

## **Memories of Migration and Migration of Memory:**

### **The Transnational History of the Jewish Deportation to Mauritius (1940-1945)**

Roni Mikel Arieli

My project uncovers the history of a traumatic human story situated at the intersection of significant events and driving political forces and events—the Holocaust, the Second World War, Jewish displacement, British Imperialism, and modern Zionism. However, this intersection remains limited to the margins of history. Within the project, I focus on 1,581 Jewish refugees who fled Nazi-controlled Europe in late 1940, survived a long journey to Haifa and then were deported by the British Mandate authorities in Palestine to Mauritius. The detainees spent almost five years in the Beau Bassin prison before being released and then leaving the island in August 1945. With their departure, the detention site and the story all but disappeared from collective memory.

Despite some commemorative efforts since the 1990s, the Jewish deportation to Mauritius has largely been neglected from most accounts of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and, until recently, it has been on the periphery of Mauritian collective memory. My project proposes an interdisciplinary approach to examine the history and memory of the deportation to Mauritius by juxtaposing the methodologies of various subfields including microhistory, oral history, memory studies, and postcolonial theory. By recounting the history and memory of Jewish displacement during the Holocaust in detail, I seek to give a human face to impersonal historical processes often addressed as the histories of Jewish displacement during the Holocaust.

To further this endeavor, I have established a transnational archive comprising of the official records of the German authorities, British colonial correspondence, global Jewish institutional reports, memoirs, personal letters, material objects, newspaper cuttings from

Mauritius, Palestine, South Africa, and Britain, and finally, interviews with the Jewish detainees, and local Mauritians who remember the detainees. By arguing for a transnational approach to the gathering and processing of archival data, testimonies, and other forms of historical and individual memory, my project brings the peripheral experiences and consequences of the Holocaust into focus. Assembling and analyzing this transnational archive enables me to reconstruct this multi-layered dramatic story and to trace how the marginality of the people and the place are manifested in the discourses and actions of various historical actors, as well as in its memory and memorialization.

### **The Deportation – A History**

The little-known event of the deportation of Jewish refugees began when three ships—*Pacific*, *Milos*, and *Atlantic*—set sail from Tulcea, Romania to the port of Haifa in the British Mandate of Palestine, carrying 3,500 Jewish refugees. These ships were chartered on September 4, 1940, by the Central Office for Jewish Emigration, under the leadership of the Austrian Jewish financial advisor Berthold Storfer, and with the consent and cooperation of Nazi German authorities. The refugees, who arrived from the Jewish communities of Vienna, Prague, Brno, Berlin, Munich, and Danzig, followed different branches of Judaism and had varying affinities to Zionism.

Owing to the 1939 British White Paper, which enforced a strict immigration quota for Jews entering Palestine, some of the arriving refugees were transferred to a ship called *Patria* to be deported to Mauritius. In a retaliatory response, the underground military organization of the *Yishuv* in Palestine, the *Haganah*, decided to smuggle a bomb onto the ship, and on November 25, at 9 a.m. it exploded, causing the tragic death of more than 260 Jewish refugees.<sup>1</sup> The British authorities permitted the survivors of the *Patria* to remain in Palestine, transferring them to the Atlit detention camp near Haifa. The *Atlantic* passengers, however, were kept in a separate section of the camp, where wired fences separated them from the *Patria* survivors.

Two weeks later, on December 9, 1940, they were forcibly removed from Atlit to Haifa, where they were put on two ships to Mauritius.

Located off the eastern coast of Africa, Mauritius Island in the Indian Ocean was once the capital of French power in the east and the base from which corsairs pursued British merchantmen as they plied their trade between India and Europe. British imperial control on the island was established after a British invasion in 1810 and ended on March 12, 1968, when Mauritius became independent. During the Second World War, the local population comprised two-third of Indo-Pakistani origin, most of whom descendants of indentured laborers brought to work in the sugar industry during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; one-fourth of Creole origin (mixed French and African descent); a small number of Chinese origin and a small yet powerful Franco-Mauritian elite. Mauritius played a central role in British strategic planning, and during the Second World War, local troops were recruited for service overseas, the Eastern fleet guarded the Indian Ocean, and a base for British naval forces was established on the island.<sup>2</sup>

After traveling in the overcrowded ships for seventeen days, the refugees arrived at the harbor of Port Louise, the capital of Mauritius, and were later transferred to the Beau Bassin camp. They were defined by the local colonial authorities as “European Detainees,” and “ordinances” were established to legislate their detention, legal status and to prevent contact between them and the local population. The high walls of the principal compound of the camp ensured the separation between two sections of the camp—the men were accommodated in the prison cells, and the women and children stayed within a compound of huts. Only in July 1942, after a furious protest on the part of the detainees, did a new routine order arrive that permitted the wives to visit the men’s camp during certain daytime hours.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the conditions, the detainees maintained a rich cultural and social routine behind the prison gates. There were two active synagogues, schools, adult education centers, youth

movements, theatre groups, a Zionist association, a library, a camp newspaper, coffee shops, and a soccer team. Workshops were established inside the camp where the detainees' manufactured toys, bags, recycled papers, and wooden items. Additionally, in late 1941 some of the skilled detainees received temporary permits to work outside of the camp and assisted in electricity and telephone services, as well as in the local manufacture of cosmetics, and toys, while others were employed as music, art, and language teachers at local primary schools. Neither colonized nor colonizers, the refugees were defined as 'European Detainees,' and while interned in a prison and treated in a punitive manner, the colonial authorities considered them as useful for the colonized society because of their European nationality, skills, and characteristics.

On February 21, 1945, Sir Bede Clifford, the British governor of Mauritius, informed the detainees' leadership that the British authorities had decided to allow the Jewish refugees to enter Palestine. However, it took another six months before the refugees left the island. In 1946, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies acquired ownership of the Saint Martin Jewish cemetery in Mauritius, where 126 Jewish refugees who died during their detention were buried. Despite this, no public efforts were made to keep the story of the Jewish deportation to Mauritius alive in local memory.

### **Remembering the Deportation in Mauritius**

More than five decades after the liberation of the Beau Bassin camp, significant interest in the Jewish deportation can now be detected in Mauritius. In 1998, the book *The Mauritian Shekel* was published by Geneviève Pitot, a Mauritian who lived in Germany but had a close relationship with one of the Jewish detainees on the island. In 2001, Mauritian author Alain Gordon Gentil published his novel *Le Voyage de Delcourt* about a fictional romantic relationship between a young Jewish detainee and a Mauritian boy. The novel was adapted into

a play titled *Marika est partie* in 2014 and performed in Mauritius, France, and Germany. In 2007, Mauritian author Nathacha Appanah published her novel *Le dernier frère* about a fictional friendship between a Creole boy and a Jewish refugee from Czechoslovakia. Since 2016, Appanah's novel is being taught in Mauritian public and private high schools as part of the history curriculum. Lastly, in 2014 the Beau Bassin Jewish Detainees Memorial and Information Centre (BBJDMIC), housed in the Mauritian Jewish cemetery garden, was established by the African Jewish Congress to commemorate the deportation. The memorial holds educational visits for local high school students where they learn about antisemitism, persecution and the Holocaust.

During my first visit to Mauritius in May 2019 I contributed to the formation of a collaborative relationship with the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southern Africa, and the BBJDMIC. The visit received significant media attention, testifying to the public interest in revising this episode from the past. In January 2020, on another short visit to Mauritius, the collaboration launched a video testimonies project with local Mauritians who had personal recollections of the wartime event. While these recent engagements in the memories of this forgotten episode in Mauritius provide new findings regarding the mark left by the detainees on the island, it is also worthwhile to explore what stands behind the growing local interest in this story.

Mauritius has a complicated colonial history which includes Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British colonialism, slavery, as well as sugar and indentured laborers. It is a polyglot society of 1.265 million people with a small but powerful Franco-Mauritian elite, and a strong Indian, Chinese, and Creole presence. Mauritius has been ranked in the top 20 of the world's most peaceful countries in the 2018 Global Peace Index (GPI).<sup>4</sup> However, the anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues that since Mauritius gained independence, “[p]eace is maintained on the crowded, culturally heterogeneous island only because there is a precarious numerical equilibrium and functioning politics of compromise between the ethnic groups. Any ‘upsetting

of this balance' would ostensibly threaten the peace."<sup>5</sup> Despite its multifaceted history, postcolonial Mauritius has thus largely avoided dwelling on its past.

This pitfall of multiculturalism is a direct expression of the national slogan "unity in diversity," which involves a careful distribution of cultural capital in the country to maintain social cohesion. Recently, through the work of certain activists, poets, and authors, the local histories of slavery and colonialism has regained some resonance. However, these traumatic memories are still willfully neglected in Mauritian collective memory.<sup>6</sup> In this context, the Jewish deportation becomes central as a somewhat non-conflictual history to engage within this multiethnic society. Furthermore, the deportation, while located at the margins of the Holocaust, indirectly connects the island to the Eurocentric history of the Holocaust.

The second part of my research project explores this present interplay of the global dynamics of Holocaust memory by focusing on the local process of the memorialization of the traumatic Jewish detention in Mauritius. It focuses on moments of intersection between Mauritius' legacies of slavery and colonial violence and the story of the Jewish deportation as potentially productive for creating a point of contact between what the historian Charles Maier refers to as the two opposing master narratives of the twentieth century: the Holocaust and postcolonialism.<sup>7</sup> While Maier focuses on the diversion of these two counter-narratives, Michael Rothberg suggests a paradigm of "multidirectional memory", which steers the discussion of memory away from competitive models to claim that the dynamics of different historical memories are not necessarily based on zero-sum struggles.<sup>8</sup> An exploration of the Mauritian case study through the lens of Rothberg's paradigm can shed light on how the geographical periphery shapes the multidirectional nature of histories and memories. In doing so, my research demonstrates how local instances of entangled histories and memories carry the potential for enabling repressed pasts to regain prominence and decolonize memories in the present.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Dalia Ofer, *Escaping the Holocaust* (Oxford, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990), 31–32; Arieh J. Kochavi, *Displaced Persons and International Politics* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers Ltd, 1992), 8, 42.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 325.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Zwergbaum, *The Second Year on Mauritius* (Place of publication not identified, 2000), 5–9.

<sup>4</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace. Global Peace Index 2018: Measuring Peace in a Complex World, Sydney, June 2018, accessed on June 19, 2020, <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Common Denominators: Ethnicity, Nation-Building and Compromise in Mauritius* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Allen, *Selves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Anne Eichmann, “The Heritage of Slavery and Nation Building: A Comparison of South Africa and Mauritius,” in *Slavery, Memory and Identity, National Representations and Global Legacies*, eds. Douglas Hamilton, Kate Hodgson and Joel Quirk (New York & London: Routledge, 2012), 66.

<sup>7</sup> Charles S. Maier. “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era.” *American Historical Review* 165, no.3 (2000): 807–830.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).