

Elizabeth Schächter, *The Jews of Italy, 1848-1915. Between Tradition and Transformation*, London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010, pp. 268.

by *Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti*

Elizabeth Schächter (University of Kent) has specialized in the field of comparative literature and, in particular, has dedicated herself to the study of the human and literary figure of Italo Svevo, thus developing – from the peculiar point of view of Trieste – an interest for the history of Italian Jewry.

In this book she reconstructs Italian Jewish history in the period comprised between the emancipation of 1848 and the country's entrance into WWI in 1915. The issues of emancipation, integration, assimilation and nationalization of the minority are put into focus, choosing to adopt the minority's own point of view on these delicate problems: "The intention – she writes in the very first page of the volume - is not to present a comprehensive, chronological survey of political and social development, but to examine the issues which were considered the principal areas of concern to the Jews themselves. [...] The primary focus is the integration [...] of the Jews from *their* perspective" (p. 1).

The volume is divided into six chapters. The first one (pp. 1-12), is of an introductory nature. It presents the sources (autobiographies, Jewish periodicals, archives, private correspondence) as well as the methodological stance adopted. In particular it deals with the issues concerning the problematic definition of Jewishness after the emancipation, both on an individual and on a collective level.

The second chapter, (*Reshaping Identities*, pp. 13-62), focuses on the time of the Risorgimento and the individual dimension of integration, portraying some key figures within Italian Jewry. Particular attention is dedicated to the emotional sphere and the role of the bourgeois family in reshaping Jewish identity (in this the author follows the tracks laid by recent historiography, and gives particular consideration to the volume edited by Barbara Armani and Guri Schwarz, entitled *Ebrei Borghesi. Identità familiari, solidarietà e affari nell'età dell'emancipazione*, "Quaderni Storici," 38, 3, 2003). The author then moves on to the reconstruction of Jewish institutional and community life in unified Italy. In the chapter *Social and Demographic Change in the Jewish Communities* (pp. 63-96), the efforts made to coordinate the various Jewish communal bodies are described, illustrating how Jewish communities tried to face various problems such as the new relationship with the State and the Nation, the growing mobility that – as many moved to the largest urban centers – caused a rapid impoverishment and decline of the smallest communities, as well as the issues connected to charity and the

education of the lower strata of Italian-Jewish population.

The analysis is then oriented – in the fourth chapter (*The Longest Hatred*, pp. 97-151) – to face the issue of anti-Semitism in modern Italy. Following the most recent trend, the author illustrates how conventional narratives portraying Italy as an idyllic place for Jews are to be swept aside, and reconstructs the various anti-Judaic trends present in the Catholic world, (particular attention is given to the well known Mortara case, but also to the anti-Jewish rhetoric present in Catholic periodical press), emphasizing the importance of thoroughly investigating the forms of anti-Jewish prejudice in Italian society and culture.

'We are a people - one people' (pp. 152-205) is the fifth chapter, dedicated to the emergence of Zionism in the Italian-Jewish world. It is probably the first time that the English speaking public is offered a careful and precise picture of the various Zionist initiatives that were present in Italy. The central figures of Italian Zionism, the ideologies and cultures, the internal conflicts and confrontations, as well as the institutional and associative framework in which Italian Zionism grew and developed are well described.

The sixth chapter (*A Jewish Renaissance*, pp. 206-230), is centered on the figure of Shmuel Hirsch Margulies, the Galician rabbi that greatly influenced Italian-Jewish culture as Chief Rabbi of Florence from 1890 to 1922. Pious man, scholar, Zionist, Margulies was able to educate and mobilize a group of young people of the Jewish bourgeoisies who would have grown to be the protagonists of Jewish life in the following decades. It must be noted that - in celebrating the influx of Margulies, and the role played by Zionist ideology at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as by the use of the concept of 'rebirth' – Schächter implicitly gives a very negative judgment of nineteenth-century's Italian Jewish culture. This point of view reflects an attitude that was widely shared throughout the course of the twentieth century by many protagonists of Italian Jewish life, and later accepted and reproduced by several historians. Such an outlook is, of course, not totally unfounded, but in itself it holds no explanatory or analytical value, nor does it allow to make steps forward in the understanding of that specific historical situation. The analysis would need to be more articulated. Moreover, the emphasis on the importance of cultural identities and on the Zionist movement should be tempered with a reflection on the fact that Italian Zionism has been a minority phenomenon at least up until the 1940s. From a historiographical point of view it would be important to investigate further the processes of social and cultural integration and the redefinition of Jewishness in liberal age, leaving aside moral or ideological judgments.

Finally, through a very brief conclusion, the author makes an effort to share with the international audience the acquisitions of recent

historiography – which, for reasons connected to the scarce knowledge of Italian by scholars of modern Jewry, is little known abroad - stating clearly that “No longer can Italy be considered an anomaly within European Jewish history” (p. 233).

The book has some important merits. In the first place it shows great accuracy and thoroughness in addressing all the key issues faced by Italian historiography in the last thirty years, thus making a positive contribution to the disruption of established interpretative paradigms and enhancing the emergence of a new and more problematic perspective. Writing in English, Schächter makes the results of latest research and interpretation available to a wide international audience. A public that, with regard to the Italian-Jewish situation, had often remained anchored at the classical but now outdated contributions made by Cecil Roth. The bibliography is rich and up to date, the references are always accurate and timely and the effort to frame the Italian case in the wider European scene must be appreciated. Yet new sizeable contributions to research or original interpretative proposals are missing: the predominant feeling is that the author has limited herself to presenting - in a very straightforward manner – the insight present in the latest bibliography. In fact, references to sources often have more of a narrative rather than analytical function, with the partial exception of the last chapter. Summing up, we can say that this volume is an excellent and detailed presentation of the state of the art. Considering the relevance of the language barrier that hindered the dissemination of recent findings and new interpretations, this is to be considered an important achievement.

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