Translator's Preface

The image that "Libyan Jewry" evokes in many people is a confused one. Some are led to think of the aristocratic demesne of the "pure" Sephardim—those who trace their ancestry to Spain and Portugal. Others conjure up the simple folkways of cave dwellers. For anyone wanting to gain an informed insight into the historical development of Jewish life in Libya, a major obstacle in the past has been the "deplorable dearth of historical accounts of African and Levantine Sephardic Communities" lamented by the American Sephardic scholar M. A. Benardete in 1952.[1] Though the gap has in the meantime been filled for other communities and Libyan Jewry has been the subject of detailed anthropological research, the lack of historical accounts persisted until the appearance in Italy in 1978 of Renzo De Felice's *Ebrei in un paese arabo*—"Jews in an Arab Land." The rich and varied political, social, and cultural life of this community has finally emerged, thanks to De Felice's multifaceted approach to it.

As a distinguished historian of Italian Fascism, Renzo De Felice is skilled in bringing an impartial and balanced mode of analysis to the issues of modern history which otherwise may arouse shrill, impassioned tones. Though his original interest had been in Jacobinism and the French Revolution, he was the first postwar scholar to venture on a critical but detached study of Fascism, and his work set off an extensive debate in Italy. His multi-volume biography of Mussolini, with its careful documentation and measured interpretations, is acknowledged as the major work on Il Duce. De Felice also studied the situation of Italian Jews under Fascism in *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (1961). Partly as an extension of that work, particularly Fascist colonial policy, in 1978 he published the present book on the Jews of Libya, a country that was subjected to Italian colonial rule between 1911 and 1945.

De Felice examines Libyan Jewry not only in the context of colonialism, but also in terms of the inner dynamics of this ancient community (established since the time of the Second Temple, 520

B.C.–70 A.D.) and its encounters with Islam and the Ottomans, with the West through Italian colonization and British occupation during and after the Second World War, with Arab nationalism and independent Libya, and with the influence of Zionism. With skill, objectivity and empathy, De Felice reveals the attitudes of rulers, movements, and ideologies toward Libyan Jewry and offers a perceptive understanding of its behavior under the stress of contradictory ideological, economic, spiritual, and personalistic forces.

In this book the author provides new information on the life of an indigenous minority in the Middle East. He shows how and why an age-old relationship dissolved, as conditions in Libya, unlike those in other North African countries, caused most of the Jews to leave before independence in 1951. The Jewish population, estimated at thirty-six thousand in the 1940s, was reduced to six thousand through mass emigration, due to intercommunal tensions and pogroms in 1945 and 1948. The majority of Jews became convinced that the Arab-Israeli conflict would make life untenable for them in independent Libya, and they were ultimately proven right. Many others, however, did not see the prospect of independence as a specific threat to themselves. The Libyan Jews' relationship to Libyan Arab culture was not a question of attraction. They were so imbued with it that they took it for granted. Those who remained in Libya after 1952 behaved toward the new state as they had always done toward their rulers: they sought and relied on King Idris' personal protection. The Europeanized Libyan Jews continued to act as cultural and economic intermediaries between Arabs and Europeans. But a gradual deterioration set in under the reign of King Idris, and almost all Jews finally had to leave in the wake of the 1967 Middle East War.

De Felice's focus on the colonial period of Libyan Jewry highlights the predicament of Jewish existence in the complicated environment of a colonized Muslim society, confirming the paradoxes of colonialism described by Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon,[2] and Albert Memmi. The last, a Tunisian Jew, found that he was colonized three times over: as an indigenous inhabitant of a country colonized by France, as a Jew in a Muslim society, and as a member of a poor, artisan family.[3] Libyan Jews, in similarly unfavorable conditions, survived, flourished, and took pride in themselves through initiative and imagination. Some of the pictures of their life which emerge in the documents that De Felice has assembled express better than any analysis their situation. While the Jews of Libya adapted to the Italian presence and many accepted its culture, they continued to maintain traditional relationships with their Muslim indigenous

milieu. But when the colony became an open field for uninhibited Fascist activities, colonial officials tried to force Jews to Italianize by abandoning some of their most cherished traditions. Thus Governor Italo Balbo, though he was a friend of Italian Jews, and delayed the extension of Italy's 1938 racial laws from the metropolis to Libya, did apply anti-Jewish measures, obliging Libyan Jews to attend school and do business on the Sabbath. As a powerless minority, beset by cultural differences between Arabized Jewish masses and Italianized elites, the Libyan Jewish community was at times unable to ward off interference in its affairs and maintain its internal autonomy. The unity of Libyan Jewry, De Felice shows, was being undermined by centrifugal forces—increasing secularism, an urge to become Italianized, indifference to community concerns. But the Jewish community did find unity and resources when necessary to deal with tensions, crises, and urgent need, and De Felice documents extensively the interplay of unifying and centrifugal forces within it. In the face of the great crises of the Second World War and the pressures of Arab nationalism, the community survived because of its unity. Though Zionism as a political movement initially met with opposition from some of the leaders of the community, its educational efforts helped in resisting assimilation and fragmentation.

Libyan Jewry emerges from De Felice's study as the object of some of the main ideologies and conflicts of the twentieth century—Fascism, colonialism, pan-Arab nationalism, and Zionism—all of which had an influence on the future of the Jews of Libya. De Felice examines soberly the issues leading to the end of Jewish life in Libya. They fit into the broader pattern of anti-Jewish hostility, described by Norman Stillman[4] as an outgrowth of European anti-Semitism which found soil in Arab nationalism and flowered with the Arab-Israeli conflict. There was also some of what Guido Fubini describes as Arab anti-Semitism in terms of a reaction of the poor against former economic intermediaries whom they identified with colonialism.[5] The end of Jewish life in Libya has meant a cultural loss for all Libyans, Jews and Arabs. They have, nevertheless, partaken of that common inner rhythm of Jewish and Arab histories, described by S. D. Goitein.[6] The two peoples have had a similar relationship to Western civilization, so that their revivals have coincided. Moreover, the Hebrew and Arabic languages and literatures have experienced their renaissance at the same time. When greater understanding between the two cultures comes about, the Jews from Arab countries will perhaps, in their accustomed role as intermediaries, have had some hand in it.

Terms and institutions which may be unfamiliar to English-speaking readers are explained as far as possible through translator's notes. Where historical documents in an English version or original are accessible, they have been quoted rather than translated. Occasional words in Hebrew or Arabic have been transcribed as far as possible according to the Library of Congress systems, except for Libyan place names and personal names. For these I have used either the form most current in scholarly English or the Defense Mapping Agency Topographic Center's *Libya: Official Standard Names Approved by the United States Board on Geographic Names*, second edition.

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