The Italian Jewish Migration to
Eretz Israel and the Birth of Italian
Chalutz Movement (1938-1948)

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Italian Jewish ‘aliyah [migration] to Eretz Israel [the Land of Israel] before the birth of the Israeli State in May 1948. This phenomenon only concerned a tiny minority of the Italian Jews. Between 1938 and 1940, out of the 40,000 Italian Jews living in Italy, only around 400 decided to migrate to Mandatory Palestine. At the end of the Second World War, Zionism became widely accepted, and an increase occurred in the ‘aliyah between 1945 and 1948. Yet, such a choice continued to be made only by a minority of Jews. The main reasons lay in the small number of Italian Jews, their high level of integration and assimilation before and after the Shoah, and the fact that Zionism was mainly interpreted as a philanthropic movement or a way to support Israel, rather than as an ideology leading towards ‘aliyah.

Keywords: Italy, Jews, Zionism, Eretz Israel [Land of Israel], ‘aliyah [migration]

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1. Introduction

The contemporary history of the Italian Jewish community has not been thoroughly addressed by scholars. Historiography on the situation of post-war European Judaism did not pay enough attention to the Italian reality, and the contributions dealing specifically with Italy have mainly, if not only, focused on the fact that thousands of refugees managed to leave Europe through Italy to reach British Palestine—or what Zionists referred to as Eretz Israel [the land of Israel]—after the Shoah [Holocaust]. What is most striking is that, contrary to a lack of contributions dealing with the history of contemporary Italian Jewry, Italian Jewish literature—especially

1) Before the war, around 47,000 Jews were living in Italy: 39,000 of them were Italian citizens, and 8,000 were foreigners. At the end of the war, only 30,000 Italian Jews had remained in Italy. It means that 40% of Italian Jewry had disappeared, either through renouncing to Judaism, or migration, or death in the Shoah. See Sergio Della Pergola, Anatomia dell’Ebraismo italiano (Assisi-Roma, 1976), and Guri Schwarz, “The Reconstruction of Jewish Life in Italy after World War II,” Journal of Modern Jewish Studies, 8 (2009), 360.

2) Since the end of the war, even Italian historiography has not dealt with this issue in a broad way. Things started to change in 1988, on occasion of the Fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Racial Laws by the Fascist government. Since that date, a revival of Jewish studies has taken place, and a relevant number of volumes has been published. As to a bibliographical survey, see Guri Schwarz, “Gli ebrei in Italia e in Europa dopo le persecuzioni: appunti per un saggio bibliografico”, Gli ebrei in Italia tra persecuzione fascista e reintegrazione postbellica, ed. Guri Schwarz and Ilaria Pavan (Firenze: Giuntina, 2001), 171-190.


4) In this article, the term Eretz Israel will be used because this is the way at that time Jews were addressing the geographical region under the Ottoman Empire that later became Palestine under the British Mandate.