

The Jews of Italy: A Personal Reflection

By Maria J. Falco, PhD

After the booksigning (“It Happened in Italy”) an extraordinarily moving lecture by Elizabeth Bettina and that of one of the holocaust survivors, Ursula Korn-Selig, at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans on May 6, I began to wonder why everyone seemed surprised that Italians had saved over 30,000 Jews during the holocaust. After all, I, a student at a Catholic College in Pennsylvania over fifty years ago, had read Primo Levi’s book “Se questo e un huomo” (If this is a Man), later translated as “Survival at Auschwitz”, and even more appropriately, Carlo Levi’s book, “Cristo si e’ fermato a Eboli”, (Christ Stopped at Eboli), during a class in Italian literature taught by a native Italian speaker. Primo had related how well he had been treated while at “internment” at Fossoli near Modena in northern Italy, and Carlo had described his treatment while in exile for being an “anti-fascist” in Lucania. Primo had, in fact, been spared imprisonment as an anti-fascist by revealing that he was a Jew, so that Fossoli was a much better outcome for him during the war than it was for those who were non-Jews.

When I mentioned these two authors after the lecture, my comments were dismissed as somewhat irrelevant—after all, Bettina was describing only the events that had taken place at her Grandmother’s village based on a picture and some documents she had discovered when she had visited a few years back. Her extensive research and determined efforts to track down actual survivors of that experience, are what make her book truly inspiring. So, to some extent, my remarks were beside the point. But I still couldn’t help wondering.

Later, I spoke to one of the Jewish men present who was wearing a skull cap. When he heard me speak about these two authors, he replied that they were

Italian Jews, not German Jews. What was remarkable was that the Italians had treated German Jews so well! That left me flabbergasted! It never occurred to me that people would think that Italian Jews are different from other Jews, no matter where they come from. I personally had had Jewish friends all my life, had attended Bar Mitzvah's, Synagogue and Seders, so why should Italians be different?

I tried to tell him that Italy had been a haven for Jews for millennia—especially Sephardic Jews escaping the Inquisition in Spain after 1492 who found refuge in Venice on the island which had served as a foundry or “ghetto” where metallic slag had been piled up in heaps for years. He was amazed at that, and found it difficult to believe that whole areas of Sicily and Calabria in the south, as well as Ferrara, and Milan in the north had also welcomed Greek, Sephardic, and later Ashkenazi Jews over the centuries. (1)

All through Italian history Jews had been welcomed as merchants, doctors, and bankers (in feudal times only Christians were permitted to be land owners, so Jews had to find some other way to support themselves), and were even given permission to charge interest on loans—something forbidden to Christians, until the Medici established their own international banks and ignored the prohibition. Jews had supported certain rulers (Theodoric), been oppressed by others (especially the Spanish when they took control of the Two Sicilies), had been allied to some (The Normans), and persecuted by others, including Popes, (forced to wear the yellow star of David on their clothing and even yellow hats from time to time), befriended by some religious and civic figures (Cardinal Alexander Farnese of Rome and the D'Este family of Ferrara) against Papal Edicts at a time when it was said that Jews practiced “ritual murder”, fought bravely in certain battles (Naples, against Justinian), and fled north when the Inquisition came to the south.

The fact that Mussolini had been reluctant to persecute the Jews prior to his exile and the invasion of the Americans from the south and the Germans from the north, and that his government had even paid for the upkeep of the German Jews who had fled to Italy to escape the holocaust, was no secret, although it is good to be reminded of it. What many people are not aware of however, is that in 1910, Italy had had a Jewish Prime Minister, Luigi

Luzzati, who was not an apostate (Leon Blum in France, Benjamin Disraeli in England) but a practicing Jew.

Nevertheless, I think it important to remember, once again, those two outstanding authors who came to my mind immediately after hearing the Bettina lecture: Primo Levi and Carlo Levi (not related, it seems, although both came from Turin).

No one, not even Eli Wiesel, has described so eloquently what it was like to be a prisoner at Auschwitz, as Primo Levi has. Anne Frank's book is remarkable for its perspective of a young teenager hiding out in an attic before being transported to a death camp, but only Primo actually described the daily soul numbing banality and the horrendous cruelty of the deprivations and inhumanity of the conditions of the Lager. But even there, the kindnesses of some of the Italian non-Jewish forced laborers (Lorenzo, for one) in sharing their food with him and his "hut-mate" Alberto, comes through loud and clear. So much so that Anthony Sher wrote a monolog/play based on the book, which he and Richard Wilson (Director) presented in London in 2004. The DVD of Sher's performance is a remarkable one that has been shown on television a number of times and has been available on line ever since.

In 1983 a video was made of Primo's train ride back to Auschwitz, accompanied by a journalist, to revisit the place where he had barely escaped death only because he had been too sick with scarlet fever to leave the hospital when Alberto and the others were ordered to march away from the invading Russians. He survived but Alberto did not. That video may be seen on Youtube today, complete with English subtitles. Primo died four years later when he fell off a balcony at his home in Turin. Some biographers thought he was a suicide, but evidence exists that he had been suffering dizzy spells and simply fell to his death. He was 67 years old. It is difficult to believe that a man who had survived what he had, and had spoken so calmly and dispassionately about it afterwards, would have deliberately taken his own life, so many years after the event.

While Primo had been a Chemist and had used this fact to his benefit at Auschwitz, Carlo was a medical doctor who preferred to be an artist, and had

actually exhibited his paintings in Paris before the war. Although he had never practiced medicine, he was so deeply moved by the conditions of the peasants of Lucania to which he had been exiled, that he was determined to use that medical training to try to benefit them in some way. Their poverty was so extreme that he was shocked. He had never seen anything like it in the north. His book, “Christ Stopped at Eboli”, written shortly after the war, was meant to be a damning critique of all those in and out of government and even the Church, who had so long ignored the living conditions of the peasants in the South. His book instigated the post-war government’s decision to modernize the “Mezzogiorno” and to stimulate the economy of the South. Carlo Levi’s book succeeded in waking up the rest of the population of Italy to the desperation still being experienced in their own country. (2, 3)

So thank you Carlo Levi for the marvelous results of your very important book. Every Italian and Italian American whose relatives came from Southern Italy should sing your praises for the benefits that your famous book had on their relatives in that area. And buy the DVD of the movie made from it in 1979 by Francesco Rosi, issued in the US in 1980.

Footnotes:

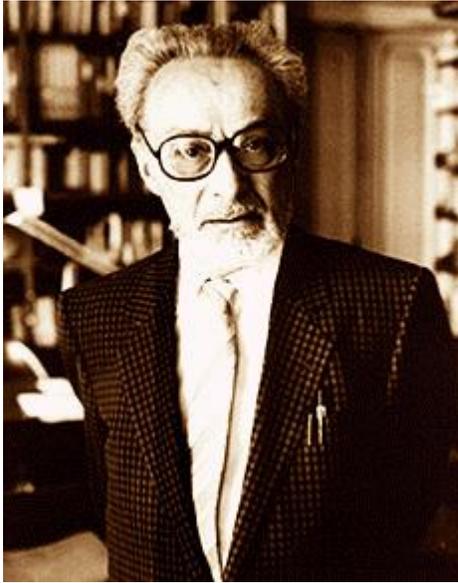
1. One of the most famous havens for Jews had been on an island right in the middle of the Tiber River, across from and in sight of the Vatican—at least since the time of Vespasian, if not Augustus, over 2,000 years ago. (Earlier, Julius Caesar was considered a friend of the Jews who mourned his assassination.) True, many had been transported to Rome as slaves following the sacking of the Temple of Jerusalem by Vespasian’s son, Titus in 66 AD, but by working to help build the Coliseum (Flavian Amphitheater, Flavius being Vespasian’s Gens name) they rapidly earned their freedom and became an integral part of the culture and commerce of the city.

2. I recall visiting the area in 1955 with my mother during my year as a Fulbright student at the University of Florence. We went to see my grandmother’s brother, in the small town of Paternopoli, in the mountains near Avellino, outside of Naples. Because of his persistent asthmatic attacks,

he had been forced to return to Italy from the United States just before the war, but did so with a money-belt full of cash, and had used it to buy a “palazzo” (no running water, or heat other than a fireplace, but a palazzo nevertheless) in his home town. The rest of the people in that town were not so lucky. They were basically shop keepers or worked in the fields as “sharecroppers” (coloni or serfs) at the discretion of the landholders—not too much different from conditions under feudalism. I also remember our visiting the city of Syracuse in Sicily as tourists, looking for the tomb of Archimedes. We found it—not empty, as we had expected, but with a homeless family living in it. Ten years after the war and the conditions were still deplorable.

3. True, Italy had only been a nation since its unification in 1860, and the Pope had not been freed from his voluntary exile in the Vatican until Mussolini had signed the Concordat recognizing its independent status. So perhaps it did take a while for Italians to recognize themselves as Italian and not just Torinese, Neapolitans, Sicilians, Milanese, Venetians (Venetians still prefer their 1000 year long Republic to the present day situation), etc. But eventually the Italian government did get around to improving the southern economy, and built a series of Autostrade or Highways all the way down to the bottom of the boot. Much to everyone’s amazement, enclaves of villages were discovered where the people spoke Greek! It took scholars quite a while to figure out whether the Calabrese were speaking Ancient or Byzantine Greek.

Pictures and notes:



Primo Levi: 1919-1987.



Carlo Levi: 1902-1975.

Venice

The German, Italian and Levantine communities were independent, yet lived side by side to one another. A hierarchy existed among them, in which the Sephardic (Spanish and Portuguese)/Levantine Jews were at the top of the scale, Germans in the middle and Italians at the lowest rung.

Venice has five synagogues, a Jewish bookstore, a Jewish publishing house, a social center, a rest home, a museum, a yeshiva and a kosher restaurant

The Spanish/Portuguese and Levantines lived in the Ghetto Vecchio



Though it was home to a large number of Jews, the population living in the Venetian Ghetto never assimilated to form a distinct, "Venetian Jewish" ethnicity. Four of the five synagogues were clearly divided according to ethnic identity: separate synagogues existed for the [German](#) (the [Scuola Grande Tedesca](#)), [Italian](#) (the [Scuola Italiana](#)), [Spanish and Portuguese](#) (the [Scuola Spagnola](#)), and [Levantine Sephardi](#) communities (The [Scuola](#)



[Levantina](#)). The fifth, the [Scuola Canton](#), is believed to have been either [French](#), or a private synagogue for the families who funded its construction. Today, there are also populations of [Ashkenazic](#) Jews in Venice, mainly [Lubavitchers](#) who operate one of two kosher foodstores, a yeshiva, and the Chabad synagogue

The Jews lived in many **Sicilian** cities such as [Palermo](#) ^[2] and [Catania](#). ^[3] In the sixth century, communications were sent to [Pope Gregory I](#) about the plight of the Jews in the [Kingdom of Sicily](#). In 1210, the Jews of Sicily faced so much persecution from [Crusaders](#) that [Frederick II](#) had to intervene on behalf of the Jews. Persecution of the Jews continued and in 1392 the Jews were ordered to live in [ghettos](#). Despite persecution, the Sicilian Jews continued to thrive. Some Sicilian Rabbis communicated with [Maimonides](#) posing religious questions. ^[4]

The culmination of religious persecution finally came with the [Expulsion of the Jews from Sicily](#) in 1492. ^[5] Many of the Sicilian Jewish refugees escaped to neighboring [Calabria](#) where in time they were forced to emigrate again to the rest of [Europe](#).

The history of the Jews in **Calabria** is presumed to date back several centuries before the common era. While there is evidence of [Hellenized](#) Jews living in the Greek colony of [Magna Graecia](#), ^[1] there is no direct evidence of a Jewish presence in Calabria, then known as [Bruttium](#), until much later. However, legends state that many Jewish captive [slaves](#) were brought to Calabria after the destruction of the [Temple in Jerusalem](#) in the year 70. ^[2] Other legends state that it was the Hellenized Jews from [Egypt](#) who introduced the [Etrog](#) to Calabria during the time of [Magna Graecia](#). In fact, the prized Etrog known as the [Diamante Citron](#) is still grown in Calabria to this day. ^[3] The Calabrian town of [Santa Maria del Cedro](#) still features their Etrog heritage in its place name.

The first dated mentionings of Jewish communities in Calabria were by Roman officials in the service of the Western Emperor [Honorius](#) in the year 398. ^[5] Some ancient towns known to have had a Jewish community were [Reggio](#) (*Rhegion*) ^[6] and [Catanzaro](#) (*Katantheros*). ^[7] Today some physical remnants of the ancient Calabrian Jewish community still survives. For example, the remains of an ancient [Synagogue](#) have been unearthed in the town of [Bova Marina](#) ^[8] Another example is an inscription that mentions Calabria in the Jewish [catacombs](#) of Monteverde in [Rome](#). These catacombs were in use from the first to the third century. ^{[9][10]}

Rome: Today, of Italy's 35,000 Jews, nearly half call Rome home. Jews here have a uniquely Roman style of worship, and even preserve remnants of their own Judaic-Roman dialect. That's because, unlike most of the world's Jewish people, Roman Jews are neither Sephardic (descended from Spain) nor Ashkenazi (descended from Eastern Europe). Italy's Jews came directly from the Holy Land before the Diaspora, first arriving in Rome in the second century b.c. as esteemed envoys, and then, after Rome invaded Judaea in the first century a.d., as POWs sold into slavery.

Julius Caesar favored the Jews because they were well-networked throughout the empire, and they didn't push their religion on others. As Christianity enveloped Rome and the pope became literally the king of Rome's Jews, the Jews experienced discrimination, with laws intended to limit the spread of Judaism (e.g., no proselytizing, new synagogues, or intermarriage). The severity of these laws varied from pope to pope. Through most of the Middle Ages, Rome's Jews prospered and were often held in high esteem as physicians, businessmen, and confidants of popes. The community in Trastevere was even allowed to spill across to the opposite bank of the Tiber.

Starting in the eighth century, anti-Semitism began increasing throughout Europe. Then, in 1492, all of Spain's Jews were either baptized or expelled, with similar decrees following in other European countries. Rome's Jewish population doubled, swelling with refugees. By the 1500s, the Catholic Counter-Reformation — begun to combat rising Protestantism — turned its attention to anything deemed a "heresy" or simply not Catholic, including Judaism.

While Rome's Jews enjoyed a little freedom when Napoleon occupied the city (1805–1814) and after the walls were torn down in 1848, it was only after Italian unification in 1870 that the ghetto's inhabitants were granted full rights and citizenship.

When Mussolini was deposed and the Nazis occupied Rome late in the war, the ghetto community was in even greater danger. Of the 13,000 ghetto-dwellers, 2,000 were sent off to concentration camps



Interior of the Arch of Titus showing the Sacking of the Temple of Jerusalem in 66 AD.

The old “Ghetto” of Rome dating from the time of Augustus:



Tiber Island with the dome of the modern Great Synagogue in the distance.



NB: The three Footnotes above are mine, the “Pictures and Notes” are not. The pictures and notes on Venice are from the internet, as are the notes on Sicily, Calabria and Rome. The three pictures from Rome were taken by my friends who traveled to Italy with me last October: Tricia Danflous, Harriet Haworth and Patricia Cheron.