Jews in Italy from Antiquity to Present Days: Between Ghetto and Integration

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In spite of its far-reaching, border-crossing cultural significance, Italian-Jewish history is still rather unknown outside Italy. Especially in Germany, there has been a lack of research into the topic. While it is true that more than ten years ago, in 1993, the Leo Baeck Institute in collaboration with several Italian institutions made the attempt to arouse interest in the field by organizing a conference in Rome that aimed at a comparison between the Jewish experience in Germany and in Italy during the period from Enlightenment to Fascism, the impact of the event did not really go beyond a small group of experts, neither did the comparative approach prove to be successfully applied. All the more welcome was the recent invitation by Michael Brenner (Munich) and Martin Baumeister (Munich) to an international conference on the history of Jews in Italy, covering the period from Roman times to the present days, which took place on 16 and 17 June 2005 in Munich. The conference focused on the tension between exclusion and integration, peaceful coexistence and discrimination, which can be regarded as the paradigmatic question for research not only into the history of Italian Jewry but the Jewish minority in Europe in general. Besides leading experts from Germany, Italy, Israel, the US, Switzerland, France, and Great Britain, prominent guests such as Amos Luzzatto, President of the Council of Jewish Communities in Italy, were among the participants.

After the welcoming remarks by Michael Brenner, Martin Baumeister, and Francesco Scarlata (Consul General of the Republic of Italy), who recalled some of his personal experiences as counselor of the Italian embassy in Tel Aviv twenty-five years ago, David Ruderman (Philadelphia) opened the conference with a lecture on *Beyond the Dialectic of Ghetto versus Integration: Towards a New Vision of Jewish Cultural History*. Impressively, Ruderman demonstrated the different viewpoints in interpreting the historical experience of Italian Jewry by looking back at his own long-standing disagreements with the eminent scholar Robert Bonfil, who has seen Jewish life in Renaissance Italy as characterized by marginalization and often violent exclusion, whereas Ruderman has emphasized the cultural exchange and inspiration between Jews and non-Jews in Italy. Ruderman explained that although the underlying ideological differences according to which scholars had tended towards either the former or the latter interpretation had not disappeared, a certain consensus had emerged in the last years that viewed the categorical opposition between exclusion and integration for the history of Italian Jewry as flawed. Instead, the polarization between integration and ghetto segregation is increasingly replaced by a nuanced perspective that sees cultural interaction intensified rather than diminished by the ghetto experience. On the basis of three texts - two from the late 15th century by Judah Messer Leon, one by Elijah Benamozegh from the early 20th century - Ruderman illustrated the complex linguistic and ideational relationship between minority and majority culture in Italy. With these observations, the opening lecture prepared the ground for the following debates, equally indicating the general significance of this „new“ approach for the study of Italian Jews, which should recognize their ability to adopt and elaborate movements of the surrounding non-Jewish culture such as humanism, while preserving a specific Jewish identity at the same time.

The first section (chair: Martin Zimmermann, Munich) focused on Italian Jews in Antiquity. In his lecture *The Expulsions of Jews from Rome: Why the First Century?* Daniel Schwartz (Jerusalem) examined the reasons for the expulsions of Jews from Rome in the first century AD. Although the expulsions are reported or reflected in a number of sources, there is still much scholarly debate as to what caused them, some focusing on religious matters, others on issues of law and order. On the basis of previously rather unknown Roman sources, Schwartz tried to give evidence for the causal and temporal relationship between the growing violence in Judaea, which was to culminate in the Jewish rebellion of 66-73, and the expulsions of the Jews from Rome. Arguing that in the first century Jews were understood by the Romans primarily as being „Judaeans“, Schwartz interpreted the expulsions from Rome as a result of the growing Roman exasperation with the Jews of Judaea, „punitive moves“, as he put it, against „Judaeans“, the „trouble-makers“, in Rome.

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Erich Gruen (Berkeley) disagreed with Schwartz's thesis. He refused the connection between upheavals in Judaea and expulsions of Jews from Rome pointing to the fact that besides Jews also others peoples were expelled by the Romans and that the expulsions of Jews from Rome were by no means a specific anti-Jewish measure. It was precisely the emphasis on the uncertainties and ambiguities scholars encounter when dealing with the history of Italian Jews in Antiquity that rendered his lecture *Italian Jews in Antiquity: Alienation, Toleration, or Integration - or None of the above?* one of the most convincing and intriguing of the whole conference. Gruen emphasized that because of the scarcity of sources there was no „connecting narrative" of Jewish life in Rome and ancient Italy, the interpretation of the few scattered inscriptions being always subject to dispute. Even more radical than Ruderman, Gruen refused familiar categories such as assimilation, acculturation, and accommodation versus resistance, alienation, and cultural antagonism as often misleading and reductive. Consequently, his lecture endeavored to dissolve the dichotomies and to complicate the picture by exploring testimony on Jewish communal life, relations between Roman Jews and Israel, as well as on attitudes of Roman writers and intellectuals towards Jews. Proof for Gruen's thesis that Italian Jews were part of the rich cultural scene of the Roman Empire while keeping „a sense of distinctiveness" was especially evident in his vivid description of Italian Jewry's linguistic behavior: Although Greek stayed the main language of the Jewish communities in Italy, the majority of the names was taken from the language of the Romans, Latin, expressed in Greek letters. At the same time, Semitic names did not disappear, which shows a certain attachment to the roots. Jews chose freely from Latin, Greek, and Semitic names; in the same family, children could have names from different languages. Looking at the attitude of Romans towards Jews on the other hand, Gruen drew the conclusion that their remarks reflected above all ridicule but no open hostility. The policy of the Roman government to Jews „fell somewhere in the vast area between persecution and benefaction", said Gruen. According to his point of view, Italian Jews in Antiquity did not face exclusion since the Romans had no specific „Jewish problem", but there was no need or drive for integration either. They were not afraid to exhibit their religious and cultural identity, participating in and enjoying the benefits of Roman society.
In the following discussion, which revealed once more the contradiction between Schwartz's and Gruen's points of views, the latter defined the persecution of Christians by Romans as at least as problematic as the persecution of Jews.

The second section (chair: Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, Venice) was dedicated to the Middle Ages. Giuseppe Veltri (Halle) made the beginning with a lecture on *„Dante's Judaism": Italian Language in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Literary Identity*. Veltri examined Yehuda Romano's interpretation of some of Dante's philosophical verses in his „Divina Commedia", Moshe da Rieti's philosophical tractate „Filosofia naturale e fatti di Dio", as well as some examples of the work of the philosopher Leone Ebreo. By discussing the implications for the audience these authors addressed and the goals they pursued with there writings Veltri tried to shed light on the relationship between Jewish philosophical identity in the middle ages and the new-born Italian language, introduced by Dante, the „inspiring literary force from the 15th to the 18th century". Veltri held the view that Italian Jews, even if adopting themes and styles from Dante's opus, wrote for their own community and did not aim at a literary and philosophical exchange between Jews and Christians. The fact that they used Hebrew letters for their Italian texts represented a proof for the inwardness of the Jewish philosophical and literary productions of that time, Veltri argued. While Latin remained the „lingua franca" of philosophy, Italian-Jewish literature became an alternative to Christian production. Veltri's paper shifted the accent on cultural interaction, which Ruderman had set in his opening lecture, towards a particular, rather confined Jewish medieval culture that used the achievements of the majority culture but did not want to contribute to it. This rather problematic thesis was questioned by several scholars in the discussion, who also raised doubts on the reliability of the sources in question.

David Abulafia (Cambridge) spoke about *Royal Jews: The Jews of Southern Italy and Sicily in the Late Middle Ages*. His lecture focused on the relationship between the Jews and the monarchy in southern Italy and in Sicily, where the Jews of medieval Italy had been mainly concentrated. Abulafia explained how the idea of the Jews changed according to the different rulers of Sicily and mainland southern Italy. Whereas Frederick Bar-

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barossa introduced the German concept of Jews as „servants of the royal chambers“ into Sicily, which rendered them the king's ministers and not his slaves, the idea of the Jews as servants acquired increasingly negative connotations under the Aragonese kings of the island of Sicily, culminating in the decree expelling all professing Jews from Sicily in 1492/93. Abulafia convincingly indicated the parallels between the authoritative concept of Jewish „servitude“ in Sicily and in Spain, where the Aragonese rulers had originally come from. A new change occurred in the fifteenth-century kingdom of Naples, when the king, drawing profit from the resident Jews and even benefiting from the Sicilian and Spanish expulsions, began to see himself not only as the possessor but also the „active protector“ of the Jews. The wealth, thus the financial utility, and the artisan skills of many of the resident and newly arriving Jews were important preconditions for this new attitude of the monarchy. From then onwards, the original idea of possession became more and more closely linked to that of protection, seeing in a crime against the Jews also a crime against the crown.

The third section (chair: Giulio Busi, Berlin) dealt with the Renaissance period.

In her vivid and well structured lecture on *„Tell me what you read and I will tell you who you are“: Italian Jews of the Sixteenth Century and their Books* Joanna Weinberg (Oxford) endorsed David Ruderman's position when distancing herself explicitly from Robert Bonfil's delineation of Italian-Jewish culture and the powerful ideological debates that arose from it. Instead, Weinberg argued for the existence of a „republic of scholarship or culture of reading“ in Renaissance Italy. On the basis of several examples such as the passion of Jewish readers for Ariosto's „Orlando Furioso“, Petrarch's „Canzoniere“, and other popular Italian literature of that time, Weinberg demonstrated that Jews and non-Jews developed the same curiosity and desire for knowledge and were able to share the same cultural values. There existed even dictionaries with introductions in Italian, Latin, and Hebrew, aiming at both a Jewish and a non-Jewish readership, as Weinberg explained. She implicitly supported Ruderman's thesis of cultural exchange and interaction, suggesting the existence of a common space in which readers met authors regardless of religious or national allegiance.

Benjamin Ravid (Brandeis) asked in his lecture the question *How Successful was the Ghetto in Isolating the Jews?* After an overview of the original meaning of the Venetian word „ghetto“, its application to the „compulsory, segregated and enclosed“ quarter assigned to the Jews of Venice in 1516, and the extension of the term to all the newly established enclosed areas on the Italian peninsula Jews were required to live in from 1555 onwards, Ravid examined the legislation establishing the individual ghettos, before looking at other measures taken to identify and isolate the Jews. Trying to answer the initial question, Ravid argued that even if the Catholic Church had desired to distance Christians from Jews, the purpose of the ghetto had never been the one to break all contacts between the two societies. In this case, expulsion would have been the consequent measure. Jews had already represented „the Other“ in Christian society before the establishment of the ghetto, which Ravid defined fittingly as „a visible sign of the already existing separation“. At the same time, he emphasized Ruderman's notion of the „open ghetto“, pointing to the lively social and cultural interaction that had existed on all levels between ghetto and surrounding especially in Venice. The ghetto did not succeed in fully isolating the Jews. The fact that they were required to wear distinguishing clothing in order to be always recognized as Jews might have been a sign for the high degree of their linguistic integration, said Ravid in the discussion. Assumedly, their visible distinction was necessary because they did not only know their Jewish dialects but mastered equally the language and accents of the surrounding culture.

A special event in the context of the conference represented the evening lecture by Dan Vittorio Segre (Lugano), which was introduced by Hans Magnus Enzensberger and followed by a panel discussion moderated by Michael Brenner with Diana Pinto (Paris) and Amos Luzzatto.

In his opening remarks, Enzensberger outlined the significance of Segre's recently published autobiography „Storia di un Ebreo fortunato“, translated into German with the title „Ein Glücksrabe“, which tells the survival story of Segre's Jewish family in Fascist Italy. Enzensberger discussed the meaning of the words „fortunato“, „Glück“, and their various translations and connotations, which he related to Segre's particular story, before indicating the exemplary importance of this family saga for the history of Italian Jewry.

Segre's lecture on *The Case of the Italian Jews: Jewish Normalcy or Jewish Exception?* tried to give

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evidence for the uniqueness of the Jewish experience in modern Italy until the passing of the Racial Laws in 1938. Segre described the profound commitment of Italian Jews to the unification process in the 19th century, their acceptance in high social positions both in the army, the diplomatic corps as well as in the government, underlining the immense economic, intellectual and artistic impact of a numerically so small group of people. Within this very positive portrayal of Italian-Jewish existence, Segre's explanations regarding the passing of the Racial Laws in 1938 and the Jewish reaction to it were less convincing. The inherent anti-Semitic tendency of Italian fascism and the gradual radicalization towards official measures against the Jews in Italy remained in the background, even if Segre defined the „total dismay" and „lack of preparation" many Italian Jews felt when being confronted with the anti-Jewish legislature as rather naïve.
The following panel discussion succeeded in clarifying this point. Endorsing Segre, Luzzatto described the Italian Jews as patriotic, believing in the king and somehow even in Mussolini, but he equally pointed out that Italian anti-Semitism, rooted in Catholic religion, had existed before 1938 and did so still today. Diana Pinto stated that nowadays there was far more evidence for the prehistory of the Racial Laws, which were consequently no longer seen as a mere „accident".
Among other issues, the speakers touched upon the question whether one could make out a specific Italian-Jewish identity both in the past and today. Segre mentioned the large number of „catholic Jews" in Italy then and now, whose Jewish identity was hardly or not at all distinctive. Pinto indicated the remarkable extent of activities of Italian Jewry today but doubted that these helped to re-find an Italian-Jewish identity. Michael Brenner was probably closest to the solution when he distanced himself from the *Sonderweg*-theory for Italian Jewry, putting instead emphasis on their diversity and the many paths they entered, hereby developing into a „cosmopolitan community".

The conference continued with two sections on the 19th and on the 20th century.
The first one, entitled Emancipation and Nation (chair: Martin Baumeister, Munich), was opened by Ulrich Wyrwa (Berlin) with a lecture on *Italian Jewish History in the Age of Emancipation and in the Risorgimento. A Reassessment.* Picking up current debates in Jewish historiography and studies on the Emancipation of the Jews in Italy, Wyrwa addressed several central issues - among others the term assimilation, the concept of Jewish identity, and the emancipation process in Italy in light of comparative European perspectives - in order to reassess the state of current research and discuss the question of peculiarities of Italian-Jewish history in the age of Emancipation. According to Wyrwa, the process of assimilation meant neither „treason nor loss" of Jewish identity but led to a rather productive emergence of „fluid identities". Comparing the emancipation of Italian Jewry to other Jewish communities in Europe, Wyrwa held the view that the differences seemed less sharp than assumed. The majority of Italian Jewry supported the project of nation because it provided protection, rights, and equality; however, like in other European Jewries, different identifications continued to exist side by side with the national ideal. Wyrwa concluded that the history of Jewish emancipation in Italy represented a „success story", but that this success should not hide the inconsistencies of the historical process.
In the discussion Michael Brenner questioned the comparability of Jewish emancipation in Italy and in Germany. Whereas in Italy anti-Semitism had been of an almost exclusively religious nature, in Germany anti-Semitism had become also a pseudo-scientific issue, said Brenner. Therefore, the opponents of emancipation had been different in Italy and in Germany, he argued. Also Eli Bar Chen (Munich) saw dissimilarities in the Italian and the German emancipation processes, indicating the different starting positions; in Italy almost the entire Jewish society had lived in ghettos, which in Germany had been an exception.

Mario Toscano (Rome) concentrated in his lecture on *National Integration and Jewish Identity in Italy 1870-1925.* The chosen period represented an important age for emancipated Italian Jewry, stated Toscano. He argued that a reconstruction and analysis of anti-Semitism during Fascism required firstly an analysis of the emancipation period, which witnessed acculturation on the one hand, the construction of a new relationship to the state on the other hand. Toscano held the view that in Italy acculturation had happened before political emancipation. In the course of the lecture, he outlined the process of Jewish integration and their commitment to Italian national life as reflected especially in their participation in the army. The Dreyfus-affair in 1894 and the beginnings of the Zionist movement at the end of the 19th centu-

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ry were caesuras in this development but they did not halt it. Toscano described how Italian Jews increasingly saw themselves as part of the national bourgeoisie, taking pride in their past contribution to the Risorgimento. In the eyes of the majority, Italy as the country in which they were born became their „Jewish motherland". As Toscano pointed out, the idea of the nation was as well closely linked to the Italian language, the language of Italian Jews and non-Jews alike. It was Fascist policy which put an end to the achievements of this development of decades.

The time of *Fascism* was also the period the last section (chair: Lutz Klinkhammer, Rome) focused on.

Simon Levis Sullam (Venice) made the beginning with a lecture on *Between Consent and Opposition: Paths of the Nationalization of the Jews in Fascist Italy*. On the basis of historiographical literature, private letters, novels, diaries, memoirs, and police reports, the contribution aimed at an assessment of the historiographical debate on the Jews of Italy under Fascism. Sullam had decided to concentrate on Turin as one of the headquarters of „Jewish anti-fascism" (how the fascist regime called it), represented by personalities like Leone Ginzburg, Vittorio Foa, and Carlo Levi, who were all among the collaborators of the leftist *Quaderni di „Giustizia e Libertà"*. Turin however was also the city of the major Italian „Jewish fascist" periodical, as *La Nostra Bandiera* and its leading group defined themselves. Starting from this juxtaposition of „anti-fascist" and „fascist" Italian Jews, Sullam examined to what extent and in which ways these opposite experiences could be defined as „Jewish" and, more generally, the implications of these phenomena for the Italian-Jewish experience during modernity. Sullam outlined the historical context focusing on the „internal project of anti-Semitism" within the Fascist movement on the one hand, the adherence of not few Jewish communities as well as Jewish individuals to the Fascist regime on the other hand. When looking at the „Jewish component" of the anti-fascist and the fascist group in question, Sullam applied David Sorkins's concept of „Jewish sub-culture" and concluded that both the collaborators of *Giustizia e Libertà* and the journalists of *La Nostra Bandiera* had reflected the richness and complexity of Italian-Jewish experience that could obviously result in the emergence of totally different political and cultural outlooks.

In the discussion several scholars questioned Sullam's concentration on these two political extremes, emphasizing the overwhelming existence of a „middle way" for Italian Jewry, as well as the frequent presence of liberals, communists and semi-fascists within the same family.

Susan Zuccotti (New York) spoke about *Anti-Semitism in Fascist Italy, the Anti-Jewish Laws of 1938-39, and Jewish Perceptions of Their Place in Italian Society*. The lecture began with a review of expressions of anti-Semitism in Fascist Italy for the period before the anti-Jewish laws, considering recent findings by Giorgio Fabre and Michele Sarfatti, as well as anti-Semitic statements in the Catholic press such as *L'Osservatore Romano* and *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Subsequently Zuccotti examined the „expressions of astonishment" by Italian Jews at the time of the anti-Jewish laws, especially as recorded in their memoirs. Why were Italian Jews so astonished if so many expressions of anti-Semitism had appeared already before the Racial Laws, Zuccotti asked. In a convincing way, she attributed this tendency to the fact that most of the memoirs which are handed down to us have been written by survivors. After the end of the war, these were reluctant to mention the crimes and the sorrow they themselves had experienced. They mainly remembered and documented their survival and that „Italians had been good to them". In fact, survivors like Levi and Segre focused on the positive image of the Italian people, as Zuccotti pointed out. The degree of astonishment about the Racial Laws would have been surely reduced in the testimonies of those who did not survive. „They would not have been so generous", was Zuccotti's résumé.

The concluding remarks at the end of this rich conference program touched upon some of the central issues of the debates. David Ruderman refused the idea of a „unified Italian-Jewish history" and described Italian-Jewish experience instead as one of linguistic and geographical discontinuities, remaining always in „a space in between". Similarly, Martin Baumeister found the polarities of exclusion and inclusion inadequate for a multi-layered approach to Italian-Jewish history, referring explicitly to Erich Gruen's emphasis on the ambiguity of the Italian-Jewish experience. Michael Brenner welcomed the frequent transgression of the chronological lines in the extensive and lively discussions. According to him, the conference had shown that Italian-Jewry consisted of „many sto-

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ries“. The frequently asked question „what is Italian Jewry today“ could be applied also to German and most of European Jewry. Diana Pinto referred to current political debates within the Jewish community in Italy and wondered if they reflected a kind of „intellectual ghetto“. At the same time, she found the presence of so many young Italian-Jewish historians on the conference significant and promising.

Undoubtedly the conference's extensive discussions, interaction and dispute were a source of inspiration and new incentives for the research into the history of Italian Jewry. What was often missing however was the consideration of the complex relationship and interplay between Italian-Jewish and general Italian history. Neither was the „uniqueness-pattern“ of Italian-Jewish history successfully clarified; the question whether the Italian-Jewish experience had been „unique“, and if, how this „uniqueness“ had manifested itself, remained rather unresolved. Moreover, the conference revealed once again the continued existence of different ideological positions within Jewish scholarship and their influence on historical interpretation. It is the ideological point of view which still decides whether the history of Italian Jewry is regarded mainly as a „success story“ of productive integration or else seen as a story of exclusion and persecution.

A successful approach to future research on the history of Jews in Italy will above all require the consideration of its ambiguity. As Erich Gruen put it, „like in many subjects, ambiguity is more fitting than false clarity“.

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