



## SEPHARDIM IN ITALY: TWO NEW PUBLICATIONS

Aron de Leone Leoni, *La Nazione ebraica spagnola e portoghese di Ferrara. Vols 1 and 2*, Florence: Leo Olschki Publishers, 2011.

Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini, Michele Luzzati, and Michele Sarfatti, eds. *Studi sul mondo sefardita in memoria di Aron Leoni*. Florence: Leo Olschki Publishers, 2012.

### Reviewed by Judith Roumani<sup>1</sup>

These two works, as is evident from their titles, revolve around the extensive research of Aron Di Leone Leoni. An agronomist who only devoted himself fully to his research into the history of the Sephardim of Ferrara after his retirement, Aron Leoni was a meticulous, impressive, and far from amateur scholar. The two weighty volumes of his work, and the collection of scholarly papers published in his memory, attest to this. He unfortunately passed away in 2010, before either of these works saw the light.

Though Italy has the ancient community of Italian and especially Roman Jews, and its long-settled Ashkenazi groups, a large proportion of Italian Jews can be identified as Sephardim, descendants of exiles from the Iberian Peninsula. The patchwork characteristics of Italian Jewry were established in the pivotal sixteenth century, as Spanish and Portuguese Jews and *conversos* (referred to by Italians of the time as '*marani*') filtered in and across Italy from west to east, and Roman and also southern Italian Jews filtered northwards. Due to the tolerant attitude of the Este family, dukes of Ferrara (who had an eye also for opportunities for trade and business growth) the community of Jews and secret Jews in Ferrara flourished, attracting members of the prominent Mendes-Nasi and Abravanel families, among others.

Aron Leoni's two-volume study on the Spanish and Portuguese Nation in Ferrara between 1492 and 1559 is richly documented, based on his research in the Estense archives (within the state archives in Ferrara) and in other sources. Of the thirteen hundred pages in this work, fully half (the entire second volume) consists of documents, largely in Latin or Italian, dating from 1350 to 1567. The scholarly apparatus (bibliography, indices, etc.) is impeccable. He describes the original members of the Ferrara Jewish community as Jews from central and northern Italy, connected with money-lending and loan banks. The arrival of many prominent and less prominent Iberian exiles swelled their numbers greatly, while the nearby community of the port of Ancona also grew, though it was in territory controlled by the pope. The discussion of the documents details all the letters of safe conduct, financial transactions and legal cases of the various *nazioni*—Italian, Levantine (as some Levantine Jews were also gravitating to the area) and Spanish and Portuguese. We also read about connections with the Sephardic trading diaspora in other countries and, in particular, links between Ferrara and Safed.

The first blow to the well-being of Jews of the area was struck in 1549 by a plague, which provided the occasion for new arrivals from Portugal to be accused of being plague-bearers, and expelled, and by burnings of the Talmud all over Italy. In 1552 the church imposed enormous taxes on the Jews of Ancona, this also affecting Ferraran Jews, such as the Abravanel, who had interests in both cities. Outright persecution broke out in Ancona in 1555, leading to the martyrdom by burning of twenty-five Jews of Ancona. Others lost all their possessions and fled to Ferrara, where they lived under safe conducts provided by the duke. De Leoni brings us numerous documents on the Ancona events, from conditions in the papal inquisition's prisons to details on the Jewish boycott of the port of Ancona, led by Gracia Nasi. The individual names and details enable us to gain a clearer imaginative grasp of what it must have been like to struggle for survival as a Jew in the sixteenth century. Ultimately, under pressure, even Duke Ercole II made some small concessions to the church, but without substantial effects on the Jews of Ferrara. The Portuguese Jews consistently were favored by both Ercole and his son Alfonso who, though he instigated persecutions in 1581,

by 1582 was restoring the privileges of the Portuguese. The Sephardic Jews of Ferrara dropped the name 'Portuguese' and called themselves Spanish and Levantine, to deflect the attention of the church, which considered 'Portuguese' almost a synonym for *marrano*. Eventually 'Levantine' was also dropped, and all were known as Spagnoli or Sephardim. By the seventeenth century there were three synagogues in Ferrara, the Italian, the Tedesca (Ashkenazi) and the Spagnola, a situation which lasted until the Holocaust era. Leoni provides interesting archival photos of the three synagogues, only one of which is still functioning today (I would also refer the reader to this reviewer's article in an earlier issue of *Sephardic Horizons*, "**In Search of the Garden of the Finzi-Continis, Finding the Courtyard of the Finzi-Magrinis,**" *Sephardic Horizons* 1:2). Leoni's portrayals of the sixteenth century Spanish and Portuguese exiles, persisting in wearing their Iberian fashions long after they had settled in Ferrara, show their self-confidence and sense of trust in their new home in Ferrara.

The meticulously edited volume of studies by thirteen scholars in honor of Leoni's memory concentrates on Sephardic life in Italy, but ranges as far as Salonika and Amsterdam. Most contributions are in Italian, except for one in English and one in French. All discuss aspects of Sephardic culture. Maddalena del Bianco Cotrozzi discusses the establishment of a synagogue following the Sephardic *minhag* in Trieste by a Levantine Jew with a Spanish-sounding name (Camondo) in the 1780s. Eventually, as more Sephardim arrived in Trieste, a large building was put up, containing a Sephardic synagogue and an Ashkenazi one. Camondo continued to pray in his personal synagogue, having nevertheless made a large donation for the other building. The family later acquired a reputation for philanthropy, moving back to Ottoman lands (Istanbul and Rhodes) where they also founded a synagogue.

Benjamin Ravid examines the influence of a Sephardic merchant on the Adriatic commerce being conducted by Venice in the late sixteenth century. Venice was feeling the pressures of competition from many sides, and Ravid shows how Daniel Rodriga, in a series of sixteen memoranda sent to the authorities, though he himself was a Jew living under extremely restricted conditions in the ghetto, could have extensive impact through his imagination and resourcefulness over the last two decades of the century on the commercial policies of the Cinque Savi, rulers of Venice.

Passing to more modern times, Michele Sarfatti discusses how in 1943 Salonikan Jews having Italian citizenship, and provisional Italian Jews, were evacuated from the city and saved from deportation to Auschwitz. For reasons of state as well as humanistic values, Italian diplomats sought to protect Italian citizens even though they were Jewish. This was the policy for Tunisia and Greece, not always successfully carried out, of the Italian Foreign Ministry. The Jews of Libya, being under the Ministry of Colonies, received different treatment. Thus a few hundred Italian Jews, and even a few who had once had Italian citizenship and had given it up, were sent by train to Athens. Eventually some of them were repatriated to Italy and avoided deportation, though a few were captured by the Germans in Athens. About a hundred of those saved from Salonika held 'provisional Italian citizenship'. This was mainly the work of the Italian consul in Salonika, Zamboni, who must be greatly commended for his initiatives in saving Jews.

The two volumes by Leoni himself, and the third volume of studies published in his honor, represent an important resource for those wishing to delve further into the history of Sephardim in Italy. They belie the assertion one still sometimes hears that 'Italian Jews are not Sephardim' and show the extensive influence of Sephardim on Italian Jewish life over the last five centuries. Today, Italian Jewish life is a complex embroidered appliqué of culture on culture, origin on origin, in which Sephardic culture in many places plays a large role, making it all the more fascinating for scholars and laypeople alike.

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## Notes

1 Judith Roumani is the editor of *Sephardic Horizons*.

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