

HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN ITALY

The Jews of Italy have strong bi-cultural roots dating back to the second century BCE, when many Israelites, under the leadership of Judah Maccabeus, left the land of Israel to go the "Eternal City" (Rome). They also settled in Naples and in various localities in the southern part of the peninsula. Jews in pre-Christian Rome were very active in proselytizing their faith.

It was not until the Jewish revolts in 132 CE, culminating in the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, that the Jewish-Roman alliance was broken and the Jews were forced into slavery. Approximately 10,000 Jews were transported to Rome to be used as work hands to help build the Coliseum. This image of history remains frozen in time for all to see in the 'Arch of Titus,' where the Roman victory over the Jews is etched in stone.

Although enslaved, the Jewish population in Rome flourished. Thirteen synagogues and numerous Jewish cemeteries were built. Many Jewish communities were established in southern and northern cities in Italy as well, such as Taranto, Ferrara and Milan. Nevertheless, many Romans despised the Jews and considered their rituals to be barbaric.

Throughout history, the status of Italy's Jews depended largely on who was in control of either the Roman Empire or the Church. The endorsement of Christianity as a 'legal' religion in 313 CE by the Emperor Constantine marked a transition for Italy's Jews from an era of acceptance to one of discrimination. The situation for the Jews worsened in 380 CE, when the Edict of Tessa Lonica of Teodosia recognizing Christianity as the official religion of the Empire was enacted, with very little tolerance for Judaism or other religions.

After the fall of the Roman Empire (circa 476 CE), the state of Jewish life depended on which invading army or power gained the upper hand. The Ostrogoths (493-553 CE) and Lombards (568-774 CE) treated Jews better, while they later suffered much oppression under Byzantine rule. As the Church gained more power, tolerance for the Jew swayed back and forth: Charlemagne (Charles the Great, Emperor of the Romans, 800-814 CE) defended the civil and commercial rights for Jews which gave them relative tranquility for about two centuries. Later, Ottoman Empire rulers let the Jews live peacefully as well.

After 1000 CE, conditions became more uncertain for the Jews due to the establishment of feudal systems and artisan guilds. Jews were barred from all guilds and were allowed only two positions, that of money lending and selling used clothing. However, their occupation as money lenders helped them to survive and eventually own property, and many feudal lords were kind to their money lenders and protected them from harm.

Benjamin of Tudela's travels in Italy chronicle Jewish life in the peninsula in the middle of the 12th century. His journals indicate that most Jews lived in southern Italy, especially in Palermo, numbering more than 8,000 out of a total population of 100,000. They excelled in the production and dying of silk. During the same period, Jews also left behind traces of their literary achievements, boasting poets such as Shabtai ben Moses of Rome and his son Jehiel Kalonymos, regarded as a Talmudic authority even beyond Italy.

In Italian provinces under Aragon rule, such as Sicily and Sardinia, Jews generally lived peacefully until 1492, when King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella decided to expel all Jews from the Spanish Kingdom. Many fled to northern Italian cities between the years 1492-1541. Over 37,000 Jews left Sicily, never to return. Most headed for Rome and Milan, while many others settled in Ancona, Venice and Livorno, where conditions for Jews were more favorable.

By the second half of the 16th century Pope Paul IV (1550-1559) instituted a Papal Bull decreeing that all Jews were to be enclosed in ghettos and wear a 'contrassegno' (identification), and that each community could have only one synagogue. All civil and commercial rights for Italy's Jews were revoked as well. Although similar rules had been instituted in 1215, this was the first time these laws were regulated. Many Jews decided to flee the Papal State and go to other states where these rules did not exist.

In 1516, the world's first Jewish ghetto was established in Venice and in 1555 a second ghetto was established in Rome. Ironically, although both were overcrowded and dirty, the study of Torah and Talmud flourished between their walls, resulting in the growth and enrichment, rather than the destruction, of Jewish religion and culture.

With the arrival of Napoleon and the French army in 1797, the doors of the ghetto were torn down and the Jews were granted equal rights and treated as first-class citizens. However in 1815, with the defeat of Napoleon - considered to be a 'savior' by most Jews - the Jews were thrown back into the ghettos and once again their rights were repealed.

This era of persecution did not last long, as the Italian revolution of 1848 unified the Italian states under the House of Savoy and the new government granted the Jews full civil and political equality, without religious distinction. The establishment at the end of the 19th century of the united secular Italian State led to a liberal, non sectarian society.

Although the integration of Jews into Italian society was nearly complete by 1922, Mussolini's Fascist Movement rose to power at the same time. At the beginning, many Jews supported them. However, in 1929 Mussolini passed the racist Falco Laws, contradicting the freedom of religion sanctioned by the Italian Constitution. In 1938 he declared the Italians to be part of the 'pure

race,' along with the Aryans. Jews were expelled from all public services and schools and many decided to leave Italy in hope of building better lives. In 1931, there were 48,000 Jews in Italy. By 1939 nearly 4,000 Jews had been baptized and thousands more chose to emigrate, leaving approximately 35,000 Jews in the country.

During World War II, Jews were interned in labor camps in Italy, but when the north of the country became occupied by the Germans in 1943, the threat to the Jews became critical. While the south of Italy was occupied by the Allied Forces, central and northern Italy, where the Jewish community mostly lived, became German-occupied areas. In October 1943, the Nazis raided the former Ghetto of Rome and deported 2,000 Jews to death camps. In November, they sent the Jews of Genoa, Torino, Florence and other small communities to Auschwitz. By the end of the war, the Nazis and Italian Fascists murdered 7,750 Jews.

A number of Eastern European Ashkenazim, mainly Holocaust survivors, settled in the country after World War II, while many survivors emigrated to the newly-founded State of Israel. In more recent years, Italian Jewry has been bolstered by some 3,000 Libyan Jews who moved to Italy in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

DEMOGRAPHY

There are approximately 28,400 Jews in Italy today. They are concentrated in Rome (13,000) and Milan (8,000), with smaller communities situated in Turin (900), Florence (1,000), Venice (600) and Leghorn (Livorno, 600). Other Jewish communities numbering a few hundred members in each city can be found in Bologna, Genoa, Trieste, with even smaller enclaves in Ancona, Naples Padua, Pisa, Modena, Siena, Parma, Verona and other areas.

COMMUNITY

The community's umbrella organization, the Unione delle Comunita Ebraiche Italiane (Union of Italian Jewish Communities), provides religious, cultural, and educational services to Italy's Jewish population and also represents community on the national-political level. While individual Jewish communities and associations operate independently, they maintain strong cooperative links with the Rome-based Union.

The continual presence of a Jewish community in Rome for more than two millennia has produced a distinctive tradition of prayer known as 'Nusach Italki' (Italian version), which is comparable to yet different from standard Sephardic or Ashkenazi versions. A number of synagogues in Rome, including the Great Synagogue, conduct their services following this tradition. The

customs and religious rituals of the Italian Jews are viewed as a 'bridge' between the Ashkenazi and Sephardic traditions, with similarities to both, yet closer still to the customs of the native Greek Jews, the Romaniots. It is often claimed that the Italian prayer book contains the last remnants of the Judean-Galilean Jewish tradition, while both the Sephardic and Ashkenazi versions reflect the Babylonian tradition.

Pope John Paul II's visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome in 1986 marked the warming of relations between the Jews and the Vatican. Until Israel and the Vatican secured a diplomatic accord in December 1993, the Unione was a critical link between the Catholic Church, Israel and World Jewry.

CULTURE AND EDUCATION

Leading international Jewish organizations such as B'nai B'rith, Keren Kayemet, Keren Hayesod and WIZO are active in Italy's main cities. In addition, a number of youth movements, such as B'nai Akiva and Hashomer Hatzair offer social, cultural and educational programs to the community's younger generation. Milan and Rome host Jewish cultural clubs catering to the community-at-large and youth age groups.

There are a total of 4 Jewish schools in Italy, located in Rome, Milan, Turin and Trieste. A majority of Jewish children study at local primary-level Jewish schools but often attend external schools for secondary education. Advanced Jewish study programs, including Rabbinical Academies, are found in Rome, Turin and Milan.

Kosher food is readily available, with a variety of kosher restaurants in Rome, Florence, Milan, Venice and Bologna.

SEPHARDIC CUISINE

Sephardic cuisine refers to the foods eaten by a large and diverse group of Jews that bear the unique stamp of their regions of origin, which include Spain, North Africa, the Middle East, Egypt, and Turkey.

Italian, Indian, and other non-European Jewish foods are also sometimes included in this mix.

There is logic to this broad grouping: Almost all of these lands were part of the Islamic world. The Arab conquest of the 7th and 8th centuries united land from the Iberian Peninsula and the Atlantic Ocean to China and India. Active trading went on between these lands, spreading new food all over the region. Eggplant

from India, spinach from Nepal, and spices from the Near East are examples of foods that spread throughout the Islamic empire.

Jews participated actively in Islamic society. They were successful in cultural, political, and financial arenas. Thus Sephardic cuisine often represents refined, even aristocratic, food. Besides the quality of the food, the Jews of the Islamic world stressed quantity as well. Asceticism was not valued, and lifecycle celebrations such as circumcisions and weddings were lengthy and luxurious.

Cookbooks that cataloged medical advice alongside recipes were a common genre of literature in the Muslim world. The 13th-century Cookbook of the Maghreb and Andalusia, one of the most important of these books, lists five Jewish recipes. All of these are full of spices and aromas and are detailed in their ingredients and preparation. One such dish, a chicken with giblets, was made with, among other things, fennel stalks, coriander, oil, citron leaves, eggs, flour, and chicken liver. The dish is first roasted and then left to sit in murri—a fermented condiment used in medieval cooking—vinegar, rose water, onion juice, and spices. All the dishes in the book, including the Jewish ones, exhibit delicate attention to flavor, texture, and presentation. Jews also authored recipe and dietetics books. Isaac Israelicus' 10th century Book of Foods was translated into Latin in the 15th century and used in medical schools until the 17th century.

ASHKENAZI CUISINE

European Jewish cuisine developed along with the migration of the European Jewish community--from west to east.

For the most part, the Jews of Eastern Europe were poor, and so the Jews who lived in the shtetls (villages) of this region ate peasant food.

The exact type of peasant food reflected a number of factors: geography and geographical shifts, the unique international nature of the Jewish community and, of course, the Jewish dietary laws.

Early in the middle Ages, most Jews living on the European continent lived in Western Europe, particularly in Germany. In the thirteenth century, however, the Germans became more antagonistic to the Jews, and many Jews headed eastward to Poland and Russia. The foods of Polish and Russian Jewry reflect this German base. Horseradish, rye bread, and pickles are all German foods

eaten by the Jews of Germany and passed on to later generations in Eastern Europe.

Once the Jews arrived in Poland and Russia, they built upon this German foundation and adopted local food customs. Because of the harsh winter climate of this area, Polish and Russian Jews ate a lot of grains, root vegetables, and stews. Fruit was readily available, and it was used in almost everything, including soups and sauces. Perhaps the most famous “Jewish” food of all, bagels, also originated in Poland. The Jews of Poland had a communal sweet tooth, and they added sugar to vegetable dishes and fish. Sweet gefilte fish with beet sweetened horseradish or chrain, originated in Poland. Whereas the Polish Jews used a lot of sugar, the Russian Jews opted for peppered and sour foods.

The Jews of medieval Europe were active merchants, and they often came into contact with Jews from other regions. Through these meetings, foreign elements entered Jewish cooking. Noodles, though not widely eaten in the general German population, became a staple of German Jewish cooking after being introduced by German Jewish merchants who had traveled to Italy.

In the Middle Ages, Jewish dietary laws were strictly observed, re-enforced by logistics and communal pressure. Most shtetl Jews did not have private cooking facilities. Each community had a communal cooking house, baking house, and slaughterhouse. The cooking and baking areas had separate sections for meat and dairy. The dietary laws were also responsible for pushing Jews into the food trade. Jews had to produce their own foods because the preparation of kosher food must be supervised by Jews. In addition, wine produced by gentiles was also off-limits to Jews, and so Jews had their own vineyards. Some local governments encouraged these food production and trading activities. Many Jews living in the Polish provinces managed the agricultural lands of the Polish nobility. In exchange, the Jews were given flour mills, dairy production facilities, and exclusive rights to produce certain alcoholic beverages.