

PREFACE

The Renaissance is justifiably regarded as one of the most significant eras in human history. When people tired of the burdensome limitations imposed upon them during the Middle Ages, they discarded them and broke through to a broad avenue of new social and cultural creativity. The cultural treasures of the Antiquity were rediscovered. Men began to consciously perceive the world with all its vastness and beauty, and to extol the worth of the individual, his powers, his talents, and his aspirations for creativity and fulfillment.

The new approach that opened society to the individual, offered hitherto unimaginable opportunities to the Jew. Renewed interest in the ancient world and its culture effected a changed relationship between enlightened Christian and Jew. Affection for the Jew displaced hatred, for he was the keeper of an important part of ancient culture—Hebrew language and literature. Simultaneously, new economic conditions gave rise to a new, more liberal attitude to “Jewish” professions. The social significance of the Jewish humanist and moneylender became enhanced and many sought their services. Some came to the Jewish humanist to study Hebrew language and Scripture; others visited synagogues to listen to his interesting sermons. On the basis of a special contract (*condotta*), that offered many privileges to the Jew, Jewish moneylenders were invited to many cities and states throughout the peninsula.

This astonishing change awakened a powerful response in Jewish hearts. The new attitudes and patterns of life penetrated the Jewish quarter. Almost feverish activity seized the Jews. They began to express interest in areas of knowledge which the Renaissance created. Political problems and events began to concern them, and even the visual arts engaged their interest.

In the area of visual arts, however, it becomes apparent that the Jews did not immerse themselves in the culture of the Renaissance unconditionally. The meagerness of Jewish

creativity in the visual arts reveals that where new views clashed with a fundamental of the Jewish faith, Judaism emerged the winner. After perusing the description of the various areas of life, the reader will conclude that in virtually every respect the Jews accepted the Renaissance "cautiously". They honestly strove to create a harmonious blend of Judaism and Renaissance culture in life and thought patterns, and to a large degree they succeeded.

As a result of specific historical conditions another social development of considerable importance became crystallized during the first half of the Renaissance period. Persecutions of Jews in Germany and their expulsion from France and Spain, while favorable conditions prevailed in Italy, stimulated a Jewish mass migration into the Italian peninsula. This migration transformed the Italian Jewish community from a unicultural group (Italiani) into a composite of Italiani, Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and Levantines. The immigrants also repopulated many areas on the peninsula which had become devoid of Jews at the close of the Middle Ages.

It is thus readily understood that the path of the Renaissance Jew is due to attract the attention of the historian. The Jewish scholar is further drawn to this period because of the "modern" problems that the Renaissance Jewish community faced: How to live in a friendly, highly cultured non-Jewish environment without losing its own specific Jewish character. Equally challenging to the scholar is Renaissance Jewry's composite structure, within which different groups lived in close proximity to one another, and where tension and cooperation were perpetually interchanging. The complex historical experience of the Renaissance Jewish community may be of special interest to the modern Jew in his quest to understand his position in the contemporary world.

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Hebrew words were generally transliterated in accordance with the system used in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Italian surnames were mostly given as they are listed in Marco Mortara's *Indice alfabetico dei rabbini e scrittori Israeliti di cose Giudaiche in Italia* (Padua, 1886). Hebrew books were generally listed in the *Notes* by their original titles. Whenever the frontispiece also listed the title in Latin characters, or in the vernacular, they were used.

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My colleague and friend Byron Sherwin and my former student Benita Masters made many constructive and felicitous stylistic suggestions. Mrs Mildred Crane of the secretarial staff of Spertus College of Judaica prepared the typescript, and my student Mary Pattison prepared the index.

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Moses A. SHULVASS