

AVENUE

AARON

VINCENT

ELKAIM

EXPLORES

THE FADING

HISTORY OF

MOROCCO'S

JEWISH-MUSLIM

COMMUNITIES

IN HIS NEW SERIES,

A CO-EXISTENCE

Toronto-based freelance photographer Aaron Vincent Elkaim has photographed everything from daily news events to fashion shows. But to create his more artistic series, *A Co-Existence: Lost in the Wake of Zionism*, now showing at the Pikto Gallery, he tapped into his personal family history to document the fading memory of co-existing Jewish and Muslim communities in Morocco. The photos in the series are a result of Elkaim's three-month trip from Casablanca to Marrakech, and many Moroccan spots in between. The Post's Kate Wilkinson talked with Elkaim about history, religion and happenstance.

On becoming a photographer

"I originally got into photography, like I guess many people do, while travelling. In university I studied cultural anthropology and film. My girlfriend had signed me up for a quick course in my last semester of school, a two-month intro to photography course, because I'd shown some interest in it. And it led me to my first camera, and my trip to Europe, where I became an avid photography hobbyist."

On starting to document

Jewish Morocco "I was at this workshop in New York, the Eddie Adams workshop. The head of the of The Associated Press, Santiago Lyon [was there]. I spoke to him and showed him my portfolio. He was asking me about my family history and my cultural background. I told him I was Moroccan-Jewish, and he kind of dropped a hint that I should explore my roots there. It was once the largest Jewish population in the Arab world — 300,000 Jews there in the 1940s — and that the population had dwindled now to only about 5,000. I remember reading that and thinking, 'I want to go document these last Jews of Morocco.' I had a cousin getting married in Paris — I was going to go there with my father, so we organized a trip together to Morocco for two weeks. He toured me around, he showed me where he grew up. It was really a rewarding experience going over his youth, and the streets that he walked, with him. I also began to realize that the story I wanted to tell wasn't so much about this romantic ideal of these last Jews of Morocco, it was more about the history."

On Morocco's history of

co-existence "I remember walking into the synagogue in Marrakech, and seeing a woman who lived there, and she was a Muslim woman, one of the caretakers. There was something in her that sparked this understanding for me — the respect. I was in Israel before and I saw the tensions between the Palestinians and the Jews, and I'm aware of Muslim-Jewish tensions in the world. And when I saw this Muslim woman living in a synagogue, it just opened my eyes to that history of co-existence and mutual respect. Less than a year later I went back to Morocco for another

three months and started exploring all the places where Jews once lived, all the old neighbourhoods. Old cemeteries and synagogues that were at the farthest reaches of the country. It was amazing to see how embedded they were in the fabric of the country. I think it's important to document Morocco and bring to life that history, because it shows evidence that it is possible, that we can get along. In a way, I think people perceive that conflict as one that's kind of gone on forever. I think this just offers a history and a truth that says that's not quite the case."

On the new generation of

Moroccan Jews "Pretty much 90% or more of the Jews who are in Morocco now live in Casablanca, which is the modern city. So the Jews who are left there, to generalize — especially with the youth — more Westernized, in terms of their culture. They've distanced themselves a bit from that Arab heritage in a way, because the culture there really was quite united. People lived side by side in villages for generations and generations. So there wasn't a huge cultural separation between the Arabs and the Jews. Whereas nowadays, you find that there's more of a distinct separation. It didn't really interest me that much, what I'd found in Casablanca. I was looking for that romantic vision of the past, and it didn't exist generally, anymore, at least in the main community. But there were little pockets still, you'd find one Jew here, just a singular Jew in a market."

On his favourite photo in the series

"I think the favourite photo is one of the synagogue in Marrakech. It's not of the actual prayer room but it's in the synagogue. It's like a blue tiled area and there's drapes flowing. In that synagogue, when you walk into it, you're in the middle of red, dusty Marrakech, in the Mellah, the old Jewish quarter. Narrow walls, a very claustrophobic kind of place. And you walk into the synagogue, and the blue just strikes you immediately ... it's like this oasis."

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Aaron Vincent Elkaim's exhibit runs until May 31 at Toronto's Pikto gallery. For more information, visit pikoto.com.

