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Introduction

“[THERE] WERE MORE than a hundred and [they] are now only forty; the ones who do not know how to work and let their bread be stolen and are slapped from the morning to the evening; the Germans call them ‘*zwei linke Hande*’ (two left hands), and even Polish Jews despise them as they do not speak Yiddish.” This is how Primo Levi describes how Italian Jews were seen in the camp, with a hint of amazement that there were Jews in Italy at all—Jews, what’s more, who didn’t speak the language of the Jews.¹

Indeed, there are few Italian Jews. Few in Auschwitz in 1944 but also few in the centuries preceding the Shoah. Today, there are 23,000 Italian Jews enrolled in a Community,² less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the population. It is difficult to establish the actual number of Italian Jews in ancient and medieval times, but to give an idea of its order of magnitude compared with the rest of the European diaspora, it is estimated that there were 120,000 Italian Jews in the fifteenth century, up from about 50,000 at the beginning of the fourteenth century. In the fourteenth century, before the expulsion, there are believed to have been 20,000 Jews in southern France and 100,000 total in France, and 100,000 in the Holy Roman Empire, which was down to 80,000 at the end of the fifteenth century. In Spain—the figures are excessive and not based on reliable sources—the number of Jews before the expulsion of 1492 has been estimated at 250,000. At that time, the Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe were just beginning to be established: 30,000 individuals in Poland and 20,000 in Hungary at the end

of the fifteenth century.³ From the seventeenth century onward, the ascendancy of the Jews in Poland and in the rest of Eastern Europe, in terms of numbers, social identity, and cultural expression, together with their massive extermination in the Holocaust, has overshadowed the existence of an Italian Judaism. The roots of this Jewish Community can be traced back to ancient times. It was, in the first millennium, the privileged community of origin for much of the Western diaspora. Over the centuries, this term, “diaspora,” has taken on very different meanings, but I will use it here in its original meaning of “dispersion of the Jews,” however motivated and whether or not effected by the use of force, starting from the second century BCE.

The role of the Italian Jewish world in the first millennium as the cradle of the Western diaspora has never taken on the legendary aura in Jewish memory that is reserved for the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the *gherush*, which soon became mythical, sharing as it does the same date, the ninth of the month Av, as the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE.⁴ Thus, while much history has been written in recent decades about the Italian Jewish world—about its extraordinary culture, and about its ghettos—little has been remembered, or is known, outside of academia. That amazement of which Primo Levi speaks regarding the very existence of Italian Jews persists outside of Italy. To a certain extent it signals the Italian Jewish world’s specificity, its having a history that in some way is unusual.

This book recounts that history: the first two thousand years—actually a little more—of the Jews in Italy told from a bird’s-eye view, across time and place. It is a history of the Jews, not of Judaism.⁵ In this book, the reader will find the history of Judaism only in its relation to the history of the Jews: that is, in so far as it touches on the Jewish presence and experience in Italy, its motivations, its juridical status, its culture, and the world in which it is immersed. And since, I believe, it is impossible to think of a history of Italy without the Jews, this is also a history of Italy, an Italy distinguished by the existence of the Jewish minority in its bosom. This is a history that brings to light the specificities of the Italian Jewish experience, its differences with respect to the histories of the other Jews in Western Europe, as well as the similarities,

relationships, and analogies with those other histories. The focus here is Italy within Western Europe. A book that examined the whole of Europe—encompassing Central and Eastern Europe, from Poland to Russia—would be another enterprise, not the history you will read here.

But while this book is centered on the Jewish experience in only one country, the long duration and unusual continuity of the Jewish presence in Italy means that readers of this book will be contending with a vast amount of information: individual and collective actors and events, as well as political, theological, and philosophical movements, and so on. To help them digest that information and to flesh out the larger themes that interweave throughout the history of the Jews in Italy, each of the eleven chapters ends with a section that focuses on the experience of an individual, place, document, or movement that in one way or another can be seen as emblematic of the Italian Jewish experience in each particular period of our evolving story. The hope is that these emblematic individual experiences will also facilitate a deeper appreciation for the distinctive features of the Italian diaspora relative to its counterparts in other areas of Europe.

When did this history of the Jews in Italy begin to be “different”? It was not so in the very first centuries of the diaspora, before the war between Rome and Judea, when nothing differentiated the Jews who settled in Rome from the Jewish merchants of various origins who settled on the Mediterranean coasts. Despite the bloody war that brought thousands of Jewish slaves to Rome, it was not so even in imperial times, when the Jews residing in Rome were *cives romani* (Roman citizens). The history of Italian Jews began to be different, however, when the empire became Christian and the norms that put the Jews in a state of inferiority were accompanied by the violently anti-Jewish propaganda of the Fathers of the Church. It began to be different when the popes, from Rome, enshrined the legitimacy of the Jewish presence in Italy even while decreeing the inferiority of Judaism to Christianity. Furthermore, the specific character of Italian Jewish history was evident, chiefly though not exclusively, in geographical areas where ancient Roman law and the influence of the Church were strongest. In no other part

of the Jewish Diaspora has the Jewish presence been so accepted and sanctioned as in Italy under papal rule or influence. Jews were the only religious minority allowed in the Christian world, pending their final conversion. For this reason, the Jewish presence in Italy has been symbolically strong, having taken on an importance far exceeding its size and composition.

The history of the Jews in Italy is also rather well documented, even if the beacon illuminating it leaves large areas of shadow, centuries in which we know little about the life of the Jews and their culture as well as the world around them. Indeed, historical documentation offers us a precise picture of the Jewish presence in Italy in the centuries prior to the destruction of the Temple, when Jewish merchants and slaves already constituted a considerable population in Rome. We also know a great deal, from the large number of sources, written or archeological, about the Jewish presence in the city of Rome, the center of the empire, and later of Christianity and the seat of the papacy. The Jewish presence in the Eternal City is distinguished by a continuity unknown to the rest of the Italian and European Jewish world, and much greater than that of the other Romans, so much so that the Jews claim to be the only inhabitants of the city who can boast a centuries-old uninterrupted ancestry. The Jewish presence is also well documented on the coasts of southern Italy, thanks to the development of its great cultural flowering between the sixth and ninth centuries, the earliest in Europe. The evidence we have of this Jewish presence is ample and precise, allowing us to trace it back to ancient times. This is not something we can do, by contrast, in England, where Jews were not present before the eleventh century, nor even in Spain and Provence, where a Jewish presence dates back to the first centuries of our era but where documentation is very scarce for those early centuries.

This is not to say that Italian Jewish history is entirely different from the history of the Jews of other countries. There have been very few moments in its history when the Italian Jewish world was closed to other Jewish experiences. For the most part, the opposite was true, from contact with Babylon in the first millennium, to contact in the Middle Ages with Jews on the other side of the Mediterranean, to contact with Venice and the other Italian cities of the

Sephardic and Portuguese diaspora, to the relationship of Italian Jews with the European culture of Haskalah. There are countless relationships and similarities that accompany and compete with the differences. This is true—to a lesser extent, of course—in Rome and its area of influence, and to a much greater extent in cities with a Sephardic presence such as Livorno, a real center of the transnational network of Italian Jews.

Yet, despite the important and enduring relationships between the Italian Jewish world and the Jewish world beyond the Alps and on the two coasts of the Mediterranean, Italian Jewish history is considered here as having its own substantial specificity. Its distinctiveness depends largely, though not entirely, on its relationship with the Church, which always guaranteed the presence of the Jews in its bosom, preventing their generalized expulsion, unlike almost all the rest of Europe, for strictly theological reasons. At least since the end of the Middle Ages, the Church was interested in pushing the Jews to the baptismal font, rather than getting rid of them. The Church, unlike the developing monarchical states, England, France, and later Spain, decided to maintain and even safeguard the presence of the Jews, while always subordinating and controlling them and ever mindful of their theological “inferiority.” In fact, true that the relationship with the Christian world was a unifying element of at least a part of the Jewish world during these centuries, the same was not true for the relationship with the institutional Church, as distinct from the relationship between Jews and Christians and even between Jews and local clergy.

From a still broader perspective, this book highlights the close relationship between Italian Jews and the surrounding Italian Christian world, of which the Jews adopted many important elements starting in the very first centuries of the Jewish presence, from the language to ways of dressing, from cohabitation in neighborhoods and streets common to non-Jews to social and cultural interactions and exchanges. The Italian Jews’ relationship with the majoritarian Christian world did not exclude Jewish influence on that world and its culture, and that relationship, in different ways, crosses the centuries, at times closer, at times tenuous, but never erased even by the existence of the walls of the ghettos. Italian Jews speak Italian and often share, in addition to the language,

non-Jewish Italian culture. Between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Jews even made a not insignificant contribution to the birth of vernacular literature. Relations, at least up to the age of the ghettos but also beyond, were close, characterized by a sort of mutual knowledge that did not eliminate mistrust, of course, on both the Christian and Jewish sides, but nevertheless kept it under control. This is not to say that the coexistence was all rosy: there were many periods in which it broke down, as in southern Italy in the first millennium, when Apulia, Calabria, Basilicata, and part of Campania were under Byzantine domination or later under the Angevins. But it is a fact that Italian Jews were and remain difficult to distinguish from the Christians among whom they lived, so much so that in 1215, to do so the Church had to introduce the use of the distinctive sign, borrowing it from medieval Islam. The Jews' relationship with the Church is also closely linked to the institution of ghettos, another distinctive Italian feature, involving the night-time enclosure of Jews in confined spaces and their radical separation from the homes of Christians. Except for the Venice ghetto, created in 1516 and very much a case apart, this closure was promoted by the Church and was carried out not only as a separation but above all as a way of pressuring Jews to convert.

It must also be emphasized that the Italian Jewish world is also quite specific in the continuity of its religious practice. Italian Jews have never chosen the path of radical transformation nor, conversely, total conservation. They embraced neither the Jewish Reform movement of the nineteenth century nor modern forms of ultra-Orthodox Judaism. To what extent was this choice of a middle road associated with Italian Jews' habitual reshaping of their culture, with their continuous relationship with the outside world, and in particular with the Church? The fact remains that Italian Judaism speaks and has always spoken the language of the cultural majority, absorbing the majority culture and in turn influencing it profoundly, constantly measuring itself against the outside, expressing curiosity about this majority culture, adjusting to it, and resisting it.

"How Jewish is Jewish history?" Almost two decades ago, the Israeli scholar Moshe Rosman posed this question about a book of essays edited by his fellow historian David Biale. Rosman

interrogates, in particular, Biale's decision to entitle his book *Cultures of the Jews* rather than *The Culture of the Jews*. Opting for the latter, singular option would have signaled an emphasis on the internal ties of the Jewish world, rather than on its connections with the various external worlds.⁶ Such questions remain a matter of much debate among historians of Jews today. There is an emerging tendency to highlight, with regard to Italian Jews, not what is anomalous or specific about their history but their connections with the rest of the Jewish world, the Jews both of the Mediterranean and of the Germanic region, as well of Israel.⁷ The roots of these connections are tradition and religion, or, instead, the economic and cultural ties between the different communities. In my view, however, this perspective can only supplement and deepen, not replace, an approach that focuses on the specificity of Italian Jews as a very small minority, strongly conditioned by their direct relationship with the Church and their centuries-old integration with the external society, with which they share language, culture, expertise, and sometimes, as in the movement for Italian unification (the *Risorgimento*), ideals and political platforms. The history of the Jews in Italy is a history that has been influenced over time more by their relations with the non-Jewish Italian world than by those, however longstanding and significant, with the rest of the Jewish world. The history of the Jews in Italy can rightly be defined as "an Italian history," so much so that it can be argued that, without the presence of this Jewish world within it, Italian history itself would have been profoundly different.

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