

Pride of PIEDMONT'S Jews



The shuls from the now-defunct communities of Northern Italy have seen several fates. Either they've been transformed into museums, their furnishings have been transferred to Israel or to other shuls within Italy, or they are in their original condition but rarely used. We originally came to Italy's Piedmont region to perform brissim, but our visit wound up being an adventure in rediscovering the exquisite, abandoned shuls of the last centuries — left intact to tell the stories of their past

BY Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan
PHOTOS Ari Greenspan, Ari Zivotofsky, Yosef Zivotofsky

We were on our way to Chicago for another of our Mesorah Dinners featuring an array of dishes created from little-known and unusual kosher animals, but the path to the Windy City passed through the Piedmont region of northwest Italy, and it is here that our tale begins.

We were summoned to Piedmont's regional capital of Turin (Torino) to perform a series of brissim by our host, Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum, the chief rabbi of Turin and Piedmont. He asked us to come to Italy in order to perform brissim for three adults and an infant. We arrived after midnight on a Thursday, and by 8 a.m. the next morning we were on our way to an old Italian villa at the top of a hill overlooking the Alps to perform a bris on a baby whose parents can trace their Jewish roots back over 500 years.

Next, we prepared to do brissim on the adults. One was a prospective *ger*, but he was a no-show. The other two were much simpler halachically, yet quite emotional. They were both Jews who had until then been *arellim* (uncircumcised), one of them being the son of a Holocaust survivor, a 60-something-year-old Jewish widower, who had been baptized as a youth and who felt a passion to have a bris before he died.

The bris of an adult is a serious matter that requires local anesthesia, surgical instruments, stitches, bandages, and a sterile environment. We sterilized all of the equipment and proceeded to do the brissim in the course of two hours. One of the men talked about how meaningful it was for him to have his bris at age 30. He felt a need to be part of the Jewish Nation. His lack of a bris until now was a sad testament to the absence of active Yiddishkeit in the Italy of the postwar decades, since this man's grandfather had been a beloved *gabbai* and *shochet* only two generations earlier.

After we finished the surgery and stood up to make the *brachos* and give these men Jewish names, there was great emotion in the room, as we felt we had done something historic. There was actually a little singing and dancing. The 30-year-old has a cousin who is a rabbi in a city about 100 kilometers away. This rabbi made the trip on Erev Shabbos to give physical and emotional support to his cousin as he was welcomed into the bris of Avraham Avinu. He served as the *sandak* by holding his cousin's head, then made the *brachos* and gave the Hebrew name.

And so happened our introduction to the 800-strong Jewish community of Turin, which was our base



The *aron kodesh* in the shul in Asti dates back to the 14th century



A Baroque wooden pillar with a gold leaf design supports the cupola of the *bimah*



Ari G. (L) and Ari Z. analyze the gold leaf *aron kodesh* in Turin, painted black as a sign of mourning for the king who granted the Jews their freedom from the ghetto

for Shabbos. The Turin Jewish community is centered around a beautiful large shul that was completed in 1884 — a story in itself. However, it was not in this grand shul that we davened on Shabbos, but rather in the “small” shul in the basement of the adjoining building that is currently used year-round with the exceptions of Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, Simchas Torah, and the first day of Pesach. On those days the larger crowds make it appropriate to give honor to the main shul.

The small shul in Turin is a picturesque, amphitheater-shaped room that was renovated in 1972. We found the architecture and furnishings magnificent, but were disappointed that nothing was left of its original function — this room was the matzoh bakery for the community for almost 100 years. Unfortunately, it has been many decades

since matzoh was baked locally, and despite our best efforts we were unable to locate any remnants of matzoh-baking equipment.

The Piedmont area is in fact dotted with numerous villages and towns that previously had small but active Jewish communities. Of these, only Turin still has a Jewish *kehillah*. The shuls from these now-defunct communities have seen one of four fates: some have been transformed into museums; others are in their original condition, although rarely used; the furnishings of some have been transferred to Israel (either to shuls or museums); and some have seen their interior furnishings transplanted within Italy. This was the case with the shul in Chieri, a small town 11 kilometers from Turin. Its splendid furnishings now grace the small Turin shul.

Preserved for the Future We were curious to at least see photos of the old matzoh bakery, and our search led us to the communal archives. We have been in numerous archives worldwide, but the collections of this small community are among the most impressive we've ever seen. They include books, documents, paintings — all preserved in a temperature-controlled room with sophisticated sliding walls and shelves and a computerized database.

One of the most spectacular items was a book on the laws of *shechitah* from 1807. The author of this rare book was clearly a creative individual who found a unique way to format the laws of *treifos*, animals with physical defects in the various limbs and organs, which render them nonkosher. He inserted diagrams of each of the animal's body parts and organs, visually describing

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what makes them questionable.

One popular item in any Jewish archive is the local *kesubah*. While the text of *kesubos* is standardized in the US, historically, there were regional variations. One interesting custom we noted in the Piedmont *kesubos* was that not only was the city mentioned, but its location was described by the body or bodies of waters on which it was located. This custom more precisely identifies the city so that in Israel, for example, one would not confuse the Beis Lechem in Yehudah with the Beis Lechem in the Galil. This practice is standard in the writing of a *get*, and often presents a challenge when writing *gittin* in new locales due to the difficulty of correctly identifying — and spelling the Hebrew names of — the local bodies of water. We later inquired with the chief rabbi of Rome, Rav Riccardo Di Segni, who informed us that this is standard practice in all of Italy. Some seforim also cite examples such as: “the holy city of Shechem between the mountains of Har Gerizim and Har Eival,” or “the holy city of Tzfas that sits on the river Duvlai.” Thus, in Rome, *kesubos* mention the Tevere River, in Florence, the Arno River, and in Venice and Leghorn they write “*al kefyama*.”

Nusach Turin Italy's Jewish population — which originated in the time of the Second Beis HaMikdash, when Jews lived throughout much of the Roman Empire — was augmented during the Middle Ages with Jewish migration from other areas, which led to the creation of unique *nuschaos* in davening and *leining* in Rome, Turin, Milan, and other areas. While we tend to think that all that exists are the *nusach Sfard*, *nusach Ashkenaz*, and *nusach eidot haMizrach* for Sephardim, in fact there are many lesser known variants.

Once, in the kosher pizza shop in the old Jewish ghetto of Rome, a young *frum* couple spending the day in Rome en route to New York was seated at the table next to mine and we began discussing the community. The husband spoke disparagingly of the locals' davening

and how they didn't say a particular Kaddish when they were “supposed to.” I explained to him that in addition to the *nusach Sfard* and *nusach Ashkenaz* and possibly Yemenite with which he was probably familiar, there is also the lesser known “*nusach Roma*.” Note that it is not called *nusach Italia*, because each of Italy's cities has its own traditions.

Nusach Roma may be one of the oldest extant *nuschaos* — and, in fact, it is almost identical to that of the siddur of Rav Saadiah Gaon — but it may also contain elements that antedate the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 CE. *Nusach Roma*, following Rav Saadiah, has special modifications on Friday night in the brachos preceding Shema. Florence preserves a ruling of Rashi that *Parshas Zachor* is read twice: as the last *aliyah*, and then again as *maftir*. Some other interesting variants that we noticed in the Turin siddur are: adding to *Acheinu Beis Yisrael* the words *acheinu Yisrael va'Anusei Yisrael*; saying *she'asani Yisrael* instead of *shelo asani goy*; and no *aleinu* at the end of Minchah. The Italian communities each take their own *nusach* so seriously that throughout the Shabbos morning davening in Turin, one of the locals grumbled about the fact that the usual *baal korei* was away and the one reading that Shabbos was not using the Turin melody but the melody from Milan, a city a mere hour's drive away.

The Mole Antonelliana Turin's skyline is dominated by a singular building called the Mole (mo-leh) Antonelliana which, when built, was the tallest brick building in Europe, its spire rising an amazing 167 meters in the air. What makes this building so unique is that this massive structure was actually built by the Jews to serve as a shul!

During the Middle Ages and until their emancipation, Jews were allowed to work in only a limited number of professions, with most becoming moneylenders. They were often very successful, but since they could not buy land or own businesses, they kept their money

out of sight, only to be used privately. The last thing a Jew living in the ghetto wanted was for a Christian to know he was wealthy.

Then when Napoleon emancipated the Jews, they were able to live as they wanted. But a few years later, with the restoration of an Italian monarchy in 1814, the Jews again were relegated to the ghettos and limited in their professions. Finally in 1848, King Alberto decided that the Jews should be free, and from that date onward, the ghettos were opened and Jews were free to practice religion and work as they wished. So beloved was King Alberto by the Jews of Piedmont that, when he died, a beautiful 18th century *aron kodesh*, housed today in a niche behind the Torino small shul, was painted black as a sign of mourning for him, as was the *aron* in the nearby town of Ivrea.

When the Jews were finally offered freedom and equality, they had an opportunity to build this shul, with its bold design. Such an undertaking certainly reflected their confidence, wealth, and, after centuries of chafing under the yoke of the Church, was intended to send a message by the mere fact that a shul would now be taller than any church in the world. But because of conflicts with the architect that arose during the building's design and construction, the building was ultimately given back to the city at a fraction of its cost, and it never did become a shul. Construction had begun in 1863, but as it progressed, the architect continued to make modifications that raised the height and the cost. At one point the Jews told him that they wanted a place where they could “pray to G-d, not whisper in His Ear.” Finally, in 1876, the Jewish community, which had spent almost three times its allotted budget and still did not have a completed shul, announced that it was withdrawing from the project. The Jews gave it to the city in exchange for the piece of land on which the current shul stands. The Mole was finally completed in 1889 and today is a municipal museum.

The current shul was completed in



1. The Mole tower, almost a shul

2. Each city has its own *nusach*

3. A hanging oil lamp in Mondovi

4. Cheder kids left their mark as far back as 1896

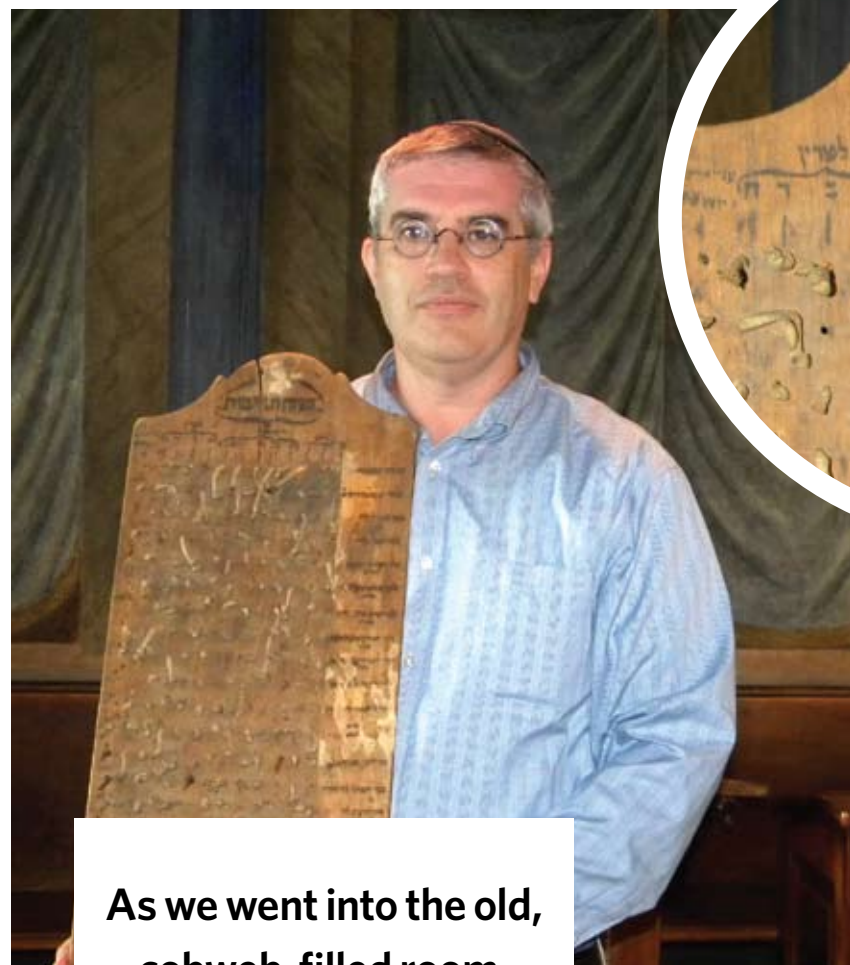
5. Round tefillin, according to the opinion that only the base must be square

6. Small space, but exquisite design

7. What lies behind this menorah?

8. A heart-shaped *kesubah* from Turin, 1846





As we went into the old, cobweb-filled room, we wondered about the generations of Jews who had used this structure

1884 and is crowned by four onion domes on corner towers that can be clearly seen from the Mole observation deck. It is located in a complex that houses a Jewish elementary school, a prestigious rabbinical college, an old-age home, the archives, a small museum, and the community offices. In 1942, during World War II, the shul was hit by a bomb that was supposedly intended for the central railway station a few blocks away. While the bomb did not explode, a miracle in and of itself, the ensuing fire completely destroyed the interior of the shul. The magnificent interior of the rebuilt shul is said to be a mere shadow of what it had been before the war.

In Silk All around Piedmont, we continued our search for remnants of once-vibrant Jewish life.

One of the marks of these communities is the Italian Jewish custom of making exquisite tallesim out of silk. This unusual custom has its roots in the region's economic history. Often a wealthy prince would come into a Jewish moneylender with a fancy expensive silk garment and pawn it for cash. When the loan was not repaid, the Jews would repair, embellish, and resell the piece, creating a tradition of fine sewing crafts, particularly in silks, which ultimately gave them a foothold in the international silk trade.

The use of silk for a tallis, however, raises unique halachic questions. Firstly, can the tzitzis on the tallis be made of anything but wool? Secondly, if they can be made from silk, then the spinning and string production processes must

Shabbos innovation: keeping track of contributions with a board and string

be done *lishmah*, with intent of doing it for a mitzvah. Yet most production, which involves the extremely delicate work of unspinning the silk cocoons and spinning the almost microscopic fibers, is done by non-Jewish experts in China. When *poskim* have addressed these halachos over the last few hundred years, it has often been in direct response to Italian Jewish practice.

On Shabbos afternoon we walked through the ancient Turin ghetto, created in 1679. Everything about Jewish life in this period was understated. No extravagance could be displayed publicly for fear of the Christians. In fact, Jews could not buy land or businesses, and as a result, the Jews had few things on which to spend their money. That fact explains the preponderance of spectacular Jewish synagogue art in such a small concentrated area over a several-hundred-year period. As we explored the shuls, we found that many of them were located in completely unmarked, unremarkable buildings so as not to rouse the ire of the Church. The synagogues were on the top floor of housing structures, based on the view of many *poskim* that one should not live directly above a shul, as well as in an effort to covertly make the shul the tallest building in the city, which the Church prohibited.

We were fortunate to visit the shuls in the four towns of Mondovì, Asti, Carmagnola, and Cherasco, from among

the many villages in the Piedmont region that have diminutive but exquisite shuls. Often there were not more than 30 to 40 seats in these houses of worship; some had a balcony with a few seats for women, while others had a small outside area from which women could observe the services through a window or screen. Yet, despite their size, an extraordinary amount of money and attention was lavished on beautifying these small *mikdashim*. It seems that no expense was spared to employ non-Jewish artisans who were experts in woodwork, painting, and gold leafing, which is almost a lost art today, but was considered to be the ultimate in Renaissance-era elegance.

The Mondovì shul is on the top floor of a Jewish-inhabited building near the highest part of town, with no external indicators that a shul is within. We had been told that nothing remains of the *mikveh* that had existed in the basement, but we were shown an unusual stone on the balcony that fed into a channel that supposedly fed the *mikveh*. The view from the top floor is amazing, overlooking a verdant valley. As in many of the shuls in this area, the *aron* was not a cabinet or ark, but rather a small room that could be entered, with the Torahs resting on shelves. For this reason, what Ashkenazim called an "*aron kodesh*," meaning an ark, Sephardim referred to as "*heichal*," which was often a small room.

In Mondovì, we saw an ingenious solution for how donations could be recorded on Shabbos. A big wooden slat was drilled with holes going down and across in lines. Along the top was a list of coin values, one over each column and along the side was the name of each member of the community. In each hole was a short length of leather knotted on the front and back. All of the leather was pulled back and when somebody made a donation on Shabbos or Yom Tov, the piece of leather corresponding to the amount was pulled forward and left that way until after Shabbos. That way, on Motzaei Shabbos, the *gabbai* would know how much each person had pledged.

In a number of the shuls we found a room with benches used for teaching the kids of the community. For kids, sitting for hours on a wooden bench can be challenging, and it was sweet and comical to see the engraved graffiti of the names and dates that generations of cheder children had inflicted on the wood.

While we were in this shul, now an official museum, an old neighbor came by and told us proudly that he had been friendly with the town's last Jew, who had died some years ago. When he saw our curiosity about the community, he said, "Would you like to see something interesting?" He produced a big, old skeleton key, took us to a locked cabinet and

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opened it. Inside was a treasure trove of seforim and old documents, many written on parchment, among which were some old illuminated *kesubos*. Next, we put our hands into the cabinet and pulled out amazing objects that appeared to be round tefillin! These round, or more precisely, cylindrical, tefillin are so different from what we are used to seeing that they raise immediate questions. The halachah states that all parts of tefillin must be perfectly square, but how precise must the square be? It is clear that there is no obligation to use a micrometer, but rather it must look square. Yet here were round tefillin. Just a mere few generations ago, there was no way to shape thick cowhide and thus, most tefillin were made from thinner sheep or goat skin. Perhaps, over time, the tefillin wore down and what was left was what we were seeing?

But there is a shocking alternative. Commenting on the *mishnah* in *Megillah* that seems to disqualify round tefillin, Tosafos make clear that only the base of the tefillin needs to be square and not the entire *bayis*. This is a major debate among the Rishonim, but other significant authorities hold like this as well. Thus they held that as long as the stitching on the base is square, the *bayis* itself could be cylindrical. The Jewish Encyclopedia has such a picture of tefillin from 1725. It could thus be that we were holding

tefillin made according to the opinion that such tefillin are kosher.

The absolutely exquisite shul in Carmagnola is located on the top floor of an 18th-century building. It features chandeliers from the 18th century, gold-leafed wood, and a magnificent *teivah* from 1766. The community was never large, reaching a maximum of 171 members in the early 19th century, and there are no longer any Jews in the town, and so for many years the synagogue remained abandoned and decaying. About 30 years ago the Turin community undertook its restoration, and today it serves as a museum of Judaism through which local tourists and school children can learn about Judaism and the local community’s history.

Since we were accompanied by the chief rabbi, we were granted a special tour of the Carmagnola shul. Access to the shul was originally via a staircase on the side of the building facing the ghetto. When the Jews were permitted to leave the ghetto, the egress to that staircase was sold to a non-Jew, who bought it with the understanding that Jews could pass through his property on their way to shul. But when the community disappeared and tourists began using it merely to visit the museum shul, the descendants of that non-Jew barred access, arguing that the agreement was only made to enable Jews to

pray, and not for tourists. Therefore, a new entrance has now been opened on the other side of the building, and the original entrance has been sealed.

The recently restored Cherasco shul and classroom is located on the top floor of an otherwise nondescript building. This small Jewish community believed in giving its children a general as well as a Jewish education, as evidenced by a most unusual 200-year-old globe found in the classroom.

The Torino Jewish community has undertaken the preservation of at least 16 shuls in the Piedmont area, along with even more cemeteries, and it is doing so even as it struggles for its own survival. The Turin Jewish old-age home has about two dozen residents, the majority of whom are Jewish. Its kitchen provides kosher meals for shul functions and communal meals, such as the Friday night dinner that we enjoyed together with members of the community and Israelis who are studying and working in the thriving city. Although very few of the community members actually keep kosher, there is an ice cream parlor under kosher supervision. The Jewish school runs a day camp in the summer that, when we visited, had about 15 kids, only one of whom was Jewish. Nonetheless, the *bentsching* out loud compared favorably with that of any New York day camp.

Over the Coast When we were in Italy on a previous “halachic adventure” researching the *esrog* industry, we learned about exciting developments taking place in Trani, and decided to make the four-hour cross-country trek to witness these changes firsthand.

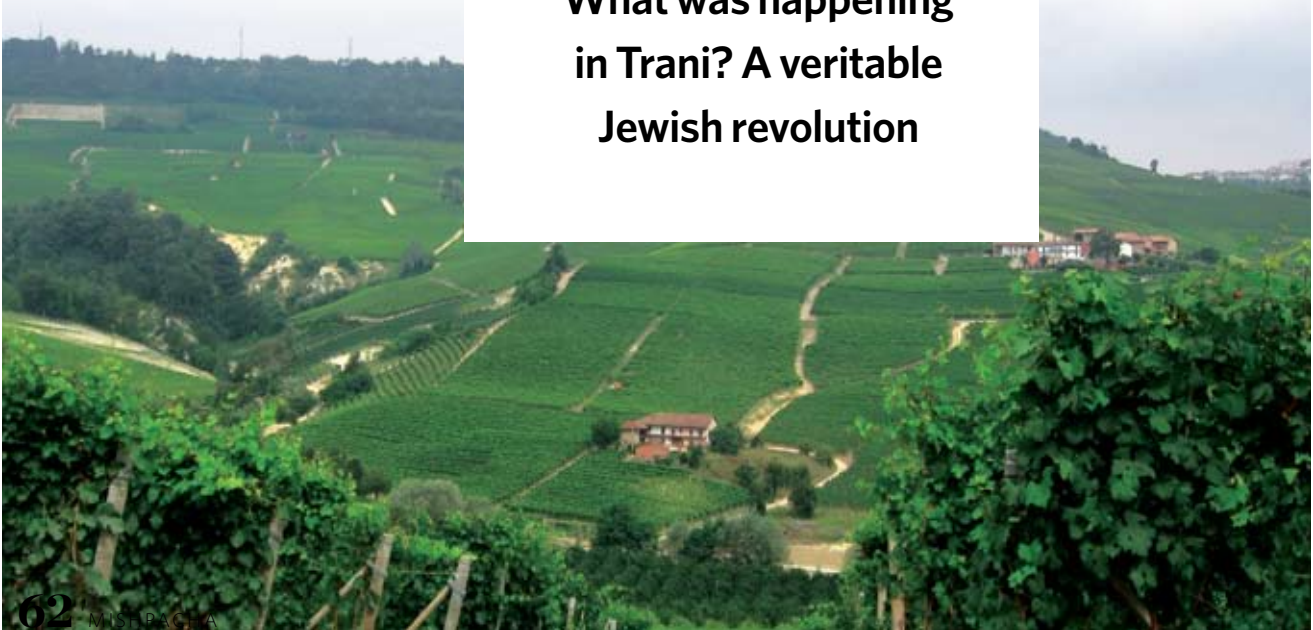
What was happening in Trani? A veritable Jewish revolution, the significance of which is laced in its history. Trani is a seaport on the southwestern coast of Italy in which, for most of the 12th and the first half of the 13th centuries, the Jews enjoyed a measure of self-rule and governmental protection, leading to a thriving Jewish quarter. By the end of the 13th century, however, the situation had deteriorated, leading to confiscations, forced baptisms, and blood libels. Many Jews fled over the years, although for several centuries there remained a strong Neofiti (the name by which Italian Anusim were known) community alongside the vestiges of the Jewish community. In 1510, the Jews were expelled from all of Puglia, Italy’s southern “boot heel” that includes Trani, and the Jews left Trani entirely in 1541 because of a decree that obligated them to choose between baptism or exile. Most of the Jews chose exile, fleeing to places such as Salonika and Corfu. They left carrying memories of their city of origin as attested by the family name Mitrani, meaning “from Trani,” a not uncommon name in Israel.

In 1290, four synagogues were confiscated and converted into churches. Two of these, Scolagrande and Sclanova, still stand, and for 700 years, these two majestic buildings — with the mezuzah space still in the door frames, the indentation in the wall for the Torah scroll, and remnants of a *mikveh* in the basement — have borne witness to the tragedy of Jewish life on a Catholic continent.

Although Italy was freed from the shackles of the Church in 1861, there was no way for a community to reconstitute itself in Trani or its neighboring towns — Jews hadn’t practiced Judaism openly in southern Italy for well over 300 years. However, Neofiti Jews continued to practice their unique hidden brand of religion in the region. The mini-miracle of Trani’s resurrection began with Professor Francesco Lotoro, a pianist and conductor, who had been researching the music of concentration camps. In 1995, he founded the Orchestra Musica Judaica and in 2004, he and his wife, Grazia Tiritiel, officially converted to Judaism through the Rome rabbinical court and began living a fully observant Jewish life in Trani. We were privileged to meet them on our visit.

After converting, the Lotoros approached the Trani municipality to request permission to use the Sclanova synagogue, which was no longer being used as a church and had been standing empty for the past 50 years. When their request was granted in November 2005, they immediately assembled a group of Jews to pray there and organized a community. As they entered the ancient building for the first time, they were dumbfounded to see that in the niche where the ark had originally rested, there was a medieval oil painting of Mary. The Catholic Church refused to remove it, even if it would be preserved and displayed in a museum, and as a protected historical site, it was prohibited for the nascent Jewish community to touch the painting.

Piedmont, the land of castles and vineyards



What was happening in Trani? A veritable Jewish revolution

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The existence of the synagogue in Trani has reawakened Judaism in the region, and from the most unusual sectors. One group are the spiritual heirs of an uneducated non-Jewish, disabled World War I veteran from Sannicandro Garganico, a town north of Trani, who received a Bible from a Protestant chaplain. That gift started him on an odyssey to observance of the written commandments. He attracted a few dozen followers who eventually converted, most of them moving to Israel and settling in Biryá, near Tzfas. The descendants of some of those who remained behind have now started observing the commandments and have connected with the emerging Trani synagogue.

Some of the Neofitis, the Italian Anusim, have joined the shul as well. Avraham Zecchillo, a *ger tzedek* who passed away just four months ago, related to us that he remembered his grandmother leaving church and kissing the spot where the mezuzah should have been. He also remembered a ritual that faintly evoked a *pidyon haben*, in which on the 30th day after a firstborn