

An Italian Jewish family's story rebuilt

When I discovered that a Jewish family once lived in my hometown, I tried to reintegrate them into my village's story

AUG 3, 2024



Norma Stella and Moisè Vittorio. Credit: Possamai Family.

Every corner of Jerusalem has a myriad of stories and anecdotes to reveal. They often span centuries, if not thousands of years. Not too far from Jerusalem's Old City, the Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art preserves some of these meaningful secrets and icons of beauty. Unknown to many locals, this tiny space is home to hundreds of artefacts and pieces of art which connect the land of Israel to Italy, or in Hebrew, I-Tal-Yah, meaning the island of God's dew.

When visiting the museum, one can admire a simple wooden Aron ha-Kodesh originally from San Daniele del Friuli, Udine. Painstakingly crafted by Natanaele Luzzati, whose first name appears in Hebrew characters on its top right corner, for nearly four centuries this Ark held the Torah scrolls of its small but well-known Jewish community. Having originally come from the same province of Italy myself, the existence of this Ark led me to an unexpected discovery: that a small Jewish family used to live in my village of

Mereto di Tomba (Udine), located just a few kilometers away from San Daniele del Friuli.



The Gentilli family's home in Mereto di Tomba. Credit: Gabriele Mancini. Who could have imagined that from this single artifact, the untold story of this family would be revealed again? After 80 years of complete oblivion and over thirteen months of remote and on-site research, I consulted multiple civic, state, religious and private archives and was eventually able to rebuild their family story and learn about their tragic destiny.

This is the story of the married couple Norma Stella Colombo (1899-1944) and Moisè Vittorio Gentilli (1894-1944), whose lives were intrinsically connected with the village of Mereto di Tomba for approximately fifty years. They were well integrated in the village as the owners of a grocery shop which provided the locals with their basic necessities. They had an active Jewish life in the nearby synagogue and, based on the archival documents we consulted, were well respected in the local village.



Stolpersteine commemorate Holocaust victims in the form of brass markers placed in the pavement on the street where the victims were last known to have lived. Credit: Gabriele Mancini.

Probably influenced by the rising fascist regime's propaganda, they moved to Venice in 1930. While trying to escape to Switzerland, they were brutally arrested in 1943 in Olgiate Comasco. They were later deported from Fossoli di Carpi to Auschwitz on February 22, 1944, together with five other close relatives as well as the renowned author and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi. The Gentilli family never came back to their home. May their memory be a blessing.

After putting together this fragmented and powerful story, the question remained: what could our local town council do to reconnect the community with the story of its former Jewish neighbors after eight decades of blind indifference? We decided to get creative, connecting a historical lecture about the Gentilli family to the music, literature, illustrative and contemporary symbolic arts. Working with the historian and professor Valerio Marchi, who wrote a book about other members of the Gentilli family in this region of Italy, we were able to retell this story at an official ceremony held in the local town hall in Mereto di Tomba on January 21, 2024.



Memorial Event in Mereto di Tomba on 21st January 2024. Credit: Gabriele Mancini.

We then installed two Stolpersteine in their perpetual memory across from their last known address at an event attended by hundreds of people with curiosity, respect, and genuine interest. (Stolpersteine, which means “stumbling stones” in German, commemorate Holocaust victims in the form of brass markers placed in the pavement on the street where the victims were last known to have lived. The German artist Gunter Demnig initiated the Stolpersteine project.)

Davide Merello, an emerging Italian artist, also illustrated five places important to their lives (San Daniele del Friuli, Mereto di Tomba, Padua, Venice, and Jerusalem), later printed as postcards along with a list of thirty books to further explore Italian Jewish life.

We also involved Umbertina Gentili, 93, who is one of the last witnesses of those dark times in Udine, and who interacted with dozens of Italian teenagers in a beautiful exchange of letters and artworks. Last April, a group of teenagers was also able to meet with the rabbi of Venice, Rav Sermoneta, and discover the presence of Jewish life in the famous city built on water and where the same Gentili family lived in the 1930s. (Ironically, Venice was also the first city on earth to formally establish a ghetto in 1516.)



Installation of Stolpersteines. Credit: Gabriele Mancini.

And this story is not yet finished. Next year, we will install the remaining four Stolpersteine in Trieste as a memorial to the other Gentilli family members. We will expand the local library by offering a list of books to assist the community in better understanding Jewish life, and we will continue to connect generations in order to build awareness, knowledge, and education. The story of this family, revealed again after decades of unforgivable indifference, started from a wooden Aron ha-Kodesh which sits in an unknown corner of the capital city of Israel. Who knows how many other small and big stories could be revealed? May their memory be a blessing to all.