

ASHKENAZIM IN ITALY

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It was in an article published back in 1950 that Moshe Avigdor Shulvass first drew serious attention to the question of how the Ashkenazi Jews immigrated and settled in Italy, defining it as "one of the most important problems in Italian Jewish historiography".¹ According to Shulvass, who was at that time collecting material for his history of the Jews in Italy during the Renaissance period, the process of Ashkenazi settlement in Italy was to be seen above all as a particular component in that history, which he also considered to a large extent an antecedent of more recent Italian Jewish history. In that perspective, most probably under the impact of events immediately following the war, Shulvass wanted to suggest a larger process of transformation upon a homogenous group of Italian Jews made up of Italians, Ashkenazim, and both Eastern and Western Sefardim. He considered this process for the most part responsible for moulding the destiny of Italian Jews up until the present day. I would propose that we adopt that perspective on this occasion too, and I would suggest that doing this means in effect reflecting on the paradigmatic significance of the Ashkenazi settlement in the formation of a composite group of Jews based in Italy, and that, in this view, the paradigm actually extends into the field of Italian Judaism as a whole, becoming pertinent to the more general problem of the pluralistic composition of Jewish society, an issue which is everywhere today.

First of all we must naturally turn our attention to the continuous and well documented settlement in Italy of Transalpine immigrants in the course of centuries. This is certainly not the right occasion to look again at the immigration routes from North to South, in the ambit of the more general restructuring of Jewish settlement in the peninsula beginning from the XIVth century, or to go over in detail all the intensive historical research which has built up gradually in the course of more than half a century.² Elia Capsali from Candia, describing the Jews of Venice in the second decade of the XVIth century, gives some idea of what Italy must have represented in the mind of potential

immigrants - a land of refuge from persecution. In a well known and often cited passage, Capsali gives us in effect the first Jewish version of the "Venice myth" with reference to the first mass immigration of Ashkenazim during a period which he alludes to vaguely as the years immediately following the middle of the XIVth century. In the text, the author sets the immigration from the Northern Lands in the context of an escape from an atmosphere of terror and persecution.

"And they persecuted the German Jews in all their cities, and diverse communities came under the sword... [and here he enumerates several pogroms, beginning from those perpetrated during the First Crusade, and concludes] these then were the reasons why the Jews refused to live any longer in their lands, that is in the German lands, and agreed to emigrate whithersoever they might find a place to settle... and when the children of Israel did receive news of the grand and noble Venetian State and of her just ways, and of the righteousness of her laws and of her other virtues, when they did see that their country was ripe for settlement and the land fertile, then did they decide to go and live under their government in the land of Italy, to be subject to the most precious laws of the Venetians, their magistrature and their magnificent governors... then indeed did they begin to invoke the Name of the Lord in the Italian lands, founding for themselves *midrashoth* and *yeshivoth* in all parts... [and he goes on thus to describe the miraculous spread of Jewish culture in Italy at the hands of the German immigrants].³

It is not so important on this occasion to probe in depth to what extent this portrait is true and what possible components might go along with this phenomenon. It is important rather to get a flavour of the whole: the pride in the *yeshivah* of Padua (to

¹ Moses A. Shulvass, "Ashkenazic Jewry in Italy", *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science* 7 (1952), pp. 110-131 [first published in Yiddish in: *Yivo Bleter* 34 (1950), pp. 157-181].

² For an overview it will suffice to cite here Attilio Milano, *Storia degli ebrei in Italia* (Torino 1963), to which I would add my *Storia degli ebrei in Italia nell'epoca del Rinascimento*, Firenze 1991, at the end of which a useful bibliography is to be found.

³ Eliyahu Capsali, *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, here cited in the edition of Aryeh Shmuelevitz, Shlomo Simonsohn and Meir Benayahu, 3 vols., (Ben-Zvi Institute & The Hebrew University, Jerusalem and the Diaspora Research Institute, Tel-Aviv University, 1975-1983), II, pp. 244-245. On the author and his works see the third volume of the edition by Meir Benayahu. See also Charles Berlin, "Sixteenth-Century Hebrew Chronicle of the Ottoman Empire:

The Seder Eliyahu Zuta of Elijah Capsali and its Message", in *Studies in Jewish Bibliography and Literature in Honor of I. Edward Kiev*, Ed. by Charles Berlin, New York 1971, pp. 21-44 (revised and extended version of the author's doctoral thesis *Elijah Capsali's Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, Harvard University 1962); Hayim Hillel Ben-Sasson, "Kavim li'emunat olamoh haruhani ve-hevratu shel khroniton yehudi beshalhei yemei-habeynayim", in *Sefer Zikaron Li-Gedalyahu Alon, (Essays in Jewish History and Philology in Memory of Gedaliahu Alon)*, Edited by Menahem Dorman, Shmuel Safrai and Menahem Stern, Tel-Aviv 1970, pp. 276-289; Ann Brener, "Portrait of the Rabbi as Young Humanist: A Reading of Elijah Capsali's «Chronicle of Venice»", in *Italia* 11 (1994), pp. 37-60; Roberto Bonfil, "Jewish Attitudes Toward History and Historical Writing in Pre-Modern Times", in *Jewish History* 11/1 (1997), pp. 7-40.

which Elia Capsali's father sent him to study and which he describes vividly (a little after the text cited above) is grafted into this text in the mythical way in which he represents Venice and the good things which the land has to offer. In Capsali's florid Hebrew, that which I have awkwardly translated as "the precious laws of the Venetians, their magistrature and their magnificent governors", in fact echoes the principle components of what modern historians have classified as the "Venice myth": "most serene Venice", "Land of Liberty", "Land of Justice", "Land of perfect mixed government", and we can establish a correlation of real cause and effect between the immigration of Jews from the North and the flourishing of Jewish learning in this country. The subjective perception of Ashkenazi cultural pride thus merged with the receptivity of Italy tracing an idealized image in terms of a land fertile to the aim of diffusing of Jewish culture. This was certainly mythical imagery, but mythical in the same subtle sense in which the pictorial imagery of Venice was mythical - mythical, that is, more for the propagandistic representation of reality than for an actual falsification of the single components; mythical in as much as potential hopes and aspirations were never effectively realized in full, but were nevertheless constantly present as an ideal programme and in the end were partially realized in a variety of ways.

In this light we must immediately turn our attention to the following problem: what sort of organic nexus was established between the Italian Jews, that is the autochthonous descendants of the ancient residents dating from the Roman era, and the Jews from Germany? To the eyes of non-Jews this nexus presented itself essentially in the guise of economic activity (moneylenders, that is, the ones like the others, to the extent that in the documents "Germans" sometimes signifies "Italians and Germans"), but in Jewish society it appears constantly beyond the level of the economy - in a unified community structure, as already in XVth century Padua where the Germans constituted the great majority of the Jewish population, albeit that they arrived later than the Italians; and in the use of the same synagogue for religious services. At Ferrara for example⁴ the Germans had joint prayers with the Italians until, in 1542, they succeeded in building their own synagogue. When however this was damaged in the famous earthquake of 1572 (a memorable description of which has been left to us by Azariah De Rossi), they came back again and joined the Italians. Having joint prayers meant at that time also adapting to the service according to the Italian rite; the time had not yet come for the mixed services which we find in those communities where, because of the small Jewish population, the proceedings take place

according to alternate rites. This fusion was definitely never without contest, resistance, and collision of a more or less violent sort. If, as Capsali has already shown, the ethnic pride of the Germans manifested itself in terms of pretentious displays of socio-cultural superiority, the Italians certainly don't seem to have acted in any lesser way. Indeed we must come to see this fusion as a composite picture of meeting and collision, of harmony and discord, of convergence pregnant with antagonism and not rarely breaking out into hostility, of equilibria more or less unstable and always to be protected. We should never lose sight of how decisively problematic it must always have been to establish new equilibria after the meetings had degenerated into conflict and the antagonism into hostility. But even so, we should not exaggerate the manifestations of discord so much that they negate the underlying basis of harmony.

Let us consider for example that resentment with which, still in the XVth century, a member of the Italian family Rieti tried to dissuade a relative of his from marrying a "German" girl.

You are thinking of getting involved with that arrogant bunch of Germans? Among them of all people you have chosen to make for yourself a respectable household? These [German] women are wont to cause damage to every Jew and particularly to us Italians. They stroll around proudly after having fornicated, swaggering shamelessly and arrogantly, they bring with them sin with laces of seduction and inane chatter.⁵

Apart from the vulgar cackling, to interpret it from the other side with a grain of salt, we only really get a clear sense of this text if we bear in mind the stark parallel which is provided by the Germans in the way they saw themselves as moral superiors. This would result in an extraordinary attack on traditional standards, and would definitely be in contrast with a hypothetical liberal permissiveness characteristic of the Italians. And we shouldn't forget in this regard that modern Jewish historiography, almost exclusively of the German brand, greatly exasperated this antagonism, although in general it swapped round the prejudices concerning the hypothetical "liberality" characteristic of the Italian Jews in opposition to the "strictness" characteristic of the Germans, so that what was bad for the German Jews of the XVth century was transformed into the good by the enlightened minds of the XIXth and XXth centuries.⁶ The residues of this antithetical representation are still strongly perceptible, and not just in the field of historiography. I would go as far as to say, looking around me,

or perhaps better digging superficially into my own personal memory, that the Jewish Milan of today could present an optimum observation post, whereby we might verify in an anthropological way, and "in the field" as it were, how this evaluation has both continued and changed, according to the perception of socio-religious identity - stated in concrete spatial symbols: via Guastalla in relation to via Cellini.

Moreover, beyond all that which provides historians, journalists, sociologists and, naturally, community leaders with their daily bread, it remains fundamentally true that this fusion is verifiable and measurable more than anywhere else in the way marriages were planned. We don't know what weight his relative's advice would have had on Rieti, who was at that time a widower with children, as regards the marriage with the German girl, in as much as it seems to be her first marriage. These details would have to be further taken into consideration in making this specific situation more precise. But who, apart from a specialist in the material, would today remember that the Luzzattos or the Minzis, the Tedeschis or the Ottolenghis, the Modenas or the Calimanis are actually of German origin?

In the cultural field the picture is no different. It would not be hard to compile a fat dossier displaying the acrimony which emerged in the course of disagreements or the more so in disputes. Remaining in the XVth century, we could for example consider the revered rabbi Yitzhak ben Emmanuel di Lattes, of Provençal origin, who in 1519 in the course of a bitter controversy blasted his German colleagues thus:

"Their way is the way of insanity, they approve the Ashkenazim indiscriminately, both as oppressors and as oppressed, holding the Italians responsible, without in any way verifying the truth. With their chatter they would cause the death of everyone, saints and sinners, if salvation were not coming from elsewhere."⁷

Fifty or so years earlier, in 1475, basing his authority on the rabbinical ordination which he had received in the Paduan Ashkenazi *yeshiva* and the traditional texts of the Ashkenazi rite, Leone di Vitale, who received the title *doctor* from the Conte palatino in 1478, and who by virtue of his aristocratic status, was called Messer Leon, tried to impose his authority throughout Italy by publishing decrees intended to modify the ritual norms handed down by local tradition and, which is more important for us, to prohibit the reading of Levi ben Gershon's *Torah* commentary, which was widely read among the Italian Jews. The reaction of Guglielmo da Montalcino, at that time resident in Florence, was violent, but not for that any the less clear in its central point.

"If Messer Leon desired that his ordinances be respected, he should first have explained clearly his motives and then reinforced them by teaching many pupils in various cities, in order that they or their own pupils should win over everyone with their arguments to take notice of the teachings".⁸

We must bear in mind though that Guglielmo da Montalcino's text does not in fact intend to reject out of hand the learning which came from the Germans, and not even to deny that they could be a source of authority for Italian Jews such as him. Rather, he intended to make this learning subject to liberal criticism, after which must logically follow agreement or disagreement. Guglielmo da Montalcino was then insisting on the necessity of having the kind of open discussion from which the authority of knowledge should emerge. Without such discussion, it seemed senseless to him to talk about a person's authority. In other words, far from rejecting German learning, Guglielmo da Montalcino was in fact insisting on the need to integrate it into the local cultural tradition.

The Italian community of Florence has in the past provided a concrete example in showing itself ready to do this. It is documented that at least on one occasion during the years when our Guglielmo was residing in that city, the community invited the rabbi Yosef Colon to preside over a divorce case. He was of French origin and therefore an Ashkenazi - clear proof that at that time professional competence was valued higher than ethnic origin.⁹ The disposition which we have mentioned did not nevertheless stop our Guglielmo from voicing his open dissent against the same Colon in regard to a different problem, in which he considered that his personal authority in the matter of ritual norms had been undermined by one of Colon's judgements.¹⁰ It wouldn't be hard to add to these examples many others of different kinds. No matter what Capsali and others who thought like him might say about the untouchable cultural superiority of the Ashkenazim in Italy, this superiority was never recognized without discussion and without open and sometimes biting criticism.

But here too, beyond displays of discord with regard to culture and ritual norms, remains a fundamental and blatant disposition towards cultural integration. As the reader has probably noticed, the examples of open dissent mentioned until now have almost exclusively been drawn from the XVth or XVIth centuries. This is not by chance, nor is it because the writer feels particularly at home in this period. The fact is that it is precisely this period which is effectively richest in testimony of this kind. In the following era we notice rather a gradual lessening in the intensity of friction, which actually seems to stop altogether with the almost total assimilation of Ashkenazim in the local context. In the above mentioned article Shulvass also notes the

gennaio - agosto 1996, pp. 137-166.

⁴ See Shlomo Simonsohn, "I banchieri da Rieti in Toscana", in *Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, vol. XXXVIII (1972), pp. 406-423, 487-499.

⁵ I have touched upon this theme in my "The Book of Honeycomb's Flow by Judah Messer Leon: The Rhetoric Dimension of Jewish Humanism in Fifteenth-Century Italy", in: Barry Walfish (Ed.), *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume II, Jewish History* 6, Haifa 1992, pp. 21-33.

⁷ On this I refer the reader to my *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy*, Oxford 1990, p. 108, n. 28.

⁸ For this see also *ibid.*, pp. 45-48.

⁹ Umberto Cassuto, *Gli ebrei a Firenze nell'età del Rinascimento* (Firenze 1918; reprinted Firenze 1965), p. 214.

¹⁰ Josef Colon, *Responsa* (editio princeps: Venezia 1519), n.° 171.

constant dwindling of the Ashkenazi element in the life of Italian Ashkenazim, attributing it to the separation which took place between them and the ever increasing population of Ashkenazim beyond the Alps. Moreover, putting forward such a hypothesis intended to justify the detachment, Shulvass recognized the complexity of the phenomenon and expressed the hope that subsequent studies would come to shed light on it. The hope still remains valid, despite the research of recent studies dedicated to the history of Italian Jewry. Staying within the confines of this study, we might propose as an explanation exactly this open disposition towards integration of which we have spoken above. In the course of the centuries this was certainly hindered by the petulant ambitions of men moved by various interests interweaved in contrasting ideologies, but in the end it came out decisively victorious, nor have we witnessed any recent manifestation of the contrary tendency. From this standpoint, an imaginary chain binds the XVth century Florence of Guglielmo di Montalcino with the XXth century Florence of the Galician Samuel Hirsh Margulies (to whose name is today dedicated the rabbinical school in which I had the privilege to study back in the 1950s) - the same chain which binds the XVIIIth century Paduan rabbinical college of Samuel David Luzzatto, in its own way taking the place of the XVth century *yeshiva* of Rabbi Yehuda Mintz, with the David Almagià rabbinical college, in a way heir to the well-known Roman *yeshiva* of the Middle Ages - a chain whose links have been in the course of time men of Ashkenazi origin and culture, organically sewn, as it were, into the texture of local life and culture - and it seems particularly appropriate for me to mention at this point the names of Sally Mayer, Ermanno Friedenthal, David Schaumann and Naftali Frostik-Adler, whom Jewish Milan keeps in ever-fond memory.

From the other side, and in partial correction to all that I have said up until now, we find something in this theme which precisely clarifies the peculiarity of the Italian Ashkenazim. For we see too a welding of a multi-faceted Jewish culture into the confines of a space which is either uniform or unifying, but, at any rate, clearly distinct from that of the non-Jews. A good example is provided by Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, who seems to have had no difficulty in moving from Cremona to Cracow to take up an appointment there as Rabbi. And we will do well to remember in this context that this Ashkenazi Rabbi is the same one who, in the course of a dispute studied by Rabbi Laras, came out against excommunicating card players, thus establishing a precedent for the famous Leone Modena, who was himself a hardened gambler and often taken as an example of the permissiveness of Italian Jewish society despite his Ashkenazi origins.¹¹ From this point of view, then, the case of Eliezer Ashkenazi should be understood as an example of

close rapport between the two "establishments": that of the Italian Rabbis and that of the Transalpine rabbis. There was a cultural and ritual continuum, which was not necessarily restricted to the Ashkenazi environment, even if it was, as we might expect, founded upon it.

The channels of communication run in both directions according to the period and the need for them. During the XVth and XVIIth centuries the learned Jews of Poland were drawn to the Italian publishing houses no less than poets were drawn to the Italian skies. Thus it was that Gumprecht of Szczebrzeszyn came to compose his poetry at Venice, and Rabbi Mordekhai Jaffe, author of the *Levushim* of the *Shulhan Arukh*, resided for a period in Italy, as did R. Yaakov Soresina of Cracow, who came to live first at Castellazzo and subsequently at Venice. But from our point of view, we would do well to emphasize that on the whole in the XVth and XVIIth centuries it was rather Italy who was exporting her culture, and not just culture of the Ashkenazi kind. Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen, known as the Maharam of Padua, suggested to Rabbi Moshe Isserles of Cracow that he should send him fifty or so copies of Alfasi, hot off the press from Sabbioneta, adding that it was a real bargain - clear evidence of a rapport in which learning and business were closely connected.¹² During this same period the *Zohar* was printed at Cremona, as far as we know today, almost exclusively for the Ashkenazim of Europe.¹³ The diffusion of the Lurian Kabbalah from Safed through Europe had its beginning in the last part of the XVIth century. Jewish Italy and her printing presses were the medium for this diffusion, and the process continued uninterrupted, culminating in the XIXth century with the Polish-Hassidic world receiving the teachings of Moshe Haim Luzzatto.

The diffusion of Yiddish literature, both that produced in Italy as well as that which was just printed there, forms an integral part of this picture. The lecturers specializing in Yiddish have dealt competently in the course of this conference with various aspects of this theme, and we can see, as it were, a concrete representation of it in the exhibition. I shall make just one point on this theme. A literate Jew, whether he came from this or that side of the Alps, who was reading one of those volumes printed in the characteristic Gothic lettering of Judeo-German, would have before him a work which testified to a certain affinity of tastes - and this is particularly evident when one is dealing with illuminated volumes. A fine example is furnished by the *Passover Haggadah*, printed in Venice in 1629 in three different editions - one with a translation into Italian (naturally in Hebrew characters), one into Spanish, and one into Yiddish. In all three editions the printers, for reasons of convenience, recycle the illustrations and use the same wood-engravings. Conversely, the wood-cuttings of the Prague *Haggadah* of 1527 were recycled

by the printers of the Mantua *Haggadah* of 1560. It was Isaiah Sonne who broadened the picture, noticing the extraordinary similarity between the illustrated frontispieces of Eastern European origin with those of Renaissance Italy, and proposing as long ago as 1948 that the institution of the *Va'ad Arba Arazot* was actually derived from the regional "meetings" of the Italian-Jewish communities.¹⁴ Scholars of Italian-Jewish history have in general looked upon this theory of Sonne with incredulous condescension, viewing it more than anything else as a scholarly eccentricity. But it seems that more recent studies dealing with the organization of communities in Europe and the make-up of the delicate equilibrium between rabbinical leadership and that of the laity reveal a very great affinity with the model we have just mentioned, which is characteristic of communal organization in Italy. If this is indeed the case, it would not be out of place to go back and seriously reconsider Sonne's premature intuition. As with other ideas which he had, more in-depth research might produce interesting results. Whatever the case, from our point of view it is still the whole community of motives and cultural characteristics which really draws our attention. It suggests once again that we should reflect upon that underlying unity of cultural space and upon those mechanisms bound by this space, and in various ways set in motion.

To sum up, while emphasizing the features which were distinct and bringing out the worth of that which made up the Ashkenazi component, a balanced view of Jewish history should take into account the basic and substantial organic unity which existed. We must not forget the bond, or rather that organic "welding", which took place between Italian and Transalpine Jews, and we should stop making stereotypical schemes based on binary opposition which tend to give a clumsy picture of the one side as liberals and the other side as pedants, or the one side as assimilated and the other side as orthodox. Apart from freeing Jewish Italy from the stigma of being on the margins and for the

most part irrelevant to the course of Jewish history, a view such as we have proposed will have the enormous advantage of proving how very compatible the Ashkenazi *Weltanschauung* is with that of the Italians. Consequently we may from this standpoint set down a principle which should no longer seem too paradoxical despite the setting in which we find ourselves here. This principle is that the difference between the different groups of diaspora Jews consists more in the variety of ways in which these groups respond to the challenge of the non-Jewish environment in which they are reflected and in respect to which they define their own cultural identity than in the intrinsic differences between the groups themselves. In this view, we can say without doubt that the Ashkenazim in Italy are more "Italians" than Ashkenazim, not however because they have assimilated and lost part of their identity, but rather because to be Jewish in Italy means to be Jewish against the background of traditional Italian culture, and is therefore substantially different from being Jewish in Germany, in Poland, in Russia or in the U.S.A. Using as a point of reference the natural relations which exist between themselves and Ashkenazim in other places in terms of kinship and special affinity, the Ashkenazim of Italy have played a part, and still do play a part, in maintaining the bridge connecting the culture of Italian Jewry with that of elsewhere. And it is this same bridge which makes it possible today in Italy to enjoy imported Yiddish literature, in the sense of enjoying it as an integral part of Italian culture rather than as an exotic display of an "alien" culture. So to reflect on the paradigmatic significance of Ashkenazim living in Italy, in relation to the exhibition which is being opened today, means in my opinion to reflect on the possibility of cultural pluralism in defining everyone's cultural identity, wherever we are sure that the bridge of connection and transmission is in working order.

[Translated by Jeremy H. Grant]

¹¹ Robert Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy*, pp. 136-138 and index, see under Ashkenazi, Eliezer.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 191. For this see also my "Le biblioteche degli ebrei d'Italia nell'epoca del Rinascimento", in: *Manoscritti, frammenti e libri ebraici nell'Italia dei secoli XV-XVI. Atti del VII° Congresso Internazionale*, S. Miniato

(Pisa), 7-8-9 novembre 1988, Roma 1991, pp. 137-150.

¹³ Roberto Bonfil, "Cultura e mistica a Venezia nel Cinquecento", in: *Gli Ebrei a Venezia (secoli XIV-XVII). Atti del Convegno organizzato dall'Istituto di Storia della Società e dello Stato Veneziano della Fondazione Cini*, 5-10 giugno 1983, Milano 1987, pp. 469-508: 489.

¹⁴ Isaiah Sonne, "Ha-va'ad haklali, av le-Va'ad Arba Arazot be-Polin [Il sinodo generale in Italia, prototipo del "Sinodo dei quattro paesi"]", in *Ha-Tekufah* 32-33 (1948), pp. 617-689.