chapter six

The Jews of Italy in the *Triennio Giacobino*,
1796–1799

GEOFFREY SYMCOX

The French Invasions, 1796–1800

In this essay I will examine what happened to Italy’s Jewish communities during the *Triennio Giacobino*, the three years of Jacobin rule between 1796 and 1799. During this short, dramatic period Italy’s Jews would experience what has come to be called their ‘first emancipation.’ The victorious French armies and their Italian Jacobin allies proclaimed the revolutionary ideal of civil equality, irrespective of race or creed. In the new republics they established, they opened up the ghettos and promulgated laws that for the first time granted Jews the rights — and imposed the duties — of citizenship. But this emancipation did not last, for it depended on the military ascendancy of France and the political domination of the Jacobin regimes it had called into being. The defeat of the French armies in 1799 doomed the Italian Jacobin republics, which were too weak to stand on their own; a counter-attack by the armies of an anti-French coalition and a tidal wave of ‘throne and altar’ revolts swept them away and restored the old governments. The Jews, who were identified in the popular mind with the fallen Jacobins, were persecuted, the ghettos restored, the old discriminatory laws reinstated. Not for long, however: in June 1800 the French armies returned, this time to win a more lasting victory, install the Jacobins in power once more, and resume the interrupted process of Jewish emancipation.

To make sense of this chaotic period I must briefly recapitulate the key events. Early in April 1796 the French Revolutionary Army of Italy, commanded by the young Napoleon Bonaparte, advanced from the coast near Genoa into the north Italian plain, quickly defeating the Austrian and Piedmontese armies in its path. By the end of the month the Piedmontese government had concluded an armistice with France, leaving Bonaparte free to push the Austrian forces out of Lombardy. He entered Milan on 14 May; the Austrians fell back on their stronghold at Mantua, where Bonaparte besieged them. French detachments then fanned out across the small duchies of the Po valley and into the northern Papal States. Bonaparte’s whirlwind invasion shattered the old regime states of northern Italy. Italians who sympathized with the revolutionary cause, who for some time had been calling themselves ‘patriots’ or ‘Jacobins’ after the French model, pressed for the establishment of democratic, constitutional republics in their place. In April 1797, Bonaparte expelled the Austrian army from Italy and concluded a provisional armistice, which was confirmed in a final peace treaty at Campo Formio in October of that year. It left the French in control of northern Italy and guaranteed the new republics they had established there. The most important of these was the Cisalpine Republic in Lombardy, created with Bonaparte’s approval in 1796 and endowed with a French-style constitution a year later. A second, smaller republic was established in Liguria, with its capital at Genoa.

Having concluded his treaty with Austria, late in 1797 Bonaparte departed from Italy, already planning the conquest of Egypt that he would attempt — unsuccessfully — the following year. But his departure did not halt the revolutionary ferment spreading through the peninsula. In February 1798 a small group of local Jacobins established a republic at Rome, backed by French troops. They declared all citizens free and equal, opened the Roman ghetto, deposed Pope Pius VI, and later imprisoned him. Meanwhile the French gradually extended their control over the Papal States and Tuscany, occupying Florence early the next year, and declaring the local Jewish communities free and equal. But these events triggered a powerful backlash. From the early summer of 1798 a peasant insurrection spread across central Italy; marching to the cry of ‘Viva Maria,’ the rebels declared their hatred for the godless French, the godless Jacobins, and the Jews, whom they perceived to be their allies.

External events soon combined with this insurgency to make the situation of the Roman Jacobins and their French allies increasingly precarious. Bonaparte’s Egyptian campaign miscarried. The destruction of his fleet at Aboukir in August 1798, marooning him and his army in Egypt, led to the formation of a new coalition against revolutionary France, made up of Britain, Austria, Russia, and the Bourbon Kingdom of Naples. In November 1798 a Neapolitan army took Rome and overthrew the
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large, vibrant urban communities, frequently beset by divisions of class and culture. Their responses to the events of the Triennio Giacobino and to the promise of emancipation that it offered were therefore far from uniform. We must be careful always to think of them in the plural: Italy’s multifarious Jewish communities did not constitute a single monolithic bloc.

In aggregate the Jewish population of Italy in the 1790s was very small; around 31,000 persons out of a population of perhaps sixteen million for the whole peninsula.1 As was customary in the corporative structure of the Old Regime, the local communities of Jews were organized in self-governing entities — called the Università degli Ebrei or Nazione Ebra — whose rights, taxes, and duties were defined by a condotta or contract of privileges, renegotiated periodically with the governments of the states in which they lived. From the sixteenth century onward, in a gradual, piecemeal process, most of these communities had been confined to ghettos. By 1790 perhaps three-quarters of Italy’s Jews lived in ghettos, with some notable exceptions; the rest were scattered in nuclei too small for formal ghettoization.

The largest ghetto was in Rome, with over 5,000 inhabitants. Other substantial ghettos were at Venice, Mantua, and Turin, each with its specific social structure and administrative machinery. The big Jewish community of Livorno, by contrast, was not ghettoized. It had a population of over 4,300 in 1784, and was dominated by an oligarchy of wealthy Sephardic merchant dynasties, which kept a tight hold on the communal administration despite the efforts of Grand Duke Peter Leopold of Tuscany to open it up to other elements of the Jewish population.2 This was the most prosperous Jewish community in Italy; it enjoyed a privileged status, and unlike the other large Tuscan communities at Florence and Siena, its population was expanding. But the fastest-growing Jewish community in late-eighteenth century Italy was that of Habsburg Trieste — like Livorno, a free port dominated by a mercantile elite. The Jews there had benefited — as had their fellows in the Austrian-ruled Duchy of Mantua — from Joseph II’s Toleration Patents of 1781–82, and from the abolition of the ghetto three years later.3 Sustained by their relatively buoyant mercantile economies, Livorno and Trieste had become the twin poles of Jewish cultural life in the peninsula, with an array of schools and polyglot publishing houses.

The other communities were less prosperous, and less culturally open. The Roman ghetto is a case in point. It could not match the cultural florescence of Trieste or Livorno, for its economy was in decline, and the

Italy’s Divergent Jewish Communities

We must begin by noting that Italy’s Jewish communities were located only in certain regions of the north and centre of the peninsula; two centuries of Spanish rule had left the Duchy of Milan, southern Italy, Sicily and Sardinia Judenrein. Reflecting the diversity of the patchwork of Italy’s Old Regime states, in which they were embedded, Italy’s variegated Jewish communities differed widely in size, culture, juridical status, and economic prosperity. Some were tiny, somnolent rural enclaves; others were

Jacobin republic there. A month later the French army counterattacked, restored the republic, and in January 1799 went on to conquer Naples, where it installed yet another republic led by local Jacobins.

This triumph proved very short-lived. In February 1799, a peasant ‘Army of the Holy Faith’ (La Santa Fede) formed in Calabria. Led by a cardinal, the Sanfedisti advanced on Naples; in June they crushed the Jacobin republic and restored the Bourbon monarchy. The small French garrison that had occupied Naples withdrew northwards. Meanwhile in March an Austro-Russian army had invaded Lombardy, extinguished the Cisalpine Republic, and advanced into Piedmont. Spurred by the success of the Sanfedisti and the Austro-Russian advance, the ‘Viva Maria’ insurgency in central Italy sprang up again with renewed ferocity, while other ‘throne and altar’ insurrections spread across Lombardy, Piedmont (the ‘Massa Cristiana’), and Liguria (where the rebels also adopted the title of ‘Viva Maria’). The beleaguered French armies retreated to Genoa and into Switzerland. In the ensuing anarchy the peasant rebels wreaked atrocities against local Jacobins and a number of Jewish communities. The Triennio Giacobino was over, and the ‘first emancipation’ had ended in blood and chaos. Order was gradually reimposed by the Austrian armies. Through these three turbulent years the fate of Italy’s Jews had been inextricably and tragically intertwined with the fate of its Jacobins; together they had tasted ephemeral liberation, and together they were overwhelmed by counter-revolution.

But the French were only temporarily beaten. In the spring of 1800 Bonaparte returned to Italy and defeated the Austrians at Marengo. He restored the Jacobin regimes in northern Italy, under his own firm tute-lage, and the emancipation of Italy’s Jews recommenced. Let us now briefly examine the various Italian Jewish communities on the eve of the revolution in order to assess how they were affected by the cataclysmic events of the Triennio Giacobino.
communal administration was effectively bankrupt. A few of its elite families prospered in long-distance trade and government contracting, but most of the inhabitants eked out a meagre living as artisans and second-hand dealers. Rome in fact offers a good example of the political and economic fissures that ran through the larger Jewish communities in the later eighteenth century: the communities at Venice or at Turin were similarly divided between a narrow, affluent elite and a large, impoverished proletariat. The disparity between rich and poor generated resentments, exacerbated by the better-off Jews’ ability to obtain privileges that exempted them from many disabilities, and allowed them to reside outside the ghetto. But in the small rural communities of Tuscany and the Po valley, such social divisions were hardly evident: something closer to shared penury prevailed. The inward-looking, traditional culture of these isolated communities was very different from that of cosmopolitan centres like Venice or Livorno or Trieste, where some of the leading spirits were in touch with the new currents of Enlightenment thinking.

These social and cultural divisions were compounded by political divergences, because of the wide variations in juridical status between Italy’s heterogeneous Jewish communities from state to state, and even within the confines of a single state (for instance, in Tuscany). So when the revolution burst upon them their responses inevitably differed from one place to another. Nevertheless it is probably true, as some scholars have argued, that the general reaction was favourable from the start. As revolutionary agitation spread through the peninsula in the early 1790s, Jews were to be found here and there among the Italian Jacobins and patriots, joining Masonic lodges and political clubs, and after the French invasion they seem in the main to have supported the new Jacobin regimes. But their reaction was not one of simple, univocal approval. In many communities, for instance, the new freedom offered by the revolution evoked a guarded or lukewarm response. Emancipation offered benefits, true, but also risks and uncertainties. Its secular ideology posed a direct threat to the religion that underpinned the community and did so much to define its identity, especially for the Orthodox. The revolution offered the Jews emancipation and civil equality, but it also dissolved the familiar corporate structures and social hierarchies that had governed their lives for centuries, and precipitated them into an entirely new relationship with the outside world, a relationship for which they were totally unprepared. This ambivalence replicated the mixed feelings with which these communities had previously greeted the new ideas propagated by the Enlightenment. Thus in 1797 the Jews of Ferrara rejected a proposal to abolish their Università degli Ebrei, preferring to maintain the old social and political structure that had long governed their lives. The Jews of Rome were reluctant to join the revolutionary National Guard, in which they would have had to serve alongside non-Jews. The revolution also heightened the existing social and political tensions within the Jewish communities: the Jewish patricians at Livorno, for instance, showed little or no enthusiasm for the revolution, but those lower down the social scale joined the new National Guard when it was formed, while one or two bold spirits among them even dared to criticize the ‘despotism’ of the ruling oligarchy, and called for democratic governance.

Before the Revolution: Tension and Coexistence

The revolutionary events of 1796–99 came as a sudden, traumatic shock. But these events must also be understood as the continuation, compressed into a brutally short interval, of a process long under way: the struggle against the traditional order in Church and State, waged by intellectuals and reforming rulers inspired by the Enlightenment, which Franco Venturi has charted so magisterially. The central element in this conflict, the steady whittling away of ecclesiastical jurisdiction and fiscal privilege by secular rulers bent on extending their authority, had vital implications for Italy’s Jews, for the Catholic Church was a virulent source of anti-Semitism. The clergy, and the Mendicant Orders in particular, were always ready to whip up popular hostility against the Jews or encourage forced baptisms of Jewish children, a practice that Pope Benedict XIV (1740–58) explicitly favoured. This pope also blocked the efforts of the new Bourbon ruler of Naples, Charles III, to allow some Jews to settle in his kingdom in the 1740s. And although Clement XIV (1769–74) relaxed some of his predecessors’ measures against the Jews in the Papal State, his successor Pius VI (1775–99) restored them. Any weakening of the Church’s authority would therefore tend to benefit the Jews.

It is important to note, however, that the Catholic clergy were not uniformly hostile to the Jews. The Jansenist reform movement in particular, which gathered momentum in the later eighteenth century, thanks in part to the support of the reforming sovereigns in Lombardy and Tuscany, had begun to change the intellectual climate within the Church. Jansenist theologians were highly critical of papal power and of the Jesuit Order which strenuously upheld it. The Jansenists were also hostile to
the forms of popular piety that the Jesuits propagated, which they deemed extravagant and insincere, in contrast to the more austere, internal devotional life they themselves advocated. The Jansenists were determined to rid the Church of this type of corrupting influence, and they played an important part in forcing the pope to dissolve the Jesuit Order in 1773. Their program of reform sought to return Catholicism to the simplicity of the early Church. This led some of them into an investigation of Christianity’s Jewish roots, and thus to a more positive evaluation of Judaism.

But despite the secular rulers’ offensive against Church power in Piedmont, the Habsburg states, and some of the lesser principalities, and despite the philosemitism of a few Jansenist divines, the condition of Italy’s Jews was still far from enviable, although it was perhaps not as gloomy as earlier writers like Attilio Milano and Renzo De Felice have suggested. Although the status of the Jewish communities varied considerably from one state to another, everywhere the Jews were hedged about with different kinds of discriminatory legislation. Their economic opportunities were gravely limited, and they were subject to day-to-day vexations interspersed by occasional bouts of persecution. The bigoted Savoyard monarchy in Piedmont, and the governments of the Papal State and Venice were particularly restrictive. In a number of states the activities of Jewish loan banks – an important resource for many communities – were curtailed or forbidden outright, with serious effects on the economic life of those communities. Everywhere there was friction between Jewish artisans and the local guilds, eager to limit possible competition. At Rome, Turin, and elsewhere a trickle of conversions was abetted by the local Case dei Catecumeni (Houses of Converts), and by the blandishments of the clergy. The forced or surreptitious baptism of Jewish children provoked periodic protests from their communities. The process of ghettoization continued: in the course of the eighteenth century the total number of ghettos in Italy rose from twenty-nine to forty-one, the last being established at Correggio in 1779. But at the same time the absolutist rulers and republican oligarchies of Old Regime Italy were generally successful in suppressing any outbreaks of popular hostility against their Jewish subjects. Pogroms and anti-Semitic riots were largely a thing of the past – not so much because these rulers were moved by an enlightened spirit of toleration, but from their firm desire to suppress any challenge to their authority and to maintain public order against any forces that might threaten it.

Yet change was in the air. Only two years after the last ghetto of the Old Regime was established at Correggio, the Emperor Joseph II would sign the Toleration Edicts extending the rights of the Jews of Mantua, Trieste, and the lesser communities he ruled in Italy, and in 1783 he would abolish the ghetto at Trieste. His reforms, and those of his brother Peter Leopold, Grand Duke of Tuscany, mark the high point of the Enlightenment attack on clerical power. Both were strongly influenced by the Jansenist vision of a simpler, more personal piety, purged of baroque emotionalism, and of a clergy devoted to the service of the state rather than the pope. But these successes helped stimulate a revival of traditional anti-Semitism. In 1772 the Venetian government negotiated a new condotta that imposed harsher conditions on its Jewish subjects. In 1775 Pius VI issued a sweeping edict reimposing the restrictions on the Jews in the Papal State that his predecessor, Clement XIV, had relaxed. In the same year Francesco Rovira Bonet – director of the Casa dei Catecumeni at Rome – published a Life of the boy-saint Simon, supposedly the victim of ritual murder by Jews in 1475 at Trento. Twenty years later, during the revolutionary period, Bonet would go on to publish L’armatura dei forti, in which he collectively indicted Freemasons, philosophes, Jansenists, and Jews as enemies of the Church. His literary trajectory demonstrates how the Catholic reaction against the Enlightenment led seamlessly into the anti-Jacobin and anti-Semitic reaction of the 1790s.

The religious innovations decreed from above by reforming rulers and their clerical supporters also stirred popular opposition, paving the way for the ‘throne and altar’ uprisings of the revolutionary period. In Tuscany, the efforts of the Jansenist bishop Scipione de’ Ricci (explicitly supported by Grand Duke Peter Leopold) to limit processions, feast days, and the cult of the Sacred Heart in 1786 provoked riots, for the lower classes remained deeply attached to these hallowed devotional practices. In the same way, Joseph II’s Jansenist-inspired reforms in Lombardy aroused an undercurrent of opposition. The attack on traditional forms of piety by reforming clergy and enlightened rulers began to create a feeling that Christianity itself was threatened, and would help fuel the violent popular movements a decade later directed against all those who were seen as the foes of traditional religion: free-thinkers, Jansenists, Jacobins, and its most ancient enemies, the Jews.

**Revolution and Counter-Revolution**

Bonaparte’s invasion overthrew the old structures of Church and State, and set out to create a new order in their place, based on the ideals of the
Enlightenment and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. As his victorious troops advanced across northern Italy in 1796 they proclaimed the revolutionary creed of freedom, equality, and religious toleration. In June the Jews of Lombardy were freed, followed by those of Ferrara and Bologna in the northern Papal State, then those of Modena and Piacenza. (The Jewish communities in Piedmont would not be liberated until the French occupied the region in 1798.) In February 1797 it was the turn of the Jews of Mantua, then of Ancona, then of the Venetian Terraferma, and finally of Venice itself in mid-May. There the gates of the ghetto were ceremoniously destroyed and a liberty tree planted. Trieste was briefly occupied by the French, but without eliciting enthusiasm from its Jewish community, content with the privileges it enjoyed under Habsburg rule. The ‘first emancipation’ thus developed as a piecemeal process, contingent on the success of the French army, and only extending into the areas that the French conquered in the Po valley and the northern Papal State. And the new freedoms proclaimed by the French armies immediately provoked a backlash of popular hostility: the ‘godless’ Italian Jacobins and their ‘godless’ French allies were feared and distrusted, along with the ‘godless’ Jews they were liberating.

The behaviour of the French invaders lent credence to this belief. They desecrated churches, confiscated sacramental vessels, and sold off Church lands as biens nationaux. Often it was Jewish merchants who handled the sale of the church plate, since Christians would not touch it. The laws of the most important French-supported republic, the Cisalpine, aroused Catholic hostility by placing Christianity on an equal footing with all other creeds. The constitution promulgated for it by Bonaparte in July 1797, modelled on the French Directorial constitution of 1795, stipulated the equality of all faiths and freedom of worship for all. The foundation of the Jacobin republic at Rome in February 1798 further outraged Catholic feelings. Pope Pius VI was deposed, and then imprisoned. When General Berthier’s troops and the Roman Jacobins opened the ghetto, which they renamed the Piazza della Concordia, the basso popolo responded by assaulting it. In this highly charged atmosphere the French moved on to occupy much of Tuscany and then Piedmont, proclaiming the Jewish communities free and equal wherever they went. Everywhere it seemed that the Jews were among the chief beneficiaries of the French conquerors and the Jacobin regimes they installed.

A reaction now set in. The arrest of Pius VI touched off a wave of “throne and altar” rebellions across central Italy. Peasant bands, led by priests and nobles, and encouraged by a spate of miracles associated with the Madonna, rose up to do battle against the Jacobins and the well-to-do with the rallying-cry of ‘Viva Maria’. The desperate economic situation, caused by a series of bad harvests further exacerbated by the disruption brought on by the war, did much to stoke these insurrections. In Tuscany, the epicentre of the revolts, grain prices rose by 271 per cent between 1791 and 1801. The peasants attributed the high prices to the economic reforms enacted by Grand Duke Peter Leopold over the preceding decades, which had abolished price controls and traditional provisioning mechanisms in order to create a free market in grain, according to physiocratic principles. The insurgency thus formed part of a generalized reaction against every aspect of Enlightenment reform: the rural masses were rejecting the brave new world of rational piety and laissez-faire economics imagined for them by Peter Leopold and his Jansenist and physiocrat advisers. This wave of revolts would climax the following year in a massive jacquerie that destroyed the fragile Jacobin republics and led to atrocities against a number of Jewish communities.

It is important to note, however, that although the Jews of central Italy became a target of the ‘Viva Maria’ insurgency, they were neither its sole nor its primary objective. The revolt was fundamentally a jacquerie directed against the better-off, triggered by famine and by the breakdown of social and political authority that followed the French invasions. Thus in Liguria, where there were few, if any, Jews, the ‘Viva Maria’ rebels attacked the local landowners and their representatives. Similarly, the targets of the peasant Sanfedisti in southern Italy – where there were no Jews – were the local bourgeoisie and the Jacobins, who came from that social class. To the rebels everywhere, in the Kingdom of Naples or Tuscany or Piedmont, the predominantly middle-class Jacobins were identified with the rural bourgeoisie that oppressed and exploited them. And insofar as the Jews were stereotyped as wealthy (most of course were not), and traditionally seen as usurers battering on the Christian population, they too became the objects of this economic resentment. In this sense it could be said that, in those places where Jewish communities existed, the insurrections were also driven by a recrudescence of deeply rooted anti-Jewish feelings. After being held in check for a century and more by the governments of the Old Regime states, this traditional popular hostility now erupted with renewed vigour. The explicitly Christian appellations and battle-cries that the rebels adopted indicate the extent to which they were motivated by traditional religious animosities, among which anti-Semitism of course bulked large.

Events reached a climax in the early months of 1799. In the autumn of
1798, as counter-revolutionary insurrections spread through central Italy, a second coalition formed against revolutionary France, sparked by the news of Bonaparte’s defeat in Egypt. It consisted of Britain, Austria, Russia, and the Bourbon Kingdom of Naples. In November 1798 a Neapolitan army captured Rome, overthrew the Jacobin republic, re-imposed the old restrictions on the Jews, and walled the ghetto up again.30 The French quickly counterattacked, expelled the Neapolitan army from Rome, restored the republic, and reopened the ghetto. Having secured Rome, in January 1799 the French marched south to conquer Naples and expel its Bourbon rulers. With French military backing, the Neapolitan Jacobins established yet another republic, the Parthenopean, destined to have a short and tragic life. Within a month Cardinal Ruffo’s counter-revolutionary peasant army of the Sanfedisti had formed in Calabria and was on the march northwards, attacking all those it deemed to be Jacobins along its route. The French soon withdrew from Naples, and in June the Sanfedisti took the city and extinguished the Parthenopean Republic. The collapse of French power in the south encouraged the ‘Viva Maria’ insurgency in central and northern Italy; in both regions the clergy and nobles mobilized the peasantry in defence of the traditional order. Meanwhile an Austro-Russian army was advancing into Lombardy. It defeated the French at Cassano d’Adda on 27 April, overthrew the Cisalpine Republic, and went on to occupy Piedmont in May. This threat to their rear forced the French troops in central Italy to retreat northwards, harassed by the ‘Viva Maria’ bands, leaving the local Jacobins and Jews unprotected. The insurgency in central Italy now entered its most violent phase.

On 6 May a supposed apparition of the Madonna touched off a revolt at Arezzo.31 The rebels imprisoned the local Jacobins and a number of Jews along with them.32 Here, as elsewhere, the local notables and clergy took the lead in stirring up the revolt.33 From Arezzo the ‘Viva Maria’ bands marched out to capture the nearby towns, some of which harboured small Jewish communities, as at Monte San Savino and Montepulciano. Encouraged by the insurgents’ success, revolts sprang up again in the Papal State: they followed the now-familiar pattern of attacks on local Jacobins and on Jewish communities, where these were to be found. On June 18 the rebels massacred thirteen Jews at Senigallia. But their attacks were not always successful: at Pitigliano the citizens fought off the rebels and protected their Jewish neighbours.34 Likewise in Tuscany the violence was partially contained. At Livorno the authorities bought off the rebels with a hefty contribution levied from the Jews.35 At

Florence, Archbishop Antonio Martini intervened in person to halt the rebels’ assault on the ghetto.36 But at Siena the Jews were subjected to the full violence of the insurgency. The ‘Viva Maria’ rebels from Arezzo entered the city on 28 June. Some townspeople joined them in a rampage of plundering and in attacking the Jews, whom they branded as supporters of the French and the Jacobins, although in fact the Sienese Jews seem to have shown scant enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause.37 Jewish houses were pillaged, the synagogue was desecrated, and a dozen Jews, male and female, were wounded or killed, along with a French soldier. The victims were cast, dead or still alive, onto pyres in the Campo and burned.38

The massacres at Senigallia and Siena marked the hideous climax of the ‘Viva Maria’ insurrections. In July the first Austrian troops arrived in Tuscany and the Papal State, and began slowly to re-establish order.39 And with the Austrian army came the restoration of the Old Regime. The ‘first emancipation’ was over. Or perhaps not. In June 1800 Bonaparte defeated the Austrians at Marengo and reasserted French hegemony over the north and centre of the peninsula. The emancipation of Italy’s Jews resumed, this time less fleetingly, until the collapse of the Napoleon regime in 1814.

**Experiencing the ‘First Emancipation’**

In a leap of historical imagination, I should like to pose what I consider a crucial question: how did Italy’s Jews react to these tumultuous events? What did it feel like to experience this chaotic, piecemeal emancipation? One reaction must have assuredly been disorientation and shock. Consider, for instance, the Jews of Rome, buffeted hither and thither by revolution and counter-revolution, invasion and counter-invasion. In February 1798, after the Jacobin Republic was established, the French dismantled the Roman ghetto, planted the customary liberty tree, gave the Jews tricolour cockades to wear in exchange for their yellow badges, and told them to enrol in the National Guard. Seven months later, in October, the Neapolitan army took Rome and closed them back into the ghetto. But after an interval of just over a month the French returned, declared the Jews free and equal, and opened the ghetto once more. Six months later; however, in the spring of 1799, the French garrison was forced out of Rome by the armies of the coalition, and the Jews were consigned to the ghetto for a third time.

Then from an existential standpoint, what did it actually mean for
Italy's Jews to be told that they were 'free,' that they were 'citizens,' with equal rights? I am reminded, mutatis mutandis, of the reaction of Booker T. Washington's family when told by a Union officer at the end of the American Civil War that they were no longer slaves: a tumultuous mixture of elation, bewilderment, and foreboding. We should perhaps not push this parallel too far: the disabilities imposed on Italy's Jews, dire though they may have been, were in no way equivalent to the total bondage of slavery. But I would hypothesize that the Jews' reaction may well have been a similar mixture of joy and foreboding. The promise of freedom and equality opened up for them by the Triennio Giacobino was an obvious blessing, but it entailed heavy new responsibilities and came at a considerable price: the dissolution of the familiar structures and routines that governed everyday life, the potential subversion of religious faith, the pressure to participate in the strange new world that the revolution was creating. Without any preparation, the erstwhile inhabitants of the ghetto now had to face a bewildering new world, rich with opportunities but also bristling with dangers. How were they to preserve their culture now that they were ostensibly equal members of civil society and free to move in the wider world without restrictions? Would emancipation entail assimilation and acculturation? These were fundamental questions that the events of the Triennio Giacobino forced Italy's Jews to confront. Their history offered few answers to these questions: those answers would have to be invented.

Notes


4 Attilio Milano, *Storia degli ebrei in Italia* (Turin 1983), 288 ff. By 1755 the community's debt stood at 280,000 scudi, while the total value of Jewish property was 75,000 scudi, down from 189,000 scudi in the 1680s. Cf. Mario Rosa, 'La Santa Sede e gli ebrei nel Settecento,' Vivanti, *Storia d'Italia*, vol. 2, 1067–87.


7 As argued by Renzo De Felice, 'Per una storia del problema ebraico in Italia alla fine del XVIII secolo e all'inizio del XIX. La prima emancipazione,' *Movimento Operaio* n.s. vol. 5 (1955); Franco Della Peruta, 'Gli ebrei nel Risorgimento fra interdizioni ed emancipazione,' Vivanti, *Storia d'Italia*, vol. 2, 1133–67; reference here is to 1135–7.


10 Caffiero, 'Tra Chiesa e Stato,' 1129; Della Peruta, 'Gli ebrei nel Risorgimento,' 1137.


12 See esp. his *Settecento riformatore. Da Muratori a Beccaria* (Turin 1969), and *La Chiesa e la repubblica dentro i loro limiti, 1758–1774* (Turin 1976).

13 On the failed attempt to introduce Jews to Naples, see Caffiero, 'Tra Chiesa e Stato,' 1099–1100; Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, 75–7. Rosa, 'La Santa Sede,' 1074–5 notes that Benedict XIV in 1747 authorized the 'offering' of Jewish children for baptism under certain circumstances.

14 Rosa, 'La Santa Sede,' 1086; Caffiero, 'Tra Chiesa e Stato,' 1092. She notes that Milano entitled the chapter of his work dealing with this period, 'L'età dell'oppressione.'

15 E.g., at Rome in 1682, or in the Venetian Terraferma after 1714.

16 Luciano Allegra, *Identità in bilico. Il ghetto ebraico di Torino nel Settecento* (Turin 1996), 64, table 3, lists only 320 Jewish conversions at Turin between 1720 and 1902. The *Case dei Catecumeni* were institutions founded during the Counter-Reformation expressly to convert heretics and Jews.

17 Ibid., ch. 1.

18 Caffiero, 'Tra Chiesa e Stato,' 1092.


20 This 'Editto sopra gli ebrei,' inter alia, restricted the study of the Talmud, placed controls on the sale of books, and ordered the Jews to wear yellow badges.

21 Rosa, 'La Santa Sede,' 1084. The *Life* was published in 1775. In 1799 Rovira
Bonet had published three devotional tracts: *Breve, e divota notizia della vita, martirio, virtù e miracoli di alcuni santi dell'Antiteatro Flavio, volgarmente detto il Colosseo; Metodo pratico per venerare Maria vergine addolorata; and Metodo pratico della via crucis*. These works were reissued in 1796.

22 The Habsburg Emperor Francis II did not restore the ghetto when Venice was ceded to Austria in October 1797.


28 This is the basic argument of Gabriele Turi, *Viva Maria. La reazione alle riforme leopoldine (1790–1799)* (Florence 1969).


31 Turi, *Viva Maria*. 248 ff. gives a detailed account of the revolts in Tuscany.


33 Claudio Tosi, ‘Il marchese Albergotti colonello delle bande aretine del 1799,’ *Studi Storici* 39:2 (1998), 495–531. Salvadori, ‘Gli ebrei nell’Aretino,’ 73, notes the role in these events of Mgr Passeri, titular bishop of Larissa, then residing at Siena with the archbishop, and of Giuseppe Romanelli, a priest from Arezzo.

34 Salvadori, *Breve storia*, 95.

35 Ibid., 91.

36 Ibid., 94. Antonio Martini (1720–1809) was a renowned biblical scholar who produced the first Italian translation of the Vulgate between 1769 and 1781.


40 Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery, An Autobiography* (New York 1901), 15: ‘For some minutes there was great rejoicing, and thanksgiving, and wild scenes of ecstasy ... The wild rejoicing on the part of the coloured people lasted but for a brief period, for I noticed that by the time they returned to their cabins there was a change in their feelings. The great responsibility of being free, of having charge of themselves, of having to think and plan for themselves and their children, seemed to take possession of them.’