



Aron di Leone Leoni (1932-2010) *

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In Memoriam

On March 17 2010 an unforgiving ailment ended the laborious and persevering days of Aron Leoni or Aron di Leone Leoni, as he signed his writings since 1986 to honor his Father, the rabbi Leone Leoni.

With a degree in agronomy, he had been director of Cartiere Vita Mayer of Milano for many years and after his retirement devoted himself to historical studies. Therefore, his was not a career of a professional, but rather a passionate devoted scholar, who throughout the years absorbed the scientific rigor that distinguished him, adding to it a particular engagement and an indefatigable devotion to the archival research.

The special interest of Aron Leoni was the Sephardic life that he analyzed in its components in a process that, in some measure, we could define a geographical journey in reverse: from the settlements in the Este's States he retraced the epopee of the Jewish people in other Italian and European settlements, going back to Portugal, one of their countries of origin.

Starting point of his research, and perhaps the very same point of destination, was the Community of the Sephardic immigrants to Ferrara in the hospitable lands of the duchy, that "Nation Portuguesa" which is spoken of, as an independent organization, legally recognized, since 1545 (cfr. *Infra*, n.17, A. Leoni, *Gli Ebrei a Ferrara*

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nel XVI secolo cit.p.290). Leoni came back to research the “Nation Portuguesa” over and over again during the course of his studies. I remember in particular the history of the crucial years between 1538 and 1550 during which the Nation was expelled and re-admitted to Ferrara (cfr.*infra*, n.20). These studies were followed by researches on Sephardic settlements in the territories of the Dukes of Este between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and found a fortunate summary in the volume: “*La Nazione ebraica spagnola e portoghese negli Stati estensi: per servire a una storia dell’ebraismo sefardita*” (n 4 **Rimini**, **Luise** 1992). The general picture was enriched by prosopographical studies devoted to emblematic personages of the second part of the XVI century. For instance the clandestine *moel* **Gabriel Enriquez, alias Yosef Saralvo, or Cerralvo**, a new Christian, executed on February 19, 1583, because apostate and apostatizing, and the marrano **João Lopez**, who was elevated by Sisto V in 1591 with the title of “depository of the Apostolic Dataria”, but after the Pope’s death was accused of malversation and was compelled to flee to Salonika, where he returned to openly practice Judaism. To these studies others are added regarding prominent families of the marrano’s diaspora of the XVI century, such as the Benveniste and the Nassi (cfr.*infra*, nn.9 & 11) or pertaining to Jewish-Spanish families such as the Abravanel (cfr.*infra*, nn. 9 & 11). And finally an essay written in collaboration with António Lopes Andrade on **Daniel Rodriga**, the founder of the “scala”, the free port of Salonika and in some measure creator of the western community of Venice in 1589 (cfr. *infra*, n. 27).

The studies on the Sephardic settlements in the Este territories are complemented by those devoted to other components of the Jewish community of Ferrara: the German and the Italian (cfr. *infra*, n.8 & 10) the previous events of which are retraced with a punctual analysis of the Este’s diplomatic action in favor of their immigration (cfr.*infra*,n.7).

The desire to deepen the knowledge of the Sephardic community's vicissitudes in Italy and beyond, drove Leoni to widen the field of his research to include fundamental settlements for their history: Ancona, Pesaro and Venice. On this subject refer to the exhaustive essay by Leoni describing the Lusitania's presence in Ancona and Pesaro: "*Per una storia della Nazione portoghese ad Ancona e a Pesaro*" (cfr. *infra* n.18 pp. 27-97) in the volume that I edited in 2000 "*L'identità 'dissimulata'*" (cfr. *infra*, n.18)

Contextually his attention turned to the Sephardic communities of Hamburg, Antwerp and London, centers of vital importance of such migration in Europe. The dynamics of the Sephardic established in the German port are analyzed by Aron in the essay published in the Miscellanea in memory of Israel Salvador Revah (1917-1973), the greatest European scholar on *marranos* in the 20th century (cfr. *infra*, n.22). The subject of the establishments in Antwerp and London are the objects of a much wider study: the stimulating monograph *The Hebrew Portuguese Nations in Antwerp and London at time of Charles V and Henry VIII*, in which Leoni does not limit himself to offer new interpretations regarding the commercial and financial contributions of the Sephardic nations in the privileged markets of the international trade, but supports them with the publication of sources never edited before in the ample documentary Appendix (cfr. *infra*, n.26).

As an indication of the multiplicity of his interests I remember in particular his writings regarding the jewish printing press (or editing establishment?) in Ferrara, the chief cultural expression of the Sephardic group in the Five hundreds (cfr. *infra* n. 12, 23, 24); and the study in which he confronts the problem of *The pronunciation of Hebrew in the Western Sephardic settlements in Ferrara and Venice between the XVI and the XX centuries* and offers convincing explanations (cfr. *infra*, n.28).

While I am writing this in memoriam of my Friend, I have in front of me the proof of the work to which he devoted so much passionate research: *La Nazione Ebraica Spagnola e Portoghese di Fer-*



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rarra (1492-1559), I suoi rapporti col governo ducale e la popolazione locale e i suoi legami con le Nazioni Portoghesii Ancona, Pesaro, Venezia. Aron could not see it published but his last preoccupation, at the end of his days, was to send the manuscript to the Casa editrice Olschki in Firenze that, with the support of the CARIFE Foundation of Ferrara, is now in the process of being printed.

It is a monumental work in 2 volumes with a total of 1,186 pages of which the monographic part alone is divided in 20 chapters for a total of 541 pages, provided with a Glossary, a chronological table and a rich Bibliography. It can be considered a veritable Summa of the history of the Sephardic Community of Ferrara, of its origin until the death of Ercole II d'Este (1559), furthermore it is like a bridge to investigate carefully other hiberic settlements in Italy, such as Ancona, Pesaro and Venezia. I am truly proud that it becomes part of the series "*Storia dell'Ebraismo in Italia. Studi e Testi*", that I have been directing for years.

This is certainly the most cherished research to the Author. It is not surprising that he dedicated it to the memory of his Parents. The protagonist in the book is that Sephardic Community of which Aron felt sentimentally integral part and of which he was a member by choice. It is in Ferrara, his birthplace, where he formed during the difficult years of the discrimination, it is in this Community where his Father, Rav Yehuda Gavriel Leoni, served as chief rabbi during the years of persecution and during those of rebuilding after the war until 1950. With this majestic masterpiece ends this scholar's undertaking that indeed was initiated with the history of *his Ferrara*. In actuality his dream would have been to expand his work until the devolution of the Este's Dukedom (1597), an objective that his failing physical conditions did not allow him to pursue, as he told me with regret during one of our last telephone conversations. In the aftermath of his death we must be deeply grateful for the devotion, the perseverance and the love that he dedicated to this last, fundamental, generous effort.

