

Not just Intolerance

1779: the Case of Pitigliano

BY ROBERTO G. SALVADORI

At the end of the 18th century the Jews living in the single states into which Italy was divided at the time experienced a decisive moment in their history with the entry of the armies of revolutionary France on the Italian peninsula. Wherever they arrived, the Napoleonic armies liberated them from the ghettos in which they were confined and from the numerous harassments to which they were subjected, declaring them citizens equal to all others. This was the first emancipation of the Jews, which came, mainly, like an unexpected gift, from outside. The second was to come - after the Restoration, which re-introduced the old oppressive legislation - through the direct and prominent participation of the Jews themselves in the Risorgimento: with Italian unity the process was completed and until the racial legislation of the Fascist regime (1938) there were to be no more differences between the juridic condition of the Jews and that of other Italians. The operation between 1796-1799 was no painless one. If it was a welcome surprise for the Jews, for most of the population among whom they lived it was a scandalous and unacceptable measure. The common town-dwellers and, even more, the country people felt a deep-seated suspicion of and hostility towards what at that time was known as the *la Nazione ebraica* (the Jewish Nation). A strong religious prejudice had taken root in most of the population and had generated social (if not racial) prejudices that were no less profound. The separation between Jews and Christians, which had occurred in about the 4th century A.D., had soon become an attitude of prevarication towards the minority, resulting in an interminable series of measures that seriously limited the liberty of those



who belonged to the minority.

It was with stupor and indignation that the Christians saw the enemies of the 'true' religion and the alleged murderers of God enter the *Guardia Nazionale*, hold public office, acquire the right to own private property and contract mixed marriages. When, in the spring of 1799, the Austro-Russian armies, with a series of victories, compelled the French to abandon most of their conquests in Italy, these resentments found expression in episodes of unprecedented

violence. Even Tuscany - "mild", or reputedly mild, Tuscany - was the scene of such episodes. There were anti-Jewish demonstrations wherever there were Jews: in Livorno, Pisa, Florence, Siena, Monte San Savino (in the province of Arezzo), and Pitigliano (in the province of Grosseto).

The gravest incidents occurred in Monte San Savino and Siena. In Monte San Savino the *keillà* (community) which dated as far back as the mid-seventeenth century (though there had been Jews in the town since the fifteenth century) was driven out in July 1799 and its members, who included Salamone Fiorentino, the first Jewish poet to have a place in Italian literature, were scattered between Siena, Florence and Livorno, and never returned. In Siena the "Viva Maria" band - the reactionary movement with its origins and base in Arezzo - banded together with the town's thugs and attacked the ghetto, sacked the synagogue and killed, or rather butchered, thirteen Jews (several of whom, gravely wounded, were burnt alive in the Piazza del Campo). And it is worth recalling that a similar, if less savage, *pogrom* had occurred ten days earlier at Senigallia, in the Marche: there too there were thirteen

victims. Things went differently in Pitigliano. The events there mark, at least partially, an exception worthy of mention.

In the two weeks between June 4 and 19, 1799 the Arezzo insurgents trickled into the town. The inhabitants, to tell the truth, greeted them in much the same manner as they had greeted the French. In that remote and quiet country village, where nothing noteworthy had happened for a century and a half, the arrival of both produced unease rather than enthusiasm. In any case, Pitigliano too saw the formation of a "*comitato*" (committee), modelled on the *Suprema Deputazione del Governo provvisorio della città di Arezzo*, consisted of five worthies which supported what was called at the time of the *insurrezione*. It was a short-lived alliance: at the beginning of October it was dissolved on the pretext that it had achieved its aims.

On June 2, two days before the "Viva Maria" bands appeared in the area of Pitigliano, two or three Jews had been arrested and the precious objects they had with them were confiscated. From the beginning of the presence of Jews in Pitigliano and Sorano (the second half of the 16th century) the oligarchy which held sway over the two villages there had included a minority animated by profound anti-Jewish sentiments. Needless to say, this minority took advantage of the situation to strike a blow at the Jews, whom they branded as enemies on two counts: as deniers of Christ and as Jacobins, that is, allies and protectees of the French, themselves bracketed among the unbelievers. Nor should it be forgotten that the popular image of the Jews was that they were rich; a conviction that was not unfounded since, within the framework of that dreadfully poor agricultural economy, the Jews, who pursued commercial and artisan activities, modest though these were and at times at the bare subsistence level, enjoyed a comparatively better condition to that of the wretched local peasants and shepherds.

In the days that followed, with the arrival of members of "Viva Maria", the number of convicts increased, reaching thirty-one, of whom fourteen were Jews. The others were Christians who were reputed to be pro-French. On June 12 the *comitato* ordered the *Nazione Ebraica* (Jewish Nation) to hand over eighteen pounds of silver. This amounted to plundering the synagogue, whose sacred furnishings are made, according to tradition, of that very metal: four biblical pomegranates with a bell (that is, the *rimmonim*, staffs with pomegranate-shaped handles around which the scroll of the Law is wrapped), four candle-sticks, two silver lamps, one biblical crown (the crown is the symbol of the Law, or *Toràh*).

On June 16 things took a violent turn: the tree of freedom, raised by the French, was cut down. Several Jews were manhandled, beaten, dragged off to prison. One of these - Abramo Camerino - struck on the head with a hatchet, died shortly after. The fury of the mob seemed

by now to have been released. Abramo Servi's house was stormed and sacked. Servi himself was dragged naked to prison and on arriving there, the aggressors tried to gain possession of the keys of the building so that they could beat up the inmates.

It might be worth quoting the exact words, without any further comment, of one of the archive documents referring to these episodes: the "Note of those detained in prison on the authority of the Insurgent People of the annexed region", compiled by the *Deputati* of Pitigliano, who were supporters of the Arezzo rebellion, but moderate. This 'Nota' lists four Jews who had been arrested: "Abramo Servi, aged about 80; Pacifico Sadun, David Capua, Danielle Sadun, Emanuelle Pergola, Isacco Sadun, Isacco Orvieto, Emanuelle Capua, Alessandro Pergola, The Jew Romano. All were jailed by the *Popolo* for having in on various occasions demonstrated their sympathy for the change of Government, with the exception of the first, whose imprisonment not even they could account

for, and therefore on the 18th day the "Council of all the Corporals" (*Il Consiglio di tutti i Corporali*), and lance-corporals [the leaders of the anti-French faction] in the presence of their General, and captain resolved that they be allowed to leave prison freely, and that it was not then performed because of the

outcry of the *Popolo*. - Angelo Sadun: it was decided on the aforesaid day that he could be released on the understanding that he present himself on request: of this decree [against the latter] all that appears is the testimony of one who affirms that, speaking to him in confidence, when the Republic entered the Government of Tuscany, he had declared that the time of Reigning Monarchs was at an end, and that one should swallow the bitter pill; and that he was suspected of having corresponded with the French, though there was no sure proof of this. When a search was made of his shop where his correspondence was kept, no letter was found nor any other seditious document. - Abramo Camerino: openly displayed his sympathies for the French both in his manner of dressing and in what he said. - Vitale Camerino his son, David Servi: likewise mere suspicions, yet at the Council meeting of the aforesaid June 18 it was deliberated that they be kept in prison."

A few days later, Captain Giuseppe Romanelli, on reaching Pitigliano at the command of eight Aretines, ordered the release of the arrested men (twenty-two on June 21 and nine the following day): as was the case almost everywhere, nobody knew what accusation could be brought against them. Nevertheless, things were still very tense. By what was possibly no mere coincidence, on June 28, the day that the Siena massacre took place, there was an attempted assault on the ghetto. However, according to one Jew's eye-witness account, "that night all the best of the village came to our defence".

*A confrontation between Christians
and Jews during the anti-French
rebellion in a small town in Tuscany's
maremma district. How solidarity
can be born of violence.*

The Pitiglianesi were, therefore, divided in two, or rather in three: the pro-French (probably a small minority who very sensibly lay low); the extreme anti-French and the moderate anti-French. The latter included those who were prepared to express solidarity for the victims, to help and protect them. There are records of similar phenomena in Siena, Monte San Savino and elsewhere. But, as we shall see, only in Pitigliano did this feeling become widespread and inspire, in concrete terms, a reaction on a mass scale. There are, obviously, reasons for this.

On July 6 six soldiers entered Pitigliano. They were dragoons commanded by a certain Pietro Ceccarelli and they defined themselves as *aretini* (Aretines). In point of fact they were all Orvietans who supported (or claimed to support) "Viva Maria". The exception was their commander who came from Florence (but who had also stopped over in Orvieto) and passed himself off as a Major. Ceccarelli was clearly on good terms with Gaetano Luciani, *co-mandante della piazza* ('commander of the square'), and with his son Luigi. The two men were animated by deep anti-Jewish sentiment (the son still more than the father). It was all too likely they who had called to the town these *forestieri* (foreigners) (Orvieto was at the time part of the Papal State) to take the place of the real (*veri*) Aretines, led by Captain Romanelli who had, in the meantime, left. One thing we know for sure: all the dragoons billeted themselves at Gaetano Luciani's house, in the main square of the town, Ceccarelli vainly sought to recruit volunteers for the *armata aretina* (Aretine Army). With the agreement of the Lucianis, he wished to form a band in order to cross the frontier into the Papal State. But his attempt fell on deaf ears: the peasants - those from Maremma as much as those from the area of Pitigliano - were busy getting in the wheat harvest and appeared to be endowed with scant fighting spirit.

From the beginning, the new arrivals behaved in such a way as to arouse widespread dislike. Arrogant and overbearing, they gave the impression of being a small gang of brigands rather than a group of cavalrymen accustomed to a certain discipline. They would stop the inhabitants in the street, and force them to hand over their small personal effects (jewels, embroidered handkerchiefs, articles of clothing) by way of a contribution - so they said - to the cause for which they were fighting. The only one to issue a receipt was Ceccarelli, but it is clear that also the victims of these acts of extortion who chanced into his hands, rather than those of his followers, had good reason to doubt whether the receipt would be honoured.

The most sought-after to pay these forced donations were the Jews, but there were also Christians, possibly those who were thought to be Jacobins or who, quite simply, had the appearance of wealthy people. Many passers-by, moreover, heard the Orvietans spurring each other: *andiamo, andiamo a saccheggiare il ghetto* ("come on, let's go and sack the ghetto"), which was seen, as usual, as a deposit of riches of every kind. To give this robbery a semblance of legality, Ceccarelli summoned the rabbi of the community, Israele Moisè Urbino, and Abram Bem-

porad, one of its notables. He haughtily ordered them to supply him with seven dragoon's uniforms free, each complete with pure gold chevrons. Apparently, the manner in which he made this request was as peremptory as it was confused. At first, he asked for delivery of four uniforms, then added three, giving the impression that he was ready to bargain. One thing he was clear about: there had to be the chevrons and they had to be in pure gold. The two Jews hesitated, resisted and protested. The community had already given their predecessors eighteen pounds of silver; there was nothing left. Ceccarelli replied that what a captain had been granted could not be refused to a major, who was higher in rank. The negotiation in short became mean, as well as grotesque and ended in Urbino and Bemporad's refusal to obey. Ceccarelli then resorted to force and gave orders that the cloth required for the uniforms should be taken directly from the drapers' shops of the Jews.

This order was viewed with suspicion by many Pitaglianesi, who were already irritated by the activities of which the Orvietans had made themselves protagonists that morning. Some of them demanded to know whether the supplies would be paid for, or not. The canon Francesco Fortini went up to Ceccarelli and warned him "that ill humour was growing in this People for the insolence, and insults, with which his soldiers were treating the *Nazione Ebraea*, and that he would therefore see to it that measures were promptly taken". There is certainly no need to stress the significance of an intervention of this kind coming as it did from an authoritative priest living in close contact with his congregation. Ceccarelli lost much of his haughtiness, realising that this warning could not be ignored, and ordered his men to behave more correctly. As if this were not enough, the notables of the town, hostile to Luciani, whom they depicted as unworthy of respect, tried, with the help of the highest ecclesiastical authority in Pitigliano, the high priest don Bernadino Fabbriziani, to form a group of armed men obedient to their orders. And so July 6 ended in an atmosphere rife with uncertainty and unease. The following morning Ceccarelli's six men, without heeding their commander, and probably without informing him, showed up at the synagogue and entered in a more decisive fashion. According to the testimonies of one of their number, some were "rompicolli" (daredevils), capable of anything. They pointed their swords at the rabbi's throat, and declared, grinning, that they had come to celebrate the feast day of the Jews (*la festa degli ebrei*); they entered the room given over to the study of the Law (the *yeshivà*), where one of them, mocking all the while, declared that he wished to satisfy his urgent bodily needs (and made a gesture as if he were about to pull down his trousers). Shortly after, he went so far as to perform this act, along with two or three of his companions, in the main synagogue itself.

This extremely vulgar action was undoubtedly the decisive error. The population of Pitigliano, who were profoundly Catholic, certainly did not understand let alone appreciate the rituals of the Jewish religion, of which they

truly knew little or nothing. But no-one could doubt that an insult had been made to a place dedicated to God, a sacred temple, something in short which, in its way, could be regarded as a church. Ceccarelli reprimanded his men and, when they failed to heed him, disarmed them and ordered their arrest, but this was not enough. *“Il popolo aveva cominciato a tumultuare, e parte di esso erasi già armato”*, say the chronicles: “The People had begun to riot, and some had already taken up arms.”

Rumour even had it that those men were not dragoons at all but criminals, not devoted to the *Madonna del Conforto* (the Madonna of Comfort), the emblem of “Viva Maria”, as they claimed, but rather Jacobins, irreligious and even atheists. Hesitations and divisions within the community dissolved. Blind with indignation, the mob set about pursuing the Orvietans through the streets of the town. Two of them (a certain Giuseppe Pangrazio and a certain Luigi Travaglino) managed to give them the slip; four others, together with Ceccarelli, found refuge in the Lucianis’ house, which was at once besieged by a wild mob. It soon became clear that the doors which had been locked behind them would not hold for long. So they attempted a desperate getaway. In vain. The only one who managed to save his skin was Ceccarelli, who was arrested and imprisoned; the other four were almost literally cut to pieces,

one inside Luciani’s house and the others in the square, with clubs, hatchets and swords. The victims were a thirty-year-old labourer, a twenty-six-year old *maestro* (scribe), a joiner aged almost 20 and a peasant of 35. There is no doubt, even if no explanation is offered in the documents, that Ceccarelli owed his less hapless fate to the fact that he had not personally participated in the episode in the synagogue that had inflamed the spirits of the Pitiglianesi.

Those who participated in the riot - those, that is, whom we are able to identify - were subsequently imprisoned and subjected to an interminable trial in Siena, the outcome of which is unknown. It is worth recalling, however, that the proceedings of the debate - those have come to light to date - feature two petitions - respectively of February 10 and February 16 1801 - requesting the acquittal of the accused. Their signatories (some fifteen in each case) were both Christians and Jews. This fact, itself unusual for the time, is particularly worthy of men-

tion since the signatures on the documents are mixed, and follow no special order.

The events of that July 7 in 1799 are a landmark in the history of the relationship between the Christians and Jews of Pitigliano. They might be said to represent both a point of arrival and a point of departure. From then on the suspicion, if not the hostility, of the former towards the latter was to diminish, as was the fear and wariness of the latter. The two communities learned to live together, day after day, in mutual respect. In the course of the nineteenth century there were still to be shadows, but never of such an order as to jeopardize a process which placed the two cultures on the same plane of dignity.

As we have seen, this was not the case elsewhere. The way things turned out for the Jews in Monte San Savino, for example, is dramatically different from what happened in Pitigliano. The details of the episode we have recounted do not adequately account for this difference. There is undoubtedly something more deep-rooted behind the difference in behaviour in the populations of two towns that were similar to each other in so many respects (both were territories organized along feudal lines up to the mid-eighteenth century and beyond; their fundamental, rural, economy was the same and bore the same characteristics of poverty; from the socio-political point of view, they were both peripheral and marginal, and so on).

Very probably, the answer should be sought in the way in which the Jewish community of Pitigliano differed in character from that of Monte San Savino. The Pitigliano community, as such, came into being before the Aretine community and was three or four times more numerous. The Pitiglianese Jews possessed a right - the ownership of land - that was denied to the Savinesi. Besides traditional commercial activities, the former also engaged in artisan activities on a much larger scale than the latter. These and other factors, taken together, made ties (one might almost say integration) between the Jewish and Christian members of the population far closer and more incisive in Pitigliano than in Monte San Savino. This confirms, indirectly but eloquently, how useful mutual knowledge and the interpenetration of activities is in creating satisfying intercultural relations.

Transalated by P. Levy



The interior of the Synagogue of Pitigliano before its collapse and recent restoration. In the background, The Aron (The Ark of the Covenant, built to conserve the scrolls of the Torah. On page 48: a view of Pitigliano.