

A Sunday Afternoon Back to the Jews Ghetto of Rome

Susannah Gold (May 27, 2011)



Thanks to Centro Primo Levi, on Sunday, May 22, the choir from the Tempio Maggiore - the Synagogue of Rome - came to New York City to perform a number of special works for the first time

The sold out event was quite the sought after affair and as I made my way into the room, I heard a number of ladies lamenting their not being able to get inside. Once in the beautiful auditorium, everyone in the audience was transported back to the Jewish Ghetto in Rome through a lovely series of photographs projected onto a large screen.

The Ghetto lasted for 350 years. Jews throughout Italy were freed upon unification in 1861 but the Roman community - the oldest diaspora - was only finally freed 10 years after Italian Unification in 1871.

The choral group was composed of nine men led by Claudio Di Segni and featuring the Hazan or Cantor of Rome, Alberto Funaro and the organist Federico Del Sordo. The concert was very touching



from the first notes until the last. One particularly touching number was the “Hebrew Chorus” from the well-known Giuseppe Verdi opera, *Il Nabucco*.

“Va Pensiero” is an incredibly meaningful work for Italians and for Jews in particular. It tells the story of the exile of the Jews after the destruction of the First Temple. It is also the somewhat unofficial anthem of the Italian people and is well loved and sung by everyone. The group also sang the Israeli national anthem that the crowd responded to immediately by rising in silence.

The group was brought to these shores thanks to the Museum of Jewish Heritage, the Centro [Primo Levi](#) [2], the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [3], the Divinamente New York Festival, the Jewish Community of Rome, and RAI Italian Broadcasting Company in collaboration with the American Society of Jewish Music. It was also made possible through the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the 150th Anniversary of the unification of Italy.

The event created by the Italian actress Pamela Villoresi, was part of a four-day program called the Festival of Spirituality. The festival is also part of the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Italian Unification.

“The Italy which we are proud to celebrate is not only the Italy that has been, but also the Italy that is (and will continue to be) capable of developing: an ongoing process of construction, a project for the acceptance of diversity, of solidarity; a project brought to life by the freedom of courageous and sincere spiritual enquiry, a place that welcomes all those who believe in human dignity and happiness, and express values which provide comfort, cohesion and solidarity in the midst of diverse opinions and beliefs,” the organizers said.

Choirs have been part of Roman Jewish tradition for centuries said Berkeley Muscologist Francesco Spagnolo. He also spoke about how competing influences came through the synagogue walls and how in many works you could hear strains of opera, chamber music, Arabic music, songs from the Iberian nations of Spain and Portugal and other places. The Jewish diaspora came to Italy in many waves and each consecutive group brought their own Sephardic or Ashkenazi liturgical tradition too.

Jewish liturgical music was said to have been enjoyed by Jews and non-Jews alike and to be one of the ways that the Roman Jews sought to reach out to other groups. All of this ended with the Holocaust during World War II. Choirs were not part of the Jewish tradition since the War but there has been a recent resurgence in them and an interest in rediscovering their repertoires.

The event also took place in a very beautiful and appropriate location, the Museum of Jewish Heritage. The museum was “created as a living memorial to those who perished during the Holocaust, the Museum honors those who died by celebrating their lives—cherishing the traditions that they embraced, examining their achievements and faith, and affirming the vibrant worldwide Jewish community that is their legacy today.”

The resurgence of joy through singing seemed to fit very nicely into these lofty goals. Hearing the choir and reflecting on the goals of the museum was a nice respite from hurried New York life for all who had the privilege of attending the event.

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