

# Shaking Hands with Qaddafi

## Part I: My Boyhood in Tripoli

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*I feel very strongly that I am under the influence of things or questions which were left incomplete and unanswered by my parents and grandparents and more distant ancestors. It often seems as if there were an impersonal karma within a family which is passed on from parents to children. It has always seemed to me that I had to answer questions which fate had posed to my forefathers, and which had not yet been answered, or as if I had to complete, or perhaps continue, things which previous ages had left unfinished.*

—C. G. Jung (1963/1989, 233)

I remember waking up in Tripoli at the age of eight to the smell of coffee coming from the kitchen. When I began to smell orange blossom essence, it meant my mother was putting the coffee in a thermos, and I had to be ready to take it to my father's shop. I ran out of the apartment, down the stairs, and, once outside the building, I turned right. After the third storefront, I would find my father waiting outside his shop with my sister Ruby. I entered the shop like a professional waiter and put the thermos on the brown table where watches and jewelry were repaired.

On the other side of the shop, my sister helped him sell watches, alarm clocks, silver rings, and other jewelry. There was a big display window to the right. It was common practice for my father or Ruby to open the door and invite those looking at the display to come inside to have a look at the large selection "at bargain prices," a ritual during which I remained silent. Sometimes the person bought something—which brought a smile to my father's face. Otherwise, my father moved to his second strategy: while he was smoking a cigar and sipping coffee, I was sent down the street to investigate, in a casual way, if a potential customer had stopped in Mancini's shop, our



The location of the shop in Tripoli owned by David Gerbi's father, until the family was forced to flee Libya. (Photograph courtesy of the author, 2002.)

biggest competitor in the area. "You must walk straight and look at all the shops on the right-hand side," he instructed. "Don't stare. All you have to do is see if he has stopped to buy." In later years, this ability to see yet remain unseen was crucial for the continuing survival of my family. While I went to investigate, my sister remained by his side. Together they waited for the "verdict," which I hoped would be negative so he would not be disappointed. After my return, my father then said, "It is time for you to take the thermos back to Mama," which meant it was time to open the safe and he did not want me present because I was too curious.

Two quarters in Tripoli were completely Jewish: Hara Kebira and Hara Zerera, each with synagogues. The wealthier families lived near Galleria de Bono, between the two quarters. According to my mother, our house was situated on one of the most beautiful streets of the city, Sciara Isteklal, close to Galleria de Bono, which was like a small coliseum with numerous arcades full of shops on the outside, including a restaurant with many windows. Until 1967, our address in Tripoli was Sciara El Kaira 13, a large first-floor apartment, full of light with three balconies. Two balconies and one window opened onto Sciara Isteklal and another balcony onto Sciara El Kaira. There were my parents' bedroom, the children's room, a small *sbinsa* (storeroom), and a big room used for Shabbat and holidays. Our rectangular kitchen had a marble table on which my mother prepared all kinds of good food. The second *sbinsa* was located between the kitchen and the veranda.



Street outside David Gerbi's childhood home in Tripoli. (Courtesy of the author, 2002.)

The veranda was my favorite place in the house: sunny with a cool breeze in the afternoon. I had a good view of Galleria de Bono and of the neighboring buildings, including the one where Aunt Halu lived with her two daughters, Laura and Dinni, and two sons, Elinio and Daniele. We lived in a big complex of apartments with many windows that opened onto a spacious courtyard. The women called across the courtyard to find out the latest news; this served as my television, radio, and telephone, and my education in the world of women. Sitting on the cool marble floor, I played with my toys and enjoyed the sight of all those faces that gave life to the courtyard. One of my most vivid memories from those days is when my mother gave me a small plant. She had planted it in a vase on the veranda and told me to take care of it and water it regularly. I was fascinated by its growth, and day after day, I observed the little buds slowly turn into leaves. It was a great lesson for me, as I learned to have faith and to see how love and nurturing were essential parts of life, giving me an early sense of the need to help nurture and care for the lives of others.

From the veranda, I could also smell my mother's cooking, particularly on Thursday and Friday afternoons before Shabbat, when she prepared the most delicious dishes. One of my favorite typical Libyan dishes was called *abraimi*, fish served with a strong and spicy sauce. The scent of the boiling sauce made my mouth water, and I could almost taste it with the *halla*, the Shabbat bread. The Shabbat menu was always the same, varying only if it coincided with a holiday. Meat soup was served as a second course because it was needed to "extinguish the hot flavor." We indulged in



**The Gerbi Family in Rome. Back, from left: Ruby, David, Miriam, Elia. Front from left: Simon, Dina (mother), Scialom (father), Rafael.** (Courtesy of the author. Photographer unknown, 1968.)

meatballs with couscous or soaked in lemon, salt, and pepper. Dessert varied according to the festivity.

On Friday morning an old man on a bicycle with a basket passed in front of my father's shop. The basket was full of *besamim* wrapped in damp newspapers. My father bought a bunch of these scented spices, used in the ceremony to mark the close of Shabbat, and wished the man a Saturday of peace, *Shabbat shalom*, as he cycled off.

At home, my mother began preparations for the Friday evening meal. A piece of dough, about the size of an olive, was baked in the oven after reciting a special blessing. (In ancient times, in the Temple of Jerusalem, this offering was dedicated to the Almighty and handed over to the

high priests.) My mother then sent me to the *kusha* (Arabic for bakery). Holding the tray with the *halla*, the Shabbat bread, on my head, I crossed the Arab quarter with swift and firm steps, enjoying all the fragrances in the air: spices, fruit, and vegetables. My mother made me swear to return quickly because she feared someone might bother me (which unfortunately did occur later) or that I would become a target for some gang of Arab youngsters. So I headed straight for my destination, avoiding eye contact with people. At the bakery, I handed my tray to the baker, a thin man with a dark complexion, a tiny moustache, and skin that shone with sweat. He had a big, bright smile for everyone and was always very polite. Many people adored Arab bread, which was round, tasty, smooth, and crunchy at the same time. However, I could never eat bread made by Arabs because it was not *kosher*.

Around four o'clock on Friday afternoons, my mother became excited in the haste of preparing the Shabbat dinner. She made soup and fish sauce and prepared the condiments. In an effort to keep me out of the kitchen, she made a doughnut out of a piece of the pie dough for me to taste before Shabbat. I would go out on the veranda to eat it in the cool breeze, awaiting the arrival of my father, tired and longing for a good hot bath after a hard day's work. While there, I witnessed the Muslims' holy day ending, just as our Shabbat was about to begin. I heard the muezzin's voice praying out loud



The author with his mother, friends, and relatives on Tripoli's beach. (Courtesy of the author. Photographer unknown, circa 1960.)

*Allah Akbar!* ("God is great!"), and I saw throngs of people dressed in the traditional white clothes used on feast days. The men wore pants that were low in the crotch, with very long shirts covered by traditional hooded jackets or a vest, and a white or red hat decorated with pom-poms. The women donned a traditional gown, which was wrapped around their body, as well as lots of jewelry, especially bracelets. The women's different scents and henna perfumed the air.

On Saturday, all the Jewish shops closed, and the men of the family went to the synagogue for the Morning Prayer, while the women remained at home to rest and set the table with the food they had prepared on Friday. (It is forbidden to light a fire or cook on Shabbat). The entire male community gathered to enjoy Shabbat and give thanks to God for the day of rest. The *Shamash*—the synagogue's custodian, something like the beadle of a church—welcomed the people and distributed the prayer books. He also offered a few drops of a special perfume made from a distilled orange flower essence called *zer* and a box containing *neffa*, a particular type of tobacco, inhaled to give pleasure to the soul.

How I suffered, longing to play outside in the garden instead of being forced to stay inside to receive the two obligatory blessings from my father! I vividly remember sitting on a chair, stamping my little feet, bored to death, silenced by my father's



*mmmh*. The best part was later, when my father took us to the Café Sordi. Because we could not use money on Shabbat, he paid the next day. At the café, he read the newspaper, had a drink, and then I would finally eat the longed for pistachios with vanilla and chocolate ice cream served in a colorful paper cup decorated with fruit.

Then, as our Shabbat finished, I saw people gathering in the streets on Sunday, the Christian holy day, which was only beginning. On Sundays, I heard the bells of the big Catholic cathedral, which was the meeting place for the Italian families. They were the most elegant of all, with a sweet pleasant smell of Italian perfume about them.

My father loved the idea of abundance. Since the weather in Tripoli was hot most of the year because of the Sahara wind, he relished keeping a great deal of fresh fruit at home. There were always melons and watermelons under the bed. When he did the shopping, he filled the house to overflowing. "I want more space!" He wanted fewer objects and more free space where he could store food.

On *Sukkot*, the Feast of the Tabernacles, the fathers, who until then had been busy working in their shops, were transformed, as if by magic, into hut builders with the assistance of their eldest sons. My father bought huge palm leaves, and with great skill he built the *Succah* (ceremonial hut) by fixing the palm leaves onto a previously constructed framework. Then, with the help of my oldest brother Elia, he adorned the hut with all kinds of fruits, such as pomegranates, grapes, and dates. A special lamp, consisting of a glass of water with a top layer of olive oil and a wick, was placed inside the hut. This lamp was lit every day of the seven days of *Sukkot*, while a second lamp was lit on Shabbat. Similar *Succah* could be seen on many verandas in the neighborhood.

I never went to restaurants when I was a child; it was not part of our tradition. We always ate at home, and I was allowed to accept only sandwiches, quick snacks to be eaten "on the go," from our relatives. The shops were full of delicious-looking pastries made by Arabs, which I was not allowed to eat because they were not *kosher*. We were only allowed to buy the long fresh French baguettes and milk at the Latteria Triestina and to eat Gruyere, chocolate, and biscuits. Our mothers were able to do everything: cook, sew, help women in labor, those getting married, and the poor who were trying to survive. Everything was done in silence and with a respectful attitude. Visitors were greeted with open arms. *Aslamach, l'hosh douach*: "Greetings, the house is illuminated by your presence." We hugged and kissed each other, and the visitor was asked about the health of his family members, just as the Arabs did, and then the guest was offered tea or almond milk and very light, fragrant, salted biscuits.

Although I could not comprehend to what extent it was possible to communicate among the different religious groups, the fact that each of the main religions had a different weekly holiday made an impression on me. I did not know then why I liked this aspect of Libyan life so much, but now I understand it. These were, after all, the

only moments of calm and relatively peaceful coexistence among the three monotheistic religions. On the other hand, there was certainly ambivalence in our relationships. There was a clothing shop opposite my house that I would visit, and I soon became friendly with the son of the owner, an Arab, even though I knew I was not allowed to play with Arabs. I did not understand why and neither did he, so we continued playing together despite the taboos. On Fridays, however, we had to get home early in order to avoid conflicts during the Arab holy day. Fighting between Arab and Jewish gangs was very common at the Galleria de Bono. There was also a taboo against my playing with the daughter of the Italian notary (lawyer) who lived opposite our veranda. I sensed that it was better not to risk mingling with them. The only things clear to me were that I was neither to socialize nor to ask questions. Silence and vagueness buried everything. I accepted the rules of the game even if I did not understand why the Arab babysitter and the Arab cleaning woman could be our friends while others could not. I was greatly confused by all these mixed messages I kept receiving. Of course, as I grew older, I gradually began to understand who I could talk to and whose company I was to avoid. I was being prepared to close myself off to other religions and cultures.

My father often warned me, “When you are out on the street, don’t talk to strangers.” At home, we were not permitted to talk much about ourselves. If we were facing an adult, we had to lower our eyes, and we had to be polite and respectful toward others. My father had learned self-control. He refrained from replying to a group of Arabs who spat at him and called him a dirty Jew and my mother a *kachba*, a prostitute. Our Jewish community did not want us to react to this kind of provocation because the memory of past persecutions was still very much alive. *Hellia sakcha*—just let them say what they want; do not react.

So we became the children of the culture of silence. We were taught to keep everything inside us. We had to hide our Jewish appearance and try to look like others. We were also brought up to keep certain events of our life secret: *Ma cheduish*—don’t reveal your emotions, especially when there were important and significant events in our lives: a pending business deal, a baby on the way, the announcement of an engagement, and so on. We were not to discuss it until the positive result was achieved; otherwise envy could easily affect the results. In the end, my communication felt so restricted that I started to suffer.

One day some workers came to our house to close half of the veranda. Mr. Faragi, the lawyer who lived next door, had decided to take half of our veranda. He was a Muslim and declared that this was his right. My father had to accept this injustice without reacting in order to keep the peace and out of fear of possible repercussions. I had been nicknamed *Duda* (black ant) by my family: I was small and dark, but able to run very fast. But from then on, I could no longer see what was happening out in the street, talk

to Lillino, or drop eggs onto the people below. So I began squashing the little ants that crawled out of the storeroom and torturing flies by trapping them under a glass before ripping off their wings. I limited their freedom like I felt I had been limited. I knew their wings could make them fly, and I envied them because they could fly anywhere in the world, which was what I wanted to do at that time.

On May 26, 1967—the 5th of Sivan in the Jewish calendar—I turned twelve, and exactly ten days later, the most important event in the lives of the Libyan Jews took place: the Six-Day War broke out between most of the Arab countries and Israel. On the night of June 5, the local Arab population tore through the streets setting fire to shops, including my father's, and some families were killed. We hid in the living room, in silence and in the dark, with all the windows closed despite the summer's stifling heat. We listened to the radio with the volume turned down very low and remained locked in the house for days. Through the shutters, I could see smoke rising from Sciara Isteklal.

We lived in terror because, apart from the ancestral hatred, the Libyan extremists were furious at Egypt's defeat. Many Libyan fanatics had affiliated themselves with Egypt's dictator, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and they blamed Israel for his loss of power. Radio programs incited the Libyans to exterminate the Jews, spewing a hatred we could not combat. Our hearts were torn between stifled joy at Israel's victory and desperation at what could happen to us as a result. I remember how a furious crowd, holding tools, sticks, and clubs had gathered in protest in front of our house. I kept running back and forth from the window to the terrace, peeking through the shades to get a glimpse outside. I could hear them shouting, swearing, and calling us offensive names.

Not until years later, when studying Kabbalah, did I discover that even the moral evil of a ruthless mob has a higher purpose in this world because, as my teacher Sarah Yehudit Schneider explained, "Every circumstance of our lives—individual or collective, good or bad, just or unjust, natural or connived—happens because the Master of the Universe determined that this was the most efficient and least painful way to accomplish a necessary [spiritual] repair" (2009, 160).

At the time though, I was experiencing for the first time what it meant to be the object of a riot, and with shock, I realized that these people desired our deaths simply because we were Jewish. My father repeated obsessively, *Ma ihabu nesh, ma ihabu nesh* ("They don't want us; they don't want us"), trying to bring comfort to the souls of his young ones. I could see the anxiety in his face, and although my mother was equally frightened, she still seemed to be full of faith. I had never seen so many people in one place, a mass of bodies who remained even though night had fallen. I was fascinated but at the same time terrified to see so much strength and force. They were yelling threats at us, while we remained locked up in the house with no food, too terrified to leave.



A very kind, newlywed Italian couple who lived upstairs secretly brought us some food. After a few days, the police discovered what was going on and ordered the couple to stop. They never brought us food again. My mother later told me that upon leaving Tripoli, she had left all of our gold and silver in the care of this couple, who had subsequently visited us in Rome in order to return our valuables. They had been deeply moved after witnessing what poor refugees we had become, after having been so wealthy. They even offered to lend my father money, which my father proudly refused. Only after much insistence did he agree to accept a sum, which he paid back soon after.

After having to suffer the extremities of hunger, my mother eventually chose me, out of her six children, to go out in the dark to find some bread and milk. I was the most suitable for the job. My sisters could not go because it was not safe for women or girls to go out at night. My brother was too old; if the Arabs caught him, they would have him arrested. Rafael was a newly born, and Simon was only five years old. I was twelve, had dark skin, and could easily pass for an Arab. At four o'clock in the morning, my mother accompanied me downstairs, opened the huge entrance door, and, with God's blessing, sent me out. Just a child: dark, small, agile—off I went. That was how I learned to run like a small fox. I learned how to elude the soldiers standing in the street. I was invisible: I could see without being seen, and every day I repeated the same ritual. I realized in later years how my agility and swiftness of movement employed during that period of time to nourish and sustain my family were the same qualities that nourished and strengthened my participation in dance theatre and therapy later in life. I returned home breathless with bread, milk, and other supplies. My mother then quietly opened the door when she heard my knock, and, after hugging and kissing me, we climbed the stairs to our house.

I loved our Muslim Arab housekeeper. Her name was Bekusha, which means "mute" in Arabic. Ironically, she was the one who warned us that we were in danger and should flee from our house and hide. She told us this by gesticulating and making frightening sounds. There was also a kind Arab lawyer who helped us with the documentation when it was time to leave. He asked my father where we would go. Being a child, I did not grasp how desperate our situation was. I was just tired of staying home for so many weeks. Finally, one day my father informed us that we were going to Italy. I became very excited at the prospect, as I had always wanted to move to another country, discover new places, and travel like my father had. He was one of only a few in our community to have traveled in Europe.

It was still very dangerous to go outside during the last few days we were in Libya. I kept asking my parents, "When are we going to Italy?" Before we finally departed, we lived in fear of being killed for two and a half months. At home, I had always heard everyone speak highly of King Idris of Libya and his enlightened attitude with regard

to the Jews and other minority groups. In 1948, some Libyan Jews had emigrated to Israel to begin a new life while others remained in Libya, hoping the king would improve our situation. My family had been one of the few who decided to remain. I like to remember King Idris as the last powerful person who considered me as one of his citizens. I referred to him as “my king,” as I loved him simply because of his continuing protection and support of us, the minority group. He even sent soldiers to escort us to the port when it was time to leave. My sister Miriam still remembers how, in those terrible moments, while our properties were being set on fire and the crowd was baying for our blood, screaming, *Uh, uh—al lehud!* (“Death, death to the Jews”), King Idris had stood in his convertible with a megaphone, coaxing the crowd to go home and not to stain the country’s reputation with death and destruction. Despite his active intervention, many people were killed and even more properties set on fire, yet thanks to his efforts, the majority of us were saved. Many times, when I was living in Rome, I imagined meeting King Idris’s nephew, also in exile, to whom I would convey the gratitude I would never be able to express to the king himself.

Instead of choosing to leave the country, we could have gone to a refugee camp, but my parents decided to go to Sicily after one of our friendly Muslim neighbors informed us that three families had been killed in the camps. He helped us get the necessary documents to leave the country. We were ready for the exodus. While the Jewish community crowded the airport trying to get airline tickets, we were one of the only two families who left Tripoli by ship because my father had once promised my grandmother that he would never travel by plane.

I couldn’t wait to go to Italy, but one thing troubled me: who would water my little plant? My Uncle Sion and Aunt Wanda clearly remember when, upon their arrival at the airport, they had been interviewed by Italian radio and television journalists. They told the journalists they had been treated well by Libya. Aunt Wanda later explained to me why she had lied: “We could not tell the truth; otherwise the Libyan authorities would have taken revenge on those who were still in the refugee camps waiting to depart, as had already happened in the past in other riots. Furthermore, we could not tell the truth because we hoped to return one day, if not for good, then at least to sell our belongings and then reconstruct our life in Rome. For these reasons, we swallowed everything.”



David Gerbi’s paternal grandparents, Miriam Azra and Elia Gerbi. (Courtesy of the author. Photographer unknown, early 1940s.)

When we left Tripoli on a ship heading for Catania (Sicily), we were loaded with the traditional emigrants' cardboard suitcases, tightly packed and tied with ropes. In spite of all my efforts, I was unable to help my father and brother carry the enormous suitcases. I longed to be helpful but I was just not strong enough. We were on the ship that was about to take us to a safer haven, far from our former hostile but, at the same time, beloved homeland. Our trip from Tripoli to Catania and from there to Rome lasted three days. We were tired, dejected, and even disoriented, with an urgent need to wash ourselves and eat kosher food, but we were also very happy because we had finally made it. We were safe and ready to start all over again.

We never returned to Libya as a family. Many relatives have died, including my father in 1979; he was laid to rest near his parents in Israel's Ashkelon Cemetery, his mother and father having made *aliyah* (Hebrew for "ascent," referring to the immigration of Jews to the Land of Israel) in 1948. I am happy he was buried there and not in the cemetery in Tripoli, which has since been covered by a highway and many buildings.

*The whole world is a very narrow bridge. The essential thing is not to be afraid.*

—Rabbi Nachman of Breslav (1772–1810), *Likutey Moharan*

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David Gerbi's maternal grandparents, David Debach and Rubena Meghnagi. (Courtesy of the author. Photographer unknown, early 1970.)

and conducts seminars internationally on dream interpretation, involving techniques of psychodrama and movement. As an actor and dancer, Dr. Gerbi mounted a one-man show entitled *Making Peace with Qaddafi* in 2006 and, since then, has performed it in theaters in the United States, Japan, Italy, Israel, and South Africa, and is currently developing an updated version for 2011. He has written two books on the subject of peace and is currently working on a third book focusing on the challenge of peace and unresolved historical conflicts and a fourth on dream interpretation. *Correspondence:* Via Cesare Pascarella 34, Rome 00153, Italy. E-mail: davidgerbi26@mac.com; website: www.costrutturidipace.it.

**ABSTRACT**

Jungian psychoanalyst Dr. David Gerbi describes the journey of his awakening to peace and reconciliation in this three-part article. In Part I, he describes his childhood in Tripoli, the expulsion of his Jewish family by the Libyan government, and their arrival as refugees in Rome.

**KEY WORDS**

Arabs, Christians, dance therapy, dream interpretation, exile, exodus, Israel, Jew, C. G. Jung, Kabbalah, King Idris, Libya, Muslim, peace, pogrom, Qaddafi, refugee, riot, Sephardic Jews, Six-Day War