The Jewish community of Libya was founded in the days of the Roman Empire. Since that time it has been both a refuge and a place of terror as the country fell under the sway consecutively of the Spanish, Turkish, Arabs, Italians and British and eventually achieved independence. Post WW2 persecution caused virtually all the community to emigrate, its property confiscated. In the diaspora, in Israel, Italy, the USA and Britain, Libyan Jews, a warm and generous people, still hold on to their special customs and hope for the time when their contribution to Libya’s development will be given appropriate recognition and their property returned. With the country’s new desire to rejoin the world community there are signs that this might happen.

Our thanks to all the contributors and particularly to Pedi Benattia, director of the Or-Shalom museum of the community in Israel. He made his entire photo archive available to us and was unstinting in his help. Particular thanks also to Raphael Luzon, leader of the Libyan Jewish community in the UK, to Janet Naim who so skillfully distilled 2,000 years of history and to Mrs Niran Timan Basson.

Photo: Gabriel Arbib, who was to become a rabbi, with his mother and sister - circa 1940


THE JEWS OF LIBYA

JANET NAIM

THE TIMELINE

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

C 6th BCE  Palestinian Jewish traders settle in Cyrenaica, the Eastern province of Tripolitania, bordering Egypt.
C 3rd BCE  The Egyptian ruler Ptolemy I conquers Cyrene and settles Jewish garrisons, peopled by Palestinian captives.
C 1st BCE  Jews form the majority of the population in Cyrenaica and constitute the largest Jewish settlement outside Palestine. Enjoying equal rights, they graduate from various gymnasia and one, Eleazar, son of Jason, is a government official in Cyrene.
14 BCE  The Jews of Berenice (Benghazi) erect a marble column in honour of Prefect Marcus Titus who particularly favoured the local Jewish population.
56 CE  A large synagogue and amphitheatre is built in Benghazi.
C 1st  First rabbinical academies (yeshivot) established in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania.
115-117  Jewish Revolt against the Romans. The Jews are initially victorious but are crushed by a large army that kills over 200,000. Survivors flee to the interior, taking refuge among the Berbers.
149  Palestinian Jewish traders settle in Tripolitania, bordering Egypt.

ARAB, TURKISH AND SPANISH RULE

C7th  Muslim rule. Fleeing Spanish Jews settle in Libya.
C10th  800 Jews live in Tripoli.
1549  Moroccan Rabbi Shimon Labi, breaks his journey from Fez to Palestine to settle in Tripoli and educate the Jewish community in torah and kabbalah.
1551  Turkish rule begins

ITALIAN RULE

1628  Sla El Kebira synagogue built in Tripoli.
1711  Karamanli Dynasty (Arab) begins. Under the Turks and the Karamanlis, Jews once again flee across the Mediterranean in search of refuge in Malta, Sicily or Leghorn in Italy. Some are caught by Barbary pirates. Records show that two Jews were ransomed in Tripoli and that European and British Jews were also known to have contributed financially.
1705  Purim Sherif 23 Tevet. Jews of Tripoli saved from extermination by the Bey of Tunis, Ibrahim esh Sherif, though his forces, weakened by an epidemic, have to retreat.
1784 and 1785  Famine and plague strike Tripoli. To avoid paying a burial tax the poorest Jews bury their dead in the courtyards of their houses.
1795  Purim Burghol, 29 Tevet. Jews of Tripoli erect a marble column in honour of Prefect Marcus Titus who particularly favoured the local Jewish population.
1831  A Jewish fruit merchant is stripped, coated with honey and nailed to a synagogue wall for refusing to sell his merchandise until the policy depreciating the currency was regulated.
1850  The Roman Jewish traveller, Benjamin II, visits Tripoli. He finds a devout community of 1000 families, four rabbis, eight synagogues and a community fund sustained by wealthy Jewish merchants for their poorer brethren. Benghazi has 100 Jewish families and two synagogues.
1880s  There are 11 yeshivot in Tripoli, several with libraries.
1903  Jacob Tschuba from Benghazi writes to Herzl suggesting he establish branches of the Zionist movement in Libya. Most of the Zionist organisations subsequently set up are religious.

1911  The Italians occupy Libya.
1919  When they hear about the terrible pogroms befalling Jews in Russia, Tripoli’s Zionists organise a general strike and a black ribbon is hung on every door.
1925  Ain Zara, a Jewish agricultural settlement, is established to train prospective immigrants for life in Palestine.
April 1928  Italy’s King Victor Emmanuel III attends the inauguration of a new synagogue, Slat Dar Bishi, in Tripoli’s Hara Kebira, a large Jewish quarter during his first official visit to Libya. Along the route of the motorcade, a flag bearing the Star of David flies alongside the Italian flag.
1931  The Ben Yehuda Association is established. Teaching Hebrew is a major activity. Many Libyan Jews speak fluent Hebrew before settling in Israel.
1935  Illegal immigrants leave for Palestine.
1936  Public flogging of two Jews for flouting a fascist decree by not opening their shops on Shabbat.
March 1937  Mussolini, visits the Hara Kebira accompanied by Marshall Italo Balbo, the state governor, who has been well-disposed towards the local Jewish population. Mussolini assures Rabbi Lattes, the Chief Rabbi from Italy, that the Italian Government would always respect the religious rights and traditions of the Jews. However, the Ben Yehuda cultural centre is closed and Maccabi Associations are excluded from the Libyan Sports Federation.
1938  Italian anti-Jewish racial laws introduced. Jews expelled from certain jobs and professions and from schools and higher education. ‘Jew’ is stamped in all official documents. A Jewish school is created by the community.
1941  Jews constitute 40.5% of the population of Tripoli.
1942  The Africa Corps of Marshall Rommel comes to support of the Italian army. Jewish men between 18 and 45 are sent to forced labour camps. Two Jews are accused of helping the British army and executed by the Italian Fascists. 3,000 Benghazi Jews are imprisoned in Giado concentration camp. Thousands evacuate to Gharian to escape bombardment. They return to Tripoli when the British arrive.
BRITISH RULE

1943 British Military and Civil Administrations. More Jews leave illegally for Palestine via Tunis, Marseilles and Italy. Jewish soldiers from Palestine help the Eighth Army in the battle of Tobruk.

May 1943 The Jewish soldiers are invited to lead the Victory Day parade to honour their contribution. The First Bey appointed by the British was a Jewish soldier, Colonel Arkin.

1945 Arab pogrom mainly in Tripolitania. 160 Jews are killed, many injured and 4,000 rendered homeless. Nine synagogues are desecrated, 35 Torah scrolls and over 2,000 holy books destroyed and 89,000 kgs of silver sacred ornaments looted. It lasts for three days. The British are indifferent.

June 1948 Pogrom following the creation of the State of Israel. 16 Jews killed, 30 injured and 1,500 made homeless.

1949 June With recognition of State of Israel, British Administration lifts ban on exit visas for Jews of military age. The Israeli vessel Eylath sails from Tripoli harbour with 3,500 Libyan Jews.

British and US embassies create a committee for the reconciliation of Arabs and Jews to support Libya’s claim for independence.

1949 November United Nations votes for Libyan independence, supported by Israel and the local Jewish community.

1949-52 About 30,000 Jews leave the country. The majority, less well off, settle in Israel. Others move to Italy, France, Great Britain and the USA. About 5,000, mainly wealthy, Jews remain in Libya.

INDEPENDENT LIBYA

1951 Britain helps King Idris I (Senussi tribesman) to gain the throne. The Jews of Tripoli are received by the King and are thanked for their support.

1952 The weekly newspaper Al Libi makes a vicious attack on the State of Israel and refers to the local Jews as ‘Tel-Aviv envoys’ exploiting Libya’s resources to assist Israel.

1953 Jewish Agency closes. Jews are still prominent in the Libyan trading community but do not participate in public or political life. Maccabi Association is closed.

1954-56 All postal and telegraph communications with Israel suppressed.

1956 Jews forbidden to travel abroad unless leaving a member of the family as hostage. Businesses belonging to Jews subjected to harassment and restrictions. A pogrom is threatened at the time of the Suez crisis but protection is offered by the British army base.

1957 Royal decree orders all Jews with relatives in Israel (ie most) to register with the anti-Israel boycott office.

1958 Tripolitanian Jewish Community Board dissolved and an Arab appointed to administer the affairs of the community.

1961 The government confiscates property of Jews who emigrated to Israel which had been held under administration and forbids others to acquire property. They also have to take Arab partners into their businesses.

1967 Six-Day War in Israel provides a pretext for pogroms. 18 Jews killed including the Luzon and Rahah families who were murdered by a Libyan officer who offered to protect them. The remaining 3,500 Jews hid themselves in their homes. Shops owned by Benghazi Jews bombed. Jews allowed to leave the country with a suitcase of clothes and £20 sterling. The Italian ambassador helps them obtain travel documents.

1969 Muammar el Gadafihh seizes power in a bloodless coup following the collapse of the monarchy resulting from the effects of the Six-Day War.

1970 Property of absentee Libyan Jews is nationalised without the compensation legally provided for. In Rome the Association of Jews of Libya is set up by Raffaele Fellah to seek restitution for communal and private property. It has been active ever since.


2002 Esmeralda Megnaghi dies aged 80. Gadafihh sends her body to Italy for burial in his private jet.

2004 Deputation of Jewish community invited to Tripoli by the Libyan government. Janet Naim is a freelance writer and researcher. She helped to create the exhibition Libya, An Extinct Jewish Community at Bet Ha-tefutsot in 1980.

CAVE DWELLERS

Jews, fleeing from successive persecutions over the centuries, settled in the interior of Tripolitania, in Tigrinna, Jefren, Nebfusa and Gharian, where they lived among the Berber tribes and dwelt in underground villages. These troglodytes lived beneath the mountains in caves cut into the rock and dug out of the earth. The caves on several levels opened on to a sunken courtyard. The roofs were level with the ground outside so that they were invisible from the road. Access was through a stout bolted door and then down a sloping passageway in the rock into the courtyard. The rooms stayed cool in summer and warm in winter. The water supply was from cisterns in the fields, supplemented by springs flowing from the rocks.

Several families lived together. Separate rooms served as bakery, kitchen, store for hay and food, and synagogue with school attached. Concealed from the desert roads they could be safe from bombardment.

Jewish women went about unveiled unlike their Berber counterparts. 20th century visitors to these communities described them as functioning well. The men were craftsmen or peddlars travelling all over the desert. The women and children worked in agriculture around the settlement.

Jews continued to live in these settlements until 1949 when they left for Tripoli in preparation for aliya to Israel. Whole communities converged to prepare for their journey to the ‘Promised Land’ including the 1300 year-old troglodyte Gharian community which left to settle in moshavhs in the Upper Gallilee.
THE BEGINNING OF THE END

ALDO HABIB experienced the last years of the community

I grew up in Tripoli with my parents, three sisters and a large extended family. We were able to observe our traditions, keep our festivals, eat kosher food and maintain our strong sense of Jewish identity, while mostly living in harmony with our Arab neighbours. But we lived through difficult years: Fascism under Italian rule; World War II; the British Army Administration and finally Arab rule under King Idris.

We survived anti-Semitism and the presence of the German Army and we were comparatively lucky as they did not really bother us. They deported those couple of hundred Jews who had British passports to concentration camps in Libya and Germany. Luckily – yet ironically – these people returned safely. We were spared the fate of the Jews of Europe in the Holocaust.

Instead of stopping the fights, the British police took the Jews to prison

The British Army Administration from 1943-1952 was harsh and we Jews were treated as enemy aliens. My first experience of riots was in 1945, when mobs of Arabs attacked Jews in their homes and in the street for no apparent reason. More than 300 Jews were killed. The British police did not stop the riots immediately on the grounds of not having orders from London to do so.

Every time there was even a slight incident in Israel there were skirmishes. Two particular tragedies remain in my mind: a Jewish man ran from the mob to the safety of an Arab farm hoping to find shelter. He was buried alive by the Arab he thought was his friend. Then there was the young pregnant Jewish woman who was attacked by a mob who cut her unborn child from her stomach. I cannot forget these people even today.

There was an accident at our own home when a mob of Arabs were trying to enter. We found a cupboard with wine in it and threw the bottles down to the street. Nobody was hurt, the Arabs ran away and the police complained to my father that the bottles were acid as they had left marks in the street.

My father was deeply committed to the Jewish community as well as being in business in a substantial way. For several years he was the President of the community and fought for the civil liberties of the Jews. He was often involved in disputes with the British Catholics and Muslims, as a judge for a couple of years, until the Libyan Arabs took over the courts. Most Jews continued to run successful businesses. The dealers in cars, trucks and tyres were Jewish and the major part of the export and import business was in the hands of Jews. Many Arabs worked with them and also became successful in business. In the late 1950s and early 60s there was the oil-prospecting boom and business was good for everybody.

Up to 1967, relations with the Arab population were mostly calm, though there were small incidents in Tripoli that coincided with periods of unrest in Israel. The Jews would shut their shops and businesses and stay at home to avoid trouble. Life would then return to what we considered to be normal.

When in 1962 my father died, several hundred people including many Muslims came to his funeral. There were so many people that the police were sent to see what was happening in case it was a riot against the Jews.

In 1967 when trouble was brewing in the Middle East, we had just an inkling of what was happening through television reporting from abroad. At the outset of the Six-Day War there were riots in Libya that signalled the beginning of the end of the remaining Jews.

The flat where I lived with my English wife and two small children was next to the American Embassy and mobs of screaming Arabs were in the street outside. Through the shutters we saw cars being overturned and burnt. The rest of my family were in another part of the town. I cannot tell you the fear I felt. We learnt that several Jews were killed including two large families who disappeared into the ‘safety’ of Arab police custody and who were never heard of again. For 17 days we were imprisoned in our home, relying on English neighbours to bring us food and grateful to our few brave Arab friends and employees who risked their lives to visit us. Eventually we were contacted by members of the police and told to leave for our own safety. We left with little in our hands.

The Italian government assisted the exodus to Italy of many of the community, some of whom settled in Rome and Milan. The majority went to Israel. A small number settled in different parts of the world, including London.

I earnestly hope that one day all those Jews who left the country will be compensated for the property that they could not take with them. Aldo and his family settled in London.
"...So, what are you complaining about?" the Colonel would say, in his tent. "You wanted to leave, and we let you leave."

Yes, of course, you even encouraged us to go, stripping the few crazy ones who were still attached to the land of their rights and property. Don't worry, though, I'm not writing to you out of homesickness. I'm not one of those poor, unhappy persons who trip off to their holidays to re-live the childhood they spent in Tripoli. Because if there's one thing I refuse to accept, it's that catastrophic illusion of resemblance, that so small yet so great distance – base, yet head spinning – that separates the tear from the drop of rain. Just as, when you're lost in a soul, you look for your mother, see her, shout her name, she turns round, and it's not her. When I shout, she turns, and it's always her, Jerusalem. And when I want to go there, I go.

Why am I bothering to write to you is to tell you that this community of ours is very much alive. It's growing, and prospering. It's made a new life for itself, 'hamdullah', because after it lost everything, it had no choice but to press forward. We're like bees, Colonel. If the lord of the farm steals our honey in September, we make haste to make more, before winter sets in, and if we go on stinging you with our claims for damages, it's more out of dignity than out of interest, to remind you of your debt, but above all, of your loss: we are producers of goods, materials and morals, and we always have been, you know that, because we're not afraid of work, because, for us, work has never been punishment, but expression. No, a blessing, rather. The proof: just a month in refugee camps in Latina and Capua, and our people left the novels and set off in search of work, and Italy, who gave us shelter, and citizenship, thought she was giving us charity, but soon realised that she's made an investment.

But you, like all the governors of the new Arab world, wanted to wash the Jews out of your social fabric. So doing, you've ruined its fibres: trade, craft, farming the professions, everything's come loose, and been swept away, like sand in the chibili, and all the experience you purchase in the West will never replace the ancient experience that we had of you, whose vocation has always been communication: among beings, groups, races, disciplines, principles, states, civilizations. That same vocation was indispensable for the grandeur of Islam, of the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, pre-Nazi Germany, and you could have made it yours, if you had wanted to.

Just think, dear cousin. A troubadour was born on that slice of hell you govern. With the inexplicable, almost perverse love that Jews have for the stepmotherland that adopts them, he could have made wings for your kings, for your heroes, for your saints and martyrs, and then sent them off to tell the world that your country exists. He could have sung the praises of that desert of yours, with words that would have made that rose of sand you have instead of a heart fall in petals.

But Allah, who is great, and sees far, desired to have us depart, by your hand, so that I could go off and sing my songs below other skies, and so that your nation could go on, as in the past, with its exciting task: to fulfil its role as the flyleaf of the Great Book of Islam. Shalom ve Salam.

Herbert Avraham Haggiag Pagani

Translated from the original Italian by Annalena Limentani.
The Jews of Libya were mainly merchants and artisans. Never numbering more than 40,000, they were a devout community. Most lived in the towns along the fertile, coastal strip. The largest concentration was in Tripoli where poorer Jews lived in the Haras (Jewish quarters) and the wealthier in the European section of the city.

For centuries, whole streets in Hara Kebira (the largest Jewish quarter) were devoted to one particular trade such as the silk market (Suq el Harara) and the spice market (Suq el Attara). The silversmiths made and sold their wares in Suq Assayaga.

In the early part of the 20th century the men and some women adopted European dress. They spoke Italian in the wider community but between themselves spoke their own Judeo-Arabic dialect. In the early 1940s Jews constituted 40 per cent of the capital’s population and at one time had 62 synagogues. Libya’s second city, Benghazi, had a much smaller community and no Hara.

A house in a town might have two storeys and be built around an open courtyard with a balcony running around the upper floor linking the accommodation and overlooking the courtyard. The floors and walls would be tiled.

JANET NAIM
PASSOVER TRADITIONS

RAPHAEL LUZON

The Libyan Jewish community has many of its own festival traditions. Passover particularly is very special.

In Libya, it was the custom to bake matzah daily at home in a clay oven prepared especially for the purpose. They were round and thick, similar to the Israeli pitta bread but much larger. The women worked incredibly fast without compromising the level of kashrut. It took them no longer than 15 minutes to prepare the dough and bake the matzah. The tradition of baking fresh matzah daily continues in Libyan communities in Israel.

On the first day of the counting of the Omer (begun on the 2nd day of Passover and completing seven weeks later at the festival of Shavuot) a lump of salt was distributed to each synagogue worshipper who was bound to keep it intact throughout the 49 days. It had to be produced every time the Omer was counted and brought close to the eyes where the worshipper would stare at it while reciting “May G-d restore the Temple speedily in our days.” The superstition was that the piece of salt protects against the evil eye.

There are other traditions which are still carried out in Libyan communities all over the world.

It is the custom to put an egg on the Pesach plate, or in some cases two eggs, for each person. A piece of liver and a piece of lung are placed next to the shank bone that comes from a lamb bought especially for Pesach.

When it is time to hide the afikomen, the youngest of the family takes the half of it, wraps it with a napkin, pretends to put it on his shoulder and leaves the room. The rest of the family shout “thief, thief” to the excitement of all the children. A few minutes later, the boy with the afikomen returns and the father of the family asks him “Where have you been?” He answers “In Egypt”. Then the father asks “And where are you going?” The answer is “to Jerusalem”. That is the cue for the whole family to say three times “next year in Jerusalem”.

When it is time to show the Pesach plate, it is customary for the lady of the house to lift the plate over the head of each member of the family while everybody recites Ma Nishtana. This creates a happy and joyful atmosphere.

At the end of the first night the lady of the house usually sets aside some of the rice dish which is traditionally included in the menu. The plate is left uncovered all night and the next morning all the members of the family taste it. It is believed to bring luck.

At the end of Pesach it is customary to bake special bread with cumin seeds. Just before putting it in the oven an egg is placed on top. This bread is called Mimuna.

While the community was still in Libya, it was on the eighth night that the festivity reached its peak. In the afternoon the streets of the Jewish quarters would be filled with unmarried men, while by the windows and on the balconies and even in front of the houses, unmarried women would stand in their best clothes, to be seen by the young men. This is how a lot of match-making used to take place.

The last night of Pesach was known as ‘lettuce and flowers night’. Every young man took a basket of lettuce, flowers, oranges and many types of sweets to his fiancée’s house. There he would be welcomed by music and song and usually spend all night enjoying the occasion. On that night too, every father came home with lettuce and flowers and touched each member of the family with them, while the mother blessed them.

Raphael Luzon left Libya in 1967 after eight members of his uncle’s family had been murdered by a government official. He worked as a journalist and manager in Italy and Israel before settling in the UK where he runs a Judaica business. He is the current head of the Libyan Jewish community in the UK.
LOVE AND MARRIAGE

IN THE PAST...

Immediately after Passover was the Feast of Roses, the celebration of betrothals. In Tripoli’s Hara, girls would stand at the doors of their houses dressed in their finest and most colourful clothes, waiting for a suitor to declare himself by throwing a rose to them. If she returned it the boy would send his mother to the girl’s house to talk about possible marriage.

In the Jebel (mountains), girls gathered near a fountain where they waited for the men to make their choice. In Jeffren, the fiancée visiting her future husband’s newly white washed house for the first time threw an egg at the wall in front of the gate to symbolise the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

During the Ottoman period in the Jebel, weddings always took place on the eve of Sukkot because the men were mostly away working as travelling peddlars and only returned home for Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot and Passover.

NOW...

Mali Tayar Zekaria describes some of the traditional betrothal customs among observant Libyan Jews.

When a young man likes a girl in the community, he will arrange to be introduced to her and her family by a go-between. Following a meeting, if the family do not approve of him, they politely make an excuse, claiming perhaps that they think their daughter is too young and not ready for this match.

However, if they do take a liking to the boy, they ask their daughter for her opinion and feelings towards him and his family. If the answer is positive, the third party will arrange for a meeting to take place between the two sets of parents and their children. No food is served on this first occasion but just a drink. If the boy and girl like each other, they will be allowed to get to know each other by going for a walk accompanied by mutual friends. If all goes according to plan, the families will arrange a meeting in which the boy will announce a pledge of commitment (kinayan) to the girl in the presence of both parents, a Rabbi and a further witness. This marks the beginning of a series of parties leading to the wedding which lasts seven nights.

The most colourful and enjoyable event is the girl’s night known as the henna night. The tradition was to colour the hair of the girl with special henna powder as a mark of this stage of the betrothal as well as being designed to enhance the beauty of the bride to be! Nowadays girls don’t like to mess with their hair in this way but henna is applied instead to the palm of their hands or to their feet.

Henna, a natural herb powder, has certain healing properties including a cooling effect during hot weather. It also has great benefits for cleansing the skin and in many middle Eastern countries is believed to enhance a woman’s sens-uality. It is such factors which have given rise to its important symbolic value and forms the central focus on the night.

The night of the henna party itself is a joyous occasion with plenty of food, music and dancing. It is customary for those present to dress in traditional embroidered garbs. The formal procession of the evening begins with the groom being sat on a throne, surrounded by a few close relatives and friends, awaiting his fiancée to join him. She is carried in on an ornate cushion, covered in a red veil and is preceded by girls holding candles – fighting the way to her husband to be. Her future mother-in-law will then be the first to decorate her with gold jewellery or coins – symbolising good luck and prosperity.

This is followed by her friends and close relations painting her fingers and palms with the specially prepared henna. The girl’s mother is then in charge of holding the pot of henna and inviting all the as yet unmarried girls to come and dip their fingers into the mixture for good luck. Drink, food and special sweets are served throughout the night. The boy and his male friends join in the eating and drinking while the female guests dance and sing with the girl. This exuberant party is designed to ease the pressures of the wedding preparations but most importantly, to act as springboard for propelling the bride into a rich and colourful journey with her husband in their future life together.

Mali Tayar Zekaria left Libya with her family in 1950 and moved to Israel. Now she lives in London. She and her husband have four children.

The photo above is of the henna party of Mali’s eldest daughter Sharon in 2003. Sharon’s fiancé, and now husband, is Simon Eder, publisher of The Liberal and JR reviewer.
IN LIBYA
NOW

RAPHAEL LUZON

No Jewish activities have taken place in Libya since the forced mass exodus in 1967.

When the Jews lived in Libya there were 62 synagogues. Some were demolished, others are in ruins and some were converted to mosques or churches. It was heart breaking to see a picture of Sla El Kebira, now a mosque with minaret added, where I used to go every Saturday with my family for the Shabbat service. I could see where I used to sit beside my father, I couldn’t stop myself crying. The big synagogue in Benghazi was converted to a Coptic Church.

In a few of these converted mosques and churches there is still evidence that they were synagogues once upon a time. Quotations from the bible and Jewish symbols are still on the walls.

In 1994 the Dar-e-Sarousi Synagogue, which had also been the main Jewish school, was restored and it is now a beautiful building which houses a museum of the medina. In the 1990s also, the cupola of the Da Bishi Synagogue, which had fallen down, was reconstructed by Gadhaffi.

It is suggested that this was a result of Gadhaffi’s guilt feelings about all the Jewish cemeteries he destroyed in the first two years after coming to power.

In the last three years, following recent political developments and the desire of Gadhaffi to become part of the international world, there have been some overtures towards the Jewish community.

In 2002 when Esmeralda Megnaghi, then thought to be the last Jew in Libya, died at the age of 80, Gadhaffi sent her body to Italy for burial in his private jet accompanied by one of his bodyguards.

After 37 years, there is a wave of optimism among the Jews of Libya that compensation for their losses might be forthcoming. Months of negotiations between the Libyan government and Libyan Jews resulted in an invitation for a formal Jewish delegation to visit Libya. Six members of Italy’s Libyan Jewish community met Mr Shalgam, Libya’s Foreign Minister, on October 11 2004 for what was described as ‘a handshake and photo opportunity’.

In December 2004 Jews of Libya in seven countries came together in an international association. This organisation, led by Raffaeo Fellah, continues to lobby for just restitution.
RUNNING RISKS
FOR THE RECORD

Or-Shalom is a museum in Israel that goes to unusual lengths to acquire its holdings

Pedazur (Pedi) Benattia is a Libyan Israeli with a mission: to conserve the heritage of his people. He, together with other enthusiasts, initiated a bi-monthly magazine, ADA, a web-site, and a museum. For almost 10 years all this was run from a small room in Pedi’s apartment in Bat-Yam in Israel. Recently he and his colleagues collected nearly £25,000 and began building a permanent home which will include museum galleries, a library, a lecture room and offices.

Most of the artefacts and photographs in the Or-Shalom collection date from the time when the community was flourishing in Libya. However, Pedi’s enthusiasm persuaded several of the few Jews who have recently been working or travelling in Libya to help him acquire contemporary images, albeit at a time when photography by foreigners could have dangerous consequences.

In June 2004 Pedi met a foreign worker in Libya on the net. Their ‘conversations’ led to a mission to find the old Jewish cemetery of Al-Khums. From an internet café in Tripoli, Pedi was emailed images of broken gravestones and scattered bones. When the photographer returned to the cemetery to take more pictures and to bury the bones, he was caught by the Libyan Muchabarat. “Immediately he lost his job and was deported from Libya,” Pedi told me “but with a lot of satisfaction in his heart.”

In 2002 Pedi persuaded a Jewish student from Holland to revisit Libya to take pictures. “This lovely person took about 400 pictures and 12 hours of video,” said Pedi. “He was caught in Zuwara by the Muchabarat, who accused him of being a Mossad agent. He was put in jail for nine days, in very unpleasant conditions. A day before his return flight he was set free and what do you think he did? Of course he ran back to the old Hara and took another 100 pictures and two hours of video. When he arrived at the airport next day who do you think was waiting for him? Of course, the policemen of the Muchabarat. They took two video cassettes, but miraculously they asked whether the film boxes were new or used. He said new, and that’s how, for the first time in 35 years, we got pictures of Dar Bishi and Sla Lekbira synagogues.”

Yet more photos were provided in 2004, when Or-Shalom sent an Israeli photographer who had a German passport to Tripoli, Garjan, Yefren and Al-Khums.

Or-Shalom is now seeking further funding to create exhibitions from the rich collection of photographs and artefacts they have collected.

THOSE WHO STAYED BEHIND

PEDAZUR BENATTIA

Four years ago, David Gerbi, who had lived in Italy since his family left Libya in 1967, discovered that his aunt was still living there. It was, Rina Debash, who with her brother and sister, had decided to stay in Libya and had since lost touch with the family in Italy. The family were informed that she was living in an old age home in Gaddafi. Pulling some strings, David got permission to visit her in Tripoli and found her severely mentally disturbed. Gradually she began to talk to him, in Arabic. She remembered the Jewish festivals and told David that she didn’t eat the meals at the home because they were not kosher.

David went back to Italy and after a year of prevarication the authorities informed him that Rina Debash would be sent to Italy with two nurses. Rina arrived in Rome and was with her family for just four weeks until she died. The family, with a little pressure from Israel, decided to send her body to Israel where she was buried with the traditional rites of the community.

There are still some Jewish women living in Libya who converted to Islam. Most of these were motivated by romantic attachments. A smaller number were kidnapped by Muslims and because of the fragile relations with the Arabs, the Jews could do nothing to bring the girls back. Some of the converts to Islam still retain some of their Jewish past.

Two years ago, a Libyan Jewish woman now living in Moshav Sede Uzyathat met her sister was kidnapped in 1940 in Al-Khums and converted to Islam. She said that even today, after more than 50 years of being a Muslim, she reads the shema before she goes to sleep.

SEE ALSO: THE LIBYAN JEWISH KITCHEN, PAGE 46 AND LAST WORDS, PAGE 48