THE GHETTO OF FLORENCE

JEWS IN FLORENCE BEFORE THE GHETTO

Though the focus of this essay is the Jewish ghetto of Florence in relation to the rest of the city and the relations that the Jews had with their Christian neighborhoods, a complete understanding of the dynamics that led to the establishment of the ghetto requires a short historical background.

There is a substantial amount of uncertainty as to when the history of the Florentine Jewish community begins. British historian Cecil Roth dates the establishment of a Jewish community in Florence to the Early Middle Ages;¹ Umberto Cassuto goes back to the Roman era;² finally, there are those who date it to the fourteenth century.³ Despite this uncertainty, what can be asserted with confidence is the fact that there is evidence of the presence of a merchant named Eleazar da Firenze (Eleazar from Florence) in England in 1286, and of another man from Florence named Mayr in Treviso (Northern Italy) in 1323.⁴ As such, it is possible to argue that the Jews are beginning to arrive in Tuscany between the tenth and the fourteenth century, settling primarily in Lucca, Pisa, Siena and Florence. Although the Jews’ presence in major Tuscan cities allows us to believe that their employment was primarily related to commerce and business, the fact that there is no account of a famous Jew in this time points to the fact that they probably had little relevance in the wider financial and economic situation of the city.

Nonetheless, most scholars indicate 1437 as the year of the formal establishment of a Jewish community in Florence, after the government of the Republic of Florence led by Cosimo de’ Medici (the first of the Medici political dynasty) authorized the residence of

Jewish moneylenders according to the rules laid in the condotta, a charter allowing each Jewish male to bring his family, three work associates (and their families) and the necessary professional staff for a total of not more than 60 Jews.5 Indeed, it is generally assumed that the earliest Jewish settlements in the northern and central regions of the Italian peninsula were a result of invitations on the part of the rulers for the need of moneylenders. However, there is evidence that a vast part of the Jewish Florentine population was not involved in moneymaking activities.6 In fact, Jewish Florentine bankers were an urban elite who – despite not being connected to the Florentine patriciate of the Medicis7 – was certainly in good relations with wealthy and prominent families of Florence. The period of Jewish banking in Florence coincides with that of the Republic’s prosperity, when Florence became one of the most important cultural hubs centered around the figure of Lorenzo de’ Medici, whose House continued allowing the presence of the Jews within the walls of the city.

After this period, the presence and policies of Jews in Florence was a function of the fortune of the Medici House. Indeed, the Medicis lost and acquired power several times in the decades going from 1490 to the late 1530s. With the seizing of power of puritanical Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, the Medicis were expelled from Florence. Under the theocracy established by Savonarola,8 which excited the population against the Jews,9 the Jewish population was forced to abandon the city. In 1498, after Pope Alexander VI managed to have Savonarola burned at the stake, and Jews were allowed back into Florentine territory until 1527, when the Medicis (and as a result, the Jews) were expelled

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6 Siegmund (2006), 103.

7 Siegmund (2006), 97.


once again. Cosimo I de’ Medici managed to seize definitive control of the city in 1537 and established the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, which existed until 1859.

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Under the rule of Cosimo I de’ Medici (1537-1574) Jews at first experienced a good amount of privileges, such as the right to live and lend money within the walls of Florence at a relatively high rate. The granting of such privileges was not a reflection of Cosimo’s respect for religious minorities. While scholars have argued that he was influenced by his wife the duchess Eleanora of Toledo who had a friendly relationship with Doña Benvegnita Abravanel while living in Naples,\textsuperscript{10} it seems more likely that his decision was a function of utilitarian drivers, such as the economic benefit of having moneylenders in Florence, an occupation forbidden to the Catholic population.\textsuperscript{11}

However, things changed in October 1570, when Cosimo I de’ Medici approved an edict expelling all Jews residing in the Florentine domain\textsuperscript{12} and required them to move to a place that was to be determined. It is widely believed that the Cosimo I’s reasons for ghettoizing the Jews are purely political. Starting the 1560s, he was trying to gain a more powerful title than that of duke, which would give him more international recognition. The best way to attain such a goal was through Pope Pius V, to whom he promised the establishment of the papal Inquisition in Tuscany and the persecution of all non-believers in exchange for the title. The place where Jews were to be confined was finally revealed in 1571, when the decision was made to create a ghetto modeled on the Venetian and Roman ghettos that had been established in 1516 and in 1555. In redefining religious, communal and

\textsuperscript{10} Siegmund (2006), 99.
\textsuperscript{12} The edict was titled “Decreto et general: editto sopra li hebrei che di presente habitano nel Dominio Fiorentino.” Stephanie Siegmund (2006) provides a picture of it in her book.
spatial boundaries of the Jewish community, the ghettoization of Tuscan Jews can be considered one of the most crucial events in Florentine Jewish history. Indeed, the community of Tuscan Jews prior to the creation of the ghetto was not defined by the governmental influence of the Medici House, but rather by a set of cultural boundaries that unified Tuscan and Northern Italian Jewish families who saw each other as potential allies through marriage. Furthermore, as Professor Stephanie Siegmund argues, even without Jewish institutions Tuscan Jews could be considered part of a larger Jewish community based on their shared membership in a minority religion, their inevitable consciousness of ‘sameness’ in contrast to the “otherness” of non-Jews, and their awareness or shared experience of being seen as “other” and discriminated against by the Christian government in many arenas of life.

The ghetto was realized in what was then (and still is now) the most central point of downtown Florence. While today the neighborhood is considered to be an elegant and renowned place in Florence, this was not the case in the sixteenth century. Indeed, the ghetto was built where the Mercato Vecchio (a dirty and crowded market) had been for about a century. In the middle of the Mercato was the Gran Postribolo, Florence’s main brothel. The fact that the area (roughly 200 squared meters) was surrounded by tall walls that had in the past kept the brothel isolated from the rest of the population seemed an ideal feature for the construction of the ghetto. Furthermore, the ghetto was delimited by a market, the Duomo, the baptistery and the Santa Maria Novella Church. Both the spatial and cultural associations of the Jews and prostitutes and the delimitation represented by the Church are noteworthy. As Siegmund states, the idea that Jews were obliged to move where prostitutes had previously lived reflects an association that has often been made in western Christian

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14 Siegmund (2006), 147.
municipal legislations. Indeed, both groups were seen as unwelcome as they corrupted the spirits of the Christian local population, whose presence was nevertheless inevitable.

The ghetto consisted of dark and narrow streets as well as two small squares. Until 1704, there was only one entrance that was closed every night. With Cosimo III’s extension of the Old Ghetto and the creation of the Ghetto Nuovo, Jews had two ways to return to their neighborhood. It is interesting to note that the second gateway was right behind the archdiocese. The main gateway had Cosimo I’s coat of arms, as well as an inscription in Latin that read the following:

Cosimo dei Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and his son the most serene Prince Francesco motivated in all things by great piety, willed that the Jews be enclosed in this place, segregated from the Christians but not expelled so that through good example they might come to bow their stubborn necks to Christ’s light yoke. Year of the Lord 1571.

It is clear from this text that when we speak of the benevolence of the Medici House toward the Jewish population, it must be kept in mind that it was relative to sixteenth century standards of respect of minorities. What we can infer from this engraving, indeed, is the fact that Cosimo would have seen the Jews’ conversion to Christianity with favor, as this would have been the only way for the Jews not to be viewed as “stubborn.”

The decision of putting and keeping the Jews in an enclosed space is also a function of the total population of Florence relative to the size of the town and it is related to the idea that Jews should not occupy space that could be useful to the rest of the population. Due to the growing size of the Jewish population, in 1705 Cosimo III made the decision to enlarge the ghetto in order to include the 105 families that were living in the proximity, in houses

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15 Siegmund (2006), 204.
that were described as “the most comfortable of the nation as they have four rooms of different size and with a well and other comforts.” While the fact that Jews were living in the vicinity of the ghetto indicates the presence of an informal Jewish space, it is interesting to note the inclination of Florence’s rulers to formalize such a space, in order for both the city and the population to create a clear dividing line between the minority and the majority.

While the ghettoization of Florence Jewry emphasized the “otherness” of Jews relative to the population living outside the ghetto walls by making religion the central category of identification (thus undermining differences such as socioeconomic status between Jews), it simultaneously highlighted gender distinctions within the ghetto. Indeed, it affected men and women in different ways. As Siegmund argues, men were as a group better capable to mitigate the degree of their isolation from the rest of Florentine society, as they had more opportunity to leave the ghetto for commercial reasons. While the exclusion of Jewish women was undoubtedly more severe, it gave rise to institutions that were not present before the establishment of the ghetto. While Jewish confraternal societies existed prior to 1571, in fact, the Compagnia delle Donne – a consoronal society – was created only when Jewish women were in daily contact with each other while living in the ghetto.

It is clear that the creation of the ghetto in 1571 made the Jews – who were until then a non-institutionalized community – a semi-autonomous group who had the opportunity to formalize the relationships they had with one another. The three doors of the ghetto were carefully opened at dawn and closed at night by a Jewish gatekeeper for more than two centuries. During the reign of the House of Lorraine in the second half of the 18th century, however, local authorities ceased to inspect whether the law was being

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18 Siegmund (2006), 133.
19 Siegmund (2006), 404.
implemented. While the Jews continued to fulfill the obligation for eighty more years, on January 8, 1835, the ghetto gates stopped being closed. The separation of the Jews from the rest of the population came to an informal end, and was officially confirmed in the 1880s with the demolition of the ghetto. During a project of urban renovation of the city center at the time when Florence was the capital of Italy (1864-1870), the ghetto was demolished and a monumental arch portal was built in what is today Piazza della Repubblica (one of Florence’s central squares). “The arch includes an inscription that reads: “The ancient center of the city/from centuries old squalor/to new life restored/1895”20 (see picture).

Works Cited


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