

JEWISH ROME: EUROPE'S OLDEST JEWISH COMMUNITY

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

Today, Rome's Jewish population counts some 15,000 people and a dozen Orthodox synagogues. The liturgy of the largest and most ornate, *Il Tempio Maggiore*, follows the Orthodox Italki rite as practiced by Italian Jews since early Roman times. In fact, Jews have lived in Rome for more than 2,000 years, making it the oldest Jewish community in Europe. The first to arrive, in 161 B.C., were diplomatic envoys sent by the Maccabees to establish a treaty with the Roman Senate asking for its protection from persecution by the Seleucid Greeks. The Romans were delighted to help; they couldn't wait for an excuse to get their hands on Greek territory.

The best way to explore Jewish Rome is by booking one of the many Jewish Rome Tours listed on the internet. The most extensive website is "Roman Jews: See Rome through the Eyes of a Roman Jew" run by Marco Misano, born in Rome in an Orthodox Sephardic family (info@romanjews.com). Misano's tours include one for children, another with Roman Jewish cooking lessons, and still others of Jewish symbolism in Michelangelo's art in the



The *Tempio Maggiore* of Rome was built between 1901 and 1904 on the land obtained by demolishing the most dilapidated areas of the Ghetto. (Wikipedia).

Below, the procession of Jewish slaves carved on the Arch of Titus in Rome's Forum

Vatican, and of Jewish catacombs.

Others contacts are Micaela Pavoncello, www.jewishroma.com, or David Walden at "Jewish Rome Tours." You'll learn that after the Maccabees, the tables turned when Rome invaded Judaea a century later. The first members of Rome's permanent Jewish community arrived in 61 B.C. as Pompey's enslaved prisoners-of-war, even if they retained the right to regain their freedom. A century later, after the Emperor Titus destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Rome's numerous Jewish newcomers were again all slaves, who helped build the Colosseum, and lived across the Tiber in today's Trastevere neighborhood.

With the rise of Christianity some Popes were quite tolerant of the Jews; others were not, such as Pope Paul

IV, who founded Rome's ghetto in 1556. After 1492, when Spain expelled the Jews who refused to convert, they came to Rome. So did the Jews in Sicily, then under Spanish rule. Rome's Jewish population doubled to c. 5,000 people. The terrified Pope forced them to live together behind three gates locked at night in a malarial- and flood-prone six acres on the Tiber's left bank. Previously merchants,



bankers, physicians, craftsmen, and papal servants, for over three hundred years Rome's Jews were forced to wear yellow scarves and outlandish yellow hats, were prohibited from owning property, and were forbidden to work except as rag or second-hand items sellers and money lenders.

Because of their overcrowded quarters, *friggitori*, or fry shops, were set up in the streets for families without kitchens. These gave birth to *carciofi alla giudia*, *fiori di zucca* and *filetti di baccalà*, deep-fried artichokes, zucchini flowers and salt cod fillets, still the most popular Roman Jewish dishes — like the population, of predominantly Sephardic roots.

Rome's ghetto wasn't demolished until 1870 when Italy was unified and King Victor Emanuel II granted the Jews full Italian citizenship. One named Ernesto Nathan was elected mayor of Rome in 1907 and is famous for the phrase “non c'è trippa per gatti” when he abolished payments for tripe to feed Rome's numerous stray cats from the city's strained budget. Another, Luigi Luzzati, was briefly Prime Minister from 1910-11, and ironically several Jews were close advisors to Mussolini before *Il Duce* enforced Hitler's 1938 racial laws.

The King had also given the Jews the right to live wherever they wished, but many chose to remain in their close-knit neighborhood with its centuries of tradition. This led to the darkest episode in local Jewish history commemorated with several on-site wall plaques.

On October 16, 1943, the Nazi German occupiers rounded up Jews throughout Rome, gathering at the ghetto. From the Piazza Portico d'Ottavia, 2,091 were deported to death camps in Germany and Poland; only 16 returned.

The ghetto's main sight is the already-mentioned *Tem-*



Leo X (1513-1521) was among the Popes who tolerated the presence of Jews in Rome, and right, Paul IV (1555-1559) among the more hostile. In 1555 he founded Rome's ghetto.

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pio Maggiore, built between 1901-4. In 1986 Pope John Paul II was the first Pope to visit here; Benedict XVI visited in 2010, and Francis in 2016. In its basement is Rome's Jewish Museum, containing tombstones from Roman catacombs and Ostia's historic synagogue, decorative and liturgical items dating back centuries, and Jewish objects and documentation from more recent Roman history.

Other Jewish sights in Rome are outside the ghetto: the menorah carved on the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum; and five Jewish catacombs, believed by scholars to predate the Christian ones by at least a century (Villa Torlonia, Vigna Apoloni, Vigna Cimarra, Vigna Randanini, and Monteverde).

To stay or eat in the ghetto: two of Rome's five *kascèr* (kosher) bed and breakfasts are on the Portico d'Ottavia. Also here are several *kascèr* restaurants, all good, although my favorites are La Taverna del Ghetto for its medieval atmosphere, and around the corner on Piazza Cenci, Yotvata, which takes its name from the oasis in present-day Israel where the Jews first stopped after leaving Egypt with Moses.

For *Kascèr* sweets head to Marlene's Kosher Gelateria, the “Antico Forno del Ghetto.” Its specialties, a kind of “Jewish Strudel” of candied fruits, almonds, raisins and pine nuts called “pizza ebraica” or “tronchetto,” and its almond and cinnamon biscuits were favorites of Benedict XVI.

Nearby are another three even better-known “Jewish,” but not *kascèr* restaurants: Evangelista, famous for its *carciofi al mattone* (artichokes squashed between two bricks and baked, a favorite dish of Karol Cardinal Wojtyla before his election as Pope), Dal Pompiere and Piperno, already famous with foreign tourists when the ghetto was still locked at night.○

In 1986, John Paul II met Rome's Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff, highlighting the Vatican's efforts “to offer refuge and safety to so many Jews of Rome” in Church institutions, even the Vatican itself, during Nazi occupation

