

Tauber Institute Newsletter – Author Spotlight

Between Jaffa and Tel Aviv, 1870–1930: A Memoir

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*** How do you describe this book and its significance?**

Between Jaffa and Tel Aviv is the first translation of a 1931 memoir by Yosef Eliyahu Chelouche, a prominent Sephardi community leader and businessman active in Palestine/Eretz Israel during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The memoir offers a rich and fascinating account of his family's experiences in Ottoman Jaffa, their relations with Jewish, Muslim, and Christian neighbors, partners, and rivals, and his professional career in construction and commerce, which intertwined with his role as a key 'builder' of Tel Aviv.

The uniqueness of Chelouche's memoir, originally published in Hebrew, lies in his insider-outsider position, deeply rooted in his personal background. Unlike most founders of Tel Aviv, Chelouche was born in 1870 in Jaffa to a prominent Arabic-speaking Jewish family of Moroccan and Iraqi origin. He grew up receiving Jewish education in Jaffa and Beirut, yet, unlike most members of the Jewish community, he was drawn to construction, becoming a self-made building contractor and manufacturer of cement-based products that relied on imported European technology. Although working closely with Arab partners and builders, he became a key public figure in Tel Aviv, the Hebrew neighborhood-turned-city that separated itself from Jaffa.

Among the many extraordinary episodes that Chelouche recounts, his expansive description of his family's expulsion from Tel Aviv during World War I and their eighteen-month-long struggle to find food, shelter, and safety is an important contribution to the social history of the war. His wartime stories deliberately underscore episodes of generosity offered by Arab acquaintances, which are sometimes recounted as mirror-images of shameful acts by members of the Jewish community.

Chelouche also critically describes life during the first decade of the British Mandate, when the world he had known so well began to disintegrate. After the British conquest of Palestine, he became a sharp critic of both the Mandate government and the immigrant Zionist leadership, not least of all because he resented the marginalization of 'native sons' like himself. Chelouche was no friend to the Palestinian nationalist movement, but he felt he had a clearer understanding than his fellow Jews of how to steer the course of Jewish-Arab relations in Palestine away from conflict and violence and towards a shared country.

Because of this, Chelouche is an important witness to the possibilities—and shortcomings—of an ‘alternative path’ for Jews and Arabs in Palestine. His life experiences and his explicit warnings provide a powerful contrast to what came after. At the same time, Chelouche was a passionate and active Zionist for his entire life, and he consistently failed to accept or understand Palestinian criticisms of the movement’s aims. Thus, readers should wrestle with what, from a contemporary perspective, seem like contradictions or omissions in Chelouche’s memoir.

We wrote an extended introduction to bring readers into Chelouche’s world and to clarify and contextualize key aspects of his text. We also annotated the text in order to document, corroborate, or in some cases, challenge his memories.

*** Could you describe your research process as you wrote this book? What sorts of sources proved challenging?**

The main challenge was that the history of Jews in nineteenth century Jaffa has been either virtually ignored or villainized (in Arab sources), or it has been treated as completely exceptional and isolated (in Jewish sources). Instead, we needed to try to understand the world in which Chelouche grew up, worked, built, and flexed a social network that connected him to his non-Jewish neighbors in very intimate and, indeed, *life-saving*, ways. We also wanted to understand the city of Jaffa before and after the establishment of Jewish neighborhoods starting in the 1880s, some of which Chelouche’s father helped build. Unfortunately, though, much of that nineteenth century social and urban history has not yet been written. Instead, we drew on scattered primary sources from the Ottoman period—*shari’a* court records, notary records, interior ministry telegrams, newspapers, maps, and photographs—to attempt to reimagine the city. We also wanted to document, as far as possible, the many people Chelouche mentioned and interacted with, but this proved difficult for the private individuals who did not seem to make it into the history books.

*** What was it like to work as a team?**

For the memoir itself, we worked with a professional translator, but the translation was truly a collective effort. On the one hand, we had Chelouche’s somewhat archaic and florid Hebrew, which required a significant fluency in Biblical verses and texts that seeped seamlessly into his language (but were never explicitly cited!). On the other hand, we wanted to ensure that the English would be idiomatic and comprehensible to an undergraduate and broader nonspecialist audience. Tari Chelouche, another descendant of Yosef Eliyahu, was a tireless team member whose knowledge of the family history was invaluable.

The annotations and introduction were tackled based on our own strengths and interests—they sort of organically developed that way. Or has a deep understanding of Jaffa and Tel Aviv's urban structure and architecture, as well as an intimate familiarity with Chelouche's memoir and the family history (as a direct descendant). Michelle wanted to give more substance to nineteenth century Jaffa as a Palestinian Arab and Ottoman city. We excitedly shared, marveled at, and sometimes questioned each other's findings and contributions. What is clear, though, is that the book would have been much weaker without both of our strengths.

*** Has this work fueled any new areas of research and thinking for you? What projects have you embarked on since finishing this book?**

Or: For me, the project became a sometimes intense revisiting of an old territory. I was very engaged with the book for almost a decade, starting with the publication of a new Hebrew edition in 2005 (Babel Publishers) and then with a series of articles that attempted to rewrite a few chapters on the architectural and urban history of Jaffa and Tel Aviv. Working now on the English translation of the book, I figured out how little we still know about late Ottoman Jaffa and the forces that shaped its physical transformation, which eventually made this small Mediterranean town the center of modern urbanity in Palestine. This is a gap that I hope can be gradually narrowed through extensive research of Turkish and Arabic primary sources from that era, which have received little scholarly attention until now.

Michelle: I have been working on a social history of nineteenth century Jerusalem for years now, so while Jaffa was a geographic departure for me, I was able to bring snippets from the enormous evidence I found in the *shari'a* court and commercial notary records documenting Sephardi Jewish land purchases, business partnerships, and other mundane evidence of their lives in Jaffa. I hope to be able to spend more time on that in the future, restoring Jews as actors in nineteenth century Jaffa, while also understanding them as part of an Ottoman and Palestinian urban network.

Through this project I became much more interested in World War I in Palestine, in part also because I taught a class on the war at Penn State as we were wrapping up the book. I would love to spend much more time researching in the Ottoman, German, and British archives about the war over the country, hopefully providing deeper context for Yosef Eliyahu's own extraordinary wartime journey.