

The Jews of Egypt and the French Language – A Romance

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Socio-political Context

Like most Jewries of Arab lands, the Jewish community of Egypt had roots that went far back into Antiquity. Since the Arabs conquered Egypt in 641, followed by the Ottomans in 1517, Jews have lived under Muslim rule as *dhimmi*s, protected but inferior. They were defined by their religion, speaking mostly Arabic or Judaeo-Arabic. In the modern period, with the opening up of Egypt to Western influence, the Jews experienced a golden age under the protection of the colonial powers, France and Great Britain. By 1947, the Jewish population numbered around 80,000. Unlike other Jewries of the Arab world, it was a community defined by its ethnic and cultural diversity, having grown dramatically through immigration in the course of the preceding century since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the boom of the cotton industry. Today, all that is left of that vibrant community is at best twenty elderly Jews between Alexandria and Cairo. Egyptian Jews and their descendants are now scattered throughout Israel, Western Europe, the Americas, and Australia.

The most distinguishing feature of the Jews from Egypt was their multilingualism. Having lived in a multicultural society comprising a variety of minority groups, they were conversant in many languages such as Arabic, French, Italian, Greek, English, and more. However, French was the one language they all possessed and used at different levels of proficiency. For the Jewish minority, French represented more than just a *lingua franca*. Somehow, it became their mother tongue. In pre-Nasser Egypt, “the Jews were one of the firmest pillars of Francophony” (Aslanov 2008:241). At the root of this phenomenon, was the fact that Egypt, as a former Ottoman province, was already exposed to a blend of French used among the non-Muslim *millet* communities of Istanbul since the beginning of the eighteenth century.

A number of questions will be raised in this paper.

- When was French influence first introduced in that corner of the world?
- How did the French language gain and maintain such a foothold in Egypt?
- Why did the Jews of Egypt adopt the French language with such enthusiasm?
- Why French, since more often than not, it was not a question of national identity?
- Why not Arabic, the national language or English, the language of power?
- What became of their French once they were forced out of Egypt?

Status of French in the Ottoman Empire

Two separate events marked the beginning of French influence in the Levant. The signing of the first Capitulation Treaty in 1536 between François 1^{er} of France and Suleyman the Magnificent of Turkey had given France extraterritorial jurisdiction over French expatriates in the Turkish Empire. Eventually, it extended to cover all Europeans.¹ France became the protector of Christians of the Middle East, thus gaining a privileged political, commercial, and cultural position in that part of the world. Around the same time – in 1539 - the French language became the official language of the Kingdom of France (Luthi 2005:9-10). By the mid 1900s, the use of French was “well rooted among the urban elites in many places of the Ottoman Empire” and particularly among the non-Muslim minorities (Aslanov 2008:243).

The French Expedition (1798-1801)

By the end of the eighteenth century, Egypt was a backwater province of the decaying Ottoman Empire, ravaged by constant civil wars and dissension between the ruling Mamluks.

French presence suddenly manifested itself in July 1798, when a military force led by General Napoleon Bonaparte landed in Alexandria, accompanied by an important contingent of scholars, scientists, and technocrats. The strategic reasons behind the French invasion were clear: blocking Britain’s trade route to India and protecting French trade interests while adding to the military prestige of the ambitious young general who wanted to walk in the footsteps of Alexander the Great.

Napoleon came bearing the mantle of a liberator from the cruel Mamluks' oppressive rule, promising change, democracy, and reforms, in line with the new French Republic's avowed "*mission civilisatrice et génératrice*". This imported objective of civilising and regenerating Egypt proved to be the cornerstone of Egypt's future from then on and had far reaching consequences on the destinies of its non-Muslim minorities.

The French Expedition ended in disaster with the destruction of the French Fleet by Admiral Nelson in August 1798 at Abukir and the surrender of the stranded French forces to the British in 1801. In spite of the military debacle, it was the legacy of the French scholars and scientists that made the greatest impact. Their numerous achievements included the creation of *l'Institut d'Egypte* in 1798, modelled on the famous *Institut de France*. They also established a printing house and two periodicals, thanks to the printing press brought in by Bonaparte. It had fonts in Arabic, Latin, and Greek and was far superior to the nearest presses used in Istanbul (Cole 2007:32; 2005:10-11). They started a public library and in 1809 published an encyclopaedic work, *La Description de l'Egypte* that revealed Egypt's ancient glory to Europe. Finally, the deciphering of the hieroglyphs in 1822 by the French Orientalist Jean-François Champollion, epitomises the most crucial contribution to the study of Egyptology. It is thus fair to state that the French incursion into Egypt opened the door to Western influence and modernity (Cleveland 2004:65).

Muhammad Ali (1769-1849)

Most importantly, the French Expedition brought to Egypt Muhammad Ali, an Ottoman military commander of Albanian origin who astutely took advantage of the vacuum left by the French withdrawal to grab the reigns of power in 1805, challenging the authority of the Sultan. He became Viceroy of Egypt with the title of Pasha and ruled for 44 years. He is considered the founder of modern Egypt and his dynasty ruled Egypt till the demise of King Faruk in 1952.

The French recognised immediately that he was the only possible ruler for Egypt and cultivated privileged relations with the Pasha. The exchange of presents between the new ruler of Egypt and the king of France, Louis-Philippe, included the famous Luxor obelisk that is now standing at the Place de la Concorde in Paris. In return, Muhammad Ali was given an iron clock for the Mosque of the Cairo Citadel that is still there, although it apparently never worked.

In order to establish his autonomy vis-à-vis the Sultan who was allied

to the British, the Pasha turned mostly towards France, whose prestige was at its peak, for assistance in the realisation of his ambitious plans of military, administrative, and economic reforms. He used the skills of the French technocrats who stayed behind after Napoleon's departure and others who came after the collapse of the Empire in search of a job. He understood the need to educate a local elite capable of understanding and transmitting Western knowledge and *savoir-faire*.

Higher education institutions were created, namely a medical school established by the French Doctor Clot (known as Clot Bey). Since the courses were dispensed in French, it was imperative to establish modern schools that would teach French, not only to tertiary but also primary and secondary students (Luthi 2005:13). Furthermore, the foreign settlers who flocked to Egypt since the early part of the nineteenth century were demanding modern schools.

Egypt is reputed to have been the first Oriental country to welcome Western culture most enthusiastically. From 1840 onwards, the Egyptian rulers encouraged the establishment of foreign language and missionary schools. By 1844, Christian schools for boys dispensed an excellent education in French and Arabic while the nuns (Order of St Vincent de Paul) undertook girls' education, mostly in French and Italian.

By the 1860s, each ethnic community had its complement of schools teaching in its respective language - French, English, Italian, Greek, Armenian, German - and thus providing Western-style education to whoever could afford it.

How did this political, cultural, and institutional upheaval affect the indigenous non-Muslim minorities, namely the Jewish minority?

The local Jewish community

By the end of the 1700s, the indigenous Jewish community was depleted and underprivileged, reduced to six to seven thousand, made up of Rabbanites and Karaites (Stillman 1979:32).² They were subjected to the whim of the local rulers who oppressed them and confiscated their property. According to foreign visitors to Egypt, they "were held in the utmost contempt by Muslims in general" (Lane 1836:344-349). In the new world order ushered in by Muhammad Ali's reforms, the Jews saw the potential to forge a better future for themselves. Gradually, their living conditions improved as Muhammad Ali's successors continued to display even more partiality to the West. In 1855, the heavy burden of the *jizya*³ and community tax traditionally imposed on *dhimmi*s was lifted.

The new rulers' *laissez-faire* policy opened the door to foreign

nationals – Italians, French, Greeks, Syrio-Lebanese Christians, Armenians and more - who started to flock to Egypt, set up shop, form colonies, and gain influence. They were encouraged by the privileged status granted to foreigners through the Capitulations regime. It placed them under the jurisdiction of their own consuls and later the Mixed Courts. The Mixed Courts, established in 1875 in Cairo, Alexandria, and El Mansurah, were headed by one Egyptian and two foreign judges. The Court of Appeals consisted of six Egyptian and ten foreign Judges, and the litigations were conducted in French, based on the Code Napoléon (Krämer 1989:30).

The boom of the cotton industry followed by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 created a climate of stability and prosperity that transformed Egypt into a country of immigration, offering golden opportunities.

The indigenous Jewish and Christian minorities viewed the increasing European economic and cultural penetration of Egyptian territory as liberating them from their *dhimmi* status (Stillman 1991:178). The number of Europeans in Egypt rose from 91,000 in 1882 to close to 110,000 in 1897 (Abitbol 1999:270).⁴

Egypt also became an attractive destination for a large proportion of Jewish immigrants from the ailing Ottoman Empire and the Mediterranean basin (Smyrna, Corfu, Salonika, Italy). Furthermore, Ashkenazi Jews from Russia, Rumania & Poland fleeing persecution, particularly after the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, found refuge in Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The newcomers' diverse ethnic backgrounds dramatically altered the face of the indigenous Jewish community. As pointed out by Aslanov, most of the Jewish migrants from Turkey and Syria - called *Juifs ottomans* – were already using a Levantine blend of French as their linguistic expression. The renewed Jewish community emerged as a multicultural and multilingual mosaic where the Sephardim who constituted the majority were conversant in Judaeo-Spanish, French, Italian, Turkish, or Greek. It is from their ranks that the social elite of Egyptian Jewry rose to occupy most leadership positions until 1956. The Greek Jews or *Romaniots* spoke Greek while Ashkenazim conversed in Yiddish, Russian, and/or Polish. On the other hand, the Karaites and the underprivileged indigenous Rabbanites spoke Egyptian Arabic, while the Yemenite and Syrio/Lebanese Jews had their own Arabic dialects. In view of this multilingual chaos, French became the obvious and most natural choice of language as a vehicle for communication between all these Jews of various origins.

Egyptian Jewry and Western Education

Traditionally, the Ottoman rulers never took an active role in reshaping the cultural and educational life of non-Muslim minorities throughout their vast empire. The latter enjoyed religious, cultural, and communal autonomy based on the Ottoman *millet* regime.⁵ In the case of the Jewish community of Egypt and up to the first half of the 19th century, Jewish boys were traditionally educated in religious schools or *heder* (*Kuttab* in Arabic) whereas girls were not given formal education.

Once Muhammad Ali opened up Egypt to the West, upper and middle class Jews came to realise that in order to enjoy the same privileges as foreign nationals, they had to acquire the citizenship or the protection of European countries such as Austro-Hungary, France, Italy, and Great Britain. By 1947, about twenty-five to thirty percent of the Jewish community had obtained a foreign passport. Twenty-five to thirty percent had Egyptian citizenship and the rest - over forty percent - remained stateless or "*sujets locaux*". Nevertheless, the majority believed Western culture to be not only superior to the local culture but also the ultimate key to modernity and advancement.

With the increasing cultural encroachment of Western powers, the Jewish and Christian minorities were eager to give their children the best educational opportunities. They now had a choice between different education systems in a variety of European languages. They believed that modern education had to be acquired from a "genuine Western source" (Stillman 1991:22). Therefore, upper and middle-class Jews from Cairo and Alexandria started sending their children to French, English, German, or American missionary schools.

Initially, they wanted their children to acquire foreign languages for their usefulness in dealing with Europeans. Thus their motives were "primarily economic" (Stillman 1991:30). Eventually, the desire to acquire French culture became much more than just economic pragmatism. It was reinforced through the activism of the Jews of France, whose aim was to educate and "regenerate" their Eastern brethren through French culture, which would usher them into the modern world.

The Jews of the Middle East had captured the imagination of French Jewry as a consequence of the Damascus Affair of 1840, a blood libel accusation brought against twelve Jewish notables of that town. They had been arrested and tortured into confessing their alleged crime and four of them died under torture (Abitbol 1999:212-214).

Adolphe Crémieux – the French Jewish politician later responsible for granting French citizenship to all Jews of Algeria (Abitbol 1999:161-

166) – together with Sir Moses Montefiore, came to Egypt to meet with Muhammad Ali, then ruler of Syria, and plead for the release and exoneration of the prisoners.

In the course of his visit, Crémieux was appalled by the state of Jewish education and called on Egyptian and French Jewry to establish schools for boys and for girls in both Cairo & Alexandria. His appeal motivated local Jewish philanthropists to set up community and vocational training schools in both cities. From 1854, free Jewish community schools opened their doors in Alexandria to provide a more modern education to the underprivileged. The first Jewish girls' school was founded in 1862. The language of instruction was Italian then switched to French. The syllabus included also Hebrew and Arabic.

Crémieux's initiative paved the way for the *Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU)* - founded in 1860 in Paris by a group of liberal Jews that included Crémieux - to come to Egypt in 1868 and open schools in the cities and the countryside, as they did in the Maghreb and the Levant. Their curriculum combined religious and secular studies (Stillman 1991:23). The *Alliance* schools were strongly imbued with the French spirit of the *mission civilisatrice*. Their aim was to bring French culture and language to the uneducated Jewish populations of the Middle East and North Africa.

In Egypt, the introduction of *AIU* schools in 1896 had a further motivation: "to halt the flow of Jewish children" going to Christian missionaries schools as these schools were clearly trying to convert their Jewish pupils (Landau 1969:86). One particular case in 1914 galvanised the community into action when twenty-two Jewish students or former students of Catholic institutions in Cairo and Alexandria, secretly converted to Christianity (Stillman 1991:245-246).

In 1919, the *AIU* considered its work done and handed its schools in Cairo and Alexandria to the Jewish community, except for one school in the country town of Tantah that operated until World War II. The fact that languages such as French, English, Hebrew, and Arabic were taught throughout their school years, ensured that the *AIU* pupils "reached a fairly high standard of linguistic proficiency" (Landau 1969:91).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Jewish middle and upper classes also had the choice of the new secular French schools called *Lycées de la Mission Laïque française*, established in 1909 by the French government. They offered an excellent education from

kindergarten to the baccalauréat in Alexandria and Cairo, grooming their students for entrance into French universities.

Furthermore, in reaction to a blood libel accusation emanating from a Catholic school in Alexandria, a private Jewish dayschool – the *Lycée de l'Union Juive pour l'Enseignement* - was established in 1925 in Alexandria by members of the B'nei Brith Lodge and the Jewish philanthropist Baron de Menasce (Krämer 1989:81). It provided a non-sectarian education that followed the syllabus of the French Lycées.

Until 1945, all these private and communal schools, secular or religious, operated independently of local government interference and were free to establish their own curriculum. The study of Arabic in the private schools was only made compulsory in 1946-47 but was still relegated to the rank of a foreign language.

By 1947, the overall rate of literacy of the Jews of Egypt had risen to 82.2 percent compared to 49.7 percent in 1907 (Laskier 1992:10).

Comparative Status of French, English, and Arabic

Under British rule, from 1882, English was considered the ultimate road to Western culture in both government and private schools. Anglophile Jewish families enrolled their children in prestigious British private schools such as the Victoria College where they sat on the same benches as Egypt's elite. Nevertheless, English never succeeded in dislodging French as the preferred language of the Westernised urban centres of Egypt. Apart from the general perception that English was the language of business whereas French was the language of culture, and the stereotype that French culture was more refined than British culture, there was certainly a political angle to that preference, in reaction to British occupation and strong anti-British sentiments. In many families, French was the language spoken at home even when children attended English schools.

French remained the second official language of Egypt after Arabic until the late 1950s. A good knowledge of French was essential in the legal, professional, and business sectors, as well as in social interaction and intellectual circles. Furthermore, numerous cultural institutions, books, newspapers, French films and theatre, French popular music, radio programs, and literary events greatly promoted the status and prestige of the French culture.

From the 1860s onward, French became “the primary language of high culture for Oriental Jewry” (Stillman 1991:178), the language common to the lower, middle, and upper middle class. The communal

records of the Jewish community of Egypt were kept in French. Most prayer books were printed both in French and Hebrew. With some exceptions, the use of Arabic sank to the level of the language of the underprivileged and uneducated Jews. A basic knowledge of colloquial Egyptian Arabic was sufficient to get by in everyday situations with shopkeepers and domestics.

In essence, French secular schools gave their Jewish pupils “far more than an education. It gave them a new self-image, created new expectations within them... It also produced cadres of Westernised native Jews who now had a distinct advantage over the largely uneducated Muslim masses” (Stillman 1991:178). A whole generation came out of these schools with a Western worldview, using French as their mother tongue, their eyes turned towards France and Europe, while their feet were firmly planted in their Middle Eastern milieu, culture, and language. The result was an idiosyncratic style of Levantine French that often borrowed words, structures, and metaphors from other languages such as Arabic, Maltese, Italian, Hebrew, and English (Hassoun 1990:168). Even when their French was grammatically perfect, the accent of Egyptian Jews remained very distinctive and often proved to be a hurdle to their eventual integration into French society.

The Second Exodus of the Jews of Egypt

After 1948 and particularly after the Suez War of 1956 followed by the 1967 Six-Day War, the majority of the Jewish population of Egypt was implicated as a fifth column and forced to undertake a “second exodus”.

By then, the minds of a whole generation of middle class Jewish boys and girls had been shaped by the French education system. They had appropriated the French culture as their own. Their love of France was deeply ingrained and when the time came to leave Egypt, some would not even consider going elsewhere. Several elected to continue their tertiary education in French universities.

In the domain of high culture, a number of francophone Egyptian-born Jewish writers such as Carlo Suarès (1892-1976), Elian Finbert (1899-1977), and Edmond Jabès (1912-1991), settled in France in the 1940s and 50s and became well-known and respected poets, philosophers, and novelists.

In fact, a relatively large number of Egyptian-Jewish émigrés (ten to twelve thousand) looked towards France as a destination of choice, because of their deep acculturation with the French language

and culture. It is interesting to note that, whereas in Egypt French was perceived as the language of cultural sophistication, in the new reality of their forced exile, it acquired the attributes of a refuge.

The Jews of Egypt who settled in France were among the first - if not the first - of all the other groups of Jews from Egypt scattered throughout the Western diasporas to lobby for a remembrance of things past and the need to preserve and transmit their cultural heritage. They inspired other members of the Egyptian Diaspora to follow in their footsteps. This important work of preservation and transmission was initiated by a group of intellectuals, namely Jacques Hassoun who, together with other Egyptian-Jewish émigrés, founded a journal called *Nahar Misraïm* in 1980.⁶ In the editorial of the first issue, Hassoun declared: "Let us reclaim our history, the prestigious times as well as the tragic times."⁷ The *raison d'être* of this journal was to articulate the preoccupations and aspirations of the group as a whole, to reveal the specific character of the Jewish community in Egypt in all its diversity – diversity in religious rituals, languages, occupations, food, and culture – and finally to record the role the Jews played in the development of modern Egypt, and the crucial contributions they made in the socio-economic and cultural domains.

Several novels, written in French and English by expatriate Egyptian Jews, have provided further insight and colour to the life of the Jewish community both in Egypt and in their adopted countries. In France, Paula Jacques, who left Egypt as a little girl, was one of the first to write in that genre. Her semi-autobiographical novels, *Lumière de l'oeil* (1980) and *Baiser froid comme la lune* (1983), evoke the modern exodus of Egyptian Jews, based on her personal and often collective memories. These novels paint a critical but sympathetic picture of Jewish society in Egypt prior to the Suez crisis of 1956. In a tragicomical style, while her characters express themselves in that typical form of Egyptian-French, Jacques uncovers the problems of forced emigration and the unforeseen difficulties of integration and acculturation. Even the Algerian Jews who were repatriated to France after decolonisation between 1955 and 1965 and who were equally if not more at home in French, experienced similar difficulties when they first arrived. However, as Michael Laskier has pointed out, "the Maghrebi Jewish segment emerged as the majority of the Jewish population" and French Jewry, now predominantly Sephardi, became the "second largest Jewish community in the Western world, with over 550,000 people" (Laskier 1998:39).

Conclusion

The French language came to Egypt from a variety of external and internal sources. It came with Napoleon Bonaparte, with the Ottoman migrants, with the French missionary schools and later the *Alliance* schools. It also came from within, with Muhammad Ali and his descendants who favoured French culture and expertise. For the non-Muslim minorities, it rapidly became a symbol of modernity and high culture. Obviously French is not a Jewish language but in Egypt, until the mid-twentieth century, it was certainly the language of the Jews who adopted it with great enthusiasm. Wherever they settled after their forced exodus from Egypt in the 1950s and 60s, and at whatever level of proficiency, the status of French took on a life of its own and became an integral part of their identity. They persevered in its use within their circle of family and friends. For the most part, they passed it on to their children as one would a treasure, as a sign of their lost heritage.

Endnotes

1. This treaty became the model for later Capitulations treaties with other powers. It granted freedom of religion as well as legal and fiscal privileges to foreign merchants residing within the Ottoman Empire.
2. The Karaites (Readers of the Scriptures) are the descendants of an ancient Jewish sect believed to have coalesced with other Jewish sects in Baghdad in the eighth century. Karaites only follow the Written Law or *Tanach* and deny the divine origin of the Talmudic-Rabbinical tradition.
3. Poll tax imposed by Muslim rulers on their Jewish and Christian subjects known as *dhimmis* in exchange for protection and freedom of religion.
4. According to Abitbol, the Jewish migrants represented approximately one quarter of that number.
5. Nation - Ottoman Turkish term for a legally protected religious minority.
6. Jacques Hassoun was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1936. After being imprisoned by Egyptian authorities for his communist activities and subsequently expelled, he settled in France in 1954 at the age of 18. He became a psychoanalyst and remained in France for the rest of his life. Apart from his participation in *Nahar Misraim*, he also published *Histoire des Juifs du Nil* (1990). He died of a brain tumour in Paris in 1999.

7. "Réapproprions-nous notre histoire! Celle qui concerne nos heures prestigieuses mais celle qui concerne aussi nos heures douloureuses". Nahar Misraïm, Numéro 1, Décembre 1980.

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