

The Jewish Community's priceless library in Rome looted by the Nazis in 1943: the possible cooperation of the Library for Foreign Literature of Russian Federation on the traces of the disappeared heritage

.1. Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm attending this conference on behalf of the Italian Commission, that I'm honoured to chair, which was set up by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in 2002¹ which aims to trace back the events related to the bibliographic heritage of the Biblioteca della Comunità ebraica (Jewish Community's library in Rome), looted by the Nazis in October 1943.

Let me first thank Ms. Ekaterina Genieva and the Library for Foreign Literature of the Rudomino Foundation for the kind invitation to take part to this important meeting. I see that the topic of the conference, the cooperation between Russia and Europe for the preservation and usage of the cultural and the historical heritage, is a very important issue that we have at heart. In fact together with Ms. Genieva we are carefully studying the possibility to schedule, through the work of researchers of the Rudomino Foundation's library and under the direction of Ms. Genieva, a programme of activities to check if in the Russian territory there is the priceless library of the Jewish Community of Rome, whose traces have until now been lost. As I will say later, there is a plausible but not confirmed hypothesis (it is only a supposition) that once the second World War was over and after the defeat of Nazism, the confused events of the immediate post-war period could have brought it to Russia where it could be somewhere in a depository.

I wish to thank also the Italian ambassador to Moscow, Mr. Vittorio Surdo for his priceless support in finalizing the settlement for the research.

.2. As I already told in the Symposium held in Hannover² last year, the Jewish Community's library of Rome was in the same building as the community and it was (but I would like to say "is", because I'm convinced that it is safely kept somewhere) very priceless not just from a venal point of view because of the rarity of the material collected, but also from a cultural point of view. It was made up of very rare works, sometimes unique, as manuscripts, incunabula, "soncinati"

¹ The following specialists are members of the commission: Avv. Dario Tedeschi (presidente; Unione delle Comunità ebraiche italiane), dott. Anna Nardini (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri), dott. Bruna Colarossi (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri), Ministro Maurizio Lo Re (Ministero degli Affari Esteri), dott. Rosa Vinciguerra (Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali), dott. Marcella Conti (Ministero della Giustizia), dott. Michele Sarfatti (direttore del Centro di documentazione ebraica contemporanea), prof. Mario Toscano (Università La Sapienza di Roma), dott. Filomena Del Regno (Università La Sapienza di Roma), prof. Lutz Klinkhammer (Istituto storico germanico di Roma).

² Judischer Buchbesitz als Raugbut – Zweites Hannoversches Symposium, Frankfurt am Main, 2006

and works of the sixteenth century, the so called “cinquecentine” printed by Bomberg (among them a first version of Talmud in eight volumes²), Bragadin and Giustiniani. It also included works printed in the sixteenth century in Constantinople, Salonica, Cracow and in Lubin and others of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries coming from Venice and Livorno. Only a small part of the library was fortunately saved from the looting since it was kept in another place. These included biblical parchment manuscripts and some printed volumes among which there were some incunabula³.

Isaiah Sonne, an expert who examined that library in 1930's, claimed that it contained approximately one fourth of the Soncinos' production. I would like to briefly remind to you that the Soncinos were Jewish printers who worked in Italy and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries moved to Salonica and Constantinople. Their production consisted primarily of published sacred texts, commentaries and rabbinic works, sold at reasonable prices.

At first the library was placed in the five synagogues (“scole”) and in thirty confraternities representing in ancient times the Roman Jewish Community, later it has become one single body. The library was enriched through the centuries, especially from the fifteenth, also through donations traditionally made by Jewish families. For the most part the books were written in Hebrew and they didn't deal only with religious, philosophic and cabalistic topics. Among the numerous volumes, around seven thousand⁵, I'm going to mention few of them as an example: a treatise on medicine of Avicenna, translated from Latin in 1324⁴; a summary of medicine written by Abraham Caslari and Aleh Raanan in 1325⁵; other treatises on medicine, pharmacology and astronomy; a codex containing a treatise on Jewish ethics dating back to the second half of the fourteenth century, translated from Arabic⁶; a super-comment to the comment made by Averroè on the logical art (The organon) of Aristotle, codex of the second half of the fourteenth century⁷; a collection of ritual and legal advices of the first half of the sixteenth century¹⁰. In some of these works there were very useful references for scholars to expand their knowledge of what occurred in the two-thousand year-old

² A. TOAFF, *Stampe rare della Biblioteca della Comunità Israelitica di Roma scampate al saccheggio nazista*, in *La Bibliofilia*, Olschki, Firenze 1978, pagg. 139 segg..

³ ID., *op. cit.*.

⁵ see letter of Fabian Herskovits to Fausto Pitigliani, dated April 5, 1961 – documentation preserved in the secretary's office of the Community. Herskovits, director of the Educational and Cultural Department of Tel Aviv-Giaffa, during the 30s took care of running a catalogue of the Italian Rabbinic College library and in the summer 1938 he was required by David Prato to draw a catalogue for the Community as well, but because of the anti-Semitic legislation Herskovits was forced to leave Italy in June 1939.

⁴ SONNE I., *Scelta di manoscritti e stampe della biblioteca della Università israelitica*, Rome 1934, manuscript cod. 16 (8), pag. 12

⁵ *ibid.*, manuscript cod. 16 (2), pag. 10

⁶ *ibid.*, manuscript cod. 6, pag. 4

⁷ *ibid.*, manuscript cod. 7, pag. 4

¹⁰ *ibid.*, interesting examples, n.3, pag. 39

Jewish Community of Rome: i.e the act of sale of a codex drawn up in the fifteenth century. The issues tackled show the variety of cultural interests of that community.

According to expert Dr. Fabian Herskovits¹¹, who visited the library in 1939, there were mainly books unavailable elsewhere because there was only one copy of them. Another expert, Dr. Attilio Milano¹², wrote a letter to the then President of the Community stating: "Definitely, no other Italian Jewish library had so many priceless books and very few book collections outside Italy exceeded it".

.3. Unfortunately a detailed inventory of the entire community's looted book collection doesn't exist. Nobody knows exactly the reasons of this lack, but we suppose that inside the community, which at the end of the 19th century succeeded in overcoming the centuries-old material and moral straits of the Roman ghetto, the awareness of the necessity of organizing the library for a swift consultation for unusual readers too was not rooted. In fact nobody could imagine that those books could be looted and that a complete catalogue could facilitate the research.

An incomplete inventory, called "choice of manuscripts and printed matters of the Israelite University of Rome, examined and catalogued by Isaia Sonne", was drawn up only in 1933 and 1934 and contains only 120 titles out of the 7000 disappeared volumes we are searching. That inventory was not a simple work of classification, but a rational and annotated catalogue of books, which the compiler had examined and has been given, for its scientific importance, to the Office for book property of the Ministry by the Union of the Italian Jewish Communities which at that time had ordered it.

Previously, only in 1895 a list of books coming from Talmud Tora Confraternity (literally Tora's study) was drawn up and then incorporated into the Community library. But this list, which has only 3156 volumes, has been written in Jewish language with a cursive Rabbinic Italian writing and has been updated with 2 annexes in 1900 and 1902. It's not really a catalogue, because it contains only the titles, with their signature, of the concerned books while it lacks in essential data such as the specification of the authors' names, the years and the places of the press¹³.

It's very important the presence of the stamps' facsimiles which the Community hadn't catalogued and had used to distinguish all the library's books and to facilitate the research.

In the building, where there was the Library of the Jewish Community, but on another floor, there also was the Library of the Rabbinic College which was a different and distinct thing from the Community one.

¹¹ see letter, *cit.*

¹² see letter of Attilio Milano to Fausto Pitigliani dated March 21, 1961: in 1927-1928 Milan reorganized the archive of the Community and examined the library under the direction of Isaia Sonne. Documentation is preserved in the secretary's office of the Community.

¹³ A. TOAFF, *Ibid.*

.4. On 30th September and 11th October 1943 two men in uniform, apparently belonging to the famous SS. Costoro, appeared in the Community's offices and inspected the two libraries. One of them appeared to be a qualified bibliophile, in fact he was an expert in palaeography and Semitic philology. This event has been described in a well-know book by Giacomo Debenedetti "October 16th 1943 ", which has been translated in English by Estelle Gilson¹⁴. There is also a synthetic diary about these events, that is kept in the Jewish Community in Rome and which was daily written by the Community's secretary Ms. Rosina Sorani.

In this diary there is also the description of a second visit of the two men on October 11th 1943, few days before the looting and the deportation of the Jews of Rome toward the extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, on October 16th. Hear the words of Ms. Sorani's written report: " I saw two German officers, I was alone in the office and, after visiting again the libraries, one of them phoned the firm Otto and Rosoni to know when they could send a wagon to load the books. After knowing that the wagon would come in a few days, they told me that they saw exactly how many books there were in the library and their order and they told me that both libraries were under distress, and that in a few days they would have come to take the books and that everything should have remained as it was, otherwise I would have been killed".

Actually it took two days to move the books: a first loading took place on October 14th when the whole Community's library and part of the Italian Rabbinic College were taken away. The second loading was done the following December and about this one, the Commission has discovered in the Berlin *Bundesarchiv* an interesting document, called " Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg- SonderKommando Italien", that has been signed by a man named Maier, about the activities done in 1943 and which was sent to Berlin on January 21th 1944⁸⁵. This report says: "thanks to a special operation in Rome, what remained of the library of the Synagogue has been loaded on a wagon and sent to the Institute in charge of the research on the Jewish case of Frankfurt on the Main . In Rome there is no other Jewish-property material to obtain".

¹⁴ GIACOMO DEBENEDETTI, *October 16th 1943*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1993 (last edition); about the same argument. PUGLIESE S., *Bloodless torture: The books of the Roman Ghetto under the Nazi Occupation*, in *Libraries & Culture* 34/3 (1999).

⁸⁵ BUNDESARCHIV, *Records of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, Sonderkommando Italien*, O. U. den 21.1.1944, Original Stabsfuhrer Berlin, Dezember 1943.

Besides confirming the date of the second loading, this document also confirms¹⁶ that probably the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, shortened ERR, took care of the looting and not any other organisations among those belonging to the Nazi regime that were charged for looting goods, even books in the occupied Europe¹⁷. This piece of information obviously facilitates the research that can thus be oriented towards the places where the ERR had headquarters or where it kept the looted material. In addition, the fact that a special operation took care of the second loading confirms the importance given by the Nazi regime to this two libraries.

.5. In a previous report, presented by the Commission during the Symposium held in Hannover in May 2005, on the basis of information given to the Commission, it was claimed that the whole Library of the Italian Rabbinic College, unlike the Jewish Community Library, was recovered and returned. Those information were confirmed by Seymour J. Pomrenze during the Symposium on the return of looted collections, held in Amsterdam in April 1996. Colonel Pomrenze, director of the Offenbach Collecting Point (OPC) from February to May 1946, reported that he had returned the "historical library of the Rabbinic College in Florence (including incunabula)"¹⁸, certainly referring, in this way, to the Library of the Italian Rabbinic College, which was actually located for a certain period in Florence, but during the looting and still now is located in Rome.

Just on the occasion of the Conference held in Hannover in 2005, however, Italian participants received a welcome and appreciated information. At the end of the report which I presented, the Director of the Rosenthal Library of Amsterdam, Professor Hoogewoud gave to me a little Pentateuco, printed in Amsterdam in 1680 by Uri Fhoebus Halevy and containing the *ex libris* of the Italian rabbinic College with some annotations of a Finzi's family. The recovery of this book has an interesting and singular story, which was illustrated by prof. Hoogewoud¹⁹. Furthermore, he noticed that, despite what we supposed on the basis of information now considered probably inexact, the recovery suggests that the Library of the Rabbinic College was not entirely returned.

As a consequence, the Commission has widen its area of research, which remains unique for the peculiarity of the facts which lead to the looting of the two libraries. In fact it is reasonable to

¹⁶ In reality someone said, without the support of documents, that the looting had been carried out by the E.R.R., to see GRIMSTED, Patricia Kennedy: *New Clues in the records of archival and library plunder. The ERR and the RSHA VII AMT operations in Silesia*, in Hoogewoud, F.J., Kwaardgras, Evert P. (eds.): *The Return of Looted Collections (1946-1966)*, an Unfinished Chapter, Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1997, 11-18; GILSON E., *The fate of the Roman Jewish Libraries*, in De Benedetti G., *October, 16, 1943*, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, 93; R. KATZ, *Sabato nero*, Rizzoli, 1973, pag. 123 segg..

¹⁷ About the argument, J. STARR, *Jewish cultural property under nazi control*, in *Jewish social studies*, New York, 1950, vol. XII, 28 segg..

¹⁸ S.J. POMRENZE, *Offenbach reminiscences and the restitution to the Netherlands*, in *The return of looted collections (1946-1966): An unfinished chapter*, in *Proceedings of an International Symposium to Mark 50th Anniversary, etc.*, Amsterdam, 1997.

¹⁹ HOOGEWOUD, F. J., *Eine spate Ruckgabe*, in *Judischer Buchbesitz als Raugbut*, cit.

think that if it is possible to recover the Library of the Jewish Community, it should be also possible to recover the part Library of the Rabbinic College, which had not been returned, identifiable through the *ex libris*.

.6. Any other trace of the libraries does not exist, apart from the trace before mentioned and other two manuscripts preserved in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York²⁰, which, for several reasons, could be not among the looted manuscripts. On the basis of agreed information collected through several reliable sources, our Commission is quite convinced, but not sure, that the books have never been lost and, as a consequence of the fortunes of war, they could be in the hands of a single person, whose identity is unknown. In fact, such an important library, as the Jewish Community Library of Rome, could not have been lost.

Anyway, if the books had been fallen in private's hands, they would have been appeared through the inevitable inheritances.

It is also improbably that, apart from the exception before mentioned, the books could be preserved in public libraries. In fact, the Commission, after having digitise the abovementioned catalogues, has examined the catalogues of public libraries around the world, but for the moment, without any relevant result.

The route of the books is totally unknown from the moment they were moved from their original collocation. The Otto & Rosoni Company, required to transfer the books into railway wagons, only reported that those wagons belonged to German Railways Company and also indicated the wagons' registration numbers²¹, but not their destination.

Our Commission, in carrying out its work, which implies, not only the research of lost volumes, but also several surveys of archives with the aim of reconstructing the routes, has made enquiries into a lot of archives, including the Italian, German and Swiss Railway Company archives. Unfortunately there was no result, except for the recovery of the above-mentioned document, in which only the last shipment sent to Frankfurt am Main in December 1943 is mentioned. This information refers to the recovery in Offenbach, where the ERR moved their Frankfurt depository, of only the books belonging to the Italian Rabbinic College.

We may conclude that, for unknown reasons, the first shipment followed a different route and had a different destination unless these books were recovered in Offenbach and lost in private hands or in public libraries. But these two hypothesis should be excluded for now. This shipment could have arrived, for example, in Hungen, a place thirty-two miles from Frankfurt, which has become an important marshalling yard to Ratibor, in Poland, where the ERR had a depository to

²⁰ GILSON E., *op. cit.*

²¹ DRPI MUNCHEN 97970 C; DRPI MUNCHEN 97970 G.

store books too²². The whole depository could be moved from Ratibor, which was in the Soviet occupation area, to the Soviet Union and now it could be in the Russian Republic , but we don't know if and where²³.

Our Commission is carrying out an interesting and difficult research in all its possible ways after sixty years from the events and with a small number of documents. We carried out some inspections in the archives and libraries of the United States and Germany, and a complementary research will soon be done in the United States. Researches have been made in the Kiev State Archives, where ERR documents are preserved, without finding information about the lost library.

Moreover, the Italian Institute of Culture is carrying out enquiries in Israel to find out if, once Europe was free from Nazism, a part of Jewish looted books may have been sent there. This is an hypothesis which has not been confirmed yet and which seems quite difficult because in that country such important books could hardly have passed unnoticed.

In past meetings, the Library for Foreign Literature, whose director is Ms. Ekaterina Genieva, showed its willingness to examine, in the territory of the Russian Federation, archives and depositories, in which the documents and volumes we are looking for may have been preserved and not catalogued yet since a lot of decades, that is during the post-war period. The hypothesis for a research programme is under consideration and it implies a work of archival and bibliographic research by experts under the direction of Ms. Genieva. In the past Ms. Genieva and her Institute have already carried out a demanding research, that has led to the recovery of a part of the archives of the Jewish Theological Seminary in Wroclaw (Juedish-Teologishes Seminar in Breslau), recovered in Moscow in the Russian State Library and in the Russian State Military Archives, and of a part of the book collection of the Sarospatak Calvinist College Library, in Hungary. So we are really confident that, with the organizational skills and the scientific knowledge of the famous Institute that launched this conference and, why not, with a bit of luck, we will be able to achieve positive results. Our Commission will guarantee full cooperation, and at the same time we hope to reach the necessary agreements soon.

To conclude I really wish we would have soon a new future meeting about the successful recovery of the Jewish Community's priceless Library in Rome!

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²² P. KENNEDY GRIMSTED, *The Road to Minsk for Western "Trophy" Books: Twice Plundered but Not Yet "Home from the War"*, in *Libraries & Culture*, 39/4 (2004).

²³ About the events concernine the Ratibor depository, v. J. STARR, *op. cit.*, passim.