

## 150 Years of Oriental Studies at Ca' Foscari

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# 'Ad me'ah ve-hamishim. Notes on the Teaching of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ca' Foscari, from 1950 to Today

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**Abstract** The teaching of Hebrew at Ca' Foscari officially began in 1965, under the guidance of Franco Michelini Tocci and continued until today thanks to researchers and professors specialised in Bible Studies, as well as modern Hebrew, Israeli culture and Jewish Studies more generally. Earlier than that, the early '50s had seen the birth of a short-lived Hebrew *lettorato* taught by two rabbis, Elio Toaff and Leone Leoni, thanks to an agreement between Ca' Foscari and the Union of the Italian Jewish Communities. Basing upon archival documents and interviews with some of the people involved, this essay aims to reconstruct the development of the teaching of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at the University of Venice, contextualising it within the history of Italian Orientalism and that of the Jews of Italy in the period that goes from 1950 to today.

**Summary** 1 Venice, December 1950. – 2 Hebrew and Orientalism in Modern Italy. – 3 The Teaching and Studying of Hebrew at Ca' Foscari from 1965 Onwards. – 4 'To One Hundred and Fifty'.

**Keywords** Hebrew. Jewish Studies. Orientalism. Venice. Jewish history.

## 1 Venice, December 1950

On Monday 4 December 1950, Elio Toaff – without a doubt the most significant personality of postwar Italian Judaism and Chief Rabbi of Rome from 1951 to 2001 – inaugurated the first Hebrew class at the Istituto Universitario di Economia e Commercio of Venice, giving the speech *Storia e vitalità della lingua ebraica* in the *aula L* of Ca' Foscari, to the presence of


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the Israeli Consul-General in Rome and other authorities. In the previous months, the Dean of the Institute – the economic historian Gino Luzzatto, himself of Jewish origin (Lanaro 2006, 735-40) – had discussed the idea of opening this course with the President of the Union of the Italian Jewish Communities (UCII), the Venetian-born Raffaele Cantoni. Cantoni had proposed “creat[ing] a *lettorato* of Hebrew in the Faculty of Languages”, specifying that the salary of the lecturer – Elio Toaff, then Chief Rabbi of Venice – would be paid by the UCII.<sup>1</sup> Although Luzzatto – who was also Vice-President of the Jewish Community of Venice from 1945 until his death in 1964 (Levis Sullam 2002) – supported the initiative, he feared that the class would have no students, since “among the many students of Commerce, no one is interested in culture per se [...], as for those of Foreign Languages, almost all are *poveri maestri elementari* (poor primary school teachers) and nothing can be hoped from their part”. Mocking the racist lexicon of the Italian Fascist bureaucracy, Luzzatto suggested solving the problem by “ensuring the attendance of three or four Jewish young men, who would then convince a few... Aryans”.<sup>2</sup>

Even though these first Hebrew classes do not seem to be mentioned either in the minutes of the Board of Executives of Ca' Foscari or in those of the Council of the Faculty of Economics, they must have lasted for about three academic years, from 1950-51 to 1952-53. Their launch grew out of a cooperation programme promoted by the UCII, together with the State of Israel and the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which foresaw the introduction of Hebrew classes to Italian universities and of Italian classes to Israeli higher learning institutions. Thus, between 1950 and 1959, Hebrew classes were opened in Venice as well as in the universities of Padua, Trieste, Rome, Genoa, Florence and the Università Bocconi of Milan. All were taught by the local rabbis, except for the short-lived *lettorato* of Rome, taught for one year by the journalist and intellectual Carlo Alberto Viterbo.<sup>3</sup>

In Venice, Hebrew was listed among the subjects offered by the Foreign Languages and Literatures section of the Faculty of Economics – whose council approved its introduction in a meeting of the end of October 1950.<sup>4</sup>

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1 This is a mistake on the part of Cantoni, since the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures was not established until 1954 (Meregalli 1991, 23).

2 Archivio Storico dell'unione delle Comunità Ebraiche Italiane (AUCEI), Attività UCII dal 1948, b. 231, f. 91-4, Cattedre di ebraico (Ebr.)/Venezia, Luzzatto to Cantoni, 26 July 1950. If not otherwise said, all the quotations have been translated into English by the Author.

3 AUCEI, Attività UCII dal 1948, b. 231, f. 91-4, Ebr./Roma, Viterbo to the UCII President, 6 July 1952.

4 Archivio Storico Università Ca' Foscari (ASCF), serie rettorato, scatole lignee, b. 30/B, f. 11, Ebr., Luzzatto to Cantoni, 23 October 1950.

Toaff wrote in his autobiography *Perfidi giudei, fratelli maggiori* that in the first year the course had about twenty students, only two of whom were Jews (Toaff 2017, 153), and consisted of an introduction to Hebrew, both in its ancient and modern version. The bibliography included a selection of texts from the Bible, but also from post-biblical and modern literature, “with particular attention [...] to the economic-commercial and geographic content”.<sup>5</sup> Toaff’s programme partly followed the suggestions made by the UCII in an undated and unsigned preparatory document on the *lettorati*: “for the commercial institutes, the readings and exercises will focus on practical rather than literary issues, such as: the Israeli industry, the various types of colonisation of Ere[t]z Israel”.<sup>6</sup> As for the lessons of Biblical Hebrew, attention was to be paid to passages like “Exodus 21 and 23: the administration of justice”.

Following a second agreement with the UCII,<sup>7</sup> in the academic year 1952-53 the *lettorato* was taught by Leone Leoni, who had served as Chief Rabbi of Ferrara before replacing Toaff in Venice when the former was nominated Chief Rabbi of Rome (Graziani Secchieri 2016). Also under Leoni, the course focused on ancient and modern Hebrew: the material ranged from excerpts of the Book of Isaiah up to medieval poems of Ibn Gabirol and early twentieth-century texts by some of the leading Hebrew writers like Haim Nahman Bialik, Shmuel Yosef Agnon and the poetess Rahel.<sup>8</sup> Leoni’s class was attended by seven students who, by the end of the year, “could understand sentences and texts that I read to them and were able to answer simple questions in Hebrew”.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, belying Luzzatto’s fears and to the surprise of the President of the Jewish Community of Venice Vittorio Fano, none of the attendees was a Jew.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, the *lettorati* were motivated more by the desire to spread knowledge about the State of Israel – established only a few years earlier, in May 1948 – and about Jewish culture in general among Italian youth than by the idea of setting up an organised Hebrew course structure at Ca' Foscari. The people involved belonged to a network of rabbis, Jewish communal leaders and intellectuals who had survived the traumas of the Second

5 ASCF, Istituto Universitario di Ca' Foscari Venezia, *Programma della Sezione di Lingue e Letterature Straniere*, a.a. 1950/51, 53.

6 AUCEI, Attività UCII dal 1948, b. 231, f. 91-4, Ebr./Lettorato di lingua ebraica: proposta di programma per un corso biennale.

7 ASCF, serie rettorato, scatole lignee, b. 30/B, f. 11, Ebr., Lattes to Luzzatto, 23 December 1951.

8 ASCF, Istituto Universitario di Ca' Foscari Venezia, *Programma della Sezione di Lingue e Letterature Straniere*, a.a. 1952/53, 56.

9 AUCEI, Attività UCII dal 1948, b. 231, f. 91-4, Ebr./Venezia, Leoni to UCII, 1 July 1952.

10 AUCEI, Attività UCII dal 1948, b. 231, f. 91-4, Ebr./Venezia, Fano to UCII, 11 July 1952.

World War and the Holocaust – Gino Luzzatto, together with others, had been removed from his position after the promulgation of the 1938 racial laws (Bettanin 2016, 73-80, 118-76) – and were now taking part in the ‘return to life’ of Italian Judaism (Sarfatti 1998; Schwarz 2004). Furthermore, both Toaff and Leoni had a deep interest in the educational realm (on the teaching of Hebrew in the Italian Jewish schools see Trevisan Semi, Sohn 1998, 98-111): Leoni fought against the closure of the school of the Jewish Community of Venice in the late ‘50s (Trevisan Semi 1997, 181) and participated in educational programmes broadcast by RAI, the Italian national television company (Graziani Secchiari 2016, 70-1). Toaff instead was to become head of the Italian Rabbinical College and always talked of teaching as “my greatest satisfaction, for which I never cease to thank the heavens” (Toaff 2017, 227).

The Hebrew *letturato* disappears from the faculty guidebooks in 1953. Even though the exact reasons for its closure remain unclear, it is likely that this was due to the limited number of students, cuts in the financial support given by the UCII and, last but not least, the administrative restructuring of Ca' Foscari that would lead to the establishment of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures in 1954. In any case, in 1961, when the Israeli Consul in Milan asked Giulio Anau, the Secretary of the UCII, “whether a Chair or *letturato* of Hebrew still exist in the universities of Bologna and Venice and who the lecturers are”,<sup>11</sup> Anau answered negatively, adding “I do not believe those universities even possess any Jewish or Israel-related publications”.<sup>12</sup>

## 2 Hebrew and Orientalism in Modern Italy

If, as I have suggested, the *lettorati* reflected the postwar history of the Jews of Italy and their relations with the newly-born State of Israel, in order to understand how a Chair of Hebrew makes its appearance at Ca' Foscari, one should rather go back to the history of Italian Orientalism and to the place that Hebrew and Semitic Studies occupied in it. It is fair to argue that in Italy – until the second half of the nineteenth century at least – Hebrew was considered to be a subject primarily of interest to Jewish or Catholic scholars, especially when it came to the religious and biblical dimension of the language. Unlike other European countries, in Italy the study of ancient Hebrew and Judaism for purely academic purposes long remained a marginal enterprise (Facchini 2005, 46), unless conceived in philological or archaeological perspective as part of the field

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11 AUCEI, Attività UCII dal 1948, b. 231, f. 91-4, Ebr./Varie, Smilan to Anau, 6 November 1961.

12 AUCEI, Attività UCII dal 1948, b. 231, f. 91-4, Ebr./Varie, Anau to Smilan, 9 November 1961.

of Semitic Studies (Rinaldi 1971). And with the partial exception of studies devoted to the history and literary production of the Jews of Italy, post-biblical Hebrew was even less relevant (Sierra 1971, 70-1).

One of the first scholars seeking to apply a scientific approach to the field was David Castelli, born in Livorno in 1836. A “‘rationalist’ and non-conformist Jew” (Levi della Vida 2004, 66), in his works – from *Leggende talmudiche* (1869) to *Il Messia secondo gli ebrei* (Castelli 1874) – and in his activities as a lecturer of Hebrew at the Istituto di Studi Pratici e Superiori of Florence, where he began teaching in 1875, Castelli utilised new approaches to the study of Judaism based on a rigorous analytic methodology and a critical reading of the biblical text, as per the post-Enlightenment *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (science of Judaism) and in opposition to the rabbinical tradition (Facchini 2005, 202-5).

Giorgio Levi della Vida is another scholar embodying the Italian Orientalist school at its best. Born in Venice in 1886 into a family of Jewish origin that was “non observant, but of patriotic traditions” (Nallino 1968, 306), Levi della Vida studied Hebrew and Arabic at the University of Rome in the early 1900s under the guidance of eminent Orientalists like Ignazio Guidi. He contributed to Leone Caetani’s *Annali dell’Islam* (Caetani [1905-26] 1972) then took up positions first as Professor of Arabic Language and Islamic Studies at the Istituto Orientale of Naples in 1913 and then as Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Studies at the University of Rome in 1919. Levi della Vida was one of the twelve Italian professors expelled from academia for refusing to take the oath to Fascism in October 1931 (Boatti 2001). After the 1938 racial laws, he became Professor of Semitic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and then in San Diego, holding this position until his return to Rome in 1945, where he died in 1967. Even though he was a Semitist and scholar of the Islamic world more than of Hebrew (Fales 2010; Facchini 2014), Levi della Vida left an indirect mark on the history of Hebrew teaching at Ca’ Foscari, especially as regards the cultural meanings of Judaism, the ‘Oriente’ and their multiple ties to Europe.

Umberto Cassuto, who was probably one of the most important scholars of the Hebrew Bible of the first half of the twentieth century, first in Italy and then in Israel, came from a very different background. Born in Florence in 1883, Cassuto was Chief Rabbi of Florence between 1922 and 1924, and from 1932 he replaced Levi della Vida as Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Studies at the University of Rome (Rigano 2016). In 1938 Cassuto resettled in Jerusalem where he taught Bible Studies at the Hebrew University until his death in 1951 (Rofé, Piattelli 2016; Zatelli 2016). He is known as an acute exegete of the Bible and author of commentaries to the Torah as well as of important monographs like *Gli ebrei a Firenze nell’età del Rinascimento* (Cassuto 1918) and *Storia della letteratura ebraica postbiblica* (1938).

### 3 The Teaching and Studying of Hebrew at Ca' Foscari from 1965 Onwards

As if establishing an ideal connection with the existing Orientalist tradition, the first Professor of Hebrew Language and Literature in Venice was Franco Michelini Tocci, a disciple of Giorgio Levi della Vida. His appointment in 1965 was intended to help meet Ca' Foscari increased staff' needs following the creation of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures in 1954 (Meregalli 1991, 23) and then of the degree in Oriental Languages and Literatures in 1965. Moreover, Maria Nallino – daughter of the great Islamist Carlo Nallino, who was Professor of Arabic Language and Literature at Ca' Foscari from 1962 onwards (Baldissera 1991, 83; see also Zilio-Grandi in this volume) – also played an active role in recruiting colleagues from other universities so as to create a Venetian school of Oriental Studies.<sup>13</sup> Thus Ca' Foscari could at last become “a true *politecnico* of the commercial languages of Europe and the East”, as Luigi Luzzatti had hoped when founding the Regia Scuola Superiore di Commercio in 1868.<sup>14</sup>

Prior to his appointment, Michelini Tocci was *assistente* to the Chair of Semitic Philology at the University of Rome and before that he had served as cultural attaché to the Italian Embassy in Israel for two years.<sup>15</sup> A scholar of ancient Judaism and of the history of religions – see, for example, his *I manoscritti del Mar Morto* (Michelini Tocci 1967) – Michelini Tocci was also interested in the study of modern Jewish literature and in fields such as psychoanalysis and mysticism. The committee that promoted him to Full Professorship of Hebrew in 1969 – which numbered some of the most distinguished Orientalists of the time, from Sabatino Moscati to Alessandro Bausani – underlined his versatility, noting “the original contribution given [...] in a field that was essential to open to the interest of the Italian culture”.<sup>16</sup> One of his first students recalls the depth and eclecticism of his teaching, that “open[ed] whole new worlds” to the young men and women attending his classes (Trevisan Semi 1991, 97).

In the academic year 1965-66, Michelini Tocci's first class consisted of an introduction to the Hebrew language, based on the one hand on the book that is still the most widely used grammar of Biblical Hebrew in Italy today, the *Grammatica della lingua ebraica* by Antonio Carrozzini

13 Telephone interview of the Author with Giuliano Tamani, 20 November 2017.

14 *Notizie e dati* 1871, 34; see Boscaro 2007.

15 ASCF, serie personale docente, f. Michelini Tocci Franco (1965-1970), Curriculum accademico-scientifico dei professori universitari, 1966.

16 ASCF, serie personale docente, f. Michelini Tocci Franco (1965-1970), Relazione della commissione giudicatrice per la promozione del prof. Franco Michelini Tocci ad ordinario di Lingua e Letteratura Ebraica, 1969.

(1961), and, on the other, upon the modern Hebrew textbook *'Elef milim* (Rozen 1958).<sup>17</sup> From 1968-69 onwards, that is, after the creation of the degree in Oriental Languages and Literatures, the programmes required an extremely rich reading list for the exams, including classics like Soggin's *Introduzione all'Antico Testamento* (1968) and Klausner's *Storia della letteratura neo-ebraica* (1926). Although only a few Italian translations of Hebrew authors were available at the time, several were listed in the bibliography: from two novels by Agnon, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966, to *Un re di carne e sangue* by Moshe Shamir (1959).<sup>18</sup>

In 1969, Giuliano Tamani – a young scholar of medieval Hebrew literature and palaeography from the Catholic University of Milan – joined Michelini Tocci at Ca' Foscari. Tamani, who worked in the university until his retirement in 2012, became the guiding figure of Hebrew and Jewish Studies when Michelini Tocci left his post in 1972 to become Professor of History of Religions in the Ca' Foscari's Faculty of Humanities – a choice dictated by the wish to better pursue his own research interests.<sup>19</sup> Tamani began by teaching Biblical Hebrew and, as time went by, included other subjects closer to his area of expertise such as medieval Hebrew literature, philology and Jewish philosophy. He also played a key role in promoting the acquisition of books and manuals of Hebrew and Jewish Studies – which were, until then, virtually absent from the university libraries.<sup>20</sup>

In 1970, Emanuela Trevisan Semi – one of the first graduates of Hebrew at Ca' Foscari – became part of the teaching staff, remaining until her retirement in 2017 and specialising in contemporary Hebrew literature and modern Jewish Studies. Other lecturers teaching in the period from the mid-'70s to the mid-'90s were Frederick Mario Fales, Fabrizio Pennacchietti, Bruno Chiesa and Giulio Busi. For several years, Ca' Foscari also had an adjunct lecturer in Yiddish, Sigrid Sohn. From the early 2000s, a new generation of professors and researchers in Hebrew and Jewish Studies has been active at Ca' Foscari, working on subjects as different as Biblical and Medieval Hebrew, the history of the Jewish thought, the Talmud, Israeli literature, Jewish and Israeli history, and Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies.

Although *esercitazioni di ebraico moderno* are only mentioned in the faculty guidebooks from 1974-75, it seems that these conversation classes did exist before and that the first *lettore* was an Israeli medical student

17 ASCF, Istituto Universitario di Ca' Foscari Venezia, *Programma della Sezione di Lingue e Letterature Straniere*, anno accademico 1965-66, 61.

18 ASCF, Università degli Studi di Venezia Ca' Foscari, Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere, *Notiziario/Guida per lo studente*, anno accademico 1968-69, 79-83.

19 Interview of the Author with Emanuela Trevisan Semi, Bologna, 4 November 2017.

20 Telephone interview of the Author with Giuliano Tamani, 20 November 2017.

at the University of Padua.<sup>21</sup> For several years, starting from 1974-75 the *esercitazioni* were given by Menachem Emanuel Artom, a rabbi and author of an important Hebrew-Italian dictionary.<sup>22</sup> His classes were based upon the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's *Sifron la-student* (Blum-Kulka, Ashuri 1968) and – in the case of more advanced students – included the translation of texts by Israeli authors.<sup>23</sup> As the number of students increased, the so-called *lettorato* became both an opportunity for students to converse as if in an Israeli *ulpan* ('language school'), and an occasion to get to know Jewish and Israeli everyday life and culture by reading newspapers and children's books, and visiting art exhibitions or the Israeli pavilion of the Venice Biennale, as well as the Ghetto and the old Jewish cemetery at the Lido.<sup>24</sup>

The first graduates of Hebrew were two young women who, in 1969, defended dissertations on the poetry of Yehudah Amihai and Haim Nahman Bialik, respectively. Other dissertation topics chosen in those years concerned the Bible, Venetian Jewish history, Israeli society and the medieval poet Yehudah Halevi.<sup>25</sup> The topics chosen point out "a new type of student" who does not follow the traditional Semitic Studies curriculum and is "interested in Judaism and Hebrew not only as something related to the past, but to our times".<sup>26</sup> The intellectual stimuli given by the lecturers surely had a role in this, as confirmed by a graduate from the late '70s who subsequently embarked upon a successful academic career abroad but still remembers the "special atmosphere" of her university years and the mark they left upon her: "Entering Ca' Cappello", where the Seminario di Lingua e Letteratura Ebraica was transferred in the early 1970s, "meant being inside a never-ending lecture. Professors had discussions with students outside the classroom [...]. Perhaps because we were so few, we had very direct relations".<sup>27</sup> More generally, we should also consider the repercussions of the increased space occupied in Italy by Jewish and then, from the '80s onwards, Israeli culture: just consider the historic visit to the Roman

21 Telephone interview of the Author with Giuliano Tamani, 20 November 2017.

22 Menachem Emanuel Artom (1916-1992) was the son of Elia Samuele (1887-1965) – a central figure in the history of the Italian Jews, who was Chief Rabbi of Turin, Tripoli, Ferrara and Florence, a scholar and teacher at the Italian Rabbinical College. After emigrating with his family to Palestine in 1939, Menachem followed in the path of his father and of his maternal uncle Umberto Cassuto as a Jewish Studies scholar, serving also as Chief Rabbi of Turin between 1985 and 1987 (Sierra 1993).

23 ASCF, Università degli Studi di Venezia Ca' Foscari, Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere, *Notiziario/Guida per lo studente*, anno accademico 1973-74, 127.

24 Interview of the Author with Tsipora Baran, Venice, 5 December 2017.

25 ASCF, Lista Tesi di Laurea 1914-91.

26 Interview of the Author with Emanuela Trevisan Semi, Bologna, 4 November 2017.

27 Telephone interview of the Author with Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault, 7 November 2017.



synagogue by Pope John Paul II in 1986 and the echoes it had, the public debates on the Holocaust and the role of Fascism, and the great success of Israeli novelists like Abraham B. Yehoshua and David Grossman (Trevisan Semi 2010; Steindler Moscati 2009).

#### 4 'To One Hundred and Fifty'

Since 1950, many generations of Hebrew scholars and students have passed over the threshold of Ca' Foscari. From 2013 to 2017, an average of twenty-eight students have been enrolled in the first year of the BA programme, much fewer in the MA and doctoral programmes. The library of Ca' Cappello holds almost 8,700 volumes and more than eighty journals, thirty of which have active subscriptions, in the field of Hebrew and Jewish Studies. Notwithstanding these successes, when it comes to the place of Hebrew in the Italian academic system overall, as Mauro Perani, President of the Italian Association for the Study of Judaism, noted, there is still "a great discrepancy between an increasingly popular and productive subject, mainly in extra-academic domains, and a scarcity of means and space granted to it by university regulations" (Perani 2005, 115). Trevisan Semi talked about the "desolating picture" that emerges when we consider the space allocated to Hebrew and Jewish Studies by Italian universities (Trevisan Semi 1991, 103). While, against the background of the increased precariousness affecting Italian universities, Tamani calls upon us to consider how "the rules of the game have changed" since the creation of the Chair of Hebrew at Ca' Foscari in the '60s, explaining that "the future of Hebrew is precarious if universities only take into account the number of students", leaving aside concerns about the broader cultural significance of the subject.<sup>28</sup>

Surely, what remains is the wish to transmit the knowledge of a language and culture that are undoubtedly a key part of the heritage of both East and West, which Micheli Tocci, echoing Levi della Vida, defines as "two cultural areas [...], but not [...] two worlds or two different humankind" (Micheli Tocci 1970, 8). While trying to follow their teaching, and keeping in mind Toaff's and Leoni's pioneering classes, let us then hope that the 'Hebrew history' written by the city of Venice (Tamani 2007) and then by Ca' Foscari will continue for many years to come. Or – to paraphrase a well-known Jewish greeting – *'ad me'ah ve-hamishim* (to one hundred and fifty).<sup>29</sup>

28 Telephone interview of the Author with Giuliano Tamani, 20 November 2017.

29 *'Ad me'ah ve-esrim* 'to one hundred and twenty' is the traditional Jewish birthday wish. Its origin is Genesis 6:3: "And the Lord said, my spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years".

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