

# Trauma and Memory

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# **The feelings of those who have been expelled. Notes on some psychoanalysts forced to leave Genoa because of the Italian Racial Laws**

*Cosimo Schinaia\**

**Abstract.** The separations the Jewish professionals were forced to because of the racial laws were violent, traumatic, brutal, not deeply sought-after. They had to hide and unjustly suffered the distancing from their scientific interests, but they also promoted in some cases passages, transitions from one cultural landscape to another, exchange of ideas, transpositions of concepts, models from one world to the other. The author recalls the story of Emilio Servadio, Ettore Rieti, Stefano Fajrajzen, three Genoese psychoanalysts, who did not return in Genoa and made good fortune elsewhere.

**Keywords:** memory, feelings, Servadio, Rieti, Fajrajzen.

«When in 1873 I first joined the University, I experienced some appreciable disappointments. Above all, I found that I was expected to feel myself inferior and an alien because I was a Jew. I refused absolutely to do the first of these things. I have never been able to see why I should feel ashamed of my descent or, as people were beginning to say, of my race. [...] These first impressions at the University, however, had one consequence, which was afterwards to prove important; for at an early age I was made familiar with the fate of being in the Opposition and of being put under the ban of the 'compact majority'. The foundations were thus laid for a certain degree of independence of judgment» (Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, 1925, p. 9)

Memory is often the subject of controversies and divisions and can be declined in as many ways as the number of witnesses, interpreters, exegetes, etc. This is because memory is a living material intertwined with our lives, worldviews, ways of conceiving the present and the future. However, one thing is to take note of the various possible variations, another is to deny the racial drives that characterized our history and specifically what happened in Italy first with the notorious *Manifesto of Race* and then with the Racial Laws, both proposed in 1938. It is worth noting that Italians reacted to these laws with indifference and often with open support. Today this work of revisionism and falsification is almost impossible even for the most hardened denier. Anti-Semitism is only a variant of racism to which we have to beware today.

The expulsion from the working places of many professionals provoked intense feelings of shame, an inner upheaval made of modesty, humiliation, mortification, embarrassment. Shame is connect to traumatic experiences in which the subject feels impotent and has not the possibility to defend himself or herself from the irruption of stimuli too intense to be psychically elaborated (Baranger, Baranger, and Mom, 1988).

The writer and journalist Lia Levi (2018) recalls her father's silence when she asked him why he did not go to work and comments: "Only later I understood only that it was only shame that made my father's dumb".

The separations the Jewish professionals were forced to because the Racial Laws were violent, traumatic, brutal, not deeply sought-after. They had to hide and unjustly suffered the distancing

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from their scientific interests, but they also promoted “*passages, modern transhumance, transitions from one cultural landscape to another, [...] exchange of ideas, transpositions of concepts, models from one world to the other, from an inner space to another*” (Diena, 2016, p. 134).

Migrating implies crossing not only geographic but also cultural and existential borders. The dimension of the passage therefore involves a complex process of psychic transformation and negotiation at the relational and cultural level. The two poles of emigration are the origin and the destination. “*To emigrate is to be confronted with the new and the unknown: it means allowing yourself to be traversed by the unknown without allowing yourself to be assimilated by it, without being annihilated to go through without being assimilated, without being annihilated by dismay, and without feeling threatened. At the same time, emigration fuels the need to firmly preserve one’s roots and allows them to grow in the face of otherness: this means to not ignore that your original identity is always inside of you, but rather to slow down that hard work of transformation that aims at reaching a separation from our origins. Emigration means having experienced the loss of the container object. Such a feeling is strictly connected to the removal of the indigenous reference points*” (Schinaia, 2016, p. 2).

This situation requires to learn to tolerate and even to endorse an insurmountable and fruitful ambivalence. This is difficult to do without the risk of losing the focus, that is to say, the risk of being into an unstable equilibrium between security and insecurity, known and unknown, recognition and disorientation, identification with the origins and identification with the stranger.

There is the risk (a risk that necessarily has to be taken in order to structure a new identity) of establishing a compensatory mechanism of hyper-adaptation to the new environment. This means to superficially and falsely assimilate the new culture so that a person seems to be more autochthonous than the autochthonous people, imitates the natives without an authentic elaboration, too rapidly re-arranges the coordinates of orientation of his or her own existence. The fear of not being adapted to the new context, also due to the impossibility to be supported by some consolidated and recognized collective identities (family, community, nation) only the original environment can provide, would favor the establishment of a false robotic self having conformist characteristics of rigid submission to the rules and inhibition of the affections. This is because in the new environment there is not a container able to receive and modulate the person’s deep anxieties.

The linguistic gap regards not only the learning of a vocabulary and a syntax but also of facial expressions and gestures to recognize and a number of symbols to appreciate (Pélicier, 1964). The expressions of feelings like joys and affliction are not universal. Thus, some errors of interpretation of the surrounding world and its messages are always possible (Frigessi Castelnuovo and Risso, 1982).

Traditionally, psychoanalysis has modeled and still models itself on new cultural and social systems, on new traditions in time and space, it is always crossed by new scientific paradigms. The scientific propositions, often conceived as indisputable and absolute, are subjected to theoretical and practical testing. The models are transformed and the practices are integrated. In order to build new anchor points up, to get used to new sights, to settle into new contexts, and to provide necessary mediations and translations between them, psychoanalysis allows us to “learn to learn” (Bateson, 1972). This means to reconsider those features taken for granted and to become involved with them again. In other words, this means to allow and promote fantasies of a new beginning in contrast with those feelings of having sacrificed, blocked, or censored some aspects of the true self for adapting to the environment.

The sufferings these professionals forced to leave their homeland experienced led them to welcome with greater sensitivity the distress of the new patients they encountered (Diena, 2016).

Among psychiatrists, psychologists and psychoanalysts overwhelmed by anti-Semitism in Italy we mention: Gustavo Modena, vice president of the Italian Psychiatric Society; Marco Levi Bianchini, the founder of the first Italian Psychoanalytic Society, who had to hide to escape persecution; Anselmo Sacerdote, Isidoro Imber, Luisa Levi and Guido Treves, who had to resign from the Turin Psychiatric Hospitals; Evelina Ravitz, who left the Psychiatric Hospital of Trieste; Giuseppe Muggia from Venice, who died at Auschwitz; Edoardo Weiss, Emilio Servadio, Ettore Rieti, G. M. Hirsch, Enzo Bonaventura, Stefano Fajrajzen, Ladislao Kovacs, Amedeo Limentani, Silvano Arieti, who chose exile. The German-born Hans Loewald, who graduated in Medicine in

Rome in 1934, worked in Padua, and decided to take refuge in the United States of America, where he became one of the best-known American psychoanalysts, famous for his contributions on the issue of sublimation.

### **Brief annotations on Genoese psychoanalysts**

#### *Biographical note on Emilio Servadio*

Emilio Servadio was born in 1904 in Sestri Ponente, which at his time was not an autonomous town, but a quarter of Genoa. He is famous for having been the only Italian analyst who published a scientific article (Psychoanalysis and Telepathy) in 1935 in "Imago", the journal Sigmund Freud directed. In 1938, he moved to India, where he carried out his pioneering work as an analyst in Bombay. After the fall of fascism, Servadio returned to Italy and re-founded the "Rivista di Psicoanalisi" (the Italian Journal of Psychoanalysis) in 1945. In 1947 he officially re-established the Italian Psychoanalytic Society (Società Psicoanalitica Italiana) and became its president. He then separated from this society in 1992 to found the Italian Association of Psychoanalysis (AIPsi). He died in Rome in 1995.

We know very few of two other psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, Ettore Rieti and Stefano Fajrajzen, who lived for a period in Genoa, where Arturo Morselli and Ugo Cerletti, two of most important positivist psychiatrists in Italy, taught. They were the pillars of the so-called "psychoanalytic resistance" against the positivist psychiatry.

#### *Biographical note on Ettore Rieti (Hector Joseph Ritey)*

Ettore Rieti was born in a Sephardic Jewish family on August 17, 1900 in Alexandria, Egypt. He was a Freudian psychoanalyst, a criminologist, and a child psychiatrist. He was the founder of the Metropolitan Center for Mental Health in New York.

He came to Italy in 1916 to study as a concert pianist, but then he started to study psychiatry at the Universities of Florence, Rome, Turin and Genoa, and worked as a psychiatrist in various institutions, including the mental hospital of Grugliasco and the Genoese psychiatric hospitals: first that of Quarto and then, from '32 to '39, that of Cogoleto. Since 1907, a small group of psychiatrists was formed in Cogoleto Hospital. This group was led by Dr. Terravagni, which was sympathetic with the Freud's thought and translated in Italian and discussed the Gradiva essay. A young assistant in the Cogoleto Hospital, Ettore Rieti was his best pupil.

He was among the members of the first Italian Psychoanalytic Society, that Marco Levi Bianchini founded in 1925 at the Psychiatric Hospital of Teramo, for which he was appointed as Treasurer Secretary. In 1932 he was one of the founders of the Italian Journal of Psychoanalysis, whose publication was suppressed by fascism two years later. In 1933 he attempted a critical assessment of psychoanalysis in Italy.

Because of the Racial Laws, he moved first to Paris, where he worked with René Allendy, who in 1926 founded, along with Marie Bonaparte and several others, the Société Psychanalytique de Paris, and then to the United States, where he took the name of Hector Joseph Ritey and lived a large part of his professional life, achieving wide fame. He dealt extensively with the relationship between religion and psychiatry. His most notable work is "*The Human Kingdom: A Study of the Nature and Destiny of Man in the Light of Today's Knowledge*" (1962).

Among his works in Italian, I want to remember: "*La volontà come sintesi*" (The will as synthesis) (1929), "*Le disposizioni eidetiche visive dei malati mente*" (The visual eidetic dispositions of the psychiatric patients) (1932) and "*Tecnica dell'esame psicologico sperimentale in psichiatria e medicina legale*" (Technique of experimental psychological examination in psychiatry and forensic medicine) (1937).

He died on October 14, 1968 in New York. In his honor the Jewish National Fund planted a grove in the Kennedy Forest in Israel.

Until when Morselli was the director of the University Psychiatric Department, there was no room for psychoanalysts. At his death, Morselli was replaced by Cerletti, the inventor of electroshock. In 1935 Leonardo De Lisi was called to replace Cerletti. He was a neurologist open to

art and personal friend of the painter Giorgio De Chirico. He created a circle of disciples including one who later became an important psychoanalyst: Stefano Fajrajzen.

### *Biographical note on Stefano Fajrajzen*

He was born in Lodz in 1910, from a Jewish father, a wood merchant who moved to Genoa (his brother Aleksander was the playwright, actor and director Alessandro Fersen, and his niece, Alessandro's daughter, Ariela directs a small kibbutz Bar 'am in Israel on the border with Lebanon. She is the custodian of the memory of his father, whose works are kept in the Fersen archive at the Museum of the actor of Genoa). Fajrajzen studied Medicine in Genoa and followed the lessons of Cerletti and De Lisi and, passionate about psychoanalysis, studied German to do an analysis in Vienna, where he moved in 1934 and did his analysis with Rosa Walke, a pupil of Paul Federn. Rosa Walke was killed by Gestapo in Paris on 1942.

Returning to Genoa, he resumed his studies and specialized in Neuropsychiatry with a thesis on sexual abstinence. He emigrated to Switzerland and then to London, where he made an analysis with Edward Bibring. In 1940, like other Italian citizens residing in England, he was interned in the concentration camp of the Isle of Man, where he met Amedeo (Adam) Limentani. Back in London, he worked as a paediatrician to earn (little) to live. He returned to Genoa, but then left for the United States, from which he left in 1948 to move to Rome, where he published in 1950 a book on sexual abstinence with the forward of Levi Bianchini. He was unable to have academic fortune in Italy, so he returned to the United States and worked at Hillside Hospital on Long Island in New York, where thanks to the teachings of Harold Searles, he was also able to extend the psychoanalytic technique to borderline and psychotic patients, overcoming the limits of the traditional setting, involving the hospital staff in a team work. Fajrajzen returned to Rome in 1961 and became a well-known training and supervising analyst of SPI. He died in 1994.

In one of his works in 1973 there is a quotation from Marcel Carné's movie *Les enfants du Paradis*: «C'est simple d'aimer» is pronounced by Garance, the girl, but Baptiste is looking for an absolute and unconditional love and cannot appreciate the real availability of Garance, losing his magic moment and chasing her uselessly for all his life. As Fajrajzen writes, he cannot accept the "real" symbiosis, overcoming the other's narcissistic desire. "It is so simple to love": in its disarming simplicity this sentence constitutes a rigorous teaching for the treatment of the psychotic patient.

### **Conclusions**

I conclude with the verses taken from a sermon by Martin Niemöller, a German Lutheran pastor, to highlight the risks of apathy and carelessness towards violence and hatred:

*«First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.  
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me».*

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## A life in search for meaning. Art and justice *à propos* of Eichmann's trial\*

Silvia Londynski Vaks\*\*

**Abstract.** Adolf Eichmann's influence has passed through the author family's life for four generations. His father's, because of his emigration from Poland before WWII, his activism within the Jewish diaspora community and participation in Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem. The children's, because of their Jewish education in a family fled from the anti-Semitism, and the grandchildren's and great-grandchildren's respect for the memory, tradition, and its creative continuity. This work is a reflection on the marks of the Shoah in a Buenos Aires family, the perpetuation of inherited testimonials, and the possibilities of experiencing justice through art.

**Keywords:** Memory, Family, Shoah, Meaning.

“With my eyes fixed and wide open, I look at the anchored boats in the harbor of Buenos Aires. I was then seven or eight years old. Between fascination and fear, I could not take my eyes off those immensities made of iron and wood that sculpted smoke, squeaks, and people. Wrapped in my thoughts I looked at them without seeing it. For the third time in my short, but intense life, I had escaped from the room where I lived with my family in the district of Villa Crespo. I had a firm intention: to return to my homeland, to the warmth of my grandmother, and the happiness of my friends. I used to approach the mariners and talk to them in a mix of *Idish* (1) dripped with my scarce Castilian words. Some would look at me in astonishment, others were indifferent. My extreme thinness, the shaved hair, and my loose and worn clothes formed the very image of helplessness. I was determined to find a boat that would definitely take me away from this land that I felt hostile and foreign. A boat that would take me back to Brest Litovsk (2), to my cows, to the cart that I used to pull from house to house, to those neighbors that greeted me each morning while following my grandmother Masha in her milk and cheese distribution. I also missed the snow, in which with my *shiteled* (3) I used to play racing with the other boys, fellow students in *Jeider* (4) and accomplices in our escapes to the other side of Bug river, where we used to dive”...

This is the first paragraph of the book *Memorias de una vida intensa*, from Ber Londynski. *Berele* in his native language. My father. A man who wanted to tell his story, the comes and goes of a life marked by the desire of growing, learning, progressing, forming a family and celebrating his time and resources on the construction of a Jewish community in the Diaspora.

In such way he was narrating fragments which, sometimes, repeated throughout his 91 years. Testimonies of presence and memories that I used to hear as fresh remembrances of smells, colors, pains, punishments, hungers, achievements, defiance. A whole life! The excerpts were joining each other in time such as puzzle pieces. At moments, passages full of sense. In others, they were sprouting as a work from the imagination, being built in their flow. It looked like if he held himself at any moment, his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren would know where they came from, from which deep waters the roots of our lives feed, being able to find the strength and inspiration that are necessary and indispensable to keep growing, to fly in search of the ways to keep writing new chapters of our intense history for generations.

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\* This work was presented at the meeting “Art And The Shoah. Singular Presences and the Insistence of Memory”, held at the *Fondazione Museo della Shoa*, Rome, Italy, on April 19-20, 2018.

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This is how I yearned bringing some of these reports impregnated with sense from my memories, risking finding the footprints that would guide me to meet my history as an attempt of continuity, honoring the memory of a generation which is going away.

How to transform a life that starts with the catastrophe of extermination, the destruction of the family, dreams, the abandonment of home, the loss of dignity and the escape to some other country? How to turn a life in search for sense?

Those first experiences would deeply mark a path of fight for subsistence, for the desire of reaching goals and justice. I remember my father sharing his experiences as an activist of *Hashomer Hatzair* (5), or of the sports *Club Hacoaj* (6), or *Sojnut* (7) an Israeli governmental entity in Buenos Aires, which is responsible for organizing *aliyah* (8).

But I recall a particular story from him. It always started with time. It was 1960, a very special year for the Jews from all over the world and also for the Argentinians. He would make a long pause and deeply breathe as if falling into a long dive, in a dense sea. And continued.. In May, this year, an Israeli intelligence command kidnapped the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann here in Buenos Aires, and he explained to me, he was the one who led six million European Jews to systematic death during the Second World War. Eichmann had arrived in Argentina in 1950, under the false identity of Ricardo Klement, with the complicity of the government of our president Juan Domingo Perón, and the support of several members of the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, which provided financial assistance, coverage, documentation and escape routes to various Nazi criminals. My father then stopped, lowered his head and so, unintentionally, his hair moved from his “always combed to the side” hairstyle, prolixly covering his baldness, he adjusts it and proceeds, Eichmann was captured at night, on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1960, at the corner of his house, Streets Garibaldi and Ruta 2010, at the district of San Fernando, in Provincia de Buenos Aires, as he returned from work at Mercedes Benz. He was then identified with certainty and kept hidden for several days, until they could take him in an Israeli EL AL airplane that had brought the Israeli delegation invited to the celebrations of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the May Revolution (9). When Israel’s first Minister, David Ben Gurión, made the news of the capture known in a session of the *Knesset* (10), the world was shocked. Eichmann would be immediately subjected to judgment in Jerusalem for his crimes against the Jewish people and against humanity. The Argentinean Jewish Community struggled between emotion and fear. Reprisals were expected by the not few allies and sympathizers that Nazism had, since always, in our country. The clandestine capture of the murderer was justified by the fact that other criminals of war had vanished from Argentina since it had been intended to follow the legal routes for their arrests, by requests of extradition.

My father continued with a pulsed voice and the sight farther away from me; Those were feverish days. The institutions were preparing for self-defense. The Jewish sports clubs organized groups of boys armed with sticks and batons, distributed around dozens of schools and synagogues of the capital and Greater Buenos Aires. The directives, like me, (he said) could not participate directly in the custodies, but we equally supervised, to see how each of our boys complied with their duties. In one of these patrols, he remembers, he asked a boy: “Why are you taking this risk if you have never entered in a *Shil* (11)?” The boy, with tears in his eyes, answered him: “*I do it for the Jewish dignity*”. Those were intense days indeed, with many nights of vigil. There were moments of violence. But the leader of the Nazi execution machinery would be judged with all guarantees of the law, in a judicial system model for equanimity and transparency.

His reports started making sense in understanding the possibility of changing fate, like the image of a horizon where the boats he expected to find in the harbor were born to take him back to his life ripped from Poland and to guide him inside himself to modify his life with creating capacity. Suddenly, I could see him emerging from the center of a target. I caught myself in his gaze. His light blue eyes reflected images of judgments, reserves. And I could only try to decipher them.



He would then adjust himself on the black Miller armchair and carry on. Time, he continues: In the year of 1961, the judgment started. That year, I had the opportunity to travel for the first time to Israel, the country I had always dreamed of and for which I had fought so much since my juvenile militancy and all my activity as an adult in different communitarian spaces. I was invited to watch Eichmann's trial sessions. We were placed in the journalists' sector room. With headphones on, we received simultaneous translations from German to Hebrew and from Hebrew to Spanish. So it would take a long time, a void remained between each speech. But we could see him there, inside a glass cabin, speaking in German. The image looks vivid and intense. A very thin, downcast, helpless, simple man, without any signal of emotion when hearing the witnesses and calmly answering them. An extremely touching and ineffable experience. Suddenly he stopped. In that moment, I was able to see that far sight he had once again in that documentary (Cervio *et al*, 2016), when I was intimately touched.

The following years, every time an illustrious Israeli visitor would go to Argentina, they'd asked my father to take them for a stroll around Buenos Aires in our car. Personalities such as Golda Méier (12) and Jaika Grossman (13). They all wanted to know the place where Eichmann had been captured. They all arrived at that corner and stayed there for a long time, speechless and thoughtful. Some of them cried.

I treasure this story that comes to my mind as a testimony among so many other intense, sad and exciting memories of my father's reports as a survivor of the Shoah. Images full of meanings for me and my whole family. Why can we look back and feel that our lives have been shaped by his testimony? Why do these images touch us in a singular way and are always making themselves present?

I understand a life in the search for sense as a Jewish family legacy. Sprouting from the pain, from the images of a tragic memory, opening ways for transformations as a work from the imagination of lived lives. Making justice with creative singularities. Perpetuating through art, literature and poetry in the lived reports. Through the creation of communitarian projects, carrying on a defense for life that touches and embodies itself, making us and the memories alive when exercising Jewish traditions.

Adolf Eichmann was one of the greatest assassins of all time, the Nazi who before his execution thanked his homeland, Austria, and Argentina, my birthplace. The permanence of Eichmann in my country gives it an added value: on one hand, for contributing to unraveling a tragedy; on the other, because it forces us to look at ourselves once again as a country in a dark and marshy mirror, with secret stories that can justify the past as the future.

Another situation refers to one of the most controversial expressions within the field of twentieth-century thought, coined by Hannah Arendt, which is the "banality of evil," or how behind noble appearances monsters exist. Could one of the biggest criminals look like a "normal man"?

To this day, these images cause chills, at the same time as they come up as stripped stories that pass through the Shoah and deeply touch us when they are present.

Adolf Eichmann has crossed the history of my family for many generations. My fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers as testimonies of the extermination and escape to Argentina. Of my parents' great-grandchildren when learning from their great-grandfather's memoir a part of our family's history, as well as watching his testimony in the movie *The German Neighbor*. One of his granddaughters working on this documentary (from the Eichmann trial) as a record of the Shoah and an excerpt from the nefarious history of our country. My generation, the children of immigrants fleeing from World War II, growing up with the complex task of taking root between two cultures in this new country, between grandparents who only spoke Idish (1) and a Spaniard-laden accent. Doorway to scents of food, singing, dancing, and traditional parties, felt through all senses, perpetrating the legacy of life in search of meaning.

## Vocabulary

- (1) *Idish (Yiddish)*: it is a language from the Indo-European family, belonging to the German subgroup, having been adopted by Jews, particularly in central Europe and in Eastern Europe, in the second millennium, who write it using the Hebrew characters.
- (2) *Brest Litovsk*: City located in the center of the western frontier of the Russian empire, at Bug riverbank, was one of the few places where the Russian Czars had allowed the Jews to live legally.
- (3) *Shiteled*: Sled.
- (4) *Jeider*: A school where the rabbi taught Torah, sacred book of Judaism.
- (5) *Hashomer Hatzair*: Socialist Zionist youth movement, of scout style, which had been founded in Poland, in 1913 and that had subsidiaries in several countries. In Argentina, it reached thousands of members and still exists.
- (6) *Hacoaj*: Jewish Nautical Club located in the district of Tigre, Province of Buenos Aires.
- (7) *Sojnut*: Jewish agency in Buenos Aires. An Israeli governmental entity, in charge of organizing aliá and going through with educational programs, always collaborating to the construction of the Jewish community.
- (8) *Aliyah*: A term that designates the Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel.
- (9) *May Revolution*: It is the historic event that caused the collapse of the Spanish government in Buenos Aires and the creation of a Government Board integrated by the creoles of Rio da Prata.
- (10) *Knesset*: Israeli Parliament.
- (11) *Shil*: Synagogue.
- (12) *Golda Méier* (1898-1978): Israeli politician of the *avodá* party, social democrat, founder and Prime Minister of the State of Israel. She has also been Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Labor.
- (13) *Jaika Grossman* (1919-1996): Survivor of the Shoah, a heroine on the revival of the Bialystok ghetto. Israeli politician of the Mapam party, Zionist, socialist, political arm of Hashomer Hatzair. Member of the Knesset for many years in which she once became vice president.
- (14) *El Vecino Alemán*: Film, The German Neighbor, directed by Rosario Cervio and Martin Liji, Buenos Aires, 2016.
- (15) *Shoah*: Holocaust was the genocide or mass murder of around six million Jews during the Second World War, in the greatest genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## Simha Rotem (1924-2018): *Ad memoriam*\* The broom and the resilience

David Meghnagi\*\*

**Abstract.** Simha Rotem was born in Warsaw in 1924. He was one of the most important member of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in April 1943. Under the cover name of Kazik. He was a leader of the young Jews who were one of the first in Europe to rebel against the Nazi occupation. His original name is Symon Rathajzer, who upon his arrival in Israel he changed in Simha Rotem to symbolize a new beginning. His heroic and history is full of anecdotes that encroach of the unbelievable. Rotem came in and out of the ghetto, through the city's sewers, besieged and burned, to bringing news and organizing the escape of the few survivors. Thanks to him the last fighters of the ghetto succeeded in acriding the "Aryan" area of the city, finding refuge from not Jewish people connected with the Polish resistance. In 1944 Rotem fought in the Warsaw uprising against the Nazi occupation. He was one of the leader of the Jewish exodus from Poland to Israel. He contributed to save thousands of people. The author died in Jerusalem in 2018.

**Keywords:** Anti-Semitism, Bundism, Marek Edelman, Ghetto uprising, Resilience, Shoah, Simha Rotem, Zionism.



*«...the injury cannot be healed: it extends through time, and the Furies, in whose existence we are forced to believe, not only rack the tormentor (...) but perpetuate the tormentor's work by denying peace to the tormented» (Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*).*

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«This is what the Lord says: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more. (...) Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears. They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your descendants» (Jeremiah, 31, 15-17, my translation from the Hebrew).

«Qui su l'arida schiena / Del formidabil monte / Sterminator Vesevo, / La qual null'altro allegra arbor nè fiore, / Tuoi cespi solitari intorno spargi, / Odorata ginestra, / Contenta dei deserti. Anco ti vidi / De' tuoi steli abbellir l'erme contrade / Che cingon la cittade / La qual fu donna de' mortali un tempo, / E del perduto impero / Par che col grave e taciturno aspetto / Faccian fede e ricordo al passeggero. / Or ti riveggo in questo suol, di tristi / Lochi e dal mondo abbandonati amante, / E d'afflitte fortune ognor compagna» (Giacomo Leopardi, La ginestra o il fiore del deserto (1836). In: *I canti*, XXXIV: 1-13).

It is with great pleasure that I accepted Anna Rolli and Simha Rotem's invitation to write this foreword. I have followed her progress as a student of a Level II International Master's Degree in the didactics of the Shoah, at Roma Tre University, towards a more complete scientific maturity, which I hope will lead to other results. Apart from his work, it has been a privilege to discuss with Rotem the more tragic pages in Jewish history, as well as speaking of its wealth and vitality, the depth of the hopes and dreams that, in spite of the devastation, have kept alive a great civilisation, contributing to its rebirth in the places in which it took shape and developed thousands of years ago.

A number of the passages of this interview revisit known facts about which the author has already written in his memoirs (Rotem, 2014). Rotem wanted to know what was driving the young Italian researcher to dedicate all her time to studying this event. Why did she experience as her own, as everyone ought to, the anguish of a nation that a little over seventy years after the mass extermination, coexists with a fear of violent extinction. Surprised by the immediacy of the question, Anna Rolli assumed a professional attitude; she was a journalist who wishes to provide documentary evidence.

«We will speak of anything you wish, but I will never tell you anything, not even a word about Warsaw and World War II... it is too painful for me... Let us go out into the garden. Let us sit and drink tea. This is my vineyard. It has been here for 60 years and in 60 years I have never used any chemical substances. Taste the grapes, see how good they are. Why are you interested in this story?

*I am a journalist. It is my job. I like telling stories. People of your generation have lived through so many events... in a historical period... you lived in such an interesting historical period...*

All I can say and wish you is that you should never have to live during an interesting historical period...» (Rotem, 2016, p. 18).

Having learned that the interviewer had paid for her own travel expenses, her accommodation and the publication of the work, Rotem proposed that he should pay a share of the translation costs (*ibidem*, p. 58).



Anna Rolli, Simha Rotem and Ewa Razieli (Rome, 2015)

When he arrives in Israel, Rotem chooses the most tiring and difficult jobs. As a construction worker, exhausted by his work, he is able to sleep at night. It is exhaustion therapy used to keep his memories at bay so as not to go mad. When asked by the job centre's employee where he was living, Rotem answers that Tel Aviv's beaches and gardens are certainly more hospitable than the sewers of Warsaw. It is a discreet request for hospitality that the lady accepts without hesitation. At night Rotem has nightmares. He screams in his sleep, he tosses and turns, calls out for help, cries in despair. From the room next door, Zippora and her husband listen in silence, their eyes fill with tears, participating in the nameless pain of a young man who has seen 400,000 people violently torn from their homes, to be deported and exterminated, and other tens of thousands burnt alive for having refused to get onto the trains of death. In the morning, as if nothing had happened, Zippora prepares a hot drink and gives him a sandwich to get him through the hard day awaiting him. During those years, there are many in Israel who fear their own nightmares. After her husband's death, Zippora moves to Jerusalem, where every Friday, on the evening of the *Shabbath*, she is the Rotems' guest. These I moving times about which the old fighter often speaks of in conversations with his closest friends.



**Simha Rotem and David Meghnagi (Rome, 2015)**

*«Soon after I had arrived in Tel Aviv, after the war, I lived in the home of Zippora Czyzik, an employee at the job centre, and her husband Goldman. When I first met her she asked me what kind of job I was looking for and I answered that I was looking for a tough construction job. She looked at me and asked if I were mad [...] “No, it is what I want. A physically very demanding job that will help me not to think” [...]. Instead of a month I stayed on for three or four months without ever realising what happened at night while I slept. I slept very soundly...They only told me a long time after I had left their home. [...]. A wonderful woman... [...] of Russian origin, [...] who had immigrated to the Land of Israel in 1903 (who) only spoke a little Yiddish. [...] They were a couple with two sons; one was my age and the other was younger, [...] One of them lived in a kibbutz [...] the other was a member of the Resistance, the Haganah, [...] and later became my friend... I spent over three months with them. [...] throughout that period [...] they helped me in an incredible way. [...]. A few years later she left Tel Aviv and came to live in Jerusalem [...], she came to see us every Friday evening [...]» (ibid., pp. 87-89).*

These are memories of human solidarity that knows no borders and that the author intends to keep alive in the difficult challenge posed by creating a different future for the next generation. This without illusions and without giving up a vision of the future, one that is open to others and inclusive. Marysia and Anna were Polish Christians and did not look the other way, paying a high price for this.

«I had never met them before. I met them the day after I left the ghetto... I went to the home of two sisters, Anna and Marysia and spent the night there. The apartment had just one small room. The two of them lived there with the daughter of another sister and Stefan, the son of yet another sister, but he was killed shortly after that. [...] I went there every evening to sleep on the floor in the little space that remained, and Anna had always been very welcoming [...]. I went back to this family... five minutes before curfew [...] she opened the door. [...] she looked at me strangely opening the door just a crack. I asked, "Madam, what has happened?" and she said, "Have you not heard, Sir? Stefan was shot dead by the Germans. They searched the apartment [...], they found nothing and they left." [...]. She told me all this very quickly... I looked at my watch and there were only five minutes left before curfew [...]. Where should I go? The moment I set foot outside it would all be over. [...] "Pani Anna, allow me to sleep here tonight." What do you think that lady answered? What would you have done in her place? [...] She looked at me rather surprised and then said, "Look Mr. Kazik, if you think you can stay in this place after what has happened, then stay!"» (*ibid.*, p. 29)

Having re-entered the ghetto in flames to save the fighters who had survived, Rotem is overcome by discouragement. He is surrounded by hell. Only smoke and flames. The walls are collapsing and one cannot breathe. After moving through the entire ghetto calling for his friends, it is as if he were in a trance. Tens of thousands of people had died, burnt alive, and he is there to take some to freedom. The Jewish people had been murdered. Rotem feels like giving up. Like dying. Living makes no sense. This is a thought he cannot allow himself. There are people waiting for him in the sewers. Rotem has to survive so others could live. He goes down into the sewers and is pleasantly surprised to hear familiar voices, those of friends hiding in the dark.

«As soon as I went in I immediately met two or three people, they were exhausted, about to die [...] I asked whether they knew the ghetto fighters, [...] then I said, "Look, I have just returned from the Aryan side. If you wait for me I will take you back with me." [...] When I returned they had vanished. They did not trust me [...]. When inside I started to shout [...] from somewhere below the rubble [...] someone spoke to me from very far away [...] it was a woman's voice, [...] at every moment the voice seemed to come from a different direction. [...] at times I heard a voice from the right, then from the left and then in front of me and behind me. I asked, "Where are you?" In the end, she told me her leg was broken. She was lying somewhere [...]. I couldn't find her [...] I had no help, I couldn't help her, [...] I walked on... and found no one... [...] I decided to stay there and die... I felt I was in state between awareness and confusion [...] I sat down... I believe I was unconscious for a while [...]. [...] The suddenly I told myself, "No, I will go back!" [...] I went back into the sewers where I had left a friend to wait for me with the workers. [...] and shouted: "Let's go, I haven't found anyone!" And we started to move [...] at that point, I suddenly felt, [...] that there was someone in there, that there were people there, but I did not know who... they might have been Germans and after a minute or perhaps a second [...] I shouted the password again and a friend of mine came out, a girl I knew, a ghetto fighter, with a group of nine other people... imagine that... It was unbelievable, in the sewage tunnels, suddenly I had met a group of fighters I knew, they were all my friends. You can imagine what one feels inside when a meeting like that takes place» (*ibid.*, pp. 44-45).

Rotem reassures his friends. Although he had no plan for getting them out, he tells them a plan was in place. He orders them to stay together, not to move too far from the point from which they would leave when he comes back with a truck, which from there would take them away to the "Aryan" area of the city. It would take a week for the plan to be ready. So as not to raise suspicion, not be heard from the outside, the fighters wait in silence, without moving. While they wait amidst the sewage fumes, so as not to suffocate, some are permitted to go down into the tunnels. The truck arrived. People come out of the manhole. There is little time. The Germans are standing about one hundred metres away. "Is there anyone else?", shout Rotem repeatedly. No one answers. Time was up. They live. Zivia Lubetkin screams and threatens to shoot. They must get the others out. There is no time.

The Germans are coming, attracted by the crowd. It is Rotem who makes the decision. He orders the driver to press on the accelerator and take his companions to safety before it is too late. Edelman, in theory his commander, remains silent. He actually approves. After taking his friends to safety, Rotem comes back to see what had happened. The Germans had massacred all those present. He leaves before anyone could recognise him. As a Jew he is running a double risk. The nationalist Right was fighting the Germans but killing Jews. Some of the ghetto fighters, who had fled, had been murdered by Polish right-wing partisans. The following year, in camouflage, he had taken part in the Warsaw uprising together with the comrades who had survived. He is oppressed by a thought. What would he tell Shluster's sister when and if he would see her in Israel? His friend Shluster had gone back to call their friends who had been trapped in the tunnels. He did not make it out. That emotional encounter would take place in Israel. With no resentment, only pain.

«[...] There was a moment at which they stopped coming out, I checked myself and was certain that there was no one else there... [...] When I had met them in the sewers they had asked "Do you know what to do?" I had answered, "Of course, I have checked out the road... coming and going, and I know where we are. This is an order: under no circumstances are you permitted to move to other tunnels. You must remain here for as long as necessary!" They wanted to know if everything was ready. To tell the truth nothing at all was ready. Nothing! But I wanted to reassure them, leaving them with a good feeling and I answered 'yes', telling them that everything was ready to get them out of there... A journalist working for a Polish daily newspaper, an idiot [...] once asked me "[...] "Why did it take you a whole week to get organised?" [...] I decided not to answer him [...] if that is what you think, you are an idiot and we have nothing in common... Zivia said to me, "Stop! We have left people down there!" [...] I had a few seconds to make a decision. [...] You can check for yourself even today if you go to Warsaw [...]. We were between a hundred and hundred and fifty metres from the German guard post. [...] It was our only chance. Take it or leave it [...] I would have preferred to have them all alive... It could have happened if they had done ... exactly as I ordered them [...] someone else gave them permission. [...] They had spoken to me, they knew my plans... [...]. They knew. [...] My best friend... was sent to look for them... [...]. It was between ten and eleven in the morning, people watched in astonishment, paralysed. Warsaw was a large city, they were seeing something they had never seen before and that I too had never seen before. I watched the Germans [...] I wandered around. When I realised no one else was coming out, I ran towards the manhole, I shouted into it, asking whether there was still someone down there, no answer, I looked again, no one, I gave the order to leave [...]. I assume all responsibility for that. [...]. On the truck Marek (Edelman) did not say a word. They all lay there as if dead. Later on I asked him why he had not taken command. He was my commander! He answered, "[...] I had understood that you were the only one who knew what to do and what was happening." [...] Marek was [...] a very capable man, and it is true that he did not know what I had to do, where I had had to begin [...] I was without any help at all... Our chance of succeeding was one in a thousand [...] If I had not done what I did it would have been the end. [...]"» (*ibid.*, pp. 54-55).

Rotem speaks of Marek Edelman with respect and affection. After the war the ZOB's deputy commander did not want to hear of moving to Israel with his comrades. The guardian of a violently vanished world, as if time had come to a standstill, Edelman was anachronistically opposed to the Zionist choice. He was not a Zionists, says Rotem. He was however, worried, no less than him, about the future of the inhabitants of the new state. He considered theirs a desperate endeavour, one heralding new dangers and wars. Edelman's idiosyncrasies are the result of a past season, one of projects and broken dreams, many of which anticipating events, a psychological claim, which easily could be misleading used by those who have never really accepted Israel's existence. In truth there are no alternatives. One can only act wisely and hope that one day things might improve for all the region's inhabitants. Edelman stayed in Poland. In 1968 the flowers he received every year in memory of those who died in the ghetto did not arrive. Thirteen thousand of the thirty thousand Jews who remained in Poland after the war (there were three and a half million in 1939), had definitively left the country. Edelman is dismissed from the hospital he works in. Following protests he found a job in another hospital.

At ORT headquarters of Rome, where there is now the House of Remembrance and Roman History, Libyan Jews, who fled after the 1967 pogrom as well as Polish and Czechoslovakian Jews all meet to study English. Hebrew courses are also held at the ORT. Many stop off in Rome before

emigrating to Israel or leaving for the United States. Their arrival in Rome coincides with the silent escape of the Arab world's last Jews. Friends are made at the *Kadimah* club. In the evening, hundreds of people appear in search of a friendly place. Renzo Gattegna, the former president of the Italian Union of Jewish Communities, is the acting president while the vice-presidency is entrusted to a Jew from Tripoli, my brother Isaac.

Edelman returns to speak out in 1977. He is helped by Hanna Krall, a young author who at the time of the mass exterminations was a very young girl and survived thanks to a Polish family that hid her throughout the whole of the war. It is she who finds the words for expressing and healing a wound involving space and time; words to express new and old questions, doubts and uncertainties, to the torment experienced for having to impotently watch the massacre of an entire nation; the burden of subconscious guilt that from within attacks both *joie de vivre* and open wounds. It is up to her to delicately and profoundly heal the broken lines of dialogue between the generations, giving a name to immense pain. A prisoner of the past and of his unfulfilled hopes, Edelman seems incapable of expressing empathy for the immense effort made by his former comrades in arms to rebuild a Jewish life in the land of their fathers. After the war and with the birth of Israel, Zionism progressively assumes a central role in the lives and self-perception of the Jews of the Diaspora. The guardian of a vanished world, Edelman is unable to free himself of his idiosyncrasies. The mourning "of the theory" is blocked. Visiting the Kibbutz of *Lohamei Ha-Ghettaoth*, the evening before leaving, Edelman has an ideological disagreement with Yitzhak Zuckerman. Their friend Antek is a key figure of Jewish resistance in the ghetto. There is something moving in this heartrending need to remain united, come what may. Many years later Edelman remembered that the next day Antek was at the airport. He brought oranges and chocolate. Having heard years later that Celina was unwell, Edelman promised to return to assist her should she need him. He arrived too late for the funeral. As always his friend Antek is at the airport. "Stay here with us" he begs him again before he left. This time ideology is not an issue. It is now in the name of the friendship that united ghetto fighters that he says. "This might be the last time we meet," before hugging him. The two men were not to meet again. The coldness that had fallen between the Soviet Bloc and Israel following the anti-Semite campaign after the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the Prague Spring made all contact impossible. Edelman was to make reparations many years later, accompanying to Israel the Polish Foreign Minister who awarded a medal for bravery in memory of Antek, for his participation in the 1944 Warsaw uprising (Meghnagi, in Edelman, 1985; *ibid.* in Rotem 2014).

«[Edelman was] a socialist, right! He was not against Israel, such an idea was a mistake made by the Israelis. He was [...] frightened by our situation. We discussed this many times. [...] He would say, "You are in danger! How can you live amidst one hundred million Arabs? [...]. In the beginning he spoke of a hundred million... I would answer, "What would change if instead they were ten million? [...]. If we were to find a way of establishing a stable friendship between Israel and the Arabs, I would be extremely happy [...] What the Arabs would really like is to have us all vanish completely..." Now there is Ahmadinejad» (Rotem 2016, p. 53).

The burden of memories is a great one. The room is hot. Anna Rolli is visibly moved and cannot hold back her tears. Rotem asks her whether it would not be better to go out into the garden. In the garden there is the *rotem*, a plant that the old fighter has planted in his garden. Spanish broom that grows in the desert of Judea, in canyons and in rocky places, on slopes and at times also in the sandy desert, where the roots dig deep in search of dampness ([wol.jw.org/it/wol/d/r6/lp-i/1200000829](http://wol.jw.org/it/wol/d/r6/lp-i/1200000829)). When it is in flower with its tufts of delicate pinkish white flowers, it pleasantly covers hillsides that are otherwise bare. A convergence of meanings between the name chosen upon arrival in Israel and the flowers that have accompanied its morning awakening and that of his children, on the edge of a city separated by barbed wire, exposed to sniper shots placed on the walls of the opposite site of the city. It is a metaphor for the effort made to prevent the catastrophe of the massacres turning into never-ending mourning.





David Meghnagi and Simha Rotem in Simha Rotem's home garden (Jerusalem, 2016)  
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In the Leopardian poetry, the broom tree is the symbol of an indomitable vitality that resists against the blind violence of nature. In the Biblical story, where the eclipse of the Divine is only temporary and where, even in the most tragic of moments, God is always present at the side of those who suffer unjustly, broom is a symbol of hope and redemption from the violence of man against his neighbor.

There is a convergence of meanings between the name chosen by Rotem upon arrival in Israel and the name of the tree which has, for decades, accompanied the morning awakening of the place and her children, on the edge of a city separated by barbed wire, exposed to snipers positioned on the walls of the opposite side of the city.

Under a broom tree (in Hebrew a *rotem*) the prophet Elias, had searched for shelter after a long and difficult journey through the desert. Tired by the journey and the vicissitudes experienced, he had express a desire to die. But the prophet's task was not finished. For another forty days and another forty nights he walked all the way to the mountain of God. (Elias 19, 4-8). Would Rolli perhaps like a coffee? A glass of water? Rotem asks whether there is someone who will contribute to the cost of translating the book. He would like to contribute to the cost. Pain turns into laughter. A great resource, which the Jews have cultivated for centuries (Freud, 1905, 1927; D. Meghnagi, 1992, 2015).

«Now talk to me about something different. Are you going to do the translation? – *I have already started.* – Who will pay for the translation? You cannot work without... Someone should pay you for your work. Perhaps I could contribute... [...] I feel ill at ease about you because I think you should be paid... – *I will do my best to get paid by the publishing house (laughter).* It is not easy in Italy. – Let me know if things turn out well. – *As soon as I have a contract I will mail it to you. Let's have a drink now.* – What would you like? – *I had a coffee earlier, let's have something else...* – During the war and the occupation, if anyone had seen me refuse to drink... I was a Jew!... They would have understood immediately [...]» (Rotem, 2016, pp. 61-62).

Among the subjects addressed in this interview one could not leave out the plan to poison the SS that Rotem and his group had organised soon after the massacre. It was a plan that was never implemented. Together with his group, led by Abba Kovner, Rotem discussed at length how they could poison thousands of SS captured by the American Army. An initial project to poison the

aqueducts is soon abandoned. It involves the risk of killing innocent people. It is an ethical and very topical choice; “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” an anxious Abraham asks God.” (*Bereshit/In the Beginning/Genesis*, 18: 23). The fall-back plan involving poisoning the bread, is more complicated and requires transporting heavy bags filled with arsenic. In the meantime Ben Gurion, who had seems to approve, ensures that the project is not carried out.

«*You had decided to poison the aqueducts, you would have killed everyone.* – Absolutely not! After that initial moment we abandoned the plans involving water. There was a bakery in the camp that made bread for the SS and only for them. By poisoning the bread with arsenic we were certain no innocent people would be killed. We had not planned to flee afterwards, we would have waited, they would have arrested us and we would have spoken. We wanted the whole world to know why we had done it. Unlike German soldiers, the SS were [...] volunteers [...]. – *At a certain point you were stopped.* – [...] Probably, someone from Israel, perhaps Ben Gurion [...], I am not sure. By poisoning the water we would have also killed innocent people [...]. We could not provide a hundred per cent guarantee that no one else would have eaten a piece of bread, but it was a bakery where they made bread by hand and only for the SS. [...]» (Rotem, 2016, p. 82).

There were more urgent matters to attend to for the father of the homeland. The plan for partitioning Palestine into two states was soon to be part of the United Nations’ political agenda.

Exemplary action undertaken by the Jewish resistance once the war was over might have favoured members of the U.S. State Department and the British Foreign Office who are against the rebirth of a Jewish nation. Towards the end of the war, U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall states that the *raison d’etre* of a Jewish state no longer existed after the Nazi massacres. America doesn’t not want to favour the Soviet Union to which the Arabs might turn, encouraging its penetration in the region. Following this logic, survivors languishing in the camps can return to their old homelands. Since they are not as “numerous” as they used to be, the Jews who are still alive could be “re-absorbed”. Little does it matter that in Poland massacres are organised against the few survivors who had returned to their homes and are waiting to emigrate. A difficult challenge is emerging. It becomes necessary to find allies and do nothing that may damage the image of the movement supporting a Jewish national rebirth.

After the war, Rotem is one of the leader of thousands of young people attempting to travel to the land of their fathers. Having arrived there and following a period spent as a prisoner in a British camp, he becomes part of a special corps assigned to Ben Gurion’s personal safety. Later on, after the 1948-1949 war, he plays a role in the organisation of Jewish immigration to Israel from Eastern European countries. He could have become a political leader and aspire to being a member of the *Knesset* (the Israeli Parliament). But that is not what he wanted. His greatest desire was to live a “normal” life.

In view of the remembrance journey organised by the Municipality of Rome in cooperation with the Jewish community, on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014 he met with students in schools. One girl asked him what religious meaning could be attributed to the *Shoah*. “We are speaking of actions carried out by human beings against other human beings,” said Rotem. He could have stopped there. But then, with his back to the *Tevah*, he exclaimed, “But what God could allow all this...” The students were shocked. This was a question about God that Rotem had once posed to his doctor, a quite religious homeopath he greatly respected. The laconic answer was, “God must have had his reasons, which we humans cannot understand.”

«I thought I no longer had a heart. Seeing a two or three-month-old baby still alive in the arms of a dead woman, and walk by without doing anything, without being able to do anything, is not easy... I cannot remember whether that is in the book... I spoke to a doctor once, my homeopathic doctor. I respected him [...] a good doctor [...] a religious man; not very religious but a man who believes in God... I asked him, “Tell me, how could your God just watch while the Germans killed over a million children in the east? [...] What kind of God is this? What God is he? If there is one. [...] It is a question that has no answer. What I can say is that the answer might be, “He had his good reasons for doing that.” That was my answer» (Rotem, 2016, pp. 97-98).

In the afternoon the book was presented at the Capital Museum's Sala Pietro da Cortona at an event organised by the International Master for Holocaust Studies in cooperation with the Municipality of Rome<sup>1</sup>. Rotem was enchanted by the location's beauty. He told me what he was thinking, "It would be lovely if a little of this beauty arrived in Israel. A little of this beauty would be good for us Israelis." In Rotem's words this fascination for Italy and its people is constantly present, profoundly marked by the sympathy shown at the end of the Forties for exiles leaving from Italian ports for the land of their fathers. "It is true," I told him, "Italians too would need a little of the love you have for life and for the future of your children."

The following evening, October 8<sup>th</sup> (14<sup>th</sup> of Tishrì), was the festivity of *Sukkoth* (the Feast of Ingathering), the day on which Jews celebrate their journeys across the desert before their arrival in the Promised Land. Rotem was our guest. In the course of the conversation, the subject returned to the question posed by the student. According to my daughter Micol, it involved the silence of humankind. On this Rotem is perfectly right. The theological question, however, cannot be avoided. He asked me what I thought. I addressed the subject in broad terms. Jewish tradition is imbued with the idea that God is present in the history and the lives of humankind. The Biblical God is not an immobile driving force that takes no interest in the world. This point marked a great change in the history of religious ideas and morals. Freud, who was notoriously an atheist, dedicated the last twenty years of his life asking himself about the role of the mosaic revolution in the development of ethics. According to Freud this was a momentous turning point (D. Meghnagi, 1992, 2015). Unlike the people of ancient times, the Jews did not replace their God with the divinities of the people by whom they had been defeated, dispersed and enslaved. The Romans destroyed the Temple, cancelling the country's very name. Circumcision was forbidden, Judea renamed "Palestine" and a temple in honour of Jupiter was built on the ruins of Judaism's most sacred place. After the destruction of the Sanctuary, the Jews transformed their hearts into a great temple, which accompanied them into exile like a great ark. The *Torah* became their portable homeland (Heine), the *Shabbath* their refuge. In the Bible, God does not abandon His people: His is an eternal pact. In the beginning, suffering is the result of punishment aimed at the purification of hearts. But the Bible does not make do with this explanation. It provides other more complex and profound ones. Isaiah's suffering servant does not suffer because of crimes he has committed. He bears witness to the evils of the world. Israel's exile is not a punishment. It is the symbol of a rift that involves all creatures. Using mythical language, the Lurianic *Kabbalah* addresses the tragedy of the exile of Spanish Jews, searching for a reason in the very origins of the world. According to Luria, the origin is the result of a *zimzum*. In Hebrew *zimzum* means "withdrawal" and "contraction". To make the world possible, the Divinity *withdrew*, thereby making possible an empty space in which the worlds that later followed one another could exist. According to kabbalists, it is no coincidence that word *'olam* (world/realms) also means concealment. In Judaism, God hides and reveals himself simultaneously. He is absent and at the same time present, transcendent and immanent. Isaac Luria's doctrine can be used as a model for a better understanding of creative and generative processes. An authentically dialogical relationship has a self-limiting act for a backdrop, to use the language of Hebrew mysticism, an inner *zimzum*, which make possible the existence of the *Other*. Without a conscious and intentional choice involving "self-limitation", making room for the words of others, there could in truth be no dialogue between people, let alone between parents and children. It would only be make-believe, filled with violence and subjugation, at best an undeclared "armistice". For potential victims, an act of *concealment* aimed at survival. In a way all this is a form of withdrawal to protect the most precious nucleus of one's own identity. (Meghnagi, 1992, 2010, 2015). In this simultaneous *presence and absence* of God, exile is a consequence of the first act of creation that made the world possible. The primordial contraction, repeated at the lowest levels, is a condition for the existence of the world and the role entrusted to humankind to complete the work of the creation. In the mythical language of the *Kabbalah*, a number of the *Vases* needed to collect primordial divine energy, *were unable* to contain the flow. They therefore *broke* (*Shevirat Ha-Kelim*), producing fragments and sparks that were dispersed in the universe,

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<sup>1</sup> The presentation of the book was promoted with the patronage of the Municipality of Rome, with the participations of Simha Rotem, David Meghnagi (Chair of the Master), Anna Rolli (co-author of the book), and the greetings of Carla Di Veroli (Delegate of Memory of the Municipality).

*becoming prey* for *Sitrè Achrà* (the *other side*, evil), with which they *blended*. In the kabbalists perspective, without this “primordial incident” the world would have been poorer. Human beings would have been like angels, entirely good beings, incapable, however, of choosing between good and evil. The breaking of the “Vases” mixed good and evil, so that nothing in the world would be without two opposites. According to the *Kabbalah*, humankind’s task is to take the creation to its highest level, releasing the divine sparks trapped in every being and every place, returning them to their perfect root (*‘Olam Tikun*). In Job’s text, his false friends add bile to his wounds, while to all appearances defending God. In the end, God finds Job and not his friends to be right. In the Biblical story, Satan challenges the Divinity, saying that Job is a fair and good man only because he has everything. Should he experience a calamity, he would no longer be fair and good. God accepts the challenge at Job’s expense. Job emerges as the winner. From victim he becomes a witness and in spite of having lost everything he does not renounce the idea of goodness. The Book of Job can be read as a great metaphor for what tragically happened in the recently ended century. No one can provide comfort for an entire world that has been annihilated. The capacity to believe in goodness, in spite of everything, of imagining and dreaming of a different future for one’s children and grandchildren has prevented Judaism from falling into endless mourning. With Job, the religious conscious accesses a new awareness (M. Susman 1999). God exists wherever we allow Him to enter. He exists because we *make Him* exist. The witnesses of the greatest tragedy, who in spite of everything believed in goodness, provide the greatest evidence of this. Rotem, who had followed this conversation, addresses the subject. He finds this perspective interesting. When he will return to Israel he will study the matter in depth. Leaving the house he forgets his kippah on his head the whole way. A gesture filled with meaning. When I saw him again soon after that in Jerusalem, he drove me to the station. Pressing on the accelerator, just as he had when driving the fighters out of the ghetto, he said, “At my venerable age I will not give up driving. It helps me keep my reflexes working. Don’t stop fighting,” I answered. “We will always need you and the example you set.”



**The grave of Simha Rotem and his wife Ghina  
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# Traces of the past: Alternative forms of repair in visual culture and public memory\*

Michaela Quadraro\*\* & Anna Lisa Tota\*\*\*

**Abstract.** This paper will investigate the crucial role played by images in the public arena as conveyers of meanings and social relations. Visuality, as a cultural and social practice in which meanings are constructed and negotiated, will be explored as a primary medium of the intersubjective transmission of trauma that involves both the artist's perspective and the viewer's reception. Several contemporary art productions emerging from a context of diaspora and cultural hybridity speak of a past that cannot be forgotten and wounds that cannot be fully healed, but still demand recognition or an alternative form of "repair". An act of repair invokes a creative ethics and a potential for transformation, in an open-ended process of change that also brings to the fore concerns over the tensions between memory and representation, particularly when they relate to experiences of communal trauma.

**Keywords:** Photography, Public Memory, Traumatic Past, Reconciliation.

## 1. Preliminary remarks

This paper investigates the crucial role played by images in the public arena as conveyers of meanings and social relations. Photography, in particular, as a concrete material medium of memory, in regard to a family history as well as to the processes of public commemoration, is extremely relevant for individual, collective, and public memories. How can photography function as a tool of memory and how does it work? How can we influence the representation of a biographical story of a family or the public representation of a traumatic past through a picture? Photography has several sociological, ethical, and political implications that should be taken into account. Our contribution refers to the connection between photography and memory, with a particular focus on the images associated to traumatic events. Our theoretical questions address the nature, the role, and the function of the photographic representation of a traumatic event: a picture is considered as a "condenser", a container of a particular part of the reality. Even if an image depicts a portion, the all-encompassing impact on the spectator is unquestionable. This effect is the power of the iconic sign, which makes the spectator forget that a photo is just a photo, as critical theory has demonstrated.

Referring to a theoretical corpus that highlights the role and the efficacy of images in the transgenerational transmission of the past, this paper contributes to this debate through the exploration of contemporary visual examples that, emerging from a context of diaspora and cultural hybridity, speak of a traumatic past that cannot be forgotten and wounds that cannot be fully healed, but still demand recognition. What visuality brings to the fore, in our view, is an investigation on an alternative form of "repair", an act that opens the archive and disseminates its scattered pieces in the present.

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\* Paragraphs 1-5 (pp. 21-25) are authored by Anna Lisa Tota, and paragraphs 6-9 (pp. 25-29) are authored by Michaela Quadraro.

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## 2. “Just a photo”

An interesting take on the visual representation of the past regards the difference between images and words in their capacity to transmit messages and meanings. Which are the different forms of narration when images, rather than words, are used? We know that all images are polysemous, as Roland Barthes has demonstrated, in other words a multiplicity of meanings coexists within one image, of which the viewer can choose some instead of others (1964). As a result, the linguistic message is one of the techniques used to fix the image, to function as an “anchorage” of all the possible meanings of the photograph, and to direct the reader. Nevertheless, the elucidation of the language is selective, applied only to certain signs of the iconic message, to convey ideological values.

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes further develops his intuitions about the crucial role played by the viewer in making sense of the image, suggesting two modalities of experiencing photography: *studium* and *punctum* (1980). The former is a form of rationalized and distanced knowledge, a sort of interest and general curiosity engendered by the actions, the facts, or the faces represented in the image, while the latter is an “accident”, a puncture, an arrow, something in the photograph that affects the viewer and hurts her/him. Something happens when a detail in the photograph opens a wound, a trauma, or a fissure that, regardless of the photographer’s intentions, strikes the viewer in an unexpected and powerful way.

Recalling Barthes’ analysis, Nicholas Mirzoeff comments that the most important and unknowable singularity of the photograph is this capacity to open a *punctum* as a means to connect memory and the realm of the dead (1999). This power of photography provokes the viewer’s production of unexpected and unintended meanings. Moreover, Mirzoeff defines the visual as an interdisciplinary and challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and racialised identities, where meanings are created and contested. Visuality is thus developed as a problematic place, in which subjects, are defined both as agents of sight and as objects of a visual discourse. The theoretical tools of visual culture reveal the frictions that constitute a visual regime and make it possible to investigate vision in its social and cultural dimension. Considered as a field of study, visibility is concerned with the social activities of looking and seeing; it considers the image as a sign or text that produces meaning (Hall and Evans 1999). Furthermore, since these meanings cannot be completed within the text, they require the subjective capacities of the viewer to make the images signify. This leads to a theory of visibility according to which images, more than written texts, offer themselves to be read as “natural”, because they have a more direct relationship with the reality they represent. Because of this, an image is more successful in transmitting the ideological meaning than a written text, as we know from Stuart Hall’s famous work “Encoding, Decoding” (1993 [1980]). This is the reason why the viewer will probably forget that the photo is not the reality, but “just a photo”.

Hall’s argument still convinces today and seems connected to a more recent study by Karin Knorr-Cetina, who proposes a visual approach based on a kind of “viscourse”, rather than discourse, to highlight the prevailing, communicative, and experimental role of pictures in several arenas (2001). Focusing on high-energy physics, Knorr-Cetina stresses the superior capacity and the inherent power of the images to function as evidence, since a pictorial representation is indispensable in demonstrating specific formations. This is particularly clear and theoretically consistent if we consider the crucial role played by photography as a representation of the past, or as a visual narration of what has happened, eventually engendering a process of remembrance and recollection.

A photo is an objective reality, but it does not objectively represent a reality. More precisely, it simultaneously expresses subjective and objective positions. The opinion according to which an image represents an event, whose meaning depends both on the photographer’s subjective perspective and on the observer’s subjective reception is very common among sociologists and

communication scientists (Barthes 1964; Zelizer 2004; Eberle 2004; Sontag 2008; Shevchenko 2014). This epistemological perspective on the role of the visual versus the depicted reality is particularly useful when considered in relation to the processes of remembering and forgetting, as Shevchenko (2015) emphasizes. Since Halbwachs (1925; 1941) the theoretical investigations and the empirical research on memory have known an important development (Nora 1984; Connerton 1989; Middleton & Edwards 1990). The different individual, collective, and social forms of memory are more and more analyzed as a work in progress, influenced by the present, which makes the objective rendering very problematic, as Maurice Halbwachs has proposed (1968). Therefore, the past is not a static object, but a dynamic construction, whose public narration is formed by several individuals, social groups, communities, institutions, and factors.

### **3. The photo as a synecdoche**

The correlation between photography and memory allows us to view both areas from a theoretically coherent perspective: both photography and memory can be interpreted as social activities whose meanings are deeply linked to the subjectivity of individuals. Similar to a photographer who has to decide what s/he wants to shoot (and this decision always implies a drastic reduction), a person's act of remembering is always very selective. This selectivity is deeply linked to the epistemological status of photography and memory. As Homi Bhabha suggests, the past cannot be separated from the present; the former is not a mere predecessor of the latter (1994). On the contrary, the past presents itself as a contingent, interstitial and "intermediate" space that intervenes in the present, bringing newness with it. What is crucial is that remembering cannot be a quiet and introspective recollection, but it is an act of putting together the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.

Very interestingly, the partiality of the selection engendered by photography and memory leads to the confusion of a part for the whole. The trope that indicates this semiotic phenomenon is "synecdoche" (from the ancient Greek "συνεκδοχή"). Both photography and memory are in a relation to the reality that could be described as a synecdoche: although they just represent a part, they are implicitly perceived as the whole. This is their potential in conveying an ideological content: if this "empty" space can be hidden between a part and the whole, then a particular perspective can be transmitted as a universal one. In other words, this gap allows the elaboration of a "cultural hegemony", which refers to the specific cultural aspect of a struggle over legitimacy (Gramsci 2014 [1948-1951]). Filling the gap with an ideological, ethical, and political content carries a specific meaning in case of personal or communal trauma. Actually, the manipulation of the narration of individual or collective violence has ethical and political implications, which are more important than the representation of a normal event of life.

### **4. The visual representation of trauma**

A consolidated tradition in Memory Studies addresses questions about the role of visual memory in representing trauma and war atrocity, stemming from Walter Benjamin's invitation to reflect on the images of public events as a guide for the future. Benjamin's angel of history embodies a critical observer: with his face turned toward the past, struck with silence in the face of the world destruction, he would like to stay and recompose the catastrophe, but a storm propels him into the future, while his gaze remains directed toward the past (Benjamin, 1940). Departing from the evocative suggestion of the German philosopher, as well as from Susan Sontag's recalling of the atrocity photos to link past and present, Barbie Zelizer examines how haunting visual memories of the Holocaust were produced by the photographic coverage of the World War II Nazi concentration



camps (2000). These memories act as a permanent reference point of the Western imagination and as an iconic representation of human evil. The photographs of the liberation of the concentration camps were used for the journalistic record and created collective memories about these atrocities. More powerfully than the narratives describing the camps, the flood of photographs was presented with few identifying characteristics and succeeded where words did not, turning collective disbelief into the horror of recognition.

As for the ethical implications of a visual rendering of traumatic events in the public discourse, Andrea Liss (1998) has reconsidered the demand to bear witness, not to discredit photographs, but to rethink the ways they give a realistic evidence of the events and to analyze the role of the representation strategies in relation to the Holocaust. What happens when photos are used as lessons of history for future generations? Liss suggests that a reevaluation of how the Holocaust is represented through the photographic representation is particularly pertinent and very problematic: beyond the voices of direct witnesses, the difficulty is not only about the appropriate form that representation should take, but also about the issue of legitimacy (who can legitimately recount the events), the use of photography as historical proof, and the translation of traumatic memory into "postmemories". However, to adhere to the prohibition of speaking for the events beyond the voices of direct witnesses would mean to leave these events silent. As Liss suggests, the inauthenticity of the postevents' speaker is inevitable, indeed necessary, for memories to be part of the public discourse. From different perspectives, Zelizer and Liss analyze the use of traumatic images in the public arena and investigate their ethical and political implications. In a transformative perspective, the photo of a traumatic event acts both as a conveyer of collective suffering and as an opportunity to elaborate a collective trauma.

## **5. Family/collective memories**

Images play an especially significant role in narrating multiple versions of the past. How does an image function as a medium of family memories? Elevated to an object worthy of academic scrutiny, the family album constitutes a simultaneous cultural production and cultural criticism, because personal remembrance is necessarily intertwined with the collective narrations of the past. According to Martha Langford, a photographic album is a repository of memory and an instrument of social performance, characterized by a collective compilation, rather than individual authorship (2001). As a way of constructing multiple versions of the past, the album is a cultural artifact that also offers a model for how we might analyze our connection to the past. This relation is undoubtedly characterized by gaps, breaks, and puzzles, which avoid a linear reading of the content. Combining photography with orality, Langford demonstrates how we can remember through albums and dispose our stories in the future.

As already said, the nature of the photographic representation can be described as a synecdoche; thanks to this specific quality, a photo can function as a possibility of a deep transformation of the past. Since a photo can be confused with the reality, its representational function becomes very strong. Alternatively, it can be considered as a bridge, where the past and the present meet and reflect each other. When Halbwachs argues that memory is accomplished via a shared consciousness that forges it to the agendas of the present, he precisely refers to this transformative capacity of memory.

A photo from the family album can be a chance to narrate a story, to interrupt the linearity of time, and to lead us to a time of immanence, where different narrations coexist and insist on the present. Through the exercise of memory, it is possible to discover the past and elaborate it differently, eventually engendering processes of healing (Tota, 2014). The leading British artist and cultural theorist Keith Piper, born to a family of African-Caribbean descent, develops his interests in photography and archiving strategies in his artistic practice (1997). During a residency within the

walls of Birmingham Central Library, he produces the visual project *Ghosting the Archive* (2005). In 1990 this institution acquired a large collection of more than ten thousand images, mostly unidentified, both proof prints and negatives, from the studios of Ernest Dyché (1887-1973), a commercial portrait photographer who operated in the suburbs of the inner area of Birmingham and had taken family portraits of many members of the communities of migrants arriving from the Indian subcontinent, African countries and Caribbean islands from the 1950s to 1970s (Campt, 2012). Piper physically opened the boxes of Birmingham City Archive and found countless portraits of families without names or other identifying elements; crucially, among the photos of the collection, he found photographs of his own parents' wedding celebration in 1957.

During the residency Piper decides to focus on the negatives, which laid unquestioned and anonymous since they were taken: held by the artist in a white-gloved hand, these fragile cultural conveyers of memories are reframed one after the other in the contemporary space of Birmingham City Archive by Piper's digital camera for the video *Ghosting the Archive*. A shutter click presents each time a different negative plate that, through technology, slowly morphs into its positive version and makes countless individuals appear. Family members, women with newly born children, men seated on the chairs provided at Dyché Studio, wearing work uniforms, new or borrowed coats, emerge from obscurity and have the possibility to reappear as a ghostly presence.

The negatives of the huge photographic collection opened by Piper do not allow the viewer to look for physical attributes, essential or authentic evidence. Rather, they ask the observer to engage in a reconstruction work and a critical confrontation with the multiple cultural formations and historical experiences of migration, in which individual as well as collective memories emerge. The past emerged from Piper's family history and from the scattered pieces of other migrants' family albums necessarily intertwines with a collective history that, in this case, is the history of Europe, of the diasporic formations that constitute the European space, and of the impossibility of "going back".

## **6. The album of the evicted**

The focus on visuality, on photography in particular, represents a deliberate choice of this article and a strategy to provide useful insights into the relation with the past. The distance between the shutter click and the final view of the image interrupts linearity and involves us, the viewers, in a more direct way, as if we were there, in the moment of the shoot. The dead represented in the photographs that constitute the Dyché Collection are not dead, because their lives leave traces that allow us to reconfigure the present. In this sense, photography draws us in a conversation with the dead, an action that opens the wounds of traumatic events. This dialogue still demands recognition and new tools, not only to make sense of the past and the present, but also to understand the processes of imagination.

In her quest to address her own relation to South African history, Siona O'Connell turns to images from her family albums: a photo of the wedding of her paternal grandparents, the other of her parents' wedding, married at the same church in Cape Town. As she stresses, the photograph connects memories and histories in a real way, conveying meanings that are embedded in concrete social, political, and economic contexts (2018). In particular, the family album exceeds autobiographical or personal memories, and yet helps to preserve them in the obligation to remember. More than two-dimensional objects, because of the material place they occupy, photographs propose an anchorage of imagination. Therefore, the two prints O'Connell finds in her family album - the first one depicting her father as a kid outside the church at her grandfather's second wedding, the second with her father appearing as a young bridegroom - say little or nothing of a trauma to come. Indeed, a short and unexpected notice would have changed these people's life forever: Cape Town, the "Mother City", shaped by histories of colonialism, regulation, and

displacement, saw the apartheid legislated forced removals and evictions of District Six and other areas of the city that begun in the 1960's and continued until the 1980's, resulting in the displacement of about sixty thousand people only in District Six for the arrival of new, white residents. O'Connell recalls that in the years 1960-1982 about three and a half million black people were subjected to several forced removals as a result of the apartheid segregation regime that was legislated in 1948. Forced to leave areas such as District Six, Constantia, and Harfield Village, millions of people moved to new "coloured" townships with cruel and ironic names such as Atlantis and Ocean View, which were everything but pleasant places to live and to raise children. Families were separated from other relatives and from their neighbors, and forced to live in inhospitable places such as Atlantis, situated sixty kilometers from the city center, without public transportation. The cruelty of the eviction notice, which came totally unexpected and knocked on families' doors, destroyed any basic notion of the sense of community and neighborhood.

The narratives of the home-owners evicted from District Six, together with the stories of the people who passed away in the meantime, are becoming pale, like the surface of the black and white photographs of O'Connell's family album, in which she tries to perform an imagined homecoming following her relatives' pathways. The memory that seems to fade is actually still alive and powerfully resonates with the actual social and economic conditions of the new South African society, where everything evokes the sound of the bulldozer during the forced removals. Therefore, how can we situate ourselves in a history that we have not experienced? How can we engage with old photographs, knowing that they are pieces of a larger memory?

## **7. Impossible returns**

The documentary *An Impossible Return* (2015) investigates the oppression caused by the forced evictions in South Africa, through an oral and visual archive that allows new elaborations of social justice after oppression. Starting with intimate photographs of family life as a way of operating outside of mainstream regimes of knowledge, the film stresses the lived experiences of black families and their struggle for self-representation. While doing research for this film, the director O'Connell had several conversations with ex-residents of District Six, all of whom were her parents' neighbors and then evicted. After the unavoidable sadness of meeting each other after forty years and many relatives and friends left behind, these people were invited to bring photographs with them: pieces of history, contained in plastic bags, were passed around with great care. Grainy pictures depicting moments of life in the area of District Six appeared as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, whose edges could not be connected. After speaking about the progress of the land-claims process, the photographs suddenly brought this people back to a trauma that was not resolved, but yet still alive and clearly recognizable. In these collective conversations, O'Connell understands that much is yet to be elaborated, because, as her father commented, these people always seem to be afraid of something, even if they are not sure of the demons that keep haunting them. In addition, the amount offered by the Land Restitution process is insignificant, compared to the injuries caused by apartheid, of which some remain silenced in the work for reconciliation, including forced removals and racialised distributions of wealth and poverty. This has produced citizens who still have to understand what happened to them and what is at stake for the project of social justice and an alternative future.

The struggle for democracy and justice needs to be imagined with a work on the past: as O'Connell reminds us, the power exerted by apartheid, as a consequence of slavery in Africa, produced a non-human oppressed subject, whose future had to be totally re-shaped and re-invented. Even when this subject is free, s/he keeps living in an immanent state of fear and has to come to terms with her/his past. Many evictees have never accepted to return to their homes in District Six, to a place where their oppression was inscribed. "There's no going back", as one former resident

affirms. The impossibility of their return represents a clear request of recognition, the acknowledgement of a trauma that cannot be healed with the post-apartheid apparatus of remembering and forgetting, carried on by museums and institutionalized archives. What apartheid did, according to O'Connell, is making these people unable of comprehending their sorrow and loss: the lack of names on the headstones in District Six has not permitted an official recognition of this suffering as part of a larger narrative of nation-building. The ex-evictees have been left alone and have come to terms with the dead on their own, often looking at a photograph taken from a plastic bag and passed around, following the invitation of a former neighbor's daughter who has to do research for her new documentary on impossible returns. These photographs lead to a journey in the lives of these oppressed people and bear witness to a traumatic past that is not over, but still persists in the present.

## **8. An alternative repair**

We have demonstrated that photography can be described as a synecdoche and function as a possibility of a deep transformation of the past, or as a bridge, where the past and the present meet and engage with each other. The faded photographs that emerge from personal archives speak, many years later, of a desire to break the undisputed authority of the archive. Since no existing archive can preserve the totality of history, we are always confronted by a selection, an assemblage of pieces that are put together in an illusion of coherence. In *L'archéologie du savoir* Michel Foucault states that the archive is neither an accumulation of documents nor a complex of institutions: it cannot be defined in its totality, but only in fragments and levels that reveal why so many realities are hidden (1969). Consequently, how can we re-imagine the paralyzing pattern of the archive to include unauthorized voices? How can the legitimizing force of the archive be diverted from the preservation of only certain memories? The images that have been preserved by millions of South African who were forcibly removed, as well as Black British migrants' photographs silently included in the Dyche Collection, bring history into focus and present a parallel history that still asks for recognition. The photographs of the oppressed or marginalized subjects of history bring us to an immanent time: in the here and the now the past forces us to remember and to find new ways to come to terms with a personal and collective traumatic past that is far from resolved.

Silenced memories give evidence of the trauma of the past and its persistent existence in the present. We cannot imagine the future regardless of our history, even if we know that it is impossible to return to an original condition. What is crucial is that, in the tension between memory and representation, images can offer new tools for the repair of a controversial past. For the new South African generations of ex-evictees, photographs can become a chance for an act of repair, which speaks of wounds that cannot be healed, but still demand recognition.

## **9. Towards an arts sociology of repair**

We are aware that the term "repair" covers a multitude of synonyms and differences, of which some pursue the avenues of renovation and replacement. This point addresses the implication of repair in relation to human body, in the context of illness and disease. As Nadine Ehlers has recently articulated in relation to post-mastectomy breast reconstruction surgical interventions, repair in relation to human body, to the female body in particular, can be considered both as a normalizing procedure and as a promise to return to a supposed state of wholeness (2018). Nevertheless, the problematic issue of the "precarity of repair" raises questions about unexpected forms of renewal. In the context of recovery, the vulnerable human bodies are not only fixed, but

they also experience new ways of continual becoming and alternative modalities of inhabiting the world.

Wounds and representations of suffering are not limited to the corporeality of the body. Yet the recognition of the implications of repair also concerns the social body, the narration of collective trauma that intersects with the overlapping and intertwined histories common to different people and social groups. In this article we propose a theoretical approach to repair that could investigate complex social formations, expanding upon the ethnomethodological conception of the term. As we know from Harold Garfinkel (1967), repair can be a way to describe the intersubjective maintenance of social order in everyday conversations and to study how people respond and restore mutual understanding. In “The Mechanics of Workplace Order: Toward a Sociology of Repair”, Christopher Henke (2000) imagines a sociology of repair that expands the ethnomethodological use of the term and applies it to a more general study of social order, to investigate the material and social forms in the workplace, in other words the negotiations of ideas and behaviors that allow workers to do their job. This point calls attention to a broader meaning of repair, which not only applies to objects and material things, but also to intangible forms such as communities, cultures, and memories.

Hence, differently from a static form that creates both distance and proximity with the past, as in the psychoanalytical approach to repair, in our sociological take on repair we wish to draw the attention on the on-going and unpredictable fractures of social order. In this sense, repair becomes a useful way to think about an unlimited range of human experiences, in a constant tension between the drive for restoration and the acknowledgement of on-going forms of reparation. In an open-ended process of change that also brings to the fore concerns over the tensions between memory and representation, an act of repair invokes a creative potential for transformation, particularly when the remaking relates to experiences of communal trauma. Here, we wish to turn to the efficacy of photography in addressing these issues and to raise a more general point of the sociology of arts, which examines how artistic forms emerge as meaningful within interactions and have an impact on questions on memory and trauma. In our view, this places the sociology of the arts on the forefront of the study of culture, in the engagement of art with other human variables, providing the framework for the investigation of more general cultural mutations.

Our analysis concerns the provocative work of the Berlin-based French-Algerian artist Kader Attia, who helps us to focus on the bodies damaged by wars and conflicts and on the attempts of healing those open wounds. His work has been exhibited at the Venice Biennale, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, the Whitechapel Gallery in London, dOCUMENTA(13) in Kassel, as well as at MoMA and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Tate Modern in London, and Centre Pompidou in Paris, just to name a few. The multicultural vision of his work is rooted in his own heterogeneous life experiences: the inter-cultural conflicts of his childhood, like the years spent in Congo and Algeria. Born in 1970 in France to a family of Muslim immigrants from Algeria, Attia grew up in the multicultural atmosphere of the suburbs of Paris, in a context where Muslim and Jewish immigrants lived side by side in relative harmony. In his early works Attia focuses on the implications of demographic changes in France and on the encounter between different religious practices. In a kind of proximity with Jewish spirituality, Attia produces *Big Bang*, a significant work for the interior courtyard of the Jewish Museum in Paris, then re-presented as a smaller installation in 2007 at Haifa Museum of Art. In this work the symbols of Judaism and Islam - the Star of David and the crescent – are condensed into a monumental sculpture, a large ball or a meteorite that expresses Attia's concern with the tension between religious traditions and social conflicts.

In his 2010 exhibition *Holy Land*, at Galleria Continua in San Gimignano, Italy, Attia placed twenty-one tombstone-shaped mirrors along the Tuscan countryside, as if simulating the arrangement of the tombstones in a cemetery. These mirrors create a complex web of meanings and reflections that do not help us but rather force us to think of questions such as invisibility and absence, disappearance and erasure. In presenting *Holy Land* on a beach of Fuerteventura (Canary

Islands), where thousands of African “illegal” immigrants land in the promise of a better life or, more often, perish during a very precarious journey, Attia forces us to think about our own history and about our responsibility. Furthermore, through absence, the mirrors reproduce a reminder of collective suffering and communal trauma. Following David Meghnagi’s intuitions, we could say that Attia’s intervention is part of a process of re-elaboration of a collective trauma that tries to re-compose the fragmented pieces and the violent fractures of tragic life experiences for future generations. Through artistic practices such as *Big Bang* and *Holy Land* we are invited to fill the voids in the process of re-signification of traumatic events. In a conversation with controversial pasts and experiences of resilience, the living ones constantly engage with the dead and confront with their own responsibilities.

In works such as *Open Your Eyes* (2010), *The Repair* (2012), and *Untitled (Work on Memory I)* (2017) Attia juxtaposes images of French soldiers wounded in World War I with repaired objects taken from colonial-era Africa that were considered unsuitable for display in Western museums. His argumentation starts in Congo in the 1990’s, when he saw for the first time an old and delicate fabric made of raffia, which had been repaired with small pieces of a colonial French fabric applied on the holes. Then, he discovers that many objects, such as bowls and masks, had been repaired in their African local contexts with old buttons, pieces of old fabrics, and mirrors. However, these objects have been kept aside in the collections of Western museums of African art, maybe because they belong to an aesthetic code that the Occident cannot decipher (Attia, 2018). Even if some repaired objects are occasionally displayed in Western ethnological museums, the institutional discourse never takes their repair into account, despite the fact that examples of repair can be found among many African ethnic groups in Congo, Tanzania, and Cameroon. Do these objects reveal an alternative aesthetics in the non-Occidental world?

Attia establishes a resonance among African and European histories of repair via a common experience of trauma. When thousands of African masks and other objects were brought to Europe, this continent was experiencing one of the most traumatic moments of its history. During and after the First World War, indeed, millions of wounded soldiers returned home with their faces seriously injured or repaired with early plastic surgery interventions. In the artistic/research project *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*, shown at Documenta 13, Attia juxtaposes a series of different objects from some ex-colonized African countries, taken from private archives, with a slide show of the so-called *gueules cassées* (broken faces), the Veterans of the Great War, thus called for their evident signs of surgery on their faces. These soldiers, recruited both in Europe and in the colonies, were concrete reminders and testimonies of the brutality of war, but were given little social visibility or historical recognition. In France, for example, they were assigned by the government a house 40 kilometers from Paris and often excluded from the public commemoration of the Great War (Ianniciello, 2018). Their status as damaged survivors made them walking reminders of an open wound and unrepaired trauma.

In this way, Attia reminds us that archives are always sites of selection and exclusion and brings us into a decomposed and alternative archive, which is not a monument of the past, but an aspiration for alternative futures and ethico-aesthetic forms of repair. The disturbing photographs of the “broken faces” of the war, marginalized in the public memory of the conflict, ask for a dynamic process of repair and revision. These disturbing faces, emerged from a scattered archive prepared by the artist, strike the viewers in a powerful way. Next to repaired object, collected for the exhibition in Kassel, the photographs of the damaged bodies of the combatants are there, all looking for repair. If we persist in looking at the soldiers’ pictures, we envision a relation between the damaged bodies and the process of memory: these images ask for an alternative elaboration of a collective suffering and, within an art context, offer us the opportunity to acknowledge a controversial past whose consequences are still here. In this perspective, we claim that the photographs of a traumatic event can act as a concrete reminder of a collective sorrow, but also as an opportunity to transform a controversial past, operating outside its institutionalized versions.

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**Eliyahu Lillo Arbib (Tripoli, 1911 - Bat Yam, 2003)**

*Ad memoriam*

David Meghnagi\*



Eliyahu Lillo Arbib was a leading exponent of the Tripolitan Jewish Community. In 1931 he was active in the foundation of the maritime school at Civitavecchia of the Betar Movement (the right wing of the Zionist movement). In 1947 he represented the Libyan Jewish Community at the United Nations Commission for the Protection of Minorities, voting for Libya's independence. In 1948 he assumed the presidency of the Tripolitan Jewish Community. After the 1948 pogrom, he took part in the meeting on the American aircraft carrier *Keaserge*, in which there was stipulated the agreement that made possible the mass exodus of the Jewish community to Israel. In 1962 he was among the promoters of a government petition for the protection of the Jewish rights minority. In the weeks that followed the 1967 pogrom, he carried out an intense activity for the exodus of the Jewish community. He moved with his family first to Livorno and then to Israel. Among his writings: *The Jews in Libya between Idris and Gaddafi*; "The anti-Jewish pogrom of November 1945"; "The legal status of the Jews of Libya".

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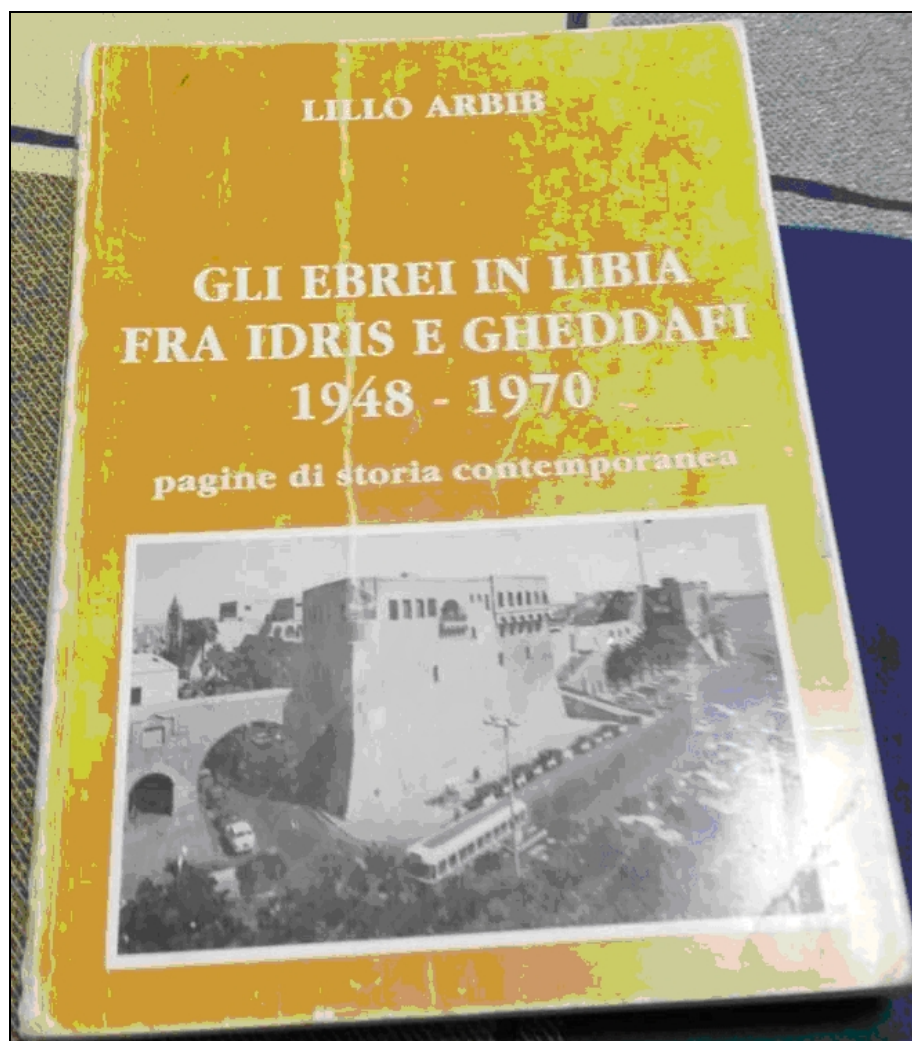


## Libya 1945\*

Lillo Arbib

**Abstract.** This paper is taken from a book by Lillo Arbib, published by the author at his own expenses (*Ebrei in Libia tra Idris e Gheddafi, 1947-1970. Pagine di storia contemporanea* ["Jews in Libya between Idris and Gheddafi, 1947-1970. Pages of Contemporary History"]). Israel: Bat Yam, 1970, pp. 1-24). It is a living testimony of the 1945 pogrom in Libya. At that time Arbib was the secretary of the Tripolitan Jewish Community. In 1948 he assumed the presidency of the Tripolitan Jewish Community. After the 1948 pogrom, he took part in the meeting on the American aircraft carrier Keaserge, in which there was stipulated the agreement that made possible the mass exodus of the Jewish community to Israel.

**Keywords:** Jewish Community of Libya, Libya, Anti-Semitism, Zionism.



Cover of the book by Lillo Arbib, *Ebrei in Libia tra Idris e Gheddafi, 1947-1970. Pagine di storia contemporanea* ["Jews in Libya between Idris and Gheddafi, 1947-1970. Pages of Contemporary History"]. Israel: Bat Yam, 1970

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\* Lillo Arbib, *Ebrei in Libia tra Idris e Gheddafi, 1947-1970. Pagine di storia contemporanea* ["Jews in Libya between Idris and Gheddafi, 1947-1970. Pages of Contemporary History"]. Israel: Bat Yam, 1970, pp. 1-24. Copyright Europa Ricerca Onlus.

## Chapter I, Part I (May 1948)

Clouds of imminent war were gathering in the skies of the Middle East in the beginning of May 1948.

The defenseless Jewish communities in the Arab countries (Middle East and North Africa), where then living in a climate of terror owing to the imminent danger of finding themselves suddenly transformed in hostages and at the mercy of primitive frantic and irresponsible populations.

Great Britain, that had then the mandate on Palestine, declared to all the world her decision of renouncing to that mandate and decided to leave that country at the date of May 15, 1948.

Palestine, inhabited then by 300,000 Arabs and 600,000 Jews will be left to her destiny.

Hours of anguish and a very heavy atmosphere full of unforeseen, burdened on all, but especially on the Jewish population who were living minorities in the Arab communities (Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Libya, Tunisia, and the Maghreb).

### **The situation in Libya**

Libya was an Italian colony from October 1911 to January 1943. On January 23, 1943, after the war events of WW2, Libya was occupied by the troops of the British -8<sup>th</sup> Army under the command of Marshal Montgomery.

From that date was established in the country a British military government (B.M.A – (British Military Administration) having as Chief Administrator in 1943 the Brigadier General Travers Robert Blackley.

In the Province of Tripoli was appointed the lieutenant Colonel C. Oulton, as S.C.A.O (senior civil affairs officer). Both the Chief administrator and the S.C.A.O belonged to the British Colonial Office and had a long experience in managing indigenous populations by the law of “divide et impera” .

From the beginning of British occupation, the government allowed a lot of Libyan exiles that left the country during the Italian Era (32 years) to return. The British administration brought with it also a lot of “imported Arab personnel” (wearing a red Fez on the heads), either Syrians, Palestinians or Egyptians, that were placed in all government services and in the police.

The return of the exiles and the presence of the “Red Fez”, succeeded in creating a nationalist conscience and agitation between the Arab population, whose political feeling weakened during the Italian period.

The leaders of Jewish community in Tripolitania, having their responsibility, were studying ways to maintain and defend the Jewish population amounting to 30,000 souls of which 25,000 in Tripoli the city and 5,000 in different centers in the inter land (Amrus, Tagiura, Zavia, Kussabat, Homs, Zliten and Misurata). In the precedent weeks, the streets of Tripoli were crowded by thousands of Arabs coming from Maghreb countries (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco). There were the Jihad (holy war) volunteers; they were all travelling in the *Balbia Road* (the highway between the Tunisian border and the Egyptian one), to fight the holy war against the Jews.

The bitter experience of November 1945 Pogrom, that left 140 dead Jews in Tripolitania, hundreds of wounded and invalids and damages for millions of Sterling (which no government agreed to refund ever), made the Jewish population very suspicious and wary.

The commercial and handicraft life was almost paralyzed, the *Suks* in the Arab city and the stores in the new city started to close at the first hours in the afternoon. The atmosphere was that of wait and see – but of What? What was supposed to happen? The notables Arabs understood that something had to happen, but nobody knew exactly what was boiling in the pot. Libya was fighting to obtain her independence. From other Arab countries were coming former exiles and the agents of the Arab League. The British intelligence service was represented by very outstanding clerks: Major Greatorex, Lieutenant Mc Dearden, who were doing very big efforts to collect from all Arab world the most violent exiles of the Italian period.

So, returned after more than 30 years, Hag Beshir Sadawy, Khaled Bey El Gargani, Mohammed Suehly, Taher El-Mraied, Ahmed On Sof and others.

They left Libya after Italian occupation of 1911, and after the breakdowns of peace talks between Italy and the Senussi Movement in 1919.

Used by the British, these people spoke about Libyan independence but in reality were acting on behalf of Arab League transforming Libya in a Vulcan.

Great Britain in that period had to achieve two different targets: coming close to the end of the mandate on Palestine she wanted to prove that all the Arab world was against the proclamation of a Jewish state in Palestine and in the same time wanted to prove that the Libyan populations were very primitive and still not ready for self-government, in the Annual Report of the B.M.A of 1945, we can read at page 11: "Since the middle of this year a plebiscite on the future of the country would decide on behalf of a British protectorate.

That is still true for the tribal regions, but in the cities nationalist ambitions are growing and therefore we are thinking about the complete independence or about a stronger union with the Arab League. The nationalist party is advancing.

### **Community situation**

Following the anti Jewish disorders of November 1945, the Jewish community had a long period of instability and financial difficulties.

The Presidency of the Community which had only administrative and educational powers, found itself mixed up in political decisions which it did not have the right to decide.

The president in that period, Zachino Habib (z.l.) ,was a British citizen, nevertheless had for various times to participate to the meetings of the National United Front (*Gebaa Wataneya*) and against his best advice, to make declarations that would in the end oblige the whole community.

These were moments of decision of the Libyan future: The Arab population, being under the influence of the exiles who returned home, and of the Arab League, under Abdurrahman Azzam Bey, a man who knew Libya very well, having participated in various insurrection movements against Italy, was inclined a total independence and refused whichever interlude of Italian or an Arab state provisional administration.

The president Zachino Habib (z.l.) had to give a declaration of sympathy for the movement promoted by the National United Front for the independence on behalf of all the Jewish population, the same Jewish population that was waiting for a decision on U.N in favor of an Italian *trusteeship*.

This way the president had to give his resignations and was substituted by a government commissioner by name of Shalom Nahum, up to then his deputy.

At the end of 1947, after new elections, the presidency was given to Dr. Maurizio Forti (z.l.) that stayed in power up to April 30, 1948.

During the presidency of Maurizio Forti Jews started a more active participation in Libyan political parties, a representative appeared in front of the UN *Quadripartite commission* in its session of January 23, 1948, and the community organized a ceremony on behalf of the exile Beshir Bey Sadawy that returned to Tripoli in the *Mehari Hotel*. In front of the UN Commission , the community was represented by Maurizio Forti and Rag. Lillo Arbib who explained to the members of the Minorities Commission, the position of Libyan Jews in that historical moment, the economic situation of the country and the opinion of the Jewish collectivity toward the future of the country. In order to better understand the events of that period, is interesting to remind that to better prepare the country to an autonomous government, the military administrations started a program for the institution of a court that was called "the Ahliya Court" with narrow competences specially for criminal law.

The official inauguration of The Ahliya Court was celebrated in Villa Volpi in Sciara Ben Ashur, the residence of the chief administrator Brigadier General Blackley on December 4, 1947.

In that occasion were appointed 21 magistrates of whom 15 Arabs and 6 Jews, all were chosen between the most cultured elements of the population.

The Jewish judges nominated in that occasion were: Lillo Arbib son of Simeon, Babani Meghnagi son of Abraham, Mushi Nahum son of Iedidiae, Joseph Habib son of Elia, Isacco Nahum Sembira son of Juda and Benjamin Racah son of Elia.

These magistrates remained on their function up to the proclamation of the Kingdom of Libya in 1952, up to the forming of Libyan Courts (in that occasion were abolished the Ahliya Court and the Rabbinical Court, and the personal statute of Jews was devolved to a single judge, namely Mr. Barbani Meghnagi, and the business of treating the personal statute of Arab population remained in the hands of the *Sharaitic Court*.

I think it to be very important that for our better understanding to remind here few sentences of the speeches pronounced by the brigadier General Blackley, Chief Administrator and by the Mufti of Libya Shaich Abul-Asad El Alam in that ceremony, as we can find in the Public Record of War Office no. 238/241 X 86848, pages 14, 15, 16 and 17 with the indication "secret".

### **From the speech of the Chief Administrator:**

«When I invited you to drink tea with me today, I had no intention whatsoever to make a speech.

But today all the Middle Eastern countries and the world in general think about what is happening in Palestine, and news about what happens in that country are strongly expected here in Tripoli, that's why I see it as necessary to dedicate few words to the attitude of B.M.A. about expressing these sentiments through public manifestations in Tripoli.

The B.M.A thinks that manifestations are to be accepted only if normal methods of making known the popular sentiments to the external world would be refused in Tripoli we enforced no restrictions.

Every political party and every private individual has the right to write and to telegraph to whoever political personality or political institution in whichever part of the world, and our political parties did that and more. They even sent their delegates to meet with different bodies outside the country.

For that reason here are not needed demonstrations. Here in Tripoli we do not want them, especially now that the population is hungry and life necessities will push irresponsible people to profit of general disorders to steal and plunder without limits.

Because the B.M.A has the supreme duty to maintain order and security in any case, we will give no permit for whichever demonstrations, and, in case it will happen by itself we will care about it in the most adequate matter».

After this long introduction, the Chief Administrator, wanted intelligently to remind the sad events of November 1945, with the following conclusions:

«Irresponsible people started the disorders of November 1945 causing the death of many innocent people.

According to my opinion, in that occasion we did not use the army enough early in order to help the civil power destabilize order. We did not understand how people of a community living side by side with another community for a 1000 years could attack it randomly.

Nevertheless, though I do not for see disorders in the immediate future, I want it to be very clear that the Military Distric Commander and I personally agreed on how to stop disorders least them blow.

I cannot give you the details of our program, I can only say you that if people have to be killed in future disorders, we want the trouble makers to be kicked ad not their innocent victims.

The best precaution of all against the disorders will be the example and the influence of responsible Libyans of every race and religion. I then ask all the people present here today and others like you to so in a way that the good name of this country will no more return to the reputation level of 1945».

To the speech of Brigadier General Blackley answered his beatitude the Mufti Shech Abulasaad El Alem. I will bring here few parts of his speech:

«My opinion is that is more convenient for us Libyans not to intervene in what is happening in Palestine in a way that could damage us and not help the Palestinians. We are Arabs and we have to express our sentiments of support and brotherhood to other Arab states, but we have never to degenerate in violence. Our sentiments toward the other Arab brothers can be expressed through protests and complaints or other pacific means that will give good results to the Palestinians and in the same time not damaging to us. Our national

duty today is to live in peace with the Jewish community as we lived for various centuries. We regret and deplore the disorders of November 1945 that were caused by irresponsible persons. Whichever future disorder between us and the Jews will have very bad consequences and its political consequences will fall on both communities whose interests are intertwined.

Therefore we have to do our best to prevent whichever risk, in order to give to the administration the sufficient time to care about the agricultural and economic interest of the country is the actual moment and to allow the administration to assist us in achieving our national aspirations. We will therefore do all the possible efforts in order to live in peace together and to collaborate for the maintaining of what is benefitting to us all».

The “Secret Relation” of the public record of war office, from which I have reported the two speeches was connected to a letter signed by civil liaison officer Major F.G McLean from which I report here a small part that will help us to have a more complete vision of the local situation.

«Some recent events in Italy and Palestine created naturally a certain tension between Muslims of Tripolitarians and the Jewish community. A recent declaration of a certain Mr. Cantoni (he means Raffaele Cantoni) Chief of the Union of Jewish Communities in Italy, that 30,000 Jews of Libya wanted strongly the return of an Italian administrations, had a big publicity in Europe, in Arab press and in the radio. Whichever would it be the truth, of that declaration, it produced alarm and desperation among the local Jews and a big nuisance among the Arab nationalists. The Jewish community hurried to inform Cantoni and the press that the Jews of Tripolitania are giving full support to Arab aspirations to independence».

The letter ends with the following words:

«Even if is still not sure that incidents will not break out, nevertheless the atmosphere is quiet and the Jews are dedicated to their normal activities.

The Libyan press gave a wide diffusion to the speeches of the chief administrator and the mufti and then the situation stayed sufficiently calm, except for few student parades during the month of December, under the auspices of various political parties.

The Jewish community, by its past, was having contacts, through very discreet, with various political parties. In the frame of these contacts, and in view of the lack of whichever protection by the occupying nation (military administration of an enemy occupied country B.M.A., the Jews tried to establish relations with Arab nationalist leaders in order to obtain a certain security. Being present in Libya after long years of exile, the nationalist chief Bashir Bey Sa’adawy, the Jewish Community Council decided to do a party on his honor in the Hotel Mehari. Between others Mr. Sa’adawy was chosen because of his old good relations with few Jewish families. I remember that after a message of salute to the Presidency of the Community, Mr. Sa’adawy said more or less that: “Your invitation to this nice ceremony made my heart happy from one side and from other saddened me.

I am sad having being invited by you as “Jewish Community” though you are a part of the Libyan people and the Libyan people is an indivisible unit of which you are an organic part».

To the ceremony were invited representative of various political parties, all the representative of the Jewish community, the representative of Greek and Maltese communities and some of the member of British military authorities.

Despite the attempts by the Jews to arrange toward excitement of the Arab population, caused by one side, by political activity for the achievement of the independence, and from other side, the inner need of the Arabs around the world to show their bitter reaction waiting for the decision of English American enquiry commission for Palestine, the Libyan Arabs made very massive psychological action in order to induce the Jews to become members of the National United Front, were made very heavy pressure also on Maccabi and Ben Yehuda organizations to obtain from them declarations in favor of Libyan Arab aspirations to independence.

To convince the low Arab people of Tripoli to agree, the Arab bosses told a fairytale about a dream by Mr. Abdulrahman Azzam Pasha, the secretary of Arab League in which he was admonished to care that no harm will happen to the Jews. Inside the Jewish community thought the

situation became unbearable and the presidency with all the council lived long days of crisis. The general economical situation was not enough prosperous, and the community was in a big turmoil because Passover was coming and the community had to provide as usual enough food for 11,000 poor people, to give them Kosher flour, Matzot bread, wine, meat and more.

During the month of March 1948, the community crisis got to its end with the resignation of the president Dr. Forti. The coming close of the end of the British mandate in Palestine (May 15, 1948) and the certainty that Jews would in the end proclaim their state, made the community crisis even harder and difficult to solve because no one of the members of council agreed to take on himself the community business in such a critical moment.

In all Arab countries were expected anti-Jewish disorders with the end of British mandate on Palestine.

Libya was in that period the most vulnerable between all the surrounding Arab countries, being under British military and administration and under members of the Colonial Office, notoriously hostile to Jews.

In the key places of the administration were the officials of the Intelligence Service and the British C.I.D (Colonial Intelligence Department) with years of service in the Middle Eastern countries knowing well the Arab populations, their language, their mentality and their customs.

The Chief Administrator was as I said before, Brigadier General Travers Blackley, coming from English-Egyptian Sudan, and Chief of the Civil Administration, was the Colonel C. Oulton (S.C.A.O), with function of superior on all the province, who did never hide his deep aversion toward the Jews.

Colonel C. Oulton was sadly famous because of his eye covered by a black monocle that made his face a disagreeable mask). The Jewish community Council was based on free professionals and merchants very known between Jews, Arabs and Italians, but nobody of them has the courage to put their candidature. Big pressure were done on me to accept the presidency and in various occasions I was reminded of my past and present time of active Zionist and Revisionist. Preparing to the proclamation of the Jewish state the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, was necessary to strengthen the Diaspora and to give it the necessary prestige in a difficult moment. I was convinced to answer to acts of force by Arabs, by acts of force by Jews even if British forces would intervene. After the pogrom of November 1945, the Jewish youth received a certain instruction in auto-defense and in using weapons. In May 1946 came from Palestine a Shaliah (a man in mission), who mixed with the Palestinian Jewish soldiers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, having the precise function to teach youngsters to use arms. This person known with the name of "Dod" (uncle), was as well called "The invisible man". He had no fixed address and he was sleeping every day in a different place. Under his guide was organized a very efficient *Haganah* (defense).

He organized small groups, not known between themselves that went to train in empty places near Tripoli and bought weapons in the black market, and through Arab underworld, without the knowledge of the British. By this way were trained more than 150 boys and 50 girls. The group was strengthened by few tens of Jewish policemen out of service. Near the end of 1947, though the local police got strong suspicion on the activity of the "uncle" (in reality Israel Gorelik) and he was sent out of Tripoli. The community knew about the existence of this activity, but officially had to ignore it. Nevertheless, a very big help moral and material was given to the Hagana by the members of Council Zion Nemni, Dr. Andrea Viterbo, and in a very active manner, furnishing weapons by Mr. Vittorio Zard, the President of Maccabi club and by Mr. Ben Attia Refael called "Stalin", who was in contact with Arab smugglers in the border between Libya and Tunisia. Being sure to rely on this active force on the given moment, at least to defend the Jewish district (the Hara) I agreed to become president and my nomination was approved at unanimity by the council and was communicated according to the law to the British Chief Administrator, Brigadier General Blackley who with administrative decree confirmed it by April 20, 1948.

The decree concerning my nomination was published in Tripolitanian Gazette no. 10 of 1948, May 15, 1948, General Advice no. 474. I started my function on May 1, 1948, and I immediately contacted some of my collaborators to have precise news on the protection of the Hara and on its clandestine weapons. Who knows the structure of the Jewish districts of Tripoli, knows that it is based on an infinity of very narrow streets with building mostly on one floor and with low roofs connected one with the other and then simply defensible in case of necessity.

One of the main entrances was near the Spanish wall near the new gate (Fum el Bab), which through very near the Arab zone of the city, was at my advice very apt to be defended, The other gate was opened towards Giama'a Mahmud near the school "Pietro Verri" that was connected to other city neighborhoods all inhabited by Jews.

Other entrances were these of Bab El Bahr coming from the port area, and from the monument to the fallen, which while inhabited by fanatic Arabs has also a mixed population of Jews, Maltese and Italians.

Being sure of the collaboration of the youngsters, good trained by the Hagana and knowing logistic situation of the neighborhoods inhabited by the Jews, I was pleased to accept the propositions of the colleagues of the community council and I was elected president by unanimity, like I referred before.

Immediately after my election as president, had a secret meeting with my collaborators and I gave a free hand to the underground arming of the neighborhood of Hara, which being then still inhabited by a large population appeared like a stronghold. The Jews living in the new city could either depend on their proper self defense, or they could temporary transfer to the Hara in the building of Talmud Tora (Dar Serussi) or in other buildings belonging to the community. All the entrances and the exit of the Hara were reinforced and young ready to defend the Jewish honor optimally.

A Jewish doctor (Dr. Andrea Viterbo) member of the council of the community, would organize the first medical, medical aid, having his car protected by signs of International Red Cross. One of the first acts of my administration was sending a direct and personally signed letter to the Governor Blackley (protocol 351, dated May 14, 1948), explaining him the deep concern of our community for the Arab activity in general and for the local Arab press attitude toward the events in Palestine and what could happen around the 15 and 16 of May, with the ending of the mandate and the British leaving the Palestinian territory. The answer of governor Blackley was immediate. *The government anticipating the end of the British mandate in Palestine, had already taken all the measures necessary, giving emergency instructions and to the police and to the high command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army in order to properly curb whichever disorders* (letter 16/L of May 14, 1948). The Governor did not only send me a letter by hand, with his personal officer, he also phoned me and authorized me to reassure the Jewish collectivity that the government was watchful and had all the situation under control. I have to excuse myself to the reader in these pages having treated this delicate argument in first person and I will continue to do so for more pages to come.

Owing to the gravity of situation I had then to personally assume responsibility for very hard decisions getting active help from Rav Shelomo Yelloz Z.L, who in these days always supported me, maintaining continuous contacts with civil and military authorities in whichever hour of day and night. A strong moral support was also given to me by the Rabbi Hai Gabizon Z.L, by his various conferences in the synagogue and his appeals to the public with the words "Al Tira 'Avdi Ya'akov, Al Tira" (Do not fear, Jacob sons). However, the Jewish population was worried considering that some Arab circles were excited and they disturbed the Jews threatening and acting with arrogance toward them. Also in Cirenaica the situation was very serious. There was constituted a "Committee for the defense of Palestine" that had a permanent office in Benghazi in order to organize groups of volunteers to send to different Arab governments. In that committee there was a man called Mustafa Sarkazy who proposed to distribute pamphlets inviting the Arab population not to menace or attack the local Jews, having they nothing to do with Palestine. There was another

group headed by Abulssalam Besekri and Awad Zaakoub who insisted on instigating disorders against Jews. It looked that the Jewish community of Benghazi sent then a committee to the Emir Idris Essenussi asking for his protection. It looks that the meeting with the Emir did not achieve any big results owing to the facts that the Arab league headed by Azzam Pasha refused to accept volunteers of Cirenaica, declaring that they could not come with the flag of Senussi who was still not recognized as a sovereign and independent State.

Nevertheless in the city of Benghazi the situation was very tense and there were noticed various individual attacks against Jews.

The archive of the War Office reports that only the store of Mr. Sion Saadun was burned and destroyed in Omar El Muktar street, though eyewitnesses reported that there were a lot of destroyed and burned stones but there were not dead people.

The Emir Idris instead of addressing the committee members for the defense of Palestine and instead of convincing them not to menace and attack the local Jews, stormed the British military administration and in Benghazi and in Cairo with telegrams holding it responsible of every worsening of the local situation, a matter that would cause heavy damages to the position of Libya that was fighting to obtain her independence. In Tripolitania, the date of 15 of May passed without serious incidents despite the general excitement. The local newspapers gave information about the proclamation of the State of Israel and about the invasion of the Palestinian territory by the army of the various Arab states.

The general opinion was that the five Arab states that invaded Palestine would occupy all the territory of the new Jewish state and that war would end in a few days. However the overthrow of the general situation of was in favor of the small state of Israel, brought to a general unrest in the various Arab countries and to an excitement never known before.

In the city of Tripoli the Jewish community while on the one hand tried to maintain calm the population, could not on the other hand not help the youngsters in preparing the self-defense in case of accidents. As usual the Arabs chosen a holy Jewish day to begin anti-Jewish disorders. The afternoon of Saturday 12 of June, eve of Shavuot, started the first disorders. Groups of screaming Arabs armed of clubs, stones, knives and iron brass, started to march from the neighborhood of Bab El Horria, taking to the Street Sidi Omran intending to invade the Jewish district. Near the New Gate united to them big groups of Tunisian Arabs who came to be a part of the holy war (Jihad) against the Jews. Near the New Gate the Arab mob formed a strong opposition by the Jewish Haganah formed by youngsters, Jewish men and women armed of hand grenade and Molotov bombs. The rioters then withdrew heading to the zone of the local market in the Via Leopardi and to other not defended zones of the city, leaving in the back dead and wounded.

The heroine of the first day of disorders was Rina Bendaud who lost an arm because of the British bombardment in which was hit the synagogue "Haddad Abubi" in Sciarra Mizran. She was living in Sharia Hannuna, exactly on the border between the Jewish and the Arab neighborhoods.

Crying "Haganah arrived", and heading the Jewish defenders of the "hara", she repulsed the Arab invaders up to the center of the city inflicting them heavy losses.

The day after, first day of Shavuot, started back the violence though only in a smaller scale, because the British declared the state of emergency and the curfew.

Skirmishes and single aggressions continued the next days, in which Arabs "blew off steam" by burning and destroying the synagogue "Gerbi" in Palmi street; they burned, destroyed and sacked stones, deposits and garages belonging to Jewish societies in the industrial district of Via Petrarca.

The British authorities report (Public Record FO 3711/6 9422 - Arab-Jewish disturbances - Tripoli, June 12-13, 1948, Part II) reports 3 dead between Arabs and 11 between Jews. The *Corriere di Tripoli* no. 123 of Tuesday 15 of June, reports 13 dead Jews and 3 Arabs. In reality there were 13 Jews dead for the defense of the Jewish neighborhoods and in attack done by Arabs against lone unprotected families and one Jew killed by the police during the curfew, while between the Arabs there were more than 90 dead, counting that the Arabs use to hide their dead.



There were a lot of wounded from both sides.

The British report speaks about 8 heavily wounded and 18 lightly wounded between the Arabs and 10 heavily wounded and 6 lightly wounded between the Jews, while *Il Corriere Di Tripoli* of June 15, 1948, reports 22 heavily wounded and 16 lightly wounded between the Jews and 13 heavily wounded and 38 lightly wounded between the Arabs, plus the Italian and a police agent lightly wounded. The police arrested 197 people. Neither the British authorities nor the police or the Arabs expected such an immediate and massive armed reaction by the Jews. The use of arms and hand grenade by Jewish youngsters was not pleasing to the British military authorities that were expecting by the Jews only a defensive attitude. The third day of the disorders, the general governor Blackley invited me to come with him to visit the wounded in the civil hospital of Tripoli. The picture that was preset in our eyes was terrifying. While some Jews were lying in the first beds, wounded at their head by iron bars, tens of Arabs were lying on the floor covered by their woolen Barracass, almost all wounded by firearms and by shrapnel of hand grenades. General Blackley wanted to specially to emphasize the use of firearms by Jews and clapping me with one hand on the shoulder said me: "*Mr. Arbib, you know very well your job, my congratulations!*" In request by Arab elders there was a meeting in the afternoon Monday June 14 in the house of Taher Bey Caramanli, the sone of Hassuna Pascia, who was so loved by all the citizens, either Arabs or Jews.

To the meeting participated the Kadi and the Mufti, various Arab personalities and representatives, while from the Jewish side participated the Chief Rabbi, Yelloz, the President of the Community Rag. Lillo Arbib and various Jewish personalities representing the commercial and industrial walks of life of the country. At the end of the meeting it was drawn up an appeal to citizenship in order that peace and tranquility would be durably restored.

The *Corriere Di Tripoli* of June 15 published the text of the appeal which is included in the Appendix. *La Voce dell'Africa* (The Voice of Africa) of the June 19 delivered the news about the civil unrest from 16:30 of Saturday 12 of June, as well as about the meeting in house Caramnli of June 14 with a wealth of details and direct accusations toward the British administration of not trying to prevent this civil unrest. The article "Tripoli touristic city of massacres" brings a shorthand summary of the meeting that took place in an atmosphere and in an ambiance of exasperated souls.

The shorthand summary reported the speech of the president of the community Rag. Lillo Arbib and of the Chief Rabbi Yelloz who clearly expressed their accusations to the government for not presenting the worst, despite the continuous reports submitted by the Jewish community who provided an exact picture of the situation of tension and alarm in which the community was living from more than two months. After this sort of speeches the British officials representing the government proposed to draw up a statement to the population to calm tempers. The newspaper added that "*the statement is always a panacea for all the English evils*". The statement was drawn although its text was displeasing; someone suggested for the Mufti and the kadi to make an immediate visit to the Jewish neighborhood in order to speak to the Jews and calm them.

The visit to the *Hara* neighborhood, at the entrance to the Talmud Tora "Dar Serussi" was a real disaster, because the Arab elders were received by a crowd screaming "long live Italy" and "Aliya, aliya". The crowd pushed the kadi and the Mufti aside almost to suffocation and they stayed alive only by miracle. Fortunately we had not civil unrest in other centers of Tripolitania except for Amrus (a town 7 kilometers from Tripoli) where the Jews suffered various pillaging. The government took a smart decision by banishing immediately after all the Tunisian volunteers, who were carried by military trucks to Capuzzo near the Egyptian border. A big part of them was returned to Tunisia because of the refusal of Egypt government to receive them. Anyway the Tunisian volunteers left me a personal remembrance. I am stopping here my events relation to bring the text of my book concerning my meeting with the Tunisians.



**Lillo Arbib and his wife Nuccia Nahum Arbib**



**David Meghnagi**  
**in *The Last Exodus* (2018), by Ruggero Gabbai and David Meghnagi**

# The situation of the Roma in Italy\*

Francesco Palermo\*\*

**Abstract.** The paper briefly illustrates the legal situation of the Roma and Sinti minority in Italy, focusing in particular on the reasons that so far have prevented their official recognition as national minority. From the non-recognition a number of negative consequences arise, leading to a severe marginalization. At the same time, a number of commendable activities are carried out, especially at local level, although with a piecemeal approach. At national level, a mechanism for dialogue between the government and the Roma and Sinti communities has recently been institutionalized, which is a first step in the right direction, although by far insufficient.

**Keywords:** Roma and Sinti, National Minorities, Recognition, Effective Participation.

The lack of knowledge of and attention to the situation of the Roma in Italy is manifest and it is one of the major structural reasons of marginalization. At the same time, this unawareness is a breeding ground for emotion-driven debates and populist slogans. Hence, it is very positive and commendable that the issue of the Roma was brought under the spotlight during the 2018 plenary session of the IHRA in Rome.

## The social and legal framework

To better assess the extraordinary complexity of the challenges, it is worth starting with some data. Reliable estimates made by national authorities and the Council of Europe situate the number of Roma, Sinti and Camminanti (RSC)<sup>1</sup> in Italy between 120.000 and 180.000. About half of them are Italian citizens, the others were born abroad or in Italy from families recently migrated almost exclusively from former Yugoslavia and Romania. In several cases, persons from former Yugoslavia have become stateless as the successor countries of Yugoslavia have not recognized their Yugoslav papers. A progress in this regard was achieved when Italy eventually ratified the 1961 UN Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness in 2015<sup>2</sup>.

Roma and Sinti virtually live throughout the country but the degree of inclusion varies considerably. Generally, complications are more acute in bigger cities due to a higher numerical concentration and the presence of camps, thus causing spatial segregation and severe problems with regard to housing.

Following the EU Commission's communication for the establishment of an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020<sup>3</sup>, Italy has adopted its National Strategy for the

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<sup>1</sup> This is the official terminology used in the national strategy. Despite the fact that the situation of Sinti and Roma communities in Italy is considerably different, and that Camminanti are just a small group of persons (about 2000) located only in Sicily, the strategy decided to focus on all three main categories of persons facing similar problems.

<sup>2</sup> Law no. 162/ 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Communication no. 173/2011.

Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Camminanti 2012-20. The National Anti-Discrimination Agency (UNAR) has been tasked to *coordinate* and *monitor* the implementation of the strategy. The main goals of the strategy are the following:

- Put an end to the “emergency approach” to Roma issues (see below) and adopt a medium-long-term approach, which includes an indispensable process of social maturity;
- To do so, anti-gypsyism must be eradicated by raising social awareness, especially in schools;
- Promote inter-institutional coordination of the initiatives.

The strategy identified four areas of priority intervention:

- Education
- Access to the labour market
- Housing
- Health care

A legal shortcoming is the persistent lack of recognition of RSC as national minorities. The framework law adopted in 1999<sup>4</sup> was approved only after having reached a compromise that excluded the RSC communities from the list of recognized minorities. The main formal reason for this amendment was the territorial approach taken by the law. While this makes it generally more difficult to set up special measures explicitly aimed at protecting this particular group, it does not mean that this is not happening. On the contrary: the last State Report under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, submitted in 2014 (the next is due in March 2019) is devoted to its half to the situation of RSC<sup>5</sup>.

The design of policies of inclusion is done in close cooperation with the representatives of Roma civil society organizations (following art. 15 FCNM on effective participation), although this is at times difficult due to some persistent divisions in the RSC civil society and pro-Roma organizations.

### **Emergency, strategy and governance**

The strategy’s main aim has been to overcome the so-called “nomad emergency”: in 2008, the government issued a highly contested decree declaring the state of emergency first in three, then in five regions<sup>6</sup>. The decree was renewed in the following years until 2011. It established a series of measures that were based on ethnic grounds, including fingerprinting of people living in camps, and it vested the prefects with extraordinary powers in terms of public order, i.e. to close the camps. In 2011, the Council of State found the declaration of the state of emergency unlawful<sup>7</sup> and the decree was discontinued.

Right after, the strategy was adopted, also following the pressure and critics by all international monitoring bodies, including the European Parliament<sup>8</sup>, the UN Human Rights Committee, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC), the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), the Social Rights

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<sup>4</sup> Law no. 482/1999.

<sup>5</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680090310>

<sup>6</sup> Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers 21 May 2008 – see the full-text in [http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie\\_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2008-05-26&atto.codiceRedazionale=08A03712&elenco30giorni=false](http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2008-05-26&atto.codiceRedazionale=08A03712&elenco30giorni=false)

<sup>7</sup> Ruling no. 6050/2011.

<sup>8</sup> Resolution of July 10, 2008.

Committee under the European Social Charter, and by NGOs and advocacy groups such as the European Roma Rights Center<sup>9</sup>.

The strategy has put in place a rather complex governance due to the need to link responsible institutions at different levels and the numerous NGOs dealing with RSC rights. A political “cockpit” brings together the ministries responsible for the main areas of the strategy (Education, Labour, Infrastructure, Health Care and Justice), and involves representatives of the regions and the local authorities. In addition, two bodies exist:

- a) Platform (established by governmental regulation in 2017<sup>10</sup>): This advisory body for dialogue and promotion of initiatives is aimed at removing discrimination against RSC communities. It is composed of 79 associations and modelled after a widespread European practice.
- b) Forum (established by the strategy<sup>11</sup>): It supports the national focal point in monitoring the implementation of the strategy. It also helps identify good practices at local level and can present proposals to the national focal point. The Forum is part of the platform and is composed of a smaller number of associations, namely 25, and notably only of those that comprise (exclusively or in prevalence) persons belonging to the RSC communities.

Specific inter-ministerial and regional working groups exist on the areas covered by the strategy (health care, education, access to the labor market, housing), as well as on areas dealing with legal aspects and statistical data.

Despite the governance being rather complex, this is the only way to link decision-makers (relevant ministries, representatives of local and regional authorities) and the quite plural RSC civil society. After all, effective participation has proven to be the backbone of minority rights, as stated by the Advisor Committee on the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities<sup>12</sup>.

### **Regional and local level**

Most of the practical initiatives in the areas identified by the strategy fall in the scope of regional and local authorities. Some regions also have their own legislation on Roma and Sinti, which is however for the most part outdated, as it was drafted in the 1980ies, and takes a “nomadic” approach, i.e. assuming that RSC are nomads<sup>13</sup>. Luckily, a handful of regions have started to adopt new legislation, including the autonomous province of Trento<sup>14</sup> and the region Emilia-Romagna<sup>15</sup>.

UNAR is promoting coordination both nationally with representatives of regions and municipalities, and locally by establishing specific “dialogue roundtables”, which also include civil society, in more than half of the regions. The role of regions turned out to be significant especially in key areas such as labour market and education.

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<sup>9</sup> See also C. Tavani, *Collective Rights and the Cultural Identity of the Roma. A Case Study of Italy*, Leiden-Boston: Brill-Nijhoff, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> *Decreto Capo Dipartimento Pari Opportunità*, Sept. 11, 2017, REP/D/44/2017.

<sup>11</sup> Strategy, para 2.3.2., p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the protection of National Minorities, Commentary on the Effective Participation of Persons Belonging to National Minorities in Cultural, Social and Economic Life and in Public Affairs (2008), ACFC/31DOC(2008)001.

<sup>13</sup> For further details, see P. Bonetti, A. Simoni & T. Vitale (editors), *La condizione giuridica di Rom e Sinti in Italia*, Milano: Giuffrè, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Provincial Law no. 12/2009.

<sup>15</sup> Regional Law no. 11/2015 on closing the settlements.

Even more important are the municipalities, as they provide the basic services, such as sewage, water, electricity, housing, transport, etc. The strategy provided for three actions, to be carried out in cooperation between UNAR and the association of municipalities:

- It *mapped* the situation and the claims at local level. This action has already been more or less completed.
- It *monitors* adherence of the local actions with the strategy.
- It *supports* municipalities in elaborating “integrated local action plans” and local benchmarks.

It is to be noted in this context that the EU Commission acknowledges that since 2015, there has been an increasingly positive and targeted use of EU structural funds earmarked for RSC communities. There are several positive examples of actions at local level, especially in smaller municipalities<sup>16</sup>.

### **Remembering the *Porrajmos* today**

Despite the unsuccessful attempts to include the *Porrajmos* in the law establishing the day commemorating the Holocaust victims<sup>17</sup>, State President Mattarella officially mentioned *Porrajmos* during the celebration of January 27<sup>th</sup> 2018 for the first time ever. On 15 and 16 May 2018, a big commemoration was organized to mark the anniversary of the Roma rebellion in the *Zigeunerlager* in Auschwitz in 1944 and to remember the extermination of Roma and Sinti during World War II. Later this year, a *Porrajmos* memorial will be inaugurated in Lanciano in the Abruzzo region.

Several actions to remember the Roma genocide are taken, at national as well as at regional and local level. These have increased in recent years, which indicates a generally positive trend, especially as compared to the past. However, it remains to be seen to which extent the persistent hostile attitude and harsh rhetoric by several political figures in the country, impacts on this development of commemoration.

Apart from all efforts and initiatives to remember, legislative shortcomings remain, especially with regard to the recognition of RSC as a national minority and the non-inclusion of *Porrajmos* in the law commemorating the victims of the Holocaust.

Nevertheless, especially in these burdensome times, the challenge remains to make such progresses sustainable and lasting, which implies a more widespread mainstreaming of awareness raising and of targeted policies.

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<sup>16</sup> For further details, see the 5<sup>th</sup> report on Italy (2016) issued by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) at the web page <https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Italy/ITA-CbC-V-2016-019-ENG.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Law no. 211/2000 (see Senate bill, XVII legislature no. 1748).

# The media and the public perception of the Roma and the Sinti in Italy\*

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**Abstract.** Although Italy is one of the countries with the lowest percentage of Roma and Sinti population, anti-gypsyism is higher than the European average. This is not due to demographic factors but to the inclusion policies adopted and the difficulties in social interaction between the Roma and the *gadjo* (non-Roma). De-segregation policies are needed. Meanwhile, anti-gypsyism has become “standardised”, meaning that it has been minced and widespread, becoming ever more pervasive and omnipresent. It has become socially acceptable and is now part of our system of values. In the “post-truth era”, Web and social media have been a crucial tool for the diversification and spreading of racist messages. The text also emphasizes the responsibility of media and politics, which continue to promote stereotypes about the Roma, strengthening the negative aspects and regarding them as a threat to the population. This attitude could be defined as a form of “organized ignorance”. Roma people are highly visible in public debate, but in fact they are always judged only on the basis of stereotypes and prejudice and never seen as individuals. No mention is ever made of the dynamic nature of the Roma’s identity or of the process of gradual transformation resulting from their secular interaction with majority society. Thinking of “the Roma” as objects and not individuals will only lead to their being trapped in the cage of an immutable culture. Here is the “paradox: we talk a lot about Roma and quite a lot of money is spent at the public level, but this does not seem to be sufficient to develop an appropriate policy that would provide opportunities for interaction and the possibility to get to know each other better. Contacts with Roma individuals are considered disreputable and the majority of people can happily do without.

**Keywords:** Roma and Sinti minorities; anti-gypsyism; intercultural relations; web; racism.

The 2017 Final Report of the Jo Cox Committee on hate, intolerance, xenophobia and racism, which was set up in 2016 by the Italian Chamber of Deputies, states that «anti-gypsyism is a historical topic in the Italian society and it has strengthened over the past decade» (Commissione Jo Cox, 2017, p. 90).

This is confirmed by a lot of evidence and all Roma and Sinti people living in Italy are well aware of it (Pasta & Vitale, 2017). Unfortunately, the number of negative facts that we could recall is huge and I will only mention some of the most recent. In Turin, in the night of May 7, 2018, a camper where a Roma family lived, was burned down for reasons which are still to be clarified. Some of the local residents were filming the event. Some of them were simply laughing while some others are reported to have said: «They should all have been burned». In Rome, two days later, Tobbias, a Romanian Roma who was playing his accordion on a tram was attacked by three people, forced out of the tram and beaten. Anti-gypsyism has become an everyday problem. In Milan a few weeks ago, while Madalina was walking her children to school, she was approached by a car. The driver lowered the car window and spat on the children. Moreover, a few days ago Iosif, 18 years old, did not dare to ask his employer for family allowances for his daughter because he was afraid to lose his job. He thought that his young age would reveal that he was a Roma.

Several surveys and studies confirm that anti-gypsyism is deeply rooted in the Italian society. The 2008 Eurobarometer survey showed that almost one EU citizen out of four declared that having a Roma neighbour would cause discomfort; in Italy this percentage rose to the 47% and only the 7%

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of Italians declared to be willing to have Roma friends. Those outcomes are also present in the Eurobarometer survey “Discrimination in the EU in 2012”, where, even if the 74% of the Italians believed Roma people were at risk of discrimination, only the 33% of them thought that the society could benefit from Roma integration. According to the 2015 Eurobarometer survey, the 43% of the Italians - against an European percentage of 20% - would feel uncomfortable if one of their colleagues were a Roma. The ISTAT 2011 survey shows how the 68% of respondents didn't want to have a Roma or Sinti as a neighbour. The Map of Intolerance of Vox showed that on Twitter the most used insult after “redneck” - a common insult related to people coming from southern Italy - was “gypsy”. A study published in 2015 by the Pew Research Center reported that 86% of the respondents in Italy held a negative opinion about Roma (61% about Muslims and 21% about Jews).

Although Italy is one of the countries with the lowest percentage of Roma and Sinti population<sup>1</sup>, anti-gypsyism is higher than the European average. This difference does not depend on demographic factors, such as the actual number of the Roma population in this country, but on the inclusion policies adopted and on the opportunities of interaction and friendship between the Roma and the gadjo (Vitale & Caruso, 2011; Kende, Tropp & Lantos Nóra, 2017). What we need are de-segregation policies. It must also be emphasized the significant responsibility of media and politics.

The last ten years can be divided into two phases (Pasta, 2017a). From 2007 to 2011 five Italian Regions issued a Nomad Emergency Decree, which is a discriminatory measure also involving the fingerprinting of minors. This Decree was strongly criticized by the Jewish Community. The Emergency Decree was the consequence of a series of incidents emphasized by the media and exploited politically, such as the pogrom against a makeshift camp located at Opera, just outside Milan, sheltering 67 Roma, 37 of whom were minors or the violent mortal attack to Giovanna Reggiani in the outskirts of Rome by a Romanian man that lived in the slums but was not a Roma, or the pogrom of the Ponticelli camp, close to Naples, which was burned to the ground by people said to belong to the “Camorra”, the local mafia. The Emergency Decree includes the extra-judicial measures usually taken in the aftermath of calamities such as garbage emergency or earthquakes. This clearly shows what the Roma have been considered in the previous years : as a calamity<sup>2</sup>.

At the end of 2011 the Emergency Decree was declared unlawful by the Council of State (No. 6050 as of November 11, 2011) and a few months later, at the instance of the European Commission, the new Italian Government adopted a National Inclusion Strategy which detailed the concrete policies and measures to be taken<sup>3</sup>. Regrettably, the Inclusion Strategy remains unapplied.

Regarding the perception of Roma by the Italian society, the Emergency Decree period has been characterized by a strong daily campaign by media on the “Roma question” with the purpose to criminalize the Roma and make them a target for hostile feelings.

Over the last years the Roma topic has been less debated, mainly because other irregular migrants have become a new target. However, this does not mean that anti-gypsyism has diminished. We can only say anti-gypsyism has become socially acceptable and this has now become part of our system of values.

We could even say that anti-gypsyism has become “standardised”, meaning that it has been minced and widespread, becoming ever more pervasive and omnipresent. The current situation is well represented by an episode happened in February 2017, which had a wide media echo: two

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<sup>1</sup> There are no accurate data on the current number of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (RSC) in Italy, but the European Commission estimates the number of 110,000 to 180,000 individuals, which represents around 0.23 to 0.25 per cent of the total population (Vitale, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/questioni-aperte/identita-e-cittadinanza/una-minoranza-italiana.php>.

<sup>3</sup> Italian version: UNAR, *Strategia Nazionale d'Inclusione dei Rom, dei Sinti, e dei Caminanti 2012/2020. Attuazione Comunicazione Commissione Europea n. 173/2011*, Roma: 2012; English version: UNAR, *National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti Communities. European Commission Communication No. 173/2011*, Roma: 2012.



employees of a supermarket in Follonica, near Grosseto, locked two Roma women in a trash bin, after having surprised them while rummaging. The video<sup>4</sup>, which became viral on YouTube and Facebook, shows the two employees laughing and insulting the two women. When the aggressors were fired, the Mayor of the city expressed his regret and the secretary of Lega Nord, Matteo Salvini, offered them legal support and launched a boycott campaign against the supermarket. Not only locking, insulting, and frightening these women has been viewed as normal but the two people involved had no problem boasting about this with their friends online.

Besides the socio-historical problems, the primary cause of anti-gypsyism is the so called “paradox of visibility” a concept based on gender-related prejudices that, along with van Baar and Vermeersch, could be defined as “a-visibility” (Van Baar & Vermeersch, 2017). Roma people are highly visible in public debate, but in fact they are always judged only on the basis of stereotypes and prejudice and never seen as individuals.

For instance, no mention is ever made of the dynamic nature of the Roma’s identity or of the process of gradual transformation resulting from their secular interaction with majority society. Thinking of “the Roma” as objects and not individuals will only lead to their being trapped in the cage of an immutable culture.

Here is the paradox: we talk a lot about Roma and quite a lot of money is spent at the public level, but this does not seem to be sufficient to develop an appropriate policy that would provide opportunities for interaction and the possibility to get to know each other better. Contacts with Roma individuals are considered disreputable and the majority of people can happily do without. Moreover, political authorities and media continue to promote stereotypes about the Roma, strengthening the negative aspects and regarding them as a threat to the population. This attitude could be defined as a form of “organized ignorance”. The most impressive example is the absence from history books and collective consciousness of any mention to the genocide of Roma and Sinti. The term “Porrajmos” remains completely unknown, just like the name of the main concentration camps for Roma and Sinti in Italy. In this respect it is worth mentioning a multimedia guidebook, “Giving memory a future”, published some years ago by the Catholic University (Center for Research on Intercultural Relations) together with the Institute USC Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education and financed by IHRA, which builds memory links between past and present (Italian version: [www.romsintimemory.it](http://www.romsintimemory.it) English version: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/>).

Media play a significant role in the criminalization of Roma. We are living in a post-truth era, namely a situation in which people are more likely to accept a statement based on their emotions rather than one based on facts. Anti-gypsyism is both a cause and a consequence of this concept.

Furthermore Web and social networks have been a crucial tool for the diversification and spreading of racist messages (Pasta, 2017b, 2018a). Traditional media maintain their influence, but local political actors, local news websites, self-produced “unofficial information” blogs, Facebook groups and even private pages on social networks are largely contributing to the spread of anti-Roma speeches. This has three main dangerous consequences and is a powerful hindering factor in preventing Roma inclusion: a) it has a direct impact in terms of daily discrimination on the lives of those targeted; b) it acts as a powerful deterrent for the administrators in charge to design and implement inclusion policies addressing Roma and Sinti; c) it gradually allows explicit racist rhetoric against Roma and Sinti, which is likely to be easily accepted by public opinion, paving the way to occasional violent drifts<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iToARdN23go>; “Follonica, licenziati i dipendenti che imprigionarono le rom. Salvini: ‘Boicottate la Lidl’”, in *la Repubblica*, 29 aprile 2017. See also: Dotti, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Associazione 21 Luglio, *Submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women at its 67th session - 03 July – 23 July 2017*, available at: [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/ITA/INT\\_CEDAW\\_NGO\\_ITA\\_27946\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/ITA/INT_CEDAW_NGO_ITA_27946_E.pdf).

Besides stereotypes, media and websites are offering an ideal platform to spread hate speech, which is intended to be contagious. For example on March 2, 2015, during the television broadcast *Piazza Pulita* (which was attended by the Roma activist Dijana Pavlovic), the MEP Gianluca Buonanno accused the Roma people of being «the scum of humankind», making the word “scum” a trend topic of hate speech in social networks. The incident was followed by two legal procedures, but these violations to civil rights are seldom penalized (Naletto, 2017).

As for the press, there are a number of “pilot” procedures for anti-gypsyism opened by some professional associations. In 2016 the Professional Journalism Association of Lombardy sanctioned the editor of the daily newspaper *Libero*, Maurizio Belpietro, and the columnist Mario Giordana, director of the TV news bulletin *Tg4*, for an article criminalizing Roma people<sup>6</sup>. However this is an isolated case. In general, professional associations tend to avoid direct involvement.

The “Association Carta di Roma”<sup>7</sup>, which was created to monitor the implementation of the Code of Ethics for Professional Journalists, has frequently denounced similar situations. This occurred, for example, given the debate which followed a radio programme called *La Zanzara*. I was personally involved in this case<sup>8</sup>. *La Zanzara* is a mainstream broadcast by *Radio 24*, which is owned by the General Confederation of Italian Industry. The programme included a discussion about the Roma. Some of the participants in the debate, whose views were already known to the radio host, had envisaged «the total extermination of gypsies, women, men and children». Another listener had suggested to make animal food out of the gypsies, adding: «Gypsies should be enclosed in a concentration camp where they should be put in garbage trucks. Gypsies would be loaded from the front and exit at the rear as pig meal». This was followed by another listener who quoted *Mein Kampf*. The comment of the radio host was that «people can say whatever they think».

At this point I wrote an article on the *Famiglia Cristiana* magazine criticising the choice of the *Zanzara* colleagues to give space to this type of nonsense<sup>9</sup>. *La Zanzara*, which is one of the most popular radio programmes in Italy, reacted by insulting me gravely and launched a campaign against *Famiglia Cristiana*, encouraging the audience to phone the magazine to insult it. Some of these calls were broadcasted live on the radio for a week.

References to genocide are borderline cases but, unfortunately, they are rather frequent. However, in general, the stereotypes reported by media tend to confirm the sense of estrangement towards Roma, without ever mentioning that half of the Roma and Sinti population is Italian. With a few exceptions, the diversity of the different Roma and Sinti communities living in Italy is seldom addressed by media who, all too often, portray a negative image<sup>10</sup>.

Roma people are described to have “totally different values”, “an uncivilized way of living”, and are accused “not to care enough even about their children”. Many stereotypes emphasize their opportunistic behaviour, their deformed bodies, their negative attitude towards the minors who are neglected and ill-treated, the Roma have no sense of economy and throw money away, they steal, they are dirty, kidnap children, refuse to integrate, are lazy, indolent and unable to take serious commitments. A new stereotype has emerged in the past decade: the Roma are viewed as a privileged community receiving more resources than regular citizens. But stereotypes are not always negative. There is also a romantic image of gypsies who have long been portrayed among the most exotic peoples.

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<sup>6</sup> Stefano Pasta, “L’Ordine dei Giornalisti condanna Belpietro e Giordano: intento xenofobo e razzista”, in *Famiglia Cristiana.it*, 20 maggio 2016, <http://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/l-ordine-dei-giornalisti-condanna-belpietro-e-giordano-intento-xenofobo-e-razzista.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> [www.cartadiroma.org](http://www.cartadiroma.org).

<sup>8</sup> See also: Associazione Carta di Roma, 2014, pp. 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Stefano Pasta, “Zanzara shock: ‘Fare dei rom cibo per maiali’”, in *Famiglia Cristiana.it*, 21 novembre 2014, <http://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/alla-zanzara-fare-dei-rom-cibo-per-maiali.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> See also: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/questioni-aperte/interculturale/agli-occhi-degli-altri.php>.

One of the most significant ambivalent stereotypes is associated with nomadism. The label of “nomads” is employed instrumentally to frame them as outcasts and is used by institutions to support anti-gypsyism: the message is «if they are not willing to integrate, it’s their own fault» (Pasta, 2018b).

In Milan, between 2008 and 2011, more than 500 camps were evacuated. This operation was accompanied by a strong anti-gypsy rhetoric. As an example, when the excavators started destroying the camp and people were forced from their homes, somebody said: «Aren’t they nomads ? So let them move round!».

Thus Cristina, a Romanian Roma, who migrated for economic reasons, at the age of 10 has been evacuated ten times in a year, while her cousin Samuel has changed eight schools in three years. They were not nomads from a cultural point of view but they did become nomads given the continuous evacuations. Media stereotypes argue that all Roma and Sinti live in camps, campers and slums. In reality, at least two thirds of the Roma people in Italy live in regular houses and apartments, but this reality is not accepted by the majority of Italians<sup>11</sup>.

Many other prejudices have proved groundless, in particular regarding children kidnapping by Roma people. In this respect it must be said that the University of Verona made a research which found out that in 40 cases of kidnappings labelled as “Roma” not a single one was committed by a person of Roma origin.

Moreover, it is not correct to say that all Roma are poor. It is true that their conditions of life are sometimes truly dramatic, mainly due to discrimination and marginalization. I would like to recall the children who were killed when a candle, left burning to keep mice away, caught fire. However it must be said that in Italy there is a number of Roma and Sinti that are famous football players, university professors and entrepreneurs in the fields of entertainment, horse meat and safety services. This is rarely mentioned by media while great attention is given to stereotypes which are more likely to become embedded in the collective consciousness of the civil society.

Here is another example regarding the Roma being considered thieves. Last October, the European Parliament approved the motion 2017/2038 “On fundamental rights aspects in Roma integration: fighting anti-gypsyism”, in which the States are asked to «set up, within the Police forces, units educated to combat anti-gypsyism» and «encourage the recruitment of Roma people within the Police forces»<sup>12</sup>. I wish to point out the reaction of Consap - one of the main Italian police unions - that defined the recommendation as «a delirious priority». The statement quotes: «The concept of Roma integration is a contradiction, as their culture has always been to live on the margins of society to boost their parasitism. Using a Disney metaphor, it would be like asking the Beagle Boys to protect Scrooge McDuck’s money bin»<sup>13</sup>.

We are well aware that such statements may become hate crimes. The Association 21 July has registered 25 hate crimes towards Roma in 2015-16<sup>14</sup> (*Associazione 21 Luglio, 2017*). For example: on April 25, 2016, two members of the Lega Nord of Milan, on the occasion of the Liberation Day<sup>15</sup>, devastated the houses of the Italian Roma camp in Via Idro – which had been closed the previous month by the Municipality – using hammers to break down the walls, throwing stones and spreading the facts through the social networks<sup>16</sup>; on the third of April 2016, after the end of a football match, a group of hooligans attempted to attack a spontaneous Roma settlement nearby.

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<sup>11</sup> See also: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/conosciamo-i-roma-e-i-sinti/chi-sono/da-dove-vengono-il-nome.php>.

<sup>12</sup> [www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A8-2017-0294+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A8-2017-0294+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN).

<sup>13</sup> Press release Consap available at: <https://st.ilfattoquotidiano.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Comunicato-stampa-Rom-in-Polizia-1-1.doc>.

<sup>14</sup> 21 Luglio Association, *Submission on hate crime cases to Osce-Odihr*, Roma: 2017. Hate crimes have not always been punished or condemned.

<sup>15</sup> It remembers the defeat of the fascist regime and the end of the II World War in Italy.

<sup>16</sup> [http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/04/25/foto/milano\\_via\\_idro-138421765/1/#1](http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/04/25/foto/milano_via_idro-138421765/1/#1).

The inhabitants were protected by the police. On April 28, 2016, in Rome, during the night, three paper bombs targeted a spontaneous Roma settlement in the north of the town, the attackers fled the scene in a car. In general – although rarely – there are investigations that recognize the racist motivation as an aggravating factor, but it is difficult to get convictions and investigations are often filed. For instance, going back to the camp of Via Idro, the case was followed by: a) a report to UNAR<sup>17</sup> made by a citizen; b) the lawsuit against the perpetrators by some inhabitants of the camp, presented to the local Police; c) the complaint, presented to the Public Prosecutor, by three representatives of pro-Roma associations. After two years, nothing has happened as yet.

The main problem is often the way media and politics handle social problems arising from difficult contexts. This introduces another issue which is common to proscription procedures, namely the assertion that gypsies fully deserve what they are suffering. This is not only dangerous for our society, but it might cause an increase in crime rates rather than solve the problem.

Ethnic issues are wrongly viewed as a social problem. I am referring once again to the stereotypes that portray Roma as thieves and to the social deviation experienced by young people living in the camps or in the slums. These issues are real but are linked to the social conditions and the discrimination suffered by the Roma rather than to cultural matters<sup>18</sup>.

It must not be forgotten that in the fifties the Swiss Juvenile Court Judges started a debate on the grounds that too many Italian minors were involved in penal procedures. At that time the Swiss wondered whether there could be an Italian cultural propensity to theft, an idea strengthened by many other European studies. The debate slowly died down when Italian migrants started opening pizzerias and ice-cream shops, and the Juvenile Court began dealing with new migrants.

There is loud-voiced rejection of the Roma and Sinti. It is said all too often that they are «Born for theft» as written years ago in the headlines of *Panorama*, one of the major Italian magazine<sup>19</sup>.

Yet very little is done to address this problem. For example: the data coming from the Ministry for Justice prove that the percentage of Roma minors reported to social services is higher than other ethnic groups but the percentage of young Roma actually helped by the social services is significantly lower<sup>20</sup>.

In conclusion, I can't stress enough how important it is for our country to acquire the tools to continuously monitor and contain anti-gypsyism or any other form of racism. To this end, periodically repeated surveys are needed, with indicators similar to the ones adopted in France and the involvement of the National Institute for Statistics (ISTAT) is essential.

Liliana Segre, an Italian senator who survived the Shoah, suggested to set up a committee addressing and supervising cases of racism, intolerance, instigation to social hatred and discrimination. This seems particularly important regarding the Roma population, if we want to build a society where both media and collective consciousness will be able to overcome antigypsy feelings, prejudice, discrimination and racial targeting. History is teaching us how dangerous all of this is.

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<sup>17</sup> UNAR is the Italian Office against Racial Discrimination.

<sup>18</sup> <sup>18</sup> Pasta, Stefano, *L'inclusione delle politiche per i rom: una novità ancora da assimilare*, in «*Aggiornamenti Sociali*» 11/2017, pp. 739-748.

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/questioni-aperte/intercultura/agli-occhi-degli-altri.php>.

<sup>20</sup> For example, according to the data provided by the Ministry of Justice about the year 2006, out of 19.920 minors 2.424 Italian and foreign Roma were referred to the Offices of Minors social services, that is to say 12% of the minors referred, whereas 67% are Italian not Roma and 20% foreigners not Roma. However the Roma minors have a particularity: of those referred only 37% are taken in charge by the services (which then start a project for re-education and social reintegration), against the 54% of the foreigners and 74% of the Italians referred.

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