

The Jewish Pearl of Africa

By Ted Trzyna

In the early 1960s, I was a young United States Foreign Service Officer assigned to an isolated diplomatic post in the middle of Africa. I was a vice consul at the American Consulate in Élisabethville, capital of the mineral-rich Katanga province of the Congo, the former Belgian Congo.

At the time, Élisabethville (its name was changed to Lubumbashi in the 1970s along with all other Belgian colonial place names) was almost daily

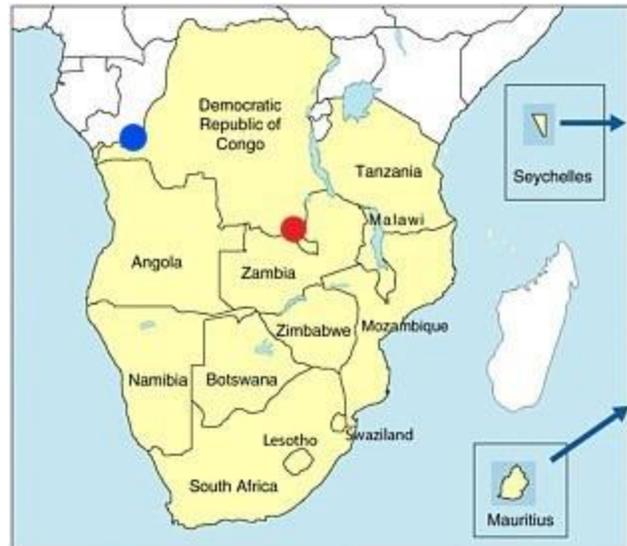
on the front pages of newspapers around the world. In 1960, right after the Congo achieved independence from Belgium, Katanga seceded and became a de facto independent country, with its own president, ministries, flag, and other national symbols.

I lived there from October 1962 to October 1963 during the final months of the secession, the fighting that ended it, and occupation of Katanga by the Congo's national government. I went on to spend a year at our embassy in the Congo's capital, Léopoldville, now called Kinshasa.

See the endnotes for links to background.

Among the various ethnic groups in Katanga, the Jews were an unusual case. I first learned about them from Allegra Assayas, the consulate's extroverted and multilingual receptionist. Allegra and her husband Raymond, manager of a textile factory, were members of Katanga's Sephardic Jewish community.

The first Jews settled in Élisabethville in 1902. By 1909 there was a *minyán*, and a temporary structure was built for religious services and meetings. More Jewish immigrants came in the 1920s. In 1930, they built a striking white-columned synagogue on a prominent corner. They started businesses, including general stores, wholesale houses of consumer goods, small factories, and cattle



Red dot marks location of Élisabethville, now called Lubumbashi, the second most important city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Blue dot marks Léopoldville, now called Kinshasa, the DRC's capital. Distance between them is about 1,000 miles (1,600 km). [Base map: National Academies Press]



Synagogue in Elisabethville, now called Lubumbashi.

ranches. They had their own Boy Scouts, sports teams, dances, theater groups, picnics, and excursions to waterfalls. Elisabethville became known as the “Jewish Pearl of Africa.”

At the beginning, Jews came to Katanga for economic reasons. They were mainly Ashkenazic Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, and many of them left when the Belgian Congo was hit hard by the Great Depression. Then, in the 1930s,

another group of Jews immigrated to escape anti-Semitism. These were mainly Sephardic Jews whose ancestors originated in Spain, Portugal, and North Africa. Most came from the Island of Rhodes in the eastern Mediterranean, or from Egypt.

Why Rhodes? Rhodes was settled by Jews in at least the second century BCE. The island was part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries until Italy took it over in 1912. Benito Mussolini’s fascist government came into power in 1922, became allied with Nazi Germany in 1936, and adopted anti-Semitic racial laws in 1938 that stripped Jews of their Italian citizenship and ability to work in the professions. The last ship carrying Jewish refugees from Rhodes to the Congo left in 1939. The Belgian Congo, particularly Elisabethville, situated on a plateau with a cooler and less humid climate than most of the colony, was an alternative to Palestine, where Zionist immigration was limited under the British mandate.

The American Consulate in Elisabethville was set up during World War II to provide cover for operations of the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency. For the OSS officers posted at the Elisabethville consulate one of the most reliable sources of intelligence was Grand Rabbi Moshe Meir Levy, who had arrived in 1937 to serve the local synagogue. No surprise that he wanted to help the Allies, especially since there had been at least one local incident of shop windows of Jewish merchants being painted with swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans.

Although Jews in the Belgian Congo felt relatively safe, they knew their coreligionists in Belgium suffered greatly: Belgian authorities collaborated with the Germans in rounding up and sending many of them to death camps. By the end of the war, 25,124 Jews had been killed, 44 percent of the total number of Jews living in Belgium on the eve of the German occupation.

Meanwhile, German troops occupied Rhodes. In 1944 they rounded up almost all the remaining Jews on the island and sent them to Auschwitz, the

largest German Nazi concentration and extermination camp. Out of the 1,673 men, women, and children who were taken away, only 150 survived.



Maurice Alhadeff in his office in Léopoldville in 1957. He collected Congolese art and was an important patron of Congolese artists. [Photo by André Cauvin.*]

By the time of the Congo's independence in 1960, Jews made up a quarter of Élisabethville's white population, about 3,500, second only to the Belgians. Moïse Rahmani, whose memoir of Jewish life in Katanga, *Shalom Bwana*, goes into detail about interracial matters, says Jews tended to treat their black servants and employees better than most other whites.

A good example was Maurice Alhadeff, the most prominent Jewish businessman in the Congo, who arrived from Rhodes in 1911 and made his

fortune in retail, food, and clothing. Among other things, he had the Pepsi-Cola franchise for the country.

Alhadeff, who sometimes dropped by the consulate, was a naturalized U.S. citizen who had homes in Léopoldville, Élisabethville, and New York City. He was among the first white shop owners to welcome black people in their stores as clerks and customers. This happened in 1946. To understand how radical it was, consider that until 1956 black people found to be on the streets in a white area after 9 pm had to show a pass from their employer.

In sexual matters, too, most Jewish men did the right thing by recognizing their children born of black mothers, giving them their family names, and providing for their care and education. If whites had to give a good example, they thought Jews had to be even more irreproachable. In the Belgian Congo there were no laws enforcing racial segregation. It was common for single white men to have live-in African women companions, although the subject was taboo and the women were referred to as *ménagères*, household help.

The children of these liaisons were proud of their heritage. One such relationship led to a sort of clan, the Mulongo Finkelstein family. Several children of Jewish fathers and Congolese mothers rose to political prominence. These included Léon Lubicz, the son of a Polish Jewish doctor and a Congolese mother who earned a doctorate in law from the Université libre de Bruxelles and has held high positions in the national government, including as prime minister and senate president. (Lubicz had to change his name to Kengo wa Dendo when all names had to be Africanized in 1971 and is now known as Léon Kengo wa Dondo.)

In stark contrast, the thousands of children of non-Jewish white fathers and black mothers usually had very different experiences. They were taken from their mothers by the local authorities and placed in Roman Catholic orphanages or convents. Many ended up in Belgium. In most cases fathers refused to admit paternity. In some cases, the parents were married, but interracial marriages were not recognized by the colonial government. Black women who had children by white fathers were considered prostitutes.

This has become a sensitive political issue in Belgium. A group of biracial women who were separated from their parents during colonial times has sued the Belgian government for reparations and is lobbying for financial compensation for all such victims. These *métis*, as biracial persons are called in French, are now in their seventies. The Belgian prime minister and the Catholic Church have formally apologized for what happened.

As I write this in 2021, the son of a Sephardic Jew from Rhodes has his eye on the Congo's presidency. Moïse Katumbi was born in 1964 to Nissim Soriano and his wife Virginie, the daughter of a paramount chief of the Kazembe people.

Soriano left Rhodes in 1938 to escape Mussolini's anti-Semitic laws. He settled in Kashobwe, a village in Katanga on the Luapula River, a tributary of the Congo River which forms the border between the Congo and Zambia (the former

British colony of Northern Rhodesia). The area is rich in fisheries and Soriano built a business based on transporting fresh and dried fish to urban markets.

His son, Moïse Katumbi, is Roman Catholic but refers frequently to his Jewish roots, even calling himself “the Moses of Katanga, back to lead his people.” (Moïse is the French version of the name Moses.) Katumbi became one of the Congo’s richest people, starting with expanding the family’s fish industry and moving on to mining and trucking. He is president of one of Africa’s premier football (soccer) teams, TP Mazembe, and owns radio and TV stations. Entering politics in the early 2000s, he

served from 2007-2015 as the first elected governor of the Province of Katanga. The province was then about the size of Spain but has since been split up into five provinces. Katumbi is positioned to be a leading candidate for president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the election to be held in 2023.



Moïse Katumbi. [Photo by Mmalembo, 2016. CC BY-SA 4.0.]

In the decades following the Congo’s independence in 1960, almost all members of Katanga’s Jewish community left the country, often for South Africa. Our consulate receptionist Allegra Assayas and her husband Raymond moved to Israel and are buried in a cemetery in Netanya.

The island of Rhodes has fascinated me, mainly because I’ve read a lot about the history of the Sovereign Order of Malta, which arose during the Crusades and had its headquarters on Rhodes from 1309-1523. Although it possesses no territory, the order is a sovereign entity under international law and maintains diplomatic relations with over a hundred countries.

In the spring of 2004, I went to Rhodes for a small scientific conference and got there a few days early to get a feeling for the place. I stayed in the old part of the city of Rhodes, which was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988. The island was transferred from Italy to Greece in 1947 as part of post-war territorial settlements.

I had booked a room in a small hotel which turned out to be in the former Juderia or Jewish Quarter. I told the owner, a Greek Canadian, that I had known

Jews from Rhodes in the Congo and mentioned a few family names, including Alhadeff. He pointed out the door in the direction of Alhadeff Street. He said the one remaining synagogue, Temple Kahal Kadosh Shalom, was on the next street over and I should visit it the next morning. I did so. A very old woman greeted me, pointed to the number tattooed on her arm, and after a few false starts gave me her standard talk, which she must have memorized in many languages. She stumbled in English, so I suggested French. The story she told would have been depressing in any language. Before World War II over 4,000 Jews lived in Rhodes. Only 30 or so lived there now.

It turned out the Alhadeffs had been a prominent family in Rhodes' Jewish community, and the street as well as an adjacent park were named after Salomon, an older relative of Maurice, the Alhadeff who made his mark in the Congo.

It was a short walk to the Square of the Martyred Jews. Nearby is the dock where German soldiers herded 1,673 men, women, and children onto boats to cross the Aegean Sea to the port of Piraeus on mainland Greece where they were put on trains for Auschwitz. This was on July 23, 1944. Even ordinary Germans knew by the end of 1943 that the war was lost, but the efficient killing machine carried on in the camps and in death marches all the way up to the German surrender on May 8, 1945.



Floor mosaic of Medusa, 2nd century BCE, taken from the Island of Kos and installed in the Palace of the Grand Masters in Rhodes. [PD]

When I planned my trip to Rhodes, I looked forward to visiting places connected to the Sovereign Order of Malta. But after roaming around the Juderia and being moved by its tragic story, the Order of Malta sites were a letdown. The most important location is the Palace of the Grand Masters, and the main attraction in the palace is a series of beautiful floor mosaics.

But the mosaics don't belong there. They were brought from the Island of Kos, or Cos, 60 miles away, when the palace was "restored" in 1937-1940 at the direction of Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. The mosaics had been discovered in 1933 when a strong earthquake exposed ruins of an ancient city. For me, the Kos mosaics in the Rhodes palace seemed to violate its architectural integrity. I was also put off by the connection with Mussolini.

Although the Palace of the Grand Masters was a disappointment, I became curious about the current status of the Order of Malta.

A little history: The full name of the order is *Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta*, which tells much of its story. Founded in 1048, before the start of the Crusades, its seat was in Jerusalem. The *Military* part of its name had to do with protecting Christian pilgrims in the city. Along with the Crusaders, they were driven out of the Holy Land by Muslims in 1291. Cyprus was the next stop, and then Rhodes, which was the order's headquarters from 1310 to 1523, when a long siege by Muslim forces ended in defeat. The order was centered on Malta from 1530 until Napoleon expelled it in 1798. Eventually its headquarters was set up in Rome, where it remains, in an impressive palace near the Spanish Steps. It is both a sovereign entity and a global charity organized as a lay religious order of the Roman Catholic Church.

As a sovereign entity the Order of Malta has officers with fancy titles and uniforms, and issues its own passports, postage stamps, coins, and license plates (SMOM, red on white). All of this may seem ostentatious and even a bit ludicrous, but such trappings and its special status help the order carry out the serious purpose for which it was created and still operates: assistance to the poor and the sick. Nowadays this involves tens of thousands of paid and volunteer staff who provide emergency medical and humanitarian aid in some 120 countries. This includes operating hospitals, carrying out disaster relief and prevention, and helping refugees.

I was glad to learn that one of its top priorities is helping the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

NOTES

This is an excerpt from a memoir that is a work in progress. For more excerpts, go to <https://trzyna.info/selections-from-a-memoir>.

These websites are especially useful:

- Belgian national archives website on the colonial métis (in French and Dutch): <https://www.metis.arch.be/>.
- Rhodes Jewish Museum: <https://www.rhodesjewishmuseum.org/>
- Sovereign Order of Malta: <https://orderofmalta.int/>

- Wikipedia: Congo Crisis: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congo_Crisis

A key source on the Jews of Katanga is *Shalom Bwana: La Saga des Juifs du Congo*, by Moïse Rahmani, Editions Romillat, Paris, 2002.

*The photo of Maurice Alhadeff, from the Fonds André Cauvin, Photo no. 256004, is held by CEGESOMA, part of the Belgian national archives: <https://www.cegesoma.be/en/cegesoma>.

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