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‘We Were all Italian!’: The construction of a ‘sense of Italianness’ among Jews from Libya (1920s–1960s)

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores how a ‘sense of Italianness’ formed among Jews in Libya during the Italian colonial period and in the decades following its formal end. Based on interviews with Jews born in Libya to different generations and currently living in Israel and Europe, the essay considers the concrete declensions of this socio-cultural phenomenon and the different meanings that the respondents ascribe to it. Meanings span from the macro level of historical events and societal changes, to the micro level of individual social relations and material culture. Viewed across generations and framed in the peculiarities of Italian colonial history, the ‘sense of Italianness’ expressed by Jews in Libya appears as both a colonial and post-colonial legacy.

KEYWORDS

Libya; Jews; Italianness; postcolonial; memories

Introduction

Over the last three decades, scholars of Italian cultural, colonial and postcolonial studies have elaborated tremendous new insights into how the Italian national discourse and identity developed across time and space. This was achieved by introducing new disciplinary perspectives of the *Risorgimento*, the nineteenth-century movement for Italian unification (Banti 2000; Banti and Ginsborg 2007), traditionally regarded as the crucial founding phase of Italy as a nation-state (Patriarca and Riall 2010); by addressing Italy’s ‘Southern Question’ as a ‘neo-orientalist discourse *within* Italy itself’ (Schneider 1998, 8) but also by taking this deconstructionist paradigm further (Perrotta 2014), thanks to new empirical research and new theorization (Pipyrrou 2014); by exploring the Italian racialized identity already theorized during the *Risorgimento* (Barsotti 2020) and consolidated during the colonial experience and the fascist regime (Palumbo 2003; Spadaro 2013; Deplano and Pes 2014); and by questioning ‘the processes of racialization, gendering, and cultural transformations engendered within contemporary Italy by the legacy of colonialism, emigration, and global migrations’ (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012, pos.301).

Although incomplete, this overview conveys the image of a constellation of disciplines and cases studies. In respect to them, the history of how Jews from Libya have understood

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Italianness – the subject of this essay – might appear relatively marginal. However, the memories of Jews from Libya represent an important contribution to the understanding of Italianness as a constructed category. As I understand it, the Italianness expressed by Jews from Libya is a ‘knot of memory’ (Rothberg 2010): a performance of memory in which are knotted ‘rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference’ (Rothberg 2010, 7). How it unfolds across generations reveals the ‘porosity of temporal boundaries’ (Paulicelli 2015, 5) across the colonial and postcolonial. Here, a sense of Italianness – as I suggest to term it – stands for a more individualized perspective (Grimshaw 2020) that enables us to understand Italianness ‘from within’ (Little 1980), ‘as a series of interacting points of rupture and continuity rather than a series of clear breaks’ (Paulicelli 2015, 5).

This essay intends to contribute also to the field of *Mizrahi* (meaning oriental in Hebrew) and Sephardi studies, that is the scholarship investigating the fate of Jews living – like other minorities – in Muslim-majority countries (Meir-Glitzenstein 2018; Moreno 2020). The case of Jews from Libya remains at the margins of this growing body of research,¹ exploring how Jews have been affected, in late modern and contemporary times, by the political, economic and social processes of the whole region.

Italianness in perspective

Italianness was not something I was looking for while conducting interviews with Libyan Jews. My interest resided in unveiling, via a comparative study (Green 2002), how Jews who were born in Libya and emigrated to Israel and Italy understood, recalled and transmitted their identities, as individuals and as a group (Rossetto 2015).

During the process of data analysis, I more clearly realized the ‘keyness’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, 82) of this theme in the way people recalled their life story and eventually made sense of it. However, Italianness was not much referred to as a ‘national character’ (Patriarca 2010). Rather, interlocutors resorted to personal experiences, ‘daily declensions’ – as I would call them – to talk about what and who they perceived to be Italian, including themselves, although they were not all Italian nationals.²

It is precisely this dimension of the individual – both in claiming a certain identity and in understanding it in different ways that are not necessarily linked to a political structure (Renucci 2005) – that needed a more evocative construct (Swayd 2014). I found that ‘sense of Italianness’ could better serve this purpose than Italianness *tout court*. In this respect, the concept of ‘Jewish sensibility’ developed by Mark H. Gelber was also inspiring, where the author considered ‘sensibility’ (semantically related to the word ‘sense’) as comprising empathic understanding, intimate perception and emotional solidarity (Gelber 2014, 13).³

This semantic choice does not mean however eluding the long history of the porous, multifaceted idea of Italianness, which ultimately mirrors the ‘great array of historically specific forms of openness and diversity’ (Dickie 2001, 26) of Italian history. On the contrary, throughout the article I will highlight the persistence – across generations – of some imaginaries of Italianness, ‘deep images’ as cultural historian Alberto Banti would called them (Banti 2008), but also how they transformed in the post-independence time in Libya.

Actually, Italianness is not a new topic in scholarship of Libyan Jewry: it was pointed out as one of the main reasons that kept Jews from emigrating from Libya to Israel in the 1940s (De Felice 1978; Haggiag-Liluf 2005; Roumani 2008). Without denying the

role it played in shaping their decision to stay, here I suggest reconsidering this aspect – trying ‘to find more imaginative ways of connecting micro and macro levels’ (Rügen 2010, 660; also Burton 2007; Clancy Smith 2012; Moreno 2020) and knowing that ‘a change of scale might lead to a change of question and of explanation’ (Struck, Ferris, and Revel 2011, 580). In fact, as I observed during my research, Jews’ affinity and identification with Italian culture in Libya intensified after 1952, when Italian colonialism officially ended. This led to me to question whether Italianness was the cause of staying or, rather, the result of not leaving.

The sense of Italianness expressed by Jews born in Libya between the 1920s and the 1950s takes on different connotations across time. On the one hand, the recollections by Jews born between the 1920s and 1930s revolve around the idea of Italians as the bearers of modernity, development and education. Italian as a language of instruction in Jewish schools occupies a central place in the recollections, while examples of sociability with Italians are less prominent, except when work experiences are mentioned. On the other side, recollections by younger generations (Jews born between the 1940s and 1950s) who lived in the Independent Kingdom of Libya (proclaimed on 24 December 1951), hint to a deeper and more personal involvement in and with Italianness, including closer social relationships with Italians (especially in school), Italian language (for most of them their mother tongue), and material practices such as popular culture, fashion, leisure activities.

I begin my discussion by briefly recalling the history of Jews in Libya in contemporary time and their role in the Italian colonial expansion in the country starting from the end of the nineteenth century. A section dedicated to the research design introduces the description of how a sense of Italianness formed among the generations 1920s/1930s and subsequently, the transformations this ‘sense’ underwent in the experience of younger generations (1940s/1950s).

Libyan Jews: between history and historiography

In the late 1940s, Libya’s Jewish community was the smallest in North Africa. An estimated 30,000 Jews lived in the Tripolitanian region and 6,000 in Cyrenaica, at the time. Given these figures, the migration of about 30,400 Jews from Libya in a very short period – between 1949 and 1952 – represents a unique phenomenon, as observed by historian Maurice Roumani (Roumani 2008).⁴ This means that nearly 90% of Libya’s Jewish community left for the state of Israel in the immediate aftermath of its establishment. Both the emissaries of the Jewish Agency involved in organizing the migration and the members of cultural associations promoting the Libyan Jewish heritage recall the event in messianic terms – and as the accomplishment of the Zionist dream (Varadi 1989; Haggiag-Liluf 2005).

However, some 6,000 Jews decided to remain. They were later forced to leave the country in 1967, following the riots that broke out – mainly in Tripoli and Benghazi – during the Six-Day War. But why did they decide not to leave Libya in the 1940s? How is it that they felt they could remain, while the majority of their fellow Jews had already left?

In his pioneering work on the history of Jews from Libya, De Felice defines the Jews who remained in Libya after the mass emigration of the 1940s as the most Italianised

and the richest of the community, who did not want to leave behind their properties and assets. He portrays a Jewish community profoundly divided between indigenous and foreign Jews; between elements who supported tradition and rejected modernity and those who embraced a Western, Italian way of life; and – concerning the discussions held at the UN about the destiny of the country in the immediate after-war period – between Jews whose position was pro-Italian and those who supported the process of independence for the Libyan nation (De Felice 1978, 317–330). Individual trajectories, however, challenge any linear interpretation of the migratory phenomenon they formed part of. Of what, exactly, did De Felice's reference to Italianness consist?

Undoubtedly, he was thinking of the role played by Jews in Italy's expansion in Libya, as I will show in the next paragraphs. However, as illustrated by the recollections of the interviewees presented in this essay, this is only one of the many declensions in which this idea unfolded across time.

Italian colonialism and Jews in Libya

Italy's colonial ambitions around Libya began during the so-called 'scramble for Africa,' just two decades after the Kingdom of Italy as a unified country was proclaimed (1861). Reasons of diplomacy and prestige, as well as the will to expand the national economy, drove the Italian colonial venture (Labanca 2002). The years immediately following the end of the first world war were characterized by uncertainty in the Italian government about which political form the provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan should take. At this time (1919), the Italian parliament issued separate statutes, known as *Legge Fondamentale*, for the provinces. These statutes were considered 'remarkably liberal' measures 'providing considerable and broad powers to the local leaders' (Vandewalle 2006, 28); unfortunately, they were never implemented.

When fascism came to power in Italy (1922), it engendered a substantial change in the attitude towards the colonization of Libya, which had been meant to be fully integrated as Italy's nineteenth region, especially by means of demographic colonization and agricultural settlement (Pergher 2010). This project could have been pursued on a larger scale, after the violent suppression of the Libyan resistance movement culminated with the hanging of its charismatic leader, Omar al Mukhtar, in 1931.

With the aim of forging a 'national-imperial identity for the Italians' (Spadaro 2013, 5), fascist politics in Libya involved not only demographic and agricultural settlement but also substantial urban interventions and an important investment in the tourism industry. Buildings were intended to recall the glory of the ancient Roman empire and to instil a sense of admiration in the Italian colonizers (Fuller 2007). This should have made them feel proud to have been entrusted with the mission of bringing Italian civilization back to Libya. The tourism industry, in turn, should have conveyed the message of Italian prestige to the largest possible public, both in the colony and in the metropole, and among European nations (Spadaro 2013).

As I will later illustrate, the Italian colonial enterprise in Libya ended with the Second World War as a result of the military defeat that Italy suffered, and the international agreements signed in Paris in 1947. The way Italian colonialism ended (Ballinger 2016), along with other historical circumstances, such as the exploitation of oil resources, the rise of

Pan Arabism, and the Cold War, influenced the way in which Libyan society was transformed in the post-independence era.

I will now focus on the place that Jews occupied within this evolving societal frame, giving particular attention to the role they played in mediating Italianness. In fact, well before the 1911 military occupation, Jews in Libya served as mediators of Italian culture. In 1880, Eugenio Arbib, a Jewish notable in Tripoli, established a club where the most influential members of European society, Italian in particular, would meet (De Felice 1978, 39). Among the Jews who belonged to this high-society milieu, De Felice mentions Halfalla Nahum and Mario Nunes-Vais as two of the most Westernized, cultivated members of the Jewish community. On the eve of the 1911 Italian occupation of Libya, they were part of the governing board of the local committee of the Società Dante Alighieri, a cultural institution founded in 1889 with the aim of preserving and spreading the Italian language and culture in the world (De Nardis 2016).⁵ Some notables amongst Tripoli's Jewish community, such as Halfalla Nahum, Moisé Hassan and Ercole Nunes-Vais, were also members of the governing board of the Banco di Napoli (an Italian bank) in Tripoli; of its 12 councillors, seven were Jews (De Felice 1978, 66).

Giannetto Paggi, a Jewish schoolteacher from Livorno, Italy, arrived in Tripoli in 1875 (Spadaro 2020). He had been invited by some rich Jewish families who were eager to provide their children with an Italian education (Buccianti 1994; Paggi and Roumani 2012). One year later, Paggi opened the country's first non-Catholic Italian school.⁶ In 1909, the first Tripolitanian newspaper in a Western language – Italian – was founded: *l'Eco di Tripoli*. The editor was Gustavo Arbib, a leading figure of the city's Jewish community. At the religious level, the Jewish communities of Tripoli and Benghazi were officially affiliated in December 1912, with the Union of Italian Jewish communities – although not without disputes and controversies.

Recollections convey a rather positive image of Italo Balbo, the governor of Libya between 1934 and 1940. He is remembered as a 'friend of the Jews' who tried to mitigate the application of the anti-Jewish legislation in Libya in 1938. Actually, Balbo aimed at transforming Libya into a modern, economically developed colony, which could not have been fully realized without the support of the Jewish entrepreneurs. However, this did not spare Libyan Jews from discrimination and imprisonment in concentration (Salerno 2008) and labour camps in Libya – a practice widely used in the colonization of Libya (Home 2019) – and even deportation to Europe (Roumani 2008).

Prior to this, Italian Jewish families, especially the most well-off, had been very close to the ruling Italian colonial elite, with whom they shared an intense social life (Nunes Vais 1982). Analyzed by Spadaro (2020), the memories recounted by Paola Giuli (a descendant of Giannetto Paggi) of her mother's monarchic sentiment and later feelings of social isolation following the enactment of racial laws in Libya, testify precisely to the privileged place that these Italian Jewish families occupied in colonial Libya. In Paola's view, what her mother ultimately regretted was not so much that she lost her job as a result of the racial laws, but that people did not look at her in the same way (i.e. as possessing a higher social status) as they used to.

This testimony by a descendant of Giannetto Paggi, considered perhaps the best example of Jewish involvement in spreading Italianness in Libya, brings us to the methodological core of this contribution: to explore the different meanings attached to the Italianness from a micro-level perspective, as they emerge from individual recollections,

according to the peculiar way in which knowledge is constructed in anthropology. The next section will illustrate this.

Research design

When – during the summer of 1967 – Jews from Libya found refuge in Italy, many considered themselves Italian. Legally, however, many of them were not. Not all held Italian nationality and, once they arrived in Italy, they had to continuously apply for residence permit renewals as foreigners. A long legal battle began, soon after their arrival, to obtain their Italian citizenship '*Optimo iure*' (fully) as a group. This was eventually granted in 1987 – although it was granted via an administrative procedure, rather than by law (Gritti 2019).

When I interviewed the late Simone Habib, z.l., one of the lawyers who assisted the Libyan Jews in this process, he insisted that Libyan Jews did not arrive in Italy as foreigners. As a matter of fact, they did not arrive – in the sense of emigrating – in Italy. They came home.⁷ Italy was their home because they were Italian, the argument went: their culture was Italian, their language was Italian and they went to Italian schools.

As I began to analyse my sources, I soon realized that interviewees often resorted to comparison in the definition of 'who' and 'what' was Italian.⁸ This was clearly revealed in the very first interview I conducted. The lady I met was born in Tripoli in 1951, to a family that – according to what she heard from her parents and relatives – had always lived in Libya. Yet, as she remembers it, everything at home was Italian: books, music, newspapers and magazines. The neighbours were Italian, as well as her friends and classmates. The language spoken at home was Italian, except when the parents did not want the children to understand them, in which case they used Judeo-Arabic. To my question of whether the family had Arab-Muslim friends, Mirella responds that her family members had friends and acquaintances mainly among other Jewish families and also among Italians:

Mirella: We did not associate with Muslims ... not much ... we were mainly among us, of Jewish religion, and then we had our schoolmates who were ... real Italians, I mean really Italian ... and we were friends with them because the school builds a strong connection, the school experience binds people together.⁹

Further in the interview, Mirella explains her expression 'real Italian'. She says that she means schoolmates whose families originated from Italy, even if they themselves were not born there. In this way, she establishes different degrees of 'being Italian', determined by factors that did or did not depend on the individual's will. She is not a 'real Italian', since her family does not have Italian origins. Yet she can consider herself Italian because of the cultural and social world in which she was and is immersed. I will return later in the essay to this aspect of 'Italian authenticity' that Mirella's statement highlights.

Inspired by this 'comparative' form of narration, I started my analysis by dividing the collection of interviews into two groups: those with interviewees born in the 1920s/30s and those with people born in the 1940s/50s. As we shall see in more detail later, the mass migration of nearly 90% of Jews from Libya to Israel in 1949–1952 was the event that most deeply affected the configuration of the country's Jewish population. I decided to set this as the watershed event – not only as a category of time, but also

because it sets a clear distinction between those who left for Israel and those who decided not to leave.

Subsequently, I looked for everything and everyone that was termed 'Italian' in the interviews. I then compared the two groups and reached the following conclusion. Although the affiliation of Jews in Libya with Italians and Italian culture was a trait that had its roots prior to the beginning of Italian colonization, it is nevertheless clear that this phenomenon intensified after colonialism officially ended in 1950.

This was due to the demographic changes that occurred in the Jewish community, with the mass migration of the late 1940s towards Israel. Yet it is also a result of the transformations that took place in the postcolonial Libyan society at large – and to the peculiarities of Italian colonialism and postcolonialism. By this I mean, for instance, the fact that after the official end of Italian colonialism, about 45,000 Italians remained in the country. They were allowed to continue their professions and businesses and keep running their schools, until Muammar Gheddafi ordered their expulsion in 1970. In this respect, official statistics are quite telling. They estimate a total population of 144,543 inhabitants for the city of Tripoli in 1954, divided as follows: 107,668 Libyans, 5,869 Jews, 27,000 Italians and 4,006 people of other nationalities (Di Giulio 2016).

In the next sections, I will continue the discussion by comparing the different generations: those born in the 1920s/1930s (about 30 people) and those born in the 1940s/1950s (about 40 people).

Constructing a sense of Italianness: 1920s–1930s

Every morning in the school, before entering the classroom, we used to sing a song in Italian which I forgot now. But it was a song entitled '*Viva il re*' (Long live the King) in honour of Vittorio Emanuele. Afterwards, with Mussolini and Fascism, we stopped with Vittorio Emanuele – of whom, in any case, there was a picture in every Jewish household, rich and poor alike. And there were also the pictures of Vittorio Emanuele III, of Umberto of Savoia and the queen of Italy: three pictures.¹⁰

A fascinating, kaleidoscopic picture emerges as a result of exploring the testimonies given by Libyan Jews born between the 1920s and 1930s, regarding what or who was Italian in their eyes. It merges daily encounters and historical events, personal experiences and global connections. Here I aim to share the richness of this image with readers, by listing the elements that recurred most often in the interviews and singling out the most telling ones.

For many of the Jews I met, Italians were those who brought development and modernization:

I remember that when I was a child, my father used to say 'this year there is no rain and as a result there won't be work', because the Arabs used to live out of the products of the earth. The Arabs didn't contribute to the development [of Libya, A/N], but the Italians yes!¹¹

The Italians built the city of Tripoli, its *lungomare* (the promenade), the public gardens, the statues, the fountains. Italian became the toponymy of the town of Tripoli, such as *Corso Sicilia*, *Piazza Italia*, *Corso Vittorio Emanuele* and *Via Giosuè Carducci*.¹² The recollection of the urbanistic development of Tripoli, such as the *Lungomare Volpi* or the *Monumento ai caduti*,¹³ still elicits a sense of amazement in the respondents which ultimately resonates

with what Mia Fuller identifies as the final goal of Italian colonial planning between the 1920s–30s: to impose Italian superiority through the built environment (Fuller 2007).

The imposingness of colonial architecture coexists in the recollections with smaller, ordinary places: the butchery, the shoes shop, the atelier of the tailor, the workshop of the upholster, the *taverna* (an Italian term, no longer in use, for the modern equivalent of ‘pub’), the bakery, the *latteria* or creamery. They depict not only ordinary places, but also many Italian ‘ordinary people,’ such as neighbours or partners in trade:

My father was a tradesman, and I remember, when I was young, he used to work with an Italian company in Milan. I still remember its name: Dei. My father used to export different products from Tripoli to Italy, such as eggs, for instance. He would place them in the straw, in big boxes, and he would send them to Italy. He exported also *henna* to this company, to the Dei. And they, I guess, used it to produce cosmetics.¹⁴

I lived with my wife and my son in a flat in Galleria De Bono (De Bono gallery), at the second floor. As neighbours, we had the family of the notary Mr. Messina. They were Italian; he and his wife used to come to us as if they were at their own place.¹⁵

Italians were employers – with whom Jews worked and from whom Jews often learnt a profession – according to the interviewees. In many cases, they are remembered by name, even when the interviewee is speaking of her father’s employer: M. Monteforte, the upholsterer; M. Fiaschetti, a Sicilian tailor; M. Gherardi, who owned a very well-known tannery, and Mme Conti, a seamstress who owned a shirt factory; and, in general, the *concessionari* [Italians who obtained *concessioni*, land properties, from the Italian government, A/N]. As Daniel recalls: ‘My father felt very close to Italy because he worked for 25 years as an accountant for an Italian non-Jewish family, the Calò family, in their *concessione*, 70 km from Tripoli’¹⁶ (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Photo of Daniel’s father at the *concessione* Gasr Chiar (?), 17/04/1931 (© Mapping Living Memories Collection, CDEC Foundation).

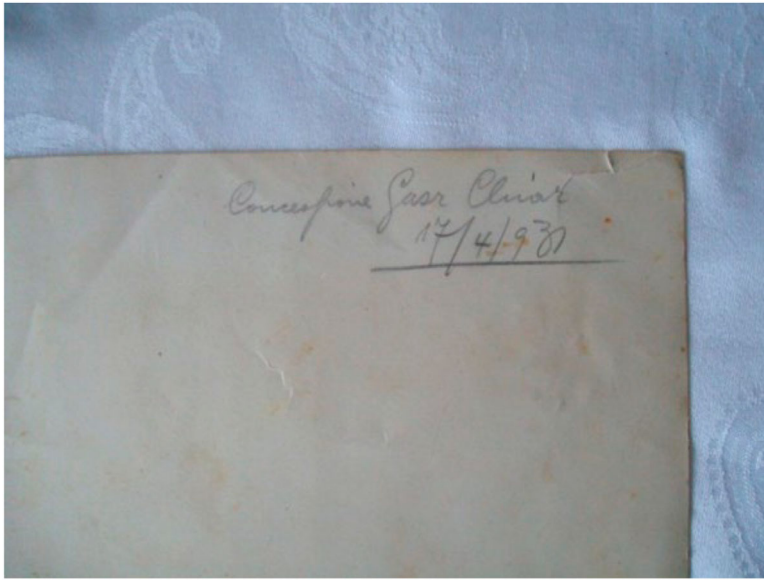


Figure 2. Back of Daniel's father photo at the *concessione* Gasr Chiar (?), 17/04/1931 (© *Mapping Living Memories* Collection, CDEC Foundation).

The social profile of the Italians involved in the colonization of Libya reflected the different phases and purposes in which the colonial project developed across time and space. Italians came from different social backgrounds, settled in both rural and urban areas, occupied various positions within the 'new colonial society', not only peasants in the colonized villages (about 30,000 individuals arrived in Libya in 1938/39), but also *petits blancs* such as artisans, shopkeepers, workers and masons. Sion recalls: 'The butcher was a Sicilian who couldn't speak Italian: I taught him Italian!'¹⁷

Along with an elite of diplomats, military and landowners, the colonial society in Libya saw the emergence of a middle class comprising colonial officers, merchants, professionals and teachers. As observed by Spadaro, these middle-class Italians enjoyed a considerably higher status in the colony than they would have had in the metropole; this distinguished them from the other 'poorer Italian immigrants and from those subjects among which they employed masons, attendants, servants, washerwomen and other personnel' (Spadaro 2013, 8).

However, in the recollections of the interviewees born between the 1920s and 1930s – Italians are also remembered as 'the anti-Semites': 'Italians were the colonisers, they were all very fascist and terribly anti-Semite!'¹⁸ although with some exceptions:

Italians were anti-Semites but we had a family doctor who was Italian and Christian. Doctors were forbidden to treat the Jews because of the anti-Semitism [of the regime, A/N] and he would come during the night to visit patients at their home. He would come in the evening, at 11 pm in the night, to treat me.¹⁹

Contrary to what has – until recently – usually been affirmed, the scholarship now shows that the Italian Fascist regime's implementation of the racial laws did not occur under pressure from Nazi Germany. Instead, it was the result of 'an independent "maturing

process” of fascist anti-Semitism, which Michele Sarfatti – historian of Italian fascism – regards as decisive for Italy in general’ (Hoppe 2018, 50).²⁰ As early as the 1920s, acts of violence and intimidation had been committed by Fascists against Jews (Sarfatti 2006). The positions of the Italian governors in the provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, vis-à-vis the Jewish population, worsened during the 1930s. Jewish religious life was targeted (such as via the implementation of a law compelling Jews to work on Saturdays), as were its community organizations (the Jewish community was obliged to have a non-Jewish community leader). Fascism’s racist character – as expressed in the racial segregation implemented in Italy’s East African colonies (Abyssinia, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland) – finally became a catalyst for anti-Semitic legislation in Libya as well (Hoppe 2018), with the implementation of the racial laws (*Le leggi per la difesa della razza*, 1938) in the North African colony.

Quite interestingly, the interviewees’ recollections of the racial discrimination they suffered in Italian schools and leisure and cultural clubs do not seem to convey much anger or disappointment. As Beniamino, born in Tripoli in 1930, recalls, ‘Since we lived in a quarter mainly inhabited by Italians, there was the *Circolo Virtus*, and as a young boy I used to go there and play. One day, when the racial campaign started, they kicked me out’.

As we have seen earlier in this essay, Spadaro (2020) mentions the recollection of one of the descendants of the Paggi family. The lady was deeply distraught by the 1938 racial laws, especially because of the resulting social isolation she experienced. In contrast with the majority of the other respondents comprised in my research, the lady was, in Mirella’s words, ‘a real Italian’; she was born in Libya, but her family had arrived from Italy one generation earlier. We could argue that her recollections hint at a deeper sorrow because she was Italian, and this distinguished her from her fellow, local Jews, who were equally discriminated against by the racial legislation. This difference could ultimately be interpreted as the embodiment of the deep image of kinship (Banti 2000, 2008; Banti and Ginsborg 2007), which implies imagining the nation as a community of descent, where individuals are connected by race or blood.

The construction of a ‘national self’ entailed constructing and confronting ‘the other’: the ‘internal other’, or the Southern question and the ‘external other’, colonial subjects in colonies. After the establishment of colonial rule in Eritrea in 1897, colonial policies set clear racial hierarchies that affirmed ‘European superiority over the natives’ (Barrera 2003, 89). Banti extended his analysis of the morphology of Italian nationalist discourse from the *Risorgimento* to fascism (Banti [2011] 2014) and proved its essential continuity, although significant new elements entered the fascist language. In Benito Mussolini’s discourses on ‘race’ and ‘nation’, we find both continuity and change. In continuity with the deep image of kinship, Mussolini conceives the nation as an organism supported by an endless series of generations. However, his discourses become progressively closer to a biopolitical understanding of the nation when throughout the 1920s and 30s, as a dictator, he speaks – rather interchangeably – about *stirpe* (stock, ancestry) and *razza* (race). A shift from race and nation to racism precisely followed with the publication of the *Manifesto della razza* in 1938, a document that clearly stated that Jews did not belong to the ‘Italian race’.

Recollections of Italian racial discrimination coexist with those of Italy as epitome of modernity and beauty. Franca’s narration in Hebrew is studded with words in Italian,

like the Italian names of the shops she still remembers. The mimicry and gestures that accompany her narrative evoke the admiration she had – and still has – for Italian fashion and beauty, as if to affirm that fashion and beauty were ‘Italian’:

The Ottomans built the market [in the old city of Tripoli, A/N], known as Suq at-Turq. The Jews came and opened beautiful shops and the Italians did the same. There was a shop *La casa del bebè* (The Baby’s House). It was an Italian shop for baby clothing. There was also *La casa di Rosa* (Rosa’s House), an Italian shop for women’s clothing. And also *Calzature* (Shoes), this was also Italian.²¹

Indeed, later in the interview, she adds, ‘My mother used to tell me that her sister was so beautiful, with long blond braids and blue eyes, that the people would say that she was conceived with an Italian, not with a Jew!’ This aspect however, deserves further exploration, like that of the role of fashion quite unanimously perceived by the respondents across generations as a common trait of Italian identity (Paulicelli 2001).

These excerpts highlight various aspects of daily life that contributed to forming a sense of Italianness, among the older generations of Libyan Jews I met. Yet it is important to discuss another crucial aspect before considering the recollections of younger generations: the school experience. The following quotation from Rina’s interview is particularly revealing of the centrality of the Italian language, in her understanding of the closeness Tripolitanian Jews felt with Italy:

Rina: Tripolitanian Jews have always been very close to Italy, because at school I learnt Italian. At home we spoke Arabic—a special kind of Arabic, the Arabic of the Tripolitanian Jews. Not the Arabic spoken by Arabs. In our Arabic there are many words in Italian and Hebrew; however, the Italians were in Libya since a very long time [...], to us the Italian language is like our first language, because at school everything was in Italian.²²

According to Rina, the proximity of Tripolitarians to Italy is grounded in the fact of having studied in Italian. She does not often refer to proximity with Italian people, but rather with a more abstract entity: Italy and, in particular, with Italy as reified in the Italian language (Ricci 2005). From Rina’s narrative, we learnt that she went to Pietro Verri Elementary School, the school established in 1876 by Giannetto Paggi for Jewish children living in the old city of Tripoli. Rina’s teacher was Madame Falco, an Italian Catholic lady, but all the pupils were Jews (Figures 3 and 4).

As another interviewee, Tikva (born in Tripoli in 1936) explains ‘(...) we felt [in Italian Tikva says “ci sentivamo” from the verb “sentire”, feel A/N] Italian, even if we attended the Jewish school, because the teaching there was in Italian’.²³

In this sense, the daily interaction was with Italian as language of instruction, with the Italian teacher and with the materiality of the school milieu. At the age of 92, Sion still remembers the Italian poet Giosuè Carducci, for instance, whose photo appeared in the school textbook: ‘I remember also Giosuè Carducci from Italian history, the poet. I remember his picture in the school textbook’.²⁴ The centrality of the school experience in shaping a sense of Italianness emerges not just from the interview content but also, indirectly, from the linguistic traces we found in the recollections. In the group of interviewees that I’m considering in this section – those born in the 1920s and 1930s – a number of interviews were conducted in Hebrew: six interviews, for a total of eight people born between 1932 and 1939, all of whom emigrated to Israel between 1948



Figure 3. Picture of Toni and her class at the Pietro Verri School in Tripoli, 1947 (© *Mapping Living Memories* Collection, CDEC Foundation).

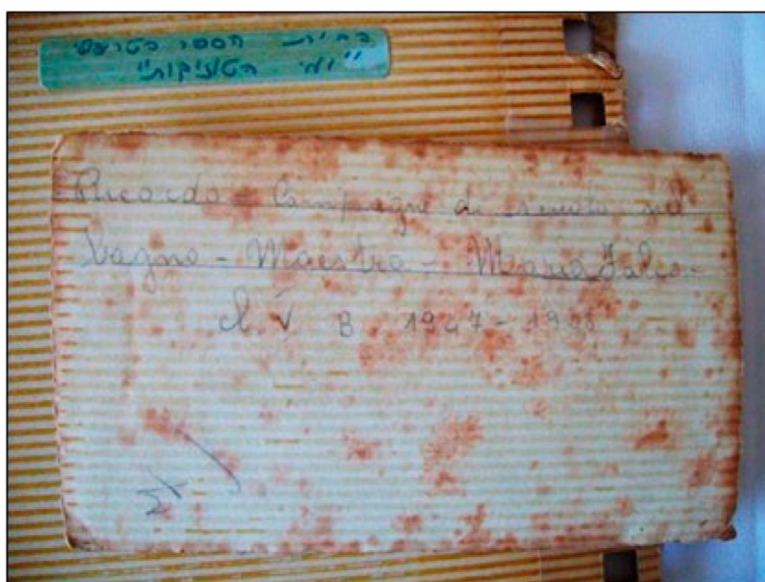


Figure 4. Picture of Toni and her class at the Pietro Verri School in 1947; at the back of the picture Toni noted: "Ricordo compagne di scuola al bagno – Maestra Maria Falco cl. V B 1947" (souvenir of the classmates at the bath – Teacher Maria Falco, class V b, 1947) (© *Mapping Living Memories* Collection, CDEC Foundation).

and 1951. This means that their recollections of Libya are mainly linked to experiences in their childhood or adolescence.

During our conversation in Hebrew, many Italian words appeared, the richest sample referring to the school milieu and, in particular, to how children dressed at school. Shimon, born in Zliten in 1939, explains that there was a different 'dress code' for the Italian school than for the Jewish Talmud Torah: in the Italian school he would wear trousers with *bretelle* (suspenders), a white shirt and a *basco* (beret), while at the Talmud Torah he used to wear white trousers.²⁵ Ariel, in his eighties at the time of the interview, recalls Mussolini's visit to Tripoli in 1937. With great accuracy, he remembers wearing a *grembiule bianco*, the 'white school apron' typical in the Italian school system.²⁶ The accuracy becomes even more striking in Franca's interview. In this case however, tangible aspects of her school experience are connected with more intangible ones, a connection fostered – I argue – by her own professional career as nursery schoolteacher.

Interviewer: What did you study at school?

Franca: We used to study Italian, not Hebrew, from 8.00 to 12.00, every day. We went to school wearing *il grembiule* [the school apron], and not like today that everybody goes to school as she likes ... the girls with the *grembiule bianco* [white school apron] and the boys con *il grembiule nero* [with the black school apron] [...] and on the *grembiule* there was the name, in my case Franca, *ricamato a mano perchè mia zia era ricamatrice, col rosso, bianco e rosso, certe volte verde e con il fiocchettino, con le scarpe, con le calze, tutti vestiti uguali* [hand embroidered because my aunt was an embroiderer, with the red, the white and the red thread, sometimes green and with a small bow, the shoes, the socks, all dressed the same], not like here [in Israel]! There [in Libya] there was *disciplina*, discipline, and in the morning everybody would stand up to [to greet the teacher]! And the same also when other teachers entered the classroom!²⁷

Franca's recollections of the school dress code are interesting, and not just because of her astonishing memory of Italian words – even entire sentences – after so many years without speaking Italian. (Consider that Franca was born in Tripoli in 1933 and emigrated to Israel in 1948. She has been living in Israel since then, with very little contact with Italian culture). It is also interesting to note how – from these very tangible details concerning the school uniform – she touches upon a more intangible aspect of her school experience: discipline. In this sense, as Rosén Rasmussen notes concerning the material and affective recollections of school experiences,

the materiality of the memory objects becomes crucial to the recollection of the past; it acts as a spearhead for the presence of history. (...) woven into the recollections of ink and pen were the pupils' struggle as well as joy of mastering the demands of writing – the more intangible aspects of the discipline of writing. (Rasmussen 2012, 124)

Moving towards the recollections of younger generations, it is crucial to highlight an important change in the school system in Libya that deeply affected the construction of a sense of Italianness among younger generations. This happened as a result of the Jewish mass emigration to Israel and the birth of the modern Libyan state.

Post-independence Libya

As we have seen, interviewees born between the 1920s and 1930s, mostly recall studying Italian and in Italian but in Jewish schools and with Jewish classmates – although I found few life-stories that depart from this pattern. The situation changed drastically after the mass emigration towards Israel, as a UNESCO report on the school year 1950–1951 points out.²⁸ According to the report, there were five Jewish schools in Tripolitania in 1948. The number had dropped to just three by 1950 and, by the time the report was compiled, only one was left.²⁹ Higgins and Le Tourneau, the authors of the survey, ascribed this decline to the mass emigration of the Jewish population towards the State of Israel. ‘The Jewish pupils who remain in Tripoli’ they affirmed ‘will be able to choose between the Libyan schools and the Italian schools’ (Higgins and Le Tourneau 1953, 28). Between the two possibilities, the majority of Jewish families in both Tripoli and Benghazi chose Italian schools. This should be understood in the context of the educational policy implemented during the first years after independence in Libya. The United Kingdom of Libya was proclaimed on 24 December 1951 as a result of international negotiations with Idris al-Sanussi as King and Sayed Muhammad Muntasser as Prime Minister. However, the path to build a national community was fraught with challenges.³⁰ Independent Libya remained deeply divided in the three regions (Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan) and the image of a Libyan nation never developed into a concrete reality. The monarchy – we should not forget the Sufi origin of the Sanussi order – resorted to religion as unifying element and the first visible impact was the introduction of compulsory and free education of Islam and Arabic at the primary level (Baldinetti 2010, 144). Choosing Italian schools implied not only accepting Italian as the language of instruction by Italian teachers – according to the programmes running in Italy³¹ – but also having almost exclusively Italian, and some Maltese, classmates.³²

While the linguistic element was found also in older generations, we must add here the element of social relations: the interviewees born between the 1940s and 1950s lived within a far more Italian social environment. Italians were their teachers, as well as their classmates. The teachers were among the estimated 45,000 Italians who remained in Libya after the official end of Italian colonialism, who continued to run their businesses and perform their professions. Moreover, in other socio-economic spheres, we can see a progressive intensification of the daily contact between Jewish families and Italians. As I will point out in the next section, all these aspects contributed to strengthening a sense of Italianness among the Jews after the majority of the community had left and with the establishment of an independent State.

Continuity and change: the 1940s–1950s

“Negli ultimi cinquecento anni nessuno, nella famiglia di mio padre, è morto nella città dove è nato. Il futuro è più grande degli enigmi, soprattutto se non si libera mai del passato”. Victor Magiar, *E venne la notte. Ebrei in un paese arabo*

A few additional notes on the peculiarities of the Italian postcolonial experience in Libya may help to better frame this section, which is devoted to the narratives of Jews – born in Libya between the 1940s and 1950s – here recalled.

One of the specificities of Italian colonialism in Libya is that it did not end as the result of a liberation war between the occupying power and the colonized population. The end of Italian colonialism in Libya was determined on the ground in 1943, with the arrival of the British troops, and officially in 1950, following the international agreements (1947) that obliged Italy to leave its former colonies. As Labanca sharply observed: 'The political end of Italian colonialism is characterised by the fact that it followed a military defeat, a defeat inflicted by "whites" on other "whites"' (Labanca 2002, 334).³³

In 1950, the Italian government was obliged to renounce to its colonial ambitions in Libya; however, many Italians remained.³⁴ And remaining, along with the Italians, were the Italian schools and teachers, clubs, restaurants and coffee shops. In the same period, the Jewish communities of Libya also underwent profound socio-demographic transformations. Following the mass migration of 1949–1952, the Jewish population in the country decreased – as mentioned earlier – from 36,000 individuals to about 6,000, mostly concentrated in the cities of Tripoli and Benghazi. By then, the majority of Jewish families in Tripoli lived in the new parts of the city, while some continued to reside in the Jewish quarter of the Medina.

In their recollections and narratives, interviewees born between the 1940s and 1950s use many expressions to define their connection to Italy – their sense of Italianness: they speak of a 'very Italian lifestyle,' 'Italian mentality' and 'Italian culture'.³⁵ In the following paragraphs, I intend to explore these expressions. What is their content? To what do the interviewees refer when using them? In relation to what, and to whom, did these ideas form?

On the one hand, the sense of Italianness is substantivised by objects and material practices that strongly emerge from the narratives: the way of dressing, the music, the language, the furniture, the food. On the other hand, the interviewees consider themselves Italians – on the grounds of the social relations they experienced in Libya, but also in the countries where they later settled. The construction of the self as Italian does not end with the departure from Libya. It keeps transforming (yet not necessarily reinforcing itself) after departure, in the receiving country.

To the interviewees born in the 1920s and 1930s, the Italian language played a major role in their definition of the special link they felt with Italy and Italian culture. They continued, however, to speak Judeo-Arabic at home and their classmates were mostly Jews. The younger generations considered here saw Italian as their mother tongue. The vast majority of them attended Italian schools – the schools of the Italians – together with a few Maltese and Muslim classmates, although Pietro Verri Elementary School still existed in the Jewish quarter of the Medina. The following excerpts illustrate the situation well:

- Denise: My classmates were all Italian, non-Jews. I went to the school of the Catholic sisters, and my brother to that of the priests. Actually, we had contact with very few Jews, only on Saturdays, when we went to the synagogue.³⁶
- Fiorella: I studied at the Italian school, then at the school Roma and finally at the *ex-faire*, where there were only three other Jews. The majority of the pupils were Italian. But at the secondary school there were few Muslims and at the school Roma, two or three.³⁷

Yolanda: (...) in any case, we used to go the Italian schools, we had Italian teachers ... we had a rather European way of life, we had our traditions, our food, our prayers, but our lifestyle was very Italian.³⁸

For the interviewees born in the 1940s and 1950s whose families did not emigrate to Israel in the 1949–1952 wave of mass migration, sharing daily life with Italian and Maltese classmates in mixed classrooms had already become increasingly common, starting in nursery school. As underlined by Mirella earlier in this essay, ‘the school experience binds people together’ and it is precisely among classmates that friendship often develops. Outside of school, the interviewees recall spending time with their friends – mainly Italians – going to the cinema, walking in the city centre and eating ice cream at the *latteria* or creamery (Figure 5).

Chantal: As for us, we used to meet at the *latteria*: we would stroll along the *Corso* [Avenue Corso Vittorio Emanuele, in the city centre of Tripoli, A/N] and we would eat *panna siciliana* [Sicilian cream dessert, A/N]. Then we used to have parties at home. I still remember the party for my 15th birthday, in the garden. At that time, we used to have parties in private homes.³⁹

This friendship between Jews and Italians, however, also had its limits – especially in the case of Jewish girls.

Interviewer: Did your classmates come to your home in the afternoon, to study together?

Nadia: I usually went to my friends because my mother worked as seamstress. I spent more time with my friends than at home.

Fiorella: When we were younger, mam allowed us to go to our friends, Italian friends. But once we reached the age of 12, my father and my mother forbade me to see them. My sister was more astute; she would say that she could not simply tell her friends that suddenly they were no longer her friends.

Interviewer: Did they fear something?

Nadia: Yes, at the age of 14 I had a friend, his name was Mercurio, he had a Vespa [motorcycle A/N] and he would drive accelerating under our apartment, mam never noticed it!

Interviewer: Did they fear that the girls could fall in love and marry ... ?



Figure 5. Picture of Yolande and her class, Liceo Dante Alighieri, Tripoli, 1950s (© *Mapping Living Memories* Collection, CDEC Foundation).

Fiorella: In Tripoli it was difficult, but it did happen, especially in families ... in poor families.⁴⁰

Even amongst Jews and Italians – two groups that, according to the recollections, were very close – there are frontiers not to be crossed.⁴¹ In the 1960s, exogamy was still a very sensitive issue between the two religious communities. Cases of people marrying outside their religious groups are deeply engraved in the recollections of the Libyan Jews I met. These are accompanied by different feelings: a Jewish woman marrying a Muslim man leaves the community ‘petrified’,⁴² while a Jew marrying a Christian is part of the experience of some Jewish families – especially Jewish families of Italian origin – and is not remembered as a traumatic event.⁴³

The cultural sphere represents another interesting realm for observing how a sense of Italianness intensified among the Jewish population of Libya in the 1950s and 1960s. All cultural and leisure activities at Jewish clubs like the Maccabi were progressively prohibited and the Maccabi itself was closed in 1953, as part of the measures adopted by the Libyan State upon joining the Arab League (De Felice 1978, 405). Livia, born in Tripoli in 1940, notes that there were no Jewish cultural centres during her youth:

Fiorella: Yes, we did live a comfortable life from the economic point of view, but we did not have cultural centres, only the school and some beautiful cinemas. When we were young, we used to go with our classmates to the cinema of the Christian Brothers’ congregation. [...] I remember that they screened only Christian movies.

Nadia: Also *Gone with the Wind*, in 1964!

Fiorella: I saw the movie *Buddha* ...⁴⁴

The reduction of the Jewish population in the 1940s, as well as the process of nation – and state-building in the now independent Libya, weakened the Jewish community organization. More and more Jews thus joined Italian clubs like the *Circolo Italia*, which was sponsored by the local branch of the Società Dante Alighieri. For Fiorella, the library of the *Circolo* became a weekly appointment, every Saturday after school:

Fiorella: Imagine that on Saturday we would finish school at 12 (pm)— my father forbade me to write [in order to keep the Shabbat prescriptions, A/N]—but I would tell my father that I would come back at 1 pm. In reality, I went to stroll with my friends along the *Corso*, and afterwards I used to go to the library of the Dante Alighieri to bring back books and borrow new ones.⁴⁵

Even after her departure from Libya to Israel in 1966, Fiorella would ask her mother to send her Italian books. These – along with Italian furniture,⁴⁶ food⁴⁷ and clothing⁴⁸ – made her home in the Israeli coastal city of Netanya a true ‘Italian household’ (Spadaro 2018) in the eyes of her Israeli neighbours. To them, as Fiorella recalls, she is not ‘Libyan’ but ‘Italian’. To Fiorella, then newly arrived in a totally foreign country, this was a way to recreate a more familiar environment and reorient her daily life (Tolia-Kelly 2004; Giorgi and Fasulo 2008). Everyday objects act as keepers of memory and affection, but also as projections of social relations and belongings (Meloni 2011).

There is another aspect that emerges from the interviews with Jews from Libya born in the 1940s and 1950s, which concerns the Italians – women in particular – who entered Jewish houses to perform various tasks, such as sewing, ironing and babysitting. These

figures frequently recur in the recollections of this group of interviewees. As Yolanda, born in 1943, and Livia, born in 1940 – both in Tripoli – recall:

- Yolanda: We had an Italian lady from Turin who came to iron. Her husband worked at the Fiat company and came to Libya with the whole family. She used to come to us twice a week. The seamstress came once a week, every Tuesday. We were four women at home and at that time there was not much clothing ready to wear ... she would cut, baste, sew and she would teach us to do simple sewing works.
- Livia: We also had a seamstress, from Turin, and she would also come to us every Tuesday. Her name was Maria.⁴⁹

Less-skilled tasks, such as cleaning, were usually left to Muslim workers. This was especially true after the mass departure of Jews from the lower social classes: those who had previously lived in the Hara, the Jewish quarter in the old city of Tripoli, and had worked as cooks and cleaners for richer Jewish families. The interviewees' recollections concerning Italian personnel in Jewish households reveal how – beyond their actual work as seamstresses or babysitters – they acted as mediators of Italian culture and thus helped strengthen the sense of Italianness that we are exploring here in its multiple declensions. Chantal, born in Tripoli in 1949, recalls her two Italian babysitters, for instance: the older of the two came to Libya during the migration, mainly of Italian farmers, that had been organized by the Fascist regime between 1938 and 1939 in its effort to demographically gain control of the country (Labanca 2002, 322–323). Since her parents used to go out with friends nearly every evening, Chantal grew up in the care of that babysitter – to the extent that she would call her *nonna*, granny, as she still remembers fondly. Chantal's mother, who was born in Tunisia to a culturally French family, learnt Italian from the babysitter, who, in this way, performed an additional cultural task beyond that of caring for the children.

Italian seamstresses, too, beyond their well-known and appreciated talent as artisans, became vectors of Italian fashion – an essential aspect in the construction of a sense of Italianness. This is well exemplified by the following excerpt from the recollections of Yvette, born in Tripoli in 1947, and her husband Moses, born in the same city in 1943. Both left Libya in 1967.

- Moses: Muslim women would be rather hired for cleaning, while the Italian ones for ironing.
- Yvette: Or as seamstresses at home, when there were not yet department stores. Two months before Passover, they would come to our home and we would choose together the dress models in Italian fashion catalogues, beautiful catalogues. Afterwards we would buy the cloth and they would come to us for two days, or an entire week. They sewed clothes for all the girls and women in the family. On the contrary, men would go to the tailor shop. The seamstresses stayed with us the whole day, from the morning until the evening, and they ate with us.⁵⁰

The relationship between the Italian seamstress and the family who employed her is one of proximity, symbolized by the fact of having meals together. It is a relationship that sometimes lasted for years, after the forced departure from Libya of both Jews (1967–1969) and Italians (1970). Listening to the memories shared by Yvette and the other interviewees, I could imagine these young women thumbing through the Italian fashion catalogues – as well as other magazines imported from Italy by the Zard family (a Jewish

Tripolitanian family) – while chatting and gossiping, perhaps about the latest famous actresses, actors and singers who had come to Tripoli on tour.

Fashion, then, ‘an embodied experience that is culturally, socially and historically situated’ (Paulicelli 2015, 2) fuelled the sense of Italianness also of younger generations. Yet so did popular culture in general (David 2015). In the family photo album of a Libyan woman I interviewed in Rome, I found a picture of Sophia Loren – as if she were part of the family. At that time, Sophia Loren had been in Tripoli shooting the 1957 film *Timbuctù* (*The Legend of the Lost*), directed by Henry Hathaway. Interestingly, the producer was himself a Libyan Jew: Robert Haggiag of DEAR film. As one interviewee put it, Italian popular culture – in all its multiplicity – increasingly pervaded the daily lives of Jews in Libya.⁵¹

Framed within the entanglement of language and identity, this affinity or even identification with Italian culture is pointed out in the performances of memories as the key factor for claiming a successful integration in Italy. The example quoted by Meir, born in Tripoli in 1957, is emblematic. After their forced departure from Tripoli in 1967, Meir’s family decided to settle in Rome to give their children the opportunity to continue their education in Italian, their language of instruction in Libya. In Rome, Meir began elementary school. He still recalls his first day of school. When he entered the classroom, accompanied by his mother, the teacher was explaining to the pupils that a new classmate would come: an African refugee. Everybody looked at him, in particular a boy sitting next to Meir, trying to figure out if Meir could understand him. The children themselves were actually speaking Romanesco, the Roman local dialect – ‘While I’, recalls Meir, ‘myself, I was speaking Italian! (...) We were not strangers; we were already Italian!’⁵²

In Meir’s view, the paradox consists in the fact that he – the one supposed to be the ‘African refugee’ – could speak Italian, while his classmates, the ‘real Italians’ could not. He was not a foreigner, he was already Italian, concludes Meir. During the interview, Meir compared the migration from Libya with other Jewish migrations to Italy from the Middle East. More specifically, he referred to the experience of the Jewish community of Milan, where some thousand Jews arrived during the second half of the twentieth century, mainly from Egypt, Iran, Syria, Lebanon.

Meir: We all [Jews from Libya] spoke Italian, we did our school in Italian. Italy was a country we knew well because everybody used to come to Italy for vacation. This was not a traumatic emigration; somehow, we were not strangers. And this, I understood it by observing the Lebanese or the Persian Jews in Milan. They did not speak Italian, they were true ‘Middle Easterners’ coming to Europe.⁵³

The linguistic element is not just a tool for communicating. It represents, along with other elements, an essential component of one’s sense of Italianness, enabling one to integrate into the receiving country. Indeed, in many recollections shared by Libyan Jews who migrated to Italy in the summer of 1967, their arrival is compared to a homecoming – yet one fraught with difficulties, suffering and hardships.

Italian postcolonial literature (Derobertis 2010; Proglia 2011) represents a unique space of representation for many difficult homecomings, especially those of subjects whose family’s destiny crossed more closely that of Italians in the colonies (Ghermandi 2007; Scego 2010, 2015; Wu and Antar 2012). Historian Valeria Deplano analyzed the presence of former colonial subjects in Italy between the 1940s and 1960s. She argues that whether

students, workers or former soldiers of the Italian army, subjects coming to Italy from former colonies were deeply perceived as racially 'others,' although the Italian Republic rejected in its Constitution any racist ideology (Deplano 2017). The hardships experienced by Libyans and Eritreans applying for Italian citizenship, and the 'anti-black' sentiment suffered by Somali students in Italy in the 1960s, prove how among Italian institutions (political and administrative) and society at large, persisted the image of a white and ethnically homogeneous nation, developed during the Fascist rule (Deplano 2018).

In this respect, Meir's recollections seem to point to 'ambivalence' (Bhabha 1994), to a position 'in between' which reproduces the colonial hierarchy in the metropole: the Libyan Jews being more Italian than the Middle Eastern Jews, but not quite in comparison to the 'real Italians'. Commenting on Irma Taddia's work with memories by Eritreans and Ethiopians on Italian colonial presence, Jacqueline Andall and Dereck Duncan observe: 'Memory breaks down any predictable division between colonizers and colonized and demands that theorizations of relationships between these broadly conceived groupings be grounded in the variations of historical detail and circumstance' (Andall and Duncan 2005, 14).

Sensing Italianness. Concluding remarks

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the verb sense as 'to perceive by the senses' and 'to be or to become conscious of something'. To sense is an act involving not only perception and feeling but also intuition and realizing. In constructing their sense of Italianness – of what and who was Italian in their eyes – Jews from Libya refer to experiences that deeply involved their senses, perceptions and feelings. However, the researcher also participates in this construction: in the way she senses the Italianness performed by the respondents and in how she systematises what she became aware of.

As I understand it, having reached the end of my journey through the memories of Jews from Libya, 'sense of Italianness' should illustrate a two-way process, 'built from within the minority and through external bodies' (Pipyrrou 2014, 246). The view from within was provided by allowing large space in the essay to the recollections, acknowledging that oral sources have the peculiarity of revealing 'not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did' (Portelli 1981, 99–100). The view from external bodies is represented by my interpretations of the recollections considered, based on current scholarship on Italian cultural, colonial and postcolonial studies. This view could be improved by establishing more rhizomatic connections with other colonial experiences, as the most recent developments of Jewish studies show (Katz et al. 2017). This essay is, in the case of Libya Jewry, a first attempt.

In my understanding, the kaleidoscopic image we obtain seems to hint at two major elements of 'concretion' in this 'ramified surface extension' of memories (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 7): materiality and sociability, as signifiers of Italianness. The two agglomerate 'very different acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive' (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 7), and they ceaselessly establish connections among them and with other colonial experiences.

The 'narrative constellation' – to borrow Banti's words – of materiality unfolds vividly before the eyes of the respondents, ranging from the detail of a suit or school uniform

to the imposingness of architectural works. Recollections by older generations resonate with colonial imaginaries of Italianness in the homeland especially that of imperial prestige (Proglia 2016), Italy's supremacy (Ghidei Biidu and Marchetti 2010), an ethnic understanding of belonging, which is passed on to younger generations as well.

But to concrete, ordinary places are also knotted memories of 'ordinary Italians,' such as the lady who came to iron, the babysitter, the seamstress. Insights on sociability, how it transformed between the colonial and the post-independence time, is what these original sources offer, especially to the study of Libya's Italian minority in postcolonial times in particular – a story that still awaits full exploration (Di Giulio and Cresti 2016).

More generally, the ways in which Jews from Libya they articulate their sense of Italian-ness resonates with other Jewish experiences of 'becoming Italians' in the Mediterranean context not only through claims of Italian citizenship but also through 'participation in commercial networks and social and cultural milieus' (Reiman 2018).

If colonial legacies are not a new research interest in anthropology, it is nevertheless important to recognize how, in recent years, anthropologists have engaged more and more in 'exploring the various ways the colonial (and the pre-colonial) past is negotiated, contested, reinvented, reinterpreted, forgotten or denied by the various heirs' (De L'Estoile 2008, 277) in our contemporary societies. From this point of view, the story of Jews from Libya should also be a source of reflection for considering contemporary issues of borders and boundaries (Fassin 2011), human mobility and the right to citizenship – particularly in the case of Italy, which has one of the strictest citizenship legislations in Europe. I am thinking, here, of the approximately one million minors born in Italy to non-Italian parents who do not hold Italian citizenship, since the current Italian law is based on the *ius Sanguinis*, a principle that considers citizenship as inherited, passed down from parents to children. One solution has received advocacy mainly from civil society associations and a few politicians. It would consist of granting citizenship to these minors according to the *ius Culturae* – a principle that grounds the right to citizenship in 'culture' and, more concretely, in having successfully completed the entirety of one's primary or secondary school education in Italy, such as the Italian certificate equivalent of the British GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education). But – I wonder – is not that precisely what Libyan Jews argued?

Notes

1. Most of the literature produced on Libyan Jewry, both historical and anthropological, has focused on Jewish life in Libya between the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, as well as on the resettlement of Jews from Libya in Israel after their migration between 1949 and 1952. I will mention here some of the most important scholars in this field: Rachel Simon, Harvey Goldberg, Maurice Roumani, Renzo De Felice. Only more recently, we find publications and *mémoires* or fictions dealing with the second major wave of migration from Libya, that is the forced migration that, between 1967 and 1969, took mainly to Italy and Israel the about 6,000 Jews who were still living in the country.
2. In Libya, Italian nationals were a minority within the Jewish population. Some were born in Italy and moved to Libya. Others hold an Italian passport or as a result of the Capitulation system. For a discussion on citizenship in the Mediterranean area in the twentieth century see for instance the works by Sara Abrevaya Stein, in particular *Extraterritorial Dreams. European Citizenship, Sephardi Jews and the Ottoman Twentieth Century* (2016), or *Family Papers. A Sephardic Journey through the Twentieth Century* (2019).

3. I am grateful to prof. Gerald Lamprecht for suggesting me this insightful reading.
4. Israeli historiography on Jewish mass migration from the MENA region compared the case of Libya to those of Yemen and Iraq, where similarly in a very short period of time, the majority of the Jewish population was transferred to Israel. For a discussion see Meir-Glitzstein (2011, 2012). For a discussion of current trends in Israeli historiography of Jewish migrations from Arab countries to Israel see Meir-Glitzstein (2018).
5. <https://ladante.it/chi-siamo/la-societa-dante-alighieri.html>
6. For Catholic Italian schools see Bucciante (1994). For a more comprehensive study of the school system in Libya during the Italian occupation see Cresti (2000).
7. Interview with Simone Habib, Rome, 13 March 2012, Rossetto's Private Archive. As it was his express will, I mentioned the full name of M. Habib. For all the other interviewees in the essay, names were changed to protect the privacy of the respondents. If not otherwise indicated, the interviews featured in this article are part of the collections *Mapping Living Memories* and *Edoth* own by the CDEC Foundation (Milan, Italy). All translations from Italian, Hebrew and French are mine.
8. Interview with Mirella, Padua, 27 June 2011.
9. Ibid.
10. Interview with Yosef, Netanya, 1 July 2012.
11. Interview with Sion, Tel Aviv, 8 July 2012.
12. In Italian respectively: Sicily Avenue, Italy Square, Vittorio Emanuele Avenue, Giosuè Carducci Street.
13. The promenade dedicated to the Governor Giuseppe Volpi (1921–1925). The *Monumento ai caduti*, in Tripoli, was the monument dedicated to the Italian soldiers fallen in the conquest of Libya and to Victory (1923–1925), by architect Armando Brasini (1879–1965), a professional very close to Benito Mussolini. See Conforti (1990). Brasini was called to Tripoli in 1921 by Giuseppe Volpi, governor of Tripolitania, 'to give a visual immediacy to Italy's renewed imperial policy' (Conforti 1990, 46). The monument, which represents the first building constructed by Brasini in Tripoli, stood in a very suggestive site, 'on the sole height that to the west stirs the reclining city profile' (Conforti 1990, 49).
14. Interview with Beniamino and Nina, Haifa, 05 March 2013.
15. Interview with Yosef, Netanya. 1 July 2012.
16. Interview with Daniel and Lucille, Tel Aviv, 25 February 2013.
17. Interview with Sion, Tel Aviv, 8 July 2012.
18. Interview with Yolande, Livorno, 15 July 2013.
19. Interview with Perla, Tel Aviv, 6 March 2013.
20. Hoppe quotes Sarfatti, 'Autochtoner Antisemitismus,' 234–238; but see also Sarfatti (2006).
21. Interview with Franca, Ramat Gan, 6 March 2013.
22. Interview with Rina, Tel Aviv, 10 March 2013.
23. Interview with Tikva, Venice, 4 January 2012.
24. Interview with Sion, Tel Aviv, 8 July 2012.
25. Interview with Shimon and Jasmine, Kiriat Ekron, 24 February 2013.
26. Interview with Ariel and Fortuna, Ramat Gan, 28 February 2013.
27. Interview with Franca, Ramat Gan, 6 March 2013.
28. As it is explained in the introduction to the report, the United Nations commissioned a survey during the second semester of 1951–18 professionals representing the UN and its special commissions. The commission was supposed to study the socio-economic problems that Libya was facing and to make suggestions about the future development of the country (Higgins and Le Tourneau 1953). The commission operated under the technical assistance of the UN to Libya. M. Roger Le Tourneau was professor of history and civilisation of the Muslim West at the University of Alger, specialised in the study of the development of the school system in the country.
29. The reports point out that Italian schools included: 22 nursery schools, 72 primary schools and 7 high schools (Higgins and Le Tourneau 1953, 27). The situation in Cyrenaica was as follows:

Along with official schools, four so called 'communitarian schools operate in Benghazi: one Jewish school is deemed to disappear due to the lack of pupils. One Greek schools has two classes (...). One school run by the Italian congregation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and follows the Italian curriculum, with a compulsory teaching of Arabic: the school is run by four religious, it has about 90 pupils. One school run by Italian religious sisters, includes three classes of nursery school and three classes of primary school (Italian curriculum, with compulsory teaching of Arabic); the school has more than 150 pupils, both male and female, among them several young Arabs. (Higgins and Le Tourneau 1953, 32)

30. The general elections called soon after the declaration of independence and completed on 19 February 1952, resulted in riots and disturbances: 'Buildings and public property were destroyed, while transportation was interrupted, and telephone wires cut. The British Legation in Tripoli reported that between 19 and 22 February 1952, 17 people were killed, 210 injured and 300 were arrested. The government firmly responded to the disturbances and on February 22nd the headquarters of the National Congress party were raided' (Baldinetti 2010, 142–143). Members of the political opposition were expelled and the social unrest which followed the general elections was not a good sign for the country.
31. The lack of Libyan teaching staff should be considered within the Italian school policies during the colonial period and more generally within the politics, almost inexistent, of Muslim elites' formation in Libya in the same period of time. For a discussion see Cresti (2000).
32. 'It will be the same for the Maltese schools, since the Maltese community do not have the necessary funding to run a school and did not find a support from abroad. The majority of the Maltese pupils are now enrolled in Italian schools' (Higgins and Le Tourneau 1953, 28).
33. 'Caratteristico della fine politica del colonialismo italiano fu di essere stata decisa in seguito ad una sconfitta militare, subita da "bianchi" ad opera di altri "bianchi"' (Labanca 2002, 334).
34. It is estimated that in 1945 about 45,000 Italians lived in Libya, almost half this number (about 22,000) in 1965. At the end of the 1940s, the settlers who are returning to Italy or already returned (1941–1943) were about 90,000, housed in temporary refugee camps. It must be observed that the Italian case of repatriations is much smaller than, for instance, French repatriation during the mid-1950s and early 1960s: 30,000 from French Indochina, 47,000 from Madagascar, 80,000 from African colonies and 1,560,000 from the Maghreb.
35. I recall here the destinations of the interviewees (37 individuals) born in Libya between 1940s and 1950s: 22 in Italy, 6 in Israel, 6 in UK, 2 in France and 1 in Canada.
36. Interview with Denise, Rome, 12 November 2012.
37. Interview with Fiorella and Nadia, Tel Aviv, 17 June 2014.
38. Interview with Livia and Yolanda, Milan, 11 July 2013.
39. Interview with Chantal, Rome, 9 July 2013.
40. Interview with Fiorella and Nadia, Tel Aviv, 17 June 2014.
41. On the persistence of frontiers between Jews and Muslims in Morocco in particular concerning food and marriage see Trevisan Semi and Sekkat-Khatimi (2011, 111–116). See also Anteby Yemini (2014).
42. Interview with Fiorella and Nadia, Tel Aviv, 17 June 2014.
43. Interview with Gad, Serena and Elsa, Rome, 4 July 2013.
44. Interview with Fiorella and Nadia, Tel Aviv, 17 June 2014.
45. Interview with Fiorella and Nadia, Tel Aviv, 17 June 2014.
46. This is a recurrent feature in interviews. In Libya, Italian furniture was considered the most fashionable and modern.
47. Along with books, the family of Fiorella would send her biscuits and other products for children produced by the Italian company Plasmon, specialised in baby food.
48. Fiorella for instance recalls buying all the clothing for her children in Italy while living in Israel. This produced sometimes bizarre outcomes, as she recounts:

All the clothing for my children, when I came to Israel in 1969, I bought them in Rome, and the kids here [in Israel, A/N] would make fun of them because of the three-quarter

button shorts and socks they wore (...) Here it was not common! (Interview with Fior-
ella and Nadia, Tel Aviv, 17 June 2014)

49. Interview with Livia and Yolanda, Milan, 11 July 2013.
50. Interview with Yvette and Moses, Rome, 13 March 2012.
51. Interview with Meir, Rome, 24 May 2012.
52. Interview with Meir, Rome, 24 May 2012.
53. Interview with Meir, Rome, 24 May 2012.

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