



Italy's poetic Parma region

Remnants of a Jewish past – and the roots of Verdi

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Special to The Jerusalem Post

PARMA – Unlike Rome, Florence or Venice, the city of Parma and its vicinity are relatively unknown by most tourists. This area of northern Italy, known as Emilia-Romagna, is bounded by the Po River to the north and the mountainous Apennines in the south and lies between Milan and Venice. Its cities, towns and villages offer the traveler historic, architectural and artistic wonders. Recently we toured the area exploring remnants of its Jewish past and seeking out the roots of Giuseppe Verdi, the great opera composer.

Italy has one of the oldest European Diaspora communities and a Jewish presence has been documented in Rome for more than 2,200 years. However, Jews only arrived in the Emilia-Romagna region during the 13th century.

The Jewish population in the area greatly increased following the Spanish expulsion in 1492. Jews were permitted to settle in Emilia-Romagna because of their experience in banking.

Banking was solely in the hands of the Jews since the church discouraged Christians from this profession.

In 1555, Pope Paul IV ordered all Jews in Italy to be placed in ghettos.

Ghettos were abolished only after the Napoleonic invasion in 1796. Jews remained in Emilia-Romagna until the unification of Italy in the late 1800s. By that time, prohibitions on Jewish business had ended and they left for the more populated regions of Milan, Rome, and Turin.

The 45,000 Italian Jews underwent severe persecution and hardship during World War II and more than 8,500 were deported to concentration camps. Many Jews participated in the resistance and a high proportion were shot or executed.

With the establishment of ghettos in the middle of the 16th century, Jews living in Parma were forced to leave. Duke Ottavio Farnese permitted them to live in 12 small villages in the vicinity and open money lending banks. Among them were the villages of Soragna and Busseto.

Soragna, 27 kilometers from Parma, had been governed for centuries by the Meli Lupi family, whose descendants still live in the town. Jews lived in tranquility due to the tolerant attitude of the ruling family and were given permission to acquire a burial ground and build a synagogue. They remained in Soragna uninterrupted until 1971, when the last member of the community died and the original Torah ark, dating from the 1600s, was presented to the Knesset in Jerusalem.

A synagogue still exists in Soragna. It is the largest and most beautiful in the area. It probably occupies the same spot as the original edifice and was renovated in 1854. The external façade blends with the adjacent buildings, making it impossible to identify the site as a synagogue.

During World War II it was confiscated and

became a fascist social club. The building was renovated in 1979 and now serves as a museum.

The driving force behind this development was Fauto Levi, former president of the Jewish community of Parma. He gathered pieces of furniture, decorations and religious objects from synagogues in the surrounding area to display in the museum.

Besides ritual objects, there is a fascinating photographic display of the Jewish history of the region, including a memorial and documentation of the Holocaust with emphasis on the deportation of Jews from the area.

The actual synagogue hall is built in a neoclassic style with a vaulted ceiling. The painted floral decorations are by Isacco Gioacchino Levi, a Jewish artist from Busseto and date from the second half of the 1800s. The side walls have stucco Corinthian style columns supporting a cornice on which are inscribed verses in Hebrew taken from the psalms. The Torah ark is flanked by two windows and two decorative columns. The woman's gallery is situated one floor above and the *mehitza* is made of a most attractive wrought iron grating decorated with an intricate and symmetrical design. Since no Jews currently live in Soragna, the synagogue is used for Jewish cultural events and occasional weddings.

Jews were also permitted to live in Busseto, a small village 10 km. from Soragna. There was an interrupted if small Jewish presence there until the 1950s, although the number never exceeded 50. In Busseto, there was also a small synagogue which was in use until 1917. In 1966 it was sold and the Torah ark, *bima* and pews were shipped to Jerusalem and are now in Beit Knesset Hatzvi Yisrael on Rehov Hovevei Zion in Talbiyah.

Today Busseto's fame rests on the fact that Verdi spent much of his life there. Not surprisingly, the main square is known as Piazza Verdi. In its center is a bronze monument to Verdi by the sculptor Luigi Secchi, which was put up in 1913. On the south side of the square is Casa Barezzi. This was the home of Antonio Barezzi (1788-1867), a prosperous merchant and music lover. The first public appearance of the 16-year-old Verdi was at the Barezzi home in the salon "Salone Barezzi." Barezzi was one of the first to recognize Verdi's musical talent and he hired him as a music teacher for his daughter, Margherita, who later became Verdi's wife. Verdi's early life was filled with tragedy and within four years, Margherita and their two young children had died.

To its undying shame and embarrassment, the prestigious Milan Conservatory rejected Verdi as a student, and his music education was largely financed by Barezzi. The Barezzi home is now a museum run by the cultural association Amici di Verdi (Friends of Verdi). Verdi was forever grateful

to Barezzi for his support and he dedicated his opera *Macbeth* to him.

This dedication page is on view in the museum, which also has an excellent collection of pictures and documents relating to the composer's early years. It also houses the piano on which he composed his opera *I Due Foscari*.

On the north side of Piazza Verdi is the citadel or Rocca, which was once the castle of the Pallavicino family. The citadel now holds municipal offices, the tourist information office and the Teatro Verdi. This 300-seat compact theater with horseshoe boxes is modeled after Milan's La Scala and was built between 1856 and 1868. There are four medallions in the façade by the Jewish painter Isacco Gioacchino Levi. Verdi strongly opposed the construction of a theater, although ultimately he did contribute to its cost. All of Verdi's 28 operas have been performed in this jewel of an opera house, often with prominent singers.

Leading from Piazza Verdi, is the main street of Busseto, Via Roma. This is colonnaded on both sides to afford protection from the heat and rain. In 1845, with money he had earned from his early operas, Verdi bought a luxurious house, Palazzo Orlandi, on Via Roma.

He lived there for two years with the former opera singer Giuseppina Strepponi, who would later become his second wife. Because they were not married, this caused a scandal among the narrow minded townsfolk. This house is now private property and closed to the public.

Verdi was born in a tiny village called Roncole four kilometers away. It has now been renamed Roncole Verdi. Verdi's father was an



PLAY ON! The interior of the synagogue at Soragna House (top left) and the Piazza Verdi in Busseto with Verdi's statue (above). (Irving Spitz)

innkeeper and ran a general store in their humble home. This modest building can still be seen and is situated at crossroads in the center of the village, just across from the village church of San Michele Arcangelo (St. Michael the Archangel).

It was in this church that Verdi was baptized and had his first music lessons from the organist. Verdi never forgot his humble beginnings. In 1863 at the height of his fame, he said, "I was, am and always will be a peasant from Roncole."

Three kilometers north of Busseto is the village of Sant'Agata. In May 1848 Verdi bought a small farm nearby, which he developed into his home Villa Verdi. This was Verdi's main residence from 1851 until the end of his life nearly half a century later. He gradually bought up the adjacent farmland and this became a significant farming operation, which he personally supervised.

The furnishings of the villa are intact and it is filled with Verdi relics. Today, descendants of his adopted daughter live in Villa Verdi. Five rooms on the ground floor are open to the public. These include Giuseppina Strepponi's room and dressing room, which contains a piano that Verdi used, the trunk that he took to Russia when he attended the world premiere of his opera *La*

Forza del Destino, commissioned by the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg.

The third room was Verdi's own room, where he slept and worked. It contains numerous mementos of his long career. The fourth room was the study, where Verdi kept his accounts. Today this room contains the vocal scores of all of Verdi's operas, along with many photos and documents. The fifth and last room contains the furniture from the room in the Grand Hotel in Milan where Verdi died in January 1901, at 87. The gardens at Sant'Agata are lavish with myriads of flowers, trees and bushes. The lawns are manicured with a gorgeous landscaped pool.

Travel tip: The day before arriving at a new destination, we booked our accommodation at www.expedia.com. The rate quoted invariably proved to be less than half had we arrived at the hotel without pre-booking.

In addition to the region of Parma, our trip also took us to the fascinating towns of Cremona, Lake Garda, Ferrara and Vicenza.

The writer, emeritus professor of medicine, is an avid traveler and photographer. He frequently writes, reviews and lectures on medical topics, music, art, history and travel. Additional pictures from this as well as other trips can be seen on www.pbse.com/irvspitz