

By Rochel Isaacson

The Sad Saga of Libyan Jewry

Part I

Libya today is widely regarded as a hostile and repressive Muslim stronghold, veiled in a chilling mystique. The myriad glistening domes of the mosques dotting this Arabian landscape hint at its real menace. Little is known about Libya under the current totalitarian regime of Muammar el Gadhafi, who has barred his nation from all contact with the Western world.

As inhospitable as Libya is to outsiders, it is even more inhospitable to Jews. Even former Jewish citizens

are denied entry to their native land and are forbidden to visit their abandoned homes, synagogues, and graveyards in the two cities of Tripoli and Benghazi, and the many villages where they once lived.

In 1948, 36,000 Jews lived in Libya; today, none are left. A once-thriving Jewish community was destroyed and its members forced to seek refuge in foreign lands. Elia Roumani, a former Libyan Jew, says, "Any time you have a community that is erased, it's a tragedy for the community and for humanity. It's a loss for everyone."

Meet the Luzons

Raphael Luzon was born in 1954 in the city of Benghazi, which overlooks the Mediterranean Sea. The Luzon family lived in a neighborhood where most Jews were concentrated, although it was not exclusively Jewish. Apartment buildings in this section of the city were white two-story residences with lofty arched entrances and balconies whose balustrades ran along the length of the buildings' second floor.

Raphael's family and close friends called him "Faelino," or "Little Raphael," in Italian, a language that was commonly spoken in Libya then. His parents, Amos and Rachel, he and his two sisters, Betty and Rita, had close ties with their extended family, consisting of his father's two uncles and five aunts, and his mother's two uncles and three aunts, and their children.

The streets of Libya's capital city, Tripoli, and the smaller city of Benghazi were a mix of Oriental and European architecture. The European influence had been introduced early in the twentieth century, when Libya became an Italian colony. Under Italian influence, Jewish men who had hitherto dressed in traditional Libyan garb switched to the more fashionable European styles. Although most Jewish women followed suit, some still continued to cover their

heads with the traditional Libyan foulard head covering.

Despite their outwardly European appearance, the Luzon family, like other Libyan Jews, spoke Judeo-Arabic among themselves, marking them as Jews to the indigenous Arab populace, which communicates in Libyan Arabic. Libyan Jews were almost all fluent in Arabic, Italian, and Hebrew. Hebrew was taught to Libyan Jewish children long before the founding of the State of Israel.

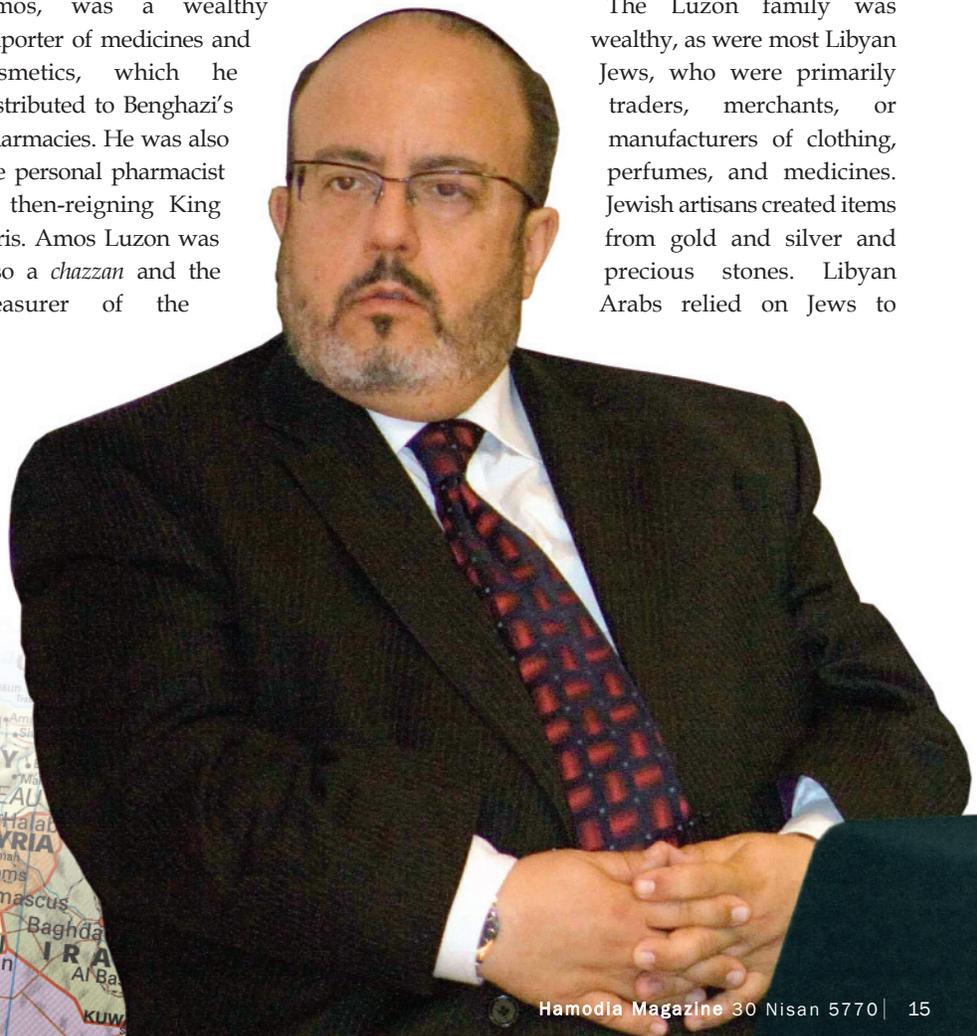
Raphael Luzon's father, Amos, was a wealthy importer of medicines and cosmetics, which he distributed to Benghazi's pharmacies. He was also the personal pharmacist of then-reigning King Idris. Amos Luzon was also a *chazzan* and the treasurer of the

kehillah. Raphael attended services in the synagogue regularly, as did nearly everyone in the community, and he was a lead singer in the choir, whose members were called *paytanim*. The *paytanim* would chant *Tehillim* at *Minchah* on Erev Shabbos and *Shir Hashirim* on Friday night. They were especially trained to sing the liturgical melodies of the *Yamim Nora'im*.

Raphael's uncle was the rabbi of a Benghazi synagogue and the director of the *cheder*, which was called "Talmud Torah."

He was also the city's official *shochet*.

The Luzon family was wealthy, as were most Libyan Jews, who were primarily traders, merchants, or manufacturers of clothing, perfumes, and medicines. Jewish artisans created items from gold and silver and precious stones. Libyan Arabs relied on Jews to



Raphael Luzon



generate a productive economy, which led to a mostly peaceful coexistence. But Jews resided somewhat uneasily alongside their Arab neighbors, for they were frequent targets of Muslim discrimination and violence, which at times erupted into bloody pogroms. Jews had the official status of *dhimmi*, a Muslim designation of second-class citizenship.

Jewish Life in Libya

In Tripoli and Benghazi, the main centers of Jewish life, Libyan Jews were faithful in all observances including Shabbos, kashrus, and praying with a *minyan*. Each of these two *kehillos* had a Chief Rabbi, a *shochet*, a *mohel*, a *beis din*, and a Talmud Torah.

The *beis din* did not adjudicate disputes often as community members lived serenely together, united by the commonality of a devout Jewish lifestyle.

"It was as if we were living in a protective bubble, despite the stresses of being Jews in an Arab society," says Raphael Luzon. "Everyone cared for [everyone else and] was always ready to help each other."

Community institutions aided destitute Jews, a *mitzvah* funded by levying taxes on *shechitah*, selling honors

in the synagogues, and collecting donations from the more affluent community members. Disadvantaged Jews lived mostly in Tripoli, within the walled *Hara*, or Jewish Quarter, whose streets were narrow and winding. The *Hara Kabira* was Tripoli's larger Jewish quarter, where most of the needy Jews lived.

The Libyan Jewish community was an ancient one that had been in the country for millennia under all its foreign occupiers, the more recent of which were Spain (from 1510) and Turkey (from 1551). In 1911 Italy conquered Libya and turned it into a colony administered by Italian officials. Subsequently Libya became home to foreign nationals from Italy, Great Britain, and France.

Libyan Jews at first welcomed the arrival of the Italians, who they thought would modernize Libyan society. However, Libyan Arabs fought the Italian conquest of their country, viewing the foreigners as invaders. When Italy's fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, rose to power in 1922, he made concerted overtures to Libya's Arabs and ultimately won their allegiance. By 1932 he was able to declare Libya "the first North African fascist colony." It was soon obvious that the Italian fascist regime favored the Arabs over the Jews.

The Fight for Shabbos

A precursor of Jewish maltreatment at the hands of the fascists was the 1932 Italian edict enacting "Sabbath Law." All schoolchildren were required to attend school on Saturday, but under the Turks Jewish children had been exempted from this law. The Italian governor, Pietro Badoglio, designated Sunday as the official day of rest in the colony, forcing Jewish students to attend school on Shabbos. The Tripoli *beis din* prohibited children from attending school on that day despite promises from the Italian authorities that Jewish students would not have to write in school. The *beis din* reprimanded parents who allowed their children to attend.

A compromise was eventually reached in 1934 between the new Italian governor, Italo Balbo, and the Jewish community, whereby separate schools for Jews and Italians were established, without changing their curriculum.

Nevertheless, circumstances worsened. In May 1935 an Italian decree was passed requiring storekeepers in Tripoli to close their shops on Sunday. In November 1936 another decree demanded that all stores throughout Libya stay open for business on every day except Sunday.

The first Shabbos the new decree went into effect, Jewish shopkeepers refused to



The Dar Bishi Synagogue in Tripoli is visited by Italian governor, Italo Balbo, in 1937. Rabbi Izhak Bukobza blesses the entourage near the open Torah scrolls."



Libyan Holiday Minhagim

During Pesach, it was customary for Libyan women to bake matzah daily in their homes in clay ovens prepared specifically for this purpose. Some women tied kerchiefs around their mouths so that not a drop of moisture would destroy the kashrus of the matzos. The women worked swiftly, making sure the process did not exceed fifteen minutes to assure the strictest adherence to *halachah*.

On the day after Pesach, the entire community assembled in a large park, where they sang, rejoiced, had refreshments, and recited the *Birkas Ha'ilanos*, the blessing on trees.

On Erev Yom Kippur, the *shochet* would go from house to house to slaughter the chickens used for *kapparos*.

On Simchas Torah, Libyan Jews held *hakafof sheniyo*s at dawn. Children rose early so they could hasten to the synagogue and join the joyous celebration, and of course enjoy the festive refreshments served afterward. The women prepared coffee and delectable cakes; the men, with the assistance of copious

quantities of Arak, within a short time felt "elevated" spiritually and otherwise.

Purim was a two-day affair, to commemorate the Purim miracle of Shushan, as well as two other miracles that occurred centuries later. One was Purim Sherif, which memorializes the rescue of Tripoli's Jews from the decree of the Tunisian Bey Ibrahim esh Sherif, who had planned their extermination. The second was Purim Burgol, which commemorates the defeat of the Algerian corsair Ali Burgol, who burned two Jews at the stake.

At one point during the Shovavim period (when the Torah portions of *Shemos* through *Mishpatim* are read in the synagogue), Libyan Jews gathered to recite the entire *sefer Tehillim* three times in succession and held a *taanis dibbur*, or verbal "fast."

Many of these customs are still practiced in Libyan Jewish enclaves today.

open and skirmishes broke out. A Tripolitan newspaper defined Jewish refusal to conduct business as open rebellion. As a punishment to the Jewish community, trade licenses were rescinded and two people were publicly flogged. This drew the attention of the international press and did not reflect well on the Italians.

The Italian rabbinate, which appointed the Libyan Chief Rabbis, wished to force modern reforms on the religious Libyan Jewish community, and they named Rabbi Gustavo Castelbognesi to the position in anticipation that he would do so. But Rabbi Castelbognesi maintained that his

religious duty "was to encourage Jewish religious traditions," and he did not persuade the Jews to open their shops on Shabbos. Because he objected to Shabbos desecration, he was recalled to Italy in 1935.

The appointment of Chief Rabbi Aldo Lattes in 1937 enabled the Libyan Jewish community to work more effectively with the Italian governor, for Rabbi Lattes was politically astute and he convinced Governor Balboa to revoke the penalty against those Jews who refused to open their shops on Shabbos.

On a visit to Libya that year, Mussolini was reported to have said to Chief Rabbi

Lattes, "[The] governor's presence in the region ensures that the Jews of Tripoli can rest assured that the fascist government, which issued the law on Jewish communities, will always respect their traditions."

Racial Laws

Until 1938 Raphael Luzon's father, along with the other Libyan Jews, dealt with the fascist colonial government with relative ease. But matters deteriorated in 1938 after Mussolini introduced Germany's racial laws in Libya. Jews were dismissed from municipal and public jobs and other

Libyan Jewish Community Timeline

professions; they were banned from attending public schools and institutions of higher education; and the word "Jew" was boldly stamped on all official documents obtained by Jews.

Racial laws invoked a clear distinction that characterized Jews as inferior to Muslims and promoted rising tensions between Arabs and Jews. Italians thus viewed Jews as subordinate to themselves and inferior even to the lower classes of Libyan Arabs.

Both of Raphael Luzon's parents were expelled from school. Although a Jewish school had been established by the community, Amos Luzon went out to work and found a job with a family of livestock traders. Afterward, in order to help his family survive financially, he tried his hand at trading in spices and gold. He did his best to manage daily life, buffeted by the virulent racism of both Italians and Arabs.

The situation declined dramatically when Mussolini solidified his ties with Germany by signing an alliance with Hitler in 1939. That pact boded ill for Jews, both in Libya and in Italy.

Between 1940 and 1943 the port cities of Benghazi and Tripoli came under attack by opposing Italian and British forces. The Jews of Benghazi found themselves under fire several times when British troops fought the Italian forces and occupied the city. The Italians fought back to regain control of the city, and at one point Benghazi was left in limbo for several days without anyone in command. The Italians finally crushed the British troops and recaptured Libyan territory.

When British forces had first invaded Benghazi, the Jews welcomed them, hoping for improved conditions, so when the Italians reconquered Libya, they took revenge against the Jews for this "traitorous" behavior. Italians and Libyan Arabs stormed through the city, rioting, pillaging, and looting Jewish stores. The Jews trembled in fright inside their homes. Food was scarce, hunger prevailed, and Jews received scantier rations than those of their Muslim neighbors.

Benghazi synagogue classroom
before World War II.

Libya, the fourth-largest country in North Africa, is bordered by Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Egypt, and the Mediterranean Sea. Its three provinces are Tripolitanea, in the west, in which the capital city of Tripoli is located; Cyrenaica, in the east, the site of Benghazi; and Fez in the south. Jews have lived in Libya since the early days of the Roman Empire.

Fourteenth century B.C.E. – Benghazi Jews honor Roman Emperor Titus, who favored the Jews.

First century C.E. – Yeshivos are established in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania; in **3816/56 C.E.**, a large synagogue is built in Benghazi.

Seventh century C.E. – Muslims conquer Libya.

Tenth century C.E. – Jewish population in Tripoli is 800.

5270/1510 – Spain conquers Tripoli.

5309/1549 – Rabbi Shimon Labi, a legendary Rabbi and kabbalist, settles in Tripoli to educate the Jewish community in Torah and *Kabbalah*. Eight hundred Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition settle in Libya.

5311/1551 – Turkish Ottoman rule begins. Synagogues are built in Tripoli.

5671/1911 – Italians occupy Libya.

5695/1935 – Decrees are enacted against Jews.

5701/1941 – Jews are deported or interned in Libyan and Tunisian concentration camps.

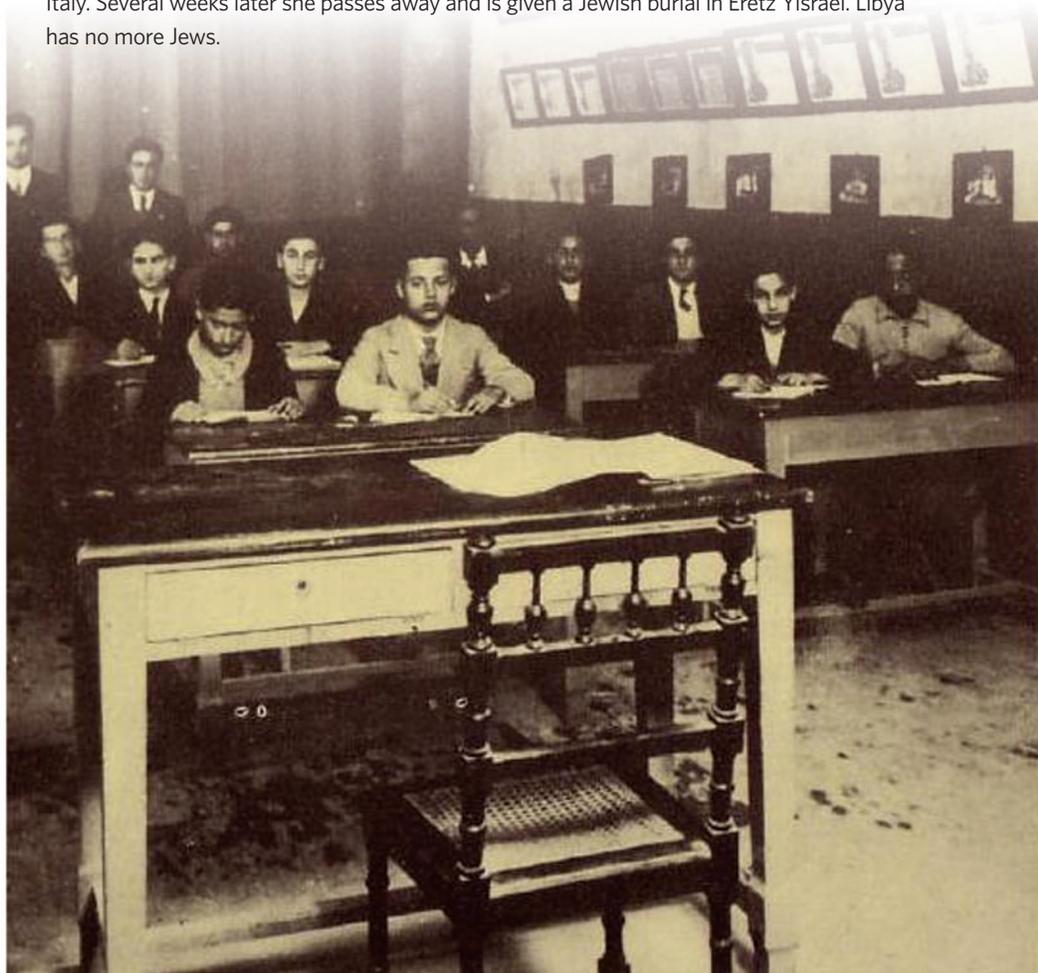
5703/1943 – British Mandate begins; anti-Jewish rioting and two pogroms by Muslims take place.

5711/1951 – Libya achieves independence under the reign of Senusi tribesman King Idris; oil is discovered and Libya becomes a wealthy oil exporter.

5727/1967 – Libyan Jewish community evacuated from Libya to Italy.

5729/1969 – Muammar el Gadhafi acquires power in a bloodless coup.

5764/2004 – The last Jew, Rina Debash, is discovered in a Libyan nursing home. Her nephew, David Gerbis, negotiates her release with Gadhafi's government and she is flown to Italy. Several weeks later she passes away and is given a Jewish burial in Eretz Yisrael. Libya has no more Jews.



Deportation

In February 1941 Marshal Rommel's German troops arrived in Libya to shore up Mussolini's occupation. The same devastating methods they were using on Jews in Europe were now pressed on Jews in Libya, and deportations to concentration camps began. Jews of British nationality in Libya were deported to Italy, and from there packed into freight trains and taken to the infamous Bergen-Belsen and Innsbruck-Reichenau concentration camps. Jews with French citizenship were deported to internment camps in Tunisia.

One such group from Benghazi arrived at Innsbruck-Reichenau, a division of the Dachau concentration camp in Austria, and were immediately separated by gender. The men were forced to work from early morning until late at night. When the Libyan Jews attempted to pray, the Nazis reacted with singular cruelty, subjecting them all, even the elderly, to starvation and solitary confinement. Ashkenazic Jewish inmates marveled at the Libyan Jews' uncompromising maintenance of kashrus, despite the halachic leniencies of *pikuach nefesh* on which they might have relied. Indeed, most of the Libyan Jewish prisoners there died of starvation.

The Libyan Jews who were deported to Bergen-Belsen were, at times, treated differently. Although their living conditions were starkly similar to those of other Eastern European Jewish internees, the Libyan Jews were considered privileged, for they were permitted to live as family groups (although segregated by gender), a condition that helped them to survive. They also sporadically received packages from the Red Cross, although they were still malnourished. They were virtually isolated from the other inmates by lack of a common language, but all the inmates, Europeans and Libyans, lived in the shadow of the crematoria, which induced a relentless dread.

Libyan-born Jews with only Libyan citizenship were rounded up for forced labor and detained in internment camps that the German-Italian conquerors established throughout Libya. These camps were also established in the



Photo credit: "The Jews of Libya; Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement"

Several rabbis studying Torah in one of Tripoli's yeshivos. Second from left: Rabbi Zion Bitan; second from right: Rabbi Refael Dabush.

neighboring countries of Tunisia and Algeria. The camps in North Africa were not quite as deadly as their European counterparts, which were systematically exterminating Jews; these camps were designed, rather, to break the Jews through excruciating slave labor and starvation. The Giado internment camp near Tripoli was known to be particularly brutal, and its Italian commandants were notorious for their sadism.

Giado survivor Giora Roumani recounts, "[The Italian officers] took us all outside and put us in a large circle and wanted to kill us. But after fifteen minutes a call came through from higher Italian authorities who said, 'Don't kill the Jews. Make them suffer.' That's what the Italian commandants did. The Italians told the elderly rabbis with long flowing beards to sweep the floor with their beards. And that's what the rabbis did. They swept the floor with their beards, on their stomachs, as they were ordered to do."

Inmates of Giado were forced to build roads, and their barracks resembled an austere warehouse. The lack of adequate hygiene was exacerbated by the extreme rain and cold in winter, and the stifling heat of

North Africa's summer. Starvation was rampant, for Arab overseers—who were occasionally more humane than the Italian officers—did not have enough food for the imprisoned Jews. Famine bred disease, and many died of combined hunger, hard labor, and illnesses such as malaria. Jews from Tripoli were permitted to send food to Giado's malnourished inmates, but despite their efforts, provisions were insufficient and many victims starved to death.

The British recaptured Libya from the Italians in 1943. At the war's end, following the Allied liberation of the concentration camps, Libyan survivors were permitted to return to their war-torn, razed cities and villages. The Libyan Jews had come home, but they were unaware that their stay in Libya would prove to be very short-lived. **M**

To be continued

This article was partly based on the book The Jews of Libya; Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement, by Maurice M. Roumani, Ph.D. Quotes from Elia and Giora Roumani are from the documentary film The Last Jews of Libya, directed by Vivienne Roumani-Denn, used with permission.