

Exiled Libyan Jews look with hope toward homeland

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ROME (RNS) The Jews of old wandered the wilderness for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. For the exiled Jews of Libya, it's already been 44.

The struggle to reopen a synagogue in Libya, 44 years after the forced departure of the country's last Jews, is emerging as a high-profile test of the new Libyan government's commitment to freedom in the post-Moammar Gadhafi era.

On Sunday (Oct. 2), David Gerbi, a Libyan Jew who immigrated to Rome in 1967 at age 12, used a sledgehammer to enter the closed Dar Bishi synagogue in Tripoli. Two Muslim clerics lent their support, and some neighborhood residents offered help with cleanup.

But when Gerbi returned on Monday, he found the door locked and was told to stay away or risk losing his life.

"If they want to prove that it's different from Gadhafi ... they need to do the opposite," a tearful Gerbi told reporters after being turned away.

Meanwhile in Rome, leaders in the Italian-Libyan Jewish exile community watch such developments with a mix of apprehension and

cautious optimism. Post-Gadhafi Libya, they hope, might ultimately prove itself more tolerant and just than the land they left.

The Jewish presence in Libya dates back more than 2,000 years; at the end of World War II, the country's Jewish population still numbered more than 40,000. But their environment grew increasingly inhospitable over the following two decades, with outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence linked to conflicts between the new State of Israel and its Muslim-majority neighbors.

Libyan Jews began to emigrate, most of them to Israel; by 1967 there were only about 6,000 Jews left in the country, almost all of them in the capital city of Tripoli.

After Israel won the Six-Day War against Egypt, Jordan and Syria in June 1967, the reaction in Tripoli finally made the Jews' situation intolerable.

"They killed two entire families, took them out of their houses, shot them with machine guns," said Shalom Tesciuba, president of the Welfare Committee of the Jews of Libya.

Mobs injured more than 200 other Jews, burned synagogues and looted Jewish shops, while the police made it clear that they would offer no protection.

All of Libya's remaining Jews left shortly thereafter. Because the Libyan government blocked direct access to Israel, most refugees fled to Italy. With Italian schools a legacy of Italy's colonial presence in Libya from 1912 to 1947, the refugees were familiar with their new country's language and culture. The Dar Bishi synagogue, Tesciuba noted,

had been modeled on the Great Synagogue of Rome.

Almost all of the "Tripolitani" settled in Rome, where Tesciuba, 77, now serves as one of the rabbis at the Beth-El Synagogue.

He was part of a delegation of Italian-Libyan Jews that was invited to Tripoli in 2004 by the Gadhafi regime to discuss possible compensation for the money and property they had left behind.

The visitors were treated with shows of the "greatest respect," Tesciuba recalled, including lodging in a luxury hotel and personal bodyguards. One government official asked why the Jews had ever left Libya.

"We hadn't left," Tesciuba replied. "They'd thrown us out."

Gadhafi, who came to power two years after the last Jews left the country, made his 2004 overture amid a wider campaign for better relations with the West, which also included renouncing weapons of mass destruction. But the negotiations never led to any concrete agreement.

Libya's new ruling power, the National Transitional Council, reached out to Tesciuba's committee during the civil war against Gadhafi, seeking the Jewish group's endorsement as the NTC pursued American support.

Some NTC representatives have privately promised to compensate the Jews for their losses, said another committee member, Elio Raccah, 59, adding that those promises have been "fluid, nebulous, (and) ambiguous," particularly with regard to timing.

The post-Gadhafi regime has also offered help with reconstructing the Dar Bishi synagogue, Raccah said. In 1967, Libya had a total of 78 synagogues, 44 of them in Tripoli. Most were later reduced to rubble, and three in Tripoli were converted into mosques.

The welfare committee decided that any effort to restore Dar Bishi would be "premature," Raccah said, until they could determine whether "popular feeling" in Tripoli was still hostile to the Jews.

In a press conference on Monday, the NTC's head Mustafa Abdul-Jalil also said the synagogue question was "premature and we have not decided anything in this regard."

Even as the situation in Libya remains unsettled, the exiles clearly retain strong emotional ties to their homeland. Tesciuba says his nostalgia grows particularly acute this time of year during the Jewish High Holy Days.

"I remember those beautiful moments when we made the unleavened bread at home, the evening of Rosh Hashanah, when there was a table four meters long with every sort of good thing: sweets, dates, pomegranates," he said.

After more than four decades in Italy, however, with children and grandchildren who do not speak Arabic, the exiled leader believes few Libyan Jews would seriously consider moving back.

But he said he and many others would be eager to return on a personal pilgrimage. "If tomorrow it becomes tranquil," Tesciuba said, "I guarantee that a thousand people will go every month."