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THE MEMORY OF THE LOST PEOPLE

Shmuel Trigano

The generations born into pre- and post-World War II Jewry experienced two great cataclysms of unequal gravity in nature and extent but with equally serious consequences when gauged by the yardstick of the experience and the continuity of the groups affected. The two groups constituting the Jewish world in fact were shattered by the events of an appalling century. In the Holocaust, the most vibrant centers of the Ashkenazi world were decimated, in an immeasurable catastrophe. With the decolonization, and the subsequent “nationalization” of the Arab world, the Sephardi world lost the very environment in which it existed.

These two arenas of upheaval reveal the link connecting the two ordeals of the Jews of this period: World War II is the linchpin. It is in its aftermath that the decolonization process was triggered in North Africa and the Middle East. The story of Europe, in particular in modern times, is at the heart of this history. With the advent of the European Nation-State, which gave the Jews citizenship only at the individual level, the Jewish people, by reason of its dispersal, lost any practical and legitimate basis of existence.¹ Hannah Arendt, seeking an explanation for antisemitism, considered that the Jews (in this case the Ashkenazim) as a *people* had lost their ambiguous place as mediators in Europe partitioned by the Nation-States, when in 1914 these had entered the era of total war, so that the mass extermination of the Jews was inevitable and only a matter of time.² The fate of the Jews of the southern area of the Mediterranean (in this case the Sephardim) had long been tied to Europe: originally, with the expulsion from Spain; then, subsequently, with the protection that the “capitulations” system of the European powers afforded them against the arbitrariness of the Ottoman regime,³ removing them from the condition of *dhimma*; and, finally, their delivery by the colonial powers from their inferior status of “protected people”, of *dhimmis*.⁴ With decolonization, their destiny was identified with that of the colonizers, sent home by the

colonized, even though the majority of Sephardim had no "home" in Metropolitan France, like the colonial populations. In fact they had been living in these colonial countries often long before their domination by Islam.

The Jewish condition was transformed by this dual trauma. Central and Eastern Europe, one of the oldest centers of Jewish culture, disappeared for ever from the arena of Jewish history. With rare exceptions (pacific as in Morocco, dangerous as in Iran) there are no longer any Jewish communities in the Arab countries.

I. An Unfinished Exile

Since the loss of its original "heimat," how can the Sephardi condition be described today? Can it be said to be characterized by the exile? Concretely, the Sephardim are not yet distanced from their transplantation and dispersal. Psychologically and intellectually, they are floundering in a kind of internal exile. It is in Israel that this lack in themselves and in the world is most strongly felt, because of their messianic expectations of Zion. The Israeli experience was marked by the ordeal of a sudden discrepancy. They expected to arrive in the land promised by the prophets, but were propelled into the historic arena of political Zionism whose ideological plan was to terminate Jewish exile and to derive a "new man" from the old Diaspora Jew. Although very close to the climactic and geographical milieu of their former Mediterranean localities, the cultural Israel that they encountered thus did not really validate their age-old expectations.

In France too, where many already had citizenship, the benefit of the language and cultural familiarity, but which constituted a very different physical milieu, their exile was paradoxical. France no longer embodied a distant ideal model, but was now identified with daily routine. Immersion in a "Metropolitan" world, marked by Christian culture and a centrist political culture, ended the existential arrangement in which they had lived with the coexistence of a mosaic of communities and religions under the majority, but inert, weight of Islam and under the aegis of a sure but distant metropolitan political power. For those who immigrated to the Americas, the rupture was total. So far from the Mediterranean and the East, from their specific human milieu, they were transplanted as it were to another planet, even though, making the most of a bad situation, they were reminded by the American spaces and the natural multiculturalism of these immigration lands, as Naim Kattan once wrote, of the infinite spaces of the desert and the colorful landscapes of the East.

Can the situation described above really be defined as an "exile"? This would imply that the Sephardim had previously "put down roots" in their native regions. Yet, despite several ingrained myths, which see in them (above all for

