

Rethinking Morocco: Life-writing of Jews from Morocco

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Our aim is here to focus on the autobiographical narratives written by Jewish Moroccan writers from Israel and from the diaspora, considering them as true *entrepreneurs de memoire* who have figured little in the national Israel narrative and whose contribution to the building of a counter-narrative has formed an important aspect of written production over recent decades.

The analysis of the production of life-writing texts of the Morocco Jewish diaspora includes that of Israeli writers of Moroccan origins that have been incorporated because of their deep feelings of belonging to Morocco, still considered a homeland.¹

This narrative contributes to show the return of the homeland and of the “imaginary homeland” to the limelight for this migration.²

Through personal memories life-writing contributes to the building of a collective memory and to a more diversified history by completing missing details but also and above all by lending a personal qualitative touch full of emotions to the anonymity of a public archive. In life-writing, life as it has been lived replaces imaginary intrigue, while direct witness substitutes invention.³

The contribution made by the autobiographical narratives of the Jewish Moroccan diaspora, especially by those people who belong to the 1.5 generation, the generation that left during childhood their country of origin in a traumatic manner, as described by Susan Rubin Suleiman,⁴ is very

1. See André Levy, “The Diaspora that turned into a Center: contemporary Jews in Morocco,” *City and Society* 13 2 (2001): 242-272; André Lévy, “Homecoming to Diaspora: Nation and State in Visits of Israelis in Morocco,” in *Homecomings, Unsettling Paths of Return*, ed. Fran Markowitz and Anders H. Stefansson, 92-108 (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004).

2. On the complexity of this identity see also Daniel J. Schroeter, “The Shifting Boundaries of Moroccan Jewish Identities,” *Jewish Social Studies* 15 1 (2008): 145-64; Emanuela Trevisan Semi, “La mise en scène de l’identité marocaine en Israël: un cas “d’israélianité diasporique,” *A contrario* 5, 1 (2007):37-50; Emanuela Trevisan Semi, “Museums of Moroccan Jews in Israel: what kind of memory?,” in *Memory and ethnicity, Ethnic museums in Israel and Diaspora*, ed. Emanuela Trevisan Semi et al., 45-75 (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013); Aomar Boum, “ ‘The Virtual Genizah’: Emerging North African Jewish and Muslim Identities Online,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (2014): 597-601.

3. Helen Epstein, *Écrire la vie* (Condé-sur-Noireau: La cause des livres, 2009).

4. Susan Rubin Suleiman, “The 1.5 Generation: Thinking about Child Survivors and the Holocaust,” *Imago* 59, 3 (2002): 277-295. We use the 1.5 generation concept in a broader sense since the author was referring to the children of the holocaust.

meaningful and widens our understanding of the history of those Jews who left Morocco as infants or children or the manner in which they use their past in order to recreate their own history. This happens independently of the country chosen for emigration, be it Israel, France, Canada or the United States, and independently of the language they are written in (Hebrew, French or English). In some cases these writers have ended up living in a number of countries, including Morocco.

We think that a cross-language and cross-cultural comparison may revisit previous analysis based only on national relevance, opening up a broader space to grasp better diasporic transnational discourse.⁵

In fact not only does this narrative widen our understanding of recent history but also tells us about the mixed feelings of belonging and of pluri-belonging on the part of this generation, showing more blurred boundaries and porosity.

If the category of writers belonging to the 1.5 generation will be much represented in this paper because they are filled with diaspora memory and share feelings of exile, nonetheless the second and the third generations will also be considered.

Some of the authors we appraise have returned once or more to Morocco to visit the places of their childhood, as a pilgrimage to family graves or tombs of saints, or for tourism.⁶ This is an important point because having access to the place of memory changes the narrative landscape.⁷

We have drawn up a *corpus* of twenty two writers: seventeen writers belonging to the 1.5 generation, three writers belonging to the second generation, and two writers to the third; the list is not exhaustive but is certainly representative of the type of writing being considered. Five of the writers of generation 1.5 have emigrated to France, nine to Israel, one to Israel and then France, one to Canada and finally the only female writer to the United States while one belonging to the third generation to the United States.

That only one of the authors of generation 1.5 is a woman is due to the fact that it was unusual for Moroccan women of the 1940s and 50s to write. Women, even when they were not illiterate, had greater difficulty in narrating their lives in writing. This was due to economic reasons, a lack of

5. See Lital Levy and Allison Schachter, "Jewish Literature/World Literature: between the Local and the Transnational," *PMLA* 130, 1 (2015): 92-109.

6. On the memory of the Jews of Morocco, see Trevisan Semi, Emanuela and Hanane Sekkat Hatimi, *Mémoire et représentations des juifs au Maroc: les voisins absents de Meknès* (Paris: Publisud, 2011).

7. The same attitude may be found in contemporary Mizrahi cinema in Israel, see Yaron Shemer, *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel* (US: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 177.

personal space, time and self-confidence. It is interesting to note that over the last decade there has been a considerable growth in the number of young female writers of Moroccan origin producing, for the most part, fiction. They now live in Israel or were born or bred there and write in Hebrew. Some of them have put into their fiction memories and family stories of Morocco or of the first stages of emigration (Iris Argeman, Yamit Armbrister, Galit Dahan Carlibach, Malka Inbal).

The authors selected belonging to the 1.5 generation come from different areas and cities of Morocco: Meknes, Mogador, Marrakesh, Sefrou, Tamzerst (Atlas Mountains), Tangier, Tetouan and Casablanca. Those who emigrated to France are Marcel Benabou (Meknes), Jacob Cohen (Meknes), Daniel Sibony (Marrakesh), Rolph Toledano (born in Paris but who lived between Casablanca and Tangiers), and Gilles Zenou (Meknes). Those who emigrated to Israel are Mois Benarroch (Tetouan), Gabriel Ben Simhon (Sefrou), Erez Biton (born in Oran but of Moroccan origins) Ami Bouganim (Mogador), Shlomoh Elbaz (Marrakesh), David Elmoznino (Mogador), Asher Knafo (Mogador), Uzziel Hazan (Tamzerst, Atlas Mountains), Haim Shiran (Meknes). Ruth Knafo Setton (Safi) emigrated to the United States, Micael Pariente (Meknes) emigrated to Israel and then to France, while David Ben Soussan (Mogador) emigrated to Canada. The authors selected belonging to the second generation are Sami Berdugo, Shimon Adaf and Iris Argeman, and to the third are Yamit Armbrister, a female writer who has emigrated to the Usa, and Galit Dayan Carlibach.

In some cases these writers have created narratives which may be considered fiction or which have been disguised as fiction and where the boundaries between novel, autobiographical novel and autobiography are blurred. However, all contain parts that evoke events in the author's life.⁸

The amount of life-writing has been growing in recent years and this phenomenon was foreseen by Carlos de Nesry, the writer who in the Jewish press of the 1950s was considered the Albert Memmi of Morocco, although today he is hardly represented in the collective memory. Carlos De Nesry witnessed in 1958 the vast changes which Morocco was undergoing. He described the abandonment of Morocco by the Jews with great perspicacity and foresight but also with concern and sadness. He commented that "native lands, even those adopted, cannot be dreamed up on the spot...It does not always suit the Moroccan Jew to play the wandering Jew."⁹

8. The following belongs to this latter category: Mois Benarroch, Gavriel Bensimhon, David Ben Soussan, Jacob Cohen, Ruth Knafo, Rolph Toledano, Gilles Zenou and Daniel Sibony.

9. Carlos de Nesry, *Les Israelites marocains à l'heure du choix* (Tangier: Éditions internationales, 1958), 102.

From an analysis of these writers' narratives there emerges an important difference between those who emigrated to Israel and those who went to other countries. In particular, of the writers analysed, it is only those who emigrated to Israel who take time to remember the country or the town left behind, manifesting strong and complex feelings of double-belonging and identity. The writers who emigrated to other countries keep a greater distance from their native country or town, often mentioning it only fleetingly or writing about it in a detached manner, offering a less rose-tinted memory compared to the reality of the surroundings they found in the new country. Otherwise they merely narrate what are essentially family memories. The detachment of their identity-giving sense of belonging and their place of origin is greater. Hence it is more those writers who have emigrated to Israel who present attitudes harking back to feelings of a double or multiple identity of belonging, which is to say belonging to the country and the city of their birth, which becomes a sort of city of memory, and sometimes to an earlier place of exile, that of Spain.

Jonathan Schorsch has largely written about the outpouring of memory work related to "the Sephardic past" or to "the golden age" of medieval Spain in contemporary Sephardic autobiography¹⁰ but finding similar attitudes among Moroccan memoirs written in Hebrew is quite a recent phenomenon.

The second–or third–generation writers often turn to a narration incorporating autobiographical memories referring to Morocco and recounted by their own mother (Berdugo) or grandmother (Dahan Carlibach). These are included in the novel, almost as a stand-alone part.

Between the two territories and the two identities, inhabited in reality or in the imagination, it is above all the language of the country of origin which occupies the largest area and often the introduction of Moroccan Arabic or French allows an easier reconnection with the past.

Shimon Adaf recalls that his mother would tell of her childhood in *Derb al garna* in Marrakesh and of the multiplicity of languages that she regretted not being able to convey:

Perhaps, if I had added words in the languages that I knew, the depth of Moroccan Arabic, the language of my childhood with the warmth of the rooms and the streets, the tenderness of French with its sing-song tone through which they had taught her of a world hidden to sight... and the harshness of Hebrew...of prayer,

10. Jonathan Schorsch, "Disappearing Origins: Sephardic Autobiography Today," *Prooftexts* 27 (2007): 82-150.

of her parents who even if they could not write dared to use it and dared to go to Israel, land of milk and honey which already on their lips had been transformed into the whisper of sheet metal incandescent in the summer heat, into the silence of the meadows in the mud of winter.¹¹

In *Faces Burned by the Sun*, Adaf uses many Moroccan expressions, especially when referring to children or to aspects of character, which were perhaps the terms used by his mother (*mehinda*: hard-head, *dawara*: tramp, *jin*: treasure).¹²

Iris Argeman, born in 1967 in Ashdod of immigrant parents, also remembers that her grandmother spoke in Moroccan Arabic to her father without her understanding anything of that unknown language. On the one hand she recalls her anger at learning that her mother had been forced to forget her mother tongue and on the other remembers her suffering at being forced to break with that past. Her mother, an emigrant of Marrakesh at six years old, with the *aliyat ha-noar* had grown up parentless in a *kibbutz*, where it was forbidden to speak any language but Hebrew on pain of not receiving postage stamps to write home and so making an even cleaner break with the bonds of her own family past:

My mother did not speak her mother's tongue and grew up without parents. She herself does not get angry but I do so for her and I fail to understand this submission to the language that has been imposed upon her.¹³

When her mother (the grandmother) reached Israel from Morocco, it was as if she was mute since she was unable to speak:

(The mother says) I was uprooted, I wasn't Israeli and I wasn't Moroccan but gradually, as your grandmother spoke to me only in Moroccan Arabic, I began to remember the language and despite that I spoke it to her only because I knew it was forbidden to speak it in any other place... I came as an immigrant when I was only a small child and I have grown up here but I feel something is missing... Mother, tell me again about when you were a child in Morocco, speak to me in Arabic. I can't talk to you in Arabic, I

11. Shimon Adaf, "Rohav ha-olam (In the Big World)," in *Teudot zehut, ha-dor ha-shilishi kotev mizrahit* (Identity card, the third generation writes in Mizrahi), ed. Mati Shmueloff, Naftali Shem-Tov, and Nir Biram, 20-36 (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 2007). All the translations from Hebrew in this paper are mine.

12. Shimon Adaf, *Volti bruciati dal sole/ Faced Burned by the Sun (Panim zrufe hamah)* (Rome: Atmosphere, 2013), 53, 199.

13. Iris Argeman, *Sfat em* (Mother Tongue) in *Teudot zehut*, ed. Mati Shmueloff et al., 129-136, 134.

don't remember or perhaps I do remember but the language won't come naturally.¹⁴

The memory of Morocco may also become tyrannical and this is what occurs with Marcel Bénabou. In the first pages of his novel he employs the term “tyranny” and makes a parallel with memory to express the intensity of these feelings, linked to his Moroccan past, which tormented him until he took it upon himself to entrust to the written word the task of freeing his past from the hypertrophy of memory, a past which refused to erase itself. Thus was born his family novel, in whose pages he evokes “the profusion, the burgeoning, the hypertrophy of memory, or rather the tyranny of this memory, encumbered with a Moroccan past which refused to move on”¹⁵ and “the brutal flood of memory,”¹⁶ and concluding: “I had to face up to the facts; Morocco was stitched to my memory as if the threads attaching me to that land refused to let go.”¹⁷ Fourteen years after the publication of the novel, in an interview I conducted with the writer, he spoke rather of the distance he had managed to put between his own Moroccan past and his later Parisian life, whilst it seemed to him that numerous friends and acquaintances had not succeeded in freeing themselves from the thick drape of this past which had managed to completely envelop them:

I kept my distance from all those who remained transfixed, those who were completely transfixed; 40 years have gone by now since they came to Paris and they're still living in Meknes... As for me, I had already kept my distance when I was in Meknes.¹⁸

According to Bénabou, the fact of being able to create this distance—and I would even add the fact of having in some sense cut himself off from his home town before arriving in France—would have allowed him to integrate into a new Parisian context without having to live with the obsession of this past. It is probable that the writing of the novel was made possible by the fact that the first steps to distance himself from and break with the town where he had grown up, *to have kept this distance*, had been taken while he was still in Morocco.

Yet it is Morocco itself and, above all, his hometown which become the place where the narration is set, a place of significant memory among the writers who have departed to emigrate to Israel. Erez Biton has dedicated

14. Ibid., 135.

15. Marcel Bénabou, *Jacob, Ménahem et Mimoun une épopée familiale* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 21. See also Emanuela Trevisan Semi, “Tyrannie de la mémoire en migration, le Maroc revisité par Marcel Bénabou, Ami Bouganim et Sami Berdugo,” in *Migrations maghrébines comparées: genre, ethnicité, religions*, ed. Yolande Cohen, Mireille Calle-Gruber, Elodie Vignon (Paris: Riveneuve, 2014), 107-117.

16. Ibid., 26

17. Ibid.

18. Paris, interview on May 6, 2009.

some of his poems to the festive atmosphere of the *mellah*¹⁹ and to marriage²⁰ in Morocco, alternating Moroccan Arabic and Hebrew. Gavriel Bensimhon has paid homage to Sefrou in Hebrew while Ami Bouganim, Shelomo Elbaz, Haim Shiran celebrate their own hometowns in French.

Gavriel Bensimhon who was born in 1938 in Sefrou and emigrated to Israel in 1947 aboard the first ship of immigrants, sets his play, *Melech Marokai*, (a Morocco king) in Sefrou.²¹

Most of the play, which can be read figuratively as the destiny awaiting the Jews who would emigrate to Israel, is set on the roofs of Sefrou while there takes place a slaughter of poets who believe themselves the Messiah. They decide to take flight and jump off the roof and head for the Promised Land, ending up mangled. This is a drama which takes up the Messianic euphoria of Moroccan Jews at the moment they decided to leave Morocco, in this case Sefrou, with much humour and poetry.

His largely autobiographical novel, entitled *Nearah be-hulzah kehullah* (the Young Girl in the Light-Blue Shirt) is set in Haifa, but the constant reference is Sefrou. The writer tells the story of Yonatan Marciano, the young Sefrou-born protagonist who recounts tales where the protagonists and characters retain recognisable features of Bensimhon's story. In the course of the novel, "our" city of Sefrou becomes a reference point and the fulcrum of the whole narration.²²

On the one hand the protagonist would like to lay waste to the past in order to integrate all the faster into his new society while on the other he requires that past to give a meaning to the present; this is the dilemma of a generation. The protagonist would like to be like the *sabra*, the native Israelis who, he writes, "are afraid of nothing" but to be like them he must "throw away the past, hide it, burn it."²³ However, how can the past be thrown away if Sefrou is a constant point of reference, the place of comparison and the root of his new existence? The present seems to exist only to recall Sefrou's past, according to the same model described by André Aciman for Alexandria in Egypt:

There are enormous parts of New York that do not exist for me: they don't have Egypt, they have no past, they mean nothing. Unless I can forge an Egyptian fiction around them, if only as a mood I recognize as Egyptian, they

19. Erez Biton, *Simhah ba-mellah* (Joy in the Mellah), in Erez Biton, *Minhah maroqait* (Tel Aviv: Ha Universita ha Yivrit, 1976), 32.

20. Erez Biton, *Hatunnah maroqait* (Moroccan Marriage), in Biton, *Minhat maroqait*, 36.

21. Gavriel Ben Simhon, *Melekh Maroqa'i: dramah kabalit be-shalosh ma'arakhot* (A Moroccan king, a cabalistic drama in three acts) (Tel Aviv: Adi, 1980).

22. Gavriel Bensimhon, *Neurah be-hulzah kehullah* (the Young Girl in the Light-Blue Shirt) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot Books, 2013), 12.

23. *Ibid.*

are as dead to me, as I am dead to them. Egypt is my catalyst, I break down life in Egyptian units.²⁴

In fact Sefrou and the Sefrou Jews remain central to the narration. The many young men native to Sefrou who died in the Israeli wars are mentioned: “Most of the young men who were with us in Cyprus and from our city (Sefrou) have fallen.”²⁵ It is believed that the arrival in Israel of public figures of an important status in the Jewish Sefrou community such as “Sidi Avraham” might also improve the status of the whole community in the new Israeli environment: “In our city of Sefrou, he (Sidi Avraham) would help everyone, freeing anyone possessed by demons and freeing men and women from the *dibbuq*.”²⁶ In popular imagination there was no doubt that such an influential public figure would be listened to by the new Israeli authorities: “The mayor will certainly listen to him and so will the head of government.”²⁷ The wait for the landing of the ships known to be carrying emigrants native of Sefrou “in order to seek those among the new arrivals who belonged to us”²⁸ is described in a vivid page, rich in colour and emotions.

The Israeli landscape echoes the one left behind and appears to acquire meaning precisely because it harks back to Morocco: “Jerusalem is like the Fes medina, the same alleys, same voices, same colours, same smells, same music and same children, but it is made of dreams.”²⁹ The Moroccan fritters called *spenz* are sold in the Haifa streets with the vendors shouting “Spenz, spenz!”,³⁰ giving to understand that together with the fritters an entire Moroccan past is on sale.

The present refers back to the past, to the *mellah* without the colour green, while the past allows the present to acquire meaning. The search for green, necessary for school, reminds the protagonist of the lack of green in the *mellah* and the power of imagination which made up for that lack.

Sefrou appears as a point of comparison and of constant reference: “In Sefrou there was no cinema because justice was assured by the rabbi, the treasurer, the teacher, the king and God,”³¹ in contrast to what happens in Israel where destinies are turned upside down; the richest person in Sefrou was not the richest in Haifa.³²

24. André Aciman, *Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Geroux, 2011), 73.

25. Bensimhon, *Nearah*, 27.

26. *Ibid.*, 129.

27. *Ibid.*, 12.

28. *Ibid.*, 183.

29. *Ibid.*, 148.

30. *Ibid.*, 150.

31. *Ibid.*, 16.

32. *Ibid.*, 109

The memories of stereotypes involving the various cities are still alive; the Jews of Oujda are shy and not bunglers like those of the Atlas. “In Oujda we are timid by nature, not like those of the Atlas who are noisy duffers,”³³ while in Israel the comparison and the perceptions are extended to other *mizrahim*; the Moroccans start dancing as soon as they hear music, as opposed to the Iraqis “who come to weddings but do not dance, preferring to remain seated. They have a feel for money but understand nothing of women.”³⁴

There are many dichotomies reflecting double belonging and references which take us from one place to another. In the case of the small portrait of Rabbi Amram ben Diwan, the famous Moroccan saint, which is given to the protagonist by his uncle, the dichotomy is overcome by his wearing it around his neck along with a portrait of Ben Gurion.³⁵ Dress also reflects double belonging: one day the protagonist decides to wear the *jellaba* to school as a sign of identity since the other pupils wear the uniforms of the associations they belong to. However, the *jellaba* is considered a strange item of clothing and thought by the teachers to be too strongly connected to an Arab past; it is therefore not allowed.³⁶ Listening to Tosca is seen as an alternative to listening to Zohra Fassia, the famous Moroccan singer who, once she had emigrated to Israel, was forgotten by everyone. The protagonist, however, wonders why in Wadi Salib, a neighbourhood of immigrants from Arab countries and where the Black Panther protests broke out, he hears the music of the Tosca coming from the houses and not Zohra’s: “Because the radio is theirs (of the *ashkenazim*),” his uncle tells him, “and we ourselves don’t have record players.”³⁷

In the narrative we find entire texts of songs in Arabic and when suddenly the sound of their favourite Moroccan singers floods into the house:

Slowly all those who happened to be at home came in. And one by one began to move. First the women, Sultana and Freha, both surprised, and then my brother Amor and the children, followed by my mother and father, and finally my grandfather Avraham and uncle Amram. All were swaying to the rhythm of the song as if taking part in a mysterious rite³⁸ and when they heard the voice of Sami al Maghribi the neighbourhood began to dance along with him to the love song.

Ami Bouganim, born in 1951 in Mogador (today Essaouira) and who emigrated to Israel in 1970, has never ceased to evoke Mogador in all his

33. *Ibid.*, 133.

34. *Ibid.*, 134.

35. *Ibid.*, 15.

36. *Ibid.*, 47-8.

37. *Ibid.*, 61.

38. *Ibid.*, 64.

tales and novels. This writer has continued to write his stories in French, the language he grew up with and the only one allowing him to tell of his exile, an exile comprising three exiles, from Jerusalem, Spain and Morocco.

In particular it is in *Es-Saouira de Mogador*³⁹ where Bouganim pays homage to his own native city. He tells us of the origins of Mogador and its history, its nature, its artists, its Sufi Islam and all of its own specific character—the Jews of former times and the Jews of today, the Christians, of the priest of a church that no longer has any congregation, himself as a child and his own family, the actors of today, poets, dreamers, shopkeepers and museum curators; yet most of all he tells of his nostalgia. He speaks of his return visits to Mogador, of having stayed in what was once his house (the second, now a *riad*) and of his disappointment at Israel. He dwells on the coexistence with Muslims but without mythicizing it and speaks of his own position as a non-believer taking an interest in Judaism, Islam and Christianity. However, he lingers above all on the wind, the ocean, the waves and the seagulls of Mogador. It is not just a Jewish Mogador he evokes but a Mogador in the round, Mogador as a common city:

I remained Moroccan, a son of Mogador, more Berber than Arab, with Jewish insanity. And yet in Morocco we were living as foreigners. It was not our country and could not become so. We were at once admitted and excluded, persecuted and protected, hidden and visible. We were happy and unhappy, confiding and reserved ... We did not wish to bother anyone—we maintained a prudent reserve—and we did not wish to mix—we kept our distance. We were always about to depart and we had been so for thousands of years, destined to a better fate.⁴⁰

Shelomo Elbaz, originally from Marrakesh, emigrated to Israel when he was already 33 years old and the long period he spent in Morocco is reflected in his writing and already evident in the title of his memoirs: *Marrakesh-Jerusalem: The Native Land of my Soul*.

A double or multiple belonging is claimed and highlighted and the two cities, Marrakesh and Jerusalem, are linked in a special way:

“These form a pair with this city of mine. One saw me born, Marrakesh; in the other, Jerusalem, I will end my days. My life, either a classic dated verse or an archaic biblical extract, will have had its two hemistiches, about the same length.”⁴¹

39. Ami Bouganim, *Es-Saouira de Mogador* (témoignage, Avant Propos, Waterloo, 2013).

40. Ibid., 44.

41. Shelomo Elbaz, *Marrakesh-Jerusalem: The Native Land of my Soul* (Louvain-la-neuve: Promise, 2013), 101-102.

Even pronouncing the names of the two cities becomes an occasion to recall one's biographical journey:

“Marrakesh (pronounced M'rakch)

Four savage consonants, hard and resonant, propped up by the single phonic vowel of this non-Berber...

Jerusalem (Yerrouchalaim)

The other arrow of the compass of my biographical journey—the euphonic and eurhythmic structure of this word, with five musical syllables ending, oh wonder, in a languorous *aim*, rhyming with *maim* (water) and *chamaim* (skies), was made to beguile our children's ears...⁴²

“This strange operation, recalling the cinematic technique of “dissolving,” takes place in my interior space and in actual daily life. To the extent that, thinking Marrakesh, my lips say Jerusalem despite myself. And vice versa.”⁴³

The two cities are joined together by golden threads:

“Golden threads have been stretched between the town of Machrek and that of the Maghreb. Threads of gold or silk, the web of my life. In order to weave the threads which connect these two towns (M'rakch and Jerusalem) my imagination has called upon the collective memory of a community, that community over there, in the distant Marrakesh ...”⁴⁴

The cities mark the beginning and the end, birth and death:

“Two towns at the extremes of my life. In one I was born in and in the second my life shall end. They are hitched together, so linked that sometimes I can no longer tell the difference.”⁴⁵

Haim Shiran, a film maker native of Meknes, writes in his autobiography essay that:

“Life has certainly smiled more on me in my mature years in Israel than in my childhood. However, as my career progresses and the pages turn, I have never ceased—I am well aware of it—to shower praise upon my Meknes past ... some will say that this book is a love song to Meknes ... a friend of my youth (she said to

42. Ibid., 105.

43. Ibid., 103-104.

44. Ibid., 91.

45. Ibid.

me): ‘Why do you praise Meknes so much for we were not really so happy there’. In contrast to the “reality” and to my intentions, despite the pain accompanying the re-opening of old sores, I was probably unable get out of my mind this indelible love which untidily encompasses everything relating to my origins.”⁴⁶

Aside from memory of the home city and the Arabic of Morocco, the lifewriting of the generation born in Morocco speaks of traditional items, of specific celebrations such as the *Mimuna*, of the traditional recipes of the Passover *Seder*, or of the Lalla Solika tomb in Fes. These are threads joining that generation to a past which in part they have been able to bring with them and in part anchors them to something lying over the horizon and which cannot not be moved, only memorisable thanks to written narration.

Even if in this narrative feelings of multi-belonging and exile remain particularly well-rooted, nonetheless discussions surrounding the controversial and at the time distressing subject of the possibility of emigrating from Morocco and the difficult integration into Israel are widely represented. All this serves to compare the present to the past, to link one to the other, to build bridges.

The importance of the *Mimuna* celebration,⁴⁷ which is held on the last day of *Pesah* for example, is witnessed by the fact that it is remembered by many of the authors being examined. Uzziel Hazan in particular dedicates almost three pages to it of an almost ethnographic flavour, listing the details of the *Mimuna* according to how his childhood eyes had perceived them: “We were furnished with two nice white pillow cases and a ringing tambourine. The doors of the houses were open to all comers and brightly lit up the animated streets. Jews in celebratory clothing exchanged best wishes of success and prosperity (*trab’hou outsa’dou*) and went into each other’s houses to enjoy the cakes and the special decorations of the celebration... (there follows a full and accurate description of all the pastries). Anyone entering got sprayed-green leaves of mint or lettuce soaked in a bowl of milk to sprinkle upon anyone happening by. Lady Mimouna, we wish you bliss and success (*Alala Mimuna ambarka messouda*) as we struck the tambourine, and our pillow cases filled up from visit to visit.”⁴⁸

46. Haim Shiran (Shkérane) and Fabienne Bergmann, *Le rocher d’origine* (Paris: La compagnie littéraire, 2013), 97.

47. On the significance of the *Mimuna* celebration, see Harvey E. Goldberg, “The *Mimuna* and the Minority Status of Moroccan Jews,” *Ethnology* 17 (1978) 1: 75-87 and on the memory of the *Mimuna* among the Moroccan Muslims of today see Trevisan Semi and Sekkat Hatimi, *Mémoire*, 104-111.

48. Uzziel Hazan, *Armand. Entre fuite et voyage (Armand)* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003) (translation from Hebrew), 170.

A minute description of food and recipes, the repository of memory par excellence, of the Passover *Seder* can be found in Ruth Knafo Sitton.⁴⁹ It is during the Passover *Seder*, the traditional occasion for the wider family to meet, where the author sets the discussion on the wisdom of leaving the Morocco of the 1970s and of the various possible options, as we will return to later on.

Among the items most often recorded we find carpets and coloured Berber blankets, brought personally from Morocco or shipped at a later date; these function as metonymic objects. They served to improve the quality of the poor, grey, shoddy furnishings distributed by the Jewish Agency and represented a point of comparison with the country they had departed, full of colours and scents and rich in craftwork⁵⁰—a carpet sold in secret to buy a record player plunges a mother into despair in the novel quoted by Gavriel Bensimhon, while a blanket arriving from Morocco turns into an event celebrated by the whole family for Galit Dahan Carlibach.⁵¹ In fact a mysterious package smelling of Morocco is enough to leave one emotionally stunned. “I’m convinced the package will give off one of those special scents which will remind me of the narrow alleys of the *Sūq*... I will not throw the wrapping paper away...”⁵² “I opened the package and on unfolding the purple Kaftan embroidered with gold thread, I was enveloped by the smell of Morocco emanating from the box. Whiffs of perfume intoxicate the senses and allow memories wrapped in oblivion to re-emerge.”⁵³

The sense of multi-belonging is a feature of many of the authors we are considering. The Jews belong to several places at once and the possibility of having a sense of belonging to places which contain the double characteristics of being at once a place of birth and a place of exile⁵⁴ is a part of the Jewish experience, with its long history of diaspora. For example, the experience of the time spent in Spain, which in turn became an exile, has remained firmly anchored in a sense of identity and collective belonging for Sephardic Jews.

Mois Benarroch is a perfect example of this multi-belonging. In the *Tetouan Trilogy*, a novel comprising three parts, he questions himself about this strange feeling of belonging to Spain, the place of origin of his family

49. Ruth Knafo Sitton, *The Road to Fez* (Washington: Counterpoint, 2001), 91-2.

50. David Elmoznino, *Palais et Jardins (Armonot u-vustanim)* (Ashdod: ed. Brit Kodesh, s.d.) (translation from Hebrew), 186.

51. Galit Dahan Carlibach, *Ahoti kallah we-ha-gan naul*, (My Sister, my Bride and the Locked Garden) (Kinneret: Zmora Bitan, 2010), 152.

52. Elmoznino, *Palais*, 159-160.

53. *Ibid.*, 164.

54. Trevisan Semi, “La mise en scène”; Efrat Rosen-Lapidot and Harvey E. Goldberg, “The Triple Loci of Jewish-Maghribi Ethnicity: Voluntary Associations in Israel and in France,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 18 (2013) 1: 111-130.

before moving to Tetouan. He writes: “How can I be an exile of Spain, not being born there? And since not even my father was born there and not even my grandfather, how can I be an exile in every place? My home is exile... You will forever be an exile because in Spain too we were exiles. There too we felt nostalgia for Jerusalem...but here (*in Jerusalem*) we are full of nostalgia for a place that could be Seville but also Jerusalem and Tetouan at the same time.”⁵⁵ The writer probes these feelings within him when he writes; perhaps it may happen that some people feel exiled in their own land, in their own land of Israel, but feel at home in the place of their exile. And later on: “Of all exiles only Spain has been our land. We felt a part only in Spain, four centuries ago.”⁵⁶

Exile, a sort of fabric which allows the weaving of small *chez soi*, is dealt with at length by Daniel Sibony, an emigré to France:

“I myself go back to my home town where I have never felt at home and I only gather the impression of having a sense of home when I leave and of having had departure in my body throughout my childhood...It is an exile which follows on from another exile where we were at home. In Marrakesh we were well “rooted” and our roots were made of exile. Just being there meant we had departed a little... our exile was of the kind where one fabricates small, uncertain *chez soi* which are delicious, festive, luminous havens.”⁵⁷

The question of why the Jews left Morocco, still a matter of scientific debate today, is a thorny and complex issue.⁵⁸ In an attempt to provide answers, David Bensoussan has two young men, one Muslim and one Jew, converse and in this conversation their different stances are expressed. In their exchanges, feelings of nostalgia are attributed above all to Muslims, who feel the shadows of the Jewish past weigh on them, “the past of our town haunts us” but at the same time the discourse of the young Arab is felt to be hypocritical because it would not include as victims of terrorism those Jews of Mogador dying in Israel:

55. Mois Benarroch, *Ha-Trilogiyah ha-tetuanit* (Trilogy from Tetuan) (Yerusalem: Muvan, 2007):13 (From the first part, *Miftahot Tetouan*).

56. Mois Benarroch, *Ha-Trilogiyah ha-tetuanit*, 145 (From the second part, *Lucena*).

57. Daniel Sibony, *Marrakesh, le départ* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2009) 14-5.

58. Yaron Tsur, *Qehillah Qeruah 1943-1954* (A Torn Community: the Jews of Morocco and Nationalism 1943-1954) (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 2001) (Hebrew); Emanuela Trevisan Semi, “Double Trauma and Manifold Narratives: Jews’ and Muslims’ Representations of the Departure of Moroccan Jews in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9 (2010) : 107-25; Emanuela Trevisan Semi, “Différents récits sur le départ des juifs du Maroc dans les années 1960-1970,” in *La bienvenue et l’adieu. Migrants juifs et musulmans au Maghreb XVI^e-XX^e siècles*, ed. Frédéric Abécassis et al. (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 67-97.

“I can conceive that the French have returned to their home country,” says Mounir. “But why have the Jews left the town? They felt at home and lived in friendship with us!”

“They have nonetheless gone back to their homeland,” says Elika,

“But how can we speak of homeland? They had lived on Moroccan soil for more than two millennia. The past of our town haunts us”, declares Mounir. Many of our elders talk of nostalgia for the town “at the time of the Jews”. Your ghosts gnaw at our walls.

“Why have there not been included the Israeli victims of terrorism of Moroccan or Mogador origin? Where is that nostalgia for past times that you so love to bring up?”, exclaims Elika.⁵⁹

A similar conversation, this time taking place between a Jewish family during the long *Pesach* dinner (as I have mentioned above) and set in the 1970s, concerns the possibility of leaving Morocco (after recalling the actions of the Zionists who had come to empty the Berber villages and the astonishment of the Berbers unable to grasp how it was possible to leave suddenly up sticks in a flash, give up everything they had ever known, for a land they had never seen):

Tonton Elie lifts his head from a prayer book: the time is not ripe yet.

A land they’d never seen but that they knew in their bones, says papy.

Elie shrugs, I know that we’ll all eventually end up in Israel. It’s the only place we’ll ever feel at peace.

At peace! cries Haim. Are you crazy?...

Why not move to Paris? asks Justine

Since when do the French love Jews?

No one loves us but at least I won’t live in fear.

I’ll tell you who loves us, shouts Haim... King Hassan loves us and has sworn to protect us...

I want to be free! says Mani. To feel completely free. To walk in a land that’s mine. Not a land that *suffers* me.

...Haim. Israel will suffer you too. The Jews from Germany and Eastern Europe see us as Arabs, not Jews. So where is home for this family?

59. David Bensoussan, *La rosace du roi Salomon* (Montreal: Edition du Lys, s.d.), 230.

Why not in America? I suggested earlier at the *Seder*:

Gaby said, “Why? So we can all turn out like you and forget what we are?”⁶⁰

The fears felt by the more elderly during the times of departure are also recalled in a few brief but dense lines by Uzziel Hazan, a native of a small village in the Atlas Mountains:

“‘We have lived for generations and generations in our little village without ever leaving it’, chimed in my aunt, hiding her fear of any possible change. ‘But what about this nostalgia for a land mentioned in the Bible, a land we have been taught about and which we do not know,’ added the grandfather, allusively...”⁶¹

On the other hand, what was for many a hard awakening from childhood dreams and highlights the themes surrounding the problematic integration into Israel, is recalled by Jacob Cohen, an emigré not to Israel but to France:

His dream was almost wrecked in Yeruham (*a development town in the south of Israel*) just like most of the dreams which the young had brought to the outskirts–dormitories far from the cities and forgotten...they had left the *mellah* because they could expect nothing from the Muslims, despite the fine words, and found themselves in a similar situation, exposed to the sarcasm of comedians and politicians. The Moroccans again bowed their heads, this time before other Jews believing in Western superiority...a portrait of the colonised clung to him easily. Ashamed of his origins, he said he was from Marseille.⁶²

A number of writers of the 1.5 generation have written on the criticality and suffering of the integration process, among whom we have Erez Biton, in his poetry especially, with *Qnia be-Dizengof* (Purchase at Dizengoff), Bouganim (*Le cri de l'arbre*), Mois Benarroch (in poetry and in *Ha-Trilogya ha-Tetuanit*) and Gabriel Bensimhon (*Nearah be-hulzah kehullah*). With particularly vocal tones Benarroch accuses Israel of having stirred up juvenile delinquency, previously almost non-existent in Morocco, and has his protagonist say that he regrets emigrating to Israel because if he had done so to France or Canada he would have got his high-school diploma and gone to university, while in Israel he has ended up in prison for theft. With sarcastic tones he delivers judgement: “When we were in Tetuan it was said that it was better to have a room in Erets Israel than a big house in Morocco, but is it

60. Knafo Sitton, *The Road*, 98.

61. Hazan, *Armand*, 22.

62. Jacob Cohen, *Du danger du monter sur la terrasse* (Rabat: Tarik Éditions, 2006), 35.

better to be in prison in Israel or free in exile? No one had ever told us that... The only positive side of prison is that most inmates are Sephardic Jews and you come across very few Ashkenazi Jews. If that's the way it is, well, a mouldy prison in Erets Israel is better than a forty-room house in Morocco. Long live Zionism!"⁶³

The writings of second–or third–generation authors are totally different; they often choose to give voice to the female members of the family, a mother or grandmother, often illiterate, to narrate their Morocco.

In Sami Berdugo it is the story of the mother while in Galit Dahan Carlbach it is that of the grandmother. These figures are integrated into novels set in Israel, the country which becomes the focus of the narrative while the native country of the parents or grandparents becomes central only to a part of that story.

In the novel by Berdugo,⁶⁴ the narration of the son, an Israeli librarian, cynical, frosty and disillusioned, alternates and contrasts with that of his illiterate mother, an immigrant from Morocco, very down to earth and fiery. The mother forces her son to listen to her story so he may realise that the world is much vaster than this “little country” which is Israel and which her son considers the centre of the world: “Do not believe that the world is completely enclosed in this country where you grew up,”⁶⁵ his mother tells him, as in effect there is a lot more. In contrast, Morocco becomes the place where events had taken place which were full of meaning and which not only must be recounted but which children have the duty to attend to. Morocco becomes the place of action and light, and Israel that of inaction, passivity and obscurity, just as in other stories by Berdugo. Of these two characters, it is once again the mother who occupies the greater part of the narration at the expense of the son and it is the story of the mother which attracts the greater interest of the reader, while that of the son remains trivial and insignificant. A sort of verbal dispute between languages and personal histories is born of this difference: the language and the history of the son are reported in correct Hebrew with an elevated register while the language and history of the mother are narrated in a mix of jostling languages, in a Hebrew full of grammatical errors, in *darija*, the Moroccan dialect, in French and finally in a language which is hers alone.⁶⁶ It is a language which is deliberately without translation or notes: “because that's how my mother expressed herself, without caring

63. Benarroch, *Ha trilogyah*, 134-135.

64. Sami Berdugo, *Elle ha-devarim* (The Way Things Are) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-meuhad, 2010).

65. *Ibid.*, 45.

66. See interview with Berdugo by the author in Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *Tre scrittori mizrahi a Venezia*, (*Three Mizrahi Writers in Venice*) (Florence: La giuntina, 2015), 53-57.

whether I understood or not,” the author told me during an interview.⁶⁷ In the shift from the spoken to the written language, we find ourselves caught in between and it is within this ambiguous space that we find the insertion of words of another language, of heterolingualism and hybridity.

In this family novel, the language of the mother is a substitute for a native land where different identities blend as in a composite language.

Like Marcel Bénabou, Berdugo too needed to find a form of written expression to allow this excess of recollections and memory to take shape. The result is that he pays homage to the generation of fathers or, rather, of mothers, in other words the generation that preceded him. In the case of Berdugo, this language has spanned a generation which has handed it down. This generation either did not wish to or was unable to convey memory via a written form but nonetheless claimed its right to retain it in the form of oral narration.

Galit Dahan Carlibach, who was raised in Sderot and then moved to Jerusalem, is of the third generation and has set his novel *Ahoti kallah we-ha-gan naul* (My Sister, my Bride and the Locked Garden) in Jerusalem in a home of Arab origin, which has become a *Mizrahi* house with a wall made of mud as was the custom in Morocco⁶⁸ and a garden where is grown the argan brought of Morocco which “resisted DDT”⁶⁹ together with other plants brought “from over there.”⁷⁰ The house contains four women belonging to three different generations.

There is a traditional Moroccan oven (*farnea*) for making bread even though, as the author writes, it was not easy to find the straw needed to build that specific kind of oven, which is sacred enough to be compared to a temple (“when the grandmother is standing next to the oven it looks like a temple”⁷¹) The grandmother’s reference points constitute a culture of magic populated with *jinn* and which new generations are required to abide by (it was forbidden to pour boiling water into the sink because within the pipes there were supposed to be the *jinn* who tended to get irritated; cutting one’s nails at night was also not allowed).⁷² It is a world which has come down to us with the loss, through the shift from one culture to another, of much that sustained it and of which it was built.

67. Interview carried out by the author in Tel Aviv in May 2010.

68. Dahan Carlibach, *Ahoti*, 15.

69. The reference to the use of DDT as a welcome for the *mizrahim* arriving in Israel is a recurrent theme in *mizrahi* literature. In Dahan Carlibach, *Ahoti*, 12.

70. *Ibid.*, 20.

71. *Ibid.*, 15.

72. *Ibid.*, 61.

The second part of the novel takes place in the Atlas Mountains and tells the story of grandmother Sarah whose ancestors had left their little village in the Atlas because the wife had been (eyeing, when you look at a girl with desire) eyed up by a Muslim official who forced the family to flee in the night. This part, as in the case of Berdugo, sees Morocco burst onto the scene with the novel in full flow thanks to a piece of diaspora history which makes the past return to the Israel of today.

We also find a Moroccan past in Yamit Armbrister,⁷³ a third-generation writer who left Israel for the United States. In this case, where there is no recourse to any direct mediation by a figure belonging to a preceding generation, the past is transformed into a distant writing, into nostalgia for a Morocco filtered through Israeli ideology. It is a Morocco which ends up being trivialized and fed by many Western stereotypes and, case in point, Israeli ones. There lacks the freshness of a first-person narrative and the story draws on an often confused and rather incoherent memory. However, this memory does have the merit of being presented as an individual one wishing to have its voice heard in the reconstruction of that past.

To conclude, we can see in the narrations examined that there emerges a strong feeling of multi-belonging, where the native town aspires to being a town of memory and where the native language aspires to one of memory. This is all the more significant when we are dealing with writers who have emigrated to what, according to Zionist discourse, should have been their mythical home country. In practice, the swinging of feelings between the two countries accompanies the life-writing of the writers under consideration and often the return to the past suggests the possibility that there is an ongoing negotiation with one's own past so that it may be used in the present as a redefinition of personal and collective identity.

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73. Yamit Armbrister, *Ishah maroqait ahat* (A Moroccan Woman) (Tel Aviv: Ha kibbutz ha-meuhad, 2013).

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ملخص: إعادة النظر في كتابات يهود المغرب عن حياتهم وسيرهم الذاتية.

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى التركيز على سرد وحكاية السير الذاتية لكتاب مغاربة يهود من إسرائيل ومن الشتات، باعتبارهم أصحاب مشاريع ذاكرة حقيقيين لم يبرزوا إلا قليلاً في الرواية الإسرائيلية الوطنية فشكلت بالتالي مساهمتهم في بناء السرد المضاد جانباً هاماً من جوانب الإنتاج المكتوبة على مدى العقود الأخيرة. ويتضمن تحليل إنتاج النصوص الخاصة بالكتابة عن حياة اليهود المغاربة كتاباً إسرائيليّين من أصول مغربية تم إدراجها بناء على مشاعر عميقة بالانتماء إلى المغرب الذي لا يزال يعتبر وطناً لديهم. وتساهم كتابة ذكريات الحياة الشخصية في بناء ذاكرة جماعية وتاريخ أكثر تنوعاً. ويساهم هذا السرد في إظهار عودة الوطن و"الوطن الوهمي" لأضواء هذه الهجرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشتات المغربي، اليهود المغاربة، الذاكرة الشخصية، الذاكرة الجماعية.

Résumé: Repenser le Maroc: écriture de la vie des juifs du Maroc.

Cet article vise à se concentrer sur les récits autobiographiques écrits par des écrivains juifs marocains d’Israël et de la diaspora, les considérant comme de véritables “entrepreneurs de mémoire” qui ont peu figuré dans le récit national israélien et dont la contribution à la construction d’une contre-narration qui a constitué un aspect important de la production écrite au cours des dernières décennies. L’analyse de la production des textes de vie de la diaspora juive au Maroc comprend celle d’écrivains israéliens d’origine marocaine qui ont été incorporés en raison de leur sentiment profond d’appartenance au Maroc, encore considéré comme une patrie. Les mémoires personnelles la vie-écriture contribue à la construction d’une mémoire collective et à une histoire plus diversifiée. Ce récit contribue à montrer le retour de la patrie et de la “patrie imaginaire” au centre de l’attention pour cette migration.

Mots clés: diaspora marocaine, juif marocain, mémoires personnelles, mémoire collective.

Abstract: Rethinking Morocco: Life-writing of Jews from Morocco.

This paper aims to focus on the autobiographical narratives written by Jewish Moroccan writers from Israel and from the diaspora, considering them as true *entrepreneurs de memoire* who have figured little in the national Israeli narrative and whose contribution to the building of a counter-narrative has formed an important aspect of written production over recent decades. The analysis of the production of life-writing texts of the Morocco Jewish diaspora includes that of Israeli writers of Moroccan origins that have been incorporated because of their deep feelings of belonging to Morocco, still considered a homeland. Personal memories life-writing contribute to the building of a collective memory and to a more diversified history. This narrative contributes to show the return of the homeland and of the “imaginary homeland” to the limelight for this migration.

Key words: Moroccan Diaspora, Moroccan Jewry, personal memories, collective memory.

Resumen: Repensar Marruecos: escritura de vida de judíos de Marruecos.

Este artículo pretende enfocarse en las narraciones autobiográficas escritas por escritores marroquíes judíos de Israel y de la diáspora, considerándolos como verdaderos emprendedores de memoria que han figurado poco en la narrativa nacional israelí y cuya contribución a la construcción de una contra-narrativa ha formado Un aspecto importante de la producción escrita durante

las últimas décadas. El análisis de la producción de textos de escritura de la vida de la diáspora judía de Marruecos incluye el de escritores israelíes de origen marroquí que se han incorporado debido a sus profundos sentimientos de pertenencia a Marruecos, todavía considerada patria. Memorias personales La escritura de la vida contribuye a la construcción de una memoria colectiva ya una historia más diversificada. Esta narración contribuye a mostrar el retorno de la patria y de la “patria imaginaria” al centro de atención para esta migración.

Palabras clave: Diáspora marroquí, judería marroquí, memorias personales, memoria colectiva.