

Residents of Pitigliano, a small Italian town nicknamed "Little Jerusalem," honored their heritage and pride -a once thriving Jewish community- with a Jewish arts celebration.



by Anna Maria Vinci
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Anna Maria Vinci is the arts and leisure editor for two newspapers, Il Corriere di Viterbo and Tarquinia Città.

Translated by Debra Hanna Leoni.

The second edition of the Jewish Film and Culture Festival held last Oct. 30 through Nov. 1, opened in the magical setting of [Pitigliano](#), in the province of Grosseto.

Visitors arriving for the first time to the enchanting, medieval village round their final curve after winding dramatically through miles of sheep-swept landscapes (coming from the direction of Tarquinia, about 60 miles northwest of Rome) to suddenly behold a city melted into the rocky summit of ancient hills. In the heart of this romantic image lie the remnants of a once thriving Jewish community - awaiting its renaissance.

The festival, subtitled "una chiave per comprendere" (a key to understanding and sharing the depth of Jewish Culture") under the direction of Michela Scomazzon Galdi, a free-lance journalist and film researcher, was enriched by collaboration with the Boston Jewish Film Festival and the Center of Judaic Studies at the University of Denver.

Women as peacemakers

This year's theme was "La donna ebrea: l'altra metà della stella" - "the Jewish Woman: 'the other half of the star'" or "the other side of the coin," in this case the Jewish woman as expressed in film, art and culture.

With violence and abuse characterizing so much of the 20th century, the objective of the new millennium, Scomazzon proposed, was seeking peace between people.

"We are convinced that [peace] is much more feasible with women's concern, support and attention," Scomazzon says. "In fact, as it often happened in the past and even now women are still the strongest supporters of peace. For this reason, we have dedicated the second edition of this festival to the women as symbols of hope."

The festival included women who are directors, actresses, painters, dancers, choreographers, writers, musicians, historians and political philosophers.

A city of refuge

It's not by chance that Pitigliano was chosen as the site.

Located in [Tuscan Maremma](#), an international tourism destination with special interest for Jews, Pitigliano is known as Little Jerusalem because it's one of the most ancient Italian Jewish communities and in the past one of the most populated.

The festival officially opened on Saturday at 8 p.m. in the lovely 14th

century palace of Duke [Orsini](#), in Sala Ildebrando.

After the opening greetings, Angelo Biondi, cultural council member of Pitigliano, began by announcing that '99 is the bicentennial for an extraordinary event that took place here in 1799.

The Christian inhabitants of Pitigliano valiantly defended the Jewish community from the attacks of neighboring Tuscan and Umbrian rioters who had already staged many acts of abuse and violence against the Jews.

Since the 1500s in fact, Pitigliano has maintained its role as a refuge for Jews, and Biondi closed by saying that the festival commemorates the unique relationship between these two communities.

By the 1800s the Jewish population numbered about 275, and then in 1861 when equal rights were granted to the Jews, most Jews left Pitigliano to study and work in the larger cities.

From 1938 to 1939 there were still about 60 Jews living in Pitigliano, but with the enforcement of the fascist anti-Semitic laws, the remainder moved to Rome and Florence.

Catholics rebuild Little Jerusalem

The last Jew born in Pitigliano, Enrico Spizzichini - one of only two Jews living there now, his mother being the other - says that he feels a great responsibility toward rebuilding and preserving the Jewish culture and so he plays an active role in revitalizing this ancient community.

The association, The "[Little Jerusalem](#)", is open to both Jews and Catholics, as is the tradition in Pitigliano, and it's the latter who largely sustain the association.

The village still contains the ancient [synagogue](#) that is designated as a historical monument and sometimes used for services by an occasional visiting rabbi.

There are also underground rooms and ovens where Passover matzo was baked, the oldest remaining ovens in Italy, and where we find epoch photographs.

Artist Eva Fischer

The festival proceeded immediately from the verbal to the visual with the exhibition of the international painter and Holocaust survivor, Eva Fischer.

Fischer "survived" to paint the dark labyrinths of her memories, but her father, a rabbi, and 32 other family members were killed.

She painted the tragedies from her assaulted memory for many years without ever showing her work. "I had hoped that painting would serve me as a cathartic ritual, but I cannot forget these horrors and I can't forgive."

Only in 1989 did Eva decide to show her paintings.

"The people had to know. I saw things that nobody had yet described." When the war was over she chose Rome as her adopted new home and there became part of a group of artists on Margutta Street - artists such as Mafai, Guttuso, Fazzini, Carlo Levi, Corrado Alvaro, De Chirico, Sandro Penna, Alfonso Gatto and others struggling to keep their inspiration aflame in the midst of a dark dictatorship.

During the early '50s Eva met Picasso in Luchino Visconti's home, and he encouraged her to continue with her landscape work and to also include architecture from southern Italy.

Soon after this period Eva transferred her work to Madrid where she

also took active part in the debates of Juana Mordo's Atelier in the fight against Franco's fascism.

In the '60s Fischer exhibited her work in London in Lefevre's Gallery, then in Israel and the United States.

Photographer [Shai Ginott](#)

Photographs of internationally acclaimed Shai Ginott were inaugurated and offered as an extraordinary "leg-stretcher" between showings of the films, the exhibit being made possible with the help of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Ginott started her artistic career in '84 as the photography director for the Natural Reserve Parks in Israel.

Since then, her photos have been published in newspapers, magazines, periodicals and books including the best-seller "Echoes of a Landscape", for which she was awarded the Golden Prize at the International Book Fair in Jerusalem.

Film director [Roberto Faenza](#)

Italian film director Roberto Faenza spoke at a round table discussion on the "Jewish Woman - Past and Present," the strength of the Jewish woman with regard to his film, *Jonah che visse nella balena* (Jonah Who Lived in the Belly of the Whale), a metaphor for life in the concentration camps.

"Jonah has a courageous mother who succeeds in maintaining a stupendous relationship with her young son, giving him courage through the strength of her love, the only, but extremely powerful light in the hell of the concentration camps."

The director then spoke about his latest film, *L'amante perduto* (The Lost Lover), revealing a cast and crew composed of both Palestinians and Israelis who learned to work together.

"I worked with many young Israelis on the set and in particular the young women who fought relentlessly to break the barrier of communication between the two ever-warring tribes.

It was a marvelous experience to see harmony and collaboration replace secular hatred on the set."

NY's Matilde Cuomo

To great applause, Matilde Cuomo, wife of the former New York State governor, spoke at the same round table discussion, greeting the many journalists who came to document her visit to Italy.

She praised Jewish women for values they have instilled in so many cultures. "In America, I worked intensively to help disadvantaged young people," she says, who found themselves in extremely difficult circumstances."

"Together with my husband, I visited many centers. ... The surprising thing is that in all of our visits and interviews we never met even one Jewish youth - a great tribute to the strength of the Jewish family and in particular, the Jewish mother."