

Lebanon's Jewish Community

"...an important contribution to the literature on the tragic and forgotten fate of the Jewish communities expelled from Arab lands after the creation of the State of Israel. Highly recommended for both academic and general readers who are interested in the old Lebanon."

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"Franck Salameh has artfully woven the story of the Jewish community in Lebanon, and in effect the story of Lebanon *and* its Jews...a must read for whoever wishes to know more about an important chapter in Lebanon's history and the history of the Jews in the Middle East."

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"...a long overdue contribution that sheds light onto one of the many taboo topics that still haunt Lebanese society."

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"A fascinating and deeply moving book, recalling the precious Lebanese dream of the early twentieth century: making Lebanon a free democracy, a refuge for the persecuted."

—Bat Ye'or, *Author of The Dhimmi and The Decline of Eastern Christianity*

Franck Salameh

Lebanon's Jewish Community

Fragments of Lives Arrested

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*To the Jews of my life;
To humanity's first literate people;
To the teachers of the teachers of our human race;
To my teachers;
To Avigdor, Noam, Gisèle*

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CONTENTS

1	Prolegomenon: When Lebanon Loved the Jews	1
2	Lebanon of the Jews: An Introduction	23
3	Lebanese Jewry: Memory Fragments	45
4	Rootedness and Exile: Holocaust and Aftermath	77
5	Lebanese Jewish Memory and Memorial: Personal Recollections	101
6	Through the Eyes of Others: History's Reckoning	181
7	On Lebanese Jewish History and Memory: A Conclusion	197
	Bibliography	201
	Index	205

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Prolegomenon: When Lebanon Loved the Jews

A Greek-Orthodox friend of mine from Byblos-Lebanon used to say that he could not possibly be a Christian-Lebanese without first being a Jewish-Lebanese.

Fady Gadeh (July 2017)

While on a furtive visit to Lebanon in the summer of 1986, I made pilgrimage to the celebrated biblical “Cedars of the Lord,” in Bsharré. At that time, Lebanon was still in the throes of “civil war,” its government a “puppet regime” beholden to the Syrian occupation army controlling large swaths of Lebanese territory, ruling them in classic colonial fashion. The cruelty visited on the Syrian people in our time, in these sad decades of twenty-first century, had their first dress rehearsals and dry runs in Syrian-occupied Lebanon of the late twentieth century. The Syrian Arab-Baath regime, that has been beating the Syrian people to a pulp in our times, is the same one that had pummelled Lebanon and battered the Lebanese into submission during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, murdering thousands of civilians, wiping out entire neighborhoods, raining destruction on schools, hospitals, churches, and other sanctuaries where the powerless ordinarily sought shelter. Much like the French under Nazi occupation, Syrian-occupied Lebanon was rendered a “slave state” wrapped inside a “police state” apparatus. Syria maintained a stranglehold not only on the government, policy, political loyalties, school curricula, the media, and the military, but indeed on the smallest minutiae

Lebanon of the Jews: An Introduction

There are records of exchanges, both cultural and trade, between [the Phoenician] King Hiram of Tyre and King Solomon. An Old Testament Hebrew prophet is buried on Lebanese territory in Sujod [...] a place of pilgrimage [for Lebanese Jews and others.] Jewish communities of merchants and artisans flourished at Deir al-Kamar, Saïda and Tripoli, and in Beirut [...] ancient synagogues bear witness to an active Jewish life in those times...¹

(World Jewish Congress, 1964)

Researchers doing work in the Middle East, those with intimate Lebanese connections among them—present company included—may be cursed with too much confidence, convinced that upon showing up at the doorsteps of, say, Beirut's Jewish community, they would be

An earlier version of this chapter was an essay published in the *Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, Volume 6, 2015. I would like to thank the JMEA editors for granting permissions to reuse in this volume.

¹Anonymous, Profile of the Lebanese Jewish Community (Beirut, Confidential, June 1964), Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, The World Jewish Congress Collection, Series H: Alphabetical Files, 1919–1981, Box: H235, File 3, Lebanon, 1960–1969, 04.031.

Lebanese Jewry: Memory Fragments

Le souvenir d'une certaine image
n'est que le regret d'un certain instant;
et les maisons, les routes, les avenues,
sont fugitives, hélas, comme les années

Marcel Proust (1871–1922)

A great deal was written in the late twentieth century about Maronite–Jewish and Israeli–Lebanese relations. Namely, there is much in the literature on the furtive fitful “alliance” that tied Lebanese Christians to their southern Jewish neighbors during the days of the Lebanese wars of 1975–1990 and even earlier flirtations going back to the pre-state period during the 1920s and 1930s.

But beyond passing references, often in the context of Zionist–Christian or Israeli–Maronite relations, during and immediately following the French Mandate period (1918–1946), the literature strictly speaking on the Jews of Lebanon remains scant, fragmentary, and restricted in scope. Two major, seminal works come to mind in this respect: Kirsten Schulze’s excellent *The Jews of Lebanon*, which was researched some two decades ago and may be in want of some updating; and Tomer Levi’s *The Jews of Beirut*, published more recently in 2012, but as its subtitle suggests, a work limited to “*The Rise*” of the Beirut Jewish community during late Ottoman times and the early French Mandate period. More importantly, Levi’s work focuses primarily on four major themes in the development of Beiruti Jewish life, which he describes as “migration,

Rootedness and Exile: Holocaust and Aftermath

Que le désespoir nous inspire du courage.

Sénèque ca. AD 47

As stressed earlier in this volume, Lebanese Jews are a long-standing Lebanese community which may more legitimately than others claim precedence and deeper roots in Lebanon. Likewise, as a “minority” in a Lebanese “federation of minorities,” Lebanese Jews are both similar to *and* distinct from other Lebanese communities, just as they may be similar to and *distinct* from neighboring Jews of “Arab lands.” For one, the Lebanon of the first half of the twentieth century was not an “Arab state” in the traditional connotations of the term and did not consider itself to be an “Arab state”—indeed, many Lebanese to this day still take great umbrage at being considered “Arabs” in an “Arab world.”

Therefore, what might have befallen the “Jews of Arab Lands” in “the shadow of the Holocaust” certainly did not apply in the case of Lebanon, and Lebanese Jewish life appears to have been markedly different from Jewish life elsewhere in the Arab-defined Middle East.

Consequently, Lebanese Jews, their stories, their status, their socio-cultural production, and their political allegiances cannot, and indeed *ought* not, be folded into the same complex of events and circumstances as other Jews of the Middle East.

In this sense, although naturally preoccupied with the goings-on in the nearby *Yishuv*, the Zionist project, and news of the destruction of European Jewry, Lebanese Jews of the first half of the twentieth century

Lebanese Jewish Memory and Memorial: Personal Recollections

La parole est moitié à celui qui parle,
moitié à celui qui écoute.

Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592)

As mentioned at the outset of this study, besides being a research-based work of history, this book's aim was to also contribute a modest little brick to the edifice of "a memorial" to Lebanon's Jewish community; an act of remembrance as it were; and a sanctuary and place of reflection dedicated to a foundational Lebanese community—arguably the oldest and most "indigenous" of "indigenous Lebanese" communities—and one well-nigh expunged from the normative scholarship on modern Lebanon.

Their miniscule numbers notwithstanding, Lebanese Jews are not a marginal community, even as they might not have benefitted from adequate treatment in the corpus of Lebanese history. What's more, Lebanese Jews themselves are not unaware of their venerable age-old lineage in Lebanon. Their written "profiles" of themselves, their internal communal memoranda, their official and informal correspondence with foreign and Lebanese interlocutors, their public commentaries and official stances, and their own self-narratives in the Lebanese press as well as in a variety of private contexts all attest to their keen awareness of their deeply rooted connection to Lebanon. In one such profile dating back to

Through the Eyes of Others: History's Reckoning

... je portai à mes lèvres une cuillerée de thé où j'avais laissé s'amollir un morceau de madeleine. Mais à l'instant même où la gorgée mêlée de miettes du gâteau toucha mon palais, je tressaillis, attentif à ce qui se passait d'extraordinaire en moi. Un plaisir délicieux m'avait envahi, isolé, sans la notion de sa cause.

Marcel Proust (1871–1922)

It may not be inappropriate to preface this final section, “history’s reckoning,” with a personal reflection; an author’s testimony of sorts, and my own childhood’s remembrances and observations on Lebanon, Lebanese Jewry, and Jewish life in Lebanon as I remember them.

I grew up in a Christian, overwhelmingly Maronite neighborhood of East Beirut. Our home was a small apartment perched on the top floor of an old building; a flat ringed round by windows, with almost no walls, surrounded by a spacious sunny terrace considerably larger than the dwelling itself, overlooking the Mediterranean, drowned in fragrant citrus orchards splayed in the sunny salt-sprayed wave-driven breeze rising from the West. Contrasting this, my childhood’s Mediterranean vista, Mount Lebanon stood near, to my back, soaring in the East, august, white, dignified, casting its hoary snowy shadow on the coastal playgrounds at my feet. As a child, I needed only race down our apartment building’s four flights of stairs, cross the street below, hop over the now disbanded coastal railway that had once connected northern Lebanon to northern Israel, and there I was, on the beach, wading

On Lebanese Jewish History and Memory: A Conclusion

Le talent de l'historien consiste à faire
un ensemble vrai avec des traits qui ne
sont vrais qu'à demi.

Ernest Renan (1823–1892)

It is sometimes said that trauma survivors, exiles and expatriates among them, are so troubled, some even say “damaged,” that they remain mute on their past’s painful experiences, suppressing some of their memories, opting not to share them, not even with loved ones. But that is not necessarily always the case; survivors of personal and collective trauma have indeed written about and memorialized their experiences; they might not have done so methodically, consistently, or in droves, but they have done so regardless.

With that in mind, and save the discreet social media chat group here, the random blog or instagram photo-sharing there, and the occasional newspaper article issuing from a diffident Lebanese press often featuring reticent respondents—usually a “token good Jew”—Lebanese Jews seem to have been written out of Lebanese history. They have in any case almost never written publicly about their Lebanese experience, neither past nor present. And although a few (outlier) scholarly books and articles treating the topic of Lebanese Jewry do in fact exist, none may be said to carry the unadulterated unvarnished voices of Lebanese Jews emitted *by* Lebanese Jews—or, for that matter, by *other* Lebanese who knew them, who remembered them, and who proposed