



Florence's Great Synagogue

Jewish History and Art in Florence and Tuscany

Tuscany, besides being a region extremely rich in history, art and culture admired throughout the world, is also witness to one of the most ancient Jewish communities, rich with their own art and history closely interwoven with our own heritage.

The first written account which refers to a Jewish community in this area was given by Pope Gregory in the sixth century while speaking of the community of LUNI in TUSCIA (Latin designation for Etruria).

Also, there is said to have been a Jewish community and cemetery in the roman city of FLORENTIA, situated in the area on the other side of the Arno River near the present site of the Ponte Vecchio, where the roman VIA CASSIA entered the city.

The next written mention comes in the year 1160 when a fellow by the name of BENIAMINO DI TUDELA gives an account of his travels from LUCCA to PISA and mentions Jewish families living in both cities.

Pope Innocent III in 1200 writes a letter to all the bishops of Tuscany promising to pay all the debts due to Jewish bankers for loans granted to all those people who will agree to participate in the Crusades to the Holy Land. We also have written confirmation of a small number of Jewish families that for some time established themselves in the DUCATO DI MASSA E CARRARA ruled by the MALASPINA family.

All these Jewish communities were formed mainly by moneylenders.

Spurred on by the arguments of Innocent III during the second half of the Middle Ages, churchmen started a campaign of anti-Semitism.

Foremost among them were the friars, especially the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Of course the friars did not begin as anti-Semites, we all know that St. Francis had no animosity towards Jews and St. Dominic, according to testimony at his canonization process was: "Loving to all, the rich, the poor, the Jews, the Gentiles". But eventually they became a product of the environment, becoming aggressive proselytizers to lapsed Christians, to the heterodox and the Jews.

Their policy gradually became to convert the Jews or get them out. They dominated University life in the thirteenth century and supervised Jewish life. They took the view that St. Augustine's tolerant attitude towards them was no longer tenable, and went beyond concentrating on strictly theological issues in their preaching to the masses.

The Franciscans preached love but did not apply it to the Jews as people: "In respect of abstract or general love", the friar BERNARDINO DA SIENA said, "We are permitted to love them, however, there can be no concrete love towards them". They tended to open their convents in or near the Jewish quarters as a basis of harassment; they began to specialize in urban and mercantile problems and took particular interest in money lending themselves.

The Jews survived because their interest rates at 15-20% undercut the Christian ones.

Jewish banks were particularly important in Tuscany and their presence became even more marked during the MEDICI rule which began in 1430. The COMUNE DI FIRENZE officially allowed Jews to practice banking from November 23, 1396 with the first loan-bank license being granted on October 17, 1437. After this, all the most important families of money lenders, including the DA PISA, previously known as the DA SINAGOGA, the DA RIETI and DA TIVOLI were attracted to the city and took up residence in the same area on the other side of the ARNO where the Jews had always lived.

VIA DEI RAMAGLIANTI, which cuts across BORGO SAN JACOPO was once known as VIA DEI GIUDEI (the road of Jews).

Until the Second World War, the remains of an old synagogue with the arches of the women's gallery still intact could be seen there. This was destroyed on August 5, 1944, when the retreating German Army blew up all the buildings on either side of the PONTE VECCHIO.

The Jewish Cemetery was probably within the city walls in a triangle of land situated on the present LUNGARNO DELLA ZECCA.

The period under the early MEDICI rule was marked not only by relative calm, but also by intense cultural exchanges between Hebrew scholars and Christian humanists, writers and philosophers.

It seems that the iconography of LORENZO Ghiberti's GOLDEN PARADISE DOOR (1425-1452), depicting old testament stories, in the baptistery was designed by the humanist AMBROGIO TRAVERSARI after consultations with a Jewish philosopher.

LORENZO IL MAGNIFICO went to great lengths to protect the Jewish community. At his court, GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA (1463-1494), a great humanist and philosopher, ELIA DEL MEDIGO and JOCHANAN ALEMANNO and others nurtured a climate of erudite interest in Hebrew and Arab culture.

In 1477 LORENZO stopped an attempt to expel the Jews from the city, which had resulted from anti-Jewish feelings aroused by the preaching of BERNARDINO DA FELTRE, a Franciscan agitator.

On LORENZO's death in 1492 the city became a republic and Florentine Jews had to face tougher times. Now, the preaching of FRA' GEROLAMO SAVONAROLA, a Dominican friar, convinced the rulers of the city first to withdraw Jewish loan-bank licenses and transfer them to the Christian MONTE DI PIETA (1495) and then to expel Jewish money lenders altogether. (By the way, the Monte Di Pieta still exists today in Italy but it is identifiable with our pawn shops).

At this point, the Jews expelled from Florence went to other small towns like EMPOLI, a small city about 50 km. from Florence where they lived fairly peacefully until 1514, when they were allowed to return to FLORENCE.

There is an anecdote taking place at about this time about the banker ZACCARIA D'ISACCO who without thinking, threw some rubbish out the window of his house just as the statue in the Corpus Domini procession was passing under his house. His trial took place in Florence and the magistrate condemned him to pay ten gold Florins, the cost of a wall shrine to the Madonna with the inscription: OF THE PRICE THE JEWS PAID FOR THEIR ERROR, THIS COUNCIL OF EIGHT DID THE GLORY OF GOD

ON THE 18TH, DOMENICO PARIGI, PRETOR, the tabernacle is still visible today and is attributed to the workshop of ANDREA DELLA ROBBIA.

One must remember that this is the era of the DIASPORA of the Sephardic Jews, brilliant craftsmen in precious metals and stones, mathematicians, makers of precision instruments, accurate maps and navigational tables.

This large and gifted community was dispersed all over the Mediterranean because of their expulsion from Sepharahad, the land of Spain.

Many of them were forced to embrace Christianity.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS for instance, was legally Genovese but did not write Italian and may have come from a Spanish family of Jewish origin.

The name COLON was a common one among Jews living in Italy. He boasted of his connection with KING DAVID, liked Jewish and Marrano society. (Marrano "Pig" was the name given in the middle ages in Spain and Portugal to Jews and Muslims converted to Catholicism by force).

In Italian, the term was used in the 1800's to mean someone without too much culture or manners.

Columbus was influenced by Jewish superstitions, and he used tables drawn by ABRAHAM ZACUTO. Even his interpreter, LUIGI DE TORRES, was Jewish though he was baptized just before they sailed for America.

One of the sources that indicate that COLUMBUS was probably of Jewish origin is the writings of GRACIANO DE TOLEDO, a medical doctor who has the distinction of being the first of the Sephardic refugees present in the city of GENOVA.

He notices that a first wave of refugees escaping Spain had already reached Genoa since 1380 when the first massacres had occurred in the Jewish quarters, and it is in this group that Columbus's family belonged.

The Jews encountered no difficulties in the city of Genoa and they participated fully in the economy of the city and therefore it became natural to move to other port cities nearby and especially LIVORNO (Leghorn) in Tuscany the main port of the MEDICI family.

COSIMO DE' MEDICI, who became Duke of Tuscany around 1537, had a benevolent attitude towards the Jewish community and even encouraged the move of other families to the city. After the MONTE DI PIETA had been unable to meet the financial needs of the community he again granted banking licenses.

He took the advice of JAACOV ABRAVANEL and encouraged Levantine Jews to settle in Tuscany and thus set up a consolidated Mediterranean network of trade and banking interests.

At this time many Jews settled in the countryside and began to farm the land. Traces of their presence are preserved in local places names such as “The Jew’s Farmyard”, or “The Jew’s Field”, or “Little Jerusalem”.

Cosimo even ignored the many injunctions from the Pope that Florence should establish a ghetto similar to the one set up in Rome in 1555.

Finally, Pope Pius V dangled the bait of a possible Grand Ducal Crown and so it was that in 1570 there was a proclamation that all Jews in Tuscany had to live in the two cities of SIENA and FLORENCE where within a year ghettos were created.

These measures eventually paid off: in 1569 a papal bill raised Cosimo to the rank of Grand Duke.

The Ghetto in Florence was designed by the Grand Duke’s architect BERNARDO BUONTALENTI.

It occupied a square area that was bound by VIA DEI SUCCHIELLINAI (now VIA ROMA) to the south by PIAZZA DEL MERCATO VECCHIO (now PIAZZA DELLA REPUBBLICA) to the west by VIA DEI RIGATTIERI (now VIA BRUNELLESCHI) and to the north by CHIASSO DI MALACUCINAA, (now VIA TOSINGHI).

The ghetto was situated in the heart of medieval Florence, near the Archbishop’s palace, the Duomo and the Baptistery.

Access to the ghetto was by two gateways, one in Piazza DEL MERCATO VECCHIO and the other in Via DEI SUCCHIELLINAI. The central square, PIAZZA DELLA FONTE, had the well that supplied the inhabitants with water.

In the same square stood two Synagogues, on the north side was the oldest, dating from about 1571 which was the Italian one, and on the east side was the Spanish or Levantine one dating from the end of the 16th century, the ark from which is now in the Yavne kibbutz in Israel.

Around 1670 the northern area of the ghetto was destroyed by fire and so, in the rebuilding, the Italian Synagogue was extended and embellished and the ghetto itself was extended to reach VIA DE’PECORI.

With the end of the MEDICI dynasty and the arrival of the HOUSE OF LORRAINE the Jews began again to enjoy more freedom.

In 1750 the community was allowed to buy the two buildings housing the Synagogues and then all the houses, shops, warehouses and public spaces of the ghetto were put up for sale and bought by a consortium of Jewish bankers.

With the arrival of NAPOLEON’s troops, the Jews enjoyed full freedom and equality until 1859 when Tuscany became part of the Kingdom of Italy.

In the last decade of the 19th century the ghetto was demolished as part of a redevelopment program launched in the period when Florence had been the capital of the Kingdom Of Italy (1864-1870).

In 1872, plans for the construction of a large Synagogue were approved and the site chosen was the new district of MATTONAIA near the church of SANT'AMBROGIO.

The choice was opposed by some centralist Jews who in 1882 opened two small temples in VIA DELLE OCHE. One was intended for Italian Rite worship, the other for use by the confraternity of MATTIR ASSURIM, while the new Moorish style building was located in one of the new residential areas intended for the city new middle classes. (A scale model of the Florence Synagogue can be seen today at the Jewish Museum in New York City).

This marked the beginning of the Florentine Jews total assimilation within the populace.

In 1899 the Rabbinical School was transferred to Florence, originally it was in Rome.

Florence was also the home of the 19th century publishers BEMPORAD; the same family also ran the famous LIBRERIA MARZOCCO, where hundreds of students still buy their books today.

In recent times, some of the most renowned names of Jewish painters were SERAFINO DA TIVOLI, VITOD'ANCONA and VITTORIO CORCOS of the school of MACCHIAIOLI, the Leghorn answer to French impressionists, and AMEDEO MODIGLIANI, the famous sculptor who studied at the ACCADEMIA in Florence.

Other important figures at the beginning of this century include Rabbi UMBERTO CASSUTO who wrote "The Jews of Renaissance Florence" and whose son, Nathan, never abandoned his place in the community even during the period of Nazi deportation. He was eventually one of the 247 Florentine Jews who died at Auschwitz.

Finally, the modern Synagogue in VIA FARINI, was built from 1874 to 1882 with funds left by David Levi who wanted to give Florence a Synagogue "worthy of the city".

In the vestibule there are plaques commemorating Levi, the architects that designed the temple, Rabbi MARGULIES and the visit by King UMBERTO I in 1887 and by King VITTORIO EMANUELE III in 1911 as well as the names of those who fell in combat in the First World War.

It is to be noted that the Nazis used the temple as a garage for military vehicles and when they retreated they tried to dynamite the building, but failed to do any serious damage.

Today in Florence the old ghetto is gone, but inscriptions can be found commemorating where it stood. The CAROCCI museum in the Monastery of St. Marco contains various objects from the old ghetto including various writings in Hebrew and marble scrolls.

Most of the main Florentine libraries have rare illuminated manuscripts of 16th century Hebrew books.

The Mediceo Laurenziana Library has a particularly rich collection of medieval and renaissance manuscripts, while the Galleria Dell'Arte Moderna at Palazzo Pitti houses some 700 paintings of renowned Jewish artists including works by FATTORI, MACCHIAIOLI etc.

The Museo Nazionale Del Bargello has one of the richest collections of fabrics in Italy and in the Museo Bardini you can see 17th century Hanukah lamps.

Today there are two Jewish cemeteries in Florence, one of which is still in use in the Rifredi district, while the other is situated in Via DELL'ARIOSTO.

Last but not least mention must be made about food!

Actually some of the best loved Tuscan food is really ... Jewish cuisine!

Naturally the basis for all the recipes, whatever the origin, was a respect for the rules of kosher cooking, so, given that it was forbidden to mix butter and meat, olive oil was used for cooking, a practice that was much criticized in the ARTUSI's famous cookbook.

This book gives us as much information about livornese Jewish cooking and its Florentine derivative. It mentions for example the recent introduction of aubergines (eggplant), at the time considered a food fit only for Jews, but now a valued part of Italian cuisine in general.

Many of the recipes came from Spanish (Sephardic) Jewish cuisine and include SCODELLINE, a cream of almonds and eggs that is a traditional dessert for the Passover supper, the BOCHE DI DAMA, made with almonds and sugar, the ROSCHETTE (TARALLI) made with flour, water and oil.

Chickpeas were introduced by the Jews and the famous TORTINI, omelets with vegetables, have also become a specialty.

By the way, it was the Jews who first added tomatoes to the traditional ZUPPA DI PESCE, and to round off my culinary list ... an extraordinary beverage: coffee, it seems that the Jews had already introduced this drink into Leghorn by 1632!