

## CHAPTER 22

# Jewish Educational Proposals in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Florence

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### INTRODUCTION

The variety of institutions for Jewish children in several Italian communities, from the early nineteenth century on, affirms the awareness and interest in social and pedagogical changes taking place at that time. Deep social, economic, and institutional changes were beginning to be perceived, not only by the moderate Italian intellectuals, but also by the representatives of some Jewish communities which, after the advent of Napoleon, began “to open the ghetto’s doors” by introducing the new ideas and behaviors circulating in those years. In some cases, new institutions were founded based on these ideas.

Attention to early education was not limited to the opening of primary schools for the education of young Jewish Italians; it led to the creation of other institutions, such as orphanages, kindergartens, arts and crafts schools, and boarding schools—which had different characteristics from charitable institutions. Boarding schools were established to give rich Jewish families the opportunity to enroll their children in a school where it was possible to learn Jewish and civil disciplines, and where the level of teaching was higher than that in public and existing Jewish schools. Moreover, students from small cities and towns that did not have Jewish schools attended these boarding schools.

The “Israelite University” of Florence,<sup>1</sup> and a similar one in Livorno, consistently showed a foundational interest in the diffusion of knowledge and action on behalf of the most disadvantaged children. These communities were part of the moderate Tuscan milieu within the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and followed the models already present in the Lombardy region. In the 1830s, after the region achieved economic recovery, and social progress began to be made, the need was acknowledged for institutional settings for children whose parents were working outside the home from morning to late evening. These “Custody Rooms” not only gave assistance to abandoned children, but also gradually became places where young children of working parents received their first elements of education. The Custody Rooms were founded on the educational model of Ferrante Aporti (1791–1858), who believed it was necessary for education to be for all, in particular for people historically excluded from any kind of education and instruction.

## KINDERGARTEN

In 1836, the Florentine Israelite University decided to offer the service of a kindergarten to the Jewish community. Its first “Regulation for the School of Poor Jewish Children” stated: “The School will host those children who are aged from three to no more than six, and who belong to the disadvantaged class of the Jewish Community of Florence.”<sup>2</sup> This school essentially targeted the deprived children in the Jewish community, just as other nineteenth-century community institutions were earmarked for deprived children. The philanthropic nature of the Jewish community’s kindergarten lasted until the first decades of the twentieth century. In some cases, this created problems of attendance. Since these schools were intended to respond to the social and educational needs of the poorest among the Jewish community, the middle class and affluent families perceived them as places for the excluded and marginalized. It was not important that these schools were teaching Jewish

1 In the history of Italian Jewry, congregations and institutes have had many typologies and names. One of these was the “Jewish University” or, more precisely, the “Israelite University.” This name was given after the Rattazzi Law of 1857, which set out the new system for the Jewish congregation in the reign of Savoy. A. Milano, *Storia degli Ebrei in Italia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1963); G. Disegni, *Ebraismo e libertà religiosa in Italia. Dal diritto all’uguaglianza al diritto alla diversità* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983).

2 ACEF (Archivio della Comunità Ebraica di Firenze/Archive of the Jewish Community of Florence), B.44.1, fasc.1.

knowledge; what was perceived as their main characteristic was that they were dedicated to poor children. In the 1840s, after emancipation, most families preferred to send their children to schools where they could have meaningful social interaction with children from better social environments.

The first call for funds and support for the establishment of the kindergarten was made in 1833, and an official request for children's education was drafted in 1835.<sup>3</sup> The idea of creating this school, which recalled some of the characteristics of Aporti's model, was based on the need to educate poor children from their earliest years to prevent future deviance and delinquency. The school was expected to teach the children hygiene and to give them regular and sufficient meals. There was a doctor in service, in order to assess the children's health periodically. It is worth noting that the first tuition-free Jewish school had been founded in Berlin half a century earlier.<sup>4</sup>

The educational activities of the school included religious orientation, such as encouragement to say blessings and learn the principles of a good moral and religious education through morality tales and religious history. They also learned basic elements of reading and writing Italian and Hebrew, anatomy, math, and natural history, "especially about the more frequently observed entities in their environment."<sup>5</sup> While proposing new elements of knowledge to children, teachers had to take into consideration the age of the children and their mental abilities and concentration skills. Teachers stimulated children's attention by varying daily activities, with singing classes, gym, and manual work.<sup>6</sup>

The regular school functioning was under the responsibility of the director (usually a woman) who, according to the Regulation, had several tasks: opening, cleaning, and being in charge of the school premises, as well as teaching and organizing the classes. A deputy director and a caretaker helped the director, executing her orders and coordinating the work with her.

Children attended the school all year around—except for Saturdays and the Jewish holidays. The school was open from 9:00/9:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. The option of remaining at school so late was because many parents worked

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3 Ibid.

4 S. Feiner and C. Noar, *The Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

5 ACEF, B.44.1, fasc. 1.

6 G. Cassuto, "Una visita all'Asilo Infantile Israelitico di Firenze," *La Settimana Israelitica* 2, no. 13 (January 1911).

long hours and came home late at night. These parents were often unable to give their children meals. The teachers, director, and benefactors believed that keeping the children in the Custody Room would avoid leaving them to wander the streets alone at night.

At the beginning, the school admitted only boys, but after only two years, in December 1838, girls were also admitted. Recess was separate for girls and boys.<sup>7</sup> Education for females was one of the issues being extensively debated and undergoing significant changes in Italy at this time, both in Jewish education and in the wider society.<sup>8</sup> Other amendments were introduced into the original Regulation: namely, the maximum age until which students could stay at the school was raised to seven and then to nine, if necessary. The “Regulation for the Jewish Kindergarten in Florence,” approved in 1864, specified (Article 52) that: “children leave the kindergarten at the age of eight, if their educational level does not give them access to the higher school cycle earlier. Under particular circumstances, they can remain until older.”<sup>9</sup> The estimated attendance in the first year was between twenty-two to twenty-five pupils. Over the years that followed, attendance increased: “The number of children is constantly increasing. Almost all of them are in good health, their moral qualities benefit from new learning in comparison to the past. They care about the school so much that, when they have to leave it because they have grown up, it makes them cry.”<sup>10</sup>

The school later introduced the first classes of primary school. It was a unique situation, as Florentine Jewish children were given the opportunity to attend the first year of primary school either in Jewish primary schools or in the Jewish kindergarten, then to start regular primary school in the second year. The Statute of the Jewish Kindergarten of 1891 gives these details:

A regular first year of primary school has been established at the kindergarten, in compliance with the rules of Art. 27 of the Regulation approved by Royal Law, 16 February 1888. In this first year of primary school, carried out by a teacher with a regular license, besides accepting children from six to seven, either males or females, not only the didactic programs

7 ACEF B.44.1, fasc. 2.

8 M. Agnesi, R. Messbarger, and P. Findlen, *The Contest for Knowledge: Debates Over Women's Learning in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

9 ACEF, B.44.1.

10 ACEF, B.44.1, fasc. 3.

of the Kingdom's schools will be carried out, but children will also learn to read in Hebrew.<sup>11</sup>

In 1919, the option to attend the first year of primary school at the kindergarten was abolished.

On Jewish holidays, the Florentine kindergarten organized parties for the children, with the active participation of parents, relatives, and older children. Younger students performed songs, gym routines, and small works of art were exhibited. Adriana Genazzani's report, published in 1920 in *Israel dei Ragazzi*, describes these holidays:

There is nothing nicer and more charitable than a party for small children in a Jewish school. The school is Talmud Torà of Florence and the children participating are young children of the kindergarten and the first year of primary school. Imagine a quantity of white and blue, of little rosy faces and anxious eyes full of joy and laughter: here are the little artists, who performed without any hesitation to a wide public in the crowded school room.<sup>12</sup>

## SCHOOLS

During the political transformation of post-Napoleonic Europe and of post-Restoration, the schools of the Italian preunification states began to become "popular." The need to educate all social classes became increasingly clear, because that would facilitate progress and economic development. The new social policies of the preunification central and northern Italian states began to design a public education system and to fight illiteracy. However, it should be remembered that the educational policies of the various states depended on the regimes that ruled them. For example, the part of the peninsula subject to the control of the Austrian Empire enjoyed "a primary school system minutely regulated, entrusted to the municipalities of discrete administrative efficiency and educational models defined even if questionable."<sup>13</sup> Despite the different historical traditions and policies carried out to overcome the control of the

11 ACEF, annex B.42.1, *Jewish Kindergarten Statute*.

12 A. Genazzani, "Una festa di bambini al Talmud Torà di Firenze," *Israel Dei Ragazzi*, 24 (4 Tevet 5681/December 15, 1920): 3.

13 G. Cives (a cura di), "La scuola italiana dall'Unità ai nostri giorni," *La Nuova Italia* (Florence, 1990): 56.

Roman Catholic Church over education and instruction, the school increasingly represented the key place for the training of future citizens.<sup>14</sup> At this time, the literacy rate among the Jews (particularly among males) was relatively high due to their religious education, which emphasized the reading of holy texts. In this way, Jewish education facilitated the entry into secular education.<sup>15</sup>

New ideas in education led to changes in the fields of teaching and teacher training.<sup>16</sup> The Casati Law of 1859 (enacted under the Kingdom of Savoy at a delicate moment of political transition in the middle of the War of Independence and extended to the annexed provinces in 1860–61) made school compulsory for the first two years of elementary school. The proposal made school free (although this was largely disregarded) and ensured freedom of teaching. This law, a cornerstone of the Italian educational system, unavoidably involved the relationships with and the structures of minorities' educational systems, especially those of religious minorities in the Piedmont region and subsequently in the annexed provinces. This law gave a decisive incentive to the education of the masses, giving those who had lived in social exclusion the first real chance to feel equal to others and have access to the same social opportunities.

For the Jewish world, this trend of educational and scholastic proposals meant both a great opportunity and a new social challenge. The need to make a change within the communities' educational institutions was supported also by regulatory requirements and external policies, oriented toward processes of secularization and the system of state control.<sup>17</sup> A debate ensued with regard to the school, which immediately shed light on the most critical aspects of the matter. A relatively widespread opinion expressed the danger of weakening training opportunities offered by the community in favor of the public school and fears that the enrollment of young people in municipal schools would merely confirm

14 One example is the Boncompagni Law of 1848. In the Kingdom of Savoy, the process of "secularization of the school started through the move of the administration of public education to the 'Directorate of the Ministry of State in charge of that department' and on its dependence the primary schools and upper primary schools entrusted to the Municipalities," *ibid.*, 5.

15 D. Aberbach, *The European Jews, Patriotism and the Liberal State, 1789–1939: A Study of Literature and Social Psychology* (London: Routledge, 2012).

16 The promulgation of the Boncompagni Law (1848) and the Casati Law (1859) defined and formalized training courses for primary school teachers, launching the amendments that can be traced to the "Normal School" for men and women for a period of three years.

17 In 1848, the Boncompagni Law of the Kingdom of Savoy had already taken steps to regulate the passages of the schools of all levels, from the control of the ecclesiastical authority to the ministerial authority. This step sanctioned the state's new role in educational policies and control of knowledge.

what the emancipation progress was defining: the reduction of the Jewish tradition to mere religion. There was awareness of the fact that for much of non-Jewish society, the “emancipation” of the Jews was contingent on reeducation, which would lead to their assimilation into European society. In some places (such as France), the government attempted to close unlicensed Jewish schools. In others (such as England), public schools required attendance at Christian religious services. Jewish students were faced with the choice of attending or asking to be excused, which marked them as “outsiders.”<sup>18</sup> Systems of vocational schools for Jewish youth were established in Russia and Lithuania.<sup>19</sup>

By virtue of this awareness, several possible solutions were defined: maintain and support the Jewish school for the training of young people; strengthen and support Jewish family education; give women and especially mothers greater responsibilities and involvement; and create larger Jewish community centers in economically attractive urban centers, where communal children’s educational choices were easier to organize.

Of an entirely different opinion were those who perceived this moment of freedom and equality of rights as a concrete possibility to enroll their children in public schools and be able to share an equal educational opportunity—just like the younger generations from all social and cultural backgrounds of the country. Many Jewish parents maintained that only by being able to attend popular schools, with their moral, physical, and intellectual education, could their children really learn and practice the meaning of coexistence and of social equality, without any class division or religious difference.

Many Jewish families chose the public school, especially those who were sufficiently affluent not to send their children to “welfare and charity” community schools. The Jewish schools, despite having undergone an internal transformation of adapting curricula to the ministerial demands, did not exercise a strong attraction because they were of low quality and had poor social status. Within a few years, they remained popular only among the children of poor families. For most of the nineteenth century, the choices made by families to facilitate the integration of their children remained in the shadows and did not seem to worry those in charge of the community policies and Judaism in general.

18 J. Frankel and S. J. Zipperstein, *Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

19 M. Zalkin, *Modernizing Jewish Education in Nineteenth Century Eastern Europe: The School as the Shrine of the Jewish Enlightenment* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

We must therefore wait until the first decades of the twentieth century to see a maturation of the awareness of the need to invest community resources in the field of education and the actualization of the training of the young. The first real participatory consultation on the situation of the educational institutions in the Italian Jewish communities was proposed during a conference held in Florence in 1911.<sup>20</sup> A committee, made up of Umberto Cassuto, Elia Samuele Artom, and Alfonso Pacifici,<sup>21</sup> was formed during the congress in order to promote an investigation and study of the condition of the Jewish schools in Italy. The report, presented the following year by Artom at the Second Congress of the Youth, showed for the first time (although with some inaccuracy), the condition of Jewish education in Italy. Since the publication of the investigation in an Israelite journal, the researchers showed that out of a Jewish population of 40,000, about 1,600 students attended Jewish schools. It was calculated that about 4 percent attended community educational institutions, well below the ratio of the previous decade, which had been about 10 percent.

## SCHOOL OF ARTS AND CRAFTS

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the establishment of a School of Arts and Crafts for young males and females of the Florentine community was of great interest from a vocational point of view. This kind of school was a new initiative in Italy, and there were only a few similar initiatives in other countries. Other organizations, like the Evangelical Church, established this kind of institution in Florence only at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> In some other European countries, Jewish students found it difficult to find craftsmen willing to accept them as apprentices, and they were limited to certain traditionally Jewish vocations.<sup>23</sup>

Around 1826, after the creation of a Philanthropic Society of Arts and Crafts, a school proposal was presented, in which guidelines and specific reg-

20 E. S. Artom, *La scuola ebraica in Italia: relazione letta al 2. Convegno giovanile ebraico, Torino 24 dicembre 1912* (Florence: Tip. Giuntina, 1913); S. Guetta, "La scuola ebraica dall'emancipazione alla riforma Gentile," op. cit.

21 Cassuto, Artom, and Pacifici were part of an active group of students who attended courses at the Rabbinic College in Florence, organized by Rabbi Margulies, in around 1910. These three men were important figures in Italian Judaism in the 1900s. M. Molinari, *Ebrei in Italia, un problema di identità, 1870–1938* (Florence: Giuntina, 1991).

22 Andrea Mannucci, *Educazione e scuola protestante* (Florence: Luciano Manzuoli Editore, 1989), 222–26.

23 J. Frankel and S. J. Zipperstein, *Assimilation and Community*.



ulations for the future institution were indicated. The project was sent to the representatives of the Israelite University, which had requested it. Although interest in the realization of the school had been shown since the beginning, the school opened only in 1836.

Reading that original document allows us to understand how the foundation of the school took into account the evolution of orientations and ideas in the educational environment of those years. The stated purpose of the institution was to establish:

a happy and wished-for regeneration for those poor among our co-religious, who are threatened to be corrupted and damaged by laziness. When people are abandoned to themselves, laziness pushes them to practice shameful deeds that degrades them among all nations and marks them with the sign of misery and humiliation. The progress of universal education, not only in the civilized world but also in areas still experiencing ignorance and superstition, must be an object of true joy for all friends of Humanity... . An illuminated Government, which considers that realizing the happiness of its people is its best patrimony, will encourage our initiative.<sup>24</sup>

The need to provide education for the poorest and most disadvantaged classes, in order to allow them to progress beyond a world supported by charity and alms, was certainly a positive characteristic of the Jewish approach toward this kind of issue. The intention of founding this new institution reveals a modern and progressive idea of education, far from the reactionary–conservatory forms that were widespread during the years of the Restoration.

The Florentine School of Arts and Crafts was linked directly to the other educational institutions of the Israelite University. It did not offer early education, as this was already taken care of by the kindergarten and the Jewish primary schools. Rather, it placed the students directly in workshops, where they would learn an art or craft easily and practically. The commission in charge of elaborating a report on the foundation of a new school clearly understood the need to take into account the families' potential negative attitudes or problems regarding their children's regular attendance at this school. Learning a specific trade meant avoiding the risk of prematurely having to take over their fathers' businesses and selling their work in the street. In the new institution, children

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24 ACEF, B.40.1.

invested their time and energy in learning a trade that would be a source of income in the near future. Therefore, another purpose of the institution was “to facilitate the placement of children in the workshops and factories by giving appropriate advice, and to distribute financial support to their less lucky parents and families.”<sup>25</sup>

In addition to professional training, the Philanthropic Society of Arts and Crafts also proposed that during the factories’ and workshops’ closure on Christian holidays, students could be assembled in a school to advance their studies of Italian grammar, linear design, and practical geometry, “because these are things that go closely with the arts, and that good craftsmen cannot do without.”<sup>26</sup> During the Jewish holidays, trainees were obliged to attend “one or two hours of letters, of morals, and of domestic and social virtues.”<sup>27</sup>

The school admitted students after a selection process that examined their families’ motivations and economic situations. Once accepted into the institute, students were overseen by inspectors, who were specifically in charge of supervising students’ conduct and relations with the teachers. Students’ attendance was the result of collaboration between the school and the family, as “it is the relatives’ responsibility, more than others, to transmit those religious feelings to their children, in favor of which the Philanthropic Society gives its protection to the trainees.”<sup>28</sup> According to Article 10 of the Regulation, attached to the report presented to the committee of the Israelite University, trainees were obliged to present a monthly certificate of good conduct, religious principles, and good health, signed by one of the inspectors. Article 11 requested demonstration of basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, although this applied only to male students. These allowed the family to receive the financial support determined by the directors. The Philanthropic Society fixed the terms of the monthly stipend for trainees of both sexes depending on their age. Ten percent of this stipend was retained to create a protection fund and a fund for the youngsters’ future, to provide them with the necessary tools of the trade they were learning.

An annual general meeting held each November was established to monitor the activity of the institution and the students’ progress. At this meeting,

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25 ACEF, B.40.1.

26 ACEF, B.40.1.

27 ACEF, B.40.1.

28 ACEF, B.40.1.

awards were distributed to trainees who had distinguished themselves during the year for their good conduct or progress in learning their trade.

Although the idea of creating this kind of school in the Jewish community appeared to be of interest to many people, the project was delayed for some years due to a debate about what the appropriate age should be to start learning a trade. Article 9 of the first Regulation of 1826 maintains that “trainers will not benefit from financial support unless aged ten, or if older than 16.”<sup>29</sup> The age of ten was chosen as the minimum age most likely because the student would have completed the primary school course of Talmud Torah or kindergarten. As there was no official age to start mandatory education, children began attending Jewish primary school at the age their parents considered appropriate.

Some thought that the age of ten was too young to burden a child with the heavy responsibility resulting from work. According to this view, admission to the training schools for boys would be possible only if they were older than thirteen. Girls could not be younger than twelve, and they were not allowed to go to Jewish teachers living outside the “delimited area or annexed streets.” When the school opened in May 1836, Article 2 of its regulations stated: “males should not be younger than ten years old, and not older than fifteen, while females not younger than eight and not older than thirteen.”<sup>30</sup> The new regulation clearly stated that the workshops attended by students had to be inside the Jewish neighborhood, or very close to it.

When the school opened, the admission age was set at thirteen for boys and twelve for girls, which had been identified as the most socially appropriate ages. One should note that this corresponds to the ages at which Jewish youth come to maturity according to the religious tradition. We may assume that the choice was dictated by the fact that youth could work outside the community’s environment once they had achieved religious maturity, while still respecting their duties in the Jewish tradition such as, for example, by keeping the Sabbath. Nonetheless, it is not clear what the children did in the intermediate years between primary school and vocational school. The maximum age of attendance was raised to twenty years.

At the outset, there were about fifty students at the school. In addition to the crafts skills taught, male students were offered classes in physical and moral education, geometrical design, and Jewish religious studies (Talmud Torah). Female students attended classes in reading, writing, arithmetic, and Jewish

29 ACEF, B.40.1.

30 ACEF, B.40.1.

studies. The inclusion of these courses was possible thanks to a break of two hours in the daily work schedule, one of which was dedicated to the lessons and another to lunch, from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m.

Articles 8, 9, and 10 in the Regulation of 1836 give us an idea of the organization:

Males and females are divided into classes and each class will have its own teacher; for male education there will be a male teacher in charge of the two classes of *Carpenter* and *Cabinetmaker*; *Turner*; *Shoemaker*; *Tailor*; and *Upholsterer*. For female education, there were courses such as *Dressmaker*; *Maid-servant's Cap Maker*; *Hand-Sewn Whites*; and *Embroidery*. After careful attention was given to both the male and female students, the most appropriate trade would be assigned to him/her, independently from those indicated in the aforementioned article; like *Bookbinder*, *Umbrella Maker*, *Goldsmith*, *Silversmith*, and others; the Commission would have to deal with it separately, when having to execute it.<sup>31</sup>

This school organization was modified in 1850, when the need for integration into public life was better perceived. The School of Arts and Crafts, also called the Vocational School, reinforced its tools to achieve the “regeneration of the poor Jew.” It created the “Jewish worker,” a physically strong man, also strong in spirit, simple in wishes and aspirations, but rich in ideals and used to the culture, far from the average working people around: in other terms, the “good worker, the good Jew.”<sup>32</sup> By confirming the placement of students as trainees at crafts workshops, the Vocational School underlined the need to send children to work places where they would be permitted to respect the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.

The School of Arts and Crafts, like the kindergarten, organized annual parties to distribute awards to the best students. During these ceremonies, which were attended by the general public, the Executive Committee gave speeches about the school's achievements, its successes, and the students' attendance. But problems concerning the school were not concealed, as seen in this speech made by Attorney Aristide Nissim, president of the school, in 1915. The institution,

31 ACEF, B.40.1.

32 “Questioni Comunali. Le Scuole professionali Ebraiche,” *La Settimana Israelitica* 49 (December 4, 1914): 2.

created for the purpose of orienting boys and girls toward the exercise of a trade or craft, embodied the aim of the honorable founders and benefactors in having the students respect Saturdays, which, until some years ago, fully corresponded to their wishes, with several students distinguishing themselves. Nowadays, however, while the female section is large in number and gives good results, the male section, with a few exceptions, does not completely correspond to the Board's aim, as the students' registrations are decreasing. This situation does not depend on the Committee, or on a lack of statute dispositions, or on a lack of internal teaching, but it depends on a lack of trust on the parents' part, who wrongly think that damage may be caused by the absence from work on Saturdays. The Jewish feeling must be awoken effectively to convince them that it is possible to achieve the purpose of life, while maintaining ourselves as good observant Jews.<sup>33</sup>

The intention was to prevent parents from prohibiting their sons and daughters from attending the school due to a perception that the only work available to them was as peddlers, and subsequently taking advantage of their unstable condition and constantly begging for money from the community. The supporters of these schools considered charity to be "the moral and material elevation of the poor, achieved in a rational and modern way. Begging is not useful to elevating the poor, even when it does not facilitate laziness, it can never provide long-term relief. It is necessary to make a person feel the importance of work and to give him or her a job, thus offering a safe way to seriously uplift one's own condition."<sup>34</sup>

33 *Notizie in Il Vessillo Israelitico* 2 (January 31, 1915), 46.

34 "Per l'educazione e l'avvenire del proletariato ebraico," *Il Vessillo Israelitico* 6 (June 1910): 257–58.