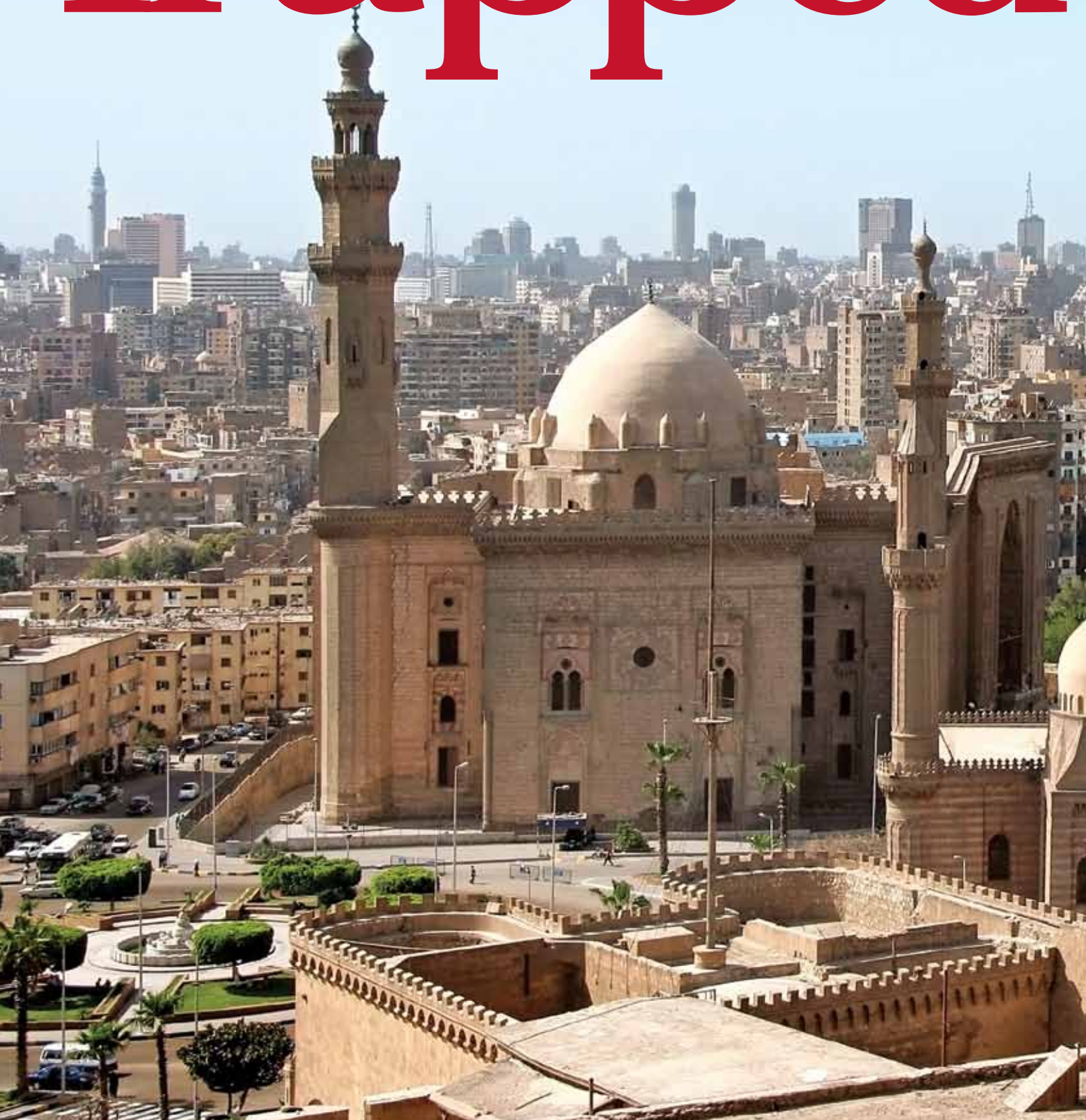


Trapped



By Avi Tuchmayer

in Egypt

Jewish Egyptian Expats Fight to Save Their Heritage



“I’d traveled to Egypt so that my mother could reconnect with her past, and so that I could forge a connection with my family heritage. But we were treated like suspicious intruders.”

Joseph Mosseri’s visit to Cairo in 1985 was the culmination of a dream. As the son of Egyptian immigrants to New York, Mosseri had grown up with stories about life in Cairo—one of the world’s most cosmopolitan cities in the mid-twentieth century, and home to one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world. Through his parents, he developed a deep connection to everything Egyptian-Jewish, from laws and customs to food and music, and to the land where generations of his relatives had lived prior to their expulsion from 1957-1961.

Nearly three decades after that visit, Mosseri still recalls his Egyptian sojourn vividly.

“A member of the community, a man by the name of Mourad Gabbai, couldn’t have been any more gracious in showing me around,” says Mosseri. “The synagogues were in terrible disrepair, but I was welcome to visit them and to explore. He was happy to let me see community records, Torahs, books—whatever I wanted.

“I met him at the main synagogue, Shaar Hashamayim, where he opened up the *heichal* (Torah ark), showing me the ornate cases in which we Sephardim keep our *sifrei Torah*. He took me to another room and showed me hundreds of books that had once belonged to our chief rabbis. They were kept in glass cases, very well preserved, and I was allowed to take photographs of the courtyard, of old donor plaques that had fallen off the wall, and much more. He could see how moved I was by the whole experience, and he was happy to let me take a *siddur* home with

me.”

Offering a stark contrast to the above personal account is that of Andrew Strum, an attorney from Melbourne, Australia, with a background similar to Joseph Mosseri’s. He, too, is a descendant of Egyptian Jews—in this case, of chief rabbis and community leaders. Like Mosseri, Mr. Strum has a broad knowledge of and keen interest in Egyptian Jewry and Judaism. But the “welcome” he received in 2007 by the dwindling Jewish community there was a far cry from the one Mosseri had received just two decades earlier.

“I took my mother back to Egypt for our birthdays—her seventieth, and my fortieth,” Strum explained. “Over the years, I’d read so many books about Jewish Cairo. I’d looked at so many historic maps and collected so much Egyptian Judaica, that I felt I was traveling to a place that was thoroughly entwined with the deepest part of my identity.

“When planning our trip, I had contacted the community president, Carmen Weinstein, for help in facilitating our visit. However, upon arrival, I was basically blocked from the vast majority of the community’s—my family’s—heritage. At the Great Synagogue of Cairo, I was allowed briefly to see some old books, which are kept under lock and key, without any form of conservation, but that’s about it. It was only with great persistence on my part that I was even allowed to take some photos in the synagogue, for example, of the seat with the name of my great-great grandfather. There should be at least 100 *sifrei Torah* in Cairo, and they have been

removed from the handful of remaining synagogues there, including one that was donated by my great-great grandfather, Isaac Maratchi. But I wasn’t allowed access to it, or even to see our communal records, such as my grandparents’ marriage record.

“I’m sorry to say it, but I’d traveled to Egypt so that my mother could reconnect with her past, and so that I could forge a connection with my family heritage. But we were treated like suspicious intruders,” Strum recalled with disappointment.

Access denied

To many ex-Egyptian Jews, Mr. Strum’s tale is all too familiar. For decades, Egyptian Jews—both organizations and private individuals—have tried to access community records, to obtain restitution for private property and businesses left behind in the country during the “second Exodus” of the 1950s and ’60s, and to remove Jewish holy books and religious items currently in storage in Egypt for use abroad.

On the whole, however, those efforts have come to very little. Egyptian law forbids the removal of antiquities from the country without written permission from the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and nearly all remnants of the once-thriving Jewish community are listed as “Egypt’s” cultural heritage. In addition, government officials require the agreement of relevant communities in Egypt in order to approve the transfer of heritage items. In the case of the descendants of Egyptian Jews, this means pressing Jewish community officials in Cairo to recommend the removal of Torah scrolls, crowns, boxes and more.

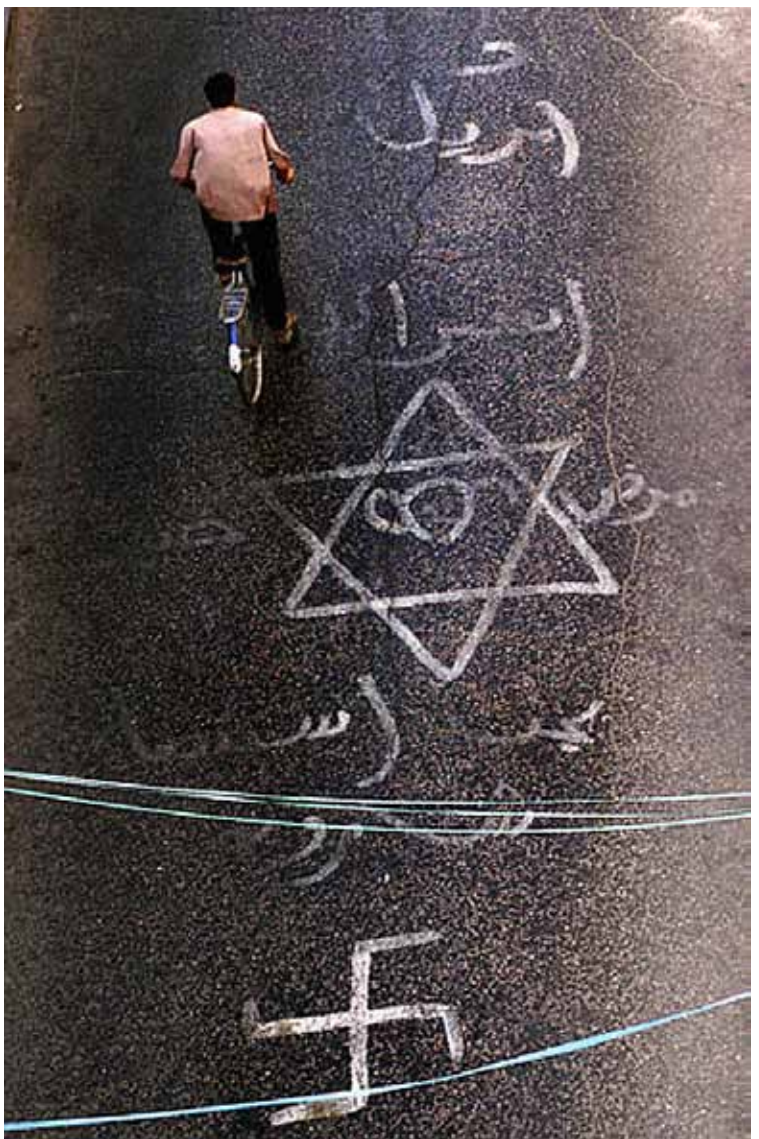
But in recent years, access to Jewish sites and patrimony has been made more difficult by an unexpected party: The Jewish community itself. Although the community is barely a shadow of its former self—there are fewer than 20 Jews left in the country, down from a high of more than 80,000 in the mid-twentieth century. Getting Egypt's remaining Jews to sanction the transfer of Jewish antiquities out of the country has been difficult, even impossible. Long-time community President Carmen Weinstein, who passed away on April 13, maintained a strong belief that removing the material would drive the final nail into the coffin of Egyptian Jewry and would finally render Egypt, for the first time in 2,500 years, *Judenrein*.

By all accounts, Weinstein was a powerful personality with a very particular view of the community's needs. Several people interviewed for this article said they encountered Weinstein while they were students at the American University in Cairo. They said she encouraged the visitors to go back to their home countries, marry, and return to the country of their fathers in order to rebuild the once-thriving community. Supporters and detractors alike described Weinstein as a dogged optimist who hoped against hope that a thriving Jewish community would once again grace the banks of the Nile.

As a result of her fierce belief and tenacious personality, Weinstein was largely responsible for the upswing in preservation efforts in recent years, from the renovation of the Rambam Yeshiva and Synagogue in Cairo's Old City; to the development of the Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue's Hebrew Learning Center, for Muslims to learn about Jews and Israel.

Joseph Mosseri and Andrew Strum feel that the community leadership in recent decades allowed the community's assets to crumble or deteriorate, and they accuse Weinstein of having caused damage to Egyptian Jewry's historical heritage by refusing access to researchers, descendants and even heirs of the material in question. In 1997, the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt accused the Jewish Community of Cairo of "pilfering" the community; today, both men say she overstepped her mandate.

"People say that if it hadn't have been for Carmen there would be nothing left," says Strum. "I suppose that could be true, to some degree. But I can also say that if it hadn't been for her, it



An Egyptian cyclist rides, past graffiti on an Alexandria street that declares: "Israel is a cancer that should be cut out." The Jewish Star of David, meant to be trampled on, is linked to the Nazi swastika in the graffiti, remnant of large protests in this Mediterranean city in reaction to Israeli incursions into Palestinian towns.

would probably have been a lot easier to get things out of the country. Of course, some synagogues in Cairo are nominally open, more for tourists than for prayers—there hasn't been a *minyan* of Cairene Jews there in many years—and I think we would all agree that the synagogues that are occasionally open should have a few Torahs in their arks.

"It is an outrageous disgrace that there are so many Torah scrolls sitting in storage, gathering mold and rotting away. And for what? These possessions are our inheritance; they belong to Egyptian Jews and their descendants. They were donated because people wanted them to be read, not kept in dusty storage rooms."

From a historical perspective, the religious *sefarim* that are currently in storage at the Great Synagogue could be considered even more valuable than the ritual artifacts described by Mr. Strum. According to Joseph Mosseri, the volumes of Torah commentaries he saw on the shelves in 1985 contained many pages of notes penciled in the margins, written by the rabbis of the community.

“For Torah and secular scholars, these materials are a priceless historical record and treasure that is just wasting away right now,” said Mr. Mosseri.

While the religious implications of preserving and using religious items are clear, from a historical perspective the two most valuable materials in the possession of the Cairo community today are the library and the community records.

Yves Fedida, a native of Alexandria and the cofounder of the

Paris-based Nebi Daniel Association, said that access to community records is a matter of importance to all Jews, regardless of religious affiliation. He also said it is an important issue to pursue because it is the only part of the Egyptian Jewish patrimony that clearly has no connection to non-Jewish Egyptian officials.

“The Ottomans required each religious community to maintain their own community records, so the files reflect every social and religious aspect of the community’s history—births, deaths, marriages, divorces, immigration—everything. Our records are the only thing about which

there is no question of ownership, and they are relevant to all Egyptian Jews around the world,” said Fedida.

Both Mr. Fedida and Reform Rabbi Andrew Baker (who serves as Director of International Affairs for the American Jewish Committee [AJC]) have noted that Egyptian civil authorities have traditionally resisted releasing community records. This is due to a fear that Jewish groups and individuals will use the information to pursue property and restitution claims in Egyptian courts. Fedida stressed that property claims are not on his organization’s agenda, and that



UNESCO Egyptian Jewry's Last Hope?

could qualify for protection as part of the Memory of the World program.

However, Amelan stressed that as an intergovernmental organization, UNESCO cannot tell member states what heritage to preserve. UNESCO regulations require member states to apply for World Heritage Site status, so in the case of Jewish heritage in Egypt, he said the Egyptian government would have to apply for UNESCO assistance.

Amelan also said that in most cases, UNESCO does not provide funding for preservation projects.

“There are isolated cases in developing countries in which UNESCO provides minimal emergency funding, but it is important to note that this is the exception, not the rule. We work with governments and local communities to ensure that heritage sites and materials are being preserved, for the benefit of all mankind. But the governments have to make that commitment themselves. We do not have a mandate or the financial resources to save all the cultural artifacts in the world,” Amelan said.

Currently, there are six sites in Egypt listed on the World Heritage List, including the famous Pyramids at Giza. Cairo has also identified 32 additional sites that could be presented for future addition to the World Heritage List. These sites include several desert and Nile River landscapes.

Egypt has not requested UNESCO assistance for the preservation of the country’s Jewish sites or patrimony.

One possible avenue to preserve Egypt’s Jewish patrimony could be via the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). According to the UNESCO website, the organization’s mission is to contribute to the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information. Organization objectives include “addressing emerging social and ethical challenges, fostering cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and a culture of peace.” A final objective is to “build inclusive knowledge societies through information and communication.”

According to Roni Amelan of UNESCO’s press service, the organization maintains two separate frameworks for preserving heritage sites and historic property. The World Heritage Convention, established in 1972, deals with natural and cultural heritage. The Memory of the World register lists documentary heritage, including film, carved stone, recordings, and more.

Under the terms of the Heritage Convention, Egypt’s synagogues and cemeteries could qualify for protection. The holy books and community records



Elderly Jews in the shul in Alexandria, Egypt

“It is an outrageous disgrace that there are so many Torah scrolls sitting in storage, gathering mold and rotting away.”

the community registry does not deal with property records. Finally, he added that the descendants of the community would be willing to pay for high-resolution photocopies of the records.

“It is important to show civil authorities that we are not out to harm Egypt, only that we must be able to research the history of our community,” Fedida said.

Competing claims

It should be noted that not all Egyptian Jews and Jewish organizations support the ongoing attempts to take religious items out of the country. Because Egyptian law

forbids the removal of antiquities from the country except in extenuating circumstances, some activists feel the Egyptian Jewish heritage would be best served by respecting the government and pushing Egyptian officials to better preserve the material inside the country.

Beyond the practical discussion, there is a moral discussion to be had about the fate of the Cairo collection. With Egyptian families spread out around the world, in places ranging from New York to Israel and from Europe to Australia, many descendants of Egyptian Jewry ask simple but legitimate questions. People includ-

ing Yves Fedida say they understand the high emotional stakes among those who want to avail themselves of the community’s rich historical heritage. But he notes that he is not sure that there are any grounds to ask the government to release the antiquities, or that it would be the correct thing to do.

“We have to ask ourselves, ‘What do we want from these Torahs?’” said Fedida. “It is true that there is not likely to be a sizable Jewish community in Egypt ever again. But what better way to remind Egyptians that we Jews once lived here in harmony with the Muslim majority—and that Jews predated Islam here by more than 1,000 years—than to have a solid display of Egyptian *sifrei Torah* and other Judaica? There has been talk of creating an Egyptian Jewish museum at the Shaar Hashamayim synagogue, similar to the Jewish museum in Prague. I think that is really the correct way to deal with our heritage.”

Notably, Jewish property and religious antiquities have fared better in Egypt over the years than nearly anywhere else in the Arab world, and cer-



An Egyptian policeman guards the front of the synagogue Shaar Hashamayim in Cairo, Egypt (left).

(top) Joseph Mosseri, Andrew Strum

(right) Mourners carry the coffin of Carmen Weinstein, inside the Jewish cemetery in Cairo. Weinstein was well known for her tireless work preserving synagogues and a once-sprawling Jewish cemetery.

tainly better than they did in Europe. To be sure, the issue has been a touchy one for Egyptian leaders for decades: During the Camp David peace process from 1977-79, Israeli and Egyptian negotiators failed to reach agreement on compensation for Jewish losses in the 1950s and '60s. Eventually, a brief paragraph was added to the agreement, saying only that "The Parties agree to establish a claims commission for the mutual settlement of all financial claims." That commission was never established, however, and Egyptian Jews have waited since then to obtain access to their ancestral property.

In the years following the agreement, Cairo sent a series of mixed signals on the matter. In 1997, the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt reported that government officials had agreed to allow much of the country's Judaica collection to leave the country, but had changed course when the leadership of the Jewish community refused to endorse the transfer.

More recently, the AJC's Andrew Baker, who has visited Egypt 15 times since 2005, has come to the conclusion that Egypt is definitely not interested in creating an international partnership to work on preserving this heritage. He said that officials, such as former Culture Minister Farouk Hosni and former Antiquities Minister Zahi Hawass, viewed the country's Jewish treasures as part of Egypt's cultural tapestry, and thus objected to removing them from the country.

But Baker also said the Mubarak government often acquiesced to outside pressure, and would often agree to fund renovations. He also noted that lobbying from American groups seems to have been more effective with the previous gov-

ernment than requests from local Jewish groups or from Israeli authorities.

"I think what this all teaches us is the importance of being smart about all this, not just being right," Baker said in a phone interview last week. "After all, the government put up \$1.5 million to restore the Rambam Yeshivah and Synagogue.

"Compare that to the synagogues and cemeteries in eastern Europe. There, the buildings and cemeteries were never repaired after the Holocaust. They were virtually destroyed during the war and then allowed to disintegrate in the 70 years since."

Like Egypt, Eastern Europe is home to hundreds of Torah and *megillah* scrolls, as well as countless holy books, ritual items and more. Countries like Lithuania and Ukraine share the view expressed by the Egyptians—the Jewish artifacts and religious materials that were stolen or abandoned during the Holocaust are part of their national heritage.

Baker points out that there are hundreds of *sifrei Torah* in Ukraine, but authorities are loath to allow them to be used for religious services even inside the country, to say nothing of sending the items abroad. In Lithuania, the holdings of the Vilnius Central Library include approximately 100,000 volumes of uncatalogued Judaica.

"Of course, we would like greater access to the treasures in Cairo, but at least the collection of Judaica there has been catalogued and protected," Baker said.

Change in the offing?

Looking forward, many Egyptian Jews are hopeful that newly elected community leader Magda Haroun will expand access to community property, and that she will move to preserve and restore the synagogues and Jewish cemeteries in the country. In the weeks after Carmen Weinstein's death, there were signs of



hope that Haroun would challenge the government on this point: An industry journal, *The Art Magazine*, reported on April 26 that Haroun would ask the government to fund more restoration and preservation projects.

But nearly all Egyptian activists are united in the belief that Haroun will maintain the policies set by her predecessor. To be sure, her family history does not indicate that any significant change is in the offing: Her father, Chehata Haroun, was a founding member of the Egyptian Communist Party and was strongly anti-Israel. One individual claimed the elder Haroun was arrested (together with many Jews) following Israel's preemptive attack on June 4, 1967, and was rumored to have defended the move by Egyptian authorities because "whatever I'm suffering here is nothing compared to what Israel has done to the Palestinians." Six years later, he is said to have volunteered to fight on behalf of the Egyptian army during the Yom Kippur War. Neither claim could be independently verified.

Even more significantly, Haroun may not have much choice but to maintain

Weinstein's policy of suspicion vis-à-vis outsiders. The Jews who have remained in Egypt through the years have been exposed to ongoing, extreme scrutiny by Egyptian law enforcement and security agencies, including the *mukhabarat*, Egypt's secret police. The community has suffered harassment, on and off, from all administrations since the 1950s. That much is unlikely to change under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is unapologetic about its ideology that views Jews as "sons of pigs and monkeys." In a strong breach of local protocol, the government boycotted the funeral of Carmen Weinstein, possibly sending a message to the few remaining members of the community to prepare for tough times ahead.

In that context, perhaps, Weinstein's policy of cool relations towards outsiders becomes understandable. Yves Fedida pointed out that living as a tiny minority in a Middle Eastern country such as Egypt is a complicated reality that may be difficult for Westerners to understand, and he stressed that as the community's president, Weinstein had to juggle multiple factors when administering the commu-

nity's assets. Egyptians abroad will certainly have difficulty understanding her reluctance to provide even a minimum of cooperation with their requests to see community records, but Fedida said that even though Weinstein had the legal right to divulge community information to outsiders, she would likely have been questioned by security forces had she agreed.

Fedida added that he expects the 61-year-old Haroun to operate under the same constraints as Weinstein did, but he added a hope that the younger woman might have more strength to overcome the harassment. He also said that community leaders—both in Egypt and abroad—must think creatively to craft alternative approaches to meet the needs of Egyptian Jews abroad while also maintaining the integrity and security of the local community. The alternative, he said, will truly be the end of an historic Jewish community.

"The nature of these things, unfortunately, is for new authorities to come in and to erase the history that came before. We don't want to allow them to do that to us. Our Egyptian Jewish heritage must be preserved in a dignified way," Fedida said. ●