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Racing Pianos at the Harbour: Sephardi Jewish Masculinity Put to the Test

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Abstract This essay explores how Sephardi Jews from Thessaloniki, Greece, harnessed racial and gendered discourses to secure scarce resources, particularly immigration permits to Mandatory Palestine during the 1930s. Leaders of the Yishuv viewed their bodies as robust and well-suited for maritime labour, aligning with Zionist ideals of conquering the sea and cultivating the land. Salonican Jews capitalized on these perceptions to advance the migration of impoverished workers to Palestine. By examining archival materials and memoirs, the essay delves into the intersection of race, labour, and masculinity, revealing how Sephardi men reshaped Jewish identity within the Mediterranean landscape and Zionist ambitions.

Keywords Sephardic Studies. Masculinity. Thessaloniki. Haifa. Zionism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Sephardi Exceptionalism. – 3 Conquering the Sea. – 4 Public Humiliation at the Port. – 5 Performing Masculinity. – 6 The Wonders of Heavy Weights. – 7 Conclusion.

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> The heart was drawn after those Jewish seamen of Salonica, handsome and upright, proud and strong, like no other Jewish diaspora. Where would you find such Jews, with iron muscles gripping oars? […] All of them instil fear in their neighbouring nations, and stop working at the port and city on Sabbaths and holidays. When were these Jews born […] capable of stirring a true revolution in conquering the ports, in the Land of Israel? (Molcho 1951, 20)

1 Introduction

During the 1930s the Sephardim of Thessaloniki (or Salonica), a major port city in the eastern Mediterranean, became the subject of a conversation about Jewish bodies and the role they should play in the Jewish national movement in Mandatory Palestine. The leaders of the Yishuv (the Jewish community of Palestine) of eastern European origin imagined Sephardi bodies as strong and therefore well prepared for the 'conquest of labour' in those fields still not dominated by Jews. Some Salonicans took advantage of this discourse to achieve their goals, primarily that of relocating impoverished Jews from Thessaloniki to British Palestine, where they could better sustain their families.[1]

This essay demonstrates how racial and gendered discourses were utilized by a racialized party to gain access to scarce resources, in this case immigration permits for poor workers from Thessaloniki. A lively discourse about their bodies and physical skills, portraying Sephardi Jews as more naturally suited to the Mediterranean landscape and the sea, enabled Greek Jews to assert their expertise in maritime labour. Such discourse was activated in concrete moments when there was a burning need to leave a strong impression on British officials and to convince sceptical Jewish leaders of the importance of Greek Jews to the project of Jewish labour in British Palestine. Thus, I examine the spread of a gendered image of masculinity from Salonica to Palestine in the early twentieth century by various agents, primarily Zionist activists, Salonican community leaders, and workers (roles that often overlapped in the history of labour Zionism). Here I follow recent studies which seek to explore racial notions among Sephardi subjects themselves, as the Jews of the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean were more than passive bearers of others' knowledge about their bodies (Smith 2022; Moreno, Karkason 2024).

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1 On poverty in Salonica and its literary representations see Gruss 2012.

During the period I examine, the decline of Thessaloniki's port and the marginalization of its Jewish workers by Greek nationalists meant that many Jews had become poor and needed to find new occupational opportunities abroad.[2] Following the steps of other immigrants since the early twentieth century, many chose to settle in France (Mordoch 2021, 8-9),[3] while others in Argentina or the US.[4] Mandatory Palestine was a far less attractive destination. Even there, not every Jewish worker was in high demand: hoping to form a new socialist society and to create a Jewish state liberated from the 'maladies' of European Jews and their urbanity, Jewish leaders sought those well-equipped to work, especially in cultivating the land.

In pursuit of the dream of Jewish statehood, Salonican Jews offered an even rarer set of talents: they were men of the sea. Menachem Usishkin, the Zionist leader, described the inhabitants of Thessaloniki as the "Jewish sailor, master of the sea, with his strong muscles and national pride, whom we Ashkenazim aspire to see in our lifetime" (Molcho 1951, 42). Drawing on memoirs, archival sources, newspapers, and recent studies such as the works of Shai Srougo and Kobi Cohen-Hattab on modern maritime Jewish history, this essay examines how racialized ideas about Sephardi Jews were put to the test in the quest for Jewish dominance of local harbours, as stevedores had to publicly display their physical prowess alongside Arab workers. Through a gendered lens, the essay also explores the tensions surrounding Sephardi masculinity, which occupied an impossible cultural space. I argue that such masculinity was perceived as neither Ashkenazi, Jewish, nor Arab – while simultaneously being reimagined as a Zionist ideal for a new Jewish subject who could surpass Arab masculinity. This modern Mediterranean fantasy, imported from Thessaloniki to the shores of Haifa, materialized in struggle with the harsh realities harbour workers of modest means faced in the Mandate.[5]

2 Recently, Shai Srougo challenged this narrative, demonstrating that the process through which Greek workers replaced Jewish ones was only partially successful and was more gradual than historians have previously assumed. Still, at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s many Jews found themselves unemployed and sought to immigrate (Srougo 2014, 324-6).

3 See for example the biography of Vidal Nahoum (Morin 2009).

4 See for instance Naar 2007.

5 There is a growing interest in Haifa, its port, and shore as a site of Jewish and Palestinian modernity, as well as a site for interracial and interfaith border-crossing. See for example Hillel 2019 or Aharoni 2019.

2 Sephardi Exceptionalism

Sephardi Jews had been living in Thessaloniki since their expulsion from Spain. It was in this city, among other urban centres in the Eastern Mediterranean, where their Sephardi identity was created in a centuries-long process of community formation. Many of those Jews who decided to stay in Iberia and were willingly or forcefully converted to Catholicism, in Spain and later Portugal, also found their way to Thessaloniki during the sixteenth century, where they started practicing Judaism openly (Ankori 1988). Within a few years, the city became a "Jewish enclave in an otherwise Muslim state" (Levy 1992, 6). In 1520, more than half of the city's 30,000 citizens were Jews; they considered their city a 'second Jerusalem', and a centre for Torah learning and rabbinical innovation (Mazower 2005, 49-50).

400 years later, their descendants thought of Thessaloniki as their home; only a small group among them considered the alternative of immigrating to Eretz Israel. Following the Greek conquest of the city in 1912, a growing number of Jews began to see themselves as belonging first to the young Greek society (Naar 2016, 60-3), but Judeo-Spanish was still their native and main language, as they very slowly acculturated to the Greek language and its culture. A hint of their strong commitment to their Iberian heritage could be found in the decision of around 1,950 Salonican Jews to apply in 1913 for Portuguese or Spanish citizenship: they preferred these two European states over the young Greek one. This choice later saved the life of 366 of them, who were deported to Bergen-Belsen instead of Auschwitz, from which they were later transported to Palestine (Varon-Vassard 2021, 48, 58-9).

While it is difficult to determine the exact numbers, there were around 60,000 Jews living in the city around 1912, around a third of the city's general population (Gounaris 1993, 500-1). David ben Gurion recounted going to study the Turkish language in Thessaloniki (1912) and not in the capital Istanbul, "since I knew that it is a Jewish city, and indeed when living there I saw that it is the most Jewish city in the whole world, and even in Eretz Israel there is no Jewish city like it, since all the labour in this city – in factories, workshops and even at the port – is being done by Jewish labourers" (Ben Gurion 1972, 415). Thessaloniki was virtually synonymous with its port – and the port with its Jews. Famously, there were so many Jews involved in its maritime activities that on Shabbat work at the port would almost cease.

Foreign and particularly European travellers to Thessaloniki were impressed by the vast Jewish presence in the city. The main reason for their attraction was that the Sephardim of Thessaloniki were not like any other European Jews they had known or read about before. In his 1929 memoir of Thessaloniki, *The White Tower* (named

after the ancient and iconic tower located on the waterfront of the city), the journalist and Zionist organizer Yosef ben Pinhas 'Uzi'el (1888-1968), reported the great impression his fellow Jews had left on the Norwegian author Alexander L. Kielland (1849-1906) ('Uzi'el 1929, 9-10).[6] Kielland had published a short portrayal of the city in his 1891 collection of stories and essays, *Men and Animals*, and 'Uzi'el remained fond of this description decades later. Kielland, he wrote, was drawn above all to the clothes these 'typical Jews' wore – their blue cloaks and long, wide robes – which made them move "with a special oriental grace" ('Uzi'el 1929, 10-11). The author praised those Jews "with a black beard decorating suntanned or white faces, with an expression of strength and confidence" ('Uzi'el 1929, 11).[7]

'Uzi'el lived in Thessaloniki up until his *Aliyah* (immigration; literally: ascent) to Palestine. Although he was a passionate Zionist (and translated Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland* to Judeo-Spanish), he continued to cherish the north European traveller's admiration of his compatriots in Thessaloniki. He used Kielland's gaze to offer a Hebrew readership a flattering portrait of his old community:

> If I were a Jew and lived in Northern Europe, where Jews must feel they are black and small and their legs are twisted, then, I would have rewarded myself an annual trip to Salonica […] I would have asked these relatives of mine of the same race to lend me for a few days their wide *cübbe* and thin and bright *entari*, and out of joy and pride of the special beauty of the chosen people, as they are revealed and embodied there, I would have straightened my legs and filled my soul with contempt to the people of the north, with their high hats and watery eyes.[8] ('Uzi'el 1929, 11)

Kielland describes a European Jew who, once a year, can escape his broken and twisted body and enter a space where oriental clothing transforms him into a new subject – a healthy, respected Jew who might look down on fellow Jews with disdain. The author attributes lesser bodies to the Jews of northern Europe, but his racial perspective allows for transformation: one can always travel to Thessaloniki.

Kielland was struck by the existence of other Jewish ways of life, which he viewed as noble and reminiscent of the lives of the biblical 'chosen people'. He also portrays Thessaloniki and its Jewish lifestyle as a solution to the Jewish Problem. Even before Zionist immigrants claimed to be the heirs to the ancient Jewish residents of the Land of Israel, Salonican Jews were seen as fulfilling that role. "I have never

6 For a short biography of 'Uzi'el see Benvenisti 1982, 185-8.

7 For the original Norwegian text see Kielland 1891, 244-6.

8 For the *cübbe* and *entari* see Refael 2001, 28-31.

seen in my life more beautiful people than these Jews whom I have seen in Thessaloniki, as they are walking outside on Shabbat through the streets or outside the city walls", Kielland wrote, and added:

> I was especially impressed by two youngsters, maybe brothers, tall as any other Portuguese, their hair and beard are wonderfully beautiful, their skin is brown and dark, their eyes are deep, and everything has a kind of calmness and self-confidence which is categorically different from what we see among the Jews. ('Uzi'el 1929, 11-12)

In Kielland's imagination, it was not just the Ottoman cultural landscape or the port city that made Salonican Jews appear beautiful; their distinctiveness was also racial, as they were both Sephardi and resembled non-Jewish Portuguese men. Their distinctive outfits captured his attention as well: as seen in this watercolour **[fig. 1]**, a modern reconstruction of nineteenth-century local outfit, the Jews of Salonica were wearing the *Entari* of striped silk over their garments, and over the *Entari* the *Cübbe*, an outer robe in the Ottoman fashion.[9]

Figure 1
Nikos Stavroulakis. 1988. Watercolor. Athens.
In *Sephardi and Romaniote Jewish Costumes in Greece and Turkey: 16 Watercolours*. The Jewish Museum of Greece, Athens

9 Working class people also wore the *entari* on Holidays, even if one less luxurious than the one depicted here. Molcho 1950, 94-5, 167.

Kielland declared that, after visiting Thessaloniki, he could finally understand what he had read about Jews in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius. Prior to this visit, he had regarded Josephus' accounts as mere legend; now, he grasped how these ancient Jews could have fought back against the Romans and inflicted significant casualties. As we will see, these images of Salonican men travelled to Mandatory Palestine, where Greek Sephardi émigrés actualized stories about their unique masculinity as they laboured in the Haifa harbour.

Around the same time 'Uzi'el published this portrait of Salonica, Salonican Jews laid the groundwork for a future Jewish presence at the port. As we will observe, networks of recent migrants, such as 'Uzi'el, helped pave the way for future migrants to enter a restricted labour market. Similar efforts to 'conquer' maritime labour had already occurred at the Jaffa port, where, in 1925, Jewish porters and wagon drivers from Thessaloniki began transporting goods to nearby areas. "This group introduced new methods for lifting heavy loads that the Arabs had neither known nor imagined before. Their organized and efficient work became the talk of the day among both the Mandate authorities and the Arabs alike", explained the entrepreneur and Zionist activist Shlomo Venecia who had immigrated from Thessaloniki only a few years earlier, highlighting the novelty of Salonican presence at the harbour (Molcho 1951, 52). Another small wave of immigration during the years 1929-32 laid the foundations for the transformation that took place at the port later in the decade (Srougo 2020, 875-6). If the Jewish authorities had previously ignored the water in favour of the land, by the mid-1930s, Kobi Cohen-Hattab identifies "a 180-degree turn […] in the attitude of the central institutions towards the sea; seafaring rose on the central leadership's agenda" (Cohen-Hattab 2019, 19).

How did this shift manifest in the performance of Jewish masculinity, and what role did Salonican men play in driving this change? In the next section, I trace this transformation as embodied in the porters. All rested on their ability to meet (or fall short of) the high expectations placed on them in the 'conquest of the sea'. And while Shai Srougo recently provided a detailed analysis of labour dynamics at the Haifa port (Srougo 2023, 866-84), my focus here is more modest: I aim to explore how Salonican Jews performed a distinct form of masculinity essential to the success of the Zionist project.

3 Conquering the Sea

"The Haifa port with its deepwater harbor guarded the gateway of the empire to the east, as well as the approach to the Suez Canal from the north": Deborah Bernstein evokes this significance in her description of the newly opened Haifa port in 1933, calling it "the hub of the life of the city" (Bernstein 2000, 141). To execute its important goals, it needed workers, and debates over their identity began in the earliest stages of the port's development. The Zionist activist Berl Repetur noted in *Davar* newspaper that "many fields of labour connected to the sea and the port have not yet been conquered by the Jewish worker, and the value of Hebrew labour is not yet found in these areas".[10] Historian Anita Shapira explains that such 'conquest of labour' referred not only to replacing Arab workers with Jewish ones but also to the idea of mastering oneself – overcoming the physical demands of labour and finding fulfilment in the struggle of hard work (Shapira 1999, 65).

Repetur contrasted maritime labour with other professions where Jewish workers were by now present and active, asserting that the sea remained largely inaccessible to them, despite the limited success of Jewish efforts to break into port labour in both Jaffa and Haifa. He attributed this problem to the Yishuv's prevailing attitude, which held that shipping and port work were too arduous for Jews. Repetur strongly rejected this view, advocating for Jewish participation in these demanding fields. "With the Jewish capital paid for portage [...] we could have sustained hundreds of new Hebrew families and fortified political positions whose importance is enormous". He also lamented the fact that Arab workers outnumbered Jewish workers three to one, and that in the fields of shipping, portage, and stevedoring there were only 50-60 Jewish workers.[11] From his perspective, there was no real value to commerce at the port, if it was not carried out by Jewish labourers. And he pushed against the notion, still common during this period, that one could not find Jews capable of strenuous physical work.

The answer to this challenge was to bring in skilled workers who, despite being Jewish, had a 'different' physicality. Jewish Salonican seamen fit the bill, both because of their objective skills and due to the reputation they had earned as physically superior to other European Jews; they already had a 'Zionist body' (Gluzman 2010). In

10 *Davar*, 31 October 1933, 10-11.

11 *Davar*, 31 October 1933, 10-11. In general, stevedores were considered more skilled than porters. See for example the request for 'good stevedores' versus porters who could only work at warehouses: Letter to the Palestine Office in Salonica (21 February 1935), The Pinhas Lavon Institute for Labour Movement Research (Tel Aviv, Israel) (=Lavon), IV-250-27-5-74. For the classification of porters see Broudo 1961, 74-6.

the pages of *Haaretz* (September 1933), the journalist and novelist Baruch 'Uzi'el (1901-1977) called on the authorities to help these seamen settle in Palestine.[12] He noted that no other group of Jews could adapt to maritime professions as easily and as quickly, given that the Salonicans had long worked the sea. Later, he published a memorandum to the Jewish Chamber of Commerce in Haifa:

> There is one place in the world where Jews have been engaged in maritime work for generations and that place is Salonica. There, you find veteran sailors, powerful dock labourers, and fishermen by birth. If we want to establish a class of maritime workers in the Land of Israel without many sacrifices and without much toil, we must turn, therefore, to this city and make use of its seamen. (Eshel 1984, 40)

Other Salonicans in Palestine also promoted the idea that a solution to the Yishuv's maritime challenges was to be found among the members of their former community. "Only port workers of this kind, who were accustomed to such hard work for generations and generations and were much experienced with the sea, could perform any role, whether light or heavy", wrote Isaac Molcho, another influential Zionist activist and journalist from Thessaloniki (Molcho 1951, 52). In Molcho's and Baruch 'Uzi'el's perspectives, we find an almost evolutionary perspective on the Salonican maritime experience: they were prepared for this work not only as the result of concrete physical training in their own lifetimes, but also thanks to a centuries-long process that had transformed their bodies.

Salonican men had their own reasons and motivations for immigrating to Palestine. Enthusiasm about the Zionist project spread after World War I and into the 1920s. By 1930, Zionism became the leading political movement in Thessaloniki. A nationalistic trend that promoted intolerance against the Jewish population also pushed Jews to leave the country. "The Salonican Jews are not Greek patriots but Jewish patriots. They are closer to the Turks than to us", said the Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos (Mazower 2005, 382). The 1931 riots against 220 Jewish families who lived at the Campbell camp (known as the Campbell Riot) led more Jews to wonder if Thessaloniki was their home.

Another prominent factor was growing poverty, as many porters came from the lower classes of Jewish society (Hasid 1997, 41). Yet even poor Salonicans did not consider leaving for British Palestine. The scarcity of entry certificates issued by the British, a severe

12 On 'Uzi'el the Zionist politician and scholar of Judeo-Spanish culture see Refael 1988.

recession in Palestine, and the efforts of the Greek authorities to prevent Jews from leaving led to a smaller number of immigrants (Mazower 2005, 379). With a shortage of necessary certificates, many Greek Jews arrived first as tourists to Palestine, and only later found a way to stay permanently. The majority of these immigrants performed manual labour; only a small percentage practiced liberal professions and possessed capital (Kerem 2002, 181).

Many letters testify to the official effort to help Jewish workers leave Thessaloniki. For instance, in 1932 the Palestine Office in Thessaloniki wrote to Isaac Molcho in Jerusalem, asking that he use his influence to acquire more certificates for young women who were going through months-long agricultural training to prepare for *Aliyah*.[13] But there appears to have been even more urgency regarding bringing the men first. A letter from the Jewish Agency to the chief rabbi in Palestine, Yaakov Meir (1856-1939, who had previously served as the chief rabbi of Thessaloniki) apologized, declaring that the Agency was doing everything in its power to acquire more certificates, and insisting that the worsening conditions of Salonican Jews remained "close to their heart". At the same time, they noted that other Jewish diasporas were also going through great hardship.[14] Meanwhile, the Haifa port opened, creating even greater motivation to acquire the necessary documents.

4 Public Humiliation at the Port

The Haifa-Salonica Committee (later: The Maritime Committee) was established in 1933. Aba Hushi (1898-1969), the later legendary 'red' mayor of Haifa, joined the Committee and expanded its activities as the Secretary of the Haifa Labour Council. He took over responsibility for bringing Salonican workers and appealed to Moshe Chertok (later Sharet, 1894-1965), head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency. Through Chertok he secured immigration permits for fifteen Salonicans who committed to working at the Haifa port. The first fifteen were selected by the Palestine Office's officials, who promised they had chosen "the most skilled and capable elements for the work of unloading and loading ships" (Eshel 1984, 42). The dockworkers arrived in July, 1933 and were given a few days of rest before starting work at the port. However, it became apparent on day

13 The Palestine Office in Salonica to Isaac Molcho (07/11/1932), Archive of the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center (Tel Aviv, Israel), P-16 (Isaac Molcho's Collection), Judeo-Spanish in Latin characters. I wish to thank archivist Anat Shimoni for her help.

14 A letter from the Aliya Department of the Jewish Agency to R. Jacob Meir (09/11/1932), Goldstein-Goren, P-16/174.

one that these dockworkers were entirely unfit for the task. Baruch 'Uzi'el reported that:

> With a sense of confidence and anticipation of victory, we approached to witness the work of our world-famous labourers, known for their great strength, and to derive satisfaction from our workers. But soon we were like dreamers. Are these the Jewish porters of Salonica? (Eshel 1984, 42)

Having advocated for the migrants, 'Uzi'el and other Zionist activists wished to see the fruits of their lobbying effort. But the high expectations were transformed into a deep sense of disappointment:

> Woe to the eyes that see such things. There they are, buckling under the weight on their backs, staggering under their burdens like drunkards about to fall […] My world darkened, and I could not utter a word. Had I not praised and exalted the sons of my city […] What will they say now? Indeed, I must have appeared like a liar in the eyes of others, and even I was infinitely disappointed. But no, I said to myself, this cannot be, there is a terrible mistake here, a bad dream […]
>
> Aba Hushi cast a sharp glance at us but said nothing. He turned away in disappointment and walked toward the port gate. (Eshel 1984, 42)

To the shame of the Jewish leaders involved, the Salonicans failed to deliver. The fiasco tarnished Thessaloniki's reputation, and that of its outstanding Jewish seamen, in the eyes of the Yishuv; the Jewish role in the portage sector was at stake. Baruch 'Uzi'el writes that

> The scene was bleak and embarrassing, and our ears heard the laughter of the Arab workers who were also observing the 'Jews' [*Yahud*] at work. Even the laughter of the Englishman [K.W.] Stead, the port manager, did not escape us. We knew that he was taking pleasure in our misfortune and that the whole matter of bringing Jewish dockworkers was not in accordance with his wishes. (Eshel 1984, 42)

Thus, the failure at the port was both visible and audible, and the entire port became a stage on which seamen tried and failed to perform their virtuosic skills. It was later revealed that the Salonican official responsible for selecting the workers had accepted bribes, as immigration permits were a rare commodity. As a result, the group consisted of milkmen and other tradesmen, with not a single experienced porter among them (Eshel 1984, 43). A frustrated Aba Hushi left for Thessaloniki and took matters into his hands.

5 Performing Masculinity

Before the incident, Zionist activists portrayed Salonican men as calm, healthy, strong, confident, and courageous. Now, subsequent efforts to test and confirm this image had both practical and symbolic implications: a new performance of masculinity had to erase the shameful memory of the first. It was indeed a performance, since, as Judith Butler suggests, masculinity is not an inherent trait but rather a construct built through performative practices.[15] Through the act of carrying (or failing to carry) goods from ship to shore the Jewish porters 'revealed' the nature of their masculinity. Of course, the ultimate goal was to demonstrate a 'superior' masculinity. According to R.W. Connell, there is no single masculinity but rather a multiplicity of masculinities, which engage among themselves in a struggle for hierarchy and hegemony (Connell 2005, 76).

In the early 1930s, Zionism confronted the hegemonic masculinity of the white, Western-European man.[16] At the same time, Zionist men also faced the local Arab masculinity of the Middle East. In Palestine, the project of creating the male Zionist body centred not only on challenging European masculinity, but also on the effort to differentiate from the local Arab man. Put differently, Zionist masculinity was not merely a response to antisemitic European portrayals of Jews as weak and effeminate; it also served to differentiate Jews from Arabs.

What were the specific masculine norms of the national Jewish movement? According to George Mosse, modern nation-states came to value and idealize a masculinity of 'quiet grandeur' and self-control, the latter required for hard physical labour. In doing so, they created a direct identification between the socio-political body and the male physical body. Furthermore, to reinforce this masculine stereotype, societies needed a countertype that would contrast negatively with their masculine virtues (Mosse 1998, 56). But, of course, Jewish-Arab differentiation was not only cultural; it also reflected the creation of a dual economy following the Jewish 'conquest of labour', which required the separation of Jewish and Arab societies in British Palestine and their organization into two separate economies. Since the British-controlled Haifa port was a space shared by both Jews and Arabs, it offered Zionist ideology a new challenge in its quest for masculinity.

Bernstein has shown that, regardless of the potential for Jewish-Arab solidarity at the port – hauling was a rare industry in which the

15 Butler 1999, 173.

16 See for example the new iconography of the Jewish *sabra* of Eretz Israel circulated in Jewish Mediterranean diasporas: Guedj 2019, 59-60.

groups comingled and might engage in joint action – organized Jewish labour soon led to segregation (Bernstein 2000,161-4). At the same time, I argue that gender, and masculinity in particular, was also instrumental in establishing such hierarchies and separation between port workers. Initially, Jewish masculinity needed to match that of Arab men; subsequently, this developed masculinity could be leveraged to create segregation. Salonican stevedores were recruited for this purpose as well: their 'oriental' customs and robust masculinity made them resemble Arab men, whom they were later expected to surpass in their work.

Following his earlier public failure, Aba Hushi decided to travel to Thessaloniki, where he would pick the labourers himself, after testing their skill at carrying large weights. He was familiar with the job: a decade earlier, right after his immigration to Palestine, he carried coal at the Haifa port (Eshel 2002, 22). Here are the impressions he shared with the *Histadrut* Executive Committee in September 1933:

> Dockworkers: There are still several hundred workers in Salonica engaged in various types of dock work from coal handling […] a type of work that even the local Arabs are not accustomed to, for which they bring in Sudanese labourers from Port Said; porters who can carry on their backs 350-400 kg, and stevedoring […]. From among these workers, after careful examinations and after observing each one individually at work at the port, I selected about 100 men for the jobs in Haifa. I spoke with each worker individually and thoroughly explained all the difficulties of working at the Haifa port, and arranged a work contract.[17]

Hushi compared the Jewish stevedores to the Arab ones and found the former superior: he claimed they could carry an almost unbelievable weight of 400 kilograms. Hushi also distinguished between local Arabs and 'other' Arabs – specifically, the stronger Sudanese who came to Palestine from Port Said.[18] This was not merely a professional hierarchy (related to how many kilograms each worker could carry) but also an ethnic one, linking ethnicity to physical strength.

Hushi went beyond testing the physical strength of the candidates. He sought information about "the lifestyle of the selected workers (as some of the workers in Salonica are communists, hashish smokers, card players, etc.)" and chose about 100 men who met these exacting qualifications: "If we obtain the necessary certificates, we will bring

17 Letter from Aba Hushi to the Executive Committee of the Histadrut (18/09/1933), Aba Hushi Archive, Younes and Soraya Nazarian Library, University of Haifa, A1/38:2.

18 Sudanese workers could be found in other sectors and were employed for example at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem (Lockman 1996, 313).

them to Haifa [within] two-three months from today to begin working at the port".[19]

Smoking hashish or playing cards were leisure activities common among the workers, and they can be found for instance in popular postcards of Jewish porters after World War I (Alexander, Hadar, Sabar 2011, 212-13). Yet Hushi sought to avoid stevedores who engage in them. Such activities might have reminded him of Jewish depictions – common to Jewish orientalist painting at the time – of Arabs playing backgammon or dominoes and smoking (Manor 2005, 129).

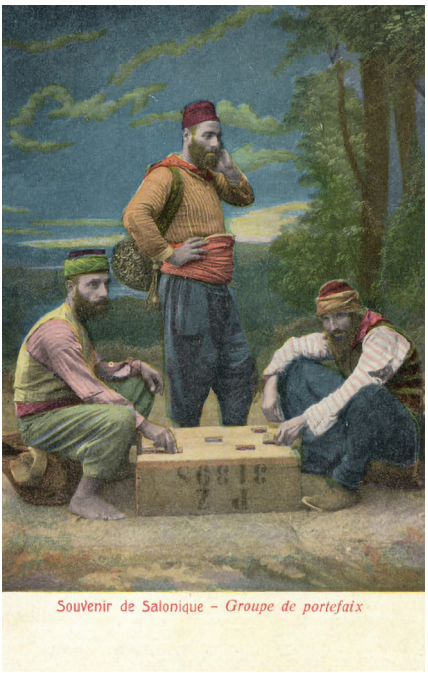

Figure 2
Three dockworkers from Salonica playing over an improvised box. 1917 ca. Postcard. *Souvenir de Salonique*, ed. Hananel Naar. University of Michigan Library

Such negative images had haunted the Jews of Thessaloniki since they had arrived in Palestine twenty years earlier. In Palestine and later Israel, they were considered more Sephardi than Salonican. David Benvenisti recounts in his memoir that as early as World War I, he and his fellow Sephardim tried to fight such stereotypes that were prominent among the Ashkenazim. They wished to show the latter "the good in the lives of the simple folk living in the Old Town of Jerusalem, those whom they saw after their difficult daily work sitting

19 Hushi to the Executive Committee, Hushi Archive, A1/38:2.

in tiny taverns during night time, playing backgammon, smoking narghile, or drinking coffee while having a friendly conversation".[20] They emphasized instead the Sephardi commitment to Jewish ritual life organized around the synagogue, and they worked hard to portray a pious Jewish masculinity. In Thessaloniki, Hushi continued to test the potential workers:

> I examine each individual at work and listen to each one, but I record my opinions privately to myself. Today, I observed the coal workers and was astonished at what even Arabs in our region are unable to do – here, Jews have been doing it their entire lives. […] I spoke with the stevedores working with coal, and they are as black as the Egyptians from Port Said who work in Haifa. The Salonicans work better – they carry larger sacks, 18/19 kilos each […] and they are willing to work 10-14 hours. (Molcho 1951, 57-8)

The workers' coal-blackened skin highlighted similarities and revealed the inherent ambivalence within Zionism's construction of the national masculine body: on the one hand, the ideal Jewish man was meant to resemble the strong, healthy Aryan; on the other, he was also expected to integrate characteristics associated with the Aryan's perceived opposite, the dark-skinned Arab. In the context of this racial theatre at the harbour, similarity to Arab workers was considered advantageous, at least temporarily: Hushi did not expect that Salonican Jewish workers would fully resemble the Arabs of Port Said, but rather appreciated the temporary resemblance facilitated by their work with coal.[21] The comparison to Arab workers was indeed dangerous, since the Zionist attitude toward the Arab body was ambivalent and entangled with racial politics of hygiene that associated 'oriental bodies' with disease and epidemics (Yosef 2004, 3). Zionist educators and hygienists also fretted over the potential 'orientalization' of Jewish immigrants, which they feared could lead to sodomy (Ilany 2017, 107-20).

20 Benvenisti 1981, 179: Benvenisti narrates how the Ashkenazim of Jerusalem looked down on the immigrants from Salonica, who nonetheless occupied a middle position between the European immigrants and other Sephardim: "when we complained to them about their inappropriate attitude, at times, towards the Sephardi, they would have responded: "you are not Sephardim… and even if so, you are different Sephardim".

21 Despite this report, Jews would not dominate the field of coal portage in the following years: a 1938 report still describes Jews in coal portage as a novelty. The author wished that Jewish coal merchants would consider hiring Jewish porters more often, given their newly demonstrated skills. "At The Haifa Port", *Haaretz*, 27 March 1938, 3.

6 The Wonders of Heavy Weights

The work of porters and their extraordinary capacity to carry heavy cargo also captured imaginations back in Salonica. Baruch 'Uzi'el opens one of his novels, *Jacob the Crow*, with the entertaining story of efforts by Yehuda, the deaf porter, to carry a chest (*forsél*) filled with expensive clothes and decorated with tulips that was the property of a family departing to Palestine:[22]

> He stumbled here and there, and the crowd of onlookers – porters and neighbours standing on the stairs and at the doorways – cheered at Yehuda's playful antics. Indeed, their laughter also stemmed from the enjoyment of seeing the man's great strength as he carried such a heavy load on his shoulders. ('Uzi'el 1973, 7-8)

Such performances of masculinity were also integral to life at sea. The sailor Ze'ev HaYam ('the sea wolf', Volodya Itzkovitz), who had long worked at sea, records this short anecdote from his journey to Jaffa:

> The Jaffa port sailors were known for their agility and professionalism throughout the Mediterranean, and even beyond its boundaries. To this day, I vividly remember that when I arrived with my mother in 1905 from Russia, as a small child, to visit my grandmother's house in Gedera, the Jaffa port sailors unloaded me from the ship in a most original manner: they tossed me from one sailor's hands to another, with half a dozen of them standing on the ship's gangway from the deck to the boat. (Ze'ev HaYam 1968, 71)

Elsewhere, Ze'ev HaYam recounts the daily ritual through which porters were selected for the day's work: "The foreman, a tall and large Arab named Kabichi, would touch the candidate's shoulder with the stick in his hand, signalling that he had been chosen for the day's work, and the selected one would enter the port running" (Ze'ev HaYam 1968, 72).

Such public demonstrations of skill were an integral part of the porters' work lives: they occurred when workers were designated to travel abroad; at the beginning of each workday, and even outside of work, when they amused themselves and passengers with demonstrations of their physical strength. Additionally, at certain key moments, as I argue in this study, workers had to prove their strength in order 'to make history'; to show Jewish, Arab and British spectators the promise of a new Jewish subject able to transform land and sea through his muscular presence.

22 On the *forsél*, used to keep the bride's clothing and part of the dowry, see Juhasz 1990, 204-5.

Some Salonican Jews appeared to accept this reality and to use it to their benefit. An early anecdote from World War I reveals a division of labour between Sephardim and Ashkenazim. David Benvenisti describes how Jewish Salonicans entertained the crowd during a literary event (*neshef sifruti*, 1916, dedicated to the author Sholem Aleichem): "We took it upon ourselves to participate in the more humorous part: spectacular gymnastics exercises and dances […] We presented boxing exercises (without, of course, causing harm to the body), or human pyramids".[23] Gymnastic performances had been common among Jewish Salonicans since the Zionist Maccabi sport organization introduced them at the beginning of the century; by the 1930s, their body was already a locus of Zionist self-fashioning.[24]

I would like to conclude this essay with one physical demonstration that left an unforgettable impression on its spectators. It was more grandiose than previous tests and competitions and, according to its author, Ze'ev HaYam, left little doubt as to Jewish superiority:

> The Jewish porters from Salonica successfully competed with the Arabs and Hauranians who worked at the Haifa port and even caught up with them.[25] In response, Kamal Abu-Zeid and Kamal Rano demanded that their chief foreman, Abu-Ali, bring a group of Arab porters from the Jaffa port, known to be the most agile and strong.[26] A whole group arrived, including one named Abu-Qamar, and two groups of porters – Jews from Salonica and Arabs from Jaffa – prepared to compete. (Ze'ev HaYam 1968, 75)

Here, the inner- and inter-hierarchies of porter masculinity were at play: Arabs and Hauranians from the Haifa port failed to outcompete the recently recruited Jewish men of Salonica. In order not to suffer a humiliation at the hands of the newcomers, the best Arab porters were summoned from Jaffa. But even they could not succeed, the author suggested, against the superior Jewish porters:

23 Benvenisti 1981, 177-8. The event was dedicated to the question of whether Sholem Aleichem should be considered a Hebrew author despite his Yiddish novels.

24 See the testimony of Shlomo Venecia (1967, 116-17).

25 Hauran is a geographical region located in southern Syria, but the meaning of the term 'Hauranians' was not self-evident. For instance, Moshe Shartok asks the Haifa Labour Council (1935) whether by 'Hauranian' they mean "every Arab who is foreign to the land–meaning trans-Jordanians; Syrian who are not Hauranians; from Sinai, etc. […] are you confident that you haven't counted among them native Arabs–people from far away villages, Bedouin from the Negev or other places, etc." Moshe Shartok to the Haifa Labour Council (05/03/1935). Lavon, IV-250-27-5-100. All archival sources from Lavon are my translation from the Hebrew. I wish to thank Dr. Eran Tal for his kind help.

26 On Abu Zeid Shipping, Stevedoring & Storage company see Ran 2008, 47.

> When they began unloading pianos in crates from the ship, each weighing 500 kg along with the packaging, they loaded such a crate onto the shoulders of Moshe Kaprino, who carried it from the dock to the warehouse without any assistance. Before everyone's eyes, the Jaffa porters tore off their carrying equipment with their own hands, and threw it on the dock while shouting: "Against such demons we cannot compete!" (Ze'ev HaYam 1968, 75)

The competition was a visual spectacle that inverted common Zionist representations. Painters and novelists alike depicted the Arab as "a role model for the New Jew – an idealised image of belonging" which "represented in his rootedness and strong physique a kind of antithesis to the image of the feeble Jew of the diaspora". (Manor 2005, 129). Here, however, with the help of the 'imported' Sephardim, Jews overcame Arab masculinity. Additionally, the competition illustrates how the struggle between Jews and Arabs at the port went beyond the 'conquest of the body' in the sense of mastering self-control, as in this case the porters needed to demonstrate masculine *excess*. To win, they had to go beyond the limits of the body or the human. Beyond mere physical strength, the competition required the almost monstrous endurance and resilience needed for piano lifting. Everyone who watched could see that the new Haifa immigrants were no ordinary Jews, but 'demons'.

7 Conclusion

By November 1933, two months after Hushi's journey to Thessaloniki, 38 Salonicans worked at the port: 34 porters and 4 stevedores. These labourers brought their families with them, a total of 138 Salonicans. The Haifa Labour Council reported an immediate success:

> [T]he workers have earned a reputation as the best porters in the entire city. […] and many Arab merchants are requesting that we provide them with Salonican porters for work, as their expertise, responsibility, organization, and discipline have surprised everyone. This group of workers has opened a path for us to work in the port which had been closed to us for years. If we know how to take advantage of this beautiful start, we can bring hundreds of Jewish workers into the port and conquer the most important jobs in the government sector.[27]

27 Letter to the Jewish Agency (15/11/1933), Lavon, IV-208-1-608.

Additionally, for the first time, a new work contract was signed for the significant project of loading and unloading two and a half million crates of oranges, providing dozens more jobs. This trend continued during the following months, with the Haifa Port taking over key shipping functions from Jaffa. When Arab merchants turned to Syria (specifically Aleppo) and Egypt for a few hundred more workers to satisfy the new demands, the Haifa Labour Council responded by asking the Jewish Agency to obtain more immigration certificates and to put pressure on the British government to increase the number of Jews allowed to work at the port. It argued that now "every custom clerk, from the Arab policeman to […] the custom managers" understands that the Jewish porters are the most capable ones to execute such a job.[28] The performance of masculinity could thus be translated immediately into political demands for more Jewish control of portage. By 1937 there were 1,200 Jewish workers at the Haifa Port (including non-Sephardi ones).[29]

Zionist authorities and writers cultivated the glory of the Salonican porter, in real time during the 1930s, and years later, in memoirs praising the porters for their exceptional skills and essential role in securing Jewish labour at the port. Such praise had various functions: it eased the conscience of Zionist activists such as Aba Hushi, who placed a heavy burden on the Salonican workers' shoulders, wide as they were. Growing fame also served the Salonican themselves, providing them with a sense of pride. Was the recognition and glorification of their exceptional masculinity the compensation the Yishuv offered for their unbearable toil? Immigration, especially in the context of poverty, often destabilizes gender roles and traditional notions of masculinity.[30] Struggling to provide for their families in Haifa, these men might experience the performance of masculinity as humiliating, as their bodies were put under the scrutiny of other men. At the same time, performances of masculinity allowed the workers to demonstrate their value and skill in performing work at which they already excelled.

28 Letter to the Haifa Labour Council (29/1/1934), Lavon, IV-208-1-608.

29 Letter to the Halutz Centre in Germany from Aba Hushi (9/3/1937), Lavon, IV-250-27-2-319. When given other alternatives, some Salonican workers decided to pursue other opportunities and switch to a different profession. A 1938 letter, for instance, complained that the porters were to blame for their bad economic situation, as they had switched to other professions in times of greater prosperity and now, during the economic crisis brought on by the Great Revolt (1936-39), wished in vain to return to their jobs at the port. Letter to the Zionist Histadrut in Thessaloniki (14/7/1938), Lavon, IV-250-27-2-319.

30 See for example Devi Mays' study on the role of physical violence in restoring masculine honour, among Sephardi immigrants from the Ottoman Empire to Mexico and the US (Mays 2014).

Furthermore, years later, porters would use their heroic past at the port as pioneers in the conquest of maritime Jewish labour when making political claims. For example, in a 1951 letter to Prime Minister David ben Gurion (copying Aba Hushi, then the mayor of Haifa), the porter Isaac Strogano asked for support to buy a taxi:

> I have been a dockworker at the Port of Haifa since the year 1934. I came from Salonica with the Aliyah of Aba Hushi, and I was also a dockworker abroad. I was one of the first to work at Tel Aviv port in 1936. Five of my sons who served in the Israel Defence Forces also work at the port. I lost one of them in our War of Independence […] I am now 66 years old, my health is frail and I am no longer able to continue with this hard work.[31]

Jews from Thessaloniki continued to be a dominant group at the ports of British Palestine and later in the state of Israel – yet a comprehensive account of their post-1948 experience remains unwritten. During the Holocaust, the Jewish community of Thessaloniki was destroyed. Out of 56,000 Jews living in the city before the Holocaust, less than 2,000 had survived.[32] Hundreds of workers who left for Haifa during the 1930s survived with their family members. Jewish masculinity shifted from that Diaspora to the Land of Israel. When, in February 1958, an Israeli ship visited the port of Thessaloniki, the reporter covering the story for *Davar* newspaper emphasized the novelty of the event: "apparently, this is the first ship under Israeli flag at that port, and for this reason, an Israeli person, in the eyes of the Jews of Thessaloniki, is what such a person was to the entire world a few years ago: a creature from a fairytale land".[33]

31 Letter from Isaac Strogano to David ben Gurion (29/06/1951), Aba Hushi Archive, A1/38:2, Hebrew.

32 Table: "Jewish population in Greece before and after the Holocaust", Saltiel 2020.

33 "The Last Jews of Salonica and the First Sailors of Israel", *Davar*, ha-Shavu'a supplement, 12 February 1958, 2.

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