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BASIC SOURCES OF SEPHARDIC SURNAMES

by Alexander Beider

The term *Sephardic Jews* has two senses, the narrow and the broad ones. In the narrow sense, a *Sephardic Jew* is one whose ancestors lived in the Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula, that is, in the territory of modern Spain or Portugal. In the broad sense, a *Sephardic Jew* is one who follows in his religious life the so-called *Sephardic rite*. This rite was brought by influential rabbis from Spain and accepted by various communities whose original roots were heterogeneous. According to this definition, a large majority of Jews who during the last centuries lived in the territories of the Ottoman Empire, Italy, North Africa and the Middle East can be called *Sephardic* even if none of their ancestors ever lived in the Iberian Peninsula. Below in the present article, the word *Sephardic* will be used only in its narrow sense.

In the Middle Ages, numerous Jewish groups of various regions (including Italy, northern France, Germany, Slavic countries, territories of modern Greece and

Turkey, Levant, Caucasus and Central Asia) were not using hereditary family names but for a very few exceptions. The situation in the Iberian Peninsula was different. Local Jews established a firm tradition of using surnames well before their expulsions during the 1490s. Surnames based on Hebrew include the designations of Jewish castes (*Cohen*, *Levi*), several occupations such as *Gabbai* (tax collector, treasurer) and *Sofer* (scribe), and numerous surnames based on the given name of the ancestor such as *Baruch*, *Barzilai*, *Guedelha*, *Haim*, *Meir*, *Saltiel*, *Sasson*, *Uziel*.

Yet most Sephardic surnames are not based on Hebrew. For the history of these surnames, one should distinguish two periods that for different regions corresponded to different time spans. The first one is related to the Muslim (Arabo-Berber) rule in these territories. It started in the 710s when the Iberian Peninsula was conquered by Muslims. The second one is related to the return of Christian rulers (*Reconquista*) that was gradual

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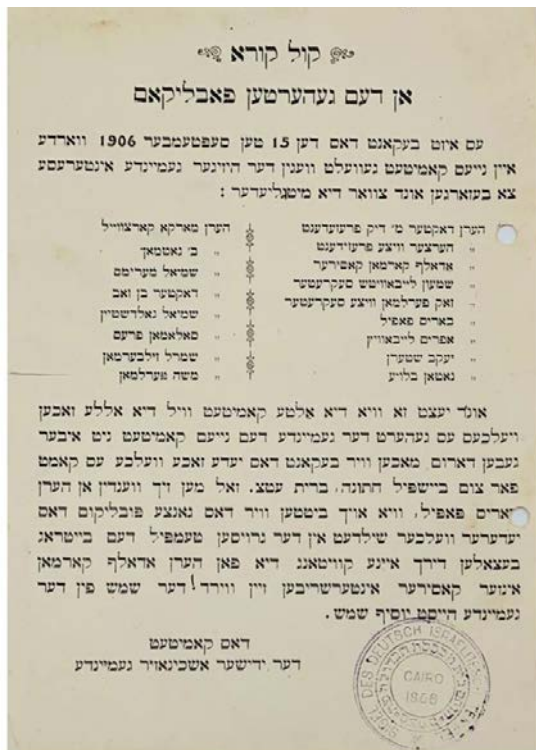
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INDEXING THE CAIRO JEWISH SURNAMES

by Jacob Rosen-Koenigsbuch



Announcement of the Ashkenazi Community in Cairo with the names of new board members in 1906

Last December I published an update of the “Index of Jewish Surnames in Cairo During the 20th Century” <https://avotaynuonline.com/2020/12/index-of-jewish-surnames-of-20th-century-cairo/> with 1,854 surnames. It is the first in a series of four indexes of Jewish communities in the Levant that I took upon myself to create.

The indexes of Damascus and Baghdad have already been published on the same website of [Avotaynuonline.com](https://avotaynuonline.com) and the index of Alexandria is under construction. What motivated me to do it was the dire absence of surname indexes in this region, unlike the databases for East and Central Europe that can be found on [Jewishgen.org](https://www.jewishgen.org) and especially on JRI-Poland.

The main reason for this is that most of the Jews left Egypt, Syria and Iraq in a hurry, leaving behind both their property and documents. The vital birth, marriage and death records are kept by the local authorities and are not accessible for the time being. This creates legal difficulties in personal affairs as well as genealogical voids when people can't provide vital documents.

Though the four cities are different from each other, in many respects they nevertheless share several common denominators. First and foremost, there are barely any genealogy-related documents in Jewish archives and research centers in Europe, Israel or the United States.

Here and there one may find a *mohel* ledger or protocols of Jewish communities, but they pertain mainly to educational and communal matters. The Jewish Agency, Hebrew Immigration Aid Society and Joint Distribution Committee have lists of Jews who were assisted by them, but they detail in most of the cases the country from which they came, not the city in which they resided. And, of course, not all the Jews fall under this category and/or left without leaving archival fingerprints within these organizations.



Cairo Jews in the Insurance business, 1950

So in the case of Cairo, a city with a community of around 40,000 Jews at its peak during the 1940s, one had to start from scratch and simply collect surnames one by one from any available source. The first discovery I made was that, despite the gloomy predictions, there are sources where surnames can be harvested. The most important is the scans of the three Jewish weeklies that were published in Egypt during the 1920s to the 1940s in French: *La Tribune Juive*, *Israël* and *L'Aurore* and two short lived ones: *La Revue Sioniste*, and *La Voix Juive*, which can be found in the Historical Jewish Press at <https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/newspapers/jpress>

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INDEXING THE CAIRO SURNAMES

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Wedding of Ezra and
Gloria Patan, 1927

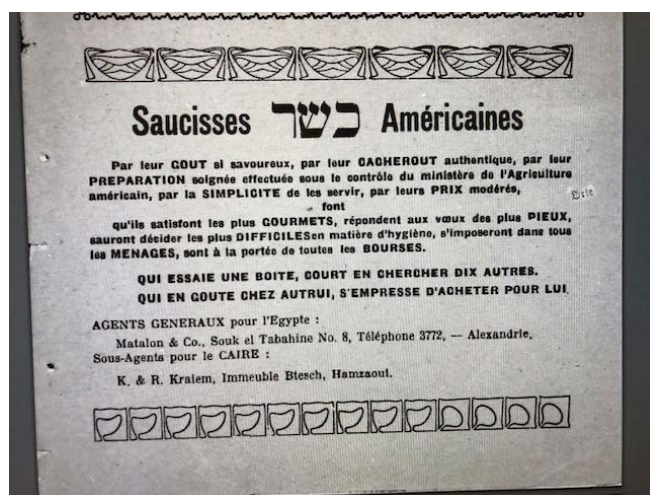
But not every Jewish family donated, and many Jewish children did not attend Jewish schools, so they were beyond the scope of this very important source.

Judging from analysis, what became evident quite early after collecting just a few hundred surnames is the heterogeneous composition of the Jewish community. Side by side with North African (Maghrebi) surnames, there were plenty of Sephardic surnames mainly from Turkey and Bulgaria, Italian, and Oriental or “Mizrahi” surnames from Baghdad, Aleppo and Damascus. And much to my surprise, there were quite a number of Ashkenazi surnames originating from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Along with them, mainly in school lists, one may find Karaite surnames reflecting the degree of their integration.

Business and telephone directories are another important source of Jewish surnames. Scans of the 1913 and 1941 Cairo directories were available until recently on the website of [CENTRE D'ÉTUDES ALEXANDRINES](http://CENTRE-D-ETUDES-ALEXANDRINES.cealex.org) (cealex.org). The 1913 directory provides an interesting snapshot since it was published on the eve of World War I and the Communist Revolution in Russia and the population movements which followed. However, one must read these directories line after line to sift out the Jewish-sounding surnames. This is quite a challenge because some Christian Copts in Egypt bear surnames and given names that are used by Jews as well.

They are OCR searchable and after a recent upgrade are very user friendly. The Jewish press dealt mainly with Jewish and communal affairs and thus regularly published lists of donors to various Jewish organizations, lists of successful Jewish pupils in Jewish schools, in sports activities and, of course, advertisements for Jewish businesses.

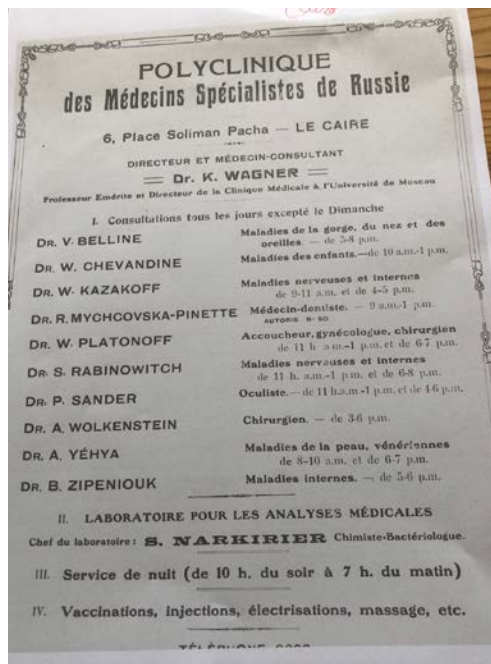
On the other hand, some Jews from Arab countries such as Iraq and Syria bear Arabic given names and surnames. And as with the Jewish press, these directories contain only those with telephones and/or businesses and free professions, or, in other words, upper middle-class people. Many Jewish families did not belong to those categories, so their surnames are not there. Comparing the Jewish surnames in the Cairo 1941 Directory with those in 1913, one unearths both the increase in the Jewish population in the city during a span of just three decades and their social mobility.



Kosher American Sausages, Egypt, 1920

Quite a number of Cairo-born Jews such as the late Lucette Lagnado and Ronald Cicurel published acclaimed memoirs of their childhood there, but they rarely provide surnames. There are several good websites dedicated to the history of Egyptian Jews, but none of them has a section dedicated to surnames of families that resided there.

All those limitations and shortcomings were in the back of my mind when I tried to navigate my way through this “terra incognita.” Being a veteran of Jewishgen.org, the accompanying SIGs and many Facebook groups, I decided to give social media a try. The results were immensely fulfilling. I discovered all over the globe a cluster of FB groups of Jews who have roots in Egypt: some of them born there and others who belong to the second and third generation of emigrants.



A listing of Russian medical professionals in Cairo, 1920

This genre of research through social media, which is nicknamed “crowd sourcing,” proves to be very efficient and fast. Almost all the Jewish families that resided in Cairo (and Alexandria) have a “representative” on one of those Facebook groups, thus enabling me to fill many gaps and list surnames that are absent in the previously described sources. Those groups are in Hebrew, Portuguese, French and English languages. Correspondence is quick, either by posting a question or by contacting privately via messenger. Social media yielded or produced about one-fifth of the surnames I have so far, with more forthcoming, either by bringing to the surface a surname I was not aware of or by providing a clue to surnames in the Jewish press in Egypt that were not detected previously due to technical reasons.

What is the index’s use except for genealogical research? Cairo was one of the fastest growing Jewish communities in the 20th century. From fewer than 10,000 members in 1897 it grew to 20,000 in 1907 and to 30,000 in 1917 and up to 40,000 in the mid-1940s. Its demise was fast after Israel was created in 1948. The index is a database that will enable future researchers to understand, through surnames analy-

sis, the origins of this colorful community and where its members originated.

The very fact that their press was in the French language, though it was under French occupation for a very short period in the Napoleonic Era, may also offer an interesting insight and perspective. We are lucky to live in an age and stage when the internet and social media enable us to communicate with people who still remember and are willing to share with us what they know before we hand the lead to the next generation.



Bar Mitzvah Boys, Cairo 1939

Ambassador (Ret.) Jacob Rosen-Koenigsbuch served as Israel's ambassador to Jordan from 2006 to 2009. His other diplomatic posts included Doha, Atlanta, New Delhi, Cairo, New York, London and Hague. He is currently a consultant on demographic mapping and publishes articles on tribal affairs and linguistic aspects of counter terrorism. He is fluent in Polish, Dutch, English, Arabic, and Hebrew and is the author of Crossing the Jordan River: The Journeys of an Israeli Diplomat (Atlanta, 2004).