The Rabbinical Seminary in Italian Rhodes, 1928–38: An Italian Fascist Project

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Abstract

The Italian Fascist government of the island of Rhodes established a rabbinical seminary in 1928. The aim was not only to train rabbis, giving them a modern education, but also to create vectors of Italian influence in the Sephardi communities where the rabbis would assume duties once they graduated. The establishment of this institution was a response to the acute crisis in the education and formation of modern rabbis, especially chief rabbis, among the Sephardim of the Levant. The new seminary relied on the financial support of the Italian government and on subsidies from Jewish communities. The seminary closed because of financial difficulties in 1938, at the same time that antisemitic legislation was introduced in Italy.

Key words: Fascism, Sephardi Jews, rabbinical seminary, Italian colonialism, Rhodes

In 1928, a rabbinical seminary opened with great fanfare on the island of Rhodes, which was under Italian rule at the time. This institution, which lasted only 10 years, is largely unknown in general Jewish historiography.[1] The circumstances of its founding and its trajectory during its existence are highly unusual: it emerged as a result of the efforts of Mario Lago, the Italian governor of the island, who aimed to create an establishment that would become a prime vector for the spread of Italian influence among the Sephardi communities of the Middle East and southeastern Europe.

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How did such a seminary emerge in such an unlikely location at the instigation of an Italian governor? The explanation requires an understanding of the major transformations and upheavals that the Levantine Sephardi[2] world underwent during the last century of the Ottoman Empire. New states such as Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria emerged in the Balkans during this period, replacing Ottoman rule. Sephardi Jewry, which had come into existence as an integral part of the Ottoman social fabric following the expulsions from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century, fragmented. The community faced new political masters and nation-building polities with new demands. With the Greek annexation of Salonica in 1912, the majority of Sephardim now lived in a post-Ottoman world. Sephardi communities saw considerable socioeconomic and cultural change as a result of major European incursions into the economies of southeastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean. The reforms instituted by the Ottoman state and the westernizing action of European Jewry in the shape of the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle left deep marks. Jewish religious and popular culture came to be deeply affected by these developments. Traditional education declined. French became the language of high culture among the Jews. Rabbinical intellectual production came to a halt. There was no significant religious work in Hebrew being published in the region by the end of the nineteenth century.[3]

Sephardi rabbinical leadership was in deep crisis by the early twentieth century. The Jews of Balkan countries such as Greece and Bulgaria as well as Turkey experienced great difficulties in finding appropriately trained rabbis to fill their top rabbinical positions. The problem was also in evidence at the level of finding rabbis for individual communities. The system of training rabbis had become increasingly chaotic. The traditional education provided in Sephardi yeshivot entered a period of deep and terminal decline. Most of these institutions, which had never been as strong as their Ashkenazi counterparts in eastern Europe and Russia, closed in this period. The few that survived proved incapable of producing the modern rabbinate that was increasingly required in the new states that replaced the Ottoman Empire. The demand was now for rabbis educated well in both secular and religious matters. Major Sephardi communities such as those of Bulgaria and Greece had to import foreign, Ashkenazi rabbis as chief rabbis because they could not find viable local candidates for these important positions. The Jews of Turkey encountered the same problem and would sometimes go without a chief rabbi for extended periods.[4]

The end of the nineteenth century saw one attempt to create an institution that would form modern rabbis for the Sephardi world. The noted maskil Abraham Danon founded a rabbinical seminary in Edirne (Adrianople) in 1891 with the support of European Jewry, most notably the Alliance Israélite Universelle. The establishment moved to Istanbul in 1898 and appeared poised to play a leading role in graduating rabbis who would constitute the Jewish religious leadership of the various communities of the Ottoman Empire. The Alliance saw in the training of modern rabbis the missing link in its work of "regeneration" of the Jews of the Levant. However, communal conflicts and lack of funding bedeviled the institution in spite of the enthusiasm with which it was greeted at its founding. Many students in the seminary dropped out before graduating, and only a few of its graduates found positions as rabbis. Most became teachers of religion and of Hebrew in Jewish schools. The Istanbul seminary went from crisis to crisis and closed its doors definitively in 1917.[5]

The rabbinical seminary established in Rhodes was designed to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Istanbul seminary a decade earlier. Italy, a newly arrived colonial presence in the area, tried opportunistically to exploit the crisis in the Sephardi rabbinate by parlaying its presence in Rhodes to establish a seminary there and attract Sephardi communities into its orbit. The history of this institution offers a fascinating glimpse into the fleeting encounter between Sephardi Jewry and Italian colonialism and illuminates the final act of the attempt to create a modern Sephardi rabbinical class.

The Jewish community of Rhodes, with a population of about 4,300 at the beginning of Italian rule, had been a classic Ottoman Sephardi one. Most of the population of the island was Greek Orthodox. Muslims and Jews had for centuries also been the principal recognized communities residing on the island. Jews constituted a quarter of the population of the town of Rhodes, an important Aegean port. The new century brought dramatic changes. Italians conquered the island together with the rest of the Dodecanese island chain in 1912, part of a strategy to force the Ottomans to give up resistance in Libya, which Italy had attacked in 1911. The Balkan Wars of 1912–13 and then World War I led to a decade of uncertainty about the status of the Dodecanese. This was resolved only by the signing of the Lausanne peace treaty in 1923, which ceded the islands to Italy. Though the Italians undertook a certain number of Italianizing policies after their arrival, it was only after 1923 that Italian rule demonstrated its full strength. It is important to note that the annexation of the Dodecanese occurred after Fascism had

triumphed in Italy in 1922. Hence formal Italian rule came as part of the Fascist colonial enterprise.

The Dodecanese islands, now called the Possedimenti Italiani dell'Egeo (Italian Possessions of the Aegean), occupied a place in Italian colonialism that put their inhabitants closest in status to those of the metropole. They were granted a lesser form of Italian citizenship in return for the right to keep their religious civil status and courts. They could apply to become full citizens if they gave up this status and, in the case of males, did military service. The overwhelming majority of Greeks, Muslims, and Jews of the islands did not take this step. In fact, Italian rule kept many aspects of the old Ottoman *millet* (officially recognized non-Muslim religious communities) arrangements of communal legitimation and administration intact until 1938.[6]

Initially hesitant about the challenges they faced, the Jews of Rhodes soon adapted to the new reality and came to embrace their new rulers. This stance was reciprocated by the Italians, who remained wary of Greek irredentism that claimed the island for Greece. They were suspicious of Muslim Turks on an island only a few miles off the coast of Turkey who, not being subject to the Greek-Turkish population exchange of 1923, remained in place. Certain elements within the Italian colonial imagination concocted the notion that the Jews, who spoke Ladino—considered by the Italians to be a Romance language—were the most promising vectors of *italianità*, "Italianness," and favored this element of the population over others. The Sephardim of the former Ottoman Empire had already begun, during the preceding decades, to attract the attention of the Italian Foreign Ministry as a potentially useful demographic that it could draw into the Italian orbit in the eastern Mediterranean.[7] This attitude toward Jews characterized the policies of Governor Mario Lago between his arrival in 1922 and his departure in 1936. The rabbinical seminary project emerged in this context.

The Alliance Israélite Universelle had a school for boys and a school for girls that had been operating on the island since the turn of the century, dispensing its distinctive Franco-Jewish education in French.[8] The new Italian administration had not interfered with these schools, which constituted the main educational establishments of the Jewish community, with the exception of encouraging the teaching of Italian as a secondary language. This changed soon after the island became an Italian possession: Lago insisted in 1925 that these schools could not function as before and had to be Italianized,[9] and the Jewish community of Rhodes complied.[10] The Alliance, perceived by Italians to be aligned with French interests in the Levant, could no

longer operate on what was now Italian territory. French was dropped as the language of instruction, to be replaced by Italian. The schools became Italian Jewish establishments. A new Italian Jewish director, Aldo Lattes,[11] arrived in 1925.

Governor Lago was extraordinarily active in his engagement with the Jews of the island and with leading Italian Jewish personalities in the metropole. He was a loyal follower of Mussolini and was certainly part of the Fascist project of remaking Italy. At the same time, he was favorably inclined toward the Jews in the Dodecanese and thought of them as the most reliable indigenous population. In fact, he would praise them for their "patriotic and fascist civism" in a letter written to the president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities in 1936.[12] Recent historiography has considerably revised the perception that antisemitism and racism became part of Fascist ideology and practice only under pressure from Nazi Germany and only in the late 1930s. At the same time, as figures like Lago illustrate, some Fascist leaders and politicians were not antisemites and could even be philosemitic in their overall orientation. And as is well known, many Italian Jews became ardent Fascists. This was for many a logical extension of their patriotism.[13]

Lago's positive attitude toward Jews was conditioned by his conviction about the potential utility of the Jews for the promotion of Italian cultural and economic influence far beyond the borders of Italy. Given the strategic location of Rhodes in the eastern Mediterranean and the presence of a Jewish community there, now under Italian rule, the island emerged as a natural location to launch a new project of Italian cultural propaganda. Forming rabbis imbued with *italianità* by a Rhodian seminary, who would go on to become leaders in the Jewish communities of the Levant suffering from a dearth of "modern" rabbis, appeared to be an ideal way to achieve the goal of orienting these communities toward Italy. The dual task of the seminary, the promotion of *ebraismo* (Judaism) and of *italianità* in the eastern Mediterranean, was emphasized even at the highest level, during a meeting between Mussolini and the head of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities in 1933.[14] Lago concurrently worked to create an Italian university in Rhodes that would achieve the same task for all communities in the Levant in a much larger way, a project that did not come to fruition because of financial problems.

The plan to establish a rabbinical seminary in Rhodes appeared in a memorandum from Aldo Lattes to Mario Lago in mid-1927.[15] Lattes explicitly identified the latent potential of Italy forming rabbis among the Jews of the East, pointing out that the last rabbinical seminary

among the Sephardim, the one in Istanbul, had ceased to exist. He argued that the existing Italian rabbinical seminaries in Italy were not up to the task and identified Rhodes as the perfect location for such an establishment. It is clear that this memorandum emerged in the context of Lago's goal of promoting Rhodes as the fulcrum of his larger vision for the island and was in all likelihood solicited by him. Indeed, later accounts confirm that the seminary was his idea.[16] Lago immediately forwarded this memorandum to Mussolini with his strong support; Mussolini endorsed it, promising 30,000 lire per year to the future establishment.

From the beginning, the project faced challenges in finding funding, an issue that bedeviled the enterprise throughout its existence and that in the end was the principal factor in its demise 10 years after its foundation. The Italian administration, whether in Rome or the local governorate, always made an annual contribution, but the expectation was that the Jewish communities of the Levant would provide subsidies each year. The same was expected from the Jewish community of Italy. Istanbul, Izmir, and Salonica's Jewish communities did make periodic contributions, frequently in the form of stipends and scholarships to rabbinical students who came from these cities. Lago lobbied heavily for the support of David Prato, an Italian Jew who was the chief rabbi of Alexandria until 1936, when he returned to Italy to assume the position of chief rabbi there. Prato was converted to the cause and as a result the wealthy Alexandrian Jewish community made regular contributions to the seminary until Prato's departure from the city.[17] A small number of individual Italian Jewish donors also contributed. Lago was indefatigable in pushing for other fundraising as well, writing regularly to the Italian ambassadors and consuls in the Levant to encourage them to find financial support among local Jewish communities, highlighting the patriotic nature of the enterprise.[18]

Financial assistance from Rhodes's Jewish community was relatively minor. The community did not have many resources, but it nevertheless made regular small donations and subsidized one or two rabbinical students. The main family of notables on the island, the Alhadeffs, initially donated the use of two of their buildings to house the seminary.[19] However, the global economic downturn that started in 1929 made it impossible to put the finances of the institution on a sound footing. Fundraising had to start anew each year and was always precarious.

A much larger issue, with both financial and political implications, was the extreme ambivalence with which the leaders of the Italian Jewish community dealt with the Rhodes seminary project. The

creation of the seminary caught them totally by surprise, and all the evidence suggests that the Italian Jewish leadership was none too keen to have a new institution foisted upon it by the overzealous Lago. Rhodes Jewry was technically part of the official Italian Jewish community after the island became formally Italian in 1923. It came to be considered by the island's new rulers to have a distinctive place in their plans to expand Italian influence abroad, setting it apart from the communities of the metropole. At the time of the founding of the rabbinical seminary in Rhodes, the main rabbinical seminary in Italy was the one in Florence, which moved to Rome in 1932. It was not a flourishing institution at the time, and the new establishment on the island was seen as a threat to it. It is easy to understand this reaction: here was a new seminary being proposed, outside the authority of the established Italian Jewish community, that would ordain rabbis in what was now an Italian possession. The Italian Jewish community would not control this new establishment, and yet it was being asked to support it financially and morally.

The main response of the Italian Jewish leadership, which in 1930 entered a new structure created by the state to become the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, was to try to make the new seminary an institution that would provide entry-level rabbinical instruction. This idea was already in evidence in 1928.[20] Graduates would occupy lower-level religious positions, and a select few would go on to further study in Italian rabbinical seminaries. Lago had to scramble to convince community leaders of the metropole that this was not an acceptable solution because the special vocation of the new establishment was to train rabbis for the Sephardi communities of the Levant, a task that could only be undertaken in a Levantine Jewish community such as Rhodes. The union's leadership was caught in the unenviable position of appearing to oppose a patriotic enterprise presented to it by the state. Lago maintained adamantly that it was the community's "duty" to help,[21] and Mussolini himself stressed the importance of the seminary in a meeting with the union. The union yielded and promised to support the new institution in any way it could, but it is clear that it never quite accepted the seminary and was frequently remiss in fulfilling its promise to send a financial subsidy each year. Lago and members of the administrative council of the seminary complained regularly about the lack of real support by the union all the way up to the end of the establishment in 1938.

Italian aims in East Africa in the mid-1930s appeared for a while to improve the seminary's prospects. The Italian colonial imaginary had conceived of Sephardi Jews around the eastern Mediterranean

basin as potential allies and came to see the Jews of Rhodes as loyal subjects. It did not take long for the Beta Israel Jews (known then as Falashas) of the newly conquered Ethiopia (1936) to be seen in the same light.[22] These Jews could be useful to imperial Italy. Soon there were plans afoot to create an Italian Jewish school in Gondar, in northwestern Ethiopia, where the Beta Israel were concentrated.[23] The Rhodes seminary could be used to teach the Beta Israel "pure Judaism" and "Italian civilization"[24] by training new teachers and eventually even rabbis among them who would come to study at Rhodes and then return to Ethiopia to further this mission. Lago took the lead again, proposing the project to the Foreign Ministry in Rome in July 1936. He stressed that the seminary in Rhodes was the perfect place to form "teachers of Italian language and education and of oriental mentality perfectly in line with the current conditions of life of those backward people."[25] In fact, one Ethiopian Jew did arrive in Rhodes in 1937 as part of this project, subsidized by a scholarship from the Ministry of Italian Africa. His stay was cut short by the closure of the seminary a year later.[26]

This new colonial mission appeared to be favored by the union in Rome and also by the local administrative committee of the seminary in Rhodes. Intense patriotic colonialist zeal among the Jews of Italy certainly played a role. The desire to "regenerate" the Jews of Ethiopia was another late iteration of projects to remake eastern Jewish communities undertaken by European Jewry ever since the creation of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in 1860.[27] It reflected the general sentiment among the leadership of European Jewry that Jews outside the West were not civilized and had to be transformed. This new Ethiopian mission strengthened the rationale for the existence of the seminary and for its funding, promising to solve the longstanding financial problems faced by the institution. In the end, however, it was all to come to naught. As we will see below, a confluence of new developments led to the abrupt closure of the establishment in 1938.

A directing committee composed of Rhodes's Jewish leaders acted as the oversight body for the seminary's day-to-day activities on the island. The founding statutes of 1928 called for a committee of at least three permanent members: the president of the community, a representative of the government of Jewish origin, and another from the communal administration. Two names, Hizkia Franco and Vitalis Strumza, recur with great regularity on this committee and in the life of the institution throughout its existence.

Hizkia Franco was the president of the Jewish community of Rhodes for at least three terms during the interwar period. Born in Rhodes

and educated in Asia Minor, he had been active in the Ladino Jewish press and became the president of the Jewish community of Izmir during World War I. He returned to Rhodes in 1920 and continued his work as a journalist there, most notably as the editor of the Turkish newspaper *Selam* and as a regular contributor to Ladino newspapers in Turkey.[28] He was best known as the author of one of the first accounts of the Holocaust in Rhodes, which he published in 1952.[29] Franco took a leading role in the affairs of the seminary and worked closely with both Lago and Strumza to raise funds for it.

Vitalis Strumza was the Jewish representative of the government on the seminary administrative committee for its entire existence. In fact, he played arguably the most significant role, seeing to it that Lago's aims were fulfilled and acting in tandem with him in fundraising in Rhodes and abroad[30] and in hiring personnel. Oversight of the seminary was only a part of Strumza's activities on the island. He also occupied a formal position in the civil service, acting as liaison between the governor and the Jewish community on the island. A Salonican Jew by birth, he had had a distinguished career in the Ottoman bureaucracy in the European part of the empire. He was asked to come to the island in 1920 by then-governor Felice Maissa, with whom he had worked closely before the Balkan Wars on the International Commission for Financial Reform for the Ottoman provinces of Salonica, Monastir, and Kosovo. He joined the Italian administration of the island when he arrived,[31] and he was ubiquitous in the Jewish affairs of Rhodes.[32]

One of the most important challenges that Strumza faced during his years overseeing the seminary was the difficult task of hiring the director and teaching staff. Several matters had to be dealt with. The Italian state preferred that personnel have Italian citizenship with the right educational qualifications and be in good political standing. The latter meant that employees would ideally be members of the Fascist Party or at least not be associated with groups and movements opposed to the regime. At least two candidates for teaching positions during the years of the seminary's existence were eliminated because they were found not to be in good political standing. The number of metropolitan Italian Jews with rabbinical training who could become directors of the establishment was also very limited. In the end this issue contributed significantly to the decision to shutter the seminary after a decade of existence.

In spite of the desideratum of Italian citizenship, a steady supply of non-Italians arrived over the years and occupied several teaching positions at the seminary. Aldo Lattes, who had served as director since 1925, left the island for better opportunities in Italy in 1928.

The position of director of the institution was filled in 1929 by Isidore Kahan. It is unclear whether the latter was an Italian citizen. A Hungarian Jew by birth, he was educated in the yeshivot of Bratislava (Pressburg) and Frankfurt, obtained a doctorate in law from the University of Zurich, and was serving as the rabbi of the small Jewish community of Gorizia, north of Venice, when he was recruited to Rhodes. In addition to serving as the principal administrator of the seminary, he also taught Talmud and Hebrew language and literature there. He left Rhodes in 1932, when his contract was not renewed, for reasons that remain unclear.[33]

Simon Marcus, born in Poland and with a Ph.D. from the University of Prague, had been teaching at a Jewish school in Sofia when he was hired in 1930 to teach philosophy; eventually he would also teach Hebrew language and literature.[34] He taught at the seminary until 1936 and went on to contribute to the history of the various Jewish communities of the Levant by publishing numerous articles during the following decades.

Among the teaching staff of the rabbinical seminary, Riccardo Pacifici looms the largest in the historical record. He arrived as a teacher there in 1930, becoming director in 1932 after Kahan's departure. Even today, Pacifici is one of the most revered figures among Italian Jews. He was to perish at Auschwitz in 1943 after selfless service to the Jewish community of Genoa, serving as chief rabbi during its darkest years. He received his rabbinical ordination in Florence and was the deputy chief rabbi of Venice before coming to Rhodes. He became Lago's principal interlocutor on all matters related to the seminary, and it was during his tenure that the seminary's curriculum saw its final iteration. Toward the end of 1935, the prospect that he might become the Jewish chaplain of the Italian army in Ethiopia emerged. Lago did everything in his power to nip this possibility in the bud.[35] However, it is clear that the directorship of the seminary was no longer satisfactory to Pacifici, as he was by then looking for other professional opportunities. Reuven Israel, the chief rabbi of Rhodes, had not been replaced after his death in 1932, and Pacifici was filling that void. He became the president of the rabbinical tribunal and had also become the de facto religious leader of the community as acting chief rabbi. However, the possibility that he would become chief rabbi of Rhodes in 1936 came to naught, the result of opposition by the community. Pacifici left to become the chief rabbi of Genoa in the same year.[36]

A long search for his replacement ended with the selection of Isaiah Sonne as acting director. Sonne was already a major Judaica

scholar and would continue to have a distinguished career as a scholar and later as a professor at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Born in Poland, he had received his rabbinical ordination from the seminary in Florence and had taught at the same institution. However, he was not an Italian citizen, and the passage of antisemitic racial legislation in Italy in 1938 meant that he had to leave his position at the Rhodes seminary only two years after his appointment.[37] The same fate awaited Marcus Breger, the seminary's Romanian-born and Breslau- and Berlin-educated teacher of Talmud who had replaced Isidore Kahan in 1932.[38]

The absence of Sephardim among the teaching staff of the seminary speaks volumes. Very few Sephardim in the early twentieth century had obtained the skills and credentials to teach in modern rabbinical seminaries. There was no established tradition in Ottoman and post-Ottoman lands for the education of rabbis in such institutions. In fact, the Rhodes seminary had emerged with its mission to form modern rabbis precisely as a response to this lacuna. That the Italian state wanted to exploit this situation to its advantage should not hide the fact that there was indeed a dearth of Sephardi rabbis trained professionally in modern seminaries, and it is therefore not surprising that they were not represented among the principal teaching staff of the Rhodes institution.

The curriculum of the Rhodes rabbinical seminary followed the structure in place in Italian seminaries.[39] Initially there were three four-year levels, constituting a cycle of twelve years: preparatory, middle, and advanced. This was reduced to three years each in 1931, when the initial program was revised.[40] The age of admission for students was a minimum of 13 and a maximum of 17. Students admitted to the preparatory level had to have some knowledge of Hebrew and continued to study the language after admission. In this level, they also studied selections from the Hebrew Bible, Jewish history, prayers, laws and customs, and the rules of ritual slaughter (*shehitah)* of animals. They also studied mathematics, general history, geography, sciences, accounting, Italian, and French and could take Turkish, Greek, or Arabic as a language elective.

Students could enter the intermediate level upon passing examinations that demonstrated their knowledge of the material taught in the preparatory one. Here the students were introduced to selections from the Mishnah and the Talmud, with medieval and modern commentaries as well as the laws of Jewish religious practice. They also studied ancient and modern Hebrew literature, composition and grammar, and postbiblical Jewish history and elements of biblical exegesis. They

could receive training as cantors and as ritual slaughterers in addition. The same secular subjects offered in the preparatory level continued in the intermediate one and now followed the program of the baccalaureate of Italian secondary schools. Upon graduating from this level, students received diplomas as Hebrew teachers, cantors, and ritual slaughterers.

The advanced level admitted only students who could demonstrate mastery of the material taught in the intermediate level. The advanced curriculum covered the Hebrew Bible in its entirety and trained students in various aspects of Jewish religious law. It also taught modern Hebrew literature, grammar and syntax, commentaries, religious philosophy, and predication. Students were expected to continue in a university to study a secular subject in depth at the doctoral level.[41] This proved to be difficult in practice, with only one student able to audit courses at the University of Rome.

There is nothing surprising about this curriculum in terms of its offerings. It combined modern scholarship in Jewish topics with a focus on the traditional, as was befitting for an institution aiming to train rabbis for the overwhelmingly traditional Sephardi world. The model was that of the educated Italian rabbi in the metropole. No real reform movement had emerged in Italy, and the rabbinate remained nominally Orthodox. Secular subjects received considerable attention in the institution, especially Italian language and literature. The exposure of students to the Italian culture and "spirit" was undertaken with great attention to the larger cultural and political aims of the foundation of the institution. Riccardo Pacifici had been brought to the seminary to teach these subjects and continued to do so after he became director, an indication of their importance.

The seminary started with five students from Izmir and three from Rhodes in 1928.[42] In the 1928–29 academic year, there were 16 students, thanks to the addition of arrivals from Bulgaria (Burgaz and Sofia), Turkey (Istanbul), and Egypt (Alexandria).[43] The number of students would fluctuate between 15 and 23, almost always originating from Sephardi localities. Most students were in classes in the preparatory and intermediate levels.[44] The arrival of five more students from Egypt in 1932, thanks to the successful recruitment campaign of Vitalis Strumza and the devoted support of the chief rabbi of Alexandria, David Prato, led to the hiring of a teacher of Arabic.[45] However, the numbers from Egypt dwindled after the departure of Prato for Rome in 1936. The students were supported by scholarships provided by the communities from which they hailed and by donations from

individual benefactors and charitable societies in the various Jewish centers of the Levant.

By 1936, Mario Lago could boast of the seminary's success by pointing to the 20 alumni of the seminary who had come from nine different countries, among whom were seven graduates of the intermediate level serving as "minor rabbis" (that is, as teachers of Hebrew and cantors). Two had become full rabbis, having graduated from the advanced level. A separate note from Strumza identified these nine graduates. Michele Albagli, one of the full rabbis, had become president of the rabbinical tribunal of Rhodes and was employed as cantor and Hebrew teacher there. The other full rabbi, Aron Angel, was continuing his studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The other graduates who had become Hebrew teachers and cantors served in these professions in Novo Zagora (Bulgaria), Montevideo (Uruguay), Milan, Istanbul, Albertville (Belgian Congo), and Benghazi (Libya).[46] By the end of the 1935–36 academic year, another full rabbi had graduated and left for Sarajevo. Two others graduated from the intermediate level, one going to serve as a Hebrew teacher in Alexandria and the other, who had obtained the diploma of cantor, to serve as the rabbi of Elizabethville, in the Belgian Congo.[47] These far-flung destinations illustrate the spread of the Sephardi diaspora in the modern period—a diaspora that was in dire need of rabbis to serve its communities.

In the last year of the seminary (1937–38), there were a total of 21 students registered, nine from Rhodes, three from Turkey, four from Egypt, two from Palestine, one from Yugoslavia, and one from Ethiopia. Nine of these were in the preparatory classes, and eight were in the intermediate ones.[48] Four had obtained teaching diplomas, and one had obtained the diploma of a full rabbi.

There are no definitive statistics for the total number of students who graduated with a diploma from the seminary by the end of its existence in 1938. An examination of the annual reports over the 10-year period of the institution's existence suggests that there were a total of 15–20 such graduates, with three having finished the superior level and obtained the diploma of full rabbi.

The seminary was closed by Cesare Maria Governor de Vecchi in August 1938.[49] De Vecchi, who had replaced Lago in 1936, was a hardline Fascist, part of the quadrumvir whose March on Rome in 1922 had brought the Fascist movement to power in Italy. Many have assumed that it was his ideological orientation that led to the closure of the institution. However, the evidence shows that he had wanted to

continue the institution, had propagandized on its behalf for funds, and valued it for its potential mission to spread Italian influence in the Levant.[50] Indeed, he had been keen to underline the respect of Italy's Fascist leaders for religion, distinguishing it from France, which he portrayed as a force for militant secularism. He asked for funds for the establishment from various sources throughout 1937, complaining about the lack of support from the organized Italian Jewish community.[51] He was also keen to find a new director who was an Italian citizen. Lack of success in these areas and a growing deficit led him to make the decision to close the seminary, which he announced to the Italian foreign minister, Galeazzo Ciano, in a telegram on August 25, 1938.[52]

It is of course quite clear that growing antisemitism in Italy at the time provides an important context for the demise of the institution. Ciano had already alerted de Vecchi in the summer of 1938 that the task of the seminary would become very difficult because of looming legislation against Jews.[53] And indeed, this legislation, which began to be introduced in September 1938, stipulated among the many restrictions on Jews the expulsion of foreign Jews from Italian territory, resulting in the departure of core teaching staff at the institution, such as Sonne and Breger, who were not Italian citizens. The decision to close the seminary was made a few days before the passage of the first antisemitic legislation.

How is one to evaluate the impact of the seminary's activities? Its short-lived existence meant that it had only modest success in achieving its goal to train a new rabbinical class for the Sephardi communities of the Levant. It produced only three full rabbis. Most of the students who graduated stopped at the end of the intermediate level and found employment as teachers and cantors in various Jewish communities. Paradoxically, it was one among these who would have the most notable career: David Asseo, who had arrived from Istanbul as a student when the institution first opened[54] and graduated in 1932[55] without entering the superior level for rabbinical instruction, went on to become chief rabbi of Turkey years later.

As for the founders' mission to make the institution a potent force for the spread of Italian influence among the Jewish communities of the Levant, it is clear that this remained only a dream. Fascist Italy simply did not have the power of attraction that France had exercised over these communities in the preceding half-century. The new impulse was too weak, too diffuse, and indeed too short to have much of an impact. The various actors used each other. Italian state officials wanted the Jews to become agents of Italian influence. The

Jewish leadership in Rhodes went along with this project as part of the age-old Jewish diasporic impulse to render itself useful to the ruling power in order to secure its existence. This is not to downplay whatever commitment may have emerged among Rhodes's Jews to the new ideologies of Italian colonialism. But making oneself useful and hence valorized was certainly an important factor. The same was true for the Italian Jewish leadership in the metropole. Caught by surprise by a project that came seemingly out of nowhere, from the Italian governor of a newly acquired Italian possession, Italy's Jewish community dragged its feet and went along without any enthusiasm. In the end, the quixotic nature of the enterprise doomed it to failure at a time of darkening skies for European Jewry.

Like its Istanbul counterpart, which had closed in 1917, the Rhodes rabbinical seminary suffered from inadequate support, financial and otherwise. The subsidies from the Jewish community of Italy and from the communities of the Levant were anemic and intermittent. The seminary could never have survived without the financial contributions of the local governor and the Italian state. As had happened with the Istanbul seminary, the majority of its graduates went on to become teachers of Hebrew. The ideological and colonial context of the institution casts an eerie light on its existence. In the end, its history is not only part of the tragic history of Jews under Fascism and Italian colonialism. It is also that of the decline of the Sephardi rabbinical class in modern times. In this respect, this is also part of the larger story of the end of the Levantine Sephardi world.

Notes

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1 The main work on the seminary is Luca Pignataro, "Il Collegio Rabbinico di Rodi," *Nuova Storia Contemporanea* 16, no. 1 (2012): 49–86.

2 I use the term *Sephardi* in this article to refer to the Judeo-Spanish communities of the Ottoman and former Ottoman Empire. I use the term *Levant* in its old expansive sense to refer to the Ottoman Balkan and eastern Mediterranean littoral and its hinterland.

3 For an overview, see Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th–20th Centuries* (Berkeley, 2000).

4 Ibid., 65–158. For the Greek case where this was most acute, see Devin Naar, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece* (Stanford, 2016).

5 See Aron Rodrigue, "The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Attempt to Reform Jewish Religious and Rabbinical Instruction in Turkey," in *L"Alliance" dans les communautés du bassin méditerranéen à la fin du 19ème siècle et son influence sur la situation sociale et culturelle*, ed. Simon Schwarzfuchs (Jerusalem, 1987), liii–lxx.

6 The most thorough study of Italian rule of the Dodecanese islands is Luca Pignataro, *Il Dodecaneso Italiano, 1912–1947,* 2 vols. (Chieti, 2011–13). For a survey of the history of the Jewish community of Rhodes, see Aron Rodrigue, "Rhodos," in *Enzyklopedie Jüdischer Geschichte und Kultur,* ed. Dan Diner, 7 vols. (Leipzig, 2014), 5: 215–18. For the varieties of Italian colonial citizenship, see Sabina Donati, *A Political History of National Citizenship and Identity in Italy, 1861–1959* (Stanford, 2013).

7 See Sergio Minerbi, "Ha-pe'ilut ha-diplomatit italkit be-kerev ha-yehudim ha-sefardiim, 1915–1929," *Pe'amim* 12 (1982): 59–85.

8 For a survey of the work of this organization, see Aron Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims: Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition* (Seattle, 2003).

9 Mario Lago to Foreign Ministry, telegram, June 15, 1925, 385P, Genika Archeia tou Kratous Nomou Dodekanisou, Rhodes (hereafter GAK DOD).

10 Vittorio Alhadeff, letter to unknown recipient, Apr. 8, 1925, 484P 2 1926, GAK DOD.

11 See the information about Aldo Lattes in Mario Lago to Director of Foreign Schools, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 23, 1928, 753P, GAK DOD. This letter, written at the time of Lattes's departure, indicates that he was a graduate of the University of Pisa, was an ordained rabbi, and had taught at the Istituto Tecnico in Alexandria in Egypt. He was the nephew of Dante Lattes, the noted Italian Zionist leader, and would be appointed chief rabbi of Libya in 1937.

12 Mario Lago to President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, Mar. 13 1936, Fondo 'Attività dell' Unione delle Comunità Israelitiche Italiane dal 1934' (hereafter FAUCII), b. 41A, f. 41A-6, sf. 4114, Archivio Storico, Centro Bibliografico–Unione delle Comunità Ebraiche Italiane, Rome, Italy (hereafter AS-UCEI).

13 For the latest study of the Jews of Italy and Fascism, see Shira Klein, *Italy's Jews from Emancipation to Fascism* (Cambridge, Engl., 2018).

14 Memorandum, January 1933, FAUCII 1933, b. 8, f. 26, sf. 5A/7,12 "varie," AS-UCEI.

15 Aldo Lattes to Mario Lago, memorandum, June 12, 1927, 707P, Lattes, GAK DOD, also discussed in Pignataro, "Il Collegio Rabbinico," 53.

16 "Ordine del giorno Alhadeff per il Collegio di Rodi," FAUCII 1933, b. 8, f. 26, sf. 5A/7,8 – I 5A/6,8A, AS-UCEI.

17 David Prato returned to Italy in 1936 to become the chief rabbi.
18 Pignataro, "Il Collegio Rabbinico," 56.
19 Annual report, 1935–36, IT/IT 1192, Central Archives of the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem, Israel (hereafter CAHJP).
20 Pignataro, "Il Collegio Rabbinico," 54.
21 Mario Lago to Felice Ravenna, Aug. 12, 1934, IT/IT 1192, CAHJP.
22 For an overview of the history of the Beta Israel, see Lisa Anteby-Yemini, *Les Juifs d'Ethiopie: De Gondar à la Terre promise* (Paris, 2018).
23 Guidi Levi, Vice President of the Union of Jewish Communities in Rome, to Vitalis Strumza, July 25, 1937, IT/IT 1192, CAHJP.
24 See the several memoranda from 1936 to 1937 in FAUCII 1934, b. 41A, f. 41A-6, sf. 4116, AS-UCEI, and FAUCII 1934, b. 41A, f. 41A-6, sf. 4111, AS-UCEI; and report, Oct. 10, 1937, 707, 1936–37, GAK DOD.
25 Mario Lago to Foreign Minister, July 7, 1936, folder 559, GAK DOD.
26 Report, Oct. 10, 1937.
27 For a study of this "regeneration" effort as it was applied to Ethiopian Jews, see the study of one of its leading proponents, Emanuela Trevisan, *Jacques Faitlovich and the Jews of Ethiopia* (London, 2007).
28 For the newspaper *Selam*, see Meryem Orakçı, *Rodos Müslümanları: Selam Gazetesi 1926–1936* (Istanbul, 2012).
29 Hizkia Franco, *Les martyrs Juifs de Rhodes et de Kos* (Elisabethville, 1952). For more information on Hizkia Franco, see David Bunis, "The Anti-Castilianist Credo of Judezmo Journalist Hizkia Franco (1875–1953)," *eHumanista* 20 (2012): 63–97.
30 He undertook a major fundraising trip to Egypt in 1932, which met with some success. See letters dated Nov. 6 and Dec. 9, 1932, 1175 P 1932, GAK DOD.
31 Vitalis Strumza to Cesare Maria de Vecchi, Sept. 2, 1928, P/177/14b, CAHJP. On Strumza's career in the Ottoman civil service, see Sezai Balci and Ahmet Yadi, *Osmanlı Bürokrasisinde Yahudiler* (Istanbul, 2013), 194–95.
32 Biographical information on Strumza can also be found in the newly discovered Italian police archives in Rhodes, 1.1.136, 1933, Carabinieri Reali, Police Archives (hereafter CCRR), GAK DOD.
33 *Il Collegio Rabbinico di Rodi,* undated printed booklet, p. 36, in IT/IT 755, CAHJP. See also report, sf. Kahan Isidoro, FAUCII 1933, b. 17, f. 71, AS-UCEI; Ty Alhadeff, "The Tale of Sephardic Seattle's Refugee Rabbi," Stroum Center for Jewish Studies, University of Washington, Feb. 11, 2016, https://jewishstudies.washington.edu/digital-sephardic-treasures/seattle-refugee-rabbi/; "Isidore Kahn (Kahan)," Rabbini Italiani, accessed Aug. 24, 2018, http://www.rabbini.it/isidore-kahn-kahan/; and Angelo Mordechai Piattelli, "Repertorio biografico dei rabbini d'Italia dal 1861 al 2015," accessed Aug. 24, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/33007400/repertorio_biografico_dei_rabbini_ditalia_dal_1861_al_2015._Seconda_edizione_rivista_e_aggiornata.

34 Report on the third year of the seminary, Oct. 13, 1930, 905P, III.G.24, GAK DOD; excerpt from article in *Haaretz*, Dec. 5, 1930, 905P, III.G.24, GAK DOD; note, Nov. 22, 1932, 1175P, GAK DOD.

35 See the several letters from Mario Lago, Oct.–Nov. 1935, Fondo Serie Affari Politici (1931–45), Dodecanneso, b. 10, f. 6, Archivio Storico-Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome, Italy.

36 See the several letters from Mario Lago to the Foreign Ministry in Rome and to David Prato, Mar.–May 1936, 608, folder 293, GAK DOD; unsigned and undated biographical note on Riccardo Pacifici, written after World War II, Serie II-VS, class. 1.2, b.17, f. 588, Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea–Archivio, Milan, Italy (hereafter CDEC).

37 Piattelli, "Repertorio biografico." See also folder on Sonne, 1.2.966, 1936, CCRR.

38 Piattelli, "Repertorio biografico." See also folder on Breger, 15. PS. 684, 1932, CCRR.

39 See Riccardo di Segni, "I programmi di studio della Scuola Rabbinica Italiana, 1829–1999," *Rassegna di Mensile di Israel* 55, no. 3 (1998): 15–40.

40 Report, Sept. 23, 1931, 1065 P, GAK DOD; see also report, sf. Kahan Isidoro.

41 For the curriculum, see "Collegio Rabbinico Convitto di Rodi, Programi di Studio," unsigned and undated print brochure, most likely from 1929, FAUCII 1933, b. 25, f. 99, AS-UCEI, also in TR 12 101, CAHJP. See also "Collegio Rabbinico di Rodi," print brochure, 1936, S1.2.2., S1.2.2.3., b. 1, f. "Rodi," CDEC.

42 Letter from the communal committee established to support the seminary, Jan. 12, 1928, 707 P, GAK DOD.

43 Mario Lago, second-year report, Nov. 11, 1929, 785 P, GAK DOD.

44 Annual report, 1931–32, 1175 P, GAK DOD; annual report, 1932–33, 1349 P, GAK DOD.

45 Annual report, 1932–33.

46 Mario Lago to Felice Ravenna, Mar. 13, 1938, 608, folder 793, GAK DOD; see also Vitalis Strumza, note, Mar. 13, 1938, 608, folder 793, GAK DOD.

47 Annual report, 1935–36, 680, folder 793, GAK DOD.

48 Annual report, 1937–38, dated Oct. 1, 1937, 559, GAK DOD.

49 Cesare Maria de Vecchi, telegram, Aug. 25, 1938, IT, Colonie 14, R8/I-35, 2F, CAHJP, 10.

50 For a discussion of de Vecchi's role in the closing of the seminary, see Pignataro, "Il Collegio Rabbinico," 78–80.

51 Vitalis Strumza to David Prato, Apr.–Aug. 1937, P 177/149, CAHJP.

52 Cesare Maria de Vecchi to Galeazzo Ciano, telegram, Aug. 25, 1938, IT/Colonie, R8/I-35, 2F, CAHJP.

53 Pignataro, "Il Collegio Rabbinico," 78.

54 Italian Consulate, Istanbul, June 15, 1928, 707 P, GAK DOD, mentions him among three students from Istanbul at the seminary.
55 Annual report, 1932–33.

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