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Tierra prometida: Jews from Rhodes in the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia, 1910s–1960s*

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In May 1960, the Athens representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee wrote a letter to the organization's office in Geneva reporting that "some two months ago . . . former [Jewish] inhabitants of Rhodes [annexed to Greece in 1947], who are now settled in Congo, came as tourists to visit their city of origin . . . in a pilgrimage spirit". Given that the Belgian Congo was moving quickly towards independence – and a period of instability – the representative reported on rumours that these visitors were "envisaging [a return to] their country of origin." Locals feared that they would return with "powerful means and thus could monopolize the whole market." "It must be pointed out", the representative continued, "that the former people of Rhodes who are now settled in Congo are former Italians or of Belgian nationality. Their resettlement in Greece . . . depend[s] entirely on the laws concerning all foreigners".[1] Who were these "former inhabitants of Rhodes"? Why did Greece consider them to be foreigners? And how had they ended up in the middle of Africa?

Jews from Rhodes (*Rhodeslis* in Judeo-Spanish) began settling in the Belgian Congo (today Democratic Republic of Congo) in the 1910s. From then to the early 1960s, between 1,000 and 1,500 lived there. Similarly, about 800–1,000 Rhodeslis lived in Southern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe). These numbers are significant in the context of the community's demographics. In the 1940s, for example, the Jewish population of Rhodes decreased

1 Haim Benrubi to Herbert Katzki, 31 May 1960, G55-64/4/6/34/BG.299, Belgium: Congo-Jewish Communities, 1960–1969, Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (hereafter, AJDC), online. See also Marco Clementi and Eirini Toliou, *Gli ultimi ebrei di Rodi: leggi razziali e deportazioni nel Dodecaneso italiano (1938–1948)* (Rome: Deriveapprodi, 2015), 221–2.

* I use the names of states and cities as they appear in the sources, as they were used by my informants, or as was in force in the period in question (e.g. Belgian Congo, not Democratic Republic of Congo; Salisbury instead of Harare), with modern names at their first mention.

from 4,000 to approximately 2,000 people because of successive waves of emigration. Rhodeslis remained in Congo until the end of Belgian rule, and in Rhodesia until the late 1960s or early 1970s – in some cases even later – when most resettled in South Africa, Belgium, the United States, Israel, or Italy. Until today, the migration of Jews from Rhodes to the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia remains little known, and has not received much attention from scholars interested in the Jewish presence in central and southern Africa. Instead research has focused on conversion movements or on ethnic groups claiming Jewish ancestry.[2] Historians and anthropologists who have written about Jewish Rhodes discuss this migration, but do not systematically track this diaspora.[3]

For many Jews from Rhodes, the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia symbolized a *tierra prometida* (Judeo-Spanish: "promised land") – as a Rhodesli song written in the interwar years called it – where they improved their socio-economic status, or after the Holocaust reconstructed a shattered community.[4] Moreover, even though their story may seem unusual, it sheds light on important dynamics of migration, national belonging, and Jewishness that connect the Mediterranean to central and southern Africa. In this article, I discuss how the racial hierarchies and the historical legacies of countries like the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia impacted the Jews of Rhodes, and how the social implications of these African contexts – together with the experiences of colonialism, the Holocaust, and decolonization – shaped a diaspora whose origins were rooted in an island that had been Ottoman for centuries, then Italian,

2 See Edith Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

3 The main exceptions are Moïse Rahmani, *Shalom Bwana: la saga des juifs du Congo* (Brussels: Romillat, 2002); Renee Hirschon, "The Jews from Rhodes in Central and Southern Africa", *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, vol. 2, ed. M. Ember, C. Ember, and I. Skoggard (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2005), 925–34; Sabine Bompuku Eyenga-Cornelis and Malca Lévy, "Population européenne, filières méditerranéennes et communautés juives dans le Katanga colonial", in *Haut-Katanga: lorsque richesses économiques et pouvoirs politique forcent une identité régionale*, ed. Jean Omasombo Tshonda (Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 2018), 171–84; Jacqueline Benatar and Myriam Pimienta-Benatar, *De Rhodes à Elisabethville: l'odyssée d'une communauté sépharade* (Jerusalem: Elkana, 2020). See also Pierre Sintès, *En présence du passé: géopolitique de la mémoire aux frontières de la Grèce* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2017), 83–123; Marco Clementi, *Storia della comunità ebraica di Rodi (1912–1947)* (Rome: Tab Edizioni, 2022); Andreas Guidi, *Generations of Empire: Youth from Ottoman to Italian Rule in the Mediterranean* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 177–8.

4 Rebecca Amato Levy, *I Remember Rhodes* (New York: Sepher Hermon, 1978), 162.

and became Greek only after the Second World War. This article draws on documents from Italian, Israeli, American, and Greek archives, as well as oral histories and memorial literature by Jews of Rhodian descent published mainly over the last three decades. Studying this combination of sources, located in different countries and written in different languages, using the tools of history and memory studies, is necessary for obtaining a nuanced reading of a story that is in itself multi-sited and whose written records – if only because of subsequent migrations and of the trauma of the Holocaust – are fragmentary and not always easily accessible to researchers.[5]

The Jews of Rhodes

The presence of Jews in Rhodes dates back to antiquity. In the Middle Ages, a Romaniote (Greek-speaking) Jewish community lived on the island. The history of modern Rhodes Jewry began in the sixteenth century with the arrival of Sephardim expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. Throughout the Ottoman period, the Sephardim preserved a rich heritage and tradition, spoke Judeo-Spanish, and lived relatively peacefully, working mainly as tradesmen, street vendors, or even fishermen, within the boundaries of the *juderìa* (Judeo-Spanish: "Jewish quarter") of the old city of Rhodes. Relations with the Greek-Orthodox and Turkish communities usually were good, and the only significant episode of antisemitism occurred in 1840, when – under the influence of the Damascus Affair of the same year, the most infamous ritual murder accusation to have occurred in the Ottoman Empire – the Jewish community was accused by some within the Greek-Orthodox population of having kidnapped and killed a young boy for ritual purposes. Eventually, the Jews were discharged thanks to the intervention of the European consular authorities and a decree by Sultan Abdülmecid I.[6]

5 For reflections on these issues see Sarah Stein, "Black Holes, Dark Matter, and Buried Troves: Decolonization and the Multi-Sited Archives of Algerian Jewish History", *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (2015): 900–19. For the Jews of Rhodes, the archives of the Carabinieri (the Italian national gendarmerie) of Rhodes, rediscovered in 2013 thanks to the historian Marco Clementi, and which contain information on Jewish life during the Italian period and on the deportation, are now in the Dodecanese State Archives but have been inaccessible to researchers for several years. Even greater problems of accessibility pertain for the Zimbabwean and particularly Congolese national archives.

6 Olga Borovaya, "The Rhodes Blood Libel of 1840: Episode in the History of Ottoman Reforms", *Jewish Social Studies* 26, no. 3 (2021): 35–63. On the Damascus Affair see Jonathan

Until the Second World War, the community was dominated by a small group of families – particularly the Alhadeff, Notrica, and Menasce families – who acquired an important role in trans-Mediterranean commerce and in the banking sector from the nineteenth century.[7] That said, the scarcity of resources on the island and the generalized poverty led many to live and work between Rhodes and nearby cities on the Anatolian mainland, like Milas or Bodrum, where they often had family bonds. Others moved further away to Egypt and even the United States.

Beginning with Italian colonial rule in 1912, and especially during the 1920s, the social environment of the Dodecanese archipelago began to change, in the aftermath of the so-called Italo-Turkish War (1911–12) that culminated with the Italian occupation of Libya. During the governorate of Mario Lago (1922–36) important projects of urban and economic renewal were put in place.[8] From 1925 the Jews of Rhodes, like the rest of the Dodecanesians, became eligible for the so-called *cittadinanza egea* or *piccola cittadinanza* ("Aegean" or "small citizenship"). This guaranteed citizenship with important exceptions. Holders did not gain political rights, were excluded from civil servant jobs and affiliation to the Fascist National Party, and were not obliged to serve in the army. The *cittadinanza egea* also had no impact on matters of personal law, which continued to be dealt with according to ethnoreligious affiliation.[9]

From a cultural point of view, Jews rapidly Italianized. The younger

Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder", Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

7 Avraham Galante, *Histoire des Juifs de Rhodes, Chio, Cos etc.* (Istanbul: Société Anonyme de Papeterie et d'Imprimerie, 1935); Marc Angel, *The Jews of Rhodes: The History of a Sephardic Community* (New York: Sepher Hermon, 1978); Esther Fintz Menascé, *Gli ebrei a Rodi: storia di un'antica comunità annientata dai nazisti* (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 1992); Clementi, *Storia della comunità*. For an overview on Greek Jews see Katherine Fleming, *Greece: A Jewish History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

8 Luca Pignataro, *Il Dodecaneso italiano, 1912–1947*, vol. 1: *L'occupazione iniziale, 1912–1922* (Chieti: Solfanelli, 2011). On the Italian Dodecanese, see also Nicholas Doumanis, *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean: Remembering Fascism's Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Filippo Espinoza, "Fare gli italiani dell'Egeo: il Dodecaneso dall'Impero ottomano all'Impero del fascismo" (Ph.D. diss., University of Trento, 2017); Valerie McGuire, *Italy's Sea: Empire and Nation in the Mediterranean, 1895–1945* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

9 In the context of Fascist Italy, all citizens were *de facto* deprived of full political rights. On the *cittadinanza egea* see Filippo Espinoza, "Una cittadinanza imperiale basata sul consenso: il caso delle isole italiane dell'Egeo (1924–1940)", in *Sudditi o cittadini? L'evoluzione delle appartenenze imperiali nella Prima Guerra Mondiale*, ed. Sara Lorenzini and Simone Bellezza (Rome: Viella, 2018), esp. 196–7.

generations started to be educated in the Italian language, especially after the Alliance Israélite Universelle closed its local school in 1925. The Italian authorities, with the support of the Italian Jewish leaders, also founded a rabbinical college (1928–38) that was to train future rabbis from the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean.[10] In spite of these changes, the economic conditions of the Jews – except elite families, like the Alhadeffs, who took great advantage of the new economic environment – did not improve much.[11] The anti-Jewish laws promulgated by the Fascist regime in 1938 and the beginning of the governorate of Cesare Maria de Vecchi (1936–40; one of the leaders of Mussolini's March on Rome and former Minister for National Education) further complicated the situation, and prompted more people to leave Rhodes.

If the Rhodeslis had a long history of mobility, until the late nineteenth century this had been confined to the Mediterranean region. Only from the early twentieth century did it expand to the Americas and to Africa.[12] The origins of the Rhodesli settlement of Southern Rhodesia involve a small group of young men who from 1900 to 1910 settled in Salisbury (Harare) and Bulawayo, after an initial stop in the port cities of Mozambique. They opened small shops and started employing other Rhodeslis who followed a pattern of chain-migration.[13] The pioneer seems to have been Marco Alhadeff, who settled in Salisbury in 1907 and "opened a tin shack shop . . . selling plough shears etc. . . . When going on holiday to Rhodes [he] encourage[d] more [of] his community to come".[14]

10 Aron Rodrigue, "The Rabbinical Seminary in Italian Rhodes, 1928–1938: An Italian Fascist Project", *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 1 (2019): 1–19; Simonetta della Seta, "Gli ebrei del Mediterraneo nella strategia politica fascista sino al 1938: il caso di *Rodi*", *Storia contemporanea* 6 (1986): 997–1032.

11 Espinoza, "Fare gli italiani", 324–7.

12 Angel, *Jews of Rhodes*, 146. On Rhodesli migrants to North and South America see Yitzhak Kerem, "The Settlement of Rhodian and Other Sephardic Jews in Montgomery and Atlanta in the Twentieth Century", *American Jewish History* 85, no. 44 (1997): 373–91; Andreas Guidi, "Patterns of Jewish Mobility between Rhodes and Buenos Aires, 1905–1948", *Südosteuropäische Hefte*, 4, no. 2 (2015): 13–24; Devin Naar, "Turkinos beyond the Empire: Ottoman Jews in America, 1893 to 1924", *Jewish Quarterly Review* 105, no. 2 (2015): 174–205; Guidi, "Démarcation générationnelle et divergence mémorielle: sur l'émigration des Juifs et des Grecs de Rhodes vers les États-Unis au long du XX siècle", *Slavica Occitania* 52 (2021): 232–60.

13 See Barry A. Kosmin, *Majuta: A History of the Jewish Community of Zimbabwe* (Harare: Mambo Press, 1980); Hugh Macmillan and Frank Shapiro, *Zion in Africa: The Jews of Zambia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999).

14 Aliza Hatchuel, interview with Solly and Stella Alhadeff, n.d., *Zimbabwe Jewish Community*, https://zjc.org.il/solly-and-stella-alhadeff/#gsc.tab=0 (accessed 28 Sept. 2023).

During the 1910s and 1920s, many of these migrants continued to move back and forth between Rhodes and Rhodesia, as well as between Salisbury and the smaller centres of the interior where they sold their goods or opened small emporia. For example, around 1924 Jacob Alhadeff, "together with J. S. Benatar and Haim Galante formed a partnership to take possession of a chain of concession stores operating on the gold mines in the Shamva/Bindura district. At the peak of the gold mining industry they employed many young immigrants from Rhodes, some of them relatives".[15] The son of Behor Almeleh, one of the first migrants, described that "this constant shuttling between Rhodes and Rhodesia was a necessary part of his life. . . . the only way he could look after his family and his parents was to establish a business here in Africa and send money home".[16] In many cases, after a few months or years, or as soon as they improved their financial situation, the migrants went back to Rhodes to get engaged and then married.[17]

Even though central Africa had been envisioned by some early Zionist thinkers as a possible destination for migration and establishing a Jewish state, it remained a place where few ventured and in which Jewish communities were small or non-existent.[18] When the first Rhodeslis arrived in the Belgian Congo, they found a few Jews of Ashkenazi origin working in the trading sector. These forerunners had founded the Congrégation Israélite du Katanga in 1909.[19] The first Jew from Rhodes to arrive in Katanga was Salomon Benatar who reached the colony in 1910. He had left Rhodes earlier for Egypt where several Rhodeslis had settled from the late nineteenth century, driven by the job opportunities after the opening of the Suez Canal (1869). According to family memories, in 1898 Salomon embarked with a brother from Egypt for the port of Beira

15 Nick Alhadeff, "Alhadeff Brothers", *Zimbabwe Jewish Community*, https://zjc.org.il/alhadeff-brothers/#gsc.tab=0 (accessed 28 Sept. 2023).

16 "Behor David Almeleh – Recollections by his Son", in Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Rhodesia, *A Brief History of the Congregation on the Occasion of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary and the Consecration of the New Synagogue, 1933–1958* (Salisbury: Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Rhodesia, 1958), 34.

17 Rahmani, *Shalom Bwana*, 59–62.

18 Gur Alroey, "Angolan Zion: The Jewish Territorial Organization and the Idea of a Jewish State in Western Africa, 1907–1913", *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 14, no. 2 (2015): 179–98.

19 Peggy Frankston, interview with Elie-Christophe Vamos, Brussels, 11 July 2015, Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn531079.

in Mozambique, where he opened an emporium. Having accumulated a small fortune at the time of the South African War (1899–1902), he started a new business in Umtali (Mutare), Rhodesia. Finally, he entered the Belgian Congo at the time when the city of Elisabethville was founded.[20] As this indicates, the early history of the Rhodeslis of Congo is related to that of Katanga and of its capital Elisabethville. Katanga was in fact the region where most Europeans concentrated, not only Belgians but also Italians, Portuguese, and Greeks. Katanga was home to the most important industries and natural resources of the colony, including the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga.[21] Rhodeslis founded a synagogue in Elisabethville in 1930, which was led from 1937 by a young graduate of the Italian rabbinical college of Rhodes, Moïse Lévy.[22]

The major difference with Southern Rhodesia was the fact that it was under British colonial rule and was envisaged as a settler colony, whereas Congo remained a *colonie d'exploitation* – a source of natural and human resources – that attracted relatively few European settlers, especially prior to the Second World War.[23] This also shaped the dynamic of the Jewish population in each setting. In Elisabethville, Rhodeslis dominated the local Jewish community. In Rhodesia, by contrast, the Sephardim remained a minority. From about 1900, Ashkenazi Jews mainly from the Russian Empire settled in Northern and Southern Rhodesia, drawn by commercial opportunity, initially working as itinerant traders selling

20 Angel, *Jews of Rhodes*, 146; Rahmani, *Shalom Bwana*, 38–9; see also Solly Benatar, “Ma famille”, 2022, Ms. kindly provided by the author, who is the grandson of Salomon Benatar.

21 Bruce Fetter, *The Creation of Elisabethville, 1910–1940* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976); Sophie Boonen and Johann Lagae, “Scenes from a Changing Colonial ‘Far West’: Picturing the Early Urban Landscape and Colonial Society of Cosmopolitan Lubumbashi, 1910–1931”, *Stichproben: Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien*, 28, no. 15 (2015): 11–54; Boonen, “Une ville construite par des ‘gens d'ailleurs’: développements urbains à Elisabethville, Congo Belge (actuellement Lubumbashi, RDC)”, *ABE Journal* 14–15 (2019): https://journals.openedition.org/abe/6164?lang=it (accessed 28 Sept. 2023). On non-Belgian settlers see e.g. Rosario Giordano, *Belges et Italiens du Congo-Kinshasa: récits de vie avant et après l'indépendance* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008); Alexandra Fefopoulou, “The Role of the Greek Orthodox Religion in the Construction of Ethnic Identity among the Greek Community of Lubumbashi, RDC”, *Proceedings Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 1 (2014): 115–26.

22 Milantia Bourla Errera, *Moïse Levy: un rabbin au Congo (1937–1991)* (Brussels: Longue Vue, 2000).

23 Enocent Msindo, “Settler Rule in Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1979”, in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, ed. Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini (London: Routledge, 2016), 247–62.

goods to other settlers or to the native population.[24] The Sephardi population grew more slowly. In 1904 there seem to have been only four of them and about thirty in 1911. By the 1930s the number had grown to a few hundred, sufficient to support the creation in 1931 of the Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Rhodesia and the consecration of a Sephardi synagogue in 1934, both in Salisbury. This synagogue was never in the hands of a Rhodes-born rabbi, but from 1944 it was led by Manfred Papo, born in Vienna in 1898 to a Sephardi family from Bosnia.[25] Despite these differences, the Rhodesli communities of the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia were in close contact. This was due to the geographical proximity and to the presence of railway lines that went from Katanga to South Africa, but most of all because of business and especially family ties between Elisabethville and Salisbury. What kind of feelings of belonging did these migrants nurture? Did they feel attached to Rhodes only, or did they develop a local sense of belonging in the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia?

Nationhood and colonialism before the Holocaust

The Rhodeslis who settled in the Belgian Congo were often perceived by the Belgians as part of the so-called *petits-blancs*, that is Mediterranean Europeans of lower social status who were not involved in the administration of the colony.[26] As previously noted, most of the Rhodeslis living in Rhodes became Italian colonial citizens in the 1920s. Those who had actually left the Dodecanese when it was still Ottoman could "receive Italian protection through local consuls and representatives", and perhaps feel Italian without necessarily being Italian citizens.[27]

24 The most important were the Susman brothers; see Hugh Macmillan, *An African Trading Empire: The Story of Susman Brothers & Wulfsohn, 1901–2005* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).
25 Gabriele Anderl, "Als Rabbiner und als Religionslehrerin in Südrhodesien: Manfred und Luise Eva Papo", in *Going East – Going South: Österreichisches Exil in Asien und Afrika*, ed. Margit Franz and Heimo Halbrainer (Graz: Clio, 2014), 313–21; see also Maurice Wagner, "Rhodesia", *American Jewish Year Book*, 88 (1978): 510; Kosmin, *Majuta*, 27, 63; Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Rhodesia, *Brief History*, 14.
26 Rosario Giordano, "L''élu' et le 'kipanda cha Muzungu' ('morceau de Blanc'): quête de réussite et parcours identitaires des Italiens au Congo belge", *Cahiers d'études africaines* 221–2 (2016): 317–42.
27 "Passaporti a dodecannesini in Africa", III Political Bureau of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Italian Royal Legation of Léopoldville, telegram, 10 Feb. 1934, Congo Belga, file (f.) Affari Politici 1931–1945, Belgio, envelope (env.) 6, Historical Archive of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter, ASDMAE), Rome (unless otherwise

For many Rhodeslis of the Belgian Congo, the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–36) was a significant moment. In actively supporting Italy, some helped to establish a branch of the Italian National Fascist Party in Katanga.[28] According to the explorer and politician Carlo Baragiola, who visited the Belgian Congo in the early 1930s, a first Fascio had been founded in Elisabethville under the impulse of the Italian consul, Luigi Drago.[29] This was followed, in 1936, by the founding of a second Fascio in Jadotville (Likasi). Not all the Rhodeslis who partook in these initiatives were Italian citizens, and in any case even those who were *cittadini egei* could not be members of the party. That said, since the Rhodeslis were reputed to be the most prosperous among the Italians in Congo, the Italian consul-general in Léopoldville noted that "[they] should not [be] consider[ed] as second-class Italians . . . but we should try to attract the best elements and secure their support to the Italian cause".[30] The support given by the Rhodeslis of Katanga to Fascism was not exceptional, but in line with nationalist feelings that Jews living in Rhodes, and Italian Jews more generally, were expressing at a moment when Fascism had not yet adopted explicit anti-Jewish policies.[31]

indicated, all translations are mine). According to the Treaty of Lausanne, the *opzione* (the option to become Italian citizens) was not possible for members of non-majority communities residing abroad at the time of the treaty signature, i.e. Jews and Muslims in the case of the prevalently Greek Orthodox Dodecanese. However, the Italian authorities generally extended this possibility to Dodecanesian Jews, as a way to increase the number of Italian subjects in and outside the archipelago. See Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Extraterritorial Dreams: European Citizenship, Sephardi Jews, and the Ottoman Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 81.

28 Anne-Marie Morelli, "Les diplomates italiens en Belgique et la 'question juive', 1938–1943", *Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome* 53–4 (1983–84): 357–406. On the Fasci Italiani all'Estero see Luca de Caprariis, "'Fascism for Export?' The Rise and Eclipse of the Fasci Italiani all'Estero", *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 2 (2000): 151–83; Emilio Franzina and Matteo Sanfilippo, eds., *Il fascismo e gli emigrati: la parabola dei Fasci italiani all'estero (1920–1943)* (Rome: Laterza, 2003).

29 Carlo Baragiola, *Il segreto dell'Africa equatoriale* (Milan: Editoriale Arte e Storia, 1933), 175–6.

30 Italian Consul-General in Léopoldville to the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, "Colonia italiana al Katanga", 1 Nov. 1935, Congo Belga, f. Affari Politici 1931–1945, env. 9, ASDMAE. The economic role played by the Italian community was also highlighted by the Belgian authorities: see Vincent Genin, "L'Italia e i processi di decolonizzazione: il caso del Congo Belga (1957–1960)", *Ventunesimo secolo* 14, no. 36 (2015): 109; Carlo Carbone, *Italiani in Congo: migranti, mercenari, imprenditori nel Novecento* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2019), 94.

31 Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista: vicende, identità, persecuzione* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), 75–94; Sarfatti, ed., "Italy's Fascist Jews: Insights on an Unusual Scenario", *Quest* –

In the case of Southern Rhodesia, some Rhodeslis naturalized as British in order to avoid any problems related to the sanctions imposed in 1935 on Italy by the Society of Nations after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Abramo Alhadeff, for example, was vehemently criticized by the Italian consular authorities in South Africa for being one of those Rhodeslis who "[exhibited] shameful behaviour, since, as Italian subjects, their duties for their adopted motherland [*patria d'adozione*], that did so much for their progress, should be particularly felt in this moment". Even in 1934, Alhadeff had been described in antisemitic terms as "a typical Jew, only worried about safeguarding his businesses, [that] in the actual political context did not hesitate to ask for British citizenship".[32] All this shows the ambivalence and frailty that notions of nationhood had for (Jewish) colonial subjects from the post-Ottoman Dodecanese. This was particularly pronounced in places far away from the motherland where the Rhodeslis often constituted a small yet important, and useful, group of businessmen for the Italian state. This attitude is in line with what had been argued since the early twentieth century – when Italy had only one colony, Eritrea, but at the same time a great number of Italians were migrating abroad – by a number of Italian politicians and economists. The most significant example is that of the politician and, from 1948 to 1955, second President of Italy, Luigi Einaudi.[33]

Rhodesli businesses seem to have catered to the needs of the local population more than to colonial settlers.[34] The issue of relations with the locals, however, is difficult to reconstruct in detail, as most of the sources of the time do not mention it. Nevertheless, the written and oral testimonies of recent decades present these relations in specific terms: either as between employer and employee, or within the context of the household. Oral histories do speak of extra-marital unions and more rarely of marriages between Rhodesli men and local women, especially in the initial stages of Rhodesli settlement in Congo and Rhodesia when

Issues in Contemporary Jewish History 11 (2017): i–xviii; Luca Ventura, *Ebrei con il Duce: "La nostra bandiera" (1934–1938)* (Turin: Zamorani, 2002).

32 "Posizione naturalizzati", Regia Legazione d'Italia a Cape Town, 1936, Ufficio Centrale Speciale (UCS), Dodecanese State Archive (hereafter, GAK), Rhodes; "Alhadeff Abramo", Schedato politico, pratica 925, 1934, UCS, GAK, both cited in Clementi, *Storia degli ebrei*, 241–2.

33 Luigi Einaudi, *Un principe mercante: studio sulla espansione coloniale italiana* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1900).

34 "Colonia italiana al Katanga"; see also Rahmani, *Shalom Bwana*, 44–6.

the community was mostly formed by men.[35] Moreover, we know that in the 1940s some firms employed Congolese to run shops under the supervision of Rhodeslis in small villages in the interior of the regions of Katanga and Kasai: "[The shops] were run by the locals, but there were Isakhar, Josué, Victor [Benatar], etc. . . . The honesty of the Congolese, we left the doors open, the money, nobody touched anything".[36] Although it is difficult to get a deep understanding of these issues from sources of this kind, it is arguable that the Rhodeslis were between colonizer and colonized. Their Italianness as well as their position as members of an ethnoreligious minority could simultaneously make them close to the white settler community and set them apart from it.[37]

When the Second World War broke out, Rhodeslis who had an Italian passport – Italy now an enemy country – were interned in a prison camp with other Italians living in the Belgian Congo. However, based on what Rabbi Moïse Levy told his biographer, the Jewish internees were freed shortly afterwards thanks to his intervention with the governor of Katanga. By 1940, Italianness was no longer a nationality to be proud of. "I do not want to mention", Levy wrote in a letter to the governor, "under which circumstances, that went beyond their own will, my Dodecanesian compatriots were given Italian papers . . . It is also clear that my compatriots cannot have any sympathy for Fascist Italy . . . I cannot believe . . . that here in Congo, in the free and independent Belgian land, Jews that have given so many proofs of their attachment to Belgium . . . can be considered and treated as enemies".[38] The testimony of a member of the Benatar family gives a slightly different version, arguing that it

35 Rahmani, *Shalom Bwana*, 59–64. The most renowned case is that of Moïse Katumbi, former governor of Katanga and considered one of the wealthiest men in Congo, born in 1964 to a Congolese woman and the Rhodesli businessman Nissim Soriano; see Cnaan Lipshiz, "Son of Greek Jewish Holocaust Refugee now one of most Powerful Leaders in Congo", *Times of Israel*, 18 Feb. 2021, https://www.timesofisrael.com/son-of-greek-jewish-holocaust-refugee-now-one-of-most-powerful-leaders-in-congo/ (accessed 28 September 2023).

36 Sergio Minerbi, interview with Gabriel Benatar, Brussels, 1982, 12–13, 195 (1), Oral History Department (hereafter, OHD), Institute for Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

37 Similarly for Italians who migrated in the early twentieth century from the small town of Roasio, in Piedmont, to Ghana, Congo, and Nigeria; see Matteo Grilli, "Mémoires d'Italiens d'Afrique: les *Roasiani* entre Congo, Ghana et Nigeria", in *Des Italiens au Congo aux Italiens du Congo: aspects d'une glocalité*, ed. Pierre Halen, Daniele Comberiati, and Rosaria Ionounes-Vona (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2020),133–46.

38 Bourla Errera, *Moïse Levy*, 58.

was Gabriel Benatar, who naturalized as Belgian in 1938, who discussed the issue with the governor and offered him money in exchange for the release of the prisoners. In this case too, the underlying assumption was that the Rhodeslis were Dodecanesian Jews who happened to have Italian passports. Their imprisonment, moreover, meant that "all business [in Elisabethville] had come to a halt".[39]

These episodes show how the Rhodeslis and their communal leaders were able to evoke different national and ethnoreligious categories to define themselves in Congo: first as proud Italians, then as Dodecanesian Jews with Italian citizenship, and lastly as citizens of a British or Belgian colony. Italy could be either a vector of modernization that allowed the Rhodeslis to reclaim their belonging to the country, as happened during the Italo-Ethiopian War, or a regime that obliged them to become Italians. Although this shift reflected changing political circumstances (including the promulgation of anti-Jewish laws in Italy from 1938), it also reflected the inherently ambivalent national categories that this diaspora confronted.[40] More generally, it confirms that Rhodeslis, similarly to other inhabitants of the post-Ottoman Mediterranean who had moved abroad for economic or political reasons in the early twentieth century, like the Lebanese or Palestinians, had "many . . . concentric circles of self-identification", related to different spaces and entities that could include one's ethnoreligious affiliation, village, island, and nation(s), and that could be invoked according to the circumstances.[41]

Between Holocaust and decolonization

In Southern Rhodesia, the Rhodesli presence increased in the 1930s

39 S. B., telephone interview with the author, 24 Feb. 2022.

40 See Sabina Donati, "'Cittadinanza', 'sudditanza' e 'nazionalità' in contesto imperiale: riflessioni sul caso italiano tra guerra e dopoguerra, 1914–1925", *Italian Culture* 39, no. 2 (2021): 155–73. For a partly similar example see Ruth Ginio, "The Implementation of Anti-Jewish Laws in French West Africa: A Reflection of Vichy Anti-Semitic Obsession", in *The Holocaust and North Africa*, ed. Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 76–91.

41 Alexis Rappas, "Greeks under European Colonial Rule: National Allegiance and Imperial Loyalty", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 34, no. 2 (2010): 209. On Lebanese and Palestinian migrants and on Ottoman Sephardi Jews in the Americas see Jacob Norris, "Exporting the Holy Land: Artisans and Merchant Migrants in Ottoman-Era Bethlehem", *Mashriq & Mahjar* 2 (2013): 14–40; Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (London: Hurst, 2014); Devi Mays, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

and 1940s when, "with the coming of Hitler, there was an impressive accession of new Sephardi immigrants, the majority of whom settled in outside districts, where work was available, including Gatooma, Shabani, Que Que, Gwelo and Bindura".[42] A man whose father moved to Southern Rhodesia in 1936 recalled that: "At that time a lot of the younger men were moving because of the economy there [i.e. in Rhodes], things were difficult. They were looking for [a] better life".[43] Jewish immigration from Europe was limited because the colonial authorities feared that the arrival of refugees would be detrimental to the consolidation of a settler community that was mainly of Anglo-Saxon origin.[44] A similar approach was adopted in 1930s South Africa.[45] More generally, people from countries such as Italy, Portugal, or Greece were considered "undesirable" settlers, especially if they belonged to lower strata of society and/or to leftist political movements.[46] According to Rahmani, this – together with economic and legal factors that made the migration to Southern Rhodesia more difficult – was the reason that more Rhodeslis opted for the Belgian Congo.[47]

If the Second World War constituted a significant watershed for the Rhodeslis living in the African diaspora, it was even more so for those remaining in the Dodecanese. In Rhodes, all Jews – with the exception of a few dozen who were Turkish nationals and under the protection of the local Turkish consul – were deported to Auschwitz through a joint operation between the German army and the remaining Italian authorities in 1944. Of the 1,661 Jews who were deported, fewer than two hundred survived. Although communication was not easy, news of their fate also reached Southern Rhodesia. In September 1944, just a month after the deportation, the minutes of a meeting of the Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Salisbury reported that "following a communication

42 Eric Rosenthal, *Rhodesian Jewry and its History*, pt. 4 (Salisbury: Rhodesian Jewish Board of Deputies, 1960), 49.

43 V. A., online interview with the author, 11 Nov. 2022.

44 Alois Mlambo, "'Some are more White than Others': Racial Chauvinism as a Factor in Rhodesian Immigration Policy, 1890 to 1963", *Zambezia* 27, no. 2 (2000): 139–60.

45 Milton Shain, "From Undesirable to Unassimilable: The Racialization of the 'Jew' in South Africa", in *Holocaust Memory and Racism in the Postwar World*, ed. Shirli Gilbert and Avril Alba (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019), 72–90.

46 George Bishi, "Immigration and Settlement of 'Undesirable' Whites in Southern Rhodesia, c. 1940s–1960s", in *Rethinking White Societies in Southern Africa, 1930s–1960s*, ed. Duncan Money and Danelle van Zyl-Hermann (London: Routledge, 2020), 59–77.

47 Moïse Rahmani, *Rhodes: un pan de notre mémoire* (Brussels: Romillat, 2000), 162–3.

from the Congo Congregation", it had been notified that "our people at Rhodes had been deported by the Germans, cables had been sent to Egypt for confirmation, but replies received so far indicated no grounds of truths in these reports".[48] Contradictory news about the deportation, based on reports from British radio and the International Red Cross, circulated in the Belgian Congo, Southern Rhodesia, Egypt, and Europe throughout the summer of 1944.[49] In November, when the reports were confirmed, the Rhodeslis of Salisbury received the support of the Rhodesian Greek community, which cancelled its annual Grand Ball "mainly in view of the tragic news regarding our people in Rhodes".[50] In this case, two ethnoreligious diasporas living in a foreign country but both coming from territories with a similar sociocultural and linguistic background, supported each other in ways that recall the solidarity between the first Dodecanesian Greek-Orthodox and Jewish migrants to Seattle in the early twentieth century.[51]

It is noteworthy that in Southern Rhodesia, even more than in the Belgian Congo, "origins, rather than race strictly defined as a primordial identity, were the defining factor when it came to immigration restrictions", and "'determined social ranking' when it came to white immigration".[52] In this context, pre-migratory animosities between ethnoreligious groups could temporarily be put aside. As the initial difficulty of integrating was overcome through time, and many Jews became more or less accepted members of white Rhodesian society – something which distinguished them from other non-British migrants, for example the Indians – the Rhodesli communal leaders invented a quasi-magical connection to the land. "This is a story", reads a 1962 publication marking the opening of the Sephardi Hebrew School of Salisbury, "of a Community who by a strange co-incidence of fate left an Island called Rhodes and migrated to a country with an almost identical name – Rhodesia. It is a happy story because you,

48 Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Rhodesia – Minutes of Committee Meeting held on the 20th September 1944 at the residence of Mr. S. N. Alhadeff, 12, North Avenue, RH SB/25, Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (hereafter, CAHJP), Jerusalem.

49 Clementi, *Storia degli ebrei*, 449–52.

50 Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Rhodesia – Minutes of Committee meeting held at the residence of Mr. M. B. Hasson, 21, Van Praagh Avenue Salisbury on Tuesday the 22nd November 1944, at 8.15 pm, RH SB/25, CAHJP.

51 Guidi, "Démarcation générationnelle".

52 Trishula Rachna Patel, "Becoming Zimbabwean: A History of Indians in Rhodesia, 1890–1980" (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 2021), 57.

each and every one of you, has had a share and is part of this progress".[53] This narrative has retained its power into the present, as in this account by a woman born in Southern Rhodesia and now living in Cape Town: "The Sephardi community [of Rhodesia] was very successful in business . . . It is extraordinary, from such small and humble beginnings . . . this is my history and what we try to tell our children".[54] Similar rags-to-riches stories are found in many other migrant and diasporic communities, of course, though in this case they assume the added layer of migrants as hard-working pioneers in a colonial society.[55]

In 1945, when the Second World War came to an end, the Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Salisbury continued to show solidarity with the motherland, and prayed for "[t]hose fortunate enough to survive the persecution of the Nazi monsters [who] are still awaiting to be returned to Rhodes".[56] Few survivors resettled in the Dodecanese, however: on the contrary, approximately 70 – almost half of the less than 200 Rhodesli Holocaust survivors – migrated to the Belgian Congo and a smaller number to Southern Rhodesia, which were among the few places where they had living relatives able to support them.[57] The fact that most of the survivors were women led to the birth of a new generation of Rhodeslis in Africa. In the case of Congo, it also contributed to the increase of the Italian community, which by then formed the largest group of settlers after the Belgians and in 1946 numbered 1,500 people.[58] Of these, about 800 were Dodecanesian Jews, "almost all working as tradesmen" according to a letter by the Italian consul-general in Léopoldville in 1947.[59]

53 "Editorial", Our Years of Progress 1931–1962 – Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Rhodesia, 3, RH SB/35 Rhodesia, CAHJP.

54 V. M., online interview with the author, 17 June 2022.

55 Josephine L. Fisher, *Pioneers, Settlers, Aliens, Exiles: The Decolonisation of White Identity in Zimbabwe* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2010), 5.

56 Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Rhodesia – Minutes of Annual General Meeting held at the Sephardi Hall Jameson Avenue, Salisbury, on Sunday 2nd September 1945, at 10.30 am, RH SB/25, CAHJP.

57 Bourla Errera, *Moïse Levy*, 85. Whereas Bourla Errera counts 163 Rhodesli survivors, 159 people are cited by Marco Clementi, "The End of the Rhodes Jewish Community", in *The "Jewish Question" in the Territories Occupied by the Italians*, ed. Andrea Ungari and Giovanni Orsina (Rome: Viella, 2020), 229.

58 Etienne Deschamps, "Entre héritage colonial et destin européen: la Belgique, le Congo et la problématique de l'outre-mer dans le processus d'intégration éuropéenne (1945–1960)", vol. 1 (Ph.D. diss., European University Institute, 2016), 425.

59 Italian Consul-General in Léopoldville to the General Director for Emigration of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Consistenza numerica delle collettività italiane

Interestingly, even though the Italian rule over the Dodecanese had ceased, the Rhodeslis are generically presented as Italians, showing the complexity and indeterminacy of Italianness – and of the *cittadinanza egea* – in the wake of the fall of Fascism and of the end of the Italian colonial empire.[60]

The role of the Rhodeslis became even more important in the following years, as confirmed by a report by Umberto Nahon, an Italian representative of the Keren Kayemet le-Israel (Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901 to buy and develop land in Palestine and then in the State of Israel, where nowadays it also deals with water supply and forestation), who visited Elisabethville in the summer of 1947.[61] Jaki Israel, born in Rhodes in 1922, remembers that in Elisabethville, "Amato, Benatar and others . . . all gave jobs to those who arrived. . . . and after some time, [some of the new migrants] opened their own businesses".[62] If the largest factories and enterprises were still in the hands of the colonial companies or connected to the Belgian state, Rhodeslis inhabited a more informal sector between the colonial and local economies, which often meant selling items that both the settlers and the local population needed in their daily lives.[63]

The war without doubt left indelible marks on some people. Elisa Franco-Hasson admitted that "For years, I continued to cry at night, woken up by terrible nightmares. . . . memories [of Auschwitz] assaulted me without warning".[64] Rhodeslis were nonetheless able to forge successful new lives in the Belgian Congo, and some – such as the Benatar, Alhadeff, Amato, and Tarica families – became among the most important entrepreneurs. Maurice Alhadeff, for example, had an

nel Congo Belga e nell'Angola Portoghese", telegram, 4 Dec. 1947, f. DGIE – Ufficio I Collettività italiane all'estero 1912; 1935–1957, env. 7, ASDMAE.

60 See Pamela Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made: Decolonization and the Foundation of Postwar Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 144–5.

61 "Duah ve-heshbon me-'et dr. H. Nahon 'al-nesiyato le-Kongo ha-Belgit" [Hebrew; Report of dr. H. Nahon about his travel to the Belgian Congo], July 1947, KKL5/14575, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

62 Jaki Israel, interview with Sergio Minerbi, Brussels, 22 Sept. 1982, 195 (3), OHD. According to Jacqueline Benatar, Salomon Benatar also paid for many Rhodeslis the deposit requested from all foreigners by the Belgian authorities to enter Congo: Benatar and Pimienta-Benatar, *De Rhodes à Elisabethville*, 125–6.

63 See Jean-Luc Vellut, "Hégémonies en construction: articulations entre état et entreprises dans le bloc colonial belge (1908–1960)", *Revue canadienne des études africaines* 16, no. 2 (1982): 313–30.

64 Elisa Franco-Hasson, *Il était une fois l'île des roses* (Brussels: Clepsydre, 1996), 132.

import-export business, acted as honorary consul of the State of Israel in Léopoldville, and became a well-known collector and patron of Congolese artists.[65] The Benatar family owned Solbena (acronym of Salomon Benatar et fils), a commercial enterprise that in the 1940s had seventeen branches all over Congo. By the mid-1950s, they had become the most important sellers of textiles and opened a textile factory with more than a thousand workers.[66] Lastly, Amato Frères, founded in 1925 in Kamina as a commercial enterprise, developed in the import-export sectors, as well as in the cultivation and processing of manioc, palm oil, and peanuts.[67]

Even though the Rhodeslis of the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia were not themselves colonial officials, they became part of colonial systems of domination that ruled over local populations. This may seem at odds with the fact that they had been themselves subject to colonial, and then anti-Jewish, policies in the Italian Dodecanese. At this time, however, as Samuel Moyn has argued, "a widespread humanitarian paradigm of human rights" had not yet come about and only emerged in the 1970s; until the 1950s "the Western policy was . . . to insert a colonial clause to ensure that human rights did not apply to imperial spaces".[68] As with settlers elsewhere, and as Jews in apartheid South Africa, they too became "implicated subjects", trying to rebuild their lives "between different sites of violence" and against "a complex, connective history of trauma, implication, complicity, and forgetting".[69] It is true that Rhodesli-owned department stores were among the first in Congo to open their doors to blacks in the 1940s, and that, in their recollections, some Rhodeslis acknowledge the racial and class divisions present in Africa. In these cases too, however, they assume a world governed by specific (colonial) logics: "[In Elisabethville] there was a *ville blanche* and a *ville noire*", one of my interviewees remembers, "[but] I did not see

65 Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "A Century of Painting in the Congo: Image, Memory, Experience, and Knowledge", in *A Companion to Modern African Art*, ed. Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 336.

66 Solly Benatar, "Projet pour mes 'mémoires'", 2021, Ms. kindly provided by the author.

67 Teobaldo Filesi, "Struttura economica del Congo Belga", *Africa* 7, no. 1 (1952): 6. Information on Rhodesli businessmen can be found in *Le Congo Belge et ses coloniaux: livre d'or* (Léopoldville: Editions Stanley, 1953) ; Pasquale Diana, *Lavoratori italiani nel Congo Belga* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa, 1961).

68 Samuel Moyn, *Human Rights and the Uses of History* (London: Verso, 2017).

69 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 111.

aggressiveness towards the Congolese".[70]

Racial hierarchies and dynamics in Southern Rhodesia are not frequently mentioned. The public image of the community was of a group of hard-working men (and, to a limited extent, women), "spurred [on] with a pioneering spirit to make success in a new country".[71] This foundational myth allowed the Rhodeslis to present themselves as integrated into the white settler community, and suggested their acceptance of Rhodesian racial hierarchies.[72] At the same time, most Rhodeslis evoke the relatively inward-looking Sephardi microcosms of Salisbury and Bulawayo, the Ladino language and culture, and the stories of their forefathers more than they do similarities with other settlers.[73] This points to a process of increased (Jewish) ethnicization over time that can also be found in other displaced communities, such as Algerian Jews in France who stress their Jewishness and distance themselves from both the *pieds-noirs* and Algerian Muslims, or the Rhodeslis of Seattle who seem to relate more to American Ashkenazi Jews than to Americans of Greek, even Dodecanesian, origin.[74]

The early 1960s were a turning point for the Belgian Congo and its inhabitants. The sudden end of Belgian rule brought freedom but also dramatic economic, social, and political consequences, including the assassination of the prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, and the secession of the Katanga region in July 1960.[75] In the immediate aftermath of independence, some Rhodeslis hoped to return once the situation calmed down but were never able to do so: "It seems clear that Congo

70 S. B., telephone interview with the author, 24 Feb. 2022. See also Rahmani, *Shalom Bwana*, 184–5.

71 Solly Alhadeff, "Our Years of Progress", Our Years of Progress 1931–1962 – Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Rhodesia, 40, RH SB/35 Rhodesia, CAHJP.

72 David McDermott Hughes, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging* (London: Palgrave, 2010), 4–5. More generally see Ruramisai Charumbira, *Imagining A Nation: History and Memory in Making Zimbabwe* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 94–103.

73 See the testimonies in "Bozes de Zimbabwe: memoria i kultura de la komunita sefaradia", *Centro cultural Sefarad*, 6 Feb. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-SpbVJ7jyo. (accessed 28 Sept. 2023).

74 See Dario Miccoli, *A Sephardi Sea: Jewish Memories across the Modern Mediterranean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 77–82; Guidi, "Démarcation générationnelle", 250–52. See also Alexis Rappas, "Memorial Soliloquies in Post-Colonial Rhodes and the Ghost of Mediterranean Cosmopolitanism", *Mediterranean Historical Review* 33, no. 1 (2018): 89–110.

75 See David van Reybrouck, *Congo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2015), 303–55; Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (London: Zed Books, 2002), 94–120.

Jewish businessmen are only too eager to return", noted an officer of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in August 1960: "very few will make emigration plans to South America or to Canada or to Los Angeles and Seattle".[76] But this is precisely what soon happened: almost all Rhodeslis, like other settlers, rushed to leave the country and sell what they could of their properties: "Scared to death . . . I was selling, nothing but selling", remembers the Holocaust survivor Laura Varon, who owned a shop in Léopoldville and left Congo in 1961, settling first in Salisbury and then in the United States.[77]

In 1961 more than 7,000 Jews lived in Rhodesia, among them about 1,000 of Sephardi, mainly Rhodesli, origin. Some had arrived in previous years from Congo, but many came from South Africa and Great Britain after the establishment of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1953–63).[78] In the immediate aftermath of Congolese independence through to the late 1970s, Rhodesia was a place where Rhodeslis sought to re-establish their lives and businesses; while "some of them stayed a short time and went to South Africa, some stayed a long time".[79] However, following the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from Great Britain in 1965 – which led to the establishment of a white-ruled state almost unrecognized at international level, soon subject to political and economic sanctions – many Jews began to leave, as "economically and emotionally it appeared that they had much to lose in the forthcoming racial confrontation and political polarization" between the white elite and the black majority.[80]

The fact that Israel officially supported sanctions against Rhodesia did not change the situation much, as relations between the two countries were limited, and there was no diplomatic Israeli presence in Salisbury. Nonetheless, local Jews had often been active supporters of the Zionist movement and helped it with substantial economic donations. Israel secretly maintained some commercial relations with Rhodesian companies, and Israeli representatives visited Salisbury unofficially, as

76 Leonard Seidenman to Charles H. Jordan, 19 Aug. 1960, G55-64/4/6/BG.299, AJDC. This feeling was also expressed by the Chief Rabbi, Moïse Lévy; see Bourla Errera, *Moïse Lévy*, 123–30.

77 Laura Varon, interview with Vera Federman, 17 Jan. 1989, OHC0119, Washington State Jewish Archives, Seattle.

78 Wagner, "Rhodesia", 508.

79 P. H., online interview with the author, 7 Oct. 2022.

80 Kosmin, *Majuta*, 121. On UDI see Mlambo, *History*, 149–93. The only two countries that accepted Rhodesia's UDI were Portugal and South Africa.

for example Haim Herzog did in 1969 while he was Military Governor of East Jerusalem, Judaea, and Samaria.[81] Relations between the Belgian Congo and Israel were also established during the 1960s, lasting more or less until the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Israel offered military training to the Congolese army, and in 1962 President Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi (1952–63) made an official visit to the country. Several Zionist groups had been established over the years, and Zionist institutions such as Keren Kayemet le-Israel and Keren Ha-Yesod (Foundation Fund, established in 1920 as the fundraising arm of the World Zionist Organization) frequently sent emissaries to Elisabethville and Léopoldville.[82]

Remembering the African juderìa

In both the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia, the end of colonialism marked the decline and then the end of the *juderìa* that the Rhodeslis had reconstructed after the Holocaust. Leaving these countries was particularly painful because it often meant arriving in yet another foreign country: "In 1961 I came to Ashdod. There was nothing, just the sky, the sand and the sea. . . . [In Congo] we lived well".[83] For many, the years in central Africa remain difficult to convey to outsiders: "'You did not make everything up, did you?', Fatima asks her . . . 'The New Year's Eve, the party, the giant lake. Even the servants. And that place, what was its name?' 'Belgian Congo' 'Belgian Congo, even the name seems unreal'".[84]

Following the electoral victory of Robert Mugabe in 1980, the few Rhodeslis still living in Rhodesia (renamed Zimbabwe) felt not only that the Jewish presence was irreversibly declining, but also that their Sephardi heritage risked being forgotten too. Even daily things such as food became important to its preservation, as a publication of the Sephardi Ladies of Bulawayo suggests: "*Bulema, fritada, boyos, travados*

81 Kosmin, *Majuta*, 165–74. See also Eitay Mack, "When Israel supported Boycotts against a White Supremacist Regime", *+972 Magazine*, 10 March 2021, https://www.972mag.com/israel-rhodesia-boycott/ (accessed 28 Sept. 2023).

82 Zach Levey, "Israel's Involvement in the Congo, 1958–68: Civilian and Military Dimensions", *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (2003): 14–36; Eytan Bar-Yosef, *Villah ba-jungle: 'Afriqah ba-tarbut ha-isra'elit* [Hebrew; A Villa in the Jungle: Africa in Israeli Culture] (Jerusalem: Van Leer Jerusalem Institute/Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 2016); Haim Yacobi, *Israel and Africa: A Genealogy of Moral Geography* (London: Routledge, 2016).

83 Stella Franco, video interview with Marcello Pezzetti, 10 Jan. 1996, Progetto Interviste alla Storia, Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, Milan.

84 Virginia Gattegno with Matteo Corradini, *Per chi splende questo lume: la mia vita oltre Auschwitz* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2022), 38.

are words that bring to life the spirit of the Spanish Jewish heritage that is disappearing. . . . the Spanish of Castile and the Sephardi cuisine are the sole living relics of the lost fatherland".[85] Today, Rhodeslis look back with nostalgia on the years when the first generation of migrants was still alive: "Often after meals we would sit together and listen to old tales and fables recounted by my grandmother . . . The African rites and folk beliefs of our domestic help added yet another dimension to our extraordinary childhood experiences."[86]

For the few who remained, the turning point was not so much Zimbabwean independence as the beginning of Mugabe's land reforms and the increased marginalization of the white population from the 2000s, as one recounted: "[In 1980] my father said: 'Let's be confident and stay here'. . . . everything was very good in this country until the year 2000".[87] For the majority of Rhodeslis, central Africa ended by being a temporary home against the background of a rapidly changing, decolonizing world. As an officer of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society eloquently wrote back in 1960: "there is a 'Jewish problem' in Africa, but it is not the usual one. Here the difficulty of the Jew is not that he is Jewish, but that he is part of another minority group. The problem of the Jews is that they are whites in a Continent that is increasingly black dominated. The fate of the Jews is linked to that of all other Europeans."[88]

That said, and as opposed to the Belgian or British settlers, the Rhodeslis did not have a homeland to which they could return. Neither Jewish Rhodes nor the Italian Dodecanese existed any more, and surviving relatives were scattered between Belgium, South Africa, Italy, Israel, the United States, and Argentina. In South Africa, many settled in Cape Town and Johannesburg. There, a Sephardi Congregation was established in 1960 by Rhodeslis from Congo who did not want to attend the local Ashkenazi synagogues, "as they found the services strange and . . . not comfortable". This first group was joined, in 1971, by "a second wave of Sephardi arrivals . . . this time from Rhodesia", and the congregation soon

85 Stella Cohen, "Foreword", *Sephardic Cuisine* (Bulawayo: Rcp (Pvt) Ltd., n.d.), 1.

86 Stella Cohen, *Stella's Sephardic Table: Jewish Family Recipes from the Mediterranean Island of Rhodes* (Cape Town: Hoberman Collection, 2012), 16.

87 P. H., online interview with the author, 7 Oct. 2022.

88 Morton Friedman, "Statement on Africa", 1 Dec. 1960, Box BG 26, Belgium Congo – Jewish Communities 1960–1961, AJDC. On Jewish international organizations during decolonization see Nathan A. Kurz, *Jewish Internationalism and Human Rights after the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 86–111.

assumed a more structured aspect.[89] For Moïse Rahmani, who lived in the Belgian Congo and then moved to Brussels, the Rhodes *judería* nowadays survives in these new settings more than on the island itself: "One day, just go to the Sephardi synagogues of Brussels, of Seattle, of Harare, of Ashdod or Cape Town. . . . Close your eyes and, with no big effort, you will travel in time and space. The Mediterranean sun pours in and brightens your soul and heart. . . . Here it is! *Voilà*! There you are. You are in Rhodes. Their Rhodes. Rhodes."[90]

Many of these synagogues are named after the only remaining synagogue of Rhodes: Kahal (or Kehila) Shalom. The synagogue of Sea Point, Cape Town, proudly preserves the Rhodesli tradition, "[that] we carry forward from our Papous and Nonas [Judeo-Spanish: "grandfathers and grandmothers"] – the age-old tunes, food, *tefillah* [Hebrew: "prayer"] and Torah".[91] Rhodeslis in South Africa continue to be a close-knit group connected to both the largely Ashkenazi community and the Rhodesli diaspora in other countries, including those who left South Africa for Israel or Great Britain.[92] The longing for Rhodes sits with the longing for Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo without necessarily implying nostalgia for colonialism itself: rather it is, in many cases, a nostalgia for youth and for a feeling of togetherness that vanished with the migrations of the 1960s and 1970s and the passing of time.[93]

Arguably, being a Rhodesli first meant feeling attached to the Mediterranean Sephardi world that ended with the Holocaust; to the

89 "The Diaspora of Rhodes – the Sephardi Community of South Africa", in *Sephardi Jews: 25 Years Cape Town* (Sea Point, Cape Town: Sephardi Congregation of Sea Point, 1986), n.p., Vicissitudini dei singoli – Haim Menascé, series 1, env. 6, f. 479, Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea; see also Hirschon, "Jews from Rhodes". No mention of the Sephardi community from Rhodes can be found in general works on South African Jews, e.g. Gideoni Shimoni, *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2003). See also Roni Mikel-Arieli, *Remembering the Holocaust in a Racial State: Holocaust Memory in South Africa from Apartheid to Democracy (1948–1994)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

90 Rahmani, *Rhodes*, 225–6. For an insightful ethnography of the Rhodesli diaspora today see Pierre Sintès, "(Re)construire la Djuderia de Rhodes", *Ethnologie française* 43, no. 1 (2013): 19–30; Sintès, *En présence du passé*, 83–123.

91 "Welcome", *Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Cape Town*, n.d., https://sephardiblog.wordpress.com (accessed 28 Sept. 20203).

92 V. M., interview with the author, 17 June 2022.

93 For a broader analysis of such nostalgia see Dario Miccoli, "'I Come from a Country that is No More': Jewish Nostalgia in the Postcolonial Mediterranean", *Ethnologies* 39 (2018): 51–68.

Italian Dodecanese which, albeit in contradictory ways, contributed to the modernization of the community; and lastly to the diasporic microcosms that Rhodesli migrants and their descendants constructed in places as diverse as Egypt, the United States, and central Africa. The Rhodeslis always navigated between "creolized, rhizomatic identities – changing and situational rather than essential and moral".[94] These identities proved useful in order to overcome the hardships of migration, of the postwar period, and of living as members of a foreign ethnoreligious minority in colonial and racialized contexts.[95] As we have seen, they generally did not question the racial hierarchies and colonial violence they encountered. The fact that the Rhodeslis had been subject to racial discrimination as Jews in the Italian Dodecanese after 1938, and that some were Holocaust survivors, did not always entail an understanding or acknowledgment of colonial racism.[96] This was because Rhodeslis saw themselves as white Europeans, or in any case as other than the local population, and came from a (post-) Ottoman world where people lived alongside (if not together with) one another, and that was built along resilient cultural, ethnoreligious, and economic lines.[97]

Few tangible Jewish traces remain, and only about 300 Jews continue to live in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and about 100 in Zimbabwe, some of them of Rhodesli origin. Looking at the history of the Rhodesli diaspora from an African perspective helps us to unravel hidden relations between apparently far away identities and spaces. It challenges us to move away from grand narratives of colonial history and culture, and from facile assumptions about citizenship, ethnicity, and minority identities, shedding light on "more modest [narratives] of commercial enterprise and career building" that developed along less predictable lines.[98] Lastly, it "enable[s] both the study of anti-Semitism and of colonial racism to move beyond insular histories of victimization and to adopt a more open-minded sense of historical connectedness", as Bryan Cheyette has

94 Liisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees", *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 36.
95 See Gilbert and Alba, *Holocaust Memory and Racism*.
96 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
97 See Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
98 Lucy Riall, "Hidden Spaces of Empire: Italian Colonists in Nineteenth-Century Peru", *Past & Present*, 254 (2022): 233.

argued.[99] The story of the Rhodeslis ultimately appears to be the quest for a lost or ungraspable *tierra prometida* extending across epochs and continents – from the ancestral Rhodes to territories like the Belgian Congo and Southern Rhodesia that were, at least for a time, "lands of refuge, of oblivion and rebirth".[100]

99 Bryan Cheyette, "Postcolonialism and the Study of Anti-Semitism", *American Historical Review* 123, no. 4 (2018): 1245.
100 Laura Franco, *Et un jour, la joie de vivre s'arrêta à . . . Auschwitz* (Owing Mills, MD: Marla Stein Associates, 1994), 135.

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