

Michael M. Laskier, *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.

What would have been the fate of the Jewish minority in Arab countries had there never been a Zionist movement and had the State of Israel never been established?<sup>1</sup> When this question is raised in Israel it often turns into a raucous and emotional public debate. Some exploit it for political reasons,

1 S. Svirsky, "The Echo of Eliahu Alisher" (Hebrew), *Ma'ariv*, 3 July 1981.

others — especially historians who do not like questions cut from the mold, “what if?”<sup>2</sup> — for academic ones. But those who are not deterred will be interested in this book. Indeed, the author focuses on the history of one Jewry, Egyptian Jewry, but approaches it as a case study that sheds light on an issue of broader scope — the fate of Jewish communities in Arab nations of the Mediterranean basin against the background of the Zionist-Arab conflict in Palestine, and later, Israel.

The extended research that is the basis for this book also yielded articles that the author published in various periodicals.<sup>3</sup> The chapters are annotated and there is a detailed archival list, an up-to-date bibliography, statistical and other lists, and an index. Despite the scientific format, it is written in a fluid, readable style and includes background material for those who are not experts in the field. Thus the book is likely to appeal to any reader interested in the subject, not only academic scholars.

The introductory chapter gives a brief history of Egyptian Jewry and poses the questions that guided the research. The other chapters trace the events in Egypt between 1920 and 1970, an era that is marked by significant political upheavals in the Middle East and Egypt that left their imprint on Jews in general and the Jews of Egypt in particular. In the 1920s, the Jews of Egypt had reached their demographic pinnacle, attained economic prosperity and enjoyed particularly favorable political and social conditions. Then, in less than 50 years they were transformed from a minority that was privileged to one that was persecuted.

Laskier begins with the San Remo agreement of 1920, which granted the Balfour Declaration international legitimacy. The first chapter examines the expressions of solidarity on the part of the Jews of Egypt towards the national homeland in the period between the two world wars. The second and third chapters deal with Egyptian Jewry's struggle with anti-Semitism, which became an issue with the hold of Nazism and fascism over Europe and the penetration of their agents into the Middle East. From there, Laskier moves on to World War II: the period preceding it, its duration, and its ramifications for Egypt. The subsequent chapters focus on the effect of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the Jews of Egypt. In fact, this conflict's influence on Egyptian Jewry became increasingly stronger after Egypt's entry into the pan-Arab arena and when it assumed the leadership of the Arab League.

The next chapters take up the wars between Egypt and the State of Israel,

2 E. Weinrib, “What if?” (Hebrew), *Zmanim* 33 1990, pp. 28–37.

3 Laskier, “The Jews of Egypt in the 1930s and the 1940s” (Hebrew), *Yalkout Moreshet*, vols. 43–44, 1987, pp. 209–230; Laskier, “From War to War: the Jews of Egypt from 1948 to 1970,” *Studies in Zionism*, vol. 7, 1986, pp. 111–147; Laskier, “Egyptian Jewry in the post World War II Period, 1945–1948,” *Revue des Etudes Juive (Paris)*, vol. 148, nos. 3–4, 1989, pp. 337–360; Laskier, “Egyptian Jewry under the Nasser Regime, 1956–1970,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1995, pp. 573–619.

from the 1948 War of Independence, through the Sinai Campaign of 1956, and the Six Day War in 1967. Laskier describes the consequences of these events for the Jews of Egypt, but he emphasizes that the major change in their status was a result of political shifts in Egypt itself; and this is the focus of the last two chapters. The revolution of the Free Officers in July 1952 paved the way for the ascension of Nasser as the undisputed leader of Egypt. A sequence of domestic and foreign political events — the author dwells on some of these — transformed the economic and social structure in Egypt and distanced it from the influence of the Western powers. As a consequence, the symbiosis between the society of the Arab-Muslim majority in Egypt and its minorities, who were identified with the West, came to an end. These processes dealt a fatal blow to the communal life of Egyptian Jewry. Within the 20-year span between 1947 and 1967, the number of Jews dwindled from 80,000 (some say 100,000) to a few thousand.

As noted, Laskier begins with the agreements that sealed World War I and divided the territories of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East into separate ethnic entities. It is important to note that the two political events that were especially significant for Egyptian Jewry were enacted under the supervision of the British power: on the one hand, Egypt received partial independence; and on the other hand, the Zionist movement received a mandate to establish a national homeland in the land of Israel. Laskier devotes his first chapter to examining the relationship of Egyptian Jewry to the national homeland that was taking shape on Egypt's border. It seems that this might have been the place to examine, in parallel, the relationship of Egyptian Jewry to the land of their residence, Egypt, which was also in the throes of a process of national consolidation, and even to delve into the tension between the two relationships.<sup>4</sup>

The chapters dealing with the involvement of the Jews of Egypt in the struggle against Nazism amplify and expand on issues that have already been examined in previous works.<sup>5</sup> Laskier sums up the existing research and also adds interesting details that had not heretofore been published. But the

- 4 This issue attracted a few Arab historians who tended to accuse the Egyptian Jewry of double loyalty. See for example: S. Nassar, *The Jewish Press and the Zionist Propaganda in Egypt* (Arabic), Cairo, 1991; idem, *The Egyptian Jews between Egyptianism and Zionism* (Arabic) Beirut, 1980; and 'Abd al-Rahaman, *The Zionist Press in Egypt 1897-1954*, Cairo, 1977. But most of these studies, some poorly documented and some biased, tend to oversimplify complicated issues. A more objective approach to these issues can be found in the excellent research done by Gudrun Kraemer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt 1914-1952*, London, 1989. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that a vacuum still remains that calls for further investigation.
- 5 D. Eldar, "The Response of the Jews in the Near East to the Nationalist Anti-Semitism in Germany" (Hebrew), *P'amim*, 5, 1980, pp. 55-66; Kraemer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt*, pp. 128-139; Laskier, "The Jews of Egypt in the 1930s and the 1940s," pp. 203-230.

importance of this research becomes evident precisely in the final chapters of the book. These chapters furnish a link that had been missing in research conducted hitherto: that is, a reconstitution of the chronicles of Egyptian Jewry from the end of Israel's War of Independence until the death of Nasser. Laskier uncovers information that sheds light on the process of the estrangement of the Jews from the social and political life of Egypt. He analyzes the nature of the negative policy towards the Jews, points out its anti-Zionist character, and examines its anti-Semitism and the sources that sustained it.

The era of Nasser's reign was marked by severed relations between Egypt and the Western powers, and the rapprochement of the Arab world with the Soviet Union. One of the results of this process was a worsening of the situation of foreign minorities in Egypt. The era of prosperity that they had known under the protection of Egypt's parliamentary monarchy — that had enabled them to act with relative freedom and to enjoy their political, economic and social ties with the West — ended with the establishment of Nasser's authoritarian regime. "Sooner or later, due to democratic problems, Egyptianization, and the surge of nationalist and fundamentalist ties, the Jews, like the other minorities — portrayed with European imperialism — would have been forced to resort to communal self-liquidation" (p. 301). Laskier cites the fate of the Greeks in Egypt to support his assertions:

In fact, economically, the Greeks were in a similar situation as the Jews, even though Greece was not at war with Egypt.... Already in 1951, the Egyptian government began whittling away at the privileges of the Greek community (then 140,000 strong)...Egyptian thought to confine Greek economic activity and increase official involvement in minority affairs. They insisted on the right to deport any Greek whose occupation or activities were incompatible with state security.... By the mid-1960s, the number of Greeks in Egypt had dwindled to about 30,000.... The "second catastrophe" and the "second Smyrna" were terms the Greek press employed to depict this campaign (pp. 300-301).

Laskier brings this example in order to prove that the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the identification of Egyptian Jewry with the hated Zionist entity — even if it did exacerbate the deterioration of the situation — was not the sole cause of the demise of their communal life. Thus does Laskier answer the question with which we began our article, and the question that he had posed at the outset of his work (p. 14).

The puissance of Laskier's study is that it presents a panoramic picture based on the collection and analysis of data culled from various archival documents in Israel and abroad. Reports of emissaries of various organizations active among Egyptian Jewry that focused on Egyptian Jewry in

periods of crisis or external political change enabled Laskier to reconstruct the external skeleton of the community's history, and to hone in on the turning points in its status. Laskier was primarily interested in how the political shifts in the region influenced the status of Egyptian Jewry, and less interested in the social and cultural changes that shaped the internal dynamics of the Jewish community or the methods the Jews of Egypt used in order to cope with their changing situation.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that defining the political framework that describes how Egyptian Jewry behaved is likely to pave the way for future researchers who will seek a bird's-eye view of the ranks of the Egyptian public, to follow the social, cultural and political struggles among members of the community and to study their complex identification and multi-faceted relationship with the land of their residence, on the one hand, and with Europe and the Jewish population in the land of Israel, on the other hand. It is true that researchers who seek to investigate these aspects will encounter difficulties because of the heterogeneous composition of this fascinating community; but they will have at their disposal the prolific literary and journalistic legacy of Egyptian society as a whole, and of the Jewish one in particular. This written legacy — particularly rich compared with the rest of the communities of the Middle East — enables one to learn about the history of Egyptian Jewry from the viewpoint of the members of the community themselves, and to listen to their voices. Only thus may one distinguish among the many hues of this multi-dimensional society, to discover what it shares with the rest of the communities of the Mediterranean basin — and also what makes it unique. Progress in this direction has already been made in the realm of the legacy of Jewish law and of literature, but there is still much more to be done.

In conclusion, less than 15 years ago, library shelves contained a small handful of research works on the history of Egyptian Jewry in the 20th century. Since then, there has been significant progress in reawakening the memory of this distinctive Jewry from its dormancy. The pioneering works of Gudrun Kraemer<sup>6</sup> — on the 20th century — were a breakthrough that paved the way for monographs and articles. Some of them appeared in journals such as *P'amim*, *Shorashim Bamizrah*, *Yalkut Moreshet*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, *Studies in Zionism* (now entitled *The Journal of Israeli History*), etc. Others were grouped into anthologies edited by renowned Middle East scholars such as Shimon Shamir.<sup>7</sup> Laskier's book constitutes another layer in the recreation of the history of this fascinating Jewry: kudos to him.

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6 Kraemer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt*.

7 S. Shamir, ed., *The Jews of Egypt: A Mediterranean Society in Modern Times*, Boulder, 1987.