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The Roles of the Jews in Italian Society

Dan V. Segre, January 17, 2010
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- Most Italians think there are many times more Jews in Italy than the thirty-one thousand paying members of the Italian community. Native Italian Jews probably number no more than fifteen thousand. There are sizable communities of Libyan (mainly in Rome) and Lebanese and Iranian origin (mainly in Milan). The false perception of a large number of Jews in Italy results from the fact that several Jews have indeed played key roles in Italian society over the past century and a half.
- Jews see themselves – and also are seen as such by many educated Italians – as one of the "tribes" of what can best be called "the Italian nation in the making." The rise in recent decades of the Northern League shows once again that the idea of Italy as a single state is a contested one. In such a context there is suddenly a place again for the Jews as one of the distinct Italian groups, as was the case for many centuries before Italian unity.
- Another development of the last decades has been the reinvention of the Italian Fascist Party. Most of its members joined in 1995 a new movement, Alleanza Nazionale. Its leader, Gianfranco Fini needed the Jews and Israel to give legitimization to his party as genuine democrats.
- External developments have fostered a sudden reemergence of Italian Jewry. This has made Italian Jews again proud of their identity.

"Italy has a population of about sixty million. When one asks educated Italians how many Jews live in the country, the most frequent answer is half a million. In reality the number of paying members of the Italian Jewish community is thirty-one thousand, or five for every ten thousand Italians. There are probably another few thousand Jews who do not publicly identify as such, but no reliable estimates of these people exist. In addition there are many cultured, educated, or well-off Italians who will tell you that they are partly of Jewish origin.

"The two major Jewish communities in Italy are Rome with twelve thousand registered Jews and Milan with six thousand and a few thousand unregistered. Native Italian Jews probably do not number more than fifteen thousand. In Rome there is a sizable Libyan Jewish community. Iranian and Lebanese Jews have developed social centers in Milan so as to foster marriages within their communities. Jewish immigrants from Egypt, Morocco, Gibraltar, and Germany as well as Israelis in smaller numbers are dispersed among various communities."

Dan Segre has been a professor of political science at several universities including the University of Haifa, MIT, Stanford, and until recently the University of Lugano. He has simultaneously been involved in journalism for many decades.

Jews as One of Italy's Tribes

Segre remarks: "The false perception that there are so many Jews in Italy derives from the fact that they are considered so prominent. A number of Jews have indeed played key roles in Italian society over the past century and a half.

"Jews see themselves – and also are seen as such by many educated Italians – as one of the components of what can best be called 'the Italian nation in the making.' However strange this may sound, Italy has existed for a long time only as a geographical, linguistic, and cultural concept. Many Italians regard themselves first as Romans, Florentines, Neapolitans, Venetians, and so on and only after that as Italians.

"The origins of the cultural notion of Italy go back to the thirteenth or fourteenth century. At that time there were several internationally famous writers such as Dante Alighieri and Giovanni Boccaccio who, along with other less prominent authors, began to write in Italian rather than Latin. By the way, the oldest existing written document in Italian was written in Hebrew letters and dates from the ninth century. It was found in Sicily."

The Risorgimento

"One cannot understand the contemporary position of Italy's Jews without considering the country's history since the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, one of the obstacles to the creation of an Italian nation was the Risorgimento itself. This national movement politically united the peninsula, but failed to create the Italians. As an ideological and cultural movement it started in the decades after the Congress of Vienna in 1815. This assembly had restored the array of small states that existed before the occupation by Napoleon's France.

"Subsequently Italian nationalists sought a political agglomeration of the various Italian areas, some of which, in the north of the peninsula, were occupied by the Austrians. One of the fighting slogans against the Austrian occupiers was

'Viva Verdi.' It did not refer so much to the composer as to the king from the House of Savoy, Vittorio Emanuele Rex (d') Italia (Victor Emanuel, King of Italy).

"Italian unity was realized by the army of the Royal House of Savoy, which ruled in the area of Piedmont, Savoy (till 1860), Liguria, and Sardinia – with Turin as the capital. With the help of Giuseppe Garibaldi, this army conquered the other parts of the Italian peninsula. People were induced to join the nationalists either through military conquest itself, in the south and the Papal States, or through plebiscites in the north. Only the educated citizens of Piedmont spoke Italian. The rest preferred to use Piedmontese – a mixed Italian-French dialect – till the beginning of the twentieth century. Although most of the inhabitants of the peninsula were indifferent to the Risorgimento, and the Christian aristocracy of the old states was hostile to the new Italian kingdom, they were given no choice.

"The old Italian states, including the Republic of Venice – transferred by force by Napoleon to the Austrian Empire – that existed before the unification had all had a much longer political and cultural history than Piedmont. What would contemporary Italy be without Florence or Naples, or Rome where the pope ruled?"

The Role of the Jews

"The Jews were a factor not only because they had lived in Italy many centuries before the unification of the country but because of their higher level of education and an active, albeit loose interconnection among them. In the early stages of the Risorgimento, correspondence in Hebrew, often hidden in kosher food was used by Jewish members of secret patriotic societies to foil the Austrian police as well as that of the old states.

"During the Risorgimento the Jews were the most active group in favor of Italian unification. The reason was simple: all other states were aristocratic and Catholic and did not leave the Jews a place in society. Piedmont was the only liberal bourgeois state. It was secular – or at least opposed the rule of the Church. Hence it represented a clear choice for the Jews, however divided they were between supporters of the Savoy dynasty and of a republic under Mazzini's leadership. In both cases they turned into a kind of useful notability, especially in Piedmont where they formed a devoted cultural, ideological, and economic group in support of the House of Savoy, obtaining high positions in the military, the new administration, and the arts.

"In retrospect, 20 September 1870 was a crucial date for the Jews in Italy. On that day the Piedmontese army occupied Rome. The new rulers of a united Italy then had to replace the stories of the older Italian states with a new one founded on two myths. One was inspired by Rome as capital and successor of the Roman Empire; the other by Rome no longer as capital of the Papal State but of Christianity. The Jews could not be part of either vision, and thus lost the very special position they had attained during the Risorgimento."

Expelled from National Consciousness

"Little by little the Jews were expelled from Italian national consciousness. They did not notice the change as it was not immediately apparent. In 1909, the number of Jewish parliamentarians in Italy was larger than in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany, or France even though all these then had Jewish populations tens of times larger than Italy's. There were then about thirty-three thousand Italian Jews out of a general population of thirty-three million.

"Jews also were strongly represented in the military. They joined Garibaldi's militias and, as already mentioned, were members of many secret societies in the old states that favored Italian unity. Jews actively participated in the Risorgimento in numbers totally disproportionate to their part in the general population. By the end of the nineteenth century there were twenty-eight Jewish generals and eight admirals in the Italian military, plus a large number of commissioned officers in active service or in the reserves.

"Under Mussolini in 1934-1935, the most prestigious aristocratic mounted artillery regiment stationed in the town of Udine was commanded by a Jewish colonel, Luigi Liuzzi. He was the son of a Jewish general, Guido Liuzzi, and a relative of one of the most highly decorated officers in the Ethiopian campaign, Aldo Liuzzi. Luigi Liuzzi, expelled from the army as a Jew in 1938, became the first Jewish chief of staff of postwar republican Italy.

"Jews, thanks to their important role as journalists, also contributed to the development of the Italian language. In the period 1848-1900, they strongly supported all political currents of the Risorgimento. In Piedmont the newspaper of Camillo, Count of Cavour, the most important politician in the creation of the new Italy, was edited by a Jew, Giacomo Dina who would later become a senator. Dina was also an active member of the Jewish Burial Society in Turin.

"After Cavour had lost his seat in the Piedmont parliament, the 1853 election was critical for his political survival. He won a seat against a well-known aristocrat. His electoral district – at the time only people who could write could vote, and all Jewish males could do so – was an area of the ghetto of Turin. His main electoral agent was the chief rabbi of Turin, Lelio Cantoni. Later when Cavour was prime minister of the country, the head of his cabinet was Isacco Artom. Born in Florence, wounded in the first war of independence (1848-1949), Artom became one of Italy's first Jewish ambassadors. As for Cavour, his statue still stands in front of the ghetto."

Fascism

"Under the fascists in July 1938, Jews were eliminated from prominent positions. Jews had been important members of that party and also of the Socialist and Communist parties. The official discrimination against the Jews led to them being gradually expelled from Italian society, including the military even though many Jews had been highly decorated even in the war against Ethiopia.

Despite the fascist laws against the Jews, the Jewish admiral Isacco Umberto Pugliese, considered a genius in naval construction, was called back in the middle of World War II to salvage the Italian battleship hit by the British in the harbor of Taranto. Another Jewish admiral, Aldo Ascoli, expelled by the navy, was recalled after the war to become head of the Coast Guard. A third Jewish admiral, Augusto Capon, the father of Laura Capon, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Emilio Fermi's wife, was deported and died in Auschwitz.

"After the fascist discrimination began, some Jews considered moving to the colonies of Ethiopia and Eritrea, hoping they would not be subject to racial laws there. It was an illusion as the racial laws were soon extended to the colonies. After the Italian conquest of Addis Ababa and the declaration of the Italian empire, local revolts took place in Ethiopia. To suppress these and allow the building of new infrastructure, mainly roads, cavalry units were employed in these areas. Ethiopian Jews volunteered for one of these mounted brigades commanded by an Italian officer, Amedeo Guillet who agreed to train them in weapons use, enabling them to defend their villages against hostile neighbors. Yet Ethiopian Jews were doubly discriminated against by the fascist regime – as Jews and as Ethiopian natives.

"In 1939, the Italian Jewish community reached its highest number thanks to an influx of about six thousand Austrian and German Jews. By that time there were forty-six thousand Jews in the country. Of these, 7,322 would die in the concentration camps; some were executed, as in the case of a German reprisal act in Rome. Partisans such as Primo Levi were captured in the north and sent to Auschwitz as Jews. After the war perhaps about ten thousand Jews converted to Christianity, including Israel Zolli, formerly chief rabbi of Rome. Many others emigrated. Postwar, the community declined to about ten thousand native Italian Jews."

Emigration to Israel

"After the war part of the community's intellectual leadership emigrated to Israel. There this small community has made great contributions to the country. There have been many ambassadors of Italian origin as well as important scholars. Since the Israel Prize was instituted in 1953, several recipients have been of Italian origin.

"Already before the war there was a small but very high-powered religious-Zionist leadership in Italy. The rabbinical seminary in Florence had among its teachers internationally known scholars such as Umberto Cassuto and Elia Samuele Artom. Its founder Dr. Samuel Hirsch Margulies, an East European Jew who had come to Italy, was a key figure among the Zionists. Most Italian Jews viewed this Zionist identification with amazement.

"Before the war there was also a training base for Palestinian Jewish sailors in the town of Civitavecchia. Mussolini approved of this. He also donated a Zionist flag to the small Zionist group in Florence."

Staying out of Politics and the Military

"After the war, the Jewish community's attitude toward Zionism was very different. Now Italian Jews stayed out of several areas in which they had been active in the past such as politics and the military. There were still a few Jewish politicians in the Communist and Socialist parties. The most important among the Communists was Umberto Terracini. In the Socialist Party, which under its best-known leader Bettino Craxi became very anti-Israeli, there was a small group of pro-Israeli Jews, among them the parliamentarian Giorgio Gangi.

"In view of the impossibility to belong to the right-wing parties and the dominating Christian Democrats, and also in view of their significant role in the resistance, many Jews became leftists after the war. Now the perception of Jews by Catholic-dominated Italy was as communists.

"In the extraparliamentary Ciampi government of 1993-1994, formed by nonparty personalities, the Jewish chemist Umberto Colombo was minister of the universities and scientific research. In the 2008 elections, Fiamma Nirenstein, a Jewish journalist and author, became a parliamentarian of the People of Freedom Party of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and vice-president of the parliamentary commission for foreign affairs. She has been very visible, for instance in organizing pro-Israeli activities.

"In recent decades Italian Jews have also contributed greatly to science. At one point, four out of six living Italian Nobel Prize winners were Jewish. All emigrated to the United States following the racial laws: Emilio Segré, Salvatore Luria, Franco Modigliani, and Rita Levi Montalcini, who is a hundred years old and as such the oldest Nobel laureate.

"A new generation of modern, well-educated Orthodox rabbis has emerged. The chief rabbi of Italy, Riccardo Di Segni is a radiologist. Another rabbi, Shalom Bahbout teaches physics at Rome University. A third, Gianfranco Disegni is a member of the National Center of Research; Giuseppe Laras, the former chief rabbi of Milan is a professor of philosophy."

New Perceptions

"In recent decades, two new elements have rather suddenly emerged that have altered the Italian public perception of Jews. One is the rise of a separatist party, the Northern League. Its leader Umberto Bossi aims for autonomy or independence of the northern regions of Italy as a new political entity, Padania. This party's electoral success shows once again that the concept of Italy as a single state is a contested one. In this context there may again be a role for the Jews as one of the oldest Italian groups of the peninsula. It will not be similar to the role of the Jews in the Risorgimento, but it may again be significant for Italy and Judaism.

"A second important event was that the Italian Fascist Party reinvented itself. In 1995, most of its members joined a new movement called Alleanza Nazionale. Its leader, Gianfranco Fini thereafter needed the Jews and Israel to give legitimization to his party as genuine democrats.

"This new party condemned the racial laws of 1938. Fini was received by the Israeli government in November 2003. The Italian Jews now accepted him and his party. It may offer an alternative to the leftist parties, especially after Alleanza Nazionale merged in 2009 into Berlusconi's People of Freedom Party.

"Under the Berlusconi government, Israel's position in Italy is radically different from that in many other European countries. For this government Israel is not a problematic country. Berlusconi and his followers are pro-Israeli and say so clearly, including in the forums of the European Union."

Attitude toward Israel

"During the Gaza war there were anti-Israeli demonstrations in several Italian cities. However, one of the most impressive

pro-Israeli demonstrations in Europe took place on 14 January 2009 in Rome. More than a hundred parliamentarians from different parties participated.[1] The initiative for this demonstration was taken by Nirenstein. She later attacked Sweden's foreign minister Carl Bildt when he refused to condemn an anti-Semitic article in the Swedish anti-Israeli daily *Aftonbladet*.

"The current political support for Israel and other favorable factors have given Italy's Jews new self-confidence. There are some other notable indications. In Italy all taxpayers must decide on a contribution of 0.8 percent of their tax assessment to a religious or other approved organization. The number of Italians who, in 2008, decided to allocate this money to the Jewish community was sixty-one thousand. This far exceeds the number of Jewish families in Italy and is a sign of sympathy from non-Jewish Italians.

"Recently the Italian Jewish community started to publish a monthly, *Pagine ebraiche, Il giornale dell'ebraismo italiano*. The first issue was printed in one hundred thousand copies, and the following issues in thirty thousand copies, half distributed freely and half sold directly or by subscription. Many of its readers are non-Jews, including many parliamentarians. This sudden reemergence of Italian Jewry, because of developments not related to them in the country, has made Italian Jews proud of their identity.

"The Italian Jewish community now speaks out on many issues. Renzo Gattegna, chairman of the Italian Union of Jewish Communities is often called upon to comment on various issues such as mixed marriages, medical use of embryos, or the Swiss vote against minarets. This is very different from the situation with his predecessors when Jews aligned themselves with a political trend or preferred not to take positions."

A Jewish Revival

"Chabad is very active. It also plays a prominent role in the public domain when during Chanukah, in Piazza Barberini at the bottom of Rome's most famous street Via Veneto, a large menorah is erected and lighted in a public ceremony each night of the holiday. A new synagogue, the sixteenth in Rome's area, has been inaugurated in the Ostia quarter where there is now a small Jewish community. In this former Roman port there are also the ruins of a two-thousand-year-old synagogue.

"In the south of Italy where Jews were expelled in the Middle Ages, synagogues are being renovated. The most spectacular case is the rebirth of the Trani community in southern Italy, with the return to the Jews of the ancient synagogue – probably the oldest in Europe, having been built in the year 1200 and for centuries used as a church. The small community, with forty registered Jews, is partly composed of converted Jews who have decided to return to Judaism.

"The same is now happening at Palmi, in the Calabria region of the south, under the impulse of a liberal woman rabbi Barbara Aiello, also a returned Jew. Even in places where there are no Jews, Jewish tradition is being revived by local authorities who see it as a tourist attraction and source of publicity.

"In the northern town of Turin, there are nowadays many public activities in the area around the synagogue. The participants are mainly non-Jews including local parliamentarians. Also in the north, in Asti there is another important Jewish building, the palace of the Ottolenghi family, which it donated to the city. It is regularly used for Jewish and Israeli cultural events. Count Ottolenghi was the first Jewish minister of war in Europe, a follower of Garibaldi and later a senator.

"There are plans at present for a Jewish university in Italy. Through the good offices of former Italian president Francesco Cossiga, a palace near Rome that belonged to one of the most anti-Semitic princes, the Ruspoli Palace, has been made available for this purpose. All this reflects both a Jewish vitality that a few decades ago would have been unthinkable and a positive perception of the Jews by society at large."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Notes

[1] "Una piazza che no ci saremmo aspettati," www.fiammanirenstein.com/articoli.asp?Categoria=11&Id=2085. [Italian]

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Dan Segre has been a professor of political science at a variety of universities including Haifa, MIT, Stanford, and until recently the University of Lugano. He has simultaneously been involved in journalism for many decades. He is the former Israeli correspondent of the French *Le Figaro* and the Italian *Corriere della Sera*. He is a cofounder of the Italian daily *Il Giornale*, and still writes for that paper. He has published several books including *Memories of a Fortunate Jew, Memories of a Failed Diplomat*, and *The Metamorphosis of Israel* (in Italian only).

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About Dan V. Segre

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Studies at the University of Lugano, Switzerland. view all posts by Dan V. Segre →