

Editorial: Ten Years of *Quest*

by *Guri Schwarz*

Ten years ago, we published the first issue of our journal. *Quest* had been in the works for well over a year, the idea stemmed from the need of the Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea (CDEC) of Milan to equip itself with a scientific periodical. As a result of the discussions that took place within the CDEC's Scientific Board, it was decided to take what Michele Sarfatti, Editor in Chief for the first eight issues of *Quest* and Director of the CDEC, qualified as “a leap of faith:”¹ the creation of an English language, online, open-access journal devoted to publishing contributions on any aspect of Jewish history from the 18th century onwards. Not merely the house-organ of the CDEC – which was, and still is, the main Italian research center for the study of the Holocaust, modern Italian Jewish history and antisemitism – but a more ambitious project.

It was not an obvious choice. There was no lack of Jewish history journals, so why the need to create a new one? The team that conceived the project was based in Italy – a country with a tiny Jewish minority and at the same time a long and rich Jewish past – and our intent was to create a venue for scholarly discussion that could further stimulate the field of Jewish studies, and Jewish history in particular, in Italy where, despite the fact that some significant scholarly works were and are being produced, the field has little autonomy and is confined to being a subset of wider disciplinary sectors (such as modern history, religious studies, Hebrew literature etc.). If that had been the only objective, we could have done it in Italian, and in many ways it would have been easier. There was also another, maybe more ambitious goal: as we discussed the various options, we realized that one of the things that we yearned for was a venue that could promote dialogue between different academic traditions. It is a fact that the U.S. represents the vital core of Jewish Studies worldwide. This reflects availability of funding, the recognition awarded to the field within academic institutions and, of course, the quality of the works produced. Then there is Israel, with its own traditions and institutions, which also constitutes a crucial point of reference. In the 21st century, if one wants to find a place in the global discussion in this field English is the obvious medium,

¹ “A New Journal: *Quest*, Alessandro Cassin interviews Michele Sarfatti, historian and Director of CDEC,” *Printed_Matter: Centro Primo Levi Online Monthly*, January 28, 2010; <https://primolevicenter.org/printed-matter/a-new-history-online-journal-quest/>

but language is not the only barrier. A European scholar could find a way to be read by having his/her work translated into English and publishing in American academic journals. What is required though is, often, not a mere linguistic transformation, but an adaptation to a different cultural milieu. We must recognize that there are varying, sometimes diverging, certainly autonomous historiographic traditions that deserve to retain their identity and that – at the same time – could benefit from a closer dialogue. With this journal our goal was to foster such scholarly conversation, creating bridges that could put different schools and approaches in communication with each other. Consequently, we chose to create a journal that would guarantee the easiest access to the widest possible audience. That was one of the reasons why *Quest* was “born digital.”²

It is of course not up to us to measure our success. In these first ten years we published 17 issues, striving to come out twice a year, an objective that was reached most of the time, and concentrating primarily on the publication of special, monographic issues, revolving around a unifying theme. Only three issues have not followed this course and have instead taken the form of *miscellanea*, in which we gathered unrelated contributions that we received. Next to the *Focus* section, which hosted the research articles, we also published book discussions and reviews. Overall, we published 133 research articles as well as a total of 130 other contributions, summing together *Discussions* and *Reviews*. The topics and time periods covered varied widely, as did the methodologies employed, reflecting the open approach that we selected. The authors of said articles and contributions were based in various parts of the world: in the Americas (Canada and the U.S.), in Israel, in Europe (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, U.K.), and in Australia. Through time the journal gained traction, it is currently indexed in DOAJ, Scopus, WoS, Rambi and other platforms. Last spring the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) has classified *Quest* as a top tier journal (“Fascia A”) in the fields of Early Modern History, Modern History, Religious Studies, Hebrew Literature and Culture, History of International Relations and of Extra-European Societies and Institutions. This is a fundamental recognition for a journal based in Italy; it suggests that – at least in part – with this

² Heide Lerner, “Jewish Studies ‘Born Digital,’” *AJS Perspectives*, Spring 2011, 40-42; <https://www.associationforjewishstudies.org/professional-development/professional-development/digital-jewish-studies/perspectives-on-technology/jewish-studies-born-digital>

endeavor we were able to stimulate the Italian academic system into acknowledging the relevance of the field of Jewish History.

Programming the issues and pursuing our project, year after year, was an arduous enterprise, made possible by the fruitful teamwork of a tight-knit group of Editors, wonderfully supported by the Editorial Staff and by the Editorial Advisory Board. I take this opportunity to thank the Editors of the special issues and all the authors who collaborated with us, writing articles, discussions and reviews. And I cannot forget the invisible but crucial work of all the external peer-reviewers who accepted to lend their expertise, reading and commenting on the texts we submitted to their attention. In celebrating what was accomplished in these first ten years my memory turns in grateful appreciation to all those who supported us. I wish to express my gratitude to the Fondazione CDEC, which allowed us to work free of constraints while offering an unrelenting financial and institutional support. I also feel the need to remember, in particular, those colleagues and friends who followed our project since its inception and who are no longer with us. I believe it is appropriate to honor here the figures of the medievalist and scholar of Italian-Jewish history Michele Luzzati (1939-2014) – founder and first director of Italy’s first Jewish Studies Center set inside a university³ – and of Giovanni Miccoli (1933-2017), scholar of the Catholic Church who made several key contributions to the reframing of the interconnections between antijudaism and antisemitism. As members of the CDEC’s Scientific Board, both supported the project of launching *Quest* and then joined in as members of the Editorial Advisory Board. Last but not least, my thoughts turn with gratitude to David Cesarani (1956-2015), the pioneering historian of Anglo-Jewry and the Holocaust, who accepted to join *Quest*’s Editorial Advisory Board with enthusiasm and then contributed with critical and constructive feedback since the early stages of the journal’s life.

For this tenth anniversary we gifted our readers and ourselves with a new, more modern and more flexible website. The transition to this new website proved to be more complex than expected and there are still some small problems that need to be resolved. Nonetheless it was time to go online with a new issue, the few remaining bugs will be fixed in the upcoming weeks. This renewed infrastructure will, hopefully, allow us to make a more proficient use of the potential of digital technology. One of our future goals is in fact to go beyond the conventional journal format that basically publishes online the contents of a traditional paper

³ The Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Ebraici (CISE) was established at the University of Pisa in 2003.

periodical. We would like to implement the full potential of a digital journal, publishing contributions that make use of audio and video content. The easiest and most obvious option is, of course, to publish audio or audio/video recordings of interviews and/or roundtable panels. We will consider that, but would like to be bolder and, if possible, go further. In fact, if the future of scholarly communication is digital, then the way in which we conceive and write our papers will have to adapt, allowing for a better and more efficient use of recorded sources and materials that could not fit into a printed medium. We are thus considering future issues revolving around cinema, tv, and/or music, as these could represent the most obvious pathways to experiment with the full potential of a digital journal. We are thus looking forward to receiving proposals for articles or special issues that move in this direction, ideally with contributions that will not be merely illustrated by links to audio/visual resources, but that establish a new kind of interaction between the scholarly text and the digital resource analyzed.

Among the new features that we present to our readers, along with a renewed graphic interface, is a new section, denominated *Research Paths*, that will host research articles not connected by a unifying topic and unrelated to the *Focus* section. Thus, we encourage scholars to send us essays to be considered for publication in that framework. We are delighted to inaugurate this new section of our journal with two original contributions authored, respectively, by Rebecca Wolpe, and by Tamir Karkason, two junior scholars based in Israeli academic institutions. Through the analysis of the Yiddish periodical *Tsaytung*, published in Lemberg, Wolpe explores the Jewish reactions to the 1848-49 revolutions; instead Karkason, drawing insight from the work of scholars such as Matthias Lehmann and Yaron Tsur, reconstructs the interactions between maskilim in the Ottoman world and in the Austro-Hungarian empire, investigating intellectual networks and shared cultural frameworks.

The *Focus* section of this 17th issue, entitled *Thinking Europe in Yiddish*, is edited by Marion Aptroot. It includes five contributions – by David E. Fishman, Marc Caplan, Daria Vakhrushova, Debra Caplan, Gennady Estraiikh – selected among those presented in a conference with the same title organized at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf in 2018.⁴ The *Introduction* illustrates the rationale of the operation and how those five articles fit together, here it may suffice to say that this special issues does not merely reflect on Yiddish as an expression of European culture, but it explores the ways in which European spaces, cultures, identities

⁴ The conference was organized by Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed, Andrea von Hülsen-Esch.

were conceived and represented by the Yiddish speaking world as well as how, and to what degree, the Yiddish cultural community related to those concepts.

As usual, this issue is enriched by a *Discussion* of a book that we believe reflects trends and key questions debated in the field. In this case we selected Daniel Boyarin's thought-provoking synthesis *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, that here is critically analyzed by Luca Arcari, and by Daniel Barbu. Furthermore, in accordance with what is the established tradition for our journal, we publish also ten shorter book reviews, with the aim of offering to the reader a taste of recent contributions to scholarly research on variety of topics and time periods, considering books published in several languages (in this case in English, German, and French).

These have been ten years of hard work and passionate discussions. We learned a lot, heard new voices, confronted with different approaches. It is nice to look back and think of all the path covered together. It is even better to be able to look ahead, thinking of all the projects that we will be able to share in the future. Even now. Especially now, in a disquieting time in which our horizon seems encompassed in an overwhelming present, perhaps the best thing we can do is to strive to do our job as historians and scholars, keeping on the incessant struggle to reconnect the present and the past.