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The Jewish Legacy of Libya

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The presence of Jews in the regions that now constitute Libya took place under the Phoenician, Greek, and Roman rules. Archaeological evidence, for instance, records a Jewish revolt against the Romans in Cyrenaica in 115–117, while according to Jewish and Arab traditions, local Jews and Berbers opposed the Arab conquest of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 642

[\(Roumani, Meghnagi, Roumani 2018\)](#). In the following centuries, Jews shared—within the legal status of dhimmi, which defined them—the changing fortunes of the other populations of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, in the urban centers and the rural areas: under the Almohad rule, the Spanish occupation of Tripoli (1510–1530); the Ottoman conquest (1551–1711); and the Qaramanli monarchy (1711–1835) when the Ottoman Empire eventually reconquered Tripoli. Demographic data [\(Haggiag-Liluf 2007\)](#) demonstrate that between 1882 and 1910, Jews were mainly concentrated in the cities of Tripoli and Benghazi, which in which 10,000 and 2,850 Jewish residents lived, respectively (in 1910). Jews also lived, although in much smaller numbers, in the Tripolitanian coastal towns of Zuara, Zavia, Zanzur, Kussabat, Homs, Zliten, Misurata, Sirte, and in rural areas of the interior such as Gharian, Meslata, Yefren, Tigrinna, Beni Ulid. Concerning the geographic distribution of the Jewish population of Cyrenaica, one should mention Barce, Cyrene, Derna, Tobruk and Bardia.



Slat Lekbira Synagogue (c) JIMENA

Jewish Community in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

In the late nineteenth century, with the establishment of the French protectorate in Tunisia (1881) and the beginning of indirect British rule in Egypt (1882), the Ottoman Empire strengthened its military presence in Tripoli. However, Italy's colonial ambitions around Libya had already begun during what was called 'scramble for Africa', just two decades after the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy as a unified country (1861). Diplomatic reasons, the pursuit of international prestige, as well as the desire to expand the national economy led to the Italian colonial enterprise and to the occupation of Libya by the Italian army in 1911. Well before then, Jews in Libya served as mediators of Italian culture and played a role in conveying certain Italian ideals. As recalled by Renzo De Felice (1985), in 1880 Eugenio Arbib (a Jew from Tripoli) had established a club where notables among European and especially Italian society met. Even if not numerous, among the more Westernized and cultured Jews there was a significant presence of 'Italianizers': on the eve of the Italian occupation, two of them, Halfalla Nahum and Mario Nunes-Vais, were advisers to the Tripoli committee of the Dante Alighieri, an institution founded in 1889 with the aim of protecting and spreading the Italian language and culture throughout the world.

Some of the most important personalities of the Jewish community of Tripoli, such as Halfalla Nahum, Moisé Hassan and Ercole Nunes Vais, sat among the commissioners of the Tripoli branch of the Banco di Napoli; seven out of twelve members of the board were Jews (De Felice 1978). In 1875, a Jew from Livorno, Giannetto Paggi, arrived in Tripoli, invited by some wealthy Jewish families to open the first Italian school in the city. In fact, these families were eager for their children to be given a more modern and Western education than

the one available in the country. The following year, in 1876, the first school was opened. In 1909, the first Tripolitan newspaper in a Western language (Italian) was founded, the *Eco di Tripoli*, edited by Gustavo Arbib, a leading member of the Tripoli Jewish community (De Felice 1978). In December 1912, the Jewish community of Tripoli, and later that of Benghazi, was officially incorporated into the *Comitato delle Università Israelietiche Italiane*, the union of the Jewish communities of Italy. This was anything but a smooth process.



Giannetto Paggi with his colleagues at the school, including his two daughters Ida and Clelia. (c) Roberto Nunes Vais, *Reminiscenze tripoline*

Between the 1920s and 1940s, Jewish social and cultural activities developed, including those overtly supportive of and inspired by Zionism. The sport association *Bnei Tzion* was established in Tripoli in 1920 and later (in 1926) became an official part of the Jewish world organization *Maccabi World Union*. In 1923, the *Associazione Donne Ebee Italiane (ADEI)*, the Italian branch of the *Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO)*, was established. After several unsuccessful attempts by individual groups, the *Organizzazione Sionista di Tripoli (Zionist Organization of Tripoli)* was finally founded in 1924, reaching its highest peak in popularity in the early 1930s. A case in point is the *Ben Yehuda* group, a branch of the organization that began to carry out extensive Zionist activity in Tripoli. This included Hebrew language instruction (to both children and adults), the staging of plays in Hebrew on biblical themes, the inauguration of a Hebrew library, the publishing of the weekly *Limdu Ivrit [Learn Hebrew]*, and finally the opening of the *Hatikva* Hebrew school, which in 1937 had more than one thousand students enrolled (Liluf 2005). This latter initiative boosted female involvement in Jewish education; women made up the majority of the teaching staff and were responsible for the progress of Hebrew education in Libya (Simon 1992).

The 1931 Italian census of the Libyan population and an earlier Italian survey of the economic activities in Tripolitania (1928) provide a picture of the professional profile of Jews, mainly in Tripoli and Benghazi (De Felice 1985). They were involved in commerce and industry, where the latter referred “to traditional trades such as blacksmith, tinsmith, cobbler, tailor, carpenter, jeweler” (Goldberg 1971: 249), and the former to small-scale retailers.



A group of Libyan Jews sitting in a Sukkah during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. (c) JIMENA

The rise to power of Fascism in Italy (1922) had brought about a substantial change in the attitude towards the colonization of Libya, which was to be fully integrated as the nineteenth region of Italy. The racist character of Fascism, as expressed in the racial segregation implemented in Italy’s East African colonies (Abyssinia, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland), eventually became a catalyst for antisemitic legislation in Libya as well (Hoppe 2018) with the implementation of the Leggi per la difesa della razza [racial laws] in 1938 in the North African colony. The situation deteriorated in 1941 when German troops entered Libya. Libyan Jews were imprisoned in internment camps such as Giado in Tripolitania, where at least 562 inmates died (most due to a typhus epidemic). Others were confined to forced labor camps such as the Sidi Azaz camp, to which some 3,000 Jews from Tripolitania were taken by the Italian authorities (Hoppe 2018).

During World War II, Libyan Jews holding foreign passports were deported; those holding French nationality were sent to Tunisia, and those holding British passports were sent to Italy and eventually to the camps of Bergen-Belsen and Ravensbrück. In 1943, with the support of the Jewish Brigade from Palestine, the British army defeated the German troops in Libya. They liberated the country and a military administration was put in place. Aggravated by a very precarious economy, the social and political situation remained extremely tense, and Jewish communities in Libya were targeted in two pogroms (November 1945 and June 1948) with some 130 Jews killed in the former and 14 in the latter.



After WWII, Libyan Jews started moving back after being deported to different countries based on their passport countries. In this photo, Jews are returning to Libya from Bergen-Belsen. (c) Yad Vashem

Dissolution of the Community

At the end of World War II, the institutional contours of Libya still remained to be defined. Italy hoped to maintain some form of control over the country, where some 43,000 Italians still resided in 1952 [\(Di Giulio and Cresti 2016\)](#). On the other hand, the geopolitical context marked by the configurations of the Cold War convinced the United States, Great Britain and France of the need for a unified, independent and therefore 'free' country (Libya), which could negotiate strategic agreements, including military ones.

In this geopolitical context, on November 21, 1949, the United Nations Assembly voted on a resolution on the independence of Libya, and Adrian Pelt was appointed commissioner to oversee the transition process, which culminated in the proclamation of the United Kingdom of Libya on December 24, 1951, with Idris al-Sanussi as king and Sayed Muhammad Muntasser as prime minister. However, the path to building a national community was fraught with challenges. The general elections called soon after the declaration of independence and completed on 19 February 1952 resulted in riots and disturbances, with public property destroyed and transportation interrupted. The government responded firmly, and members of the political opposition were expelled [\(Baldinetti 2010\)](#). The social unrest that followed the general elections did not bode well for the country. Indeed, independent Libya remained deeply divided between its three regions (Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan), and the image of a Libyan nation never developed into a concrete reality.

In this political scenario, and in the framework of the immigration policies of the newly proclaimed State of Israel (1948), a major migration process from Libya to Israel began, first illegally and, from February 1949 onwards, with the authorization of the British military administration. In the late 1940s, the Jewish community of Libya was the smallest in the North Africa. An estimated 30,000 Jews lived in the Tripolitanian region and some 6,000 in Cyrenaica. Given these figures, the migration of some 30,000 Jews from Libya to

Israel in a very short period—between 1949 and 1952—represents a unique phenomenon. The Jews of Libya arrived in Israel toward the beginning of the mass emigration that doubled the newborn state's population in only three years (1948–1951), and they therefore benefited from housing in the central areas of the country. This guaranteed them better opportunities for work and integration into the social and economic fabric of the country compared to members of other communities sent to live in developing cities in Israel's periphery. In addition, the Jews of Libya founded several moshavim, common agricultural villages, which sometimes represented true examples of transplanted communities, that is to say the reconstruction in Israel of an entire village of rural areas of Tripolitania or Cyrenaica [\(Goldberg 1974\)](#).

The few thousand Jews who remained in independent Libya resided almost exclusively in the cities of Tripoli (about 6,000) and Benghazi (about 800). Until their sudden, forced departure in the summer 1967, they experienced less than two decades of deep societal and political changes, including the economic boom triggered by the discovery and exploitation of oil resources in the country and the increasingly stark influence of Arab nationalism and Pan-Arabism.

As previously mentioned, due to the excessive influence of external powers and the weakness of local political forces, independent Libya remained deeply divided and could not develop a solid national project. The monarchy—one should not forget the Sufi origin of the Sanussi order—resorted to religion as a unifying element, and the first visible impact of that development was the introduction of compulsory and free education of Islam and Arabic at the primary level. Moreover, while Italian colonialism in Libya officially came to end in 1950 (following the international agreements in 1947), an estimated population of 40,000 Italians remained in the country. This is one reason for the close affiliation with Italians among the Jews who decided not to emigrate to Israel between 1949 and 1952

[\(Rossetto 2021\)](#). It also explains why many of them chose Italy as a country of resettlement in 1967 when, following the riots that broke out in Tripoli and Benghazi during the Six-Day War, Jews were forced to leave Libya.

After spending weeks barricaded in their homes as well as in military camps under the protection of the Libyan army, the Jews were evacuated by means of air and naval operations. Different institutions participated in the organization of the departures as well as the resettlement in Italy: the Italian government, the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC), the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), the Unione delle Comunità Israelitiche Italiane (the Union of Italian Jewish Communities), and the Deputazione Israelitica di Assistenza (DIA, the social assistance service of the Jewish community of Rome). As historian Maurice Roumani notes, Libyan authorities also helped organize departures and issued Jews the necessary travel documents to leave the country [\(Roumani 2008\)](#).



Between the 1920s and 1940s, Jewish social and cultural activities developed, with an emphasis on the inspiration of Zionism. Pictured are members of the Society of Young Zionists of Tripoli. (c) The "Or Shalom" Center for Libyan Jewish Heritage

The Libyan Jewish Diaspora

The Jews of Libya in contemporary times are dispersed among many countries such as the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Canada, Australia, Shanghai, and Venezuela, but those who chose to settle in countries other than Israel and Italy are a minority. Between 1948 and 1952, the vast majority of Libyan Jews settled in Israel. Emigration reached its highest point in 1949, with 14,357 departures. According to the data of the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2021 about 11,200 Jews who were born in Libya were living in Israel, while about 52,700 were born in Israel to a Libyan Jewish father. Considered together, the two categories represent less than one percent of the overall Jewish population of Israel. This figure, for instance, is comparable to the Egyptian Jewish population of Israel (about 51,500 born in Egypt or born in Israel to an Egyptian Jewish father). The Merkaz Moreshet Yahadut Luv (Center for the Heritage of Libyan Jewry) in Or Yehuda, a former transit camp, is dedicated to the preservation and transmission of Libyan Jewish culture, traditions and history. A similar cultural enterprise is also run by the Merkaz Or Shalom leShimur veHankhalat Moreshet Yehudei Luv (Or Shalom Centre for the Conservation and Transmission of the Heritage of Libyan Jews) in the coastal town of Bat Yam.

Almost half of the roughly 6,000 Libyan Jews who arrived in Italy during the summer of 1967 continued on their way to Israel or other destinations, while the other half settled mainly in Rome and today represent about a third of the community, although the statistical data are difficult to verify. To contextualize this estimate, it is important to recall that according to Della Pergola's figures (AJYB), in 2021 Italy had a core Jewish population of 27,200 individuals, half of whom were living in Rome. The Museo Ebraico di Roma (the Jewish

Museum of Rome) has a room, the Sala libica, dedicated to the Libyan community with material donated by several Libyan Jewish families. After their arrival to Italy in the 1960s, Libyan Jews made a tremendous contribution to the Jewish demography of the country. While keeping their cultural and religious traditions, Libyan Jews integrated into the local Jewish communities thus enhancing Jewish practice and life in Italy. Moreover, thanks to the international networks and commercial experience they brought with them, they boosted the local economy and were successful in various entrepreneurial ventures.



members of the community board of Benghazi and the rabbinic court (c) The "Or Shalom" Center for Libyan Jewish Heritage

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