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From Colonialism to a Special Relationship (1911–2021)  
*Edited by Luciano Monzali & Paolo Soave*

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# Italy and Libya

From Colonialism to a Special  
Relationship (1911–2021)

**Edited by**  
**Luciano Monzali**  
**Paolo Soave**

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## 5 If the Monument Could Speak

### Jewish Italian Imaginaries across the Mediterranean

Piera Rossetto

*Tripoli...Tripoli...Tripoli...: tutte le nostre conversazioni sono piene di questo nome, così caro a tutti noi. Ma com'era, che cosa rappresentava, perché ci stava tanto a cuore questa nostra piccola patria?*

Roberto Nunes Vais, *Reminiscenze tripoline*<sup>1</sup>

In 1921, architect Armando Brasini (1879–1965), a professional very close to Benito Mussolini,<sup>2</sup> was called to Tripoli by Giuseppe Volpi, governor of Tripolitania. Brasini was entrusted with the construction of the ‘Monumento ai caduti’, a monument dedicated to the Italian soldiers fallen in the conquest of Libya and to Victory (1923–1925). In the governor’s view, the ‘Monumento’ should give ‘a visual immediacy to Italy’s renewed imperial policy’.<sup>3</sup> The monument, which represented the first building constructed by Brasini in Tripoli, stood on a very suggestive site, ‘on the sole height that interrupts the city’s reclining profile to the west’.<sup>4</sup> Through the choice of the architectural elements, the monument declared Tripoli as ‘being again under the sign of Rome’.<sup>5</sup> This monument must have been particularly effective in conveying this message, if we consider that it was destroyed in the 1950s,<sup>6</sup> after the proclamation of the independent kingdom of Libya in what has been interpreted as a practice designed to ‘remove the colonial past’.<sup>7</sup>

The monument was very close to the Medina, and in particular to the Jewish quarters of the old city. In fact, it was used by the community as a kind of collective space. Photos of Jewish school classes were taken at the monument, as well as of community groups such as the Scout movement or various Jewish associations. The construction of the ‘Monumento’ was supervised by Umberto Di Segni (1894–1958), a young Jewish architect born in Tripoli, who added the cascading staircase to the sea.<sup>8</sup> Umberto Di Segni is considered one of the major architects operating in the colonies, the only one to have been born there. Although his training did not take place within the architectural current of rationalism, his works present many contact points with Italian representatives of this movement, such as Carlo Enrico Rava, Luigi Piccinato and Giovanni Pellegrini.<sup>9</sup> During his career, Di Segni worked extensively for public and private clients, including on the renovation and construction of synagogues. Between 1932 and 1939, he designed

and realised several buildings for the public administration, both in Tripoli and in smaller centres like Gharian, Zliten and Jefren. He worked on the rural settlements planned by the Italian colonial regime, by designing, for instance, the villages Michele Bianchi (1936), Oliveti (1938) and Tarhuna (1939), just to mention a few of his works.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter, however, is not devoted to the history of Italian colonial architecture in Libya. Rather, the figure of Umberto Di Segni offers a good starting point from which to explore the complexity of multiple Libyan Jewish identities and their entanglement with Italian imaginaries across the Mediterranean: Who, then, were the Jews in Libya?

Although Di Segni was born in Tripoli, he was not a ‘local’ Jew, as were, for instance, the Jewish cave dwellers of the Nafusa mountains.<sup>11</sup> His family had Italian origins, and, in fact, although Di Segni lived and worked in Libya, he always kept his official residence in Livorno, Italy.<sup>12</sup> We do not know if his family had arrived in Libya long before, following the expanding routes of Jewish traders from Livorno—as his residence lets us suppose.<sup>13</sup> These traders were very often Sephardi Jews (i.e., of Spanish descent) who expanded their networks and family roots across the whole Mediterranean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> In some instances, these families preserved part of their Sephardi heritage, be that the language—they kept speaking Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) among themselves—or elements in their religious and liturgical traditions. Other families had arrived from Italy in Tripoli and other parts of contemporary Libya much later, towards the end of the nineteenth century, and considered themselves fully Italian: they were Italian subjects of Jewish faith living in Libya. The fact that Di Segni studied at the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Rome does not help us solve the dilemma about the origin of his family, because both ‘groups’ wished for their children an Italian education.

Although scant, these elements of Di Segni’s biography and career give us a glimpse of the complex web of possible identifications among Jews in Libya and from Libya. Things become even more challenging when individual claims of identity are entangled with collective ones. In this chapter, I would like to explore some of these collective ‘knots of identification’<sup>15</sup> and see how they might contribute to the articulation and understanding of Italian imaginaries across the Mediterranean. This contribution is inscribed in my interest in looking at how Libyan Jews negotiate their multiple belongings, the different meanings they attach to the idea of ‘who were the Jews in Libya’ and ‘what it means now to be a Jew from Libya’. My aim has been to explore both the public narratives of groups and associations which represent Libyan Jews collectively, and ‘the far-ranging ability of individuals to “put things together” in ways that make sense to them, and to utilize this capacity to forge new definitions and affiliations’.<sup>16</sup>

In the first part, I wish to portray the complexity of ‘Libyan Jewish identities’ by exploring an intriguing Jewish almanac published in Tripoli in 1937. The second part insists on a more methodological reflection, which I draw

from my experience with the ways in which Jews from Libya 'put things together'<sup>17</sup> both personally and collectively. In both cases, the 'Monumento ai caduti' will feature not only as a meaningful stage but also as an agent that destabilises existing narratives and suggests further routes down which the research questions may be pursued. Before doing that, I will briefly outline the current state of research and the methodological framework of this contribution.

In the last two decades, the history of Jews living in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been increasingly attracting the interest of scholars from different disciplines, eager to investigate the fate of Jews living, like other minorities, in Muslim-majority countries. Among the most recent and innovative works are those that embrace new research perspectives and methodological paradigms, including a wider postcolonial framework<sup>18</sup> and drawing on concepts from ethnic studies and migration studies.<sup>19</sup> These changes in paradigms and perspectives are paving new directions<sup>20</sup> in the field of Sephardi and Mizrahi studies—i.e., the fields that deal with the history, culture and traditions of North African and Middle Eastern Jews, both in their countries of origin and in their countries of resettlement.

This new course has also invested in the study of Jewish life in Libya, a topic which has long remained—and to a certain extent still is—at the margins of scholarly investigation. Acknowledging pioneering works on Libyan Jewry, such as those by historians Renzo De Felice, Rachel Simon, Maurice Roumani and anthropologist Harvey Goldberg, most recent scholarship on Jews in and from Libya tries to go beyond sources that have been privileged until recently or to reconsider them from different perspectives.<sup>21</sup>

My contribution is deeply indebted to and resonates with Barbara Spadaro's exploration of Jewish memories from Libya, and, more specifically, to her most recent work about the figure of Giannetto Paggi: an Italian Jew from Pitigliano (Italy) celebrated as a champion of Italian culture and civilisation in Tripoli between the 1880s and 1910s.<sup>22</sup> Spadaro's investment in the knowledge exchange between her and Paggi's descendants constituted for the scholar a 'moment of truth',<sup>23</sup> which helped her realise how it is crucial 'to move from research that validates existing narratives to a knowledge exchange that, through the disruption and negotiation of those narratives illuminates the constant mobility of memory'.<sup>24</sup> Looking at my own anthropological research about and with Jews from Libya, I recognise moments in which, by showing me a picture or recalling a particular event or place, interviewees made me question the existing scholarship I was relying upon. In other instances, although recollections or findings seemed to perfectly fit within mainstream narratives, my point of view was nevertheless destabilised or invited to take notice of a larger context and a longer time span. To me, these moments of truth, in Spadaro's words, represent an invitation to 'find more imaginative ways of connecting micro and macro levels',<sup>25</sup> knowing that 'a change of scale might lead to a change of question and of explanation'.<sup>26</sup>

### Between Emporia and Imperium: A Jewish Almanac

A handwritten annotation on the letter says 'April 1936': the *Senatore del Regno d'Italia* (Senator of the Kingdom of Italy) Achille Loria,<sup>27</sup> a university professor of political economy and an Italian Jew, was writing to Gabriele Raccah, a Jew from Tripoli, to express his appreciation for what he considered 'un'opera meritevole', a meritorious work. In Senator Loria's view, Raccah had the great virtue of having collected and made public 'i nomi di quegli ebrei tripolini, che si acquistarono un nome onorevole nei campi di battaglia del pensiero' (the names of those Tripolitania Jews who gained their respectability on the battlefield of the intellect).<sup>28</sup> In so doing, continued Loria, Raccah had dispersed the prejudice that the 'correligionari dell'altra sponda [fossero] esclusivamente dediti ai miseri traffici e digiuni di ogni luce intellettuale' (the fellow Jews of the other shore were merely interested in trading and lacked any intellectual light).<sup>29</sup>

The 'opera meritevole' Senator Loria was referring to was probably Raccah's 'Lunario ebraico libico' (Libyan Jewish Almanac) or, given the discrepancy in dates between the letter (1936) and the 'Lunario' (1937), an earlier draft of it.<sup>30</sup> Loria himself had contributed to the almanac by providing Raccah with useful information about the life of some Italian Jewish senators mentioned in the publication. The almanac was published in Tripoli and written in Italian. The three dates printed on the cover—'5698' according to the Jewish calendar, '1937' and 'XV' according to the fascist calendar—represented very well the heterogeneity of its contents. Just by looking at the daily entries for the month of March, we gain indeed a clear picture of how Raccah's almanac combined the most diverse actors and events taken from Jewish history, both local and international, as well as Italian history: from Mussolini's visit to the Jewish quarters of Tripoli in March 1937 to the nomination in March 1904 of Edoardo Arbib—a Jew of Libyan descent and a fervent Garibaldian—to the *Senatore del Regno d'Italia*; from the passing away in Florence of Rabbi Margulies—recalled for having written about Tripolitania Jews—to the prayers the community raised on 15 March 1912 in the main synagogue of Tripoli to thank God for having saved the life of the king and queen of Italy from attack. Cultural and social life of the local Jewish community was also recorded. Raccah mentioned the establishment of the charitable association 'Lavoro e virtù' in Tripoli in 1912 by Miss Bianca Nunes Vais Arbib and the participation of the local Maccabi team in the Maccabiah Games in Palestine in 1935.

Yet, whose prejudice was Senator Loria referring to in his letter to Raccah? That of Italian society in general towards the Jews—as the final lines of the letter seem to hint at—following the mounting antisemitism in Italy under the fascist regime? Or was the habit of depicting Libyan Jews as only 'dediti ai miseri traffici e digiuni di ogni luce intellettuale' (merely interested in trading and lacking any intellectual light) a prejudice to be found among Italian Jews, something the senator might have become aware

of from the Jewish Italian press or simply in conversation with his fellow Jews in Italy?

In December 1912, the Jewish community of Tripoli, and later that of Benghazi, was officially incorporated into the Comitato delle Università Israelitiche Italiane, the union of the Jewish communities of Italy. This was anything but a smooth process, as Renzo De Felice underlines, with the Italian rabbinic authorities lamenting the 'misoneismo intransigente della grande maggioranza dei numerosissimi rabbini indigeni [che] hanno in orrore tutte le novità della civiltà europea e in ogni rabbino italiano, chiunque sia, vedono qualche cosa di peggio che un riformatore, un distruttore addirittura' (the uncompromising misoneism of the majority of the indigenous rabbis, who despise all novelties brought by the European civilisation and who see in every Italian rabbi, no matter who he is, something worse than a reformer, even a destroyer).<sup>31</sup>

In July 1913, from the pages of the *Il Corriere Israelitico*, the Italian Jewish intellectual Dante Lattes expressed his disappointment at the little interest demonstrated by Italian Jewish institutions in the case of the Jews of Salonico (Thessaloniki). He expressed harsh criticism of these institutions, which were guilty of being, in his view,

giovenilmente soddisfatto delle proprie imprese che daranno perfino un rabbino italiano ai barbari giudei della Libia redenta' (childishly satisfied with their own enterprises to the extent that they will appoint an Italian rabbi to the Barbarian Jews of the liberated Libya).<sup>32</sup>

However, the prejudice might also have been that of Italian Jews who lived in Libya and associated more with the Italian colonial elite than with the local Jewish population. Historian De Felice identified the social and cultural cleavages between Jews of Italian descent and local, indigenous Jews as the crucial tensions characterising the collective identity of the Jewish population in Libya during the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, this attitude lasted long and still reverberates in personal recollection of Libyan Jews of Italian descent.<sup>33</sup>

Actually, as we learn from the introduction to the 'Lunario ebraico' from its very author, Gabriele Raccah's aim was 'to dispel the clouds that thickened in the course of the years, around the past of local [Libyan] Jews'.<sup>34</sup> Raccah was referring to the scant attention that eminent scholars of Jewish studies in Europe and Israel, such as Théodore Reinach, Heinrich Graetz and Josef Kastein, had paid to the history of Jews from Libya. In his 'Histoire des Israelites' (1885), Raccah noted, Reinach had devoted only a few words to the Jews of Tripolitania, defining them as 'being merchants in the port cities and nomadic in the interior'.<sup>35</sup> His almanac, it was Raccah's hope, would have undoubtedly demonstrated that Libyan Jews had also produced 'valiant *gaonim* [sages], theologians, poets, consuls, heroes'.<sup>36</sup>

Besides the almanac considered above, Raccah authored a series of publications that presented the story of different Jewish communities of Libya: Gharian, Zliten and Derna. In these publications, Raccah celebrated 'l'opera benefica fascista', the beneficial contribution of fascism, which, in his view, brought peace and security to the Jews of Zliten;<sup>37</sup> or praised Derna as a touristic destination, which had become, he added, even more attractive thanks to the attention of the governor Balbo.<sup>38</sup> Raccah's series was published in Florence in March 1938, only a few months before the promulgation of the 'Leggi razziali', the Italian racial laws, that would also reach Jews in the colonies.

Little is known about Gabriele Raccah. According to archival sources, in December 1934—the same year in which Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan were unified under the name of Libya—Raccah obtained a 'brevetto di spedizioniere doganale', a licence to act as customs agent. In 1952, we find him in Israel, in the transit camp for new immigrants Be'er Ya'akov, barrack no. 22. It is at this address that Halfalla Nahum, a prominent member of the Jewish elite in Tripoli, sent him a copy of some funerary inscriptions that Raccah had requested from him. Later, Raccah's name appears in two Israeli publications of 1960 devoted specifically to Libyan Jewry.<sup>39</sup>

Gabriele Raccah presents a polyhedric figure: a local Tripolitanian Jew, a customs agent who, in a time of profound political and social unrest (the first half of the twentieth century in Libya), read Reinach, Graetz and Slouschz. He followed the international debates on Jews and Judaism, had wide networks across the Mediterranean, and was eager to document and preserve the rabbinic tradition and production in Tripoli.<sup>40</sup>

From Raccah's writings, we gain important insights into the complex reality of who were the Jews in Libya. His publications are a tribute to a long history of Jewish presence in the country and its wide networks across the Mediterranean. At the same time, they represent a reaction to foreign and Italian imaginaries—both in Italy and in Libya—about Libyan Jews. The almanac entries include many declensions of Libyan Jewish identities, spanning across times and different socio-cultural domains: sages and consuls, politician and writers, women and men, devoted to charity or part of the trading elite. The mobilities of these subjects speak of a Mediterranean interconnectivity or 'the matrix of the *emporion* (the trading settlements of antiquity)<sup>41</sup>: 'a decentralized network that transformed the sea itself into an hinterland'.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, his language echoed the Italian colonial rhetoric and the 'Imperium' matrix of the Italian imaginary, with the logic of coloniality firmly grounding the Italian-fascist project.<sup>43</sup> His idea of a long Libyan Jewish history, its roots stretching back into antiquity, resonated with the spirit of the imperial era in which the ancient Roman vestiges in Libya were rediscovered and reinvested in as the traces of glorious continuity in the service of Italian colonial, and later imperial, aspirations. Raccah's figure and works oscillate between these two matrixes as many Jews in Libya did.

Well before the 1911 military occupation by Italian forces, Jews in Libya served as mediators of Italian culture and played a role in conveying certain Italian imaginaries. In 1880, Eugenio Arbib, a local Jewish notable, established in Tripoli a club where the most influential members of European society, Italian in particular, would meet. Among the Jews who belonged to this high-society milieu, De Felice mentions Halfalla Nahum and Mario Nunes Vais as two of the most westernised and cultivated. 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.<sup>44</sup> 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 in the city's Jewish community. Some notables among 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 in Tripoli; of its 12 councillors, seven were Jews.

In 1875, Giannetto Paggi, a Jewish schoolteacher from Livorno, Italy, arrived in Tripoli. He had been invited by some rich Jewish families who were eager to provide their children with an Italian education.<sup>45</sup> One year later, Paggi opened the country's first non-Catholic Italian school for children of any religious background.<sup>46</sup> However, the school reforms of 1924 created a separate system of education, with schools for Muslim, Christian and Jewish pupils. As a result, the school, Pietro Verri, became fundamentally a Jewish educational institution.<sup>47</sup> And for their school picture, the Pietro Verri pupils used to gather prominently at the 'Monumento', not far from the school's premises.<sup>48</sup>

In their recent work on school photos as a genre of vernacular photography, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer invite us to consider how

states use school to bind students to group and national belonging, through civic and historical education but also through spoken and unspoken lessons in group and communal allegiance. [...] By bringing into focus the subordination of individuality to group membership and incorporation into a social and civic assemblage, school pictures viscerally convey the desire, but often also the reluctance, to belong to the group.<sup>49</sup>

Around both the subjects, the pupils of the Pietro Verri school, and its stage, the 'Monumento', different concretions of Italian imaginaries among Jews in and from Libya materialise. The 'Monumento' functions as a stage for a performance of a collective allegiance symbolised by the children doing the fascist salute. It also reminds us of the fact that the very existence of this school picture and of the school itself was bound to another performance of collective allegiance: that of Jewish families—of more or less long

Italian descent—who were eager to offer their children a modern, Italian education. This initiative expanded to include not only the offspring of Italian Jewish families living in Libya or Italianised, well-off Jewish families from Libya, but also children coming from local families of much lower economic background, those who, to recall Raccah's intellectual battle, were prejudicially conceived of as only 'dediti ai miseri traffici e digiuni di ogni luce intellettuale' (merely interested in trading and lacking any intellectual light).

Some years later, other collective performances around the 'Monumento' took place: in May 1948, the establishment of the State of Israel was celebrated at the monument's feet and in the square in front of it. A few months later, Jews gathered en masse to greet the Israeli emissaries of the Jewish Agency: the British authorities had officially allowed the migration of Jews from Libya to Israel, the 'Aliyah'. The picture of Jews waving banners in Hebrew, celebrating the new state and later greeting the emissaries, became emblematic of what is widely considered the major turning point in the modern history of Jews in Libya. Around this event, and again symbolically around this monument, the image of another collective allegiance developed and crystallised: the image of a Jewish community willing to fulfil its religious and national aspirations.<sup>50</sup> What did it see and hear from the people gathered at its feet? Why did they decide to leave? Or to stay? It was an important moment and they wanted to catch every single word of Yitzhak Rafael, the emissary of the Jewish Agency who visited Tripoli in July 1949 when some thousand Jews had already left for Israel.<sup>51</sup> They came to hear what their destiny might be. Some of them had already travelled to Palestine before the state was established and, as they could see, life there was not so easy. The same kind of news came from relatives already living in Israel, and men were discussing that, murmuring among themselves, their whispering merging with the enthusiastic voice of Rafael. Moreover, there was the problem of the sick: apparently, they were not allowed to travel to Israel, but then Rafael promised to bring everyone there, giving, however, preference to young healthy immigrants.<sup>52</sup> It was hard to take a decision for the whole family and yet it was vital to make up one's mind for the good of the family and the future of the children.

While the emissary from Israel was speaking, we can imagine that people pondered his words: there were convinced Zionists among the Jews in Tripoli and his speech, talking about Jerusalem, strengthened the belief as well as the fervour of the religious ones willing to reach the holy city. But there were also those who came to the 'Monumento' just because everybody was there, perhaps not yet willing to leave. Yet, the scars of the two pogroms against the Jews (on 4–7 November 1945 and 12–13 June 1948) in Tripoli and other parts of the country were still open, the sufferings caused by the Italian fascist regime—including deportation and forced labour—hard to forget, and then there were the disaffection with the British and the uncertainty about the future of Libya as an independent state.

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. Given these figures, the migration of about 30,400 Jews from Libya in a very short period—between 1949 and 1952—represents quite a unique phenomenon as nearly 90 per cent of Libya's Jewish community left for the State of Israel in the immediate aftermath of its establishment.

Yakov Haggiag-Liluf, one of the founders of the museum-heritage centre of the Libyan Jewry in Israel, stresses the religious and Zionist component of the departure.<sup>53</sup> He 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'. Maurice Roumani, a 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 experienced by the Libyan Jews in the colonial (Italian) and British authorities; the violence of the pogroms against the Jews in 1945 and 1948; the rising of a religious and nationalist fervour among the Muslim population which led, according to him, to widespread antisemitism; and only to a lesser extent, ideological convictions.<sup>54</sup> If according to Haggiag-Liluf, Libyan Jews left for Israel because of their deep Zionist commitment, in Roumani's view they left under the pressure of economic and political factors, both internal and external to the country.

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. It was precisely while listening to the personal stories of Jews who remained in the country in the 1940s that I realised how interesting and illuminating is the question of their non-departure. Listening to individual trajectories that challenge any linear interpretation of this migratory phenomenon represented a moment of truth, to borrow Spadaro's expression. Why, then, did people decide not to leave Libya? How is it that they felt they could remain, while the majority of their fellow Jews had already left?

De Felice defines the Jews that remained in Libya as the most 'Italianised' and the richest of the community, who did not want to leave behind their properties and assets. However, of what exactly did De Felice's reference to Italianness consist? As I observed during my research,<sup>55</sup> Jews' affinity and identification with Italian culture in Libya intensified after 1952, when Italian colonialism officially ended. This led 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.<sup>56</sup> 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 and leisure activities.

Libyan Jews I interviewed in fact considered and defined themselves as 'Italians' in different ways and to different extents, depending on multiple factors such as social and economic conditions, as well as personal life trajectories. In general, however, their definition is always constructed in relationship to 'something' and to 'somebody'. This 'comparative trait' in the definition of 'who' and 'what' was Italian struck my attention since the very first interview I conducted,<sup>57</sup> and it provides us an example of the need to 'zoom the picture in' and see things from a micro-level perspective.

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. According to her recollections however, everything at home was Italian: books, music, newspapers, 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 and then they used Judeo-Arabic. To my question whether the family had Arab-Muslim friends, Mirella answers 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 Italian, I mean really Italian...and we were friends with them because the school builds a strong connection, the school experience binds people together.<sup>58</sup>

Further in the interview, Mirella explains her expression 'real Italian' by saying that she meant schoolmates whose family origins were from Italy, even if they themselves were not born in Italy. In this way, she establishes a different degree of being Italian, determined by factors that did or did not depend on the will of the person: she is not a 'real Italian' since her family has not Italian origins, but she can consider herself Italian because of the cultural and social world in which she is immersed.

For the interviewees born between the 1940s and 1950s and whose families did not emigrate during the great Aliyah, sharing their daily life with Italian and Maltese classmates became more and more common, starting from nursery school. To the linguistic element, an element we find also in younger generations, we have to add the element of the social relations: the interviewees born between the 1940s and 1950s live in a social environment



much more Italian. Italians are not only the classmates but the teachers as well.<sup>59</sup> They were part of those about 20,000 Italians who remained in Libya after the official end of the Italian colonialism and continued to run their business and perform their professions. In other socio-economic spheres, we assist to a progressive intensification of the daily contact between Jewish families and Italians, which contributed in strengthening a 'sense of Italianness' among the Jews.

Jewish families in Tripoli, especially middle and upper class, used to have Jewish personnel coming from the Hara (the Jewish quarters in the old city), to their house for cleaning and cooking. Since the majority of the (poor) population of the Hara had left for Israel, Jewish families were obliged to hire more and more Italian housemaids to perform different tasks: babysitting, cleaning, cooking and ironing. Many ladies, for instance, recall 'their Italian lady who came once a week to iron'. However, the warmest and most widespread recollections concern the Italian seamstresses who worked regularly for Jewish families at their homes. Ladies recall the seamstress (very often they still recall her name) who arrived with the latest fashion catalogues from Italy: they looked at the catalogues together, and then a model would be chosen and the seamstress, helped by the ladies themselves and their daughters, would spend entire days sewing in these Jewish families: sharing meals, chats, gossip, we can imagine. In the family album of a Libyan lady, I found a picture of Sophia Loren, as if she were part of the family. As an interviewee put it, it was Italian popular culture in all its multiplicity that inhabited more and more the daily life of Jews in Libya, to the point that to describe his 'sense of Italianness' the interviewee affirms: 'When we arrived to Italy [in 1967], we knew the Italian national anthem as well as all the songs by Tenco and Morandi [two very popular Italian singers]'.<sup>60</sup>

As we approach the conclusion of this chapter, we can say that the affiliation of Jews in Libya with Italians and Italian culture was a trait that stretched its roots before the beginning of Italian colonisation, and yet this phenomenon intensified after its official end. This was due to the demographic changes that occurred in the community with the mass migration of the 1940s, but also as a result of wider transformation in the postcolonial Libyan society at large. By 'zooming the picture in', I argue, we can gain precious insights on the processes that lead to larger transformations within history and society. We can get, in Alessandro Portelli's words, 'not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believe they were doing, and what they now think they did',<sup>61</sup> that is the individual subjectivity. Around the 'Monumento', I experienced moments of truth that destabilised existing narratives about and representations of collective Jewish imaginaries.

Yet, the 'Monumento ai caduti' features not only as a meaningful stage but also as an agent that suggests further routes down which the research questions should be pursued. Were we able to stretch our imaginative effort,

we could perhaps have heard other voices not far from the 'Monumento'. We could imagine Muslim Arabs, Italians, Maltese looking at that tremendous gathering, probably trying to make sense of what was happening. The legal 'Aliyah' started in February 1949 and lasted until the end of 1953. During those years, the destiny of the country changed dramatically: the United Kingdom of Libya was proclaimed on 24 December 1951 as a result of international negotiations with Idris as-Senussi as King and Mahmud al-Muntasir as Prime minister. However, the path to building a national community was fraught with challenges.

The general elections called soon after the declaration of independence and completed on 19 February 1952 were heavily influenced by Great Britain, which had interests in supporting pro-Western government candidates and preventing the Tripolitanian National Congress—the opposition party led by Bashir al-Sa'dawi and supported by King Fu'ad and the Egyptian government—from winning the elections.<sup>62</sup> And indeed the government obtained the majority in parliament, and the defeat of the National Congress 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 22 the headquarters of the National Congress party were raided. Bashir al-Sa'dawi, with his brother, nephew and immediate followers was expelled.<sup>63</sup>

If Jewish families were anxious about their future, the Arab ones, no less than the Italian or Maltese, also had reasons to worry about what the new political situation would bring about. The social unrest which followed the general elections was not a good sign for the country. And indeed, independent Libya remained deeply divided and the image of a Libyan nation never developed into a concrete reality.

These voices, however, are still silent, and my own research is not an exception to that. And yet, if we aim at exploring the relationship between Libya and Italy including the 'objective conditions and subjective categories'<sup>64</sup> of being 'minorities' and 'majorities' in a given social and political space, we should strive to include them, with all their power to produce 'moments of truth'.

#### Notes

1 'Tripoli...Tripoli...tripoli...: all our conversations are full with this name, so dear to us all. And yet, how was it, what did it represent, why did we all love it, this little homeland of our?'

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- 7 Massimiliano Munzi, *La decolonizzazione del passato. Archeologia e politica in Libia dall'amministrazione alleata al regno di Idris* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2004) 89.
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ITALY AND LIBYA

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