

Report by Michael Thaler, Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics, UC San Francisco, on Gadi Luzzatto Voghera's presentation, "The Emancipation in Italy and in Venice: from Jews to Israelites"

The Emancipation of European Jews

Europe's Jews followed two pathways toward emancipation:

Pathway 1. "Regeneration" before Emancipation. This route became available with the promulgation of the Toleranzpatent (Law of Tolerance) by Austrian Emperor Joseph II in 1789. The Law stipulated that Jews could gain the entitlements due to subjects of the Austrian crown, such as entrance into the professions and ownership of all businesses, provided two conditions were met: Jews had to attend Christian schools and become secularized; Yiddish and Hebrew had to be eliminated and German would be exclusively used in prayer books, publications, and public discourse. The Law affected Eastern/Central European Jews, as it applied specifically to Jews in the Habsburg empire. However, after the Austrian takeover in 1797, Italian Jews living in Mandova, Trieste and Venice were also affected by the Law of Tolerance.

Pathway 2. Emancipation before "Regeneration." The French Revolution initiated a historical process requiring abandonment of Jewish peoplehood as the price of admission into French society. Based on a proposal of Clermont Tonnerre in 1789, "Jews must become citizens. They should be denied everything as a Nation, and given everything as individuals." This formulation was aimed at Western European Jews. However, despite wholesale conversions to Christianity and post-enlightenment assimilation, the Jews as a distinct cultural and religious ("ethnic") group did not disappear. By the end of the 19th century a new wave of anti-Semitism swept through Europe.

A foreign army liberated the Jews of Venice. The ghetto gates were opened and the ancient legal restrictions largely eliminated as a consequence of the French occupation in 1797. Napoleon granted Jews freedom to live anywhere they wished, and to pursue all trades and professions, with the single exception of pharmacy. By the time Austria came into possession of Northern Italy later in 1797, most Italian Jews moved toward Emancipation without legal prodding from the Law of Tolerance. They readily assumed an Italian identity, lived side by side with Christians, spoke Italian, and had achieved ownership of large real estate, banking, and merchantile enterprises. Nevertheless, thousands of poor Jewish families remained in the few "open" ghettos that resisted or were unable to take advantage of emancipation. Prominent members of the newly emancipated Jewish merchant class established a network of social, educational, and self-help organizations to promote "regeneration" of the ghetto poor. Their religious and social emancipation became important community goals, exemplified by the life history of Moise Soave (In, Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, Italian Jews. Pp.170-187).

While the predominant majority of Italian Jews eagerly transformed into secularized Italians, Italian society as a whole was as yet unwilling to accept these emancipants as equals in its midst, reflecting centuries of anti-Jewish preaching by the Church. Italy was a "backward country" prior to its unification in 1860, and its own emancipation from the

Vatican awaited the liberalizing trends unleashed by the French and Austrian occupations. It is, therefore, not surprising that Italy awaited the imposition of foreign laws to initiate the process of Jewish assimilation. In the interim, Jews faced many social and legal barriers on the way toward full citizenship. Jewish students were excluded from public schools, and relations between the secular institutions in Italy and the Jewish community were thwarted by religious and class prejudice, as illustrated by the exclusion of Jewish students from the casa d'industria in Venice (Ibid, p. 179).

The situation changed dramatically with the installation of a national unity government in 1860, followed by the capture of Rome in September 1870 and final separation of the Italian liberal state and the Church. Modern democratic Italy needed a new professional and bureaucratic "ruling class" of elected representatives, lawyers, army officers, journalists, managers, etc. "Regenerated" Jews were advantageously positioned to take advantage of these opportunities and finally gained what seemed to be unconditional acceptance into Italian society.

"Israelitism"

The advent of modernity and extensive secularization of the larger Italian society presented the tiny Jewish minority with a novel existential dilemma. New formulas and social structures had to evolve if religious identity were to offer sufficient cohesiveness and separation to preserve a distinctive Jewish communal existence into the late 19th and 20th century. Officially, Jewish religious practices remained orthodox, but the traditional norms and rituals gradually gave way to reformist innovations. On the one hand, traditional rituals, prayer books, and the separation of men and women during religious services (mechitsa) were generally preserved; on the other, Judaism in Italy underwent internally generated reforms that served to approximate Jewish communities to their Christian counterparts. New ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvah were modeled on Catholic communion, Italian appeared alongside Hebrew in prayer books, cremation became acceptable, and photographs of the deceased graced the Italian-language gravestones in Jewish cemeteries. Synagogues were constructed to resemble churches (eg. the synagogue of Torino), the aron hakodesh was modeled on an altar, and rabbis, resplendent in gold-embroidered head gear and gown, preached down from elevated pulpits while professional cantors chosen more for their vocal talents than their piety, sang hymnals before an increasingly unobservant congregation.

In the next two generations, many young Jews changed their foreign-sounding names, abandoned Jewish practice and rituals, stopped learning Hebrew, intermarried with increasing frequency, and blended seamlessly into the majority culture. Whatever remained of formal Judaism in modern Italy became a strictly private affair. Gadi Luzzatto Voghera defines this product of Italian history and acculturation as "Israelitism" the transformation of Judaism from a civilization fashioned from a unique weave of religious belief and observance, language and culture, embedded within communities dedicated to preserving their distinctiveness, to a new cultural mutation: „An Italian Israelite is first of all an Italian patriot, and then an Israelite, (Voghera lecture handout).

Israelitism's nationalistic differences from the radical Reform movements originating in Germany and subsequently developed in N. America, and from traditional Judaic orthodoxy practiced throughout Eastern Europe, resulted in a significant isolation of Italy's Jews from the rest of Jewry scattered throughout the world. In view of these differences, Voghera addressed whether "Israelitism" represents a viable alternative to the more normative forms of Judaism. In his opinion, the new construct failed the challenge of history when the "racial laws" were implemented by the Fascist government of Italy in 1938. Practicing "Israelites" and fully assimilated (emancipated? regenerated?) Italians of Jewish origin proved incapable of grasping the true extent of the existential threat, nor emotionally prepared to deal with the failure of Italian society to support them. "They were rejected as Jews, but they did not know what it means to be a Jew," concluded Voghera.