

ASF/Sephardic House Celebrate the Jews from Egypt

By Sarina Roffé

More than 300 people gathered for the 8th Annual Sephardic Weekend Experience: Celebrating the Jews from Egypt at New York's Congregation Shearith Israel last March. The weekend Shabbaton featured Egyptian-style Shabbat meals, music, hazzanut, speeches and discussions with prominent community members including His Excellency Ambassador Mahmoud Allam, Consul General of Egypt in New York as well as Mr. Ahmed Helmi, the representative of His Excellency Ahmed Abul Gheit, Egyptian Ambassador of the Permanent Mission of Egypt to the United Nations. An exhibit featured Egyptian photographs and artifacts on loan from private collections.

In 1948, more than 100,000 Jews lived in Egypt. About one-fourth of Egypt's Jews were indigenous, the rest traced their roots to Syria, Iraq, Poland, Russia, Greece, other parts of North Africa and other countries. Many had come to Alexandria and Cairo in the late 1860s, after the opening of the Suez Canal had changed the economics of the Middle East. This heterogeneous Jewish community made important contributions to the Egyptian economy in agriculture, textiles, industry and banking. Import-export businesses thrived. Jews had a particularly strong impact on all aspects of life in Alexandria. Maccabi Alexandria was one the best basketball teams in Egypt until 1949. The "Hôpital Israelite" of Alexandria was one of the best in town.

Sephardic House under the auspices of the American Sephardi Federation brought the history and culture of Egypt to New York with this entertaining and informative weekend. Egyptian-style Shabbat meals were followed by fascinating talks by Rabbi Albert Gabbai of Philadelphia's Congregation Mikveh Israel who spoke about the religious life and customs of the Jews in Egypt, and Professor Jean Marc Oppenheim who delivered an historical overview of Jewish Egyptian political dynamics. Saturday evening featured *Taqasim*, a film about virtuoso violinist Felix Mizrahi's life in Egypt after which Mizrahi and his ensemble performing Treasures of Classical Arabic Music. Hazzan Moshe Tessone joined in with Egyptian Hazzanut, which brought the entire room to sing and dance. On Sunday morning a round table discussion entitled "Jewish Life in Egypt: What Was it Like?" featured Joseph Mosseri, Dr. Victor Sanua, Dr. Pierre Cachai, Mr. David Ribacoff, and a contribution from Mrs. Liliane Dammond that was read by Professor Oppenheim.

Life in Egypt between the two world wars was quite pleasant for Jews. Life centered on families, club activities and swimming pool facilities. Cairo had practically everything that a major European city could offer: Italian operas, ballet, Comedie Française, movies, nightclubs and foreign symphony orchestras. Alexandria was the major Resort City, where many went to the beaches during vacation time.

One of the issues for Egyptian Jews in the U.S.A. is the recovery of Jewish records, torahs and artifacts, which the small residing community in Egypt today is unwilling to part with. Today, what remains of what was once one of the most vibrant Jewish

communities in the Middle East is fewer than 100 Egyptian Jews, mostly elderly, in a population of 69 million. There are no rabbis and not enough men in one place for a minyan. There are about a dozen synagogues in Cairo today, 18 less than in previous decades. Two are open to the public, including Cairo's Ben Ezra -- the second oldest Jewish temple in the world, where its primary visitors are tourists. Several key holy sites have been restored through efforts of the Jewish Community Council of Cairo and donations from international Jewish organizations.

All those that were present at the Shabbaton were happy to have His Excellency Ambassador Mahmoud Allam address our audience and participate in the roundtable discussion. Ambassador Allam will be our link with the past, and we hope to develop and maintain this strong relationship with both Ambassador Allam and Ambassador Ahmed Abul Gheit.

The 8th Annual Sephardic Experience Weekend, Celebrating the Jews from Egypt was made possible in part by a grant from the Smart Family Foundation and was organized by Sephardic House, the cultural Division of the American Sephardi Federation. We look forward to next year's Shabbaton, Celebrating the Jews from Italy!