

The Eli Cohen Files

Part I: The Roots of Spies

By Wesley Britton

[Abstract: Traces the circumstances of the Cohen family from their flight from Syria to Egypt after World War I to their eventual migration to Israel in various stages. Describes the contexts of Jews in Egypt from relative tolerance in the early years of the 20th Century through increasingly hostile persecution and expulsion. Focusing on the stories of brothers Eli and Maurice Cohen, the rise of Zionism is explored with analysis of Eli Cohen's possible involvement in clandestine activities, notably in the "Lavon Affair." Part 1 concludes with Eli Cohen's expulsion from Egypt in 1956.]

From Syria to Egypt

When Eli Cohen embarked on his secret mission to enter Damascus on January 1, 1962, he must have taken time to ponder the profound ironies surrounding his assignment. Only the week before, he had sat beside his mother in Israel as the family mourned the passing of his father, Shoul. During Shiva, the six day Jewish period of grieving, Eli Cohen must have reflected on the fact he was about to enter the country where both his father and mother had been born, Syria being the ancestral home of the Cohens. Fifty years before, the man after whom Eli was named – his grand-father Eliyahu Cohen – had left Syria in the face of persecution against his people, an experience repeated for both his son and then namesake. In the truest sense, Eli Cohen was about to become less a spy for one country than a covert agent serving his race. While the younger Eli – or Elie – himself had been born and raised in

Egypt, he had never been Egyptian. His father had carried a British passport, although Shoul Cohen likely never made more than perhaps brief visits to that distant nation, if at all. Now, Eli Cohen was about to go on one of the most dangerous tasks any Jewish secret agent could undertake for a country that hadn't even existed until he was twenty-four years old, a country he hadn't lived in until he was deported from Egypt at the age of thirty-two. A country he had known for just over five years before he agreed to become "Our Man in Damascus." A mission so secret he couldn't tell his grieving family why he had to break Jewish tradition and leave the Shiva rituals one day early to go to the land of his roots, not as a Cohen but in the guise of an Arab businessman.

It had all begun in the city of Aleppo. According to Eli's brother, Maurice, it was toward the end of 1914 when "thousands of Jewish and Christian families left their homes in Aleppo, Syria, due to instability in the Muslim regime, then part of the Ottoman Empire under the rule of the Sultan of all Ottomans and Caliph of the Arabs." (M1) Previously, Jews and Christians had enjoyed a largely independent, if second-class status in Syria. But in the years leading up to World War I, the economic situation for the caravan-center of Aleppo had greatly declined as Damascus grew and the Suez Canal and other trade routes were developed. Along with this, "For the first time, Jewish men were being sought to serve in the army to fight in the Balkan Wars. Overnight, Jewish men were secretly being sent away to avoid military service." (Roffé)

While most Syrian Jews headed for America, especially New York, others stayed in the Middle East. While a great number of friends and relatives had settled in flourishing communities in Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt, Eliyahu and Sanyar Guindi Cohen, the parents of Eli Cohen's father, first chose to move to Beirut, then part of Greater Syria, in 1912. Their trek from Aleppo to Beirut was relatively simple. Instead of an ocean voyage, a rail line had connected the two cities in 1907. As part of Greater Syria, the Guindi Cohens needed no visas or travel documents, and they could take their possessions and money with them. Two years later, they moved on to Alexandria only a few weeks before the outbreak of World War I. (Aldouby and Ballinger 20)

While of Syrian origin, the family had British passports courtesy of a distant and forgotten relative, a most fortunate circumstance. As historian Racheline Barda notes, at least until 1947, having a foreign nationality "was a highly desirable asset for the non-Muslim minorities in Egypt because it meant that they had the protection of a foreign power," especially in the courts. British citizenship was the most difficult to obtain. Great Britain, being the dominant power in the country, was very selective and normally only families originally from Gibraltar, Malta or Cyprus were considered eligible. (Barda) Joel Beinin observed that whatever passport a family head carried, British domination in Egypt had, since 1882, consolidated a climate of security and political stability that encouraged foreigners to establish themselves in Egypt, create trade links with Europe and develop new industries. While anti-Semitism simmered below the surface, still there was a "high level of toleration, communal autonomy, and cultural symbiosis among Muslims, Christians, and Jews." Individual Jews achieved high positions in the political and economic arenas in late Ottoman and monarchical Egypt, but Muslims occupied the leading military and political positions, and their right to do so was not seriously challenged. (Beinin "Egyptian")

Alexandria, in particular, seemed an ideal setting for any Jewish family. Maurice Cohen noted the city was once the most important town of the Jewish Diaspora, a port city with a cosmopolitan mix of five hundred thousand habitants. Alongside the majority Arab population, “Greek Colonies, Italians, French, Armenians, Maltese, Blacks and about thirty thousand Jews” had large communities. Jews had come from Greece, Turkey, Yemen, Eastern Europe, Odessa, Smyrna, and from Syria to join one of the oldest Jewish centers anywhere. (M1) During this colonial era, there was considerable interest in Western culture. The “mobile middle class,” Barda notes, was particularly mesmerized by the French culture. Most of the non-Islamic ethnic groups were educated primarily in European private schools or in Jewish communal schools where the main language of tuition was French. (Barda)

At that time, Maurice wrote, “The Jews of Alexandria were consolidated in a flourishing united community although they saw themselves as Egyptians in every aspect. They were free to develop their own Jewish culture and reserve their relationship and linkage with Israel. They were allowed to be landlords of various well founded communal institutions and establishments.” (M1) Unfortunately, such conditions were not to last.

According to Maurice Cohen, both the Cohen and Guindi families had come from large, important Aleppo clans with deep roots and eminent scholars in their ancestry. Shaul, “the youngest indulged child of the Guindis’ family,” spent his days with other Jewish boys of similar economic status studying Talmud at the Customary Chamber. (M1) In the evenings, he was likely to spend an hour learning to write Arabic, a skill few mastered in the Arab world at the time. Shaul, born in 1900, had two older sisters, at least one of whom would later find her way and settle in Argentina. Half a century later, Israeli spy Eli Cohen would break protocol to visit his aging aunt in Buenos Aires though he would introduce himself as a “friend on business carrying regards from her family in Israel.” (M5) The Guindi side of the family “brought with them the loom and old fashioned knitting machines and all the necessary material in order to continue their business, producing natural silk fabric requisite for neckties’ manufacturing as previously performed in Aleppo.” At the same time, Shaoul Cohen joined his father as an apprentice while continuing to study in the evenings. His mother passed away in 1916, and then his father went into partnership with a close friend. “They decided to modernize the business by eliminating the old machines and to replace them with others imported from Germany and Switzerland.” (M1)

After his father died in 1920, Shaoul went into a business of his own “performing some modifications in his new business.” Instead of producing silk fabric himself, he decided to import fashionable, colorful material from Europe and open a workshop, manufacturing and distributing a “vast variety of neckties.” According to the market request, Shaoul often traveled to Italy, France, and Belgium in order to purchase silk fabric and visited various textile exhibitions. He began producing pure silk hand-crafted sets of ties with suitable scarves and pocket kerchiefs, “very popular amongst all the rich Arabs.” He gained fame for his ties by giving samples to prominent Arab leaders. (M5) He supplied his merchandise to the main men’s stores and boutiques all over Egypt, his business gradually prospering. (M1)

Meanwhile, wealthy textile manufacturer and merchant Maurice Tawil Cohen and his wife Sara, the parents of Eli and Maurice Cohen’s mother, also left Aleppo in 1914 with their seven

children (four boys and three girls). Though both Maurice and Sara had come from prestigious Aleppan families of renowned status, the Tawils could trace their ancestry of judges, rabbis and scholars back to the High Priest serving during the time of the Biblical Judges. Perhaps fearing for the safety of his sons in the face of the military draft, the future grandfather of Eli Cohen closed his businesses in the Khan (palace for caravans) off Aleppo's stone-covered arched souk maze of bazaars as his family abandoned their hohsh (private residence) and walked through their high-walled courtyard that had sheltered them from the sun and the prying eyes of tax collectors for the very last time. They set off for a new life in Cairo. The family included Sophie, Eli Cohen's future mother, "number six in the quorum of the blessed children." (M1)

Sophie Tawil Cohen was born in Aleppo in 1907, seven years old when she arrived in Egypt where her parents chose to live in the most prestigious premises in Cairo, as appropriate to their status. "Sara, Sophie's mother, passed away when she was little"; her father remarried and had seven more children (four boys and three girls). Sophie was sent to learn *métier* at [Atelier de Haute Couture], a prestigious costume and dressmaker named Atelier. His "distinguished customers were the Egyptian Monarchy and famous movie stars." Later on she joined a Ladies Wigs & Hats Manufacturer who supplied hats to the 'ATS', Women in the British Army Troops, serving in Egypt. (M1)

Sophie's elder brother had left Egypt and immigrated to the United States and settled in Brooklyn, New York. After a short time, he was appointed as an executive of a major department store. At the same time, all of Sophie's brothers and sisters from the first marriage also left Egypt and migrated to the U.S., Argentina, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Sophie, after reaching adulthood, "was summoned to join her brothers in America." She left Cairo and went to Alexandria to visit her elder sister Rachel Saban while waiting to sail to the United States. Everything was ready. She had gathered her belongings, packed her luggage and impatiently waited for her ship's arrival.

It wasn't to be. During Sophie's stay in Alexandria, many of Rachel's friends "were enchanted to see the charm of an attractive slim nice girl" and tried to acquire her hand in marriage. Sophie wasn't interested in marriage proposals at this time, focused on joining her siblings in America. However, her sister Rachel continued to press for a local marriage and forego the sail. After a long deliberation, Sophie decided to postpone her plan of traveling. After being introduced to Shaoul Guindi Cohen, "influenced by his charm," she decided to become his wife after a brief courtship. Sophie, five years younger than her husband, married Shaoul Cohen in a traditional ceremony in 1922.

A Jewish Family in Alexandria

According to Maurice Cohen, Alexandria, the second largest city in Egypt "and the Summer Capital of the Nile country" seemed a perfect choice for the newlyweds . . . "The wonderful, spectacular landscape of Alexandria suited the young couple due to its comfortable climate and population similar to that of Aleppo, their motherland." (M1) The Cohen family lived in uptown Alexandria in a commercial quarter where many Europeans resided. Due to the frequent

business traveling of Shaoul, the raising and education of the children was left to Sophie. In his opinion, Maurice thought, “The noble-minded wife took this responsible assignment with few apprehensions and great mellowness that enable her to succeed in granting to her six boys and two girls Jewish upbringing and a wide general education.” (M1)

The first child, a daughter, was Odette, born in 1923. A year later, Eliahu ben Shaoul Cohen was born on Saturday, December 26, 1924. On that day, the family celebrated a double festival, the birth of a boy and “Shabbat Chanukah,” the eighth day of the Jewish Festival of Lights. While attending the prayer at Zaradel Synagogue Knisset El Halabiyeh, as was the custom in Syrian Jewry, Shaoul proudly announced that his successor would carry his grandfather’s name. **(Note 1)**

Maurice (Moshe) Cohen arrived three years later on June 15, 1927. The other siblings, all born in Alexandria, were Ezra (b. 1929), Sara (1932), Tzion (1934), and Ephraim (1937), the year of Eli’s Bar Mitzvah. One brother, Nissan, was born in 1940 and died of typhoid fever a year later. The youngest child, Abraham, was born in 1946. Inside this growing family, Maurice said his parent spoke Arabic with a light Syrian locution, their children speaking Arabic and French “fluently and clearly.” They also occasionally used Judeo Espagnol ‘Ladino’. (M1)

During these years, Shaoul Cohen practiced the laws and customs of the oriental Jewish tradition and heritage, religion always taking precedence over nationality. “Every Saturday eve, Shaoul blessed the wine, washed his hands, and recited the ritual prayer on the bread, observing the traditional holy Sabbath.” (M1) The young Eli and Maurice often accompanied their father to the Synagogue, sitting in the first row in a special place designated to “Cohanim.” They enjoyed the rituals, the songs and prayers, reciting holy phrases and songster. “Eli would read the Bible and declaim Torah sentences by heart.” (M1)

In his early years, Eli frequented the neighborhood Jewish semi-orthodox kindergarten “La Pergola” under the management of R’ Wizeman, situated not far from the family’s residence. Then he studied in the primary school, the Aghion Jewish Community School of Alexandria. “The family rituals and the orthodox climate in which Eli was raised, the enthusiasm and excitement which Eli showed in these religious ceremonies and his apparent intelligence, prompted him in later years to join the chorus of the Synagogue” Temple Menashe at Mohamed Ali Pasha Square, El-Manchieh, Alexandria, under the Presidency of Baron Felix de Menashe, headed by Rabbi Angel Shlita. Eli encouraged Maurice to join the chorus of the Grand Community Synagogue Eliyahu Hanavi as a vocal cantor. Eli participated in the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Jewish Community of Alexandria, under the management of Maestro Alberto Hemssi, playing clarinet and saxophone. After surgery on his tonsils, he switched to percussion.

As a boy in Egypt, Eli Cohen joined the Boy Scouts and was later nominated to be a scoutmaster. He was, his brother maintains, talented with an extremely good memory and had good facilities with languages, mathematics, and geometry. He liked to read books, work crossword puzzles, and especially collect stamps. He won occasional prizes for swimming, sailing, and drawing. But not everything was idyllic. Suddenly the family’s fortunes declined. This resulted, Maurice claimed, from Arab leaders deciding together to no longer patronize Jewish businesses. Shaoul Cohen went bankrupt. (M5)

According to Eli Ben-Hanan's 1968 translation of the trial of Eli Cohen, Maurice's older brother told the Syrian court that his family then "lived in a cheap apartment in Duek Passage in the Jewish Quarter. My father made a bare living by working in the tie factory of the rich Jew Daniel Banin." (Ben Hanan 105) In the 1965 trial transcripts, Eli Cohen reportedly said, "In spite of the hardship at home, I did well at the public school of the Jewish Community, and while my brothers left school one after the other, I continued studying at a French high school with the help of a grant I received. But my studies did not relieve me from the obligation to help support my family, and after school I worked as a salesman in the Clark clothing store." (Ben-Hanan 105)

During this period, important mentors for Eli included the "Eminence Rabbi (Moise) Moshe Ventura Shlita." He held a Doctoral degree in Philosophy, having graduated from the Sorbonne University in Paris. He was a Formal Lecturer of Jewish History. After Eli's Bar Mitzvah, being graduated from primary school, he joined the Midrash Rambam, the Maimonides High School for advanced Talmudic learning headed by Rabbi Ventura, chief Rabbi of Alexandria. Eli Cohen said, "When the Rabbi of Alexandria, Dr. Moshe Ventura, set up an evening Yeshiva, I joined it without hesitation. I studied there diligently, and that's where I learned Hebrew." (Ben-Hanan 105) According to Maurice, "The Rabbi at once recognized Eli's extremely good memory and open, quick mind. He diligently instructed him phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence, through passages of the Talmud." (M1)

Before long, Maurice maintains, Eli could read the Rashi commentary and the critical and explicative notes freely. He quickly earned the confidence of Rabbi Ventura, whose curriculum placed the strongest emphasis on a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew language. Thinking young Cohen could be a good Rabbi, Ventura suggested to his parents Eli should be enrolled in the High Sephardic Beit Midrash L'Rabanim [High College of Rabbinical Studies], in Corfu island, and the summer institute at the Greek Island of Rhodes, sponsored by the Jewish Community in Alexandria. (M1)

Knowing his son had higher than average abilities, his father encouraged him to enter the competition for a partial scholarship. While Eli passed the tests without difficulty, he tactfully rejected the religious path. Instead, because of his interest in mathematics and geometry, he chose secular studies at King Farouk Ist. University, under the Faculty of Electric Engineering, Moharam Bey, Alexandria. (M1)

But circumstances for Egyptian Jews had begun to decline in the 1930s with alarming developments that escalated over the next thirty years. Arab resentments about colonial rule began to bubble to the surface, especially regarding the status of Jews, who had traditionally been treated as inferior beings for centuries. Rage had been percolating against both Jews and Christians benefiting from the educational opportunities Eli Cohen and others were enjoying, a situation not common in Arab communities. From the Arab point-of-view, they saw schools producing "cadres of westernized native non-Muslims who now had a distinct advantage over the largely uneducated Muslim masses, arousing the ire of the latter." (Bostom) In addition, the Muslim majority deeply resented Western acculturation, "Conspicuous overachievement," and the economic success of Jewish and Christian minorities. (Bostom) With the rise of Muslim

nationalism and the growing whispers of European Fascism, the Cohen family, among many others, began to see themselves as double-outcasts. “Egyptian Muslims were growing increasingly hostile toward Jews,” Maurice Cohen recalled, “and the British, who ruled Egypt until 1954, did nothing to temper the discrimination. From our earliest childhood, we knew that we were interlopers in Egypt and longed to create a place where we could truly belong.” (M2)

The Cohens’ growing interest in Zionism would have also resulted from their family’s extremely religious traditions, an aspect not yet shared in many circles. According to Joel Beinin, before the Second World War, there was but a small percentage of Egyptian Jews who considered themselves Zionists. They were rarely vocal in their ideals, as most Jews were more secularly minded and comparatively comfortable and not interested in migrating anywhere. During the 1930s, this began to change with the many youth groups that sprang up, all advocating emigration to Palestine and socialism in one form or another. (Beinin *Dispersion*)

This was Maurice Cohen’s experience. “By the time I was ten, the Zionist movement had gained considerable momentum among young Jews like myself. I joined the Halutzim, the Pioneers, a kind of boy scouts for Zionist youth, and by the age of 14, I was a troop leader. We scouts were all-out nationalists for a country that did not yet exist, and our mission was to use our knowledge of Jewish history and culture to inspire younger Jews to join us. Though not yet adults, we sought to hasten the creation of the Jewish State, a land where we could celebrate our heritage without fear or shame.” (M2)

The War Years

Then came World War II. In June 1941, German field marshal Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel, known as the “Desert Fox,” was about to reach Alexandria. To the alarm of the Jewish population, Rommel’s victories in the Libyan Desert had stirred a concealed pro-Axis sympathy among the Arabs. Compassion for the Third Reich only heightened Egyptian nationalism. The nationalist Moslem Brotherhood were already planning a victory parade for the triumphant Wehrmacht Panzer, the German armed division. Anticipating their arrival, they urged the people to prepare German and Italian flags for the day of liberation. (M1) **(Note 2)**

Subsequently, in 1942, many European and Jewish families, fearing the heavy air bombardment, left Alexandria. The Cohen family temporarily moved to Cairo, then to Tanta (near Cairo), where Shaul Cohen bought a house. Shortly after their arrival in Tanta, the Cohen family mourned the death of Nessim, their one-year-old baby after he had been contaminated with typhoid caused by bacteria in the small intestine. Nissim was buried in an unmarked grave in Tanta’s cemetery. (M1)

To earn money, Eli gave private lessons in French to Arab adult students turned to him by his own teachers. But since the little income from private lessons was not enough, towards the end of World War II, Eli found a good job as a sales clerk in the “N.A.A.F.I.” This was an Army Mobile Canteen for British and Allied troops serving in El-Alamein, a small town in northern Egypt where the German forces were stopped in World War II and Marsa Matruh Camp on the

Mediterranean Coast, a western desert in northwestern Egypt. (M1)

At the same time, Maurice worked as a clerk for the R.A.S.C. (Royal Army Service Corps) for the British Forces stationed in Fayed, Ismailia/Suez Road. One day, Eli and Maurice decided to surprise their mother by offering her, from their first salary, a full set of aluminum saucepans and a wonder patented cake mold made by Soltam Co, specially imported from Palestine for this occasion. Sophie Cohen was “so proud and emotionally affected to receive this unique and valuable gift from Israel, the cookery not existing at the time in local markets.” (M1)

One event was a tragic foreshadowing of Eli Cohen’s future. On March 23, 1945, Maurice said he and Eli witnessed the hangings of Eliahou Bet-Zouri and Eliahou Al Hakim, both in their early twenties, members of the Stern Gang who’d assassinated the British Colonial Secretary for Egypt, Lord Moyne, in November 1944. The Cohen brothers, Eli aged 20, Maurice 17, would have seen the pair “dressed in the traditional, ill-fitting red burlap suit of condemned men, marched barefoot to the gallows,” blindfolded at the scaffold, and hanged. (Lapidot) Maurice described the scene, saying: “The two Eliyahus proudly mounted the hanging platform singing the ‘Hatikvah,’ the national Hebrew hymn of hope. They went to their deaths as proud Jews, the age old prayer ‘Shema’e Israel’ on their lips. The condemnation strongly affected Eli. Their martyrdom, he later confessed, would bring him much closer to the Zionist cause.” (M1)

In the same year, the last of the Cohen sons, Albert (Avraham), was born after the family returned to Alexandria. Two years later, Maurice said, “Egyptian law required all males, including Jews, to serve in the army, but Eli was rejected on the grounds of questionable loyalty.” This may have resulted from Eli helping organize a student demonstration against the British. (A4) As Jewish youths had the choice of army service or paying a proscribed sum, Eli had tried to enlist in January 1947 in an attempt to avoid paying the fee. Through Jewish protection and Arab Parliament members who were friends of their family, their father was able to pay the amount required.

Meanwhile, when Maurice was old enough for the army, “my father arranged for an exemption and pulled strings to get me appointed to the King’s Guard.” In his view, Maurice was chosen because of his “cleverness and multi-language capabilities, in addition to being tall and handsome.” In 1946, he went to work as a file clerk for the British Army at the Royal Army Service Corp headquarters in Ismailia. “At night, I studied accounting at La Societé de Compabilité de France and architecture at the British Institute of Engineering Technology.” (M2)

Zionist Activation

During the war and in the years immediately afterward, conditions for Egyptian Jews and in most Arab countries became insufferable. Maurice remembered many businessmen, leading companies and manufacturers closing up their business. “Some affluent Armenian Communities left Egypt and migrated to Armenia. Most Greek Congregations migrated to Greece.” (M4)

In large part, this wave of migration resulted from the first of a series of anti-Jewish riots in November 1945 which took place in Cairo and Alexandria, fermented by Islamic groups including the Muslim Brotherhood and the Young Men's Muslim Association. “Hundreds were injured during the rioting and looting of some 110 Jewish businesses in Cairo, while the disturbances in Alexandria claimed the lives of five Jews.” (Bostom) These were far from isolated events. For but one example, in the Cohens’ former home city of Aleppo, anti-Jewish violence had also erupted on November 18, 1945, where “a mob broke into the Great Synagogue of Aleppo, smashed votive objects, burned prayer books, and beat up two elderly men who were studying there.” (Bostom) **(Note 3)**

For their part, the Jewish settlements in Israel had started to organize toward a struggle for independence. As part of their outreach to international Jewry, in 1943, Zionist emissaries from Palestine and activists among the Allied troops and the Palestinian Jewish Brigade stationed in Egypt gained wider support as “they conveyed the news of the mass murder of European Jewry” which, they emphasized, had implications for Jews everywhere. (Beinin *Dispersion*) The Jewish Agency headed by David Ben-Gurion began to talk about Jews in Arab countries as a significant reservoir for future migration to Israel. At the same time, Ben-Gurion saw Egypt as a stockpile of weapons left over from the war. Into this mix, Jewish underground movements renewed their efforts to forge an independent Jewish state.

Eli Cohen experienced the impact of these hostilities first-hand. “I attended the Faculty of Engineering at Farouk University for two years, but then – it was in 1951 – riots broke out in Egypt against the British, and the Moslem Brothers put a stop to studies in the university with their demonstrations. I left my studies and went to work full time in the clothing store.” (Ben-Hanan 105) **(Note 4)** As a result, Eli never earned his degree in electronic engineering. His brother Maurice thought Eli left university in November 1947. “At the University, Eli and other Jewish students were persecuted by the Muslim Brotherhood, so he withdrew to continue his studies at home, which I later learned had given him more freedom to work on behalf of the Zionist cause. We, his family, were blissfully ignorant of the fact that Eli was already on shaky ground with the Egyptian authorities. This was the first of Eli’s many secrets.” (M2)

While much that occurred during this period remains a matter of speculation, it is certain Eli worked for Clarks department store as a manager for at least six years. Another businessman, Maurice Mizrahi, later claimed Eli Cohen had also worked at his business, and “noticed that Elie took a long time to carry out his duties outside the business. At that time, Cohen was connected with the movement of the young Zionists, which explained these long absences.” (Sanua) **(Note 5)** But what Eli Cohen specifically did for the Zionist cause in Egypt must remain a subject of uncertainty. “I know for a fact,” Avraham Cohen said in 2007, “Eli worked for the Haganah.” (A4) In particular, Avraham claims his brother labored for one of the Haganah affiliates, the Mossad le-Aliyah Bet, the main body involved in illegal immigration of Jews escaping Europe both during and after the Holocaust. **(Note 6)**

Avraham Cohen bases his belief his brother was involved with the Mossad LeAliyah Bet on conversations he had with a James or “Jens” Halifax, a British national living in Alexandria at the time who said he rented Eli an apartment sometime in the 1950s. Halifax had a father who was somehow connected to the Freemasons and brought Eli into the lodge called Qualite (or

French for Equality). (A1) Avraham says Halifax managed a Greek shipping line that ran from Alexandria – Beirut – Haifa, which was used to smuggle weapons and ammunitions into Palestine. Eli worked his lodge to raise the funds to purchase weapons from Egyptian Bedouins who had stolen them from the Brits. (A3) But Avraham doesn't know if this was before or after independence in 1948.

These claims of Cohen's membership in the Masons is supported by Samir Raafat when he wrote in 1999 that "it was discovered that Eli had been a freemason in Egypt where he was born," a 1965 revelation that seemed to validate a crackdown on Masons in Egypt the previous year. (Raafat) In addition, Halifax's recollection the lodge had been named "Qualite" is in line with one aspect of Egyptian Masonry, that "tenets of continental Masonry, with its Republican watchwords of Fraternité, Liberté, Egalité had evidently overshadowed the strong British elements which once prevailed in our numerous lodges." (Raafat) **(Note 7)**

Maurice Cohen also believed Eli was involved with the Haganah. Noting the Cohen children had their own groups of friends, Maurice said Eli was involved in the Haganah while the younger Maurice was in the scouts. On one occasion, Maurice accompanied his older brother when they left home in a car but he was forced to come home by himself on a bus. While angry, Maurice was told Eli had business to attend to for which he didn't want any family members involved. (M5) As it happened, Maurice was also very much pro-Zionist. One evening, Maurice claimed he was arrested and, "having no legal identification in my possession, incarcerated. In the absence of a proper jail, my captors kept me in an outhouse for the night before taking me to Ismailia for arraignment. Sitting in the car along the way, I became gripped by fear when I realized that I had nationalistic Israeli songs written in Hebrew in my pocket. Cautiously, I ripped the papers into tiny pieces, chewed them to a pulp and threw them out the window. When we reached the police station, a small piece of the paper remained in my pocket. I needed an efficient way to rid myself of the songs. A janitor cleaning the floors became my only opportunity to divest myself of the last scrap. I wrapped it in a one-pound note and dropped it to the floor. The custodian saw the bill and quickly put his foot over it to claim it for himself. The paper landed in the garbage, courtesy of the cleaning man who had eyes only for the money. It was my first act of espionage." (M2)

First Migration to Israel

On May 14, 1948, when David Ben Gurion announced the creation of the state of Israel, a royal decree imposed martial law throughout Egypt. On the same night, "the Egyptian police raided Jewish homes all over the country. Small units composed of one officer and two policemen carrying rifles burst into the houses and arrested Jewish residents. Up to 1300 Jews were detained, including Zionists, Communists, Community leaders and wealthy businessmen as well as Jews with no political involvement." (Barda) The property of those suspected of Zionist activity was sequestered, pro-Zionist Jewish newspapers were closed, and Zionism was declared illegal. (Beinin "Egyptian") According to an eyewitness account, in one seven-day period, 150 Jews were murdered or seriously wounded. (Peters)

According to another source, despite a truce in Palestine declared on July 18, 1948, during the next three-month period, Egyptian Jewry continued to be under siege, as bombs destroyed Jewish-owned movie theaters and large retail businesses. Overall, these attacks on the Jews of Egypt claimed approximately 50 lives in the summer of 1948, accompanied by enormous property losses. Hundreds were left injured, homeless, and unemployed. (Boston)

This triggered a wave of mass emigration. The Jewish Agency “records showed that 20,000 Jews, a sizeable 25% of the total Jewish population of about 75,000 to 85,000, left between 1949-1950 of whom 14,299 settled in Israel.” (Barda) The Cohens were part of this first wave of Jews escaping their homeland.

In 1948, Maurice was discharged from the Royal Army headquarters and faced unemployment in Egypt. “Israel had declared statehood and the situation for Jews in Arab lands was becoming ever more dangerous.” Consequently, the family decided that daughter Odette and brothers Ezra and Maurice would emigrate to Israel, the rest of the family to follow later. (M1) They had considered moving to America, but they had no sponsors in the states, a requirement for émigrés in their circumstances. (M5)

Years later, Maurice said in a video-taped interview that he had been forced to stand in long lines at the proper office to secure the exit papers for the three Cohens when a friend saw him in the line and approached him. When Maurice said he was waiting for his turn, the friend said, “Why don’t you ask your brother? He can get you the papers – he can also help with the travel expenses. He does that for everybody.” Very angry, Maurice confronted his brother. “Why do you let me go every day to stand in line wasting my time while you are helping other people? Why can’t you do something for me?”

Eli replied that he could do no such thing. “Who told you this?” He asked Maurice not to repeat this again – this could cause him trouble. So Maurice went to their father, who also interrogated Eli, who again denied he was able to help. Maurice thought Eli must have worried his father would learn the truth and interfere with his activities. (M5) “In time, after much trouble, Ezra, Odette and I received our exit papers and departed for Brindisi, Italy, where we obtained the necessary documents to enter Israel. Ezra was 19, the perfect age to join the now official Israel Defense Forces. I was 21 and took a job at the post office.” (M2) Eli remained in Egypt with the rest of the family.

During this initial wave of displacement, in many Jewish households there was still hope good relations would return after emotions cooled. Before being overthrown by General Gamal Abdel Nasser, “There was a brief and surprising period under the more tolerant leadership of General Muhammad Naguib.” (Peters) In addition, “The signing of Arab-Israeli armistice agreements in the spring and summer of 1949 rekindled a cautious optimism among many upper, and some middle class Egyptian, Iraqi, and Syrian Jews. This optimism quickly faded for the Jews of Syria and Iraq,” but many in Egypt held on for another eight years. (Boston) For one matter, many Jews were still economically secure enough with no means to abandon everything to migrate to an unknown country. Even during the tense months of 1948, Haim Sha’ul, a clandestine Zionist emissary sent to organize immigration to Israel, reported that an important Jewish community

would continue to live in Egypt and that it was necessary to think about how to organize it. Some 50,000 Jews remained in Egypt until after the 1956 Suez/Sinai War. (Beinin “Egyptian”)

Then, in the wake of the Free Officers movement that toppled King Farouk in 1952, ending British rule in Egypt, the stage was set for the presidency of Jamal Abd al-Nasser which began on November 14, 1954. Until 1970, Israel’s arch-nemesis led Egypt as a virtual dictator, pledged to pan-Arabism, the annihilation of Israel, and a quest to unite the Arabs in a single state. But he also quickly became a player in the international jockeying for influence between the Soviet Union and Western powers, and Israeli intelligence began efforts to ensure Nasser would not benefit from either potential benefactor.

So yet another anti-Zionist campaign was initiated in Egypt. (Yarid) “Like thousands of other Jewish families,” Maurice wrote, “my parents and younger siblings left everything behind and immigrated to Israel.” (M2) Remaining behind, in 1952 Eli was arrested for the first time on suspicion of engaging in Zionist activities. The Cohen family, Maurice said, worried much about Eli as they received little news from him for the next few years. (M5)

“The Lavon Affair”

There has been considerable speculation about Eli Cohen’s possible involvement in the otherwise well-documented Israeli operations during this period. One fact is known. “In August, 1954,” Eli Cohen said, “I was arrested as a suspected member of a Zionist spy ring. I was arrested with a great many other Jews and put in a detention camp near Cairo. It wasn’t an easy life there, in the Egyptian ghetto. But it served me as sort of a springboard to get out of Egypt. All I had with me when I left was a suitcase with some old clothes.” (Ben-Hanan 105)

In his *Soldier Spies*, Samuel Katz cited an article in the Israel Defense Force (IDF) weekly magazine *Bamachane* (“In the Camp”), where it was questioned whether or not Eli Cohen was recruited into Israeli Military Intelligence in Egypt, since many have reasoned that this could have been the only true reason for him to remain behind after his family left. (Katz 163) Eli’s own claim seems a bit thin. “I was determined to finish my university studies,” he reportedly claimed in his trial deposition. (Ben-Hanan 105) There is no record Eli ever returned to formal higher education. Avraham Cohen speculates there might have been a simpler reason. To this day, he has a photograph Eli sent to him as a postcard in 1956, picturing Eli and people he believes are the owners of the Clarks department store on vacation in Ismailia sitting in a jeep. (A4) Avraham wonders if Eli was involved with the daughter, seen in the back seat. “Perhaps this is why he stayed.” Avraham “heard the owner was half Jewish and half Armenian or something like that,” which might have meant the daughter was not considered Jewish if it was her mother with that line. If so, perhaps the Cohen family would have been unhappy about any such romance, accounting for there being no formalizing of any relationship.

Whatever Eli’s domestic scene, the August 1954 incarceration resulted from an Egyptian crackdown after an Israeli intelligence unit, attempting to destroy Egyptian relationships with western powers, was uncovered that July. In one of the most far-fetched, and infamous Unit 131

operations, thirteen operatives sabotaged American and British installations, hoping this would be considered the work of Egyptians. Maurice Cohen wrote that Eli was indeed a member of this unit. “Unbeknownst to us, training and planning were underway for what would later be called the Lavon Affair, after Israeli Defense Minister Pinhas Lavon. This spy network, code named ‘Susannah,’ was designed to penetrate, attack and disrupt civil and military installations within Egypt.” (M2)

In 1954, along with eleven others, the Egyptians captured Moshe Marzouk and Shmuel Azar, key members of the “Susannah” network. Cohen was also arrested. Yet while Marzouk and Azar were convicted of treason and hanged, and several other Egyptian Jews arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for over ten years, interrogators accepted Cohen’s version of events, according to which he had rented a flat to Israeli activists unknowingly. (Florsheim and Shilon) After brutal questioning by the Egyptian Muchabarat, he was released for lack of evidence. (Katz 163) Maurice believed Eli eluded capture as “he hurried home and destroyed the secret documents in the attic and hid the revolver.” (M1) “Nothing showed up, no books, no documents, no records, no telephone calls.” (M5) However, Avraham Cohen doubts Eli was involved in the Lavon Affair. He recalled hearing through Jans or James Halifax, that Eli’s only connection with the Lavon Affair or Operation Susannah was that he “sublet his apartment to a bunch of guys which turned out to be those involved in the mission. After Eli was arrested, Eli supposedly claimed that he didn’t know what they were doing and assumed they were using the place for parties, etc.” (A1) He believes Eli likely knew at least one of the conspirators, Max Bennet, who committed suicide rather than talk to his captors. Bennet and Eli Cohen might have become friends working for Mossad LeAliyah Bet. In addition, when Avraham was later permitted to see Eli’s job application for AMAN, there was no mention of this, nor any other Egyptian operation, indicated in Eli’s own apparently hand-written curriculum vitae. (A4)

Two cryptic notes in the memoirs of Israeli agent Avraham Seidenberg (Avri El-ad) both confirm Cohen’s non-involvement in the ill-considered scheme while raising new questions. Sent to oversee the operations of a clearly non-professional team, Seidenberg said he talked with Victor "Pierre" Levy about which agents he could rely on. “Eli ‘Alex’ Cohen, trained in Israel as our principal wireless operator, was, I gathered, too busy with his work to get involved.” So El-Ad told Levy, “‘Until Eli Cohen cooperates, you will act as wireless operator,’ I said. ‘Can you do it?’” (El-Ad 128-129)

These passing mentions would indicate that Eli Cohen was a member of Unit 131 before the summer 1954 bungled “Operation Susannah” attempted sabotage. He was the sort of man the unit’s creator, Avram Dar, would have had in mind when he built the group in Egypt several years before, posing as British citizen John Darling. These agents were drawn from the ranks of those like Cohen, Egyptian Jews who had previously been active in illegal emigration activities. They were to be local sleeper agents, to be called into action in case of war. However, in the aftermath of the Lavon matter, “Yossi Harel ordered the withdrawal of all unit 131 agents operating in Arab countries from the field, until it could be ascertained that nobody was compromised by the arrests. They were only returned in 1956.” (“Lavon”)

This description doesn’t match existing records of Eli Cohen’s whereabouts during 1954-1955. There’s no indication he visited Israel before 1955 nor that he was withdrawn from Egypt to

avoid potential problems with Egyptian authorities. El-Ad may have been mistaken about where any training for Eli may have occurred – Darling providing such inside Egypt in the field – but his short sentences indicate any relationship with Unit 131 would have been informal, a volunteer free to turn down missions. If, of course, he was anything more than a freelance aid to Jewish émigrés and weapons purchases.

Whatever his involvement with the Lavon plot or other anti-Egyptian activities, Samuel Katz maintained, in the summer of 1955 Cohen was brought to Israel from Egypt for secretive intelligence training. “His journey was through the back-door route of Greece, and his arrival in Israel was attended to with absolute secrecy. He did not see his family in Israel, but was rushed to a seaside hotel and, supplied with a pseudonym, kept in hiding for several weeks.” He was taken to the same Unit 131 training facility that had served as home to his Susannah compatriots in 1953. (Katz 163)

Maurice Cohen supports this account with a personal anecdote. “. . . my brother was sent to an espionage course in Israel. It had been years since we’d seen our Eli, so you can only imagine our excitement when he telephoned Odette to divulge that he was in the country. She immediately told me the name of his hotel in Tel Aviv, and I jumped in my car to see him. But I missed my chance. His superiors discovered that he had contacted us and spirited him away before I arrived. He was sent back to Egypt.” (M2)

But what, if anything, came of this alleged training remains a mystery. According to Katz, unlike the Susannah spies, Eli Cohen was not to serve the Israel Defense Forces as a fifth-columnist nor as a saboteur. “He would become Israel’s chief intelligence operative in Egypt.” (Katz 163) Hani Yarid also reported “Eli Cohen worked successfully as an undercover agent in Egypt until after the Sinai Campaign in 1956,” what the Arab world called “the Trilateral Aggression against Egypt” by Israel, France and Britain.” (Yarid) If Cohen performed any duties of this type between 1955 and 1956, they remain classified. And the fact Cohen found no work in Israeli intelligence for nearly five years after his deportation casts considerable doubt he had any major duties – if any at all – in his last year in Egypt.

What is certain is that, as a result of Nasser’s nationalization of the British-controlled Suez Canal, on October 29, 1956, Israel invaded the Sinai peninsula followed by British and French forces two days later to ensure their access to the waterway. But, under pressure from the U.S, fearing interference from the Soviet Union, the three countries withdrew within the month. As a result, Egypt became a firm ally of the Communist bloc which, in turn, deemed Israel part of its enemies list. At the same time, in December 1956, the Egyptian Ministry of Interior launched a campaign against Egyptian Jewry. Among many others, Eli Cohen had been placed under Muchabarat – the Egyptian secret police – surveillance and was detained by Egyptian authorities. (Katz 163) It wouldn’t be long before Eli Cohen was forcibly expelled from Egypt.

Notes

1 – grandfather: According to Cairo-born journalist Lucette Lagnado in her 2007 memoir, *Man in a White Sharkskin Suit*, “Aleppo exerted a powerful, almost mystical hold on all those who traced their origins there, and always would, whether they lived in nearby Cairo, or settled in a far more distant capitals.” The prescribed custom of naming children, the first after a paternal grandparent and alternating between maternal and paternal relatives, would keep them tied to their ancestry and provide a verifiable means to trace their roots. Even today, the large Syrian Jewish enclaves like those of Brooklyn, New York and Deal, New Jersey where Arabic is still heard in the streets and often spoken at home, are tightly knit and extremely private. In his *Aleppo Chronicles*, author and Syrian genealogist Joseph Sutton suggests that, as an immigrant group, Syrian Jews are perhaps the most impervious to assimilation. Rather than shamed by their immigrant status, Jews of Syrian ancestry remain connected and proud of their heritage. (Note by H. Fragman Abramson.)

2 – Muslim Brotherhood: According to “The Muslim Brotherhood `Project” by Patrick Poole in FrontPageMagazine (2005), the organization is still active and even more dangerous. “The Muslim Brotherhood, regarded as the oldest and one of the most important Islamist movements in the world, was founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928 and dedicated to the credo, ‘Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. Qur’an is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope.’” See www.americancongressfortruth.org.

The Brotherhood remains the main opposition party in Egypt. In his memoirs, Maurice Cohen said they were joined by the WAFD, or “Delegation” party, in embracing the arrival of the Nazis. However, this organization, while opposed to the monarchy, was also anti-Fascist.

3 – Aleppo: After the U.N. vote for the partition of Palestine, from December 2nd to the 5th, violence in Aleppo was severe. Many Jews were killed, significant physical devastation occurred, and roughly half of Aleppo's Jewish population fled. (Boston) By the end of 1953, 75 percent of Syrian Jews had left the country.

4 – university: One reminiscence recounted by Racheline Barda described the experiences of someone in the very same position as Eli Cohen. He was a student at the Faruk University, in his last year of Engineering. “In April 1948, members of the Muslim Brothers Society tried to stop him from entering the grounds of the university on the pretext that ‘they did not want Egypt to help the enemies of Islam’. When he tried to force his way in, they physically assaulted him. The dean of the faculty, who did not want any problem with the powerful Muslim Brotherhood, worked out a compromise where the Jewish student collected his lecture notes from friends without attending classes personally. This arrangement was short-lived as, on 15 May 1948, the day Egypt and the other Arab states declared war on Israel, the authorities formally arrested him.” While in the interment camp, he was still able to receive his degree. See Barda in “Works Cited” below.

5 – Clarks store: While conducting research for this project, Helene Fragman Abramson spoke with a Cohen cousin now in Florida who claimed he worked with Eli in the small Clarks store

between 1948 and 1951. He told Helene that Israeli intelligence didn't want it discussed, but that Eli was certainly working for them even before independence in 1948. He claimed Clarks was opened in 1946 and run by Unit 131 director John Darling. "If anyone came in to buy they were told to come back or asked to leave; no shirts were ever sold." The cousin said he worked as a messenger; Eli was the 'bookkeeper.' He added the apartment raided during the Lavon roundup was located behind the shop. We were unable to explore these claims further.

6 – Haganah: The complex Mossad leAliyah Bet network grew in Italy, France, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, and other countries. They acquired ships, sailed them, and smuggled Jews past British blockades. ("Studies"). But it was not the only group engaged in such activities.

Before 1948 when it evolved into the official military intelligence agency, the AMAN, the Haganah's main intelligence service was the Shai, short for "Sherut Yediot." Their operations first centered inside Palestine, serving as an illegal guerilla army on behalf of Jewish settlers. The Shai's members were not professional spies, investigators, nor saboteurs. The Shai gathered information as a weapon to "defend the Haganah organization, its members, and its secret storehouses." (Dekel 14) Working against both the Arabs and British, they expanded their efforts to include acquiring arms and assisting refugees seeking to emigrate to Israel. ("Jewish")

Other groups also involved in these efforts included the Arab Platoon of the Palmach, composed of Arabic-speaking and Arab-looking Jews. "Beyond that there was Rekhesh, a secret organization charged with obtaining weapons for the Yishuv by whatever means necessary." ("Early")

7 – Masons: Near the beginning of the 20th century, these numerous lodges included 54 lodges in Um al-Dunya. "Later, between 1940 and 1957 we find 18 Masonic halls listed in Cairo, 33 in Alexandria, 10 in Port Said, 2 in Mansourah, 2 in Ismailia and one each in Fayoum, Mehala al-Kobra and Minieh." (Raafat)

Historically, Jewish associations with Free Masonry were long and of considerable importance. Jews had perceived the Society as a way to achieve equality and in time they became the torchbearers of Freemasonry. And since much of the Masonic symbols, rituals and erudition were linked to Jewish mysticism, "accusations cropped up whenever an economic crisis loomed or when the purported Judeo-Christian alliance fell out of favor" in Islamic lands. (Raafat)

In particular, when Farouk ascended the throne, Freemasonry in Egypt quickly became associated with Zionist sympathies. "In the minds of traditionalists, the physical similarities between Masonic halls and B'nai B'rith lodges – a Judeo-Zionist organization fashioned upon the Masonic model – were far too obvious for anyone not to confound the two." Following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, "it was open season for opponents of Freemasonry to pursue their claims that Masonic halls were subversive and dangerous, bent on undermining Arab nationalism and patriotism." (Raafat)

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M1. "Reminiscences: Maurice Cohen's Reminiscences on his brother Eliahu Cohen, Most Famous Spy." A 47-page collection of notes written by Maurice with material gathered from unknown sources, apparently between 1998-2001.

M2. Cohen, Maurice as told to Carla Stockton. "Am I My Brother's Keeper?" Retrieved, June 5, 2007.

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M3. From conversations between Helene Fragman Abramson and Maurice Cohen throughout 2006.

M4. Discussions with Maurice Cohen, Harvey Chertok, and Wes Britton in the Home of Helene Fragman Abramson, Oct. 8-9, 2006

M5. From a videotape of an unaired Television interview found in the archives of Maurice Cohen. Interviewer and intended program are unknown.

Interviews with Avraham Cohen

A1. Avraham Cohen interview with Helene Fragman Abramson, Tel Aviv, November 15, 2006.

A2. Avraham Cohen interview with Helene Fragman Abramson, May 2007.

A3. Avraham Cohen phone interview with Helene Fragman Abramson, July 31, 2007

A4. Avraham Cohen telephone interview with Wes Britton and Helene Fragman Abramson, Aug. 2, 2007.
