

Italian Jewish Émigrés in the United States, 1938-1950

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The archival work I carried out in the Rockefeller Foundation Archives forms one of the chapters in my doctoral dissertation. Whereas most historians assume that European Jewry ended in 1945 and gave way to America and Israel as the new centers of Jewish life, I argue otherwise. My dissertation shows that in the case of Italy, a vibrant European Jewish culture continued among refugee émigrés in the British Mandate of Palestine and in the United States, and among postwar survivors in Italy. This study reveals that despite the catastrophic effects of the Holocaust, Italian Jews maintained their attachment to Italy and to their prewar communal traditions well after the war.

The materials I located in my three days at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) helped me to understand the adaptation of Italian Jewish émigrés in the United States. I discovered that a number of Italian Jewish refugees were assisted by the Rockefeller Foundation (RF). The documents I examined also revealed an ambivalent attitude toward refugees, both among Rockefeller officials and among faculty of universities which welcomed the refugees. On the one hand, these Americans sought to help the refugees and believed America would benefit profoundly from the Europeans' scientific and academic achievements. On the other hand, they viewed the refugees as foreigners above all else, and expressed misgivings about the extent to which these strangers could conform to their host society.

As I progress with my research, I will be able to assess whether other refugees besides academics received a similarly ambivalent welcome. I will also inquire into how this ambivalence affected refugees' sense of being European, and how it shaped their desire and ability to see themselves as part of an American community.

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