

A Jewish Farewell to Consul General Talò

Benedetta Grasso (July 15, 2011)



On July 12 2011, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations held a celebratory lunch that recognized Francesco Maria Talò's contribution to the Jewish community in Italy and in New York City.

It's a well-known fact that in New York City's mythical yet very real melting pot of immigrants, it's impossible to ignore the city's Jewish presence. Doing so would mean missing out on a deeper New York "state of mind" – connections between different countries, understanding local history, cultural references, typical humor, and joyful religious celebrations throughout every neighborhood and season.

Italian-Americans and Jews have always been mutually supportive although in the U.S. they are



groups with well-defined, separate identities. The same cannot be said about Italy where Italian Jews blend these two identities and allow them to co-exist in their everyday lives.

If you're an Italian Jew and you've visited New York City recently, you might have felt more at home than you would have expected. Thanks to the work of the Centro Primo Levi and Consul General of Italy Francesco Maria Talò, there is a profound awareness of the Italian Jewish identity in New York City and this facet of Italian culture has become much more relevant.

There are those politicians and diplomats who arrive at a place and examine it from their ivory towers, there are those who bring only their background to the table, and then there are those like Consul General Talò who, to quote a Jewish adage, approach their positions knowing that "one who is wise is one who learns from all."

In honor of Consul General Talò's term which came to an end on July 12 2011, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations presented him with a shofar (a horn used in Jewish religious rituals). Each of the speakers underscored how this particular celebration of an Italian Consul General isn't a routine event, but rather it is a special occasion to express their gratitude for Consul General Talò since he has always gone above and beyond to support the Italian Jewish community.

Talò, a law graduate of La Sapienza, has served as the Consul General of Italy in New York since 2007 and has had a long and honorable career based in New York City. He spent several years working at the U.N. and was living in New York City at time of the September 11 attacks. Throughout his professional career he has completely immersed himself in the life of the city that he knows and loves.

He was celebrated by the Conference as an "important person for the Jewish community" and as a "good friend from the moment he arrived" who has helped both the Italian and international Jewish community.

Two important contributions stood out. The Remembrance Day event takes place outside the Italian Consulate every year in the cold, freezing January air. The name of each and every Italian Jew who died in the Holocaust is read aloud, and the reading spans from dawn to sunset with various speakers taking turns to read the names on the list. It is a somber and powerful ritual, especially as the names echo along Park Avenue as passersby look on.

In 2009 Consul General Talò also helped organize a visit, a mission to Rome for prominent members of the Jewish community in New York for the historic meeting between the pope and the chief rabbi of Rome, which addressed many pressing and complex issues and was very significant for both groups.

The most striking memory from the trip was seeing Rome in a new and very special light. Through in-depth tours of Jewish landmarks, attendees came away with the impression that "the city has always belonged to the Jews and the Romans were a minor presence."

Deputy Consul General of Israel Shlomi Kofman reminded the audience of how important it is for Israel to know that it has friends in Italy.

From Chairman Richard Stone to Executive Vice Chairman Malcolm Hoenlein, from former U.S. Ambassador to Italy Richard Gardner to Deputy Consul General of Israel Shlomi Kofman and Past Chair of the Conference of Presidents Harold Tanner, everyone emphasized that Talò's accomplishments will be remembered and that they are even more meaningful because they were not required, and that in Judaism it is important to recognize those who go out of their way to do good.

Senior Rabbi Schneier at Park East Synagogue attended the event and congratulated the Italian Consul General as well.

"You represent the city I love so much. I feel like a New Yorker," Talò said in his final speech. "The



Jewish community gave me the sense of being in a city of welcoming people, ever able to welcome new immigrants.”

He recalled how after only a few days on the job he got in touch with Richard Gardner through his wife and he soon became his mentor. He was the one “who made all of the suggestions.” It wasn’t long before he was celebrating Sukkot for the first time with Rabbi Schneier, immersed in the city’s cultural life and in the holiday’s cheerful festivities.

“I learned more about Italy through this experience. I had several meetings with the Jewish community in Rome. I have to say that if you want to meet a true Roman, you have to meet a Jewish one.”

In collaboration with Centro Primo Levi there are several events planned every year including concerts, exhibits, lectures, movie screenings, and celebrations such as this year’s commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel. There are too many initiatives to name and hopefully they won’t end with Consul General Talò’s departure.

So...kol hakavod! Good job!

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