

REMEMBERING HOME AND EXILE: MEMOIRS BY JEWS OF MUSLIM LANDS

Alanna E. Cooper

A century ago, close to a million Jews inhabited the Muslim lands of North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Today, less than fifty thousand remain. Popular and academic accounts of this population shift

focus mainly on the political processes that generated it.

Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No* (2004), Andre Aciman's *Out of Egypt* (1994), and Albert Memmi's *Pillar of Salt*

(1953), are part of a small but important group of Jewish autobiographies that provide a different focus. Writing about the twentieth-century Muslim world on the eve of massive Jewish emigration, these three Jewish authors navigate the tension-riddled relationship between their own growing sense of self and the volatile, maturing countries in which they live. These memoirs explore the events leading up to their authors' departures from their countries of origin, offer meditations on Jewish identity in the Muslim world, and dwell on the Jews' relationship to exile and home. As a group, they

provide three models for understanding the experience of Jews born in Muslim lands in modern times.

Journey from the Land of No

Roya Hakakian's story begins in

the courtyard of her family's home in Tehran. In this idyllic childhood setting, the strands of her identity are seamlessly linked. Under the Shah's rule, her family celebrates Jewish holidays, worships in the

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synagogue, and marks its home with a mezuzah but at the same time fully partakes in Iranian culture and

security abruptly ends. Yet the youthful, optimistic Hakakian manages to maintain an integrated sense of self until she emigrates in 1985.

The descriptions of her efforts to remain true to both to her Iranian-ness and her Jewishness provide an unexpected view of the revolution in which she and her friends take part. Not, of course, as advocates of Islamicization but rather as fighters against the poverty, corruption, and censorship that prevailed under the Shah. Aspiring to an era of freedom and equality, Jewish youth—like their Muslim counterparts—participated in the exhilarating

project of shaping the future of their beloved country.

One morning, for instance, Hakakian and her classmates in Tehran's large, all-girls Jewish day school found that their principal had

been replaced by a veiled, Muslim woman. The bewildered students mocked the new principal behind her back, but diligently attended her lessons in the Koran. However, when Mrs. Moghadam declared that attendance would be required during Passover, the students refused to go along. Storming the classrooms and crashing windows, they rebelled as both the "children of Moses, freer of slaves," and as Iranian "daughters of the revolution," who fought tyranny in all its manifestations.

public life. In 1979, with the fall of the Shah, her life of comfort and

Throughout the memoir, Hakakian

insists that the revolution—like her “Passover Rebellion”—was essentially a struggle for freedom and equality, and that the persecution she suffered after 1979—as both a Jew and as a woman—was simply a symptom of a revolution gone awry. Nevertheless, the Jews’ worsening situation eventually leads her family to emigrate. In exile, she becomes not only geographically displaced but alienated from herself, as her Iranian identity is negated. Almost fifteen years later, she writes her autobiography to mend the breach. This process becomes integral to the memoir itself, as it is through the act of writing that she is able to reclaim both her Jewish and her Iranian heritage.

Out of Egypt

Like Hakakian’s, Andre Aciman’s autobiography recounts the events leading up to his family’s expulsion at a time when the inhabitants of his homeland were redefining their national identity. The similarities, however, end here. Whereas Hakakian’s work is linear—beginning in her courtyard, where the coordinates of home and self are solid, and ending with the trauma of exile—Aciman’s book elides trajectory. Like a dream, it moves back and forth in time. Identities are constantly in flux and the shifting category of “home” is elusive and ephemeral. Much like floating characters in a Chagall painting, Aciman’s mobile, cosmopolitan family members are painted in brilliant colors and playful forms, without a horizon line to ground them. They live in Alexandria but are not rooted there, having arrived from Istanbul at the turn of the twentieth century along with a large influx of immigrants—Jews and non-Jews alike—who were

attracted by the city’s favorable economic conditions.

Taking full advantage of the country’s social and financial opportunities, Aciman’s grandparents and their siblings become closely connected with the centers of political and economic power. Yet, over the course of their three-generation sojourn in Egypt, they never become Egyptian—an identity they deride as primitive and barbaric. They are above all cosmopolitans, ready to move, if the conditions are right, anywhere a business opportunity presents itself.

The family is Jewish too. But with no sense of connection to a religious covenant, to an enduring community, or to a scattered people, this aspect of their identity

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is also fleeting and cosmopolitan, shaped by the particulars of their own complex past. Their ancestors were fifteenth-century exiles from Spain who resettled in the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, and who acquired various forms of European citizenship in the nineteenth century. For them, Jewishness is an identification with those who share their history. Others—like their Jewish brother-in-law from Iraq (whom they refer to as an “Arab”)—are simply outsiders.

It is, perhaps, the historical memory of their ancestors’ *converso* experience in fifteenth-century Spain that most strongly informs Aciman’s family’s Jewish identity. This legacy is fully realized when the young Aciman and his father

convert to Christianity, not out of conviction but as an act of self-preservation in the face of Egypt’s growing anti-Jewish sentiment. “I understand,” the priest says, “Communion on Sunday, but Fridays the *Shema*. With you Jews nothing is ever clear. . . . You’re citizens nowhere, and traitors everywhere, even to yourself.”

Just as Aciman’s memoir does not begin with a stable starting point—where home and identity are clearly defined—it does not end with rupture. Like Hakakian’s memoir, it does, however, close with the family’s forced migration. For Aciman, though, departure from Egypt belongs to a long history of expulsions. “Everything repeats itself,” his father tells him as he packs to leave, relating stories of a string of ancestors who had done the same.

In this case, exile comes in the wake of the Suez crisis. As Egyptian nationalist fervor peaks, foreign property is

expropriated and expulsion notices are issued to French and British nationals as well as to Jews. “But we are not Israelis!” Aciman’s uncle Isaac protests. “Tell that to President Nasser,” another uncle retorts.

Reacting to the imposed link between Jewish and Israeli identity, Aciman struggles against any intimation that the Jews are a people with a national homeland. Israel, for him, is not home. But neither is Egypt. For Aciman the persistent condition of exile poses no rupture, as it does for Hakakian, but hardship that is mitigated by the magnificent opportunities accompanying it. Exile in *Out of Egypt*, is akin to the adulteress liaisons in which Aciman’s father and uncles indulge. Rather than

focusing on their domestic relationships, they forever chase the allure of the lover, who is fully adored only when she is a transient, fleeting, affair. Likewise, it is not until the eve of Aciman's departure from Egypt, that he finds himself longing for Alexandria, a city that he never knew he loved.

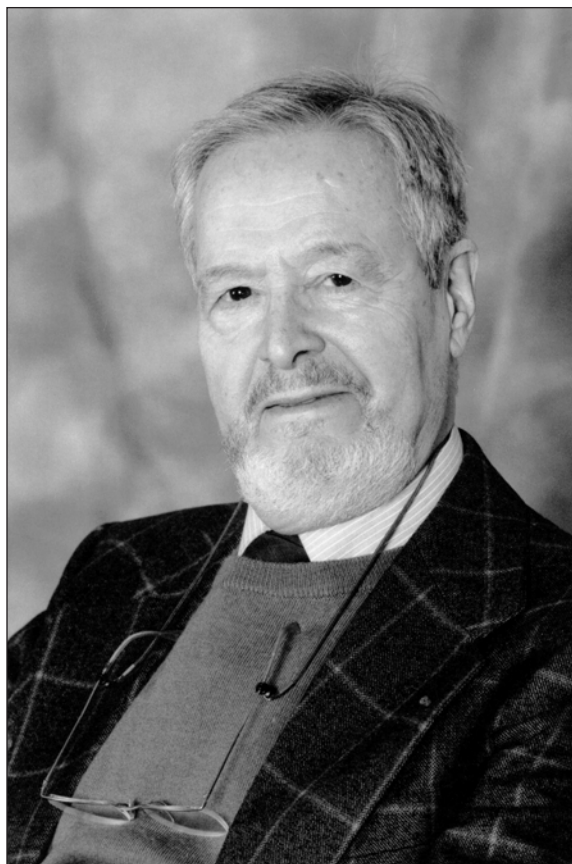
Whereas memoir-writing for Hakakian is an act of reclaiming her Iranian identity, denied to her by Khomeini's regime, for Aciman, memoir-writing is a romantic celebration of exile. No home—Spain, Egypt, Turkey, Israel, France—is worth a tale unless it is fondly remembered from a safe distance.

Pillar of Salt

Albert Memmi's semi-autobiographical *Pillar of Salt* takes place in Tunisia in the years prior to the country's independence in 1956. These same years correspond to his development from boyhood to manhood, and to the events leading up to his decision to emigrate. Unlike the memoirs of Hakakian and Aciman, Memmi's work concludes by highlighting the impossible contradictions faced by the Jew in the postcolonial Muslim world. Where Hakakian depicts the allure of the revolution, and Aciman lingers over the romance of exile, Memmi's character broods, offering no good resolution to his painful, persistent state of alienation.

Alexandre Mordekahi Benillouche, Memmi's alter-ego, leaves the safe alley of his boyhood to attend the local *Alliance* school. Here he begins to view himself through the eyes of his enlightened, western, colonial educators. Later, in his French lycée, he comes to loathe the indigenous Jewish customs of

his mother's home, which he learns to characterize as primitive and backward. Working to separate himself from his family, he immerses himself in the academy and in French high culture, and ceases to speak his native Arabic dialect.



Albert Memmi. Courtesy of Le félin.

When World War II erupts and Tunisia's Jews are threatened by advancing German forces, Benillouche turns to his French teachers and employers for protection. They refuse his requests, identifying him as Jew and a native, rather than a true Frenchman. Benillouche faces the second traumatic rift in his identity. "I had rejected the East, and had been rejected by the West. What would I ever become?"

Betrayed, Benillouche contemplates reconnecting with his roots, not via the muddy, narrow streets of his youth but via the modern nationalist movement. He is

encouraged by a Muslim colleague who reaches out to Benillouche as a fellow "native-son." But after an eruption of anti-Jewish violence and destruction, Benillouche again faces alienation from himself and from those around him.

Having rejected—and been rejected by—his native Jewish community, the French, and Muslim nationalists, Benillouche experiences a disintegration of identity and an utter loss of home. He contemplates suicide, but chooses migration instead. He packs a few bags, says goodbye to his parents, burns his diaries, and sets sail for Argentina, a land to which he has no ties.

Unlike *Out of Egypt*, which ends with Aciman gazing out at the Mediterranean, imagining himself in his new home looking fondly back towards Egypt, *Pillar of Salt* closes on the sea. Under dark skies, Benillouche feels the uneasiness of the ocean, and ponders how he might refashion himself in a strange, new land. In part, he does so through the writing of his memoir. "As I now straighten out this narrative," he writes, "I can manage to see more clearly into my own darkness and find my way out." It is significant that it is Benillouche, not Memmi, who is the protagonist in this narrative. European colonialism and Tunisian nationalism have forever alienated Memmi, so that even in writing his own life, he remains an exile.

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