

The Last Jews of Libya



**A documentary film by Vivienne Roumani-Denn
Narrated by Isabella Rossellini**

WORLD PREMIERE European Independent Film Festival, Paris

U.S. PREMIERE Tribeca Film Festival (*four sold out screenings*)

Jerusalem International Film Festival

Sao Paulo International Film Festival

Washington Jewish Film Festival

Atlanta Jewish Film Festival

Virginia Jewish Film Festival

Sephardic Jewish Film Festival, NYC

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

Farthest North Jewish Film Festival, Fairbanks Alaska

Seattle Jewish Film Festival

Detroit Jewish Film Festival

Public Performance Screenings & DVD Sales:



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for Jewish Film

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SYNOPSIS

The Last Jews of Libya documents the final decades of a centuries-old North African Sephardic Jewish community through the lives of the remarkable Roumani family, residents of Benghazi, Libya, for hundreds of years.

Thirty-six thousand Jews lived in Libya at the end of World War II, today none remain.

The Last Jews of Libya traces the story of the Roumanis from Turkish Ottoman rule through the age of Mussolini and Hitler to the final destruction and dispersal of Libya's Jews in the face of Arab nationalism.

The Last Jews of Libya is the story of an ancient and unique Jewish community transformed by modern European culture and by its relations with Arabs all the while retaining its own religious traditions, and of a family ultimately saved through the strength of its Jewish tradition and faith.

Based on the recently discovered memoirs of the family's matriarch, Elise Roumani, as well as interviews in English, Hebrew, Italian, and Arabic with several generations of the Roumani family and a trove of rare archival film and photographs, it is an unforgettable tale.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Director:	Vivienne Roumani-Denn
Editor:	Amanda Zinoman
Executive Producer:	Aryeh B. Bourkoff
Narration written by:	Joseph Dorman
Cinematography:	Vivienne Roumani-Denn
Additional Cinematography:	Alan S Deutsch Mitchell Reichler Tal-El Productions Thomas Powick Geyer
Narrator:	Isabella Rossellini
Traditional Music:	Maurice, Daniel, and Jonathon Roumani Elia Roumani
Academic Advisor	Maurice Roumani

PRODUCTION DETAILS

USA, 2007, 50 minutes, color, Beta or DVD

LAST JEWS OF LIBYA WEBPAGE

<http://lastjewslibya.com/links.shtml>

LAST JEWS OF LIBYA VIDEO TRAILER

<http://www.thelastjewslibya.com/trailer.shtml>

VIDEO INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR

<http://www.manhattanmoviemagazine.com/tribeca-videos/jews-of-libya.html>

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT by Vivienne Roumani-Denn

No one knew about the manuscript. After my mother died, my brother Maurice and I found her hand-written memoir describing her life in Libya. It clarified the allusions that we had heard so often to events before our births, it personalized the dry facts that we had learned as history, and it filled in facts that history books could not address. Elise Tammam Roumani was born just three years after the Italians conquered Libya from the Ottoman Turks, and she experienced the transition of the Libyan Jewish community under European influence. She wrote about family and Jewish life during the period of Italian colonization and the growth of Fascism, about the wrenching impact of the Second World War, and about the post-war experience with Arab nationalism. She described vibrant Jewish life and pogroms, and the intrinsic contradictions of relationships.

I was born in Benghazi, Libya in 1950. We spoke Arabic and Italian at home. The Roumani family had roots in Libya that went back hundreds of years, but there was no place for Jews in Libya after the rise of Arab nationalism. Ninety-five percent of the Jewish community, including my Mother's family, left Libya between 1949 and 1951, following the establishment of the State of Israel. My brother Maurice came to the U.S. in 1960 to study, because he could not attend the university in Libya. My brother Jacques followed in 1961, and I came with the remaining immediate family in 1962, at the age of twelve. The rest of my father's family fled to Rome following riots and killings in 1967. The Jewish community in Libya had a recorded history dating back thousands of years. Today, there are no Jews in Libya. Not one.

My family maintained the traditions of Libyan Sephardic Jewry in the United States in our homes, but we had no community with which to share these traditions. When my son Aryeh asked me to make a film, so that his children could appreciate their unique heritage, I knew that my mother's manuscript was the ideal template. The film is structured around her memoir, supplemented by interviews with other family members and archival film footage. It tells the story of our family, and, through my mother's eyes, together with those of other members of the family, it tells the story of the Jews of Libya and the devastating effects of war and civil conflict on individuals and their generations. When I listen to Isabella Rossellini's lovely reading of her manuscript, I hear my mother's voice speaking to my grandchildren.

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Director Vivienne Roumani-Denn was 12 years old when her family emigrated to Boston in 1962 from Benghazi, Libya, where they had lived for centuries.

Graduate degrees in librarianship and management landed Vivienne positions heading departments at the Johns Hopkins Library and the Library of Congress and directing science and maps libraries at the University of California, Berkeley.

She subsequently became the Judaica/Hebraica Librarian at Berkeley to pursue her avocation of research on Sephardic Jewry, conducting extensive oral histories of Jews from Libya. She moved to New York City in 1999 and served as the Executive Director of the American Sephardi Federation, founding the Sephardic Library and Archives. Vivienne conducts interviews in the major languages of the Sephardic world: Arabic, Hebrew, French, Spanish, and Italian. She has published and lectured widely on information technology, including electronic access, distribution and pricing, and, for the past decade, on Sephardic Jewry. This is her first film.

Executive Producer Aryeh Bourkoff is a managing director and head of the global media & communications group of UBS Investment Research, specializing in coverage of the Cable & Satellite and Entertainment sectors. In 2005, Aryeh became the first analyst to be ranked as the top in his sector in the *Institutional Investor* Equity, Fixed Income, and Hedge Fund surveys in the same year. For the past seven years, he has been recognized as the number-one ranked cable & satellite fixed income analyst on *Institutional Investor's* Fixed-Income All-America Research Team. He also recently received the top spot in the “Broadcasting and Entertainment” category of the *Wall Street Journal's* annual “Best on The Street” equity analyst rankings for stock picking. Aryeh has covered the Media and Telecommunications sectors for more than eleven years. Prior to joining UBS, he was the senior cable and telecommunications high yield research analyst at CIBC World Markets Corp.



Cool Movie Review: The Last Jews of Libya

Anyone who's ever wondered about their family history especially when that history involved fleeing from persecution will find *The Last Jews of Libya* fascinating and moving.

In fifty-minutes the film takes you through the history of the 2,500 year-old Jewish community in Libya, told through the memories of the real-life Roumani family who flourished for decades in the city of Benghazi, Libya. The family photos and the archival film, as well as the personal stories of the Roumanis clearly convey the richness of the family's life and the life of their Jewish community followed by the horror of the persecution and death that many suffered under the Nazis and subsequent Arab nationalism. The Roumanis fled Libya in the years following WWII as did all of the other 36,000 Jews who had once made it their home.

The film, directed by Vivienne Roumani-Denn who was 12 when her family escaped to Boston, and produced by her son Aryeh Bourkoff, debuted at the Tribeca Film Festival. The Sundance channel will air it in December. We'll alert you to that air date when it comes closer.



"The Tribe at Tribeca" (4/27/07)

By George Robinson

Intriguingly, Vivienne Roumani-Denn has also chosen to retell a historical story through the eyes of a single family. Her film "*The Last Jews of Libya*" would be just another talking-head documentary, albeit an unusually interesting one, if her own family were not the 50-minute film's central focus. The Jewish community of Libya, over two millennia in continuous existence, no longer exists, but her family was at its center for much of the last 100 years of Jewish life in Benghazi, and a few of them were, as the title says, the last Jews to leave in the 1960s. As was the case for many Sephardic Jews in the Arab countries of North Africa, existence was generally comfortable, if precarious. The filmmaker's grandfather Yosef was respected by the local Arab merchants, but when Mussolini caved in to Hitler, Fascist racial laws were instituted in Italian-held Libya. And when the Six Day War broke out, Jews were the victims of anti-Semitic rioting.

Roumani-Denn tells this story as experienced by her mother (with Isabella Rossellini giving effective voice to her diaries and letters). Because the focus of "*Last Jews*" is entirely on the Roumanis and the Tamams (her mother's family), the film is something more than another superficial historical documentary. Instead, viewers are given concrete examples of the workings of history on individuals, and history has an appealing and entirely human face.

BLOGCRITICS MAGAZINE

Movie Review: *The Last Jews of Libya* at the Jerusalem International Film Festival

By Judy Lash Balint (7/6/07)

It's the first full day of the Jerusalem International Film Festival and a couple of hundred Israelis and visitors spend more than an hour of a beautiful July Friday afternoon in the auditorium of the Menachem Begin Heritage Center glued to the screen by a moving documentary entitled *The Last Jews of Libya*.

It's always excruciating to sit down at the end of June with the 280-page catalog and a calendar and try to come up with a realistic number of films that will squeeze into your life in July.

My list certainly got off to a good start with *The Last Jews of Libya*. Produced by Aryeh Bourkoff and his mother, Libyan-born Vivienne Roumani-Denn, the film chronicles three generations of Jews with roots in Benghazi, Libya. Based on the memoirs of Vivienne's mother, Elise Roumani, that were discovered after her death and enhanced by archival footage and interviews, we see 20th century history through the prism of a proud Jewish community that had prospered in a Moslem country for centuries.

This is not the story of poor Eastern European Jews living in shtetls in a predominantly peasant culture. The Jewish families of Benghazi were worldly, sophisticated business people who nevertheless were strong adherents to Jewish tradition and by and large resisted the assimilationist tendencies of their educated Ashkenazic brethren.

Still, the colonial powers of the 20th century combined with the long reach of the Nazis and Arab anger over the founding of the state of Israel all converged to lay waste to this once vibrant Jewish community. Today, unlike Morocco and neighboring Tunisia, there's not a single Jew left in Libya.

Many in the audience at the Festival screening are Jews of Libyan descent, who murmur appreciatively at the Arabic and Italian expressions used by some of the interviewees and gasp as the horror of internment camps and Arab pogroms are recounted.

Despite the fact that the majority of the Roumani family ended up emigrating to America, at their request, Vivienne's parents, Elise and her husband Yosef, are both buried on the Mt of Olives. One of Vivienne's Libyan-born brothers remarks in the film that this was more than a mere gesture — his parents must have wanted to emphasize that Israel is the only place where a Jew can feel totally at home.

Almost the entire Roumani family is present at the screening as Aryeh, a thirty-something Manhattan investment banker, gets up at the end to explain why he produced the film. "I have three kids and I realized I wanted to tell them where we came from," he told the attentive audience. "This was a project celebrating family unity," he continued. The film is dedicated to his grandparents, Elise and Yosef Roumani, who emigrated to America in the 1960s to join two of their sons studying at American universities.