

Introduction

“Before you ask any more questions, I want to tell you something,” said ninety-year-old Clara Rothman. It was a bright California morning in December 2013, and I was interviewing Clara for my book on Italian Jewish history. I nodded, pen ready in hand.

“Italians are the most wonderful, wonderful people,” she said. “Never, ever did I experience anti-Semitism in Italy.”¹

Her statement was surprising, to say the least. Clara’s story – like the stories of most other Italian Jews of her generation – was not a care-free one. Clara had grown up in the age of Fascism, in the port town of Trieste. Life as she knew it came to an abrupt halt in 1938, when Italy enacted a series of racist laws targeting its 45,000 Jews. Suddenly, she was expelled from school, her family’s business crumbled, and her father was interned in an Italian concentration camp. After several nerve-racking months of applying for visas, the family finally fled to the more tolerant shores of America. Clara never went back; but she did hold on to a glowing view of Italy and its people.

This book offers a new perspective of the myth of Italian benevolence in World War II, and the role Jews themselves played in its creation. Italy has long enjoyed a reputation of having treated Jews well during the war; supposedly, Italian anti-Semitism was a poor imitation of German racism, a mild policy that did no harm. Since the 1990s, scholars have revealed the gravity of Italian anti-Jewish policy, and numerous studies have highlighted Italians’ complicity in the Holocaust. Yet the old assumption, that Italy was categorically good to Jews, still dominates public discourse. This image of Italians as *brava gente*, as historians have dubbed it, “good people,” remains one of the most enduring myths about modern Italy.

What was the role of Italian Jews in promoting the *brava gente* narrative, and how did their experience in the decades before World War II – during which they became fervent Italian patriots, some even Fascists, while maintaining their distinctive Jewish culture – influence them to do so? In other words, how did the experience of Italian Jewry from

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emancipation in 1848 to Italy's first anti-Semitic laws in 1938 lead Jews to help perpetuate this account during and after World War II? I argue that Jews, the very victims of Italian wartime racism, played a role in bolstering the *brava gente* idea. Italian Jews themselves – like Clara Rothman – promoted a favorable image of Italy during the war and in its wake. Indeed, the roots of Jewish praise for Italy run deeper than World War II; they date back to the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Jewish idealization of Italy was transnational. Italian Jewish refugees in the United States and in British Palestine idealized Italy no less than Jewish survivors who stayed in the peninsula. They spread the *brava gente* story far beyond Europe.

This book is not just about memory, however; it also offers new insights on Jewish life from the 1850s to the 1950s, and explores Jewish practices in modern Italy, which are central to understanding Jews' praise for Italian society. The conventional wisdom is that Italian Jews "assimilated," or abandoned their Jewish identity, after gaining equality in the nineteenth century. I show the contrary: Jewish culture and religion flourished after emancipation, the process that granted Jews legal and civic equality. Furthermore, after a forced seven-year hiatus from 1938 to 1945, Jewish culture thrived once more.

In order to show why Italian Jews helped create a discourse of Italian goodness, particularly Fascist goodness, this book answers a little-explored question: why most Italian Jews in the interwar period supported Fascism. Jews' adherence, acceptance, and indifference to Fascism is a thorny issue for many Italian Jews today. In an era that lambasts Fascism and all it represented – imperialism, racism, suppression of liberties, unchecked power of the state – there is a nagging discomfort among Jews whose parents or grandparents approved of Fascism or at least tolerated it. Yet Jews who opted for Fascism had their reasons, as family letters, diaries, and memoirs reveal. One cause for Jews' acceptance of Fascism, among several discussed in this book, was that they feared the socialist Left and its threat of revolution. Since Fascism promised to safeguard the rights and capital of the middle class, to which most Jews belonged, they saw Fascism as the safer alternative. Their faith in Fascism led them to trust the regime even after it turned against them in the late 1930s.

Jews and the Myth of the *Brava Gente*

Until the 1990s, most scholars assumed that Italy had treated its Jews well during World War II. Studies of the Holocaust, mirroring public opinion in Italy and abroad, downplayed Italy's role in persecuting its

Jews, and put the blame entirely on Germany. They depicted Italian anti-Semitism as a weak imitation of its evil German counterpart. At best it was a halfhearted attempt at racism, at worst a serious policy backed only by Mussolini and his henchmen, but not by rank-and-file Italians. The first major study on Jewish life under Fascism, by the acclaimed non-Jewish historian Renzo De Felice, took this approach. Published in 1961, De Felice's book said that "the anti-Semitic measures were not popular with the majority of the Italian people." Indeed, wrote De Felice, "the calumnies and monstrosities against the Jews" persuaded Italians to "open their eyes to Fascism . . . and revise their opinions." Because Italians were "relatively immune to racism," they reacted to the racial laws with "disgust, solidarity with the Jews, and loss of confidence in the state."² De Felice's book, and its exculpatory approach toward Italians, set the tone for decades. It was reprinted in seven Italian editions (1972, 1977, 1988, 1993, 2002, 2005, 2008), translated into English in 2001, and republished in English in 2015.

Other historians echoed De Felice's opinions on Italian benevolence. In some versions of the *brava gente* discourse, Italians were portrayed as mostly anti-Fascist or intent on saving Jews; in others, they were described as adherents to a harmless Fascism. Both approaches confirmed Italians were incapable of any wrongdoing.³ In 1978, Meir Michaelis remarked on the "philo-Semitism of the Italian masses."⁴ Michael Marrus said in 1981 that "[Italian] persecution lacked energy."⁵ In his 1989 survey of the Holocaust, Marrus repeated that "persecution [in Italy] . . . involved many exceptions, and did not have the enthusiastic support of the Italian population."⁶ In 1986, numerous scholars organized a conference tellingly entitled "Italians and Jews: Rescue and Aid during the Holocaust." A book of essays soon followed, called *Italian Refuge*. "The role of Italians [was] saving and protecting Italian and foreign Jews," stated the editor, Ivo Herzer.⁷ In 1990, Jonathan Steinberg commented on the "remarkable practical compassion" of Italians in the face of anti-Jewish persecution.⁸ In 1995, De Felice himself reiterated this opinion in an essay. "In Italy racism was unknown, and anti-Semitism did not have a real tradition of its own," he wrote. "The racial legislation of 1938–1939 . . . [had] a different character, more moderate and 'civilized,'" he continued, for Italy "applied the racial laws in a restricted spirit, avoiding excesses and at times using bland procedures that ended up favoring the Jews."⁹

Starting in the late 1980s, some scholars began to question this story of Italian innocence. The impetus for change came in 1988, when the fiftieth anniversary of the racial laws sparked new research. That year, a dozen scholars convened for a conference on Italy's anti-Jewish laws,

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and *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, the key Italian academic journal on Jewish history and culture, published a special issue with 500 pages' worth of essays and documents on the topic of "Laws Against the Jews."¹⁰ The study of Italian anti-Semitism expanded significantly from the 1990s onward, as more researchers joined the field. The findings of these scholars, synthesized in Chapters 3 and 4 of this book, showed that the truth was not as rosy as De Felice and others had argued. Anti-Semitism in the peninsula was *not* an import from Germany, they said, and the Italian government had persecuted Jews relentlessly between 1938 and 1945. Michele Sarfatti, Stefano Caviglia, and Michael Livingston demonstrated the far-reaching extent of the Italian racial laws; Giorgio Fabre and Annalisa Capristo focused on their ruinous effect on Jewish authors and academics; Ilaria Pavan studied the tremendous economic impact of persecution; Liliana Picciotto and Enzo Collocci showed the complicity of Italian authorities in rounding up Jews and delivering them to the Nazis; David Kertzer and Susan Zuccotti highlighted the Vatican's silence on the racial laws, and later on the deportation of Jews from Italy; and the list goes on.¹¹ Other historians, among them Guri Schwarz, Filippo Focardi, Lutz Klinkhammer, Rebecca Clifford, and Michele Battini, traced the history of Italy's self-acquittal from the late 1940s to later decades, revealing how the tale of the *brava gente* took root in the peninsula and became embedded in public opinion.¹²

It is true, historians affirmed, that the murder of Italian Jews began only after the arrival of the Germans in September 1943, and that some non-Jewish Italians – both policemen and civilians – protected Jews from being deported. Of the 32,307 Jews resident in Italy in September 1943, the month the Germans entered Italy, 7200 (22 percent) perished, the majority in Auschwitz.¹³ Italians' help proved crucial in enabling 78 percent of Jews in Italy to survive, a high figure compared to other Jewish communities in Europe. Yet Italian policemen and civilians also played a hand in deporting the Jews. The Italian government competed with the Germans for the right to round up Jews and confiscate their capital; Italian police hunted down Jews, gathered them in Italian-run camps and prisons, and delivered them to the Germans. Denunciation was a widespread phenomenon during those years, as Italian civilians reported hidden Jews to the police. Italian Jews' survival owed not only to the help of gentile Italians, but also to the late date of the Germans' arrival, the proximity of neutral Switzerland and the Allied south, and the chaos of civil war, which generated masses of displaced people and made Jewish fugitives less conspicuous.

Despite the extensive recent scholarship on the Italian Holocaust, the *brava gente* story is still popular among the public. Non-academic

renderings of the Holocaust in Italy, particularly newspapers, novels, and films, still speak of Italy in flattering terms. One vivid example is Roberto Benigni's 1997 *Life Is Beautiful*, probably the most famous film on Jews in wartime Italy.¹⁴ It won multiple Academy Awards and the prestigious Grand Prix at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival, and set a record of more than 16 million viewers when released on Italian television in October 2001.¹⁵ This film both reflects and bolsters the idea of Italian benevolence to Jews. The 1938 racial laws are barely mentioned; indeed, the film begins in 1939, showing Jewish life at that time as carefree and happy. The plot depicts a Jewish man marrying a Catholic woman, a union that would have been near impossible under the racial laws. When Italian racism does make an appearance, it is trivialized and accompanied by comparisons to German racism, emphasizing the harmlessness of Italian anti-Semitism. *Life Is Beautiful* and other recent films exemplify that public opinion in the peninsula and abroad has yet to be convinced of the gravity of Italian anti-Jewish policies.

Wikipedia, the most frequently accessed encyclopedia in the world and one edited by the general public, reflects the popularity of the idea of the good Italian. The English-language article "Italian Racial Laws" stated (as of April 2017) that "the Italian Racial Laws were unpopular with most ordinary Italians," and provided De Felice as a reference. On average it is read 1800 times a month.¹⁶ The article "History of the Jews in Italy," with 4400 monthly views, has little information on Jews under Fascism or during World War II.¹⁷ These articles, with a readership far greater than any revisionist historian might hope to have, not only mirror public opinion about Italian benevolence; they also strengthen it.

The idea of Italian philo-Semitism is no isolated concept; it is part of a larger story concerning Italian benevolence. For decades, Italy promoted the idea that after 1943, most Italians backed the Resistance and worked to topple the Fascist regime and the German occupiers. Italians have also cultivated a self-image as kind conquerors, supposedly leading a benign colonization of Africa from the 1910s to the 1940s, and a gentle occupation of Greece and Yugoslavia between 1940 and 1943.¹⁸ Scholars in the 1990s began to challenge these assertions, at roughly the same time as their colleagues questioned Italians' benevolence to Jews.¹⁹ In 1991, Claudio Pavone's study revealed that, between 1943 and 1945, many Italians chose to fight with the Fascists and Nazis against the Resistance, in what amounted to a civil war.²⁰ Other scholars exposed Italian brutality abroad; Italian colonialism in Libya, Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia claimed over 100,000 lives.²¹ Italy used poison gas, an internationally banned weapon, in its attacks on Libya and Eritrea in the 1920s, and in Ethiopia in 1935–1936. Italians subjected Africans to mass population transfers, forced marches, detention in concentration camps, as well as

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sexual exploitation and daily racial discrimination.²² In wartime Greece and Yugoslavia, the Italian occupiers burned and destroyed villages, as well as tortured and executed civilians.²³

Yet just as the narrative concerning Jews still dominates the media and public opinion, so too does the narrative on Italy's fairness in its occupied territories. The Hollywood movie *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (2001) is a prime example, contrasting peaceful Italians with brutal Germans on an occupied Greek island.²⁴ Historians have offered various reasons for the endurance of claims on Italians' goodness toward Jews, Africans, and Greeks. These include, to mention just a few, the reluctance of the Italian state to acknowledge its colonial and wartime crimes; the publication of state-sanctioned books praising the country's conduct in the 1930s and 1940s; and denigrating stereotypes, still held by the international community, that Italians cannot fight and therefore could not have committed serious crimes.²⁵

This book re-contextualizes the much-studied claim of Italian benevolence. I argue that Jews, despite having been among the very victims of Italian racism, are central to the durability of that myth. Italian Jews described Italy in flattering terms from the start of the racial laws, and continued to do so after the war was over. "Italy simply cannot implement racial German theories, which are foreign to the country's civilization and culture," said an Italian Jewish man in August 1938, just before the first racial law was passed. A week after its passage, in mid-September 1938, three Jewish men from Ferrara, Florence, and Milan wrote, "We don't yet know the scope of the measures . . . but we trust in the fairness of Government decisions." "Poor Mussolini, he's fallen on his knees before Hitler," exclaimed another Jewish man, several months later, to explain the racial laws. "Poor, innocent Italians. This poor nation of ours is truly unfortunate," wrote a Jewish refugee in the United States. He penned these words in early 1943, even though the racial laws had been in place for over four years. "Race and racism [are] distant words in the beautiful, healthy, beloved life of the Italian countryside . . . which knows no wickedness," wrote another Italian Jew in 1946. "Mussolini had to create anti-Semitism," stated an Italian Jewish woman in 1955. "It did not exist in Italy."²⁶ So thought an Italian Jewish man in 1995, when interviewed by the Shoah Foundation about his past. "There was no anti-Semitism in Italy," he explained. "It came after, started by Germany."²⁷

How are we to explain the flattering statements Jews made about Italy? Guri Schwarz has ventured a possible answer. He has shown that Jewish communal leaders in late 1940s Italy exculpated the Italians for pragmatic reasons. The postwar Italian government sought to absolve

Italians of wartime responsibility in order to gain good standing with the Allies. Italian Jewish leaders, for their part, wanted the government's cooperation in aiding thousands of Jewish refugees who were passing through Italy on their way to Palestine. In a sort of quid pro quo, Italian Jewish leaders supported the story of Italian innocence and the government allowed the refugees to sojourn in the peninsula.²⁸ This study builds on Schwarz's findings and expands them, both thematically and chronologically.

The roots of Jewish praise for Italy, I show, are older and deeper than the postwar era, older even than World War II; they date back to the nineteenth century. The unification of the peninsula under one crown, completed in 1870, brought in its wake full equality for Jews. Conditions improved rapidly for Jews after emancipation. They moved out of the ghettos, received more education, and worked in better jobs than ever before, becoming a seamless part of the Italian bourgeoisie. The more their lives improved, the more patriotic Jews became, crediting the Kingdom of Italy with their good fortune. World War I further cemented Italian Jews' ties to the peninsula. When the country joined the war in 1915, Jews rushed to the barricades to defend their homeland, even though it meant fighting their Austrian coreligionists. Not even the rise of Fascism in 1922 marred the Jews' sense of belonging in Italian society.

These decades of integration, well-being, and patriotism shaped the Jewish reaction to the racial laws of 1938. Though shocked and horrified at the persecution, many Italian Jews kept their faith in Italy and held to what would later become known as the *brava gente* narrative. The state had been so good to them in the past, they reasoned; surely the laws would be only temporary. Surely the Italian government had enacted them purely to appease Hitler, and would nullify them just as soon as it could. So trusting were most Italian Jews that they scoffed at the idea of leaving Italy; emigration rates were far lower than outside observers expected, reflecting the belief that better times were just around the corner. The few who did emigrate – about 3000 (less than 9 percent) – still maintained the idea of Italian innocence.²⁹ The most vocal wartime supporters of Italy, in fact, were Italian Jewish refugees in the United States. Although they had gone to America to escape Italian racism, they spent the war years idealizing their native country. Their praise of Italy was founded on decades of integration. Also, by portraying Italians as innocent, indeed as anti-Fascists, they hoped to persuade the sizable non-Jewish Italian American community to rally against Mussolini.

Jewish survivors who resurfaced from hiding after the war also painted Italy in positive hues. Certainly their relationship to Italy had changed; the trauma of persecution, the murder of loved ones, and the massive

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destruction of Jewish property and community buildings had taken their toll. Yet alongside their pain from all that had occurred between 1938 and 1945, the majority of Italian Jews chose to stay in postwar Italy and to reconcile with their neighbors. This positive thinking enabled Italian Jews to feel at home again in Italy. Unintentionally, they reinforced the idea of Italian benevolence during World War II.

Jewish Culture and the Assimilation Debate

The fervent patriotism of Italian Jews throughout the nine decades from emancipation (beginning in 1848) to the racial laws did not mean they abandoned their Judaism. Indeed, Italian Jews appreciated Italy's enabling them to live as Jews, a fact that contributed to their later praise of the country. This book revises the widespread belief that modern Italian Jews "assimilated," that is, that they lost their Jewish identity after emancipation. In reality, the Jews of modern Italy maintained their distinctiveness from non-Jews and developed entirely new forms of Jewish culture. From the second half of the nineteenth century until World War II, the Italian Jewish communal system consolidated and centralized. Jewish leaders harnessed state laws to strengthen their communities, and established national organizations where none had stood before. A growing Jewish newspaper industry fostered the sense of belonging to a Jewish collective. Women and girls participated in Jewish public life more than in the premodern period, and religious practice evolved as Italian Jews, like their German and French coreligionists, introduced reforms. Jews cultivated their identity in personal and intimate ways, through life-cycle events, culinary customs, and dialect. In all these ways, Italian Jews forged their own modern Jewish identity.

The claim that modernity led to the disintegration of Jewishness began over a century ago, and was not particular to Italy. In the 1890s, the Russian Jewish historian Simon Dubnov argued that emancipation threatened to corrode Jewish culture, particularly in western and central Europe. Jews in these areas, he warned, were nearing "national assimilation" which would eventually "impel Jews to merge with other nations – and Judaism would disappear."³⁰ This paradigm ruled supreme for decades. Scholars described the Jews of France, Germany, Austria, and Britain as communities on the path to losing their Jewish distinctiveness. Ben-Zion Dinur led this argument in the 1950s, positing that modern Western Jews had gone down a path of "self-negation." Maintaining only "a minimal degree of Jewishness," they had become "a diffused minority with no clearly distinct way of life . . . [and] only the very vaguest traces of the ancestral heritage."³¹

Scholars of Italian Jews shared this opinion. Citing the rise of mixed marriages and the decline of strict observance, they stated that Italian Jews shed their Judaism in the modern period. “The impact of emancipation upon the internal life of Italian Jewry was . . . deleterious,” wrote Cecil Roth in 1946, as “assimilation had made appalling progress.” Roth described Jewish culture in Italy as “wasted,” “dwindled to vanishing point,” “neglected,” and “pathetic.”³² De Felice agreed with this view, asserting in his famous 1961 study that Italian Jews experienced a “repudiation of their own Jewishness, as if being Jews meant that they were not able to be completely Italian.”³³ In 1963, Attilio Milano charged modern Italian Jews with “drowsiness.” When emancipation abolished the ghettos, he said, it also destroyed “a wall against external influences . . . , a rock protecting [Jewish] individuality, traditions, and culture.” Modernity “corroded” Jewish culture and “slackened” Jewish ties, Milano stated.³⁴ Andrew Canepa concurred with this argument, positing in 1977 that modern Italian Jewish history was one of “conversions and absorption . . . [which] determined the triumph of the assimilationist conception.”³⁵ In 1986 Mario Toscano wrote that “the awareness of Jewish identity wavered” after the granting of equal rights.³⁶ By the late nineteenth century, Toscano opined, “Judaism was reduced to a mere religious dimension and took on negative, archaic, backward, restrictive connotations.”³⁷

In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars of western and central European Jewry, but not of Italian Jewry, began to challenge the Dubnovian axiom. New research questioned whether post-emancipation Jewish identity had, in fact, withered. In her 1983 book *The Jews of Vienna*, Marsha Rozenblit borrowed a term from American sociologist Milton Gordon when she argued that Vienna’s Jews “acculturated”; that is, they absorbed the norms and culture of the majority group but maintained certain distinctive Jewish features. She posited that Viennese Jews did not “assimilate,” a term implying the abandonment of ethnic particularity.³⁸ In 1992, Jonathan Frankel and Steven Zipperstein’s edited volume, *Assimilation and Community*, further challenged Dubnov’s perspective. In the words of David Sorkin, a contributor to the volume, the idea that “emancipation begat assimilation” simply was not true.³⁹ Historians of German Jews, such as Sorkin and Marion Kaplan, and of French Jews, such as Paula Hyman, Esther Benbassa, and Lisa Leff, made a similar point, while Israel Finestein did the same for British Jewry.⁴⁰ By the early 2000s, a revision had occurred within the field, firmly concluding that modern Jewish culture in central and western Europe had developed but not disintegrated. In the words of Enlightenment scholar Lois Dubin, “Jewish community persisted, but in changed forms.”⁴¹

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In the field of Italian Jewish history, no such revision occurred. Scholars in the 1990s, and indeed to this day, continued to argue that Italian Jewish identity crumbled in the modern period. Demographer Sergio Della Pergola wrote in 1993 that Italian Jews in the modern period underwent a “rapid process of merging and assimilation,” resulting in the “irreversible erosion” of Jewish culture.⁴² Shortly after, political scientist Dan Vittorio Segre wrote of the “rapid disintegration of Italian Jewry,” and described the Italian Jewish press of the late nineteenth century as “anemic, conformist, and defensive, fighting a lost battle against assimilation.”⁴³ In 1998, historian Gadi Luzzato Voghera acknowledged that Italian Jewish intellectuals had produced a rich literary culture in the nineteenth century, but bemoaned what he considered a “disorientation and loss of identity” and the “substantial cultural impoverishment suffered by the Italian Jewish communities in the nineteenth century.”⁴⁴ Sara Reguer agreed with this point in her history of Italian Jews. “In the encounter between the Jewish and Italian cultures,” she wrote in 2013, “it was inevitable that the Jewish one would succumb to the Italian one.”⁴⁵

In the last few years, some historians have begun to move away from the claim that Italian Jews lost all sense of ethnic particularity, although their research falls short of dispelling it completely. In 2006, Barbara Armani warned against describing modern Italian Jewish identity as “weak and ragged”; Cristina Bettin suggested in 2009 that “the Jew of that period [1870–1938] was integrated rather than assimilated”; in 2010, Francesca Sofia wrote that “the entrance of Jews into the majority society . . . was not a furious assimilation”; Elizabeth Schächter, in 2011, dismissed the term “assimilation” as an “inadequate . . . analytical tool” for studying Italian Jewry; and in 2012, Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti argued that the fear of “assimilation” expressed by Italian Jewish leaders was an exaggerated concern.⁴⁶ These scholars, attuned to the revisions in research on other European Jews, hinted at the continuing distinctiveness of Italian Jews after emancipation, but then, reasonably enough, went on to develop other arguments. The question remains *how* Jews were distinct – as individuals, families, and communities – and *in what ways* they adapted Judaism rather than abandoned it. The following pages build on the findings of these recent works and expand them, to clarify the particular ways in which Italian Jews maintained their cultural and religious particularity following emancipation.

Furthermore, this study shows that Italian Jewish culture thrived after World War II. In spite of the horrific blow to Italian Jewry – the murder of 7200 individuals, the drastic impoverishment of the community, and the damage to synagogues – those who survived produced a thriving