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# The Jewish Bourgeoisie of Egypt in the First Half of the Twentieth Century: Modernity, Socio-Cultural Practices and Oral Testimonials

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## Introduction

In recent years, there has been increased interest in the history of Middle Eastern Jewish communities. Some works focus on the social history of these communities, address modernity as a lived experience, and offer a different framework for the understanding of modernity.[1] Other works anchor modern Jewish Middle Eastern life experiences in the immediate context of the societies of which they were a part.[2] Thus, they offer perspectives that move away from both modernization theories and essentialist categories that present Middle Eastern Jewries as monolithic, and bring to light more nuanced accounts of their histories.

1 Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

2 Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Ruth Kimhi, *Zionism in the Shadow of the Pyramids: The Zionist Movement in Egypt, 1918-1948* (in Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 2009); Yoram Meital, 'A Jew in Cairo: the Defiance of Shehata Haroun', *Middle Eastern Studies* 53 (2017): 183-197; Dario Miccoli, *Histories of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s-1950s* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); Dario Miccoli (ed.), *Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature: A Diaspora* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); Orit Yekutieli, 'Artisans at the Medina of Fes in the Twentieth Century: Social Transformations in Modern Morocco' (in Hebrew) (Ph.D. dissertation, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2010).

Incorporating these perspectives and addressing modernity as a lived experience, this paper analyzes the utilization of three socio-cultural practices by members of the Jewish community of Egypt in their efforts to construct and appropriate a shared modern identity, and to enjoy the new opportunities that this identity summoned during the first half of the twentieth century. Tracing past social behaviors and daily realities, I draw on Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Defined as 'a set of dispositions that play a dual role both as principles of social classification and as organizing principles for action',[3] habitus is that which reflects people's shared backgrounds and enables them to respond in accordance with what is considered appropriate in different situations. Expressing the interplay between group culture and personal history, Bourdieu's habitus and theory of practice offer a framework for interpreting social processes and individual behaviors.[4]

The three socio-cultural practices discussed herein are the use of language, residential urban dispersion patterns, and the social phenomenon of mixed marriages. I analyze the ways in which contemporaries – the Jewish bourgeoisie of the time and place – utilized these practices in their struggle to gain access to financial, cultural and social capital under colonial rule during a period of rapid transition. This was a struggle defined in terms of old versus young, traditional versus modern, backwardness versus progress. In Egyptian society under European cultural hegemony and later British rule, modernity was the currency for upward mobility. This paper brings to light the daily gestures and manners by which contemporaries appropriated modern identity instrumental for their upward mobility and illuminates their conscious (yet not cynical) and unconscious roles in the construction of modern identities. It also challenges widely accepted stereotypes associated with Middle Eastern societies in particular, and modernity in general.[5]

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 13; On the definition of habitus and the concept of dispositions in Bourdieu's work see also Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1993), 15, 19, 46, 76, 87.

4 The development of habitus as a theoretical concept for social analysis contributed to a broader understanding of another pertinent concept – capital. Central to Marxist analysis, this concept came to mean not only financial wealth, but also cultural and social resources.

5 For a broader analysis of these issues, see my dissertation, 'The Jewish Bourgeoisie of Egypt during the First Half of the Twentieth Century: Gender and Family as Perspectives' (in Hebrew) (Ph.D. diss., Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2018).





The analysis presented here relies primarily on the wealth of details provided by oral testimonials of contemporaries, gathered during personal interviews. Wherever possible, comparisons were made with documents from the archive of the Jewish (Sephardi) community and Grand Rabbinate of Cairo.[6]

## The Sources

Two pools of sources provided the information on which this study is based: life stories of former members of the Jewish community, and documents from the archive of the Jewish (Sephardi) Community and Grand Rabbinate of Cairo (the highest Jewish judicial authority). The testimonials, which provided the majority of information for this paper, are divided into three groups.[7] The first is my private archive, which holds 40 interviews conducted in Israel in the years 2011-2018.[8] The second consists of interviews from the archives of the Oral History division at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. These interviews were conducted between the 1960s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, both in Israel and abroad. The third group is comprised of life stories, documented in a book edited by Lillian Dammond – herself a former member of this community – and Yvette Raby, and published in 2007.[9]

6 While there was a separate Jewish Ashkenazi community with its own institution in Cairo, the Sephardi community and its head were considered the representative body of Egyptian Jewry.

7 Please note the following abbreviations used: AT – author's translation; PA – private archive, which includes interviews held by the writer and divided chronologically into two groups marked G1 and G2; interviews kept at the Division of Oral History at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem are marked by the abbreviation J-lem. They are numbered P35 (Project 35), I no. (Interview number); documents from the archive of the Grand Rabbinate and Jewish community in Cairo are marked YUA (Yeshiva University Archive) and given by reel and document number.

8 All of the interviewees' names were changed and appear here in pseudonym.

9 Of the interviews in the book, I used only those with people who could have been included in the Jewish Bourgeoisie (omitting those of the lower strata or upper echelons of the Jewish society). Liliane Dammond and Yvette Raby, *The Lost World of the Egyptian Jews: First-Person Accounts from Egypt's Jewish Community in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: iUniverse, 2007). Ruthellen Josselson, *Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry: A Relational Approach* (in Hebrew), trans. Amia Lieblich (Tel-Aviv: Mofet, 2015).

The selection process of interviewees and the methodology applied by the interviewers differed significantly between the groups. This complexity required an on-going awareness of the effects that these differences may have had on the interviewees. At the same time, the differences limited the dispositional effect that a single interviewer might have had over the collected material.[10] Often, it was this diversity that shed light on the inherent biases of both the interviewers and the interviewees.

While oral testimonials have become an important source in anthropology and sociology, there is still no consensus regarding their validity in historical research. Those who oppose their use claim that testimonials collected in retrospect and relying on memories are not credible. Alessandro Portelli, one of the prominent advocates of the use of oral sources, confronts this claim head on. Arguing that there is always a lapse of time between the event and the written record, he states that the written document actually hides its dependence on time and presents an immutable text that assumes that no modifications were made to it. In fact, Portelli argues, what is written 'is first experienced or seen [...]. Therefore, the reservations applying to oral sources ought to be extended to written material as well'.[11]

More importantly, Portelli argues that the strength of oral testimonials is derived not necessarily from their adherence to facts, but rather from '[their] divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, [and] desire break-in'. Once their factual credibility is verified based on established criteria of historical, philological criticism that applies to every document, the contribution of oral sources lies in the fact that 'untrue' statements are still psychologically 'true'. Such intentional or unintentional 'errors' can often be more revealing than factually accurate accounts.[12]

Oral sources force us to detect and address both the speaker's and the researcher's own subjectivity. When the research is broad and articulated, it also

10 On the work with narrative sources in general and with life stories in particular, see Ruthellen Josselson, *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007); Josselson, *Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry*; Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop* 12 (1981), 96-107; Na'ama Sabar-Ben Yehoshua (ed.), *Traditions and Genres in Qualitative Research: Philosophies and Advanced Tools* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Mofet, 2016).

11 Portelli, 'Peculiarities', 99-101.

12 Ibid, 100-101.





allows for a cross-section of the subjectivity not only of individuals but also of social groups. It tells us not just what people did, but also what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.[13]

Finally, those who criticize the use of oral sources argue that memory-based testimonials are often distorted by nostalgia. Indeed, the passage of time and the fluid nature of memory, ever changing and culturally constructed, demand a growing awareness of such nostalgic tendencies. However, there are effective methodologies to respond to this challenge. While a single life story provides mostly anecdotal information, a cluster of interviews provides a basis for comparison and analysis. This comparison also facilitates the analysis of collective nostalgic constructions.

While there is no doubt that archival documents are a critical source for historical research, they mostly present a dominant narrative, selected and preserved by elites. Oral sources, on the other hand, can provide a window into the daily lives, perceptions and strategies of ordinary people, unobtainable otherwise. They allow a comparison between collective and individual memories, and 'often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events [...] [and] cast new light on unexplored sides of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes'.[14]

As current geo-political circumstances prevent access to almost all of the archives of modern Middle Eastern Jewish communities, oral testimonials are the main source of new and invaluable information pertaining to these societies. In the following pages, I focus on the life stories of men and women of the Jewish bourgeoisie of Egypt, bringing to life the multi-dimensional aspects of daily realities, and drawing attention to the ways in which the historical agents played a central role in the construction of modernity. I also reveal gaps between ideals and images and lived experiences, thus facilitating a break from the dichotomous narratives of modernity.

Available archival sources documenting the activities of the Jewish community during this period in Egypt are scarce. However, extensive research uncovered the existence of the partial archive of the Jewish Community and Grand Rabbinate of Cairo.[15] The archive documents the period between 1924

13 Ibid, 100.

14 Ibid, 99.

15 The full archive exists but is not accessible. An anonymous blog essay indicates that on 2 May 2017, the Egyptian government gave agreement in principle to

and 1956,[16] and has been stored at the library of Yeshiva University in New York since the 1970s.[17] It includes over 9,000 documents recording the activities of the Grand Rabbinate in Cairo. In addition, it holds documents pertaining to the B'nai B'rith movement's chambers[18] and other organizations with whom the community of Cairo had dealings, both in Alexandria and outside Egypt. It also holds numerous certificates attesting to the personal status of members of the community,[19] lists of donors and recipients, bills paid by the community and other documentation. Wherever possible, I compare the information gleaned from the oral testimonials and that provided by this archive.

allow access to the communal records. See 'Point of no Return: Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries', 15 May 2017, http://jewishrefugees.blogspot.co.il/2017/05/at-long-last-egypt-may-agree-torecords.html?utm_sourcefeedburner&utm_medium=email&utmcampaign=Feed:+blogspot/ZpKYsS+(Point+of+no+return), retrieved 20 May 2017. Despite the publication, the documents have not become available yet.

16 Chronologically in sync with the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Egypt and the approval of a new constitution in 1922 and 1923, respectively, the Jewish community underwent a process of reorganization. In 1924, Joseph Aslan Qattaui, one of the Jewish community's most affluent and influential families, became Nassee (head lay leader). Qattaui was also a member of the delegation to London to negotiate for Egyptian independence, one of the founders of Bank Misr and a member of the committee that formulated the Egyptian constitution in 1922. In 1924 he served both as the head of the Jewish community and as Egypt's exchequer. He promoted the establishment of elected committees to run the community's day-to-day operations. The establishment of the archive in 1924 was likely part of these changes. It ceased its operations in tandem with the dissolution of the community's institutions, following the wave of Jewish immigration from Egypt in 1956. For more information on the archive, see the introduction by Yeshiva University Library archival staff (YU Lehman Archive, Role 1).

17 I wish to extend my deepest appreciation to Shulamith Berger and the Yeshiva University Library's staff for making this material available to me.

18 Members of the Ashkenazi community, who thought the Sephardi elite would not let them participate in existing institutions, were the first to establish a B'nai B'rith chamber. In time, members of the growing bourgeoisie opened another chamber, which became an alternative center of power to that of the Grand Rabbinate and Sephardi community.

19 Many of which are travel documents issued for those who were *apatrid* (i.e. people with no citizenship).





## A Bourgeois Community of Immigrants: Historical background

Cairo and Alexandria of the first half of the twentieth century were vibrant urban metropoles, buzzing with opportunity.[20] Investment in infrastructure by Mehmet Ali Pasha and his successors; the Suez Canal project; the integration of Egypt into the world economy; the capitulatory privileges granted to foreign nationals and the growing colonial European presence – all created new economic positions and social opportunities for those who could master the set of skills and behaviors considered modern. The new opportunities encouraged immigration to Egypt, primarily from within the Ottoman Empire and the Mediterranean basin. In 1882, decades of growing colonial presence culminated in Britain's direct occupation of the country. The growing British presence contributed to the increase in immigration.

These processes directly affected the Jewish community as well. Over a period of a hundred years, the community grew at least fifteen-fold, from roughly five thousand rabbinic Jews in 1857[21] to between eighty and a hundred thousand in 1948.[22] In absolute numbers, the Jewish community was demographically marginal. Nonetheless, in the economy and society of Cairo and Alexandria, Jewish presence was strongly felt.[23]

The community's specific characteristics – namely urbanism, polyglotism and international socio-religious and economic networks – rendered it particularly suited to take on a new role as intermediaries between local Egyptian society and colonial and business-oriented elites. In fact, the new opportunities for socio-economic mobility instigated the rise of a new social

20 Beinin, *Jewish Dispersion*, 13-41; Kimhi, *Zionism*, 23-40; Miccoli, *Histories of the Jews of Egypt*, 1-8.

21 There were two distinct Jewish groups in Egypt from the ninth to the twentieth centuries, the Rabbinic and the Karaite. While the Egyptian state considered them one community, the Karaites and Rabbinic Jews kept separate institutions. In 1857, there were roughly 2,000 Karaite Jews in Egypt in addition to the Rabbinic. For more on the Karaite community, see Beinin *Dispersion*, 183-206; Ilan, *Egypt*, 257-270; Yoram Meital, *Jewish Sites in Egypt* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1995), 84-88.

22 Nineteen-forty-eight is considered the peak year of the community's size. Afterwards, emigration reduced its numbers.

23 Gudrun Kramer, 'The Rise and Decline of the Cairo Jewish Community' (in Hebrew), *Pe'amim* 7 (1980), 5.

stratum within this community, which I refer to as the Jewish Bourgeoisie of Egypt. In light of the low cost of living and the relatively high salaries enjoyed by those able to master European languages and etiquette, the vast majority of the community could share in bourgeois practices and affiliations. By the early decades of the twentieth century, over sixty-five percent of the Jewish community in Egypt considered themselves to be part of this stratum. Thus, a community that, until recently, had been small and embedded in the local culture, transformed into a community of immigrants with collective bourgeois sensitivities.[24]

As a community of newcomers with bourgeois preferences, the Jewish population was quick to identify the benefits attached to European affiliations, as they became synonymous with modernity. Living in a world ruled by colonial interests, Egyptian society reorganized itself along an imagined axis drawn between constructed concepts of 'East' and 'West', 'tradition' and 'modernity'. In this dichotomous construction, the Jewish community (as well as others) strove to be included with the 'modern West'.

With the breakdown of the Ottoman political framework and the increased integration of Egyptian society with the colonial order, the urban non-Muslim communities gradually came to be known as 'foreign' communities.[25] This process both accelerated the disassociation of the Jewish community from the general Egyptian public, and strengthened the Jewish bourgeoisie's claim to the privileges awarded to other communities of 'foreigners'.

Tracing back the social realities of this turbulent period of rapid change, in what follows, I focus on the first half of the twentieth century, with particular

24 The Jewish (as well as many other non-Jewish) immigrants to Egypt arrived primarily from other provinces of the Ottoman Empire and from around the Mediterranean basin. Many came from Italy or Greece. Smaller numbers of immigrants came from North Africa, and a smaller group still from Yemen. Even though since 1865 there had been enough Ashkenazi (i.e. Eastern European) Jews to enable the establishment of an Ashkenazi community, this group never counted for more than ten percent of the community. In addition, many of the Ashkenazi Jews in Egypt were in fact immigrants who first tried to settle in Ottoman Palestine, but for various reasons (illness, financial hardship and/or opportunities, and marriage) moved to Egypt, either temporarily or permanently.

25 On the historicization of the concept of minorities, see Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*; White, *Minorities*, 8-13.





emphasis on the years between the 1920s and 1940s. This period was one of the peaks in the process of transition to modernity in Egypt; it also aligns with the interviewees' dates of birth, allowing their memories to reflect on this period in Egyptian history.

## Socio-Cultural Practices and the Appropriation of Modernity

### *1. The Parisian Beacon and Language as a Social Field*

In a long and detailed interview conducted with Suzie – born in Cairo in the 1930s – she stated:

> Egypt was an Arab country but everywhere they spoke French. At all the stores, offices, everything was in French. [...] We never asked ourselves why. It was as if that was the way it was supposed to be [...] I studied at the Alliance [Israélite Universelle] school [...] but all of the other schools also taught in French [...] even the Arab ones. [...] There was no need for Arabic, only at the markets. [...] Even when you went to get a passport, you would speak in French and that was a government office.[26]

The vast majority of interviewees described a linguistic reality similar to that of Suzie's. Most of them presented an environment of complete immersion in French language and culture. Often, French was the language in which they first learnt to read and write, and many considered it their mother tongue even though their parents often spoke other languages at home. In striking opposition to this, most of the interviewees said that they did not know Arabic at all, or only at a very basic level.

While the interviewees did all speak French fluently, a more attentive reading of their stories reveals a much more intricate reality. While Suzie said Arabic was not learnt because it served no purpose, she later mentioned that her mother spoke Arabic at the market, that her father's family spoke Arabic with each other, and that in her husband's neighborhood, Sakakini, Arabic was the language commonly used by many of the Jews. For his part, Eddie described himself a francophone. Yet, his father sent him to Victoria College, one of the most prestigious British private boys' schools in Egypt. Thus, it was

26 PA, G2, Suzie, 12.03.2014, Israel: 1-2 (AT).

English, and not French, which Eddie spoke and wrote for the better part of the day. He said: 'The children went to either an English or a French school [...] and [their] mother tongue was French. There were some who also knew a little Arabic, but apart from the exceptional few, it was the Arabic of foreigners'.[27]

Charles (pronounced in the French manner as 'Sharl') and his family came to Egypt from Lebanon when he was eight years old, in search for better livelihood. He said: 'My friends, family and social group were all Europeans. We all spoke French [...] went to French schools'. 'French-ness' was, and remained, an important part of Charles' self-identity. Yet, he also said: 'With my parents, we spoke Arabic [...] they spoke only Arabic [...] With my older brother I spoke French'.[28] Though Charles had a French name and French education, he came from a family for whom Arabic was the common language at home. In fact, as Arabic was the only language in which he could communicate with his parents, it – and not French – must have been his mother tongue.

The generational linguistic split that Charles depicts was not exclusive to his family. Many interviewees reveal a reality in which the older members of the family communicated in Arabic while the younger generation, born between the 1920s and the 1940s, was more versed in French. 'At home, we mostly spoke French, though at times we spoke Arabic with our parents and grandparents' said Edith[29]; Benois added: '[My brother and I] spoke French more. My mother spoke Arabic with her parents and gradually they began speaking more French'.[30]

In his works, Bourdieu draws a connection between social and institutional crisis and a change in the commonly used language.[31] This can be applied to the analysis of historical circumstances of Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century. The rapid financial and political changes that characterized Egypt since the early 1900s, precipitated a feeling of deep and intense change, which affected the choice of language.[32] Under French – and later British – influence, European languages came to offer those who mastered them immediate social and economic advantage, and French in particular became a symbol of modernity.

27 PA, G2, I17, 06.14.2014, Israel: 1 (AT).
28 J-lem, P35, I45, 10.24.1999, U.S.A.: 3 (AT).
29 J-lem, P35, I18, 12.12.1996, U.S.A.: 1.
30 PA, G2, I22, 08.18.2014, Israel: 4 (AT).
31 Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 63.
32 On this feeling of radical change see Orit Bashkin et al., *Sculpting Culture in Egypt: Cultural Planning, National Identity and Social Change in Egypt* (in Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Ramot, 1999), 11-25.





The interviewees' stories revealed that they would use different languages according to the setting and the participants involved in the conversation. Jaqueline observed:

> Grandma spoke Arabic but with our parents we spoke French. To the maid we spoke in Arabic [...] [G]randma lived with us. [...] We spoke to her in Arabic, but she understood everything in French. [...] [I]t was very funny.[33]

And Ze'ev observed:

> [S]trangely, at the French Lycée[34] Arabic was not required. My first language was French, my second [...] Italian [... Still], my generation spoke Arabic and French well [and yet] we would never speak to the maids in French nor to [our] parents in Arabic.[35]

Isaac added: 'It was a funny situation. I spoke French with my mother, English at school and with my uncle. [... I spoke] Arabic with my aunt and the servants'.[36] These short excerpts clearly indicate how language served as a marker of age, class and social status (or lack thereof). Those who spoke Arabic, like Jacqueline's grandmother, were labeled 'old' and 'traditional', and were even ridiculed for it at times.

The interviewees and their families used Arabic to communicate not only with the older generation, but with the domestic staff as well.[37] As all of the

33 PA, G2, I23, 09.04.2014, Israel: 1 (AT).
34 Starting in 1840, there were different types of schools in Egypt that targeted the Jewish population. The first were private, sponsored by local and European Jewish donors. Missionary schools and the schools of the Mission Laïque Française (French affiliated schools that taught according to French secular curricula) targeted both Jewish and other non-Muslim populations. The schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle [AIU] opened at the end of the nineteenth century as well.
35 J-lem, P35, I30, 07.24.1996, U.S.A., 1.
36 J-lem, P35, I48, 10.28.1998, U.S.A., 1.
37 This strategy, of using different languages in different settings or with different people, is not unique to the Jewish Egyptian experience. Bourdieu noticed this when working in both Algiers and Barn among bilingual people. According to him, people use different languages and often even different registers according to

families in this study had household staff and as the 'servants' were generally not fluent in French, Arabic was the language of communication with them. Thus, all family members – children included – would have needed at least some fluency in colloquial Egyptian Arabic. In addition, women of the Jewish bourgeoisie needed Arabic to speak with vendors and providers of various services who routinely came to the house (e.g. laundry girls, the iron man, the ice seller). Those in salaried employment – more often men than women – needed Arabic at their workplaces.[38]

Based on the interviewees' testimonials we can conclude that a total disconnect from Arabic was more of a constructed image rather than a concrete reality. Arabic and French were used interchangeably, depending on the situation and the conversants. In Egypt of the first half of the twentieth century, language became a field within which the struggle for modernity – and the social and economic capital attached to it – took place.

Bourdieu argues that upon learning a language, one simultaneously internalizes what is to be gained from using it.[39] Thus, language is not merely a means of communication, but also a reflection of social and economic relations, in which the speakers are assessed and evaluated and in turn rewarded (or dismissed) accordingly.[40] By swapping between languages, vocabularies and accents, people consciously and unconsciously respond to different situations in order to gain access to the benefits they detect therein.[41] In Egypt of the period under discussion, French enabled contemporaries to participate in the construction, appropriation and replication of a modern identity, and enjoy the benefits bestowed by this identity.

The continued hegemony of French among the Jewish community in Egypt over all other languages, either Arabic or any other European language, as late as the Second World War is interesting, especially because it was Britain

both the subject of conversation and the participants in it. Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 62, 64.

38 For the interviewees' testimony, see e.g. PA, G1, 06.19.2011, Israel: 2 (AT).

39 In Bourdieu's words, "We never learn language without learning at the same time the conditions of acceptability of this language. In other words, learning a language means learning at the same time that this language will be profitable in this or that situation"; Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 62.

40 Ibid, 62.

41 Ibid, 62-64.





that held control over the country after 1882.[42] Understanding language as a means of response and social manipulation by groups competing for capital provides an effective framework for explaining this continuous linguistic anomaly.[43]

The testimonials reveal that the interviewees' were well aware of the link between language, modernity and social status. Rachelline stated plainly, 'Speaking French was part of being modern. We learned, lived, grew up in French [...] Those who did not were regarded as less modern'.[44] Along the same lines, Armond said:

> Many of [the Jews in Egypt] were modern [...] in their appearance, language, education [...] I think it would have hurt the Egyptians if we said we were modern and they were not [...] It was relevant for the time though to say that being modern meant speaking French or English, not Arabic, the indigent language [...] Even the Egyptians [who] were part of high society spoke French.[45]

When describing the old Jewish neighborhood, called Harat al-Yahud, Betty used language as a marker of the social inferiority of its inhabitants: 'The Jews of Harat al-Yahud [...] spoke only Arabic and were not intellectuals', she pointed out.[46] For Betty, if a person spoke Arabic or lived in the older parts of Cairo, he was automatically marked as traditional, uneducated and poor. Interestingly, Betty's take on the linguistic preferences of the residents of Harat al-Yahud may in itself be a misconception, as those interviewees who actually lived there often described themselves as French speakers.

From the contemporaries' accounts, it can be argued that at least some of them understood that the use of language was far more indicative of cultural capital and social status than actual financial capital. 'A person could have

42 It should be stated that French was the language of international diplomacy and a symbol of modernity and sophistication, not only in Egypt and the Middle East. Thus, the social status it secured for those who mastered it derived not only from the immediate social circumstances in Egypt.

43 Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 62-64.

44 PA, G2, I15, 06.12.2014, Israel: 4 (AT).

45 PA, G2, I21, 08.24.2014, Israel: 7 (AT).

46 PA, G1, I30, 01.14.2014, Israel: 6 (AT).

lots of money and live like an 'Arab' [...] A *fellah*. The two are unrelated. We didn't have a lot of money in our house but we lived properly', said Suzie. Her son, also present during the interview, added: 'There were behavioral codes that [one had to follow in order to be] modern, to be European'.[47] In the archive, French is the primary language in which the documents were written.[48] This indicates that French was not only the language of choice for individuals or families, but also the one chosen by the community's institutions for its correspondence and formal documentation, including letters, ledgers and minutes of internal meetings.[49]

The fact that the vast majority of interviewees knew at least some Arabic did not stand in the way of the creation of a coherent narrative, one that separated them from the general Arab and Muslim population. French enabled them to attach themselves to modernity, as this came to be synonymous with European culture. The competition between those holding capital – both cultural and financial – and those who wanted to share in the wealth associated with modernity and progress materialized in the linguistic field with full force. Within the modern (and colonial) discourse, biased as it was toward all that was European, the Jewish-Egyptian bourgeoisie marked its separation from all things 'native', and did so using language (as well as other practices, as will be demonstrated below).[50] The superiority of French over Arabic in Egypt can only be understood within the historical and social context of the transition to modernity under European domination; and only if language is understood as a

47 PA, G2, I29, 12.03.2014, Israel: 8 (AT).

48 The archive also holds documents in Arabic, as well as some in Hebrew, English, and occasionally Jewish Arabic in Hebrew-Rashi script.

49 See e.g. YUA, R1, pg. 22-24, minutes of the meetings held in the years 1922-1928. Interestingly, the Grand Rabbinate, considered a 'traditional' institution of the community, chose French as its primary language as well.

50 It was not only the Jewish Egyptian bourgeoisie that sought to mark its modernity. For a discussion of parallel groups in the Egyptian society who desired modernity, see Najat Abdulhaq, *Jewish and Greek Communities in Egypt Entrepreneurship and Business before Nasser* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016); Angelos Dalachanis, *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration, 1937-1962* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2017); Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Ryzova, *Age of the Efendiyya*.





social field in which participants are evaluated and rewarded according to their understanding of and adherence to the rules of the game.

Notions of gender provide another dimension to the understanding of this social struggle as manifested in language. A reading of the interviewees' stories reveals that the struggle for modern identity took different forms for men and women. As women picked up Arabic mostly from domestic staff and vendors, the Arabic they knew was usually the colloquial Egyptian dialect (*'Amiya*) rather than literary Arabic (*Fusha*). This meant they had more difficulty following mass media (radio or newspapers), which was printed and broadcasted in *Fusha*. As men were expected to find positions in the labor market, there were educational options for them to gain proficiency in Arabic either at school or university. This was generally not an option for women, for whom local Egyptian schools and academic institutions were considered altogether inappropriate. As Suzie noted:

> We went to the Communité Israélite [school] and there was no high school there, so my parents argued. My father wanted me to go to an Egyptian school so that I would learn Arabic, but my mother insisted on the Lycée Français. 'I do not want her to be like the *Fellahs*'.[51]

Leon said: 'There were two options at the Lycée. One was a course of study in Arabic [...] and the other in French. That was where the girls were'[52]; and Clara summed up, saying that fluency in Arabic was simply not considered necessary for women. Jewish girls meeting the codes of respectability and appropriate social behavior were not expected to speak Arabic, except for basic communications in the domestic sphere. They were expected to use French (or at least another European language) for their social interactions. In turn, these linguistic limitations determined the extent to which they could participate in various social and professional spheres.

The analysis of the interviewees' oral testimonies demonstrates that Arabic was positioned not only in contrast to modernity, but also in contrast to refined bourgeois femininity. It also reveals that gendered roles and bourgeois sensitivities were determining factors in the choice of language, and that the choice of language was a means for drawing gendered boundaries.

51 PA, G2, I16, 08.01.2014, Israel: 1 (AT).

52 PA, G2, I19, 08.12.2014, Israel: 3 (AT).

### *2. Urban Dispersion Patterns, Social Mobility and Modernity*

Language was not the only social strategy utilized by contemporaries in the process of construction of a shared modern identity. In what follows, I discuss patterns of urban dispersion and the way in which the Jewish bourgeoisie of Egypt used its place of residence to appropriate a modern identity both individually and collectively.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, new neighborhoods rapidly sprung up throughout Egypt's metropoles. This change took place while the European presence in Cairo and Alexandria expanded, and older sections of the cities became associated in public discourse with disorder, urban chaos and social backwardness. These characteristics were attributed to a dysfunctional Ottoman state that had failed to provide appropriate municipal services to its residents. Throughout the nineteenth century, new neighborhoods such as Sakakini, Daher, Bulaq, Maadi, Abbassia, Ismailia, and later Zamalek and Heliopolis, developed around and outside the old city center of Cairo.[53] Architecturally, the new neighborhoods' outlines followed European models. These new neighborhoods did not merely change the landscape of Egypt's metropoles, but also played a part in the struggle for social mobility.

As mentioned, until the middle of the nineteenth century the majority of the relatively small Jewish community resided in Cairo in a neighborhood called Harat al-Yahud.[54] The internal stratification of the community resembled that of the general Egyptian population: a majority of people with basic living conditions, and a small, rich circle of families (of Sephardic decent), who formed the elite. Economic status notwithstanding, the rich and poor of the community lived in close proximity. As the new neighborhoods grew, affluent families began leaving the Jewish neighborhood situated in the old nucleus of Cairo. They favored neighborhoods that had a majority of non-Muslim

53 On the city and the changes it underwent between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); Gudrun Kramer, 'Moving out of Place: Minorities in Middle Eastern Urban Societies, 1800-1914', in Peter Sluglett (ed.), *The Urban Social History of the Middle East, 1750-1950* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 217; Meital, *Jewish Sites*; Samir W. Raafat, *Maadi 1904-1962: Society and History in a Cairo Suburb* (Cairo: Palm Press, 1994).

54 There were two adjacent neighborhoods considered Jewish – one for the rabbinic Jews (*Harat al-Yahud al-Rabaniyyin*), and the other for the Karaites (*Harat al-Yahud al-Karayyin*).





foreign residents – or at least enjoyed a reputation as such. Yet, patterns of habitation did not break entirely, as the Jewish population tended to cluster together in specific areas and often even in specific buildings, following family members and friends.[55] The effect of these relocations on the appropriation and construction of a shared modern Jewish identity is evident in the life stories of interviewees.

Betty, whose family moved from the center of Cairo to Heliopolis – one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of the city at the time – reminisced:

> We did not connect [with the Jews of Harat al-Yahud]. We would go to Harat al-Yahud only to buy matzah bread and things for Passover. I remember I used to go with mother in this carriage, and she would sit in it and they would bring things to her.[56]

Aline said that 'it was clear that those who lived [in Harat al-Yahud] were poor'.[57] Leon, whose father immigrated to Egypt from Jerusalem, noted: 'No one [from the family] lived in Harat al-Yahud but rather in Gamra and Sakakini. Those were neighborhoods with many Jews'.[58] Lucie described her family as follows:

> There [in Egypt] I would say we were a medium-high socio-economic family [... and] my husband was from the high middle classes [...] Harat al-Yahud was an area of simple people, of miserable and destitute people. They had lowly professions, [they were] daily workers with no education and many children. [In Harat al-Yahud] women did not work, they had at least 4-5 children. Their schools, too, were simple.[59]

The archive's documents support the image of Harat al-Yahud as it is described by Lucie, Aline and Leon . Following the Jewish alms (Zdaka), a directive of

55 Meital, *Jewish Sites*, 37. This tendency of ethnic and religious groups to cluster together even in the new neighborhood was not unique to the Jewish community.

56 Betty, I30, Ibid, 6 (AT).

57 PA, G2, I25, 08.28.2014, Israel: 7 (AT).

58 Leon, I19, ibid, 2 (AT).

59 Lucie, I16, ibid, 9 (AT).

communal and private benevolence, the community gave a weekly allowance to twenty of its most destitute members. Lists of the beneficiaries of this allowance indicate that they did not reside in the new neighborhoods of Cairo. Although the documents offer only indirect testimony, they seem to strengthen the image of Harat al-Yahud as a poor neighborhood.[60]

In light of this common imagery of Harat al-Yahud as a downtrodden, neglected urban space as compared to Cairo's new upbeat neighborhoods, testimonies that present the former in a different manner are especially interesting. Cammy's family lived in Harat al-Yahud right until they were obliged to emigrate from Egypt in the early 1950s. While her older brother left the neighborhood, following his marriage, to a newer yet nearby location (in order to maintain his family connections), her parents chose to stay in the old neighborhood. It seems they opted to stay there not because they lacked financial resources, but because they felt their needs were being met there. Cammy explained:

> [My] family was [...] well established [...] We lived in Harat al-Yahud but were among the best [off financially]. We had a house, electricity, [running] water. My oldest brother, when he got married, moved not too far away, but outside the neighborhood.[61]

Celeste, whose family also remained in Harat al-Yahud, was from an affluent background. While describing her home, she said:

> When they started expanding Cairo, people began leaving the neighborhood [...] People lived in alleys upon alleys, but we had everything. There were schools, [...] medical clinics, a WIZO center,[62] a Goutte de Lait[63] center that provided care for mothers and infants from poor families. Everything was given in secret. The clinics were operated on donations and funds given by the

60 For example, YUA, Reel 4, D49.

61 PA, G1, I13, 08.22.2011, Israel: 1-2 (AT).

62 WIZO, the Women's International Zionist Organization, is a non-partisan international organization within the Zionist movement, dedicated to the advancement of women as well as other social goals.

63 Literally, 'a drop of milk'.





> wealthiest families [...] After 1946[64] [...] Jews began to leave the Hara to live in more modern suburbs in which Europeans also lived such as Abbasiya [and] Sakakini [...] People began working in new professions, opened shops, were in the stock exchange market and banks, and in the cotton trade. This required them to exit the [neighborhood].[65]

Celeste's description indicates that visibility played a significant role in the decision to move away from the old parts of the city, and that Celeste and her contemporaries were well aware of the social implications of such a move.

At the same time, Cammy and Celeste's excerpts indicate that despite an image of destitution, the inhabitants of Harat al-Yahud were not all poor or unable to pursue other options. Rather, it seems that residents of the neighborhood came from a broad range of economic backgrounds, and that at least some chose to remain even though they possessed the financial means to leave. This suggests that the choice of residence was at least partly based on social considerations rather than on strictly financial ones. Celeste and Cammy's depictions of Harat al-Yahud stand in contrast to its more widespread image, and thus reveal the tensions that influenced the decisions of the historical agents. Though the relocation did not necessarily entail a significant improvement in living conditions, the bad reputation of the old city neighborhoods and their association with a non-modern Muslim and Arab culture, prompted many to change their place of residence.

Like the use of language, the shift in patterns of urban dispersion can only be fully understood when perceived as one of the means by which contemporaries could appropriate and construct a modern identity, and enjoy the concrete, immediate benefits that this bestowed upon them. This also explains the interviewee's preoccupation with the image of the neighborhood in which they lived, whether they moved out of Harat al-Yahud, or continued to reside there.

As a new social order came into being and manifested itself in the reputation attached to different neighborhoods, gender-dependent sensitivities took shape as well. According to the interviewees' accounts, the urban public space was divided by gendered codes of respectability and visibility. There

64 Jews moved out of the neighborhood much earlier. Celeste's timeline is probably based on her age and ability to remember.

65 PA, G2, I1, 06.22.2011, Israel: 1-2 (AT).

were areas that were perceived as inappropriate for women, and others where women could only be present if accompanied by male chaperones, or as part of a group. One example of such spaces was the markets. As most of the interviewees' households enjoyed the services of in-house staffs, daily shopping became the responsibility of (often male) servants. Thus, respectable bourgeois women could avoid the bustling markets and interactions with lower-class Egyptians, as well as the use of Arabic in public. As Dalia recalled:

> There was always a manservant to do the heavy work [...] We had an ice box at the time with big blocks of ice and that meant that we had to shop every day, and that was the job of the manservant. Mother gave him a shopping list and he bought the stuff and came home with it. On Fridays father bought the fish.[66]

In only two cases, the interviewees told a story of a female family member who went out to the markets for food and supplies. One was a grandmother (a woman beyond the age of fertility) who went out for a special order of products for the Jewish High Holidays.[67] The other was a mother, who was accompanied by her daughter to the Jewish district to order specific Jewish food items. The mother and daughter remained seated in their carriage while the grocer came out to them and took their order.[68]

In contrast to the markets, which the interviewees depicted as a locus of Muslims of lower socio-economic status, the cinema, coffeehouses, promenade, and high street stores were perceived as venues of modern leisure activities befitting the stature of bourgeois women. Their presence there – either with other women, children or male chaperones (typically a father, older brother, husband or son) – was acceptable. In fact, as these places served as platforms in which one could meet potential husbands/wives and make their social appearances, the female presence was expected.

In their stories, the interviewees shared the names of many of those places. Not surprisingly, most carried English or French names. The known Café Americaine, Café Riche and Café Nord Pole; the cinema La Potiniere, the Miami Movie House and the Paramount Cinema; the pastry shop Loques,

66 J-lem, P35, I15, 10.21.1999, U.S.A.: 3. See also PA, G2, I30, ibid, 7.

67 PA, G2, I21, 08.24.2014, Israel: 2 (AT).

68 See Betty's excerpt mentioned on page 16 above. PA, G2, I30, ibid, 6 (AT).





and the high-end bakery shop and Café Groppi; the literary club Les Amities Francaise; the British Officers' Club, as well as many other (less prestigious) neighborhood tennis, sports and members clubs. These places were established as centers of European and modern culture, and hence came to be considered the loci of respectable leisure activities for young women, wives and mothers, as long as they did not attend them alone. Along the same lines, women who resided in the European neighborhoods were considered both wealthier as well as more modern than those living in the older neighborhoods, merely because of their place of residence and its socially constructed reputation.

In contrast to cafés, cinemas and restaurants, nightclubs were less acceptable places for women. Though this was considered a legitimate recreational venue for men – single and married – only a small number of the women mentioned in the interviewees' stories attended such places, and when they did, it was always in the company of fathers or husbands. Some interviewees described women who attended these places as 'fast women', a euphemism for women of loose moral standards.

The interviewees' life stories reveal ways in which the physical urban dispersion facilitated their efforts to appropriate modern identities and attain social mobility. They also reveal that the physical space was one in which gender boundaries were marked, manifested and replicated. It should be noted, however, that despite a collective declarative narrative, strict gender segregation was not always a fully materialized reality.[69] As my previous research indicates, men and women of the Jewish bourgeoisie – single and married – could and did interact without supervision at different places and settings throughout the period under discussion.[70] However, the discussion presented here demonstrates that in the process of appropriating gender dependent modern identities, the contemporaries made use of the physical urban space for the demarcation of both social status and gendered power relations.

### *3. Mixed Marriages, Socio-Economic Capital and Modernity*

Other than parenthood, the most important social and legal mechanism for the establishment of kin-relations was marriage. Marriage served (and still serves)

69 In part, the realization of a gendered spatial separation depended on economic means.

70 Maggid Alon, 'The Jewish Bourgeoisie of Egypt'; and Liat Maggid Alon, 'Women, Gender and Family in the Jewish Communities of Cairo and Alexandria, 1930-1956' (in Hebrew) (MA Thesis, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2012).

as a primary means for the production, reproduction, and protection of social and financial capital.[71] As such, it is interesting to examine the ways in which Egyptian Jewish society utilized marriage in the process of appropriating modernity and ensuring social mobility during the first half of the twentieth century. As the scope of this work does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of marriage and kin relations, the brief discussion that follows will focus on the phenomenon of mixed marriages between Jews and non-Jews in Egypt during this period.

As a group, the interviewees presented a cohesive narrative reflecting a taboo against mixed marriages. In their testimonials, they described it as a highly scrutinized and seemingly marginal phenomenon. However, these cohesive narrative stands in contradiction to the details the interviewees shared in their testimonials. These reveal that attitudes towards mixed marriages were not necessarily a result of clear religious boundaries, but rather of social hierarchies and colonial sensitivities.

As mentioned, twentieth-century Cairo and Alexandria were places of daily interaction between people from different ethno-religious backgrounds. During both World Wars, the presence of foreign armed forces and the growing numbers of women in the workforce made these interactions more common. Some developed into romantic relationships and even marriages. The interviewees' stories offer numerous examples of mixed marriages. Almost all of them shared details of family members, friends or acquaintances who married outside of the Jewish community.

In the vast majority of cases – like those of Lilianne's sister, Lillette's sister, Rachel's sister-in-law and Cammy's sister-in-law, or Collet's mother, to mention but a few – members of the Jewish community (often women) married European or American Christians. When reviewed together, the individual narratives indicate that the phenomenon was quite tolerated and at times even encouraged. However, the attitude towards mixed marriages depended on whether the non-Jewish spouses were considered foreign or local. Marriage with European and American Christians drew partners and dependent families closer to the circles regarded as modern and as providing fast-tracked upward mobility. On the other hand, marriage with an Egyptian, particularly a Muslim,

71 See e.g. Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in Rayna R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210.





was construed as a step down the social ladder. It is therefore not surprising that these marriages received more scrutiny and were met with more disapproval.[72] As Benois put it: '[mixed marriage] was not even considered [for members of my family]. For sure not [with] an Arab'.[73]

Mirei's comments reflect the way in which contemporaries used language as a marker of social status and an indicator of matrimonial potential:

> [...] the Syrian Jews [...] spoke Arabic at home. They also spoke French but [spoke] Arabic [at home]. [For] Syrian and Sephardi Jews [to intermarry] [...] it would have had to be very unusual. It was like marrying the 'Other'. The Syrian Jews were truly [Arab], their customs and their food was Arab.[74]

According to Mirei's family, the use of Arabic contributed to the evaluation of whether or not a man or a woman was suitable for marriage. Betty's story reflects the way in which contemporaries used place of residence as another marker of social status and an indicator of matrimonial potential:

> The Jews of Harat al-Yahud and us [...], we did not mix. We would go there only to get matzah bread [...] The Jews of the Hara spoke only Arabic and were not intellectuals so there was nothing connecting us.[75]

Exploring the relationship between gender and colonial policy in India, Durba Gosh argues that the colonial state placed the human body and sexuality under regulation. The colonial state took a clear stance against mixed marriages, because they challenged social order, national citizenship and the selective allocation of legal rights.[76] Along similar lines, Ann Laura Stoler argues that the

72 The community's reaction to Layla Murad's marriage to Anwar Wagdi (and her conversion to Islam) present an interesting example. Though she was a Karaite Jew, her actions provoked intense criticism and reprimands.

73 PA, G2, I22, ibid, 4-5 (AT).

74 PA, G2, I18, 08.05.2014, Israel: 5 (AT).

75 PA, G1, I30, ibid, 6 (AT).

76 Durba Gosh, 'Gender and Colonialism: Expansion or Marginalization?' *The Historical Journal* 47 (2004), 743, 745-6, 750. The issue of interracial marriages

separation of Europeans from native bodies was essential for the preservation of colonial hierarchy.[77] The power relations described by Gosh and Stoler can be applied to the examination of the Jewish Egyptian bourgeoisie's attitude towards mixed marriages. Marriage provided an important mechanism through which they could disassociate themselves from the native Muslim and/or the Arab body and become part of the European club of modernity.

Despite all of the above, the archive – though invested in documenting the personal status of the Jewish populace – remains almost completely silent regarding mixed marriages. With the exception of two short divorce certificates, in which the names of one of the parties implied that they were not Jewish, I found no direct reference to this phenomenon. Interestingly, in both certificates, the marriage was not contracted in Egypt.[78] Granted, the Grand Rabbinate was interested primarily in documenting Jewish (legal and other) proceedings and was thus less inclined to document non-Jewish marriages held outside its jurisdiction. Still, the resounding silence of the archive on this issue suggests a selection process, perhaps intentional, that disregarded this phenomenon.

## Conclusion

Addressing one of the most basic questions of social history, this article explored what being modern meant to ordinary people. Analyzing modernity as a lived experience, it examined the contemporaries' strategies as well as conscious and unconscious social manipulations, utilized in response to the great changes of the time. Focusing on specific socio-cultural practices, I identified the role played by members of Jewish-Egyptian society in the construction and appropriation of modernity during the first half of the twentieth century. I also pointed to the centrality of their new modern identity in providing both means for social mobility and a common denominator for the Jewish bourgeoisie, a community of immigrants emerging from the specific circumstances of Egypt.

was a concern in the southern states in the United States as late as the 1960s. Until that time, state law prohibited such mixed marriages.

77 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

78 YUA, R1, D182; R4, 152.





Language, residential dispersion and mixed marriage represent some of the social practices that allowed this Jewish community of immigrants to reinvent itself, to rise as a bourgeois stratum of intermediaries in Egyptian society, and to pave its way to modernity, and through it, to various forms of capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, this paper illuminates the ongoing social negotiations and renegotiations in which contemporaries were involved, the strategies they implemented individually and collectively for upward mobility, and the rewards modernity promised them.

Utilizing gender as a critical analytic category, this paper also draws attention to the fact that in this period of rapid change, gender dictated the boundaries for acceptable behavior and agency. The arena in which women could execute their agency differed from that of men, and the potential gains were gender-dependent.[79] The interviewees' life stories also reveal the central role played by the family as a buffer and a framework that allowed individual and group adaptation to rapid change.[80] While modernization theories depict the family as a social institution in decline, the testimonials point to its continuing vitality. In the context of Middle Eastern societies, the family is also often described as a 'traditional' player, halting 'progress' and restricting liberal processes. The accounts of the contemporaries, however, indicate that the guiding principle for family decisions was neither adherence to tradition nor modernity as such, but rather pragmatic considerations.[81]

Relying on contemporaries' testimonials as the primary historical source, this paper underlines the tremendous potential that oral sources have for the

79 At the same time, the limitations that gender imposed on the players' agency were far more complex, dynamic and fluid than that stereotypically associated with Middle Eastern, Muslim, Arab or *Mizrahi* societies. The scope of this paper does not allow for an in-depth analysis of gender power relations, but those interested can refer to my dissertation 'The Jewish Bourgeoisie of Egypt'; also see Maggid Alon, 'Women, Gender and Family'.

80 For further discussion of the new and ongoing roles which the familial networks fulfilled in situations of immigration, urbanization and transition to modernity, see Tamara K. Hareven, *Families, History and Social Change: Life-Course and Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); Tamara K. Hareven, 'The Family as Process: The Historical Study of the Family Cycle', *Journal of Social History* 7 (1974): 322-329.

81 More on the continued roles of the family see Maggid Alon, 'The Jewish Bourgeoisie of Egypt'.

study of modern Middle Eastern societies. For anyone researching Jewish Middle Eastern communities that no longer exist, and for whom the geo-political circumstances make archival documentation less readily available, oral testimonies are critical sources. The well-established methodology developed over the past decades for the use of these sources allows for their wider acceptance not only by anthropologists, sociologists or psychologists, but also by historians.

The life stories presented here provide details, memories and anecdotes through which an abundance of new knowledge is revealed. This knowledge simply cannot be obtained otherwise. As Portelli states, oral sources 'often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events [...] [and] cast new light on unexplored sides of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes'. They also compel researchers 'to rearrange our interpretations [...] [and] recognize the collective processes of symbolization and myth making'.[82] A comparison of the expanded knowledge transmitted through these sources with knowledge documented in archives reveals dramatic gaps between ideals, constructed images and social norms on the one hand, and the day-to-day social realities on the other. This knowledge also brings to light possible explanations of social behaviors that are less dichotomous and more multifaceted and leads to a better understanding of modernity.

By bringing oral testimonials and life stories to the forefront, this paper challenges the narrow perspective arising from a singular use of archival sources for historical research. As archives reflect priorities, interests, and biases of elites, they provide a limited picture of the past that is the functional equivalent of looking down a straw at a broad historical picture. The interviewees' life stories infuse the historical past with color, texture and vitality, revealing a much more complex reality that, in turn, challenges commonly accepted stereotypes, and presents a more comprehensive, and thus a more accurate, historical vista.

82 Portelli, 'Peculiarities', 99-100.