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The Pantesque Experience: Between Tunisian Jewry, and Claimed Relics of Crypto-Judaism on Pantelleria Island

Abstract: Relics of (crypto)Judaism, or claims of family memories of a Jewish past, have been emerging in recent decades in Sicily, as well as in the Southwest of the United States. It turns out that such claims have also been made for a family from Pantelleria island off Sicily, a family that moved to Tunisia before moving to the Italian Republic during the exodus of ethnic Italians from Tunisia. This article discusses select topics from a book of memoirs.

Key words: Italians and Jews in Tunisia, alleged relics of crypto-Judaism on Pantelleria.

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1. Revisiting Giuseppe Gabriele's Memoirs

Nearly fifteen years ago, a booklet appeared, Giuseppe Gabriele's *Quel centimetro in meno* (2003), of family memoirs by an Italian born into a family from the island of Pantelleria, off Sicily, who had settled in Tunisia and were eventually expelled after that country gained independence.¹ The author was born in Tunisia and who reached adulthood there, and his charming booklet is many things at the same time. It is a book of autobiographical recollections, spanning up to the previous three generations of the author's family, and since their immigration into Tunisia from the island of Pantelleria off the southwestern coast of Sicily, thus facing Tunisia indeed: so massive was the "Pantesque" exodus (of the *panteschi*) to Tunisia, that the resident population of the island was reduced to one tenth of what it used to be in the 19th century. Also Gabriele's wife's family background is something about which the book's author dwells: her mother was Jewish. What Gabriele relates about his own Catholic wedding, to a young lady of recent Jewish ancestry, is of considerable interest: the *verba solemnia* combined a translation of the Hebrew formula *ke-dat Moshe ve-Yisra'el*, with reference to the Trinity. This, too, is something about which Boccara remarks, while attempting an interpretation (p. 13).²

The scope of this article is deliberately rather narrow, and touches upon some points in Gabriele's book and develops them in some direction or the other on an *ad hoc* basis. The criterion adopted is either to point out something novel to scholarship, in particular the claims about remembered relics of crypto-Judaism on Pantelleria island,³ or then in order to signal a passage some long forgotten publication that arguably offers an interesting perspective on a subject that is otherwise well-trodden in scholarship. The scholarly and memoirs literature about Jews in the Maghreb in the modern era, and about their intercultural contacts, is vast.⁴ There would be little point in enumerating here exhaustively such items that concern Tunisia.⁵

¹ Note the works on Italian colonial returnees by Patrizia Audenino (2005, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018).

² While relating about his wife's Maghrebine Jewish ancestry, Gabriele fondly refer to her as being his Berber one, which is entirely dependent upon his acceptance and endorsement of a vulgate version of a speculative, indeed romantic and pseudo-scientific claim, bereft of evidence, about the ethnogenesis of Maghrebine Jewry that was put forth by Nahum Slouschz (1873–1966). It is worthwhile to realise this, regardless of how Maghrebine Jewry actually originated. See Emanuela Trevisan Semi's study "Slouschz and the Quest for Indigenous African Jews" (2012). She "present[s] a few observations on the theories that Slouschz gradually elaborated, starting with the missions carried out between 1906 and 1916 in North Africa" (Trevisan Semi 2012, p. 192). Already Haim Ze'ev Hirschberg (1963) debunked the myth of pre-Islamic Berbers being Jewish; rather, he cogently argued for situations of cultural hybridity in some contexts during the Islamic era. In his very important reassessment, Hirschberg (1963) pointed out instead the influence of some Jews who lived among North African nomads during the Islamic period. Labelle Prussin (2006) discussed the impact of North African Jewish goldsmiths also in the southern Sahara and further south in West Africa. As for the legend concerning the supposedly Jewish identity of a Berber queen, Dahyā (*recte* Kahya) al-Kāhina, active in the Aurès (in northern Algeria) and who resisted the Arab conquest, but was defeated, Hirschberg (1963) debunked that, too. Ibn Khaldūn's account was misread as though she was Jewish, whereas he merely claimed that in the very distant past (apparently, a "heroic", biblical period), the Berbers had been Jewish. Mohamed Talbi (1971) showed that the Kāhina was carrying icons, and that she was Christian.

³ Claims by groups of families about the alleged crypto-Judaism of their ancestors have emerged, e.g., in the United States' South West, and in recent decades have received scholarly attention, e.g. Atencio (1996), Hordes (1996), Nidel (1984).

⁴ See, e.g., Hirschberg (1957), Laskier (1994), Tartakowsky (2016), Valensi (2002).

⁵ Suffice it to mention that Elia Boccara (2000, 2016a, 2016b) has discussed this community. He is the author of the preface to Gabriele (2003). The Jews of Tunisia are the subject of, e.g., a paper collection

Gabriele's is a book that probes, based on personal memory, into the complex inter-denominational and inter-ethnic relations in Tunisia, up to the exodus, in the 1960s, of the French, Italians, and a major chunk of the local Jewish community, itself traditionally divided between an autochthonous element (the *Twansa*), and families of Leghorn extraction (the *Gorna*: they started to settle in Tunisia in the 17th century). Francesco Aghilone, an uncle of the Giuseppe Gabriele, was an architect, and built the main synagogue of Tunis, but the interplay of the communities, at many levels, is much more complex and nuanced, the way it emerges from this book. For example, the background of the Aghilon family appears to be Sephardic, and Gabriele's grandfather had been raised by a Jewish childless couple (who deferring to his family background, held the baby at the baptismal font).

2. Portuguese Conversos in Pantelleria

Most tantalisingly, Gabriele's is a book in which the author, an Italian Catholic, follows several threads in his quest for elements of residual Jewishness in the ancestry of his wife, as well as in his own. For example, it is certainly a contribution to the sum total of scholarly knowledge about Marranism or the Converso experience, to learn that Catholic families of Jewish background in Pantelleria were not just traced back to local or more broadly Sicilian Jewish stock. A grandmother of Gabriele was from a family of Portuguese Converso extraction that had moved to Pantelleria, and from some details of domestic routine appears to have retained some relic of ancient crypto-Jewish practices, such as her lighting two candles on Friday evenings, with no other explanation given than this being a custom. His grandmother, carrying out the yearly spring cleaning around the time of Passover, used to hang a matzoh bread on the wall, only to replace it on the following year. Whereas there is no such *surviving* Jewish custom, Boccara (p. 11 in Gabriele's book) identifies it as a Marranic custom; this is apparently correct, but see below. At the same time, such families also were deeply Catholic in their practice, and customs included, for example, the slaughtering of a pig before a festival.

This is a kind of information that in other geographical contexts, has received considerable attention since the 1980s. Namely, there has been a wave, in the Southwest of the United States, of Hispanics claiming discovery of Jewish roots, and whereas this aroused interest, it was also fraught with controversy (See on pp. 7–8 in Aviva Ben-Ur's "Sephardic Jews in America", 2008). The phenomenon of

edited by Denis Cohen Tannoudji (2007), and another one, edited by Robert Attal and Claude Sitbon (1979). A book by Abraham Udovitch and Lucette Valensi (1984) is concerned with the Jews of the Tunisian island of Jerba. Esther Schely-Newman (2002) analysed narratives told by Tunisian Israeli women. Valensi (1989) described weddings among Jews in southern Tunisia. Hagar Salamon and Esther Juhasz (2011) discussed the custom, among autochthonous Tunisian Jews still in the early 20th century, to fatten betrothed girls prior to their wedding (Henri Dunant, the founder of the International Red Cross, wrote about that), a custom known also among some non-Jews in the Maghreb, Mauretania, and West Africa. Harvey Goldberg and Hagar Salamon (2011, 2014) discussed Jethro's Feast, a celebration among Tunisian Jews for boys reaching their religious majority. A book of Yehudit Henschke (2007) has explored the Hebrew component of the Tunisian Judaeo-Arabic vernacular.

A referee asked me to refer to the writings of Chochana Boukhobza. Suffice it to say that she is a French-language Israeli novelist, born in Sfax, Tunisia, in 1959.

See https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chochana_Boukhobza

rediscovered Jewish ancestry among Hispanics the American Southwest has received sustained attention in scholarship, including in the quarterly *Ha-Lapid: The Journal of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies*, and the more formal, newer the *Journal of Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian Crypto Jews* (edited by at Florida International University in Miami).⁶ Also consider that Sicilian Jewry and its remnants after the expulsion of 1492 have been a popular subject for a new generation of historians, in both Italy and Israel.

3. Unleavened Bread Hanging on the Wall

Consider again the matzoh bread hanging on the wall all year round, being replaced around the time of the Passover. The closest we get at present within Judaism, is the custom of conserving (but not hanging) a piece of the *afiqomán* (a particular half a matzo bread) for good luck, with some local peculiarity (e.g., in flooding-prone Baghdad, it would protect from flooding). And yet, the custom of hanging matzoh bread in synagogues and houses is mentioned on pp. 237–238 in Israel Jacob Yuval's (2006) *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. The vicious “Relatio vera Joannis Seraphinowitz baptizati Judaei”, supposedly given on his deathbed in Gdańsk in 1719 by that alleged former “Chief Rabbi of Poland and Germany, born in Persia”, claimed libellously, concerning blood in matzoh bread: “The *mitzve* [sic] bread should hang in every house and every synagogue all year. After [this] time it is no longer called *mitzva*, but it becomes a means to bring happiness to the Jews and unhappiness to the Christians. It is added to beer and vodka sold to Christians so that after swallowing it they contract pimples, pustules, and other illnesses” (translated on p. 42 in Paweł Maciejko's “Christian Accusations of Jewish Human Sacrifice in Early Modern Poland: The Case of Jan Seraphinowicz”, 2010).

It must be said that hanging baked items is not unknown to Christendom, as a Christian practice, rather than one ascribed to the Jews. Westwood and J. Simpson's *The Lore of the Land* (2005) have an entry (p. 462) about the Widow's Son pub in Bromley-by-Bow, in East London (this is *not* the South East London borough of Bromley). “It is notable for the profusion of very dry hot cross buns hanging from the ceiling: a new one is added every year on Good Friday, usually by some sailor, but it is not known in what year this custom began.” Allegedly, at one time the publican was a widow, whose sailor son “promised before setting sail that he would be home by Easter, and told his mother to be sure and have a bun ready for him. He did not return; but year after year she baked for him, and put it aside. When she died, the neighbours hung the whole collection from the ceiling” — but Westwood and Simpson explain: “It is a good tale, but the custom it explains was far from unique: it was a common custom to make a hard-baked bun or small loaf on good Friday and keep it all year, hanging from the kitchen ceiling — though it would be unusual to allow numerous buns to accumulate.” They quote from William Hone (*The Every-Day Book*, 1827): “sometimes there hangs from the ceiling a hard biscuit-like cake of open cross-work”, that would be replaced on the next Good Friday; this was “kept ‘for luck’”, and “preserves the house from fire” (Hone, *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 31). Westwood and Simpson state that it was usual to preserve the bun for medicinal purposes “as a remedy for various illnesses, especially diarrhoea and whooping cough. It was also a

⁶ See the articles posted at <http://www.cryptojews.com/Articles.htm>

general luck-bringer, and in some coastal areas was believed to protect all members of the household from shipwreck.” (Westwood and Simpson, *ibid.*, p. 462).

While perhaps Giuseppe Gabriele’s grandmother was *perhaps* following a vestigial practice of Portugal’s *Christãos Novos*, hanging some item of bakery all year round and replacing it around Easter is not a Jewish custom, while being a Christian custom in places including England. Bear in mind that even as Jewish communities were re-established in Portugal in the early nineteenth century (see Cardozo de Bethencourt’s “The Jews in Portugal from 1773 to 1902”, 1903), some unrelated *Christãos Novos* in the North of Portugal were allegedly still practising some customs so far removed from Judaism (*ibid.*, pp. 262–263), that — so it was still alleged ca. 1902 — an ill person, while in the throes of death, would be stifled: “the *abafadores*, suffocators, were formerly very numerous” (p. 263). Or so state officials would believe. “M. Lino d’Assumpção, Inspector-General of the libraries and archives of Portugal, has kindly authorized me to say that he has recently been informed of the existence at the present day of the *abafadores*, or suffocators, by a public prosecutor at Bragança.” (*ibid.*, fn. 1: d’Assumpção related it to Cardozo de Bethencourt, an overt Jew!).

4. Italy and France’s Rivalry in Tunisia

Gabriele’s book relates much that is relevant to the rivalry between Italy and France. The interval between the 19th and 20th mid-centuries was a time, when both newly unified Italy, and France coveted control of Tunisia, and French colonial administrators devised ways to marginalise some conspicuous elements of organised Italian presence, such as a religious order (see below), or even an annual religious procession, in which the sacred image had no longer to come from a Sicilian bishopric, but from France. After the Liberation,⁷ France’s animosity against ethnic Italians in Tunisia reached its unrestrained apex (owing to her being backstabbed by Mussolini’s invasion in 1940),⁸ but neither the French, nor the Italian communities were to last in a newly independent Tunisia that proceeded to expropriate the assets of ethnic aliens. Still, France was to provide a “home-coming” into France to both ethnic French, and ethnic Italians leaving Tunisia, whereas over decades, the Italian state displayed all in all indifference to the integration of Italian returnees. In his preface, Boccara remarks (p. 8) that *that missing centimetre* in the title of the book applies both to Gabriele’s uncle who wasn’t conscripted because just a bit too short, and to Gabriele’s and other Tunisian Italians’ disappointment with how Italy turned out to be. A referee remarked that “on Fascist and pre-Fascist policies in Tunisia, one should at least consider the two-volume study by Daniel Grange *L’Italie et la Méditerranée*

⁷ The policies of Mussolini’s Italy towards Tunisia are the subject of a book by Juliette Bessis (1981). Also see Nullo Pasotti’s *Italiani e Italia in Tunisia* (1970).

⁸ Imprisonment, forced labour, and confiscation under restored French rule in Tunisia also hit Tunisian Jews who had Italian citizenship, even though they had been subjected to Italy’s racial laws promulgated in 1938. The criterion apparently was to seize the assets of wealthy people, and to consider this part of war reparations.

The situation of Tunisia’s Jews during the six months of German Nazi occupation is the subject of books by Claude Nataf (2012) and Robert Borgel (2007). Cf. Boccara (2016). Also see Michel Abitbol’s book (1983) *Les Juifs d’Afrique du Nord sous Vichy*, and Filippo Petrucci’s book (2011) *Gli ebrei in Algeria e in Tunisia, 1940–1943*.

[i.e., Grange (1994), but it covers the period 1896–1911] or the recent works on Italian colonial returnees by Patrizia Audenino”.⁹

5. The Capuchins in Tunisia and Syria

Intercommunal relations responded in interesting ways to the rivalry between the French and the Italian community. For example, the French authorities expelled Italian Capuchin friars en bloc, and among those who interceded for them there also were influential members of the Jewish community. This kind of alliance provides a counterpoint to what we know of Syria in the decades around the middle of the 19th century, when France (with no Italian political rivals) had made herself into the protector of a Catholic clergy that was conspicuously Italian in places like Damascus and Aleppo, and in 1840 the government of Adolphe Thiers in France (at the time at odds with the other powers because of its encouragement of the Egyptian conquest of Syria) sailed unfazed through international opprobrium¹⁰ because it backed its wayward consul in Damascus, Benoît-Ulysses-Laurent-François, Count de Ratti-Menton, while he indicted and even tortured local Jews, conveniently charged with the ritual murder of a friar who was a Sardinian subject. The Capuchin friars in Damascus disseminated the rumour on 5 February 1840.¹¹

For an examination of the attitudes since then and in the ensuing three quarters of a century on the part of the most prestigious clerical periodical in Rome, see Charlotte Klien’s “Damascus to Kiev: *Civiltà Cattolica* on ritual murder” (1991). The classic book on the Damascus Affair is Frankel’s *The Damascus Affair: “Ritual Murder”, Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (1997). Fr. Tommaso from Calangiano (now officially Calangianus, a town in northwest Sardinia otherwise mainly renowned for its cork market) had been most likely murdered by a Muslim coach-driver who was known to have threatened him, in a climate of deep Muslim resentment and partly justified fear

⁹ See Audenino (2005, 2015, 1016, 2017, 2018).

http://www.unimi.it/chiedove/cv/patrizia_audenino.pdf contains Patrizia Audenino’s CV as well as her publication list.

¹⁰ Thiers became infamous again as a prime minister thirty years later, because of the bloodbath which accompanied the repression of the Communards upon the fall of the Commune of Paris.

¹¹ the same King Carlo Alberto (Charles Albert) whose name is associated with the emancipation of Piedmont’s Jews in 1848, and with the constitution (the Statuto Albertino) of that year, had taken a step in 1841 that pandered to a climate of intimidation among the Jews of his kingdom (and in Italy) because of a blood libel. Soon after the Damascus Affair of 1840 (Frankel 1997) — when, starting on 5 February 1840 the Capuchins in Damascus and then Rome falsely accused the Jews of Damascus of ritually murdering a missing friar, Tommaso¹¹ of Calangiano (now officially Calangianus, a town in central northern Sardinia, and a market of cork) — knighted in March 1841, by decorating him with the ribbon of a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Saints Maurice and Lazarus, the French consul to Damascus, Benoît-Ulysses-Laurent-François, Count de Ratti-Menton, who, still new in the job, had (along with the governor-general of Syria, Sherif Pasha, at Ratti-Menton’s behest) sadistically pursued the Jews of Damascus, supervising the torture of some (even to death), and starving nearly one hundred Jewish children in a building where only he could access them (surely a dream of a situation for a child abuser). Unlike the Austrian consul in Damascus, the British consul in Damascus accepted Ratti-Menton’s claims credulously. As an outcry developed in the West, the British consulate in Alexandria intervened against the blood libel, by order of the then premier, Lord Palmerston.

When deciding to decorate Ulysse de Ratti-Menton, Carlo Alberto certainly reasoned that Fr. Tommaso, a Sardinian by birth, was his own subject. Moreover, Carlo Alberto wavered during his career between reform and reaction. Another ethnic Italian by origin, the Austrian consul to Damascus, Merlato, revealed to the world what was actually happening, causing an international outcry to France’s shame.

of a European attempt at taking over actual rule in the Ottoman East. Yet, admitting that much ran counter the official rhetoric of the European-extorted Ottoman and Egyptian reforms. Tommaso Calìò devoted a chapter to the effects in Italy of the Damascus Affair, in his book *La leggenda dell'ebreo assassino* (2007).

Arguably the French consul in Damascus, Ratti-Menton, paying lip service to French Jewry in 1840 (while warning it not to side with the Damascus Jews he was quite literally torturing) was quite modern (for all of his deeds befitting the most harrowing features of the Middle Ages), and is in a sense the archetype of a major stream of propaganda, current in the West during the last three decades of the 20th century, and still nowadays. To enjoy equality, the Western Jew is required to either shut up, or indeed denounce Jewish “crimes” in the Near East — a locale in which the European imaginary (its bilge of less edifying wishes included) allows itself more unguarded manifestations.

Contrasting the narratives from Syria (during the Damascus Affair) and Tunisia (as per Gabriele’s memoirs) foregrounds France’s overarching political motives.

6. A Forgotten Episode

It is little known that France’s consular service afterwards made some efforts to ameliorate the very poor image it had cut internationally¹² because of Ratti-Menton,

¹² A decade of Egyptian rule in Syria came to an end after the great powers, except France, pressured Egypt into withdrawing. Muhammad Ali had first rejected the offer that by complying immediately and withdrawing from Syria, he would be allowed to retain the Holy Land. He eventually found himself to withdraw from there, too, returning all those territories to the Sultan. At that point, Muhammad Ali had come to the conclusion that his alliance with France had been worthless for him. Rather grotesquely, once Muhammad Ali had resolved to comply with the ultimatum and withdraw completely, hereceived the visit of a French politician, Count Alexandre Florian Joseph Colonna-Walewski (the putative son of Napoleon from Countess Marie Walewska). This visitor advised Muhammad Ali to accept a French protectorate. Muhammad Ali flatly refused. That was one funny episode in a thoroughly unfunny story. The July Monarchy had had the goal of turning France’s alliance with Muhammad Ali into a protectorate over Egypt, and it was wishful thinking to propose the protectorate precisely at a time when Egypt realised that France had been unable to stand by Egypt effectively against the other European powers. Later on, Alexandre Walewski was the envoy extraordinary who announced to the British prime minister, Palmerston, Louis Napoléon’s *coup d’état*. He became minister of foreign affairs in 1855. Being the recognised son of Walewska’s husband, he never accepted Napoleon I’s rumoured paternity.

Eventually, Muhammad Ali, the Albanian ruler of Egypt, had Sherif Pasha executed because of the disrepute into his deed had brought his regime in the eyes of the public opinion in the West, other than in France. Arguably, this was also because Sherif Pasha had followed the instructions of France’s consul, hardly something that in retrospect could please Muhammad Ali.

Actually, it is quite possible that the coach-driver who had threatened Fr. Thomas and the latter’s his Muslim servant, Ibrāhīm ‘Amāra, with killing them (before their disappeared) had done so in the climate of excitement, after both the Sultan in Constantinople and his rebel vassal in Egypt had granted equal rights to the Christians. The majority populace feared that this would also eventually bring about Christian rule. It so happens that the concern was founded. Both the newly enfranchised community, and the European powers that had made pressures in that direction, given the times (1839–1840) had on their mind more European power in the East, rather than human rights (it was a bit early for the notion to be assimilated). Arguably in 1840 demonising the Jews of Syria was a way to turn a setback (a climate of fear and the actual disappearance of Fr. Thomas) into a display of power: Sherif Pasha himself behaved as though Ratti-Menton was his boss. This was more than enough to irk Muhammad Ali.

The Damascus 1840 blood libel has been perniciously influential in the Levant, and the myth was promoted by the Baath rule in Syria from the 1970s. Curiously, current promoters of the myth in the Near East have been claiming that the friar was “from Camangiano in Sicily”. This is because Sicily is

but it only did so after France lost her alliance with Egypt (as Muhammad Ali demurred because of the hostility of the other European powers: Ufford's *The Pasha: How Mehmet Ali Defied the West, 1839–1841* (2007), covers the military and political aspects of Egypt's Syria campaign, but rather extraordinarily, does not even mention the Damascus Affair). We get a glimpse of that aftermath, from an upbeat tract of 27 pages, "*La-Yehudim Haytah Orah: An Address to the Jews of Great Britain, with reference to their literary, political, civil, and religious condition*", about the state of the Jews in Britain, published in 1844 by Moses Samuel of Liverpool, who wrote on p. 15 as follows:

Thus, from evil cometh good, as may be seen by the treatment of the Jews in Jerusalem at present. In the "Times," of February 16th, we read of the gross ill usage which an Israelite there received for passing before the church of the holy sepulchre, from a band of Christian fanatics, who left him for dead on the spot.

The French consul, Lentivy, having been informed of the occurrence, immediately forwarded a dispatch to the Pasha, who had the parties arrested; a measure which excited an extraordinary sensation among the Christian population, who adduced, in extenuation of the offence, the existence of a usage, precluding Jews from visiting the vicinity of the church. The priors of the Greek and Latin convents, interfered in behalf of their co-religionists; but Lentivy would admit of no excuse, and Haider Pasha fully concurred in the opinion of the consul; but the priors, having pledged themselves that such an outrage should not recur, Lentivy consented to the prisoners being released, after a few days' confinement, and their paying the expences [sic] of their victim's illness. The Pasha, moreover, issued orders, forbidding Christians, under the severest penalties, from ill treating Israelites, who should pass before the church of the holy sepulchre. Such has been the effect of the acquittal of the Jews from blame in Rhodes and in Damascus. Their moral worth is respected in the East. The Ancona persecution is stopped in the bud, and if there be at present any incipient symptoms of oppression in other places, it is hoped, by Divine power, speedily to die away.

Thus far, the quotation. Apart from the foregoing, there were situations when a *modus vivendi* was in place between friars and Jews. Zohar Amar has pointed out how Capuchin medical practice crossed communal boundaries in Jerusalem under Ottoman rule (Amar 2005), and I myself recall that once at a medical surgery providing community healthcare services in Beer-Sheva, a Jewish Tunisian woman recollected to other women about her receiving medical care from a friar back in her native country. An anonymous referee remarked that "the fact that Tunisian Jews took advantage of Christian (or Muslim) medical services and hospitals is not surprising, as many studies demonstrated. The opposite was true as well: Muslims and Christians — for example in 20th century Egypt (see the studies by Mine Ener on this) — were treated (also) in Jewish hospitals. This does not mean that Jews treated in non-Jewish hospitals were the object of proselytism or anti-Semitism. The same happened in the field of education: many Jews all over the Middle East and especially in North Africa attended Catholic or Protestant schools, without this implying (except for few cases) proselytism or forced conversion to Christianity". This is uncontroversial, though I had not elaborated. For that matter, in the history of Arabic language planning and neologisation in the first half of the 20th century, a prominent exponent in Iraq was the Carmelite scholar and lexicographer Anastase Marie [Nastás Mári] al-Karmalli (born in Baghdad in 1866, and educated in Beirut, then in Chevreumont in Belgium,

more easily recognisable than Sardinia, and because in Arabic, *kamánja* denotes 'fiddle', 'violin'. That is to say, there was lexical interference.

and then in Montpellier);¹³ in Baghdad, he had cordial relations with a local younger intellectual who was Jewish.

At any rate, the point of this section is to signal the passage by Moses Samuel (1844), as it throws light about how a French diplomat had apparently tried to correct the terrible impression that the Damascus Affair, another French consul, and France's Thiers government handling of the matter had made (upon being exposed) on European and North American public opinion other than in France.

7. Why Name a Baby *Abdelkader* in 19th-Century Italy?

Nissan (2016a) has tried to clarify why two Italian scholars in the 19th century had *Abdelkader* or *Abd El Kader* as their first name. Abdelkader Salza was a Piedmontese born in 1875, a historian of early modern Italian literature in the mould of Alessandro D'Ancona, and a classmate of Giovanni Gentile, who published an obituary after his untimely demise. Another scholar, Abd-El-Kader or Abdelkader Modena, was born in 1841 and was from Rovigo, a city in southwestern Venetia.

Nissan (2016a) tries to show subtle differences between the naming motivation of those two men born in the 19th century, based on the region of birth, the Jewish background of Abdelkader Modena, and especially the respective year of birth in relation to international events which happened at the time: the Algerian emir Abd-El-Kader fought against the French conquest, then had to surrender, and had to sign the Treaty of Tafna, which still held when Modena was born. Soon afterwards, the war in Algeria resumed, Abd-El-Kader lost the war, was imprisoned in France, became reconciled to French rule in his country, and was later freed; then while living in Damascus, during the Druze–Maronite war in Lebanon, Abd-El-Kader gave sanctuary to Christian refugees, and was hailed as a benefactor in western Europe, including in a painting casting him as a noble hero. Abd-El-Kader had gradually acquired a halo of a noble foe, and a Romantic hero, thus fit for European Christian babies to be named after him just like after some character from an opera.

In Abd-El-Kader Modena's case, I argued, as he was born in 1841, there was the added factor of the Damascus Affair of 1840, a blood libel¹⁴ concerning an elderly Capuchin who was missing and who was a Sardinian, thus a Piedmontese subject, and in 1841, Piedmont's king Charles Albert had honoured with a knighthood the French consul in Damascus, Ratti-Menton, a sadist who had supervised the torture there of Jews, both adults and dozens of starved children, in order to obtain a confession. Austria's consul in Damascus, Merlato, after a Jewish man with Austrian citizenship had managed to reach his consulate, had revealed to the West the behaviour of Ratti-Menton, and there was an international outcry, but France stood by her consul (Thiers, the premier, believed the blood libel), and the King of Piedmont (not yet the liberal reformer he became in 1848) sided with France's version of the events. Rovigo, where Modena was born, was under Austrian rule, and we suggest that their naming their child after the Algerian emir may have been motivated by animosity towards France because of the ongoing international scandal, which through Capuchin propaganda in Rome had brought about a climate of fear for Jews in Italy.

8. French Reprisals against Italian Culture in Tunisia

¹³ See the English-language entry on him on p. 575 in the *Who's Who of Iraq* directory of 1936, at <http://www.imarawatijara.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Whos-Who-Iraq-Directory-1936.pdf>

¹⁴ About blood libels, see e.g. Nissan (2010).

As can be seen from French attitudes in Tunisia, once Italy came to be perceived as a colonial rival, colonial administrators had no love lost on such hallmarks of Italian presence as the Capuchins. The Italian Capucins had been the Catholic monastic order active in Tunisia until 1887, when the French Cardinal Lavigerie brought about their expulsion from the country. He had them replaced with the French *pères blanches* of Carthage. Gabriele (p. 71) states that when Lavigerie had the Capuchins expelled, “the entire Italian community, freemasons and Jews included, rose in protest”. Gabriele is not innocent of *schadenfreude* when he relates (pp. 71–72) something that his own grandmother had learned from the *pères blanches*: namely, that the policy of having them mix with the Arab populace with conversionist intents, partly backfired, as allegedly 5% of the friars converted to Islam. Whether this is historically accurate or otherwise, it is significant that such lore was even voiced. (This phenomenon is also known from colonial history, in connection of the Czarist Russian policy of encouraging Buddhist monks from Mongolia to establish monasteries in areas of Russian-ruled Siberia, in the hope that once converted to Buddhism yet not steeped enough in it, the natives would have been more easily amenable to conversion to Russian Orthodox Christianity. What happened instead was that a substantial portion of the natives who had already converted to Christianity, became Buddhist. This motivated the Russian authorities to expel the Buddhist monks.)

Gabriele is more cogently, and definitely, gloating when he relates how the French had been unsuccessful when, in 1946–1947 — having forbidden the procession of the Madonna of Tràpani (a town in Sicily) which was traditional in Tunis on August the 15th — they tried to have the French Notre-Dame des Victoires accepted instead (pp. 199–200). Some of the details in Gabriele’s book are potentially a feast for cultural studies, as the incidents concerning those processions appear to impinge directly on the nature of what a polytopic cult of the same sacred character amounts to, and moreover there are various degrees of syncretism: the author reads into empathetic Jews viewing the procession upon the reinstatement of the annual Sicilian cult, perhaps more sentimental participation than they provided, or than they would have admitted to themselves, and certainly to their rabbi and fellow congregants, but most likely it comes closest to the truth if we were to say that they distinguished the cultic aspect from just empathy for a joyful moment for community that was their cultural “commensal” (to use Norman Stillman’s term) in their shared Tunisian locale.¹⁵

¹⁵ An anonymous referee apparently mistook what I have stated for an instance of religious syncretism involving Jews, but it is not. (Or was he or she thinking of how at Gabriele’s wedding, the celebrating priest made a reference to the bride’s Jewish ancestry?) The referee wrote: “As regards religious syncretism and Jewish-Muslim relations, I direct the author to the works of e.g. Manoel Penicaud and Dionigi Albera that dealt with the issue of shared sacred spaces and shared religious practice between Jews, Christians and Muslims in the southern shore of Mediterranean”.

When it comes to partly shared domestic space, see Joëlle Bahloul’s 1996 book *The Architecture of Memory: A Jewish-Muslim Household in Colonial Algeria, 1937–1962*. The use of domestic space by Jews in Baghdad vernacular housing is a major theme of Nissan (2009 [2010], 2016b, 2018 [2019]) and Amar and Nissan (2009). Nissan (2018 [2019]) reported about a house inhabited by a Jewish family, on the flat roof of a monastery in Baghdad: “Apart from the British army being in control of the city yet not intervening to stop the pogrom [on 1–2 June 1941, upon the fall of the month-long pro-Nazi government of Rashid Ali al-Gailani], take the following example of the behaviour of the local police. The twin sister of my great-grandmother died of the Spanish flu after her husband went missing during the First World War. Her little girl, the cousin of my maternal grandmother, became her adopted sister. At the time of the 1941 pogrom, she was living in a house on the flat roof of a monastery(!), threw her children from that flat roof, to the flat roof (or terrace) of a neighbour, then turned to a policeman who was standing in the street, and asked him to watch over that other house. He turned

9. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have selected for comment and elaboration a few topics from Giuseppe Gabriele's *Quel centimetro in meno* (2003), the memoirs of an ethnic Italian returnee from Tunisia, where he was born. He elaborates about relations between Catholics, Jews and Muslims in Tunisia, as well as about his ancestry in Pantelleria island, allegedly partly Portuguese crypto-Jewish (relics of "Pantesque" crypto-Judaism were unknown to scholarship, as far as I am aware), as well as about his wife coming from a family of Jews converted to Catholicism (and whom he took pleasure to related as fact to the modern myth that Maghrebine Jews were descended from pre-Islamic Judaised Berbers). The present study signals some points of interest to scholarship, and elaborates about these.

Gabriele also relates Jewish practices in their own denominational and cultural context, such as the extent to which some families would go when celebrating a *bar mitzvah*, and this, too, is something about which Boccara usefully comments in his preface (p. 12).

Gabriele's charming book (2003) was published by the author, rather than by a trade publisher with a distribution system of wide outreach, it is to be feared that it would slip into oblivion, unless this book is signalled (which I am doing now), or that it would eventually become unavailable, unless libraries with a Jewish studies compartment actually get copy soon, before addresses change (Marchetti, the volume editor, sent copy to the Centro di Documentazione Contemporanea in Milan). This book is a first-person narrative with much interest for both folklore studies, and other branches of cultural (and specifically Jewish) studies, e.g., for research into the construal of identity. It is engaging and of much human interest, and it certainly deserves scholarly notice.

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towards her, then shot her in the shoulder. She was pregnant. Then a mob arrived and invaded her home. Her husband (they were left in their underwear) rushed her inside a wheelbarrow to a hospital, but before he could get in, he was made to understand that it would be a fatal error to have her hospitalised (all Jewish inpatients of the governmental hospital were made to die by medical means). Therefore, she had to recover without the cares of the hospital". In another neighbourhood of Baghdad, it has been reported in the scholarly literature, the police placed a machine-gun on a roof and fired at fleeing Jews, hitting some of them; then policemen obtained part of the booty from the looting mob.

¹⁶ Also online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14725880802681924>

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