RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Faith and Fatherland:
A Study of the Dual Identity of Italian Jews in the Twentieth Century

BY
GREGORY SPEAR

An honors thesis submitted to the History Department of
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
under the supervision of Professor Rudolph M. Bell.

New Brunswick, New Jersey
April 16, 2010
Acknowledgements:

First and foremost, I owe an enormous amount of gratitude to Professor Rudolph M. Bell, who served as my primary advisor for this thesis. Since I first showed up at his office door over a year ago without a topic or an ounce of experience, he has challenged me relentlessly and guided me through the rigors of historical research. Without his tireless dedication, this thesis would not have become a reality.

I must also extend a special thank you to Professor Virginia Yans, my second reader, for her useful advice, and to Professors Ariella Lang and Elizabeth Leake for enthusiastically lending their expertise whenever I needed it.

A warm thanks to Professor James Masschaele, who fielded the anxious questions of me and my fellow thesis-writers for two semesters, to Dean Douglas Greenberg and Dr. Kenneth J. Breslauer for their interest and advice during the formative stages of this thesis, and to the Aresty Research Center, which contributed generously to my research expenses.

I would also like to thank Peter Miniscalco, my high school history teacher, for instilling in me an enjoyment of studying history, and, last but not least, my parents for their unending support.

Gregory Spear
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ........................................................................................................... 4

**The Dual Identity of Italian Jews under Fascism** ......................................................... 8

A Historical Anomaly .................................................................................................. 12

Winds of Change: 1934-37 ......................................................................................... 24

The Racial Laws and their Immediate Aftermath: 1938-40 ........................................ 35

**Freedom and Identity in Italian-Jewish Literature** ................................................... 50

Pre-Fascist Italian-Jewish Identity: Italo Svevo ............................................................. 51

The Generation of Italian-Jewish Authors under Fascism: Natalia

Ginzburg and Giorgio Bassani ..................................................................................... 56

Primo Levi and the Ultimate Realization of Jewish Identity ........................................ 65

Literary Quandaries ..................................................................................................... 67

**The Shoah in Italy: Remembrance and Identity** ....................................................... 79

Emancipation Synagogue Architecture ...................................................................... 80

Jewish Museums in Italy ............................................................................................... 93

The Risiera di San Sabba ............................................................................................. 102

**Epilogue: Life is Beautiful** ...................................................................................... 110

**Works Cited** ........................................................................................................... 115
**Introduction**

The experience of Italian Jews in the 1930s and 1940s until recently has been understudied compared to the plights of other contemporary Jewish communities, and also relative to the enormous scope of scholarly research on Fascist Italy. The first complete, comprehensive study of Italian Jews and Fascism was undertaken by the well-known Italian historian Renzo de Felice, most noted for his immense seven volume biography of Benito Mussolini. Originally published in 1961, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* is a very thorough study of the Italian Jews as a whole, in particular their relationship with the Fascist government. However, it should be noted that de Felice’s work has come under fire by more recent scholarship for painting a rather sympathetic interpretation of Italian Fascism, while absolving the Italians and the Italian way of life of any and all anti-Semitic tendencies. I have tried not to let de Felice’s contested historical perspective inform my own research, drawing from his work only the objective data it provides, such as documents, statistical information, and primary sources not otherwise available to me.

In addition, H. Stuart Hughes’ *Prisoners of Hope: the Silver Age of the Italian Jews* (1983) remains an authority on Italian-Jewish authors of the period. His chapters on the writings of Italo Svevo and Primo Levi in particular led me to explore Italian-Jewish literature as it relates to my central thesis. Alexander Stille’s *Benevolence and Betrayal* (1991) was very influential on my research as well, providing a more recent study of Italian Jews under Fascism that approaches the subject through the biographical lens of five Jewish families, whose stories reveal very different aspects of the duality I seek to
capture. I consulted all three of these secondary sources extensively in developing information for my argument.

Where my thesis differs from these and other respected works, is in its central focus on the dual identity of Italian Jews from emancipation to the memorialization of the Holocaust. I set out to answer the following question: when confronted by racial exclusion at the hands of their own government, how did Italian Jews manage their conflicting attachments to their national and ethno-religious identities? Faced with such an extreme scenario, how were dual loyalties maintained or destroyed? Naturally, such a complex interaction between religious obligation and patriotic feeling cannot be simplified into two neat categories, but I was interested in discovering what the effect this sudden calamity had on the religious and national consciousness of Italian Jews.

The racial laws of 1938 fit into fascist ideology as part of Mussolini’s dream of creating a civilization of strong, active, healthy Italian warriors, a vision he often equated to ancient Rome. But ironically, the Roman Empire generally had allowed conquered subjects to maintain their religious practices, as long as they acknowledged and obeyed the political superiority of the ruling government. At its zenith, the Empire was less a unified race of Romans, than a conglomeration of ethnicities and religions from all over Europe and the Mediterranean. Indeed, some of the empire’s most celebrated ruling dynasties were of Spanish, African, and even Syrian origin. Similarly, early Ottoman sultans permitted their Christian vassals to retain a liberal degree of autonomy over their domains, and as a result of this acknowledgement of cultural and religious distinction, their empire was enriched and possibly even strengthened.
Attaining this equilibrium is a challenge that still exists today for many minority groups. A good contemporary example of the conflict between patriotism and religious distinction among minorities is the ongoing controversy in America over the constitutional lawfulness of the “under God” clause of the Pledge of Allegiance, as well as the right of state governments to require its daily recitation in schools (a U.S. Appeals Court ruling as recent as March 11, 2010 upheld the clause, deeming it, “of a ceremonial and patriotic nature”\(^1\)). In my own experiences as a part time ESL teacher, I’ve observed second-generation Asian, Indian, and Latin American teenagers display substantial acculturation in their dress and mannerisms, while choosing to communicate amongst themselves almost exclusively in their native languages.

Though the basic character of religious and national loyalties may be similar everywhere, the case of Italian Jews is notable for its particulars. Jews were the most ancient and widely dispersed religious minority in western history. Italian Jews, in particular, were not second or third generation “guests” in their country of residence. Rather, they had been rooted in Italy for centuries, some as far back as before the birth of Christ. They had seen the rise and fall of Rome, the era of papal dominance, the creation of the Italian state, and the rise of Fascism. In short, they were as Italian as could be, based solely on residential criteria. Such uninterrupted longevity in both religion and homeland made for deep loyalties to both Judaism and Italy.

At the outset of my research, I searched for examples that reflected commitments on the part of Italian Jews to their dual identities to try to determine how they valued each in their personal and collective sensibilities. As I delved deeper, I found myself putting

on many different hats—historian, literary critic, architect, museum curator—and as I approached the question from each new angle, it became clearer that the “choice” imposed on Italian Jews by Fascist anti-Semites in the 1930s was really not a choice at all. Upon examining the delicate, complicated interplay between these two identities, I have concluded that when confronted with racial exclusion, Italian Jews did not choose one over the other. The experience of the racial laws and ultimately the Holocaust did not forcibly tear their two identities apart from one another, but rather strengthened the inseparable bond of their fully Jewish and fully Italian identities. Whether it be the shared fate of bitter political enemies in the face of Fascist persecution, the emergence of a strong Jewish consciousness in the literature of Jewish authors, or the methods by which Italian Jews preserve the memory of the Holocaust today through museums and memorials, all these perspectives reflect an intricate duality, an inseparable wholeness, and a powerful sense of confidence in their identity as Italians and as Jews.
Chapter 1
The Dual Identity of Italian Jews under Fascism

In early November, 1924, twenty-three year old Nello Rosselli, an upstart historian from Florence, took the stage to address his peers at the Jewish Youth Convention at Leghorn. The topic of the three-day gathering was the crisis raging within Italian Jewry. The Italian Risorgimento had allowed Jews, after centuries of marginalization, the opportunity to participate fully in Italian life and leave the dark memory of the ghetto behind. The vast majority of Italian Jews wasted no time in embracing this newfound equality, joining the workforce and otherwise Italianizing themselves. As wealthy members of bourgeois Florentine society, Rosselli’s family was among these Jews who benefited from assimilation.

However, some Jews opposed wholehearted secular immersion, citing the importance of maintaining their age-old identity first and foremost as Jews. At the head of these non-assimilationist groups were the Zionists, Jews who supported the creation of a Jewish political state in Palestine. Their most outspoken leader at Leghorn was Enzo Sereni, a young Roman Jew who, like Rosselli, hailed from distinguished ancestral roots. His father had been appointed a court physician to the newly installed monarchy of the Kingdom of Italy and he was also well-established within the highest circles of the Roman Jewish Community. His father’s dual affiliations made Sereni’s family “Italian to the core” while still retaining a higher level of religious observance than many upper
middle class Jews after emancipation.² This heightened connection to Judaism may well have been what led Sereni to embrace the Zionist perspective as a teenager.

Despite their comparable upbringings, their conflicting perspectives on the matter of Italian-Jewish identity led the two young men to clash at the 1924 Leghorn Conference. Although Rosselli represented the pro-assimilationist Jews at the conference, he found himself caught somewhere between these staunchly opposed positions. His family had strong ties to the Risorgimento, and he had served as a junior officer along with his older brother Carlo during the First World War.³ Despite this patriotic upbringing, he advocated the integration of Jews into Italian society while nonetheless retaining the essential characteristics of his Judaism. Firmly committed to these dual loyalties, Rosselli described to the congregation what being an Italian Jew meant to him:

Before addressing such questions… we must know what we are getting into, who we are… I am a Jew who doesn’t go to temple on the Sabbath, who doesn’t speak Hebrew, who is completely unobservant. And yet I am attached to my Jewish identity, and I want to defend it against any kind of deviation that may be a broadening or a reduction of itself. I am not a Zionist…

For me (because I am speaking here only for myself), the Jewish issue is of interest only in its religious aspects: as a Jew I feel a need for religion. However, all the other problems of life appear to me one by one, with an intensity, an anxiety, I would like to add, as great as the problem of religion and

completely separate from the issue of being Jewish. I personally do not feel the Jewish problem as being the fundamental, the only, problem affecting my life. Some people may dislike or despise this confession of mine; it remains, however, a fact. One cannot dictate to certain deep-seated feelings; we are what we are; we must accept what we are…

Let me repeat that I consider Judaism a religious concept of life. For me the national question that many of us see as closely tied to Judaism has no connection to religion. I have explored my own soul; I can’t say that this idea of the motherland to be reconquered, of the land where the Jewish people will reunite, has moved me at all, not even once. I would add more: inside me, there is the foundation of my entire being, the consciousness of a citizen who is part of his own country, who loves his homeland, criticizes it, rejects it, adores it, who really feels its presence, who has no intention of discussing whether this is or is not legitimately his country.

But, you will ask me, how then do you feel Jewish? What is this Jewish identity you cling to so strongly? You don’t feel that being Jewish is something that penetrates your entire life and gives it its passion from the first breath to the last—and is the right feeling? You are religious, and at the same time you say you don’t follow the religious rites. So why then do you say you are Jewish?

I do say I’m Jewish, I cherish my Jewish identity because my belief in only one God is indestructible, and no other religion has expressed this belief so clearly… because I see the tasks of this life with Jewish seriousness, and with Jewish serenity the mysteries of the afterlife—because I love all men as Israel
tells us to love them, and I therefore have the social view that comes from our best traditions, because I have the religious sense of family that appears from the outside as a foundation of Jewish society…

The integral Jews find their peace, or look for their peace in Zion. We, and I also, must find our peace, the happiness of our own lives. This can only come from the foundations of our individuality: in Judaism and Italian identity.\(^4\)

Rosselli’s speech denotes a fundamental turning point in the relationship between the dual identities of Italian Jews that had developed during their long residence in Italy. Though not a Zionist or even a practicing Jew, Rosselli claimed to feel deeply attached to his Jewish identity, while also fostering a profound allegiance to the land of his birth. According to him, no longer were the two mutually exclusive; no longer did being Jewish necessarily mean being less Italian, nor did a rejection of Zionism and a commitment to his country make him any less Jewish. Rosselli’s speech captures the essence of the complex dual identity that defined Italian Jewry after emancipation. It represents the impossibility to choose between one’s Jewishness and Italianness that many Jews already felt over a decade before Fascism essentially forced this choice upon them.

It is my aim in this thesis to show that the separation of these dual identities was impossible for Italian Jews, who were fully Jewish and at the same time fully Italian.

In 1938, after several years of heightening tension, the Fascist party initiated a series of laws, supported by “scientific findings,” severely limiting the rights of Jews. The infamous Racial Laws excluded Jews from the Italian race, and placed heavy restrictions on them economically, politically, and socially. Many Jews of high public

---

standing were forced to give up their positions, fascist Jews had their membership revoked from the party, and intermarrying was prohibited by law. The reactions varied, but its devastating effects were universal among Italian Jews of all ages and backgrounds. The fascist state forced Italian Jews to reconsider what they, the Fascists, considered a balance between Judaism and Italian citizenship, almost a ratio between two parts of a whole. They essentially tried to make Italian Jews choose between these two “parts,” a decision that even the most assimilated or the least acculturated Jews could not truly make. It is my judgment that because these Jews were fully Italian and Jewish, even the traumatic descent into racial discrimination by their own government was not enough to remove this deep-seated sense of Italianness that gripped them, nor did it diminish the strength of their Jewish identity. Instead, Fascist racial legislation renewed the collective consciousness of a people whose history taught them to suffer injustice communally. The ultimate result of the Fascist racial campaign was not the destruction of this dual identity, but its full manifestation within Italian Jewry.

***

I. A Historical Anomaly

Our curtain opens on the Italian Jews of the early twentieth century, a small minority population that had experienced both the historical processes of persecution and then of integration. From Garibaldi’s Red Shirts to the Great War and the subsequent rise of Fascism, Italians had been pushed to subscribe to the ideological tides of unity, secularism, and nationalism. Italian Jews, emancipated after centuries of confinement in ghettos as a result of these same sweeping ideological reforms, were ready politically and
ideologically for this explosion of national consciousness, and were generally on their way toward substantial assimilation. They entered the workforce enthusiastically, and many immediately began to excel and rise through the Italian social class structure. In the span of only a generation, most Jewish families had raised themselves to either middle or upper middle class status in Italian society, with a high percentage attaining leadership positions in the fields of industry, academia, and even the military.

This economic integration was followed by a tendency among Italian Jews to integrate themselves culturally, a strong desire to partake fully in the daily life of Italian society. Many characteristics of Jewish society of the past had been a direct result of the heavily enforced economic and geographic restrictions imposed by the Catholic Church for centuries. Being a tiny, persecuted minority forced to live in one place obviously had kept Jews from participating in the public life of cities like Rome, Milan, and Venice. But for the first time, the people of Italy were now bound by a powerful national consciousness in which Jews eagerly participated. They bought into the concept of the new unified Italy enthusiastically, perhaps even more so than the average Italian due to the freedom and equality they owed to the Risorgimento movement. With the ghetto abolished and most economic barriers lifted, the previously closed and communal nature of Italy’s Jewish communities became a remnant of a beleaguered past. In the process of adopting the outer trappings of their fellow Italians, their identity as Jews sometimes came to be obscured, although it never disappeared entirely.

There are several characteristics unique to Italian Jewry that allowed for the cultivation of such a harmonious existence between Italy and its Jews. The first is the deep-rooted history of the Jews in Italy. The second is the unparalleled integration of
Jews into Italian society during this period, some aspects of which began long before emancipation. The final reason is the general absence of anti-Semitism in Italy during the period following unification.

A “Brief” History

The notion of providing a succinct account of the history of the Jews in Italy is in itself paradoxical, since there is nothing fleeting about their residence on the peninsula. The community of Rome dates back to the late Roman Republic, making it the most ancient unbroken Jewish community in Europe. For over two thousand years, it existed in the shadow of the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church, two institutions that left powerful and lasting legacies on Italian history and culture. To understand the position of Italian Jews under Fascism requires some familiarity with this extensive history.

The first Jews arrived in Rome as early as 161 B.C.E. from the newly conquered province of Judea. To these original pre-imperial immigrants were added large influxes of Jewish slaves and prisoners imported after the First Jewish Revolt was quelled by the Flavian Dynasty in the first century C.E. This defeat, and the devastating impact of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., led to the wide dispersal of Palestinian Jews throughout the Empire, a migration that came to be known as the Second Jewish Diaspora.

The Jews were further alienated when Emperor Constantine I adopted Christianity as the official religion of the empire in the fourth century C.E. Though Jews were also afforded the right to practice their religion freely, this momentous shift paved the way for the Catholic Church to assume its role as the dominant political and cultural institution of the peninsula. Early Church doctrine held the Jewish people responsible for the death of
Christ, for which God punished them by destroying their Temple and dispersing them from their homeland. This logic essentially formed the basis for the harsh treatment of Jews in Christian Europe throughout the Middle Ages.

Despite the oppressive relationship between Catholic Italy and its Jews, the years 1100 to 1500 saw a general increase in the peninsula’s Jewish population. By around 1500, Italian Jews are estimated to have numbered as many as 120,000. A large portion of this increase was caused by the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. The introduction of Sephardic Jews to Italy for the first time in copious numbers made a colorful impression on the dynamic between different ethnic and cultural components of Italian Jewry. Another lasting consequence of the Inquisition was the displacement of Jews residing in the Spanish-governed Kingdoms of Naples and the Two Sicilies. This produced a massive geographical redistribution of Jewish communities, with most reestablished in the northern and central regions of the peninsula, where they remain heavily concentrated to this day.

Shortly after this expansion, the lives of Italian Jews took a downturn. The Protestant Reformation incited a new hardening of the papacy’s attitude toward the non-Catholic world, including an aggressive and reactionary stance against any religious group that threatened to undermine the authority of the Catholic Church. Though mainly aimed at the splintering sects of Protestantism, Italy’s Jews were caught in this reactionary current, and the Church employed draconian measures against them, including economic and social restrictions as well as acts of public degradation. These injustices were capped by Pope Paul IV’s infamous 1555 papal bull *cum nimis absurdum*,

---

which declared the "absurdness" of allowing Jews to live side by side with Christians, reaffirming the ghettoization of Jews under papal rule.

Aside from a brief period of respite when Napoleon’s forces occupied parts of Northern Italy and disbanded the city ghettos, enclosed residence and economic restriction remained a harsh but accepted reality for Italy’s Jews for roughly three centuries. With Italy’s unification things changed for the better for the new nation’s Jews. Pope Pius IX, r. 1846-78, did his utmost to withstand the tides of liberalism and secularism that undermined the pope’s political authority in Italy, but by mid-century his power was severely challenged. By 1860, and in Rome 1870, the wave of modern and secular ideologies had knocked down the walls of the ghettos for good. Jews played an active role in unification, and it was by no coincidence or act of benevolence that their emancipation was so closely tied to nationhood. As a result of the Risorgimento, Jews achieved the liberties of full citizenship, redefining their place within the greater frame of the Italian people.

**A Snapshot of Jewish Integration: Population, Occupations, and Politics**

In order to get a fuller picture of the extent of the cultural integration of Italian Jews during this period, let us consider some demographical statistics taken from Renzo de Felice’s, *The Jews in Fascist Italy*. After accounting for various inconsistencies in the original census-gathering criteria, de Felice finds that the total number of Italian Jews hovered around 40,000 between the years 1921 and 1938.\(^6\) Other estimates have placed them around 47,000, and even 50,000 out of some 45 million Italians, or about one out of every thousand. Regardless of the exact number of Italian Jews, their percentage of the

---

\(^6\) These statistics were drawn from the censuses conducted in 1911, 1931, and 1938. Though by far the most thorough, the census of 1938 utilized racist criteria for deciding who was a Jew. For this reason, the exact numbers cannot be taken at face value. For details, see de Felice, 2-4.
total population was very low compared to surrounding European countries. In Austria, for example, Jews comprised over 3% of the total population, with over 90% of those Jews residing in Vienna. In Italy, this tendency to cluster around one major urban area was less pronounced. Other than Rome, the largest and most historical Jewish community in Italy, other significant Jewish populations resided in Milan, Trieste, Turin, Florence, Venice and Ancona. Although heavily concentrated in the northern regions, this scattering across a variety of urban areas eased the way for the economic and social integration of Jews into the towns and cities of the new Italy.

Italian Jews entered a wide array of economic sectors and were surprisingly dispersed in their political orientations. It is true that Jews were disproportionately represented in occupations such as public administration, banking, and intellectually based posts, leading a significant number to join the upper-middle bourgeoisie. However, many Jews held lower-middle and working class jobs, particularly among those who stayed within the urban ghetto centers of Rome and Venice. According to the 1938 census, Jews working as mid-level managers, employees, and workers numbered well over 12,000, roughly half the population of Jewish adults of working age. Their political affiliations covered a similarly wide range, determined not by their religious identity but by other social and economic factors.

The cultural integration of Italian Jews is also visible in the high rate of mixed marriages from this period. According to the 1938 census, the 7,457 mixed marriages with one Jewish partner represented 43.7% of total marriages involving Jews, a statistic

---

7 De Felice, 16.
8 According to the “Demography and Race” report to Mussolini in August 1940 (de Felice, 709).
consistently higher than in other European countries. These figures indicate a willingness on the part of many Italian Jews to compromise their religiously based identity at least to the extent of marrying someone of a different faith. In many cases these marriages must have involved at least nominal acceptance of Catholicism, if not for themselves then for their children, a compromise of conversion such as we will see in the case of Italo Svevo.

Their small absolute numbers and their dispersed economic, political, and geographical distribution kept Jews from overwhelming their fellow Italians in any sector of public life, greatly easing the transition into the larger Italian population. Their liberated presence was not suddenly felt en masse, but gradually and evenly throughout different layers of society. They were free to pursue their own secular interests like every other Italian, based on their economic and social standing and almost entirely independent of their Judaism. In this small window of time, Italian Jews viewed their place in Italy, at least in public spheres, less through the lens of their Judaism than according to their status as citizens.

Anti-Semitism in Italy

Another factor that fostered integration was the absence of virulent anti-Semitism in Italy during this period. Unlike in other countries, ethnicity and race were not driving forces in the creation of an Italian national consciousness. Regional differences among the people who now fell under the same banner of statehood were vast; the people of Milan or Venice had little in common with the citizens of Naples or Sicily. Jews exhibited the characteristics of their native regions far more noticeably than any universally Jewish traits. They reflected every facet of these regional differences—in

---

9 De Felice, 11.
their speech, their cultural values, and their culinary traditions—making them virtually indistinguishable from other Romans, Milanese or Florentines. They were therefore viewed not as a separate homogenous group thrown into the mixture of peoples now considered Italian, but as part of the coming together of different regional identities to form the Italian people as a political unit comprised of many different local identities.

Moreover, the traces of anti-Semitism that did exist were largely linked to traditional Catholic doctrines. With the crumbling of papal influence in the nineteenth century, popular Catholic anti-Semitism diminished, giving way to the liberal ideology of national unification. Some lingering vestiges of anti-Semitism continued in the form of a few far-rightwing organizations associated with the papacy. In particular, a Jesuit periodical called Civiltá Cattolica, produced with papal authorization, contained tangible traces of these prejudices. For the most part however, anti-Semitism during this period was limited to these extreme sources and was not significant generally in public opinion.10

This absence of widespread anti-Semitism is important for understanding the meaning of the events that befell Italian Jews in the 1930s and 40s at the hands of the Fascist party. We will see the threads of past prejudices picked up once again, first by radical rightwing anti-Semites, and later by the party itself, in vicious propaganda campaigns, culminating in the promulgation of the infamous Racial Laws of 1938. This anti-Semitism was forcibly created, and came as a largely unforeseen shock, certainly to Italian Jews and probably to millions of other Italians as well. Later in this chapter, we will deal at length with the effect this rupture with the post-unification past had on Italian

---

10 De Felice describes these movements as “small manifestations of an innocuous and traditional type,” 25.
Jews. But first, we want to see how Italian Jews viewed themselves and their personal relationships with their Jewish identity in the period before Fascist anti-Semitism.

_The Pre-1934 Status of Jewish Consciousness_

I have posed the question of what effect this mass integration and acceptance into Italian society had on the consciousness of Italian Jews; that is, the centrality they attached to their identification as Jews. Clearly the process of joining Italian society in full after centuries of marginalization had an effect on their attachment to Judaism. To assess this question, I will examine a variety of firsthand accounts, memoirs, and testimonies. We have already seen how Nello Rosselli described his own connection to Judaism as something personal but not outward. His mother, Amelia Rosselli, explains how she reared her children in regard to their Jewish identity:

> We were Jews, but _first and foremost_ Italians. That is why even I, born and raised in that profoundly Italian and liberal environment, saved only the pure essence of my religion within my heart. Religious elements that were solely of a _moral_ character: and this was the only religious instruction I gave my children.\(^\text{11}\)

It is hardly surprising, then, that her son would grow up with a limited attachment to his Judaism, at least on the surface, and conversely a strong bond to his homeland. Upon examining other testimonies from this period, it becomes apparent that a great many Jews took their Judaism in a similarly limited way. Their identity as Jews was mainly traditional, something drawn from an ancestral past that made them unique, but did not set them apart from their Italian compatriots in currently compelling ways. Instead, they placed more immediate importance on their allegiance to Italy. This trend is particularly

prominent in the first generation of Jews raised under Fascism. In *Memoirs of a Fortunate Jew*, Dan Vittorio Segre includes a chapter titled “My Jewish-Fascist Childhood,” in which he gives a very vivid description of his upbringing in Fascist Italy. Born in 1922, the same year as the March on Rome, his childhood was surrounded by the aura of Fascism:

I never entered into the Mussolini regime, I was born into it. As a totally assimilated Jew and as an Italian raised under a political regime of which my family and all my friends approved without reservation, I, too, saw Fascism as the only natural form of existence.\(^{12}\)

As a byproduct of this assimilation, Segre goes on to state that, “the Judaism practiced in my home did not entail any special obligations.” In fact, he recalls spending the majority of Jewish High Holidays “in the mountains, playing cowboys and Indians,” and how he often attended Christmas mass with his Christian cousins.\(^{13}\) All this seemed entirely natural to Segre, who carried on with very little conception of the world outside his happy, assimilated bourgeois childhood in the Piedmont region.

Similar sentiments are expressed by Carla and Franca Ovazza, who were distant relatives of Segre and experienced the same upper middleclass, pro-fascist upbringing. They were born into the same social standing as Segre, but were raised with a more resolute and vigorous political affiliation to Fascism, due to the high standing of their uncle Ettore within the local party ranks.\(^{14}\) Alexander Stille met with the sisters and recorded some of their tender and nostalgic memories of their childhoods in his study of


\(^{13}\) Ibid. 48

\(^{14}\) Ettore Ovazza, brother of Franca and Carla’s father Vittorio, and cousin of Dan Vittorio Segre’s father. We will meet him more formally later in this chapter.
five Jewish families under Fascism entitled *Benevolence and Betrayal*. These excerpts reflect the same connection between an assimilated upbringing and weakening Jewish consciousness found in *Memoirs of a Fortunate Jew*. Carla, born the same year as Segre, describes her family as “typical bourgeois… We followed the formal, material traditions of religion, but there was no moral substance to it… There were some religious Jews, but they tended to be poorer, closer to the roots.”

Carla’s sister, on the other hand, recalls the allure of Fascism and what it meant to children like her and her sister:

“I was a great fascist when I was a kid,” Franca recalls. “I loved the parades, the drills, the uniforms and the songs. I really was fascist. I used to drag my friends to all the assemblies. I could go skiing without paying, we could march in parades and do exercises instead of going to school. For a kid it was marvelous.” Carla adds that, “To us, fascism meant parades on Via Roma and free skiing. We were happy when Mussolini came to town because it meant we could skip school.”

Even though at school the fascist instructors “taught that the Jews killed Christ,” the sisters felt “absolutely no difference between us and the non-Jews except that we left class during the hour of religion.” The joy of skipping out of a class was a widely echoed sentiment among assimilated Italian Jewish children from the Fascist era. Segre also claimed:

I do not remember, either in school or outside, one single occasion when I felt uneasy because I was a Jew. I was convinced that being Jewish was a treat, no different from Cirio brand marmalade, the more so because I was the constant

---

16 Ibid., 43.
17 Ibid.
object of jealousy among my school friends for being allowed “for religious reasons” to be absent from the boring lessons of the gymnasium priest.\textsuperscript{18}

In these accounts, it becomes clear how these assimilated Jewish youths viewed their religious identity, less as a cogent defining factor than as a distinction with no negative connotations.

This reduction of a once bittersweet defining Jewish consciousness to a benign, often nebulous cultural awareness is characteristic of assimilated Jews throughout Italy. As the great author and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi would later write of his own past, “For me, being Jewish meant something vague…it meant a quiet consciousness of the ancient history of my people, a sort of benevolent amazement in the presence of religion.”\textsuperscript{19} So for many Jews like Levi, a residual consciousness of the antiquity of their cultural identity stayed with them, but not enough to separate them from their compatriots or to draw them to faithful practice of the religious rites of Judaism.

Looming over this harmonious reality were the makings of a sudden and drastic transformation. Anti-Semitic tendencies had begun to fester in some parts of the Fascist government, and by the mid-thirties, the relationship between fascism and Italian Jewry was poised for a tragic change of direction. Fortunately for Segre and the Ovazza sisters, their parents were among the minority of Jewish families with both the understanding and the financial means to get their children out of Italy before escape became impossible. In 1940, a torn and reluctant Vittorio Ovazza uprooted his family and transported them to the United States, with nothing but a tourist visa to validate his residency since the U.S.

\textsuperscript{18} Segre, 47.
\textsuperscript{19} Quoted by Sophie Nezri-Dufour, \textit{Primo Levi: una memoria ebraica del Novecento} (Florence: La Giuntina, 2002), 19.
Italian immigration quota had no room for them. Segre looked to the opposite direction; at age 16 he left for Palestine, becoming part of the first wave of Jews to do so after the passage of the Racial Laws. These two families, and a few like them, managed by emigration to avoid the devastating effects of persecution that shook the remaining Jewish community to its roots.

The rest of this chapter will look at the course of events that took place in the mid- to late-1930s, and the dramatic effects upon the whole of Italian Jewry. Most importantly, I will argue that when it came to the ultimate test of legal discrimination, the majority of Italian Jews were unwilling to relinquish their Jewish identity, and in the process, discovered the renewed force of an ancient Jewish consciousness that had been previously rendered less visible but never eliminated entirely by the dramatic effects of assimilation.

***

II. Winds of Change: 1934-37

*The Zionist Controversy*

The first issue to turn the Fascist party’s attention to the Jews in a negative light was the Zionist question, which had engaged the Italian Jewish community for over a decade and rendered all Jews more likely subjects of anti-Semitic attack. As established at Leghorn in 1924, not all Italian Jews embraced the Zionist vision; in fact, most assimilated Jews, like Nello Rosselli, were personally opposed to it. Up to this point, however, the issue had remained a private and strictly religious matter debated only within Italian Jewish forums, ignored by the government and by the non-Jewish

---

20 Stille, 79.
population. Many Jews, feeling relatively assimilated and distant from their Judaic roots, maintained an attitude of mild indifference toward their Zionist brethren.

However, in the mid-1930s, certain far rightwing members of the Fascist party caught wind of the debate and used it as an excuse to attack the loyalty of Zionist Jews. The ultimate goal of Zionism, they proclaimed, stood in direct violation of the most fundamental tenet of fascist ideology, the supremacy of the state. The Zionist dream stirred images—real or imagined—of what Mussolini himself often vaguely referred to as a “Jewish International,” a subversive interconnectedness between all of Europe’s Jews in positions of influence in a variety of fields. Furthermore, the Zionists called for unique concessions to separate Jews from the greater community, such as the institution of separate Jewish schools. These goals raised serious concerns among local party officials, and eventually caught the attention of the Fascist press, whose more ardent members devoted their pages in large measure to sniffing out potential enemies of the regime.

January 1934 marked the first prolonged and openly hostile attack on Zionism by the rightwing Fascist press. Not only were its instigators successful in turning the issue into a source of mainstream controversy, they also began to expand their platform from anti-Zionism to general anti-Semitism. The controversy lasted roughly from January to April, and involved two fascist newspapers, *Il Tevere* and *Il regime fascista*, which pitted themselves against the Jewish publication *Israel*, well-known for its Zionist leanings. The editors of the fascist newspapers—Telesio Interlandi and Roberto Farinacci, respectively—were both active anti-Semites, the former becoming the founder of the racist magazine *Difesa della Razza* and the latter a leading member of the pro-Nazi rightwing extremists within Mussolini’s party. As we examine excerpts from these
articles, the Fascists’ fixation on what they claimed to be the inherently subversive nature of the duality of Italian Jews emerges clearly.

On 30 January, 1934, *Il Tevere* drew first blood, in a stunningly open and unprovoked attack on the speech of a Zionist leader delivered in Rome twelve days prior. In it, the editorial writer states:

At this point, we should demand to see the speaker’s identity card. If he is Italian, and we have no doubt that he is, he is deeply mistaken—if not guilty of a bad deed—by encouraging his coreligionists to not ‘assimilate themselves completely’… Is it possible that the Jew who refuses to ‘assimilate,’ who refuses to become a one hundred percent citizen, can be nostalgic for the ghetto days?21

The threatening undertone of this question and its implications—namely that if Jews want to feel separate from the Italian population, we’ll throw them back in the ghetto—was only the beginning. Over the next month, *Il Tevere* continued to hack away at the Italian identity of Zionist Jews. The newspaper published letters from Jews who condemned Zionism, and continued to provoke editors of *Israel* by challenging the legitimacy of their Italian citizenship. This strategy elicited a carefully worded response from the president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UIJC) reaffirming their loyalty to Italy, while also firmly defending their right to be Zionists. Though the clamor continued from *Il Tevere*, the issue began to wane by mid-March, due largely to the decision of *Israel*, put very much on the defensive by the sudden campaign of disparagement, to ignore its aggressors once it had made its initial repudiation.

Just as the controversy began to lose steam in the mainstream media, however, the widely publicized arrest of a large group of Torinese anti-fascists, caught in the act of

smuggling anti-fascist pamphlets across the Swiss border, reignited the firestorm in late March. Of the fifteen people arrested, no less than a dozen were Jewish.\textsuperscript{22} *Il Tevere* seized upon this opportunity to launch the second phase of its anti-Semitic campaign, one characterized by a more vicious and all-encompassing attack on Italian Jews. Now Jews were cast in the role of anti-national Zionists and dangerous anti-fascists, one covert and the other in open opposition to the Fascist state. Both of these “crimes” were attributed to the dual identity the Jews fostered. The day after the arrests were made public, the newspaper published an article claiming:

> The Jew does not assimilate because he sees in assimilation a reduction of his own identity and a betrayal of his own race; that the Jew demands a dual nationality—let us even say a dual homeland—to remain a ‘productive element,’ that is, to go about his business… that not even war (and therefore Fascism) assimilated the Jews into the nation for which they fought…\textsuperscript{23}

Let us compare the two releases: the article from January attacked the position of one man, a noted Zionist, whose individual identity as an Italian was questioned. The article published two months later, however, has clearly modified this stance to include all Jews, implicitly accusing all Italian Jews of not being willing to become a part of the Italian people. Not surprisingly, assimilated, non-Zionist Jews were stung by their inclusion in Interlandi’s charge of disloyalty, one previously only associated with Zionism. Such a broad condemnation struck them as unfair, and the article produced a flurry of letters protesting the unrealistic scope of such unfounded generalizations.

\textsuperscript{22} De Felice lists eleven Jewish names arrested in connection to the incident, plus Mario Levi, who managed to escape to Switzerland (135). Stille, however, writes that only nine were of Jewish descent (49).

It was not Interlandi, but Farinacci’s *Il regime fascista* that finally put all the chips on the table for the Fascists. On April 18, he declared the following ultimatum: “If they wish to avoid the appearance of every form of deplorable anti-Semitism…Italian Jews only need to follow the advice we gave them: decide!”

This warning marked the end of the first bitter struggle in the media over the position of Italy’s Jews. But it left them in an extremely undesirable and ultimately dangerous situation, wherein their loyalties had been brought into question. For the moment, the attacks had not gained much notice from non-Jewish Italians, and more importantly, they seemed to lack the authorization of the Duce himself, whose personal political mouthpiece, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, never entered into the debate. Most Italian Jews took comfort from this fact, at least for the time being. But, though initially barely perceptible, Farinacci’s demand to “decide” would bear haunting similarity to Mussolini’s future policies regarding the Jewish Question.

*The Jewish Reaction*

The heat of the battle had abated—at least temporarily—but the struggle faced by Italian Jews was just coming to the forefront. Though Jews in no way formed a cohesive and organized group, these carefully calculated anti-Semitic attacks in the media had forced them into a dangerously defined category. At first, this did not cause any sort of unified effort on the part of all Jews. Despite the noble and dignified efforts of the Zionists to defend their Italianness, the majority of Italian Jews did not rally to support their coreligionists. Instead, many felt scorn and blamed the Zionist movement for causing unwanted tension between the regime and themselves. Within Judaism, a schism

---

formed over which direction to take. Some individuals felt the need to heed Farinacci’s challenge by visibly disassociating themselves from their Zionist coreligionists to regain esteem in the eyes of the Fascist government. Among the most vocal of these Jews to emerge was a small core of ultra-assimilationists led by the ardent fascist Ettore Ovazza, one of only a handful of Jews who had participated in the 1922 March on Rome and founder of the Jewish-fascist newspaper *La Nostra Bandiera* [Our Flag]. The primary purpose of his newspaper, created in the wake of the January-April 1934 controversy, was to reestablish the unwavering loyalty of Italian Jews to the regime. Its opening edition made this objective clear:

> We are soldiers, we are fascists. We feel equal to all other citizens, especially in our duties toward the Fatherland. Members of the same family, in peace and in war, we want to kiss the tricolor flag for which we are always ready to fight and die; we want to pray to the God of our fathers in good conscience.

> Whoever takes a sacrilegious hand against our country or disturbs our religious peace will find us ready to defend and attack… The Italian Jews have always guarded jealously the perfect spiritual unity between love of religion and love of Fatherland.  

> For Ovazza, to support anything but one’s homeland was outrageous. He believed that Zionism had no place in a country where Jews were treated so equitably. As a loyal fascist and a Jew, he saw it as his duty to represent the pro-fascist position of assimilated Jews within the UIJC. Like Farinacci, he too saw the Zionist question in black and white, something that every Jew must take a stand for or against. For this reason, he worked tirelessly to eradicate Italian Zionism within the UIJC, while extolling

---

the virtues of the Fascist regime with a zeal bordering on excessive. Ironically, his blind dedication to the regime would seal his fate, as he was to become a tragic example of the betrayal that awaited even the most loyal of Italian Jews.

Upon its inception, Ovazza’s Bandiera movement excited controversy within the Jewish community, splitting it into two camps. The UIJC, concerned about the mounting discontent of assimilationist Jews voiced by La Nostra Bandiera but morally obligated to support the Zionist cause, tried desperately to reconcile the two sides, but to no avail. In the face of organized press attacks, this stalemate weakened the UIJC as it desperately tried to reach an agreement, while struggling to maintain an outward appearance of unity under the watchful eye of the regime. In the end, an agreement between the two sides in January 1935 temporarily bandaged the wound, only to be re-opened two years later. Fed up with the inaction of the UIJC, members of La Nostra Bandiera founded a “Committee of Italians of the Jewish Faith,” effectively cutting all ties with the central body of Italian Jewry. This secession delivered a fatal blow to the cohesiveness of the Italian Jewish community. Desperately divided and with no unified voice with which to combat the growing threat of a common enemy, many Jews were left to “fend” for themselves in the coming years of tribulation.

1937: Two Pivotal Events

The year 1935 saw the Jewish question virtually disappear from the press, replaced mostly by news of the conflict in Ethiopia and the fascist dream of a new Italian Empire to rival that of the ancient Romans. The Jews, according to Renzo de Felice, acted, “as Italians living among Italians,” mostly in favor of the war in Ethiopia, and paying little mind to the sporadic grumblings of small anti-Semitic publications. It was

---

26 De Felice, 177.
not until 1937, the pivotal year before the Racial Laws, that the first signs of state-sponsored anti-Semitism emerged. Two important events in 1937 signaled this change, one at home and one abroad. The first was the publication in mid-April of Paolo Orano’s *The Jews in Italy*, one of the most effective pieces of propaganda penned during the Fascist era. The second was Mussolini’s official state visit to Germany in September of that year.

For all the barking from the Fascist press, Mussolini himself had so far remained extremely tightlipped in regard to the Jewish question in Italy. His attitude seemed rather ambivalent; he resolutely denied the existence of any racial question in Italy, while also occasionally spouting ominous warnings about International Jewry. At times he could appear rather sympathetic and reassuring—at least in official statements—toward Jews, even pledging his support of the Zionist movement on a number of occasions (“I am a Zionist, myself,” the Duce once told Nahum Goldmann, a member of the World Jewish Council). Such comments arose not out of any moral solidarity with the Zionist cause, but purely out of the intriguing political implications of establishing a friendly nation in the Middle East by which to combat the influence of Great Britain. On the other hand, by his personal nature he always remained leery of the international influence he perceived among Jews “in high places.” Despite his wavering stance, it is safe to say that even as late as mid-1936, Mussolini had not made up his mind on the growing question of Italian Jewry.

Paolo Orano’s *The Jews of Italy* marks the first major shift in the Duce’s official position, and the beginning of the end for the relationship between Jews and Fascism. In it, Orano argues a two-prong attack against Italian Jews. On the Zionist issue, his diatribe

---

27 Hughes, 57-58.
varies little from the nationalistic rancor that Farinacci and Interlandi had been stirring up since 1934. What is different is the studious and seemingly nonbiased tone in which Orano analyzes fascist Jews, who he claims have tried to set themselves apart by loudly voicing their allegiance as a means to cover up their intimate bond of religion with the Zionists and anti-fascist Jews. In other words, Orano accuses fascist Jews of being overly fascist, thus completing the vilification of all of Italian Jewry—Zionists, anti-fascists, and now even loyal party members—from the perspective of the regime.

Most Italian Jews were dumbfounded by the ridiculousness of such a claim. Ettore Ovazza, who due to longtime party connections was a good friend of Orano, was particularly incensed, and wrote a stinging rebuttal entitled, *The Jewish Problem: Response to Paolo Orano*. The effort was futile. A slew of Fascist papers praised the pamphlet, and anti-Semitism in the press once again rose to a fever pitch, and this time it would not recede until the fall of Mussolini in 1943. The Fascist organ, *Il Popolo d’Italia* broke its silence on the issue, and signaled the change, publishing a positive review of the book and asking the question, “Do they consider themselves Jews in Italy or Jews of Italy?”

Many Italian Jews anxiously saw Mussolini’s endorsement of Orano’s attack as a subtle indication of a change in the Duce’s official direction but they failed to perceive fully the danger. Though the endorsement gave them legitimate cause for concern, they lured themselves into thinking that the baseless clamoring of rightwing propaganda would never be enough to sway the Duce, who had always fancied himself to be more

---

28 Stille documents the relationship between these two men around the time of Orano’s publication of *The Jews in Italy* (65-68, 80-81). Despite a heated literary exchange, the two remained very good friends, and Orano later helped Ovazza the best he could to get by after the racial laws. Above all, this strange dynamic highlights the absurdity and paradoxical nature of the ensuing racial campaign.

29 De Felice, 203.
politically-minded. Their primary fear was of a much greater political source of anti-Semitic influence: Mussolini’s growing fascination and reluctant admiration of Hitler’s Germany. Though Fascist anti-Semitism was never as malicious or practiced on the scale of Nazi Germany, the state-sponsored approach that Italy took is unquestionably linked to the heightened connection between Rome and Berlin during these crucial years. In fact, if we look back at the relatively tranquil period in the press, 1935-36 were the years when Mussolini’s attitude toward his fellow dictator to the north was lukewarm at best, more often characterized by disapproval and disgust than by approbation. But by 1937, his opinion had changed. During his state visit to Munich on September 26, the show of Nazi strength and discipline greatly impressed him, and he made a series of speeches declaring Italy and Germany to be lifelong allies. Due to this new spirit of camaraderie, he returned to Italy even more susceptible to the virulent propaganda campaigns emanating from within his own party, campaigns aimed just as much at winning over the Duce to German racial theories as at spreading them to the masses. The social and political situation was now primed for the “anti-Semitic plunge.”\(^{30}\) The previously intermittent rightwing propaganda machine began to operate with a renewed vigor and consistency that suggested far less constraint from official party policy makers. For many Jews, this moment marked the start of an eye-opening disenchantment with the Fascist regime, and a slow realization of what the coming years might bring.

The years 1934 through mid-1937 had been contradictory times for Italian Jews. On the one hand, they had experienced a resurgence of anti-Semitism in the press that had not existed for nearly a century. The barrage had gradually increased in intensity and scope, until it threatened even the most assimilated and dedicated Jews. On the other

\(^{30}\) Hughes, 57.
hand, the community received occasional encouragement by official statements from Mussolini, who declared as late as June 1937 that, “the Jews of Italy…shall continue to receive the same treatment as that awarded to any other Italian citizen, [and] that no form of racial or religious discrimination is on my mind.” Most Italian Jews still trusted the Duce’s words, a trust he was soon to violate.

Even late in 1937, many Italian Jews understandably failed to read properly the signs pointing to the new anti-Semitic direction of their government. Of those who did sense the changes in the wind, many on balance dismissed them, or refused to acknowledge fully their seriousness. Though newspaper articles gave Jews growing cause for concern, the printings had no immediate effect on their daily lives, and for the most part did not affect their interactions with non-Jewish acquaintances. But in the meantime, what was the state of the collective Jewish consciousness on the eve of the racial laws? Even as they stood by Mussolini’s assurances in good faith, it was becoming evident that Italian Jews had been typecast by the anti-Semitic press solely according to their identity as Jews, with little regard for their independent socio-political status. Even among the most assimilated, well-off Jews, there may well have been some form of a regenerative Jewish consciousness during this phase, or as Giorgio Bassani’s fictional Micòl Finzi-Contini succinctly puts it, “now we are all in the same boat.” But regardless of the level of awareness they possessed, few were adequately prepared for the fateful course of action the regime was about embark upon.

***

III. The Racial Laws and their Immediate Aftermath: 1938-40

Mussolini and the Political Inevitability of the Racial Laws

The anti-Semitic laws of 1938 remain one of the most glaring blemishes on the Fascist period in Italy. Though posed under the guise of race, they targeted virtually only the Jewish population of Italy, aside from an extremely small number of non-Italians in the newly conquered colonies, who were barely affected. In an instant, almost 50,000 Italian Jews were disenfranchised, disowned by their own government and stripped of many of their basic rights as Italian citizens. These laws had a devastating effect. In a sense, though the plight of physical persecution was much less in Italy than in other European countries, the psychological experience of the racial laws was more painful for Italian Jews than for their more marginalized coreligionists elsewhere in Europe, if for no other reason than the relatively benign integration during the decades since unification.

It can readily be stated that the racial laws were not the result of any popular consensus, but rather a byproduct of higher political maneuverings. Although Mussolini himself made numerous claims denying the possibility of Italian racism, he was quick to disregard the promises he had made to Italian Jews when the opportunity for a potentially prosperous political venture presented itself. This reality, which loyal fascist Jews such as Ovazza—who had gained personal recognition and reassurance from the Duce—would never admit, was aptly summed up by the German Jew Herman Swith in an article from 1934:

It is stupid to say that Mussolini loves or hates the Jewish people. He simply loves Italy… For Mussolini, the Jews are a pawn on the world chessboard, not
terribly important, but not all together useless. This is Mussolini’s attitude toward us, no more, no less.33

The opportunity in this case was the decision to align himself with Hitler and form the Axis Powers, a course of action that would have tragic consequences for both Italy and its Jews.

The extent to which the racial laws were an imitation of Nazi protocol is debatable. Though there certainly must have been a considerable degree of influence based solely on the chronological proximity of the two developments, Italian anti-Semitism was by no means a carbon copy of the German variety. Mussolini disdained the virulence of Nazi anti-Semitism too much—and had made too many statements saying so—to simply emulate Hitler. For the sake of his world image and the purity of Italian Fascism he ultimately wished to uphold in the face of his increasing likeness to Germany, he sought to craft a more ideological anti-Semitism, one based on a cult of empire and civilization rather than applied genocide. More than anything, the laws were a political concession to Nazi Germany. It was this political calculation that prompted the Duce set aside whatever reservations he may have had and to join pro-Nazi right wingers in an open embrace of anti-Semitism.

The Racial Laws

The Fascists hoped to gain support for the new racial laws from Christian Italians by prefacing them with some form of evidence against the Jews. Accusations of Jewish internationalism and anarchy had not been enough to arouse popular anti-Semitism in the past, so the Fascists attempted to manufacture more definitive proof of the Jews’ non-

33 Herman Swith, “Il Duce, la Palestina, ed il Congresso Ebraico Mondiale,” Haaretz (December 29, 1934): De Felice, 156.
Italianness. The onslaught came on July 14, 1938 in the form of a “racist manifesto” signed by several of Italy’s leading scientists, which presented a list of ten pseudo-scientific discoveries regarding race. Among these discoveries were:

1. Human races exist.
2. The actual population of Italy is of Aryan origin and its culture is Aryan.
3. Jews do not belong to the Italian race.\(^{34}\)

Though this flimsy attempt at scientific evidence seemingly did not convince the masses of the validity of state-sponsored anti-Semitism (if anything it alerted Italians to the falsity of their government’s actions\(^{35}\)), it provided the regime with self-justification to enact racist legislation. The first round of laws passed in early September, and targeted every facet of Italian Jewish life. Property rights were severely restricted; Jewish children were no longer allowed to attend public schools; Jews were no longer allowed to hold a wide range of administrative, academic, military, government, and financial occupations; mixed marriages were banned; and Jewish families were no longer allowed to employ house servants of the Italian race.\(^{36}\) In addition, rigorous regulations as to who was to be classified as a Jew were put into place.

Although the laws touched every Jew, their impact was uneven owing to the differing walks of life among Italian Jews. The job security of working class Jews remained relatively high, whereas the more assimilated, middle to upper-middle class families felt more fully the weight of the racial laws. Some were put into dire economic

---

\(^{34}\) Manifesto of the Racist “Scientists.” De Felice, document 16 (679-680).

\(^{35}\) De Felice writes that the majority of Italians, at least at this early juncture, refused to “swallow the racist pill” (305), while Stille references some popular acknowledgement of the “intellectual dishonesty of the new Italian anti-Semitism” (67).

straits due to the overnight loss of their jobs. In many cases, prosperous Jews were forced to relocate, or take up jobs that drastically underutilized their professional skills. Jewish college students had to find ways to circumvent the laws in order to not forfeit their university degrees, and a few observant Jews who depended on non-Jewish servants to take care of household tasks on the Sabbath were left with no place to turn.

**Reaction of Italian Jews**

Despite the unofficial warnings that preceded passage of the racial laws, the vast majority of Italian Jews were blindsided when the bombshell of legal discrimination fell upon them, and justifiably so. The overwhelming response was confusion and disbelief. Few had understood fully the serious domestic implications of Mussolini’s tightening bond with Hitler over the past year. To be sure, Jews had openly disapproved of rapprochement with the Nazis because of their well-known anti-Semitism, but the overwhelming majority firmly believed that these barbaric atrocities could never take place in Italy. After all, they believed, Italian Jews were not German Jews, and Mussolini was not Hitler. Instead, they anxiously asserted that the laws must have been a mistake, some gross misunderstanding that would soon be righted.

But by the time the second round of legislation passed in November, whatever veil of illusion had remained was torn asunder by the grim reality of persecution. There were those who expressed anger and those who expressed sadness, some who lashed out at their Jewish neighbors and others who called for solidarity and steadfast endurance. But common to all Italian Jews was the slow, painful sense of betrayal, the stinging realization that their own government had turned against them. Nonetheless, despite the grave injustice dealt to them, most Jews found ways to cope with the material
repercussions of the racial laws, which ranged from inconvenience to catastrophe. A much more insidious consequence was the damage that the racial laws did to their sense of belonging to their homeland. The deeply-felt patriotic loyalty that Nello Rosselli had described in his speech, that the bandieristi had pursued relentlessly among their fellow Jews, and that even Israel had claimed to harbor—the fundamental right to feel Italian—was wrenched from their cultural and personal sense of self with no sufficient explanation. Denied all other aspects of their identity, the only one remaining intact was their Jewishness, the very identity that for centuries had been their burden but also their refuge. In the years after 1938, they would not give up their national allegiance as Italians, which had become over the preceding eight decades since unification a treasured and inseparable part of themselves, but their sense of pride in their Jewishness flourished as never before.

Emigrations and Conversions

In order to explore the dimensions of this inseparability, it may be appropriate first to address the obvious counterexamples, or, in other words, the Jews who outwardly did “choose” between their two identities. To accurately gauge the degree to which Italian Jews leaned toward one or the other identity on an individual basis is extremely difficult because of the high degree of variation in the circumstances behind such a complex and personal matter. However, in simple demographic terms, the categories that best represent these “deciders” are those who either converted to Christianity (Italian over Jewish identity) or who emigrated out of Italy (Jewish over Italian identity). According to Stille, 5,706 Jews converted to Catholicism immediately after 1938; at the other
extreme, the number of Jews who emigrated in the years 1938-1940 was around 6,000. Combined, the single-identity choosers amount to roughly a quarter of Italy’s Jews in 1938, no paltry number. However, a closer study of the circumstances and motives behind their actions suggests that these “choosers” may not have been as detached from their dual identities as at first appears.

The numbers of converts vs. emigrants are remarkably even. This balance shows that even among Jews who did consciously value one identity over the other, there was no general consensus about which identity took precedence. It was a feeling that varied from person to person. Furthermore, there is no way to verify the level of conviction with which these Jews made their decision. In many cases conversion or emigration was primarily a temporary mode of escaping racial persecution, and did not necessarily signify permanent detachment from either their religion or their homeland. Among emigrants, it is well documented that many left their homeland primarily out of familial necessity, no more willing to abandon their Italian identity than Christian Italian emigrants had been for many decades. Since the racial laws descended hardest on the Jewish family unit—loss of income, children kicked out of school, restrictions on social activities—those Jews who had the means to leave often did so mainly for the sake of their children, or at least sent them to study abroad in neighboring countries in the hopes that the laws would be rescinded. Some of these Jews returned to Italy as soon as the war ended. A similar case can be made for the flood of Jewish converts after 1938. These “new marranos” cannot be considered as genuinely Christianized, due to the obvious

38 Hughes, 60. The author refers to the term “marrano” used in fifteenth century Spain for those Jews who converted to Christianity in order to avoid expulsion from the kingdom in 1492. Despite professing the
pressure under which they made their conversions. Again, many of them denounced their Judaism for the benefit of children and grandchildren, in order to secure for them Aryan status in compliance with the complicated genetic regulations set forth by the regime. Such drastic measures were examples of the chaotic aftermath that wrecked havoc on the Jewish community during these tumultuous years. Even those Jews who managed to partially remove themselves from the devastation of the racial laws may nonetheless have shared the suffering of their fellow Jews, even if in a more distanced manner. Finally, the fact that three-quarters of all Jews did not take either course suggests how logistically difficult and perhaps emotionally painful it was for these Jews to abandon either of their dual identities.

Three Reactions: Anti-fascist, Zionist, and Loyalist

Italian Jews who remained in Italy and endured the full weight of persecution responded in a variety of ways to the racial laws issued against them, ranging from anger, indignation, and blame to painful acceptance and communal solidarity. Their positions on the Jewish Question expressed before 1938 serve as a proper starting point for assessing the impact of the racial laws on their sense of identity. Let us examine three responses in turn, using the protagonists I previously introduced.

Anti-fascists: The Rosselli Brothers

The initial shock of racial exclusion was felt less violently by those Jews whose divorce from fascism had begun well before 1938. These were mainly the anti-fascist Catholic faith, they were reviled by both Jews and Catholics for continuing to practice Jewish cultural and religious traditions in secret.

Even for those Jews “of a certain social and cultural level, who were aware of moral rather than political issues,” and for whom “it was just as easy to go into exile as to remain at home” (de Felice, 318), the enormous impact of having to uproot their lives in Italy and start over in another country cannot be discounted.
Jews whose opposition to fascism stemmed from political motives, now hardened by the anti-Semitic laws. Nello Rosselli and his brother, Carlo, were among the leading organizers of the loose network of clandestine anti-fascist movements that had formed in North Italy in the 1930s. Despite their distinguished Florentine ancestry and assimilated upbringing, the brothers had turned to anti-fascism early in their adult lives. In 1929, they founded the *Giustizia & Libertá* (GL) movement, one of the more wide-reaching underground anti-fascist organizations, and one with which many well-known anti-fascist conspirators, including Carlo Levi and Leone Ginzburg, were affiliated.

After 1938, partisan movements grew, due to the number of Jews who “saw the light” and turned against their Fascist government after its open embrace of anti-Semitism. At the same time, GL leaders renewed their efforts to thwart fascist plots, particularly in and around the Piedmont area. When the regime responded in turn by clamping down on anti-fascist conspirators, the movements were forced further underground, and their leaders were often compelled to take up residency outside of Italy to avoid imprisonment.

Carlo Rosselli, the more active anti-fascist conspirator of the two brothers, spent most of the 1930s in exile in Paris, where he continued to involve himself with the anti-fascist struggle in Italy and more directly in Spain with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Nello, the more conservative-minded of the two, remained in Italy, where he stayed in contact with GL leaders while keeping a low profile in Florence. On June 6, 1937, he traveled to France to meet Carlo, who at the moment was back in Paris trying desperately to rouse support for the anti-fascist front fighting in Spain. Three days later,
on a country road in Normandy, the brothers were ambushed and murdered by French fascist sympathizers, allegedly under orders from Mussolini himself.\footnote{Pugliese, “Death in Exile.”}

\textit{Zionists: Enzo Sereni}

In circles beyond committed anti-fascists, the main organs of Italian Jewry faltered. The UIJC, torn apart by the Zionist controversies and overrun by independent initiatives, was virtually powerless to form any sort of unified front to defend its members, even in this time of momentous struggle. And yet, many leaders of the Jewish community, particularly those with Zionist affiliations, raised their voices in a call for unity. Their attachment to fascism had not been altered by political irreconcilabilities, as with the anti-fascists, but by their encounter with the malicious propaganda campaign of Fascist anti-Semites in 1934. Consequently, much like anti-fascist Jews, their eyes had been opened early on to the underlying hostility of Mussolini’s regime. When the anti-Semitic laws came, the response was one of unruffled, dignified acceptance, and a call to universal compassion. Dante Lattes, a prominent Zionist leader and co-founder of \textit{Israel}, was among the most outspoken promoters of Jewish solidarity. In an article dated September 8, 1938, he begged Italian Jews to come together and suffer communally, in the way their forefathers had suffered throughout the history of the Diaspora. Only by bearing the weight of persecution together would Italian Jewry be able to endure through its current time of trial.\footnote{Dante Lattes, “Nell’ora di prova,” \textit{Israel} (September 8, 1983): De Felice, 321.} It was to be the final issue of \textit{Israel} before the magazine was permanently shut down two weeks later.

An even more compelling example of Zionist solidarity is the fate of Enzo Sereni. Only nineteen years old when he had faced off with Rosselli at the Jewish Youth
Conference in 1924, since then he had dedicated his life to the Zionist movement. Just as a strong aversion to fascism led the Rosselli brothers to embrace the anti-fascist movement, Sereni’s dedication to Zionism was a political response to the rise of Mussolini’s government as much as it was an outgrowth of his Judaism per se. Newly married and having received his Ph.D. from the University of Rome at age 22, Sereni left Italy with his wife in 1927 to serve the Zionist cause abroad.

The majority of his seventeen years away from Italy were spent developing his dream of social Zionism in Palestine, where he helped found a Kibbutz and worked extensively to pacify Arab-Jewish relations in Palestine. In the 1930s, he came to the United States to promote Zionism among American Jews, and later made several trips to Europe to recruit Jewish youths for Zionist labor colonies being established in Palestine. As the war in Europe grew closer, he became involved in smuggling Allied propaganda pamphlets into Egypt for the British Army, and also used his Roman connections to stay up to date on the political situation in Italy.

In an act of supreme solidarity with his Italian Jewish roots, Sereni returned to Italy during the war to help the Italian resistance movement. Shortly after parachuting into Nazi-occupied Italy with a band of fellow volunteers and British soldiers, he was captured and deported to Dachau concentration camp, where he was executed on November 18, 1944. In a letter of remembrance dated shortly after the confirmation of his death, an acquaintance described what had been closest to Sereni’s heart: “These things he loved: Italy - Italian art, Italian philosophy, even Italian historiography, and the Italian people; Jews - Eastern European Jews, German Jews; the Yiddish language, which
he barely knew…his friends…and his own home and family." This eulogy documents poignantly the depth of Sereni’s adhesion to both the Italian and Jewish traditions he valued most.

The similar fate of Nello Rosselli and Enzo Sereni reveals that despite their earlier disagreement at the Leghorn Conference in 1924, their views on Italian-Jewish identity were really not as diametrically opposed as they had seemed at the time. Both men rejected fascism from the outset, though they chose to express this rejection through different outlets. In no way was Rosselli’s dedication to the anti-fascist movement a contradiction of the deep love he professed for his country, nor did Sereni’s Zionist pursuits mean that he turned his back on his Roman heritage, something he spoke of with love and pride throughout his life. Rather, both men were among the first to make the key observation that the Fascist regime and Italy were not one and the same, no matter how much Mussolini tried to unify them. This realization allowed them to react against totalitarian rule, while simultaneously upholding their dual devotion to Judaism and Italy.

**Loyalists: Ettore Ovazza**

There were a few prominent Jews who did not heed this call for unity, and instead lashed out bitterly at less “fascist” Jews, who they deemed the underlying cause of their predicament. Despite the clarity with which the racial declaration had spelled out the new position of the Mussolini government, they felt it was still possible and necessary for loyal fascist Jews to distinguish themselves from their disobedient coreligionists through gestures of good faith by which they could ingratiate themselves with the regime. Among these stubborn patriots was Ettore Ovazza. Although his *bandiera* movement

---

had been largely disbanded, Ovazza still fought desperately to win favor for loyal Jews.
In a last-ditch attempt to sway the regime, he led a gang of followers to burn down the
office of *Israel*. Dan Vittorio Segre’s memoir contains a dramatic account of Ovazza’s
attempt to convince his father, another prominent fascist Jew, to take part in the attack:

On a cold, gray autumn day, Ettore Ovazza arrived at my parents’ home at my
mother’s farm near Turin, accompanied by two or three people I did not know…

His proposal was as follows: in Florence, the Jewish publication, *Israel*, which
should be devoting its attention only to cultural and religious matters, had instead
transformed itself into a mouthpiece for political ideas that Fascism could not
tolerate. It claimed that greater Jewish solidarity and consciousness was
necessary to compensate for the loss of that Italian identity being forcibly torn
from the Jews. This thesis went against the interest of Italian Jews. To ask to be
different in such a way and at such a moment meant detaching oneself from the
national body, confirming the accusations of the anti-Semites who wanted to see
Jews as a foreign body. It was therefore important to show on which side the
Fascist Jews, the patriots, stood. A punitive action… could be an act more useful
to the Jews of Italy than a thousand written polemics.\footnote{Segre, 79-81.}

This act of desperation predictably did nothing to improve the lot of the Jews
under Fascism. The only thing Ovazza’s super-fascist history secured for him was
discriminatī status, meaning that he and his family qualified for certain exemptions from
the original racial laws due to past services to the party. At first Ovazza took heart in this
recognition, believing that Mussolini had not forgotten about those Jews who had
remained faithful to him from the beginning. But he was sadly shaken when even these
partial grants of immunity were denied by a subsequent round of legislation that made it increasingly difficult to gain a certificate of discrimination. Jews were forced to bring their case before the Ministry of Demography and Race, which like all Fascist bureaucracies operated inefficiently and was highly corruptible. The result was a chaotic, market-like trafficking of discriminations, usually entailing a long and humiliating ordeal for Italian Jews, all for a piece of paper that in the end meant very little to their situation.

The problems that arose over the issuance of discriminations expose in yet another way the crude and ill-considered nature of Fascist racial policy. For the first time, the Fascists themselves realized how difficult it was to distinguish between loyal Jews and “bad” Jews. The very process underlined the absurdity and impossibility of the government’s attempt to discriminate amongst the discriminated. It was for reasons like these that Ovazza clung to his beliefs, refused to abandon his country, and never acknowledged the ever-present danger of persecution, even after the Nazis occupied the peninsula. Despite pleas from family and friends to seek refuge in Switzerland or the Americas as the threat of death loomed ever nearer, Ovazza refused to abandon Italy. “They’ll never touch me,” he stated boldly. “I’ve done too much for fascism.” He was tragically mistaken. On October 9, 1943, he was arrested with his entire family near the Swiss border, and was executed the following day in a very macabre manner.

The hopeless delusion of Jews like Ovazza formed only part of the tragedy of Italian Jewry. Despite the vast differences in the responses of men such as Ovazza, the Rosselli brothers, and Sereni to Fascist racism, they shared a fundamental similarity in

44 Stille, 84.
45 Ovazza was tortured and executed along with his wife and children in the basement of a school. Their bodies were then chopped up and disposed of in the building’s furnace. The last days of Ovazza’s life are vividly described in Stille, 87-89.
the indivisibility of their Judaism from their Italianness. Although their personal beliefs placed them on opposite sides of the heated Zionist debate in 1924, Nello Rosselli and Sereni proved remarkably similar when tested in their commitment to their Jewish and Italian identities. Even Ovazza, who stood against both anti-fascism and Zionism with every fiber of his being, made concessions on account of the intricate duality of his identity. Immediately upon hearing of the passage of the racial laws, the distraught Ovazza sent Mussolini a heartfelt cry on behalf of loyal Italian Jews for leniency wherein he states that to deny his own Judaism “would be a betrayal—and we are Fascists.”

This dire plea on behalf of his religious identity exposes an inextinguishable kernel of Judaism in even the most ardent fascist Jew. Though deeply committed to diverse and irreconcilable sets of beliefs, the common fate all three men experienced is indicative of the complex dual identity that every Italian Jew shared, regardless of political and ideological affiliations.

The racial laws of 1938 triggered a strong resurgence of Jewish identity. However, the laws were really only the opening salvo in the dark years of trial ahead for Italian Jews. Insecurity, material discomfort, and deep moral suffering characterized the period between 1938 and 1943, a situation aptly described by Hughes as a “bizarre twilight period for Italian Jews.” On the eve of this dark descent, Italian Jews took what little comfort they could in two realities. For one, throughout their terrible ordeal, they were able to rely on the support, or at least the tolerance, of the vast majority of their fellow Italians, who never fully embraced the attitudes of their government. Once Mussolini was overthrown, owing to the dislike for the Nazi’s among most Italians, they

---

46 Stille, 72.
47 Hughes, 60.
could in many cases count on the complicity of their non-Jewish neighbors in thwarting exportation and extermination plans against them. Indeed, stories of Jews narrowly escaping deportation due to acts of kindness from their neighbors were not uncommon in the years of German occupation. A second comforting reality was the rekindled pride in their Judaism. It was something in which they took refuge, a kind of inner pride that emerged instinctively, nurtured by a renewed awareness of their two thousand year history. Armed with these indispensable truths, Italian Jews rose to face the last stage of their unfolding drama.
Chapter 2
Freedom of Identity in Italian-Jewish Literature

We have seen how the Jews of Italy possessed a deep and complex dual identity and that when the racial laws forced Jews to choose between these two identities, it proved impossible for them to abandon either one. This difficulty is attributable to a unique characteristic of Italian Jewry after emancipation: a freedom of identity that allowed them to be both equal and different from their non-Jewish compatriots. Armed with this freedom, emancipated Jews enjoyed the ability to move within their dual identities as they wished, and to live within or without their Judaism to any extent. Such was the state of Italian Jewry after emancipation and before fascist ideology became polluted with scientific racism. We have also seen the sudden menace of a virulent brand of Italian anti-Semitism engineered to attack this ability to be both equal and different. Its primary objective was to force Italian Jews to sacrifice their Jewish identities and completely assimilate into the Italian population, or else accept immediate marginalization. Lastly, we have seen how these state-sponsored measures of discrimination affected Italian-Jewish communities, the chaos and destruction it wrought on the population as a whole, and the strong counter-resurgence of Jewish consciousness it produced. This new consciousness resonated acutely, particularly among the disillusioned generation of Jews born and raised under Mussolini’s government.

This chapter will attempt to show the link between the loss of freedom of identity and the emergence of a new Jewish consciousness, using Italian-Jewish literature in each of the following chronological stages: 1) The period between emancipation and the onset of Fascist anti-Semitism, focusing on Italo Svevo as a model of the freedom of identity
that Italian Jews possessed during this time. 2) The mid- to late-1930s, in which this freedom was called into question and then openly attacked by the Fascist racial laws. I will draw on the literature of Natalia Ginzburg and Giorgio Bassani to point to the emergence of a newly recovered Jewish consciousness during these years. 3) The ultimate realization of full Jewish consciousness in the Holocaust literature of Primo Levi, in his case born out of his ten month detainment at Auschwitz but ultimately embraced by most Jews, in Italy and worldwide. The literary evidence supports the view that even when faced with the most extreme forms of anti-Semitic persecution, Jews did not abandon their sense of *italianità*, the ironic inverse of what happened in the immediate pre-war years when Jews retained their religious identity in the face of Fascist legal persecution.

I. Pre-Fascist Italian-Jewish Identity: Italo Svevo

In selecting an author who exemplifies the extent to which emancipated Jews might freely choose how fully to embrace their Jewish identity, several candidates spring to mind. For the sake of brevity, however, I have decided to analyze only one author whose case I find most interesting: Italo Svevo, a German-Triestine Jew whose works comprise an essential component of the literary tradition of Trieste in the early twentieth century. This is not to say that the works of prominent Jewish authors like Umberto Saba and Alberto Moravia would not be important pieces in assembling a full picture of modern Jewish identity in literature. But practical restrictions limit my ability to adequately treat all Italian-Jewish authors from the emancipation era who might be considered as part of my thesis.
Svevo’s fundamental struggle with his Jewish identity fits naturally into the period following emancipation that saw a rapid absorption of Italian Jews into civic society. It is worth taking a quick look at the factors that contributed to the unique makeup of his ethnic and religious identities in order to better examine the results of this complex background in his writing. His upbringing consisted of a vibrant composite of identities drawn from the culture of his native Trieste. As both a border city and a major port of trade, Trieste was a cosmopolitan crossroads of international business and commerce. German, Italian, and Slovenian were all spoken widely throughout the city in different quarters and sectors of the economy. Into this array of cultures was Svevo born in 1861. His father was a Jew from Germany, and his mother was from Trieste and also of Jewish descent. His given name, Aron Ettore Schmitz, reflects his threefold identity of German, Italian, and Jewish heritage.

For most of Svevo’s lifetime, the Hapsburg dynasty ruled Trieste. Due to its position in the northeast corner of the Adriatic Sea, it served for many years as the primary seaport of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This economic centrality was lost with the break up of the Hapsburg domain after World War I. Annexed by the newly formed Kingdom of Italy, Trieste went from being a thriving capital of trade to a remote outpost, and as a result, it lost much of its cultural luster, remaining a multi-ethnic urban center, but one eclipsed by more established major cities on the peninsula. A notable demographic effect of the annexation was the addition of the city’s nearly 7,000 Jews to
the official Italian Jewish population, accounting for much of the overall increase between the censuses of 1911 and 1931.48

Svevo’s own gravitation toward Italy—its literary and linguistic traditions—began well before the Italianization of Trieste. He was a major figure in Trieste’s Irredentist movement, collaborating frequently with Irredentist periodicals, most frequently l’Indipendente, with which he had a lifelong affiliation. For this reason, Svevo’s literary legacy is bound to the Italian language. Svevo consciously chose to divorce himself from the years of Hebrew and German schooling he had undergone as a child and to associate himself wholly with his Italian identity, even though it was not his first language. In his literary pseudonym (literally, “the Swabian Italian”), he paid homage to both his German and Italian identities. His third identity, Judaism, is noticeably omitted, an ambiguity toward his Jewish identity that mirrors itself in his subsequent literary legacy.

“Shylock”

Tellingly, Svevo’s first publication, appearing in a local newspaper when he was just twenty years old, was the one in which he dealt most directly with a “Jewish” topic. It came in the form of a short theater review entitled “Shylock.” The play in question is Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice, widely noted for its notoriously anti-Semitic depiction of its antagonist, the moneylender Shylock. Scholars have long argued to what extent Shakespeare’s own prejudices played a role in his depiction of Judaism. I have no intention of entering into that debate. For the purposes of this thesis, we will stick to the traditional stance of critics like Harold Bloom, who once stated, “One would have to be

48 De Felice, 3.
blind, deaf and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare’s grand, equivocal comedy The Merchant of Venice is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work.”

On the spectrum of reactions to this unflattering depiction of Italian Jews, one might assume that many Jewish playgoers would be predisposed to take a position like Bloom’s, but Svevo’s review complicates the obvious. He writes:

Now if a dispassionate spectator went to see Merchant of Venice not with the sole intention of self-enjoyment, but to study, to think, to little by little dissipate the veil that the scenic effect and the spirit of the times put in place, there rises pure and clear in all its truth a colossal figure, admirable and human: the Jew Shylock!....

Bent, alone, and abandoned by every person…. Who would laugh at this sad figure? Oh, my old friend William, isn’t it maybe false that you could have wanted to ridicule this figure?

Instead of expressing outrage at Shakespeare’s stereotypical characterization of Jews, Svevo denies that the vindictive, avaricious Jew can possibly be a subject of humor, arguing instead that Shakespeare intended his villain to be an object of sympathy and human compassion. In so doing, Svevo deflects charges of anti-Semitism away from the playwright and redirects them toward the audience member who laughs at Shylock’s expense. Such a dismissal of the obvious anti-Semitic undertones of Merchant of Venice in favor of a more subtle interpretation of Shylock’s character speaks directly to what may be termed a persistent and meaningful retention in Svevo of his Jewish identity.

So, can it be said that Svevo completely abandoned every trace of his former Jewish identity in his later writings? To assume so would be wrong. In his analysis of *Confessions of Zeno*, H. Stuart Hughes proposes that certain aspects throughout the novel are “crypto-Jewish,” that is, bear traces of concessions on the author’s part to his own identity as a Jew. There are two major clues from Svevo’s life that can help us pick up the threads of this thinly veiled Jewish identity: the first is in the circumstances surrounding his conversion to Catholicism, and the second, more significantly, is his dying request to be buried in the traditional shroud of his Jewish ancestors.51

Sources tell us that Svevo’s conversion to Catholicism was directly tied to his marriage to Livia Veneziani in July 1896, but did not take place until over a year later, in August 1887. The decision to officially abandon his Judaism proved difficult for Svevo, and seemed to be made only in an effort to placate his new bride and her family. Furthermore, his own words suggest that he had little esteem for the Catholic faith, as evidenced by a letter to his wife in which he wrote, “The only part about Christianity I don’t mind is you and Titina [their daughter].”52

The second fact, the dying author’s reaffirmation of the Jewish religion, signals a more robust, final, and conscious reclamation of identity. Svevo’s retention of his Jewish identity lies at the end of a spectrum; nominally he chose to emphasize his Italian identity but his Jewish self never disappeared entirely and eventually in death he fully reclaimed it. Thus, even Svevo’s life course affirms the larger theme of my thesis, namely that the Jewish identity of Italian Jews never could be eradicated entirely, and remained an integral part of their self-definition. We will see a person at the opposite end of the same spectrum.

---

spectrum of dual identity when we reach the end of our study in the final phase of Jewish identity with Primo Levi.

***

II. The Generation of Italian-Jewish Authors under Fascism: Natalia Ginzburg and Giorgio Bassani

Whatever pressures Svevo felt in grappling with his Jewish identity, he died well before the crisis that would be thrust upon Italian Jews a decade later. The next generation of Italian-Jewish writers found it yet more difficult to live through the realities of their Jewish heritage. As they faced mounting hostility from the Fascist government and ultimately were denied their membership in the Italian national consciousness, Italian Jews developed a deeper connection with their Jewish identity, a process visible in the literature that came out of this experience. In this section, I will analyze the literature of Natalia Ginzburg and Giorgio Bassani, whose respective works contain clear evidence of their burgeoning Jewish consciousness. Though the road to reclamation was different for each of them, the end result was similar: a strong feeling of being Jewish.

The circumstances of Natalia Ginzburg’s upbringing have much to do with her particularly complex reclamation of her Jewish identity. She was the youngest of five children, only three years old when her family moved to Turin from Palermo, where her father had been a university professor. She was the product of a mixed marriage; her father was a Jew from Trieste and her mother a Catholic from the region of Lombardy, though neither actively practiced their religion. The only beliefs to influence Ginzburg’s childhood were political. Turin was a hotbed of political activism as well as home to a
thriving Jewish community. Due to her father’s bourgeois connections and her mother’s deep-seated socialist sympathies, Natalia was brought into close contact with the northern anti-fascist movement from an early age. Despite the dedication of her father and older brothers to this cause and the consequent peril that surrounded their family, Ginzburg remained an observer in her early years, one who never fully embraced the movement as her own. To the young Ginzburg, her conflicting identities—neither fully Jewish nor Catholic, neither rich nor poor—cancelled each other out. Instead of feeling partly associated with each, she resigned herself to being raised “nothing,” an ideological shapelessness that haunted the author long into her adult life.

Her marriage in 1938 to the Russian-born Jewish intellectual and anti-fascist Leone Ginzburg was the first step toward dissipating her deep sense of nonbelonging. The year of the racial laws marked the beginning of Ginzburg’s slow sense of realization and identity. In an interview from 1992, she stated:

My Jewish identity became very important to me from the moment the Jews began to be persecuted. At that point I became aware of myself as a Jew… So, while I did not have any sort of formal Jewish upbringing, I nevertheless felt my Jewishness very acutely during the war years (my first husband, Leone Ginzburg, was a Jew).\(^{53}\)

Nonetheless, the emergence of such an identity in her literature was hesitant, even ambivalent. As H. Stuart Hughes puts it, the Jewish characters began to appear in her writing “on tiptoe,”\(^{54}\) coming in the form of foreigners and side characters, often without names and never as protagonists. When it came to these Jewish elements, there always


\(^{54}\) Hughes, 102.
remained some degree of uneasiness, a sort of reluctance to claim it as her own. She openly admitted her doubts about giving last names to her early characters because, “all the surnames that came into my head were Jewish ones, and I did not want them all to be Jewish. I wanted to be mixed in with everyone.” She credits *Voices in the Evening* as the first novel in which she used authentic Jewish last names. Slowly but surely, her Judaism became more important in her writing.

It was not until 1963 that Ginzburg found the courage to confront openly the question of her own Judaism, and answered it with a resounding “yes.” *Family Sayings* is essentially a cathartic denunciation of the emptiness of the childhood that had imprisoned her for so many years. Her portrayal of her family members is warm and at times comedic, an ironic contrast to the barren ideological amorphousness that they had imposed upon her in her youth. She disarms the frightening memory of her father’s choleric outbursts by transforming them into non-threatening quirks, portrayed through his comical irritability and tendency to loudly voice his discontent over such things as musical instruments and “acts of kindness.” She highlights her mother’s nurturing phrases and gestures, along with the steadfast patience with which she endured her husband’s moodiness. While painting this rosy familial picture, she still manages to convey the seriousness of the events surrounding her family’s involvement in anti-fascist conspiracies with a childlike simplicity. The periodic arrests and exiles of her older brothers, her romantic affiliation with Leone Ginzburg, and the constant comings and goings of myriad family friends and acquaintances actively involved in the struggle

---

against fascism bear witness to the very real fear that pervaded this time in Ginzburg’s life.

As far as overt references to her family’s Judaism, they are few and far between in the pages of *Family Sayings*. One refreshing exception is Ginzburg’s paternal grandmother, who serves as the last outpost of traditional Judaism in the family. She constantly reproaches her son for not maintaining some semblance of his Jewish heritage, summed up in her oft-repeated phrase, “You make a shambles of the whole place.” But even her Judaism has its ironies. Ginzburg explains, “Every day she said her prayers in Hebrew, without understanding a word, since she did not know the language. She shuddered at people who were non-Jews, as she did at cats.”

Jewish identity found greater expression in the author’s connections with the Torinese anti-fascist underground. The majority of these were Jews and with many of them Ginzburg would form strong ties of kinship later in life. There was Giulio Einaudi, a lifelong friend who with her husband co-founded the publishing house where she would be employed for many years; Adriano Olivetti, a friend of Ginzburg’s older brother Gino who came to Natalia’s rescue when Leone was arrested in Rome. She described him later as, “an extremely courageous man, an extraordinary man.”

(particularly the alleged comment of Natalia’s brother, Mario Levi, who was the only one who managed to escape to Switzerland during the arrests: “Cowardly Italian dogs!”). These dangerous truths are only tangentially referred to in *Family Sayings*, and when they are, Ginzburg describes them in a nonchalant, matter-of-fact tone. Instead, she turns away from these harsh realities and tries to return a sense of normalcy and simplicity to the family life she remembered. In this way, her rediscovery of her Jewish consciousness, nurtured by her connection with the persecution of anti-fascists more generally, allows her to shed the ambiguity of her former self and come to embrace her newly recovered identity as a Jew.

Throughout *Family Sayings*, Ginzburg draws from memory to reassemble the past she left behind. She describes her fixation on reconstructing the past in its true form, a reconstruction devoid of the imagination she had used to mask her identity as a writer in her earlier works. “I was throwing away everything that could have been invented. I would think of something and say, ‘No, I’m making that up.’ I was looking for the truth, what I remembered. It is a book that comes straight from memory.” In recasting the story of her early life, she made the conscious decision to eschew dates, even for major dramatic events such as the flight of her brother Mario to Switzerland and the subsequent arrests of his fellow conspirators. So even though her intention is to paint an accurate representation of the past, her obstinate refusal to frame the events of her autobiography chronologically contributes to the rather dreamlike state of memory. She seems less intent on providing a diligent corroboration of historical facts than on providing a portrait of family life based solely on her own recollections.

---

59 DeFelice, 135.
This oscillation between factual memory and fantasy in recreating a lost past finds common ground, but also difference, in the works of Giorgio Bassani. Born the same year as Ginzburg, in Bologna, he too relocated in his early childhood to the city that would become intimately associated with his life and writing, Ferrara. It would serve as the setting of his significant writings, particularly his most famous novel, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. Militant anti-fascism was not as prevalent in Ferrara as in Turin. The city’s small Jewish community still felt the sting of anti-Semitism, but apparently accepted the situation with the stoic, restrained dignity captured so beautifully in *Garden of the Finzi-Continis*.

Like Ginzburg’s *Family Sayings*, Bassani’s novel is based on fragments of the author’s memory, and seeks to salvage a sense of belonging that was lost with the promulgation of the racial laws. Also like Ginzburg, Bassani’s recovery of his Jewish identity came through the anti-fascist movement, though he arrived by a different road. He was not introduced through familial ties, as was Ginzburg. Instead, his upbringing resembled that of countless other assimilated upper middleclass Jews born under the banner of Fascism. It was marked by a happy, carefree sense of belonging, and he took social acceptance for granted as a member of the privileged upper middle class of Ferrara. 1938 saw the privileges he had enjoyed abruptly torn from him; forbidden from a position for which his newly received education otherwise qualified him, he was forced to accept a low-paying teaching post at a Jewish school, as well as to break his engagement to a young Catholic woman. Thus left bitter and confused, “his eyes opened and his spirit hardened,” Bassani joined the clandestine anti-fascist movement.

---

61 Hughes, 120.
Unlike Ginzburg, a strong, straightforward Jewish element is noticeably present from the very beginning of Bassani’s literary career. More than for any other contemporary Jewish author, his religious identity was a source of pride from which flowed much inspiration for his stories. No where is this more apparent than in his most famous novel, The Garden of the Finzi-Continis. Published just one year before Family Sayings, the story is set in Ferrara in the autumn of 1938, and chronicles the relationship of the narrator with the object of his unreciprocated desire, the young Micòl Finzi-Contini. Their amorous relationship is set against the backdrop of Italy on the verge of its harrowing descent into state anti-Semitism. The novel portrays a vivid snapshot of Italian Jewry in the instant of conflict; the racial laws have passed and are being put into effect, but the full burden of discrimination has not yet rocked Italian Jewry to its foundation. Alarmed but otherwise only moderately inconvenienced by the laws (the narrator actually uses his exclusion from the public tennis courts and library as excuses to spend more time at the enormous estate of Micòl’s family) the Jewish characters in the book find themselves nonetheless increasingly connected by their Judaism, particularly the traditionally aloof and intensely private Finzi-Continis, who reappear at the local synagogue.

Fact, Fiction, and Memory

Like Ginzburg, Bassani employs a complicated blend of fact and fiction to recreate the past. A fictional story line—the narrator’s faltering courtship of Micòl—takes place within a well-defined historical space, complete with accurate dates and events. It is difficult to tell where Bassani draws the line between the real and imagined elements of the story, but it is nonetheless clear that his work is more rooted in concrete
historical fact than Ginzburg’s memoir, which often seems to wistfully defy chronology. Bassani’s intention, by contrast, is focused on accurately tracking the flow of history outside the plot of his storyline.

Throughout *Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, there is a strong rootedness in the past, as viewed through the lens of memory. The entire novel is spurred by a memory. It was “on a Sunday in April, 1957,” while visiting an old Etruscan burial ground (Bassani does not hesitate to draw the parallel between that ancient civilization and Judaism for the reader, as one that is dead and gone and another that has managed to survive through centuries of dispersion and persecution), that the narrator is struck by the memories of his youth growing up in Ferrara, and of his boyhood fascination with the Finzi-Continis. These memories are accompanied by a longing, something that compels him to actually write down the story of his relationship with the Finzi-Continis. According to Bassani, memory is the vehicle by which the past can be restored.

Within the pages of the novel, the character who most embodies this adherence to memory is Micòl. Mysterious, free-spirited, and elusive, the future holds little appeal in her eyes; it is “the past, the dear, sweet, sainted past”\(^62\) that captivates her imagination. As the narrator slowly comes to terms with Micòl’s rejection of his advances, he realizes that for both of them the past holds more significance than the present.

She could tell very clearly: for me, as for her, the past counted more than the present, possession counted less than the memory of it. Compared with memory, all possession, in itself, can only seem disappointing, banal, inadequate… My eagerness for the present to become *immediately* past, so that I could love it and

---

\(^{62}\) Bassani, 200.
cherish it at ease, was also hers, just the same. It was our vice, this: proceeding with our heads turned back. Wasn’t she right?  

This notion of “proceeding with our heads turned back” takes on a greater meaning than the relationship between these two fictional characters. The value of memory on an individual level can be translated to the larger portrait of Italian Jewry as it adjusted to its new plight. This stems directly from the author’s nostalgia for how things were before the experience of racial discrimination and then the Shoah. Both the narrator and the author hope to find solace through retrospection. Furthermore, it fits even more broadly into the inverse relationship of history and memory that is prevalent in Jewish thinking, to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The period of anti-Semitic persecution before Nazi occupation was hard on Italian Jews. As we see in Ginzburg and Bassani’s works of memory, people managed to retain many aspects of their daily lives, albeit with unwelcome and involuntary adjustments. Even Ginzburg’s family, always immersed in anti-fascist conspiracy, maintained a façade normalcy, despite constantly having to uproot their family and worry about imprisonment. The fascist characters do not seem entirely vicious in either account. Finucci and Lutri, two fascist guards at the local prison in Turin, were always very courteous toward Ginzburg’s mother in Family Sayings, while overt anti-Semitism in Garden of the Finzi-Continis is limited to the bumbling Marchese Barbacinti, conspiring to keep a young Jew from winning a doubles tennis tournament. The real struggle for Italian Jews was psychological as much as it was economic or social, being suddenly excluded from the society they had called their own. In a sense, the process of belonging was opposite for Ginzburg and Bassani. Ginzburg went from having no belonging, to

---

63 Bassani, 150.
finding a place for herself in the anti-fascist struggle. Bassani on the other hand, who felt secure in his sense of belonging to Italian society, was left without a state. He managed to recover by the same means as Ginzburg, embracing the anti-fascist cause and his own Judaism. For both authors, the reclamaion of Jewish identity in their writings reflects a process surely felt by many of their coreligionists and compatriots.

***

III. **Primo Levi and the Ultimate Realization of Jewish Identity**

Natalia Ginzburg and Giorgio Bassani capture the conflict over what it meant to be a Jew in Fascist Italy. They symbolize the turning point in the development of a Jewish consciousness because their freedom of identity was strongly contested by the passage of racist legislation that ultimately encouraged them to reestablish in new ways their identity as Jews. This process was sometimes slow and occurred at an individual pace. Not until Ginzburg was an adult did she find the courage to voice her newfound Jewish identity, and it took nearly twenty years for the pang of memory to compel Bassani to put the story of the Finzi-Contini into print. However, the erratic injustices of the anti-Semitic laws were only a preamble to the darkest challenge Italian Jews would share with the rest of their coreligionists in Europe. The Shoah is the central event of modern Jewish history. Many Italian Jews had personal relations with victims of this horrible tragedy, and even those who did not felt deeply a sense of solidarity and connectedness that sprang from the bond of their Judaism. This solidarity emerges in the work of many Jewish authors from the period, including Ginzburg and more openly Bassani, who refers not only to the grim fate of the Finzi-Continis, but also to “uncles and
cousins, most of whom, a few years later, would be swallowed up by German crematory ovens.\textsuperscript{64} The Shoah deeply affected all of Italian Jewry, and those who actually experienced it played the primary role in defining its meaning for Jewish consciousness. The Lager of Auschwitz forged Primo Levi’s Jewish identity as a writer and Holocaust survivor. In his account, we finally come to what Hughes calls, “a ‘real’ Jew,” our first full-blown Jewish consciousness, and the final stage in the devolution of that freedom of identity felt by Italian Jews since emancipation. The result of this experience was a permanent and inseparable connection with his religion, for him and for myriad readers of his story.

Levi was born in Turin on July 31, 1919. Like many of the Italian Jews discussed in this thesis, he came from an integrated, bourgeois family. To what extent his religion played a role in his upbringing has been a topic of debate, and Levi himself tends to vary his position on it. It can be agreed in any case that the practice of Judaism in his early life was limited to the celebration of traditional rites of passage and adherence to certain traditions, as we saw in the opening chapter.

The year of the racial laws found Levi as a nineteen year old chemistry student, very much in the same situation as many other Jews his age who were blindsided by the sudden adversity which befell them on the verge of their adult lives. Like Ginzburg and Bassani, he turned to anti-fascism, and became involved in the underground partisan resistance movement in his native Piedmont. To this extent, Levi is much like his contemporaries— the painful realization, the sense of

\textsuperscript{64} Bassani, 124.
betrayal, and the urge to reconsider and accept his Jewishness. However, his experience departed radically from theirs when in December 1943 he was arrested by German soldiers and deported to Auschwitz.

A scientist by his education, Levi maintained that had it not been for his Holocaust experience, he would have never taken up writing. Similarly, he would never have had reason to embrace his Judaism so strongly. “I was turned Jewish by others,” he said in a 1976 interview with Edith Bruck, “Before Hitler, I was a middle-class Italian boy.” Levi cites Hitler and his extreme final solution as the primary mover that brought on the return of his Jewish identity, not Mussolini and the racial laws. For him, Fascist anti-Semitism was “never more than superficial and inconsistent.”

This is echoed by historian Sophie Nezri-Dufour, who writes that, “after Auschwitz, the Jew was no longer free to not be Jewish.” Primo Levi stands as the most complete manifestation of this phenomenon in literature. By this point, we have arrived at the other end of the spectrum from Italo Svevo and his nominal although temporary and half-hearted rejection of Jewish identity. Although their lives overlapped by about a decade, Svevo and Levi are separated by the enormity of the Shoah. After Auschwitz, Levi has no choice but to fully embrace his Jewish identity, an identity as tangible as the numbers tattooed on his arm.

***

IV Literary Quandaries

T.S. Eliot once claimed, “Dante and Shakespeare divide the world between them—there is no third.” These two men are rightly regarded as cornerstones of western

---

66 Quoted by Harrowitz, 26-27.
67 Nezri-Dufour, 64.
literature, giants whose works define their respective national literary traditions. One commonality in the creation of these literary traditions is the exclusion of Jews from both of these national identities, attributable to the anti-Semitic qualities that pervade the writing of both Dante and Shakespeare. We have already seen how Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* contains an overtly negative portrayal of Judaism, and how Italo Svevo grappled with his own identity as a Jew as he reviewed the play. This section will juxtapose Svevo with the more seismic clash of identity found in Primo Levi’s Holocaust memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz (Se questo è un’uomo)*, with its abundant references to Dante’s *Inferno*.

By the time we get to Primo Levi, Svevo’s freedom to define and even submerge his Jewish identity has been eliminated by harsh realities and replaced by a newly recovered Jewish consciousness forged in Nazi concentration camps. In *Survival in Auschwitz*, his memoir recounting his ten months in Auschwitz, Levi draws heavily on Dante to describe his experience. This presents a complex conflict. On the one hand, Dante constitutes a pillar of Italian literature, the founding father to all Italian writers. However, Dante was also a profoundly medieval Christian poet, one whose work is steeped in centuries of Catholic anti-Semitism. Levi therefore represents a larger, more significant challenge to Jewish identity than Svevo for two important reasons: First, unlike Svevo, Levi was irrefutably tied to his Jewish identity by his Holocaust experience. Second, Dante was the defining sources of Italian culture, thus causing Levi—raised like every Italian with a strong love of Dante—to be intimately attached to his literature. Shakespeare did not carry this same significance to Svevo or any other Italian, nor did the *Merchant of Venice*—aside from reflecting a foreigner’s vantage point of Italy’s Jews—have a strong impact on Italy’s cultural self-
perception. Dante, on the other hand, was swept into the wave of nationalism that bolstered the twentieth century Italian brand of anti-Semitism. This is precisely what makes Primo Levi’s utilization of Dante to describe his Holocaust experience so interesting. At a historical moment, when it might have seemed to Jews that a sense of Italianness might best be eradicated, leaving only their recovered religious identity, Levi reached back to the founder of Italian literature to impart his tale.

*Dante and anti-Semitism*

At first it may seem unfounded to implicate Dante in the anti-Semitism that fueled events of the twentieth century. Jews are mentioned only sparingly in the *Divine Comedy*, and the references Dante does make are fleeting. However, while genocide was certainly not part of the medieval Christian worldview that Dante espoused, his position on Jews is far from benign or marginal. This stance is apparent in several minute and outwardly passive references to Judaism that come in the form of explanative theological monologues from Dante’s guide Beatrice. Though they are only glancing references, they mask a deep-seated anti-Semitism that twentieth century anti-Semites interpreted as justification for the persecution of Jews.

Dante refers multiple times to the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem by the Roman emperor Titus in 70 C.E. This first occurs in *Purgatorio*, where his companion Statius invokes the memory of “the worthy Titus, [who], with help from the Highest King, avenged the wounds from which the blood that Judas sold had flowed.”

The second comes in *Paradiso*, as Beatrice attempts to explain to Dante Justinian’s description of the destruction of Jerusalem as “just punishment for a just act of

---

revenge.” Both passages refer to the event as divine retribution, and both render it justifiable, reflecting the pervading anti-Judaic stance of the early and medieval church.

This account of the destruction of the temple that Dante accepts is at the heart of the deep-seated anti-Semitism that became entrenched in Christian dogma. In the hands of early church theologians, Titus is defined as the instrument chosen by God to exact His “divine retribution” for the killing of Christ, a notion carried into medieval Christian theology and eventually beyond. According to the modern scholar Wiley Feinstein, this concept of “just punishment” indicates that “vengeance against the Jew is just, and Jews are always justly punished, and they therefore deserve any wrongs that are done to them… Dante, the poet of Christian justice, here lends what will become definitive European cultural authority to punish Jews anywhere, during any period.”

Nowhere is this more apparent than within the far rightwing, philo-Nazi circles of the Fascist party. As a deeply Christian symbol of Italian cultural pride, Dante was swept into the ranks of cultural markers that these racist thinkers claimed for Italian culture, something pure and unstained by Judaism. A further indication of Dante’s preeminent standing within Italian anti-Semitism was the placement of quotations from the *Divine Comedy* on the cover of every issue of *Difesa della Razza*, the most virulently racist circulation of Fascist propagandists. Citations included a warning against mixing peoples within a society, and the infamous and often overlooked, “Beware the Jew among you who laughs” verse. By printing Dante’s words on its covers, editor Telesio Interlandi

---

70 It can be traced to the gospel of Matthew, in which, after vehemently chastising the Jews for their hypocrisy and wickedness, Jesus reveals to his disciples that, “not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (Matthew 24: 2). By this prophesy, Jesus is in effect blaming the future destruction of the Temple on the Jews for their departure from the Jewish laws.
attempted to make Dante a spokesperson for his magazine’s vituperative content, denying the universality of the *Divine Comedy* and the poet’s role as the everyman. This misrepresentation of Dante did not necessarily incite racial intolerance among the greater Italian population, nor did this universality escape Primo Levi who, when he settled down to retell his Holocaust experience looked to Dante for inspiration.

*Parallels between Dante’s Hell and Primo Levi’s Auschwitz*

Holocaust literature shares with Dante a pressing need to bear witness to an experience for the betterment of humanity. In the same way that Dante felt compelled to retell the story of his journey through the afterlife, so Holocaust writers are compelled to bear witness to their experiences in concentration camps. The parallels between Primo Levi’s description of Auschwitz and Dante’s *Inferno* run yet deeper, in a variety of allegorical levels. Levi uses certain characters from *Inferno*, such as Charon and the devils of Malebolge, to describe his captors. He directly borrows Dantean terms to describe the suffering of prisoners, most notably referring to those who succumb to extermination as “i sommersi” (the drowned). His pages are filled with still subtler references that evoke the same images as Dante’s Hell, such as “infernal cold,” “a world of death and phantoms”, and “shades of men.” These allusions suggest how strongly Levi identified with his Italian upbringing and knowledge of Dante.

The most natural comparison to Hell is the physical description of life in Auschwitz. Levi aptly states his first reaction upon his admittance to the camp of the conditions in which the prisoners were forced to live: “This is Hell. In our times, Hell must be like this.”

72 The physical attributes of Auschwitz brim with hints of Dante’s own writing. Throughout the book, Levi consistently refers to life in the concentration camp

---

as “the bottom.” This becomes the name of the chapter in which he describes the conditions of camp life from the still-unaccustomed perspective of a new arrival. It is a geographical characterization that directly mirrors the descent of Dante through the depths of Hell, a Hell which in Dante’s medieval conception of space was the lowest point in the universe and therefore furthest from God. It makes sense that Levi associates distance from God with life in the Lager.

In Canto III of *Inferno*, Dante and Virgil pass through the gate to Hell, over which an inscription reads:

DIVINE JUSTICE MOVED MY HIGH ARCHITECT.
I WAS RAISED HERE BY DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE,
PRIMORDIAL LOVE AND ULTIMATE INTELLECT.

ONLY THOSE ELEMENTS TIME CANNOT WEAR
WERE MADE BEFORE ME, AND BEYOND TIME I STAND.
ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE.73

The inscription contains two important messages. The first, expressed in the famous final line, warns readers that perpetual hopelessness awaits all those who enter. Auschwitz has a strikingly similar greeting for all those who pass through its gates. Above its iron gate reads the chilling camp slogan, “Arbeit Macht Frei” (“Work Makes One Free”). Cruel and ironic in its falsity, it contains the same sense of complete hopelessness that guards the door to the Inferno, and is something new arrivals to Auschwitz quickly learned to accept as reality in the Lager.

However, there is one major divergence of Auschwitz from the Dantean model of Hell expressed in this inscription. The Inferno claims to be a product of “divine justice”

and “primordial love.” It functions under an orderly set of immutable laws, with sinners laid out in different circles of Hell based on a complex set of ethical and theological considerations. The assignment of punishments is rigidly logical, and its organizational structure demonstrates a level of symmetry consistent with the classical philosophy from which it draws its inspiration. Furthermore, the suffering of its residents is absolute and eternal; souls who suffer in Hell deserve to be there, and therefore have no hope of redemption.

In Auschwitz, the exact opposite holds true. Justice and love are non-existent, and a complex web of arbitrary laws make up the day-to-day routines of the prisoners. “No one can boast of understanding the Germans,” Levi writes, in resignation to the organized but illogical camp mandates. For instance, in a place where workers are inhumanely starved and malnourished, Levi finds it bizarre that those selected for extermination get double-rations the night before they are to be taken away. Similarly, while the camp is in shambles and thousands are being sent on death marches and to the crematory in anticipation of the Russians, Levi finds himself promoted to chemical specialist and entitled to “a new shirt and underpants.” This absence of logic is summarily represented by a simple event early in Levi’s captivity. Suffering from thirst, he reaches out his window to grab an icicle, only to be immediately reprimanded by a German guard. When the surprised and confused Levi asks why he cannot have the icicle, the guard gruffly replies, “Hier ist kein warum.” (“Here there is no why”). This seemingly trivial incident exemplifies the haphazard laws that govern the Lager, laws that prisoners must quickly adapt to if they have any chance to survive.

---

75 Ibid., 18.
The Indescribability of Dehumanization

In addition to its descriptions of physical setting and specific events, *Survival in Auschwitz* contains larger, more pervasive themes that reflect the author’s literary affinity to Dante. In “On the Bottom,” Levi relates his deepening realization of how horrific were the conditions of his fellow prisoners. “For the first time, we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom.”

This short excerpt is loaded with Dantean themes: the inadequacy of language to describe such suffering, and the dehumanization of detainees at Auschwitz. These two themes are drawn upon by Dante to describe the eternal suffering of Hell in *Inferno* and are echoed throughout *Survival in Auschwitz* to express a similar degree of incomprehensible degradation.

The first significant Dantean element of this excerpt is indescribability, the realization that language lacks the ability to describe this unprecedented form of suffering. On several occasions Dante asks his readers’ forgiveness for his inability to relate that which he experienced due the primitive capabilities of human language. Coming from Dante, this indescribability conveys that what he witnessed on his trip through the afterlife was so amazing that it exceeds mankind’s comprehension of love, sadness and fear. Levi resorts to this literary device as well, and very effectively. According to him, words such as hunger and cold take on different meanings than they have normally: “these were free words, created and used by free men... If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born.”

---

76 Ibid., 16.
77 Ibid., 88.
Dehumanization is the central recurring theme of *Survival in Auschwitz*, the one from which the book draws its original title, “If this is a Man.” To Levi, the Lager is “a great machine to reduce us to beasts.” In the *Inferno*, Dante’s descent into Hell is characterized by the increasing degeneration of the sinners he encounters. Near the top, souls like Francesca, Ciacco, and the austere Farinata, retain human elements of sadness, pride, and longing. As one descends into the lower circles, this humanity begins to decrease. The sinners become more bestial as they bite, claw each other, and howl like animals. In the last bolgia of the circle of fraud, humanity lost becomes apparent to Dante in the behavior of the sinners he meets there; he sees them “lying heaped on one another / in the dank bottom of that fetid valley. / One lay gasping on another’s shoulder, / one on another’s belly; and some were crawling / on hands and knees among the broken boulders.” The message bears remarkable resemblance to a passage from *If this is a Man*, in which Levi describes what their abject state must look like to the civilian workers outside the barbed-wire fence:

They hear us speak in many different languages, which they do not understand and which sound as grotesque to them as animal noises; they see us reduced to ignoble slavery, without hair, without honor and without names… they know us as thieves, untrustworthy, muddy, ragged and starving, and mistaking the effect for the cause, they judge us worthy of our abasement.

In the next canto, Dante ventures down into the bolgia to interact with the falsifiers. His description of their barbaric behavior is graphic:

---

78 Ibid., 27.
79 *Inferno* XXIX, 64-68.
But never in Thebes nor Troy were Furies seen / to strike at men or beast in such a mad rage / as two I saw, pale, naked, and unclean, / who suddenly came running toward us then / snapping their teeth as they ran, like hungry swine / let out to feed after a night in the pen. / One of them sank his tusks so savagely / into Capocchio’s neck, that when he dragged him, / the ditch’s rocky bottom tore his belly.\(^{81}\)

Levi goes on to tell how the civilian workers threw scraps of food over the fence from time to time, just “through simple curiosity to see us running from all sides, to fight each other for the scrap, bestially and without restraint, until the strongest one gobbles it up, whereupon all the others limp away, frustrated.”\(^{82}\)

The resemblance between the behavior of the sinners in the lowest depths of Hell and the prisoners of Auschwitz is harrowing. For the prisoners of Auschwitz, the complete destruction of societal standards leads to an animalistic society. The best example of this phenomenon is Elias, a fellow prisoner whom Levi describes as “a madman, incomprehensible and Para-human…different from our modern world and better adapted to the primordial conditions of camp life.” In the Lager, “the only road to salvation leads through Elias, to insanity and deceitful bestiality. All other roads are dead-ends.”\(^{83}\) The dehumanizing machine that is Auschwitz endeavors to create a place where men such as Elias become the highest evolution of man. For those who lack the strength of consciousness to cling to life, it is the only way.

This struggle against this dehumanizing machine, and against the loss of one’s innate human characteristics, is absolutely imperative to survival in Auschwitz. Levi

\(^{81}\) *Inferno* XXX, 22-30.
\(^{82}\) Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 86.
\(^{83}\) Ibid., 69.
learns this early from a man named Steinlauf. When the bitter Levi sees Steinlauf carefully washing himself after using the latrine, he wonders why Steinlauf even bothers washing his hands in a place of such permanent and wretched filth, where cleanliness is of little meaning when one is not even sure of his day-to-day existence. Only later does he realize that such menial tasks as washing one’s face and polishing one’s shoes are imperative in order “to remain alive, not to begin to die.”  

This epiphany is bestowed upon him in a singular event that brings us to the final and most overt manifestation of Dante in *Survival in Auschwitz*, one that seals the recapture of his former Italian identity. The chapter is called “The Canto of Ulysses,” and in it Levi attempts to teach a young kapo’s assistant Italian. Naturally, he resorts directly to the purest fountain of the Italian language, Dante’s *Commedia*. For time’s sake, Levi simply begins to recite a verse from the poem—one of the most famous from the entire *Inferno*—in which Ulysses recites his final speech to his band of travelers:

> Consider your noble birth!
> You were not made to live like brutes,
> But to follow after worth and knowledge

“Like the blast of a trumpet,” the passage takes on glorious new meaning for Levi. Everything he tells the earnest Jean—about the sea, of freedom, of the nobility of his birth as a man—ignites a newfound realization of his own inherent worth that comes flooding back to him in the beautiful Italian of Dante. And so, Levi manages to win himself a small, fleeting victory in the endless war against the Lager.

---

84 Ibid., 27.
85 *Inferno* XXVI, 118-120.
It is entirely natural that Levi turned to Dante to describe the horrors of his experience at Auschwitz. The text served as a fundamental coping mechanism, a distant light from his past that kept him going and guided him through his darkest hour. Dante became somewhat of “a spiritual anchor, a link to his older existence, a guide to survival in Hell.” Despite the refashioning of the Divine Comedy espoused by ultranationalist supporters of biological anti-Semitism, Levi chooses to ignore the anti-Semitic references and adhere only to the innate Italianness of Dante in which he shares. This choice speaks volumes to the wholeness and inseparability of the dual nature of Italian Jews.

---

Chapter 3
The Shoah in Italy: Remembrance and Identity

At a conference in January 2010 at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, an audience member prefaced a question to the featured author with the following sentence: “It is often said that memory is the DNA of the Jewish soul.” Although he did not cite the origin of this expression, it provokes deep thought about the relationship between memory and Jewish identity. It touches upon a fundamental truth, one that is essential to understanding Jewish identity: the importance of memory as a method of transcribing history. Preservation of the past is imperative for Jews because memory is the foundation on which their history is based. They are the people of the book, an ancient people with a religion that maintains its history as a sacred obligation, one based on traditions handed down through prayers, religious writings, and lore. Where other religious peoples write down what happens as a history, which then is translated into collective memory, Jewish thought is noted for working in the opposite direction, going from millennia of collective memory to written historical text.\(^87\) It is this concept of history as memory that informs the way in which Italian Jewish communities define and represent their pasts.

This chapter examines how memory of the Shoah has been preserved both by Jewish communities in Italy and by the nation as a whole in the postwar period. The primary area of my focus is physical sites of memory of Italian Jewry. In keeping with the first two chapters of the thesis, this one moves chronologically, tracing the development of the visual representation of Italian Judaism before and after the

\(^{87}\) Parussa, 3. For greater depth on the nature of Jewish memory and identity, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s *Zakhor: Jewish history and Jewish memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).
The first segment studies the post-emancipation construction of synagogues, and how these proclaimed the status of Italian Jewry in the period before Fascist and Nazi persecution. From these towering symbols of pride and progress, we then turn to the postwar period, and how the memory of the Shoah is preserved in Jewish museums.

The final section stays in the postwar era, but widens the focus to consider the relationship of Italy as a whole to its Holocaust past. For decades after WWII, Italy displayed a general reluctance to accept responsibility for its role in the Holocaust. Italian citizens cast themselves as pure and compassionate, “la brava gente,” and passed off the weight of historic guilt to their Nazi counterparts, the clear perpetrators of dastardly crimes against humanity. For two decades, this “conspiracy of silence” shaped Italy’s historical self-image. Then, beginning in the 1960s, a greater awareness of complicity took hold. The chronologically most recent representation of the Holocaust, the Risiera di San Sabba, treated in the last section of this chapter, is dedicated to this change toward a gradual acceptance of the nation’s own part in the Holocaust.

***

I. Emancipation Synagogue Architecture

Before examining how Jewish sites of memory record the Italian Holocaust experience, it is beneficial to look briefly at how Jews visually represented their culture and their history prior to the Fascist/Nazi period. As shown in the previous chapters, the state of Italian Jewry after emancipation was one of freedom and acceptance; during these decades, most Jews chose Italian acculturation and rapid integration while maintaining some semblance of cultural and religious distinctiveness. The most visible
and lasting expression of this pre-Holocaust freedom to maintain a dual identity is the explosion of synagogues constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The splendid new synagogues that emerged in many Italian cities and towns were grand and powerful visual testaments to this freedom.

Emancipation era synagogues displayed unusual architectural designs and striking decorative features. They were built to stand out, to be bold visual celebrations of the freedom and equality Italian Jews enjoyed after unification. One distinguishable feature in these new synagogues is the prominent influence of nonwestern architectural styles: Byzantine, Islamic, and Near Eastern influences often mixed with Romanesque to create vivid appearances. For example, Rome’s synagogue contains Greek as well as Asiatic and Assyrian influences; the main synagogue in Genoa features Byzantine architecture, while the temples in Florence and Turin display decorative features inspired by Spanish Moorish design. Italian Jewish communities adopted the exotic visual characteristics of Eastern cultures for two main motives. The first was to set their synagogues apart from the solemn, uniform design that dominated the architecture of Catholic churches in Italy. The second was to recall ancient antecedents of Judaism in the Near East. The adoption of Eastern architectural styles meant not only a fundamental rejection of traditional Italian Catholic design, but also displayed powerfully the separate past that Jews maintained parallel to their new sense of Italianness.

Although Jewish temples constructed in the post-emancipation era shared the same outward goals and drew upon similar historical and cultural inspirations, they also varied in size, shape, color, and other architectural features. These divergences arose partly out of the creativity of their principal architects, but also because there existed no
previous single standard by which large temples should be modeled for an Italian setting. For the past four centuries, Italian Jewish communities had been banished to ghettos, and places of worship had been regulated by non-Jewish city governments. The result was that many Italian synagogues had been crammed into tiny, unassuming structures that blended in with the rest of the ghetto.\textsuperscript{88} Due to this lack of prior models, emancipated Italian Jews were free to design their new synagogues as they wished, resulting in a rich and diverse set of architectural styles.

I have selected five synagogues constructed during the emancipation era to look at in closer detail: namely, the main synagogues of the five largest Jewish communities in Italy according to the 1931 census, which together comprised about three-fourths of the total Jewish Italian population.\textsuperscript{89} These communities are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Jewish Population</th>
<th>Temple Constructed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>11,280</td>
<td>1901-1904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milan</td>
<td>6,865</td>
<td>1890-1892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trieste</td>
<td>4,627</td>
<td>1908-1912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turin</td>
<td>3,758</td>
<td>1876-1880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>2,586</td>
<td>1874-1882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29,116 (out of 39,112 Italian Jews\textsuperscript{90})</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of these synagogues, constructed between 1874 and 1912, exhibits the spirit of pride, freedom, and patriotism that characterized the emancipated state of its congregants. Historians of Italian Jewry may be struck by the absence in this list of Venice in the North and of Palermo and Naples in the South, but in these cities the pre-existing temples

\textsuperscript{88} In the case of Rome, the Pope had even denied the separate worship of different rites of Judaism, relegating all of them to one synagogue. The Roman Jews’ solution was to design a complex and creative building that housed five separate Jewish temples, or “scole,” which were packed tightly into one compartmentalized structure. These “Cinque Scole” remain one of the most cherished memories of the Roman Jewish community’s history, because they represented the community’s ability to endure and thrive even under the repressive measures of the papacy.

\textsuperscript{89} Michele Sarfatti, \textit{The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy: From Equality to Persecution}, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 35.

\textsuperscript{90} De Felice, 2.
apparently sufficed since their historically significant Jewish populations had declined greatly by the emancipation era.

**Florence and Turin**

It is not by coincidence that both Turin and Florence served briefly as capitals of the newly unified Kingdom of Italy before the new nation captured its historic center in Rome in 1871. Historically, both cities were important catalysts of the Risorgimento. Due to their close proximity to the core areas of unification, Piedmontese and Tuscan Jews were among the first in Italy to be granted full equality, a condition that surely nurtured their fierce loyalty to the ruling House of Savoy as it expanded its realm. Quite naturally, the prominent Jewish communities of these two cities expressed their patriotic position within the urban space of these cities in which they now moved freely.

The most telling example (not withstanding the ultimate irony) of this newfound civic identity is the construction of the Mole Antonelliana, the dominant iconic feature of Turin’s urban landscape. Originally commissioned as a synagogue, the independent ambitions of the outside architect conflicted with the plans of the Jewish community, and exceeded its financial means. As a result, Jewish leaders abandoned the project, managing to sell it to the city of Turin, which completed the structure in 1889 as a secular edifice.

Instead, the community opted to build a synagogue on a much more modest scale. Though not nearly as imposing as the Mole, the Great Synagogue built by Turin’s Jews is

---

91 Stille, 23. Tuscan Jews were liberated in 1847, and Piedmontese Jews were officially liberated in 1848, though they had long lived under more tolerant conditions under the ruling House of Savoy than did Jews in other regions of the peninsula.
in many ways yet more unique from an architectural point of view. Unlike, the Mole, which emulated classical Renaissance-style architecture, this synagogue was built in a Moorish Revival style. Its colorful exterior and the onion-shaped domes on each of its four towers immediately provide a stark contrast from the rest of the northern industrial city. This was a cognizant decision on the part of Turin’s Jewish community to spurn completely Antonelli’s architectural designs, not to build a smaller and less expensive version of the Mole but to create a visually-striking “Jewish” element for its temple. The effect made their new synagogue less Italian and more noticeably Jewish, a practice that set an example for many of the synagogues to follow, particularly in Florence.

Notwithstanding the lesson of the failed non-synagogue in Turin, the Jewish community of Florence entertained similar visions of a grand new synagogue, one that would publicly announce their Judaism while also symbolizing their new standing within Florentine society. Before they could start construction, the Florentine Jews needed to decide where to erect their synagogue. Unlike in Turin, they faced the added task of competing with the city’s iconic religious buildings. In order to make their temple stand out, they had to decide carefully on its location, so as not to lessen its grandeur in comparison to the architectural landmarks that already divided the city’s spatial identity. They decided on a plot of land facing Via Luigi Carlo Farini, on the northeastern periphery of the city center.

The Great Synagogue of Florence is a stunning example of Moorish Revival architecture. Upon its dedication, one non-Jewish Florentine observed churlishly that the temple introduced, “a foreign style never before seen in Tuscany,” and that the building,
“struck a discordant note in the architectonic harmony of the city.”92 It displays many characteristics similar to the Great Synagogue of Turin, such as the triple-arched entrance, the onion-shaped domes, and the pink, mottled striped façade capped by a prominent, semi-circular front gable. But while similar in their decorative characteristics, the two synagogues differ in size and structure. Despite its four elaborate towers, the Turin synagogue is only two stories. The Great Synagogue of Florence, however, was designed not only to stand out stylistically, but also spatially, standing tall among the features of Florence’s impressive urban landscape. Its imposing façade is three stories, and its crowning central dome is easily discernible along the Florentine skyline. Aside

from making the Great Synagogue of Florence one of the most striking and recognizable temples of its time in Europe, its bold and exotic design is a visual testament to a fundamental truth for emancipated Italian Jews: “equality was now compatible with difference.”

*Trieste and Milan*

While the communities of Turin and Florence embraced a Moorish style of architecture to create a visual identity for their new places of worship, the communities of Trieste and Milan sought inspiration closer to the roots of Judaism. Two very old cities recently “redeemed” from Austrian Hapsburg control, their Jewish communities were heavily influenced by Irredentism, and thus rushed as did their compatriots in Turin and Florence to the banner of Italian unification. Instead of adopting the Spanish-Muslim appearance chosen by Turin and Florence, however, the architects of these synagogues employed classical Romanesque and Byzantine elements in their designs, a decision partly linked, no doubt, to the fact that both Milan and Trieste were built on the ruins of ancient Roman cities. Milan served as the seat of the Western Roman Empire in the late third century C.E., while Trieste later became an important military outpost of the Byzantine Empire during the rule of Emperor Justinian.

The main synagogue of the Jewish community of Milan is the Heichal David u-Mordechai, built between 1890 and 1892, during a period in which Milan had one of the largest and fastest-growing Jewish populations in the country. Its principal architect was Luca Beltrami, a well-known Milanese architect of the period who produced many

---

93 Lerner, 11.
94 Milan was annexed to the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia after the defeat of the Austrians at the Battle of Solferino by a French-Sardinian alliance in 1859, and Trieste become part of the Kingdom of Italy following WWI.
95 Sarfatti, 31.
other buildings in Milan and the surrounding area. Although the synagogue was heavily
damaged by Allied bombings during the Second World War, the enormous, colorful
façade remained intact, and the rest was reconstructed in 1947 as closely as possible to
the original design.

Like other synagogues erected during 1880s in Turin and Florence, the Heichal
David u-Mordechai displays Eastern influences, in this case the large, vibrant mosaics
that adorn the facade. They contain a mixture of bright colors and elaborate designs that
hearken back to ancient and foreign cultures of the East. This exotic flair, however, is
not carried beyond the outward, decorative features of the synagogue. In its long, simple
structure, the temple stands more in the tradition of Western cathedrals than in the
Eastern basilica-style design that many emancipation synagogues embraced.

Furthermore, many of Beltrami’s works, including the synagogue, were based on the dual
components of “memory and intuition,” two words he himself used to describe his
architecture, thus enriching the duality of the edifice. According to Ornella Selvafolta,
this technique melded together an attention to the past and a positive anticipation of the
future, a combination very much in line with the goals of Jewish communities
throughout Italy. By combining elements of East and West, of past and future, Milan’s
Jewish community managed to commemorate their past, while accepting their new
position within Italian society.

Composed of a uniform grey limestone, the synagogue of Trieste lacks the vibrant
decorative design of other temples, but still constitutes an imposing presence in the city’s
landscape. Although it does not vertically dominate the surrounding city blocks as do the

---

Clockwise from top left: Great Synagogue of Florence, Heichal David u-Mordechai in Milan, Synagogue of Trieste, Great Synagogue of Turin. Center: Great Synagogue of Rome.

(Photos: JewishItaly.org)
temples in Florence and Rome, in terms of spatial presence, Trieste’s synagogue is among the most massive in Italy. It was designed by two brothers, Arduino and Ruggero Berlam, in a combination of Near Eastern styles that recall Byzantine and classical elements. The most arresting decorative feature is the enormous rose window that forms a Star of David in its center.

The liberal reforms of Hapsburg emperor Joseph II had liberated Trieste’s Jews from the ghetto as early as 1784, but this prosperous community did not commission a monumental synagogue until 1908. Upon its grand opening four years later, one observer referred to its appearance as, “a mixture of an Assyrian temple and an Egyptian tomb.”

Though misguided in its assessment of the temple’s cultural influences, this comment touches on a key question about these monumental synagogues: namely, to what extent were they too spacious and elaborate for the communities they served? For centuries in the ghettos, an essential part of Judaism had been its intimate sense of community, a closeness Jews shared with each other and their religion. The small, unassuming synagogues of the ghetto fostered this intimacy and simplicity. At the time it was conceived, Trieste’s synagogue took the place of four older local synagogues which had collectively served a thriving community of over 6,000. Today, the same enormous structure is home to a community of fewer than 600, giving new meaning to the “tomblike” quality it exhibited almost a century ago.

*Rome*

The ghetto of Trieste was the first in modern-day Italy to be abolished; Rome’s was the last. As emancipation swept through the peninsula as part of the secularization
brought by unification, Rome’s embattled Jewish community was forced to wait an additional decade before gaining the freedoms of full Italian citizenship. Rome’s inclusion in the Kingdom of Italy in 1871 was the ultimate triumph for Italian Jews, the dawn of a new age for Roman Jewry as equal citizens of the capital of the new Italy. In erecting a new synagogue to mark its “exodus” from the ghetto, the largest and oldest Jewish community in Italy did so with the same sense of dual pride of country and religion that inspired other Jewish communities. In a discourse celebrating its grand opening in 1904, the president of the Roman Jewish community, Angelo Sereni, proclaimed:

And so, ladies and gentlemen… here, between the monuments to Vittorio Emanuele II and Garibaldi, the two great agents of our Italy, is erected today, majestically free and surrounded by the pure and free sunlight, this temple… rising as a sign of freedom, equality, and love.98

In this speech, Sereni does not hesitate to draw a connection between the leaders of the Risorgimento and the new freedom and equality achieved by Roman Jews. By aligning the new temple with secular monuments of liberty and nationhood, Sereni also touches upon the ways in which the synagogue interacted with other architectural features of Rome. While it stood in harmony with several contemporary structures, it also responded to various Roman and Christian structures strongly associated with the city’s anti-Judaic past. Its towering presence negated the symbolic significance of the Arch of Titus, which for almost two millennia had portrayed the Jews as a subjugated minority. Its enormous, green, rectangular dome defied the primacy of Christian buildings across the river, such

as Castel Sant’Angelo, where in medieval times Jews had been forced to attend Christian sermons to induce conversion, and even the dome of St. Peter’s itself.

The Great Synagogue serves another purpose, one more central to the Jewish ethos. During the period in which the temple was planned and constructed, the former Jewish ghetto was largely demolished, with only traces still remaining today. In its place, the synagogue assumed the public identity of Roman Jewry, rising majestically above the tree-lined Tiber River overlooking the area where the ghetto had been. Though it physically replaced the ghetto, it was not meant to erase the memory of the centuries of Jewish repression that took place there. Instead, the synagogue was built to celebrate the state of emancipated Jewry, while also preserving the memory of the ghetto, to serve as a “grand container of historical memory of the most ancient community of the Diaspora.”\footnote{Ibid., 99.}
Abraham Berliner, a German Jew, hoped that the memory of the Roman Jewish community’s long history in the ghetto would not be replaced by the new synagogue. “It is our sincere hope,” he wrote,

that when [the synagogues of the old ghetto] are gone from the earth… to make room for the new temple, the memory of this marvelous history does not vanish from the minds of future generations, so that in their memory, the faithful will keep lit a fire that no storm can put out.100

This was a fundamental goal of all emancipation synagogues, something that would be mirrored in the treatment of the Shoah a half century later, to signal a new era while also preserving the memory of the past.

In closing this section, I would like to reflect on the relationship between the rise of these ambitious outward symbols of pride – clearly intended to send a message to the gentile population of Italy – and the trends of actual Jewish observance among Italian Jewish communities. Given the equality and the rights as Italian citizens that Jews had won, what are we to make of this enthusiastic desire to erect shining monuments to their Judaism? They certainly suggest that immediately upon achieving freedom, the leaders of these communities publicly reaffirmed their Jewish identity. But how was this burgeoning public exhibition of their Judaism reconciled with the changing relationship of emancipated Jews to their Jewish identity? The firsthand sources presented in chapter one show that for many Jews, the practice of religion had become something intensely private, co-existing with a more robust, outward tendency to feel and act Italian. In Gardens and Ghettos, Mario Toscano attempts to place these monumental synagogues within the wider context of Jewish acculturation, referring to them as “the expression of a

100 Ibid.
tendency to support an increasingly uncertain religious identity with ostentatious display.” His observation captures the subtle distinction between the way Italian Jews viewed their dual identity during this period and the image they wished to project through the construction of these enormous temples. Despite this discrepancy, emancipation synagogues were built with the double intention to bear witness to the innate sense of national belonging that Italian Jews felt, while also firmly stating their commitment to their distinctive identity as Jews.

***

II. Jewish Museums in Italy

The integrated, dual identity of the emancipation period, expressing simultaneously a pride in Jewish traditions and a firm commitment to Italian nationality, became difficult after the Holocaust. The seamless duality of old was replaced by a powerful Jewish consciousness stemming from the defining experience of the Shoah. In the postwar period, this collective consciousness is sustained primarily through the lens of memory. One mode of transmitting this memory is the Jewish museum, which collects and displays items in order to preserve historical and cultural memory. In a chapter titled “Structuring Memory,” Ruth Ellen Gruber studies the delicate issue faced by postwar Jewish museums of how to reconcile the immense tragedy of the Holocaust experience with the traditional functions of a museum. “In today’s Europe,” she writes, “all Jewish museums are—to one degree or another—Holocaust museums of a sort; what is

presented is inevitably viewed through the backward lens of the Shoah.”

102 This speaks to how prominently the Holocaust experience figures into the modern Jewish identity that these museums seek to preserve.

In order to better understand how Jewish museums in Italy represent the Holocaust, I conducted a general survey of thirteen museums (listed in Figure 2), drawing information from their official websites and those of the municipalities in which they are located. My goal was to uncover what sort of spatial representation these museums dedicate to their Shoah exhibits, and to what extent these exhibits focus on the Holocaust memory of the individual communities or the experience of all Italian Jewry.

This geographical listing shows that Jewish museums are located almost exclusively in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Museums</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trento-Alto Adige</td>
<td>Jewish Museum of Merano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veneto</td>
<td>Jewish Museum of Venice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friuli-Venezia Giulia</td>
<td>Jewish Museum of Gorizia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carlo and Vera Wagner Museum of Jewish Culture (Trieste)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piedmont</td>
<td>Jewish Museum of Casale Monferrato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilia-Romagna</td>
<td>Jewish Museum of Bologna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jewish Museum of Ferrara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fausto Levi Museum (Soragna)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Museum of the Children of Villa Emma (Nonantola)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuscany</td>
<td>Jewish Museum of Florence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Museum of the Jewish Community of Leghorn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jewish Museum of Pitigliano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazio</td>
<td>Jewish Museum of Rome</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Jewish museums in Italy by region.

the northern third of Italy, with a particular concentration in the north-central regions of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany. The lack of any Jewish museums south of Rome, given the antiquity of some of the Jewish communities of the South, suggests that by the time of emancipation, they no longer had the resources to institute museums.

Not surprisingly, many of the northern and central cities and towns that contain Jewish museums are also home to longstanding Jewish communities. In most cases, the community established and operates the museum, either independently or in conjunction with the municipality. Figure 3 shows how directly linked by physical location each of these museums is to the history of their local communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Attached to Synagogue?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bologna</td>
<td>In Ghetto</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casale Monferrato</td>
<td>Not in Ghetto</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrara</td>
<td>In Ghetto</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>Not in Ghetto</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorizia</td>
<td>In Ghetto</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leghorn</td>
<td>Not in Ghetto</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merano</td>
<td>In Ghetto</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonantola</td>
<td>Not in Ghetto</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitigliano</td>
<td>In Ghetto</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>In Ghetto</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soragna</td>
<td>In Ghetto</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trieste</td>
<td>Not in Ghetto</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venice</td>
<td>In Ghetto</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Physical location of Jewish museums within Jewish communities.

This table shows that six of eight museums located in the former ghetto of its city are housed within the community’s main synagogue, suggesting that the exhibits they contain have a local orientation. Some, such as the Museum of the Jewish Community of Leghorn and the Fausto Levi Museum (named after a mayor of nearby Parma), make it

---

103 The outlying examples in this study are museums that are either in the old ghetto and not attached to a synagogue (Bologna, Venice) or attached to a synagogue that is not in the former ghetto (Florence).
clear from their names that they aim to preserve the history of the local community. From online information ranging from virtual tours to room-by-room descriptions, I was able to ascertain to what extent each museum focuses on the history of its own community. Figure 4 separates the museums into those that focus primarily on local Jewry and those that have a more universal approach to representing the memory of the Shoah.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Jewish Experience</th>
<th>Universal Jewish Experience</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bologna</td>
<td>Gorizia</td>
<td>Merano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrara</td>
<td>Villa Emma</td>
<td>Pitigliano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leghorn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casale Monferrato</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fausto Levi (Soragna and Parma)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. and V. Wagner (Trieste)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4**

The results reveal that the majority of Italian Jewish museums focus on the history and culture of their own community. If we compare this to Figure 3, we find that physical proximity to the past of the local community does not necessarily determine the focus of the exhibits of these museums. For example, the museums in Trieste and Casale Monferrato do not display a high degree of physical connection to their Jewish communities’ respective pasts, yet still they focus their exhibits primarily on local Jewish history. Conversely, the museum at Gorizia, which is located in the ghetto and attached to the main synagogue, has only a small section that pertains to its own history. Instead, most of its exhibits center on the culture and history of Judaism from biblical times, part of a recent approach “aimed at demystifying Jews and their world.”

---

104 Gruber, 161.
that the spatial representation of the Holocaust in each of these museums is often presented separately from the rest of the exhibits in the museum. Separation serves two purposes: it gives the Shoah the primacy and respect it deserves, and it accentuates the huge emotional shift that accompanied this phase of Jewish history, thus preparing viewers for the solemnity they will encounter. Figure 5 categorizes the museums by the degree of clear, spatial separation they grant the Shoah.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clear Separate Space</th>
<th>No Clear Separation</th>
<th>No Treatment of Shoah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bologna</td>
<td>Ferrara</td>
<td>Venice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>Gorizia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Pitigliano</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fausto Levi</td>
<td>Leghorn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. and V. Wagner</td>
<td>Merano</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casale Monferrato</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villa Emma</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5

Of the museums with separate Holocaust exhibits, the degree of separation varies. The clearest distinction can be found in the Jewish Museum of Bologna, the Fausto Levi Museum in Soragna, and the Carlo and Vera Wagner Museum in Trieste, all of which have separate rooms dedicated to the memory of the Shoah. The museums in Rome and Florence are close behind, combining twentieth century persecutions together into one room by displaying documents that catalogue the experience of the Fascist racial laws and Nazi deportation. The Museum of Ancient Jewish Art and History in Casale Monferrato features a lone memorial dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Shoah near its entrance. In other museums, the Shoah is addressed, but not assigned a separate room. For the most part, these museums and the communities that house them are smaller; therefore the lack of spatial separation is most likely a result of practical limitations, such as a shortage of space or items to display. Curiously, the museum of the
community of Venice—one of the most significant historic Jewish communities in Italy—contains no exhibits dedicated to the Holocaust, being dedicated instead mostly to religious artifacts from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries.105

This brief survey shows that Jewish museums in Italy tend to dedicate separate treatment to the memory of the Holocaust, if space allows, while focusing almost exclusively on the experience of their local communities rather than the shared experience of European or even Italian Jewry. Alternatively, many modern Holocaust museums, such as those in the United States and Israel, are dedicated to memorializing the Holocaust experience of Jews throughout Europe. These museums are generally the product of outside witnesses to the catastrophic period rather than communities that experienced the Shoah firsthand. Local Italian Jewish museums, however, while fully acknowledging the enormity of the Shoah and preserving its memory, try to place it within the centuries of local Jewish history that came before.

No Jewish museum in Italy has more history to preserve than the National Jewish Museum in Rome, which is dedicated to preserving the community’s history. Their slogan, “We’ve been here for twenty two centuries; we have some stories to tell” [Siamo qui da ventidue secoli; ne abbiamo da raccontare] captures the pride they take in their lengthy existence. Due to its longevity and its central role in the story of the Italian Holocaust experience, Rome makes for an optimal case study of how local Jewish communities attempt to preserve the memory of the Shoah. I had the good fortune of visiting the Museum in person to find out how the presentation of this subject is different than other rooms/exhibits of the museum, and what this presentation of Holocaust

memory says about how Jews felt toward their nation’s role in the Holocaust. By exploring some of these dynamics, I hoped to get a better sense of the status of postwar Italian Judaism and how religious identity came to interact with national consciousness.

The National Jewish Museum of Rome is located underneath the Great Synagogue, and is divided into a series of connected rooms that lead the visitor through the historical eras of Roman Jewry. The fifth and final room covers the period from the emancipation to the present, and is dedicated mostly to the history of Fascist anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. The exhibits include myriad firsthand materials—photographs, documents, newspapers, letters, and anti-Semitic periodicals.

So how does this room contrast with presentations in the other rooms of the museum? In the previous rooms, the exhibits have a very positive orientation. They focus on Roman Jewish culture and religious traditions developed and maintained through the centuries. Large panels narrate the history of oppression and intolerance, but the exhibits themselves do not emphasize these negative aspects of the past. Instead, they highlight the continuity and durability of Roman Jewry by focusing on culture of Jewish life through each period. The memory of these traditions is preserved in a variety of relics, such as beautiful tapestries, prayer books, marble engravings from ancient temples, and a host of religious artifacts from the cherished “cinque scole.” There is also a room dedicated to the vibrant culture of the Roman ghetto, which includes information on linguistic and culinary traditions born out of a period of repression. The overall impression is that the museum does not dwell on the tragic aspects of Roman Jewish history, but instead celebrates its distinctive culture and traditions.
This sense of cultural celebration disappears upon entering the last room. Here, the viewer is confronted by an unrelentingly dark past, one that feels a lot closer than in the previous exhibits. Ancient stone inscriptions are replaced by Fascist and Nazi documents, and ornate religious vestments are replaced by the bland, tattered, and chillingly recognizable uniform of a Holocaust prisoner. Historical synopses of the events during this period—mainly emancipation, the racial laws, and Nazi occupation—are still provided to direct the viewer chronologically, but in this room, the exhibits speak for themselves. Photographs, newspaper articles, and letters have a much more gripping effect on viewers than text, putting them into direct contact with the memory of the past. The Fascist and Nazi declarations and documents strike fear, such as a written statement ordering all residents of the Jewish ghetto to “pack for eight days” and be ready to go in twenty minutes. It is impossible not to be struck by the immediacy of these exhibits, which make the other rooms seem distant.

Despite the gravity that pervades this room, it holds a fundamental similarity to the presentations of the other rooms—a focus on the will to survive. The documents capture the pain, confusion, and fear of their authors, but are also tinged with pride and reserved hopefulness. For example, Roberto Ascarelli, a lawyer writing from exile in Switzerland addressing the firm from which he has been banned, claims to “have the honor of being among the Italian citizens of the Jewish Race retained by the laws.”

One of the most poignant testaments to the solidarity that Roman Jews exhibited during these dark times is a collection of over a hundred receipts of gold donations from the infamous Nazi extortion of the Roman community in September 1943. In the first major

---

106 “Orders to the Jews Captured by the Nazis on October 16, 1943.” National Jewish Museum, Rome.
organized act of Nazi persecution in Rome, Gestapo Head of Police Herbert Kappler ordered the community to come up with the sum of 50 kilograms of gold in exchange for sparing the lives of two hundred Jews. Roman Jews, as well as some compassionate non-Jews, met the demand with an enormous outpouring of their personal wealth and possessions, recalling the communal togetherness that had characterized Roman Jews in the face of hundred of years of outside oppression.

Though many of the most unsettling exhibits pertain to the phase of Nazi occupation and deportations, the room does not neglect the role of Italy in the twentieth century persecution of Italian Jewry. The room is split almost equally between Fascist and German anti-Semitism. One of the most eye-catching pieces is an enormous blow-up of the front page of an issue of Corriere della Sera, in which the headline announces the Fascist high council’s approval of laws for “the defense of the race.” There are several other items pertaining to strictly Fascist anti-Semitism, such as working papers and report cards stamped “Jewish” and a collection of copies of the racist magazine Difesa della Razza. The documents accurately reflect the transition from Fascism’s isolation and marginalization of the Jews to the Nazis’ intent to annihilate them. Though by no means physically obvious, the subtle division of the room between the two different phases of anti-Semitic persecution provides some insight into the way Italy’s Jews view their country’s role in the Holocaust. The exhibits do not take on an accusatory tone toward Italy in general; rather, any suggestion of blame is aimed squarely at Mussolini’s government, in keeping with the scholarship of the period in which the museum was

108 “It is not your lives we are interested in… it is your gold that we want in order to give our country new weapons.” (Quoted by Alessia Faligghi, Saved by the convents: the help of the Church to the Jews of Rome during the Nazi occupation, 51). This blatant lie would be revealed less than a month later, when Nazi soldiers raided the Jewish ghetto and deported over two thousand Jews to Auschwitz.

109 De Felice, 452.
dedicated. More recent scholarship, however, has dispelled the “myth of innocence” that characterized the benign role Italian citizens were believed to have played in the plight of the Jews. 

***

III. The Risiera di San Sabba

The final site of memory I’ve chosen to study is the Risiera di San Sabba, the only former Nazi concentration camp on Italian soil. A onetime rice-husking factory located a few miles south of the city center of Trieste, the Risiera was used by Nazis first as a temporary detainment and transportation facility for prisoners, and after October 1943, as a full time concentration camp for the execution of political prisoners and Jews. In 1944, a large building housing a crematorium was installed in the main courtyard, greatly increasing the camp’s capacity for mass murder. Thousands of men, women, and children were killed within its walls before the Nazis abandoned it in spring of 1945.

Today, the Italian government recognizes the Risiera as a national monument. The site also contains the Civic Museum of the Risiera di San Sabba, defined by the city

---

110 For more on this view, see Anna Bravo’s “Social Perception of the Shoah in Italy,” in The Jews of Italy: Memory and Identity, ed. Bernard D. Cooperman (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2000): 381-400.

of Trieste as “a site for the conservation of memory, a place where the visitor comes into direct, tangible contact with human suffering and tragedy.”112 I was interested in two major differences that separate this museum, opened in 1975, from other Jewish museums such as the National Jewish Museum in Rome. The first is that unlike in Rome, where the visitor is presented with a series of carefully ordered and preserved items and documents, holocaust history surrounds the visitor in San Sabba. The space itself is filled with living memory, not just in the plaques, statues and exhibits, but in the walls of eroded brick, the boarded windows, and the heavy air that fills each room. I wanted to see what effect this immersive quality had on the overall presentation of holocaust history. The second fundamental difference is that the site is operated not by the Jewish community, but by the city of Trieste. In 1965, “by decree of the President of the Republic,” the Risiera was declared a National Monument, “entrusted to the Italian nation by virtue of its great historical and political interest.”113 This act of governmental acknowledgment signaled a change in Italy’s relationship with its holocaust past, a past that for many years after the war was treated passively by the majority of Italians.

The memorialization of San Sabba was part of a wider trend of site memorialization still taking place in postwar Europe during the 1960s. Across the continent, the transformation of Holocaust sites into commemorative spaces had already begun, in some locations as soon as liberation occurred. In an article published in the American Historical Review, Harold Marcuse discusses the emergence of Holocaust memorials in postwar Europe. He examines the phases in which these monuments appeared, as well as the wide range of architectural expressions they adopted. In

112 Official informational guide to the Risiera di San Sabba, 5.
113 Decree of the President of the Republic, April 15, 1965, no. 510 (official informational guide, 6).
particular, the article notes the divergence of eastern and western styles of representation.\textsuperscript{114}

Traces of this western style are clearly visible in the monument constructed at the Risiera. The design was selected in a competition announced by the city council of Trieste in 1966. The winning architect, Romano Boico, described his design for the memorial:

The Risiera, half destroyed by the fleeing Nazis, was squalid, like its surroundings. I thought that this total squalor could rise as a symbol and itself become a monument. I decided to remove and restore, rather than add.\textsuperscript{115}

This artistic vision accounts for the bare, desolate appearance the site maintains today. Visitors are first led down a long, narrow entranceway, lined by high walls and overlooked by a menacing brick façade with boarded up windows, which leads into the central courtyard. Immediately upon entering, one is confronted by the dreariness and emptiness of the place. The area is enclosed by two towering grey walls and the large, ominous brick buildings of the Risiera, converted by the Nazis into various work rooms, holding cells, and torture chambers for the thousands of prisoners who passed through the camp. On the first floor of the left-hand building, there is a long row of seventeen small cells, used by the Nazis for interrogation and torture, as well as a separate room labeled “the death cell.” According to eye-witness accounts, this is where prisoners marked for immediate execution were sent to spend their final hours, often sharing the room with

\textsuperscript{114} Harold Marcuse, “Holocaust Memorials: The Emergence of a Genre,” \textit{The American Historical Review}, vol. 115, no. 1, 88-89. The original Eastern tradition used mainly the expressionistic, heroic realism emphasizing the individual, whereas the more recent Western trend of representation favored expansive, modern, avant-garde symbolism that utilized “experiential space.”

\textsuperscript{115} Official informational guide to the Risiera di San Sabba, 4.
corpses still awaiting cremation. At the far end of the ground floor is a long room known as the “room of the crosses,” so named for the elaborate system of now-decaying wooden crossbeams that made up its framework. Also included in this room is a small collection of belongings recovered at the camp after it was abandoned by the Germans in the spring of 1945. The simplicity of these items—which include eyeglasses, pins, watches, and combs—are a heartrending testament to the normality of life from which these victims were tragically torn.

The first floor of the second building, formerly the mess hall and officer chambers, now houses the museum. It is dimly lit, and permeated by the same dank, dreary atmosphere that it had when it served prisoners their daily ration. In the middle are a series of exhibits encased in glass, surrounded by walls displaying maps, plans, photos of the camp, letters, notes scratched on walls, personal possessions, and several harrowing drawings. Behind the main exhibit hall is another large, empty room containing dozens of documents outlining the history of the site and the region.

Almost all of the pieces of memory in the Risiera Museum were produced in the camp itself. For this reason, they are a lot bleaker than the letters preserved in the National Jewish Museum, since there the letters were written pre-Holocaust. In the Risiera, all the horror, fear, and suffering of the Shoah are captured in the notes, drawings, and journal entries. Nonetheless, even in this most dire situation, shades of hope and pride are perceptible. Similar to the Roberto Ascarelli letter in Rome, one anonymous prisoner expressed immense pride and fortitude in a diary entry:

This place is an atmosphere of melancholy sadness, without a single comfort…

There are thirty of us—twenty women, ten men… There will remain with us an

---

116 Ibid., 1.
imperishable memory, but this doesn’t matter… we are bold and full of pride. It is necessary to fight, and to suffer on behalf of peace, and for the liberty of our people.¹¹⁷

Aside from the museum items and documents, the Risiera contains many other features that contribute to the remembrance of its victims. The biggest monument, covering a large area in the central courtyard, is almost unnoticeable at first, owing largely to Boico’s decision to “remove and restore.” It consists of a large metal plate set into the pavement. This “terrible path of steel” demarcates the location of the crematorium, the underground smoke channel, and the smokestack, all destroyed by the fleeing Nazis. Upon crossing the courtyard and looking back toward the museum, this visual representation becomes more obvious by the outline of the infernal structure still clearly visible on the main building. At the base of the wall where the two buildings used to meet, under a small arch that most likely was the door leading downstairs to the crematorium, is a shrine adorned with wreaths, flowers, candles, and tri-colored ribbons, commemorating the victims of San Sabba. Across the courtyard from the memorial is a tall, pointed monument representing where the

¹¹⁷ Civil Museum of the Risiera di San Sabba, Trieste.
smokestack of the crematorium once stood overlooking the camp. According to the informational guide, this modern-abstract structure is meant to symbolize the smoke rising out of the chimney.\footnote{Official informational guide to the Risiera di San Sabba, 2.}

Boico’s central monument is so simple and unassuming that at first its visual significance can be overlooked. As its meaning becomes clear, however, it is an incredibly powerful visual testament to the memory of the horror and tragedy that took place there. It is a striking example of what Marcuse refers to as symbolic representations “predicated on the absence of that which is symbolized.”\footnote{Marcuse, \textit{AHR}, 85.} By representing the crematorium with empty space, the design does not force the architect’s own vision on the viewer, but instead provides the parameters by which the viewer can reconstruct the crematorium in his or her own mind. This spatial element of the design is a powerful part of the memorialization of the Risiera’s holocaust past.
Another area containing strong visual representations of Holocaust memory is a short outdoor corridor, out of sight from the main entrance to the courtyard, which connects the two large rooms of the museum. The walls of this corridor are filled with plaques commemorating different groups of victims who lost their lives in the Risiera, including mothers, homosexuals, partisans, and various ethnic groups. Some plaques also contain poems bearing witness to the pain and horror of San Sabba, but also to the hope of a brighter future. Cementing this message of hope and peace is a cast iron sculpture in the back corner of the memorial room of the museum. This sculpture typifies the more abstract symbolism that characterized the western school of Holocaust site representation that can be seen in other concentration camp memorials throughout Europe.\textsuperscript{120} It depicts four skeletal human figures reaching upward through some sort of stylized jagged fencing in a symbol that could be construed as either despair or hope, or perhaps a bit of both.

Historians estimate that over three thousand men, women, and children were killed in the Risiera, while countless more were transported to their deaths in other camps in Germany and Poland. How did postwar Italy reconcile this glaring evidence of its role in the Holocaust with its generally hands-off treatment of its Holocaust history? Unlike other more vague remnants of the Italian Holocaust that would eventually disappear or lose prominence in the collective memory of the Italian people, the Risiera represents an

\textsuperscript{120} Particularly striking is its resemblance in certain elements to Yugoslavian sculptor Nandor Glid’s highly abstract memorial at Dachau, which contains a similar interaction between skeletal humanoid figures and barbed wire. For more on the different styles of Western Holocaust memorials, see Marcuse.
enormous and nonnegotiable truth, a dark stain on the conscience of the Italian people. It could not be returned to its original use as a rice factory; how could a place where the most horrible crimes of human nature were perpetrated ever be used again for civic purposes? Alternatively, to shut the complex down or to demolish it altogether would only cement the feeling of guilt and complicity that Italians were trying to avoid. It would make them no better than the Nazis themselves, who destroyed over half the buildings and the crematorium in order to cover up the heinous crimes carried out there. The decision to make the Risiera a national monument in 1965 marked an essential step in the gradual change in the outlook of Italians on their own role in the Holocaust. It signaled an outward reclamation of the Shoah as part of their own past, an experience shared with Italian Jews, indicating a reabsorption of the Italian Jewish into the national consciousness of the Italian people.
Epilogue: *Life is Beautiful*

Readers may wonder why Roberto Benigni’s landmark film, *Life is Beautiful*, is absent from the previous discussion of visual representations of the Holocaust. *Life is Beautiful* represents a different “site” of memory, a watershed moment for the cinematic representation of the Italian Holocaust experience, one that is physical but not geographically located. Earlier Italian films dealing with the Holocaust had addressed issues concerning Italian complicity, but *Life is Beautiful* broke new ground in redefining the way the Shoah, and Italy’s own role in it, are represented.

The film opens in the small Italian town of Arezzo in 1939, a year after the racial laws were passed. The harsh new discriminatory measures initially have little effect on the carefree, happy-go-lucky Guido, who remains immersed in his own wistful pursuits, the most urgent being the lovely Dora, a school teacher who he falls for through a series of chance encounters. Their budding romance leads Dora to elope with Guido from her own engagement party, and in due course they give birth to Giosué, whom we meet as a charming, five-year old son.

The first half of the film includes the telltale features of a romantic comedy, one that ostensibly should have a happy ending. However, Guido’s storybook existence is abruptly cut short by the deportation of his entire family to a Nazi labor camp. From this point, the movie loses its fanciful mystique and is shrouded in a veil of fear in the face of a desperate struggle for survival, one that defines the harrowing experience of the Holocaust. The plot now centers on Guido’s efforts to conceal the terrifying truth from his young son. By his own natural inventiveness, he manages to convince Giosué that the harsh new reality surrounding them is only a playful competition, one that promises a
sizable reward if they emerge the victors. The “game” becomes Guido’s method of placating his restless son, while more importantly providing him with rules by which he will better be able to survive the true purpose of the camp. In this way, the second half of the film becomes a race for the quick-thinking Guido to remain one step ahead of his son’s inquisitive nature while also avoiding the very real dangers of the camp. In the end, Guido is caught trying to sneak into the women’s quarters to find his wife, and is shot by a Nazi guard. Yet, in the dramatic climactic scene, he manages to keep his charade alive in the mind of the innocent Giosué all the way to the very end.

The disparity between the two halves of the film is a deliberate creative move on Benigni’s part as co-writer and director. Where other films tended to move back and forth between past happiness and present suffering, *Life is Beautiful* keeps them clearly separated. This “architectural schizophrenia” creates a stark contrast between Italian Fascism and Nazism. In the first part, Fascism is personified by Dora’s blundering fiancé Rodolfo and the pudgy fascist inspector from Rome, whose place Guido steals in an entertaining and intelligent condemnation of Fascist racism. Overt acts of anti-Semitism are mostly absent, except where used occasionally as strategic foreshadowing of the coming events.

This portrayal may seem to sustain the innocent *brava gente* myth when juxtaposed with the atrocities enacted by the Nazis in the second half. But upon closer inspection, Benigni does not let Italians off the hook so easily. In several scenes in the first half of the film, he confronts the *brava gente* by capturing examples of their complicity in the events that led to the tragedy. Their guilt is present in the philo-Nazi schoolteacher, the “No Jews or dogs” sign in a shop window, and the fascist officials who

---

121 Marcus, 76.
harass Guido at his bookstore. Furthermore, not one Italian makes a concerted effort to help Guido and his family nor any of the other Jews rounded up for deportation; in fact, they seem to disappear all together at that pivotal point in the movie, leaving even the Christian Dora to be transported to her death.

At the center of the maelstrom of controversy that surrounded the release of *Life is Beautiful* lies the issue of representation, and to what extent the Holocaust should be portrayed in a positive, even humoristic light. Though it garnered great public success and critical acclaim, some branded the film as a trivializing depiction of the horrible tragedy. Already famous for tackling major Italian themes in earlier comedic roles, Benigni’s decision to test the waters of Holocaust cinema was spurred by his desire to push the limits of his own art. “I had this strong desire to put myself, my comic persona, in an extreme situation… the ultimate extreme situation is the extermination camp, the worst thing imaginable.”

Although it is a fine line, and one that some critics believe he crossed, Benigni in my judgment manages to respect the gravity of the historical situation in which he places himself. His respectful tone is underscored by the manner in which he casts the concentration camp scenes. In the lager setting, what comedic aspects still remain exist solely in the context of the father-son plotline. Guido’s gags are not mindless humor, but survival strategies, all for the sake of keeping his young son out of harm’s way. Furthermore, his methods of depicting the horrible realities are rarely direct, but more often through chilling allusions, such as female prisoners sifting through a large pile of clothes, and several references to the infamous “showers.” These scenes contain no

---

comedic value, but instead are intended to reconstruct the reality that Benigni wishes to respect.

A potential point of contention is a scene in which Giosué confronts his father about the rumors he has heard about the unspeakable truths that go on at the camp. A quick-thinking Guido is forced to quell these fears in the only manner he knows how: to ridicule them with hearty laughter and to mock the illogical nature of such things. By appealing to the child’s primitive sense of morality—often the soundest of moral compasses—he is in fact making a point about the absurdity of the heinous crimes executed by the Nazis during the Holocaust. So what could be construed as wildly inappropriate humor at the expense of the horrible tragedy of concentration camp reality is really a reaffirmation of the Holocaust “as history’s worst nightmare.”

This “nightmare” is revealed in the film’s most unsettling depiction, a short, dreamlike scene in which we see Guido carrying his sleeping son through a thick mist, while he wearily reminisces about the simple pleasures of life outside the camp. After losing his way, he stumbles upon the vague outline of an enormous pile of corpses, shrouded in fog. There is no foreboding music to accompany this image, only a howling wind. Nor are we told where they are coming from or where they are going; the scene serves no narrative purpose in the otherwise very tightly-constructed plot. Guido’s face shows his reaction of awe and fear, yet also his grim determination to survive. What towers before his eyes is a truth that he cannot dress up or decide to ignore. This haunting visual image is Benigni’s way of accepting the enormity of his subject matter, a concession to the depth of human tragedy that even his own optimism cannot traverse.

---

124 Viano, 29.
To some within the community of Holocaust survivors and those who preserve the event’s warning in memory, Benigni’s cinematic fairytale may not be an acceptable form of Holocaust remembrance. There are some who maintain that only those who experienced the Shoah are suited to speak and write about it. Others hold that only well-documented factual accounts are acceptable, while still others believe that strict silence is the only appropriate response to the tragedy. Such people may find *Life is Beautiful*, in which a non-Jewish movie star employs comedy to celebrate the triumph of love and the human spirit over the most of harrowing circumstances, offensive to a more traditional, sobering memorialization of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the standards by which appropriate representation of the Holocaust is judged have undergone a dramatic shift in recent years, both within and outside the Jewish community. *Life is Beautiful* played a major role in this transformation. Often asked about what inspired him to create a film about the Holocaust, the comic actor responded, “The Holocaust belongs to everyone. I am a man and therefore it belongs to me.” That a cultural icon like Benigni took on the role of an Italian Jew with all his trademark energy, amiability, and genuineness represents a monumental step in reclaiming the Holocaust for all of Italy.

---


126 Tugend, 3.
Works Cited

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


Ancient Jewish Art and History Museum (Casale Monferrato)
   http://www.casalebraica.org/ITA/Museums/JewishArtHistMuseum/JAHMusMain

Carlo & Vera Wagner Museum (Trieste)
   http://www.triestebraica.it/museoebraicotrieste

Fausto Levi Museum (Soragna)
   http://www.museoebraicosoragna.net

Jewish Museum of Bologna
   http://www.museoebraicobo.it

Jewish Museum of Ferrara
   http://ww3.comune.fe.it/museoebraico.htm

Jewish Museum of Florence
   http://www.moked.it/firenzebraica/itinerari/il-museo-ebraico

Jewish Museum of Merano

Jewish Museum of Pitigliano
   http://www.museidimaremma.it/it/museo.asp?keymuseo=26

Jewish Museum of Rome
   http://www.museoebraico.roma.it

Jewish Museum of Venice
   http://www.museoebraico.it

Museum of the Jewish Community of Leghorn
   http://www.comunitaebraica.org/main

Villa Emma Foundation
   http://www.fondaZionevillaemma.org

Official Informational Guide to the Risiera di San Sabba:
   www.retecivica.trieste.it/triestecultura/new/musei/risiera_san_sabba/brochure/Risiera