



## **MEIS INAUGURATION JEWS, AN ITALIAN STORY**

On December 14<sup>th</sup>, in Ferrara, MEIS is being inaugurated. A national museum devoted to Jewish history and life, starting from the unique experience of Italian Jews, for twenty-two centuries interwoven into the country's fabric.

What is a national museum of Italian Judaism for? Above all it serves to talk about today: about the dialogue between cultures, the contribution of minorities, the richness of multiple identities, the beauty of knowing a different world that lives within and embraced by our own.

The Museo Nazionale dell'Ebraismo Italiano e della Shoah - MEIS (National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah) opens with an exhibit entitled "Jews, An Italian Story. The First Thousand Years" and it is no coincidence that this is taking place in Ferrara. Indeed, it had to start with an introduction to this story, beginning to give the public a glimpse of the origins of Italian Judaism, a surprising story that is not well known. The Museum thus takes the visitor on a journey through the first thousand years of Jewish Italy, a major exhibit curated by Anna Foa, Giancarlo Lacerenza and Daniele Jalla, prepared by the GTRF studio in Brescia. There are over two hundred precious objects on display, including twenty manuscripts, seven incunabula and sixteenth century editions, eighteen medieval documents, forty-nine Roman and medieval epigraphs and one hundred and twenty-one items such as rings, seals, coins, oil-lamps and amulets that are little known or on display for the first time, on loan from museums around the world (from the Genizah of Cairo to the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, from the Vatican Museums to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York to the Cambridge University Library).

We will witness a triple inauguration: opening of the exhibit "Jews, An Italian Story. The First Thousand Years" which, from a scientific, museological point of view, is the first major section of the Museum; opening of the multimedia show "Through the Eyes of the Italian Jews", the permanent introduction to the topics covered by MEIS; presentation of the large renovated building of Via Piangipane, in the historic center of Ferrara, until 1992 home of city prisons, a place of exclusion and isolation par excellence, brought back to life as an open, inclusive space.

The MEIS, established by an Act of Parliament in 2003, is called on to recount the more than two millennia of vital, uninterrupted presence of Jews in Italy, their traditions and the fundamental contributions they have made to the history and culture of the country as well as to Judaism as a whole.

Though a minority (in Italy, it seems their numbers never exceeded 50,000), starting from the days of ancient Rome, during the Renaissance and continuing on to modern times, the Jews have played a foremost role in the economic development of North and Central Italy, in the unification of Italy and the Italian Risorgimento all the way through to their literary and scientific contributions of the twentieth century. In addition, over the centuries, they have helped establish numerous relationships between Italy, Europe and the other shores of the Mediterranean.

The Jews are therefore an essential reference for understanding Italian history and civilization, amid periods of calmer coexistence and fruitful interaction and other tragic times of persecution and banishment, culminating in the tragedy of the Shoah. A strongly asymmetric dynamic exists between a numerically small group and a religiously homogeneous and politically stronger majority. Yet, despite this imbalance, Italian Judaism has never been in a position of inferiority. And the goal of this inaugural exhibition is to communicate the uniqueness of this story, describing how the Jewish presence in Italy was formed and developed in subsequent stages, and how, from generation to generation, the Jews of Italy built their own unique identity, even with respect to the rest of the diaspora.

The curators have created an original experience where contexts (temporal, spatial, social, cultural) are presented and brought to life through filmed contributions of some experts, authentic objects or reproductions, written texts, still or moving images.

Introducing the themes in the show, the multimedia installation “Through the Eyes of the Italian Jews” reviews the history of the peninsula from the perspective of an Italian Jew. The visitor is accompanied from Jerusalem to Rome and, in the process, gains an understanding of many things: the trauma reaped by Roman destruction of the Temple, what Jewish life was like under Julius Caesar, how the pagans confused the Jews with the early Christians and how, after becoming the official religion, Christianity initially tolerated and later marginalized the Jews. And it continues as they are dispersed across the Italian peninsula, where the Jews still managed to keep their heritage alive and still deal with surrounding society. And finally we land at the active Jewish presence in southern Italy and the dialogue between the Christian, Jewish and Arab cultures in medieval Sicily.

This story shows us that Italy was built with the Jews and also by the Jews; that the Jews have long been part and parcel of the fabric and wealth of our country, having come to Italy long before the Longobards, the Normans, the Franks and the Spaniards; that they fought in the Italian wars, for the Risorgimento and for liberation; that they have always worked to make this land fruitful. Indeed, it is not by chance that in Hebrew it is called *I-Tal-Ya*, “the island of divine dew”.

And the backdrop in which this story is recounted is MEIS, the first Italian museum on relations between minorities and majorities. In a sort of retribution, it has emerged from the renovation of the former prison in Ferrara: what in the twentieth century was a place of segregation and isolation, particularly during the dark years of fascism (with the confinement of opponents of the regime and citizens of Jewish origin, among them Giorgio Bassani), has now become a center of culture, research, teaching, dialogue and inclusion.

All this is taking place in Ferrara, identified as the ideal venue for MEIS because its streets, its history and traditions are permeated with the Jewish presence, like few other places in the world. Jews have been living here for over a thousand years, a steady presence in a natural exchange with the rest of the population. Credit for this also goes to the Dukes of Este, who opened the gates of the city to the Jews at a time when other rulers – first and foremost the Popes – were banning or isolating them. Roman and Sicilian Jews, Tuscan Jews and Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal all found refuge in Ferrara. And here, the three synagogues, the enchanting Jewish cemetery within the city walls and the streets of the ghetto all still speak Hebrew. It is these living places that MEIS begins to reveal to us.

The exhibition is promoted by MEIS, with the support of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism, the Emilia-Romagna Region, the Municipality of Ferrara and the Union of Italian Jewish Communities - UCEI.

Main partner: Intesa San Paolo. Sponsors: Bonifiche Ferraresi, Leonardo, Emilia-Romagna Region, Istituto di Storia Contemporanea di Ferrara - ISCO, Avio, Fondazione Ebraica Marchese Cav. Guglielmo De Levy. Technical Sponsors: iGuzzini, Montenovi.

The Museum, the exhibit and the installation will remain open until Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2018 at the following hours: Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays - 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.; Thursdays - 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. Closed: Mondays, March 31 (First Day of Passover), September 10 (First Day of Rosh Hashanah) and September 19 (Kippur).

The MEIShop, the library, the cataloging center and the museum's educational suites will also be open at the same hours. In particular, the educational suites are included among the activities covered in the agreement – signed in September by MEIS and the Ministry of Education, University and Research – undertaking to work together to promote educational initiatives, conferences, seminars, travel and school-work programs for students and teachers at every level, also with the support of renowned foundations, research centers and parties representing higher education.

General admission: €10.00; discounted admission €8.00 (children between the ages of 6-18 years, university students, affiliated groups); groups of 8 to 15 persons €6.00 (one free admission for every 15 paying visitors); schools €5.00 (two free admissions for persons accompanying each class). Free admission: children under the age of 6, persons with 100% disability and the person accompanying them, card-carrying journalists and tour guides, ICOM members and uniformed military personnel. As a tribute to the city of Ferrara, on Thursday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, free admission for all.

**Press kit and images available at this link:**

[http://www.meisweb.it/en/mostra/ebrei\\_una\\_storia\\_italiana\\_primi\\_mille\\_anni](http://www.meisweb.it/en/mostra/ebrei_una_storia_italiana_primi_mille_anni)



## JEWS, AN ITALIAN STORY THE FIRST THOUSAND YEARS

“Jews, an Italian Story. The First Thousand Years” is the inaugural exhibit of Museo Nazionale dell'Ebraismo Italiano e della Shoah - MEIS (the National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah). Curated by Anna Foa, Giancarlo Lacerenza and Daniele Jalla, it illustrates the origins of the Jewish presence in Italy, from its dawning to the Middle Ages, highlighting its truly unique, distinctive character.

From 14<sup>th</sup> December 2017 to 16<sup>th</sup> September 2018, in Ferrara, a one thousand square meter facility on two floors hosts an exhibit that prefigures the first section of the future Museum, presenting authentic objects, replicas, models, images, maps, backdrops, multimedia devices. Together they recount the first millennium of Italian Jewish history, how it took root and expanded through conversions and the influx from other territories, and how its peculiar identity was formed.

Where did the Italian Jews come from? When? Why? And, once in Italy, where did they choose to settle? What relationships did they establish with the resident populations, with the public authorities: first with Imperial Rome, then with the Church, but also with the Longobards, Byzantines and Muslims, under whose dominion they lived? How did they live? What were the customs, language, culture of the Jewish communities of Italy throughout this long time? And above all: what is so particular and specific about Italian Judaism as compared to that of other places in the Diaspora?

In the original project by Anna Foa, Giancarlo Lacerenza and Daniele Jalla, and in the exhibit prepared by GTRF studio of Brescia, these questions are answered through a new way of presenting history in a museum: the focus here is on people and not objects, on people through objects. The more than two hundred objects on display, some on public display for the first time, were selected especially to represent the contexts to which they bear witness. Full knowledge and understanding of these objects is also entrusted to the titles and texts within the halls, to documents and illustrations, reconstructions that evoke the environments, situations, events, and to the words of the curators and experts who, along the route, address the visitors directly through videos, explicitly revealing the historical interpretation proposed.

And the answers that are provided, for the first time in such depth, start from the absolute uniqueness of the Jewish presence in Italy: an ancient presence, uninterrupted for over two thousand years, part and parcel of the history of our country, expression of a particular relationship between majority and minority.

The exhibition focuses on the first thousand years of this relationship, presenting the arrival – in part spontaneous, in part forced – of Jews in Italy. They then laid down roots and integrated, a minority among minorities; but also the only minority left standing, the only minority that was not assimilated, first under the Roman Empire and then under the power of the Church, highlighting its continuous presence and uniqueness when compared to what was seen in other countries.

“Jews, an Italian Story. The First Thousand Years” opens with a view of the places of origin of the Jewish people and its diasporas (the Syrian-Arabian peninsula, Mesopotamia, Canaan, the Land of Israel and Egypt) between Israel and the Roman conquest of the Judea, from the twelfth century BCE to 70 CE. In the foreground, at the end of this introductory part, is Jerusalem, at the time of the tragic destruction of the Second Temple.

From here we move on to Rome of the imperial age and late antiquity, pointing out that Rome is the site of the only Jewish presence in the western diaspora to have lasted, without interruption, from the second century BCE to the present day.

Our itinerary continues with the transition from a pagan empire to a multi-religious, and finally Christian one – until the Jewish presence is accepted, albeit in a climate permeated by an ever-growing anti-Judaism under Pope Gregory the Great (590-604).

No longer following a chronological, but rather a geographical order, the exhibit embarks on a journey revealing how, besides in Rome, Judaism took root and flourished above all in southern Italy and on the islands. Here, although the Jewish presence is documented only from the fourth to the fifth centuries, several sources set its origin in the early imperial age both among other “eastern” entities and as an effect of the first and second century deportations from Judea. From south to north, the exhibit winds its way along the peninsula, from Puglia to Friuli touching Sicily, Calabria, Basilicata, Campania, Sardinia, Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy.

At the end of this journey among the Jewish communities of the peninsula, the exhibit shows the widespread diffusion, variety and cultural richness of Jewish Italy during its peak between the seventh and eleventh centuries when the “people of the book” rediscovered Hebrew, using it in all possible forms of expression: from the copying of manuscripts to writing literary or scientific texts. Amid the altering domination of the Longobards, Byzantines and Muslims, this period saw an original, truly “Italian” Jewish culture taking hold.

The exhibit concludes with the “Itinerary” (*Sefer massa’ot*) of Benjamin Tudela, a twelfth century Navarrese Jew who takes us on a journey stretching from the Mediterranean to the Middle East, offering a precious view of the Italian Jewish communities of the times. Thus we learn of the Jewish presence in central and northern Italy and the northward migration of some families and cultural traditions all the way to the Rhine Valley, laying foundations of Ashkenazi Judaism.

As noted by the curators Anna Foa, Daniele Jalla and Giancarlo Lacerenza, “within the historical and geographical limits of the first millennium of Jewish presence in Italy, the exhibit covers the relationship between majority and minority from two different vantage points: i) that of the majority and the conditions it creates for the minority – from rejection to assimilation, passing through all possible nuances of these extremes –, leading to disappearance of that minority; and ii) that of the minority which, while it can pursue coexistence and interchange with the surrounding society – in other words, integration – it cannot accept assimilation or it would lose its identity”.

“We believe,” the curators continue, “that the discovery and knowledge of a part of our little-known history may prompt reflections that, from the past, inevitably reflect on the present. It is an indirect invitation to pose questions and seek answers. And, today, as opposed to the past, such answers cannot disregard the values of recognition and respect for others, for those who are different, mutual recognition of both the stronger and weaker party. It requires conditions of equal rights and obligations that demand responsibility from both majority and minority, requiring that each and every person assert these values in their own lives and in their relationships with others”.



## TECHNICAL DATASHEET OF THE EXHIBIT "JEWS, AN ITALIAN STORY. THE FIRST THOUSAND YEARS"

**Exhibition site:** Museo Nazionale dell'Ebraismo Italiano e della Shoah - MEIS (National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah)  
Via Piangipane, 81 - Ferrara

**Opening times:** from 14<sup>th</sup> December 2017 until Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2018

**Promoter:** Museo Nazionale dell'Ebraismo Italiano e della Shoah - MEIS (National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah)

**Curators:** Anna Foa, Giancarlo Lacerenza, Daniele Jalla

**Museographic and layout project:** GTRF Giovanni Tortelli Roberto Frassoni Architetti Associati

**Multimedia production and contents:** PUNTO REC STUDIOS srl

**Production and supplies:** Ott-Art, Permasteelisa Group, Gruppofallani s.r.l., Graphic Report, Airone Service s.r.l.

**Lighting systems supply:** iGuzzini

**Mosaics:** Gruppo Mosaicisti Ravenna

**Reproductions and 3D printing:** Tryeco 2.0 s.r.l.

**Catalogue:** by Anna Foa, Giancarlo Lacerenza, Daniele Jalla; published by Electa

**Patronages:** Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism, Emilia-Romagna Region, Municipality of Ferrara, Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI)

**Main partner:** Intesa Sanpaolo

**Sponsors:** Bonifiche Ferraresi, Leonardo, Emilia-Romagna Region, Istituto di Storia Contemporanea di Ferrara - ISCO, Avio, Fondazione Ebraica Marchese Cav. Guglielmo De Levy

**Technical sponsors:** iGuzzini, Montenovi

**Opening hours:** Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays - 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.;  
Thursdays - 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m.

**Closing:** Mondays, March 31 (First Day of Passover), September 10 (First Day of Rosh Hashanah) and September 19 (Kippur).

**Tickets:** general admission: €10.00; discounted admission €8.00 (children between the ages of 6-18 years, university students, affiliated groups); groups of 8 to 15 persons €6.00 (one free admission for every 15 paying visitors); schools €5.00 (two free admissions for persons accompanying each class). Free admission: children under the age of 6, persons with 100% disability and the person accompanying them, card-carrying journalists and tour guides, ICOM members and uniformed military personnel.

As a tribute to the city of Ferrara, on Thursday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, free admission for all.

**Information:** [www.meisweb.it](http://www.meisweb.it)

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## THE REASONS FOR A NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ITALIAN JUDAISM

*Dario Franceschini*

Minister of Cultural Heritage and Activities  
and Tourism

The first MEIS catalogue, devoted to the exhibition *Jews, an Italian Story. The First Thousand Years*, marks an important step in the course undertaken in 2003, when as a brand new member of Parliament, I succeeded in pushing through the law to establish the Museum.

I have always thought that Italy should have a Museum dedicated to Italian Judaism, since it is a significant part of our national cultural identity. It is a story to be brought to light and to be told, because the encounter with Jewish culture has been among the most enriching and fruitful of our country.

With more than 200 original objects, reconstructions of environments and multimedia installations, the exhibition will accompany the visitor through a story never before narrated with such scientific attention to detail and such scope.

Tireless efforts to mount this exhibition are thanks to three exceptional curators – Anna Foa, Giancarlo Lacerenza and Daniele Jalla – and the motivated staff of MEIS under the direction of Simonetta Della Seta, carefully guided by the Board of Directors chaired by Dario Disegni. To all of them I wish to give recognition for having performed this miracle.

For the renovation of the building hosting the exhibition – which resembles not even a bit the old prison of Ferrara – I would like to thank the architect Carla Di Francesco, very recently appointed to the administrative leadership of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism as Secretary General.

Lastly, MEIS stands in Ferrara, which is also my city. I am well aware how much the people of Ferrara have anticipated it, and I am certain that it will offer Ferrara a cultural and tourism opportunity on an international scale, just as this city deserves.

With this exhibition, a dream has been achieved and a great void filled. A few years will be needed before MEIS sees its completion; however, today we have made an important step forward.





## THE INVITATION OF ERCOLE I D'ESTE TO THE JEWS

*Tiziano Tagliani*  
Mayor of Ferrara

*We are very pleased that they come to live here with their families . . .  
as they shall always be well thought of and regarded in all things possible  
and each day more shall be counted of them who have come to our home.*

The invitation of Ercole I d'Este in 1492 to the Jews expelled from Spain is one of the high points in the eight centuries of the Jewish presence in Ferrara. It was the beginning of the Modern Age when the fugitives settled in the Estense capital, initiating the development of the refined Sephardic culture. Now, 525 years later, we are witnessing another major event that blends and interlaces, still strongly and vibrantly, with the history of our city.

Ferrara embraces with renewed enthusiasm the 'story' of Jews during their first thousand years. It is an Italian story that, over time, has embedded itself into the special relationship of the city with those 'places of the soul' recognizable in the vast Ghetto, in the Synagogues on the ancient via Sabbioni, in the evocative 'garden of the Jews' on Via delle Vigne.

Alongside the significance of the inaugural exhibition, Ferrara resonates as a European city – in validation of that special relationship – in hosting and seeing the growth of the National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah, with its specific objective of representing a cultural centre of Judaism, a means of knowledge for the exchange between different cultures.

*Jews, an Italian Story. The First Thousand Years.* The title of the exhibition encapsulates content of great value that traces a long and extraordinary history; as are of enormous value the artefacts, objects and manuscripts on exhibit coming from around the world, testimonies of Jewish life in Italy reaching back to the most distant past.

Special thanks are due the curators of the catalogue and this inspirational exhibition – Anna Foa, Giancarlo Lacerenza, Daniele Jalla –, to Dario Disegni and Simonetta Della Seta, President and Director of MEIS.



## A MUSEUM TO PROMOTE KNOWLEDGE AND DIALOGUE

*Dario Disegni*

President of the National Museum  
of Italian Judaism and the Shoah

With the exhibit *Jews, an Italian Story. The First Thousand Years*, the Museo Nazionale dell'Ebraismo Italiano e della Shoah (MEIS - National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah) inaugurates its first large building, a milestone in creation of the Museum established by act of the Italian Parliament with Law no. 91 of 17th April 2003, as amended by law No. 296 of 27th December 2006.

And so the former prison of Ferrara, which has been impeccably remodeled for its new intended purpose, is gearing up for a sort of comeback, transitioning from a place of segregation and exclusion – as it was throughout the entire twentieth century, especially during the dark years of fascism – to take on the extremely important role of cultural centre, a place of research, education, measurement and dialogue; to sum it up in a single word, a place of inclusion.

MEIS will be completed by the end of 2020 with construction of the remaining modern buildings, inspired by the five books of the Torah. Alongside the exhibition spaces, these buildings will also house a public reception area, a museum shop, a library, an archive, a documentation and cataloguing centre, an auditorium, educational suites, a restaurant and cafeteria, thus giving life to a great museum and cultural complex.

Decisive to achieving this important goal was the generous contribution of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism, which guaranteed coverage of the entire cost of construction thanks to the strong, undoubted support of Minister Dario Franceschini, who was, among other things, the first signatory of the Draft Law on establishing the Museum.

The institutional purposes assigned to MEIS by the above law stipulate that it must:

- a) be a Jewish cultural hub, in particular bearing witness to the cycle of events characterizing the two thousand years of the Jewish experience in Italy;
- b) raise awareness of the life, philosophy and culture of Italian Judaism from its origins to the present day, including particular emphasis on the period of racial persecution and the Holocaust as experienced by Italian Jews;
- c) be an open and inclusive space, a laboratory for ideas and reflections on what it means to be a minority, stimulating the debate on Judaism, its future in Italy and on the value of dialogue and interaction between different cultures.

The object of the story MEIS will recount – beginning with the exhibit on the first thousand years – is the more than two millennia of vital, uninterrupted presence of Jews in Italy, their traditions and the

fundamental contributions they have made to the history and culture of the country as well as to Judaism as a whole.

Though a minority, the Jews did indeed play a foremost role – starting from the days of ancient Rome, during the Renaissance and continuing to modern times – in the economic development of North and Central Italy and, later, in the unification of Italy and the Italian Risorgimento all the way through to their literary and scientific contributions of the twentieth century. In addition, over the centuries, they have helped establish numerous relationships between Italy, Europe and the other shores of the Mediterranean. It can therefore rightly be argued that the Jews are an essential reference in understanding Italian history and civilization, amid periods of calmer coexistence and fruitful interaction and other tragic times of persecution and banishment, culminating in the tragedy of the Shoah.

From this point of view, the inaugural exhibition does not pose to be a mere temporary exhibit on a particular theme; rather, from a scientific and exhibition point of view, it is designed as to be the first, large section prefiguring the Museum to come. Its goal is to communicate the uniqueness of the history of Italian Judaism, describing – for the first time in such detail – how the Jewish presence in Italy was formed and developed in subsequent stages, and how, from generation to generation, the Jews of Italy built their own unique identity, even with respect to the rest of Judaism.

An exhibition that the curators Anna Foa, Giancarlo Lacerenza and Daniele Jalla, in collaboration with Studio Tortelli and Frassoni of Brescia, have set out to make truly original, conceiving it as the presentation of contexts (temporal, spatial, social, cultural) through the use of actual objects or reproductions, written texts, fixed or moving images to interpret and communicate to the visitors the first thousand years of Jewish history in Italy.

Over two hundred objects, many invaluable – including 20 manuscripts, 7 sixteenth century incunabula, 18 medieval documents, largely from the Genizah of Cairo, 49 Roman and medieval epigraphs and 120 items such as rings, seals, coins, amulets that are little known or being displayed for the first time, on loan from many important museums in Italy and abroad –, highlight the great importance of this initiative within the cultural landscape of the country.

Our most heartfelt thanks go to the curators and their co-workers, the consultants, designers, Italian and foreign scholars who have written pieces for the catalog, communications experts, lenders, sponsors, and anyone who has worked on this complex yet fascinating operation based on the guidelines approved by the Board of Directors and Scientific Committee and in close coordination with the Museum's Director and its small but efficient, passionate staff.

No less gratitude goes to the: Project Manager for the complex construction site, from the outset of the work last September, Carla Di Francesco, currently Secretary General of MiBACT (Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism), who passed the baton to Rita Berton; the Ministry's Regional Secretary for Emilia-Romagna, Sabina Magrini, a precious partner who has dedicated extraordinary attention to the MEIS project; Site Manager, Angela Ugatti; Studio Arco of Bologna - SCAPE S.p.A. of Rome, winners of the international competition for the architectural project; the contractors and workers for their great commitment and professionalism.

Truly sincere, and not just formal, thanks go to those who played a role in the initial portion of the MEIS story, from Vittorio Sgarbi, who, with Alain Elkann and Massimiliano Fuksas, outlined in 2001 the idea of a Museum on the history of the Jews in Italy and on the Shoah, to Riccardo Calimani, who served for two terms as President of MEIS at a time of intense cultural development and planning, as well as to all members of the Boards of Directors, the Boards of Auditors and Scientific Committees that have served in these years.

Deep gratitude must be expressed to the City of Ferrara – its Mayors and the entire Administration, which has always supported a project deemed strategic to development of the city and qualified cultural tourism – and to the Emilia-Romagna Region, at our side in all stages of implementation of this initiative.

Constant dialogue and close collaboration with the Jewish Community of Ferrara, the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI) and the Jewish Contemporary Documentation Centre (CDEC) have created a strong, fruitful synergy that we gratefully acknowledge.

It is only thanks to this truly choral effort that MEIS has been able to reach this first important milestone and can face the demanding challenge ahead to complete the ambitious, complex but inalienable project at a time when dialogue between the many components of national society is increasingly a fundamental goal to be pursued with tenacity and foresight.



## INTRODUCTION

*Anna Foa, Giancarlo Lacerenza*

As we well know, Jews have been in Italy for more than 2,000 years. During this long period of time their presence has been essentially uninterrupted.

No other place in the western Diaspora can indeed boast a Jewish presence that has been so ancient, widespread and constant. Although it should not be forgotten that over these two thousand (and more) years their presence has not been evenly distributed over the territory and that – truth be told – there have certainly been interruptions, more or less complete, they have never been sufficiently widespread or long-lasting to undermine fundamentally the essential truth of this claim.

The 'Jewish Italy', unequivocally characterised by continuity and the fact it has been so widespread, a part of whose history shall be told here, is, however, almost exclusively Southern Italy, including the islands, apart from Rome, naturally. Indeed, this is the environment for the Jewish presence in the Italian peninsula for the first thousand years. Yet even referring to Southern Italy is itself a generalisation. These were lands invaded by many conquerors: the Visigoths from the start of the 5th century, the Vandals in Sicily in the second half of the same century, the Ostrogoths and Byzantines between the 6th and 8th centuries, the Longobards to a limited extent in Puglia, Calabria and Lucania, and finally the Arabs. The Jewish presence would continue over the centuries despite these different conquerors, often warring amongst themselves, without any particularly significant breaks in the lengthy span of their thousand-year presence.

A further distinguishing element of Italian Judaism – not so much in historiographical literature but in the commonly and often pointless discussions on the socio-historical factors and questions of identity of Judaism in general – is that Italian Judaism, also due to its long-lasting roots in the territory, has some distinct characteristics: 'unique' according to some commentators, which marked their development in a symbiosis, albeit not always easy, with the surrounding environment.

By no means intended to prove or deny the basis of this assumption, the opportunity to curate an exhibition on the origins of the Jewish presence in Italy and how it developed over the course of little over its first thousand years seems to be a perfect occasion to illustrate the premises for it as broadly as possible. Consequently, we have decided to show how, in the first place, between the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, the presence of Jews in the whole of Italy, even if this can be followed more closely only in Rome and its neighbouring regions, would change unexpectedly from just one of the many diverse components in the Empire, which was in practice multicultural, to the *only one* able to resist the passing of time. In this process, they would become part of a society which had in the meantime emerged as principally Christian; certainly, they were a minority but widely spread over the territory and, above all, structurally integrated into the society. In an area which is physically so well-defined – a peninsula and islands – and increasingly fought over by Goths, Byzantines, Longobards and Arabs as mentioned above, their presence would become rooted in the territory, supported by reasons of theological interest as well as economic advantage, which would allow Jews the opportunity to stay and survive, albeit in the looming shadow of the archbishoprics and

often in Giudeccas, at first very visible in the centres but later moved, often voluntarily, to outlying areas of the urban fabric.

To retrace this history – if by history we mean not only historical events but also the perceptions of Jewish and non-Jewish contemporaries and the way these were reworked and communicated – we have used historical, archaeological, literary and philosophical sources: in short, books and stones. Most of the sources are Jewish: mainly historians and chroniclers, but also physicians, scientists, poets and musicians. Frequently, rabbinical literature has been carefully considered, namely, that vast set of legal texts, commentaries and narrative texts that go under the name of Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash. Moderate use has been made of them, not in any way to question the importance of the rabbinical texts or their teaching, but simply because, however important, they do not directly recount this history, even in the broadest sense given to the word ‘history’. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, the great historian of Judaism wrote: ‘Unlike the biblical writers the rabbis seem to play with Time as though with an accordion, expanding and collapsing it at will. Where historical specificity is a hallmark of the biblical narratives, here that acute biblical sense of time and place often gives way to rampant and seemingly unselfconscious anachronism. . . . If the rabbis, wise men who had inherited a powerful historical tradition, were no longer interested in mundane history, this indicates nothing more than that they felt no need to cultivate it. Perhaps they already knew of history what they needed to know. Perhaps they were even wary of it’ (Yerushalmi 1982: 17, 21).

It needed a very careful assessment of the sources and due caution taken in their use. This has also contributed to our choice to show above all contemporary objects and documents and first-hand materials and sources, presented in their context. After all, how else could such a complex picture be represented effectively, especially after the fall of the Roman Empire?

‘Orientals’ who have never set foot in the East, ‘foreigners’ who were settled in some places well before the earliest members of the new Christian majority, the Jews of Italy were engaged in productive and economic activities which differed according to the region. In a certain sense, between Late Antiquity and the High Middle Ages, the Jews were a bridge between the ancient and the new world. Protected by some dukes, tolerated by some popes, oppressed by many others, in the context of a legal framework which allowed integration but not social equity – and which in practice marginalised them and hence excluded them as a group – the Jews would have their revenge on an economic and above all cultural level.

Literate, even in the lowest social levels, in a world that did not consider the ability to read – let alone write – to be important, even for princes and rulers, the Jews would become essential figures where there was a desire to be free from the power of the clerics; this was no longer solely in traditional occupations, such as dyeing (a specialisation dating back to the time of the Late Empire) but in ‘new’ fields such as medicine, where their ability would rapidly excel.

This happened to a large extent because they were able to cross borders and frontiers thanks to a tool which Italian Jews only seemed to have appreciated fully after the 9th century: their knowledge of Hebrew, used not only for liturgical purposes, funerary epigraphs and literature but as a medium of communication between distant, linguistically-heterogeneous individuals and communities.

As seen elsewhere, on Italian soil, Jews would use exclusively the local language and dialects. Jewish mobility within the Euro-Mediterranean area would favour contacts with other languages and idioms and mutual knowledge of them. However, the process of the reappropriation of Hebrew was not an internal phenomenon nor a result of these contacts, but the consequence of a true cultural Hebraization linked to the liturgy, and which would gradually take root at the same time as the progressive affirmation of the rabbinical movement and the intensification, also in the West, of the actions of the emissaries first from the Palestinian patriarchate and then from the Babylonian academies.

However, it is not true that this process did not meet local resistance, as shown by the initial successes of the Karaite movement. One of the most vivid examples is in the famous episode in Venosa in the 9th century and recalled long after, in 1054 in the *Book of the Genealogies* by Achima'atz ben Palti'el, also known as the *Megillat Achima'atz*. The episode is well-known: a local learned poet, Silano, annoyed by the visit (and possibly also the success) of a missionary from the Land of Israel, played a trick on him, changing the text of the homily to be read the next Shabbath in synagogue. The visitor could not make any sense of it – as Silano had inserted three punning lines of verse narrating a rather banal incident that had happened in Venosa a few days previously – but had to pretend nothing had happened; he was humiliated in front of the audience. The trick cost Silano plenty: he was excommunicated by the yeshivah of Jerusalem.

Regardless of possible interpretations of the facts, it is worth pointing out that the three lines inserted by Silano and cited in Hebrew by Achima'atz, were actually a tercet where the final rhyme is given by three non-Hebrew words, *carron*, *furnon*, *furcon* (cart, oven, pitchfork), in pig Latin based on the vernacular. This early example of a mix between the local language and Hebrew was by no means isolated

in the Jewish cultural tradition in Southern Italy, and is confirmed by the vernacular glosses in the 'Mishnah of Parma', which are actually Salentine (from Otranto?); the lexical and toponymical glosses in *Sefer Yosippon* and, last but by no means least, those in the works of the Apulian-Calabrian physician-astronomer Shabbetai Donnolo, all from the 10th century.

By the end of the century, the first millennium of Christianity would be completed, corresponding to the Hebrew year 4760 *li-bri'at ha-'olam*, 'since the creation of the world.' In those years, there was not only fear among Jews but also hope: in *Sefer Zerubbavel*, a brief apocalyptic text composed in an unknown location about three centuries earlier, but well-known also in Italy, the arrival of the Messiah 990 years after the destruction of the Temple had been predicted. In the Hebrew calendar, which dates the event in 68 ce and not in 70 ce, the decisive year would be 4818; for the Christian world, the awaited year was 1058.

The messiah, as is known, would not reveal himself, but at that time there were many other significant events for Italian Jews. For example, in those years, it is curious to note in the sources the emergence of the phenomenon of conversion to Judaism, which was almost a normal occurrence in the first centuries of Imperial Rome – as attested by various documents – but later there would be virtually no mention of it all, at least in the West. Yet again, Southern Italy is an exception to the rule, when the *History of the Normans* by Amatus of Montecassino almost grudgingly recounts the scandalous conversion of a certain Achilles, perhaps a cleric, who probably lived in the Salerno area towards the mid-11th century. Probably even more shocking was the conversion of Archbishop Andreas of Bari, in about

1066, and who died a proselyte in Egypt twelve years later, in 1078. In the meantime, in about 1070, twins Roger and Johannes were born to a noble Norman family from Oppido Lucano. Johannes, who converted to Judaism and was known as 'Ovadyah ha-ger, 'the proselyte', is notable for the exceptional testimony left to us in his autobiography, written in Hebrew many years later, in Egypt, where 'Ovadyah would die in the first half of the 12th century, not before having written, apart from his autobiography, the first extant examples of Hebrew liturgical music, using the neumes of the Longobard-Beneventan notation that he had brought as part of a legacy of his youth spent with the clerics in distant Oppido.

As is the case of these proselytes, in the 12th century the Jews turned their gaze back to the East, probably spurred by the intensification of openly anti-Jewish sentiments in various places in Europe, but not without the contribution, yet again, of a significant change in theological thought towards Jews, their role and their presence – not only long-lasting but increasingly awkward – on Christian soil, whose borders had felt for some time the looming pressure – if not the direct threat – of other 'infidels' from the south and north, with quite different intentions.

In Italy, this nostalgia for their origins seems to have been particularly rekindled in liturgical poetry: in this climate, in an unidentified location – the South according to some, Rome or Centre-South for others – the well-known *kinah* or Judaeo-Italian elegy for the 9th of Av, known as the *La iente de Zion* was composed. The recollection of the sad destiny of two young people, brother and sister, who were enslaved during the siege in 70 ce, provides the opportunity to recall the glories of ancient Jerusalem, the Hebrew people and the lost homeland, only to conclude – as usual in many liturgical lyrics – with the hope of a soon-to-be reconstruction of the Holy Temple, the return to the homeland and the coming together of all the people of Israel in Zion, the Promised Land.

Composed and sung in the vernacular, but written using Hebrew script, the elegy also celebrates the marriage of Hebrew and Italian cultures, in the written and linguistic union of Hebrew and the vernacular, of which exactly this *kinah* is one of the oldest examples, according to many distinguished philologists. Medieval Jewish Italy, and consequently the Pre-Modern Age can be dated from this point, when after little more than a thousand years of history, Jewish culture and the birth of the Italian language would meet on common ground, coming full circle and perhaps helping to shed some light on the oft-cited ‘specificity’ of the extraordinary historical and cultural adventure of Judaism in Italy.

Indeed, going back to the lines of thought in this introduction, it is a specificity that starts first of all from the fact that it can be seen as the cradle of European Judaism, or at least much of it, given that the Jews from Southern Italy moved to the North, though Rome, to boost the Jewish populations of Northern Italy and Rhineland Germany, often settling where there were ancient traces of communities lost since Roman times, otherwise creating completely new communities. Babylonian Talmudic culture came to Europe through Italy and it was perhaps the site of the first form of community organisation. Hebrew – long-neglected – would be rekindled in Italy to animate thought and everyday life. If we can speak of a sort of shining example, it was above all in the Jewish world of the diaspora. It is not by chance that an important 12th-century French rabbi, Ya‘aqov ben Me’ir, wrote: ‘for from Bari shall come forth the Torah and the word of the Lord from Otranto.’

Yet the origin of this specificity also lies in the relationship with the outside, the cultural symbiosis, which sees the Southern Italian Jews, together with Christians, taking part in the origins of Italian culture. Texts and writings that cross the cultures, vernacular words written in Hebrew characters. The Jews living in Southern Italy in the first millennium had strong ties with their Christian neighbours, notwithstanding crises and rifts. There is no assimilation, in terms of a virtually total loss of identity, but integration and exchange. The great rift, the true crisis in this coexistence, would come much later, from the North, in the echoes of the irreparable damage determined everywhere Jews lived after the massacres of the First Crusade in Germany, after the apocalyptic impulses of the Christian world.

Finally, Rome lies at the roots of the specificity of the Jewish Italian world: ancient Rome with its shining examples and tolerance of all peoples and cultures, apart from the well-known exceptions, and Christian Rome, which would adopt much of that model, and accept the presence of Jews, but Jews alone. No other minority would be able to remain inside Christian society: for heretics and other infidels, the choice was the stake or forced conversion. The relationship with the Jews was a unique relationship between a minority and a majority, far-removed from tolerance since the Jews were legally defined in a position of inferiority, but also far-removed from the extremes of expulsion or conversion, since they could remain in the Christian world and live next to non-Jews. However, the Roman model was also far from the reality in Southern Italy, where the life of the community was less marked by the ideology of Christian power, seemingly more routine. Yet, while Jews have remained in Rome up to the present day, the traces have been lost of Southern Italian Judaism, despite its importance, the many communities, its cultural explosion. Expulsions and conversions have left their mark and it has completely disappeared. We are now slowly recovering its memory. And we hope that this exhibition will also help to remember its existence.





## IN FERRARA TO EXPLORE THE TREE OF LIFE

**Simonetta Della Seta**  
**Director of the National Museum  
of Italian Judaism and the Shoah**

The first time I visited the spaces where we were to set up the first part of the MEIS exhibition, I was struck by the efforts the architects had made to maintain the structure of the former cells while still seeking to transform them into a living museum environment. A double challenge both for them and for us: to open a place that was once closed to men and knowledge. A very Jewish challenge. Counting them, I realized there were 32 cells. For Judaism, and for its more mystical philosophy, the *Kabbalah*, this is a special number since there are 32 arms of the Tree of Life, the 32 Paths of Wisdom derived from study of the Hebrew alphabet (22 letters that, according to tradition, played key roles in creation) plus the ten *Sephiroth*, the ten rings, emanations, that bring man closer to G-d. Thirty-two is also the numerical value of the Hebrew word *lev*, meaning 'heart'. The point is to take to heart the thirty-two paths of wisdom derived from the alphabet used to write the Torah and from all the teachings it makes available to humankind.

When I was chosen to direct MEIS, I spent months asking others – people I knew but also strangers – why they thought a national museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah should be built in Italy. I sometimes received simple answers: 'Jewish values are the basis of our values', 'If we want to understand what anti-Semitism is we need to understand what Judaism is'. Others were more sophisticated: 'We need to learn from the Jews how to live in uncertainty'; 'Jews exercised multi-identity before others, we should learn how'. In some cases ignorance prevailed: 'I don't know. They say that they (the Jews) are numerous and, if we know them, we recognize them'. Thus it was confirmed to me that this museum is necessary. Those who came before me sensed this and thus wanted this museum; they laid down the indispensable premise, without which I would not be here. I thank everyone: the politicians and intellectuals, scholars and administrators, in Ferrara and in Rome. Immense and sincere thanks go to those who support us and who are accompanying me on this journey today. In Hebrew the word *Binah*, understanding, intelligence, has the same root (the same letters: *bet* and *nun*) as the word *binyan* or construction.

In the *Mishnah*, the oral law (*Seder Nezikin, Pirkei Avot*, Chap. 2, 15-16) Rabbi Tarfon says, 'The day is short, the work is great... but neither are you free to desist from it'. This project has had many fathers and mothers before me and will have others after me. However, it has one fundamental condition without which it would never have been born: it is emerging in Ferrara.

Ferrara is one of the places in the world, besides the Land of Israel and Rome, where the Jewish presence is strongly felt. Jews have been living in Ferrara for over 1,000 years, a steady presence in a natural exchange with the rest of the population. In Ferrara, Judaism is in things. Certainly, some of the Dukes of Este contributed to this when they opened the city to the Jews while other Italian rulers – first and foremost the Popes – were locking them in ghettos. To Ferrara came Roman Jews and Sicilian

Jews, Tuscan Jews and Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal. Prominent figures of Judaism have passed through or lived in Ferrara, from Isaac ben Judah Abravanel, politician, philosopher and Jewish scholar born in Lisbon in 1437, to Donna Gracia Ha Nasi, a brave Jewess and merchant who lived in the 1500s, Isaac Lampronti who, in the 1700s wrote a Talmudic anthology that is still studied today, Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, who stopped to meet with the Jews of Ferrara in the winter of 1904. At two crucial moments in the history of the Jews of Italy, rabbis, leaders and scholars gathered in Ferrara to decide what to do: the first was in 1554, after the Church explicitly threw its support behind the Monti di Pietà, to replace the retail money lending carried out by the Jews, and after the violent attacks on the Talmud; the second was in 1862 to determine how to reorganize Italian Judaism after the unification of Italy.

In Ferrara there are still three synagogues, one currently operative and recently restored, as well as a large, charming Jewish cemetery, like the city enfolded within by the city walls. In Ferrara the streets of the former ghetto – which here lasted less than elsewhere – are still Jewish and in the dialect they use words derived from Hebrew (such as the ‘zucca barucca’, a combination of the Hebrew *baruch*, blessed, and the Italian *zucca*, squash). Alas, in Ferrara there is a plaque in Via Mazzini (also recounted by Giorgio Bassani) bearing the names of the Jews deported in 1943. Before the Nazi-fascist persecutions, around a thousand Jews lived here. MEIS had to come into the world in a place imbued with Jewish awareness.

In fact, the mission is to recount Judaism and, more specifically, the long, rich experience of Italian Jews. It is not by chance that the first segment of the exhibit inaugurating the museum is called *Jews, an Italian Story. The First Thousand Years*. Thus, MEIS begins to unveil a story that for most is completely unknown. It is a surprising story that shows that Italy was built with the Jews and also by the Jews. It is not an experience of others: the Jews are steeped in ancient Italianism; they are part and parcel of the fabric of our nation, an active part of Italy’s wealth and strength. They printed its books, fought in its wars, believed in its resurgence and fell for its liberation. The Jews came to our peninsula before the Longobards, before the Normans, before the Franks and before the Spaniards. Before any of them, Jews were already Italians working to make this land fertile and it is no coincidence that, in Hebrew, it is called *i tal ya*, ‘Isle of Divine Dew’. A map of Italy that the Union of Jewish Communities has donated to MEIS includes 700 Jewish sites throughout the peninsula, from Sicily to Friuli, from Puglia to Piedmont.

This is a revelation for those who become aware of the existence of the Jews only when remembering their Shoah, the most atrocious chapter in European history. Prior to that tragedy, we learn that, in Italy, there had been two millennia of coexistence, mutual acquaintance and even, amid highs and lows, building together. The museum emerging in Ferrara must also speak of discrimination, segregation, persecution and extermination, because, contrary to what many believe, such injustices were also visited upon the Jews of Italy. Deep wounds, often inflicted under the responsibility and by the hand of other Italians.

However, MEIS is not just a museum of memories. Rather it is a place to come together, a place of meeting, sharing, a place of life. The goal is to spread knowledge and speak to all: Italians and foreigners, experts and others, young people and family groups, professionals and tourists. A protocol of understanding has already been signed with the Ministry of Education, University and Research: MEIS will also be recognized for alternation of school/work experience and university research.

Finally, we open the door to dialogue: between religions, ethnic groups, social classes, generations and citizens. So that the contribution of one minority helps people get to know each other and build together worlds to share. The Ferrarese Jew Corrado Israel De Benedetti, born in 1927, now a member of a kibbutz in Israel, was imprisoned in Ferrara’s Prison in Piangipane by the Fascists on 14th November 1943. We invited him to visit the MEIS building while it was still a construction yard, to find his cell. ‘It was here’, he said, climbing up the scaffolding, ‘that I began thinking of building a more just society based on democratic and Jewish values’.



# THE SCIENTIFIC PROJECT FOR THE EXHIBIT *JEWS, AN ITALIAN STORY* *THE FIRST THOUSAND YEARS* *Daniele Jalla*

## **The Museum before the Museum**

In 2016, with the first of the completion of the works in the first of the building to enable MEIS to open its doors to the public nearing completion, the Board launched a new phase in the Foundation's activity: a phase designed to let people experience 'the museum before the Museum'. Thus, while awaiting appointment of the new Scientific Committee and the Director, they establish a Commission to 'conceive and develop the contents and scientific lines for the museum project, including the exhibits and a three-year plan for MEIS cultural and research activities and the Foundation's organization'.

At the end of its work, the Commission – composed of Rav Benedetto Carucci Viterbi, Anna Foa, Daniele Jalla, Giancarlo Lacerenza and Michele Sarfatti – presented a comprehensive proposal for activities and a three-year program of exhibits. The Board identified exhibit entitled *Jews, an Italian Story. The First Thousand Years* as the 'inaugural' exhibit, a foreshadows of the Museum to come. The work was commended to three curators: Anna Foa, Daniele Jalla, Giancarlo Lacerenza with the collaboration of Diana Joyce de Falco, Gabriella Franzone and Ilaria Valoti.

## **A Prefiguration Exhibit**

An exhibit that foreshadows the museum to come offers a rare opportunity to test out – on a limited scale in terms of chronology or subject matter – how the permanent exhibit could shape up, a sort of dress rehearsal before an audience to glean indications for the future layout of the museum.

For a museum under construction, this provides a true and proper test bench for its future existence and identity. And this holds from all points of view: not just what the public will see and experience, but also everything else that goes on behind the scenes. First of all, one aspect stands out here: among the proposals made by the Commission, the choice went to an exhibit that would embrace a time period – one that was neither too short, nor too long and which was intentionally the one that chronologically came first – and not to tackle a theme, as is normally the case for temporary exhibits. In addition, it would be open to the public for a year, an unusual time for an exhibit but one which would be able to fully verify its effectiveness.

For this reason, the curators have committed to conceiving and suggesting it – at both the scientific and exhibition levels – as though it were a real section of the future museum. And this despite the severe space constraints. Indeed, the structure and size of Building C of the former Piangipane prison, the only part of the entire structure to be preserved, did not lend itself to such experimentation and severely tested the designers: Studio GTRF Giovanni Tortelli e Roberto Frassoni of Brescia, selected by

a Commission composed of Caterina Bon Valsassina, Gianfranco Cavaglià, Andreina Contessa, Guido Guerzoni and Peppino Ortoleva.

### **A Historical Exhibit**

Like the museum for which it prefigures an ideal first section, 'Jews, an Italian Story. The First Thousand Years' is a historical exhibit. This means that its purpose is to use a medium other than a book – the most conventional means of historical communication – a documentary or a film, to impart the interpretation of a given period from the past through narration that makes use of all expographic devices available: putting objects and scenes, written texts, images, both fixed or moving, reconstructions, models, etc. on display.

Heritage interpretation is, as defined by Freeman Tilden, 'an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information'. 'Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile ... Information, as such, is not interpretation [. . .]. However, all interpretation includes information ... The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation [. . .] Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase[. . .]' (Tilden 1957).

For this reason, in conceiving and proposing this exhibit, the curators held to some fundamental choices that characterize it and which, in our opinion, set the overall approach apart from that of conventional museums. Two choices in particular require particular mention.

### **From Displaying Contextualized Objects to Presenting Contexts with the Help of Objects**

In a museum, as in an exhibit, objects are the main means of communication. The main means but, ever more frequently, not the only one. However, it is one thing to display objects with a whole slew of information referring to their context – their origins, meaning and messages – and quite another to present contexts (temporal, spatial, social, cultural, etc.) using also objects as evidence of it.

And this is what we have proposed to do: identify some large-scale scenarios and then break them down into narrative units and seek to communicate the historical interpretation through actual objects or reproductions, written texts, fixed or moving images that can represent it in eye and mind of beholder. To make the communicative intent clear, each of the sections (a total of five) and each narrative unit (around twenty, each corresponding to a physical space delimited by the layout) are introduced by a title and a text of room (or unit) providing the information and coordinates needed to understand its meaning and message. In other words, a set of images and captions serve as an introduction for viewing the objects.

In this way, we also feel that the objects do not run the risk of being perceived as 'collection pieces', instead recognizing their value as material witnesses, documents on which to reconstruct and interpret the past through a plurality of other sources.

### **An Interpretation - Explicit and Exposed**

In this regard, the decision was made to render the curators' interpretation explicit and exposed, putting it on display through two main devices: texts – the general scenarios and individual items – mainly providing concise, synthetic narrative of the facts. In addition, within the exhibit, voice and face are given to the five experts who expand on the written story with their own points of view on the events or themes illustrated.

Among the many ways to guide an audience down the path to discovery of a museum or exhibit, we deemed this the best way to inform the public of the criteria and choices behind the messages and

values to be communicated and then in the selection of the objects and images to provide visual documentation of that message.

In this way, the arrangement of the exhibit's design – always subjective in nature – is even more explicit and, with it, the responsibility for scientific interpretation becomes an open dialogue between curators and the public.

The same choice has been applied in editing the labels explaining the objects, seeking to illustrate not only what they are and where they come from, but also why they have been selected and what they mean within the exhibit.

### **The Underlying Logic for Exhibit and the Dialogue**

The general goal of the exhibit – to literally 'show' the origins and formative stages of the Jewish presence in Italy, from Roman times to the Middle Ages, highlighting its continuity and its original features as compared with other places in the Diaspora – has been broken down into other communicative goals, each covered in one of five large-scale 'sections'.

The exhibit opens with a representation of the Mediterranean and Ancient Near East, the birthplace of the Jewish people and its Diaspora: the Syro-Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamia, Canaan, the Land of Israel, Egypt. At the centre: Jerusalem. Thus, as a necessary introduction to the path followed by the actual exhibit, the first scenario presents the origins of Jewish civilization and the places in which it developed until its arrival of Rome. At the same time, it provides the first coordinates regarding the Jews and Judaism.

The antiquity of the Jewish presence in Rome – the only reality in the western Diaspora to have lasted uninterrupted from the 2nd century bce until today – is the subject of the second scenario. From Jerusalem, with the destruction of the Second Temple in the 70 ce, we move on to Imperial Rome and Late Antiquity – a time of transition from a pagan empire to a multi-religious, and finally Christian one – until the Jewish presence is accepted, albeit in a climate permeated by an ever-growing anti-Judaism under Pope Gregory the Great (590–604).

The third scenario – no longer following a chronological, but rather a geographic order – shows how, besides Rome, Judaism took hold and developed greatly in Southern Italy and the islands: here, although the Jewish presence is documented only from the 4th to the 5th centuries, several sources set its origin in the early imperial age both among other 'Eastern' entities present, as for example in eastern Sicily, and as an effect of 1st and 2nd century deportations from Judaea.

Once again shifting gears, the fourth scenario illustrates the widespread diffusion, variety and cultural richness of Jewish Italy during its apex between the 7th and 11th centuries when the 'people of the book' rediscovered Hebrew, using it in all possible forms of expression: from the copying of manuscripts to writing literary or scientific texts. Amid the altering domination of the Longobards, Byzantines and Muslims, this period saw an original, truly 'Italian' Jewish culture taking hold.

In the fifth and last scenario, the 'Itinerary' (Sefer massa'ot) of Benjamin Tudela, a 12th-century Spanish traveller and perhaps merchant, takes us on a journey stretching from the Mediterranean to the Middle East, offering a precious 'snapshot' of the Italian Jewish communities of the times.

Thus we learn of the Jewish presence in Central and Northern Italy and the northward migration of some families and texts from the south all the way to the Rhine Valley where the cultural foundations of Ashkenazi Judaism had already been laid at the time of the Byzantine persecutions

### **Sections and Units**

The discreet partitioning into sections then winds its way from room to room, each a narrative unit, its meaning clearly stated by the texts posted to introduce the visitor to the intended message. For each of

these, the designers use a different form of communication, the one best suited to the contents of the room, able to offer the visitors a variety of experiences, alternating moments of observation with moments of full immersion – using multimedia technologies, reconstructions or evoking an environment – so the visitor can perceive the overall atmosphere. Indeed, this is no simple task given the structure's spatial constraints.

To the material sources and images, quotes from contemporary Jews and others have been added – presented in a distinct written and visual form that differs from the texts and posters in the room – to re-evolve the cultural climate of the times or related to the theme of the room.

The exhibit has thus sought to go beyond the scope of a true and proper scientific project and, instead, transform itself into a sort of written screenplay from which the designer's spatial, scenographic interpretation could emerge, reflecting the curators' communicative intentions as closely as possible.

The wise design of the exhibit has set aside two spaces – one in the middle, the other at the end – something very rarely seen. These not only give the visitors a break but are also used to review and comment on the portion of the exhibition just seen.

### **Jewish Men and Women**

The first part of the title of the exhibition – 'Jews' – expresses that aspect of the scientific project that seeks to present the history of the Jewish presence in Italy as a collective sequence of women and men, people and communities, drawing inspiration from Marc Bloch's vision of history ('men in time').

The museographical translation of this vision has led us to select, describe and comment on the objects and the texts, displaying them as semiophores – according to the definition of Krzysztof Pomian – 'bearers of signs', the link between the visible and the invisible, between the visitor and things far away – in both time and space – things that acquire further meaning within the museum as medium.

Considered as a whole, it is for this reason that the overwhelming majority of the objects on display refer to communities and people, to Jewish men and women who lived in Italy between the 1st century bce (like Lucius Aiacius Dama from Aquileia) and the 12th century, like those encountered by Benjamin of Tudela

as he journeyed along the Peninsula on his trip to the East between 1159 and 1173.

In hall after hall we meet – in the epigraphs, manuscripts and documents on display – such prominent figures such as Flavius Josephus, Shabbetai Donnolo, 'Ovadyah 'the Proselyte'; rabbis and community leaders, such as Rabbi Abba Maris of Brusciano, Coelia Paterna, mater of the Community of Bresciani, Plotius Fortunatus, archisynagogue; and above all, we encounter many common people, Alexander, butcher of the market ('good soul, friend of all'), Roman, Claudia Aster, who was taken prisoner in Jerusalem and died near Naples at the age of 25, Felicita, a proselyte, the brothers Avraham and Netan'el, who died at the ages of six and three, sons of Leon and Leah of Lavello, or Faustina of Venosa, an only daughter who died at the age of fourteen (for who there was 'great enough grief for her parents and tears for the community') and so, too, many others, of whom we know only the name: the Romans Artemidora, Aster, Eulogia, and Iuda of Sardinia, Mindius Faustus of Ostia, Nopheios and Nyphe from Siracusa, Samues of Atella, Yehudah of Venosa, Zosimianos of Catania, Salutia of Rome...

And so many others of whom we do not even know their names; their anonymous existence emerging from what they produced, the things they possessed and traded: from lanterns to amphorae for kosher wine, gems, and so many other objects that have resurfaced, mute witnesses to the ancient Jewish presence in Italy: women and men, adults, the elderly and children; the visitors can meet, discover, get to know – or at least imagine – these people through the objects on display.

At the time of writing, the exhibit – discussed and reworked during several meetings between curators and the designers; the brainstorming, as normally happens, often leading to changes in the initial layout plan – is still a set of layouts and elevations, plans and drawings, texts and images of objects that can only give a hint as to how and what the exhibit will be like and whether the merging of different competencies will meet the goals laid out. Our reflections should follow those of designers, but there is nothing better than the final result and the public's opinion to tell us whether, above all thanks to them, we have succeeded in achieving our assigned goal.





## THROUGH THE EYES OF THE ITALIAN JEWS

### A multimedia show introducing MEIS

Two thousand and two hundred years of Italian history and culture in twenty-four minutes, seen and told through the eyes of the Jews. A great fresco depicting the life and fate of the oldest of Italian minorities. A scientifically rigorous project, "Through the Eyes of the Italian Jews" is a great multimedia show that opens to the public on December 14, along with the inaugural exhibition, and will be the permanent introduction to the Museum.

By Giovanni Carrada (author of the television program "Superquark", responsible for both subject and screenplay) and Simonetta Della Seta (Director of MEIS), the installation has been created through iconographic research by Manuela Fugenzi, directed by Raffaella Ottaviani and has a soundtrack by Paolo Modugno.

"Few in Italy really know the Jews and Judaism" says Carrada, "because theirs is a story not taught in the schools, except when talking about the Shoah. We therefore felt that a clever attraction that was both spectacular and engaging could, first of all, intrigue the visitors, introducing them to a community that has made such important yet little-known contributions to this country; a community whose fortunes – sometimes happy, but more often dramatic – provide an illuminating, surprising key to those more famous episodes we all know. The arrival of Christianity in the community of Rome and the difficult relations with the Catholic Church, the peaceful coexistence in the Arab, Norman and Swabian South and the origin of prejudices and persecutions, the cultural embrace of the Renaissance and the hardships of the ghetto years, the enthusiastic participation in the Risorgimento and the horrors of Nazi-fascist persecutions".

"The aim of this installation" remarks Della Seta, "is, from the very outset, to involve the public in the themes that will be explored in greater depth in the MEIS itself. Our first concern was to reach everyone, presenting the Museum's topics in a manner that is scientifically accurate and yet popular."

Pressed between two large screens, the immersive installation offers visitors a chance to travel through time, reconstructing the past with images of artwork, maps, documents, oversized prints and video inserts of great impact.

This gallop through history is driven by a narrative voice, punctuated by other voices inviting you to identify yourself with some Jewish figures in precise historical circumstances. Here, then, we walk in the uncomfortable shoes of a Jew deported to Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, or the more comfortable shoes of a Jewish scribe in twelfth century Palermo; we experience the difficult existence of a money lender between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, and we share the awe of a young man when the ghettos are opened in the nineteenth century and the tragic shock of a Jewish girl expelled from school in 1938 because of the racial laws.

Plunge in to understand. Because there is no better way to understand others than to walk in their shoes.

The installation has been realized with a contribution from the Emilia-Romagna Region and the Institute of Contemporary History of Ferrara, for the part regarding the Second World War.



General admission to the Museum and the exhibition “Jews, an Italian Story. The First Thousand Years” also provides admission to the installation “Through the Eyes of the Italian Jews” and the hours are the same. Hours: Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays - 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.; Thursdays - 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. Closed: Mondays, March 31 (First Day of Passover), September 10 (First Day of Rosh Hashanah) and September 19 (Kippur).

General admission: €10.00; discounted admission €8.00 (children between the ages of 6-18 years, university students, affiliated groups); groups of 8 to 15 persons €6.00 (one free admission for every 15 paying visitors); schools €5.00 (two free admissions for persons accompanying each class). Free admission: children under the age of 6, persons with 100% disability and the person accompanying them, card-carrying journalists and tour guides, ICOM members and uniformed military personnel. As a tribute to the city of Ferrara, on Thursday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, free admission for all.



## TECHNICAL DATASHEET OF THE MULTIMEDIA SHOW "THROUGH THE EYES OF THE ITALIAN JEWS"

**Exhibition site:** Museo Nazionale dell'Ebraismo Italiano e della Shoah - MEIS (National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah)  
Via Piangipane, 81 - Ferrara

**Opening times:** from 14<sup>th</sup> December 2017 until Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2018

**Promoter:** Museo Nazionale dell'Ebraismo Italiano e della Shoah - MEIS (National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah)

**Curators:** Giovanni Carrada, Simonetta Della Seta

**Iconographic research:** Manuela Fugenzi

**Directed by:** Raffaella Ottaviani

**Sound track:** Paolo Modugno

**Opening hours:** Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays - 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.;  
Thursdays - 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m.

**Closing:** Mondays, March 31 (First Day of Passover), September 10 (First Day of Rosh Hashanah) and September 19 (Kippur).

**Tickets:** general admission: €10.00; discounted admission €8.00 (children between the ages of 6-18 years, university students, affiliated groups); groups of 8 to 15 persons €6.00 (one free admission for every 15 paying visitors); schools €5.00 (two free admissions for persons accompanying each class). Free admission: children under the age of 6, persons with 100% disability and the person accompanying them, card-carrying journalists and tour guides, ICOM members and uniformed military personnel.

As a tribute to the city of Ferrara, on Thursday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, free admission for all.

**Information:** [www.meisweb.it](http://www.meisweb.it)

### Press Office:

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Photo: © Marco Caselli Nirmal



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEIS

With the establishment of the Museo Nazionale dell'Ebraismo Italiano e della Shoah - MEIS (National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah) with Italian Law No 91 of 17 April 2003, amended by Law 296 of 27 December 2006, the Italian government has undertaken the first systematic presentation of the heritage of Italian Judaism, offering the public an extraordinary opportunity for knowledge, information, history, identity and cultural tourism.

More specifically, according to the law establishing the Museum, its purpose is to: i) raise awareness of the history, philosophy and culture of Italian Judaism, with particular emphasis on testimonies of racial persecution and the Holocaust in Italy; ii) promote educational activities and organize events, national and international meetings, conferences, permanent and temporary exhibits, film screenings and performances on issues of peace and brotherhood among peoples and the meeting of different cultures and religions.

In sum, the purpose of this Museum is to illustrate the originality of Italian Jewish history within the broader European and Mediterranean context and, on the other hand, to promote, now and in the future, cultural activities that invest in this heritage of knowledge, activities, ideas and experiences witnessed by the more than two millennia of Jewish presence in Italy.

The Museum's management is entrusted to a Foundation established by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, the Municipality of Ferrara, CDEC (Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation of Milan) and the UCEI (Union of Italian Jewish Communities).

The site chosen as the MEIS headquarters is large complex, the former city prison facility located in the center of town, just a short distance from the former ghetto area, where the historical synagogues and other important signs of Ferrara's famous Jewish past can still be found.

The building, inaugurated in 1912, was taken out of service in 1992. Through qualified urban planning and architectural works, what was once a place of segregation and exclusion (and, subsequently, abrupt abandonment) has been recovered, transformed into a space for people and ideas.

The cost of construction (47 million euros) was fully covered by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism, thus ensuring hardware that is both technologically and functionally calibrated to the new function.

The architectural project began in 2011, under the management of the MiBACT, which held an international public tender won by the temporary association composed of Studio Arco (Bologna) and SCAPE S.p.A. (Rome).

In the years following establishment of Fondazione MEIS, after an initial phase of cultural development and planning, starting in 2016, with installation of the new Board of Directors chaired by Dario Disegni and appointment of the new Director, Simonetta Della Seta, the Museum has entered a

decidedly constructive phase, with rapid progress in the yard, enabled by complete financial coverage by MiBACT.

The Building in Via Piangipane 81 hosts the multimedia show “Through the Eyes of the Italian Jews”, by Giovanni Carrada and Simonetta Della Seta, a center for cataloging Jewish cultural assets and some educational suites. It has been open to the public since December 2011.

The second building restored (the former Ferrara prison), extending toward the city’s southern wall, opens to the public on December 14, 2017 with the exhibition “Jews, an Italian Story. The First Thousand Years”.

The structure of this building is representative of the type of prison facility first inaugurated in Rome with the San Michele correctional facility by Carlo Fontana in 1703: a long, narrow penitentiary, with corridors and a gallery overlooking the cells. This formula was then revised and rendered more complex in the nineteenth-century panopticons having a central well around which the arms converge such as San Vittore and Regina Coeli.

It is a three-story building totaling a net 1,269 square meters, to be divided into exhibition and administrative spaces; this reconversion has been received the first Gbc Historic Building certification in Italy, following the Green Building Council protocol for historic buildings renovated in the name of eco-sustainability.

Construction on the remaining modern buildings, inspired by the five volumes of the Torah, will begin in 2018 and be completed in 2020.

In its final configuration, besides the spaces mentioned above, the complex will also include: a public reception area, a MEIShop, a library, an archive and documentation and cataloging center, a restaurant and cafeteria, an auditorium, educational suites, thus giving life to a great museum and cultural complex.

**PRESS RELEASE**

**INTESA SANPAOLO SUPPORTS THE EXHIBITION *JEWS, AN ITALIAN STORY, THE FIRST THOUSAND YEARS*, THAT LAUNCHES THE NEW NATIONAL ITALIAN JUDAISM AND SHOAH MUSEUM**

*Ferrara, 13 December 2017* – Intesa Sanpaolo seizes the opportunity to support the *Jews, an Italian Story, the First Thousand Years* exhibition, which inaugurates the MEIS (National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah) activity, as established in 2003 by a unanimous vote in the Italian Parliament.

With its high profile, mission to education, and strong focus on protecting Italy's historical and cultural heritage, MEIS' exhibition, which will form the first core of the Museum, fits coherently within Intesa Sanpaolo's support of cultural activities combining sound promoting organizations with projects of excellent scientific quality.

The MEIS was presented in October at New York's Columbia University by Minister Dario Franceschini as an example of the new cultural preservation strategy in Italy. The exhibition is supported by the High Patronage of the President of the Italian Republic, as well as by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (MIBACT), the Regional Government of Emilia Romagna, the Municipality of Ferrara, and the Union of Italian Jewish Communities.

Therefore, the exhibition has full potential to become a great cultural and historical centre for Judaism, as well as a reference point for dissemination and community engagement on themes as inclusion, openness, dialogue. It aims to achieve this by 2020, when the museum itinerary is scheduled to be completed.

Following the merger between Sanpaolo IMI and Banca Intesa in 2007, the new Group Intesa Sanpaolo launched a systematic project supporting many cultural initiatives to underline the importance of the bond it has with its territory. The Group thus reinforced a special relationship over time with the country by committing to disseminate the passion for culture among the public, particularly the youngsters, and – in general – to produce positive economic and social results.

*Press information*

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