

THE HISTORY OF ITALIAN JEWS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE HISTORY
OF THE ITALIAN PEOPLE. SOME INTRODUCTORY NOTES

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Let me say at the outset that I resisted participating in this volume because I am not a scholar in Jewish studies and did not think that I could make any original contribution to the issues at the heart of it. I am also aware that my considerations may be of especial, though by no means exclusive, interest to an Italian readership. In effect, however, Jewish history is also the history of Italy – a premise that was made by a young Arnaldo Momigliano and one that is still valid today. It is also an idea that many of my generation were familiar with, even before the publishing of Momigliano's *Contributi*, thanks to Antonio Gramsci and his "Prison Notebooks" (*Quaderni dal carcere*).¹ It is interesting to re-read today this distant dialogue between two intellectuals, who were both teetering on the edge of an abyss. History has filled in the details, but these earlier writings still give us a sense of Momigliano's political awareness and his keen understanding of the problems of the time. His testimony is that of an Italian Jew, nationalist and fascist sympathizer, who wanted to put on record the merits of the milieu he belonged to at a time when the winds of hostility from Italian fascists and Catholics blew ever stronger against the Jewish minority. It may have been precisely these winds of hostility that influenced the writing of Momigliano. He looked to the past to show that Italian Jews had become Italians in exactly the same way as all the other people scattered throughout the peninsula and the islands. It was a way to exorcise the menace of a fascist antisemitism that found fertile ground in a growingly widespread Catholic anti-Judaism and that tainted even the coldly detached, aloof style of Emilio Cecchi's writings in the manner of «La Ronda», where one can easily detect the influence of the anti-Jewish campaign led by Monsignor Umberto Benigni through his antisemitic books and journals. Gramsci agreed with Arnaldo Momigliano's judgement of the Jewish presence within Italian society:

The history of the Jews of Venice, like the history of the Jews in any other Italian city, is indeed essentially the history of the formation of their Italian national consciousness [...]. The formation of an Italian national consciousness in the Jews is the same as the formation of the national consciousness of the people of Piemonte or the people of Naples.²

The Jews, said Momigliano, became Italian in the same way as the rest of the population, during the struggles and the movements that led to unification.

In fact, any historian dealing with local Jewish minorities in Italy always encounters events from the country's history preceding unification. I have researched the subject and have served as an advisor for some doctoral theses on the question of relations between Jews and Christians in Italy during the Counter-Reformation and on the work of the tribunal of the Holy Office before confronting the issue in relation to the formation of the Spanish monarchy.³ I have also reacted to attempts to push on to Luther

¹ A. GRAMSCI, *Quaderni dal carcere*, ed. V. Gerratana, I-IV, Einaudi, Torino 1979, III, pp. 1800-1801 (previously in ID., *Il Risorgimento*, Einaudi, Torino 1949, pp. XX and Editori Riuniti, Roma 1971, pp. 208-210). Gramsci quoted and commented Momigliano's review of C. ROTH, *Gli ebrei in Venezia* (Venice, Jewish Publication Society of America 1930), transl. D. Lattes, Ed. Cremonese, Roma 1933, «La Nuova Italia» 4, 4 (20 April 1933), pp. 142-143 (rpt. in A. MOMIGLIANO, *Quinto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico*, I-II, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 1975, I, pp. 1022-1025; see now ID., *Pagine ebraiche*, ed. S. BERTI, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 2016, pp. 163-166).

² Momigliano's review of C. ROTH, *Gli ebrei in Venezia*, p. 142, quoted by GRAMSCI, *Quaderni dal carcere*, p. 1800 (translation mine).

³ See, for instance, A. PROSPERI, *La Chiesa e gli ebrei nell'Italia del '500*, in C. LUPORINI (ed.), *Ebraismo e*

and Lutheran Germany the entire burden of guilt for the antisemitism of the twentieth century, a tactic that is typical of the stubbornly persistent Italian and Catholic capacity to forget our country's historical responsibility. I strived to demonstrate that the position of Luther was no different from that of the fervent Catholic reformers Giustiniani and Querini, the authors of *Libellus ad Leonem X.*⁴ Nonetheless, I do not think that this is enough to make me an historian of Judaism. Undoubtedly, as far as Italian history is concerned, the historical sources of the Catholic Church are of the greatest importance and offer continuous insights and opportunities for interdisciplinary research, given that, throughout the Modern Era – which, for Italy, means all the period up to the Italian unity, with the sole exception of the Napoleonic years – the control of the Jewish issue was entrusted to ecclesiastical directives and religion was the discriminating factor for social relations.

The strategy of the church was at best uneven. Up to the 1530s, the Papacy accepted the presence of the Jews in Rome. In this way, the Church took upon itself the role that had been the Roman Emperors' toward the Jews, but it did so with an attitude of contempt and rejection, as witnessed by the ritual of the Pontifical investiture of a newly-elected Pontiff.⁵ However, as early as the beginning of the 1500s, the reform proposals of the Church, like those of the influential Camaldolese monks Querini and Giustiniani, regarded Spain's expulsion of its non-baptized subjects as the definitive solution to the problem. The creation of the tribunal of the Holy Office in 1542 signaled a general change of direction of papal politics in the direction of a hardline orthodoxy that was directly controlled by the Church leaders in Rome. The extreme hardships imposed by Pope Paul IV included the establishment by the Company of Jesus of the *Casa dei Catecumeni* (House of Neophytes) aimed at converting Jews through the use of harsh persuasive methods. That is when the baptisms of converted Jews began to be put on record, an initiative that can be measured from the thickness of the files conserved in the Archives of the Vicariate of Rome in the Archbasilica of Saint John Lateran. Here at a glance, one gets a sense of the very limited success of this initiative over the course of time. It is only with the arrival of the Fascist racial laws that many families of minority Jewish Italians resorted to the baptism of their children in the hope of protecting them. In addition to the sources of the ecclesiastical governance, there is also the rich documentation of the Roman Inquisition. A short time after Anna Foa published her volume on the general history of the Jews in Europe (1992),⁶ the archives of the ex-Holy Office were opened in 1998. The great importance of the rich archival fund *De hebraeis* became immediately apparent and soon encouraged systematic research projects that have greatly enriched our knowledge of the subject. In addition to the pioneering work of Shlomo Simonsohn and to the investigations of Michele Luzzati and Renata Segre, there are a large number of other works which will not be listed here. Some examples, however, are the research of Aron Di Leone Leoni on the Jews of Ferrara, of Lucia Frattarelli Fischer on Livorno, and of Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini on Venice, which have established a solid base for new evaluations and in-depth studies beyond the period of the 1500s.

I will limit myself here to some considerations on the relationship between Jews and Italian society in the period between the Counter-Reformation and Unification based on studies and discoveries made

antiebraismo: immagine e pregiudizio, Giuntina, Firenze 1989, pp. 171-183; ID., *L'Inquisizione Romana e gli ebrei*, in M. LUZZATI (ed.), *L'Inquisizione e gli ebrei in Italia*, Laterza, Bari 1994, pp. 67-120; ID., *Ebrei a Pisa. Dalle carte dell'Inquisizione Romana*, in M. LUZZATI (ed.), *Gli ebrei di Pisa (secoli IX-XX). Atti del convegno internazionale Pisa, 3-4 ottobre 1994*, Pacini editore, Pisa 1998, pp. 117-157; ID., *Inquisizioni cristiane ed ebrei*, Introduction to *Le Inquisizioni cristiane e gli ebrei (Roma, 20-21 dicembre 2001)*, Atti dei convegni Lincei, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma 2003, pp. 7-28. Among the doctoral theses that I supervised, the last one is C. COLLETTA, *La presenza difficile: gli ebrei della Marca e nello Stato Pontificio tra Sei e Settecento* (Dottorato internazionale di studi storici, Università di San Marino, 31 ottobre 2009), then published in book form: C. COLLETTA, *Vivere "senza ghetto": gli ebrei nella periferia pontificia tra Sei e Settecento*, Zamorani, Torino 2011.

⁴ A. PROSPERI, *Introduzione*, in M. LUTERO, *Degli ebrei e delle loro menzogne*, ed. A. MALENA, Einaudi, Torino 2000, pp. VII-LXX.

⁵ Permit me to refer to my study *Incontri rituali: il papa e gli ebrei*, in C. VIVANTI (ed.), *Gli ebrei in Italia (Storia d'Italia, Annali, XI)*, I-II Einaudi, Torino 1996, I, pp. 497-520.

⁶ A. FOA, *Ebrei in Europa. Dalla Peste Nera all'emancipazione. XIV-XIX secolo*, Laterza, Bari 1992, 1999².

in coincidence with the 80th anniversary year of the 1938 Fascist racial laws. Before unification, the Jewish presence was much reduced and was unequally distributed across the territories of Italy. Settlement occurred at different times and under different circumstances, with some Jews fleeing from places where they had been expelled, such as the Iberian Peninsula, France and various German regions. Vast parts of the country were under Spanish rule, which ordered the expulsion of the Jews (Sicily, Sardinia, and the State of Milan). In the areas where they were allowed to remain, there were burdensome restrictions. Particularly repressive were those of the Papacy in Rome and in the Papal States. These restrictions were temporarily interrupted with the arrival of the French, and then re-established after Napoleon's fall. In the early years of the sixteenth century, as already noted, Querini and Giustiniani proposed that Rome and Italy follow the model of Spain (baptism or expulsion). Harsher rules, however, were imposed by Popes Paul III, Paul IV Carafa and Pius V. The Jews were secluded in the ghettos of the principal cities (Rome, Avignon, Bologna, Ancona); the Jewish cemeteries were destroyed, with the stones being re-used for construction (e.g., the columns supporting the statues of Borso and of Ercole d'Este in Ferrara); the Jews were subjected to humiliating insults preached in mandatory sermons. In Ancona, an open port, where there were many sailors of Hispanic origin, Pope Paul IV ordered twenty-four arrested sailors (one committed suicide) to be burned at the stake. The inquisition was active in the Duchy and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, with the exception of Livorno. Catholic maids, wet nurses and nannies surreptitiously baptized Jewish children, who were then put in institutions for converts, such as Houses of Catechumens, as Samuela Marconcini's work has shown.⁷ Two safe havens were represented by the cities of Ferrara and Livorno. In the former, Jews were under the protection of the Marquis and later the Dukes of the House of Este up to the Devolution of 1598, after which the majority of the Jews moved to Modena and Reggio, while in the latter, the protection was primarily driven by the commercial activity of the city and its port, as the extensive and valuable research of Lucia Frattarelli Fischer⁸ and the important book of Francesca Trivellato have proved.⁹

An observation that the young Momigliano did not make, but would later make, concerns the fact that the Jewish people who came to Italy after the unification were free from discrimination and interdictions thanks to the *Albertine Statute*, i. e. the constitution that Charles Albert conceded to the Kingdom of Sardinia on 4 March 1848, and thanks to the following acts which extended to the Jews the same rights of citizenship and freedom already granted to the Vaudois. Due to this liberation, the Jews felt a strong obligation to the House of Savoy and a sense of belonging to the country that led many of them to volunteer in the Italian army during the First World War. These same feelings led many Jews to become fervent nationalists and later, with varying degrees of conviction, to adhere to Fascism, as was the case with Momigliano himself and Renzo Ravenna, the last Jewish *Podestà* (mayor) of Ferrara studied by Ilaria Pavan.¹⁰ The problem of the *Interdizioni israelitiche*, i. e. the economic restrictions affecting the Jews, had been investigated by Carlo Cattaneo in 1835.¹¹ When the French Jews – who, for all intents and purposes had been citizens since the time of the Revolution – moved to Switzerland for commercial reasons, there they encountered restrictions that prevented them, for example, from acquiring land and from investing in capital improvements to the land. Close attention should be paid to the social conditions of this small minority of Jews and on the social conflicts that arose in the 1800s with the advance of

⁷ S. MARCONCINI, *Per amor del cielo. Farsi cristiani a Firenze tra '600 e '700*, Firenze University Press, Firenze 2018.

⁸ See, for instance, L. FRATTARELLI FISCHER, *Vivere fuori dal ghetto. Ebrei a Pisa e Livorno (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, Zamorani, Torino 2008.

⁹ F. TRIVELLATO, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2009 (It. transl., *Il commercio interculturale. La diaspora sefardita, Livorno e i traffici globali in età moderna*, Viella, Roma 2016).

¹⁰ I. PAVAN, *Il podestà ebreo. La storia di Renzo Ravenna tra fascismo e leggi razziali*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2006.

¹¹ C. CATTANEO, *Ricerche economiche sulle interdizioni imposte dalla legge civile agli Israeliti*, «Annali di giurisprudenza pratica, compilati ed editi dall' avvocato Zini», 23 (1836); see now ID., *Interdizioni israelitiche*, Einaudi, Torino 1987.

the agrarian and industrial revolutions: perhaps we will find some clues that may help us bring to light some layers deep-hidden in history capable of explaining how the Italian people – not only the petite bourgeoisie but also the working class – turned a deaf ear to the racial laws and to Fascist racism. At the head of the list, of course, is the hostile aggression of the Church that reacted with fury to the unity of Italy and to the taking of Rome. The birth of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (Paris 1860), and the appeal to Pius IX (joined also by the banker Rothschild) for the return to his family of the young boy Edgardo Mortara, who had been kidnapped from his parents in 1858, were the setting of the frenzied campaign of the *Civiltà Cattolica* against the Jews. There were other episodes, for example, the reactionary peasant uprising that took place in Mantua in 1842 that contributed to the rejection of efforts to ease some forms of social restrictions against the Jews: this unrest did not seem «un gran male», a great wrong to Don Enrico Tazzoli, one of the future martyrs of Belfiore.¹² The reason for the unrest, as explained by Maurizio Bertolotti,¹³ was the perception that Jews were the owners of the best residences of Mantua and of the most modernized farms: finding themselves before Jewish bosses and seeing their sons make love to local girls fueled a reaction of which we find traces in the youthful narratives of Ippolito Nievo.

However, let us look back on reflections that were made on the 60th anniversary of the racial laws. This subject was little discussed in Italy in the period immediately following the Second World War. Now a new consciousness has spread of the profoundly subversive character of those laws, and at the same time, of the general responsibility of the Italian population in their passive acceptance of the Fascist regime's antisemitic swerve. As to the adverse effects of the racial laws, new investigations conducted by Giorgio Fabre and Annalisa Capristo show not only the intrinsic violence of the new turn that paved the way for the politics of elimination that followed, but also the blind and distracted consent of the majority of Italians. In recent years, we hear less about the “Italiani brava gente”, i.e. the “good Italian people” stereotype. Apropos which, I would like to cite an important contribution, written not by a professor or an aspiring professor, but by a retired magistrate, that has inspired little interest among professionals, but that should be read and pondered attentively. I refer to a volume by Edmondo Bruti Liberati that has a seemingly innocuous title – *The Judiciary and Society in the Italian Republic*.¹⁴ Indeed, most members of the Italian fascist-republican Judiciary transferred, without meeting significant opposition, to the ranks of post-Liberation magistracy, where they then dedicated themselves to punishing precisely those who had opposed fascism. Among those magistrates there was Gaetano Azzariti, former President of the Race Tribunal (Nov.1939-June 1943), who in 1949 ascended to the third-ranking office of the ordinary judiciary, then became a judge of the Constitutional Court in 1955, and soon after, when his predecessor resigned, President of the Court itself. To exemplify the incredible manifestations of servility and clamorous enthusiasm in the opinions and sentiments of the Italian Magistracy toward Mussolini, the Duce, one may consider just the last words of the Welcome Remarks for the opening of the Judicial Year 1940.¹⁵

Once again, we can observe that, at the very least, the history of the Jews and their relationships with the general Italian population provide a painful verification not only of the fragility and failures in the post-fascist recovery of our country, but also and above all of the explicit political will, at the

¹² On these episodes and the complex social reality in Mantua see M. BERTOLOTTI, *Introduzione*, in I. NIEVO, *Drammi giovanili. Emanuele. Gli ultimi anni di Galileo Galilei*, Marsilio Editori, Venezia 2006.

¹³ Cfr. M. BERTOLOTTI, *Le complicazioni della vita. Storie del Risorgimento*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1998, pp. 132-140.

¹⁴ E. BRUTI LIBERATI, *Magistratura e società nell'Italia Repubblicana*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2018².

¹⁵ See A. ALBERTINI, Procuratore generale del Re Imperatore alla Corte di Cassazione, Senatore del Regno, *Per l'inaugurazione dell'Anno Giudiziario*, 20 Ottobre XIX, Società anonima editrice TEMI, Roma 1940, p. 26: «I magistrati [...] elevano, memore e fervido, il pensiero [...] al Duce che ha risolto il più grande problema dei tempi moderni, restaurando, con tratti romani, lo Stato. Fieri dell'apprezzamento ch'Egli esprime dell'opera loro, or è un anno, nella *Sala delle battaglie*, si accingono, con inalterata fede, a custodire, ad interpretare, ad attuare le leggi da Lui date al popolo»: ‘The magistrates raise their mindful and fervent thought [...] to the Duce who has solved the greatest problem of modern times, restoring, with Roman features, the State. Proud of the appreciation that he expressed for their work, a year ago, in the *Hall of the Battles*, they set about, with unaltered faith, to guard, to interpret, to implement the laws he has consigned to the people’ (translation mine).

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beginning of the Cold War period, to obstruct the renewal of the country by keeping the inquisitional as well as the judicial power in the hands of the very people who held power in the Fascist era. It is to that period that we must look if we want to understand a renescent, widespread sense of the irrelevancy of, and animus towards, the antifascist tradition and democracy itself that, in the post-War era, many of us believed had been laboriously implanted in our country.

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SUMMARY

Using a note that Gramsci devoted to a paper by Arnaldo Momigliano as a jumping off point, this contribution focuses on crucial points of the history of the Jews in Italy within the larger framework of the general history of the Italian people. The essay examines topics including the investiture ceremonies of popes and emperors, who took possession of their offices by meeting with the Jewish community of Rome; the founding of the *Sant'Uffizio* (Holy Office) in 1542; the creation of the ghettos and autonomous Jewish areas in Ferrara and Livorno; the *Interdizioni israelitiche* studied by Carlo Cattaneo, the Risorgimento, fascism and racial laws, whose weighty inheritance is still with us today.

KEYWORDS: History of the Jews in Italy; General History of Italy; Racial Laws.

