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Basatin

TALE OF A CEMETERY

FALL 2021 | ISSUE 8



Basatin: Reviving a Forgotten Past

ARCE Restores a Historic Egyptian Jewish Cemetery with Support from the U.S. Embassy and the Karaite Jews of America

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The tombs of Moussa Ibrahim Menasha and Marietta Lichaa Menasha, following restoration work

Located in the modern neighborhood of Basatin in the city of Cairo are the remains of one of the world's oldest operational Jewish cemeteries, which once sprawled across 147 hectares (363 acres) of land. The cemetery was officially established by decree of the Mamluk Sultan al-Ashraf Qaitbay in 1482, apparently in

response to a request by the Jewish community to expand on their existing cemetery in Fustat, Cairo's predecessor as the capital of Egypt. Given the limited available land in the increasingly busy capital, Qaitbay instead chose to allocate new land in Basatin to the Jewish community, which at that time would have been located on the undeveloped outskirts of the medieval city.

Today, the remains of this sizable cemetery comprise seven physically distinct components. These are the larger public cemetery known colloquially as Basatin Cemetery, five smaller private cemeteries named for the Cattau, Ventura, Mosseri, Ades, and the Lichaa and Menasha families, and a cemetery that houses the remains of the Rav Haim Capusi – a 17th century spiritual figure whose eponymous synagogue still stands in Historic Cairo's Jewish Quarter. While documenting the architecture at all these sites, ARCE's restoration efforts focused on the Lichaa and Menasha cemetery, which is the sole surviving



portion of what was once the Karaite section of the original cemetery.

A Fading Space

Since the 1960s Basatin has become an increasingly industrialized zone of the city and is now known locally for its commercial production of marble and stone. This shift saw the cemetery slowly taken over by both governmental and informal urban settlements and was caused, at least in part, by a modern expulsion of Jews from Egypt as a result of political tensions that arose from a series of wars between Egypt and Israel. Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the 1956 Suez Crisis, and the subsequent Six Day War in 1967, the Egyptian government progressively introduced a number of aggressive policy changes that included the seizure of assets belonging to Egyptian Jews and bans that barred them from reentering Egypt if they traveled abroad. On a social level, the once well-in-

tegrated and accepted local Jewish population also found themselves increasingly and deeply impacted by growing levels of anti-Jewish feeling.

The result of all these changes was a steady and substantial exodus of Egyptian Jews, once estimated at 80,000 in 1948, to no more than two dozen remaining in Egypt today. Of the original census from 1948, there were also an estimated 5,000 Karaite Jews, virtually all of whom had left Egypt permanently by 1970. Today, approximately 40,000 Karaite Jews are scattered across the globe.

Without a population to maintain and use purpose-built spaces such as the cemetery in Basatin, it quickly fell into disrepair and was encroached on. Beginning in the 1980s, the northern and eastern areas of Basatin were slowly converted into informal settlements and workshops for marble and stone masons and their families, built directly over large swaths of the cemetery, while the south was developed

Street view of the Menasha cemetery, following restoration





An Ottoman court document from 1649 confirming the Jewish community's right to the land of Basatin going back to the rule of Sultan Qaitbay
COURTESY: DROP OF MILK

into middle income government-subsidized housing – an extension of the expanding affluent residential neighborhood of Maadi. Beginning in the 1980s, if not earlier, the majority of tombstones and mausoleums in the cemetery were also stripped of their marble, granite, and metal fixtures for reuse. Then, in the late 1990s, the cemetery was bisected by the construction of the Cairo Ring Road.

These changes in the urban usage and landscape of Basatin dramatically impacted the identity of the cemetery and the physical conditions of its surviving plots. The seven remaining cemetery plots are effectively separate and independent entities that constitute no more than 11 hectares (27 acres) of the original 147 that composed the cemetery in the medieval period. They were also in very poor condition, having been subjected to illegal dumping, looting, and continued encroachment from the heavily populated neighborhood that surrounds them.

Changes in the Tide

Drop of Milk, a non-profit organization led by Magda Haroun that represents the remaining Jewish Egyptian community and its surviving assets, was instrumental in raising awareness of the existence of the cemeteries and the need to protect and document them as part



of the historic record. In 2018, a flurry of executive orders was implemented by the Egyptian government to preserve Egypt's remaining Jewish monuments. Drop of Milk's Deputy, Samy Ibrahim, recalled how, for the first time, there was a larger scale interest in the survival of the cemetery in Basatin. "A delegation came from the United States and they met with President al-Sisi and raised the issue of the cemetery and emphasized how deteriorated its condition was and how things could not continue like this," he explained. "Within two hours of finishing their meeting, I was contacted by the municipality and told a team was at the cemetery and was beginning to clean. I asked them 'why?' and they told me that they had received an order from the top to clear the cemetery of squatters and garbage."

Ibrahim was out of Cairo at the time of the call and promptly returned the next day and made his way to the cemetery. "They were cleaning using bulldozers and trucks and the media published images of this work as it was happening, so this really made people

A new information panel greets visitors upon entry to the Menasha family cemetery



ABOUT Karaite Jews of America (KJA)

The Karaite Jews of America (KJA) is a 501 (c)3 non-profit organization established in San Francisco in 1982, entirely supported by donated funds and managed by volunteer leadership.

KJA's mission celebrates the legacy and preserves the religious and cultural traditions that represent its members' core identity by fostering community within its synagogue, Congregation B'nai Israel, by providing meaningful worship, delivering caring life cycle resources, and offering inspiring social and educational activities for children and adults. KJA is focused on broadening the community's cultural and religious traditions by remaining relevant in an evolving world, and by inspiring the next generation of Karaite Jews to carry on their history.

KJA also works to inform and educate others about Karaite heritage and traditions through programs, publications, and a strong internet presence, with the objective of fostering mutual respect and creating strong alliances in an ever-challenging social environment. *For more information, contact davidovadia62@gmail.com.*

take notice and realize this was something important," he said. Drop of Milk began receiving donations to continue the work and Ibrahim was charged with prioritizing and overseeing the clearing of additional areas of the main Basatin Cemetery. Ibrahim was also already familiar with ARCE from a previous Antiquities Endowment Fund (AEF) award that Drop of Milk had been granted in 2017 to document Cairo's synagogues, and he suggested a partnership.

"We worked with ARCE to help identify which cemetery to prioritize for the project and we settled on the Lichaa and Menasha site because it presented the most potential for good and lasting results: it is accessible from a main road and is better located for potential visitation. Our shared vision since the beginning has been to make this a future tourism destination that educates visitors on the history, culture, and presence of the Egyptian Jews," Ibrahim explained. ARCE applied for and was subsequently awarded an Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP)



grant from the U.S. Embassy in Cairo to carry out the proposed project. The project kicked off in 2019 and targeted not only the restoration of the Lichaa and Menasha portion of the cemetery, but the architectural documentation of the other known cemeteries in Basatin and the production of a management plan to assist Drop of Milk in their future work in the area. “It was really a good match, with ARCE’s expertise in conservation and our familiarity with the site and its history,” Ibrahim noted.

Cairo’s Karaite Cemetery

The grave sites for the Lichaa and Menasha families date to roughly 1937 and the site includes small private plots of land for the two families. Both plots contain corner rooms that would have been used for family visits, and the Menasha plot features an adjacent domed mausoleum built on limestone open arches. The style of the architecture is eclectic: Islamic motifs such as muqarnas (“stalactites”) and crenellations

stand alongside classical elements. The decorative metalwork incorporates the motif of the six-pointed star on doors, screens, and the finial of the dome. Modern materials such as terrazzo (poured and polished colored concrete with marble chip inclusions) are also used. The tombstones are made of marble or granite with incised characters, sometimes filled with lead, and contain inscriptions in Arabic, Hebrew, and French. Circular marble headstones were used for the tombs under the dome in the Menasha plot.

The Menasha family cemetery, before (page 10) and after (above) the work carried out by ARCE and the installation of the garden and seating area donated by the KJA

“Of the original census from 1948, there were an estimated 5,000 Karaite Jews, **virtually of all whom had left Egypt permanently by 1970.**”

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All of these features were documented and restored by ARCE's project team, led initially by John Shearman, past Associate Director, and continued under the supervision of Nicholas Warner, Director of Cultural Heritage Projects. The team also included Mohamed Mokhtar, supervising architect, Ahmed Shafiq, assistant architect, conservators Khaled al-Sayed Afifi and Heba Chawky, and other skilled workers. Work began immediately upon receipt of the grant in 2019 and completed in mid-2020.

To offset further vandalism or uncontrolled access, work to repair the breaches in the perimeter walls of the Karaite graveyards was prioritized. Disused informal structures that had been built within the graveyards were removed. Conservation activities such as cleaning of the original marble plaques and granite tomb markers in both plots were done in addition to refitting those which were displaced from their original positions. The Menasha family room roof was at risk of collapse and several interventions such as ceiling refurbishment and support, roof installation,

and isolation were done to avoid future structural problems. All woodwork had to either be replaced or refurbished, and the renovated windows and doors were treated and coated to protect them well into the future. The Menasha plot's mausoleum received extensive conservation as well, including pinning of the arches, repairs to the walls and the dome itself, replacement of the stolen marble headstones, and refurbishment of the terrazzo flooring in the interior. Conservation of this structure took several months. Lastly, a narrow plot of land that had formerly been an access road between the Menasha and Lichaa family plots was also cleaned of waste and incorporated within the site within a new boundary wall.

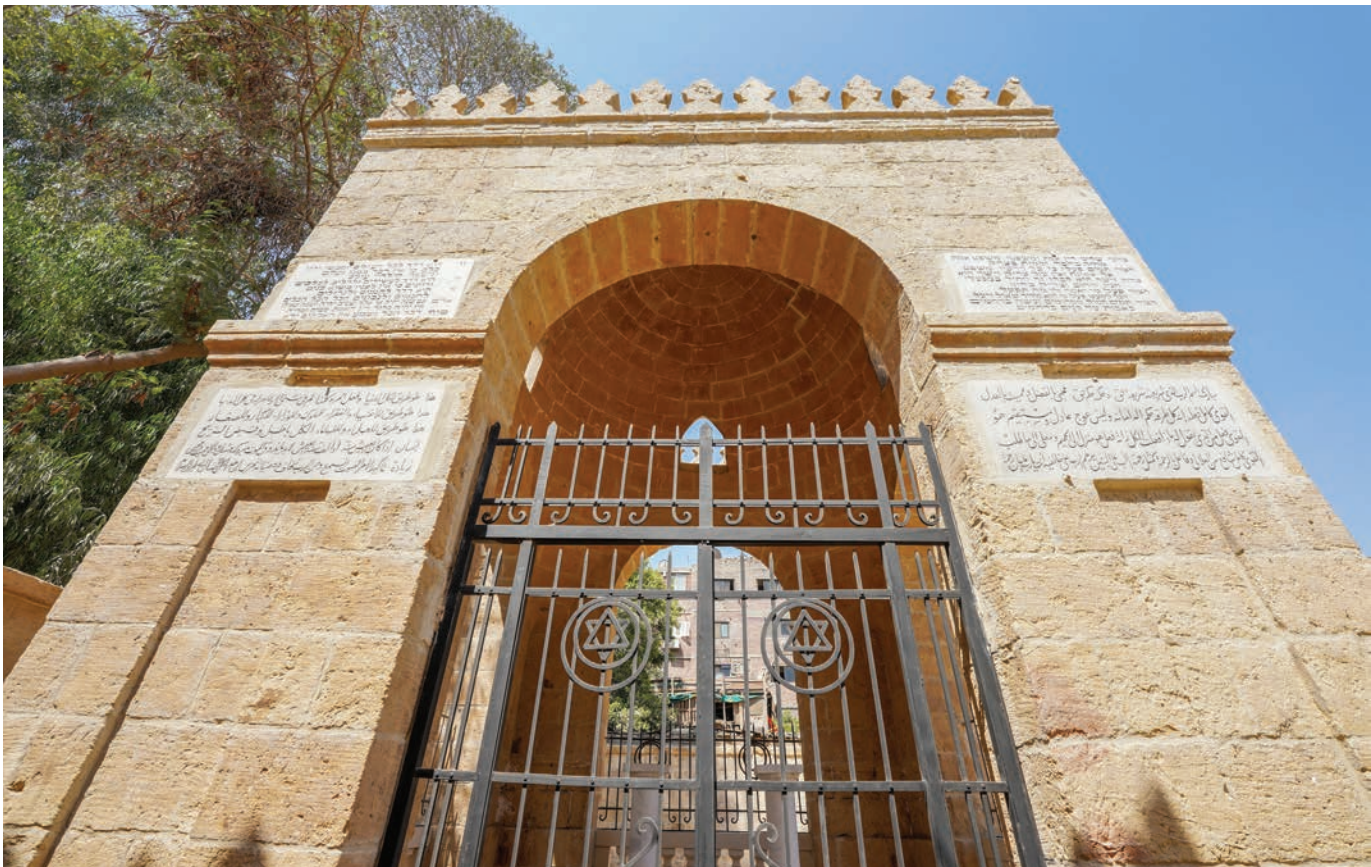
Final touches included the installation of bilingual visitor information panels in the family room in the Menasha plot. These offer information on the Egyptian Karaite community and its thousand-year history in Egypt. Following the generous donation from the Karaite Jews of America (KJA), ARCE was also able to install a 'Garden of Remembrance Honoring The

OPPOSITE PAGE:

The conserved grave of Zaki Lichaa located in the Lichaa family cemetery

BELOW:

The domed mausoleum in the Menasha family cemetery, following restoration work by ARCE





Karaite Jewish Community of Egypt,' complete with walking paths, outdoor benches, date palm trees, and additional landscaping. The introduction of these features has transformed the outdoor environment of the cemetery plots and has created a calming and reflective space for visitors.

Giving Life to the Stones: A Philanthropic and Cultural Partnership

As President of the KJA, David Ovadia, along with his wife Maryellen Himell-Ovadia, are no strangers in bringing grand visions for their community to life. They successfully spearheaded a \$1.2M campaign in 2017 – 2018 that resulted in the renovation and expansion of Congregation B'nai Israel, the only Karaite Synagogue in the United States, located in a suburb of San Francisco, California.

In September 2020, they were invited to attend an ARCE webinar on the project in Basatin. Immediately following the lecture, it became clear to the Ovadias that a partnership between the KJA, Drop of Milk, and ARCE would serve as an incredible opportunity to infuse ARCE's project with a living

Who Were the Karaite Jews of Egypt?

BY DAVID OVADIA AND MARYELLEN HIMELL-OVADIA

A small community enjoying a common bond with the larger population, the Karaite Jews were mainly of Egyptian descent and Egyptian cultural background. They spoke Arabic and used Arabic as their first language, both orally and in writing. Throughout their long history but most prominently in the 19th and 20th centuries, Karaite Jews figured notably in Egyptian society, making important contributions to the arts, education, science, business, and philanthropy. Egypt's Karaite Jews had predated Sephardic and Ashkenazi migration to the region; and the community's nearly unique Jewish religious tradition relied solely on the written sacred text of the Torah for understanding and interpreting Jewish traditions and laws. Karaite scholars and rabbis played a key role in preserving the written Hebrew language over the centuries. This reliance on the written word remains a cornerstone for descendants of the Karaite Jewish community of Egypt, now scattered throughout the world.

Prominent Karaite Jews in 20th century Egyptian society included such individuals as writer and poet Mourad Farag Lichaa (1867-1956), composer Da'ud Husni (1876-1937), philanthropist Ibrahim Eliyahu Massuda (1862-1927)), banker Jacques Lieto Mangubi (1898-1977), physicist and professor Youssef Mourad (1911-1981), educator and historian Mourad El-Kodsi (1919-2007), "Egyptian Hallmark of Gold and Silver" Chairman Farag Abdallah (1841-1922), and physician Ibrahim Moussa Menasha (1900-1988).

In Focus: The Menasha Family

Ibrahim Moussa Menasha, a prominent doctor in Cairo after returning from medical school in Germany and private physician to the royal family of Libya, was the individual who purchased the plot for his family's gravesite, commissioning its beautiful mausoleum to honor his parents – Moussa Ibrahim Menasha (1871-1952) and Marietta Lichaa Menasha (1882-1955) – buried within. A jeweler by trade, Moussa Ibrahim had been one of the founders of the first Karaite Religious Council established in 1901. His commitment to his faith led him to become a respected leader at the community's ancient Rab Simcha Synagogue in the Gamaliya district of Historic Cairo, where he served as a cantor and treasurer; in 1948 helping to lead the Synagogue's re-building efforts. Marietta also played a key role in the community while being a mother to the couple's eleven children. Only one of the eleven siblings, Zaki Menasha (1917-1953), was buried at the site; his grave lies in the courtyard. The rest of the children, including Dr. Ibrahim Menasha with his wife Adeline, immigrated to the United States and elsewhere.

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memorial to the Karaite community's lost heritage in Egypt. "Our community came out of Egypt, and we still have very strong traditions and memories from Egypt," said Ovadia.

Ovadia spent his childhood in Cairo, raised in a large family shaped by the heritage of their strongly-knit Karaite community. He recounted a happy childhood: his mother's cooking; evenings with friends in Cairo's big movie houses; month-long summer outings to beach resorts like Ras El-Bar on the Mediterranean Sea; visits to the famous Groppi's café for ice cream

and desserts; excursions to see the pyramids and other historic sites; and their beloved neighborhood synagogue, the Moshe D'Ahri Synagogue in Abbasiya.

"Although the Karaite Jewish community had lived in Egypt for generations, we were in many ways, however, still considered strangers. As a child I was often chased down the street by bullying kids calling us names and throwing rocks," he shared. In 1956, when he was six years old, the Suez War created great uncertainty for his family. As a highly respected professor of mathematics and science, Ovadia's father did not want to leave

1 The gate of the Menasha family cemetery

2-5 Restoration work in action in the Menasha and Lichaa cemeteries



6 Map depicting the land changes in the cemetery and the locations of the remaining plots

7 The corner room in the Menasha family cemetery, after restoration

Cairo, but was finally convinced by Ovadia's mother. After securing transit visas from the French Embassy, the family left Egypt for Paris when Ovadia was just twelve years old. After five months of waiting, the family overcame barriers for admission to the U.S and flew to San Francisco. They arrived three days before Ovadia's thirteenth birthday.

It is the strength, resilience, and living culture of the Karaite community that Ovadia hopes to spotlight in the present day and carry on into the future. Both Ovadias saw the creation of the Garden of Remembrance as a catalyst to further knit the Karaite community together, to tell its own story to the wider community, and to celebrate the connections of the living Karaite Jewish culture to the larger Jewish world. "If the living Karaite community does not recognize its roots, its

rich history, and its ancestors, we fear that no one will in a way that does justice to the personal narrative of so many fascinating individuals who represented the mosaic of the Karaite Jewish community of Egypt over the centuries," Ovadia explained. "While there is no longer a living Karaite Jewish community in Egypt, our thousands of members dispersed throughout the world take tremendous pride in our community's millennium-plus heritage. Many of us understand there is a real need to keep our rich history alive for the next generations."

It was to help achieve these aims, and most importantly to honor ancestors buried at Basatin – whose gravesites include not only members of the Menasha and Lichaa families, but also the many thousands of nameless ones whose memory forever lives in the

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hearts of their descendants dispersed throughout the world – that the Ovadias decided to pursue the Garden of Remembrance project with ARCE.

After several meetings with ARCE to develop schematics and plans for the proposed Garden of Remembrance, the Ovadias began to connect with Karaites all over the United States to share the vision for the Garden and to collect stories and oral histories of those whose families are laid to rest at Basatin. “One of the things that has been absolutely fascinating to us are the connections that have been forged because of this project,” said Himell-Ovadia, who although of Ashkenazi Jewish background, has passionately embraced the project and has spent countless hours





1 David Ovadia's great-grandfather, Farag Abdallah

2 Maryellen Himell-Ovadia and David Ovadia at the re-opening of the Congregation B'nai Israel in San Francisco, California

3 The IDs of the Ovadia children, which enabled their passage to France (note the original spelling of names)

4 A seminar at the re-opening of the Congregation B'nai Israel, with the Ovadias seated at center

5 The Lichaa cemetery after restoration, with a seating area, platform, and landscaping donated by KJA

with Ovadia researching family histories and connecting with far-flung members of the Karaite community. "It has been interesting to see how ARCE's project to protect the cemetery – a city of the dead - has evolved into a celebration of a living culture," she added.

While some of their outreach was initially met with skepticism from those who had mixed emotions about the past or had personally seen Basatin in disrepair, the Ovadias were able to excite many of their community members about the project and the proposed partnership with ARCE and Drop of Milk, to ultimately raise the funds needed to create the Garden of Remembrance. "There was a lot of cynicism, and it was not an easy path to inspire and to develop support from those who fled," Himell-Ovadia said. But the Ovadias forged on. David Ovadia added, "To me, this project means identity. It means pride. It means that we have re-established a palpable connection to our past. As a people, and for the benefit of future generations, we are so much stronger when we know where we came from, as well as where we are going. Supporters in the community are now telling me 'You are doing a big Mitzvah, David,' and 'Thank you for

your efforts in this historic project as it means a lot to my wife and I.'"

Ovadia also expressed his pride in the partnership with ARCE and Drop of Milk and his hope that the alliance will be sustained in future activities at Basatin and possibly elsewhere in Cairo. "This initiative has set us on a path that will undoubtedly lead to further research and scholarship, for public recognition of our heritage, for greater understanding between Egyptian and Jewish people today, and for more visits by members of our community to Egypt. The initiative, in fact, has already set me on a return path to Egypt. In November of 2022, sixty years to the month after my family and I left Cairo in November 1962, Maryellen and I plan to visit Basatin Cemetery during my first return trip to Egypt since leaving as a 12-year-old boy. It means I will be coming home," he said through a smile. 🌸

To learn more about Drop of Milk's ongoing efforts to preserve Egypt's Jewish heritage and how you can support them, visit their Facebook account: [facebook.com/D.O.M.Egypt](https://www.facebook.com/D.O.M.Egypt)