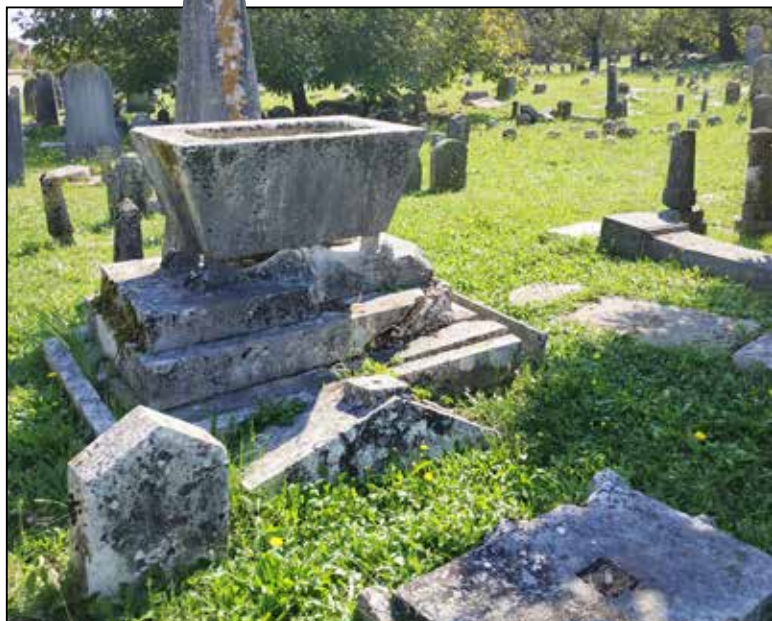


PHOTOS: ANDREA MORPURGO, WIKIPEDIA



Left above: The cemetery;  
—Left and below:  
the two towns



# Heritage unites divided Culture Capital

BY JULIE CARBONARA

► THE SLOVENIAN town of Nova Gorica and Gorizia, in Italy — two towns divided by a border — have been jointly named as the 2025 European Capital of Culture.

Their shared Jewish heritage was pivotal in winning the award. Typical of the cultural projects that helped the cities secure the nomination is the restoration of the historical Jewish cemetery of Valdirosa, spearheaded by the Foundation for Italian Jewish Cultural Heritage.

Gorizia used to be known as “the little Jerusalem on the [river] Isonzo” and was a commercially important hub for the Hapsburg Empire, a melting pot of languages and cultures, as reflected by the inscriptions — in German, Italian and Hebrew — on the cemetery’s tombstones.

Some of the 900 gravestones — the oldest dates from 1371 — were brought from elsewhere but many commemorate important local Jewish figures such as Rabbi Isacco Samuel Reggio, a 19th century scholar; poet and journalist Carolina Luzzatto Coen, the first Italian woman to edit a newspaper; artist and philosopher Carlo Michelstaedter and linguist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli.

The area underwent a severe upheaval with the demise of the Hapsburg Empire after World War One, which saw Gorizia become part of Italy but World War Two all but wiped out the town’s Jewish community.

It didn’t help that after the end of the war the territory was divided between Italy and the former Yugoslavia, where Nova Gorica was established. Long before the Berlin Wall was built, Gorizia had her own wall slicing the city centre in two. It would only be dismantled in 2004 when Slovenia became part of the EU.

Gorizia’s Jewish architectural heritage was also divided between Italy and

Yugoslavia — the synagogue and former ghetto remained in Gorizia while the cemetery was assigned to Nova Gorica.

In 1969 what was left of the Gorizia Jewish community merged with nearby Trieste and a few years later Trieste donated the ceremonial hall of the now abandoned Valdirosa cemetery to Nova Gorica in exchange for the promise to take care of the cemetery’s maintenance.

But the agreement was often ignored and the hall was at different times used as a casino and a bar. The cemetery itself was poorly maintained with some tombstones falling into disrepair.

The worst came in 1991 following the breakup of Yugoslavia when the Yugoslav People’s Army and the Slovenian Territorial Army fought for control of the border station a few hundred metres away. It is said that some of the fighting took place within the cemetery itself.

Things started to change when Slovenia became part of the EU; access was facilitated and Valdirosa returned to be part of the community.

The restoration is scheduled to start this year with architect Andrea Morpurgo as project leader. “There will be a lot of work to do,” says Morpurgo. “The damage to the tombstones is considerable, mainly caused by neglect and atmospheric agents. The old chapel for funeral rites will also be recovered and could become a permanent information place on the project but also on the history of the Jews in Gorizia.”

Two cities for years physically divided by the Cold War have finally come together with this cross-border project to give Jewish Gorizia her past back and promote economic, cultural and tourist development.



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