

JEWISH LIFE IN LIVORNO , ITALY

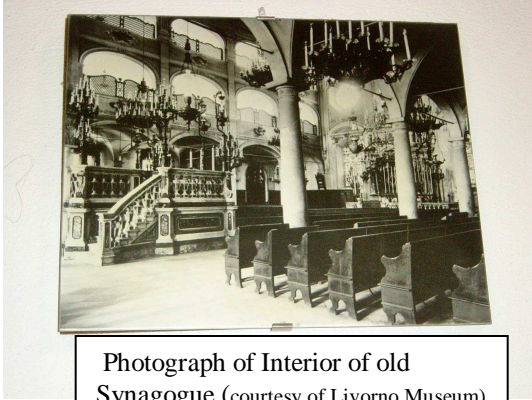
Robert W. Case

Livorno (Leghorn) is located in Tuscany, and is a major port on the West Coast of Italy, and the principal seaport of Florence.

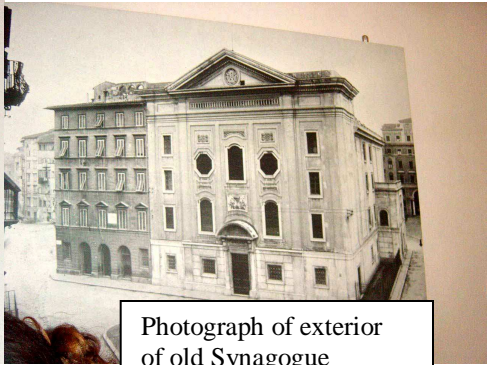
Jewish History in Italy goes back to the 2nd Century BCE, when many Israelites left the land of Israel to go to Rome. It was not until the 16th century, that the first Jews began arriving in Livorno. **Ferdinand I** (1507-1603) of Sicily offered asylum to all Levantines, Portuguese, Italians and Jews. Ferdinand granted many rights and privileges to the Jews –mainly: religious freedom, amnesty of previous crimes, and full Tuscan citizenship. Also, Jews did not have to live in a ghetto; they could own horses, slaves, carry arms, open shops, and could study at the University. The Jewish population grew from 114 in 1601 to over 3,000 by 1689. Jews, in fact, came to be the most important nationality living in Livorno. The business activity of the Livorno Jews was extensive. From physicians to merchants, from slave traders to money changers, The Jewish influence covered many parameters of life in Livorno, and extended throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. In the reign of Leopold **I** (1745-1790) Jews were granted even more privileges, including the right to representation on the municipal Council. In 1765, **Louis XIV**, king of France, offered to resettle the whole community to Marseilles, France. However, they decided not to leave, and at the end of the 18th century, nearly 5,000 Jews lived in Livorno.

After Napoleon invaded Livorno in 1796, most of the rights and privileges afforded to the Jews were taken away, and the community rapidly declined. By the end of the 19th century, the Jewish population of Livorno was reduced to about 2,500.

Livorno's 1st Synagogue was located in a room of one of the Jewish residents, circa 1548. Various houses were used until a permanent synagogue was built in the late 16th century, and was embellished and enlarged continuously until 1789. It was visited by Grand dukes and many foreign leaders, and was admired throughout Italy. In 1927 the Synagogue housed Italy's first museum of Hebrew art. The Synagogue was destroyed during WWII, along with approximately 90% of the city, by Allied bombers.



Photograph of Interior of old Synagogue (courtesy of Livorno Museum)



Photograph of exterior of old Synagogue (courtesy of Livorno Museum)



Photograph of Synagogue after bombing during WWII by Allies (courtesy of Livorno Museum)

The Jewish population after the war was less than 1,000, attrition due to death camp marches, German killings, intermarriage, etc.



Exterior of Livorno Synagogue
Photographs by Robert W. Case



Interior of Livorno Synagogue
August 2003

Currently, the Jewish population is about 600. Most are natives, and a few hundred Libyan Jews joined the community in 1967. The new Synagogue was started in 1962, and was finally completed in September 2003. It is located on the site of the former Synagogue. The community is active and vibrant. There is a kindergarten, Talmud Torah, a museum, and a rabbinical college. The Jewish community also sponsors Lectures, concerts, conferences and exhibits.

Unlike many Jewish communities, they do not make their presence well known to tourists. There is very little information on the Internet, and we had to write the Synagogue a letter requesting a tour. After a month, we received a letter from a young man who speaks five languages, and he offered us a tour. When asked what he would charge, he stated that we would only have to pay for a minibus, a paltry admission charge to the museum, and he works on “tips only” (In the many years that we have been touring, this was the first time we have encountered this.)

We were picked up at the dock, and after a short ride we were at the Synagogue. The Synagogue was locked, but he had the keys. When he opened the doors, the beauty inside astounded all six of us! It is traditional orthodox Sephardic, and there were two women’s galleries: the usual upstairs, and a smaller gallery elevated from the main Synagogue for elderly and handicapped women. Due to the enormous size and high ceilings, it is far too expensive to heat during the winter months, so they built a smaller *shul* in the basement!

We then went to the museum and Talmud Torah, which is surrounded by huge iron gates. We had to wait until the curator arrived, who is an employee of the city. The museum is not that impressive, but they had many artifacts and pictures from the destroyed synagogue, and the Talmud Torah and kindergarten, accompanied by a playground demonstrates their commitment to the future of Jewish life in the community. *This is in marked contrast to other Jewish communities that we have visited (Rome, Florence, and Venice) where the dwindling population is mostly elderly, and there are very few young Jewish people.*

In conclusion, Livorno was, indeed, a pleasant surprise. It is estimated that the total Jewish population in Italy exceeds 50,000 (Rome and Milan account for 40,000 alone) but in this writer’s opinion, Jewish life in Livorno is the most active!

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