

The Jews in Italy

Backstory

ALEX GROPPER

Many *CJN* readers have been to Italy and fallen in love with the country. Even the great scholar Rashi praised Italy in the 11th century as the most beautiful place in the world. However the Jewish connection to Italy precedes Rashi by well over a thousand years.

The Maccabees sent a delegation to Rome in the 2nd century BCE. Jews thrived in Rome and its empire. Roman Jews were amongst the earliest supporters of Julius Caesar in his bid for power. (Two thousand years later they would also be amongst the first supporters of a 20th century caesar – Benito Mussolini).

One of the earliest synagogues outside of Israel was found in Ostia Antica, Rome's harbour at the mouth of the Tiber. Some believe there is evidence of a synagogue uncovered in Pompeii which was destroyed by the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. This was after the

destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE during the first revolt against Rome.

This revolt saw tens of thousands of Jewish slaves brought to the Roman capital. It is believed that many of them worked on building the legendary Coliseum. They did such a good job that some Jewish slaves were awarded their freedom by a grateful emperor, Titus. It was Titus who had put down the Jewish revolt and celebrated it with the iconic arch at the entrance to the Roman forum which bears his name. On it one can still see the menorah from the Second Temple.

Even after a second revolt from 132 to 135 led by Simon Bar Kochba was put down, Jews still fared well in the Roman Empire and were allowed their own religious court with the Sanhedrin. Synagogues abounded within the empire, one of the best preserved being discovered in the Syrian desert at the abandoned Roman fort of Dura Europos. It is estimated that Jews may have made up 10 per cent of the population of the empire.

However the 4th century CE saw things take a turn for the worse once Christianity became the official religion of the

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Roman Empire. Jewish fortunes continued to fluctuate in the Italian peninsula throughout the Middle Ages. Then in 1492 with much of southern Italy controlled by the Spanish, Jews were expelled from areas under their control. Many fled north where shortly thereafter their fortunes reached a low point in Venice. It was here that they were forced to live in a circumscribed area in the armoury, or ghetto, as it was called. Nevertheless there were places, such as Livorno, where Jews prospered.

By the end of the 1700s the ideals of the French Revolution – liberty, equality and fraternity – were being spread into Italy by French armies. The ensuing century and a half would be ushered in by hope but end in horror as the Holocaust engulfed Italy.

Although many Jews had originally supported Mussolini, his embrace of Hitler in the late 1930s provided the first hints of the catastrophe to come with his Racial Laws that were passed in 1938. These were aimed primarily at Jews. The catastrophe of the Holocaust would fully engulf Italy with deportation of Jews to the extermination camps after the Germans occupied the country in 1943. ■

To commemorate the Jewish experience in Italy and the 80th anniversary of Mussolini's anti-Jewish laws, the Canadian Institute for Mediterranean Studies, the Goggio Chair in Italian Studies at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto, the Italian Cultural Institute and the Toronto Jewish Film Festival will host a lecture by Yale Prof. Millicent Marcus on Vittorio de Sica's film Garden of the Finzi-Continis. May 2, 4 p.m. at Alumni Hall, room 400, 121 St. Joseph St. The public is invited.

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OBITUARIES AND RELATED NOTICES

STEELES MEMORIAL CHAPEL

Gossack, Tillie Naomi	April 8, 2019	30 Edith Dr
Ashurov, Miri	April 8, 2019	46 Berwick Cres
Kohn, Eva Fayga	April 10, 2019	120 Hillmount Ave
Horenfeldt, Moe	April 10, 2019	110 Steeles Ave W
Cohen, Daniel Gary	April 10, 2019	869 Nashville Rd
Binstock, Albert	April 10, 2019	55 Ameer Ave
Bercu, Beatrice	April 11, 2019	1111A College St
Rapoport, Sarra	April 11, 2019	2357 Winnetka Rd
Abrams, Frances	April 12, 2019	435 Fairlawn Ave

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prior to the date of the unveiling.
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