

The Italy Affair

by Annie Sacerdoti

There have never been many Jews in Italy. For over two thousand years the number has not exceeded the 40 thousand that today are spread throughout 21 communities—a very small number. The good fortune of being in Italy, however, is that for centuries the Jewish artistic heritage has not been proportionate to the size of the Jewish community but to the Italian artistic heritage, which, as you know, represents a large percentage of the world's artistic heritage. In Italy, in fact, are the most ancient catacombs of the Diaspora, and some seventy synagogues, built from the Middle Ages to the 19th Century, including two dating right back to the Ancient Roman period. There are a dozen museums scattered throughout the country, containing objects of religious worship and everyday life: furniture, fabrics, books and documents, some of which are particularly valuable for their rich decorations. This is a heritage that is taking on increasing importance, as well as arousing increasing interest among the non-Jewish public, with whom it is finding its place as an integral part of the artistic heritage of Italy.

It can be said, in fact, that there is no region of the country which has not hosted a small community of Jews who have left behind them traces and tokens of their presence: in southern Italy, from where they were expelled in 1492; in the countryside and the villages, abandoned at the time of the ghettos (1555); in the provincial towns, left in the

period of emancipation (1860) for the large, flourishing industrial cities, and lastly, in the small communities left empty by the deportations. Today, half the population of Italian Jews are concentrated in just two communities—Rome (10 thousand) and Milan (6 thousand); the other half live in small or medium-sized communities, some of which count only a few dozen individuals.

The artistic heritage itself has undergone many changes over the years. In the 1950s many items of furniture belonging to Jewish communities that no longer existed were taken to Israel, such as those of the synagogue in Conegliano Veneto, which were respectfully relocated in the Italian Temple of Jerusalem. Today numerous synagogues of the State of Israel use furniture of Italian origin. Subsequently, from the Seventies onwards, the Jewish world began to take a renewed interest in its roots, with increasingly intensive studies and researches being set up. Excuse me if I mention my own work, but I myself wrote the first *Guide to Jewish Italy*, in which I indicated throughout the country synagogues, oratories, cemeteries, or merely traces of present or past Jewish settlement. This book, which was received with great interest by the non-Jewish public, for whom it represented a first introduction to the subject of Jewish artistic heritage, was followed by a series of regional Jewish guides (nine to date, many of which have also been translated into English) and finally a new *Guide to Jewish Italy*, which has just recently been released and which covers all the Jewish sites to be visited in Italy (the English version will be available in the summer). The publishing of these books has contributed and contributes to the development of not only Jewish tourism, which already existed for the more prominent places such as Venice, Rome, and Florence but also of an extraordinary historical and cultural interest in the whole country. For many, in fact, it was a surprise to

discover that the greatest European concentration of perfectly preserved 18th Century synagogues is in Piedmont. In the meantime, Jewish museums have multiplied, both in places where there are Jewish communities and places where today there are only Jewish monuments. The European Jewish Culture Day, which has been held in Italy for the past four years on the first Sunday in September and is officially recognised by the Italian Republic Presidency and the Ministries of Cultural Heritage and Education, attracts over twenty thousand visitors to Jewish sites in a single day.

The existence of this heritage and the possibility of enjoying it have led over recent years to the setting up of cooperatives of young operators (mostly non-Jewish) dedicated to receiving and accompanying visitors and students. At present, these are found in Venice, Florence, and Siena as well as in Turin for visits in Piedmont. The synagogues in this latter region are the property of the community of Turin, which, over the years, has provided for their restoration by requesting financing from the regional Authorities and the banks.

In other regions the local communities have handed over the synagogues to the town councils, which have shouldered the responsibility for their restoration and maintenance: in the Lombard town of Sabbioneta, known as the 'little Athens of the Gonzagas', the synagogue is part of a tourist trail through the town; in Ivrea, in Piedmont, the synagogue has also been handed over to the town council and is now used as a conference and concert hall; in Gorizia, in the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, the synagogue is today a museum run by local cultural associations. The synagogue of Pesaro, which became the property of the town council about a decade ago, has unfortunately been only partially restored, due to lack of funds.

The Union of Italian Jewish Communities is currently organising works on the synagogue of Vercelli, which was built in the late 19th Century and has a capacity of up to 1500 people. In the city, however, the Jewish Community counts only two members. The building needs restoration work amounting to millions of euros, but we have only managed to raise funds from two banks and from the town council for the restoration of the stained-glass windows. This does not solve the problem of the dilapidated state of the building. After restoration (costing, as I have said, millions), there will be the problem of use. The idea is to propose it as a university library, reserving one part for worship.

The Roman catacombs of Villa Torlonia are another place of international interest. A few years ago, the World Monument Fund supplied the funds needed for work that would allow the re-opening of the catacombs. Today they are Italian state property, and are closed to the public. It is not possible, in fact, to remain more than a few minutes inside, due to the presence of certain harmful gasses. These gasses, however, have maintained a stable microclimate that has preserved the wall frescoes, although these are still threatened by the roots of the trees in the park above, which work their way down between the tuff walls. Over the past months a committee made up of members of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage has been working to save the catacombs and re-open them to the public. The Ministry, in fact, has allocated funds for the next three years, which makes the situation seem hopeful. Lastly, I must mention the little-known yet very rich Jewish heritage in the south of Italy, especially in Puglia and Sicily, which is still completely to be discovered and salvaged. The area is particularly difficult, however, as there are no Jewish communities in these

regions but there are a great many individuals posing as scholars and experts, not to mention the profiteers seeking to exploit Jewish themes for business.

The large number of existing synagogues in Italy presents the Union of Italian Jewish Communities and the individual Jewish communities with problems relating to their conservation, restoration, and use. The problem is that of having to manage a great artistic heritage with the few people that the Union has available, something which requires an enormous amount of money. We were the ones who revealed this cultural wealth to the Ministries and the Regional and Town Councils, which often had no idea of the presence of Jewish artistic heritage in their territory or in their city. We requested support from banks and foundations, and now and then obtained funds—although these never cover more than 50 percent of the work needed. We tried appealing to the industries, as in the case of the restoration of the Pesaro cemetery, which was financed by Scavolini, a leading manufacturer of kitchen furniture. This, however, was an exception. So we knock on a great many doors, but those who really provide concrete support are few. European Union funding may represent a new source of support, and certainly not only for us in Italy. There is also one more path that we might yet try, and that is the Lotto Game, a lottery worth billions, which in Italy also sponsors artistic heritage. The question that comes to mind, however, is: how kosher is this type of money?