

YIDDISH CULTURE IN ITALY

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After hearing all that has been said on the subject of Yiddish literary texts composed in what is now Italy, I should like to add a brief thought which, though apparently extraneous to the subject, is in fact closely connected to it. Literary texts in Yiddish from Italy date mostly from the XVIth and XVIIth centuries. They are few in number, though their importance is out of proportion to the quantity. Although most of the texts date back to the XVI and XVII centuries, their production subsequently stopping, it is nevertheless true that it is not until two centuries later that Yiddish culture begins to graft itself onto Italian culture in an organic way. After the ghettos were opened up in the territory belonging to the Hapsburg Empire, the development of the Jewish communities in these areas was immediate, including the field of intellectual endeavour. The number of Jewish writers of different origins active in Italian literature immediately before and after the unification of Italy is enormous. In the twentieth century alone several eminent novelists have been of Jewish origin: Italo Svevo, Alberto Moravia, Natalia Ginzburg, Carlo and Primo Levi, Giorgio Bassani, Umberto Saba are some of the more famous, but why not mention also purely commercial writers like Sem Benelli, Guido da Verona and Pittigrilli? Several of these were born and educated in the area where Yiddish literature had flourished most; and for this reason, in some way, although no longer writing in Yiddish, they carried with them something of the spirit of that great culture.

Italo Svevo (Ettore Schmitz) is perhaps the most famous example. His family originates from Kiskapus in Transylvania, where there certainly existed a very strong tradition, which still survives today, especially in the field of music. This spirit is present, in a most conspicuous way, in the anecdotal nature of Svevo's most famous novel, *La coscienza di Zeno*. The story of the last cigarette; the protagonist who feels continuous pangs in his side simply because he was depicted in a home-made caricature pierced through by an umbrella; the indecision over which of three girls he should marry; these are all episodes which could very well have come straight out of a *shtetl* story. Nor do we miss the protagonist of these stories, the Eternal, with whom the characters often banter. It is in fact the silent fatalism permeating the male and female characters of Svevo's romance which alludes to him in some way. Svevo, by the end of the story, has become the expert on Judaism, and indeed it was he who helped his friend Joyce to mould the figure of the Hungarian Jew Bloom in his famous novel *Ulysses*.

Ginzburg and Moravia (Pincherle) are clearly atheists and their writings are devoid of all religious connotation. But this notwithstanding, these writings are not without a distant echo of that typical spirit which permeates Central and East Central European Jewish culture. Moravia unashamedly takes Dostoyevsky as his model, just as Ginzburg takes Chekhov. Nevertheless in certain episodes of both *Lessico familiare* and *Gli indifferenti* we have the

impression that we are experiencing a strongly Jewish story about an upper-middle-class Jewish family from the end of the century and the first decades of the 20th. We find similar stories in abundance in the literature of Central European countries too.

There is also the example of the giant and tragic figure of Carlo Michelstaedter, who committed suicide at the age of twenty-three in Gorizia in 1910. Today, according to the philosopher and scholar of aesthetics Asor Rosa, Michelstaedter represents perhaps the most original Italian contribution to the field of philosophy in the whole of the twentieth century. The works and theories of this precocious genius are the fruit of his variegated education, which took place in an Ashkenazi background in an Austrian city which had contact with Italian cities (Gorizia), and subsequently in Florence. The grafting of Central European Jewish culture onto Mediterranean culture (Michelstaedter was a student of Greek philosophy and literature) found hard hitting formulation in the few surviving works of this great talent. I should say that he represents the highest example of this phenomenon in Italy. On the other hand, these two cultures are by no means antithetic, and much of that «dionysiac» spirit of which Nietzsche speaks has been reformulated with a strong ethical and religious character, exactly that of Jewish culture replanted in one of the great European nations. Michelstaedter speaks about this clearly in his correspondence over the ancient documents in the Gorizian Library which deal with the Jewish community and his own family history: a grandfather of the young philosopher was a famous rabbi.

Miriam Mafai, a well-known journalist working for a large Italian daily newspaper, is also a descendant of a rabbi from Vilnius and was a militant marxist, at least as long as this militancy represented a great mass movement. Nor should we forget Ugo Stille (ex-director of *Il Corriere della Sera*) and many other journalists of repute who have in some way embodied, and still do embody, the spirit of the culture which we are talking about. The best interpreter of that culture up to the present day has been the world famous Trieste scholar Claudio Magris. *Lontano da dove* (*Far From Where*) is perhaps the book to which we owe most for the interpretation and popularization of Yiddish literature and the spirit of Yiddish literature in Italy, and in a certain way this work too belongs to that literature.

The great Lithuanian thinker Levinas has confuted many Heideggerian theories, including that according to which language is the house of being. It has been demonstrated that this does not always work and that a certain spirit has a power which is above language.

[Translated by Jeremy H. Grant]