

History of the Jews in Piedmont and their Emancipation

(Excerpt from the book *Piemonte – Itinerari ebraici – I luoghi, la storia, l'arte*, by Annie Sacerdoti and Annamarcella Tedeschi Falco, edited by Marsilio and the Piedmont Region, 1994. Free translation from Italian.)

Permanent Jewish habitation in Piedmont only began in the early 1400s. Before then, there had been settlements at the time of Saint Maximus, Bishop of Turin, around 423 CE, and possibly at Asti and Vercelli in the Carolingian period.

From a document dating to 1297, we can deduce that groups of Jews passed through Piedmont and paid a toll for this privilege.

We are speaking here of the Piedmont as it is today, including Alessandria, where the fortunes of the Jews were for centuries tied to the Duchy of Milan, and disregard Savoy, which constituted the principal nucleus of the Savoy dynasty's territories.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century and for a couple of centuries thereafter, the Piedmont was divided as follows:

- Savigliano, Fossano, Carmagnola, Torino, Mondovì and, for a certain time, Chieri, were under the dominion of the Savoia-Acaja branch;
- The marquisate of Monferrato, with the area of the Canavese (Trino, Casale, Moncalvo, Acqui, Nizza), was governed by the Palaiologos dynasty until 1536, when the marriage of Margherita with Federico II Gonzaga, transferred the territory to the Gonzagas. After the Peace of Cherasco (1631), signed between the House of Savoy and the Gonzagas, a good part of this territory passed into the hands of the Savoy rulers;
- Saluzzo constituted a small marquisate unto itself;
- The valleys of Aosta, Susa, Cuneo, Ivrea and Biella, governed by the House of Savoy, extended beyond the Alps;
- The territories beyond the River Sesia, with Vercelli (which passed to Savoy in 1427), Alessandria, Asti and Novara belonged to the Duchy of Milan.

Over time, Jewish families began populating these places, many of which, still today, show evidence of their passage or their presence.

In each of these, the rate and fate of Jewish settlement differed, depending on the governing entity.

Only with the accession of Duke Amadeus VIII in the fifteenth century did the Savoy rulers develop greater interest in their possessions south of the Alps.

At this time, there began a certain influx of Jews from beyond the Alps, particularly, in the direction of Savigliano.

A small group had already settled there, among which was the Trabot family of celebrated illuminators.

The famous rabbi Joseph Colon sojourned there, on his peregrinations from Chambéry eventually to Pavia.

Under the rule of Amadeus VIII, the nucleus of Jews increased so significantly, that in the five volumes of decrees promulgated by that ruler, completed in 1430, numerous pages of the first volume are devoted to the Jews, spelling out concessions and heavy restrictions.

The first rules of 1403 prohibited Jews, among other things, from employing Christians, obliged them to wear an identifying round badge of red or white fabric, but also forbade Christians to insult or persecute Jews, or to cheat them in business.

The addendum of 1430 stipulates that Jews must reside in a specified neighborhood, called *judeasymus* (in Cuneo it was known as *angulo*, corner, in Turin – *canzello*, gate), and not leave it from sundown to sunrise.

This decree was often disregarded in practice, until 1679. Among other restrictions, these rules prohibited building new synagogues and permitted refurbishment only of antique ones: from this clue, one can deduce an already fairly numerous preexisting Jewish presence.

Where did these Jews come from?

From the lists of names contained in the *censiva* (the annual tax paid by the Jews) since 1424, we learn that many came from Spain, from France (following the mass expulsion of 1394) with surnames such as Lunel, Nizza, Foa from Foix, from Germany (Alamani, Ashkenazi, Treves, from Speyer), or from southern and central Italy.

One of the principal ties existing between governments and the Jews was the *condotta*, an agreement between rulers and Jews on the conditions for opening a loan bank: the Jews were given a concession to live in an area for the purpose of opening a bank that would extend loans at interest rates fixed by the sovereigns. Well-to-do Jews were under obligation to support Jewish families less well off.

These *condotte* were renewed every ten years.

However, the Jews ended up staying for ever-longer periods; it used to be said: "Ten years of *condotta* and two of contraband." [In other words, the ten-year limit could be circumvented by a period of illicit trade].

Money-lending, albeit a source of constant criticism and defamation, was essential, since it was at that period an activity forbidden to Christians.

It was a pretext for violence against Jews, usually provoked by the preaching of Franciscan monks: at Ivrea in 1444; at Chivasso, inveighing against usury, initially Fra Antonio of Cremona, and later, in 1471, Fra Angelo, achieved the expulsion of the Jews.

The situation changed (in different mode in every region) when the Church created its own loan institutions, the *monti di piet *.

In this ever unstable and vexatious situation of the Jews, Duke Charles III intervened in a positive fashion: in 1551 he instituted the office of a Custodian of the Jews, to ensure their legal rights were respected (*Conservatore degli ebrei*).

His son Emmanuel Philibert (1553-1580) was even more liberal: he created the free port of Nice, as was later done by Cosimo de' Medici at Livorno and, on September 4, 1572, invited the Hebrew Nation in its various ancestries – Italian, German, Spanish, Levantine Portuguese, of Barbary, of Soria – to come settle in his territories.

This was the result of secret negotiations with a rich and brilliant banker, Vitale Sacerdoti, resident of Alessandria, a man of multiple international ties.

The project did not achieve the hoped-for success due to obstruction by other princes and by the Pope.

There was, however, an influx of Jews into Piedmont, resulting also from the [severely repressive *Cum nimis absurdum*] Bull issued by Pope Paul IV, and from the expulsion of the Jews from the Duchy of Milan, from Naples and from Sicily (a long wave in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain).

Under Emmanuel Philibert the communities of Vercelli, Cuneo, and Asti flourished, and the Turin group grew. He offered to conduct a "good conversation" with his Jewish subjects.

His son Charles Emmanuel, on the other hand, introduced heavy restrictions on loan banks, and instituted the yellow badge for the Jews.

Under his reign, the confines of Savoy were extended: in 1601 Saluzzo and Carmagnola became part of the duchy; in 1631, one year after his death, his son Victor Amadeus I signed the Peace of Cherasco, which ended the war with the Gonzaga dynasty of Mantua over possession of the Monferrato region. Thus the large number of Jews of Casale and of Monferrato, who had enjoyed significant privileges under the Gonzagas, came under the control of the House of Savoy.

Already in 1432, at Moncalvo, a census revealed the presence of numerous Jews, a population that thereafter continued growing in the neighboring towns.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, thanks also to new arrivals from France (rich merchants who often did not integrate with the local Jewish group), the number of Piedmontese Jews exceeded 2,000.

In Turin, where there were about 750 Jews, the Regent Duchess Marie Jeanne, mother of Victor Amadeus II, decided in 1679 to create the first ghetto (over one century after its appearance in the rest of Italy).

As of 1723, this regulation was to be enforced in all other centers: the Jews were concentrated in a couple of streets, crammed with banks and petty commerce, and in every town or village there arose the problem, sometimes acute, of finding adequate space for the ghetto.

These half-forgotten restrictive regulations were activated particularly under Charles Emmanuel III, duke since 1730, and later king.

Subsequently, the situation changed notably: a general census, commissioned by the king in 1761, revealed that Piedmont had 4,192 Jews, united in 808 families, and that the largest nucleus lived in Turin (1,317 people); twenty centers were polled.

The Jews had grown in number and had expanded their activity: not only bankers and moneylenders, but also physicians and merchants, who developed the manufacture and commerce of textiles.

Notwithstanding the suffocating conditions of the ghettos, splendid synagogues emerged in most of them, little jewels as in Carmagnola, Cherasco, Mondovì, magnificent Baroque beauties as in Casale.

Today (even if in some cases in disrepair) these synagogues demonstrate the extraordinary vitality of the many Jewish communities of Piedmont.

Liberty and equality arrived for Piedmontese Jews in 1799, with the provisional government imposed on the former Kingdom of Sardinia, continued throughout the Napoleonic "French period", until, in March 1848, following the brief Restoration period, King Charles Albert officially conceded emancipation.