

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*).*

* A first draft of this article was published as a Preface to the book by Anna Rolli, *Conversazione con un eroe. Simha Rotem racconta*. Livorno (Italy): Salomonte Belforte, 2016, pp. 9-24.

** Full member of the *International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA)*, Professor of Clinical Psychology, *Roma Tre University*, Rome, E-Mail <david.meghnagi@uniroma3.it>.

«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). 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)
(Copyright *Europa Ricerca Onlus*)

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 7th, 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 Rome¹. 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 8th (14th 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,

¹ 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 Tikkun*). 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
(Copyright *Europa Ricerca Onlus*)**

References

Wathtover on-line library . wol.jw.org/it/wol/d/r6/lp-i/1200000829

- Edelman Marek. *Memoria e storia del ghetto di Varsavia*. Preface to the French edition by P. Vidal Nacquet. Introduction to the Italian edition by David Meghnagi. Translated by Miriam Meghnagi. Città Nuova: Rome, 1985.
- Freud Sigmund (1905). *Il Motto di spirito e le sue relazioni con l'inconscio*. Opere Sigmund Freud (OSF). Vol. 5, pp. 1-211: Bollati Boringhieri, Turin.
- Freud Sigmund (1927), *L'umorismo*, Opere Sigmund Freud (OSF). Vol. 10, pp. 499-508: Bollati Boringhieri, Turin.
- Meghnagi David. *Il kibbutz. Aspetti socio-psicologici*. Barulli: Rome, 1975.
- Meghnagi David (1992), *Il Padre e la Legge. Freud e l'Ebraismo*, Marsilio, Venice, fourth edition, 2015.
- Meghnagi David, *Ricomporre l'infranto. L'esperienza dei sopravvissuti alla Shoah*, Marsilio, Venice, 2005.
- Meghnagi David, *Le sfide di Israele. Lo stato ponte fra occidente e oriente*, Marsilio, Venice, 2010.
- Meghnagi David. *Silvano Arieti's novel The Parnas: A scene from the Holocaust*. *Int J Psychoanal* (2014) 95:1155-1181 doi: 10.1111/1745-8315.12149.
- Rolli Anna. *Conversazione con un eroe. Simha Rotem racconta*. Prefazione di David Meghnagi. Livorno: Salomonte Belforte, 2016.
- Rotem Simha. *Il passato che è in me. Memorie di un combattente del ghetto di Varsavia*. Italian edition by Anna Rolli. Afterword by David Meghnagi. Salomone Belforte editore: Livorno, second edition, January 2015.
- Talmud Bavli / Talmud Babilonese* (Pesachim, 116 b). Jerusalem: The Israel Institute for Talmudic Publications, 1988.
- Torah, Neviim ve-Ketuvim*. Hebrew edition. Jerusalem. The Magnes Press: The Hebrew University, 1969.
- Scholem Gershom. *Le grandi correnti della mistica ebraica*. Translation by Guido Russo. Il Saggiatore: Milan, 1965.
- Steinsaltz Aidin. *Cos'è il Talmud*. Translation by Sandro Servi and Daniele Libermanome. Giuntina: Florence, 2004.
- Susman Margarete. *Il libro di Giobbe e il destino del popolo ebraico*. Translation by Gianfranco Bonola. Giuntina: Florence, 1999.