

Dwelling in contradictions Deep maps and the memories of Jews from Libya

Piera Rossetto

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Article abstract

The article deals with performances of memories and identities by and about Jews from the Middle East and North Africa region, with a focus on Jews of Libyan descent. It acknowledges the complexity that intrinsically characterizes these sources in terms of the heterogeneity of their contents, but also the political implications inherent to their transmission and communication. What is needed, however, is to make this complexity readable, and to make it *readable*, the author suggests making it *visible*. To achieve this goal, the author proposes adopting a new research approach which takes inspiration from the field of digital humanities, to assist in thinking *spatially* and *visually* about the performances of memories and identities. This can bring about a kind of methodological reconciliation between the researcher, the complexity of the data, the necessity to transform them into accurate research results and the responsibility to effectively communicate them to the larger public.

DWELLING IN CONTRADICTIONS

Deep maps and the memories of Jews from Libya

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Memories of who we are now, who we were, who we wanted to become,
are wrapped up in memories of where we are, where we were, and where
we will be (would like to be)

(Jones and Garde-Hansen 2012: 4)

Introduction

In 2007, the Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East published a volume on the Jewish community of Libya as part of a series of books devoted to the history of Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Saadoun 2007). The cover of the book shows a particular image of the *Hâra*, the Jewish quarter in the old city of Tripoli. The image is actually a collage of different pictures: in the background there is a picture of the *Hâra* in the 1920s; on the left there is a group of representatives of the Jewish community on their way to greet the Italian authorities that have just arrived in Tripoli (1911); a group of young Zionists in Tripoli (1915); a woman with four children, all looking quite poor; and a rather enigmatic picture of a woman, which is the only image in colour, wearing the *barracano*, the traditional female costume, and apparently waiting for something or somebody on the balcony of a house. In the background, there is a map of Libya.

To the editor of the book, the picture of the *Hâra* and this collage of images must have appeared eloquent enough to visualize and convey the contents of the book – that is, the history of the Jewish community of Libya – from different perspectives. The pictures chosen highlight some

aspects of Jewish life in the country and they transmit a certain image of this *edah*, which means “community” in Hebrew: a traditional, religious community which had good relationships with the colonial authorities and where Zionism was practiced.

If I consider the Jews of Libyan descent whom I met and interviewed between 2011 and 2014 while conducting my PhD research (about 80 people born between the 1920s and 1950s, living in Italy, Israel, the UK and France) (Rossetto 2015), many more pictures would probably need to be added to the cover of the book in order to portray the diversity of stories. These could include, for instance, pictures taken on the beach by the sea, a recurrent recollection they shared; or an image of their Italian, Maltese and Greek schoolmates to show the multicultural composition of the society of Tripoli and Benghazi; or perhaps pictures of the leisure clubs where Jews spent much of their free time.

My intention here is not to criticize the choice of this collage of images *per se*. Rather, my aim is to take inspiration from it to point out the methodological difficulty with which we are confronted and the responsibility we bear as researchers when we deal with the performances of memories and identities of a particular ethno-religious community, and how we communicate the knowledge we have gained from these performances in our research results. What we choose to transmit and how we choose to transmit it – as the example of the book cover shows – becomes part of the cultural processes where social groups and identities are created (and/or dismantled) and where cultural legacies (including the traumatic ones) are transmitted (Audenino 2015; Baussant et al. 2017).

In this article, I shall discuss the issue of performances of memories and identities by and about Jews from the MENA region, with particular reference to Jews of Libyan descent. More specifically, I would like to consider the challenges confronting us when we try to make sense of the complexity that intrinsically characterizes these people. I refer here, on one hand, to the tremendous heterogeneity and deep contradictions that we find in these performances (the complexity of the contents) and, on the other hand, to the political implications that every elaboration on them might imply due to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East but also to social inequalities internal to the Israeli society (complexity relating to the transmission of the contents).

However challenging it might be, I argue that this double complexity emerging from the contents and interpretation of the performances is essential to produce accurate research. What is needed, however, is to

make this complexity *readable*, and in order to make it readable, I suggest making it *visible*.

Taking inspiration from the field of spatial humanities, I propose adopting a new research approach and starting to think *spatially* and *visually* (Jessop 2008; Drucker 2014) about the performances of memories and identities about and by Jews from the MENA region. I believe that this approach can bring about a kind of methodological reconciliation between the researcher, the complexity of the data, the necessity to transform them into accurate research results and the responsibility of effectively communicating them to the larger public.

A few words about the field of contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi studies, to which my research belongs, might help to better contextualize the points that I shall discuss in this article.

Jewish memories across the Mediterranean

The field of contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi studies¹ deals with the history, identities, cultures and traditions of Middle Eastern and North African Jews both in their country of birth and in their country of destination following the migration processes that almost put an end to the Jewish presence in the MENA region during the second half of the twentieth century.

As Dario Miccoli notes, in the last few years, “the fields of Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies 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” (Miccoli 2017: 1). In the last decade, for instance, a growing number of scholars from different disciplines have focused on practices of *memory recovery* by Jews of North African and Middle Eastern descent. I argue that this is due to the huge influence that the notions of memory and collective memory have exerted on social science and humanities research in general for the last three decades (Erlil 2010) and, more specifically, on the increasing number of performances of memory (e.g. books, websites, oral history projects, exhibitions) by and about Jews from the MENA region, offering scholars a rich and diversified field of investigation open to exploration and interpretation.²

1. The term Sephardic refers originally to the Jewish diaspora from the Iberian peninsula and the term Mizrahi (in Hebrew “Easterner”) indicates an Israeli Jew of Middle Eastern or North African descent.
2. *Project Edoth* and *Project Mapping Living Memories* by CDEC Foundation (Milan, Italy);

The growing presence of such performances in the virtual space of the Internet (e.g. digital projects and public history websites) has gained attention to this relatively marginalized history that rarely entered major historiographical works about the region. Working with performances of memory will help highlight the discrepancies as well as the points of contact between different ways of mediating and transmitting the past: the influence that different settings have on the understanding of these long neglected histories and the role they play in interpreting the present.

My research deals with this cultural production from the perspective of memory studies, according to which the past is “a social construction whose nature arises out of the needs and frames of reference of each particular present” (Assmann 2011: 33); performances of memory produce identity-formation effects which “will always be contingent and open to resignification” (Rothberg 2010: 7); and memories travel and “possible contexts of such movement range from everyday interaction among different social groups to transnational media reception and from trade, migration and diaspora to war and colonialism” (Ertl 2011 : 11).

Based on my research experience, I would argue that researching the social history of Jewish communities of the MENA region from a memory studies perspective presents a major challenge, where methodological issues and content-related problems intertwine. While working with the memories of Jews from Libya, in fact, I faced the challenge of making sense of the deep heterogeneity, diversity and contradictions embedded in the performances of memories and identities I had collected.

As a researcher, I had to deal with tens of individual narratives: “So what? What does this multiplicity bring forth?” I asked myself. Aside from the peculiar, individual experiences, are there “nodes of memory” (Rothberg 2010) or “thick points of identification” (Rossetto 2014) to be found, for instance, around ideas of modernity, national belonging and cultural affiliation?

Moreover, the memories collected presented themselves as *spatial narratives*, as narratives of events, of processes that took place in specific spaces. I decided, then, to consider them also from the perspective of place/space. The specific focus on the spatial dimension of personal and

<http://www.memoriebraiche.it/index.htm>; Piera Rossetto private archive; archive of the Oral History Division of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; <http://www.italiaebraica.org/index.php?lang=it>; <http://www.nebidaniel.org/>; <http://www.aspcje.fr/>; <http://www.ajoe.org/>; <http://www.jimena.org/>; <http://www.morial.fr/>; <http://www.efja.org/>; <http://www.darnna.com/accueil.htm>; <http://www.sephardivoices.org.uk/>.

shared experiences which emerge from performances of memories allows for grasping, beyond the mere movement of migrants across space, the deep existential implications of leaving, encountering and inhabiting places for individuals and groups (Tuan 1977).

The question, therefore, remains open as to how to combine all these elements – space, place and time – or, in other words, how to integrate structure, process and event in order to explain larger social formations and changes (Ayers 2010).

To tackle these questions, the picture of the *Hâra* – a Jewish space in the city – is a good starting point, since it convincingly exemplifies how, being socially constructed and produced, places and spaces give us more than topographical information.

As we shall see in the next two sections, memories attached to the Jewish quarter of Tripoli offer us interesting insights into urban practices, social stratification, generational shifts, cultural transformation and personal perception of space/place. When we question spaces and places, we indirectly question identity representations, both individual and collective, related to and embedded in places and spaces.

Diversity and contradictions

In a 1882–1883 almanac, the Medina of Tripoli is described as being divided into six quarters or *hûma*, among which were two Jewish quarters: the *Hâra al-kabîra* and the *Hâra al-saghîr* (Micara 2013: 68; Lafi 2002). As architect Ludovico Micara underlines, “the composite organic urban fabric [of the Medina] corresponded, until the beginning of the twentieth century, to the cohabitation and integration between Moslems, Jews, Maltese, Sicilians, Nigerians, Sudanese, each specialized in different arts and crafts” (Micara 2013 : 53).

The experiences of the *Hâra* and the Medina varied among my interviewees according to their group age, social class, place of residence and personal perceptions. We get a particular idea of cohabitation from Penina’s interview, for instance. Penina was born in Tripoli in 1923 to a family of modest means. She recalled her Muslim neighbours in shari’ Spagnol, in the *Hâra al-kabîra*. During Shabbat, she said, they used to warm up coffee for her, and she would spend time with them.

To Franca, born in the *Hâra* in 1933, the Jewish quarter meant home, family, relatives, neighbours and human relationships. At the age

of 80, when I met her in her apartment in Ramat Gan (Israel), Franca still remembered with fondness, love and nostalgia the house where the family used to live in the *Hâra*. Her account is replete with details about the internal organisation of spaces: here the stairs, here the rooms of the neighbours, and so forth. It is also filled with memories of Shabbat meals shared with relatives. The house of Franca was open not only to relatives and neighbours but also to people in need of help, like the woman who came regularly to do the family's laundry. Every Wednesday, recalled Franca, this poor woman from the community would come to her house and she would receive flour and textiles from Franca's mother as well as meat from her father, who was a butcher. Franca's family was not rich, but as she recalled, "we had all we needed."³

This is a very different account compared to the reports written by the emissaries of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, who commented almost exclusively on the insalubrious conditions in the quarter, or compared to the testimony of Yolande, born in Benghazi in 1932 to a rich family of merchants, but living in Tripoli since 1944. Some of Yolande's memories are as follows:

Extract no. 1

Yolande: Our housekeepers came from the poor neighbourhood, the *Hâra*. In Tripoli, there was a dichotomy between the well-off and the poor who lived in the *Hâra*. I personally knew the *Hâra* only by hearsay, because our housekeepers came from there. Since we wanted to have everything kosher, for this reason, we employed Jewish personnel. After the Aliyah, the entire *Hâra* went to Israel, and I remember spending the summer with a lady, Mme Anne, who worked for the Joint⁴: she was in charge of preparing these people for the departure. They were people of absolute poverty, and she would help them because Israel wanted a healthy population. For this reason, we would visit the people and treat their trachoma with silver nitrate, but also all kinds of sickness of these people.⁵

To Yolande, *Hâra* was associated with sickness, disease, a "down there"

3. Interview with Franca, Ramat Gan (Israel), 06/03/2013. The names of the interviewees have been changed. All interviews quoted in the article are part of the collection *Mapping Living Memories*, deposited at the CDEC Foundation (Milan, Italy). The interviews were collected in 2012-2013 by the author and the co-investigator Dr. Barbara Spadaro for the research project *Mapping Living Memories: The Jewish Diaspora from Libya across Europe and the Mediterranean* run by the CDEC foundation. All translations from the original language of the interview into English are mine.
4. American Joint Distribution Committee.
5. Interview with Yolande, Livorno (Italy), 15/07/2013.

from where Jews left for Israel in conditions of extreme poverty.

The collage of pictures that I described at the beginning of the article would speak differently to Yolande in comparison to Franca or Penina. Further, this difference became increasingly striking with the urban and demographic changes which interested Tripoli especially in the 1930s and 1940s. On one hand, Jews were increasingly deciding to move, and had the possibility of doing so, from the old city to apartments in the new part of Tripoli. Interviewees spoke of this change as a sign of modernization and the improvement of one's social position, and in so doing, they read *in space* a social process which occurred during a certain period of time (Schloegel 2003: 70 quoted in Canali and Miglio 2014: 200). On the other hand, the Aliyah of 1949–51 took to Israel the vast majority of Jews living in the country (it is estimated that of a Jewish population of about 36,000, about 30,000 Jews left for Israel during the Aliyah), implying that the old city was almost emptied of its Jewish population. Most families that decided not to leave for Israel were already living in the new town.

Urban and demographic changes reverberate in the interviewees' memories. The names of the streets changed. Practically, the Jews born in the 1940s and 1950s no longer knew much about the *Hâra* and the old city, except the few who still lived there or those few who wanted to belong to this particular world. Again, we find different memories of the *Hâra* depending on the point of view: from outside or from inside the quarter. However, we find differences also among interviewees who hold an "external point of view" on the old city, as the following examples will show.

One Tripoli, many "Tripolis"?

There was a particularly salient issue in the recollections of the interviewees born in Tripoli in the 1940s and 1950s: the question of insecurity for Jews in the old city. Odette was born in Tripoli in 1950, and her family lived in the new part of the city. According to her, after the Aliyah and the consequent decrease in the Jewish population in the *Hâra*, the whole of the old city became off limits to Jews.

Extract no. 2

Odette: In the old city, we could not enter, since it was full of... ehm... okay, I would not like to pronounce the word... And if they saw a Jewish girl, they would annoy her; they would... I don't say they would kill her, but... *picc, picc*, they would throw stones at her, the youngsters,... and then we never went there alone, perhaps with our mum to visit some

families that still lived there.⁶

The testimony of Noemi, born in Tripoli in the 1950s is very similar:

Extract no. 3

Interviewer: You were talking about the perception of insecurity that you experienced when taking the bread to be baked at the bakery...

Noemi: Yes, walk quickly and straight ahead!

Interviewer: Was it dangerous to walk in the old city?

Noemi: I was not born there, but it was dangerous, because they could whisper insults against you, or you could have been followed by people who would throw stones, and then you would imagine the worst. The youngsters were dangerous!⁷

However, when I asked Chantal the same question, her answer was very different and much more clearly articulated.

Chantal was born in Tripoli in 1949 to a well-off family, and at a very young age, she would travel a lot with her father. In 1969, Chantal enrolled in a university in Italy. When asked about the perception of security/insecurity in Tripoli and in the old city, her answer resonated with her many experiences in cities in Italy, especially Rome.

Extract no. 4

Interviewer: Going back to your happy recollections, as a girl, did you ever perceive as dangerous walking around in Tripoli?

Chantal: No, but they had a bad habit: they would touch me. But this happened to me in Rome as well!

Interviewer: The Italians also?

Chantal: There was a guy who every time... until one day, I followed him; I frightened him... but this happened in Italy also (...) The Arabs instead, they would pinch you at the back. But this also happened to me in Italy. Down there [in Tripoli], it was not an exception.

Interviewer: Many people told us that the girls could not go out...

Chantal: Because the parents would not allow them! We are talking

6. Interview with Odette, Kiryat 'Ata, (Israel), 05/03/2013.

7. Interview with Noemi, Rome (Italy), 08/07/2013.

about the 1960s. It did not exist to go out in the evening. (...) And actually, it was logic that in 1967, in 1949, when there were times of tension... you should not forget that there was Nasser, who heated the crowd!⁸

Chantal did not recall a situation of insecurity that was unique to Tripoli. Her experience in Italy allowed her to contextualize things in a larger framework. She questioned also the mentality of the time, what was allowed or not in the 1960s. Finally, she considered also the influence of international circumstances on the daily life of a city like Tripoli, which had been at the centre of international economic and political interests since the discovery and exploitation of oil reserves at the end of the 1950s.

As Baussant observes in the case of Jews from Egypt (Baussant: forthcoming), recollections are influenced by a complex set of factors that we should also take into account in the analysis of the women's recollections we have just seen: gender and age; the place in which they lived; their social status and the social connections they had; the place in which the recollection process takes place.

All three interviewees quoted above were born in Tripoli, were of almost the same age, all women, all lived in the new part of the city and yet, their memories convey extremely different perceptions of the city, to the point that they seem to describe different cities – “different Tripolis.” What, then, can we conclude? How was Tripoli and its Medina then? What sense can we make of the social and urban experience of the Jews in this city? How far do all these different recollections take us in our effort to understand how Jewish life was in Libya?

The complexity of the recollection process and the contradictions which fill the data appear at times too untenable to possibly rely upon them. We should always bear in mind, however, that the aim of our work is not assessing whether a recollection is true or not. The richness of oral sources resides in the fact that they “tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (Portelli 2003: 67). It is precisely in this sense, I argue, that dwelling in these contradictions is not only possible but also desirable. If we research people's memories and identities in terms of *group memories* and *group identities*, then contradictions and ambiguities reflect a more accurate and larger picture of the memories and identities of the *group*, as well as of its history which is never homogeneous or smooth. Keeping this fragmentation of memories and (self-)identifications is crucial when

8. Interview with Chantal, Rome (Italy), 09/07/2013.

researching the history of Jews in the MENA region, in particular their changing fortune in societies where they represented a religious minority and the factors that determined their (forced)⁹ departure. This latter aspect in particular represents a crucial topic, since many interviewees elaborated on their identity precisely by recalling how and why they left Libya.

The recollections that we have considered until now represent a clear example of the complexity that I mentioned at the beginning of this article and in particular of the complexity of the contents, which intrinsically constitutes the performances of memories and identities. In the next section, I shall discuss the complexity of the transmission by considering precisely the issue of the (forced) departure of the Jews from the MENA region during the second half of the twentieth century. More specifically, I will consider the narrative that a recent political initiative by the Israeli government concerning the (forced) departure suggests, and I will compare it with the personal recollections of a Jew from Libya who experienced the (forced) departure first-hand.

Narrating memories

As I previously noted, performances of memories and identities can offer invaluable insights into large cultural processes where social groups are created (and/or dismantled) and traumatic legacies are transmitted, including through academic research and political initiatives (Audenino 2015; Baussant et al. 2017). A recent political initiative by the Israeli government offers us an interesting example of the role played by public and official narratives in the process of shaping and transmitting group identities.

I refer to the law adopted by the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) in June 2014 that established November 30 as “the Exit and Deportation of Jews from Arab Land and Iran Day” [תוצראם סידוהיהלש שוריהוהו האימיה ויצל מוי] [אריאמו ברע].¹⁰ The legislative measure concerns the (forced) departure of the Jews from the MENA region during the twentieth century – a complex historical phenomenon that almost put an end to the Jewish presence in the region between the 1940s and 1970s.

It is not my intention to explore in detail the political agenda that might

9. I choose to write the adjective ‘forced’ in brackets in order to underline the complexity of the definition of these migrations, not only if we look at them from the perspective of the individuals who experienced them, but also in terms of the countries involved (from Morocco to Iran) and the long period of time in which they occurred (from the early 1940s to the late 1970s).
10. http://knesset.gov.il/spokesman/eng/PR_eng.asp?PRID=11325 (visited 17.06.2018).

underlie this narrative. This would require a separate discussion.¹¹ Rather, I take inspiration from a few aspects of this initiative to offer another example of the essential contributions that the heterogeneity and contradictions found in performances of memories and identities by and about Jews from the MENA region can offer for understanding their complex history.

I shall begin again with an image that appeared in an article by Ofer Aderet, published in the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz* (Aderet 2015). The article deals in general with the “commemoration of the flight of 850,000 Jews from Arab countries,” to quote Aderet, and in particular with how it was performed in a house for retired people in Israel, where four ladies from Iraq and one from Yemen shared their personal memories of those years and events.

The picture in the article is of an elderly lady lighting a memorial candle, while two other ladies stand next to her. An iron brazier holds the candle resting on dark stones, surrounded by barbed wire. A flower, which appears to be a red rose, is leaning on a table next to the brazier. In order to light the candle, the lady must pass her arm through the barbed wire. The Israeli flag wraps the table, while behind the ladies, some elderly people are seated, attending the ceremony.

If it were not for the title of the article, the symbols used in this commemoration would closely resemble those for the victims of the Shoah. Indeed, one of the ladies quoted in the article, Janet Dallal, compares the situations of the Jews in Europe during the Shoah and the Jews in Arab countries, and says, “While our brethren, the Jews of Europe, were persecuted and slaughtered, hatred and incitement came to us in the Arab countries” (Aderet 2015). The symbols and the narrative used to perform the commemoration are in tune with the official statements by the Israeli government about the commemoration day, which describe it in terms of persecution, deportation, expulsion, flight, violence and pogroms.¹²

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11. As an example of the many (potential) controversial elements of this law, I should mention for instance the date on which the commemoration day is marked (November 30, the day after UN General Assembly Resolution 181 [Partition Plan] was adopted on November 29, 1947 calling for the partition of mandatory Palestine into a Jewish State and an Arab State). The choice of this date identifies a direct responsibility by the Arab countries in compelling the Jews living in the MENA region to leave their homes and assets and *de facto* equates the ‘Palestinian refugees’ after the 1948 war with the ‘Jewish refugees’ from Arab Muslim countries.
 12. http://knesset.gov.il/spokesman/eng/PR_eng.asp?PRID=11325; <http://embassies.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/Spotlight/Pages/The-Jewish-Refugees-from-Arab-Countries.aspx>; <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Issues/Pages/Jewish-refugees-expelled-from-Arab->

One of the organizers of the event, Asher Hajaj (as the author of the article informs us), explicitly talks about the Shoah while addressing the attendees of the ceremony. However, he does it from a different perspective: “Most of you were not able to tell your personal and family story to this day. As if the events of the Holocaust dwarfed the blood libels and riots that the Jews experienced in Arab countries and Iran. [...] The state almost forgot the atrocities that forced the immigrants to flee for their lives [...] But the authorities have come to their senses and begun to repair the injustice that was done” (Aderet 2015). In the words of Hajaj, the Jews from Arab countries were not only victims of the violence that they experienced in their country of origin but also “victims” of an unjust Israeli official narrative that overlooked the “atrocities” that they underwent and silenced their voices.

The image of the Jews that these narratives convey is essentially that of victims, and more specifically of being victimized twice – before and after the departure; victims of antisemitism in the country of origin (in the diaspora) and of a socially marginalized condition in Israel.¹³ The way in which the legacy of the departure is transmitted contributes to the creation of a certain group identity which is in contrast with other narratives and, as a result, with other identities produced by these narratives.

In the case of the Jews from Libya, the narrative, for instance, of Haggiag-Liluf, author of a history of the Jews from Libya and one of the founders of the museum-heritage centre of the Libyan Jewry in Israel, stresses the religious, Zionist component of the departure (Haggiag-Liluf 2005). Haggiag-Liluf depicts the Jews who left Libya as urged to leave in order to accomplish the Zionist ideal of *kibbutz ha-galuyyot*, “the reunification of all diasporas,” a narrative that now, however, does not intrinsically clash with that of the expulsions (Baussant: forthcoming).

Maurice Roumani, scholar and political scientist of Libyan descent, points to other factors in his analysis of the mass departure of Jews from Libya between 1949 and 1952: the Israeli policy towards Middle Eastern Jewish immigration in general; the disappointment of the Libyan Jews regarding the colonial (Italian) and British authorities; the violence of the pogroms against the Jews in 1945 and 1948; the rise of religious and nationalist fervour among the Muslim population which led, according to

lands-and-from-Iran-29-November-2016.aspx (last visited 18.06.2018).

13. It should be noted, however, that according to Israeli legislation “refugee status refers only to Israeli citizens who left an Arab country or Iran because of religious discrimination” (Baussant 2018).

the scholar, to widespread anti-Semitism; and to a lesser extent, ideological convictions (Roumani 2008: 158).

While Haggiag-Liluf argues that Libyan Jews left for Israel because of their deep Zionist commitment, Roumani contends that they left owing to the pressures of economic and political factors, both internal and external to the country. Both analyses contribute to a more fully articulated point of view adding several grounds for the departure narratives that we saw at the beginning of this section.

Why, then, did Jews leave their countries of origin? Was it because they were Zionist? Because they were persecuted? Because of the deep social and economic changes that affected the societies in which they lived? Because they sought a better future for their children? Actually, all of these factors played a role in the events that almost put a complete end to the Jewish presence in the MENA region in the second half of the twentieth century. As it emerges from the study of memories of Jews who experienced this complex process, not only did different persons experience different situations and therefore discuss the departure in certain terms but the different narratives coexist in the same person, as the case of Franca will illustrate.¹⁴

Crossing the sea, crossing one's own life

When I met Franca at her house in the Tel Aviv area, she devoted most of the time we spent together to remembering her departure from Tripoli for Israel. Her narrative represents an actual turning point in life, recalling it in almost epic terms. She remembered the presence of the Jewish Brigade in Tripoli in 1943 and her neighbour, Elqish, whom she defined as a “patriot Jew” because “he had the Israeli flag long before the creation of the state.”¹⁵ This man used to invite the Jewish soldiers to have dinner at his house; he was a committed Zionist, she added. This recollection triggered my questions about the eventual affiliation of Franca's family also to Zionism:

Extract no. 5

Interviewer: Your father was also a Zionist?

Franca: Actually, we could say...

Interviewer: Did you talk about Israel at home?

14. On this subject see also Smith 2006.

15. Interview with Franca, Ramat Gan (Israel), 06/03/2013.

Franca: Mostly of Jerusalem, and we had a clue of what a kibbutz was.

Interviewer: Then your father was not affiliated with the Maccabi group or the Ben Yehuda club?

Franca: No, but I was in the Scout movement.¹⁶

She also recalled how they used to hold meetings on Saturdays, all wearing uniforms, girls and boys together, although there were few girls. In Franca's family, different approaches to the changes and novelties brought to Tripoli by the Jewish Brigade coexisted. Her father allowed her to join this group even though he personally was not a member of any Zionist circles. Yet in the family, the ideal of "Jerusalem," of ascending to the holy city, circulated.

Franca continued with a lengthy, detailed account of the journey from Tripoli to Sicily, of how they were hosted for one week in the village of Pachino before they proceeded to Rome. In Rome, Franca met Yosif, whom she had known and with whom she was probably in love already in Tripoli. They were engaged in Rome. After a few days, they continued the journey to Israel, where they settled together in Yagur, a kibbutz close to Haifa. Franca described her experience of the kibbutz only in absolutely positive terms for her personal growth:

Extract no. 6

Franca: In the kibbutz, I studied Hebrew. We developed. There is nothing more to say. The kibbutz transformed us as people.¹⁷

Franca made a similar comment when she spoke of the arrival of Jews from Yemen to the kibbutz. On that occasion, Franca was in charge, together with other members of the kibbutz, of taking care of the new immigrants and assisting them at the transit camp of Rosh ha-'Ayin. There, Franca volunteered for five months with the newcomers:

Extract no. 7

Franca: They arrived in such conditions! How they lived! We transformed them into human beings!¹⁸

When Franca's family arrived in Israel, in the transit camp of Pardes Hana and later in the camp of Kiryat 'Ono, she had to leave the kibbutz

16. Interview with Franca, Ramat Gan (Israel), 06/03/2013.

17. Interview with Franca, Ramat Gan (Israel), 06/03/2013.

18. Interview with Franca, Ramat Gan (Israel), 06/03/2013.

to join and support them. Her father, who had been a butcher in Tripoli, could not find a job. Franca subsequently worked in different factories before becoming a nurse and working at a hospital in Neve' 'On.

Thus, why did Franca leave Tripoli? Even if she joined the illegal emigration, Franca did not describe her departure as a flight. In fact, during the interview, she did not articulate a precise reason for her choice to leave. She situated her departure between the religious, rather than Zionist, atmosphere of her family and her experience of the Scout movement, which probably facilitated her integration into the kibbutz, of which she had otherwise never heard before. However, her account also contains very personal elements, such as the relationship with the young man who would later become her husband.

Franca's recollections tell us how, for her, crossing the Mediterranean Sea also meant undergoing a tremendous change in her personal life, as a woman.

Franca's account clearly shows how a single narrative cannot achieve the goal of accurately transmitting the complexity of the process she underwent. Like her, many of the interviewees described a complex of reasons that led to their departure. Therefore, one must ask if oral sources are too diverse and contradictory to possibly be relied upon (Bensoussan 2014). How can we make sense of this complex phenomenon which played a crucial role in the creation, as well as in the transmission, of the personal and collective identity?

The challenge, I argue, is to produce a form of narrative that will not seek to blur the differences and diversities of the performances. Rather, we must find a way to make them *readable*. In order to do so, I suggest turning to mapping, "the tool long favoured by geographers," as it "offers a different way to achieve the goal of capturing complexity" (Bodenhamer 2015: 17; Bodenhamer et al. 2010; Presner et al. 2014). More specifically, as I will describe in the next section, I envisage a new research approach which adopts "deep mapping" both as a concept and as a tool, and combines it with digital mapping (GIS) and art mapping practices (Canali and Miglio 2014) to create a model capable of making the complexity, diversity and contradictions embedded in oral/digital sources visible and readable to the larger public.

Mapping memories deeply, mapping deep memories: towards a new research approach.¹⁹ Concluding remarks

As David Bodenhamer explains, the notion of deep maps first appeared as a suggestion by the situationists, a group of French theorists in the 1960s, who rejected categorical thinking and urged scholars to consider the full context (or situation) of the events they studied.²⁰ Their idea of a deep map was similar to eighteenth-century gazetteers – that is, a pastiche of everything that could be discovered about a place, including topography, climate, folklore, symbols, history, literature, and the like. It all gave a particular expression to space and it all must be examined together to understand how one place differed from another.

Other authors speak of “thick mapping.” One such author is Todd Presner, the founder of HyperCities, a project in digital humanities whose aim is to show the layered history of city spaces. As he puts it, thick maps are a privileged instrument “to conceptualise a connection between an embodied subject in a city space and to think about history and space in a linked and deep way.”²¹

“Deep mapping” is an innovative concept emerging at the crossroads of digital humanities and geography. It is based on the idea that places are formed through the multiple personal and collective experiences associated with them and that these experiences are often expressed as narratives (Dear at al. 2011; Bodenhamer 2015). Deep mapping is aimed at exploring places in depth through the study of the stories associated with those places, and reciprocally, further exploring narratives by approaching them through their spatial characteristics. And yet, mapping complex interactions between the physical environment and the human experience of places expressed through narratives (deep maps) is quite difficult to achieve (Wood 2015; Harris 2015). Technological maps and artistic maps are seen as contradictory (Caquard and Dimitrovas 2017), and the use of GIS in the humanities is criticized because of its limitation in representing the human experience of places and the emotions attached to them. However, there are examples to look at that support this research approach.

19. I am particularly grateful to professor Sébastien Caquard (Concordia University, Montreal) for his invaluable suggestions about the concept and practice of deep mapping.

20. <http://thepoliscenter.iupui.edu/index.php/an-exploration-of-deep-maps/>

21. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtGdfwrJSQ>: Todd Samuel Presner, “Thick Mapping in the Digital Humanities: From Berlin to Los Angeles and Beyond,” 24.01.2012.

A humanistic alternative to GIS has been advanced recently in the field of Holocaust studies, introducing “inductive visualization” to explore the “embeddedness of social process and relations in space” (Knowles et al. 2015). Scholars have proposed non-conventional forms of mapping, such as the “carte sensible” (sensitive map) (Olmedo 2011), and others have worked with artists to develop personal maps of experience and memory (Mekdjian et al. 2014; Benini 2014). Indeed, the growing field of narrative cartography shows how vibrant and prolific the relation between maps, narratives and metanarratives is (Caquard 2011; Caquard and Cartwright 2014).

I find the metaphor elaborated by Ridge, Lafreniere and Nesbit probably to be the most effective one for understanding what a deep map is:

While constructing our prototype we discovered that the line between ‘deep maps’ and ‘spatial narratives’ is itself fuzzy, as both are interpretative and use sources selectively. We came up with a ‘hop-on, hop-off’ tourist bus metaphor to clarify the difference between deep maps and spatial narratives-like a tourist bus, a spatial narrative takes you to pre-selected locations and evidence, while a deep map experience begins when you step off the ‘bus’ and begin to explore data more deeply. (Ridge et al. 2013: 185)

In a way, every interview that I conducted with Jews from Libya had the potential to be a “step off the bus” and, indeed, each one allowed me, in one way or another, to go deeper in the exploration of my research questions. As I said before, if we research people’s performances of memories and identities, contradictions and ambiguities reflect a more accurate and larger picture of them. It is possible to make sense of this diversity by stepping off the bus and exploring more deeply personal and family stories.

If we understand narratives as spaces, then we can map them deeply (mapping memories deeply) and obtain multiple deep maps. The combination of deep maps (mapping deep memories) of a specific place in a city, for instance, like the Jewish quarter of Tripoli, is likely to produce a kaleidoscopic image that is able to convey the heterogeneity, diversity and contradictions which compose a global sense of this place and indirectly a more comprehensive and complex sense of identities.

In other words, the process of mapping deeply performances of memories and identities should help us elaborate accurately the complexities of which they are made, while the process of mapping deep memories displayed in the maps should help the researcher fulfil the responsibility of making this

complexity *readable* and *visible* to the larger public.

As a way to conclude this contribution, I would suggest imagining the creation of an “Atlas of Jewish deep migration memories across the Mediterranean” as a new approach to the study of performances of memory and identity by and about Jews from Arab-Muslim countries. Actually, almost forty years ago, Sir Martin Gilbert undertook a similar project and, in 1969, published the first edition of the *Atlas of Jewish History*, where he aimed “to portray through maps the complex comings and goings of many different sorts of Jews, and the extraordinary diversity of the Jewish saga” (Gilbert 2010: Preface).

The atlas foreseen here, however, would rest on a new methodology combining oral history, digital mapping and art mapping practices, and would be aimed at unveiling, through the perspective of Jewish memories and identities, the social and cultural entanglements between Europe and the MENA region and their long-lasting legacies, including the traumatic ones.

As Erll poignantly puts it, “Today [...] we cannot afford the luxury of *not* studying memory. [...] If we want to understand the present and its running conflicts we have to acknowledge that many of the ‘hard facts’ of what we encounter as ‘economy’, ‘power politics’ or ‘environmental issues’ are at least partly the result of ‘soft factors’, of *cultural processes* [my emphasis] grounded in cultural memory” (Erll 2011: 5).

In a time of political unrest for the entire Euro-Mediterranean region, where social and cultural conflicts develop rapidly also via the Internet and social media, the study of the cultural processes through which social groups are created (and/or dismantled) and traumatic legacies are transmitted represents a crucial project to undertake in order to get, as envisioned by European policies,²² richer interpretations of the past, which are essential for better understanding and informing the present and the social challenges that it brings.

22. See CULT-COOP-09-2016: *European Heritage, access and analysis for a richer interpretation of the past*, HORIZON 2020 Work Programme 2016-2017, Europe in a changing world-inclusive, innovative and reflective societies, p.92.

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