

# PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS OF JEWISH TOURISM IN APULIA

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## 1. Premise

Apulia has recently been reconsidered as an interesting destination for international Jewish tourism.

Five years ago in New York, during an event organized by the local Italian Consulate in collaboration with a Jewish-Italian foundation with headquarters in the United States,<sup>1</sup> a specific discussion took place on the potential of Apulia to attract different segments of American Jewish tourism (Schoen Brockman 2013). The participants, mostly tourism promoters, declared their interest for and curiosity about new destinations to include in their packages, but also mentioned their concern about the potential reaction of their customers who are used to choose invariably the same holiday destinations in the North of Italy.

Established tourist destinations could be successfully substituted with new ones if we take into account a phenomenon that seems to have acquired ever greater impact in recent years: an increase in tourism offers targeting those Jewish travellers, mainly from Israel, the United States and Australia, who wish to visit the places in Europe where their ancestors or themselves had moved from to settle in their present residences.

Certainly the opening of the borders of Eastern Europe set in motion this new offer and had a significant effect on several countries including Italy. Although few are the Italian Jews who left Italy for other destinations in the last century – and few are their descendants who could be potential users of this specific type of tourism – specialized business operators have soon realized the potential of Jewish cultural heritage in Italy.

The Italian peninsula was one of the first centres of settlement of Jewish communities since ancient history: Rome and Southern Italy – in particular Salento – have seen the flowering of the oldest Jewish centres in Europe, which remained extremely vibrant for centuries. So, why not take advantage of the renewed flows of Jewish tourists to Eastern Europe and channel a substantial portion of those customers towards discovering the vestiges of the oldest diaspora of Israel in the Occident?

We are definitely talking about a type of niche tourism which has been spreading like wildfire and has acquired new life in the last few years, especially since the recovery of the Jewish identity – real or imagined – has become very fashionable in the U.S.A., and third or fourth generation Americans are willing to revise their origins, mainly Italian, in a Jewish key.<sup>2</sup> For these customers a specific sector of tourism has been developed, offering visits to small villages and

<sup>1</sup> *East of the West. Centuries of Jewish Crossover from Venice to Lecce*, New York, Italian Consulate General, Italian Cultural Institute, Primo Levi Center, 3 giugno 2009. Another event took place in New York on September 13, 2011, and focused on the analysis of the strategies to foster Jewish tourism in the Marche and Apulia regions (*Jewish Treasures, Italian Regions*, New York University / Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., <http://calabriajudaica.blogspot.com> (9.2013)

towns in Sicily or other Italian regions that were involved in mass conversions to Catholicism, since the sixteenth century.

These travellers, made 'special' by their own curiosity, are looked at in Apulia with surprised eyes. Based on some preliminary observations, combined with the examination of the experience of other geographical areas that have well-established expertise in Jewish tourism, I would like to offer some reflections intended– I hope –to renew interest for these guests, who could arrive in Apulia by ever growing numbers.

## 2. Types of Jewish tourists

People seeking to have a 'Jewish' experience in their travels are a highly heterogeneous group of tourists. However, I shall here try to subdivide them into 'types', according to some specific characteristics.

A 'cosmopolitan' tourist (mostly American) of Jewish origin and tradition is used to travelling and is always interested in participating in cultural events within a package which is generally managed by a travel agency in his/her country of origin. This kind of tourist can either visit Europe alone, with his/her family, or in a small group; in any case, they will carefully choose the desired routes so that they meet their interest in the Jewish tradition with an interest in non-Jewish art and culture. These tourists are able to find the hotels and the restaurants that meet their needs. They often have medium-high requests, based on the standards prevailing in their country of origin, but do not require any specific services entailed by their religious identity.

Therefore, these tourists visit Jewish sites as well, often relying on the experience of local operators or using specific book guides. For example, when visiting the synagogue and the Jewish Museum of Florence, they may take advantage of the Jewish Guide to Tuscany (Sacerdoti 1995) or the services of a tour operators' cooperative founded by students of the University of Florence and offering highly professional information in several languages. That student cooperative has been working for years under contract with the Jewish community of Florence which considers their services as highly beneficial. A similar experiment is being carried out in Apulia by the Jewish community in Trani. They have recently revived the cult and used a youth cooperative to organize guided visits to the Jewish quarter and its two medieval synagogues, recently restored. Presently, there is no specific Jewish Guide to Apulia (see, however, Falco, Sacerdoti 2003); however, the opening of the Jewish Museum in Trani, inside the ancient main synagogue, has led to the publishing of a bilingual (English-Italian) catalogue presenting aspects of the history of Judaism in Apulia (Colafemmina, Gramegna 2009).

In such cases, tourist guides are faced with the difficult task of having to filter out bias before giving information to the tourists. Being a tourist guide requires language skills (mostly English), as well as knowledge of the history and culture of Judaism in general and of the local area in particular.

The guides must learn not to take anything for granted and especially not to provide explanations which, without adequate clarifications, may seem 'strange' to a visitor coming from a different cultural reality. For the average American of Jewish tradition, whose family is mostly of Eastern European Jewish origin, the reality of the Italian Jews with its two thousand year history cannot be understood as a reality in itself, but only if tied to that of other larger Jewish

groups. From personal experience, the representation - as objective as it may be - of the history of the Italian Jews to the Jews of Central and Eastern European origin often suggests the idea of a minority strongly assimilated into the customs of the Christian majority, which often leads to bias and misunderstandings.

For example, the information that a seventeenth-century Italian rabbi used to talk in Italian to a mixed audience of Jewish and Christians during his sermons - which is what really happened in the ghetto of Venice - is certainly a far, if not totally alien, experience to a Jew of Polish or Russian origin accustomed to considering their identity as completely autonomic. Nevertheless, even the most prepared guide, will have to emphasize the existence of proceedings that reinforced the union rather than the separation of the communities of different faiths, while pointing out these aspects of the Italian cultural experience. Indeed, talking about cultural osmosis between Jewish and non-Jewish culture in Italy is important, but in order to convey this kind of information one must know the exact circumstances and be able to properly retrace the facts connected to the community, in order to avoid the risk of alienating an audience that has different expectations and perspectives. And all this without altering the historical veracity of the information.

An example of unreliable information is represented by Jewish tourism in Venice, which has recently been at the centre of debate. In the last few years, Venice has invested heavily in the restoration of that part of town which seems to have suggested for the first time in Europe the term 'ghetto' in all its dimensions, and in the development of its touristic potential. The features of the ghetto of Venice are unique in the world: even a cursory examination reveals immediately the cultural osmosis that took place in Venice, especially between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. But, probably due to the scarcity of the native Jewish element in nowadays Venice, the tourist services, as well as many places offering accommodation in the Jewish part of Venice, are managed by people who are associated to kinds of Judaism other than those historically established in that city. Consequently, the shops of the alleged Jewish crafts, the bookstores and many of the specialty food shops give the 'uninformed' tourist the idea that Judaism in Venice is similar to that of the Eastern Europe of the 17th- 18th centuries and that the ghetto of Venice is and has always been like many Jewish centres in Poland or Russia, i.e. separate from the surrounding non-Jewish culture.

Therefore, when visiting the ghetto of Venice, the American tourist, with little knowledge of the history of Italian Jewry, is led to believe that the Jewish community in Venice was similar to those from which his own ancestors came from, since exactly to these Eastern Jewish communities is today entrusted the management of the local tourist services. While from one hand they have developed - with positive implications - a wide range of events targeting tourism, on the other hand, these events have nothing to do with the historical reality of Venetian Judaism which is mostly Mediterranean in spirit.

A 'Jewish' experience of this kind can indeed enrich culturally and arouse great interest, but does not take into account historical reality. It is only a means of cultural marketing (often ideological) and includes contents that are objectively false and should be avoided.

Similar to what I called the 'cosmopolitan' Jewish tourist is the secular Israeli tourist. The latter usually make use of international tourist agencies offering 'generic' packages which arrange for them to visit only the major landmarks of each place on the itinerary, but with no specific attention to local Jewish heritage. The difference between these tourists and their American

counterpart is that they usually stay less in one place, and because of their permanent 'mobility' the amount of information provided must be reduced. In order to address this type of tourist, the knowledge of an international language – such as English - is sufficient, but, unlike with the previous type no special competence on the cultural history of Judaism is usually needed. Coming from a secular type of education, even if they know their identity heritage better than the Americans, they are often reluctant to talk about it, assuming ignorance on the part of their non-Jewish interlocutors as far as everything related to their traditional culture is concerned.

In some cases, however, even secular Israeli tourists come to Italy to cover specifically Jewish itineraries. I happened to be involved in organizing a tour of the Jewish catacombs of Venosa (Potenza, Basilicata) for a group of highly cultured Israelis. These catacombs have only recently been restored and reopened to the public. Consequently, the local guides were not well prepared (including language) and could not cope with the many questions of the tourists who were interested not only in discovering the specific aspects of the place visited, but also the history of the local Jewish communities – no longer existing today.

Completely different attention on the part of the local tourism operators is required by religious Jewish tourism, often coming from Israel but also from Jewish communities in other countries.

It is difficult for religious tourists to move alone. Usually, they travel in rather big groups which include also qualified rabbis who have the role of providing assistance in complying with religious rules. The accompanying persons often know the local situation or speak the local language.

I happened to attend a conference in Santa Maria al Bagno to celebrate the twinning of a town on the Israeli coast with the town of Nardò, from whose shores many Holocaust survivors left after the war, on their way to Palestine/Israel. A group of Israelis attended the meeting accompanied by a local rabbi of Italian origin, who was there to supervise the food preparation and deal with other aspects of daily life.

In their own countries, the religious Jews (who may vary extremely with regard to the degree of compliance with the rules of faith) live in an environment that allows the scrupulous observance of the norms of purity prescribed by the Jewish tradition. Consequently any place other than their own is automatically unsuitable.

Since the more complex requirements refer to the purity of food, a major problem for these groups of tourists is of a dietary nature. In towns where there are significant Jewish communities, the necessary services are guaranteed by the presence of one or more kosher restaurants, run by managers who work under the supervision of the local rabbi. The problem arises when the religious Jewish groups visit towns that have hosted a Jewish community in the past, but cannot currently provide any specific services.

As far as Apulia is concerned, there is no Jewish community, except for the one in Trani. This is a relatively new Jewish reality and counts only a few members; however, in the past few years and under the supervision of the communities of Rome and Naples, they have managed to provide kosher meal services, needed by Jewish tourists to observe the Jewish dietary laws. Following this accomplishment, a new summer flight route between Tel Aviv and Brindisi has been recently opened.

The Jewish religious tourists who come to Apulia generally ask for information before departure and make use of tour operators who know whom to

ask in order to receive specific services. But despite all efforts meeting all the needs of these tourists is not straightforward. For this reason, many tourists, always doubtful that a small place might not be suitable for the observance of the religious practices, prefer not to stay far from major communities. Although such groups are not numerous, the tourist centre of a city like Lecce should nevertheless take into consideration the possibility of offering hospitality to these people. After all, the solutions to the problem are not that complex.

I was in the position to welcome a group of religious guests in Lecce. For small groups the problem is not serious, because we are talking about people accustomed to travelling, and who know that they cannot find everything they need to comply with their precepts at destination. This is why they travel with everything necessary: they carry along food and other things they need for their daily lives.

### **3. Strategies**

The life of religious tourists would be made easier if hotels had rooms equipped with disposable tableware (plastic plates, cups and cutlery); this would allow them to eat the (usually dried) victuals they bring along in their suitcases, without concern. Other little courtesies will help, such asking whether they need hot water; but in this case one must be careful with the containers in which the water is heated. Very often the guests themselves are equipped with a small kettle. Furthermore, in order to let this type of tourist use their rooms during their religious holidays, when people cannot turn the lights on or off or use electric tools, the rooms should have metal keys and there should be no electric locks that would prevent them from entering or leaving, etc.

This kind of tourists does not go to restaurants. But a moderately religious tourist would be contented with a restaurant with a strictly vegetarian menu. Locals should avoid suggesting specialties that are absolutely incompatible with the religion of the guests; local foods which might seem ‘neutral’ can be mentioned, but without forcing the customers to accept them. On the other hand, a theoretically impure dish, impure because cooked in an impure oven, could be safely prepared in foil, as this removes the risk of contamination. Like ‘kosher’ hotels, the restaurants claiming to be able to provide a selection of suitable dishes (and which may consider being provided with a few bottles of kosher wine, too) will be included in the Jewish tourism guides and become referents for all tour operators who organize trips in the area.

This kind of knowledge can easily be gained by travel agents by attending a few-hours course. As it has already been suggested, in the Salento, those in charge of local tourism could also create a network of the small facilities which will have fewer problems to adjust to these regulations. I wish to stress again that an offer of this kind, advertised in specific guides, would significantly increase the possibility for individual accommodation facilities to be promoted within a network of specialized travel services..

Finally, in order to operate competently in the area of Jewish tourism – of any of the mentioned types – a ‘cultural mediator’ is necessary who – in the guise of a guide or as a consultant of accommodation and food – will act as intermediary between local tour operators, national or international, and groups of travellers. To this end, I think it would be appropriate to create specific university curricula aimed at graduating experts who combine language abilities, knowledge

of history, art, culture, administrative skills, and above all familiarity with the culture of the incoming tourists. Such graduates will be able to foster a new type of sustainable tourism, more and more in line with the demands of the times.

## References

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