

Conversion Paths of Trieste's Jews in 1938-1939

by *Tullia Catalan*

Abstract

During 1938-1939, a large number of conversions of Jews to Catholicism took place in Trieste. It was not only Triestine Jews who converted, but also many foreign Jewish refugees, Austrian, German and Hungarian above all, in transit through the Adriatic port on their way to the Americas. The research has been carried on the basis of the documentation conserved at the Archiepiscopal Curia of Trieste, and has made it possible to analyze many individual paths, thus enabling the reconstruction of the personal motivations for conversion; the reactions of the Jewish community and those of the local Church. The essay also examines conversions in mixed marriages, also paying attention to gender roles in conversion paths. Special attention is paid to the mechanisms of the catechumenate and the correspondence between parish priests and the Curia, in order to understand the attitude of the city priests towards the racial laws.

Introduction

Conversions in 1938-1939: Individuals Routes, the Local Church and the Jewish Community

1939: Fears and Departures

Conclusion

Introduction¹

In previous research into Triestine Judaism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, I have already explored the topic of conversion to Catholicism, highlighting above all the motivations behind this radical choice to distance oneself from the community of origin. It was a decision which was often driven by sentimental motives, but in some cases also by economic demands or dictated by political activism.² In this work I have been able to emphasize gender roles and the reactions of the Community's leadership and the rabbinate to these abandonment of the Mosaic faith. I have sought to understand how this phenomenon can be contextualized within the larger picture of the Jewish Communities of the Habsburg Empire and the process of integration which followed emancipation. In fact, the port of Trieste's crucial importance for the Habsburgs contributed to the freedom given to the Jewish Community, which was considered important because of its professional skills and its commercial and financial relationships. The Community was then, and remains today, somewhat heterogeneous in terms of its ethnic makeup, including both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews. The Community integrated quickly and seamlessly into local society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, strengthening business links, as well as emotional bonds, as the high number of mixed marriages that characterized the Jewish nucleus of Trieste from the 1870s testifies. Indeed, mixed marriages

¹ I would like to thank the staff at the historical archives of the Episcopal Curia of Trieste, who kindly supported this research with great professionalism, generously allowing me to access all of the materials necessary for the study. Furthermore, special thanks are due to Dr Giselle Levy of the UCEI Bibliographical Centre in Rome, for her usual great willingness to help.

All of the surnames of the converted Jews present in the archival documents, have been given as an initial letter only. This was a decision taken to respect the privacy of the people and the families who took such a decision in trying times.

² Tullia Catalan, *La Comunità ebraica di Trieste (1781-1914). Politica, società e cultura* (Trieste: Lint, 2000), 197-220 and 242-250; Catalan, "Les conversions et les «désaveux» de la communauté juive de Trieste entre XIXe et XXe siècles," in *Entre Judaïsme et christianisme. Les conversions en Europe, de l'époque moderne à l'apparition de l'antisémitisme politique*, eds. Paola Ferruta, Martin Drumont, and Daniel Tollet (Paris-Louvain-Bristol: Peeters Publisher 2017), 119-1132. The conversions of Jewish women in Trieste is currently being studied by Paola Ferruta. See: Paola Ferruta, "Conversions de femmes «ordinaires» et monde intermédiaire entre «judaïsme et christianisme» à Trieste au tournant du XIX siècle," in *Entre Judaïsme et christianisme*, 133-166.

were widespread and frequent in the Jewish Community of Trieste until 1938, with higher numbers than in other parts of Italy.³

Another topic of this previous work has been the so-called “recantations” carried out by those wishing to abandon religion completely, a choice which was made by a significant number of the irredentist, pro-Italy component of the Jewish Community. This component took the decision to embrace the secular religion of the Fatherland, and therefore chose to formally distance themselves from the faith of their ancestors. In many cases the entire nuclear family left the Jewish Community.⁴ Another phenomenon which is often neglected by historiography, but which had a significant weight in the recantations and the conversions to Catholicism in 1938, can also be witnessed in the numerous cases of conversions to Judaism. These conversions, registered during the Habsburg period, were primarily driven by the desire to marry a Jewish man or woman. The laws which regulated civil marriage in Austria required the abandonment of faith of one or both of the spouses, and local society demonstrated in this way its notable porosity to inter-ethnic and inter-confessional unions.⁵

We can say that the presence in the second half of the nineteenth century of these different types of conversions in the local Jewish Community, in an already very secularized urban context, played an important role during fascism, when Triestine Jews were forced to quickly choose their strategies to escape the racist persecution which was aimed at them.

The aim of this research is to understand how the Jews of Trieste that chose conversion to Catholicism as a path to salvation expressed their choice to the Bishop’s Curia; how the ecclesiastical authorities reacted to the request; and how the leadership of the Jewish Community responded to this new, pressing loss of

³ On Jews in Trieste in the 1930s, see: Silva Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste 1930-1945. Identità, persecuzione, risposte* (Gorizia: LEG, 2000); Rene Moehrl, *Judenverfolgung in Triest während Faschismus und Nationalsozialismus 1922-1945* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2014).

⁴ On the religious disavowals of entire liberal-nationalist nuclear families, see Catalan, *La Comunità ebraica di Trieste*, 303-324. The topic is also discussed by Anna Millo, *L’élite del potere a Trieste. Una biografia collettiva 1891-1938* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1987), 55-67; Ilaria Pavan, “«Ebrei» in affari tra realtà e pregiudizio. Paradigmi storiografici e percorsi di ricerca dall’Unità alle leggi razziali,” *Quaderni Storici* 114, no. 3 (2003): 777-821; 786-795, who cites many examples of abjurations by Triestine Jews.

⁵ On mixed marriages in Austria, see: Steven M. Lowenstein, “Jewish Inter-marriage and Conversion in Germany and Austria,” *Modern Judaism* 25, no. 1 (2005): 23-61.

members, which seems to have stopped in part from 1931 to 1936.⁶ It is, I believe, necessary to go beyond the figures which have already been outlined on a quantitative level and dwell on several qualitative passages of the conversions to Catholicism between 1938-1939, which primarily concern Triestine Jews but also foreign Jews in transit via Trieste for destinations overseas.⁷ It is this interweaving of individual perspectives that allows us today to shed light on how much the choice to abandon the Jewish faith was, even in these moments of loss, fear and suffering, a difficult decision and sometimes a partial choice, which divided family groups, with just the children or only one of the spouses converting.⁸ For those who in the previous decades had converted into the Jewish faith in order to marry a Jew, this represented a re-entry into Catholicism which was primarily

⁶ See Tab. 2.

⁷ For a complete picture of the period of persecution in Trieste, see Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste*; Moehrl, *Judenverfolgung in Triest*. On conversion as a means of reaction and escape for many Jews during the period of the racist persecutions, see: Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista. Vicende, identità, persecuzione* (Turin: Einaudi, 2018), 233-234. See also: Riccardo Di Segni, "Battesimi e conversioni all'ebraismo a Roma nella prima metà del Novecento. Indagine preliminare su due registri," *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 81, no. 1 (2015): 21-49; Tommaso Dell'Era, "Leggi razziste, conversione degli ebrei e matrimoni misti a Torino nel 1938. Il cardinal Fossati, la Santa Sede e il S. Ufficio," *Giornale di Storia Contemporanea* 20, no. 1 (2018): 17-42, which is also a valuable source because of the rich bibliography it contains on conversions in Italy over a long period of time; Elena Mazzini, "Konversionen und Konvertiten im faschistische Italien zum Zeitpunkt der Rassenkampagne. Die Reaktion des Heiligen Stuhles und der katholischen Kirche in Italien," *Quellen und Forschungen aus Italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 95 (2015): 346-369; Robert Aleksander Maryks, *Pouring Jewish Water into Fascist Wine: Untold Stories of (Catholic) Jews from the Archive of Mussolini's Jesuit Pietro Tacchi Venturi* (Leiden-New York: Brill, 2011). Interesting reading for an overview of conversions in Europe during the Shoah: Yaakov Ariel, "From Faith to Faith. Conversions and de-Conversions during the Holocaust," *Sonderausdruck aus Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 12 (2013): 37-66. On the modern period, see the important area of study opened in Italy by Marina Caffiero, *Battesimi forzati. Storie di ebrei, cristiani e convertiti nella Roma dei Papi* (Rome: Viella, 2004). For a fundamental international overview, see: Todd M. Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish Fold. Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Oxford-Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁸ In Italy, unlike other countries, the topic of individual routes to conversion has not been studied in depth for the period of the racial laws. The first studies on this subject in the context of Trieste were conducted by Ellen Ginzburg Migliorino. See: Ellen Ginzburg Migliorino, "L'applicazione delle leggi antiebraiche a Trieste: aspetti e problemi," *Qualestoria* 1 (1989): 99-113; 106-113; Ginzburg Migliorino, "Note sugli esiti dell'applicazione delle leggi razziali a Trieste (1938-1942), in *Trieste in guerra. Gli anni 1938-1943*, ed. Anna Vinci (Trieste: Istituto regionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione in FVG, 1992) 297-335; 302-306.

driven by fear of persecution—a choice most often seen among the elderly and amongst widows and widowers.⁹

Particular attention should, in my opinion, be reserved for the decisions taken by the Curia of Trieste, guided at that time by Monsignor Antonio Santin,¹⁰ Bishop of Trieste and Capodistria, regarding the procedures that every aspiring catechumen had to undergo. There were several requests from the various parish priests of Trieste, who were largely inclined to accept all of the many requests for conversion, even shortening the period of catechesis in some cases. As we will see, much depended on the impression the aspiring convert made on the parish priest, or on their network of relationships with the Catholic world, and whether or not they happened to be married to a Catholic. In this case, a religious marriage ceremony was often celebrated alongside the conversion. Furthermore, we must mention Monsignor Santin's request to Mussolini, which he made during the Duce's visit to Trieste on September 18, 1938, to clarify several passages from the announcement of the racial laws, which made a veiled attack on the Pope's position on antisemitic policies.¹¹

This research will not examine conversions to Protestantism, which in Trieste are explained by the history of mutual collaboration and peaceful and fruitful

⁹ There are currently no general studies on conversions to Judaism in the contemporary period [in Italy]: the first important study on the *ghiurim*, as they are termed in Hebrew, can be found in Di Segni, "Battesimi e conversioni," 24; Riccardo Di Segni, "Un secolo di conversioni all'ebraismo nella Comunità ebraica di Roma (1915-2015)," *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 83 (2017): 63-92.

¹⁰ On Mons. Antonio Santin see the fundamental text by Paolo Blasina, *Vescovo e clero nella diocesi di Trieste-Capodistria 1938-1945* (Trieste: Istituto regionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione in FVG, 1993). Also useful: Pietro Zovatto, *Il vescovo Antonio Santin e il razzismo nazifascista a Trieste (1938-1945)* (Venice: Rebellato, 1977); Antonio Santin, *Al tramonto. Ricordi autobiografici di un vescovo* (Trieste: Lint, 1978).

¹¹ On Santin's intervention, see: Zovatto, *Il vescovo Antonio Santin*, 27-35. The bibliography on the different positions of the Church regarding the racial laws is vast, see: Giovanni Miccoli, "Santa Sede e Chiesa italiana di fronte alle leggi antiebraiche del 1938," in *La legislazione antiebraica in Italia e in Europa, Atti del Convegno del cinquantenario delle leggi razziali (Roma 17-18 ottobre 1988)* (Rome: Camera dei Deputati, 1989), 163-274; Raffaella Perin, "Pio IX, l'antisemitismo e le leggi razziste," in *La svolta del 1938. Fascismo, cattolicesimo e antisemitismo*, eds. Andrea Riccardi, Gabriele Rigano (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 2020), 63-75; David I. Kertzer, *Un papa in guerra. La storia segreta di Mussolini, Hitler e Pio XII* (Milan: Garzanti, 2022).

cohabitation between the two religious minorities: the Protestant Churches in Trieste showed great solidarity towards the Jews in their time of persecution.¹² Thanks to the archival materials in the historic Archive of the Diocese of Trieste and Capodistria that I examined, it has been possible to establish an internal periodization for the numerous conversions which took place during the so-called period of persecution against the rights of the Jews,¹³ which allows us to subdivide the period of 1938-1943 into two phases. The first can be defined as the first two years of persecution: from 1938 to 1939, and features the Jews of Trieste and many foreign Jews who were affected by the decree of expulsion of March 1939. On the contrary, the second phase, from 1940 to 1943, was characterized above all by the request for conversions among foreign Jews passing through the port of Trieste, assisted by the DELASEM, the Italian organization involved in Jewish emigration, which managed the movement of many German, Austrian and Eastern European Jews towards the countries who were willing to accept them.¹⁴ In this research we will focus primarily on the first two years of the persecution, since the second stage is currently the subject of ongoing research by the author.

Conversions in 1938-1939: Individuals Routes, the Local Church and the Jewish Community

Between 1931 and the first months of 1938, according to the data of the Jewish Community of Trieste, 29 Jews abandoned their faith, a small figure, but one which is worth reflecting upon, even if only briefly, in order to better understand what took place when the persecution of Jews began in earnest.¹⁵ In the 1920s and

¹² Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste*, 176. See the figures provided in Ginzburg Migliorino, “Leggi razziali a Trieste,” 305-306 on the conversions of Jews to Protestantism.

¹³ I refer here to the subdivision of the anti-Jewish persecution proposed by Michele Sarfatti in Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista*.

¹⁴ Tullia Catalan, “L'emigrazione ebraica in Palestina attraverso il porto di Trieste (1908-1938),” *Qualestoria* 2-3 (1991): 57-107.

¹⁵ Archivio Storico Unione Comunità Ebraiche Italiane [henceforth AUCEI], *Attività dell'Ucei 1934-1948*, b. 31D, Account of the life of the Jewish Community of Trieste and the activities of its institutions during 1939, p. 5. Silva Bon also highlights this date, viewing the low number of conversions in this period as confirmation of the successful integration of Triestine Jews into the local fascist society: Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste*, 175.

1930s, the local Jewish Community was well integrated into the majority society and there were no particular signs of antisemitic outbursts that could concern Triestine Jews. There was high degree of adherence to fascism in the city, including within the Community itself, which from the very beginning of the fascist movement had seen its potential to fulfil Italian nationalist ideals.¹⁶

Jews and Catholics met each another daily at school, at work and in their free time, which led to friendships, business links and relationships. This free and unproblematic intermingling with the majority society proved so enticing that—as Giorgina M. claimed in a letter sent to the Curia in 1921—it paved the way for conversion. Giorgina wrote that her wish to embrace Catholicism was motivated by the fact that she felt “prepared by an innate aversion to semitism, developed through her extensive contact with Catholics.”¹⁷ Others converted in order to fit in better at work, as Captain Enrico W. did in 1920;¹⁸ others converted to follow in the footsteps of their family, like the seamstress Amalia Elisa F., who candidly admitted in 1920 that “another 18 of her brothers and sisters have already been baptized.”¹⁹

A certain fluidity of movement from one religion to the other was characteristic of the city, even in the fascist period, and was considered a real nuisance by the local Church, since there were many Catholics who abandoned their faith in order to enter into a mixed marriage. This is a topic which still has to be studied in depth, and one which is prominent when studying the documents: it is obvious that social pressure, family ties, romance, and economic considerations could often lead to such a radical choice, but this did not always mean the end of all ties with one’s ex coreligionists, and this had not always been the result in the past either.²⁰ We

¹⁶ Millo, *L’élite di potere a Trieste*, 275-299; Renè Moehrlé, “Fascist Jews in Trieste: social, cultural and political dynamic 1919-1938,” in “Italy’s Fascist Jews: Insight on an Unusual Scenario,” ed. Michele Sarfatti, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC* 11 (2017): pp. 46-73, doi:10.48248/issn.2037-741X/814.

¹⁷ Archivio Storico della Diocesi di Trieste [henceforth ASDTS], *Convertiti*, b. 1120, fasc. 4/23, 1921.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, b. 1114, fasc. 31/20, 1920.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, fasc. 31/28, 1920. Testimony to the strength of family ties is the fact that entire families, belonging to different social classes, decided to abjure. However, compared to the previous periods, adults were always free to make their own choice: cfr. Pavan, “«Ebrei» in affari tra realtà e pregiudizio,” 787.

²⁰ Catalan, *La Comunità ebraica di Trieste*, 234.

must also bear in mind the high number of conversions to Judaism, even for marriage reasons, since they demonstrate without a shadow of a doubt the high level of integration of Triestine Judaism in the social fabric of the city.

In fascist Trieste, just like in the Habsburg city previously, secularism continued to permeate the whole society, making it open to these movements from one faith to another without particular soul searching or scruples.²¹ Furthermore, there were many Jews, already by the second half of the 1800s, who preferred to live without any religious beliefs. In order to better understand these trends, there should be a study on all the religious confessions present in the city, because it is in this direction that the studies—and the nineteenth-century documentation on which historians have largely worked to date—point us.²²

A slight increase in the number of conversions to the Catholic Church took place in 1937, when Triestine Jews were first subject to a mapping of their presence in the economic field: the investigations were carried out by the renowned antisemitic lawyer, Piero Pieri, President of the Province of Trieste, and the product of his research was more than 100 pages long, and it included the names of Triestine Jews, followed by their role and function in the economic panorama of the city.²³ Furthermore, the echo raised in the city by the beginning of the antisemitic campaign in Italy should not be overlooked. Antisemitic journalism had begun to prepare the ground for the growth of racist propaganda that would characterize the following years.²⁴ The new climate in the country caused immediate concern for the more informed members of the Jewish Community of Trieste, and they began to take their first individual steps towards disassociation. In the first months of 1938 there was an increase in the number of Jews abandoning their faith (37, to be precise), while many more took place in the terrible summer of 1938, which saw the start of the antisemitic campaign in Italy with the promulgations of the racist laws on the education and expulsion of foreign Jews at the start of September. Then, on September 18, in Trieste, Mussolini officially

²¹ Blasina, *Vescovo e clero*, 1-12.

²² Roberto Finzi, Giovanni Panjek, eds., *Storia economica e sociale di Trieste*, vol. I, *La Città dei gruppi 1719-1918* (Trieste: Lint, 2001).

²³ Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste*, 40-41.

²⁴ Mario Toscano, *Ebraismo e antisemitismo in Italia. Dal 1938 alla guerra dei sei giorni* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2004); Francesco Cassata, *“La Difesa della Razza”. Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008).

announced the anti-Jewish campaign.²⁵ It is no coincidence, in light of these events, that in the second part of 1938 recantations reached 554 in number, roughly 12% of the local Jewish population.²⁶

The persecutions of 1938 opened up a new phase in the type of conversions taking place in Trieste, a sort of tragic parenthesis, which gives us an insight into the great fear that for local Jews, amongst others, characterized the period. Those who distanced themselves from Judaism in order to save themselves from persecution did so hoping to find protection in the Catholic Church through conversion. With the documentary materials available to us we are able to trace several of the most common types of conversion. This is especially clear in the letters of motivation sent personally by aspiring converts to the Episcopal Curia directly or through a trusted Priest, but there were also numerous returns to Catholicism following a previous abjuration. There were even pre-printed letters prepared by the ecclesiastical authorities for local parish priests, which covered all the different cases: there were those for Jewish catechumens; those for people wishing to return to the Church; those for people who wished to carry out a religious marriage immediately following their baptism. From this emerges a tried and tested system, organized by Trieste's Curia, which was created in response to the high number of conversions.²⁷

What is particularly striking when reading the documents is the extent to which the women's descriptions of their motivations for conversion differ from the men's. Men tended to be more concise, but this does not detract from the profound interior suffering which can be seen in their writing. Some, for example, asked the Curia if everything could take place in absolute secret, as in the case of the lawyer Guido M., "because he does not wish this to be viewed as motivated by opportunism."²⁸ To conduct the procedure as secretly as possible was also the

²⁵ Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste*, 109-115; Michele Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei. Cronaca dell'elaborazione delle leggi del 1938* (Turin: Zamorani, 2017); Sarfatti, "Il discorso razzista e antisemita di Mussolini a Trieste il 18 settembre 1938," *Qualestoria* 1 (2013): 103-111; Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista*, 152-171.

²⁶ Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste*, 177.

²⁷ Ginzburg Migliorino, "L'applicazione delle leggi antiebraiche," 107-108, which provides diagrams of the modules.

²⁸ ASDTS, *Fondo Diocesi di Trieste e Capodistria. Atti di gestione ordinaria*, b. 1212, fasc. 5/13-1938, Letter from the Parish Priest to the Bishop, Trieste, February 23, 1938.

desire of the elderly Alice B., born in 1859, who had had a civil marriage in 1893 and baptized her daughter Paola a few months after her birth. Alice, “for reasons of age and family,” asked if she could convert “in maximum secrecy and without any publicity.”²⁹ On the occasion of her baptism, her husband would return to the Church, which he had abandoned in order to marry her. It was a route, therefore, for the entire family, who wished to maintain their anonymity, probably in order to avoid the disapproval of their relatives and their acquaintances.

We find ourselves witnessing real family dramas, where several aspiring catechumens asked to speed up the process of conversion, which was supposed to last a month, because they already had a visa for a new country to emigrate to.³⁰

A lot of files involve in the baptism of children, still often in their school years: their parents’ anxiety to get them to safety is palpable in the questions they ask to the parish priest regarding the length of time necessary for the catechumenate.³¹ The most far-sighted families—by no coincidence the self-employed professionals, entrepreneurs and those with a high level of education—had already clearly seen by spring 1938 the government’s change of attitude towards the Jews, and had hastily arranged to baptize their children. This is what happened in the family of the twins Enrico and Maria G., students at the classical high school, who at their parents’ behest followed their older brother’s footsteps and converted.³² The same thing happened in the Frigessi of Rattalma Family, as has been well described in Anna Millo’s study, when Arnoldo and Nidia Frigessi stated that they had nothing against the baptism of their five children.³³

²⁹ Ibid., 5/38-1938, Letter from Alice B. to the Episcopal Ordinariate, Trieste April 19, 1938.

³⁰ Ginzburg Migliorino, “Leggi razziali a Trieste,” 304-305, where she mentions some emergency cases that led to the Curia’s assent to the shortening of the rite.

³¹ This is the case of the father of Rosa D., a twelve-year-old daughter from a mixed marriage. He put a great deal of pressure on Don Giusto Buttignoni, at that time the parish Priest at San Giusto, until “tired of the innumerable procrastinations”: he gave a precise, close date for the baptism “and no later.” ASDTS, *Fondo Diocesi di Trieste e Capodistria. Atti di gestione ordinaria*, b. 1212, fasc. 5/56-1938, Letter from Don Giusto Buttignoni to the Episcopal Ordinariate, Trieste May 20, 1938.

³² Ibid., fasc. 5/45-1938, Letter from Mons. Valeriano Monti of the Chiesa della Beata Vergine del Soccorso to the Episcopal Ordinariate, Trieste May 11, 1938. Here again a private ceremony was requested.

³³ Ibid., fasc. 5/72-76-1938, Trieste June 7, 1938. For further details see also the fate of the family during the period of racist persecution: Anna Millo, *Trieste, le assicurazioni, l’Europa. Arnoldo Frigessi di Rattalma e la RAS* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2004). It is for this reason that I have used here the full family name, since many details are already publicly known.

The fact that Catholicism was the religion of the State was one of the motivations of some converts, including Daniele J., his wife and their four children. The parents explicitly admitted that the youngest child, born in 1926, had not become a member of the Jewish Community, and had not been circumcised, and having the intention of converting all of their children, “they had chosen excellent Catholic governesses who had, from the youngest age, imbued their children with Catholic sentiments and principles [...]” In 1938, the parish Priest of the Chiesa Beata Vergine del Soccorso contacted the Episcopal Ordinariate, saying “the parents have reached the point where they wish not only to baptize their children, but also themselves. Initially what motivated them was the idea of aligning themselves with the religion of the country in order to avoid appearing less Italian, but after studying the religion they now have superior motives to wish to enter the Church.”³⁴ Here we find interwoven several motivations for conversion, which are worth dwelling on because they are present in other conversion requests. The political and instrumental use—if we can define it in this way—of conversion is evident and even admitted by the Priest, underlining the link between Italian national identity and religious affiliation. On the eve of the promulgation of the racial laws, several Jews thought of converting to Catholicism in order to be considered legitimate Italian citizens, and be spared from persecution, as it had happened for centuries in the past. We can infer from the rest of the documentation discovered in Trieste that many of these families had kept a very tenuous link with the Jewish Community for decades, to the point of not wishing to fulfil the rites of passage which form the basis of the faith, such as circumcising their sons.³⁵ Furthermore, some asserted that they had waited a long time to convert, since they did not wish to upset their observant parents by abandoning the faith of their fathers.

Numerous files were found regarding the conversion of children from mixed marriages, of whom there were many in the city in the late nineteenth century.³⁶ If one of the spouses was not Jewish and the offspring had been baptized before

³⁴ ASDTS, *Fondo Diocesi di Trieste e Capodistria. Atti di gestione ordinaria*, b. 1212, fasc. 5/106-110-1938, Letter from the Parish Priest of the Chiesa della Beata Vergine del Soccorso to the Curia, Trieste July 4, 1938.

³⁵ There is, however, a precedent for the absence of circumcision, in notably large numbers, from the second half of the nineteenth century: Catalan, *La Comunità ebraica di Trieste*, 235-236.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 241-243.

October 1, 1938 then they were not considered Jewish.³⁷ As a result, in these families there was often a quick return to the Church by those who had left it to marry. This was followed in most cases by the conversion of the Jewish spouse. At this point the couple's marriage in church took place, even if they had perhaps been married for decades by civil rite only. In these particular situations, the Triestine Church came to the assistance of several families, backdating the baptism. The complaints of the Prefecture testify to the existence of these practices, of which we can also find a trace in the documents held by the Curia.³⁸ Amongst these we remember the request made by the priest Giovanni Grego of the Church of S. Antonio Taumaturgo on October 7, 1938, on behalf of a young Jewish woman, Fulvia G., who wished to convert in order to marry a Catholic. The priest was aware that the new laws forbidding mixed marriages would have made this wedding impossible.³⁹ The veiled request is worded in the following way:

Since she is engaged to a Catholic, according to the present decisions of the Grand Council of Fascism, being a daughter of a mixed marriage, she is not considered Aryan if she was not baptized before 1 October. The undersigned asks if anything can be done in this sense, regarding the date of registration of the baptism.⁴⁰

In February 1938 a well-known surgeon in the local "Regina Elena" hospital, Ferruccio Girolamo W., the son of a mixed marriage, who was himself married to a Catholic woman and whose children were baptized, asked the Priest of the

³⁷ Article 8 of the R.d.l. 1728/1938, comma d. "We do not consider of Jewish race those whose parents have Italian nationality, if only one parent is of Jewish race but belonged to a different religion before 1 October 1938-XVI." The date of 1 October was made public with the declaration of October 6, and created many complications from then on.

³⁸ Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste*, 176 indeed describes the Prefecture's disappointment. See also Ginzburg Migliorino, "L'applicazione delle leggi antiebraiche," 112, which has compared the memories of the Parish Priest of San Antonio with the Curia's material, thereby identifying three cases of backdated baptisms.

³⁹ On the regulations surrounding mixed marriages see: Giuliana Cardosi, Marisa Cardosi, and Gabriella Cardosi, *Sul confine. La questione dei "matrimoni misti" durante la persecuzione antiebraica in Italia e in Europa (1935-1945)* (Turin: Zamorani, 2007).

⁴⁰ ASDTS, *Fondo Diocesi di Trieste e Capodistria. Atti di gestione ordinaria*, b. 1212, fasc. 5/338-1938, Letter from the Parish Priest to the Curia, Trieste October 7, 1938.

hospital to begin the process of his own conversion. The letter written in support of this request by don Carlo Della Mea and addressed to the Curia to obtain the necessary authorization is a masterpiece of balance and it is worth quoting a few passages from it here. This is how don Della Mea introduced the aspiring convert:

Born of a Catholic mother, the other party being an Israelite, he was not circumcised, he always attended the lessons on Religion in school. His catechists [...] Mons. Tamaro and Giacomelli. He was married in a civil union around 17 years ago [...] to a Catholic woman, he had his children baptized and wished for them to be Catholics; he has never attended worship services in his religious community.

He promised his wife many years ago that he would become a Catholic and for around a month and a half he has been reading the Catechism [...].⁴¹

The surgeon had, furthermore, demonstrated his intention to be baptized and married in the private chapel of the Elisabettine Sisters “whom he views with deference and veneration.”⁴²

It is evident that the families of converts in the course of the first half of 1938 were largely members of the local upper and middle class, and therefore already aware of the turning point brought about by Mussolini in the relationship between fascism and the Italian Jewish world. This demonstrates once more, in my opinion, how belonging to a certain social echelon offered an advantage in the path towards salvation from persecution: those with financial means could afford to leave the Community and give up the whole network of solidarity that had always supported poorer co-religionists.

Another type of conversion, notable in the large numbers of requests sent to the Curia of Trieste, were from the widows of mixed marriages—women already of a certain age, who had married a Jewish man, and in order to have a civil marriage (which was permitted in the Habsburg Empire) had chosen to abandon their Catholic faith, living without any religious affiliation. Some had indeed chosen to

⁴¹ Ibid., fasc. 5/12-1938.

⁴² Ibid.

convert to Judaism, in order to be married in the synagogue. Gabriella B., for example, was born in Vienna in 1862 where she was baptized. In Graz she married Dr Giulio B. in a Jewish ceremony, after having converted to Judaism. Widowed in 1923, and mother of a single Catholic son “she repented her deeds and prayed to be absolved and readmitted into the holy Church.” The parish official of San Bartolomeo apostolo in Barcola warmly supported her request.⁴³

Guglielmina S. in K.’s situation was somewhat different. She was also a Catholic who had converted to Judaism. She expressed to the Curia her desire to return to the Church and her wish to baptize her young daughter Liliana, who was 13 years old. Her husband, Egon S. gave his wife and daughter complete freedom to carry out their wishes, accepting that he would need to be married according to the Catholic rite, without however converting himself.⁴⁴ Different again was the case of Valeria M. born O., who converted to Judaism in order to marry. She confessed her long-standing regret of this decision to the Priest:

She said she constantly thought about the Catholic Church, which she entered alone to pray, disliking the path she had taken but too weak to return, since she faced too much opposition from her new family. Once her husband and her father-in-law, on whom she relied, had been dead for several years she sincerely repented of her rejection of her faith and asked to be readmitted into the Catholic Church. [...] Unfortunately her children are Israelites.⁴⁵

Here we witness the extent to which family conflict could affect the individual’s decision. In this case the woman used it in her favor to convince the priest to intercede on her behalf with the Curia.

In the spring and summer of 1938 conversion requests from foreign Jews increased, especially among Austrians passing through Trieste in order to emigrate to the Americas, but there was also a significant flow of Hungarian Jews: some families

⁴³ Ibid., fasc. 5/61-1938, Letter from the Parish Priest to the Curia, Trieste, May 3, 1938.

⁴⁴ Ibid., fasc. 5/65-1938. Trieste, May 1938.

⁴⁵ Ibid., fasc. 5/198-1938, Letter from the Parish Priest of the Beata Vergine del Soccorso to the Curia, Trieste August 20, 1938.

came from Budapest and others from nearby Fiume. They reached the city and before they left they asked to convert to Catholicism.

The annexation of Austria to Germany in March of that year had indeed pushed many Viennese Jews to emigrate, and the old port of the Habsburg Empire became an important transit hub, since in the Adriatic city these people could count on the assistance offered by the Jewish Agency and by the DELASEM at the emigrant reception center in Via del Monte 7.⁴⁶

The experiences of the old Barons of Strasser, Bela and Carlotta, born Leitner, are interesting. They had Austrian and Hungarian origins and escaped to Abbazia, in Istria. They wished to convert and having reached Trieste to do business with a well-known Triestine lawyer, they were directed by the latter to Mons. Giusto Buttignoni of the parish of San Giusto. Buttignoni described the couple to the Episcopal Ordinariate thus:

they are both Israelites, duly instructed in our Religion by the undersigned. They wish to be baptized in San Giusto; and to renew their marriage vows there.

They belong to the category of wanderers, because—forced to flee Vienna (due to the Hitlerian persecutions) they find themselves briefly at Abbazia.⁴⁷

The Bishop, however, asked for more information on the couple, unable to fully understand why they had not chosen to be converted directly in Abbazia.

Buttignoni explained the details and added that the couple:

[...] elderly and very distinguished people, they made upon the writer the very best of impressions. They listened with real understanding to the lessons, learning the formulas off by heart. The Baroness in particular, in

⁴⁶ On the vicissitudes of foreign Jews, see Klaus Voigt, *Il rifugio precario. Gli esuli in Italia dal 1933 al 1945*, 2 vols. (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1993 and 1996).

⁴⁷ ASDTS, *Fondo Diocesi di Trieste e Capodistria. Atti di gestione ordinaria*, b. 1212, fasc. 5/79-1938, Letter from Mons. Giusto Buttignoni to the Episcopal Ordinariate, Trieste June 11, 1938.

practical terms, was more Christian than Jew, because as a child she had always visited the Herz-Jesukirche in Graz.⁴⁸

The opinions of Don Giusto Buttignoni regarding the examples of the couple's religiosity are quite singular: having visited church as a child and learned rites by memory does not signify real and authentic spiritual conviction. However, in this particular conversion, the couple's aristocratic nature probably played a fundamental role, along with their choice of Don Buttignoni, who was very sympathetic to their case.

Don Giusto Buttignoni was not always so welcoming to Jews, and in his younger years he had been a fervent supporter of the Austrian Christian Social movement and had even written articles and a book with strong antisemitic tones, aimed against the Jews of Eastern Europe.⁴⁹ During the persecutions, however, the language he used to describe the Jews who asked to convert to Catholicism was always very careful and respectful: in his letters we often find the term "Israelite," which was often used in the 1800s and early 1900s, even by Jews themselves, to refer to their religious affiliation.

In summer 1938, due to the growing antisemitic measures rolled out by the regime, there came a turning point in the trend of conversions: an increasing number of individuals and entire families rushed towards the parishes to ask to be baptized, driven by the fresh outbreak of the antisemitic campaign.⁵⁰

Parish Priests prepared the people who wished to convert, while the youngest catechumens were instructed by the Canossian Mothers and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Sion.⁵¹ Compared to the first half of 1938, many mixed families were increasingly beginning to ask for their children to be baptized, a decision which must not have been easy for all, since some parents were sincerely devoted to their

⁴⁸ Ibid., Letter from Don Giusto Buttignoni to the Episcopal Ordinariate, Trieste June 15, 1938.

⁴⁹ Catalan, *La Comunità ebraica di Trieste*, 257-258.

⁵⁰ Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei*.

⁵¹ On the conversionist tradition of this order, see: Madeleine Comte, "De la conversion à le rencontre. Les religieuses de Notre-Dame de Sion (1843-1986)," *Revue Archives Juives* 35, no. 1 (2002): 102-119. On the baptism of Jews in particular, see 108-109. By the same author, see also: Madeleine Comte, *Sauvetages et baptêmes. Les religieuses de Notre-Dame de Sion face à la persécution des Juifs en France (1940-1944)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).

Jewish faith. One example of this struggle is Sergio C., who accepted and declared himself happy for his son to be baptized, but who remained firm in his Jewish beliefs, refusing to marry his Catholic wife in a marriage *disparitas cultus*.⁵² The first racist laws of September and the announcement of the antisemitic campaign by Mussolini in Trieste on September 18, were an important motivator to take these delicate decisions, especially for those who had been reluctant to make the leap. It is no coincidence that Sergio C. made his decision on September 19.

At the same time, there was a high increase in the number of requests from foreign Jews, especially Austrians, who were travelling through Trieste. Some, such as Giovanni R., from Vienna, could count on his cousins and other acquaintances in the local Azione Cattolica, which helped him down the path of conversion in the fastest way possible, since he was likely to be joining his siblings in Palestine at short notice. Precisely due to his file, however, notwithstanding the destination of his journey, the Priest of the Church of the Beata Vergine delle Grazie in via Rossetti, made an interesting remark to the Curia about the growing increase in Jewish immigrants from Vienna:

It is indeed the case that similar questions are frequently repeated, especially by Israelites arriving from Vienna. It is tempting to suppose they are driven to some extent by opportunism. I say as much to the parties, insisting on the need for true conviction in order to be accepted into the Catholic Church. Faced by their claims how is it possible to be calm? This Most Reverent Curia deals with many other cases [...].⁵³

Each parish priest, however, had his own style, if we can call it that, which characterized his personal idea of how the spirit of conversion should develop among the catechumens. There were scrupulous priests, suspicious ones, in some cases even discriminatory in the language used to define Jews, as we will see shortly. There were also some who were inclined to take every signal, even listening to a radio transmission, as an indicator of the desire to convert, like the Priest below,

⁵² ASDTS, *Fondo Diocesi di Trieste e Capodistria. Atti di gestione ordinaria*, b. 1212, fasc. 5/308-1938, Letter from the Parish Priest of San Vincenzo de'Paoli to the Curia, Trieste September 19, 1938.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, fasc. 5/132-1938, Letter from the Parish Priest to the Episcopal Curia, Trieste, July 21, 1938.

who in order to support the sincerity of Guglielmo C. (a Jew who had married a Catholic woman in Muggia in 1937) in his request, claimed that:

It is understood by the undersigned that the interested party wishes to become a Catholic at the baptism of his future first child. As a child he sang in the chapel choir at school until his mother forbade him from doing so. As a youth he took part out of pure curiosity in the sacred functions of the Church in Turin and Padua. He listened to radio conversations by Father Petazzi, with whom he had the occasion to meet, Father Petazzi also wishes him to be converted soon.⁵⁴

In any case, it was up to the priests to make the first contact and dialogue with the aspiring converts, and in this way they came into direct contact with their problems and their fears. The Bishop then either approved the conversion or, in some cases, referred the case for a more rigorous examination to establish the authenticity of the wish to be a catechumen.⁵⁵

During the summer of 1938 the racist antisemitic propaganda became more entrenched amongst some representatives of the clergy; we can witness this shift in the language used in some letters sent to the Curia. The Priest of Scorcola at the end of August 1938, for example, in a letter about the request to convert of a Jewish man from Budapest, speaks explicitly of an "Israelite by race and by religion."⁵⁶ With the promulgation in September of laws regarding foreign Jews and their obligation to leave the country before March 19, 1939, there was a real need to speed up the process of conversion, as can be seen in the many requests to the Curia; these seem to have been met with the favor of the Priests, who wrote about the imminent danger of expulsion from Italy as a valid motive for shortening the possible period of catechumenate.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid., fasc. 5/211-1938, Letter from the parish to the Curia, Muggia August 21, 1938.

⁵⁵ Ginzburg Migliorino, "Leggi razziali a Trieste," 303.

⁵⁶ ASDTS, *Fondo Diocesi di Trieste e Capodistria. Atti di gestione ordinaria*, b. 1212, fasc. 5/229-1938, Letter from the Parish Priest di Servola to the Curia, Trieste August 26, 1938.

⁵⁷ One example is the case of Roberto H. and Virginia M. who had requested to be able to be baptized and united in matrimony at the parish of San Giovanni. Cfr. ASDTS, *Fondo Diocesi di*

The forced distancing from Italy pushed some families of foreign Jews who knew each other to embark upon the path towards baptism together. Two married couples, the S.-F. and B.-S. for example, were driven by the desire of the two wives (who were friends), and decided to begin the process of conversion at the college of Notre Dame de Sion, where one of the women had studied for six years. Their children, 9 year old Alfredo and 8 year old Tiberio, had recently been baptized on November 23, 1938 in the same institution, and both families had demonstrated their intention to move abroad “to begin a new life with a new spiritual foundation.”⁵⁸

The rate of conversions peaked following the big shifts in propaganda and the promulgation of the laws: on November 22, 1938, for example, there was a collective conversion of Jewish boys and girls, with the approval of their parents, at the college of Notre Dame de Sion. Nine children were baptized after a month of catechumenate which had taken place at the college.⁵⁹

When the racial laws came into force on November 17, 1938, we can see another change in the way in which the Jews motivated their requests for conversion to the Curia. Perhaps influenced by the possibility of asking for “discrimination” for specific merits, including adherence to the fascist party, several of those closest to the regime began the path to conversion, seeing it as an inescapable step in order to be considered fully Italian. Professing one’s patriotism and loyalty to the State was in fact part of the request for conversion to the Curia of Trieste forwarded by Adele L., who had been born in Padua in 1874 but who had lived in the Adriatic city from a young age. She had married a Catholic in 1930, first in a civil marriage and later with the Pope’s dispensation. Adele lived with her husband and children in Pisino in Istria, and she wrote to the Bishop of Trieste thus:

I ask this most Reverend Curia to be accepted into the heart of the Holy Mother Catholic Church due to my true religious sentiments and also due to my patriotic feelings, which will not allow me to belong to a religion

Trieste e Capodistria. Atti di gestione ordinaria, b. 1212, fasc. 5/454-455-1938, Letter from the Parish Priest to the Curia, Trieste October 20, 1938.

⁵⁸ Ibid., fasc. 5/564-1938, Letter to the Curia from Don Luigi Digiacomo, Trieste November 27, 1938.

⁵⁹ Ibid., fasc. 5/556- 564-1938.

contrary to my fatherland and Fascism. I was educated as a little girl to love Italy, and one of the happiest days of my life was when the Italian troops entered Trieste where I lived with my parents from the age of five and where I was a teacher for 35 years, always teaching in an Italian manner, even when Trieste belonged to Austria.⁶⁰

Adele also asked not to be prepared for baptism in the Croatian language, which she did not know, but in Italian. This was another important aspect, which highlights the way in which she sought to disassociate herself from the Slavic element of the population, against which the fascists in that period had also started campaigning.

With the escalation of antisemitism and later also the heavy attacks published in the fascist press on the number of conversions in Trieste, which was judged macroscopic in terms of its size,⁶¹ some Priests began to insert allusions to the instrumental use of conversion in their letters in support of neophytes sent to the episcopal Curia of Trieste. One priest, for example, hastened to plead for the baptism of two siblings, Bruno and Emilia M., who from unsuspected times had been approaching the Catholic faith. The Priest in fact went so far as to claim that both “are so prepared both doctrinally and spiritually and that it [their request to be baptized n.o.a.] has nothing to do with the recent racial laws, but rather because they were not sufficiently prepared before now, and only now felt able to ask for baptism.”⁶²

Umberto F. also requested a baptism. He was a man without confession, married to the Catholic woman Ada C., and the priest describes the aspiring neophyte so:

even though he has desired to embrace the Catholic religion for a long time, he did not wish to do so, as he feared that it would appear that he was acting out of interest. Now that he has nothing to gain from, being

⁶⁰ Ibid., 5/ 630-1938, Letter from Adele L. in P., Pisino November 25, 1938. Adele abandoned Judaism on January 16, 1939, writing a formal letter to the Rabbi of Trieste. On conversion in this period as an affirmation of Italianness, see: Bruno Di Porto, “Gli ebrei italiani di fronte al 1938,” *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 73, no. 2 (2007):249-276; 261.

⁶¹ Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste*, 196, note 13.

⁶² ASDTS, *Fondo Diocesi di Trieste e Capodistria. Atti di gestione ordinaria*, b. 1212, fasc. 5/794-1938, Letter from December 12, 1938.

removed from his job, he humbly implores the most Reverend Curia to admit him to baptism.⁶³

The year 1939 began with a notable increase in conversions among foreign Jews: March drew ever closer and expulsion from Italy was therefore a very real prospect. Attempts to find a more secure path towards safety multiplied. Elisabetta H., a middle-aged woman from Prague, prepared to be baptized on her own, while her husband and children remained steadfast in the Jewish faith. An imminent departure formed the basis of the request of mons. Giovanni Grego, who made do with a passport instead of a birth certificate, that was missing.⁶⁴

Ilse J., on the other hand, asked to be baptized as soon as possible, since without being baptized she could not travel to his Catholic relatives in Brazil.⁶⁵

It was not only foreign Jews who left: many Triestine Jews decided to abandon the city. Tullio S., a twenty-nine-year-old man, was one such example. He asked if he could do an abbreviated conversion: “I turn to the reverent Curia to grant me permission to be able to accelerate the standard speed of instruction in order to be baptized before I travel overseas.”⁶⁶

The story of Gertrude H.’s life is also touching. She was born in Vienna, and married to a Catholic Nazi. The catechist Luigi di Giacomo asked Bishop Santin to be authorized to conduct an exceptional procedure. He wrote of the aspiring convert’s motivations thus:

the marriage did not have a happy ending: because the wife had felt for some time strongly drawn to the Catholic Religion and against all the sentiments of her husband, who professes the Nazi principles with totality and fullness of heart, she asked to be separated from her spouse, and was later granted a divorce according to the laws of her country.⁶⁷

⁶³ Ibid., fasc. 5/33-1939, Letter from Mons. Valeriano Monti to the Curia, Trieste January 7, 1939.

⁶⁴ Ibid., fasc. 5/68-1939, Letter from Mons. Grego to the Curia, Trieste January 24, 1939.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5/114-1939, Letter in German by Ilse J. to the Curia, Trieste February 17, 1939

⁶⁶ Ibid., fasc. 5/1939, Letter to the Curia, Trieste January 2, 1939.

⁶⁷ Ibid., fasc. 5/192-1939, Lettera to the Curia, Trieste April 15th, 1939.

Gertrude was also motivated by the urgency of an imminent departure for Buenos Aires at the end of the month.

The aforementioned are just some examples, and there were many others in these months involving foreign Jews. The Episcopal Curia showed themselves to be open and understanding of their situation, demonstrating also great awareness of the impact of the racial laws on Triestine society: this was the reason why the number of conversions to Catholicism was so high, especially in the first two years, demonstrating that the Diocese of Trieste and Capodistria, ruled by Bishop Antonio Santin, had not closed its doors to these attempts at salvation, as was the case for example in Turin.⁶⁸ This does not mean, however, that the requests were not very carefully evaluated, first by parish priests and then by the Episcopal Ordinariate. The Curia of Trieste was characterized by its openness to conversions, but also for the friendly behavior of mons. Santin towards the Jews, which was maintained even in the most difficult moments of the Nazi occupation.⁶⁹

As in other dioceses, the main focus was on couples in mixed marriages and their children. There was however an openness also towards those who did not have a religious confession, and towards younger converts.

The most complex enquiries and the most difficult cases were however faced by the Curia in the wartime years, and currently they are the object of my ongoing research. There was, in fact, in this period a change of direction towards the aspiring converts with the adoption of stricter procedures.

The two-year period of 1938-1939 represented the start of a complex machine, made up of an extended network of relations between Jews and Catholics; of parish priests who were more or less in favor of pleading the cases of aspiring converts; of the feverish correspondence—mainly of foreign Jews—with the mediation of the parish priests, to obtain baptism in the shortest time possible. The Diocese of Trieste's opening of the baptismal fonts to the Jews brought many criticisms from various parties, creating concern and discontent in the local Jewish Community, in the UCII, in the local representatives of the fascist government and even in the

⁶⁸ Dell'Era, "Leggi razziste, conversione degli ebrei e matrimoni misti".

⁶⁹ It was the Bishop of Trieste who took into custody the Habsburg Patents of Toleration and the Torah scrolls from the secretary of the Jewish Community, Carlo Morpurgo, in order to keep them from falling into Nazi hands.

most visible elements of Italian antisemitism, who used propaganda and journalism to bitterly attack the Triestine conversions.

The criticisms of Giovanni Preziosi in the pages of *Vita Italiana*; the articles published in *La Difesa della Razza* in August 1938, but also the use of many instances of antisemitic satire in local newspapers centered on the high level of Triestine conversions.⁷⁰

From the quantitative data in our possession, which was collected by Ellen Ginzburg Migliorino and by Silva Bon, we are able to quantify the total number of abjures and conversions to Catholicism in the two year period of 1938-1939.⁷¹ Thanks to the work of Ginzburg Migliorino (see Tab. 1) we know the number of Jews baptized according to their age, which allows us to insert our qualitative analysis into a quantitative context; while Silva Bon (Tab. 2) has demonstrated the number of recantations according to the Community's figures, provided in the period to the Unione delle Comunità Israelitiche Italiane.

Age	Number of converts 1938 ⁷²	Number of converts 1939 ⁷³
0-10	34	14
11-20	101	26
21-30	116	16
31-40	83	27
41-50	67	33
51-60	73	31
Above 60	41	35
No age given	246	88
Total	761	270 (out of 313)

Tab. 1. Jews who converted to Catholicism in 1938 and 1939.

⁷⁰ Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste*, 196, note 13.

⁷¹ Ibid., 175-176; Ginzburg Migliorino, "L'applicazione delle leggi antiebraiche," 106-107 for the data on age groups.

⁷² Collected by E. Ginzburg Migliorino at the Archive of the Episcopal Curia of Trieste, Position V, 1938; Ginzburg Migliorino, "L'applicazione delle leggi antiebraiche," 106-107.

⁷³ Number of conversions to Catholicism in 1939 collected by E. Ginzburg Migliorino at the Archive of the Episcopal Curia of Trieste, Position V, 1939. There were 313 cases registered, but the Curia holds the individual documentation for only 270 conversions, because the rest of the documentation was lost; Ginzburg Migliorino, "L'applicazione delle leggi antiebraiche," 106-107.

Year	Number of abjures
1931-1937	29
1938	591
1939	203
Total	823

Tab. 2. Number of abjures 1931-1939. Figures taken from the report of the President of the Jewish Community of Trieste, Egidio Canarutto⁷⁴.

Unfortunately, neither of the two studies has analyzed the aspect of gender in recantations and conversions, and there remains much work to be done in this area in order to understand, for example, the exact number of Jewish neophytes returning to the Catholic Church during the period of 1938-1939. The figures collected to this point, when compared with each other, clearly demonstrate the difference between the total number of recantations in the two years (794) and the number of conversions to Catholicism (1074).

The 280 people who are not registered in these years by the Community were probably either foreign Jews passing through Trieste, or likely citizens with Jewish origins who had already formally left the faith of their fathers for quite some time, remaining without religion.

1939: Fears and Departures

The hemorrhaging of members represented a major, immediate, problem for Italian Judaism, which was forced to confront this internal emergency.

The UCII's newsletter on September 1939 faced the topic of the abandonments of Jewish faith which had taken place in 1938, expressing profound regret and making an appeal to stand united to face the difficulties of the moment:

Let us forget previous disagreements, let us forget our personal egoisms, we must all unite to resist the adversity and invoke from the Eternal the

⁷⁴ The data can be found in Bon, *Gli Ebrei a Trieste*, 175-176.

industrious peace of our blessed and beloved Fatherland, from which we cannot detach ourselves either mentally or physically, since we were born and educated here, because our dead are buried here, because we freely gave this land the best of our spirit, our work, our blood, just as our fathers did, and for its wellbeing, its triumph, we are ready to make the greatest sacrifice.⁷⁵

In 1939, in its annual report to the UCII, the Jewish Community of Trieste addressed the painful consequences of the racial laws on Community life. They had been particularly affected by the new rules, since a good two thirds of the Community was formed of foreign citizens and stateless, who had lost the Italian citizenship they had acquired after 1919.⁷⁶ The report underlined the continuous loss of members, because of recantations, but because of the fact that many coreligionists, especially the young, had emigrated abroad in search of a brighter future. From a numerical perspective, removing those who did not belong to the Jewish faith, by mid 1939 there were 2,908 people in the community (1,294 men and 1,614 women).⁷⁷

An important passage in the report was dedicated to the abjures, which—according to President Canarutto—had literally decimated the Community. It is worth quoting this passage from the report here:

As we have seen, the Jewish population of Trieste, at the midpoint of last year did not even number 3,000 people. This depopulation is even more serious, since the Community, in the census of 1932, had more than 5,000 members. One of the greatest causes is unfortunately the very high number of recantations.⁷⁸

There followed a detailed schema (Tab. 2) from which we can clearly see the growing tendency of abandoning the faith precisely in Summer 1938: from July to December there were 554 abjures, while in the first semester of 1938 there were 37.

⁷⁵ AUCEI, *Attività dell'Unione dal 1934 al 1948*, b. 11H, fasc. 11h-22, *Notiziario dell'Unione*, n. 10, September 5, 1939.

⁷⁶ Ibid., b. 31D, *Relazione sulla vita della Comunità israelitica di Trieste e sull'attività delle sue istituzioni durante l'anno 1939*.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

As has already been underlined by Silva Bon, the figures provided by the President of the Community do not tally up with those from the prefecture of Trieste, which registered at the end of October 1939 a much higher number of recantations: 1,137. This differs by 314 from the figures provided by the Jewish institution for the entire period, namely from 1931.⁷⁹ It remains to be understood how there came to be such a significant difference between the figures provided by the two bodies, given the obligation for Jews, according to the Falco law of 1930, to be registered with the Community. Do the numbers from the prefecture also count foreign Jews travelling through the Port of Trieste and therefore not yet registered in the Community? Unfortunately the documentation available at the moment does not allow us to confirm this hypothesis.

We know with certainty that around 12% of Triestine Jews left the Mosaic faith from 1938 to 1939: among these there were many children and young people, pushed by their parents towards the option that in that moment seemed one of the few secure ways of avoiding persecution. The percentage in reality was probably slightly lower, since among those who had abjured and been baptized, there were also non-registered members of the local Community: Jews in transit for a short time through Trieste, for example. On his part, the vice president of the Jewish Community of Trieste, the engineer Clemente Kerbes, sent a new memorandum on the situation of the Triestine Jews to the Union on November 21st, 1940, in which he lamented an increasingly critical economic situation, which impacted above all the proletariat and the Jewish lower middle classes, gravely affecting the number of registrations to the Community, which were necessary to support the poorest members. Concerning these people he added an important consideration on the economic repercussions of the abjures on the Community, which sheds a light also on the implications of class in the phenomenon of recantation, which he claimed disproportionately attracted wealthier coreligionists:

It is clear that the movement of disassociation from the Community has taken place largely following the racist laws, and has affected primarily the coreligionists who were wealthy and independent, of those therefore who

⁷⁹ Bon, *Gli ebrei a Trieste*, 176.

were not linked to the Community for any material motive, while on the other hand all those who found themselves in immediate or imminent need to call for assistance, drew closer to the Community, knowing that only through it would they receive, in greater or smaller measure, the necessary first help.⁸⁰

The question of the growth of disassociations, linked often in their frequency to the growing anti-Judaism of the fascist regime, was also highlighted in the minutes of the UCII's (Unione delle Comunità Israelitiche Italiane) Giunta, which in January 1939 reported the figure of 2,232 recantations in Italy in the year 1938; the figure does not record the numbers from some Communities, who had not sent their information to the Union.⁸¹ A new surge of abjures on a national scale was registered throughout 1941, when we see the figure of 835 notifications of recantation reaching the Union, increasing the total number of abandonments from 1938 to December 1941 to 6,417: a considerable figure, equal to more than 10% of Italian Jews, who just before the promulgation of the racial laws numbered around 45,000.⁸² The tendency to choose recantation as a possible exit route seemed to diminish over the course of 1942, when in November the Council of the Union registered for that year “only 217,” claiming that there had even been some members returning to Judaism.⁸³ When the Jews were forced into hiding following the Nazi occupation, the number and practices of conversion radically changed.

⁸⁰ AUCEI, *Attività dell'Ucei 1934-1948*, b. 31D, Memorandum November 21, 1940.

⁸¹ Ibid., *Attività Unione dal 1848 al 1965*, vol. VI, *Verballi di Giunta e di Consiglio*, b. 268, Minutes from January 18, 1939, p. 10. The same minutes highlight the high number of conversions taking place throughout Italy from November 1932 to December 1938, amounting to 3,219. Unfortunately, no documents mention which Italian Jewish communities did not answer to the UCII request.

⁸² Ibid., Minutes from the Council Meeting on January 13, 1942, p. 99.

⁸³ Ibid., Minutes from the Council on November 24, 1942, p. 122.

Conclusions

In fascist Trieste in 1938 the start of the antisemitic campaign and the promulgation of the racist laws was experienced by the Jews as a real bolt out of the blue, threatening their sense of security and long-standing stability. Triestine Jews immediately implemented a set of strategies to avoid being hit by the antisemitic measures, and among the most radical of these was the decision taken by individuals and their families to formally leave the Community by recanting their faith, choosing later to convert to Catholicism, as well as Protestantism, hoping in this way—and not incorrectly, given the statistics of the Second World War—to have a greater possibility of being saved.⁸⁴

In the lay and profoundly secularized society of Trieste there had already been for some time a shift to live religion as a purely private experience—a personal choice that was not very visible in public and barely affected interpersonal relationships. This led by the end of the Habsburg period to the proliferation of mixed marriages from the second half of the 1800s, a phenomenon which did not stop after the First World War and during fascism, and which was tangible proof of how porous the various ethno-religious communities in the city were. The number of conversions from one religion to another, or the widespread inclination to recant and remain without religion also represented for a long time one of the peculiarities of Trieste, and from the moment of the promulgation of the anti-Jewish laws, conversions to Catholicism were immediately viewed as one of the most secure solutions, without disturbing the Community environment too much, apart from the leadership and the rabbinate. Many of the converts were the spouses of mixed marriages and their resulting children; there were also many people who re-entered the Church as widows and widowers, deciding to re-embrace Catholicism in later life in order to be saved. Finally, it is worth outlining the high number of foreign Jews travelling through the Adriatic Port, who, through baptism, were able to display a new identity in the Americas, thus being more favorably received by the various states. The period from 1938 to 1939 can be considered crucial, both in terms of the typology of the conversions as well as the very high numbers in which they were

⁸⁴ More than 700 Triestine Jews were deported by the Nazis to Auschwitz, during the occupation of the Adriatic Littoral (1943-1945). In this period no conversions took place in the city, because all the Jews went into hiding.

taking place. The war years, however, can be considered in light of the conflict trends, and introduce another phase which I do not have the space to discuss fully here.

The Episcopal Curia of Trieste decided to welcome baptism requests that reached them in the hundreds in these two years, demonstrating a particular understanding towards foreign Jews in transit, who were constrained by the timings of their journeys. The Curia also welcomed with minimal problems the spouses of mixed marriages and showed themselves open to the requests from young people to convert. The decisions were made by the Bishop, mons. Antonio Santin, after careful evaluation of the documentation submitted by the parish priests. The latter, who differed greatly between themselves, always supported, often with the same words as the aspiring converts, the requests for baptism. And from their letters emerge the various individual routes analyzed here, which were characterized by various sentiments: fear about the persecution in progress; the pressure of Catholic family members in mixed marriages; the presence of secure friendship and business networks in the Catholic world; fear for their children's fate, and also in some cases loyalty to fascism and patriotic sentiments.

Among those from the Jewish Community in Trieste who requested a conversion were entire nuclear families with small children, mixed couples, widowed women who had converted to Judaism in order to marry. The individuals who requested a conversion, especially in the first half of 1938, were largely self-employed people and those belonging to the economic establishment of the city, who had links with fascism and were able to anticipate the changing climate. In the second half of 1938, however, there were many foreign Jews, whose expulsion was scheduled for March 1939, and they asked to be converted as quickly as possible.⁸⁵ There were also at this time many young people and students, whose parents desperately sought a way of keeping them safe.

The picture that emerges is complex in many ways, and would benefit from further research and in-depth study, but it confirms without any doubt the profile of a secular Triestine Jewish society, in a certain sense detached and in some regards truly unprejudiced on a religious level, which was ready to take inter-confessional

⁸⁵ At the moment, it is not possible to say whether conversion represented a real lifeline for them. Their individual paths should be analyzed, but this is another research that should be done.

action in order to obtain a conversion. This was made possible thanks to the attitude of the local Church, which was ready to welcome the Jews without any qualms, understanding their motivation, but asking in return that they respect the formal rules demanded by the catechuminate. We do not know if this happened, nor are we able to reconstruct in this research how these converts related to their new faith.

It must also be taken into account, in the long term, that the local Triestine society was accustomed to the practice of conversions, not only to Catholicism, which in my opinion influenced the open attitude of the local Church in the face of the emergence of the racial laws, of which even Bishop Santin had been critical with Mussolini.

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