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## Book Review: The Most Tenacious of Minorities: The Jews of Italy

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REGUER, SARA, *The Most Tenacious of Minorities: the Jews of Italy*, 240pp., Academic Studies Press, Boston, ISBN: 978-1-61811-244-6, 2013, £48.95 (hardcover)

This well written, clear, insightful introduction to the history of the Jews of Italy includes 8 succinct chapters followed by bibliographical references and interspersed with timelines, with boxed text summarizing key ideas, people, and events chronologically arranged.

The first 8 chapters flow chronologically and Chapter 9 is titled, "Reclaiming the Heroic Jewish Judith" and includes a translation and introduction to the poem "Yotzer for Hanukah" authored by Yosef ben Shlomo from Carcassonne who wrote a midrashic variant for the Judith story instead of following the Apocrypha. Chapter 10, titled "Converso", looks at the converso Maria Maddalena de Riu (1876-1960), born in Sedilo, who tenaciously kept certain mitzvot and customs.

In chapter 1 Reguer traces the formation of the Italian Jews back to ancient Rome in the time of the Book of Maccabees. In chapter 2 Reguer notes the journey depicted in the Babylonian Talmud of Rabban Gamliel II, R. Joshua ben Hananya, R. Eleazar ben Azarya, and Rabbi Akiva as emissaries to Rome to advocate for the withdrawal of the edict against Judaism by Emperor Domitian. Reguer goes on to describe the 2nd century trip of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai and Rabbi Eleazar ben Yossi to help Rabbi Matityahu ben Kharash, head of the Italian Yeshiva, with points of Jewish law. Reguer makes passing reference to the catacomb tomb inscriptions of Jews. The fact that these inscriptions are rarely in Hebrew but in Greek and Latin speaks to the level of acculturation with the host society, even with the maintenance of the "scuola" (from the Latin word for synagogue) led by the archisynagogus (synagogue president) who raised funds for the Temple and later for the Yavne Yeshiva of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. Reguer touches on the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132-135 which was not just a revolt to reclaim a Jewish homeland from Roman domination, but against the Hadrianic persecutions.

In chapter 3 Reguer touches on Shabtai Donnolo (913-982 CE), a Jewish physician in Oria on the Adriatic coast who authored *Sefer ha-Mirkakhot* (book of Remedies) and a commentary on *Sefer Yetzira*. In this chapter we also encounter Rabbi Abraham ibn Daud's *Sefer ha-Qabbala* (Book of Tradition). Reguer also discusses *Josippon*, the historical narrative written in Hebrew by an anonymous southern Italian author which described the period of the second temple, drawing on the Latin works of Josephus, the Apocrypha, and medieval chronicles. A fourth

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## BOOK REVIEWS

source is Ahimaatz ben Paltiel (b. 1017) who moved from Oria to Capua and wrote *Megilat Ahimaatz* describing his geneology in rhymed Hebrew prose. A fifth source is that of Benjamin of Tudela who traveled through northern Italy, specifically Genoa, Lucca, Pisa, and Rome crossing the boot into Trani, Apulia, Taranto, Ortranto, and Brindisi. A sixth cultural Jewish luminary is Jacob Anatoli who at the request of King Frederick translated Averroes and Arabic astronomical works into Hebrew.

Chapter 4 covers the first printed book in Hebrew (1468), the Trent blood libel (1475), Judah Messer Leon (c. 1420-1498) author of *Nofet Tsufim* (Book of the Honeycomb's Flow), the formation of the Ghetto Nuovo in Venice (1516) and later the Ghetto Vecchio for Middle Eastern and Sephardic Jews, Rav Ovadia Sforno (1470-1550), the printing press of Gershom Soncino (1460s-1534), Daniel Bomberg's Venetian 23 volume printing of the Talmud (1519-1523,) and the burning of the Talmud in Rome (1553) recounted by R. Joseph ha-Kohen in *Emek Ha-Bakha*. In the north of Italy Rabbi Joseph Colon and R. Judah Minz of Padua ran yeshivot, and Verona and Cremona also had Rabbinic Academies. Reguer notes that the Rabbinic luminary Elijah Delmedigo (1458-1497) published his *Sefer Behinat ha-Dat* (Examination of Faith) in 1490. In the wake of the schism between the Rome and Avignon papacies, the Jews sent a delegation to the Holy See to ask the Pope for his protection, to which the Pope responded with the "Bull of Benevolence" which allowed Jewish doctors to practice medicine (1419). This chapter also discusses Immanuel of Rome (c.1261-1328) who in his *Mahbarot* (Compositions constituting 28 cantos) with the poem *Yigdal* draws on Maimonides' 13 principles of faith. Attention is also paid to women's Jewish history as in the example of Anna the Hebrew who provided cosmetics for Catherine Sforza and Queen Elizabeth I, with the further two examples of Benvenida Abrabanel and Dona Gracia Nasi. Christian Hebraicists such as Pico Della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin are also touched upon.

Chapter 5 discusses the Ghettos of Venice, Rome, Florence, and Trieste and highlights the intellectual creativity of Leone Da Mondena (1571-1648) author of *Historia de Riti Hebraici* and his autobiography *Hayyei Yehuda*. Salomone de' Rossi (1570-1630) a baroque Hebrew composer served as the court musician of Gonzagas of Mantua. Reguer also touches on Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1747) author of the *Mesilat Yesharim*. In women's history, mention is made of Sara Coppio Sullam (ca. 1592-1641) who hosted a salon in Venice for distinguished intellectuals and the prayer services for women (*scole delle donne*) in which a women would lead the responses in an attached room to the synagogue.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Chapter 6 deals with the ghetto walls being taken down (1789) in the wake of the French Revolution, and their reinstatement in 1814. The chapter carries the story of the Jews of Italy up until the early twentieth century: the formation of the Consortium of Italian Jewish Communities (1920), Mussolini's meeting with Chaim Weizman (1926), and the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (1933) when Hitler became Chancellor.

Chapter 7 covers topics such as the 1938 Manifesto of Racist Scientists, the 1938 Rome-Berlin Axis whereby Jews were expelled from academies and cultural institutions, racial laws of 1938, the banning in 1939 of Jews from professions, the formation of the Jewish resistance organization DELASEM (Delegazione per L'Assistenza degli Emigranti Ebrei) with headquarters in Genoa in June 1940.

Chapter 8 titled "Contemporary Italy" discusses the meeting of the Italian Synagogue congregation of Jerusalem in 1941, the 1951 dismantling of the Congeliano Veneto Synagogue and its shipping to Jerusalem to become the Italian synagogue in the old German compound, and the arrival of Libyan Jews (1967) Persian Jews (1978) Russian Jews (1991), Iranian Jews (1997) in Italy.

While Reguer does mention legislative actions curtailing Jewish freedoms and rights, blood libels (Trent 1475) and expulsions (i.e. from Naples in 1208) and burning of Jewish books (1553 Rome), Crusader violence during the 6 Crusades from 1096 to 1289, the Inquisition and the burning of the neofiti in auto de-fes (1513) and an auto de fes of 23 Jews on the piazza of Ancona around 1556 etc, the book avoids a lachrymose depiction of the history of Jewish in Italy. Reguer argues that "the story of the Jews of Italy is one of re-creation and tenacious resistance to merging with the larger community in the process of acculturation and assimilation (p.176)."

Some scholars may have wished that the bibliographies might have been longer. Also while Reguer cites in the bibliography the important scholarship of Bonfil, Ruderman, David, Shulvass, etc. there are no footnotes to these researchers. Footnotes might have strengthened the book.

To sum up, this book is highly recommended as an introduction and general overview to courses on the history of Jews in Italy. More advanced research should consult a wider bibliography and other seminal scholarly works.

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