

Elisa Guida, *La strada di casa: Il ritorno in Italia dei sopravvissuti alla Shoah*, (Rome: Viella, 2017), pp. 295.

by Anna Koch

The history of Jews after the Shoah has become a burgeoning field in recent decades. While the Italian case may not be quite as well researched as Germany or France, here, too, historians have begun to tackle the questions of how Jews rebuilt their communities, fought to regain their property and remembered the Holocaust.¹ Elisa Guida's *La strada di casa*, a detailed and meticulously researched study of survivors' repatriation, joins this growing body of work.

Drawing on archival material as well as on extensive oral testimony, this study examines the return of Italian Jewish Holocaust survivors to their home country. The author sets out to tell the story of repatriation from two different viewpoints as she aims to "insert the period of persecution and deportation into a wider chronological and spatial dimension" (p.10). The first part of the book titled *Catture, deportazioni, rimpatri* [Arrests, deportations, repatriations] is an institutional history of repatriation while the second part, titled *Tornare, mangiare, raccontare*, [Returning, eating, telling] focuses on survivors' personal stories of return and recovery.

Guida begins her account with the deportations and arrests of Italian citizens during World War II. Beyond a discussion of racial deportation, she also includes ample information on Italian prisoners of war and people arrested and deported for political reasons. At times the author seems lost in detail, and readers may struggle to link the information on Italian soldiers back to the history of Jewish deportees. Yet drawing such a wide net allows Guida to highlight the difficulty the Italian state faced in repatriating the mass of Italian citizens who longed for a return home. Guida provides a detailed depiction of

¹ See for instance, *Gli ebrei in Italia tra persecuzione fascista e reintegrazione postbellica*, eds. Ilaria Pavan and Guri Schwarz, (Firenze: Giuntina, 2001); Guri Schwarz, *After Mussolini: Jewish Life and Jewish Memories in Post Fascist Italy*, (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2012); *Il ritorno alla vita: vicende e diritti degli ebrei in Italia dopo la seconda guerra mondiale*, Michele Sarfatti ed. (Firenze: Giuntina, 1998); Giovanna d'Amico, *Quando l'eccezione diventa norma: la reintegrazione degli ebrei nell'Italia postfascista*, (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2006); Ilaria Pavan, *Tra indifferenza e oblio: le conseguenze economiche delle leggi razziali in Italia 1938-1970*, (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2004).

the different political leaders and aid organizations involved in the difficult process of repatriation. The author judges that while governmental and non-governmental institutions invested energy and effort in the repatriation, they failed in providing sufficient assistance to deportees. Transportation and infrastructure across Italy and Europe were destroyed, and the war-torn, impoverished country proved largely unable to effectively organize repatriation.

Jewish deportees constituted merely a small fraction within the large number of Italians trying to get home, and they received no special attention from the Italian state. There was little interest in the particular fate of Jewish survivors in the immediate aftermath of the war, and no sense of responsibility. Guida concludes, “the total war had hit everyone; all had suffered and finally the time of reconstruction and rebirth had come. For the rest there was no space, and the Jewish veterans remained alone to bear the weight of an experience that Italy wanted to leave behind” (p.96). Jewish survivors received support from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, from the Italian Delegation for the Assistance of Jewish Emigrants (DELASEM), as well as from the *Comitato ricerche deportati ebrei* (CRDE).

The book’s first two chapters are largely descriptive, and provide background for the second part which focuses on experiences of Italian Jewish survivors. While Part 1 ends with the stories of the last returnees, the beginning of Part 2 brings us back to a depiction of the death marches. The following chapter provides a case study of the repatriation from Auschwitz, the camp in which most Italian Jews were held. In her last, and perhaps most original chapter, Guida shows the meanings of the journey home which constituted also the beginning of the long and difficult journey of self-recovery.

Survivors did not experience liberation as a moment of pure joy and happiness, rather most felt confused as well as mentally and physically exhausted. Recovering from inhumane conditions, they struggled to regain their sense of self, their femininity and masculinity. Slowly deportees who previously had focused on surviving began to think about their loved ones and their fate. Plagued by uncertainty, many feared their return home – what would they find there? Disillusionment hit them when they realized that they would not receive much help and assistance, and many recounted their bitter disappointment about the widespread indifference to their fate. Guida shows that most

survivors did not receive a warm welcome. Indeed a number of them remembered being asked to leave a train or tram on the final part of their journey, either because people feared they had a contagious disease or because they did have no ticket and no means to purchase one.

Shifting the perspective, the second part of the book draws heavily from oral history interviews, mainly from the Shoah Foundation but also from interviews conducted by Guida herself between 2008 and 2016. Some may criticize this strong reliance on oral histories, yet these sources allow the author to highlight the emotional and psychological struggles the survivors faced. Guida portrays numerous individual stories of survival and return which together shed light on the varied experiences of survival, liberation and repatriation. One such story which she recounts in detail, depicts the correspondence between the then 16-year-old Piero Terracina who survived Auschwitz and the Italian ambassador in Moscow, Pietro Quaroni. While Quaroni ultimately could do little to speed up Terracina's return home (he was one of the last returnees), the young survivor who was entirely alone felt grateful for the ambassador's attention and encouragement.

The book ends somewhat abruptly, and the lack of a concluding chapter feels particularly amiss since this would have offered an opportunity to bring its two parts together. A major shift in perspective and sources occurs between Parts 1 and 2, and an effort to interlink them more strongly would have been most welcome.

While the author sets the history of Italian Jewish return within the broader Italian history of repatriation, she does not integrate her research within a wider European and transnational context. Non-Italian actors (camp survivors of other nationalities, Eastern European Jewish DPs who came to Italy, non-Italian relief workers) feature little in this study. Guida briefly mentions the Harrison report which would have been an opportunity to examine what distinguished Italian survivors from survivors of most other nationalities. Most Jewish displaced persons did not want to be submerged under their national category not only because they needed additional support but also because they no longer identified as for instance Polish or German. In contrast to Italian Jewish returnees who continued to perceive themselves as Italian, most Holocaust survivors of other nationalities did not opt for repatriation. Guida

does not investigate the question of possible postwar emigration nor does she examine why Italian Jews remained so eager to return.

These remarks, however, do not diminish the accomplishment of this well researched and very readable book which brings to light a crucial phase in Italian Jewish history. A substantial appendix contains information on each returnee, providing a useful tool for further research. *La strada di casa* constitutes a valuable contribution to our understanding of postwar Jewish history and deserves the attention of scholars in Holocaust studies and Italian History.

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