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Faculty Travel: A Room with Two Views

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Our week in Italy would do double duty, we hoped. First, of course, Jeanne and I wanted to see the Florence of "A Room With A View," the romantic, picturesque and memorable Florence. Second, I intended to do some research for a course I teach on discrimination and prejudice, into the experiences of Jews in Italy. From childhood I had heard that, though Germany and Italy had been allies during WWII, Jews had fared better in Italy than in Germany. My course is filled with bad news about the many conditions under which people treat one another badly. I would love to be able to discuss a case in which something about a people or place could be shown to diminish, if not actually stop, hatred. Perhaps it would turn out to be something even a tourist could experience, like the reported Italian genius for mixing mild hedonism with a shoulder-shrugging, laissez-faire attitude. I would do my best to find out, without, of course, ruining our tourist experience.

Achieving the first goal took no effort at all. From our room on the Arno (our room did have a view, and a balcony from which to enjoy it), we could easily walk throughout this ancient Tuscan city. By just wandering we bumped into virtually all the great tourist attractions listed in the guidebooks. While looking for lunch at a nice, out of the way trattoria, we "happened upon" the Pitti Palace and Boboli Gardens. It was early spring and most of the gardens were in bud on that crisp, bright day. From almost anywhere in the city you can navigate by the massive dome of Florence's biggest church, called "The Duomo". Jeanne shamed me into hiking with her to the top of the dome, and the very idea of trusting my life to stone stairs that were 560 years old made my fear of heights worse. The view over the red, tile roofs of the city made it worth the gamble. Every trattoria served magnificent food and wine. (We loved that in one restaurant the waiter was still pasting the label on the "vino russo della casa" as he arrived at our table.) We learned to rebuild our energies with cafe latte, pastries and fruits lingered over at tables in the windows and sidewalk tables of nameless bars. We acted like tourists should, pointing out curiosities and stunning sights to one another, taking rolls and rolls of pictures as we wandered through Piazza della Signoria (where Miss Honeychurch fainted), Piazza della Repubblica, Mercado Centrale, Mercado di San Lorenzo, the Uffizi Gallery (home of sculpture and paintings, like Botticelli’s "The Birth of Venus", we had seen only in books) and so many more. I could, of course, go on and on like this, but I imagine you get the point. We found the lovely, romantic Florence.

I hope you can understand why our visit to the Synagogue and its museum of Jewish History was delayed to the end of our visit. It turns out to have been both beautiful and sobering. It was built in the 1880’s during a time of tolerance for Jews.
Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church was in the midst of a counter-reformation effort to cleanse Italy of what it saw as the heresy and corruption that had made it vulnerable to criticism. Part of this effort was persecution of Jews in Italy. If Cosimo would force Florentine Jews to live in a concentrated area in the city, a ghetto, Pius V would support his claim to become Grand Duke. (As a sidelight, it turns out the term "ghetto" comes from the very first concentration of Jews in an Italian urban settlement, when in Venice Jews were forced in 1516 to resettle in an area of the city that was once the site of an old foundry, or "getto" in Italian.) Cosimo did as he was required and wrote the orders that created the Florentine ghetto in the area of the city that is now called Piazza della Repubblica, and in March of 1570 was crowned by the Pope as Grand Duke of Tuscany. There, for three hundred years, the Jews of Florence remained, living greatly diminished lives and suffering the persecutions they would know as scapegoats in so much of the rest of the continent. In the mid nineteenth century the old ghetto was torn down to build the new city centre. A period of tolerance and freedom for Jews in Italy began, (during which the Synagogue of Florence was built) and continued until the rise of Fascism.

As tourists Jeanne and I had walked, dreamily, through the Uffizi and Piazza della Repubblica, soaking up beauty and memories. Of course we did not think of the ambition of Cosimo I and the price he made the Jews of Florence pay for his elevation to Grand Duke. It is only now that I understand what it would have meant to our visit had we known of the history of the place we came to love. I am certain we would not have had the fresh, naive sense of wonder at the place and the people. We now agree that we are glad not to have missed those feelings. But they were, in a sense, false and childish. No place should be experienced by adults only as a child experiences the world. We have a responsibility not to bleach the truth of the past out of the present merely so we can have a lovely time. Lucy Honeychurch saw that the people and the place were both "cruel and kind," and managed in the end to take from Florence the romance for which she longed in repressed old England. Though Jeanne and I treasure the memories our naivete gave us, we know it would be a sin not to acknowledge that Florence and Italians, like the rest of the world, may be both cruel and kind.

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