The Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries

- Jews in North Africa and in the Middle East were ancient communities pre-existing Arab invasions and Islamic conquer. In some cases, as in Iraq and Yemen, Jewish communities settled before the Diaspora.
- There were Jewish communities throughout Northern African, from Morocco to Egypt, and the Middle East, from current Israel to Iraq, Iran.
- After 1492 Jews' expulsion from Spain, Jewish communities grew in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Eretz-Israel and Syria.
- Under Islamic rule, Jews, as Christians, were subject to the dhimma, an inferior status with limited rights on properties, clothing and freedom of movement, and specific duties, as the payment of the infidels' tax, called jizya.
- Jews were active in all social sectors, contributing to economic life and administration. Cultural autonomy, stemming from emargination and discimrination, led to the preservation of ancient languages, as Judaeo-Hispanic, and the development of Jewish-Arab and Jewish-Persian dialects. The integration in local communities is evident by traditions and languages – for instance, Iraqi Jews were divided in Arabic and Kurdish communities.
- With the increasing European influence in the Middle East dutin the 19th century, Jews integrated European and local cultural, also thanks to the educational activities of the French "Alliance" system.

Growing anti-Semitism

- During the 19th century, European anti-Semitism was exported n the Middle East, mainly by the translation of European anti-Semitic texts into Arabic.
- The Zionist movement, spreading all over the Middle East, was interpreted as a revolt against the subjugated social condition of the Jews and is an excuse for the strengthening of anti-Jewish Islamic hostility.

- Anti-Jewish organised violence began in Palestine, where in 1929 the Jewish community of Hebron is massacred and expelled. Jewish-Arab riots in Palestine lead to increasing violence against Jews in the whole Middle East.


Jews deported from Libya

- Arab countries under Fascist and pro-Nazi colonial rule persecute Jewish communities with the intent to extend the final solution to the Mediterranean: Jewish communities of Tunisia, Algeria and Libya are subject to racial laws, deportation in concentration camps and extermination camps in Europe.


Pro-Nazi demonstrations in Iraq

- The Nazi-Arab cooperation, promoted by the Gran Mufti of Jerusalem Amin Hussein, consolidates anti-Semitism and incites violence. In 1941, Baghdad Jewish community is attacks in a progrom called farhud.


1945 progrom in Tripoli

- After the war and the evident necessity of a Jewish state, a new wave of violence spreads in the Arab world: in 1945 the Jewish community of Libya is attacked by a series of pogroms called “meura’ot” or “pra’ot”. New discriminatory laws limit Jews’ liberty and rights, specifically directed against Zionist activists. Growing anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli hatred precedes the great Jewish exodus from Arab countries.

The exodus: the Making of Jewish Refugees


The New York Times.

JEWS IN GRAVE DANGER IN ALL MOSLEM LANDS

Nine Hundred Thousand in Africa and Asia Face Wrath of Their Foes

PROTECTION OF U. N
SOUGHT FOR JEW

- New anti-Jewish laws are adopted as part of a policy aiming to force migration of Jewish indigenous population. The creation of the State of Israel is but another excuse to expel Jews.

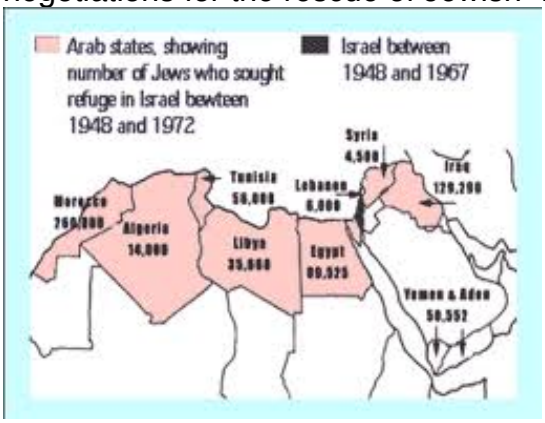
Iraqi Jews arrive in Israel

- In some countries, including Syria, Lebanon, Algeria and Morocco, Jews are expelled *en masse*. Israel organises rescue operations for evacuating Yemenite Jews (operation Magic Carpet) and Iraqi Jews (operation Babylon) to Israel. Another example is the operation “Mural”, directed by David Littman, for rescuing Moroccan Jewish children forbidden to leave the country.


David Littman, operation “Mural”

- Some communities remain in their countries, but subsequent discrimination and widespread violence in 1950s and 1960s force them to leave.
- In Egypt, Jews are expelled under Nasser incitement to violence, after their properties were seized and their citizenship withdrawn. In Libya, the surviving Jews

community was expelled in 1967, after the Six Day War, following international negotiations for the rescue of Jewish “hostages”.



- Many refuges settled in Israel, Italy, France, Great Britain, Brazil and United States.
- The few Jews left in Arab countries, unable to leave, face consistent discrimination and persecution. Over the last 20 years, Israel and other international organisations have saved many Jews from Syria and Yemen, where they survived in hostile environment.

	1948	1958	1968	1976	2001	2005
Aden	8,000	800	0	0	0	0
Algeria	140,000	130,000	3,000	1,000	0	0
Egypt	75,000	40,000	2,500	400	100	100
Iraq	135,000	6,000	2,500	350	100	60
Lebanon	5,000	6,000	3,000	400	100	~50
Libya	38,000	3,750	500	40	0	0
Morocco	265,000	200,000	50,000	18,000	5,700	3,500
Syria	30,000	5,000	4,000	4,500	100	100
Tunisia	105,000	80,000	10,000	7,000	1,500	1,100
Yemen	55,000	3,500	500	500	200	200
TOTAL	**856,000**	**475,050**	**76,000**	**32,190**	**7,800**	**5,110**

- After a first international recognition, the question of 850,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries was forgotten, overwhelmed by the imposing narrative of Palestinian refugees.

Justice for Jews from Arab Countries

- The rapid integration of Oriental Jews in the countries that welcomed them, as well as the prevalent memory of Holocaust survivors, kept history of Jews from the Arab world largely unknown. This holds true also for Israel, where the integration of Jewish refugees from Arab countries has not always been a simple process.
- Israel and some organisations, as the “Justice for Jews from Arab Countries” are consistently advancing the narrative of Jewish refugees in order to counter the predominance of Palestinian memory. Palestinian refugees, the only ones to maintain an inter-generational status of refugees, are used by Arab states as a political weapon against Israel. Numerical difference (600,000 Palestinian refugees and 850,000 Jewish refugees) and substantial difference (Arab refugees actively participated in the war against Israel and many of them could return, contrarily to Jews from Arab countries, who did not participate in hostilities and could not return), imposes a wider consideration of Middle-East history for a just solution to the conflict.

To see

- The documentary “Forgotten refugees” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KH8RL2XRr48
- Survivors of the “farhud”, the 1941 pogrom in Iraq: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BpMzS1HE_Y (part 1) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2swjE4tbQo (part 2)
- Operation Mural http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hPkyKv63n0
- “Justice for Jews from Arab Countries” http://www.justiceforjews.com/

Interview with Daniel Meron

Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Head of UN Bureau

Who are Jewish refugees from Arab Lands?

When one talks about Jewish refugees from Arab countries, one talks about one of the most neglected topics of contemporary history and affairs. Current Arab countries used to have large and established Jewish communities. Many of these communities were of ancient origin, dating back 2500 years, such as in Iraq. In the 20th century, Jewish communities in Arab countries enjoyed political and civil rights, being integral part of the social structure, contributing to all realms of life. Today nobody knows that Jews in Iraq were involved in journalism, academia, commerce and every other social sector.
When Zionism started spreading in the Middle East and progressively in the 1930s and 1940s, things changed. The status of Jews in Arab countries increasingly deteriorated due to anti-Jewish predicament, resulting in discrimination, anti-Jewish boycott, incitement, force migration and violent attacks. Such is the case of the "farhud", the 1941 anti-Jewish riots in Baghdad, when in two days Jews were attacked and killed, and Jewish properties were injured. Likewise, in 1945 the Jewish community in Libya was subject to a pogrom and in 1948 the Moroccan Jewish community suffered from anti-Jewish violence.

How did Jews become refugees?

Right after the foundation of the State of Israel, anti-Jewish predicament in Arab countries incited violence against Jews and Jewish properties. There was also an active policy encouraging Jewish migration. Forced migration was caused by systematic confiscation of properties, withdrawal of citizenship, direct discrimination.
The Arab League, founded in 1945, adopted a resolution in 1949 calling for the freeze of Jewish bank accounts in Arab countries and their use for evacuating Jewish citizens from Arab lands.

How many Jews were displaced?

Between 1940s and 1970s, almost 850,000 Jews were displaced from Arab countries, becoming refugees. Appreciable numbers of Jews were displaced right after the creation of Israel, like in Iraq. In other cases, Jews managed to remain in their countries after Israel was born and were expelled in the following years.

Are they recognised as refugees by the international community?

Two days after the creation of Israel in 14 May 1948, a report by Mallory Brown published in the New York Times warned about "Jews in grave danger in all Moslem Lands". While

the article speaks of “Moslem Lands”, I am addressing the issue of Jewish refuges from Arab-speaking countries.
Not only this, but the question was also addressed by the UN. The UN Agency for refugees, the UNCHR, determined twice, first in 1957 and in 1967, that Jews fleeing from Arab countries fall within its mandate, recognising their refugee status. Moreover, the UN Resolution 242 adopted in 1967 after the Six Day War calls for a just settlement of the refugee problem. The fact that the resolution does not mention any nationality is not by chance, but because they intended both Jewish and Arab refugees.
Furthermore, both Egypt-Israel and Jordan-Israel agreements mention the issue of refuges, calling for the establishment of a claims commission for the settlement of mutual financial claims.
Also Clinton in July 2000, in Camp David, recognised the right to compensation of Jews who were made refugees after the Independence War in 1948-49.

Why is it important to talk about it?

It is first and foremost a question of justice.
When we talk about justice in the Middle East we cannot forget about Jewish refugees: any settlement of the conflict and all analysis about contemporary Middle East should contemplate the matter of Jewish refugees from Arab countries, otherwise there will be no justice.
For political reasons, Jewish claims are often neglected. However, in 2010, the Knesset passed a law imposing the settlement of the Jewish refugees issue to be part of future agreements with Arab countries. This law insures that their claims will not be forgotten.

Are there any states backing Jewish refugees’ claims?

There is an international activity supporting Jewish refugees’ memory and claims. There is an organisation called Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, directed by Stanley Urman, with associates from US, Canada, UK, France and Israel.
The American Congress adopted a resolution in 2008 recognising Jews from Arab countries were forced to migrate as victims of human rights violations. More importantly, the resolution recognises that any debate on Palestinian refugees should also include a debate on Jewish refugees for reasons of law and equity.
Other law bills are pushed forward in the US, mainly by Congressman Jerrold Nadler, and in the Canadian Parliament. The Italian Parliament also hosted a hearing on the issue, under the initiative of former MP Fiamma Nirenstein.

What is Israel doing in this respect?

In 2012, we organised a conference on “Justice for Jews from Arab Countries”, and adopted the Jerusalem Declaration, which also mentions activities of the Israeli government.
First, we are documenting stories and personal losses, in order to address proper claims of properties that were destroyed, confiscated or lost. Secondly, we are bringing up the issue in all forums, for achieving a just settlement to the conflict that embraces Jewish claims. Finally, we plan to establish a day for remembering Jewish communities from Arab countries and their expulsion.
Moreover, MK Shimon Ohayon has established a lobby group in the Knesset for advancing matters related to Jewish refugees.
We are also active at the UN; we organised two conferences on this issue, the last one held in October 2013, which sparked harsh criticism in Arab press.

Why is this matter neglected?

There is an attempt by Arab countries to dominate the narrative in the international arena. Specifically, the Palestinian narrative domineers over international organisations.
For instance, the UN established the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, which celebrates every 29 November the recurrence of the UN Resolution on the Partition of Palestine: the same resolution that called for the establishment of a Jewish and an Arab state, which was rejected by the Arabs. Not only that, but the UN declared 2014 to be the Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.
This attempt to dominate the narrative especially in international bodies dealing with peace and justice tries to ignore Jewish claims and rights. But we are intentioned to redress the current situation advancing our narrative and supporting the legitimate rights and claims of Jews who were dispossessed and thrown out of their countries for the very fact that they were Jews.

Interview with David Meghnagi

Professor of Clinical Psychology and Director of the MA Programme on Shoah Studies, University of Roma Tre

How was the Jewish community in Libya?

On the eve of the Jewish exodus from Libya, the Jewish community had 35,000 members in a population of less than one million. The biggest Jewish centre was in Tripoli, and other relevant Jewish centres were around the country. During the Ottoman period, in the 19th century, the social and legal condition of the Jews significantly improved: Jews were always dhimmi, but however protected. The improvement of Jews' social status generated increasing hostility. Jewish status declined While with progressive decrease of Ottoman power.

Anything changed under Italian colonial rule?

Jews welcomed the Italians, hoping for change and improvement of life conditions. The new ruling power considered the Jews as a bridging community between Libya and Italy, but it showed another face, even before Italy's racist and anti-Semitic shift. Despite the persecutions, Italian domination is considered as a temporary change in the status of Jewish inferiority in Arab society.

How were relations between Jews and Arabs?

In traditional Islamic society, Jews and Arab relations were ambivalent, often leading to violence, especially in times of uncertainty. The Tripoli Jewish community celebrates Purim remembering Ester, and the saving of Jews from Amman's homicidal project, and other two episodes of local history, when Jews survived mortal dangers.
In Islam, Jews are considered as a dominated minority, a "conquered people" that was entitled to protection, but with an inferior status. Jews had to "know their place" if they wanted to avoid violence. Moreover, in a deeply gender-divided society, where women could not show their face in public, Jews were viewed as emasculated and therefore they could be in contact with Arab women for commercial purposes. That is also why Jews often worked as merchants.

Did the improvement of Jews' status in the 19th century also bring about an evolution in the relations with Arabs?

The subjugation of Jews was not challenged by positive development of interpersonal and inter-communal relations. The change was due to external factors, first under Ottoman rule, and, after, under Italian rule. As an outside change, the improvement of Jewish status was perceived as a direct attack to the Islamic "umma".
Jews were then guilty of willing to emancipate from Islamic domination. It is important to consider that the anti-Jewish rabid hatred burst out two years after the liberation, when the country started to cope with the future. One could believe that Arab nationalism risked jeopardising its credibility by instigating, right before national independence, two pogroms

against a defenceless community that had lived there before Arab invasions. However, the Islamic umma evoked in Arab nationalism, and, therefore, violence against a powerless minority expressed defiance of a foreign power and the expression of the will to preserve the past social order. Consequences would have been different, had the revolt attacked British soldiers in the country – who, by the way, intervened just three days after the massacres had begun, during which Jews living in the old city managed to pull assailants back.

Was Zionism part of Libyan Jewish identity?

Libyan Jews were profoundly Zionist. In the 1920s, there was a plan to bring Tripoli's Jews to Jerusalem. Zionists were the majority of Jewish communities' representative bodies. Being Zionist also meant learning Modern Hebrew and participating in the dream of national rebirth supported by local rabbis. Right after the liberation from Fascist domination, Zionist youth organisations were again active in society. They studied Hebrew and built the future. The organisations of pre-state Israel educated young generations for a new life. Zionism in Tripoli was part of a global identity: the return to Zion was the fulfilment of a historical cycle enrooted in prayers and in collective dreams of an entire nation, where modern and ancient combined.

Did Libya's Jews suffer from Fascist anti-Jewish persecution?

Fascist persecutions happened during the war, and were collectively considered as a consequence of the war itself. At the time, people did not realise what those persecutions would lead to: Jews from Bengasi were deported in the concentration camp of Giado, south of Tripoli. A few people know about it, but more than 600 Jews, a quarter of the whole Bengasi Jewish community, died in Giado.

Right after the war, the birth of the State of Israel caused a wave of anti-Jewish violence in the Arab world. What happened in Libya?

The 1945 pogrom was unexpected; it happened when hope resonated in the Jewish community. The 1945 pogrom represents the end of an entire world, since it had been meticulously planned by people imbued with pan-Arabism and anti-Semitism, who had lived in other Arab countries during the Fascist domination, resonant of the propaganda of the Great Mufti of Jerusalem. After that episode, Jews-Arab relations changed forever.

Arab nationalism had then an anti-Jewish component?

Absolutely. European states were reluctant to protect the local Jewish community, and, therefore, Arab nationalism asserted the right to arbitrarily dispose of its own Jews, "guilty" of challenging their dhimmi status.

How did the Jewish community react?

The burst of anti-Semitic violence meant mainly a break away from the past: the two thousand year-long history of Jews in Libya was coming to an end. It was then clear that Jews had no place in a Libyan state, so Jews' sufferance was mutated into pride and redemption, exile into exodus, dolour was sublimated. Thousands of people came from remote areas of the country to Tripoli, sleeping on the street and in synagogues, waiting for the day they would live for the beloved land of their dreams. Between 1945 and 1948, hundreds put to sea toward Eretz Israel. At home we would sing songs of pray, invoking God to protect those who decided to challenge the waters and the British army.
During the years preceding our exodus, Jewish notables negotiated with Arab authorities the terms of our leave, including Arab replacement in Jewish artisan business. Indeed,

Jews, who had been for centuries the best artisans in the Arab world, transferred their skills to Arab workers before leaving the country.
Furthermore, after the 1945 pogrom, the Jews organised in self-defence for reacting to other potential assaults. Weapons were purchased in the black market, and 150 boys and 50 girls were trained, joining former Jewish policemen. A delegate of the Yishuv (pre-state Israel) secretly helped training small groups of self-defence in desert areas around Tripoli. During the weeks before the pogrom, Jews fasted and prayed. The attack against Jewish neighbourhoods was halted back unexpectedly: Jewish youth hit back at the assailants shouting "haganah"!

What are your personal memories of that period?

I have plenty of memories. I believe I was three or four when I feigned playing in order to better listen to chats and understand why funerals were hold in darkness, under curfew, along a path guarded by armed forces that have never intervened to protect us and were now preventing mourners from ushering their beloved ones the day of their rest.
The 1945 and 1948 pogroms were unmentionable events. In the terrace on the top of our home there was a sign written in white chalk: "November 1945, day of the 'chomata'". That was the word my brothers used referring to the massacre–which we call in Hebrew "pra'oth". According to official sources, between 130 and 167 victims were massacred, synagogues were set to fire and profaned, Torah scrolls were crushed, torn and fired, pregnant women were ripped open, kids were smashed on the walls.
My parents were also in danger. They were very careful not to mention what happened when we were around, but when they did, I kept my ears open. Memories were covered by a lure of secrecy: tragedy, resilience and the final exodus of almost all Jews of Libya. We could not talk about it; we could not ask about it, and when the elders discussed about those events, I learnt to understand their indirect and circumlocutory language. People were not used to talk about death, and primarily not in front of children. In Tripoli, death was a habitual occurrence, more than in the West. When a Jew passed away, the whole community mourned. When an Arab passed away, funerals could interrupt the traffic for hours. But death for organised violence is essentially different from death for natural causes.
Images of the 1945 events weighed heavily on me. But another history alleviated their burden: the Jewish self-defence that in 1945 and in 1948 held back the murderous crowd heading to the Hara (the Jewish neighbourhood).
Evidence was all around: the ditch in a separate area of the cemetery, where there was a big grave in memory of Mushi Fellah, a wealthy man who incautiously confronted his murders. Twenty years later, in 1967, when we were all locked in our homes, his grandson Simon was about to run into the same hazard: as though our relations with the Islamic majority were the same as once, he unwarily stepped out of his home. A shouting neighbour, Ms Barnes, rescued him. Simon was agile and strong, but he faced alone a numerous, armed crowd, and even fell down when running back to his home. Our subconscious sometimes urges us to repeat events in order to bring about change, but not always are we successful. I whispered: "Lord, thanks to Thee".

Was Zionism a cause of danger as well?

In my childhood, Israel was a magic place where I would join my grandparents and uncles and aunts, a place of redemption, of unique love where all personal affections and cultural aspirations would combine. Among my most disconsolate memories, there is a night spent burning all photos and letters from relatives in Israel. The Libyan government, after putting

the Jewish community under its direct control, appointed a governmental officer to collect information about those who left the country. I cried all night for those photos: they were the only visual memory I had of my family. I was not sure I would have met them. We were hostages. If someone had to leave, even for medical reasons, someone had to stay hostage to guarantee the other would return.

Violent attacks broke out again in 1967, after increasing hostility against Israel and the Jews: what happened?

On Friday 2 June 1967, the ulemas incited to holy war from the mosques, while meanwhile the government joined the Syrian and Egyptian initiative of celebrating a week in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. The King declared the state of "defensive war" and offered support for the liberation of Palestine.
Radios reverberated everywhere that the Zionist entity had no chance to survive. Jewish notables sent to the King a declaration of solidarity, recalling their neutrality and loyalty. We were disquieted and, as every year in occasion of the Palestine Day, the wealthiest men of the community had to give a "donation" for Palestine. Hideously maltreated, they had to pretend to be happy, hoping that would prevent further harm.
We fasted; we lighted candles in honour of Rav Meir and Bar Yochai. I was terrified of violence against women; I was in fear for what could happen to my sister, my mother, my father. Somehow this fear toppled with the distress of Arab armies surrounding the Jewish state. Tel Aviv was a few kilometres away from the Eastern border, while the border in Jerusalem was just a barbed wire. During the silent and gloomy nights, I wondered what could happen if the Arabs would attack first.
When the war broke out, on 5 June 1967, the crowd was exulting in the streets. Radio Cairo announced the destruction of Tel Aviv and Haifa: we knew that it was just Arab propaganda, but we were in fear. From the PLO building, voices cried out for holy war. Waiting endless and voiceless hours for my beloved and my neighbours to come back home, I wondered what we should do had the crowd tried to break into our home. My brother Isaac managed to jump out of the window while the building where he worked was burning. As in 1945 and in 1948, youth had put a sign to tag Jewish homes and businesses.
After declaring the state of emergency and imposing the curfew, authorities managed to get in control. On Thursday 8 June, the police had to hold back a crowd of peasants from the nearby village of Zawia, where several volunteers were recruited for "the holy war against infidels". They were heading toward Tripoli for cleansing it of Jewish presence. The plan was to incite a general uprising backed by the army, but Jews were evacuated from the old city and settled in the new neighbourhoods, in police stations, and in the periphery of Tripoli.
News of clashes between the police and the rioters mingled with the fear of imminent Israeli attack. People deemed Israel was almighty, believed Israeli soldiers could reach everywhere to avenge the innocent Jews who had been brutally attacked. The collective history was fired up by the news Israelis entered into the Egyptian air space from West and not East, as it was expected. The fear to go toward the end concocted for the Jews turned into fright and panic. The overexcited crowd believed Israelis would arrive anytime to take revenge and they began fleeing.

How did you live those moments?

Behind closed windows we could not understand much of what was going on, but we could see cars and motorcars fleeing. People would wonder around dazedly. No more hugging

of volunteer soldiers at the OLP building, before joining the Arab armies toward assured death. Overexcitement was taken over by despair. During the noiseless nights, we would only hear soldiers heavily pacing through the street while guarding our homes. Police would patrol desert streets.
We would spend entire days in front of the television. We knew nothing about our relatives and about my brother Simon, who had moved to Israel seven years earlier. We talked about what we had to do, had the police come to collect us for transferring us in the camp of Gurgi. It could have been an ambush. We have to gain more time: we kept saying we lived nearby the police station and we kept in touch with embassies thanks to those who held foreign citizenship.
My mother was obsessed that the police would behave like the Nazis: who could assure that the true intentions of the police were not to kill us? Wasn't it what happened in Europe? We were alone and isolated. My mother had no rest: she instructed us not to follow the police in case we were requested to. Accordingly, she also encouraged our neighbours: we had to pretend not to be isolated, to have friends among the police; we had to make other believe that people cared about us; and we had to be careful about any request, exchanging information with the police, embassies and friends. We were later informed that a group of soldiers collected and assassinated two families promising to bring them in a safe place. The day before, I had a chat with one of the murdered young ones, telling him we were in danger and we could expect anything, but that Israel would never be destroyed.
We were 52 people living together, eating the food my mother obtained from a friendly Muslim black family. The children took part in the pogrom, but with us they behaved decently. Not to draw the attention of Arab and Palestinian neighbours, they would call my mother by the name of their youngest girl, 'Isha, so my mother would know she had to fetch the food they bought for us in exchange for small donations. The day we left, the Muslim woman asked God to pardon their sins: I never forgot this.
We were lucky. We lived nearby the police station. We would gather on evenings to listen to the latest news announced by Arrigo Levi. In order to ease the tension, some of us would imitate the last speech by Nasser, in which he retired and the following conversation with King Hussein tapped by the Israeli intelligence. Someone would maliciously smile at an older man, recently married, who took a bath every night before slipping over to his room. Another woman would bake David star biscuits for his joyful husband. Our hearts inflated with a new sense of safety. New lives were created. We were pervaded by deep emotion at the sight of Israeli soldiers praying at the Western Wall.
But the thought of those who were not there tormented me: I wondered if I would ever meet my brother again. Images followed one another on the TV screen. A Palestinian woman was staring with her son at the Allenby Bridge. A young girl uttered: "Poor creature". "Poor creatures a damn!", cried out someone else, "had they won, we'd be finished!". "She's just a little girl", says someone else; "Little girl a damn", someone is about to say. People begin to discuss and quickly they change subject. Her dismayed voice, reaching the sky together with our prayers, confirms that fright and anxiety had not stiffened our hearts and empathy for others' grief.

How did you escape?

Days passed by, and we were locked up in our homes. A telephone rang. Most calls were threats intimidating us. A young Jew who imprudently opened his butchery to fetch meat for friends had been stabbed to death. A young Jewish girl went to buy some bread dressing the Arab veil: betrayed by her accent, she was assassinated. Those holding a

foreign passport had already left. But everything was more difficult for us: we needed an exit visa and a country disposed to welcome our transit to Israel. That country was Italy. After long international negotiations, the Libyan government decided to offer a touristic exit visa to Jews who would require it. I was supposed to rejoice. I longed for that moment for years; but now that it came, I was full of discontent. I did not know who among my friends was still alive after the 5 June pogrom. In my dreams, my leave was not like that. We supported each other. People would laugh at those among us who ingenuously called Arab colleagues to say goodbye and received insults and threats in reply.
While packing our stuff, a sock fell from my mother's pocket. It was my brother's, who left the country seven years earlier. Authorities and neighbours repeatedly asked to explain why he was not with us. My mother had always kept that sock with her, as a sort of charm. My brother had fought in the Syrian front and I did not know if he had come back. In seeing my mother holding the sock, I prayed: "Please Lord, tell me he is alive!".
The day we left, a jeep was waiting for us. It was early in the morning, the air was chilly from the sea, but soon it would turn into a steamy heat. The policeman was anxious to terminate his thankless task. I felt forlorn with my luggage. The dream to leave my country forever was about to become true, but this was not the leave I dreamt of. That is when I started thinking that the biblical story of the Jewish exodus had been softened and embellished. The flee with the unleavened bread was the reality that the Bible bequeathed, while the plagues existed only in the mind of those who escaped. Under this new light, I began considering the "song of the sea" about the enemy that sinks as a real event. The Egyptian soldiers, sinking in the waters were phantoms of persecutors that we could finally leave behind us. Lonely and confused, I saw a Maltese-Italian friend passing by; we just said a brief, yet weighty, "hi", as if nothing had happened.

And that is how you became refugees…

For a long time, I have lived as though my childhood were a distant memory. It was a rupture in time and space, a turning point in my life without a conceivable before and after. I have dealt with this problem professionally, by working with people suffering from collective traumas, and I understood that my reaction was consistent to a pattern. The actors could now live in Rome, Paris, New York, London or Tel Aviv, miles away from where they had spent their childhood. Yet, the inner break follows the same pattern. Only after time passed, with new generations untouched by the trauma, may the interest for the past come back.
I was not alone in my pain. Elaborating my story, I could help those who lived experiences of uprooting and were looking for a reason to endure their loss and sorrow. As an analyst, I have worked with European, Israeli, Arab, Iranian, Jewish, Muslim and Christian patients. The existence of Israel has always been of my personal interest. As Celan wrote, thinking of Israel means caring for its existence. Had I ever forgotten her, and I couldn't ever, the obliteration of that tiny point called Israel from the maps would have been the symbolic projection of a murderous plan, explicitly articulated by the virulent Arab propaganda.

Have you ever thought of going back?

I am deeply involved in supporting the dialogue for a political settlement of the Middle East conflict. But I have never thought of returning to my home country, not even the idea of a brief visit has ever come to my mind. Nothing was left of that past. I considered myself lucky because I survived: the intergenerational chain was not broken since elders could meet youth and people made a new, free life by settling in welcoming, safe places. But there is always something disturbing in being lucky, because other people were not.

Fragrances can recall you of your childhood or simple scenes in an airport or in a train, or by looking at your children playing. Many years ago, waiting for a flight in the airport of Rome, the timetable reported two outgoing flights: Rome-Tel Aviv and Rome-Tripoli. I was tired and somehow the two signs merged. For a moment, I felt like a place could bring to the other, like I could be at home anywhere because humanity is a big family.
My Tripoli travelled with me, together with the rich and expressive rhythms of oriental music, together with love songs and liturgical songs that I would hear for the birkat ha-levana (the blessing on the moon), together with the intense fragrances, the memories of my lost friends, the breeze from the sea, my dreams and fantasies at the sight of a ship, together with the bliss of switching from Arabic to Hebrew and from Hebrew to Arabic, writing in Italian as it were Latin, from Hebrew to Aramaic.

Your story is an untold story: what are the psychological and political consequences?

I was born and raised in an Arab country that I left forever after a gory pogrom – the third my family experienced in twenty years. Over two decades, hundreds of thousands of Jews were forced to abandon their homes and their belongings in every area of the Arab and Islamic world. Jewish minorities had not participated in the war of destruction waged by the Arab League armies against the newborn State of Israel, and they did not represent a danger by any mean. They were hostages. Their flight was voiceless, ignored by the international media.
Once the Jews disappeared from the Arab world, so happened to the vestiges of ancient civilisations that dwelled in the Near East before Arab invasions. The centrality of the Holocaust in debates regarding the legitimacy of Israel eclipsed the pain of Jews from Arab countries, also in the eyes of the Israelis. Only recently, this story is recognised in its tremendous historical and political implications.
Remembering the pain of Jews from Arab countries means to consider the complex Middle East in its entirety.

And with regard to Israel and the Arab refugees?

Had the Arab states accepted the partition of Palestine voted by the United Nations, history would have taken another course. Both Israelis and Arabs could have celebrated in the same day. By their policy toward Jewish minorities, Arab states confirmed again the necessity of the existence of Israel, if one had ever needed.
Both parties had refugees, but with a radical difference: Jews were defenceless and away from the region at war, while Palestinians were actively involved in the war waged by the Arab world. Jews fallen in Arab hands were killed, expulsed or kept prisoners. In Israel, great part of the Arab population could remain or return to their homes. Israel counted 600,000 inhabitants when it was created. Zionism could survive just by welcoming the refugees languishing in European camps waiting for a country to welcome them and the Oriental Jews.
Despite the difficulties of the first years, the sense of alienation, poverty and distress, Oriental Jews were considered and looked upon themselves as part of a process of national rebirth and redemption after centuries of oppression.
Palestinians have become ontologically refugees because of a political choice by Arab states, which vehemently refused to integrate them, even if it meant a displacement of just a few kilometres. Religiously and nationally, the creation of a Jewish State in the heart of the Arab nation and the Islamic umma represents a violation of divine and secular order.
To consider Israel as a disgrace, is the dramatic moral and political guilt of Arab nationalism, representing political immaturity and the origin of a much more general failure.

Interview with Cecilia Nizza-Cohen Hemsi

You were expelled from Egypt right after the creation of the State of Israel. What are the memories of your family?

I must say I do not hold personal memories: when we were expelled, I was too little. I was born to a French-speaking Jewish family from Alexandria. After the expulsion, we went to France, Israel and eventually we settled in Milan.

Did your parents talk about Egypt with nostalgia, as in many Egyptian families?

My parents have never cultivated nostalgic sentiments of their life in Egypt. They used to be in touch with friends, Jewish and non-Jewish refugees from Egypt. Pining for the past went through small things, like food. I recall my father once bought a guava fruit from an oriental shop in Milan, which for me was a marvellous fruit. We used to eat Egyptian food, such as falafel, hamin.

There were some Arab words we used, such as “agami” (stranger), “haram” (pity) and “zeft” (disgusting). I also remember a song in ladino – my father spoke ladino, but never taught us.

I experienced my uprooting from Egypt in Italy, where bilingualism was considered negatively – at home we used to speak French – and being Egyptians we were sort of primitives!

How was Jewish life in Egypt?

The two main Jewish communities were in Cairo and Alexandria. We are Alexandrian. My father, Joseph Cohen Hemsi was editor in chief of the “Journal d’Alexandrie”, where he also wrote of music and literature. He received a Jewish religious education, but soon after the death of his parents, he became secular. His family had been in Egypt for generations and they held Italian passport. During the Fascist rule they lost their citizenship, as Jews not resident in Italy. My mother was of Bulgarian and Romanian origins, and her family moved to Egypt at the beginning of the 20th century.

My family had a typical colonial life, as other European communities in Egypt: cocktails, servants and an intense cultural and intellectual life. There were also more Oriental Jews, in Cairo and Ismailiya, who were not well integrated in European societies.

Why were you expelled in 1948?

In 1942, my parents left Egypt for Palestine; for fear that Rommel invaded the country. My sister was born in Jerusalem. In 1943 they went back to Egypt, longing to return to their normal life.

In 1947 my father publishes a book, “Notre Combat”, which I published again in 2007, a series of articles he had written since 1942. His main study was anti-Semitism after the Second World War, focusing on Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian Youth. He was confident of Arab-Jewish friendly relations. Although he was aware that growing anti-Semitism was directly linked to Zionism, he believed that a future Jewish state would not break Arab-Jews relations. Consequence: first he was deported to Abukir and the expelled!

His brother left the country in 1953 and his sisters left three years later. They all settled in Milan, while in 1960 my uncle moved to Israel.

Was he deported as a Zionist?

In May 1948, right after the War of Independence began, he was deported with a group of people accused of Zionist and Communist activities. In Abukir, he was imprisoned with his

friends, including the famous collector Arturo Schwarz. My sister remembers when we used to visit him. Eventually, my mother found, in the basement of the Italian Embassy in Cairo, our Italian passports with which we could leave the country. I vaguely remember the day he came directly to Alexandria, where we had to leave from. That is how we became refugees.

How was life as refugees?

I hold vague reminiscences; I remember I cried when we left our family. My life really started in Milan, a difficult life. We had a radio, which we could bring from Egypt and with which we were educated in classical music. There was also a box of books, lost upon our arrival in Italy, which became a family story.
With the Sinai war, new refugees came, when Jews understood they had not future in Egypt. They integrated successfully, thank you also to the Jewish school, which was instituted after racial laws against Jews in Italy. The Jewish school had integrated of refugees' community coming from Lebanon, Persia and Libya who decided to settle in Italy.
The first years in Italy, my father used to write on Middle East affairs for "Combat" directed by Camus and for other Italian newspapers.

At home you did not speak about your story. When have you first been interested in your Egyptian origin?

When I settled in Israel after my aliya. In Italy nobody asked about what happened. Our story, and I can understand it, was far less relevant than the tragedy of the Holocaust. And that is what happened in Israel as well.
Now we talk about it: I have discovered my origins and identity thank to Levana Zamir in Israel and Yves Fadida in France, who founded two associations of Egyptian Jews.
In 2006, a friend of mine invited me to a conference on Egyptian Jews, held in Haifa. I went bringing with me my father's book, and there I met Levana and Yves, who encouraged me to republish his book. I then realised I did not know anything of our past, of our story, as Jewish refugees from Arab lands.

Your political consciousness and identity are somehow related to the history of your family?

My liberal approach originates from my father's education, while my political consciousness dates back to 1967. My father was secular but had a strong sense of Jewish identity, on which he wrote extensively, including Jesus as a Jew! It was this education that led me understand in 1967 that anti-Zionism is but a form of anti-Semitism. I recall the discussions and quarrels among friends of the Jewish Youth organisation, majorly left wing, who accused us of being Fascists.

Why have you been forgotten?

The Holocaust prevailed over our history. But we are all survivors: had Himmler invaded Northern Africa, all Jews would have been exterminated. We also forgot about anti-Jewish persecutions in Tunisia, Algeria and Libya, under Petain's France and Fascist Italy.
Personally, I realise of what happened to us Jews from Arab countries just now. Actually, we would not even talk about the Holocaust. Not even in the Jewish school, where a big panel reporting the names of the deported members of the Jewish community reminded us of what happened. I have realised what happened while in 1960s, working for the Jewish community of Milan, I was requested to type the names of the deportees: then I became

aware of what the Holocaust had been! We started then organising activities for the memory of the Holocaust but not of Jewish refugees.

Why talking about it?

For several reasons. First, our story needs to be remembered because we also suffered. It is what my father warned about: the permanence of anti-Semitism after the defeat of Nazism. Secondly, regarding the conflict with the Palestinians, why shouldn't we talk about 800,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries?

Interview with Sharon Nizza

You belong to the second generation of refugees from Arab countries. What does it mean to you?

At home we have never talked about our Egyptian origins. I was attracted to this story at university, when I took a course on contemporary Egypt with prof. Meir Hatina. He talked about the Israeli Academic Centre in Cairo, whereby I began researching on my origins.

Did you grandfather influence you?

I read his book and his journals. His book, "Notre Combat", was dedicated to his homeland, Egypt, but right after it was published in 1947, it was censored and all copies but one were destroyed. In 2007, we republished it. By reading his journals, I realised he had never recovered by the trauma of uprooting from the country he considered his homeland, the cosmopolitan country where he enjoyed intense intellectual life. He wanted the last copy of his book to be destroyed, had it not been republished within 100 years from his birth. And we managed to fulfil his dream.

His analyses focused on Egypt of 1940s and 1950s: what are his arguments?

My grandfather exposed anti-Semtism after the Holocaust, mainly in Egypt and in the Arab world, but he believed in friendly relations between Jews and Arabs. He was a Zionist, and by his writings on Jewish national rebirth I comprehended many aspects of my Zionist identity. Therefore, I started researching on Jewish refugees from Arab lands, a topic I knew little about.

After two generations, you visited Egypt: how was your experience?

I visited Egypt twice: in 2007 and in 2012. I saw the house where my family lived in Alexandria, in Fouad street; I visited the graves of my relatives, in the now neglected Jewish cemetery, and other places of what was Egyptian Jewish life.

Have you met any Jew?

I met several members of the Egyptian community. In Cairo, Jewish places are kept under guard. In the main synagogue, Sha'ar Shamaim, an Egyptian guy tells about an allegedly prosperous Jewish life in Cairo.
I visited Egypt a second time after the revolution, and I went to the synagogue for Kippur and Sukkot: we were altogether seven people or so. It was deeply emotional.

How are Jews in Egypt now?

Many Jews do not leave because they cannot afford it, while others want to stay. I met the last relative left in Egypt, a grandaunt. In 2012 she was preparing to leave the country, fearing for what could happen under the Muslim Brothers. Now she lives in Canada. Jewish identity in Egypt is obliterated. Those left do not manifest their Jewish identity; their fear for the result of the revolution originated principally from their being Egyptians and then from their being a minority.

Why do you think it is necessary to talk about Jewish refugees?

I am not sure we can use the word refugee, since they have never been recognised as such. The fact they left and built a new life abroad shows a high sense of dignity, enrooted in Jewish identity and history, made of persecutions, expulsions and recreation, keeping memory of the past but looking forward.

The story of Jewish refugees is not fully part of Israeli narrative. My grandfather writes about the period in Israel spent in tents: my grandmother wanted to live because she could not cope with the fact their sufferance was not acknowledged.

Why talking about it now?

It is a question of justice, but after 60 years it is difficult to talk about it. It is however essential because debates on the Middle East exclusively refer to Palestinian refugees, who under UNRWA maintain their status through the generations.
Ideally, Jewish and Arab refugees are considerable as a population transfer – a common phenomenon in Europe after the war. But the Arab population is considered, while the Jewish is obliterated.
As an assistant to former MP Fiamma Nirenstein, I have worked on the parliamentary hearing on Jewish refugees from Arab lands, and we realised nobody had a clue of what happened. And yet, I am not sure that this can bring to any result, but that is why, as a second generation, I feel I am compelled to preserve the memory.