

The Jewish Diaspora after 1945

The Jewish Diaspora after 1945:

*A Study of Jewish
Communities in the Middle East
and North Africa*

Edited by

S. Behnaz Hosseini

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Letters: Perspectives for the 21st Century (Rowman and Littlefield), and “Painting for Fools: Foucault and Klossowski,” forthcoming in *Theory, Culture & Society*.

Lior Sternfeld is Assistant Professor of History and Jewish Studies at Pennsylvania State University, specializing in the histories of the Middle East and the Muslim World. A social historian of the modern Middle East, his particular interests are in the Jewish people and other minorities of the region. His first book, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran* (Stanford University Press 2018) examines—against the backdrop of Iranian nationalism, Zionism, and constitutionalism—the development and integration of Jewish communities in Iran into the nation-building projects of the last century. He is currently working on two book projects: “The Origins of Third Worldism in the Middle East” and a new study of the Iranian–Jewish Diaspora in the USA and Israel. He teaches classes on the modern Middle East, Iran, Jewish histories of the region, and Israel–Palestine-related issues.

Wolfgang Treitler is Professor of Theological Research at the Catholic Faculty of the University of Vienna. He studied theology from 1980 to 1985 in St. Pölten and Vienna (Austria) and has a PhD in “Basic Theological Research.” He was appointed Professor in 1998 and taught Judaic Studies from 2007 to 2013 at the University of Vienna. Dr Treitler lectures at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Bar Ilan University in Tel Aviv, and at different universities in Germany. His main research fields are: Jewish literature of the Shoa and Christian responsibility in terms of the mass extermination of Jews in Europe; development of an understanding of Jesus as Messiah that will negate any anti-Jewish inclinations and tendencies of theological and ecclesiastical Christology; sexual abuse of minors as a fundamental crisis and critique of ecclesiastical ethics and faith.

Emanuela Trevisan Semi is Professor of Modern Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ca’ Foscari University in Venice and was Coordinator of the European MA Erasmus Mundus in Crossing the Mediterranean towards Investment and Integration (MIM). She has published many books and articles about contemporary Jews, Karaites, Ethiopian Jews, Moroccan Jews, Judaizing movements, and memory and diaspora issues. In recent years she has conducted research on the contemporary life writing of Morocco Jews She has published, among others: *Les caraites un autre judaïsme* (2013), (with Tudor Parfitt) *Judaizing movements* (2002), *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia* (2007; with Hanan Sekkat Hatimi)

“Mémoire et représentation des juifs au Maroc: les voisins absents de Meknès” (2011; with Dario Miccoli, Tudor Parfitt) *Memory and ethnicity, Ethnic museums in Israel and Diaspora* (2013), *Tre scrittori mizrahi a Venezia* (2015), *Conversioni all’ebraismo* (2016), *Taamrat Emmanuel: An Ethiopian Jewish intellectual, between colonized and colonizers* (2018).

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This volume honors the memory of Esther Webman who gave a talk at the conference, but was unable to complete a paper due to her sudden death.

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S. Behnaz Hosseini

FOREWORD

LIOR B. STERNFELD

The study of the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has gained traction in the past two decades. A myriad of publications of the highest quality have created a historiographical nexus at which Middle Eastern and Jewish Studies have converged, supported by other studies, for example, on ethnicity, migration, culture, and gender and sexuality. This historiographical shift is allowing us to examine the relationships between Jewish communities in contexts that, until recently, had remained untouched.

The present volume takes us on a journey to the Middle East, to remote destinations in 20th century Jewish experience. Taking the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel as a focal point, the book analyzes the transformational period experienced by Jews across the region, both in the runup to this momentous event and in its aftermath. We read of communities that ceased to exist directly after 1948, such as those of Iraq. We are also able to imagine the place of Jewish heritage in contemporary affairs at a global scale, among others, in Turkey, in Cold- and post-Cold-War relations, and among diaspora communities in the West. The chapters in this volume provide an interesting take on the relationship between the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the majority non-Jewish society.

The question of heritage is addressed in a number of studies. Revisiting the prominent narratives of migration is useful not only in terms of evaluating the role of 1948, but also in positioning the migration vis-à-vis old narratives and the stories of the former homeland. For example, what can the migration narratives of Moroccan Jews teach us about the place of Jews in the collective memory of Morocco or about construction of the “Moroccan past” in Jewish and non-Jewish Moroccan diasporas in the United States and Europe? Religion can play its part in varying ways too, as in the vivid description of a group of Muslim pilgrims from Libya encountering Maghrebi Jews in Israel and creating a new cultural-religious sphere.

Interestingly, the Jewish culture that made the rounds of the Middle East after 1948 seems to go beyond the culture or thinking created by Middle Eastern Jews. It is beyond intriguing to consider the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber and his perspectives of Zionism being debated among Iranian intellectuals in post-revolutionary Iran, given the perception commonly held in the Islamic Republic of the place of Jews and Judaism.

The volume also looks at how Jews are represented in various instances. The reader can compare the golden age of the Jews in Egypt, thought to be one of the oldest Jewish communities in the Middle East, with the emotions surrounding their post-World War II expulsion and their feelings of inferiority to the European Jews settling in Israel. Aharon Appelfeld's literature and its reading can supplement understanding of the post-holocaust Jewish experience.

Lastly, the volume offers a look at the place occupied by Jews of the region in the public discourse as they strove to establish their own society. The absence of Jews has been a topic at the center of self-reflection by Middle Eastern societies over the past two decades. It is appropriate and very useful to reflect on the notion of inclusiveness when we are evaluating the past, present, and future of these societies, their relations with the minorities that still live there, their relations with the Jewish communities that have left, and the relations with Israel, in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Lior B. Sternfeld

INTRODUCTION AND VOLUME OVERVIEW

BIRGIT AMMANN

Jewish communities have been an integral part of the Arab world, Turkey, and Iran for millennia. Until the period ending in 1945, which is the period covered by this book, the Jewish population in those countries numbered approximately one million. Since the mass exodus of Jews, especially from Arab countries, many countries are no longer home to any Jews, while others still house a very small part of their former population. According to surveys, the largest Jewish communities today are to be found in Turkey (less than 17,000), Iran (less than 10,000), Morocco (2,000), and Tunisia (1,000).

Jews came from different traditions such as Sephardic, Eastern, Ashkenazi, and Karaite. Jews conversed in the languages of their home countries, for example, Arabic, Turkish, and Farsi, as well as in specific Jewish variations of those languages. They also used different vernaculars such as Aramaic and Ladino.

The world has been fascinated by the ten lost tribes of Israel for hundreds of years. There is a massive body of literature, myth, and legend surrounding the topic to this day. Theories have sometimes been astounding, with claims of descent from the lost tribes having been proposed in relation to a wide range of groups, almost all of them in the Middle East and North Africa.

In reality, Jewish communities in Muslim majority countries fared better overall than in Christian majority ones, but there have also been myths surrounding Jews' possession of equal rights in Muslim settings. One possible reason for the comparatively easier situation in Muslim than in Christian countries is the lack of implication that the Jews were responsible for the death of a prophet (Jesus Christ). Apart from that—unlike Christianity—Islam does not consider itself as the renewed and improved successor religion of Judaism. Moreover, Jews were not perceived historically as "foreign bodies" in the Muslim world, as was the case in Europe. In Europe, the exclusive designation of Jews as moneylenders led to resentment, which was often channeled into violent outbursts against

them. There were no professional restrictions on Jews in the Muslim world, and all professions were open to them.

Nevertheless, Jews as a religious and social minority faced persecution, humiliation, and arbitrariness, that eventually led to mass expulsion and emigration, ending the existence of a vital part of nearly all societies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This reduced social diversity forever and changed them into more uniform and therefore less flexible societies.

The largest and most affluent Jewish community in the Middle East was the Iraqi Jewry, whose history goes back almost 2,800 years. As Babylonian Judaism, Iraqi Judaism was the oldest and most significant Jewish community in the world in terms of religious history.

It had its historical roots in two major waves of deportations at the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and there are thus two entirely different stories in Iraq: the story of the Arab Jews and the story of the Kurdish Jews. The latter—probably due to their rural isolation, lack of formal education and influence—have been largely and unfairly neglected by historians and other researchers.

However, well-educated Iraqi Arab Jews played an important role in civic life, and some icons of Iraqi society were Jewish. Jews were strong in trade, money-changing businesses, and various banking activities. They were important in developing the judicial and postal systems. At the time of the monarchy, most professional musicians in Bagdad were Jewish. Living a traditional religious life with an estimated 60 synagogues in Bagdad alone, Jews were fully integrated into Iraqi society. They felt that they were Jews by religion and Arabs by nationality, and strongly identified with the country. The overall atmosphere was one of coexistence, friendship, and partnership. They were part of the elite and found themselves at the center of Iraq's political and intellectual life. They viewed themselves as helping to shape the character of Iraqi society and state. In 1932 Iraq achieved full independence after the British mandate ended. In 1933 the Nazis came to power in Germany, and their influence was soon to become strong in Iraq. The new King Ghazi was a fervent admirer of the Nazi ideology. Iraqi nationalists viewed Nazi ideology as coinciding with their anti-British and anti-Jewish views. At the same time, the British represented a certain protection for the Jews. The German ambassador Fritz Grobba was a highly popular figure in governmental circles at the time. He had Hitler's *Mein Kampf* translated into Arabic and serialized in a newspaper. His anti-Semitic

propaganda was partly responsible for the Farhud pogrom of 1941, the brutality and massiveness of which were unpredicted and came as a total shock—and not only to the Jews.

Jewish history in neighboring Iran and the Caucasus region is only slightly younger. Jews have been living there since the late 6th century BC. There was an estimated number of around 100,000 after World War I and still 85,000 just before the Islamic Revolution in 1978. As in most countries of the Middle East, the Jews predominantly lived in an urban environment and those who remain still do. After their cultural and social heydays in the early periods, they gradually became an impoverished and degraded minority with just a few exceptions. They started to obtain better opportunities for economic and social mobility from the 1920s onwards. Modernizing reforms implemented by the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran greatly improved their situation. Less than two decades later, Nazism started infiltrating society and became a major threat to the Jews, who made up about 2% of the people at the time. They finally left by the tens of thousands when Israel became a state. Nevertheless, there is quite a profound sense of national identity and a strong sense of belonging to Iran among the Jews. It is linked to collective and individual memories and to the symbols and myths of religion connected to their region. This is despite the official suspicion of Jews due to the government's intense hostility toward the State of Israel. Occasional cases of detention and even executions of prominent Jews are a constant warning and lead to a pervasive feeling of insecurity among the communities. For whatever reason, Iran has adopted a policy of keeping Jews in the country. Views are split over the condition of Jews in Iran. In any case, the price for keeping the status of the Jewish community as a whole seems to be a great deal of silence.

Turkey, another exception among Muslim majority countries is—according to a generous estimate—home to around 17,000 Jews, most of them living in Istanbul. There have been Jewish communities in the far eastern part of Anatolia since antiquity. Their story is closely connected to the early communities of Iran and Iraq. They belong to the group of Kurdish Jews who no longer live in any of the areas adjacent to one another, but are separated by national borders. The main bulk of Jews in Turkey have their roots in the Spanish and Portuguese Jews expelled from Spain by the Catholic Monarchs' Edict of Expulsion in the late 15th century. Tens of thousands of the expelled were welcomed into the Ottoman Empire, including regions now outside of Turkey. The Jewish community that established itself was a valuable asset to the Ottoman Empire in economic, cultural, and academic terms. Their descendants are referred to as Sephardi

Jews. At times, Jews made up 10% of Istanbul's population; just prior to World War I there were an estimated 130,000 Jews in Turkey. The history of the Jews in Turkey contains an interesting detail, as it was the only Muslim majority country to have sheltered persecuted Jews from Europe during the Nazi regime. These comprised a small group of around 50 academics, most of them Jews or people declared Jewish by the Nazis. They taught at Istanbul University as emigrants between 1933 and 1945. There are continued reports of widespread antisemitism in Turkey, at times intensified by events in Israel, such as the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel by the U.S. Trump administration in 2017. Trying to keep the Jewish community inside the country and to maintain a positive image concerning the Jews (even though their numbers are rapidly dwindling and the public does not notice this) seems to be part of the concept of neo-Ottomanism, including pride in the fact that the Ottoman Empire once saved Jews expelled from Spain.

In the Maghreb region of North Africa and in Egypt, established Jewish communities existed well before the arrival of the Sephardi Jews. They possibly date back to Phoenician Carthage; and they prospered under the dominion of the Roman Empire. Maghrebi Jews later mixed with the newcomers from Spain and eventually embraced Sephardi Jewish identity in most cases.

In Egypt, Jewish communities expanded and thrived with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Promising trading prospects led to the immigration of Jews from all over the Ottoman Empire as well as Italy and Greece. The Ashkenazi, Eastern European Jews, only came as a reaction to late 19th century pogroms. At the turn of the century, around 25,000 Jews lived in Egypt, peaking at about 70,000 in the mid-1940s. Now the Jewish community in Egypt is practically extinct, as it is in Iraq. Jews left the country in three major successive waves in 1948, 1956, and 1967.

Morocco, with over 250,000 souls at its peak in the 1940s, was once the country with the largest number of Jews in the history of the Middle East and North Africa. Jews in Morocco had a special relationship with the indigenous Berber groups, originally actually speaking their language. They emigrated in two major waves: the first in reaction to the Spanish Inquisition and the second when being expelled from Spain and Portugal by the Catholic Monarchs. Periods of Spanish, Portuguese, and, most of all French, occupation of Morocco more or less destroyed the traditional ways of balancing relations and the patterns of coexistence between Jews and

Muslims. They were regulated by the principle of *dhimmi* which granted protection to non-Muslims living under Muslim rulers. On the other hand, the French protectorate and, following its lead, metropolitan Jewish organizations such as the school, the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, would grant a certain, though limited, degree of emancipation to the Jews. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948, together with the successful anti-colonial movements in North Africa, were major issues driving Jews out of the country. The political crises in the 1960s and 1970s meant the end to many Jewish communities. Jews had been living all over the country from very early on; now internal migration to the big cities and finally out of the country developed rapidly and in parts became desperate.

Today the Moroccan government promotes the remembrance of Jewish history and the preservation of Jewish sites across the country. This might be a strategy to promote tourism, attracting especially Israeli, North American, and German tourists, but is clearly backed by sizeable parts of society, who are volunteering to guard Jewish sites. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the tiny communities in Morocco and also in Tunisia have a future.

Libya is another country with no Jews left since the beginning of the millennium. The Jewish community was comparatively small, with numbers fluctuating around 20,000 people. Libyan Jews enjoyed some appreciation from the Italian colonial powers for the first 25 years after Libya was occupied (1911) and experienced a period of prosperity and progress. Severe discrimination and persecution set in with Italy's alliance with Nazi Germany in the 1930s. The Jewish population was subject to anti-Semitic laws; people were imprisoned, deported, and murdered. There was no overall improvement in the aftermath of the war or under the Gaddafi regime. Mass emigration from Libya to Israel took place between 1949 and 1951. As observed in other Muslim majority countries, there are still quite a few memories of positive interaction especially in certain niches of society.

Islamic law theoretically protects Jews as well as Christians as People of the Book. The traditional concept of *dhimma* provided for freedom of belief and protection. At the same time series of measures, regulations, and obligations reflected the subordination and inferior status of the dhimmis, the protected people after the Islamic conquest in the 7th century. As in the whole region, there were Jewish subjects of high rank and influence who remained untouched, and at the same time pogroms, property confiscations, forced

conversions, and abductions of women and children. The 19th century saw an irreversible deterioration in the Jews' living conditions. Anti-Jewish violence increased rapidly, incidents of persecution, including executions on arbitrary charges, rose in number, and accusations of ritual murder following the European example spread in the Ottoman Empire. Jewish life is nearly gone in the region, but there is a growing sense of a specific identity not only among the descendants of its formerly so significant communities. Known as Mizrahi Jews, they live in various countries and in Israel currently constitute more than half the total population and play an increasing role in contemporary Israeli politics and culture. This is accompanied by a rising scholarly interest in their unique legacy and circumstances of life across a variety of periods in time. A tradition of Jewish Studies has been developing in various Arab and Muslim majority countries, even though it is still largely separate from Western scholarship.

This book shares contributions from a conference that took a deeper look at different Jewish communities after World War II. What distinguishes the volume is its specialization: the academic deep drilling has brought to light more or less unknown lodes of Jewish history that have hardly ever been discussed in one place and in such an intriguing combination. The book is divided into two parts. Part One focuses on Jews in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey and Part Two on Jews in the Mediterranean and North Africa region.

In Chapter I, Monica Mereu, PhD candidate in Persian Studies at Università degli Studi di Cagliari, looks at the Jewish community of Tehran from a female perspective. Her chapter provides insights into the memories of women who used to live in the historical neighborhood of Oudlājān in Tehran, during the first half of the 20th century. The quarter—a true world of its own—was formerly inhabited mainly by Jews and other minorities. It played an essential role in building Iranian–Jewish identity, based on a strong sense of belonging. The most interesting and somewhat tragic outcome seems to be the loss of female space after the more or less complete abandonment of the quarter by its Jewish inhabitants. Even though women had been restricted in many ways by the division between their home's private arena and the public sphere, there had been a very specific set of liberties in the social space of women that could not be replicated in another setting.

In Chapter II, Yasser Mirdamadi, a philosopher, currently a Researcher at the Muslim Biomedical Institute of Isma'ili Studies, London, and an expert in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, traces the question as to why

Martin Buber, one of the fathers of “cultural” Zionism, is esteemed, at least among the educated, in the expressly anti-Zionist state of Iran. Buber is a philosopher of interreligious dialogue, but he also has the potential to bridge the intellectual gap between Persian and Jewish culture, especially with respect to the Israel–Palestine conflict. Tragedies in Buber's early life led to his feelings of severe persecution and social exclusion. Persian translators, themselves the victims of oppression following the 1979 revolution, were drawn to translate a number of Buber's books, book chapters, and articles about his life and ideas, for a Persian readership. “The heartbroken know the esteem of each other,” as Baba Taher, the 11th century Sufi poet, wrote. Heartbroken translators translated the heartbroken Buber into Persian, placing him “in Persian attire” and thus in a rare situation: he could be compared and contrasted with medieval and contemporary Muslim (mainly Persian) mystics and philosophers. No other 20th century Jewish religious thinker has assumed this status in the Muslim world.

Chapter III on the history of Iraqi Jews is by **Khairuldeen Al Makhzoomi** of Georgetown University, a Berkeley graduate, Researcher, and Journalist on the history of Iraqi Jews. He describes in great detail the challenges faced by Iraqi Jews due to the conflicts between Arab nations and Israel, especially between 1948 and 1958. He looks closely at the phase from the beginning of their initially reluctant and secret emigration in the early 1940s to the pre–State of Israel and elsewhere until the expulsion and emigration in sheer panic after the Farhud pogroms and the UN declaration of Israel as a new nation state in 1948. The multitude of anti-Jewish laws, declarations, and regulations—some of them issued under the pretext of fighting communism and what would be called Zionism—are meticulously documented. Makhzoomi's analysis shows the overall deterioration in the social, political, and economic well-being of the Jews at that time, not only in Iraq, but throughout the region.

Catherine Soussloff, Professor Emerita of the University of British Columbia, examines in **Chapter IV**, the specific culture and history of the Turkish shadow puppet theater in relation to the European–Jewish diaspora in Turkey. Soussloff shows how the diasporic history of Andreas Tietze may have caused him to construct a particular interpretational framework for the Turkish shadow theater. Tietze was a world-renowned Austrian Turcologist with a long Jewish ancestry. Tietze, however, did not consider himself a Jew. He began his career at Istanbul University in 1938. Turkey became his refuge from the Hitler regime, and he stayed until 1958. He wrote a book about a collection of Turkish Shadow Theatre puppets, which are now in a

museum in Israel. On a primarily associative, but highly inspiring level, the author constructs parallels and symbolic interconnections between the theatre and diasporic spheres, with the traditional puppets as a cultural leftover embodying a multicultural and multiethnic past, related to the Ottoman Empire. These protagonists are eternal guests in the entire Middle East with their different dialects and sociolects struggling with negative stereotypes. Tietze's interpretation of the puppets as highly symbolic—standing for the simultaneity of materiality in the puppets' bodies and the casting of their ephemeral shadows—draws both on the language and concepts of art history and psychoanalysis. It suggests that their play brings the unconscious—including Tietze's own—into visibility via their shadows on the screen.

In Chapter V, Michèle Baussant, Senior Researcher in anthropology at the French National Centre for Scientific Research in Paris is an expert in memory studies. She takes an anthropological approach to considering different displacements of populations and the role of memory. Her contribution focuses on the impact of the creation of the State of Israel and the three wars between Egypt and Israel on the Jewish communities in Egypt. These communities had different traditions such as Sephardic, Eastern, Ashkenazi, and Karaite. Through interviews she discusses the memories of a golden age in which differences were minimized but which, in the end at least, was bitterly betrayed. At the same time, she describes the disillusioning experiences of new immigrants in Israel and various other countries, where they felt discriminated and stigmatized in comparison to the Jewish immigrant from Europe. Baussant's contribution is a painful reminder of Al Makhzoomi's contribution about Iraq and the Iraqi Jews.

Emanuela Trevisan Semi, one of the most important European scholars of Jewish and Israel Studies, has contributed **Chapter VI** on the Jews of Morocco. She affirms that the establishment of the State of Israel was but one factor that contributed to the departure of most Jews from Morocco. Most Moroccan Jews were devoted to France even though the anti-Jewish Vichy legislation had affected their trust. Thus, the end of the French Protectorate in 1956 and the independence of Morocco became one of the push factors for Jews to leave the country. An interesting detail in this paper is the distorted collective memory of Muslim Moroccans concerning the exodus of their Jewish countrymen.

In Chapter VII, Harvey Goldberg, another outstanding scholar, formerly of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, gives a wonderful description of a

group of Muslims from Libya making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and being welcomed by Jews who had left Libya 40 years before. Drawing from his profound knowledge of historical Jewish–Muslim relations, he provides an interpretation of what he observed while participating in this 48-hour encounter: the sense of such relaxed familiarity between the two groups that a passerby would have no inkling that these people might be glibly depicted as "enemies."

Chapter VIII by **Wolfgang Treitler**, Professor of Theological Research at the Catholic Faculty of the University of Vienna, reflects upon the work of writer Aharon Appelfeld, an assimilated Jew from the old Austrian empire and a German native speaker. Unusually, Appelfeld, who learned Hebrew only as a young man in Israel after World War II, used his new language as a central means of connecting his destroyed home to Israel and creating Israel as the homeland of his ancestors and his family. His works have helped Hebrew become part of world literature.

PART I:

THE JEWISH DIASPORA IN IRAN AND IRAQ

CHAPTER I

OU DLĀJĀN MEMORIES: THE IRANIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY OF TEHRAN FROM A FEMALE PERSPECTIVE.

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Abstract

This chapter is based on stories and memories composed through interviews with women living in the *Oudlājān* neighborhood of Tehran or who remembered their families living there during the first half of the 20th century. This generation of women experienced a deep cultural and religion transition from a community social life in the *mahalleh*² to a secular society in Tehran. I try to reconstruct their memories and feelings about the changes that occurred. Testimonies of men who spoke emotionally about their

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² In this chapter, *mahalleh* is used as a synonym of “quarter,” as in modern Persian. In the past, *mahalleh* described the area of a city specifically related to a community “that was socially, and spatially bound (Masoudi 2018: 62). Unlike now, the term had slightly disparaging connotations because of its religious/ethnic demographic. The Jews in Iran were never forced by law to live in a separate *mahalleh*. Their concentration in a single quarter was due to external pressure (before the Pahlavi dynasty, the Jews could not open shops and synagogues in quarters with a Muslim majority). It was due also to personal feelings and a sense of solidarity with the other Jews, with whom they shared a “collective life-style” (Levi 1999: 438). During my interviews with some Tehrani Jews, I noticed that *mahalleh* is still used as a denigratory term by Jews who have never lived in *Oudlājān* and had no contact with it, that is, the wealthy Jews of the north of Tehran. Living or not living in *Oudlājān* marked out two different social strata and also two different communities: the “wealthy-elite-non-*mahalleh*-dwellers and the poor-*mahalleh*-dwellers” (Loeb 1977:74), even though not all *mahalleh* dwellers were badly off.

mothers and grandmothers and their life in the *mahalleh* were also collected.³

Keywords. Oudlajan, Tehran, *mahalleh*, Jews, memory, minority.

*Memory is the membrane
in which the past is sealed*

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to give a narrative form to the *Oudlājān* neighborhood of Tehran (the old Jewish quarter), collecting memories and stories of the Jewish women who used to live there and moved out during the 1940s. As depicted in the lines by Hakakian Roja (2004:14) that introduce this chapter, it is important to trace an objective image of *Oudlājān*, as it held memories and tales of unity among the Iranian Jews of Tehran. Living in *Oudlājān* guaranteed the cohesiveness of the Jewish community, and the quarter was a key element in the construction of Jewish "belonging" to the Iranian homeland. The transformation of *Oudlājān* from a residential quarter to a more commercial one contributed to generating a sort of "loss of religiosity" on the part of the Iranian Jews, intensified by the socio-political situation: during the last decades of Mohammad Rezā (1941–1979), men and the young generation of women, especially, embraced the secularization policy of the monarch. The sense of place that they shared in that period was based on the constant identification with the land and with the figure of the Shah. This identification estranged the Iranian Jews from their culture and drastically altered their identity, causing a sort of alienation from their traditions and religion. The focus of this chapter will be on the female component of the community, which was affected more significantly by the Shah's policy. In particular, moving out of the quarter impacted the Jews' social life, especially in terms of the division between their home's private arena and the public sphere.

Oudlājān in the 20th century: A communitarian neighborhood

From the time of the Qajar monarchy (1794–1925) the city of Tehran was divided into different neighborhoods, which had special and quite distinctive characteristics with respect to the ethnicity and religion of their

³ All interviewees have been given a pseudonym.

inhabitants. The *Oudlājān* neighborhood was one of five neighborhoods in the old city of Tehran, located on the margins of what is now the *Bāzār-e Bozorg* (Grand Bazaar); it was bounded on the south by *meidān-e Molavi*, on the north by *khiābān-e Āmir Kabir* and *Sarcheshmeh*, on the west by *Shams al-Amāreh*, and on the east by *Emānzāde-ye Yahy*, which was, in the past, an integral part of the old *Oudlājān* neighborhood. Most of the inhabitants of *Oudlājān*, until at least the 1960s, were Jews. Although Jews had been in the majority in *Oudlājān* since the Qajar era, the quarter had a multicultural face, hosting a great variety of religious buildings belonging to the most ancient religions of Iran. Synagogues, shrines (*ārāmgāh*), mosques, and churches overlooked the narrow streets of *Oudlājān*, symbols of the old interactions of the neighborhood. This “symbiosis” between different faiths “has roots in the intangible heritage which is still alive in the neighborhood” (Habib et al. 2017:107).

The lack of historical and archival documentation makes it almost impossible to accurately determine the historicity and antiquity of the neighborhood, the name of which can be seen in historical texts and maps from the early Qajar era. The term “*Oudlājān*” has probably roots in the townsfolk’s way of pronouncing⁴ three different words. “*Ou*” might be the local pronunciation of the word “water,” “*drajin*” means “distribution,” and “*ān*” is a place suffix in the Persian language (Kariman 1976).

At the center of the *mahalleh* there was a circular area known as *Sarechāl*,⁵ literally translated as “head of the slum,” probably because of the garbage pit located in its midst. Yousef remembered:

Some families did not have a pit for the garbage in their homes, so they dumped their trash in the only pit that existed in the area.⁶

According to another version, the word *Sarechāl* is the hole located in the central square of *Oudlājān* neighborhood where water flowed down the pit and into the well. For the Jews living in *Oudlājān*, the name *Sarechāl*

⁴ Before Persian became the common language among the Jewish communities of Iran, Iranian Jews spoke several variants of Judeo-Jewish dialects. These were influenced by the local dialect of the city, with a few language loans from Hebrew and Aramaic, unlike the European Jewish languages. The relatively few Hebrew terms were mainly religious words. In Tehran, where the immigration of many Iranian Jews seeking jobs was registered, several Jewish dialects were spoken, all of which are now extinct.

⁵ In this chapter the terms *Oudlājān* and *Sarechāl* are used interchangeably.

⁶ Personal interview with Yousef, November 2019.

became a symbol of their quarter, showing a deep connection to this specific area which, at the core of the 20th century, was the most dwelled in by Tehrani Jews. Even today, *Sarechāl* is the term used more frequently by the Jews themselves to refer to the *mahalleh*.

The *Oudlājān* quarter had specific urban characteristics typical of many traditional Iranian cities, such as a system of alleys and narrow streets without an end. The houses, a reminder of the edicts of the Safavid era (1501–1736),⁷ were vast constructions greater in width than in height (Sarshar 2002). All the edicts, though far back in time, also wielded a strong influence in *Oudlājān*: a common characteristic of the houses of the *mahalleh* was the presence of a large courtyard, mainly used to grow vegetables and for social gatherings. Shehrazād⁸ remembered her grandparent’s house as follows:

My grandfather’s house in the *mahalleh* was like a Roman house, extended like a Pompeian house: it was large and faced North, South, East, and West.

There was a large *deracht-e tut* (mulberry tree) and a rooster always stood in the immense garden. The rooster was so violent that it pecked the legs of anyone approaching.

Tehrani Jews were, at least until the first half of the 20th century, less integrated into Iranian society (Cohen 1986).⁹ In other big cities, like Shiraz, the Jews’ activities and identity were “more rooted in the urban history” (Hourcade 2015:6), whereas in Tehran their political and social role was limited and mostly invisible. This was for different reasons: first, because Tehran, as a new city, had a different historical and social path until the first half of the century; second, because it also depended on the status of the *mahalleh* and its position, isolated in the southern suburbs of the city. The isolation of the quarter determined the perceptions that people had about

⁷ Jews in Iran faced a long history of discrimination especially after the advent of the Safavid dynasty. This period was marked by various restrictions imposed by the religious authorities on the Jewish communities of Iran. For example, Jewish houses were not allowed to be taller than those of their Muslim neighbors. Sarshar (2011) in his article “*Mahalleh*,” argues that the imposition of specific architectural characteristics was made in order to distinguish the Jews from the Muslims. Although *Oudlājān* did not exist in the Safavid age, the architectural impositions were maintained over time and also influenced the construction of the neighborhood.

⁸ Personal interview, January 2020.

⁹ In the early 20th century the Jewish community of Tehran, the majority of which was still living in *Oudlājān*, grew significantly. In the 1890s there were about 4,000 Jews with 10 synagogues. In 1918 there were 19 synagogues due to the needs of an expanded population.

Oudlājān,¹⁴ which was seen as a place of stigmatization. Even though the *mahalleh* itself did not originally have any specific negative connotation, it was perceived as the symbol of the long history of discrimination faced by the Jews in Iran, especially after the advent of the Safavid. This perception of the neighborhood has often negatively influenced many scholars who have described *Oudlājān* as a place of discrimination, poverty, and guiltiness (Goldin 2003; Vivier-Muresan 2007).¹⁰ On the other hand, for the Jewish inhabitants, *Oudlājān* was, and still is, the place of their family, friendships, and alliances. The words of the poet Nourollah Khoramian, who defines *Sarechāl* as a *kākh* (palace), full of sweetness and beauty, convey the great attachment of Tehrani Jews to their neighborhood and to their religious community (Khoramian 1992). Living in a separate *mahalleh* gave the Jews of Tehran the chance to grow up as a community from an economic and social point of view, and allowed them to create “a social space distinct from the public and the political center of the capital” (Bankar, 2015: 156).

First of all, the fact of living in a Muslim-dominated culture and society enhanced solidarity among the members of the community. The collaboration in the labor market for the men of *Oudlājān* was a way they could overcome the condition of minority status in an economy entirely dominated by their Muslims compatriots. For women, safeguarding the unity of the family and cultivating a strong sense of community with the other Jewish women was a way of surmounting their specific condition of minority in a male-dominated world and society.

Moreover, most of the people I interviewed spent their childhood in the quarter, and it was here that they experienced their first moments of joy and

¹⁰ Some scholars attribute the presence of ethnic and religious quarters in Iran to the advent of Shi'ism during the Safavid era and as a consequence of strict Shi'ite doctrines regarding the non-Muslim citizens of Iran. In reality, this urban feature also existed in Iran during the Sassanid time and therefore “has a profound historical root prior to the rise of Islam in Iran” (Vivier-Muresan 2007: 593). Moreover, some scholars still define *Oudlājān* and all the other Jewish quarters of Iran as “religious ghettos,” which is a word that is only used in the European context. “Ghetto” is not a neutral term, especially in a Jewish context, as it creates a world of images that do not reflect the reality of the Jewish situation in Iran, especially in modern times. Some scholars, like Vivier-Muresan, use the term ghetto to refer to the Jewish quarter of Shiraz, as does Farideh Golding in this context; they do not use the term in its historical sense, as it is used in Europe, but as a “distinct and separate neighbourhood suffering from stigmatisation and poverty” (Vivier-Muresan, 2007: 593).