

Sources for the History of the Holocaust Extant in the State Archives of Venice. Inventory Projects and Digitization

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Abstract. In this paper are illustrated the arrangement and the digitization processes at the State Archives of Venice. The aim is to valorize the heritage here preserved on Jews persecution happened between 1938 and 1945.

In questo paper vengono illustrate le fasi di inventariazione e digitalizzazione messe in atto dall'Archivio di Stato di Venezia per la valorizzazione del suo patrimonio documentale sulla persecuzione degli ebrei fra il 1938 e il 1945.

Introduction

For some years now, the State Archives of Venice (Archivio di Stato di Venezia) has attempted to highlight the importance of modern and contemporary as well as medieval and Renaissance documentation, with the purpose of promoting Venice's vast patrimony. Such a decision may be unexpected. In the collective imagination, in fact, but also in the more profound reflection of scholars, the Archives at the Frari seem "consecrated", so to speak, to the historical memory of the Serenissima. Therefore, they are considered most useful for medieval and early modern studies. While this is certainly true, the institution also conserves many important sources regarding the history of Venice in the twentieth century: among them, records pertaining to the twenty years of the Fascist regime, a time of racial and, more specifically, anti-Jewish persecution. Such persecution took place in Italy between 1938 and 1945 and especially during WWII, after the Italian armistice of September 8, 1943, the surrender of the Kingdom of Italy to the Allies, and the organization of the neofascist Social Italian Republic supported by Germany. Documentation from the centuries preceding the end of the Republic of Venice in 1797 cover the broad spectrum of policy choices, diplomatic relations, and social life of what was one of the largest Italian and, indeed, European political and cultural entities. It is

consequently evident that they address matters well beyond the limits of a local history, extending to trans-regional concerns. The framework is completely different for the period after 1797. Venice was no longer a capital, but only a provincial city like the others in Italy. For the period following 1866 (the year of the union of the Veneto with the Kingdom of Italy), only the archives of the offices of the so-called “peripheral” administration of the Italian State operating in Venice are conserved in the State Archives of Venice. For those interested in twentieth-century history, the archival material is undoubtedly more limited in scope. This, however, does not represent a significant impediment, if scholars consider the holdings of other libraries, archives and institutions, in the country and elsewhere, which when taken together permit more comprehensive investigations. The historical context that is the background to the present contribution is extremely complex and of fundamental importance to the development of the Italian state in the twentieth century. It was in fact one of the darkest periods ever known in Italy: an era of systematic anti-Jewish policies. It is unnecessary to emphasize how such a subject might lend itself to a profound analysis. This article, however, will be limited to a description of the relevant sources housed in the State Archives of Venice, and a brief discussion of the nationwide projects that the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage has undertaken to ensure their conservation and to promote their widest possible usage.

Analyzing the Sources

Even today many hold that the fascist racial laws adopted in Italy in 1938 were merely a façade without substance, and that an organized and well managed persecution of the Jews never took place in Italy. Moreover, according to several studies, in spite of the defamatory press campaign orchestrated by the regime, Italian Jews themselves kept alive the hope that Mussolini only intended to show a gesture of friendship and goodwill to Hitler, in order to promote and maintain the alignment of Italy with Germany, and that “The Duce” would not have actually pursued severe measures against the Jews. This was true, it has been suggested, at least during the year of 1938. At that time, and for some time to come, in Italy and elsewhere some credence was in fact given to the theory originating with sympathizers of the Fascist party that the Italian government was proposing to “discriminate lightly”, but not to “persecute” the Jews.¹

The documents stored in the Venetian State Archive help however, with many others, to testify precisely to the opposite. The documentation produced by the most representative bodies of the Italian public administration from the fall of 1938 is irrefutable, comprising tangible proof of the uninterrupted and intense application of severe anti-Jewish racial legislation in pre-war Italy. In fact, the papers produced by the Venice Prefecture and the Police Headquarters document the continuous activities required to apply in the daily lives of Jews what the racial laws had defined in a general and abstract way. Quite often, Rome had sent detailed written instructions, as the result of the close interaction existing between the inner circle of Under-

1 See 3., 175-186; 175-176.

Secretary of State of the Interior, Guido Buffarini Guidi, and the Directorate General for Demography and Race, which was part of that same Ministry. The directives from the central bodies and their application by the local offices represent concrete evidence of what was so effectively defined as “the legality of evil”, in the context of the “darkest and most infamous page by far in the whole legal history of the Italian state. The perfect functioning of persecutory legislation was ensured by an impressive amount of work: a true demonstration of antisemitism by the ministerial bureaucracy”.²

Archival Documents' Series

The archival records deposited and permanently transferred in the past years to the State Archives of Venice by the originating offices can be divided into four areas:

- 15 folders produced by the *Questura* (the Police headquarters) in Venice, which contain 991 personal dossiers relating to men and women belonging to the Jewish community of Venice. The practices are organized in sub-series and are mainly related to the following issues: investigations about the “racial status” of each person; requests from the Jews to obtain permission to employ “Aryan” domestic servants; requests for permission to spend holiday periods in areas outside the city of Venice; in time of war, even seizure and requisition of Jewish-owned home radio equipment. After the armistice between Italy and the Allies and the consequent German occupation of Italy, the neofascist Italian Social Republic decided to send “all the Jews [...] to special concentration camps” and then to deliver them to the Germans. The “immediate seizure” of “all their properties”³ was also authorized. The documents reflect the new political context. An increasing number of files then concern the search and seizure of all properties, both movable and immovable, owned by Jews, and the assignment to non-Jews of the confiscated dwellings. The records tell us of raids, arrests, deportations, and the institutionalization of violence that only finished at the end of the war, with the victory of the Allies and the anti-fascist Italian forces.⁴

- 4 folders created by the Prefecture of Venice, which contain 398 personal dossiers with

2 4., 2; 9.

3 For the full text of the Police Ordinance n. 5 of November 30, 1943, signed by G. Buffarini Guidi, Minister of the Interior of the Social Republic, see Michele Sarfatti, “1938. Le leggi contro gli ebrei”, in *La Rassegna mensile di Israel*, LIV, n. 1-2 (1988):198. Scholars said that in doing so the fascist Republic passed from eroding the civil rights of the Jews to taking their lives. As has been remarked, “The Italian Shoah is not only the result of the alliance of Mussolini and his Social Republic with Hitler’s Germany, but is also the consequence of the direct action of many Italians adhering to the fascist regime” 2., 57.

4 2.. On the same page the data reported by Liliana Picciotto are quoted: “Between September 7, 1943 and April 25, 1945, 7,013 Jews were arrested in Italy [...]. In more than 30 percent of the cases we know the author of the arrest, members of the Republic of Salò are involved.” For the situation in Venice, see also 5..

requests for exemption (the so-called “requests of discrimination”), produced by individuals and families belonging to the Jewish community of Venice, to obtain the benefits that the racial laws accorded to those Jews who had demonstrated their titles of service and merit to the nation or the fascist party.⁵ In each dossier, one can find the petitioner’s request with many attachments and the investigation developed by the Prefecture, which acquired documents from other offices and institutions. The local judgments regarding these petitions were then transmitted to the Ministry of the Interior where final decisions were made.

- 11 other folders generated by the Cabinet of the Prefecture of Venice (Office for General and Jewish Affairs), which contain additional documents relating to anti-Jewish actions in the territory of the province: the lists of Italian and foreigner Jews resident in Venice, drawn up in 1938 and updated until 1945; provisions and decrees with instructions for the application of the racial laws; many “thematic” dossiers (e.g. concerning “mixed” marriages, school institutions for Jews, inspections and investigations of Jewish property and businesses in Venice, racially-motivated dismissals from public offices and other professions, requisitions of movable and immovable goods, and transport of the Jews to concentration camps).

- A folder of the Venetian Chamber of Commerce, containing documents about anti-Jewish measures to be adopted in the economic sector.

Local and National Projects

At least some of the documents stored at the Frari Archive are publicly known and have already been the object of analysis by historians specializing in the Holocaust. Indeed, in the past few years, some important exhibitions have been mounted in Venice: one, at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, was very effective in delineating the inexorable advance of racial discrimination through the “extraordinary zeal of the whole Structure of the Public Administration”.⁶ Another was organized by the Ministry of Interior and the Prefecture of Venice, in co-operation with the Marciana National Library, the State Archives of Venice, the Jewish Community of Venice, and the Superintendent for the Archives of the Veneto, in conjunction with the “International Holocaust Memorial Day” in 2011. Through the documents presented, the aim was to highlight “the gradual and ever more dramatically increasing persecution of the Jews, leading from their marginalization to outright persecution of all Italian and foreign Jews living in the territories of the Kingdom of Italy, starting from the racial laws of 1938 until the end of WWII in the spring of 1945”.⁷ In many cases over the years

5 “Esse consentivano ai liberi professionisti di mantenere la loro clientela privata; agli imprenditori di proseguire nelle loro attività purché fossero di ridotte proporzioni e non rientrassero fra quelle essenziali alla difesa nazionale; e offrivano qualche attenuazione ai vincoli sulla proprietà,” in 6..

6 The 1995 exhibition partially reproduced an exhibition in 1988, see Segre, *Gli ebrei a Venezia*.

7 1938-1945. La persecuzione degli ebrei in Italia. Documenti per una storia:

<http://marciana.venezia.sbn.it/mostre/1938-1945-la-persecuzione-degli-ebrei-italia>. The archival research was carried out by P. Bortolozzo, C. Salmini and A. Schiavon for the State Archives of Venice

the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, and the State Archives Administration, directly or indirectly participated in different projects dedicated to the Holocaust and the anti-fascist Resistance. One good example is the Guide to the Archives of the Resistance, realized more than thirty years ago by a Commission chaired by C. Pavone.⁸ More recent examples are offered by the so-called “thematic portals”, which have been incorporated into the SAN - National Archives System: in particular the “Archives of the Twentieth Century”; and the “Voices from the Shoah”, collected by the General Directorate for the Archives beginning in 2002, in collaboration with the cultural institution created by S. Spielberg to preserve the audiovisual testimonies of the last survivors of the Shoah. These few examples will have to suffice, as a complete list is too long to include here. To close, we should recall the fundamental research, conservation, and service activities that a galaxy of other public and private Italian institutions carries out with regularity. Organizations devoted to the history of the Resistance and the conservation of the memory of the Jewish communities as well as research groups within Italian Universities are all developing programming on an increasingly systematic and progressively wider scale.⁹

Inventory Activity, Scanning, and Digitizing

In June 2014, the General Directorate for the Archives of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage renewed for another ten years a prior agreement to collaborate with the US Holocaust Memorial Council and its Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. The intention behind this joint project was to identify and reproduce archival material still conserved in the Italian State Archives relating to the “history of the persecution of the six million Jews and millions of other victims of Nazi tyranny”. The new project represents the continuation of an ambitious plan that has allowed the US institution over the years to acquire copies of every document giving evidence of “this unprecedented tragedy, and perpetuating its memory”, with Italian State Archives then obtaining a full set of digital reproductions for consultation by scholars. Thus, representatives for Europe of the US Holocaust Memorial contacted the State Archives in Venice, to obtain permission for the full digital reproduction of the papers on twentieth-century racial persecution housed in the city on the lagoon. The archival series described above fit perfectly in this context. In order to organize this reproduction as efficiently as possible and in accordance with the high standards commonly applied in the State Archives of Venice, the latter determined to complete the sorting, analytical filing, and complete numbering of pages of the documents before starting the process of reproduction with digital photography. By decision of the Director of the Venetian Archive, Dr. R. Santoro, a team, coordinated by the

(co-ordinated by director R. Santoro), and by R. Segre for the Jewish Community of Venice.

8 1..

9 Significant in the Venetian context was the conference of October 10, 2015, titled “Archives of the Resistance: A Widespread Heritage to Know, Defend and Promote.” http://www.save.archivi.beniculturali.it/sites/default/files/locandina_archivi_resistenti_10-2015_2.pdf

author here, was then organized. The works began in September 2014; the collaborator appointed by the Holocaust Memorial was then provided with the parameters for correct digital reproduction and for the “pyramidalization” of the images, as is required for their subsequent long-term preservation and insertion in the context of image- and text-databases stored in the State Archives of Venice. The work undertaken in Venice concerning the archival series in question, which are extremely sensitive in terms of their contents and also fragile in terms of their old-paper support, consisted of restoring the original sorting when necessary, identifying and numbering each document, and drawing-up an analytical inventory. Additionally, an index of names was prepared. The archival description was mainly based on the international accepted standards, in accordance with the standardization and normalization procedures that are habitually used in the State Archives in Venice. Due to the constraints of time imposed by matters of scheduling, the team included young volunteers working alongside the Archive’s staff. The first part of the work ended in February 2015; the photographic shoots were carried out in the month of March. A total of 34,668 image files are now available, of which 20,138 are related to the Questura, 12,505 to the Prefecture, 937 to the Chamber of Commerce and 1,088 to the Prefecture of Rovigo (which has located its files on racial persecution in the Venice Archives). The files are ordered in a manner that reflects their archival organization, and are thus immediately identifiable through the inventory. They can be consulted daily in the study hall of the Venice State Archives, at dedicated workstations. From 2015 to 2017 the activities continued on the whole complex of documentation produced by the Office for General and Jewish Affairs of the Cabinet of the Prefecture of Venice.¹⁰ It consists of 11 folders, for a total of about 1,000 registers and dossiers. The papers are not entirely related to racial persecution, but also offer interesting insights into Venetian history in the years before WWII and during the conflict. Among them, of great interest is documentation concerning the confiscation of houses, villas, hotels and other properties (owned by Jews and non-Jews), located especially at the Lido, for the use of German troops and Fascist officials.

Conclusion

We have attempted here to briefly describe the main recent inventory and digitization projects concerning twentieth-century records stored in the Venetian State Archives pertaining to the persecution of Jews in the Fascist period in Italy. Our operations were carried out in conformity with prevailing archival protocols, which require the application of the so-called “historical method” in the sorting of papers, and as far as possible the reproduction of complete documentary series rather than isolated examples. It is now up to historians and scholars to conduct research on the digitized documents, to product increasingly detailed evaluations and analysis.¹¹

10 These archival records have been described and indexed by T. Carretto, with the collaboration of I. Sarcinelli, D. Sanna, P. Bortolozzo for the index of names.

11 I am very grateful to Karen-edis Barzman for her kind help in revising the English translation of my text.

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