

From the History of Jewish Community of Verona with Focus on its Contribution to the Urban Life

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THE MOMENT when the Jews settled in Verona is difficult to establish. They probably settled there during the sixth century, when the king Theodoric received a Hebrew group who had come from Ravenna.

Not until the twelfth century can it be certidude the Jewish presence as a community in Verona.

As a result of a theological dispute between Christians and Hebrews, the bishop RATHERIUS ordered the expulsion of the Jews from the town in 965. They returned after a while as we know that Abraham Ibn Ezra was present in the city between 1146 and 1147 and that Eliezer Ben Samuel (grandfather of the philosopher and physician Hillel Ben Samuel) lived in Verona towards the end of twelfth century.

The first documentary attestation about the Hebrews' existence in Verona dates from 1408,¹ when they were granted the right to live in the city.

The Jewish community enjoyed the collaboration of famous personalities, such as Hillel Ben Samuel and the poet Immanuel di Salomon of Rome, also known as Roman or Manoello Immanuello Giudeo.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, during the Scaligero period, the Hebrew community was represented by exponents of representative cultural value.²

In Verona, the Jewish settlement was renewed at the beginning of the fifteenth century, when the city passed to the Republic of Venice. The Jews obtained permission to live in the city and to lend money at interest. This concession was met with strenuous opposition from a large number of the citizens; and all other professions were forbidden to the Jews. They lived among the Christians in the quarter of San Sebastiano, in the central part of the city, and built a synagogue in the Vicolo dei Crocioni, of which no traces have remained. In 1422 they were compelled to wear a badge, in the form of a yellow wheel, on the breast, or to pay a fine of 25 lire. The regulation, however, gradually came to be disregarded, but the ordinance decreeing the use of the badge was renewed. In 1443 the Jews were again refused permission to engage in the professions; and the shape of the badge was changed from a circle to a star.³ The activity of Hebrew loan-

bankers⁴ (creditors) that settled there is significant. They were the only ones authorized to provide a service prohibited by the Catholic Church, to lend money at interest. In the cities where extensive commercial concerns had been developed these loans were strictly necessary.

The Jews were allowed to live in Italian cities on the basis of agreements with the urban communities. These contracts would force the Jews to pay a fee. In return, they were given permission to exercise their professions and to maintain their religious traditions.

Later, the church agreed to grant loans to the Christians too, through the Monti di Pietà institution, a Christian loan bank, was founded in 1490.⁵

However, with the establishment of this bank, the hostilities against the Jews increased. In these conditions, the Jews were expelled again from Verona in 1499 and they were allowed to return to the city in 1516.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Hebrew community of Verona became permanent, being composed mainly of Ashkenazi, immigrants arrived from Germany. In the eighteenth century, a number of Sephardim Hebrews (originating from Spain and Portugal) settled in Verona, among whom there were members of the well-known Aboab family. They organized a separate community. Although the two communities set up a common organization, the differences between them lasted for a long while.⁶

In 1526, the Civic Council of Verona requested permission to the Venetian Republic to close the Hebrew banks. Serenissima Republic managed to postpone this decision until 1548, when the loan guarantee was denied to Jews. This provision was tightened in 1578.

On May 23rd 1555 the Cardinal Carafa became the Pope, under the name of Paolo IV. On July 14th 1555, he issued the Papal bull “Cum nimis absurdum”⁷ against the Jews. One of the provisions of this document consisted of the segregation of the Jews in a special quarter, called *ghetto*⁸ (our italics, D.I.). Inside of it, the Jews organized themselves according to their own criteria, having their own religious (rabbis) and administrative leaders. Outside the ghetto, they had no rights. The obligation to live in a ghetto was doubled by the rule to wear a distinctive sign.

In 1599 Agostino Valieri, Bishop of Verona, resolved to segregate the Jews in a ghetto; but, not finding a suitable location, it was only in 1604 that the bishop carried out his designs, and enclosed the Jews in a ghetto, in a place called “Sotto i Tetti” (Under the roofs).⁹

The Ghetto’s place was established into the urban centre, where there had already existed an area inhabited by the Hebrew community for a long time.¹⁰

According to the census realized in 1599, the Hebrew community counted 400 members and possessed twenty-five shops. Two centuries later it reached 900.¹¹

During the great plague which swept Italy (1629–1630) the Verona Hebrew community suffered a great loss. The number of victims was around 200 people.

The Jewish banking diminished, they began to earn their living from trading activities and various crafts. Another important source of income was the lease of tobacco monopoly.

Attention is required about the fact that the Hebrew community of Verona was the first to have established the reform of the tax system, known as “Casella”, which was introduced at the end of seventeenth century.¹² Every head of the family had to present the value of its patrimony and the tax which had to be paid in an envelope.

The Jewish emancipation, begun in the Italian states before the arrival of the French revolutionary armies of Napoleon Bonaparte in March 1796, was a first step toward the social and economic integration of the Jews in Italy. With the change of the political and social frame, it encouraged the gradual incorporation of the Jewish community into Italian society.¹³

Of great importance to the Jewish community was the action of the French army, in 1796, when the city was occupied by Napoleon.

A severe episode of the anti-Semitic hatred took place in 1797, under the pretext that the Jews were considered pro Jacobins. The Verona ghetto was assaulted and burned by the townspeople.¹⁴ The Jews supported the French because they promised to grant them civil rights.

On July 4th 1801, the Cisalpine Republic decreed the abolition of ghettos. The gates of Verona's ghetto were symbolically torn down, and the Jews were granted civil rights.

Once Verona entered Austrian control, the Jewish rights were limited.

Full civil equality was restored to them when Verona was reincorporated into the Italian Kingdom in 1805.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the number of Jews in Verona reached 1200 (in 1864).¹⁵

With the return of Veneto region to Italy, in 1866, the Jews won more rights and freedom. They were allowed to settle down not only in urban areas but throughout the national territory as well. Attracted by famous urban centers, or because of the weakening of ties with the community to which they belonged, the number of the Jews diminished. Therefore 600 Jews were living in Verona in 1909.¹⁵

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Jews distinguished in the field of arts: for example, the musicians Giacomo Bassani and Cervetto Giacobbe, who introduced the art of cello in Britain, the painter Solomon Bassan with his sons Israel and Marco, authors of floral frescoes.¹⁶ During 1800–1900, the Jewish role in the economic, cultural and social development of the city was particularly important. Among the Hebrew personalities that marked those times we mention the scientist Cesare Lombroso (1836–1909), considered the father of modern criminology school.¹⁷ Eugenia Vitali Lebrecht (1858–1930) was the founder of the first cooperatives for women's work in Italy. The activity of Achile Forti (1878–1936) as a naturalist is significant. He left a lot of his patrimony to Verona's hall and library as inheritance.

A famous painter was Gerolamo Navarra, whose attention was focused on the Jewish motives and themes. He was the only painter that concentrated on these topics (in the '80s). Among the artists of Verona there was the painter Ise Lebrecht. His favorite subjects were the views and landscapes. One of his most important works is the portrait of the poetess Lina Jenna Arianna, belonging to the refined Jewish bourgeoisie. She attended the Cignaroli Academy and she used to organize meetings with artists of international status at her house. Her work was limited due to social, political and personal reasons.

A few Jewish books were printed in Verona, at the press of Francesco delle Donne between 1592 and 1595, one of them in Judeo-German: *Pariz un Viena* (1594). The most important was the *Tanhuma* of 1595, produced by Jacob b. Gershon Bak and Abraham

b. Shabetai Bath-Sheba. Fifty years later Hebrew printing was resumed at the press of Francesco de Rossi (1645–1652), on the initiative of the Verona rabbis Samuel Aboab (and his sons Jacob and Joseph) and Jacob Hagiz, the first part of the latter's edition of the *Mishnah* with his commentary *Ez Hayyim* appeared in 1649. Two other printers were active in Verona at the end of 18th and early in the 19th century, printing mainly liturgical items.¹⁸

Through these collaborative relationships among the Hebrew community and residents of Verona we understand that there was a climate of integration undisturbed by any forms of intolerance.

The Italian Jews were fully integrated into the Italian nation. An eloquent proof of this is their participation on their own initiative, in the movement undertaken for Italia's unification.¹⁹ In the battles during the First World War, some received military decorations. Others even joined the Fascist movement. We draw attention to the fact that Italy was the only country (apart from Palestine and the neighboring regions) where the Jewish community experienced a historical continuity. There were about 429 Jews living in Verona in 1931.

The existence of a totalitarian regime radically changed this situation. Initially, the Italian Fascism was not focused on anti-Semitism. Since Mussolini's access to power until 1937, the fascist government did not act against the Jews.

On May 13th 1930, in his declaration before the Chamber of Deputies, Benito Mussolini stated: "We respect this sacred character of Rome. But it is ridiculous to think, as it was said, that synagogues should be closed. The Jews have been in Rome from the period of the Kings . . . There were 50,000 in the time of Augustus . . . They will remain undisturbed."²⁰

In 1932, The German journalist Emil Ludwig said that: "The anti-Semitism does not exist in Italy . . . The Italian Jews have always behaved well, both as citizens and as soldiers, they fought bravely."²¹

Moreover, in 1934, measures to encourage the transfer of 3,000 German Hebrews to Italy were taken.

In 1938, the events took an irreversible course. The program's change was neither imposed by Germany nor due to factors related to foreign policy. It was an obvious consequence of domestic policy.

On July 14th 1938 the "Manifesto of Racial Scientists" (Manifesto degli scienziati razzisti)²², regarding the purity of the Italian race, was published. It was compiled by ten scientists who theorized the existence of distinct races based on biology.²³

In August 1938 the first number of the magazine *Difesa della Razza*²⁴ appeared. A supporter of this magazine was the Minister of Education, Giuseppe Bottai. By means of a telegram, he recommended the Academy of Agriculture, Science and Letters in Verona to pay particular attention to this magazine, claiming the need to protect the superior races.²⁵ Also he proposed that lectures, such as "racial geography",²⁶ should be held in universities.

In September 1938 the first law-decrees against the Jews were issued. The foreign Jews were particularly affected, as they were easier to isolate.

The Italian citizenship was withdrawn from those who had obtained it after January 1st 1919 while those who entered Italy after this date were forced to leave the country in six months.

A department for demography and race was established and it had the task to coordinate the policy of racial discrimination. In order to identify those who were to be excluded from the social, national life, before imposing the anti-Jewish legislation, the fascist government conducted a census of Italian Hebrews.²⁷

On October 6th 1938, the Fascist Grand Council approved the manifest *Dichiarazione sulla Razza*, stating, as well, that it would urgently solve racial problems. On November 17th 1938 the racial laws were proclaimed.

Through this legislation, the Jewish population was discriminated. It was decided to confiscate their properties. The Jews' access to public services was denied and the Jewish press was also banned.²⁸

Basically, the Jews were not allowed to be Italian citizens anymore.

However, the Italian population had no strong anti-Semitic feelings. In this regard, the authorities conducted an intense propaganda against the Jews, especially through the media, which obeyed the official order, asserting that the presence of Jews in any sector of economic, social, political, cultural and national life was no longer tolerated.

The main laws adopted were: Fascism and the issue of race, Measures for the protection of race in schools, Measures against foreign Jews, Establishing elementary schools for Hebrew children, the Declaration of race, Measures to defend the Italian race.

The Anti-Jewish legislation was interpreted as a "return to the Middle Ages,"²⁹ stating that "It's time that the Italians declared themselves racists."³⁰ It had a destructive impact on the Jewish community of Italy.³¹

Based on the decree-law for the Protection of the Italian race (November 17th 1938) marriages between Jews and non-Jews were forbidden. The work of the Italian Jews was denied also in public civil and military administration.³²

The first sector where the racial laws were applied was the educational one, through the decree-law of September 5th 1938,³³ which provided for expelling the Jewish students and teachers from schools and universities. The Hebrew people had, however, the right of opening their own elementary schools.

As a result of the racial laws those persons belonging to Hebrews community were removed from the register of attorneys and prosecutors in Verona.³⁴

The enforcement of this legislation made Jewish life impossible.

In 1942, 279 Italian Hebrews, 12 German Hebrews, 11 of Yugoslavian ethnic, 8 of Czechoslovak ethnic, one Romanian Jew, one Polish Jew and 11 stateless people—who due to wars, did not have any citizenship—were registered in Verona.³⁵

Verona's Jewish population belonged generally to the middle class, the most common occupations being those of merchants, industrialists, craftsmen, artisans, farmers, and artists. Most women were housewives.³⁶

Their situation worsened in 1943. The army of Nazi Germany occupied the central-northern Italy military, expanding the anti-Semitic policies of extermination in these territories. On September 23rd 1943, with the agreement of Germany, they proclaimed the Italian Social Republic (known as *Repubblica Salò*),³⁷ a fascist, republican and collaborator state,³⁸ covering Northern and Central Italy and setting the stage for the "final act in the immense tragedy of the Italian Jews."³⁹

The Jews had to hide, try to escape through illegal means, or fight. The last way was chosen by Rita Rosani (Rosenthal). She was born into a family of Czechoslovakian

origin, from Trieste, in 1920. After 1938, she fought back against violence perpetrated by fascists, through direct participation in illegal fighting strength. She came to Verona in February 1944, where she joined the Aquila group linked to the Pasubio brigade.

On September 17th 1944, on the Mount Common, a partisan band, led by Colonel E. Ricca (Rita's husband) lasted in the confrontation with fascist soldiers as long as it had ammunition. The group managed to retreat due to Rita, who was wounded, for she covered the others.⁴⁰ She died heroically in these circumstances,⁴¹ being decorated after death.

There has been some controversy on this female figure, who fought against fascism. Through the voice of Sergia Bertolaso, Radio Verona called Rita Rosani "a martyr for communist ideals."⁴² Carla Barale protested, and on November 1945, she stated: "I can not, must not allow—because I'm sure that our Rita does not want—to be a victim for asserting communist principles . . . I state that her ideal, for which she gave her life was quite different than the communist one. . . ."⁴³ In her memory, in 1955, a commemorative plaque was placed on the synagogue in Verona.⁴⁴

Since 1943, Verona became a triage center of thousands of deported Jews and the point of trains passing to the camps. Responsible for the performance of these operations was Sturmabführer Bosshammer, who had the task to solve "the Jewish issue" in Italy. He established the application of the German fascist rules precisely from Verona.

On November 14th 1943 the Republican Fascist Party Congress was held in Verona.⁴⁵ It adopted the document entitled "Carta di Verona", which was the political manifest of the Italian Social Republic, expounded in 18 points. "The Jewish question" was set down in point 7.⁴⁶ It states that: "Those who belong to the Jewish race are foreigners, so during this war they belong to the enemy nationality."⁴⁷ This proclamation was presented by Alessandro Pavolini⁴⁸ and stipulated an anti-Semitic policy.

The manifest "Carta di Verona" was followed by the order, dated on November 30th 1943, of the Interior Minister E. To Buffarini Guidi, who stated that starting with December 1st 1943, all the Jews, regardless of nationality, had to be sent to the concentration camps, and all their goods were to be sequestered.⁴⁹

The Jews born from mixed marriages, people aged over 70 years, seriously ill people and the Jews married with non-Jews were initially spared to this order, but since August 2nd 1944 they had a tragic destiny as well.⁵⁰

After September 8th 1943, the life of every Jew was influenced by external factors. Below, we present some cases that illustrate the Jewish options facing "the final solution".

Jenna Arianna Lina, who said: "I did not hurt anyone,"⁵¹ was arrested in June 1944 and imprisoned in San Leonardo jail, close to Verona, and then she was sent to the camp at Fossoli di Carpi, approximately 12 miles north of Modena. From there she was deported to the "death camp" at Auschwitz, where she never returned from.

Mafalda Pavia was saved due to the priest Don Calabria. She earned a medical degree and was working at a hospital in Verona. Because of the racial laws, she was forced to stop working. Following the order of the police on November 30th, which had sent Jews to camps, Mafalda Pavia asked for help from the priest Calabria. He helped her by transferring her as a novice in the Congregation "Le Povere Serve della Divina Provvidenza" in Roncà. She stayed there, under the name of Sister Beatrice, until the spring of 1945.

Only the mother superior of the monastery knew and kept the secret that saved her life. In 1964, Mafalda Pavia sent a letter to Pope Paolo VI, arguing for the beatification of the priest Calabria, noting the “infinite understanding” and “his respect for sincere religious beliefs of his fellow people.”⁵²

The Reichenbach family was saved because they had financial resources.

Many Hebrews tried to hide in the mountains around Verona. Those who could afford it tried to flee abroad, especially to Switzerland. An example is the family of Attilio Reichenbach, who met people that helped them cross the border and escape, in exchange for 10,000 pounds on the Lake Varese.

Loewental family left Germany in 1933. After several years in Rome, they established in Verona in 1938. After September 8th the Loewental family took refuge in Marcemigo di Tregnano. On February 28th 1945, when they saw the forces of republican National Guard approaching their house, they preferred to poison themselves rather than to be caught alive. Only the daughter Brigitte stayed alive. In her memoirs, she told the following: “They ordered me to get dressed because I had to be taken to control in Verona, together with others. I went upstairs and found my father laying on the bed ... my mother had swallowed sleeping pills. I said: *I also want those pills!* Then my mother gave me the *Nirvonol* tube which contained 20 pills, which I swallowed in a hurry ... after some moments I lost consciousness. I recovered ... but it took me several days to fully recover. My mother passed away on the night of March 3/4th. ... I did not know ... My father was also dead. ...”⁵³

Alberto Forti opted for suicide, as well (December 1943).

Toledano family took refuge in a village on the hills of Valpolicella Valley, where they received the support of residents. Being warned by a police control, they were helped to hide in a water tank, thus avoiding arrest and deportation.

Marco Fresco was caught with his family because a person called the police. The Fresco couple were imprisoned at Scalzi, then transferred to Fossoli camp. Their son, only 12 years old was also brought there. On June 26th 1944 they were deported to Auschwitz.

Emma Foà was born in Verona on May 23rd 1874. She studied in Rome and Genoa, obtaining a degree in pedagogy. She was appointed the director of the “San Zeno” kindergarten in Verona. On September 24th 1938 she was removed from her position and following a denunciation on January 6th 1944 she was arrested and taken to the concentration camp in Vallecrosia, where she endured many humiliations. Then she was transferred to Fossoli concentration camp, where, on April 5th 1944, together with 610 other people (deprived of water, food, and crammed into squalid trains) were deported to Auschwitz. On the fateful day of April 10th Ema Foà was sent to the gas chamber.⁵⁴

During the fascist regime we can identify two periods in which the Jews were persecuted. The first period is from February 14th/15th 1938 to July 25th 1943 and the second one from September 8th 1943 to April 25th 1945. Firstly, the fascist government proceeded to suppress the Jewish civil rights and in the second period it turned to applying “the final solution” on them.

After the horrors of the Second World War, the Jewish community of Verona was reconstituted, reaching a total of 120 members.⁵⁵ Today, it consists of about 80–100 people involved in various social and cultural activities.



Notes

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Abstract

From the History of Jewish Community of Verona with Focus on its Contribution to the Urban Life

In this paper the author presents a brief history of the Jewish community of Verona. We focus on the most important events, since the settlement of the Jews in the city. Comments relating to the expulsion of Jews (in different periods) are formulated, as well as the set up of the ghetto in Verona, and the contribution of the Jews' personalities that have marked the history of the city, in various fields (economics, arts and so on). The effect of the anti-Semitic policy promoted by the fascist government of Benito Mussolini is highlighted and the attitude of some Jewish people of Verona, who tried to evade deportation is mentioned also.

Keywords

Jews, ghetto, Verona, fascism, racial laws, deportation