

## Recollections from the Synagogue in Florence, by Dr. Enzo Nitzani

Dr. Enzo Nitzani, a historian born in Florence, Italy, performs many of the songs featured on SINGING DEW: The Florence-Leghorn Jewish Musical Tradition, a CD produced by Beit Hatfutsot. He contributed this article to the website of Beit Hatfutsot.

It is February 2001. The Florence Synagogue Choir is singing Psalm 122 "I rejoiced at those who said to me: we shall go to the House of the Lord." This moving event has gathered together a choir of two dozen or so people, including grandparents of my generation, as well as adults and youth who wish to perpetuate the ancient prayers that have echoed here throughout the centuries.

Sunday morning. Many Jews from the small Jewish Community of Florence have come here to listen and to remember. I too am among them - sixty-two years after I celebrated my Bar Mitzva here and sang as a hazan for the evening prayer LEKhA DODI ("Come my Beloved") to one of the beautiful melodies which are part of the liturgical tradition of Florence and Leghorn.



The Bimah. Interior of the Great Synagogue of Florence, Italy, 1970's  
Beit Hatfutsot, the Visual Documentation Center

Only one week after celebrating my Bar Mitzvah, in April 1939, I sailed with my parents from the port of Brindisi on our way to Eretz Israel. We left Italy, which had betrayed us with its shameful racial laws. My father was fired from his work as a doctor and my brother and I were expelled from school. Even our hired help was ordered to leave the "house of the Jews."

Until then, we had been proud of our Italian homeland. My father's family - Genazzani - came from the town of Genazzano near Rome, where our ancestors specialized in marble masonry for churches. They were expelled by the Popes at the beginning of the 17th century and immigrated to Livorno - a port city where the Dukes of the Medici family granted Jews full equal rights on the basis of the Livornina Law, the only one of its kind in Europe at that time.

My mother's family - Kalonimus - and later Calò, immigrated at the turn of the 10th century from the town of Oria in the Pulia district to the city of Lucca, which also belonged to the Duchy of the Medici family. Both families moved to Florence in the 19th century. We, who were Italians for so many generations - were suddenly considered second-class citizens, an inferior "race."

More than sixty years have passed since and the choir is now singing the Passover Psalm "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good" - it brings tears to my eyes. What would I give so that my father could hear this. Throughout his life in Israel, he worked to perpetuate the memory of these melodies, recording them and teaching them to the young members of the community of Olei Italia in Ramat Gan.

This synagogue - one of the most beautiful in the world - was built in 1882. My grandfather used to describe the splendor of the celebration of the Jewish festivals: the distinguished congregants wore top hats; the rabbi put on a large silver breastplate (ephod) and the synagogue attendants (shamashim) wandered around in their frock coats.

The Sephardi Jews of Florence did not care for divisions between Ashkenazi and Sephardi congregations. They invited the finest Ashkenazi rabbis from Eastern Europe and were proud of the wisdom of their rabbis. The Chief Rabbi, the charismatic Rabbi Margulies, was greatly esteemed by Jews and Gentiles alike. My grandfather liked to recall that when Rabbi Margulies hosted the King of Italy in the synagogue, he blessed him in Hebrew.

Rabbi Peretz Chayot (a street is named after him in Tel Aviv) and Rabbi Moshe David Cassuto, who ran the Rabbinical School in Florence, served together with Rabbi Margulies. Cassuto's Italian name was Umberto, after the King of Italy. It was also my father's name and expressed the allegiance of Jewish families to the Kingdom.

All these are memories of Florence before my time. In the days of my childhood - the Nazis had already risen to power and the synagogue was full of refugees from Germany and later Austria and Czechoslovakia. My father was one of the few members of the community who spoke Hebrew and he helped the refugees settle into the community. I first heard Yiddish sung by Paolo Gorin, a singer who eventually became a famous baritone in Israel and then in Amsterdam, but at that time he struggled without success to get a part-time position as third cantor in the synagogue.

The special atmosphere of the Jewish festivals was preserved in the community even in my day. My grandfather used to order a horse and carriage to go the synagogue. He considered my father's car as too modern and utilitarian as means of transportation to be used for the Jewish festivals.

The melodious voice of Rabbi Belgrado - the chief cantor - would then echo through the synagogue, accompanied by a boy's choir. A "Sabbath goy" played on the organ. On Sunday, he played for the Catholics in the church of Santissima Annunziata and on Saturday he played for the Jews (to the remonstrance of the few Haredi Jews in the community).

On Jewish festivals - the most moving sight was the Birkat Cohanim ("Cohen's Blessing"). The Cohanim stood before the Holy Ark, their heads covered in prayer shawls. The women descended from the women's gallery on the second floor, the children came in from their games in the synagogue garden

and each head of family spread out the prayer shawl with his arms to cover the heads of his sons, his daughter-in-laws, his grandchildren and sometimes even his great grandchildren. Tens of prayer shawls would be spread throughout the synagogue. Many cried as they remembered those who had stood under the prayer shawl on previous festivals and who were now no longer with them.

On the Ninth of Av, 1938, I sat with my father and brother on low benches in a room adjacent to the synagogue. We had already heard of the imminent racial decrees. In the dark we sang AL HEYKhALI ChEVLI KENACHAsh NOShEKH ("For my Temple I ache like someone bitten by a serpent"). I was too young to understand the note of anguish in the conversation between my father and Prof. David Cassuto - he too was planning his immigration to Eretz Israel - but I remember the sadness of the meeting to this day.

Fate was particularly cruel to the Cassuto family. After immigrating to Israel and joining the ranks of the Hebrew University, his son Nathan - a doctor and rabbi of Florence - was killed in Auschwitz. His daughter in law Hannah - who was saved from the furnaces of Auschwitz - was killed by a sniper when a convoy to the Hebrew University campus on Mount Scopus was attacked by the Arabs in 1948.

When I returned to Florence after the War, the synagogue stood in ruins and desolation. Before the Nazis retreated, they exploded a bomb which caused the collapse of the side walls. Many members of the community were exterminated in the concentration camps and others came to Israel or emigrated to the United States. Those who remained worked with dedication to regenerate community life, to restore the synagogue and to renew the study of the Bible.

Families again gather under prayer shawls for the "Cohen's Blessing." Today, the rabbi of the community is brought from Israel and not from the destroyed communities of Eastern Europe. But when I return to the courtyard of the synagogue and look at the monument commemorating the Holocaust (they have added the names of members of the Community who perished in Israel's War of Independence), when I lift my eyes to the top floor apartment where my mother was born more than a hundred years ago, I feel a sorrow which I can barely define. Perhaps it is my sense of longing for what can no longer return. The world has changed, times have changed and we too are no longer the same.

The choir is singing "And they shall sow fields and plant vineyards." My comfort lies perhaps in the fact that this is exactly what my father and his friends from Florence did; they immigrated to Israel more than sixty years ago and each and everyone contributed to the building and the fortifying of Eretz Israel.