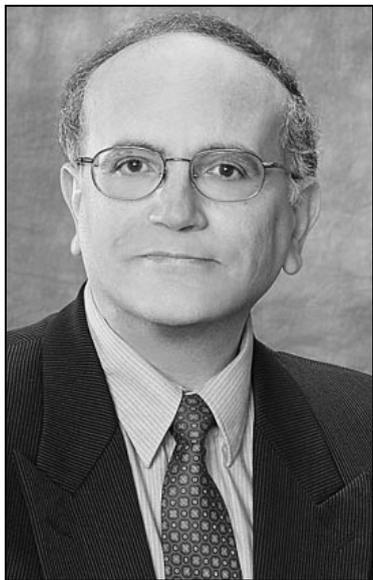


Refugees remembered

Revisiting a modern-day expulsion

By Israel Bonan

From 1940 to 1976, nearly one million Jews were expelled from their homes in the Middle East and North Africa; most of the refugees were resettled in Israel. JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa) is part of an international campaign, organized locally by the Jewish Community Relations Council, to publicize the stories of the Jewish refugees and advocate for legislation to recognize their rights.



Israel Bonan

Commentary

It took me more than 35 years before I felt comfortable talking about my personal experience as a Jew who was born, lived and was expelled with my family from Egypt in 1967. Once the emotional dike was broken, I felt the need to shout my story from every pulpit and to every ear that would listen. It is in essence the story of more than 850,000 Jews from Arab countries that had to leave all their pasts behind and start over again as refugees in new countries.

In June 1967, I was one month away from finishing my university studies when I was abruptly incarcerated and summarily expelled from Egypt after a harrowing six days in the Egyptian jails. A few more of my friends and relatives remained jailed for more than three years for no other reason than being Jews living in Egypt.

I was thrown out of the country with a torn shirt on my back and holding a pair of glasses broken intentionally on my face and little else. When a month later my parents were allowed to leave the country, having lived more than 50 years in the country of their birth, they were only allowed the equivalent of \$10 each in their pockets and 30 kilograms worth of clothing to show for a whole life lived in Egypt, in a Jewish community with ancient and biblical roots.

Several notable scholars lived in this community, including Maimonides, the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law, and renowned Kabbalist Isaac Luria. In the early 20th century, Jews contributed beyond their proportion in the Egyptian population, to all aspects of life in Egypt. Jews were visible in politics, the arts, economy, industry, crafts and banking. In 1945, there were 80,000 Jews living in Egypt; today

there are less than 20, all over the age of 70.

As documentation of what happened to my family, the complete record of my story can be found at <http://universalodddities.com/exodus/exodus.shtml>.

After my family's harrowing exodus, we found our safe haven. We succeeded in making a new life for ourselves and our families with the grace of G-d and the help of every Jewish organization and community that we encountered during our rough journey. The ultimate priority of those who helped us in our time of need was to restore our dignity as human beings and to help us get on our own two feet.

We rejected the status of "perennial victims" and chose instead to move on with our lives as productive citizens.

The current Middle East narrative is unfortunately slanted and one-sided, speaking only of the Palestinian refugee experience. There is never a mention of others affected in the region and what became of them. It is not empathy, sympathy, or the negation of the stories of others that we seek as "forgotten refugees." We seek acknowledgement of our history and redress of our rights; which have been woefully ignored in the process.

Israel Bonan of Framingham is a lecturer at Simmons College, a JIMENA committee member, and chairman of the Justice and Redress Committee of the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt (www.bsje.org). To get involved in the JIMENA campaign, call (617) 457-8650 or visit www.bostonisraelaction.org

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