

The House of Rothschild in Italy and the Jewish Community of Naples

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The history of the Jewish Community in Naples is quite variegated, and one should consider the context in which it developed. Indeed, Jews lived in Naples and in all of Southern Italy continuously up to the beginning of the XVIth century. Jewish nuclei could be found both in large cities and in remote little centers. Traces of the synagogues, ritual baths, cemeteries and of the Jewish quarters named *giudecche* are still visible to this day in many cities and villages.

However, with the end of the Middle Ages the Jewish presence in Naples and in the whole of Southern Italy had a sharp interruption. The Jews of Southern Italy were either expelled or submitted to forced conversion. The complete absence of Jews in southern Italy would last for three centuries.

This situation started changing only in the 19th century, and only in the city of Naples. In the first years of that century there had been a short-lived French domination under Napoleon, but soon afterwards the Congress of Vienna restored to power the Borbone (Bourbon) king.

Ferdinando di Borbone was at that time in the heaviest financial difficulties, due to heavy debts contracted with the Austrian army. These debts were necessary to allow Ferdinando's permanence on the throne, threatened by revolutionary troops. The king would find the necessary financial support in the Rothschild family of Viennese bankers.

The operation was entrusted to Carl Rothschild, one of the five children of Mayer Amschel Rothschild, the progenitor in Frankfurt of the dynasty of famous bankers. In 1821 the young Carl Rothschild went to Naples on a first explorative mission, and at the Congress of Lubiana in the same year the Rothschilds could offer a financing project to the Austrian Emperor: Austria would lend money to the Borbone king, for him to pay the Austrian troops that would thus keep him on the throne.

In 1827 Carl Rothschild moved to Naples and opened the first branch of the Rothschild bank in Italy. This became soon the most important bank of the kingdom of Naples. In 1841, Carl purchased from the widow of Sir Harold Acton a most beautiful mansion of the neapolitan seashore, to serve as his neapolitan residence.

After their reinstatement, the Borbone rulers began loosening the rigorous prohibition that the Jews reside in the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily. And the rare Jews visiting Naples would find an oratory in Baron Carl Mayer Rothschild's large neapolitan

mansion. In this oratory the Baron himself, his collaborators and increasing numbers of visiting Jews would attend religious services.

However, after 1861 the Rothschild bank became less important, while southern Italy was being fully integrated in the newly formed national Italian state. At the same time, many Jews from other Italian cities moved here with their families, attracted by the possibilities of economic development in Naples as a city reunited to the rest of the Italian nation.

Therefore, the oratory inside the Rothschild mansion was becoming too small; and the Rothschilds were planning to sell their mansion anyway. Indeed, in 1867 the mansion was sold to Prince Diego Aragona Pignatelli Cortes. Today the mansion is public property and it is known as Villa Pignatelli, hosting the Civic Museum and many elegant halls.

Naples needed a Synagogue that could accommodate an increasing number of Jewish families who were settling in the city. A wide flat was available, that in the past had accommodated the Embassy of Prussia and a Lutheran church. Different charity committees were thus instituted to raise the funds necessary to the restoration of the flat, to pay rent for the first 5 years (360 francs per year), and to furnish the new Synagogue. Among the most diligent and generous benefactors were Mayer Carl and Adolphe Rothschild, the two sons of Carl Mayer. This testifies to how much this branch of the Rothschild Family operated for the rebirth of Judaism in Naples.

The generosity of the new members of the rising Community led to completion of all the sinagoga structures in a short time. There were also funds for hiring a Rabbi and for the purchase of an area to be destined to a cemetery, initially a small plot in 1865 and then a larger area in 1875.

One should consider that the Jews in the Naples Community have always been quite few in numbers, never more than a few hundreds individuals (today there are about 200). Many left Naples to make aliah to Israel, where today a little group of Neapolitan Jews has maintained a relationship that is still alive with their Community and with Naples.

I myself was raised and grew up in this tiny Community. And two episodes relate to the history of my own family:

1. My great-grandfather Philipp Fabian Roesel was Prussian. He had come to Naples on the footsteps of his brother, Simon Roesel. They came from the city of Rawitsch (today Rawicz in Poland) near Breslau (today's Wroclaw), and were related to a large and distinguished German family, the Feilchenfeld family. Philipp, who became later Filippo Roesel was a descendant of that family.

A genealogy tree of the Feilchenfeld family had been assembled and distributed to descendants worldwide by a German professor, Walter Fales, right after WWII. The tree was a work of loving memory to Walter's father, because Walter Fales had succeeded escaping from nazi Germany to the U.S., but his father was left behind in Germany and died there.

At home in Naples, I had been interested since early youth in a thick document entitled "THE DESCENDANTS OF WOLF FALES a Chronicle of the Feilchenfeld Family as of June 1947". Thus, when I later started computerizing my genealogical collection, this was one of the first family trees that I slowly and patiently incorporated in my growing database. Thanks to JewishGen and internet, I later found out that the Feilchenfeld family was part of a very large network of Ashkenazi families. Therefore, my Mediterranean collection was automatically linked to a vast network of continental European jewish families.

My computerized collection has since then branched out and grown to almost 250,000 individuals, all connected by at least one marital link. In the database one can find families representative from all countries of the Mediterranean, as well as typical Ashkenazic clusters.

Why had the Roesel brothers Philipp and Simon left their homeland to travel south to Naples? They had, because they were representatives of an Austrian factory that built fireproof cabinet safes, bearing the name of its founder Franz Wertheim. Thus, I strongly suspect that the brothers moved from Rawitsch to Naples because of the business opportunity that had presented itself with the opening of the Rothschild bank first, and of the new banks of united Italy later on.

Simon Roesel was among the founders of the Jewish Community of Naples. His brother Philipp/Filippo (my great-grandfather) arrived in Naples a few years later. He was living as a bachelor when he met my great-grandmother Emma Rosselli, a young lady from Florence who was visiting Naples with her family. They were married in 1876, and my grandmother Flora Roesel Soria was one of their many children.

2. When I met my wife, a Jewish young lady from Milano, my curiosity for family histories and genealogy had yet to explode. When I met her family, I learned that her mother's Coen family was from the Adriatic coastal city of Ancona. However, her mother Loletta Coen was born in Naples. The Coens were living there when she was a child, because Loletta's father Aldo Coen had a manufacturing activity in the city. Aldo was a full-fledged Neapolitan Jew.

The only memory of Loletta's neapolitan childhood was her elementary schoolteacher Cleofe Foà. Ms Foà has taught neapolitan Jewish children for 50 years from 1902 to 1952, with a forced interruption during the persecutions and World War II. I myself had her as a teacher in my first two years of elementary school.

The "school" consisted of a large room that is still in existence today, located on the same floor as the Synagogue. In it a few children of all five classes would quietly attend elementary school under Ms Foà's guidance. A marble plaque on the wall is a reminder of the generous gift by the Rothschild family to establish the school.

The Coen family would not stay in Naples for a long time. Aldo Coen died at 38. Loletta, her five siblings and their mother Bianca Beer Coen had to leave Naples and went back to Ancona, where Bianca had her Beer family that could assist her and her children. Only vague memories of Naples were left in the family.

Meanwhile in Naples my paternal grandmother Flora Roesel had married Gastone Soria, an engineer who was a good photographer. His father Carlo Soria had come to Naples from Tuscany to open the first office shop in the city, where typewriters would be sold and serviced and one could have a text typewritten, instead of written by hand as it was done until then. In one of the photographs that my grandfather Gastone took of himself with his father, one can read on a sign: "Office copies and translations in all languages". I have written about Gastone, Carlo and my (de)Soria ancestors in a back issue of Avotaynu many years ago (Vol. X n. 4, 23, 1994).

My grandfather Gastone Soria had been heavily involved in the affairs of the Jewish Community: as a building engineer, he took care of the maintenance of the buildings belonging to the Community and of the Cemetery. Unfortunately, I never met him because he died of a heart attack long before I was born.

Although my family and I now live in Milano, I often go to Naples for work and to visit old friends. And here comes surprise: Looking at the old archival records of the neapolitan Jewish Community, I discovered that both my grandfather and my wife's grandfather had been heavily involved in managing the affairs of that congregation.

They were both elected to the Board of Councilors of the Community in 1913, and served as Councilors continuously until their untimely death, respectively, in 1929 and 1930. Nobody in my family and in my wife 's family had an even remote recollection that our grandfathers had been involved together in neapolitan Community affairs.

Talk about a small world? Indeed, this demonstrates that one can dramatically increase the probability of encounters between apparently distant individuals, by adding a fourth dimension to the three dimensions of geographical location that by itself is limited to space only: the time dimension. And this is what genealogy is all about: travelling in time besides travelling in space.