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*Yearning to Become a Jew: Donato Manduzio's Conversion*¹

Abstract: *Donato Manduzio was a Southern Italian peasant who only learned how to read and write in his early thirties, while convalescing in a military hospital during the First World War. Upon his return to San Nicandro Garganico, his reading of the Bible and the visions he experienced led him to believe that Judaism surpassed all other religions. As he was convinced that the Jewish people had disappeared from earth, he thought God had given him the mission of recreating His people. After chancing to discover the existence of organized Jewish communities in Italy, Manduzio set about obtaining an official conversion for himself and about seventy of his followers. This paper endeavors to shed light on the circumstances of this collective conversion and to elucidate its causes by examining its historical and sociological contexts.*

Keywords: Donato Manduzio; San Nicandro Garganico; Religion; Judaism; Zionism; Bible; Conversion; Visions; Faith healing.

Introduction: A brief sketch of conversions to Judaism

The sacred Scriptures of all three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – contain foundational conversion stories. Unlike Christianity or Islam, however, Judaism has neither a tradition of mass conversions, nor missionaries, nor does it have a proselytizing program. Collective conversions to Judaism nevertheless occurred during the Hasmonean period (134 BCE) when, according to Josephus, Hyrcanus conquered the cities of Idumea and required the inhabitants to either become Jews or be exiled.² Another famous case is that of Helen, Queen of Adiabene, an Assyrian kingdom identified as present-day Kurdistan. She converted in the year 41 CE, along with her son and the royal family.³ In late Antiquity, in the Roman Empire, the recurrent prohibition of conversions to Judaism might indicate that they occurred frequently enough to be

¹ A preliminary version of this paper was given as a talk in Italian on April 20th, 2018, at the Lecce City Hall (Italy), in the framework of a conference sponsored by the Elisa Springer Associazione Italia-Israele di Lecce. The present paper is based on my translation and study of Donato Manduzio's diary in V. SERFATY, *Donato Manduzio's Diary: From Church to Synagogue*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.

² See FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 13, Chapter 9, in THE GUTENBERG PROJECT, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2848/2848-h/2848-h.htm#link132HCH0009>.

³ See *ibid.*, Book 20, Chapter 2, in <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2848/2848-h/2848-h.htm#link202HCH0002>.

perceived as a problem.⁴ When Emperor Constantine made Christianity the Roman Empire's official religion in 329 CE, he reiterated the ban on conversion to Judaism, as did the *Codex Theodosianus* between 429 and 438 CE, thus forming the basis of later bans in medieval and modern periods.

In spite of the fact that they incurred the death penalty for this, a tiny number of Christians nevertheless kept converting to Judaism and lived to write about it. A royal deacon at the Carolingian court, Bodo, thus became a Jew in the ninth-century, changed his name to Eleazar and persuaded his nephew to convert as well.⁵ Another dramatic example was that of Andrea, Archbishop of Bari, who converted to Judaism out of theological conviction towards the end of the eleventh century.⁶ The story of his conversion was narrated by a young Norman priest, Johannes, who also chose the Jewish faith.⁷ These conversions all concerned individuals with such a high profile that they left a trace in history's incessant flux, while the conversions of other, less prominent individuals slid into oblivion. Collective conversions to Judaism, on the other hand, came to a halt both because of the legal obstacles set up against them by Roman law and because Judaism itself sharply restrained would-be converts.⁸

The ongoing prohibition of conversion as well as the traditional reluctance of rabbinic authorities to accept proselytes are two of the elements putting into sharp relief Donato Manduzio's story. In the nineteen-thirties, Donato Manduzio chose to become a Jew in the small Apulian town of San Nicandro Garganico, with a group of about seventy people. This paper endeavors to shed light on the circumstances of this collective conversion and to elucidate its causes by examining Manduzio's trajectory and its major stages.

⁴ For a complete analysis of Roman attitudes towards conversions to Judaism, see L.V. RUTGERS, *The Hidden Heritage of Diaspora Judaism: Essays on Jewish Cultural Identity in the Roman World*, Leuven, Peeters, 1998, pp. 209-219.

⁵ See A. CABANISS, *Bodo-Eleazar, a Famous Jewish Convert*, in «The Jewish Quarterly Review», XLIII, 4, April 1953, p. 322.

⁶ See R. GOETSCHEL, *Obadiah, le prosélyte normand*, in D. TOLLET, dir., *La religion que j'ai quittée*, Paris, Presses Paris Sorbonne, 2007, p. 88.

⁷ See M. MULSOW - R.H. POPKIN, eds., *Secret Conversions to Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, Leiden, Brill, 2004.

⁸ See S.-C. MIMOUNI, *Les Chrétiens d'origine juive dans l'Antiquité*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2004.

Part I – 1895-1931 *The early years: Finding God*

Donato Manduzio was born in 1895, in a family of laborers who nevertheless owned a very small piece of land. His family's poverty and the dire state of the Apulian schooling system both conspired to keep him out of school, so that Manduzio could neither read nor write well into adulthood. At the age of 25, he married a woman of the same social background, Emanuela Vocino, and supported himself by working as a laborer. When Italy declared war on the Austrian-Hungarian Empire in 1915, he was drafted in the army. In 1917, he was either wounded or he fell victim to an unspecified illness: there is no information about the nature of the event which led him to spend several weeks convalescing in a military hospital.⁹

It was during this time of forced immobility that he learned how to read and write, on his own, at the age of thirty-two. He wrote in his *Diary* that from that time on, he read with a passion. The books he could lay his hands on were popular stories sold by the itinerant peddlers who were the main vectors of information and diffusion of news and culture.¹⁰ These books were meant for the widest audiences and included chivalry romances, anecdotes about the kings of France, and Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He also read the almanac as well as books on "Magic", most probably compilations of herbal remedies.¹¹

Manduzio's illness had caused him to limp at first and disabled him completely at a later stage. He could no longer work as a farmhand. His recently-acquired literacy, however, gave him new opportunities. He was able to retell the stories he had been reading in serialized, oral form. In the best tradition of story-tellers, he held his

⁹ See J. DAVIS, *The Jews of San Nicandro*, New-Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2010, p. 17, opts for a war wound. On the other hand, E. CASSIN, *San Nicandro: Histoire d'une conversion*, Paris, Plon, 1957, pp. 19-20, mentions an unidentified wound or disease that gave him a limp and then gradually crippled him. See also E. CASSIN, *San Nicandro: Un paese del Gargano si converte all'ebraismo*, Milano, Corbaccio, 1995.

¹⁰ See L. FONTAINE, *Histoire du colportage en Europe, XIVè-XIXè siècle*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1993, p. 247.

¹¹ E.g. *Il Guerrin meschino; I reali di Francia*; and Rutilio Benincasa's *Perpetual Almanac*. See SERFATY, *Donato Manduzio's Diary*, cit., pp. 13 seq.

audiences spell-bound with his rendering of heroic adventures and revenge tales, sometimes even inventing new episodes.¹² Manduzio's almanac reading also turned him into an expert on farming-related lore, such as the best times to plant seeds or to harvest. Moreover, his knowledge of alternative remedies enabled him to heal some people whose illnesses could not be cured by traditional medicine.

About twelve years after he had learned how to read and write, Manduzio had acquired the reputation of a learned and wise man and that of a healer. Yet, in the first pages of his *Diary*, he writes about realizing that all the romances, chivalry tales and magic books he had been reading were nothing but smoke and mirrors. The Catholic faith he had been born into was wavering, but this did not lead him to a secular worldview. Quite to the contrary, he looked for a different kind of religion and he wants to serve «a Being who created the world and rules it, a Being who is a God of Justice».¹³

One summer night of 1930, he had the vision of a man standing in the dark and holding an unlit oil lamp. He asked the man, «Why don't you light the lamp?». «Because I don't have any matches. But *you* have some», said the man. And Manduzio saw that he held a lighted match in his own hand. He lit the lamp, the darkness receded, and the vision disappeared. Manduzio told his wife about the vision, but he did not know how to interpret it.

On the following day, a friend of his came to him bearing a Bible in Italian. «A Protestant gave it to me, but I can't make head or tails of it. I'm sure you could», he said. Manduzio had never had any contact with the Bible before. He started reading the Book of Genesis. The impact of the text was powerful, and he read all five books of the Thora in a single sitting. Suddenly, everything made sense, he understood the Creation and the Eternal, and he realized that Judaism was the only true faith. Reading the Bible had led Manduzio to experience a true revelation.

As he kept on reading, he was able to figure out the meaning of his vision of the night before. The lamp he was supposed to light implied that he was meant to preach

¹² See CASSIN, *San Nicandro: Histoire d'une conversion*, cit., p. 21.

¹³ SERFATY, *Donato Manduzio's Diary*, cit., p. 13.

about his revelation. Manduzio believed that Jews had ceased to exist, and that God had entrusted him with the task of rekindling Judaism in his small corner of Apulia. A short while later, a series of visions gave him a Hebrew name, Levi, and confirmed the nature of the mission God had entrusted him with.¹⁴

Manduzio immediately set about spreading the news of his conversion to Judaism and trying to attract other people to his new faith. As he was doing so one day, at a fair, a stranger heard him say that there were no Jews left in the world. «But the cities are full of these people», said the man, and he gave him the addresses of the Turin and Florence Jewish communities. Manduzio immediately sent a postcard to both cities, announcing his intention to convert. The Turin community answered, redirecting him to the Jewish community in Rome. Thus began the second phase of his trajectory.

Part II – 1931-1935: The middle years: Seeking recognition

Manduzio sent a postcard to the chief Rabbi of Rome, Angelo Sacerdoti. In the awkward, oversized handwriting of latecomers to literacy, he announced his intention to convert to Judaism. When this communication remained unanswered, Manduzio sent a second postcard. There was no answer either. Manduzio then sent a real letter which he dictated to the local scribe and which gave details about his group and himself. This time, Angelo Sacerdoti replied, explaining that he had taken the first two postcards for pranks. He expressed his surprise at Manduzio's request and asked him whether he was a descendant of the Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity in 1541, at the time of the expulsion of all Jews from the country, and who had kept on practicing Judaism in secret. Manduzio emphatically denied any such connection, asserting that he had received the revelation from God, «just as our father Abraham received it».¹⁵

The Chief Rabbi might easily have dismissed such words as the assertion of a self-deluded dreamer. Yet, amazingly, he did the exact opposite, for the very first time in his

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 248-251.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

entire life.¹⁶ He had sent a prominent lawyer, Alfonso Pacifici, to ascertain the nature of the group. Upon advice from Pacifici, he had replied to Manduzio's initial letter, and kept on answering his unceasing stream of correspondence. He explained that conversion could only occur after long years of study and unwavering determination. He sent books, gifts and money for newborn children, he explained with benevolence why Manduzio's impatient yearning for conversion could not yet be fulfilled. He also sent envoys.

One of these envoys was Federico Luzzatto, who came to San Nicandro Garganico with two friends on his way back from the 1932 Fair of the Levant, in Bari.¹⁷ His report stressed the sincerity of the group members, their amazing knowledge of Scripture and the hybrid nature of their Sabbath worship, which included kneeling to pray, singing hymns of their own composition and listening to the Italian national anthem on a gramophone.¹⁸ It was a clear instance of religious *bricolage*, in Levi-Strauss' terms, but it was also a remarkable case of true religious fervor which elicited the sympathy of all those who came into contact with the group.

Another visit of major importance was that of Jacques Faitlovitch in January 1935. Faitlovitch was a friend of Alfonso Pacifici's; he had studied in France and Italy and had emigrated to the future state of Israel, then under British rule. A scholar specializing in Semitic languages and a religious Zionist, Faitlovitch believed in the universalist scope of Judaism and was therefore favorable to promoting proselytism.¹⁹ He was the

¹⁶ See *Letter from Rabbi Angelo Sacerdoti to Manduzio*, dated April 14, 1932, in CENTRAL ARCHIVES FOR THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE [henceforth CAHJP], Jerusalem, *Pacifici Papers*, P172/156. See also *Sergio Minerbi Papers*, in CAHJP, P 262/7, *Manduzio's Diary*; and SERFATY, *Donato Manduzio's Diary*, cit., p. 188.

¹⁷ Federico Luzzatto, 1900-1961; an Italian Navy Captain and a scholar who studied the history of Italian Jewish communities. He had been one of the organizers of the Palestinian Pavilion representing the future State of Israel at the Fair of the Levant in Bari, in 1932. A fervent Zionist, he immigrated to Israel in 1935, aboard a purpose-built ship under his command. See A. BACHI, *Volume Speciale in Memoria di Federico Luzzatto*, in «Rassegna Mensile di Israele», Terza Serie, 3-4, 28, marzo-aprile 1962, p. 20.

¹⁸ See *Letter from Captain Federico Luzzatto to Alfonso Pacifici*, October 4, 1932, in CAHJP, *Pacifici Papers*, P 172/156, my translation throughout. See also DAVIS, *The Jews of San Nicandro*, cit., pp. 42-44 ; and SERFATY, *Donato Manduzio's Diary*, cit., p. 188.

¹⁹ See E. TREVISAN SEMI, *Universalisme juif et prosélytisme: l'action de Jacques Faitlovitch, 'père' des Beta Israel (Falashas)*, in «Revue de l'histoire des religions», CCXVI, 2, 1999, pp. 193-211. See also E.

leading figure of the movement advocating the recognition as Jews of the Beta Israel (House of Israel) or Falasha, the Ethiopians who described themselves as descendants of Dan's tribe, even though their practices were quite different from those of mainstream, modern Judaism. He was bound to be fascinated by Manduzio's case.

The fascination was mutual. As Faitlovitch could speak Italian fluently, the San Nicandrese were fully able to relate to what he was telling them. They were entranced by his accounts of how Jewish pioneers fought to make the Holy Land their national home again, of how the Hebrew language was being revived as a vernacular after having been used for liturgical purposes only for two millennia. Faitlovitch's visit was the San Nicandrese's first contact with Zionism. From then on, the hope of emigrating to Israel became part and parcel of their religious outlook. Faitlovitch's visit marked the group's embrace of Jewish history, which they now understood to be an integral part of Jewishness. In so doing, they were a step closer to becoming Jewish, as belief in the One God is not a sufficient criterion to convert to Judaism. The question of belief ranks second to the will to be part of Jewish history and be part of the Jewish people.²⁰

Between 1932 and 1935, about fifty people joined Manduzio's group. Their religious practice followed the rhythm of the festivals as described in the Bible, and only the Bible. Manduzio was opposed to the Talmud,²¹ which is an essential part of Judaism, perhaps because he was disconcerted by its extreme complexity. His leadership was generally undisputed, based as it was on his visions and their interpretation, but also on his excellent knowledge of social relationships within his group. One man, however, Francesco Cerrone, challenged Manduzio's teachings: being the father of eight children,

TREVISAN SEMI - TUDOR PARFITT, *Ebrei per scelta: movimenti di conversione all'ebraismo*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2004, pp. 95-113.

²⁰ See L. ASKENAZI, *Leçons sur la Torah: Notes sur la paracha* [1997], Paris, Albin Michel, 2007, pp. 191-192.

²¹ The Talmud is a collection of rabbinical commentaries. It is made up of the Mishnah and the Gemara. See S.G. WALD, *Mishnah*, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 14, 2nd ed., ed. by M. BERENBAUM - F. SKOLNIK, Detroit, MI, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, p. 319. The Mishnah is a 3rd century CE body of explanations that «supplements, complements, clarifies and systematizes the commandments» of the first five books of the Bible. The Gemara is a body of «discussions and elaborations» on the Mishnah; *Gemara, ibid.*, p. 423. There are two versions: the Jerusalem Talmud dates back to the 4th century CE, the Babylon Talmud dates back to the 5th century CE.

he constantly battled hunger and poverty and often desecrated the Sabbath to sell ice-cream or work the fields. This early rift was to become wider and play an important part in later events.

Part III – 1936 -1943: *Caught up in world history*

On February 14th, 1936, Manduzio was served with a two-hundred-and sixty-lira fine for holding prayers in a private home. This was due to the 1929 Lateran Treaty between Mussolini and Pope Pius XI. In exchange for the recognition of the Vatican as a sovereign papal state and the recognition of Italian sovereignty on Rome, the treaty had made Catholicism the country's official religion. As a result, all other cults required official authorizations.²² In addition to the fine, the group was now under the surveillance of the authorities, who transcribed their correspondence in its entirety.

In July 1937, i.e., seven years after Manduzio had declared himself Jewish, the Union of Italian Jewish Communities indeed decided to officially convert the San Nicandrese group. Raffaele Cantoni, a man of many military and humanitarian accomplishments, was sent to prepare the group members.²³ In three separate stays, he brought prayer shawls, perfume holders, prayer books and other items. To comply with the legislation on non-Catholic cults, he rented a house to serve as an oratory and he helped the group start the official authorization request to hold prayer meetings there. He also urged Francesco Cerrone and two other dissident group members to remain united under Manduzio's leadership, for he had perceived the strained relations among them and he wished to support Manduzio, with whom he had struck up an immediate friendship.

²² See G. SALVEMINI, *Le origini del fascismo in Italia: Lezioni di Harvard* [1961], Milano, Feltrinelli, 2015, p. 161.

²³ Raffaele Cantoni was a First World War hero, as well as an early member of the anti-Fascist group "Giustizia e Libertà". He also played a leading part in the Jewish relief organizations which helped refugees from Nazi Germany and Austria. See A. TAGLIACOZZO, *Raffaele Cantoni*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 18, Roma, Treccani, 1975, in [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/raffaele-cantoni_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/raffaele-cantoni_(Dizionario-Biografico)/)

Fascist bureaucracy, however, proved immovable and Cantoni's efforts came to naught. The application for a house of worship got lost in the province's labyrinthine administration. Shortly afterwards, in September 1938, the so-called "Race laws" were passed, institutionalizing the anti-Semitic propaganda which had been spread by the Fascist press since 1930.²⁴ Jewish citizens were now officially excluded from schools and from all professional activities. The San Nicandrese were twice required to declare whether they were Italians or Jews. Having answered they were both, the children were expelled from school and Cerrone lost the meager benefit he had been receiving for his eight children. Moreover, Manduzio's contacts in the Union of Italian Jewish communities were under attack. A vicious press campaign had forced out of office Davide Prato, who had been appointed chief Rabbi of Rome after Angelo Sacerdoti's demise. He was replaced by Israel Zolli, who took office in December 1939 with the support of Fascist authorities. Raffaele Cantoni's high profile anti-Fascist and humanitarian activities led to his being imprisoned as of January 1940 in the Sforzacosta detention camp in the Marches region, and later in the Tremiti Islands.²⁵ For Manduzio and his group, the isolation was complete.

Part IV - 1943-1949: A spectacular turn of events

After the July 10, 1943, Allied landing in Sicily, Southern Italy was systematically bombed by the Allies to cut the Axis' supply routes and lines of communication. The ports of Naples, Palermo, Messina, Catania, Bari and Manfredonia were flattened. The railway and airport hubs in the provincial capital, Foggia, were bombed three times in August 1943, causing an estimated death toll of twenty thousand.²⁶ The bombings did not reach the Gargano region, and in the *Diary*, they are briefly alluded to, but only as «a fear so deep that every man, woman and child fled to the fields» on July 27, 1943.²⁷

²⁴ See M. SARFATTI, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista: vicende, identità, persecuzione*, Torino, Einaudi, 2007, p. 87.

²⁵ See C. COLAFEMMINA, *Mosé nelle nostre terre*, Fasano, Schena Editore, 2006, p. 66.

²⁶ See CASSIN, *San Nicandro: Histoire d'une conversion*, cit., p. 68.

²⁷ SERFATY, *Donato Manduzio's Diary*, cit., p. 123.

From September 10 to October 3, 1943, the Allied victoriously fought for the cities of the Adriatic coast. The Gargano was fully under Allied control in early October 1943.²⁸

Mussolini had been deposed and arrested on July 25, 1943. He was saved by the Germans, however, and taken to northern Italy, where he was placed at the head of a puppet government, the Republic of Salò, which persisted until the final German surrender in April 1945.²⁹ A long frontline thus divided the country: Naples and all Southern Italy had been liberated, while the Germans occupied Rome as well as the northern and the central regions of Italy, where they started rounding up Jews and sending them to death camps.³⁰ Nearly eight thousand Italian Jews were murdered between September 1943 and April 1945.³¹

The arrival of Allied soldiers in San Nicandro Garganico was a turning point for Manduzio and his followers. Early one morning on October 31, 1943, a convoy of Allied army trucks and jeeps passed by Manduzio's house. Such a convoy would have been unexceptional, except for the Star of David painted over the vehicles' hoods. Casting about for a way to make themselves known to the soldiers, Manduzio and his followers hastily sewed a flag out of a piece of blue fabric and embroidered it with a Star of David in white thread. When the soldiers drove back in the evening, the San Nicandrese waved their flag and the improbable meeting took place.

These soldiers were part of the Eighth Army of the Royal Army Service Corps that had reached Foggia in September 1943. They belonged to n. 178 GT Company and were responsible for procurement. Timber was required for military construction, and they found ample supplies of it in the Umbra forest, on the slopes of the Gargano. They had to drive by Manduzio's house on their way to the forest and back to their base. N. 178 GT Company was entirely made up of Jewish volunteers from British Mandate Palestine. They were under the command of Major Wellesley Aron, a remarkably able

²⁸ See CASSIN, *San Nicandro: Histoire d'une conversion*, cit., p. 68.

²⁹ See DAVIS, *The Jews of San Nicandro*, cit., p. 111.

³⁰ See SARFATTI, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista: vicende, identità, persecuzione*, cit., pp. 84-305.

³¹ See DAVIS, *The Jews of San Nicandro*, cit., p. 113.

officer whose objectives were to participate in the war effort as well as to try and help Jewish refugees.³²

Once again, the visitors took an immediate liking to Manduzio and his followers. At a time when the Jewish people was under threat of total annihilation, Manduzio's stalwart faith as well as his courage forced admiration and sympathy. Major Wellesley Aron asked for a copy of Manduzio's *Diary*, and it was quickly made in longhand and given to him. Corporal Spitzer, a Canadian journalist, identified so strongly with the group that he fictionalized their story in a novel he wrote after the war.³³ A stream of soldiers befriended the youngsters in the group. Even Enzo Sereni, who had been parachuted to Italy to liaise with resistance groups and organize the Jewish parachute unit of the British Special Operations executive,³⁴ spent a whole day in San Nicandro Garganico.

The contact with these young soldiers who had first-hand experience of life in the future State of Israel and who, in Sereni's case, could speak Italian fluently, made a deep impression on Manduzio's group, and young men and teenagers were especially enthusiastic. But the soldiers' arrival also brought to light the conflict which had been simmering for several years between Manduzio and Francesco Cerrone. Defying Manduzio's wish to be the sole spokesman for the group, Cerrone and his children multiplied direct contacts with the soldiers. Two other group members, Costantino Tritto and Angelo Marrochella, teamed up with Cerrone and disparaged Manduzio to the soldiers and the army chaplain, Rabbi Uhrbach. According to the *Diary*, they also directed visitors to Cerrone's or Marrochella's house instead of Manduzio's and they tried to set up an oratory in a remote neighborhood, which would have de facto stripped Manduzio of his leadership, since his disability made walking very difficult for him.³⁵

Manduzio was deeply hurt by these slights. He felt betrayed by the very people he had introduced to the Jewish religion. He reacted with force by excluding "the rebels",

³² See *ibid.*, pp. 114-122.

³³ Spitzer wrote under the pseudonym of P.E. LAPIDE, *The Prophet of San Nicandro*, New-York, Beechhurst Press, 1953.

³⁴ See G.F. CASHMAN, *Remembering Enzo Sereni*, in «The Jerusalem Post», April 16, 2015.

³⁵ See SERFATY, *Donato Manduzio's Diary*, cit., p. 200.

as he called them, from religious celebrations. The conflict crystallized around the issue of emigration to the future state of Israel. Whereas Cerrone and his associates tried hard to find a way to reach the Holy Land, Manduzio now rejected this idea, saying that God had given him the mission of rekindling the flame of Judaism in his small corner of Apulia. Leaving San Nicandro would be tantamount to disobeying God's will.

The split between Manduzio and "the rebels" lasted for a year. It took all the diplomatic acumen of Raffaele Cantoni, who had resumed his activities with Jewish refugees and with the San Nicandrese after the liberation of Rome in June 1944, to work out an agreement. Cantoni urged the two factions to mend their relationship as a requirement for official conversion. Manduzio drew up a ten-point pact which was signed by Cerrone and the other "rebels." The pact spelled out the rights and duties of all group members and re-affirmed that visions and their interpretation were the cornerstone of their movement.³⁶

Manduzio was again the undisputed leader of the San Nicandrese, and the group was pacified, on the surface at least. As a preliminary to conversion, Rabbi Alfredo Ravenna was sent from Rome to teach the group in May 1945. The circumcision of thirteen boys and men took place on August 5 and 8, 1946, but Manduzio and two other men remained uncircumcised for health-related reasons. Ten days later, all group members gathered at the Torre Maletta beach to perform the ritual of immersion in the Adriatic which completed the conversion process.

Manduzio had successfully carried out his life's work. He died peacefully at home on March 15, 1948. After his death, Cerrone, Marrochella, Tritto and about seventy of his followers emigrated to the newly-created State of Israel between 1948 and 1949, thanks to the contacts they had made on their own, and their descendants are now fully integrated in the country.³⁷ Manduzio's widow stayed in San Nicandro Garganico, along with three women whose husbands had remained Catholic. For many years, this tiny group, exclusively composed of women, kept alive Manduzio's legacy by maintaining their Jewish religious practices. For the past twenty years, however, a small number of

³⁶ See *ibid.*

³⁷ See DAVIS, *The Jews of San Nicandro*, cit., pp. 162-195.

official conversions to Orthodox Judaism have been taking place in Apulia, concomitantly with the re-consecration of the Scolanova synagogue in Trani, so that the San Nicandro community has now grown to about fifty-five people.³⁸

Part V – *Discussion*

Manduzio's life story might appear to be a unique, utterly unprecedented and irreproducible event. This is what is believed by many of those who encountered him or wrote about him.³⁹ Far from being an exception, however, Manduzio's trajectory can be interpreted as the brilliant self-reinvention of a man confronted to successive personal upheavals. To shed light on this trajectory, I propose to elucidate, in a first stage, the mechanisms which account for Manduzio's transformation from simple farm laborer to seer and healer. In a second stage, I will attempt to ascertain the reasons why he chose Judaism over all other religions.

To address the first issue, Manduzio's war wound or illness must be considered. Although his physical condition is never described in so many words in the *Diary*, the picture which emerges is that of a man who hardly ever leaves his home. Except for the inaugural Bible-giving episode placing Manduzio in a field he owns and his preaching at the fair, all the events recounted in the *Diary* take place at his house. Whenever he wants to communicate with his followers, he sends for them. Moreover, one of his quarrels with Cerrone is that the latter wanted to set up a house of worship in a far-off district, which would have prevented him from attending religious functions. Manduzio's severely reduced mobility therefore is a determining element, making it impossible for him to pursue his previous farming activities.

In the classic and still very influential study about magic Marcel Mauss wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century, he showed that in early societies, individuals with conspicuous disabilities and/or extraordinary abilities were almost pre-determined to

³⁸ This number was given to me during a personal visit to San Nicandro Garganico in June 2014.

³⁹ See for instance LAPIDE, *The Prophet of San Nicandro*, cit., or COLAFEMMINA, *Mosé nelle nostre terre*, cit.

become magicians or shamans. In the process he outlines, physical disabilities or unusual dexterity sometimes cause people to reject or to distance themselves from those displaying such characteristics. This in turn may lead the people affected with these infirmities to entertain delusions of grandeur or of persecution and might even lead them to believe they have special powers. Mauss adds: «What gives them magical virtues is not so much their individual physical characteristics as the attitude society adopts towards all of them».⁴⁰

Manduzio had both an acquired physical disability *and* remarkable intellectual abilities. The conjunction of these two factors predisposed him to explore social roles which differed from the one granted him at birth. The long-standing tradition of seers and faith healers in Apulia which I will now outline gave him the opportunity of channeling both his infirmity and his gifts into a socially accepted activity.

In Book VI of his *Geography*, Strabo indicates the presence of two important sanctuaries in the Gargano: that of the oracle Calchas, on top of a mountain, and that of Podalirios, Asclepius' son, at the foot of the same mountain, near a source.⁴¹ Consulting Calchas required the sacrifice of a black sheep, which was then skinned. One had to fall asleep on the oracle's tomb with the sheepskin wrapped around one's body. The dreams one could remember in the morning were supposed to be messages from the divinity.⁴² For his part, Podalirios was known for his healing powers, as befits the son of Asclepius.⁴³ The archaeologists and historians who have tried to identify the exact location of this mountain have settled on Monte Sant'Angelo, which is only sixty kilometers away from San Nicandro Garganico.⁴⁴ Although this localization is disputed, it makes excellent sociological and historical sense.

⁴⁰ H. HUBERT - M. MAUSS, *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie*, in «L'année sociologique», 7, 1902-1903, p. 23.

⁴¹ See T. VAN COMPERNOLLE, *La colonisation rhodienne en Apulie: réalité historique ou légende?*, in «Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome: Antiquité», XCVII, 1, 1985, p. 38.

⁴² See *ibid.*; E. DE MARTINO, *Un arcangelo sul Gargano*, in *Furore, Simbolo, Valore* [1962], Milano, Feltrinelli, 1980, p. 209.

⁴³ See VAN COMPERNOLLE, *La colonisation rhodienne en Apulie*, cit., p. 39.

⁴⁴ Van Compernelle, 40 quotes these researchers, but disagrees with some of their findings and sides with J. Perret, who locates the mountain in the Carbonara valley, near Mattinata.

Monte Sant'Angelo is indeed the site of a very old religious tradition. A Christian legend has it that God sent Archangel Michael to survey his Creation. When the archangel saw the sun rising over the Gargano, he found the spectacle so beautiful that he yearned to see it again. Angels being, however, unable to stand daylight, he had to take refuge in the cave that later became the site of Calchas' sanctuary, thus imbuing it with the aura of sacredness it still has today.⁴⁵

Another legend claims that Saint Michael appeared to Lawrence, the bishop of Sipontum (now known as Manfredonia) on three different occasions, in 490, 491 and 493 CE and urged him to build a sanctuary to him in the cave.⁴⁶ The bishop obeyed, and Monte Sant'Angelo has indeed been a famous Christian pilgrimage site since the sixth century CE.

In the contemporary period, Padre Pio's hospital in San Giovanni Rotondo could be seen as the Christianization and continuation of the healing and prophesying traditions of the Antiquity.⁴⁷ A faith healer and a self-declared prophet in the nineteen-twenties, Padre Pio elicited the skepticism of the Church and the enthusiasm of the public.⁴⁸ Nowadays, his hospital, located about thirty kilometers away from San Nicandro Garganico and 25 kilometers away from Monte Sant'Angelo, is a famous pilgrimage and religious tourism site. In the same area, the thaumaturgic and oracular traditions have also been taken up by many faith healers and clairvoyants in the contemporary period as well.⁴⁹ The Gargano promontory can therefore be said to have long been home to rural, informal religious cults blending personal, emotional contact with God with healing and prophesying activities.

Manduzio's connection with this tradition is expressed through his premonitory dreams and their interpretation as well as through his healing powers. The conjunction

⁴⁵ See COLAFEMMINA, *Mosé nelle nostre terre*, cit., p. 9.

⁴⁶ See VAN COMPERNOLLE, *La colonisation rhodienne en Apulie*, cit., p. 40.

⁴⁷ See DE MARTINO, *Un arcangelo sul Gargano*, cit., pp. 211-212.

⁴⁸ The Church's position changed over time and he was eventually canonized in 2002.

⁴⁹ See M. CASTIGLIONE, *I professionisti dei sogni: visioni e devozioni popolari nella cultura contadina meridionale*, Napoli, Liguori Editore, 1981, p. 23. See also A. IUSO, *Inquietudine religiosa e itinerari spirituali a San Nicandro Garganico*, in L. BERZANO - M. INTROVIGNE, eds., *Il Gigante Invisibile: Nuove credenze e minoranze religiose nella provincia di Foggia*, Foggia, Edizioni N.E.D., 1997, p. 227.

of prophecy with healing abilities is a thoroughly traditional one, as witness the proximity of the sanctuaries devoted to the oracle Calchas and to the healer Podalirios on Monte Sant'Angelo itself, and the use of dreams for diagnosis and treatment at Asclepius' temple in Epidaurus.⁵⁰ Moreover, writing about seemingly incurable diseases eradicated by mystical or divine intervention was also a well-established practice. For instance, Nock points out that «at Epidaurus, the priesthood both interpreted the dreams of sick persons sleeping in the Temple and recorded the miraculous cures».⁵¹ Canonical Christian texts such as Saint Perpetua's also contain narrations of healing dreams,⁵² and contemporary seers such as Giuseppe and Domenico Masselli di Stornarella circulated printed booklets recounting their prophecies and miraculous cures,⁵³ thus maintaining the ritual of spelling out prophetic visions and interpretations in a written document. Manduzio did the same, recounting in his diary conversion visions,⁵⁴ healing visions followed by miraculous cures, as well as prophetic visions of the immediate future and of the afterlife.⁵⁵

Manduzio's adoption of the traditional way of being different afforded to him by his society seems to have been satisfactory for nearly a dozen years, yet he eventually became discontented with it. The reason for his unease and spiritual searching may be linked to his newly-acquired literacy and his new social role, both of which undeniably were great achievements for him, yet may have had a transgressive aspect. Even though he had been able to weave his new skills into his way of life, learning how to read and write introduced him to a modernity that undermined the foundations of his previous existence within his social environment. This made further changes not only possible, but also necessary.

⁵⁰ See E. EDELSTEIN - L. EDELSTEIN, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, vol. 2, Baltimore, MD, The John Hopkins Press, 1945.

⁵¹ A.D. NOCK, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1933, p. 54; see also p. 89.

⁵² See *The Passions of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, translated from the Latin by J. FARRELL - C. WILLIAMS, in J.N. BREMMER - M. FORMISANO, eds., *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the "Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis"*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 14-23.

⁵³ See CASTIGLIONE, *I professionisti dei sogni*, cit., pp. 56 and 125.

⁵⁴ The words "dream" or "vision" are used interchangeably in Manduzio's text, as was the case in Antiquity and up to the eighteenth century.

⁵⁵ See SERFATY, *Donato Manduzio's Diary*, cit., pp. 243-262.

Reading the Bible served as a catalyst for his self-doubt and inner turmoil because it connected him with the founding text and the origins of monotheism. And of course, the powerful words with which God tells Abraham to leave his family, his father's house and his country⁵⁶ taught Manduzio the origins of conversion to monotheism and therefore provided him with a pattern he could follow.

Conversion through Bible-reading is indeed a very common occurrence,⁵⁷ but the text's impact may have been even more powerful because reading the Bible in Italian, without the guidance of a priest, had been forbidden by the Church since the fifteenth century.⁵⁸ With his independent reading of the Bible, Manduzio did what the Protestants had done: he established a personal, individual relationship not only with the text, but with God Himself.

He did not become a Protestant, however, but a self-declared Jew. This is indeed puzzling not only because there were several Protestant denominations in the Foggia province,⁵⁹ but also because Manduzio had no knowledge whatsoever of Judaism, and even thought Jews had disappeared from the surface of the Earth. Again, Manduzio's access to literacy might provide a clue to his choices.

When writing is introduced in predominantly oral societies, far-reaching psychological and social transformations may ensue.⁶⁰ Jack Goody thus attributed to literacy the individualization process that characterizes modernity, although he modified his deterministic views in later research and emphasized the equal importance of historical and social factors.⁶¹ Yet we may still retain the idea that the linearity of

⁵⁶ See *Genesis*, 12: 1.

⁵⁷ See CASTIGLIONE, *I professionisti dei sogni*, cit., p. 38; see also V. LANTERNARI, *Dreams as Charismatic Significant: Their Bearing on the Rise of New Religious Movements*, in T.R. WILLIAMS, ed., *Psychology and Anthropology*, The Hague, De Gruyter, 1975, p. 230.

⁵⁸ See G. FRAGNITO, *Proibito capire: la Chiesa e il volgare nella prima età moderna*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005.

⁵⁹ See BERZANO - INTROVIGNE, eds., *Il Gigante Invisibile*, cit., pp. 153-155 and 225-227; see also G. ROCHAT, *Regime fascista e chiese evangeliche. Direttive e articolazioni del controllo e della repressione*, Torino, Claudiana Editrice, 1990, pp. 22-23.

⁶⁰ See W.J. ONG, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London and New-York, Methuen, 1982; M. MC LUHAN, *Understanding Media*, New-York, New American Library, 1966.

⁶¹ See J. GOODY, *Entre l'oralité et l'écriture*, Paris, PUF, 1994.

writing, as opposed to the holistic nature of strictly oral communications, is one of the elements fostering the emergence of individuality and its development.⁶²

Another element to be considered is that Christianity itself contains individualizing tendencies,⁶³ whereby the inner self becomes the source of value, as shown by the religious and philosophical introspection carried out by Saint Augustine or Saint Teresa, followed by the religious self-examination required of the Puritans,⁶⁴ and continued by the religions of the self which prevail in American denominations.⁶⁵ The combination of literacy and self-reliance enable each individual to be at the center of all value formation and to turn away from established and hierarchized religions. Such responsibility, however, can induce significant anxiety and can result in what Bloom calls “religious desire”.⁶⁶ We may surmise that Manduzio was in exactly such a position. His estrangement from Catholicism did not mean that he was ready to leave religion behind, but that he was looking for an individualized kind of transcendence.

By learning how to read and write on his own, Manduzio had gained access to the wide range of options of cultural modernity. The mere existence of Protestant churches around him pointed to the array of religious choices available to him and to the possibility of conversion. Furthermore, the Evangelical churches established in San Nicandro Garganico were characterized by their reliance on the inner self and its unmediated relationship with the divine. Yet Manduzio did not join any of them and chose Judaism.

I propose that it was precisely Manduzio’s complete ignorance of Judaism that initially set him on his path to conversion. For Manduzio, Judaism was what Levi-Strauss called a “floating signifier”,⁶⁷ a symbol devoid of any content for him, and

⁶² See J. GOODY, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 14.

⁶³ See D. HERVIEU-LEGER, *Individualisme religieux et individualisme moderne*, in «L’année sociologique», 1, 2010, pp. 41-62.

⁶⁴ See V. SERFATY, *The Mirror and the Veil*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2004, pp. 4-6.

⁶⁵ See H. BLOOM, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, New-York, Simon and Schuster, 1992.

⁶⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 39.

⁶⁷ See C. LEVI-STRAUSS, *Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss* [1950], Paris, PUF-Quadrige, 2012, p. 54.

which could therefore be infused with any kind of symbolic content. Knowing nothing whatsoever about Judaism enabled him to invent it and to re-invent himself in the process. Knowing nothing about the Bible enabled him to be deeply struck by the powerful poetry of the Book of Genesis, and to find meaning without institutional interpretive grids. Manduzio was thus able to forge a personal relationship with God, to create his own version of the Jewish symbolic system and in the process, to sustain the sense of a self-created, autonomous identity. Through his choice of Judaism, Manduzio broke away from the traditional healer and seer patterns characteristic of rural mysticism. Judaism became Manduzio's path towards modernity.

Conclusion

Manduzio and his followers could easily have fallen prey to internal dissensions and could have disappeared without a trace, like many new religious movements. Manduzio, however, kept seeking the official recognition of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, and applied without delay for official conversion. Even though he was convinced that he was the recipient of divine revelation, he realized that his mystical visions could not sustain the group on their own. He understood that social institutions were needed to structure and support his movement, even though this meant his control over his followers would no longer be complete. In so doing, he demonstrated true leadership and a keen sense of social realities.

Therefore it is possible to say that the other heroes of Manduzio's life story are the rabbis and lay members of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities – Rabbi Angelo Sacerdoti, Alfonso Pacifici, Rabbi Davide Prato, Jacques Faitlovitch, Raffaele Cantoni and many others – who seem to have felt an immediate kinship with Manduzio. They were able to transcend their own rationalist worldviews to reach out to Manduzio, accept the sincerity of his visionary mysticism and fulfill his yearning to become a Jew.

It is also necessary to point out that Manduzio's conflict with Cerrone, Tritto and Marrochella, although intensely painful to him, actually turned out to be extremely creative. By opposing Manduzio's wish to keep his followers in Apulia and finding ways of emigrating to the just created state of Israel, the three men, with the help of

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Cerrone's son Pasquale, achieved a very difficult feat in a post-war context marked by huge numbers of refugees and displaced persons. Thanks to their efforts, they became part of mainstream Jewish history, completed the religious process Manduzio had initiated and provided an awe-inspiring ending to what had started out as a single man's path towards Judaism.