

Mediterranean Mobilities Between Migrations and Colonialism



edited by
Gabriele Montalbano

viella

ALMA MATER STUDIORUM – UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA
DIPARTIMENTO DI STORIA CULTURE CIVILTÀ

Storia e culture

12

STORIA E CULTURE

Collana del Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà
Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna

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Mediterranean Mobilities

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Prima edizione: November 2024
ISBN 979-12-5469-746-7 (print copy)
ISBN 979-12-5469-747-4 (ebook)
DOI 10.52056/9791254697474

The publication of this volume was partially funded by Gerda Henkel Stiftung.

MEDITERRANEAN

mobilities : between migrations and colonialism / edited by Gabriele Montalbano. -
Roma : Viella, 2024. - 228 p. : 1 ill. ; 21 cm. - (Storia e culture / Università di Bologna, Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà ; 12)

Indice dei nomi: p. [223]-228.

ISBN 979-12-5469-746-7

eISBN 979-12-5469-747-4

I. Migrazioni - Paesi mediterranei - Sec. 19.-20. I. Montalbano, Gabriele II. Università di Bologna. Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà

304.8091822 (DDC WebDewey) Scheda bibliografica: Biblioteca Fondazione Bruno Kessler



viella

libreria editrice

via delle Alpi, 32

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www.viella.it

Contents

GABRIELE MONTALBANO	
Introduction: Mediterranean Borders, Margins and Trajectories	7
MARIE BOSSAERT	
Constantinople in the 1850s: Sharing Exile	25
BARBARA DE POLI	
At the Origins of Egyptian Nationalism: The Political Role of Italian Freemasons in 19 th -Century Egypt	41
ABEL SOLANS	
Mobility and Belonging: The Italian Anarchist Network of the South Mediterranean (1890-1920)	57
RIM LAJMI	
The Italian Women of Tunisia: Affinities and Cultural Divides Within a Framework of Militant Activity in Tunisia	81
GIULIO FUGAZZOTTO	
<i>La nostra voce</i> and the Italian Communists of Tunisia	93
MARISA FOIS	
“Making French”: Colonisation and Migration. Italians in Algeria	107
ALEJANDRO SALAMANCA RODRÍGUEZ	
“Do You Know There Are Beautiful Women?”: Migration, Sexuality and Male Fantasies in Francisco Carcaño’s Depictions of Melilla (1900-1930)	121

COSTANTINO PAONESSA	
Between Emigration and Colonialism: The Italian Colony in Egypt Before the Occupation of Libya	141
KRISTIN GEE HICKMAN	
A Black Frenchman in Morocco and the Racialised Politics of “Going Native”	157
HOUDA MZIOUDET	
Yearning for Freedom, Reclaiming Agency: The Emancipatory Strategies of Black Tunisians and Libyans	175
MARTINO OPPIZZI	
Exploring the Emigration of Italian Jews in Tunisia After World War II: Flexible Trajectories and Mobile Belonging	185
PIERA ROSSETTO	
A Map of Words: Research-Creation Perspectives on Jewish Mediterranean Mobilities	203
Contributors	219
Index of Names	223

PIERA ROSSETTO

A Map of Words: Research-Creation Perspectives on Jewish Mediterranean Mobilities

Whenever there were people around him, my father would start to narrate, and there were always new details and new stories I had never heard before. I don't know whether these were new recollections, or whether he changed a little bit of the previous version of the facts every time.¹

These words by Sandra Sciana conclude *Shamailang: Una mappa di parole* (*Shamalilang: A Map of Words*),² a five-episode narrative podcast that explores the life trajectory of Sandra's father, Roger Sciana, an Egyptian Jew born in Cairo in 1927 who emigrated to Milan, Italy, in 1968. Roger Sciana's story³ was collected by the Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea (CDEC, an Italian Jewish institution) as part of an oral history project called *Edoth* ("ethnic communities" in Hebrew) aimed at preserving the recollections of Jewish

1. Sandra Sciana, in *Shamailang: Una mappa di parole*, Episode 5, <https://www.pierarossetto.eu/eijm-creative-mapping/a-map-of-words/>. The podcast was realised as part of my research project *Europe's (In)Visible Jewish Migrants*, supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), Grant n. T1024-G28. I express my gratitude to the Fondazione CDEC for providing the archival materials and to Silvana, Sandra and Sabrina Sciana for their trust and generous support.

2. The podcast was broadcast in September 2022 on *Tresoldi*, an audio-documentary platform of the Italian national radio, *Rai Radio Tre*. *Tresoldi* has an audience of 100,000 per day. The producers include Martina Melilli (original idea and writing), Botafuego (production, sound design and writing) and myself (scientific advice and collaboration in writing). It features the participation of Silvana, Sandra and Sabrina Sciana (the daughters of Roger Sciana), Professor Emanuela Scarpellini, Professor Elisa Giunchi and journalist Marta Serafini. <https://www.pierarossetto.eu/eijm-creative-mapping/a-map-of-words/>.

3. Interview with Roger Sciana, by Liliana Picciotto, CDEC Foundation, Progetto *Edoth*, three parts: 16 June 2011, 22 June 2011 and 24 June 2011.

life in the Middle East and Nord Africa through the testimonies of Jews born in those regions and now living in Italy.⁴

In just a few lines, Sandra manages to describe the ability of her father to fascinate those who had the chance to approach him and learn about his unique life trajectory across Egypt, France, Sweden, Italy, Pakistan, Afghanistan and other parts of the world. Although I met Roger only virtually, through a video interview, I experienced the fascination of his *arte affabulatoria*, his storytelling art. However, Roger's story was not only fascinating but also equally unpredictable, irreducible and always moving. Is there a way, I asked myself, other than through the "usual" academic arenas (journal articles, book chapters and conference papers), to try to make sense of life trajectories like that of Roger Sciamia, which are both unique and "ordinary"?⁵

This chapter discusses the audio documentary *Shamailang* as a collaborative attempt (by artist Martina Melilli, the Botafuego audio documentary lab and myself) to map the story of Roger Sciamia creatively and to connect the dots of his life trajectory across different cultural milieux and multiple identities and scales. Moreover, the chapter intends to show how research-creation, which is the combination of creative and academic research practices,⁶ represents a stimulating environment for training, in the words of sociologist Les Back, our "art of listening", that is, "an imaginative attention [that] takes notice of what might be at stake in the story itself and how its small details and events connect to larger sets of public issues".⁷

The chapter first sketches Roger Sciamia's life story as he recalled it in the interview, following his trajectory across space and time. Next,

4. On the project *Edoth*, see <https://www.cdec.it/ricerca-storica-e-progetti/aree-di-ricerca/edoth-ebrei-del-mediterraneo-e-del-medio-orientale/>.

5. Florence Haegel, Marie-Claire Lavabre, *Destins ordinaires Identité singulière et mémoire partagée*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2010.

6. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) defines research-creation as follows: "An approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation and experimentation. The creative process is situated within the research activity and produces critically informed work in a variety of media (art forms)": visit <https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/definitions-eng.aspx#a22>.

7. Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, London-New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2007, p. 7.

I briefly overview contemporary Jewish migrations from North Africa and the Middle East and then highlight some of the crucial points of the historiographical debate on this complex phenomenon. The third section begins with a definition of podcast and some considerations about its exponential growth among scholars and the general public, followed by an analysis of how, in the collaborative project, we reacted and tried to address the questions raised by Roger's narrative performance, as well as by his silences.

The story

Roger was born in Cairo in 1927 to a Jewish family of Syrian descent which had relocated from Aleppo to Cairo following the economic boom caused by the opening of the Suez Canal (in 1869). The family had held Italian passports and was registered at the Livorno registry office "as everyone of us at that time", Roger said in the interview. Roger grew up in Egypt, but with the outbreak of the first Israeli-Arab war, he could sense, as a Jew, an atmosphere of rising antisemitism:

What made me decide practically to leave Egypt was that at the exit of a cinema, you know there are crowds, immediately... pushing normally when you go out, pushing so... I touched an Egyptian who turned towards me and gave me a couple of slaps and said, "Look, if you touch me again, I'll kill you". Here, it was towards the end of 1948. At that moment, I decided to leave. My family could not think that I would have the desire to leave this country. But I left first of all because I felt the malaise [the uneasiness], secondly because I wanted to make a career.⁸

In 1949, at the age of 22, he left his family and crossed the Mediterranean to study textile engineering in France. He ended up in Mulhouse, France: "Everyone was going to France to study textile engineering", explained Roger. After an internship in Sweden in 1952, he arrived in Milan as a textile engineer.

His Italian passport prompted the choice of Milan, although he could not speak a word of Italian. Nevertheless, he could count on a small

8. Interview with Roger Sciana, by Liliana Picciotto, CDEC Foundation, Progetto Edoth, three parts: 16 June 2011, 22 June 2011 and 24 June 2011.

network of friends, young Egyptian Jews, who had already settled in Milan. Roger wanted to conquer the Italian textile market in the city. Still, he could only find a job as an interpreter because at that time the textile sector was “suffering the consequences of the Korean war”, he explained. Following the advice of another Italian Jewish businessman, in May 1952 Roger resigned and left for Karachi, Pakistan, the most promising country for the textile business. “At that time, everyone was going to Pakistan to sell textiles”, Roger disclosed. However, the business did not take off, the competition was too high and he soon realised, instead, that Afghanistan was the right place to go.

After an adventurous journey from Karachi to Peshawar through the Khyber Pass, Roger arrived in Kabul with 40 kilos of Italian fabric samples. Once there, he could not find a free room in the hotel, but some Italian guests spotted him at the reception and *recognised* him as Italian. One of them (a man from Naples) offered to share his accommodations and invited him to share a meal of fettuccine he had prepared for himself in his hotel room. At that point, in 1953, Roger had learned to speak Italian during the months he spent in Italy and had an Italian passport – enough to cause a sort of Italian solidarity. “All Italians were in Kabul to sell textiles”, added Roger.⁹

The next day, as he entered the caravanserai to introduce himself and his 40 kilos of Italian fabric samples, he met a man dressed in Burberry and a Borsalino hat. “What are you doing here?” asked the man. “I’m here to sell Italian textiles”, Roger replied. The man asked him, “Where are you going to celebrate the Seder tonight?” (the Passover dinner), leaving Roger speechless. The man was Mr. Shaban, the president of the Jewish community in Kabul. Shaban had *recognised* Roger as a Jew, and owing to his Jewishness, Mr. Shaban entrusted him with a large commission, a deal that would change Roger’s career. Shaban asked Roger to import Italviscosa yarns from Italy to Afghanistan. Viscose, also known as synthetic silk, was in high demand for producing female clothing, especially chādors. Italy, particularly the Italviscosa company, was one of the major producers of this textile fibre.

Through this successful commission, Roger built a prosperous career. Starting in 1959, urged by the Italian ambassador in Kabul, Roger became

9. Actually, those he met were employees of the Italian Defence Ministry, an aviation department, who were sent to make old Isotta Fraschini aeroplane engines to work again.

the *de facto* agent, importer and mediator of many Italian products and companies in Afghanistan: “from the tie to the tractor”, he explained. He could speak the language fluently, and in a system based on letters of credit or *hawala*, he could travel across the country and abroad without an *afghani* (the Afghan currency) in his pocket. Unfortunately, Roger developed a limp due to a car accident in Cairo. He claimed, as a result, that he was referred to as *Sciama-i-langq* or “Sciama the lame” across Afghanistan.¹⁰

The system according to which Roger and all businessmen in Afghanistan were working (an economic system based on basic rules) collapsed into what Roger called “a crash”. According to Roger, “this crash” marked an irrecoverable rupture and ultimately forced him to leave the country and resettle in Milan. Back in Milan, Roger suffered from depression. According to his daughters, he never fully integrated into the new social environment; nevertheless, he managed to continue his life and business. His closest friends remained his old friends from Cairo (the Egyptian Jews living in Milan), and his business partners remained his old friends from Afghanistan.

Jewish migrations from North Africa and the Middle East

Roger Sciama’s narrative is one of the roughly 200 interviews with Jews born in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iran who settled in Milan (Italy) between the 1940s and 1980s. These interviews, which were conducted in the past 15 to 20 years, provide a fascinating insight into a minor migratory trajectory compared to the more major paths taken by Middle Eastern and North African Jews over the 20th century.¹¹ I am referring to emigration to destinations such as Israel, France, Canada and the United States, where the majority of Middle Eastern and North African Jews decided to resettle, mostly between the 1940s and 1970s, under the pressure of political, economic and social factors. These waves of migrations, which involved an estimated population of 800,000

10. *Timūr Lang* means Timur the lame.

11. Piera Rossetto, “Mind the Map: Charting Unexplored Territories of Invisible Migrations from North Africa and the Middle East to Italy”, *Jewish Culture and History*, 23/2 (2022), pp. 172-195.

individuals, ultimately led to the disappearance of the Jewish presence in Muslim-majority countries, with few exceptions (Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey and Iran).

Scholars have been discussing this migratory phenomenon under the umbrella of overarching definitions, such as exile, exodus, flight, expulsion and uprooting. Each term frames the way this experience is thought of and shapes its understanding and interpretation. However, according to critics, the broad narratives that underpin these definitions fail to recognise “the great heterogeneity of the Middle Eastern Jewish diasporas and the difficulty of writing an overarching history from Morocco to Iran”.¹² The most recent developments in the historiographical discussion of contemporary Jewish migrations from North Africa and the Middle East suggest referring to them as a cluster of diverse migration paths that intertwined and interacted with non-Jewish migrations during the same period and from the same region. As historians Frédéric Abécassis and Jean-François Faü have observed,

At a time when the slums of Casablanca are filling up with miserable men and women from the countryside, when the Kabyle sector which supplied the car factories in the suburbs of Paris with specialised workers is expanding its recruitment to the whole of the Maghreb, it is in the transit camps, then in the suburbs of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa or the cities and development areas of the Galilee and the Negev that the Jews of Yemen, southern Morocco and the Atlas mountains carry out their rural exodus.¹³

Although this perspective already provides a wider framework for understanding Jewish migrations from North Africa and the Middle East, historian Aviad Moreno invited us to complicate our analysis even further by considering the agency of the individual migrant *vis-à-vis* official migration policies and the fact that “the course of an individual’s migratory experience was often unpredictable”.¹⁴ In his analysis of Moroccan Jewish migrations to Venezuela, Moreno argued that research could advance

12. Dario Miccoli, “The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa: A Historiographic Debate”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 56/3 (2020), pp. 511-520: 516.

13. Frédéric Abécassis, Jean-François Faü, “Le monde musulman: effacement des communautés juives et nouvelles diasporas depuis 1945”, in *Les Juifs dans l’histoire*, ed. by Antoine Germa, Benjamin Lellouch and Evelyne Patlagean, Seyssel, Editions Champ Vallon, 2011, pp. 815-840: 832.

14. Aviad Moreno, “Beyond the Nation-State: A Network Analysis of Jewish Emigration from Northern Morocco to Israel”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 52/1 (2020), pp. 1-21: 3.

“beyond the narratives of mass minority departure, labour migration and integration that usually treat Morocco and other countries of emigration as homogeneous national units” by concentrating on grassroots histories.¹⁵

I contend that the story of Roger Sciamia adds another layer of complexity to these observations because it demonstrates not only that countries of emigration are far from homogenous national units but also that individual migrants embody diverse paths and patterns of mobility throughout their lives. When reading history anthropologically,¹⁶ which represents my approach to the *Edoth* collection, the goal is to apprehend the webs of significance – in Max Weber’s terms – that migrants themselves have spun in the act of recalling their migratory experiences: How can we make sense of the unpredictable entanglements these experiences are made of? When reading history from an anthropological perspective, we strive to acknowledge the different attributions of meaning assigned to the events and the plurality of actors involved: How can we make sense of both large-scale migration phenomena and the unique, individual fragments which composed them?

In the last two decades, “the fields of Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies¹⁷ grew significantly thanks to new publications that took into consideration unexplored aspects of the history, literature and identity of modern Middle Eastern and North African Jews”.¹⁸ This academic effervescence reverberated on the general public as well. Consider for instance, in the case of France, the two recent exhibitions: *Juifs d’Orient, Une histoire plurimillénaire* (Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 2021-2022)¹⁹ and *Juifs*

15. Aviad Moreno, “Expanding the Dimensions of Moroccan (Jewish) Migration: Perspectives from Venezuela”, *Journal of North African Studies*, 29/3 (2022), pp. 527-554, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2022.2088522>.

16. Pier Paolo Viazzo, *Introduzione all’antropologia storica*, Bari, Laterza, 2000. As effectively summarised by Paolo Viazzo, there are different attributions of meaning to events and different historical subjects, as there is a plurality of ways of thinking about the past and the role of culture in filtering empirical data. Quoting from Marshall Sahlins’ *The Islands of History*, Viazzo reminds us that “the empirical is not known simply as such, but as a meaning pertinent to culture, and therefore, that each culture ‘has its own distinct mode of historical production from others” (Viazzo, *Introduzione all’antropologia storica*, p. 169).

17. The fields of research that explore the history, cultures and traditions of North African and Middle Eastern Jews in their countries of origin and of resettlement.

18. Dario Miccoli, “Introduction”, in *Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature*, ed. by Dario Miccoli, London-New York, Routledge, 2017, pp. 1-9: 1.

19. <https://www.imarabe.org/fr/expositions/juifs-d-orient>.

et Musulmans de la France coloniale à nos jours, curated by Karima Dirèche, Mathias Dreyfuss and Benjamin Stora (Musée de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, Paris, 2022).²⁰ One can also think of documentaries produced in the last decade or so on Jewish communities of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco, or even graphic novels narrating the story of Jewish life in North Africa and the Middle East. How can we provide accessibility to these complex trajectories to a wider audience eager to know, as the examples above show, more about Jewish life in and migration from the Middle East and North Africa?

The performance and the podcast as “a map of words”

When I was first exposed to Roger's story, I was already collaborating with visual artist Martina Melilli to produce a series of creative visualisations and maps based on the *Edoth* collection. I consulted with Melilli to see if Roger's story could lend itself to being creatively displayed, and how. The geographical span covered by his life first instilled in me, in line with current trends in multimodal anthropology,²¹ the idea of producing a short cartoon to visualise Roger's trajectory, like a thread on the map, starting from Cairo, running through Europe, reaching Pakistan and Afghanistan, to finally end in Milan. However, the costs for realising such a research product were far beyond the project budget.

At the time, I had also started taking interest in podcasts, and I was particularly intrigued by the definition Italian journalist Mario Calabresi had given of this medium: *un viaggio di parole*, a journey of words. What about a map of words? I had the idea of creating a podcast to follow Roger Sciamà's journey using his own words, keeping in mind his storytelling talent and geographic mobility. Melilli reacted enthusiastically and

20. <https://www.palais-portedoree.fr/actualites/juifs-et-musulmans-de-la-france-coloniale-a-nos-jours>.

21. Michael Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in the Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011; Andrew Causay, *Drawn to See: Drawing as an Ethnographic Method*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2016; Jean Dennison, “Situating Graphic Anthropology”, *Visual Anthropology*, 28/1 (2015), pp. 88-108; Letizia Bonanno, “Of Athens, Crises, and Other Medicines”, *American Anthropologist*, 124 (2022), pp. 417-425; Mark R. Westmoreland, “Multimodality: Reshaping Anthropology”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 51 (2022), pp. 173-194.

suggested collaborating with Botafuego, a storytelling lab, and its founders, Carolina Valencia Caicedo and Riccardo Giacconi.²²

In its basic definition, a podcast is audio-digital content available online and on demand.²³ The term podcast is the combination of I-Pod (the portable media player by Apple) and the word broadcast.²⁴ While audio documentaries are a far older genre, the number of historical podcasts has increased dramatically during the past ten years.²⁵ Several elements make podcasts an attractive tool for scholars; in particular, this medium allows one to communicate “evidence-based historical arguments in a more immersive, and often more personal, style than monographs, articles, or straightforward oral interviews typically allow”.²⁶ Listeners, on their part, experience the intimacy and power to humanise stories that narrative podcasts have.²⁷ Their attention is captured and holds through sensorial factors that expose them to the viewpoint, or better “the point of listening”,²⁸ expressed through the narration.

The first, essential step to produce a podcast based on Roger Sciamia’s story involved discussing the effect that the story had on each of us involved in the research-creation project. Each of us listened to his story from a certain vantage point while keeping in mind a particular cultural repertoire, being more or less familiar with Roger’s life trajectory or somewhat distant from it. This implied that we shared some similar reactions to particular aspects of Sciamia’s story but also found ourselves standing in different positions whilst following the plot of his narrative.

22. <https://botafuego.org/main>.

23. Marta Perrotta, “Far sentire l’indicibile. Il podcast ‘Labanoff’ e il racconto delle morti in mare”, in *Migrazioni, cittadinanze, inclusività. Narrazioni dell’Italia plurale, tra immaginario e politiche per la diversità*, ed. by Leonardo De Franceschi, Rome, Tab Edizioni, 2022, pp. 85-97.

24. Ben Hammersley, “Audible Revolution”, *The Guardian*, 11 Febraury 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2004/feb/12/broadcasting.digitalmedia?ref=hackernoon.com>, accessed 21 February 2022, quoted in Daniel J. Story, “The Still-Emerging Worlds of History Podcasting”, *The American Historical Review*, 127/1 (2022), pp. 411-412.

25. Liz Covart, “History Podcasts: An Overview of the Field”, *American History*, 109/1 (2022), pp. 220-229; Honae H. Cuffe, “Lend Me Your Ears: The Rise of the History Podcast in Australia”, *History Australia*, 16/3 (2019), pp. 553-569; Andrew J. Bottomley, “Podcasting. A Decade in the Life of a ‘New’ Audio Medium: Introduction”, *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, 2 (2015), pp. 164-169.

26. Story, “The Still-Emerging Worlds of History Podcasting”, p. 412.

27. Covart, “History Podcasts: An Overview of the Field”.

28. Perrotta, “Far sentire l’indicibile”, p. 90.

The analysis of oral sources requires the consideration of the performative aspect of the narrative act.²⁹ The plot around which interviewees decide to arrange their discourse represents a topic of interest and enquiry no less than the facts we were researching through these very sources. We all agreed that a striking feature of Roger's narrative was the regular use he made of expressions such as "everyone was studying...", "everyone was going to..." and "all Italians were in Kabul for...". For instance, we felt rather puzzled at the idea that back in the 1950s, Italians were flocking to Pakistan to sell textiles. Moreover, the image of Afghanistan as an attractive country for business clashed with the imagination we shared of the country as under the shadow of permanent war and dependence on international aid. Was this narrative a form of exaggeration on his part? Or was it the result of being fully immersed in his network of business partners and acquaintances? Was this immersion preventing him from seeing a larger picture and relativising his own experience? We lacked the information on the geopolitical time and space Sciamia was referring to in order to make sense of his recollections.

Another aspect of the interview we all wanted to valorise and exploit was the visual patrimony that, along with his memories, Roger Sciamia entrusted to the Fondazione CDEC. This included about 60 family pictures, including the portraits of family members in Cairo (from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century); photos from his youth and summer vacations at the beach in Alexandria, Egypt (1930s); his wedding in Cairo (1954) and several pictures taken in Pakistan and Afghanistan (1950s-1960s). The latter, in particular, represented a unique way for us to see, some 50 years later, what Roger saw, to visualise the geographical and human landscape where the plot unfolded. However, how could we integrate them into the podcast narrative to fully exploit "the visual power of the sound image"?³⁰ While the photos were annotated on the back in some cases, we realised that we would require further insights into his family and personal life. For instance, Roger was almost silent about the family he created with his wife, Marceline, and their children. However, as

29. Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History", *History Workshop*, 12 (1981), pp. 96-107; Della Pollock, "Telling the Told: Performing *Like a Family*", *Oral History Review*, 18/2 (1990), pp. 1-36; Kobi Peled, "The Theatre of Memory: Direct Speech in Palestinian Oral History", *Memory Studies*, 13/4 (2020), pp. 633-648.

30. Perrotta, "Far sentire l'indicibile", p. 89.

noted by Melilli, almost inadvertently at the end of the video interview, one heard a voice, “Ci siamo ripresi anche qua” (“We managed to start again here as well”).³¹ The voice from behind the camera, constantly pointing to Roger, was Marceline’s (Roger’s wife, whom he had married in Cairo in 1954). How did they come to know each other? Did she follow him along the adventurous trajectories he recalled? How was it to be married to a man who, as he affirmed, was known in the whole country?

The different backgrounds each of us brought to the collaboration project shaped the various positionalities we embodied in Sciamia’s story and unique sensitivities *vis-à-vis* his words and silences. Concerning silences, the absence of almost any reference to his private life was rather surprising for Melilli and Valencia Caicedo. I was more used to this kind of unsaid, which I had experienced many times when interviewing North African and Middle Eastern Jewish men: often the focus of the whole interview is one’s own career and professional development, rather than accounts of private life.

Another silence that surprised my colleagues concerned the Second World War and the Shoah: Why did Roger not relate his recollections of the Holocaust? Being a Jew, how could he possibly not mention it? How is it that he mentioned instead the establishment of the State of Israel as a destabilising element in his life and as the factor that, together with the will to pursue a career, made him decide to leave his home and family? Finally, the question of the passport: How could he have an Italian passport and be registered at the Livorno Registry Office, “like every one of us [Jews in Egypt, AN]”, as he said, and yet never have set foot in Italy, let alone be able to speak the language?

The challenge was then to create a narrative that could both intrigue and explain, because, as mentioned at the start of the chapter, not only are countries of emigration far from homogenous national units but individual migrants too embody heterogeneous paths and patterns of mobility in their life trajectories.

Entrusted with writing the script, Melilli suggested organising the podcast into five episodes, which followed the main phases of Roger’s

31. Marceline Cohngalatz in interview with Roger Sciamia, by Liliana Picciotto, CDEC Foundation, Progetto Edoth, part three 24 June 2011. Cohngalatz was interviewed separately by Liliana Picciotto, CDEC Foundation, Progetto Edoth, 24 June 2011.

interview/life.³² Each episode opens with an accurate description of one picture by Melilli, taken from those Roger donated to the Fondazione CDEC.³³ The picture serves as a vignette³⁴ to elicit and anticipate the questions further explored in the episode. Whilst engaging in a deep, personal exploration of Sciamà's story, Melilli starts from the very first episode to reach out to experts who can address her (and our) questions and perplexities, as well as offer a preliminary response to Roger's silences; the following questions and a few examples from the podcast serve as illustrations.

Why Livorno? Concerning the question of Roger's Italian passport, as I explain in the first episode, we can assume that the connection to Livorno was the result of the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in the 15th century and the creation of the Sephardic diaspora across the Mediterranean.³⁵ The Sciamà family showed us a beautiful family tree that extends today to practically all the continents. Roger's great-grandfather was called Gabriel and was born in Aleppo in 1840 and then emigrated to Egypt around 1860. Roger recounted that his great-grandfather Gabriel

32. Episode 1, life in Egypt and emigration to Europe; Episode 2, from Milan to Pakistan, first challenges in the attempts to make a career; Episode 3, move to Afghanistan and beginning of a successful career; Episode 4, the crash and flight back to Milan; Episode 5, personal and family life.

33. At the beginning of each episode, the listener is provided with a short overview of major events happening worldwide at the same time as Roger's specific life episode.

34. The vignette is a data elicitation technique in qualitative research. Hazita Azman, Mahadhir Mahanita, "Application of the Vignette Technique in a Qualitative Paradigm", *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 17 (2017), pp. 27-44; Wendy Aujla, "Using a Vignette in Qualitative Research to Explore Police Perspectives of a Sensitive Topic: 'Honor'-Based Crimes and Forced Marriages", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919898352>; Jayne Pitard, "Using Vignettes within Autoethnography to Explore Layers of Cross-Cultural Awareness as a Teacher", *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 17/1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.1.2393>.

35. Angel Alcalá, *Judíos, sefarditas, coversos. La expulsión de 1492 y sus consecuencias*, Valladolid, Ambito, 1995; Bernard Vincent, "L'expulsion des Juifs d'Espagne", in *Les Juifs dans l'histoire*, ed. by Antoine Germa, Benjamin Lellouch and Evelyne Patlagean, Seyssel, Editions Champ Vallon, 2011, pp. 247-260. For a discussion about an expansive genealogy of "Sepharad" and its contemporary imaginaries in Spain and throughout the Jewish diaspora, see "Genealogies of Sepharad ('Jewish Spain')", ed. by Daniela Flesler, Michal R. Friedman and Asher Salah, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC*, 18 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.48248/issn.2037-741X/10864>.

acquired an Italian passport, but we do not know the precise circumstances in which this happened. We do know that many Jews in Egypt, but somewhat throughout the Mediterranean, claimed origins in Livorno.³⁶ On the one hand, this was connected to the Jewish diaspora from Spain at the end of the 15th century and to the arrival of many Jews in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and in Livorno, which developed as a free port and important hub for trade with all of North Africa and the Middle East.³⁷ On the other hand, the Jews in Livorno were naturalised as Tuscan subjects, which allowed them to move around the Mediterranean, including Egypt, thereby enjoying this form of protection. With the unification of Italy and the emancipation of the Jews, Tuscan subjects became Italian citizens in Italy and abroad, and they could claim these origins to affirm their Italian identity, even though they had never set foot in Italy.³⁸

Why France and Italy, and why Pakistan and Afghanistan? As a business history specialist, Professor Emanuela Scarpellini explained on the podcast that,³⁹ after the Second World War, some large, technologically advanced modern industries emerged in the textile and clothing sector and that the capitals of this phenomenon were the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, France and, to a lesser extent, Japan. The new synthetic fibre and polymer industry required highly sophisticated technologies, large installations and very little workforce. It was a typical capital-intensive industry with a clear result. These new industries were concentrated above all in more developed countries, while the traditional supply and production of cellulose-based fibres moved to less advanced countries, which had abundant cheap labour. “Concerning the role of Italian companies, Italy was already one of the protagonists of the production of textile fibres in the years between the two world wars”,

36. Alyssa J. Reiman, “Claiming Livorno: Citizenship, Commerce, and Culture”, in *Italian Jewish Networks from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century: Bridging Europe and the Mediterranean*, ed. by Francesca Bregoli, Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti and Guri Schwartz, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 81-100.

37. Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2009.

38. Alyssa J. Reiman, *Claiming Livorno: Commercial Networks, Foreign Status, and Culture in the Italian Jewish Diaspora, 1815-1914*, PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2017.

39. Emanuela Scarpellini, in *Shamailang, Una mappa di parole*, Episode 3, <https://www.pierarossetto.eu/eijm-creative-mapping/a-map-of-words/>.

continued Scarpellini. Italy had a strong tradition in the textile industry. Lacking raw materials, such as wool and cotton, Italy specialised in the production of rayon, a semi-synthetic fibre made of cellulose: “the possibility of being able to have a fibre produced independently from other markets between the two World wars, was also seen, by the fascist regime, as a very important possibility from the point of view of national industrial development”, the scholar concluded.⁴⁰

Finally, why “the crash”? Roger mentioned in the interview that the business system he followed in Afghanistan was challenged by the new generation of Afghans who, after training in business and economics abroad, demanded that Afghanistan also follow the modern rules of business and taxation. Why did an endeavour by Afghanistan to modernise itself turn into, in Roger’s words, a “crash”? Professor Elisa Giunchi, a scholar specialised in the history of Pakistan and Afghanistan, explained that Roger’s problem coincided with a positive evolution in the 1960s under the leadership of Mohammed Daoud: Afghanistan wanted to modernise.⁴¹ Following the advice of American and Soviet experts, Afghanistan tried to create order in its financial system, tax revenues, etc. Therefore, a positive aspect for a country trying to modernise became a negative experience for all those businessmen who were used to getting by daily by making unwritten agreements.

Conclusion: connecting the dots

As we accompanied Roger virtually back to Milan, from where, as a young engineer, he wanted to conquer the Italian textile market, we asked ourselves the following question in the podcast production: “What was the story that resonated with us?” As the collaborative research-creation work unfolded, we realised the many cultural dis-locations Roger experienced in the different geographical, historical and social positions he occupied. Roger was differently identified and *recognised* by others as an Italian, a Jew, an Egyptian; a Jewish target of antisemitism and a trustworthy Jewish

40. Ibid. As examples of successful Italian companies in this sector, Scarpellini mentions Sinia Viscosa, Chatillon, Cisa Viscosa.

41. Elisa Gunchi, in *Shamailang, Una mappa di parole*, Episodes 2 and 4, <https://www.pierarossetto.eu/eijm-creative-mapping/a-map-of-words/>.



Figure 1. Roger Sciama, Reception at the Italian embassy in Kabul, 1955-1960. Artwork by Martina Melilli (courtesy of the artist), Photo ©Archivio Fondazione CDEC.

business partner; a young man whose body had a physical limitation but whose spirit was driven by optimism and ambition and a person who could feel at home in so many different places and travel without an *afghani* in his pocket and yet who, later, felt like an alien, an immigrant who struggled to integrate. “It is impossible”, reflected Melilli on the podcast, “to determine someone’s identity exclusively on the basis of data, documents, bureaucracies or the fate which determines one’s place of birth: here rather than there”.⁴² Yet, this is what happens. Societies operate on borders and boundaries, with the former considered “as territorial limits defining political entities (states, in particular) and legal subjects (most

42. Martina Melilli, in *Shamailang, Una mappa di parole*, Episode 1, <https://www.pierarossetto.eu/eijm-creative-mapping/a-map-of-words/>: “I tell Piera that, in Roger’s story, I’m interested in the fact that it doesn’t contemplate borders or national identities, linguistic or logistic obstacles, impassable distances. It is a story that speaks of the human propensity to move, to feel the whole world as one’s own home, a possible home. And also of that lower, deeper, inner movement of wanting to make it, wanting to assert oneself, wanting to succeed, at any cost. To be understood, this needs to be contextualized, in the times and spaces it has crossed. Roger’s story also makes me think about how it is impossible to be able to determine someone’s identity exclusively on the basis of data, documents, bureaucracies, the case that he wants to be born here rather than there. How can one define the right of a person to feel he belongs to a place, a nation, a ‘home’?”

notably, citizens)” and the latter as “social constructs establishing symbolic differences (between class, gender, or race) and producing identities (national, ethnic, or cultural communities)”.⁴³

Euro-Mediterranean diasporas are rightly regarded as trans-imperial connection points, and Roger’s story is quite paradigmatic: in fact, from a “longue durée perspective”, his life story was also the result of several migratory and diasporic turns in the Mediterranean, shaped by the changing fortunes of different political empires. Moreover, it intersected and intertwined with the postcolonial form of economic orders and empires. However, Roger’s story also goes beyond precise categorisations and identifications and eventually questions the researcher’s and listener’s positioning in relation to how he performs it. As anthropologist Michel Trouillot affirmed, “The past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something *over there* only because I am *here*. But nothing is inherently over there or here. [...] The past – or more accurately, pastness – is a position”.⁴⁴

As we strive to make sense of both large-scale migration phenomena and the unique, individual fragments they are composed of, we should bear in mind Les Back’s remarks on the importance of sociology

as part of an embrace with and connection to the dance of life with all its heavy and cumbersome steps. It is an aspiration to hold the experience of others in your arms while recognising that what we touch is always moving, unpredictable, irreducible and mysteriously opaque.⁴⁵

43. Didier Fassin, “Policing Borders, Producing Boundaries: The Governmentality of Immigration in Dark Times”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40 (2011), pp. 213-226.

44. Michel-Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2015 [1995], p. 15.

45. Back, *The Art of Listening*, p. 3.