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ITALY

by Micaela Procaccia

In the year 1537, a Roman Jewish working class girl named Lariccia cried for days because of an unwanted match. The day before the *qiddushin*, or betrothal, a washerwoman named Clemenza heard Lariccia saying to her father: “I do not like this man, nor do I desire him. I refuse him and reject him, nor do I want him.” She declared herself to be “the unhappiest of all women,” and on the next Shabbat, she told her father that she would not agree to let “the *qiddushin* become *nissu'in*.” Her father then hit her with the butt of a knife.



The reason we know anything at all about Lariccia is because the entire story was reported before the Jewish notaries of Rome. Lariccia was not an orphan, nor had she been betrothed before she turned twelve – two factors that would have given her the legal right to claim an annulment. However, as Clemenza and others testified, Lariccia had been threatened by her father and her brothers. The groom, Angelo Galante, reported to the notaries that he had told Lariccia “Do not go through with the *qiddushin*,” to which she had replied, “I cannot do otherwise. I have been forced into it.”

It was not then and it is not now easy to force unwilling Jewish women to do something they do not wish to do. In this case and in many others, Jewish authorities in Rome justified ending engagements (not betrothals) of girls older than twelve if their fathers were alive. We do not know the end of Lariccia’s story, but the fact that Clemenza testified that she had heard the bride refusing the groom *before* the betrothal could certainly have been important information in obtaining the annulment.

The fact that Roman Jews gave depositions to Jewish as well as to Christian notaries (at least from the sixteenth century to 1640) provides us with a great deal of information not only about broken engagements (23 cases of about 560 matches registered) but about the everyday life of Jewish women as well as their engagement in the cultural and business world of their time.

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Italian Jewish women often acted as financial agents for their husbands, especially when they were travelling or after they died. Women had access to monetary funds and worked in a variety of financial roles. They served as merchants, moneylenders, brokers, experts in precious metals, partners in stores and medical healers. That they made and sold cosmetics is described in the very well-known letter written by Anna the Hebrew to Caterina Sforza in 1508, advising her on how to use them.

These women – not important or famous in any way but for the fact that their names are found in historical archives – sometimes faced critical events. In the archival series *Tribunale criminale del Governatore di Roma* (the Papal Criminal Court in the City of Rome) there are several reports of trials against Jews. In many of them Jewish women appear as witnesses but rarely as defendants. On the night of Purim in February of 1551, for example, some young Jewish men pretending to be guards of the Papal government had stolen money from a young man from Naples. One of the defendants was named Dattilo. His mother,

Caradona, solicited money from her relatives and friends, possibly to pay the fine or, more probably, to bribe the prison guards. Her niece gave her a golden necklace, her sister gave her money, another woman helped her pawn a jewel, and all helped in raising money from other people. From transcripts of the trial that took place in 1551, we can see a female network of solidarity that appears to have been organized to help a young Jewish man first to avoid prison and then to escape from it.

Although the notion of the Renaissance period as an age of female emancipation has proved to be a misleading one, one cannot skip over the fact that there were outstanding Jewish *grandes dames* living in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The life of the *marrana* Beatrice de Luna or Dona Gracia Nasi (1510-1569) contains a history of the *marrano* diaspora. Dona Gracia Nasi was born and grew up in Portugal, where she lived under her Christian name Beatrice de Luna. At 26, she became the widow of Francisco Mendes (another *marrano*) and the heir to his enormous wealth. She transferred the family's house of commerce to Antwerp, where she moved with her daughter and nephew. Francisco Mendes' brother Diogo lived in Antwerp with his wife, who was also her sister Brianda. After Diogo's death, life in Antwerp became dangerous for *marranos* so the two sisters fled to Venice, securing a promise of safe passage from the Republic and transferring all their money and assets there. There, taking the name Beatrice de Luna, she managed the family business but in 1546, the two sisters began to quarrel about money. Between 1549 and 1550, they both went to Ferrara where they lived at the court of Duke Ercole II until 1552, when they returned to Venice. But the Republic had also become a dangerous place for *marranos* and in 1553, Beatrice (who had reverted to her Jewish name Dona Gracia Nasi in Ferrara) fled to Constantinople. Brianda, who remained in Venice, was called up before the Council of Ten. Two years later, in 1555, Venice expelled its *marranos* and Brianda, too, fled to Constantinople where she was reunited with Dona Gracia Nasi.

The two sisters returned openly to Judaism in Constantinople and Dona Gracia Nasi became one of the most famous Jewish women of her time: a businesswoman, a patron of the arts, and a political leader. In Ferrara, she promoted the Jewish re-education of the many *marranos* refugees. She organized a two-year boycott of the Port of Ancona after the death by fire of 24 *marranos* of Ancona ordered by the Pope Paolo IV and was said to have fed at least 80 poor Jews at her table every day. Every Jew in the area of the Mediterranean was said to have known her name and called her "*Senora*."

There is another notable Jewish woman, Bienvenida Abravanel (c. 1473-1560) who lived in Ferrara at about the same time. She was the wife of Samuel Abravanel, daughter-in-law of the famous philosopher Isaac, and sister-in-law of Jehuda, one of the founders of Renaissance comedy. Bienvenida was so well-educated that she became the tutor of the young princess Eleonora, the daughter of Don Pedro da Toledo, the Spanish viceroy of Naples, who had lost his wife. Eleonora later married Cosimo I of the Medici family and became Duchess of Tuscany. In all her letters, she addressed Bienvenida as "*cara madre*" or "dear mother."

Bienvendida is not, of course, the typical Jewish woman of this period but we know that Jewish girls in Rome were taught to read Hebrew prayers and that some of them were taught to read the Bible. There had been Jewish women scribes, women copying Hebrew manuscripts, in the fourteenth century and Anna d'Arpino seems to have functioned as any male *shaliah tzibbur* on Shabbat and holidays for at least two and a half years. She led other women in prayer and was paid for this work indirectly by an interest-free loan because payment for praying is forbidden by Jewish law. We know this from a document written by a Roman Jewish notary who also mentions the existence of a special synagogue for women – an institution also mentioned in *La Lozana andalusa*, a novel written by the Spanish priest Francisco Delicado (perhaps a *converso*) and published in Venice in the year 1530. This novel, based on the adventures in Rome of a Spanish prostitute who is probably a converted Jew, contains a description of the Jewish quarter in Rome.

Another rich source for information about Jewish women is the group of laws known as sumptuary laws. They were enacted by rabbis and regularly defied by ordinary Jews, and they let us know how Jewish women used to display their finery in public and how carefully they emulated popular fashion.

The first ghetto was established in Venice in 1516 but it was Pope Paolo IV in 1555 who launched the so-called “age of the ghettos” with the papal bull *Cum nimis absurdum* (As it is absurd...), establishing the ghetto in Rome. “As it is absurd that Jews and Christians be permitted to live together,” the papal bull *Cum nimis absurdum* sanctioned the end to relative Jewish freedom in Italy.

Southern Italy, under Spanish rule between 1492 and 1541, had expelled all its Jews. The idea of the ghetto was the result of a compromise: to keep Jews separate from Christians without expelling them as Spain had done, yet continuing to oppress them for refusing to accept Christ. Following Rome's example, almost all the central and northern Italian territories soon had their own ghettos, and new ghettos continued to be established until the 18th century, one of the last in Piedmont in 1724.

The ghettos curtailed much of the freedom Jews had enjoyed in Italy but did not completely curtail the luxuries of Jewish life in Italy. For some, life in the Italian ghettos was scarcely tolerable. Yet, in 1608, Thomas Coryat, an English traveler in Venice, described “many Jewish women, whereof some were as beautiful as ever I saw and so gorgeous in their apparel... that some of the English Countesses do scarce exceed them.”

There were several notable Jewish women in the important cities such as Venice and Rome. At the turn of the seventeenth century, Sara Copio Sullam, who died in 1641, lived in the Venetian ghetto in San Gerolamo, writing literary and theological essays and exchanging letters with the famous Catholic poet Ansaldo Ceba, who tried unsuccessfully to convert her. A few years before Sara, the Roman poet Debora Ascarelli wrote Italian verses and translated Hebrew texts into Italian. A contemporary rabbi wrote a poem in which he called her an *ape ingegnosa* (ingenious bee) and the pride of her people.

In 1749, a young girl named Anna del Monte was forced to enter to *Casa de' Catecumeni* (House of the Catechumens) in Rome and remained there for thirteen days. The *Casa de' Catecumeni* was founded by the new Jesuit order in 1541 to serve as a station for converting Jews. At the end of thirteen days, Anna was sent back to her family in the ghetto because it appeared impossible to convert her according to the Canonical Laws, that is without "evident and strong violence" (*modica coactio*, or "soft violence" was permitted). Her diary, published ten years ago, is one of the most interesting documents about forced conversions in Rome.

On September 20, 1870, the last Italian ghetto (the Roman Ghetto) was opened by the army of the new Italian kingdom. Vittorio Emanuele II granted the Roman Jews the same civil rights as any other Italian citizen. The Jews of Piedmont and Sardinia had obtained those rights in 1848 and the Jews in other parts of Italy in 1861. Many Italian Jews had joined the *Risorgimento*, or independence movement. Although they represented about one per thousand of the Italian population, they represented three per thousand in Garibaldi's army that conquered Sicily and the Kingdom of Naples in 1860. There were Jews in the short-lived Republic of Venice in 1848 and students of the Rabbinical College of Padova took up arms to defend the Republic against the Austrians. The *Risorgimento* meant emancipation for Jews. It conferred civil rights upon Jews and eventually offered them leading political positions.

Where were women in the new situation? Thanks to their long practice of independence, many Italian Jewish women joined movements for female emancipation and, together with Jewish men, socialist movements. Rabbis and Jewish men in general were threatened by this development. Jewish women had worked for centuries, but usually at home or in their husband's banco (pawnshop). They had sometimes been literate – some had even written poems, essays and novels – but now they were going outside the ghetto to claim new rights and positions.

At the turn of the twentieth century and for about fifteen years into it, a debate on women's place raged in Italian Jewish magazines. Jewish men tried to rein back their women, restricting them to the roles of wife and mother. Some of the men held women's emancipation responsible for the decline in religiosity of Italian Jews. The most liberal men, remembering that Italian Jewish women had always been an autonomous sort, proposed the creation of Jewish women's associations and schools to improve their culture. Of course, they never viewed this culture in the same terms as their own! One result of this debate and a victory for Italian women was the establishment of the *bat mitzvah* ceremony, which began to be celebrated in Italy in the middle of the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, every Jewish girl in Italy could have a *bat mitzvah*. But this did not happen without years of controversy within the (orthodox) Italian Jewish community.

The societal changes brought about by the first world war put an end to discussions of women's emancipation among Italian Jews. It was no longer possible to reduce any woman to an inferior position. In those years, an Italian Jewish woman completed her studies at the rabbinical college. Of course, she did not become a rabbi as this was not yet possible in an orthodox community. But the rabbis invented a degree for her. Her name is Lea Sestieri. She is one of our most prominent Bible scholars and she has been teaching for many years at a Vatican college.

In 1938, the Fascist laws against the Jews changed everything. A famous Italian Jewish writer Giacomina Limentani remembers that the day after the liberation of Rome all the surviving Roman Jews went to the Central Synagogue and stood in dead silence, looking at one another and trying to identify those who were missing. No one spoke in the ancient ghetto, where the Central Synagogue is located and usually one of the noisiest places in town.

During the Fascist period, Jewish women changed along with everyone else. They fought for their lives and their families' lives. They saw friends and relatives taken away. Some took part in the Resistance. A high percentage of Italian Jews fought in the Partisans' Brigades against the Fascist and Nazi armies in north and central Italy from 1944 on. Among them were several Jewish women.

Matilde Bassani, known as one of the most fearless members of the Resistance, acted as a spy for the O.S.S. Lia Corinaldi was the only woman member of the National Liberation Committee that directed the Resistance. Silvia Elfer, from Rome, was killed in error by an American soldier. Rita Rosani from Trieste, died with her weapon in hand.

It is also important to remember the women of the Rosselli family, one of the most important Jewish families in the history of Italy. They shared the destiny of Italy since the *Risorgimento*, when they were close to Giuseppe Mazzini, one of its primary leaders. During the Fascist period, the brothers Nello and Carlo Rosselli were leaders in the Resistance and founders of the *Giustizia e liberta* partisans' brigade. They were murdered by Fascists in Paris but their mother and wives continued their work. Carlo's daughter, Amelia, became well-known after the war as a writer and poet.

After the war, like all women in Europe, Italian Jewish women emerged more deeply aware of their abilities and strength. Ada Sereni, the widow of a Roman Jew who went to Palestine before the war, parachuted into Italy in 1944 and was captured by the Nazis, became the heart and soul of *aliyah bet* in Italy. She was involved in the events that inspired the novel *Exodus*.

During the fifties and beginning of the sixties, a new phenomenon appeared in Italian Jewish life: a series of strikes at the Jewish Primary School in Rome. The teachers – more than 90% of them women – demanded higher salaries, time for professional development, and re-organization of the school. Reports of the Council of the Jewish Community of Rome record the exasperation of members of the Council (all men) and their dismay at the leader of the strike, a Jewish woman who had asked the national trade unions to resolve the dispute. The teachers obtained what they asked for and, in a few years, the strike leader became headmistress of the school, one of the best primary schools in Rome. She was my mother.

Moving into the present, when a popular women's magazine published the names of nine Italian women whom their readers would like to see as President of Italy, there were two Jewish women among them: Tullia Zevi and Nobel Prize-winner Rita Levi Montalcini.

The media have dubbed Tullia Zevi “the lady of Italian Jews” because of her great intelligence, charm and glamor. When she was a young girl, her family escaped the Fascists persecution by fleeing to Paris, London, and finally the United States where she lived until the end of the second world war. During that time, she played the harp under Leonard Bernstein’s baton. She was one of the first reporters to attend the Nuremberg Trials and for many years worked as a journalist, including as correspondent for the Israeli newspaper *Ma’ariv*. For twelve years, she was President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, during which time she became very well-known in Italy, respected by politicians, intellectuals, and the general public. She negotiated an important agreement with the Italian government. This agreement grants every Italian Jew the right to observe Jewish law while holding public office, while in the army, in hospital or in school. I myself do not work during Jewish holidays and my son can receive kosher food at his public primary school. The agreement also states that the Italian Ministry of Culture and the Union of Jewish Communities cooperate to preserve Jewish cultural heritage in Italy, and this is one of my tasks at the Ministry.

Rita Levi Montalcini won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1986 for her research on the nerve growth factor of the human brain. She is one of the most famous scientists in the world. In 1947, she began to work at Washington University in St. Louis and has taught at many Italian universities, serving as the Director of Neurobiological Research at the National Center for Research in Italy and as President of the Institute for the Italian Encyclopedia. She has written extensively both in the scientific and popular fields and is extremely popular in Italy, particularly among the young.

Another prominent Jewish woman is Clotilde Pontecorvo, who is Professor of Pedagogy at the University La Sapienza in Rome. She is a member of the National Council for Education at the Italian Ministry of Education and the author of several important books about schooling, education, and children. She is also a member of the Council of the Union of Jewish Communities in Italy.

Jewish women in Italy today are usually as well-educated as Jewish men. They are often involved in synagogue life, several women are members of the Councils of the Jewish Communities, and some of them even serve as their presidents. Six Jewish girls are among the eleven members of the Council of the Union of Young Jews. It would be accurate to say that today, Jewish women have no more problems than other Italian women and no more difficulties as Jews than their brothers. Perhaps Jewish mothers are often still more involved with their children than Jewish fathers; they come into more frequent contact with the schools and with the various problems their children face in contacts with other young people.

Italian Jews are nominally Orthodox although they often behave like Conservative Jews. This means that no women can become rabbis. However there are girls studying in the *Collegio Rabbinico* (The Institute for Rabbinical Studies), and women both study and teach in the Experimental Course for University Degree in Jewish Studies created by the Union of Jewish Communities in Italy. There is no course offered on Jewish women on the university level in Italy but there are many on Jewish history.

I want to conclude with the example of a single woman who has become very well-known in the schools of Italy. Her name is Settimia Spizzichino and she is the only Jewish woman among one thousand and ninety-one Jews captured in Rome by the Nazis October 16, 1943. In the 1950s, when all the Italian survivors were still keeping silent about their wartime experience, Settimia began to go to schools every October to ask permission to tell her story. She never stopped telling it and, thanks to her, many Roman students and teachers learned about the Shoah. Today, almost every survivor in Italy has given talks about the war and often travelled with students to the camps. But Settimia, a working class woman born into a poor family, was the first. She is a well-known and beloved figure in Italy.

In conclusion, as I have tried to explain, Italian Jewish women have always been rather independent compared to the Christian women of their time. However, in the last few years, the composition of Italian Jewry has undergone a radical change. Jews from Eastern Europe and countries such as Syria, Lebanon and Iran have settled here in great numbers, particularly in Rome and Milan, bringing with them different attitudes and traditions, among them a more patriarchal tradition than Italian Jews.

We dare say that in the 2000-year-old Jewish community of Rome, the most ancient in Italy, we have had long experience in providing a haven for Jews (from France, from Germany, from Spain and Portugal), and we are moving towards a melting pot although we are not there yet. In the younger Jewish community of Milan, however, we are far from that. There the difficulties of maintaining a common cultural heritage without losing each immigrant group's specific identity are more daunting. To resolve these problems and to guarantee the future life of the longest continuous Jewish settlement in Europe is our challenge for the coming years.

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