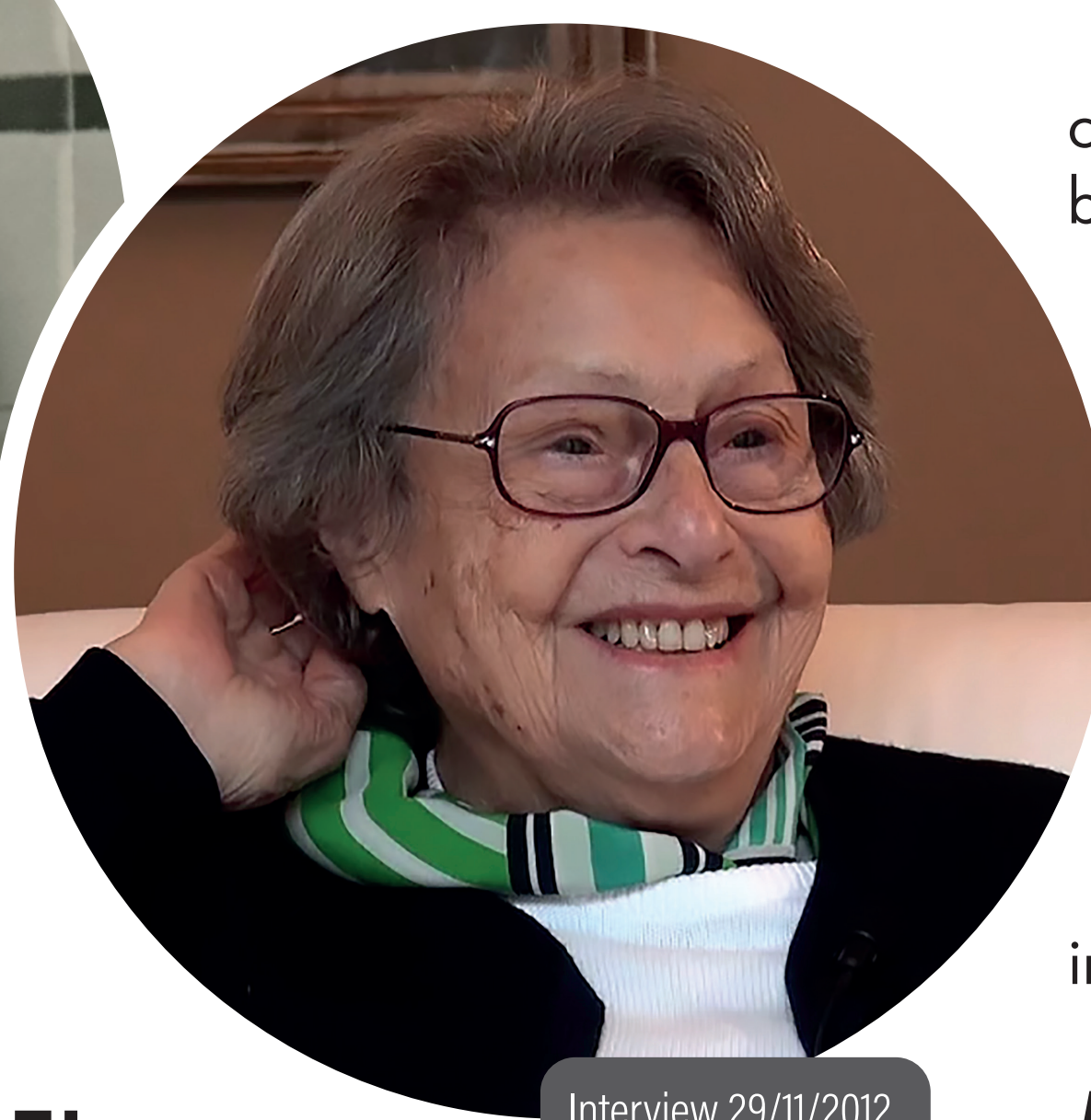


Rachele in her house in Tripoli



Interview 29/11/2012

# I WAS BORN RACHELE ABRAVANEL...

... on 19 June 1922, my parents' eighth daughter. My paternal grandfather was born in Tripoli, but his father – my great-grandfather – was born in **Thessaloniki**. My mother was the daughter of an important rabbi, Isacco Labi. Hers was a family of rabbis. My dad's name was Mosè, although he was known as Mushi, and my mum was called Gemma. She died when I was nine. My father worked with two Italian families, the Montis and the Trucchis, importing wheat, and commanded a great deal of respect. We lived on Corso Sicilia, in a district inhabited almost entirely by Arabs. The Senussi family, the princes, lived there too. My mum did some needlework jobs for them, and if one of them fell ill, **they would call her before going to the doctor.**

It was Smyrna, not Thessaloniki.

My grandmother was a healer.

**M**y grandmother – my father's mother – lived with us while she was still alive. Her name was Rachele too. We couldn't afford a car. In the summer we stayed in Tripoli. There was a beach we called The Slum, with pile dwellings, where we used to go swimming. At home we spoke first Arabic – a slightly different, Jewish form of Arabic – and then Italian. We were Libyan. However, my brother (Haim) was granted French citizenship, and was even awarded the Legion of Honour. He felt truly [French] ... My mum sent him to the Alliance Universelle in Paris, and he came back as a teacher, the first graduate to come to Libya. He taught French and was the principal at the French school. When everything happened and we had to leave school, we all crowded there, and he said "read this!" and gave us everything from Tolstoy to Turgenyev, all the great writers of the time. **When these things happen you lose your bearings and don't know what to do.**

The Abravanel sisters



**M**y wedding was the first one to take place after the end of the war. I got married in one of my sisters' houses on the seafront – their neighbour had a large terrace. A **Chuppah** was erected and the rabbi came. The ceremony had to be very simple [she smiles] but then some brothers-in-law of mine who worked at the Ameri-

Chuppah (Hebrew, "canopy" or "covering") is canopy under which a Jewish couple stand during their wedding ceremony.



can base arranged for a small band to play. There hadn't been any music after the war. This was the first time. Even strangers passing by on the street came up. The party was meant to finish at nine, but it carried on until midnight because nobody wanted to leave. Life in Tripoli was good for Jews; everyone had a job. Many of the girls did domestic work, and all the men had a shop or stall, or worked as salesmen, or in offices... they lived all over the city, depending on their income.

Manuela, Rachele, Daniel at the seafront in Tripoli



Moreno, Manuela, Daniel



**M**y husband and my brother ran two photography shops and a laboratory together. They developed films and printed postcards, and also sold cameras. They had a shop at the American base too – they worked very hard and made a lot of money. Then we abandoned everything. I got married in 1945.

My husband was originally from Benghazi, and my sister Viola's husband was also Benghazian. My brother (Jacques) happened to see my husband's sister and liked the look of her, and asked for an introduction. We did a sort of exchange.

**M**y brother Enrico was one of the people in charge of the emigrations. Haim was a member of **Joint**. At the end of the war, all the children suffered from TB, and Joint brought a lot of relief. I remember copious amounts of cod liver oil. My sister Rubina played a very active role too. Unfortunately, none of them are alive anymore.



Moreno in his shop



Foto aula

Joint | The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, also known as the Joint or the JDC, is a Jewish relief organization founded in 1914 and based in the USA.

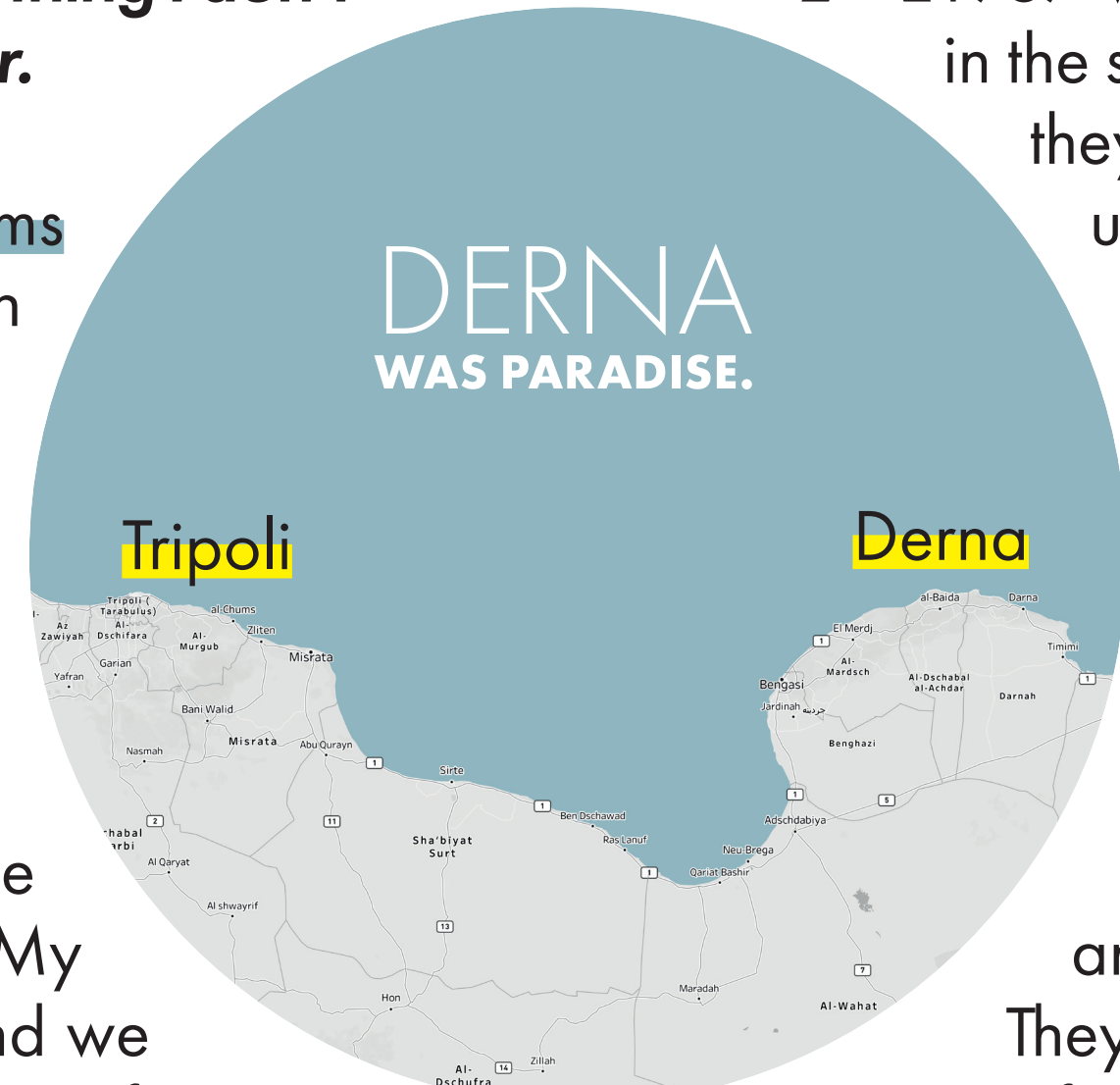
**I**t all began in 1938, or perhaps even earlier. We could sense that the antisemitism was so widespread that people who had once been friends now looked askance at us. We felt so precarious, as if everything were up in the air – they were very unhappy times. Then in 1940 the war started. We had to leave school, and they started taking all the men to do forced labour in the desert. An excellent doctor, Moscatelli, gave one of my brothers an eye condition, and another the flu, to prevent them being taken.



**R**ecently I read a book called *Ammazzateli tutti* ('Kill them all') – have you read it? If so... well you can imagine what happened to the people who went to the desert. Many of our friends were taken. Some of my cousins, whose father had British nationality, were sent to the Bergen-Belsen camp: the entire family. And those of us who remained behind were treated like cockroaches.

**By the Italians. Not by the Arabs. Unfortunately we were friends with the Arabs, and the thing I don't understand is what happened later.**

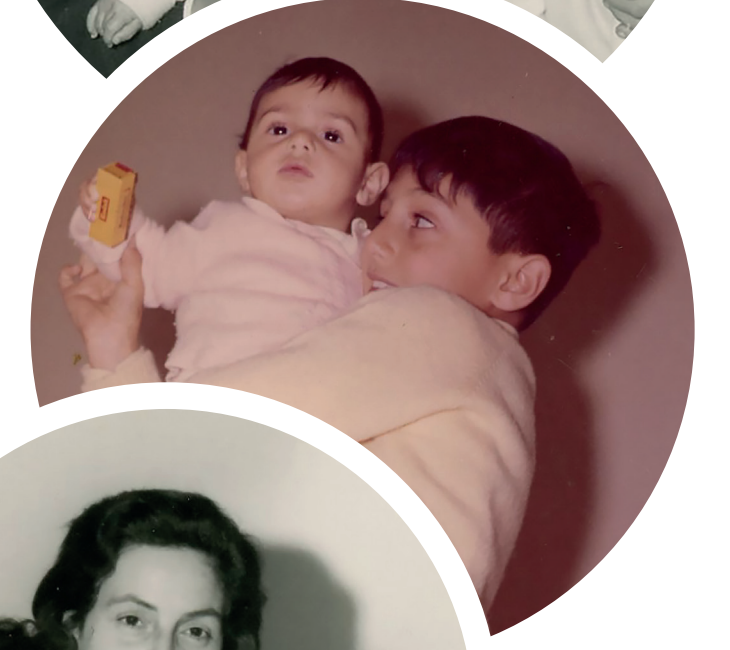
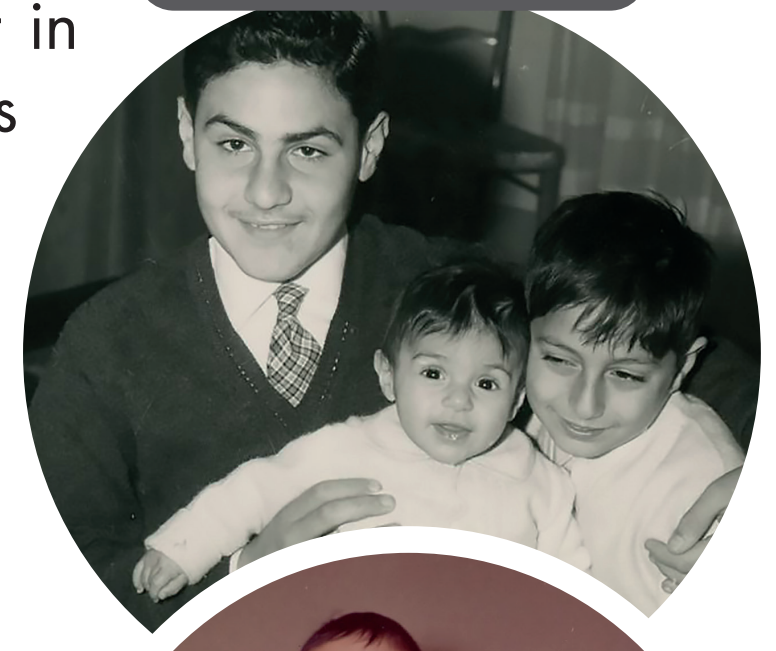
**A**t the time of the 1945 pogroms in Tripoli and Benghazi I was in Derna, 100 km [sic] from Benghazi. I was pregnant, and it was agreed that I shouldn't be told anything. The Italian nuns at the hospital, who loved me, let me recuperate with them, saying the child was ill. They told me later: over 250 people were killed and dismembered in three days. After the wedding, we lived in my mother-in-law's house. My husband was out of work. An opportunity arose and we moved to Derna, the first time I had been away from my family. We stayed there for two years, before she [my mother-in-law] said "That's enough! Come back!" and so we returned.



Pogrom (Russian, "devastation") is a violent riot aimed at the massacre or expulsion of an ethnic or religious group, particularly one aimed at Jews.

Libya obtained independence on 24/12/1951.

Roberto, Manuela, Daniel



**I**n Tripoli we lived on a street in the centre, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, which later became Sciarra al-Istiklal, or Independence Street. Almost everyone in the building, owned by an Arab man named Khilbish, was Jewish. During the day I would do the housework and take the children to school, to the gardens, or to play tennis. I learned to drive and owned a car. In 1948, when there was another pogrom, I had returned to Tripoli. We shut ourselves in the house and the people from the ghetto, led by **Haganah**, did everything they could to defend themselves. **I had three bombs in the house, which I kept on top of the wardrobe.**



He saved us, he sent a car to take us away, Pierluigi Alverà.

**W**e had lots of friends in Tripoli, with whom we would meet up in the evenings, play cards, go to the cinema and enjoy small dinner parties. We used to go to the Hotel Uaddan, a wonderful place on the seafront, where there was roulette, dancing, a restaurant... We were all rather Jewish, and antisemitism brought us closer together. The Alazraki family are here in Milan. The rest are in Rome.

**A**fter the war the Americans arrived, and with them prosperity! They discovered oil, and a period of wellbeing began. All the companies started to arrive. It was an invasion. There was enough work for everyone.

**I**n 1948, when Israel gained its independence, there were celebrations in the streets, and the **Aliyah** started, with almost 30,000 Jews from Tripoli and the **Hara** taking steamers to Israel. None of them [the Arabs in Tripoli] could stomach a Jewish state. Many Palestinians fled there and came to Tripoli and stirred up this story that they had taken their houses.

Aliyah (Hebrew, "ascent") is the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to the land of Israel. Also defined as "the act of going up"—that is, towards Jerusalem—"making aliyah" by moving to the Land of Israel is one of the most basic tenets of Zionism.

Hara (Arabic, "quarter") is the Jewish quarter. In the city of Tripoli there were two Jewish quarters.

**A**fter independence things improved, but in 1967 we had to flee: people swore at us in the street, and even punched us when they got the chance. Nasser stirred up a great deal of anti-Jewish sentiment, and this hate never went away. They wanted to kill everyone.

**W**e shut ourselves up in our homes. They came in uniform and said "come with us, we'll protect you", then they killed and dismembered two families. They came to our house too. There were four or five of them. "Come with us", they said. "No, we're staying here!" we replied. I had a houseful. My brother with his wife and daughter, my other brother, my mother-in-law... we were all shut up in the house for around a month. An Arab man had a stall below my house, and I would always give his children sweets. He did not let anyone pass, except an Italian office worker who secretly brought us food. And a neighbour of mine said "I've got my grandson at home; don't worry, nobody will touch you!" She was Libyan.

**W**hen King Idris said "woe betide anyone who touches a Jew!", they began letting people leave. So we all set off with a suitcase. We left our house full, and that saved our lives. What terrible looks they gave us, and what resentment they harboured, while we were being driven to the airport! Everyone begins with a small stone, an insult, and then... a friend who fled from Greece told us we should send some money out [of the country], so that's what we did.

**I** ended up in Milan because my son was studying at the Politecnico university here. I was 45 and Manuela was five. My youngest son and his father joined us a week later. We already owned this house, but it was occupied, so we went to live in a boarding house. You know, when my husband, my mother-in-law and I arrived, with three children in education, you can imagine the panic. It was hard – my husband was unemployed and depressed. But then it passed. Things weren't wonderful, but nor were they terrible. We had lots of friends here.

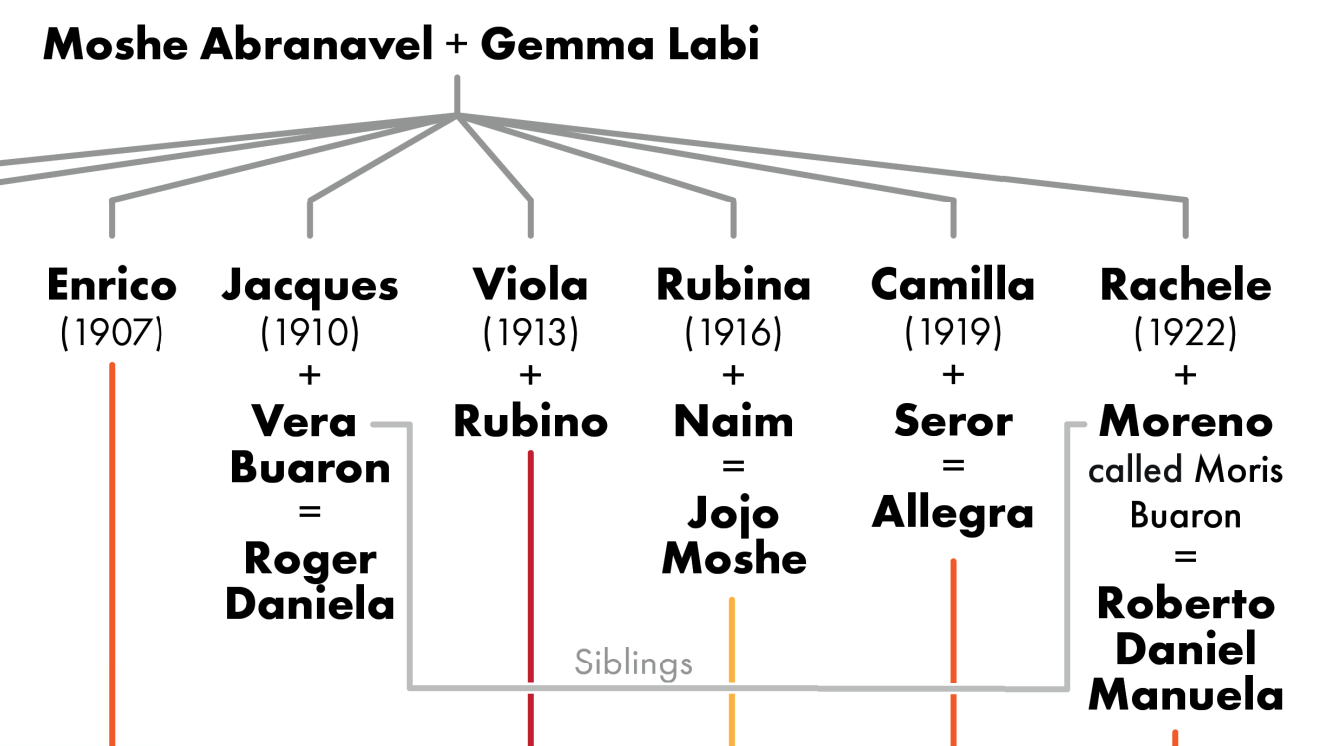
In September, October 1967, she went back to take some belongings. I cannot remember if she went alone or with my father. She took many pictures with her, suitcases full of pictures.

We could not go all together. We were like...hostages. We left in groups. I was seven and a half years old, and I remember everything.



Celebrating her 90th birthday with friends

**AND YOU ADAPT. YOU NEED TO HAVE THE COURAGE TO ACCEPT EVERYTHING.**



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