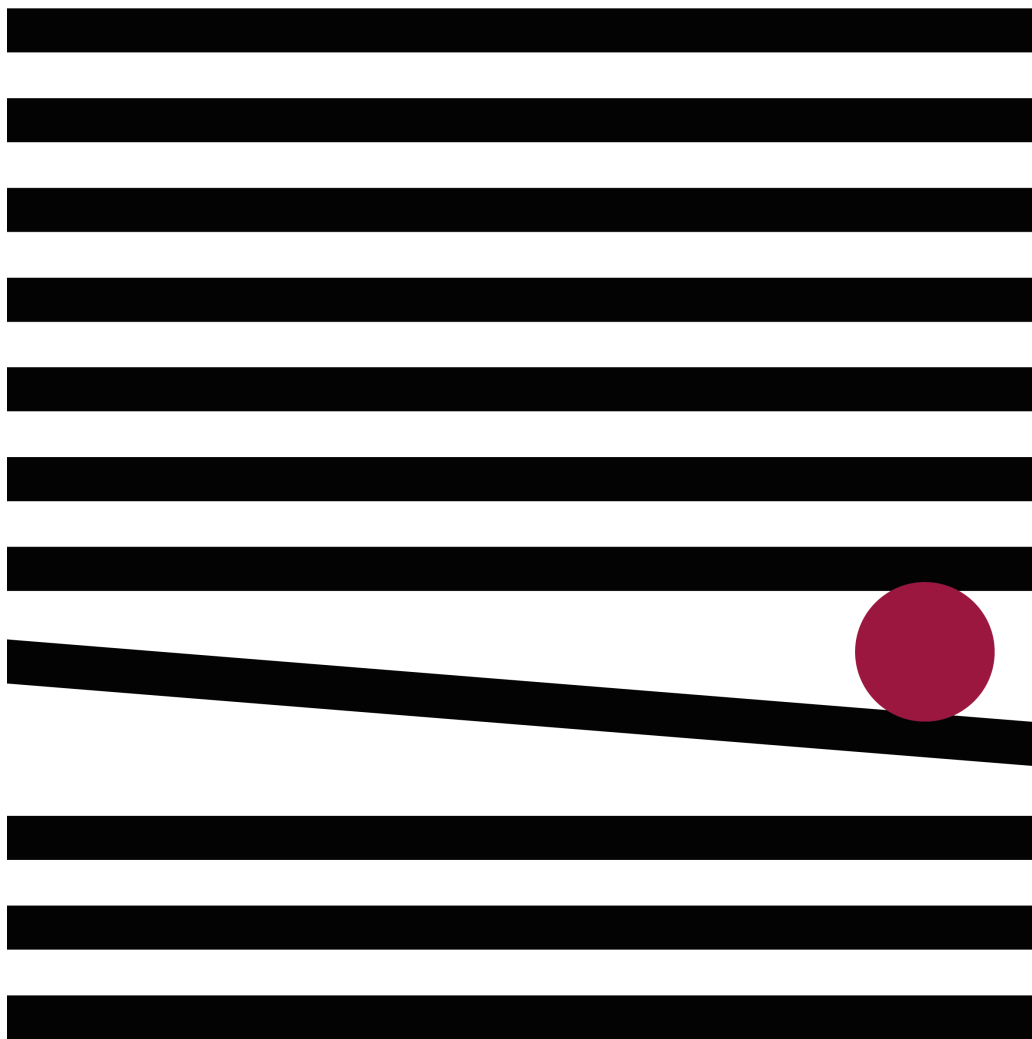


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The Editors of Quest

Introduction

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Quest 29 is a Miscellanea issue, bringing together five articles that discuss important aspects of the contemporary Jewish past in a variety of settings and on the basis of different kinds of sources. Despite their diversity, the articles share a common thread: memory and its complex elaborations as a driving force in Jewish history, particularly in the aftermath of modernity, the Holocaust and twentieth-century mass migrations. Another noteworthy feature of these contributions is their use of sources that extend beyond traditional archival documents, ranging from literature and autobiographical writing to oral interviews and visual representations in the press. This variety testifies once again to the breadth of Jewish historical studies today and to their fruitful dialogue with neighboring disciplines such as literary studies and ethnography.

The first article, "Jews in Modena in the Period between Italian Unification and the Fin de Siècle: Society, Urban Space, and Identity," by Federica Di Padova, focuses on the lesser-known Jewish community of Modena, a city in northern Italy not far from Bologna. Di Padova examines the period between Emancipation and the end of the nineteenth century, primarily from the perspective of urban and spatial history. Among other topics, she analyses the construction of a new synagogue in Modena, offering an original interpretation of the ways in which Jewish modernity and integration unfolded in a provincial Italian town.

Andrea Wuerth's article, "Home Making: Caregivers in Post-Holocaust Children's Homes in England, France and Germany," turns instead to Jewish care homes in England, France, and Germany in the period following the Second World War and the Holocaust, examining both similarities and differences among the selected cases. The article draws on first-person accounts, testimonies, memoirs, photographs, and personal papers. Together, these sources reveal how caregivers and child survivors understood the immediate post-Holocaust period and shed light on the contexts in which the directors of these care homes operated.

The third article, by Martino Oppizzi, "A Jewish Memory or an Italian Memory? The Narration of the Colonial Past by Members of the Livornese Community in Tunisia," examines how the Italian-Jewish community in Tunisia, known as the Livornese community, reconstructed its collective memory and narrated its shared historical experience. Drawing on a corpus of literary and autobiographical texts published between 1996 and 2016, Oppizzi demonstrates that the Livornese Jews' distinctive social position and multiple affiliations

produced a multifaceted memory, shaped by trajectories of emigration and by the broader processes of assimilation experienced by former European colonisers.

In “East or West: Musrara Neighbourhood and the Dynamics of Mizrahi-Palestinian-Ashkenazi Relations,” Michael Hazan examines the Jerusalem neighborhood of Musrara. He first considers the neighborhood before 1948 through the retrospective accounts of Palestinian residents who were dispossessed of their homes, and then turns to the marginality and hardship experienced by the new Mizrahi population that inhabited the area between 1948 and 1967. Drawing on oral interviews with Mizrahi activists and other sources, the article subsequently explores the different perspectives of Musrara’s residents following the Six-Day War and the reopening of the neighborhood’s borders.

The fifth and final article is Daniele Passeggi’s “‘Holocaust Vietnam 1979’: Boat People and Analogical Uses of Catholic Memory of the Shoah (1978-1980).” Here, the focus shifts to Italy and to the ways in which the memory of the Holocaust was evoked within Italian Catholic culture—particularly in the press—during the Indochinese refugee crisis of 1978-1980, at the beginning of John Paul II’s pontificate. Drawing on Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory, the article examines the use of symbols associated with Nazi extermination camps and their reinterpretation through the lens of Christian tradition.

The issue also includes a “Discussion” section featuring two essays, by Guri Schwarz and Scott Ury, on Jonathan Judaken’s *Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism*. Both contributions shed light on the important role of the volume in theorizing antisemitism from philosophical and historiographical perspectives, while also situating it within the broader context of recent scholarship on antisemitism and other forms of racism. The “Reviews” section includes discussions of seven books covering a broad range of subjects, including Jerusalem under the British Mandate, the Israeli Black Panthers, the deportation of the Jews of Rhodes, and antisemitism and hate speech in the twenty-first century.

This Miscellanea follows a special issue of *Quest* dedicated to the seventieth anniversary of CDEC, which was also the last issue supervised by Cristiana Facchini as editor-in-chief. On behalf of the editors and editorial assistants, the new editor-in-chief, Dario Miccoli, would like to express his gratitude to Cristiana for all her work. Our hope is that *Quest* will continue to serve as a recognized and authoritative venue for scholarly publication and discussion in the field of contemporary Jewish history, as it has done for the past sixteen years.

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Jews in Modena in the period between Italian Unification and the *Fin de Siècle* Society, Urban Space, and Identity

ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation of the Jewish community of Modena from emancipation to the early twentieth century, focusing on the shifting relationship between civic integration, communal continuity, and the redefinition of Jewish identity. Bringing together economic, political, social, demographic, and urban perspectives, it explores how Modena's Jews participated in the civic and economic transformation of the post-Unification city, while confronting the enduring legacies of segregation and the less visible forms of prejudice that accompanied formal equality. Particular attention is paid to the construction and subsequent transformation of the synagogue and the former ghetto, as well as to legal controversies and the emergence of Zionist mobilization at the turn of the century. The article suggests that emancipation should not be understood as a linear transition from segregation to integration, or from distinctiveness to assimilation, but rather as an ongoing process of negotiation between different forms of belonging. The history of Modena thus illuminates the complex ways in which Italian Jews participated in the making of the modern city while rearticulating communal ties, Jewish identity, and collective responsibility within a changing national and European context.

How to quote this article:

Federica Di Padova, "Jews in Modena in the period between Italian Unification and the *Fin de Siècle*: Society, Urban Space, and Identity," in "Miscellanea 2026," ed. Quest Editorial Staff, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 29, no. 1 (2026), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/17177

Keywords: Jewish Emancipation, Modena, Italian Jews, Integration, Zionism

Introduction

The history of the Jewish community in Modena, a city in the Emilia-Romagna region of northern Italy, offers a revealing lens through which to explore central questions in contemporary Italian Jewish studies, particularly those related to emancipation, integration, and identity—issues that have generated a lively historiographical debate in recent decades.¹ Despite this scholarly attention, the period between Jewish emancipation and the rise of Fascism remains relatively understudied.² While the Jewish presence in Modena from the Middle Ages through the early modern period has been extensively studied, particularly in relation to the city's role as the capital of the Duchy of Modena and Reggio,³ Jewish communal life, and ghettoization under ducal rule,⁴ and has also been covered in publications aimed at a broader readership,⁵ the post-Unification era remains comparatively unexplored. Research has concentrated primarily on the Shoah and rescue networks,⁶ leaving a gap in

¹ Guri Schwarz, "A proposito di una vivace stagione storiografica: letture dell'emancipazione ebraica negli ultimi vent'anni," *Memoria e Ricerca* 19 (2005): 159-174; Ester Capuzzo, *Gli ebrei italiani dal Risorgimento alla scelta sionista*, (Florence: Le Monnier, 2004); Anna Foa, "Il mito dell'assimilazione. La storiografia sull'emancipazione ebraica negli ultimi vent'anni," in "Ebrei e nazione. Comportamenti e rappresentazioni nell'età dell'emancipazione," eds. Carlotta Ferrara Degli Uberti and Daniele Menozzi, *Storia e problemi contemporanei* 20, no. 45 (2007): 17-30; Susan Zuccotti, "Italian Jews in Public Life, 1848-1922," *Studia Judaica* 15 (2007): 82-90; Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti, *Making Italian Jews: Family, Gender, Religion and the Nation, 1861-1918* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), originally published as *Fare gli ebrei italiani. Autorappresentazioni di una minoranza (1861-1918)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011); Marina Beer and Anna Foa, eds., *Ebrei, minoranze, Risorgimento: storia, cultura, letteratura* (Rome: Viella, 2013).

² For a general overview see: Elisabeth Schächter, *The Jews of Italy, 1848-1915: Between Tradition and Transformation* (London-Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010); Cristina M. Bettin, *Italian Jews from Emancipation to Racial Laws* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Shira Klein, *Italy's Jews from Emancipation to Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista: Vicende, identità, persecuzione*, definitive ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 2018), chaps. 1-2. An earlier English translation of a previous edition appeared as Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

³ The Duchy of Modena and Reggio was a pre-Unification Italian state ruled by the Este dynasty from 1452 to 1859. The Este family, a ruling house of medieval origin that governed Ferrara and other territories in northern Italy, established Modena as the capital of the duchy in 1598, following the incorporation of Ferrara into the Papal States. The Duchy became part of the Kingdom of Italy in 1859. For a general overview of the Este dynasty, see Luciano Chiappini, *Gli Estensi. Mille anni di storia* (Ferrara: Corbo, 2001).

⁴ For recent studies, see: Federica Francesconi, *Invisible Enlighteners: The Jewish Merchants of Modena, from the Renaissance to the Emancipation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021); Diletta Biagini, *Le confraternite della comunità ebraica di Modena* (Florence: Giuntina, 2022). Among earlier studies, see: Andrea Balletti, *Gli Ebrei e gli Estensi* (Reggio Emilia: Anonima Poligrafica Emiliana, 1930); Geminiano Benatti, *Presenza ebraica nel ducato di Modena* (Modena: Lions Club, 1984); Franco Bonilauri and Vincenza Maugeri, eds., *Le comunità ebraiche a Modena e Carpi* (Florence: Giuntina, 1999); Diego Fulvio Papouchado, *Un viaggio in un ghetto emiliano* (Modena: Terra e Identità, 2007).

⁵ Clara Ghelfi and Orianna Baracchi, *La comunità ebraica a Modena* (Modena: Comune di Modena, 1995); Luisa Modena, *Il dialetto del ghetto di Modena e dintorni* (Modena: Il Fiorino, 2001); Paolo Battaglia and Federica Francesconi, eds., *Gli ebrei e la città* (Modena: Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena, 2002); Elissa Bemporad and Federica Francesconi, eds., *L'ebraismo e l'arte, gli argenti sinagogali* (Modena: Comunità Ebraica di Modena e Reggio-Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena, 2003); *Itinerari ebraici nelle province di Modena e Reggio Emilia* (Modena: Quid-Comunità Ebraica di Modena e Reggio Emilia, 2006); Federica Francesconi and Luisa Levi D'Ancona, eds., *Vita e società ebraica di Modena e Reggio Emilia. L'età dei ghetti* (Carpi: Comunità Ebraica di Modena e Reggio Emilia, 2007); Luisa Modena, *Il Ghetto e la Sinagoga di Modena* (Modena: Guiglia Editore, 2007); Marta Africano, *Tra Naviglio e Panaro, la presenza ebraica nel territorio a nord di Modena* (Modena: Guiglia Editore, 2012).

⁶ Gianfranco Scaglioni, "Breve ricognizione storica sulle vicende degli ebrei modenese e degli ebrei presenti nel modenese tra il 1938 e il 1945," *Rassegna di storia dell'Istituto storico della Resistenza in Modena e provincia* 9, no. 8 (1989): 113-125; Walter Braccati, *La persecuzione antiebraica nel modenese e nell'Alta valle del Reno* (Bologna, 1943-

understanding the transformations of the community during the liberal period, Fascism, and the postwar years.⁷ This essay presents the first results of a broader research project tracing the trajectory of Modena's Jewish community from Unification to the end of the Second World War,⁸ focusing here on the period from 1861 to the early twentieth century. Adopting a multidimensional approach, it integrates economic, political, social, urban, and cultural perspectives to examine how individual and collective trajectories shaped the city's fabric. It explores the role of Modena's Jews in navigating post-Unification transformations while highlighting the tensions and contradictions of emancipation. Rather than a marginal exception, the Modenese case enriches our understanding of the broader transformations that shaped Italian Jewish life after Unification.

New Trajectories: Social and Economic Reconfigurations

Although a Jewish presence in Modena dates back to the late Middle Ages,⁹ it expanded considerably from the second half of the fourteenth century through the early modern period,¹⁰ eventually becoming a stable and deeply rooted component of the urban fabric. Even the imposition of segregation within the ghetto (1638-1859), located in one of the city's most unhealthy districts, did not disrupt the community's continuity or its ties to local economic and social networks.¹¹ The contribution of Modena's Jews to the Risorgimento was particularly notable,¹² reinforcing their aspirations for participation and recognition within the broader society. The emancipation of Italian Jews was a slow and inconsistent process that redefined individual, family, and collective identities.¹³ After 1861, freed from legal

1945 (Bologna: Edizioni Il Fiorino, 2008); Elena Carano, *Persecuzione, deportazione, solidarietà: la comunità ebraica modenese nella seconda guerra mondiale* (Modena: Edizioni Artestampa, 2009); Giulia Dodi, *Nessun gesto di pietà: la requisizione dei beni ebraici in area modenese dal 1938 al 1945* (Modena: Bonomo, 2016); Carmine Piscitelli and Giulia Dodi, *Francesco Vecchione, la normalità e il coraggio: l'uomo di stato che salvò gli ebrei modenese, 1943-1944* (Naples: Giuntina, 2023); Enrico Ferri, *Il sorriso dei ribelli* (Florence: Giuntina, 2013); Fabio Montella, *Speriamo in giorni migliori* (Florence: Giuntina, 2023).

⁷ Papouchado, *Viaggio in un ghetto emiliano*, 174-192; Fabio Montella, "Squadrismo, comunità ebraica e spazi urbani: il caso della città di Modena," *Storia Urbana* 172 (2023): 107-134.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion, see Federica Di Padova, "Gli ebrei a Modena. Emancipazione, persecuzione, ricostruzione (1861-1948)," in *Nuove prospettive degli studi ebraici in Italia: La Fondazione CDEC e la nuova generazione di studiosi e studiose in dialogo. Atti della IV settimana internazionale di studi sull'ebraismo italiano*, eds. Giordano Bottecchia, Angela Cimino, and Riccardo Abram Correggia (Milan: Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, 2026), 16-20.

⁹ Papouchado, *Viaggio in un ghetto*, 9-13; Francesco Valdrighi, *Dizionario etimologico delle contrade e spazi pubblici di Modena* (Modena: Andrea Rossi, 1880), 99-102.

¹⁰ Antonella Campanini, "Tracce documentarie della presenza ebraica a Modena," in *Le comunità ebraiche a Modena e a Carpi*, eds. Bonilauri and Maugeri.

¹¹ Donatella Calabi, "Dal quartiere ebraico alla costruzione del ghetto in Italia: il caso di Modena," *Ibid.*, 87-93; see also Francesconi, *Invisible Enlighteners* 52 and following.

¹² Papouchado, *Viaggio in un ghetto emiliano*, 154-167; Federica Francesconi, "From Ghetto to Emancipation: The Role of Moisé Formiggini," *Jewish History* 24 (2010): 331-354; Gabriele Fabbrici, "Il contributo degli ebrei 'estensi' alla nascita dello Stato unitario," in *Gli ebrei italiani dai vecchi stati all'unità: atti del Convegno, 9 November 2011, Museo Ebraico di Bologna*, eds. Franco Bonilauri and Vincenza Maugeri (Florence: Giuntina, 2014), 134 and following.

¹³ Ferrara degli Uberti, *Making Italian Jews*, 13 and following.

segregation but not yet fully integrated, many Jews developed new forms of integration, balancing national belonging with the preservation of a distinct communal identity. In Modena, these transformations began with the political changes of 1859,¹⁴ when the city shifted from ducal capital to part of the emerging unified state and new local elites rose to prominence.¹⁵ Throughout this process, the municipality served as an institutional and political bridge between the Este administration and the Kingdom of Sardinia, later the Kingdom of Italy.¹⁶ On June 13, 1859, the city formally abolished the exceptional laws governing the Jewish population, declaring them “equal to other citizens.”¹⁷ By 1859, the economic and social conditions of Modena’s Jews had already improved, as shown by the growing number of property owners, merchants, and shop agents.¹⁸ The first moves outside the ghetto, involving primarily the wealthiest families, marked the beginning of an internal residential mobility,¹⁹ as, for instance, in Venice.²⁰ From a comparative perspective, Modena’s experience combined broader continuities with other Italian Jewish communities and specific discontinuities that reveal its distinctive character. In Florence, for instance, the Jewish elite had achieved economic and social prominence before emancipation, with some families influential in finance and commerce.²¹ Rome offered a contrast: its largely poor Jewish population remained concentrated in modest commercial occupations until the end of the century.²² Milan differed: its relatively recent Jewish community developed a strong specialization in banking and finance, after Italian unification.²³ Building on patterns observed in cities like Venice,²⁴ Florence,²⁵ Parma,²⁶ and Reggio Emilia,²⁷ the extension of full citizenship in Modena quickly translated into participation in local political and social life. In the municipal elections of 18 September 1859, Israele Guastalla²⁸

¹⁴ Paolo Golinelli and Giuliano Muzzioli, eds., *Storia illustrata di Modena* (Milan: Nuova Editoriale Aiep, 1991), 801-854; Giuliano Muzzioli, *Modena* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1994), 3-14.

¹⁵ Roberto Cea, *La città dei Notabili: Società e gruppi dirigenti a Modena dopo l'Unità (1859-1882)* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Marco Cattini, ed., *Al governo del comune. Tremilacinquecento modenesi per la comunità locale dal XV secolo ad oggi*, Quaderni dell'Archivio Storico (Modena: Archivio Storico del Comune di Modena, 1996), 112-117.

¹⁷ Ghelfi and Baracchi, *La comunità ebraica di Modena*, 47.

¹⁸ Ines Miriam Marach, “Demografia e composizione familiare nella Comunità di Modena,” in *Le comunità ebraiche a Modena e a Carpi*, ed. Bonilauri and Maugeri, 178-179.

¹⁹ Ibid., 182.

²⁰ Simon Levis Sullam, *Una comunità immaginata. Gli ebrei a Venezia (1900-1938)* (Milan: Unicopli, 2017), 58.

²¹ Barbara Armani, *Il confine invisibile: l'élite ebraica di Firenze* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2006), 115-168.

²² Stefano Caviglia, *L'identità salvata. Gli ebrei di Roma tra fede e nazione (1870-1938)* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1996), 12 and following.

²³ Rony Hamaui, *Ebrei a Milano: due secoli di storia fra integrazione e discriminazioni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016).

²⁴ Levis Sullam, *Una comunità immaginata*, 66-72; Donatella Calabi, *Venezia e il Ghetto. Cinquecento anni del «recinto degli ebrei»* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2024), chap. 8.

²⁵ Armani, *Il confine invisibile*, 333-335.

²⁶ Lucia Masotti, “Dopo l'emancipazione. Visibilità e invisibilità degli ebrei a Parma nella vita cittadina,” in *Ebrei a Parma: visibilità e invisibilità degli ebrei nella vita cittadina*, ed. Lucia Masotti (Parma: Associazione Italiana Amici dell'Università di Gerusalemme, 2005), 77-80.

²⁷ Alberto Ferraboschi, “L'eredità del ghetto. Gli ebrei a Reggio Emilia nell'Ottocento,” *L'Almanacco* 50 (2007): 77.

²⁸ For a portrait of Israele Guastalla and his family, see: “Adeodato Malatesta, *La famiglia Guastalla*, olio su tela, 1869,” Il Palazzo comunale di Modèa, accessed August 11, 2026, <https://saestoriche.unesco.modena.it/sala-di-rappresentanza/la-famiglia-guastalla/>.

and Giacomo Sacerdoti were elected to the city council;²⁹ Sacerdoti was subsequently appointed municipal councilor, and both were repeatedly re-elected in subsequent years, alongside Alessandro Castelfranco (1860).³⁰ The figure of Israele Guastalla (1825-1880) is particularly emblematic of these transformations. Born to a family that had settled in the city in the early nineteenth century, Guastalla was an entrepreneur, businessman, and financier engaged in urban modernization, remembered by the press as one of the architects of national railway development.³¹ His trajectory—combining local rootedness with national engagement—illustrates the opportunities afforded by the post-unification period. The latter half of the nineteenth century was a period of urban transformation and gradual economic modernization in Modena,³² during which Jews helped reshape the city's socioeconomic profile through civic and economic engagement. Additional Jewish representatives were elected to the city council in subsequent years—including Donato Fortunato Formigginì, Angelo Formigginì, Cesare Rovighi, and Leone Sacerdoti—while others became prominent in the city's economic and social life. When the Modena branch of the National Bank was established in 1860, industrialist Moisé G. Diena joined its board of directors, while agricultural entrepreneurs Davide Nacmani and Moisé Sanguinetti served as auditors, together accounting for 30% of the board.³³ By comparison, no Jews were appointed to the board of directors at its Milan headquarters.³⁴ In 1863, merchant Moisé Urbini became vice president of the Modena Chamber of Commerce and later served as its president (1877-1885), while the industrialist Moisé Diena served as vice president.³⁵ By century's end, David Diena (1877) and Giuseppe Ravenna (1895-1900) had also served as presidents, making three of six chamber presidents Jewish.³⁶ In 1866, the entrepreneur Carlo Sacerdoti founded the local Comizio Agrario [Agricultural Committee], later serving as its vice president and promoting agricultural innovation through its publications.³⁷ Among its active members there was the winegrower Angelo Formigginì (1824-1875), whose commitment to the

²⁹ For the history of these distinguished families, see: Benvenuto Donati, *Genealogia della famiglia Guastalla di Modena, con note illustrative* (Modena: Tipografia Ferraguti, 1942), and the entries "Guastalla" and "Sacerdoti" in Benatti, *Presenza ebraica*. All the names of the elected city council members are taken from: "Appendice documentaria: elenco sistematico dei consiglieri del Comune di Modena dal 1412 al 1995," in *Al governo del comune*, ed. Cattini, 255-298.

³⁰ In the absence of reliable alternative criteria for identifying Jews active in the city's various spheres, this study adopts the onomastic criterion as a heuristic tool, while acknowledging its limitations and the risk of both omissions and ambiguous attributions. For a methodological discussion of this approach see Maida, *Dal Ghetto alla città*, 21-22.

³¹ Donati, *Genealogia della famiglia Guastalla di Modena*, 9-22.

³² Muzzioli, *Modena*, 81-99. For a general overview of Modena in the 19th and 20th centuries, see: Giordano Bertuzzi, *Il rinnovamento edilizio a Modena nella prima metà dell'Ottocento* (Modena: Aedes Muratoriana, 1987).

³³ *Annuario del Ministero di agricoltura, industria e commercio del Regno d'Italia*, vol. 1 (Turin: E. Dalmazzo, 1863), 638.

³⁴ Germano Maifreda, *Gli ebrei e l'economia milanese* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000), 175-176.

³⁵ *Annuario del Ministero* (1863), 538.

³⁶ *Dizionario biografico dei presidenti delle Camere di commercio italiane, 1862-1944*, vol. 2 (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005), 221-225.

³⁷ On Carlo Sacerdoti and his role as founder of Modena's agricultural institutions, see: Golinelli and Muzzioli, *Storia illustrata di Modena*, 809.

dissemination of agricultural knowledge is well attested in contemporary sources.³⁸ He was among the promoters of the Società Enologica di Modena [Modena Wine Society], which brought together several of the figures discussed above, including Giacomo Sacerdoti, Israele Guastalla, and Davide Nacmani.³⁹ A particularly significant development was the founding of the Società Operaia di Mutuo Soccorso [Mutual Aid Workers' Society] in 1863, out of which the Banca Popolare di Modena [Modena People's Bank] emerged in 1867,⁴⁰ providing artisans, small merchants, and workers with greater access to credit and supporting their economic growth.⁴¹ Among the Società Operaia's councilors was the accountant Momolo Coen (1828-1895), who was also a leading promoter of the bank and its second director until his death.⁴² Alongside Coen, Jews represented approximately 20 percent of the members of the founding committee.⁴³ These developments marked a significant phase of Jewish civic, economic, and social engagement in Modena, following a trajectory comparable to that of nearby Reggio Emilia.⁴⁴ Many of the figures mentioned above also helped found the Società del Casino di Modena [Modena Casino Society] (1862), an elite club reflecting the rise of the emerging bourgeoisie of landowners, professionals, and entrepreneurs. Jews represented 20% of the founding membership, highlighting their presence within this new urban elite.⁴⁵

Unlike Florence⁴⁶ and especially Milan,⁴⁷ Modena's Jewish elite was particularly distinguished by industrial and agricultural entrepreneurship, as in nearby Reggio Emilia.⁴⁸ Key industrial sectors included silk spinning and leatherworking,⁴⁹ represented by firms such as Moisé Diena's steam-powered mill and the Guastalla and Nacmani tannery,⁵⁰ as well as the production of luxury furniture and beds. In the agricultural sphere, Jewish entrepreneurs were active in dairy farming and cheese production, winemaking, sericulture, and cereal cultivation. As in many other Jewish communities, traditional artisanal, manufacturing, and commercial activities remained prominent, with many Modenese Jews engaged in

³⁸ See his numerous articles published in the *Bollettino del Comizio agrario di Modena* and his pamphlets on the subject, including *Escursioni di viticoltura nel bolognese* (Modena: Tipografia sociale, 1872). See: Biblioteca Estense Universitaria, Archivio Familiare Formiggini, b. 9, file 180.

³⁹ *Relazione della Società Enologica di Modena per Angelo Formiggini* (Modena: Tip. Sociale-Palazzo Orlandi, 1870), 15-20. Formiggini published innovative studies on agriculture and developed a new winemaking technique known as the "Formiggini process."

⁴⁰ Paolo Battaglia, ed., *150 anni di valori: Storia illustrata di BPER Banca* (Modena: Artioli Editore 1899, 2017).

⁴¹ Graziella Martinelli and Giorgio Montecchi, eds., *La società operaia di mutuo soccorso di Modena* (Modena: Edizioni Artestampa, 2014).

⁴² Mariella Ferrari and Francesco Zaffe, eds., *La società operaia di mutuo soccorso di Modena (1863-1883)* (Modena: Società operaia di mutuo soccorso, 2003), 37.

⁴³ Battaglia, ed., *150 anni di valori*, 30-33.

⁴⁴ Ferraboschi, *L'eredità del ghetto*, 38-39.

⁴⁵ For the list of founding members, see the appendix in Licia Beggi Miani, *Dal nobile Casino dei cavalieri alla Società del Casino* (Modena: Guiglia Editore, 2004); Armani, *Il confine invisibile*, 321 and following.

⁴⁶ Armani, *Il confine invisibile*, 117.

⁴⁷ Maifreda, *Gli ebrei nell'economia milanese*, 116-132.

⁴⁸ Ferraboschi, *L'eredità del ghetto*, 35-39.

⁴⁹ In Modena, the Conceria pellami fuori Porta Castello (the Modena tannery located outside the Castello city gate) was active as early as 1664; see: Benvenuto Donati, *La conceria pellami di Modena fuori Porta Castello nella sua storia più volte secolare* (Modena: Società Tipografica Modenese, 1945), 17.

⁵⁰ *Relazione generale della Camera di commercio, arti e industrie di Modena: a S.E. il Ministro d'Agricoltura e Commercio per il biennio 1863-64* (Modena: Camera di Commercio e Industria-Nicola Zanichelli, 1865), 10, 14.

commercial enterprises and retail shops registered under the Italian Commercial Code (1883).⁵¹ Between 1883 and 1889, about 30% of businesses were first registered in the names of Modenese Jews.⁵² These firms operated across diverse sectors, from iron and paper to manufactured goods, clothing, cereals, leatherworking, and banking. The register also records frequent dissolutions, reconstitutions, and corporate transformations, reflecting a highly adaptive and mobile economic environment. The *Annuario d'Italia amministrativo e commerciale* [Administrative and Commercial Yearbook of Italy] of 1889 provides further insight into the occupational profile of Modena's Jewish population.⁵³ Although accounting for approximately 2% of the city's population, Jews were particularly represented in several key sectors, including textiles, leather, furniture, and finance, as shown in the following table:

Sector	Jewish-Owned Businesses	Total Businesses	Share (%)
Currency Exchange Offices	2	2	100,0
Bankers	4	5	80,0
Leather Goods	7	9	77,8
Furniture Stores	6	9	66,7
Fabric Stores	26	39	66,7
Silk Mills	1	3	33,3
Fancy goods	5	16	31,3
Haberdashers	3	7	42,8
Delicatessens	6	39	15,4
Grocers	2	27	7,4
Attorneys	27	60	11,7

Source: *Annuario d'Italia: amministrativo e commerciale*, 1889; author's calculations.

The *Annuario* lists silk spinning, lithography, furniture and iron-bed production, and agricultural machinery, while recurring family names—Diena, Levi, Sacerdoti, Formiggini, Modena, Vigevani, Donati, Crema, Sanguinetti, Finzi, and Teglio—reveal diversified family businesses, often organized as “Brothers,” “Heirs,” or “Company.”⁵⁴ The first commercial census (1911) recorded only 59 firms with Jewish surnames among 6,207 across the province (0.95%), a much smaller share than twenty-two years earlier.⁵⁵ At this stage, this decline appears to reflect both changes in entrepreneurial patterns and the community's

⁵¹ Tribunale di Modena fonds, *Registro delle trascrizioni delle società* (Register of Transcriptions of Commercial Companies), vol. 1 (1883-1890) and vol. 2, State Archives of Modena (ASMo).

⁵² This percentage was calculated by the author from a consultation of the above-mentioned register.

⁵³ *Annuario d'Italia amministrativo-commerciale* (Genoa: Annuario d'Italia, 1889), 1354-1368.

⁵⁴ See also: Tribunale di Modena fonds, *Registri d'ordine delle società commerciali* (Registers of Commercial Company Registrations), vol. 1, 1889-1898, ASMo, which corroborate the same patterns of surnames and economic trends.

⁵⁵ *Registro delle ditte* (Business Register), vols. I-II, Historical Archive of the Modena Chamber of Commerce. See a similar phenomenon in Florence: Armani, *Il confine invisibile*, 120.

sharp demographic contraction, discussed below. Finally, the *Annuario* reveals limited Jewish participation in public institutions, with only isolated cases in fiscal and judicial administration, the military, and education, science, and culture, unlike, for example, Florence.⁵⁶ The *Annuari della Regia Università di Modena* [Yearbooks of the Royal University of Modena] also confirm this pattern, showing sporadic Jewish representation in academic appointments until the end of the century;⁵⁷ only Pio Foà, a Milanese Jew and professor at the University of Modena, appears among the members of the prestigious *Accademia di Scienze, Lettere e Arti* [Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts].⁵⁸

Emancipation also brought new social, cultural, and institutional challenges, including demographic decline linked to mobility and the attraction of larger urban centers.⁵⁹ In Modena, however, this trend emerged only after 1881;⁶⁰ until then, it was offset by arrivals from smaller neighboring towns, including Scandiano (Reggio Emilia), Carpi, and Finale Emilia (Modena).⁶¹ National censuses confirm the decline: Modena's Jewish population fell from 1,361 in 1871 to 405 in 1911. By contrast, Bologna grew from 229 Jews in 1861 to 492 in 1881,⁶² while Venice declined only in the early twentieth century⁶³ and Florence and Milan followed divergent trajectories of growth. Despite new freedoms, the poorest Jews saw little improvement in living conditions. The enduring effects of segregation meant that poverty remained a persistent feature of community life.⁶⁴ For many, the situation was so severe that, in both 1862 and 1863, the municipality of Modena provided financial assistance to indigent Jews.⁶⁵ A survey conducted between 1895 and 1896 by Modenese professor Carlo Levi documented the precarious sanitary conditions of the poorest Jewish residents, while also highlighting an extensive network of assistance—including a charity committee, the *Società dei padrini* for postpartum women, a nursery, and regular distributions of food and aid from private donors—that provided tangible support to community members.⁶⁶ This demonstrates the persistence of internal communal cohesion despite the new context and

⁵⁶ Armani, *Il confine invisibile*, 118.

⁵⁷ The *Annuari* were consulted by the author for the years 1870-1900.

⁵⁸ Francesco Barbieri and Ferdinando Taddei, *L'Accademia di scienze, lettere ed arti di Modena dalle origini (1683-2005)* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 2006), 166.

⁵⁹ Roberto Bachi, "Le migrazioni degli ebrei dopo l'emancipazione," *La rassegna mensile di Israel* 12, nos. 10-12 (1938): 318.

⁶⁰ Livio Livi, *Gli Ebrei alla luce della statistica*, vol. II: *Evoluzione demografica, economica e sociale* (Florence: Vallecchi Editore, 1920), 288-289.

⁶¹ Ibid., 324. On the demographic decline of Jewish communities in the Po Valley lowlands from the 1840s onward: Daniela Bergonzoni, *Gli ebrei di Scandiano* (Florence: Giuntina, 1998), 43-45; Riccardo Finzi, *Gli ebrei di Correggio* (Modena: Bizzocchi, 1958), 6-7; Fulvio Diego Papouchado, "Il declino della comunità ebraica di Carpi. Riflessioni su un percorso storico-demografico," in *Storia di Carpi*, vol. III, *La città e il territorio nel lungo Ottocento (1796-1914)*, eds. Anna Maria Ori and Elio Tavilla (Modena: Mc Offset, 2010), 285-313; Marco Fincardi, "L'estinzione dei ghetti padani. La laicizzazione delle comunità israelitiche nella bassa pianura reggiana e mantovana," *Storia in Lombardia* 16, no. 2 (1996): 5-23.

⁶² Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, Direzione Generale della Statistica, *Annali di statistica*, serie III, vol. 9 (Rome: Tipografia dei Fratelli Dencini, 1884), 197.

⁶³ Levis Sullam, *La comunità immaginata*, 51-52.

⁶⁴ Stefano Arieti, "Assistenza e strutture sanitarie nella Comunità di Modena tra il XVII e il XIX secolo," in *Le comunità ebraiche a Modena e a Carpi*, eds. Bonilauri and Maugeri, 95-101; Papouchado, *Viaggio in un ghetto*, 116.

⁶⁵ "Affari diversi riguardanti oggetti appartenenti a particolari" (3), 1817-1867, *Sezione ebraica* (Jewish Section), Filza A, Carteggio (1812-1867), box 41.1, file 13, Archivio Storico della Comunità Ebraica di Modena (ACEMO; Archive of the Jewish Community of Modena).

⁶⁶ Carlo Levi, "Gli israeliti poveri nel comune di Modena," *La Riforma Sociale* 4, vol. 7, no. 10 (1897): 962-969.

emerging challenges, as evidenced by the relatively small number of “mixed marriages”⁶⁷ which were expected to become more common in the following years.

Urban Space as a Mirror of the Contradictory Emancipation of Modena’s Jews

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, monumental synagogues were built in major cities of northern and central Italy as expressions of Jewish emancipation.⁶⁸ In Emilia-Romagna, this process had begun earlier, with the inauguration of new buildings or the renovation of existing ones in Soragna (1855), Reggio Emilia (1858), Carpi (1861), Parma (1866), and Bologna (1877).⁶⁹ Inaugurated on 19 December 1873, the Modena synagogue⁷⁰ was among the earliest post-emancipation Italian synagogues, distinguished by its prominent urban setting and, unlike earlier synagogues in the region, its purpose-built building with a monumental façade facing a major square. Designed by Ludovico Maglietta and decorated by Ferdinando Manzini, it was built in the former ghetto, whose urban fabric still shaped the cityscape.⁷¹ The Jewish community was actively involved in the project, which aimed to unify all spaces of study and worship⁷² while serving as a symbol of emancipation and public affirmation within the urban space. In his inaugural address, Salomone Jona, rabbi of Modena from 1870 to 1894, appealed to his coreligionists to support the construction of a building that would be “useful and glorious.”⁷³ The project was financed through public appeals, subscriptions, and loans, with a decisive contribution from the wealthy Isacco Sacerdoti.⁷⁴ Before construction was approved in 1864, the municipality had already begun demolishing surrounding buildings in 1861 to prepare the square.⁷⁵ Built between 1869 and 1873, the synagogue drew local press attention and appeared in new historical-artistic city guide.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Nunzio Greco, *Le scelte matrimoniali dei Modenesi nel Secondo Ottocento*, Quaderni dell'Archivio Storico 23 (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 2008), 128. For ‘mixed’ marriages among Jewish families in those years: Ferrara Degli Uberti, *Fare gli ebrei italiani*, 63 and following.

⁶⁸ Andrea Morpurgo and Amedeo Spagnoletto, eds., *Case di vita, sinagoghe e cimiteri in Italia* (Genoa: Sagep Editore, 2023), 41-47, 55-59.

⁶⁹ Franco Bonilauri and Vincenza Maugeri, eds., *Le sinagoghe in Emilia-Romagna: Immagini per un percorso storico di conservazione e valorizzazione* (Rome: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 2003).

⁷⁰ Graziella Martinelli Braglia, Ivan Marmioli, and Franca Stagi, *La Sinagoga di Modena* (Modena: Artegrafica Silva, 1997).

⁷¹ Eugenio Salmi, *Un frammento di città: Il ghetto di Modena nell'Ottocento* (Modena: Terra e Identità, 2015), 34-49.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 36-37.

⁷³ Salomone Jona, *Discorso inaugurale pronunciato da Salomone Jona rabbino maggiore della comunione israelitica di Modena addì 8 gennaio 1870* (Modena: Andrea Rossi, 1870), 14.

⁷⁴ See the materials concerning the signature-collection campaigns in fasc. “Carteggio,” *Sezione Postunitaria*, “Tempio”: *Erezione del Tempio. Anniversario. Prestito bancario (1853-1898)*, b. C.29, ACEMO; materials concerning donations and offerings are also in b. C.28, “Tempio.” For expenses related to the construction of the synagogue, see also: *Legato M. I. Sacerdoti. Fabbrica del Tempio*, b. C.30.

⁷⁵ Giordano Bertuzzi, *Trasformazioni edilizie e urbanistiche a Modena* (Modena: Aedes Muratoriana, 1992), 35-69; 36; Salmi, *Un frammento*, 34-37.

⁷⁶ Arsenio Crespellani, *Guida popolare di Modena*, 1887, 38; Valdrighi, *Dizionario storico-etimologico*, 239-241.



Fig. 1. Orlandini, Pellegrino & Figli (1894–1914), Piazza Mazzini before restoration works, photograph, 1905–1906, courtesy of Biblioteca civica d'arte e architettura Poletti. Fondo Tonini.

The inauguration ceremony was meticulously covered by the liberal daily *Il Panaro*,⁷⁷ whose reporter described the interior as “a little theatrical, but elegant and harmonious,” emphasizing the respectful attention of the audience.⁷⁸ Both Maglietta and Manzini were widely praised, and the Jewish University formally honored Ludovico Maglietta.⁷⁹ The synagogue’s inauguration marked a milestone for the community and was widely covered by the Jewish press, which followed its civic and religious ceremonies.⁸⁰ It was not merely the opening of a new Jewish “place,” but symbolically transformed the area of former segregation into a visible “space” of Jewish integration and presence within the city.⁸¹ Over the course of a few years, the entire area developed into a central urban space, also serving as a site of interaction and negotiation with the broader, non-Jewish society and local institutions.⁸² To mark the occasion, a booklet was published containing an Italian translation of Psalm XXX and a hymn composed by Modenese lawyer Pacifico Levi.⁸³ The president, David Diena, also involved the poet Giovanni Vecchi from Scandiano, who, despite being absent from the ceremony, dedicated several compositions to the event.⁸⁴ The volume also included texts by Luigi Vaccà, rector of the University of Modena, and Eleonora Reggianini, a prominent figure in the cultural Risorgimento landscape. Although beyond the scope of this essay, these texts show that the participation of prominent non-Jewish figures representing local patriotic

⁷⁷ “Cerimonia religiosa,” *Il Panaro*, December 18, 1873; “Cerimonia religiosa,” *Il Panaro*, December 19, 1873.

⁷⁸ “Inaugurazione,” *Il Panaro*, December 20, 1873.

⁷⁹ “Arte locale,” *Il Panaro*, December 22, 1873; “Attestato di Onorificenza,” *Il Panaro*, December 24, 1873.

⁸⁰ “Inaugurazione del nuovo Tempio israelitico a Modena,” *L'educatore Israelita*, March 1874, 12–14.

⁸¹ For the distinction between Jewish place and Jewish space: Anna Lipphardt, Julia Brauch, and Alexandra Nocke, eds., *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place* (London: Routledge, 2016), 14.

⁸² On this aspect: *Rethinking Jewish and Non-Jewish Relations, Jewish Culture and History* 21, no. 1 (2020): 1–4.

⁸³ *Per la solenne inaugurazione del nuovo tempio israelitico in Modena addì 19 dicembre 1873* (Livorno: Costa, 1873).

⁸⁴ *Nella solenne inaugurazione del nuovo tempio israelitico di Modena* (Modena: Andrea Rossi, 1873).

culture gave the ceremony a strong civic dimension alongside its religious significance.⁸⁵ The synagogue embodied Jewish integration within the urban and civic context, a narrative later reinforced by Modena's new rabbi, Giuseppe Cammeo, who in 1894 urged community members to love their homeland, obey state laws, remain attached to Modena, and remain loyal to the monarchy.⁸⁶ The evolution of Modena's "Jewish space" can be interpreted in light of recent contributions regarding the "spatial turn," which understand space as a social product, a site of symbolic layering, and a field of identity negotiation.⁸⁷ The construction of the monumental synagogue and the surrounding initial renovations was therefore not solely architectural or urbanistic but constituted a mechanism through which the community once again had its place within the cityscape.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the former ghetto remained one of the city's most unhealthy areas for years, as attested by contemporary reports, photographs, and later memoirs.⁸⁹



Fig. 2. View of the Modena Ghetto before its demolition, 1903–1904, photograph (1920–1940), gift of Dr. Luigi Magelli, courtesy of Biblioteca civica d'arte e architettura Poletti. Fondo Tonini.

⁸⁵ For aspects concerning the relationship between Jews and Risorgimento culture in the new homeland: Ferrara degli Uberti, *Making Italian Jews*, 1-3 and 169-210.

⁸⁶ Giuseppe Cammeo, *Discorso inaugurale pronunziato nel Tempio israelitico di Modena il Giorno 5 gennaio 1894* (Modena: Namias, 1894).

⁸⁷ For general studies on space and place in Jewish studies: Barbara E. Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Lipphardt, Brauch, and Nocke, *Jewish Topographies*; Mimi Levy Lipis, *Symbolic Houses in Judaism* (London: Routledge, 2011), who argues that "symbolic houses" and house metaphors are tools for understanding the meaning of space, community, and religion in Judaism.

⁸⁸ Natalia Romik, *Architecture of Memory* (London: UCL Press, 2025), on the role of architecture in structuring urban space and social-symbolic relations.

⁸⁹ Alessandro Giuseppe Spinelli, "Del ghetto e degli Israeliti in Modena," *Il Panaro*, June 4, 1893; Arturo Rabetti, *Modena d'una volta* (Modena: F.F. Formiggini Editore, 1936), 95-96.



Fig. 3. Building facing the Modena Synagogue (on the right, a view of Via Coltellini) before the demolition of the Ghetto for the creation of the present-day Piazza Mazzini, photograph (1920–1950), courtesy of Biblioteca civica d'arte e architettura Poletti. Fondo Tonini.

Only new urban interventions, culminating between 1889 and 1906 with the demolition of the entire block, transformed its appearance. The municipal council only gave final approval for the demolitions at the end of 1902,⁹⁰ with the removal of buildings around the synagogue carried out between 1904 and 1905.⁹¹

⁹⁰ *Atti a stampa del consiglio comunale di Modena* [Minutes of the City Council of Modena] 1902–1903 (Modena: Tipo-Litografia Paolo Toschi, 1905), December 10, 1902, 72–84.

⁹¹ For a comprehensive reconstruction: Bertuzzi, *Trasformazioni edilizie*, 35–69; Salmi, *Un frammento di città*, 43–46. For a critical perspective on this project: Michele Smargiassi, “Genesi del piccone demolitore. Un secolo e mezzo di trasformazioni urbane a Modena (1760–1915),” *Storia Urbana* 13, no. 47 (1989): 129–173. On nineteenth-century urban transformations in Italy and large-scale neighborhood demolitions: Guido Zucconi, *Le città dell'Ottocento*, new ed. (Bari-Rome: Editori Laterza, 2022) and *Le città degli igienisti* (Rome: Carrocci Editore, 2022), 157–165 and 218–238.



Fig. 4. Ettore Giberti, *Modena: new Piazza della Libertà*, postcard, 1905–1907, courtesy of Biblioteca civica d'arte e architettura Poletti. Fondo Tonini.

The dismantling of Modena's ghetto formed part of a broader national process of urban renewal, although Italian cities followed different trajectories: Florence, Mantua and, later, Verona largely demolished their former ghettos;⁹² Venice, Ferrara, and Bologna preserved substantial portions of them,⁹³ while Rome represented an intermediate case, combining urban demolition and transformation with symbolic continuity.⁹⁴ The Modena project provoked disputes even among Jewish citizens affected by expropriations,⁹⁵ as was the case with the Sanguinetti School⁹⁶ or buildings owned by Michele Sacerdoti, against whom the municipality pursued legal action.⁹⁷ Institutional debates and local press coverage reveal that the area's recovery was guided primarily by aesthetic and functional criteria. The Jewish community was largely excluded, resulting in a radical transformation of the square and of Jewish space, which became increasingly invisible and unmarked. A telling example is councilor Setti's proposal to demolish the synagogue to create a single avenue leading to the

⁹² Piergabriele Mancuso, "Il Ghetto di Firenze: da spazio ebraico a ghetto urbano," *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 89, nos. 1-2-3 (2023): 43-65; "La città scomparsa: la demolizione del ghetto ebraico di Mantova," Museo di Storia del Novecento, accessed September 14, 2026, <https://www.novecento.org/ipermuseo/la-citta-scomparsa-la-demolizione-del-ghetto-ebraico-di-mantova-1906/>; Valeria Rainoldi, *Il ghetto di Verona e la sua sinagoga. Tutela, demolizione e ricostruzione dal XVIII al XX secolo* (Verona: Cierre edizioni, 2020).

⁹³ Franco Bonilauri and Vincenza Maugeri, eds., *Ghetti e giudecche in Emilia-Romagna: immagini per un percorso storico di recupero e valorizzazione* (Rome: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 2004); for a general overview, see the relevant entries in *Viaggio nell'Italia ebraica* (Touring Club Italiano, 2024) and Anna Foa, *Andar per ghetti e giudecche* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2024).

⁹⁴ Foa, *Andar per ghetti*, 59-75; Serena Di Nepi, *Il ghetto di Roma* (Rome: Carocci, 2026), 132-137.

⁹⁵ *Atti a stampa del consiglio comunale di Modena [Minutes of the City Council of Modena] 1902–1903* (Modena: Tipo-Litografia Paolo Toschi, 1905), February 12, 1903, 241.

⁹⁶ "Oratori," Post-Unitarian Section, b. C. 27 "Tempio," and b. C.39, ACEMO.

⁹⁷ *Minutes of the City Council of Modena*, February 12, 1903.

Ducal Palace.⁹⁸ Within a few years, the former “Piazzetta degli Ebrei” [Jews’ Little Square] was renamed “Piazza della Libertà” [Freedom Square] and later “Piazza Giuseppe Mazzini” [Giuseppe Mazzini Square]. The square was entirely rebuilt in line with Liberty-style principles,⁹⁹ featuring an English-style courtyard in front of the synagogue, and in 1933 it saw the inauguration of the Albergo Diurno (an underground public bath and service facility),¹⁰⁰ which gave the square a commercial and social character that continues to this day.



Fig. 5. Alfredo Giuliani, Modena: Piazza della Libertà, postcard, 1915–1925, courtesy of Biblioteca civica d'arte e architettura Poletti. Fondo Tonini.

In subsequent decades, landscaping interventions—such as the thickening of vegetation to screen the synagogue façade—further contributed to the “neutralization” of this former Jewish space. Modena’s urban space was thus both a stage for Jewish emancipation and an expression of its ambivalence, with the synagogue as the city’s sole enduring marker of Jewish memory.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ *Atti a stampa del consiglio comunale di Modena 1904–1905* (Modena: Tipo-Litografia Paolo Toschi, 1905), January 10, 1905, 100–103.

⁹⁹ For the new Liberty-style renovations of the façades and shops in Piazza Libertà: Graziano Manni, ed., *Liberty in Emilia* (Modena: Cassa di Risparmio di Modena and Artioli, 1988), 134–141.

¹⁰⁰ Bertuzzi, *Trasformazioni Edilizie*, 42.

¹⁰¹ For some stimulating reflections on the relationship between architecture and space: Natalia Romik, ed., *Architecture of Memory: Exploring (Post-) Jewish Spaces in Eastern Europe* (London: UCL Press, 2025); While set in a very different context from Modena, useful insights into the relationship between Jewish history, the city, and urban space can be found in Małgorzata Hanzl, *Jewish Culture and Urban Form: A Case Study of Central Poland before the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2023).

Emancipation: Tensions and Contradictions

Between 1859 and 1860, while emancipation opened new avenues for integration, the controversial conversion and subsequent flight of a fourteen-year-old Jewish girl from Modena revealed the persistence of longstanding tensions. Between 1814 and the end of 1859, at least eighty-six Jews from Modena converted to Catholicism—a remarkably high number, mostly composed of young people likely motivated by prospects of social advancement.¹⁰² This phenomenon followed a long history of forced baptisms and seemingly “voluntary” conversions in the Modena (and Estense) area during the modern era, continuing into subsequent decades.¹⁰³ In December 1859, the fourteen-year-old Jewish girl Benedetta Formiggini announced her intention to convert to Catholicism.¹⁰⁴ Apparently determined in her choice, she fled from the home of a fellow community member, where she worked as a maid, and—mediated by the Catholic woman Clotilde Boschi-Benassati—went to the Educandato di San Paolo (a girls’ boarding school). Initially, her father, assisted by representatives of the Jewish community, managed to bring her home, but the case ultimately reached the courts. The Modena judiciary had to determine whether Benedetta Formiggini’s decision was truly voluntary or influenced, and thus whether the minor possessed the capacity to act with free will. Despite formal legal equality for Jews, for the Modena Tribunal, the Formiggini case had to be addressed according to the still-applicable Este Codes¹⁰⁵ which stipulated that at that age, a person was sufficiently mature to understand and freely guide their moral actions.¹⁰⁶ In an 1860 ruling, Giovanni Bertolucci, president of the Modena tribunal, judged that the girl was capable of independent decision-making; he ordered her legal separation from her family, placed her in the care of a Catholic household, and imposed child support payments on her father.¹⁰⁷ Benedetta was eventually baptized under the new name Carolina Coratti.¹⁰⁸ In the following years, the number of conversions in Modena gradually declined,¹⁰⁹ but in 1879, even a final attempt at forced baptism was thwarted.¹¹⁰

Between 1874 and 1878, the Modena community and public opinion were shaken by another contested legal case. In 1866, a newborn child later registered as Enrichetta Maria

¹⁰² The number comes from Matteo Al Kalak and Ilaria Pavan, eds., *Un'altra fede. Le Case dei catecumeni nei territori estensi* (1583-1938) (Florence: Olschki, 2013), 154; the entire fifth chapter of the volume is of central importance for these events. More generally on the issues of forced and clandestine baptisms in history, see the recent volume E. Bianchi and Elèna Mortara, eds., *Bambini rapiti, bambini contesi* (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 2025); in particular, see the opening essay by Marina Caffiero for an updated bibliography on the subject.

¹⁰³ Al Kalak and Pavan, *Un'altra Fede*, 1-100; Emanuele D'Antonio, “Battesimi forzati e libertà religiosa nell'Italia asburgica,” *Passato e Presente* 40, no. 115 (2022): 142-160.

¹⁰⁴ The story of Benedetta Formiggini is reconstructed in detail in Al Kalak and Pavan, *Un'altra Fede*, 168-180, but it can also be summarized through a court ruling: *Ordinanza dell'avvocato Giovanni Bertolucci presidente del tribunale di prima istanza in Modena profferita sul fatto della fuga della giovinetta ebrea Benedetta Formiggini all'oggetto di abbracciare la religione cristiana cattolica* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1860).

¹⁰⁵ Al Kalak and Pavan, *Un'altra Fede*, 177.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ordinanza dell'avvocato Giovanni Bertolucci*, 18-19.

¹⁰⁸ Al Kalak and Pavan, *Un'altra Fede*, 180.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 180 and following.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

Luigia Peri was abandoned in the “foundling wheel” in Carpi (Modena) and placed in the local orphanage, run by the *Congregazione di Carità* [Congregation of Charity].¹¹¹ In January 1871, two Jews from Carpi, Buonaiuto Teglio and Speranza Giggia Levi, married and soon declared before the civil authorities that they recognized Enrichetta, by then four years old, as their natural daughter.¹¹² She had been abandoned at birth because the couple could not care for her; after their marriage, they requested her return and legitimization. Although recognized as their natural daughter, she became the subject of a protracted legal battle with the *Congregazione di Carità*, which had baptized her and raised her as a Catholic. On 7 February 1874, the Modena civil court initially ruled in favor of the parents’ request to regain custody. However, on December 20 of the same year, the president of Modena’s Court of Appeal overturned the decision, allowing the Congregation to not return the child.¹¹³ The case sparked heated debate in local newspapers *Il Panaro* and *Il Diritto Cattolico*, with *Il Panaro* siding with the parents and comparing the case to the Mortara affair,¹¹⁴ while *Il Diritto Cattolico* condemned the ruling as “regrettable.”¹¹⁵ The Catholic newspaper warned the family and their lawyers: “If nothing else, the famous Mortara case should have convinced them, if they ever doubted, of this Catholic dogma, which admits no contestation.”¹¹⁶ Moreover, being Jewish, the Teglio-Levi family was considered “entirely hostile to the faith of the little Christian, with an evident risk of apostasy.”¹¹⁷ On 11 December 1875, the civil court of Modena again granted the Teglio-Levi family’s petition, a ruling confirmed by the Court of Appeal on 2 June 1876. The decision ordered that the child be returned to her parents while reserving her right to a guardian to protect her interests, particularly in light of the family’s religious differences. The couple accepted the ruling insofar as it favored them but appealed to the Court of Cassation over the appointment of the guardian. Meanwhile, the *Congregazione di Carità* refused to hand over the child, and a subsequent ruling on 10 July 1876, ordered that she remain in the orphanage.¹¹⁸ The Teglio-Levi couple petitioned the president of the Court of Appeal of Modena, with the support of the public prosecutor, but their appeal was denied on 9 September 1876. Subsequent requests to revoke the July 10 order were rejected on 16 January and 13 July 1877.¹¹⁹ On 21 August 1877, the public prosecutor brought the case before the Court of Cassation, challenging the earlier rulings and contesting both the legitimacy of the guardian appointed by the Congregation—by then lacking authority over the child—and the decision to remove her on the grounds of religious difference. The parents likewise appealed, alleging abuse of authority and legal errors

¹¹¹ The case is reported in N. De Crescenzo, “Udienza 27 Febbraio 1878, Pres. De Ferrari P. P., Est. Agnelli, P. M. Robecchi, Avv. Gen. (Concl. Conf.) — Coniugi Teglio (Avv. Prof. Erio Sala) c. Congregazione Di Carità Di Carpi (Avv. Feri),” *Il Foro Italiano* 3, no. 1 (1878): 315-328. See also: Papouchado, *Viaggio in un ghetto*, 177-178; Daniele Scalise, *Il caso Mortara* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1997), 211-213.

¹¹² De Crescenzo, “Udienza 27 Febbraio 1878,” 316.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ “Una notevole sentenza,” *Il Panaro*, March 12, 1874; “La fanciulla Teglio,” *Il Panaro*, March 14, 1874; and “Il nuovo fanciullo Mortara,” *Il Panaro*, March 17, 1874.

¹¹⁵ “Un fatto deplorabile,” *Il Diritto cattolico*, March 14, 1874.

¹¹⁶ “La congregazione di Carità di Carpi, e l’appello da essa interposto,” *Il Diritto cattolico*, March 19, 1874.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Hearing on February 27, 1878*, 316.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 317.

concerning guardianship, parental rights, and religion.¹²⁰ The case highlights the gap between formal legal emancipation and the persistence of prejudice in post-unification Italy. Although full parental authority was formally recognized, the court showed caution regarding the child's return to a Jewish family, expressing concern about possible religious influence. The appointment of a guardian as a form of "preventive" protection reflects this approach, unlikely in a Catholic family context. While the Court of Cassation affirmed that religious difference could not justify the child's removal, the case—as well as the contemporary press debate—shows how religious sensitivities shaped the practical application of civil rights, revealing subtle forms of anti-Jewish prejudice. The dispute continued for several months, with multiple appeals, judicial reversals, and interventions by the public prosecutor.¹²¹ Ultimately, in 1878, the Court of Cassation confirmed the Court of Appeal's decision, ordering that the child be returned to her parents while preserving her right to be represented by a guardian to protect her interests.¹²² Nevertheless, partly for family reasons, the girl did not return to her parents but went to live in Livorno with a Jewish family.¹²³ Between 1902 and 1903, the newspaper *Il Panaro* sparked another controversy, accusing the municipal administration of bias against Jewish religion teachers in elementary schools. The controversy began on 7 June 1901, when the city council announced a competition to fill vacancies in rural girls' schools.¹²⁴ The resolution authorized the administration to appoint teachers to positions becoming available during the year, without new examinations, selecting from the merit ranking established by the examining commission and comprising already qualified candidates.¹²⁵ Thirty-nine individuals applied.¹²⁶ On 30 August 1901, the executive board recommended that the city council appoint three teachers who were the highest-ranked candidates, noting that all were fully eligible.¹²⁷ The matter resurfaced the following year. In June 1902, faced with new vacancies in the elementary schools, the board proposed the appointment of eleven teachers. The council selected them from among the top twenty-six candidates but, surprisingly, excluded Marta Teglio, who had ranked eleventh, instead appointing Giuseppina Muzzioli despite Teglio's superior qualifications.¹²⁸ The episode sparked fresh controversy and raised questions about the transparency and fairness of the appointments, casting a shadow over the administrative procedures of the time. The controversy escalated in the pages of *Il Panaro*. On 30 May 1903, the paper claimed that the administration was unwilling to appoint "Israelite teachers" because, as it reported, "In the countryside, our clerical-moderates say, the population does not tolerate Jewish women

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ "Ultime notizie," *Il Diritto cattolico*, March 18, 1874.

¹²² For example: "La leggenda dell'ebreo errante," *Il Panaro*, May 28, 1874. The term "archivio antiebraico" is taken from S. Levis Sullam, *L'archivio antiebraico* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2008). For a bibliography on liberal antisemitism (an area still largely unexplored): Ulrich Wyrwa, *Come si crea l'antisemitismo* (Florence: Giuntina, 2020), especially 9-21.

¹²³ Scalise, *Il caso Mortara*, 212.

¹²⁴ *Atti a stampa del consiglio comunale di Modena 1900-1901* (Modena: Tipo-Litografia Paolo Toschi, 1902), June 7, 1901, 305.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 305-306.

¹²⁶ Ibid., August 30, 1901, 491-493.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., June 30, 1902, 229-237.

teachers.”¹²⁹ The case concluded on 10 November 1903, when the provincial superintendent of schools confirmed Marta Teglio’s appointment as a municipal teacher in a rural girls’ school. The ruling formally closed the matter but revealed the social and religious tensions of the period. Personal memoirs reflect similar experiences of everyday prejudice.¹³⁰ Modenese lawyer Enzo Levi (1889-1947), father of journalist Arrigo Levi, recalled enduring the label “Jew” as an insult in his youth: “How much bitterness, how much sorrow in my early years, over the inexplicable hostility directed against me and mine, simply because we were Jews.”¹³¹ This episode represents yet another example of the tensions—and at times open hostility—that Modenese Jews experienced during the years of emancipation.

Zionism and Jewish Mobilization in Modena

At the turn of the twentieth century, Modena’s Jewish community emerged as a true laboratory of Italian Zionism, a hub of cultural and political experimentation. The year 1897 marked a turning point for European Jewry: the First Zionist Congress in Basel affirmed political Zionism as an organized national project, destined to influence debates over identity and internal dynamics within Jewish communities.¹³² In Italy, the movement developed somewhat later in terms of mobilization and emigration,¹³³ but it quickly emerged as a cultural force.¹³⁴ After the Second Zionist Congress (1898), Zionist societies were established in Ferrara, Padua, Venice, and Turin,¹³⁵ but the event of greatest significance for Italian Zionism followed the Third Basel Congress (1899).¹³⁶ In Modena, a city whose Jewish population was gradually declining, the twenty-one-year-old Amedeo Donati founded the *Associazione Sionistica Modenese* [Zionist Association of Modena] in 1900. With roughly one hundred members,¹³⁷ the association became a center of cultural and political development, connecting with similar societies in Ferrara and Bologna, and anticipating the formation of the Italian Zionist Federation. After its statutes were approved, the Modenese Zionist Association was inaugurated on 25 March 1900, with a major event featuring speeches by Carlo Alberto Conigliani, Felice Ravenna—representing the Ferrara group and the Central Committee of Vienna and Basel—and the Modenese lawyer Amleto Sacerdoti. Conigliani emphasized the fight against antisemitism and solidarity among co-religionists. In an international context marked by profound inequalities, he argued that emancipated Jews had

¹²⁹ “Le maestre acattoliche nelle scuole elementari di Modena,” *Il Panaro*, May 30, 1903.

¹³⁰ *Atti a stampa del consiglio comunale di Modena 1903-1904* (Modena: Tipo-Litografia Paolo Toschi, 1904), November 10, 1903, 91-92.

¹³¹ Enzo Levi, *Memorie di una vita: 1889-1947* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1972), 11-12.

¹³² Arturo Marzano, *Storia dei Sionismi* (Rome: Carrocci Editore, 2017), 33 and following.

¹³³ Arturo Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere* (Genoa-Milan: Marietti 1820, 2003); Mario Toscano, “Judaism, Zionism, Society: The Italian Case (1896-1904),” in M. Toscano, ed., *Judaism and Antisemitism in Italy: From 1848 to the Six-Day War* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2003).

¹³⁴ Ferrara Degli Uberti, *Making Italian Jews*, 183. Marco Bencich, “Protagonisti e correnti del sionismo italiano fra Otto e Novecento,” (PhD diss., University of Trieste, 2012/2013), 204-223.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 192-193.

¹³⁷ *Della idea sionista e dei suoi fini nei riguardi delle associazioni locali. Discorsi pronunziati nel giorno dell'inaugurazione dell'Associazione sionistica di Modena* (Modena: Tipografia degli Operai, 1900).

a duty to support the “weak,” preparing “salvation” for them and offering an “asylum,” while for the privileged, “emigration would be a reckless and useless sacrifice.” The association’s goals were articulated as the “Jewish colonization and the emancipation of the Israelite proletariat,” alongside “mutual defense and social education of Jews” and the struggle against antisemitism.¹³⁸ Sacerdoti, while recognizing the necessity of providing a “safe haven” for persecuted Jews, insisted that in emancipated countries, zionism should primarily promote “mutual assistance and defense among co-religionists,” not separation from Christians, but to “improve ourselves” and contribute to the progress of civilization. For him, zionism represented a form of moral regeneration capable of strengthening a community weakened by centuries of segregation and countering antisemitism—a vision that reinterpreted the idea of regeneration “in a modern and secular key.”¹³⁹ Beginning in 1901, the journal *L’Idea Sionista* was published in Modena.¹⁴⁰ Founded by Carlo Conigliani, the periodical aimed to be “a publication dedicated to the propaganda and elaboration of Zionist ideals.”¹⁴¹ Its contents addressed Zionism, Jewish conditions in Europe, Palestine and beyond, poverty, antisemitism, and cultural, literary, and historical-religious issues. Despite financial difficulties, the journal was recognized by other Italian Zionist groups and testified to the cultural and political dynamism of, above all, the local community. On 20 October 1901, Modena hosted what the Italian Zionist press described as the second Italian Zionist Conference, attended by representatives from Ferrara, Modena, Milan, Ancona, Vercelli, and Naples.¹⁴² *L’Idea Sionista* provided a detailed chronicle of the event.¹⁴³ Once again, the focus was on combating antisemitism and fostering solidarity among co-religionists, while also addressing Zionist propaganda and defining the movement’s goals: strengthening the Italian Zionist Federation, supporting the Central Committee in Vienna, cultivating solidarity and moral-intellectual growth among Jews, and promoting zionism across Italy.¹⁴⁴ A resolution by Felice Ravenna reaffirmed the “perfect compatibility of the Zionist idea” with loyalty to Italy, stating that zionism’s “sole purpose” was to secure civil and political rights for Jews denied them in their countries of residence through “systematic colonization in Palestine.”¹⁴⁵ At the third Zionist Congress in Ferrara, opened in his memory, Modena was represented by Giulio Foà.¹⁴⁶ Carlo Conigliani, the driving force behind the Modenese group, died on December 6, 1901, two months after the conference, deeply affecting local Zionists. Two years later, reports of the Kishinev pogrom shocked the Jewish community of Modena.¹⁴⁷ In 1903, *L’Idea Sionista* devoted significant space to documenting the violence in Bessarabia and stood in

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ferrara Degli Uberti, *Making Italian Jews*, 185.

¹⁴⁰ Bencich, *Protagonisti e correnti*, 49 and following.

¹⁴¹ *L’Idea Sionista* 1, nol. 1 (January 31, 1901).

¹⁴² Bencich, *Protagonisti e correnti*, 204 and following.

¹⁴³ *L’Idea Sionista* 1, nos. 10-11 (October-November 1901): 73-77.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ *L’Idea Sionista* 3, no. 1 (January 1903): 2.

¹⁴⁷ Steven J. Zipperstein, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation/W.W. Norton & Co., 2018).

defense of persecuted co-religionists in the Russian Empire.¹⁴⁸ Subsequently, a local support committee was established to aid the victims of the pogrom and Modena's Jews organized public fundraising efforts and enlisted the assistance of *Il Panaro* to disseminate appeals.¹⁴⁹ While many contributors came from within the Jewish community and Zionist circles, the response demonstrated widespread engagement.¹⁵⁰ In subsequent years, the youth group "Carlo Conigliani" sustained zionism in Modena until the late 1920s, when its statutes were revised to admit non-Jews. The previously mentioned Enzo Levi recalled in his memoirs: "between 1910 and the onset of the antisemitic campaign in Italy, my attachment to Judaism grew... and I became increasingly convinced of the necessity of Zionism."¹⁵¹ In an international and local context, marked—albeit differently—by social tensions and the legacies of emancipation, Zionism offered part of the Modenese Jewish community a new language through which to rethink belonging, identity, and collective responsibility.



Fig. 6. Piazza Mazzini, 1945, photograph, courtesy of Biblioteca civica d'arte e architettura Poletti. Fondo Tonini.

Conclusion

Jewish "modernity" in Modena took shape as an unstable balance between integration and dispersion, belonging and redefinition. Emancipation opened new possibilities for citizenship, civil rights, and public participation, allowing Modena's Jews to become active protagonists

¹⁴⁸ Numerous articles were published in *L'Idea Sionista*, Anno III, nos. 4-5 (April-May 1903): 38-41.

¹⁴⁹ "Per gli israeliti di Kischew," *Il Panaro*, May 19-20, 1903.

¹⁵⁰ "La sottoscrizione a favore degli ebrei di Kischew," *Il Panaro*, May 20-21, 1903; "Sottoscrizione a favore degli Israeliti a Kischew," *Il Panaro*, May 21-22, 1903.

¹⁵¹ Levi, *Memorie di una vita*, 30.

in the city's transformation. Through entrepreneurial, industrial, and financial initiatives, many contributed to the economic modernization of post-Unification Modena, participating in new institutions, commercial networks, and civic engagement that connected local rootedness with broader national development. Despite demographic decline, the Jewish presence in Modena retained high civic and economic visibility, with participation in municipal institutions and entrepreneurial networks that exceeded its numerical weight. At the same time, emancipation created new vulnerabilities: demographic decline, territorial dispersion, and the weakening of traditional communal structures required new ways of articulating Jewish belonging. The construction of the new synagogue and its role within the urban landscape represented an effort to assert Jewish visibility and collective identity within the framework of civic integration. Yet persistent social prejudice, institutional tensions, and episodes of discrimination revealed the distance between formal equality and everyday experience. For some members of the community, zionism emerged not as a rejection of Italian citizenship, but as a new language of Jewish self-definition, solidarity, and collective responsibility, linking local experiences to broader European Jewish debates. The Modena case demonstrates that Jewish emancipation was never a linear process of assimilation or integration, but a continuous negotiation between participation and distinctiveness, inclusion and exclusion, national belonging and transnational Jewish consciousness. By examining economic transformations, urban spaces, and identity formations together, this study highlights the complex trajectories through which Italian Jews navigated the decades between Unification and the *fin de siècle*, showing that minority integration involved not only legal recognition or cultural adaptation, but also active participation in the social, economic, and symbolic construction of the modern city. The Modena case thus shows that Jewish communities in post-Unification Italy did not simply enter modernity; they actively shaped its meanings and forms.

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Home Making

Caregivers in Post-Holocaust Children's Homes in England, France and Germany

ABSTRACT

After the liberation of the camps the vast numbers of orphaned and refugee children emerged from camps, hiding places, forests where they had somehow managed to survive against all odds and under miserable circumstances, taking aid workers by surprise. Of the estimated 175,000 Jewish children who survived the Holocaust, a few thousand found their way to Jewish children's homes scattered throughout Europe.

Recently, a wealth of scholarship has drawn attention to rescue operations like the Kindertransport as well as child survivors of the Holocaust. By drawing on child survivor stories told in their own voices, they give them agency and bring them from the silent margins to the center of Holocaust and post-Holocaust history. Some of these scholars have discussed post-Holocaust children's homes, but most studies have focused on a single home or national setting.

Using personal testimonies, memoirs and other primary sources focusing the lives of caregivers and their work in a few homes in England, France, and Germany in the immediate post-Holocaust period, this article identifies practices that aided child survivors' recovery from traumatic experiences. By considering these homes together, similarities and differences in caregiving practices are identified, suggesting that exceptional caregivers made vital contributions to reestablishing Jewish identities and communities after the Holocaust.

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Keywords: Children's Homes, Caregiving, Jewish Child Survivors, Post-Holocaust Europe, Aid Organizations

As much as I don't recommend institutions for children in ordinary times—boarding schools, etc.—at a time like that, being in the same boat was, in fact, very important.
Gaby “Niny” Wolff Cohen¹

I hope you know what role you have played in our existence.
Elie Wiesel, to Taverny director
Judith Hemmendinger²

Introduction³

In his 2021 memoir, *Boy from Buchenwald*, Robbie Waisman (1931) wrote, “I began to see that the Holocaust wasn’t all I needed to talk about. [...] I found there was another story inside me.”⁴ Orphans, including Robbie, known then as Romek, somehow survived concentration and slave labor camps, death marches, starvation, and illness. One part of the story of their childhoods is about unfathomable cruelty and unimaginable loss. The other part is what happened after the Holocaust when, alone in the world, they first comprehended the magnitude of their losses—their families, their homes, their communities—and had to learn how to go on living.

After the liberation of the camps vast numbers of orphaned and refugee children—many more than expected—emerged from camps, hiding places, and forests where they had somehow managed to survive against all odds. Of the estimated 175,000 Jewish children who survived the Holocaust, a few thousand found their way to Jewish children’s homes scattered throughout Europe.⁵ The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (known as “Joint”) sponsored most of these, approximately 300 in total scattered throughout Europe, housing 25,000 Jewish child survivors, mostly orphans. In France alone, they worked with the Oeuvres de Secours aux Enfants (OSE) to fund 61 homes, serving 15,000 Jewish children; the Committee for the Care of Concentration Camp Children (CCCCC) of Central British Fund (CBF) sponsored 732 orphans who lived in 47 hostels in England, Scotland and Wales; and in Allied-occupied Germany, they helped fund 13 Jewish homes.⁶

For decades, most scholarship about the immediate post-Holocaust period focused on adult

¹ See n. 50.

² Elie Wiesel, “Forward,” in *Judith Hemmendinger and Robert Krell, The Children of Buchenwald: Child Survivors of the Holocaust and their Post-War Lives* (Jerusalem-New York: Gefen, 2000), xii-xiv: xiv.

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⁴ Robbie Waisman (with Susan McClelland), *Boy from Buchenwald: The True Story of a Holocaust Survivor* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 7.

⁵ Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children, Reconstructing Families After World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 11.

⁶ “JDC in the 1940s.” Website of the JDC, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://archives.jdc.org/our-stories/history-of-jdc/1940s/>.

survivors. In the last two decades, a wealth of scholarship has drawn attention to rescue operations like the Kindertransport as well as child survivors of the Holocaust. Rebecca Clifford's 2020 book, *Survivors*, is perhaps the boldest, most comprehensive effort to address this gap, and other scholars including Boaz Cohen, Joanna Michlic, Daniella Doron, Joanna Sliwa, Sharon Kangisser Cohen and Dalia Ofer have centered on child survivor stories told in their own voices, giving them agency and bringing them from the silent margins to the center of Holocaust and post-Holocaust history.⁷ Some of these scholars have also focused attention on the adults who cared for child survivors, especially orphans, in post-Holocaust children's homes.⁸ Most of these studies have focused on caregivers in a single home or national setting, but much can be learned by comparing and contrasting the efforts of caregivers, all focused on children's recovery but in very different circumstances and settings. Such comparisons allow us to identify specific differences as well as draw general conclusions about caregivers' challenges and accomplishments in aiding the recovery of child survivors in post-Holocaust Europe and bringing the "surviving remnant" [*She'erit Hapletah*] back to life.

In most cases, directors of children's homes were women, while policymakers in aid organizations, governments and military occupation forces were almost exclusively men. Some authors have noted that in this case, traditional roles defining women as caregivers gave them an advantage in taking on leading positions in agencies focused on children but that as a result, their work in post-Holocaust Europe was often overlooked and undervalued. For example, Christine Schmidt and Dan Stone show how women aid workers who ran the Child Search Branch of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) charged with locating families of unaccompanied children received little attention despite the critical nature of their work because "gendered assessments of 'care' and 'feminine' roles in UNRRA/IRO [...] have hidden their activities as a subject worthy of analysis."⁹ They argue for elevating the importance of their work by redefining carework in less gendered terms, since "the roles held by women such as [Eileen] Blackey [director of UNRRA's Displaced Persons Child Search and Repatriation team] were complex and involved

⁷ Boaz Cohen, "The Children's Voice: Postwar Collection of Testimonies from Child Survivors of the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 73-95; Cohen, "Young witnesses in the DP camps," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 11, no. 1 (2012): 103-125; Joanna Michlic, "What does a child remember? Recollections of the war and the early postwar period among child survivors from Poland," in *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939-Present: History, Representation, and Memory*, eds. Sylvia Barack Fishman and Joanna Michlic (Waltham, MA: Brandeis, 2017), 153-172; "The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust," in *Lessons and Legacies X: Back to the Sources: Reexamining Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders*, ed. S. Horowitz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 141-189, and, "Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Some Vignettes of Jewish Children's Lives in Early Postwar Poland"; Daniela Doron, *Jewish Youth and Identity in Postwar France: Rebuilding Family and Nation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015); Joanna Sliwa, *Jewish Childhood in Krakow: A Microhistory of the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021); Sharon Kangisser Cohen and Dalia Ofer, eds., *Starting Anew: The Rehabilitation of Child Survivors of the Holocaust in the Early Postwar Years* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2019).

⁸ See for example: Boaz Cohen, "Survivor Caregivers and Child Survivors: Rebuilding Lives and the Home in the Postwar Period," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 32, no. 1 (2018): 49-65.

⁹ Christine Schmidt and Dan Stone, "Women in child search: a gendered view of post-World War II reconstruction," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 30, no. 6 (2023): 888-906. Accessed August 17, 2026, www.tandfonline.com, 22.

high-ranking executive decisions as well as leadership.”¹⁰ While this is undoubtedly true, I would suggest that “masculinizing” their work to make it appear important essentially misses the truly transformational impact of exceptional caregiving work. Instead, I argue for measuring their success by how they were able to improve individual children’s lives in significant ways by creating deeply personal caring environments for survivors of trauma. In this study, I focus on some Jewish care homes in England, France and Germany, citing examples of similarities and differences in the selected cases. Rich primary source material, particularly first-person accounts, testimonies, memoirs, photographs, and personal papers continues to be recorded, transcribed, catalogued and made available digitally.¹¹ They reveal caregivers’ and child survivors’ personal understandings of the immediate post-Holocaust period and the contexts in which directors operated. As Sharon Kangisser Cohen has suggested, testimonies must be read with an eye to the context and circumstances of their recordings, but nevertheless can contain “nuggets of experiences.”¹² I have found many such nuggets, especially since interviewers often fail to ask questions about children’s post-Holocaust experiences and, yet, they mention them anyway. Directors’ personal papers and official agency correspondences offer valuable insight into their efforts to define their vision and advocate for resources. Finally, reunions became occasions for survivors to share their painful memories, inspiring a series of publications containing their testimonies about individual children’s homes.¹³

By carefully examining these primary sources, I have identified specific features present in all homes, while differences in political and cultural contexts, personalities and biographies of staff and the makeup of the child survivor groups account for distinct “care cultures.” Successful directors shared a holistic—that is, not purely psychological—understanding of trauma before the concept was popularized. Their agendas shared certain key features, including: restoring Jewish identities; meeting educational needs; building trust; minimizing control and maximizing freedom; creating communities of shared loss; advocating for child survivors; meeting special needs; and challenging established policies when they did not represent the interests of the children in their care.

Before they began their work in mid-1945, children’s home directors faced a major challenge. They had been trained to work with children, but were the young, slight people with the faces

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ These include collections at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum archives (hereafter referred to as USHMM), the Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation (hereafter referred to as USCSF), the Fortunoff Video Archive the Imperial War Museum (hereafter referred to as IWM), the Wiener Holocaust Library (London), the Ghetto Fighters House Archives (Jerusalem); the online archives of Jewish organizations including CBF, OSE, JDC and ORT; and the collections of regional Holocaust-related museums, local archives and survivor websites.

¹² Sharon Kangisser Cohen, “Who? Where? and How? Establishing the Story: Early Recollections of a Devastating Past,” Yad Vashem, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://early-testimony.ehri-project.eu/exhibits/show/about/kangisser-cohen-introduction>.

¹³ These include Sarah Moskowitz, *Love Despite Hate: Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Their Adult Lives* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983); Judith Hemmendinger, *Survivors: Children of the Holocaust* (Palo Alto: National Press, 1986); and Verein zur Erforschung der Juden in Blankenese, ed., *Kirschen auf der Elbe: Das jüdische Kinderheim Blankenese, 1946-1948* (Hamburg: Klaus Schümann Verlag, 2006). I will refer to this edited collection in future citations as *Kirschen auf der Elbe*.

of “old men”¹⁴ really children? While officially no one over the age of 16 was permitted to live in a children’s home, many residents had reduced their actual age by a few years. Some were in fact as old as 20 or 21.¹⁵ Aside from this technical issue, did it make sense to apply the term “child” to those who had been robbed of their childhood? Elie Wiesel (1928), speaking especially for young concentration camp and death march survivors, responded with a clear “no,” arguing that: “The youngest among us had a fount of experiences more vast than the oldest of them [the directors and counselors].”¹⁶ Each director wrestled with this significant issue: children who had experienced more tragedy and loss than much older adults still needed comfort, safety and care, but they refused to be patronized or treated as victims. Time and time again, child survivors described the moment they arrived at children’s homes mature beyond their years and deeply mistrustful, followed by the moment they realized they could let down their guard. While some claimed that in the homes they could “be children” again, others resigned themselves to having lost their childhood in the Holocaust. Wiesel summarized: “We became their counselors,”¹⁷ implying that a director’s first job was to listen.

Exceptional Homes¹⁸

As UNRRA officials tried to figure out how to manage the refugee crises in post-liberation Europe, individual aid workers and Jewish organizations wasted no time locating Jewish children in camps and orphanages throughout Eastern Europe. As one child survivor of Theresienstadt who spent time in various UNRRA care homes put it, he felt “at the mercy of the authorities, who didn’t show concern for our identities as Jews.”¹⁹ Soldiers of the Jewish Brigade²⁰ were often the first to identify unaccompanied Jewish children and appealed to organizations like Joint and Jewish Agency for Palestine (the primary Jewish aid organization in Palestine headed by David Ben-Gurion). The atmosphere at numerous CBF care homes and hostels in Britain, OSE homes at Ambloy and Taverny in France, and the Warburg estate in Blankenese, near Hamburg, Germany, differed markedly from UNRRA facilities at Aglasterhausen, Kloster Indersdorf, Prien and elsewhere, that housed hundreds of child refugees. Jewish children’s homes allowed for smaller groups to live together with caring adults. In most cases, the directors were themselves Jewish refugees who had lost most if not all of their extended families in the Holocaust.

¹⁴ Hemmendinger, *Survivors*, 13. Hemmendinger referred specifically to the “Buchenwald Boys,” hence the term “men.”

¹⁵ In this article, birth years have been noted in parentheses following the names of child survivors mentioned.

¹⁶ Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 111.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁸ For an overview of children’s homes and caregivers discussed in this paper, see Appendix.

¹⁹ Gershon Willinger (1942), testimony for Surviving Memories exhibit, n.d., The Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program. Azrieli Foundation website, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://memoirs.azrielifoundation.org/fr/exhibits/sustaining-memories/gershon-willinger/>.

²⁰ The Jewish Brigade was the name for regiments of Jewish soldiers mostly from the Yishuv in Mandatory Palestine serving in the British army in World War II.

Weir Courtney (Lingfield)

Over the course of a period of years—from August 1945 to April 1948—five groups of Jewish concentration camp survivors arrived in England as part of a rescue effort initiated by Leonard Montefiore, Elaine Blond, and Lola Hahn-Warburg (known as the CBF's "Triumpherate"). The CBF had lobbied the British government for permission to house up to 1000 Jewish unaccompanied child survivors in Britain temporarily until family could be located, adoptive parents found or they received visas to immigrate elsewhere.²¹ A moderate and pragmatic voice in Reform Judaism in London, Leonard Montefiore "firmly believed that the child Holocaust survivors needed to be cared for in a Jewish environment."²² Homes (also referred to as hostels) for no more than 30 child survivors were organized according to age, places of origin, and degrees of religiosity. When the Central British Fund considered saving costs by increasing the number of children per home, Montefiore balked, threatening to resign as treasurer of CBF and chairman of CCCCC if they decided on " 'mass immigration' of young people from the Continent to be cared for here in large units."²³ Of the 732 child survivors that made it to Britain²⁴ who were known (misleadingly) as the "Boys" (even though 204 of them were girls or young women), only a few were under the age of ten.²⁵ Young children were placed temporarily under separate care, toddlers first at a home called Bulldogs Bank, and the others at Weir Courtney, an estate of Sir Benjamin Drage, a leader of the West London Reform synagogue. There, Alice Goldberger, a trained kindergarten teacher from Berlin who fled to England, along with four other primary caregivers, lived with a total of 24 young children, including six older girls between the ages of 13 and 16. A mansion in Loughton, Essex, just north of London became the home for a group of young, mostly Polish survivors. Here, they formed a close knit group under the directorship of Oscar Friedmann and Heini Goldberg.²⁶ When Loughton hostel closed in 1947, many Loughton boys moved to

²¹ 152 children from DP camps around Munich arrived in Southampton in October 1945; 149 arrived from Prague in March 1946; 101 from Prague via Paris in June 1946 and a final group of 21 from Poland in April 1948, after the British had agreed to let children stay indefinitely. See, "The Boys' Story." Website of the '45 Aid Society, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://45aid.org>.

²² Ibid.

²³ "Minutes of Working Committee for Care of Children from the Camps," June 3, 1946, "Post-war: Working Comm for the Care of Children from the Camps: Minutes, 29 Oct 1945-1. Feb 1950," HHNJPW 727582627, GALE, 1. Accessed at Wiener Library London.

²⁴ This number fell short of the 1000 for whom the CBF had secured visas. As Zionists became more vocal and organized, the CBF—and Montefiore in particular—faced strong opposition from Zionist leaders in Palestine and in DP camps to efforts to resettle Jewish children of the "surviving remnant" to places other than Palestine, since that would divert from the drive to establish an independent Jewish state. Since the British government initially had limited refugee visas to two years, Montefiore and others on the CCCCC were under pressure to find permanent homes for their charges. With hundreds of young Jews waiting to begin their lives, Montefiore saw few other options, however distasteful he found political Zionism. For more on Montefiore's views on Zionism, see Leonard Montefiore, "Address given to the Cambridge University Jewish Society," October 18, 1946, Shoshannah Gallowski Fine papers, RG-19.041, Series 3, File 2, USHMM Archives, 8. For more on Zionist leaders' claims on Jewish child survivors: Avinoam Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009); "The Future of the Jewish People: Youth and Education in the DP Camps," in Cohen and Ofer, eds., *Starting Anew*.

²⁵ For an overview, see Martin Gilbert, *The Boys: Triumph Over Adversity* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1996).

²⁶ Of all the directors, Oscar Friedmann is the only one who is almost never referred to by his first name. Since he generally insisted on formality, he was referred to even by his fellow directors as "Dr. Friedmann." It therefore

London where they mostly lived independently, meeting regularly at a center for young Jewish refugees and English Jews they called the Primrose Club after the local phone exchange.

When asked in 1977 by the psychologist Sarah Moskowitz how she ended up taking the position at Weir Courtney in Lingfield, Alice Goldberger shared feelings about the family she had lost in the Holocaust, including guilt that she had failed in her efforts to rescue them. Interned as an “enemy alien” (she was a German Jew) after her arrival in England, she was unable to arrange her family’s escape.²⁷ Her despair motivated her to help children in the internment camps and, later, to create a home for orphans. Manna Weindling, also a German Jew who had lost most of her family in the Holocaust, had been working with Anna Freud at the War Nurseries in north London²⁸ and was recruited to assist Alice. Manna recalled:

Coming to Lingfield that spring morning was a stirring moment in my life...a salvation...I was so moved, I couldn’t stop crying. I put my suitcase and violin case down and watched with tears streaming. When I recovered I just joined in and started dancing the hora, laughing and crying at the same time.²⁹



Fig. 1. Manna Weindling Friedmann and Alice Goldberger at Weir Courtney. USHMMA.

seemed appropriate to refer to him by his last name in this article. I refer to the others by their first names, as the children did.

²⁷ Moskowitz, *Love Despite Hate*, xv.

²⁸ For more on this, see Christiane Ludwig-Körner, *The Women of Anna Freud’s War Nurseries: Their Lives and Work* (London: Routledge, 2024).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

Loughton Hostel (Essex) and Primrose Club (Belsize Park)

Following Oscar Friedmann's directive not to break up groups of friends, 26 older boys who, as Roman Halter (1927) put it, "got on so very well together,"³⁰ were assigned to the Loughton hostel in Essex, not far from London. Friedmann and Heini Goldberg, the two directors at Loughton, were German Jews who fled Nazi persecution in the late 1930s. Friedmann had worked at homes for young offenders and had a strong interest in psychoanalysis. Heini's background had been in youth work and religious instruction; he developed a good rapport with the boys, quickly winning their affection. Heini, who had belonged to *Habonim*, a Jewish socialist movement founded in Britain in 1929, set the Zionist tone at Loughton and had an infectious energy. Paul "Yogi" Mayer was involved with the boys primarily as the director of the Primrose Club, a social center in north London founded in 1947 to allow the young refugees to remain connected after the hostels closed. Yogi, also a German Jew, had been a professional athlete and sports journalist until he fled Germany in 1939. In London, he became a youth leader working with boys in East London. The three men's personalities, interests and approaches could not have been more different. Oscar Friedmann was serious and intense, an intellectual who strongly encouraged independence and often lacked warmth. Of the three men, he acted as manager and psychological counselor, setting policies for the homes, reporting to Montefiore and the other trustees, and tenaciously lobbying the CCCCC for funds for the Primrose Club.



Fig. 2. Heini Goldberg teaching English upon boys' arrival at Windermere. USHMMA.

³⁰ Roman Halter, interview with Lyn E. Smith, January 12, 1996. Catalog number IWM17183, Imperial War Museum, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80016549>.

Taverny

In France, the OSE had rescued many Jewish children from the Nazis already before and during the war and began establishing children's homes for young Jewish survivors immediately after the liberation of the concentration camps.³¹ More than 400 of the so-called Buchenwald Boys, most of them between the ages of 12 and 21 arrived at Ecouis, a former Army barracks, in late June 1945.³² Then twenty-two-year-old OSE social worker Judith Feist³³ recalled: "Their eyes spoke of sadness and suspicion, for the supervisors of the home seemed to be no better than the guards of the camps."³⁴ Counselor Leo Margulies who also survived Buchenwald understood why a group of emaciated Orthodox survivors refused food that was not kosher. He lobbied on their behalf, and as a result the OSE established an Orthodox hostel for older boys in an old chateau in Ambloy. When they arrived in Ambloy, however, the director there "was upset about the boys' aggressiveness toward him."³⁵ According to Judith, "he believed they were true psychopaths, cold and indifferent by nature and that is why they were able to survive the camps."³⁶ She took issue with him and decided to take on the directorship together with Gaby "Niny" Wolff³⁷ who, like Judith, had lost many close family members and her home in the Holocaust; shortly after, they moved to the home in Taverny. Robert Krell, a psychologist and Holocaust survivor who came to know Judith well, suggested what drew her to the boys: "They no longer had a home. Neither did she. So Judith decided to build together with them 'our home'."³⁸ The boys, including future Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, were immediately drawn to Niny who exuded youth leader energy and enthusiasm. Leo Margulies became their teacher and mentor. When OSE tried to recall Leo to their office in Paris, the boys protested and the OSE relented. According to Judith, Leo was "their spokesman in all management matters," he was "honest and pious," he listened to them, and they listened to him: "... for him, the children behaved properly without need for drastic measures."³⁹

³¹ The work of OSE historian Katy Hazan provides a summary of the OSE children's homes. See especially, "Hidden Children, Found Children: Child Survivors of the Shoah," *Les cahiers de la Shoah* 1, no. 9 (2007): 181-212; Katy Hazan and Georges Weill, "The OSE and the Rescue of Jewish Children, from the Pre-war to the Post-war Period," in *Resisting Genocide: The Multiple Forms of Rescue*, eds. Jacques Semelin, Claire Andrieu, and Sarah Gensburger (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 245-263. See also the OSE website, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://www.ose-france.org/memoire/>.

³² Officially, only "children" 16 or younger were accepted in children's homes, but many of the Buchenwald survivors registered themselves as younger than they actually were in order to be able to avoid DP camps.

³³ She later married and became Judith Hemmendinger.

³⁴ Hemmendinger, *Survivors*, 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ She later married and went by Gaby or Niny Wolff Cohen (or just Cohen).

³⁸ Hemmendinger and Krell, *Children of Buchenwald*, xx.

³⁹ Hemmendinger, *Survivors*, 39.

Warburg Estate (Blankenese)

In the Hamburg suburbs less than one hour from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, groups of young Jewish survivors found a home in the Villa Warburg, a sprawling estate on a hillside overlooking the river Elbe. The Warburgs, a wealthy banking family, fled Germany in 1938. Eric Warburg, one of the estate's owners who became a colonel in the U.S. Army during World War II, gave permission first to UNRRA then Joint to use the house for a Jewish children's home, allowing unaccompanied children in Belsen to be transferred to Blankenese. The first two groups of children arrived under the supervision of Zionist youth leaders, each staying for only a few months before immigrating to Palestine. Beginning in Spring 1947 Joint's Betty Adler and the Jewish Agency's Reuma Schwarz were appointed co-directors of the home.

Correspondence records reveal how the young, devoted directors at Blankenese had the support of the Joint's regional director Sylvia Markowitz, who was not afraid to push back against her superiors in order to defend Betty and Reuma's work. When Erich Warburg requested they allow some of his displaced German friends to move into the guest house, Markowitz intervened: "...right now during the next coming months we have a duty and an obligation to the children from Belsen, and sincerely feel that the new tenants of the Guest House can wait a few months, until we have serviced the children."⁴⁰ When Warburg continued to insist on housing the guests, she challenged the benefactor, citing incidents of antisemitism directed against survivor children: "We have spoken with several of the prospective German tenants who *do not feel comfortable having Jewish children in such close proximity*." She continued "... the children should feel free in their new environment," insisting that the guest house was needed to house support staff.⁴¹ Finally, Markowitz put her foot down: "It is impossible for us to do this now." On 4 August 1947, Erich Warburg responded that "we have come to a complete meeting of the minds, which I never doubted," asking only for regular reports.⁴² With Markowitz's backing, the co-directors, a team of counselors, health care workers, and groundskeepers created a comfortable home for the children. They agreed to devote all buildings at Blankenese exclusively to Jewish child survivors and staff with one primary goal: creating a safe, supportive, loving home life where the Jewish children could remain together as a group until their emigration. This example illustrates how competent, courageous persons who recognized children's needs in this unprecedented moment were able to secure resources that otherwise would not have been provided, resources that proved life-changing for many child survivors. It appears that such instances—and powerful allies like Sylvia Markowitz—were rare.

Like Judith, Reuma was only 22 when she became co-director of Blankenese. Betty Adler, who had been recruited from Brooklyn, NY, was a bit more experienced, but just a few years older. Reuma confessed, "I had neither experience nor confidence and I was made further insecure because I knew people doubted me. Only Betty supported me and so we became friends."⁴³ Both were committed to working with Zionist youth organizers who served as

⁴⁰ Letter to Erich [sic.] Warburg from AJDC Hamburg (Sylvia Markowitz), May 6, 1947, JDC online archive.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Letter to Miss Sylvia Markowitz [AJDC] from Eric M. Warburg, August 4, 1947, JDC online archive.

⁴³ Reuma Schwarz-Weizman, "Auftrag in Blankenese," in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 70.

counselors and teachers. Berta Reher and her husband, who worked as housekeepers at the estate, reported to Anna Warburg, the original owner of the house and mother of Eric: "With Betty and Reuma, order returned to the house. Betty was so young but very clever and energetic. She had a calm, formal nature, the children hung on her like barnacles, and Reuma, too."⁴⁴

Exceptional Caregivers

Aid organizations paid special attention to professional qualifications and experience when selecting children's home directors, though many were not much older than the oldest survivors.⁴⁵ Judith and Niny at Taverny and Betty and Reuma at Blankenese all were under 25 years old and unmarried. Exceptional caregiving in crisis contexts questioned established standards of professionalized, institutionalized care. Since the 1920s, social workers in the United States, for example, were warned against "putting too much of one's own prejudices, sentiments, loves and hates into one's job,"⁴⁶ acting less as a motherly caregiver than as the "dispassionate expert."⁴⁷ Also beginning in the 1920s, psychoanalysis had become increasingly popular, providing a set of scientific methods and tools for diagnosing children's behavior.⁴⁸ In contrast, a number of caregivers in children's homes in post-war Europe recognized that the opposite was needed for child survivors of trauma: personal relationships with individual children. These caregivers embraced the model of the home rather than the institution as the ideal setting for healing and recovery. In most cases, directors of Jewish children's homes had gathered experience working with displaced children during the war and early liberation period, voluntarily providing relief, comfort and activities for them in dangerous and chaotic contexts.⁴⁹ Exceptional care home directors recognized this particular, unprecedented period of history as a chance to follow their own visions and impulses rather than strictly adhere to policy guidelines, to respond to needs in ways that felt authentic and personal. As Taverny co-director Niny Cohen phrased it: "we didn't think, we lived the thing."⁵⁰

How exactly did they "live the thing"? First of all, most of the children's home directors accepted that they could not fully relate to the children who had survived the concentration camps and understood why they sometimes dismissed them as a result. Elie Wiesel

⁴⁴ "Auszüge aus einem Brief des Ehepaar Reher an Frau Anna Warburg (und Dr. Fritz Warburg—den Besitzer des 'Weißen Hauses') in Stockholm vom 27.2.1949," reprinted in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 236-237.

⁴⁵ In order to be taken into a home, Jewish organizations determined that a "child" could be no older than sixteen. As a result, many claimed they were younger than they actually were, often as old as 18 or 19.

⁴⁶ Daniel J. Walkowitz, citing Hazel Newton, in "The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity: Social Workers in the 1920s," *American Historical Review* 95, no. 4 (1990): 1051-1075; 1051. Newton's article, "Miss Case-Worker Goes Scientific," was published in 1930 in *Survey*, a journal devoted to social service reform.

⁴⁷ Walkowitz, "Making of a Feminine Professional Identity," 1075.

⁴⁸ Zahra, *Lost Children*, 71.

⁴⁹ Alice Goldberger, for example, had established a kindergarten in an internment camp on the Isle of Man and Niny Cohen had worked in OSE children's homes in Vichy France.

⁵⁰ "Gaby Cohen (née Wolff)," interview with Catherine Bernstein, 24.

remembered how distraught and unruly he and the others were when they were first brought to Ambloy and Taverny. “We totally refused you. We did not want your help, your understanding, your psychological tests, your charity.”⁵¹ Decades later, he asked: “How did you succeed, Judith, to tame us?”⁵² This question can be asked of all the adults who devoted themselves to Jewish child survivors.

Restoring Jewish identities

In an effort to make the house feel like a home, Alice and Manna celebrated the children’s first post-Holocaust Shabbat on the day they moved into Weir Courtney in 1945. On Jewish holidays, the children created elaborate decorations, gifts, meals, and performances. Shabbat, celebrating holidays, and deepening connections to Jewish culture were part of life in each hostel. Even though not necessarily believers, the boys at Loughton were “very strong in their involvement in living Judaism,” Yogi recalled.⁵³ Some Loughton boys adopted Zionism in reaction to the Holocaust, largely as a result of Heini Goldberg’s influential lessons of Zionist history and ideology.⁵⁴ Future Olympian Ben Helfgott, who survived Buchenwald, Schlieben and Theresienstadt, described Heini’s crucial impact: “Although most of us were Zionists in the sense that we ardently believed in a Jewish State... He was a clear thinker, and whenever he spoke we devoured his words voraciously.”⁵⁵

In France, the homes at Ambloy and Taverny were defined by their commitment to Orthodox Judaism and keeping kosher. Taverny attracted mostly boys who had as children been steeped in Orthodoxy in tight-knit Jewish communities in Eastern European *shtetls*. Judith and Niny, who both had been raised Orthodox themselves, understood their demands for kosher food and Talmudic instruction. Religious instructors encouraged them to put this latest chapter into historical context: the long history of antisemitism and persecution but also of Jewish survival and resilience. The boys adopted Hebrew at Taverny, distinguishing themselves in this way from the other homes where usually Yiddish was spoken. The Taverny group was largely defined by the so-called “intellectuals” that included Elie Wiesel and others who spent their days studying and debating Talmudic teachings.

In Blankenese, the goal for all orphans was emigration to Israel, though directors believed children with relatives elsewhere should choose for themselves. In a letter to her parents, co-director Reuma Schwarz⁵⁶ referred to the Blankenese children as “Israel’s orphans.”⁵⁷ Co-director Betty Adler, calm and soft-spoken, was entirely committed to restoring and deepening the children’s understanding of Judaism and traditions. She had grown up in an Orthodox family in New York steeped in Jewish tradition, culture and history and spoke

⁵¹ Elie Wiesel, “Forward,” in Hemmendinger, *Survivors*, 8.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Gilbert, *The Boys*, 384.

⁵⁴ “Obituary: Heini Goldberg [Chaim Golan],” *Journal of the ‘45 Aid Society* 16 (1993), 51, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://45aid.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Issue-Number-16-1993.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Ben Helfgott, quoted in Gilbert, *The Boys*, 349.

⁵⁶ Reuma Schwarz later became Reuma Weizman after marrying Ezer Weizman, an Army general who became Israel’s president in the 1990s.

⁵⁷ Schwarz-Weizman, “Letter to her parents,” May 23, 1947, in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 81.

fluent Hebrew.⁵⁸ Living in a Jewish community with child survivors in Blankenese affected her deeply and strengthened her commitment to Zionism. According to the account of one of the teachers there, she was visibly moved when the children and counselors organized a celebration of the U.N.'s recognition of the Jewish homeland in November 1947: "Her whole body shook and she muttered, more to herself than to those standing around her, 'I am part of all this. I am witnessing the salvation of the Israeli people'."⁵⁹ Through music, celebration, and even parades in which children waved Israeli flags as they marched through the streets of Blankenese, they restored children's pride in being Jews. Zvi Sohar (1931) remembered: "My time in Blankenese was the gateway to immigration, the point of transfer, during which I began to develop my Israeli identity. I left Herschel and the Polish language behind and became Zvi, who spoke Hebrew and was fascinated by religious stories and Jewish histories."⁶⁰

Meeting educational needs

When it came to education, all directors agreed there was little time to waste: the children had missed years of classroom instruction, had to learn the local language (in Britain and France) and, in the case of older teenagers, had to begin training for work or for immigration to Palestine. Directors all understood that these children faced greater challenges than just catching up on subject matter. As Judith Hemmendinger put it: "It was clear that all traditional methods of education were bound to fail."⁶¹

The young children in Lingfield and Loughton were strongly pushed to learn English so that they could attend school in town or participate in job training programs and apprenticeships. Alice and Manna created a home life rich in opportunities for developing skills and pursuing interests. Both creative and handy, they taught them crafts, games, and songs, and since both directors were familiar with the progressive pedagogy of Pestalozzi, Montessori and others, they knew young children enjoyed organized activities and could assume responsibilities in and around the home and garden. All the children—older and younger—worked together to create elaborate celebrations, birthday parties and feasts for special occasions. Manna liked to play her violin, and the children learned traditional Jewish folk songs and dances. In one of the many pictures from Weir Courtney documenting these activities, Manna, laughing or perhaps singing, is leading a chain of hand-holding children, skirts and shirts fluttering, dancing the hora on the lawn in front of the house in Lingfield. Art and creative writing was also important. For Alice's birthday, the children created an extraordinary scrapbook in which some wrote joyful poems and each drew pictures in bright colors depicting their favorite activities or adventures at Lingfield.

The residents of Loughton received on site lessons in English in order to participate in job training programs and apprenticeships and to begin to earn a living. The older youths were encouraged to attend the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT) School in

⁵⁸ Betty Adler, "Von Brooklyn nach Blankenese," in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 115.

⁵⁹ Chana Dichter, "Eine Schule für Überlebende der Shoah," in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 106.

⁶⁰ Zvi Sohar, *Aus der Finsternis zum Licht* (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2012), 54.

⁶¹ Hemmendinger, *Survivors*, 33.

South Kensington. ORT was active throughout Europe, supported by Jewish communities and organizations globally.⁶² The London ORT schools, a relatively short commute from Loughton, taught engineering, welding, drawing, electrical skills, and radio mechanics. Girls, including some of the teens at Lingfield, had one option: dressmaking.⁶³ Montefiore suggested they learn a useful trade, keeping ambitions low so as not to draw the attention of the majority of Brits who were wary of assistance going to refugees. Montefiore explained: “when we asked these children what they wanted to do and occasionally were told they would like to spend seven years in this country studying to be a doctor, or a professional pianist, or to become a portrait painter, we had to say, ‘Think of something else.’”⁶⁴ Sometimes he used his influence with local Jewish tradespeople, who offered them apprenticeships.

Though most young survivors were not very religious, Heini was able to ignite an interest in debate and discussion of moral and political issues. In addition to studying the Talmud and Jewish traditions, assimilation vs. *aliyah*, the past and future of the Jewish people, and Israeli statehood were among the subjects they discussed. Heini invited guest speakers and introduced young people to the arts, especially theater and music. Both at Loughton and later at the Primrose Club, they put on performances and listened to classical music. Barbara Barnett, one of two counselors at the Club, recalled the musical appreciation sessions there:

These became very popular. For some it was a first discovery of classical music, a newly found leisure pursuit with strong appeal; while for others powerful memories were evoked of music enjoyed in their childhood homes before all hell was let loose. Through art and music, people can find expression without any language barrier. Once that barrier disappeared I had added weekly play-reading; and later on we performed Emlyn Williams' grim tale, *Night Must Fall*, at St Peter's Church Hall in Belsize Square. [...] Nowadays art and music and drama are recognised as valued outlets for self-expression. We did not know that then.⁶⁵

The educational agenda in the children's homes in France had been the subject of heated debate within the OSE leadership. At an educational congress in 1946, the organization left room for directors to specify the educational program within a broad framework: education should be “neutral,” by which they intended to distance themselves from the Zionist ideological fervor of some of the youth groups; but it should be “respectful of the Jewish collective soul to achieve the maximum development of each personality.”⁶⁶ Most of the boys had come from Eastern Europe and spoke Yiddish which quickly became the language of instruction (Judith, who spoke only German and French, also made a concentrated effort to learn Yiddish.) They learned Hebrew and were taught Jewish religion and history, mostly by

⁶² For more on the almost 150-year-old organization founded in Tsarist Russia, see the ORT website (ort.org), accessed August 17, 2026, <https://ort.org/en/about-ort/history/>.

⁶³ ORT Union, “Report on the ORT Activities: August 1946-July 1947 [Great Britain].” Submitted to the meeting of the Central Board of the World ORT Union in Paris, July 6-7, 1947, 37, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://dpcamps.ort.org/dp-reports-intro/united-kingdom-ort-report/>.

⁶⁴ Montefiore cited in Gilbert, *The Boys*, 362.

⁶⁵ Barbara Barnett, “Some personal reflections—your influence on my life,” *Journal of the '45 Aid Society* 24 (2000).

⁶⁶ “OSE, A Century-Old History,” 4-5, Website of the OSE (Oeuvre de secours aux enfants), ose.org, accessed August 17, 2026, www.osefrance.org/je-decouvre/histoire/histoiredelose/.

Leo, who ignited their interests in these subjects by inviting Jewish scholars to Taverny. Headly classroom lessons and discussions ran parallel to practical concerns about the future. Leo understood that their studies could be welcome distractions and helped them to think deeply about their place in the world.

Judith and Niny managed to convince a number of reluctant boys to attend training programs offered by ORT. France was home to more ORT schools than any other country in Europe, 21 in Paris alone.⁶⁷ Judith recalled: "When we asked the older ones what they might want to learn, the adolescents looked at Niny and me in complete bewilderment."⁶⁸ When they asked them about their fathers' occupations, they discovered that a few were interested in carrying on the family tradition. Some boys traveled back and forth to Paris, sometimes residing at the school for months at a time, developing skills, or taking language or math classes. Solomon Hans (1928) trained at ORT to make pocketbooks.⁶⁹ Allan Weiss (1929), another Taverny boy, traveled daily to Paris to work as an apprentice to a jeweler.⁷⁰ Though ORT provided community centers for Jewish youth to socialize and relax, he, like most others, preferred to return to Taverny at the end of the day.

At Blankenese, children who mostly had been living with constant upheaval as they made their way from Eastern to Western Europe were expected to learn in a structured environment and received education in Hebrew language and history as well as music, art and sports, before making *aliyah* to Palestine: "When the groups arrived at Blankenese, they were no longer divided up according to youth movement affiliation, but were schooled and housed according to age and academic requirement."⁷¹ The teachers at Blankenese were known to be strict and the lessons challenging, especially Hebrew. According to Israel Wiesel (ca. 1934) Reuma often took issue with the Polish educators' approach, insisting they be more open and patient with the children.⁷² Unlike in the other western European homes, the children at Blankenese did not have access to an ORT school, but the curriculum included developing skills for kibbutz life, particularly gardening.

In caring for children, directors also brought their talents, interests and passions into the life of the home, that in turn lit creative energies in the children. Alice and Manna brought an infectious joy to group projects—murals, albums, celebrations, poetry evenings, musical performances—at Weir Courtney. With Yogi, it was sports that had come so naturally to him and that were his way of relating to the boys, and the boys' memories of the sports teams were usually among their most vivid ones.⁷³ Reuma, who played the flute, created a musical

⁶⁷ ORT Union, "The Work of the ORT in Europe, January-May 1946 [France]." Report presented to a meeting of the members of the executive committee of the ORT Union, Geneva, May 26, 1946, 30, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://dpcamps.ort.org/dp-reports-intro/france-ort-report/>.

⁶⁸ Hemmendinger and Krell, *Children of Buchenwald*, 20.

⁶⁹ Solomon Hans, interview with Marlyn Alkins, February 10, 1997. Interview 25814, USCSF, Visual History Archive, <https://vha.usc.org/25814>, accessed August 24, 2026.

⁷⁰ Allan Weiss, interview with Sandi Pelly, January 16, 1995. Interview 665, Visual History Archive, <https://vha.usc.org/665>, accessed August 24, 2026, USCSF.

⁷¹ Chana Dichter, "Eine Schule für Überlebende der Shoah," in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 97.

⁷² Israel Wiesel, "Die Geschichte der Gruppe ATID," in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 163.

⁷³ Robin Frydman, for example, recalled how her father, Gershon Frydman (1923), often told stories about the success of Loughton boys' soccer team in local leagues and their reputation as fierce competitors. Phone interview with the author, May 14, 2025.

group of kindergartners who entertained the other children, arranged for piano lessons and even gifted her flute to Israel Wiesel after he developed a strong interest in playing it.⁷⁴ This practice of “letting your life speak”⁷⁵ encouraged children to do the same. In children’s testimonies, children often recalled moments in which caregivers expressed themselves creatively, evidence that caregivers’ lives spoke loudly and resonated deeply. In Israel Wiesel’s words, “After Blankenese I was never again offered music lessons and I never had any again. [...] I will never forget this episode.”⁷⁶ And he held on to the flute as a memento.

Building trust

As a psychoanalyst, Oscar Friedmann believed survivors should be encouraged to speak about their Holocaust experiences, but they were often unwilling to do so. Especially survivors of the camps struggled with trusting adults and preferred to confide in the younger youth movement leaders and counselors who assisted in many of the homes. Wolfgang Gordon, a member of Hashomer Hazair youth group and staff member at Windermere, where most of the first child survivors arrived, trusted the “Boys” instinctively and the feeling appeared to be mutual. He reported that

they talked freely about their sufferings. [...] The reason for this success lies, in my opinion, in the fact that most of the workers were young and experienced youth leaders. That they were also Jewish, and that all that had happened to the children could have happened to them, made it undoubtedly easier for them to gain their confidence.⁷⁷

While youth movement experience may have helped to win the trust of older children, younger children often looked for substitute parent figures who could show them love and affection. Felizitas Sonnenschein Hart (1939) was 6 when she moved into Weir Courtney. She was very shy and almost never spoke. Occasionally she would act out, though decades later she could not explain why. She felt marginalized by the other children and tried to avoid them, but she took to Alice:

I could hold her hand and follow [her around], someone who would play with me sometimes. I remember she had things to do and I was holding her hand and she’d say she’d come to me in a minute. And I’d wait and I’d go up and say, Are you ready now?⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Reuma told the story about Israel and the flute at a reunion a few decades later, sharing that it had not been easy for her to part with it. Wiesel, “Geschichte,” 164.

⁷⁵ This phrase comes from Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

⁷⁶ Wiesel, “Geschichte,” 165. He was only there for three months before receiving permission to resettle in Palestine.

⁷⁷ Wolfgang David Gordon, “Some Notes on the Work with Continental Youth from the Concentration Camps,” *Journal of the 45 Aid Society* 9 (1981): 22-28; 23, accessed August 17, 2026.

⁷⁸ Felizitas Hart, interview with Vanessa Ring, February 27, 1995. Interview 1224, USCSF, Visual History Archive, <https://vha.usc.org/1224>, accessed August 17, 2026.

Alice's ability to give her some focused attention made a difference to her and remained her strongest memory of the home.

The young directors at Taverny knew better than to expect the Buchenwald survivors who had been humiliated and debased to trust them, but they could see beyond their rough exteriors. As Elie Wiesel put it, speaking of Judith and Niny: "You bet on us to recover."⁷⁹ One boy remembered that some of their outbursts would have appeared "mad" but in the group at Taverny, he felt able to express his pain like in a "surrogate family."⁸⁰ George Citrom (Georg "Laci" Czitrom–1931), a Romanian-born Buchenwald survivor, was 14 when he first arrived in France. He was intimidated by the "undisciplined" boys who stole and boldly asserted themselves. Niny noticed and reached out to him, and they quickly developed a special relationship whose emotional impact was evident in his testimony more than sixty years later, when he spoke about his experiences for the first time:

INTERVIEWER: What was so special about Niny? Why did you trust her?

GEORGE CITROM: Maybe I needed a mother. I have no answer for you. Maybe I needed a person that can guide me. And she was willing. She was the right person.⁸¹

She met with him often after he began living with a family and going to school in Paris. At Blankenese, Yehuda Margalit (ca. 1934) remembered how they sometimes referred to Betty as "America" and Reuma as "Israel."⁸² The terms suggest that they may have felt less comfortable with Betty, since she was a "foreigner" from a place the children only knew about from the GIs in the DP camps. Reuma, who had been associated with the youth groups for a long time, probably felt more familiar. But the children soon "adopted" Betty as a mother figure. She was dedicated to helping them fulfill their dream of emigration and shared their enthusiasm for Israel. They also sensed—and some likely knew—that she had conveniently looked the other way when they escaped from the American zone to the British zone which at that time greatly increased their prospects of gaining legal passage to Palestine. "We knew she belonged to us."⁸³

Minimizing control, maximizing freedom

The children's home at Lingfield was known as "the hostel without punishment."⁸⁴ Alice's focus was on making children's lives as comfortable, beautiful and carefree as possible. The children each had spaces in the house reserved for them, that they could decorate and enjoy as they saw fit, and they had acres of outdoor space for playing and taking care of their many

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Hemmendinger and Krell, *Children of Buchenwald*, 58-59.

⁸¹ George Citrom, interviewed by Nancy Fisher, February 11, 2010. Interview 52023, VHA, USCSF.

⁸² Jehuda Margalit, "Ferne Tage," in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 169.

⁸³ Margalit, "Ferne Tage," 169.

⁸⁴ Goldberger, "Report to Foster Parents, January 1952," Alice Goldberger papers, Series 4. Accession Number 2007.423.1, USHMM.

pets. Zdenka Husserl (1939) remembered: “We had dogs, we had a guinea pig, rabbits, my chickens... and it was me that used to go once a week to order the food for the animals. So, I liked doing that, I went on a bike.”⁸⁵ As she described the countryside surrounding the Lingfield house to an interviewer, child survivor Judith Singer Sherman (1940) recalled her first feeling of freedom. At the Ravensbruck forced labor camp where she was imprisoned she also had noticed the surrounding natural beauty. At Lingfield, she remembered feeling, “If there was a beautiful place, you could go there.”⁸⁶ In July 1952, Alice wrote to some donors: “In a place like ours where the children feel free and completely at home, they are not always at their ‘best behavior’ and show and express their difficulties and dislikes quite strongly.”⁸⁷ The fact that the children did so and were still loved and accepted made it possible for them to slowly venture out into the world, meeting friends from school and “organizing their days by themselves.”⁸⁸

As for the teenage Loughton boys, the best approach, according to Friedmann, was to allow them, even push them, to experience independence and autonomy. His approach fit well with Montefiore’s impulses: “We have only aimed at giving freedom, freedom of movement from place to place, freedom to choose employment, and, so far as funds permit, freedom to choose training and education.”⁸⁹ Outside the hostel, their freedom was inhibited by the constant stream of suspicion and rejection they faced from landlords, employers, and the public. CBF program director Helen Bamber recalled: “The young people did not feel that we could give them what they needed—and how could we?” They needed support, which she admitted she misunderstood at the time, and they also needed space; she learned “not to invade it.”⁹⁰ Once they had left Loughton, many young survivors turned up at the Primrose Club in Belsize Park, London, after work and on weekends. In photos of Club outings to the seaside, young men and women clad in fashionable bathing costumes, bodies loosely intertwined, smile into the camera, appearing comfortable with themselves and with each other. Generally, adolescents found solidarity with each other regardless of the attitudes of directors. In this regard, the children’s home directors were much like parents—people whom teens challenged, tested and sought independence from. It seemed to work since they knew they had support if they needed it.⁹¹

At Taverny, maximizing young survivors’ freedom included allowing them to select their roommates (which usually meant those who came from the same region, had lived in the same camps and spoke the same language). The boys were told: “This is your home, everything is at

⁸⁵ “My Faith: Zdenka Husserl,” interviewed by A. Riffat, August 18, 2015. The National Holocaust Centre and Museum website, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://www.holocaust.org.uk/my-faith-zdenka-husserl>.

⁸⁶ Judith Sherman, interview with Eileen Molfetas, October 23, 1996. Interview 21687, VHA, USCSF. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁷ Goldberger, Report to Foster Parents, July 1952.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Montefiore, Cambridge University speech, 8.

⁹⁰ Helen Bamber, interview with Vera Frankl, December 28, 2003. Accession number 2003.443, RG-50.030.0482, The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, USHMM.

⁹¹ After leaving the homes, most “Boys” still received allowances. CCCCC records indicate that they often received requests for financial and other support that were considered on an individual basis. The committee usually honored these requests, sometimes over Friedmann’s objections. They also reached out to each other for financial and other forms of support, well-documented on the ‘45 Aid Society website.

your disposal.”⁹² This included the pantry. Judith and Niny’s approach stood out: “The Directors of other homes also housing children from Buchenwald had been selected according to their ability to command authority. [...] They could not understand why our liberal methods were so successful.”⁹³ Among these liberal policies were complete freedom to leave the grounds, and most of the boys frequently went into town to spend their pocket money. They made almost daily excursions into town to have their photos taken together, often asking Niny to join them. By swapping outfits and accessories, and posing by themselves and in groups, they made bold statements “to show themselves still existing.”⁹⁴ Many of them also took photos in the clothes they were wearing when they arrived in France by train from Buchenwald—their striped concentration camp uniforms—perhaps to bear witness and signal their resilience.



Fig. 3. Betty (5th from right), Niny (seated at table, right), some Buchenwald Boys and aid organization representatives
Source. USHMM.

At Blankenese the children were younger, ranging in age from 8 to 13. They led a fairly structured existence, largely isolated from the surrounding communities and closely chaperoned by leaders of different youth groups. It was very important to the Warburg estate staff that the children be given free reign of the 16-acre grounds, which extended from the top of a large hill to the banks of the Elbe. Due to their age and the hostility of the outside world, the children’s freedom ended at the property perimeter unless they were with adults. Despite the legitimate outside threat, the adults at Blankenese refused to allow fear to permeate the home. The adults modelled freedom and courage when on the day the UN approved the formation of the state of Israel in 1947, they paraded with the children through

⁹² Hemmendinger, *Survivors*, 24.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁹⁴ Cohen, interview with Catherine Bernstein.

the streets of Blankenese, joyfully waving their blue and white Israeli flags, singing folk songs in Hebrew.

Creating communities of shared loss

All directors agreed that creating communities around Jewish culture and tradition was vital for giving young survivors hope for the future, but they differed on whether to press child survivors to speak about the past. Oscar Friedmann felt that individual sessions for sharing their experiences were necessary. On this point, he differed from Yogi, who believed their future depended on building confidence in their abilities—on the sports field and in their training programs—and blending in as much as possible with the British, who did not want to hear the details of survivors' experiences.⁹⁵ Yogi recalled: "I had to leave it to Oscar Friedmann to try, as a psychologist, to relieve the pressure of the past. Some hated those sessions like the dentists' chair. Others found the sessions a great relief."⁹⁶ Whether they did or did not speak of the past, the powerful sense of shared loss that only they could understand created a powerful bond and became the unspoken link that led to the creation of the Primrose Club after the homes closed in 1947.

Most children of Weir Courtney and Lingfield House did not recall being asked directly to speak about the Holocaust. Judith Sherman regarded this as a good thing: "None of us ever talked about the camps. We were not discouraged and we were not encouraged. But the whole thrust was towards healing and the future."⁹⁷ The refuge they created focused on restoring normalcy and creating a harmonious environment but very young children like Joanna Millan (Bella Rosenthal–1942) felt confused about what to do with their recent memories and feelings of loneliness and fear that often overcame her. When she was adopted by a family, she felt suddenly cut off from fellow survivors who shared their past experiences, suffering from being cut off from fellow survivors and from their past.⁹⁸

Initially at Écouis, many of the Buchenwald Boys refused to speak to anyone who had not experienced the horrors of the concentration camps. The only exception was Leo Margulies, who also survived Buchenwald. For Niny, asking the boys about the past felt like a violation: "Some of them talked, some of them didn't talk."⁹⁹ But Hemmendinger understood the value of a community based upon shared trauma, that after leaving the home in Taverny, "they lost an environment where awareness of the wartime past was always close, always alive...."¹⁰⁰ Reflecting back decades later Niny conceded that while she was not an advocate for communal living in ordinary times, "at a time like that, being in the same boat was, in fact, very important."¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ "Paul 'Yogi' Mayer." Website of the '45 Aid Society, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://45aid.org/carers/paul-yogi-mayer/>.

⁹⁶ Mayer, quoted in Gilbert, *The Boys*, 383.

⁹⁷ Sherman, interview by Eileen Molfetas.

⁹⁸ Born in 1942, Joanna Millan was one of the youngest children at Lingfield. She had been part of a group of toddlers first housed at Bulldogs Bank in Sussex. Joanna Millan, interview by Shirley Murgraff, February 15, 1998. Interview 37960, VHA, USCSF.

⁹⁹ Cohen, interview with Catherine Bernstein, 29.

¹⁰⁰ Hemmendinger and Krell, *Children of Buchenwald*, 124.

¹⁰¹ Cohen, interview with Catherine Bernstein, 24.

Like most of the other children at Blankenese, Zvi Sohar recalled, “We did not speak of the Holocaust.”¹⁰² Only after they arrived in Palestine/Israel, where few people seemed to speak of the Holocaust, did they miss the unspoken shared sense of loss. For a few, meeting with fellow survivors and children’s home staff were occasions—sometimes the only occasions—when they spoke openly about the past. At a reunion fifty years later in Tel Aviv, survivors from Blankenese insisted that the atmosphere at the children’s home, which focused their attention on a future in Israel, helped them survive: “How do you close the door to hell? One looks forward into the day, into the light, in the moment. They made that possible for us in Blankenese.”¹⁰³ But, on the other hand, many expressed isolation and loneliness when memories of the past resurfaced.

Many testimonies from child survivors reveal that whether in Britain, the U.S., Israel or elsewhere, when they needed or wanted to speak about the past no one wanted to listen. Decades later, survivors told stories they were only able to tell in the company of child survivors from the children’s homes. Even child survivors who settled in Israel experienced the harsh judgment of sabras and found consolation and community with others from the homes. Naphtali (1926) one of the oldest Buchenwald Boys at Taverny, initially felt welcome and accepted by native Israelis, but the distinction between sabras and survivors never entirely disappeared. He spoke of his past mainly with his younger brother “Uncle Lulek” (Israel Lau–1937) who Naphtali protected in Buchenwald.¹⁰⁴ A version of these stories was true of many of the children who spent time in an exceptional children’s home:

Linked together in a strange communion
Linked by a past that none could foretell,
And none understand,
Unless he’d seen Hell.¹⁰⁵

Advocating for child survivors

The children who ended up in Britain attended local schools and training programs where they came in contact with British people on a regular basis. The fact that they were “foreign” was enough to warrant unwanted attention. Denny Muench (1940), who lived at Weir Courtney, recalled that some of the children in the village school they attended identified his German accent. When Alice learned that one of the student teachers had told him would look good in a Gestapo hat, she scolded teachers and administrators, reminding them of the impact such unchecked actions had on the children.¹⁰⁶ In monthly reports to the American Foster Parents, a group of Jewish philanthropists in the New York area, she focused on a

¹⁰² Sohar, *Aus der Finsternis*, 55.

¹⁰³ Jizchak Tadmor, “Vorwort für die deutsche Ausgabe,” in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 14.

¹⁰⁴ Hemmendinger and Krell, *Children of Buchenwald*, 115–116. Naphtali became a journalist and diplomat, assistant to Moshe Dayan; Israel became Israel’s chief rabbi.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Etkind, “The Reunion,” *Journal of the ‘45 Aid Society* (1977): 23–24: 23. Accessed August 27, 2026, <https://45aid.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Journal-issue-3-1977.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Denny Muench, quoted in Moskovitz, *Love Despite Hate*, 96.

specific child, explaining how funds were filling their particular needs.¹⁰⁷ In her eulogy at Alice's funeral, Zdenka Husserl referred specifically to Alice's selfless advocacy: "She did not expect us to be grateful." She treated them with dignity, "never as victims."¹⁰⁸

Loughton resident Roman Halter recalled that the English often believed that their experiences in the camps "perverted us and brutalized us and certain families felt that children should not be associated with us." Montefiore constantly spoke out in their defense. He told CBF leaders, "They represent the survival of the bravest and the most gallant but also the toughest, the sharpest, the most ingenious, in finding ways and means of escape,"¹⁰⁹ and asked an audience of Cambridge students to consider the dehumanizing environment where only the group and not the individual matters. After some time of recovery, they, too, would adjust to their new, democratic environment: "Let them become individuals, each with a mind and an opinion of his or her own, not selfish but social, not egotistic but co-operative."¹¹⁰

Leo, Judith and Niny fiercely defended the Buchenwald Boys against people within the OSE who argued they needed to be contained and controlled. Witnessing how counselors stood up for them clearly contributed to rediscovering their direction and directing them "toward confidence and reconciliation."¹¹¹ Directors also intervened in individual cases, helping survivors secure visas and travel papers, chasing down embassy and local officials and rushing the boys to ports and train stations. In one case, a boy had received word that his uncle would sponsor his immigration to the U.S. Since he had once illegally used someone else's train pass, he had a criminal record; after Hemmendinger negotiated with local police, they cleared his record and he was free to travel.¹¹²

Reuma and Betty were very wary of lingering antisemitism in the local population and felt very protective of the children, deciding mostly to keep the children on the Kösterberg property. When they went on outings, Jewish Brigade soldiers and youth movement leaders acted as security guards. When children had to be treated in local hospitals, one director always went along. Reuma recalled, when a young girl developed acute appendicitis, medical staff in a Hamburg hospital questioned whether they had to admit a Jewish child. As a result, she and Betty took turns keeping watch over children to ensure the children received proper treatment and care.¹¹³

Meeting special needs

While many children suffered from the effects of malnutrition, disease and abuse, some children were significantly disabled. Children's home dictors made extra efforts to meet individual needs, and by insisting that everyone was part of the community, influenced healthier children to care for those who otherwise might have been excluded or dismissed.

¹⁰⁷ The Alice Goldberger papers (Series 4) at the USHMM contain each of these reports from 1945 to 1957 when the Foster Parents abruptly cut her funding.

¹⁰⁸ Zdenka Husserl, "Eulogy." National Holocaust Centre and Museum, NEKHC: 2009.216.1-5, accessed August 17, 2026, <https://www.holocaust.org.uk/eulogy>.

¹⁰⁹ Montefiore, CBF speech, 4.

¹¹⁰ Montefiore, Cambridge speech, 12.

¹¹¹ Wiesel, "Forward," in Hemmendinger, *Survivors*, 9.

¹¹² Hemmendinger, *Survivors*, 49.

¹¹³ Schwarz-Weizman, "Auftrag," in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 75.

1) Lingfield: Margot

One 11-year-old girl in Alice and Manna's care, Margot (1935), appeared to be very mentally disabled, unable to attend school with the other children.¹¹⁴ Anna Freud saw her weekly before determining she likely would never be able to live independently and found her a place in a care home in Edinburgh, Scotland. Alice accompanied her, wrote and visited her annually. When Margot's mother suddenly contacted her in 1952, requesting that her daughter come to live with her in Germany, Alice traveled from Edinburgh to Dortmund with Margo, who would have preferred to stay in Scotland, to make sure she "fits in with her new environment."¹¹⁵

2) Treating TB at Ashford and Quare Meade

Forty of the "Boys" contracted serious cases of TB in the camps and needed long-term care. When they were denied entry into Britain as a result, the two female members of the "Triumpherate" sprang into action, arranging for a doctor at Ashford, a sanatorium near London, and, later, Quare Meade, to admit and care for them. Lola Hahn-Warburg, one of the Triumpherate, was committed to visiting them regularly, making sure they had books and other supplies to ward off some of the boredom, loneliness and depression. The director, a nurse, reported, "It needs some experience not to be shocked at their talk, and to take them as they are because of their past."¹¹⁶ They formed a closed community, resting for 4-5 hours a day (or longer) and otherwise moving about freely, reading, playing chess and learning English from the nurses. Some of the children remained there until 1950, their expenses covered by CBF. Mayer Perlmutter (1929) recalled one nurse they all liked who "cared for us all lovingly."¹¹⁷

3) Taverny: Eric

Eric was born without hands or feet but managed to survive the war in an OSE orphanage in France. His parents had immigrated to the U.S. in 1938, reluctantly leaving him behind since, "Only people in good health were accepted by America," Judith wrote, "and Eric was refused entry."¹¹⁸ At Taverny, he waited for a visa so he could join his family. Judith admitted to being shocked by his condition: the 16-year old looked like a boy ten years younger. But despite his disabilities, he was able to eat, write and even knit, and he "soon became everyone's friend."¹¹⁹ An academically gifted student, Judith drove him to school on her bicycle. There he excelled, found a friend and experienced "joy."¹²⁰ He wrote to Judith shortly after immigrating to the U.S., pleading to be able to return to Taverny.

¹¹⁴ Goldberger, Report to foster parents in America, September 1946.

¹¹⁵ Goldberger, Report to foster parents in America, October 1952.

¹¹⁶ Eva Kahn-Minden, *The Road Back: Quare Meade* (Self-published manuscript, 2017), 5.

¹¹⁷ Michael Perlmutter, as quoted in Gilbert, *The Boys*, 353.

¹¹⁸ Hemmendinger and Krell, *Children of Buchenwald*, 66.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

4) Blankenese: Grischka

When six-year-old Grischka arrived at Blankenese, he did not speak. Noting decades later that he likely was “autistic,” Reuma recalled: “I decided to get closer to this child.”¹²¹ Once, when he fell off a high beam, he began screaming, completely helpless. She dusted him off and gave him a kiss and from then on, he clung to her. She always remembered this occasion because after that he began to develop: “I loved him very much, him in particular, because he was a very problematic child and had no family.”¹²² Personal attention and affection, even without psychological diagnosis, seemed to help him.

Pushing the envelope

In late 1945, the CCCCC board accepted the policy that adoption almost always was in the “best interests” of orphaned child survivors, especially the youngest ones.¹²³ Alice was expected to help facilitate these adoptions and did so at first. In time, Alice began asserting that the children needed contact with other survivors and pushed back on the adoption policy. For more than a decade Alice successfully challenged the central assumption of agencies dealing with orphaned survivors, namely that living in a nuclear family was preferable to living in a loving group home. She also challenged the idea that healing would be quick, constantly fundraising for the children by holding craft bazaars and lobbying the American Foster Parents. By mid-1947, the CBF was facing a grave financial crisis,¹²⁴ but Friedmann, too, insisted on continuing support for older youth. Faced with increasing donor fatigue, he faced an uphill battle.¹²⁵ He gained a few years of support until the board finally voted to close the Club in 1950.

Judith proved that she was willing and able to challenge OSE policies. She recalled one occasion when four older girls arrived at the home in dire need, as was sometimes the case when stray refugees heard about Taverny. They stayed for a few days before OSE administrators insisted they be transferred, since it was inappropriate for girls and boys to be living together in an Orthodox home. Judith escorted the girls by train to what was to be their new home in Versailles. As it came time for her to leave, she noticed the girls’ desperate expressions and gave in to their plea to be allowed to return to Taverny. Afterwards, they told her it had felt like “a death sentence” to be taken from a place where they had begun to trust people.

In Blankenese, directors were daring and skilled in circumventing British policies. Reuma explained, “We had to hide the fact from the British that the children weren’t from the British

¹²¹ Schwarz-Weizman, “Auftrag,” in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 74.

¹²² Ibid., 74.

¹²³ For a critical discussion of the notion of “best interests” in post-Holocaust child recovery efforts, see Zahra, *Lost Children*.

¹²⁴ Henry Oscar Joseph, “The C.B.F. has a crisis too,” *C.B.F. News Bulletin*, (October 1947): 4. Shoshanna Gallowski Fine papers, 1995.A.0112 RG-19.041, Series 5/File1, USHMM.

¹²⁵ In CCCCC board meetings, Montefiore often spoke about his efforts to wrangle funds from potential donors. One one occasion, a wealthy donor admitted she had been fearing another one of his letters. Montefiore quipped: “Poor woman! She dreaded my letter! I feel like a murderer.” Leonard Montefiore, Memo to Robin, March 7, 1947. Correspondence of Leonard Montefiore (microfilm), File D003752, 27/21/112, Wiener Holocaust Library. Gale Primary Sources. Refugees, Relief, and Resettlement series, HHNJPW 727582627.

zone.”¹²⁶ Most of the children there had been smuggled from the American zone into the British zone where they had better chances of receiving emigration visas to Palestine. Reuma told authorities the children were there only temporarily to attend a recovery camp. Reuma wrote to her parents: “In my eyes, Germany at this time looks like a sinking ship, and everyone is looking for rescue options. Every Jew sailing on this ship is trying to get a spot on the few available lifeboats. ... People are pushing ahead at the price of small children and other helpless beings. Only those with strong elbows win.”¹²⁷ Largely because of their clandestine activities (and strong elbows), about 300 child survivors at Blankenese received visas to emigrate to Palestine.

Providing direction

Initially, CBF wanted to assure the British public that the refugees were only temporarily enjoying their generosity and hospitality and were “preparing for Palestine.”¹²⁸ Home directors were mostly convinced that England offered them and young survivors the best opportunities for education, jobs and a peaceful existence. Directors also encouraged children to go where they had family—the U.S., Australia and, in some cases, Israel. The older boys, influenced by Zionist youth movements, protested the British government’s Palestine policy, and a few enlisted in the army to defend the newly-declared Israeli state in 1948. Most returned to England at the end of the war.

At Taverny, some of the Buchenwald Boys were or became Zionists and joined the clandestine emigration movement, *aliyah bet*. A few joined the famous *Exodus* voyage, were turned back by British troops, and ended up in internment camps in France or Germany. Others who sailed illegally to Palestine were sent to Cyprus where they waited months in order to enter Palestine.¹²⁹ Some of them fought in the Arab-Israeli War and settled in Israel. Some young survivors stayed in France or moved to the U.S., Canada, and Australia. Judith and Niny supported their choices; Niny stayed in her home country of France, while Judith eventually settled in Israel.

In contrast, virtually all Blankenese children went to Palestine/Israel. Staying in Germany, though possible, was not an option for most children since they did not have family there. Repatriation either to Germany or elsewhere in Eastern Europe where antisemitic pogroms were driving hundreds of thousands of refugees to DP camps in western and southern Europe, also was not desirable. By mid-1946, the JDC policy had shifted and the organization supported legal and illegal emigration, convinced that Palestine offered the best solution for most orphaned refugees. Betty, Reuma and the rest of the Blankenese staff were united in the effort to prepare children for resettlement in Palestine. Reuma accompanied the last boat

¹²⁶ “Reuma Weizman, wife of President Ezer Weizman, talks about her work with child Holocaust survivors,” Yad Vashem YouTube channel, accessed August 24, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h81JFAXjGT0>.

¹²⁷ Schwarz-Weizman, “Letter to her parents,” June 23, 1947, in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 83-84.

¹²⁸ “Preparing for new home—Palestine,” *Chigwick Times and West Essex Star*, April 13, 1946. Shoshanna Gallowski Fine papers, Series 5/File2, USHMM.

¹²⁹ Much has been written on this subject. See for example, Ruth Gruber’s well-known coverage of the events in her book, *Witness: One of the Great Correspondents of the Twentieth Century Tells her Story* (New York: Schocken, 2007).

load of children leaving Blankenese and arrived in Haifa harbor just as the Arab-Israeli war broke out. If she had any regrets about bringing children into a war zone, she committed none to writing: “I arrived in the ship with the children, gunfire ringing all around us. We left the harbor in a tank from Solel Bone. ... I came exactly at the right time on the ninth of May, and on the fourteenth of May, the British left the country.”¹³⁰

Conclusion

In a 2013 tribute to Manna Weindling Friedmann,¹³¹ Lingfielder Judith Sherman reminisced about Manna’s caregiving skills: “... those training analysts at the Freud Institute learn[ed] about child development from an expert—by watching you in action.”¹³² Implicit in this statement is that there was something beyond professional training that made a difference in Sherman’s life. Exceptional directors of Jewish postwar children’s homes used a combination of knowledge, experience, intuition and love to react to countless uncertain and unprecedented situations in real time. Caring, listening and accepting took precedence over pedagogical or social work methodologies, and celebrating Jewish identity was central. Given the impact of their work, it is important to note that while policymakers who led organizations—almost exclusively men—were offered opportunities to continue to apply their experience and receive compensation for it. But in most cases, caregivers—mostly women—were dismissed as soon as carehomes closed. Manna, Judith, Niny, Betty, and Reuma married soon after; only Niny continued working for OSE while the others focused on raising families and remained active in their communities, in some cases pursuing education and continuing caregiving in other forms. Alice, much older than most other directors, decided to continue caring for child survivors voluntarily. Though Montefiore and the CCCCC had concluded in 1957 that the young people, now between 15 and 21 years old, were “self-supporting and in need of periodic assistance or advice only”¹³³ Alice still insisted that some of the young people wanted—even needed—to live with other survivors and were not ready to strike out on their own. Four children moved into a flat in Hampstead with Alice while they began first jobs, completed apprenticeships and continued training programs.¹³⁴ Despite recognizing her thirteen years of service, Montefiore balked when some committee members suggested paying Alice, who was 61 years old in 1958, a “proper pension.”¹³⁵ Economist Nancy Folbre has noted in her celebrated book, *The Invisible Heart*, that understanding why caregivers receive so little compensation—something she called the “pink collar penalty”—goes beyond any market-based explanations but instead correlate with gender stereotypes (and the sex of the majority of the workers in a certain field). Referencing

¹³⁰ Schwarz-Weizman, “Auftrag,” in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 77.

¹³¹ Manna married Oscar Friedmann in 1956.

¹³² Sherman, Untitled tribute on behalf of the Lingfield children to Manna Friedmann, November 23, 2013, Alice Goldberger papers, USHMM.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Record of Iselworth residents and their places of work, 1957. MF Doc 27/37/200, Wiener Library.

¹³⁵ Letter from Alfred Rubens, treasurer of Lingfield House, to M. Stephany, Central British Fund, April 22, 1955. After referring the matter to the Central British Fund, the chairman responded that they “do not contemplate paying pensions to their former employees.” See: Letter from M. Stephany to Alfred Rubens, April 25, 1955.

the work of sociologist Paula England, she states simply, "... jobs that require nurturance are paid less, all else being equal, than other jobs. Jobs that involve exercising authority over other people, on the other hand, are paid more."¹³⁶

The long-term impact of children's home caregivers can best be measured in qualitative terms, by the testimonies of child survivors, many of whom stayed in touch with them until the end of their lives. At children's home reunions, they spoke out about the importance of that first post-war community; their first taste of security and stability; the therapeutic effects of home and nature; the moment they felt hopeful again; and the process of finding their way back to the realm of the living.¹³⁷ Adult testimonies are peppered with deeply personal and vivid memories of places, people, and personal interactions rendered with honesty, emotion, affection, humor, and, in some cases, self-deprecating embarrassment. Often grown-up child survivors confessed they had not spoken with anyone, not even their partners and children, about what had happened to them during the Holocaust and how it felt to be alone without family. Many found their voices only when surrounded again by the children and caregivers from the children's homes. Those who listened to them then were present again, each emotional statement, tear and hug an indicator that their work had made a significant difference.

In some cases, the directors initiated these reunions when, later in life, they recognized just how significant and transformative the children's home years were for them as well. At one such reunion in 1995, Reuma, who had become Israel's First Lady after her husband Ezer Weizman was elected President by the Knesset, recalled how the short time at the Warburg estate had changed her life: "My entire effort was directed towards this work. I loved the children and felt very close with them. Before I worked there [at Blankenese], I had not realized how much I loved children and how much I wanted to help them."¹³⁸ At the same reunion, Betty also confirmed the impact of their shared experiences: "Today we all see each other again and feel as though the fifty years that have passed did not exist. We are still close even though we only spent a short time together."¹³⁹

When Niny, who spent her entire career working with children, was asked late in her life about whether she thought much about the Taverny years, she responded that she thought about the children more and more often: "I realize that those two, three years spent with the group... take up more and more space in the end."¹⁴⁰ Why would they become more rather than less important with time? Many of the children reached similar conclusions in their later years. They felt more compelled to speak about their experiences both in the camps and in the children's homes, in part because they were asked by children and grandchildren and felt they owed them the truth. More than a few boys from Taverny who could not "open up" sent

¹³⁶ Nancy Folbre, *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 44-45.

¹³⁷ The survivors who lived in hostels in the United Kingdom formed an association known as the '45 Aid Society; for years, they published a journal, and established a tradition of an annual reunion in London, continued by second and third generations. The first reunion of Taverny children took place in New York in 1965. Reuma organized a reunion for Blankenese children at the President's villa when she was First Lady of Israel in 1995. They held subsequent reunions in the former children's home in Blankenese in 2005 and 2006.

¹³⁸ Schwarz-Weizman, "Auftrag," 73.

¹³⁹ Betty Adler, "Von Brooklyn nach Blankenese," in *Kirschen auf der Elbe*, 117.

¹⁴⁰ Gaby Cohen (nee Wolff), Interview with Catherine Bernstein [transcript], 37.

their children and grandchildren to Judith “so I could reveal the story.”¹⁴¹

Further research is needed to shed light on caregiving work in restoring Jewish communities after the Holocaust and in establishing new ones throughout the world, particularly comparing homes in western Europe and Germany to homes in Eastern Europe, where the influence of Zionism was strongest.¹⁴² Much work remains to be done also in comparing caregivers in children’s homes to those in kibbutzim, youth camps and other contexts where unaccompanied and orphaned children spent the days, months and years after the Holocaust, waiting to settle permanently in homes of their own and the life-long connections between caregivers and child survivors. Caregivers’ lives speak not only about the past but also offer hope for the present and future. Today, children are still at risk everywhere, and, more than ever, “the world must care that all children are protected, to allow them to grow, to develop.”¹⁴³ These messages and their testimonies along with their life-long caregiving work are their legacies. Their work connects them with countless caregivers who have helped and will help child survivors of war, loss and abuse return to life.

¹⁴¹ Hemmendinger, *Survivors*, 141.

¹⁴² This article is part of a larger study that includes children’s homes in Zakopane and Otwock, Poland, and Selvino, Italy, focusing on the work of Lena Küchler Silberman, Luba Blum-Bielicka, and Moshe Ze’iri.

¹⁴³ Gaby “Niny” Cohen (nee Wolff), Interview with Catherine Bernstein, 38.

Appendix: Overview of Children's Homes

Name of directors/key staff	Town/ country	Number of children	Ages/gender of children	Dates
*Alice Goldberger *Manna Weindling Friedmann *Sophie Wutsch, Gertrude and Sophie Dann	Weir Courtney in Lingfield; Lingfield House in Isleworth, London ENGLAND	24 children	Mostly young children; 4 older girls	1945-1957
*Leonard Montefiore *Dr. Oscar Friedmann *Heini Goldberg *Paul "Yogi" Mayer	Loughton (Essex); Primrose Club, Belsize Park, London ENGLAND	26 youths	Older boys	1945-1950
*Judith Feist Hemmendinger *Gaby ("Niny") Cohen Wolff *Leo Margulies [Margolis]	Ambloy; Taverny FRANCE	ca. 100 youths, not all at the same time	Almost all older boys, young men	1945-1948
*Reuma Schwarz Weizman *Betty Adler Rozensztok	Warburg estate (Kösterberg), Blankenese GERMANY (British Zone)	150 children	Young boys and girls (under 13)	1947-1948 (3rd group only)

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The Narration of the Colonial Past by Members of the Livornese Community in Tunisia

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how the Italian-Jewish community in Tunisia, known as the “Livornese community,” has reconstructed its collective memory and its common historical path. The minority, composed of Sephardic Jews who settled in Tunisia between the 17th and 18th centuries, maintained a distinct identity from local Jews and other European groups. They were influential in the colonial milieu but occupied a complex position due to the intersection between their religion and their Italian nationality. The decolonization process (1943-1970), triggered a mass emigration from the country, but also conflicting narratives about the community past. This research explores how these narratives have been created and transmitted through autobiographies and interviews, highlighting the interplay between national, religious, and political identities. The Livornese Jews’ unique social position and plural affiliations produced a multifaceted memory, influenced by the emigration trajectories and the broader process of assimilation of former Europeans colonizers.

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Introduction

During the second half of the 20th century, most Western European countries faced the challenge of managing refugee flows from the post-colonial world. The reception of these new arrivals varied significantly, impacting how public memory of these migrations evolved over time through non-linear trajectories.¹ Such variations have, in turn, influenced the long-term construction of private memories in each national context.²

This study analyzes how former members of a highly dynamic minority group in modern Tunisia—the Italian-Jewish community³—have remembered and reinterpreted their past during colonial era. Settled in Tunisia between the 17th and 18th centuries as merchants,⁴ Livornese Jews were also known as “Grana” (an Arabic adaptation of “Livorno”) to distinguish them from local Jews, or “Twansa” (plural of “Tounsi,” Tunisian). This semantic plurality reflects a peculiar historical path and complex interactions with other communities in modern Tunisia. In 1710, in order to maintain their independence and preserve the legal protection of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, the Livornese Jews established a separate community distinct from local Jews, creating a juridical division that officially lasted until 1944.⁵ By the early 20th century, a large part of the Livornese Jews had formed a small but influential urban bourgeoisie of about 4,000 people. They stood apart from the local Jewish population—around 50,000,⁶ subjects of the Bey and part of the colonial milieu—and from the broader Italian community of 85,000,⁷ mostly Sicilian and Catholics, generally with a more modest social status. Due to their plural belongings, the memory production of this minority offers a valuable perspective for examining broader historical questions. The social position of Livornese Jews within the colonial system made them connectors between different groups. As Jews who had settled in Tunisia long before the French protectorate, they maintained a relatively close relationship with some parts of the local population while preserving a long-standing sense of superiority over Tunisian Jews: this sentiment was often explicitly

¹ Jean-Louis Miège and Colette Dubois, eds., *L'Europe retrouvée: les migrations de la décolonisation* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995); Andrea Smith, *Europe's Invisible Migrants* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003); Patrizia Audenino, *La casa perduta: la memoria dei profughi nell'Europa del Novecento* (Rome: Carocci, 2015); Pamela Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made: Decolonization and the Foundation of Postwar Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Alessandra Vigo, "Dealing with 'Returns': African Decolonization and Repatriation to Italy, 1947-70," *Journal of Contemporary History* 57, no. 3 (2022): 751-774.

² Andrea L. Smith, *Colonial Memory and Postcolonial Europe: Maltese Settlers in Algeria and France, New Anthropologies of Europe* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006); Dennis Walder, *Postcolonial Nostalgias* (New York-London: Routledge, 2010); Dirk Göttsche, ed., *Memory and Postcolonial Studies: Synergies and New Directions, Cultural Memories* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019).

³ Also known as the “Livornese community” due to its origins in the Jewish community of Livorno, and officially called “Portuguese Israelite Community” since XIX century, to underscore the common Sephardic heritage of its members.

⁴ Richard Ayoun, "Les Juifs livournais en Afrique du Nord," *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 50, no. 9-12 (1984): 650-688; Paul Sebag, *Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie: des origines à nos jours* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991).

⁵ Martino Oppizzi, *Les Juifs italiens de Tunisie pendant le fascisme. Une communauté à l'épreuve (1921-1943)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2022).

⁶ Direction Générale de l'Agriculture, du Commerce et de la Colonisation, *Statistique générale de la Tunisie. Année 1922* (Tunis: Imprimerie Générale J. Barlier, 1924), 3.

⁷ According to the official numbers. Based on the rate of natural increase of Italian population, Juliette Bessis has estimated a range between 99,000 and 143,000 people. Juliette Bessis, *La Méditerranée fasciste: l'Italie mussolinienne et la Tunisie* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1981), 17.

mentioned in contemporary documents, like the local press.⁸ As Italian citizens, they enjoyed the legal privileges accorded to the European population by the Beys and then by the French authorities, while being excluded from the colonial administration.

Following their departure from Tunisia during the after war and the decolonization period—between 1943 and 1970, often under coercive circumstances—the reconstruction of their own past gave rise to conflicting narratives. This study aims to analyze the contested memory of colonialism, shedding light on how national and religious identities intersected and influenced each other. It is based on an analysis of all autobiographies published by Livornese Jews since their departure, mostly published in the 2000s.⁹ To further explore the interplay between public and private memory, this study also incorporates a corpus of approximately 30 interviews conducted between 2013 and 2022. These interviews served as a valuable tool to enrich the books' analysis, helping to clarify the processes of selection and omission at work during the memorial elaboration of the colonial past, between written narratives and oral discourse.

Therefore, this study first analyzes the publication corpus, then explore how the migration trajectories of Livornese Jews of Tunisia affected the construction of their collective memory, and finally examines which self-perception and a view of colonial society emerges from the texts.

A Small and Homogeneous Corpus

Previous research has identified a corpus of nine autobiographical publications written by former members of the Livornese Jewish community of Tunisia. Listed alphabetically by author, these works are:

⁸ For example, in 1931, the official journal of the Alliance Israélite Universelle described the Livornese as an "aristocratic caste" and blamed their "superior attitude and a strong attachment to their language and traditions," which unsettled local Jews ("Grana et Twansa," *Paix et Droit*, April 1, 1931). Some years before, an anonymous observer wrote that "The Tounsi sees the Gorni as a spoiled rich kid, a degenerate aristocrat, and a vain ignoramus" ("Pour la fusion," *La Justice*, April 8, 1927).

⁹ The selection only included works that were published and explicitly intended to preserve the memory of the past in Tunisia. As a result, certain categories were excluded, such as unpublished manuscripts (e.g., *Souvenirs livornais* by Victor Koskas), autobiographical works not centered on the colonial period (e.g., *Racines* by Claudia Giami or *Ricostruzione di un'anima* by Elia Boccara), and non-memorial publications (e.g., the political pamphlet *Ebrei italiani contro il razzismo* by Maurizio Valenzi, published in Tunis in 1938).

Author	Title	Publisher	Place	Date	Language
Bensasson Ferruccio	<i>Utopie perdute: per un domani all'altezza dei nostri sogni</i>	Aracne	Rome	2008	Italian
Boccara Elia	<i>Un ebreo livornese a Tunisi: affetti trovati e perduti tra Tunisi, Italia e Israele</i>	Giuntina	Florence	2016	Italian
Boccara Elia	<i>In fuga dall'inquisizione: ebrei portoghesi a Tunisi: due famiglie, quattro secoli di storia</i> ¹⁰	Giuntina	Florence	2011	Italian
Lévy Lionel	<i>La communauté juive de Livourne: le dernier des Livournais</i>	l'Harmattan	Paris	1996	French
Lumbroso Bruno	<i>Histoire de la famille Lumbroso</i>	Tipografia Arti Grafiche	Pomezia	2006	French
Nunez Giacomo	<i>Nostalgia di un livornese di Tunisi: vivere e parlare bagito nella comunità portoghese di Tunisi</i>	Salomone Belforte	Livorno	2013	Italian
Nunez Giacomo	<i>Delle navi e degli uomini, i portoghesi di Livorno: da Toledo a Livorno e a Tunisi</i>	Salomone Belforte	Livorno	2011	Italian
Spano Nadia	<i>Mabrúk: ricordi di un'inguaribile ottimista</i>	Editori Riuniti	Cagliari	2005	Italian
Valenzi Maurizio	<i>Confesso che mi sono divertito</i> ¹¹	Pironti	Neaples	2007	Italian

Despite its limited size, this production appears quite cohesive because of several common elements. The most evident is the predominance of the Italian language: Italian citizens shaped most of the public memory of the Livornese community by publishing their texts with Italian editors and addressing an Italian audience. There are, however, two exceptions. The first and most significant is Lionel Lévy's book, considered by the author as a part of a broader reconstruction of the Sephardic Jews' history in Tunisia and Europe, blending autobiography with historical analysis.¹² The second is the book of the Italian doctor Bruno Lumbroso. Though printed in Rome by an Italian publisher, it is written in French to reach the author's family, most of whom had emigrated to France. Overall, this production forms therefore a small yet distinct corpus of Italian-language literature.

The predominance of Italian authors is primarily because, since 1861, most Livornese Jews in Tunisia had chosen to take the Italian citizenship. This decision seemed a natural step for a population who came from Livorno and lived under the protection of the Tuscan consuls during the 18th and 19th centuries. From a juridical point of view, the newly established nation-state appeared as the logical continuation of the previous Capitulation system,¹³ which guaranteed civil rights and fiscal privileges to Europeans minorities in Muslim countries. For other Jews who had joined the community later, during the mid-19th century,

¹⁰ Translated into French and published as Elia Boccara, *La saga des séfarades portugais. Tunis: un havre pour les familles fuyant l'inquisition* (Paris: Tchou, 2012).

¹¹ Translated into French and published as Maurizio Valenzi, *J'avoue que je me suis amusé: itinéraire de Tunisi à Naples* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014).

¹² Lionel Lévy, *La nation juive portugaise. Livourne, Amsterdam, Tunis: 1591-1951* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999).

¹³ The capitulations were commercial treaties to regulate the presence of non-Muslims in the territories of the Ottoman empire, since the 16th century. This system allowed Christian or Jewish subjects (often merchants from European countries) the right to work and move, exempting them from some taxes. Moreover, capitulations protected non-Muslim subjects from the local justice as long as the crimes committed were not against other Muslims. Anh Nga Longva and Anne Sofie Roald, eds., *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation, Social, Economic, and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 52-54.

the connection to Italy was even stronger. In fact, most of them were political exiles involved in the *Risorgimento* movement, who arrived in Tunisia to promote Italian patriotism among fellow migrants and who already spoke Italian as their primary language.¹⁴ Two of them, Pompeo and Esther Sulema, even founded the first Italian school in 1831.¹⁵ Under the French Protectorate (1881-1956), the Livornese Jews were often considered the backbone of Italian presence in the country,¹⁶ because of their strong sense of patriotism and the central role played in local Italian institutions such as banks, hospitals, newspapers, the chamber of commerce, and Masonic lodges. The authors' biographies show strong family and cultural ties to the Italian community in Tunisia, shaped by the historical and legal context. The Italo-French Treaty of 1896, known as the "Conventions," established their legal status by applying *ius sanguinis* instead of *ius soli*: this meant that Italian citizenship was inherited from the father, regardless of birthplace. Consequently, although all the authors were born in Tunis under the French protectorate, they were Italian citizens from birth. Even Lionel Lévy, born as French citizen, grew up in an Italo-French family,¹⁷ illustrating the complex interplay of national identities in colonial Tunisia.

The authors' social background further highlights the strong cohesion that characterizes this memorial literature, since all of them were born into highly educated, middle-class families of the urban bourgeoisie of Tunis. The professions of their fathers—merchants, entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors and surgeons—effectively illustrate this social distinction: Nadia Gallico's parents even included Tunisia's first female pharmacist.¹⁸ This uncommon condition was the mirror of the wealthy socio-economic profile of the local Italian Jewish community, where 90% of the active population worked in commerce, entrepreneurship, or the liberal professions. In contrast, 80% of the broader Italian population was employed in agriculture and manufacturing¹⁹ while, during the same period, an estimated 30% of Tunisian Jews barely survived thanks to precarious jobs.²⁰ Growing up in this social environment had a profound impact on the authors' individual paths and professional trajectories. After proficient studies (often involving university studies), they all pursued successful careers as scientists, lawyers, journalists, professors, or prominent political figures.²¹ Eventually, this social and cultural profile shaped the memory of an entire generation.

¹⁴ Ersilio Michel, *Esuli italiani in Tunisia (1815-1861)* (Milan: Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale, 1941); Leila El Houssi, "The Qrāna Italian Jewish Community of Tunisia between XVIII-XIX Century: An Example of Transnational Dimension," *Studi Emigrazione/ Migration Studies* 49, no. 186 (2012): 361-369.

¹⁵ Filippo Petrucci, "Una comunità nella comunità: gli ebrei italiani a Tunisi," *Altreltalie: international journal of studies on the peoples of Italian origin in the world* 36-37 (2008): 173-188, 176.

¹⁶ Gaston Loth, *Le peuplement italien en Algérie et en Tunisie* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1905), 315.

¹⁷ Lionel Lévy, *La communauté juive de Livourne: le dernier des Livournais* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 35-37.

¹⁸ Nadia Spano, *Mabrúk: ricordi di un'inguaribile ottimista* (Cagliari: Editori Riuniti, 2005), 83.

¹⁹ Oppizzi, *Les Juifs italiens de Tunisie pendant le fascisme*, 42-43.

²⁰ "Le paupérisme juif à Tunis," *La Justice*, April 6, 1923.

²¹ Maurizio Valenzi was a senator and mayor of Naples in the 1980s, while Nadia Gallico Spano was one of the first women to be elected to the Constituent Assembly in 1946, helping to draw up the Constitution of the Italian Republic.

An Italian Memory, a Late Memory: Critical Aspects

Despite these common features, the linguistic homogeneity observed in the biographies appears noteworthy and somewhat unusual, for three main reasons. First, the Livornese population represented a cosmopolitan and transnational community,²² the only one, in the social mosaic of colonial Tunisia, without a distinctive language.²³ Instead, multilingualism was their defining characteristic. From the time they settled in Tunisia, Livornese merchants used Spanish and Portuguese alongside Hebrew and Arabic. Speaking different languages was not only a practical skill for international trade but also a mark of intellectual and social status. Among these languages, Italian and French gain a crucial importance during the 19th century. "My father spoke Italian and French to perfection, and Arabic too, including the literary version," recalled Giacomo Nunez: "I could at least understand French and Italian, but I also knew Sicilian dialect of Palermo, which I learned from my classmates at the school Regina Margherita."²⁴ Even official authorities noted this multilingualism, sometimes pointing out the preference for the French.²⁵ The community's ability to speak multiple languages became a status symbol, reflecting a cultural and social prominence.

Second, under the Protectorate (1881-1956), the influence of French culture steadily spread among Livornese Jews, many of whom adopted French citizenship, including some of the community leaders. This may seem counterintuitive, given the crucial role the Jewish-Italian minority played in developing of local Italian institutions. In fact, behind this public dimension, the private milieu was quite cosmopolitan: marriages between Italian and French Jews were common and many families were multilingual. Children—particularly boys—were often sent to French schools, which were seen as offering better career prospects. Numerous observers, both local and foreign, commented on this cultural permeability: in 1934, a fascist newspaper wrote that in Tunisia the Livornese Jews formed a "Jewish placenta" between French and Italian middle classes.²⁶ This French influence extended beyond culture: during the interwar period, between 1921 and 1940, about 320 Italian Jews of Tunisia (almost 10% of the population) applied for the French citizenship.²⁷ This shift got stronger after 1938, when the introduction of racial laws by Fascist Italy drove many Livornese Jews toward France. The younger generation was particularly touched. After Mussolini's antisemitic turn, most of Italian-Jewish families withdrew their children from Italian schools and, between 1938 and 1939, 83% of these children transferred to the French school system, rapidly

²² El Houssi, "The Qrāna Italian Jewish Community of Tunisia between XVIII-XIX Century."

²³ In fact, there was a dialect imported from Livorno, called Bagito or Bagitto, but its use was restricted to the private sphere and its public utility was severely limited. Furthermore, no interview shows a trace of this dialect among the generation born between the 1920' and the 1950', and no witness remembered hearing it in their family, not even by grandparents. Giacomo Nunez, *Nostalgia di un livornese di Tunisi: vivere e parlare bagito nella comunità portoghese di Tunisi* (Livorno: Salomone Belforte Editore, 2013), 27.

²⁴ Giacomo Nunez, *Delle navi e degli uomini, i portoghesi di Livorno: da Toledo a Livorno e a Tunisi* (Livorno: Salomone Belforte Editore, 2011), 57.

²⁵ For example, in June 1938, the director of Italian schools, Ruggero Roghi, complained that the Jewish students spoke better French than Italian. Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), Archivio Scuole - I Versamento (1936-1945), f. 128, report of June 24, 1938.

²⁶ "Aberrazioni," *La Stampa*, May 5, 1934.

²⁷ Oppizzi, *Les Juifs italiens de Tunisie pendant le fascisme*, 115-118.

accelerating the assimilation process.²⁸ Few years later, the colonial authorities eventually stripped the Italian population of their legal privileges and abolished the *ius sanguinis* principle: since June 1940, every child born from an Italian father became automatically French.

This process of cultural francization and social and legal integration into the local French population led to the third and most significant factor: postwar migration. In fact, the predominance of Italian language in the Livornese Jews' public memory appears even more surprising when considering that only a small portion of the community chose to repatriate to Italy. Quantitative analysis on the generation born between 1918 and 1940 shows that most Livornese Jews decided to migrate to France during the postwar years and after Tunisia's independence. Approximately 70% of Livornese Jews settled in France, 20% in Italy, and no more than 10% in other countries (including Israel). This pattern distinguishes the Livornese Jews from other Tunisian Jews, whose migration was evenly split between France and Israel, with around 50,000-60,000 people in each destination.²⁹ Although no dedicated studies have investigated Livornese Jews' specific path, some traces of it have emerged since the 1970s in broader research on the emigration of North African Jewish communities.³⁰

These migration patterns make the linguistic homogeneity observed in the biographies even more peculiar: despite a strong integration into French society, the public memory remains predominantly in the hands of Italian authors. Among them, three arrived in Italy in the 1940s (Maurizio Valenzi, Nadia Gallico and Ferruccio Bensasson) and two in the 1950s (Bruno Lumbroso and Elia Boccara). Only Lionel Levy moved directly in France, while Giacomo Nunez spent a few years in Italy before relocating to Paris and, after his retirement, to United-States. The authors' profiles reveal two others significant common points: the sex and the age. Except for Nadia Gallico, all authors are men. Additionally, all of them were born within a narrow timeframe, between 1909 and 1932, with a first cluster between 1909 and 1916 and a second between 1925 and 1932. Moreover, their publications appeared within an even shorter span, between 2006 and 2016, with the notable exception of Lionel Lévy. Interestingly, the first subgroup published their works within just four years (2005-2008).³¹ A simple timeline offers a clearer perspective on this distribution:

²⁸ From this point of view, it's significant that all the authors, except Lionel Lévy, began or even completed their schooling before the proclamation of racial laws, in an Italian institute.

²⁹ Sebag, *Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie*, 305; Jacques Taïeb, "Immigrés d'Afrique du Nord : Combien ? Quand ? Pourquoi ?," in *Terre d'exil, terre d'asile : migrations juives en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, ed. Colette Zytnicki (Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 2010), 148-154, 151.

³⁰ In her quantitative investigation about Jewish immigration from North Africa, Doris Bensimon found that Italian was spoken by 56% of adults from Tunisia and by 44% of younger (among the immigrants from Algeria the proportion was of 14% and 19%, adults and younger respectively; among the Moroccans immigrants the proportion was of 20% and 11%, adults and younger respectively). Doris Bensimon, *L'Intégration des Juifs nord-africains en France* (La Haye: Mouton, 1972), 24.

³¹ No single political, social, or cultural reason fully explains this rise in publications. One possible catalyst is the 2000-2016 book series on the history and memory of Italians in Tunisia, produced through a partnership between the Italian embassy in Tunis and local editor Finzi. This initiative may have helped to trigger a new wave of memorial writing. <http://www.ilcorriereditunisi.it/default.asp?id=41&mnu=41>, Accessed February 2, 2025.

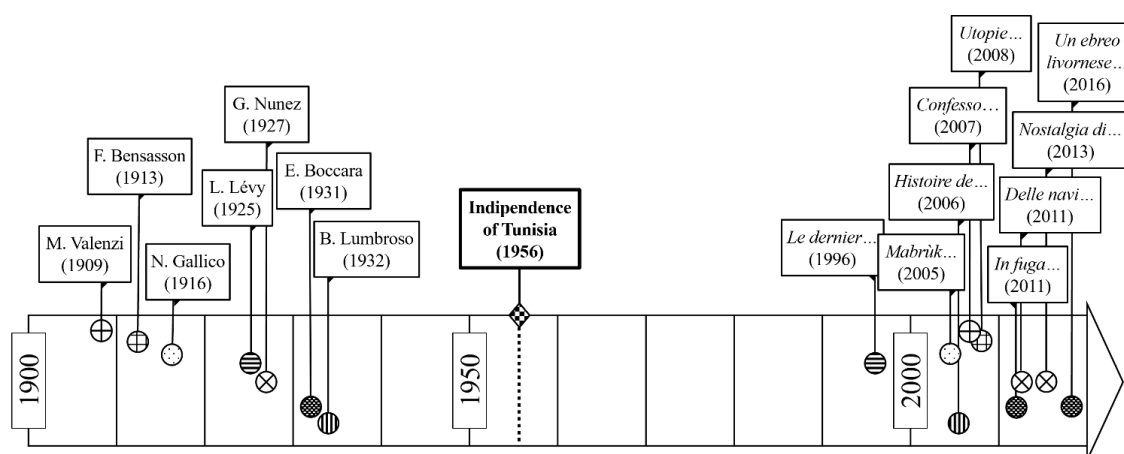


Fig. 1. Timeframe of authors' biographies and publications (each book has the same symbol of its author).

Hence, the diachronic analysis of the memorial production reveals a significantly delayed memory, shaped decades after Tunisia's independence and the subsequent postcolonial migration. This delay is even more striking when compared to the elaboration of Tunisian Jews' public memory, which began early, during the emigration process itself. Instead, in the case of the Livornese community, historical events and personal perspectives were fixed in their definitive form nearly half a century after the major transformations that reshaped Tunisia and its colonial society, at the end of a long process of personal and collective rethinking. A closer look at the individual trajectories supports this observation. All of them wrote their book between the ages of 70 and 90: the "youngest," Bruno Lumbroso and Lionel Levy, were 74 and 71 years old, while the eldest, Ferruccio Bensasson and Maurizio Valenzi, were 95 and 98, respectively. What emerges is a generation of intellectuals and professionals (although none were professional historians)³² which began writing their memories at the end of their lives, to pass on their legacy after having achieved most of their personal and professional aspirations. So, in the absence of historiographical or sociological studies, the memory of the Livornese community has been transmitted mainly by its former members, through first-person accounts and autobiographical publications. This body of work, however, presents a challenge for historical research. While it provides a coherent narrative source, it also appears as a hybrid genre, blending historical facts with personal storytelling and self-representation. Shaped by an urgency to preserve a fading cultural heritage, it prioritizes safeguarding memory over rigorous selection or analysis. Consequently, this literature is more focused on documentation and transmission than on contributing to a broader, critical historiographical debate.

³² Lionel Levy is maybe the only exception, although he began studying history after his retirement in 1991, earning a doctorate at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris in his late years.

Between Jewish Remembrance and Italian Oblivion

Only a small minority of emigrants—those repatriated to Italy after World War II—produced almost all the public memory about the old community, while most of the population, who moved to France or Israel, remained largely silent. Where does this imbalance come from? The answer lies at the intersection of two dynamics linked to migration and the interpretation of the colonial past.

The first factor is the North African Jewish diaspora between the 1940s and 1960s, that followed the establishment of Israel and decolonization. During this period, the emigration of several thousand Livornese Jews from Tunisia to France joined larger waves of Jewish emigration from the Maghreb: approximately 120,000 from Algeria, 65,000 from Tunisia, and 55,000 from Morocco, totaling 240,000 people relocating to the ex-metropole.³³ Some were already French citizens, while others retained their previous status, yet none came directly from Livorno or Italy. As a result, the Italian-Jewish minority was absorbed into this broader demographic shift and, from the perspective of French and Israeli historians, was incorporated into a larger Jewish historical narrative. From the late 19th century, France's colonial expansion and the establishment of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) school network across the Mediterranean fueled growing interest in the history of North African Jews. Local intellectuals such as Abraham Cahen in Algeria, David Cazès in Tunisia, and Nahoum Slouschz in Morocco, along with AIU teachers and rabbis,³⁴ played a key role in shaping a North African Jewish historiography, promoting a new age of studies of their communities. The "great uprooting"³⁵ during decolonization of Arab countries did not slow this process. Instead, this process of migration and resettlement stimulated a strong demand for history among new generations seeking to reconnect with their roots. In both France and Israel, this renewed interest led to a surge of publications from the 1970s onward, often written by those who had lived through the migration themselves. The work of historians like André Chouraqui, Paul Sebag, Richard Ayoun, Doris Bensimon, Claude Tapia, Colette Zytnicki³⁶ reshaped the knowledge of Maghrebi Jewish history. As Ewa Tartakowsky

³³ Taïeb, "Immigrés d'Afrique du Nord: Combien? Quand? Pourquoi?", 149-151.

³⁴ Colette Zytnicki, *Les Juifs du Maghreb: naissance d'une historiographie coloniale* (Paris: PUPS, 2011), 344.

³⁵ Georges Bensoussan, *Juifs en pays arabes: le grand déracinement, 1850-1975* (Paris: Tallandier, 2012).

³⁶ I cite as examples, in a chronological order: Paul Sebag and Robert Attal, *La hara de Tunis: l'évolution d'un ghetto nord-africain* (Paris: Presses Univ. de France, 1959); André Chouraqui, *La saga des Juifs en Afrique du Nord* (Paris: Hachette, 1972); Bensimon, *L'Intégration des Juifs nord-africains en France*; Michel Abitbol, *Judaïsme d'Afrique du Nord aux XIXe-XXe siècles: histoire, société et culture* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1980); Richard Ayoun, Bernard Cohen, and Gérard Nahon, *Les Juifs d'Algérie, deux mille ans d'histoire* (Paris: J.C. Lattès, 1982); Robert Attal, *Bibliographie annotée sur les Juifs d'Afrique du Nord. 1974-1979* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1983); Ayoun, "Les Juifs livournais en Afrique du Nord"; Claude Tapia, *Les Juifs sépharades en France (1965-1985): études psychosociologiques et historiques* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986); Sergio Della Pergola and Doris Bensimon, "Structures socio-démographiques de la population juive originaire d'Afrique du Nord," in *Les Juifs du Maghreb: diasporas contemporaines*, eds. Jean-Claude Lasry and Claude Tapia (Paris; Montréal: L'Harmattan; Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1989); Jean-Claude Lasry e Claude Tapia, *Les Juifs du Maghreb: diasporas contemporaines* (Paris; Montréal: L'Harmattan; Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1989); Sebag, *Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie*; Michael Menachem Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Patrick Simon and Claude Tapia, *Le Belleville des Juifs tunisiens* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1998); Denis Cohen-Tannoudji, *Entre Orient et Occident: Juifs et Musulmans en Tunisie* (Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 2007); Colette Zytnicki, *Les Juifs du Maghreb: naissance d'une historiographie coloniale* (Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2011); Colette Zytnicki, *Terre d'exil, terre d'asile*:

observed, North African Jews showed remarkable intellectual vitality, producing over 450 works that now form part of the French literary landscape.³⁷ From the 1960s to the 1990s, this historiography assigned Livornese Jews in Tunisia a distinct place: as a minority within the Jewish world, their trajectory was inscribed within the broader history of Tunisian and, on a transnational scale, of Maghrebi Jews. This approach introduced a subtle teleological perspective, prioritizing religious identity over national affiliation and assuming that an Italian Jew was, above all, a Jew. It also portrayed the establishment of the Portuguese Israelite Community in 1710 as an “unnatural” division, attributing tensions between Grana and Twansa to some “typical” traits of Livornese psychology, like the sense of honor, the arrogance, and “an air of superiority”³⁸ towards local Jews. From this perspective, assimilation to France through education and language was seen as a natural process, leading both groups to merge into French society: the 1944 dissolution of the Portuguese Israelite Community—imposed by colonial authorities to cut Italian influence—appeared as the natural outcome of this fusion. The convergent migration path to France and subsequent integration into the same environment further reinforced the idea of an inevitable socio-cultural unification. In essence, Livornese memory was absorbed into the broader memory of Tunisian Jews in France: nowadays, it is recalled in conferences, ceremonies, and collective works organized by Jewish associations often linked to the former Tunisian community, such as the *Société d'Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie* (SHJT) and the *Cercle de Généalogie Juif* (CGJ).³⁹ The second dynamic affecting the memory process was the repatriation of Italians from Africa during and after World War II, which involved settlers from the Italian empire (Libya, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia), but also civilians from territories under the control of another colonial power (like Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco). Repatriations began during the war after the fall of Italian East Africa (AOI), with about 30,000⁴⁰ people returning to Italy, and continued after the war as Libya's independence disrupted the presence of some 108,000 Italians living there. The decolonization of North Africa dismantled all the remained Italian communities (about 180,000 people in 1940),⁴¹ often established in foreign colonies. Consequently, Livornese Jews of Tunisia found themselves involved (and confused) in this chaotic return, which the new Italian republic struggled to manage due to logistical and political reasons.⁴² The ambiguous legal status of Italians arriving from Tunisia—neither military refugees nor prisoners of war, nor settlers from Italian colonies—left them in a

migrations juives en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles (Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 2010); Benjamin Stora, *Les trois exils: Juifs d'Algérie* (Paris: Pluriel, 2011); Bensoussan, *Juifs en pays arabes*; Albert-Armand Maarek and Michel Abitbol, *Les juifs de Tunisie entre 1857 et 1958. Histoire d'une émancipation* (Paris: Éditions Glyphe, 2014).

³⁷ Ewa Tartakowsky, *Les Juifs et le Maghreb. Fonctions sociales d'une littérature d'exil* (Tours: Presses universitaires François Rabelais, 2016).

³⁸ “Grana et Twansa,” *Paix et Droit*, April 1, 1931.

³⁹ For example, in 2016 a remarkable work of transcription and organization of all the marriage records of the Portuguese Israelite Community has been accomplished by the “Tunisian” section of the Cercle de Généalogie Juive (CGJ), a Jewish genealogy group located in France. The official purpose was “to perpetuate the memory of a community”: Gilles Boulou and Alain Nedjar, *La communauté juive portugaise de Tunis dite livournaise ou Grana: Registres matrimoniaux* (Cercle de généalogie juive, 2016).

⁴⁰ Romain Rainero, “Rapatriés et réfugiés italiens: un grand problème historique méconnu,” in *L'Europe retrouvée: les migrations de la décolonisation*, eds. Jean-Louis Miège and Colette Dubois (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), 30.

⁴¹ Miège and Dubois, *L'Europe retrouvée*, 15.

⁴² Alessandra Vigo, *Rimpatriati d'Africa: assistenza, associazioni e reintegro tra storia e memoria (1939-1952)* (Padova: Scripta, 2016); Giacomo Canepa, *Riabilitare gli italiani. Politiche dell'assistenza post-bellica e costruzione della cittadinanza* (Milan: Viella, 2024).

juridical limbo.⁴³ Throughout the 1950s, they fought to obtain the same economic support and professional reintegration measures provided to other categories. Many spent years in refugee camps, enduring conditions of overcrowding and isolation. Family losses, separations, material hardship, and the struggle to rebuild their lives in their new homeland linked these repatriations to other classic postcolonial experiences, such as the return of the “pieds noirs” from French Algeria.⁴⁴ This traumatic return was soon complicated by the fact that, in Italy more than in France, refugees from Africa faced isolation and the indifference of public institutions, society, and the academic community. Post-war Italian society was marked by the loss of colonies imposed by peace treaties, which hindered the development of a critical awareness regarding imperialism and colonial violence in Italy’s former dominions.⁴⁵ While other colonial nations like Britain and France faced hard decolonization processes that challenged both institutions and national identities, Italy largely bypassed this historical turn, keeping old colonial paradigm and clichés, such as the notion of the “good Italian” dedicated to civilizing colonial populations.⁴⁶ Due to this reluctance to confront the colonial past, historiographical reflection on Italian imperialism developed slowly and late. In this process, Italian communities in foreign colonies suffered a double marginalization: they were reminders of a colonial past to forget and, at the same time, “leftovers” from non-Italian colonies. With few notable exceptions,⁴⁷ such as Romain Rainero’s research,⁴⁸ the Italians of Tunisia remained largely absent from colonial historiography until the 1990s. Only after this decade they did become a historical subject, stimulating new studies⁴⁹ and various memorial projects.⁵⁰

Consequently, unlike other nationals who emigrated to France, Livornese Jews from Tunisia who fled to Italy between 1943 and 1970 were placed in a memorial “twilight zone,” lacking official recognition from either the state or society. As their collective bonds gradually weakened, their identities became unclear: were they Italians from Tunisia, Italians like others, Italian Jews, or Italian Jews from Tunisia? Unlike North African Jews who migrated to France, the Italians repatriated from Tunisia did not develop a strong collective sense of belonging based on shared origins or diasporic awareness. This was evident in a 2000 study

⁴³ Pamela Ballinger defined it “a twilight zone between colonial subjects and citizens.” Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made*, 3.

⁴⁴ Michèle Baussant, *Pieds noirs, mémoires d'exil* (Paris: Stock, 2002).

⁴⁵ Christopher Seton-Watson, “Italy’s Imperial Hangover,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 15, no. 1 (1980): 169-179.

⁴⁶ Audenino, *La casa perduta*, 117-118.

⁴⁷ Nullo Pasotti, *Italiani e Italia in Tunisia: dalle origini al 1970* (Milan: Finzi, 1970); Janice Alberti Russel, “The Italian community in Tunisia, 1861-1961. A viable minority” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1977); Juliette Bessis, *La Méditerranée fasciste*.

⁴⁸ Romain Rainero, *La rivendicazione fascista sulla Tunisia* (Milan: Marzorati, 1978); Romain Rainero, “Presenza culturale e scuole italiane in Tunisia negli anni '30,” in *Il vincolo culturale tra Italia e Francia negli anni Trenta e Quaranta*, eds. Jean Baptiste Duroselle and Enrico Serra (Milan: Angeli, 1986), 220-233.

⁴⁹ Michele Brondino, *La stampa italiana in Tunisia: storia e società, 1838-1956* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1998); Giovanna Gianturco and Claudia Zaccai, *Italiani in Tunisia: passato e presente di un'emigrazione* (Milan: Guerini scientifica, 2004); Mark Irvan Choate, “Identity Politics and Political Perception in the European Settlement of Tunisia: The French Colony versus the Italian Colony,” *French Colonial History* 8, no. 1 (2007): 97-109; Daniela Melfa, *Migrando a sud: coloni italiani in Tunisia (1881-1939)* (Rome: Aracne, 2008).

⁵⁰ Notably, a project has been launched in 2000 by the Italian embassy of Tunis with the Dante Alighieri society, which has resulted in seven collective volumes published between 2000 and 2016, covering various aspects of the former Italian community.

involving 100 individuals who arrived in Italy from Tunisia in the after war.⁵¹ The survey revealed that most of them struggled to define their identities after the repatriation. Moreover, many tended to claim a “pure” Italian identity and to obscure their past, as if their Tunisian origin were a source of shame.⁵² Despite having lived in Tunisia for over 20 years (51% of those surveyed) and having parents born there (around 35%), almost none of the migrants identified himself as “Italian-Tunisian.”

Lack of a strong identity, historiographic void, and social oblivion left Livornese Jews repatriated to Italy seeking memory through autobiographical literature. The authors often present their works in this context, emphasizing the need to pass on their memories to future generations and to counter the silence surrounding their history. “This book is like a bottle in the sea,” Elia Boccara states at the end of his book, “in the hope that some of the sons, nephews or grandchildren who descend from our families will become aware of a page of our past often ignored.”⁵³ Similarly, Giacomo Nunez proudly evoke the history of his family, inviting his descendants to carry on their legacy: “It’s been a magnificent adventure, despite the price we’ve had to pay, and it will remain fundamental for at least a part of us. This feeling is destined to carry on in the future, if some of our sons and grandsons, aware of this history, claim it with pride.”⁵⁴ Bruno Lumbroso explicitly dedicates his efforts to his grandchildren: “I’m writing our family history for Léa, Diane, Philippe and Ilan, and the others who will come. They will read it when they are 12-14.”⁵⁵ This migration and memorial path offer insights into the peculiar patterns observed in the corpus of publications. It highlights the imbalance between Italy and France and explains the considerable delay between events occurred in Tunisia and the emergence of autobiographies. While Tunisian Jews in France have engaged in a vibrant historical and intellectual reflection on their past since the 1960s, with key figures like Albert Memmi and Paul Sebag,⁵⁶ Livornese Jews missed this turn with both the Italian and Jewish historiography. The genesis of their memorial production illuminates its content and style, shaped by the authors’ social profiles, their positions within colonial society, and their need to assert a solid identity and distinctive trajectory, both in relation to Tunisian Jews and other Italian immigrants.

Describing the Colonial Time: Family, Community, and Society

At first glance, this literary corpus seems to present two very different approaches to memorializing the past: family memories and political memories. The first type is predominant in the books, but also among the other minor texts produced by the same

⁵¹ Marinette Pendola, “Fra memoria e oblio. Inchiesta sugli Italo-tunisini residenti in Italia,” *Il Corriere di Tunisi* (*Corriere Eurafrica*), April 20, 2000, 5.

⁵² In the report, 54% of witnesses claimed to have married a native Italian, and only 38% an Italian of Tunisia. Pendola.

⁵³ Boccara, *La saga des séfarades portugais*, 490.

⁵⁴ Nunez, *Delle navi e degli uomini, i portoghesi di Livorno*, 25.

⁵⁵ Bruno Lumbroso, *Histoire de la famille Lumbroso* (Pomezia: Tipografia Arti Grafiche, 2006), 5.

⁵⁶ Sebag and Attal, *La hara de Tunis*; Sebag, *Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie*; Paul Sebag, *Les noms des juifs de Tunisie: origines et significations* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 2002); Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1957); Albert Memmi, *Portrait d’un Juif* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962); Albert Memmi, *La statue de sel*, Éd. rev. et corr (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

authors, such as papers, articles, reviews, internet posts helping circulate memory in the public space. Family memory focuses on retracing a collective history, blending ⁵⁷ This genealogical focus aims to legitimize the Livornese community's existence and position it as an independent actor of the history of Tunisian Judaism. Tracing history back to the late Middle Ages serves two purposes: it establishes a "noble" heritage, as Spanish Jews were often prominent figures in royal courts, and presents a coherent historical path that had been way more complex and sometimes contradictory. It also identifies a founding moment in the persecutions initiated by the Catholic Kings in 1492, which led to forced conversions, trials, and expulsions in collaboration with the Spanish Inquisition. This persecution caused a diaspora across the Mediterranean, yet the autobiographies frequently insist on the transmission of a common Iberian heritage. Elia Boccara, for example, referred to "the Portuguese community, symbol of the ancient history of essence of old families who had escaped the Inquisitions of Spain and Portugal, who still morally carried the [honor], that nobility that had never left them inside, source of much misunderstanding."⁵⁸ Many narratives also emphasize the arrival of Sephardic Jews in Livorno and their successful integration into the city, providing a strong identity and an honored place. At the end of the 16th century, Livorno attracted many Spanish and Portuguese Jews due to the policies of the Grand Dukes of Tuscany, who granted Jewish merchants unprecedented economic and legal privileges. This topic subtly tends to the Livornese community, presenting it as an unchanging historical entity. Giacomo Nunez remarked on his ancestors' remarkable ability to endure: "The most astounding thing is without a doubt their ability to survive, to remain the same, stubbornly, despite the dangers met anywhere."⁵⁹ The perceived continuity between Al-Andalus and colonial Tunisia creates a sense of stability. As Cherry notes, communities often attribute qualities to their origins, such as social homogeneity and consensual relations among members. This perception leads to an implicit positive evaluation of the community as natural and meaningful, thus "self-legitimized."⁶⁰ In reality, however, very few families could genuinely claim Iberian descent by the early 20th century; many had migrated to Tunisia more recently from Italy or other European nations.

Other than a common origin, the memorial literature portrays the Livornese Jewish community as a dynamic social actor, well distinguished from local Jews as well as other Italian immigrations. "The adjective 'Livornese' placed you," said Elia Boccara:

First and foremost, in relation to other Italians, who were generally Sicilians, Calabrians or Sardinians, and in any case Catholics. [...] Secondly, it distinguished us from the indigenous Jews: we, the Livornese, were not Tunisian Jews. It was very important, then: from the moment I was born, I heard "us" referred to as "us the Livornese," because that was the most important thing.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Interview with Giacomo Nunez, by the author, October 25, 2014.

⁵⁸ Elia Boccara, *In fuga dall'inquisizione: ebrei portoghesi a Tunisi: due famiglie, quattro secoli di storia* (Florence: Giuntina, 2011), 368.

⁵⁹ Nunez, *Delle navi e degli uomini, i portoghesi di Livorno*, 23.

⁶⁰ Cherry Schrecker, *La communauté: histoire critique d'un concept dans la sociologie anglo-saxonne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), 14.

⁶¹ Interview with Elia Boccara, by the author, December 27, 2013.

If the authors frequently emphasize their Italian identity,⁶² they insist above all on their connection to the European world, which underscores their distance from the local population. This perspective often implies a pattern of prejudices inherited from the colonial era, echoing in oral interview too.⁶³ All the attention is focused on colonial society, on its spaces, its codes, its routine, its sociability: the social background of the urban bourgeoisie of Tunis. Recent research indicates that most Italian Jews lived in the European district, centered around Avenue Jules Ferry and Avenue de Paris,⁶⁴ and the memorial geography in the autobiographies confirms this spatial distribution.⁶⁵ Another area often mentioned in autobiographical literature is the seaside district extending from northern Tunis to the Sidi Bou Said promontory, encompassing towns like La Goulette, Carthage, Le Kram, and La Marsa. Many European bourgeois families had holiday homes here, and residing in this area became a status symbol and a marker of affiliation with colonial society. Authors who spent their childhoods between Tunis and its nearby beaches depict this region as a maritime Eden, almost exclusively inhabited by Livornese Jews, resembling a utopian, family-oriented community. One author recalls that “at Le Kram, the whole neighborhood was ours, it was like the Finzi-Contini garden. Every summer we lived there with our families: there were only our cousins, beautiful villas, we went to everyone’s house, we breathed an atmosphere of conviviality.”⁶⁶

An Invisible World?

In stark contrast to the meticulous description of their social milieu, the world of the colonized, which comprised 90% of Tunisia's population, is portrayed as a shadowy, distant reality, colored by colonial stereotypes. Interactions with Tunisians, referred to as “Arabs” (a term used by colonial authorities to deny their national identity) are often described as friendly, but are framed within a context of structural inequality described as normal or even obvious. For example, one author notes: “our relations with the Arab population of Le Kram were cordial: actually, they worked for us.”⁶⁷ While some memoirs criticize discrimination, most present an apologetic view of colonialism as a peaceful existence. The separation between colonizers and the colonized appears unproblematic and natural. Authors use phrases like “the Arabs were like wallpaper,” “Tunisians were part of a distant background,” or “were part of the landscape, like dates or prickly pears.”⁶⁸ The Tunisians feel almost invisibles, as one author notes: “The Arabs: one might wonder where and who they were. In

⁶² Elia Boccara, *Un ebreo livornese a Tunisi: affetti trovati e perduti tra Tunisi, Italia e Israele* (Florence: Giuntina, 2016), 9.

⁶³ Like during the interview with Renato Pariente, by the author, July 13, 2018: INTERVIEWER: You said you were part of the Jewish world in postwar Tunisia... RESPONDENT: Not just “Jewish,” okay? We had nothing to do with Tunisian Jews. Don’t call us “the Jews”... but Italian Jews.

⁶⁴ Oppizzi, *Les Juifs italiens de Tunisie pendant le fascisme*, 86.

⁶⁵ Nunez, *Delle navi e degli uomini, i portoghesi di Livorno*, 123.

⁶⁶ Interview with Bruno Lumbroso, by the author, February 15, 2016.

⁶⁷ Nunez, *Delle navi e degli uomini, i portoghesi di Livorno*, 161.

⁶⁸ Boccara, *Un ebreo livornese a Tunisi*, 20.

the European district, we did not see them much.”⁶⁹ Interviews suggested that this vision was shared among Livornese Jews’ community:

We *really were* at home! It was our home, it was our town, it was our street... it was very small, Tunis: we crossed the street, there was a café, and then “*salut*” [hello], “*bonjour*” [good morning], “*c’est la cousine de machin...*” [she’s his cousin], “*c’est le frère de truc...*” [he is his brother]. It was just us! The others [the Arabs] were in the Arab district.⁷⁰

This perspective aligns with the “moral economy of domination”⁷¹ established by colonizers. Participation in colonial mechanisms appears in descriptions of workplaces, where authors often recall the employ of Arab workers in a subordinate relationship.⁷² Similarly, in the family sphere, descriptions of domestic staff reveal a clear hierarchy based on ethnicity and religion: typically, Italian (or even Tuscan) nannies held the highest status, while Arab or Jewish-Tunisian servants and housemaids occupied the lowest levels, as illustrated by Lionel Levy.

In my childhood, and up until the war, many servants shared our lives. Their hierarchy followed the subtle division of the country into opposing nations and religions. I mentioned the faithful Isola, an unalterable piece of Tuscany in a barbarian land [...]. There was Rahmin, a Tunisian Jew still wearing the traditional baggy pants, the *sarwal*, and the *fez*, whose only language was Judeo-Arabic and whom I understood only through his smiles and gestures of affection. An irreplaceable factotum, he had served my father's grandparents, whom he had witnessed being born. I’m told that, as was customary for servants in the great Tunisian houses, he slept on a mattress outside his masters’ door.⁷³

The contradictions of colonialism became evident only at the end of the Protectorate, as Tunisian protests grew, and independence approached. However, this realization often triggered surprise rather than embarrassment: “we had to wait until the Liberation and the demonstrations organized by the nationalists to find out that they [Tunisians] were quite numerous. When I saw them parading after 1945, clapping their hands vigorously, I realized that we were not at home. They were so many, and they were so determined.”⁷⁴ This late awareness, evoked also by Marinette Pendola in its works on Italian of Tunisia,⁷⁵ created a deep sense of displacement. One interviewee recalled:

One day, we were at the beach: well, the beach was full of people, and they were all Tunisians. That day, I knew it was over. That’s it. I used to say “this is my beach” or

⁶⁹ Nunez, *Delle navi e degli uomini, i portoghesi di Livorno*, 131.

⁷⁰ Interview with Pierre Fiorentino, by the author, October 19, 2017.

⁷¹ Didier Fassin, “Moral Economies Revisited,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 64, no. 6 (2009): 1237-1266.

⁷² Nunez, *Nostalgia di un livornese di Tunisi*, 65-66.

⁷³ Lévy, *La communauté juive de Livourne*, 65.

⁷⁴ Nunez, *Delle navi e degli uomini, i portoghesi di Livorno*, 131.

⁷⁵ Marinette Pendola, *La riva lontana* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2000), 17-18.

“this is my town.” And then comes a moment when things suddenly turn around: and you’re no longer at home.⁷⁶

This euro-centric perspective may seem self-evident: after all, it can be founded in the public memory of the most part of ancient settlers, like the “pieds noirs” in Algeria and the Italians of Libya. The myth of the colonial society as a pacific and cosmopolitan world is also a common topic in the collective memory of many minorities, such as the Italians of Egypt⁷⁷ or the Jews of Libya.⁷⁸ Yet, when comparing autobiographical books from the 2000s with opinions expressed by Livornese Jews in the aftermath of Tunisia’s independence,⁷⁹ we realized that this position was not so widespread at the time.

In fact, many of them openly criticized colonial society, describing it as superficial, racist, and, particularly from women’s perspectives, misogynistic. They also condemned the social marginalization of Tunisians:

It was a very closed environment, and I didn't realize it at the time, because for me that was all my world, we all lived inside it, the rest didn't exist [...]. What I regret now, from that period, is that total break with the Arabs, essentially, because we lived in an Arab country after all, but without participating in anything, neither in their way of life, nor in their way of thinking, nor in their philosophy, nor in their culture, nothing.⁸⁰

Thus, it appears that the colonizers' perspective was neither the only viewpoint nor a neutral or “natural” opinion. Its hegemony did not emerge instantly but developed gradually, through a historical trajectory between the 1950s and the 2000s. Analysis of written and oral sources suggests that this process of memory building began after the social contestation of the 1950s and the disillusionment with Habib Bourguiba’s nationalist policies in the aftermath of independence. The Arabization of society promoted by the new governments and the gradual marginalization of the European population—culminating in the mass exodus of Italians, French, and Tunisian Jews—caused deep traumas, leading to a more indulgent perception of the past. Several interviewees recalled the loss of their homes, the abrupt liquidation of their possessions, and their sudden departure with only a few belongings. Others mentioned cases of depression or even total amnesia which persisted for years. The urge to forget was particularly evident in the account of one witness, whose mother decided to tear up all her photographs before leaving home.⁸¹ Over time, a process of selective memory took place, crystallizing, many decades later, a more peaceful image of the Livornese community and the colonial past. This reinterpretation was also influenced by the singular position occupied by Italian immigrants within the colonial hierarchy under the French protectorate, between

⁷⁶ Interview with Pierre Fiorentino, by the author, October 19, 2017.

⁷⁷ Marta Petricoli, *Oltre il mito. L'Egitto degli italiani (1917-1947)* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2007).

⁷⁸ Piera Rossetto, *Juifs de Libye: constellations de mémoires* (Arcidosso: Effigi, 2023).

⁷⁹ The result of a field study by anthropologist Michèle Salmona (1931-2019), whose transcriptions were kindly donated by Mr. Mario Bensasson.

⁸⁰ Interview with Pierre Lumbroso, by Michèle Salmona, 1963.

⁸¹ Interview with Aldo Sitbon, by the author, February 19, 2020.

colonizers and colonized. This condition of “non-dominant allogeous”⁸² was quite problematic, as Italian emigrants were viewed as a threat by the colonial authorities. However, after independence, this ambiguous status helped Italians redefining themselves as victims of the colonial regime. This narrative was particularly compelling for the Grana, who suffered from dual Italian and Jewish identities: they faced Mussolini’s racial laws in 1938, antisemitic persecution by Vichy during the war, Nazi threats during the Axis occupation, and, after 1943, expulsions by the French as enemies. These experiences left deep marks on public memory, also because all the authors lived the persecutions and the war as children. They vividly recall the impact of racial laws, the imprisonment of parents, and the hostility of both Vichy and German authorities. This focus on victimhood overshadowed their involvement in the colonial system and neglected the fact that some of these refugees had been also agents (and not only the victims) of conflicting nationalisms.

An Alternative Memory, between Politics and Anticolonialism

Within the corpus of memorial text analyzed, a second subset offers a very different vision of the colonial past. The books of Ferruccio Bensasson, Nadia Gallico and Maurizio Valenzi are characterized by an even greater uniformity than the family memories: they are published in a very short span of four years (2005-2008), they result from a life spent in political action, and their authors are tied together by deep familial and ideological connections.

The common denominator of the authors is their active participation in the anti-fascist and anti-colonial movements since the 1930s, in the ranks of the Tunisian Communist Party (PCT). The aim of these autobiographical accounts is to transmit a political legacy through personal narratives that highlight an exemplary path. This intent shapes their style and themes, setting aside topics common in other memoirs, such as the Livornese community, Sephardic identity, ancestral roots, and family ties. Instead, identity centers on the party, defined by political rather than religious or national affiliations. This kind of public memory challenges the tendency to essentialize the Livornese community and to idealize its coherence, because the authors often emphasize internal conflicts cracking the unity of their religious or national cluster: personal rivalries, social hierarchies, political divides, and family tensions between children and parents. The antifascists are at the same time the witnesses and the catalysts of these disputes because their political choice clashed with family values and the social norm of the colonial system. For instance, when Ferruccio Bensasson led a strike in Tunis, he became a sort of pariah among the European middle class:

The news of my presence at the head of two thousand tram drivers immediately made the rounds of bourgeois houses, deformed and magnified as it passed from mouth to mouth. All the doors were slammed in my face. Even the Bessis, who said: “You’ll understand! Putting at the head of a gang of strikers! It is a challenge against society! We cannot run the risk of being compromised by its head blows!” Above all,

⁸² Miège and Dubois, *L’Europe retrouvée*, 14.

Maurizio became the black beast, the instigator of that hybrid group of spoiled children lent to the Bolshevik revolution.⁸³

The anti-colonialist perspective of militant memories valorizes inter-community sociability and crossed solidarities. Despite personal and familial ties among Italian Jewish militants, relationships with Muslim Tunisians, Tunisian Jews, and other workers were forged without regard to race, class, or nationality. Political involvement in the PCT helped bridge the gap between colonizers and colonized, as illustrated in a chapter from Maurizio Valenzi's book.

At the first PCT meeting I met my cousin Silvano Bensasson and Michelino Rossi. [...] We met Arab comrades from the port, Italian tram drivers, and French teachers. The language used in the debate is Arabic, and when we couldn't make ourselves understood, we asked for translations. The atmosphere of solidarity and equality thrill us, it's unlike anything else.⁸⁴

This new awareness of the importance of the Tunisian world also impacted social dynamics at home. For example, Nadia Gallico and her parents build a strong relationship of mutual respect with the *factotum* Ad bel Kader, who became almost a family member and provides a crucial help during the war period, when he refuses to collaborate with the Vichy authorities in their hunt against Jews and anti-fascists.⁸⁵ The new sociability also affected the choice of spouse, which became more flexible: many militants marrying fellow activists, including Tunisian Jews or even non-Jews, breaking a social taboo within the Livornese community. In the political corpus of memorial texts, colonial domination is depicted not as a natural or a neutral background, but as a violent and oppressive system. In this perspective, the anti-colonialist fight is assumed with pride: instead of highlighting differences with other Jews in Tunisia, authors prefer to emphasize the social and political divisions among Italians and the colonial system in general. The struggle against local representatives of the Fascist regime during the interwar period is a key theme in these memoirs. Even the militants' early departure for Italy during the war, another central topic in their autobiographies, was driven by political commitment and the desire to continuing the anti-fascist fight during the war after Tunis's liberation in May 1943.

Conclusions

The Livornese Jews' relation with the memory of the colonial past in Tunisia is part of a broader European issue: the reassessment of colonial history in European societies. In both France and Italy, immigrants from former empires embody the legacy of a defeat: the collapse of colonial system and the failure of European nations to maintain a presence in independent countries as agents of modernization. Witnesses and symbols of this uncomfortable memory, they experienced varying degrees of invisibility, mistrust, and oblivion. In Italy, as reminded

⁸³ Ferruccio Bensasson, *Utopie perdute: per un domani all'altezza dei nostri sogni* (Rome: Aracne, 2008), 107.

⁸⁴ Maurizio Valenzi, *Confesso che mi sono divertito* (Naples: Pironti, 2007), 26.

⁸⁵ Spano, *Mabrúk*, 104.

by Labanca,⁸⁶ even historiography ignored their experience for a long time, neglecting the fact that Italy's ultimate imperial goal was demographic colonialism, with settlers as its main actors. This lack of public memory, however, stimulated the parallel emergence of private narratives, which developed in a non-linear way, influenced by politics and by the historical events that occurred in the decades following the decolonization process.

For those who experienced this exodus, individual and collective memories often diverged from historical narratives. Examining the evolution of private memory among Livornese Jews highlights how the colonial past has been shaped and transmitted over time by its protagonists. At the same, it warns about the risks of excessive generalization in the study of colonial societies. Under the same label of "colonizers" (or even Italians or Jews) existed a heterogeneous population, established in the country at different times and through different waves, with countless geographical origin, complex social backgrounds, fluid national identities. The relation with the colonial power was never the same: the case study of Livornese Jews shows that a minority could be at the same time part of the colonial system and a victim of its contradictions, inside its logics and outside its benefits. Despite the significant uniformity of its authors, the memorial production discloses a wide range of sensibilities, perceptions, and choices toward the question of the colonial past and the collective identity. Under the common need to transmit a legacy to the new generations, emerge a multifaceted memory where religious, national and politic belonging combines in an original way.

Finally, the crossed analysis of autobiographical books and oral interviews reveals their mutual influences in shaping a collective narrative of the past. The publications reworked individual and collective knowledge and opinions that were already present and had become "common sense" among many former members of the Livornese community of Tunisia. On the other hand, these written memories spread memorial topics to a wider audience, contributing not only to preserving them, but also to consolidate common views and old clichés. This study, therefore, invites us to ponder the importance of memory stratification resulting from a never-ending crisscrossing of personal experience, social context, and historical contingencies, often marked by abrupt changes, upheavals, identity crises, and conflicts.

⁸⁶ Nicola Labanca, *Posti al sole: diari e memorie di vita e di lavoro dalle colonie d'Africa, Memorie* (Rovereto: Museo storico italiano della guerra, 2001).

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East or West?

Musrara Neighborhood and the Dynamics of Mizrahi-Palestinian-Ashkenazi Relations

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the history of the Musrara neighborhood in Jerusalem from its foundation to the period following the Six Day war, adopting the perspective of urban microhistory. Using Musrara as a lens of analysis makes it possible to highlight how the constant reconfiguration of Jerusalem's urban space reflects not only the social, political, and cultural dynamics of the region, but also the specific ways in which these processes acquired distinctive meanings within the boundaries of the neighborhood itself. Through oral history and direct testimonies, this article retraces the lives of Musrara's new Mizrahim residents against the backdrop of ethnic and socioeconomic discrimination and the Arab Israeli conflict, while also examining the development of a political consciousness among them.

Musrara was a Palestinian bourgeois neighborhood until 1948, a frontier zone of a marginalized Mizrahi subproletariat between 1948 and 1967, a theatre of war and social conflict, and eventually a concrete and symbolic hinge between East and West following the Six Day War. The transformation of urban space thus sheds light on the interaction between national conflict and the ethno-social question—two crucial aspects for a more analytically comprehensive historical reconstruction of Israel and Palestine, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and the different degrees of subalternity produced by social hierarchies and nationalism.

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Introduction

This article aims to analyze the history of the Musrara neighborhood in Jerusalem from its foundation to the period following the Six-Day War, adopting the perspective of urban microhistory. Using Musrara as a lens of analysis makes it possible to highlight how the constant reconfiguration of Jerusalem's urban space reflects not only the social, political and cultural dynamics of the region, but also the specific ways in which these processes acquired different meanings within the boundaries of the neighborhood itself.

Musrara is a neighborhood that has represented a symbol of the radical transformations that reshaped the territory of Jerusalem between the early and the late twentieth-century. This neighborhood carries with it the memory of extremely different stories, of lived experiences and life trajectories that are incompatible—if not openly conflicting—where the lives of entire families were overwhelmed by the events of history. If we were to observe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the history of Mizrahim¹ in Israel through a closer lens, this small neighborhood would prove to be a privileged site capable of revealing more than entire historical or sociological investigations might disclose.

This paper has therefore set itself several objectives: first, to analyze Palestinian Musrara before 1948 through the retrospective gaze of the Palestinian residents who were dispossessed; second, examine the conditions of marginality and hardship experienced by the new Mizrahi population that inhabited in Musrara between 1948 and 1967; and eventually, to explore the different perspectives of Musrara's residents following the Six-Day war and the reopening of the neighborhood's borders. In comparison with the analysis of Paola Caridi and of Moshé Naor and Abigail Jacobson—whose work I have extensively drawn upon in examining the case of Musrara—this article focuses on the perspectives of the Musrarians after the expansion of the city's boundaries and the new geographical position that the neighborhood assumed after 1967.

The dichotomy between East and West—that is, the gaze that the Musrara's Mizrahi inhabitants direct either toward Jewish Israeli society or toward Palestinian Arab culture—constitutes the central theme of this paper. These two diametrically opposed perspectives—which will be clearly presented in the final section of the article—reveal the directions undertaken by the process of reaffirming the political and cultural identity of the Mizrahim. The transformation of urban space therefore sheds light on the interaction between national conflict and ethno-social question—two crucial aspects for an analytically comprehensive historical reconstruction of Israel and Palestine, of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and of the multiple levels of subalternity produced by social hierarchies and nationalism.

From a methodological perspective, the article combines the microhistorical approach with the use of oral history. In his essay "Microstoria: due o tre cose che so di lei," Carlo Ginzburg argues that "every social configuration is the result of the interaction of countless individual

¹ Mizrahim are Jews in Israel whose origins lie in Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa. The term "Mizrahi", which means "Oriental" in Hebrew, refers to a socio-cultural and economic category, used to distinguish Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin from the Ashkenazi Jewish population originating from Europe.

strategies: an interweaving that only close observation makes it possible to reconstruct.”² Microhistory therefore represents an essential element for a historical reconstruction in which it is possible to identify phenomena, relations, transformations—as they take shape in a specific case—that reveal or suggest complex and, at the same time, broader dynamics. In the volume *Microstoria e storia globale*, Francesca Trivellato emphasizes the relationship between “abstraction and detail” and the role that microhistory plays within this dialectic.³ Referring to one of the founding figures of Italian microhistory—Giovanni Levi—the author argues that “microhistory seeks not to sacrifice knowledge of the individual element to generalization, but also not to renounce every form of abstraction: minimal clues or individual cases can be revealing of more general phenomena.”⁴ Microhistory, therefore, as it developed in Italy in the second half of the seventies, grounded its approach in the in-depth study of available sources, in research, and in the identification of what can be inferred and analytically reconstructed through the study of cases that had previously been ignored or discarded. Or, as Ginzburg writes in the 2019 afterword to *Il formaggio e i vermi*, it is “an analytical history built around the study of cases.”⁵ The same methodological approach has also been embraced internationally by the historian Natalie Zemon Davis, who identified the close study of specific cases—most famously in *The Return of Martin Guerre*—as an effective means of uncovering “the hidden world of peasant sentiment and aspiration.”⁶

In this case, the reconstruction of an urban microhistory was made possible using oral history. This essay presents interviews conducted with several leaders and members of the Israeli Black Panthers movement—Reuven Abergel, Charlie Layani, and Eliezer Abergel—who lived in the Musrara neighborhood. These interviews enrich our understanding of the neighborhood’s history and transformations, as well as the perceptions, aspirations, and perspectives—at times divergent—of those who experienced it firsthand. Within the secondary literature on which I have relied, it is already possible to find direct testimonies and interviews, which I compared with those that I conducted myself. Oral history therefore represented a fundamental aspect of carrying out this historical research. From this perspective, it was not merely a useful supporting tool but assumed an autonomous value capable of offering a complex and diversified investigation. In *Voci della memoria*, Bruno Bonomo emphasizes the responsibility that historians bear when collecting the memories of historical actors through “an attitude capable of combining empathy and critical distance,” while seeking to give appropriate weight to the dimension of “individual experience and subjectivity.”⁷

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author’s own. Carlo Ginzburg, “Microstoria: due o tre cose che so di lei,” *Quaderni storici* 29, no. 86/2 (1994): 532.

³ Francesca Trivellato, *Microstoria e Storia Globale* (Rome: Officina Libraria, 2023), 56.

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, *Il Formaggio e i vermi*, 10th ed. (Milan: Adelphi, 2019), 214.

⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983) 4.

⁷ Bruno Bonomo, *Voci della Memoria. L’uso delle fonti orali nella storia* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2013), 37-38.

Musrara before the State of Israel: Memories of a Vanished Neighborhood

In *Urban Neighbourhood Formations: Boundaries, Narrations and Intimacies* (2020), the researchers Hilal Alkan and Nazan Maksudyan highlight three main perspectives for defining what distinguishes a neighborhood from another area of the city. First, they identify the spatial perspective, which defines the boundaries of a neighborhood within the broader urban context. According to the authors, these boundaries are not necessarily material; they may also be experienced, narrated, imagined and internalized in the bodies and everyday practices of those who traverse them. Second, the narrative component, which defines the neighborhood through stories that may be extremely diverse. Some memories are silenced or forgotten, while others persist through the recollections of those who recount them. Third, the perspective that foregrounds social relations: residents, as active social agents, define the boundaries through interaction and conflict with the rest of the city.⁸ According to Moshé Naor and Abigail Jacobson, Musrara exemplifies all three of these elements: from real and imagined boundaries that are difficult to cross, to competing narratives and memories that portray very different periods in the life of the neighborhood, and to the interactions between residents on the eastern and western edges of Musrara, which reflect the neighborhood's history following the establishment of the State of Israel.⁹

Within the volume edited by Alkan and Maksudyan, there is also an article by Johannes Becker entitled "Past Neighbourhoods: Palestinians and Jerusalem's 'Enlarged Jewish Quarter'" which shows how the Jewish quarter of the old city of Jerusalem was transformed following the Israeli conquest of 1967. Becker analyses how the perception of the Palestinian residents who left the area—and those who still inhabit it—has developed new spatial and temporal memories, often forgotten within the new dimension the quarter has acquired. Becker's perspective suggests that the context of war represents a rupture in the relationship between place, inhabitant and memory, one that is crucial in the production of narratives layered over time and space, yet incompatible in any attempt to reconstruct a single, unified history of the neighborhood.¹⁰

The history of Musrara presents an analogous case. The image of the neighborhood in the memories of its Palestinian residents has completely faded and now survives only in recollections and stories of those who once lived there. At the same time, Musrara has undergone new transformations and welcomed new residents, generating new memories and stories that intertwine with the old ones. This offers a complex and multifaceted picture, capable of bringing together opposing perceptions and imaginaries that are nonetheless equally real and present.

Musrara is an urban cluster founded in the late nineteenth century, around 1875, in Jerusalem under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. It is bordered to the south by the walls of

⁸ Hilal Alkan and Nazan Maksudyan, *Urban Neighbourhood Formations: Boundaries, Narrations and Intimacies* (New York: Routledge Studies in Urbanism and the City, 2020), 1-14.

⁹ Moshé Naor and Abigail Jacobson, "Between the Border of Despair and the 'Circle of Tears': Musrara on the Margins of Jewish-Arab Existence in Jerusalem," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 28, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 2023): 77.

¹⁰ Johannes Becker, "Past Neighbourhoods: Palestinians and Jerusalem's enlarged Jewish Quarter," in *Urban Neighbourhood Formations*, eds. Alkan and Maksudyan, 99-118.

the old city, stretching between the New Gate and the Damascus Gate, and by the Pontifical Institute known as the Notre Dame de France Hospice; to the north by the ultra-Orthodox Jewish quarters of Mea Shearim and Geula; to the northeast by the predominantly Muslim neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah; and to the west by the “Russian Compound” and the commercial area of Jewish Jerusalem. Most of the houses in Musrara were built by Christian and Muslim Palestinian families between 1889 and 1925.¹¹ In her article “Musrara, The Center of the World,” Paola Caridi describes the neighborhood from an architectural perspective: it featured the “typical style of fin-de-siècle Jerusalem: local stones, sloping roofs on four sides, Arabic windows high and arched in the upper part, and rose gardens separating houses from the street.”¹²

Entire Palestinian families who had resided in the old city of Jerusalem moved into the new houses, reproducing the same lifestyles they had maintained within the walls. Numerous prominent Arab figures of Jerusalem chose to live in the new neighborhood, including the distinguished Palestinian politician Musa al-‘Alami, the Christian Sakanini family, and the Greek orthodox artist and painter Sophie Halaby. The inhabitants of early twentieth-century Jerusalem thus gave rise to the first neighborhood built outside the walls, inhabited by the city’s bourgeoisie which was mixed religiously and ethnically.¹³ Indeed, during the early decades of the twentieth century, Musrara also attracted members of the Jewish bourgeoisie of Jerusalem. Toward the end of Ottoman rule, a small Jewish quarter arose near Damascus Gate, in the area that is still considered today the Arab part of Musrara. In this area, the Jewish community built two medical institutions—the Jewish Health Station and the Pasteur Institute—which further attracted new Jewish residents to move there.¹⁴ However, in the period between the end of 1920 and the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939, most Musrara’s Jewish residents left the area following several clashes among Arab and Jews. By 1938, in fact, only 200 Jews remained in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, until 1948, as indicated by the 1947 census of the Jewish Community Council, Jews continued to reside in Musrara, albeit in extremely limited numbers.¹⁵

The 1948 war radically transformed the city’s territory and the composition of its inhabitants. Between January and April of 1948, clashes between the Haganah,¹⁶ the Arab Liberation Army and Palestinian irregular forces led many Palestinian residents of western and southern Jerusalem to leave. This was also the case in Musrara, from which a large part of the Palestinian population—also following the spread of news about the Deir Yassin massacre¹⁷ on April 9, 1948—decided to depart and never return. In her book *Gerusalemme senza Dio*,

¹¹ Naor and Jacobson, “Between the Border of Despair and the ‘Circle of Tears,’” 78.

¹² Paola Caridi, “Musrara, the Center of the World,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 62 (2015): 30.

¹³ Naor and Jacobson, “Between the Border of Despair and the ‘Circle of Tears,’” 78.

¹⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The Haganah was the main Jewish Zionist paramilitary organization during the period of the British Mandate in Palestine. It was founded in 1920 and remained active until 1948, when, following the creation of Israel, it was integrated into the Israel Defense Forces.

¹⁷ The Deir Yassin massacre has gone down in history as the bloodiest massacre carried out during the Nakba by the Zionist paramilitary groups Irgun and Lehi, which led to the death of more than 100 people in the Palestinian village near the Jerusalem area.

Paola Caridi offers an image of the neighborhood before the Nakba¹⁸ through the eyes of a Palestinian Christian resident forced to abandon it, returning only decades later as a guest. As Paola Caridi faithfully recounts, “his memories, even half a century later, are still very vivid; he remembers the people, the houses, the trees, retracing the streets of his childhood, still etched in his memory, even though today they represent the paths of a painful nostalgia.”¹⁹ In the cycle of memories of Musrara during Ottoman and Mandate periods, another name evocatively emerges confirming how this neighborhood can be interpreted as the inexorable symbol of all the seasons of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is the name of Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, a Palestinian Christian boy born in Musrara in 1944 who lived on Saint Paul Street—today Shivtei Israel Street. Like many others, the child was forced to leave the city in 1948, taking refuge in Jordan and later being admitted to a study program in the United States. However, the memory of the war remained deeply imprinted in his soul even many years later. On the night between June 5 and 6, 1968, the boy became known for the assassination of Robert Francis Kennedy—the younger brother of American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who had been assassinated on November 22, 1963—and who was expected to run as democratic candidate in the U.S. presidential elections. Sirhan Bishara Sirhan killed him because of the support Kennedy had shown toward Israel. This event—which also profoundly changed American history—occurred not coincidentally just one year after the Six-Day War which, in addition to reshaping the course of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, once again transformed the face of Musrara.²⁰

On May 14, Israel definitively occupied the neighborhood following the evacuation carried out a few days earlier by British forces. However, just five days later, when the Arab Legion entered Jerusalem to secure a connection between Ramallah and the old city through Sheikh Jarrah and Musrara, fighting broke out again. The prolonged conflict led the Israeli commander Moshé Dayan and the Jordan commander ‘Abudullah El-Tell to draw a new territorial boundary that split the neighborhood in two. On November 30, 1948, in a house in Musrara, the two leaders met to draw an imaginary «urban line» that would separate the Israeli and Jordanian forces present in Jerusalem. Initially, this line—which cut across houses and streets in the neighborhood—was conceived as a temporary boundary pending an armistice that would establish permanent borders. Nevertheless, on April 3, 1949, the same line proposed by the two leaders became the internal frontier of Jerusalem, dividing the city between Israeli and Jordanian sovereignty. According to IDF archives, as reported by Naor and Jacobson, this new seven-kilometer-long frontier zone stretched from Beit Safafa in the southern part of the city to Musrara in the north and was known as the *No Man’s Land*. In some areas, the zone was approximately 200 meters wide, while in Musrara the distance between the two sides was only 10 meters. The borders were sometimes reinforced with

¹⁸ Nakba, meaning “catastrophe” in Arabic, refers to the forced displacement of the Palestinian population from the territories of historic Palestine in connection with the establishment of the State of Israel and the 1948 War. In this period, approximately 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes and several villages were destroyed, giving rise to the Palestinian refugee issue and the question of the “right of return,” which remain central to Palestinian collective memory.

¹⁹ Paola Caridi, *Gerusalemme senza Dio. Ritratto di una città crudele* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013), 36-37.

²⁰ Asaf Elia-Shalev, *Israel’s Black Panthers: The Radicals who punctured a nation’s founding myth* (Oakland: University California Press, 2024), 16.

barbed wire and actual separation walls, along with signs in Hebrew, Arabic and Yiddish warning residents of mines planted.²¹ The history of bourgeois Palestinian Musrara prior to 1948 vanished entirely. Situated along the frontier, between 1948 and 1967, the neighborhood became trapped in the perpetual conflict between the two regional powers, transforming from a center of early twentieth-century urban modernization in Jerusalem into a frontier zone of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Between 1948 and 1967: Musrara as a Marginalized Mizrahi Ghetto

As noted previously, Musrara changed drastically following the 1948 war and its consequences. The Jerusalem municipality had to urgently confront the issue of the new Jewish immigrants arriving in the city. The abandoned Arab residential areas became one of the main locations for settling these new citizens, in order to prevent the return of Palestinian refugees. Within ten years, the demographic situation of Musrara was completely transformed. As reported by Naor and Jacobson, according to the census of 1961, 4040 people were living in Musrara, 80% of whom were Jewish immigrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries. Particularly, 58,3% were originally from Morocco, followed by 9.6% of Algerians and Iraqis and 7% of Turks and Persians.²² Most of the new inhabitants of Musrara were therefore composed of “Eastern” Jews, and half of the population consisted of children and young people under the age of nineteen. As Paola Caridi argues

Musrara remained an “Eastern” neighbourhood after 1948 although profoundly transformed: its new residents were no longer Ottoman subjects, but citizens of the new State of Israel, while still sharing an Arab-Jewish culture that distanced them from the Ashkenazi élite. Thus, the neighbourhood was inhabited by a new urban underclass that shared the habits and smells of the Arab culture mixed with a harsh social condition.²³

Indeed, the socioeconomic circumstances of the new arrivals were tough: despair, hunger and unemployment were the three main structural elements of Musrara that, from the early 1950s onward, began to take the shape of an area densely populated. Nevertheless, a series of articles had already begun to appear in October 1950 in the Sephardic newspaper *Hed ha-Mizrah*,²⁴ collecting testimonies about the living conditions of the new residents. Aharon, originally from Casablanca, described the state of degradation in which his family lived in Musrara: “He shared two rooms with his wife and four daughters, some sleeping on beds and others on mattresses laid on the floor. One daughter suffered tuberculosis and was unable to

²¹ Naor and Jacobson, “Between the Border of Despair and the ‘Circle of Tears,’” 80-81.

²² Ibid., 82.

²³ Caridi, *Gerusalemme senza Dio*, 60-61.

²⁴ It was a newspaper, initially published twice a month and later weekly, that was published in Palestine/Israel between 1942 and 1951 in Hebrew and specifically addressed topics related to Sephardic Judaism.

recover due to the poor diet and inadequate sanitary conditions.”²⁵ Even ten years later, on July 7, 1961, in an article in the Communist Party weekly *Qol ha’am*, Musrara was described as “a neighborhood of absolute poverty surrounded by the holiness of Jerusalem’s old city, where the only way out was through its western boundary toward the city center. The eastern side, by contrast, was blocked by the invisible border that cut through the neighborhood’s main street.”²⁶ The article showed how the area was full of garbage, lacking drainage system and insisted on the absence of toilet facilities, and the presence of a single water that was shared by thirty families. Furthermore, the article depicted the interior conditions of the homes: between six and thirteen people living in a single room, damp walls, and many children in need of medical care due to poor sanitary conditions.²⁷

The transition of Musrara illustrated the changes that the 1948 war generated in several border localities. Musrara, moreover, was situated in a unique position that served a dual function in the logic of the Israeli leadership: on the one hand, it acted as a peripheral neighborhood with respect to Jewish Jerusalem; on the other hand, it represented a border district that separated Israel from Jordanian territory. Musrara’s uniqueness thus left the neighborhood isolated and trapped between two territories that remained largely unknown to most of its inhabitants between 1948 and 1967. Furthermore, Musrara also became a clear example of the process of destruction and renewal of neighborhoods abandoned by the Palestinian population. Like many other urban areas or villages, it underwent a phenomenon of eradication of the Palestinian presence through the changing of street names and even the name of the neighborhood itself. In 1958, on the tenth anniversary of the founding of Israel, the name was officially changed from Musrara to Morasha. However, most of the Mizrahi residents were not accustomed to pronouncing the new name, and Musrara remains the commonly used designation to this day. During a recent visit to the main school of the neighborhood, at an informal meeting with elderly residents, the mayor and spokesperson of Musrara reopened the debate over the name, reaffirming the importance of the term Musrara as a site of memory for the parents who had moved there and for the hardships endured in the first decades of their arriving.

Therefore, the inhabitants of Musrara were meant to be part of the “absorbing process” of the new *olim* (Jewish immigrants). However, the life in Musrara in no way represented a model of integration into the urban fabric of Jerusalem. Most of its young residents spent their days in the streets lacking schools and educational systems, without being aware of the broader context surrounding them. As reported by Asaf Elia-Shalev, for years, the only school within the neighborhood was the religious institution of the ultra-Orthodox movement Agudat Israel,²⁸ which offered an education based on Torah lessons usually delivered by teachers speaking in Yiddish, sometimes beating the Oriental students if they let slip a few words in Arabic.²⁹ In an interview with Eliezer Abergel—a Moroccan Jew who moved to

²⁵ Naor and Jacobson, “Between the Border of Despair and the ‘Circle of Tears,’” 82.

²⁶ Ibid., 83.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ It is a political movement that developed in Poland toward the end of the nineteenth century and served as a reference point for the Haredim, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, of Ashkenazi rite. After developing in Israel, it became the main Orthodox religious party in Israel among Ashkenazi Jews.

²⁹ Elia-Shalev, *Israel’s Black Panthers*, 25.

Musrara with his family in 1950s—he recounts his experience in this school and explains why he decided to leave it:

There was a school here in the neighborhood, Beit Ya'aqov. I went to school, and the teachers were particularly strict. I was beaten, I was not educated, and I was mocked. What did I gain from it? I wanted to go to school, but I decided to leave without telling my parents. I chose to go to the greengrocers and some shops in the neighborhood to help them in exchange for something to eat—not money, I was satisfied with food.³⁰

The peculiar position of Musrara, as we have seen, placed its residents in a condition of marginalization that enclosed the neighborhood between the area of the *no man's land* and the central Jerusalem, to which the access was denied to Musrarians. It was no coincidence, in fact, that young people would push beyond the frontier, venturing into the *no man's land*. As reported by Naor and Jacobson, Rafi Marciano and Reuven Abergel—two youngsters of Musrara—recalled football matches near the *no man's land* where Jewish and Arab children would kick the ball back and forth across the wall. In an interview taken from Naor's and Jacobson's text, Reuven Abergel—the future leader of the Israeli Black Panthers³¹—remembered a Palestinian friend, Isma'il, with whom he often spoke in Arabic through the wall that separated them and who occasionally threw him candies. Abergel sometimes found it difficult to accept them because he had nothing to give in return.³² The *no man's land* was an area frequently crossed by the youth of Musrara, driven by their innocence and unaware of the dangers of the war. Charlie Layani, in an interview conducted by the author in Musrara on July 22, 2024, recalls his life in the neighborhood, highlighting the spontaneity of children in a context of constant conflict:

Until the Six-Day War, we grew up without knowing anything. We were shut in the neighborhood. On one side of the border were the Jordanians. We had nothing to do and nowhere to play. Sometimes we would go to the cinema in the morning and watch movies about the Romans. To imitate them, we would take pieces of wood and make swords out of branches and fight like that. We used garbage bins as shields and threw stones at each other. That was our way of playing. But one day, we got tired of it and decided to create a football pitch. Where did we go? Into the *no man's land*—that's what they called it, the land between us and the Jordanians. No one was allowed to enter it. But we built a football pitch there on the border, and every time the ball went beyond the fence, we did not care—we would climb over to

³⁰ Eliezer Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 22, 2024.

³¹ The Israeli Black Panthers was a Mizrahi political movement that emerged in the early 1970s in Musrara and later spread throughout the rest of the country. The people who were interviewed in this article were all part of the movement and its leadership. The movement's main struggle was aimed at improving the material conditions of the Mizrahim, but it was also instrumental in fostering political awareness among Mizrahi in Israel and in denouncing the socioeconomic, political and cultural discrimination present in Israeli society.

³² Naor and Jacobson, "Between the Border of Despair and the 'Circle of Tears'," 88.

retrieve it. At that point, the Jordanian soldier would shout at us: “what are you doing! Get out of here!” We were not aware of the danger, and we did not think about it. But sometimes they also shot into our neighborhood. They killed a girl. Why? They would shoot without reason; even though we did not cross the border, they sometimes fired. They shot many times here.³³

In the final words of this interview, Charlie Layani refers to the tragic death of Yaffa Binyamin, a fourteen-year-old girl who was killed by Jordanian soldiers in 1965. The death of the daughter of a family of new immigrants from Iraq took on national significance and the residents of Musrara, without knowing, were portrayed by the country’s public opinion as pioneers and “guardians of the borders.” Musrara’s strategic position thus became part of the Israeli national narrative and was embodied into the Zionist discourse emphasizing the need to protect the borders.

However, the condition of ghettoization to which the inhabitants of Musrara were subjected, was not limited to the border dividing Israel from Jordan but also existed within Jewish Jerusalem itself. Young people from Musrara were rarely allowed to go to other parts of Jerusalem, further underscoring the distinction between Ashkenazi upper-class neighborhoods and Mizrahi underclass peripheries. From this perspective, another passage from the interview is particularly interesting, in which Charlie Layani emphasizes this aspect of his childhood:

Sometimes we would go into the city. The police would promptly stop us: “Boy?” Yes, I was an 11-or 12-years-old boy. “Where do you live?” I was walking in my own city; I was on Jaffa Street. I answered: “I live in Musrara,” and the police officer told me, “Fly back home!” Why was it like that? Because it was as if we had escaped from a refugee camp. Have you ever heard of the Second Israel? There were the Ashkenazim, who were the elite, and then there were us, the poor. That’s how we lived here, we could not go into the city, and we were afraid to go to the center of Jerusalem because we knew that they would drive us away. Musrara was like a ghetto; we did not know anyone outside the neighborhood.³⁴

Musrara thus represented a closed neighborhood with a “double border,” both physical and mental, that trapped the young inhabitants within it. On one side of the boundary were the rifles of the Jordanian army aimed in their direction; on the other side lay a completely unexplored world where Musrarians were prevented from moving freely. Until 1967, Musrara stood as the evident example of the segregation of Mizrahi Jews within the Israeli urban context, revealing the contradictions of the integration policies promoted under the ideology of “the Ingathering of the Exiles.”³⁵ Reuven Abergel perceptively brings out this

³³ Charlie Layani, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 22, 2024.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “The Ingathering of the Exiles” represents one of the fundamental principles on which the ideology of Zionism was founded: the idea that in the State of Israel Jews of the diaspora could be reunified. The unification of Israel’s

aspect, using a metaphor that conveys the suffering of the Musrarians and the subsequent massive protest of the Israeli Black Panthers:

We were not allowed to go into the white neighborhoods. When we went there, the police would arrest us. It is as if a Palestinian boy today came to Musrara. There would be the border patrol and a policeman stopping him and asking: "what are you doing here?" Well, it was the same for us; we could not go to Rehavia.³⁶ Once, I was beaten by a policeman and I was arrested at the age of nine for leaving Musrara. I mean, I was in the Jewish country, but this country was not mine. I had to stay in Musrara and not move unless I was given permission. So, when you leave a pool of water for a long time, the water becomes stagnant and produces many mosquitos. Well, the mosquitos were the Black Panthers.³⁷

Despite the presence of borders, barbed wires and Jordanian army, the boundary between Musrara and East Jerusalem was constantly being tested. On the one hand, Palestinian refugees attempted to cross it in order to return to their abandoned homes; on the other hand, Jews tried to cross the frontier in an effort to reclaim their previous lives. Between the 1950s and the 1960s, the Israeli police reported that around one thousand Israelis had crossed the border for personal or economic reasons. As early as June 1951, Naor and Jacobson show the example of Israeli police who arrested a group of individuals who were forging passports to facilitate the return of the new immigrants to Morocco.³⁸ The extreme poverty and the perpetual conflict playing out in the streets of Musrara pushed many residents to seek any possible way to leave not only the neighborhood, but the State of Israel itself. Reuven Abergel clearly described life in Musrara before 1967 and his father's failed attempts to leave the country and return to Morocco:

Now we are sitting in my house. It was as if, from the other side of the road, we could see the Jordanian army. In Morocco, we and the Muslims were friends, we listened to music together and greeted one another. Suddenly, we found ourselves in a situation that was the exact opposite. The Jews who had convinced us to come to Israel, we never saw them again. We ended up on the border and once again lived next to the Muslims. Only this time, the Muslims we saw were all armed and, at times, they would shoot. We had done nothing wrong to anyone. Why were they shooting like that? Until 1967, for 17 years from 1950 when we arrived here, our lives were in danger. I was already a grown boy, but I did not know the truth. I did not understand why that was the situation we were forced to live in. I thought the Jordanians constantly kept their rifles pointed at me and not at what I later understood to be my real enemy only later. The Zionists told me to come here

Jewish citizens on an ethnic basis formed the foundation of the Law of Return (1950) which legally makes it possible for Jews to become Israeli citizens.

³⁶ Rehavia is one of the most important Ashkenazi wealthy neighborhoods of Jerusalem.

³⁷ Reuven Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 21, 2024.

³⁸ Naor and Jacobson, "Between the Border of Despair and the 'Circle of Tears'," 89-90.

because I am Jewish and that in the Land of Israel, I would find the place where I would feel at home. From this day on, I never felt at home again; I missed where I had been. They took away our documents. I remembered my father trying twice to take us back to Morocco. We were like prisoners. Then, in 1967, everything changed. But why, until then, had I not seen even a single Ashkenazi?³⁹

Toward East or West? Perspectives of Musrarians after Six-Day War

The year 1967 marked a turning point in the history of Israel and radically transformed the history of Musrara and its inhabitants. The Six-Day war—fought between 5 and 10 June—substantially redefined Israel’s territorial borders, also severely affecting the future of the Palestinians through the military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. According to traditional Israeli historiography, the Six-Day war was launched by Israel as a pre-emptive measure to counter the adjacent Arab powers—Egypt, Jordan, and Syria—which, in their alliance with the Soviet Union, were increasingly perceived as threatening. However, Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi has argued that this threat was a myth. In his historical reconstruction, the United States and its intelligence agencies, moreover, has assured Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson that Israel’s military strength was significantly superior to that of the other Arab states combined. Indeed, U.S. intelligence ruled out the possibility of a coordinated Arab attack against Israel and remained firmly convinced that Israel enjoyed clear military superiority and was not facing an existential threat.⁴⁰ As reported by Arturo Marzano, several historical analyses argue that the Arab powers had no real intention of attacking Israel and that the Israeli offensive aimed to “finish the job” begun in 1956 with the Suez Canal Crisis, and to “teach the Arabs another lesson.”⁴¹ In his meticulous reconstruction of the origins and consequences of the Six-Day War, historian Tom Segev recounts the criticism levelled by former General Yigal Allon against David Ben-Gurion, whom he accused of having abandoned the conquest of Jerusalem’s old city and the West Bank during the 1948 Arab-Israel War. According to Segev, a deep sense of frustration had spread throughout Israel, shared by many of the soldiers who had fought in the War of Independence as well as by prominent figures within the military establishment. For Allon himself, the annexation of the West Bank was primarily motivated by strategic considerations: establishing Israel’s borders along the Jordan River and around Jerusalem would have made the state less vulnerable from a security standpoint.⁴² According to Segev’s interpretation, the 1967 war came to represent, in the imagination of a significant portion of Israeli society, the ultimate fulfilment of the Zionist project. Segev further demonstrates that this perspective, combined with the opportunity to redraw the

³⁹ Reuven Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 21, 2024.

⁴⁰ Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 97–104.

⁴¹ Arturo Marzano, *Storia dei Sionismi. Lo stato degli ebrei da Herzl a oggi* (Rome: Carocci, 2017), 139.

⁴² Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that transformed the Middle East* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 174–175.

region's borders, enjoyed broad support among the senior ranks of the Israeli military. Although there had been no intention in the preceding years to launch a military campaign, by the mid-1960s numerous confidential discussions had already raised the possibility of expanding Israel's borders. In 1963, the future Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin himself suggested to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol that Israel should consider expanding its border if the right opportunity presented itself. According to this interpretation, the Six-Day War ultimately provided precisely such an opportunity, fundamentally reshaping the political and strategic geography of the region.⁴³

The war initiated by Israel became a full-scale war of conquest that far exceeded the objectives originally set by the Israeli army and the government. In just six days, Israel defeated Egypt, occupying the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip; defeated Jordan, occupying all the Jordan River valley, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, including the old city; and defeated Syria, occupying the Golan Heights. Although Israel did not have a specific plan for the newly conquered territories, it gradually began to encourage settlement in the occupied areas, particularly in Gaza and the West Bank, facilitating the growth of the "Gush Emunim" movement (Bloc of the Faithful) which, on the theoretical basis of religious zionism, sought to promote Jewish settlements in the territories of the Biblical Israel in order to hasten the arrival of the Messiah. Initially, the Israeli government allowed the creation of only a few settlements, justifying them as "military security reasons."

However, over the decades, the number of new settlements grew enormously, and along with them also expanded the ideology based on messianic redemption. Although this is not the central focus of this topic, it is interesting to observe how the expansion of the borders once again affected the Mizrahi population. On the one hand, several oriental Jews moved to the West Bank for reasons of economic opportunity (many settled in the new territories not only for ideological reasons but also for economic advantages due to a more convenient real estate market). On the other hand, the opening of the labor market to the Palestinians placed the new Palestinian working class in direct competition with Mizrahim, generating tensions among them in the job market. The constant search for low-cost labor fostered Palestinians at the expense of Mizrahim, causing resentment among the latter toward the former. This represents one of the many reasons behind the current distance between the Mizrahi and Palestinian population, as Reuven Abergel once again explains clearly:

Thousands of Palestinians joined us in the search for work. We were all doing low-paid manual labor. After the Six-Day war, they stopped hiring us and began hiring Palestinians. When we started asking why, they told us: "the Palestinian comes to work almost for free. Do you want to work for free?" Why should I? Today, the Jew who defines himself as Mizrahi hates the Palestinian because he took his job, his means of livelihood, and lowered the value of his work. But it was not the Palestinian, I mean, he had no more choice than we did. It was the occupation that created these conditions. The Palestinian also had nothing, to the point that he would accept

⁴³ Ibid., 176-177.

working almost for free just to survive and to support his children. That was the reality—it was unbearable.⁴⁴

Moreover, 1967 also transformed Musrara from a geographical point of view. The neighborhood which had been located on the border with Jerusalem under Jordanian authority, assumed a new central position within the city. Its location near to the old city made Musrara a transit area crossed by a large part of the Ashkenazi population. From a neighborhood trapped between two borders, Musrara opened up both to Palestinian Jerusalem and to Ashkenazi Jerusalem. The young residents of Musrara began to realize the differences between their living conditions and the well-off social situation of much of West Jerusalem, gradually developing a sense of anger and a desire of redress. The research conducted through the interviews with the old inhabitants of Musrara highlights how the opening of the neighborhood after 1967 provoked profoundly different reactions. The majority of Musrara's population turned toward the rest of Israeli Jewish society in an attempt to acquire a social status that would allow them to become an integral part of the State of Israel. At the same time, a small minority welcomed the renewed proximity to Arab culture, naturally reshaping an Arab-Jewish identity within the new Middle Eastern context. These two inclinations offer a diversified picture of the general attitude of Mizrahim following 1967, and, more broadly, in the more recent history of the State of Israel. In the case of Musrara, the interviews clearly reveal these two perspectives. On the one hand, Reuven Abergel remembers 1967 as an opening toward the eastern side of Jerusalem and as a new personal rapprochement with the Arab world, which reminded him of his connection to Morocco. On the other hand, Charlie Layani and Eliezer Abergel tend to recall with greater emphasis their encounter with the rest of Israeli society, aspiring at a social redemption. In the article of Moshé Naor and Abigail Jacobson, it is reported what Reuven Abergel wrote about the first contacts with East Jerusalem. Abergel maintained that "the encounter with the Arab neighbors was fascinating," and that "he immediately found a common language and the same music he listened to in his parent's home."⁴⁵ It was the first time he met people in Israel whom he considered similar to himself, arguing that his attempts to find his proper place in West Jerusalem had failed, and had gradually led him to realize that there was no possibility for him to integrate there. In the interview conducted by the author, Abergel once again expresses his inclination to relate to the Palestinian world of East Jerusalem. He speaks of it in terms of a "natural connection," where cultural proximity was also accompanied by the possibility of engaging in joint economic activities. Thus, Reuven Abergel recalls his opening toward the Palestinian world:

We went to the old city and met the local people. It was a natural connection, like a family that has not spoken for 17 years and now makes music together. We did business together; we sold drugs and worked together because our clients were Ashkenazim. We opened cafés with Arabic live music and a club that we called

⁴⁴ Reuven Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 21, 2024.

⁴⁵ Naor and Jacobson, "Between the Border of Despair and the 'Circle of Tears'," 88.

“Oriental Nights.” I remember once we needed to find musicians, and I went by taxi with a friend to Gaza. We walked around and eventually found some musicians. All the Mizrahim who lived near Gaza—for example in Ashdod, Ashkelon or Netivot—used to go there often. They bought fruit and vegetables, and they did business. There were never any problems. The problems were created by the system when it realized that the Oriental Jews were slipping out of its hands. They began closing all our places; they shut down our venues, and they started dismantling the solidarity between Mizrahim and Palestinians. Truly, there was an important bond: we had a hotel in Ramallah, I brought musicians from Bethlehem, I slept at friend’s house in Abu Dis and in Shuafat. They understood that the connection between us and the Palestinians was dangerous for them, and they created the conditions to dissolve it. In prisons they began placing us in separate cells to disunite us—this is how I began to understand politics.⁴⁶

Reuven Abergel therefore argues that the solidarity that emerged between Mizrahim and Palestinians after 1967 was interpreted by the ruling class as a dangerous phenomenon that had to be opposed. Furthermore, he sees in the period after the Six-Day war the beginning of a political awareness that gradually took shape through the experience of his life and the suffering of his socioeconomic condition. For Abergel, the encounter with East Jerusalem represented a milestone in his political consciousness and a revelation that allowed him to awaken his forgotten memories.

Charlie Layani and Eliezer Abergel, on the other hand, emphasized their contact with other neighborhoods of Jerusalem and the differences between them and their Ashkenazi peers. This is how they remembered the period after 1967:

After the Six-day war, we were seventeen years old and the borders opened. We started to meet people from outside the neighborhood, and we saw how they lived. We realized that we were living in a ghetto. It seemed like two different worlds, like Africa and England. We met people from other neighborhoods whose socioeconomic situation was far better than ours. In this way, we began to give significance to our suffering.⁴⁷

According to Charlie Layani and Eliezer Abergel, the opening of the internal border represented a concrete opportunity to escape the condition of marginalization to which they had been subjected. As with Reuven Abergel, this transformation of space also stimulated the growth of political awareness. In this case, however, their gaze was directed toward Israeli society and took the shape of national claims, in which the Jewish dimension of the State became the instrument through which they could reaffirm their political and cultural identity. As Baruch Kimmerling argues, with the decline of Mapai’s hegemony—externally with the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and internally with the Likud victory in the 1977 elections—new

⁴⁶ Reuven Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 21, 2024.

⁴⁷ Charlie Layani and Eliezer Abergel, interview by the author, Jerusalem, July 22, 2024.

national, cultural and ethnic groups, initially relegated to the margins of Israeli collective, began to emerge.⁴⁸ It was no coincidence that the Mizrahim, with second and third generations, developed new and influential forms of cultural and political mobilization that became deeply central and crucial in the history of Israel.

Conclusion

Musrara therefore represented a cross-section of the history of Jerusalem both before and after the establishment of the State of Israel. From a neighborhood of the Palestinian bourgeoisie, it was transformed between 1948 and 1967 into a neighborhood of the urban Mizrahi underclass. The alienation of the Mizrahi population along the western border of Jerusalem clearly reflected the difficulties of the “Absorption Process” and the limits of the Israeli ideology of the “Ingathering of the Exiles.” The year 1967 marked a turning point: the end of the trap in which the inhabitants of Musrara had been confined opened them up to Jerusalem, both East and West, fostering the development of deeply dichotomous political perspectives and identity reaffirmations. The Israeli Black Panthers experience in Musrara gave rise to the large-scale intra-Jewish ethnic conflict. Although the Panthers did not have the strength or organization to transform themselves into a mass movement, they undoubtedly represented a driving force in the acquisition of political awareness within the Mizrahi population. As the case study of Musrara demonstrates, the political consciousness of the Mizrahim was far from uniform and developed on different levels in various parts of the country. In this article, Musrara has been adopted as an analytical lens to observe the profound changes in the urban fabric and to show how these transformations reveal the contradictions within Israeli society, the relationship with Palestinians, and the influence produced by the conflict and continuous reconfiguration of the space. Through the study of Musrara, it is possible to reconstruct two main attitudes within Mizrahi political culture, and, more broadly, within the complex interaction of relations among Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, and Palestinians in the region. On the one hand, a minority turned its gaze toward the East in an attempt to rebuild the Arab-Jewish identity which had been lost with the displacement of the Jewish Population from Islamic Countries. In “Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew,” Ella Shohat claims the necessity of a cultural, political and economic integration of Israel into the Middle East as the only tool capable of ending the binary logic of war.⁴⁹ Similarly, following in the footsteps of Ella Shohat, other intellectual figures have politically and theoretically advocated this idea: from the concept of “Hitmazrehut”⁵⁰ (Becoming of the East) clearly expressed by Atalia Omer, to Orly Noy’s idea of “Dismantling the Villa in the Jungle.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 130.

⁴⁹ Ella Shohat, “Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew,” in *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings of Ella Shohat* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 82.

⁵⁰ Atalia Omer, “Hitmazrehut or Becoming of the East: Re-Orienting Israeli Social Mapping,” *Critical Sociology* 43, no. 6 (2017): 949-976.

⁵¹ Orly Noy, “Dismantling the Villa in the Jungle,” in *The Israeli Black Panthers Haggadah*, eds. Itamar Haritan and Reuven Abergel, 2nd ed. (New York, Brooklyn: Jewish Current Press, 2022).

In this regard, Hillel Cohen, in *Enemies a Love story: Mizrahi-Arab-Ashkenazi Relations since the Dawn of Zionism*, identifies four different Mizrahi attitudes toward the Palestinians. According to Cohen, although such a perspective did exist, the idea of an Arab-Mizrahi alliance against Zionism is more a political construction emerging from the Palestinian interpretation of the Mizrahi struggle than a concrete Mizrahi political project. Historically, more common than the notion of cultural affinity and political alliance—advanced, however, by Reuven Abergel—is the idea of Mizrahim as a “bridge to peace.” Within Zionist framework, this view sees Mizrahi cultural ambivalence as potentially capable of mediating between Arabs and Jews.⁵² On the other hand, a large segment of the Mizrahi population reshaped its political consciousness around the need to become a central political subject within Israel. Jewish identity thus became a unifying element for the Mizrahim and characterized the crucial factor for claiming a space within Israeli culture and politics. The decline of the hegemony of Mapai—largely generated by the growing distance between Mizrahim and the Israeli leadership—represented the breaking point that allowed new forms of political identity to emerge among Mizrahim, sometimes fostering a significance convergence between marginalized populations, nationalism, and new models of ultra-Orthodox religiosity. This tendency, moreover, sheds light on one of the contradictions inherent in the history of Zionism and the State of Israel: the belief for the State to contain both a liberal dimension and an ethno-religious character. The sociologist Oren Yiftachel argues that the first demonstration of the concept of “Ethnocracy” - through which he defines the peculiar political form of the State of Israel—can be identified in the progressive process of the “Judaization” of Israeli society imposed by the State. According to Yiftachel, this process can be analyzed through the cultural, political and social relations between Jews and Palestinians, and, at the same time, through what he defines as “ethno-classes” within the borders of Israel—that is, the subordinate relations between the Ashkenazi establishment and the Mizrahi population.⁵³

In the analysis of Musrara after 1967, the aim is to highlight these attitudes and, at the same time, to raise questions about how the transformation of the space can also serve as a driving force for new political perspectives and for the multiple reformulations of identity among the populations affected by these changes. One question remains open: the East-West dichotomy is still crucial to the evolution of Israel. How could a State located in the Middle East continue to identify itself as Western despite its complex social configuration and the constant danger of military confrontation with its neighbors?

⁵² Hillel Cohen, *Enemies, a Love Story: Mizrahi-Arab-Ashkenazi Relations Since the Dawn of Zionism* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2025).

⁵³ Oren Yiftachel, “Nation Building and the Division of Space: Frontiers and Domination in the Israeli ‘Ethnocracy’,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 4, no. 3 (1998): 33-58.

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“Holocaust Vietnam 1979”

Boat People and Analogical Uses of Catholic Memory of the Shoah (1978-1980)

ABSTRACT

This article examines the analogical use of Holocaust memory within Italian mass Catholic culture during the Indochinese refugee crisis (1978-1980), at the beginning of John Paul II's pontificate. The study aims to reconstruct the origins and functioning of the parallels established between the Jewish genocide and the exodus of the *boat people*, analyzing how the Italian Catholic press reworked the traumas of the past to interpret the present. The theoretical framework adopted is Michael Rothberg's concept of the “multidirectional memory.” The research investigates the use of symbols associated with Nazi extermination camps, reinterpreted through the lens of Christian tradition. It identifies three levels of comparison: the analogy between the persecuting regime and Nazism, the parallel between refugees and Jews, and the comparison between the silence of Western powers in the past and in the present. Through the analysis of covers, cartoons, photomontages, and articles authored, the analysis demonstrates that these rhetorical and visual strategies were not driven solely by humanitarian or apolitical aims. Rather, they enabled Italian Catholics to reinterpret their relationship with the past in redemptive and identity-building terms, overcoming historical guilt and reinforcing the “myth of the good Italian.” At the same time, the mobilization against indifference and the rhetoric of “never again” functioned as effective instruments of self-legitimation, aimed at reaffirming the role of the Church as a moral and spiritual guide.

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Introduction

Following the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, around 140,000 South Vietnamese associated with the former government were evacuated to the United States. At the same time, smaller numbers fled by sea to neighboring countries: approximately 5,000 reached Thailand, 4,000 Hong Kong, 1,800 Singapore, and 1,250 the Philippines. These refugees, who escaped aboard often makeshift vessels, soon became known in Western public opinion as “the boat people.” After the proclamation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on 2 July 1976, the communist government's nationalization policies, which particularly affected the ethnic Chinese Hoa minority, triggered a sharp increase in emigration. The number of refugees rose from about 15,000 in 1977 to more than 62,000 in 1978, around 70 per cent of whom were Hoa. Following Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 and China's retaliatory attack in early 1979, the exodus accelerated further. By 1979, Malaysia had received 124, 103 Vietnamese boat people, Hong Kong nearly 80,000, and Thailand just over 25,000.¹

In recent years, the topic has been addressed only in scattered contributions and mainly within the broader scholarship on the history of migration and humanitarianism during the Cold War.² From 2016 onwards, Michael Vossing's study of the reception of the boat people in West German public discourse³ inaugurated a wave of scholarship devoted to individual national case studies, often adopting a comparative perspective.⁴ In 2019, Andrea Possieri was the first to offer a detailed reconstruction of the debate that unfolded in the Italian press.⁵

Compared with these studies, my aim is to reconstruct the origins and functioning of the analogies drawn in Italy between the boat people and the Shoah, focusing on the first three years of John Paul II's pontificate (1978-1980), which coincided with the emergence of the Indochinese refugee issue on the international stage. This contribution seeks to explore the specific Catholic elaboration of the Shoah in Italy, considering collective memories not as isolated and competing realities, but as dynamic processes shaped by mutual influence and “multidirectional” interaction.⁶ Robert S. C. Gordon's pioneering work offered the first comprehensive reconstruction of Italian cultural responses to the Jewish genocide between 1945 and 2010 but did not examine the specific role of Catholic culture. The limited attention given to the Holy See's use of the term Shoah and to debates over Pius XII's silence appears

¹ For a detailed reconstruction of these events, see Becky Taylor, Karen Akoka, Marcel Berlinghoff, and Shira Havkin, “Introduction,” in *When Boat People Were Resettled, 1975-1983. A Comparative History of European and Israeli Responses to the Southeast Asian Refugee Crisis*, eds. Becky Taylor, Karen Akoka, Marcel Berlinghoff, and Shira Havkin (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 47-77.

² Michele Colucci, *Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia* (Rome: Carocci 2018), 63-64; Silvia Salvatici, *A history of humanitarianism, 1755-1989. In the name of others* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 197-235.

³ Michael Vossing, “Competition over Aid? The German Red Cross, the Committee Cap Anamur, and the Rescue of Boat People in South-East Asia, 1979-1982,” in *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Johannes Paulmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 345-368.

⁴ See note 1.

⁵ Andrea Possieri, *Rifugiati. La vicenda storica dei profughi indocinesi in Italia (1978-1979)* (Perugia: Morlacchi editore, 2019).

⁶ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the age of decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

insufficient, given the lasting influence of Catholic culture on Italian society.⁷ The topic has so far been addressed only in scattered and generally framed contributions. In 2005, Manuela Consonni opened this new field of research by offering a preliminary, albeit partial, investigation into the ways in which the ecclesiastical hierarchy engaged with the memory of the Shoah in the early years of the post-war period.⁸

In the article were identified three main symbolic-rhetorical constructions characterized the catholic press in Italy. At the first level, an anti-totalitarian rhetoric emerged, centered on the analogy between Nazi regime and the new perpetrator, identified with the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. A second level of comparison revolved around the parallel between the boat people and the Jews. The third level rested on a parallel between the silences of the Western powers in the face of the Shoah and the attitude adopted by those same countries towards the tragedy of the Vietnamese refugees.

Catholic anti-totalitarianism and the analogy of the persecutor

The first reports concerning Vietnamese refugees reached Italy in January 1977, thereby opening what came to be known as the “caso Vietnam” (Vietnam controversy).⁹ Italian public opinion addressed the issue of Vietnamese refugees later than the international debate, which had already developed in countries such as the United States and France. The French press had begun covering their plight immediately after the fall of Saigon in 1975. In the context of the Cold War, a sense of responsibility toward the colonial and imperialist past, combined with the tendency to identify the boat people with anti-communists, contributed to an early acceptance of refugees.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the issue did not immediately achieve full visibility even in 1977 within Italian public opinion. References to the crisis in Vietnam remained sporadic and fragmented until November 1978, while even more limited attention was devoted to the refugees themselves.¹¹ Despite limited media coverage, the issue nevertheless came to the attention of the Italian government.

The United States delegation to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) urged allied countries to accept even a modest number of Indochinese refugees, alongside the implementation of its own resettlement program. Following an interministerial meeting convened on 10 February 1978, the Italian government decided not to comply with the American request. The political debate focused on two main sets of issues. On the one hand, legal concerns emerged, stemming from the non-applicability of the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees to non-European citizens. On the other hand, doubts arose regarding the social, employment, and public order implications associated with

⁷ Robert S. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian culture, 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 90-95 and 179-180.

⁸ Manuela Consonni, “The Church and the Memory of the Shoah: The Catholic Press in Italy, 1945-1947,” in *Jews, Catholics and the Burdens of History*, ed. Eli Lederhendler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21-34.

⁹ Possieri, *Rifugiati*, 31.

¹⁰ Karen Akoka, “France: Boat People Brought by Plane,” in *When Boat People Were Resettled*, 47-77.

¹¹ Possieri, *Rifugiati*, 68-69.

the potential reception of foreign immigrants.¹²

In December 1978, newspapers around the world gave extensive coverage to Malaysia's decision to refuse permission for the merchant vessel *Hai Hong*, carrying approximately 2,500 refugees, to dock.¹³ These events attracted the attention of Italian public opinion, also beyond Catholic circles. André Glucksmann, one of the leading figures of the *nouveaux philosophes* movement, published in the moderate Italian daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* a series of articles on the Vietnamese refugees as part of the third instalment of "Reportages di idee," which had previously featured contributions by Michel Foucault and Alain Finkielkraut. As a proponent of a liberal-progressive and anti-communist political outlook,¹⁴ he undertook a journey to investigate the underlying causes of the exodus. On that occasion, he reflected on the mechanisms of persecution. "Why do they leave? The reasons are many." Dr. Don, one of the Vietnamese refugees, recounted his experience of the "concentration camps" in North Vietnam.¹⁵ He went on to draw a detailed comparison between the "vast industrial enterprise" of "the German camps," the Chinese, the Soviets, and the "Vietnam newcomers, by contrast, drew upon the methods of their predecessors."¹⁶ This idea spread primarily through the pages of the illustrated Italian magazine *Gente*. On 6 January 1979, the weekly published a lengthy interview with survivors of the "Vietnamese lager": "Harrowing testimonies on 're-education' carried out by the Communists: as in Auschwitz and Dachau."¹⁷ "Perpetrators, or Analogy as Denunciation," was the first type of analogy to emerge. As the Italian historian Guri Schwarz writes, "the central feature of this kind of exercise is the condemnation of a political adversary, a new perpetrator who is degraded through association with Nazism." The core of this comparison therefore lies in the focus placed on the perpetrator's intentions and responsibility.¹⁸

The Italian context was shaped by the reverberations of a debate that, at the time, was particularly intense across the Alps. Glucksmann promoted in France an initiative that gained broad public attention: *Un bateau pour le Vietnam* (A Boat for Vietnam). At the end of 1978, the project of chartering a vessel to rescue Vietnamese boat people received the support of prominent intellectuals from different political backgrounds, including Raymond Aron and Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as Cardinal François Marty.¹⁹ Sartre, a former Marxist, represented a generation of intellectuals increasingly critical of justifying present suffering in the name of future benefits. This position reflected the gradual decline of grand historical narratives and overarching interpretive frameworks.²⁰ In the 1970s, the resulting vacuum was gradually filled by the emergence of human rights as a new universalist "utopia," grounded in the

¹² Ibid., 104-106.

¹³ Ibid., 38-39.

¹⁴ Akoka, "France: Boat People Brought by Plane," 64.

¹⁵ André Glucksmann, "I 'nipoti dello zio Ho Chi Min,'" *Corriere della Sera*, February 11, 1979. From this point onwards, all translations of articles are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ M. Thérèse de Brosses, "Così torturano uomini, donne e bambini nei lager del Vietnam," *Gente*, January 6, 1979.

¹⁸ Guri Schwarz, "Un antirazzismo commemorativo. La Shoah, i migranti e i demoni dell'analogo," *Italia contemporanea* 297 (2021): 145-179, 166.

¹⁹ Akoka, "France: Boat People Brought by Plane," 64.

²⁰ Tony Judt, *Postwar. A history of Europe since 1945* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 559-584.

protection of individual rights regardless of political affiliation.²¹ In 1974, the publication of the Italian and French translations of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* provided an opportunity for numerous anti-communist intellectuals, including Glucksmann, to challenge Marxist doctrine by drawing comparisons with Nazism.²² This anti-totalitarian reflection also included a strong critique of American imperialism and European colonialism.²³

This interpretation had a significant impact in Italy, especially within debates among left-wing forces, contributing to the political divide between the positions of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and those of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The PCI rejected the view that the Vietnamese regime's dictatorial nature lay among the causes of the exodus, it directed its criticism primarily towards the historical legacy of French colonialism.²⁴ On January 12, several PSI senators submitted parliamentary inquiries against the government, accusing it of failing to undertake any rescue initiatives.²⁵ A few days later, Paolo Flores D'Arcais addressed the issue in the PSI newspaper, *Avanti!*, accusing his generation of having supported a just anti-imperialist struggle without considering its consequences: the rise of a new "totalitarianism."²⁶ Around the same time, Arturo Viola pushed this rhetoric even further, observing that the "Vietnamese are fleeing their country" to escape the "concentration camp" and the "hell of the lager."²⁷ The condemnation of Vietnam, through a comparison with Nazism, was accompanied during those months by a broader and more complex reflection. On March 4, *Avanti!* interviewed the French philosopher, who was engaged in identifying the elements "of rot and commonality among totalitarianisms." On this occasion, the comparison focused on the "identity of methods" and the "identity of weapons" among Vietnam, the United States, and Nazism, noting that "currently, the communist Vietnamese have taken up American weapons again," and "the consequences are essentially the same": "political prisons," "concentration camps [...] that were those of the Nazis."²⁸ It is a comparison that "places 'democratic' countries alongside totalitarian countries."²⁹ As in France, the Italian left interpreted the boat people phenomenon through a humanitarian and apolitical discourse, grounded in the promotion of human rights as a means of moving beyond ideological confrontations. This raises the question of how the Italian Catholic world interpreted and responded to the crisis.

The Catholic Church had in fact been concerned for some time with the fate of the populations of Southeast Asia, at least since the Paris Peace Accords between the United States and Vietnam on 27 January 1973.³⁰ On 3 December 1978, the newly elected Polish pontiff Pope John Paul II stirred Catholic public opinion by issuing an appeal to pray "for those

²¹ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia. Human Rights in History* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²² Enzo Traverso, *Totalitarismo. Storia di un dibattito* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2015), 103-108.

²³ Akoka, "France: Boat People Brought by Plane," 66-69.

²⁴ Possieri, *Rifugiati*, 71.

²⁵ Ibid., 68.

²⁶ Paolo Flores d'Arcais, "È stato criminale non chiedersi per cosa ci si batteva," *Avanti!*, January 16, 1979.

²⁷ Arturo Viola, "Una nave per il Vietnam," *Avanti!*, February 17, 1979, 1.

²⁸ Arturo Viola, "Sto dalla parte degli uccisi," *Avanti!*, March 4, 1979, VI.

²⁹ Viola, "Una nave per il Vietnam," 1.

³⁰ Possieri, *Rifugiati*, 45.

Vietnamese who, having left their land, are suffering because they do not find anyone to welcome them.”³¹ Thereafter, the Holy See’s daily newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, had reported on the front page the specific details of the tragedy of the Hai Hong vessel, without, however, questioning the deeper causes of the exodus.³² It called upon public opinion and governments to make a “gesture of humanity,”³³ recalling that “thousands of Jews had wandered from one port to another across the Mediterranean without any country being willing to accept them.”³⁴ As the Archbishop of Singapore reiterated in an interview with the newspaper: “Our understanding is not based on politics, race, or religion, but rather on understanding in the deepest sense of human values.”³⁵ At the same time, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Jesuit fortnightly widely regarded as the Pope’s “semi-official voice,” condemned the “totalitarian” climate of Vietnamese regime, and the “creation of numerous concentration camps to which [...] people were sent who, because of their social position and their political and religious beliefs.”³⁶ Unlike the PSI, the Holy See did not, during this period, extend the category of totalitarianism to include either the United States or French colonialism. Instead, it claimed to stand above ideological divisions, without this implying any renunciation of a political interpretation of events. Since the end of the Second World War, Catholic humanitarianism had shaped its discourse within the context of the Cold War, adapting its relief programs to a particular conception of the geopolitical order.³⁷ As Daniele Menozzi has observed, Pius XII invoked the category of “totalitarianism” “to emphasize that the ‘subordination to the nation, race, or class’ was incompatible with Catholic doctrine.”³⁸ Even at that time, however, the Pope did not confine this condemnation to totalitarian regimes in the strict sense but regarded it as potentially applicable to any political order, including democracy, should it cease to be firmly anchored in Christian principles.³⁹ The roots of this decline were traced back to the principles of the French Revolution, identified as the moment when humanity had abandoned its sense of God.⁴⁰ From this perspective, the denunciation of totalitarianism served a clearly political purpose: to restore Catholicism as the foundation of the identity of individual states. John Paul II situated himself within this tradition, reinterpreting anti-totalitarianism as part of a broader political project of the re-Christianization of Europe.⁴¹ The aim was to reaffirm the Catholic Church’s role as the

³¹ John Paul II, “Angelus. Sunday, 3 December 1978,” *The Holy See*, accessed March 12, 2026, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/1978/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19781203.html.

³² For example, see “La tragedia dei profughi dal Vietnam,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, December 6, 1978, 1.

³³ “I cinquemila profughi vietnamiti in attesa di un gesto di umanità,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, December 31, 1978, 1.

³⁴ “Israele potrebbe accogliere parte dei profughi vietnamiti,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, January 5, 1979, 1.

³⁵ Gianfranco Grieco, “Il dramma dei profughi dell’Indocina,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, April 7, 1979.

³⁶ Giuseppe De Rosa, “La coscienza cristiana di fronte alla tragedia dei profughi vietnamiti,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 1, (1979): 259-260.

³⁷ Elena Serina, “‘A Great Work of International Charity’: Catholic Humanitarianism, Displaced Persons and the Making of Post-War Europe (1945–1947),” *Contemporary European History* 35 (2026): 1-19.

³⁸ The quotation is taken from the address delivered by Pius XII on October 2, 1945, before the Tribunal of the Sacred Roman Rota. Daniele Menozzi, “Chiesa e totalitarismo: una difficoltà per la ‘Resistenza’ cattolica,” in *Storia della Resistenza in Toscana*, ed. Marco Palla (Pisa: Carocci, 2009), 10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-34.

⁴⁰ Daniele Menozzi, *Giovanni Paolo II. Una transizione incompiuta?* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2006).

⁴¹ Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade. The Vatican’s Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2019).

guardian of human rights.⁴² The Holy See's position on the boat people cannot therefore be reduced to an apolitical explanation and differed also from the interpretations advanced by the various currents of Italian Catholicism.

During the first months of 1978, the plight of the Vietnamese refugees began to receive increasing attention in the missionary press. These publications continued to represent one of the principal channels through which Italian Catholics encountered humanitarian crises affecting non-Western countries.⁴³ At this early stage, a pivotal role was played by Piero Gheddo, a PIME missionary and editor of *Mondo e Missione*,⁴⁴ who rapidly established himself as one of the most authoritative and influential voices within Italian Catholic public opinion. Gheddo joined the PIME in 1945. In the following years, he worked as a journalist for *L'Osservatore Romano*, and, in 1962, was appointed by Pope John XXIII as an expert advisor for the conciliar decree *Ad Gentes*.⁴⁵ In 1967, the missionary undertook an extended journey to Vietnam at the invitation of the Archbishop of Saigon. On that occasion, he regarded the Vietnamese struggle for national independence as fully legitimate and acknowledged the active role played by Catholics, who participated in it with enthusiasm and even initially supported Ho Chi Minh's leadership.⁴⁶ His position reflected that of a generation of Italian Catholics who, during the Vietnam War, had joined anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist movements, especially in the early months of 1965. However, the first policies of the new communist government generated growing disillusionment, leading to a significant shift in outlook.⁴⁷

As early as 15 July 1978, *Mondo e Missione* published a review of Bishop Paul Seitz's *Le temps des chiens muets*, the Bishop of the Diocese of Kontum exiled in 1975, who had spent thirty-eight years as a missionary in Vietnam. The book openly denounced the international community's silence regarding the Christian persecution unfolding in Vietnam: "Vietnamese bishops, missionaries, and priests are closely monitored and constantly harassed through repeated demands and searches."⁴⁸ Piero Gheddo highlighted the principal allegations: "Ideological dictatorship: the indoctrination of the population through every means available to a totalitarian state," and the "forced labour and extermination camps."⁴⁹ This portrayal of Vietnam evoked the specter of Nazism, implicitly establishing a parallel between the modern

⁴² Daniele Menozzi, *Chiesa e diritti umani* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2012).

⁴³ During the 1950s and 1960s, it had long played an almost hegemonic role in this field, reaching a circulation of approximately 800,000 copies per month. Mauro Forno, *La cultura degli altri. Il mondo delle missioni e della decolonizzazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2017), 25-26.

⁴⁴ The PIME journal, *Le Missioni cattoliche* was founded in 1872. Piero Gheddo served as editor from 1959 to 1994, renaming the journal *Mondo e Missione* while maintaining a circulation of approximately 45,000 copies. Valentina Ciciliot, "Il laboratorio missionario del Pontificio istituto missionario estere (PIME): la rivista 'Le Missioni Cattoliche' (1972-1968)," in *Laboratorio della fede. Religione e cultura popolare in Italia dall'Unità al miracolo economico*, ed. Giovanni Vian (Rome: Carocci, 2026), 89-108.

⁴⁵ "Biografia," GHEDDO PIERO sito ufficiale, accessed July 9, 2026, <https://www.gheddopiero.it/it/biografia/>; Piero Gheddo, *PIME. 1850-2000. 150 anni di missione* (Bologna: EMI, 2000).

⁴⁶ Piero Gheddo, *The Cross and the Bo-Tree. Catholics and Buddhists in Vietnam* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1979), 25-27.

⁴⁷ Francesca Ghezzi, "Cattolici di Francia e d'Italia dinanzi alla guerra in Vietnam: verso la rottura del 'fronte filoatlantico' (1963-1965)," *Chrétien et sociétés* 26 (2019): 1-18.

⁴⁸ Piero Gheddo, "Il tempo dei cani muti," *Mondo e Missione*, June 15, 1978, 405-406.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

communist persecution of Christians and that suffered by Jews.

In December 1979, the tragedy of the Vietnamese refugees truly entered the horizon of mass Catholic culture, providing a specific response to this humanitarian crisis. Although, from the beginning of 1978, the Catholic weekly *Famiglia Cristiana*⁵⁰ had avoided addressing the issue, it underwent a significant shift in those weeks. In its 17 December 1978 issue, the magazine announced on its front cover an “exclusive report” [Fig. 4] on the journey undertaken by the French journalist and photographer Alan Dejean to document the “hell” endured by the refugees aboard the *Hai Hong*.⁵¹ In a boxed feature accompanying the article, Piero Gheddo asked: “Why are they fleeing? The answer is beyond doubt: because they no longer wish to live under a totalitarian and oppressive regime that denies every freedom.”⁵² A few weeks later, Renzo Carnevali likewise condemned the “crimes against humanity” committed by the country, attributing full responsibility for the “odyssey of the refugees from the camps of Vietnam” to communist ideology.⁵³ At the same time, he expressed “regret for the former rulers” of the “colonial era” and argued that, even during the Vietnam War, “the imperialists were not the Americans but the North Vietnamese.”⁵⁴ Piero Gheddo articulated his interpretation more clearly in the pages of *Il Sabato*, a weekly magazine associated with circles of Catholic conservatism. “Implacable Totalitarian Regimes” is the subtitle chosen. The “communists’ seizure of power in Vietnam [...] brought a new and implacable oppression, marked by the elimination of political opponents and the establishment of ‘re-education camps,’ which increasingly proved to be concentration and extermination camps.”⁵⁵ Indochina is still at war, but, once again, “not because of colonialist and imperialist powers.”⁵⁶ A significant segment of Italian Catholicism shared the Holy See’s anti-totalitarian stance but distinguished itself through a more pronounced alignment with the Western bloc in the context of the Cold War.

Avvenire, the daily newspaper of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), reiterated its condemnation of the persecution of Christians.⁵⁷ The newspaper devoted its front page to the press conference of Bishop Paul Seitz, who attracted widespread public attention only during those weeks. In December 1978, he was hosted by the PIME in Milan, where he met with the Archbishop of Milan to prepare a document to be sent to the President of the Republic.⁵⁸ On that occasion, he denounced the “situation of the Catholic Church in Vietnam,

⁵⁰ According to government records from 1963, the magazine had an average of 6.9 million readers. *Famiglia Cristiana* was the most widely circulated weekly magazine in Italy, the third most widely circulated in Europe, and the Catholic weekly with the largest readership worldwide. Mauro Forno, “La battaglia dei costumi. ‘Famiglia Cristiana’ e morale cattolica in un ventennio tempestoso (1960-1980),” *Memoria e Ricerca* 81, no.1 (2026): 150-180.

⁵¹ Alan Dejean Sygma, “Ho fotografato l’inferno. Sulla nave dei vietnamiti che nessuno vuole,” *Famiglia Cristiana*, December 17, 1978, 34-40.

⁵² Piero Gheddo, “Perché fuggono dal Vietnam?,” *Famiglia Cristiana*, December 17, 1978, 39.

⁵³ Renzo Carnevali, “La parabola ‘rossa’ ” orchestrata dall’URSS. Che cosa c’è dietro la ‘guerra comunista’ tra Vietnam e Cambogia,” *Famiglia Cristiana*, January 21, 1979, 18.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Piero Gheddo, “Le zanne del Vietnam. Le radici antiche della guerra contro la Cambogia,” *Il Sabato*, January 13, 1979, 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Piero Gheddo devoted an entire article to the “discrimination, deprivation, and slander” to which the Church in Vietnam was subjected: Piero Gheddo, “Essere cristiani in Vietnam,” *Avvenire*, April 13, 1979, 3.

⁵⁸ Possieri, *Rifugiati*, 56.

describing it as ‘deeply rooted, heroic, resilient’ despite the persecution to which it is subjected.”⁵⁹ This narrative remerged particularly in Seitz’s interview with Piero Gheddo, published in the weekly *Gente*. After denouncing the murder of “catechists,” “systematically eliminated,” the bishop recounted the testimony of the “survivors, who seemed to have come out of a Nazi *Lager*.”⁶⁰ Monsignor Seitz drew a further parallel between the persecution of the Chinese minority in Vietnam and the Holocaust. “The phenomenon resembles that of the Nazi period, when gold was confiscated from the Jews in exchange for promises to spare their lives.”⁶¹ In this media context, Italian Catholics provided their own representation of the present, contributing to the resurgence of a specific interpretation of the crisis. Traces of this same imagery can also be found in PIME’s missionary discourse. On 1 May 1979, *Mondo e Missione* published a special feature on Father Fernando Galbiati’s journey to South-East Asia. In attempting to decipher the root causes of the ongoing repression, the article raised a fundamental question—“What were the reasons for these measures?”—and immediately pointed to both “racial considerations” and a “religious motive: the Vietnamese were Buddhists or Catholics.”⁶² Beyond these ethnic and religious dimensions, the report argued that the persecution was heavily driven by economic interests. To illustrate this state-sponsored expropriation, the author drew a direct comparison to Nazi Germany, writing that “Much like the Jews in Germany during Hitler’s era, who controlled 80 per cent of the country’s finances, in Vietnam too the anti-Chinese campaign was rooted in a solid motive: to transfer to the state the businesses and wealth of this industrious minority.”⁶³

The comparison between the Chinese minority in Vietnam and the Jews, constructed through an antisemitic rhetoric centered on the alleged control of finance and industry, thus came to provide a justification for the government’s policy towards the refugees. The Vietnamese refugees offered the Catholic world an opportunity to project a specific representation of the past onto the present. The political condemnation of the new Vietnamese perpetrator, assimilated to Nazism, was articulated through a dual analogy: the violation of Christians’ religious freedom and the rejection of biological racism. Italian Catholic publications developed, on the one hand, a victim-centered interpretation of the Catholic Church and, on the other, explicitly acknowledged the Jewish genocide. The former interpretation was not an original formulation of John Paul II but rather had its roots in the pontificate of Pius XII and in a reading of contemporary history centered on the suffering endured by the Church and its clergy.⁶⁴ *La Civiltà Cattolica* continued, at least until the 1960s, to avoid directly addressing the issue of the Shoah, following a tendency shared by Italian society as a whole, and instead promoted a celebration of Pius XII’s charitable actions.⁶⁵ By the late 1970s, the memory of the Shoah had acquired a new centrality within Catholic

⁵⁹ Arrigo Bongiorno, “Perché fuggono dal Vietnam?”, *Avvenire*, December 17, 1978, 1.

⁶⁰ Piero Gheddo, “Italiani, non chiudete gli occhi davanti a questa tragedia,” *Gente*, January 6, 1979.

⁶¹ Arrigo Bongiorno, “Perché fuggono in massa dal Vietnam?”, *Avvenire*, November 17, 1978, 1.

⁶² Fernando Galbiati, “Un viaggio tra i profughi del Vietnam,” *Mondo e Missione*, May 1, 1979, 321.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁶⁴ Andrea Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio. Pio XII, il nazismo, gli ebrei* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2022), 288-291; Consonni, “The Church and the Memory of the Shoah,” 21-34.

⁶⁵ Elena Mazzini, *L’antiebraismo cattolico dopo la Shoah. Tradizioni e culture nell’Italia del secondo dopoguerra (1945-1974)* (Rome: Viella, 2012), 61-63.

discourse, also because of the post-conciliar climate and the role of John Paul II, having grown up in close contact with the Jewish community of Wadowice.⁶⁶ However, considering the analogies that emerged during the boat people crisis, this recognition still tended to place the persecution of Jews on the same level as the suffering endured by Catholic cardinals and priests, thereby reproducing certain antisemitic stereotypes. In this way, while acknowledging the specificity of Jewish persecution, Catholic discourse risked diminishing its distinctiveness by once again incorporating it into a victim-centered framework focused on the history and identity of the Church.

Indifference and the Myth of Good Italian

From June 1979 onwards, Catholic mass discourse accorded unprecedented prominence to a dual parallelism: between the boat people and the Jews and the bystanders of the past and those of the present. Attention to the victims was the result of long-term cultural dynamics. The traditional conception of war as an opportunity for individual and collective redemption gradually gave way to a sense of repulsion, which contributed to placing the victims of oppression at the center of public attention.⁶⁷ This trend was further strengthened in the early 1980s by the spread of a new pacifist sensibility. A series of events triggered an intense public reaction, which occurred only a few days apart: the broadcast on Italian television of the NBC American miniseries *Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss* and John Paul II's pilgrimage to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the first historic visit by a pope to a concentration camp. *Holocaust* was first broadcast in the United States in April 1978, reaching about 120 million viewers within a few days. It was the first widely distributed television portrayal centered on the specifically Jewish dimension of the Shoah. In West Germany, the series caused a profound shock and opened a broad national debate about the country's collective responsibilities. In Italy, however, the reaction was different. After it aired on Rete 1 between May 20 and June 19, no significant discussion emerged about Italy's role in the persecution and extermination of the Jews. Alongside the broader tendency to preserve Italy's self-image as a nation of victims, those weeks were marked by a notable reluctance to comment on the miniseries' references to the Christian persecution of the Jews.⁶⁸

Not coincidentally, these were the central themes of the gestures and speeches delivered by John Paul II at Auschwitz on 7 June 1979. Wojtyła regarded his visit to the camp as a central moment of his first pilgrimage to Poland. The visit was marked by gestures of great symbolic significance, within a process that was nonetheless accompanied by tensions and misunderstandings. Among the most innovative elements was, during the liturgy at Birkenau, the prayer before the inscription in Hebrew, an explicit recognition of the Shoah that represented a significant gesture of reconciliation. The decision to place a large wooden cross on the railway ramp where Jews were selected for extermination, however, provoked debate.

⁶⁶ Renato Moro, "L'elaborazione cattolica della Shoah in Italia," in *Memoria della Shoah. Dopo i testimoni*, ed. Saul Meghnagi (Rome: Donzelli, 2007), 30-34.

⁶⁷ James J. Sheehan, *L'età post-eroica. Guerra e pace nell'Europa contemporanea* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2009).

⁶⁸ Emiliano Perra, *Conflicts of Memory. The Reception of Holocaust Films and TV Programmes in Italy, 1945 to the Present* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 117-147.

This element superimposed Christian symbolism onto a site already charged with other meanings.⁶⁹ In John Paul II's discourse, Auschwitz thus acquired the meaning of a universal warning of peace and fraternity. The camp became a symbol of the denial of the "rights of nations: to existence, to freedom, to independence."⁷⁰ There were, therefore, two elements common to the Catholic reception and, more broadly, to the Italian one: the tendency to universalize the meaning of Auschwitz and the failure to come to terms with one's own historical responsibilities. While John Paul II avoided, on that occasion, any reference to antisemitism and to the responsibilities of the Church, Italian society similarly failed to undertake a reflection on its own involvement in the persecution of Jews. Both aspects contributed not only to creating a cultural environment favorable to comparisons, but also to fostering a specific rhetorical framework: the guilt of present-day indifference was contrasted with the silence of the past, justified by the presumed lack of awareness of the scope of the Shoah.

On 19 June 1979, *Corriere della Sera*, declared on its front page: "Basta con l'olocausto dei profughi del Vietnam" (Stop the Holocaust of the Vietnamese refugees).⁷¹ André Glucksmann was particularly struck "by the screening of *Holocaust* and by the photographs of a Pope celebrating Mass in a former death camp."⁷² The coincidence of these two events led him to shift his attention to denouncing the Pope's alleged silence regarding the boat people. The French philosopher published a forceful denunciation of "His Holiness Pope John Paul II," urging him "not to remain in the silence of Pius XII at the time of Auschwitz."⁷³ The debate over the attitude of the Holy See and of Pius XII toward the Shoah had already emerged during the Second World War,⁷⁴ only to intensify in the 1960s with the opening of Pacelli's cause for beatification and, above all, with the staging in Berlin, in 1963, of Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy*. Translated into around twenty languages, the play helped disseminate internationally a deeply negative image of Pius XII, based on accusations of pro-Nazi sympathies, indifference, and cowardice.⁷⁵ The references in the miniseries *Holocaust* to the role of the Catholic Church during the persecution of the Jews contributed to inviting comparisons with Pope John Paul II.⁷⁶

Alongside this analogy, Glucksmann also invoked the parallel between Europe's silences. Although "Europe did not know," it was nevertheless held responsible for the "crime of having allowed the Jews to be gassed"; for this reason, "today's indifferent," namely the "relatively wealthy countries—France, Germany, Italy," were called upon to prevent "the China Sea"

⁶⁹ Massimiliano Signifredi, *Giovanni Paolo II e la fine del comunismo. La transizione in Polonia (1978-1989)* (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 2013), 113-116; On the international reception of that media event, see the work of Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 207-225.

⁷⁰ "Vittoria della fede e dell'amore sull'odio. 7 giugno: al campo di concentramento di Brzezinka," *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 9, 1979.

⁷¹ "Basta con l'olocausto dei profughi del Vietnam," *Corriere della Sera*, June 19, 1979, 1.

⁷² André Glucksmann, "Li hanno scaraventati in un mare senza sponde," *Corriere della Sera*, June 19, 1979, 1.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Giovanni Miccoli, *I dilemmi e i silenzi di Pio XII. Vaticano, Seconda guerra mondiale e Shoah* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000), 1.

⁷⁵ Alessandro Angelo Persico, *Il caso Pio XII. Mezzo secolo di dibattito su Eugenio Pacelli* (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 2008), IX-X.

⁷⁶ Perra, *Conflicts of Memory*, 131.

from becoming “a liquid Auschwitz.”⁷⁷ This latter comparison gained much greater traction in public discourse.



Fig. 1. *La Stampa*, June 28, 1979, 3.

“I saw *Holocaust* on television. That is what Vietnam is like today,”⁷⁸ commented Giuseppina Cosimo, a refugee who had escaped a refugee camp. “The conscience of humanity is once again confronted with the horror of genocide,”⁷⁹ “comparable only to Hitler’s persecution of the Jews.”⁸⁰ The Turin-based daily also sought to mobilize Italian public opinion by evoking the image of the “Lager at sea,”⁸¹ [Fig. 1] accusing the Hanoi government of using “the South China Sea as Hitler used the gas chambers.”⁸²

At the same time, the weekly magazine *Gente* published an article entitled: “1979: The Holocaust Continues. Vietnam: The Charge Is Genocide,” written by the Catholic journalist Piero Gheddo. The appeal was directed even more explicitly not only at governments, but also at the indifference of civil society. “I wonder whether the ‘holocaust’ of the Vietnamese refugees [...] might not also be partly our fault—our fault as Italians although we are so moved when we see it on TV.”⁸³ Forty years later, public opinion had been informed “of the crimes committed by the Nazis throughout Europe.” Why, then, should we wait “another forty years

⁷⁷ Gluksmann, “Li hanno scaraventati in un mare senza sponde,” 1.

⁷⁸ Giuseppe Baiocchi, “Come hanno potuto riprendere a vivere i primi profughi approdati dal Vietnam,” *Corriere della Sera*, June 21, 1979, 23.

⁷⁹ Giovanni Testori, “Vietnamiti: la nostra coscienza davanti all’orrore del genocidio,” *Corriere della Sera*, June 20, 1979.

⁸⁰ “Le macerie del Vietnam,” *Corriere d’Informazione*, June 21, 1979, 2.

⁸¹ “I lager nel mare,” *La Stampa*, June 28, 1979, 3.

⁸² Mimmo Candito, “Una barca che va all’inferno. La tragedia dei profughi in fuga dal Vietnam,” *La Stampa*, June 25, 1979, 3.

⁸³ Piero Gheddo, “1979: l’olocausto continua. Vietnam: l’accusa è genocidio,” *Gente*, June 29, 1979, 74.

to be informed of the atrocities taking place before our eyes?" For Gheddo, if Italians had not been fully aware in the past, in the present, once informed, they were called upon to act. From this perspective, the "comparison with Hitler's time" appeared "spontaneous": "there, the Jews; here, the Chinese; there, the crematoria; here, the mass expulsion."⁸⁴ On 28 June 1979, Ugo Intini, editor-in-chief of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) newspaper *Avanti!*, published a front-page article entitled "'Holocaust' in Vietnam." In it, he asked: "If Vietnam has its own 'Holocaust,' why is there hesitation, beyond expressions of solidarity with the refugees, to identify the Nazis of the day—that is, Hanoi's ruling class?"⁸⁵ Intini issued his appeal "to spark, above all within the Left, a debate,"⁸⁶ resorting to "even those provocative stimuli," such as analogies with the Shoah.

This line of reflection also extended to the left-leaning press that was not affiliated with any political party, such as *L'Espresso*. On 1 July, the weekly magazine devoted part of its cover to the issue under the headline: "Olocausto '79. I dannati del Vietnam" (Holocaust '79. The Damned of Vietnam). While, on the one hand, PCI member and Italian Senator Umberto Terracini condemned Vietnam and its "Lager,"⁸⁷ Noam Chomsky expressed a radically different position. The American linguist and philosopher condemned "the abuse of the term," "Stalinism and totalitarianism,"⁸⁸ while defending the legitimacy of Vietnam's economic policy. Moreover, there was no consensus even within the pages of the PSI newspaper. The central question concerned the actual usefulness of such analogies: "Simply talking about Vietnam, perhaps in the style of 'Holocaust 1979,' would be a waste of time or a distraction. It would solve neither the refugees' problems nor the many problems of our own country, which exist regardless of Vietnam."⁸⁹ The existence of this debate confirms both the effectiveness and the evocative power of this analogy.

At this point, it is necessary to examine the response of Catholic culture. Faced with renewed accusations against Pius XII, Raimondo Manzini defended the conduct of the papacy on the pages of *Avvenire*. At a time when "some news of the horrors of the concentration camps had already begun to emerge," the Holy See is said to have provided "silent assistance" "to help Jews leave the country."⁹⁰ According to the CEI newspaper, the Catholic Church had already done everything that could and ought to have been done. The silence to be denounced was instead that of governments and public opinion, which became central to the Catholic interpretation of the boat people crisis. On 20 June 1979, *Il Popolo*, the newspaper of the ruling party, the Christian Democracy (DC), described the Vietnamese exodus as "a different new Holocaust," involving mainly refugees of Chinese origin who had been "driven out of their workplaces (like the Jews, indeed)."⁹¹ The aim was to encourage Italians to abandon

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ugo Intini, "'Olocausto' in Vietnam. La sinistra non può eludere il dibattito," *Avanti!*, June 28, 1979, 1.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Umberto Terracini, "Olocausto '79," *L'Espresso*, July 1, 1979, 7.

⁸⁸ Guido Moltedo, "Ma che piagnoni questi europei. Intervista a Noam Chomsky," *L'Espresso*, July 1, 1979, 8-9.

⁸⁹ Marcella Andreoli, "Una prima porta aperta per i Vietnamiti," *Avanti!*, June 20, 1979, 1.

⁹⁰ Raimondo Manzini, "Quella resistenza eroica e silenziosa," *Avvenire*, May 20, 1979, 3.

⁹¹ Paolo Giuntella, "Una tragedia anche nostra. Il terribile dramma dei profughi indocinesi," *Il Popolo*, June 20, 1979, 1.

their own “indifferent cynicism.”⁹² A few days earlier, *Avvenire* published on its front page an evocative article by Piero Gheddo titled “L’olocausto dei profughi vietnamiti” (The Holocaust of the Vietnamese Refugees).⁹³ Drawing on these tragic episodes, Piero Gheddo denounced:

Italian television is showing us these days another “Holocaust,” that of the Jews in Nazi Germany and Europe forty years ago—but it is absurd that it remains silent, that it does not adequately portray this other Holocaust happening before our eyes. [...] We are all responsible for the Vietnam Holocaust 1979, even if we pretend not to see or hear the anguished pleas coming from Southeast Asia. Future generations will accuse us of having done nothing (or almost nothing) to stop the massacre; yet we feel our conscience is clear because we watch, with indignation, the televised portrayal of Nazi crimes from forty years ago. Comfortably seated in our armchairs.⁹⁴

This initiative did references to the Jewish persecution reach the readers of *Famiglia Cristiana*. On July 8, 1979, Piero Gheddo clearly warned of the advent of a “new holocaust.”⁹⁵ Numerous testimonies about the escape from “concentration and extermination camps” were accompanied by an effective iconographic representation, constructed through cartoons and photographs.⁹⁶



Fig. 2. *Famiglia Cristiana*, July 8, 1979, 16.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Piero Gheddo, “L’olocausto dei profughi vietnamiti,” *Avvenire*, June 17, 1979, 1.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Giuntella, “Una tragedia anche nostra. Il terribile dramma dei profughi indocinesi,” 1.

⁹⁶ Piero Gheddo, “A quei profughi le parole non servono. Nessuno può tirarsi indietro di fronte alla tragedia dei profughi indocinesi,” *Famiglia Cristiana*, July 8, 1979, 16.

In the same article, a cartoon was published [Fig. 2]. The cartoon features a family sitting in front of the television, watching two different tragedies. In the first scene, they watch the American Miniseries *Holocaust* and exclaim, “Poor Jews!”; in the second, they witness the tragedy of the boat people with the same passivity, as if it were “just a show.”⁹⁷ The cartoon shifts the responsibility to the present: while ignorance could be pleaded back then, today’s indifference is no longer justifiable, because awareness of the Shoah demands action. On July 8, 1979, *Avvenire* published, within a section titled “Che dice la gente su Olocausto ‘79” a series of letters sent by some readers. Among these, Giovanni Lodi, from Genoa, wrote: “Dear Editor, the TV film *Holocaust* has ended, raising outrage and horror for its portrayal of a horrifying campaign of mass murder that took place, under conditions of calculated secrecy.”⁹⁸ In this perspective, the silence of the past was once again explained by the presumed impossibility of knowing, whereas “the Holocaust of the Vietnamese refugees” was unfolding “before an insensitive world.”⁹⁹ The Holy See’s press offered a substantially similar interpretation.

On June 20, 1979, John Paul II spoke again on the matter at the end of the general audience in St. Peter’s Square: “I appeal to the conscience of humanity, that all should take their share of responsibility, both the peoples and those who govern them, in the name of a solidarity that goes beyond frontiers, races and ideologies.”¹⁰⁰ Just four days after the papal speech, the Holy See’s weekly illustrated magazine, *L’Osservatore della Domenica*, denounced the “racial aspects” of the Malaysian government’s policies¹⁰¹ while also condemning public indifference.

The Holocaust of the Jews cries out to heaven, and everyone has asked, “How could this have happened?” But at that time, the world did not know—or did not know to what extent; the war set up insurmountable barriers. But today we know; today we have time; today we can prevent disgrace from happening again.¹⁰²

La Civiltà Cattolica had, moreover, already reiterated: “This is a terrible drama, before which human and Christian conscience cannot remain indifferent.”¹⁰³ This condemnation would soon be replaced by an opposing narrative, based on a constant celebration not only of the Italian humanitarian spirit, but more specifically of its Catholic roots. On June 25, the Italian government established a “Committee for the Coordination of Public and Private Activities in Support of Southeast Asian Refugees.” During the first meeting at the Prime Minister’s

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ “Che dice la gente su Olocausto ‘79,” *Avvenire*, July 5, 1979, 3.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ John Paul II, “General Audience, 20 June 1979,” *The Holy See*, accessed March 15, 2026. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19790620.html.

¹⁰¹ The member countries of ANSEA—Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand—had, in fact, decided to push Indochinese refugees back out to sea, towing them into international waters with police boats. Possieri, *Rifugiati*, 82.

¹⁰² Raimondo Manzini, “Due interrogative,” *L’Osservatore della Domenica*, June 24, 1979, 3.

¹⁰³ De Rosa, “La coscienza Cristiana,” 259-260.

office, the goal was set to organize a humanitarian mission to Southeast Asia. On July 4, the cruisers Vittorio Veneto and Andrea Doria, and the supply ship Stromboli departed from La Spezia and Taranto.¹⁰⁴



Fig. 3. Cover of Famiglia Cristiana, July 9, 1979.

¹⁰⁴ Possieri, *Rifugiati*, 90-95.



Fig. 4. Cover of *Famiglia Cristiana*, December 17, 1979.

On July 29, 1979, *Famiglia Cristiana* featured on its cover the announcement of the arrival in Italy of the first refugees. Italy, “of the poor, of the humble,” was ready to “give meaning to the lives of these wretched people, who had escaped, through a thousand sufferings, that immense genocide.” The first to aid were the members of Caritas Italy, “to which all Catholic organizations” active in those days reported, tasked with “arranging for the first arrivals to be placed with families and institutions.”¹⁰⁵ Starting with the magazine's cover, a substantial change occurred in the iconographic representation of Indochinese refugees. The central element of the image was no longer the family, as in the December 17, 1978,¹⁰⁶ [Fig. 4] issue, but rather the children, depicted looking directly at the reader with a stern gaze and a hand gripping the barbed wire [Fig. 3]. Although it has not been possible to determine the name of

¹⁰⁵ “Nuova vita per i profughi. Sono arrivate in Italia le prime famiglie di esiliati dal Vietnam,” *Famiglia Cristiana*, July 29, 1979, 16-17.

¹⁰⁶ Cover of “Sulla nave dei disperati. La tragica avventura dei profughi dal Vietnam,” *Famiglia Cristiana*, December 17, 1978.

the photographer or the production context of the image, it is possible to focus on the iconographic level of description. The barbed wire evoked the fences of a concentration camp. In that discursive context, the symbol generated a comparison with the Shoah, visually reproducing those discursive elements that had, until then, been part of journalistic language: indifference and the rhetoric of “never again.” Ultimately, this general mobilization against indifference, the rhetoric of “never again,” and the analogy with the Shoah led—especially within the Catholic world—to numerous initiatives to adopt refugee children left orphaned.¹⁰⁷ The arrival of the Vietnamese refugees had helped fuel a national debate on reception policies, provoking complaints from some journalists about the lack of oversight and the complete disorganization.¹⁰⁸ *Corriere della Sera* questioned the regularization of immigrants, while condemning “racism, but also demagoguery.”¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, an unemployed woman from Milan wrote to the moderate weekly *Oggi*, arguing that Vietnamese refugees “aspired to privileged positions,” while “millions of Italians” were forced to wait “for years at employment offices.”¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, *L'Osservatore Romano* devoted an entire page to a detailed account of the reception given to the refugees, making no reference to the issue of racism. The Holy See's daily, on the other hand, offered the portrayal of a nation of priests and Christians who “with simplicity and affection seek to make their integration into the new life easier.”¹¹¹ To reinforce this narrative of Italian hospitality, the article highlighted the gratitude of the newcomers themselves, reporting that “they [the refugees] say they already love Italy: a country they did not know, but that immediately made them feel at home.”¹¹² On 3 February 1980, Maria Grazia Bevilacqua praised, in the pages of *Famiglia Cristiana*, the “generous and spontaneous” willingness of Italian families to adopt a refugee child, seeing in it the “awakening [...] of a Christian conscience.”¹¹³ During those same weeks, an image of Italy as a country that had returned to Catholicism spread, above all through the Catholic press, reinforced by the words of the refugees, “who said they were happy to come to Italy precisely because they knew they were coming to the country that hosts the Pope.”¹¹⁴ “What a fortunate country Italy is: it has the Pope and no communists,”¹¹⁵ proclaimed *Gente*. The pro-government Mondadori weekly *Epoca*, by contrast, published an evocative photograph of a child left “silently gazing at the magical domes of the churches of Venice.”¹¹⁶ As early as 1

¹⁰⁷ Andrea Possieri, “Un ruolo di supplenza. L'associazionismo cattolico e l'accoglienza degli immigrati stranieri in Italia (1979-1986),” in *Disuguaglianza e generazioni in Italia (1914-2008)*, eds. Stefano Cavazza, Emanuele Costantini, and Emanuela Scarpellini (Bologna: Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, 2026), 57-80.

¹⁰⁸ Possieri, *Rifugiati*, 62.

¹⁰⁹ Renato Ferraro and Milo Vignolo, “‘Né razzismo, né demagogia’. Che cosa si può fare per regolarizzare la posizione degli immigrati,” *Corriere della Sera*, August 6, 1979, 3.

¹¹⁰ “I vietnamiti e noi italiani,” *Oggi*, September 29, 1979.

¹¹¹ Sergio Trasatti, “Accolti con amore, primi gruppi di rifugiati indocinesi a Roma e a Grottaferrata,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 29, 1979, 2.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Maria Grazia Bevilacqua, “‘Aiutateci ad avere un bambino cambogiano’,” *Famiglia Cristiana*, February 3, 1980, 58.

¹¹⁴ “Italia: il Paese del Papa,” *Avvenire*, September 9, 1979, 8.

¹¹⁵ Francobaldo Chiocci, “Che paese fortunato l'Italia: c'è il Papa, non ci sono i comunisti,” *Gente*, August 24, 1979, 32-38.

¹¹⁶ “Svanisce l'incubo: appare Venezia,” *Epoca*, September 1, 1979, 16-19.

October 1979, Piero Gheddo, one of the leading figures in this campaign, had published his concluding reflections: "First, it must be said that the response of the Italian people has been unexpected, wonderful."¹¹⁷ Framing this public outpouring of solidarity as a spiritual turning point, he went on to assert: "This is the Christian sign that our society needs."¹¹⁸ Almost a year after the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in Italy, on April 6, 1980, Renzo Giacomelli asked on *Famiglia Cristiana* the question: "How are we doing on racism in Italy?" The article began with an interview with the Vietnamese refugee Agnese Nguyen Thi Ngoc Hieu, owner of a restaurant in Rome. The answer was clear: "Racist Italians? Absolutely not. I feel good in Italy, and the Italians are all very kind and friendly."¹¹⁹

Conclusions

The word "indifference," invoked in the Catholic press, has become one of the central references of Italian Holocaust memory. As Guri Schwarz has observed, this moral category had its roots in the late 1980s, when it was used both to interpret the persecutions of the 1930s and 1940s and to reflect on the dilemmas of the present.¹²⁰ This interpretive framework, however, does not fully apply to the Catholic reception of the boat people, which was instead characterized by the justification of the silences of Italian and European society, attributed to a lack of information. In this context, the "myth of the good Italian," a foundation of anti-fascist national identity since the establishment of the Italian Republic,¹²¹ continued to exert a strong influence on public discourse, limiting a full assumption of responsibility for the past. While acknowledging the Jewish genocide, the Italian Catholic world used the tragedy of the Vietnamese refugees to construct a predominantly victim-centered narrative,¹²² focused on the suffering of the Church itself and, in some cases, still connected to persistent antisemitic stereotypes. The victim-centered imagery employed in the analogy between the boat people and Jews in fact reflected an ancient anti-Jewish stereotype: that of the "witness people." Beginning in the 1980s, the emergence of the renewed interest in Jewish identity and culture in Italy, contributed to the formation of a positive repertoire of images of Jews that was, at times, "dangerously close to negative representations."¹²³ A stereotypical and victim-centered image of "the Jews" thus spread in Italy, connected to the idea, rooted in the Christian anti-Judaic tradition, of a people punished by God and

¹¹⁷ Piero Gheddo, "Il centro missionario P.I.M.E. per i profughi del Vietnam," *Mondo e Missione*, October 1, 1979, 554-558.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Renzo Giacomelli, "Come stiamo a razzismo in Italia?," *Famiglia Cristiana*, April 6, 1980, 61.

¹²⁰ Schwarz, "Un antirazzismo commemorativo," 165-171.

¹²¹ I mention only the main works, see David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1994); On the role of the Italian Jewish leadership see Guri Schwarz, "On Myth Making and Nation Building: The Genesis of the 'Myth of Good Italian,'" *Yad Vashem Studies* 1 (2008): 111-143; For the intertwined representations of the "bad German" and the "good Italian" Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2013).

¹²² Consonni, "The Church and the Memory of the Shoah," 21-34.

¹²³ Simon Levis Sullam, *L'archivio antiebraico. Il linguaggio dell'antisemitismo moderno* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2008), 82-86.

condemned to an endless dispersion until the end of time.¹²⁴ “They call them the ‘people of the boats’. Without a homeland, without geography.”¹²⁵ This was the definition that Monsignor Ersilio Tonini attributed to the Vietnamese refugees in the pages of *Avvenire*. However, the reference to “indifference” was employed to encourage public opinion to transform the new historical awareness, also shaped by the viewing of a television miniseries, into concrete action. The silence of the past, even without an explicit attribution of guilt, was thus interpreted as a moral responsibility requiring redemption. With the arrival of the first Vietnamese refugees in Italy, Catholic narratives interpreted humanitarian operations as evidence of the nation’s return to its Christian spirit and to its spiritual guide: the Pope. For this reason, Catholic anti-totalitarianism in those years cannot be considered exclusively humanitarian and apolitical, unlike the form promoted by the Italian Left. The condemnation of the new totalitarian regimes and the reference to the Shoah were therefore also part of a broader political project: the reaffirmation of a Catholic Italy.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Piero Stefani, *L'antigiudaismo. Storia di un'idea* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2004).

¹²⁵ Ersilio Tonini, “Quel campo di concentramento è nei mari del Vietnam,” *Avvenire*, July 8, 1979, 2.

¹²⁶ On the origin of Catholic Nationalism see Guido Formigoni, *L'Italia dei cattolici. Dal Risorgimento a oggi* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2010).

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Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism

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Antisemitism Reconsidered

In the eyes of many observers, the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, the ensuing war in Gaza and the US-Israel war with Iran have become nothing less than a watershed, generational moment for Jews across Europe, North America, Israel and other centers. While vocal anti-Israel protests on campuses and city squares from Berkeley to Berlin and from London to Lisbon have made many Jews and Israelis feel uncomfortable, violent assaults (and, at times even acts of murder) against Jews and Jewish institutions in Manchester, Sydney, Toronto and Washington, DC, have forced Jews in a range of locations to think hard about what it means to be a Jew today, in the twenty-first century. Are Jews, indeed, full and equal citizens in different European, North American and other societies? Or, was the enlightenment dream regarding the ability to be both a Jew and something else—a Pole, a Canadian, an American—an illusory moment whose time has come to a sudden and deafening closure?

In North America and elsewhere, Jewish communities and local universities have responded to this acute moment in modern Jewish history by creating an array of new research centers and initiatives dedicated to the academic study of antisemitism at leading institutions such as Brandeis University, New York University, the University of Michigan, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Toronto and others. The underlying principle behind this wave of research centers is clear: If we could only understand the social illness we collectively refer to as “antisemitism,” then we would surely be able to combat, contain and even eliminate it, just as scholars and scientists were able to do with other deadly contagion that threatened modern society, from polio to AIDS to Covid. Although surprised and, for some even traumatized, by the events of the past three years, the vast majority of Jews and Jewish institutions remain fundamentally Whiggish regarding the very path of modernity and its fundamental promise regarding the construction of a just, ethical, and inherently better

world in which one can be both a Jew and an equal member of the surrounding community. However, as Jonathan Judaken convincingly demonstrates in his illuminating, learned and provocative study *Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism*, many of these same questions pre-occupied a range of leading intellectuals from Sartre to Arendt to Mosse, and their conclusions regarding the nature and history of antisemitism and the future of “the Jews” are as varied (and as fascinating) as the writings and lives of these, primarily Jewish, thinkers themselves. Rather than despair at the multiplicity of approaches and potential answers to these questions, Judaken is inspired by these works and his path-breaking study is designed to encourage readers to follow their footsteps, embrace their intellectual challenges, and to take the study of antisemitism seriously as both authors and readers revisit, probe and rethink some of the fundamental postulates regarding hostility and prejudice towards members of the Jewish community (antisemitism) that are very often accepted in Jewish society and also among scholars of Jewish studies and leaders of Jewish communal life.

For the past two decades, Judaken has been one of the more prominent voices advocating for the need to reconsider the very nature, history and potential resolution of antisemitism as well as the different ways that scholars study and discuss the phenomenon, and *Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism* expands upon and continues his bold intervention.¹ Noting how academic and public discussions of antisemitism often degenerate to a discursive “battlefield” and the extent to which they frequently serve as surrogates for heated debates regarding the “Israeli-Palestinian question,” Judaken calls on readers and scholars to turn to works by key twentieth-century thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, members of the Frankfurt School, Hannah Arendt and Jean-François Lyotard, as well as sociologists like Talcott Parsons and Zygmunt Bauman and historians like Léon Poliakov and George Mosse (pp. 3 and 1, respectively). Close readings of studies by these scholars, allows Judaken “to write a history of the major theories and theorists of anti-Semitism” which aims to bring “critical theories of anti-Semitism into dialogue with critical race theorizing” and, in the process, to advance his larger goal of revitalizing the academic study of antisemitism (p. 15).

Delineating his methodological goals and the book’s scholarly intervention in the Introduction, Judaken presents his position clearly. “I maintain that writing about Judeophobia today demands greater interrogation of our terms, methods, narratives and epistemologies. It requires that we appreciate the connections between anti-Semitism and colonialism, immigration, and xenophobia; the links between gender and Jewishness, and between Jews and Muslims and other ‘Others’; and the ties between the postcolonial condition shaped by slavery and imperialism, and the experiences of other genocides and the Holocaust. In short, I argue against exceptionalism, eternalism, teleology, apologetics and theoretical naïveté” (p. 3).

Although many of their earlier works consciously avoided Jewish topics and the study of antisemitism, leading members of the Frankfurt School like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno turned increasingly to these topics after their exile from Nazi Germany and arrival to

¹ Jonathan Judaken, “So What’s New? Rethinking the ‘New Antisemitism’ in a Global Age,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 42, nos. 4-5 (2008): 531-560; David Feldman and Marc Volovici, eds., *Antisemitism, Islamophobia and the Politics of Definition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2014); Scott Ury and Guy Miron, eds., *Antisemitism and the Politics of History* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2024).

the US as German-Jewish refugees in Southern California in 1941 (pp. 49 and 51). Their research on antisemitism was advanced by a major funding initiative from the American Jewish Committee which supported and published the groundbreaking Studies in Prejudice series that Horkheimer directed (p. 46). Leading to such definitive studies as *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), *Rehearsal for Destruction: A Study of Political Anti-Semitism in Imperial Germany* (1949), and *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (1949), the five books published as part of the Studies in Prejudice series shaped the way that generations of scholars and other observers would understand the nature of antisemitism and its critical place in both the Nazi's rise to power and the implementation of the Final Solution. Nor is Judaken shy in noting how relevant questions like those regarding the charisma of the authoritarian figure, the allure of political rhetoric, and the impact of racial antisemitism are for understanding today's political discourse. According to Judaken, these books can be read as a "secret playbook" regarding the "contemporary right-wing populist authoritarian discourse" in the United States and other locations (p. 59).

Horkheimer and Adorno also collaborated on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which looked at "anti-Semitism within the development of Western civilization, instrumental rationality, and the administered society of modernity" (p. 65). While the works published under the auspices of the American Jewish Committee's Studies in Prejudice series were widely read and incredibly influential, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would speak to a different, more academic audience, and the book continues to serve as a central part of the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory to this day (p. 65).

Horkheimer, Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School were part of a generation of post-war émigré scholars who attempted to comprehend the searing black hole that World War II and the Holocaust created in the very middle of Europe in the very middle of the twentieth century. Hannah Arendt similarly set out to understand these and related developments in her sweeping study *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). After her arrest and imprisonment by the Gestapo in the summer of 1933, Arendt and her mother fled Germany to Paris where she was later interned as an "enemy alien" in 1940 before escaping and fleeing, first to Lisbon and then to the United States. Settling in New York, she began writing for a number of central Jewish journals like *The Menorah Journal* and *Jewish Social Studies*, where she published pieces that would lay the foundations for her masterwork, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (p. 75). Antisemitism was key to Arendt's study, taking up the first third of the tome as she repeatedly called for the phenomenon's "historicization" (p. 73). As part of her efforts to challenge how many understood and studied antisemitism at the time, Arendt criticized "eternalist narratives that postulate that Jews are transhistorically hated and abused," and was "also critical of apologetics, casual teleology, and exceptionalist narratives" (p. 73, see also pp. 88 and 99). After her analysis of antisemitism, Arendt turned to imperialism, by focusing on the example of Cecil Rhodes and other imperial financiers (some of whom were Jewish) active in colonial South Africa, thus allowing her to forge a connection between "the histories of anti-Semitism, racism, imperialism, Nazism, and genocide" (pp. 95 and 77).

Forceful and enticing, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* "instantly became a key reference in debates about totalitarianism during the Cold War and in postwar discussions of anti-

Semitism and the Holocaust.” Arendt’s 1963 study *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, on the other hand, “was far more controversial and helped ignite key debates in the emerging field of Holocaust studies” (pp. 75-76). The renowned German-Israeli scholar of kabbalah from the Hebrew University, Gershom Scholem, for example, accused Arendt in a private letter of lacking a “love of the Jewish people” (*ahavat Yisrael*),² as fierce debates among Jews surrounding Arendt’s study of Eichmann foreshadowed many of the arguments and divides that plague the study of antisemitism today as the field repeatedly attempts to strike a balance between scholarly research and Jewish communal interests.³

The Polish-born sociologist Zygmunt Bauman similarly turned to the study of antisemitism and the Holocaust in exile after being forced out of Poland in wake of the 1968 anti-Zionist campaign. After a few, apparently unhappy, years at Tel Aviv University, Bauman continued on to Canada and the United States before finding an academic home at the University of Leeds’ Department of Sociology in 1971 (p. 106). There, Bauman turned his attention to the Holocaust and “the Jewish question” with such provocative works as *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) and *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (1995). Embracing the Frankfurt School’s intellectual legacy and Arendt’s iconoclastic temperament, Bauman brushed up against the burgeoning field of Holocaust studies just as it was developing a scholarly consensus in major academic centers in Israel and the United States.

Turning to the long-overlooked Polish literary scholar of Jewish descent Artur Sandaeur, Bauman embraces the term *allosemitism* to highlight the different ways “that Jews and Judaism are treated as the quintessence of difference, often embodying how all forms of alterity” threaten the socio-political reality (p. 124).⁴ Focusing on *allosemitism* also allows Bauman to emphasize the extent to which antisemitism should be “treated as a case of *heterophobia* - the resentment of differences that provoke anxiety,” since “Judeophobes [...] fear the anxiety produced by the Jews because they blur borderlines” (pp. 124 and 125). In this and other ways, Bauman’s analysis substantiates one of Judaken’s main points regarding the many connections between antisemitism and other forms of group hatred.

While Bauman viewed *allosemitism*, ambivalence and modernity as key forces underpinning antisemitism and the Holocaust, Léon Poliakov pointed to the longue durée of antisemitism and its central role in the Nazis’ rise to power and the implementation of the Final Solution. Judaken’s chapter on Poliakov is very much an historiographical rehabilitation of the French Jewish historian as he sheds light on “Poliakov’s often-unacknowledged contributions to the establishment of Holocaust studies” (p. 158; also see, p. 164). According to Judaken, Poliakov’s work served as nothing less than “a palimpsest that sketched key aspects of the Shoah that were developed and treated by others, but rarely with credit to their origins in his work” (p. 159).

Poliakov’s approach to the topic was laid out in his study *Bréviaire de la haine* (*Harvest of Hate*) which was published in 1951, the same year that Arendt produced *The Origins of*

² Gershom Scholem to Hannah Arendt, Jerusalem, July 23, 1963, in Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 241-242.

³ Scott Ury and Guy Miron, “Antisemitism: On the Meanings and Uses of a Contested Term,” in *Antisemitism and the Politics of History*, 1-21.

⁴ Artur Sandauer, *On the Situation of the Polish Writer of Jewish Descent in the Twentieth Century: It Is Not I Who Should Have Written This Study...*, trans. Abe Shenitzer and Sarah Shenitzer (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005).

Totalitarianism and a year after the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno and others. Unlike these works, however, Poliakov was, according to Judaken's frank assessment, "no theorist" (p. 158). At the same time, Poliakov's study, which "was the first all-encompassing survey of the genocide of European Jewry in any language," helped lay the foundations for how generations of scholars would understand and define the Holocaust by highlighting the Christian roots of antisemitism, the view that Nazism was, essentially, a new religion, and the centrality of modern racism to both antisemitism and the Holocaust (pp. 164 and 167-168). These and other points were also central to Poliakov's four-volume study on *The History of Anti-Semitism*, a seminal work that claimed that anti-Judaism lay at "the core of Western civilization." "To write the history of anti-Semitism," Poliakov believed "is to write the history of a persecution that, in the bosom of Western society, was linked with the highest values of this society" (p. 177). Unlike Arendt and Bauman's emphasis on the path of modernity, Poliakov believed that "Christian anti-Judaism was the scaffolding for modern racism" (p. 188). Here, in particular, Poliakov's work helped lay the foundations for prevailing analyses of antisemitism as well as its central place in the study of the Holocaust.⁵ While the twinning of antisemitism and the Holocaust may seem self-evident to many observers today, Judaken demonstrates the different interpretations of the relationship between racism, antisemitism, World War II and the Holocaust that a range of twentieth-century thinkers adopted and the far-reaching ramifications of these authorial and methodological strategies, both then and now.

The study of antisemitism is a heavily presentist field and while Judaken is determined to challenge this approach, the concluding chapter turns to today's world by pointing to the various ways that the different thinkers he discusses can help us unpack and understand pressing contemporary issues. Bauman's emphasis on the ambivalence inherent in *allosemitism* as well as his use of the concept of *heterophobia* helps demonstrate "how Judeophobia in the present is entangled in anti-Muslim, anti-black, and xenophobic racisms" in contemporary American society where "the outcasts are a rolling list of targets: Muslims, immigrants, liberals and socialists, and Jews" (pp. 221 and 228). At the same time, works by members of the Frankfurt School and other scholars (like the historian George Mosse) can help people decipher contemporary examples of the *Authoritarian Personality* and various *Prophets of Deceit* in the United States, Hungary and other countries where many Jews live. Similarly, Poliakov, who was "the key forerunner of 'the new anti-Semitism' theorists," can help us understand "the shifts in the discourse of the Left following the Six-Day War in 1967" (p. 228), and Arendt, who "was labeled as a 'self-hating,' anti-Semitic, 'enemy of Israel,'" serves as a stark reminder regarding the angry debates today surrounding the State of Israel and many of its policies in which "Jews who are vociferous critics of Israel" are often derided and delegitimized as "self-hating" members of a Jewish fifth column (pp. 233 and 237).⁶

Judaken's wide-ranging, learned analysis raises a litany of questions that readers and scholars will ponder throughout his provocative study. I, for one, repeatedly found myself

⁵ See, Shmuel Almog, ed., *Antisemitism through the Ages* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1988); Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Antisemitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (New York: Random House, 2010).

⁶ Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Antisemitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Sol Goldberg, "Jewish Self-Hatred," in *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism*, eds. Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 147-160.

thinking about the potential impact that larger catastrophes like the Holocaust and the very experience of exile may have had upon a particular thinker's decision to study antisemitism and the Holocaust. The vast majority of the authors that Judaken discusses are Jews (in one way or another) whose lives were violently disrupted by the Nazi's rise to power. Whether it was Adorno and Horkheimer in Southern California, Arendt in New York, Poliakov in Paris, Bauman in Tel Aviv and later in Leeds, or George Mosse in Iowa and then in Wisconsin, most of them turned to the study of antisemitism only after their seemingly idyllic European lives were torn asunder and they attempted to comprehend the Nazis' rise to power and repair, somehow, the shattered remains of their pre-war lives. While these points are raised periodically throughout Judaken's book, the potential link between the very personal experience of exile and loss, on the one hand, and the turn to larger historical questions, on the other, might prove to be a productive line of thought for future studies.

As refugee scholars, many of these thinkers and their research projects were also dependent upon the goodwill and support of Jewish communal institutions and their associated leaders. The American Jewish Committee's backing was critical to the publication of the *Studies in Prejudice* series undertaken by Horkheimer and other members of the Frankfurt school and Poliakov's early forays into the field began through his activities at the postwar *Contemporary Jewish Documentation Center* and his subsequent role as an expert in the French delegation to the Nuremberg trials (pp. 162-3). Some two decades later, Arendt was pilloried for her book on the Eichmann trial by an array of prominent Jewish communal figures, including Scholem and also Jacob Robinson who was the founding director of the Institute of Jewish Affairs in New York, the research arm of the World Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Congress.⁷ Nor does this confluence of interests end with the lives and works discussed in Judaken's book. To the best of my knowledge, all of the centers for the study of antisemitism currently active today—academic and communal—are supported by private or, in the case of the largest center in Europe at the Technical University in Berlin, by public funding, and even the esteemed forum sponsoring this scholarly discussion of Judaken's book is published with the support of the Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea (CDEC, Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation). While the maintenance and development of a range of academic fields depend upon support from either private or government sources, the study of antisemitism has a long history of Jewish communal backing and involvement and I wonder about the extent to which this ongoing, albeit diffuse, dependence on communal support has shaped the very study and development of the field, and what this, in turn, can tell us about the way that scholars, students and community members think, teach, study and understand antisemitism.

Digressions aside, Jonathan Judaken's book is one of the most important studies of antisemitism to have been written in this fragile century of ours and it is nothing less than a must read for any student, scholar or community member interested in learning and thinking about antisemitism, its history and the heated debates that continue regarding its potential resolution or unfortunate endurance. The range of works analyzed by Judaken is staggering and his readings are clear and thought-provoking. *Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism* adroitly delineates the different approaches that a range of key thinkers implemented in their

⁷ Jacob Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, the Jewish Catastrophe and Hannah Arendt's Narrative* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965).

attempts to understand, explain and perhaps even resolve antisemitism and, in doing so, allows students and scholars to gain a much deeper understanding of the different ways that the phenomenon has been studied, presented and discussed.

While Judaken's study may be a bit too detailed at times for undergraduate survey courses, it will prove essential for graduate student seminars and accompanying reading groups on the topic and will also be of great use in courses on European intellectual history and modern Jewish thought as students and their instructors dive deep into the works, minds and lives of central thinkers like Sartre, Adorno and Arendt as well as sociologists like Talcott Parsons and Bauman, and historians like Poliakov and Mosse. Interested community members as well as a wide range of Jewish and non-Jewish educators, practitioners and communal leaders will also gain much from Judaken's spirited call that we all take this very moment in our fragmented, frenetic lives on the precipice of a post-human era to pause and think about a range of basic assumptions that have long been accepted as fundamental truths regarding "the Jews," their history and their fate.

Whether or not Jewish studies scholars and students as well as community members and other interested readers will be able to hear and embrace Judaken's intellectual, political and existential intervention remains, at the end of the day, an open question.

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Antisemitism Reconsidered

Jonathan Judaken's *Critical Theories of Anti-Semitism* begins by observing that few topics such as antisemitism have been, at the same time, the object of so much attention and so many publications and are so significantly undertheorized. The book is an attempt to remedy that condition by returning to some of the most influential twentieth-century thinkers who tried to explain the phenomenon, and by asking what their theories can (and cannot) do for us today.

The book appeared in June 2024, in Columbia University Press's "New Directions in Critical Theory" series. It arrived at an exceptionally charged moment. It was published months after the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023, and the war that followed, while encampment protests were unfolding on campuses in various parts of the world. The book can be read as a work of intellectual history and conceptual critique, and it can be also seen as an intervention in the most polarizing political argument of its day.

Judaken is well positioned to write such a book. He is a scholar of modern European intellectual history, and his first monograph, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question*, treated representations of Jews as a lens on the role of the French intellectual.¹ His engagement with the conceptual problems of antisemitism harks back several years, with contributions in prestigious journals.² This 2024 book can be read as the full elaboration of those earlier reflections on the category of antisemitism and its flaws. It is a synthesis of a career, and it is also a sustained argument about the need to reorganize the field.

The book has a double character, and Judaken is explicit about it. It is at once a theoretical

¹ Jonathan Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

² Jonathan Judaken, "So what's new? Rethinking the 'new antisemitism' in a global age," *Patterns of Prejudice* 42, nos. 4-5 (2008): 531-560; Jonathan Judaken, "Rethinking anti-Semitism," *American Historical Review* 123, no. 4 (2018): 1122-1138.

reflection on the methodological and conceptual problems in analyzing antisemitism and a history of a series of very different yet undoubtedly relevant authors or schools. Its introduction presents the state of the art, the tensions existing in the field, and the severe limits of the debates on antisemitism. Judaken invites the reader to consider hostility towards Jews as one racism among others, historically specific, discursively unstable, but analytically comparable, rather than as a timeless and singular “longest hatred.” He very clearly outlines his intent: to promote a different category, that of Judeophobia, and to do so by engaging with some of the main reflections on antisemitism that developed in the wake of Nazi racism and the Holocaust. Each chapter then takes on a major thinker or tradition, considered as representatives of significant conceptual frameworks that Judaken qualifies as: “existentialist, interactionist, socio-psychoanalytic, sociological, postmodern, and historical” (p. 19). Each is used in turn to test and complicate the others. The result is a survey as well as a sustained conversation among interpreters whose disagreements are treated as productive.

The first thinker analyzed in depth is Sartre, on whom Judaken is an expert. The relevant chapter concerns the argument of *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1944), that the Jew is in an important sense produced by the antisemite’s gaze, and that antisemitism is a passion, a choice of hatred as a way of being, rather than an opinion. Judaken traces the evolution of Sartre’s thought from existentialism to antiracism. That trajectory matters because Sartre’s later anticolonial writing, including his engagement with Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, connects the analysis of antisemitism to a wider critique of racism and imperialism. This is exactly the connection Judaken wants the field to make. Yet the author does not spare criticism for Sartre, as he does for the other authors considered. The author analyzed thus appears as both a resource and an admonition.

The second chapter turns not to a single intellectual but to a wider circle: the Frankfurt School. The relevant texts include the “Elements of Anti-Semitism” chapter in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the empirical *Studies in Prejudice* project, Franz Neumann’s *Behemoth*, and the institute’s wider analyses of fascism, authority, and mass culture. The chapter’s importance for Judaken’s larger thesis lies in the Frankfurt School’s insistence that antisemitism is inseparable from the structure of modern society and cannot be blamed on aberrant individuals or a discrete ideology. Its limitations, notably a tendency to treat Jews as objects of projection rather than as historical agents, are also part of the story.

With Hannah Arendt, the third chapter takes up one of the most influential and possibly most contested accounts of modern antisemitism. The relevant portion of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* rejects both the eternal-hatred thesis and the scapegoat thesis. The chapter’s subtitle signals an interest in Arendt’s “story” of history.

The fourth chapter pairs two sociologists across a generational divide, Talcott Parsons and Zygmunt Bauman. Parsons’s 1942 essay on the sociology of modern antisemitism analyzed the phenomenon as an expressive reaction to strain and anomie in a society undergoing rapid modernization, with Germany as the crucial case. Bauman, writing decades later in *Modernity and the Holocaust* and in his reflections on “allosemitism,” transformed the question by arguing that Jews occupied the position of the stranger, the figure who defies the categories by which modern order is maintained, and who therefore provokes both fear and fascination.

Bauman's emphasis on ambivalence supplies the theoretical basis for Judaken's insistence on the plasticity of anti-Jewish imagery. Because the Jew can be made to signify almost anything, from capitalist to communist, from cosmopolitan to clannish, the concept resists any single explanatory frame.

Jean-François Lyotard is the object of the fifth chapter, and he represents the book's most philosophically demanding turn. In *Heidegger and "the jews"* (1988), Lyotard used a lowercase, quoted plural to name not an empirical people but a figure of what the European tradition cannot assimilate, an alterity that Western thought has repressed and then tried to eliminate. This is a powerful move, and a risky one. It turns the Jew into a philosophical trope, and critics have long worried that such tropes can displace actual Jews from view. Judaken's engagement with Lyotard also matters for a later reason, since the notion of the "differend," a conflict in which no shared rule of judgment exists, mentioned and discussed also in relation to Sartre, reappears in the conclusion as a way of framing the conflict in Israel-Palestine and its representations.

The two final chapters move on to treating the work of historians, analyzing the works of Léon Poliakov and George Mosse. It is a puzzling twist, one might wonder what these two influential, and among themselves distant scholars, have to do with critical theory. Judaken himself registers that Poliakov was not a theorist, and that for Mosse theory remained implicit. Together they let Judaken pursue the issues of continuities and disconnects between traditional anti-Judaism and the Holocaust. They also supply, at least partially, a historical depth that the earlier, more abstractly theoretical chapters lack.

The conclusion, entitled "Critical Theory and Post-Holocaust Judeophobia," is intended as the culmination of this intellectual tour de force. Here Judaken applies the preceding analyses to the contemporary situation. He treats definitions, including the recent controversies over working definitions of antisemitism, the relationship between anti-Zionism and Judeophobia, and the hatred of Jews in the postcolonial and Middle Eastern contexts. He describes a decoupling of Jews and Muslims, in which, beginning in the 1930s the demonization of Jews became more common in the Islamic world, drawing on the European antisemitic arsenal, while anti-Arab racism spread among Jews. This chapter carries the book's most direct claims about the present.

Overall, the book deserves praise for a clarity of writing and a command of a wide ranging scholarship which lead to the production of a well informed and useful text. The book gathers, in one place and in a single interpretive voice, a body of work that is usually encountered in fragments, and it puts thinkers who rarely appear together into productive tension. This makes it a valuable resource for students and scholars alike. At the same time the selection inevitably appears idiosyncratic and eclectic. The canon Judaken assembles is made up of European and American theorists, mostly men, mostly of Jewish origin, and mostly writing between the 1940s and the 1990s (but with a strong emphasis on the 1940s). It is defined, for the most part, by the attempts to understand the catastrophe during the war and right after its conclusion. That selection is defensible, yet it sits somewhat uneasily with the book's own claim that the study of antisemitism should absorb the insights of postcolonial and decolonial thought.

The book's larger methodological wager also deserves to be discussed. To insist that

antisemitism be studied comparatively and as part of interlaced histories is to take a position against a widespread tendency to treat it as *sui generis*. It is an evident reaction to a tendency of segments of intellectual and academic circles, mostly in the American setting, to set it aside when confronting issues such as racism or postcolonial conflicts. The value of a connection between these theoretical strands and scholarship on antisemitism is more presented as a given rather than discussed in depth, and one might also wonder if a rapprochement between decolonial thought and scholarship on antisemitism is even possible considering nature of the current debates and clashes.

Another critical remark concerns the defining concepts presented in the introduction and central to the book's arguments which would have merited a more thorough discussion. The very concept of critical theory (or theories), which lies at the heart of the book, is not presented with the same clarity and discussed with the same scrutiny as applied in the core chapters of the book. The same could be said for postcolonial and decolonial theories, often cited jointly by Judaken, but which are different and each hold significant polarities and tensions within. Similar considerations are prompted by the treatment of religious hostilities towards the Jews and by the post-war intertwining of Judeophobia and anti-Zionism. Religious prejudice is presented basically as a mere precursor, or as one of the elements on which modern antisemitism builds its profile, through shifts and changes. Yet the specificity of anti-Judaism, be it Christian or Islamic, is not considered, nor is its persistence and autonomy, even in the modern and contemporary, age given sufficient consideration. As for anti-Zionism, with scant exceptions the authors selected by Judaken and thoroughly analyzed in this book concentrate on Nazi antisemitism, and one may wonder how useful those theories are to confront with what has been dubbed a decisively "post-Nazi" form of hostility, which develops in the post-war years and which is more connected with events in the Middle East than with the traditions of modern racist thought.³

The conceptual problems are mixed with a terminological issue of great consequence. Judaken prefers Judeophobia as the name for both the fear of and the fascination with Jews across history, and makes quite a compelling case for this. He essentially proposes that antisemitism proper be confined to the era of modern racism in which the word was coined, a period reaching its climax in the Holocaust, and that the phenomenon after 1945 be called post-Holocaust Judeophobia. Whether this distinction effectively clarifies or obscures is one of the central questions the reader is confronted with. It seems relevant to note that while he claims to prefer the term Judeophobia, yet the book uses antisemitism in the title, and both terms are used throughout the book. If Judeophobia is chosen to enable conceptual precision and periodization, then the book should use it with precision. If the two terms are used interchangeably, the periodizing argument is undercut. Finally, it should be noted that the author reacts to the processes of delegitimation and erosion of meaning of the term antisemitism, something that has emerged repeatedly in scholarship in recent years.⁴ As is often the case, these reactions are of interest and should be considered for what they reveal

³ Pierre-André Taguieff, *La Nouvelle judéophobie* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).

⁴ Among the most radical and provocative positions on the subjects see David Engel, "Away from a Definition of Antisemitism: An Essay in the Semantics of Historical Description," in *Rethinking European Jewish History*, eds. Jeremy Cohen and Moshe Rosman (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009), 30-53; David Engel, "Thinking about 'Antisemitism'," in *Antisemitism and the Politics of History*, eds. Scott Ury and Guy Miron (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2024), 33-44.

about the state of the discipline, its current crisis and the efforts made by some to be accepted and recognized in wider cultural trends and academic fields. In this case it would be about making antisemitism (or Judeophobia) relevant for critical theory, as well as for the fields of racial, postcolonial and/or decolonial studies.

Furthermore, one may notice that the concluding chapter is too compressed for its own ambitions. In the conclusions the sustained historical analysis of the earlier chapters gives way to a briefer and more assertive treatment of the contemporary Middle East, of definitions of antisemitism, and of the relation between anti-Zionism and Judeophobia. This is possibly unavoidable, yet the reader remains with the feeling that said chapter tries to accomplish too much in too little space.

None of these critiques diminish the book's principal achievement. It is a serious and generous work of intellectual history that treats over eight major interpreters with empathy and critical rigor, illustrating how their explanations complement and contradict one another. It raises important questions concerning the value of bringing antisemitism within the orbit of general theories of racism, modernity, and the nation. It makes a compelling case that the field has too often relied on unexamined categories, on the assumption of uniqueness, and on explanations that cannot account for the concept's mutable content. It also makes a genuine contribution to the history of ideas by reconstructing debates that are often forgotten or misread.

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Sonja Mejcher-Atassi

An Impossible Friendship

Group Portrait, Jerusalem Before and After 1948

(New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), pp. 376

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Jerusalem Divided: The Demise of a Cosmopolitan Friendship

What happens when a vibrant intercultural friendship collides with the violent emergence of ethnonationalism? This central question brings to life Sonja Mejcher-Atassi's meticulously researched study of five intellectuals whose bonds were severed by the catastrophe of 1948 Palestine. The book's haunting cover—featuring two Muslims, two Christians, and a Jew posing together while smiling—serves as a poignant visual counterpoint to the title's grim declaration of impossibility.

Mejcher-Atassi reconstructs the brief flowering of an "ecumenical circle" that gathered regularly at Jerusalem's King David Hotel during the British Mandate era. This cosmopolitan quintet—Walid Khalidi, Rasha Salam, Sally Kassab, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and Wolfgang Hildesheimer—shared passions for modernist literature, artistic expression, and intellectual exchange that transcended religious boundaries. Their gatherings at the YMCA Arts Club and contributions to the literary magazine *Forum* embodied a passing moment of cross-cultural possibility in late-colonial Jerusalem.

The author skillfully positions this friendship against the backdrop of Palestine's shifting sociopolitical landscape. Their intellectual exchanges occurred during what Mejcher-Atassi, borrowing from Ussama Makdisi, terms the fading glow of an "age of coexistence" (p. 225). This period between the world wars represented the twilight of Ottoman cosmopolitanism, when Jerusalem's neighborhoods still formed an intricate patchwork of religious and ethnic communities. These young intellectuals—university-educated, multilingual, and culturally open—navigated between Western modernist influences and local traditions, creating a distinctive intellectual milieu that defied easy categorization.

The narrative pivots on 22 July 1946, when the Irgun bombed the King David Hotel—just one day after the group's final meeting. This act of terrorism serves as both literal and

metaphorical demolition of their shared space. What follows is a carefully traced diaspora, as the five friends scatter geographically and ideologically across continents, never to reunite as a group. The January 1948 bombing of the Semiramis Hotel near Jabra's home becomes another defining moment, forcing Palestinian members into permanent exile.

Beyond the friendship's dissolution, Mejcher-Atassi examines how the physical city itself transformed. Jerusalem's previously porous boundaries between neighborhoods hardened into security checkpoints; identity cards replaced face-to-face recognition; and the communal spaces that had facilitated cross-cultural exchange were systematically dismantled. Through this lens, the book offers not just biography but urban history, tracing how political violence reconfigured spatial relations and everyday interactions in ways that rendered the previous cosmopolitanism increasingly "impossible."

Methodologically, the book employs what Hartman calls "critical fabulation" (p. 14)—a deliberate working against the silences of archives to recover histories otherwise lost. This approach is particularly evident in Mejcher-Atassi's treatment of the female members, about whom documentary evidence is sparse. For Sally Kassab, the most elusive figure, we glimpse primarily her artistic talents and romantic connection to Hildesheimer. Her subsequent relocations—first to Beirut, then to England during the Lebanese Civil War—sketch a life persistently disrupted by regional conflicts. Rasha Salam emerges more fully through unpublished memoirs that reveal her educational achievements at King Fuad University, her family's nationalist commitments, and her complex feelings toward her Jewish friend.

Jabra's trajectory from impoverished Bethlehem youth to Cambridge scholar to exiled Iraqi intellectual reveals a man who refused the "refugee" label while producing literary works that processed displacement through modernist aesthetics. His declaration that "it is ironic that the new wanderers should be driven into the wilderness by the old wanderers themselves" (p. 179) encapsulates the bitter historical irony that shadows the narrative. Khalidi's transformation into a preeminent historian documenting Palestinian cultural heritage destroyed in the Nakba represents intellectual resistance against erasure. His scholarly publications, particularly *All That Remains*, meticulously catalog the Palestinian villages depopulated in 1948, creating an archive that counters historical oblivion.

Perhaps most complex is Hildesheimer's evolution from Jewish refugee in Palestine to reluctant witness of Palestinian dispossession. Born into a "Jewish family imbued with German culture" (p. 103), his immigration to Palestine in 1933 was a flight from Nazism rather than a Zionist journey. His father's margarine factory, which exclusively employed Jews, exemplified the separate economic development encouraged under the Mandate. After returning to Germany post-war, Hildesheimer's silence about the devastation of Al-Majdal during a 1953 visit reveals the uncomfortable position of German Jews caught between Holocaust trauma and witnessing new injustices. Mejcher-Atassi thoughtfully explores how Hildesheimer's work as a Nuremberg trials translator shaped his pessimistic worldview without leading to public denunciation of Israel's actions.

The book's strength lies in its refusal to romanticize the friendship circle, acknowledging their elite detachment from everyday Palestinian life while still recognizing the genuine connections that formed across religious and cultural lines. Unlike romanticized narratives of cross-cultural harmony, Mejcher-Atassi presents these relationships with all their complexities and contradictions—including Hildesheimer's father's business practices that

undermined local Arab industries and Jabra's Anglophile tendencies that initially blunted criticism of British colonial administration.

This groundbreaking social biography merits attention from diverse readerships. Scholars of Palestinian history will appreciate the granular reconstruction of intellectual life before the Nakba. Those focused on Jewish diaspora studies will find in Hildesheimer's story a nuanced exploration of German-Jewish identity navigating between Nazi persecution and Zionist nationalism. For specialists in Arab literary modernism, the trajectories of Jabra and Khalidi illuminate how exile shaped transformative cultural production. General readers unfamiliar with either tradition will discover accessible entry points through these intertwined life stories, which humanize a conflict often flattened into impersonal political narratives.

The book's extensive documentation would translate beautifully to digital humanities formats—interactive maps tracking the protagonists' movements, timelines of their publications and collaborations, and galleries of the visual materials that enrich the text. Such a presentation could further expand the audience for this important contribution to understanding how national trauma fractures personal bonds. Mejcher-Atassi's rich archival research—drawing on unpublished memoirs, correspondence, artistic works, and oral histories—provides a foundation that could support multimedia engagement with this material, allowing readers to trace connections across disciplines, languages, and geographies.

Literary scholars will particularly appreciate Mejcher-Atassi's attention to the modernist sensibilities that bound these intellectuals together. Their shared fascination with T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* takes on prophetic dimensions as their own world fragments into ruins. The book's attention to the group's literary productions demonstrates how creative work became both memorial to lost connection and vehicle for processing collective trauma. Hildesheimer's inclusion of a line from Eliot's "Burnt Norton" in his later novel—"What might have been and what has been/Point to one end, which is always present" (p. 223)—suggests how these literary touchpoints continued to frame understanding of historical rupture decades later.

As contemporary headlines report on the war in Gaza and escalating violence in the West Bank, Mejcher-Atassi's study gains urgent relevance. The photograph of five friends from different faiths appears not merely as historical curiosity but as evidence of alternative possibilities. Through meticulous biographical reconstruction, the author demonstrates how political catastrophe destroyed not only lives and property but also fragile intercultural connections that might have offered different futures. In recovering these lost friendships, the book itself becomes an act of memorial imagination.

The book ultimately offers a form of counter history to the conventional histories of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and contributes to the creation of a language of historical reconciliation. This is not reconciliation as political compromise or historical erasure, but rather a more profound reckoning with the human dimensions of nationalist violence. By recovering these five intertwined lives—their shared passions, their divergent fates, their complex responses to catastrophe—Mejcher-Atassi reminds us that before borders hardened and identities calcified, there existed spaces of genuine intellectual exchange across the very lines that would later become impassable boundaries.

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Asaf Elia-Shalev

Israel's Black Panthers

The Radicals Who Punctured a Nation's Founding Myth

(Oakland: University of California Press, 2024), pp. 325

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Ha-panterim ha-shehorim (Hebrew: "The Black Panthers") have been one of the most significant Israeli social and political movements of the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, their history, success and rapid decline made them—in the eyes of many—an epitome of the limits of Israeli radicalism and of this country's Left more generally: a scarce degree of unity, an Israel- and Jewish-centered perspective that focuses on the cleavages between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, while ignoring the Palestinians. The impact of the Black Panthers on Israeli politics and society has been assessed in contrasting ways, underlining the rapid dissolution of the movement and how some of its leaders took very different, in some cases divergent, political paths. But even though the legacy of the Black Panthers is indeed ambivalent and not always easy to historicize, the importance of this movement not only for the Mizrahim themselves, but for Israel as a whole is undeniable. This is why Asaf Elia-Shalev's *Israel's Black Panthers* constitutes a significant addition to Mizrahi Studies, as well as to the social and political history of Israel—even more so when thinking of the limited knowledge about the Black Panthers outside of Israel.

Israel's Black Panthers is divided into twenty short chapters that follow—in a chronological manner—the history of the Black Panthers, from the years that preceded the founding of the movement in 1971 up to its decline and gradual dissolution starting in the second half of the 1970s. Even though this might appear as a rather short time span, it actually encompasses some of the most relevant events in Israeli history: from the Yom Kippur War (1973), to the historic victory of Menahem Begin's Likud in the 1977 elections and the peace treaty with Egypt (1979). The author Asaf Elia-Shalev, who is a journalist by training, writes in a narrative style that allows us to read the history of the Black Panthers almost as a documentary fiction. The book is based on thorough archival research, which includes previously undisclosed police records, and on interviews that he conducted with some of the Black Panthers'

leaders—especially Reuven Abergel—and with others. Despite the richness of its primary and secondary sources, *Israel's Black Panthers* does not have footnotes or endnotes, but a lengthy final section entitled “Notes on Sources,” in which the author refers to sentences from each chapter and describes the sources on which he based himself. If the non-academic public might appreciate the choice of not burdening readers with footnotes, from a scholarly perspective this makes referencing Elia-Shalev’s sources extremely difficult to follow.

As said, the chapters follow the history of the Black Panthers chronologically. Thus, we start from Reuven Abergel’s upbringing in 1950s Musrara—the Jerusalem popular neighborhood near the 1948 armistice line where the founders of the Black Panthers grew up—to the impact of the 1967 War, passing through his Moroccan origin and the 1959 revolt of Wadi Salib, Haifa, which is considered one of the first cases of Mizrahi political activism in Israeli history. The book then retraces the origins of the Black Panthers and the debut of other important members, such as Saadia Marciano and Haim Biton, as well as the impact of (Ashkenazi) social workers, activists and journalists on these young sons of mainly North African immigrants in the context of 1960s Israel. The 1970s protests and manifestations are described in great detail, up to the much-cited meeting with Prime Minister Golda Meir in April 1971 after which she famously described the Black Panthers as *lo’ nehmadi* (Hebrew: “not nice”).

Elia-Shalev also presents the struggles of the movement, especially in relation to aspects such as the dialogue with the Palestinians, and the discussions between its leaders on how to advance their ideals of social justice and equality in the context of 1970s Israel. In this, the author is supported by the seminal study of the renowned Israeli sociologist Deborah Bernstein, author of a doctoral dissertation on the Black Panthers already in 1979, and by the more recent works of Sami Shalom-Chetrit and Bryan K. Roby among others. The last chapters continue to follow the trajectory of the Black Panthers before and after the 1977 elections and the so-called *ma’apakh* (Hebrew, lit. “reversal”) caused by Likud’s victory. It was in those years that the Black Panthers finally entered parliamentary politics, something which also led to divisions within the movement and the final dispersion in different directions that would later include the Israeli radical Left, as well as the Sephardi ultra-Orthodox party Shas. In the last pages, the legacy of the Black Panthers is assessed by going forward to the 2000s and to Abergel’s final return to Morocco for a visit to his childhood home in Rabat and his participation in a New York University seminar three years later, in which he reflected on his trajectory in terms of a personal and political struggle: “I am here today to tell you how I and an entire generation became Black Panthers. [...] regardless of whether a struggle succeeds or not, the most profound changes happen inside those people who fight for their rights and their dignity” (p. 277). The book also hints at the global dimension of the movement—a topic that still remains quite understudied—and how the Black Panthers connected not only to Israeli politics and society, but to 1960s and 1970s Third-Worldism, as well as to radical leftist and youth movements. In addition to the American Black Panthers, which are of course evoked already in the name, the Israeli Black Panthers for example had contacts with Italian leftist and extra-parliamentary groups such as Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua.

As said, it is difficult to evaluate the impact and legacy of the Black Panthers in a definitive manner. However, Elia-Shalev’s book makes clear how they were able to identify problems that are, in many respects, still at the core of any Israeli social agenda: the cleavage—surely less evident nowadays than it was in the 1970s, but still present in fields such as education

and job opportunities—between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, between center and periphery; the relations with the Palestinians—Haim Biton was among the first Israelis to meet officially the PLO leader Yasser Arafat in a 1980 conference in Bulgaria—and the possibility of working with them in a shared struggle for social justice and equality; the meanings of Zionism and its promise of Jewish liberation and emancipation in the face of intra-Jewish conflict and discrimination in Israel.

Elia-Shalev's book then shows the profound significance of the Black Panthers and how their history has perhaps not entirely come to an end, as it can still provide us with useful cues for looking at contemporary Israeli society and politics.

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Mirjam Zadoff

Gewalt und Gedächtnis

Globale Erinnerung im 21. Jahrhundert

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It is a very personal book that Mirjam Zadoff, the director of the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism, which conveys the history of National Socialism with a view to the present and the future and considers the historical experience of the Nazi dictatorship in a current and global context, has written. Her topic is the global remembrance in the twenty-first century, and she wanted to know how people individually and how societies as a whole deal with war crimes and genocide, experiences of violence and crimes against humanity in wars and civil wars, and not just in German-occupied Europe. To this end, she has visited memorials in various European countries as well as in Asia and Africa, visited monuments and reflected extensively on the topic of refugees. In addition, Zadoff, having taught history and Jewish studies at Indiana University Bloomington from 2014 to 2019, has been able to integrate her academic experience in America into her considerations.

In accordance with her chosen personal approach, Mirjam Zadoff begins with thoughts about childhood memories, about the possible future memories of her children and her own memories of her childhood in Innsbruck in the 1970s. She recalls how her parents listened to the protest and anti-war songs of Joan Baez or Bob Dylan, for example, or the German singer-songwriter Franz Josef Degenhardt, songs that, according to Zadoff, became the “first media of remembrance” (p. 10).

The first stop on her journey is Jerusalem, where she sought dialogue with the writer Avrom Sutzkever, who was born in 1913 in the Russian Empire. Through his Yiddish poems, he developed, what Zadoff has called a “programmatic remembrance of the Holocaust” (p. 21). At the Yad Vashem memorial, she combines her observations with references to the early collections of sources and documents on the persecution and murder of the European Jews by National Socialist Germany as well as views on the current controversies surrounding the politics of remembrance.

Her next stop is Milan, where she visits the memorial to the Jewish victims, the Memoriale

della Shoah. This was erected in 2013 in Milan's main railway station on the underground platform from which Jews were deported to the concentration and extermination camps. Strangely, she did not mention the Documentation Center for Contemporary Jewish History, CDEC, which is located in the same place and in fact played a key role in the opening of the memorial.

In Warsaw, she visits the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, POLIN, founded in 2013, describes the current historical-political debates in Poland, and draws attention to the contribution by Polish artists to the "controversial memory of the Holocaust" (p. 61).

Zadoff then looks at current refugee policy and links her observations with references to the experiences of refugees during the National Socialist era. In a further step, she examines the manner in which traditional monuments are dealt with and poses the question of how a critical approach can be applied in this context. Starting with the controversial monument in the harbor of Livorno, il Monumento dei Quattro Mori, from the seventeenth century, she goes into the debates about the Karl Lueger monument in Vienna. She concludes this topic with reference to the USA, where a research project is investigating how history is told in public spaces on the basis of 50,000 objects.

A photo collage shown in Tel Aviv about the last survivor of the mass murder at Babyn Yar leads her to the war today. There were once plans to build Europe's largest memorial project with 15 museums in that ravine near Kyiv. The Russian war against Ukraine has put paid to this idea.

A visit to the museum of wax figures in Berlin, where Anne Frank is exhibited alongside the Scholl siblings and Adolf Hitler, leads her to reflect on Frank's diary, which has become an international icon of Holocaust remembrance. According to Zadoff, the figure of Anne Frank serves as a symbol for the globalization of memory, while simultaneously highlighting its commercialization.

After these reflections on the internationalization of Holocaust remembrance, Zadoff travels to Asia and visits the Shrine of the Fallen Soldiers and Civilian War Victims in Tokyo. She criticizes the empty spaces and the nationalist-bellucist agenda of the adjacent museum, in which militarism and pacifism stand are juxtaposed. Having visited Hiroshima, Zadoff illustrates the coexistence of divergent forms of remembrance within Japanese society, while also highlighting the tendency to overlook the history of Japan's war of aggression and its colonial past.

It is on her next stop, in South Korea, that this strikes home with particular force when she visits the memorial to women forced into prostitution in the wartime brothels of the Japanese army. As Zadoff observes, the presentation of the exhibits is reminiscent of exhibition design in Holocaust museums. In fact, their "language and aesthetics of remembrance," (p. 132) as the director explains, served as a model. Another museum in Seoul shows just how problematic the culture of remembrance is in Korea. Set up in a former prison, which was used as such until the fall of the authoritarian military regime, the museum displays exhibits on Korean nationalism and national independence.

In Phnom Penh, Mirjam Zadoff is greeted by blossoming trees. They stand in the courtyard of the genocide museum, which commemorates the crimes of the Pol Pot regime. The building previously served as a prison and torture center for the Khmer Rouge security forces. Zadoff again points out the ambivalence of commemoration, because the museum, although it was

opened to commemorate the murder of two-thirds of the Cambodian population, was not originally intended to serve as a reappraisal of Cambodian history. The purpose of the museum was rather to “justify the Vietnamese occupation of the country” (p. 146). The exhibition works with the concept of “shock and emotion” (p. 147). According to Zadoff, “voids of missing memories” remain in Cambodian society, especially as the Khmer Rouge deliberately destroyed “the country’s cultural memory” (p. 151). According to Zadoff, it is dancers and filmmakers that fill these gaps today.

It is in Belgium that Zadoff comes face to face with the legacy of colonial crimes in Africa. She visits the Africa Museum there “to understand how Belgium deals with its violent colonial history” (p. 154). The museum seeks to self-critically come to terms with the atrocities during the Belgian colonial era, and at the beginning of the exhibition, as Zadoff quotes, stands the sentence: “Everything passes, except the past” (p. 159).

When Zadoff returns to her investigation of the traces of European colonial crimes, it is in Cape Town. Here she visits the island on the west coast of South Africa, where Nelson Mandela, among others, was imprisoned. The island has become the most important place of remembrance in South Africa. An exhibition shown in South Africa about the diary of Anne Frank, which established “the crimes of the Nazis as a paradigm” (p. 173), came to represent a link between the memory of the apartheid regime and the Holocaust.

Here and there amid her considerations on the memorials and museums, Zadoff has inserted reflections on current refugee movements, thus bringing them into relation with the experiences of refugees from Nazi Germany—topics she had also discussed with her students in Bloomington. In the final chapter Zadoff returns to her experiences in the USA and recounts the current war being waged by conservative Republicans against liberal society. This is mainly being fought over libraries, museums and universities. Zadoff speaks of a “censorship fever” (p. 185). But democratic America, according to Zadoff’s optimistic outlook, “would not be democratic America if it did not find an answer to this” (p. 185). She sees these in book weeks at American libraries, in projects to commemorate slavery, or in the Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, which opened in 2016. She does not leave out the nationalist counter-narratives, but concludes her book by recalling the inauguration of President Joe Biden, at which the young poet Amanda Gorman recited her hopeful poem “The Hill We Climb.”

Mirjam Zadoff’s reflections are convincing not least because of her personal approach, her generous inclusion of her own observations and perceptions at the memorials. It is also remarkable that in her explorations the historian Zadoff did not so much consult historical research; rather, she sought to establish a dialogue with writers and visual artists.

Zadoff thus opens our eyes to international developments in the field of politics of the past and shows how Holocaust remembrance has become the paradigm for an international culture of remembrance. However, she repeatedly draws attention to the ambivalences in the various cultures of remembrance. Zadoff had already warned at the beginning: “Our present has become complicated and with it our view of the past” (p. 27). “History and memory,” she laments, are being “instrumentalised, used and distorted in a propagandistic campaign” (p. 29).

This book by Mirjam Zadoff on remembrance in the twenty-first century comes at just the

right time in view of the multiple attacks on the German culture of remembrance coming both from the nationalist side and from professional historians. In view of the recent attacks on the politics of history in the USA by the new administration, the book perhaps came a little too soon. But a shadow of tomorrow had already been cast by the banning of Amanda Gorman's poem by the Miami school board in May 2023, which Zadoff had drawn attention to. By the time Donald Trump was re-elected in November 2024 and inaugurated in January 2025, Mirjam Zadoff had already written her book. Now a new chapter in global memory in the twenty-first century has begun.

Postscript. Given the personal nature of Mirjam Zadoff's explorations and her memories of the anti-war songs heard by her parents, the author of the present review might be forgiven for allowing himself a brief personal reminiscence. In his youth, he had heard the protest songs of another German singer-songwriter, Dieter Süverkrüp, who in the song "Kirschen auf Sahne" (Cherries on cream) released in 1967 on the record "Widerborstige Gesängen," tells the story of a former resistance fighter whose memories of Auschwitz caught up with him during a visit to a café. When a lady at the next table began to eat cherries on cream, he is overcome by the image of "blood in the snow." "And the shaky man becomes embarrassed and leaves. He's ashamed, because all those damned memories won't go away."

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Jeremy Eichler

Das Echo der Zeit

Die Musik und das Leben im Zeitalter der Weltkriege

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In contrast to the 2023 American original edition, the subtitle of the German edition of Jeremy Eichler's already award-winning work of non-fiction omits two central themes: the Holocaust and the "music of remembrance." This omission is disconcerting. The diluted formulation that the book presents a broad cultural history of "music" and "life" in the "age of the world wars" neither does justice to the common focus of the study—the before, during, and after of the singular civilizational rupture of the Holocaust—nor to the author's intention to elucidate, from multiple perspectives, the forms and potentials of a musical (and music-historical) culture of remembrance and to make contemporary readers and listeners aware of its ongoing relevance.

The prominent compositions "of remembrance" by Richard Strauss, Arnold Schoenberg, Dmitri Shostakovich, and Benjamin Britten, which Eichler approaches with sensitivity and nuance, emerge as "echoes of their times": of the era in which they were composed and of the historical moments to which they directly and indirectly bear witness—for example, Strauss's *Metamorphosen* (1945), Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947), Britten's *War Requiem* (1962), and Shostakovich's Symphony No. 13, Op. 113, "Babi Yar." The book's contemporary resonance becomes unmistakable when Eichler observes that this symphony—through the poetry of Yevgeny Yevtushenko, which denounces Soviet-era antisemitism—was able to "express the problem of conscience in music" (p. 335),¹ and further notes that at the time he completed his manuscript it had not yet been performed by the Vienna Philharmonic (p. 350). The study thus becomes an echo of the present and will endure insofar as it confronts every future present anew with the question of how to engage with "musical monuments."

The suppression of this principal theme in the German subtitle is therefore as incomprehensible as it is counterproductive. This is all the more striking given that, in the final

¹ Page numbers refer to the German edition reviewed here.

chapter, Eichler advances the compelling thesis that music—especially music composed as a memorial to unimaginable human suffering—possesses a distinctive relationship to memory. In listening, we are actively prompted to become conscious of past pain and trauma in all their historical entanglements, a process that may render us more critical and attentive to injustices in the present (p. 382). Eichler’s book not only advocates “deep listening” at its beginning and end (p. 28); it offers nothing less than a guide to its practice. In short, whether read by academic specialists or interested laypersons, this study enriches its audience through an impressive synthesis of microhistory and *histoire croisée*, effectively fostering a more profound mode of listening. Conceptually, Eichler productively adapts the method of *histoire croisée* to the genre of narrative non-fiction and skillfully integrates a layer of personal experience. Across chapters, this experiential dimension establishes fixed points of orientation by mapping a topography of sites of memory that serve as points of departure for reflections on historicity, processes of overwriting, and the disturbing coexistence of high culture and barbarism.

The interwoven travel narratives lead readers to the stump of the Goethe Oak, felled in 1937 by prisoners during the construction of the Buchenwald concentration camp on the slopes of the Ettersberg near Weimar. The fragility of the seemingly permanent, and the shocking visibility with which the National Socialists openly enacted iconoclastic antisemitism, are further illustrated by the example of the Mendelssohn monument in Leipzig. Erected in 1892 before the Gewandhaus, it was completely destroyed by the Nazis in 1936 despite international protests and rescue efforts, and reconstructed as an exact replica in 2008. Such reconstruction, Eichler argues, risks leveling the “contextualization of the sins of the past” (p. 386). Re-erection in the form of a copy appears to annul history itself, potentially erasing even the scars left by crime. Unlike mutable—and manipulable—sites of memory, music can function as a “missing plaque” (ibid.), speaking more clearly and proving resilient and “untouchable” (p. 355) in the face of attempts to frame, control, instrumentalize, or even obliterate material monuments in accordance with prevailing cultural-political narratives.

Eichler’s most compelling account of a site visit appears in his description of the execution site at Babyn Yar, a ravine near Kyiv that became one of the principal sites of the “Holocaust by bullets.” Concealed and physically altered by the Soviet regime—whose infamous handling of the terrain led, as Eichler learned on site, to there being “no ravine left”—the area came to embody a “permanent wedge” (p. 352) driven between landscape and memory in the postwar period. Today the site has been transformed into a recreational park dotted with individual memorials to various victim groups, situated amid urban infrastructure and the “green lung” of a modern metropolis once again scarred by war. Despite the assistance of a knowledgeable guide, Eichler was unable to identify the precise location of the massacre. In contrast to the mutability of physical places, music remains a “home of conscience” (p. 355)—in this instance, Shostakovich’s *Symphony No. 13*. As a musical monument, it is neither alterable nor corruptible. More than that, such music becomes a site-independent and timeless testimony to concealed atrocity and a personal confession by its author, whose own conflicts—inscribed into the composition under totalitarian conditions—are thereby made communicable.

Eichler’s detailed reconstructions of the lives of composers and musicians (including the deeply moving account of the Viennese Rosé family) and his contextualization of the motivations underlying these memorial compositions converge on this central claim

regarding the singular value of musical monuments. This becomes evident, for instance, in his discussion of Schoenberg's "combination of premonition and passion in political matters" (p. 87), which, upon his expulsion in 1921 from the holiday resort of Mattsee, made him acutely aware of the impending catastrophe—a trajectory Eichler traces to the periphery of music history in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where *A Survivor from Warsaw* was premiered in November 1948 by an amateur ensemble. It is equally apparent in Strauss's premiere of *Metamorphosen* in Zurich two years earlier, which Eichler characterizes as a "uniquely 'open' memorial" (p. 162), enigmatically binding together "sincerity and inscrutability" (ibid.) amid the morally encumbered idyll of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, where, for example, the grave of the conductor Hermann Levi lay neglected for decades and only since 2010 has a modest memorial commemorated regional victims of National Socialism. Through these narratives, Eichler consistently renders accessible and experientially tangible to contemporary audiences the complex mnemonic space in which these compositions unfold.

The book is neither an introductory listening guide nor a specialized work of musicology. Eichler writes from the firm footing of a cultural historian who, through meticulous research and—judging from the acknowledgments—sustained dialogue with numerous interlocutors, reconstructs the historical constellations of musical monuments and thereby enables readers to grasp the unimaginable catastrophes to which these works fundamentally refer. Implicitly, readers are invited to extend this inquiry by examining other relevant compositions and their authors from this era with regard to the biographical ruptures wrought by fascism and their relationship to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

Even if many historical details may already be familiar to expert readers, the clearly structured and never cumbersome *histoire croisée* guarantees an intellectually rewarding reading experience for specialists as well. The German translation by Dieter Fuchs likewise deserves high praise. One may hope that many readers, through Eichler's reflections on musical remembrance, will also recognize that this topic has recently received growing attention within musicology. Melanie Unseld's 2025 study *Musik und Erinnerung*, grounded in interdisciplinary memory studies, classifies and discusses diverse forms of souvenir and memorial compositions. In the same year, Erik Battaglia and Claudio Voghera published a compendium of recent commemorative compositions dedicated specifically to the victims of the Shoah, written for events marking Italy's *Giorno della Memoria* under the title *Musica per la Shoah. Concerti per il Giorno della Memoria al Conservatorio "G. Verdi" di Torino*. The musical echo of this era—if one is willing to hear and see it—continues, with hope, to resonate ever more widely.

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Richard Breitman

A Calculated Restraint

What Allied Leaders Said about the Holocaust

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2025), pp. 352

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Why Allied leaders didn't do more to try to save millions of Jews being murdered during World War II is explicable, if regrettable. The Jews were trapped behind enemy lines and significant operational and strategic obstacles existed to rescuing them.

Why Allied leaders didn't say more about the ongoing Holocaust, however, is harder to comprehend once the immediate post-war explanation—that the leaders didn't know or didn't trust the information they were receiving—dissolved in an avalanche of scholarship proving otherwise. No logistical impediments stood in the way of Allied leaders speaking.

Yet, neither Roosevelt, nor Churchill, nor Stalin spoke directly and consistently about the extermination campaign during almost six years of war. In *A Calculated Restraint*, Richard Breitman, the leading contemporary scholar on America and the Holocaust, tackles the question of why that was. Breitman seeks to connect "analysis of what Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt knew about the Holocaust to what they said about it in their most important statements on the subject," (p. 3) and then endeavors to explain their muted response.

Breitman acknowledges the difficulty of the task. None of the three kept diaries. FDR refused to allow minutes of cabinet meetings or notes of his conversations. Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin didn't correspond among themselves or with others on the topic. As a result, "direct evidence of their reactions is limited," Breitman writes (p. 4). Instead, he analyzes the text of their speeches, statements in the press, and the writings of staff and those trying to influence the leaders.

The resulting book expertly weaves the events of the Holocaust as Allied leaders then understood them with the daily military challenges they faced. It also presents a concise and compelling account of Allied knowledge of the Holocaust as it unfolded.

What *A Calculated Restraint* doesn't do as successfully is answer the central question: Why were Allied leaders so restrained in their public pronouncements? This is especially vexing

because Breitman concludes that the leaders' statements "would have mattered at the time," perhaps convincing "more Jews to flee" or go into hiding, and more non-Jews and neutral governments to help them (p. 7).

One problem is that Breitman doesn't tally Roosevelt's and Churchill's major speeches and statements about the Holocaust (Stalin gave just one speech), nor compare them to the otherwise voluble leaders' overall speechifying. With seemingly few Holocaust statements to work with, Breitman at times loses sight of the thesis. The book often wanders into ancillary territory: Hitler's speeches, US journalists' internment, Jan Karski's mission. By the end, controversies such as the bombing of Auschwitz and the blood-for-trucks negotiations overwhelm Allied leaders' statements. Ultimately, *A Calculated Restraint* reads more like an update on the US response to the Holocaust than a deep dive into the perplexing question of Allied silence.

To start, Breitman doesn't grapple with whether Allied leaders actually wanted to address the Holocaust. To prove the response was calculated not callous, Breitman needed examples of Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin desiring to speak but being convinced not to for well-substantiated reasons. There aren't any.

When Breitman does land on an overarching explanation for the Allied leaders' restraint, it's basically the one scholars have proffered before—Roosevelt and Churchill feared emphasizing atrocities against the Jews would feed into Nazi propaganda and thus harm the war effort. "Experts in psychological warfare in Washington and London" warned against helping the Jews because of "the high level of existing antisemitism" (p. 264). But Breitman's discussion of this intelligence—if it is indeed intelligence and not supposition—is thin. What were Allied leaders being told about possible responses to knowledge of the atrocities, by whom, for what reasons, with what credibility and what certainty of a particular outcome?

Breitman offers a different explanation for Stalin referring to the Holocaust specifically only once; the Soviet dictator said during a November 1941 speech that the Nazis were "carrying out medieval 'pogroms'" (p. 91). Stalin never again mentioned the mass murder of Jews publicly, preferring to fold the genocide of Soviet Jews "into the larger crisis of the war and huge civilian and military casualties" (p. 93). Still, the Stalin chapter proves illuminating. While Stalin wasn't speaking, the Soviet press and some of his advisors were. Breitman's recounting of what they said about the early massacres and what the Western press picked up (or didn't) provides insight into this frequently overlooked aspect of the Holocaust.

Breitman's discussion of Churchill seems primarily intended to dispel the notion that the British prime minister was more concerned about the Holocaust than the American president. Churchill's 24 August 1941 speech, with its evocative description of a "crime without a name," is often considered "a warning about the Holocaust" (p. 38). Breitman disagrees. British intelligence had in fact detected the first stages of the Holocaust as the Germans conquered Soviet territory, eventually killing more than one million Jews. (This also prompted Stalin's single reference). But Churchill "said nothing about the fact that most of the victims were Jews," Breitman reports (p. 47). Protecting British code-breaking operations wasn't the reason; Churchill revealed other sensitive information in the same speech. "If he was trying to preserve the secrecy of Bletchley Park's successes, he said too much," Breitman writes. "If he was trying to warn about what later was called the Holocaust, he said too little" (p. 65). Churchill didn't follow up. Breitman cites other examples of Churchill's disinterest,

including his repeated failure to meet with Jewish representatives.

Not surprisingly, Breitman, author of *FDR and the Jews*, devotes most attention to the American president. He explains the military and public relations challenges FDR faced when in December 1942 he declined to make a statement in advance of the 11 Allied nations' confirmation of the extermination campaign, and when in March 1944 he agreed to such a statement as Hungarian Jews faced deportation to their deaths. A few weeks before the December declaration, FDR told Jewish representatives requesting such a statement that his comments would only strengthen the German people's will to fight and complicate the situation with Muslims in North Africa. Neither explanation seems particularly persuasive, especially when the president's words could be chosen to try to avoid such problems. Breitman justifies FDR's reticence, however, by citing the ultimate success of the North African campaign and the difficulty of saving Jews at the time. In the first instance, Breitman engages in the type of retrospective analysis for which he often admonishes "twenty-first-critics." In the second, he assumes there would have been no value in informing the public unless immediate action followed.

State Department officials, who were "skeptical and unsympathetic," might have influenced FDR (p. 145). Breitman doesn't say why State officials took that position when in late 1942 skepticism was manifestly unjustified, or why FDR listened to them. He also describes State officials as believing "that the United States could not effectively fight the war and try to defend the Jews" (p. 146). But again, Breitman doesn't explore how State officials came to this conclusion. Did they consider rescue measures or did they simply assume the easiest stance?

Circumstances had changed by the time FDR denounced, during a 24 March 1944 press conference, the "blackest crimes of all history [...] the wholesale systematic murder of the Jews of Europe" (p. 210). The tide of the war had turned and an American agency to help rescue Jews was in place. Still, the process to get FDR to issue the statement was tortuous, involving multiple edits and even a draft that went missing for weeks and turned up in Roosevelt's bedroom. Nor did a torrent of statements follow condemnation of "the blackest crimes of all history." In public, FDR was almost as quiet as before and in private, he wasn't pressuring recalcitrant government agencies to assist the new refugee board.

It may be that Allied leaders and their advisors believed what was convenient to believe about acknowledging the Holocaust and didn't test their assumptions. As Breitman writes in a different context, contemporary authors "put more effort and thought into what would or would not have worked to destroy the gas chambers than the military and government officials did at the time" (p. 257). The same can be said of Allies' decision-making over publicizing the Holocaust. Allied leaders' silence speaks volumes not merely about the obstacles they faced but also about their interest in overcoming them.

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Matthias J. Becker, Laura Ascone, Karolina Placzynta
and Chloé Vincent (eds.)

Antisemitism in Online Communication

Transdisciplinary Approaches to Hate Speech in the Twenty-First Century

(Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024), pp. 260

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From 2020 to 2024 the international interdisciplinary research project “Decoding Antisemitism: An AI-driven Study on Hate Speech and Imagery Online” was carried out by a research team at the Center for Research on Antisemitism, Technical University Berlin in collaboration with the University of Applied Sciences (HTW) Berlin, the University of Michigan’s School of Information, Cardiff’s HateLab and King’s College London. The research project examined antisemitism on social media at both content and linguistic-visual levels. The project researchers developed a guide that defines the diversity of antisemitic concepts and compares their linguistic and visual patterns. The guide makes it possible to identify and analyze antisemitic content in large datasets according to a fixed framework. In parallel, antisemitic hate speech online was documented. Experts in the project searched the most important forums of online political debate: social media platforms and mainstream media websites. The focus was on discourses in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. The project’s multi-stage methodological design aimed to capture the complexity and diversity of antisemitism as well as related trends on the internet. The project team produced a variety of publications accessible online.¹

The key findings and analyses of the innovative research project are presented in the volume under review here, published in 2024. The different chapters cover case studies, antisemitism in conservative web milieus, “Pop” antisemitism and deviant communities, the use of the concept of genocide in UK online debates about Israel, countering antisemitism

¹ <https://decoding-antisemitism.eu/publications>, accessed July 4, 2026.

online, multimodal cognitive anchoring in antisemitic memes, new approaches to detect antisemitism online which often takes subtle or implicit forms and is therefore more difficult to identify and finally the problem of algorithms and the automated detection of antisemitism which has been little explored compared to other forms of hate speech. The authors point out the problem of wordplay and the combination of letters and imagery that are recognized within the scene but are unfamiliar to the general public. For example, the American-Jewish philanthropist and hedge fund manager George Soros, who has become a figurehead for conspiracy theorists and has in many places taken on the role of the Rothschild family—which carries antisemitic connotations—is depicted on social media with a small snake emoji standing for “s,” the letters “oro,” and, finally, the emoji snake again. The snake icons imply malice and deceit—classic antisemitic motifs. Many social media posts use implicit language through allusions, in which a word or phrase is used but placed in a new, seemingly incompatible context. For example, terms posted online such as “Final Solution to the Palestinian Question,” “Fourth Reich,” “Hamas = Resistance 2.0,” and “Gaza = Warsaw” illustrate how Holocaust distortion spreads on the internet. Indirect speech acts—such as rhetorical questions, irony, sarcasm, and jokes—pose a particular challenge, as they are often accompanied by content with antisemitic undertones, in which terms like greed, money, wealth in connection with Jews as well as oppression, and ethnic cleansing in connection with Israel are used.

The interactive web has generated a huge amount of data. Due to the large presence of hateful content, different new techniques have been developed to track antisemitism and other forms of hate speech. Yet qualitative approaches to antisemitic web comments have so far attracted little attention. And it is qualitative analysis, even more than quantitative work, that provides the basis for countering antisemitism online. The view that counter-speech is helpful to react against antisemitic content on the web is still very widespread. However, it has become clear that this actually contributes to the further spread of such content and is therefore not really the right approach to countering and combating antisemitism online.

Drawing on various significant events that triggered antisemitic content online—such as the escalation of the Middle East conflict, the war in Ukraine, Kanye West’s antisemitic remarks, the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn’s antisemitism, and the debates around “documenta 15”—the book shows how public debate fuels antisemitic rhetoric and pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable to say in public ever further.

The publication provides valuable insight into the dissemination of antisemitic content in the form of text, words, and imagery—such as memes—on social media. Throughout the individual chapters, there are frequent references to another publication by the research team, which provides a comprehensive guide to explicit and coded forms of contemporary antisemitism: “Decoding Antisemitism: A Guide to Identifying Antisemitism Online.”²

² <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-031-49238-9.pdf>, accessed July 4, 2026.

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Anthony McElligott

The Last Transport

The Holocaust in the Eastern Aegean

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In July 1944, Nazi German forces deported the ca. 1800 Jews of Rhodes and Kos with the aid of the Italian authorities of the Dodecanese. Only about 200 (just above 10% of the 1939 population) survived the deportation to mainland Greece and then Auschwitz, the relocation to other concentration camps, and the hardship of post-war displacement and scarcity. *The Last Transport* by Anthony McElligott, a renowned scholar in German and Holocaust history, is the most thoroughly researched work on this historical rupture in the Aegean to date. The book is the result of more than a decade of research that started with the idea of retracing the identity and life of the young boy appearing on the book's cover.¹ Organized into a preface, nine chapters, and an epilogue, this book ambitiously ventures back into the history of Ottoman Rhodes (before 1912) and the subsequent Italian rule (before 1938). It also provides perspicuous discussions on the aftermath of the deportation by examining postwar trajectories and testimonies as well as memory practices observable until recent years. It is therefore part of an expanding scholarship in the long history of this community.²

Chapter 1 frames World War II and the Holocaust within the longer history of Rhodes and Kos. This section offers data and figures useful to grasp the Aegean setting in comparative European perspective and cogently illustrates that the decisive turn leading to the 1944

¹ The author had already published a chapter on the topic in 2018: Anthony McElligott, "The Deportation of the Jews of Rhodes, 1944: An Integrated History," in *The Holocaust in Greece*, eds. Giorgios Antoniou and A. Dirk Moses (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 58-86.

² Pierre Sintès, "(Re)construire la Djuderia de Rhodes," *Ethnologie Française* 43, no. 1 (2013): 19-30; Andreas Guidi, "Defining Inter-Commuality between Documents, Tradition and Collective Memory: Jewish and Non-Jewish Capital and Labor in Early Twentieth Century Rhodes," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017): 165-80; Aron Rodrigue, "The Rabbinical Seminary in Italian Rhodes, 1928-38: An Italian Fascist Project," *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 1 (2019): 1-19; Marco Clementi, *Storia della comunità ebraica di Rodi (1912-1947)* (Roma: TAB, 2022); Dario Miccoli, "Tierra Prometida: Jews from Rhodes in the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia, 1910s-1960s," *Jewish Historical Studies* 55, no. 1 (2024): 152-75.

deportation was the adverse military situation for Nazi Germany in the Mediterranean in late 1943, which increased the strategic importance of the Ionian and Aegean islands. Chapters 2 and 3 change the approach by investigating everyday life in the Jewish neighborhood of Rhodes before the war. This section has the merit of questioning the idea of a secluded or harmonious community, analyzing their relations to non-Jewish “neighbors” and Italian authorities. The Italian police (the Carabinieri) files (acquired by the Greek State Archives in the early 2010s, used by a handful of historians, and in recent years much more difficult to access) are used to reconstruct experiences and the urban landscape destroyed by the Holocaust. Yet, Chapter 2 arguably the book’s weakest, often indulging in detailed, yet overall pointillist descriptions and anecdotes. Interesting as a prehistory of a catastrophe that precipitated from Italy’s Racial laws of 1938 onwards, this chapter points to intercommunal encounters. Yet, its scope does not allow for a real comparative analysis of the Greek, Muslim, and Catholic communities in Rhodes. Their multiethnic “shared world,” based on pragmatic coexistence, is only touched upon, a limit common to narratives focused on a single Ottoman or post-Ottoman community. On the contrary, Chapters 4 and 5 are the finest. When discussing the arrival of German troops in 1943 and the 1944 deportation, McElligott delivers a logically adamant and empirically fine-grained analysis. Interesting findings compared to existing literature are those about German commander Kleemann’s “cordial relations” (p. 127) with the Jews until the arrival of Adolf Eichmann’s trustee Anton Burger and his crew in early July 1944. Accordingly, the deportation was planned ahead of this date in Germany and Athens, not in Rhodes. Another important feature of these chapters is the actors-centered narrative. This also applies to the perpetrators (both the military and bureaucrats, in Rhodes as well as in the Haidari concentration camp) and, more rarely, those who attempted to save Jewish lives. Chapter 5 sheds new light on the Turkish consul Selahattin Ülkümen’s “rescue” of Jews claiming Turkish origins. McElligott demonstrates how wealth, rather than legal belonging, was determinant in the last-minute attempts to prevent the deportation of some dozen Jews. In Chapter 6, the book turns to life and death in Auschwitz and other camps. This is another brilliantly composed section, in which survival testimonies are orchestrated with historical rigor. The choral narrative connects individual accounts produced after the war. This is rewarding for the general reader as well as for the historian interested in the material reality of events narrated through memory. Worth highlighting is the use of sources from the ITS Arolsen Archives that allow us to follow transfers and to document death with accuracy. Chapter 7 turns back to Rhodes to address the confiscation, pillage, and seizure of Jewish property after the deportation. Discussing the archival sources of a sub-commission created ad hoc by the Italians in the wake of the deportation, McElligott argues that institutional confiscation aimed above all to secure law and order. Neither did the administration wish to protect Jewish property, nor to favor savage looting. The fate of Holocaust survivors is the main topic addressed in Chapter 8 through sources of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and the International Refugees Organization (after 1947). This chapter tackles complex and often arbitrary decisions affecting the survivors and their attempts at “cementing the bond of survival learned in the camps” (p. 256). Many were caught in bureaucratic anomalies, ambivalent legal belonging, and contradictory accounts of their journey to and from the camps. The last chapter describes how the trauma of the deportation reverberated in

postwar testimonies and attempts to reconstruct a diasporic community. Its strength is the conceptual discussion of memory and silences between individual and collective experiences, arguing that “positing a binary between memory and history about the life of the Jewish community [...] does not do full justice to the complexity of the past” (p. 290).

McElligott’s book can be commended for three main reasons. Firstly, it is the most valuable study on World War II (written large) in the Aegean, especially due to the use of German sources. Secondly, the taste for local details coexists with an excellent composition of diverse sources from Rhodes, Germany, the UK, and international organizations. In this sense, it frames the Aegean islands as part of broader Mediterranean, European, and global history in accessible and captivating prose. The book will make the fate of the local Jews known to a wide readership but also encourage further studies on the Dodecanese. A third merit is the narrative’s human dimension. A wide range of actors whose emotions, decisions, beliefs, resources, luck, and misfortunes populate a vivid narrative. As the author states in the epilogue, the main objective of “seeking a greater alignment between archivally grounded lived experience and the memory of it” (p. 305) is masterfully achieved.

The book contains numerous geographic, phrasal, and historical inaccuracies; yet they do not primarily apply to the main events and protagonists.³ Although the book skillfully uses sources in Greek, German, English, French, Ladino, and Hebrew (translated), a further issue is the spelling mistakes, too frequent, alas, to be left unmentioned. This mostly applies to text in Italian such as place names, persons, institutions, and sources, especially in the endnotes, and risks reproducing mistakes when this book is cited, as will certainly happen frequently due to its value.⁴ This does not diminish the quality of the research and the analysis, but it is an editorial problem that most proficient readers cannot overlook. Those interested in the history of Rhodes and the Dodecanese, the Holocaust, World War II and its aftermath will nonetheless greatly appreciate this contribution crowning several years of impressively meticulous research.

³ To give a few examples: the Venetians never ruled over Rhodes or Kos, and the Genoese only occupied Kos (p. 9); the mention of Ankara as the center of Ottoman power in 1912 (p. 11); the camp of Ferramonti indicated as being in Sicily instead of Calabria (p. 129); the puzzling sentence “the inverse appearance of Abraham [instead of Moses!] leading the Jews to the Promised Land” (p. 151); the mention of a “Fascist Republican government of Rome” instead of Salò (p. 217); the Fossoli camp situated in the South of Italy whereas it is close to Modena (p. 253); Samos is erroneously included in the Dodecanese territory but not Castellorizo, Casos, and Patmos (p. 327).

⁴ Among the most important ones: the mayor of Rhodes Antonio Macchi spelled as Macci, Vice-Governor Iginio Ugo Faralli spelled Farelli, the Metropolitan bishop spelled Apostolides (instead of Apostolos), the village of Peveragno spelled Pervegna, Cypress instead of Cyprus.