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MARTINO OPPIZZI

Exploring the Emigration of Italian Jews in Tunisia After World War II: Flexible Trajectories and Mobile Belonging

The process of the decolonisation of Tunisia, a French protectorate from 1881 to 1956, triggered a vast demographic exodus that led some 250,000 Europeans and 60,000 local Jews¹ to leave the country. The reasons, forms and outcomes of this dispersion have been traced in many sociological and historiographical studies since the 1960s focusing on the different national and religious components: the Jewish population, the French settlers (whose repatriation was part of the broader process of the disintegration of the French colonial empire in North Africa) and the Italian community, which occupied an intermediate position between settlers and colonized people.

In the wake of these works, and based on a post-doctoral research developed between 2018 and 2021, this contribution aims to analyse the emigration trajectories of the Italian Jews of Tunisia after World War II, from the liberation of Tunis (May 1943) to the Six-Day War (1967), in order to trace its causes and forms. While some emigration paths have already been presented in a recent article by Filippo Petrucci,¹ the goal of the present study is to rethink the collective dynamics that intervened in the dispersion of the Italian Jewish community of Tunisia, with a particular focus on the social and identity transformations that took place from the 1930s to the post-war period.

Under the French protectorate, in the first half of the 20th century, Italian Jews constituted a small population of about 4,000 individuals: a minority not only in comparison to the country's overall population, estimated at around two million, but also in relation to Italian emigrants, who exceeded 100,000 in the 1920s, and compared to the Jewish community of

1. Filippo Petrucci, "Dalla Tunisia verso l'Europa: alcuni percorsi di emigrazione della comunità ebraica italiana dopo il 1945", *Ricerche Storiche*, 47/1 (2017), pp. 65-82. Paul Sebag, *Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie: des origines à nos jours*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1991, p. 300.

Tunisia, which counted about 70,000 on the eve of the Second World War. Questioning the emigration of this population, which was at the crossroads of different communities on a national and Mediterranean scale, means reflecting on the complexity of foreign collectivities in colonial spaces, whose belonging came into play, and often into conflict, at the moment of departure. The structure of the present contribution takes into account this complexity and proposes a reflection in four parts. In the first I outline the methodological issues inherent to the study of the migratory phenomenon of Italian Jews in Tunisia, stressing the importance of a micro-historical approach. In the next three I focus on the main factors which shaped the decision to leave and oriented the choice of the destination.

The emigration of Italian Jews as a historiographical problem: specificities, sources, approaches

The profile of the Italian Jewish population was noteworthy due to two major elements, which affected its post-war emigration. First, this was a community with a long tradition of mobility on an international scale. Unlike the local Jews, who had lived in Tunisia since at least the 2nd century CE, the Italian Jews were largely of Sephardic, hence Iberian, origin. They first settled in Livorno, where they had been able to rebuild their community sheltered from the Spanish Inquisition, and then established themselves in Tunis for commercial reasons between the 16th and 17th centuries. In order to distinguish themselves from their Tunisian coreligionists, who were numerous and less tied to the European world, the “Livornese” or “Grana” (plural of the Arabic word “Gorni” which indicated the city of “Leghorn”, Livorno) Jews founded a separate community which was legally recognised since 1710, only to be ultimately dissolved in 1944. This long history of collective migrations left traces in the socio-professional profile of the community: in 1922, around 65% of the active population was employed in commercial, entrepreneurial and economic mediation activities,² involving links through international and Mediterranean markets. Moreover, 90% of the population lived in the country’s main ports, which were centres of exchange and circulation.³ Travel

2. From a study realised on the almanac of the Italian population of Tunisia: *Almanacco italiano della Tunisia: annuario commerciale industriale e turistico*, Tunis, Libreria Nazionale, 1922.

3. Displaying a lot of common features with the category of “port Jews” described by David Cesarani in *Jews and Port Cities, 1590-1990: Commerce, Community and*

abroad was frequent, especially to Italy and France, for reasons ranging from work to holidays, from university studies to family visits.

Linked to this socioeconomic profile is the second characteristic of the Livornese: they constituted a dense network of relations with neighbouring communities, which was the product of a long history of hybridisation, contacts and exchanges. For example, within the Jewish Italian population of Tunisia, Italo-French families were common, while children were polyglots and often completed their studies at French universities. At the same time, exogamy was increasing steadily since the 19th century: in the 1920s-1930s “mixed” marriages with Tunisian Jews represented about one-third of all unions. The Italian authorities at the time observed the phenomenon with ill-concealed hostility, accusing the Livornese of becoming a “Jewish placenta” between the Italian and French bourgeoisie in Tunisia, at the expense of national interests.

After the war, in a profoundly changed context, these two elements contributed to forging an original emigration trajectory compared to that of both Tunisian Jews and Italians. We find here a second topic of interest, this time external to the community: the emigration of Italian Jews from Tunisia appears, in fact, at the crossroads of two concurrent migratory phenomena triggered by the process of decolonisation.

On the one hand, there was the massive departure of the local Tunisian Jewish population, which should have been integrated into the new structures of the Tunisian republic but which instead ended up taking the road to exile. As this community had lived in Tunisia since ancient times, its emigration took on the appearance of a real uprooting,⁴ definable in terms of dispersion or diaspora. On the other hand, there was the emigration of European citizens, especially French (180,000) and Italian (66,000): an allochthonous population, relatively recently settled in Tunisia, lawfully separated from Tunisians and fully integrated in the structures and culture of Europe. The latter, hence, was an emigration that took the form of repatriation, or demobilisation, albeit in equally abrupt and traumatic forms.⁵

Cosmopolitanism, ed. by David Cesarani and Gemma Romain, London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2006, pp. 1-13.

4. Georges Bensoussan, *Juifs en pays arabe. Le grand déracinement 1850-1975*, Paris, Tallandier, 2012.

5. *L'Europe retrouvée; les migrations de la décolonisation*, ed. by Jean-Louis Miège and Dubois Colette, Paris, Éditions L'Harmattan, 1995.

The complexity of the migratory movements that developed in Tunisia from after the Second World War until the 1960s is thus evident. Although all linked to the decolonisation process, these migrations implied a plurality of actors (European settlers, local Jews, poor Whites),⁶ a plurality of motivations (push factors, pull factors) and a plurality of definitions (repatriation, exile, diaspora). How does the emigration of Italian Jews fit in? Does it fall within the field of “return” migrations of Europeans, or is it assimilable to a Jewish diaspora? Simplifying as much as possible: did Italian Jews emigrate as Jews or as Italians?

Answering these questions from a divergent emigration perspective⁷ means confronting both methodological and documentary problems. In general, archival fonds preserve few traces of the mobility of foreign populations, especially when focusing on the context of departure and trying to understand the motives of emigrants. The reason for this is mainly administrative: bureaucracy is designed to follow (and control) the flow of incoming immigration, controlling those who arrive more than those who leave. For the researcher, there are also methodological obstacles: it is generally easier to study the migration process on arrival, when dealing with an already settled population, rather than upstream, when dealing with a dispersing population, whose movements escape the meshes of administration. It is therefore not surprising that the settlement of Tunisian Jews (and more generally of North African Jews) in France and their strategies of integration into the local society stimulated earlier historiographical and sociological studies, benefitting from a rich harvest of qualitative and quantitative sources.⁸

The studies on the Italian Jewish population of Tunisia could not be supported by such documental abundance. Furthermore, this population lacks visibility within the administration since Italian Jews escaped the classification criteria adopted by all the authorities (French, Italian or Tunisian) at the time.

6. Andrea Smith, *Europe's Invisible Migrants*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2003.

7. This perspective has been analysed by Nancy Green, *Repenser les migrations*, Paris, PUF, 2002.

8. Doris Bensimon, *L'Intégration des Juifs nord-africains en France*, La Haye, Mouton, 1972; Sergio Della Pergola, Doris Bensimon, “Structures socio-démographiques de la population juive originaire d’Afrique du Nord”, in *Les Juifs du Maghreb: diasporas contemporaines*, ed. by Jean-Claude Lasry and Claude Tapia, Paris-Montréal, Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1989.

Under the French protectorate, in particular, demographical statistics were used to divide the population by nationality, and the only religion-defined minority to receive specific attention was that of Tunisian Jews, whose evolution was closely followed for political purposes. Confronted with this void, all analyses have to show flexibility, on the one hand by adapting the objectives to the available documents, and on the other by looking for new sources. The reflections proposed in this contribution, for example, are largely based on a corpus of oral and written memories, including a series of interviews conducted between 2013 and 2020 on a group of former members of the Italian Jewish community of Tunisia. The primary goal is to fill the gaps in public archives, but also to acquire first-hand information about the private sphere and personal trajectories. This meant adopting a bottom-up perspective, enhancing the role of marginal actors. Thanks to its ability to recombine the local and the global, microhistory served as a key to understanding these broader phenomena.

In this perspective, the historical trajectory of Italian Jews in Tunisia offers an interesting observatory through which to understand the articulation between identity flexibility and geographical mobility. By shifting the focus to departures, it is possible to understand how the different belonging⁹ come into synergy, or clash. Rather than focusing on the destinations chosen, or on the material preparation for departure, the reflection therefore explores the identity stratification of the Italian Jewish population in order to understand its impact on migratory trajectories.

The weight of national identity

The claim that Italian Jews were of Italian nationality is less tautological than it might seem because the common national belonging hides a more complex and nuanced reality.

The bond with the Italian peninsula was deep and invested the material and affective spheres in equal measure. Linked by origin and

9. In this article the notion of “belonging” had been usually preferred to “identity” because involving the idea of the identity as a dynamic construction instead of a social fact, with a constructivist approach. Rogers Brubaker, Frédéric Junqua, “Au-delà de L’identité”, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 139/1 (2001), pp. 66-85, online: <https://doi.org/10.3406/arss.2001.3508>.

trade to the port of Livorno and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, the Grana enjoyed a privileged juridical and economic status in Tunisia, thanks to the capitulation system.¹⁰ In the 19th century, they enthusiastically took part in the struggles for the unification of Italy, even participating directly in the wars of independence: when the new Italian state was born, in 1861, most of them chose, and obtained, Italian citizenship, legally sanctioning an identity transformation that had already been accomplished. Assimilation to the Italian nation, the pledge of political and social emancipation, was so deeply-rooted that in the current language of the time the expression “Livornese Jew” indicated a generic Italian Jew, even if born outside Livorno. At the same time, Livornese Jews in Tunisia invested energy and resources in founding cultural and social associations (schools, hospitals, banks, philanthropic works, newspapers) in the service of the national community. The patriotism of the Italian Jews of Tunisia was frequently spotted by observers of the time¹¹ and has been constantly emphasised by historians and authors:¹² with an effective expression, the author Adrien Salmieri wrote that “the Livornese were Jews of Italian religion”.¹³

As a temporary achievement in a long historical journey, citizenship was not, however, an immutable asset, especially in Tunisia, where Italian-ness was a political issue. As non-dominant foreigners,¹⁴ Italians constituted a European collectivity, and therefore were alien to the local population. At the same time, as non-French citizens in a French protectorate, they were excluded from the exercise of colonial power. Moreover, they were seen as a threat by local authorities, especially in the fascist period when the

10. The capitulations were bilateral treaties signed between a Christian country and the Ottoman Empire, according fiscal, commercial and juridical privileges to the European subjects. *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*, ed. by Anh Nga Longva and Anne Sofie Roald, Leiden, Brill, 2012, pp. 47-68, online: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004216846>.

11. Gaston Loth, *Le peuplement italien en Algérie et en Tunisie*, Paris, Librairie Armand Colin, 1905, p. 319; Charles Monchicourt, *Les Italiens de Tunisie et l'accord Laval-Mussolini de 1935*, Paris, Sirey, 1938, p. 69.

12. Sebag, *Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie*, p. 209; Lionel Lévy, *La nation juive portugaise: Livourne, Amsterdam, Tunis: 1591-1951*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999, p. 105; Filippo Petrucci, *Gli ebrei in Algeria e in Tunisia, 1940-1943*, Florence, Giuntina, 2011, p. 29.

13. Adrien Salmieri, *La communauté italienne de Tunisie*, Paris, CIRCE – Paris III, 1996, p. 19.

14. *L'Europe retrouvée: les migrations de la décolonisation*, ed. by Jean-Louis Miège and Colette Dubois, Paris, Éditions L'Harmattan, 1995, pp. 13-14.

regime openly claimed Tunisia as the “legitimate aspiration” of the new imperial Italy. The sense of an imminent danger from the Italian community led France to introduce a demographic policy aimed at absorbing this population, first by encouraging French naturalisation (through a special law, published in the *Journal Officiel Tunisien* on 12 November 1921), then through more coercive measures. After the Second World War and the collapse of the fascist regime in Italy, the colonial authorities dissolved the institutions of the Italian community and confiscated its properties, while banning the Italian-speaking press and schools. Children born to Italian parents after 10 June 1940 automatically became French, while the closure of schools obliged young Italians to attend the French education system, starting an irreversible process of linguistic and cultural integration.

Like their compatriots, the Italian Jews of Tunisia were thus involved in this national transition that led them to integrate with the French population. Applications for naturalisation increased significantly after the Second World War, from an annual average of 17 in the period 1921-1940 to an average of 48.5 in the period 1943-1956.¹⁵ Interviews with witnesses born between 1930 and 1950 reveal an almost complete integration into the French school system, with the adoption of a new language, culture and mentality compared to their Italian parents’ generation.

This shift in identity profoundly influenced the dynamics of emigration: departures were increasingly oriented towards France, the new country of adoption, rather than towards Italy, the old country of origin. “I studied in France [...] and at 18 I became French. French, heartily French, believe me”, declared Eliana G., born in Tunis in 1930, “and when we passed our baccalaureate, we went to France. It was unavoidable, there was no way to go back there”.¹⁶ Of course, this phenomenon concerned the entire Italian population, but with different impact based on religious belonging. Overall, 23% of the Italian population, approximately 21,000 people, emigrated to France. They were mainly the poorest part of the community, whom the local Italian authorities themselves preferred to divert out of Italy, not to swell the ranks of the unemployed.¹⁷ Among the Italian Jews

15. CAD Courneuve, *Affaires tunisiennes et marocaines (1944-55)*, cartons 210-226 and 673-700.

16. Interview with Eliana G., Paris, 11 July 2018.

17. According to the statistics of the Italian authorities in 1959, 14,000 young Italians were bi-nationals (with both Italian and French citizenships) and 6,683 families included at least one child with French nationality, for a total of 29,000 people living in “mixed”

in Tunisia, on the other hand, the numbers were much higher. According to the interviews, it is probable that France absorbed about 60-70% of the Livornese emigration from Tunisia, while Italy took less than 20-25%. The first results of a quantitative study on the generation born between the two wars¹⁸ suggests an even sharper imbalance in favour of France, which was preferred in 84% of departures.

According to the interviews, a close link emerged between education and emigration. France was chosen by 25 out of 41 cases: all of these individuals declared that they were already fluent in French, and two-thirds of them already held French citizenship. Most of them had already visited the country and had relatives already established in the place of arrival. Emigration to France was thus presented as the last stage in a process of integration in full swing, which was already in place before departure. In other words, for this generation, leaving Tunisia seemed more a continuity than a disruption.

This appears far from obvious: a community that had deep roots in Livorno, that had linked its civil emancipation to Italy, that had always been pointed as the spearhead of Italian-ness in Tunisia moved almost entirely to France, all in the span of a single generation. Belonging to the Jewish religion played a crucial (albeit indirect) role in determining this shift: in this sense, emigration showed that Jewish and non-Jewish Italians took deeply different paths, despite their common national affiliation.

Religious identity at work

Acknowledging that Italian Jews were of the Jewish religion appears as another tautology; yet, like in the case of nationality, this belonging was much more complex. Since their arrival in Tunisia in the 17th century, the Grana had never been known for a particular attachment to religion. On the contrary, their Tunisian co-religionists had shown, since the first

families. Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (hereafter ASMAE), Direzione Generale Affari Politici (hereafter DGAP), Ufficio III (1959-1962) – II versamento, busta 76, “Prospetto delle famiglia comprendenti ragazzi con doppia cittadinanza”, 1959.

18. The sample has been reconstructed thanks to the birth certificates kept in the civil status registers of the Italian Consulate of Tunis between 1918 and 1940, conserved in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome. A total of 507 birth certificates have been collected.

contacts, a certain disdain for these “false Jews”¹⁹ from Europe, whose morals and mentality seemed far from Jewish traditions. The Livornese community underwent a process of secularisation between the 18th and 19th centuries: the religious authority of the rabbis in juridical and collective matters became weaker, and decisions were increasingly taken by the general assembly of community members, based on more democratic logics.²⁰ Moreover, the Livornese Jews were among the first to introduce Freemasonry in Tunisia and founded numerous lodges under the obedience of the Grande Oriente d’Italia, helping spread the ideals of liberty and universal brotherhood. At the beginning of 1900, the Grana represented 30% of the membership of all Italian Masonic lodges. Alberto Bensasson, a member of the Risorgimento Lodge, was the first prominent member of the Jewish community to refuse a religious funeral and was buried in 1904 according to the civil rite.²¹

Having remained in the background for a long time, the Jewish religion became a burning issue in 1938 when the fascist regime emanated the racial laws and made Italian Jews second-class citizens. In Tunisia, as European subjects, Italian Jews were protected by French law, which officially prohibited racial discrimination and racist propaganda. Nevertheless, they suffered social marginalisation, which was allowed (and often promoted) by the Italian authorities, who encouraged their exclusion from cultural institutions (such as the Dante Alighieri), banks, the Italian hospital and schools. In this way, Italian Jews were affected by antisemitic discrimination measures earlier than their Tunisian and French co-religionists, who experienced their first persecutions only two years later, during the war, when the collaborationist Vichy regime extended the *Statut des Juifs* to the colonial possessions.

The racial laws of 1938 were crucial for the destiny of the Livornese community as they pushed most families to withdraw their children from Italian schools. In the span of few months, 227 students out of 265 (ca. 83%)

19. André Chouraqui, *Histoire des Juifs en Afrique du Nord*, Paris, Hachette, 1987, p. 122.

20. Itshaq Avrahami, “La contribution des sources internes, hébraïques, judéo-arabes et arabes à l’histoire des Juifs Livournais à Tunis”, *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 50/9-12 (1984), p. 737.

21. Lucia Valenzi, *Italiani e antifascisti in Tunisia negli anni Trenta: percorsi di una difficile identità*, Naples, Liguori, 2008, p. 5.

were transferred to French schools.²² About half of them were high schoolers, forming the future upper and middle class of the Italian community. An entire generation of children and teenagers entered the French school system ten years earlier than the rest of the Italian school population: this produced a precocious and deeper assimilation, which oriented their emigration choices towards France. From this point of view, it is interesting to note how the antisemitic environment that reigned in French schools in Tunisia under the Vichy regime (1940-1943) did not have significant repercussions on the orientation of young Italian Jews, who continued to attend the same schools even after the war.²³

In this perspective, being a Jew made France a more desirable destination than Italy. At the same time, it added a third potential destination that was precluded to the rest of the Italian Catholic population: Palestine and, since 1948, the new state of Israel. In the first half of the century, the Grana entered the sphere of influence of Zionist propaganda, which grew considerably in Tunisia, especially after the Second World War. Some 34 Zionist newspapers were published, and an official organisation (the Fédération Sioniste de Tunisie) was founded in 1920, which led to the development of a network of associations that also included the scouts of the Union Universelle de la Jeunesse Juive (UUJJ).

In the immediate post-war period, Zionism experienced an unprecedented boom, transforming Tunisia as the centre of the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement in North Africa.²⁴ The development of mass propaganda and the organisation of Jewish Agency offices to coordinate emigration to Israel led to the departure of 25,000 Tunisian Jews within a few years, rising to 50,000 in the period 1943-1970. Zionism gradually imposed itself on the Tunisian Jewish population as a concrete alternative to French assimilation, and the *aliyah* as an emigration choice worthy of attention, even of enthusiasm. However, the response of Italian Jews was ambivalent. On the one hand, thanks to their contacts with Europe, the Livornese Jews had been the forerunners of the Zionist movement in North Africa. In 1911, Alfred

22. ASMAE, Archivio Scuole Italiane all'Estero, Archivio Scuole - I Versamento (1936-1945), busta 128, note of the Italian consul Giacomo Silimbani, 30 December 1938.

23. Giacomo Nunez, *Delle navi e degli uomini, i portoghesi di Livorno: da Toledo a Livorno e a Tunisi*, Livorno, Belforte, 2011, pp. 163-166.

24. Olfa Ben Achour, *L'émigration des Juifs de Tunisie De 1943 à 1967*, Namur, Publishroom, 2019, pp. 44-52, online: <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=6140070>.

Valensi founded the first Zionist association, the *Aghoudat Sion*, in Tunis; in the 1930s and 1940s, Allegra Boccara directed the Women's International Zionist Organisation (WIZO), coordinating the efforts of Jewish women for the settlers in Palestine, while her husband, the lawyer Victor Cattan, was president of the Tunisian section of the Jewish National Fund and closely followed every development of the Zionist movement in the protectorate. On the other hand, Zionism could not overcome national belonging, and its project was perceived, above all, as a message of solidarity with poor and dispossessed Jews, who were looking for a place to live in peace. At a UUIJ conference held in Tunis in 1928, the Livornese notable Arnaldo Attias gave an enlightening definition of Zionism in this sense: "to be part of the Jewish people, without this being incompatible with the duties of the Jews as citizens of their respective homeland".²⁵

At the time of emigration, and in contrast to Tunisian Jews, very few Italian Jews left the country for Israel. The interview campaign brought to light only one case in which an entire family made the *halya*: the Lumbroso family, whose members actively participated in the creation of *kibbutzim* in Palestine. In the abovementioned quantitative study, only 10 departures for Israel were traced out of 500 people born in the period 1918-1940. In summary, religion had an important role, but not in the same way as for the rest of the Jewish population of Tunisia: other forms of belonging, primarily social, came into play.

Social class and emigration strategies

Protagonists for a long time in the maritime trade between Livorno and Tunis, even in the first half of the 20th century, the Grana largely represented an urban bourgeoisie, of relatively wealthy condition, employed in commerce and liberal professions. This social status, much more than their religion or legal situation, distinguished them from the rest of their Tunisian co-religionists, who made up a generally poor and socially marginalised population, and from their Catholic compatriots, mostly Sicilian emigrants of very humble extraction who had arrived in the country much later (at the end of the 19th century) and who were mainly employed as labour by French companies. Moreover, among the Livornese

25. "A l'U.U.J.J., Sionisme et assimilation", *La Justice*, 17 February 1928.

Jews of Tunisia, awareness of this social status was widespread, along with the conviction that they represented an informal aristocracy, “founded more on the conscience than on a lineage”,²⁶ called upon to lift the fortunes of other Tunisian Jews and other Italian emigrants.

A socio-professional analysis gives an idea of the phenomenon. In 1921, although representing only 5% of the Italian population, 9 out of 13 lawyers were Grana, as well as 6 out of 25 pharmacists, 24 out of 56 doctors, 3 out of 7 shipping agents, 32 out of 43 insurance agents and 20 out of 28 grain merchants.²⁷ Livornese families in Tunisia had the economic and cultural resources to put their children through high school and even to support their studies at European universities. The comparison with the Tunisian Jewish community is even more striking: despite a remarkable spread of the professions of doctor, pharmacist and lawyer, in 1936 25% of the working population still appeared employed as industrial workers and 20% worked for a low and unstable wage, often paid day-by-day.²⁸

Belonging to a group that valued personal success, which also saw education as the main engine of emancipation and social lift *par excellence*, undoubtedly contributed to discourage migrations towards Israel, deflecting them to more promising destinations, first and foremost France, which guaranteed more prestigious higher studies and vertical mobility. On the contrary, the proclamation of the state of Israel did not seem to offer a plausible alternative in the eyes of the new generations of middle-class families.

This phenomenon was not exceptional: the Tunisian Jewish population in general was also affected, in the same period, by the same dynamics of differentiation on a social basis. The Zionist organisations themselves directed towards Israel the poorest groups, those excluded from the emancipation process, who had nothing to lose. The upper middle classes and elites, whether they were Tunisian, French or Italian, were hardly involved in this.

This aspect did not escape the public authorities. The Italian consulate in Tunis, which examined the emigration of Jews to Israel between 1951 and 1955, pointed out that the flow of departures was more intense in the isolated and vulnerable southern regions of the country and mostly

26. “Plus de conscience que de lignage”. Lévy, *La nation juive portugaise*, p. 216.

27. *Almanacco italiano della Tunisia*, Tunis, Edizioni T. Di Pietro, 1938.

28. Sebag, *Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie*, pp. 187-189.

concerned humble people who did not have the money to pay for the journey. Forty years later, the historian Paul Sebag observed:

It was the more modest and traditional individuals of the population that emigrated to Israel, while it was the more affluent and Westernised ones that emigrated to France. It has been said that the Tunisian *aliyah*, like the North African *aliyah* as a whole, represented the emigration of a social body amputated of its elites.²⁹

In short, while the head of the Tunisian Jewish community went towards France, the body went towards Israel. In the Italian Jewish community, where the “head” was much bigger than the body, the reluctance to leave for Israel was stronger, mixing social and personal reasons. The absence of an established family network, the impossibility of making the most of the educational capital built during school in Tunisia, the difficulty of integrating in a context seen as foreign, were all serious obstacles for a population already integrated in the European world. In the words of the witnesses, Israel was often presented as a “leap into the unknown”. Claudia B., who left with her family for France, recounted:

Neither I nor my husband have ever been Zionists. But we know Zionism, we know it, we love Israel very much: if you like, Israel is in my heart like Italy is in my heart. [...] I love both! But actually it was not possible for us to go to Israel. We weren’t religious, so we couldn’t be part of a religious group, we didn’t know the language, neither of us, so as in Israel they speak and write in Hebrew... We didn’t know and... how to tell you? We had no future in Israel.³⁰

A quick glance at the behavior of other Jewish communities in the Maghreb (both French and Italian) seems to confirm this hypothesis. Even on a transnational scale, we can find the same logics in place. Where the local Jewish population had been able to undertake early assimilation into the European one, as in Algeria, the flow of emigration was almost entirely to France. In Tunisia, where the integration process was still incomplete, the choice of France was more selective and mainly concerned the educated middle classes.³¹ In Morocco, where a politic of naturalisation began

29. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

30. Interview with Claudia B., Paris, 28 October 2018.

31. Jacques Taïeb, “Immigrés d’Afrique du Nord: Combien? Quand? Pourquoi?”, in *Terre d’exil, terre d’asile: migrations juives en France aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles*, Paris,

later and with several limits, emigration was massively directed towards Israel, while France absorbed a small minority.³² The same dynamics were observed in the case of the Jewish community of Libya, which was an Italian colony between 1911 and 1945. Here, between the post-war independence and the Six Day War, Libyan Jews underwent a selective emigration that took the working classes (30,000 departures) to Israel and the elites (6,000 departures) to Italy, the latter already involved in a process of assimilation within Italian colonial society.³³

Both qualitative and quantitative analyses show that the old paths of emancipation and real prospects for the future prevailed over the ideal impulse and mere religious belonging. Individual, family and personal logics came into play, with a decisive impact on the mode of departure and choice of destination.

A galaxy of factors at play

Entering the personal sphere means facing a plurality of belongings, mostly subjective, that interfere with the national, religious and social dimensions, recombining them.

First of all, there was a “generational belonging”, which characterised those born between 1930 and 1950 and which manifested itself in an intra-familial division between children and parents. This factor emerged clearly from the corpus of interviews conducted in the 1960s³⁴ on the generation that emigrated after the war or in the aftermaths of Tunisia’s independence. Most of the protagonists showed themselves willing to leave the country for reasons described as personal and voluntary, and above all for the difficulty of recognising themselves in the model of colonial society in which their families lived. In other words, there was a widespread climate of rebellion against the world of their parents, described as hypocritical and uptight, self-referred and uninterested in political issues:

Éditions de l’Éclat, 2010, pp. 149-151, online: <https://www.cairn.info/terre-d-exil-terre-d-asile--9782841622139-page-148.htm>.

32. Ibid.

33. Piera Rossetto, *Mémoires de diaspora, diaspora de mémoires: juifs de Libye entre Israël et l’Italie, de 1948 à nos jours*, s.l., [s.n.], 2015, p. 5.

34. These fifteen interviews were realised by the sociologist Michèle Salmona in 1963, as part of a personal study of the Livornese Jewish community in Tunisia.

This life in a closed environment, this colonial life, was particularly sterile. [...] My parents' generation was frighteningly dull. After this degradation, my generation was fortunate, of course, to have been brought into contact with the [current] problems: first of all, if you like, the racial problems, secondly the political problems and thirdly the colonial problem. So we had to deal with these issues. For example, when I first expressed to my mother at the age of about 12 that I found the colonial situation intolerable, she thought I was crazy.³⁵

While the older generations grew up imbued with Italian patriotism, the new generations were able to observe, and to experience firsthand, its darkest contradictions: fascism, racial laws, war and occupation. The rupture was observed at the time of emigration: those who left for Italy were often already adults, who identified themselves as fully Italian and who were already integrated in an Italian network of relationships. Younger people, on the other hand, who entered French schools at an early age, were more assimilated to the French society (into which many young people from the Tunisian Jewish community converged) and saw their Italian identity as a secondary belonging, if not as a residual influence. This generated some peculiar dynamics. Sometimes a parent left for Italy but the children stayed in Tunisia to study and then moved to France. Alternatively, some children left to study in France, and the parents, who remained in Tunisia, joined them decades later, because by then there was no one left in Italy.

Numerous testimonies show, directly or indirectly, that gender questions were grafted onto this generational division. The convergence towards France occurred for different reasons. Males sought their opportunities for personal and professional fulfilment – university, careers, personal projects – which they could not achieve in Tunisia. The females discovered in emigration a form of emancipation, both moral and social, in open rupture with the cultural patterns inherited from their parents, which were associated with the colonial world. It was a world concerned with maintaining a façade of respectability in the public sphere, while in private life its oppressive and conformist character was revealed, particularly in relation to women and in their sentimental choices. “We were racist, each environment considered itself superior to the others”, Eliana G. repeated: “we didn’t mix with others, it was racism! If we had married an Arab, people would have shouted: scandal!”³⁶ For many young women, leaving

35. Interview between Michele Salmona and Renato Pariente, Paris, 1963.

36. Interview with Eliana G., Paris, 11 July 2018.

Tunisia therefore meant being able to get away from old prejudices and stereotypes, and being free to look for husband or a partner outside the restricted sphere of the Livornese community.

For others, the departure took on an even deeper meaning and was linked to paths of political belonging. From a quantitative point of view, political emigration remained a marginal phenomenon among the Italian Jewish community in Tunisia: it was nevertheless of a certain qualitative importance due to the fact that it was part of a long-lasting militancy which started in Tunisia and continued in Italy, sometimes leading to public positions. Numerous Italian Jews fought in the anti-fascist ranks, especially in the 1930s when the Tunisian Communist Party (PCT) was able to attract young people into active militancy. Political commitment continued even during the war, despite arrests, trials, torture and cross-repression by the fascist, Nazi and Vichy authorities, which left deep traces in memoirs.³⁷ When Tunis was liberated from the Axis occupation forces in May 1943, a small group of militants born in the Livornese community (13 men and 7 women) decided to leave Tunisia to continue the anti-fascist endeavour in Italy, following the Anglo-American armies. This migration appeared to be a special case for several reasons. It was a unidirectional migratory flow, in the sense that it went entirely towards Italy, in a very short period of time, between the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944. It was a path involving militants linked to each other by a political bond, but also by family and marriage: of the 20 Italian Jews involved, 12 were married within this group or to other non-Jewish militants, and 12 had close-family relationships (siblings or cousins). This was a group of migrants who moved in a collective and organised manner, and who maintained deep, lasting contacts over the following decades, preserving a certain unity.

Conclusions

The case study of Italian Jews in Tunisia offers a key to enrich the debate on the migration of Jews from the Arab world, starting with a

37. Nadia Spano, *Mabrùk: ricordi di un'inguaribile ottimista*, Cagliari, Editori Riuniti, 2005, pp. 151-220; Maurizio Valenzi, *Confesso che mi sono divertito*, Naples, Pironti, 2007, pp. 45-57; Ferruccio Bensasson, *Utopie perdute: per un domani all'altezza dei nostri sogni*, Rome, Aracne, 2008, pp. 187-212.

reflection on the categorisations used to study this phenomenon. When describing migration, academics often use definitions that imply a specific social, political or cultural affiliation: Jews, Tunisian Jews, natives, French, Italians – definitions that sometimes risk turning into conceptual cages.

On the contrary, the analysis of the mobility of Italian Jews in Tunisia after the Second World War shows a continuous recombination of affiliations, and the consequent difficulty – if not impossibility – of establishing a clear and definitive hierarchy among them. A person could emigrate to France because they had become French; to continue their studies; in search of independence from the family, as in the case of many young women; or to follow the spouse. Certainly, in crucial moments, the historical context exacerbated some forms of belonging to the detriment of others: between 1943 and 1945, for example, many Grana chose to return to Italy to escape French anti-Italian politics; in 1967, at the time of the Six-Day War, many Italian Jews still living in Tunisia chose to leave out of fear of antisemitic violence.

When departing from a colonial context, it is taken for granted that one chooses a destination as an Italian, as a Jew, as a Frenchman; but we must also take into account other dimensions of identity that come into play and that are part of one's private, even intimate, sphere. A person may undertake the path of emigration for socioeconomic reasons, as a worker; or for cultural reasons, as a student; or for affective reasons, such as following one's spouse; or for ideal reasons, in the name of a political battle or for the realisation of a utopia.

Italian Jews, due to their position as mediators between different communities and worlds, represent an ideal observatory to study the complexity of these dynamics.