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The San Nicandresi Jews: A Brief Bibliographic and Photographic Essay

by

Michael Vocino

15 March 2012

I was teaching at the University of Rhode Island when in the early 1980s I went to the University Club on campus for lunch. I got into a discussion with some men about my plans for the coming summer. I said that I was visiting my grandfather's hometown of San Nicandro Garganico on the Garganico peninsula of Italy which juts into the Adriatic. One of the gentlemen, Prof. Robert Weisbord said, "You are kidding. Are you familiar with the Sannicandresi Jews?" I said that I was but that I couldn't believe that someone thousands of miles away would know of this little group of Southern Italians, indeed a group of mainly cobblers, who converted to Judaism in the 1940s after following for years their founder Donato Manduzio. Manduzio thought he and his group were the only Jews in the existing world. They had no idea they were to become part of the larger Jewish community after meeting "outsiders" who came to San Nicandro during and after World War II.

I now own a small apartment in San Nicandro and have had the opportunity to meet a few of the descendents of the converts still living there...most now reside in Israel. I've also been able to visit the graves of the founder, Donato Manduzio and his wife Emanuela Vocino and a few other of the converts who are buried in the town cemetery. For years now, I have been reading about this amazing story of faith. The local museum in San Nicandro, run by Michele Grana, has a very important display of information and all sorts of artifacts on the Sannicandresi Jews. At the museum one summer, I even met a young man, a descendant of the original group, who was exploring his roots and it was his first time in San Nicandro.

The Museum of San Nicandro, officially launched in 1998 is called *Il Museo Storico, Etnografico e della Civiltà Contadina di San Nicandro Garganico* and is located just a few hundred feet from my little apartment and it is in the Old Town, inside a restored Swabian Castle which probably saw the start of construction during the 12th century. It is called Palazzo Fioritto. Here are photos of the entrance to the Museum:



The Museum also has a copy of a BBC documentary recorded a couple of decades ago and directed by Sergio Minerbi on the group designed to remember the history of this group of converts to Judaism who did so in the most perilous of times during World War II. Although the conversion process for Manduzo began shortly after World War One, by 1946, most of the by then 80 or so San Nicandresi Jews succeeded in converting to Judaism, and the vast majority of them made *aliyah* in 1949 and most now live in Galilee. Manduzo himself did not want to leave San Nicandro and died there in 1948.

This group has also found attention in countries other than the United States, including, as stated, the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Argentina and of course Israel itself.

The most important of the first news media coverage of the group came from an article in **Time** magazine of 15 September 1947, "The Converts of San Nicandro." The **New York Times** was not to be outdone, and they published on the San Nicandresi Jews, too: "Italian Converts Find Their Way in Israel," on March 3, 1953 and "Converts Abandon Old Passover Rite," on April 1, 1953, both articles are penned by Dana Adams Schmidt.

The first book of note was written by WWII soldier Phinn E. Lapide (a Canadian-born Lieutenant in the Jewish Brigade of the British Eighth Army who met the San Nicandro Jews during the War) who wrote the entire story of the founder of the group, Donato Manduzo and his followers in **The Prophet of San Nicandro** (NY: Beechhurst Press, 1953). It was soon translated into Spanish by Noemi Mibashan de Goldenberg under the title **De San Nicandro a Galilea** (Buenos Aires: Editorial Candelabro, 1954.)

According to some critics, however, the best and most detailed monograph on the Manduzo and San Nicandrese conversion story is that written in French by Elena Cassin, **San Nicandro: Histoire d'une conversion** (Paris: Plon, 1957.) Two years later, it was translated and published in English as **San Nicandro: The Story of a Religious Phenomenon** (London: Cohen and West, 1959.) A second French edition of **San Nicandro: Histoire d'une conversion** was published with additional afterword information from Cassin (Paris: Quai Voltaire, 1993.) An Italian edition of the 1993 Cassin edition was published in Italy: **San Nicandro: Un paese del Gargano si converte all'ebraismo** (Milano: Corbaccio, 1995.) The Italian edition was important for its introduction by Alberto Carvaglion and its inclusion of the diary of Eliezer Tritto, one of the original converts.

The latest publication of a detailed history of the Jews of San Nicandro is by Yale historian John Anthony Davis, **The Jews of San Nicandro** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.) Davis' book also includes the most detailed bibliography of primary and secondary sources extant on pages 221-228 where much of the bibliographic information outlined here may be found in greater detail. Eric Hobsbawm reviewed Davis' book on February 3, 2011 for the London Review of Books and it was praised as the best record to be produced to date.

For a brief, quick history of the San Nicandrese Jews and even some of their current status, the following two sites might be helpful:

Shavei Israel at http://www.shavei.org/communities/san_nicandro/articles-san_nicandro/manduzio-father-of-many-people/?lang=en

Or the Around Naples Encyclopedia:

<http://ac-support.europe.umuc.edu/~jmatthew/naples/nicandro.htm>

Continued below:

What follows is a series of photographs that appeared on the Facebook page by Vincenzo Flena, C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!!

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/171676372931793/> Some of the photographs may be found in the three monographs that are mentioned here, but it was a locally generated Facebook page of San Nicandresi recalling their childhoods and towns that gives us these important historical records.

From: Vincenzo Flena C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!!

Nazario Tritto, con la fidanzata Incoronata Bux, i genitori Costantino e Incoronata, il fratellino Samuele, e la cugina Giulietta - poco tempo prima della partenza per Israele, per iniziare una nuova vita (Sannicandresi Jews Nazario Tritto, with his fiancée Incoronata Bux, the parents Costantino and Incoronata, brother Samuele, and cousin Giulietta – a short time before they parted for Israel, to begin a new life.)



From: **Vincenzo Flena** C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!!

Emanuela Vocino, moglie di Donato Manduzio!! - foto di Andrea Di Monte. (Photo of Emanuela Vocino, the wife of Donato



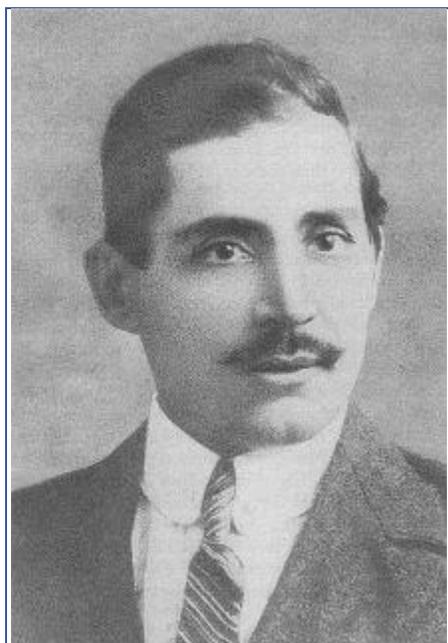
Manduzio, founder of the Sannicandresi Jews.)

From: Vincenzo Flena C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!!

Durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale, Nazario Tritto è stato mandato in un campo di HACHSHARA - Un movimento giovanile sionista, un'organizzazione costituita per bambini e adolescenti ebrei per lo sviluppo educativo, sociale e ideologico. Foto concessa da Batsheva Manes, figlia di Nazario Tritto. In questa foto, Nazario Tritto (in piedi a sinistra) è stato visitato da padre Costantino Tritto (seduto al centro), un altro amico da Sannicandro (in piedi secondo da destra), e alcuni soldati della Brigata Ebraica. / (During the Second World War, Nazario Tritto was sent to HACHSHARA - A youthful Zionist organization for children and Jewish adolescents for educational development, social and ideological formation. Photograph from Batsheva Manes, child of Nazario Tritto. In this photograph, Nazario Tritto (on his feet on the left) was visited by father Constantine Tritto (sitting in the center), another friend from Sannicandro (second row from right hand), and some soldiers of the Jewish Brigade.



From: **Vincenzo Flena** C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!! Nel giorno della memoria.....voglio ricordarvi gli ebrei che fondarono la comunità ebraica di San Nicandro Garganico. Nella foto Donato Manduzi il fondatore!! A day of memory...a recollection for the Jewish community of San Nicandro Garganico this is a photo of the founder Donato Manduzio.)



From Vincenzo Flena C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!!

I miei nonni genitori di Nazario Tritto (Costantino Tritto 1889 - 1956) e (Leonarda Mascolo 1901 - 1933). Le foto sono di Batsheva Manes, figlia di Nazario Tritto che aderì alla fondazione della comunità ebraica di San Nicandro Garganico. (My grandparents, Nazario Tritto and Leonarda Mascolo....This is a photo from Batsheva Manes, daughter of Nazario Tritto who were part of the foundation of the Jews of San Nicandro.)



Vincenzo Flena C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!!

Foto di Batsheva Manes, figlia di Nazario Tritto. I membri della comunità ebraica con Enzo Sereni, che visitò nel 1943 a Sannicandro. Enzo Sereni (Roma, 1905 – Dachau, 1944) un sionista italiano, fu un combattente della resistenza che fu paracadutato nell'Italia occupata dai Nazisti durante la Seconda guerra mondiale. Preso dai tedeschi, fu successivamente ucciso nel campo di concentramento di Dachau. (This photo of Batsheva Manes, daughter of Nazario Tritto, shows the members of the San Nicandro Jewish community with Enzo Sereni who visited San Nicandro in 1943. Enzo Sereni was born in Roma in 1905 and died at Dachau in 1944. He was an Italian Zionist who was a combatant with the resistance who fought the Nazi occupation during World War II. He was killed in the Dachau concentration camp.)



Below are other San Nicandrese Jews from Vincenzo Flena's Facebook page "C'era una volta San Nicandro...ricordi d'infanzia!!"

- **Vincenzo Flena C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!!**

Costantino Tritto con la seconda moglie Incoronata Di Lella e con i due figli Antonio di 16 anni e Nazario di 10 anni!



-

From: Vincenzo Flena C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!!

I miei bisnonni (nonni di Nazario Tritto) Antonio Mascolo 1870 - 1906 e Angela Leggieri 1870 - 1960. Foro di Batsheva Manes. (My great grandparents (grandparents of Nazario Tritto)...photo from Batsheva Manes.)



From: **Vincenzo Flena** C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!!

Giuseppa Iannone (1875 - 1951) - gli ebrei di San Nicandro.



From: **Vincenzo Flena** C'era una volta San Nicandro....ricordi d'infanzia!!



Enzo Sereni. Enzo Sereni, che visitò nel 1943 a Sannicandro. Enzo Sereni (Roma, 1905 – Dachau, 1944) un sionista italiano, fu un combattente della resistenza che fu paracadutato nell'Italia occupata dai Nazisti durante la Seconda guerra mondiale. Preso dai tedeschi, fu successivamente ucciso nel campo di concentramento di Dachau. (Enzo Sereni, who visited San Nicandro in 1943 was a parachutist for the resistance against Nazi occupation during WWII. After being taken by the Germans, he was killed at the Dachau concentration camp.)

Antonio Bonfitto, another Sannicanrese who converted to Judaism, too!

