

ANTI-JEWISH PERSECUTION IN THE PROVINCE OF IMPERIA (1938-1945) (PAOLO VEZIANO)

The most significant traces of Jews in the province of Imperia date back to the early 20th century and can be found in the monumental «Foce» cemetery in San Remo. In the 20s there was an early immigration of Jews from northern Italy to the Riviera. Most were elderly persons who moved there for climatic reasons; in other cases, their reasons were the good opportunities for work. During the 30s this group was joined by Jews from the central European countries, in particular Germany, after Hitler's rise to power. Until 1935 the chances of foreign Jews finding employment were relatively good. In the early months of 1937, a group of some 200 resident Jews contacted the Israelite community in Genoa to ask whether a base for Jewish life could be set up in San Remo. On 23 April 1937 the Genoese community approved the constitution of a Section in San Remo. At the time there were three small private oratories in the city and a hostel that provided *kosher* food. Religious life followed a regular pattern but was accompanied by considerable internal disputes, accentuated by the lack of a stable rabbi.

During the early months of 1938 the Section included 110 members, including a majority (70%) of foreigners. An analysis of the professions exercised by the contributors allows the group to be classified as middle class. In order to ascertain the numbers of Jews living in Italy, a detailed census was held on 22 August 1938. This revealed the presence in the province of 260 Jews, of whom 160 were foreigners. The numbers of Jews exceeded two per thousand, but the racial situation was not regarded as causing for concern.

Application of the Anti-Jewish regulations and its consequences

On 5 September 1938 the Jews were banned from all teaching in and attending public schools of any type and level, nor could they teach in higher education. On 7 September it was stipulated that foreign Jews living in Italy after 1 January 1939 would have to leave the country within six months after the publication of the decree. Later decrees banned Jews, among other things, from military service, marriage with Italian citizens of "Arian race" and working for the State, the provinces, municipalities, organisations or other public companies.

As a result of the law of 7 September, some 5,000 foreign Jews had to leave the country by 12 March 1939. The serious difficulties that this led to prompted the Ministry of the Interior to issue instructions in January and April 1939 to prefects that "the exodus of the Jews should be facilitated using all possible means". From that moment on, the police stations in north Italy and the Italo-Jewish aid organisations were expected to guide Jews towards the commissariats in border towns. Expulsion to France was the most practical solution because the frontier was not heavily guarded and there was a good chance of entering the country illegally. From spring 1939 onwards hundreds of Jews arrived in the province; the prefect was expected to oversee their removal, in an attempt to avoid any public disorder: the end justified the means that were used. Illegal activities were immediately legalised; the border guards took over from smugglers and assumed the role of «passeur di Stato»; boatmen became indispensable. Fishermen were encouraged and were guaranteed complete freedom of action. Local authorities expected a greater involvement in the exodus, also in financial terms, from Jewish aid organisations, also hoping for a more efficient organisation of clandestine transport.

The arrival en masse of Jews prompted numerous "clandestine shipping agencies" to be set up after July 1939, and during August they managed to transport more than 400 Jews across the border. The agencies were rapidly reorganised after they had lost part of the fleet and numerous boatmen, and they recruited other fishermen and purchased motorboats. During the summer of 1939 most of the Jews left from the beach known as "Bagnabraghe". This was a small inlet to the east of the town of Bordighera, overlooked by a crumbling building, formerly used as an abattoir, where documents were checked and the Jews were subject to personal searches. In the early months of 1940, the French naval presence was relaxed, encouraging attempts to organise runs every month until May 1940.

The local authorities were responsible for organising almost all of the escapes across the mountain paths, successfully rebutting attempts by local guides to interfere in the exodus. In Ventimiglia, the officers responsible for public order called a meeting of the captains of the border guards to agree the times and places when Jews who spent too long in the city would be removed over the mountains. Jews were escorted under armed guard to the barracks of the border guards or the finance police in Ciotti and Olivetta. In fact, these villages were ideally suited: they were close to the frontier and had access to a network of paths, most of them narrow and unguarded. The most frequently used paths included the one leading from Ciotti and Villatella across the *Passo del Cornà* to Mentone, and the one which led from *Olivetta S.Michele* to Sospel

across the *Treittore Pass*. The barracks and Alpine huts along the way acted as centres where Jews could gather and be sorted before being expelled. The path across the Muratone Pass to Saorge was occasionally used by smugglers who, by avoiding the patrols carried out by the border guards, managed to guide the clandestine Jews to their destination.

From July 1939 onwards the overland routes ceased to play an important role because of the development of the "maritime agencies" who could transport entire family groups more rapidly and at more attractive prices. It is thought that, using both overland and sea routes, as many as 3,500 foreign Jews were smuggled clandestinely to France during the period 1938-1940.

Over one hundred foreign Jews living in the province decided to leave immediately and joined the hundreds of refugees heading towards France. In some cases Jews were sacked from their public offices immediately and without any outcry. In August 1940 it was decided that ten doctors and two pharmacists would be struck off the professional guild: it was the individuals in these professions who paid the highest price. The severe economic restrictions imposed on Jews by the measures introduced in November 1938, even if these were lessened because of their middle class status, meant that the Section found itself in real difficulty when called to help a few families facing serious problems. In December the following year, in view of the disastrous financial situation faced by the Section of San Remo after the departure of most of its contributors, the Jewish community of Genoa resolved to close it down.

Arrests and deportations (1943-1944)

In the spring of 1943 the Jewish presence increased following the arrival of their fellow countrymen forced to leave France. After the rapid military occupation of the province, German units of the Gestapo and SS inspected the lists of resident Jews. Once they had assured the indispensable collaboration of the Italian police, they commenced a long and ruthless hunt for Jews, as they had already done elsewhere. The period of terror started on 18 November 1943 in Bordighera with the arrest of three members of the Hassan family. During the tragic night between 25 and 26 November, SS guards and Italian police agents rounded up thirty-three Jews who were arrested in Ventimiglia, Bordighera and San Remo. They were imprisoned in the prisons at San Remo and Imperia and subsequently transferred to Genoa. On 5 December 1943 the Ministry of the Interior of the Italian Social Republic ordered that "all Jews, even if discriminated, should be arrested and interned in special provincial camps and their personal possessions and property immediately sequestered".

In the province of Imperia the camp was set up in Vallecrosia, in an area already occupied by military buildings. It was set up in February 1944 and closed in August of the same year. The camp was used above all to hold political prisoners, the parents of recruits who failed to report for military service and only five Jews who were arrested in Bordighera and San Remo. Over the following months, the few arrests that were made can all be attributed to the squalid phenomenon of encouraging informants. Some families had the good fortune to escape being arrested and immediately left for Switzerland. Other families or individuals were hidden and protected by friends or neighbours; some were given refuge in religious institutions. A new outbreak of arrests occurred in April 1944 when five elderly Jews were taken prisoner in San Remo. Among these was Elena Abraham who subsequently died in gaol in Imperia. The reign of terror came to an end the following month. The overall number of Jews who were arrested and deported from this province, where the Jewish presence was never very high, is nonetheless impressive and amounts to at least 54 deportees. Only five would survive the inferno of the Nazi concentration camps and return.

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