

Aghion Family Saga

by Fabio Aghion



Old township of Ayllón Northern Spain 2014.

The first evidence of the Aghion family dates back to the 12th century, when a thriving Jewish community founded and populated the small town of Ayllón in Spain, located one hundred and forty kilometres north of Madrid and on the route to France. Life there progressed uneventfully until Isabella I of Castile – known as Isabella the Catholic – issued a decree on 31 March 1492 proclaiming that all Jews residing in Spain who had not converted to Catholicism were to be expelled.

Along with hundreds of other Jewish families in Spain, the inhabitants of Ayllón left Spain and spread throughout various European countries. Consequently, over the following three centuries, signs of the presence of the Ayllon family could be found in Italy, Holland and Greece (Thessaloniki). In 1775, this migration stretched even further, beyond the European borders, when Moise Salomon – son of Salomon Ayllon, rabbi of Amsterdam – moved to Egypt, the country that became home to part of the family until 1956.

The Alexandrian period

An official document written in Arabic, Italian and Hebrew shows that on August 16, 1853, Moise Salomon's sons, Joseph, Rahmin and Jacques decided to formally change their last name from *Ayllon* to *Aghion*, thus becoming the patriarchs of all *Aghion* peoples around the world. There is no certainty as to why their last name was modified, but the most substantiated explanation is that the change was simply a formal recognition and acceptance of the Egyptian pronunciation of *Ayllon*, given that in the Egyptian language the letters y, j, and g are pronounced with a guttural "gh" sound.

Although they had first settled in Cairo, the Aghions were merchants, bankers and stock-brokers and soon moved to, and began gaining influence in, Alexandria, as the city was becoming a thriving cosmopolitan hub, attracting investments and entrepreneurs from all over the Middle East and Europe.

In Alexandria, the Aghion family promoted the construction of infrastructure including a hospital, an orphanage, a school and several residential buildings. Among these were the current headquarters of *Al Ahram*, one of the main Egyptian newspapers, and the well-known Villa Aghion, which was designed by French architect Auguste Perret and was a masterpiece of modernist architecture until it was recently demolished.



Left: Verandah of the author's great grandfather Jacques Rahmin Aghion's house in Alexandria with his family circa 1900



Right: Same verandah with Fabio Aghion 2019

Another less famous villa was commissioned by my great-grandfather Jacques Aghion, son of Rahmin. He built it near the great Elihau Hanavi synagogue, as he served at length as president of the Jewish Community of Alexandria and lived there with his wife and seven children. Towards the end of the century, he also commissioned a large family mausoleum – which could hold up to twenty graves – constructed in one of the city's Jewish cemeteries.

In the early 1900s, several members of the Aghion family, including my grandfather, moved from Alexandria, by ship, to Trieste in Italy as well as to France. The youth of the family thus took part in the fighting during the World War I and some were decorated. André Aghion died heroically in the decisive battle of the Piave river – when General Armando Diaz led the Italian army to victory against the Austro-Hungarian army – and deserved the silver medal for military valor.

With World War II and the rise of Nazism, mourning once again struck the Aghion family when Ernest and Clementine Aghion, who had moved to France, were deported and killed in Auschwitz. Miraculously, a better fate was in store for my grandfather's family when, in March 1939, they received warning of their imminent arrest by the Nazis and managed to escape in the night, leaving behind all their belongings and returning by ship to Egypt where the rest of the family still lived.

It is an historical paradox that Egypt, the same country that had represented a haven for my family and meant its salvation from the fury of the Nazis also imprisoned and expelled thousands of Egyptian Jews starting in 1948. My grandfather died in Alexandria in 1944, and as soon as the war ended, my family returned to Italy.

Research and discovery of the mausoleum

Many years later, my Australian cousin Jack Aghion commendably managed to reunite a group of descendants of the Aghion family on an unforgettable trip to the village of our ancestors in Ayllón. This occasion increased my latent desire to seek out the testimonies of my family in Alexandria, and I decided to return to Egypt to do some research. With me on my trip I had only an old 1890 photograph that my great-grandfather had taken which portrayed the entire family on the steps of the Aghion villa where they lived.

It was a thrill to discover that the same villa still stood merely a few hundred metres from the synagogue in Alexandria. Nowadays, it has become the headquarters of the French Cultural Institute, whose director welcomed me and allowed me to visit the place where my ancestors had lived. In a spirit of recreating that special moment in time which the family photograph depicted, I had a picture of myself taken on that very same staircase. Both pictures are now proudly displayed in my home in Italy.

When my search then led me to the cemeteries, things became more complex as access to Jewish cemeteries is not free and requires various police permits. However, with a little luck, I finally managed to find the Aghion mausoleum. Although it was in a state of disrepair, it evoked a great deal of emotions. Not only was I standing before the tomb of my grandfather, who passed away before I was born, I also identified the graves of at

least fourteen family members in the photograph that had guided me in my research. My immediate reaction was that I wanted to restore the mausoleum, and fate came to my aid. A few weeks later, another Aghion reunion brought me to Thessaloniki, where I met Geoffrey Hanson, a man who had long lived in Egypt and had moved to Israel. As a child, he had been taken care of by the Aghion orphanage, and when he retired, he made it his mission to help any person of Aghion or Egyptian Jewish descent preserve their memory of their heritage in Egypt.

He assisted me in finding the right contacts in Alexandria and, with the cooperation of the president of the Jewish Community of Alexandria, I was delighted to complete the restoration of our family's mausoleum in only two years.

Cemeteries are a part of a people's historical heritage and proof of the presence of the Jews in Egypt. It is our duty, as their descendants, to preserve this heritage and thus keep the memory of our loved ones alive.



Mausoleum of Family of Jacques Rahmin Aghion in Chatby No. 3 Cemetery, Alexandria, Egypt, built circa 1900, renovated 2020.

Fabio Aghion lives in Italy and is a retired professor and CEO in telecommunications. A FOSKC member suggested that Fabio contribute this article.