Brief History Of Libya’s Jews

THE CIRCLE CLOSES

The history of the Libyan Jewish community in the 20th century involves a lot of suffering. First under the dictatorship of Benito Mussolini, then under the Nazi regime, and at end of the Second World War, the Jews of Libya were also victims of attacks and programs by the local Arab population. Finally, in 1969 Libyan Jews suffered horrific discrimination imposed by General Muammar Gadaffi, which was exceptionally cruel to the few Jews who remained there.

On the other hand, the Libyan Jewish community had always a very important ally: the State of Israel, which even before it was born, was there to help. The brief history that I am about to tell you today represents a little of the spirit of these days in the Hebrew calendar: the transition from the Holocaust towards the creation of the Jewish State: Medinat Israel.

MUSSOLINI AND THE JEWS

There is evidence that Jews lived in Sirte, Libya, as early as the 13th century before the Common Era. This Jewish community was one of the oldest in the world. But we are focused now on the 20th century. From 1911 to 1951 when it gained its independence, Libya was an Italian protectorate. The early years of Mussolini were not so bad for the Jews of Italy and Libya. But their situation got worse in 1936 when Mussolini made a pact with Hitler. Anti-Jewish decrees were established in Italy and its protectorates. At the end of the 1930s there were more than 30,000 Jews in Libya, especially in the capital Tripoli, where Jews constituted 25% of the total population. They had 44 synagogues. Under Mussolini Jews were forced to open their businesses on Saturday, for the sake of “contributing to Italy’s economy”. Many objected, until the authorities, as an exemplary measure, executed two Jewish

merchants. Italy’s infamous racial laws prohibited Jews from accessing high school or college education. Jews were also banned from working in government organizations, banks, or municipal offices. And all their official documents had to bear a stamp that said “Jew”.

In June 1940, Italy officially entered the war and sided with Germany. Thousands of Libyan Jews were sent to labor camps within Libya for construction work or to build military routes, just as had happened in Morocco and Algeria, and most survived. But Libyan Jews who had English citizenship were sent to death camps in Europe, such as Bergen-Belsen, where many died of starvation, typhus, or exhaustion.

A CONCENTRATION CAMP IN AN ISLAMIC COUNTRY

In February 1942 Mussolini ordered the establishment of a concentration camp in the city of Giado, 200 kilometers south of Tripoli, to take the Jews there. In June 1942, the Italians had already deported a total of 2,584 Jews to Giado. The conditions of life in the camp were impossible. The camp was crowded: dozens of families slept in a four-meter space and were separated only by bedding and blankets. The daily food rations consisted of a few grams of rice, oil, sugar, and coffee substitute. Men over the age of 18 were sent to forced labor every day. Water scarcity, malnutrition, overcrowding, and dirt intensified the spread of contagious diseases. And the Italian guards enjoyed humiliating the Jews. Of the nearly 2,600 Jews sent to Giado, 562 died of weakness and hunger, and especially of typhoid and typhus. The Giado concentration camp not only recruited workers but entire families. In this sense, this camp was the closest to a European concentration camp that could be found in North Africa. And it had the highest number of Jewish victims in Islamic countries during World War II.

THE BIG SURPRISE

In early 1943, British forces were defeating the Nazis and the fascists. The big surprise for Libya's Jews was to encounter among the soldiers fighting to liberate Libya some "Israeli" soldiers, that is, young Jewish fighters coming from the Holy Land, then under British control, who had training in Jewish combat units, Lechi, Hagana, etc. After 1948 the fighters serving in those units formed the Israeli Army. The presence of these soldiers obviously created a great positive impact on the morale of the poor Jews of Tripoli and Benghazi. But the sufferings of the Libyan Jewish community did not end with the end of the Second World War.

In 1945, when the Jewish soldiers returned to Israel, there was a terrible pogrom carried out by the local Arabs in which close to 150 Jews were killed.

In 1948 some 3,000 Jews illegally escaped to Israel. This immigration started the redemption of the Libyan Jewish community towards a greater future!

In 1949, finally, England legalized immigration to Israel, and the remaining 30,000 Jews left. Only 700 Jews remained in Libya.

In 1967 during the Six-Day War 17 Jews were killed.

GADAFI BUILDS A CAMP

In 1969 when Muammar Gaddafi came to power, he decided to make life impossible for the few Jews who were still there. He did it the best Nazi-style. Jewish property was confiscated. The debts owed to the Jews were canceled. Jews were prohibited from leaving the country. And Gaddafi ordered the Jews to be taken to a detention camp where they were forced to stay for several months!

Yom HaShoah day of remembrance ended last night. However today I decided to write about what Libyan Jews suffered in the Holocaust and beyond because, despite all the pain and losses,

the community had a happy ending. In the 1970s the Jews who remained in Libya were able to escape. Many settled in Rome, Milan, London, or New York. But the majority live nowadays in Medinat Israel.

Today, Baruch HaShem, there is not a single Jew left in Libya.