A Circulation Society, Reconsidered: Syrian Jewish Merchant Networks after the Exodus from Aleppo

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Abstract

This article analyses the durability of transregional Syrian Jewish merchant networks through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when the centre of these trading networks shifted several times in response to economic transformations and political pressures. Migration patterns from Aleppo following the Ottoman collapse and the exodus after 1947 call for a modified conceptualisation of centres, peripheries and circulation from dominant approaches to merchant networks and circulation societies. Centres are generally thought of as the origin points of persons and goods—namely, women, religious specialists and collateral-free credit—which circulate exclusively within the network; peripheries are nodes which merely receive and depend on centres in these respects. I add to this by analysing central or critical nodes as those where different kinds of mobility intersected to inject new vitality into the networks. Peripheries are not only dependent nodes, but vital points of refuge and transition in times of duress. Furthermore, beyond persons and credit, the circulation of aesthetic and ethical standards, in addition to name values, has helped to maintain the integrity of the network in a period of geographic reconfiguration.

Keywords: *Syria; Jews; trading networks; Milan; Kobe; São Paulo*

Introduction

This article outlines the emergence of worldwide Syrian Jewish trading networks from the remnants of an earlier Sephardic Mediterranean-centred commercial diaspora and offers an account of their durability during turbulent decades through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The individual and family trajectories documented here show that after they adapted to the industrial revolution and the

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attendant transformation of trading routes, Aleppine Jewish merchant networks were transformed by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the emergence of twentieth-century nationalisms, decolonisation and the Jewish exodus from Aleppo and Syria after 1947. Compared to other ethnic trading networks—such as the Armenians and Western Sephardim in the early modern period and the Sindhis and Baghdadi Jews in the long nineteenth century—what is distinctive about Syrian Jewish merchants, who were mainly of Aleppine origin, in the twentieth century is the number of times their geographic hub shifted: from Aleppo to Aleppo and Beirut; then from Aleppo and Beirut to Beirut and Milan; and from Beirut and Milan to Buenos Aires, São Paulo and New York, with New York now the leading demographic and cultural-ideological centre of the worldwide networks.

What accounts for the resilience of trading networks amid such disruption? Studies of 'trading diasporas' have highlighted the significance of trust rooted in shared ethnicity, religion and kinship, and the accountability mechanisms that these afford (Curtin 1984). Cautioning against taking ethnicity for granted, some have stressed the effect of hostile host environments in reproducing intra-group solidarity, economic specialisation and ethnic consciousness among 'middlemen minorities' (Bonacich 1973). Others have focused on the structure of networks, understood as channels of circulation (Aslanian 2014; Markovits 2000). Analyses of 'circulation societies' (Markovits 2000) and 'mobile societies' (Ho 2017; Marsden 2021) understand trading networks as translocal societies constituted by multiple kinds of circulation. Some of these are exclusive to the network and define its cohesiveness. For example, Markovits (2000) argues that while commodities circulate both within and beyond an ethnic network, other goods and persons stay within it, and these define a relationship between central and peripheral nodes. Centres are those nodes which are the source of persons and goods that circulate exclusively within the network: women, religious specialists and collateral-free credit. Because these are necessary for the social and cultural reproduction of the network and determine its economic vitality, the preservation of the centre is essential for the durability of the network through time. Accordingly, some have argued that the ability of a network to withstand turbulence can be enhanced by having multiple centres: Aslanian (2014) has argued that this explains why the early modern Western Sephardim were able to survive the loss of Iberia, but the Armenian New Julfan network dissipated after the loss of New Julfa in Iran.

The rapidly shifting configuration of Syrian Jewish merchant networks through the twentieth century also calls for some modifications to this notion of a circulation society, which was developed from studies of trading networks that enjoyed a relatively stable geographic configuration over a period of time. The Syrian Jewish experience from the early twentieth century until the present day—especially their rapid emigration and the emergence of a sequence of new centres after the Ottoman collapse and partition of Palestine—calls for a different conceptualisation of centres, peripheries and circulation. In brief, I propose that during a period of turbulence, the central or critical nodes are those where different kinds of mobility interact to inject new vitality into the network. Peripheries are vital points of refuge and transition in times of duress. Moreover, I suggest that the circulation of aesthetic and ethical standards, along with name values, are among the exclusive forms of circulation which help to maintain the integrity of the network during periods of geographic reconfiguration.

Scholarly literature on the Syrian Jewish diaspora tends to focus on the history of settlement or dynamics of cultural production and ethnic persistence in particular locales, rather than the translocal structure of the wider network.[1] This article synthesises elements of this secondary literature and draws on primary sources to document and theorise the translocal nature of the network and relationship between nodes: for example, how Milan was related to Beirut, Beirut to Latin America and East Asia to New York. Methodologically, it identifies the trajectories of a series of connected merchants and merchant families, tracing their trading connections and mobilities through time. To do so, it uses interviews I conducted with Syrian Jewish merchants in New York in 2023; memoirs and biographies of Syrian Jewish traders published over the last ten years; transcripts of interviews with merchants conducted in 1983 by Joseph Sutton, author and member of the community, and published in Sutton (1988); online blogs and archives compiled by members of the community;[2] and immigration databases and public records.[3] I used genealogy databases[4] to cross-reference between these sources and identify connections between individuals documented in them. I have used pseudonyms to refer to interviewees and their direct relatives, but otherwise have reproduced the names of individuals where they already appear in publicly available sources.[5]

From a Mediterranean Centre to a Worldwide Network

By the 1700s, Aleppo was the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire—an entrepot on the Silk Route connecting trading posts across Eurasia. Alongside Muslim Ottomans, its merchants included Armenians, Greeks, Christian Arabs, Europeans and Jews from Venice and Livorno. After the expulsion of Jews from Iberia in the 1490s, a network of Sephardic entrepreneurial elites had taken shape around the Mediterranean, with Livorno becoming an important centre of Europe-Middle East trade from the 1600s. As a node in these Mediterranean Sephardic networks, Aleppo's Jewish community became a mixture of descendants of Iberian emigres, Italian merchants who arrived in the 1700s ('Francos') and native Middle Easterners with ancient roots in the region (Marcus 1989). This community was to play a significant role in the city's commercial connections, both as traders and financiers, with commerce reportedly stopping on Jewish holidays by the late eighteenth century (Laskier and Simon 2002). European firms often relied on Jews as agents; in 1682, the French had granted protection to Jewish merchants in Aleppo, and in the 1800s, Britain registered many Jews as its own protected subjects as capitulation treaties became a means for European powers to extend influence in Ottoman lands (Collins and Bierbrier 2008).

The centuries-old Sephardic Mediterranean-centred trading network declined in importance as the Ottoman empire weakened and global trade shifted away from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic (Laskier and Simon 2002). However, leading families in Aleppo adapted to the opportunities offered by the industrial revolution. Members of the Silvera family, who had moved to Aleppo from Livorno in the 1700s, were key actors in the export of cotton from Manchester to the Middle East in the nineteenth century (Collins and Bierbrier 2008). As the centre of industrial revolution and cotton trade, Manchester attracted merchant capital and immigration, including from Sephardim who exported the city's high quality and cheap textiles to the Middle East and beyond, often to compatriots and co-religionists. From the 1860s to the 1920s, Syrians—and Aleppines in particular—came to dominate the Sephardic community in Manchester and established outposts in the Americas and Caribbean (Haiti and West Indies). From one branch of the Silvera family which settled in Manchester in the 1880s, three children subsequently settled in Haiti and three in Buenos Aires (in the 1930s and 1940s) (Collins and Bierbrier 2008). Joseph Sutton's

interviews show that another well-known merchant, Ezra Sitt, moved from Aleppo to New York City in 1892 and made a name for himself by shipping Manchester textiles to Aleppine Jews in Buenos Aires, Colombia, Chile, Peru and Haiti (Sutton 1988).

As the industrial revolution and the shift in trade routes accelerated by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 ended Aleppo's predominance as a caravan city between Asia and Europe, many emigrated to the growing cities of Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria. Others went further afield in search of economic opportunity; from the 1880s and through the first half of the twentieth century, Syrians emigrated to New York, Latin America and the Philippines. Emerging nationalisms in the Middle East also encouraged emigration from the region in the early twentieth century; for example, the Young Turks ended exemption from conscription for minorities including Jews in 1908 and the erecting of new state borders after the First World War obstructed trade (Laskier and Simon 2002). While elite merchants travelled in search of new sites of investment for their capital, most who moved beyond Europe had considerably less means and found work either as labourers or as peddlers. Through both kinds of economic mobility, global networks of Aleppine Jews took shape in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Initially, many emigres went with the intention to sojourn and return, but then settled as they grew prosperous (Harel 1998). Even settled communities tended to maintain Aleppine or Damascene identities; they were connected to Aleppo and other nodes of Syrian settlement through continuing forms of circulation: commerce, new arrivals and the movement of religious specialists (ibid).

After 1948, some Jews remained inside Syria, as successive regimes prohibited emigration until 1992 and sequestered the property of those who left. By the mid-1950s, rapidly industrialising economies in Latin America drew Syrian Jewish elites to booming cities. Some Syrian Jews moved between cities in the Americas—entrepreneurs seeking to make their fortunes or expand existing businesses and rabbis and religious functionaries circulating between nodes as openings arose in different locales. Such mobility was observable among all social classes but was easier for the elites. Eduard Farhi, born in 1938, was from a well-known Damascene family, members of whom were community presidents in Beirut and Rio de Janeiro (see interview in Sutton 1988: 208). He moved from Aleppo to Beirut in 1955, where he secured a job with a textile merchant on the strength of his family name, then to Milan and shortly afterwards São Paulo. After his business of selling

clothes and furniture to homes via commission brokers failed in Brazil, he tried to establish businesses in various other nodes of the Syrian Jewish merchant network, such as in New York, Panama and Mexico City. While these attempts did not bear fruit, he supported himself by taking non-rabbinical leadership positions in synagogues in São Paulo, Mexico City and later New York. His example shows that the value—the recognisability and cachet—of family names could circulate between Damascus, Beirut and Latin America.

Through the twentieth century, Brooklyn in New York became the site of the largest concentration of Syrian Jews in the world—today numbering perhaps around 60,000—who maintained a distinct cultural identity from the wider society (Shelemay 1998, Zenner 2000). The first arrivals in the 1890s were mainly peddlers, but after 1948, New York city became a destination of choice for wealthier emigres. A vibrant community infrastructure developed through the twentieth century, including several synagogues, mutual aid societies, a Sephardic Community Centre and a news website. Many Syrian Jews maintained a pattern of residential clustering in Brooklyn, as well as in Deal, New Jersey, which began and still serves as a vacation community alongside Aventura in Florida. Since the late twentieth century, some have gone into the professions, but the community retains an occupational clustering in commerce, mainly in retail, with some in import-export, especially textiles, electronics and tourist goods. Many have become professional investors in real estate. New York City can be seen as a cultural-ideological centre as well as a demographic one: it is the site of heritage organisations which cater to Syrian Jews mainly in New York but also beyond the US. The Sephardic Heritage Foundation was founded in the 1970s to produce Aleppine rite prayer books and Syrian Jewish songs (*pizmonim*) for Syrian communities in the US, Mexico, central and south America, Europe and Asia. The Sephardic Heritage Project, founded in 2004, has compiled marriage and circumcision records of the worldwide Syrian Jewish community; furthermore, the Sephardic Heritage Museum, founded in 2005, funds and organises efforts to preserve Syrian Jewish heritage in the Middle East.

Having sketched some of the commercial and migratory geographies that took shape during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I now introduce a series of merchant biographies, in order to identify the institutions, practices and forms of circulation that enabled merchant networks to cohere through time.

Merchant Biographies

Moise D.[6]

Abraham D. was a partner in a leading Jewish firm in Aleppo, which imported textiles mainly from Manchester in the early twentieth century. He maintained a friendship with merchants from the Silvera family, to whom the D. family were also related by marriage. Abraham's two eldest sons went into the family business, which went on to enjoy great commercial success in the First World War through their access to textiles in a time of shortage. A third son, Moise, who was born around the turn of the century, did not follow his brothers into the family firm, but instead partnered with his cousin in money exchange, banking and the gold trade. Moise made money during the First World War by selling Turkish currency which could be purchased at a 50 per cent discount in Aleppo for gold in Istanbul where it still commanded confidence. Between 1916 and 1920, he moved between Aleppo and Cairo on business; he then moved to Jerusalem to sell gold (1920-23); and to Istanbul to sell discounted notes (i.e., offering short-term loans) as a private banker (1923-28). In 1927, he married into another wealthy banking family. Moise returned to Aleppo where he invested the deposits of Turkish livestock traders, issuing checks for them through his connections in Istanbul (1928-38). He also served as a member of the Jewish community's leadership committee. Next, he moved to Beirut (1938-53) where he traded gold, buying gold from London and the United States and selling to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and later to Hong Kong, Indonesia and Indo-China. Profits in the international gold trade in Beirut peaked in 1948-49, when he made 15 per cent per transaction.

In Beirut as in Aleppo, Moise was appointed to the leadership committee of the Jewish community. After 1947, he became involved in organising the clandestine passage of Jews out of Aleppo to Beirut and then Israel. As this role exposed him to growing tensions with the Lebanese authorities, he moved to Milan in 1953, where he met a Silvera whose father had known his father in Aleppo. He soon moved on via São Paulo to Buenos Aires, where one of his brothers had settled and where Syrians and Aleppines dominated the Sephardi community. Early Syrian Jewish arrivals there had built factories, established an Aleppine community and synagogue and supported new arrivals by giving them goods to sell. Consulted about a suitable rabbi for

the community, he recommended an Aleppine rabbi who had fled to Beirut and whom he knew personally. The rabbi was duly appointed in Buenos Aires, and Moise credited him with bringing many back to observance of the Sabbath. Moise commented in an interview with Joseph Sutton in 1982 that wherever they settled, even the Far East, Aleppine Jews were known for their religiosity, and Buenos Aires was second in religiosity to New York: 'the simha party for close friends is not held on Saturday mornings as in Brooklyn'. Moise sent his three sons to the Jewish school at Brighton, Whittingehame College, between 1948 and 1967.

Abraham D.[7]

Moise's brother Raffoul went into the family textile business. He married Renee L. in Aleppo. Their three sons, born in 1912, 1914 and 1916, all went into the import-export business. In 1936, the eldest son Abraham travelled from the family base in Aleppo to Kobe in Japan, where he stayed for five years, also travelling to Shanghai, Hong Kong and India to export textiles. He purchased piece goods and sold them to the family firm in Aleppo, which sold them to merchants in Aleppo and across the Middle East. He also imported textile piece goods in partnership with a Muslim businessman based in Khan al-Gumruk in Aleppo and represented a large Italian firm of weavers. Abraham returned to Aleppo in 1941. His first son, Raffoul, was born there in 1944. Raffoul recalled that on 1 December 1947, two days after the UN announced the partition of Palestine, a Muslim mob came to the Jewish quarter of Jamiliyyeh where the family lived, burning synagogues, schools, social centres and Jewish shops. Two days later, the family left, having sold what possessions they could. Ninety per cent of Abraham's money was already outside Syria. He joined his brothers in Hong Kong, where the three of them had business, before moving to Milan for six years (at least one of his brothers also moved his main residence to Milan).

In 1954, Abraham moved to São Paulo as a permanent resident. His immigration card declared his nationality as Iranian. His brothers had visited São Paulo earlier that year, on documents declaring Panamanian and Argentinian nationality respectively. After 1948, it was usually not possible for Jews to renew their Syrian travel documents, and it was not uncommon for those with means to acquire passports from other countries, often central American[8] and Iran (Gross 2022).[9] In Brazil, Abraham traded chemicals and metals, which were in heavy

demand as Brazil rapidly modernised and the region around São Paulo turned from agriculture to manufacturing. His son recalled that Abraham was with Edmond Safra (who had also moved from Milan to São Paulo at about the same time) and was the head of the Syrian community in São Paolo, where he established a synagogue, a youth movement and after-school activities such as learning Hebrew. He also recalled that the family integrated with Jewish communities, both Ashkenazi and Sephardi. A biography of Edmond Safra also reports that Syrian Jews joined a Greek-Turkish Sephardic synagogue in São Paolo. In 1958, Araham D. convened a wealthy committee to expand it under an Aleppine rabbi. The first Jewish immigrants from Syria had arrived in Brazil several decades earlier, but those who arrived in the 1950s formed the bulk of the community and tended to bring wealth and modern education acquired in the French Alliance Israelite schools. Many had also experienced the confiscation of their wealth and turned to each other for support (Gross 2022). One of Abraham's distant cousins who left Aleppo for São Paulo in 1955, and a great nephew of Moise D's business partner, suffered the confiscation of family wealth on leaving Syria. He went on to become a prominent Brazilian real estate developer and philanthropist.

Syrian Jewish merchants who had settled in Brazil before the 1950s had been active in the textile trade, importing linens from England and silks from France (Sutton 1988). Between 1945 and 1960, Brazil's textile manufacturing sector was expanding rapidly, and Abraham's eldest son Raffoul set up a factory in São Paolo. However, the business did not succeed, and Raffoul instead took a consignment of precious stones from a Syrian Jewish friend, whose father had moved from Damascus to Beirut during the mandate period and then onto Antwerp in the 1950s where he had established a diamond trading business. In Antwerp, the founder's sons joined the firm and sought to expand its global reach through the 1960s and 1970s. They supplied Raffoul who went on to become wholesaler and retailer of diamonds, with customers in Brazil, Argentina, France, Israel and the United States. Raffoul met his wife in São Paulo—an Aleppine Jew born in Beirut who immigrated to Brazil with Iranian travel documents in the 1960s. Like most Syrian Jews, the two assimilated linguistically, learning Portuguese—they spoke Arabic at home, but it had more or less died out by the third generation. The family moved their main residence from São Paulo to New York City in the 1990s, where they continued to trade gemstones from the diamond district in Manhattan. From there, Raffoul commented to me

that unlike Egyptians, few Aleppine Jews in Brazil intermarried with non-Jews. But he would permit his grandchildren to marry European Jews—it was good, as in Brazil, not to be culturally insular.

Rahmo Sassoon[10]

When Abraham D. travelled from Aleppo to Kobe in Japan in 1936, he arrived with another young man born in Aleppo in 1912: Rahmo Sassoon. A representative of a large Italian firm of weavers, Sassoon had studied at the Alliance school in Aleppo. His brother-in-law, an agent for Manchester textile merchants, was already in Kobe. Rahmo sojourned as an independent trader in Kobe between 1936 and 1964, before moving to New York. During this period, he was a leading figure in the Jewish community of Kobe, playing a key role in establishing a Sephardic synagogue. According to some accounts, a large building rented by Sassoon was used as a synagogue in 1939, when Sassoon named it 'Ohel Shelomoh' and took over the Torah scrolls held by Isaac Antaki. Others report that Rahmo's furniture warehouse was converted into a synagogue named Ohel Shelomo between 1945 and 1948. Sassoon's leadership role included liaising with the Japanese government on behalf of the Jews in Kobe. He was a member of a Sephardic committee formed to help Polish Jews who were fleeing the Nazis and arriving in Japan via Siberia in 1940. He played this role alongside Nissim Tawil, a textile exporter from Aleppo who became the rabbi and cantor of the Sephardic synagogue. Sassoon's family home in Kobe later hosted many Jewish businessmen who visited Japan after the Second World War.

In 1949, Rahmo Sassoon went to Milan to find a Syrian Jewish bride (Gross 2022). He married Renee, a member of the Silvera family whose father had moved from Aleppo to Milan (Sassoon's own mother also moved to Milan). The two married in Italy in 1951 before returning together to Kobe. During his stay in Milan, Rahmo met Edmond Safra, who asked him for business associates in Shanghai, Japan and Bangkok, agreeing to split the commissions equally between them. After moving to Milan, Edmond Safra had continued to arbitrage gold between Europe and East Asia, with a consortium of Syrian Jewish businessmen, using a family member as a receiving agent in East Asia. But after gold prices harmonised and arbitrage was no longer possible, his focus in East Asia turned to trade finance, where he sought to access Syrian Jewish customers. He and Rahmo Sassoon formed a business partnership, financing exports from Shanghai, Japan and

Bangkok. They remained partners for decades (ibid). In 1956, Rahmo travelled with Renee from Kobe to São Paolo, Buenos Aires and New York, declaring his profession as 'businessman' on his arrival in Brazil. In 1968, after they had moved their main residence to New York, Rahmo visited São Paulo where he declared his profession as 'banker' and stayed at an apartment on Avenida Paulista—a few doors down from where Edmond Safra had lived ten years earlier. Between 1948 and 1954, after his Syrian travel documents had become invalid, Rahmo travelled on a UN document and on passports from Central America; he then acquired an Israeli passport 'under mysterious circumstances'[11]—Brazilian immigration records show that it was issued in 1955 citing Tel Aviv as a place of birth—which he used until he became a US citizen in the 1990s.

Ezra and Lucy Choueke[12]

Aleppine Jews in Kobe were a small community of perhaps thirty families, but they were a regionally and globally connected one. They belonged to a global network of Aleppines—based in Aleppo, Beirut, Manchester, Milan, Buenos Aires and New York—which converged on Kobe, as well as Shanghai and Hong Kong, as East Asia became a source of high-quality textiles undercutting European products in the 1930s. Most were not as wealthy as the D. family and the Sassoons, but came with relatively modest resources of their own and intended to return to Syria once they had accumulated some reserves. Another member of the same prayer group (*minyan*) in Kobe as Rahmo Sassoon was Ezra Choueke. In Aleppo, Choueke had been a travelling salesman through Syria, employed by a Christian importer of textiles. In 1935, his employer sent him to Kobe, where he established himself both as a commercial agent and as a trader on his own account. Ezra and his Aleppine-born wife Polissa (known as Lucy) exported cotton sheeting, shirting, blends and jacquards. They expanded their network of customers through her brothers in Palestine and through Syrian Jewish contacts in Brooklyn, to whom they shipped tablecloths, shoes and clothing accessories. They bought up excess goods taking up warehouse space in Japan—clothing and fabrics from cancelled orders and wastage allowances from large orders from the US which could be sold in markets outside the US, such as Panama and Latin America where there was a Syrian diaspora.

In 1941, the United States embargoed international trade with Japan. Lucy turned to trading currency and food on the black market. The

couple started exporting again after 1945 as US demand grew for Japanese goods, with Ezra shipping goods to two Syrian Jewish importers in New York and to Jewish customers who had moved from the Middle East to Italy. While Ezra focused on radios and electronics, his wife exported pearls and jewellery. They were able to put the Syrian Jewish owners of a large electronic firm in Mexico in touch with Japanese suppliers, including a forerunner of Panasonic. After 1947, Lucy's brother Rafoul used his record store in Aleppo—for which he sourced goods in Beirut—as a front for smuggling Jews out of Syria. He later moved to Hong Kong where he worked as a buying agent, shipping clothes, shoes and accessories to customers whom he had smuggled out, and to others to whom they had recommended him. Lucy's other brother David had been a commercial agent in East Asia since 1933, exporting cotton, including from Kobe (where he was a competitor to Ezra), and then based himself in Hong Kong. When Rafoul joined him in Hong Kong, he moved to Milan to look for a Syrian Jewish bride. Rafoul expanded the business, exporting Chinese goods around the world.

In the 1970s, many import agents moved from Kobe to China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea. Ezra and Lucy stayed in Kobe but sourced goods from China, attending the Canton Fair in 1978, and banked in Hong Kong. They thought of moving to Brooklyn for the education and marriage of their children; however, they stayed in Kobe while their children moved to the United States and Mexico where they expanded the family's trading business, working in jewellery, electronics and fashion. The family went on to supply Target and Walmart, major US chains. When Ezra and Lucy retired as commercial agents, they transferred their customers to Albert Hamway, a religious member of the Jewish community. Albert Hamway and his daughter Gail had arrived in Kobe from New York in 1957. Gail Hamway described their family as the 'only Orthodox' family in Kobe; her father had kosher food shipped in from New York,[13] and he presided over synagogue services, ensuring that the prayers mostly followed the Aleppine rite, which appealed to the Syrian majority. He put a plaque at the port, inviting any Jew who needed a meal to call him, and in that way came to host several visiting businessmen. In 1968-69, when the Kobe community raised money to replace Rahmo Sassoon's old warehouse with a more solidly constructed synagogue, Albert Hamway instructed the architect to design it so that it resembled the Shaare Zion synagogue in Brooklyn.[14] Shortly after Ezra and Lucy transferred their customers to him on their retirement, he decided to leave Japan and return to New

York. They then introduced their customers to a Muslim commercial agent and a good friend of theirs in Kobe—a move which surprised some of their customers initially.

Mike Sutton

According to a memoir written by his daughter, Claudette Sutton (2014), Mike Sutton travelled from Aleppo to China in 1941 at the age of 19, sent by his importer father Selim who feared the rise of Arab nationalism and the decline of Jewish fortunes in Aleppo. Selim preferred his sons to go into the medical professions rather than commerce and saw Shanghai as a way station for his sons to get to the US, for which there was a long wait for visas. Sutton was employed in China by Selim's brothers, who were importers and US citizens based in New York with an export office in Shanghai, for hand-embroidered linens managed by a Syrian Jew from Brooklyn. International trade was shut down during the war, after which Mike resumed travelling within China and to Manila, Hong Kong and trading posts in Japan, buying tablecloths, linens and pillowcases for the US market. He and his friends did not experience an 'enveloping' Syrian Jewish community of their own in Shanghai, but socialised mainly within their own families and were friends with Christian as well as Jewish Syrians and Lebanese. Cultural and social boundaries were more fluid in Shanghai than he had known in Aleppo; for example, he had a Russian Orthodox girlfriend. In 1947, Mike Sutton achieved his goal of entry to the US. He settled in a culturally Americanised suburb of Washington, where he took over his father-in-law's retail business in children's clothes. He attributed his ability to live away from the centre of Syrian Jewish life in Brooklyn to his experience of living independently from family and community in the Shanghai trading post.

Analysis: The Reconfiguration of Syrian Jewish Trading Networks

These biographies show that some Aleppine Jews leaving the Middle East in the first half of the twentieth century sojourned in East and South East Asian trading ports, especially from the 1930s, when high-quality East Asian textiles began to rival more expensive European ones. Those who travelled operated either as independent businessmen or as agents for their family firms in Aleppo, Milan, Manchester and New York. Ezra Sitt, the well-known Syrian merchant mentioned above

who moved from Aleppo to New York city in 1892, imported embroidered tableware and shoelaces from Japan, which he sourced through an Aleppine Jewish agent (Sutton 1998). Syrian Jews operating in East Asia frequently travelled between nodes—Kobe, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Manila and later Bangkok—to procure supplies for their customers; some also sojourned for a few years in one node before moving to another. For example, Sutton's interviews show that Isaac Djemal, born in Aleppo in 1912, travelled to Kobe where he resided from 1936-38, trading textiles with his brothers who lived in Syria and Lebanon. After Kobe, commerce took him to Shanghai (1938-41) and then—when the Japanese seized Shanghai in 1941 and confined many Jews to the ghetto of Hongkou—he moved to Thailand (Sutton 1988). Because each settlement was integrated into wider regional networks, residents were able to manage political turbulence by cultivating alternative bases which they could fall back on if they were forced to move (Clarence-Smith 2004).

The biographies also suggest that until the 1940s, Aleppo continued to function as a regional distribution centre for textiles imported from Manchester, Milan and East Asia, for merchants visiting from across the Middle East (see Choueke 2021). However, Moise D.'s trajectory points to the significance of Beirut as a node of elite Syrian Jewish mobilities. In the interwar period, Beirut developed infrastructures for the Jewish community: a newspaper, a bank run by Edmond Safra (a scion of an Aleppine Jewish banking dynasty), a new synagogue which opened in 1920, a community council funded by an obligatory tax—with committees for poverty relief and education and a burial society, holiday resorts in the mountains at Aley and Bamdoun and connections between community elites and Lebanese politicians (Gross 2022, Tomer 2012). After the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Jewish population of Beirut rose significantly, as Jews flocked in from Syria and Iraq; the city became a node for organising the clandestine passage of Jews out of Syria. Eventually, the political tensions between Arab nationalism and Zionism reached Beirut too: through the 1950s, many elite Jewish merchants left for Milan and cities in Latin America.

Milan attracted many, including Moise D. and his brothers, Abraham D. and Rahmo Sassoon. Visas were fairly easily arranged for those leaving Beirut, and by 1947 its textile and car industries were reopening and required trade financing; its jewellery industry also made the city a centre for gold trading (Gross 2022). Edmond Safra set up a gold trading operation supplying European gold to markets in the Middle

East (Lebanon and Kuwait), India and the Far East (ibid). Some Syrian Jewish families had established a presence in the city in the 1920s, joining a predominantly Ashkenazi community that had been established in 1866, and in some cases introduced wealthy new arrivals to Italian Jewish families. For a few years, from 1947 to the mid-1950s, Milan was an important commercial and community hub for Syrian Jewish business families. Around a thousand Middle Eastern Jews arrived in the city, perhaps doubling the Sephardic population; in 1954, Syrian Jews led the establishment of a Sephardic prayer room in the main synagogue (Rossetto 2022). Traders based in East Asia visited the city to find a wife. Some, during their visits, formed business partnerships with Aleppine Jewish financiers based in Europe who were seeking to fund trading enterprises in East Asia (see Gross 2022). Several Milan-based merchants, such as Moise D., sent their children to the Jewish Whittingehame College in Brighton, which attracted elite families fleeing the Middle East after 1948, until it closed in 1967.

Peripheries as Stabilising Forces

The durability of Aleppo's Jewish trading networks through the twentieth century was facilitated by the staged nature of Aleppo's decline as a Jewish centre, as it faced first an economic challenge from the late nineteenth century and then a political one in the 1940s. This chronology enabled an alternative centre to develop in Beirut in the interwar period. Yet Beirut's pre-eminence was also short-lived, as economic changes—the decline of gold-trading opportunities between Europe and East Asia—and rising political tensions connected to the partition of Palestine led to an emigration of Jewish business elites from Beirut after the Second World War and through the 1950s. Despite the rapid decline of Beirut as a centre, the trading network did not dissipate. Rather, multiple new centres developed in what had previously been peripheries: Milan, Buenos Aires, São Paolo and New York. This suggests that any account of the durability of the trading network should acknowledge not simply the stability of centres, but the role of peripheries in providing stability in times of turbulence. Peripheral nodes in East Asia and South East Asia provided a point of refuge for capital and people who were politically precarious, as in Abraham D's case. The mix of cooperation and competition between family members described by Ezra Choueke in Kobe and Hong Kong illustrates the dual function of these locations as both commercial nodes and sites of

refuge. East Asian cities could also, as in Mike Sutton's case, serve as way stations to more desirable locales with more stringent immigration controls, such as New York, which was to become the dominant centre of the whole network (Sutton 2014). Finally, East Asian ports served as fall-back bases and alternative supply nodes, providing flexibility for the wider network, as in the case of Isaac Djemal and New York-based merchants who invested in Manila. In England, Brighton and Haywards Heath—sites of the Jewish Whittingehame College between the 1930s and 1967—also served as points of refuge and cultural preservation, enabling Jewish identity to be transmitted intergenerationally among Sephardi families leaving the Middle East. The durability of the network depended in part on merchants' strategies of deploying capital and people in multiple peripheries prior to and in response to shocks.

Centres: Where Different Types of Circulation Interact

Peripheries could also develop into new centres, vital to the reproduction of the network as a whole; this was the case in Beirut, Milan, Buenos Aires, São Paulo and New York. The economic, political and historical context of each node helps to explain why particular peripheral nodes were able to develop into new centres. Milan's textile and jewellery industries recovered quickly after the Second World War, offering opportunities for gold and textile traders, visas were offered to Beiruti Jews, and the city already had a small Sephardic merchant community with connections to wider Italian Jewish peers, enabling it to become a centre for elite reproduction. Latin America, Argentina and especially Brazil were industrialising rapidly after the Second World War and offered economic opportunities for those with capital and trading skills. Visas were accessible to wealthy Sephardim, and key cities already had a demographic base of Syrian Jewish petty traders and some importers. Ongoing Syrian Jewish migration to New York since the late nineteenth century had also established a base community there, and after the Second World War, the city was increasingly attractive as a centre of global finance and trade.

From the perspective of circulation societies, the question is not just why particular locales flourished, but how the network as a whole retained its integrity: what kinds of circulation connected the locales and defined them as nodes of a translocal Syrian Jewish network. An account of mobilities and trading connections through time helps illuminate the role that particular locales played vis-à-vis the wider network. Beirut

and Milan, peripheries to Aleppo at the turn of the twentieth century, became temporary centres of finance, marriage and transit in the interwar and post war periods. As such, they enabled merchant networks to expand commercially, reproduce themselves socially and reconfigure themselves geographically. They became centres, temporarily, in the sense of organising the dynamics of the wider network. They were able to do this because they were nodes of multiple kinds of circulation which intertwined in a way that injected new vitality—more dynamic and expansive forms of circulation—into the wider network. For a few years after the Second World War, Milan became a place where Syrian Jewish businessmen came to look for a wife; Rahmo Sassoon and David Choueke visited Milan from Kobe and Hong Kong respectively in the late 1940s. It was also a centre for gold trading between Europe and East Asia, which Edmond Safra and his consortium of Syrian Jewish bankers developed. And it was a transit hub between the Middle East and Latin America for those fleeing the Middle East—including the gold trader Moise D. who moved there from Beirut after being exposed to mounting political risk. These various forms of mobility and circulation could interact with productive results. For example, Edmond Safra (relocating his gold trading operations) and Rahmo Sassoon (seeking a bride) were introduced to one another and formed a business partnership which lasted for decades, bringing trade financing to many Syrian Jews in East Asia and South East Asia. Networks formed and expanded through the intersection of multiple kinds of mobility. Another example is Rafoul Choueke who, like Moise D., was an agent in Beirut organising the clandestine emigration of Jews from Syria. He later became a commercial agent in East Asia for some of the merchants whom he had smuggled out and for their wider network to whom they recommended him. Fundamental to the creation of this wider network was the status of Beirut as a centre both of commerce (where Choueke sourced goods from France for import into Syria) and of clandestine emigration. Since mobilities connected to marriage and clandestine emigration were tied to Syrian Jewish identity, their interaction with trade also served to reinforce the cohesion of the commercial network.

Communal Institutions: Circulating and 'Boosting' Translocal Values

In both peripheral and central nodes, business elites financed or supported the establishment or development of communal institutions—especially synagogues. Rahmo Sassoon played this role in Kobe, and

Abraham D. did so in São Paulo with Edmond Safra and others. In Milan, a separate Sephardic prayer room was established after Syrian elites arrived in larger numbers after 1947. Similar institutions were established in most places where Syrian Jews settled. Such institutions can enable ethnic or religious persistence in a specific locale (Zenner 2000), and the vigour of their leadership can determine the degree to which communities in particular locales maintain their ethnic and religious identities and boundaries (Milkewitz 1991). These institutions also played a role in enabling translocal circulations between nodes. In cities in the Americas where Syrian communities were large enough, they often sought to appoint rabbis from notable lineages. They also tended to promote endogamy—officially among Jews, but also cultural-ethnic endogamy among Syrian or even Aleppine Jews. The value of recognisably Syrian or Aleppine names was therefore reproduced. As these names were recognisable in any nodes of the Syrian Jewish global network, they had a value—a name value—that circulated exclusively within the network. Marriages arranged in Milan in the 1940s and 1950s, whose parties subsequently circulated to other nodes, also reproduced the value of elite names within the wider network.

Donations and leadership roles in synagogues and associated institutions also reproduced the name values of elites. Syrian synagogues, for example in Manchester and New York, display the names and sometimes images of donors and religious and community leaders. Such name values moved between institutions, as they were created in a communal institution in one locale and recognised in another. In Damascus, Farhi's name coded prestige linked to wealth and community leadership. The value of the Farhi name was recreated in Beirut (as community president); it was recognised in shops there (enabling Eduardo Farhi to find a job) and subsequently recognised in synagogues in south, central and north America, where Eduardo took a series of positions. Abraham D. made a name as a community founder in São Paulo—a fact invoked by his grandson on the website of his real estate business in Tel Aviv 70 years later in order to establish the credentials of his company. In New York in 2023, his uncle Raffoul D. invoked the name of his cousin in São Paolo and business partner in Antwerp as well-known philanthropists who had funded the restoration of synagogues there.

Conclusion: Circulation Societies Reconsidered

The circulation of name values from older, dying centres in the Mediterranean to newly emerging centres in the Americas and their peripheries in East Asia and Israel enabled the network to maintain its coherence through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Synagogues, community centres and endogamous match-making practices did not only provide for ethnic persistence in discrete locales—the dominant approach to them in the literature; by reproducing values that circulated translocally, they also acted as nodes in a wider global network. From a mobile rather than sedentary perspective on social institutions, name values themselves were not created only by local institutions, but also by wider processes of circulation. The Farhi name had value in Latin America not just because a Farhi was community president in Rio de Janeiro, but because the name had travelled and was known to have travelled from Damascus to Beirut to Latin America, and because it had long circulated between nodes of a far-flung Syrian Jewish merchant network. The name embodied the translocality of the wider 'community', and in this sense constituted 'the community' as a cohesive, expansive entity. Eli Hedaya, interviewed by Joseph Sutton in 1983, recalled that Ezra Sitt had been 'known over the whole Syrian world—Manchester, Buenos Aires, etc., in Syrian commerce' (Sutton 1988: 264). The value of Sitt's name was constituted in part through its circulation over large distances, reflecting Nancy Munn's (1992) analysis of the relationship between value and movement through space-time. The 'Syrian world', both as a structure of circulation and as a concept available to people's imagination, was co-constituted in the early twentieth century with the name of Ezra Sitt and other prominent mobile merchants.

Alongside merchants' reputations, another aspect that circulated within the network, through time and space, were inter-familial ties. Moise D. recalled that in Milan he had become friends with a Silvera whose father had been friends with his father in Aleppo. I encountered similar reflections among Syrian and Middle Eastern Jews in New York in 2023: 'I knew him [at Whittingehame College] in Brighton, and our sons have become business partners here in New York', or 'my father knew him in Syria, and my son became friends with his grandson in New York'. As with reputations, inter-familial relationships could circulate through space and time, and their translocal properties were central to how individuals constructed

the value of such relationships. Even demographically minor or transitory nodes—such as Whittingehame College in Brighton from the 1930s to 1967, or the marriage hub in Milan during the late 1940s and 1950s—take on a new significance when the network is considered as a structure through which name values and inter-familial relationships circulated.

In addition to name value and inter-familial relationships, ethical and aesthetic standards and templates also circulated exclusively within the network, maintaining its coherence as it was reconfigured geographically in a time of turbulence. Aesthetic templates circulated through the network via synagogues. For example, the establishment of separate Syrian synagogues was often connected to a preference for the Aleppine style of prayer and Torah recitation, and a foundation was established in New York in the 1970s to publish prayer books according to the Aleppine rite and distribute them in Latin America, Europe and Asia as well as North America. When the synagogue in Kobe was being rebuilt in 1967-68, Albert Hamway instructed the architect to copy the design of the Shaare Zion synagogue in Brooklyn: its architectural template circulated from the centre in New York to the periphery in Kobe. Synagogues were also nodes through which ethical standards circulated. The prohibition of marrying converts, considered until today to be distinctive of Syrian Jewish identity in New York, was issued in Buenos Aires by an Aleppine rabbi in 1927, and subsequently adopted and proclaimed in NY in 1935 and reaffirmed in 1946, 1972 and 1984 (Roffe 2006), where a copy of the proclamation was displayed on the wall of the Magen David synagogue in Bensonhurst. Like a signal travelling with a telecommunications network, it travelled from Buenos Aires to New York, where it was 'boosted' (Zuntz 2023) or amplified by rabbis at Syrian Jewish synagogues in the city. Similarly in 1983, on a visit to New York from Buenos Aires, Moise D. invoked the pious sociality of the community in New York as a standard by which to measure communal life in Buenos Aires. The same year, Eduardo Farhi, who had taken a job at a synagogue in New York having turned down an offer from Buenos Aires, invoked the greater levels of intermarriage in Argentina as a reason to rank New York above Buenos Aires. Standards of sociality and religiosity were not simply promulgated and cultivated in particular locales; they circulated within the network from node to node as individuals drew comparisons, posited hierarchies and advocated emulation. The circulating values were not uncontested and could

shift through time. In 2023, Raffoul D., who thirty years earlier had moved from São Paulo to New York, suggested that marriage between Syrian and European Jews was desirable, implying that Syrian or Sephardic boundary maintenance—which some associated with the community in New York—could be a negative form of insularity.

Previous accounts of circulation societies (Aslanian 2014; Markovits 2000) have focused on the movement of women, religious specialists, information and collateral-free credit as processes which establish and reproduce the cohesiveness of an ethnic trading network. Syrian Jewish trajectories in the twentieth century enable a reconsideration of the nature and durability of merchant networks, and the ways in which particular nodes become central to them. This trading society was constituted as a cohesive network not just by the circulation of people and materials, but also by the circulation of ideological forms—templates, standards and name values—exclusively within its channels. Nodes became central when their institutions succeeded in amplifying such values, whether name-cachet or particular aesthetic and ethical standards, making them available for further circulation—which is to say recognition elsewhere in the network. Community leadership committees in Beirut and São Paolo; Edmond Safra's banks in Beirut and São Paolo; synagogues in New York and Buenos Aires; and marriage match-making in post-war Milan, can all be understood in this light. Such institutions not only provided for socio-cultural boundary maintenance in particular places; they also maintained the coherence of the wider network as boosters for values that circulated across it. The heyday of this multi-nodal commercial world may have passed, as New York-based merchants increasingly invest more of their capital in New York real estate. But the invocation of Abraham D.'s name on a real estate website in Tel Aviv suggests that efforts are still being made to circulate Syrian Jewish name values across time and space.

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NOTES

1 Key works in English include Sutton 1979, Harel 1998, Shelemay 1998, Zenner 2000.
2 jcckobe.org (Jewish Community of Kansai), http://historyofjewishkobejapan.blogspot.com/2009/11/hi.html, accessed 15/6/23.
3 Available through www.familysearch.org, accessed 15/6/23.
4 farhi.org (Les Fleurs D'Orient), geni.com (Geni, a MyHeritage company), accessed 15/6/23.
5 Data relevant to parts of the article and the wider project is available at www.jcckobe.org, http://historyofjewishkobejapan.blogspot.com/2009/11/hi.html and https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/cgi/users/home?screen=EPrint::Summary&eprintid=856242.
6 This section draws on Sutton (1988). Pseudonyms are used for this family.
7 This section is based on interviews, genealogical archives and immigration records.
8 www.jcckobe.org (Jewish Community of Kansai), accessed 15/6/23.
9 Moise D. had arrived in Brazil in 1953 with a Panamanian passport issued a year earlier; his sons who were born in Aleppo and Beirut travelled from London to Rio de Janeiro in 1955 on Argentinian passports.
10 This section draws on archives at http://historyofjewishkobejapan.blogspot.com and jcckobe.org (Jewish Community of Kansai), accessed 15/6/23.
11 www.jcckobe.org (Jewish Community of Kansai), accessed 15/6/23.
12 The account of trading networks and relationships in this section is based on the biography of Lucy and Ezra Choueke by their grandson Ezra Choueke (2021).
13 http://historyofjewishkobejapan.blogspot.com/2009/11/hi.html, accessed 15/6/23.
14 http://historyofjewishkobejapan.blogspot.com/2009/11/hi.html, accessed 15/6/23.

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