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Pontremoli's Cry: Writing History and Scale into Personhood¹

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On 25 September 1969, Moise Pontremoli went in for surgery in Rome. The 73-year-old, born in Izmir, displaced to Alexandria and finally to Rome, quickly scribbled a final testament in case the procedure did not go well. He noted that his only wealth was a “compensation” (indennizzo) from the roughly 900 feddans (400 hectares) of garden, agricultural land, a small house, and large agricultural installations in Egypt’s northwestern desert, which “the Egyptian Authorities pillaged [from me] in an act of racial exploitation and genocide against Jewish Italian citizens in violation of international conventions, accords, and laws.”² The roughly 816,000EGP³ he anticipated, however, came from indictments he had raised against both Egyptian and Italian governments, which had not yet--and still have not--come to fruition. The large sum was to be

¹ This essay has benefited from comments from Pam Ballinger, Naor Ben-Yehoyada, Kim Bowes, Dario Gaggio, Elizabeth Leake, Erik Mueggler, James A. Palmer, and Maria Robles, Aya Sabry, as well as participants in the *Italian Jews in Context* conference held in NY. Research was funded in part by a Fulbright IIE grant and by the Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan. Writing was supported by the American Academy in Rome.

² “...sono stati depredati dalle Autorità Egiziane in applicazione di spoliazioni razziali e genocidio applicati contro i cittadini italiani ebrei, in violazione di Convenzioni, Accordi e Leggi internazionali.”

³ It is worth noting that between 1914 and 1962, the Egyptian Pound was pegged to the British pound sterling.

split five ways between the children and widows of his deceased siblings in London, Israel, and Brazil.⁴ By the mid 1960s, the extended Pontremoli families had all departed from Egypt, along with at least 40,000 other Italian residents. Moise's final testament was as indeterminate as his life. Between his birth in 1896, in Smirne/Izmir, his 54 years of residence in Egypt, and his death in Rome, he saw himself as a pioneer, a wounded patriot, and a persecuted Jew--none excluding the others. In his final, notarized testament, he described himself, one last time, as a "refugee from Egypt (un profugo d'Egitto)." (image 1).

In this essay, I argue that the life and death of Moise Pontremoli illustrate the relations binding personhood to the histories that encompass (and sometimes dismantle) transregional and transnational geo-politics in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is this scalar movement from the micro to the macro (and back again), I contend, that lends "palpability" to the Mediterranean (Ben-Yehoyada and Silverstein, this volume). This argument has two main components. First, Pontremoli anchored his personhood both to the desert landscape of el-Gharbaniyat, Egypt, and to his body, left wounded in the First World War. Notwithstanding his status as a wounded veteran (*mutilato di guerra*), he struggled to transform arid land into what he variably called his 'paradise' and 'the forest of the desert.' Pontremoli fastidiously narrated his sense of personhood through suffering, as though seeking affirmation of where and how he was placed within broader political constellations. Indeed, personhood was at stake inasmuch as these constellations were infused with legal sanctity. This recalls what Collier, Maurer, and Suárez-Navaz (2006: 5, 10) denote as the product of "bourgeois law," which constructs its subjects as both "abstract" individuals "equal to and indistinguishable from other abstract individuals" and yet as "the

⁴ Unione Comunità Ebraiche Italiane (UCEI), Fondo Moise Pontremoli (MP), "successione."

bearer of a unique and natural self.” As a result of this bifurcation, the authors argue, bourgeois law “compels those who come before it to have ‘potentialities’ they want the freedom to express.” This also evokes Marcel Mauss’s classic inquiry on the development of the notion of the self from a masked performance to “a fundamental form of *thought and action* [emphasis mine],” drawing particular attention to the concreteness through which the self moves through the social worlds in which it is embedded (Mauss 1985: 22).

Pontremoli alternated between his abstract individuality and his experience as a unique and natural self by entangling his greening of the desert with his wounded body. As he sought to intervene in the geo-politics of the Mediterranean, I suggest that we can apprehend how the ‘potentialities’ expressed in his thoughts and exhibited in his actions allude to indeterminate historical worlds of social belonging. As is the case with indeterminacy--Victor Turner (1980: 158) has convincingly argued-- Pontremoli saw his life, until its final moment, as one of (unfulfilled) potentiality, or “the possibility of becoming,” always mediated through body and desert.

Second, the materials that recount Pontremoli’s life and death unfold scales of historical process which are collapsed into one individual. Reading these materials as an ethnographer, in this essay I claim that anthropology has much to gain by attending to the historical “knots,” or entanglements, that constitute personhood, particularly in the transimperial and transnational worlds of the twentieth-century Mediterranean.⁵ Most of the evidence that substantiates this

⁵ My use of ‘knots’ here is borrowed from Sarah Green (2014), and ‘entanglements’ --also used by Green--comes mainly from Borutta and Gekas’s description of the “colonial Sea” as a

project comes from one archive, from a collection given to the Italian Jewish Community in Rome by the daughter of Pontremoli's deceased lawyer; others I gathered from archives in Egypt, Italy, Switzerland, England, and Turkey. They include letters, photographs, diplomatic correspondences, newspapers, government and consular documents. Some were discussed further with members of the extended Pontremoli family. While these documents do not offer holistic models, they do work against statically synchronic and deterministically diachronic narratives of historical belonging. Here, I contend that it is the threading together of the stories told in these documents that reveals the limits of holism--the limits of context and description--and demonstrates how locating personhood within history rearranges value in the world.

The texts within these materials recounted stories that pointed in myriad directions. Their details are themselves properties of the social worlds of the characters involved. I see these social worlds as threads, woven into the character of Pontremoli. Here, I invoke notions of fractal and partial personhood described in the work of Roy Wagner (1991) and Marilyn Strathern (1991). As such, one story touches upon and tangles with others. At these points of entanglement, we can understand the commensurability of temporal scales and, moving between them, play what Jacques Revel has called "games of scale."⁶ Pushing this argument further, I would argue that

"maritime space of colonial interactions and entanglements that transcended continental and national boundaries" (Borutta and Gekas 2012: xx).

⁶ For an anthropological understanding of how these categorical identities can work at the temporal scale of the instant/moment, see Katherine Ewing (1990); important ideas regarding the question of continuity and narrative identity instead are discussed in Pierre Bourdieu (1987); see also Gérome Truc (2011) for the idea of "games of scale." I refer to the collection of essays

the vast entanglements recounted in this essay are inconspicuously present on a side street of the now famous Tahrir Square in Downtown Cairo. There, a furniture store once owned by Moise Pontremoli's cousin still bears the appellation 'Pontremoli' on its signage (the store was sequestered in 1956 and nationalized in 1961) (Shawky 2013). Inside, the portrait of his cousin, who himself carries the name of the patriarch of the Pontremoli family, still adorns the wall. (images 2 & 3).

As I will show, Pontremoli's continual narration in relation to political and legal regimes of the Mediterranean moves among familial, national, and regional scales of socio-historical process. It is a "social drama," where, as Turner (1980: 151) reminds us, "false friendship is winnowed from true communality of interests; the limits of consensus are reached and realized; real power emerges from behind the facade of authority." Narrating himself into the desert, into his body, and into the pages of his final testament, Pontremoli draws attention to the limits of law and the perceived failure of his contemporaries to compensate him for what he suffered as a subject of *History*. In a sense, his articulation of this failure is what permits us to bear witness to history; it is what renders the entangled processes that compound past and present visible, and projects them into the future (Caruth 2002: 436).

Origins

carrying the same title, specifically to the introductory chapter, in which Jacque Revel (2006) argues that the variations of scales between social actors and collective events permits the microhistorian to pass from one story to another. See also Mueggler (2011).

Moise Pontremoli, born in 1896, was the son of Celebi, born in 1858, himself the grandson of the patriarch of the family, Raffaele, of whom little remains. At least during the late-nineteenth century, the extended Pontremoli family resided in a town outside of Izmir, Turkey. The earliest record of the family is a “declaration [made by] a consular agent from Manisa (Magnesia)” in 1871.⁷ What is known from the declaration is that the consular agent attested the family’s claim to Italian nationality, and that the head of the family, Raffaele, was provided with Italian passports. This was common practice at the time; and the story of the “declaration” itself is a thread to a history of both nationalist and imperialist origin.

By the late-nineteenth century, a series of bilateral treaties known as the capitulations connected Ottoman rulers to European powers (from *capitula* in Latin, they were also known in Arabic as *al-imtiyāzāt* and in Turkish as *ahdname*). Some of the earliest forms of these treaties date to the eleventh century when, under such treaties, Islamic authorities permitted European merchants (initially from Genoa, Venice, and Marseilles) to travel and trade under the jurisdiction of their respective consular authorities in territories under Islamic rule. Merchants were thus exempted from the local Islamic courts. Both sides held that, by permitting greater mobility, wealth would flow into their empires. The treaties increased in complexity through the centuries, but never disappeared (Barakat 1950; Brinton 1968: 3).⁸ In 1534, French subjects were given commercial *and* residential rights under French jurisdiction in all Ottoman territories (Angell 1901: 256). With the further consolidation of European nation-states into the nineteenth

⁷ Archivio Cancelleria Consolare del Cairo (ACCC), Nessim Pontremoli di Behor - 1914.

⁸For further historical analysis of the capitulations and their increasingly complexity - and in Turkey eventual abolition - see Ahmad (2002).

century, the 1534 treaty became the prototype for later capitulations between Western powers and the Porte, granting “extraterritorial” privileges to European subjects. Initially intended to ensure European consuls and merchants, the treaties’ protective powers spread to the national communities living under the authority of their consuls.

Following Italian unification, the capitulations constituted one of the “citizenship tools” used in Italy’s foreign policy between 1870 and 1914, which aimed at cultural and commercial penetration of Mediterranean port cities (most shores were already claimed by the British and French). The Italian state practiced “small naturalization (*la piccola naturalizzazione*)” by granting protected status to many Sephardic Jewish subjects--such as the Pontremolis--who had moved to the region during and after the time of the maritime republics. By creating “protected groups” (*protégés*) whose commercial activities and mobility was secured by Italian authorities, the Italian state hoped to gain access to broad merchant networks that transcended national and imperial boundaries (Donati 2013: 134-136). The idea, further, was to foster national enclaves in the corners of a vast territory that was largely held by Italy’s imperial rivals.

When declaring one’s status as protected, a claim to Italian origin--even if specious--was required. Pontremoli’s legal residence was registered as Torino. He and other members of his extended family would later use this genealogical origin as evidence of their Italian-ness (*italianità*), and as a feature distinguishing their own lineage from other Italian protégés holding legal residence in Livorno. Many of the Italian protégés had been automatically registered as originating in Livorno, a city that was home to historically significant Sephardic and Italian Jewish communities.⁹ This was often the case whether or not evidence could be provided to

⁹ For example, see the work of Francesca Trivellato (2009).

support the claim that distant relations connected the families to the city--this thread will weave back into the story during the 1950s.

With the outbreak of the Italo-Turkish war in 1911, many Italian protégés fled Izmir and Istanbul to safer harbors in Alexandria, where they contributed abundantly to Italian cultural institutions, charity organizations, and economic centers. The relative success of this “citizenship tool” for the Italian state is revealed in the many donations provided by Italian protégés to the construction and development of Italian national institutions in Egypt. These included the Italian hospital in Alexandria, the Dante Alighieri Society, and several state-run elementary and secondary schools. The importance of their large and regular donations to locally-based charity organizations supporting unemployed and impoverished Italian emigrants cannot be underestimated, as these organizations sustained much of the Italian working-class population in Egypt. Moreover, protégés were widely active in the networks of the Italian Chambers of Commerce and in Italian Freemasonry in Egypt.¹⁰

The Pontremoli family was registered in the Italian national records in Alexandria in 1912, an important step in guaranteeing their continued protection under the capitulations.¹¹ In Egypt, the family practiced the same vocations it had in Turkey--trading in carpets, tapestries, and furniture. In most Mediterranean territories the capitulations had been abolished (within the

¹⁰ Evidence of this is amply recorded in the archives of the Italian diplomatic representation in Cairo. Archivio storico-diplomatico Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), Ambasciata Cairo (AC). See also Petricioli (2007).

¹¹ ACCC Ralph Pontremoli (167); UCEI, MP, D.S. “Nasser mi ha tolto 50 anni di vita” Moise Pontremoli, *Lo Specchio*, 17 March 1968.

Turkish context, they were cancelled with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, in Tunisia much earlier with the formation of the French Protectorate in 1881, and in Libya they were cancelled by the Italian colonial administration in 1912). However, in part due to partial sovereignty from the Porte since Mehmet Ali's reorganization of Egypt into a European-style state in the 1830s, and in part due to the struggles between Egyptian nationalists and British authorities, the capitulations continued to exist, creating a complex web of antiquated privileges, exceptions, and jurisdictional protections for foreign subjects residing in Egyptian territory (Fahmy 2013).

The existence of the capitulations, though, also helped to create conditions of possibility for the flowering of Italian nationalist sentiment. And, when Italy entered the First World War in 1915, along with some 5,000 military-age men of the roughly 40,000¹² Italians resident in Egypt at the time, the 18-year-old Moise Pontremoli left to fight for Italy (Amicucci 2000: 82).

Historiographical traditions beginning in the 1930s remember the First World War as a constitutive moment in the history of Italian residents in Egypt. It was the first event during which they, despite their range of national, religious and ethnic origins, participated collectively in a specifically *national* global event. For many scholars, their participation signified the culmination of nationalist propaganda advanced by Francesco Crispi, Enrico Corradini, and others, which aimed to instill a shared sense of Italian-ness and reverence for the homeland (Patria) among Italian residents. In Egypt, this propaganda had informed the organization of Italian state schools and the Dante Alighieri Society (active in Egypt since 1896, just seven years after its founding in Rome), and in the work of the Salesian nationalist-religious schools.

¹² Census information for 1907 puts the Italian community at around 34,926, while in 1917 it had grown to 40,198.

Indeed the war left a lasting impression on Pontremoli. Somewhere on Italy's borders, he lost the toes of his right foot, marrying this nationalist cause to his own body.¹³ In 1922, the same year Mussolini marched on Rome and Egypt was unilaterally declared an independent state by the British, Pontremoli co-founded the Alexandrian section of the Association of Wounded Veterans (Associazione di Mutilati di Guerra), which provided the 43 Italians from Egypt wounded during the war with monthly pensions.¹⁴ At its very inception, the group was accused of threatening to draw funds away from other Italian charitable associations. They distributed around 100 copies of a libel against the Italian consul, entitled "il Grido dei Mutilati" (the cry of the wounded), which denounced the consul from monopolizing the Italian community through his control over propaganda and resources. Pontremoli was purported to have organized the campaign, already known by authorities as an instigator and condescendingly referred to as "the famous nutcase (il noto pazzoide)," by the consul.¹⁵ (Image 4).

Despite the story Pontremoli recounted in the libel, wherein he described his many ignored pleas to the consul for support in covering the expense of the recommended amputation of his leg, doctor reports reveal that Pontremoli *himself* repeatedly rejected the doctor's recommendations. There were around 18 other cases mentioned in the libel. After a brief investigation, the consul determined that only one of the signees of the campaign was actually in financial difficulty and thus the state's resources could be better spent elsewhere. It was a

¹³ Personal communication, Rosina Roscioli 7 October 2012.

¹⁴ Archivio Central dello Stato (ACS), Presidenza dei consigli ministri (PCM), 15/3 68251 Guido Fiore Miraglia to Pella 3 December 1953.

¹⁵ ASDMAE, AC 1923 B133, fasc. "Associazione Mutilati di Alessandria d'Egitto."

moment of frenzied political activity, Egypt had just been declared sovereign and independent by the British and the recently consolidated National Fascist Party in Rome was looking to consolidate its relations with the Egyptian Monarchy. This is the first entanglement in Pontremoli's story, one threaded tightly with histories of competing empires and nascent nationalist movements in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Forest and the Desert

In 1923, Moise traveled to the desert of el-Gharbaniyat, 60 kilometers west of Alexandria. At the time, only semi-nomadic Bedouin families populated the dry desert landscape just south of Lake Mariout. Perhaps here Pontremoli began to formulate a new sense of his personhood, feeling his body marred by the war. Perhaps he anticipated that the transformation of the desert would reshape his relation to the socio-historical boundaries of the Mediterranean in which he lived. Utilizing financial support from his extended family, Pontremoli bought pieces of land in subsequent years from the West Delta Farming and Trading Company--an English firm that had been commissioned by the last Khedive, Abbas Hilmi Pasha, to convert desert into agricultural land, but that had failed to do so. (Image 5).

He sold off most of the land by 1933 and lived on its profits. Pontremoli began to develop a small piece of the remaining land for himself. He disappeared into the desert during the interwar period. Later, in his many letters, Pontremoli would only denote the number of years spent learning, laboring, and experimenting on the land, but he would never provide details about

how he acquired his deep knowledge of agriculture.¹⁶ His plot of land was roughly 340 by 510 meters.¹⁷ First, he worked to solve the problem of irrigation, building a large cistern and network of tubes to gather, store, and distribute rainwater. He purchased a defunct German airplane and turned it into a windmill to move the water and irrigate the land. Then, he built a small villa, and an elegant pool and pool-house, decorated with a fountain shaped as a lion's head. (Image 6). Pontremoli's most prized accomplishment was what he called the "forest of the desert." There, he grew hundreds of trees--peaches, plums, olives, cypress, casuarina, tamarisk, and orange. He was proudest of his peach crop. The fruit itself seemed to represent Pontremoli's conquering of the desert. He gave away baskets of fruit from his land as gifts; the British consul in 1938 wrote to thank Pontremoli for the sampling of his peaches. He wrote, "His excellency [the British consul] finds the peaches delicious and compliments you on being able to grow them in the Western Desert."¹⁸

¹⁶ This is something that the surviving members of his extended family fail to explain. They too do not know how he gained such intimate knowledge of desert agriculture. Dario Israel and Sarina Roscioli (née Pontremoli), personal communication.

¹⁷ As it turns out, the engineer who drew up the map of Pontremoli's land was Carlo Tortelotti, one among the founders of the Dante Alighieri Society in Izmir, who had also been displaced by the events of Italo-Turkish war. See <http://www.giustiniani.info/italianiasmirne.pdf>.

¹⁸ That this exchange happened in 1938 is important. It was the same year that the Fascist regime enacted its racial laws, one of the first explicit acts of state-sanctioned racism and a sign of the regime's acquiescence to the German Nazism. The implications of this act may suggest that

At el-Gharbaniyat, Pontremoli entertained family and friends and spoke widely of politics, the war, and the desert.¹⁹ (Image 7). Anticipating military reinforcement of the region in the case of an Italian invasion from the west, Anglo-Egyptian authorities conducted a survey of Egypt's northwestern desert in 1939. Pontremoli's installations were significant enough to occupy space on their survey. "Villa Morice" stands beside Villa Tortillia (owned by a French Jewish family that would host Charles De Gaulle when he came to Egypt during the Second World War) and the Hotel Gharbaniyat, a site that remains a mystery.²⁰ Only a gypsum factory and several other small lodges mark the landscape. Over the course of the 1930s, Pontremoli built the land into his own paradise. Just before his death, far removed from the desert landscape, he would refer to the efforts he invested in this "paradise" as symbolic of his enterprise "...as a pioneer in the arid and desolate lands of the desert, which I transformed into luxurious gardens." These efforts, he wrote, were examples of his "honorable" servitude to "the Patria" in search of "peace abroad."²¹ His struggle to bring "affluence and progress (benessere e progresso)" to the Egyptian desert entangled his own sense of personhood to a vast landscape of faltering imperial worlds.

War

Pontremoli was "taking sides" in the broader political spheres and imperial rivalries. UCEI, MP, II scatalone.

¹⁹ Personal communication, Dario Israel 28 March 2015.

²⁰ CEAlex (Centre d'Études Alexandrines), extrait 1939 Survey of Egypt.

²¹ "anni di lavoro di pioniere nelle terre arride e desolate del Deserto, che ho trasformato in giardini lusse [sic]." UCEI, MP, "Busta 3."

Meanwhile, events in the 1930s fostered increasing hostility between Italian residents and British authorities in an Egypt that, although declared independent in 1922, lingered under British military occupation. The Fascist regime in Rome funded several Egyptian nationalist movements, sponsored foreign-language and Arabic newspapers, and brought Italian schools, cultural centers, and mutual aid and charity societies (which sustained much of the community) under the authority of its offices in Egypt. A contemporary British observer, despite her hostility towards the Italian regime, noted the pervasiveness of Fascism in Egypt, and the regime's largely successful efforts to create a new generation, "radiating not only national loyalty but self-respect" (Monroe 1938: 196-197).²² British archives reveal that the Italian residents were so immersed in Fascist propaganda that the British authorities acting in Egypt did not distinguish between an Italian in civilian clothing and one in a black shirt (Williams 2006: 127). Indeed, within the Italian community it would not be until 1943 that an antifascist movement emerged, even then led by a small group of individuals who were quickly ostracized from the community after the Second World War due to their presumed connections to communist organizations.

In the years preceding the Ethiopia Campaign, and alongside Mussolini's increasingly violent imperialist projects in Libya and aggressive discourses on the Mediterranean (his desire to remake the sea as "an Italian lake"), growing fears of an attack on Egyptian soil influenced the political environment in Egypt. Many Egyptian nationalists sensed the possibility of an Italian invasion. The *Wafd*, the largest nationalist party, signed the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of Alliance in 1936, which conceded military authority to England in the case of war, but also set a timeline for the final abolition of the capitulations (Morsy 1984a, 1984b; see Hashish 1994).

²² For more on the role of political fascism in Egypt, see Gershoni and Jankowski (2010).

In the eyes of British authorities, the approximately 60,000 Italian residents represented a fifth column community. When Mussolini pronounced Italy's entry into the war on 10 June 1940, Anglo-Egyptian authorities froze Italian assets, repatriated diplomats, occupied the cultural institutions, and began arresting Italian males aged 18 to 55. They were held temporarily in the occupied Italian schools and in Egyptian prisons, and then collectively sent to Fayed, a civilian internment camp in the eastern desert, where many would remain until 1945. While some 5,000 males were eventually arrested, Pontremoli was placed on house arrest. Initially sent to the same "concentration camp (campo di concentramento)" as others, he pleaded to be released on account of his status as a wounded veteran. However, given the option to sign a declaration against Italy, which would have granted him freedom from the wartime sequester and from the internment, he refused. In an especially revealing letter, Pontremoli insisted that because neither Italy nor Egypt had declared war against the other the arrest and internment of Italians was in violation of international law, and *all Italians should be released*. He wrote, "... while Italy maintains friendly and normal relations with Egypt... an Italian citizen, wounded from the war... could suffer such injustices? NO! This is immoral and contrary to international rights and should stop!"²³ The terms of the 1936 Treaty superseded in the case of war, and Egypt fell under British military control. This detail escaped Pontremoli, and he attributed sole responsibility to the Egyptian Government for having ruined him both in "work and health."

Pontremoli was forbidden from traveling to el-Gharbaniyat, as the region was placed on lockdown and, around 1942, became home to a large relief center for allied troops battling Italian

²³ UCEI, MP BXIV; see also BI, "certificat d'internement" 24 June 1940, which does not - in contrast to most Italians - have a date of release.

and German troops at el-Alamein (Rock 1956). He did not return to his ‘forest of the desert’ until 1945.²⁴ Pontremoli’s body and land, bound together through shifting national and imperial tensions, threaded the socio-political worlds of the unraveling colonial Mediterranean between the end of the First World War and the end of the Second World War.

A New Home, a New Egypt

After the war, Pontremoli returned to his desert paradise. But he did so in an Egypt that was quickly accelerating towards complete sovereignty from the British and from foreign dominance over its national economy. The postwar years were characterized by uncertainty for most Italians in Egypt. The sequester on Italian accounts was not officially lifted until 1948 and the few resources of the community, already impoverished and demoralized from the internment, quickly dwindled. Opportunities for work declined due to the Company Law of 1947, which had set quotas on non-Egyptian hiring and required any foreign companies to engage Egyptian partners and employ Egyptian workers hoping to absorb the growing class of unemployed and educated Egyptians.²⁵ The transition period away from the capitulations expired in 1949, entailing the complete integration of Italians (and other non-Egyptian subjects) into the Egyptian legal system. None of these processes stabilized the tensions between Egyptian nationalists and the structures of colonial rule. Then, only months after the Cairo Fire on 26 January 1952--when Pontremoli’s cousin’s furniture store which bears the family name was among the many stores burned and looted--the faltering monarchy headed by King Faruk was toppled by a group of young military

²⁴ UCEI, MP, BXIV, permission to travel for a two-month long stay granted on 11 October 1945 from the Military Governor’s Office.

²⁵ For a comprehensive analysis of the Company Law, see Karanasou (1992).

officers in the July 1952 coup d'état. With the abdication of the king, who fled to Rome, the British too were finally being pushed out of Egypt.

After the coup, Pontremoli's advances in the desert attracted the attention of the local sheriff. One of the priorities of the military regime was to reform agricultural land-ownership in Egypt. When the Agrarian Reform Law 178 announced that no single entity could possess more than 200 feddans, local authorities immediately seized Pontremoli's lands, justifying themselves both with the legal restrictions of the Agrarian Reform itself and with other laws that had been created to limit the privileges of foreign residents in Egypt.²⁶ Pontremoli brought his case to the Agrarian Reform administration, which determined that his land did not, in fact, qualify as agricultural land and thus he was compensated and renewed access to it.

The campaign against him, however, continued as conditions worsened for foreign residents in Egypt. The disappearance of work opportunities generated a search for employment elsewhere and foreigners began to depart from Egypt in massive numbers. In the meantime, Italian residents, not having recovered from the internment and sequester, were excluded from Italy's emergent foreign policy. Italian politicians and diplomats in the new republic saw the Italian community in Egypt as an anachronistic residue of Italy's recent fascist past. Many Italian residents themselves were convinced that the republican government had neglected them in the immediate postwar years and saw emigration as the only viable solution to their situation. Emigration to Brazil, Venezuela, South Africa, and Australia, among other locales opened

²⁶ UCEI, MP, BXVI Le Progres Egyptien ND on Law 37 of 1951 forbidding the ownership of agricultural lands by foreigners.

opportunities for many individuals leaving Egypt, and requests for passport renewals, for the first time since the end of the war, were numerous.

Concurrently, the Egyptian Government attempted to regulate the number of foreigners in Egypt by issuing new residency policies.²⁷ It was at this juncture of emigration and residency that the citizenship status of many Italian protégés came under question, including that of the Pontremolis. For the Italian diplomats in Egypt, the destruction of the Italian consular archives in Izmir in 1922 left the status of many protégé families ambiguous. No trace of the documents attesting to their nationality survived the fire. Provisional nationality was granted to some, and a passport released with the caveat that only Italian authorities in Egypt could renew it. The subjects needed, however, to fulfill several prerequisites: “that the subject fluently speaks our language, demonstrated genuine sentiments of *italianità* [Italian-ness], and could be assimilated to the national [peninsular] environment.”²⁸ Many of the protégés who had obtained the so-called “small nationality” were seen as valuable assets in a struggling postwar economy, thus given life to Italian citizenship policies from the liberal period (Donati 2013: 134-136). Pamela Ballinger (2007) has called the postwar Italian state’s use of these “citizenship practices” to construct notions of socio-political belonging “linguistic nationalism.” By 1954, procedures were underway to grant full nationality to 34 families of protégés from Alexandria.²⁹ Most, however,

²⁷ Archivio Consolato Generale Alessandria d’Egitto (ACGA), Sidi Mosè di Daniele 1906.

²⁸ “...il medesimo parli correntemente la nostra lingua, abbia dimostrato sinceri sentimenti d’italianità e possa ritenersi assimilato all’ambiente nazionale.” ACCC, Pontremoli Nessim di Behor - classe 1914.

²⁹ ASDMAE, AP Egitto 1956 B1006 rapporto consolare 1954 30 June 1955.

would emigrate to Brazil. Calling into question this genealogy of citizenship in such a moment illustrates the flexibility with which political regimes defined the boundaries of national belonging. While the postwar regime distinguished itself from a past to which many Italian residents in Egypt saw themselves as integral, it also deepened the rupture in experience that had connected northern, southern, and eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

That same year, questions regarding the national culture of Italian residents in Egypt-- Catholics and Jews alike--had caused Italian diplomats to discourage repatriation. The diplomatic representatives argued that Italians from Egypt lacked the potential to integrate into metropolitan economic and social life. For example, the consul of Alexandria wrote, “these *connazionali* (compatriots), once repatriated, would find themselves feeling strangers in the country of which they hold the nationality, and even regret that which they left [behind], notwithstanding the restrictions and humiliations they were forced to experience.”³⁰ Indeed, by this point, the Italian state minimized the number of repatriates it would admit, suggesting that it was easier on the national budget to support “all the impoverished Italians in Egypt” than to repatriate them. But the consul acknowledged that lack of action could be “dangerous to the morale of our *connazionali*, who are naturally predisposed to [recall] the... exceptional well-being and prosperity under the Capitulations.”³¹

The problem of unemployment already facing Italy was only exacerbated by fear of political instability brought by the influx of Italians from the former colonial territories (Salvatici 2014). Italian politicians understood that the vast majority of Italians in Egypt remained loyal to

³⁰ MAE AP1955 Egitto B1006 “Rapporto Consolare 1954” Alexandria 30 June 1955.

³¹ MAE AP1955 Egitto B1006 “Rapporto Consolare 1954” Alexandria 30 June 1955.

political fascism and the monarchy (the Italian king, when he left Italy in 1946, relocated to Alexandria where he died one year later and remains to this day). They feared that their presence in Italy would sway political influence in favor of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano) and thus destabilize the Christian-Democrats. Emigration was the solution.

When discussions on emigration filled the pages of the only Italian newspaper in Egypt at the time, *Cronaca*, Pontremoli insisted on the right to *stay* in Egypt. He cited economics as the main reason that the Italian state should continue to invest in its citizens abroad. While the campaign continued against him and his land, Pontremoli engaged in these debates from within this extraterritorial Italian national context, depicting himself as an Italian patriot, wounded in the nationalist war that built Italy, and thus able to accurately represent and “diagnose” the problems and anticipate the future of the Italians in Egypt.

On 6 February 1953, he sent a letter to the editor of *Cronaca*, Athos Catraro, threatening that if Catraro did not publish his appeal, he would bring it to French and Arabic papers, “which would only aggravate the [situation].” In a sense, Pontremoli continued to draw upon the tensions of competing imperial powers amidst Egypt’s emerging nationalist regime. Italian diplomats--with whom Catraro was regularly in touch--sought to avoid any controversy that could assimilate the Italians to other foreign communities, especially to colonial powers, and thus compromise the new political ties between Italy and the military officers built on a discourse of neutrality. In what seemed a repeat of his 1923 libel, Pontremoli claimed that the Italian diplomats in Egypt were out to monopolize the Italian community. They denied Italian residents their rights, he argued, which included subsidized living and pensions. He noted that while Catraro received payments from the government for his paper, many others “made

sacrifices for the dear Patria, and [did so] in silence.” He likened his case to that of “artisans, [and] poor [Italian] workers” who made up the majority of Italians in Egypt.³² Italians in Egypt were actors of and for the state, as Pontremoli saw it.

Pontremoli accused Catraro of operating under the same premises with which he had worked during fascist rule (when Catraro was editor of the Italian newspaper, *Il Giornale d'Oriente*, which functioned under the supervision of the National Fascist Party). He claimed that Catraro ignored the rights conferred to Italian citizens under the new Italian constitution, while Egypt's poor Italians were forced to sell their properties, belongings, and depart. Pontremoli struggled to engage in national-political action and to affirm his own national belonging in a socio-political context that to him appeared antiquated and uncompromisingly structured on the relationships built during the fascist period. But, at the same time, he relied on an idea of extraterritoriality that was quickly dissipating. Catraro responded cautiously, observing that the paper's intention was to “safeguard the harmony and prestige of our

³² “di sacrifici per Patria carità ne abbiamo fatti molti e in silenzio” UCEI, MP, 2° scatalone; at the same time, the Associazione Mutilati ed Invalidi di Guerra, headed by Guido Fiore-Miraglia, sent petitions to the Italian politicians and diplomats in Egypt - Janelli in Cairo and Giuseppe Pella in Rome - and blamed the former consul in Alexandria for the community being “divisa in piccoli gruppi, senza alcun contatto di reciproca solidarietà e benevolenza” and the consulate had harmed the potential to “riprend[ere] l'antico prestigio, in un paese prettamente internazionale.” ACS, PCM 15/3 68251, Guido Fiore-Miraglia to Giuseppe Pella 3 December 1953, Guido Fiore-Miraglia to Janelli 17 March 1953.

compatriots [in Egypt]”³³ and that he could therefore only publish the sections of Pontremoli’s complaint that would not stir controversy.

Two years later, after residency laws were again modified, Pontremoli responded angrily to a statement published by the Italian diplomats in the *Cronaca*, which announced that, contrary to rumors circulating amongst Italians, the consulate would not provide assistance for the residency renewal fees required by Egyptian authorities. Aware that a patrimony of 150,000EGP was available from the sale of the Italian state schools in Alexandria that was part of the postwar settlement between Italy and Egypt, Pontremoli asserted that this money would best serve to stabilize the precarious status of Italian residents in Egypt.³⁴ Otherwise, he warned: “the damage would weigh, with enormous consequences, on the expenses of repatriation and the responsibility of [finding] new housing in a country [Italy] already over-populated.”³⁵ To the diplomats, however, a future in Egypt was impossible without reverting to the same capitular

³³ “salvaguardare l’armonia e il prestigio dei connazionali [in Egitto].”

³⁴ A similar letter had been sent from the president of the Associazione Mutilati ed Invalidi di Guerra, Guido Fiore-Miraglia in 1952, noting that neglecting to abruptly and properly distribute the 150 thousand LE, Italian institutions and services were left in a state of disarray and disorder and “l’Autorità Consolare ha favorito la divisione del patrimonio comune.” ACS, PCM 15/3 68251, Guido Fiore-Miraglia 14 March 1952.

³⁵ “il danno verrebbe a pesare con conseguenze enormemente superiori, sulle spese di rimpatrio e nella responsabilità di nuove sistemazioni in un Paese [Italia] già troppo intensamente popolato.” UCEI, MP, 2° scatalone.

privileges that had only recently been abolished.³⁶ Before any public announcement was made, the Italian ambassador had already decided against investing the 150,000EGP in a new Italian school and instead gave a portion to the existing Salesian missionary school, the Italian hospital in Alexandria, and towards the development of a locale for “cultural gatherings,” which aimed more at introducing Egyptians to Italian culture than to sustaining the Italian community.

The future of Italians in Egypt was increasingly channeled by conditions of impossibility. Throughout these years, Pontremoli and other property-owners in el-Gharbaniyat faced continued intimidation by local authorities. He complained that Italian state interests “suffocated” his case; that diplomats ignored his complaints because they were busy concluding business deals, such as those between Enrico Mattei (the headman of the Italian petroleum company, ENI) and Nasser’s regime. Several years later he would angrily recall that, “in 1956, to ensure Egyptian oil concessions, ENI imposed on the Italian government a philo-Nasser politics, to which it [the government] acquiesced... Italian diplomatic authorities in Egypt, MORE THAN ITALIAN POLITICS, ENACTED THE POLITICS OF ENI.”³⁷ In a memorandum which was to be incorporated in his many future letters, Pontremoli argued that the methods of the Italian diplomats were in contrast to “constitutional principles... [and] they are excluding me,

³⁶ ASDMAE, AP Egitto 1955 B1006 Appunto 20 October 1954.

³⁷ UCEI, B.3. “Nel 1956, per assicurarsi le concessioni petrolifere Egiziane che appartenevano ‘alla Shell’ nel Sinai, L’ENI ha imposto una politica filonasseriana al governo, che lo ha docilmente secondato... Le autorità diplomatiche italiane d’Egitto PIU CHE LA POLITICA DELL’ITALIA, HANNO FATTO QUELLO DELL’ENI” [sic].

unjustifiably, from my inalienable right[s] to justice and protection by my Patria...’’³⁸ In a letter to the Italian ambassador he complained, “while Italy maintains peaceful and normalized relations with Egypt, [how could] a wounded Italian citizen (cittadino) possibly suffer so many injustices?” His letters often went unanswered or received a standardized response informing him that his case was being looked into (in at least one instance, diplomats explicitly noted that Pontremoli had not in fact suffered any legal infraction at the hands of the Egyptian government).

However, things took a drastic turn after the Suez War in 1956, when local authorities falsified Pontremoli’s nationality as French, profiting from the decrees against the English and French, and repossessed his land. It was vandalized by a group of Bedouin he claimed were supported by the same sheriff that had attempted to dispossess him in 1952. His forest was burnt to the ground, the villa looted, and the lion-head statue in the pool smashed to pieces. It was a paradise no more. Years of work and struggle against the conditions of the desert were reduced to ruin. (Image 8). He appealed again to Italian authorities, but to no avail. Indeed, his name and situation do not figure in any official documents while there is ample record of the roughly 40 Italian Jews who were arrested and others who had property and accounts sequestered following the attack on Sinai. The Italian diplomats ensured the release of those arrested, accused of threatening state security under the lax conditions of the State of Siege, on the condition that they leave Egypt within a short period.

Pontremoli was renewed access to his land in 1957, but the destruction remained. Unfulfilled by the lack of action by Italian authorities, he wrote directly to the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs. They responded that the issue should be taken up with the local authorities in

³⁸ UCEI, B.10.

el-Gharbaniyat. He then sent a letter to the Egyptian Minister of Interior describing his impression that the Italian authorities, having intervened, probably overlooked the gravity of his case. He exclaimed, “my life is in danger!” and maintained that he suffered 14 attempts on his life since the autumn of 1956.³⁹ When he hired an Egyptian defense lawyer to bring his case against the local authorities in the Military Courts in Markaz el-Hammam (juridical region of el-Gharbiyat), his lawyer, maligned for helping a Jewish foreigner and “turning away from Egyptians,” was pressured to dismiss the case. Both the lawyer and Pontremoli were fined 50EGP.⁴⁰ At this point, his writing transforms dramatically.

Out of the Desert

Pontremoli continued to write reports and letters, restating his case and reassessing the value of his losses. When Egyptian authorities ceded to his many claims in 1958 and agreed to send a team of agricultural experts to appraise the damage to his land, he immediately contested their estimation that around 5,626EGP had been lost. According to Pontremoli’s diligent calculations, and excluding the incalculable 30 years he had invested in creating this desert ‘paradise,’ he had instead lost around 52,097EGP.⁴¹

Legal and diplomatic routes had failed Pontremoli, so he turned again to the press. When Virgilio Lilli, a correspondent for *Corriere della Sera* who had covered Egypt for many years, traveled to Egypt to write a series on the Italian community, Pontremoli requested to meet with him. He was, however, denied presence at the official gatherings--by this point he was infamous

³⁹ UCEI, MP, BXVI 3 May 1956.

⁴⁰ UCEI, MP, BX processo 3 September 1957.

⁴¹ UCEI, MP, BX, Judgement of experts 16 October 1958, note opposition ND.

for his aggravation--so he went directly to the Cecil Hotel in Alexandria where Lilli was staying. Unable to access the journalist there, Pontremoli left a copy of one of his long petitions and a letter personally addressed to Lilli. When Lilli's article was finally published, Pontremoli called it an "unsettling" perspective on the community told through the eyes of a generalized "emigrant elder" who bemoaned the bygone privileges foreigners had enjoyed under the capitulations.

Pontremoli charged the "emigrant elder" of being a "gestapo" that merely repeated the discourse of the Egyptian press, suspecting further that the character was aligned with Nasser's regime and did not, therefore, truly represent the Italian community. In fact, this language belonged to a growing trend in Pontremoli's writing: in his countless drafts, he referred to "Nasserian Hitler-ism (l'hitlerismo nasseriano)" and alluded to rumors that German exiles were directing the Egyptian military to persecute Italian Jews. Presenting himself as a wounded Italian patriot, Pontremoli described the Italians of Egypt through a trope largely inherited from fascist-era historiography, one that had been used as propaganda to subvert British dominance and instill in the Italian community a sense of the "historic"⁴² ties between Italy and Egypt. This perspective imagined the community through an isolated thread of its history, which in fact depicted a small minority of Italians in Egypt. Pontremoli claimed that Italian residents had never been privileged, nor had they needed legal protection. They were, instead, "honest workers

⁴² I use "historic" in the sense described by historian Claudio Fogu (2003) who examines Fascist Italy's particular engagement with events as 'historic' marking a temporality of exception that gave authority to the National Fascist Party and the so-called Fascist revolution.

who built ports, streets, bridges, houses, canals, offices, schools, mosques, hospitals... etc.”⁴³ It appears that Pontremoli decisively held onto that distant past: meanwhile the community he spoke of departed en masse, experiencing unemployment that stayed around 25 percent since 1945.

Conclusion

Many Italian residents requested collective repatriation, hoping that the Italian state would recognize their place in the narrative of Italy’s history abroad. Due to economic constraints, however, the state avoided taking collective action. Feeling abandoned by state-level politics across the Mediterranean, the Italians of Egypt organized associations to safeguard their interests. By force of events and pressure from political opposition (from both the right and left, the Movimento Sociale Italiano and Partito Comunista Italiano, respectively), the status of “national refugee”--created in 1952 to incorporate Italians returning from colonial possessions lost in the postwar settlement--was expanded to include Italians leaving Egypt (the process initiated early in 1957, but took several years to be put into action). Upon their “definitive” departure from Egypt, they were required to renounce future residency there.

Pontremoli’s efforts to find recompense were fruitless and, in 1963, after his relatives and over 40,000 other Italian residents had departed, he too left Egypt as a “national refugee.” The

⁴³ “lavoratori onesti... che hanno costruito i porti, le strade, i ponti, le case, i canali, le officine, le scuole, le Moschee, gli ospedali, organizzato la Posta, telegraffi telefoni, elettricità, ferrovie, hanno organizzato l’agricoltura, i servizi di assistenza, polizia, etc.[sic]” UCEI, MP, BIII, Moise Pontremoli to Virgilio Lilli, and Virgilio Lilli “Il vecchio emigrato rimpiange l’Egitto ‘paradiso degli occidentali’,” *Corriere della Sera* 14 June 1958.

67-year-old Pontremoli, however, continued his campaign from Rome. In contrast to previous iterations, he identified now as a pioneer who had tamed the desert, a patriot wounded in the war, *and* a refugee persecuted for his status as an Italian Jew. He alluded to the “thousands” (*migliaia*) in similar situations in his many appeals, but rarely provided details or specific comparative examples. The collection of his documents shows that, in fact, he communicated only with a small circle of individuals after leaving Egypt. What united Pontremoli’s experiences to his perceived “thousands” – and what facilitated this scalar movement -- was the assumed *possibility* of shared experience. He often concluded that his own case demonstrated most dramatically the intersecting histories of personal suffering and loss in the disentangling of the colonial Mediterranean.

From his small apartment at Piazza Irnerio, he filed a case against the former ambassador in Egypt, Giuseppe Fornari, for negligence and violation of his constitutional rights. He drew upon the terms of the 1937 Montreux Convention--which had abolished the capitulations and stipulated a 12-year transition period--and international human rights laws to justify his claims. But it was in vain: Pontremoli sought answers in a past that was obscured by emergent geopolitical realities, a past no longer contiguous with the present. He learned from his lawyer that Italian diplomats had never intentionally targeted him. Rather, given the national, regional, and international circumstances of the moment, they circumvented controversial matters so as to safeguard the Italian community, “thus any decisive action [by Fornari] would have probably been irrelevant for Pontremoli and even counterproductive for the general interests of the Italian

communities.”⁴⁴ Fornari had been sent to Cairo to remake Italian politics in Egypt amidst the country’s decolonization and emerging Cold War dynamics. He oversaw the beginning of Amintore Fanfani’s, then Italian prime minister, “political friendship” with Nasser, which resulted in several industrial deals for the Italian state, but failed to resolve the question of repatriation for the Italian residents living there (Melcangi 2013; Onelli 2012, 2013; Perfetti 2001; Tonini 2007, 2012; see Viscomi 2016). Pontremoli saw Fornari--and others in Fanfani’s administration--only as “diplomatic functionaries of the Fascist dictatorship, who remained in their positions... drunk with the principles that sent 42,000 Italians to the Nazi extermination camps...”

It was only in the turbulent years of the late-1960s that Pontremoli’s case found an audience in the pages of magazines and newspapers critical of the Italian government (*Il Borghese, La Folla, Il Globo*). In 1968, he wrote in *Lo Specchio*, “I created a paradise in the desert and hoped to finish my days there, when I lost everything, and it was all destroyed, I

⁴⁴ “per cui una sua [Fornari] azione più decisa sarebbe stata probabilmente irrilevante per il Pontremoli o addirittura controproducente per la generalità degli interessi della collettività italiana colà esistente.” UCEI, MP, BX “Promemoria”; It should be noted that similar procedures were practiced in other cases, such as the claim against Giannotti involving illegal trading practices. The Italian diplomats did not take a position in support of Giannotti’s case because they feared that the position would place them in a negative light with respect to the Egyptian Government.

returned to Italy to die here.”⁴⁵ The same month the article appeared, he was invited to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with 14 others to discuss a secret accord between Italy and Egypt that would provide reparations for Italian properties lost in the 1952 Agrarian Reform. He was outraged by the presence of others who, according to his own hierarchy of suffering, did not *truly* suffer under Nasser’s regime. Moreover, he was angered by the meeting’s secrecy and that the reparations would cover a sum, he claimed, meant to appease and silence those who had endured misfortune. As the historical constellation of the Mediterranean from which Pontremoli emerged changed shape, so too did its possibility to hold together a narrative. In returning to Italy “to die,” Pontremoli contemporaneously perceived that the connections, movements, and relatedness that once rendered his Mediterranean palpable no longer resonated.

I end with scraps of Pontremoli’s writings that fill loose pieces of paper, absent of dates, and strewn amongst his final testament, legal documents, reports, photographs, and endless copies of his letters to politicians. Perhaps in these words he attempted to provide closure to his story, which he himself appears to have seen as indeterminate. In a piece Pontremoli entitled “the desert and its dangers,” the narrator asks an anonymous doctor “what purpose does the desert serve?” to which the doctor responds, “to test human valor... a courageous challenge to nature, an intelligent and resolved wager on the future.”⁴⁶ In another fragment, Pontremoli wrote:

⁴⁵ “Avevo creato un paradiso nel deserto, e speravo di finirci i miei giorni. Quando ho perduto tutto, e tutto è stato distrutto, sono tornato in Italia per morire qui.” UCEI, MP, D.S. “Nasser mi ha tolto 50 anni di vita” Moise Pontremoli, *Lo Specchio*, 17 March 1968.

⁴⁶ UCEI, MP, B.III “Il deserto e i suoi pericoli.”

the present... is an SOS that addresses the civilized people... a poignant tale of suffering... this [wounded] man who confidently befriends the righteousness of the Western world and the democratic system risks losing all that trust and turning towards other movements... because of the severity of injustices he suffered.⁴⁷

Moise Pontremoli's personhood encompassed his participation in the First World War, his subduing of the Egyptian desert, and his status as an Italian Jewish refugee post-Second World War Italy. It bound those events and processes to the geo-politics of the twentieth-century Mediterranean. In its capacity to entangle events and processes, the micro-details of Pontremoli's sense of personhood itself became a testament to transformation in Mediterranean socio-political worlds. He died in 1969, leaving inconclusive compensations in his will. At the moment of his death, Pontremoli remained committed to an elusive, but nevertheless potential, future that adjusted the meaning of past and present. His life of suffering did not come from a hopeless struggle against the unyielding desert or against his wounded body, but by living through each of these, by knotting them to his sense of personhood. His suffering was a work of *poesis*.⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ Turner, "Social Drama," 168.

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Images.

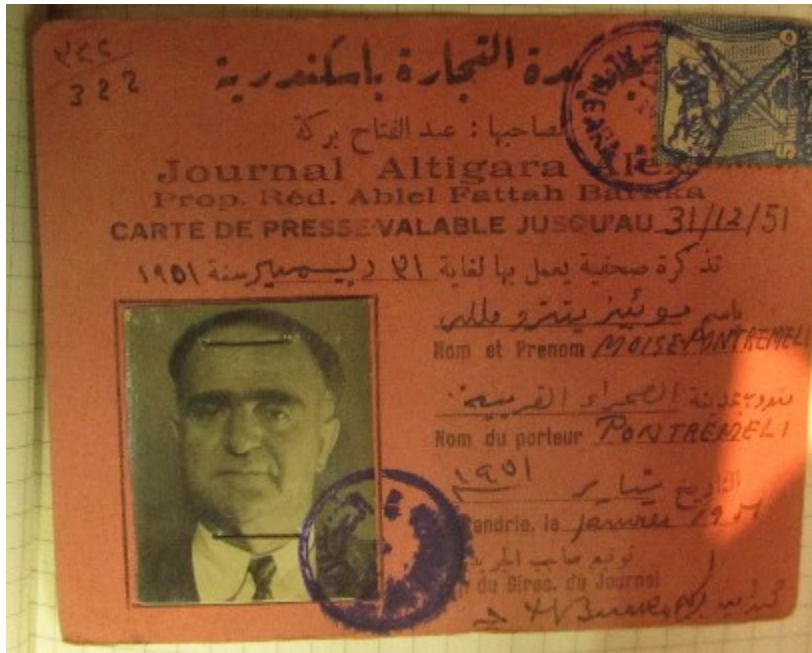


Image 1: Press Card with Photo of Moise Pontremoli.



Image 2: Pontremoli store in Cairo, today (photo credit: Aya Sabry)



Image 3: Portrait of Moise Pontremoli's cousin.



Image 4: Pontremoli's libel against the Italian consul. ASDMAE, AC 1923 B133 fasc.

"Associazione Mutilati di Alessandria d'Egitto."



Image 5: Pontremoli's photographs of the land from 1923. UCEI, fondo Moise Pontremoli.



Image 6: Pontremoli posing with the lion fountain. UCEI, fondo Moise Pontremoli.



Image 7: A page from Pontremoli's albums showing the forest of the desert. UCEI, fondo Moise Pontremoli.



Image 8: Pontremoli documents the damage in 1956. UCEI, fondo Moise Pontremoli.