

Across Europe and the Mediterranean Sea Exploring Jewish Memories from Libya

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Abstract The article aims at presenting a cross-disciplinary project on the histories and memories of the Jews from Libya: *Mapping Living Memories: The Jewish Diaspora from Libya across Europe and the Mediterranean*. The project was designed and carried out by the authors of this article; its main outcome is a collection of interviews with fifty men and women who consider themselves to be Jews and who left Libya from the 1940s to the 1960s, moving to Italy, Israel, France and the UK. The purpose of this article is twofold: firstly, to outline the premises and distinctive features of the project, highlighting how the collection contributes to the further elaboration of the notion of 'Libyan Jewry'; secondly, to point out the potential of this project for postcolonial readings in History.

Summary 1. Premises and Distinctive Features. — 2. A 'Libyan Jewry'? Notes from the Fieldwork. — 3. Across Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. — 4. Memory and the Unravelling of Postcolonial Histories. — 5. Conclusion: If, by Chance, an Anthropologist Happens to Meet a Historian.

Over the last year, the CDEC Foundation of Milan (*Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea*, Jewish Contemporary Documentation Centre) has been host to an innovative and cross-disciplinary project on the histories and memories of the Jews from Libya: *Mapping Living Memories: The Jewish Diaspora from Libya across Europe and the Mediterranean*. The main outcome of the project is a collection of interviews with fifty men and women, who consider themselves to be Jews and who left Libya from the 1940s to the 1960s, moving to Italy, Israel, France and the UK. The interviews are now archived in Milan at the CDEC Foundation, along with digital copies of personal records, photographs, and other materials donated by the interviewees.¹

1 The CDEC Foundation is a leading Italian centre for the study of Jewish history, culture and society, with special reference to Italy and the contemporary period and a specific commitment to collecting and archiving pertinent documentation. As such, it collaborates with public and private institutions, Jewish organisations and Italian and international educational and research institutes on Jewish history and the Shoah, including, among others, the *Mémorial de la Shoah* in Paris, the Primo Levi Centre in New York and the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem. In addition to its role as a repository of documents, the CDEC Foundation is committed to scientific research and its international dissemination through the publication of *Quest*:

The project was designed and carried out by the authors of this article, as part of their respective doctoral and postdoctoral research. As such, it benefited from support and advice from a number of academic and research bodies in Europe and Israel as well as from substantial funding from the European Sources Material Programme of the Rothschild Foundation.²

This article aims to present the *Mapping Living Memories* project by explaining its premises, methodologies, implementation, and potential. All of these will be further developed in our work and, hopefully, in the work of scholars using these sources in the future. The project stemmed from a collaboration between two early career scholars with a European background – specifically with research into the history of Italians in the Mediterranean during the age of European empires (Barbara Spadaro) and into Hebrew language, literature and social anthropology (Piera Rossetto). It was focused on the Jews from Libya as subjects whose transnational trajectories and multiple belongings stimulate new perspectives on the history and cultures of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. We will start by outlining the premises and distinctive features of the project, highlighting our respective understanding of its cross-disciplinary nature and the paths it has opened up to us for further investigation. While we carried out the fieldwork jointly, our respective backgrounds shaped our perceptions of the materials gathered. For this reason, this article includes both co-written and single-authored sections. Piera Rossetto has written sections 2 and 3, and Barbara Spadaro section 4. Everything else has been co-written, reflecting the encounter of our creative and intellectual energies.

1 Premises and Distinctive Features

The preliminary goals of our project were to map the movement of the Jewish diaspora from Libya to its destinations in Europe and Israel, to stress

Issues in Contemporary Jewish History (<http://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/>), an open-source, peer-reviewed journal acting as an international forum for the latest scholarship on the history, culture and society of the Jews in Italy within wider international debates. *Quest*, 4, 2012, edited by Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Piera Rossetto is a special issue on *Memory and Forgetting among Jews from the Arab-Muslim Countries: Contested Narratives of a Shared Past*.

2 The authors are grateful to prof. Emanuela Trevisan Semi (Ca' Foscari University of Venice), prof. Maurice Roumani (Ben Gurion University of Jerusalem), prof. Harvey Goldberg (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), dr. Michèle Baussant (CNRS, Paris), prof. Frédéric Abécassis (ENS, Lyon) and Dr. Simon Levis Sullam (Ca' Foscari University of Venice), for supporting, encouraging, and discussing the project, and prof. Charles F. Burdett (University of Bristol) and dr. Roberta Pergher (Indiana University) for comments on this article. For assistance and supervision, special thanks is due to Michele Sarfatti, Liliana Picciotto and Laura Brazzo at the CDEC Foundation. We are also grateful to the Society for Libyan Studies and the British School at Rome for enabling Barbara Spadaro to conduct essential preliminary research. And to David Perkins de Oliveira for assisting us in the final revision of the text.

the vividness of its memory in 'hosting' communities and countries and to collect neglected testimonies of historical events.

Before proceeding any further, our use of the word 'diaspora' deserves explanation. As a result of its remarkable proliferation in different academic and social realms, the meaning of diaspora has been stretched in various directions, in a sort of «'diaspora' of diaspora - a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space» (Brubaker 2005, p. 1). Nevertheless, the concept continues to provide research with perspectives and insights (Anteby-Yemini et al. 2005; Braziel, Manur 2010) that enrich our understanding of a human phenomenon in which different elements are at play: dispersion and dissemination (Prévélakis 1996), homeland and multiple belongings, boundary maintenance and boundary erosion (Brubaker 2005, p. 6). It is in this frame of reference that we consider the 'diaspora' of the Jews from Libya as a phenomenon historically situated between the Second World War and 1970 in which these people were dispersed across different countries which were likely to become their multiple identity referents (Bordes-Benayoun 2002) - and for different reasons, including political turmoil, insecurity and individual and collective searches for a better and more meaningful life. Our interviewees negotiated the meaning of their trajectories from Libya starting from different points of departure, thus interpreting the sense of their experience, and that of their belonging to this 'diaspora', using different frameworks. A core strand of our research is the acknowledgment of such dynamic interrogation and the investigation of its interaction with changes in the historical and cultural context.

On the eve of their major dispersion, which occurred from the 1940s to the 1960s, the community of Jews living in Libya numbered about 38,000 (Goldberg 2012) - being the smallest, yet one of the oldest Jewries of North Africa. As was the case of sister communities in the region - e.g. that of Tunis - those of Tripoli and Benghazi were highly diversified in social and cultural terms, having been exposed to a vast range of contacts and patterns of circulation between Europe, North Africa and the Middle East since the second half of the 19th century. As these circuits intertwined with a large range of secular and religious networks of mobility and exchange, the Jews in Libya were confronted with wider processes of decolonization, post-colonial migration and resettlement. These drew most of them to Israel (mainly between 1948 and 1952) and the former colonial metropolis, Italy (1967-1969).

Academic works addressing this specific diaspora are still less numerous and less known than those concerning other Jewish diasporas from North Africa and the Middle East (Attal 2009). Documentation regarding its history is extremely scattered, often uncatalogued, and difficult to access. Thus this collection of interviews and private records concentrated primarily on rescuing fading life stories and neglected sources - notably

those of the last generation of Jews born in Libya. This is in line with the principal aims of the CDEC Foundation, which has recently launched a new line of research on the social and cultural profile of Italian Jewry aimed at documenting the contribution of Jewish *edoth* (ethnic communities) from North Africa, the Middle East and Iran to Jewish culture in Italy.³ The *Mapping Living Memories* project participates in this endeavour but, at the same time, expanded its investigation to include other destinations and patterns of migration. We targeted subjects who consider themselves to be Jews and, by referring to them as 'Jews from Libya' and not 'Libyan Jews', we wish to stress the great variety of origins, nationalities, local and transnational identities they carry with them. The roots and trajectories of our interviewees are kaleidoscopic, with new overlappings generated in the contexts of their arrival in new locations – as in the case of those Italian-speaking members of the former Benghazi elite who, in Rome, find themselves labelled as '*Tripolini*' (Tripolitians).

A distinctive feature of *Mapping Living Memories* is that materials were gathered in multiple destinations of the diaspora. Existing collections of records and interviews, notably in Israel and in Italy, are the result of scattered, private initiatives undertaken by community centres and museums of the Jews of Libya and increasingly shared via the Internet. Earlier scholarship relied on diplomatic and institutional archives (De Felice 1978; Roumani 2008), reflecting the specific perspectives of Jewish and non-Jewish organizations monitoring the main streams of migration at critical moments, for example in 1948 and 1967. Our aim was to widen such perspectives by collecting life stories from across multiple destinations in Europe and Israel (with trans-oceanic destinations reserved for further stages of research) and considering narratives originating from community centres as well as networks based around alternative hubs, e.g. family, social and non-Jewish ones.

Rather than charting the demographic profile of the different communities – which is a task for experienced demographers – we were interested in exploring the different streams of migration and multiple meanings associated with 'being a Jew from Libya' in different contexts. However, our search for Jews from Libya in 'alternative' destinations has obviously led us to engage with the available surveys and common perceptions of the demographic configuration of this diaspora in different countries. This resulted in a contemplation of the way in which statistical representations build collective identities, reflecting mainstream (national) narratives. For example, we realised that even in the most recent surveys (Campelli 2013), Italian Jews have not been counted according to their country of origin and the shared opinion that the arrival of the «*Tripolini*» has secured demographic

3 Notably focussing on the case study of the city of Milan. See the project's website (in Italian): <http://www.cdec.it/home2.asp?idtesto=1355>.

survival of the Italian Jewish community cannot be supported by statistics yet.⁴ In contrast, Israeli immigration surveys (1948-1979) provide numbers per year of the Jews who entered the country from Libya and of Israelis with a 'Libyan' father. In the UK, despite the number of Jews from Libya resident in the country proving far fewer than we originally estimated, the production of self and community narratives was lively and indeed enlightening for our research questions. In short, the *Mapping Living Memories* project was not a study of the demographics of the diaspora of the Jews from Libya: the latter, we think, would be a task for skilled demographers trained in managing and comparing different systems and models of categorization in population statistics. However, our focus on the self-perception of the subjects involved in this project – their self-perception as Jews – highlights historical and political issues which play a role in demographic representations, bringing us back to the questions underlying our research: Who should be counted as a 'Jew from Libya'? How is this 'identification' articulated between collective narratives and personal *parcours* (Bertaux 2010, p. 37) in specific historical frameworks? What does the expression 'Jewish diaspora from Libya' account for?

2 A 'Libyan Jewry'? Notes from the Fieldwork

The cultural and historical complexity of the notion of 'Libyan Jewry' has been elaborated on recently by anthropologist Harvey Goldberg (Goldberg 2012). Comparing patterns of designation of this group, originating both within and outside of it, Goldberg shows the tight connection between the different terms that are used and the historical and cultural contexts in which they were forged. Goldberg explores the case of Israel in particular, where Jews from Libya arrived quite early in comparison to other *edoth* (ethnic communities). He also highlights the role played by heritage centres and journal publications in conveying to the 'public' different articulations of the notion of 'Libyan Jewry'. The question of how different generations react to the *mise en musée* of community heritage is an interesting perspective from which to explore issues of transmission and collective memory processes. Considering the example of the Libyan heritage centre in Or Yehuda, Goldberg assumes a connection between the success of the museum and the generational juncture at which it was created: «This first generation has dwindled, and many of their children, who only partially appreciate some of the items (or texts or photos), but do not want to discard them, have adopted the Museum enthusiastically as a

4 Some statistic data about the presence in Rome of Jews born in Libya is available in Natale, Toscano 2010.

way of both preserving the family past, gaining recognition, and relieving themselves of clutter» (Goldberg 2012, p. 22).

The inclination towards «documenting and ‘preserving’ the past» (Goldberg 2012, p. 14) showed by the Jews from Libya is a feature we discussed with our interviewees not only in Israel, but also in the other destinations. In Rome, for instance, where the Jews from Libya represent a significant part of the Jewish population, cultural and social activities dealing with Libyan Jewish traditions, history and memories are attracting more and more interest and recognition. Cultural and social interactions provide the conditions for the collective construction of memory, for shaping what I have elsewhere termed the ‘relational memory’ among Jews from Libya (Rossetto 2013). In such settings, personal and collective memories are mutually articulated; as in a *jeu de miroirs* they reflect each other’s influences. This influence can be traced in narratives and detected in the circulation of recurring elements, such as the summoning of tragic events, heroic deeds, or prominent figures, evoked by many as essential markers of the collective history. Using this mutual interaction between the personal and the collective as a lens through which to read our collection might represent an interesting development of the project.

However, there is potential for research to be developed in another direction, based on the observation that, while cultural activities promoting Libyan Jewish heritage are not a completely new phenomenon among the Jewish community of Rome,⁵ the collected interviews confirm an increase in both initiatives involving and interest shown by different generations.⁶ Bearing this in mind, it would be possible to scrutinise the collection for clues that could address the following questions: What are the conditions (social, economic and cultural) that determined this phenomenon in the contemporary Italian context? Is this perhaps, in Goldberg’s terms, the «generational juncture» favourable to the promoting of such initiatives? In respect to heritage and transmission, is it possible to draw a comparison between the initiatives promoted by the Jews from Libya in Israel and those

5 Recalling the history of this kind of activism among the Jews from Libya would require much more space than that we have in this article. However, as an example of it, we could mention the tireless activism of Raffaello Fellah, as witnessed by many of our interviewees, as well as by an impressive amount of documentation donated by the family of Raffaello Fellah to the CDEC Foundation, in the context of the *Mapping Living Memories* project. In addition to that, we should at least mention that important initiatives were promoted in the UK, to arouse interest in the past but also the future of the Jews from Libya. In this respect, we thank Mr Raphael Luzon for providing us with relevant material and essential first-hand knowledge.

6 We could mention several persons, women and men, whose long lasting or more recent commitment towards promoting the traditions of Jews from Libya has contributed to this growing interest and awareness. In order to avoid any regrettable omission, we prefer not to mention individual figures. We limit the discussion to the observation that they could be considered as ‘*entrepreneurs de mémoire*’, in line with the explanation of the category elaborated by Trevisan Semi (2006; 2013).

in Rome? Would it be possible to expand the comparison by including other groups in a situation of transnational migration and perhaps adopt tools that have shown to be effective in exploring the construction of resulting identities (Jaspal, Cinnirella 2012)?

This last perspective could prove to be an interesting one, able to illuminate the processes of affirmation of 'a Libyan Jewish identity' and the designation of what constitutes, or not, *un ebreo tripolino* (a Tripolitanian Jew).⁷ These issues are growing in importance within the Jewish community of Rome and beyond. We are conscious that, as researchers, we may have contributed to the construction of the notion of 'Libyan Jewry' inasmuch as we questioned people assuming that they were, to some extent, a part of it. Being aware of the «challenge of essentialism» (Faist 2012) that might accompany research dealing with diasporic and transnational communities, I encouraged interviewees to expand on alternative heterogeneities (Faist 2012, p. 57) that shape(d) their individuality. On the one hand, heterogeneities in individual histories are essential to highlight personal *parcours* that have sometimes been overlooked by collective-official narratives. On the other hand, the combination of personal heterogeneous *parcours*, through a process of progressive construction (Bertaux 2010, p. 36), could help arrive at a much wider sociological understanding of what is collectively and officially transmitted. In the next section, I will consider the issue of 'mobility' as a marker of heterogeneity and as an indicator of further possible directions of inquiry.

3 Across Europe and the Mediterranean Sea

As previously mentioned, a distinctive feature of *Mapping Living Memories* is that materials were gathered across multiple destinations of the diaspora of the Jews from Libya, namely Israel, Italy, Great Britain and France. The multiple destinations considered in our research often coincide with the country of arrival after emigration. In other cases, they represent one of the different stages that formed the migration *parcours*. While listening to life stories, however, we soon realised that 'mobility' is an experience that extends far beyond a point of departure and a point of arrival. The life stories we have collected testify to the

7 As an example of how issues of identity and belonging to a group cross groups themselves and generations, I quote a recent video shot among young Jews living in Rome and posted on the web. The video would deserve further observation and contextualization, but in the scope of this article I can retain only the fact that each participant is presented, in subtitles, with her/his name, age and one of the following designations: *tripolina/o* (Tripolitanian), *romana/o* (Roman), *misto/a* (mixed). It would be interesting to further inquire the young participants about their personal self-attribution in the terms of these categories: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwIREq-QKok> (2014-02-18).

other 'crossings' that took place during the lifetime of our interviewees, and even before, shaping their 'positionality' not only in terms of geographical location but also in terms of understanding their personal and collective *parcours*.

Mobility across the Mediterranean, for instance, appears in the genealogies we collected. The stories of two of our interviewees are a case in point: the first is taken from the interview with F., who left Tripoli in 1967;⁸ and the second from the interview with A., born in Rome into a family of Libyan origin which left Tripoli in 1948.⁹ While tracing the origins of his family, F. talked about his great-grandfather, a French military official. A lieutenant of Napoleon during the Egyptian campaign, he apparently fell in love with the daughter of a general and fled to Tripoli. He settled there, keeping his French nationality and passing it on to his heirs, probably together with at least one property in France. Our interviewee, in fact, recalls that his brother went to France to study and lived in a house in Paris that belonged to the family. In 1967, fleeing Libya with his mother, F. chose Paris as a destination despite not knowing the language (he spoke only Italian) and never having set foot in the country. Having his brother there and a house where he could stay influenced the direction his life would take. In this sense, it could be argued that a 'mobility of the past' shaped a 'mobility in the future', a *parcours* from the past determined the conditions for a new direction. F.'s story is not an exception with regards to the experience of mass emigration of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries that took place in the second half of the 20th century. As pointed out by Abécassis and Faü (2011, p. 831), Jewish communities in the Muslim world were far from homogeneous from a social, economic and cultural point of view. As individuals and as families, Jews could count on highly heterogeneous 'capital' (human, social, material), and this, according to the scholars, clearly influenced the directions they embarked on at the moment of leaving. Even if F.'s story is just one of many, it nevertheless prompts another set of questions in relation to the Libyan experience. Indeed, our research showed very few Jews from Libya chose France as their destination. This choice seems to represent an exception, positioning these Jews at what we could call the 'periphery' of this dispersion. How are these «narratives from the periphery» connected to those of the 'centres', namely Israel and Italy? Do issues of affiliation with and transmission of 'Libyan Jewry' (in the sense we previously articulated) arise in this peripheral location?

A second, particularly fascinating example of mobility is the story of A.'s grandparents. His grandfather M. was born in Tiberias to a Jewish

8 Interview with F., in Paris, 20 June 2013.

9 Interview with A., in Rome, 3 July 2013.

family belonging to the ancient nucleus of Jewish families still living in the four holy cities of Palestine. The family then crossed «the Orient», as A. described it to eventually settle down in Tripoli where one day, caught by stormy weather, a boat carrying a group of young Jewish itinerant artists sought refuge. They originally came from Alexandria and used to travel across the Mediterranean and the Middle East to perform as musicians, singers and dancers in weddings, *bar mitzvah* or *henna*, «a sort of bachelorette party» as A. defined it for us. Among this group there was also his grandmother N., born in Aleppo but living in Alexandria with her family. According to the story that A.'s mother used to tell him, some Jewish families in Tripoli heard of the young artists' arrival in the port and offered them hospitality since it was the eve of Shabbat. On that occasion, the two grandparents met and fell in love, changing the destiny of grandmother N., who, from an itinerant artist, became a midwife, while at the same time keeping some her old habits:

Yes, but she was an emancipated woman, she used to dress according to European fashion, even if on some occasions, such as feasts she took part in, she wore clothes of oriental tradition, but definitely she was an emancipated woman, a chain smoker, which was a huge transgression for the time, but she kept this habit, and for that she was pointed out by women.

A. recalls his mother smiling while talking about his grandmother. Apparently she was not ashamed of revealing her mother's transgression (smoking), nor her previous profession as singer in a group of itinerant artists. It is precisely the fact that this story was not concealed in the history of the family, but was rather transmitted, and transmitted in a positive spirit, that struck my attention. The borders of social constructions about what does, or does not, fit into official and familiar narratives can be 'mobile'. What does push, or pull, these borders in the stories we collected? How are they negotiated in respect to other articulations, such as social, economic or cultural mobility?

The examples we have just briefly touched upon demonstrate the potentiality of reading the *Mapping Living Memories* collection employing key concepts such as 'mobility'. In a similar way, others can be mobilised to grasp what we identified, from the beginning of this project, as one of our main interests: exploring different streams of migration and multiple meanings associated with 'being a Jew from Libya' in different contexts.

4 Memory and the Unravelling of Postcolonial Histories

As previously mentioned, a main objective of the *Mapping Living Memories* project was to gather neglected life stories and testimonies of historical events for the *National Archive of Jewish Oral History* at the CDEC Foundation of Milan. Such a task, involving 18 months of project implementation and interview fieldwork, was understood by and negotiated between researchers, the hosting institution, and the interviewees in many different ways. By challenging our scholarly backgrounds, premises and methodologies, this process certainly helped to refine our academic approach, and how we carried out the fieldwork. This section will outline some of the premises and research questions which motivated the cross-disciplinary nature of this research from my viewpoint as a historian and highlight the potential of this project for historical reading.

The trajectories of our interviewees are drawn on a map of decades of colonial and postcolonial relations between Italy and Libya, Europe and its others. We gathered personal and family histories from fifty men and women from two generations. The eldest interviewee was born under Fascist rule in 1925 and the youngest in the mid-fifties. The stories collected chart shifts of concepts of Europe and 'the West', 'Empire' and 'home', 'Europe' and its 'others' as well as the related transformation in understanding of difference, 'race' and citizenship. The experience of such shifts - for example of inclusion and rejection from Italian, European or Libyan citizenship or from ideas of Jewish or non-Jewish culture - have marked the lives, strategies and self-narratives of our interviewees in many different ways. These men and women from North Africa brought with them to Italy, Europe, and Israel, multiple ways of being 'Jew', 'Arab', 'Italian', highlighting the historically constructed nature and the ongoing, mutual shaping of these very concepts. In line with recent scholarship in Jewish Cultural Studies (Biale 2002; Bassi 2011) and History (German et al. 2011), this project addressed the study of the Jews from Libya not as a pre-determined collective, but as subjects who consider themselves to be Jews, whose multi-dimensional interaction with cultures and societies has shaped ideas of Jewish and non-Jewish belonging over time. Such an approach informed our interview fieldwork in significant ways, as I will illustrate below.

Memory and subjectivity, as many scholars have pointed out (i.e., Passerini 2003), connect past and present through fantasy and imagination, raising fundamental questions about the meaning and practices of History. My investigation proceeded at two interconnected levels: questioning national/community narratives through the exploration of multi-dimensional belonging of our interviewees and addressing the intimate, the material, the every-day and the imaginary, to illuminate subjective appropriation of mainstream narratives of belonging.

The *Mapping Living Memories* project should therefore be read as a

collection of self-narratives illuminating dynamic processes of memory and forgetting, rather than as a repository of rare ethnographic data and testimonies on a factual past. Some of our interviewees used the word *mitzvah* (in Hebrew, religious duty) to explain their participation in this project, meaning fulfilment of a duty of testimony towards their families and religious communities. I believe that some of them would agree that our encounters also testify to how the past, traditions and identities are constantly being forged.

This is apparent in how our conversations sprang out of expectations, resistance, conflicts and negotiations between interviewers and interviewees. These include external factors at play in each different context of our fieldwork, since individual and collective narratives about the Jews from Libya intertwined with local streams of national and community narratives, emerging from the kaleidoscope of public memory.

Our project is hosted by the CDEC, a Jewish foundation and an institution widely acknowledged for its work on the history and memory of the Holocaust in Italy. This manifestly shaped the expectations of most interviewees, influencing their narratives, responses and what they would share with us. For example, our work was frequently understood as a gathering of testimonies of the violence suffered by the Jews from Libya, in line with the core expertise and research activities of the CDEC, despite the project being presented as a study focused on neglected aspects of the history of the diaspora of the Jews from Libya and one with a particular emphasis on women's perspectives, domesticity, gender relations, and family memories.

We avoided relying on the CDEC's official networks in an attempt to minimise such effects. For example, when setting up interviews, we chose to proceed via a snowball technique, asking each interviewee to suggest names and contacts of others who would be interested in helping with the project. Thus our fieldwork was largely directed by informal and family networks instead of religious or community institutions. For the same reason, we did not conduct interviews on the premises of the CDEC Foundation because it is an important historical site for the Jews of Milan and a hub of religious and cultural activities. Instead, each encounter was a unique event, staged by the interviewees in a location of their choice – notably their homes, offices or other places they judged relevant. This was a pivotal consideration in all contexts of our fieldwork.

Inevitably though, our institutional umbrella acted as one of the filters between us and the interviewees: for example, they tended to assume our Jewishness and attachment to religious tradition. Indeed, if the issue was not raised in preliminary phone contacts, it was during our visit, since apparently our names and attitudes rarely corresponded to expectations. Some of the strategies employed to deal with such discrepancies, before ascertaining our religious background, remain recorded in the interviews. They provide an interesting perspective on the intersubjective dynamics at

play in the encounters, occasionally marking some hilarious moments. For example, the defiant tone adopted by people perceiving us as pious young women when 'confessing' lack of celebration of Jewish rituals, questions on the origins of our names, speculations as to our uncommon interest in Jewish culture and history, not to mention some awkward comments on our 'non-Jewish' physical appearance. Such comments also reveal aspects of our interlocutors' self-perception and self-stereotyping based on their ideas of Jewishness. To put it in Alessandro Portelli's words, the acknowledgement of our difference – in this case identified as Jewish versus non-Jewish belonging – constituted a major source of the content and drama of our encounters, springing from the continuous marking and erasing of that 'line' between us (Portelli 2007, p. 67).

Another set of tensions woven into the narratives of the Jews from Libya which is worth evoking in the present overview is intertwined with the contested memories of Fascism, the colonial past and the Holocaust. In recent years, episodes of rehabilitation of Fascist figures in public memory in Italy have been identified by historians as forms of revisionism and historical manipulation (Mammone 2006). However, I argue that how these instances of rehabilitation interact with memories of Italian colonialism, including personal narratives of former settlers in Italian colonies, requires further investigation in order to deepen our understanding of the meanings of Fascism and colonialism in contemporary Italy as well as engaging with the history of Italian rule in Africa (Pergher 2014). The perceptions of Fascism and Italian colonialism expressed by our interviewees provide an important, albeit neglected, perspective on manifestations of colonial nostalgia in Italy, which illuminates how Italy, fascism and colonialism meant different things to different people and how feelings of belonging, memories and multiple understanding of citizenship are shaped by emotions and personal trajectories. Perhaps one of the most striking examples of the overlaps of different perceptions in the manifestation of colonial memory gathered in this collection is a recent initiative by Walter Arbib, a successful businessman from Tripoli. Arbib, who is an Italian, Israeli and Canadian citizen, played a decisive role in resolving the legal and political stalemate between Italy and Ethiopia concerning the return of the Axum obelisk, an archaeological treasure taken by the Italians during colonial rule. In our interview, he showed no interest in the colonial origins of the controversy surrounding the obelisk, presenting his personal initiative instead as an act of philanthropy and «a gift from the Jews from Libya», a sign of gratitude to Italy, the country which provided refuge to «his community» when they fled Tripoli in 1967.¹⁰ With

10 Interview with Walter Arbib, Rome (18 July 2013). Due to the public nature of the initiative, and according to the interviewee's will, reference to this interview requires no pseudonym or abbreviation.

my background as a European historian investigating narratives of colonial nostalgia and postcolonial migration, I found the reply – with its lack of interest in the symbolic dimension of the obelisk within Italy's colonial history – to be unsettling. Yet, reflecting on it, I realized that Mr Arbib's narrative illuminates just how many points of view are possible on the same history. From a postcolonial point of view, I would call this an example of 'divided memories' (Contini 1997; Foot 2009) which allow deeper, broader understanding of the past and of its shifting and multiple meanings as well as of the different (political) identities stemming from transnational trajectories of belonging.

The Jews from Libya are not celebrated heroes of the Resistance, nor monumentalised victims of colonialism; their relation with ideas of Italian-ness and whiteness is far more fluid, resulting in a tremendous lesson on the shifting meanings of histories and identities. Our interviewees do not «choose to address their complex origins, identity, and language use» in the same ways as other subjects already targeted by scholars of Italian postcolonialism – people expressing «consciousness of form of domination and resistance within Italian culture as related to power structures that are connected to both colonial policies and new global dynamics» (Ponzanesi 2012, p. 60). The men and women we interviewed do not articulate those forms of «counter-hegemonic stance», yet their trajectories and narratives challenge ideas of homogeneity in Italian history and culture, from indirect perspectives that require scholars to be critically aware.

In this sense, the *Mapping Living Memories* Project has the potential to bring further feminist and transnational approaches to the history of the Mediterranean and its subjects on the move. It is an exploration of «histories that nobody wanted» (Clancy-Smith 2010), an investigation of disregarded patterns connecting Europe, North Africa and the Middle East through perspectives long marginalized by nation-centred accounts of nation-building, decolonization and democracy. All these narratives tell stories of cohesive and neatly defined communities, usually stemming from progressive myths of struggle, survival and (national) regeneration. As a core manifestation of European and imperial culture since the 18th century, this tradition of History writing has been appropriated and 'translated' into the histories of Europe's internal and external 'others' – i. e., nationalist histories of decolonization and histories of religious, ethnic and other minorities. Reflecting on our fieldwork, I would argue that this collection of interviews calls for a postcolonial way of reading – and writing – the histories of Italy, Europe and the Mediterranean. This approach should make use of wider, more inclusive frameworks in order to relativise the epistemological approaches of Western scholarship and its notions of subjectivity, politics and modernity.

5 Conclusion: If, by Chance, an Anthropologist Happens to Meet a Historian

As happens when 'disciples' of different disciplines meet, in this case a historian and an anthropologist, we have drawn inspiration and knowledge from very different work on the history and culture of the Jews in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Starting as simple collaboration between two early career scholars, this project has been the cause of mutual enrichment and is now taking our research questions and ambitions in unexpected directions.

As this article has illustrated, the *Mapping Living Memories* project has raised questions on the creation of communities and identities by investigating the memories of the Jews from Libya. The study of memory is acknowledged as a vast intellectual field, drawing from and contributing to different specialisms. Despite the distance between our backgrounds, we have discovered overlaps in the articulation of many of our research questions which we believe have enriched our joint fieldwork and the main output of this project - the collection of interviews with the Jews from Libya across Europe and the Mediterranean deposited at the CDEC Foundation of Milan. The overlaps in this article and the diverse contributions to different fields of study that we envisage, reflect our experience.

Minorities and postcolonial diasporas, along with their cultural and material manifestations, have long been overlooked by political and historical narratives stemming from Eurocentric or 'Western' epistemological frameworks. In recent decades, postcolonial, cultural and feminist studies have been at the forefront of transformations in the scholarship landscape. The historical study of migration and memory has turned to emerging narratives from 'marginalized' or 'silenced' subjects and communities, questioning the mechanisms of memory and forgetting.

The histories and memories of Jews from Arab countries are a case in point and the *Mapping Living Memories* project engaged with the Jews from Libya and questioned national-based narratives. The project listened to fifty voices speaking in multiple languages about 'being a Jew from Libya'. Our approach tackled this diaspora as a dynamic phenomenon, in which identities and communities are constantly being constructed, reflecting multiple subjectivities, senses of belonging and self-perceptions which have all determined the strategies and patterns of integration of these subjects at different destinations and historical moments. By unravelling the multiple understandings of 'being a Jew from Libya' among people who have accepted being identified as such - and interviewed for this project - we have simultaneously put into question the very notion of 'Libyan Jewry' and explored multiple ideas of Italianness, Jewishness and whiteness.

As narratives of the self these interviews contain, along with much information, a variety of emotions: fear, rage, love, hope, nostalgia, regret and tender-

ness. They bear testimony to the human desire for inclusion and belonging and the incessant negotiations between the individual and community, which result in elaborated combinations of imagination and material feelings. While carrying out the investigation of these manifestations of human creativity in history and society, we hope that the sources we have collected and the sharing of multiple readings of this project will stimulate fellow scholars to raise new questions, perspectives and narratives on the history of the Mediterranean, its moving subjects, and transforming communities.

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