

# Qaddafi's Jewish

# Guest of Honor

*Zman* interviews the potential Jewish candidate for Libyan parliament, Raphael Luzon, touching on his unique relationship with Muammar Qaddafi

*Zman* is proud to share with its readers an exclusive interview with the leader of the Libyan Jewish community-in-exile in London, who once maintained a relationship with Muammar Qaddafi and today is closely allied with the rebel leaders.

At age 13, Raphael Luzon lost 9 family members to a violent Arab pogrom and barely escaped to Italy with his life. From there he traveled to Eretz Yisrael and later to England, where he was appointed leader of the Libyan community there. He worked for years spearheading the preservation of Jewish sites such as shuls and cemeteries as well as Jewish property left behind in Libya.

In 2002, Luzon established contact with Colonel Qaddafi, and in September 2010 he was invited by the Libyan strongman to attend the celebrations commemorating 41 years since his rise to power. For the first time, Luzon spoke to Qaddafi in person and convinced the leader to grant generous concessions to benefit the Jews of Libya.

Today, after Qaddafi's demise, Luzon is in contact with the leaders of the Libyan revolution and has been invited by them to return to his homeland and run for a seat in the new Libyan parliament.

*Shimon Rosenberg*



**“Idbach al Yahud!”** (Slaughter the Jews!) The bloodcurdling shrieks of the crazed Arab mob could be heard from far away. The torches, axes and knives in their hands made their violent intentions horribly clear.

It was June 5, 1967, and the Arabs were out en masse to raze the Jewish quarter of Benghazi, Libya.

The Jews barricaded themselves in their homes, blocking the doorways with heavy furniture and turning off all lights so as not to draw undue attention, shutting the windows and then hiding under their beds, cowering in fear as the frightful screams drew nearer.

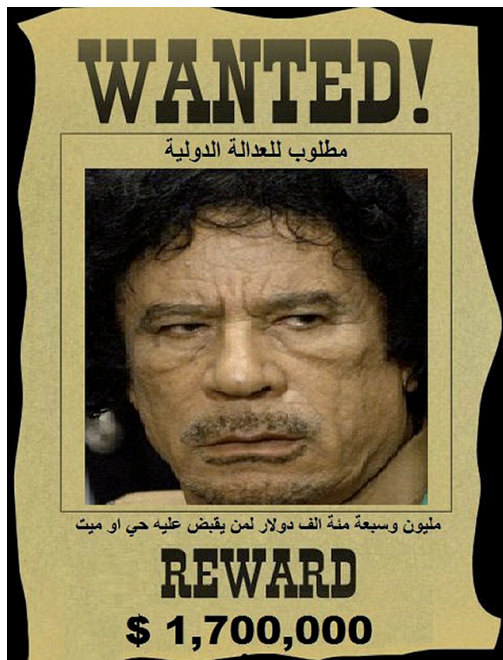
In the Luzon home, the parents crouched on the floor with their children, trying bravely to calm their fears. The father forced a calm smile, as he whispered to his children, “Don’t worry, they won’t do anything. They’ll shout and throw things around a bit, and once they’ve let out their anger, they’ll go back home. The president of our community sent a delegation to the king. The soldiers will be here soon and disperse the mob.”

But his shaky voice belied his doubt. There was nobody there to stop the frenzied mass from breaking into their home.

A few months back, young Raphael Luzon had celebrated his bar mitzvah. As the wealthiest Jewish family in Benghazi, it had been attended by virtually the entire Jewish community. Most of the Jews in Benghazi were successful businessmen and were counted among the most well-to-do in the world. Jews had lived relatively untroubled for centuries in Libya, and had a presence there as far back as almost 2,500 years previous. Now, suddenly, the glorious age of Jewish Libya was about to come to an abrupt and violent end.

Raphael Luzon reflected upon the recent celebrations and the sudden change in his life. Would he and his family live to see his childhood aspirations come to fruition?

As the family huddled close together, they could hear the sound of the glass windows being smashed. Then came the



Leaflet offering a reward to anyone who assists in bringing Qaddafi to arrest.

pungent smell of smoke, as the house was quickly filled with thick, black fumes. The mob had thrown their torches into Mr. Luzon’s business downstairs, and the fire through the building spread with astonishing speed.

The children broke into sobs. Their parents darted frightened glances at each other. What should they do now? Stay inside and be burned alive or turn themselves over to the mob....

## Historic Meeting with Qaddafi

Now, 43 years later, Raphael Luzon’s thoughts drifted off into the past, conjuring up images and reliving emotions from that fateful day in 1967. How had they survived?

As he began to replay their miraculous escape, he was shaken from his reverie by the serious voice of a state official....

“Mr. Raphael Luzon, please come forward.”

It was now 2010 – more than four decades after the Arab mob had done its damage, setting Jewish homes, businesses and shuls on fire, and forcing the survivors, including

the Luzon family, into ignoble exile. Luzon shook off the frightening memories of his youth and snapped back to the present.

He was standing in a royal palace filled with dozens of heads-of-state and soldiers in imperial uniforms. In front of him stood Libyan “President” Muammar al-Qaddafi. A smile was spread across the Libyan leader’s face as he stretched out his hand to Luzon in a friendly gesture.

It was hard for the survivor of that dreadful day 43 years earlier to believe where he was at this moment. How could he take the outstretched hand of the dictator, albeit the successor of the dictator who had stripped him of his childhood and sent him and his family running for their lives?

Nevertheless, this was an opportunity to help his people. For the past 30 years, Raphael Luzon had been very active on behalf of Libyan Jews—who lost everything under the regimes of Qaddafi and his predecessor King Idris the First (and last). Together with other leaders of the Libyan-Jewish exile, Luzon worked through diplomatic channels to convince the Libyan government that it would be in Libya’s best interests to return stolen Jewish property to its owners, as well as to protect the remaining Jewish sites in Libya.

In 2002, Qaddafi had sent Luzon a formal letter inviting him to exchange ideas. As Mr. Luzon told *Zman*:

*In his invitation he sent me he wrote—I quote his exact words—“I have followed your activities for the last 30 years. You were the only Jew who always criticized Libya in a dignified fashion, without any accusations or attacks. I respect this very much. I would like to meet you and learn about you in person.”*

*I began dealing directly with the Qaddafi regime and his inner circle, his closest people, including his son, Saif al-Islam, as well as his aides and secretaries.*

The correspondence went on for a few years, and then in August 2010 Qaddafi

invited Luzon to visit Libya. It was the surprise of his life. He accepted the invitation and now stood with the one man who could restore what had been lost.

But would he? And what were the dictator’s real motives?

These thoughts filled his mind as he forced a smile and returned Muammar Qaddafi’s handshake.

## Oldest Jewish Settlement

Incredible as it sounds, Jews came to Libya 600 years *before* the Arabs arrived there. The first Jews arrived well before the *churban* of the second *Beis Hamikdash*. They settled in Cyrenaica, the region where Benghazi is located. The only inhabitants of Libya then were the Berbers and the Jews.

“It’s known in history books,” Raphael Luzon tells *Zman*, “that one of the Berber queens was Jewish. Archaeologists are still finding historical remains, mainly stone tablets, from the Jews of that epoch.”

A large percentage of the Libyan Jewish



The Arab mob approached with knives, axes and other weapons.



A Libyan visits the fresh graves of fellow countrymen who were killed by Qaddafi’s forces during the recent revolution.