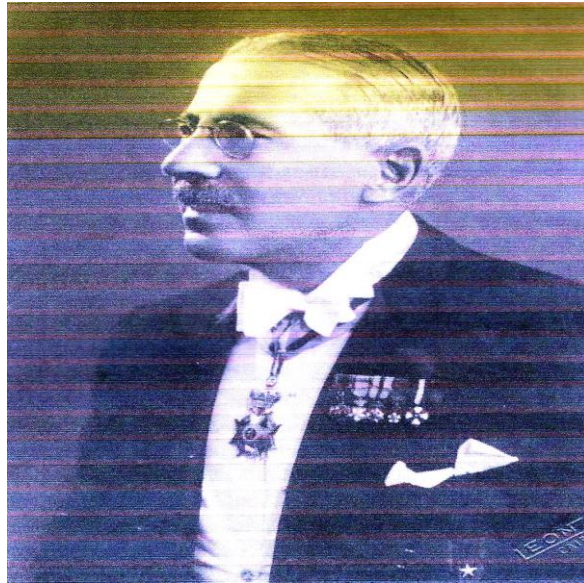


MEMORY AND HISTORY:
 "UNCLE ISAAC" AND/OR DR. ISACCO GIUSEPPE LEVI



Lecture given on the occasion of the inauguration of the Barda Chair for the Study of the History of Egyptian Jewry, University of Haifa, 14 October 2013

It has been said that "memory is often owned, [but] history is interpreted". In that sense, memory belongs individually to persons, or collectively to families and communities, but history is investigated, discovered, often re-discovered, by scholars who have not necessarily lived in the period or the environment of the object which they study. In short, researched and reconstructed.

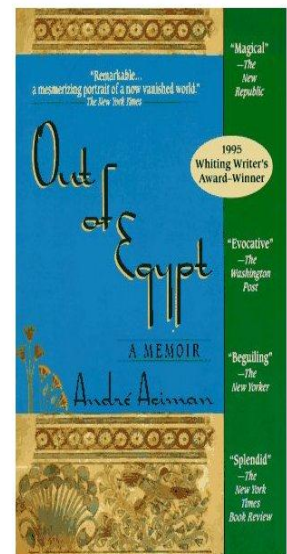
When it comes to the history of the Jews in Egypt – I would even say – their heyday in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, the historian faces not a few challenges: their dispersion after the 1960s; the lack, inaccessibility, or disappearance of relevant archives; often scattered and incomplete periodicals; but also idealized or biased memories and sometime nostalgia.

As a student of the Middle East, who has no personal connection to Egypt, I have, at times, tried my hand at the reconstruction of certain aspects of this history of Jews in Egypt: the history of the SG des Sucreries, an initially Jewish company – folded within the biography of

its director Henri Naus, a Belgian catholic, which I called *retrieved* ; the story of the Wadi Kom Ombo society, the largest land development company, whose shareholders were by and large Jewish, which I called *excavated*; and the "*saga*", as I called it, of the Orosdi-Backs, two intermarried Hungarian-Jewish families who founded a chain of department stores all-over the Middle East , of which the over 80 Omar Effendi branches in Egypt still remain. By the way, for those who have read my earlier work, - after having been privatized and sold to Saudis in 2006, the Arab Spring has reverted the company to Egyptian hands.

For this festive occasion of the inauguration of a new chair, I have chosen to talk about one prominent Jewish figure, in the context of his time, the first half of the twentieth century: About the relocation of his family from Istanbul to Cairo and Alexandria; about his achievements, and his tragic departure, and his passing away in Nice. It is more than just one biography, because it encompasses the public sphere, and can therefore be relevant for the understanding of a wider society and an era.

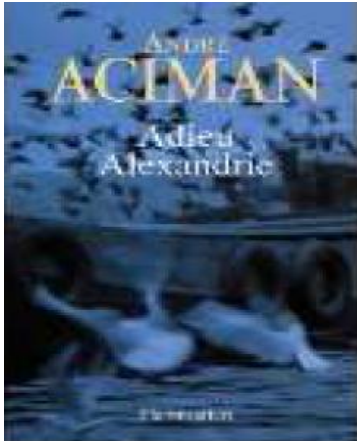
The man I am going to speak about is - I suppose - familiar to some of you as "Uncle Isaac", one of the heroes in André Aciman's *Out of Egypt*, a memoir published in 1994 and since translated into many languages. In Hebrew it is entitled *Layla Aharon be-Alexandria*. André Aciman is distinguished professor of literary theory at CUNY (his name should be pronounced *aciman* in Turkish (dj), but *asiman* had become accepted long ago. It would have been worthy to have him here for this occasion, but in an email to me, he apologized with the excuse that his Hebrew is not adequate. Not knowing that we speak English today.



Indeed, *Out of Egypt*, is one of the most lovable memoirs written by former Jews of Egypt over the past years, even though the story of a whole family, being forced to leave Egypt, is most tragic. It profoundly touches, what I believe to have been the atmosphere of the late 1950s.

The literature of reminiscences by Jews of Egypt has grown impressively over the past decades, and it has become a literary genre unto itself,

varying from nostalgic romance to meticulous auto- biography. Since historiography, of late, has taken a so-called literary turn, personal and collective memories have gained a recognized value.



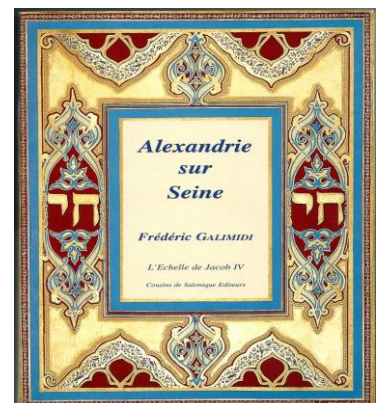
Aciman's book, however, caused a row in 1996. My good friend - I think I may even say our good friend -, Samir Raafat, who has written extensively and admiringly on Jews in Egypt, in the *Egyptian Gazette* and later in the *Egyptian Mail*, has accused Aciman of plagiarism and distortion. The dispute focused on the identity of the dominant figure of the book, Uncle Vili, - supposedly a British spy, but posing as a fascist protagonist. In the end, it turned out that Uncle Vili was Maurice George

Levi and had settled in England. Samir Raafat was particularly incensed because Aciman had received a \$30,000 award for non-fiction. Writing, which ought to have meticulous footnotes, which the book lacks. I, for one, had never read that book as history in the positivist vein, but as the sort of family narrative, in which truth and imagination often intertwine, in between non-fiction and some fiction.

For several years I had left it at that, I had considered Uncle Vili and Uncle Isaac as real but literary, somewhat, romanticized heroes, altercating between the tragic and the amusing. Relevant here is that in the Alexandrian, rather than Cairene, family, this Uncle Isaac, stands out as "the most westernized of the family", erudite, well-connected, a bit arrogant and at times cynical.

Without the internet, I would probably never have discovered that Uncle Isaac was none other than Dr. Isaac Levi, the man I had encountered in my earlier study of Henri Naus, the Belgian industrialist. Naus established in 1922 the Federation of Industries, and soon after Levi became the secretary-general of that organization, about which later.

Thus, I discovered another commendable memoir, a more factual autobiography , that of the late Frederic Galimidi, which delivered to me the real identity of Uncle Isaac. Galimidi's book, *Alexandria on the Seine* (a pun on



Khedive Isma`il's "Paris on the Nile") describes his uncle Isaac, with admiration, as the man who put him on the track of a lawyer's career, which is today continued by his son and daughter in Paris. I would have been honored to welcome Mrs. Galimidi here this evening, to reciprocate her family's friendliness to me in Paris, recently, but to my regret it did not work out.

Here we reach an inversion point between memory and history. Uncle Isaac is not less real than Dr. Isaac Levy. I did not mean to imply Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, certainly not a negative and a positive side, or two different personalities, but the question is how we can arrive from Aciman's funny, a bit sarcastic uncle, and Galimidi's a bit pedantic uncle, - one and the same person-, at Dr. Isaac Levi 's public stature, and his role in Egyptian society. Let us see what a historian can know about him.

History

Isacco Giuseppe Levi was born in Istanbul in 1878, in the ancient Italian-Jewish community. His father was a cloth supplier to the Ottoman army. He was the second child among nine brothers and sisters. After going through local Italian schools, he came to Napoli to pursue higher studies, and eventually obtained a doctorate in law from the venerable Federico Secondo University, and another degree in languages from the equally prestigious l'Orientale, with Greek as a major. In 1903, he arrived in Egypt, where his parents and siblings moved somewhat later, most of them settling in Alexandria. As we know, at the time, conditions in Egypt worked as a magnet on many who aspired at new economic opportunities or more freedom. At first, Isaac Levi worked as an advocate in the Mixed Tribunals, then at the Italian Consulate, and soon entered the Statistical Service.

I am arguing that the Italian connection was arguably as important as the Jewish one; it runs through the entire biography. Isaac Levi's acquaintance with Prince Fuad must have been an asset; we remember that the future Sultan and King, had spent part of his childhood in Naples, and subsequently also underwent military training in Turin. Whatever the case, André Aciman depicts Isaac's relatives, as poking fun at his connections with the former King and his entourage, - so sorely lacking at the critical moment in 1956 when the then King Faruq was of no help any

more. As against the latter's poor behavior, still at a young age, Levi is quoted by Galimidi saying: "Fouad, ça etait un roi!".

Let us now consider Dr. Isaac Levi's career under four headings:

(1) Statistics

In 1905 Levi joined the Department of Statistics (then still part of the Ministry of Finance), ultimately leaving as Director-General in 1923. Our colleagues, Roger Owen at Harvard and Timothy Mitchell at Columbia, have, of late, analyzed, what is called today, the "production of statistics" and the sequence of "statistical regimes" in Egypt. Each "regime" with its own instruments and goals (initially limited to demography, education, disease, public debt etc.). According to Owen, a third stage began in 1905, when Lord Cromer reinstated the statistical service with emphasis on colonial interests, - read land, cotton, and trade. I am not sure, however, that with Isaac Levi, it did not become a fourth stage, as required by the Egyptian nation-state.

Here was an Italian connection too. With Colucci Bey and Frederico d'Amici Bey as foreign predecessors in the 19th century, another Italian, Giuseppe Randone, who had conducted the census of 1882, was brought in in 1905 as the new director. He hired Levi. We do not know whether statistics had been part of Isaac Levi's legal studies – economy probably did - , but it might well have been the case. Indeed, shortly before Alberto Errera, a lawyer by training, had taught statistics in Naples. At the time, Italians were prominent in the field, from Luigi Bodio to Corrado Gini (of the coefficient) - whatever their divergent political orientations.

Randone embarked on a policy of professionalization of the service, soon enhanced by Levi who succeeded him as the "vivid animator", in the words of the French scholar François Ireton. This is also clear from an account which Isaac Levi published in 1925 after his retirement. The production of statistics gradually embraced more and more branches of government, and added new fields. And graphs as well. The *Annuaire Statistique* (of 1909) began to appear in 1910, and enjoyed immediate interest, also from

abroad. Statistics now became national, as well as public, and available not only in French but also in Arabic.

True, reliable statistics always had meaning for government. Galimidi relates that when a beduin revolt broke out, the King consulted Levi, who was able to supply him with a realistic estimate of the tribes involved, - obviously to suppress it. Asked to mention a wish for reward, Levi, allegedly, answered the King merely with: *Salamtak, ya galalat al-Malik !* Your well-being, Majesty !

By the way, Levi did get ample honors in his lifetime, honorary memberships of international professional organizations, and foreign decorations. Yet, he never became bey or pasha –possibly lacking the resources - and always remained doctor Levi.

(2) The Société d'Economie Politique, de Législation et de Statistique

In 1909, Isaac Levi had become co-founder of the Société d'Economie Politique, de Législation et de Statistique, - to my mind, the most important of a number of such scientific societies.



It was to explore problems of "national life". "Political economy" then meant what we call today simply "economy". Over time, the association's ascription went through Khedivial, Sultanic and Royal, and

finally became Egyptian. Prince Fuad, the later King, was personally involved. Later it entered an imposing building on today's Ramsis street which still bears the name in French! With some 200 members in the beginning, and 600 in the 1940s, lawyers, bankers, entrepreneurs, high civil servants, etc., it conducted weekly lectures and deliberations. In short, a meeting ground for the Egyptian intelligentsia and the foreign residential elite. Most of the latter category considered Egypt as their so-called "patrie d'adoption". Not that many Jews there, yet we do find the

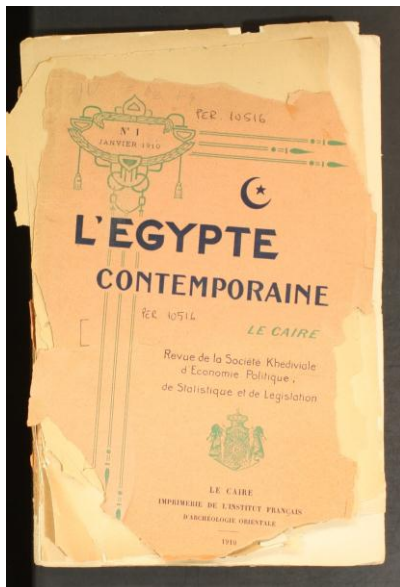
names of Adda, Aghion, Cattau, Cohen, Green, Jabes, Morporgo, Mortera, Mosseri, Nahmias, Najar and Perez, mostly the lawyers of these families. From its inception, Dr. Isaac Levi prominently served as the society's secretary.

The association initiated the publication of the journal *l'Egypte Contemporaine* (then still in French). All three aspects, economy, statistics and legislation were amply covered, reason why even today, it can be considered as an eminent source for the study of the socio-economic discourse of the pre-Revolutionary period. That is forgetting about domestic party politics or other sensitive issues which were forbidden. No Muslim Brothers for instance.

The association deserves more attention than I can give to it here. For lack of a Parliament, at first, - or an effective and truly representative one, later, - one might consider it as the think-tank of the period. Most current historiographers ignore it as a colonialist or reactionary body, closely allied with the King or with highly controversial politicians such as Isma`il Sidqi. And too many foreigners. However, it would be useful to systematically compare the lectures and the articles to the actual legislation enacted in the period of the Monarchy (as Malak Badrāwi recently has done specifically for budget debates, but disregarding *l'Egypte Contemporaine*).

This pertains also to the nearly forty learned articles which Dr. Isaac Levi published over the years in *l'Egypte Contemporaine* and a few other leading journals. All in French, a few in Italian, - I never found anything written in Arabic. It is in these articles, I propose, that his main contribution must be sought. This apart from the statistical tables on cotton prices, foreign trade, maritime movement and exchange rates, which he regularly placed in the journal. For the first time there was also serious discussion on what national statistics should be, and should be for.

His first major article dealt with the arbitrary price gaps at food markets in Cairo, and between cities and villages, to which end,



quite remarkably, he went to collect data on the spot. He wrote that first article with Germain Martin, a French economic historian who had been guest professor at the new Egyptian University (later minister, even under Vichy). Their recommendation was to publish regular price surveys. In addition, Levi was the pioneer of a systematic discussion of Egypt's national income, read its

GNP, which he estimated significantly higher, more optimistic, than the British had done apparently to show its unpreparedness for independence. This was shortly after 1922, Egypt's first spurious independence. Economic planning and efficiency were close to his heart, he consistently pleaded for industrialization and for a protective tariff (which indeed came in 1930). One finds articles on the need to encourage tourism, commercial education, and consumer cooperatives. In short, new fields of discourse on the national economy, all of which still need a closer look to determine what their impact could have been on the longer run.

For a short period (1919-1921) Isaac Levi taught "political economy" at the - then Sultanic- Ecole de Droit. In 1922, moreover, he served as a member of the mixed Conseil Supérieur Economique (the establishment of which he himself had urged), to which we may add that, in 1938, he would become a member of the committee which studied fiscal reform following the formal abolition of the Capitulations in Montreux.

(3) Federation of Industries

In 1925, aged 47, Dr. Isaac Levi, left the Statistical Service for a new position. He became Secretary-General of the Association (thereafter Federation) of Egyptian Industries, which had been founded in 1922 by the Belgian industrialist Henri Naus Bey together with a few other foreign-residential entrepreneurs. He would remain in that post for another twenty eight years. The

Federation had initially been an organization of mainly foreign-residential industrialists (with few Egyptians), but in the following decades it turned into the main organization of indigenous Egyptian entrepreneurs. Here too, Levi was instrumental in setting up a journal called *l'Egypte Industrielle*. Unfortunately, most articles in that periodical (both editorials and informative items) are not signed, so we can only assume that Levi himself contributed not a few of these.

The Federation of Industries has not been described kindly by historians, be it Egyptians, or be it most western academics. Jacques Berque, Marius Deeb, Joel Beinin & Zachary Lockman. All considered it as an instrument against labor strikes, against workers' demands, against legislation for their benefit (e.g. the law to combat illiteracy which obliged employers). *l'Egypte Industrielle* even showed pro-Mussolini tendencies, - albeit in the 1920s, rather than later, as far as I could ascertain. I tend to agree to some of their criticisms, even though the Federation was never powerful enough to thwart progress. It could not have been different as an employers' union. But here I prefer to follow the more positive approach of Princeton's Robert Tignor. From the late 1920s, the Federation saw its membership increase and quite soon there was an indigenous Egyptian majority. Not many of them were Jews, but we know that Levi himself held directorships of several small industrial enterprises which I know very little about, e.g. Kahira Textiles, Minoteries et Silex, and Neon Lights. Main thing: The Federation definitely worked to promote industrialization. Levi also played an instrumental role in the organization of some of the large agricultural and industrial exhibitions in Cairo of that era.

(4) Jewish activities

We do not know much about his activities in other public societies and organizations, including several in the Italian sphere mentioned by our colleague Marta Petricioli. Here, however, we propose to go back to the Jewish part of the biography. Though less pronounced

than with regard to his public career, the *Annuaire des Juifs d'Egypte* which appeared a few times in the early 1940s, nevertheless mentions his name as a board member of several Jewish charities, e.g. Société de Bienfaisance Israelite du Caire, l'Oeuvre de la Goutte de Lait, l'Oeuvre d'Apprentissage Salomon Cicurel, as well as les Amis du Collège Rabbanique de Rhodes – allegedly a pro-Mussolini institution-, and the Friends of the Hebrew University. A propos, in this connection, a few years ago I had access to the records of the latter organization, and discovered its substantive financial contributions; in Alexandria, it was headed by Vera Nadler, no other than the later mother-in-law of Butrus Butrus-Ghali.

Galimidi is of the opinion that Levi, and Grand Rabbi Haim Nahum effendi, were instrumental in exempting Jews from war time restrictions against the other non-Jewish Italian and German nationals. But, more importantly, Isaac Levi also served on the board of the Jewish Community of Cairo. Hence, when in November 1946, its presidency went over from Rene Cattai to Salvator Cicurel – a transition seen by Gudrun Kraemer, in her well-known book, as a sign of democratization and allowing more leeway for upper-middle class elements, Isaac Levi became its vice-president.

The End

Soon after the Revolution of 1952, when he was already on the verge of retirement from the Federation on Industries, Isaac Levi was ousted from his position of Secretary-General. In addition, the assassination of one of the new executives by a servant who had been loyal to Levi, brought him in disrepute. Yet in the late 1950s he was still mentioned with all his titles in the annual elite directory, the *Mondain Egyptien et du Proche Orient*. By then, however, he had already safely settled in Nice. After all, at some point, he had obtained French nationality, even though one historian, Anthony Gorman, considered him to be a "quintessential *mutamassir*", meaning Egyptianized. And behold, against the advice of relatives and friends, it would seem that he felt secure enough to go back to Egypt in order to settle his affairs there. Here, the versions of Aciman and

Galimidi again partly overlap and partly diverge, but the fact is that he was arrested and harshly interrogated on false grounds. And finally released. In short, - he returned to Nice, a broken man, in a wheelchair, and died a few months later in 1961.

Amazingly, or not so amazing perhaps, I could, thus far, find only one single obituary in the Egyptian media, - by an Italian entomologist Anastase Alfieri, and published in 1963 in the *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Egypte*. Not a word in *l'Egypte Contemporaine* or in *l'Egypte Industrielle*, which had been his "own" journals.

In conclusion:

There is more than memories alone. The salient point is that all institutions which I have talked about, continue to exist, but without the Jews who had been actively involved: Much of the routine of the statistical service (after Levi led by the Englishman James Craig, who was assassinated on Black Saturday of 1952), carried over into CAPMAS of the Nasirist era. The Egyptian Society for Political Economy still occupies its majestic building, and though it lost its former role, it still holds occasional meetings. *L'Egypte Contemporaine*, now called *Misr al-Mu`asira*, appears fully in Arabic (with an English abstract). The Federation of Industries, Ittihad al-Sina`at al-Misriyya, once located in the Immobilia tower, has moved to a modern building, is maybe not that kicking but it is nevertheless alive. The quarterly *Misr al-Sina`iyya* too still appears. Typically, its Golden Jubilee Book of 1972, as so many comparable Egyptian memorial accounts, passes over the pre-1952 era in two scant pages, ignoring Naus and Levi. This is a problem of history-writing in Egypt.

Both memory and historical research have their meaning. They must work together, memories –written, printed, photographed, or orally transmitted –, to be integrated with current historiographical sources, trends and insights. This is not easy, because Egypt after all is Egypt, and Jews are Jews. But here, I would think, lays the challenge for the new Barda Chair: not only to narrate the heritage, but to understand its context and its meaning.