



Catholic Jewish Relations in Pescara: a dream linking the past to the future

Lisa Palmieri-Billig* | 01.11.2019

The European Day of Dialogue for Judaism observed this year in 88 Italian cities, in 15 regions all over the country had as its theme “Dreams: A ladder to heaven”, based on Jacob’s dream, in Genesis, of a ladder connecting heaven to earth, man to God, with angels walking up and down its steps

PESCARA. The European Day of Dialogue for Judaism observed this year in 88 Italian cities, in 15 regions all over the country had as its theme “Dreams: A ladder to heaven”, based on Jacob’s dream, in Genesis, of a ladder connecting heaven to earth, man to God, with angels walking up and down its steps. As Noemi Di Segni (president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities) noted, Jewish tradition has found inspiration in dreams ever since Biblical times; in the Torah, the Talmud, in writings of Jewish mysticism and right up to Freud, whose “Interpretation of Dreams” illuminated the mechanisms of repressed subconscious instincts and desires, and their influence on everyday life. Dreams can also be a symbol of hope, Noemi Di Segni observed, and that was exactly the keynote of the Day of Dialogue as celebrated in the Adriatic town of Pescara.

Amidst the myriad of celebrations all over Italy, the commemoration in Pescara was perhaps the most highly symbolic, keyed to stressing the great value of Jewish-Christian relations in the past, present and future development of cities and towns in Europe.

With great enthusiasm for this initiative which was embraced by his city for the first time, Mayor Carlo Masci introduced a well attended conference on “Jewish Culture, the pleasure of knowing one another – the European and Italian roots of the Jews of Abruzzo.” The event was promoted by AJC – American Jewish Committee and UCEI - the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, and coordinated by Federico Gentilini, a lawyer and university professor. He has been working with great conviction and commitment, together with Prof. Amy Rosenthal, a journalist and Advisory Council member of John Cabot University’s Institute for Public Affairs, on bringing to light the history of centuries of peaceful and fruitful cohabitation between Jews and Christians in the Abruzzo region. Speakers also included the renowned historian Marco Patricelli and Lisa Palmieri-Billig, AJC’s Representative in Italy and Liaison to the Holy See. The conference ended with a tree-planting ceremony. An olive tree donated by Camillo Colangelo, director of the Confagricoltura Abruzzo, was planted in front of the municipality, in honor of the many generations of peaceful cooperation and dialogue between Catholics and Jews that took place in this territory.

Federico Gentilini recalled the Jewish origins of a trademark of the Abruzzo coastal region – the Trabocchi. These are bridges leading to wooden cabins in the sea raised on stilts furnished with large fishing nets, periodically raised up from the water by pulleys to deliver the fare of the day. These structures were invented and built by Sephardic Jewish immigrants who sought refuge from persecutions via epic migrations from Spain and Portugal following the 1492 “Alhambra Expulsion Decree”. Specifically, as noted by Amy Rosenthal, this invention saved the local fishing industry and brought prosperity to the coastal towns. It was the ingenuous contribution of the Veri family, immigrants from the south of France, who, seeing the wreckage caused by a disastrous tsunami in 1627 following an earthquake, designed and constructed the Trabocchi to defend this most important and characteristic source of livelihood for the area. Today, the Trabocchi that jut out of the coastline, are precious tourist attractions, offering exquisitely fresh fish of the day.

The entire Abruzzo region is marked by a rich history of good relations between Christians and Jews, as pointed out by all the speakers. During the Nazi invasion of World War II when Jews, even in Abruzzo, were interned and deported to concentration camps, the countryside simultaneously bore witness to heroic acts where local citizens risked their lives to hide and save their Jewish neighbors – as testified by the true stories cited by Gentilini and also by Yad Vashem’s recognition of Abruzzo’s “Righteous Gentiles”. Good relations continue today even though the Jewish community was decimated; for example, the hospital of Pescara partners with Israel in an exchange program where Israeli medical experts are hosted in order to teach local nurses and paramedics the lifesaving techniques of first aid therapies used in Israel.

Mayor Carlo Masci summed up the special message of the Day, by saying that by “strengthening awareness of the close relations that have always existed with representatives of Jewish culture in Italy, we are drawing on our Judaeo-Christian roots: a tradition that created the modern world of tolerance, of sensitivity to the needs of the weakest members of society, a striving for peace, and the culture of beauty. This culture is at the base of our European democracies.”

Historian Marco Patrocelli expanded even further on this theme. He presented a rich panorama of Italian and European culture as being star-studded with Jewish contributions in all areas, from the sciences to the arts, to participation in governance and economic advances, etc. “It is inconceivable to speak about European culture without referring to its outstanding Jewish contributions” he said. He is considered an expert on 19th and 20th century European history. One of his many books, “Il Volontario”, is the result of original research that brought to light the amazing and previously unknown story of Polish Captain Witold Pilecki, the first person to submit an official eye-witness report to London on the Auschwitz death camp - which he had entered, by getting himself arrested by the Nazis in order to organize internal resistance and report to the world what he had seen, after a successful escape in 1941. Patrocelli recalled that after heroically fighting in the Polish Resistance, Pilecki was sentenced to death in 1948 for his opposition to the Polish Communist Regime that had taken over his country.

Federico Gentilini spoke of an interreligious dream that he hopes will be realized and contribute to reviving the region of Abruzzo, whose capitol, Aquila, has still not recovered from the major earthquake of 2009, where Israeli first aid teams worked side by side with others to contain the damage and suffering of the population. The lush, varied Abruzzo countryside is dotted with empty medieval and renaissance villages perched on hillsides, deserted by their former inhabitants because of a dearth of enterprises that could provide a source of living. Recalling its past history and the rich natural resources of Abruzzo – its national parks and natural reserves, its famous landmarks such as the Gran Sasso mountain - Gentilini presented his thoughts on exchange programs with Israel that could import and harness technical and agricultural know-how as well as attract more Israeli and Jewish international tourism to the region. He aims to draw on the interreligious priority fervidly espoused by Pope Francis together with an array of leaders of the world’s major religions who are frequently called to participate in Vatican conferences on the topic of sustainable development. Amy Rosenthal noted that by organizing summer camps, skiing excursions, scout gatherings, guided walks and tours to explore the beauties of the Abruzzo mountains, waterfalls, brooks and streams as well as the Adriatic Sea, while listening to the true stories about the far and recent past history of Christian-Jewish friendships, the region could become a special attraction for young Israelis and Jews from all over. As a Jewish American who now calls Italy her home, she recalled the excitement she felt at her discovery of the Trabocchi, now a symbol of the Abruzzo coast, but created by foreign Jewish settlers for the population four centuries ago.

AJC’s Lisa Billig, struck by the warmth and enthusiasm of the people of Pescara, remarked that the celebration of Christian-Jewish relations and related projects could become precious tools for combating growing antisemitism in Europe today, where pseudo-theological anti-Jewish stereotypes are again invading the popular imagination and ignorance of the Vatican II “Nostra Aetate” document and all subsequent developments in dialogue and cooperation for the common good,

unfortunately still abound.

Editorial remarks

** Lisa Palmieri-Billig is Representative in Italy and Liaison to the Holy See of AJC - American Jewish Committee.

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