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Still Jewish after all these years

By Ariela Bankier

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One morning, while strolling in the tiny mountain village of Serrastretta in the Calabria region of southern Italy, Rabbi Barbara Aiello came across an obituary notice: Her neighbor's mother had died. When she went to his home to pay a condolence call, she was stunned to see that all the chairs had been removed from the room, the mirrors were covered in black, and hard-boiled eggs had been placed on the table.

"I asked the neighbor what this was about and he told me: "These are our family traditions," she relates. "I explained to him that they were Jewish traditions for the shiva, and he said: 'Jewish' I once heard something vague about it but it wasn't really spoken of in our home. It's just considered to be a family tradition, and that's all." It was a formative moment.

Aiello is an American of Italian extraction, the first female Reform rabbi in Italy. She comes from a family of anusim (descended from Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity in Inquisition times). For three years now, she has been working to revive the Jewish community of Calabria, one of Italy's poorest provinces and home to a centuries-long Jewish tradition that has almost completely disappeared. Aiello recently opened the first synagogue in Calabria in about 500 years, Ner Tamid del Sud (Eternal Light of the South), as well as the Center for the Study of Jewry in Calabria and Sicily in an ancient house that has been in her family for 400 years. "Calabria is full of archaeological and cultural remnants of the Jewish communities that once lived here, and several studies indicate that almost 40 percent of Calabrians may be of Jewish origin," says Aiello, explaining what prompted her to undertake this work. "Many Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity continued for hundreds of years to preserve their Judaism in secret."

The search for her origins and the hope of resurrecting the past has occupied Aiello for more than two decades, ever since her first 'roots' trip to Italy. After she was ordained as a rabbi 11 years ago, she decided to increase her efforts, inspired in part by her father.

"His family secretly maintained a Jewish lifestyle in Calabria in the 1920s, before they immigrated to the United States," she says. "My grandmother used to close all the shutters before she lit the Shabbat candles, so no one would see. When they came to America, my



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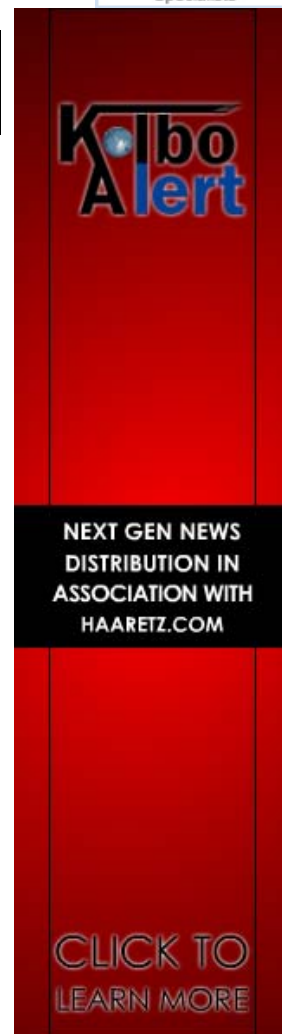
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father told her that here she could light candles in the open, that nothing would happen, but she still hesitated. She said you never know."

Her grandmother did not raise her daughters as Jews (so as not to hurt their chances of marrying, laughs Aiello), but she did send her two sons to learn Torah, in secret. "Every Monday and Thursday they would travel by horse-drawn wagon, with a full cargo of artichokes, to the house of a certain man, where they studied."

Aiello says the opening of the synagogue and Jewish study center has introduced a revolutionary change for the dozens of locals who participate in the activities there. "Before, if you had any interest in being Jewish, if your family had certain traditions or distant memories that you wanted to explore or discover, there was no way for you to do it," she says.

So far, more than 80 families have taken part in activities organized by Aiello, and that number is growing every year. "Here in the south there are still communities that are descended from the anusim," says Angela Amato, a local resident who is involved in the synagogue activities. "One of their main traditions is to marry among the families, to stay together and preserve the Jewish names. Now we can have Kabbalat Shabbat [the Friday night religious service?] together."

Unlike the Orthodox Jewish community, which does not recognize the Judaism of many who attend the synagogue, Aiello makes a point of welcoming as many people as possible to her center. "We're trying to see Calabrian Jewry as a circle, and you can enter this circle at any point, by taking part in Kabbalat Shabbat, for example. I wanted to make it approachable for people and to enable them to experience this, especially here in Calabria, where the Catholic presence is very strong. In my family, for example, there are priests and nuns, and this is because of the family origin in the Marrano culture; many of them were forced to convert to Christianity. I have a cousin who once said to me: 'You know, if I could only have gotten closer to the Jewish religion when I was young, if I could have studied it, I probably would have become a rabbi and not a priest, but Christianity is what I knew, so that's what I did.'"

Catholics with Jewish roots

Financial contributions to the activities in Calabria come both from Jews and Italian Catholics. This doesn't surprise Aiello. "The most common type of intermarriage in America is between Jews and Catholics," she points out. "People are always saying how many similarities there are between Italians and Jews: we're both traditional and family-oriented – and I've always believed there was something more to it than that. If it is really true, as some claim, that 40 percent of the population of Calabria is Jewish or of Jewish origin, and you add to that the current statistics – that 80 percent of the 26 million Italian-Americans are descended from families that came to the United States from the poorest parts of Italy, from Calabria and Sicily – when you consider these two figures, what are the chances that an Italian-American has Jewish roots? Very high.

Aiello has been collecting and working on Inquisition documents for several years alongside other researchers at the center in Calabria, including Prof. Francesco Renda, Dr. Enrico Mascaro and Prof. Vincenzo Villella. "We are studying the records of families whose property was confiscated and the records of families who bribed the authorities or who fled, and later were symbolically burned as straw dolls," Aiello explains. "Let's say someone comes to us with the surname Vitali. I can locate his ancestors from the Vitali family who were rounded up in Sicily and burned at the stake."

The Spanish expulsion decree of 1492 also affected the Jews of Sicily, then part of the Spanish kingdom of Aragon, and many of them fled to Calabria, which belonged to the kingdom of Naples. "After that point, we find the same surnames in Calabria," says Aiello. In 1504, Calabria also fell to King Ferdinand of Aragon.

When Aiello began visiting the villages and towns of Calabria and asking people whether they had Jewish roots, most of them said no. "But then I discovered that I was just asking the wrong questions," she says. "People would tell me, no, we're just secular. It was only when I started asking about their family traditions, about superstitions, that the doors suddenly flew open. People started telling me: 'You know, we never went to church,' or: 'When my grandmother was dying, she told us – Don't call the priest, don't place a rosary in my hand, wrap me in a sheet and bury me before sunset of the next day.' One time, I went into a shop near my house and I saw a lot of low wooden stools there. I remarked to the old salesperson: 'Oh, a family with a lot of kids must live here.' And he said to me: 'No, no, these are chairs for mourning. Every family in the area has chairs like these. You sit on them for a week after someone dies.'"

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"Southern Italy and Calabria in particular was once one of the wealthiest and liveliest areas for Italian Jewry," says Vincenzo Villella, a local historian active at the Serrastretta Jewish center. His focus is the Jewish history of the region. "One of the oldest synagogues in the world was discovered here, in Calabria, in Bova Marina, and if I were to start to list for you all the towns and cities where evidence remains of a Jewish presence, the list would never end."

Nonetheless, the Center for the Study of Jewry in Calabria and Sicily encountered stiff resistance from some local residents. "They viewed the claim that they might have Jewish ancestry as an embarrassing accusation," says Villella. "When we wanted to open the Jewish center in a big city like Lamezia, we couldn't get approval. We didn't even get a response from the city. We put up beautiful signs in all kinds of places that said something like: 'This quarter was home to a community of Jewish ironmongers during the years such and such' and every time the sign was taken down or burned."

When Aiello and Villella began studying the most common surnames in the south and putting together a list of the most typical Jewish surnames in the region, they received some threatening phone calls. "People thought it was an affront to their dignity to say that the source of their name was Jewish," he explains. However, says Aiello, as soon as the center opened, dozens of people who were curious about its activity came and sought assistance in tracing their roots, and even the local priest came to her aid.

"People came to celebrate Hanukkah with us, and the local priest, Don Gigi Uliano, spoke with members of his church and said: 'I know that many of us have Jewish roots.' He also told them: 'I plan to learn about my Jewish heritage with Rabbi Barbara, and you ought to come, too.' And so he basically gave them permission to come. I never pressure anyone to renounce the Catholic religion, I just tell them that it's good to know who you are and where you come from."

Villella says the claim that 40 percent of Calabrians are of Jewish background is exaggerated, but insists that the figure is no lower than 15 percent. "Local tax records and records of a special tax called the mortafa that the Jews paid show that around the year 1276 there were 2,500-3,000 Jews living in Calabria and around 15,000 Jews in all of southern Italy. Toward the end of the 15th century – and we also know this from the tax records of the Jewish community – their number in Calabria exceeded 12,000, which means that about one in every 10 or 12 Calabrians was a Jew. On the other hand, we lack a lot of information, since some of the communities were not registered and so it's hard to know the precise number of Jews. But we've been conducting genealogical, linguistic and etymological studies that have enabled a good number of families to discover their Jewish roots, and they are proud of this."

Many of the descendants of anusim who contacted Aiello have begun to live a more Jewish lifestyle, and a few have even undergone a Reform conversion. One of these "new Jews" is American-born former priest Frank (Francesco) Tamborello, who after discovering his roots, gave up the priesthood, converted, studied for the rabbinate and was ordained as a Reform rabbi. Tamborello, who comes from a Catholic family of Calabrian and Sicilian origin, grew up around Jewish families but never had any inkling about his family's Jewish background.

"My grandmother came from the town of Sambuca in western Sicily, an area where there were lots of Jews. On her side of the family there are doctors and lawyers, and we always used to joke that she must have been Jewish," he says.

From a young age, Tamborello was drawn to the spiritual world; after graduating from university, he enrolled in a Greek Catholic seminary. He went on to serve as priest of the Ukrainian Catholic community in Long Island, where he was exposed to anti-Semitism. "It's something I just couldn't ignore," he says. He describes the transition from the priesthood to the rabbinate as almost natural.

"When I was in college, I belonged to a fraternity that was mostly Jewish. I also have a lot of relatives who married Jews, and so I was familiar with the traditions. I became intrigued and started learning about Judaism, and at a certain point I just knew that I wanted to be called to the Torah."

Last year, Tamborello attended an Italian Jewish Roots Conference Aiello organized in the United States. He was excited when he heard many of the other participants who had stories similar to his. "There were people there who for the first time in their lives were exposed to the possibility that they had a Jewish background," he says. "People want to know where they come from, what their name means, and this leads to conversations along the lines of: 'Wow, I always thought there was something Jewish about my grandmother,' or: 'That really fits in with the stories I've heard.' And then it's fine, because it's a cultural thing, a

matter of roots."

Old fears

Aiello is not the only one behind a Jewish revival in southern Italy. Not long ago, physician and Orthodox rabbi Stefano Di Mauro, an American of Sicilian descent, returned to Sicily and opened a center for Jewish studies and conversion in Siracusa (Syracuse). Di Mauro says dozens of people attend his classes at the center and most believe they are descended from Jewish families who lived on the island. Like Aiello, Di Mauro has also had to overcome suspicions and hardships.

"In the south there is still fear, because of prejudices about Jews," he says. "Most of the Jews who remained in Sicily, who converted to Christianity, secretly kept their Jewish aspects – they were Christians on the outside but Jews on the inside – but after so much time, without the presence of a rabbi, without involvement and learning, they've completely lost their Jewish aspects, although they are still deeply interested in Jewish culture."

The biggest difficulty he has to deal with, says Di Mauro, in addition to combating ignorance and anti-Semitism, is the lack of involvement on the part of the leaders of Italian Jewry. "The void here was created in part because no one ever came here," he says. "If only a few rabbis would have been sent here 50 years ago – the memory was much more alive then. There were people who, despite the passage of 400 years, were still living a Jewish reality. For example, there is a group of families here that gets together once a week on Shabbat. They see themselves as Jews, but don't want anyone to know that, not even now."

The fear of acknowledging one's Jewishness doesn't surprise Di Mauro. "I came from the United States. Just think of what I was used to there. Once time this fellow came to see me – he's still not ready to say that he might be Jewish, but he comes to meetings, and he sees me walking around with a skullcap on my head. He was truly astounded and started shouting: 'Are you out of your mind? They'll kill you! Who goes around with a skullcap? When I do Kabbalat Shabbat on Friday night, I close all the windows.'"

"Later on he explained to me that his father always warned him not to ever tell anyone that they were Jews, because if they did somebody would call the Sbirri [a Sicilian term for the police]. And then one day this man met someone who had the same surname as he did, and this guy was a policeman!" Di Mauro laughs. "The fellow was in shock! Right away he asked him: 'With your surname, you work as a policeman? How did they let you? My father always used to say that the guy who's protecting you today will be escorting you across the border tomorrow. You see? The old fears are still there.'"

In addition to the religious activity provided by Di Mauro, there has recently been a cultural awakening on the island that includes attempts to expose the wider public to the Jewish history that was erased. Jewish festivals, exhibitions and archaeological sites have drawn a large number of visitors.

"Contrary to popular belief, Calabria, Sicily and Puglia have just a rich and glorious history as more famous communities like Rome and Venice," says tour guide Maria Rosa Malesani, a scholar of Sicilian Jewish history. "In the 15th century, their number reached almost 40,000, but then the Inquisition wreaked tremendous destruction. In Siracusa, Jewish books and Torah scrolls were torn to pieces and used to bind Christian law books. Because of this, one of the ways we collect information is to check the inner bindings of law books. This sort of thing makes you understand how much animosity there was toward the Jewish community."

There were massacres, too. "The prosperity of the Jewish community in Sicily, particularly in the period of Arab rule, angered a lot of people," says Malesani. "There were more than a few massacres, especially after inflammatory sermons by monks. The Jews were the only ones who had permission to trade in slaves and other trades considered 'dirty,' from which Christians were barred, but of course this was a very convenient arrangement for everyone. So much so that we've found letters written after the expulsion decree was issued for Sicilian Jews in 1492 [in the late 15th century, Sicily was part of the Spanish kingdom] in which various officials ask the king to annul the expulsion decree, which led to an economic collapse in Siracusa and other areas in Sicily. But the Jews here were not only traders. There were also important Jewish physicians, astronomers and mathematicians whose writings are now on display in museums in Paris and London," she adds.

In certain towns in Sicily, says Malesani, Jews made up as much as a third of the population, and the Jewish quarter of Siracusa was home at one time to a dozen

thriving synagogues. To this day, the remnants of several synagogues can be found hidden behind churches – old stone buildings inscribed with Jewish symbols and signs marking the congregants' seats. But the vast majority of Jewish buildings have been destroyed.

"Today, unfortunately, most people are totally unaware of the Jewish heritage that fills the island. One of the funniest instances happened about 15 years ago," recalls Malesani. "The priest at one of the churches in the city of Agira in northern Sicily thought the altar in his church was an ordinary altar, until one day an expert on ancient languages came to the church and pointed out to him that it was actually a holy ark that once held a Torah scroll, and that all the inscriptions on it were in Hebrew."

As in Calabria and Sicily, the Jewish residents of Trani, a small city in Puglia in southern Italy, are trying to revive their once thriving community and culture. But unlike Di Mauro and Aiello, the Jews of Trani, who observe an Orthodox lifestyle, are receiving budgetary and organizational support from the Union of Italian Jewish Communities.

"We wanted to bring a Jewish fire to Puglia, and Trani was suited to this idea of the rebirth of Judaism, as a city that once had a very strong Jewish spirit, a city that once had four synagogues and was home to many Jewish sages," says pianist Francesco Lotoro, an organizer of Jewish activity in the city. "We were given use of one of the four synagogues that remained here and today, thank God, we can celebrate all the holidays, even Tu B'Shvat," he says with unabashed pride. Lotoro says that about 40 families participate in Jewish activities on a regular basis, but that they are stricter here about verifying people's Jewishness. "A lot of people want to come, but we have to check the documents of some of them," he explains.

Lotoro, who comes from a family of anusim, converted to Judaism when he was just 15, after he felt "an ancient call," as he puts it, to connect with his Jewish ancestors. "Judaism in the south was never completely erased," he asserts. "We're convinced that Judaism here didn't disappear, but rather that it was frozen, that it went into hibernation. And hundreds of years later, all it took was a small thing and it all began anew. At the very first meeting in Trani, where the idea of reviving the Jewish community was discussed, 20 Jews showed up just on the basis of word of mouth. Whereas we thought that there were no Jews left in the area."

He says there is nothing peculiar about the return to Judaism in Trani, smack in the middle of Puglia. "The sages say: You didn't become Jewish, you returned to being Jewish. Eighty percent of Trani residents were of Jewish origin," he claims. "The surnames in Trani are Jewish surnames – Graziadio, Moselli, Mosco, Benvenuto, Nunes, Lotoro. Just look at the local phone book and you'll see that most of the names there are Jewish names. Let's say that Trani, deep down, never forgot its Jewish roots. When we came back here and men with a skullcap or a long beard started showing up here, it didn't look strange to people. They didn't say: 'Welcome.' They said: 'Welcome back.'"

No proof

While Lotoro, Aiello and Di Mauro all share a great enthusiasm for a Jewish revival in this part of the country, this isn't the first time in history that southern Italians have tried to reconnect to their roots. One of the most famous cases occurred about 70 years ago, when the peasant Donato Manduzio from the Puglian village of San Nicandro claimed that God had appeared to him in a dream and commanded him to become a Jew. After protracted negotiations, Manduzio converted with the blessing of the chief rabbinate in Rome and, together with several dozen supporters who also converted, immigrated to Israel in the late 1940s.

Many women who remained in the village in Puglia, not far from Trani, still maintain a Jewish lifestyle and conduct a Kabbalat Shabbat service together at the local synagogue. Prof. Michele Luzzati of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Pisa says that Italy's south is brimming with other spontaneous displays of Jewish activity.

"There was one case many years ago in Calabria where a group of people sought to be recognized as Jews by the rabbinate in Rome. Every Friday night, the men in this group would put on a clean shirt, don a hat and go together to a restaurant and drink wine. They didn't know why they did this. They started looking into it and studying and they concluded that they had Jewish origins. The rabbinate in Rome was not completely convinced, so the group appealed to a rabbi in Belgium, who eventually agreed to convert them. The problem with such cases is that we can't know today how original and authentic these memories really are, and to what degree they are affected by information received from television and the press."

Luzzati believes the ongoing quest for Jewish cultural roots in southern Italy sometimes gives rise to confusion and exaggerations that lack a sound historical basis. "Calabria and Puglia were indeed to a certain extent major centers of Jewish culture. The Talmud is said to have passed through Bari and southern Italy to Rome and then on to Germany," he notes.

"In Sicily there was a very strong Jewish presence, and even after the wave of conversions to Christianity started, Jewish culture was not completely wiped out, for one thing because people from the community continued to marry among themselves and the memory of Jewish life endured. Many of them fled from Sicily to Calabria. But it's impossible to say, as a few people claim, that such a high percentage of the present population is definitely of Jewish origin. This is not something that is possible to prove. It is very difficult to construct a family tree according to the father's name, and it is impossible to construct a family tree according to the mother's name, and we cannot examine each and every case. I'd say that these are people who aspire to be Jews and who go to different rabbis who decide whether or not to accept them as such."

Luzzati says that while it is possible that the statistics presented by the Center for the Study of Jewry in Calabria and Sicily are correct, they may only apply to certain towns or areas in Calabria where the same families are known to have lived for centuries. "Generally, you can't say that the inhabitants of a certain place today are necessarily the descendants of the people who lived there 500 years ago. Social mobility, emigration – this has a tremendous impact. We don't know how many Jews back then managed to flee, to get to Saloniki or to Istanbul. History gives us very few answers. I'm not saying that it's wrong. It may well be true, but as of now it is not possible to assess on the basis of documented information.

"For now, this can primarily serve as folklore and a source of comfort. There are still a lot of open questions, and the void is being filled with various theories. It's funny – it used to be that people in Italy tried to prove that they weren't Jewish, and now people are coming to me all the time and asking me if they might be Jews. Why? Because a Jew has this pride of knowing where he came from, and these people don't know where they belong, where they come from."

Attorney Renzo Gattegna, chairman of the Association of Jewish Communities in Italy, takes a much firmer stance. "South of Naples, there is no Jewish community," he avers. "There may be some people there, some families, some private activity, but not a community. There is no official relationship with them. Italian Jewry, officially, is Orthodox Jewry. These people, like Aiello, are organizing activities privately.

"According to Italian law, for a community to be recognized it must belong to the Association of Jewish Communities. And these are not communities that belong. They are not recognized. We have not had direct ties with Di Mauro, for example. Nor do they inform us about what activities they are organizing."

Meanwhile, Aiello and other activists are quite confident that the quest to uncover the past has just begun. "We are continually visiting small villages and meeting more and more of these families, and I expect that in time the number will only increase," she says. For her, the goal is not only to revive the Jewish past in southern Italy, but also, to a great extent, to save the Jewish people.

"If you read the statistics about the Jews in Israel and in the United States, the two largest Jewish communities in the world, you see that the numbers are continuously on the decline. I believe that if we Jews, and especially rabbis, the Jewish leadership, open the doors and welcome Jews who were lost and isolated, we will have a renewal of Judaism in Italy and the whole world. There are so many mixed families in Italy that could be Jewish if they were only given an alternative. If we obtain money to build synagogues and schools, there could be a vast influx of Jews.

In Aiello's view, the wariness with which her actions are regarded by the leaders of the Orthodox Jewish community, the only one officially recognized by the Italian government, is irrelevant. "I was once asked: 'Why aren't you registered in the community's books?'" According to their laws, I am considered a Jew; I could register. I told them: "Thank you very much, but I don't need your seal of approval to know that I am a Jew."

"A lot of people come to us after being turned away from regular synagogues because they don't have the documentation to prove they are Jewish. My cousin was born in 1941. The Christian midwife convinced my aunt to baptize the children and write in their birth certificates that they were Catholics, because those were dangerous times. And so you have a Jewish man, with Jewish roots

going back hundreds of years, with a birth certificate that states he is of a pure Aryan race. And he goes to the synagogue in Rome, I don't know which rabbi he spoke to, and said to him: 'I want to be part of the life of the community,' and the rabbi just laughed at him. The Jewish community in Italy has become more rigid in recent years, more closed. There has always been this rivalry between north and south. My family used to be called terroni [a derogatory term for southern Italians]. When you take into account this cultural rivalry, it's not surprising to see why Jewish communities in the north don't want to hear about how archaeological excavations done in Calabria of all places unearthed a synagogue even older than theirs."

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