

---

**“They crossed the sea on dry land”. The Jews of Libya  
in Italian Displaced Persons camps and the international refugee regime  
in the aftermath of the Second World War (1948-1949)\***

**Chiara Renzo\*\***

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 significantly reduced the number of Jewish displaced persons in Italy’s DP camps. However, it also marked the beginning of an unexpected movement of some eight thousand Jews who, between 1948 and 1949, travelled to Italy from Libya, seeking international assistance to resettle in Israel. This article explores the reasons for which the Jews of Libya illegally attempted to reach Italy’s DP camps, the role Jewish and Zionist organisations played in this process, and the reaction of international humanitarianism to the ensuing emergency. It argues that a Eurocentric vision, intrinsically rooted in the international refugee regime of that time, deprived the Jews fleeing from Libya of the status of displaced persons.

**Key words:** Jews of Libya, Displaced persons (DPs), DP camps, Italy, Second World

## **Introduction**

Statistics tend to conceal the realities of human tragedy behind a curtain of useful administrative data. There is a danger of forgetting the personal disasters — the misery of family torn apart, the uprooting of people from their homes, and the difficulties of living in strange and not always congenial communities, the frequent and pernicious condition of lethargy, so often an aftermath of the shock of sudden catastrophe.<sup>1</sup>

These are the opening lines of a very short paragraph written by Louise W. Holborn and called “human problems”. In the 1950s, Holborn was given the task to write the official history of the International Refugee Organization (IRO): between 1947 and 1951, the United Nations agency offered assistance to 1,037,404 refugees of the Second World War in Germany, Austria and Italy.<sup>2</sup>

\* Translated by Andrea Hajek (andrea Hajek@gmail.com)

\*\* Università degli Studi di Firenze, Dipartimento di Storia, Archeologia, Geografia, Arte, Spettacolo (SAGAS); renzo.chiara@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Louise W. Holborn, *International Refugee Organization: A Specialized Agency of The United Nations. Its History and Work, 1946-1952*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1956, pp. 190-91.

<sup>2</sup> On the refugee crisis in post-war Europe, see Malcolm J. Proudfoot, *European Refugees: 1939-52. A Study in Forced Population Movement*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press,

These were the last of seven million people who, at the end of the war, found themselves outside the borders of their countries and lacking the means to restart their lives, thus falling under the responsibility of the Allied army and, subsequently, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).<sup>3</sup> The latter was the United Nations' first humanitarian arm to enter into action at the end of the war with the aim of offering "relief and rehabilitation" to the populations that had been affected by the conflict, importing the new welfare model that was developed during the years of the New Deal.<sup>4</sup> By forging agreements with local governments and collaborating with various humanitarian voluntary organisations, until 1947 the UNRRA also endeavoured to manage and implement solutions for the refugee problem, considered an element of great instability that might jeopardise the democratisation project in post-war Europe.<sup>5</sup>

The above-mentioned refugee numbers could have been even higher if we consider the fact that, during the conflict, some thirty million people were deported, relocated, expelled or forced to leave their country.<sup>6</sup> Yet, not all of those who survived the six years of war were granted the right to assistance by the UNRRA and the IRO. From 1945 onwards, UNRRA and IRO officials found themselves interrogating, classifying, controlling and managing millions of people and, consequently, millions of personal experiences of a war that had torn Europe apart, distorted its geopolitical connotations and destroyed or separated countless families. To determine who was entitled to international assistance and who was not, the officials used manuals filled with definitions, clauses, exceptions, descriptions of ethnic or national groups, and chronologies of the conflict for each and every European country that had been affected by the war.

Although the criteria for entitlement were redefined and adapted over time, the only civilians considered eligible were those from UN member countries who, by the end of the war, were outside the borders of their home country for conflict-related reasons and willing, but unable, to repatriate or to find a

1956; Jacques Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-War World*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1953; Mark Wyman, *DP: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-1951*, Philadelphia, Balch Institute Press, 1989. For a broader analysis of the refugee crisis in the twentieth century, see: Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> On the history of the UNRRA, see George Woodbridge, *UNRRA: the history of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1950.

<sup>4</sup> On the development of international humanitarian work in the second post-war period, see Silvia Salvatici, *Nel nome degli altri. Storia dell'umanitarismo internazionale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2015, pp. 192-207.

<sup>5</sup> On the discussion of the UNRRA's intervention in Italy, see Silvia Salvatici, "Not enough food to feed the people". *L'UNRRA in Italia (1944-1945)*, "Contemporanea. Rivista di Storia dell'800 e del '900", 2011, n. 1, pp. 183-99.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the war as a "civilian experience" see Tony Judt, *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*, London, Vintage, 2005, pp. 13-40.

new homeland on their own account. The so-called “displaced persons” (hereafter DPs) were the sole exception: those who, during the war, had been persecuted for religious, racial or political reasons, and who were eligible for assistance from UN agencies regardless of their nationality. This long and endless screening process, which focused on the principle of nationality, mixed the need to identify and attribute responsibilities for the war — by distinguishing victims from executioners — with old prejudices against and new doubts about the refugees and the poor.

This article focuses on a group of nearly eight thousand Jews who, between 1948 and 1949, illegally crossed the Mediterranean Sea from Libya to the Italian Displaced Persons camps (hereafter DP camps), with the final aim of reaching Israel. The Libyan Jewish community, which between 1938 and 1943 had been brought to its knees by the Italian racial policy and by the war, had failed both to re-establish itself under British occupation and to be recognised as a minority in the political discourse on Libya’s independence. Moreover, the outbreak of anti-Jewish violence in 1945 and 1948 had greatly enhanced the difficulties of this community: encouraged also by Zionist organisations, it was forced to leave its country in the hope of emigrating to the State of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

Between 1945 and 1948, an annual average of 15-16,000 Jewish DPs — almost all from Eastern Europe — lived in DP camps and *hachsharot* located throughout the country. The camps were administered by the UNRRA and, subsequently, by the IRO,<sup>8</sup> in cooperation with a network of Jewish organisations; these included institutions founded locally by Jewish Palestinian soldiers of the Allied army, those of the political delegates of the Jewish Agency and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (hereafter JDC).<sup>9</sup> Scholarship has demonstrated that, after the liberation of the southern regions in 1943, Italy became a land of passage for thousands of refugees, mainly foreign

<sup>7</sup> On the Jews in Libya, see Renzo De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo. Gli ebrei nella Libia contemporanea tra colonialismo, nazionalismo arabo e sionismo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1978; Maurice M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia. Dalla coesistenza all’esodo*, Rome, Castelvechchi, 2015; Harvey E. Goldberg, *Libya*, in Reeva Spector Simon, Michael M. Laskier, Sara Reguer (eds.), *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 431-443.

<sup>8</sup> The *hachsharot* (singular *hachsharah*) were agricultural farms founded by various delegates of the Jewish Agency in the refugee camps, which were meant to accommodate and prepare the DPs for emigration to Palestine. Arturo Marzano, *Relief and rehabilitation of Jewish DPs after the Shoah: the Hachsharot in Italy (1945-48)*, “Journal of Modern Jewish Studies”, 2019, vol. 18, n. 3, pp. 314-329.

<sup>9</sup> The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is one of the largest Jewish humanitarian organisations. Founded in 1914 and based in New York, its aim was to centralise the aid to the Jewish communities affected by the First World War. On the JDC’s contribution during the Second World War, see Yehuda Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939-1945*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1981. For a more recent historical overview of its first 100 years, see Avinoam Patt e al., *The JDC at 100. A Century of Humanitarianism*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2019.

Jews who poured into the country in an attempt to leave Europe and often also reach British Palestine illegally.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, the Italian government's tacit support was essential for the accomplishment of the plans of the Mossad le-Aliyah Bet, the secret arm of the Jewish Agency that was responsible for organising the clandestine aliyah of the Jews who had survived the war.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, Italy played a far more limited role in the assistance and rehabilitation of foreign refugees; at the end of the war, the government mainly had to take responsibility for Italian displaced persons and refugees.<sup>12</sup> Even after the establishment of the State of Israel, Italy continued to be a preferred travel route for Jewish migrants: thousands of DPs, coming even from German and Austrian camps, began their trip towards Israel, the United States, Australia, Canada or Latin America in Italian ports. Nevertheless, just as the assistance programmes for Jewish DPs in Italy were about to be reduced, a sudden wave of Jewish migrants from Libya forced Jewish humanitarian organisations to review their mission in response to this emergency.

In 1948, Libya counted 32,670 Jews, of whom 21,000 lived in Tripoli, 4,500 in Cyrenaica and the rest in coastal towns and villages.<sup>13</sup> On 27 January 1949, shortly before the UK de facto recognised the State of Israel, the British military administration officially authorised the legal emigration of Libyan Jews directly from Tripoli to the port of Haifa. Over the next three years, some thirty thousand four hundred Jews "made aliyah". The JDC estimated that, from the foundation of the State of Israel until that moment, about two and

<sup>10</sup> It is not possible to thoroughly examine the refugee issue in Italy here, but various publications have explored different aspects of this phenomenon in depth. For a general analysis of the refugee crisis in Italy between 1945 and 1951 see Silvia Salvatici, *Between National and International Mandates: Displaced Persons and Refugees in Postwar Italy*, "Journal of Contemporary History", 2014, vol. 49, n. 3, pp. 514-536; on the Jewish refugees, the organisations that dealt with them, and other aspects of their stay in Italian refugee camps, see Cinzia Villani, *Milano, via Unione 5: un centro di accoglienza per displaced persons ebrei nel secondo dopoguerra*, "Studi Storici", vol. 50, n. 2, 2009, pp. 333-370; Martina Ravagnan, *I campi Displaced Persons per profughi ebrei stranieri in Italia (1945-1950)*, "Storia e Futuro", n. 30, 2012; Chiara Renzo, "Our Hopes Are Not Lost Yet." *The Jewish Displaced Persons in Italy: Relief, Rehabilitation and Self-understanding (1943-1948)*, "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", 2017, n.12; Federica di Padova, *Rinascere in Italia. Matrimoni e nascite nei campi per Displaced Persons ebrei 1943-1948*, "Deportate, esuli, profughe", vol. 1, n. 36, 2018, pp. 1-19.

<sup>11</sup> The aliyah, Hebrew for "to ascend", refers to the Jewish immigration to Palestine and, after 1948, to the State of Israel. For a discussion of the Italian government's position on the illegal immigration of Jewish refugees to Palestine, see Mario Toscano, *La «Porta di Sion»: l'Italia e l'immigrazione clandestina ebraica in Palestina, 1945-1948*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1990; Idith Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power: the Holocaust Survivors and the Emergence of Israel*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1998, pp. 17-51.

<sup>12</sup> Silvia Salvatici, *Between National*, cit; Giacomo Canepa, *Rifare gli italiani. Profughi e progetti per il welfare (1944-47)*, in "Meridiana", N. 86, 2016, pp. 57-78.

<sup>13</sup> These figures exclude the Libyan Jews of foreign nationality. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit., p. 202.

a half thousand Libyan Jews migrated to Israel via Italy.<sup>14</sup> Having until then devoted all its energies to assisting the Jews in the DP camps of Germany, Austria and Italy, as well as helping the European Jewish communities face the difficult reconstruction process of the post-war period, the JDC was forced not only to expand its mission in Libya (and throughout the whole of North Africa) but also to manage an unexpected flow of men, women and children arriving in Italy in the hope of receiving assistance as DPs fleeing their country, as had previously happened to their European co-religionists.

Nonetheless, the transition of the Libyan Jews in the Italian DP camps did not end when the UK authorised emigration from Tripoli to Israel; between January and September 1949, another 5,400 people took this route.<sup>15</sup> Scholarship has only partially studied this case, which is numerically insignificant in the European scenario of the refugee crisis of the second post-war period, discussing it almost exclusively as a marginal aspect of the exodus of Libyan Jews to Israel after 1948.<sup>16</sup>

This article aims to investigate and question the consequences of anti-Jewish persecution during the Second World War as well as the post-war displacement of Jews beyond their conventional boundaries.<sup>17</sup> In doing so it takes inspiration from Peter Gatrell’s observations in his essay *Refugees — what’s wrong with history?* Wondering why historians have ignored the experiences of refugees for so long, in this essay Gatrell argued that we must rely on historical investigations to fully understand the condition of being a refugee (“refugeedom”), considered as “a matrix involving administrative practices, legal norms, social relations, and refugees’ experiences, and how these have been represented in cultural terms”.<sup>18</sup> Gatrell therefore urged historians to avoid “piling up a series

<sup>14</sup> American Joint Distribution Committee Country Directors’ Conference Paris, 1 October 1952, in Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (hereafter AJDC), New York, G45-54/4/22/4/NA.58 North Africa: Country Directors Conference Paris 1952.

<sup>15</sup> These data are drawn from quarterly reports provided by the JDC, which estimates the transit of 1,107 people between January and March 1949, 1,335 in April-June 1949, and 2,393 in July-September 1949. This last group — referred to as “North Africans” by the JDC — included another 659 Jews who were sent to Marseille for medical treatment. Ajdc activities in Italy, January-March 1949, 23 June 1949; Ajdc activities in Italy, April-June 1949, 29 August 1949; Ajdc activities in Italy, July-September 1949, 23 November 1949, in AJDC, NY AR194554/4/44/2/625, Italy, General, 1949.

<sup>16</sup> A short reference can be found in M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit., p. 200.

<sup>17</sup> On the effects and consequences of the Second World War, the racial laws and anti-Semitism in North Africa, see the recent publication by Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (ed.), *The Holocaust and North Africa*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2019. For a study of Jewish displacement in a non-European context, see Atina Grossman, *Jewish Refugees in Soviet Central Asia, Iran and India. Lost Memories of Displacement, Trauma, and Rescue*, in Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Atina Grossmann (eds.), *Shelter from the Holocaust. Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2017, pp. 185-218.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Gatrell, *Refugees - What’s Wrong with History?*, “Journal of Refugee Studies”, June 2017, vol. 30, Issue 2, pp. 170-189.

of regionally differentiated and disconnected crises and responses”, rather paying attention to the connections between historical circumstances, the refugees’ trajectories and the system governing the refugee crisis. This article, then, examines the circumstances and the events that pushed the Jews to leave Libya, describes the humanitarian organisations’ response to their arrival in the Italian DP camps and, finally, questions the position of Libyan Jews within the system that governed the refugee crisis at the time. By studying this migration flow from Libya to Italy and from Italy to Israel, the article aims to further challenge the idea that the Second World War was an exclusively European experience, demonstrating that this Eurocentric perspective was intrinsically rooted in the international refugee regime in place at the time.

### **The reasons for fleeing: the experience of the Jews of Libya between 1938 and 1948**

The enactment of the Italian anti-Jewish legislation of 1938 marked a turning point also in the lives of the Jews residing in Italian Libya. Initially, Italian citizens were affected by prohibitions and restrictions aimed at their total exclusion, whereas foreign Jews who had obtained Italian citizenship after 1919 were expelled.<sup>19</sup> Although anti-Jewish legislation in Italian Libya did not run parallel with that in Italy, it damaged social life by enhancing the differences between the Italian, Jewish and Arab citizens living in the colony.<sup>20</sup>

The situation of local Jewry significantly worsened with Italy’s entry into the war on 10 June 1940, the start of military operations in North Africa and the ensuing involvement of new political actors on the Libyan scene (i.e. the British and the Germans). First of all, in Libya the Jews of enemy nationality — or those considered dangerous in the context of war — were interned, as was happening in Italy. In reality, internment was implemented to a moderate degree, at least initially, first in the Tagiura camp and then in that of Buerat El Hsun, in the Sirtica.<sup>21</sup> Although the newly appointed governor of Libya, Ettore Bastico,<sup>22</sup> ordered further measures for the expulsion of foreign Jews,

<sup>19</sup> In 1934, Tripoli counted 510 Jewish citizens of Italian nationality, 1,260 French Jews, 310 British Jews and 80 Jews of other nationalities. M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit., p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> De Felice identified two (interconnected) factors that determined “the very peculiar course of racial policies in Libya”, which at least initially saved the Libyan Jews from the racial laws: on the one hand, Italo Balbo’s role as governor of Italian Libya and, on the other hand, the Jews’ economic impact on the colony. According to De Felice, Balbo managed to prevent the extension of the measures issued to Italian Jews to the Libyans by means of a series of local economic and political measures. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., pp. 260-265.

<sup>21</sup> R. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., pp. 265-66.

<sup>22</sup> When Italo Balbo died in an airplane incident in June 1940, Rodolfo Graziani took over as general governor of Italian Libya. Following the crushing defeat by the British army less than a year later, in March 1941 Graziani was replaced by Italo Gariboldi, who — owing to disagree-

the implementation of this plan was slowed down by the military operations on North African territory in 1940 and the temporary conquest of Cyrenaica by the British between December 1940 and April 1941, and then again between November 1941 and April 1942.<sup>23</sup>

After two years of war, when the Italians reconquered the Cyrenaica, the anti-Jewish measures were extended and applied more systematically, developing along multiple lines and ultimately affecting four groups. The first transfers concerned the French Jews who, in agreement with the Vichy government, were interned in concentration camps established in Tunisia, La Marsa, Agareb and Gabes. In August 1942, a report by the Police of Italian Africa (Polizia dell’Africa Italiana, hereafter PAI) stated that 2,542 French citizens — 681 Muslims and 1,861 Jews from Libya — had been interned in Tunisia.<sup>24</sup> In November 1942, following the Italian-German occupation of Tunisia, these concentration camps fell under Nazi control and the internees — suffering from malnutrition, lack of hygiene and Allied bombing raids, which killed 50 people — were only freed after the Allied landing in April 1943.<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, the Fascist government worked towards the expulsion and the internment in Italy of 870 British Jews living in Libya, who departed mainly in the period running up to April 1942, when over four hundred people were embarked on cargo ships heading towards Naples. Once in Naples, 77 men were sent to the Bagno a Ripoli camp, 51 people (mainly families) to that of Civitella della Chiana and 107 to Civitella del Tronto.<sup>26</sup> The arrival of the Libyan Jews, many of whom had typhus, worsened the already precarious situation in the three Italian camps, which became overcrowded and at risk from a health and hygiene point of view.<sup>27</sup> When the armistice was signed on 8 September 1943, these camps came under the control of the German occupation and the Italian Social Republic; in 1944, as they were about to be closed,

ments with Erwin Rommel — only remained in office until July. Ettore Bastico therefore held Balbo’s position until the British occupation of Libya in 1943.

<sup>23</sup> Jens Hoppe, *The Persecution of Jews in Libya Between 1938 and 1945: An Italian Affair?*, in A. Boum, S. Abrevaya Stein (eds.), *The Holocaust and North Africa*, cit., pp. 58-60.

<sup>24</sup> M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit. p. 55; J. Hoppe, *The Persecution of Jews in Libya*, cit., pp. 61-63.

<sup>25</sup> J. Hoppe, *The Persecution of Jews in Libya*, cit., pp. 61-63

<sup>26</sup> We do not know the exact number of British Jews that was deported to the German camps. Liliana Picciotto, *Gli ebrei in Libia sotto la dominazione italiana*, in Martino Contu, Nicola Melis, Giovannino Pinna (eds.), *Ebraismo e rapporti con le culture del Mediterraneo nei secoli XVIII-XX: atti del Convegno storico internazionale*, Villacidro (Cagliari), 12-13 April 2002, Giuntina, Florence, 2003, pp. 96, 102. On the internment of the Libyan Jews in Tuscany, see Valeria Galimi, *L'internamento in Toscana*, in Enzo Collotti (ed.), *Razza e fascismo. La persecuzione contro gli ebrei in Toscana (1938-1943)*, Rome, Carocci, 1999, pp. 524-538.

<sup>27</sup> On fascist civilian internment in Italy and for a general discussion of the living conditions in the internment camps of Bagno a Ripoli, Civitella della Chiana and Civitella del Tronto, see Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *I campi del duce L'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista (1940-1943)*, Turin, Einaudi, 2004, especially pp. 182-185 and 210-211.

the Anglo-Libyan Jews were moved to the concentration camp of Fossoli di Carpi, from whence they were deported to the Aufenthaltslager of Bergen Belsen, Germany.<sup>28</sup> Here, the Anglo-Libyan Jews who were deported from Italy were transferred as “bargaining chips” to the internment camps in Germany (Liebenau and Biberach) and France (Vittel), where the Allied forces eventually liberated them. Although nearly all survived, the Anglo-Libyan Jews did not manage to repatriate to Libya until September 1945, that is, three years and eight months after leaving their homes.<sup>29</sup>

The third group of Jews to be interned was that composed of 2,584 Italian and Libyan Jews who resided in Cyrenaica; they were accused of having supported an enemy country during the first and second British occupations of the region.<sup>30</sup> Like the British Jews mentioned above, these Jews were deported in 1942: the PAI moved them to the internment camp of Giado (nowadays Jadu) in Tripolitania, where nearly six hundred of them died of malnutrition and typhus in the second half of January 1943, before the British 8th Army arrived.<sup>31</sup> When they were liberated, a further 500 prisoners were immediately hospitalised; the evacuation of the camp itself was only completed in October 1943, precisely because of the typhus epidemic.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, in June 1942, the fourth group affected by anti-Jewish measures was interned; it was composed of male Jews (Italian and Libyan) aged between 18 and 45 years, who were forced to work until the end of that year. Some three thousand Jews were interned in the forced labour camp of Sidi Azaz (nowadays Sidi Said), 350 of whom were next moved to that of Buqbuq to build roads connecting Libya and Egypt.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> The Aufenthaltslager (a holding or residence camp) of Bergen Belsen was established in April 1943 and remained active until December 1944; it served to imprison Jews who were not meant to be killed but released and used as exchange objects because of their peculiar characteristics. For this purpose, 405 Jews were deported from Italy to the Aufenthaltslager of Bergen Belsen. Liliansa Picciotto, *Ebrei turchi, libici e altri, deportati dall'Italia a Bergen Belsen*, “La rassegna mensile di Israel”, September-December 2010, vol. 76, n. 3, pp. 243-259.

<sup>29</sup> L. Picciotto, *Ebrei turchi, libici e altri, deportati dall'Italia a Bergen Belsen*, cit., p. 255.

<sup>30</sup> In February 1942, Attilio Teruzzi (Minister of Italian Africa and a close collaborator of Mussolini) notified both Bastico and Ugo Cavallaro (Army Chief of Staff) of Mussolini’s decision to deport and gather in a concentration camp in Tripolitania all the Jews of the Cyrenaica. M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit., p. 52, R. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., pp. 273-274.

<sup>31</sup> On the internment camp of Giado, see Jens Hoppe, “Giado” in Geoffrey Megargee (ed.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, Vol. 3, *Camps and Ghettos Under European Regimes Aligned with Nazi Germany*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2018, pp. 528-529.

<sup>32</sup> J. Hoppe, *The Persecution of Jews in Libya*, cit., pp. 63-64.

<sup>33</sup> On the forced labour camps of Sidi Azaz and Buqbuq, see Jens Hoppe, “Sidi Azaz” in G. Megargee (ed.), *The USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, cit., pp. 529-530; Jens Hoppe, “Buk Buk [Buq-buq]” in G. Megargee (ed.), *The USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, cit., pp. 527-528. M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei in Libia*, cit., p. 58; R. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., pp. 275-276.



In January 1943, that is, a little over a month after the promulgation of the law that extended the racial legislation already in force in Italy to the whole of Libya, Tripoli's civil authorities handed the city over to the British General Bernard L. Montgomery. When the Allied arrived, the Libyan Jewish community was in an extremely precarious and uncomfortable situation: the result of the dismemberment provoked first by Italian racial and colonial policies, then by the war and the Italian-German alliance. Upon their return, the former prisoners and deportees — malnourished and suffering from serious infectious diseases — had to rebuild every aspect of community life, their homes and businesses having been looted or destroyed. However, the presence of the Jewish soldiers from Palestine who had joined the British army as volunteers marked a turning point.<sup>34</sup> In fact, they played a key role in mediating between the Jews and the British military administration in Libya, in particular with regard to the re-opening of community institutions, Jewish schools and pre-existing social clubs, especially in Tripoli. Yehiel Duvdevani, one of the Jewish soldiers of the Palestinian units active in Libya in that period, recalled the situation as follows:

Instinctively, I guess, and without any conceptual or political preparation, in Libya we drew a conclusion that later took on a tangible expression: to eliminate the diaspora. That is, we saw the Jews coming home without a leadership, without educators for their children, without rabbis, without *yeshivot*, almost without Jewish schools, without Jewish teachers [...] and talking to each other we came to the conclusion that these Jews had no meaning and no national logic that could save them in that desert. Everything had to be done to eliminate this diaspora and to take it to Eretz Israel. So we started working on the Jews in Libya: a very important economic support, on the one hand; schools, pioneering movements and attempts to evacuate Jews to Eretz Israel, on the other.<sup>35</sup>

Although the Zionist movement had been active in Libya ever since the 1920s, when the Libyan Jewry adhered to the Italian Zionist Federation, only very few decided to emigrate to Palestine before 1943.<sup>36</sup> In those years, the *Yishuv*

<sup>34</sup> On the Jews from Palestine who voluntarily joined the Allied army, see Yoav Gelber, *The Meeting Between the Jewish Soldiers from Palestine Serving in the British Army and the She'erit Hapletah*, in Gutman Israel, Saf Avital (eds.), *Sherith Hapletah, 1944-1948: Rehabilitation and Political Struggle, Proceedings of the Sixth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference (Jerusalem, October 1985)*, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 1990, pp. 60-79; Morris Beckman, *The Jewish Brigade. An Army with Two Masters (1944-1945)*, Staplehurst, Spellmount, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> Interview (in Hebrew) with Yehiel Duvdevani, 16 November 1965, in Oral History Division of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (OHD), (4) 70, Ha-Brichah, 7'31"-11'46". Not to be confused with Baruch Duvdevani, a delegate of the Israeli government in Libya from March to December 1949.

<sup>36</sup> According to Roumani, prior to the birth of the State of Israel, the emigration from Libya had essentially been sporadic and only 500 Jews (mostly elderly people who wanted to spend the last years of their lives in Palestine) opted for the aliyah before 1943. M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit., p. 191. On Zionism in Libya see Rachel Simon, *The Social, Cultural and*

— in view of what was happening in Europe at the time — questioned its migration policy,<sup>37</sup> changing its parameters from a selective aliyah to a large-scale aliyah.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, the Jewish Agency started training and sending delegates (*schlichim*, singular *shaliach*) to the liberated areas of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, with the aim of coordinating the process of preparing candidates for the aliyah and organising their departures, challenging the limits on Jewish emigration imposed by the British Mandate in Palestine via the White Paper of 1939.

The first two *shlichim* were Yair Duer and Zeev Katz, who arrived undercover in Libya in September 1943. Of Syrian and Romanian origin, respectively, Duer and Katz were affiliated with the left-wing, secular kibbutz movement Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad and were sent to Libya by the Mossad le-Aliyah Bet.<sup>39</sup> Duer and Katz had to tackle numerous difficulties, which in fact compromised their plans, especially those relating to the aliyah. In the first instance, they were faced with a decreasing number of candidates for emigration: at least during the first year of British administration, Libya's economic life undoubtedly benefited from this situation, allowing for an almost rapid recovery that raised vain hopes of a return to normality.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, conscious of the fact that Zionist propaganda would both cause unrest locally and have repercussions on the British Mandate for Palestine, the British military administration denied entry to all delegates, educators or teachers from Palestine.<sup>41</sup> A final factor that negatively impacted on Duer and Katz's mission was the need to balance their membership in a secular movement with the religious observance among the majority of Libyan Jewry. Nonetheless, the two *schlichim* decided to invest their energies in the foundation of a Zionist youth movement that, by performing educational and recreational activities, would help to instil in the young Jews of Libya the idea of the aliyah and the Zionist principles of self-realisation (*hagshamah atzmit*) through agricultural work and kibbutz life. The first unit (*gar'in*) of young pioneers, called "Bikurim" (first fruits) settled in a *hachsharah* near Tripoli in June 1944, thanks to the support of a third *shaliach* who arrived in February 1944: Naftali Bar-Ghiora, affiliated with a reli-

*Political Impact of Zionism in Libya*, "Jewish Political Studies Review", Fall 1994, vol. 6, n. 3/4, pp. 127-133.

<sup>37</sup> The Hebrew *Yishuv* refers to the Jewish settlement and its institutions in Palestine before the State of Israel was founded.

<sup>38</sup> For a complete overview of the *Yishuv's* migratory policy in the context of war, see Dalia Ofer, *Escaping the Holocaust. Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939-1944*, New York&Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 199-217.

<sup>39</sup> Rachel Simon, *Schlichim from Palestine in Libya*, "Jewish Political Studies Review", Spring 1997, vol. 9, n. 1/2, p. 38. For a history of the kibbutz movement in the twentieth century, see Henry Near, *The Kibbutz Movement. A History*, voll. 1-2, Portland (OR), The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> R. Simon, *Schlichim*, cit., p. 38; R. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., pp. 285-290.

<sup>41</sup> R. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., p. 289.

gious kibbutz movement (Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Dati).<sup>42</sup> Before returning to Palestine in July 1944, Bar-Ghiora and Duer prepared the necessary infrastructure to facilitate the mass emigration of Libyan Jews and trained some local Jews to continue their work after their departure.<sup>43</sup>

No *shaliach* was sent to Libya in the next two years, but these years led to a break that became definitive with the pogroms of 1945. As the economic situation worsened and the Libyan national movement — which wanted the country to become independent — took hold, the Arabs’ attitude towards the local Jews changed: they started accusing the Jews of enriching themselves at the expense of the dramatic economic situation in Libya, which resulted in small yet repeated incidents. De Felice suggested that we must frame these episodes in a political context that was already in the process of changing, starting in 1943 when a number of pan-Islamic and nationalist groups began to exploit popular discontent and religious sentiment to gain consensus.<sup>44</sup> In July, certain anti-Jewish discourses by the *qadi* of the mosque of Homs and, in October, rumours that Jews had killed an Arab girl by throwing her into a well began to alarm the Jewish community and Arab leaders alike.<sup>45</sup> Yet, both were convinced that things would calm down if the economic situation improved. In early November 1945, several anti-Jewish incidents in Egypt were followed by a wave of violence in Tripoli. On 4 November, Zachino Habib — president of the local Jewish community — denounced the dangerous turn that the tensions between Arabs and Jews had taken in the country, but the British administration underestimated the situation. The fighting started that same day in various parts of Tripoli and spread to the neighbouring towns of Amrus, Tagiura, Zanzur, Zawia and Kussabat. What is known as the 1945 pogrom resulted in 130 deaths, 30 widows, 92 orphans, hundreds of wounded, whole families massacred and women raped.<sup>46</sup> The Jewish neighbourhoods were looted and destroyed, whereas two thousand people were forced to live in DP camps and about fourteen thousand needed full support to survive. According to the Jewish community, the occupation damages amounted to a total of 300 million lire.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> For an overview of the Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Dati movement, see Yossi Katz, *The Religious Kibbutz Movement and Its Credo, 1935-48*, “Middle Eastern Studies”, April 1995, vol. 31, n. 2, pp. 253-280.

<sup>43</sup> Katz was already back in Palestine by December 1943. R. Simon, *Schlichim*, cit., pp. 38-40.

<sup>44</sup> R. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., pp. 291-294.

<sup>45</sup> Qadi, from the Arab “judge”, is the office of the magistrate who administers justice according to Muslim canon law.

<sup>46</sup> M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit., pp. 82-88; For a general overview of people who were killed or went missing in the pogrom of 1945, see R. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., p. 345, note 20.

<sup>47</sup> R. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., pp. 295-297; on the responsibility, reactions and reparations of the British administration, see M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit., 86-90.

This violence marked a break with the past that propelled Libyan Jewry towards mass emigration to Palestine. A few months later, in 1946, the Mossad le-Aliyah Bet sent a new *shaliach* to Libya: Israel Gur, also known as “the uncle”. Following the model developed in Palestine by the clandestine resistance movements, Gur primarily devoted himself to the training of small defence groups (*haganah*) that obtained their weapons on the black market.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, by liaising with the European headquarters of the Mossad le-Aliyah Bet, Gur focused on organising the clandestine aliyah in an attempt to move individuals or small groups to DP camps in Italy and France, where they would receive assistance from Jewish aliyah organisations. Between 1946 and 1948, a few hundred Libyan Jews easily obtained visas to travel to Italy for business, health or study reasons in the *yeshivot* or vocational schools, but many more managed to reach their final destination in Palestine before Gur was forced to leave Libya in the first half of 1947.<sup>49</sup>

Immediately after the proclamation of the State of Israel, between 12 and 13 June 1948, Tripoli was again struck by violent anti-Jewish incidents.<sup>50</sup> This time, though, the self-defence training that the Libyan Jews had received from the *shlichim*, and especially from Gur, proved fundamental in limiting the damage. The Jews reacted to the attacks (similar to those of 1945) by driving the attackers away, while the police — on this occasion — intervened only a few hours after the violence began. The Jewish community of Tripoli eventually suffered 14 losses.<sup>51</sup> This incident was the tipping point of a chain of events and circumstances that changed the fortunes of Libyan Jewry forever. The anti-Jewish persecutions under the Italian government, the war in North Africa, the difficult recovery during the British military administration, the rise of Arab nationalism and the failure to be recognised as a minority in Libya’s independence process forced the Libyan Jews to make a choice: staying or leaving the country.

### **“The need for emigration and resettlement for these Jews is obvious”: the Jewish organisations and their assistance of the Libyan Jews in Italy**

The anti-Jewish violence of June 1948 pushed the JDC — which until then had focused its efforts on the Jewish communities in Europe and the Jewish DPs in the refugee camps of Germany, Austria and Italy — to intensify its assistance programmes for the Jewish communities in Libya, and more generally in

<sup>48</sup> R. Simon, *Schlichim*, cit., pp. 41-42; R. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., p. 318.

<sup>49</sup> M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit., pp. 199-201.

<sup>50</sup> R. De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, cit., pp. 319-332.

<sup>51</sup> M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit., pp. 91-97.

the whole of North Africa.<sup>52</sup> Already in 1945, the JDC guaranteed the Tripoli community a monthly grant of one million dollars that was distributed in the form of an individual subsidy, which was increased by five million dollars after June 1948. Nonetheless, the JDC’s representative in North Africa Hélène Cazès-Benatar announced the decision to set up its offices on the spot and to define a direct assistance plan for the Jews in Libya. Not without difficulties, Cazès-Benatar strove to form a local executive office. The Tripoli community had been debating this issue for some time without reaching an agreement when its former president, Ruben Hassan, offered to lead the JDC’s mission in Tripoli as a volunteer. Thus, three offices were established for the aliyah (one in Tripoli, one in Cyrenaica, and one in the rural areas surrounding the two regions), whereas canteen services, schools and care services for children, the elderly and the sick were enhanced; for this reason, the JDC further increased the budget to 25 million dollars per month.<sup>53</sup>

Starting in the second half of 1948, the situation of the Tripoli Jews became an object of discussion also in the Italian offices of the JDC; according to the latter, hundreds of Libyan Jews had entered the peninsula’s DP camps since the summer of that year. In the quarterly report of October-December 1948, the Director of JDC in Italy, Louis Horwitz, expressed his concern about new “infiltrators” from Tripoli: if at the end of November there were 350 of them, after about a month their number had almost doubled.<sup>54</sup>

The Jews arrived from Libya at a time in which the JDC planned to substantially reduce its programmes in Italy following the migration policies of the Israeli government, which in 1948 gave priority to the refugees held in the camps of Germany, Austria and Italy.<sup>55</sup> Yet, after visiting Libya several times and, especially, deeming it impossible for an independent Libyan state to guarantee the rights of the Jewish minority, the JDC officially expressed itself in favour of the Libyan Jews’ emigration:

It can hardly be said that a solution for this unfortunate Community can be found in the country of its origin. The need for emigration and resettlement for these Jews is obvious from the dark period of their sufferings and from the present miserable position in Tripolitania.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Robert Pilpel to Mr Robert S. Marcus, 3 September 1948, in AJDC, G 45-54/4/23/3/LY.16, Tripolitania: Jewish Community. 1947-1950, 1954.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Loeb and Troper to Dr. Joseph J. Schwartz, 12 May 1950, in AJDC, G 45-54/4/23/1/LY.1, Tripolitania: Audited Reports 1949-1954.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Louis D. Horwitz to Jacob Joslow, Subject, 15 February 1949, in AJDC, NY AR194554/4/44/2/625 Italy, General, 1949.

<sup>55</sup> For an analysis of Israeli migration policy in the early years of the State and the difficult process of absorbing immigrants, see Dvora Hacoen, *Immigrants in Turmoil. Mass Immigration to Israel and Its Repercussions in the 1950s and After*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> The Plight of the Tripolitanian Jews, 1 December 1948, in AJDC, G 45-54/4/23/4/LY.31, Tripolitania: Tripoli 1948-1949.

Other international Jewish organisations joined the JDC, including the Central British Fund (hereafter CBF),<sup>57</sup> one of the most active Jewish organisations in the assistance of the Jewish refugees since the 1930s. In a report dated January 1949, the CBF delegate Ben Segal — following a visit to Tripoli — contradicted the information that the British administration had disseminated on the alleged “good conditions” of the local Jewish community; he claimed that this idea was conditioned by the massive intervention of numerous charitable organisations that were active among the local Jews, which had no counterparts among the Arab population. Like Horwitz, Segal considered mass emigration the solution to the problem of the Libyan Jews and suggested that priority be given to children, whose proportion was “extraordinary”.<sup>58</sup> In his report, Segal observed that there were 250 children per 370 adults in the country’s rural areas:

I was impressed by the natural brightness and adaptability of the Jewish children, and I regard them as good pioneering material. The majority of Jewish parents will gladly allow their children to emigrate, largely in the hope that they will reach Israel.<sup>59</sup>

Segal furthermore mentioned that, in 1948, about sixty children had already travelled from Libya to Italy; here, the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (hereafter ORT) — a Jewish organisation specialised in vocational training and already active among the Jewish communities and the Jewish DPs in Europe — had previously organised educational programmes for 300 to 400 children aged 12 to 15 years. The CBF delegate reported that, in Libya, 2,000 applications instantly arrived for inclusion in the first group of 50 children who would have participated in the ORT programme and who would have left Tripoli on 16 January 1949. Segal concluded his report by recommending a large-scale (4,000-5,000) relocation of children and indicating Italy as the main evacuation country, where the infrastructures already in place for the European refugees would have guaranteed an adequate preparation and education for the aliyah.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, at the end of December 1948, the JDC already recorded the arrival in Italy of some hundred Jewish children from Tripoli, “healthy and happy children all of whom are anxious to go to Palestine”, and expected

<sup>57</sup> Nowadays known as the World Jewish Relief, the Central British Fund was founded in 1933 by a group of British Jews (including Anthony de Rothschild, Leonard G. Montefiore and Otto Schiff) in response to the refugee crisis arising from the anti-Semitic propaganda and persecutions in Germany.

<sup>58</sup> Letter from Harry Vitales to Paris, 6 February 1949, in AJDC, JER 44-52/4/4/1/JER.868, Middle East: Jews in Moslem Countries Reports 1947-1949.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Dr. Joseph Schwartz, 7 February 1949, in AJDC, G 45-54/4/23/3/LY.22, Tripolitania: Program Reports 1946-1954.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Dr. Joseph Schwartz, 7 February 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 60; Letter from Harry Vitales to Paris, 6 February 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 59.

that another group of some hundred minors would arrive very soon.<sup>61</sup> In this regard, James Rice — from the JDC’s Geneva office — informed Moses W. Beckelman (deputy chairman of the JDC’s European headquarters in Paris) that he had spoken to Mrs Lane from the IRO; the latter had reassured him that her agency would have taken on the responsibility of assisting both the children who had already arrived and those who were yet to arrive from Libya in case the latter “should turn up mysteriously in Italy”. Mrs Lane, Rice added in his letter to Beckelman, claimed that other IRO officers would also have collaborated because they were “most sympathetic to the Israeli movement”:

Mrs. Lane said further that we should not worry about any technical decision on eligibility by IRO Geneva. She was sure that in Italy they would find a way to get around any unfavourable decision. In other words: “eligibility-shmeligibility”.<sup>62</sup>

Rice furthermore shared details of a hilarious conversation with the IRO staff in Switzerland, in which they had speculated about the conditions of the Tripoli children on their arrival in Italy:

Just how the children had arrived from Tripoli, Mrs. Lane was unable to say. Miss Dickinson had implied that perhaps they had walked across the water. I told Mrs. Lane that since these were Jewish children, it was more likely that the waters of the Mediterranean had parted in the Biblical tradition of the Red Sea episode.<sup>63</sup>

We can trace references to the Jews’ methods of reaching Italy in some eye-witness accounts, like that of Haim Fedlon, a Jew from Tripoli who had been trained by the *shaliach* Israel Gur. In a 1987 interview, Fedlon described how he had become an activist, in his early twenties, in the clandestine operations to collect arms for the *Yishuv* and in the organisation of the illegal aliyah from Libya.<sup>64</sup> Fedlon confessed having met representatives of the Jewish Agency during a business trip to Italy in 1947, among whom David Golding, a depart-

<sup>61</sup> Letter from James P. Rice to Mr M.W. Beckelman, 14 December 1948, in AJDC, G 45-54/4/23/4/LY.31.

<sup>62</sup> “Eligible” is the technical term that was used to indicate those meeting the requirements for receiving assistance from the IRO. In this case, James Rice of the JDC added the prefix “shm-”, which in American slang is used to give a word a Hebrew sound, or to suggest that the word has no meaning for the person who pronounces it. Letter from James P. Rice to Mr M.W. Beckelman, 14 December 1948, in AJDC, cited in note 57.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from James P. Rice to Mr M.W. Beckelman, 14 December 1948, in AJDC, cited in note 62.

<sup>64</sup> Haim Fedlon, aka “Ciccio”, was born in 1922 in Tripoli, where he first studied in the Italian school “Pietro Verri” and, after the racial laws were introduced, in the Jewish school “Hatikva”. Having grown up in a family that spoke Hebrew and attended local Zionist circles, he emigrated to Israel in 1949 and became a *shaliach* for the Jewish Agency in Egypt.

mental delegate of the Aliyat Ha-No'ar,<sup>65</sup> and Ada Sereni of the Mossad le-Aliyah Bet,<sup>66</sup> with whom he had discussed the possibility of transferring children and young adults from Tripoli to Italy to prepare them for the aliyah in the *hachsharot*.<sup>67</sup> According to Fedlon, between the end of 1948 and 1949, at least four hundred minors illegally travelled from Tripoli to Sicily (often to Siracusa, or nearby); from there they were distributed across the peninsula's DP camps and *hachsharot*. Fedlon recalled having waited in Siracusa for the first group of children, who were housed on straw mattresses in one of the local schools, closed for the Christmas holidays:

Other captains of fishing vessels realised that there was money to be made in Pachino, so they took their boats and brought over more groups, 50, 30 [people], as many as they could take. They started to transport pregnant women, elderly people [...] not like us, who had brought only girls and boys. It didn't matter who they were: whoever could afford to pay 5,000 lire for the trip was taken to Pachino.<sup>68</sup>

The Jews who arrived from Libya in the last four months of 1948 were absorbed into the *hachsharot*, but since the arrivals increased in number, the Palestine Office started pressuring the JDC to grant assistance to the Libyans as well.<sup>69</sup> At the end of 1948, the two organisations reached an agreement: the Palestinian Office would have continued managing “all the normal DP population” (i.e. all European Jewish DPs) independently by gathering them in six *hachsharot*, whereas the remaining six *hachsharot* located near Rome would be designated to receive the Libyan Jews, whom the Palestinian Office would have managed under the JDC's supervision. Finally, two Children's Homes (i.e. *hachsharot* for children) would remain operational to accommodate the minors

<sup>65</sup> Founded in Berlin in 1933, the Aliyat Ha-No'ar helped Jewish children in the Third Reich by relocating them to Palestine. It subsequently became a department of the Jewish Agency. On its assistance to Jewish refugees in Europe after the war, see Shlomo Bar-Gil, Mehapsim Bait Motz'im Moledet, *Aliyat Ha-No'ar Ba-Hinukh u-Ba-Shikum Ha-Sherith Ha-Pletah 1945-1955* [Seeking a home, finding a homeland: the Youth Aliyah between the education and the rehabilitation of Holocaust survivors 1945-1948], Yad Itzhaq Ben Zvi, Jerusalem, 1999.

<sup>66</sup> Ada Sereni played a crucial role in the Mossad le-Aliyah Bet, which took some twenty-three thousand Jewish refugees from Italy to Palestine between 1945 and 1948. Ada Sereni, *I clandestini del mare, l'emigrazione ebraica in terra d'Israele dal 1945 al 1948*, Mursia, Milan, 1973.

<sup>67</sup> This event is also described in M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit, p. 199 and in Yacov Haggiag-Liluf, *Toldot Yehudei Luv*, Or-Yehuda, Bat Yam, 2000, p. 138, published in Italy under the title *Storia degli ebrei di Libia*, Centro di studi sull'ebraismo libico, 2005.

<sup>68</sup> Interview (in Hebrew) with Haim Fedlon, 1987, in OHD, (187) 7, The Jews of Libya, 1:28:38-1:29:10.

<sup>69</sup> The Palestinian Office (or Merkaz He-Halutz) refers to the institution founded by Palestinian Jewish soldiers in 1944 to coordinate assistance to Jewish refugees in Italy and to organise their aliyah. Over time, the Palestinian Office became increasingly political, especially after the arrival of the *schlichim* and representatives of various Zionist and religious movements of the *Yishuv*, and when it was given the task to manage the country's *hachsharot*.



coming from Libya; at that time, these were the only Jewish children to be found in the Italian DP camps because the European displaced children were the first to have been emigrated to Israel.<sup>70</sup>

The JDC had to face two issues in its management of the Libyan Jews in the Italian DP camps. The first regarded the health of the newcomers, who were often infected with tuberculosis, trachoma and other contagious diseases, and were therefore declared unsuitable for emigration, “an additional burden on the shoulders of JDC”.<sup>71</sup> The second was linked to the difficult task — not only of the JDC but also other Jewish organisations — to have the IRO grant the Jews coming from Libya the status of displaced persons. Only thus could they obtain international assistance for their subsistence in DP camps and for resettlement, like their European co-religionists who were already recognised as DPs because they had been victims of persecution during the war.

With regard to the Libyan Jews’ health conditions, the JDC approached the matter on several fronts. In first instance, steps were taken to solve or at least contain the health emergency in Libya. At the start of 1949, the JDC and the OSE (Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants) sent a committee to Tripoli to study the problem and set up a medical and health programme for the local population in view of their evacuation to Israel.<sup>72</sup> On that occasion, the OSE estimated a very high disease rate as well as an exceptionally high infant and general mortality rate. Moreover, the majority of Jews suffering from diseases did not have access to medical care, whereas the sanitary conditions were extremely poor. For this reason, the JDC launched — as early as March 1949 — a programme in conjunction with the OSE for the registration and mass examination of all the candidates for the aliyah. By 1952, when the health programme in Libya was closed, the OSE’s staff had examined an average of 150 to 200 people a day, for a total of 31,661 Jews during 33 months of activity. Yet, the OSE and the JDC encountered various difficulties in their attempt to accelerate the process of direct emigration from Libya to Israel: while many refused to depart if a family member had not yet been recognised as suitable for emigration for medical reasons, others (usually the head of the family) did not want to leave their jobs to obtain the necessary medical treatment. Finally, the Israeli government itself refused entry to those who were not entirely healthy. Although these

<sup>70</sup> Letter from Louis D. Horwitz to Jacob Joslow, Subject, 15 February 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 55.

<sup>71</sup> Reduction of the JDC program in Italy, 18 January 1949, in AJDC, NY AR194554/4/44/2/625 Italy, General, 1949.

<sup>72</sup> The OSE was founded in Russia in 1912. Initially called the “Society for the Health of the Jewish Population”, in the 1930s it moved its headquarters to France and changed its name to “Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants”, as it was then committed to protecting and caring for children during the war. After the war, when the OSE established an office in Italy, it became known as the Jewish Health Organization (Organizzazione Sanitaria ebraica). On the OSE and the JDC’s health programme in Libya, see M. Roumani, *Gli ebrei di Libia*, cit., pp. 121-131.

difficulties considerably postponed the aliyah, the JDC worked hard to liaise with the Israeli authorities and obtain a shorter time frame for the emigration of those who had recovered from illness in both Libya and Italy.<sup>73</sup>

In Italy, too, the precarious health of the Libyan Jews weighed heavily on the JDC: it not only had to provide for their medical care, but it also had to ensure that the DPs who were perfectly entitled to emigrate would not be exposed to the risk of infection. Between January and June 1949, the JDC's officers in Italy still recorded thousands of arrivals from Tripoli, "despite repeated instruction to the Palestine Office that AJDC would not take care of new arrivals".<sup>74</sup> Indeed, for months to come Italy remained one of the privileged channels for the aliyah, even when the new *schlichim* — Barukh Duvdevani and Max Varadi — were preparing the direct emigration from Libya.<sup>75</sup> Thus, at the end of the summer of 1949, the JDC decided to change its strategy; instead of distributing the arrivals from Tripoli across the *hachsharot*, as it had done until then, it divided them into two groups. Those in need of further medical treatment were relocated to the transit camps of Marseilles,<sup>76</sup> whereas those healthy enough for the aliyah were all housed in a single transit camp in Resina (nowadays Ercolano), near Naples.<sup>77</sup> Between July and September 1949, 2,393 of the 3,052 North African Jews (mostly Libyans) who passed through Italy emigrated to Israel, while 659 of them were relocated to Marseilles. In the same quarterly period, though, about two hundred people stayed in the Resina camp — mostly relatives of tuberculosis patients who were being treated in the JDC's facilities and who were entitled to assistance for the full duration of their stay.<sup>78</sup>

In the short time of its existence (September-November 1949), the transit camp of Resina raised quite a few concerns, especially after a letter was delivered — at the end of November — to Mrs Adele Rosenwald Levy, a board member of the JDC and chair of the National Women's Division of the United Jewish Appeal (hereafter UJA).<sup>79</sup> The letter was written by a friend of Levy,

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Louis D. Horwitz to Jacob Joslow, Subject, 15 February 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 55.

<sup>74</sup> Ajdc activities in Italy, January-March 1949, 23 June 1949; Ajdc activities in Italy, April-June 1949, 29 August 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 16.

<sup>75</sup> On the activities of the *schlichim* among the Jews of Libya between 1949 and 1951, see Maurice M. Roumani, *The Jews of Libya: Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement*, Brighton and Portland, Sussex Academic Press, 2009, pp. 141-153.

<sup>76</sup> On the contrasts between the activities of Zionist organisations and pan-Arab anti-colonial movements in Marseilles in 1948, see Maud S. Mandel, *Muslim and Jews in France. History of a Conflict*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2014, pp. 15-34.

<sup>77</sup> Ajdc activities in Italy, July-September 1949, 23 November 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 16.

<sup>78</sup> Ajdc activities in Italy, July-September 1949, 23 November 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 16

<sup>79</sup> The United Jewish Appeal for Refugees and Overseas Needs was founded in 1939 by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the United Palestine Appeal and the National Coordinating Committee Fund, with the purpose of joining forces to assist the Jews in Europe and in Palestine.

Ellen Conreid, after she had visited the Resina camp:

Dear Mrs. Levy,

I've been in Europe for the last few weeks, and have been in Naples the last few days. Today I visited transit Camp Resina [...]. I think the memory of that camp will haunt me the rest of my life! The conditions there are inconceivably atrocious! [...] No concentration camp in Germany could have been worse, nor as far as any documentary films that I have seen, was any worse! The place was a factory — no heat — today was cold and rainy — children running around in bare feet, in rags — no warm clothing for old or young — they aren't given any [...]. It is horrible beyond belief.<sup>80</sup>

Convinced that the UJA could not have afforded a similar situation, Conreid asked Levy to intervene, and Levy demanded an explanation from the JDC. After a heated exchange of letters between the JDC's offices in New York, Paris and Rome, a month later Louis Horwitz replied providing a detailed report that countered Conreid's letter of disappointment. Horwitz explained that the Resina camp had been opened to tackle the emergency of arrivals from North Africa and that, even if the Palestinian Office — which was responsible for the camp — had acted quickly to find accommodation, the only available place at the time was the factory of Resina.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, Horwitz underscored the fact that, when compared to other DP camps, Resina was in a fair condition, that no building or house in southern Italy was equipped with heating, and that the North African Jews themselves had requested and received a subsidy of 300 lire per day to buy and prepare food instead of using the catering service as planned. Horwitz furthermore specified that

the North Africans have their own mode of living and it was not possible within the short space of time they were in Italy, to alter any of their habits [...] the children running around barefeet was not so much due to the lack of clothing but the fact that it was no doubt a habit of the children to go without shoes in North Africa.<sup>82</sup>

After a few months, the Italian government made a former hospital in Brindisi available, and already at the end of November, the JDC arranged the transfer of the North African refugees from the Resina transit camp, which was closed permanently.<sup>83</sup> The transit camp in Brindisi, which on 20 December 1949 accommo-

<sup>80</sup> Letter from AJDC New York to AJDC Paris, 22 November 1949, in AJDC, G 45-54/4/13/14/IT.115, Italy: Resina Camp 1949-1950. The emphasis is in the original, where Levy is called by her husband's name: Mrs David M. Levy.

<sup>81</sup> Letter from AJDC Rome to Mr Melvin S. Goldstein, 28 December 1949, in AJDC, G 45-54/4/13/14/IT.115, Italy: Resina Camp 1949-1950; Letter from M.W. Beckelman to Mr Moses A. Leavitt, 9 January 1950, in AJDC, G 45-54/4/13/14/IT.115, Italy: Resina Camp 1949-1950; Letter from Melvin S. Goldstein to Mr M.W. Beckelman, 28 November 1949, in AJDC, G 45-54/4/13/14/IT.115, Italy: Resina Camp 1949-1950.

<sup>82</sup> Letter from AJDC Rome to Mr Melvin S. Goldstein, 28 December 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 82.

<sup>83</sup> Ajdc activities in Italy, July-September 1949, 23 November 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 16.

dated 961 people, was again managed by the Palestinian Office; until that month, 3,000 North African Jewish refugees (Libyans and Egyptians) had passed through the camp, who had already been transferred to Marseilles or emigrated to Israel.<sup>84</sup>

### **The issue of international recognition: displaced persons or migrants?**

Correspondence between the JDC's offices in Rome, Geneva and Paris reveals that the issue of eligibility for the Libyan Jews' international assistance had already been presented to Myer Cohen, assistant director-general of the IRO's Health, Care and Maintenance Department, in December 1948. However, Cohen took a long time to respond.<sup>85</sup> The issue had become urgent when Horwitz informed the JDC's headquarters in Paris of an unannounced IRO inspection of two DP camps where some Jews from Tripoli had initially been housed; the UN's agency subsequently deprived the Jews of international assistance because they did not fall into the displaced persons category.<sup>86</sup> If James Rice, director of the JDC in Switzerland, had initially seen a glimmer of hope in his interaction with Mrs Lane from the IRO's welfare office, who declared to be "very interested in this problem" and gave the impression that her opinion would have had a considerable effect on Myer Cohen, it soon became evident that the Jews arriving from Libya would have been classified as migrants, not as DPs fleeing from persecution.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, the IRO officials were so overwhelmed by this flow of migrants towards Italy that the Italian head of mission, G.F. Mentz, raised the issue with the British Embassy on 15 December 1948:

Several hundred persons from North Africa have recently arrived in Italy and have applied to IRO for assistance. [They came from] the Libyan Coast between Tripoli and Benghazi, where they were occupied as traders, builders, etc. They are dressed without exception in Arab costume, very few can speak anything but Arabic, and the great majority appear to be illiterate, with little or no education. There is a high percentage of young children under 12 years of age [...]. They seem to have embarked at Tripoli or Benghazi at intervals, some in group and others as single families and to have disembarked at various places in the Naples area or at Syracuse in Sicily. Landing appears to have taken place at night, so that no one is aware of the precise place, and on arrival on Italian soil they were apparently met by representatives of Jewish committees and given rail tickets to various destinations.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Excerpts from the Quarterly Report on the Italian for the period October-December. 1949, 1 December 1949, in AJDC, NY AR194554/4/44/2/625, Italy, General, 1949.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from James P. Rice to Mr L.D. Horwitz, 23 December 1948, in AJCD, G 45-54/4/23/4/LY.31, Tripolitania: Tripoli 1948-1949.

<sup>86</sup> AJDC Activities in Italy October-December 1948, 15 February 1949, in AJDC, NY AR194554/4/44/2/625, Italy, General, 1949.

<sup>AJDC</sup> Activities in Italy October-December 1948, 15 February 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 87.

<sup>87</sup> Letter from James P. Rice to Mr L.D. Horwitz, 23 December 1948, in AJCD, cited in note 86.

<sup>88</sup> International Refugee Organization Italy to the British Embassy in Rome, 15 December 1948, in Archives Nationales (AN), Paris, AJ 43/1036 Italie. Refugies Juifs en Italie 1947-48.

Mentz highlighted that those who had been interviewed in the IRO's Italian offices had justified their leaving Africa as “the desire to avoid Arab persecution”; some had also claimed to have lost family members, whereas one man even showed a wound he had sustained during the clashes, when an Arab had stabbed him. According to the IRO, though, the general picture that emerged from the interviews was one of “sporadic Arab attacks on Jewish communities in Libya, with occasional outburst on a larger and graver scale, and of the police forces being unable or unwilling to afford the Jews protection”. Since all those who had been interviewed by the IRO up to that point had expressed a desire to emigrate to Israel, Mentz requested information from official sources to establish whether the Libyan Jews fell within the IRO's mandate.<sup>89</sup>

At the end of 1948, Horwitz prepared a report titled “The Plight of the Tripolitanian Jews” to draw the IRO's attention to the case. He stressed the fact that the Italian occupation, while having “introduced civilization”, had gradually deteriorated Jewish life as a result of the introduction of the racial laws. Horwitz highlighted that, when the Germans occupied North Africa in 1942, “the virus of German anti-Semitic propaganda was generously and skilfully instilled among local Arabs that bore its sad and tragic fruits after the liberation”, manifesting itself in the explosion of violence of the pogroms of 1945. The director of the JDC's mission in Italy was convinced that the Libyan Jews' situation was a direct consequence of those disastrous years. In this atmosphere of constant terror, their community never managed to develop a reconstruction programme and was still in a precarious condition, of which the Arabs — Horwitz argued — had “took great advantage [exercising] moral pressure, threats and blackmail” to extort a public declaration of solidarity with the Libyan National Unity Front. Although the British administration and representatives of the Muslim community had guaranteed peace and freedom for the Jews in Libya after the violence of 1945, Horwitz pointed out that the violence, which could not be considered an isolated case, had re-emerged in June 1948, permanently compromising the “millenary cohabitation” between Muslims and the Jewish minority in the country.<sup>90</sup> The JDC therefore claimed that the Jews were forced to leave Libya for fear of being persecuted:

Indeed it appears to A.J.D.C that the fate of Tripolitanian Jews who succeed in reaching Italy must be considered within the same framework of the assistance extended by IRO to other DPs from whom they only differ by the mere facts that they have become displaced only at a later stage but by exactly the same causes rooted in war events. Their present plight therefore is nothing but the direct outcome of antisemitic and racial propaganda in an Axis ruled territory during the war.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup> International Refugee Organization Italy to the British Embassy in Rome, 15 December 1948, in AN, cited in note 89.

<sup>90</sup> The Plight of the Tripolitanian Jews, 1 December 1948, in AJDC, cited in note 57.

<sup>91</sup> The Plight of the Tripolitanian Jews, 1 December 1948, in AJDC, cited in note 57.

While waiting for the IRO's decision, the JDC took full responsibility for providing the Libyan Jews with all the necessary aid and paying the costs of the *hachsharot* in which they were staying.<sup>92</sup> Together with the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the World Jewish Congress, the CBF too supported the JDC's request to the IRO to grant eligibility for international assistance to the Jews fleeing from Tripoli.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, despite the efforts and the cooperation, the IRO rejected this proposal, as the JDC wrote in its report on the January-March 1949 trimester.<sup>94</sup>

My analysis of the screening of Libyan Jews in Italy through their applications and the IRO's interviews with the Jews reveals how difficult it was for the UN's officials to establish whether they could be considered displaced persons. It turns out that only two candidates out of a sample of 42 applications examined for this essay were already in Italy (for study) in 1947, whereas all other candidates arrived between the beginning of 1948 and September 1949, with the final aim of emigrating to Israel.<sup>95</sup> Many had to wait up to six months before they received a decision on their application, which in most cases arrived after 27 May 1949, when the IRO sent out a telegram in which it determined that Libyan Jews in the Italian DP camps were not entitled to international assistance. Indeed, with the exception of three candidates, nearly all were declared "ineligible", that is, not meeting the requirements for DP status as per the international standards of the time.

The IRO's refusal to take responsibility for helping the Libyan Jews is striking when we consider two categories in particular: unaccompanied minors and former deportees, who in these circumstances were not officially considered such.<sup>96</sup> In fact, exactly half of the applications analysed here concern people under 16 years of age, who all (except for one) arrived in Italy without relatives. Some of these, such as Clara G. (13 years) and Mino M. (15 years), were even registered as "war orphans" by the very IRO officers who inter-

<sup>92</sup> AJDC Activities in Italy October-December 1948, 15 February 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 87.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Harry Vitales to Paris, 6 February 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 59.

<sup>94</sup> Ajdc activities in Italy, January-March 1949, 23 June 1949, in AJDC, cited in note 16.

<sup>95</sup> This essay draws on an analysis of 42 applications presented to the IRO by Jews from Libya who stayed in Italy between 1948 and 1949. These documents are held in the International Tracing Service (ITS) archive in Bad Arolsen, Germany. The Allied and the International Committee of the Red Cross established the ITS at the end of the war with the aim of tracing down people who had went missing in the conflict.

<sup>96</sup> The IRO included the following children in the "unaccompanied children" category: children under 16 years of age who were outside their country of origin or that of their parents; orphans; and children whose parents had abandoned them or had gone missing. On the approach to minors in the post-war period in international humanitarianism, see Tara Zahra, *I figli perduti. La ricostruzione delle famiglie europee nel secondo dopoguerra*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2012.

viewed them: Clara’s parents were killed during wartime bombings,<sup>97</sup> whereas Mino lost his in the Tripoli pogrom of 1945.<sup>98</sup> In November 1948, both arrived in Italy with the help of the religious Zionist movement Mizrahi, which accommodated them in the children’s *hachsharah* of Villa Orvieto, in Florence. Other minors, such as the two 16-year-olds Haim Z. (from Bengasi)<sup>99</sup> and Rahmin G. (from Tripoli),<sup>100</sup> claimed that their parents had entrusted them to Zionist organisations (among which precisely the Mizrahi and the Aliyat Ha-No’ar). They were to be educated in Italy in the *hachsharot* of the movements to which they belonged (near Rome, in Genazzano, Grottaferrata, Monte Mario and in Salerno), before they would subsequently be sent to Israel. Giving priority to childrens’ aliyah was actually a common practice among Jewish families in Europe from the 1930s onwards. For instance, in Italy, once the concentration camp of Ferramonti di Tarsia was liberated in 1943, many DP parents sent their children to the *hachsharot* run by the Palestinian Office, which they saw as an opportunity to offer their children a better future in another country while meeting all their basic needs (from the most practical ones, such as food, medical treatment and clothing, to education).<sup>101</sup> Hence, despite the fact that the 20 candidates from Libya, many of whom were orphans or unaccompanied minors, were no more than 16 years old and in a different country from their own, the IRO recognised them as neither displaced persons nor unaccompanied children; after more than six months, it simply stamped “ineligible” on their applications.

Surprisingly, the same stamp was applied to the candidatures of some Libyan Jews who had been deported to Giado and the European concentration camps. Among the Jews from Benghazi who were held in the Giado camp, including Leoni D.,<sup>102</sup> Zarina T. (a widow who had given birth during internment),<sup>103</sup> Giulia

<sup>97</sup> File on Clara G., in International Tracing Service Digital Archive (ITS), Bad Arolsen, 3.2.1.2/80374095, Iro care and maintenance program: Files originated in Italy.

<sup>98</sup> File on Mino M., in ITS, 3.2.1.2/80434965, Iro care and maintenance program: Files originated in Italy.

<sup>99</sup> File on Haim Z., in ITS, 3.2.1.2/80482517, Iro care and maintenance program: Files originated in Italy.

<sup>100</sup> File on Rahmin G., in ITS, 3.2.1.2/80373615, Iro care and maintenance program: Files originated in Italy.

<sup>101</sup> I am referring to the relief programmes of organisations that were active during and after the war, such as the Kindertransport, the Œuvre de secours aux enfants, and the Aliyat Ha-no’ar. On DP children in the *hachsharot* in Italy between 1943 and 1948, see Chiara Renzo, “To Build and Be Built”: Jewish Displaced Children and Youth in Post-War Italy, 1943-48, in Beatrice Scutaru, Simone Paoli (eds.), *Child Migration and Biopolitics. Old and New Experiences in Europe*, London, Routledge, 2020, pp. 105-123.

<sup>102</sup> File on Leoni D., in ITS, 3.2.1.2/80359024, Iro care and maintenance program: Files originated in Italy.

<sup>103</sup> File on Zarina T., in ITS, 3.2.1.2/ 80526972, Iro care and maintenance program: Files originated in Italy.

D. and her family,<sup>104</sup> and Abraham F.,<sup>105</sup> only the last managed to obtain legal protection and assistance from the IRO, which got him housed in a DP camp in Italy. However, this decision seems to have been determined by the impression Abraham F. apparently made on the IRO officer who interviewed him; the officer justified the granted concession by the fact that Abraham F. came across as an “honest looking man, who seems to have stood the situation as long as possible”. The promptness with which the practice was closed is also relevant, as the IRO officer made the decision on the same day of the candidate’s presentation of his application (26 June 1948), more than a year before the IRO officially decided against the eligibility of the North African Jews.

To offer further proof of the uncertain decision-making tools that the IRO’s operators were equipped with and of the weight of their personal judgement, at least in the first phase of the screening process, let us look at the candidature of Joseph N.<sup>106</sup> and Leone G.<sup>107</sup> The former was a Tripoli Jew who had left Libya in 1940 to undergo surgery in Romania, from where he was deported first to Transnistria (in 1941), and then to the Nazi camp of Ebensee (in 1943); the latter, by contrast, was a Greek Jew living in Tripoli, whom the Fascist government had transferred to Italy in 1940, where he was forced into free internment (in Montecatini and Amatrice) and subsequently moved to the Fossoli concentration camp before being deported to various death camps (including Auschwitz and Mauthausen). Joseph N. told the IRO’s operators that, along with his wife and children, he had been moved to the Austrian DP camp of Linz after the war, and that he had reached Italy in 1947, where he had lived in the DP camps run by the JDC. Leone G., on the other hand, showed the IRO officer the tattoo on his forearm as proof of his internment in Auschwitz, declared that his family had been killed in the concentration camps and stated that he had returned to Italy in August 1945, earning his living as a street vendor. Joseph N., who had requested assistance for resettlement to Israel with his family on 12 March 1948, received an odd response from the IRO officer who had interviewed him: he was declared “eligible for repatriation to Tripoli, if resettlement not possible”, an assessment that was changed, four days later, to “eligible for repatriation only, if not accepted he is not the concern of IRO”. Leone G., who had asked for legal protection, a temporary subsidy in Italy and coverage of the travel expenses for resettlement to Canada or Australia, was granted assistance to be repatriated to Greece (where he had never lived) or

<sup>104</sup> File on Giulia D., in ITS, 3.2.1.2/80359031, Iro care and maintenance program: Files originated in Italy.

<sup>105</sup> File on Abraham F., in ITS, 3.2.1.2/80363242, Iro care and maintenance program: Files originated in Italy.

<sup>106</sup> File on Joseph N., in ITS, 3.2.1.2/ 80441179, Iro care and maintenance program: Files originated in Italy.

<sup>107</sup> File on Leone G., in ITS, 3.2.1.2/80373378, Iro care and maintenance program: Files originated in Italy.



Libya (where he refused to be repatriated for fear of persecution). In this case, too, the IRO officer who had interviewed Leone G. — on 12 July 1948 — was unable to make an immediate decision because they believed that “there is a lot of moonshine in this man’s story”. In fact, they had the impression that the candidate was trying to obtain the IRO’s assistance merely because his Italian residence permit was expiring, and that the objections to repatriation were “purely personal, as he says he lost all his family in concentration camps and memories would be too painful”. At the end of the month, Leone G.’s application was reviewed by a second IRO officer, who declared him fit only for repatriation; after refusing this option, in 1950 he was judged “ineligible”.

The cases examined here challenge — at least in part — the idea that, at the end of the war, Jewish DPs “were recognised as an ideal-type community of victims by western humanitarianism” and given full status of political victims, unlike other refugee groups who had “entered the market of international compassion in the 1940s”.<sup>108</sup> Seen from this otherwise perfectly acceptable viewpoint, the victorious powers — and the institutions that represented them in the management of the refugee crisis (i.e. the UNRRA and the IRO) — allegedly recognised the supranational nature of Jewish persecution and attributed a collective “survivor” identity to Jewish refugees, who were automatically classified as “United Nations nationals” and entitled to a “preferential treatment”.<sup>109</sup> In reality, the Eurocentric perspective of the international refugee regime framed the Jews who left Libya and transited through Italy before emigrating to Israel between 1948 and 1949 neither as victims of anti-Jewish persecution nor as more general victims of the war. However, this lack of recognition has also manifested itself in the oblivion of collective memory and the silence of historiography that have long ignored the experience of the Jews in the colonies of North Africa during the Second World War.

## Conclusion

When the Libyan Jews entered the European context, disembarking on Italian soil, they entered a political, social and cultural scene in which the category of “genuine refugee” already existed. Moreover, the figure of the Jewish refugee had already established itself as the “victim par excellence” of a peculiar form of persecution, who had already obtained historical and political recognition within the system that managed the war refugees.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Daniel G. Cohen, *The Politics of Recognition: Jewish Refugees in Relief Policies and Human Rights Debates, 1945-1950*, “Immigrants & Minorities”, 2006, vol. 24, n. 2, here p. 125.

<sup>109</sup> D. Cohen, *The Politics of Recognition*, cit., p. 129.

<sup>110</sup> Already in the “Harrison Report”, commissioned by the US President Harry S. Truman and published at the end of the summer of 1945, the Jewish survivors of the death camps were

This monolithic representation of the European Jews' war experience was characteristic not only of the institutions that took care of them, but also of the refugees themselves. On the one hand, humanitarian law included in the same category of "Holocaust survivors" those who had suffered persecution and internment as well as the approximately two hundred thousand Polish, Baltic and Russian Jews who had been deported to the vast territories of the Soviet Union during the war, from which they were repatriated at the end of the conflict only to realise that they had become refugees without a homeland, either as a result of the geopolitical changes brought about by the war and peace treaties or because they had to flee post-war anti-Semitism in their country of origin. On the other hand, this collective dimension of the Jewish experience during and after the war was also promoted by representative committees of the Jewish refugees in the German, Austrian and Italian camps themselves. Although Leib Garfunkel — leader of the Organisation of Jewish Refugees in Italy — referred to "the recent pogroms of Tripoli" in his opening speech at the first conference of Jewish refugees in Italy, held in November 1945,<sup>111</sup> the focus on the situation of the Jews in Europe was also prevalent (if not exclusive) among the DPs. The Jewish refugees in the camps of Germany, Austria and Italy attributed to themselves a collective and community identity with a historical responsibility, which they conveyed through the biblical expression *Sherith Ha-Pletah*: "the survived remnant" or "the surviving remnant", "called upon to play a formative role in shaping the Jewish future".<sup>112</sup> The community perspective was also encouraged by the Jewish soldiers and by the *shlichim* who spurred the refugees to focus on their future, instilling a further element of belonging: that to *Eretz Israel*.

Conversely, the episodes of discrimination, internment, deportation and displacement of the Libyan Jews were not instantly elaborated in these terms by the protagonists themselves, nor were they integrated into the social, political and cultural sphere of the DP camps. In fact, the Libyan Jews experienced their stay in the Italian DP camps as a brief transit, to the point that there is no trace — at least in the documents studied so far — of any attempts to set up committees, as the European Jewish DPs had done following the liberation.

Moreover, the contemporary policy of international humanitarianism on refugees also contributed to their exclusion from the category of "survivors".

described in these terms. The Harrison Report can be accessed online at: [www.ushmm.org/exhibition/displaced-persons/resourc1.htm](http://www.ushmm.org/exhibition/displaced-persons/resourc1.htm).

<sup>111</sup> Opening Speech by L. Garfunkel at the Conference of the Jewish Refugees in Italy, Rome, 26 November 1945, in Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, L16/521 Sifron Kinus Ha-Pliḥim Be-Italia Be-širuf ḥovrim Tmunot Proṭookolim Mitkatvim ve-Mavrikim [Programme of the Conference on refugees in Italy, with supplementary brochures, photographs, letters and guest list].

<sup>112</sup> On the origins and development of the use of this expression by Holocaust survivors after the war, see Zeev Mankowitz, *Life Between Memory and Hope. The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, here p. 3.

Thus, before the 1951 Geneva Convention, the humanitarian organisations that had succeeded one another in the first half of the twentieth century had defined the refugee status and solutions to the refugee crisis by referring to specific ethnic or religious groups and precise historical events. One good example is the UNRRA, whose definition of displaced persons was based on the persecution during the Second World War of a broad range of groups, listed in the above-mentioned manuals that its operators used to determine the candidates' eligibility for international assistance. Subsequently, the IRO introduced a kind of “political turn” in terms of a new awareness of the refugee crisis, namely that it did not finish with the end of the war, but that it also depended on post-1945 territorial and political changes at a global level.<sup>113</sup> This changed situation is, for example, what allowed many European Jewish DPs to justify their refusal to be repatriated and to obtain the IRO's assistance in the DP camps and the resettlement process. Yet, this approach — closely linked to the events of the war in Europe — did not favour the Libyan Jews in the Italian DP during the screening process, as might have happened after the 1951 Geneva Convention, which finally proposed an individual approach and the recognition of the right to flee, or in the 1960s, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees extended its mandate to non-European countries.<sup>114</sup> In this case, we could argue that international humanitarianism had not managed or did not yet have the right tools to recognise those “personal catastrophes” of which Holborn spoke in reference to the human problems encountered during the IRO's mission.

Excluded from the often Eurocentric narrative of the Holocaust, from the limiting categorisation policy of post-war international humanitarianism in DP camps, and from the predominance of Ashkenazi Judaism that long characterised the Israeli national and socio-cultural context, the displacement experience of the Jews of Libya has struggled to attract the interest of historians and establish itself as an episode of displacement in history. In fact, historiography has only recently started to discuss the impact of the implementation of racial policies and the consequences of the Second World War on Jewish communities within the colonial context of North Africa, taking into account the “unique triangular situation, where Jews found themselves between the European colonizers and the Muslim colonized”.<sup>115</sup> Thus, in the case of the Libyan Jews, the causes behind the displacement are to be found in the Italian racial policies that placed the Jewish minority in a position of inferiority as opposed

<sup>113</sup> For a historical analysis of population movements from a global perspective, see Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>114</sup> Recognition of refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention remained limited to European citizens for over a decade.

<sup>115</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Paradigms and Differences*, in A. Boum, S. Abrevaya Stein (eds.), *The Holocaust and North Africa*, cit., p. 216.

to the Italian settlers and the local Muslims; in the Italian-German alliance and the dynamics of the war in North Africa; and in the British occupation policy, which failed to protect the Libyan Jews from the anti-Jewish violence that resulted from bitter popular discontent and the development of a Libyan national movement. Finally, a decisive factor that determined the trajectory of this migratory flow was the Zionist propaganda of the Jewish soldiers and the *schlichim* who successfully channelled it towards Israel, as also happened with the European Jewish refugees.

Hence, the historical approach enables us to fully understand both the reasons behind the Libyan Jews' displacement and the context in which the reaction of international humanitarianism to their presence in the Italian DP camps developed. Rather than considering the history of the Libyan Jews' displacement as being disconnected from that of the Jewish DPs in Europe or comparing the two experiences, this contribution — responding to Gatrell's invitation — has sought to highlight “connections” that may integrate the histories of both groups.