

The Jews of Cherasco

The protagonists' father, speaking to his son about the Finzi-Contini family, remembers that:

... They had always preferred to spend their real money for aristocratic trivialities; like when, in '33, to find an ehàl and a parochèt worthy of their personal synagogue (genuine Sephardic articles, for heaven's sakes, they mustn't be Portuguese, or Catalan, or Provençal, but Spanish, and of proper dimensions!), they had journeyed by car, with a Carnera following them, all the way to Cherasco, in the province of Cuneo, a village that until 1910, or around then, had been the headquarters of a little Jewish community, now extinct, and where only the cemetery had remained in operation, simply because some families in Turin, which had originally lived in the place, Debenedetti, Momigliano, Terracini, et cetera, continued to bury their dead there...

Giorgio Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini*, translated by William Weaver, HBJ, New York and London, 1977, pp 46-47.

The Jews of Cherasco

(Excerpted from *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, VOL XXI – FASC. 11, by Emilio De Benedetti, edited by the City of Castello 1955)

The present city of Cherasco (following all the upheavals in earlier settlements dating back to remote antiquity) was founded between 1215 and 1220.

Inhabitants from all over Piedmont migrated there.

However, it is not possible to establish when the first Jews arrived, nor even where they came from.

Some indication would likely have been found in the community's archive, ample and precious in both quality and quantity of documents it contained: unfortunately, the Turin Community claimed possession of it in 1930 and requested its transfer. When the Turin synagogue was destroyed in an air raid on November 20, 1942, the archive was completely lost.

Information must now be drawn from the municipal records of Cherasco and the State archives in Turin, from the collections of memoirs preserved in the Adriani Library in Cherasco, and from the inscriptions in the synagogue of Cherasco.

At the entrance to the synagogue, in fact, a marble tablet placed over a basin for washing hands bears the name of the donors in Hebrew, and the date shown, 5557, corresponds to the year 1797. [Actually, the plaque shows 5553, i.e. 1793]

But at that time, as we shall see, the Jewish settlement, made up of people of varying origins, was already very numerous and it is thus almost certain that the initial immigration of Jews to Cherasco occurred a few centuries earlier.

Some names are of Spanish origin; however, even though the exodus of these families from Spain dates back to the period of the great persecution, they did not emigrate only from that country. In Piedmont, as in all the other states in the peninsula, it was above all from southern France that the Jews arrived in multiple small trickles.

From a liturgical standpoint, they belonged to the Sephardic rite.

There is evidence that Cherasco, an important town in Piedmont, was home to *banchi feneratizi* (banks providing loans at an interest) as early as the 16th century, in accordance with the reforms introduced by Emmanuel Philibert.

Money-lending was first practiced by Meir Debenedetti and continued by the Debenedetti family; Donato Debenedetti secured sanction for this activity under Charles Emmanuel I in 1624: this duke established permanent locations for banks and named the families entitled to run them according to the regulations and list of 1624.

The “banking” family was joined by other families, thus creating the Jewish community.

By around 1730, a certain number of Jews must have already been settled in Cherasco, given that a ghetto was established there, as in the rest of Piedmont. Certain towns did not have a ghetto, due to the small number of their Jewish residents. However, the Jews in such towns were obliged to move to other localities, where a ghetto had been created.

An initial census taken of the Jews in Piedmont in 1761, under the orders of Charles Emmanuel III, revealed the presence in Cherasco of eleven families, comprised of 51 people. The period of the French Revolution was approaching: dating from this period there are specific accounts regarding the donation of blankets.

In the archives of the commune we find a decree, dated April 20, 1801, under which blankets were requisitioned on behalf of the French army: this decree stipulated that each family had to supply a blanket, and the families themselves are listed by name. There is no Jewish name among them, but the ghetto [as a whole] is ordered to deliver 25 blankets. It may thus be presumed that 25 families inhabited the ghetto at that time.

French domination brought freedom and progress to the Jews.

On February 27, 1803, the commune published a list of the one hundred taxpayers who paid the highest taxes. Figuring among them were Debenedetti brothers Abram and Donato, sons of the deceased Raffaele.

The new situation of the Jews in that fortunate period is reflected by the fact that, already in 1807, Debenedetti, Lattes and Levi were among the names of riflemen belonging to the first and second companies of the National Guard, whose various companies were under the command of captains belonging to noble families.

In 1810, when licenses for commercial activities were instituted, various Jewish families were among the licensees.

In particular, a certain Debenedetti Abraham held a license for the spinning of silk with ten ovens.

The same holder of the silk-spinning license is also named as a member of the city’s Municipal Council in the minutes of a meeting held in May 1813.

However, when the House of Savoy regained control in 1814, restrictions were again imposed: the edict issued by Victor Emmanuel I on May 21, 1814 revived the notorious Royal Constitutions of 1770, except for the obligation to wear a distinguishing mark. Under the Royal Licenses of March 1, 1816, the ghetto was reinstated and Jews were banned from buying and owning real estate, with the exception of their own homes in ghettos.

The ghetto of Cherasco consisted of a large block of dwellings in the center of the city, with several entryways. As was the custom at that time, wooden balconies had been constructed facing the courtyard to provide access to the numerous rooms.

The same building housed the synagogue, at the center of which there was a carved wood *Duchan* (pulpit) of fine craftsmanship, dating indubitably from the 18th century, *Sefer Torah* [case] in silver, and rich wall hangings.

It is well known, however, that although the new restrictive measures issued at that period imposed the fulfilment of such decrees within established time limits, they were practically disregarded. There were exceptions, extensions were granted, which for some families lasted many years.

After 15 years of freedom, it was not so easy to reestablish the ghetto. Many Jewish families, especially the wealthiest ones, had taken up their abode elsewhere and their homes in the ghetto had been leased or even sold to non-Jews.

Jewish families had even been allowed to establish spinning mills, which led them to prolong their residency in the surrounding countryside.

Some documents preserved in the State Archives of Turin offer interesting data about Cherasco, especially from a civilian viewpoint, i.e. in the sphere of relations between Jews and the civilian authorities. The first documents (1823) refer to a certain Lattes Jona, who requested an extension of his permit to keep a spinning mill. Dating from the same time is a request from Abram Debenedetti to keep a house outside the ghetto, which he had bought in 1806, and another from Michele Sacerdote to keep a house he owned in the vicinity of the ghetto.

A few years later (1827), David Debenedetti asked for permission to buy a house to be used for silk spinning, and the following year (1828) Emilio Debenedetti asked to buy a home from the heirs of Cavaliere Vercellone.

This request was rejected, which had the effect of triggering a campaign in Cherasco against the Jews, who, despite provisions to the contrary (in 1814, the 18th century provisions to prevent as much as possible cohabitation between Jews and Christians had been renewed), lived outside the ghetto intermixed with Christians.

Jews were thus peremptorily ordered to move into homes in the ghetto.

Their aggregation led to the elimination of windows looking to the outside. Homes were accessed through a single entry; hence, the shops were inside. Jews were given eight months to reinstall themselves in the ghetto.

There were frequent exchanges of ordinances from Turin and information from the authorities of Cherasco, especially because a tavern had been allowed to exist in a house bought by a certain Olivetti, shopkeeper from Turin, and given its proximity to the ghetto, it was frequented by Jews, who conducted their business there. Those premises, according to the superior authorities in Turin, were to

be used as housing for the Jews. Steps were taken to evict the tavern keeper, who had to search for other premises.

It was proposed that the Olivetti house be used as an extension of the ghetto. But it was close to a church – San Gregorio – not far from the home of the parish priest, and only a wall divided it from the latter's garden.

It was decided to give up this plan and force the Jews into more cramped accommodations, also exploiting the fact that some dwellings had remained empty due to the death of two women, Allegra Valobra and Bersabea Debenedetti, and the removal of the family of Emilio Debenedetti, who left Cherasco after suffering financial losses (1831).

The new project for the ghetto was ready, but it was not certain that all the Jews could be accommodated there.

The Jewish population numbered about ninety. Given the difficulty in accommodating so many people, in 1837, in an attempt to solve the problem, a mandate was issued to the Royal Delegation overseeing the Jews of Mondovì, extending its responsibilities to the ghetto of Cherasco.

In all the localities inhabited by Jews, many issues had arisen in connection with their re-entry into the ghetto. Special commissions called Royal Delegations of the Jews were set up to examine individual cases, with full decision-making powers.

The work of the Delegation of Mondovì proceeded slowly: the question of the Olivetti house was re-examined, because the Jews objected that they were unable to enter the ghetto due to the owners' exorbitant demands.

In 1841, discussion was still ongoing: the Olivetti house was still at issue, and while its inclusion in the ghetto was declared a temporary solution, Christians began voicing their opposition.

This explains why some Jews, such as Marco Debenedetti in 1842 and a certain Jona in 1845, were given renewed permission to reside outside the ghetto.

In those years, a census was taken of Jews who lived inside and outside the ghetto in different localities. Ninety three Jews were reported living in Cherasco.

A certain Debenedetti family had settled many years earlier in La Morra: Abramo Giuseppe, Isacco Leon and Emilio (1823) had obtained a permit from King Charles Felix to buy a house and the adjoining land, where they could engage for ten years in the silk spinning from cocoons.

At the expiry of the ten years, Charles Felix's successor Charles Albert was reluctant to renew the permit.

The eldest of the brothers remained in La Morra. Having entered into a relationship with a Christian woman, he was obliged to convert in order to marry her. His brothers returned to Cherasco.

In 1842, the Levi brothers Salvador and Elia were granted permission to frequent the markets and fairs of Cortemilia for a fairly long period of time.

Following the promulgation of the Statute of King Charles Albert in March 1848, the Jewish community began to break up: the community of Cherasco continued to exist briefly and the last rabbi to hold office was Gabriele Levi Polacco, who died in 1858.

[With the centralization of Jewish communities, resulting from] the Rattazzi Law (1857), the community in Cherasco ceased to exist and was annexed first to the one in Cuneo and later, in 1930, to the community of Turin; some of the families moved to larger cities or emigrated abroad, while the remaining families scattered throughout the territory.

The Jews of Cherasco

(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)

A number of families remained in Cherasco, such as Segre, which, until the 1930s directed the Segre Leone Bank (formerly Segre and Debenedetti Bank) in the edifice housing the synagogue (which belonged to the same family until the 1980s, when it was ceded to the Jewish community of Turin).

This bank, according to popular memory, extended loans to indigent peasants from the autumn until the following Easter, up to a maximum of 10 lira, interest-free.

Popular memory is rich with episodes about the Jews: Emilio Debenedetti, an engineering graduate (the first of his family who was permitted to attend university, a privilege denied to Jews until their emancipation) brought electricity to Cherasco in 1900. When he reached the age of 80, he presented the city with a bell for the Civic Tower, which had been stripped of its bell by the war, and in its stead had rung the bells of the neighboring church of San Martin. He had only one condition: at his death, the bell was to ring three times also for him, the Jew Debenedetti.