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# The Materialities of be-longing: Objects in/of Exile across the Mediterranean

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# THE MATERIALITIES OF BE-LONGING: Objects in/of Exile across the Mediterranean



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*Mobile Culture Studies.  
Materialities*

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Materialities*

Vol. 7 2021

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# The Materialities of Be-longing

## Objects in/of Exile across the Mediterranean\*

Guest editors Piera Rossetto and Ewa Tartakowsky

*But to be certain of our own existence,  
we need the objects, the gestures, and the words.*

Herta Müller

Throughout their long history, the humanities and social sciences have been influenced by several ‘turns’: the interpretative turn, the cultural turn, the affective turn, the spatial turn, the material turn, and the ‘mobilities turn’ (Hannam et al. 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006), the last being perhaps one of the most recent of this incomplete list.

Although ‘whether and how mobility constitutes a new paradigm in and for the social sciences’ (Faist 2013: 1638) has been up for discussion, it is unquestionable that scholars of different disciplines find themselves fully immersed in and confronted with what has been framed as ‘the mobilities moment’ (Brettell 2018: 18).

As a transdisciplinary field of research which has been steadily growing and expanding (Faulconbridge and Hui 2016), mobilities studies have given new input also to the discussion about the relationship between migrant worlds and material cultures, between mobility and materiality (Basu and Coleman 2008). Indeed, Arjun Appadurai (1986;1996) and George Markus (1995) have already called for their contemporaries ‘to follow not only the movement of people, but also of things; metaphors and ideas; plots and stories; lives and biographies’ (Brettell 2018: 19). However, as noted by anthropologist Galitzine-Loumpet, ‘the many sociological and anthropological studies of the migratory phenomenon take only partial interest in objects; also, studies on material culture rarely consider [...] objects within the mobility condition peculiar to migration’ (Galitzine-Loumpet 2013: 4, our translation).<sup>1</sup>

\* As editorial project, *The Materialities of Be-longing: Objects in/of Exile across the Mediterranean* drew inspiration from an ongoing conversation and exchange among several of its contributors. More specifically, it is the result of the Itinerant Seminar organised by Piera Rossetto in the framework of the research project *Europe’s (In)Visible Jewish Migrants* (funded by the FWF-Austrian Science Fund – Grant n. T1024-G28). More on the project here: <https://memories.hypotheses.org/>

As guest editors, we wish to thank the Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Graz for its generous support as well as the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable work. Sincere gratitude goes to the MCSJ editors for having accepted our thematic proposal and to all authors for turning our seminal interrogations into an original exploration.

<sup>1</sup> “les nombreuses études sociologiques ou anthropologiques du phénomène migratoire ne s’intéressent qu’accessoirement aux objets ; pas plus que les études de la culture matérielle n’abordent [...] les objets dans le régime de mobilité spécifique de la migration” (Galitzine-Loumpet 2013: 4).



Since the beginning of the 2010s, a growing number of research projects and publications have sought ‘to understand the relationships of humans and things in the context of flight and migration’,<sup>2</sup> such as ‘objects of exile’ (Bischoff and Schlör 2013a), ‘precipitates of re-memory’ (Tolia-Kelly 2004), and a constellation of things that were left behind or taken with, that went lost or managed to survive. Objects in exile and objects of exile<sup>3</sup> are interrogated and conceived as ‘relational objects’ that bear a ‘cumulative memory’ and belong to both realms of ‘materiality and immateriality’ (Galitzine-Loumpet 2013).

This thematic issue of *Mobile Culture Studies. The Journal >mcsj>* is dedicated to the ‘unexpected directions’ that research can take when things are taken seriously (Brown 2001; 2004; 2015). Like human beings, things also ‘embark on a journey and find themselves somewhere – elsewhere in the world – again’ (Bischoff and Schlör 2013b: 9, our translation). To follow the trajectories of displaced things and persons requires openness to the ‘surprise of movement’, to the ‘cultural connections between unexpected times and places’ (Greenblatt 2010: 18; 17).

Researching the entanglement of ‘materiality, agency, and subjecthood’ (Dini 2017: 3) in the context of exile and migration encompasses the effort to unveil an object’s ‘resonance’: its power ‘to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which – as a metaphor or, more simply as metonymy – it may be taken by a viewer to stand’ (Greenblatt 1990: 19–20). What place do objects occupy in the process of making sense of a specific event or an entire life trajectory? Do objects enable us ‘to find more imaginative ways of connecting micro and macro levels’ (Rügen 2010: 660), knowing that ‘a change of scale might lead to a change of question and of explanation’ (Struck, Ferris and Revel 2011: 579)? How is it that some objects are mobilised and others are instead – consciously or unconsciously – left aside? Do the latter tell us different stories than the former?

However, this same entanglement of materiality, agency, and subjecthood can also be considered from a less explored and yet equally fruitful perspective: a self-reflective stance – on the part of the researcher – towards the objects in/of exile. What happens when the researchers themselves are the ones who move or find themselves in a condition of *exilance* (Nuselovici 2013)? Through the mediation of literary texts or archival sources, of images or personal recollections, researchers are confronted with the experience that people have of mobility in its broader sense: of going elsewhere, coming from elsewhere, longing for elsewhere but also of feeling or being perceived as belonging to elsewhere. Why does the researcher stop at a particular object when listening, reading, and looking at these stories of migration and/or exile? Wonder – affirms Greenblatt – is the power of the object ‘to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention’ (Greenblatt 1990: 21): what unexpected directions might wonder impress on a research path?

Issue 7 of *Mobile Culture Studies. The Journal >mcsj>* originated from a call for submissions which aimed at grasping the transnational resonances that objects of/in exile enshrine. At the same time, we wanted the collection to be ‘peculiar, particular, and local’, sharing the view that cultural mobility is better understood in terms of *contingentia* than through the prisms of

2 <http://materialitaet-migration.de/en/> is part of the project <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/593397.html>; Bischoff and Schlör 2013b.

3 <https://displacedobjects.com/> is part of the project <https://nle.hypotheses.org/>



new grand narratives (Greenblatt 2010:16–17). In developing this publication project, we had in mind three possible directions of enquiry. Firstly, *Research on objects*: analysis of objects brought by migrants in the relational perspective, objects that have changed their social biotope and the reconfigurations and new status that this implies in terms of related practices. Secondly, *Research with objects*: analysis of objects used by researchers as tools in their interactions with the empirical field of research on Mediterranean migration (e.g. which photos are used during photo elicitation interviews? What is the relationship between researchers and the objects brought from their research field and/or with respondents who have offered objects to them?) as well as of objects which stimulate the ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills 1959). Finally, *Restitution by objects*: analysis of epistemological issues connected to creative and alternative (i.e. non-academic) restitutions of research by objects (Alexandre-Garner and Galitzine-Loumpet 2020).

Methodologically, we solicited pieces that explore different (auto)ethnographic practices of research (Reed-Danahay 2017) and writing (Ellis 1999), along with more traditional scientific articles and creative interventions. In this sense, the issue endorses a pluralist and polyphonic style of thinking, which is also expressed by the different languages used by the contributors (English, French, Italian). Concretely, we invited authors to focus on an object that is meaningful to them personally or to those they have met in their field of research. Finally, we decided to focus on the Mediterranean region, which has always been a place of multiple exchanges for people, ideas, and objects (Trivellato et al. 2014). These include objects of exile, such as those that migrants themselves have brought to Europe, but also objects in exile in the literal sense of the word, including material objects connected to trade and those brought to Europe during the colonial period. Indeed, issues concerning the restitution of African heritage by the European ex-colonial empires represent one of the angles from which to construct a socio-material landscape of these ‘migrant’ objects, their movement, and the socio-political practices connected to them (Sarr and Savoy 2018).

The contributions we present here explore the multiple dimensions of ‘what can be learnt from objects in the context of migration and exile’. By adopting different disciplinary perspectives, the articles can be interpreted through four main epistemological declensions. These encompass the object as therapeutic care and object of mediation; as heritage and archive; as testimony of absence; and as mirror of the self, of reflexivity, and of self-construction.

*The Materialities of Be-longing: Objects in/of Exile across the Mediterranean* opens with three articles that deal with contemporary migrations across the Mediterranean to Europe. What is the role of the object(s) that migrants bring with them in the often-traumatic experience of displacement and dis-location? Which temporal, spatial, and mental dimensions do objects in the context of migration reveal? Francesca Alemanno presents the case of Suryabhan, an Indian migrant who settled in Southern Italy. The migratory trajectory is investigated through the prism of his relationship with a sacred idol representing the God Ganesh, an object he brought directly from India. Alemanno combines analysis of the cultural dimension of the migratory experience – referred to in the article as the ‘culture of migration’ (Marshall 1982; Kandel & Massey 2002; Turco 2018) – with a critical perspective of material culture. In this way, the author unveils the different meanings with which the object is invested in the temporality (Rosales 2017) of the migration trajectory and in the development of Suryabhan as human being and as entrepreneur: not only a religious object and an artifact which mediates the rela-





tionship with (the absence of) the family of origin, but also a ‘device’ capable of promoting his self-confidence and taking him out of the existential stagnation into which he had fallen.

The vulnerability of the migratory condition is also explored by Catherine Thomas and Laure Levillayer, respectively a psychiatric nurse and an anthropologist. In the article *Objets de l’exil, objets de soins*, Thomas and Levillayer discuss their therapeutical practice with refugee or asylum seeker patients suffering from multiple traumas related to exile. In the context of clinical sessions, objects emerge as carriers of meanings and emotions that help the patients to reconstruct their psychic life and their social existence. Physically brought or simply recalled, objects have the potential to serve as therapeutic levers to re-establish internal security and open the individual towards the future. The transcultural consultations that Thomas and Levillayer describe allow us to glimpse what it means to pass through social isolation and psychological disorganisation in the context of migration and exile. More often, however, we ‘experience’ these human trajectories only through the mediation of images on the screen, where, in their most tragic form, they disappear under a white cloth.

Angela Viora’s visual essay invites us to reflect on how media, whilst bridging ‘physical and geographical distances, [...] may also accentuate the gap between reality and virtuality, blurring the line between “subjectness” and objectification’ (Viora in this issue). In the durational and live performance *The Foreigner – Unknown Unlabelled Unexpected* – which is discussed in the visual essay, Viora wanted to embody the disembodied images we see on screen. As she explained, the author-performer’s body lying on the ground of publicly accessible spaces elicited dynamics of empathy and alterity. By adopting the form of the visual essay, Viora offers to the readers the opportunity to immerse themselves in a similar experience at the intersection of image, object, body, and subject and ponder their own implication (Rothberg 2019) in the map of contemporary migrations across the Mediterranean.

In a perspective of *histoire croisée* (Werner, Zimmermann 2004), contemporary migrations can often be inscribed in the ‘ongoing and durable effects of colonial violence after decolonization’ (Navaro 2020: 167), that is – as Navaro puts it following Stoler (2013) – the ‘aftermath of colonialism’. Objects as ‘imperial debris’ (Stoler 2013), their persistence as things and metaphors, are addressed by Fabio Colonnese, Maria Grazie D’Amelio, and Lorenzo Grieco in a co-authored essay, as well as by Claudia Sbuttoni and, in the form of a collaborative visual essay, by Lilla Szasz and Elsa Peralta.

In *The Transfer of Architectural Heritage as a Transcultural Tool: The Case of the Obelisk of Aksum*, Colonnese, D’Amelio, and Grieco (respectively an architect and scholars of the history of architecture) discuss the relocation of the stele – transferred from Ethiopia to Italy in 1937 by the fascist regime as war booty – back to its original site in 2005. The transfer is framed within the history of movement and relocation of artworks and architecture, which since antiquity has been, as the authors recall, ‘the result of asymmetrical power relations in times of peace and war [...] and as such unjust’ (Colonnese, D’Amelio and Grieco, this issue). While acknowledging this political asymmetry and the symbolic value of the stele in the Italian colonial and postcolonial history, the authors focus on the technical challenges of the transportation of architectures, which is indeed one of the possible interpretations of the object itself (see Barbara Spadaro in Rossetto e Spadaro 2014). In the authors’ view, the return of the obelisk ‘prompted a process of knowledge transfer, opening new opportunities of cultural cooperation’ (Colonnese, D’Amelio and Grieco, this issue).



While the obelisk was claimed by its legitimate owners (the Ethiopian people), Claudia Sbuttoni's article takes its cue from unclaimed objects in the context of another 'aftermath of violence' (Navaro 2020): the post-WW2 Trieste borderland and its complex memoryscape. The objects which inspired Sbuttoni's essay are the belongings of Istrians who identified themselves as Italian and who left, between 1943 and 1956, the territories previously belonging to the Italian State. Bed frames, children's toys, trunks, aluminium cooking pots, wood-burning cast iron stoves, bathroom sinks, tools, children's school notebooks, ceramic dining sets, sewing machines, books, dark wooden wardrobes: the Magazzino 18, a warehouse at the old port of Trieste, is packed with all these relics. By discussing the tours organised at the Magazzino 18 by the Istituto Regionale per la Cultura Istriano-fiumano-dalmata (Regional Institute of Istrian-Fiumean-Dalmatian Culture, I.R.C.I.), Sbuttoni offers a critical reading of the construction of nationalistic memory in the Italian community displaced by the so called 'exodus' from Istria and Dalmatia after WW2. In *Unclaimed objects, reclaimed history: Magazzino 18 and the Istrian Exodus*, Sbuttoni illustrates how relics, otherwise mute, are mobilised to tell a certain story of collective memory and identity by former Italian refugees and how, eventually, 'the importance paid to the objects of the exodus act to obfuscate Italy's fascist past and minimise Italy's role in the second World War' (Sbuttoni, this issue).

Like the relics featured in Sbuttoni's essay, the plethora of material spoils found in Lisbon's flea market or in forgotten personal archives lead us to explore what remains today of the Portuguese colonial history: 'a memorial field fraught with fractures, traumas and silences' (Peralta 2019). In *TRACES. A visual essay with photography by Lilla Szász and words by Elsa Peralta*, the authors invite us to follow the 'memory traces of an illegitimate history' (Peralta and Szász, this issue). Letters sent from Madrinhas de Guerra (Godmothers of War) to soldiers in the former colonies, negatives of photographs which remained unclaimed, and photo albums in which only captions remain are assembled in Szász's photographic practice. The visual essay displays the connection between the objects, i.e. the fragments, of an untold past and the present of the artist and the questions that inhabit her. As she looks at the photo albums without images, she asks: 'What is a caption without an image? What is the function of a photo album? What do we wish to preserve with it? Do they still form our memory of the past?' (Peralta and Szász, this issue).

These questions deeply resonate with Michèle Baussant's poignant essay on objects lost and left behind by Egyptian Jews. By taking inspiration from a bronze plaque on a synagogue bench in Cairo that carries the name of its former owner, Youssef Ades, Baussant delves into the complex layers of remembering and forgetting, of being present and absent, experienced by Jews who 'came out of Egypt, but have been unable to bring Egypt out of themselves' (Baussant, this issue). In her long ethnographic work with Egyptian Jews in Egypt and in the many countries where they settled, Baussant observed how, like 'phantom limbs', artifacts and objects left behind often 'take on more importance and space than the objects carried into exile' (Baussant, this issue). The 'stickiness', to use Baussant's metaphor, of this past to the present (the present of Egyptians and of Egyptian Jews), challenges any interpretation exclusively based on the binary identifications framed by nationalisms. Moreover, it urges us to, in Baussant's view, assume our own responsibility vis-à-vis a heritage of which we are not just 'passive receivers' (de l'Estoile 2008).



The story of Pedatzur Benattia, an Israeli of Libyan descent, presented by Giordano Bottechia in the form of an interview, offers an example of another diasporic Judaism, namely Libyan Jewry, and the value assigned to objects in the effort to ‘preserve’ them. Benattia could be defined as an ‘entrepreneur de mémoire’ (Noiriel 2004 ; Trevisan Semi 2006) who has, for decades now, actively researched, collected, and bought items belonging to the Jewish community in Libya. The collection he has put together includes objects (especially religious) brought by Jews from Libya at the time of their emigration to Israel as well as items that were left in Libya (which he has managed to buy and transfer to Israel). In 1995 Benattia established the Or Shalom Centre (Centre for the Preservation and Transmission of the Heritage of the Jews of Libya) with the aim of creating a museum of Libyan Jewry. His efforts in support of the establishment of a common, public memory of Libyan Jews were deeply influenced by his own personal story, as he is a descendant of a Libyan Jewish family. Public activism and personal biography intertwine in Benattia’s trajectory as entrepreneur de mémoire, a passion that started as a childhood inclination for old objects but soon took on a communal dimension.

This personal dimension of Benattia’s activism offers an ideal connection to the concluding essays of the issue, in which objects feature as mirrors of the self and levers of (self)reflexivity. Dario Miccoli presents a (self)reflection on the role that books have played for Jews along the southern shore of the Mediterranean during colonial and postcolonial times. A book he has never read, *Storia politica, civile, militare della dinastia di Savoia dalle prime origini a Vittorio Emanuele II* by Francesco Predari, inspired Miccoli to reflect on his own journey as a scholar of Jews of early twentieth-century Egypt (Miccoli 2015). Mixing historical analysis with ego-historical reflections, the essay looks at books ‘as mirrors of the plurality of (Jewish) identities and memories that can be traced in the Mediterranean up until the 1950s and 1960s and, in different ways, until today’ (Miccoli, this issue).

Like the book that Miccoli never read, the tennis racket discussed by Martino Oppizzi is also a specific and yet apparently anonymous object. However, in the recollections of its owner, a Tunisian Jew named Carlo U., it functions as signifier of an entire social world and its rules. In *The Rules of the Game: Tennis, Clubs and Postcolonial Society in the Memory of an Italian Immigrant From Tunisia*, Oppizzi offers an original analysis of the ‘sociability’ of the elites in post-colonial Tunisia from a micro-historical perspective. The Tunis Tennis Club, in fact, represented a ‘significant continuity between the colonial period and independence, particularly in the eyes of the Italian bourgeoisie to which Carlo belonged’ (Oppizzi, this issue). Although a material object that can be replicated, the tennis racket is invested in Carlo’s narrative with a complex stratification of multiple belongings and eventually provides a unique access ‘to the geographical, emotional and social anchor points’ of the interviewee’s past before his emigration to Italy.

*Addis Ababa-Florence: round trip. Story of three letters and a photo* by Emanuela Trevisan Semi closes this collection dedicated to researching the entanglement of ‘materiality, agency, and subjecthood’ (Dini 2017: 3) in the context of exile and migration. Trevisan Semi’s essay deals with the history of the Beta Israel (Falasha, Jews of Ethiopia), of which Trevisan Semi is a renowned scholar. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Beta Israel attracted the philanthropic attention of several European Jewish institutions, which were eager to provide them with a ‘modern, Western’ education. Young Ethiopian Jews were thus sent to study in Palestine or in European capitals, such as Vienna or Paris, so that they may later become educators and teachers back in their native country. In this essay, Trevisan Semi concentrates on the life



trajectory of one of these, Menghistu Isaac, and dwells in particular on the dramatic situation in which he found himself during the Second World War, during which he was forced to ask for help, in the letters presented by Trevisan Semi, from Italian co-religionaries. Trevisan Semi interprets the letters as ancient palimpsests on which several layers of history overlap, and she reminds us of the responsibility we bear to decipher 'the density of their meanings, both explicit and implicit' (Trevisan Semi, this issue).

The circumstances that led Trevisan Semi to re-open the boxes of an archive built over forty years of research inspire the concluding remarks of this introduction. Over the years, Trevisan Semi has been repeatedly asked by the descendants of the young Beta Israel she researched for documents and details about their great-grandparents and other relatives. Some of these young men, who crossed the Mediterranean or left their villages for Addis Ababa with the promise to become 'illustrious and famous people' (Summerfield 2003: 175), 'had tragic stories, since they had died, often in conditions of great solitude and abandonment, of depression, tuberculosis and other diseases' (Trevisan Semi, this issue).

These tragic stories resonate with the essays which opened this issue: with the vulnerability of the migratory condition, with the existential stagnation into which migrants might fall, with the multiple traumas related to exile. At the umpteenth request from a Beta Israel descendant, Trevisan Semi reopened the numerous boxes of her archive, and this request prompted her 'to pore again over that precious material [...] in the hope of creating generational and cultural bridges for the Beta Israel whose memories of their past in Ethiopia had faded after they had emigrated to Israel' (Trevisan Semi, this issue). What if, we wonder, one day the descendants of those who are crossing the Mediterranean today turn to scholars and ask for documents and details about their relatives? This brings us back to the question of the archive: Which kind of archives are we building? How should we exploit and conserve them, how should we patrimonialize these objects and the memories that make them singular?

The present issue aims to question the links that individuals in exile, researchers, and more widely societies have with objects – these non-humans charged with meanings that change according to context and temporality. It is possible to wonder if these links participate in 'convergences', in a common memorial regime, despite their singularities and heterogeneities? Do they form an archipelago 'under the double figure of the rooting of each one, here and now, and of common features which draw, in spite of everything, a whole' (Amar, Bertheleu & Teulière, 2015, 16, our translation),<sup>4</sup> or do they create a constellation (Banti 2000 ; Ben-Yehoyada 2015 ; Baussant 2019 ; Rossetto 2021) which unspools itself beneath the gaze of the researcher?

The multidisciplinary evocations presented in this issue allow us to question the dialectic between singular and common at different scales: that of individuals' own socialisations and their interactions with and via objects and society on the one hand, and that of the articulation of the singularity of 'case' research and the construction of general theoretical frameworks specific to the social sciences and creation reflexivity on the other. Like windows on migrant conditions, with contrasting landscapes, the study of objects in and of exile finally sheds light on the contemporary stakes of democratic constructions and the place that these reserve for migrant objects and, more generally, subjects.

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<sup>4</sup> « sous la double figure de l'enracinement de chacune, ici et maintenant, et de traits communs qui dessinent malgré tout, un ensemble » (Amar, Bertheleu & Teulière, 2015, 16).





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# Fare impresa all'estero: storie di oggetti, storie migranti.

## Un percorso di risignificazione identitaria.

Francesca Alemanno

**Abstract** One way migration culture is manifested is through its materiality, represented by cultural artefacts, social networks, symbolic emblems or objects of memory, which represent a way or an instant method to get in touch with one's past and present existential trajectories. These objects, in fact, often become symbolic devices capable of nurturing a sense of belonging in the new world and a link with one's place of origin.

In this article, we will consider the life story of a migrant who pursued an entrepreneurial path by trying to open his own business in his destination country, specifically in the city of Matera in southern Italy.

The case study analysed focuses on the story of Suryabhan and his relationship with a sacred idol representing the god Ganesh. An ethnographic research method was used, aided by interviews.

**Keywords** Migrant entrepreneurship; materiality; identity; life story; anthropology of migration

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## I Introduzione

Il numero di migranti nel mondo è cresciuto esponenzialmente negli ultimi decenni (Gold & Nawyn 2013; Castles, de Haas & Miller 2014) in seguito a diversi fattori: l'aumento di calamità naturali ed eventi distruttivi causati dall'uomo (De Castro 2015), l'ampliamento delle differenze socioeconomiche tra paesi a basso e alto reddito, i legami diasporici resi più forti dai social media e le tendenze all'urbanizzazione che riguardano tutto il globo (Castelli 2018; Latour 2018). Si stima che, a seguito di tali pressioni geopolitiche e ambientali, le migrazioni mostreranno una tendenza ancora crescente durante i prossimi decenni (Christensen et al. 2019; Latour 2020; Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2020; Honig 2020).

In questo contesto, il "crocevia migratorio" (Pugliese 2020) è un elemento cardine della contemporaneità e riveste un ruolo cruciale nella comprensione delle dinamiche globali odierne, caratterizzate da flussi costanti di persone, idee, beni, che insieme creano la cosiddetta "cultura della migrazione" (Marshall 1982; Kandel & Massey 2002; Turco 2018). In essa, la migrazione viene considerata non solo in quanto spostamento geografico ma come spostamento che include e comprende una serie di modificazioni che hanno origine e avvengono all'interno della vita del migrante e che hanno risvolti diretti sia sul Paese e sulla situazione di origine che su quella di approdo (Salazar 2011).

Della "cultura della migrazione" fanno parte anche le motivazioni e le modalità che spingono gli individui a compiere l'atto migratorio. Motivazioni e modalità sono mediate da immaginari di luoghi altri e di vite possibili che si costituiscono nel tempo attraverso l'interazione con altri migranti e attraverso l'uso dei social media, grazie all'infinito numero di immagini che circolano al loro interno (Crapanzano 2007; Jackson 2008). La prospettiva transnazionale ha messo in luce l'importanza degli spazi e delle relazioni sociali che vengono instaurati dai migranti sia nei paesi di origine che in quelli di destinazione (Glick Schiller, Basch & Szanton Blanc 1995; Levitt 2001; Vertovec 2007; Brettell 2018).

Da un punto di vista culturale, infatti, la globalizzazione consiste nella mobilità dei gruppi umani, delle culture e dei saperi su scala globale. Si tratta quindi di spostamenti nello spazio che comprendono anche oggetti, immagini e immaginari, dimensioni emotive e valoriali (Salazar 2011; Turco 2018). Le immagini e le raffigurazioni che accompagnano un percorso migratorio si concretizzano, si rendono manifeste e vengono usate nelle identificazioni della vita quotidiana e negli oggetti che giornalmente ne fanno parte. In questo modo, essi si rivelano strumenti utili all'analisi delle pratiche che essi stessi contribuiscono a costruire (Hall 1996). L'immaginario migratorio, infatti, è una componente strategica della cultura della migrazione capace di riorganizzare l'esperienza del viaggio (Colomer 2017); questo spesso avviene poiché è l'immaginario stesso a dare significato alla dimensione della materialità che si configura come dimensione visibile e tangibile diventando così un simbolo di tutte le trasformazioni valoriali che lo attraversano (Turco 2018). La materialità si configura come dispositivo socializzato, in grado di racchiudere in sé moltissimi cambiamenti a livello di significati e rappresentazioni che accompagnano qualsiasi percorso migratorio.

La cultura della migrazione, che si manifesta quindi anche attraverso una sua materialità, viene rappresentata da artefatti culturali, reti sociali, emblemi simbolici o oggetti della memoria. Essi rappresentano un modo o delle pratiche immediate per entrare in contatto con le proprie traiettorie esistenziali passate e presenti. Il significato dei mondi materiali dei migranti



è dunque modellato dalla natura particolare dei loro distinti viaggi. Viceversa, la natura della loro migrazione è modellata dalla sua materialità. In questo caso, il termine “materialità” viene usato non solo per riferirci a oggetti e mondi fisici, ma anche per evocare forme più varie - multiple - di esperienza e sensazione che sono sia incarnate che costituite attraverso le interazioni di soggetti e oggetti (Basu & Coleman 2008).

Le materialità migranti sono costituite in vario modo attraverso diverse forme di mobilità. Gli stessi oggetti possono agire come significanti fluttuanti, veicoli in grado di trasmettere una varietà indeterminata di significati e significanti, a seconda del contesto. Allo stesso tempo in cui costituiscono l'esperienza migrante, tuttavia, alcune forme di materialità possono anche essere forme e simboli potenti di indice dello status e della posizione sociale del migrante. La migrazione, infatti, è di per sé un processo, in cui la materialità può indicare il cambiamento di status di un dato migrante nel tempo - la trasformazione del suo posto all'interno del “mondo nuovo” in cui è entrato, volente o nolente (Parkin 1999; Parrott 2012).

Porre l'accento sulla materialità nella migrazione implica riflettere su ciò che viene “trasportato” dai migranti durante il viaggio e che li porterà a trasformare i loro nuovi e vecchi mondi in nuovi territori e contesti. Gli oggetti sono potenzialmente mobili almeno quanto le persone (Appadurai 1986), vengono trasportati da un Paese all'altro e spesso diventano evocazioni fisiche di qualcosa che è stato lasciato alle spalle o di una qualche dimensione che si trasforma durante il viaggio (Basu & Coleman 2008). In questo senso, la dimensione materiale serve da chiave per esplorare le intense relazioni in corso tra i migranti e la loro identità, i luoghi in cui vivono e le persone con le quali vengono in contatto; questo è possibile poiché gli oggetti partecipano alla co-produzione della realtà, componendo una cornice familiare e uno scenario sottile per la pratica sociale.

In questo contesto, anche la ricerca sui processi e l'evoluzione delle dinamiche legate ai rituali e ai loro oggetti, ovvero la loro dimensione materiale, è andata intensificandosi (Parkin 1999; Jayasinhji 2006). Gli oggetti legati ai rituali, infatti, stabiliscono un legame forte e una connessione diretta tra il paese e la cultura di partenza e quella di arrivo: si tratta di artefatti che rappresentano l'intreccio della dimensione materiale, culturale e affettiva. Durante il viaggio migratorio essi si trasformano producendo, da un lato, nuovi significati e permettendo, dall'altro, di mantenere un legame forte con le proprie origini (degli Uberti 2018). Gli oggetti che vengono selezionati per essere portati nel viaggio migratorio verso il nuovo Paese di approdo possono assumere nel tempo diverse funzioni, come per esempio quella consolatoria in momenti nostalgici, possono diventare il simbolo degli esercizi di resistenza quotidiana che ogni migrante affronta, oppure possono assumere un valore magico-religioso e diventare oggetto “protettivo” da eventuali insidie incontrate nel viaggio (Pisoni 2018).

Questi presupposti teorici fondano le domande di ricerca che hanno animato l'indagine antropologica qui presentata: gli oggetti che approdano insieme ad un migrante in un nuovo Paese conservano il ruolo e il valore che avevano in origine, o questi aspetti cambiano a mano a mano che il migrante viene a contatto con la nuova cultura e con le nuove usanze del luogo in cui ha deciso di vivere? Che ruolo può avere un oggetto appartenente alla vita del Paese d'origine nella nuova storia che un migrante si costruisce nel Paese di approdo?

A queste domande ho cercato di dare risposta attraverso la costruzione di un rapporto etnografico, corroborato da osservazione partecipante, interviste e note di campo, intrapreso



con alcuni migranti che hanno deciso di aprire impresa in Italia. I processi fino ad ora descritti, infatti, possono essere osservati e colti in maniera privilegiata proprio entrando in contatto con le storie di vita dei migranti.

In particolare, questo studio riporta l'analisi fatta riguardo alla vita di Suryabhan, un migrante indiano, e al suo rapporto con un idolo raffigurante il Dio Ganesh, nel contesto del progetto imprenditoriale che egli intende fondare in Italia, dove risiede dal 2014.

Il fenomeno dell'imprenditoria migrante qui analizzato mette in luce la storia di persone che sono riuscite a costruire un legame così stretto con il nuovo territorio di approdo da poter immaginare e poi realizzare la costruzione di una propria impresa personale (Kloosterman, Van der Leun & Rath 1998). L'azione migratoria, infatti, non può essere più considerata solamente come ispirata da immaginari di un migliore benessere economico come suggerivano le teorie "push-pull" (Dorigo & Tobler 1983), ormai superate a causa del loro insufficiente potere esplicativo di un fenomeno che si è rivelato avere delle radici e delle motivazioni molto più ampie e varie, come il poter perseguire strade gratificanti anche culturalmente e socialmente (Salazar 2011).

La storia di Suryabhan mostra come la materialità degli oggetti che hanno accompagnato i migranti nel loro percorso, faccia emergere il valore e l'importanza del bagaglio culturale che insieme a loro ha viaggiato e che nel tempo si è trasformato assieme a loro: prima, durante e dopo la migrazione stessa (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). Prima di presentare la storia di Suryabhan e analizzare il ruolo che la materialità legata ad un oggetto rituale riveste nel suo progetto imprenditoriale, è utile precisare alcune note metodologiche.

## II Metodologia

La metodologia adottata nella presente ricerca, all'interno della quale ho conosciuto la storia di Suryabhan e il suo progetto imprenditoriale Holy World, è stata influenzata dalla condizione pandemica causata da Covid-19. Solo in maniera sporadica, infatti, e nei periodi di allentamento delle misure restrittive, ho potuto adottare il metodo etnografico nella sua accezione classica (Fabietti 1999). In alternativa, ho fatto ricorso a pratiche metodologiche che hanno previsto l'uso delle tecnologie e della comunicazione a distanza, così come interviste online, e la costruzione del rapporto etnografico anche attraverso supporti di messaggistica online, chiamate e l'uso di video-call. Queste pratiche mi hanno permesso di costruire un rapporto di fiducia con il testimone ancor prima che ci fosse la possibilità di conoscersi personalmente.

Le interviste con Suryabhan (sia online che in presenza) hanno portato alla ricostruzione parziale della sua storia di vita. Condotte nel 2021 per approfondire alcuni argomenti specifici, sono state ulteriormente supportate da materiale raccolto durante l'etnografia e durante le conversazioni meno strutturate. I momenti di intervista sono sempre stati registrati in formato audio, previa firma di un consenso informato. Le interviste in presenza sono sempre state condotte all'aperto e rispettando il distanziamento sociale. Sono state volutamente condotte in maniera libera, con un primo spunto iniziale offerto dall'intervistatrice e seguendo poi il flusso del discorso dettato dall'intervistato. Questo mi ha permesso di avere accesso alla ricca trama dell'esperienza personale di Suryabhan (Brettel & Hollifield 2014) e di entrare in contatto con l'assoluta unicità delle particolari esperienze individuali dei migranti (Benmayor & Skotnes 1994). In questo articolo, al fine di rispettare il diritto alla riservatezza e all'anonimato dei sog-



getti coinvolti nella ricerca etnografica, il nome dell'aspirante imprenditore e della sua impresa sono stati modificati.

I primi incontri con Suryabhan, nei quali sono venuta a conoscenza della sua idea imprenditoriale, sono avvenuti attraverso il canale digitale, nel contesto di "Elyme", un corso di educazione imprenditoriale rivolto a migranti organizzata da MateraHub (consorzio che si occupa di progettazione europea in Basilicata). In questa cornice è stata raccolta la documentazione preliminare relativa al progetto, incluse le sue caratteristiche principali e il possibile sviluppo temporale. Inizialmente, Suryabhan ha partecipato al corso solo grazie alla modalità online. Egli era infatti rimasto bloccato in India a causa della sospensione dei servizi dei mezzi di trasporto (sempre per cause legate alla pandemia).

Nel mese di marzo del 2021 Suryabhan ha potuto rientrare a Matera. Fin da subito abbiamo iniziato a trascorrere del tempo insieme durante il quale Suryabhan ha avuto modo di raccontarmi molti aspetti della sua storia, della sua idea imprenditoriale e di introdurmi alla sua visione di vita che si riflette molto anche nel suo progetto lavorativo. Abbiamo dunque costruito una solida relazione etnografica che mi ha permesso di approfondire aspetti importanti e delicati della sua vita e della sua visione del mondo. Nella cornice del rapporto di profonda fiducia instaurato, Suryabhan mi ha raccontato la storia del Dio Ganesh e mi ha permesso di vedere e di fotografare l'idolo che egli custodisce con estrema cura e dedizione. Si tratta di un oggetto intriso di una dimensione spirituale così potente da dover essere trattato con pratiche speciali, non può entrare in contatto se non con persone fidate, per assicurarsi che la sua aura non venga rovinata.

### III La storia di Suryabhan

Suryabhan è nato a Orissa in India. Mi racconta di essersi trasferito in Italia nel 2014 con il desiderio di esplorare nuovi mondi e acquisire nuove conoscenze. Lo animava la prospettiva di poter creare qualcosa che fosse veramente suo, nel quale potesse investire tutte le sue energie e il sapere culturale e spirituale acquisito fino a quel momento della sua vita. Dopo svariati anni passati a lavorare in condizioni disumane di sfruttamento nel territorio del napoletano, riesce a interrompere il circolo vizioso che lo teneva incatenato ad un posto e ad uno stile di vita che risultava essere profondamente distante da ciò che si era immaginato prima della sua partenza verso l'Europa.

Nel suo immaginario c'era infatti la possibilità di approdare in un Paese dell'Unione Europea, ovvero in un contesto di possibilità e prospettive floride, dove realizzare se' stesso e costruire una vita lavorativa soddisfacente. Suryabhan, invece, si è trovato in una dimensione del tutto differente rispetto a quella immaginata: svincolarsene ha richiesto un processo lungo e complesso. Come accade a molti migranti che approdano in Italia, anche Suryabhan è stato inserito all'interno di circuiti lavorativi che, a differenza di quanto promesso inizialmente, lo hanno portato ad essere schiavizzato nelle campagne vicine a S. Gennaro Vesuviano nel napoletano. Qui si è occupato principalmente della raccolta di cachi e di altri frutti, lavoro fisicamente sfiancante soprattutto per l'ammontare di ore lavorative giornaliere a cui era costretto per non perdere il lavoro che sembrava, in quel momento della sua vita, l'unica possibilità di sopravvivenza. Anche le condizioni abitative non erano facilmente sopportabili; l'unica possibilità era infatti quella di condividere un'abitazione in affitto insieme ad altri braccianti, persone a lui del





tutto sconosciute. Gli spazi non erano adeguati al numero degli occupanti e non offrivano né privacy né possibilità di trovare sollievo dopo l'orario lavorativo.

È stato sicuramente anche grazie alla sua grande attenzione alla spiritualità e al suo stato di benessere interiore, nonché alla sua fede, se Suryabhan è stato in grado di trovare la motivazione per andarsene. Approdato nella città di Matera, è riuscito ad iniziare a lavorare in condizioni che si possono definire legalmente, giuridicamente, eticamente e sanitariamente migliori, lavorando come cameriere, lavapiatti e poi aiuto cuoco. Suryabhan ritrova in questo percorso le energie fisiche e mentali necessarie per riprendere anche a pensare e a sistematizzare il suo progetto di vita originario: immaginare, costruire e aprire qualcosa di suo, una attività commerciale, nella quale poter investire tutte le sue competenze e che potesse essere realizzata secondo i suoi criteri, secondo i principi di vita che scandiscono in maniera molto ferrea la sua esistenza.

La sua idea imprenditoriale prende il nome di Holy World: questo fa già intuire quanto il suo progetto sia intrinsecamente intrecciato con una dimensione spirituale. Il progetto imprenditoriale di Suryabhan consiste nell'apertura di un'impresa che si occupi di import-export mettendo in connessione India e Italia; è per ora ancora in fase di concettualizzazione e di sistematizzazione del disegno di impresa e del business plan, documenti necessari da produrre per poter proporre la propria idea a degli esperti dell'educazione imprenditoriale, per poter chiedere dei riscontri tecnici oppure per presentare l'idea a potenziali finanziatori.

Questa fase iniziale è decisamente complessa e richiede molto tempo; è in quest'ottica che Suryabhan continua a lavorare come dipendente per mantenersi ma cerca di trovare impieghi che gli permettano di lavorare la sera ed avere le mattine libere per dedicarsi proprio alla parte creativa e all'adempimento della parte burocratica che è fondamentale nella prima fase di definizione del concetto e del progetto imprenditoriale. Grazie alla rete che Suryabhan si è creato in città, è riuscito a conoscere persone, sindacati, associazioni e iniziative che potessero aiutarlo e accompagnarlo nel suo percorso imprenditoriale: è infatti attraverso un suo conoscente che viene a conoscenza del corso "Elyme" che gli ha permesso di definire meglio il suo progetto imprenditoriale, renderlo adatto per essere presentato bandi o possibili finanziatori.

Le modalità attraverso le quali Suryabhan si sta muovendo per realizzare il suo sogno imprenditoriale, sono in linea con quanto descritto dalla teoria della "mixed embeddedness" (Kloosterman & Rath 2001; Kloosterman 2010), che guarda al fenomeno dell'imprenditoria migrante cercando di comprenderlo nella sua interezza. Questo implica un approccio "strutturale" che fa riferimento ai meccanismi del mercato: ai suoi incentivi, opportunità e barriere. Questi sono indagati e interpretati come i parametri decisivi per la performance e il successo dell'imprenditorialità. Allo stesso tempo, viene adottato anche un approccio "individuale" che pone maggiore attenzione a ciò che il singolo imprenditore è in grado di fornire, alle sue capacità specifiche e alle sue risorse interiori (Penninx & Berger 2006).

Superando uno sguardo parziale sul fenomeno, questo approccio si pone come comprensivo, olistico e in grado di tenere in considerazione sia gli aspetti strutturali che quelli individuali e peculiari della storia di ogni migrante imprenditore. Questa cornice teorica permette di superare la "teoria dello svantaggio" (Light 1979; Boyd 2000) che si concentrava (in maniera, però, evidentemente troppo semplicistica) sul solo elemento dello svantaggio delle persone migranti, rispetto al resto della popolazione, nell'accesso a condizioni lavorative soddisfacenti.

Nel caso di Suryabhan, del suo percorso di definizione e apertura di un progetto imprenditoriale, si può riconoscere una particolare propensione a far confluire, nella sua idea di impresa,



una forte componente personale. Nonostante si trovi ancora nelle prime fasi di ideazione, infatti, il principio che Suryabhan intende mettere con grande convinzione alla base di ogni sua azione quotidiana e soprattutto nella creazione della sua impresa, è che ogni azione umana, nel momento in cui si vuole vivere una vita in armonia con l'universo secondo ciò che dice la religione Hindu, deve essere fatta pensando non al bene proprio ma al bene comune di tutti gli esseri viventi che abitano il pianeta. Perciò anche la sua impresa deve essere sacra, "holy". Questo concetto viene espresso bene in ciò che Suryabhan racconta durante una intervista:

"Holy World deve essere 'holy', per una buona vita degli altri e poi per te stesso. Prima però ci devono essere gli altri. Che sia facendo marketing o che sia facendo qualsiasi altra cosa, industria... non devi fare male alle persone e io ho questa cosa ben chiara in testa. Non mi piace creare plastica, o produrre cose inutili...se questo è il principio, allora va bene. Nel nostro Paese, in India, ci sono tante cose ancora da creare ed è giusto farlo con dei principi ben chiari..." (Intervista dell'autrice con Suryabhan, Matera, luglio 2021)

Per soddisfare a queste condizioni, Suryabhan cerca di seguire i principi che lui impara dalla religione induista e che lo accompagnano nella sua quotidianità. Ci sono infatti delle pratiche quotidiane che segue con grande devozione e che sono per lui di fondamentale importanza per proseguire nel percorso di conoscenze e di crescita all'interno del suo cammino spirituale che ispira tutti i principi legati alle azioni che compie e alla costruzione della sua impresa; questa, infatti, acquista senso nella sua vita solo se viene fondata sui dei principi sacri di armonia con il resto dell'universo. Questo aspetto così prominente nella vita di Suryabhan, trova riverbero in alcuni rituali che segue con grandissima accuratezza e devozione, rivolta principalmente al dio Ganesh che, come spiega lui stesso, è uno tra gli dei più importanti perché racchiude tutti i principi sacri ed è in relazione con ogni cosa del mondo (Singh & Ratate 2021). Ogni principio sacro e ogni aspetto della sacralità religiosa, è connessa con Ganesh in primis:

"Ganesh...Ganesh viene in tutto, capito? in ogni cosa, esatto, senza Ganesh non c'è niente..." (Intervista dell'autrice con Suryabhan, Matera, luglio 2021)

Nella vita di Suryabhan, ogni cosa, ogni azione, è guidata o da riferire agli dei e, prima di tutto al Dio Ganesh che assume in questo modo un'importanza fondamentale, tanto da ispirare tutti i principi fondativi dell'idea imprenditoriale di Suryabhan: questa infatti ha per lui un senso, solo nel momento in cui è creata sulla base di questi principi e si ispira all'idea di universo guidata dalla sua spiritualità. Questo passaggio è importante anche per capire quanto questi principi e quanto la spiritualità di Suryabhan e il suo far affidamento alla devozione per Ganesh, siano delle risorse interne che gli permettono di affrontare le molte difficoltà, gli ostacoli e le delusioni che incontra nel suo percorso imprenditoriale.

La sua grande devozione alla religione Hindu e, in particolare al Dio Ganesh, sono infatti presenti nella sua vita fin da quando era piccolo: l'idolo che ha portato in Italia veniva adorato già in India da tutta la sua famiglia durante i momenti di preghiera quotidiani. Il legame con la statuetta intesa in senso fisico, che viene espresso poi nel reiterare anche in Italia i rituali e le preghiere ad essa rivolti e ad essa legati, è proprio ciò che la rende così unica, rappresentando un legame molto forte con la terra di origine, con le sue radici e con i suoi famigliari. L'idolo di Ganesh si fa quindi portatore e mezzo attraverso il quale le sue origini possono essere vissute



anche nella solitudine del nuovo luogo di residenza e, allo stesso tempo, mezzo che simboleggia la nuova modalità che Suryabhan adotta nell'approcciarsi alla sfera religiosa e di devozione che assume tutt'altra forma nel presente: l'idolo è lo stesso mentre la ritualità cambia nella forma, anche se non nella sostanza, venendo messa in atto da una sola persona e non nella collettività familiare.

#### **IV Materialità. Una dimensione di importanza fondamentale: l'idolo di Ganesh**

Migrare implica inevitabilmente portare, inviare e ricevere: la "valigia del migrante" è sempre piena di oggetti fisici e materiali, oltre che di desideri e aspettative. A loro volta, questi oggetti sono chiamati, attraverso i significati che li impregnano, a dare forma e a partecipare attivamente alle esperienze quotidiane dei migranti e sono utilizzati come strumenti di valutazione rispetto a ciò che è stato realizzato durante le loro traiettorie migratorie.

La dimensione spirituale e la particolare devozione che Suryabhan rivolge al Dio Ganesh si concretizzano quotidianamente nelle cerimonie devozionali che egli pratica tutte le mattine e che sono rivolte ad un piccolo idolo che rappresenta il Dio mezzo uomo e mezzo elefante (Ayutacorn & Ferguson 2018): questa statuetta è stata portata da Suryabhan direttamente dall'India. Era l'idolo che veniva venerato dalla sua intera famiglia, quando abitavano insieme a Orissa e che gli è stata data in dono dai suoi famigliari con il mandato di portarla con sé nella sua migrazione. Ganesh è infatti una delle cinque principali divinità della religione Hindu, ed è considerato iniziatore e protettore di tutti i rituali e, soprattutto, di ogni avvenimento sulla terra (Singh & Ratale 2021). Nel caso di Suryabhan, però, questo idolo assume un ulteriore significato e valore: rappresenta casa. Rappresenta un'unione, un legame inscindibile con la sua famiglia che in India prima della sua partenza tutta insieme rivolgeva le sue preghiere e le pratiche religiose giornaliere a questa statuetta. Ora, questa ha assunto una sacralità ancora maggiore e riesce a rappresentare un legame familiare, una sensazione di casa che viene evocata ogni volta che Suryabhan si inginocchia davanti all'idolo per le pratiche mattutine.

Le cose, gli oggetti, svolgono quindi un ruolo importante nella gestione delle relazioni con chi è rimasto nel Paese d'origine; inoltre, la dimensione della materialità può richiamare relazioni significative con tutte e tre le dimensioni temporali che scandiscono il tempo della migrazione: con il passato - rievocando un sentimento di apprezzamento e di riconoscimento, oppure di nostalgia verso le cose di casa che sono state lasciate indietro; con il presente, nel momento in cui gli oggetti assumono un nuovo significato nel contesto in cui vengono riposizionati; e con il futuro - potendo diventare anche simbolo di quanto ogni persona si augura per il proprio futuro in terra straniera (Rosales 2017).

Nel caso in cui la materialità presa in considerazione appartenga ad una dimensione religiosa, bisogna considerare che questa può svolgere un ruolo molto importante nel momento in cui le persone stanno affrontando un cambiamento radicale. Questo può avvenire soprattutto quando, come nel caso della migrazione, si prevede un cambiamento che coinvolge vari aspetti della propria esistenza (Pisoni 2018). La religione, soprattutto se vissuta già nel Paese d'origine come una sfera importante all'interno della propria vita, permette alle persone che cambiano il loro contesto di ritrovare uno spazio espressivo di una dimensione sociale significativa e di rievocare la dimensione di casa attraverso pratiche e rituali che sono famigliari e che fanno di casa (Riccio 2014; Brambilla & Rizzi 2011).



**Image 1. Idolo di Ganesh appoggiato sul suo apposito cuscinetto**

L'idolo di Ganesh è fatto di legno di Tulsi, conosciuto anche come “basilico sacro” che viene usato dalle persone induiste per la costruzione di idoli o oggetti sacri poiché è l'unico legno che viene considerato come una divinità. Infatti prende il nome da Tulasi, la consorte del Dio Vishnu. L'idolo è a sua volta attorniato da Mala Tulsi, anch'esse fatte di legno di Tulsi, ovvero delle collane sacre che servono per pregare.

L'idolo che si può vedere nella foto è tenuto in mano da Suryabhan stesso. L'onore di vederlo e fotografarlo mi è stato concesso ma a determinate condizioni: mi sono dovuta recare proprio sotto casa di Suryabhan poiché è importante che l'idolo rimanga sempre in un luogo dove non ci siano delle vibrazioni negative che possano rovinare la sua aura sacra. Per questo motivo Suryabhan non lo porta mai fuori dalla sua stanza e non lo sottopone mai allo sguardo di persone che pensa possano avere una cattiva influenza su di esso. Dopo che l'ho potuto vedere e, eccezionalmente, fotografare, Suryabhan l'ha riportato subito in casa. Solo successivamente abbiamo potuto trovare un momento di confronto e di dialogo perché lui potesse raccontarmi la sua storia, il rapporto che ha con questo idolo, la storia sacra che gli conferisce questa grande importanza, la storia di Ganesh e, infine, come questo oggetto sia presente nella sua vita quotidiana e come sia legato ad ogni azione che lui compie e, quindi, anche alla nascita della sua idea imprenditoriale.

Le pratiche quotidiane di devozione al Dio Ganesh iniziano già la mattina presto. Prima ci si deve lavare il corpo e poi si fa lo stesso con l'idolo. Solo dopo si può iniziare a pregare e a cantare i mantra. In questo modo si purifica sia il corpo che lo spirito, come spiega Suryabhan stesso:

“...quando tu hai un sistema di preghiera induista ogni mattina fai il bagno e quando sei tutto pulito, tu sei puro nel corpo. Solo nel corpo però. Non nell'anima. Tu poi inizi a pregare e prima di iniziare tu devi far fare la stessa cosa all'idolo. Lo lavi, lo pulisci, metti un po' di profumo come lo metti tu...capito?” (Intervista dell'autrice con Suryabhan, Matera, aprile, 2021)

Inoltre, Suryabhan mi spiega che durante la pratica di preghiera quotidiana riesce a concentrarsi e a raccogliere la giusta energia per poter continuare a pensare al suo progetto imprenditoriale e a trovare soluzione ai pensieri critici e alle problematiche che si presentano nel suo percorso.



Nella sua visione, senza questo momento dedicato al Dio Ganesh che tutto vede e tutto riesce ad influenzare, per lui non sarebbe stato possibile continuare in questo impegnativo progetto. Inoltre la religione induista e gli insegnamenti di Ganesh gli ricordano qual è la strada giusta secondo lui da percorrere per creare un'impresa che rispecchi gli obiettivi che lui si è posto: creare qualcosa che contribuisca a portare armonia, pace e giustizia nell'universo.

Per Suryabhan, è molto importante avere un oggetto che sia fisicamente presente a ricordargli tutto questo: mi spiega che perdere la costanza di preghiera e, quindi, allontanarsi dai principi che lui vuole seguire, è molto facile se non si ha quotidianamente davanti agli occhi qualcosa che ci ricordi chi vogliamo essere e qual è la direzione che vogliamo perseguire nella vita (essendo molto facile venire distratti da ciò che lui chiama Maya, le illusioni della vita che ci distolgono dalla Verità). Nella religione induista, i fedeli sono soliti avere un forte legame con le rappresentazioni fisiche del divino, quindi con i dipinti e gli idoli e con tutti i tipi di rappresentazione del sacro che diventano, appunto, incarnazione terrena della sacralità (Jayasinhji 2006).

A Matera la comunità induista è molto ridotta; non esiste per la religione Hindu un luogo di culto ufficiale ed è anche difficile creare dei contesti nei quali ci possa essere uno scambio religioso o un luogo dove poter praticare assieme. Per Suryabhan questa è una grave mancanza che rende i rituali di preghiera svolti in casa ancora più importanti ed intimi. L'accesso diretto alle fonti religiose è una dimensione estremamente significativa che, quando non sono presenti luoghi di culto ufficiali, è accessibile solo attraverso la presenza fisica di materialità sacra nei propri luoghi abitativi. Per questo motivo il rituale che prende forma nell'intimità di casa propria assume un valore ancora più pregnante, essendo l'unica modalità nella quale è possibile esercitare il proprio culto. La possibilità di poter professare la propria religione e la libertà di culto sono infatti degli aspetti fondamentali per le persone che migrano e che cambiano contesto, trovandosi in dei Paesi nei quali la loro religione non è tra quelle principalmente praticata.

Anche per questo motivo Suryabhan ha instaurato un rapporto che è molto particolare con il suo idolo: a volte si rivolge ad esso proprio come se fosse un'entità reale, trovandosi a parlare con lui e usandolo come sfogo nei momenti più difficili. Nella religione Hindu, infatti, le immagini sacre e gli idoli che rappresentano gli dei non sono solo rappresentazioni alle quali rivolgere le proprie preghiere, ma vengono invece percepite come incarnazioni della presenza della divinità con le quali poter sviluppare un'articolata modalità di comunicazione. Questo permette ai fedeli di attribuire agli dèi non solo la capacità di rispondere alle loro varie domande e richieste personali, ma anche di avere uno scambio che riguarda tutta una varietà di sentimenti che caratterizzano quel determinato momento delle loro vite (Vidal 1989; Vidal 2007). Questa è una pratica che gli porta molto sollievo, facendo riemergere nell'immediato non solo il legame diretto e costante con la divinità ma, attraverso il ripetersi di questo rapporto e dialogo quotidiano, anche il legame alla sua famiglia in India insieme alla quale queste pratiche venivano vissute in maniera collettiva nell'intimità di casa e nel tempio; l'idolo racchiude simbolicamente in sé tre aree della vita di Suryabhan che sono imprescindibili per la comprensione del significato che ha per lui questo oggetto: casa, famiglia e religione.

La connessione immediata con queste tre componenti che vengono rievocate e rese attuali attraverso un solo oggetto (Pisoni 2018) consente a Suryabhan di ricreare un sentimento di legame continuo con la divinità e con le sue origini che, solitamente, lo porta a sentirsi molto meno solo, soprattutto nei momenti di difficoltà:





“Poi certe volte quando sono arrabbiato io parlo con l’idolo di Ganesh e dico che non sto bene. Io quando mi arrabbio parlo con questo...e mi fa stare meglio, mi ricorda la famiglia quando lo pregavamo assieme e mi sento meno solo.” (Intervista dell’autrice con Suryabhan, Matera, luglio 2021)

Questo legame così importante con la statuetta di Ganesh, ci fa comprendere anche il fatto che Suryabhan abbia voluto creare il logo della sua impresa (che lui definisce uno dei progetti più importanti della sua vita) con dei richiami alla spiritualità e a Ganesh stesso. Il logo è stato infatti pensato prendendo dal simbolo della svastica, che per gli induisti simboleggia l’evoluzione del primo principio della creazione e l’evoluzione dell’innocenza e della divinità, gli elementi che erano graficamente necessari per produrre un logo che fosse efficace ma che rimandasse anche ad una simbologia sacra che potesse richiamare alla totalità dell’universo in armonia con i principi induisti:

“...quindi diciamo, nella preghiera induista e nella energia che richiama, c’è sempre sia la svastica che Ganesh...quando si inizia a pregare Ganesh è come se l’energia creata facesse metaforicamente girare la svastica, riproducendo così il suono dell’OM che è il suono dell’universo e smuovendo così anche i 5 elementi della natura...” (Intervista dell’autrice con Suryabhan, Matera, luglio 2021)



Image 2. Logo Holy World

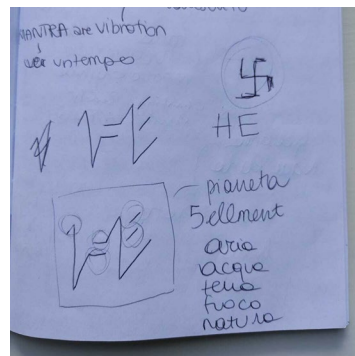


Image 3. Spiegazione grafica fatta da Suryabhan della creazione del logo e del suo significato sacro

Il logo di Holy World riprende quindi così nella sua schematicità sia il simbolo della svastica che dei cinque elementi che compongono l’universo, richiamando in questa maniera l’energia sacra che questi elementi stanno a rappresentare e, di conseguenza, la cornice di principi dentro alla quale Suryabhan vuole che si inserisca la sua impresa, Holy World.

Questi elementi sono fondamentali per comprendere quanto per lui siano importanti i principi fondativi sui quali vuole costruire il suo progetto imprenditoriale e, ancora, quanto le sue pratiche religiose e, soprattutto, la sua devozione all’idolo di Ganesh influenzino in maniera massiccia la sua quotidianità e la modalità attraverso la quale affronta le sue sfide giornaliere. Ganesh è, infatti, anche il Dio a cui rivolgersi quando ci si trova in difficoltà, quando ci sono degli ostacoli che impediscono di raggiungere un obiettivo che ci si è prefissi (Ayuttacorn & Ferguson 2018); da questo punto di vista diventa ancora più importante all’interno di un percorso di costruzione di impresa che prevede e presenta moltissime sfide da affrontare.



Infine, la cultura materiale può lavorare in modi non previsti, esponendo caratteristiche della vita e dell'identità dei migranti che altrimenti sarebbero state più difficili da conoscere, rendendo visibile il loro legame ad alcune sfere che hanno a che fare con la vita che svolgevano nel paese d'origine e, soprattutto, testimoniando le nuove esperienze e i significati che sono andati costruendosi durante il viaggio migratorio (Parrott 2012; Horst 2011). Quindi, il regno materiale della migrazione può anche essere uno strumento particolarmente utile per indagare le dimensioni meno evidenti e più complesse, a volte dolorose, che derivano dal trasferimento e dallo spostamento.

In questa maniera le cose, gli oggetti si trasformano in traduttori produttivi, materializzando diversi modi di vedere il mondo e contribuendo in modo cruciale alla gestione dell'appartenenza e dell'alterità e del sé (Rosales 2017). La materialità, quindi, non solo partecipa attivamente a questi processi di costruzione e ristrutturazione di significati, ma costituisce anche un terreno particolarmente fertile per osservare come si svolge sia la sfera pubblica che quella privata della vita delle persone migranti, costituendo un elemento cardine del processo di negoziazione delle loro identità (Basu & Coleman 2008).

## V Conclusioni

Le scienze sociali in generale, e l'antropologia in particolare, hanno sempre riconosciuto la materialità come un elemento significativo della pratica. Recentemente, tuttavia, gli oggetti hanno acquistato una nuova centralità grazie a produzioni teoriche che, come discusso precedentemente, sottolineano l'urgenza di ripensare la materialità contemporanea e le sue relazioni con i soggetti.

Riprendendo quanto premesso nell'introduzione e quanto viene trasmesso dalla storia di Suryabhan, concentrarsi sull'aspetto della materialità nella migrazione ha lo scopo di incoraggiare la riflessione su ciò che è racchiuso nella "valigia del migranti" durante il viaggio che li porterà a trasformare il loro universo di senso e la loro costruzione del senso di identità. Proprio in questo senso, infatti, la materialità si presenta come una dimensione che permette di entrare in maniera più immediata e diretta nella vita delle persone: può essere interpretata come chiave di ingresso utile per poter intercettare esperienze di vita e dimensioni profonde che, altrimenti, sarebbero molto più difficili da scoprire. L'oggetto materiale è infatti un elemento visibile e tangibile, quindi di percezione immediata: inizialmente più facile da indagare nelle sue caratteristiche sensoriali più evidenti ma capace, anche, di essere veicolo di mondi e dimensioni intime e personali che sono racchiuse in storie di anni, a volte di secoli, disvelando aspetti poco conosciuti e difficilmente intercettabili della vita migratoria.

La storia di Suryabhan, inoltre, conferma quanto già dichiarato da Rosales (2017) rispetto alla dimensione della temporalità che attraversa la materialità in triplice forma. In questo specifico caso, ricorda il passato e tutto i significati che l'idolo può aver assunto nel tempo, accompagna la vita del migrante nelle trasformazioni presenti che sta affrontando e, infine, può ricordare gli obiettivi e le proiezioni verso il futuro, gli immaginari che Suryabhan ha della vita che si vuole costruire. Nel caso dell'idolo di Ganesh, avendo l'oggetto anche un valore intrinsecamente religioso, riesce a sopperire alla mancanza di luoghi formalmente e istituzionalmente adibiti alla professione di un culto e quindi della possibilità di condivisione della pratica religiosa.

L'oggetto preso in considerazione, in questo caso, continua a mantenere in parte lo stesso



ruolo che aveva nel Paese di origine: in questo senso l'idolo diventa il mezzo che simboleggia il legame con le proprie origini, i propri affetti e i significati del mondo che si è lasciato. Proprio in virtù di questo però, l'idolo di Ganesh con il quale Suryabhan continua ad interagire anche in Italia seppur con modalità differenti, assume ruoli nuovi. Non è più solo un oggetto religioso da venerare e al quale rivolgersi in preghiera insieme alla famiglia, ma diventa artefatto con il quale interagire anche per chiedere consiglio e per trovare conforto e supporto nelle difficoltà, rappresentando -nel nuovo mondo- non più solo una divinità, ma anche la presenza simbolica della sua famiglia e di una benevola vicinanza che lo accompagna nelle sfide quotidiane. Dalle parole di Suryabhan, si può infatti evincere come sia proprio il dialogo con l'idolo che gli dà la forza e gli trasmette il coraggio per continuare ad essere tenace nelle difficoltà e, nello stesso tempo, a ritrovare se stesso quando si sente perso.

La possibilità di accedere in maniera così diretta a questi aspetti della vita quotidiana, ai simboli, ai rituali e ai significati che caratterizzano la storia di alcune persone, ci permette di comprendere quanto la dimensione materiale costituisca uno "strumento chiave" per interagire e cogliere tanti aspetti della realtà migratoria; essa rappresenta, inoltre un dispositivo di socializzazione utile alla definizione di identità collettive e modi di vedere il mondo (Miller, 2010).

Concludendo, in accordo con quanto già enunciato da Rosales (2017), la materialità riesce a funzionare come un significativo dispositivo di stabilizzazione capace di promuovere la sicurezza e il riconoscimento per mezzo di oggetti che vengono percepiti come familiari. La materialità può anche cambiare la percezione che i migranti hanno di sé stessi, incidendo e modificando i loro modelli di interazione sociale. Questo aspetto può interrompere un senso di ristagno esistenziale o, altrimenti, aprire la persona a nuovi orizzonti di esplorazione per un nuovo senso di sé.

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### Extended Summary:

Migration as a complex socio-spatial phenomenon has been a universal phenomenon throughout human history. The concepts of mobility and migration are built around a stratification resulting from the interweaving of symbolic, imaginary and material components; the latter are conceived as objects with physical qualities, but are also continuously imbued with cultural meanings. In this sense, these objects are understood as a material dimension constantly traversed by processes through which the meanings of the objects are created and re-created.

Migration culture is therefore also manifested through its materiality, represented by cultural artefacts, social networks, symbolic emblems or objects of memory, which represent a way or an instant method to get in touch with one's past and present existential trajectories. These objects, in fact, often become symbolic devices capable of nurturing a sense of belonging in the new world and a link with one's place of origin.

The tendency to study migration by observing it as a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than merely an event dictated by economic and political logic has led to the development of a transnational perspective; this, over time, has allowed the promotion of a greater interest in the spaces and social relations that are established by migrants in both their countries of origin and destination countries. Moreover, more and more frequently and in an increasingly analytical way, there is an attempt to understand what the processes are and how the dynamics related to rituals and the material dimension have evolved.

In this article, we will consider the life story of a migrant who has pursued an entrepreneurial path by trying to open its own businesses in his destination country, specifically in the city of Matera in southern Italy.

The case study analysed focuses on the story of Suryabhan and his relationship with a sacred idol representing the god Ganesh. This object, which he brought directly from India during his migratory journey, is of fundamental importance for him not only in the spiritual sphere but also in many other aspects of his life. This object, in fact, comes to inspire even his entrepreneurial project – Holy World – which he says is one of the most important projects of his life.

The object thus becomes a way to grasp the materiality of everyday life and to analyse the ways in which the material, geographical and socio-cultural dimensions are intertwined.

The objects selected to be carried on a migratory journey to a new destination country take on different functions over time. These include offering consolation in times of homesickness, symbolising the daily exercises of resistance to adverse events that every migrant faces, or taking on a magical or religious value and becoming a 'protective' object for any pitfalls encountered on the journey.

The idol symbolically encompasses three areas of Suryabhan's life that are imperative to understanding what this object means to him: home, family and religion.

The immediate connection with these three components, evoked and updated through a single object, allows Suryabhan to recreate a feeling of continuous connection with the deity and his origins that usually leads him to feel much less alone, especially in times of difficulty.

All the aspects highlighted in this article were observed and developed ethnographically, using fieldwork when possible and corroborated by remote interviews.

The research method used allowed personal information about the interlocutor's life to be collected, in an attempt to explore and learn about as many aspects of his story as possible; this



provided in-depth access to the rich texture of his experience, offering an opportunity to get in touch with the absolute uniqueness of migrants' unique individual experiences.

On a theoretical level, the article is part of a constructionist framework, particularly suited to detecting and analysing processes of redefinition and remodulation of meaning, ascertaining how representations of migrants themselves and the meanings attributed to the objects that surround them change over time, and finally capturing the consequent repercussions of this process on a conceptual, emotional and practical level.

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## Objets de l'exil, objets de soins

Catherine Thomas, Laure Levillayer

**Abstract**      Respectively a psychiatric nurse and an anthropologist, we work within a multidisciplinary group of therapists. We use a complementary approach, as described by Georges Devereux, combining the psychological and the anthropological approach of the subject with refugee or asylum-seeker patients suffering from multiple trauma related to exile. In a state of great vulnerability, separated from their loved ones, these people suffer from social isolation and psychological disorganisation. The aim of our work is to lead them to psychological self-reliance. Therefore, we try, by forging a bond, to reorganise their thoughts and bring back the vital feeling of internal security. During these sessions, while we examine the connections between the patient and their environment, their relatives and their culture, a variety of objects may emerge. Either they are just mentioned through memories or dreams, or they are presented in a more concrete way, shown on a photo, displayed in consultation or offered to therapists as a gift. Jewellery, clothes, photographs, candles, cakes... All of these objects carry meaningful life stories, memories and are full of emotion. We look at them closely in order to work with the patients. Through a few clinical examples, we wish to share here the unique stories of some of these objects that have come from far away, either companions of exile or resilience tools in the host country, which have become therapeutic levers during transcultural consultations. Therefore, we support the idea that listening to people telling the life of their objects and the links they forge, receiving their emotions, contributes to the co-construction of their psychic life and their social existence. Because the object shows the strength of the social cohesion and is a landmark, it allows the patient to consider a future. The object, anchored in the past, is used during transcultural consultations as a therapeutic lever and becomes a tool for building a future.

**Keywords**      Devereux, psychotrauma, transcultural consultation, objects of exile, therapeutic levers, resilience

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La Méditerranée, carrefour migratoire, est traversée par des milliers d'exilés chaque année et certainement par autant d'objets qui leur appartiennent.

Ces trajectoires s'établissent principalement du sud vers le nord, du continent africain au continent européen, mais aussi de l'est vers l'ouest, au départ de la Turquie et de la Grèce vers l'Italie, les migrants venant alors du Caucase et de l'Asie.

Les objets qui font partie de la vie des individus, qui accompagnent en totalité ou en partie leurs parcours, ne font pas toujours la traversée. Perdus, volés, brisés, ils restent parfois inscrits dans la mémoire comme porteurs d'une histoire, d'un souhait, d'une promesse.

Respectivement infirmière en psychiatrie et anthropologue, nous travaillons au sein d'une consultation psychothérapeutique transculturelle. Les personnes réfugiées ou demandeuses d'asile que nous accueillons sont dans des situations de grande précarité, souvent séparées des leurs. Elles souffrent bien souvent d'isolement social et présentent, pour certains, une désorganisation psychique.

L'objectif du soin étant la reprise de l'autonomie psychique, nous tentons, en créant du lien, de réorganiser la pensée et de rétablir le nécessaire sentiment de sécurité interne.

Lors de ces séances, nous interrogeons les relations que la personne entretient avec son environnement, son entourage et sa culture. Une diversité d'objets peut alors émerger, en pensée d'une part, au travers les souvenirs et les rêves, matériellement d'autre part, montrés sur une photo, présentés en consultation ou offerts aux thérapeutes en contre-don.

Ainsi, bijoux, vêtements, photographies et bougies sont des objets porteurs d'une histoire, d'une mémoire, autant de véhicules d'affects et de sens sur lesquels nous nous interrogeons et travaillons avec les patients.

Après avoir présenté plus précisément le cadre thérapeutique, nous souhaitons, à travers quelques exemples cliniques, partager ici les histoires singulières de quelques objets venus de loin, compagnons d'exil ou objets de résilience dans le pays d'accueil, devenus leviers thérapeutiques le temps de consultations transculturelles.

## I Le cadre thérapeutique

L'association ACSSIT (Association comprendre et soigner en situation transculturelle), située en Vendée, est composée de professionnels de santé bénévoles (médecins généralistes, infirmiers, éducateurs, orthophonistes, psychologues) et d'une anthropologue de la santé. Les patients, orientés en deuxième intention, sont reçus par une équipe pluridisciplinaire, une fois par mois. Reposant sur les principes de l'ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste de Georges Devereux (Devereux 1972), ce suivi psychothérapeutique s'appuie alternativement sur les dimensions psychologique, psychanalytique et anthropologique du sujet. Empruntant au modèle d'accueil mis en place par Tobie Nathan à la fin des années 1970, puis développé par Marie-Rose Moro, les consultations se déroulent en présence d'interprètes afin d'accueillir les mots et les émotions dans la langue des patients. Le patient s'entretient avec son thérapeute principal et les co-thérapeutes présents participent en proposant leurs interprétations et leurs questionnements. Ce dispositif permet la circulation de la parole, l'enrichissement du sens et évite une relation duelle parfois difficile lorsqu'il s'agit d'aborder l'innommable.

La grande majorité des personnes que nous recevons ont connu des événements traumatiques : guerres, enlèvements, menaces de mort, tortures, etc. Tout au long de cet accompagne-





ment, elles nous racontent leurs parcours, leurs pertes et leurs attaches, l'histoire de leurs pays, de leurs concitoyens, de leurs familles. Au cœur de ces histoires, les patients nous présentent des personnes, des lieux, des moments et parfois aussi des objets qui ont partagé leur vie et leur exil.



Figure 1. *Male nostrum*, by Michele Ganzarolli, courtesy of the artist

Nous nous sommes questionnées sur l'importance de ces objets, leur valeur, leur symbolisme. Notre pratique clinique nous a permis d'observer dans quelle mesure ils pouvaient être porteurs de protection pour certaines personnes et servir de levier thérapeutique pour les thérapeutes.

## II La pierre de Romain

Romain est originaire d'Afrique de l'Ouest. Dans son pays, depuis son plus jeune âge, il a subi de terribles persécutions. Aujourd'hui il est en proie à des cauchemars, des reviviscences, des crises d'angoisses durant lesquelles des voix l'assailent et lui intiment l'ordre de mettre fin à ses jours. Le groupe de thérapeutes qui le suit cherche avec lui des moyens de résister à ces attaques.

À chaque consultation, Romain évoque les hauts et les bas qui rythment ses semaines. Les rencontres avec les thérapeutes ou les membres d'associations qu'il côtoie l'apaisent, les périodes de solitude le replongent dans la terreur. Il sait que le chemin vers la guérison sera long, que c'est « *pas après pas* » qu'il doit avancer. Une co-thérapeute, faisant référence aux contes de notre enfance, propose l'image de cailloux posés sur son chemin, comme « *pour se repérer dans une forêt obscure* ». Sa thérapeute principale développe : « *Il y a les "cailloux" qui sont des repères, les consultations, les amis... et il y a les "cailloux" symboliques, porteurs de nos rêves, de nos inconscients. Les bons cailloux on les garde parce qu'ils sont porteurs d'espoir et ceux qui nous rappellent de mauvaises choses, on les jette.* » Pour conclure la séance, elle propose que la fois prochaine, chacun



apporte un « caillou » ou tout autre objet naturel qui symbolise pour lui-même l'espoir et que nous lui offrirons pour symboliser notre présence à ses côtés.

À la consultation suivante, Romain semble touché sur le moment par les objets ramenés, mais il tient à souligner qu'il ne pense pas qu'il les gardera toujours avec lui : « *Quand j'étais au pays, j'avais une pierre blanche, je l'avais toujours sur moi. C'est une pierre que ma mère m'avait donnée pour me donner de la force. Je l'ai perdue, ça a été très dur. Dans le désert, on m'a tout pris. Je me sentais perdu. Je ne veux plus m'attacher à un objet.* »

Malgré la tristesse provoquée par ce souvenir douloureux, sa thérapeute principale saisit cet instant pour évoquer avec lui l'absence de sa mère, mais aussi le lien préservé entre eux : « *Vous nous avez dit que votre mère vous savait ici, entouré de femmes, de mères. Peut-être que, comme elle l'a fait pour vous, nous pourrions vous offrir ces pierres pour vous soutenir à notre tour.* » L'idée, ici, de considérer l'objet comme un lien, comme un relais entre Romain et son histoire, mais également entre sa mère restée au pays et nous, fut efficiente.

L'objet donné dans le cadre thérapeutique marque la rencontre entre le patient et les thérapeutes. Il symbolise l'alliance thérapeutique, le soutien qui perdure au-delà du temps de la rencontre. De plus, qu'il soit présent ou évoqué, l'objet est un support narratif qui facilite l'évocation des souvenirs et des émotions qui y sont associés. Il rétablit le lien entre la personne et le soignant et avec les siens : il est médiateur.

### III Les bougies de Tiana

Comme marqueur de la singularité de l'individu, l'objet de l'exil a un pouvoir évocateur. Il est porteur d'éléments biographiques, témoigne d'une identité, de représentations et de croyances. En matérialisant également un lien entre le pays, ses habitants et son propriétaire, il a une fonction de repère ainsi que de contenance psychique et culturelle. La description de l'objet, son usage, son histoire, son origine mettent en exergue les contenants culturels. Ces derniers sont constitutifs de la personne car ils permettent l'organisation psychique, donnent du sens aux événements de vie et fondent les étayages sécurisants pour la personne. En ce sens, ils sont facteurs de protection.

Tiana est une femme croyante, pratiquante. Lors d'une consultation, elle évoque les bougies utilisées lors des cérémonies importantes dans son pays. Ces bougies sont fabriquées dans des lieux de cultes selon un procédé unique, elles sont « *bénies* ». Pour Tiana elles sont un support à la prière, à ses vœux adressés à Dieu.

Thérapeute principale : « *Donc hier, vous avez placé une bougie à la fenêtre.* »

Tiana : « *Oui pour faire venir Jésus dans la maison et dans notre cœur. On fait un vœu particulier, en priant avec la bougie. Si on demande avec le cœur, ça sera exaucé.* »

Thérapeute principale : « *Et à la première consultation, vous nous aviez montré une petite icône qui vous apaisait. Vous aviez déjà ce lien avec votre paix intérieure, cette paix que vous retrouvez aujourd'hui.* »

Tiana : « *Oui, je me souviens. Cette icône, je l'ai placée dans une petite boîte avec une bougie à côté* »

Cothérapeute : « *Comme un petit autel.* »

Tiana : « *Oui, pour prier.* »

Parvenue au terme de son suivi, Tiana a tenu à offrir à chacun des thérapeutes une bougie.



La bougie, support à la prière, objet porteur d'espoir, est devenue ici à la fois un cadeau d'au revoir et un contre-don en retour du temps d'écoute et du soutien offerts par les thérapeutes.

#### IV Le châle de Gia

Dans son pays, Gia travaillait comme journaliste télévisée, elle était très active. Elle est partie en raison de fortes pressions politiques et c'est avec une grande peine qu'elle évoque la perte de son travail, l'éloignement d'avec sa famille et ses amis. L'évocation des objets, laissés avec regret au pays ou choisis avec soin et conservés à travers l'exil, entraîne rapidement le récit des souvenirs et des émotions ressenties.

Pour Gia, les bijoux, transmis de mère en fille, témoignent de l'histoire de sa famille, ce sont des objets importants. Elle a pu, par chance, conserver quelques bijoux appartenant à sa grand-mère maternelle, pour qui elle était la « préférée » des petits-enfants. L'évocation de sa grand-mère et de sa relation toute particulière avec elle est également associée à un objet, un châle que cette dernière lui a confié.

Tout en parlant du châle, Gia évoque plusieurs souvenirs d'enfance et son récit, accompagné de sourires, est ponctué de rires. Ce sont des souvenirs heureux avec ses grands-parents, ses cousines et ses cousins. Gia est, à ce moment, très loquace. Par exemple, elle se remémore comment sa grand-mère lui a appris à lire plus vite : « *J'ai commencé à lire avec ma mamie et j'ai lu beaucoup avec elle. Elle avait une grande bibliothèque à la maison et elle m'a donné beaucoup de livres. Elle m'a appris beaucoup de choses, j'ai beaucoup de souvenirs avec elle. C'est important [...]. Elle mettait ça [le châle] bien souvent et elle me l'a toujours proposé : "Oh ma chérie, tu veux que je te donne mon châle, ça va te sauver, tu ne vas pas attraper le froid et si tu as froid, je peux te le donner".* »

Gia est toujours en possession de ce châle dont elle se couvre quand elle a froid.

Certains objets évoqués pendant les entretiens sont visibles et accessibles, d'autres sont rangés et peu visibles, d'autres, enfin, ont été perdus ou volés. Gia range le châle de sa grand-mère dans son armoire de manière visible : « *C'est le châle de ma mamie, alors quand je le vois, même si je ne l'utilise pas je le vois dans l'armoire. C'est le châle de ma mamie, je regarde, je souris et je passe.* »

Gia utilise toujours son châle pour se prémunir du froid, comme sa grand-mère le faisait : « *J'aime bien lire dans les soirées avec un thé, avec le châle de ma mamie, c'est une tradition.* » Elle dit que penser à sa grand-mère lui fait du bien.

#### V L'objet comme levier thérapeutique

Porteurs de mémoire, les objets sont un support d'« élaboration des problématiques traumatiques sur lequel le non-dit a pris une place importante » (Gimenez, 2002 : 97). Les objets sont (font) le lien entre le passé de la personne et ce qu'elle est dans l'ici et maintenant.

Le choix des objets de départ est le fruit d'un processus cognitif élaboré à partir de ce qui semble important ou utile pour la personne dans l'élaboration de son projet migratoire (Galitzine Loupet 2013). Les objets personnels, par opposition aux objets médiatisés du migrant, sont des marqueurs des liens sociaux et montrent l'attachement aux pays ou aux personnes. Ces objets témoignent de la biographie de la personne, ils font partie des souvenirs et les font revivre (Cousin 2018 ; Thomas 2014). Ils ont également une valeur protectrice pour la personne. L'objet devient un marqueur social chargé de contenants culturels et un marqueur de la singula-



rité, porteur d'éléments biographiques. L'objet est concret, il est externe en tant que « non-soi » (Gimenez 2002). Il peut être visible, accessible, rappeler des souvenirs heureux, matérialiser le lien avec les personnes et les événements du passé. Il est parfois peu accessible, moins visible, car sa remémoration engendre un souvenir douloureux. Enfin, l'objet peut être caché, oublié car son évocation ramènerait des reviviscences traumatiques (Tisseron 2016).

Dans notre pratique clinique, il nous a été souvent donné de voir ou d'entendre l'extrême dénuement. De nombreuses personnes témoignent de tout ce qu'elles ont perdu, matériellement et socialement. Elles ont pour la plupart le sentiment de n'avoir « *plus rien à quoi se raccrocher* ».



Figure 2. Container, by Michele Ganzarolli, courtesy of the artist

Une des approches possibles pour les thérapeutes est alors d'explorer avec le patient le contenu de ce que nous nommons « la valise migratoire » (Thomas C. 2019). Il s'agit de retrouver à l'aide du patient les choses qu'il n'a pas perdu, qu'il a su préserver. Tout d'abord l'immatériel, les valeurs, les souvenirs, les savoirs et savoir-faire, puis le matériel, les objets. Et c'est là qu'apparaissent, une bague, un vêtement, une photo, qui serviront de support narratif lors des consultations.

Ainsi, nous constatons qu'écouter des personnes raconter la vie de leurs objets et des liens qu'ils tissent, recevoir leurs émotions, contribuent à (co)construire leur vie psychique et leur existence sociale simultanément. Parce que l'objet est investi de la force du lien social et qu'il est un repère, il permet à la personne d'envisager un futur. Ancré dans le passé, l'objet, saisi lors des consultations transculturelles comme levier thérapeutique, devient un élément de construction de l'avenir.



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# From Anonymous, Objectified Images to Subjects Mirroring Multiple Identities: Performing *The Foreigner(s)*

Angela Viora

**Abstract** *The Foreigner – Unknown Unlabelled Unexpected* (2016, 2018) is a durational and participatory live performance that I designed and performed as a personal response to the migration question involving Europe, Africa, and the Middle East in the past decades. The objects analysed in this essay are the images of those dead migrants' bodies covered by white cloths on the Italian and Greek shores. I am Italian and I have been on some of those shores.

We mainly experience these bodies as images on screens via the media. These bodies have no identity, they are “the foreigners”. We, the viewers, can forget about them by switching our screens off: due to way they are presented by the media, “the foreigners” cease to be subjects and become simple objects, images. What would happen if I removed the cold and reassuring mediation of the screens and recreate that image in flesh, in public spaces crossed by people in their everyday lives? How would people react to that objectified image - now a breathing body, and thus, a subject?

**Keywords** Foreigner, migration, performance art, objects, subjects, audience

**DOI** 10.25364/08.7:2021.1.4



## I Introduction

In this visual contribution, I present *The Foreigner – Unknown Unlabelled Unexpected* (2016, 2018). This is a durational and participatory live performance that I designed and performed as a personal response to the migration question involving Europe, Africa, and the

Middle-East in the past decades. The objects analysed in this essay are the images of those dead migrants' bodies covered by white cloths on the Italian and Greek shores.

We mainly experience these bodies as images on screens via the media. These bodies have no identity, they are “the foreigners”. We, the viewers, can detach from these bodies and forget about them by switching our screens off: due to way they are presented by the media, “the foreigners” cease to be subjects and become simple objects, images.

Much scholarship argues that the media may anaesthetise us due to the lack of body-to-body relationship (Hazou; Marsh; Viora, *To Be or Not to Be There. When the Performer Leaves the Scene and Makes Room for the Audience*). Even live-streamed face-to-face events happening live and showing images of migration (and violence) are likely to foster feelings of detachment and isolation “or the absence of social bonds— [due to] the lack of physical co-presence of interaction participants that reduces the possibility of individuals to become caught up in the emotions and actions of others.” (Bellocchi) By performing *The Foreigner*, I took the reassuring coldness of the media screens off and put the body back at the centre of the representation of migration— my performing body, the audience members' bodies, and those evoked, shipwrecked bodies. I aimed to reconstitute the status of subjects to those migrants who became corpses, then “foreigners”, then just images.

I am Italian and I have been on some of those beaches called “the door to Europe.” (Bolzoni)

I am an immigrant in Australia, albeit migrating under more fortunate circumstances than the persons to whom the performance refers. These covered bodies seen on TV and the Internet made me reflect upon the relationship between myself here in Australia as a temporary resident and the migrants and refugees in the place that I call ‘home’.

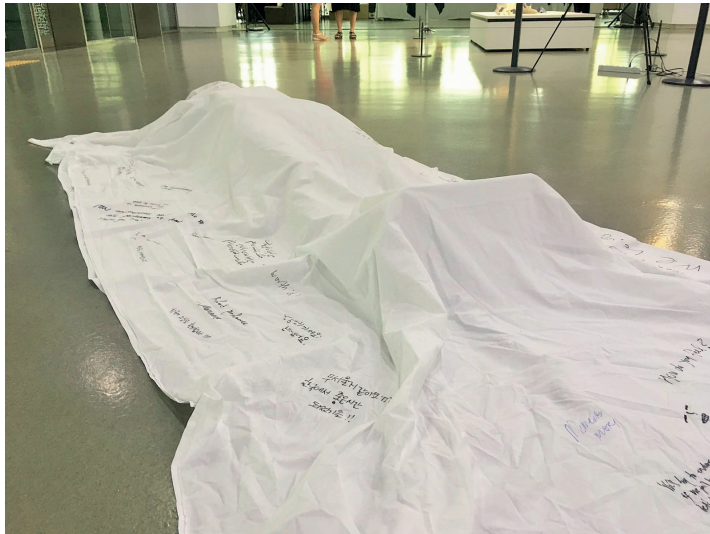


Figure 1



Whilst the media bridge physical and geographical distances, they may also accentuate the gap between reality and virtuality, blurring the line between “subjectness” and objectification. The unidentified person underneath that cloth could be me, a young and educated woman moving to the other end of the world (or the sea) to follow her dreams. What if I was underneath that cloth? I wondered what would happen had I embody that image and throw it in public spaces crossed by people in their everyday lives. What would happen if I removed the cold and reassuring mediation of the screens and recreate that image in flesh? How would people react to that objectified image - now a breathing body, and thus, a subject?

I performed *The Foreigner* to explore these questions. I did so through the anonymity and vulnerability of my performing body eliciting dynamics of empathy and alterity, and fostering the active participation of the audience in the performance process (Viora, To Be or Not to Be There. When the Performer Leaves the Scene and Makes Room for the Audience) (Viora, Analysing the Performance Art Process Through the Forces of Fragmentation and Union: An Offer) My object-subject body worked as a mirror reflecting personal ideas, constructs, and emotions of the visitors, many of which identified as ‘migrants’, ‘immigrants’, ‘expats’, or ‘diasporic subjects’. These people became participants in the performance through their actions and reactions towards an object, an image, which slowly became a subject before them. Participants experienced and interpreted the vision of *The Foreigner* according to their personal histories and past experiences, generating a multiplicity of perspectives on identity, migration, and belonging (Viora, Analysing the Performance Art Process Through the Forces of Fragmentation and Union: An Offer). I performed *The Foreigner* for the first time in 2016 at the Monash Performing Arts Centre in Clayton, Australia. The performance lasted for five hours. I then reperformed this work for two and a half hours at the Daegu Art Factory in South Korea in 2018, as part of *PSi#24* Performance Studies International Conference.

This is a visual essay in which images, more than words, lead the readers through the work and introduce them to a narrative that is for them to create. This is because I wish to give the readers a sense of the processuality of the performance, which put the audience members before a living image with neither instructions nor ready-made stories to hold onto, or screens to hide behind. Body to body, the blank cloth performed as a mirror: standing before *The Foreigner*, participants ended up before themselves. The structure of this contribution aims to draw the readers into *The Foreigner* slowly yet inexorably. The performances have shown that, through duration, most participants experienced the work more deeply and, for them, meaningfully. That said, nonetheless, in the spirit of live performances, I invite the readers to dip into this work at their own pace, slowly or quickly, scrolling through pages, videos, and images, possibly in a random order, perhaps leaving half way and then coming back, skipping passages, breathing. Although the essay presents an introduction, a body of the text, and a conclusive section, this structure is loose, and I hence encourage the readers to take a personal approach to the work.

In the following pages,

*The sentences written in italics are the imaginary questions and statements of *The Foreigner*.*

The sentences written in this different style are the audience members’ feedback, reported exactly as they were written.



The images of words written in different languages on a white cloth are the pieces of feedback left on the Foreigner by the participants, during both performances. Image credits are at the end of the essay.

## II *The Foreigner* — From Image to Object to Body to Subject

Videos



[“THE FOREIGNER - Unknown Unlabelled Unexpected” \(Melbourne 2016\) by Angela Viora on Vimeo](#)



[“THE FOREIGNER - Unknown Unlabelled Unexpected” \(Daegu, SK 2018\) by Angela Viora on Vimeo](#)

I performed unannounced during daytime in public spaces crossed by people. Visitors would happen upon me. My identity did not appear anywhere: *I am The Foreigner, I have no identity but that that others would label me with.*

“You are entering an area where a recorded performance is in progress. There is a performer lying down on the floor, covered with a white sheet. You cannot see the performer and the performer cannot see you. Neither of you knows anything about each other: gender, nationality, skin colour, physical features, and language. The performer will lie down under the sheet without moving or speaking for an unspecified duration. You are invited to take a pen marker and write your name on the white sheet, thus, on the performer. You can write your name in form of signature, fully writing, initials, or nickname. Signing links to identity. Signing recalls appropriation and domination, but also responsibility. You can



write whatever you want about The Foreigner. You can choose not to write anything and simply stay in the area, close to or far from the performer, and share the place with the rest of the audience. You can occupy the space as you wish. You can stay in the room for as long as you wish. You can go away and come back again. You can approach the performer from any side and in whichever way you want to.”

*(The Foreigner statement)*



Figure 2



Figure 3

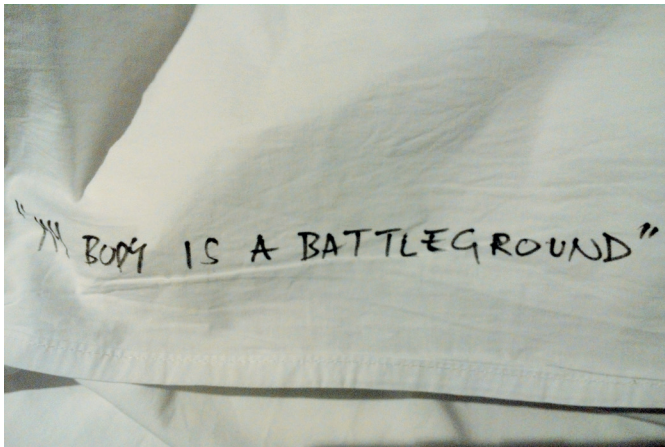




**Figures 4 & 5**

*If you do not know my identity,  
what you are going to see?*

*If I remain motionless, what you are  
going to do?*



**Figure 6**



I breathe, you breathe.  
I have a name. You have a name.  
I have a history. You have a history.  
Is this room my space or your space?  
Is it a common space?  
Is it a commonplace?

Stillness is a bit difficult “thing” for me to navigate... but then I got seduced by it, I was looking, trying to find the little movements, the breath, the tiny lifting of the chest. I felt in those little moments in which I could see the movement as a dialogue with the performer, like a shared secret: He/She was alive!



Figure 7

What did my body reveal to me, as an agentic subject rather than an immaterial image, when my heart-beat increased consistently each time that someone came closer to me? As I wrote down soon after performing, “rationally, in my mind, I was calm, and I had no fear. I *thought* that I was calm, but my body was telling me another story.”

It is like watching a performance within the performance. Each person I saw reacted differently to the body [of the Foreigner], some walked around it from a distance, some went straight to the body, each encounter was a different story. I experienced it as a performance within the performance.



Katarina Mattsson discusses the “historicity of encounters” to explain that experiences and encounters never happen only in the present, but carry past events and memories with them (Bromseth 143). According to St Augustine, past events can return to existence in the present through evocations and memories. The event itself no longer exist yet is present as “the expression of it in the form of images, that have been imprinted like footprints in the soul by means of the senses” (my translation from Italian).<sup>1</sup> (Agostino)

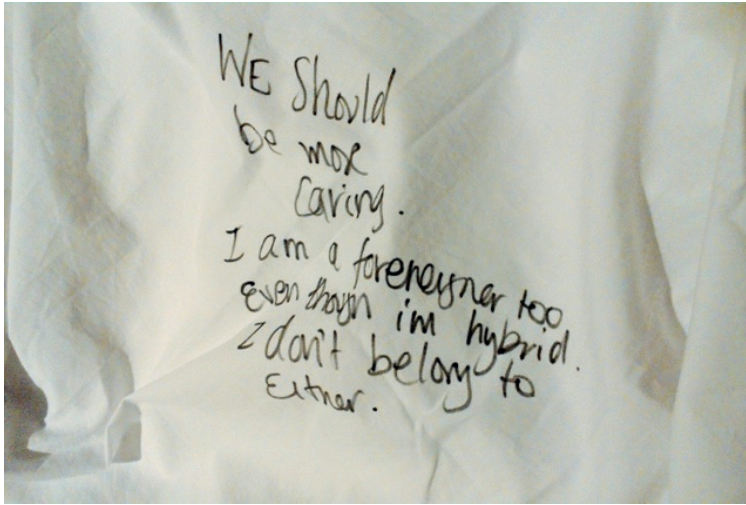


Figure 8

“I can relate many of my feelings inside the room as not knowing the land’s rules. As a recent migrant, never sure anymore what, where, when and how.”

“The performer was alone and exposed in the room as well as migrants in a new land.”

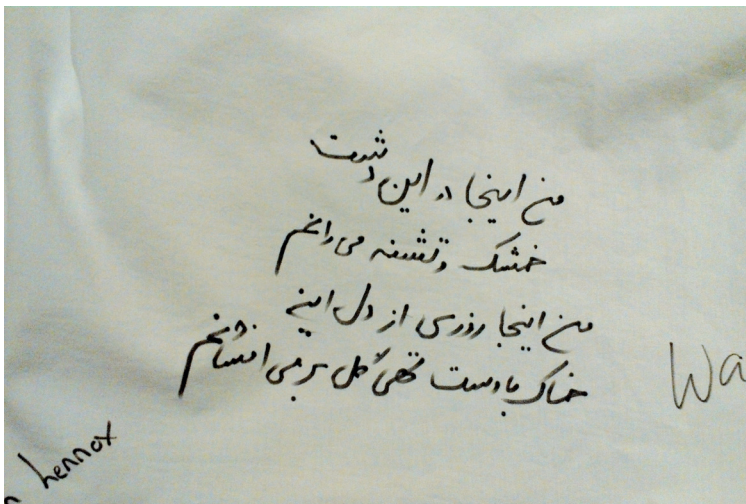


Figure 9

1 Original: “quando si raccontano avvenimenti passati veri, non si tirano fuori dalla memoria gli avvenimenti in sé stessi, ma espressioni formate dalle loro immagini che si sono impresse a guisa di orme nell’animo per mezzo dei sensi.”





Everyday objects, materials, and images belonging to our collective culture(s) may work as meaningful signifiers. *The Foreigner* originated as a reflection of mine on migration issues involving Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. I embodied a media image that is for everyone to see. Throughout the performance, nonetheless, this image was re-interpreted by the audience and acquired further meanings. For an Iranian participant, for instance, the motionless body of the Foreigner covered by a white sheet recalled Iranian funerals, during which the bodies are wrapped in white cloths. We must also remember that images and objects always perform within contexts: space, in performance art, is not only the physical venue in which the event happens. Rather, multiple geographical, cultural, social, and evoked spaces are involved in a performance. *The Foreigner* performed in Melbourne in a university (2016) involved different forms of spatiality than the same performance in the Daegu Art Factory during an international conference (2018). Thus, the piece evoked further spatial realities for each audience member. In Melbourne, the image of the Foreigner made many Australian participants think of the asylum seekers' situation on Nauru and Manus Islands. Some Filipino participants in Daegu linked that same image to the anonymous corpses of the victims of the drug war plaguing their country. *The Foreigner* recalled the 2016 Orlando gay-club massacre for an American participant identifying as gay, who burst into tears. A "bearer of messages," (Vergine) my performing body became a symbol of broader realities for each audience member.



Figure 10



*... I thought I was entering a crime scene. It was so dramatic that for a moment I forgot the context of the conference — at the same time the double presence of the cameras brought that context back — everything is documented, ub? Everything is “image”.*

In the following paragraphs, I explain how the image of the Foreigner’s dehumanised body, gradually passed from being perceived as an object to being acknowledged as (belonging to) a subject by the audiences. I performed in the lobby of the Art Factory in Daegu, and the stillness and anonymity of my body made many viewers think that the Foreigner was a statue among other statues. When these audience members realised that there was a living person under the cloth, they reacted with either shock or discomfort. The video recording shows a teenager coming closer to the Foreigner, lifting the cloth, and then immediately jumping back in shock when they saw my hair, their mouth and eyes wide open. Another person passed by and stopped suddenly. They slowly walked in circles around the Foreigner, closer and closer, and then looked directly into the camera to say, I found this deeply disturbing.

How could my body, performing an image, become a mirror, and then a subject, during the development of a performance? Was being there in the flesh enough?

How did the Foreigner practically enter in relation with space, time, and the other bodies involved in the work—the spectators’ bodies and the represented or evoked bodies?

My answer to this is, a body become an embodied subject through the acknowledgement and display of its own limits.

A performance artist makes present their own body “as subject and object, in specific relationships to the world.” (Birringer 66) I discussed elsewhere my understanding of the performance process as an ecosystem in which space, time, and bodies all have agency in shaping the development of the work, acting upon each other in relationships of mutual influence and exchange. (Viora, *Analysing the Performance Art Process Through the Forces of Fragmentation and Union: An Offer*) Within this framework, “embodiment is presence: it is the condition of the body that makes itself present to itself in the place-world.” (Viora, *Analysing the Performance Art Process Through the Forces of Fragmentation and Union: An Offer*) I understand becoming present as a relational and ecological phenomenon, according to the Ancient Greek concept of *sōma*, namely, “the embodiment of the person,” (Dunn 56) encompassing the physical apparatus, the mind, the emotions and the senses:

it [*sōma*] denotes the person embodied in a particular environment. It is the means by which the person relates to that environment, and vice versa. It is the meaning of living it, of experiencing the environment . . . . It is the embodied “me,” the means by which “I” and the world can act upon each other. (56)

In *The Foreigner*, I made myself present through limits (Birringer), in the form of pain and stamina levels, by means of vulnerability and duration. I performed ‘for as long as possible’ without rehearsing, until I was physically and mentally able to do so. At no time I could see what was happening around me and *to me*. The vulnerability brought forward by stamina, unpredictability, and exhaustion prevented me to act and left the audience members witnessing something “utterly raw” (Scheer and Parr) to which they were exposed without the mediation of any narrative or the filters of any screen. This unmediated process connected myself to my



humanity and that of the audiences, eliciting dynamics of mirroring and empathy in them, who then stepped into the work and became agentic parts of it (Viora, *To Be or Not to Be There. When the Performer Leaves the Scene and Makes Room for the Audience*). As a result, the audiences perceived the Foreigner as a subject rather than an object.

Initially preoccupied with their own experience of spatiality and duration, visitors empathised with mine by progressively focusing on the performing body of the Foreigner.

I employed breathing techniques to endure stillness, overcome pain, and maintain focus. Breathing deeply made my chest move up and down, and this allowed many members of the public to establish a connection between their bodies and the still anonymous yet human body of the Foreigner. These participants declared in the feedback book that they moved closer to me and wrote on the cloth once they noticed my breath and attuned to it. Observing my breathe, the reflected on the universality of the human condition represented by the Foreigner because

we all have a body and we all breathe.

Objects do not breathe. Participants saw me gasping underneath the cloth and realised my struggle, perceiving the tension of my muscles and my fatigue. In Melbourne, a woman sat next to me and chanted for what I perceived as a very long time. She did so to give me relief because she knew how hard is to maintain that position for a prolonged time.

Her chanting worked as a balm that gave me energy: focusing on it, I overcame pain and I could continue to perform. Another person laid down on the floor

in solidarity and [to] see how the performance felt from your perspective.

During the performance in Daegu, someone wrote on my leg as soft as possible so as not to disturb your stillness. Another person refrained from writing on the cloth because

the body of the Foreigner looks so frail...

A woman witnessing *The Foreigner* in Daegu for its entire length worried for my personal safety. According to the staff of the venue, this woman asked them to check on me several times during the performance because she worked there, and she knew how cold that floor was. The corporeal limits make the body as *sōma* exposed, and thus, vulnerable. *The Foreigner* shows that vulnerability is a fundamental communication channel between space, time, bodies, performer and audience. The vulnerability of the Foreigner turned the limits of my body from limitations to possibilities of embodiment and encounters. That is, the embodiment of an image of migration and death that ceased to be an object and became a subject through the encounters between bodies as “portals of sensorial experiences.” (O’Callaghan)





Figure 11



Figure 12

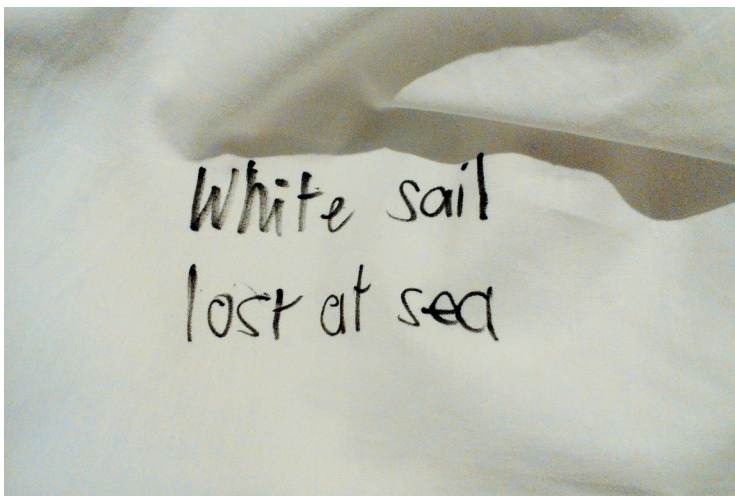


Figure 13

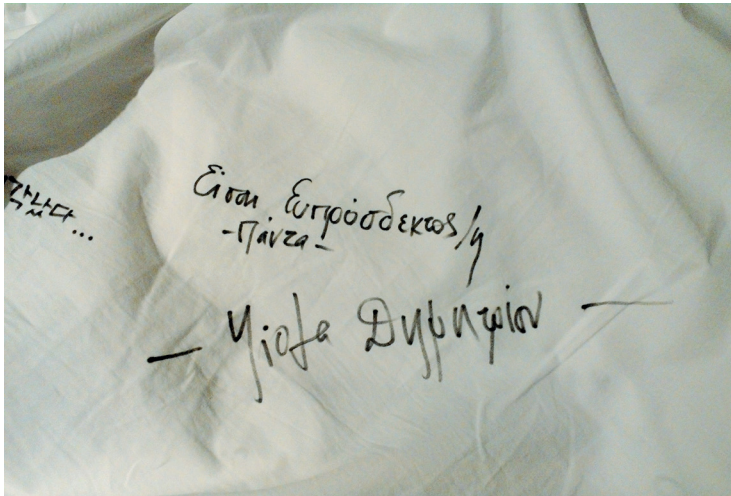


Figure 14

What if you were underneath the sheet?

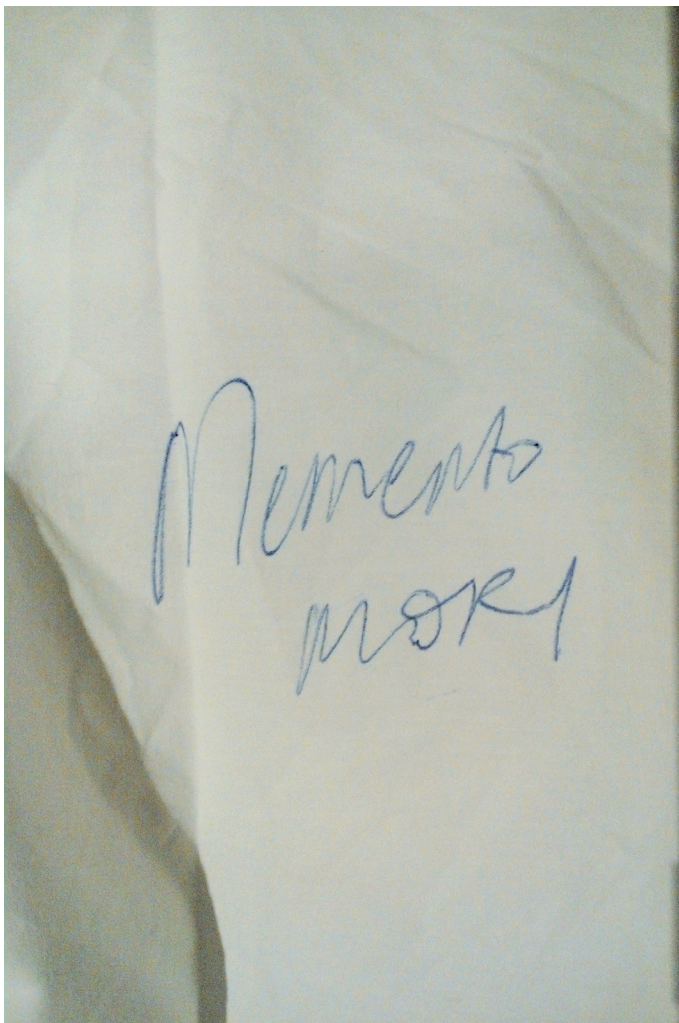


Figure 15



### III A final reflection...

*The Foreigner* positions itself within this special issue in a particular way. On one hand, the images of ‘the foreigners’ perceived through the media are ‘objects of exile’ inasmuch as aleatory, bodiless figures moving across screens and borders. On the other hand, the bodies of these foreigners are not objects in exile, in fact, they perform the opposite way. The dead bodies of immigrants are likely to become dehumanised when they are perceived through and as images: those bodies become the objects that remain with us, the viewers. Their quality of being human is what is exiled in our perception of migration. Therefore, the status of subject is exiled from those bodies and their owners. My performance aimed to bring that humanity back into the eye of the beholder. Giving materiality and volume to an image makes it an object. Giving (a) body to an image means giving it breath, life, and thus, humanity: as explained in the following pages, that object is then experienced as a subject by and among other subjects. What was previously a mere image from a screen, becomes still, solid, and tangible through embodiment, physically sharing the space with the viewers, who are now participants.

The noun “object” comes from the medieval Latin *objectum*, *objectus*, which is the past participle of *obicĕre* (*ob-*, in the way of + *jacere-*, to throw), indicating something that “presents itself to the sight”, and is “put before (the sight or the mind).” (Treccani Enciclopedia) Once the Foreigner appeared in front of the audience members, the actions that they decided to do or not to do towards that embodied image were conscious choices determining their agency in shaping the performance process. As I analyse in the following pages, the audience members attributed many different meanings to the body-object of the Foreigner until it became a subject to the eyes of many of them. Identity is always a matter of relations and encounters (Bromseth), and responsibility, I add: by signing the cloth covering the Foreigner, and writing their responses to and onto it, the participants restituted identity and the status of subject to that body. I agree with Professor of Art Frazer Ward contending that there are no “innocent bystanders” among the witnesses of a performance. (Ward) Similarly, I believe that there are no innocent bystanders when it comes to migration and human rights: being physically far from places of struggles and violence, and switching our screens off is not enough to call ourselves estranged from these questions. I aimed to highlight this in *The Foreigner* by becoming anonymous and vulnerable, and thus, giving full agency to the audiences within the performance.

When people die, for the first few years, their family members, friends, relatives visit their grave and mourn them. When they do that, they might want to say something to the dead, but they can’t. And perhaps, the dead person inside the grave might want to hear what people on the out world want to say to them. But they cannot hear it either. So, I interpreted this performance as communication between the dead and the alive. Some people may just pass by, and some people may want to mourn. And maybe the dead can hear it like we do through this performance...?



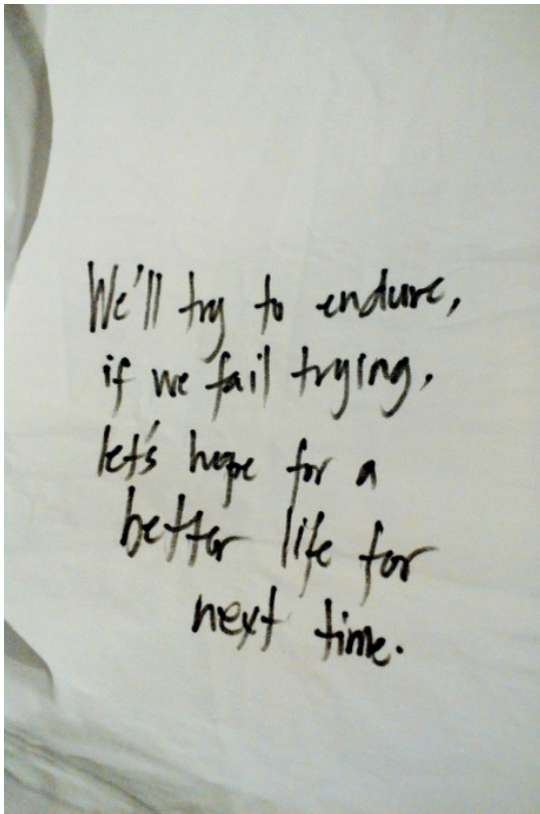


Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

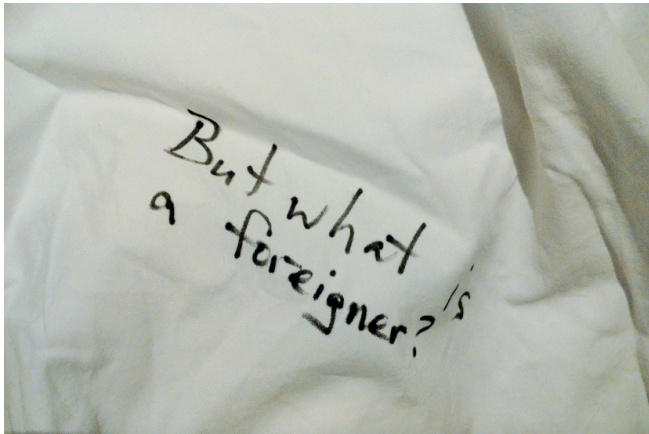


Figure 19

### Credits:

Video 1 © Angela Viora 2016, *The Foreigner-Unknown Unlabelled Unexpected*.

Live performance. Performing Arts Centre, Monash University, Melbourne (AUS). Supported by Monash University. Video editing by D.B. Valentine for Angela Viora.

Video 2 © Angela Viora 2018, *The Foreigner-Unknown Unlabelled Unexpected*.

Live performance. 24th Performance Studies International Conference, Daegu Art Factory, Daegu (SK). Supported by Monash University. Video editing by D.B. Valentine for Angela Viora.

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Live performance. 24th Performance Studies International Conference, Daegu Art Factory, Daegu (SK). Supported by Monash University. Ph. Panayiota Demetriou, Peter Burke, and Daegu Art Factory. Courtesy of the artist and *PSi* Archive.



Figures 6, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19. Audience members' writings on *The Foreigner*. © Angela Viora 2018, *The Foreigner-Unknown Unlabelled Unexpected*. Live performance. 24th Performance Studies International Conference, Daegu Art Factory, Daegu (SK). Supported by Monash University. Courtesy of the artist.

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She has performed, exhibited, and presented her work internationally, including at BOAA – Biennale of Australian Art, Daegu Art Factory (SK), University of Bielsko-Biała (PL), Performance Studies International Conference, the MAXXI Museum in Rome (IT), and the 12th Istanbul Biennial (TK).

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# The transfer of architectural heritage as a transcultural tool: the case of the obelisk of Axum

Fabio Colonnese (Sapienza University of Rome), Maria Grazia D'Amelio  
(University of Rome Tor Vergata), Lorenzo Grieco (University of Rome Tor  
Vergata, University of Kent)

- Abstract** The story of King Ezana's Obelisk of Axum and its Italian exile represents the epitomic example of the cultural and political implications of relocating architecture. The 4th-century CE stele in basaltic stone, which stood broken in Axum, modern Ethiopia, was taken as war booty by the Italian troops after the military occupation of 1935. In 1937, the obelisk was transferred to Rome and re-erected in front of the Ministry of Italian Africa, overlooking the Circus Maximus: a graft resulting in cultural contaminations. Ethiopia had been asking for its restitution since 1947, but the stele was returned only in 2005. It was disassembled and reduced again into pieces, then transferred to Ethiopia by three cargo flight. The restitution required the export of Italian technologies and professionals to carry out the re-composition, providing the African country with the necessary knowledge to re-erect the other obelisks lying broken in Axum. From this point of view, the return of the obelisk prompted a process of knowledge transfer, opening new opportunities of cultural cooperation.
- Keywords** Obelisk of Axum, Return of cultural property, Postcolonialism, Structure relocation, Ethiopia
- DOI** 10.25364/08.7:2021.1.5



## Monuments on the move<sup>1</sup>

Artworks and even architecture move and travel like all other goods. In 70 A.D, Cicero, referring to the tour guides and to the artworks Verres took away from the people of the province of Sicily, wrote “[they] now have their description of things reversed; for as they formerly used to show what there was in every place, so now they show what has been taken from every place” (*In Verrem*, II, 4, 132). Cicero’s text proves how the physical transfer of artworks is a practice that dates back millennia, although its cultural and philological implications have only recently been investigated, particularly in the field of relocated monuments.

Artworks and monuments move, or better ‘are moved’, for several reasons and with many different consequences. The relocation of works of art is always the result of asymmetrical power relations in times of peace and war – be they economic, political, martial, etc. – and as such unjust but not always illegal. The range of situations is wide, and the ethical margins are blurred. The phenomenon unfolds through art theft, war spoils in the context of *ius praedae*, the appropriation of cultural assets during colonialism, the export of artefacts from excavations, including clandestine ones, confiscations justified by ideology, and the material diaspora of

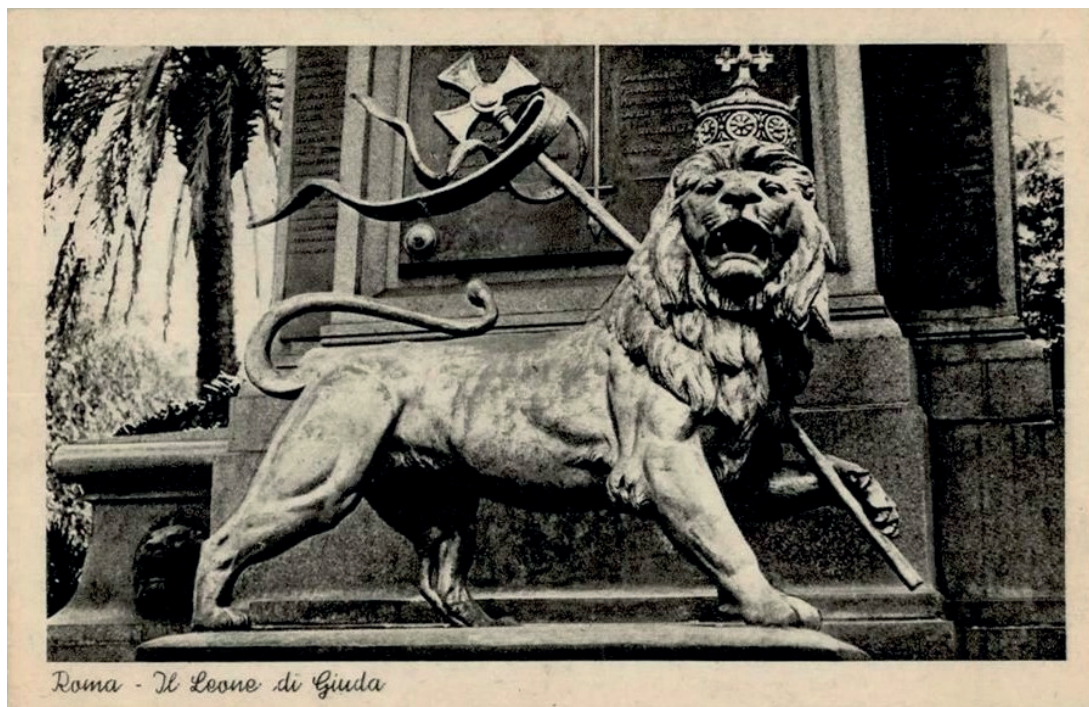


Figure 1. The Lion of Judah, brought to Rome in 1937, beneath the monument to the fallen soldiers of Dogali. Courtesy of Il Corno d’Africa.

1 This contribution is dedicated to the memory of Teresa Sarti and Gino Strada, founders of the NGO Emergency, along with Carlo Garbagnati and Giulio Cristoffanini. The authors owe a special thanks to the engineer Simone Pietro Lattanzi of Lattanzi Srl, for the precious materials on the disassembling of the obelisk in Rome and its re-erection in Ethiopia. The text results from collegial work by the authors. However, Fabio Colonnese edited the section ‘Monuments on the move’; Maria Grazia D’Amelio edited the section ‘The stele that came from Axum to Rome’, and Lorenzo Grieco edited the section ‘The return of monuments as knowledge transfer’.



entire civilisations favoured by the art trade. These practices have recently prompted ethical and legal issues on the illicit transfer of cultural property. They resulted in motions for repatriations which have been legitimised by several international agreements and directives, from the 1970 UNESCO Convention to the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention, and recently the Sarr-Savoy Report (2018), which has a special focus on decolonising policies.

However, the directives rarely mention the fertilising processes triggered by the transfer of cultural assets. Imported objects are capable of influencing tastes and fashions: consider, for instance, the overseas shipment of entire monasteries dismantled in France and the Iberian Peninsula (e.g. the Met Cloister and the Cistercian Monastery in Miami) or of parts of buildings sold by antique dealers through an international sales network (Brugéat 2018; Colonnese, D'Amelio, Grieco 2021).<sup>2</sup> John Henry Merryman, in his pioneering writings on restitutions (2006, 2009), tried to move the discussion to a different level. Besides recognising the validity of the reasons in favour of repatriation, which are largely taken for granted (Thompson 2003), Merryman sustained that often objects 'in captivity' can improve the notion of diversity and connect distant cultures.

These operations are the basis of recent analyses on the status of migrant objects, characterised by a process of displacement and exile; in particular, the debate on the fate of archaeological, artistic or ethnographic collections raises ethical, political and cultural questions, only partially silenced by reasons of legitimacy, as the controversies on the Elgin Marbles and more generally the theme of the decolonisation of museums demonstrate (UNESCO Recommendation 19.COM 8; Procter 2020; Grechi 2021). The judgement on the asymmetry of power that has engendered the diasporas of artefacts, imbued with allogeneic cultures, is now taken for



Figure 2. The stele in Axum, visited in 1935 by the Italian marble carver Rocco Altieri (Castelluccio Valmaggiore, FG, 21 October 1911 - Castellbolognese, RA, 18 January 2006). Courtesy of Leonardo Altieri.

2 See also the Decolonize Our Museum project at <https://decolonizeourmuseums.tumblr.com> (accessed December 2021).



granted. However, it cannot be ignored that 'migrant' works, besides dealing with the identity of peoples and territories, are the foundation of powerful and subtle cultural contaminations that branch out into multiple spheres. In this sense, the concept of the material or immaterial 'contact zone' (Pratt 1992) may be useful. This is defined as the 'spatial and temporal coexistence of subjects previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures' (Pratt 1992: 7), capable of implementing phenomena of osmosis and, in any case, prompting powerful cultural mechanisms.

The 'prodigious flight' from Nazareth to Loreto, which transported the Holy House (9,50 x 4 m) in its entirety in 1294, has become a myth. It gave rise not only to one of the most important places of pilgrimage for the Catholic Church, but also to a flourishing of fanciful legends, an endless iconographic repertoire, and even musical compositions. All these narrative and artistic expressions have flowed into the so-called 'Loreto tradition', which has also blossomed in places far away from the small town in the Marche region, eventually promoting the construction of copies of the small building/custody (Giffin 2021).

As Alina Payne wrote, the circulation of art and architecture, including smaller items like fabrics, printings, medals and artefacts, was of crucial importance in shaping a global history of art. She subtly distinguished mobility from portability; the former does not imply the physical movement of a work of art or the product of a culture, be it material or immaterial. In particular, the scholar highlighted how, in the modern period, traded objects influenced artistic experimentations and developments in the Mediterranean area. In such a scenario, portable images can help to unlock the host culture. An effective example of this is the facade of Palazzo Spinelli in Florence, which features a *sgraffito* with the decorative motifs of textiles that this family of merchants traded, especially with Asterabad, Iran. Through this exotic intermediary, the Florentine formal repertoire absorbed innovative patterns that had formerly originated in Asia – arabesques, some asymmetrical arrangements, dragons, and other such animals – which then spread through the Mediterranean region.

The relocation of large-scale artefacts or life-size pieces of architecture provides an even more powerful unlocking mechanism, as in the case of the Altar of Zeus, which was moved from Pergamon to Berlin (Payne 2008, 2013, 2014). In this case, the premise for the architecture's portability must be particularly strong, as it also requires a complex and expensive operation. The entire process must be worth the effort needed both in dismantling the building (studying how to divide it into smaller, transportable parts; numbering the elements; lifting and packing; moving; etc.) and in reassembling it. This generally requires a different approach and techniques from the primitive ones, since the passing of time may have obliterated the original construction techniques and the dimensions and materials of the reconstructed building rarely coincide with the original ones (Bilsel 2012). These processes demand significant expertise and complex operations, since the transported objects are rarely monolithic elements (obelisks or statues); instead, they are often poly-material constructions in which at least some parts of the original material are conserved in the final product.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the musealisation drive triggered a sort of diaspora of temples, urban walls, tombs and other constructions, testified by the temples of Debod, Tafa and Dendur re-erected in Madrid, Leida and New York respectively, the chapel of el-Lessiya, which was moved to Turin, and the gate of Ishtar and the market of Miletus, which were





transported to Berlin (Troilo 2021). One of the effects of this global agency was to promote a new awareness of place and the inextricable relationship architecture has with it. The deep meaning of architecture itself started to be questioned from the perspective that a building is valuable only when it weaves an organic relationship with the site and embodies the *genius loci*. Even ephemeral architecture, from Bedouin tents or nomadic medieval huts to classicist revolutionary architecture for feasts, revised the traditional bond of a structure to a place through its temporary character.

The practice of moving architecture pieces away from their original place, often exerted over the Global South through military and economic power, neglects the premise that objects, but even more monuments, only make sense when they maintain an organic relationship with the place (Hopkirk 1980). Due to their rooted nature in the space, architecture pieces are always transported with material and symbolical alterations (Annoni 1941). Further considerations arise from the idea of architecture as a language, whose meaning, citing thinkers like Walter Benjamin (2002) or Jacques Derrida (1979; 2001), cannot be translated (physically and figuratively) without losing the non-grammatical factors that influenced its original state. Can Bilsel (2002), referring to the Staatliche Museen in Berlin, puts forward the hypothesis that artefacts recomposed elsewhere are nothing but reveries of the originals. They can be seen as enactments, which are perceived – because of the cultural strategy that produced them – as authentic monuments.

In this historical and theoretical context, the story of the Ethiopian Obelisk of Axum (Aksum), its Italian exile in the twentieth century and its restitution to the country of origin in the twentyfirst century epitomise the cultural and political implications of relocating architecture. In Ethiopia, the obelisk was charged with a sacred and symbolic value; Axum was considered to be one of the holiest cities in the country. The two relocations it was subjected to, first from Axum to Rome in 1937 and then from Rome back to Axum in 2005, produced not only a deep transformation of its meanings, perception and reception, but also a two-fold cultural cross-fertilisation that we will describe and discuss below.

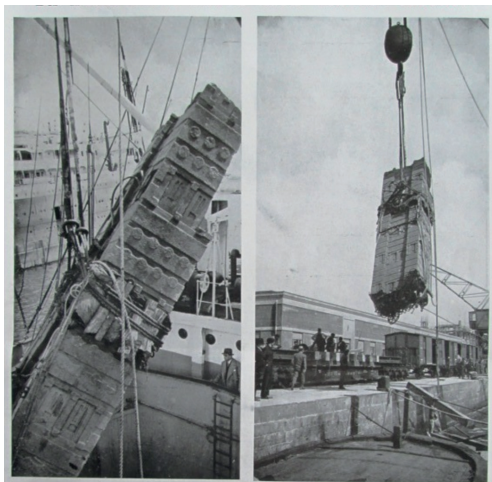


Figure 4. The fragments of the stele arriving in Naples, 27 March 1937. From *L'Illustrazione Italiana* 4 April 1937.





## The stele that came from Axum to Rome

The Obelisk of Axum is actually a carved stele in phonolite (a basaltic stone), which dates from between the first and fourth century BCE (Ricci 1996). It is part of an ancient funerary site in Axum, Ethiopia, where it was found along with another 176 funerary stelae, probably marking the location of underground burials. Over the ages, most of the stelae fell. In the nineteenth century, of the three major stelae, only King Ezana of Axum's Stele (21 metres) stood upright; the Great Stele (33 metres long) and the so-called Obelisk of Axum (24 metres) lay broken on the ground.

In short, in 1935, during the wretched colonial occupation of Ethiopia, the Italian troops found the archaeological site and, in 1936, it was decided to bring one of the major stelae to Rome. This operation was part of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime's aim to remove the monuments celebrating Ethiopia's independence, including those celebrating the Battle of Adowa (1896), in which Menelik II had defeated the Italian troops. The Duce originally planned to remove the statue with the Lion of Judah and that of Menelik and to convert the Ethiopian king's mausoleum into a different use (Pankhurst 1969; Antonsich 2000).

Due to technical difficulties in moving the Lion of Judah, Mussolini demanded that the biggest of the fallen obelisks in Axum be taken instead of the animal statue, and sent to Rome to be re-erected. Eventually, both the Lion and the obelisk were sent to Rome in 1937. This choice was possibly a consequence of Mussolini's specific interest in the figure of the lion and its relationships with the Roman obelisks and Hercules, symbols of ancient power.<sup>3</sup> In any case, the Lion of Judah was transferred by the Fratelli Gondrand company. It was remounted at the bottom of an Egyptian obelisk, which was brought to Rome by Emperor Domitianus (I century CE) and re-erected in 1887 by the Termini Station within a monument commemorating the Italian soldiers who died in the battle of Dogali against the Ethiopians.

The obelisk was also transferred by Fratelli Gondrand. It arrived in fragments at the port of Massaua, Ethiopia, before being shipped to Naples and then moved to Rome, where, two and a half months later, it was re-erected under the direction of archaeologist Ugo Monneret de Villard.

The relocation and reassembly of the stele achieved the dual purpose of exhibiting political muscle befitting a colonial power and technical prowess. This technological supremacy was not only displayed in the context of the construction site: it was also amplified through several means of communication, including newspapers, magazines, comics, photographs and news-reels. In this way, the fascist state aimed not only to deprive the Ethiopian people of one of their

3 Mussolini is only one episode in the centuries-long bond between Rome and the Lion. The Lion, with its mantle, recalled the mythical Hercules, who defeated Caco and was celebrated as a protector by the early Romans. In the Middle Ages, the Lion became a symbol of civic power, witnessed by the medieval map of Rome in the shape of a lion and a statue of a lion grabbing a horse at the Piazza del Campidoglio. This statue was close to an Egyptian obelisk resting on 4 lions, eventually moved to Villa Matte in 1535 and indirectly linked to the Vatican Obelisk, whose copper globe was reputed to hold Julius Caesar's ashes. Mussolini's war trophies – a lion and an obelisk – seem to be part of this iconographic chain. Born under the zodiac sign of Leo, the lion, the Duce was rhetorically associated with figures such as Julius Caesar and Hercules, for example in the proposal to build the Colossus on Monte Mario. In this light, both his love for lions (he had a lioness called Italy and a lion called Libai, captured in Ethiopia) and the lions depicted by artists in Fascist buildings – from the Casa delle Armi to the Palestra del Duce and GIL in Trastevere – and squares – the mosaics of Piazzale dell'Impero – can be seen to stem from an ambition to compare himself with the greatest Roman ancestries and myths. See Cacace 2007. The authors would like to thank Marco Giunta for his information on the subject.

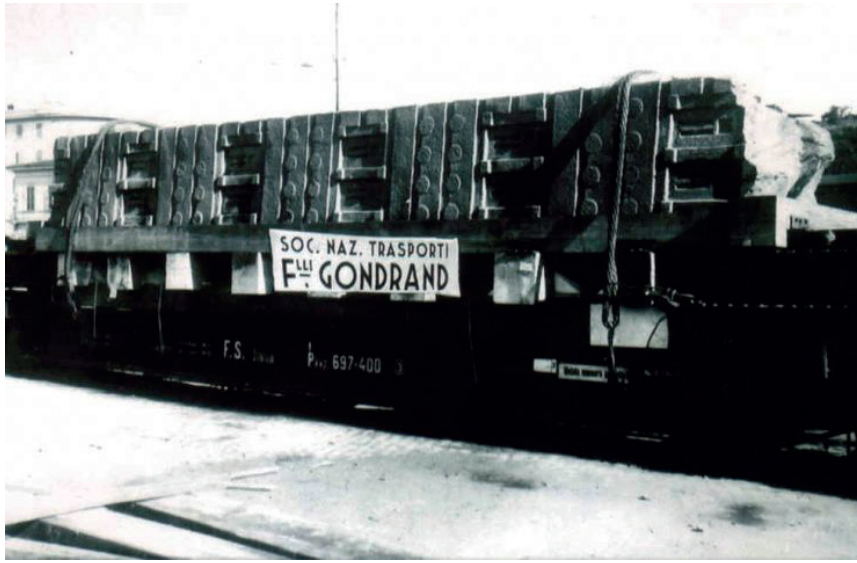


Figure 5. A fragment of the stele arriving in Rome by Train, 1937. Private Collection

identifying monuments, but also to demonstrate the results of the African campaign, embodied in the stele displayed in Rome, to Italy's citizens.

From this point of view, the stele was just one of the many symbolic and narrative elements distilled by the regime (Sbacchi 1985; Fuller 2010). Another example was the 'human zoos', the African villages reconstructed for pseudo-ethnographic purposes at national and international fairs, beginning with the Turin 1884 expo. These 'zoos' hosted indigenous Africans, who were indirectly called upon to display their technological backwardness and, by contrast, to recall the supremacy of the white and Italian man. They were intended as pseudo-anthropological tools to legitimise any colonial operation (Abbattista 2013). In this case too, displacement and recontextualisation were meant to provide new anthropological meanings and to educate the eye to the colonial gaze. By the end of the 1920s, propaganda preferred the architectural body to the physical body of the wild, exotic, diverse native. Thus, in spite of *Povero Selassie* (Poor Selassie), the terrible ditty in which the Negus Neghesti is described being brought in a cage to Rome, Mussolini preferred the architectural remains of the subjugated enemy.

This imperial glorification was solemnly renewed on 9 May 1937 with a military parade along Via dell'Impero, featuring the marches of indigenous colonial troops from Libya and Italian East Africa. A few months later, on 17 July 1937, Mussolini re-opened the Museo delle Colonie, renamed Museo dell'Impero Italiano. In line with these events, on 28 October 1937, the stele was erected in Piazza di Porta Capena.

To re-erect the body of the stele as an emblem of the new empire, Ugo Monneret de Villard resorted to the technique for assembling broken obelisks invented by Domenico Fontana (Fontana 1590), which enabled, for example, Gian Lorenzo Bernini and his collaborators to recompose the pieces of the Roman obelisk in Piazza Navona in 1650. Fontana's description of his advanced technological solution had also played a major role in the recomposition of the Egyptian obelisks in San Giovanni in Laterano, Santa Maria Maggiore and Piazza del Popolo between 1587 and 1589 (D'Amelio 2006; Long 2018). And in 1932, this same technique had been used to raise Mussolini's obelisk designed by Costantino Costantini onto the base made of large prismatic marble blocks (D'Amelio 2009).



The four main fragments of the Obelisk of Axum were reassembled with mortar cement, while the missing parts were filled with some stones taken from the original base. The recomposed stele had a rectangular section, with a total height of 23,50 metres (of which 21.10 meters were above ground) and weighed 152 tonnes.

The Ethiopian stele was regarded as symbolising historical continuity in the ancient imperial tradition of looting obelisks from North Africa to be erected again in Rome. The stele, not by chance named 'obelisk' in the press (Romanelli 1938), served to establish a line of continuity with the colonial traditions of the Roman Empire. Of course, like the many obelisks taken by ancient Romans from Africa, the Obelisk of Axum was not a voluntary gift of friendship from the Ethiopian people; it was war booty, and the Ethiopian people soon missed an important symbol of their national identity.

The re-erection place was chosen in order to express the obelisk's full political and cultural potential. As a war trophy, it was re-erected along the road connecting Via dell'Impero and Via Cristoforo Colombo and EUR (known as the 'Third Rome') and the sea. Specifically, it was placed along the main axis of the Circus Maximus, where a proper headquarters for the Ministry of Italian Africa was planned and built one year later. Despite its significant location, no further apparatus was added to the obelisk. Unlike the many Egyptian obelisks, which had bases, inscriptions, animals, bronze spheres, crosses and other elements added to them to celebrate their patron and emphasise their new role in the urban space, only a simple white marble block was used as a base for the Ethiopian monument. Compared to this 'silent' monument, the Egyptian obelisk in Piazza dei Cinquecento, which had had the Lion of Judah added to it, looked like an explicit celebration of the fascist victories in Africa (Acquarelli 2010a).

While the transfer of ancient monuments certainly embodied a colonialist approach to cultural heritage, the practice of moving ancient architectural pieces for symbolic aims was not unusual in that period. For instance, a few years before the transfer of the Obelisk of Axum, in 1934 the Italian government donated an ancient Roman column from the archaeological area of Ostia to the city of Chicago, to be used in a monument celebrating the transatlantic flight (1933) performed by the Italian aviator and politician Italo Balbo.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in 1928, the Fascist government had donated a Pompeian red granite Roman pillar for a cenotaph to the Byakkotai samurai to be built at Iimori Mountain, Japan. The transfer of architectural artefacts, and especially those of historical relevance, was therefore seen not only as a demonstrative exercising of political dominance, but also as a symbol of cultural assimilation.

During the twenty years of the Fascist regime, the relationship between the dominant and the indigenous culture was not entirely one-directional. Indeed, the cultural history of Fascism reveals some hints of cross-fertilisation, especially in terms of arts and architecture. While architects like Marcello Piacentini and his young assistant Luigi Piccinato were planning the expansion of Libyan towns and designing specific typologies to export Italian rationalism to the African colonies, other architects and artists were fascinated by the objects coming from these exotic places. Exchanges, travel, merchandise and art objects provided the images of otherness and elsewhere (real or imaginary) required by the colonial policy. Some exhibitions,

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4 The inscription on the monument says: "This column twenty centuries old erected on the shores of Ostia port of imperial Rome to safeguard the fortunes and victories of the Roman triremes Fascist Italy by command of Benito Mussolini presents to Chicago Exaltation symbol memorial of the Atlantic squadron led by Balbo that with Roman daring flew across the ocean in the eleventh year of the Fascist era". Balbo Monument, Chicago, USA.



such as the First International Exhibition of Colonial Art in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome (1931)<sup>5</sup>, the Second International Exhibition of Colonial Art in the Maschio Angioino in Naples (1934-5)<sup>6</sup> and the Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare (1940), also held in Naples, played a central role. These events housed pavilions inspired by the souks with shops selling and processing carpets, mats, cushions, trinkets, weapons, utensils and exotic jewellery, alongside rooms displaying paintings of typical costumes and scenes of life (Tomasella 2017). They conveyed an image of Italian Africa that influenced artists (Manfren 2019). One such artist was Enrico Prampolini, the creator of the ceramic wall decorations for the buildings of the Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare, whose iconography stems from a common colonial repertoire. Prampolini also referenced African art in his paintings.<sup>7</sup>

While the political consequences of the cultural contamination fostered by these exhibitions is currently being analysed by scholars (Abbattista 2013; Falcucci 2020; Falcucci 2021), the political potential of Italian artistic heritage was already clear to the regime. Mussolini's



Figure 6. The stele in piazza di Porta Capena, Rome, before its final relocation, 15 November 2003. Courtesy of Lattanzi Srl [www.lattanzi.it](http://www.lattanzi.it)

5 See *Giornale Luce* A0887.

6 See *Giornale Luce* B055201.

7 For instance, see *Visione magica* from 1931 and *La disputa dei feticci* from 1931.





instrumental and nonchalant use of Italy's cultural heritage prompted the lending of hundreds of masterpieces from the most important Italian museums to be showed at the 1930 London exhibition entitled 'Italian Art 1200-1900'. These pieces were intended to exalt the 'Italian magnificence' and to open a preferential channel with Great Britain in foreign policy. The cargo, which reached Britain by sea, was one of the most precious artistic treasures ever to reach the British coasts. It included Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Piero della Francesca's *Duke and Duchess of Urbino*, Donatello's bronze *David*, Giorgione's *Tempest*, Pollaiuolo's *Portrait of a Lady* and Masaccio's *Crucifixion*. In addition, there were works by Titian, Tiepolo, Carpaccio and Caravaggio, to name only the most famous of the 600 names selected for the legendary exhibition, whose cultural and political repercussions are well known (Borghi 2011).

### The return of monuments as knowledge transfer

Despite the Fascist policies, the relocation of the Obelisk of Axum sent a shockwave through the national spirit of the Ethiopian people. This is proven by the fact that the stele transferred to Italy was intentionally re-evoked in the shape of the Arat Kilo Monument in Meyazia 27 square, Addis Abeba, erected in 1941 to celebrate the end of the Italian occupation, while images of the stele were reproduced on official items such as stamps. After the peace conference of 1946, some of the artworks taken by the Italian occupants were returned. In 1947, the Ethiopian government started to officially ask the Italian State for the restitution of the Axum Obelisk. In 1951, the former Ministry of Italian Africa built by the obelisk was converted into the headquarters of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), and the proximity of the obelisk started to appear inappropriate, to say the least.

In the postwar years, Italian society struggled to deal with the colonial question and the implicit recognition of the 'other' (Meskell 2005). Newspapers and Rai, the national broadcaster, had built the reassuring 'myth of the good Italian'. Compared to the daily violence recorded in the French and British colonies, Italian 'colonisation was likened to a form of migration, through which the poor had found a job and brought value to African territories' (Deplano 2017: 83).

The debate heated up in the early 1960s, as the launch of Rai 2 and illustrated weeklies such as *Epoca* created a media platform for a more complex and contradictory cultural perspective. By acknowledging the emergence of specific African identities – from Abebe Bikila's victory in the Rome 1960 Olympic Games marathon, to the speeches of the leaders of African nations at the United Nations – the media started a laborious process of conscious decolonisation. At the same time, Aldo Moro's tenure at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, starting in 1969, was characterised by an attempt to tackle the ghosts of Italy's colonial past from an institutional perspective (Dau Novelli 2017: 254). His visit to Ethiopia in the summer of 1970 and the restitution of the Lion of Judah statue encouraged Haile Selassie to visit, after years of attempts. On his return to Italy in November, Selassie was finally received with the honours of a legitimate president. Part of the press was committed to promoting a new vision of the relationship with the former colonies, which included the need to return the Obelisk of Axum as well. Several intellectuals, including historian Angelo Montanelli and journalist Indro Montanelli, a veteran of the Abyssinian war, were well known for their support for the return: 'Let's give it back! Let's listen to our conscience: after all, we're getting off really cheap!' (Montanelli 1970; Frau 1993).





Figure 7. The stele during the disassembly process, Rome, 23 November 2003. Courtesy of Lattanzi Srl [www.lattanzi.it](http://www.lattanzi.it)

Meanwhile, the obelisk was a fundamentally foreign object to the affairs of the Romans and Italians. The surrounding space was used infrequently as a car park and, on some Saturday nights, as the starting point for the religious procession to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Divine Love (Acquarello 2010a). Its profile, encircled by traffic, was also recorded in various scenes in the movie *Torture Me But Kill Me with Kisses* (1968), directed by Dino Risi. Somehow, the obelisk's lack of semantic contextualisation, which could be considered a consequence of the philological or 'soft' approach adopted by Monneret de Villard and his team, had fostered a sort of oblivion or incapacity to give sense to that dark *menhir*, which even managed to appear small in the vast esplanade of Rome's Piazza di Porta Capena, constantly crowded by noisy cars and buses.

The Ethiopian government's request for the return of the stele received a positive response from Oscar Luigi Scalfaro in April 1997. After a political debate, the stele was finally returned to the Ethiopian people on April 2005, almost 60 years after its theft (Pankhurst 1999; Ravaglioli 2005; Petraglia 2010; Santi 2014).<sup>8</sup> The operation was accompanied by further controversy, this time regarding the restitution.<sup>9</sup> Curiously, discussing the complex and expansive operation of repatriation triggered a novel interest in the monument, and after decades of indifference, the simple act of planning the return suddenly gave the object back its original value and meanings (Calchi Novati 1991; Fiquet 2004; Marcello, Carter 2020). The disassembly operation was arranged by the engineer Giorgio Croci of Croci & Associati and carried out by the construction company Lattanzi srl, led by the engineer Simone Pietro Lattanzi. To be shipped, it was disassembled and once again broken into pieces, along the ancient fractures (for a complete description, see D'Amelio 2006). The shaft was therefore divided into three pieces of about the same size and weight. In addition,

8 Interestingly, the operations were not carried out in application of specific international treaties, but in the context of war reparations to the Ethiopian state (Scovazzi 2009a; Scovazzi 2009b).

9 See the 2002 Italian Parliament's interpellation on the obelisk, retrieved from [legxiv.camera.it/\\_dati/leg14/lavori/stenografici/Sed201/aint03.htm](http://legxiv.camera.it/_dati/leg14/lavori/stenografici/Sed201/aint03.htm) (accessed September 2021)



Figure 8. One of the fragments while being loaded onto the Antonov An-124 aeroplane, 23 April 2005. Courtesy of Lattanzi Srl [www.lattanzi.it](http://www.lattanzi.it)

a specific cut was made to separate the stone block from the concrete foundation into which about two metres of the stele was immersed. The process required the use of special technologies, such as a layer of fibre-reinforced mortar and aramid and carbon fibre links, to protect the surface from stresses. Moreover, the forces for the breaking were applied to a mediating metal structure that surrounded the structure at the fracture points. A complex metal construction provided a pre-stressing force to compensate for any dangerous stresses during the dismantling process. The forces were applied by means of oil jacks, and sensors were used to monitor the integrity of the stone during the operation.

Once disassembled, the three stumps of the obelisk were transferred to Ethiopia by three cargo flights, using the Antonov An-124 strategic airlift. Transporting them by air required a tailored approach, from adapting the aircraft and a precise calculation of its payload to accurately measuring the runway at Axum Airport and finding suitable machinery to move the fragments and transport them to the site. The complex orography of the archaeological site and the lack of mechanical machines and qualified workers in Axum meant Italian technologies and professionals had to be exported to carry out the recomposition work. The re-erection was planned by Croci and executed by the Lattanzi company, with the contribution of an Ethiopian technical committee, led by the engineer Tadele Bitul Kibrat. The reinstallation ceremony was accompanied by huge enthusiasm from the Ethiopian people, who came to celebrate the event, and the local engineering group, who soon started work on the re-erection process.<sup>10</sup> When asked about the reconstruction by a journalist, Tadele Bitul Kibrat expressed his pride in the project, underlining that ‘the anchoring, the platform, the scaffolding, these were all made in advance by Ethiopian engineers’, while the Italian Government had offered ‘all the financial support from the time of dismantling to the re-erection.’<sup>11</sup> The circulation of expertise and machines also provided the African country with the necessary expertise to restore other stelae

10 The parade and the ceremony on the occasion of the obelisk’s return can be seen in several recordings, like the one retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_zq9fD8III0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zq9fD8III0) (accessed April 2022). See also the segment of the Tg2 Italian TV news report from 11 November 2012.

11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHauxo89Z8s>



in Axum. The knowledge derived from transporting the obelisk from Rome, for instance, was employed in the straightening of King Ezana's Stele, conducted from 2007 to 2008, with the project once again managed by Giorgio Croci and Lattanzi. Moreover, the restoration works carried out on the obelisk in Axum increased the numbers of tourists visiting the area, boosting the local economy, at least until war broke out once more. From this point of view, the repatriation of the obelisk prompted a process of technological transfer which opened new cultural and economic perspectives and resulted in hybrid knowledge.



Figure 9. The fragments of the stele after their arrival in Ethiopia, while being transferred to the re-erection site, 25 April 2005. Courtesy of Lattanzi Srl [www.lattanzi.it](http://www.lattanzi.it)

Of course, objects imported from colonies were used as a reference for cultural comparisons: their image served to compare the distant culture with the dominant countries. The comparison was often practiced by opposition, but the case of the Axum stele proves it was also exerted by means of affinity with the Egyptian-Roman tradition of obelisks. However, its difference from 'traditional' obelisks and the lack of a proper semantic apparatus made it an in-between object. Indeed, the transfer of architecture, which causes unavoidable estrangement, produced a third space: relocated architectures remain 'authentic' buildings, but their changed context highlights the loss of their *raison d'être*, or the contingent relationship with the site (and often with the original function). At the same time, the physical return of the obelisk highlighted an unbalanced relationship between the Italian technological power and the Ethiopian knowledge. This inequality created a void which was filled by the development of a new hybrid expertise which, as stated above, was fundamental for the restoration of other obelisks at Axum. In this sense, a lot of artworks and architectural elements preserved in the museums and places of Western cities offer an extraordinary opportunity not only to return 'stolen' objects but also to balance this inequality and to foster the emergence and sharing of new hybrid knowledge.

Haile Mariam has underlined the cultural benefits of the operation. Even before the return, in 1994, Ethiopian and Italian archaeologists conducted a joint investigation at the stele site, excavating and preserving the ancient tombs. Moreover, during the return of the stele, 'the numerous technical challenges [...] were adequately addressed through the cooperation of the two countries' (Haile 2009). For instance, Ethiopian restorers were trained on-the-job during





the restoration of the stele, and they also had the opportunity to work with the Italian Central Institute of Restoration at the Tower of Pisa (UNESCO 2009). To strengthen the local skills and the sustainability in the preservation of the site, UNESCO also provided training events, including a workshop on the management of the site and a training session for tour guides (UNESCO 2009). The programme gave the Ethiopian state the opportunity to improve the management of the site and to restore the other steles, although to date few works have been completed and the results have been much debated (Hagos 2018).

In the meantime, the void the obelisk left in Piazza di Porta Capena, Rome, was simply erased. Today it is difficult to make out where the stele stood for almost 60 years. Every trace of its presence has been removed, despite a group of citizens' intention to replace it with an artistic substitute. The memory of the technologically advanced final relocation of the Obelisk of Axum, along with its function as a political model, has been totally neglected. Photographs, videos and press clippings, preserved in the archives of the companies engaged in the task, are the only traces left to reconstruct this story, which is worth narrating to prove how the movement of a physical object can prompt complex political, cultural, technological and economical phenomena. By analysing them and UNESCO reports, this paper proves that structural relocations and repatriations enhance complex processes. It aims to prompt major reflections on the colonial past in Italy, so the debate enters the consciousness of contemporary Italian society.

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# Unclaimed objects, reclaimed history: Magazzino 18 and the Istrian exodus

Claudia Sbuttoni

**Abstract** This article examines the interplay between cultural identity, objects and memory in the Istrian exile community in Trieste, Italy. The close of the second World War and the transfer of Istria from Italy to the newly established socialist state of Yugoslavia saw the migration of the majority of Italians to Trieste and abroad. This article focuses on the objects held in Magazzino 18, a warehouse at the old port of Trieste, which were left unclaimed after the Istrian exodus of 1943–56. It analyses 1) how the exile community relies on the tools of Holocaust memorialisation to carve out its own narrative through objects, 2) how the imposition of the Holocaust model undermines intercultural understanding by insisting on a frame of competition and singularity, and 3) how that process ultimately obscures the role and responsibility of Italian fascism in the borderland.

**Keywords** Fascism, Italy, Istria, memory, exodus, Holocaust, material culture, borders

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Stacks of chairs on display at Magazzino 18. Source: Furio Baldassi, „Magazzino 18 riaperto al pubblico. Dal 16 febbraio su iniziativa dell'Irci sarà nuovamente visitabile il luogo della memoria degli esuli,“ *Il Piccolo*, February 5, 2015, <https://ilpiccolo.gelocal.it/trieste/cronaca/2015/02/05/news/magazzino-18-riaperto-al-pubblico-1.10803941>. Used with permission.

Tucked away among the Hapsburg-era warehouses of Trieste's Old Port is one that is of particular interest to scholars of memory, material culture and migration: Magazzino 18. Walking through the warehouse and its endless rooms filled with household objects and personal items, one is struck by the sheer amount of *stuff* it contains. This warehouse-museum is a repository of relics left behind during the Istrian exodus<sup>1</sup> of 1943–56: unclaimed family portraits, religious iconography, bed frames, children's toys, trunks, aluminium cooking pots, wood-burning cast iron stoves, bathroom sinks, tools, children's school notebooks, ceramic dining sets, sewing machines, books, dark wooden wardrobes. Affixed to some of the pieces of furniture, one can find a sort of *carta d'identità* (identity card) – as if they were human – from the shipping agency, complete with a family name, identification number and destination.

Closed behind an actual gatekeeper (*posto di blocco*) at Trieste's Old Port and only accessible for group visits and by appointment, Magazzino 18 is a space of the ghosts of the exodus, a conglomeration of the vestiges of displacement. It is one site in a series of memorials to victims of war frequented by school trips and affinity groups – including the former concentration camp Risiera di San Sabba and the Foiba di Basovizza memorial – participating in the repack-

1 The 'Istrian exodus' is referred to in many different ways by different strains of historiography. It is also referred to as the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus, the Julian-Dalmatian exodus, or simply 'the exodus' in Italian publications. In Slovene or Croatian scholarship, it is more likely to be referred to as 'population movements' or 'post-war migrations', although 'the exodus' is also used, often in quotation marks. I use the term 'Istrian exodus' because I am largely focused on the way that the Istrian exile community and its associations in Trieste use the Magazzino 18 to construct a shared memory of their history. These naming practices are also reflected in how individuals who left Istria are referred to: exiles (*esuli*) in the Italian scholarship and 'optants' (suggesting a voluntary choice, that they opted for Italian citizenship) in the Slovene and Croatian case (See Hrobat Virloget 2021a, 253).





aging of contemporary history in a contested borderland. The constellation of objects in Magazzino 18, brought by Istrians as they left their homeland and often pertaining to the domestic sphere, form part of a larger effort by the Istrian exile community to construct a historical narrative that inscribes its history into that of the Holocaust.

## I Historical context of the Adriatic borderland

With the fall of Mussolini, the end of World War II, and the post-war shifting of borders, the conflict was not immediately resolved in the Julian March borderland.<sup>2</sup> Both a local territorial dispute with roots in previous irredentist campaigns and an issue of wider importance due to Anglo-American fear of socialist internationalism (Hametz 2005), the issue of borders in the postwar period was a complex one. While Istria was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy after the first World War, the defeat of Italian fascism meant a revisiting of those boundaries. The end of the Second World War precipitated the transfer of most of the Julian March (the Karst plateau, Istria, the Kvarner Gulf islands) from Italy to the newly established socialist state of Yugoslavia. The period of 1943–56 saw large waves of movement – 200,000 - 350,000 people, the majority of them identifying as Italian<sup>3</sup> – from the territories previously belonging to the Italian State (Pupo 2005, 2015). These ‘highly visible and politicised population movements’ (Ballinger 2012, 117) followed the previous departure of over 100,000 Slovenes and Croats from the Julian March in the interwar years, during a period of Italian fascist repression (Verginella 2015).

With the establishment of the Yugoslav socialist order in the postwar years came the increasing fear that Italians would be targeted for reasons of ethnicity, political ideology or class (Ballinger 2003; Pupo 2005; Kalc 2019; Hrobat Virloget 2021). The mass migration from the area, specifically from Istria, was precipitated by a number of factors. According to Hrobat Virloget, while Slovenian historians tend to focus on the economic motivations of departure, Italian historians are more likely to emphasise political reasons (Hrobat Virloget 2017, 33). Rather than framing departure as a choice, Italian-speaking Istrians cite the hostile post-war environment, their status as a minority group and its implications for language use and education, the confiscation of property and the fear of (or actual) discrimination (Hrobat Virloget 2015, 180). Additionally, political propaganda, especially from the Italian State, warned of the horrors to be suffered at the hands of ‘Slav terror’ (Troha 1997, 58–59).<sup>4</sup> An important corollary of this terror was the *foibe*, a term which refers to natural sinkholes or chasms characteristic of the Karst region, some of which are several hundred meters deep. The term is imbued with

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2 The ‘Julian March’ was a term coined in 1863 by Gorizian linguist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli to refer to the Italian-speaking parts of the Austrian Littoral (the Istrian peninsula, Gorizia and Gradisca, and the Imperial Free City of Trieste). The area is referred to as Venezia Giulia in Italian (referencing both its Roman and Venetian history) and Julijska Krajina in Slovene and Serbo-Croatian (which includes the Roman reference but omits the Venetian).

3 It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of individuals, as well as their ethnic composition. Pamela Ballinger uses the range of 200,000–350,000 individuals (Ballinger 2003), while Raoul Pupo estimates between 250,000 (Pupo 2005) and 300,000 (Pupo 1995, 2015). Other Italian works have suggested that the number is closer to 200,000 (Donato 1997; Nodari 1997). The number cited by most Istrian exile associations is 350,000.

4 The encouragement on the part of the Italian State to emigrate and settle in the peninsula was supported by the promise of Italian citizenship: most of the movement ‘resulted from the exercise of the right to opt for Italian citizenship – with the consequent obligation to move to Italy – foreseen by the Peace Treaty that came into force on 15 September 1947 to protect the Italian citizens of Italian mother tongue resident in the territories assigned to Yugoslavia’ as well as the London Memorandum of 1955 (Pupo 2015, 29).



political and mythical meaning (Hrobat Virloget 2015, 156) and has become synonymous with the massacres of 1943–5 during which victims were thrown into these pits. There continues to be much disagreement regarding the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the *foibe* massacres, including the number of victims, the ethnicity of victims, the motivations for the killings and the role of ideology (Pirjevec 2009). The Istrian Italian community insists on the ethnic (and political) purity of these victims and has labelled the *foibe* a uniquely or exclusively ‘Italian tragedy’, often downplaying the diversity of victims who met their end there (Ballinger 2004; Knittel 2014). Together, the *foibe* massacres and the exodus have left an indelible mark on the history of postwar Italy and collective memory in the borderland.

Despite being Italy’s easternmost city, Trieste occupied, and continues to occupy, a central role in both the history and subsequent memorialisation of World War II. It is a city with many roles: a bridge (or buffer) between ‘East’ and ‘West’, an important commercial centre and port city under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a cosmopolitan and ethnically heterogeneous beacon at the crossroads of empires, the Holy Grail of both Italian and Slav nationalists and a hub of twentieth-century literary and intellectual life. Not only was Trieste a common destination of emigration for those leaving Istria – and for many other refugee and immigrant groups, swept up in the movement shifts of post-World War II – the two areas also shared historic cultural and economic ties. Because it became the most important host city of Istrian emigration, it is in Trieste that the Istrian exile community is most active, visible and organised today.

In the postwar period, while their applications were being processed by various international agencies<sup>5</sup> given the difficult task of deciding who counted as an Italian refugee in a multiethnic, multilingual border area, many Istrians were housed in refugee camps in Trieste and throughout the Italian peninsula (Ballinger 2006).<sup>6</sup> These individuals, who migrated in the period 1943–56, brought with them their personal possessions, the contents of their homes, and whatever they imagined they needed to start a new life in Italy. Because they were unable to keep these objects with them in the cramped living quarters of the refugee camps, what was brought with them was kept temporarily in warehouses in port cities all over Italy – for example in Trieste, Venice, Bari, Tirrenia, and Messina (Delbello 1992). While many individuals and families reclaimed their belongings once they found permanent housing and work, others never returned. Some did not survive the years-long wait for approval of refugee status, while others simply moved too far away to return or into smaller, often public, housing with limited space.

[Magazzino 18](#) is one of a series of warehouses that existed across Italy in the postwar period for this very purpose, to momentarily hold these exiled objects while their owners were in limbo. The belongings that were never picked up were eventually sent to Trieste and held there indefinitely. What is left today is a graveyard of objects, occupying a warehouse space of nearly 2,000 square meters, that has become of central importance to the way the exile community in Trieste narrates its history. Magazzino 18 is a microcosm of the many pieces of the many lives disrupted by outside forces, with hundreds of the same items in sad repetition. Since it opened to the public in 2011, tens of thousands of affinity groups and school trips have visited its objects. It is a site of (exclusively) Italian memory, lesser-known and with less footfall than the nearby Foiba of Basovizza, a controversial site of memory and national monument to a wartime

5 For example, the International Refugee Organisation and the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

6 Specifically in [Centro Raccolta Profughi di Padriciano](#) and the Risiera di San Sabba.



massacre which receives tens of thousands of visitors per month (Pirjevec 2009, Gobetti 2020). The entity which cares for and organises tours of Magazzino 18, the *Istituto Regionale per la Cultura Istriano-fiumano-dalmata* (Regional Institute of Istrian-Fiuman-Dalmatian Culture, IRCI), laments its unrecognised potential.

## II The museum that wasn't a museum

For IRCI, Magazzino 18 is not a museum in the traditional sense but '*un museo spontaneo*' (a spontaneous museum). It is not on TripAdvisor. I discovered it through word of mouth and promotion by the various Istrian exile associations in Trieste. The warehouse is logistically difficult to get to, not forward- or public-facing, and viewing its rooms requires advance planning. Inside, the smell of cigarette smoke hangs in the air as visitors peruse objects as if at a sinister flea market where nothing is for sale and everyone is sad. A sacred place of the exile community, Magazzino 18 is difficult to find and requires elaborate identificatory mechanisms. To access it requires persistence. Guided tours are only conducted by IRCI a few times a year. In order to be granted permission to enter the space, one must provide identification (*documento di riconoscimento*) and personal details must be sent ahead of the visit. The name, birthplace and birthdate of the visitor are then passed along to the port authorities and checked at the entrance gate. It is a very controlled and mediated experience, the opposite of a public memorial. Because it is located in the still-functioning Old Port of Trieste, visitors cannot walk in on foot. One must either come on a coach (on a tour, often organised by schools or for the families of exiles by exile groups) or drive a private car inside. Other scholars have similarly commented on this mediated process and have even compared the port's security rules to those of contemporary refugee camps (Altin and Badurina 2018). What are the implications of not being a public-facing institution, and what effect does the mediation of access have on this history?

In the late 1980s, several of the warehouses at the port were scheduled to be demolished, including the warehouse that housed the objects of the exodus (Magazzino 22 at the time) (Delbello 1992). Troops of volunteers helped transport tons of furniture and personal items in order to preserve this history and thus, Magazzino 18 was born. A decree donated the warehouse<sup>7</sup> in question from the prefecture to IRCI, in order to make this chapter of history known to the Italian public. From the outside, the warehouse looks like all the others, a proud yet slightly derelict building with N° 18 written in faded paint above the entrance. It is described by the director of IRCI as both a 'space drenched in time' – a space where time accumulates, protecting the unmodern, anachronistic objects inside from its ravages – and the 'Pompeii of Trieste' – the objects of the warehouse existing as if frozen in time, as proof of the community's existence and displacement. Housing the stuff of people's lives, it aims to represent the accumulation of a typical displaced family. Its embrace of temporal discontinuity is similar to that of a museum, although it is not strictly considered as such by the exile community.

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<sup>7</sup> Today, the warehouses at the Molo Vecchio are protected by the Sovrintendenza di Trieste.



### III The narrative of Magazzino 18

How does the space present historical context to its visitors? The short answer is that it doesn't. Any context is provided by a guide, the director of IRCI, who speaks at length at the beginning of each tour. A thread throughout the presentation is that this history is not acknowledged. The theme of silence is repeated often, and it is pointed out that the exile community finally feels that they have an opportunity to tell their story. Containing thousands of unclaimed personal items, Magazzino 18 is organised but not ordered. Walking through the warehouse, visitors are encouraged to think about how these individuals lived, the objects that made up their many lives.

There is no explanatory text anywhere in Magazzino 18. To an uninformed visitor, there is little information about how many individuals left Istria, what areas they came from, for what specific reasons they left, the circumstances of the war's end, and the changing of borders and political systems. Items are not labelled and no further details are given about their provenance. The objects are arranged by type (by working tools, by books, by chairs) and roughly reflect the typical divisions of a home. The tour guide underlines the loss of individuality that accompanies this process in which everything is grouped together. Family portraits are filled with nameless individuals who are sometimes recognised as family by visitors to the warehouse, according to the director of IRCI. The emphasis on the loss of individuality – how individuals are reduced and amassed – underscores the anxiety of existing without an identity. There has seemingly been no effort to trace the path of these items nor have the guides chosen to focus on the objects of a specific family to tell a more personal story. It's ironic, then, that these items, which are an aggregate of abandoned belongings from warehouses all over Italy – and previously, from all over the Adriatic borderland – are further stripped of their origins by the very memorialisation project that seeks to reinstate them.

With its lack of signage and scant historical context, it is easy to make assumptions, accurate or inaccurate, about the objects' owners and their fates. The most striking 'pile of objects' is a mountain of wooden chairs, previously used in homes across the Adriatic and difficult to display due to their number and shape (Figure 1). These chairs also play a central role in the 2013 musical about the exodus by Italian singer-songwriter Simone Cristicchi, entitled *Magazzino 18*.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the musical, Cristicchi plays a Roman archivist, a choir participant, a young army page on his way to the *foibe*, the singer Sergio Endrigo, the father of a child who froze to death in the Padriciano refugee camp, a Yugoslav partisan. In his role as a bumbling archivist sent to make an inventory of the warehouse's objects, Cristicchi laments how Magazzino 18's 'victims' are becoming faceless numbers. The empty chairs on the stage (Figure 2) act as stand-ins for the Istrian exiles, the absence of testifying bodies mirroring how the identities of the objects' owners have been erased. The personification of objects in *Magazzino 18* is made even more significant by the fact that the only recurring character on stage is Cristicchi himself (a children's choir does appear intermittently, as well as a female child who appears once as a victim of the 1946 explosion in Vergarola). While the musical did not receive universal accolades – some critiques

8 The [musical](#), *Magazzino 18*, was written and performed by Italian singer-songwriter Simone Cristicchi in collaboration with journalist Jan Bernas. It premiered in 2013 at Trieste's historic theatre, Politeama Rossetti.

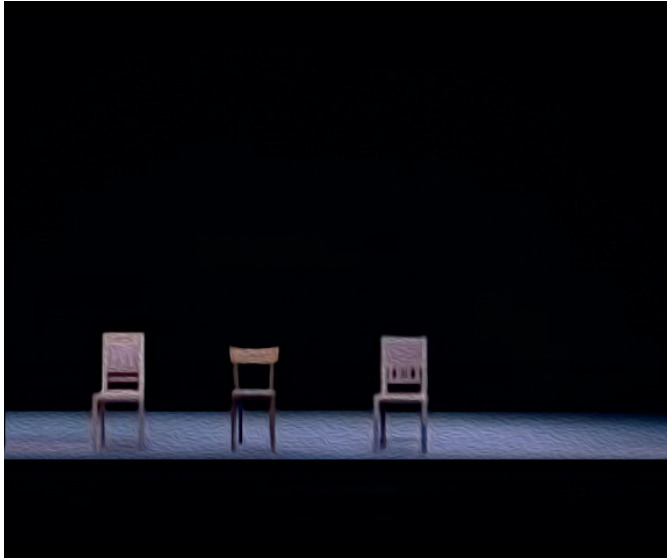


Figure 2: Artistic rendition of the use of wooden chairs in the musical, *Magazzino 18*.

lamented its limited engagement with Italian fascism and criticised it as a work of political propaganda aimed at reinforcing a shared memory that underlines Italian victimisation (Wu Ming and Purini 2014; Altin and Badurina 2018; Hrobat Virloget 2017) – it was widely appreciated and celebrated by Istrian exile organisations and the larger city of Trieste.

While the musical makes use of a few symbolic chairs on stage, the chairs in *Magazzino 18* itself are imposing, stacked in a large precarious pile and eerily reminiscent of the mounds of shoes on display at Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>9</sup> In fact, on a tour of the warehouse in October 2019, I was struck by outright comparisons made to the Holocaust and the reaction of some fellow visitors, who described the experience as ‘the same as visiting Auschwitz’.<sup>10</sup> I later found that Altin and Badurina had made similar connections (Altin and Badurina 2018). Importantly, the exhibit at Auschwitz-Birkenau exists as evidence of Nazi crimes. It is what has been taken from the dead, the objects that live on. In this way, the items on display at Auschwitz act as proof of the Holocaust.

After a visit to *Magazzino 18*, what visitors are left with is the presentation of unclaimed, abandoned, forgotten objects *without* the explicit acknowledgement that their owners did not suffer the same fate as Europe’s Jews. Dust and layers of memories swirl the rooms and suggest a sinister end. *Magazzino 18*’s suggestive elision of the exodus experience with that of the Holocaust, however, requires clarification. The objects on display at *Magazzino 18* do not belong to people deported to a camp for extermination. They are not remnants of the dead, but of the displaced. The warehouse holds the possessions of people who, whether voluntarily or under duress, went into exile. They belonged to Istrians who, upon the close of World War II and the transfer of Istria from Italy to Tito’s Yugoslavia, were faced with the difficult decision of living under a socialist regime without the guarantee that their minority rights would be respected. The majority chose to leave, taking their belongings with them. What are the implications of the remnants of the dead versus the displaced? What is it about displacement that incurs sentiments structured around a notion of death?

9 See <http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/exhibits/evidence-of-crimes,1.html>.

10 Their responses were surprisingly in line with the dominant historical narrative.





When the tour came to an end, the audience was clearly moved and motivated to spread the word about what they had learned. The impetus was to speak and make known. It was this reaction from the audience that prompted me to think critically about the implications of the narrative being suggested at this site of memory. The desire to imbue the space with a certain sacredness – according to the director of IRCI, ‘here, even the dust has value’ – is striking. It matches other impulses in the exile community to frame its history in terms of martyrdom and sanctity. The journey of these objects is significant because it mirrors the meandering and movement of exiles, uprooted, displaced, unable to ever truly ‘return’ home, but existing still. In fact, while preparing this article, the objects of Magazzino 18 were displaced once again to a nearby warehouse, [Magazzino 26](#).

#### IV The use of Holocaust framework

Often, discussions of borderland history choose 1943 as their starting point, neglecting to contextualise this history and acknowledge the preceding two decades of Italian fascist rule in these territories. Remembering that parts of the Julian March (including Istria) were annexed to Italy after the Great War and brought into the fold of the nation for the entirety of the fascist regime helps us understand the environment of the postwar and the atrocities that followed. As Pamela Ballinger writes:

I heard exiles’ accounts of ‘Slavic barbarity’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’, suffered in Istria between 1943 and 1954, as well as Slovene and Croat narratives of the persecution experienced under the fascist state and at the hands of neofascists in the postwar period. Admittedly, I could not forget – as many exiles seemed to do – *that the exodus from Istria followed on twenty years of the fascistization and Italianization of Istria, as well as a bloody Italian military campaign in Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1943*. Nor could I countenance some exiles’ frequent expressions of anti-Slav chauvinism. At the same time, however, I could not accept at face value the claim by some that the violence the Slavs suffered under fascism justified subsequent events in Istria or that all those who left Istria were compromised by fascism. Similarly, I came to reject the argument that ethno-national antagonism had not entered into the equation, as well as the counterview that the exodus represented simply an act of ‘ethnic cleansing’ (Ballinger 2003, 6)<sup>11</sup>

While a certain strain of Italian scholarship finds the origin of the *foibe* massacres in a policy of ethnic cleansing,<sup>12</sup> it is necessary to consider these events in the broader context of the Italian fascist regime and Second World War. The Adriatic borderland was the stage of much violence during both world wars and beyond. It is a space where several different histories of violence interact and where the categories of victim and perpetrator transformed over the course of the conflict: those who were targeted by the Italian fascist regime before and during the war, those who faced Italian fascist and Nazi violence during the turbulent period of 1943–45, those who

11 My italics.

12 This claim is made belatedly after the horrors of the Yugoslav wars in attempt to trace patterns of violence backwards, or see these episodes as part of the same ‘barbaric’ impulse. For discussion on how the *foibe* is treated through the lens of ‘ethnic cleansing’ see Gobetti 2020; Ballinger 2019, 2004.



were subjected to violence at the hands of Yugoslav partisans, those who were targeted because of their minority status under Tito's rule of Yugoslavia, and more.

While the *foibe* massacres and the exodus are interrelated, they are also distinct historical phenomena. Often, though, public discussion in Italy falls into the trap of conflating the two (Ballinger 2004, 149; Gobetti 2020, 3). Postwar violence in the Adriatic borderland, in particular the *foibe* massacres, has been likened by many Istrians to an 'Italian Holocaust' (Ballinger 2004; Altin and Badurina 2018; Gobetti 2020). Because it is often difficult to extricate discussions of the exodus from the *foibe*-exodus binary, this connection to the Holocaust can be further extended to encompass the exodus. In Italian public discourse and among exile circles in Trieste, the exodus is often portrayed as exclusively and directly stemming from the *foibe* massacres, a simple cause and effect relationship. But as Gloria Nemec writes, 'This interpretation has been grossly simplified to fit the general audience. Therefore the exodus has been explained this way, even though the direct witnesses of the facts described a maze of events and motivations that eventually led to it' beyond the *foibe* massacres (Nemec 2015, 141). In taking together the victims of the *foibe* and the displaced of the exodus, the institutions of the exile community in Trieste encourage us to inscribe the objects of Magazzino 18 into the history of the *foibe* and by extension, the 'Italian Holocaust'.

## V The conflation of Holocaust and borderland memory

In the last few decades, the *foibe* and exodus have occupied an ever more prominent place in Italian collective memory and remain highly politicised events even today. Many members of the exile community, as well as IRCI, have imbued the events surrounding them with an almost sacred weight. Less attention, however, is paid to the manner in which these phenomena are memorialised and commemorated by the exile community in Trieste, and the role that objects play in this process. Much of the memorialisation efforts and memory narrative in Trieste follow a framework carved out by Holocaust representation: the community's insistence on a singular or 'unique' victimhood; the use of objects as 'proof' of the event; the employment of the term 'Holocaust'; the use of certain images, such as a small girl with a suitcase (Knittel 2014, 179); the insistence on (Italian) innocence; the trope of silence; the need to make known or the compulsion to speak; the erasure of identity in the face of a tragedy of massive proportions. The Holocaust has become a point of reference for our thinking on memory and trauma. Its importance as an event sometimes eclipses or overshadows other histories of violence, and its mark on the fields of memory and trauma studies won't fade anytime soon. Despite the overshadowing of other histories of violence within memory studies in favour of a focus on the Holocaust, these studies offer crucial theoretical insight. While this article explores some of the shortcomings of using Holocaust memorialisation, it also builds on and borrows theoretical insights from these studies. Although taking the Holocaust and the history of borderland violence together can allow us to understand them in a deeper way, we should be wary of attempts to equate these two episodes of violence, as is happening now in the memoryscape of Trieste.



## VI Applying Holocaust memory theory to Magazzino 18

What can Magazzino 18, with its implicit and explicit equating of the exodus and Holocaust, tell us about how material culture fits into the memoryscape of the borderland? Regarding the connection between Magazzino 18 and Auschwitz, Altin and Badurina write that

‘This makeshift exhibition with a sense of serial repetition prompts evocative references to the Holocaust and the photographs of the mountains of seized footwear taken from the deportees to Auschwitz. The narrations of witnesses underline this perception of the past interrupted by escape; the exile thus becomes a founding event for the collective memory and sense of belonging, based on the historical loss’ (Altin and Badurina 2018, 193).

While this experience of displacement informs the collective memory of the exile community, it also illuminates a link between the exiled’s identification as Italian and their status as victims. Connected to the idea of structuring an identity around historical loss, the *foibe* and exodus exist as wounds that continue to afflict borderland memory – two interrelated episodes around which memory and narrative are organised. Much has been written on the memorial landscape of the borderland of Trieste – on the competitiveness of victimhood and conflicting national memories (Ballinger 2003, 2004, 2014; Pupo 2005; Hrobat Virloget 2015, 2017, 2021; Hrobat Virloget and Čebrov Lipovec 2017), on the *lieux de memoire* in the Trieste memoryscape (Klabjan 2017, 2018, 2019), on narratives of the exodus (Pirjevec 2009; Orlić 2015) and on the possibilities for solidarity and coexistence (Fikfak 2009).

In the realm of trauma and Holocaust representation, Eric Santner explores the limits of narrative in the face of the massive trauma of the Holocaust (Friedlander 1992, 1). He outlines the idea of narrative fetishism, informed by Freud’s *Trauerarbeit* (the ‘work of mourning’), as a form of coping ‘with the mourning necessitated by the trauma of the Nazi experience through the ongoing retrieval of minor enactments of the loss and the ‘redemption’ of the past’ (Friedlander 12). Santner argues that most Germans have not adopted this ‘working through’ method but rather rely on a fetishisation of the narrative of Germany under Nazism in which they avoid openly engaging with the past but instead *return* to it in different ways. Narrative fetishism is ‘the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called the narrative into being in the first place’ (Santner 1992, 144). Narrative fetishism casts aside the discussion of any anxiety, putting it off or removing it from the equation. It involves the refusal to mourn and is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere. It involves the refusal to mourn and is ‘a strategy undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere’ (Santner 144). The piecing together of one’s own identity, then, is relegated to a different, later time (if it is addressed at all).

Both *Trauerarbeit* and narrative fetishism are modes through which humans can reconfigure their identity following traumatic events. The difference between them, however, lies in the ‘willingness or capacity to include the traumatic event in one’s efforts to reformulate and reconstitute identity’ (Santner 152). How do the objects in Magazzino 18 serve this rhetorical sleight of hand, this narrative of shifting responsibility? The objects act as fetish objects that negotiate the national trauma without addressing it. According to Sharon Macdonald, in her exploration



of the ‘musealisation’ of everyday life,

Taking ‘ordinary’, ‘mundane’ objects of the recent past and putting them on display in museums might be seen as a kind of fetishisation of past everyday life. Collecting such ordinary things and displaying them, typically in densely massed profusion, speaks to a profound and affectively meaningful relationship with objects. According to Freud, fetishism involves desires that should be directed at people being misplaced onto objects instead... (Macdonald 2013, 159-60)

In the context of Magazzino 18 focusing on the objects of the exodus serves to displace fascist guilt, and short-circuits the phase of working through the trauma. It’s as if there never was one. By preserving the objects of the exodus inside Magazzino 18, the cultural organisations representing the exile community not only mediate or control access to the items, they also help underline their victim status and sidestep a serious interrogation of fascist Italy’s role in Istria. In Italy, the myth of *italiani brava gente* (Del Boca 2005) in the postwar period is also a manifestation of this narrative fetishism, through the decision to locate the locus of suffering somewhere else: in Nazi Fascism. As Claudio Fogu writes, ‘Statements concerning the difficulty encountered by Allied officers in finding a single “fascist” among the liberated Italians have penetrated in Italian popular folklore more widely and deeply than any fascist claim to a “Great Italy” produced during the *ventennio nero*’ (Fogu 2006, 147). The suffering of Italians toward the end of the war, as well as the appropriation and mythicisation of the Resistance, enabled the premature reinstatement of the pleasure principle and the location of anxiety away from Italy.

## VII Parallels with other memory practices in Italy

There is a yearly uptick in the amount of people visiting Magazzino 18 in February, in connection to a related day of memory. A significant event that marked a turning point in the discussion and recognition of the *foibe* and exodus was the establishment of the *Giorno del ricordo*, the National Memorial Day of the Exiles and Foibe, in 2004. Mila Orlić argues that the law that established this day was ‘the conclusion of a path that began in the early nineties, with the crisis of the political system and its basis of legitimacy in anti-fascism and in the [Italian] Resistance’<sup>13</sup> (Orlić 2015, 447). This day of memory is of great importance to the Istrian exile community in Italy, and many events, conferences and memorials are organised around it. The date of the *Giorno del ricordo*, February 10, also coincides with Italy’s signing of one of the Paris Peace Treaties in 1947, which transferred Istria and other border territories to Yugoslavia. Part of the aim of the day is to spread awareness of these events to students and young people. The law also encourages institutions to organise studies, conferences and discussions with the goal of preserving the memory of the exodus and *foibe*. The creation of the *Giorno del ricordo*, which is similar in nomenclature and close in date to International Holocaust Remembrance Day for the victims of the Holocaust (named *Giorno della memoria* in Italian, observed on January 27), is yet another parallel between the memorialisation efforts of the *foibe*/exodus and the Holocaust. Susanne Knittel argues that the Italian State’s decision to create an additional memorial day for the *foibe* and exodus was ‘not historically organic but rather motivated entirely by political

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13 My translation.



concerns and the conscious attempt to shift the framework of national memory toward a specifically Italian narrative of innocence and victimhood' (Knittel 2014, 179). This move is another example of narrative fetishism at play. This discursive shift, coupled with the emphasis placed on the objects in *Magazzino 18* as 'proof' of suffering, serve to obfuscate Italy's fascist past and reconstitute a post-war identity without addressing the traumatic event.

While taking inspiration from the internationally recognised Holocaust Remembrance Day, the *Giorno del ricordo* focuses on the Italian victims of a very specific slice of borderland history. It frames those who perished in the *foibe* as 'victims of a genocidal persecution', encouraging the creation of a myth of Istrian martyrdom (Knittel 179). Another example of the conflation of Holocaust and exodus remembrance is the use of an oft-repeated image of a little girl holding a suitcase (discovered to be Egea Haffner) to promote the *Giorno del ricordo* events: 'a prime example of how those who wish to promote the memory of the *foibe* tap into the familiar iconography of the persecution of the Jews during the Holocaust in order to align the victims of the *foibe* with those of the Nazis' (Knittel 179). Haffner's image was also used on the cover of the book, *Ci chiamavano fascisti. Eravamo italiani. Istriani, fiumani e dalmati: storie di esuli e rimasti* (Ugo Mursia Editore, 2010) by journalist Jan Bernas, who co-authored the musical *Magazzino 18* with Cristicchi.

The institutionalisation – or institutional recognition – of the *foibe* and exodus with the *Giorno del ricordo* shows how this Holocaust framework can be formulated and formalised: with it, proponents of this interpretation of history are encouraged or legitimised by this new (national) recognition. However, the yearly organisation of conferences and events inspired by the anniversary has not been done with the most impartial academic rigour nor with the objective distance that history-writing requires. Thus, we are left with a certain narrative of Italian victimhood and innocence, fanned by political entities when convenient, much to the chagrin of the neighbouring nations of Slovenia and Croatia.<sup>14</sup> The establishment of this day of memory has folded the *foibe* and exodus into Italian historical memoryscape. Meanwhile, this memoryscape circumvents or excludes any real reckoning with Italian fascist violence in the area. This institutional recognition (and by extension, legitimisation) has made the Adriatic borderland a hot topic and helped bolster the revisionist claims of the Italian far-right and neo-fascists.

The history of fascism in Istria, the presence of German troops in the Adriatic Littoral and Italian collaboration (especially in the city of Trieste), as well as the violent situation in the postwar borderland, paint a picture of a very different wartime experience than the rest of the Italian peninsula. Although the war affected different parts of Italy in largely disparate ways, the Adriatic borderland has had a particularly difficult time assimilating, as its experience is not reflected in the traditional, overarching national narrative of the war. An oft-repeated senti-

14 For more on conflicting national memories, see Katja Hrobat Virloget. 2021a. *V tišini spomina: »eksodus« in Istra*. (Koper, Trieste: Založba Univerze na Primorskem, Založništvo trzaskega tiska); Katja Hrobat Virloget. 2021b. "Better Be Quiet": Silence in Memories of the "Istrian Exodus," National Heroes and Beliefs.' *Cultural Analysis*, 19(2); Katja Hrobat Virloget. 2017. "Istrian exodus": Between official and alternative memories, between conflict and reconciliation', *Ethnologies* 39(2), 31–50; Katja Hrobat Virloget and Neža Čebren Lipovec. 2017. 'Heroes we love? Monuments to the National liberation movement in Istria between memories, care, and collective silence', *Studia ethnologica Croatica*, 29, 45–71; Katja Hrobat Virloget. 2015. 'The Burden of the Past. Silenced and Divided Memories of the Post-war Istrian Society' in *At Home but Foreigners. Population Transfers in 20th Century Istria*, edited by Katja Hrobat Virloget, Catherine Gousseff, and Gustavo Corni, 159–188. (Koper: University of Primorska, Science and Research Centre, Annales University Press).





ment by the director of IRCI is that the year 1945 (the Liberation of Italy) does not mean much for the city of Trieste, for it was instead the beginning of the years of exodus. This insistence on difference has allowed Triestine history to be sold as an Italian Holocaust to Italy, thereby undercutting fascist guilt. The recent emphasis on these histories of violence, seen especially in the creation of the *Giorno del Ricordo*, shifts the gaze from Italian responsibility to victimhood (Ballinger 2003, 2004; Knittel 2014; Hrobat Virloget 2015, 2017; Hrobat Virloget and Čebren Lipovec 2017).

### VIII Borders

The heterogeneous and multicultural border area raises questions of different (and often conflicting) histories of victimhood (Rothberg 2009) and contentious memories (Assmann 2007). This issue is inherently about collective memory and the construction of official (or state) narratives, especially in a border area where several different histories of violence interact and where the categories of victim and perpetrator transformed over the course of the war and postwar period, as previously mentioned: under the Italian fascist regime, during the particularly violent and uncertain period of 1943–45, and in the postwar period during Tito's rule of Yugoslavia. This is not meant to equate different histories of violence, but simply to underline the multiple players and complicated process of parsing out responsibility in a contested border region. This web of victimisation complicates the story of collective memory and memorialisation. There can be no overarching narrative – with all the players, border changes and movement, it is difficult to construct a history that is acceptable to *all* border citizens of *all* political and national subscriptions. It is not simply a question of difference: it is also a political question and one grounded in different systems of government which transformed over time from the Kingdom of Italy to fascist dictatorship to the Italian Republic or Yugoslav socialist state. By focusing on the tragedy of the *foibe* and exodus – rather than Italian fascism and its persecution of Slovene and Croats – ‘a nation recalls its own suffering in order to avoid being reminded of its own guilt’ (Assmann 2007, 15 cited in Hrobat Virloget and Čebren Lipovec 2017, 50). In highlighting the horrors of the postwar borderland, certain aspects of national memory are strategically emphasised. This phenomenon has been instrumentalised by the post-Fascist right in Trieste, which has in turn affected the memoryscape and the health of contemporary memorialisation in Trieste.

### IX Can borderland memory be multidirectional?

Trieste, and the border region more broadly, is plagued by memory competition between ethnic groups and political threads. In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Michael Rothberg puts Holocaust studies and postcolonial studies in conversation. By taking events of the Black Atlantic, French Algeria and the Jewish diaspora together, Rothberg encourages us to reconsider the foundations of collective memory and its role in the formation of group identity. He does so by arguing against competitive memory logic – relying on the conclusion that it is not a ‘zero sum game’ – and exploring examples in which the Holocaust has been used to inform understandings of colonialism and decolonisation (Rothberg,



2009, xiii). Rothberg challenges the model of competitive memory, arguing against the memory theory that suggests that the public sphere only has a specific or *limited* amount of space for collective memory, and thus different ‘memory strains’ must compete with one another in order to achieve recognition, establish a hierarchy or enter into the official narrative. Rather than understanding collective memory as competitive memory, Rothberg suggests that it is multi-directional: ‘as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative’ (Rothberg, 2009, 3). While other scholars have suggested using Rothberg’s idea of multidirectionality to connect the situation in Istria to larger population movements in Europe and to Italy’s colonies in Africa (Ballinger 2015), I ask instead: would Rothberg’s framework allow us to interpret connections to the Holocaust in the memorialisation of the Istrian exodus as productive? How does comparing seemingly incompatible or incommensurable legacies occurring around the same historical moment complicate the analysis further? Would thinking the Holocaust and postwar Trieste together lead to a relativisation of the Holocaust (Rothberg, 2009, 10)?

It is clear that Magazzino 18 encourages a connection between the exodus experience and the Holocaust. If the Istrian exile community in Trieste ‘use[s] the presence of widespread Holocaust consciousness as a platform to articulate a vision’ of its own historical condition, what is to be gained by this comparison (Rothberg, 2009, 2)? Rothberg writes that multidirectional memory allows for the potential to achieve understanding, empathy and solidarity across seemingly separate histories of violence (2009, 19). This conclusion relies on several assumptions: that the public sphere is malleable and that there isn’t ‘limited real estate’ for memory; that the anachronistic quality of memory is viewed positively; and that memory isn’t competitive. Rothberg argues that memory strands do not compete with one another for recognition.

What we are seeing instead is an elision of the Holocaust and exodus experience in Magazzino 18. This article argues that Magazzino 18 and the importance paid to the objects of the exodus act to obfuscate Italy’s fascist past and minimise Italy’s role in the Second World War. As a site of memory of central importance to the Istrian exile community in Trieste, Magazzino 18 participates in the reinforcing of a revisionist narrative born in the 1990s that affirms Italian innocence. It is one thing to use the tools of Holocaust memory and incorporate them into one’s own memorialisation efforts, and another to enter into the slippery game of competition. While the theoretical underpinnings of Holocaust representation are helpful in theorising other events, there are some obvious shortcomings to this model.

## X Concluding remarks

This article concludes that the Adriatic borderland is a stage where competitive memories and strains of histories play out most forcefully. The border region, and especially Trieste, consists of groups of individuals who trace their persecution through different actors and political systems. I argue that the thinking together of the Magazzino 18 case study and the Holocaust encourages competitive memory rather than solidarity. In the presentation of Magazzino 18, the exile community and organisers rely on the audience’s familiarity with the Holocaust to narrate their history and make plain their victimisation, utilising the type of exhibits used at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum as well as tropes of ‘unique’ victimhood, silence, the erasure of individual identity and more. While multidirectional memory can ‘construct sol-



identity out of the specificities, overlaps, and echoes of different historical experiences' (Rothberg 2009, 16), sometimes it is not the creation of solidarity but the attempt to speak louder or shout over that comes through. Not all intercultural memory fosters cross-cultural understanding. Nor is such an understanding ever explicitly mentioned as the goal or interest of memorialisation in the Magazzino and other spaces organised by the Istrian exile community. While some Istrian exiles see their historical experience reflected in that of the Jews or First Nation peoples (Ballinger 2003), much of the memorialisation insists on the uniqueness of this history of violence and its subsequent exodus. It asks not to be compared, but to stand alone. It is both a disavowal of the Holocaust and proof of its success in gaining and sustaining the attention of political leaders, museums, and the public. There is much to be gained by putting the objects of Magazzino 18 in conversation with the objects of the Holocaust, or even the objects of contemporary migration studies. Doing so, however, requires further contemplation of Italy's fascist past and a willingness to recognise the possibilities of thinking together different histories of violence.

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## TRACES

A visual essay with photography by Lilla Szász and words  
by Elsa Peralta

Elsa Peralta and Lilla Szász

- Abstract** This visual essay is the result of a long collaboration between an anthropologist who studies the memory of the end of the Portuguese empire and a visual artist who uses her artistic sensibility to give expression to places of memory for which there is an absence of words. In it we present images that convey small fragments of past experiences of violence, war and displacement related to Portuguese colonialism and decolonisation. These include objects found in forgotten personal archives or in Lisbon's flea markets, together with a plethora of material spoils of the former life of colonial Portugal, such as letters sent by soldiers to their war godmothers, photo albums from which the images have been torn away by time and where only captions remain, and negatives of lost and unclaimed photographs. They are no more than traces of memory of an illegitimate history, with no place in written and spoken memory, but that nonetheless reveal the feelings, the affect and the life of the time that has passed.
- Keywords** Portugal; colonialism; decolonisation; memory; traces, photography
- DOI** 10.25364/08.7:2021.1.7



1974 and 1975 in Portugal were years of change and hope for a new democratic era. The coup of 25 April 1974 finally put an end to the authoritarian and colonialist regime of the *Estado Novo* and to the colonial wars that the Portuguese military had been waging in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique for 13 years, thus paving the way for the independence of the Portuguese colonies in Africa. But these were also the years in which the Portuguese had to confront the heavy legacies of their colonialism. Between 1961 and 1975, 8831 Portuguese soldiers lost their lives in the wars fought by Portugal in Africa, not counting the many thousands of deaths among the African soldiers who fought alongside the Portuguese armed forces. In addition to the dead, an estimated 30,000 people were made disabled and 140,000 suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Overall, the colonial wars involved 1,368,900 men, of whom around 800,000 came from the metropole.

These numbers matter. It is a lot of people. Especially if we take into account the demography of the country: between 1960 and 1970, the metropolitan Portuguese population was little more than 8.5 million. To the countless dead, mutilated and traumatised people returning to Portugal in those years, we can add another large number: the exodus from African territories of around 500,000 *retornados*, the former settlers dispossessed of their property and privileges in the colonial territories they once occupied. It is a huge mass of people involved in a double displacement: the settlers, who although they migrated to the colonies voluntarily, did so often to escape the poverty that plagued them in the metropolis, and then made an unwanted return migration, stripped of their property, when their presence in Africa no longer served as an instrument for the colonial project; and the soldiers, who were torn from their homes in every corner of Portugal, forced to fight in a war they did not understand to defend territories they did not know, only to return, stripped of themselves, to a new Portugal, that proved incapable of incorporating the personal and social dramas that the Portuguese decolonisation encompassed. After almost 50 years, while in political discourse and in common sense there continues to be a celebration of the past glories of a 500-year empire, the 'dark legacies' of the end of Portuguese colonialism remain a memorial field fraught with fractures, traumas and silences (Peralta 2022).

This visual essay is the result of a long collaboration between an anthropologist who studies the processes of remembrance of the end of the Portuguese empire and a visual artist who uses her artistic sensibility to give expression to places of memory for which there is an absence of words. The images we present are small fragments of these past experiences of violence, war and displacement. They capture objects found in forgotten personal archives or in Lisbon's flea markets, together with a plethora of material spoils of the former life of colonial Portugal. They are letters sent by soldiers to their war godmothers, to whom they wrote to scare away the ghosts of death, photo albums from which the images have been torn away by time and where only captions remain, and negatives of lost and unclaimed photographs. The objects we present here are the spoils of an illegitimate history, resonating ghosts that dramatise shattered identities. They are traces that carry memories that fade with the passing of time and generations, and that will eventually be erased from memory.

However, as the existentialist anthropologist Michael Jackson reminds us, 'That which has been (...) always leaves a trace' (2013: xv). Of what was and will not be again. Of that which, having been, will never cease. Traces that celebrate time, loss and oblivion, becoming and corrosion, not as impossible or idealised totalities, but of an absolute precariousness, to be preserved

in its perishable value. For, as Henri Bergson noted aptly, matter does not remember the past; it constantly repeats it (Bergson [1896] 1991: 223). Traces, finally, that despite constituting an incomplete, rescued, fragmentary territory, in the end are what is most precious to memory, because they reveal a past that carries in itself the time that has passed (Didi-Huberman 2012). A past that is raw material, which is not thought, because it is on the side of feeling, of affections and of life. From them, we can situate the present that we inhabit, there in that past that is missing, and, from that place, be present to the whole heritage of a story that was left untold.

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Figure 1 Coney Island mouse pad with a card from *Madrinhas de Guerra*

“*Madrinhas de Guerra*” or “Godmothers of War” are Mozambican women who took part in the National Women’s Movement from 1961-1974. These women were sponsored by the Portuguese government to provide moral support to the soldiers fighting on the frontlines during the Mozambican War of Independence. Through letter writing campaigns to soldiers – many of whom they never actually met – the *Madrinhas de Guerra* played a critical role in the psychological support to the colonial armed forces. Some *Madrinhas* went so far as to meet and regularly visit the soldiers to whom they wrote letters, developing deep relationships sometimes leading to promises of marriage when the young men returned at the end of the war. In exchange for their support during the war, many of these women were rewarded with influential positions



in society and the upper classes. In 1974, when the war of independence ended with a ceasefire agreement between the Mozambican FRELIMO forces and the Portuguese government, the National Women's Movement officially ended. However, the *Madrinhas de Guerra* were ostracized within Mozambican society for their role in supporting the colonial forces.

The card was purchased in Feira da Ladra flea market, in Lisbon. The mouse pad was a present from an American friend, whom I met when I worked on the essay on Russian Jewish WWII Veterans living in Brighton Beach, New York.

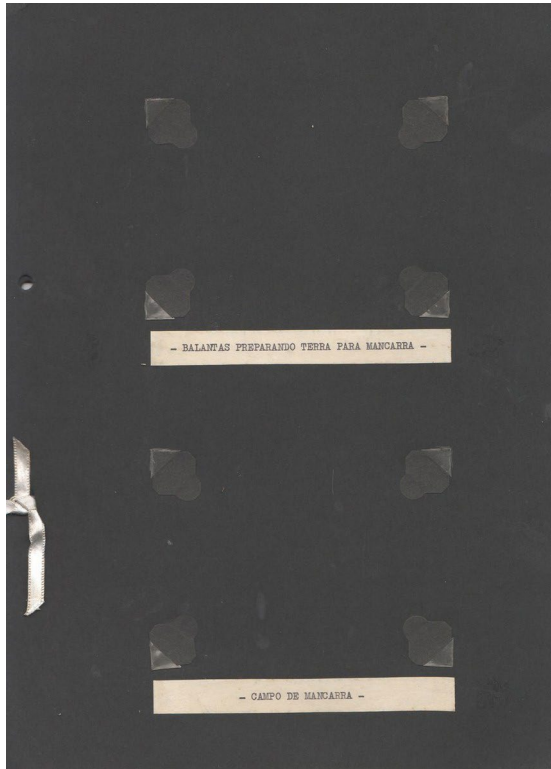


Figure 2 *Balantas preparando a terra para mancarra* – Balantas (an ethnic group from Guinea-Bissau) preparing the land for mancarra (a type of peanut)

I bought a photo album at Feira da Ladra, where almost all images were missing, only the captions remained. I was amazed by the images that the captions drew without the physical existence of the images themselves. What is a caption without an image? What is the function of a photo-album? What do we wish to preserve with it? Do they still form our memory of the past? I have purchased numerous negatives and photographs from the colonies in the Lisbon flea





Figure 3 Photos of soldiers in the Portuguese colonies with a card from *Madrinhas de Guerra*

market, as they are still widely present there. How do these images and albums show life in the colonies? What happens to photographs as objects when memory fades and only the object remains? Do they still form our memory of the past? Who took the photos? Why? Did they send it to the homeland? How much were these photographs censored? These were the questions I was trying to find an answer to.

The card and the photos were purchased in Feira da Ladra flea market, in Lisbon. How do

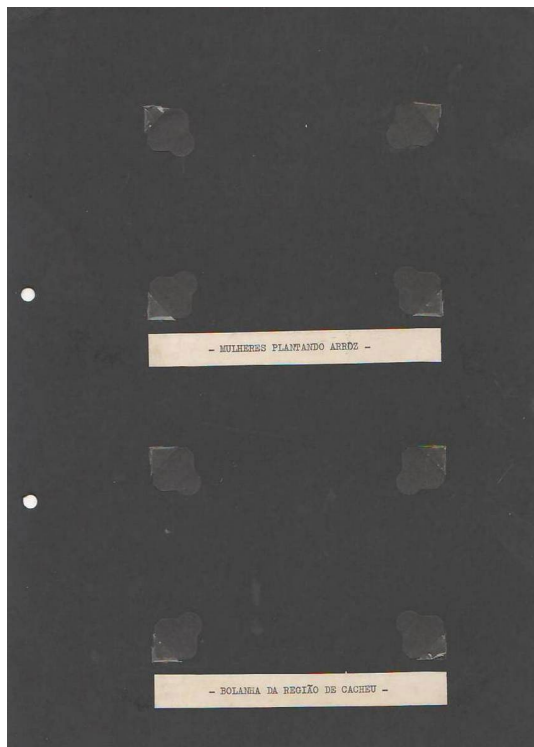


Figure 4 *Mulheres plantando Arroz* - Women planting rice; *Bolanha da Região de Cacheu* - Bolanha (large marshy land where rice is grown) from the Cacheu region of Guinea-Bissau



Figure 5 Photos of soldiers in the Portuguese colonies with a Card from *Madrinhas de Guerra*

these images and albums show life in the colonies? Were they sent to the homeland? How much were these photographs censored? These were the questions I was trying to find an answer to. My presence in the form of shadow represents how we connect to our memories, and to our

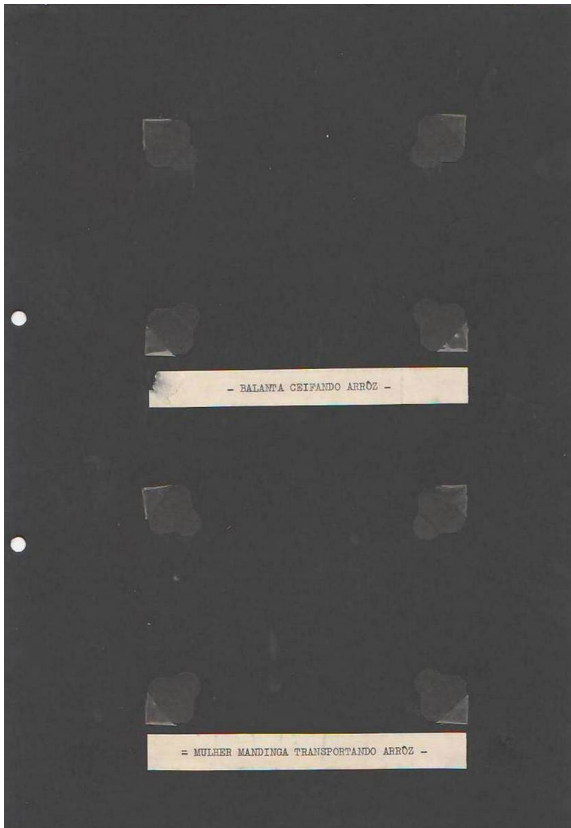


Figure 6 *Balanta ceifando arroz* – Balanta harvesting rice; *Mulher Mandinga transportando arroz* – Mandinga (an ethnolinguistic group from West Africa) woman carrying rice

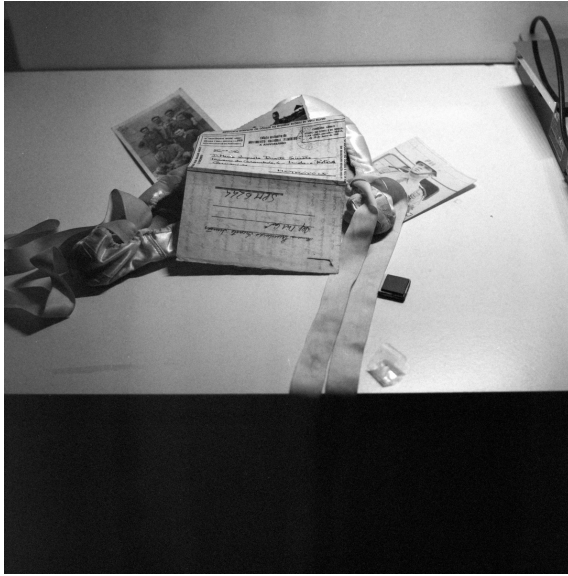


Figure 7 Photos of soldiers in the Portuguese colonies with a card from *Madrinhas de Guerra*



Figure 8 Photos of soldiers in the Portuguese colonies with a poster in the background found in my rented room

objects. How our memories fade with time and how our objects start to lose their significance, too.

How does a stranger react to the objects left in the room, flat, house left that is rented by us?



Figure 9 Photos of soldiers in the Portuguese colonies with ballerina shoes found in my rented room

What picture do we get from the other person, who had originally lived there? What are the traces?

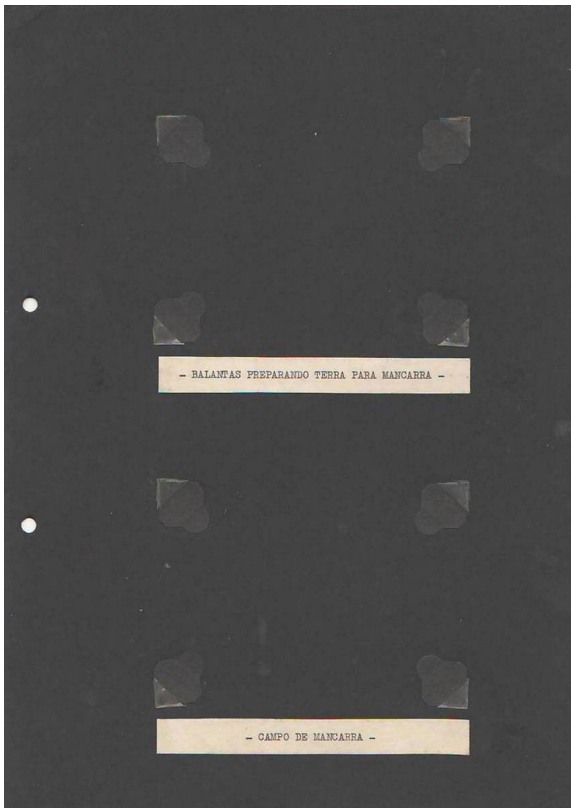


Figure 10 *Balantas preparando terra para mancara* – Balantas (an ethnic group from Guinea-Bissau) preparing the land for mancara (a type of peanut); *Campo de Mancarra* – Mancarra field

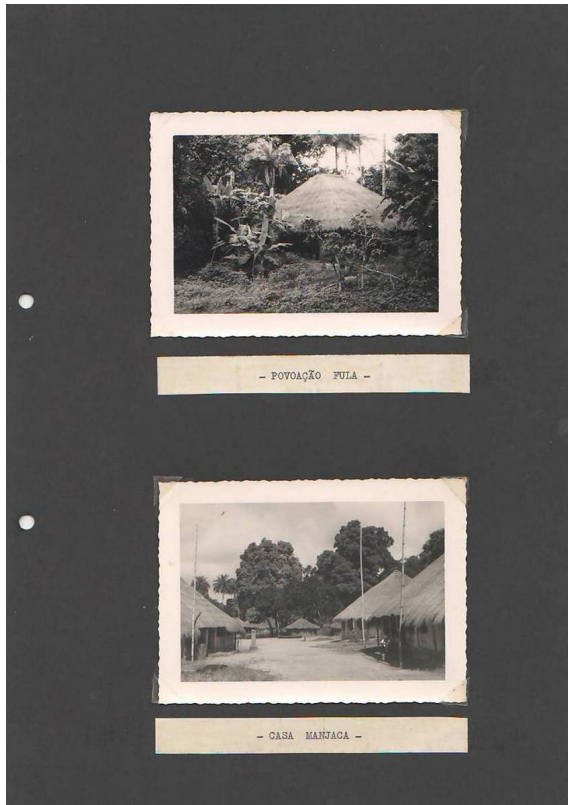


Figure 11 *Povoação Fula* – Fula (Islamised West-African people, present in Guinea-Bissau) village; *Casa Manjaca* – Manjaca (ethnic group from Guinea-Bissau) house



Figure 12 Photos of soldiers in the Portuguese colonies with ballerina shoes found in my rented room





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# “My landscape is mute”

## Artefacts lost and left behind by Egyptian Jews

Michèle Baussant

**Abstract** This article focuses on artefacts lost and left behind by Egyptian Jews after their departure from Egypt. It shows how these material artefacts and their preservation, especially those with a collective dimension such as synagogues or objects of worship, play a key role in the forms of continuity of the Jews of Egypt in the diaspora. Like a ‘phantom limb’, they often take on more importance and space than the objects carried into exile. The article also aims to grasp why the Jewish past sticks to the present, inside and outside Egypt, seemingly more than the Greek, Italian or Shawam (Syro-Lebanese) ones. This persistence is due to a double dynamic: one, the eagerness of certain Egyptian Jews to maintain this heritage in situ and to gain recognition for the Jewish contribution to Egyptian culture and history, and two, the diverse, asymmetrical interests, often resulting from different if not opposite aims, which lead to the valorisation of this heritage in Egypt. To highlight this dynamic, I will refer to an event in Alexandria two years ago, which reveals contradictory forces, diverse interests and convergences, and the central role of the objects and materials left behind in this process.

**Keywords** Egypt, Jews, memory, heritage, silence

**DOI** 10.25364/08.7:2021.1.8



Many years ago, when I began studying Egyptian Jews, I was struck by how they portrayed their life in Egypt coming to an end and the dwindling of their population there. People I met referred, of course, to the political contexts that had shaped their destiny and the vanishing of the multi-millennial Jewish presence in Egypt: 1948 and the creation of the state of Israel, 1956 and the Suez war, the Jews' involvement in communist movements that led to their expulsion, the sequestration of their property and the loss of jobs. Most striking, though, was their depiction of a world where their families and friends disappeared suddenly from one day to the next, usually leaving everything behind: flats full of objects but devoid of people, half-empty schoolrooms, closed offices, streets that changed their demographic composition, shops with different owners.

A world that was once seen and then no longer seen, but which has left behind some traces, such as buildings, objects and pictures. What has gone missing? Is it that those who have disappeared no longer exist? Or have they just vanished from view? No longer being or not being seen are two ways of being absent. However, absentees can still resurface and return, unless they are only ghosts whose stories we would no longer remember were it not for the traces and artefacts they left behind.

Materialities are often viewed as points of stability and frames of memory. Studies of immigrants frequently emphasise what they take with them, such as the emblematic symbol of the house key kept by the Palestinians. They give a specific value to these kept objects, although they sometimes stem not from a specific form of attachment but from pragmatic considerations. Most conclude that they reveal a form of continuity in an interrupted human life and that ‘living matter and its history bestow on the object a presence, which activates its entire surroundings’ (Borcherdt 2021). The objects left behind are of little concern, seldom examined by research scholars who focus on what is taken when people have to flee a country. However, as Maurice Halbwachs (1941) pointed out, these too can turn into powerful forms of attachment, memory and belonging. These objects sometimes constitute the *topoi* of memory, especially when they relate to evocations of the house and intimate spaces: they convey, as in Elias Khoury’s book *Bab el Shams* or Jacques Hassoun’s texts, the feeling that ‘everything had remained as it was, each thing had remained in its place. Even the clay pitcher...everything had remained precisely in its place, except that these people arrived and took our places’ (Khoury and Samara 2000).

#### Coming back to the apartment on Fouad Street

You arrive at this apartment on Fouad Street (what do they call it today? They told you, but you forgot), and you recognise everything. Your mother’s family used to live in a place like this. Yes, you recognise everything. The broken-down elevator, the need to go through the next building (we used to say next door) to the roof (the terrace), to go down one floor under the guidance of the janitor (doorman), an old man who is almost blind. You enter what will be your home for a week. Everything is there. The furniture protected by slipcovers. The Venetian chandeliers. The succession of salons. And in the kitchen...you make a stunning discovery: a Frigidaire brand fridge. A real one. You are overwhelmed. You are really back home. And your uncle Joseph and your Nona Giulia didn’t die in Milan. They just went away for a while. —Jacques Hassoun (Hassoun 2001, 60).

This contribution focuses on these lost and left behind materialities<sup>1</sup>. But not just any objects: a bronze plaque on a synagogue bench, a tombstone with a name endorsing the physical location of the person who is there but no longer there, a name in a Ketubah or a Mohel book. A name that we carry with us, that we give and pass on. A plaque or a stone with a name that marks the presence of an absence, related to a constellation of objects – identity papers and photos – left behind or taken with us. These leftover objects embody and identify a specific person and community belonging, both personal and collective. They bind individuals to what and who they are.



Image 1: Bronze plaque bearing the name Youssef Ades in the Vitali Madjar Temple in Cairo, February 2020, Egypt. © Michele Baussant

I took this picture of a bronze plaque on a deserted synagogue bench bearing the name and surname of an Egyptian Jew in February 2020, in the Vitali Madjar Temple, one of the few remaining synagogues in Cairo. I have never met Youssef Ades, nor Vita Habibi Pacha, Nissim Rasson, Herman Hornenstein, Aboud Tabouch, or any of those whose names, sometimes half-faded, remain on the benches of the synagogues that still exist in Alexandria and Cairo. Maybe Youssef Ades is still alive. Perhaps his name is written on a bench in a synagogue in Brooklyn, Milan, or wherever, duplicating his trace and presence in his many paths of exile: I like to imagine him travelling from Syria to Egypt and then somewhere in Europe or North America. These plaques display the name of the donor who reserved the seat, often men from prominent families. They also recount another history of displacement to Egypt, and of the former belongings of those *ḥalabi* Jews, *urfalī* Jews, *uthmānī* Jews or ‘Schlecht’ who came to the

1 This work was funded by the French Ministries of Europe and Foreign Affairs and Higher Education, Research and Innovation and the Convergences MIGRATIONS Institute, led by the CNRS, under the reference ANR-17-CONV-0001.



country between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They reveal the sedimentation of migrations and exiles, bearing witness to the genealogies and circulation of Jewish families in Egypt, the Ottoman empire and beyond. There are also anonymous benches, silent on the fate of those who have not sat there for decades. And there is nothing about the women, either.

Anyone entering the synagogues today is confronted with the presence/absence of the Jews whose names on the benches embody the ghosts of a bygone era in Egypt. Often located in the heart of urban areas, these material traces of Jewish presence, one of the country's stable identities, stand as faded monuments to the country's ancient Jewish history or remain invisible, hidden or blurred into the landscape over the long term. Their access is closely controlled, if not entirely blocked.<sup>2</sup> As a result, they are seldom accessible to the Egyptian population and the Egyptian Jews in the diaspora. In fact, walking the streets of Cairo or Alexandria today, it is almost impossible to imagine that more than 80,000 Jews lived in the country only a few decades ago. Indeed, the end of British imperial domination over Egypt produced a reduction of histories and cultures and led to the absence of whole segments of peoples, social spaces, languages, religions and relationships in a few decades. Jews almost disappeared from Egypt, and the landscape they had shaped was reinvested, transformed or destroyed after their departure, which has been described as neither totally voluntary nor wholly forced. As a result, it is barely recognisable to those who attempt to come back for a visit, eroding the tangible connections with the country the Jews once claimed as their own.

However, the Jews in the diaspora still find it challenging to separate the country from themselves. They came out of Egypt, but they have been unable to take Egypt out of themselves. This chiasmic relationship between them and the country makes the idea of their history being totally forgotten more painful, without it being clear what this forgetting means: absence of memory, lack of discourse, absence of knowledge or indifference, or perhaps apathy. However, the prolonged absence of concern over the Jews' departure, or even representations of it in the public sphere, does not mean forgetfulness or a complete void, as evidenced by the resurgence today of crossed and parallel social constructions of the presence and absence of the Jews, both in Egypt and abroad: on social media and in newspapers, cinema, official heritage initiatives, publications and exchanges between Egyptians and Egyptian Jews on the internet and via Facebook. People whose voices had been silenced – notably the Jews in the diaspora or Egypt – and others who were silent for reasons other than the coercion of remembrance – such as the younger Egyptian generations – are showing curiosity in the few remaining Jewish traces and artefacts in Egypt. Some voices decry the abandonment and neglect of Jewish heritage, invoking the anti-Israeli feelings of the Egyptian population. At the same time, other Egyptian monuments, Coptic and Muslim or related to the other groups of the contemporary period (such as the Greeks, the Syro-Lebanese people, the Italians...), have also deteriorated and been abandoned or destroyed. Others express nostalgia for a past time seen through the critical lens of the present, before the abdication of King Farouk, when 'Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together' and 'they were all Egyptians': a 'cosmopolitan' Egypt which accepted the other, whatever their colour, religion or nationality.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the silence also turned into a vehicle of memory used by various groups for different purposes.

2 Before 2011, during my fieldwork in Egypt, one required a passport and the agreement of the president of the Jewish community to enter a synagogue, which was kept locked if a member of the community was not present.

3 <https://www.almasyalyoum.com/news/details/767392> (accessed 26 February 2022)..





I could address the Jewish past and its legacy in Egypt and in the diaspora in many ways. Nevertheless, this article stems from issues I observed during my extensive fieldwork,<sup>4</sup> which I did not understand at the time. I have some specific questions in mind here: why does the Jewish past stick to the present, inside and outside Egypt, seemingly more than the Greek, Italian or Shawam (Syro-Lebanese) pasts do? Why is this heritage reduced to synagogues, buildings, religious (mostly Rabbanite) artefacts and cemeteries? And why is it defined only as a ‘cultural heritage’ that shapes a narrow picture of Jewish identities and contributions to Egyptian culture?<sup>5</sup> How has this past become something that different people want and can relate to?

The current concern about the Egyptian Jewish past involves a double dynamic: one, the eagerness of certain Egyptian Jews to maintain this heritage in situ and to gain recognition for the Jewish contribution to Egyptian culture and history, and two, the diverse, asymmetrical interests, often resulting from different – if not opposite – aims, which lead to the promotion of this heritage in Egypt. To highlight this dynamic, I will refer to an event in Alexandria two years ago, which made me realise that the long-noted silence on the Jews was not a void, but a fragile surface. It reveals contradictory forces, diverse interests and convergences, and the central role of the objects and materials left behind in this process.

## I A Place Where the *Nefesh* ‘Blows’ Again

In mid-February 2020, as part of my fieldwork, I followed an official delegation of Jews of Egyptian origin<sup>6</sup> from at least ten different countries, including Israel but mainly from Europe, who travelled to Alexandria and Cairo under the auspices of the Association Internationale Nebi Daniel, which works to preserve Jewish sites in Egypt. There was also another smaller delegation of fifteen people from Israel, linked to the first one, but organised by an Israeli association, the International Association of Jews from Egypt. This delegation was initially composed of 35–40 people from Israel, but more than half of them were denied visas to enter Egypt.

Both delegations came to perform the Hanukat Habayit (rededication) ceremony of the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue on 14 February;<sup>7</sup> the synagogue had undergone an extensive renovation costing US\$4 million after its roof collapsed in 2016. Accompanying the two Jewish delegations were people such as ambassadors and consuls (from the US and France), Rabbi Andrew Baker of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), Roberto Marini, the current president of the Alexandria Jewish Community, Rabbi Yosef Nefoussi, son of the last chief rabbi of Alexandria,

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4 This article is based on multi-sited fieldwork conducted in Egypt and in the various places where Egyptian Jews have settled. However, I have to point out the asymmetry of the data collected during my fieldwork. I met many Jews from Egypt in the diaspora (France, Italy, the UK, Switzerland, Canada, the US, and even Turkey) and in Israel. Fieldwork in Egypt around this issue was more complicated, especially among the Egyptian population.

5 Is it a statement made by the Egyptian Jews themselves, or the Egyptian state, which links culture and religion to preserve its national heritage?

6 Approximately between 165 and 180 people, depending on the source.

7 In Egyptian newspaper articles announcing the rededication, the synagogue was presented as dating back to the fourteenth century, before being destroyed by the French in 1798. The current Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue was built in the nineteenth century and could once accommodate 1,000 people. The complex also used to include ‘a school (currently leased to the city), community offices (including the Rabbinate), and a social hall (now sold), as well as apartments and stores rented out for income’. A full description is available at <http://archive.diarna.org/site/detail/public/49/> (accessed 16 September 2021).



Rabbi Avraham Dayan, of Egyptian descent and chief rabbi of Livorno, Rabbi Bueno, a hazan of Tunisian descent, and Ariel Cohen, the director of the Israeli orchestra Firqat al Noor.<sup>8</sup>

No Egyptian officials attended the Hanukat Habayit. In fact, on Friday 10 January 2020, the Egyptian government held an inauguration ceremony for the synagogue separately from the Jews and with no official Israeli representative present – a ceremony designed as a ‘patrimonial’ event. The Egyptian minister of tourism and antiquities, Khaled al-Anani, officially opened the temple after two years of restoration and renovation in the presence of Magda Haroun,<sup>9</sup> the former minister of antiquities and Egyptology and the deputy minister of antiquities for engineering affairs. The Egyptian newspapers reported that this first ceremony was attended by around 20 ambassadors and 20 ministers.<sup>10</sup> Some of the newspaper articles, some of which appeared in the ‘tourism’ section, praised the vastness of the temple, which could host 700 worshippers. They provided rather approximate information on the existence of between 50 and 63 ancient copies of the Torah, which were of ‘great religious and archaeological value’, and a collection of books ‘dating from the 15th century AD’. They provided a detailed description of the building’s interior: the two floors with the women’s section, the library, the marble boxes for collecting donations and the private offices that formerly supplied services to community members. There was no mention of the community archives that the synagogue had housed only a few years ago. The articles also repeatedly stated that the synagogue would ‘no longer be a place of worship’ because there were hardly any Jews left in Egypt.

The delegates stayed in Egypt for a week. Group tours were organised under high security from the hotels where they were staying – mainly the Cecil Hotel, the Metropole Hotel and the Windsor Hotel in Alexandria. They moved under police and sometimes military escort, with masked and heavily armed men, as well as snipers posted on the surrounding rooftops, controlling all movement. The members of the delegation had received several internal guidelines before their visit: do not post anything on social networks until Saturday evening for Alexandria and until Tuesday evening for Cairo; do not cluster together when walking in groups of more than four people; exit the synagogue in small groups; and wear a cap or a hat outside, rather than a kippah. Each event was accessible only with a personal badge provided by the organisers.

The high level of security made other visits, such as visits to their former neighbourhoods, homes and Egyptian friends, difficult, but not impossible. Fateen, who was an engaging guide, took care of families’ and individuals’ requests to identify specific graves in cemeteries.

The delegates who arrived on Wednesday night were able to start their visit as ‘ordinary’ tourists with visits to the Shawkafa Catacombs, the Roman Amphitheatre, the Abou El Abbas Mosque, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Patriarchate Museum, accompanied by English and French guides. On Thursday evening, members of the delegation (except those following the Kashrut) met for dinner at the Greek Yacht Club. On the morning of Friday 14 February, buses and minivans carried all the visiting delegates to Alexandria’s two main Jewish cemeteries, Chatby and Mazarita, which were poorly maintained despite six full-time gardeners being

8 The two-day tour encompassing the various events organised in Alexandria, including the ceremony, were subject to the payment of fees, covering contributions to the cost of the Mezzuzot, the commemorative Kippot, the rabbis’ fees and travel expenses, the invitation of special guests, coaches for the Cairo synagogue tours, meals and synagogue fees levied by the Cairo community.

9 Represented by the press as ‘the head of the Jewish community in Egypt’.

10 <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1456194> (accessed 20 February 2021)



on the community's payroll. Several weeks before the visit, and thanks to donations and financial assistance by members of the Egyptian Jewish community worldwide, the cemeteries had been cleaned up. Some 40 tonnes of rubbish were removed from the two Jewish cemeteries in Alexandria, revealing the extent of the damage there: smashed or stolen marble, many graves unrecognisable, indecipherable or with erased names, and covered with dog excrement. The morning of 14 February was busy: on arrival at the Chatby Cemeteries, and afterwards at the Mazarita Cemetery, a rabbi said a collective Kaddish prayer. Then people looked for their loved ones' graves, wandering through the paths, some of which were impassable, shouting when they happened upon a familiar name or family member, commenting, cleaning, taking pictures, becoming silent, stopping to light a candle, and praying. The cemetery was theirs, albeit surrounded and protected by numerous police and military personnel.

Then at 2.30 pm, the delegation went under escort to the synagogue for the rededication ceremony. Although the synagogue is in a popular shopping area, the street on which it stands and those adjacent to it were closed to traffic, with police strictly controlling access to them. Even so, the delegates had to line up at the entrance of the synagogue and submit to a security check and high-security procedures to enter. Once in the courtyard, they only had to look up to see the snipers posted on the roofs around them.

Rabbi Andrew Baker of the American Jewish Committee, who has been involved with restoring Jewish sites in Egypt for the past ten years, started the official Nebi Daniel rededication ceremony by attaching a new mezuzah to the synagogue door as people crowded around to watch. Full of emotion, they then followed the procession of men moving forward under a tallit with 12 of the Torah scrolls remaining in the synagogue. People then moved inside the synagogue, which they had only been able to see in passing before the beginning of the ceremony: the benches had been moved and some of them placed in a circle; holes had been drilled in the ground and covered with transparent glass to allow visitors to see the foundations, as in a museum or archaeological site. The lights and colours evoked images of some oriental churches, while on the women's first floor, the layers of paint had been applied too quickly and the wall already sported damp spots. Some lamented the changes and the lack of 'soul'. Others were moved, marvelling at the lively atmosphere. And others looked at the names on the wooden benches, hoping to find those belonging to their relatives.

The ceremony that took place before Shabbat had several highlights: Roberto Marini, the new president of the Alexandria Jewish Community, greeted those assembled there in both Arabic and Italian; the attendant (of Nubian origin) of the synagogue received a medal for his service from the Egyptian government; one of the founders of the Nebi Daniel Association performed the Shehecheyanu blessing; Levana Zamir, president of the Union of the Jews from Egypt in Israel, read a Bracha in Hebrew for the state of Israel; and the orchestra Firqat al Noor played mizmorim (liturgical songs) accompanied by a classical Arabic violin.

At 5.25 pm, the Kabbalat Shabbat started. After the service, those not strictly observing the Shabbat laws were taken to a dinner at the Fish Market. The following day, on Saturday, the Shabbat service started at 9.30 am, and men were requested to bring their Tallits and prayer books. Then the delegates were taken for lunch at a famous and popular former Jewish restaurant Binyamin, now named Mohamed Ahmed. In the afternoon, at 2.30 pm, the French consul invited the French nationals in the delegation for ice cream and coffee at the French consulate,



while the others went to visit their former homes. On Saturday evening, a few of the delegates left the country; most others joined the Cairo programme, escorted by police and army personnel, all masked and heavily armed.

## II A Still-Vivid Memory in the Silence

In Cairo, except for those who decided to visit family and friends, the delegation was drawn into a never-ending series of visits to synagogues and cemeteries: the synagogue and yeshiva of the Rambam (Moses ben Maimon), the Moussa Dar'i synagogue (Karaite), the Hanan synagogue (also known as Etz Hahaim), the Shaar Shamayim (also known as the Adly Street synagogue), the Ben Ezra synagogue, the Bassatine Cemetery, the Meir Einayim or Meir Biton synagogue in Maadi and the Vitali Madjar synagogue in Heliopolis, a Karaite cemetery restored as part of an international programme, amidst buildings and self-constructed spaces, all guided by an Israeli professor of Middle-Eastern studies. Once again, we could walk between the benches of the synagogues, which were opened specially for us, and read the names, sometimes half-erased, on the wood. But neither in Alexandria nor in Cairo were we allowed access to the community archives, which had been given to the Egyptian government by the current president of the Jewish community in Cairo.

None of the synagogues 'came back to life' during the tour as on the Shabbat in Alexandria, where many might believe the Nefesh had never left the place. Nevertheless, the visits often provoked joy, sharing of memories, curiosity, especially in the Karaite synagogue with which most people were not familiar, and religious activities: the Rambam synagogue and yeshiva (Moses ben Maimon) provoked many memories of travelling and sleeping there to make a vow to the Rambam as children. When visiting the Ben Ezra synagogue, the only synagogue open to tourists, and which hosts the Cairo genizah, some group members started to perform a collective prayer, singing in the synagogue in front of the Egyptian visitors and other tourists. Surprised and amused, the visitors filmed the scene, much to the embarrassment of the Egyptian police, who responded promptly by asking people to turn off their phones and to evacuate the place. Sometimes guards accompanied individuals and timidly pointed out architectural elements. Others who had lived during the Jewish presence spontaneously joined the delegation in singing Jewish religious songs in the synagogue's courtyard. However, the tour also aroused astonishment, weariness and dissatisfaction among some Jews who wondered why they were visiting so many religious buildings which, in the past, they had frequented only during the main holidays.

During the trip, the Jews witnessed the abandonment and degradation of the Jewish and Egyptian sites, and their transformation or erasure from the landscape. Many were speechless in front of the desolation of the Bassatine Cemetery, which is known as the second-oldest Jewish cemetery after the Mount of Olives,<sup>11</sup> and where very few Jewish graves remain.

Nevertheless, the rededication ceremony was a way of reaffirming the Jews' long history in Egypt. Although many were traditionalists in Egypt, they took advantage of this tour to revive

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11 Only around 1,200 graves remain at the Bassatine Cemetery, and most of these bear only partial names, available at: <http://bassatine.net/bassamap.php> (accessed 16 September 2021). See also Aaron Kiviat's indexing of 1,683 names and 252 partial names at the Bassatine Cemetery, available at: <http://blog.teamwarneford.co.uk/> (accessed 28 February 2022).



the life and soul of the community – both living and dead – whose only visible traces are now associated with these places. They formed a minyan for the cemeteries and synagogues where they prayed. Thus, reinstating a Jewish presence in Egypt for even this short time allowed a substantial equivalence to be recreated between Egypt and the Jewish community.

Being in Egypt also provided an opportunity to speak with Egyptians and to remember together. However, the delegates were often disappointed that so few remembered this past despite it being so recent; that the Jewish presence in Alexandria or Cairo, which rose from 2 million inhabitants in 1947 to more than 10 million in 2016 (out of a total city population of 20.5 million), had been so quickly forgotten. Sometimes they expressed surprise that their long absence had not even registered with the people of Egypt, but they were even more surprised when they were recognised. They interpreted it as a recognition of their Egyptian belonging and a still-vivid memory shrouded in the silence about their past life in Egypt and the disappearance of their community from the country.

They therefore often had to rely on inhabitants both young and old, evoking souvenirs and sentences in Arabic, to find a building or street that often did not exist anymore on current maps or that had been renamed.

After we visited the cemeteries in Alexandria, I went through the city with Elie and his grandson. We hailed a taxi in front of the cemetery entrance; the driver was immediately stopped by the police. The police officers took a picture of his driving licence and ID and asked for his mobile phone number. Only after these security procedures were completed could we get into the car and visit the places Elie wanted to show his grandson. The driver, who was of a certain age, made various comments in Arabic, pointing out spots of so-called cosmopolitan Egypt – Le Salon Vert (a department store), the 'Sporting Club', the Saint-Marc college and the Rio cinema. We were looking for rue Belzoni, where Elie had lived and which no longer exists on the map. This street had been the subject of a lively debate between us for at least two years while discussing Elie's 'mental' map of Alexandria. It was impossible to locate this street on any current maps of the city. Elie could remember no landmark other than the people who had lived there until he remembered the existence of the Kanis al-Yahud synagogue on the street. The driver still did not know where we wanted to go. However, after several unsuccessful attempts, people on the streets, sometimes even children, guided us to the former rue Belzoni. Elie finally recognised his street but could not find any synagogue there. He seemed utterly lost, even disoriented. He could not identify anything, not even the taxi driver who had parked the car further ahead and came to meet us. I ended up asking two men who came out of a house, intrigued, and they confirmed that we were on rue Belzoni and that the synagogue had been destroyed many years ago and replaced with a new building.

### III A Past that Still Matters

For both the Jews of Egypt and those in the diaspora, speaking about and keeping a Jewish presence in Egypt alive facilitates remembrance through exchanges with the Egyptians and among themselves and thus gives this memory something tangible. However, not all Egyptians





were welcoming: the military escorts and blocked streets attracted attention and sometimes hostile glances and mistrust, particularly in neighbourhoods where the residents feared the Jews would reclaim their homes. But there was also curiosity, and occasionally, manifestations of empathy.

For a few years now, an association called Drop of Milk<sup>12</sup> has been working with the government to preserve some parts of the Jewish heritage in Cairo and Alexandria. The Drop of Milk association has opened up some of the synagogues and turned them into cultural places for classical concerts or cultural discussions for Egyptians and into Egyptian symbols of tolerance. In an uneasy context, and driven by a deep attachment to the country, they work to raise awareness among Egyptians, whatever their religious affiliation, to the history of the Jews and the Jewish history of Egypt. According to the association, synagogues should be ‘open to all...places that feed the mind and the soul’. Talking with members of this association, some also emphasised that the restoration and preservation of Jewish heritage must be accompanied by improvements and concern for today’s residents: one should not preserve traces of the past without taking care of the present.

For the authorities in Egypt, which has relations with the United States and thus with Israel, neglecting the country’s Jewish heritage could be politically costly. In addition, talking about a Jewish past currently constitutes a political resource at an international level. It is ‘a message to the world that the Egyptian government is committed to the Egyptian heritage of all religions’, branding Egypt as a ‘superpower’,<sup>13</sup> a symbol of tolerance since antiquity. Highlighting the Jewish part of Egypt therefore reveals wider international political interests – in particular those concerning Egypt’s relations with the United States or Egypt’s efforts to campaign for major positions at UNESCO. This heritage is integrated into the Egyptian national heritage all the more readily since there are almost no Jews left in the country.

However, at a local and national level, this past remains controlled and is treated ambivalently. The noise around specific events like the synagogue’s renovation is tantamount to muting or ignoring certain aspects of the past while favourably highlighting other aspects. In particular, this narrative of tolerance rebuilds the image of a community whose essential features are religious and belong to the past. It is defined by an absence not so much of the evocation of the Jews but of knowledge about them – what remains are only empty symbols that often mean nothing to Egyptian people today. It reinforces a silence about the fate of the Jews and other minorities, past and present, as seen in the capture of the Jewish community archives – religious and civil documents<sup>14</sup> – in the Egyptian National Archives. These archives are now totally inaccessible.<sup>15</sup> The Nebi Daniel Association also aims to digitise all the Alexandria Jewish cemeteries, comprising around 20,000 tombs, as the death registry is also inaccessible to the

12 The Drop of Milk association was set up by the last Jews in Egypt, some from communist and nationalist families.

13 Available at: [https://www.masrawy.com/news/news\\_egypt/details/2020/1/9/1702796/%D8%A3%D8%AB%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-](https://www.masrawy.com/news/news_egypt/details/2020/1/9/1702796/%D8%A3%D8%AB%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-) (accessed 8 September 2020).

14 Until 1956, the millet system devolved civil and religious status to the rabbinic authority for internationally recognised legal documents. Some—like Ketubot—have been stolen from communities or are preserved in the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem or the Yeshiva University in New York.

15 Jaimie Lehmann Memorial Collection Records of the Jewish Community of Cairo, 1886–1961. This is one of the few archives that are still accessible.



general public. One of the reasons advanced for the sequestration of the community archives is the fear that the documents might contain information on financial assets. The Jews from Egypt point out that the documents serve above all as proof of their Jewish identity. When the issue of preserving archives in Egypt, and the likelihood of their disappearing, is raised, the notion of tolerance thus takes on another meaning: to admit or suffer the presence of people, and thereby mark their alienation and their marginal status.

This discourse of tolerance at an international level and the fact the government needs to articulate it with caution at a national and local level also shows that the Egyptian state is entangled in logics of hierarchies and domination over which it lacks control. While it has to present its political openness by acknowledging the historical existence of a 'Jewish Egypt' (but with almost no Jews there anymore), it has to manage this discourse internally by keeping silent about the reasons for the departure of the Jews and by continuing to interpret it according to the same reductive and dissonant narrative. Articles in the Egyptian press covering the rededication of the synagogue repeatedly mentioned this story: '[T]he history of the establishment of the Jewish temple in Alexandria goes back to the historical period when Alexandria was home to the Jewish community, as studies have indicated that the number of Jews in Alexandria was estimated to be about 4,000 in the ninth century. ... Their number reached 18,000 at the beginning of the twentieth century. It rose to 40,000 in 1948, after which the Jews began to leave Egypt for Israel after its establishment.'<sup>16</sup>

For the Egyptian population, and particularly the youth, speaking about their Jewish past allows them to discern the extent to which Egyptians and Jews are carrying part of the collective memory. However, the Jewish past also becomes a specific resource for some, telling not a story of tolerance but intolerance. Indeed, the history of the Jews in Egypt serves as a symbol of a tolerance and co-existence that no longer exists. In this case, talking about the Jews also involves talking about something else: the country's current political, social and economic situation, the multiple forms of discrimination experienced by the Egyptian populations in Egypt and by minorities such as the Copts. Nevertheless, this specific narrative often tends to silence a part of the history of the Jews portrayed as relatively homogeneous, focusing mainly on the Egyptian nationalists and communists driven out of the country by Israel and Zionism. On social networks, Facebook groups that link Egyptian Jews and other minorities that left the country in the 1950s and 1960s and exchanges between the younger and older generations are often in Arabic, more rarely in other languages, allowing the construction of intersubjective representations of the past. As I found during my fieldwork, there is indeed a renewed interest in the history of the Jewish presence, especially among young Egyptians. Some ask to visit synagogues, discuss the history of the Jews with Egyptian Jews in the diaspora through social media, and post pictures of old cosmopolitan places or Jewish families, or of themselves lighting candles and praying in a synagogue. These posts sometimes stimulate rather lively discussions between Egyptians. For example, a photo was posted on Facebook depicting the departure of Jewish families in 1956 by an Egyptian man who wrote that he regrets the absence of Jews in the country today. The argument and discussion that followed were heated; here is a sample of the arguments put forward: 'Why don't you understand what happened? Then the Jews left,

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16 Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/ar/contents/articles/originals/2020/01/egypt-opens-eliyahu-hanavi-synagogue.html#ixzz76WPZvV9C> (accessed 8 September 2021).



and most of them went to Israel, and I see what is going on in Palestine; and ‘Why do you sympathise with the Jews? Although most of them were spies for the benefit of Israel, not all of them, of course, because we did not oppress anyone’.

These three elements – the image of openness towards the Egyptian Jewish presence in the past, the absence of Jews at present, and the preservation of their memory through the patrimonialisation of religious elements emptied of content, life and stakes – rely on the same very equivocal idea of tolerance: a notion that means both an attitude of openness and empathy and a form of patronising, of having to put up with people we cannot avoid or believe we should not avoid. This idea is challenged by the exchange of lay memories between the Egyptians and the Jews, and the diasporic heritage of an Egypt carried, among others, by the Jews, which exceed the time and space of a page of revolving history. These exchanges and the visible/invisible religious traces and objects in their current uses reveal crossed and parallel social constructions of the presence and absence of the other and the self, both among the Egyptian people and the Jews from Egypt. They challenge the binary identifications framed by nationalisms, proposing ways out of the painful alternative of ‘remembering everything’ and/or ‘forgetting everything’.

Today, many of the social and architectural spaces are vanishing or have already disappeared. Others are turning into relics of a past recomposed for a re-enchanted present, but not open for everyone. However, even in their erasure, these traces challenge us. They reflect multiple interpretations of spatialities and historicities and reveal dense and loose points of identification (Rossetto 2014; Rossetto 2018) and relationships – even conflictual ones – to different territories. They urge us to face up to what we share in the present and for which we can assume responsibility: a heritage of which we are not just ‘passive receivers’ (de l’Estoile 2008), neither totally a vestige of the past nor solely a resource of the present to demand its impossible repair (or healing of the present?). They compel us to better grasp what the present does to the past and what the past does to the present.

While writing these lines, I asked myself several times: what about cemeteries as traces and places of a heritage that can neither be reappropriated nor transformed into a cultural place or a symbol of tolerance? Can we consider them as a heritage? Who are the heirs? I thought of the people I met in Paris, Istanbul, Milan, Tel Aviv, New York, Montreal and London. I remembered their trembling hands lovingly cleaning the graves of their mothers or fathers on that cloudy Friday morning in Alexandria. Their haggard, mournful and resigned faces as they lost themselves hopelessly in the untrimmed alleys, unable to bring back the memories. I thought of those plaques on the benches that speak only of a few and leave all the others, especially women, in a bottomless silence. I thought of the heirs of this Egypt without a place, in a grey suburb of northern Paris or elsewhere, and their places in Egypt without heirs. I wondered about the old Egyptians who made history and whose voices are so little heard and listened to. Do we know what they have to say about this past, the Jews and other minorities? And I thought of the young Egyptians who seek the presence of the Jews through their absence and imagine another, better world, reflected in the frosted bronze of a synagogue bench, desolate, if not in ruins. And I thought of one name among others: that of Youssef Ades.



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## Searching for lost Libya

### Interview With Pedatzur Benattia, president of “Or Shalom” Centre

Giordano Bottecchia

**Abstract** An interview with the president of the Or Shalom Centre (Centre for the Preservation and Transmission of the Heritage of the Jews of Libya), Pedatzur Benattia. Since its foundation in 1995, one of the centre’s objectives has been the creation of a museum of Libyan Jewry. To achieve this, Pedatzur Benattia has worked over the years to collect a number of articles and objects related to the history and traditions of the Jews of Libya. This initiative is especially important given this population’s recent history. About 90% of Libyan Jews left the country to settle in Israel on the eve of Libyan independence (1949–51). Those who remained had to leave between 1967 and 1970 following the violence that broke out locally during the Six-Day War and Gaddafi’s arrival in power. It was impossible for any of them to return to Libya in the following decades. This clean break with their country of origin explains the emergence in Israel and Italy of community initiatives aimed at preserving the memory and history of Libyan Jews. As well as attempting to keep the intangible cultural heritage of this community alive (traditions, prayers, songs, etc.), some people, like Pedatzur Benattia, have devoted their lives to recovering material evidence of the life of Jews in Libya (clothes, photos, liturgical objects, etc.). However, there were two main difficulties. The first was the way people emigrated. Migrants were often unable to take more than a few things with them, sometimes just one suitcase. And secondly, the impossibility of returning to Libya after emigration meant objects could not be recovered, even for the sole purpose of displaying them in museums. As a result, the recovery of material evidence was of particular importance for the Jews of Libya. Through this interview, we will try to explore the motivations that led the president of the Or Shalom Centre to undertake this initiative, highlighting the nature of the recovered objects as well as their path and history.

**Keywords** Heritage, Judaism, museum, Libya, Israel

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I met Pedatzur Benattia in 2015. At the time, I was carrying out research for my master's on the immigration of Jews from Libya to Israel and the safeguarding of their cultural heritage. It was during this time that Pedatzur, the president of the Or Shalom Centre, welcomed me to learn more about his work.



Pedatzur Benattia in the “Or Shalom” centre (courtesy of Pedatzur Benattia)

The centre was founded by Pedatzur in 1995 in Bat Yam, south of Tel Aviv, and was dedicated to the memory of Rabbi Shalom Tayar and his grandson Shalom Benattia. The centre's main objective is to safeguard and transmit the cultural heritage of Libyan Jews. Initially associated with the World Organisation of Libyan Jews (Or Yehuda – Israel), the centre gradually gained autonomy. It receives funding from the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport, which contributes to its many activities. These include conferences, concerts and performances, as well as large community meetings. In the digital age, many of these initiatives have also been broadcast live on the web via Facebook and Zoom. Besides organising events, the centre also promotes the transmission of the historical and cultural heritage of the Jews of Libya through the publication of books (mainly religious texts and collections of the wisdom of Libyan rabbis), as well as a magazine, 'Ada (אָדָא)', which features articles about the history of Libyan Jews, their customs, art, cuisine and many other subjects. For a while, in the 2010s, TV shows ('Ada TV) were also produced and published on YouTube to bring young people closer to the culture and history of the Jews of Libya in a new and more accessible way. Over the years, the team at the centre has also grown, and today Pedatzur Benattia works alongside three other employees to carry out the association's activities.

As all these initiatives show, the Or Shalom Centre is active on several fronts for the preservation and transmission of the cultural heritage of Libyan Jews. There is, however, another activity that prompted me to interview Pedatzur Benattia for this issue. Since the founding of

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1 The word Ada means custom / tradition in Arabic. Until issue 73, the magazine was published once a month, then it became bi-monthly until issue 178 and is now published quarterly. Although it is currently published less frequently, the number of pages has increased. Each issue has at least 60 pages.



the centre, one of its main projects has been to establish a museum on Libyan Judaism. For this purpose, Pedatzur Benattia has been collecting objects for display over the years. The core of the collection comprises ritual objects made by craftsmen in Tripoli and Benghazi, silver utensils made by Jewish jewellers in Libya, textiles, traditional clothes, household items and other accessories. In addition, the centre also houses an extensive archive which includes sound documents, photographs, newspapers and written material. This collection is a fascinating story of objects that have travelled through space and time, sometimes in very different ways, and that have been brought together to rebuild the memory of a past that Libya's social and political developments of the last 50 years have almost erased.

### **How did you come up with the idea of collecting objects from Libya?**

It all started during my childhood; I had a great love for old objects. I liked all kinds of old items: stamps, coins, postcards... The most important thing for me was to collect anything that bore a scent of olden times. About 30 years ago, I began to direct this passion towards our community [the Libyan Jewish community], while studying its history and learning all about its beauty. For a few years I pursued this activity while my father was still alive, even though he didn't like me going to *moshavim*<sup>2</sup> and to all kinds of community synagogues across the country, rummaging through the *genizoth*<sup>3</sup> for things that people had thrown away. My passion grew even more after my father's death. By that time, it had already taken on a more communal and less private dimension, although until recent years, everything I bought came out of my own pocket.

### **What kind of objects does the collection contain? What guides your choice of whether or not to keep an object?**

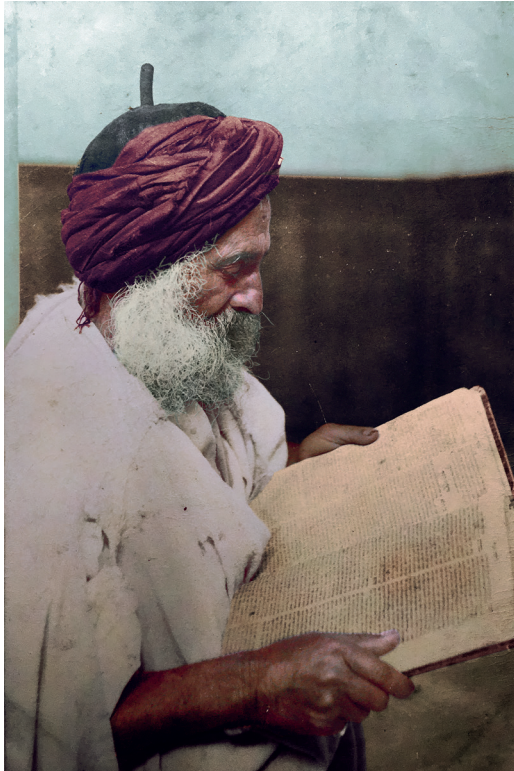
I keep everything that comes into my hands and that is related to Jewish Libya. I do not hold objects unrelated to Libya. I only have a small collection of *rimonim* (pomegranates)<sup>4</sup> and *menorahs* that do not belong to the Libyan Jewish community, but these purchases date back to the period when I was collecting for the sole pleasure of collecting. So far, I have not turned any objects down, even in cases where their condition is not particularly good, if only because not many objects from Jewish Libya have survived.

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2 A moshav (pl. *moshavim*) is a particular type of Israeli settlement, characterised by cooperative agricultural labour, but unlike the kibbutzim, where life is completely organised in a collective form, moshavim members enjoy greater economic autonomy. After the mass emigration to Israel (1949–52), several Jews from Libya decided to found new communities of this type across the country. It is reported that during the first three years after immigration, they had already established 12 moshavim. Their numbers had grown to 25 by 2000.

3 A genizah (pl. *genizoth*) is a particular area of a synagogue, usually an attic or a basement, used for storing sacred written materials and ritual objects that are worn out and no longer in use, before being transferred to a cemetery for proper burial.

4 The *rimonim* are decorative ornaments put at the top of Torah scroll covers. Since they are often shaped like pomegranates, they are called rimonim (the Hebrew word for pomegranates).



Rabbi Shalom Tayar (Courtesy of Pedatzur Benattia)

### To which precise historical period do these objects refer?

The objects I collect date from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the mass emigration of Jews from Libya to Israel (1952). No older objects have been preserved, and if they do exist, they are currently so expensive that they are beyond the financial reach of the centre.

The oldest object, if I am not mistaken, dates back to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and possibly earlier. It is a pair of cast copper *rimonim*, of rather primitive manufacture, which come from the region of Gharyan, where Jews used to live in caves carved into the mountain<sup>5</sup>.

### Collections often involve emotional investment and personal relationships with certain objects. How about you? Do you have a favourite item among those you have collected?

The truth is that I have a few, but I will focus on one I recovered recently from the depths of present-day Libya. When the revolution broke out in Libya about ten years ago, at the time of the fighting, I heard an interview with journalist Tzur Shezaf on Galei Tzahal [a well-known radio station], which was being broadcast from Libya. Shezaf is an Israeli with a foreign passport, a journalist whose father served in the British army in Libya during the Second World War, acting as an army archaeologist and uncovering a number of important sites. At that very moment, I tracked down his phone number, called him and asked him to carry out – for a fee

5 This population was studied in particular by the anthropologist Harvey Goldberg in his book *Cave Dwellers and Citrus Growers. A Jewish Community in Libya and Israel* published in 1972.



Pair of cast copper rimonim from the Gha-  
ryan region (Courtesy of Pedatzur Benattia)

of course – some operations for Or Shalom. He told me that he was already at the Egyptian border and was on his way back to Israel, but would return to Libya a month later. During his second journey to Libya, I sent him to the cemetery of the city of al-Khums, where he made a film and retrieved two tombstones from one of the ruined tombs for Or Shalom. And now those stones are in our safe.

There is another item that is very important to me, and to us: a set of four leaflets (small posters) I purchased at an auction in Israel, which were hung on synagogue doors in May 1949. They are entitled ‘Israel Independence Day’, and explain how to celebrate Israel’s first Independence Day. In one of the documents, the order of the celebrations for that day appears line by line, including instructions on how to dress, and the special prayer formulas drawn up for that feast day. The Rabbinical court of Tripolitania, which issued these proclamations, even instructed the Jews on how to name the boys and girls born that week: the name Israel was suggested for boys, and Ziona was recommended for girls.





# יום אסתקלאל ישראל

## 5 אייר 5709

5 אייר היא תשי"ח  
פכיכת ישראל והגועו לארצו

9 אב ג'א תת"ל  
גלות ישראל מן ארצו

איה אכואננה וכוואתנה אלדי פי קהלת הקדש במריפוליטניה ה' עליהם יחיו.  
קואעד לנהאר לאסתקלאל מן טרף ועד הקהלה העברית בית דין הצדק  
והרבנות הראשית למריפוליטניה.  
במוגב קואעד דולת ישראל והרבנים הראשיים לארץ ישראל תחסם נהאר 5 אייר  
פי כול ועאם נהאר לאסתקלאל. עיד עמומי פי ישראל ופי גמיע קהלות  
יש"אל פי גמיע טראף הרנית. לדאלך אהנאן ועד הקהלה פי טראבלס בית דין  
הצדק והבנות הראשית למריפוליטניה יע"א רתכנה באש גמיע אכואננה אלדי פי  
האר לגולה תחת חכומת בריטניה לעצמה יריה יכוננו יתמששאו פליום האדה  
למסה אייר פי כול ועאם ועאם על חסב התקנות אלהאיתיה. אהנאן נגזרו. קבול  
ותתבית התקנות הארון ומה יבטלוש ללאבר ודברי חכמים נמועים.  
א) גמיע אלולד אלדי ינואר פי טריפוליטניה יע"א פי האר הגמעה מרע  
לאסתקלאל ותסממה "ישראל" ולבנת התסממה "ציונה".  
ב) יום לאסתקלאל יכונן יום תשכרה. מדה ועיד והאראיאת ללפקרה ומכונס  
עלה כול ואחד מן ישראל באש יתתר פצדקה מול הנהאר וי:תתר פסעוורת  
(ואלדי מה ענדוש מלוים עליה בלהאק יעמל סעודה וחרה בלהם ושראב) וקת  
הסעודה פי וצט אלמאבלה לאום יפזמנו ויקראו מזמורי תהלים קכ"ב קכו" ופיוטים.  
ג) גמיע מחאל אשנאר ולכדמה יכוננו מסכברין פי האדה ליום.  
ד) פי האר אליום מה יקולוש תחנת. כדאלך פי מנחה מתע אנהאר אלדי קבלו.

### "ערכית"

ח) יגיו לבית הכנסת כלבס לעיד יקולו מוזמור שמחתי באומרים לי ומומור  
בשוב ה' את שיבת ציון. פעולות אל מה נוראות ויצליו כוף לחול ופי כמול אצלה  
יקראו יגדל אלקים ה'.

### "שחרית"

א) אצלה במלית ותפליו כוף לחול לאבון ויודו נשמרת כל ה'. יקולו נקדישך  
בנינון. יקראו להלל כאמל מן גיר ברכה ולכול וכונו לאבסין לבס לעיד).  
ב) יעקן סגוק מדינת ישראל קבל המליע ספר תורה.  
ג) יטלעו ספר תורה ויקראו פיה 3 עולים פי פרשת כי תבא חתה ל "כאשר  
דבר" ויקראו לפטרה פי ישעיה סימן ס' קומי אורי חתה לכמאלת לפרק. בעד  
לפטרה יקרת ה שליה צבור בלואקפה צלאת התשכרה אלדי תאללפת כעוצן להאר  
הנהאר עלה ירון בית דין הצדק ורבנות הראשית פי מריפוליטניה ואלדי תנצאב  
דאבל האדה. ובעדהא תפלה לשלום מדינת אלדי תאללפת ע"י הרבנים הראשיים  
בארץ ישראל אלדי סתאנסו יקולוהא פשבת ולעיד ובערו מי שברך ללקהל.  
ד) השליח צבור או רב בית הכנסת ידרש ללקהל ופייקחם באש ירגעו בתשובה.  
ה) ירדדו סית למטראהו ויקראו אלמזמורים שמחתי באומרים לי ובשוב ה' את שיבת  
ציון ויצליו כוף לעאדה.

### "מנחה"

ו) פי מנחה יקולו ובא לציון גואל. יטלעו סית ויקראו פיה 3 עולים פי פרשת  
קדוים מן כדו לפרשה חתה לשני. יקראו לפטרה פי זכריה סימן ח' פסוק 4 "כה  
אמר ה' הנני מושיע את עמי". חתה לכמאלת לפרק. יקראו צלאת הרשכרה מרע  
שחרית וכדאלך התפלה לשלום מדינת ישראל ויעמלו מנוחה ללקדושים אלדי מאחו  
פלהרב עלה שאן חירות ישראל ויקולו מי שברך ללקהל. וירדדו סית למכאנו ויקולו  
מומור בשוב ה' את שיבת ציון ויצליו כוף לחול ויקולו נקדישך בנינון ורתקנות  
הארון מה יתנחאחאש לדימה ודברי חכמים נמועים ואתם שלום.

ועד הקהלה העברית בית דין הצדק הרבנות הראשית

טריפולי כיום ב' אייר התשי"ח

כרפום - זךך - טריפולי



בעה"ט

מ' באב שנת שלשת אלפים תת"ל  
גלות ישראל מארצם

ה' באייר שנת חמשת אלפים תשי"ח  
גאולת ישראל ושיבתם לארצם

אנו הרבנות הראשית ובית דין הצדק למריפוליטניה יע"א תקננו שביום העצמאות ה' באייר בכל שנה להוציא ספר תורה ולקראו שלשה עולים בשחרות בפרשת כי תבא מתחלת הפרשה עד כאשר דבר. ולהפמיר בישעיה סימן ס': קומי אורי כי בא אורך... עד סוף הפרק. ובתפלת מנחה לקרא בספר תורה בפרשת קדושים שלשה עולים מתחלת הפרשה עד שני. ולהפמיר בזכריה סימן ה': כה אמר ה' הנני מושיע את עמי מארץ מזרח... עד סוף הפרק. ואחר ההפמרה בשחרות ובמנחה כגיל תקננו לקרא תפלה זו שחברנו במיוחד ליום העצמאות בכל שנה ובהחזרת ספר תורה למקומו אומרים כל הקהל בחד שיר המעלות בשוב ה' את שיבת ציון וכו' ותקנות אלו בחד נמועים לא ימושו לעולם.

הרבנות הראשית ובית דין הצדק למריפוליטניה יע"א

ש"מחה ילוז חי גאביוון יששכר חכמון כמוס נהאיסי

מריפולי כיום ב' אייר התשי"ט

## תפילה ליום עצמאות ישראל חמישה באייר בכל שנה

זה היום עשה ה' נגילה ונשמחה בו.

נדה לה' כי טוב. שהחיינו. וקיימנו והגיענו ליום הגדול הזה יום עצמאות ישראל. אשרי המנחמים העומדים בראש ישראל. שהביאו את הדור לכך. ואשרנו אנו שזכינו לכך. ברכותינו מעמק הלב שלוחות ברנה ביום העצמאות הזה לישראל. לנשיא ישראל וראש ממשלת ישראל וכל שרי הממשלה ה' יצאם ויגדלם, וינשאם למעלה למעלה. יגביה כוכב מערכתם ויאריכו ימים על ממלכתם. ויהי הצון שתשרה שכינה תמיד במעשה ידיתם. ולכל אחינו אמיצי הלב הנבורים ורבי העלילה בצבא ישראל אנו אומרים. יהי ה' עמם נבדור החיל. ולאלה שדמם הקדוש לא נשפך לריק ובמותם בנבורה ובהרוף נפש נפלאים צונו לנו את החיים ביום העצמאות הקדוש הזה לתקומת העם. לבנין המולדת ועלית שרירי הגולה. אנו אומרים: כתבתם בדמכם דף מזהיר בתולדות ישראל. ודור לדור בישראל יספרו ביום העצמאות הזה עזו רוחכם ונבורתכם. בצעתם את החזון הגדול של נביאנו לאמור: ... שאי סביב עיניך וראי כלם נקבצו באו לך בניך מרחוק יבואו ובנותיך על צד תאמנה... קומי אורי כי בא אורך וכבוד ה' עליך ורח.

אחרי זה אומר התון התפלה לשלום מדינת ישראל שתוקנה ע"י הרבנים הראשיים לארץ ישראל שלושא שנתהננו לאיפדה ככל קהלות מריפוליטניה אחר קריאת התורה והתפילה בשבתות וימים טובים; וזה נוסחה:

## תפילה לשלום מדינת ישראל

אבינו שבשמים צור ישראל וגוארו ברך את מדינת ישראל ראשית צמיחת גאורתנו. הנן עליה באברת חסדך ופרום עליה סכת שדומך. ושרח אורך ואמתך לראשיה שריה ויועציה ותקנם בעצה טובה מלפניך. חוק את ידי מניני ארץ קדשנו והנחלים ארסנו ישועה. ועמרת נצחון תעמדם. ונתת שלום בארץ ושמחת עולם ליושביה. את אחינו כל בית ישראל פקד נא בכל ארצות פזוריהם ותוליהם מהרה קוממוות לציון עירך ולירושלים משכן שמך. ככתוב בתורת משה עבדך: אם יהיה נדחך בקצה השמים משם יקבצך ה' אלקין ומשם יקחד. והביאך אל הארץ אשר ירשו אבותיך וירשתה. ויחד לבבנו לאהבה וליראה שמך ולשמור את כל דברי תורתך. הופע בהדר גאון עוף על כל יושבי תבל ארצה. ויאמר כל אשר נשמה באפו ה' אלקי ישראל מלך ומלכותו בכל משדה. אמן סלה.

התון אומר מי שבך לקה

בדפים - ורד - מריפולי







RABBINICAL COURT  
OF TRIPOLITANIA  
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בית דין הצדק  
לטריפוליטניה  
טלפון 2407

Tripoli 27.5.49 9 / 4

בה, טריפולי: כ"ה אייר ה'תש"ט

IN REPLY PLEASE QUOTE THE ABOVE N° AND DATE בתשובה נא להזכיר המספר הנ"ל והתאריך

לכבוד  
משרד הדתות למדינת ישראל  
משרד העלייה למדינת ישראל  
משרד החוץ למדינת ישראל  
הקריה

רצוננו הנזכר להזכיר את ההודאות  
שנתפרסמו מטעם בית דין הצדק והרבנות הראשית לטריפוליטניה  
בקשר להגיונת יום העצמאות בישראל (ה' אייר ה'תש"ט) לתשועת  
לב ולהוסיף כי מצאנו לנכון לקדש את החג בקריאה בתורה ובחפירה  
בבניא מדי לקבוע לחג אופי דתי ושקדנו על כך שיתקבל כזה בכל  
רמשי טריפוליטניה ברוך ה' כן קבענו לקרוא כל הזכרים  
הנולדים בשבוע שחל בו חג העצמאות בשם "ישראל" והנקבות בשם  
"ציונה". ובהתאם לכך שלשה ילדים שניסולו ביום בעצמאות  
נקראו בשם "ישראל" כפי התקנה; בריאות הטילה בעשו בבית  
הכנסת הגדול וקהל של אלפים בא לשמוע את קריאת הבנישאהאטונים  
בטריפולי על שם המדינה.

בכבוד רב  
ובברכה מדינת ישראל

הדיינים  
הרב הראשי  
שלשה ילדו

ש"י.נ.

Set of documents related to the celebrations of Israel's independence (courtesy of Pedatzur Benattia)



## What was the process of collecting items for the Or Shalom Centre?

I received some of the items from my parents: a picture of the synagogue of Al-Khums<sup>6</sup>, objects which belonged to my grandfather, manuscripts written by my great-grandfather, rabbi Shalom Tayar<sup>7</sup>, my father's school certificates, various household utensils I received from my mother and so on. Apart from that, I used to travel to *moshavim* to rummage through the *genizoth* of discarded items, just before they were transferred to the *genizah* at the cemetery, where they would have been buried forever. I also used to go to people's homes and ask if they had any items they were not interested in and were willing to give away. Finally, I was in contact with some Judaica dealers who knew that I was looking for items from Libya. They arranged to do research for me amongst other dealers or collectors, and when they found something worth collecting, they sold it to me. In recent years, as the association began to have greater financial resources, I have allowed myself the freedom to acquire some valuable items from various dealers and by attending auctions.

## Can you share a specific story about how you acquired an item?

The story of the pair of *rimonim* mentioned above is literally a story of divine providence, where God led me all the way to the object I was looking for. One day I was visiting the Zionist Archives in Jerusalem looking for pictures related to Libya. There I came across a picture of a couple of Libyan immigrants holding an open Torah scroll that had two very special *rimonim*. The picture was taken in 1950–1 in Moshav Porat, in the Sharon region not far from Netanya. Without thinking twice, I left the museum, got into the car and drove to the *moshav*. I had a feeling – and believed deeply – that I would find those *rimonim* that same day.

I arrived at the *moshav*, and went straight into the synagogue, since all the synagogues are open and the Torah ark is accessible – as if there were no thieves ... I started looking everywhere, on the *Teiva*<sup>8</sup>, where the cantor (*hazan*) stands during the services, and under the ark where the Torah scrolls are. I did not find them. Then, just before giving up, I pushed my hand to the inside edge of the ark and touched a headscarf that usually covers the Torah scroll, and felt something hard. The *rimonim* were there, wrapped in a handkerchief. Of course, I asked the permission of the *gabbai*<sup>9</sup> to take them. It took a year of perseverance, but in the end the *gabbai* accepted and now they are in the Or Shalom collection.

## How do you see the future of your collection?

The collection is basically a private one; it is the result of research and purchases I have made over the years. However, I consider it to be part of the heritage of the whole community and the Or Shalom Centre. It is therefore my intention to transfer the bulk of this collection, especially the most significant items, to the centre so that it remains a shared asset and historical memory.

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6 Al-Khums is a Libyan city located on the coast about 120 km southeast of Tripoli. It was home to a Jewish community of about 900 people in the first half of the 1940s.

7 Shalom Tayar was born in the 19th century and served as rabbi of the town of al-Khums from 1885 to 1935.

8 In a synagogue, the *Teiva* is a raised structure, usually made of wood, from which the Torah scrolls are read. In European synagogues it is called *Bimah*.

9 The *gabbai* is a person who in various ways assists with the smooth running of services in the synagogues, a kind of sexton.

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**Giordano Bottecchia's** researches focus mainly on the history of Jews from North Africa, refugees, and decolonization. As part of his Ph.D. project, Giordano works on the departure of Jews from Libya in the late 1960s, investigating processes of inclusion and exclusion in Libya and Italy.

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# I libri, l'esilio:

## (ego-)storie ebraiche nel Mediterraneo

Dario Miccoli

**Abstract** This essay discusses the role that books have had for the Jews living on the southern shore of the Mediterranean during colonial and postcolonial times, reconstructing some of the textual encounters that led me to conduct research on these issues. Books are considered as objects that talk about histories of belonging, exile and migration and that move from one place to another, pass from one person to another, and are lost and found again, objects for which we feel affection or that sometimes we want to give away. Mixing historical analysis with ego-historical reflections on my own research path, the essay looks at books as mirrors of the plurality of (Jewish) identities and memories that can be traced in the Mediterranean until the 1950s and 1960s and, in different ways, until today.

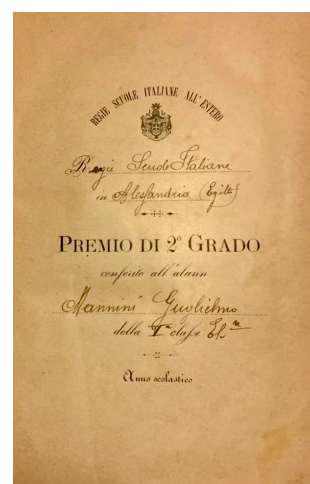
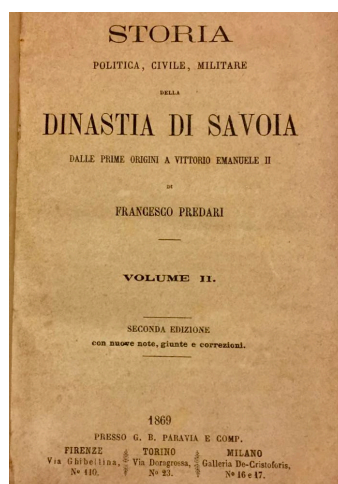
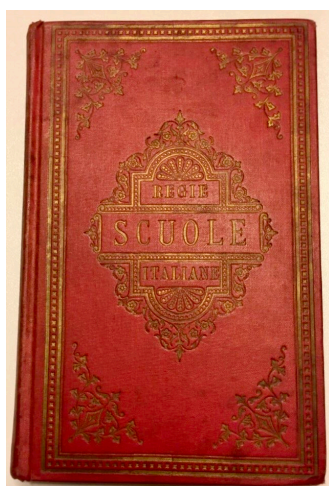
**Keywords** Mediterranean; books; Jewish history; Sephardi Jews; migration; Diaspora

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La storia che vorrei raccontare inizia tra le pagine di un libro mai letto, pubblicato a Milano nel 1869 e che da molti anni ha trovato posto nella mia biblioteca: *Storia politica, civile, militare della dinastia di Savoia dalle prime origini a Vittorio Emanuele II* di Francesco Predari. Non ricordo esattamente quando, in un mercato delle pulci in Toscana, ho acquistato questo libro – il secondo di due volumi, il primo dei quali non ho mai avuto tra le mani. Credo sia stato all'incirca vent'anni fa, poco dopo o poco prima di essermi iscritto all'università. Fu un acquisto fortuito, dovuto soprattutto al fascino *d'antan* della copertina in cuoio rosso. Inoltre, ciò che mi aveva colpito all'epoca e ancor più oggi, è quanto si legge nella prima pagina: in una sorta di intestazione, è impresso che il libro era stato donato come “premio di II° grado” delle *Regie Scuole Italiane di Alessandria d'Egitto* all'alunno “Nannini Guglielmo della quinta classe elementare” – il nome è stato aggiunto a penna – in un anno non specificato, ma direi nei primi del Novecento.

E' molto probabile che *Storia della dinastia di Savoia* fosse stato scelto come premio scolastico in quanto si trattava di un'opera ufficiale e fieramente monarchica, commissionata dal governo italiano a Predari – prolifico pubblicista, scrittore e studioso di origine lombarda, ma che ebbe ruoli di primo piano nel mondo della cultura torinese negli anni subito precedenti all'unità d'Italia (Albergoni 2016). Sia il primo che il secondo volume sono una storia di Casa Savoia attraverso le biografie dei suoi più grandi personaggi, sullo sfondo della storia italiana e europea. Il secondo, più precisamente, inizia con la biografia di Emanuele Filiberto, decimo duca di Savoia, e si chiude con quelle del primo re d'Italia Vittorio Emanuele II e di sua moglie Maria Adelaide di Lorena, del quale – scrive Predari – fu “la compagna costante, la consolatrice affettuosa [...]. Tutto ciò spiega l'amore tenerissimo di cui l'amò sempre il suo reale consorte, il quale solea chiamarla l'Angelo suo, e con perfetta verità” (1869: 424-425).



Francesco Predari, *Storia della dinastia di Savoia* (1869) © Dario Miccoli

E' curioso, oggi, immaginare cosa la lettura di questo libro potesse scaturire nell'immaginazione di un bambino italiano d'Egitto, che guardava all'Italia da lontano e attraverso i racconti dei genitori e degli insegnanti. Al momento della pubblicazione del volume di Predari, nel 1869, vivevano a Alessandria d'Egitto all'incirca 18000 italiani (Santilli 2013), appartenenti a diverse



estrazioni sociali e originari di varie città e regioni: dalla Toscana a Napoli, al Friuli. Già nel 1858 era stato inaugurato in città un collegio italiano, grazie all'intervento di una locale loggia massonica, cui negli anni Novanta dell'Ottocento – sotto il governo Crispi – seguì la fondazione di vere e proprie scuole statali (Petricioli 1997 e 2007: 215-218). Esse erano frequentate dai figli dei migranti italiani, in modo particolare quelli meno abbienti, così come da ebrei alessandrini, alcuni dei quali di origine o nazionalità italiana: “tutte le confessioni sono nelle scuole del pari trattate”, si legge in un articolo apparso sulla rivista ebraica italiana *Il Corriere Israelitico* nel 1886, “e non pochi tra i correligionari vengono con grandissima cura istruiti e educati. Noi, che contiamo in Alessandria un numero considerevolissimo di associati ed amici raccomandiamo caldamente il degno istituto alla loro attenzione”.<sup>1</sup>

Dopo molti anni dall'aver acquistato *Storia della dinastia di Savoia*, mi sono dunque accorto che questo libro – aldilà dell'argomento – raccontava qualcosa di me o meglio delle mie ricerche sugli ebrei in quell'Egitto d'inizio Novecento definito, a torto o a ragione, cosmopolita (Mabro 2017; Halim 2013; Starr 2009). A partire da ciò, vorrei riflettere sul ruolo che i libri hanno avuto per le comunità ebraiche della riva sud del Mediterraneo in età coloniale e postcoloniale, ricostruendo al contempo alcuni degli incontri testuali che mi hanno portato a fare ricerca su di esse. I libri diventano in questo modo oggetti che riflettono storie di appartenenza, esilio, migrazione e che si spostano da un luogo all'altro, passano di mano in mano, vengono perduti e ritrovati, oggetti ai quali siamo affezionati o di cui talvolta vogliamo disfarcì. I libri, in altre parole, come specchi della pluralità di identità e memorie (ebraiche) rintracciabili nel Mediterraneo e che – per loro natura – “non rispettano limiti, né linguistici né nazionali. Sono spesso stati scritti da autori che appartenevano ad una repubblica delle lettere internazionale, realizzati da stampatori che non lavoravano nella loro lingua madre, venduti da librai che operavano tra più confini nazionali e letti in una lingua da lettori che ne parlavano un'altra” (Darnton 1982: 80-81).

## Ego-storie

L'idea di riflettere sul proprio percorso di ricerca, e di intrecciare storiografia e riferimenti personali, non è certo nuova. Ad esempio, Benedetto Croce, nel *Contributo alla critica di me stesso* – pubblicato nel 1915 – aveva raccontato la sua vita attraverso le letture, gli incontri, le ricerche portate avanti fin dagli anni di scuola. Molti anni dopo, negli anni Ottanta del Ventesimo secolo, Pierre Nora curò il volume *Essais d'ego-histoire* – scritto insieme con altri importanti storici francesi tra i quali Georges Duby, Jacques Le Goff e Michelle Perrot – lanciando la sfida di “raccontare la propria storia come si scriverebbe la storia di qualcun altro” (Nora 1987, 7). Ancora si potrebbero menzionare le memorie autobiografiche di Natalie Zemon Davis *A Passion for History* (2010) o gli intrecci tra vita personale e ricerca storiografica da cui si è mossa Anna Foa in *Portico d'Ottavia 13* (2013), dove ha raccontato le vicende di una famiglia ebraica che nel 1943 viveva nello stesso edificio, nel vecchio Ghetto di Roma, dove Foa avrebbe risieduto molti anni dopo: “quelle mura sembravano chiedermi, in quanto storica, di raccontare la storia di quanti vi avevano vissuto. [...] I fantasmi si ostinavano ad interpellarmi, questa volta direttamente da un

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Notiziario – Egitto: un istituto d'educazione modello’, *Il Corriere Israelitico*, XXV (1886-1887), 135, *Archivio del Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea*, Milano.



passato recente, dall'oscuro e sanguinoso passato dell'occupazione" (Foa 2013: XII). O ancora, *Histoire des grand-parents que je n'ai pas eus* (2012) di Ivan Jablonka, nel quale l'autore ha intrecciato la storia dei nonni ebrei di origine polacca a quella dell'Europa prima e durante la *Shoah*. Sull'altra riva del Mediterraneo, nel 1971 il filosofo e letterato marocchino Abdelkébir Khatibi aveva scritto un testo a metà tra romanzo e autobiografia, *La mémoire tatouée*: un complesso intreccio di ricordi e riflessioni su se stesso e sulla generazione di intellettuali postcoloniali – educati tra Marocco e Francia – alla quale apparteneva. Anche l'opera dell'ebreo tunisino Albert Memmi *Portrait du colonisé suivi du portrait du colonisateur* (1957), può considerarsi un saggio autobiografico o un'opera che oggi definiremmo, perlomeno in parte, autoetnografica (Ellis, Adams e Bochner 2011). Andando indietro nel tempo, citerei *Al-ayyam* ("I giorni"), celeberrimo romanzo autobiografico degli anni Venti dell'egiziano Taha Husayn, nel quale l'autore ripercorreva in terza persona la sua infanzia e la precoce curiosità intellettuale, che già a nove anni gli aveva fatto imparare a memoria il Corano: "da quel giorno il nostro amico [...] divenne uno *sheikh* [...]: e chi manda a mente il testo sacro diventa senz'altro uno *sheikh*, indipendentemente dall'età" (1965: 56).

Quel che emerge da tali storie, e da molte altre che si potrebbero ancora menzionare, è la convinzione che qualsiasi percorso di letture e scrittura sia – anche o soprattutto – legato alle esperienze, sensazioni, passioni, coincidenze e incontri che in vario modo caratterizzano la nostra vita. Il mio incontro con il mondo ebraico mediterraneo è, in effetti, cominciato con la lettura dei romanzi dello scrittore israeliano di origine ebraica egiziana Yitzhaq Gormezano Goren – in particolare *Qaitz 'aleksandroni* ("Un'estate alessandrina", 1978). A Gormezano Goren ho dedicato, ormai vari anni fa, la mia tesi di laurea e da lì è nato un interesse per la storia degli ebrei egiziani, argomento sul quale ho lavorato per il dottorato di ricerca e che ancora continua a appassionarmi. È lo stesso Gormezano Goren, in un passo di un altro suo romanzo semi-autobiografico, *Ba-derekh la-'itztadion* ("La strada per lo stadio", 2003), a sottolineare la centralità del libro per ebrei mediterranei, poliglotti e dalla nazionalità incerta, divisi tra richiami al passato sefardita e ottomano e la modernità coloniale europea: "Qual è la terra cui anelo? No, non anelo a un antico villaggio della Turchia, neppure a *Sefarad* [...]. La mia patria non è un paese. Non è una qualche terra. Oggi so che la mia patria è fatta di lettere, lettere che compongono libri. I libri sono la mia patria" (Gormezano Goren 2003: 16), dice il protagonista del romanzo, ispirato alla figura del padre dell'autore. Molti ebrei egiziani erano effettivamente persone che non avevano una, ma più patrie: l'Egitto, *Sefarad*, il paese da dove i genitori o nonni erano emigrati qualche generazione prima (Miccoli 2016; Krämer 1989). Essi parlavano quasi sempre due o tre lingue e erano detentori di passaporti che poco o nulla rivelavano della loro storia familiare, quanto piuttosto riflettevano le dinamiche sociali, economiche e politiche dei mondi ottomani e post-ottomani (Stein 2016).

Aldilà del caso specifico, immaginare i libri come una madrepatria o un sostituto per essa è qualcosa che, a più riprese, torna nelle parole degli autori più disparati. Nell'epistola *Posteritati*, scritta intorno al 1367, Francesco Petrarca ammetteva che i libri erano come un rifugio dal suo tempo e dall'esilio nel quale era costretto a vivere, "giacché questa età presente a me è sempre dispiaciuta [...] e questa mi sono sforzato di dimenticarla, sempre inserendomi spiritualmente in altre" (Petrarca citato in Bolzoni 2019: 17). Nel caso ebraico, fin dall'età antica – e poi soprattutto con l'inizio della Diaspora e la distruzione del Tempio di Gerusalemme nel 70 d. C. – la



Torah e il Talmud hanno assunto le sembianze di una “patria portatile” per il popolo ebraico (Boyarin 2015, 5). Rifacendosi a ciò, lo scrittore israeliano Amos Oz in *Yehudim u-milim* (“Gli ebrei e le parole”) – scritto insieme con la figlia Fania Oz-Salzberger – ha ricordato la centralità della parola e del testo scritto, sia sacro che profano, nella storia ebraica: “nelle case ebraiche, padri e madri, nonni e nonne pregavano e benedicevano e narravano, recitavano e cantavano. A dodici anni le ragazze e tredici i ragazzi, ricevevano piena responsabilità per quest’eredità testuale” (2015: 41).

### Cataloghi, archivi, memorie

Tornando al Mediterraneo, tra la fine dell’Ottocento e il Novecento, diverse tipologie di libri in senso lato *ebraici* circolavano in questo mare: da testi di letteratura rabbinica o comunque religiosa a opere originali di letteratura moderna – in prosa o in poesia, in arabo, ebraico o anche in francese – e infine numerose traduzioni in giudeo-spagnolo, arabo e giudeo-arabo di romanzi europei (Borovaya 2011; Levy e Shachter 2017). Soprattutto nel mondo parlante giudeo-spagnolo, per esempio a Salonico e Istanbul, si pubblicavano – spesso in forma di *feuilletons* – romanzi ispirati alla letteratura europea, come *La mujer onesta* (1925) di Elia Karmona (Hanson 2021). Accanto a questo, era ancora presente una ricca tradizione di letteratura orale che – nel caso di Rodi – traeva origine nel ricordo di *Sefarad* e nei secoli di dominazione ottomana dell’isola, prendendo la forma di canti, modi di dire, proverbi e storie che passavano da una generazione all’altra e che a inizio Novecento iniziavano a attirare l’attenzione di pionieri dell’etnologia e della musicologia come Alberto Hemsì (Seroussi 1995).

Nel corso delle mie ricerche, mi sono interessato a scrittori e intellettuali ebrei egiziani di lingua francese nel periodo coloniale e monarchico: da Georges Cattaui (o Cattaoui) a Albert Staraselski, da Lucien Sciuto a Edmond Jabès – destinato a una lunga carriera in Francia (Miccoli 2016). Se alcuni di essi sono figure conosciute, i cui libri sono abbastanza facilmente reperibili, altri sono riemersi nel corso di ricerche in archivi e biblioteche, dove speravo di “trovare ciò che non cerco affatto anzi ciò di cui non sospetto nemmeno l’esistenza” (Ginzburg 2001: 905). Sempre così ho rintracciato, alla *Bibliothèque nationale de France* di Parigi, il catalogo della biblioteca personale di Joseph Cattaui, messa all’asta nel 1950. Cattaui fu una delle maggiori personalità dell’ebraismo egiziano del periodo monarchico: banchiere e imprenditore, presidente della Comunità ebraica del Cairo dal 1924 fino alla sua morte nel 1942, nominato *pasha* nel 1912, membro del senato, ministro delle Comunicazioni e delle Finanze alla metà degli anni Venti, nonché autore di svariate opere di carattere storiografico sull’Egitto antico e moderno. Non è chiaro il perché della vendita della sua biblioteca nei giorni di “giovedì 21, venerdì 22, sabato 23 e domenica 24 dicembre 1950 al Cairo, num. 8 Shareh Ibrahim Pacha Naguib (Garden City)” (Feldman 1950). Forse i figli, tra cui il suo successore a presidente della Comunità ebraica del Cairo René, non erano interessati a conservarla o piuttosto si stavano lentamente disfando dei molti beni accumulati dalla famiglia, prima di lasciare definitivamente l’Egitto per la Svizzera e la Francia alla fine degli anni Cinquanta.

Per quanto Cattaui non rappresenti l’ebreo egiziano tipo, ma un personaggio dell’élite che gravitava attorno a re Fu’ad, è interessante vedere cosa una persona del suo *milieu* leggesse nella Cairo d’inizio Novecento. Ciò che colpisce scorrendo l’elenco dei più di mille volumi messi in vendita, è il fatto che le opere presenti siano quasi esclusivamente di autori europei, soprattutto





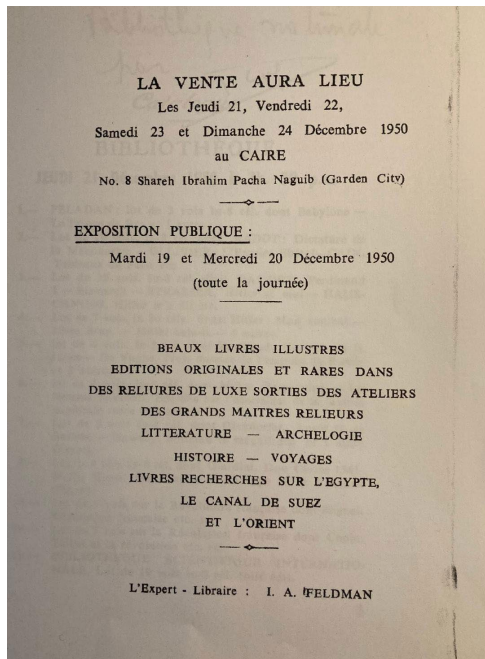
francesi, pochissime quelle di autori di lingua araba – tra i pochi, si trovano testi classici quali *al-Rihlah* di Ibn Battuta e *al-Muqaddimah* di Ibn Khaldun. Sono invece assenti intellettuali egiziani contemporanei di Cattai e che pure doveva conoscere: da Salama Musa e Muhammad Husayn Haykal a Tawfiq al-Hakim. Se sembra difficile pensare che nessuno di tali autori fosse letto da Cattai, è forse probabile che nel 1950 i figli misero in vendita soltanto i volumi più preziosi della collezione paterna, tralasciando quelli più recenti o di minor pregio. Resta il fatto che questo ricco ebreo cairota guardasse all'Europa e a Parigi come una capitale globale della cultura (Casanova 1999), continuando tuttavia a considerarsi innanzi tutto egiziano, senza vedere in ciò una frattura identitaria ma al contrario una forma di ricchezza culturale e qualcosa di abbastanza naturale (Miccoli 2015: 103-104). Il catalogo, con la sua lista di volumi numerati e le dettagliate indicazioni sulle modalità di vendita, ci ricorda inoltre che il libro è – anche e prosaicamente – una merce, qualcosa che ha un costo, un mercato, così come un capitale simbolico il cui possesso è talvolta legato alla classe sociale di appartenenza (Febvre e Martin 2011: 129-154).

Sono di altro tipo le liste di libri conservate nei faldoni degli archivi dell'*Alliance Israélite Universelle* di Parigi, che ho lungamente consultato per i miei studi sull'Egitto ebraico. Nascoste tra le centinaia di lettere e rapporti inviati dagli insegnanti alla sede centrale di Parigi, tali liste ci rivelano quali erano i volumi ordinati ogni anno a case editrici e librerie, affinché arricchissero le biblioteche delle scuole dell'*Alliance* in Egitto. Così veniamo a sapere che, nel 1939, la piccola scuola dell'*Alliance* di Tantah – una città situata tra Alessandria e il Cairo dove viveva una comunità ebraica di circa mille persone – ordinava alla Hachette di Parigi per i suoi studenti, che andavano dai sei ai dodici o tredici anni, libri quali *Le comte de Monte-Cristo* di Alexandre Dumas, la traduzione francese di *Adventure* di Jack London, *Sans famille* di Hector Malot, *La mare au diable* di George Sand.<sup>2</sup> Anche in questo caso, è una biblioteca all'apparenza sconnessa dal contesto locale e che lascia intravedere il senso di spaesamento linguistico e culturale – ma, se si vuole, anche di ibridità – nel quale furono educate generazioni di ebrei del Nord Africa e del Medio Oriente, come descritto tra gli altri dall'algerino Jacques Derrida in *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (1996).

Ciò però non significa che gli ebrei della riva sud non leggessero né scrivessero in arabo. A inizio Novecento personalità quali Shimon Moyal, Murad Farag e molti altri avevano dato vita a una vivace rete di intellettuali ebrei influenzati dalla *Nahda* – la rinascita letteraria araba tra fine Ottocento e inizio Novecento – e in contatto con loro omologhi musulmani o cristiani al Cairo, Beirut, Baghdad e altrove (Levy 2013; Fishman 2021). Negli stessi anni, si assistette anche a un'interessante rinascita culturale in ebraico, per esempio nel Marocco degli anni Venti (Guedj 2021: 419-438). A Alessandria d'Egitto, Casablanca o Tunisi, i libri si ritrovavano così a circolare in uno spazio multilingue e che poteva essere privato, quale le stanze della propria casa, o pubblico, come la scuola, un caffè, una libreria. Leggere poteva tramutarsi in un atto che avvicinava alla tradizione ebraica, nel caso in cui si sfogliassero testi di argomento religioso, o all'Europa – con le traduzioni citate sopra o i libri di scuola – o ancora che portava a abbracciare una nuova identità ebraica nel caso di riviste e giornali vicini al movimento sionista.

All'interno di questo paesaggio di libri, riviste e biblioteche, gli ebrei del Mediterraneo vissero fino agli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta, quando – a seguito della nascita dello Stato d'Israele,

2 Henry Benrey, 'Ecoles – Rapport sur la communauté juive de Tantah', Egypte, Tantah, XIII.E.198b, *Archivi dell'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, Parigi.



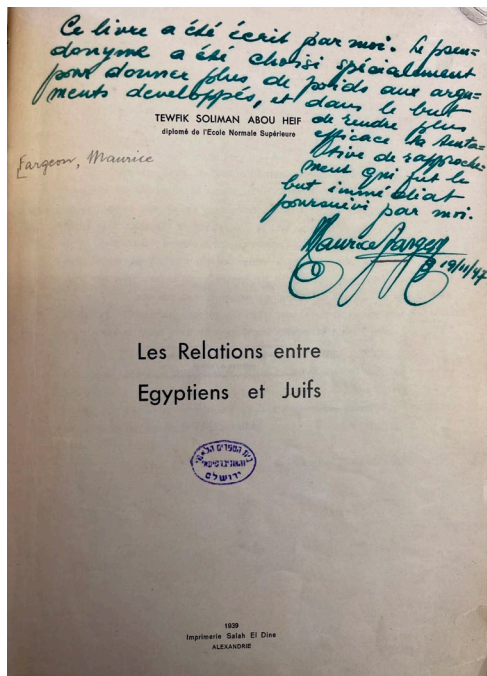
Catalogue de l'importante bibliothèque de feu  
M. Joseph A. Cattau Pacha (1950)  
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della decolonizzazione e l'istaurarsi di regimi nazionalisti arabi – la loro storia cambiò radicalmente e essi, nella maggior parte dei casi, migrarono o furono costretti a migrare verso Israele, l'Europa, gli Stati Uniti d'America e altri paesi ancora. Da quel momento, si può dire che i libri diventarono sempre più un legame – certo non l'unico, ma comunque un legame fondamentale – con un passato vicino dal punto di vista temporale e spesso spaziale, ma già lontanissimo. Ma quali libri gli ebrei che lasciarono il Nord Africa, l'Egitto e altri paesi si portarono con sé? Che cosa alcuni di loro stavano leggendo durante il viaggio, in nave o in aeroplano, che li portava in Israele, a Roma, a Marsiglia?

In Israele, all'inizio pochi *'olim hadashim* (“nuovi immigrati”) dal Nord Africa e dal Medio Oriente decisero di scrivere e pubblicare in una lingua, e un contesto letterario, molto diverso da quelli da dove provenivano. I primi romanzi della cosiddetta letteratura *mizrahi* (“orientale”) compaiono alla metà degli anni Sessanta, con le opere di ebrei iracheni come Shimon Balas. Già negli anni precedenti, vi erano comunque stati alcuni scrittori e scrittrici che avevano descritto, spesso per un pubblico molto limitato di lettori, la propria storia di migrazione: per tornare al caso che meglio conosco, vale a dire quello egiziano, è d'obbligo menzionare Jacqueline Kahanoff che dagli anni Quaranta e Cinquanta scrisse – perlopiù in inglese – dell'Egitto nel quale era cresciuta (Starr e Somekh 2011). Alcuni *'olim* iniziarono inoltre a pubblicare brevi testimonianze in riviste legate a associazioni fondate da ebrei marocchini, egiziani o per esempio iracheni (Miccoli 2018; Meir-Glitzstein 2020). Altri, depositarono in biblioteche i libri che avevano portato con sé dal paese d'origine. Per esempio, lo scrittore e giornalista egiziano Maurice Fargeon, autore di alcuni volumi sulla storia degli ebrei egiziani pubblicati al Cairo tra gli anni Trenta e gli anni Quaranta, donò una copia del suo *Les relations entre Egyptiens et Juifs* – un *pamphlet* uscito nel 1938 e che gli era all'epoca costato una denuncia per diffamazione da parte di alcuni cittadini tedeschi residenti in Egitto (Miccoli 2015: 76-79). Senz'altro orgoglioso di quella sua opera ormai dimenticata, nella prima pagina del volume – oggi custodito alla



*National Library of Israel*, a Gerusalemme – aggiunse a penna che “il nome di Tewfik Soliman Abou Heif è un nome immaginario [...]”. Questo libro l’ho scritto io”.



Nota dell’autore in Tewfik Abou Heif (Maurice Fargeon), *Les relations entre Egyptiens et Juifs* (1938), copia conservata alla National Library of Israel (© Dario Miccoli)

Ritrovamenti di questo tipo credo siano comuni a chiunque abbia esperienza d’archivio ma, quando avvengono, gettano una nuova luce sul nostro lavoro: come se, d’un tratto, il passato parlasse in modo più diretto e dicesse qualcosa che altri non avevano ascoltato. In altri casi, tra le pagine di vecchi libri si conservano segni di storie tragiche ma che, proprio per il fatto che sono giunte fino a noi, danno la speranza di essere anche superate per sempre: è il caso del timbro del *Reichsicherheitshauptamt* – i servizi di sicurezza della Germania nazista – ancora visibile in libri e documenti conservati negli archivi dell’*Alliance* che erano stati requisiti durante l’occupazione tedesca di Parigi (Weill 2010).

I libri degli ebrei del Mediterraneo, oggi, sono infine e soprattutto autobiografie, *memoirs*, romanzi, raccolte di poesie in ebraico, francese, inglese, italiano e altre lingue ancora che essi e i loro discendenti scrivono o semplicemente leggono per ricordare un passato scomparso: da *Out of Egypt* (1994) dell’alessandrino Andre Aciman a *Une nuit à Carthage* (2020) della tunisina Annick Perez, da *Tramonto libico* (2015) di Raphael Luzon – nativo di Benghazi – fino a *Zeh ha-dvarim* (“Così stanno le cose”, 2010) dell’israeliano di famiglia marocchina Sami Berdugo. Negli ultimi venti o venticinque anni, si è assistito infatti a un piccolo *boom* della memoria sefardita e *mizrahi*, nel quale i libri – insieme con i musei, le associazioni e molto altro – hanno un ruolo cruciale come vettori di trasmissione della memoria da una generazione all’altra e aldilà della comunità d’origine (Tartakowsky 2016).

## Una biblioteca dell'esilio

Ritornando agli intrecci tra ricerca e autobiografia, a posteriori riconosco che molti dei temi che ho citato e dei quali mi sono occupato nel corso delle mie ricerche – dalla storia della borghesia, fino alla memoria, alla nostalgia e all'esilio – si incrociano non solo con *Storia della dinastia di Savoia* di Predari, ma anche con autori dei quali sono un lettore affezionato: Giorgio Bassani, Natalia Ginzburg, Marcel Proust, Guido Gozzano, Amos Oz, Thomas Mann, Simone de Beauvoir. Leggere, ancora una volta, sarebbe dunque “uno strumento per riconoscere, nella pluralità dei testi, l'immagine di un altro che ci rassomiglia” (Bolzoni 2019: 155). Dall'altra parte, mi domando se questa ricostruzione a posteriori non sia falsata dalla storia di sé che ognuno si costruisce e fornisca, in fondo, un'immagine troppo ordinata di un insieme di letture che in origine erano caotiche e talvolta casuali. Anche i libri letti nel Mediterraneo ebraico d'età coloniale e postcoloniale, potrebbero essere considerati come una biblioteca costruita a partire da incontri e migrazioni di testi e lingue che attraversano tempi e spazi legati a vicende collettive vissute però in modo profondamente personale. Viene qui alla mente la *library of exile* dell'artista e scrittore inglese Edmund de Waal: un'installazione, visitabile a Venezia, poi a Dresda e infine al *British Museum* di Londra tra il 2019 e il 2021, concepita come una stanza a cielo aperto, dai muri ricoperti di porcellana bianca e foglie d'oro, “uno spazio di dialogo e contemplazione, [dove] i visitatori sono incoraggiati a sedere e leggere da una collezione di più di duemila libri di scrittori da tutto il mondo che hanno vissuto esperienze di esilio” (de Waal 2021).



Edmund de Waal's Library of Exile, British Museum (2020) © Hélène Binet, per concessione di Edmund de Waal



Dai volumi posseduti da Joseph Cattau a quelli scritti nell'Israele degli anni Sessanta dai primi autori di origine *mizrahi*, la *biblioteca dell'esilio* che ho ricostruito racconta dunque da un lato la storia di queste diaspore ebraiche, dall'altra quella di chi come me è andato alla loro ricerca. E' anche in questi (stra)ordinari oggetti di carta che si riflettono – come in un gioco di specchi – esperienze tra loro diverse di esilio, migrazione, appartenenza, estraneità e multilinguismo che viaggiano da una riva all'altra, dal passato al presente, ricordando a tutti noi che “chi scrive del Mediterraneo o ci naviga ha delle ragioni personali per farlo” (Matvejević 1991, 100).

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## Long abstract

The story that I would like to tell begins in the pages of a book that I never read, which was published in Milan in 1869 and which many years ago found its way into my library: *Storia politica, civile, militare della dinastia di Savoia dalle prime origini a Vittorio Emanuele II* by Francesco Predari. I do not remember exactly when I bought this book – the first of two volumes, the first of which I never had the chance to leaf through – in a Tuscan flea-market. However, several years after having bought *Storia della dinastia di Savoia*, I realised that – apart from the subject – it was telling me something about myself or at least about my research into the Jews of early twentieth-century Egypt (Mabro 2017; Halim 2013; Starr 2009). Taking this into account, in this essay I discuss the role that books have had for the Jews living on the southern shore of the Mediterranean during colonial and postcolonial times, reconstructing some of the textual encounters that led me to conduct research on these issues. Books then become objects that talk about histories of belonging, exile and migration and that move from one place to another, pass from one person to another, and are lost and found again, objects for which we feel affection or that sometimes we want to give away. Books are, in other words, mirrors of the plurality of (Jewish) identities and memories that can be traced in the Mediterranean.

I should note that between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, different types of Jewish books circulated across the shores of this sea: from texts of rabbinic literature to modern fiction and poetry – in Arabic, Hebrew, or even French – and finally many translations of European works in Judeo-Spanish, Arabic and Judeo-Arabic (Borovaya 2011; Levy and Shachter 2017). Particularly in the Judeo-Spanish context, for example in Thessalonika and Istanbul, novels were released that took their cue from European literature, such as *La mujer onesta* (1925) by Elia Karmona (Hanson 2021). In addition, one could still find a rich oral literary tradition that, in the case of the island of Rhodes, was rooted in the memory of *Sefarad* and in the centuries of Ottoman rule: for instance the folk songs, proverbs and sayings that passed from one generation to the next and that, in the early twentieth century, started to attract the attention of pioneering ethnologists and musicologists like Alberto Hemsí (Seroussi 1995). In Alexandria, Casablanca or Tunis, books circulated in multilingual spaces that could be private, like the rooms of one's house, or public, such as a coffee house or bookshop. Reading could be a way to remain close to Jewish tradition, in the case of religious texts, or to familiarise oneself with Europe – when it came to translations or school-books – or finally something that led people to embrace a new Jewish identity, if one considers publications close to the Zionist movement.

The Jews of the Mediterranean lived inside this complex linguistic and literary landscape up until the 1950s and 1960s, when – following the birth of the State of Israel, decolonisation and the consolidation of Arab nationalist regimes – their history changed radically and, in most cases, they migrated or were forced to leave their country of origin for Israel, the US or Europe. Since then, one can argue that books became a fundamental link that connected them to a temporally and spatially distant time *before the migration*. Nowadays, the books of the Jews of the Mediterranean are for the most part autobiographies, memoirs, novels, collections of poems in Hebrew, French, English, Italian and other languages, that they and their descendants write or simply read, in order to commemorate a bygone past: from *Out of Egypt* (1994) by the Alexandria-born Andre Aciman to *Une nuit à Carthage* (2020) by the Tunisian Annick Perez, from



*Tramonto libico* (2015) by Raphael Luzon – born in Benghazi – to *Zeh ha-dvarim* ('Things were like this', 2010) by the Israeli of Moroccan origin Sami Berdugo. In fact, over the last 20 or 25 years, we have witnessed a small boom in Sephardi and *mizrahi* memory, in which books – together with museums and heritage associations – play a crucial role (Tartakowsky 2016).

Before concluding, I should also acknowledge the fact that many of the issues that I discuss and that I have dealt with in my research – the history of the middle class, memory, nostalgia and exile – can be found not just in Predari's *Storia della dinastia di Savoia*, but also in the books of authors that I love to read: Giorgio Bassani, Natalia Ginzburg, Marcel Proust, Guido Gozzano, Amos Oz, Thomas Mann and Simone de Beauvoir. Reading, once more, then, is 'a tool to recognise, in the plurality of texts, the image of another person who looks like us' (Bolzoni 2019: 155). For this reason, the *library of exile* that I reconstruct in this essay tells, on the one hand, the history of the Mediterranean Jewish diasporas and, on the other, that of someone like myself, who has searched for them. It is also thanks to (extra)ordinary objects like books that – as if in a game of mirrors – different experiences of exile, migration, belonging, estrangement and multilingualism travel from one shore of the sea to the other, from past to present, reminding us all that he or she 'who writes about the Mediterranean or navigates it has personal reasons to do so' (Matvejević 1991, 100).

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## The Rules of the Game

### Tennis, Clubs and Postcolonial Society in the Memory of an Italian Immigrant From Tunisia

Martino Oppizzi

**Abstract** My contribution aims to enrich the debate about the relationship between migrant worlds and material cultures by the analysis of a specific, yet apparently anonymous object: a tennis racket. This object has been part of the life of Carlo U., born and grown up in Tunis in an Italian-Jewish family, then emigrated to Italy and finally arrived in Paris, where he currently resides. The tennis racket became the centre of an interview realised on January 2021 in order to understand some aspects of the childhood of its owner, between the 1970s and 1980s.

Carlo U.'s story has been an opportunity to reflect on the semantic stratification of the object, which encompasses several meanings: play tool, social marker, symbolic object, vector of sociability.

In the memory of its owner, the tennis racket evoked a lost world, a “golden age” rooted in a post-colonial context (but still linked to codes and schemes raised during the colonial era). The central elements of this world were the tennis club, in the European suburbs of Tunis, a place which embodied both an emotional and a symbolic dimension. The tennis club is remembered as a safe zone, separated from the rest of society. A place of physical training, of course, but also a social environment to build crucial networks. A place, finally, where young people could learn a set of shared values (often implicitly), the “rules of the game” of the European bourgeoisie of Tunis: respect for the adversary, merit, respectability, self-improvement, importance of social status.

Fellow of childhood, youth and then emigration, the tennis racket acquires a new dimension through the experience of exile, after leaving behind the sport, the country and some of the friendships. As a result, this object seems to remind its owner of the ambiguity of the link between past and present, and the dynamic relationship between continuities and ruptures.

From a micro-historical perspective, the analysis of this “object of exile” opens up a more articulated reflection about historical issues, such the evolution of colonial society and its legacy after independence, the sociability of the elites of post-colonial Tunisia, the building of a memory from an emigrant perspective

**Keywords** Tunis, Tennis, Migration, Colonialism, Microhistory, Livornese community

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Les études sur la mobilité ont connu une évolution constante au cours des deux dernières décennies — notamment à partir des années 2010 — en dédiant une attention grandissante aux interactions entre migration et culture matérielle, entre objets et mémoire de la mobilité. Les analyses les plus récentes (Alexandre-Garner and Loumpet-Galitzine 2020 ; Greenblatt 2010 ; Nuselovici 2013) se sont focalisées sur les relations entre objets matériels et êtres humains dans le contexte migratoire, à la fois avant le départ, pendant le voyage et au moment de l'arrivée. Une relation complexe semble s'instaurer entre le migrant et certains objets, qui participent directement ou indirectement aux transformations identitaires liées à la migration. En suscitant (ou en réévoquant) des émotions associées au déplacement, en participant concrètement au déroulement du voyage et à l'installation dans la nouvelle société, ou encore en traversant une profonde transformation d'usage et de sens à travers le processus migratoire. La vitalité des études dans ces domaines est témoignée par la recherche de nouvelles perspectives et de nouveaux concepts, tels ceux de « re-memory » et « home possession » proposés par Tolia-Kelly (2004) ou la notion de « objet d'exil » étudiée par Bishoff et Schlör (2013).

Ma contribution se propose d'enrichir le débat sur les tensions entre culture matérielle et migration à partir d'un objet sportif à l'apparence anonyme, une raquette de tennis. Cet objet appartient depuis l'enfance à Carlo, né à Tunis d'une famille juive italienne, grandi dans la société tunisienne à cheval entre les années 1970 et 1980 et ensuite émigré en Italie et à Paris, où il réside actuellement. La raquette a été le protagoniste d'un entretien réalisé à Paris entre Carlo et moi-même<sup>1</sup>, afin de reconstruire son importance dans le vécu de son propriétaire et les reconfigurations intervenues au moment de la migration.



Figure 1 La raquette de Carlo, une Wilson modèle t-2000 © Martino Oppizzi

1 L'entretien a été réalisé dimanche 10 janvier 2021, entre 18 h et 18 h 30 environ. De la durée de 35 minutes (dont 17 minutes enregistrés, le reste du contenu étant à caractère confidentiel), la conversation s'est déroulée dans une ambiance amicale et décontractée, en raison du fait que Carlo et moi sommes amis depuis 2014.



Le récit de Carlo a été l'occasion de saisir la stratification sémantique de l'objet en question, qui dans l'imaginaire du témoin emboîte plusieurs dimensions : outil ludique, souvenir d'enfance, marqueur social, objet symbolique, vecteur de sociabilité. Par la valorisation de la sphère intime, inextricablement liée à la mémoire d'un objet d'enfance, la contribution se propose également d'alimenter le débat sur le lien migration-intimité, qui a produit récemment le courant d'étude des « intimate mobilities ». Utilisée de manière critique contre les approches trop modélisantes des théories migratoires, l'intimité se propose de réinterroger le poids du politique ou de l'économique, du social ou de culture, d'un point de vue plus sensible au vécu personnel et aux réseaux personnels, d'une perspective « bottom-up » (Groes-Green et Fernandez 2018, 4). S'il apparaît improbable qu'une raquette puisse orienter une migration individuelle, elle permet d'accéder à un monde d'imaginaires et de relations sociales qui a conduit à des choix migratoires spécifiques et originaux. En faisant dialoguer le particulier et l'universel dans une perspective microhistorique (Trivellato 2015), l'analyse de la raquette comme objet d'exil a permis réfléchir sur des enjeux historiques plus vastes et articulés : la société coloniale et son héritage après l'indépendance, la sociabilité des élites urbaines de l'époque, la conservation des mémoires d'émigration.

## I Un catalyseur de souvenirs d'enfance, entre lieux de mémoire et microhistoire

Dans la mémoire de Carlo, la raquette de tennis évoque tout d'abord un lien avec l'enfance et la jeunesse, représentées comme un monde harmonieux, un « âge d'or » vécu au sein d'un milieu familial et social protégé. L'usage de la raquette s'inscrit dans la fréquentation du tennis club de Tunis, où Carlo est inscrit très tôt. Chronologiquement, la fréquentation des camps de tennis correspond à sa trajectoire individuelle en Tunisie, au point que le départ est représenté comme un abandon du tennis avant même que du pays :

Alors, j'ai adhéré au tennis club à l'âge de six mois : c'est là où ma mère me promenait quand on vivait à Tunis. Et je suis parti, dans le sens où je n'ai plus été membre, quand j'ai quitté la Tunisie à l'âge de 18 ans.

*Et tes premiers souvenirs du tennis club à quelle époque remontent-ils ?*

Je me souviens que j'étais très jeune et que je me promenais sur les pelouses, il y avait plein de pelouses d'herbe et je me baladais. Je me souviens que je n'étais pas très grand, mais je savais de quoi s'agissait, dans le sens où je vivais, j'avais conscience de toutes les choses qui se passaient.

L'entrée dans le monde du tennis s'inscrit dans une démarche collective, à l'échelle familiale. Carlo U. raconte d'avoir été inscrit, car presque tout le monde, dans sa famille, y était déjà membre, sans distinction remarquable entre hommes et femmes :

Comme il y avait une section de bridge, là-bas au club, ma mère allait jouer au bridge dans l'après-midi, lorsque moi je jouais au tennis et mon grand-père [maternel] bavardait avec ses vieux amis : donc si tu veux c'était un endroit où chacun de nous trouvait son espace. [...] Ils étaient tous inscrits au tennis, chez nous. C'était le sport de la famille.



Figure 2 Carlo pose au tennis club de Tunis, années 1970 (la raquette est ici une Dunlop Maxply en bois) © C. U. private archives

La centralité que la famille revêt dans la narration de Carlo s'explique en partie avec les *topoi* du souvenir d'enfance, mais touche également une particularité du milieu social du témoin. Carlo naît et grandit au sein d'une famille italienne de nationalité, mais largement francophone, qui d'un côté fait partie de la bourgeoisie européenne de la capitale, de l'autre appartient à une minorité juive-sépharade, une communauté informelle connue à l'époque comme « communauté livournaise » car issue d'une migration du port italien de Livourne entre les siècles XVII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup>. Longtemps séparés du reste de la population juive-tunisienne, les Livournais (appelés aussi Grana) avaient préservé l'identité de groupe et garanti la reproduction sociale de la communauté par l'endogamie matrimoniale et l'entretien de liens profonds avec les autres familles.

Aux années 1970, ces pratiques sociales étaient largement dépassées : la fréquentation de personnes externes à la communauté était courante et les mariages mixtes<sup>2</sup> constituaient la majorité. Néanmoins, elles avaient laissé des traces sous la forme d'une forte cohésion intra et inter familiale.

Le souvenir de la raquette ouvre des fenêtres sur les espaces de l'intimité, mais aussi sur les espaces physiques de la jeunesse tunisienne, entre le quartier, la ville et le pays. Les lieux de mémoire évoqués par Carlo s'organisent selon une hiérarchie précise, en fonction de leur importance pour le jeu du tennis, plus rarement en suivant une logique émotive.

Au sommet de cette hiérarchie se trouve le tennis club de Tunis, fondé en 1923 et installé au 20 bis Avenue Alain Savary, dans un quartier résidentiel au nord du parc du Belvedere. Cet espace est esquissé avec une quantité considérable de détails, signe d'un attachement profond et durable :

Il y avait 13 courts de tennis. Quand tu entrais, il y en avait certains vers la gauche, puis au bout de l'entrée tu trouvais le Club House, puis à gauche tu avais le courts central, puis les courts 2 et 3, puis en rentrant au club house, sur la droite, il y avait les courts 4, 5 et 6, à droite sur la même ligne les courts 7 et 8, et ensuite les 9, 10, 11, 12 et 13 qui étaient derrière.

2 En tenant compte que, du point de vue des Juifs livournais, le mariage avec un Juif tunisien externe à la communauté était également considéré mixte.



*Et le Club House, était-il composé de restaurants, de bars... ?*

C'était un bar. Un bar sympa, où l'on pouvait aussi manger. Il y avait aussi le restaurant, où nous mangions de temps en temps. Quand maman n'avait pas envie de cuisiner, nous y mangions de temps en temps le dimanche. Mais je m'en fichais beaucoup, je préférais aller au tennis pour jouer.

*On dirait que tu l'as gravé dans ta tête!*

C'est gravé dans ma tête, voilà.

La ville de Tunis, au contraire, ne semble avoir laissé guère de souvenir au-delà de quelques centres d'agrégation sociale. Elle apparaît presque un contour du tennis club, un espace vide qui entoure le monde du tennis et qui s'anime uniquement en relation à celui-ci. En parlant de sa raquette, par exemple, Carlo mentionne son lycée en ces termes : « Elle me rappelle aussi le lycée, parce qu'après l'école j'allais toujours au tennis club ». Derrière cette absence de souvenirs personnels liant la raquette et la ville se trouvent des raisons historiques de plus grande échelle, liées à l'évolution de Tunis après l'indépendance. Tout au long du protectorat français (1881-1956), la capitale avait connu des importantes transformations topographiques et démographiques : la croissance impétueuse de la population avait entraîné la création de nouveaux quartiers et la diffusion de nouveaux services (eau, gaz, électricité, transports urbains) et d'équipements sociaux (Sebag 1998, 317-347). Avec l'implantation d'une nouvelle population européenne qui, au début, égalait la population musulmane locale, Tunis avait connu un dédoublement entre une ville ancienne, peuplée d'indigènes, et une ville moderne, bientôt apanage presque exclusif des nouveaux venus. L'histoire parallèle de ces « deux villes contrastées, mais solidaires » (*ibid.*, 337) se termine après l'indépendance : la population musulmane, dont le poids démographique avait progressivement érodé l'importance quantitative des Européens jusqu'à devenir l'écrasante majorité<sup>3</sup>, se réapproprie des espaces urbains et sociaux autrefois occupés par les colonisateurs. Cette réappropriation engage les espaces (les rues sont rebaptisées, les symboles du protectorat enlevés) et la démographie, avec l'arabisation progressive des anciens quartiers bourgeois après le départ de la population européenne et juive.

Confronté à un irréversible déclin en nombre et en poids, les Européens qui restent à Tunis entre les années 1960 et 1980 se trouvaient obligés à renégocier leur place et leur statut dans la nouvelle ville. À leurs yeux, le tennis club apparaissait vraisemblablement comme un des derniers fiefs à conserver : trace et héritage d'une hégémonie sociale, mais aussi rappel implicite de sa fin.

Curieusement, le récit de Carlo laisse plus d'espaces aux villes mineures de la Tunisie, destination d'activités collectives comme compétitions sportives ou voyages organisés par le tennis club : « Nous étions dans une équipe, mais puis nous jouions chacun individuellement. [Les tournois] étaient tous très beaux, nous voyageions à travers la Tunisie : Sousse, Sfax, Bizerte, nous allions partout, c'était très amusant ».

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3 En chiffres absolus, Tunisiens musulmans passent de 77 318 à 338 453 entre 1921 et 1956, en dépassant les 850 000 personnes aux années 1970. Du point de vue relatif, la population musulmane représente 45 % de la population totale en 1921, 64 % en 1956, et environ 98 % aux années 1970 (Sebag 1998).



De cette manière, tout en restant un objet strictement personnel, la raquette se configurait comme vecteur d'interaction et de médiation sociale. Elle ouvrait également à la possibilité de se déplacer, en permettant une mobilité interne à la Tunisie qui, à l'époque, était encore apanage d'une minorité.

## II Le symbole d'un monde et de ses règles

La raquette de Carlo renvoie à un monde perdu, ancré à un contexte historique post-colonial mais encore lié à des codes d'époque coloniale. Elle est immédiatement<sup>4</sup> associée à un lieu de mémoire à forte valeur émotionnelle et symbolique : le tennis club de Tunis.

L'importance de ce lieu repose sur plusieurs aspects, tous renvoyant à une dimension sociale. C'est un espace séparé du reste de la ville, qui définit un « dedans » et un « dehors », et implicitement un « nous » et un « eux ». C'est un terrain de formation physique et de compétition, mais aussi de construction de rapports d'amitié, familiaux et professionnels. Finalement, c'est le théâtre où on intériorise une hiérarchie de valeurs partagées, les « règles du jeu » de la bonne société de Tunis. La dimension sportive/agonique s'estompe face à la dimension socio-symbolique, en rendant la raquette un marqueur de statut.

Comme rappelé au cours de l'entretien, le tennis club est vu par les parents comme un endroit de contrôle et de protection des enfants : « C'était un lieu où tu étais hors de la rue, ainsi qu'on évitait que tu allasses te balader par les rues [de Tunis] à faire de bêtises ». Néanmoins, à l'intérieur de son périmètre, le tennis club garantissait une liberté d'action presque totale et devenait, aux yeux des jeunes, le lieu d'expérimentation d'une indépendance « Surveillée » :

On payait la cotisation annuelle et puis tu pouvais jouer autant que tu voulais, pratiquement. Je te dis : nous arrivions en bagnole avec le grand-père et maman, nous entrions, et une fois franchie l'entrée chacun s'occupait de ses affaires [*si faceva i cavoli suoi*]. Finalement, en fin d'après-midi, on se retrouvait pour rentrer chez nous.

Dans le quotidien, le tennis club absorbait la plupart du temps libre. Carlo avoue explicitement que le tennis arrivait à saturer ses journées et parfois ses nuits :

On y allait toujours, dans le sens qu'après la discothèque — où on restait jusqu'à quatre heures du matin — on allait directement au club de tennis et on jouait de 5 h à 7 h. Ensuite on allait se coucher.

*Une véritable nuit blanche entre la boîte et le tennis!*

Oui, oui : c'était un endroit où nous étions toujours.

*Même pendant l'été?*

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4 Dès la première question, Carlo oriente le discours vers le tennis club qui devient ensuite le pivot de l'entretien : « Q : On parte de l'objet en question, ta raquette de tennis : utilisée où, quand? R : Eh bien, utilisée un peu pendant toute mon enfance, parce que toute mon enfance je l'ai passée au tennis club. »





Surtout pendant l'été! On jouait à partir de 11 h, ou très tôt le matin.

Curieusement, la dimension purement sportive du tennis — et donc de la raquette — occupe une place secondaire dans le souvenir de Carlo. Ce qui est conservé dans la mémoire est l'aspect normatif du jeu : respect des règles, du *fair play*, de l'adversaire, du code vestimentaire. Le sport apparaît plus comme une formation morale qu'une formation physique. Surtout, le tennis est évoqué comme une occasion de rencontre et d'échange avec d'autres membres de la bonne société, réunis par l'appartenance au même club. Carlo dédie une partie importante de son récit à la description de cette curieuse « tribu » du tennis club, qui dépassait le périmètre des liens familiaux et incluait des personnages pittoresques :

On trouvait deux types de personnes : ma famille, dans le sens que je croisais les Bessis et toute la famille composée de cousins, amis de familles et amis d'enfance; et puis toutes ces personnes que j'ai continué à fréquenter tout au long de ma vie parce qu'ils étaient des joueurs avec lesquels on faisait des compétitions. Donc pour moi le tennis club était d'un côté un lieu protégé où je pouvais rencontrer ma famille, et de l'autre côté un lieu où j'ai cultivé beaucoup d'amitiés d'enfance. Qui poursuivent encore aujourd'hui.

*Par exemple?*

Par exemple les champions de tennis Rafik Kaddour et Aziz Zouhir, tous ces grands noms du tennis tunisien. [...] Puis on retrouvait les présidents des cercles sportifs tunisois, ceux de l'Espérance, du Club Africain, bref on y croisait vraiment l'élite du sport tunisien. [...] C'était le club où jouait Nicola Pietrangeli, un joueur de tennis italien très connu, capitaine de l'équipe de l'Italie de Coupe Davis. [...] Mais je te dis, là-bas on se connaissait tous : par exemple j'avais gagné contre le père de Marco Farinelli, qui était ambassadeur d'Italie à Tunis. Une chose très drôle était qu'au tennis club jouait André Nagy, exilé de l'équipe nationale hongroise [de football] qui avait demandé l'asile politique en 1956, après les événements de Budapest, et qui avait été aussi l'entraîneur du Barcelone<sup>5</sup>. Et, une fois terminé le contrat avec le Barcelone, il était venu à Tunis pour entraîner le club africain. C'était un personnage très très connu de la vie sportive tunisienne. Et moi, je jouais à tennis avec lui!

Composée de Français, Italiens, Tunisiens, Anglais, Américains, Hongrois, la communauté qui fréquentait le tennis club se distinguait donc pour son cosmopolitisme. Son profil représentait une continuité avec le passé colonial, caractérisé en Tunisie par une grande variété ethnique et culturelle. Cette hétérogénéité, qui avait représenté à l'époque des parents de Carlo la normalité, s'était estompée après l'indépendance, à la suite de l'arabisation de l'administration de l'État et le départ en masse des minorités étrangères. La variété nationale cachait pourtant une claire homogénéité sociale : comme rappelé par Carlo, « le tennis club était l'endroit très chic de Tunis, y faire partie était très difficile [...]. Le tennis était le sport de l'élite, à l'époque, ça veut dire que le pratiquaient seulement les personnes qui étaient d'un certain niveau social ».

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5 En fait, en Espagne André Nagy a fait partie de l'« Unión Deportiva Las Palmas » en tant que joueur.



Figure 3 Equipe du tennis club de Tunis aux années 1930, dont plusieurs membres de la famille de Carlo © C. U. private archives

Cette fonction de lieu de sociabilité des élites (en grande partie européennes) représentait une remarquable continuité entre la période coloniale et l'indépendance, notamment aux yeux de la bourgeoisie italienne à laquelle Carlo appartenait, du moins par naissance. Entre XIX et XX siècle, les notables de la communauté italienne avaient créé un réseau d'institutions assistancielles, économiques et culturelles (écoles, hôpitaux, chambres de commerce, loges franc-maçonniques) qui étaient devenues autant de centres de sociabilité et de contact. Les Juifs livournaï, fer-de-lance de l'élite urbaine italienne, avaient contribué à la fondation et à la direction de ces institutions : les grands-parents de Carlo avaient occupé des charges prestigieuses. La Seconde Guerre mondiale avait bouleversé ce réseau d'institutions et de contacts. L'Italie fasciste avait revendiqué la Tunisie, à l'époque protectorat français : ainsi, après la défaite des armées de l'Axe et la libération de Tunis (mai 1943), la France avait décidé d'effacer à jamais le « péril italien ». Les institutions italiennes locales avaient été dissoutes et absorbées à titre d'indemnisation, les écoles fermées, et les manifestations culturelles interdites pendant une décennie. Après l'indépendance, quelques initiatives du bas avaient timidement essayé de reconstruire un tissu d'associations, mais sans pouvoir arrêter la dispersion de la communauté italienne, qui tomba de 66 500 à 66 51 personnes entre 1956 et 1976. À la fin des années 1970, le tennis club de Tunis était donc une des rares institutions qui répondait au besoin de sociabilité des notables européens, capable, par son caractère apolitique, de résister aux transformations institutionnelles du pays.

Par le jeu, les jeunes pouvaient se rapprocher à des personnages importants et entrer dans le réseau de la bourgeoisie de la capitale. En même temps, ils apprenaient — souvent de manière implicite — les valeurs partagés de la société qui comptait, les « règles du jeu » au sens élargi : moralité, honorabilité, mérite, bien-être matériel. L'intériorisation de cet ensemble de codes émerge de la narration de Carlo, qui se rappelle des matchs de tennis joués avec des personnages importants, et souligne, dans une phrase exemplaire : « pour moi, le tennis club a été le centre de mon développement socio-culturel pendant toute mon enfance ».

La raquette elle-même semble témoigner ce nœud entre valeurs et statut social : objet sportif, à usage individuel, finalisé à la compétition dans le périmètre de règles bien codifiées, comprises et acceptées par tous. Mais aussi objet précieux en soi, de grande valeur matérielle et symbolique : la raquette de Carlo est une Wilson T-2000, un modèle légendaire dans l'histoire du ten-



nis. Produite entre 1967 et 1987, avec sa structure entièrement métallique, la T-2000 représentait une révolution et devint la raquette fétiche du champion américain Jimmy Connors, qui gagna grâce à elle huit Grands Slams. Dans les mains d'un jeune joueur de la Tunisie de l'époque, elle soulignait l'appartenance à une élite sociale et sportive à la fois. Quarante ans plus tard, dans un état de conservation impeccable, elle témoigne l'attachement émotif de son propriétaire.

Il est intéressant de remarquer que la dimension économique de ce sens d'appartenance n'émerge presque jamais dans les souvenirs de Carlo : la richesse en soi ne semble pas être une valeur. Carlo se rappelle que faire partie du tennis club était difficile et qu'il fallait payer une cotisation annuelle de 25 dinars, ce qui pourrait faire penser que ce lieu était réservé à une minorité nantie. Pourtant, il souligne également que ce chiffre « n'a jamais été beaucoup ». En effet, le statut du club prévoyait plutôt une admission par parrainage : toute demande d'accès devait être parrainée par deux membres actifs ayant au moins trois ans d'ancienneté, avant d'être soumise à l'approbation du comité directeur. Le critère de sélection se fondait donc sur la réputation morale et sociale du candidat : un critère subtil, qui laissait une grande marge de discrétion et investissait les parrains potentiels d'un prestige implicite. Une anecdote de Carlo est révélatrice :

Comme je n'étais pas un étudiant trop brillant, le Recteur quand il se fâchait avec moi m'appelait dans son bureau, me grondait et me faisait signer les demandes d'adhésion [au tennis club] des professeurs.

*Donc il se laissait corrompre pour pouvoir entrer plus facilement ?*

Oui voilà ! Parce que tu vois, quand c'était moi qui signalais, comme j'étais assez fort au niveau agonistique et j'étais connu en Tunisie, alors la demande d'adhésion au tennis club passait en deux semaines à peine.

*Du coup les professeurs ne faisaient part de l'élite, a priori ?*

Enfin, ce n'était pas facile pour eux d'entrer : ils entraient un peu grâce à moi par un rapport qui était, je ne dis pas privilégié... mais bref, ils savaient qui j'étais.

L'appartenance au tennis club, signe reconnu d'élévation sociale, apparaît comme une ressource symbolique qui pouvait être possédée et échangée avec d'autres acteurs sociaux externes. Dans le cas des professeurs, cela portait à renverser occasionnellement les rapports hiérarchiques traditionnels.

Par le récit de son possesseur, la raquette permet donc d'accéder aux points d'ancrage géographiques, émotionnels et sociaux de son passé avant la migration. De ce fait, les réflexions sur le tennis à Tunis se rapprochent à d'autres cas d'étude analysés à l'échelle méditerranéenne, en ouvrant des intéressantes comparaisons. Piera Rossetto, qui a étudié la dispersion de la communauté juive de Libye entre 1948 et 1967, a remarqué une importance analogue des clubs et du tennis dans la sociabilité des élites urbaines et dans les mélanges entre population italienne et population juive (Rossetto 2015, 102-103 ; Rossetto 2016). Chez les minorités juives-livournaises et européennes de Tunisie et de Libye, les lieux de mémoire se rassemblent, les façons de les



évoquer aussi. De Tripoli, Roberto Nunes-Vais se rappelle d'« un petit monde renfermé sur soi-même, une façon de vivre sans élans et sans fantaisies » (Nunes-Vais 1982, 13-15). De Tunis et de son tennis club, Carlo déclare : « Un micro-monde : oui, c'était absolument un micro-monde. Complètement doré ». La nostalgie pour la disparition de ces lieux, avec la perte soudaine des points de repère spatiaux et sociaux, rapproche également les deux expériences.

### III Le rappel d'une condition de mobilité

Compagnon d'enfance et de jeunesse, la raquette acquiert une nouvelle dimension par l'expérience de l'émigration, avec l'abandon de la pratique sportive, l'éloignement de Tunis, la dispersion des amis, l'évolution politique de la Tunisie et ses répercussions sur le tennis club.

Comme observé par Paul Basu, la migration est toujours façonnée par les objets, par toute forme de matérialité physique sensorielle, qui se divisent en deux grandes typologies. D'un côté, les objets *de* migration sont ceux qui interviennent activement dans la mobilité, dont l'usage est fonctionnel au voyage et/ou à l'implantation (comme des vêtements spécifiques, documents, objets de voyage) ou qui sont associés, dans la mémoire du témoin, à la migration (par exemple la mer, le train, des odeurs/saveurs spécifiques). De l'autre côté, les objets *dans* la migration, éléments ordinaires de la vie quotidienne qui se trouvent impliqués dans le déplacement de leur propriétaire (Basu et Coleman 2008, 316).

La raquette en question paraît un exemple parfait d'objet dans la migration. Pourtant, à bien y regarder, elle joue un rôle actif dans le processus migratoire, en amont. En participant à la création d'un réseau de connaissances dans un milieu cosmopolite, en favorisant l'accès à des circuits sociaux ouverts à la mobilité (qui prend la forme de séjours d'études, tournois, expériences professionnelles), la raquette contribue à orienter la stratégie migratoire de son propriétaire vers l'aire européenne. En effet, celle de Carlo n'est pas une migration forcée, un exil, mais plutôt une migration volontaire dans le socle d'un parcours d'instruction supérieure qui prévoit l'accès à une université en Europe. Cela nous rappelle la pluralité sémantique du mot « migration », qui cache une énorme quantité d'expériences (migration de travail, migration coloniale, migration forcée, exil politique, diaspora) et qui risque facilement d'être employée comme un « mot valise ». L'émigration est parfois une tragédie, et parfois — comme dans le cas du témoin interviewé — une occasion de mobilité sociale. Dans d'autres cas encore, la frontière entre migration volontaire et forcée n'est pas du tout nette (*ibid.*, 314).

Le dénominateur commun de toutes ces expériences migratoires est la capacité de modifier la valeur et le sens des objets, qui traversent un glissement sémantique. Parfois il peut arriver que l'objet en soi n'a qu'une importance relative : c'est le fait migratoire qui lui donne une valeur inédite, en le transformant en un emblème, un lien avec le passé, un catalyseur de vision de soi et du monde. C'est le cas de la raquette de Carlo, qui dans la mémoire semble rappeler la précarité de l'ancien monde postcolonial, mais aussi de la permanence — et donc de l'universalité — de certaines valeurs.

Ce mélange de ruptures et continuité concerne d'abord la dimension géographique. L'éloignement de la Tunisie coïncide avec l'abandon du tennis au niveau compétitif. En parallèle, le lien entre tennis et Tunisie se renforce après l'installation en Italie et puis en France, en renforçant sa valeur émotive :



[J'ai joué à tennis] jusqu'à l'âge de 17 ans et demi, âge à laquelle — c'était le juillet 1982 — j'ai passé mon bac et je suis parti pour l'Italie en septembre.

*Du coup t'as continué à jouer à tennis en Italie?*

Non, car c'était trop cher et trop loin de chez moi. Pourtant, chaque fois que je rentrais à Tunis j'allais jouer à tennis au tennis club. Toujours.

Le passage sur l'argent est crucial et Carlo le reprend ensuite pour souligner une autre différence avec le passé, cette fois sur le terrain social :

*Depuis ton adolescence à aujourd'hui, est-ce que t'as remarqué des changements dans la structure du lieu, ou dans les personnes qui le fréquentaient?*

Bon, tout est devenu beaucoup plus « nouveau riche ». Dans le sens où désormais le tennis club est devenu un endroit fréquenté par des gens, disons, qui ont gagné de l'argent facile. Un lieu pour l'élite, mais plus une élite financière qu'une élite de jeu.

*C'est quoi d'après toi, une « élite de jeu »?*

Auparavant il y avait une sélection fondée sur le mérite, sur le talent sportif. Maintenant, il y a une sélection [fondée] uniquement sur l'argent.

*Même à ton époque, pourtant, le tennis club réunissait la crème de la société.*

Oui, mais bon, une fois qu'on y était dedans c'était le plus fort qui gagnait, pas le plus riche. Il y avait une forme de rééquilibrage social fondé sur le mérite sportif.

Au prisme des souvenirs évoqués par la raquette, le tennis devient le paradigme du déclin d'un monde et de ses valeurs, d'une époque où la sélection sociale semblait moins liée à l'argent et plus au respect de règles morales communes. Ce qui émerge implicitement, c'est la nostalgie d'une image fantasmée du passé, quand la population européenne pouvait encore se présenter comme une aristocratie auto-proclamée, qui faisait de son appartenance à des lieux privilégiés comme le tennis club un vecteur de son sens d'appartenance et de supériorité.

En même temps, cet objet révèle un malaise générationnel, lié au changement du contexte historique de la Tunisie, qui ne semble plus offrir aux descendants des anciennes communautés européennes ni d'opportunité de réussite ni d'espaces de sociabilité. Les années 1990 marquent en effet le dernier acte du déclin de la communauté italienne historique, héritière des courants d'immigration des siècles précédents. La nouvelle présidence de Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, qui en 1987 avait pris la place de Bourguiba à la tête du pays, avait attiré un nouveau courant d'immigration composé surtout d'entrepreneurs, professionnels et techniciens, attirés par les opportunités créées par la nouvelle politique libérale (Morone 2015, 64). Dépourvue d'un attachement





émotif à la Tunisie, cette « communauté d'Italiens 2.0 » ne visait pas à une installation définitive dans le pays : sa présence se fondait sur la perspective d'un gain facile et rapide (Gianturco et Zaccai 2004, 62-63). D'où le regard critique de Carlo, représentant de l'ancienne génération. Parallèlement, la mémoire de la raquette se fait vecteur d'une subtile critique socio-politique de la Tunisie contemporaine et sur la sélection des cadres sous la présidence Ben Ali et après la révolution de 2011. Carlo observe par exemple qu'« à l'époque [de ma jeunesse], de temps en temps il y avait quelqu'un qui se faisait jeter dehors parce qu'il ne respectait pas le "fair play". Je ne veux pas sembler nostalgique, mais le tennis club était beaucoup plus réglementée par rapport à aujourd'hui ».

Révéléateur de la distance avec le passé, le tennis permet néanmoins une certaine continuité dans la sphère sociale : beaucoup de relations professionnelles et d'amitiés aux années du tennis club résistent à la césure opérée par la migration. Parfois, elles contribuent à la réalisation personnelle dans les nouveaux contextes sociaux.

De ce fait, dans le récit de Carlo la raquette semble lui rappeler le rapport dynamique passé/présent, mélange inextricable de continuités et ruptures.

#### IV Conclusion

Issue d'un témoignage subjectif et isolé, l'analyse de la raquette de tennis de Carlo n'a aucune prétention d'universalité. Néanmoins, elle fournit assez d'éléments pour dépasser la dimension strictement anecdotique et aborder certaines réflexions à une plus vaste échelle, autour des notions d'objets d'exil et objets de mémoire.

Les objets impliqués dans la migration se caractérisent par leur instabilité sémantique. La mobilité change le sens de l'objet et en modifie le statut symbolique : sinon dans la réalité, du moins dans la mémoire du migrant. Comme souligné par Alexandra Galitzine-Loumpet, pendant le processus migratoire ils connaissent une métamorphose à la fois de leurs usages et de leur sens, en mêlant matériel et immatériel (Galitzine-Loumpet 2013). Du point de vue matériel, la raquette de tennis Wilson T-2000 de Carlo est un exemplaire répliquable, un produit industriel. Mais au prisme de la trajectoire migratoire de son possesseur, elle acquiert une nouvelle identité, en devenant un objet unique, car miroir d'une expérience individuelle non répétable. En même temps, elle concourt à construire l'identité de son possesseur, au carrefour entre public et privé.

Dans une perspective microhistorique, les objets d'exil offrent une clé d'accès aux cultures matérielles de la migration, ainsi qu'à des imaginaires perdus ou transformés par la mobilité. Ils permettent de saisir la complexité du global à l'échelle du minuscule, par l'étude d'un microcosme, dans lequel on retrouve les effets et les fondements de phénomènes de plus vaste envergure (Trivellato 2015, 13).



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## The Rules of the Game

### Tennis, Clubs and Postcolonial Society in the Memory of an Italian Immigrant From Tunisia

Martino Oppizzi

Following a steady evolution over the last two decades – and especially since the 2010s – migration studies have devoted increasing attention to interactions between mobility and materiality, between the so-called migrant worlds and material cultures (Basu and Coleman 2008). The most recent analyses put the focus on the relations between material objects and people in the different phases of migration: before departure, during the journey and upon arrival (Alexandre-Garner and Loumpet-Galitzine 2020; Nuselovici 2013; Grenblatt 2010). A complex relationship seems to have been established between the migrant and certain objects, which participate directly or indirectly in the identity transformations linked to migration. By arousing (or re-evoking) emotions associated with the displacement, by participating concretely in the shaping of the journey and in the process of fitting into the new society, the object undergoes a profound transformation in its use and meaning through the whole migratory process. Moreover, the constant search for new perspectives and concepts, such as those of ‘re-memory’ and ‘home possession’ proposed by Divia Tolia-Kelly (2004) or the notion of ‘object of exile’ analysed by Doerte Bischoff and Joachim Schlör (2013), seems to demonstrate the vitality of studies in this field.

My paper aims to enrich the debate on the relationship between material culture and migration, starting from an apparently anonymous sports object: a tennis racket. This object has belonged since childhood to Carlo, who was born in Tunis in an Italian Jewish family, grew up in Tunisian society between the 1970s and 1980s and then emigrated to Italy and then to France (Paris), where he currently resides. The racket was the focus of an interview carried out in Paris<sup>1</sup>, which sought to reconstruct its importance in the life of its owner and the reconfigurations that took place at the time of migration.

Carlo’s story allows us to grasp the semantic stratification of the object in question, which in the imagination of the witness embodies several meanings: play tool, childhood memory, social marker, symbolic object and vector of sociability. By focusing on the intimate sphere inextricably linked to the memory of a childhood object, this paper also provides a new case study about the interaction between migration and intimacy, which has recently produced the current study of ‘intimate mobilities’. The concept of intimacy, criticising the overly model-based approaches

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1 The interview took place on Sunday, 10 January 2021, between approximately 6 and 7 p.m. The conversation lasted 55 minutes (of which 17 minutes were recorded, the rest of the content being confidential) and took place in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, given that Carlo and I have been friends since 2014.



Figure 1. Carlo's racket, a Wilson model T-2000 © Martino Oppizzi

of migration theories, proposes to look more at the importance of the political or economic side, the social or cultural sphere, from a point of view which is more sensitive to individual experience and personal networks, adopting a 'bottom-up' (Groes-Green and Fernandez 2018, 4) perspective. While a racket alone appears unable to trace an individual migration, it allows us to understand a world of imaginaries and social relations that influenced some specific and original migratory choices. Through this microhistorical approach, connecting the particular and the universal (Trivellato 2015), the analysis of the racket as an object of exile opens a debate over broader and more diverse historical issues: colonial society and its legacy after independence, the sociability of the urban elites at the time, and the preservation of memories of emigration.

### **I A catalyst of childhood memories, between places of memory and micro-history**

In Carlo's interview, the tennis racket evokes first of all a bond with childhood and youth, represented as a harmonious world, a 'golden age' lived in a protected environment, both at a family and social scale. The racket is a consequence of Carlo's involvement at the tennis club in Tunis, where he was registered by his mother at a very young age. Chronologically, his presence on tennis courts corresponds to his presence in Tunisia. The two trajectories are so connected that the migration itself is represented as a departure from tennis rather than a departure from the country:

So I joined the tennis club when I was six months old: that's where my mother used to take me when we lived in Tunis. And I left, in the sense that I was no longer a member, when I left Tunisia at the age of 18.

*What is your first memory of the tennis club?*





I remember being very young and walking around on the courts, there were lots of grass lawns and I would walk around. I remember I wasn't very tall, but I knew what was happening all around me, in the sense that I was very aware of all the things that were going on.

The admission into the world of tennis appears to have been a collective process, on a family scale. Carlo says that he was registered because almost everyone in his family was already a member, with no notable distinction between men and women:

As there was a bridge section there at the club, my mother would go and play bridge in the afternoon, while I was playing tennis and my [maternal] grandfather would chat with his old friends: so, if you want, it was a place where each of us found its space. [...] We were all enrolled in tennis at our house. It was the family sport.

The centrality of family in Carlo's narrative can be explained in part by the classical topos of childhood memory, but also by a unique aspect of the witness's social and cultural background. Carlo was born and raised in Tunis in a European family, which was Italian by nationality, but largely French by culture and language. He grew up as part of the capital's European bourgeoisie, but also as a descendant of a specific Sephardic-Jewish minority, an informal community known at the time as the 'Livornese community' because its ancestors arrived from the Italian port of Livorno between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Long separated from the rest of the Jewish-Tunisian population, the Livornese Jews (also called Grana) had preserved a strong collective identity and ensured the social reproduction of the community through marital endogamy and by maintaining deep ties with other families.

By the 1970s, these social practices were not in place anymore: dating outside the community was common and the majority of marriages were mixed<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, the old habits had left some traces in the form of strong cohesion inside the family and among families within the same group.

The memory of the racket opens a window onto the spaces of intimacy, but also onto the physical spaces of a Tunisian youth, lived within and beyond the borders of a neighbourhood, a city and a country. The places of memory evoked by Carlo are organised following a precise hierarchy, depending mostly on their importance for tennis, and only secondly on an emotional basis.

At the top of this hierarchy is the Tennis Club of Tunis, founded in 1923 and located at 20bis Avenue Alain Savary, in a residential area north of the Belvedere Park. He describes this space with a significant number of details, which suggests a deep and lasting attachment to it:

There were 13 tennis courts. When you entered, there were some courts to the left, then at the end of the entrance you found the club house, then to the left you had the central court, then courts 2 and 3, then when you entered the club house, on the right, you found courts 4, 5 and 6, while on the right on the same line were courts 7 and 8. And finally [courts] 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13, which were behind.

*And did the club house contain something like restaurants, bars...?*

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<sup>2</sup> Although that, from the point of view of Livornese Jews, marriage with a Tunisian Jew from outside the community was also considered mixed.



Figure 2 Carlo poses at the Tennis Club of Tunis in the 1970s (here the racket is a wooden Dunlop Maxply) © C. U. private archives

There was a bar. A nice bar, where you could also eat. There was also the restaurant, where we ate sometimes. When my mum didn't want to cook, we ate there sometimes on Sundays. But I didn't care much about that, I preferred to go to the tennis club to play.

*It seems like it is burned into your mind!*

It's burned into my mind, that's it.

The city of Tunis, on the contrary, occupies a minor place in Carlo's geography of memory, aside from a few centres of social aggregation. The city appears almost like an outline of the tennis club, an empty space that surrounds the world of tennis and comes alive only in relation to it. Speaking of his racket, for example, Carlo mentions his high school in these terms: 'It also reminds me of high school, because after school I always went to the tennis club'. There are historical reasons and broader dynamics behind this lack of personal memories connecting the racket and the city, linked to the evolution of Tunis after independence. Throughout the French protectorate (1881–1956), the capital had undergone major topographic and demographic transformations: the rapid growth of the population had led to the creation of new districts and the spread of new services (water, gas, electricity and urban transport) and social facilities (Sebag 1998, 317–347). With the settlement of a new European population which, at the beginning, was as numerous as the local Muslim population, Tunis was divided between the old city, populated by natives, and a modern and richer area, mostly occupied by the newcomers. The latter became the new economic and social centre of the capital. The parallel history of these 'two contrasting yet interdependent cities' (ibid., 337) came to an end after Tunisia gained its independence in 1956. The Muslim population, whose demographic weight had gradually eroded the quantitative importance of the Europeans until it became dominant<sup>3</sup>, regained urban and

3 In absolute terms, Tunisian Muslims increased from 77,318 to 338,453 between 1921 and 1956, exceeding 850,000 in the 1970s. In percentage terms, the Muslim population represented 45% of the total population in 1921, 64% in 1956, and about 98% in the 1970s (Sebag 1998).



social spaces formerly populated by the foreigners. This reappropriation took symbolic (streets were renamed, and symbols of the protectorate were removed) and demographic forms, alongside the departure of the European and Jewish population from the central districts and their replacement by a new Tunisian bourgeoisie.

Challenged by an irreversible decline in numbers and importance, the Europeans who remained in Tunis between the 1960s and 1980s had to renegotiate their place and status in the new city. From their perspective, the tennis club probably felt like one of the last bastions to be preserved: an ambiguous testimony of social hegemony and implicit reminder of its end.

Curiously, Carlo's description leaves more space for Tunisia's minor cities, involved in several collective activities promoted by the tennis club, such as sports competitions or trips: 'We formed a team [for each club], but then we competed individually. [The tournaments] were all very nice, we travelled around Tunisia, visiting Sousse, Sfax, Bizerte: we went everywhere, it was very fun'.

In this way, while remaining a strictly personal object, the racket emerges as a vector of interaction with new people and places, promoting social interactions and allowing a mobility through Tunisia which, at the time, was still a privilege restricted to the elite.

## II A symbol of a world and its rules

Carlo's racket belongs to a lost world, anchored in a post-colonial historical context but still affected by the codes of the colonial era. It is immediately<sup>4</sup> associated with a place of memory with a strong emotional and symbolic value: the Tennis Club of Tunis.

The importance of this place rests on several aspects, all involving a social dimension. It is a protected space separated from the rest of the city, which explicitly defines an 'inside' and an 'outside' and implicitly divides its population between 'us' and 'them'. It is an area specifically intended and equipped not only for physical training, but also for building friendships and professional relationships. Finally, it is the arena where a hierarchy of shared principles, the 'rules of the game' of Tunis's high society, is acknowledged. The sporting/competitive component fades away in the face of the socio-symbolic dimension, making the racket a status symbol and a social marker.

As recalled during the interview, the tennis club is seen by parents as a place of control and protection for children: 'It was a place where you were kept away from the street, preventing you from fooling around on the streets [of Tunis]'. However, within its perimeter, the tennis club guaranteed a great freedom of action and became, in the eyes of young people, the place where they could experience a 'controlled' independence:

We paid the annual fee and then you could play as much as you wanted. As I told you, we arrived in the car with my grandfather and mother, we went in, and once we crossed the entrance everyone minded their own business [*si faceva i cavoli suoi*]. Finally, at the end of the afternoon, we met up to go home.

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<sup>4</sup> From the very first question, Carlo directs the discussion towards the tennis club, which then becomes the focus of the interview:

'Q: Let's start with the object in question, your tennis racket: where and when did you use it?

A: Well, I used it a little bit during my whole childhood, because my whole childhood was spent at the tennis club.'



In everyday life, the tennis club took up most of Carlo's free time. He explicitly admits that tennis filled his days and even his nights:

We were always there, in the sense that after staying at the disco until four o'clock in the morning, we went straight to the tennis club and played from five to seven in the morning. Only then did we go to bed.

*A real all-nighter, between the club and tennis!*

Yes, yes: it was a place where we spent all our time.

*Even in the summer?*

Especially in the summer! We used to play from 11 am onwards, often until very early in the morning.

Curiously, the specific sporting dimension of tennis – and therefore of the racket – occupies a minor place in Carlo's memory. What is retained is, above all, the normative aspect of the game: respect for the rules and the opponent, fair play and the dress code. Sport appears to have been more of a moral education than physical training. Above all, tennis is described as an opportunity to meet and talk with other members of high society, united by their affiliation to the same group. Carlo dedicates a large part of the interview to describing the curious tribe living inside the tennis club, which went beyond the borders of his own family and included several distinctive types:

There were two types of people: my family – which meant that I met the Bessis and all their extended family, including my cousins, my family friends and my childhood friends – and then a bunch of people I continued to meet throughout my entire life because they were players with whom we competed. So, for me the tennis club was on the one hand a protected place where I could meet my family, and on the other hand a place where I cultivated many childhood friendships, which continue to this day.

*For example?*

For example, [I met] the tennis champions Rafik Kaddour and Aziz Zouhir, all these great names of Tunisian tennis. [...] Then there were the presidents of the Tunisian sports associations and those of the club Esperance and Club Africain. In short, you could really meet the elite of Tunisian sport. [...] It was the club where Nicola Pietrangeli, a well-known Italian tennis player, captain of the Italian Davis Cup team, played. [...] But I'm telling you, we all knew each other there: for example, I once beat Marco Farinelli's father, who was the Italian ambassador in Tunis. One very funny thing was that at the tennis club I played



with André Nagy, who was a refugee from the Hungarian national [football] team and had asked for political asylum in 1956, after the events in Budapest, and who had been the coach of Barcelona football club<sup>5</sup>. And, once his contract with Barcelona ended, he came to Tunis to coach Club Africain. He was a very well-known figure in Tunisian sporting life. And I used to play tennis with him!

Composed of French, Italians, Tunisians, English, Americans and Hungarians, the community involved in the tennis club really stood out for its cosmopolitanism. This profile showed continuity with the colonial past, characterised in Tunisia by a great ethnic and cultural variety. After independence, this heterogeneity, which was the norm for Carlo's parents, had faded, following the Arabisation of the public administration and the mass departure of foreign minorities. Despite the variation in nationality, however, there was clear social homogeneity: as Carlo recalled, 'the tennis club was a very fancy place in Tunis and it was very difficult to be part of it [...]. Tennis was the sport of the elite at the time, which meant that only people of a certain social level played it'.

This function as a space of sociability for the (largely European) elites represented another significant element of continuity between the colonial period and independence, particularly in the eyes of the Italian bourgeoisie to which Carlo belonged, at least by birth. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, leading figures in the Italian community had created a network of economic and cultural institutions (including schools, hospitals, chambers of commerce and freemason lodges) which enhanced the social lives of the upper and middle classes. The Jews of Livorno, informal leaders of the Italian urban elite, contributed to the foundation and management of these institutions, and Carlo's grandparents too had held prestigious positions. The Second World War disrupted this network of institutions and contacts. As part of its imperialistic ambitions, Fascist Italy had claimed possession of Tunisia, which was under the rule of France. Following the defeat of the Axis armies and the liberation of Tunis from German and Italian troops (May 1943), France resolved the dispute by erasing the Italian community. All local institutions were dissolved and absorbed as compensation for the cost of war, schools were closed, and cultural events were banned for almost a decade. After independence, Italians were free to rebuild some associations, but they could not stop the rapid decrease in the population, which fell from 66,500 to 6,651 between 1956 and 1976. Surviving the political transformations of the country because of its apolitical nature, at the end of the 1970s the Tennis Club of Tunis was one of the final institutions to provide a sociability space for the European elite.

Through the game, new generations could get close to important people and enter the network of the capital's bourgeoisie. At the same time, they learned – often implicitly – the values of the high and middle classes, as the 'rules of the game' conformed to their model of society: morality, honourability, individual merit and material wellbeing. The internalisation of this set of codes emerges from Carlo's narrative, who recalls tennis matches played with important people, and underlines, in a crucial sentence: 'for me, the tennis club had been the core of my socio-cultural development throughout my childhood'.

The racket itself materialises this bond between values and social status: a sporting object, designed for individual use, intended for competition within the perimeter of well-codified

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5 Actually, André Nagy had played football for Unión Deportiva Las Palmas.





Figure 3 The Tunis Tennis Club team in the 1930s, including several members of Carlo's family © C. U. private archives

rules, understood and accepted by all. But also a precious object, with great material and symbolic value: the racket presented by Carlo is a Wilson T-2000, a legendary model in the history of tennis. Produced between 1967 and 1987, the all-metal T-2000 was a revolutionary tennis racket and became the favourite model of American champion Jimmy Connors, who won eight Grand Slams with it. In the hands of a young player from Tunisia at the time, this object was a marker of elite social and sporting status. Forty years later, its impeccable state of preservation bears witness to its owner's emotional attachment to it.

Interestingly, this economic dimension doesn't seem to affect the sense of belonging. Carlo never refers to wealth and money as a value in itself. Even when he recalls that access to the tennis club was difficult and included an annual fee of 25 dinars, he also points out that this amount 'has never been very much', suggesting that the club membership wasn't reserved to a wealthy minority. Instead, admission was based on sponsorship: the club's statute established that every new member had to present an application sponsored by two active members, with at least three years' seniority, before being approved by the club's direction. The selection was therefore based on the moral and social reputation of the applicant: a subtle criterion that left a large margin of discretion and invested potential sponsors with an informal – yet palpable – prestige. An anecdote from Carlo is revealing:

As I was not too bright a student, when the principal got angry with me he called me into his office, scolded me and made me sign the teachers' [tennis club] applications.

*So he proposed a sort a deal with you so they could gain easy access to the club?*

Yes, that's it! Because you see, as I was quite strong from a sporting point of view and I was known in Tunisia for my tennis skills, when I signed [as a sponsor] the application to join the tennis club, it went through in just two weeks.

*So the teachers were not part of the elite, a priori?*



Well, it wasn't easy for them to get in: they got in a little bit thanks to me through a relationship that was... I'm not saying "friendly" ... but in short, they knew who I was.

Affiliation with the tennis club, a well-known sign of social status, was therefore a symbolic resource that could be exchanged with other external social actors. In the case of the teachers, this meant that the traditional hierarchical relationships could occasionally be overturned.

Through its owner's narrative, the racket provides access to the geographical, emotional and social anchor points of his past before his migration. The reflections about tennis in Tunis are similar to other case studies analysed on a Mediterranean scale, suggesting some interesting comparisons. Piera Rossetto, in her research into the dispersion of the Jewish community in Libya between 1948 and 1967, stresses the importance of clubs and tennis for the sociability of the urban elites and for the integration of Libyan Jews into the Italian population (Rossetto 2015, Rossetto 2016). We can observe a similar geography of memory among the Jewish and European minorities in Tunisia and Libya, and a parallel way of remembering them. In his memories, Roberto Nunes-Vais describes Tripoli as 'a small world closed in on itself, a way of life without élan and without fantasy' (Nunes-Vais 1982, 13-15). Similarly, Carlo presents Tunis and its tennis club as 'A micro-world: yes, it was absolutely a micro-world. Completely golden'. The nostalgia for the disappearance of these places, with the sudden loss of spatial and social references, also brings the two experiences together.

### III A reminder of a migrant condition

Already a companion of childhood and youth, the racket acquired a new dimension through the experience of emigration, which involved the downsizing of tennis as sport, a growing distance from Tunis and the dispersion of friends. The political evolution of Tunisia and its repercussions on the tennis club made the rest, shaping a deep sense of displacement.

As Paul Basu observes, migration is always defined by objects and by any form of physical sensory materiality, and these can be divided into two main types. On the one hand, objects of migration are those that actively contribute to the mobility, because they are functional to the journey and/or the settlement (such as specific clothes, documents or travel objects) or because they are associated, in the refugee's memory, with migration (e.g. the sea, the train or specific smells/scents). On the other hand, objects in migration are defined as ordinary items of everyday life that are involved in their owner's movement (Basu and Coleman 2008, 316).

While our racket seems a perfect example of an object in migration, a closer analysis reveals it actually played an active role, even before the migration process actually started. By participating in the creation of a network of contacts in a cosmopolitan environment, and by promoting access to social circuits already open to mobility (in the form of study trips, tournaments and professional experience abroad), the racket helped to direct its owner's migration strategy towards the European area. Indeed, Carlo's migration was not a forced migration, nor an exile, but rather a voluntary migration to acquire higher education and achieve a personal career in Europe. This reminds us of the semantic plurality of the word 'migration', which includes an enormous variety of experiences: migration for work, colonial migration, forced migration, political exile, dispersion, and diaspora. Emigration is sometimes a tragedy, and sometimes – as in the case of the interviewee – an opportunity for social mobility. In other cases, the line between voluntary and forced migration is not completely clear (ibid., 314).



The common denominator of all these migratory experiences is the capacity to modify the value and meaning of objects, producing a semantic shift. Sometimes the migration itself gives the object a brand-new value, transforming it into a symbol, a connection with the past, an opportunity to build another vision of the world. This is the case with Carlo's racket, which seems to suggest to its owner the instability of the old post-colonial world, but also the permanence – and so the universality – of some of its values. This combination of ruptures and continuity first of all concerns the geographical dimension: leaving Tunisia meant leaving behind high-level tennis. But at the same time, the distance enhances the link between tennis and Tunisia, reinforcing its emotional dimension:

[I played tennis] until I was 17 and a half, when – this was July 1982 – I passed my baccalaureate and left for Italy in September.

*Did you continue to play tennis in Italy?*

No, because it was too expensive and too far from home. However, every time I came back to Tunis I would go and play tennis at the tennis club. Always.

The question of money became more significant with the migration, and not only due to the migrant's new social condition. Here Carlo underlines another difference with the past, concerning the tennis club's social background:

*From your youth to today, have you noticed any changes in the structure of the place, or in the people who frequent it?*

Well, everything has become much more *nouveau riche*. In the sense that now the tennis club has become a place frequented by people, let's say, who have made easy money. A place for the elite, but more a financial elite than a gaming elite.

*What, in your opinion, is a 'gaming elite'?*

Before, there was a selection based on merit, on sporting talent. Nowadays, the selection is [based] only on money.

*But even in your time, the tennis club brought together the best of society.*

Yes, but once you were inside, the winner was the most skilled, not the richest. There was a form of social rebalancing based on sporting merit.

Through the memories evoked by the racket, tennis becomes the paradigm of the decline of a world and its ideals, the end of an era when social selection was less a matter of money and more about respect for moral rules. What emerges implicitly is nostalgia for an imagined past, when



the European population could still present itself as a self-proclaimed aristocracy, which made its membership to privileged places (such as the tennis club) a vector of its sense of superiority.

At the same time, this object reveals a generational discomfort, linked to the historical evolution of Tunisia and the marginalisation of the descendants of European settlers. The 1990s marked the last act in the decline of the historical Italian community, after two centuries of presence. The new president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who in 1987 had taken over from Habib Bourguiba at the head of the country, attracted a new kind of immigrant, mainly entrepreneurs, professionals and technicians, following the opportunities created by the new liberal policy (Morone 2015, 64). Lacking the emotional attachment to Tunisia of the previous one, this community of 'Italians 2.0' was not interested in settling stably and definitively in the country: its presence was based on the prospect of quick and easy income (Gianturco and Zaccai 2004, 62-63). Carlo implicitly criticises this situation in his words. At the same time, the memory of the racket becomes a vehicle for a subtle socio-political critique of contemporary Tunisia and the selection of executives under the Ben Ali presidency and after the 2011 revolution. Embodying the point of view of its 'old' generation, Carlo observes, for example, that 'back in the days [of my youth], from time to time someone was kicked out because he didn't respect the rules of fair play. I don't want to sound nostalgic, but in my time the tennis club was much more regulated than today'.

While tennis reveals a great distance from the past, it also suggests some continuities in the social sphere. Many professional and personal relationships built during the tennis club years resisted the shock of migration, and they sometimes helped to achieve new goals in new geographical contexts.

Finally, from Carlo's perspective, the racket seems to remind him of the deep, dynamic relationship created between past and present, an inextricable mixture of continuities and ruptures.

#### IV Conclusion

The analysis of Carlo's tennis racket has no claim to universality: nevertheless, it offers enough elements to go beyond a strictly anecdotal dimension and proposes a reflection on a broader scale, around the notions of objects of exile and objects of memory.

The objects involved in migration are characterised by their semantic instability. Mobility changes the meaning of the object and modifies its symbolic status: if not in reality, at least in the migrant's memory. As pointed out by Alexandra Galitzine-Loumpet, during the migration process these objects go through a double metamorphosis (of uses and of meaning), mixing material and immaterial (Galitzine-Loumpet 2013). From a material point of view, Carlo's Wilson T-2000 tennis racket is a replicable example, an industrial product. But in the light of its owner's migratory trajectory, it acquires a new identity, becoming a unique object, the mirror of an unrepeatable individual experience. At the same time, it contributes to the construction of its owner's identity, at the crossroads between public and private.

From a microhistorical perspective, the objects of exile offer a key to understand the material cultures of migration, and to access lost cultures, transformed by mobility. They allow us to grasp the complexity of the global at the scale of the minuscule, through the study of a microcosm, in which we find the effects and foundations of larger-scale phenomena (Trivellato 2015, 13).



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# Addis Abeba-Firenze, andata e ritorno

## Storia di tre lettere e una foto\*

Emanuela Trevisan Semi

**Abstract** A photo and three letters: these are the objects this contribution explores. The letters, one of which was handwritten, were sent to Florentine lawyer Carlo Alberto Viterbo between 15 May and 25 June, 1940, by Menghistu Isaac from Dr Faitlovith's school in Addis Ababa. The correspondence, which evokes a spatial connection between Addis Ababa and Florence at a time marked by frenetic Italian colonial history, can be read as a sort of synecdoche in the history of Jews of Ethiopia (Beta Israel). The last of the letters was sent to Viterbo when he was no longer in Florence—he had in fact been arrested a few days previously and interned as a Zionist Jew in the Urbisaglia camp in Italy, where he remained until July 1, 1941. Anti-Jewish legislation, colonialism, historical and cultural fractures, migration and individual and collective memories of the past constitute the threads with which the letters are woven.

**Keywords** Ethiopian Jews; Italian Colonialism; Memory; Migrations; Palimpsest

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## I Introduzione

Gli oggetti di cui tratto nel testo sono una foto e tre lettere, di cui una manoscritta, inviate a Firenze tra il 15 maggio e il 25 giugno 1940 dalla dr. Faitlovith's school di Addis Abeba, nella persona di Menghistu Isaac, all'Avv. Carlo Alberto Viterbo. Le lettere, accompagnate da altri documenti, mi furono consegnate a Firenze, più di trent'anni orsono, da Giuseppe Viterbo, figlio dell'Avv. Carlo Alberto. Nel 1984, nel corso della mia ricerca presso i Beta Israel<sup>1</sup> nel *mercaz qelitalah* (campo d'integrazione) di Ashkelon (Israele), fui messa al corrente del probabile possesso dei discendenti dell'avvocato fiorentino di materiale di grande interesse sugli ebrei d'Etiopia. Grazie alla generosità del figlio Giuseppe e della nuora Lionella Neppi Modona, ho potuto infatti avere accesso alla ricca documentazione dell'archivio dell'avvocato fiorentino e attingervi per le mie varie pubblicazioni sui Beta Israel. L'intero archivio fotografico è stato successivamente lasciato al Zionist museum a Gerusalemme.

Tra tutte le mie pubblicazioni, sono quelle relative ad alcuni dei 25 giovani - portati in Europa, in Palestina e in Egitto (tra il 1904 e il 1930) da Jacques Faitlovitch per studiare nelle istituzioni ebraiche e rientrare in Etiopia come futuri insegnanti-, che hanno suscitato il maggiore interesse tra i Beta Israel, dopo la loro immigrazione in Israele (a partire dal 1984).

Nel corso degli anni i discendenti di questi giovani mi hanno fatto più volte richiesta di documenti o informazioni sui loro bisnonni, prozii e parenti vari, alcuni dei quali avevano avuto storie tragiche, perché morti di tubercolosi o di altre malattie, di depressione, e spesso in condizioni di grande solitudine e abbandono.

Di fronte all'ennesima richiesta di una discendente di un giovane brillante che dopo aver studiato a Vienna era morto a Parigi nel 1933, ho riaperto i numerosi scatoloni del mio archivio, costruito in quarant'anni di ricerche, e le lettere scritte da alcuni di quei giovani hanno subito colpito la mia attenzione. Frammenti e lettere di quasi un secolo fa mi invitavano a chinare di nuovo il capo su quel prezioso materiale per ricostruire brevi storie da restituire alla "storia", nella speranza di creare ponti generazionali e culturali per i Beta Israel che una volta emigrati in Israele, avevano perso la memoria del proprio passato in Etiopia. Allo stesso modo, alcune di quelle lettere mi riportavano a Firenze, all'archivio che la famiglia Viterbo mi aveva consentito di fotocopiare e utilizzare, lettere che si riconnettevano proprio al viaggio che Carlo Alberto Viterbo aveva compiuto in Etiopia tra i Beta Israel arrivando ad Addis Abeba l'11 agosto 1936, all'indomani della conquista coloniale italiana. L'ultima di queste era stata inviata da Addis Abeba a Carlo Alberto Viterbo quando però l'avvocato non era più a Firenze. Era stato infatti arrestato il 10 giugno 1940 e internato come ebreo sionista nel campo di Urbisaglia, dove sarebbe rimasto fino al 1 luglio 1941. Legislazione anti-ebraica, colonialismo, fratture storiche e culturali, migrazioni, memorie singole e memoria del passato costituivano la trama su cui si intessevano quelle lettere.

1 \* Ringrazio Monica Miniati per una rilettura di questo testo.

Niente di scritto ci è stato trasmesso dai Beta Israel per raccontare la loro storia. Ci sono opinioni contrastanti sulle origini dei Beta Israel. È stato affermato che i Beta Israel fossero discendenti di Salomone, della tribù perduta di Dan, di una colonia nell'Alto Egitto, di ebrei dello Yemen. Steven Kaplan ha scritto che "non c'è dubbio che i Beta Israel debbano essere inteso come il prodotto di processi avvenuti in Etiopia tra il XIV e il XVI secolo" (Kaplan 1993: 647). L'emergere come popolo distinto è stato quindi, secondo diversi studiosi, il risultato di diversi fattori, politici e sociali. Geograficamente si trovano principalmente nelle regioni settentrionali dell'Etiopia dove si stabilirono quando furono privati del possesso della terra, a partire dai primi anni dell'Ottocento. Erano concentrati nell'area di Gondar. La popolazione dei Beta Israel era stimata tra 80.000 e 200.000 al massimo a metà del XIX secolo (Quirin 1992: 182-183).



## II Tre lettere e una foto. Oggetti che nel loro andirivieni migratorio suscitano la mia curiosità e su cui desidero soffermarmi.

Una foto scattata dall'avvocato Carlo Alberto Viterbo, nell'agosto 1936, ritrae Menghistu Isaac, assieme ad altri (compagni), tra i quali il nipote Mekuria Tsegaye davanti alla scuola Faitlovitch di Addis Abeba. Menghistu Isaac, fratello della madre di Mekuria Tsegaye (e dunque zio materno di Mekuria) è il primo a destra della seconda fila, sullo sfondo c'è Taamrat Emmanuel, il direttore della scuola che studiò molti anni in Europa (Francia e Italia) (Trevisan Semi 2000; Trevisan Semi 2018). Nella foto sono in quattro a indossare abiti europei: giacca, camicia e cravatta. Mengistu e Taamrat con giacca e farfallino mentre Mekuria appare senza cravatta. Il quarto è Belay Makonnen (noto anche col nome di Shemariahu) che era stato a studiare a Gerusalemme. L'abito europeo è una sorta di status simbolo di chi ha fatto i propri studi fuori dal paese natale. In effetti i giovani portati in Europa o in Palestina da Jacques Faitlovitch manterranno l'uso dell'abbigliamento occidentale per tutta la vita, come se fosse un marcatore identitario cui non potevano rinunciare. Nella foto, nipote e zio sono entrambi sorridenti e sembrano posare uno sguardo fiducioso sul fotografo, Carlo Alberto Viterbo. In realtà, di lì a pochi mesi, la situazione sarebbe precipitata. Taamrat fuggirà in Egitto per non essere contato tra i morti del massacro perpetrato dagli italiani come risposta all'attentato compiuto contro il generale Rodolfo Graziani il 19 febbraio 1937 (Del Boca 1982: 87). Menghistu si troverà invece ad assumere la direzione della scuola, senza alcuna investitura ufficiale, dopo un periodo garantito da Jona Bogale, un altro giovane che aveva studiato a Gerusalemme e a Francoforte. Le tre lettere del 1940 risalgono a questo periodo e la foto a quattro anni prima.

Le tre lettere scritte in italiano tra il 15 maggio e il 25 giugno 1940 da Menghistu Isaac dalla dr. Faitlovitch's school di Addis Abeba sono state spedite all'Avv. Carlo Alberto Viterbo



Figure 1 Addis Abeba, estate 1936  
(archivio Viterbo)



a Firenze. Due sono dattiloscritte ma su carta non intestata mentre quella manoscritta porta l'intestazione della scuola in tre lingue, ebraico, inglese e italiano. Nell'intestazione in ebraico si riporta *Bet Sefer ivri doctor Faitlovitch Addis Abeba, Habash* (scuola ebraica del dr. Faitlovitch, Addis Abeba, Abissinia). È necessario sottolineare l'uso del termine *ivri* e non *yehudi* termine questo cui si sarebbe invece fatto ricorso se si fosse trattato di una scuola ebraica in Europa. Il termine *ivri* in genere si riferisce a qualcosa che ha a che fare con la lingua ebraica (*ivrit*) ed evoca un legame con l'epoca biblica mentre *yehudi* si riferisce in particolare all'esperienza ebraica diasporica. Nella lettera del 5 giugno viene accluso un foglio con i nomi dei sei ragazzi che si trovavano nella scuola in quel periodo. Accanto al nome di due di questi ragazzi è scritto "questi ultimi sono disoccupati da un mese". Vi è anche un'informazione, aggiunta a mano, sulla morte di Makonnen Levi, nipote di Taamrat a causa di "una malattia molto dura e terribile" (Trevisan Semi 2005). Nel documento si ripete ossessivamente che nessuno li sta aiutando ("...nessuno fuori di noi chi mi aiuta. Siccome non c'è nessuno che mi aiuta, vi informo che nullo" [sic]). Ovvero Menghistu, in questo italiano incerto, vuol dire che non sta ricevendo nessun tipo di aiuto da parte di nessuno. In quest'ultima frase si percepisce tutta la gravità e la drammaticità della situazione che stava vivendo il giovane trovatosi da un giorno all'altro a dover gestire una scuola in tempi difficilissimi.

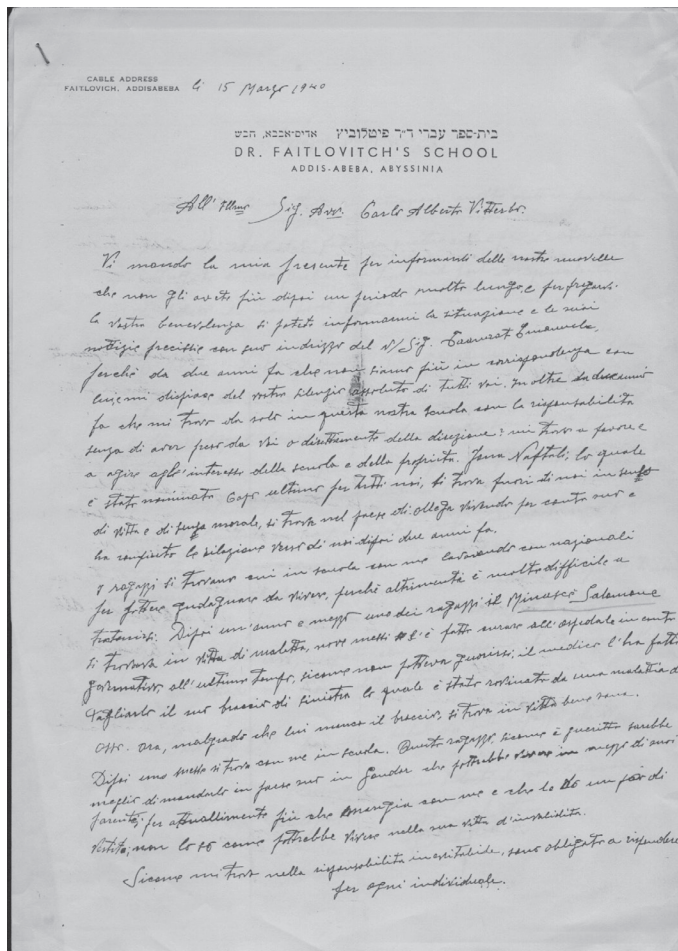


Figure 2 and 3, Letter from Menghistu to Viterbo, 15 March 1940, Viterbo Private Archive

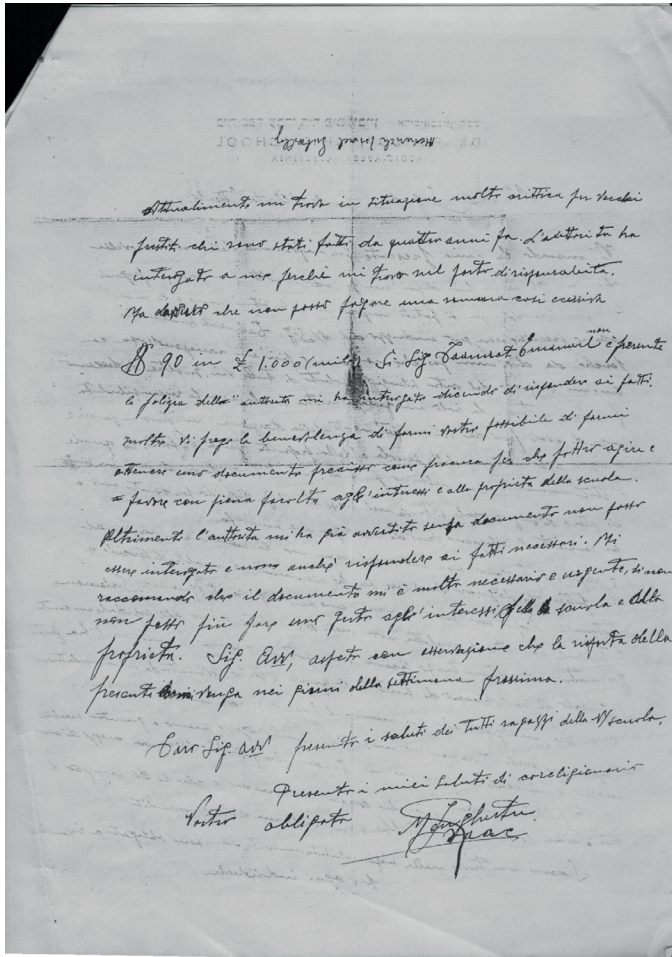


Figure 3

La scuola era stata creata nel 1923 da Jacques Faitlovitch, un ebreo polacco allievo a Parigi di Joseph Halevy, il primo ebreo europeo ad essere stato inviato in Etiopia nel 1867/68 per una missione esplorativa tra i Beta Israel (Falascià)<sup>2</sup> che erano divenuti oggetto dell'attenzione dei missionari protestanti a partire da metà Ottocento e quindi soggetti a pratiche di conversioni. Faitlovitch riprese l'opera di Halevy per contrastare l'azione delle missioni protestanti e organizzò diversi viaggi in Etiopia, a partire dal 1904/05, dai quali tornava portando con sé giovani Beta Israel che inviava a studiare presso famiglie o istituzioni ebraiche europee (Trevisan Semi 2007). Durante l'occupazione fascista la scuola era stata italianizzata e ribattezzata "Scuola isra-

2 Il termine Falasha, che secondo Steve Kaplan (1992: 65) non ha prove della sua esistenza prima del XV secolo, può essere tradotto come "rimosso dalla sua terra", "esiliato", "vagabondo". Questo termine era di uso comune, insieme a quello di Beta Israel, da parte degli stessi appartenenti al gruppo fino alla loro emigrazione in Israele. Da quel momento cominciò ad essere considerato come un'espressione estremamente peggiorativa e fu sostituito da quello di "ebrei d'Etiopia". Il termine Beta Israel non ha questa connotazione negativa ed è quello usato prevalentemente negli scritti scientifici. Il termine Falasha è qui usato quando mi riferisco al gruppo prima dell'emigrazione in Israele.





elita Faitlovitch<sup>3</sup>. Contrariamente a quanto spesso si legge, la scuola non fu chiusa dalle autorità italiane (Messing 1999: 62) ma ebbe difficoltà a garantirsi un'esistenza per questioni finanziarie dato che non riceveva più fondi dall'Unione delle comunità israelitiche italiane, l'ente finanziatore che aveva sostituito l'American Pro-Falasha Committee. Tuttavia, per qualche ragione sconosciuta, Menghistu usa la vecchia carta intestata, precedente l'invasione coloniale.

L'avvocato Carlo Alberto Viterbo era stato inviato ad Addis Abeba dall'Unione delle comunità israelitiche all'indomani della conquista dell'Etiopia, nel 1936. Il viaggio aveva un duplice scopo: riorganizzare gli ebrei italiani presenti in Etiopia e stabilire un contatto con i Falascià. Viterbo rimase ad Addis Abeba dall'11 agosto 1936 al 20 novembre 1936 e si spostò successivamente assieme a Emmanuel Taamrat tra i villaggi Falascia nella zona di Gondar fino al 22 gennaio 1937 quando lasciò Gondar per Asmara (Viterbo 1993).

Nella lettera a Viterbo del 25 giugno 1940 Menghistu era ignaro del fatto che l'avvocato fosse stato arrestato. In quella lettera Menghistu lo informava di aver ricevuto le 420 lire da questi inviate per gli allievi e la scuola. Ignorando completamente quanto stesse succedendo in Italia gli scriveva anche che sperava che l'attività morta con Faitlovitch potesse rinascere con lui, l'avvocato italiano che sembrava essersi preso a cuore la sorte dei Beta Israel.

Le lettere si riferiscono all'anno 1940, ma come si viveva in quei giorni ad Addis Abeba, sotto occupazione italiana?

Nell'ottobre del 1940 ad Addis Abeba i coloni italiani erano 35.000 di cui 11.000 donne e 7000 bambini (Del Boca 1982: 455) e la guerriglia si era nuovamente attivata con l'entrata in guerra dell'Italia. Secondo la testimonianza di una camicia nera, Giulio Lenzi, mancavano generi di consumo: "Non avvengono bombardamenti. Pare che la guerra sia combattuta in un altro pianeta. Ci sono però i segni: la benzina quasi del tutto scomparsa, per cui i borghesi devono camminare a piedi attraverso l'immensa città: certi generi di consumo, come gli insaccati, i formaggi e simili, non si trovano più, le sigarette sono razionate" (Del Boca 1982: 373). Possiamo immaginare che non fossero queste le preoccupazioni di Menghistu mentre scriveva a Viterbo. I Britannici ad ogni modo entrarono nella capitale etiope il 6 aprile 1941 e il 5 maggio di quell'anno l'Imperatore Haile Selassié vi fece ritorno mettendo fine all'impresa coloniale italiana.

Le preoccupazioni espresse nelle lettere riguardano il silenzio di Taamrat. Sappiamo che Taamrat per non danneggiare la scuola e chi era rimasto in Etiopia non aveva scritto della sua fuga in Egitto, tanto più che si era impegnato nella resistenza mentre era in esilio. Menghistu faceva presente che da due anni era il solo responsabile della scuola senza che nessuno in Italia lo avesse investito ufficialmente di quell'incarico e che non aveva più nessuna notizia di Taamrat. Sottolineava inoltre che Jona Naftali (Jona Bogale), l'unico invece ad aver avuto una nomina ufficiale, se ne era andato ("in senso di vitto e di fuga morale<sup>4</sup>) e viveva per conto suo a Wolleka dopo aver rotto ogni relazione con loro. Taamrat dal canto suo aveva scritto a Faitlovitch di aver ricevuto una lettera da Jona il quale lo informava che "Annoiato dal disordine che regna nella Scuola, causa anche la poca armonia con uno dei suoi compagni [era] deciso di ritirarsi dalla

3 Lettera di Taamrat, 23 marzo 1939, in Trevisan Semi (2000). Le lettere di Taamrat, da me pubblicate in *L'epistolario*, sono per la maggior parte scritte in italiano e si trovano all'Archivio Faitlovitch della Sourasky Central Library dell'Università di Tel Aviv, file 137.

4 Lettera di Menghistu, 15 marzo 1940, Archivio privato Viterbo.

Addis Abeba, li 5 Giugno 1940.

Al Sig. Dr. Avvocato Carlo Alberto Viterbo

Caro Sig. Avv.

Abbiamo ricevuta la vostra onorabile lettera del 21 aprile 1940 che ha fatto una viva soddisfazione e granda gioia per tutti noi di nome Falascia. E sono molto contento della vostra risposta alla mia lettera e di darvi vostra speranza che vi interessate alle nostre difficoltà, delle quale che siete informato.

Sig. Avv. capisco molto bene che le condizioni generali da voi che non sono tanto favorabili per fare il gesto di aiuto verso noi altri. Ma, le stesse difficoltà c'è gli abbiamo anche noi, più peggio ancora condizioni colorati.

Domando solamente un aiuto pro tempore per arrivare a dare da vivere a questo ragazzo che ha dovuto subire l'operazione, e per gli due ragazzi che sono disoccupati di lavoro; perché si avevo qualcuno che mi aiuta sia in denaro sia in mano d'opera, sarebbe un aiuto molto grande; ma invece non le ho né di mano d'opera né aiuto di denaro. Siccome non credo bene di andare così avanti, secondo mio opinione, credo meglio di fare il massimo possibile per aiutarli in denaro per riuscire a mandargli in Gondar che vivono in mezzo dei parenti loro, che sono separati da un periodo bastanza distante. E certamente che i parenti loro di questi ragazzi, saranno infinitamente contenti di essere raggiunti con i figli loro. Siccome che non si fa proprio niente nella scuola per il momento. Senza aiuto sarebbe molto difficile a trattargli. Anche loro preferiscono di essere raggiunti con i parenti, soltanto va molto bene per il Solomon che si trova nella vita di invalidità, che possa vivere in mezzo suoi parenti.

Quanto per l'informazioni del nostro Sig. Profesor Taamrat Emanuele l'avete dimenticato. Ora mai mi sono già informato, ma resto con difficoltà che non posso mettermi in corrispondenza.

Prima la partenza del nostro Sig. Taamrat Emanuele per Gondar con lei, c'è erano di Talleri depositati da uno suo amico. Quando Sig. Taamrat E. soggiornava per pochi giorni a Gondar; aveva dato a Jona Naftali, l'autorizzazione, dicendo che in caso di difficoltà finanziaria, che possa toccare di questi \$ N° 100. E secondo l'autorizzazione Jona Naftali gli ha doperati per conto della scuola e per conto suo personale, che ha fatto male; Questa somma di \$ 100, non sono ancora restituiti fino ad oggi. Il padrone di questa somma è arrivato del confinamento della Somalia; e mi è venuto interrogare se posso restituire. Io rispondevo che non posso rispondere a questi fatti, perché sono delle cose che non mi riguardano; ma siccome ha cominciato a tirare le polizze, mi dispiace di lasciare toccare dei individuali di fuori gli interessi della nostra scuola? Mi sono obbligato a farlo tacere in pagando di £ 200 per il momento di tasca mia e dicendo che sarà pagato fino l'ultimo. In verità non sono obbligato e non sono da intorgere in questi fatti. Per la procura e un foglio di riconoscimento che ho bisogno. Questo documento mi serve per agire e favore agli interessi della nostra scuola; ogni caso che mi presento davanti l'autorità per interegazioni generali per propriete. Fino questo anno lo salvato in qualun modo. E da Sig. Taamrat E. non abbiamo mai avuto un documento, perché non bisognava. All'ora il documento l'aspettavo e legato con la vostra prossima lettera che mi mandrete.

Presentiamo nostre ceneri saluti distinti a tutta vostra buona famiglia.

Figure 4 and 5, Letter from Menghistu to Viterbo, 5 June 1940, Viterbo Private Archive

Nella vostra presente mi avevate pregato di informarvi che i quali sono dei allievi chi residono in nostra scuola, e di quelli nostri Falascie o per asardo si c'è qualcuno che mi aiuta in qualun modo, anche fuori dei Falasci? E che lei lo rispondete.

Vi informo che ho ne dei nostri coreligionari, e nessuno fuori di noi chi mi aiuta. Siccome non c'è nessuno, che mi aiuta; vi informo che nullo.

Allievi residenti in nostra scuola sono:

BECHIE BELAINH	Vi informo la dispense novella che in data 22 Aprile 1940, è deceduto il nostro fratello Yassoum Loni il nipote del nostro Sig. Professor Taamrat Emanuele, da una malattia molto dura e terribile.
MINASCE SALOMON	
MELESE TEOLE	Questi due ultimi sono disoccupati da un mese
AIMAZIA GHETE	
GHIZAU TACHELE	MELESE - CASSA
MELESE - CASSA	

Menghistu



Addis Abeba, li 25 Giugno 1940

Al Signor Dr. Avv. Carlo Alberto Viterbo.

Abbiamo raccolto la sua presente del 6 Giugno, con il vostro generoso denaro come aiuto verso noi di £. 420.00 (Quattrocentoventi) presso Banco di Roma, e la quale ha fornito una vivissima soddisfazione a tutti noi residenti presso la nostra scuola. Io sono infinitamente soddisfatto del suo ricchissimo e generoso interessamento ed di aver'ottenuto uno parecchio aiuto da Lei stesso. E così considero che la morta attività del nos/ Dr. Paitlovi è rinascità e ricreatà da Lei. E così secondo Lei spero di riuscire a mandare i ragazzi a vivere in mezzo parenti loro in Gondar. Verso i prossimi mesi, secondo la situazione, e le condizioni generali da qui noi, certamente che Lei avete presso notizie, molto probabilmente che saremo in difficoltà, perché siamo già cominciati a essere disoccupati di lavoro.

Vi spiego a cosa mi sono servito del vos/ generoso denaro verso i ragazzi:

- 1° £. 150.00 (centocinquanta) per vestire il Salomon lo quale ha dovuto (subire l'operazione e veramente è stato guastato)
- 2° E 200.00 (duecento) che ho fatto un aiuto in nome suo per il mese di Luglio prossimo, tra la mensa loro insufficiente.
- 3° " 80.00 (Ottanta) mi sono servito per pagamento della tassa annuale della nos/ proprietà della scuola, e per rinnovamento del recinto del nostro terreno, che sono in facendo.

In oltre nostro collega l'Orefice Ezra Tbià, si trova attualmente con noi in residence alla nostra scuola perché non ha la volontà di pagare un affitto di casa fuori città. Mi dispiace che i nostri coreligionari pensando per bene loro e non mettano in testa le difficoltà di questi ragazzi abbandonati. Il suddetto è un persone per bene finanziariamente e sta residendo con noi. Al meno si ho consegnato una buona stanza a lui, per riconoscenza della scuola dovrebbe provvedere di aiutare a questi ragazzi; che l'abbiamo salvato di pagare un affitto di casa a fuori, di un periodo già di un anno.

Vi comunico questa sua mancanza di spirito, e poi che Lei lo consigliate per scritto, e noi andiamo bene con lui.

I ragazzi vi inviano una lettera scritta in lingua Amharica rispondenti alla sua presente e ringraziandovi del vostro generoso denaro per loro. Che cercherete a capirla questa lingua si non l'avete dimenticata.

Presentiamo vivamente il nostro ringrazio infinitamente e inviandovi i nostri ceneri e distinti saluti a tutta la sua famiglia.

*Sig. Avv. Menghistu*  
*Per raccomandare di non dimenticare il foglio di riconoscimento già preparato in mia precedente lettera*

Figure 6 Letter from Menghistu to Viterbo, 25 June 1940, Viterbo Private Archive

Scuola<sup>5</sup>. E' probabile che ci fossero dunque dissapori tra Jona Bogale e Menghistu e quell'accenno a "fuga morale" lo lascia intendere. Taamrat scriveva che "io sono del parere che se Jona farà difficoltà [sarà meglio] far guardare la cassa da Menghestu (ex scolaro di Strasbourg). Spero che l'amico Viterbo penserà al trasporto degli scolari. In questo caso occorrerebbe garantire il vitto al guardiano<sup>6</sup>. Taamrat pensava dunque che fosse meglio far rientrare ai loro villaggi gli scolari ma occorreva organizzare anche queste partenze, cosa che evidentemente non avvenne.

Nel 1940 I ragazzi della scuola lavoravano con i coloni italiani per potersi guadagnare da vivere. Menghistu scriveva che da un anno e mezzo Menashe Salomon (Melesse) era malato, per nove mesi si era fatto curare dall'ospedale per conto governativo ma non riuscendo a guarire, il medico gli aveva fatto tagliare il braccio sinistro per una malattia all'osso: "Ora malgrado che

5 Lettera di Taamrat, 20 gennaio 1938 in Trevisan Semi (2000: 1261).

6 Ibid.





lui manca il braccio”<sup>7</sup> sta bene e sta da loro ma sarebbe meglio mandarlo dalla sua famiglia a Gondar, senza di lui [Menghistu] non sa come potrebbe cavarsela con questa invalidità e lui ha questa responsabilità e si sente obbligato a rispondere ad ogni studente. Lui ha avuto prestiti per 4 anni dall’ autorità italiana ma ora è in situazione critica e non può pagare una somma così importante. È stato interrogato dalla polizia e chiede un documento che attesti che lui agisce negli interessi della scuola<sup>8</sup>.

L’italiano usato per le lettere risulta comprensibile seppure a tratti pasticciato.

Quell’italiano scritto, ancorché povero, utilizzato nello scambio epistolare con Viterbo, era il risultato dei quattro anni trascorsi a Strasburgo assieme al nipote Mekuria Tsegaye. Quando Menghistu e suo nipote erano arrivati a Strasburgo nel 1930 era stato infatti consigliato loro di studiare come seconda lingua l’italiano dato che le mire italiane in Etiopia erano evidenti a tutti e certamente sarebbe stato loro più utile quella lingua piuttosto che l’inglese.

Quando undici anni prima Menghistu aveva lasciato il villaggio di Traza (nel Lasta) assieme al nipote per viaggiare in una carovana condotta da allievi più vecchi di Faitlovitch (Dessié et Amazia) che avrebbe impiegato otto giorni di marcia per arrivare ad Addis Abeba, non si sarebbe certo immaginato di trovarsi nella situazione descritta nelle lettere (Mekuria 1999). I messaggeri che Faitlovitch inviava presso le famiglie nei villaggi dispersi d’ Etiopia per convincerle a lasciar partire i loro figli per frequentare la sua scuola ad Addis Abeba promettevano di mandarli successivamente in Europa dove sarebbero diventati “illustrious, famous people...” (Summerfield 2003: 175).

Menghistu, sempre assieme al nipote, di qualche anno più giovane, fu effettivamente inviato a studiare a Strasburgo ma solo per quattro anni, pochi per diventare illustri e famosi. Tuttavia è certo che quel periodo all’ estero fu determinante per i loro anni a venire.

A l’ loro arrivo in Francia, erano stati ospitati nell’ orfanotrofio di Haguenau, nei pressi di Strasburgo, dove vi avrebbero avuto dimora per un anno e mezzo.

Successivamente furono trasferiti a Strasburgo per studiare in una scuola di commercio anche se entrambi avrebbero preferito dedicarsi a studi letterari. L’orfanotrofio di Haguenau era “La maison des enfants Les Cigognes”, occupato dai tedeschi durante la guerra. Nel 1930-32, anni in cui i due ragazzi erano a Haguenau, il presidente dell’orfanotrofio era Leon Moch e direttori della scuola erano i coniugi Weill. L’orfanotrofio ospitava prevalentemente bambini piccoli (sulla base delle foto che si possono vedere sul sito web). È lecito, perciò, supporre che i due ragazzi si trovassero isolati, senza compagni della stessa classe d’età. Poiché i nazisti hanno distrutto tutti gli archivi dell’orfanotrofio ebraico non esiste alcuna documentazione sui due giovani.

Menguistu a 18 anni fu mandato a lavorare in una fabbrica di tessuti mentre Mekuria, più giovane, rimase a scuola. Il lavoro in fabbrica permetterà a Menghistu che il suo nome, qualche anno più tardi, venga proposto da Taamrat alle autorità coloniali italiane in cerca di giovani abissini che riprendessero in Italia il percorso di studi iniziato in Europa. Taamrat scriveva: “I miei giovani non vogliono faticare con la lingua italiana e si sentono vecchi: perciò ho presentato soltanto Menghestu Malachi [sic] e l’ufficiale addetto all’Ufficio mi ha detto aver scritto al Ministero delle colonie perché interessi qualche industriale per perfezionare Menghestu nei

7 Lettera di Menghistu, 15 marzo 1940, Archivio privato Viterbo.

8 Ibid.



lavori di maglia e studiare nello stesso tempo l'italiano<sup>9</sup>. Il progetto approderà a un nulla di fatto. Menghistu restò nella scuola che non poteva abbandonare, inviando parole accorate, piene di amarezza per denunciare la quotidianità tragica a quell'avvocato italiano che nell'estate del 1936 aveva passato qualche tempo con loro e li aveva anche fotografati.

In una lettera Menghistu si lamentava che l'orefice Esdra Tobià (un ebreo di Addis Abeba, non un Falascià) che stava bene finanziariamente fosse andato ad alloggiare da loro perché non voleva più pagare l'affitto della casa che aveva “mi dispiace che i nostri correligionari pensino al bene loro e non ai ragazzi che sono abbandonati lì”<sup>10</sup>. Aggiungeva anche che lui gli aveva dato una bella stanza nella scuola e costui stava lì già da un anno senza preoccuparsi della situazione degli studenti. Alla lettera ne accludeva un'altra di ringraziamento, in amarico, degli studenti della scuola con le loro cinque firme, Tecele Melesse, Melesse Salomon (si tratta del giovane che era stato operato e non aveva da vestirsi, noto anche come Menashe Salomon), Amazia Ghettie, Bechelle Bellainehe, Ghiz Antachekele.

Un anno dopo, nel novembre del 1941, il generale Nasi firmava la resa a Gondar e con tale atto finiva anche l'esilio di Taamrat che si affrettava a raggiungere Gondar con i membri della resistenza etiopica.

Rimasto vedovo, nel 1947<sup>11</sup> Menghistu Isaac si risposò con una donna di Sokota.

Dopo la guerra entrò nel Ministero dell'Educazione e alcuni decenni più tardi emigrò in Israele, a Natania<sup>12</sup>. Nella casa di Natania erano appese alle pareti una foto degli allievi della scuola di Addis Abeba di cui era stato direttore senza investitura ufficiale e una foto di Faitlovitch<sup>13</sup>. Quelle foto alle pareti sembravano indicare quanto avesse significato per Menghistu quel viaggio compiuto in carovana fino alla scuola di Faitlovitch di Addis Abeba, qualche anno prima della conquista italiana.

Una foto del 1936 che ritrae un giovane sorridente, vestito all'europea, probabilmente fiducioso di quanto lo attende al suo ritorno in Etiopia, dopo quattro anni passati a Strasburgo, e alcune lettere del 1940, scritte in un italiano approssimativo in cui sono espressi il disagio, la sofferenza, l'incertezza provocati dalla colonizzazione italiana. Tutto ciò è quanto ci resta di uno scambio avvenuto meno di un secolo fa tra Firenze e Addis Abeba. Piccole tracce di oggetti che ancora oggi ci interrogano.

La data, 1940 e il luogo di spedizione, Addis Abeba ci ricordano che si trattava dell'ultimo anno della sciagurata avventura coloniale italiana mentre Firenze e il destinatario delle lettere, l'avvocato Carlo Alberto Viterbo ci ricordano che stava iniziando uno dei capitoli più drammatici nella storia gli ebrei italiani. Menghistu Isaac si trovava nella condizione di esiliato all'interno del proprio paese, espropriato dei propri diritti e dipendente per la propria sopravvivenza dalla stessa potenza coloniale mentre Carlo Alberto Viterbo sarebbe finito nel campo di concentramento di Sforzacosta (Macerata), anch'egli esiliato nel suo stesso Paese. Oggetti d'esilio che concentrano destini e storie che si incrociano e che ci ricordano gli antichi palinsesti. Nelle

9 Lettera di Taamrat, 12 giugno 1936, in Trevisan Semi (2000: 218); in una seconda lettera della stessa data, in Trevisan Semi (2000: 219) lo chiama Menghestu Isaac e viene rinominato per un possibile invio in Italia a perfezionarsi nel lavoro a maglia.

10 Lettera di Menghistu, 25 giugno 1940. Archivio privato Viterbo.

11 Lettera di Taamrat, 5 novembre 1947 in Trevisan Semi (2000: 324).

12 Menghistu Isaac fu intervistato da Dani Summerfield a Natania nel 1995 (Summerfield 2003: 176).

13 Intervista telefonica dell'Autrice a Benjamin Mekuria, nipote di Menghistu Isaac, Parigi 16 dicembre 2020.





lettere troviamo sia caratteri a stampa che caratteri manoscritti, aggiunte di annotazioni (come quella che annuncia la morte di Maconen Levi, nipote di Taamrat Emmanuel) (Trevisan Semi 2005), l'uso dell'ebraico nei saluti e nella carta intestata, stili diversi. In pochi fogli si sovrappongono contenuti e messaggi distinti che paiono voler sfruttare al massimo il foglio disponibile onde evitare sprechi, esattamente come negli antichi palinsesti e che sta a noi decifrare nella loro densità di significati, espliciti e impliciti.

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## Addis Ababa—Florence: round trip.

### Story of three letters and a photo\*

Emanuela Trevisan Semi

#### I Preamble

The objects I explore in this article are one photo and three letters, one of which was handwritten. The letters were sent between 15 May and 25 June, 1940, by Menghistu Isaac from Dr Faitlovitch's School in Addis Ababa to the lawyer Carlo Alberto Viterbo in Florence. Along with other documents, they were delivered to me in Florence, more than thirty years ago, by Giuseppe Viterbo, Carlo Alberto's son.

In 1984, during my research on the Beta Israel<sup>1</sup> at the Ashkelon *mercaz qelital* (integration camp) in Israel, I became aware that the Florentine lawyer's descendants probably possessed material of great interest concerning the Jews of Ethiopia.

Thanks to the generosity of Giuseppe Viterbo and Lionella Neppi Modona, Carlo Alberto's daughter-in-law, I was given access to the rich documentation of the lawyer's archive so that I could draw from it for my various publications on the Beta Israel. The entire photographic archive was subsequently donated to the Zionist Museum in Jerusalem.

Of all my publications, the ones that have aroused the greatest interest among the Beta Israel after their emigration to Israel (starting in 1984) are those relating to some of the 25 young people taken to Europe, Palestine and Egypt by Jacques Faitlovitch between 1904 and 1930 to study at Jewish institutions before returning to Ethiopia as teachers.

Over the years, the descendants of these young people have repeatedly asked me for documents and details about their great-grandparents, great-uncles and other relatives, some of whom had tragic stories, since they had died, often in conditions of great solitude and abandonment, of depression, tuberculosis and other diseases.

Faced with the umpteenth request from the descendant of a brilliant young man who had died in Paris in 1933 after studying in Vienna, I reopened the numerous boxes in my archive, accumulated over 40 years of research, and the letters written by some of Dr Faitlo-

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1 \* I wish to thank Monica Miniati for her insightful comments on this text.

Nothing written was passed on to us by the Beta Israel to tell their story. There are conflicting opinions on the origins of the Beta Israel. It has been claimed that the Beta Israel were descendants of Solomon, of the lost tribe of Dan, of a colony in Upper Egypt, or of Jews from Yemen. Steven Kaplan wrote that there is 'little question that the Beta Israel must be understood as the product of processes that took place in Ethiopia between the fourteenth and the sixteenth century' (Kaplan 1993: 647). The emergence as a distinct people was therefore, according to several scholars, the result of several factors, political and social. Geographically they are found mainly in the northern regions of Ethiopia where they settled down when they were deprived of possession of land, starting from the early nineteenth century. They were concentrated in the Gondar area. The Beta Israel population was estimated at between 80,000 and 200,000 at the most in the mid-19th century (Quirin 1992: 182-183).



vitch's students immediately caught my attention. Fragments and letters from almost a century ago prompted me to pore again over that precious material to reconstruct short stories to be returned to 'history', in the hope of creating generational and cultural bridges for the Beta Israel whose memories of their past in Ethiopia had faded after they had emigrated to Israel.

In the same way, some of those letters took me back to Florence, to the archive that the Viterbo family had allowed me to copy and use, including letters that recounted in detail the journey that Viterbo had made in Ethiopia among the Beta Israel, having first arrived in Addis Ababa on 11 August 1936, the day after the Italian colonial conquest began. The last of the letters had been sent from Addis Ababa to Viterbo in Florence when he was no longer in the city, having been arrested on 10 June 1940 and interned as a Zionist Jew in the Urbisaglia camp, where he remained until 1 July 1941. Anti-Jewish legislation, colonialism, historical and cultural fractures, migration, and unique and collective memories of the past constitute the plot that wove those letters together.

Three letters and a photo: these are the 'objects' that through their many 'comings and goings' have aroused my curiosity and on which I wish to dwell.

## II Three letters and a photo

A photo taken by Viterbo in August 1936 depicts Menghistu Isaac, together with other comrades, including his nephew Mekuria Tsegaye, in front of the Faitlovitch school in Addis Ababa. Menghistu Isaac, Mekuria Tsegaye's mother's brother (and therefore his maternal uncle), appears first on the right in the second row. In the background is Taamrat Emmanuel, the director of the school, who studied for many years in Europe, in countries such as France and Italy (Trevisan Semi 2000; Trevisan Semi 2018). Four of the boys in the photo are wearing European dress, namely shirts, ties and jackets. Menghistu and Taamrat are both wearing a jacket and bow tie, while Mekuria appears without a tie. The fourth is Belay Makonnen (also known as Shemariah), who had returned from studying in Jerusalem. The European dress shows a sort



Figure 7 Addis Ababa, Summer 1936,  
Viterbo Private Archive



of symbolic status for those who had undertaken their studies outside their native country. In fact, the young people taken to Europe or Palestine by Jacques Faitlovitch would maintain their use of Western clothing for life, as if it were an identity marker that they could not relinquish. In the photo, the uncle and nephew are both smiling and seem to be gazing confidently at the photographer, Viterbo. In reality, in just a few months, the situation would change dramatically. Taamrat would flee to Egypt to escape the massacre in response to the attack carried out against Italian General Rodolfo Graziani on 19 February 1937 (Del Boca 1982: 87). Menghistu would find himself taking charge of the school, without being appointed officially, after a period in which Jona Bogale, another young man who had studied in Jerusalem and Frankfurt, had taken this responsibility. The three letters from 1940 refer to this period and the photo is from four years earlier.

The letters are written in Italian. Two are written by typewriter on non-headed paper, while a handwritten one bears the school letterhead in three languages, namely Hebrew, English and Italian. The Hebrew wording displays '*Bet Sefer ivri doctor Faitlovitch Addis Ababa, Habash*' (Jewish school of Dr Faitlovitch, Addis Ababa, Abyssinia). It should be emphasised that the word *ivri* was written instead of *yehudi*, the latter being a term that would have been used if the Jewish school had been in Europe. *Ivri* generally refers to something that has to do with the Hebrew language (*ivrit*) and evokes a link with the biblical era, while *yehudi* refers in particular to the diasporic Jewish experience. The letter of June 5 includes a sheet of paper with the names of the six boys who were at the school at the time. Next to the names of two of these young men is written 'they have been unemployed for a month'. There are also details, added by hand, about the death of Makonnen Levi, Taamrat's grandson, following a 'a very hard and terrible disease' (Trevisan Semi 2005). Menghistu obsessively points out in the document, in his uncertain Italian, that nobody at the school had been receiving any help ('no one outside of us who helps me. Since there is no one to help me, I inform you that nothing' [sic]). From this, one can perceive the gravity and drama of the situation that the young man was experiencing, having found himself forced to manage the school from one day to another in very difficult times.

The school was founded in 1923 by Jacques Faitlovitch, a Polish Jew who, in Paris, had been a pupil of Joseph Halevy, the first European Jew to be sent to Ethiopia in 1867–8 for an exploratory mission among the Beta Israel (Falasha).<sup>2</sup> The Beta Israel had attracted the attention of Protestant missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century as candidates for religious conversion. Faitlovitch followed Halevy's work to oppose these conversions and organised several trips to Ethiopia, beginning in 1904–05, from which he returned with young Beta Israel whom he sent to study both with European Jewish families and academic institutions (Trevisan Semi 2007). During the Fascist occupation of Ethiopia, the school's name was Italianised and renamed the 'Faitlovitch Israelite School'.<sup>3</sup>

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2 The term Falasha, which according to Steve Kaplan (1992: 65) has no evidence of existing before the fifteenth century, can be translated as 'removed from his land', 'exiled' or 'wanderer'. This term was in common use, together with that of Beta Israel, by the same members of the group until their emigration to Israel. From that moment, it began to be regarded as an extremely pejorative expression and was replaced by that of 'Jews of Ethiopia'. The term Beta Israel does not have this negative connotation and is the most commonly used term in scientific writing. The term Falasha is used here when I refer to the group before emigration to Israel.

3 Letter by Taamrat, 23 March 1939, in Trevisan Semi (2000). The letters by Taamrat, which I published in *L'epistolario*, are mostly written in Italian and are found in the Faitlovitch Archive of the Sourasky Central Library of the University of Tel Aviv, file 137.



CABLE ADDRESS  
FAITLOVICH, ADDISABEBA 4 15 March 1940

בית-ספר עברי ד"ר פֵּיטְלוֹבִיץ' אדום-אבבא, הַבְּשָׁה  
DR. FAITLOVITCH'S SCHOOL  
ADDIS-ABEBA, ABYSSINIA

All' Illmo Sig. Avv. Carlo Alberto Viterbo.

V. mando la mia presente per informarsi delle vostre notizie che non gli avete più dati un periodo molto lungo, e far sapere la vostra benevolenza di poter informarmi la situazione e le sue notizie precise con suo indirizzo del N. Sig. Cassarot Emanuele, perché da due anni fa che non siamo più in corrispondenza con lui, mi dispiace del vostro silenzio assoluto di tutti noi. In oltre da due anni fa che mi trovo da solo in questa nostra scuola con la responsabilità senza di aver per ora né o direttamente della direzione: mi trovo a favore e a agire agli interessi della scuola e della proprietà. Isma Nafatal, lo quale è stato nominato Capo ultimo per tutti noi, si trova fuori di noi in tempo di vita e di cura morale, si trova nel paese di Alloja distante per conto suo e ha compiuto le diligenze verso di noi dopo due anni fa.

I ragazzi si trovano qui in scuola con me lavorando con nazionali per poter guadagnare da vivere, perché altrimenti è molto difficile a trattarsi. Dopo un anno e mezzo uno dei ragazzi il Ministero Salomone si trovava in vita di malattia, non molti e si è fatto curare all'ospedale in cura formativa, all'ultimo tempo, siccome non poteva guarire, il medico l'ha fatto tagliare il suo braccio di sinistra lo quale è stato rotolato da una malattia di vita. Ora, malgrado che lui manca il braccio, si trova in vita bene sano.

Dopo uno mese si trova con me in scuola. Questo ragazzo, siccome è gueritto sarebbe meglio di mandarlo in paese suo in Gander che potrebbe essere un mezzo di suoi parenti, per attualmente più che Amengia con me e che lo ho un po' di vita, non lo so come potrebbe vivere nella sua vita d'impedimento.

Siccome mi trovo nella responsabilità in esultanza, sono obbligato a rispondere per ogni individuale.

Figure 8 and 9, Letter from Menghistu to Viterbo, 15 March 1940, Viterbo Private Archive

Attualmente mi trovo in situazione molto critica per i miei  
debiti che sono stati fatti da quattro anni fa. L'istituto ha  
interrogato a mio padre mi trovo nel posto di risposabilità.  
Ma da parte che non posso pagare una somma così elevata  
di 90 in £ 1.000 (mili). Si Sig. Cassaro è presente  
la polizia della autorità mi ha interrogato dicendo di rispondere ai fatti.  
molto si prego la benevolenza di farmi tutto possibile di fornire  
ottenere uno documento preciso come procura per che fatto agire e  
= farre con piena facoltà agli interessi e alla proprietà della scuola.  
Altrimenti l'autorità mi ha già avvertito senza documento non posso  
essere interrogato e non anche rispondere ai fatti necessari. Mi  
raccomando che il documento mi è molto necessario e urgente, si non  
non fatto più fare uno fatto agli interessi della scuola e della  
proprietà. Sig. Avv, aspeto con speranza che la risposta della  
presente ~~documenti~~ venga nei primi della settimana prossima.

Caro Sig. avv<sup>o</sup> presento i saluti dei tutti ragazzi della V scuola.  
Vostro obbligato  
M. J. Cassaro

Figure 9





Contrary to popular belief, the school was not closed by the Italian authorities (Messing 1999: 62), but it had difficulty in securing its future for financial reasons, as it no longer received funds from the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, the funding body that had replaced the American Pro-Falasha Committee. Nevertheless, for some unknown reason, Menghistu uses the old, pre-colonial invasion letterhead for his correspondence.

Viterbo had been sent to Addis Ababa by the Union of Jewish Communities in the aftermath of the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936. The trip had a dual purpose: to reorganise the Italian Jewish community in Ethiopia and to establish contact with the Falasha. He remained in the city from 11 August to 20 November 1936 and was subsequently joined by Emmanuel Taamrat in visiting Falasha villages in the Gondar area until 22 January 1937, when he left Gondar for Asmara (Viterbo 1993).

In his letter of 25 June 1940, Menghistu was unaware that the lawyer had been arrested. In that letter, Menghistu informed Viterbo that he had received the 420 lire that he had sent for the students and the school. Completely ignoring what was happening in Italy, he also wrote that he hoped that the activities that had died with Faitlovitch could be reborn through Viterbo, who seemed to have taken the fate of the Beta Israel to heart.

The letters were written in 1940, but how was it living in Addis Ababa at that time, under the Italian occupation? In October 1940, there were 35,000 Italian settlers in the city, 11,000 of whom were women and 7,000 of whom were children (Del Boca 1982: 455). Guerrilla fighting had resumed due to Italy's entry into the war. According to the testimony of a Blackshirt, Giulio Lenzi, there was a lack of consumer goods: 'There are no bombings. It seems that the war is being fought on another planet. The signs are there, however: petrol has almost completely run out, so the bourgeois have to walk through the immense city: certain kinds of food, such as sausages, cheeses and the like, are no longer found, and cigarettes are rationed' (Del Boca 1982: 373).

We can imagine that all this was not foremost among Menghistu's concerns as he wrote to Viterbo. In any case, the British entered the Ethiopian capital on 6 April 1941, followed by the return of Emperor Haile Selassie on 5 May, putting an end to the Italian colonial enterprise.

The concerns expressed in the letters relate to Taamrat's silence. We know that Taamrat, in order not to harm the school and those who remained in Ethiopia, had not written about his flight to Egypt, especially since he had been engaged in resistance while he was in exile. Menghistu pointed out that for two years he had been the only person in charge of the school, even though nobody in Italy had officially appointed him to that position, and he no longer received news from Taamrat. He also mentioned that Jona Naftali (Jona Bogale), the only one to have been appointed officially, had left ('in the sense of food and moral escape<sup>4</sup>) and was living on his own in Wolleka after severing all relations with his peers in Addis Ababa. Taamrat, for his part, had previously written to Faitlovitch to reveal that he had received a letter from Jona, who informed him that because he was 'tired by the disorganisation that reigns in the school', and also 'due to the lack of harmony with one of his comrade', Jona had 'decided to withdraw from the school.'<sup>5</sup> It is therefore likely that there had been disagreements between Jona Bogale and Menghistu, as suggested by the reference to 'moral escape'. Taamrat wrote: 'I am of the opinion

4 Letter by Menghistu, 15 March 1940, Viterbo Private Archive.

5 Letter by Taamrat, 20 January 1938, in Trevisan Semi (2000: 261).

Addis Abeba, li 5 Giugno 1940.

Al Sig. Dr. Avvocato Carlo Alberto Viterbo

Caro Sig. Avv.

Abbiamo ricevuta la vostra onorabile lettera del 21 aprile 1940 che ha fatto una viva soddisfazione e granda gioia per tutti noi di nome Falascia. E sono molto contento della vostra risposta alla mia lettera e di darmi vostra speranza che vi interessate alle nostre difficoltà, delle qualle che siete informato.

Sig. Avv. capisco molto bene che le condizioni generali da voi che non sono tanto favorabili per fare il gesto di aiuto verso noi altri. Ma, le stesse difficoltà c'è gli abbiamo anche noi, più peggio ancor condizioni colorati.

Domando solamente un aiuto pro tempore per arrivare a dare da vivere a questo ragazzo che ha dovuto subire l'operazione, e per gli due ragazzi che sono disoccupati di lavoro; perché si avevo qualcuno che mi aiuta sia in denaro sia in mano d'opera, sarebbe uno aiuto moltissimo grande; ma invece non le ho né di mano d'opera né aiuto di denaro. Siccome non credo bene di andare così avanti, secondo mio opinione, credo meglio di fare il massimo possibile per aiutarli in denaro per riuscire a mandargli in Gondar che vivono in mezzo dei parenti loro, che sono separati da un periodo bastanza distante. E certamente che i parenti loro di questi ragazzi, saranno infinitamente contenti di essere raggiunti con i figli loro. Siccome che non si fa proprio niente nella scuola per il momento. Senza aiuto sarebbe molto difficile a trattenerli. Anche loro preferiscono di essere raggiunti con i parenti, soltanto va molto bene per il solomon che si trova nella vita di invalidità, che possa vivere in mezzo suoi parenti.

Quanto per l'informazioni del nostro Sig. Profesor Taamrat Emanuele l'avete dimenticato. Ora mai mi sono già informato, ma resto con difficoltà che non posso mettermi in corrispondenza.

Prima la partenza del nostro Sig. Taamrat Emanuele per Gondar con lei, c'è erano di Talleri depositati da uno suo amico. Quando Sig. Taamrat E. soggiornava per pochi giorni a Gondar; aveva dato a Jona Naftali l'autorizzazione, dicendo che in caso di difficoltà finanziaria, che possa toccare di questi \$ N° 100. E secondo l'autorizzazione Jona Naftali gli ha doperati per conto della scuola e per conto suo personale, che ha fatto male. Questa somma di \$ 100, non sono ancora restituiti fino ad oggi. Il padrone di questa somma è arrivato del confinato della Somalia; e mi è venuto interrogare se posso restituire io rispondevo che non posso rispondere a questi fatti, perché sono delle cose che non mi riguardano; ma siccome ha cominciato a tirare la poliziale, mi dispiace di lasciare toccare dei individuali di fuori gli interessi della nostra scuola? Mi sono obbligato a farlo tacere in pagando di £ 200 per il momento di tasca mia e dicendo che sarà pagato fino l'ultimo. In verità non sono obbligato e non sono da interegare in questi fatti. Per la procura e un foglio di riconoscimento mi ho bisogno. Questo documento mi serve per agire e favore agli interessi della nostra scuola; ogni caso che mi presento davanti l'autorità per interegazioni generali per proprietà. Fino questo anno lo salvato in qualcun modo. E da Sig. Taamrat E. non abbiamo mai avuto un documento, perché non bisognava. All'ora il documento l'aspettavo legato con la vostra prossima lettera che mi mandrete. Presentiamo nostri ceneri saluti distinti a tutta vostra buona famiglia.

Menghistu

Figure 10 and 11, Letter from Menghistu to Viterbo, 5 June 1940, Viterbo Private Archive



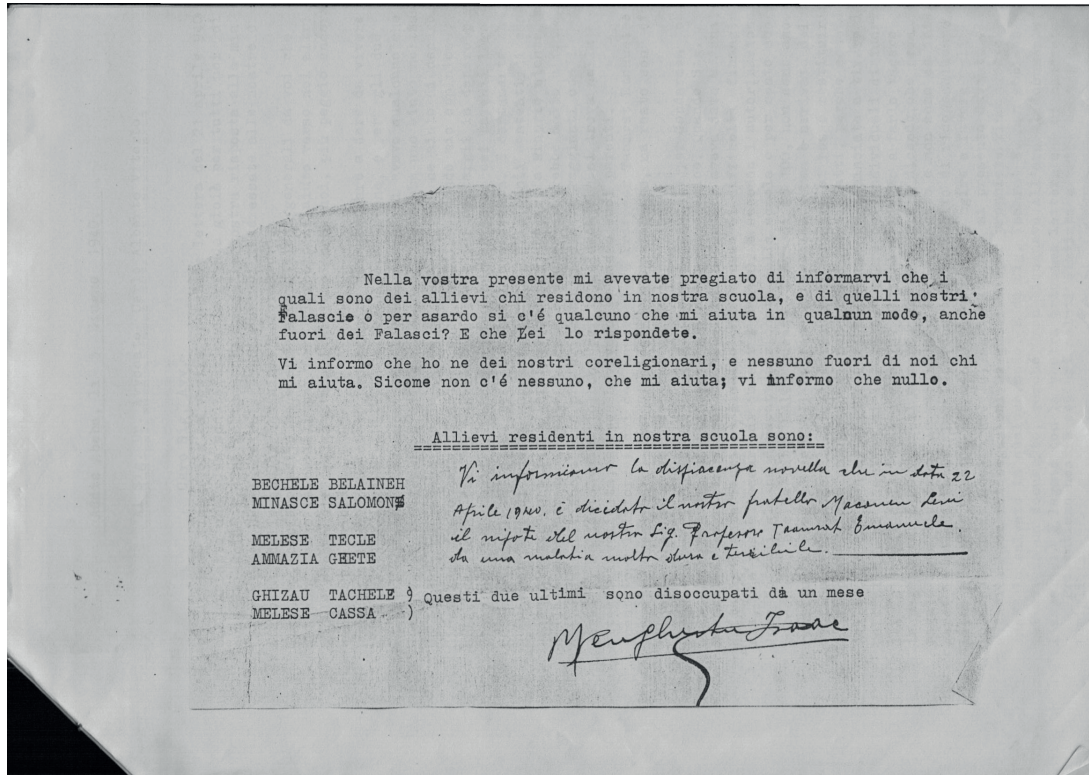


Figure 11

that if Jona makes troubles, [it would be better] to have Menghistu (a former Strasbourg pupil) as treasurer. I hope that my friend Viterbo will take care of the transport of schoolchildren. In this case, food should be guaranteed for the guardian.<sup>6</sup> Taamrat therefore thought that it would be better to have the schoolchildren return to their villages, but these departures also had to be organised, which evidently did not happen.

In 1940, the schoolboys were working with the Italian settlers to earn a living. Menghistu wrote that for a year and a half, Menashe Salomon (Melesse) had been ill; for nine months he had been treated in hospital paid for by the government, but having failed to recover, his left arm had been amputated by a doctor due to a bone disease. 'Now, despite that he is missing his arm,<sup>7</sup> he is fine and staying with them, but it would be better to send him to his family in Gondar. Menghistu does not know how Menashe will cope without him [Menghistu], and this responsibility makes him feel obliged to respond to each student. For four years, has received loans from the Italian authorities, but now he is in a critical situation and cannot pay back such a large sum. He has been questioned by the police, and he asks for a document certifying that he is acting in the interests of the school.<sup>8</sup>

The Italian that Menghistu used in the letters is comprehensible, even if it is confused at times. The written Italian, albeit poor, used in the correspondence with Viterbo, was the result

6 Ibid.

7 Letter by Menghistu, 15 March 1940, Viterbo Private Archive.

8 Ibid.



Addis Abeba, li 25 Giugno 1940

Al Signor Dr. Avv. Carlo Alberto Viterbo.

Abbiamo raccolto la sua presente del 6 Giugno, con il vostro generoso denaro come aiuto verso noi di £. 420.00 (Quattrocentoventi) presso Banco di Roma, e la quale ha fornito una vivissima soddisfazione a tutti noi residenti presso la nostra scuola. Io sono infinitamente soddisfatto del suo ricchissimo e generoso interessamento ed di aver'ottenuto uno parecchio aiuto da Lei stesso. E così considero che la morta attività del nos/ Dr. Faitlovich è rinascita e ricreata da Lei. E così secondo Lei spero di riuscire a mandare i ragazzi a vivere in mezzo parenti loro in Gondar. Verso i prossimi mesi, secondo la situazione, e le condizioni generali da qui noi, certamente che Lei avete presso notizie, molto probabilmente che saremo in difficoltà, perché siamo già cominciati a essere disoccupati di lavoro.

Vi spiego a cosa mi sono servito del vostro generoso denaro verso i ragazzi

- 1° £. 150.00 (centocinquanta) per vestire il Salomon lo quale ha dovuto (subire l'operazione e veramente è stato guastato)
- 2° £. 200.00 (duecento) che ho fatto un aiuto in nome suo per il mese di Luglio prossimo, tra la mensa loro insufficiente.
- 3° " 80.00 (Ottanta) mi sono servito per pagamento della tassa annuale della nostra proprietà della scuola, e per rinnovamento del recinto del nostro terreno, che sono in facendo

In oltre nostro collego l'Orefice Ezra Tbià, si trova attualmente con noi in residendo alla nostra scuola perché non ha la volontà di pagare un affitto di casa fuori città. Mi dispiace che i nostri coreligionari pensando per bene loro e non mettano in testa le difficoltà di questi ragazzi abbandonati. Il suddetto è un persona per bene finanziariamente e sta residendo con noi. Al meno si ho consegnato una buona stanza a lui, per riconoscenza della scuola dovrebbe provvedere di aiutare a questi ragazzi; che l'abbiamo salvato dal pagare un affitto di casa a fuori, di un periodo già di un anno.

Vi comunico questa sua mancanza di spirito, e poi che Lei lo consigliate per scritto, e noi andiamo bene con lui.

I ragazzi vi inviano una lettera scritta in lingua Amharica rispondendo alla sua presente e ringraziandovi del vostro generoso denaro per loro. Che cercherete a capirla questa lingua si non l'avete dimenticata.

Presentiamo vivamente il nostro ringrazio infinitamente e inviandovi i nostri cari e distinti saluti a tutta la sua famiglia.

*Sig. Avv. Menghistu*  
*Per raccomandando di non dimenticare il foglio di riconoscimento già presente in mia precedente lettera*

*Menghistu*  
*Gava*

Figure 12 Letter from Menghistu to Viterbo, 25 June 1940, Viterbo Private Archive



of the four years that Menghistu had spent in Strasbourg with his nephew, Mekuria Tsegaye. When Menghistu and Mekuria arrived in the city in 1930, they were advised to study Italian as a second language, since Italy's goals in Ethiopia were evident to everyone, and the language would certainly have been more useful to them than English.

When, 11 years earlier, Menghistu had left the village of Traza (in the Lasta) with his nephew to travel in a caravan led by older pupils from Faitlovitch (Dessié et Amazia), which would have taken eight days to reach Addis Ababa, he certainly would not have imagined that he was in the situation described in the letters (Mekuria 1999). The messengers that Faitlovitch had sent to families in villages across Ethiopia to persuade them to allow their children leave to attend his school in Addis Ababa had also promised to send them later on to Europe, where they would become 'illustrious, famous people' (Summerfield 2003: 175).

Menghistu, always with his nephew, who was a few years his junior, was sent to study in Strasbourg, albeit only for four years – too few years to become illustrious and famous. However, it is certain that that period abroad played a decisive role in both of their futures.

Upon their arrival in France, they were hosted at the orphanage of Haguenau, near Strasbourg, where they were to stay for a year and a half.

They were later transferred to Strasbourg to study at a business school, although both would have preferred to pursue literary studies. The Haguenau orphanage was 'La maison des enfants Les Cigognes', which was occupied by the Germans during the War. In 1930–2, when the two boys were in Haguenau, the president of the orphanage was Leon Moch, and the directors of the school were Mr and Ms Weills. The orphanage mainly housed small children (based on the photos that can be seen on the website). It is therefore safe to assume that the pair were isolated and without companions of the same age. Since the Nazis destroyed all the archives of the Jewish orphanage, there is no documentation about the two young men.

Menghistu, at 18, was sent to work in a textile factory, while Mekuria, who was younger, remained at school. Menghistu's time at the factory would allow his name to be suggested a few years later by Taamrat to the Italian colonial authorities, who were in search of young Abyssinians to resume, in Italy, the studies that they had started in Europe. Taamrat wrote: 'My young people do not want to struggle with the Italian language, and they feel old. Thus, I only presented Menghistu Malachi [sic], and the officer in charge of the office told me that he had written to the Ministry of the Colonies to convince some businessmen to support Menghistu in perfecting his weaving techniques and studying Italian at the same time.'<sup>9</sup> The project would come to nothing. Menghistu was obliged to stay on at the school, leading him to send heartfelt words of bitterness denouncing his tragic daily life to the Italian lawyer who had spent some time with the boys in the summer of 1936 and had even taken a picture of them.

Menghistu complained in a letter that the wealthy goldsmith Ezra Tobia (a Jew from Addis Ababa, not a Falasha) had stayed with them because he no longer wished to pay the rent for his house. 'I'm sorry that our co-religionists only think of themselves and not of the children who are abandoned there,' he wrote.<sup>10</sup> He added that he had given Tobia a pleasant room in

9 Letter by Taamrat, 12 June 1936, in Trevisan Semi (2000: 218); in a second letter of the same date (Trevisan Semi 2000: 219), he calls him Menghistu Isaac, as he is recalled for a possible journey to Italy to specialise in weaving techniques.

10 Letter by Menghistu, 25 June 1940. Viterbo Private Archive.



the school, but he had by then spent a year there without worrying about the students' situation. The letter enclosed a message of thanks, written in Amharic, signed by five students at the school: Tecele Melesse, Melesse Salomon (also known as Menashe Salomon, the young man who had had an operation and had no clothes), Amazia Ghettie, Bechelle Bellainehe and Ghiz Antachekele.

A year later, in November 1941, General Nasi surrendered in Gondar, and this act also ended Taamrat's exile: he hurried to reach Gondar with members of the Ethiopian resistance.

By now widowed, Menghistu Isaac remarried a woman from Sokota in 1947.<sup>11</sup> After the war, he entered the Ministry of Education, and some decades later he emigrated to Netanya, in Israel.<sup>12</sup> A photograph of the students of the Addis Ababa school of which he had been director, albeit unofficially, hung in his house, as well as another picture of Faitlovitch.<sup>13</sup> Those photos seem to indicate how much that journey made by caravan to the Faitlovitch school in Addis Ababa a few years before the Italian conquest had meant to Menghistu.

A photo from 1936 portraying a smiling young man, dressed in a European style and probably confident about what awaited him on his return to Ethiopia after four years in Strasbourg, and some letters from 1940, written in an approximate Italian, recounting the discomfort, suffering and uncertainty caused by the Italian colonisation: this is all that remained of an exchange that took place less than a century ago between Addis Ababa and Florence: small traces of objects that still ask questions of us.

The date, 1940, and the place of dispatch, Addis Ababa, remind us that it was the final year of the unsuccessful Italian colonial adventure. At the same time, the recipient of the letters, Viterbo, and his Florentine location remind us that one of the most dramatic chapters in history of the Italian Jewry was beginning. Menghistu had been exiled within his own country, stripped of his rights and dependent for his survival on the same colonial power that had placed Viterbo in the concentration camp of Sforzacosta (Macerata). Like Menghistu, Viterbo was exiled in his own country. These objects of exile that encapsulate destinies and intertwine stories remind us of the ancient palimpsests. In the letters, we find both printed and handwritten characters, the addition of annotations (such as the one announcing the death of Makonnen Levi, grandson of Taamrat Emmanuel) (Trevisan Semi 2005), the use of Hebrew in greetings and in letterheads, and different styles. In a few sheets, the contents overlap with messages that seem to want to make the most of the available page in order to avoid waste, just like the ancient palimpsests, and it is up to us to decipher the density of their meanings, both explicit and implicit.

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11 Letter by Taamrat, 5 November 1947, in Trevisan Semi (2000: 324).

12 Menghistu Isaac interviewed by Dani Summerfield in Natania in 1995 (Summerfield 2003: 176).

13 Phone interview by the Author with Benjamin Mekuria, nephew of Menghistu Isaac, Paris, 16 December 2020.

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