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Qaddafi in Rome: Libyan Jews seek restitution

THURSDAY, 18 JUNE 2009 09:58 | LISA PALMIERI-BILLIG, JERUSALEM POST

ROME — Before leaving Rome on Saturday, June 13, Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi met with about 300 Italian expatriates expelled from his country in 1970, and an unofficial group of five Jews of Libyan origin.

The official Libyan Jewish representatives had turned down Qaddafi's invitation for a Saturday meeting because "we cannot bow our heads and desecrate the Sabbath," Shalom Teshuba, vice president of the Rome Jewish community, stated in a note delivered to Qaddafi.

Teshuba's letter reviewed a century of Libyan Jewish history and included a request for talks aimed at restitution and restoration of family and religious heirlooms confiscated after the massacres and expulsions in 1967.

The five unofficial Jewish representatives who walked to the meeting included peace activist and Jungian psychoanalyst David Gerbi.

Clothed in the traditional white cassock, cap and pin-striped gilet typical in pre-'67 Libyan Jewry and wearing a Magen David around his neck, Gerbi asked Qaddafi to permit the restoration of the Sia Dar Bisni Synagogue in Tripoli, for which he had personally gathered funds.

The community left behind over 47 synagogues, several of historic and religious significance.

He also asked that six mezuzot he had brought to Libya for this purpose in 2007, when he was arrested and bereft of his belongings, be returned to him.

Both the Italian Catholic and Jewish guests were invited to speak publicly, and were greeted individually by Qaddafi.

The Libyan leader recalled the late Raffaele Fella, a former president of the World Organization of Libya Jews. When told of his death, Qaddafi said, "Mercy to his soul," and praised Fella's attempts at mediation.

He added, however, that these attempts had brought no results because "he tied the Jewish question to that of Israel."

A silver sculpture of two hands clasping in front of a mountain was presented to Qaddafi by the Italian Libyan refugees, who were mostly dressed in the green of the Libyan revolution. A gift from Libyan Jewish refugees was also given.

Qaddafi reiterated his invitation to all to come back to Libya, and again stressed that priority would be given to Italian enterprises over other nationalities.

The issue of restitution for Jews who fled from Arab lands will be discussed in Rome this week during a meeting of the Justice for Jews from Arab Countries organization.

The main speakers are former Canadian justice minister Irwin Cotler and Prof. David Meghnagi, former vice president of the Italian Jewish community and chairman of Rome University's Holocaust education master's program.



Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, Libyan president

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