



Italy: History of the Bahá'í Faith¹

1992

Italy.

Peninsular state in Mediterranean Sea, S of Switzerland and Austria. Pop 57.700.000 (1990). 302.230 sq. km. Inhabited since prehistoric times, the centre of Etruscan and Roman, and subsequently Christian and Italian civilizations. The seat of the Catholic Pope. Italian language, of the Neo-Latin group, dates back to the end of the first millennium D.C. Its renowned literary tradition is also extolled for its contributions to European literature: for instance the sonnet is a fruit of its geniuses. Its famous masters in the figurative arts, architecture and music influenced the greatest artists of all European nations not only during the Middle Ages and the centuries of its Renaissance, but also in modern times. Its philosophers and scientists significantly contributed to the advancement of civilization. Its origin as an independent and unified state dates back to 1861, after over eleven centuries of political division and foreign rule.

Official religious affiliation (1991):

the greatest majority of the population is Catholic. There are moreover 500.000 Protestants, 35.000 Jews. The localities where Bahá'ís reside are over 300.

Early Bahá'í History.

An early mention of the Faith is the announcement of the execution of the Báb and of the Zanján upheaval made by the *Gazzetta Ufficiale di Venezia* (12 September 1850). Several articles on the Bábí Faith were published by Italian newspapers in the Fifties [1: 105-109]. On 5 and 12 December 1880 two conferences on the Bábí movement were given in Torino by the Piedmontese naturalist Michele Lessona (1823-1894). In 1881 the two conferences were published as a monograph entitled *I Babi* [The Babis] [2], “one of the very first documentations, made by an European, of the episode of the Báb” [3: XII: 901]. Lessona also mentions Bahá'u'lláh, by

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reporting the presence in Baghdad (sic) of “a new Bab, successor to the first” [2: 64]. The “Báb’s successor at Acre” is also mentioned in 1894 by the Orientalist Luigi Bonelli (1865-1947), in what Bausani defined as “one of the best and perhaps the first of the scientific articles devoted to the Faith, in Italy” [1: 112].

At the end of 1898, Italy received its first Bahá’í visitor, Henrietta Emogene Martin Hoagg (Copperopolis, Ca 27 September 1869 – Charleston, S.C. 15 December 1945) [2: X: 520; 4: Oct/73, 6-11]. Enrolled as a Bahá’í a few months before, H. E. Hoagg, a good singer, went to Milan to continue her musical studies, and remained in Italy only for a short period. In the following years she returned several times contributing—with the encouragement first of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and then of Shoghi Effendi—to the diffusion of the Faith, as a teacher and a translator. In 1930 she reports “talks on the Cause... given to groups of University students” in Naples as early as 1920; one talk “to a large group of the idealistic Socialists, among the adherents of this group being some of the most aristocratic of Rome’s citizens,” in Rome; talks given after 1921 “at groups composed of theosophists, socialists and Esperanto students” in Florence, Milano, Torino, Bologna and some smaller cities; she announces that Bahá’í books “are in various libraries of the larger cities,” and that “As early as 1899 there were two Bahá’ís in Italy, both having now passed on the Abha Kingdom” [4: Aug/30: 8]. One of these two believers may be an almost unknown Edoardo Buonsignori from Milan [6: 1], and the other Maria Litsska Forni, of Polish origin, who lived in Crevenna (Erba), where—after she founded a orphanage [6: 2: 10: 7] and an old folk’s home—her memory as a saint lady is still alive. She accepted the Faith in 1899 [4: Aug/30: 8], visited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Switzerland and received from Him a Tablet [7: 2: 1 (April-June 1925): 26]. When she passed away at Crevenna on 13 July 1929, at 73 years of age, she had bequeathed part of her possessions to the Catholic church and received the papal blessing [5: 10].

In those early days Italy was visited because of its geographical position by Western pilgrims directed to the Holy Land to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá . Among them Charlotte Dixon and her daughters; through them Agnes Baldwin Alexander (later Hand of the Cause) accepted the Faith in Rome on 26 November 1900 [3: XV: 423] [4: Oct/83: 6-7]. Other pilgrims who visited Italy were John E. Esslemont, Martha Root, and Fujita. Between 1906 and 1907 some of the Oriental pilgrims as

well, since they could not reach the Holy Land through Constantinople, came to Italy, whence they proceeded to Egypt and then to Haifa [8: 117].

In the years preceding the Great War, Horace Holley (later Hand of the Cause) lived in Florence and Siena, whence on 29 August 1911 he went to Thonon Les-Bains (Switzerland) to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá [3: XIII: 850]. In those same years, the American Bahá’í teacher Nellie Steveson French [3: XII: 699]—who knew Italy and its language because she had studied as a singer in Italy in her youth—contributed to acquaint several Italians with the name and teachings of the Faith. Among them was General Renato Piola Caselli who, after having accepted the Faith and published an article on the Bahá’í World [3: IV: 344], in his latest days got close again to the Catholic church [5: 9].

From 1918 circa to 1935, Edith Russell Hall Burr (?- Florence, 30 May 1935), an American poetess, “the first Bahá’í in [Florence] and the first to kindle the light of the Cause in Italy” [3: XII: 62], taught the Faith in Florence. She introduced herself in several cultural groups, like the Theosophists and the Philosophical Society rooms in Florence; met several prominent persons, like Roberto Assagioli, founder of the Psychosynthesis School; put some of them in touch with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself, Who wrote Tablets to Assagioli and to a group of them who had invited Him to Florence [9]. Through Edith Burr one of the earliest Italian believers accepted the Faith in 1921: Teresa Bagnoli Gaspari Campani (?- Florence, 25 August 1964), journalist, speaker and writer, active Bahá’í, among the earliest translators of the Bahá’í Writings in the Italian language [5: 10-11].

From 1921 to 1928 Loulie Albee Mathews lived for several months each year, with her daughter Wanden, at Villa San Martino in Portofino (Genova), where she founded the International Lending Library [3: XIV: 360; 10]. Its books—many of which were Bahá’í books—were sent all over Europe, Asia and Africa. She received several Bahá’í guests—like Mary Hanford Ford, who used to visit Italy almost once a year [3: VII: 541]—and gave the announcement of the new Faith to several people, like Ugo Giachery (later Hand of the Cause), who in the early Twenties guided her and Wanden in a trip through Sicily [11: 8-9].

In 1928 went to Rome Verena Kropf Venturini (Berne, 7 August 1878- Rome, 1975) who had accepted the Faith in the United States in 1915 and remained a fervent believer till the end of her life [3: XVI: 566] [4: News Oct/47: 10].

In those early days “the political upheavals of the past... years... occupied the minds of the Italian” [4: Aug/30: 8] and seemingly distracted them from spiritual search. In the Thirties the diffusion of the Faith was even more seriously hampered by “the social and political conditions” which retarded “its further progress for many years” [12: letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to Teresa Gaspari Campani, 6 June 1933]. The Second World War isolated the old believers from the Bahá’í community and it was only when the war was over that a letter from Mrs. Randolph Bolles could reach Teresa Gaspari Campani [13: Sept/49] [5: 10- 11].

Immediately after the Second World War, Italy was one of the European countries where Shoghi Effendi, among the goals of the Second Seven Years Plan, called for “the initiation of a systematic teaching activity” [14: 88]. Therefore a few pioneers arose from the United States: on 20 February 1947 Ugo and Angeline Giachery arrived at Naples and from there went to Rome [11: 12; 4: Feb/47: 1; March/47: 3]; in April of the same year came Philip A. Marangella (1895-1974) [3: XI: 50; 4: May/47: 1] and his wife June, who remained for one year in Rome (they left on 19 February 1948 for the U.S.A.) [3: XVI: 525]; in 1948 came as itinerant teacher Marion Little (1891- 1973) [4: Feb/49: 6] who lived for a few years in Florence, contributing to the formation of that Local Spiritual Assembly [3: XV: 547].

Encouraged by the efforts of these active teachers of the Faith, the very few old believers (possibly only Teresa Gaspari Campani in Florence and Verena Venturini in Rome [4: Oct/47: 10]) begun working again for the Cause and new believers entered in the community. By the end of March 1947 the first Italian believer accepted the Faith after the War [11: 12], Augusto Salvetti in Genoa [4: June/47: 1 and 3]; immediately after accepted the Faith the first Roman believer, Lucia del Buono [4: Sept/47: 7]; by the end of October the first believer was enrolled in Florence, Colonel Giulio Jacoviello (8 February 1897-1974), (later a member of the National Spiritual Assembly and its treasurer); in Rome accepted the Faith, in 1948 Mario Fiorentini (1887-1967) (later a member of the National

Spiritual Assembly from 1953 to 1964 and afterwards a member of the Auxiliary Board to the end of his life) [3: XIV: 336]; Franco and Pierina Scola in April 1948 and March 1949 respectively, as well as their daughter Elsa Scola (4 December 1927 - 12 March 2003) (later an active believer and for several years a member of the National Spiritual Assembly); on 8 April 1950, Alessandro Bausani (29 May 1921–12 March 1988), (later an active believer, for several years a member of the National Spiritual Assembly and its chairman, and a famous Orientalist); in November 1950, Mario Piarulli (later a member of the National Spiritual Assembly and of the Auxiliary Board).

The first marriage between two Bahá'ís took place in Rome on 27 October 1951 between Alessandro Bausani and Elsa Scola. Laura Lonzar and Antonio Ventura married in Florence on 8 November 1951.

During the Ten Year Plan (1953-1963), the consolidation of the Italian Bahá'í community was pursued through the work of new pioneers from the United States and from Iran. In October 1953 Marie Ciocca Holmlund (Philadelphia, Penn., 1929-Cagliari, 1968) opened Sardinia to the Faith and Emma Rice and Stanley and Florence Bagley opened Sicily; in November 1953 Tábandih Paymán settled in San Marino, followed in April 1954 by her husband Suhráb: for this service these six pioneers were declared Knights of Bahá'u'lláh [3: XIII: 455]. In the following years other pioneers came from USA: in December 1959 David Ned Blackmer to Bologna [13: Jan/60: 5]; in 1960 Keith De Folo to Bologna; in 1962 Ruth Kellog Waite (Maria Montana) to Florence; from Iran came several families (in 1957 70 Iranian families are announced arriving to Italy) settling in many Italian cities, like Bari, Bologna, Genoa, Mantua, Padoa, Palermo, Perugia, Trieste, Turin, Venice etc. In those same years several Bahá'í university students came from Iran and actively contributed to the life of the community. Many of them remained and were perfectly integrated in the Bahá'í Italian community. From the United Kingdom Lady Kathleen Hornell (1890-1977) went in July 1960 to Venice [3: XVII: 443], followed by Irish Christine Bailey. A pioneer was sent to Bologna also by the Local Spiritual Assembly of Asmara (Eritrea), a forerunner of the many other who would have come in the 1970s. In the meantime also the first Italian pioneers began to move: Teresa Taffa (Pomponesco, Mantua 27 March 1915-Marino, Rome 10

November 1984), enrolled in March 1956 [13: March/56: 1], pioneered to Venice in 1959.

During the Nine Year Plan (1964-1973) the teaching work was assisted by new pioneers from Iran. The islands of Capri, Ischia and Elba were opened to the Faith by Persian and Italian pioneers. “The characteristic trends of [those years]... were a steady increase in the number of native Italian believers, a growth in the number of Local Spiritual Assemblies and localities where Bahá’í resided and a diversification of activities and projects in the field of proclamation and teaching. Statistically, at the end of the Plan, the proportion of Italian believers [rose] to eighty per cent” [3: XV: 283]. As a consequence, the community gradually acquired its independence for its own activities and in June 1967 could send its first international pioneers, Giovanni Pappalettera and his wife Leyla Brassesco, to a Mediterranean country.

During the Five Year Plan (1973-1978) “excellent progress [was] made toward the fulfillment of the goal of extending the use of mass media... More Italian believers than ever before [arose] to pioneer... an added stimulus [was] given to the Italian community by believers who [had] been forced through circumstances beyond their control to return to Italy from Eritrea” where they had accepted the Faith only few years before [3: XVI: 305]. Among them also was Giovanni (Gianni) Ballerio, (later a member and the secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly and the representative of the Bahá’í International Community at the United Nations in Geneva and in New York from 1981.

During the Seven Year Plan (1979-1986) the persecutions of the Bahá’ís in Iran made the whole Italian community to arise in their defense: the Italian Government, several town, provincial and national councils, newspapers, Radios and Televisions, leading personalities of the countries were informed of their plight and invited to defend their rights. Pioneers and travel teachers were sent abroad.

During the Six Year Plan (1986-1992) the Italian community became deeply involved in mass teaching activities which found their best expression in Portici, Naples, a high density population area which had been chosen for an experiment in mass teaching. The experience made in this field helped the Italian community to play an important role in the establishment of the Bahá’í Faith in Albania.

Institutional growth.

The first Local Spiritual Assemblies were the Assemblies of Rome, formed in 1948 [3: XI: 737] and those of Florence—the centre where the Faith was taught most actively in the early days of the history of the Faith in Italy—and of Naples, formed in 1951 [3: XII: 592, 594]. In 1953, beside these three Assemblies, 3 groups in Genoa, Milan and San Marino, and 6 isolated centres in Cagliari, Palermo, Venice, San Remo, Taormina, Sorrento are reported [3: XII: 774].

The first Italo-Swiss National Spiritual Assembly “the fairest fruit” of the European Project of the Second Seven Year Plan [16: 31], the twelfth of the Bahá’í world [3: XII: 303] was elected on 23-26 April 1953, in Florence. Four of its members were Italians.

At the end of the Ten Year Plan (1953-1963) there were in Italy 14 Assemblies in: Bari (1961), Bologna (1960), Genoa (1959), Florence (1951), Milan (1957), Naples (1951), Padua (1961), Perugia (1960), Rimini (1963), Rome (1948), Turin (1960), Trieste (1961), Venice (1960), Palermo (1958), Monte Carlo; nine groups and fourteen isolated centers [3: XIII: 1005]. Those Assemblies elected the first Italian National Spiritual Assembly in Rome on 29 April 1962. The membership was as follows: 4 Italians, 4 Persians, 1 American. In the same year the first Italian Summer School took place at Igea Marina (Rimini) from 7 to 15 September 1962 [11: 28].

During the Nine Year Plan (1964 -1973) the Local Spiritual Assemblies grew to 26 (included 1 in San Marino, 1 in Sardinia, 1 in Capri, and 3 in Sicily) and the localities to 157 [3: XV: 283]. The responsibility for Monaco was transferred to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of France. The community received by the Universal House of Justice more challenging international goals. Between 23 and 25 August 1968 the first Oceanic Conference of the Bahá’í World was held in Palermo at the presence of 4.000 Bahá’ís from all over the world, an event that “was given widespread attention by the Italian press, radio and television” [3: XV: 284]. Between 1 and 7 August 1972 a European Youth Conference was held in Padua, attracting 1.500 youth from all over Europe. This Conference was followed by a great upsurge in the teaching activities by the Bahá’í youth—especially a musical group called The Dawn-Breakers—that lead to a numerical and qualitative

growth of the believers, thereby creating the basis for the future activities of the community.

During the Five Year Plan (1973-1978) the responsibility of Rhodes was transferred to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Germany. Between 27 December 1973 and 2 January 1974 the Teaching Conference of the Mediterranean Area was held in Cagliari, Sardinia.

During the Seven Year Plan (1978-1985), and more precisely from Ridván 1980, the Universal House of Justice transferred the responsibility of teaching and consolidating the Faith in Malta from the National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom to that of Italy. The National and local institutions, while pleading the cause of the persecuted Iranian Bahá'ís, grew in their experience in dealing with civil authorities and in using mass media.

During the Six Year Plan (1986-1992) the National Spiritual Assembly grew in its experience of administering Bahá'í properties. In 1990 received from the Universal House of Justice the goal of cooperating with the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany for the establishment of the Faith in Albania.

Ugo Giachery was appointed a Hand of the Cause on 24 December 1951 and member of the International Bahá'í Council on 8 March 1952.

The Italian believers appointed members of the Auxiliary Board are the following: for Protection, Mario Piarulli, (1959- 1991) (7 November 1957?); Maria Augusta Favalli Hedayat, (1986-); Graziella Lamperti (1991-); for Propagation, Mario Fiorentini, (1964-1967); Massimo Boldracchi, (1968- 1978); Gianfranco Mazzoni (1977-1986); Giuseppe Robiati (1978-1984); Marzio Zambello (1984-); Mauro Bulletti (1986-1991), Uccio Saverino, (1986-1989); Ugo Milone (1989-).

The first Bahá'í national centre in Rome was acquired on 12 November 1955 and in 1956 a land for the future Italian Mother Temple was acquired at Fiumicino (Rome) on the banks of Tiber [12: Shoghi Effendi, cablegram to Ugo Giachery, 20 February 1954]. In 1965 an endowment located at Rocca di Papa (Rome) was donated. In 1967 an apartment in Rome was bequeathed to the community by Mario Fiorentini (today the seat of the National Spiritual Assembly). Other properties were later acquired: in 1975 a Centre was donated in Perugia; in 1980 a

greater land located at Nazzano (Rome) was donated for the Temple; in 1984 another apartment in Rome was bequeathed by Teresa Taffa. Further acquisition were the Centre “Nasrin Sabet Riso” in Portici (Naples) donated in 1990 and the Permanent Teaching Institute in Acuto (Frosinone) in 1991.

The first translations of Bahá’í books into Italian date back to the early Twenties when H. E. Hoagg translated in 1923 the talks given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Paris and London in 1911 and 1913. Teresa Gaspari Campani translated The Hidden Words and the Words of Wisdom (published in 1926 in Florence as *Parole Velate e Parole di Sapienza* di Bahá’u’lláh) [3: III: 242] as well as *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era* in cooperation with H. E. Hoagg in 1928 [13: Sept/49:]. After the War, through the efforts of Ugo Giachery, the old translations were revised and many new books were translated [11: 16].

The Italian Bahá’í Publishing Trust was formed in 1969. By that time a great number of Bahá’í Sacred Writings and books have been translated into Italian, old translations have been revised and commentaries on the Faith have been written by Italian believers. In 1977 the National Spiritual Assembly started the publication of *Opinioni Bahá’í* a Bahá’í review similar to the American World **Order**.

In the meantime Italian believers founded independent Publishing Trusts for the specific purpose of publishing Bahá’í literature: B and S in Recco, Casa Editrice Núr in Rome and in 1989 GEI (Gruppo Editoriale Insieme) in Recco.

Official recognition.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Italy was legally incorporated on 11 November 1966. In 1974 Bahá’í marriage was recognized by Italian law [3: XVI: 305] and on 21 March 1974 Augusto Robiati was appointed by the Italian Government officiant of marriages for the Bahá’í Community of Rimini on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly [3: XVI: 375].

Distinctive features of the Bahá’í Community.

In the years preceding the Second World War the Italian Community was composed by American believers who taught the Faith and very few Italian new believers. In the years Thirties two Eastern Bahá’ís, Iraqi Dawid Salih Toeg [4:

July/30: 7] and Iranian Rúhu'lláh Mouzun [3: V: 430], lived for personal reasons in Italy.

After the War between 1947 and 1953 the pioneers came from the United States; during the Ten Years Plan they came mainly from Iran, but also from the USA and the United Kingdom. In those years the Italian believers were few and the communities were mainly formed by Iranians. The percentage of Italian Bahá'ís grew from 32.4% in 1962, to 77% in 1972, to 80% in 1986 [17].

Italy and the history of the Bahá'í Faith.

The physician who tried to cure the Purest Branch after the accident that caused his death in 1870 was Italian [20: 25 (1349): 3-4: 81].

In his childhood Shoghi Effendi had an Italian teacher [18: 9].

On 27 March 1912 the S.S. Cedric arrived at the port of Naples: on the ship there was 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself on His way to the United States; in that occasion He was invited "to address a meeting in the main lounge," however He did not put His feet on Italian soil. The Italian sanitary control obliged the young Shoghi Effendi to renounce his voyage with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and to return to the Holy Land because—they said—he was infected by trachoma [8: 171-2].

In 1919, Dr. Zia Baghdadi embarked at New York on the Italian ship Giuseppe Verdi directed to the Holy Land. During his trip he taught openly the Faith and was accused by some passengers—and particularly by an Italian priest—of being a Bolshevik, enemy of Christ and of the people. At Naples he was questioned by the police, his baggage was severely inspected, but he was found innocent. He was allowed to prosecute his voyage on the same ship, but at each Italian port the ship touched he was strictly observed by the police [6: II (1921): 293- 309 (from the Persian)].

Shoghi Effendi visited Italy several times, in a private form [18: 178- 80].

Shoghi Effendi wanted the Shrine of the Greatest Holy Leaf to be carved in Italy [18: 146-7]. He wanted also the Superstructure of the Shrine of the Báb (1948-1953) and the International Archives Building (1955-1957) to be carved in Italy and entrusted Ugo Giachery of following the progress of work [21: 68- 108, 149-69]. The Italian firm Marmi Vicentini in Chiampo (Vicenza)—that had worked the

marble for the Building of the Bahá'í International Archives—was chosen also to work the marble for the new Seat of the Universal House of Justice (1975-1982) [3: XVII: 314-16].

The growth of the Bahá'í Community.

Number of:

Year	Bahá'ís	Localities	LSAs	groups	endowments
1937	-	3	-	-	[3: VII: 559]
1944	-	3	-	-	[3: IX: 656]
1946	-	4	-	-	
1956	-	5	3	1	2
1957	-	17	5	4	2
1962	284	33	15	11	2
1972	707	139	27	41	4
1978	1122	202	43	66	5
1986	1372	275	54	108	6 [22]

References to Italy and Italians in Bahá'í texts.

References to Rome, its great personages and civilization:

‘Abdu’l-Bahá :

SDC 54, 58.

PUP 18, 85, 136, 158, 254, 281-2, 293, 331, 363-4, 391-2, 406-7, 429.

SAQ 15, 303.

SW VIII: 214-5.

ABL 103.

SWAB 63, 183, 311.

Shoghi Effendi:

WOB 26-7, 33, 57, 74, 156, 171, 176, 191, 202.

PDC 101.

MBW 161.

References to modern Italy and Italians:

‘Abdu’l-Bahá ,

TDP 41 (Wilmette 1977 rev ed).

PUP 6, 84, 119.

PT 28, 30, 114-5.

SAQ 23-4.

Shoghi Effendi,

BA 34.

GPB 281.

MA 88, 95.

CF 22, 24, 37, 107, 108, 115, 119.

MBW 12, 22-3, 23, 24, 27, 31, 32, 36, 37, 52, 54, 65, 70, 114, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160.

PDC 55, 56, 108.

UD 18, 335.

LDG II: 6.

The Universal House of Justice:

LG 103, 104, 130.

MUHJ 10, 13, 16, 17, 126.

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- [17] Letter from the Department of Statistics of the Universal House of Justice, 19 January 1987, to all National Spiritual Assemblies.
- [18] R. Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl*. London, 1969.
- [19] Shoghi Effendi. *God Passes By*. Wilmette, Ill., 1944.
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