hair, using some smelly paste, a common practice among Muslim women who came to the baths to purify themselves at the end of menstruation. I couldn't believe my eyes.

Already accustomed to dividing the world into distinct categories, I couldn't figure out why Muslim women would come and pray on the tomb of a rabbi in Blida's Jewish cemetery, sprinkling their heads with water. I was to learn that the holy man was reputedly gifted with the power to intercede on their behalf so that they might bear children. Heaven knows no borders!

But earthly borders are totally random! My uncle Georges used to affectionately call the elderly Oum el Kheir "*yema*" (my mother) because at birth, he had been "sold" to her for a penny as a way of warding off the evil eye that seemed intent upon harming my grandmother's male newborns!

Unconcerned with any outside considerations, the Lavigerie elementary school focused on each individual pupil's merits. It happened occasionally that a "bad pupil" would be forced to wear a dunce cap and get paraded around the school, from classroom to classroom, by a "good pupil." The role of "good pupil" sometimes fell to me. How did I ever agree to do such a thing? But who would have dared back then to disobey a direct order at home or at school? It was simply unthinkable.

8. *Rechta* are thin noodles, but also the name of a dish where meats, vegetables, and chickpeas are heaped atop a pile of *rechta*; *caoua* (sometimes spelled *kaoua*) are a type of Algerian homemade pasta formed by rolling bits of dough between the thumb and fingers. The raw dough is dried in the sun. To serve, *caoua* are fried and then topped with vegetables or meat and sauce.

When it came to clothes, there was little room for originality. Long pants, which would have protected us much better from the cold weather, were utterly unknown to girls. Boys were hardly better off, with their short pants. My greatest luxury was a pair of gloves that I'd wear on the way to school as I grasped my book bag, but which we weren't allowed to keep on once inside the classroom, despite the frigid Blida winters and the meager heat produced by the coal-burning stove. To prove to us how much better we had it, our second-grade teacher reminded us that the little boys who lived in the mountains had to walk miles to school "with nothing but a bowl of chickpeas in their tummies."

All sorts of events interrupted the normal flow of my schooling. The years 1940–1943 left behind traces of the vile deeds Vichy France carried out under Marshal Pétain. To be sure, I sang in all innocence: "Maréchal, nous voilà."<sup>9</sup> Yes, I raised the flag every morning in the schoolyard whenever my class rank afforded me that honor. But then came the day, the astounding, terrible day in December 1941, when all Jewish pupils of Algeria were informed that they were not to come to school the next day (overzealous Algeria took the French law a step further: in mainland France, elementary schools did not fall under this new ruling). But neither I nor my brothers were affected by the law: we were among the rare privileged families whose father, having received military honors (a medal was the least they could do for my father, who was forever handicapped by his war injuries), did not lose their French nationality following the repeal, on October 7, 1940, of the Crémieux Decree of 1870 that had granted Jews full French citizenship.

The anti-Jewish legislation left me, therefore, on the peaceful shore of public schooling. But the teacher, of no will of her own, I imagine, stopped letting me "raise the colors," despite my good grades. I was also left out of the "skaters' ballet" performed by the school for Veteran's Day.<sup>10</sup> Still, I joined in to "curl" the strips of paper to be attached to the cylindrical headgear of the girls taking part. Again, I ask myself in hindsight: why didn't I simply refuse to do it? And the answer was the same: who would have even imagined disobeying a direct order at home or at school? Yet all the while, even if I wasn't fully aware of it, my interior borders were closing in, my difference was starting to show, I had really and truly turned into "a little Jewish girl."

And the immutable return of the seasons continued, despite the turbulence of history. During my early years, Ramadan occurred during the long summer months, which means that I have come to associate this holiday with that intense heat that envelopes you like a protective cloak. The much-anticipated daily *ftour*

9. Written in 1941, the song "Marshal, here we are!" was dedicated to Marshal Philippe Pétain and considered the unofficial anthem of Vichy France (the name given to the unoccupied, southern portion of France during WWII). During the Vichy period (1940–1944), it was performed at official events in France and Algeria.

10. The Veteran's Day in question refers to the *Fête de la Légion des combattants*, organized under Vichy. It is no longer celebrated in France.

was announced by one cannon shot, followed by the muezzin's call to prayer from his perch up in the mosque's minaret.<sup>11</sup> The city was suddenly deserted for about forty minutes, after which it would once again be buzzing with conversation among the sated faithful who would pause in front of every pastry shop. Those holiday treats were so scrumptious, little semolina cakes stamped with an almond in the middle (*qualb lose*, or almond at the heart). The streets of Blida were steeped in a subtle honey fragrance that lasted beyond the holy month. At the end of Ramadan, special cookies were exchanged among families, and we always got our plateful. We would return the favor and send the plate back laden with goodies of all sorts, since "one never sends a plate back empty," a precept I still adhere to.

Exchanges took place in the other direction on Jewish holidays, Passover in particular. Muslim families enjoyed our matzah. Just before that celebration, it would occasionally happen that someone would call out to my mother, Cécile, sometimes referring to her with a surprising honorary term: "*Ya Marabouta*, when is the Jewish holiday coming?"<sup>12</sup> The question had to do with their yearning for seasonal rains, "the Passover rains," as they were called, that replenished the land.

My father, Avellan Saïd, whom everyone called Monsieur Avellan, always held his cane horizontally under his paralyzed left arm, which gave him a recognizable profile. When many of his war veteran "friends" turned their backs on him during the Vichy years, even though he was one of the most upstanding of the lot, his Muslim acquaintances proved a source of great comfort. Perhaps he found solace among them on that terrible day in August 1941, when he returned from Algiers, exhausted and hopeless after Xavier Vallat greeted his delegation with nothing but scorn when they attempted to plead the case of Jewish war veterans who'd had their pensions suspended.<sup>13</sup>

The repercussions of that perverse ideology were felt long after the war was over. The young generation was steeped in anti-Semitism. I experienced its sting firsthand.

I was fourteen. Invited for a short stay in Chr ea, an Algerian mountain resort, I was making my way back to the chalet via a less traveled path, enjoying the mild summer air of the mountains. A group of idle French teenagers, both boys and girls, were sitting at the foot of a large cedar tree on a hillock a short distance from the road. They were laughing and joking among themselves, when suddenly they broke into a chant, aimed straight at me: "Jew! Jew! Jew!" Coming from their mouths, this common word lost its everydayness and became an insult.

11. *Ftour*, also written *ftoor*, refers to *iftar*—the evening meal that breaks the Ramadan fast.

12. Feminine form of *marabout*, a religious scholar or teacher in Maghrebi and West African Islam, a holy person whose tomb often becomes a pilgrimage site.

13. Xavier Vallat, a fervent Catholic and anti-Semite, was a French politician and a government administrator under Vichy. As head of the General Commission for Jewish Questions, he was in charge of implementing antisemitic legislation in France (and, by extension, in Algeria).

I seethed with blind fury. And like a boomerang, the echo of a long-buried phrase emerged from the depths of memory: “Hey, stop your shoving, Fatma!” The same tidal wave of emotion submerged me once again, filling me with revolt and impotence. All of a sudden, it made sense. Way back then, the woman was addressing the little Mauresque that I wasn’t: “Hey, stop your shoving, Fatma!” That otherwise trivial name exuded contempt. And now, by heaping abuse upon the little Jew that I actually was by hurling abuse at my origins, presumed to be insulting by definition, these thugs saddled the word “Jew” with all the infamy channeled by racist stereotypes. An otherwise simple name, neutral in and of itself but tinged with perversity, now oozed with hatred.

My heart bursting with rage, I turned away and continued down the path, long haunted by that repulsive litany. This deep seething riled both my angers. In the blink of an eye, the little Jew became Fatma. And then, suddenly, I felt an immense sense of relief at using my present exasperation to name my past indignation. I’d at last found the key!

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Avenue Claude-Debussy, Algiers

---

## “No, Not Jewish. Israelite”

Daniel Mesguich

“Mother,” my dear Leïla, is a common noun. If I say, “my mother,” everyone understands, right? By simple analogy, since everyone has, or has had, a mother. But here’s the thing: my mother has nothing to do with yours. They are two essentially distinct people, and if I say, “my mother,” you still know nothing about who I’m referring to. “Mother” is a common noun, but “my mother” is a proper noun, and as such, is radically untranslatable into anyone else’s language (Jean will always be called *Jean*, won’t he? Never *John* or *Juan*). The possessive adjective is what makes her mine and nobody else’s. “My mother” is nontransferable. I am alone with “my mother”; I *keep* her. The same goes, my dear Leïla, to a certain degree, for my childhood.

Here’s what I mean. However tender and idyllic, however “intelligent” it may be, however steeped in nostalgia or pride (or especially when steeped in arrogance, which is so often the case and obvious to anyone willing to hear it), and even when seductively packaged and stamped with the wistful label of “memory,” any claim of belonging to a tribe (be it a country, a people, a nation, a community . . . be it the Jews of Algeria or the Irish of New York, or—what do I know?—folks living in some corner of Nanterre) has always bored me to tears. First, because it is blind to its own banality (tell me, if you please, who *hasn’t* been born somewhere?); second, because it derives such joy in accepting, with the smugness of one who built it with his own two hands, that which could only have been imposed on him; and finally, because of the all too frequent ease with which it hastens to confuse, or even replace “thinking” with “belonging” (I’m from this place, therefore, I am like this). As for me, I do love (and I love more than anyone can imagine, believe me, Leïla—my childhood was happy, carefree, and wonderful), warming to the memory of the deceased loved ones who surrounded me back then—and that includes memories of my own dearly departed childhood self. Yet rightly or wrongly, I can’t



FIGURE 25. Daniel Mesguich and his mother in front of the central post office in Algiers, 1960.

help but read this memory, when people stake their claim to a given heritage, as something that sooner or later ends up building a wall: one made up of living faces instead of stones; a wall of one of those shelters whose doors open only in order to better exclude, deny, or even destroy those others, precisely those who “don’t come from this place, who are not like this.” In short, dear Leïla, I don’t think I can tell you anything about “my Jewish childhood in Algeria.”

It’s not as if, like so many *pieds-noirs* (I almost wrote “so many *other* *pieds-noirs*,” yet I have most assuredly never been a “*piéd-noir*,” even though that’s what we even called ourselves back in Algeria, but I didn’t find that out until years later, after I’d moved to France),<sup>1</sup> it’s not as if I’ve never been suddenly submerged, just as they have been, by a delicious sorrow triggered by the memory of a lost fragrance, an unrecoverable flavor, a voice gone forever, some obscure and distant sensation of fear, shame, or love (especially love), and a myriad of faces. The faces of my parents, of course, at their most splendid, for example, when they’d take us to the beach at La Madrague, in Guyoville, or the Eckart Woods, also known as the *bois d’Eckart* (which today is written “des Cars”<sup>2</sup>), or just to the Milk-Bar (pronounced “*milqueubar*”) in the lower part of rue Michelet to have a *cheval-de-bois* (our name for a *croque-monsieur*<sup>3</sup>), or to quench our thirst with a *Crush*, a *Pschitt* (two kinds of orange soda, like *Orangina*), or a *Selecto* (a cola produced by the famous Hamoud Boualem brand with its guarantee of 100 percent artificial flavoring, which we all adored). Faces then so different from those in Marseille, the miserable “Algerian refugees” that my parents would become.

Other faces: Mamie Renée, my maternal grandmother, whom I’d telephone first thing every morning—I was the early riser of the family, apart from my father, who would have left for work long before—at exactly ten minutes to seven, right after I’d read, lying flat on my stomach in the hallway, the two three-panel comic strips I followed, “Guy l’éclair” and “Bebel et Illico,” which appeared in the *Journal d’Alger* slid under our door every morning.<sup>4</sup> Yes, Mamie Renée—in whose bed I loved to sleep on Wednesday nights, on rue Alfred-Leluch, using the excuse that she had a television set and that the series *Ivanhoe*, starring the young Roger Moore, was

1. The expression *pieds-noirs* was used to designate those of French (and more generally, European) extraction who lived in Algeria during French rule of the territory. The ambiguity to which the author alludes derives from the fact that Algerian Jews were often subsumed into this category. However, while Algerian Jews held French citizenship (from 1870 to 1940, and then again from 1943 until Algerian independence in 1962), most Algerian Jews were not, in fact, of European extraction.

2. The proper name “d’Eckart” of “Bois d’Eckart” is phonetically identical to the expression *des cars*, which literally means “buses” in French. Eckart Woods is thus transformed, through phonetic slippage, into “Bus Woods.”

3. A *croque-monsieur*—called a “wooden horse” in colonial Algiers—is a grilled ham and cheese sandwich on brioche bread, a staple of bistro food in France.

4. “Guy l’éclair” is the French name for Flash Gordon; “Bebel et Illico” very likely refers to the American comic strip “Bringing up Father,” sometimes referred to as “Jiggs and Maggie” (and usually translated in French as “La famille Illico”).

on every Wednesday evening—my grandma Renée who always asked me whether she'd put too much powder on her nose before going out to meet her lady friends at the Hotel Aletty brasserie (and she did always put on too much powder).

Yet another face: that of Lamria, our housemaid with the misshapen legs (she had polio as a child), mopping the already clean-as-a-whistle floor with an old cloth and cascades of water that, in the Algiers heat, would evaporate almost on contact with the red and yellow arabesque designs of the floor tiles (I'd watch them dry as if by magic, utterly captivated), or using her own meager savings to buy my sister a certain treat, *Chocorêves*, which my parents forbade her from having because she couldn't eat just one, and that you could get at a five-and-dime on rue Dujonchay.

Or the face of Mr. Troucmanoff, the ruddy tobacconist, a racist "white Russian"<sup>5</sup> whose shop was across the street from our house at 13 avenue Claude-Debussy, and who sold chewing gum and "biberine" (a fruit-flavored sugary powder you'd suck out of its straw-like package, one of my little sister's and my favorite candies), as well as Sargent-Major brand pencil holders made out of plastic (blue for boys, pink for girls), specially molded with three different sized grooves to help you learn where to put your fingers while writing.

And the face of Mr. Ruottolo, the neighborhood butcher, and who always complained that he couldn't read his weight on the scale because his belly got in the way; and the face of the toy store owner, topped by a tall chignon that made her look like one of the dolls she sold in her shop, La Boutique—which was further up the street on the opposite side from us, almost facing the Debussy Cinema (where we saw every technicolor Western ever screened)—where my father would buy me, for the precious sum of fifty old francs, tin soldiers which I would use to make "movies" for my little sister, who would always cry at just the right place, when the hero would die in glory. The store was the victim of repeated plastic explosive attacks by the OAS (we'd pass by in the aftermath, and my mother would forbid me to pick up any toys off the sidewalk out front, even though other kids were doing it).

And the face of Mr. Victory, my last schoolmaster (after Madame Vix and Mr. Godot) who, each morning, would grant the most worthy among us the honor of filling the inkwells set into our little desks.

And the face of Amar, my friend who lived across the street (son of Mahmoud, a handsome man who disappeared suddenly one day—kidnapped by the FLN, it was said, though it turned out he'd actually left to join them, for he resurfaced as a hero at Independence), and who I'd talk with a lot (but about what?) until nightfall, each of us from his own balcony.

5. "White Russian" refers to a person from Belarus. Yet the author's use of quotation marks around the expression may indicate a reference to the "white Russians" who fought against the Bolsheviks.

And, of course, there was Mamie Léonie, my paternal grandmother, who ruled, like the queen mother, from a large leather armchair draped in brightly colored cloth, her bad leg—with its varicose veins hidden discreetly under black stockings—resting on an ottoman, and whom I never once in my life saw leave her large apartment at 4 boulevard Laferrière, where, every day at “cocktail hour,” I went to watch *Rin Tin* on television (“The only thing that dog can’t do is talk,” she would never fail to declare at the end of each new episode), and then to play with a rag ball in the hallway with my cousins, while my father and his brothers, my uncles, sipped their anisette and commented on “the events”—which meant the war, and, without a doubt, the impending “departure.”

And the face of Mohamed—the harmless hobo who, for a pittance, would take the whole building’s trash down in the elevator—on the day when, only a few seconds after a black Peugeot slowed down along rue Michelet (where I happened to be walking to school) and lowered a window to point the barrel of a machine gun right at him, he was left bleeding to death on the sidewalk, his belly ringed with a belt of little holes, murmuring “*aië imma, aië imma*” (oh Mama, oh Mama).

And so many others, my dear Leïla, so many others . . .

Faces, fragrances, flavors, or voices, no longer seen, smelled, tasted, or heard, but which must have followed me across the Mediterranean. Yet an interior sea, literally and metaphorically, the one I swim in every summer—though on the other side now—is also what separates me from that time and place. Yes, for now a sea separates me from my childhood. Today, unlike so many others with childhoods to revisit, for me to go back to that place, to rediscover the streets, houses, and gardens that are so much a part of my most intimate self, that made me who I am today, I would be going to a *foreign* country, a land that is now *other*. To visit my childhood, I need a visa.

As for my “Jewish” childhood, I have to tell you, dear Leïla, and the French (I almost said “the *real* French”) who will read these pages, the French of France, Jewish or otherwise, that no, I did not have a “Jewish” childhood in Algeria. At any rate, not in the way one might imagine it, with me basking in some Biblical tradition, more or less Arab-inflected, my parents and I taking part in some exotic and picturesque ritual or other. Not even if the word “Jewish” calls to mind some kind of symmetry with little Christians who attended catechism on Wednesdays and went to church on Sundays, or little Muslims immersed in their Qur’anic readings and family traditions. In truth, I never so much as set foot in anything resembling a synagogue in Algeria, and I don’t recall my parents being acquainted with anyone who could be construed as a rabbi. And our house—where there was not a single religious object in sight—looked exactly like any other house lived in by Catholics, and we ate exactly the same things they did. Don’t forget that the Crémieux Decree had passed through here and left its mark (the “Décrémieux,” as two great Algerian Jews, Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, so cleverly put it): at the time of my great-great-grandparents, some fifty years after the French conquest

of Algeria, this decree of October 24, 1870, which Adolphe Crémieux managed to push through parliament, offered the “native Jews of Algeria” full French citizenship, practically overnight, which they accepted en masse. In barely three generations, they swapped their traditional djellabas<sup>6</sup> for three-piece suits, came to speak French as well as any Frenchman of the mainland (how many times did I hear my father complain about a radio or television host who made some unforgivable error in French usage!), and more or less unlearned their Arabic (their Hebrew was already long gone)—my grandmothers, though they spoke French fluently, could also carry on a conversation in Arabic with an Arab. My father, who was older than my mother, could still understand some Arabic, but he couldn’t really speak it (he knew a few expressions, but he never assembled them into anything like a grammatical sentence); my mother, however, didn’t know a word, nor did I. Often, when an Arabic word just seemed to spring naturally to the lips, they would immediately add on the French translation, the way the Belgians do on their administrative forms and outdoor signage—mired as they are in their Walloon-Flemish battles: for instance, someone would say of an unhappy woman, in one breath, “*rhaïba, poor woman*” (although *rhaïba* already means “poor woman”); or if some life-threatening event was looming, you’d say “*laestorna may God spare you*” (*laestorna* already meaning “God spare you”). The little they kept of their traditions involved rare and discreet family celebrations which, like everything else in their lives, whether objects, thoughts, or desires, bore names that were translated into French (Christianized, in other words): instead of “circumcision,” they said “baptism”; “communion” replaced “bar-mitzvah”; “Kippur” became “The Day of Atonement” (this holiday, which required a daylong fast, was, to the best of my knowledge, the only one we ever celebrated, but men considered it an excuse for a huge evening dinner with their friends, and women thought it was a way to slim down, while children simply enjoyed imitating the adults). Yes, as soon as the Jews of Algeria obtained their French ID cards, they began to lose their Jewish identities. From the Arab Jews they once were, they became not French Jews, but Jewish Frenchmen and women. In order to no longer be Arabs, they (nearly) ceased being Jewish.

It has been said that they took on the language, fashions, lifestyle, and even the mentality of the *colonizer*. No doubt. But this can be seen from a different angle. For them, the colonizer had always been the Arab. For the most part, the Jews had been there, along with the Berbers, some seven hundred years before Christ, far earlier than the Arab or Turkish conquest of Algeria.<sup>7</sup> To resemble the French, to be French, was a miracle, a godsend, for it meant they could cast off the signs of their centuries-long subjugation. If they hid their Jewishness, if they

6. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women.

7. See Country Snapshot: “Algeria.”

made no display of that particular identity, it was because they didn't want anything to remain that reminded them of that indignity, that humiliation. Their minimal Jewishness was encrypted. They invented a new Marranism: this time it was not because being Jewish was outlawed, as was the case for the Marranos, but because they forbade themselves their own Jewishness.<sup>8</sup> They sought to merge with the universal. They decided to be the children not of colonial France, but of republican France, the France of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.<sup>9</sup> And you could hardly tell them apart from the “other” French of Algeria, the descendants of the *pieds-noirs* (who were themselves often of Italian or Spanish descent). We considered ourselves Algiers Jews, from “Algiers proper,” as they said back then. With the exception of the *rue de la Lyre* Jews who, like the Jews of Constantine, were considered backward (which meant not French enough, still too Arab), the Jews of Algiers were by and large the most “assimilated,” as they used to say. But in having to translate everything, they ended up transforming themselves. In other words, the act of translation changed both the object to be translated and the subject doing the translating. This type of “bad faith” was nonetheless nothing at all like those deep, dark family secrets that one hides from the world at all cost. No, their own strain of bad faith was “sincere”: the Jews of Algiers had truly *forgotten*, in the end, that they had ever been Arabized. And thus it was that while they were “Algerian”—some since 700 BCE (in all likelihood, my father's family), others since they had been hounded out of Spain and Portugal by the Catholic kings (in all likelihood, my mother's family)—these Algerian Jews all left for “their” country, France, in 1962.

But “Jew,” as you well know, *Leïla*, is the quintessential wandering signifier. A funny word, isn't it? Ghostly, slipping back and forth through whatever borders would attempt to limit it to a single definition. “Jew” just keeps coming back, doesn't it? In Algiers, in my family at least, we let it go. Oddly enough, we preferred the word “Israelite,” undoubtedly considered softer. “Jew” was for the others; it was the word the Catholics used. For insults. (Perhaps there's some Cratylism at work here: “Israelite” is too long, too fancy to be used as an insult, while “Jew,” admittedly . . .). And “Jew” rarely came unaccompanied; it was almost always preceded, until it seemed to form a single unit, by a word almost as short: dirty. Dirty-Jew! Still, the word did occasionally enter our home. On my parents' lips, as they lowered their voices mysteriously, usually when they seemed to be admiring someone whom the Christians could also admire. Sometimes, they pronounced only the first initial, as if speaking in code, lowering the volume almost

8. Marranism refers to the secret practice of Judaism by the Marranos, Jews living in Spain or Portugal during the Inquisition and who converted to Christianity to escape persecution.

9. Italics in original. This is a variation on the official title of the 1789 French declaration of human rights, whose official title is “The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.” Mesguich may be gesturing to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was signed in Paris by more than fifty nations.

to a whisper, with a kind of secret pride: “You know, he’s a J.” Or “Mendès-France, Blum, Einstein, and Freud, they’re all Js.”

One day, I must have been around six at the time, one of the class bullies, probably inspired by something he’d heard at home, grabbed me by the collar on the stairs leading from my school on rue Volta down to rue Michelet, and said, with that jovial unfriendliness of one who has discovered your terrible secret but is willing to refrain from making it public so long as you, the guilty party, are ready to play along and own up: “So it’s true, isn’t it, that you’re a Jew. Right?” I remember answering with such touching sincerity that I still smile even now: “No, not at all. I’m an Israelite.” “Oh yeah? Okay, sorry,” he replied, almost embarrassed, proving that the only thing his six-year-old self knew about Jews was to hate them. Here’s what my mother told me one day: “Jew is not a race, it’s a religion. We’re French. You, my darling, are French. There are French Catholics, French Protestants, and French Israelites. We are French of the Israelite faith.” I recall not being surprised by her use of the word “faith,” whose connotations seem so Christian, though I didn’t know that at the time. Nor did I notice her exclusion of the word “Jew” in favor of “Israelite.” But then again, this religion I’d heard about, that I’d seen being practiced by others, but which was completely absent in my family life, must therefore have been not what we *did*, but what we *were*. Still, I was miles away from formulating such a thought on that day.

I don’t remember ever being called a dirty Jew except for one time—I must have been seven or eight—in front of the plane tree in the little schoolyard on rue Volta, while we were playing a favorite game of ours involving apricot pits (little piles of five pits each were set up about three yards away, and using a single pit, we had to “wipe out” one whole pile with a single throw; if we failed, the missiles stayed where they were, but whoever destroyed the last pile pocketed all the pits, so the more skillful among us strutted around the playground with canvas sacks full of them), and I was winning so far that day. But even though frontal insults were rare, the more subtle ones came at me from all directions. The word “Jew” was a banal playground slur, spoken in anger or derision, by Christians who used it interchangeably with “bastard” or “shit-head,” or especially “cheapskate” or “tightwad,” and there in the midst of all this, I had to pretend nothing was happening, as if I didn’t hear it, or worse, laugh along with everyone else. I endorsed the insult, in other words. Insulted myself. And yet, the word “God” (which, here again, was said in the Christian way, “the Good Lord,” etc.) could be heard more often in our home than in the families of my Catholic friends. Though it’s true that they attended catechism and Mass, they seemed to get off easy where God was concerned. The name was never mentioned. They lived secular lives. In my family, however, my father, my uncles, my grandmothers tossed the name around constantly, which might account for the strange impression I had that everything with us was weightier, deeper, more epic, more legendary, more steeped in spirituality

and seriousness than elsewhere. If religion was absent, God was more present in our words and minds. So you see, dear Leïla, this is no simple matter.

A French Jew of Algeria, a Jewish Algerian Frenchman, an Algerian French Jew—my hesitation in formulating what I am might already be a clue, and my tendency toward universalism that I mentioned earlier might well be the effect of that difficulty, don't you think? My unwillingness to put words to my Jewish childhood in Algeria already speaks volumes about that Jewish childhood in Algeria. But no, I don't actually believe that, not really: born in a “France” (it has to be in quotation marks) separated from France (we called it *la Métropole*) by a sea, in a country that has since become foreign to me, under a doubly fragile nationality, not really French to the French of France, because from Algeria, and not really French to the French of Algeria (or to the Arabs, for that matter!) because Jewish, yes, a Jew but in word only, a Jewishness so encrypted it was all but absent—so, not “really” Algerian nor “really” French nor “really” Jewish (even though, if ever some hostile environment should require it, I would be prepared to assume each of those words)—how in the world, my dear Leïla, how, I ask you, can I possibly, even if I were to accept the premise, be expected to tell you anything about “my Jewish childhood in Algeria”?

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Boulevard du Nord, Orléansville

---

## With All Due Respect . . .

Aldo Naouri

Spring 1981. We picked up a couple of hitchhikers—two teachers, one in physics, the other in history. They had gone to Mers El Kébir “to knock back a few beers.” I introduced myself by saying that I had lived in colonial Algeria and that I was on a return visit to show my wife the country. They offered to show us around Oran. I accepted the offer, although I knew the city perfectly well.

We stopped in front of their high school and they told us about the history of that institution, which had once been called the *Lycée Lamoricière*—the high school where I took the second part of the oral baccalaureate exam. They concluded by leading us to the place de la Révolution, the former place d’Armes, opposite the city hall. They went on to name the different streets that led to the square, calling them by their former and current names. “And, a little higher up, you come out onto a street which used to be called, with all due respect, the *rue des Juifs . . .*”<sup>1</sup> My wife hadn’t noted the “with all due respect,” one of those orientalisms deployed painstakingly by locals in an attempt to embellish their French—with varying results.

When we were alone, I explained to her that this was the translation of a polite phrase, *Hachak*, intended to protect the listener from any discomfort that might arise when the conversation cannot avoid discussions of dirty things, of filth, of shit—categories that included Jews. I added that if I had told our interlocutors that I was Jewish and also Arabophone, they would have certainly spared us the expression, for the simple reason that the delightful codes of Arab politeness would have dictated that they put their gratitude for the service I’d done them by revealing my identity ahead of their need to protect us all from the word “Jew.”

1. *Rue des Juifs* means Jews Street.



FIGURE 26. Aldo Naouri, around ten years old, circa 1948, in Orléansville (now Chlef).

Culturally, I am, and I remain, an Arab. That's why I can speak as I do. My mother tongue is Judeo-Libyan, a dialect like you find in so many different languages, except that this one was Arabic. It's the language that has been spoken, for several generations, by different branches of my family, although my paternal family was a special case in that they had French nationality. It was precisely for this reason that we were chased out of Libya in 1942: Mussolini had decided to expel all enemy aliens from his territory.<sup>2</sup> Under the auspices of the Red Cross, we were deported to the nearest French territory, Algeria.

After two months of traveling, we reached the city of Orléansville, modern-day Chlef, where a Jewish community was ready to welcome us, my mother (already a widow) and her seven children, of whom I was the last. And so we experienced a double, if not a triple, resettlement. We didn't know a word of French. We were also an object of curiosity and rejection for the Jewish community, for whom our presence triggered a kind of psychodrama: our clothing and our religiosity triggered a return of the repressed, reminding them of their ancestors at the very moment when the repeal of the Crémieux Decree left them stripped of their French citizenship.<sup>3</sup> The worst thing, as far as they were concerned, was that we were able to keep our citizenship, something made possible, as I would discover decades later, because it was given to one of our ancestors by state decree before the conquest of Algeria. As for the Arab population, they took a close interest in us, offering help despite the differences in our respective dialects. The friends of my eldest brother, who was seventeen years older than me, continuously asked questions about this

2. Although most of Libya's twenty thousand Jews were, at the turn of the twentieth century, considered Ottoman citizens, some seven hundred Libyan Jews held French citizenship, typically passed down from a French ancestor. When Italy took control of Libya in 1942, Mussolini ordered that all Jews with French citizenship be removed to camps in neighboring Tunisia or Algeria.

3. See Country Snapshot: "Algeria."

blesed country where, despite colonization, the Jews had remained close to the Arabs whose language they spoke, albeit mixed with strange expressions that turned it into its own dialect. I remember a conversation between my brother and his new friend Ahmed, who taught me how to read before I was even five years old. Ahmed was trying to persuade my brother to join him in his resentment of France. And then came my brother's response: "In Ben Gardane (the border post between Tunisia and Algeria), for the first time in my life I was called 'Sir.' This was certainly a change from the Italians who would only address me with the insult '*Ebreo cane sensa paese sensa rei*' ('Jewish dog, with neither king nor country'), and from the Arabs who would only call me '*Youdi kelb*' ('Jewish dog'). It was France who gave me back my dignity. France is my motherland."

If I remember those words with such precision, it's because I would hear them again at the moment when, at the height of the Algerian War, the same Ahmed and his friends tried to convince my brother that the fight for independence was legitimate. My brother would say those same words to me when, as a Parisian student returning on vacation, I declared my support for that very independence. Occasionally, our mother would intervene in the conversation by uttering the prayer that she always used, "*Elli ihabounha ou elli nhaboulhoum yteh 'alihoum*" ("May what they wish for us and what we wish for them fall upon their heads").

It was her leitmotif. I heard it for the first time when I asked her about a traumatic scene that I witnessed on numerous occasions, without being able to make sense of it. I must have been six, going on seven. We lived right next to a stable that functioned as a kind of "park-and-ride" for the fellahs, the peasants who came to sell their harvest in the town markets. They had to leave their donkeys and mules there. It was often the case that, when one of them came to pick up his donkey, it would refuse to move. So the peasant would beat it. When this failed to have any effect, he would double his efforts, accompanying the beating with insults addressed to the beast, evoking its whore of a mother, its bastard of a father, its apostate grandfathers and so on, which would gradually escalate into extraordinary violence. Sometimes the donkey would move as a result. But if it didn't, the beatings would continue thick and fast, accompanied by "bitch, son of a bitch," which would pave the way for the ultimate insult, held in reserve up until that moment: "Jew, son of a Jew, filthy Jew, son of a filthy Jew, curse them all!"

It is true that we enjoyed good relations with our Muslim neighbors, particularly the women. They appreciated our Arabic dialect. Sometimes, when they came around, they would catch my mother singing in Arabic or listening to the Arabic radio. They would consequently launch into long speeches, commenting on our amazing closeness—our shared belief in one god, our common rejection of pork, and the same veneration of the heroes of our shared stories: Ibrahim, Yishaq, Yaacoub, Musa. They would finish by lamenting the fact that they could eat our food but we couldn't eat theirs, and that we stubbornly refused to recognize Muhammad as the final prophet. I admit that, with the distance I now

have, I cannot ignore that their words contained a kind of commendable struggle between the rational and the instinctive, and between the reality of the moment and the ingrained tendencies that they had inherited.

But the worst form of Muslim anti-Judaism that I ever experienced was not inflicted on me by peasants or working-class people. I experienced it, and genuinely suffered from it, at the hands of an Arabic teacher whom I had in ninth grade. I felt it from the first hour of class. It was a lesson in Arabic oral expression. He asked who knew how to speak Arabic. I raised my hand. He asked me to go to the front of the room and tell a story. I related, slowly and without the slightest mistake for him to correct, a walk in the forest. He sent me back to my seat, reproaching me, with an expression that I preferred to believe severe rather than hateful, for having an accent. It was the accent of my dialect, of my mother tongue. Recently, upon listening to Libyans on television, I realized that my accent was also theirs. The following class was a lesson in literary Arabic, the first language I had started studying, back in sixth grade. The teacher was forced to admit that I excelled in it—much to his dismay, no doubt, since our class contained a lot of Arab and Kabyle students. I never found out if that was the reason why, starting with the very next class, on Saturdays from ten to eleven, he unveiled a strategy that would last the whole year. This class was reserved for the reading of the Qur'an. There were two of us Jews in the class, and we were the ones he chose to start off the reading. But you can't start reading the Qur'an without pronouncing the Shahadah, the profession of faith: "*La illaih Lallah Muhammed Rassoul Allah*" ("There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger"). And so it was that, every Saturday, while our parents were taking their positions in the synagogue for the reading of the Torah, my friend and I were forced to reaffirm our conversion to Islam!

The worst, though, was still to come. Since I pointed out the arbitrary nature of his grading and the mistakes that he claimed to find in my work, throughout the entire year he withheld the accolades that I should have received, despite the fact that I was at the top of the class in practically every subject, including Arabic, literary and spoken. What's more, he went so far as to take me off the honor roll in the second term because of "my attitude," or so he claimed. When I went to the principal to complain, giving him my version of the facts, he threw up his hands and said there was nothing he could do.

So it is not without a certain sense of despair that I bear witness to the growing success of a myth, one that is keen to relativize Muslim anti-Semitism, making it out to be simply a byproduct of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

—Translated by Rebekah Vince

Constantine, Algeria

---

## The Hammam, and Afterwards

Benjamin Stora

In the beginning was the hammam, with the women, on Friday afternoons, the time reserved for Jewish women. Men and women never mixed there, needless to say, any more than Muslims and Jews did, which created a double separation, and for Europeans the hammam was just one of those *native* things. Ah, those steamy afternoons spent in the company of half-naked aunts and cousins . . . Mothers scrubbed the children, talked about their husbands and the dishes they'd begun preparing that morning for the Sabbath meal. They assumed that the children wedged between their thighs weren't listening, that they were like so many pieces of furniture. But nothing escaped their eyes or ears. Discovery of the female body: intriguing, surprising, fascinating in all its scented voluptuousness . . . For me, the Orient will always be a world of women (and when I returned to Algeria in the 1980s, I was distraught to find that the streets had become forests of men). It was the women who organized the holidays, oversaw the children's education, and reigned supreme over the domestic sphere.

Men were invisible, the father practically absent from daily life. Mine used to work straight through the summer, and would show up only on weekends during our month-and-a-half-long vacations at the beach. Here again, water and women, under the blazing sun this time, among my almost exclusively female extended family: my father had five sisters and a brother; my mother had six sisters and a brother. And there I was, the youngest of the clan, with just one older sister, the favorite pet of some forty cousins. But once I'd turned eight, no more Friday afternoon hammam for me. "He's getting a little old, isn't he?" the guardian told my mother. I was suddenly cast out of the paradise of women and ushered into that universe of prohibitions and fear. A veritable shock, lived and recounted by all men raised in the Orient. I now had to go to the hammam with my father, on a different day of the week.



FIGURE 27. Benjamin Stora at age five, in 1956, with his father at place de la Brèche in Constantine.

I was never afraid of women who dressed like “natives.” Probably because that’s how my maternal grandmother dressed, the one who spoke no French. In fact, she spoke nothing but Arabic, the language she and I used to communicate. Then there was the Muslim maid who would come to the house on Saturdays to do the ironing, casting off her veil as soon as she entered, and because it was the Sabbath, she would turn on the lights and light the stove for us. I used to talk with her a lot, in both Arabic and French. I would also play with Smaïl and Sebti, the two Muslims who worked in my father’s semolina business. So we were all quite close, though it never went any further than that, even in Constantine, despite what they sometimes say. Yes, the borders between the Jewish and Muslim communities—thirty thousand and fifty thousand members respectively, out of a total population of one hundred thousand—were a bit more porous than elsewhere, and the Europeans were definitely in the minority. But in Constantine, as in the rest of the country, segregation along communal lines was the hard and fast rule, and this was the heart of the problem. Jews lived among themselves, with their customs and beliefs; Muslims and Europeans likewise. I have no memory of a Muslim sitting at our dinner table, nor of a Jew dining at a Muslim home. There was no mixing in the domestic sphere, and scarcely any at the public school, named after Diderot, not far from rue Grande where I lived, in the heart of the *charrah*, the Jewish quarter.<sup>1</sup> In my class, I recall something like five Muslim pupils for some twenty Jewish ones, and a handful of Europeans, five or six, which says something about social, economic, political, and juridical disparities in 1950s Algeria. When it came right down to it, what did we have in common, Jews and Muslims? Shared languages, Arabic and French, the same prayer schedule, our musical roots, and the marketplace, the streets where the women passing by in their black veils were, for me, the embodiment of a pious form of Islam, very traditional.

Apart from my grandmother Rina Zaoui, everyone in the family dressed like Europeans. But the families on my mother’s and father’s sides were not of the same cultural origin. The Zaoui clan, who lived over on place des Galettes, were the foremost goldsmiths in Constantine. Reputed for their artistry, they made “native” jewelry in the Berber style, prized by both Jews and Muslims. The Storas, on the other hand, constituted one of the grand old families of the region. My great-great-grandfather had once been president of the Israelite Consistory of Algeria, a solemn assembly of Jewish elders. My grandfather was a notable freemason, and an important local official in Khenchela, a town in the Aurès Mountains of eastern Algeria. In the 1930s, many members of the Jewish community were committed leftists, promoting the secular values of the French Republic, but this didn’t prevent them from respecting Jewish holidays and traditions.

1. The author here uses a phonetic variation on the transcription of *la hara*, typically used to designate Jewish neighborhoods in Tunisia, but also in Eastern Algeria (where Stora’s hometown of Constantine is located).

My father went into the semolina business after a downturn in the family's fortunes. Still, he had a considerable library, a working knowledge of the law, and the profile of a true anti-Fascist secular intellectual with ties to the Surrealists, following the example of the painter Jean Atlan, a good friend of his from their school days back at the Lycée Aumale, the most prominent high school in Constantine. He passed his baccalaureate in literary Arabic under the guidance of Professor Lentin, but he didn't speak the language often, unlike my mother, who made daily use of the local Arabic dialect, as did her own mother. My mother, who had a middle school education, spoke perfect French as well. Hebrew was reserved for religious matters, at the synagogue or the "Alliance." After my father's death in 1985, I realized the importance of cultural mixing: of my mother's oriental Arabic; of the French of my Francophile father, which paved my way to republican rationality; and of the reading and study of Hebrew. In other words, the importance of a kind of strategic marriage of social and "civilizational" diversity. And, because my parents were both quite cultured, I was born heir to a robust, yet mixed, intellectual legacy. But this brought its share of fear as well, once I'd left childhood behind.

Fear, first of all, of not being at the top of my class, of letting my parents down, of not respecting religion. Like all mothers, mine bore the responsibility of passing the religion on to her children, and made sure that I not only learned my school lessons by heart, but that I never missed my prayers—a spanking awaited whenever I did. Fortunately, I was always first in my class; this filled my mother with pride and she showed me off to the whole family, embarrassing me no end. My life followed a strict schedule: after the first three days of the week at public school and before my Friday afternoon at the hammam, on Thursdays I would go to Talmud Torah at the Alliance school.<sup>2</sup> (Sometimes I was allowed to skip my Thursday lessons since, more than anything else, my mother wanted me to graduate with honors from public school.) I could read Hebrew, but didn't understand much. To this day, I can decipher a text, but still don't really know what I'm reading. The prayers came back to me when my parents died. Every Saturday morning, I would go to synagogue with my father, the "Algiers Temple" of Constantine, where the service was not classically Sephardic, but decidedly more French—complete with a prayer for the President of the Republic. This was my ritual from the age of five to thirteen, but it was in France, at the Tournelles Synagogue in Paris where all the

2. Typically, Talmud Torah refers to religious schools where Jewish boys receive elementary instruction in Hebrew and the scriptures (the Talmud and the Torah). It is worth noting, here, that Stora locates his religious education *at* the Alliance Israélite Universelle school. Unlike most other countries of the Muslim Mediterranean where Jewish youth were educated at Alliance schools, in Algeria, where the Jews had been French citizens since 1870, Jewish children attended French schools. The Alliance network in Algeria thus functioned somewhat differently: it was less involved in general education beyond the elementary level, and the classrooms of the Alliance schools were thus often repurposed for Talmud Torah instruction (where it could also be supervised by the more secular Alliance administrators).

exiles from Constantine would gather, that I celebrated my bar mitzvah in 1963. (Back then, we called it our “communion.”)

Saturday afternoons we often traveled to America via the magic of the silver screen. My friends and I would go to the Vox (later renamed Le Triomphe), where joyful pandemonium reigned during screenings of war films and westerns. The whole Jewish community rushed to the Vox to see Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*, with that nasty Edward G. Robinson—the one who urged the Jews to worship the golden calf. There was no pandemonium during this screening; you could hear a pin drop, the silence almost reverent. I was sometimes allowed to see a second feature with my parents at the Colisée (a lovely old building destroyed after independence). This is where I saw unforgettable films, the ones that made me a film-lover for life: *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, for example, in 1957, or Kalatozov’s *The Cranes Are Flying*. Or, two years later, Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows*, which would resonate with me so deeply—I identified with the Jean-Pierre Léaud character. It was that, without my realizing it quite yet, I was starting to feel oppressed by my surroundings. This would become clear to me only after we arrived in Paris, at the end of the war, in June 1962.

But my greatest fear was the war, the attacks. In 1957, at the age of seven, I saw a man die in the street right next to me. In 1958, perched on my father’s shoulders, I caught sight of De Gaulle in Constantine. In 1961, I was there when the great musician Raymond was assassinated: I was at the market with my mother when he was shot dead.<sup>3</sup> At twelve, just a preteen, I was keenly aware of the war, of what my father was risking by simply going to work every day, and of the anguish in my parents’ voices even behind closed doors. I knew all about the political situation. Time seemed to drag. During the last two or three years of the war, we went out as little as possible, and I spent my time up on the rooftop terrace playing with my cousins. I almost never went to school anymore. Our community, like the others, closed in on itself even more tightly than before. This made our arrival in France even more traumatic, since our close-knit family scattered to the four winds, to Marseille, Aix, Toulon, Nice, Strasbourg, and Toulouse . . .

As for us, we ended up in an anonymous northern suburb of Paris, Sartrouville, after a temporary stay in the basement of a statelier building in the city. With my accent and Arabic always on the tip of my tongue, there I was suddenly attending high school at the Lycée Janson de Sailly, suffering not only from the cold weather, loneliness, and the rampant individualism of French society, but also from taunts and ordinary antisemitism—all new to me. It didn’t take me long to discover that, in order to assimilate, I would have to conceal both my Jewish and my oriental

3. Cheikh Raymond, stage name of Raymond Leyris (1912–1961), was a famous Algerian Jewish singer and master of Andalusian malouf music who was beloved by North African Jews and Muslims alike. In June 1961, he was assassinated in broad daylight by Algerian Muslim militants in the Jewish marketplace of Constantine.

origins, decode the new social norms, and work very, very hard to become, once again, the head of the class.

And yet, there was no nostalgia. Farewell, of course, to the scent of the women, the smell of our houses, the aromas of the food and the streets from back home; farewell to the medina, the donkeys, the heat, the light . . . In exchange, I was soon to experience a new sense of freedom. The insecurity of the war years was behind us now. My horizon was broadening, the pressure of the community that I hadn't really noticed until now was beginning to lighten, and new standards were replacing those I had always believed to be written in stone. Yesterday's prohibitions slowly fell away: religious rules, dietary restrictions and, later on, sexual taboos. It was around the age of fourteen that women ceased to be objects of a worrisome fantasy, and my childhood finally drew to a close. I continued my study of the West thanks to the French public school system, and at last I could call a spade a spade: no more furtive looks, no more scheming, hidden thoughts, no more time lost beating around the bush.

Still, though I never denied the East that lived within me, the West that surrounded me was winning out, and I was ready. For French Algeria had also been the West in the East. Especially in that very peculiar city of Constantine, very Jewish and very Arab, so unlike Algiers, where Jews didn't speak Arabic, and ultimately so different from both the rest of Algeria and from Europe. Constantine was a city where Jews were both steeped in oriental religious traditions and very westernized at the same time, very secular. So much so that, when we landed in France we were already, despite our oriental appearance, fluent in the codes of the West.

Muslims also felt this same sense of acculturation, more profoundly in Algeria than in Morocco or Tunisia.

I am someone who has never lived in the past, never cultivated any sort of nostalgia or orientalist fantasy, never longed for those special holiday sweets, not then and not now. I've always known where I was and where I came from. It was only later that I started to ponder the importance of origins. I never had an identity crisis, I never really felt "torn": my roots came together at the end of a childhood that was at once happy and oppressive, lived between the Republic and the Orient. The warmth and the brotherhood of my community were lost, and I missed them, but I would soon find them again under another sun, the sun of Paris in May 1968, when I committed myself to the political revolution. But that's already another story . . .

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Guelma, Rue Zama

---

## The Courtyard

Dany Toubiana

For Chichette:

Summer, 2011. It materialized all of a sudden in a luminous flash while I was on vacation, watching the sun set behind the Monts du Vivarais. A revelation, the black and white checkerboard pattern gleaming from the buckets of water just splashed all over it, reflecting the dazzling sun. It was obvious: the memory of the interior courtyard of the house on rue Zama where I was born, in Guelma, emerged as the indisputable center of my childhood recollections. A site of memory that, still today, single-handedly conjures hope and disillusionment, sharing and squabbling, laughter and tears, games and daydreams.

My father, whose own father was a Tunisian Jew, always emphasized the fact that the Jews of Algeria were French.

French? Indeed, they were, but still . . .

In this land of Islam, Jews and Muslims shared certain traditions. There were rituals, such as circumcision, that were common to both, and which took place, for the most part, at the family home. Women hollered *yoyous* at Jewish and Muslim weddings alike.<sup>1</sup> For that matter, in my school textbooks or storybooks, there was never any mention of either Aïd or Yom Kippur.<sup>2</sup> In the Christian

1. *Youyous*, or *ululation*, are long, wavering cries, usually emitted by women and associated with ceremonies of various types, typically in the Middle East and North Africa.

2. Aïd, which refers here to Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha, is the Festival of the Sacrifice—one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over, it commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy. Yom Kippur is known as the Day of Atonement and is considered the holiest day in Judaism. Observed ten days after Rosh Hashanah (or New Years' Day in the Jewish tradition), it is an occasion for repentance and purification, marked by a total cessation of work and abstinence from food and drink.



FIGURE 28. Dany Toubiana, six years old, at the École Sévigné in Guelma.

tradition, processions and communions were directed outward, toward the larger, less demonstrative population. The lasting image, for me, is one of a more glorious communal consecration, bathed in a solemnity that struck my imagination. As a little Jewish girl, I could better relate to the lifestyle of my young Muslim friends, but I envied the Christian girls' freedom.

The picture now came alive, and I could hear the echoes of our childish laughter while the women of the house, who had agreed to wash down the courtyard that day, cleaned, and we kids splashed around in the suds. I was eight going on nine, and this was to be my last year in the courtyard, though I didn't realize it at the time.

Eleven families occupied the apartments of a house built around a common central courtyard. Those living upstairs had the advantage of easy access to the rooftop terrace, from their larger, better lit apartments; the ones living in the downstairs units had the privilege of direct access to the courtyard. A microcosm of Algeria at a time when society was more or less divided, the house was organized around the courtyard, with some groups of people who kept their distance and avoided the courtyard, and others who had their regularly scheduled activities there, or used it for special occasions. There was one French family "from France" whose aloofness kept the rest of us at arm's length, and another one that would vacillate between friendly and standoffish. Of this second family, the husband came from France and the wife, who was born in Algeria of a mixed Judeo-Christian marriage, was torn between the two cultures. Then there were the rest of us, all born here, Jewish or Muslim families, noisier and more outgoing, who spoke to one another in either our dialect of Arabic or in French.

I can conjure up the faces: Jean and his dog Kim; Sharif and Nabil, my downstairs friends; the two brothers Georges and Daniel, constant rivals; the sisters Zohra and Tita who lived upstairs. The adults constantly talked politics, taking the world apart and putting it back together again in these early days of the Algerian war for independence. There was also something warlike about the games we children used to play: we'd use lemons for grenades, and broom handles for machine guns. My sister was a formidable fighter; I preferred reading or imaginary travels.

Jean belonged to the other Jewish family of the compound. For reasons that were never clear, our mothers wouldn't speak to one another, and often bickered. Jean, my sister, and I made up a game that played on this inexplicable rift. We would stand in front of our respective apartment doors, and all three of us would call out to our mothers at the same time.

They would rush to the doorstep, while we would go back to our normal playing, as if nothing had happened, observing furtively to see how angry they would get. We were sure that this would be an excuse for them to go at one another. "Phooey," my mother would say, shrugging her shoulders. "Phooey," Jean's mother would conclude, pretending she'd come to put away her broom, which she always left outside the door. And each would then return to her chores, conspicuously

turning her back on the other, making a show of her annoyance. They didn't say anything, but we could tell from those looks that they hadn't been fooled for a minute by our ruse.

Old Zoureida continued to make her flatbread over her *kanoun*, giving out little pieces to the children gathered to watch.<sup>3</sup> Every spring would witness the return of Missud, the mattress-maker, who would stay for two days to stuff and stitch back together all the household's mattresses whose wool stuffing we would have removed, washed, and sun-dried on every available surface of the courtyard, in advance of his arrival.

For every Passover feast, my father would buy a sheep, who we would name either Messaoud or Bob, and who we would invariably come to adore, only to see him stolen away from us on the eve of the holiday by the knife-wielding rabbi.

Daily life continued normally, despite individual political commitments outside the house, positions that were more or less common knowledge and were deliberately kept silent within the discreet walls of the house.

No one ever talked about the murder, during the 1945 riots, of the husband and son of Fatma Bensallah, who was only able to stifle her resentment thanks to her unshakable religious faith.<sup>4</sup> We pretended not to notice when Jean's blustering father would defend French Algeria, parading around on his motorcycle with his hunting rifles on full display. Above our apartment lived Djamilia's family. Her husband was an FLN leader who had fled to Tunisia, leaving her alone with their three children. Everyone in the house knew about this, but no one ever mentioned it. The tensions of the war ate away at the ties that bound the country's various communities, but the women of the house were determined to maintain what they called "neighborly" relations. Jean's mother was the sole exception.

Thursday, laundry day. As she does every week, my mother shares the laundry room with Fatima Bensallah. Mother gets the water boiling, and soon the smell of laundry soap comes wafting over the terrace. The washing room is thick with steam rising out of the washtubs. There's one big tub for bedclothes, napkins, and other whites; a smaller one for clothes; and an even smaller one for "delicates." I'm between seven and eight years old. School will soon be out for the summer, and the June sun is already beating down on the terrace. I love the contrast between the sunbaked tiles and the water spilled across the floor in the relative shade of the laundry room. My sister and I splash around to our heart's delight. Mother scolds us when we get in the way as she moves about. We want to give her a hand, to help

3. A *kanoun* is a charcoal brazier used for cooking, generally made from terracotta.

4. The "riots of 1945" refers to what is now known as the Sétif and Guelma Massacres. On May 8, 1945, as crowds gathered in the two towns to celebrate the Nazi surrender, the parades took on a nationalist, anti-colonial character. Altercations between protesters and French police occurred; European settlers were attacked and Muslims were shot. Tensions escalated as a result, and over the next six weeks, French colonial authorities and settlers retaliated with disproportionate brutality, killing somewhere between six thousand and thirty thousand Muslims.

her scrub the linens on a washboard. Apparently, women in Algiers have washing machines. And come to think of it, I've never seen the "French from France" who live in our compound ever use the laundry room. Maybe they have a washing machine at home that we don't know about? Tired of trying to shoo us off, my mother finally gives us our father's handkerchiefs to wash. We scrub them with a brush before giving them back for her to toss into the boiler.

It's laundry day and I'm happy, for the terrace will be ours for the whole day. We can play hide-and-seek among the sheets hung out to dry. When the afternoon siesta is over, around three, and the terrace starts to fall into shade, it's the women's hour. One woman's laundry day is enough to gather them all. They take turns bringing mint tea, coffee, croquettes and *makrouds*, cornes de gazelle and cigars aux amandes.<sup>5</sup> It is during these gatherings that my sex education begins. Out of earshot of the men of the house, these rather reserved women tell their secrets in a highly coded language. My mother speaks fluent Arabic, and takes part in these conversations. It's laundry day and I love these moments when my mother lets her hair down and laughs heartily with her neighbor friends. I'm discovering the spontaneous complicity and solidarity that exists among women. Even the little boys of the household seem to understand that this moment belongs to women and girls only, whatever age the boys might be. They wander off of their own volition, to play among themselves further away. My friends Zohra, Tita, or Salima burst out laughing, and I envy them their ability to share in what their mothers or sisters are saying in Arabic. I'm the pure product of the French Republic, and I only speak French. On this particular day, Zoureida looks angry. She plops herself down on the ground, sighing loudly. Words start pouring out of her mouth, sounding like a stream of insults. The other women chuckle and tsk, weighing in on the subject at hand. Zoureida finally relaxes. I don't say a word. I love these stories and try desperately to understand what it is that has everyone giggling. No one seems to have noticed that Fadhela, a woman in her forties with a gleam in her eye and a knack for practical jokes, has slipped away. Suddenly, her head appears from behind the drying sheets, preceded by a piercing shout, full of fury. She has painted a mustache above her lip, pulled her hair back and put on a red *chéchia* and donned a man's *gandoura*.<sup>6</sup> She steps into the circle of women, which has widened to accommodate her antics, and begins gesticulating, miming what I take to be an argument between husband and his wife. She rolls her eyes, sticks out her

5. *Makrouds* are diamond-shaped Maghrebi cookies made with semolina flour and stuffed with dates and nuts; *cornes de gazelle* (literally, gazelle's horns) are cone-shaped pastries made with flour and filled with almond paste and orange blossom water; *cigares aux amandes* (literally, cigars with almonds) are cigar-shaped sweets made by stuffing sheets of *brik* dough (similar to phyllo dough in texture) with almonds.

6. A *chéchia* (often transliterated as *sheshia*) is a soft skullcap worn by many Muslim men, particularly in North Africa; a *gandoura* is a long, lightweight, loose-fitting long tunic, worn by both men and women in North Africa.

fake paunch, imitates first a man's gruff voice, then an exaggeratedly flutey voice of a woman. Zoreida has completely forgotten her grumpy mood and is laughing along with the others. My mother is laughing so hard that tears are streaming down her face. I don't understand a single word of this adult pantomime taking place entirely in Arabic, but I can tell that it's a rare moment of unbridled joy, something that goes beyond the silly anecdote being parodied. It's almost four in the afternoon now. Sharif has just come to whisper to his mother that his father has arrived back home. Almost instantly, the laughter ceases. The women get up all at once. They collect the plates and cups, and sweep away the crumbs. Fadhela has returned to her usual demure self. Pandora's Box has closed again, but for the mere ten minutes it was open, a whole feminine universe poured out, a secret world full of sisterly joy. That day, those women, who did not possess the words I was so proud to be learning at school, had presented me with my first experience of theater. In my current work as a stage director, I still dream about the unadorned simplicity and emotion of that shared experience.

Of the Guelma courtyard, there remains nothing but a photograph taken by my sister in 1993, when she traveled back for a visit. A moment stolen from time, somewhere between yesterday and now. On that day, just as in my reverie, the black and white tiles are shining. They must have been washed down just before. The door to our apartment is to the right as you enter. Carpets are hanging from the terrace all the way down to the first floor. The photo shows fine weather, and the soft light of this late afternoon seems to have preserved, as though it had seeped into the peeling walls, something of the house's timeless aura.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*



CHAPTER SIX

Morocco



## Country Snapshot

The origins of Morocco's Jews are difficult to pin down: while certain historical sources contain references to myths that would place Jews in Morocco as early as the eighth century BCE (the result of some of the lost tribes of Israel having wandered west), most historians concur that the oldest evidence of Jewish presence (in the form of engravings and architectural ruins) dates to the third century CE. There is certainly no doubt that Jewish communities were already well established at the time of the Muslim conquests in the seventh century, with the largest concentrations situated in the Atlas Mountains, in the southern part of the country. Over the centuries, the composition of Moroccan Jewry changed, growing to encompass Sephardic Jews migrating from Spain to North Africa in the sixth century and again in the wake of their expulsion from Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; Ashkenazi Jews fleeing persecution in Europe; and converts to Judaism. Until the twentieth century, Moroccan Jewry constituted the largest non-Ashkenazi Jewish community, more than double the size of any other Jewish population in the Islamic world.

With few exceptions—the most notable being the reign of the Almoravids, the eleventh-century Muslim Berber dynasty that was notably intolerant of Jews—Moroccan Jews were historically integrated into the larger community. The majority spoke Arabic, although some of the Northern Jewish communities spoke Haketia, a dialect of Judeo-Spanish carried south from Iberia by Spanish Jews. Jews occasionally held positions in court, serving as advisors, diplomats, and conducting official business, and lived in various locations, in both the *mel-lah* (Jewish quarter) in bigger cities, as well as in smaller communities along trade routes that connected Morocco with Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. After the French protectorate was established in Morocco in 1912, many of Morocco's approximately 110,000–120,000 Jews (2.5 percent of the overall population) began to migrate to larger cities.



MAP 7. Morocco. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

Although France did not officially establish its colonial protectorate in Morocco until the early twentieth century, significant French influence had been exerted in Morocco since the mid-nineteenth century. In 1862, the Paris-based Jewish philanthropic organization Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) founded its first school in Tetouan. Over the course of the next century, Morocco would go on to have the most significant AIU presence of any country in which the organization was active, with over eighty schools providing elementary and vocational education to thousands of students. As a result, the education level of Moroccan Jewry rose, spurring upward mobility and encouraging many rural Jews to relocate to urban areas. These changes brought about the existence of a new Moroccan Jewish elite, a significant portion of whom benefited from extraterritorial rights and protégé status, especially that of France and Spain. The majority of Moroccan

Jews lived as *dhimmis*, however, and remained under the legal jurisdiction of the Moroccan sultan.

Unlike many other midcentury nationalist movements of the Islamic world, Morocco's nationalist movement envisaged Jews as part and parcel of the nation in the making, a feeling shared by many Moroccan Jews themselves. During World War II, for example, Moroccan Muslims were by and large disinterested in Nazi propaganda and the Vichy government's anti-Semitic agenda, and Moroccan Jews benefitted from the protection of the sultan—although the extent of this protection is debated by historians. Nonetheless, a trifecta of factors—the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, a burgeoning Zionist movement, and the concern that independence from France would create difficult conditions for the Jews—combined to produce a mass exodus, and between 1948 and 1951 some twenty-eight thousand Moroccan Jews emigrated to Israel.

For many Moroccan Jews, the future they wished for was not one in the new nation of Israel, but rather at home in Morocco, a future in which they would be granted full rights as citizens, as opposed to their historical status as *dhimmis*. Throughout the war years and into the 1950s, Moroccan Jews by and large remained loyal to the sultan, who had become a symbol of both colonial resistance and national unity for Jews well as Muslims during the Vichy period. This loyalty was not unfounded; following Morocco's independence from France in 1956, the sultan, henceforth recognized as King Mohammad V, guaranteed full rights to Morocco's Jews in his first speech after his return from an imposed exile, and in the postwar cabinet, the prime minister included several Jewish appointees.

Yet the situation in newly independent Morocco was anything but settled. The economy was in crisis and Jewish emigration was severely restricted. Following Morocco's entry into the Arab League in 1958 and the Arab Postal Union in 1959—a move that curtailed postal correspondence with Israel—many Moroccan Jews began to think more critically about their place in the new nation. Between 1956 and 1961, some 66,500 Moroccan Jews emigrated with help from the Jewish Agency, a nonprofit organization founded in 1929 to support the immigration of diaspora Jews to Palestine, and following the ascension of Hassan II to the throne in 1961 and the subsequent easing of restrictions on emigration, many more followed in their footsteps. It is thus that, in the almost thirty-year period of 1962–1990, approximately 130,640 Moroccan Jews left the country, migrating not only to Israel but to Europe and North America. Today, there are approximately nine hundred thousand Moroccan Jews living abroad, while fewer than three thousand remain in Morocco, living mostly in cities, especially Casablanca.

Despite the dwindling number of Moroccan Jews living in Morocco, the country has the most active Jewish cultural presence of any country in the Islamic world. In 1985, the World Union of Moroccan Jewry was founded in order to foster loyalty to Morocco and to maintain the heritage of Moroccan Jews. The Moroccan

Jewish community is headed by the Conseil des Communautés Israélites du Maroc (the Board of Moroccan Israelite Communities), and is recognized by the king. Jewish and Muslim intellectuals study and promote Moroccan Jewish culture, both at home and abroad, and the country welcomes thousands of Jewish tourists every year.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*

Essaouira/Mogador

---

## For Other Tomorrows?

André Azoulay

I must have been twelve or thirteen, and nevertheless, more than half a century later, there is an image, a furtive instant, a few seconds of light that I faithfully keep present in my mind as if it were yesterday, with the same emotion, the same power, and the same singularity, abundantly rich in its exceptionality.

An image, an instant, a light that will have kept me company all my life, giving my rootedness in a Muslim, Berber, Arab, and Jewish society, the society of my country, Morocco, a depth and a legitimacy that will triumph over all the vicissitudes of the moment. Over all the doubts, as well, and the dizziness of amnesia which, for too long, have undermined and made fragile the cultural, historic, and human space that Muslims and Jews created and shared for nearly a millennium in the Maghreb and Middle East.

It was an autumn evening in the 1950s, in my father's office, at the end of a little street in the kasbah of Essaouira-Mogador.<sup>1</sup> A friend of the family, whom we called Hajj the Imam, had just come in and, after the ritual greetings, had taken out from the folds of his djellaba a little beige-colored bag full of earth that he delicately put in my father's hands, saying:<sup>2</sup> "This is for you and your family. I just returned from my pilgrimage to Jerusalem and, since it is impossible for you to go there, I came to share my prayers with you and to bring you some of this holy land that belongs to both of us."

1. The city was long known as Mogador, a word whose derivation is uncertain. It may be a deformation of the name of the city's patron saint, Sidi Mogdoul; it may have etymological links to the Arabic word *mogdoul*, meaning fortress; or it may have been imported by the Portuguese, who occupied the port city for centuries and may have named it after the Portuguese town Mogadouro. Regardless, upon Moroccan independence from France, Mogador was renamed Essaouira. Writers evoking the city's past often maintain the older name or use the two interchangeably.

2. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women.



FIGURE 29. This parade in the heart of Essaouira-Mogador, on the square called Moulay Al Hassan, took place the day of the proclamation of Morocco's independence, in 1955. Given that organized Moroccan military forces (army, police, etc.) did not yet exist, it was the city's Boy Scouts that paraded to symbolize the reconquering of national sovereignty. André Azoulay (on the right, just out of the ranks), then fourteen years old, was chosen to lead them.

It was much later that I understood the full extent of what I had just witnessed and the character—which today seems utterly surreal—of this scene. Its depth, its modernity, and its truth took on all the more texture and complexity in light of the fact that, for the child that I was—and for my father and his friend—this spontaneous and fraternal sharing of the sacred was nothing exceptional. For the three of us, it fit in naturally with the everyday social relations between Muslims and Jews in Essaouira.

This is, as everyone will understand, much more than an anecdote, and it is this sudden revelation of what is possible that I deliberately chose to single out in order to give true meaning to the evocation of my childhood and my lived experience as a Jew in a Muslim land.

Almost at the same time—this must have been in 1953–1954—without anything to prepare me or give me the idea, I remember having once again, very naturally, joined my Muslim friends to protest every night at dusk, chanting slogans calling for the end of the French Protectorate and the return to the throne of Mohamed V, who had been exiled to Madagascar by the French authorities.

There was nothing heroic about this. We were all roughly twelve years old, we ran through the narrow Souiri streets calling for the independence of Morocco and for freedom in our country, chased—but without much conviction—by the

auxiliary troops of the day, and this ritual lasted for several months, to the great displeasure of our parents, who worried about their progeny.<sup>3</sup>

This, for example, this could be a mere anecdote, but I still ask myself today about what could have prompted a twelve-year old child, a student of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the French school system, to spontaneously identify with the Moroccan national movement, when everyday he sat at his school bench and was taught that his ancestors were Gauls and that his past, like his future, began and ended with France.<sup>4</sup>

It was only after the fact that the answer to this question naturally occurred to many of us, when we consciously reappropriated this Jewish-Muslim capillarity, constructed and maintained by both groups, whose depth and permanence are found in the expression of the truest and most typical gestures of our everyday existence, thus determining—and more so than any other rhetoric or theory—our essential choices and our most fundamental behaviors.

This chronicle of the lived annals of Muslim and Jewish children in Mogador-Essaouira, I revisit it today with yearning and delight.

In evoking it here, I nevertheless have a strange and almost guilty feeling of lifting the veil on something unsayable, something to be handled with care and according to instruction, because history—the one with a capital H, the History of textbooks, of research, and of literature—had only begun to open its doors to us, and because, in the interval, all manner of cliché and fantasy had rushed in to fill the vacuum.

By default, and also out of ignorance, suspicion reigns supreme, hovering over everything, provoking doubt and sometimes worry at the mention of this soul-searching that has the audacity to assert itself against the grain of a single and dominant logic.

A thought that, at best, would have condemned me to amnesia and denial, and, at worst, to the complicit silence at the side of those who have, in the end, gotten used to seeing their identity and their history reconstructed or rewritten according to nothing more than the whims of the moment.

The profoundly Moroccan celebration of the last day of *Pessach*, Passover, takes on, in this perspective of resistance to forgetting, a dimension at once emblematic of the art of all possibilities, and above all incredibly symbolic of the degree of

3. Souiri is the adjectival form of Essaouira.

4. The author's comment about being taught that his ancestors were Gauls is a reference to the expression "nos ancêtres les Gaulois," an abbreviation of the now notorious first line of the preeminent history manual written by Ernest Lavisse in 1870. Promulgated in French schools under the Third Republic (1870–1940), the phrase was nothing less than a declaration of doctrine, brandished in service of national unity and republican identity. The exportation of the expression—along with the history books that contained it—to colonial schools has become one of the great ironies of French pedagogy, as pupils clearly not of European extraction were required to learn the phrase by heart. See Eugen Weber, "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois," *My France: Politics, Culture, Myth*, chap. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 21–39.

spiritual and cultural affinity and proximity that Muslims and Jews have expressed and preserved in Morocco over the centuries.

In Essaouira-Mogador, and throughout the kingdom, Mimouna—the name of this popular holiday—took place once a year for centuries with an air of carnival, with its parades and its bonfires.<sup>5</sup> The festival witnessed the city coming together to form one long Judeo-Muslim cohort, hand in hand, singing the same songs and celebrating the freedom and the happiness of being together with the same fervor.

In the streets of Essaouira and on the market square, transformed for the occasion into an extravaganza of joyous fraternity, the festivities began at dusk and would last for hours: there was an unceasing wave of dancers, musicians, and families in their Sunday best, embracing each other, congratulating each other, and exchanging the traditional formula for good wishes and solidarity in dialectal Arabic: *Terbah . . .* (May you flourish and your year be prosperous . . .).

Prior to this particularly moving spectacle, Muslim families would go to Jewish houses in the city. Beginning at sunset, their doors were open wide to their Muslim neighbors and friends who arrived with armfuls of trays loaded with milk, honey, butter, stalks of wheat, and flowers to celebrate this moment of grace that commemorated the exodus of the Jews from Egypt and the end of their enslavement.

This history of Jewish life in the Muslim world, which has yet to be written, is not that of a fiction staged out of deference, or in service of the cause of those with whom I identify, and who fight so that Palestinians and Israelis live in peace each in their own state, each accepting that the other has the same duties and the same rights to dignity, to justice, and to sovereignty.

On the contrary, the moment has come to say, to write, and to make known through our testimonies that our respective religions, cultures, and histories must no longer serve as alibis or as disguises for political realities that require political responses. Between Jews and Muslims today, the contentious subjects are not religious, cultural, or historical. They are political, and our spiritualities have very little to do with them.

Long awaited and hoped for by many among us, a trend is finally appearing in the Muslim Mediterranean for the recognition and reconstruction of the cultural and spiritual diversity that has shaped and greatly determined our societies. This recovery is legitimate in and of itself, but it can also be decisive in bringing about another dynamic, particularly between Jews and Muslims.

What was true yesterday can illuminate the modernity and universality of the values our societies must reappropriate.

Morocco has understood this clearly in enshrining in the preamble of its new Constitution, approved by popular vote in 2011, the founding role and deep roots

5. Mimouna is a traditional Moroccan Jewish festival, celebrated at the end of Passover. It is characterized by lavish food preparations, including special breads, pastry, and other foods that are forbidden during Passover. While the practice was recorded as early as the eighteenth century, its name and origins are a subject of dispute.

of the Berber, Jewish, and Andalusian civilizations in Moroccan society, and in the identity of the Moroccan people.

I maintain, for my part, that whatever the deviations, lapses in memory, or errors of the moment, history always catches up with us to impose the certainty of its facts.

This little bag of earth, brought back more than a half-century ago from Jerusalem, then under Jordanian control, by a Muslim Moroccan to his Jewish Moroccan friend, has lost nothing of its importance, its exemplary nature, and its truth.

That was, of course, several decades ago; I was the witness, and my father and his friend Hajj the Imam were the actors. None of us three, in the magic of that exciting moment of shared fraternity, would have imagined that this real history would one day find its succession in the preamble to the new Constitution proposed to the Moroccan people by King Mohamed VI.

Of course, the joyous and shared spectacle of the feast of Mimouna no longer occupies the market square in Essaouira, but it is again in Essaouira that, for close to ten years now, Jewish and Muslim poets, singers, and musicians get together to celebrate the Festival of Atlantic Andalusian Music, and share with music-lovers from all over the world the words and music embroidered and woven from a common heritage sung alternately in Arabic and Hebrew.

History, it is true, has often stumbled in its laborious and uncertain bid to recover the lost splendor that is the sum total of our combined cultures.

But, as should be clear, my Jewish life in a Muslim land is not simply a nostalgic childhood memory, and it is not only written in the past.

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

The New Ghetto, Meknes

---

## The Ocean in a Carafe

Marcel Bénabou

Evoking my Moroccan childhood is a fairly familiar exercise for me. I began doing it early on and have hardly stopped. It is as if my memory wanted to ensure that it never missed a chance to call up this curious period of my life. Of course, I knew that childhood memories are all too often skewed, sometimes even completely reconstructed in order to paint ordinary people, things, and places in an ideal light, to give them more or less mythical proportions. But I had persuaded myself that my memory, however selective or partial it might be for certain things, remained unassailable when it came to my youth. Unlike other peoples' ever-changing childhoods, my own was unfailingly consistent; the traces it left are not easily erased. Certain impressions, sensations, emotions, and beliefs were inscribed in me with such detail and precision that they influenced many of the choices I made as an adult. It is precisely these traces that are worth calling up here. It would be impossible, in these few pages, to paint a vast fresco in which each episode of my life would find its rightful place.<sup>1</sup> To do so would be "to try to fit the entire ocean in a carafe," to quote Flaubert.<sup>2</sup> But it is not without a pang of regret that I have decided to forego here a lengthy description of the seductive powers of the unparalleled landscapes, the striking colors, the exotic delicacy of tastes and smells. . . .

1. Author's note: An example of an attempt at this type of exercise can be found in Nessim Sibony's *Enfance juive au Maroc. Paradis perdu?* (Los Angeles: JT Productions, 2003): it took him no less than 420 pages. I've tried my own hand at this type of remembering in a few of my books, notably in *Jacob, Ménaïhem et Mimoun, Une épopée familiale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995) and in *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres* (3rd ed; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2010). (Editors' note: the titles by Bénabou are available in English translation: *Jacob, Ménaïhem and Mimoun: A Family Epic* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998] and *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996].)

2. Author's note: Flaubert is quoted as saying this in the Goncourt brothers' Journal (Feb 11, 1863).

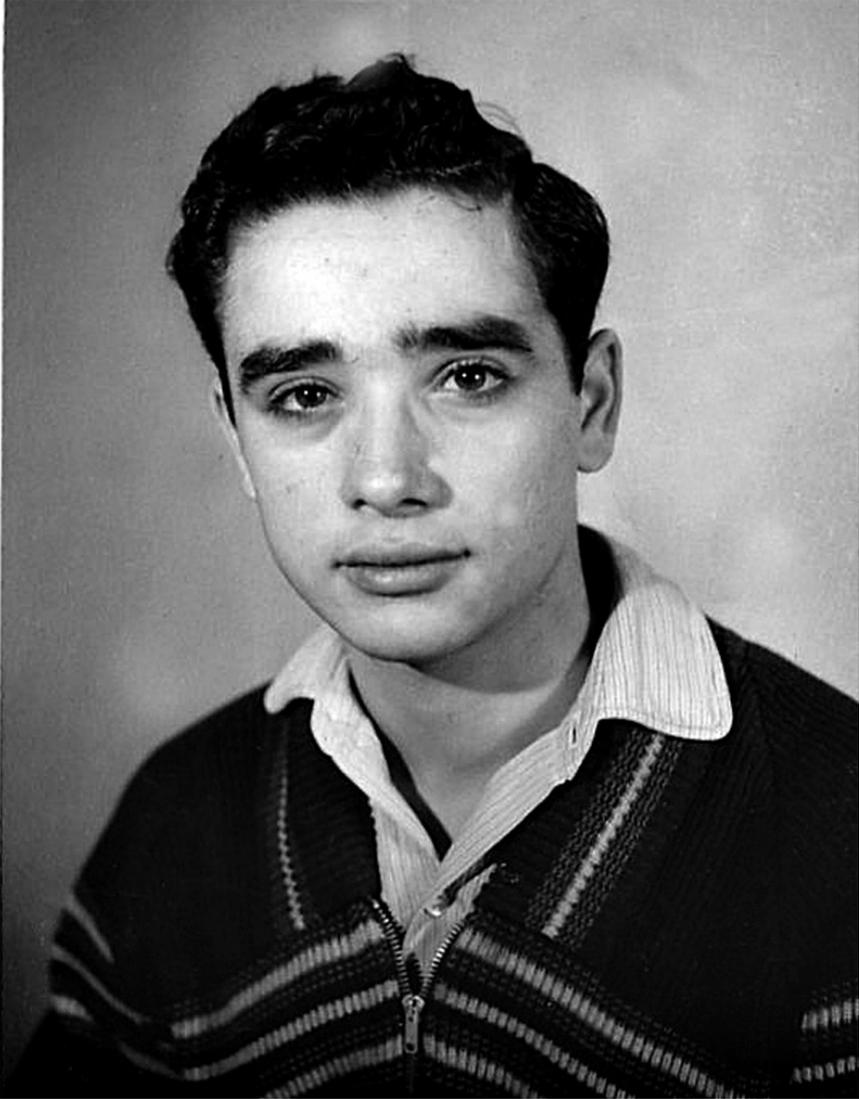


FIGURE 30. Marcel Bénabou, adolescent in Meknes.

From my birth in 1939 until my departure for Paris in 1956, I lived in Morocco, where French colonial domination took the form of a “protectorate”—with the highly differentiated and hierarchical social structure that came along with it.<sup>3</sup> I was born in Meknes, the city where my family had always lived. My childhood lasted until I was at least thirteen—the age of adulthood in religious terms,

3. Author’s note: Morocco became independent in March 1956.

celebrated by the solemn rite of the bar mitzvah—and in those thirteen years I believe it is possible to identify three principal stages, each of which contributed in its own way to the forging of a different aspect of my identity.

The first of these stages covers the very first years of my life, during which I slowly and progressively discovered the little world that constituted my immediate surroundings: my parents (who, in their forties, were considered relatively old); my three big brothers; my three big sisters (I was the seventh child in a family of eight); the family house that was too small to hold us; the neighbors' houses filled with children my age who would, along with a few of my cousins, become my inseparable playmates; and, finally, the neighborhood, the "the new mellah," entirely inhabited by Jews, as the name suggests.<sup>4</sup>

Inside this tiny little world—which was, for me, *the* world—daily life was utterly subordinated to the rhythms imposed by the Jewish calendar. First and foremost was the strict distinction between ordinary days and Saturday: every Friday I would watch as my mother struggled to get through the thousands of cooking and house cleaning tasks that were essential to the Shabbat celebration. Then it was the well-organized cycle of high holidays, which gave each year its unshakeable structure. I quickly understood that every holiday had its own particular form of celebration. Both at home and at the synagogue, each holiday had a particular atmosphere: grave and solemn for Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) or Yom Kippur; relaxed and joyful for Purim or Hanukkah. Each had a specific, delicious menu, the ingredients for which had to be procured in advance, occasionally with some difficulty. But most of all, every holiday had its own prayers written in old and precious books that my father only took out of the cabinet on these occasions: this is certainly why I was convinced, early in life, that there existed an intimate link between the book and the sacred, between reading and praying.

I should admit that, at this particular point in my life, I was especially sensitive to a few very concrete details that I found both odd and exciting: the apple dipped in honey at Rosh Hashanah that guaranteed a year full of sweetness; on Yom Kippur, the final flailing of the many chickens (one for each member of the family), whose throats were slit by a rabbi right before our eyes, in accordance with traditional ritual, and whose deaths were supposed to carry away our sins; the week of Sukkot, during which our meals were to be eaten in a hut covered with reeds set up at the back of our yard; the masks worn by all of the children of the neighborhood on Purim; and the large copper plate bearing symbolic foods that my father held up over our heads on Passover. I could go on and on, but I must move on to the second stage. This one is linked to the early years of my education, which took place in two utterly different realms: one French, the other Hebraic.

4. Author's note: In Moroccan cities, "mellah" was the name of the Jewish quarter. At the beginning of the 1920s, in Meknes, a brand-new neighborhood bearing the name "new mellah" was constructed right next to the old mellah, which dated from the end of the seventeenth century and the reign of Moulay Ismaël.

In October 1945, I began school at the Alliance, where I spent five years.<sup>5</sup> I have to insist here on the seductive effect that the place had on me, right from the start. From the vast, verdant, almost always sun-dappled playground full of pepper trees, to the classrooms: the dais with the wooden teacher's desk; the inkwells full of deep violet ink; the boxes of colored chalk; the damp rag gliding over the chalkboard; the huge, brightly colored maps that hung on the walls; and the etchings that recounted the major events in the history of France. My first days as a pupil were not easy, but my older sister, who was a teacher, helped me immensely, and I made fast progress, particularly in French, a field in which I was found to be unusually gifted. I did it all well: dictation, grammar, essays . . . but what I loved most of all was that with each passing school year I entered more deeply into a universe that I discovered through reading, a universe that was as strange as it was fascinating. As soon as I could get a hold of that special textbook made up of selected readings, I would go straight to the last section of the book, the part made up of short tales and stories, only a few pages each. This was my first encounter with fiction, and it gave me delicious shivers I had never known before, sensations so intense that, sometimes, I would take up the stories and rewrite them in my own way.

At the same moment in time, I had a very different relationship with the Talmud Torah, the rabbinic school that I had to attend during the summer months and where I felt very ill at ease. Nothing about the school inspired me: not the place itself (a squat building stuffed to the gills with students); not the teachers (bearded old rabbis whose teaching techniques were fairly archaic); and not my fellow students (most of whom were already teenagers with whom I had little in common). Notwithstanding all of this, my compulsory education at this institution had a few positive effects: it allowed me to complete my religious training so that I could have a bar mitzvah, and to work on my Hebrew, which I had started learning with my mother. It was at this point that my intense interest in language and language games began to manifest. I had access to three different idioms: French, which came in first; dialectal Arabic, which we still used fairly frequently; and Hebrew. But I discovered rather quickly that, in our way of talking, all three could be combined together in ways more or less complex to form a kind of "sub-language." We were careful to adapt our "sub-language" to our interlocutors, and each one had its own proper lexicon, syntax, and pronunciation. These linguistic gymnastics were both fun and intellectually stimulating.

This exercise carried over into the final stage, the phase of my secondary education. Shortly after we moved into a beautiful new house, big enough to comfortably hold our entire family, I began junior high—a decisive moment in my childhood.

5. Author's note: The Alliance is the abbreviated name of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a French institution created in the nineteenth century and which developed a vast network of schools for Jewish children in various countries of the Mediterranean.

For the first time, as an eleven-year-old student at the Poeymirau High School, an institution in the “new city,” I found myself outside the almost exclusively Jewish cocoon in which I’d grown up.<sup>6</sup> To get to school, I had to walk through the medina, an area I hardly knew. At high school, I discovered new teachers and new classmates: Christians, who made up the majority, and Muslims (although only a few), with whom relations were sometimes strained. But I also had access to new knowledge. Wearing the mantle of “good student” that I’d had since the end of primary school, I devoured all learning with an insatiable appetite. I was pleased to learn new languages—English, and especially Latin. The summer before I started junior high, one of my sisters had decided to teach me the basics of Latin grammar, which she had very cleverly presented as a game. A fun game based on rigorous logic: I loved it right away. The seed that would lead me to later specialize in the study of Roman civilization was planted then and there.

But this apparently beneficial and decisive turn didn’t come without a few bumps in the road. I had to learn to conform to new rules and values without forgetting the old ones. In other words, I had to accept to live every day in two more or less discordant realms, to lead a double life. With schooling, the gap between the two grew larger every year: I learned a history that had no link with my people’s past and a geography that did not correspond whatsoever to the actual environment in which I lived. Slowly but surely, everything I had known lost all value, and this fostered a permanent feeling of nostalgia and frustration, and a childhood that ended with all of the symptoms of what we might now call an identity crisis. But this, of course, is another chapter of my story . . .

—*Translated by Lia Brozgal*

6. Author’s note: The term “ville nouvelle” (new city) was used to designate the European part of the city, built at the start of the Protectorate and distinctly separated from the “medina,” or the Arab quarter.

Essaouira of Mogador

---

## God's Cradle

Ami Bouganim

It is impossible to elude the nanny's lullaby, impossible to shy away from her gestures and from the dreams in which she envelops us and that she continues to conjure through the divine echo of her voice. The lullaby's solicitude is never lost; it is impossible to forget without committing a sacrilege. We carry our cradle within us and are buried with it. We take it everywhere, in our journeys across the world, from one dwelling-place to another, transported by waves, from one port to another. I had a Berber cradle, with three rounded legs. It rocked to the rhythm of the sea that dampened the delicate and vulnerable ramparts of Essaouira of Mogador, situated on a peninsula in southern Morocco. When I returned there for the first time, thirty-five years after having left, the whole town felt like a cradle to me. The wintery warmth, the movement of the waves, the unvarying Berber chants. I no longer inhabited it; it inhabited me.

Mogador was a town made of lace that trembled when the wind kicked up. In the morning, seagulls unfurled the light of day; in the evening, gannets rolled it up again. On all sides, waves crashed against the rocks in a vain attempt to move them or get around them. The pine trees, majestic and imperturbable, replayed their old Patagonian roles; the rubber plants, disheveled and scruffy, no longer knew where to spread their branches; the palm trees pondered their nostalgia for the desert. Merchants offered grilled grasshoppers in jars and acorns boiled in cisterns. Crunchy meringues and melt-in-your-mouth pralines. Powder for all types of ink and herbs for all kinds of pain. Dried butterflies and lizard tails to bring good luck. In the shops, since converted into art galleries, almond sorters gave their seasonal concert. The call of the muezzin, the sound of bells ringing and the clock's toll bounced off the rammed earth of the ramparts, the white lime walls, the blue doors and shutters. The sea spray saturated itself with the black incantations of the Gnawas and the soft insinuations of swallows, the murmurings



FIGURE 31. “Bouquet of Brotherhood,” given by Ami Bouganim who has no photographs of himself as a child.

of soothsayers and the litanies of beggars.<sup>1</sup> Mogador was in a trance, and we joined the incessant procession that shook the city from the porte de la Marine to the porte de la Prairie and from the porte des Lions to the porte du Destin. Nostalgia is a sickness of the senses, the stomach, and the heart, more so than of the head. Everyone has their paradise lost, and Mogador is mine. I am forever longing for her. Yearning to receive her liturgical waves—whether at the foot of the Wailing

1. The Gnawa are an ethnic group in Morocco and Algeria of Western African origin. Traditional Gnawa music consists of ancient African Islamic ritual songs.

Wall or at Sacré-Coeur. Longing to make out her subdued voices in muffled memories and illuminated visions, to reconstitute with a rare precision her décor and her sites in my dreams. I left my childhood self in Mogador; I remain from there. The price of emigration, but also its compensation, is the cocoon whose caterpillar never became a butterfly and that remains the safe place where my memories are preserved.

As soon as I could walk, I was placed in the care of Rabbi Pinchas who ran a nursery school at his house. He was a devout man, dressed in a black djellaba, his head covered by the blue veil with white polka-dots worn by the sages of North African Judaism.<sup>2</sup> He lived on a somber street that connected Chaïla Square to the rue du Destin in the old casbah. We were a large flock of children, aged two to four, who repeated the letters of the Hebrew alphabet drawn on an old slate that the rabbi held against his chest. A litany that mixed Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic intonations—incomprehensible, senseless, indelible. It meant nothing; it meant everything. It was brazen; it was wise. It was deafening. Then each child was invited to identify the letter pronounced by the rabbi. When one of us got it wrong, our errant finger was placed between the rabbi's pincers, and he pinched so hard that he extracted a cry of penitence from the culprit.

It was the Divine Presence in all its fullness—candles flickering in the half-light, sobs caught in the throat, the feeling of abandonment—that was prisoner of this dingy and squalid street, which we hurried to cross in order to regain the reassuring light of day. But the Presence would remain there, a misty divinity, deaf and blind, waiting to be liberated from its imprisonment. When I went back for the first time, the caretaker of the cemetery showed me into a chamber with a tomb in the center. It was my old master. The first and last. The one and only. He had merited the distinguished honor of not being buried with common mortals. The caretaker handed me a skullcap and a prayer book. The kaddish didn't come to my lips.<sup>3</sup> It's meaningless if not enlivened by the echoes of ten or more people. Instead, what came to mind was one of Kafka's apologues, which I had to look up in my notes: "Here I am before my old master. He smiles at me and says, 'How can this be? You left my class such a long time ago. If I didn't have an inhumanly faithful memory of all my pupils, I would not have recognized you. But, as it is, I recognize you very well, yes, you are my pupil. But why have you come back?'"<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Pinchas left neither great works nor progeny. Years later, I would try to make up for his oppressive severity by devoting a story to him, in which I posit myself as his spiritual heir and lend him a copy of *The Kabbalah Unveiled*. I had him recite a

2. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women.

3. The kaddish is the Hebrew prayer for the dead.

4. Author's note: F. Kafka, *Récits et fragments narratifs*, La Pléiade, Vol. II, Gallimard, 1980, 411. (Editors' note: Unofficial English translation.)

quote from *The Book of Splendor*, which he spent his days reading: “The tohu-bohu are residues of ink that stick to the tip of the reed pen.”<sup>5</sup>

From Rabbi Pinchas’s nursery school, I moved up to the rabbinical school where I experienced the rich assortment of abuses dished out by the teachers there. God had momentarily left la rue de la Prison only to end up in the slum that was the mellah. It was the most squalid, overcrowded environment; deprivation at its extreme. It was humanity in transit, heading somewhere else, late for everything, stalled in its anticipation of the Messiah. In sordid secrecy, merely existing, raging against the wind. The roads were pitiful, as were the buildings, the streets, the faces; the prayers were insistent, whether uttered by cantors, beadles, or beggars. It was the pitiful people of God weakened by two thousand years of exile who chanted their chosenness and their degradation. Their deaf resistance was as seductive as it was repugnant. It was a human swamp that gave off a liturgical stench and nobody asked themselves if there was a God to listen to them. That was where I was taken, day after day, to receive His word.

Then we moved from the House of Wells in the medina to the cracked house of the casbah. The glass panes of the roof, tormented by the wind, shattered and smashed in the courtyard. The doors and shutters slammed incessantly, making the whole building shake. Mice and cats entered freely under the door. Swallows, in search of an emergency exit, bashed themselves against the walls. Flies, bees, and cockchafers fluttered around us until they wound up caught in one of the numerous cobwebs that laced the corners. And yet, it was paradise. The windows looked out onto the ramparts, the clock, and the porte des Lions, which was guarded by two minuscule bronze canons that we straddled under the vigilant eye of our mother, watching us behind the glass.

From then on, we were situated halfway between the Hebrew school and the colonial school. My father renounced the rabbinic ambitions he had entertained for me; my mother pushed me toward the secular classroom. It was a real school, complete with a courtyard planted with oak trees and poplars, a covered playground and . . . a weathervane knocked about by the wind. There was almost no longer any question of God. The Hebrew teacher contented himself with teaching us Hebrew grammar, in the best of the Spinozan traditions upheld by the Alliance. The Arabic teacher was the only one who unfailingly added “the prophet” every time he invoked Allah. We wore overalls and brandished our slates; colored chalk and white chalk were mixed together; and whereas at the rabbinical school the ink was black, at the Alliance it was purple.

On another return visit, I let myself be led by a colleague to consult a Gnawa fortuneteller. She had prepared everything—the tray of earthenware pottery, the blazing fire, and the incense. She completed her ritual. Then, when the moment

5. Author’s note: *Le Zohar* 30a, Tr. C. Mopsik, Éditions Verdier, Vol. I, 1981, 172. (Editors’ note: Unofficial English translation.)

came for her to speak, she withdrew, explaining that she had a migraine, which prevented her from practicing divination. She refused to speak, despite my insistence and that of my colleague. I've often asked myself what she saw or felt that made her refuse to share her predictions with me. Maybe she detected the influence of Aïcha Kandisha on me and did not want to expose her fears.<sup>6</sup> Out of discretion, out of hospitality . . . out of fear of the great Muquadama of the region.<sup>7</sup> Since then, I have fantasized incessantly about having a home in Mogador. Marquetry furniture, curtains with tassels, and mosaic tiles with Berber tones. Bay windows looking out onto the ocean, walls of glass to resist the wind and make it sing, a bedroom resembling the hold of a boat. Wrapped up in a lovely and intimate warmth, cradled by the waves, visited by seagulls, watched over by gannets, lost at home, ready to make the leap into the great silence. An extraterritoriality of body and soul, free from illusions of grandeur or ambition. To hide away behind the closed shutters to watch the ballet of the waves, unbeknownst to them. Then, from time to time, to cross paths with the Wind who, returning to Kafka, "plays with light existences, prolongs the life of the falling leaves,"<sup>8</sup> and which, in *The Kabbalah Unveiled* of Rabbi Pinchas, embodies and symbolizes God . . .

—Translated by Rebekah Vince

6. Aïcha Kandisha is a figure of Moroccan legend. Some stories hold her to be a mythical figure—a fairy, or even an ogress—and a great beauty who would prey on single men at night. Other stories classify her as an historical heroine who fought to push back the Portuguese invaders of Morocco.

7. *Muquadama* (typically spelled *muqadama* and usually transcribed as *mqadma* in Moroccan Arabic), signifies "leader." In this context, it refers back to Aïcha Kandisha.

8. Author's note: F. Kafka, *Lettre à Franz Werfel*, Décembre 1922, La Pléiade, Vol. III, 1202. (Editors' note: Unofficial English translation.)

Boulevard d'Anfa, Casablanca

---

## Flecks of Memory

Anny Dayan Rosenman

Childhood in Casablanca is a film in color. It's a coproduction in Technicolor and in stereo sound, with many extras. Everything there is colorful, musical. Everything there is double, divided, multiple, split; the places, the holidays, the first names, the languages, and even the dreams.

Then, there is the world of parents.

It is the outside world. We give them our hand, and we walk up the large avenues that cross the city, punctuated by palm trees. We hear the noise of the palms in the wind, and when we lift our heads, we see them shake their disheveled heads. We stroll on the rue Blaise-Pascal, on Saturday afternoons, when Jewish families flow in peaceful streams along the boulevard lined with fashion boutiques, and stop to introduce their future grooms and their eligible young women. In winter, we go by car for coffee on the Corniche and watch the sea, waiting for summer. In summer, we spend long days at Fedala, on the beach, and we don't come back till nighttime, drunk with sun and skin burnt with salt.

Our family ritual is to go to the cinema on Saturday night. Once we have walked up or down all the steps of the great temple, when the heavy red-velvet curtains with golden fringes have slowly pulled back, the Metro Goldwyn Mayer lion roars, again and again, to greet us, because he recognizes us as well.

Time is punctuated by family celebrations. For a marriage, there are almost always two parties. The first night, the bride wears a velvet dress, embroidered with gold, with gauzy sleeves; we are told that this is the great dress that belongs to the whole family, that it comes from Spain, and that we too—my female cousins and I—will wear it later. The women put henna on the palms of their hands as they sing, accompanied by the Andalusian musicians. The women have raucous voices that are unfamiliar to us.



FIGURE 32. Anny Dayan Rosenman, age nine, at Studio Marty (photographer), in Casablanca.

There are organs at the Algerian synagogue, just like in church. The beadle, who is the caretaker but also the master of ceremonies, wears a tri-corner hat and a coat festooned with golden chains; the children march after him shouting “Napoleon!” When the benediction is pronounced, there are festive but timid ululations, and the bride’s mother cries with emotion under a great wide-brimmed hat of organza.

The little girls wear white bobby socks, polished shoes with mother of pearl buttons, and petticoats that make their embroidered English dresses swell like flowers. Their male cousins wear tuxedos that make them look like little penguins.

Next, the bride dances with her father, while the musicians in red jackets play tangos and paso dobles. Around them, all the couples of the family move to the beat. The children find this very funny. They besiege the dance floor; they chase each other with loud cries; they weave between the couples and dive under the tables covered in sumptuous dishes. Old women catch them mid-flight and hold them close, just long enough to bless them, in Arabic, in Hebrew, in Spanish, and to prophesize a future marriage as beautiful as this one. These elderly women are all our aunts, and we have to call them "*signora*."

When it isn't a marriage, it's a bar mitzvah. In our world, we didn't say "bar-mitzvah" but rather "communion," even "first communion." The same musicians, the same dancers, the same blessings, the same discreet tears.

At home, it's the world of the grandmother, an enclosed world. Its borders are the walls of the villa. Time is marked by Jewish holidays whose cycle does not challenge the other calendar, but rather duplicates it and intensifies it. The children and grandchildren respect the time over which the grandmother presides and of which she is the keeper, all the while bringing it into harmony with what she calls "French time."

For Christmas, we get presents and are photographed with a nice old man who has a cotton-wool beard. We dream of snow, a snow that none of us has ever seen and that will fall in big flakes, just like in the movies. But at almost the same time, at home, Hanukkah, the emotional festival of lights, brings us together at nightfall, around a song sung from night to night and before a lamp for which my grandmother has prepared long wicks soaked in oil.

And at almost the same time as Carnival, for which we were bought masks and party favors in the joke and novelty store owned by an Italian behind the place de France, there was Purim, which brought together all her grandsons and granddaughters around an immense children's table.<sup>1</sup> For the occasion she made strange breads in the shape of faces, with two round, white eyes—two eggs imprisoned in a little pastry lattice that looked at us with an empty and terrifying gaze. These eyes, she told us, were Haman's. For dessert, we also had Haman's ears: rosette pastries dipped in honey. Before this cannibalistic dinner, she told us of the beauty of Esther, the courage of Mordechai, and the perversity of Haman who wanted to kill all the Jews. The children were much more moved by these stories than by the incomprehensible prayers that accompanied the meal, and it was with conviction that they banged their spoons on the table, each time the name of Haman was said. One of the uncles didn't miss the opportunity to name a contemporary Haman: it

1. As recounted in the book of Esther, the holiday of Purim celebrates the Jews' escape from the evil Persian official Haman, who sought their destruction.

was Hitler, or Nasser, who threatened Israel, or an irascible neighbor, or even the most boisterous of the male cousins.

Everything was shared, festive, all mixed up together. Yes, that was it. To be a Jewish child, at that time and in that place, was perhaps to have the happy awareness that worlds, rituals, layers of memory could be overlapping, superimposed, mixed up in a joyous incoherence. But it was also to hear a secret feminine voice talking of another time in the orphaned language that had found refuge in my grandmother. For my grandmother spoke the other language, the despised one, and she shared the dreams and words of her exiled language with the youngest granddaughter, the one who was too little to go to school. The others, the brother and the sister, only lived in the world outside, the world in French. They knew how to read and were bought copies of *Spirou*, *La Semaine de Suzette*, and *Mickey Mouse*.<sup>2</sup> But as soon as the villa was invaded by the huge mauve shadows of dusk, the grandmother would make the little girl sit next to her, on a little wooden bench, and without ever turning on the light, she told stories. The child waited without speaking, so as not to frighten away the words.

*Kan ma kan*.<sup>3</sup> Everything always began this way. On her neck, the little girl felt the shiver of beginnings. The tales took place in a city, always the same, with terraces and fountains, guarded by one hundred Black slaves. Veiled in blue, his silver dagger at his side, Haroun al-Rashid strolled through the city every night without escort.<sup>4</sup> He stopped before his subjects' windows to hear their confidences, their complaints, and their dreams. He granted the wishes of some, punished others. In the other language, the voice made itself elegant to describe the way that the king's wives were perfumed, that they were massaged with essence of sandalwood, amber, and musk. The voice made itself mysterious to evoke the tortures inflicted on wrongdoers. They were killed, said the voice in a strange formula, "hair by hair."

But most often the tales celebrated the lofty deeds of miraculous saints. The little girl understood that the saints had established a sort of direct communication with God. It was like a telephone call, but one that took place at night, in their dreams. As soon as they closed their eyes and they fell asleep, they saw the place where treasures were hidden or victims buried, they saw who was guilty of unsolved crimes. They were told of dangers to come and they sometimes warned

2. *Spirou* was a francophone Belgian comic magazine that published weekly comics, including some of the best-known serials such as *Lucky Luke* and *Les Schtroumpfs* (forerunners of *The Smurfs*). *La Semaine de Suzette*, a bi-weekly French magazine whose target audience was young French Catholic girls, is notable for having created the character Bécassine, a simple young girl from Brittany.

3. A variation of the Arabic expression *kan ya ma kan*, which is used in a similar way to the English expression "once upon a time"; its literal meaning is "it was or it was not" or "it happened or it did not."

4. Harun al-Rachid was an historical figure, a legendary Abbasid caliph who reigned in Baghdad (763–809), during which time the city reached a cultural apex. Al-Rachid signifies "the just," the upright, or the "rightly guided." He is the subject of many legends and tales; certain episodes from *One Thousand and One Nights* are based on Harun and his court.

the grandmother through signs that she knew how to recognize and interpret. When they didn't dream, they cared for and cured the daughters of the king, and these women would then treat the Jews with goodness. They rode lions, they hid in caves subsisting only on dates for years, sometimes they made giants out of terracotta, and on their foreheads, they wrote the word "*emet*," which means "truth."<sup>5</sup>

Soon, too soon, one would hear the sound of the big entry gate and then the key in the lock, and the child felt as though torn. Her mother, as soon as she arrived, would turn on all the lights in the villa. She spoke loudly, hammered the floor with her high heels, and she chased away the shadows, the signs, and the dreams. Then the child blinked her eyes, dazzled, deafened by these shouts, before running, delivered and relieved, toward her mother, as though she had escaped from some danger. Ungrateful, without a care for the grandmother, she took her distance from the twilight world. She wasn't aware that it had dug paths within her, woven its weft deep in her soul, installed voices that would call out to her at night in her sleep, that would call her from beyond space, exile, and forgetting, toward the matrix language and toward the time that existed before that of Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood.

But try as she might to respond to their call, she could never reach them. Even in her dreams, the film of childhood is henceforth a silent movie in black and white, from which the actors have disappeared and whose surface is crisscrossed with silver streaks that mark the place where the image of memory has been touched and corroded.

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

5. *Emet* means "truth" in Hebrew.

Place des Ferblantiers, Marrakesh

---

## Mamada

Lucette Heller-Goldenberg

I was born in 1942 in Marrakesh. My place of birth protected me. If I had come into the world in Europe, I would perhaps have met the same fate as my grandmother Lisa Goldenberg-Goldenzweig, in Auschwitz.

On my father's side, we were stateless, like so many Jews to whom Romania refused to grant nationality, thereby depriving them of any identity papers. We didn't become French until 1947. On my mother's side, I was a Moroccan Jew of Berber origin, from Oufrane, which my ancestors left first to go live in Mogador, as merchants for the King, and then in Marrakesh.

In this North African land, my family name sounded so strange to everyone that people always butchered it. We weren't the Goldenbergs, but the Gudambers, the Gautembers, the Goldinberges, the Goldambergers, and sometimes even the Gutenbergs. A mere pronunciation problem? No, rather the rejection of a foreign identity. No effort was ever made to assimilate us under the same label as the Duponts and the Durands, the Levys and the Cohens, or the Fatmas and Mohameds. Where were we to fit in all that?

It is true that during the Protectorate, Morocco lived in the most hermetic form of separatism. Marshal Lyautey, the country's first resident general, in an effort to protect each community's particularities, deemed it appropriate to segregate these groups that existed side by side in Moroccan cities.<sup>1</sup> This noble decision led to a formidable partitioning. There were no bridges between the Muslim medina, the

1. The resident general was the official appointed to oversee the French administration in Morocco during the protectorate (1912–1956). In the eyes of international law, Morocco remained a sovereign state and the Sultan (later, the King) retained his status as its symbolic leader. In practice, however, the French exerted an enormous amount of power and influence over nearly all aspects of life.

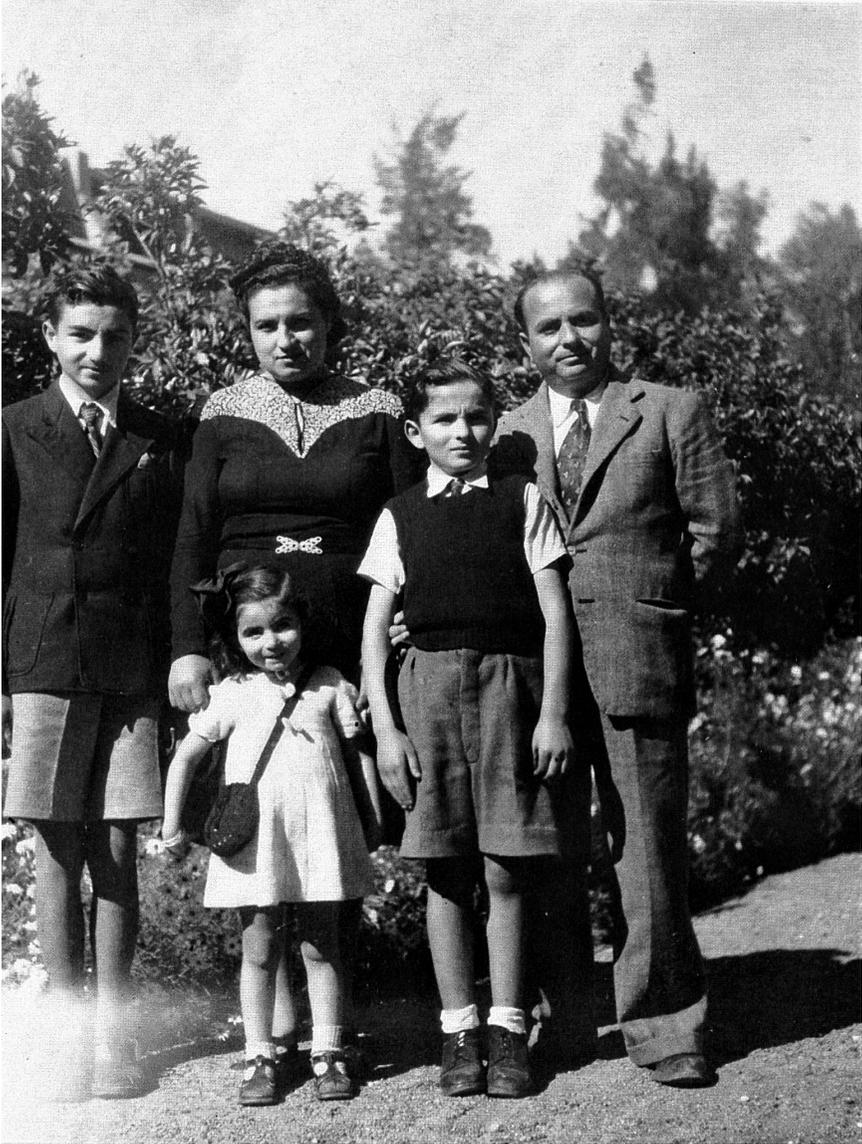


FIGURE 33. Lucette, the young girl in front, surrounded by her family, in the Mamounia Gardens in Marrakesh in 1946.

Jewish mellah, and the new European town, which together formed Dante's three circles of hell.<sup>2</sup>

Case in point: the Marrakesh swimming pool was reserved for Muslims on Friday, for Jews on Saturday, and for Europeans on Sunday, when the pool would be drained and refilled for them prior to opening. I didn't go to the Marrakesh pool. Which day would have been mine? And throughout my first eighteen years spent in Morocco, I never once crossed the threshold of a Muslim or European home, even though I had Christian and Muslim classmates.

I was Jewish, but we were not the practicing sort, and what's more, my father was Ashkenazi, while the Moroccan Jews were highly religious and Sephardic. As a teacher in the Alliance Israélite Universelle, my father was greatly esteemed by the local Jewry, but with his blue eyes and Parisian looks, he was not considered one of their own. And consequently, nor was I, whom they took to be a French girl, and who therefore never crossed a Jewish threshold either. On the other hand, in the eyes of the French, I was a Jew, since I didn't attend catechism or Mass and had a name that was hardly Catholic.

So, although I was kept very much at its margins, the Moroccan Jewish world is the one I'm recalling here. This world, which has practically disappeared since nearly all of the four hundred thousand souls that made up this community have sought exile in Israel, France, Canada, or the United States, was also mine, a legacy of my maternal grandmother, Mamada. However charmed I am by this twilight world's evocation of a bygone time, my main concern here, as a custodian to the legacy it represents, is to enrich and safeguard its memory.

My grandmother was very observant. She would spend hours in the kitchen preparing sumptuous dishes in terracotta tagines that simmered on *mezmers*, or small charcoal-fed grills. She refused to go modern. Her slow-cooking method gave these delicacies a very particular flavor that came to shape my gustatory memory. Nor would she have anything to do with refrigerators, insisting that cold water made her sick. Nothing was better than water stored in a clay jar sealed with a stopper made of dried grass, to keep the bugs out. This was the only water that could quench her thirst—cool, healthy, and natural. Mamada knew how to blend spices and other ingredients, while keeping an impeccably kosher kitchen.

Her cooking involved the kind of insider knowledge to which few were privy. When I would ask her about even the simplest orange salad with garlic, black olives, and red chili pepper seasoned with argan oil, or about the special way she grilled chili peppers (I never ventured into the intricacies of her more elaborate dishes like stuffed cardoons, lamb with *tavras*,<sup>3</sup> celery and meatballs, stuffed artichokes, or her turnovers—delicate little triangular pastries stuffed with meat), she would give me advice as to how best to prepare them, but I could never reproduce

2. The author may be confusing here Dante's three categories of sin with his nine circles of hell.

3. *Tavras* are known in standard Arabic as *terfass*, translated into English as white truffles, or desert truffles. The dish in question is commonly known as *rfisa* or *trid*, which can be made with chicken or lamb, but which always includes lentils and fenugreek.

her exquisite results. I'd go back to her. Perhaps she had forgotten to include a key ingredient? "No," she'd tell me, laughing, "you just don't quite have the touch!"

At Mamada's, daily life harked back to biblical times. Mouchi, a trusted servant with the wizened face of a Rembrandt elder—as Elias Canetti noted in his *The Voices of Marrakesh*<sup>4</sup>—would sit and tell the stories of Rachel, Esther, and Abraham as if he'd just run into them in the marketplace. Jews lived among Biblical characters as a matter of course.

Her whole life was organized around timeless rituals; I was naïve enough to believe that things would stay that way forever, as they had thus far.

The calendar year was punctuated by a series of feast days, and we always went to Mamada's to celebrate them, since she was our family's faithful guardian of purest tradition. Rosh Hashanah was associated with her seven-vegetable soup, and Sukkot with the meal eaten beneath a sukkah built of braided reeds. Simchat Torah evokes the memory of seeing the normally dour Jewish elders dancing in jubilation right there in the synagogue, holding the sacred scrolls in their arms, head and shoulders draped in their fringed tallits.<sup>5</sup> On Hanukkah, we proceeded to light our tinplate Hanukkah, which people sometimes made out of old sardine cans decorated with pieces of colored glass. What remains etched in my mind from Purim is the endless megillah reading.<sup>6</sup> I was also dazzled by the sumptuous Jewish bridal gowns worn by the girls who played the role of Esther in the plays performed at my father's school. I can recall walking to the communal oven to pick up the bread that Mamada had kneaded into a fine loaf for her two little grand-daughters, a bread made with anise seeds, turmeric, and a whole egg tucked beneath a lattice of thin dough strips, which we called Haman's eye, that I would take pleasure in breaking to avenge ourselves of this fabled traitor.

On the first night of Passover, the whole family would gather around my aunt's table to read the Haggadah.<sup>7</sup> When my uncle told of the ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians as punishment for seeking to exterminate the Jews, we would all pound on the table with the backs of our spoons, crying "*dayenou*" ("it would have been enough")—with each beat. I also recall the tiny glasses of sweet wine from Morocco's Demnat region; the bland, unleavened matzah that went along with the maror; the bitter herbs to be dipped in haroset, a sweet confection of dates, figs, nuts, and rose petals. When mealtime came, I was always perplexed by the

4. A Nobel-prize winning writer best known for his work in German, Elias Canetti (1905–1994) was a Bulgarian-born Jew whose mother tongue was Ladino. *The Voices of Marrakesh* is based on Canetti's three-week stay in the city in 1954, and stands as one of the most important travelogs written about that city, first published in German in 1967.

5. A *tallit* is a fringed prayer shawl worn primarily by Jewish men in more observant traditions.

6. *Megillah*, here, refers to the Book of Esther, read on Purim.

7. The Haggadah is the text that contains the story of the Jews' enslavement in Egypt, and their redemption. The Seder is organized around the reading of the Haggadah, which prescribes the stages of the ceremonial meal.

enigmatic empty chair left for the prophet Elijah whose place was always set at the Seder table. We were at last rewarded after all those lengthy prayers with a fresh fava bean soup and a lamb tagine with tavras. Then, at Mimouna, we'd pay visits to family and neighbors, where we would sample their bercok, pearl couscous served with whey, and crepe-like mouffletas.<sup>8</sup> It was always a joy to return to making these yeast-based foods that tradition forbade us to eat during the previous eight days.

On Saturdays at noon, we would go to Mamada's to have some of her srina, which she would have sent to the communal oven to simmer for twenty-four hours.<sup>9</sup> It was a treat every time. We would feast on eggs and roasted potatoes browned from being cooked so slowly in their unctuous chickpea broth. And I can't talk about food without mentioning Mamada's sweet-and-savory meat stuffing.

We would then take the time to sip a glass of tea made either with mint or shiba.<sup>10</sup> Out the living-room window, we could see street performers who'd come over from the Jemaa el-Fna Square to entertain the Jews, who would give them a few coins in return. The clowns would have their trained monkeys imitate the Jew digesting his srina. The animal would stretch out on its back, one forepaw behind his head, and pretend to be taking a long snooze.

All those flavors have disappeared forever, as have the moments of family joy, the jokes and stories, the laughter and emotion, shared in Arabic and French, with a few words in Hebrew added for blessing the bread and wine at the start of the meal. Though we did not respect Shabbat, we were always happy to share in the fervor of this meal that meant so much to Mamada. She knew that we drove our car, and went to school, but she took no offense.<sup>11</sup> She understood that the demands of our way of life were different from hers. These two worlds existed side by side, and would occasionally merge, then separate once again, always seamlessly, never colliding. This was the image of 1950s Judaism in Morocco: a mixture of East and West, of tradition and modernity, where Jews wearing both traditional djellabas and three-piece suits all spoke to one another in both Arabic and French.<sup>12</sup>

I left Marrakesh when I was 18, after earning my *baccalauréat*, and headed to France to attend university. I used to love returning to my home in January, to

8. Mimouna is a traditional Moroccan Jewish festival, celebrated at the end of Passover. It is characterized by lavish food preparations, including special breads, pastry, and other foods that are forbidden during Passover. While the practice was recorded as early as the eighteenth century, its name and origins are a subject of dispute.

9. *Srina* is likely a deformation of *skhina* (also called *dafina*), one of the best known North African Jewish dishes. It is a slow-cooked stew served typically for Shabbat.

10. *Shiba* (also written *chiba*) is absinthe; in Morocco, tea with absinthe is typically consumed in fall and winter.

11. In observant Jewish traditions, people refrain from doing any work on Shabbat, including driving or using other machinery.

12. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women.

my town in the snow-covered Atlas Mountains set against the bluest sky and the fiery red sunsets that highlighted the fine silhouette of palm trees. I was aware I was living my life at two speeds, with one foot in the swirl of intellectual discovery that was forging my personality as I traveled the world in search of answers to my existential questions, and the other foot planted firmly in Moroccan Judaism, from which I'd long been emancipated, though it remained as familiar as always.

When I left Marrakesh at the end of January 1965, I never sensed it would be forever. Like a migrating stork, I thought I'd always have a cozy nest to come home to, unchanged, at the end of my wanderings. But there is no more Jewish life in Morocco, just like all the other Muslim countries that have been emptied of their Jews. All that's left is memory.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Imin Tanout, Morocco

---

## Crossing an Invisible Distance

Nicole S. Serfaty

Oh, to walk once again down those narrow lanes, along the tiny stone paths where our clumsy feet once trod! In Imin Tanout, that cheerful Middle Atlas village where my consciousness was awakened, I find myself once again before the rusty old clock placed at the village's sole crossroads at the behest of a debonair inspector general during the Protectorate.<sup>1</sup> It lists dangerously to one side, and hasn't kept time for decades. But this broken clock never ceases to enliven my rebellious spirit, emerging like a demon from my memory—which is already full to the brim—every time someone has the audacity to utter that treacherous phrase: “We have watches, but they have time.”<sup>2</sup>

Since the beginning of time, my village has never pegged its existence to the hands of a clock. In order to keep pace with the rest of the world, the inhabitants would observe the sky, the clouds, the winds, the trees, the animals, their relatives, their children, and their traditions. Now, this same village continues its trajectory without us, indifferent to our definitive separation, leaving it to Moroccan history to inscribe two thousand years of cohabitation between Berbers and Jews in its records, and to nuance the story of the Jews' emancipation from their so-called immutable seclusion.

Of the interactions between the two neighboring societies that we formed, I retain a few small secrets mixed with a myriad of impressions, sensations altered by time, minuscule gray zones. The memory that I have of these interactions

1. We have opted to retain the author's spelling of her hometown in two words (Imin Tanout) even though its rendering as a single word (Imintanout, sometimes Imintanoute) is the most internationally recognized spelling. It is worth noting, however, that the town's name is also rendered certain Berber languages as Imi n Tanut, meaning “well” or “abundant water source.”

2. The proverb in question typically reads: “You have the watches, we have the time.” It isn't clear here whether or not the author's revision of this saying is intentional or not.



FIGURE 34. Nicole S. Serfaty with her father and her brother in 1956, the year Morocco gained independence, on the boulevard de la Gare, Casablanca.

cannot possibly be authentic, since it seems to me that my memory cheats a bit. So what? Those songs of joy and the ululations that escape from the forest of cedars neighboring Mogador where I've returned on vacation, those women in ceremonial dress, sitting in the shade around a cradle, with pastries and teapots at their feet, cannot be reduced to mere bedazzlement. This scene seems infinitely far off and intimately close at the same time. It was described to me on countless occasions through snippets, in the form of anecdotes, by my mother, my aunts, their close female relatives, and the young Berber teenagers who served them and who were present at every family ceremony.

I draw closer to the group and to the baby, who is enthroned in a wicker cradle and dressed in an elegant white caftan embroidered in gold. I am immediately convinced, though I have no proof other than vague memories of family stories, that in the past my young cousins slept in the very same cradle, and that the songs had barely changed since. "It's a little girl," my mother tells me. "Her name is Itto!" I feel a slight pang; Itto is the Berber diminutive of my first name, Esther. When I was a little girl, everyone called me that, apart from my mother, who called me Tittote, and my brothers, who made my name rhyme with "tête de linotte."<sup>3</sup>

The young mother spontaneously invites me to join the group of women and, while I make myself comfortable on the Berber rug, under a stand of trees, propped up by cushions covered in embroidered silk, she explains to me that the birth of a girl deserves to be celebrated as much as that of a boy. The women in my family thought and acted no differently, singing the midwife's praises in the same way:

*O midwife! O gentle one!  
 Bringer of good fortune, of luck!  
 You who predict happiness shall receive her reward!  
 I'll give you a gift to be admired!*

This cheerful song returns to my memory little by little. My voice joins the chorus, without an accent, or rather, *with* the local accent of this cozy region where I was born. I reconnect with the intonations of my mother tongue before these women who are intrigued by my perfect command of Moroccan *darija*.<sup>4</sup> They must be thinking, "Maybe she's from here, but surely from somewhere else. One of those MRE, no doubt!"<sup>5</sup> The eldest among them moves closer to whisper in my ear that she had lots of Jewish friends back in the day—Yamna, Fiby, Rachel, and Jamila—that they had shared moments of intense happiness together, but that these friends had left surreptitiously for Israel, without saying goodbye, without turning back, without a word, fifty years ago now . . .

At that time, the airwaves of Radio Maroc spoke of the puppet regime and the press violently railed against the new Zionist state whose name we no longer

3. The French expression *tête de linotte* means "bird brain."

4. Author's note: dialectal Arabic.

5. Author's note: MRE—*Marroccain résidant à l'étranger*. (Editors' note: Moroccan residing abroad.)

uttered. Instead, we just said “Canada,” with a subtle wink only caught by those in the know. Endless departures, ruptures, separations, farewells, tears, worries, long debates over which country of exile to choose, the agony of impending upheaval, the hiding of our escape to the Holy Land or to a country that had recognized it as a Jewish homeland, as the state of Israel. Could we hand over everything as it was to our Muslim neighbors, with whom we shared neither the aspiration for national independence nor solidarity with other Arab countries?

That woman with the kind eyes who utters the name “Israel” as though it were the most natural thing in the world cannot ignore that it had taken almost a half-century to assuage her country’s hostility toward that country and to dissolve the climate of suspicion and distrust that would gradually and durably erode the interactions between Jews and Muslims here.

The next day, on the hairpin bends of the road that leads me to Imin Tanout to have lunch at the house of Caïd Ben Al-Mamoun—loyal friend to my uncles and father—I realize the extent to which this historical episode and these migratory movements tainted and poisoned my teenage years. It really is an invisible distance that has always separated us from our Muslim neighbors and that, together, we could no longer maintain. Since then, we’ve convinced ourselves that we had no option but to move elsewhere, to seek refuge under what were supposedly more merciful skies. So that’s how, as I gloomily watched the rows of olive trees go by, I realized that a situation of compromise, patiently maintained over time, had disintegrated before my childhood eyes. The secular lifestyle shared on the same soil, the linguistic, traditional, artistic, and culinary affinities, could no longer hold up. For this reason, all this shared history and culture could no longer serve as an excuse to look beyond that unspeakable barrier that is otherness.

Before arriving at my host’s place, I pass by the cave-dwellings of the Jews of Imin Tanout. The day after independence, my village was already unrecognizable, almost entirely emptied of its Jewish population, which had been illicitly transported to a transit camp in Marseille, then to Haifa, aboard leaky old boats. Just like the synagogue, the hammam, the communal bread oven, and the movie theater, the little school of Imin Tanout had been locked up. On the door frames of certain caves, you can still make out, on the right-hand side, the hole left by the mezuzah spirited away in the humble baggage of God’s tenants, who liked to say that their modular housing was on divine loan without interest!<sup>6</sup>

For us, it became urgent to move to Marrakesh, where a few family members were resisting the call of the sea and where others were biding their time, waiting for the travel restrictions imposed on Jews to be lifted and their passports to be issued. We had moved to the ramparts of the red city not only in an attempt

6. Author’s note: *mezuzah* is the Hebrew name given to the small metal case that holds a handwritten biblical text. (Editors’ note: the name derives from the Hebrew word for doorpost, which is where the object is affixed in Jewish homes.)

to reestablish a life regulated by school, work, and the numerous Jewish festivals that punctuate the year, but also because my parents were attentive to the wise and caring advice of Caïd Ben Al-Mamoun, who had perceived the villagers' new-found hostility toward the few Jewish families awaiting their imminent departure to Israel.

We had all become migrants, within the country or beyond its borders, finding ourselves once again, and in spite of ourselves, in a situation of profound and deep-rooted precariousness. But if life had observed us at that time, it would have no doubt seen us reduced to silence, detaching ourselves from times gone by, without any meaningful soul-searching, as we resigned ourselves entirely to our mektoub!<sup>7</sup> This dazzling city had offered me a site of games and discoveries far more exciting than Monday's souk, the small oued, and the single sloping road of my village.<sup>8</sup> The end of our confined familial way of life also allowed me to meet and mix freely with the children of the mellah, whose family trees my parents could no longer recall.<sup>9</sup>

I share Daniel Sibony's sense that our exile was made up of small, uncertain homes that were delightful, festive, radiant havens.<sup>10</sup> Exile—the word might seem excessive. Since our departure from Imin Tanout, and knowing that other moves would follow, I had a vague premonition that I was entering a period of initiation. It seemed to me that after having made it through several steps—or different exiles—I might finally be able to put these weightless roots down again.

In the humble riad where we lived, situated between the mellah and the medina, family dinners with my parents, my two brothers, and I were lively, and the topics of conversation were always the same.<sup>11</sup> In the background, the monotonous voice of the Radio Maroc announcer went over the day's events: the minute details and gestures of the sultan, Mohamed V, and of the crown prince, Moulay Hassan, the palace visits, the droughts, the swarms of grasshoppers. We heard it without listening; our problem would not find its solution on the radio waves. The vast majority of the French had returned to metropolitan France. But what about us? Should we follow them or stay put, deprived of our family, so as to finally become good Moroccan citizens? We considered all possible capital cities where cousins, uncles, and aunts had gone before us, but the news of their living situations was not only unappealing, it was even alarming; this dismayed us and slowed down all our plans of escape.

7. Author's note: That which is written, our destiny or fate.

8. A *souk*, or *souq*, is a market or a bazaar; a *oued* (sometimes written *wadi*) is a small river- or stream-bed (in a valley or ravine) that is usually dry, flowing with water only during heavy rains.

9. Author's note: The name given to the Jewish quarter in Morocco.

10. Author's note: *Marrakech, le départ (Leaving Marrakesh Behind)* (Odile Jacob, 2009), p. 15.

11. A *riad* (or *riyad*) refers to a traditional style of Moroccan or Andalusian architecture in which a domicile (a house or a palace) features an interior courtyard or garden.

For my brothers and me, passionate about the Hollywood movies and musicals that we went to see in the original English on Thursday afternoons at the Renaissance Cinema, our future was written in bright letters in one place only: not New York or Manhattan, but Broadway! As for my father, he saw himself, heart brimming with pride, living in the holy city of Jerusalem so that he could pray every morning at the foot of the Western Wall and fulfill the secret wishes of his rabbi father.<sup>12</sup>

In turn, my mother would share with us her dream of going to France and the careers that she would have us pursue; then she'd put an end to our verbal jousting and our emotional outbursts by sending us to bed. When the school year came to an end in 1965, for a whole week she displayed a restlessness that had nothing to do with the heat wave that was pervading the town and scorching its inhabitants.

Then one evening, she announced, with a firm, determined voice and a fixed gaze, as though lured by a mirage, that, *In Chaa Allah*, we would soon be entering Paris, just as one enters Paradise!<sup>13</sup>

—Translated by Rebekah Vince

12. The Western Wall (*le mur occidental*, in French) refers to what is more commonly known in English as the Wailing Wall, one of the holiest sites in Judaism due to its proximity to the Temple Mount.

13. A phonetic rendering of *inshallah*, an Arabic expression that means “if God wills it.”

Marrakesh, Morocco

---

## In the Medina

Daniel Sibony

In my memoir, *Marrakech, le départ* (*Leaving Marrakesh Behind*), I described what might be called an ordinary childhood.<sup>1</sup> What struck me, once I had written the book, was the immediate, even necessary, shift from the story of one particular human being—an insignificant little Jewish boy who lived between the medina and the mellah from 1942 to 1955 (the date he left for France)—to the tale of the grand universal phenomena that shake the world today: clash or meeting of cultures; coexistence, natives and foreigners, modernity, return to origins; identities shattered, half-open, or intensified, conserved; existential questions; and the list goes on. *Marrakech* is something of a novel, but it even finds connections with the current financial crisis by way of a childhood memory in which a young boy of ten, proudly arriving at the entrance of a bank to exchange a dollar that an American tourist has given him, contemplates the building from which he is immediately rebuffed and imagines those who manage all those wads of cash, taking them out in the morning to do their business and bringing them back in the evening, keeping the profit, returning a month later, or perhaps never.

It also struck me that writing is a form of salvation, the writing of life, buttressed between the writing of the original Book and that of everyday life. This aspect of a broader notion, which I once conceptualized elsewhere as “in-between,” played out in the interaction between two languages, two ways of life—ours in the medina and the one that we dreamed about: far-off.<sup>2</sup> This idea of in-betweenness, which went on to permeate many of my texts, comes from there, from this childhood.

1. None of Sibony's books have been translated into English; translations of the titles are provided, in parenthesis, for informational purposes.

2. Author's note: See *Entre-deux. L'origine en partage* (*In-Between: Shared Heritage*) (Paris: Seuil, 1991).



FIGURE 35. Derb Djama' Street where the birthplace of Daniel Sibony is situated (third door on the right) in the Bahia neighborhood of Marrakesh. He has no photographs of himself as a child.

I love this childhood and the town where it unfolded, but with no desire to return there or to rediscover this “lost time” (!).<sup>3</sup> I appreciate this place precisely because, throughout my time there, it inspired me to leave. One can love a place for this, for the very reason that it inspires, through its most minute details (be they carnal, sensual, or reflective), the desire to be elsewhere. And so we owe something to that place, because this desire, which matured over the course of our time there, later takes the form of an instinctive acuity, compelling us to break out of the cage in which others confine us and refuse to be reduced to that existence. Instinctively, we delegate a part of ourselves to go elsewhere.

Why was I so keen to leave? Starting in 1950, when I was eight years old, my father was often away in France preparing our arrival, which took five years to come to fruition. But a father's departure is in itself only a symbol; in any case, we had to get ready to leave. In the mind of an alert child who might be insulted or attacked by young people in the medina at any given moment—and who also knew that the Muslim adults who formed this large crowd might impulsively

3. The exclamation point is undoubtedly the author's self-conscious way of noting his reference to Marcel Proust's multivolume literary opus *In Search of Lost Time*.

utter the word “*iheudi*” (“Jew”) accompanied by the word “*hashak*” (“with all due respect”), as if they had just uttered an obscenity—the contempt was clear, but it existed alongside a conviviality, a sort of serene encounter between *iheud* and *mslimine* who after all, the forces of life being what they are, could not always be at each other’s throats when they crossed paths. There were friendships, convivial gestures, notably during ritual festivals, and that must have had an effect on certain Jews, given that recently in Paris I heard one such Jew declare that Moroccan Judaism was “buoyed” by the Islamic *ummah*.<sup>4</sup> That too, this fluttering between vindictiveness and conviviality, would later become precious to me.

But at the time, I couldn’t work out the origin of this negative passion directed toward us, which mixed so well with convivial gestures. I had a vague impression, impossible to put into words: they despise us and they esteem us; or, better: they despise us because we are estimable. But as I didn’t have the means to reflect deeply on this, because I didn’t have the “facts”—including access to the Qur’an, as we spoke Arabic but didn’t know how to read it—I contented myself, in a primitive way, with scorning their scorn, a position I believed to be justified because it was motivated by the very contempt shown to us, which seemed to come from another time, far beyond even them. Much later, I caught a glimpse of the reason: we were deeply embedded in their sacred Text. What were we doing there? It is from their Text that we should be driven out, but that’s impossible, because without us, the Text wouldn’t hold up. This contradiction, unsolvable to this day, explains how, wherever they reign, we must leave.

I’ve said elsewhere what I think of the Andalusian “golden age.”<sup>5</sup> And I’ve come to understand why, as soon as it was possible, we nearly all disappeared from their space. I even thought to myself one day that a country without Jews, that is, a country that had them in the past and didn’t know how to hold onto them, is a condemned country. A country like that would be too mired in a war with itself to tend to an existential rift . . . a rift that it would project onto others if only in order to push it away. But that rift will forever come back to haunt it.

But the child that I was had found a fairly good balance between these two forms of contempt, which opened up a path to run, play, dream about departure, and drink in the modern culture that would perhaps help us get out of this hole. This desire for an “exit,” for departure, is inscribed on the walls of Marrakesh for me, and I love them for that.

This is to say that my novel does not exude nostalgia, in the sense of aspiring to rediscover a time and places that were characterized by happiness. We were not lacking in happiness, and when I think back to that time and those places, I think more about what could have been. Nostalgia is the desire to rediscover the initial

4. *Ummah* means “community” in Arabic, and generally is used to refer to the world community of Muslims.

5. Author’s note: See my *Trois monothéismes (Three Monotheisms)* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

acuity of the desire that belonged to those days; the desire to leave, yes, but filled with that memory, those traditions, those textures, those convivial-aggressive clashes, that serene roughness, that desire to live by casting the widest possible net over the field of opportunity.

One day I presented my novel in Marrakesh to a Moroccan audience who was charmed because I opened the book at random and commented on a few points in a humorous fashion that recalled “those days.” Not long afterwards, I received a letter from a French-speaking Moroccan teacher that said, “Having read your book, I see that you bit the hand that fed you: we welcomed you, and you failed to recognize that.” I smiled, seeing that she herself was acknowledging that we Jews weren’t “at home” in Morocco, that we had received the immense gift of hospitality from those who welcomed us, we who were there before the arrival of the Arabs. This hospitality itself signified that we were foreigners in our own land. And that is the most vivid feeling that I have of Marrakesh: being exiled at home, in our own origins. Consequently, to leave that place, to go to Paris, was not an exile. The novel describes the difference between our exile and that of an immigrant who, for his part, can always return to his country, or at least imagine such a return. For us, this initial exile could only yield “returns” elsewhere. I love Marrakesh because it was there that my poetics of return was sown—not a return to Marrakesh, the so-called place of origin, since my origin is merely a feeling—but a return to what I would later call “the points of love in being,” or that which, in being, shows us signs of compassion, everywhere, signs of gratitude.

I was fairly sure that, in the modern neighborhood of Gueliz, Muslims and Jews (at least those who were well-off or modern) lived alongside one another more peacefully, and that the children of the medina wouldn’t go there to throw stones at them. I later understood that the French served as a third party; it was necessary to maintain the appearance of a certain dignity for them—no insults, no vulgarity. Incidentally, it was when I was returning from Gueliz one day, passing by the library that was located in the town hall, that I was attacked, next to the Koutoubia: on the border between the two neighborhoods, in the passage between modernity and tradition. But I felt that the *mslmines* of the medina were more authentic than their counterparts living in wealthy neighborhoods. They expressed the truth of this large “Arab” mass of people that surrounded us with its violent ambivalence.

Although we were of modest means, we had Muslim employees (*khddamat*, workers) and our interactions with these women were utterly simple, without the smallest trace of aggression. In this case, it was work that served as an intermediary.

Later, I calmly asked myself why this ambient hostility didn’t make us a little paranoid. In my case, the reason appeared simple: the connection to writing, a multifaceted connection, with numerous branches and creases. We had our own universe, bathed in the waves of the sacred Text, itself contradictory and inviting contradiction, interpretation, questions, and dreams about its contents. That text served as a boundless goldmine for writing; other writings took their place

next to it: letters, for example, written in Hebrew-Arabic by the boy who played scribe between absent men and women, between mother and father, Morocco and France, the tradition confined to the medina and the imagined European world perceived to be inaccessible. Books too, the third thread of my tapestry, nourished me; I devoured them voraciously without asking myself if they were “good”; they were quite simply to be read. So I was “saved” by writing, before even deciding that one day I would write. I felt myself to be part of the community of “scribes,” though not like those who, in a corner of place des Ferblantiers (the *seufirim*), wrote out marriage contracts and divorce certificates, agreements and complaints . . . I felt that I was holding on to another thread of writing. In any case, when one is taken up in this textual whirlwind, one finds in his apparently stodgy identity a plethora of folds, corridors, and sinuous paths that lead to more habitable dwelling-places, places where one feels completely at home, out of harm’s way. In the novel, this takes the form of a mat on the scorching hot patio that has just been washed down with cool water so that I can sit and have a cup of tea, with a book in hand and a square of blue sky above, dreaming of departure. I don’t know if others were waiting, like me, for a liberating letter sent from afar, from France or America, inviting them to leave. Some Jews stayed until 1970 or 1975, but the fact is that of the original three hundred thousand, less than two thousand remain today. A sort of silent murder perpetrated by foolishness.

Later, we realize that the opaque aspects of one’s life, which sometimes become painful, are only illuminated when taken up in the thread of writing. I am thinking in particular of my childhood fascination with the *djama’* (mosque) on the street where I lived. I would furtively pass in front of its door. If I happened to stop, people would shout insults, but when there was no one there, I would stop and examine the door, as if it would reveal to me the secret of what happened there; I was sure that their feelings about us could penetrate the door. Is it the memory of this door that, years later, would be my entry point into the Qur’an, in Arabic, to find out what it was all about?<sup>6</sup> As though this enigma, conserved in my memory, had just knocked on my door to ask that I elucidate this mystery through the written word. But the majority prefer to remain in the dark, unperturbed, meaning that this door to the *djama’* on that street from my childhood exists in millions of Western memories, locked up for years to come.

I must add that, in spite of my mischievousness, I was at that time swaddled in complete naivety when it came to women: I don’t know through which of the multiple sources the idea was inscribed in me (but I wasn’t the only one) that women transcended sex, that they had nothing to do with this vulgar thing that is exclusive to men, who should not broach this obscene subject at the risk of shocking them. In the novel, I did not draw out the consequences of this peculiar idea,

6. Author’s note: I recount this in two books: *Les Trois monothéismes (The Three Monotheisms)* (Paris: Seuil, 1992) and *Nom de Dieu (For God’s Sake)* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

but I addressed it in order to shed light on the repression that dominated both Jews and Muslims (Europeans were still out of reach for me). In any case, the boy in the novel comes to the conclusion that, “If these loose women [prostitutes] give themselves to everyone, that must mean that real women give themselves to no one.” To seek the causes of this idiocy would take us further than we have space for here. But I’m sure that this is what united us, both “them” and “us,” in measure beyond words.

—*Translated by Rebekah Vince*

Inner Anfa, Casablanca

---

## Living between the Lines

Ralph Toledano

The first time I traveled by airplane was in July 1953. I had just been born in Paris; my parents were returning to Casablanca with me. We lived for two years at my paternal grandparents' place. It was on the boulevard named after the French capital, a vast art deco apartment whose atmosphere and décor turned their back on Morocco. I can see myself lying in my dad's old room, my cot placed between a sofa surrounded by bookshelves and a wardrobe with sliding doors. Like a spinning top, a cat that thinks it's a person turns in circles in the darkness, creating an electric crackling sound that terrorizes me. I cry for help. Dad, Mom, and my grandparents are all having dinner in the 1930s-style dining room. Footsteps resound in the hallway. Behind the door, a serious conversation begins between the three who are in favor of consoling me, and Dad, who claims the prerogative of discipline. I hear Grandfather's plea, uttered in his soft, deep voice in the only language I understand, Spanish: "Don't keep him waiting, he's afraid of being alone in the dark." Dad's response, in French, is unintelligible to me, but his firm tone needs no translation: the door doesn't open, despite my intensified crying. This was how, very early on in my life, French came to be associated with a strictness indifferent to the only kind of reason that will ever matter to me: the reason of the heart. Then, emboldened by my grandmother's insistent pleas, Mom turns the door handle. Jewish compassion prevailed over the principles of French education. Yet the end of the colonial era was adrift in cultural confusion. It would take me years to see that this merciful intrusion of four loved ones into my room was not just the Iberian way of doing things.

For the time being, all that appears fragrant and tender, like Grandfather's handkerchiefs or Grandmother's lingering perfume, carrying the echo of Spain. I live in a bubble of Castilian romances, its musical iridescence peopled with knights and besotted princesses who, for almost five centuries, have accompanied me through



FIGURE 36. Ralph Toledano, nearly two years old, in Casablanca.

an exile that I don't even feel. The world in which I grew up, protected by the walls of our houses and the love of their inhabitants, is a reassuring kingdom. In Tangiers, where from a young age I would spend lengthy vacations, all that is Hispanic reigns supreme. Radio Seville plays operettas on a continuous loop punctuated by the rhythm of castanets. On Sundays, breakfast is accompanied by the sound of Mass, whose call and response are familiar to all. Rarely does the monotonous flow of French tarnish the chant of Latin tongues. In the early years of my life, I lived not in Morocco but in an idealized Spain. In the servants' quarters, instead of Luisas, Petras, or Marias, Moroccan maids busy themselves in silence. In Tangiers, they speak a gravelly Spanish with a Rifian lilt.<sup>1</sup> In Casablanca, Grandmother addresses them in a jargon dominated by Castilian.

One summer morning in Casablanca, the Muslim maids take me up to the roof. It's laundry day. They hang up white sheets on the washing lines. Household staff from the other apartments join them. These Moroccan women laugh in the dazzling reflections on the whitewashed ground; linens and walls unite with the light. One of them takes me in her arms, speaking to me in Arabic. I say nothing. She teaches me how to say "hello" and "goodbye" in her language. Her friends stop what they're doing for a moment and make a circle around us, caressing my fair hair. Up until the age of ten, I would know only a handful of words in Arabic. And then, on the heels of a string of Spanish maids, Habiba bursts into the house, carrying the words and perfumes of a North African land that brushed past me like a shapeless ghost. The exuberant personality of the new Moroccan cook, her sensitivity (she makes a racket with her pots and pans so as not to hear my younger sister cry when she gets punished), and her ignorance of languages ("jnafo" is her only French expression, inspired by slang to signify indifference),<sup>2</sup> plunge me into a Morocco of excess, an African Morocco. For many years, this is what will define my perception of the country. Thanks to Habiba's love; to the devotion of the handyman Brahim trailing his short, ebony silhouette from one of our houses to another—carrying a tray of pastries or some kind of utensil; and to the humor of the chauffeur Smaïn who drove us to school, teaching us risqué Arabic songs on the way, I make my way into Morocco, little by little. And yet my sense of belonging to the country remains hazy, as its masses furtively brush up against my reality.

Grandfather often tells me that we are Sephardim, chased from the Iberian Peninsula by Catholic kings. Yet, on Sundays, he hums the *Salve Regina* in Latin, with feeling. It seemed to me that Sephardic identity was only incidentally Jewish, a privileged way to be Castilian, as reflected by our family name, whose significance

1. The adjective Rifian refers to the Berber-speaking people of the Rif, a region of northern Morocco bordered by Algeria to the east and the sea to the north. The term is said to derive from the Berber (or Amazigh) word *arrif*, which means coast or edge.

2. *Jnafo* is a Moroccanized version of the French expression "je m'en fous," which indicates total indifference. The English rendering would be something akin to "I don't give a crap."

my Grandfather taught me from a very young age. Yet for me, the rabbinic dignitaries scattered throughout our family tree are completely abstract. I retain only their prestige. For a long time, Toledo would prevail over Israel in my heart. We were the lifeblood of Spain. I lived in its sublimated reality, its lilting poetry. My life was undoubtedly enriched by any number of unnamed Jewish values, but Judaism itself remained practically foreign to me.

Like some young couples, my parents cultivated few traditions belonging to their race, preferring the company of Proust, Simone de Beauvoir, and Virginia Woolf to anything sacred. For them, Jewish ritual consisted of two annual appearances at the synagogue. The first took place after the last prayer of Yom Kippur, the *Ne'ila*, during which the sound of the ram's horn made my brother and I tremble with a mysterious feeling as we sheltered under Grandfather's silk prayer shawl. The second took place the day after Sukkot, when the women in the gallery who had come to celebrate Simchat Torah would shower us with sweets from above.<sup>3</sup> One day, I would come to know that this means "Joy of the Torah." My occasional visits to the synagogue were characterized by a mixture of tenderness, bound up with the presence of the beloved grandparent, and intense boredom. My brother and I read Hebrew poorly, so we were unable to follow the prayers, while the participation of the young boys educated in Jewish schools intimidated us. Certainly for the *goyim* we were Jews, but for the Jews we were strange.<sup>4</sup> The young Hebrew teacher who was hired to prepare my brother for his bar mitzvah couldn't tell us apart. During the lesson, wafts of Gregorian chants emanated from the living room. He was surprised to hear such melodies at our house. Embarrassed, I told him that it was just what happened to be on the radio. At the next lesson, the same Benedictine intonations of the Solesmes Abbey filled the air (Mom was infatuated with this music). The young rabbi asked in a sneering tone, "Has it ever occurred to you to get a new radio?"

The religion of our house was essentially a culinary one. At my parents' place, in harmony with their literary tastes, the menu included roasts followed by glazed carrots with cheese soufflé; our children's dinners typically consisted of mashed potatoes with minced ham mixed in for good measure. But Friday night dinner was at Dad's parents' place, and Saturday afternoon lunch was with Mom's parents, at their house. Both meals were preceded by blessings.

At our mom's parents' home, despite the décor that consisted of Chinese vases, Venetian mirrors, dressers made of dark sculpted wood, and mahogany seats next

3. *Yom Kippur* is the Day of Atonement. Considered the holiest day in Judaism, it is observed by a twenty-five-hour fast and intensive prayer, usually in late September or early October. Similarly, *Sukkot*, known as the Festival of the Tabernacles and also the Harvest Festival, takes place in the Fall season. The holiday lasts eight days, and the final day is called *Simchat Torah*, which means "rejoicing with the Torah."

4. *Goyim* is the plural form of *goy*, which in both Hebrew and Yiddish refers to a gentile, or a non-Jew. Although sometimes considered pejorative, the word itself simply means "nation."

to glass cases filled with figurines made of Sèvres china, the atmosphere was less European. In contrast to my paternal grandfather's place, furnished in 1930, in which prestige and order prevailed, and where Raquel the Spanish-speaking Jewish housekeeper insisted on serving the women first, my mom's parents' home bustled with activity and the improvised table service was often chaotic. The *adafina* delivered by the baker's boy arrived from the public oven to the echoes of slamming doors and gates, while we ate hors-d'oeuvres seasoned with argan oil.<sup>5</sup> For my grandfather, slow-cooking the stew in the wood-burning stove overnight from Friday to Saturday was the only way to give it the desired flavor. From the large cooking pot placed on a stool at the corner of the table, Grandmother piled up brown eggs, caramelized potatoes, roast beef, and dumplings on a platter held by a servant. In a dizzying whirl of aromas saturated by the heat of the dish, the traditional stew was passed around while Grandmother, with an archeologist's keen eye, continued to extract treasures from the bottom of the barrel: "There you go, the gelatin for my brother, the marrow bones for the children . . . Does anyone want any chickpea broth? The small potatoes must have dissolved, I thought there were more."

The independence of the Kingdom had given way to the neocolonial era. There was a status quo where the ethnic and cultural stratifications of the country contemplated each other with respect. However, the end of every school year saw a large contingent of our classmates from the French schools "return" to France, as the Arabization of our environment gained ground. The exodus of colonial settlers accentuated our Jewish identity. No longer confused with Nazarenes, we went back to being Moroccan. Following our grandparents' successive deaths, Mom returned to our religious traditions, reading the sacred texts. The meals on feast days took place in our own home. The soufflé trend gave way to a disappointing return to Jewish menus. But the end of the 1960s was marked by the lure of Moroccan heritage: Pastilla with pigeon and lamb tagine with prunes, typical Muslim dishes, replaced the roast beef. We traveled to the south of Morocco, the Israeli-Arab War of 1967 momentarily interrupting our rapprochement with the Cherifian empire.<sup>6</sup> The illusion of reconciliation was an air played on Andalusian lutes. Would we turn out to be more Judeo-Arabic than European? The idyll was fragile, the paradox uncomfortable. We picked up snippets of references to a national project but the Arabization of the country put us face to face with

5. *Adafina* is the sabbath stew of the Jews of Spain; a similar dish is called *hamin* in the Sephardic tradition and *cholent* in the Ashkenazi tradition.

6. The war in question is known as the Six-Day War, the June War, the Third Arab-Israeli War, and, in Arabic, as *an-Naksah*, or "The Setback." The conflict lasted June 5–10, 1967, and was waged between Israel and Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. The reference to the Cherifian (or Sharifian) Empire is a nod to Morocco's historical designation, as the dynasties that would come to constitute the modern nation-state were led by rulers who claimed to be Sharifian, or descendants of the prophet Mohammed.

Judaism. Was the latter compatible with Islam? The French had abolished the status of dhimmis, emancipating us from the Crescent.<sup>7</sup> I entertained a dream some mornings, surrounded by the fragrance of fresh mint mixed with the aroma of grilled rye bread: to be entirely Moroccan, with Judaism as a defining feature. At dinner, Dad told us about an incident at a Jewish community council meeting that shattered my dream. The future of Jews in Morocco would be a precarious one, oscillating between attachment and disillusionment. I would leave to pursue my studies in Paris, returning only for vacations.

The day after my baccalaureate exams, the attempted Skhirat coup d'état rapidly transformed the lullaby into a death-knell.<sup>8</sup> A Morocco without a monarchy would be a dictatorship of colonels hostile toward minorities. The obvious corruption of the Palace had betrayed the promises of independence. Once again, we returned to our wandering in search of more tolerant latitudes. My childhood was over; I had just become a Moroccan Jew.

—Translated by Rebekah Vince

7. *Dhimmi* means “protected person.” *Dhimma* status is an historical feature of Muslim law that offered certain forms of protection to “people of the book” (namely, Jews and Christians) living in Islamic lands. While *dhimmis* had fewer rights and protections than Muslims, the existence of this category nonetheless provided guarantees of some state protections. (See Introduction for more detail.) “The Crescent” refers to Islam.

8. A failed putsch, the Skhirat *coup d'état* took place on July 10, 1971. It was the first attempt by the military to overthrow King Hassan II. While the king survived the attack, more than one hundred people were killed.

## FURTHER READING

### ALGERIA

#### *Scholarly Works*

- Bahloul, Joëlle. *The Architecture of Memory: A Jewish-Muslim Household in Colonial Algeria, 1937–1962*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Cole, Joshua. *Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the Politics of French Algeria*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019.
- Roberts, Sophie B. *Citizenship and Antisemitism in French Colonial Algeria, 1870–1962*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Schreier, Joshua. *Arabs of the Jewish Faith: The Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria*. Jewish Cultures of the World. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010.
- Stein, Sarah Abrevaya. *Saharan Jews and the Fate of French Algeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

#### *Literature*

- Cixous, Hélène. *Osnabrück Station to Jerusalem*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020.
- . *Reveries of the Wild Woman: Primal Scenes*. Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic. AGM Collection. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006.
- Guénoun, Denis. *A Semite: A Memoir of Algeria*. Translated by Ann Smock and William Smock. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

## EGYPT

*Scholarly Works*

- Beinin, Joel. *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005.
- El-Kodsi, Mourad. *The Karaite Jews of Egypt: 1882–1986*. Lyons, NY: Wilprint, 1987.
- Laskier, Michael M. *The Jews of Egypt, 1920–1970: In the Midst of Zionism, Anti-Semitism, and the Middle East Conflict*. New York: New York University Press, 1992.
- Krämer, Gudrun. *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914–1952*. Publications on the Near East, University of Washington, no. 4. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989.
- Miccoli, Dario. *Histories of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s–1950s*. Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern History 18. Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2015.

*Literature*

- Aciman, André. *Out of Egypt: A Memoir*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994.
- Goren, Yitzhak Gormezano. *Alexandrian Summer*. New York: New Vessel Press, 2015.
- Jabès, Edmond. *The Book of Yukel; Return to the Book*. Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1977.
- Jacques, Paula. *Light of My Eye*. Translated by Susan Cohen-Nicole. Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier, 2009.
- Matalon, Ronit. *The One Facing Us*. Translated by Marsha Weinstein. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998.
- Nathan, Tobie. *A Land like You*. Translated by Joyce Zonana. London: Seagull Books, 2020.
- Raḥīm, Kamāl Ṣalāḥ Muḥammad. *Days in the Diaspora*. Translated by Sarah Enany. Modern Arabic Literature. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012.
- Raḥīm, Kamāl Ṣalāḥ Muḥammad. *Diary of a Jewish Muslim*. Translated by Sarah Enany. Modern Arabic Literature. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2014.
- Raḥīm, Kamāl Ṣalāḥ Muḥammad. *Menorahs and Minarets*. Translated by Sarah Enany. Cairo: Hoopoe, an imprint of American University in Cairo Press, 2017.
- Shohet, Jacqueline. *Jacob's Ladder*. London: Harvill Press, 1951.

## LEBANON

*Scholarly Works*

- Levi, Tomer. *The Jews of Beirut: The Rise of a Levantine Community, 1860s–1930s*. Studies in Judaism, Vol. 6. New York: Peter Lang, 2012.
- Salameh, Franck. *Lebanon's Jewish Community: Fragments of Lives Arrested*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Schulze, Kirsten E. *The Jews of Lebanon: Between Coexistence and Conflict*. 2nd ed. Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2009.
- Schulze, Kirsten E. "The Jews of Lebanon: History, Identity, Memory." *Chronos: Revue d'histoire de l'université de Balamand* 6, no. 6 (2002).

*Literature*

- Khūrī, Ilyās. *The Kingdom of Strangers*. Translated by Paula Haydar. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996.

## MOROCCO

*Scholarly Works*

- Boum, Aomar. *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013.
- Elmaleh, Raphaël, and George Ricketts. *Jews Under Moroccan Skies: Two Thousand Years of Jewish Life*. Sephardic Traditions 10. Santa Fe, NM: Gaon Books, 2012.
- Gottreich, Emily. *Jewish Morocco: A History from Pre-Islamic to Post-Colonial Times*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2020.
- Heckman, Alma Rachel. *The Sultan's Communists: Moroccan Jews and the Politics of Belonging*. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020.
- Marglin, Jessica M. *Across Legal Lines: Jews and Muslims in Modern Morocco*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016.

*Literature & Film*

- Bénabou, Marcel. *Jacob, Menahem, and Mimoun: A Family Epic*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Stages, Vol. 11. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.
- Benjelloun, Hassan. *Where Are You Going Moshé?* Dramatic comedy. Les films de l'Atalante, 2007.
- Hachkar, Kamal. *Tinghir Jérusalem: Echoes from the Mellah*. Documentary. Les Films d'un Jour, 2013.
- Setton, Ruth Knafo. *The Road to Fez*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001.
- Wazana, Kathy. *They Were Promised the Sea: Arab Jews between Homeland and Promised Land*. Documentary. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 2012.

## TUNISIA

*Scholarly Works*

- Carpi, Daniel. *Between Mussolini and Hitler: The Jews and the Italian Authorities in France and Tunisia*. The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry Series 17. Hanover, CT: University Press of New England, 1994.
- Deshen, Shlomo. "The Social Structure of Southern Tunisian Jewry in the Early 20th Century." *Jewish Societies in the Middle East Community, Culture and Authority*. 123–45, 1982.
- Deshen, Shlomo. "Southern Tunisian Jewry in the Early Twentieth Century: Elements of French, Arab and Jewish Culture." *Journal of North African Studies* 10, no. 2 (June 2005): 183–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629380500252259>.
- Laskier, Michael M., "From Hafsia to Bizerte: Tunisia's Nationalist Struggle and Tunisian Jewry, 1952–61." *Mediterranean Historical Review* 2, no. 2 (December 1987): 188–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518968708569527>.
- Parks, Richard C. *Medical Imperialism in French North Africa: Regenerating the Jewish Community of Colonial Tunis*. France Overseas. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017.
- Udovitch, Abraham L., and Lucette Valensi. *The Last Arab Jews: The Communities of Jerba, Tunisia*. Social Orders, Vol. 1. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic, 1984.

*Literature & Film*

- Albou, Karin. *The Wedding Song*. Drama. Strand Releasing, 2008.
- Boughedir, Férid. *A Summer in La Goulette*. Dramatic comedy. Arab Film Distribution, 1998.
- Boukhobza, Chochana. *For the Love of the Father*. Translated by Nina B. Lichtenstein. Waltham, MA: Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, 2016. <https://scholarworks.brandeis.edu/esploro/outputs/9923925692701921#file-0>.
- Danon, Vitalis. *Ninette of Sin Street: A Novella*. Edited by Lia Nicole Brozgal and Sara Abrevaya Stein. Translated by Jane Kuntz. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017.
- Kayat, Claude. *Mohammed Cohen: The Adventures of an Arabian Jew*. Translated by Patricia Wolf. New York: Bergh, 1989.
- Memmi, Albert. *The Pillar of Salt*. Translated by Edouard Roditi. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Memmi, Albert. *Strangers*. Translated by Brian Rhys. New York: Orion Press, 1960.

## TURKEY

*Scholarly Works*

- Çetinoglu, Sait “The Mechanisms for Terrorizing Minorities: The Capital Tax and Work Battalions in Turkey during the Second World War,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2012): 14–29.
- Levy, Avigdor, ed. *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Institute of Turkish Studies, 1994.
- . *Jews, Turks, Ottomans: A Shared History, Fifteenth through the Twentieth Century*. Modern Jewish History. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002.
- Rodrigue, Aron, ed. *Ottoman and Turkish Jewry: Community and Leadership*. Indiana University Turkish Studies 12. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Şanlı, Süleyman. *Jews of Turkey: Migration, Culture, and Memory*. Routledge Jewish Studies Series. London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.
- Shaw, Stanford J. *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic*. New York: New York University Press, 1991.

*Literature*

- Anter, Eddi. *Lilly: I Am an Arab Jew*. Maçka, İstanbul: GOA, 2008.
- Benforado, Sally. *Bring Me a Story*. Oakland, CA: Floricanto Press, 1986.
- Farhi, Moris. *Young Turk*. New York: Arcade, 2004.
- Kulin, Ayşe. *Without a Country*. Translated by Kenneth Dakan. Seattle: Amazon Crossing, 2018.
- Levi, Mario. *Istanbul Was a Fairy Tale*. Translated by Ender Gürol. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.

## MENA REGION

*Scholarly Works*

- Boum, Aomar, and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, eds. *The Holocaust and North Africa*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019.

- . *Wartime North Africa. A Documentary History, 1934–1950*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022.
- Cohen, Mark R., and Abraham L. Udovitch, eds. *Jews among Arabs: Contacts and Boundaries*. Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1989.
- Deshen, Shlomo A., and Walter P. Zenner, eds. *Jews among Muslims: Communities in the Precolonial Middle East*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.
- Gottreich, Emily, and Daniel J. Schroeter, eds. *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa*. Indiana Series in Sephardi and Mizrahi Studies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Hirschberg, H. Z. *A History of the Jews in North Africa. Vol 1: From Antiquity to the Sixteenth Century*. Translated by M. W. Eichelberg. 2nd ed. Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1974.
- Hirschberg, H. Z. *A History of the Jews in North Africa. Vol 2: From the Ottoman Conquests to the Present Time*. Translated by M. W. Eichelberg. Edited by Eliezer Bashan and Robert Attal. 2nd ed. Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1974.
- Hosseini, S. Behnaz. *The Jewish Diaspora after 1945: A Study of Jewish Communities in the Middle East and North Africa*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.
- Laskier, Michael M. *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria*. New York: New York University Press, 1994.
- Lehmann, Matthias B., and Jessica M. Marglin, eds. *Jews and the Mediterranean*. Indiana Series in Sephardi and Mizrahi Studies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020.
- Satloff, Robert B. *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands*. New York: Public Affairs, 2006.
- Simon, Reeva S. *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa: The Impact of World War II*. London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.
- Simon, Reeva S., Michael M. Laskier, and Sara Reguer, eds. *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Stillman, Norman A., ed. *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979.
- . *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991.
- Vince, Rebekah, and Samuel Sami Everett, eds. *Jewish-Muslim Interactions Performing Cultures between North Africa and France*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020.



## CONTRIBUTORS

### EDITORIAL AND TRANSLATION TEAM

LIA BROZGAL is professor of French and Francophone Studies in the Department of European Languages and Transcultural Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Specializing in contemporary French and North African literature, film, and culture, she is the author of *Absent the Archive: Cultural Traces of a Massacre in Paris (17 October 1961)* (Liverpool University Press, 2020); *Against Autobiography: Albert Memmi and the Production of Theory* (University of Nebraska Press, 2013); co-editor of *Being Contemporary: French Literature, Culture and Politics Today* (Liverpool University Press, 2015); co-editor of *Ninette of Sin Street* (the first English translation of the Tunisian novella *Ninette de la rue du Péché* by Vitalis Danon, Stanford University Press, 2017); and author of essays on North African literature and cinema, *beur* cultural productions, chronicles of the Holocaust in North Africa, and Judeo-Maghrebi literature and film.

REBECCA GLASBERG is a PhD candidate in the French section of the Department of European Languages and Transcultural Studies at UCLA. Her dissertation, titled “After Colonizer and Colonized: Algerian Jews and the Legacies of North African Literature in French,” focuses on representations of Jews and Jewishness in francophone postcolonial North African fiction. Prior to beginning her doctorate, Rebecca taught middle and high school French for Fairfax County Public Schools. Rebecca holds a BA in French and Spanish from the University of Virginia and an MA in French Culture and Civilization from the School of French at Middlebury College.

JANE KUNTZ holds a doctorate in French from the University of Illinois and is a translator of French-language fiction and nonfiction. Recent translations include *Western Privilege: Work, Intimacy, and Postcolonial Hierarchies in Dubai*, by Amélie Le Renard (2021); *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had*, by Ivan Jablonka (2016); *Islam and the Challenge of Civilization*, by Abdelwahab Meddeb (2013); Meddeb’s experimental first novel, *Talismano*

(2011); and *Ninette of Sin Street* (2017). Kuntz lived and worked in Tunisia from 1975 until 1993 as a teacher and translator and as an educational adviser for AMIDEAST-Tunis.

REBEKAH VINCE is a lecturer in French at Queen Mary University of London, editor of *Francosphères*, and co-editor of the Brill book series *Mobilizing Memories* (with Hanna Teichler). Her research interests include French postmemory narratives, Jewish-Muslim interactions, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Mediterranean *francosphère*. She has published articles on intercultural memory, Jewish-Palestinian identity, and inter-doubt dialogue. Selected poems, translated by Khalid Lyamlahy, appear in *Apulée: revue annuelle de littérature et de réflexion*, edited by Hubert Haddad.

ROBERT WATSON is a lecturer in Cinema & Television Studies at SUNY, Purchase College. His current research focuses on the history and memories of cinema(s) and cosmopolitanism in the Mediterranean. His articles in this area include “Next Year in Beirut?: Lebanese Jewish Identity and Memory in the Mediterranean Francosphere” in *Francosphères* (2017); and “Co-producing Nostalgia across the Mediterranean: Visions of the Jewish-Muslim Past in French-Tunisian Cinema” in *Politics: Rivista di Studi Politici* (2016).

#### FRENCH EDITOR AND CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

LEÏLA SEBBAR was born in Aflou, on the high plains of Algeria. Her father, who spoke and read fluent Arabic and French, was Muslim; her mother, a “Frenchwoman from France,” was Catholic. Both parents were teachers in the secular public school system of French colonial Algeria, where mixed couples were an exception. Sebbar does not speak Arabic, her “fathertongue,” a story she recounts in the poignant essays, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (Julliard, 2003) and *L'Arabe comme un chant secret* (Bleu autour, 2007). Sebbar left Algeria in 1960–61 to study literature at the University of Aix-en-Provence and then in Paris, where she has lived since 1963. Her numerous and varied publications include a collaboration with Canadian author Nancy Huston titled *Lettres parisiennes, Autopsie de l'exil* (1999); the trilogy of *Shérazade* novels; *La Seine était rouge* (1999); *La confession d'un fou* (2011); *Ecrivain public* (2012); and *Voyage en Algéries autour de ma chambre* (2008). Sebbar has directed several collections on childhood and writers in exile, including *Une enfance algérienne* (1999); *Enfances tunisiennes* (2010); and *Une enfance corse* (2010).

JEAN-LUC ALLOUCHE was born in Constantine (Algeria) in 1949. A journalist, he served as *Libération's* Jerusalem correspondent from 2002 to 2005 and currently teaches journalism at University of Paris III (La Sorbonne nouvelle campus). Allouche is known for his French translations, including the novel *La Deuxième Personne* (published in English as *Second Person Singular*) by Palestinian-Israeli journalist and humorist Sayed Kashua (from Hebrew to French). Allouche also translated a collection of Obama's campaign speeches from English into French under the title *Le Changement. Nous pouvons y croire* (Odile Jacob, 2008). He is the author of an autobiography, *Les Jours innocents* (Lieu commun, 1984); numerous essays on Jews and the Middle East, including *Les Jours redoutables. Israël-Palestine: la paix dans mille ans* (Denoël, 2010) and *Juifs d'Algérie. Images et textes* (Scribe, 1987); and a work of historical fiction titled *Le roman de Moïse* (Albin Michel, 2018).

ANDRÉ AZOULAY was born on April 17, 1941, in Essaouira-Mogador (Morocco). He attended the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Essaouira, high schools in Marrakesh and El

Jadida, and the Centre de formation des journalistes in Paris. Azoulay also holds university degrees in economics and international relations. Since 1991 he has served as Counselor to the King of Morocco. Prior to that, and for twenty years, he was a managing director at Banque Paribas in Paris. In 1973, he created the group "Identity and Dialogue," one of the first organizations of Jewish intellectuals hailing from the Arab world calling for the recognition of a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel. Azoulay continues his work for this cause through various international organizations.

JOËLLE BAHLOUL was born in Algiers in 1951, where she lived in the Diar-es-Saada neighborhood until the age of ten. Bahloul grew up speaking only French (both at home and at school). In 1961 her family left Algeria to settle in Nice. From 1970 to 1973 she studied law in Israel; later, after returning to France, she received a doctorate in social anthropology from the École des hautes études en sciences sociales de Paris (1981). Bahloul has been living in the United States since 1986. She is currently professor of social anthropology at the University of Indiana, Bloomington. Her scholarly works include *The Architecture of Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 1986)—originally published in French as *La maison de mémoire, ethnologie d'une demeure judéo-arabe en Algérie, 1937–1961*; and *Le culte de la table dressée, rites et traditions de la table juive algérienne* (Éditions A. M. Métailié, 1983).

LIZI BEHMOARAS was born in Istanbul. A writer, translator, and journalist, she has directed series for Editions Afa and collaborated with Turkish daily papers (*Cumhuriyet*, *Yeni Yüzyıl*, and *HaberTürk*) and French newspapers (*L'Arche*, *Tribune juive*, and *Libération*). She is the author of two collections of reportage: *Türkiyede Aydınların Gözüyle Yahudiler* (Jews through the Eyes of Turkish Intellectuals) and *Yüzyıl Sono Tanıklıkları* (Accounts from the End of the Millennium). Behmoaras has written biographies of Mazhar Osman, father of psychiatry in Turkey, and Suat Derviş, one of the first Turkish novelists and journalists. She is also the author of three novels (written in Turkish), all of which deal with the complexities of identity.

MARCEL BÉNABOU was born in 1939 in Meknès (Morocco) and has lived in Paris since 1956. A graduate of the École normale supérieure and holder of an *agrégation* in literature, he was professor of Roman history at University of Paris VII (Denis Diderot campus) from 1974 to 2002. His scholarly work has primarily dealt with North Africa during the Roman era. Moreover, he has been a member of the experimental literature workshop Oulipo (Ouvroir de la littérature potentielle, or workshop of potential literature) since 1969 when he was inducted (or "coopted," in Oulipian terms) into the group. Bénabou's Oulipian works explore a variety of domains, notably the genesis of literary work and autobiography. Recent works include the wry *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres* (Hachette, 1986); and its translation, *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books* (Nebraska University Press, 1996), which won the French award for "dark humor"; and *Jacob, Ménaïhem et Mimoun. Une épopée familiale* (Seuil, 1995), which was translated into English as *Jacob, Ménaïhem and Mimoun. A Family Epic* (Nebraska University Press, 1998), won the National Jewish Book Award (1998).

ALBERT BENSOUSSAN was born and spent his childhood in Algiers. A writer and holder of an *agrégation* in Spanish, Bensoussan taught Spanish at the Bugeaud High School in Algiers before becoming a lecturer at the Sorbonne and, later, a professor at the University of Haute-Bretagne in Rennes. Author of some twenty works of fiction, his novel *Frimaldjézar* (Calman-Lévy, 1976) won the Prix de l'Afrique méditerranéenne. In 2009 he won the Prix

littéraire du Grand ouest for his novel *Dans la véranda* (Al Manar, 2008) and for the entirety of his literary work. Bensoussan is also the author of a biography of Federico Garcia Lorca (Folio Biographies, 2010) and translator (into French) of numerous Spanish-language writers including the Nobel Prize Winning Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa.

AMI BOUGANIM was born in 1951 in Essaouria-Mogador (Morocco). A writer and philosopher, Bouganim grew up in a trilingual environment. Prior to moving to Paris where he attended the École normale israélite orientale directed by Emmanuel Levinas, he studied at the Rabbinical School (where courses were taught in Arabic), and at the Alliance schools (where instruction was in French). In 1970 he immigrated to Israel where he studied philosophy. Bouganim has published some thirty collections of short stories, novels, and essays, in both Hebrew and in French. Works include *Walter Benjamin, le rêve de vivre* (Albin Michel, 2007); *Tel-Aviv sans répit* (Autrement, 2009); *Le Rire de Dieu: Perles du Talmud* (Seuil, 2010); and *L'Arbre à vœux* (Avant-Propos, 2011). Most recently, he published the book-length essay *Vers la disparation d'Israël?* (Seuil, 2012).

CHOUCHANA BOUKHOBZA was born in March 1959 in Sfax (Tunisia), where she grew up speaking both Hebrew and Arabic, and was schooled by nuns of the Saint-Vincent de Paul order. In 1964 she and her family relocated to France, and when she was seventeen years old she immigrated to Israel where she studied math and physics at the University of Jerusalem. Boukhobza ultimately returned to France, where, for a time, she worked in journalism (at Radio Judaïques FM, for the magazine *L'Arche*, and in television). Boukhobza launched a literary career in 1986, with the publication of her novel *Un été à Jérusalem* (Balland), which won the Prix Méditerranée. She has written young adult fiction, screenplays, and several other novels including *Le Troisième jour* and *Fureur* (Denoël, 2010, 2012).

PATRICK CHEMLA was born in 1951 in Bône (Annaba), in Algeria. A practicing psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Chemla has had a long-standing engagement with the notion of the “coming cosmopolitanism.” He draws on the Algerian trauma as a source of creativity and as a founding principle of his social action in favor of “open psychiatry.” Chemla is fervently opposed to the segregation of the mentally ill in society. He belongs to the institutional psychotherapy movement and is an active member of the “groupe des 39 contre la nuit sécuritaire”—a group of thirty-nine mental health professionals who protested the draconian security measures targeting psychiatric hospitals instituted in December 2008 by then-President Nicolas Sarkozy. Chemla founded the day clinic at the Antonin Artaud Mental Health Center in Reims and currently directs the Henry Ey Clinic. He is the author of *Le Tourment de l'origine* (L'Harmattan, 2004) and the editor of numerous collections of essays devoted to questions of language, subjectivity, and origins.

ALICE CHERKI was born in Algiers in 1936. After coursework in *hypokhâgne* (preparatory school for literary studies), she opted for medical school, which led her to a position as an internist in psychiatry at the Blida-Joinville Hospital in 1955, where she worked closely with Frantz Fanon. Cherki was a fervent participant in the Algerian independence movement. In 1957 she was exiled to France, where she worked in psychiatric hospitals in the Seine region before moving back to Africa in 1958. After stays in Tunisia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cherki moved back to Algeria in 1962. Since 1965, she has been living and practicing psychiatry and psychoanalysis in Paris. Her writing projects include collaborations such as *Retour à Lacan?* (Fayard, 1981) and *Les Juifs d'Algérie* (Le Scribe, 1987). She is also

the author of *Frantz Fanon—Portrait* (Seuil, 2000, 2011); *La Frontière invisible, violences de l'immigration* (Elema, 2016); and the preface to the new French edition of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (2002).

MIREILLE COHEN-MASSOUDA was born in June 1949 in Cairo (Egypt), to a family where both French and Arabic were spoken. Having experienced various learning difficulties throughout her childhood, she nonetheless eventually completed her schooling in Monaco (where she moved in June 1956), and ultimately devoted herself to speech therapy, a profession she practiced for fifteen years, primarily with children. Later, Cohen-Massouda became a psychoanalyst and was a member of the Freud School of Paris from 1972 until the group disbanded. She participated actively in the dissemination of Jacques Lacan's public seminars prior to their official publication. She currently works in the child psychiatry department of the Argenteuil Hospital. A Karaite Jew—a little-known strand of Judaism that recognizes the Tanakh as the ultimate authority on questions of theology—Cohen-Massouda is involved in raising awareness of Karaite Judaism through public interventions and essays. She also participated in the making of a film devoted to the topic, titled *Du Silence à la parole* (2002).

RITA RACHEL COHEN was born on January 29, 1952, in Cairo, to Egyptian-Jewish parents of French nationality. Egyptian Arabic and French were spoken at home, but Rachel was also exposed to Hebrew through her father's reading, and to Greek and Italian through her mother's singing. In 1956, the family left Alexandria for Marseille, and later arrived in Paris, where Cohen studied dance, sociology, and theater. She is an actress and a director; she also writes for the theater. Notably, she directed Albert Cohen's *Ezéchiel* at the Théâtre du Rocher à la Garde (in the Var region). Her encounter with Jacques Hassoun, a Jewish psychoanalyst and writer also born in Egypt, proved pivotal: it was with him, and a group of other Egyptian Jews, that Cohen made her first trip back to Egypt in 1993. Her publications include *Lettre à Jérémie pour lui parler d'Ezéchiel* (Théâtre du Rocher, 1991) and *Mr PIN's ou les Pin's de A . . . à Z* (Éditions Francis Bréchant, 1991, 1992). This short story marks the first time she has published as Rita Rachel Cohen.

ROGER DADOUN was born in Oran (Algeria) where he went to secondary school. He began his university studies in Algiers and completed advanced degrees in Paris. He is professor emeritus of Comparative Literature at the University of Paris VII (Denis Diderot campus), where he founded the department of cinema. Dadoun is a philosopher, psychoanalyst, poet, journalist, and editor. He is a member of the editorial boards of prestigious reviews such as *Les temps modernes*, *La Quinzaine littéraire*, and *Cultures et sociétés*. He is a frequent guest on *France Culture* and is the director of the series "Traces" at Editions Payot. His most recent publications include *Renaissante enfance: enfance écrite en lettres d'or* (Éditions Les Amis du père Castor, 2011); *L'Erotisme. De l'obscène au sublime* (PUF, 2010); and *La télé enchaînée: pour une psychanalyse politique de l'image* (Homnisphères, 2008).

ANNY DAYAN ROSENMAN was born in Casablanca (Morocco) in 1946. She grew up speaking French at home and at school, and Arabic with her grandmother. In 1967, the family left Morocco for Paris, where Dayan Rosenman studied literature and cinema, obtaining an *agrégation* and completing a dissertation in literature before obtaining a faculty position at the University of Paris VII (Denis Diderot campus). She has published numerous short stories, essays, articles, and two books: *La guerre d'Algérie dans la mémoire et l'imaginaire* (with

Lucette Valensi, 2004) and *Les alphabets de la Shoah* (CNRS, 2007). She is the presenter of a radiophonic literary program titled “L’Histoire à la lettre” (on Judaïques FM). Through organizations such as Identité et Dialogue, Dialogue Arabes et Juifs en France, and Proje-t Aladin, Dayan Rosenman is actively engaged in pursuing Judeo-Arabic and Israeli-Palestinian dialogue.

LUCIEN ELIA was born in Lebanon in December 1937. He did his primary and secondary schooling in his native city of Beirut before moving to Paris, where he studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, the École des Métiers d’art, the École Estienne, and the École des Beaux-Arts. He worked for Hermès as a package designer and window dresser, and did advertising for RSCG (currently Havas), Publicis, and the ad agency BDDP. Elia has published several novels, including *Les Types* (Flammarion, 1967); *Les Ratés de la diaspora* (Flammarion, 1969); *Fer-Blanc* (Flammarion, 1973); *Pub* (1979); and *D’eau et de sang* (Albin Michel, 2000).

MORIS FARHI was born on July 5, 1935, in Ankara (Turkey), where he lived until 1946, when he moved to Istanbul. In 1954 he left Istanbul to study English and theater in England, where he currently resides. His first language was Greek, spoken to him by his mother, who hailed from Salonika. At home, he learned Ladino (the Judeo-Spanish that certain Jews from Turkey still speak) and Turkish. He worked as an actor, and later turned to writing screenplays for TV, primarily for the BBC. In 1972 he began writing novels, most of which have been translated from English into other languages. He is the vice president of the International Pen Club and the Royal Society of Literature. His novels include *Young Turk* (Saqi Books, 2004) and *Children of the Rainbow* (Saqi Books, 1999). His works of poetry have been collected in the volume *Songs of Two Continents* (Saqi Books, 2011).

ANNIE GOLDMANN was born in Tunis (Tunisia), and went on to study law, psychology, and sociology in Paris. After defending her thesis at University of Paris X (Nanterre campus) in 1969, she specialized in sociology of film. She has spent the entirety of her academic career as a professor and researcher at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Marc Ferro’s “Cinema and History” Center. Her writings include a family saga, *Les filles de Mardochee. Histoire familiale d’une émancipation* (Denoël, 1979); works of film scholarship (*Cinéma et société moderne* [Denoël, 1971] and *L’Errance dans le cinéma contemporain* [H. Veyrier, 1985]); and feminist history and criticism (*Rêves d’amour perdus. Les femmes dans les romans du XIXe siècle* [Denoël, 1984] and *Les combats des femmes* [Castermann 1996]).

HUBERT ABRAHAM HADDAD was born in Tunis on March 10, 1947. In 1950, he and his family left Tunisia for exile in France, where they lived first in Belleville and Ménilmontant (neighborhoods of eastern Paris), later in working-class suburbs. His childhood was marked by the vagaries of immigration: his father sold goods at fairgrounds; his mother, who was Algerian, suffered from an identity crisis. This is the childhood described in Haddad’s book *Le camp du bandit mauresque* (Fayard, 2005). His first work of poetry, *Le charnier déductif*, was published in 1967. In 1968, he founded the surrealist-inspired review *Le point d’être*. From 1974 on he published novels, collections of short stories, essays on art and literature, works of theater, and collections of poetry. His novel *Palestine* (Éditions Zulma, 2008) won the Prix des cinq continents de la Francophonie, and the paperback edition won the Prix Renaudot Poche in 2009. Other novels include *Géométrie d’un rêve* (2009) and *Opium Poppy* (2011).

LUCETTE HELLER-GOLDENBERG was born in 1942 in Marrakesh (Morocco). Professor emerita of the University of Cologne, Heller-Goldenberg studied modern literature at the University of Aix-en-Provence prior to teaching in a variety of institutions in France and Germany. Her doctoral thesis on Jean Giono and the Contadour was published in 1972 by Belles Lettres, and her second dissertation, on the history of youth hostels, was published by the University of Nice in 1985. In 1986 she created a research program and a series of conferences on Maghrebi literature and on Judeo-Maghrebi literature in French at the University of Cologne. She directs the *Cahier d'études maghrébines*, an annual publication featuring more than twenty-two issues. The 2008 issue contains her own autobiographical story, titled "Loiseau fabuleux de ma mémoire juive maghrébine" (prefaced by Leïla Sebbar) and a series of testimonial writings by former Alliance Israélite Universelle students and teachers.

IDA KUMMER was born in 1950 in Tunis. She grew up speaking French at school, while at home the family spoke French, Judeo-Arabic, and Italian. In 1962 she left Tunisia for Paris. Currently she teaches comparative literature at the Collège des Nations Unies (where she also directs the French program), at the New School in New York, and at the University of Paris III. She coordinates the bilingual scholarly journal *CELAAN* (publication of the Centre d'étude des littératures et des arts d'Afrique du nord), which is published in the United States and devoted to the dissemination of Maghrebi culture in North America. Her publications include: "La mémoire de l'oeil: images de l'immigration algérienne au cinéma," in *Algérie: Nouvelles écritures* (L'Harmattan, 2005); "L'Humour dans le cinéma maghrébin," in *Francophonies* (2007); and "La bédouine sur la terrasse," in *Enfances tunisiennes* (edited by Sophie Bessis and Leïla Sebbar, Éditions Elyzad 2010).

RONI MARGULIES was born in Istanbul in May 1955. He is a poet, writer, and translator. His paternal grandparents, who emigrated from Poland to Turkey in 1925, spoke Russian at home; his maternal grandparents, who were Sephardic Jews from Izmir, spoke Ladino; his parents spoke French to him and he responded in Turkish. After attending primary school in Turkish, he learned English first at the English High School for Boys, and later at Robert College, the American high school in Istanbul. In 1972, he left to study economics in England. He earned his doctorate in 1982 and spent thirty years in England before returning to live permanently in Istanbul. He has published eight collections of poetry, a childhood memoir, four collections of literary and political essays, and translations (into Turkish) of poetry by Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, and Yehuda Amichai. He writes a biweekly editorial column for the weekly paper *Taraf*.

LINE MELLER-SAÏD was born in Blida (Algeria), where she attended primary and secondary school. She would go on to study philosophy and psychology at the university in Algiers and, later, at the Sorbonne in Paris. Her five children were all born and raised in Algeria, where she lived until 1995 and to which she returns frequently. As a representative of the Joint (American Joint Distribution Committee) in Algeria since 1985, she has worked with the Consistory of Algeria to assist the Jews who remained in Algeria after independence. She continues, on a voluntary basis, to help manage the current interests and obligations of the Jewish Consistory of Algeria. She has written several novels, including *Un enfant dans la tourmente* (Raphaël, 2001); *La juive au tchador* (Alan Sutton, 2005); and *Cela ne sera pas*

*un rêve* (Jean-Paul Bayol, 2009, with a preface by Benjamin Stora). Her short stories and vignettes about her childhood are published under the title *Blida et des poussières. Une Algérie dans le miroir* (Terra Hébraïca, 2007).

DANIEL MESGUICH was born in July 1952 in Algiers, where he spoke French both at home and at school. In 1962, he left Algeria for Marseille, which became his second childhood home. Mesguich is an actor, director, and professor of dramatic arts at the Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique. He is the author of numerous theoretical articles on theater and the translation of works of theater, including *L'Eternel éphémère* (Verdier, 2006); a series of interviews with Rodolphe Fouano, *Je n'ai jamais quitté l'école . . .* (Albin Michel, 2009); and *Le Théâtre* (with Alain Viala, PUF, 2011). He is also the author of a novel titled *L'Effacée* (Plon, 2009).

NINE MOATI was born in 1937 in Paris where her father, Serge Moati—journalist and French politician—had been expelled from Tunisia by the authorities of the French Protectorate for sympathizing with the Tunisian cause. The Moatis were uprooted by the German invasion of Paris, eventually returning to Tunisia on the last boat to leave Marseille before it fell to the Germans. Moati's childhood in Tunisia was marked by her father's activity in the resistance and eventual deportation to Germany. (He survived and returned to his family in Tunisia at the end of the war.) At home and at school, Nine spoke French, although she did speak Italian with several elderly cousins who came to visit weekly. In 1957, when her parents passed away, Moati left Tunis for Paris with her little brother Henry Haim, born in 1946, whom she raised on her own. Henry would later take their father's name, Serge, and would become a successful and well-known cineaste. Moati worked as a radio journalist and for the magazine *Elle*. In 1974 she published her first novel, *Mon enfant, ma mère* (Stock). Her other novels include *Les Belles de Tunis* (Seuil, 1983) and *Deux femmes à Paris* (Ramsay, 1998). Her sixteenth novel, *Le fil de la vie*, was published in 2012 (Balland).

ALDO NAOURI, the seventh child of a family of ten, was born in December 1937 in Benghazi (Libya). In August 1942, Naouri and his family—all of whom held French citizenship—were expelled by the Italian government of Libya to Algeria. This forced relocation confronted the young Naouri and his siblings with two new languages: French, which was completely foreign to them, and Algerian Arabic, which was very different from the Judeo-Libyan dialect spoken at home. The Naouri family lived in Orléansville (today Chlef) until the city was destroyed by an earthquake in 1954, at which point they relocated to Relizane, where they lived until 1962. On his own, Naouri moved to France in 1956 in order to attend medical school. For nearly forty years, he worked as a pediatrician in Paris, while also writing best-selling nonfiction on parenting and families. Recent titles, all published with Odile Jacob, include: *Eduquer ses enfants* (2008); *L'Enfant bien portant* (2010); and *Les belles-mères, les beaux-pères, leurs brus et leurs gendres* (2011).

TOBIE NATHAN was born in November 1948 in Cairo and left Egypt with his family in February 1957, in the wake of the Suez Crisis. The family ultimately established its new home in Rome, where Nathan learned Italian, adding that language to the French and Arabic he already spoke fluently. In 1958, shortly after De Gaulle was elected president, the family relocated to Paris. With a PhD in psychology and a doctorate in arts and sciences, Nathan has worked as a psychologist, a psychoanalyst, a university professor, and a diplomat. In

recent years, he served as cultural attaché at the French embassies in Tel Aviv and in Conakry. He is one of the preeminent French researchers in ethnopsychiatry, and has published more than two hundred academic articles in specialized journals, twenty-five books on psychology and anthropology, six novels, and one play. Recent titles include *La nouvelle interprétation des rêves* (Odile Jacob, 2011); *Qui a tué Arlozoroff?* (Grasset, 2009); *Mon patient Sigmund Freud* (Seuil, 2011); *Ce pays qui te ressemble* (Stock, 2015); and *Les âmes errantes* (L'Iconoclaste, 2017).

ROSIE PINHAS-DELPUECH was born at the end of 1946 in Istanbul, where she lived until 1965, oscillating between the family home on the west bank and Burgaz, one of the Prince Islands, the place where she spent her summers until the age of eleven, and that she would come to call her “paradise lost.” At home, she spoke French with her parents, although her mother’s first language was Judeo-Spanish. Pinhas-Delpuech learned Turkish at elementary school and later earned the Franco-Turkish baccalaureate at the Notre Dame de Sion High School. In 1965 she left Istanbul for Grenoble and, a year later, for Paris, where she studied philosophy at Paris-Nanterre under Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas. She eventually obtained a doctorate in French literature. After teaching philosophy and French in Israeli high schools for ten years, she returned to Paris in 1984, from which point on she devoted herself to translating Hebrew literature into French, becoming the director of the “Lettres hébraïques” collection at Actes Sud. (Pinhas-Delpuech would also become the primary translator of Turkish short story writer Sait Faik, who also lived on Burgaz Island.) Later, she emerged as a novelist in her own right, publishing *Insomnia. Une traduction nocturne* (Actes Sud, 2009), *Suite byzantine* (Bleu autour, 2011), and a collection of short stories titled *Entre les îles* (Bleu autour, 2007).

NICOLE S. SERFATY was born in 1947 in Casablanca, to a mother from the Spanish enclave of Melilla and a father from southern Morocco. Her father was a merchant in Essaouira; his own father had been a rabbi. Serfaty spoke Arabic with the family cook who essentially raised her; she communicated in Spanish with her mother, in Berber or Hebrew with her father, and learned French at the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools. Her parents also spoke French fluently. Serfaty did her secondary education at the Mers-Sultan Middle School in Casablanca, and continued her studies at the École normale israélite orientale in Paris, under the direction of Emmanuel Lévinas. In 1964, having obtained her diploma, she returned to Casablanca where she studied law and eventually received a law degree. In 1967, the Six-Day War prompted her definitive return to France. Serfaty went back to school to study classical Arabic and Hebrew at INALCO and sociology at Paris VIII, eventually completing a dissertation under the tutelage of Haïm Zafrani. With a doctorate in Jewish Languages and Civilizations in the Lands of Islam, she taught Hebrew at the University of Bordeaux III, History of the Maghreb at Paris VII, and Judeo-Arabic at INALCO. Serfaty currently devotes her time to research; she is an active member of the INALCO research group “Jewish Languages and Civilizations of the Maghreb and the Western Mediterranean,” and she specializes in the linguistic and social history of Moroccan Judaism. Her publications include *Les courtisans juifs des sultans marocains, XIIIe-XVIIIe siècles. Hommes politiques et hauts dignitaires* (Bouchene, 1999); *Présence juive au maghreb. Hommage à Haïm Zafrani* (Bouchene, 2004); and *Juives d’Afrique du nord. Cartes postales 1880–1930* (Bleu autour, 2005).

DANIEL SIBONY was born in Marrakesh (Morocco) in August 1942, in the Médina. As a child, Sibony lived in three languages: his mother tongue, Arabic; biblical Hebrew; and French. At the age of thirteen he emigrated to Paris, ultimately becoming a researcher and professor of mathematics. Sibony also completed a thesis in philosophy. After working with Jacques Lacan, at the age of thirty-two he became a psychoanalyst, maintaining a certain distance from Lacanian techniques and practices. Since 1974 he has led a yearly seminar on therapeutic questions and the relationship between the unconscious and creative and symbolic practices. In 2010–2011, the seminar focused on Passion (as it related to love, money, transmission, power, analysis); in 2012 the seminar was devoted to The Existential. Sibony has written numerous books, including: *De l'identité à l'existence. L'apport du peuple juif* (Odile Jacob, 2012); *Création. Essai sur l'art contemporain* (Seuil, 2005); *Avec Shakespeare* (Seuil, 1988); and *Le sens du rire, et de l'humour* (Odile Jacob, 2010). Sibony is also the author of a novel, *Marrakech, le départ* (Odile Jacob, 2009) and a play, *Le jeu et la passe—Identité et théâtre* (Seuil, 1997).

GUY SITBON was born in Monastir (Tunisia) in January 1934. The Sitbon family has roots in Monastir that go back ages; the city itself was nearly untouched by French colonization and had remained nearly unchanged since the fifteenth century. As a child, Sitbon spoke French and Arabic, as did all the members of his family, with the exception of his paternal grandparents who lived with him and who spoke only Arabic. His parents had only a rudimentary education but Sitbon learned French at school, and after elementary school in Monstir he went to boarding school in Sousse, twenty kilometers from his home. After completing his studies, Sitbon began a career as a journalist, writing for the daily paper *La Presse de Tunis*. In 1964, at the age of thirty, he left Tunisia to live in Paris, where he worked for *Le Monde*, *Jeune Afrique*, *L'Express*, *Le Nouvel observateur*, and *Marianne*. He founded *Le Magazine littéraire*. Although some of his extended family decided to put down roots in Israel, most of his closest relatives immigrated to France and all of them, with the exception of one sister, have become French citizens. (Sitbon himself was naturalized in the late 1990s.) In addition to his activity as a journalist, Sitbon has also written several books, including *Gagou* (Grasset, 1980), a novel set in Tunisia; and an essay titled *L'Arabe et le Juif* (a dialogue moderated by Philippe Gaillard and published with Plon in 2004).

BENJAMIN STORA was born on December 2, 1950, in Constantine (Algeria), where he grew up speaking Arabic with his mother and French with his father. He was schooled at the Lycée Français d'Aumale and attended the Talmud-Thora where he learned Hebrew for his bar mitzvah. On June 12, 1962, Stora and his family left Constantine to live in Sartrouville, outside of Paris. Stora holds a doctorate in literature and history and is a professor at the University of Paris XIII and INALCO. Since 2014, he has presided over the steering committee of the Museum of Immigration (Paris). He has published more than twenty scholarly works, including: *68, et après. Les héritages égarés* (Stock, 2018); *Juifs, musulmans: la grande separation* (Esprit du temps, 2017); *Les trois exiles. Juifs d'Algérie* (Stock, 2006); and *La gangrène et l'oubli. La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (La Découverte, 1998).

RALPH TOLEDANO was born in July 1953 in Paris but grew up in Casablanca. He hails from a family with roots in Tangiers that date to the late eighteenth century. After completing high school at the Lycée Lyautey, he studied at the Sorbonne, where he earned a doctorate in art history in 1983. He also studied at the École du Louvre. Toledano is the author of numerous monographs and annotated catalogs. His book *Voyages dans le Maroc juif*, with

photographs by Roland Beaufre, was published by Somogy in 2004. An expert in ancient painting, Toledano divides his time between Paris and Jerusalem.

DANY TOUBIANA was born in December 1948 in Guelma (Algeria). As a child, Toubiana spoke only French, despite the fact that both her parents spoke fluent dialectical Arabic as well. Her entire family also spoke Hebrew on religious occasions. She grew up between Guelma and Bône, where she attended boarding school for two years. In 1961, her father was transferred to Nice and the entire family relocated to France. Toubiana studied theater, becoming a director, playwright, and teacher. Today she lives in greater Paris where, as a specialist in francophone repertory, she directs her own troupe, *La compagnie de la Feuille d'Or*. As a teacher, she leads workshops at the Institut d'études théâtrales and heads up writing workshops on cultural mediation in the Arts and Media Department at the University of Paris III (La Sorbonne nouvelle campus). Recent publications and productions include: *Traversées de la subversion. Les dramaturgies d'expression française* (L'Harmattan, 2010); *Le fil du funambule* (novel, Chemins de traverse, 2010); *La mort de l'enfant au théâtre* (edited volume, L'Entretemps, 2010); *Moi, l'interdite* (adapted from the novel by Ananda Devi, staged 2009); and *Nouvelle-Calédonie, les voix du Caillou* (staged production of texts by New Caledonian writers).

YVES TURQUIER was born in 1941 to a Jewish family from Beirut. He studied literature and psychology, and worked as a journalist for five years. When he was twenty-three, he moved to Paris to attend film school at the IDHEC (Institut des hautes études cinématographiques). After two years of coursework, he worked as an assistant director, and later director, of numerous documentary films, including *La dernière fuite* (on contemporary dance). He also teaches film and new technology at l'INA (Institut national de l'audiovisuel) and at the Institut international de l'image et du son. Turkiyer is one of the founders of La Fémis (école nationale supérieure des métiers de l'image et du son). Beginning in 2000, he began a research project on the emigrés of the Jewish community of Beirut. The result is his most recent documentary *Petite histoire des juifs du Liban*, which has been viewed in a dozen countries and was chosen for the Paris Cinéma festival in 2007.



## INDEX

- 'Abbāsīd caliphate, 16n2  
 Abd el-Kader, Emir, 155  
 Abdel Wahab, Mohamed, 97, 114, 114n7  
 Abdel-Wahab, Khaled, 81  
 Abouzeid, Leila: *Return to Childhood*,  
     xxxiv–xxxv  
*adafina*, 239, 239n5  
 Ain Basnam, 148. *See also* Algeria  
 Aix, 182. *See also* France  
*akoud*, 86, 86n3  
 Albanians, 21  
 Alexandria, 57–64, 60fig., 61n4, 69.  
     *See also* Egypt  
 Algeria, xiv–xvi, xvii, xxi, xxiii–xxvi, xxxi, 7, 95,  
     119–89, 120map; Arab conquest of, 170; Arab  
     culture of, 132, 145, 147; Aurès region of, 147,  
     180; citizenship and nationality in, xv n4;  
     colonial, 119–20, 131, 144–45, 174, 187n4;  
     Hennaya School in, 2fig.; history of, 125,  
     131–32; Jewish war veterans of, 163;  
     Judeo-Arabic culture of, 140–44; Kabylia  
     region of, 147; struggle for the independence  
     of, xv, 121, 126, 126n9, 126n11, 131–32, 141, 176,  
     182, 186; Turkish conquest of, 170; Veteran's  
     Day in Vichy, 162, 162n10; Vichy laws of,  
     148, 162; wartime internment camps in,  
     130, 130n1; "White Russians" of, 168, 168n5;  
     working-class Jews of, 142. *See also* Ain  
     Basnam; Algiers; Blida; Bône; Communist  
     Party of Algeria; Constantine; Djelfa;  
     Guelma; Laghouat; Mostaganem; Oran;  
     Orléansville; Sétif; Tlemcen  
 Algiers, xxi, xxx, 120–21, 138, 165–73, 183; Arab  
     neighborhoods of, 131; Diar-es-Saada of,  
     129–32, 130fig.; Eckart Woods of, 167, 167n2;  
     European neighborhoods of, 145; Gautier  
     High School of, 134fig.; Guyoville of, 167;  
     Kasbah of, 133, 149; La Madrague of, 167; La  
     Marine of, 145–50; Lazergues Middle School  
     of, 149; Lycée Bugeaud of, 148–49; Maillot  
     Hospital of, 145; Nelson Beach House of,  
     149; Notre-Dame d'Afrique cathedral of, 145,  
     145n1. *See also* Algeria  
 al-Husseyini, Hajj Amin, 57  
 'Ali, Governor Muḥammad, 55–56  
 Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), xxiv–xxvi,  
     xxiv n30, 194, 219; bombing of the school in  
     Beirut of the, 50–51, 51n4; educational system  
     of the, xxv, 1, 3, 7–8, 39, 46, 55, 57, 194, 199,  
     205, 205n5, 210  
 Allouche, Jean-Luc, xl, 123–28  
*amareldin*, 63–64, 63n10, 64n13  
 Amrouche, Jean, 148, 148n4  
 Anatolia, xviii, 14, 16, 29. *See also* Turkey  
 Andalusia: Jews of, 37, 231; Judeo-Arab, 95.  
     *See also* Spain  
 Anidjar, Gil, xxviii n43  
 Ankara, 16–22, 17fig. *See also* Turkey

- anthropology, 114
- anti-Semitism, 9, 27; Algerian, 121, 159, 163, 172; Egyptian, 57; French, 182; Muslim, 176–77; Vichy, 195. *See also* Jews
- anti-Zionism, xxix, xxixn46
- Arabic, xvi, xviii, xxn21, xxin25, xxix, xxxvii, xxxix, xl–xli, 39, 44, 55, 63n11, 65–69, 83–91, 87n4, 95–97, 103–9, 113–15, 135, 139, 170; colloquial Algerian, 147, 180–81, 186, 188–89; colloquial Moroccan, 200, 205, 215, 215n4, 225, 228, 231, 237; and Hebrew, 127, 136, 233; at home, 142; and Judeo-Arabic, 130; literary, 181; “*salam aleikum*” of, 149, 149n6, 155; singsong, 156; teaching of, 177, 209–10; translation of names into, 75. *See also* language; muezzin
- Arab-Israeli War (1948), 37
- Arab-Israeli War (1967), 39, 239, 239n6
- Arab League, 195
- Arabo-Muslim Algerians, xv. *See also* French Muslims of Algeria (FMA)
- Arab Postal Union, 195
- Arabs, xvi, xxi, xxvi–xxviii, xxviii40, xxix, 89–92; Algerian, 129, 175–76; Jews and, 115, 129, 141, 175–76, 232; Moroccan, 232; racialization of, xxviii41; solidarity of, 226. *See also* Middle East; Muslims; North Africa
- Aragon, Louis, 115, 115n9
- Aramaic, 63; teaching of, 209. *See also* language
- Armée de libération nationale (ALN), 144, 144n4. *See also* Front de libération nationale (FLN)
- Armenian, 63. *See also* language
- Armenians, 14, 16, 18, 21, 27, 27n4
- Ashkenazim, xviii, 7, 23, 55, 70n14, 193, 219. *See also* Jews
- Asturias, Miguel Angel, 93n1
- Atatürk, Mustafa Kemal, 14, 18
- Atlan, Jean, 181
- Atlas Mountains, 193, 222
- Auschwitz, 110, 217
- Australia, 58
- Austria, 107
- awra*, xxxiv–xxxv
- Azoulay, André, xivn3, xxx, 197–201, 198fig.
- Baghdad, xxv. *See also* Iraq
- Baha’is, 37
- Bahloul, Joëlle, xxvi, 129–32, 130fig.
- Balkan Wars (1912–13), 9
- bamia*, 62, 62n7
- bar mitzvah, 26, 135, 170, 182, 204–5, 214, 238. *See also* Judaism
- Bartlett, Sir Frederic, xxxix
- batata*, 136–37, 137n11
- Baudelaire, Charles: *Invitation au voyage*, 32n3
- Baybars I, 16, 16n2
- Behmoaras, Lizi, xivn3, xxxvii, 10–15, 12fig.
- beignets, 149–50
- Beirut, xxiv, 41–51, 47fig.; École Talmud Torah Selim Tarrab of, 39; Jewish Quarter of, 41; Jews of, 37. *See also* Lebanon
- Bénabou, Marcel, xxxix, 202–6, 203fig.; *Jacob, Ménaheim et Mimoun, Une épopée familiale*, 202n1; *Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres*, 202n1
- Ben Badis, Abdelhamid, 126, 126n10
- Ben Ibrahim Ben Abdelhafid, Salouha, 114, 114n7
- Bensoussan, Albert, xl, 133–39, 134fig.
- Bensoussan, Georges, xxvi; *Juifs en pays arabes*, xxvii
- Benvenisti, Meron: *Intimate Enemies: Jews and Arabs in a Shared Land*, xxvii
- Berbers, 94, 142–43, 170, 207; Almohad dynasty of the, 119, 193; Moroccan, 223, 225; “native” jewelry in the style of the, 180; Tuareg, 98n13
- Berlin, 25. *See also* Germany
- bestels*, 160, 160n4
- Bey, 14, 92n4
- Bey, Maïssa, xix, xixn16
- Bible, 76
- Bizerte, 81, 92. *See also* Tunisia
- Black Sea coast, 25. *See also* Turkey
- Blida, 138, 158–64; Arab market of, 160; Jewish cemetery of, 161; Lavigerie Elementary School of, 161; Lavigerie Preschool of, 159fig. *See also* Algeria
- boghour*, 62, 62n9
- Bonaparte, Napoleon, xxiii
- Bône, 140–44. *See also* Algeria
- Boniche, Lili, 97, 97n11
- Book of Splendor, The*, 210
- Bordas, Renée, xv
- Bouganim, Ami, 207–11; “Bouquet of Brotherhood,” 208fig.
- boukha*, 100, 100n1
- Boukhobza, Chochana, xxii, xxxii, xl, 83–87, 84fig.
- Boulak*, 69, 69n12
- Bouzar, Wadi, xxxv
- Braudel, Fernand: *La Méditerranée*, xix, xixn17
- Buddhists, 37
- Bureau of the Arab League, 81
- burnous*, 155–56, 155n11
- Büyükkada, 15. *See also* Turkey

- Cairo, xxiii, xxx, 57–59, 62, 64–76; Groppi tearoom in, 67, 68n7; Hara of, 68, 68n8; Khan el-khalili in, 64, 64n13; Lycée Français of, 69; rioting in, 75; Suleiman Pasha Square in, 68; Tahrir Square in, 69. *See also* Egypt
- Cairo Fire, 58
- Canada, xiv, 70, 226
- Canetti, Elias: *The Voices of Marrakesh*, 220, 220n4
- caoua*, 161, 161n8
- Carthage, 79
- Casablanca, 195, 212–16, 224*fig.*, 235–40; *See also* Morocco
- Cerdan, Marcel, 149
- Chavouot (Pentecost), 127, 127n14. *See also* Jewish holidays
- chèche*, 98, 98n13
- chéchia*, 90, 90n2, 93, 94n3, 96, 136n6, 188, 188n6
- Chemla, Patrick, xxx, 140–44, 141*fig.*
- chemyia*, 156
- Cherifian Empire, 239, 239n6. *See also* Morocco
- Cherki, Alice, xxx, 145–50, 146*fig.*
- Chevalier, Maurice, 123, 123n1
- childhood, xiii, xxxi, xxxiv, 1, 32, 85, 88, 93, 98, 199, 202–3, 209, 212; end of, 240; film of, 216; ordinary, 229; rediscovery of, 230
- chochet*, 133
- Christianity, 31n1; Catholic, 32, 148, 169, 237; Orthodox, 32; processions and communions of, 184, 186; Protestant, 148. *See also* Christians; religion
- Christians, 1, 21, 29, 68, 89, 100; Algerian, 123, 169, 171–72; Berber, 94; Coptic, 68; Lebanese, 39, 48; Moroccan, 206; Ottoman, 9; progressive, 148; Tunisian, 113. *See also* Christianity
- cigares aux amandes*, 188, 188n5
- citizenship: Egyptian, 56, 58; French, xxivn30, 121, 125, 125n8, 130, 130n1, 162, 167n1, 170, 175, 175n2, 181n2; Italian, 79; Lebanese, 38–39; Moroccan, 195, 227; and nationality, xv n4, 56; Ottoman, 175n2; Turkish, 9. *See also* Crémieux Decree (1870)
- Cixous, Hélène, xxix, xxxvin71, 169
- Claveau, André, 43
- cocas*, 132
- Cohen, Rita Rachel, xv, xxxix, 59–64, 60*fig.*
- Cohen-Massouda, Mireille, xxx, 65–70, 66*fig.*
- colonialism, xv n4, xxvi; French, xxi, xxiv, xxvi, 113, 129–32, 194, 203, 217, 217n1
- communism, 58, 126
- Communist Party of Algeria, 149. *See also* Algeria
- Company Law, The (1947), 57
- Conseil des Communautés Israélites du Maroc, 196
- Constantine, 95, 95n6, 119–20, 123–28, 145, 178–83; “Algiers Temple” of, 181; anti-Jewish riots in, 97; Aumale High School in, 123, 124*fig.*, 181; Hara of, 180, 180n1; Jews of, 171, 180, 183. *See also* Algeria
- cornes de gazelle*, 188, 188n5
- Corsica, 63
- couscous, 86, 103, 108–9; Arab, 103n4; Berber, 98; Jewish, 103n4
- Crémieux, Adolphe, xxiv, xxivn30, 97, 120, 125, 170
- Crémieux Decree (1870), xxiv, xxivn30, 97n9, 120–21, 125, 125n8, 162, 169, 175. *See also* citizenship
- créponné*, 142
- Croesus, 43, 43n2
- croque-monsieur*, 167, 167n3
- Dadoun, Roger, xv, xxxi, 151–57; Dadoun family, 152*fig.*
- Damascus, 37. *See also* Syria
- dan*, 73
- Dante, 219, 219n2
- darbouka*, 111, 111n3
- de Beauvoir, Simone, 238
- decolonization, 96
- de Gaulle, Charles, 182
- Deir Yassin massacre, 38
- de Man, Paul, xxxiin60
- demobilization, 91, 91n3
- Derrida, Jacques, xxxvin71, 169
- Dey, 97, 97n10
- dhimmi*, xviii, xviiin11, 80, 95n4; status of Egyptian Jews as, 56; status of Moroccan Jews as, 194–95, 240, 240n7; status of Twansa Jews of Tunisia as, 79
- Diderot, Denis, 180
- dioul*, 160, 160n4
- djama'*, 233. *See also* mosques
- Djebbar, Assia: *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, xxxiii
- Djelfa, 133–39. *See also* Algeria
- djellaba*, 98, 98n13, 156, 156n12, 170, 170n6, 197, 197n2, 209, 209n2, 221
- Djerba, 81; Hara Kebira of, 79; Hara Seghira of, 79. *See also* Tunisia
- djinn*, 160, 160n5
- douar*, 124, 125n3
- Dounia*, 59, 59n2
- dreams, 75
- Dreyfus Affair, 121

- Druze, 37  
 Druze-Maronite War (1860), 37  
 Dugas, Guy, xxxv
- Egypt, xvii–xviii, xxi, xxiii, 7, 55–76, 56*map*;  
 British occupation of, 56–57; Grand Rabbi  
 of, 75; Lavon Affair in, 58; Revolution of  
 1952 in, 58; Tunisian ambassador to, 108.  
*See also* Alexandria; Cairo; Maghgha;  
 Mansourah; Tantah
- Egyptian, 59, 61–63. *See also* language
- Egyptian Nationality Law (1929), 56  
 ‘*ei*b, 128
- Eid el Kébir/Aid el Kébir*, 75, 75n8, 111, 127, 127n12,  
 143, 143n3, 184n2. *See also* Islam
- Eisenberg, Josy, 70n14
- el Atrache, Farid, 97
- Elia, Lucien, xxx, 41–45, 42*fig*.
- El-Maleh, Edmond, xxix, xxixn46  
*emet*, 216, 216n5
- Emir Abd el-Kader, 125, 125n4
- England, xiv, xxii–xxiii, 65, 70
- English, xxxix, 11, 39, 63; at school, 25, 55, 68,  
 206. *See also* language
- Enlightenment, xxiv, xxvi
- Essaouira-Mogador, 197–201, 197n1, 198*fig*,  
 207–11; casbah of, 210; medina of, 210; porte  
 de la Marine of, 208; porte de la Prairie  
 of, 208; porte du Destin of, 208; porte des  
 Lions of, 208, 210; social relations between  
 Muslims and Jews in, 198. *See also* Morocco
- Europe, xx, 7, 55, 58; organizing aid for the Jews  
 of, 70; persecution of Jews in, 193; vacation  
 to, 68
- exile, 140, 227, 232. *See also* migration
- Farhi, Moris, xiiiin1, xxxvi, 16–22, 17*fig*.
- fascism, 57
- Fatma*, 158, 158n1
- fellahs/fellaghas*, 136, 136n9, 142, 142n2, 176
- Fergani, Mohamed Tahar, 127
- Ferry, Jules xxiv
- Festival of Atlantic Andalusian Music, 201
- fez, 41, 41n1, 67n4, 86n2
- films, 168, 182
- firman*, 74, 74n6
- Flaubert, Gustave, 202, 202n2
- Foreign Legion, 125
- foul*, 62, 62n6
- France, xiv–xvi, xivn2, xx, xxii–xxviii, 33, 45, 59,  
 70, 83, 90, 194, 233; anti-Jewish legislation of  
 Vichy, 81, 125, 125n8, 195; anti-Semitic forces  
 of, 97; colonial protectorate in Morocco  
 of, 194, 203, 217, 217n1, 235; *départements*  
 of, 106, 106n1; deportation to, 106; history  
 of, 199, 199n4, 205; imperialism of, xiv;  
 rapprochement of Tunisian Jews to, 81;  
 relocation of Algerian Jews to, 121–22, 131–32,  
 140–41, 167; relocation of Moroccan Jews to,  
 228, 230; republican, 171, 188; secular, 142,  
 180; struggle of Algeria for independence  
 from, 121, 126, 126n9, 126n11, 131–32,  
 141, 176, 182, 186; struggle of Tunisia for  
 independence from, 102; Vichy government  
 in, 121, 130, 130n1, 140, 162, 162n9. *See also*  
 Aix; French; French people; Marseille; Nice;  
 Paris; Strasbourg; Toulon; Toulouse
- Free Officers Revolution, 58
- French, xiv, xxxix–xl, 13n4, 25, 39, 63, 68, 75,  
 89–90, 95–103, 98n13, 115, 121, 147, 160–61,  
 170; culture of, 129–31, 181; in education, xxv,  
 204–5, 235, 239; at home, 11, 180, 235;  
 at Mass, 237; mastery of, 129–30; music of,  
 62; as native language, 142; newspapers in, 7;  
 at school, 55, 57, 68; songs in, 44, 61;  
 world-literature in, xxxv, xxxvn69; writing  
 in, xxxv. *See also* France; language
- French Muslim of Algeria (FMA), xv. *See also*  
 Arabo-Muslim Algerians
- French people, 89, 129; Jewish, 172–73;  
 Moroccan, 227. *See also* France
- Freud, Sigmund, xxxiii–xxxiv
- Frey, James: *A Million Little Pieces*, xxxiii
- Front de libération nationale (FLN), 121, 131,  
 141, 168, 187. *See also* Armée de libération  
 nationale (ALN)
- flour*, 162–63, 163n11
- ful wa ta'meya*, 74
- Gabès, 95, 97. *See also* Tunisia
- Gaffiot, Felix, 124, 124n2
- Gafsa, 86. *See also* Tunisia
- Gainsbourg, Serge, xix, xixn16
- gallabeya*, 75, 75n7, 156n12
- gana*, 154
- gandoura*, 147, 147n2, 188, 188n6
- gelateria*, 149
- geopolitics, xiv, xxi; of migration, xivn2.  
*See also* politics
- Germany, 107; Nazi, 92n5, 70n15, 109.  
*See also* Berlin
- Gnawas, 207, 208n1, 210–11
- Goitein, S. D.: *Jews and Arabs: A Concise History  
 of Their Social and Cultural Remains*, xxvii

- Goldmann, Annie, 88–92, 89*fig.*  
 Gottreich, Emily Benichou, xxixn49  
 goy, 45, 45n3, 48, 238, 238n4  
 Greece, xx  
 Greek, 15, 55, 61, 63. *See also* language  
 Greeks, 14, 16, 18, 21, 27, 27n4  
 Guelma, 184–89; École Sévigné of, 185*fig.*  
   *See also* Algeria  
 Gusdorf, Georges, xxxiv
- Haddad, Hubert, xl, 93–99, 94*fig.*  
 haggadah, 220, 220n7. *See also* Judaism  
 Haifa, 226. *See also* Israel  
 haik, 156, 156n12; Algerian, 158, 158n2  
 hajj, 75n8, 111n2, 143n3. *See also* Islam  
 halelem, 86, 86n3  
 Halim Hafez, Abdel, 97  
 hammam, 147, 156, 161, 178–83, 226  
 hana/henna ceremony, 138, 138n14, 212  
 Hanem, 68, 68n10  
 hanim, 14  
 Hanukkah, 204, 214, 220. *See also* Jewish  
   holidays  
   *haram*, 128  
 harissa, 86–87  
 Harun al-Rachid, 215, 215n4  
 hasbana/hasbane, 86, 86n3, 133, 134n2  
 Hasbaya, 37  
 hashak, 231  
 Hassoun, Jacques, xxxvii71, 3  
 Hayworth, Rita, 61  
*hchouma*, 128  
 Hebrew, xxiin25, xxxix, xl–xli, 13, 31–33, 59, 63,  
   67, 73–75, 90, 147; Arabic and, 127, 136, 233;  
   chanting in, 111; as national language for the  
   Jews of Turkey, 8; in religion, 181; teaching  
   of, 26, 135–36, 204–5, 209–10, 238. *See also*  
   Judaism; language  
 Heller-Goldenberg, Lucette, 217–22, 218*fig.*  
 Heston, Charlton, 182  
 hijab, 126  
 Hindus, 37  
 Hiroshima, 18  
 Hitler, Adolf, 215  
 Hittites, 21  
 Holocaust, xiv, xxxii–xxxiii, 18  
*hout cha'abi*, 127, 127n13  
 Hungary, 7, 25  
 hussards noirs, 125, 125n5
- Iberian Peninsula, xvii  
 Ibn Habib, Ya'akov, 71n1; *La Beauté du saphir*, 71  
 Ibn Khaldun, xxxiv  
 identity: Arab, xvi, xxviii–xxix, 143; crisis of, 206;  
   Egyptian, 58; foreign, 217n1; French, 129–31,  
   142–43, 181; Jewish, xvi, xxix–xxx, xxxvii72,  
   10, 23–26, 39, 58, 100, 170–73, 239; personal,  
   204. *See also* Jewishness  
*iftar*, 14  
*iheudi*, 231  
 Imin Tanout, 223–28, 223n1; cave dwellings  
   of the Jews of, 226. *See also* Morocco  
 imperialism, British, 57  
 India, 63  
 indigenous peoples, xv; Western colonization  
   of, xxiin24  
 İnönü, President İsmet, 14  
*inshallah*, 228, 228n13  
 Iran, 11  
 Iraq, xxiin25, 7, 37. *See also* Baghdad  
 Islam, xiv, xxi, xxvi, 94, 240; Arab conquest of  
   North Africa in the early years of, 125n4;  
   ban on alcohol of, 143; conversion to, 177;  
   culinary, 239; French civilizing mission in the  
   lands of, xxii–xxv, xxiin24; Golden Age of,  
   xviii; political, 10; practice of, 126; recitation  
   of the Shahada in, 31, 31n1; religious rituals  
   of, 184; Shia, xxx; Sunni, xxx. *See also* *Eid*  
   *el Kébir*; hajj; mosques; muezzin; Muslims;  
   Qu'ran; Ramazan; religion  
 Israel, xiv, xivn2, 25, 39, 44, 58, 70, 74, 81, 85, 122;  
   emigration of Moroccan Jews to, 195, 225–27;  
   establishment of, 57, 68, 70, 74–75, 195. *See*  
   *also* Haifa; Jerusalem  
 Israelite Consistory of Algeria, 180  
 Israel–Palestine conflict, xxvii, xxix, xxixn49, 177;  
   peace in the, 200  
 Istanbul, xv, xxiii, 10–15, 23–33; ethnic and  
   religious communities of, 28; Jewish  
   neighborhoods of, 15; mob violence against  
   non-Muslim minorities (Istanbul Pogrom) in,  
   27, 27n4; Robert College of, 26, 28; Şişli Square  
   in, 12*fig.*, 13. *See also* Robert College; Turkey  
 Italian, 55, 61, 63. *See also* language  
 Italians, 89  
 Italy, xx, xxii–xxiii, 79, 175n2  
 Izmir, 10. *See also* Turkey
- Japan, 25  
 Jerusalem, 197, 201, 228; Wailing Wall of, 208–9,  
   228, 228n12. *See also* Israel  
 Jewish Agency, 195  
 Jewish holidays, 25–26, 127, 127n14, 141, 147, 163,  
   170, 238; dishes and sweets of, 159; and time,

Jewish holidays (*continued*)

214; and traditions, 180. *See also* Chavouot (Pentecost); Hanukkah; Judaism; Passover; Purim; Rosh Hashanah; Simchat Torah; Sukkot; Yom Kippur

## Jewish journalism, 7

Jewishness, xvi, xxix–xxx, xxxvii–72, 10, 23–26, 39, 58, 100, 170–73. *See also* identity; Jews; Judaism

## Jewish Virtual Library, xivn2

Jews, xvi–xviii, xxi, xxvi–xxvii, xxx, 14, 16, 18, 21, 26–29, 68, 89–91, 97–100, 115n10; Algerian, xxivn30, 97, 119–89, 125n8; Andalusian, 37; Arab, xxviii–xxix, xxx, 65–70, 170; and Arabs, 115, 129, 141, 175–76; Berber, 94; Byzantine, xviii; Egyptian, 55–64; French, 170; Hellenistic, xviii; Karaite, 7, 55, 65n3, 67, 67nn5,6, 68n9, 70, 70n14; Lebanese, 37–51; Levantine, 79; Livornese, 79, 119; Maghrebi, 37; Middle Eastern, xxx; Moroccan, 193–240; Ottoman, 7–9, 26; Rabbinate, 55, 70, 70n14; Romaniote, 7; secular, 100; Spanish, 119, 193; Tripolitan, 38; Tunisian, 79–116, 184; Turkish, 9–15, 25–28, 27n4. *See also* anti-Semitism; Ashkenazim; Jewishness; Judaism; Mediterranean Jews; Mizrahim; Sephardim

*jnafo*, 237, 237n2

*Journal d'Alger*, 167

Journo, Raoul, 109

Judaism, xiv, xvii, 1, 25, 240; culinary, 159; as foreign, 238; Islamic *ummah* and Moroccan, 231; kaddish prayer of, 209, 209n3; oral law (Talmud) of, 55; religious calendar of, 74n5, 88, 131, 141, 147, 180, 204, 220, 227, 231; religious law (Torah) of, 55, 88, 238; religious rituals of, 79, 131, 180, 184, 204, 238–39; sages of North African, 209; Shabbat of, 73–74, 134, 137, 147, 156, 159, 178, 180, 204, 221, 221n11; *Shema Yisrael* of, 73, 73n3, 153, 153n5. *See also* bar mitzvah; haggadah; Hebrew; Jewish holidays; Jewishness; Jews; religion; synagogue; Zionism

Judeo-Arabic, xxxix, xl–xli, 103, 130, 147, 161.

*See also* language

Judeo-Libyan, 175. *See also* language

Judeo-Spanish, 11, 11n2, 13; Haketia dialect of, 193. *See also* language

Jugurtha, 125, 125n4

*Kabbalah Unveiled, The*, 209, 211

*kabkab*, 135, 135n3

*kabouch*, 86, 86n2

*kadid*, 87

Kafka, Franz, 209, 211

*kakhra*, 137

Kandisha, Aïcha, 211, 211n6

*kanoun*, 142n1, 160, 160n5, 187, 187n3

*kasar*, 14

*kerce*, 154

*kesra*, 142n1

Khatibi, Abdelkebir, xxxvii71

*khawaga*, 67, 67n5

*khddamat*, 232

*khliyez*, 156

*khmar*, 137, 137n13

*kif*, 110, 110n9

*kippah*, 67

Köprülü, Ottoman Grand Vizier Mehmed Pasha, 16, 21

*koukla*, 86, 86n3

Kummer, Ida, xv, xxii, xxxix, 100–105, 101fg.

Kurds, 16

Lacan, Jacques, 143

Ladino, 7–9, 11n2, 13n4, 25, 55, 103n5.

*See also* language

La Fontaine, Jean de, 13

Laghouat, 145. *See also* Algeria

*La Goutte de lait*, 149, 149n5

*laïcité*, xxiv, 55

La Kahena, 102, 102n3

language, 1, 3; Franco-Algerian mash-up of, 147–49; games of, 205; Istanbulite French, 13; of Tunisian Jews, 104; of Turkish Jews, 8. *See also* Arabic; Aramaic; Armenian; Egyptian; English; French; Greek; Hebrew; Italian; Judeo-Arabic; Judeo-Libyan; Judeo-Spanish; Ladino; Latin; Libano-Syrian; Polish; Portuguese; Russian; Spanish; Turkish; Yiddish

*La Semaine de Suzette*, 215, 215n2

Latin, 206; chanting in, 237. *See also* language

laughter, 26, 59, 61, 67, 107, 116, 184, 186, 189, 221

League of Nations, xxiii

Léaud, Jean-Pierre, 182

Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), 39

Lebanon, xvii, xxiii, 38map, 37–51, 62; partition of, xxxiii28; religious diversity of, 37.

*See also* Beirut; Zaituna

Lejeune, Philippe, xxxiin57

*Le Populaire*, 106

“Les bateliers du Nil,” 114, 114n8

Levant, xviii, 19n4, 95; Arab invaders from the, 79. *See also* Levantines

Levantines, 19, 19n4. *See also* Levant

Leyris, Raymond, 127, 182, 182n3

Libano-Syrian, 63. *See also* language

- Libya, xxvi, 175; Jews of, 175n2  
 literature, 238; autobiographical, xxxi–xxxv; of  
 childhood, xxxi–xxxvi; of exile, 227; French,  
 xxxi, xxxv, xxxvn69, xxxvi, 32n3, 202, 202n2;  
 Holocaust, xxxii–xxxiii; Mediterranean,  
 xxi–xxii; postcolonial, xxxin52; postmodern,  
 xxxiii. *See also* music  
*loubia*, 133, 134n2
- Madagascar, 198  
 Maghaga, 59, 64. *See also* Egypt  
 Maghreb, xx, xxn21, xxiii, xxix, 138n15, 197.  
*See also* North Africa  
*makrouds*, 98, 98n12, 108, 108n4, 188, 188n5  
 Mallette, Karla, xxxvii  
 Maltese, 89, 113  
 Mansourah, 59, 62. *See also* Egypt  
*marabout*, 163, 163n12  
 Margulies, Roni, xiiin1, xivn3, xxxvi, 23–28, 24*fig.*  
 Maronites, Lebanese, 48  
 Marrakesh, 217–22, 226, 229–34; Bahia  
 neighborhood of, 230*fig.*; Gueliz  
 neighborhood of, 232; pool in, 219.  
*See also* Morocco  
 Marranism, 171, 171n8  
 marriage: endogamous, 147; mixed  
 Judeo-Christian, 186; traditions of Jewish,  
 184, 212–14; traditions of Muslim, 147, 184  
 Marseille, 59, 63, 95, 107, 167, 182, 226.  
*See also* France  
*masar*, 110  
 Mashreq, xx, xxn21, xxiii  
 Mateur, 88–92. *See also* Tunisia  
*matzah*, 13, 13n5, 88, 220  
 Mauritania, 95  
 McCusker, Maeve, xxxin52  
*mech mech*, 63–64, 63n12  
 medina, 93–98, 104, 206, 206n6, 210, 227, 229–34;  
 farewell to the, 183; old Arab, 126  
 Mediterranean, xviii–xx, xixn12, xixn14, 55, 95,  
 98; Arab, xxi; Eastern, xxi; Francophone,  
 xxi; Hellenic, xxi; Levantine, xxi; lifestyle of  
 the, xix, xixn15; Northern, xxi; Ottoman, xxi;  
 Roman, xxi; Southern, 1, 142; Western, xxi.  
*See also* Muslim Mediterranean  
 Mediterranean Jews: emigration of, xivn2, 9;  
 history of, xviiin10, 200; majority of Jews as,  
 xvii. *See also* Jews  
*meguena*, 133, 134n2  
*mehkemehs*, 69, 69n13  
*mèkinet saboun*, 113, 113n5  
 Meknes, 202–6, 204n4; Arab quarter of, 206,  
 206n6; European part of, 206, 206n6;  
 Poeymirau High School of, 206.  
*See also* Morocco  
*mektoub*, 108–9, 108n3  
*mellah*, 154n8, 193, 204, 204n4, 219, 227, 229  
 Meller-Said, Line, 158–64, 159*fig.*  
 Memmi, Albert, xxix, xxixn46, xxxiii, xxxvi  
 memory, xxxiii–xxxiv; autobiographical, xxxiv;  
 childhood, 229; French, xxxix; and nostalgia,  
 231–32; synchronic, 31  
 Menderes, Prime Minister Adnan, 14, 14n9  
*merguez*, 86, 86n3  
 Mesguich, Daniel, xiii, xxxii, xxxvii,  
 165–73, 166*fig.*  
*Messageries*, 133, 133n1  
 Messika, Habiba, 109  
*mezmers*, 219  
*mezuzah*, 49, 49n3, 153, 153n5, 226, 226n6  
*Mickey Mouse*, 215, 215n2  
 Middle Ages, xviii, 79; European, xxiin24  
 Middle East, xiii, xx, xxn21, xxii–xxiii, xlii*map*,  
 55; birth of the, 75; Jewish communities in  
 the, xxvii, xxviii, 39, 79, 197; schools in the,  
 xxv. *See also* Arabs  
 migration, xivn2, xxii, 7, 9; to Lebanon, 37;  
 Livornese Jews as, 119; in Morocco, 227; to  
 North Africa, 193. *See also* exile; refugees  
*millet* system, 7–8  
 Mimouna, 200, 200n5, 221, 221n8.  
*See also* Morocco  
 Mission Laïque Française of, 39, 55, 57  
 Mizrahim, xviii, 55, 138n14. *See also* Jews  
 Moati, Nine, 105–10, 107*fig.*  
 Moati, Serge, 106  
 modernity, xxiv, 200  
 Molière, 29, 124  
 Monastir, 111–16. *See also* Tunisia  
 Montreal, 40  
 Morocco, xiv, xivn2,3, xvii, xxiii, xxxvii, 95, 183,  
 193–240, 194*map*; Arabization of, 239–40;  
 Constitution of, 200–201; French colonial,  
 194, 203, 217, 217n1, 235; independence  
 from France of, 195, 198*fig.*, 198, 226, 239;  
 monarchy of, xxiiin26, 195, 198, 201, 227, 240,  
 240n8; Muslim conquests of, 193; national  
 movement of, 199, 226; neocolonial era of,  
 239–40; shared history and culture of, 226;  
 Skhirat coup d'état in, 240, 240n8. *See also*  
 Casablanca; Cherifian Empire; Essaouira-  
 Mogador; Imin Tanout; Marrakesh; Meknes;  
 Mimouna; Tangiers; Tétouan  
 mosques, 48, 97; garish, 126; humble light of the,  
 33; local, 32, 233. *See also* *djama'*; Islam  
 Mostaganem, 121. *See also* Algeria

- Moulèd, 111, 111n2, 113  
*mouloukhia*, 98, 98n12  
*mslimine*, 231–32  
*msouki*, 88, 88n1  
 muezzin, 13, 32, 71, 127, 149, 163, 207.  
   *See also* Arabic; Islam  
 multiculturalism, xxvi, xxxvin72, 23, 26, 105, 200  
*muqaddams*, 120, 211, 211n7  
 music, 3, 63; Algerian *chaâbi*, 97, 97n11; Arab, 97–98; Arab-Andalusian, 127, 138, 138n15, 149, 201; Arab-Turkish maqâm in, 98; classical Egyptian, 63; Gnawa, 208n1; Judeo-Andalusian, 149, 201, 212, 239; Judeo-Arabic, 156; Malouf, 127, 127n15; *nouba*, 138, 138n15; oriental, 62; Singers: Abdel Wahab, Mohamed, 97; Boniche, Lili, 97n11; el Atrache, Farid, 97; Fergani, Mohamed Tahar, 127; Gainsbourg, Serge, xix; Halim Hafez, Abdel, 97; Leyris, Raymond, 127; Piaf, Edith, 44–45, 149; Songs: “Ça fait d’excellents français,” 123n1; “Le Chant des Africains,” 125–26, 126n9. *See also* literature  
 Muslim Mediterranean, xiv, xvii–xxvi, xxin23, xxxvi, 1, 85, 200. *See also* Mediterranean; Muslims  
 Muslims, xvi, xxvii–xxviii, xxviii40, xxx, 1, 68, 89, 97–100, 115, 115n10; Algerian, 121, 123, 126, 138, 147, 149, 169, 180; Blue, 65–70, 65n1; Lebanese, 39, 41, 43, 46, 48–49; Moroccan, 200, 206, 226, 232; racialization of, xxviii41; secular, 100; Shia, 37, 41, 44; Sunni, 11, 37, 43–44; Tunisian, 96, 111, 113; Turkish, 9, 11–15; world community of, 231, 231n4. *See also* Arabs; Islam  
 Mussolini, Benito, 175, 175n2  
  
*namaz*, 14, 31–32  
 Naouri, Aldo, xxvi, 174–77, 175fig.  
 Napoleon, 55, 120  
 Napoleon III, 133, 154  
 Nasser, Gamal Abdel, 58, 215  
 Nathan, Tobie, 71–76, 72fig.  
 nationalism, 9; Algerian, 121; Arab, 39, 57–58; Egyptian, 57–58, 67n5; Moroccan, 195; Turkish, 13, 27; Zionist, 121  
 newspapers, 7  
 New York, 40, 228  
 Nice, 182. *See also* France  
*nikitouche*, 86, 86n3  
 North Africa, xiii, xvii, xxi, xxii–xxiii, xliimap; coastal region of, 95n5; Jewish communities of, xivn2, xxvii, 39, 95, 129; schools in, xxv; trade with Iberia of, 119. *See also* Arabs; Maghreb  
  
 Oran, 119–21, 151–57, 153n2, 174; Arab Quarter of, 155–56; Jewish Quarter of, 154; La Maison du Colon, 154, 154n7; Lycée Lamoricière of, 174; Village Nègre of, 153–55, 154n6. *See also* Algeria; Wهران  
 Organisation de l’armée secrète (OAS), 121, 126, 126n9, 168  
 Orléansville, 148, 174–77. *See also* Algeria  
 Ottoman Empire, xvii, xxiii, xxiiin27, xxv, 7–9, 14, 25, 38, 79, 92n4; fall of the, 39, 56, 95; rule in North Africa of the, 79, 97n10, 119. *See also* Tanzimat/Ottoman Reforms (1839–71); Turkey  
*oued*, 227, 227n8  
  
 Palestine, 39, 49, 49n2, 57, 81, 115  
 Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), 81  
 pan-Arabism, xiv  
 Paris, xvi, 40, 76, 83–86, 98, 106, 132, 150, 182–83, 203, 228, 231–32, 235; Liberation of, 110; Lycée Janson de Sully, 182; Nazi invasion of, 95, 107; Sacré-Coeur of, 209; Sartrouville suburb of, 182; studies in, 240; Tournelles Synagogue in, 181–82. *See also* France  
*paso doble*, 157, 214  
 Passover, 65–67, 75, 87–88, 91, 126–27, 143, 163, 199, 200n5, 204, 220–21, 221n8; Seder of, 148, 220n7, 221; sheep for the feast of, 187. *See also* Jewish holidays  
*pataouète*, 153, 153n3  
 Pesach. *See* Passover  
 Pétain, Marshal Philippe, 92, 92n5, 109, 121, 162, 162n9  
 Phoenicians, 79  
 Piaf, Edith, 44–45, 149  
*pide*, 14  
*pieds-noirs*, 167, 167n1  
 Pinhas-Delpuech, Rosie, xv, 29–33, 30fig.  
*pkila*, 86, 86n3  
 Poland, 107  
 Polish, 55. *See also* language  
 politics, xiv, xvii; activism in, 144; nationalist identity, 96. *See also* geopolitics  
 Portugal, 31  
 Portuguese, 63. *See also* language  
 Pouillon, Ferdinand, 129  
 Proust, Marcel, 238; *In Search of Lost Time*, 230n3  
 Purim, 88, 204, 214, 214n1, 220, 220n6. *See also* Jewish holidays

- Qayrawan (Kairouan), 79. *See also* Tunisia  
 Qur'an, xli, 31, 69; access to the, 231, 233; law of the, 69; readings of the, 169, 177; teaching of the, 126; verses of the, 156. *See also* Islam
- race, xxviii; slurs of, 149; traditions of, 238.  
*See also* racism
- racism, 27, 149; in colonial Algeria, 144, 164.  
*See also* race
- radio, 49, 69, 170, 225, 227; Arabic, 176;  
 Gregorian chants on the, 238
- Radio London, 69
- Radio Maroc, 225, 227
- Radio Seville, 237
- raki, 19, 19n3
- Ramazán, 14, 14n7, 31–32, 31n2, 64, 127, 162–63.  
*See also* Islam
- rechta, 161, 161n8
- Red Cross, 175
- refugees: Eastern European Jewish, 55;  
 German Jewish, 9, 29; Iraqi, 39; Syrian, 39.  
*See also* migration
- religion: forced conversion in, 31; marker of, xxvii; Muslim religion class on Islamic, 31; practices of, 181; presence in Turkey of, 15; race and, 23; references to, 91.  
*See also* Christianity; Islam; Judaism
- riad, 227, 227n11
- Riahi, Ali, 109
- Robinson, Edward G., 182
- robissa, 71, 73n2
- Rodrigue, Aron, xxiii, xxv
- Roman Empire, xvii, 79; late, 119
- Romania, 217
- Rosenman, Anny Dayan, 212–16, 213fig.
- Rosh Hashanah, 64, 64n13, 86n3, 88, 184n2, 204, 220. *See also* Jewish holidays
- Rumi (Mevlâna Jelaleddin Rumi), 15, 15n10
- Russia, 29; Revolution of 1917 in, 89.  
*See also* USSR
- Russian, 25, 25n2, 55. *See also* language
- Russians, 16, 89
- Saadya Gaon (Al-Fayoumi), 127
- Sahara Desert, 133
- sahur, 14
- São Paulo, 40
- saroual, 86, 86n2
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 11; *The Respectful Prostitute*, 11, 11n1
- Saudi Arabia, 7, 44
- schéol, 156, 157n15
- Sebbar, Leïla, xiii–xvi, xxvi–xxvii, xxxi, 2fig.
- Sebbar, Mohammed, xv–xvi
- Second Arab-Israeli War (1956), xiv
- Sephardim, xvii–xviii, 7, 23, 25, 28, 55, 70n14, 95, 119, 138n14, 219; aristocracy of the, 143; forced conversion of the, 31; migration to North Africa of the, 193; persecution in Spain of the, 79, 171, 237; tradition of the, 11.  
*See also* Jews; Spain
- Serfaty, Abraham, xxix, xxixn46, xl
- Serfaty, Nicole S., 223–28, 224fig.
- Sétif, 145. *See also* Algeria
- Sétif and Guelma Massacres, 187, 187n4
- seufrim, 233
- Sfax, 83–87, 84fig. *See also* Tunisia
- Shaked, Edith Haddad, xxix
- Sherezli, Rabbi Yom-Tov Israel, 75
- shiba, 221, 221n10
- Shipler, David K.: *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*, xxvii
- shkemma, 133, 134n2
- Shohat, Ella, xxviii, xxix–xxx
- Sibony, Daniel, 229–34; *Marrakech, le départ*, 227, 227n10, 229; *Trois monothéismes*, 231, 231n5
- Sibony, Nessim: *Enfance juive au Maroc. Paradis perdu?*, 202n1
- Sicilians, 113
- Sidi Okba, 125, 125n4
- Simchat Torah, 220, 238, 238n3. *See also* Jewish holidays
- simit, 14n6; vendor of, 12fig., 13
- Sitbon, Guy, xxxvii, 111–16, 112fig.
- Six-Day War (1967), 81
- skouba, 109, 109n5
- smala, 95, 95n7
- Smooha, Sami, xxix
- Society of Muslim Brothers, 57
- Somekh, Sasson, xxix
- souk, 110–11, 110n7, 111n1, 113, 127, 227, 227n8
- Sousse, 115. *See also* Tunisia
- Spain, xx, 7, 11, 25, 31, 71, 79, 119, 193–94, 212, 237–38. *See also* Andalusia; Sephardim; Toledo
- Spanish, xli, 9, 63, 103, 103n5; at home, 235, 239; medieval, 13; Rifian lilt in, 237, 237n1.  
*See also* language
- Spirou, 215, 215n2
- srina, 221, 221n9
- Stanislawski, Michael, xxxiv
- Stilman, Norman: *The Jews of Arab Lands*, xxvii
- Stora, Benjamin, xiv, xxx, xxxii, 178–83, 179fig.

- Strasbourg, 182. *See also* France
- Sub-Saharan Africa, 193
- Suez War, 58
- Sukkot, 204, 220, 238, 238n3. *See also* Jewish holidays
- Surrealists, 181
- Switzerland, 59
- synagogue, 26, 33, 46–48, 73, 79–81, 85, 97, 111, 127, 131, 135–37, 159, 169, 181; Algerian, 213; Ashkenazi, 57; home and, 204; Moroccan, 226; reading of the Torah in, 177; two annual appearances in, 238. *See also* Judaism
- Syria, xxiii, 7, 37. *See also* Damascus
- tafina*, 156, 156n13
- tagine, 108, 221, 239
- taleth*, 137, 137n12, 220, 220n5
- Tangiers, 237. *See also* Morocco
- Tantah, 57. *See also* Egypt
- Tanzimat/Ottoman Reforms (1839–71), 7, 80.  
*See also* Ottoman Empire
- tavras*, 219, 219n3, 221
- tchraa*, 134
- tefillin*, 147, 147n2
- television, 169–70, 177
- terrorism, 50–51, 51n4. *See also* violence
- Tétouan, xxv. *See also* Morocco
- tirailleurs*, 155, 155n9
- Tlemcen, 1, 119, 121, 145. *See also* Algeria
- Toledano, Ralph, 235–40, 236fig.
- Toledo, 238
- tornos*, 156, 156n14
- Toubiana, Dany, 184–89, 185fig.
- Toulon, 182. *See also* France
- Toulouse, 182. *See also* France
- translation, xxxvi–xxxvii, xxxix–xli
- Treaty of Lausanne (1923), 8
- Triplet, Elsa, 115, 115n9
- Tripoli, 37
- Truffaut, François, 182
- Tunis, xxiii, 79, 81, 90, 93–110; Grana (Livornese Jews) of, 79–80; Gulf of, 99; Hara of, 93, 180n1; La Goulette of, 93, 93n2, 98, 107; medina of, 93–98; as prime location for trade, 79; Twansa (indigenous local Jews) of, 79–80. *See also* Tunisia
- Tunisia, xiv–xv, xvii, xxiiin25, xxiii, xxiiin26, 79–116, 80map, 183; Bourguiba government of, 85, 96; Djebel Boukornine of, 93, 99, 110, 110n8; independence from France of, 81, 102; invasions and dependencies of, 96; liberation of, 109; multicultural, 105; Nazi invasion of, 81, 96, 115; as province of Ifriqiya in the Middle Ages, 79, 95, 95n5; resident general of, 92, 92n4, 106, 106n2; schools in, xxv; Vichy's Jewish status laws in, 92n6. *See also* Bizerte; Djerba; Gabès; Gafsa; Mateur; Monastir; Qayrawan (Kairouan); Sfax; Sousse; Tunis
- Turkey, xvii–xviii, xxi, xxiii, xxvi, xxxn50, xxxvii, 7–33, 8map, 25; compulsory public primary schools of, 31; discrimination against non-Muslim minorities in, 9, 14–15, 33; economic Turkification of, 9; geography of, 29; Jewish emigration from, 9; racial, religious, and cultural mosaic of, 16; Republic of, 8–9, 15, 33. *See also* Anatolia; Ankara; Black Sea coast; Büyükkada; Istanbul; Izmir; Ottoman Empire; Turks; Unification of Education Act (1926)
- Turkish, xxxix, xli, 29, 55, 63; at home, 13; mock-prayer in, 26; in school, 11; in the streets, 11, 13, 25. *See also* language
- Turkish baths, 103
- Turkish Certificate of Study (1957), 33fig.
- Turkish War of Independence (1919–23), 8, 18
- Turkmen, 29
- Turks, 14, 27; blood of the, 18, 20–21, 23.  
*See also* Turkey
- Turquier, Yves, xiii, xxx, 46–51
- ummah*, 231, 231n4
- Unification of Education Act (1926), 8.  
*See also* Turkey
- Union of Algerian Women, 149
- United States, xiv–xv, xivn2, xxviii, 29, 58, 70, 233
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), 171, 171n9
- USSR, 14. *See also* Russia
- Vallat, Xavier, 163, 163n13
- Vandals, 79
- varlik vergisi*, 9, 14–15, 27
- Vienna University, 23, 25
- violence: anti-British Egyptian, 58; anti-Semitic, 9, 57; Lebanese, 40; mob, 27, 27n4, 57; Muslim anti-Semitic, 81. *See also* terrorism
- Wahran, 151, 151n1. *See also* Oman
- Wilkomirski, Benjamin: *Fragments*, xxxii
- women: Algerian Jewish, 128, 178, 188–89; Algerian Muslim, 128, 150, 161, 176, 188–89; Arab, 90, 128; in ceremonial dress, 125;

- dancing of, 109; honor of, 128; Moroccan Muslim, 237; sexuality of, 233–34; Tunisian Jewish, 98, 104; Tunisian Muslim, 14–15, 98; as wet nurses, 16, 18–22; Turkish, 29
- Woolf, Virginia, 238
- World Union of Moroccan Jewry, 195
- World War I, 38
- World War II, xiv, 9, 27, 57, 81; Algerian internment camps of, 130, 130n1; childhood in, 140
- Yiddish, 55. *See also* language
- Yom Kippur, 69, 75, 88, 170, 184n2, 204, 238, 238n3. *See also* Jewish holidays
- Young Egypt, 57
- Young Turks Revolution, 7
- Zaituna, 48. *See also* Lebanon
- Zionism, xxvi, xxix, 9, 25, 39, 58, 68, 81, 195.  
*See also* Judaism
- zlabias*, 86, 86n1, 98, 98n12
- Zola, Émile: *Les Mystères de Marseille*, 113

Founded in 1893,

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
publishes bold, progressive books and journals  
on topics in the arts, humanities, social sciences,  
and natural sciences—with a focus on social  
justice issues—that inspire thought and action  
among readers worldwide.

The UC PRESS FOUNDATION  
raises funds to uphold the press's vital role  
as an independent, nonprofit publisher, and  
receives philanthropic support from a wide  
range of individuals and institutions—and from  
committed readers like you. To learn more, visit  
[ucpress.edu/supportus](http://ucpress.edu/supportus).

*A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean* brings together the fascinating personal stories of Jewish writers, scholars, and intellectuals who came of age in lands where Islam was the dominant religion and everyday life was infused with the politics of the French imperial project. Prompted by novelist Leïla Sebbar to reflect on their childhoods, these writers offer literary portraits that gesture to a universal condition while also shedding light on the exceptional nature of certain experiences. The childhoods captured here are undeniably Jewish, but they are also Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, Egyptian, Lebanese, and Turkish; each essay thus testifies to the multicultural, multilingual, and multi-faith community into which its author was born. The present translation makes this unique collection available to an English-speaking public for the first time. The original version, published in French in 2012, was awarded the Prix Haïm Zafrani, a prize given by the Elie Wiesel Institute of Jewish Studies to a literary project that valorizes Jewish civilization in the Muslim world.

“Expertly introduced and organized, each essay is as beautiful as the next. This wonderful collection offers a distinctive account of how Jews of different countries in the Middle East and North Africa experienced their place in society.”—Jessica Marglin, Associate Professor of Religion, Law, and History at the University of Southern California

**Leïla Sebbar** is an Algerian novelist who has edited several collections on childhood and writers in exile, including *An Algerian Childhood: A Collection of Autobiographical Narratives*, *Enfances tunisiennes*, and *Une enfance outremer*.

**Lia Brozgal** is Professor of French and Francophone Studies in the Department of European Languages and Transcultural Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of *Absent the Archive: Cultural Traces of a Massacre in Paris (17 October 1961)*.

**Rebecca Glasberg** is a PhD candidate in French and Francophone Studies in the Department of European Languages and Transcultural Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

AN S. MARK TAPER FOUNDATION BOOK IN JEWISH STUDIES

*University of California Series in Jewish History and Cultures, 2*

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS · WWW.UCPRESS.EDU

COVER ILLUSTRATIONS: Childhood photos of Chochana Boukhobza and little sister; Rita Rachel Cohen and brother Jo; and Annie Taïeb-Goldmann. Photos reproduced with permission and courtesy of Éditions Bleu autour.

COVER DESIGN: Michelle Black.

A free ebook version of this title is available through Luminos, University of California Press's Open Access publishing program. Visit [www.luminoso.org](http://www.luminoso.org) to learn more.

ISBN: 978-0-520-39339-4

