

## «The Persecution Continues»: Giacomo Debenedetti, Giorgio Bassani and a Counter-Memory of the Shoah in Postwar Italy\*

Tommaso Pepe

### Italian nontestimonial literature and the Shoah: genealogical fractures

The shaping of a literary imaginary of the Jewish extermination in Italy's early postwar culture followed multiple expressive channels. The first transposition of the reality of persecution into the domain of literature actually predated the end of the war: as early as December 1944, the renowned literary critic Giacomo Debenedetti published on the journal «Mercurio» *16 October 1943*, a «narrative chronicle» of the round-up and deportation of more than one thousand Jews of the Rome ghetto, an event destined to leave a lasting mark in the collective memory after the war.<sup>1</sup> Debenedetti's work has been described as «negotiated fiction»: though not having been personally present on the day of the deportation, the author based his reconstruction on verbal accounts of witnesses, with a carefully construed balance between literary invention and factual accuracy.<sup>2</sup> Over time this «brief and wonderful» narrative<sup>3</sup> became one of the most celebrated *Urtexte* in the Italian literary memory of the genocide.<sup>4</sup> Its precocious French translation, appeared in 1947 on «Les Temps Modernes» – the prestigious review founded by Sartre, De Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty (image 1) – as well as the influence it exerted on later works, starting from Elsa Morante's *History*, further reinforced its impact on the literary archive about the persecution.

---

\* I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Silke Segler-Meißner, Universität Hamburg, for her support and encouragement in the realization of this research project.

1 Giacomo Debenedetti, *16 Ottobre 1943*, «Mercurio. Mensile di politica arte scienze», 3, December 1944, pp. 75–97, now reprinted in Giacomo Debenedetti, *Saggi*, Milan: Mondadori, 1999, pp. 25–63.

2 Cf. Risa Sodi, *Narrative and Imperative: The First Fifty Years of Italian Holocaust Fiction (1944–1994)*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 179–190.

3 Natalia Ginzburg, *16 ottobre 1943: Giacomo Debenedetti e la tragedia degli ebrei romani*, «La Stampa», 14 February 1978.

4 Cf. Robert Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944–2010*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 47.

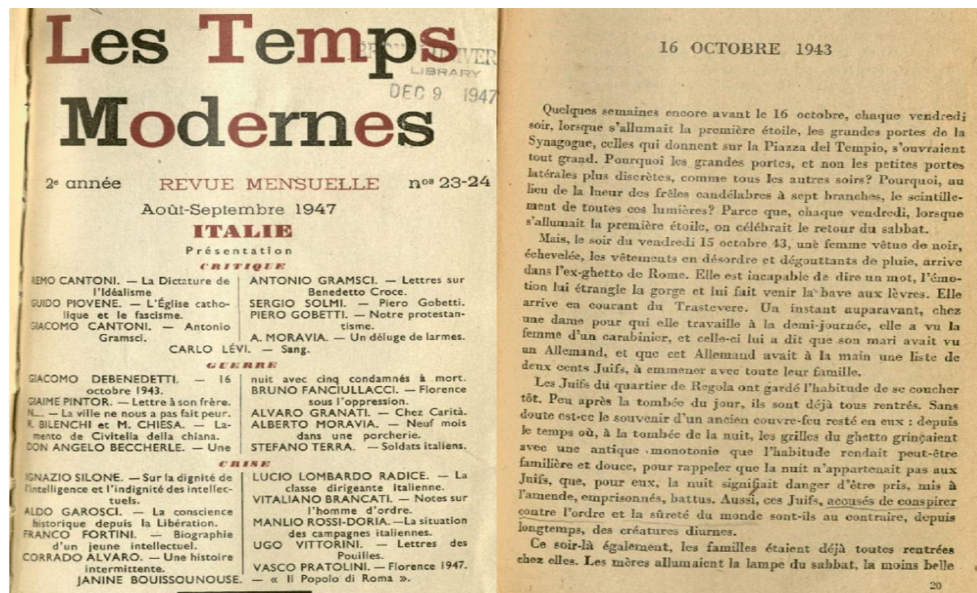


Image 1. Giacomo Debenedetti, 16 Octobre 1943, «Les Temps Modernes», August–September 1947. Courtesy of Brown University Library.

Ideally, then, 16 October 1943 marks the point of departure in the «history» of Italian literature about the Jewish genocide. A history, however, that following a suggestion by Foucault might or should be re-read as «genealogy», in the light of a conceptual narrative able to make visible the «discord» that lies at the core of any «origin»:

La généalogie ne s’oppose pas à l’histoire comme la vue altière et profonde du philosophe au regard de taupe du savant; elle s’oppose au contraire au déploiement métahistorique des significations idéales et des indéfinies téléologies. Elle s’oppose à la recherche de l’«origine» [...] Ce qu’on trouve, au commencement historique des choses, ce n’est pas l’identité encore préservée de leur origine, c’est la discordance des autres choses, c’est le disparate.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, in the fall of 1944 Debenedetti composed also another text that explicitly addressed the reality of the persecution, an essay titled *Eight Jews*. Originally appeared on *Il Tempo* in October 1944 and anticipating thus the publication of *16 October 1943*, *Eight Jews* was later reprinted in an autonomous volume in 1945 (image 2).<sup>6</sup> Unlike its

5 Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire*, originally published in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971, pp. 146, 148.  
 6 Giacomo Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, now in *Saggi*, Milan: Mondadori, 1999, pp. 64–91. *Eight Jews* was first published on «Il Tempo» in three articles appeared on 11, 13 and 19 October 1944 and republished in volume few months later, Giacomo Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, Rome: Atlantica, 1944 (but actually published in 1945). Two manuscript versions of this text, with significant variations, are cur-

narrative twin, however, the trajectory followed by this second text in the history of Italian literature about the Shoah reveals to be much more labile, if not totally erased.

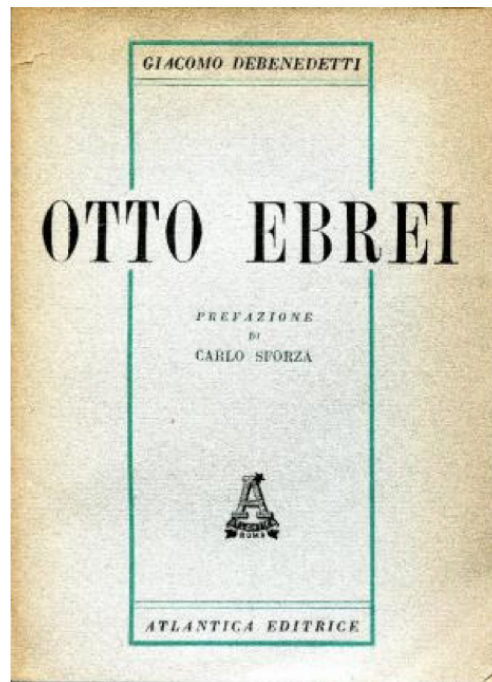


Image 2. Giacomo Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, Rome: Atlantica, 1944.

«Lo scritto», Debenedetti wrote years later,

uscì con una solidale prefazione di Carlo Sforza; ma fu per lo più accusato di ingratitude. Oggi forse lo si leggerà con altri occhi, visto che ogni giorno gli uomini di razza umana sono costretti a riscattare con un soprappiù d'amore le malefatte di qualcuno dei tanti razzismi.<sup>7</sup>

Besides the «supportive preface» by Sforza, one of the leading personalities of Italy's liberal culture since the pre-Fascist era, which resulted however in a substantial mis-

rently deposited at the Gabinetto Viesseux, Fondo Debenedetti, Serie II, Manoscritti di Giacomo Debenedetti, Documento 154. In the same period, Debenedetti also wrote other three brief articles devoted to the events of the genocide, *Lupi nel plenilunio*, «L'Epoca», I, 1, 5 February 1945; *Campo di ebrei*, «La Nuova Europa», II, 13, 1 April 1945; *La trincea degli ebrei*, «L'Epoca», 78, 8 May 1945. For an overall analysis of these texts see the useful study by Dario Collini, *La «tempesta sul fiore». Giacomo Debenedetti e la «ferita» della persecuzione*, in Anna Dolfi (ed.), *Gli intellettuali/scrittori ebrei e il dovere della testimonianza*, Florence: Firenze University Press, 2017, pp. 279–290.

<sup>7</sup> This sentence appears in a preface written for the 1961 volume edition of the essay published by «Il Saggiatore», with an introduction by Alberto Moravia, cf. Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, p. 67.

understanding of the critical message attached to the text, the most poignant comments hailing the publication of *Eight Jews* were probably those offered by Umberto Saba in one of his «shortcuts» published on «La Nuova Europa» in the spring of 1945:

Questa SCORCIATOIA non è per te, lettore della NUOVA EUROPA, che certamente non ne hai bisogno. La sua punta – se punta ha – è contro OTTO EBREI, il famoso libro – topicamente spaesato – del mio amico Giacomo Debenedetti.<sup>8</sup>

*Eight Jews* as a «topically misplaced» book: what are the motivations laying behind such a pungent judgment? Indeed, the sources of the «ingratitude» surrounding Debenedetti's essay are in some way easily detectable. In a handful of pages *Eight Jews* construes a devastating analysis of the much applauded *doppiogiochismo* which, after the collapse of Fascism, allowed a dubious and hasty forgetting about the unpleasant memory of Italy's anti-Semitic campaign:

Quello che ieri era nero – Debenedetti writes – oggi è diventato bianco, e viceversa. Qual era, sul cartellino segnaletico del fascismo, il connotato più caratteristico? Quali le impronte digitali del fascismo? Diamine, la persecuzione degli ebrei. Quale, di conseguenza, il più incontrovertibile connotato dell'antifascismo? La protezione degli ebrei. [...] Mostriamo d'esser stati pietisti, di aver avuto questo coraggio, e risulteremo senz'altro iscritti, iscritti d'ufficio, nei ranghi dell'antifascismo.<sup>9</sup>

On such premises, Debenedetti embarks on a radical unmasking of the ambiguous political and ideological *trasformismo* that accompanied the moral re-conversion of Italy's postwar society. *Eight Jews* exposes all the contradictions embedded in a sudden turn that led from a diffused and widely supported state anti-Semitism to a retrospective, and largely imaginary «pietist» attitude toward the persecuted Jews. The corrosive style of the essay and its glacial satire highlight with even greater force the inability of Italian society to face a recent as much as undesirable past. Touching then the heart of a disavowed *cattiva coscienza*, it is no wonder that the publication of this essay stirred «piqued reactions and intentional misunderstandings», resulting eventually in its substantial erasure from the customary canon of literary writings devoted to the persecution.<sup>10</sup> Debenedetti's position appears, to the least, unconventional, if not in overt

8 Umberto Saba, *Scorciatoie e Raccontini*, Turin: Einaudi, 2011 (first edition Turin: Einaudi, 1945), p. 80, shortcut n. 129.

9 Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, p. 71.

10 Cf. Filippo Focardi, *Alle origini di una grande rimozione. La questione dell'antisemitismo fascista nell'Italia dell'immediato dopoguerra*, «Horizonte. Italianistische Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaft

contrast vis à vis a *grand récit* desperately committed to validate the myth of Italy's purported extraneity to the racial crimes perpetrated by Nazism: an exculpatory narrative destined to play a hegemonic role in the definition of Italian collective memory after the war.<sup>11</sup>

If then, as pointed out by Anna Baldini, Debenedetti's writings constitute the symbolic starting point of Italian literature about the Shoah,<sup>12</sup> this genealogy reveals to be intrinsically split, open to a radical diversification of perspectives. Not only because, as originally suggested by Giuliano Manacorda, *16 October 1943* and *Eight Jews* are «clearly differentiated in their setting and development» and in the choice of different representational codes, but also because their interaction with the nascent *champ littéraire* of Italian writings about the genocide reveals almost antithetical outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

---

und Gegenwartsliteratur», 4, 1999, p. 161. Unless specified, all English translation of Italian sources are mine.

- 11 The «Italian way» toward the construction of the memory of the second world war has been carefully analyzed by Filippo Focardi, who pointed out the massive influence exerted to this purpose by a «demonization of the Germans» and by a parallel celebration of the myth of the «good Italian». This distorted and simplifying vision ultimately «silenced, minimized or denied the involvement of Italian people in the Fascist regime and the responsibilities of the country in the Fascist war and its numerous crimes», cf. Filippo Focardi, *Il bravo italiano e il cattivo tedesco: la rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale*, Rome: Laterza, 2013, p. 7; Filippo Focardi and Lutz Klinkhammer, *The question of Fascist Italy's war crimes: the construction of a self-acquitting myth (1943–1948)* («Journal of Modern Italian Studies», 9(3), 2004, pp. 330–348.
- 12 Anna Baldini, *La memoria italiana della Shoah (1994–2009)*, in Gabriele Pedullà and Sergio Luzzatto (eds.), *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, vol. III, *Dal Romanticismo a oggi*, Turin: Einaudi, 2012, pp. 758. Interestingly enough, Baldini's bibliographical analysis focuses only on Debenedetti's narrative work, *16 October 1943*, omitting on the other hand any reference to *Eight Jews*.
- 13 Cf. Giuliano Manacorda, «16 ottobre 1943» e «Otto ebrei», in Rosita Tordi (ed.), *Il Novecento di Debenedetti*, Milan: Mondadori, 1991, p. 303. Although originally referred to the domain of sociology of literature, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *champ littéraire* may provide a useful theoretical lexeme to explore this genealogical fracture, cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris: Seuil, 1992. Approaches to the corpus of Italian literary writings about the genocide have alternatively opted for a historical vision, focusing on the diachronic evolution of literary forms of representation across time, or have alternatively developed an analysis hinged on structural categories, such as those distinguishing between fictional literature and testimony. These two complementary methodologies – historical or structural analysis – underpin the researches of Robert Gordon and Risa Sodi respectively, and have produced a «history» and a «taxonomic» mapping of Italian literature of the Shoah: cf. Robert Gordon, *La Shoah nella letteratura italiana*, in Marcello Flores et alii (eds.), *Storia della Shoah in Italia*, vol. II, *Vicende, memorie, rappresentazioni*, Turin: UTET, 2010, pp. 359–383, who in his essay proposes a synthetic but effective synopsis of «a history of the Shoah in Italian literature» (p. 362, emphasis in the original); and Risa Sodi, *Narrative and Imperative*, pp. 9–13, who outlines instead a «taxonomy» of literary genres about the genocide, with a difference of scholarly perspectives that are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. A further methodological declination might thus suggest reading this corpus of writings as a «literary field», marked by the synchronic coexistence of tensions and «refractions» among different, and even opposing ethical, cultural and literary postures: «un réseau, ou une configuration de relations objectives entre des positions», cf. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *Réponses. Pour une anthro-*

The value of these «refractions» has not to be referred, however, to the conflicting interaction among «divided» or «competitive memories», nor to a «victimary» hierarchy.<sup>14</sup> It rather signals the presence of a non-univocal and epistemologically complex «genealogy» that deserves to be carefully explored.

*Eight Jews* intends to expose a dangerous mechanism of self-delusion. Yet Debenedetti's essay, with its unconventional and critical position, does not represent an isolated specimen. Few years later, and with a surprising collimation of ethical coordinates, one of the literary characters secluded in the narrative universe of Giorgio Bassani's *Romanzo di Ferrara* would clash against the same painful realization. Geo Josz, the protagonist of *A Plaque in Via Mazzini*, a short-story originally published by Bassani in 1952, seems in fact to transfigure the reflections advanced by Debenedetti into the language of narrative writing. Not only because Geo, who returned from the hell of «Buchenwald, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Dachau, etc.», will be the victim of a new, reversed and almost farcical form of «anti-persecution» in his native Ferrara. Through Geo's story, *A Plaque in Via Mazzini* probes the hypocrisy with which post-war Italy would have hastily made up a cosmetic memory of its anti-Semitic experience, amid the void of a diffused and voluntary forgetfulness. Bassani's narrative provides then another significant example of a literary writing that intentionally and systematically refuses to align with the mythography of the «good Italian», as well as with a paradigm of «reconciliatory» memory. The «inhuman cry» that seals the closure of this text rather provides the tangible symbol of an unbridgeable moral disjunction:

Ma a quelle domande [Geo] avrebbe potuto anche rispondere con un urlo furibondo, disumano: così alto che tutta la città, per quanto ancora se ne accoglieva oltre l'intatta, ingannevole quinta di via Mazzini fino alle lontane Mura sbrecciate, l'avrebbe udito con orrore.<sup>15</sup>

*pologie littéraire*, Paris: Seuil, 1992, pp. 72–73.

- 14 To this date, the most comprehensive critique of a model of «competitive memories» applied to the domain of the memory of the Shoah has been developed by Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in an Age of Decolonization*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. Giovanni De Luna has drawn to attention, instead, the emergence in Italy of a worrying «paradigma vittimario», fueling a competitive hierarchy among different histories of victimization, cf. Giovanni De Luna, *La Repubblica del dolore. Le memorie d'un'Italia divisa*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010.
- 15 Giorgio Bassani, *Una lapide in via Mazzini*, in *Opere*, Milan: Mondadori, 1998, p. 1680. Originally published in 1952 on «Botteghe Oscure», later included in Bassani *Cinque storie ferraresi (Five Stories of Ferrara)*, 1956), like many other texts of the author this short-story went through a prolonged process of revision and corrections before reaching its definitive version in the 1980 edition of *Il Romanzo di Ferrara*.

The literary memories of Debenedetti and Bassani identify then an intellectual trajectory potentially intended to articulate a «counter-memory» of the Shoah in the early postwar period: a counter-narrative aiming at questioning, rather than repressing, the legacy of Italian anti-Semitism.<sup>16</sup> Their cultural objective coincides with a deconstruction of a cultural ideogeme pivoting on the removal of anti-Jewish persecution from Italy's public memory. This critical function does not invest of course the entire domain of early Italian writings about the Shoah: nevertheless, it highlights a genealogical constellation that calls for adequate recognition.

### **Metamorphoses of Shylock: *Eight Jews* and the critique of a self-delusion**

Anticipating by more than forty years a reflection later reprised by Primo Levi in *The Drowned and The Saved*, Debenedetti presents his reader with a disquieting awareness. Contrasting with a «stereotypical picture» inclined to describe the hour of liberation as a «joyful» and comforting moment, for most Jews the rediscovery of freedom rather coincided with a renewed «phase of anguish».<sup>17</sup> The source of this malaise is to be reconnected, Debenedetti observes, with a worrying moral ambiguity. Particularly for Italian Jews, the liberation entailed in fact the returning into a polity of former perpetrators that, up to few years earlier, had enthusiastically embraced the proclaims of a massive anti-Semitic propaganda: yesterday's oppressors have transformed into the new antifascist liberators. This disturbing turnaround is alluded through a pungent reference to one of the most famous masks of literary anti-Semitism, Shakespeare's Shylock, whose presence casts a heavy shadow over the opening pages of *Eight Jews*:

16 «Contre-mémoire» is an expression coined by Foucault in his essay *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire*, where the semantic and conceptual sphere of the term acquires however a partly different value from the one considered in this essay. Besides a «platonic» configuration of history, the critical target of Foucault is in fact represented by the «metaphysical and anthropological model» of knowledge offered by «memory» itself, against which emerges the need to turn «history into counter-memory»: «De tout façons, il s'agit de faire de l'histoire un usage qui l'affranchisse à jamais du modèle, à la fois métaphysique et anthropologique, de la mémoire. Il s'agit de faire de l'histoire une contre-mémoire – et d'y déployer par conséquent une tout autre forme du temps», Foucault, *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire*, p. 167. Foucault's neologism ended up originating however a productive interpretive concept, first applied to the field of postwar literary culture by Reiko Tachibana, *Narrative as Counter-Memory: A Half Century of Postwar Writing in Germany and Japan*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998.

17 Cf. the opening pages dedicated by Levi to the issue of the «shame» of the survivor, Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, Turin: Einaudi, 1986, pp. 53–54.

E ora, mentre nei paesi liberi sorride per essi [the Jews] la luce, ora che ogni mattina si domanda-  
no se l'aria che respirano è proprio davvero l'aria di questo mondo, ecco che un nuovo Shylock viene  
avanti e, forte del proprio credito, chiede non già un pezzo di carne viva ma una passiva complicità  
nel dimostrare la purezza, di lui Shylock, e l'intemerata sua fede antifascista. Avessero la fantasia di  
scherzare, gli ebrei si domanderebbero: «Che è, nel senso ingiurioso della parola, nel senso dell'e-  
sosità, chi è il vero ebreo?».<sup>18</sup>

The face of the perpetrator and that of the liberator paradoxically coincide, adding a  
taste of intolerable mockery to the sense of ethical disproportion deriving from the  
awareness of having escaped, more than an annoying wave of discrimination, an out-  
right extermination policy. It is this sense of mockery and moral disgust that probably  
pervades Debenedetti's portrayal of the historical figure of Raffaele Alianiello, one of  
the big players in the larger tragedy of the Fosse Ardeatine massacre, which might have  
represented the actual source of this pungent Shakespearian metaphor.

The eight Jews at the center of Debenedetti's essay were included in fact in one of  
the most ominous lists in the history of Nazi occupation of Italy.<sup>19</sup> Facing a growing dif-  
ficulty in the search for the hostages necessary to carry out the retaliation against the  
partisan attack in Via Rasella, Herbert Kappler requested Piero Caruso, chief of the po-  
lice in Rome, to prepare a list of additional prisoners to be joined with those already  
identified by German authorities. After a discussion with Buffarini Guidi, Caruso an-  
swered providing a record of fifty names, selected from the inmates of the Regina Coeli  
prison. However, due to confusion and hastiness in the execution of the retaliation,  
the first group of detainees was taken away in a random manner, *a caso*, without fol-  
lowing the lists previously arranged. Alerted by Alianiello, a police functionary in  
service at Regina Coeli, Caruso ordered ten names to be removed from his list, corre-  
sponding to the first *Todeskandidaten* already transferred to the Ardeatine caves.  
Alianiello and the director of prison, Donato Carretta, carried out the correction: eight

<sup>18</sup> Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis of the events culminated in the massacre as well as its impact in the collective  
memory after the war, cf. Robert Katz, *Death in Rome*, New York: MacMillan, 1967; Joachim Staron,  
*Fosse Ardeatine und Marzabotto: deutsche Kriegsverbrechen und Resistenza. Geschichte und natio-  
nale Mythenbildung in Deutschland und Italien (1944–1999)*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002; Ales-  
sandro Portelli, *L'ordine è già stato eseguito. Roma, le Fosse Ardeatine, la memoria*, Roma: Donzelli  
Editore, 2005.



of the ten names erased from the list were of Jewish inmates.<sup>20</sup> This is the opening scene of Debenedetti's essay:

Roma, 24 marzo 1944. Si sta manipolando la cosiddetta «prima lista» per le Fosse Ardeatine. I tedeschi, per conto loro, hanno già prelevato dieci ostaggi. «Dissi a Carretta di cancellare dieci nomi. In fondo c'erano i nomi di otto ebrei. Abbiamo pensato che fossero stati aggiunti all'ultima ora per completare il numero di 50. Così Carretta li ha cancellati insieme con altri due nomi scelti a caso». In questi termini, secondo i resoconti dei giornali, si sarebbe espresso davanti all'Alta Corte di Giustizia per la punizione di reati fascisti, il signor Raffaele Alianiello, commissario di Pubblica Sicurezza, appositamente «distaccato» da un campo di concentramento, perché venisse a deporre come teste al processo Caruso.<sup>21</sup>

The «eight Jews» of Debenedetti's essay correspond then to the names of eight people saved from one of the most atrocious massacres in Nazi occupied Italy. But saved for what reason? If the two other names have been selected *a caso*, why the other eight names have not been canceled according to the same criterion? What reasoning convinced Alianiello and Carretta to grant to the Jews inmates the «privilege» and the «precedence» to be saved, amidst a list of fifty individuals all facing the same destiny? The «injustice», Debenedetti points out, «was the same for everyone»:

Perché gli ebrei ebbero il privilegio, la precedenza? Perché, su dieci posti, se ne portarono via otto? L'ingiustizia era uguale per tutti. Non si dica che sugli altri pendevano accuse precise: che la loro sorte, anche senza quella rappresaglia, era già decisa, scontata, anche gli altri otto potevano essere scelti a caso. Secondo: sugli ebrei gravava l'accusa razziale, con cui sotto i nazi c'era poco da scherzare.<sup>22</sup>

Alianello's statements – it is the suspect raised by Debenedetti – are simply aimed at the construction of an alibi: «amava Alianiello gli ebrei? Sappiamo che, al processo Caruso, li barattò», offering them in exchange for a plausible presumption of innocence. The mechanism of this exculpatory theorem can be easily deduced: the extemporaneous act of benevolence toward a group of persecuted Jews is offered in exchange for an acquittance from far more dangerous imputations, starting from the responsibility of having taken part, albeit in a minor role, in the organization of the retaliation itself.

20 Carretta was to be horrendously lynched by a ferocious mob during Caruso's trial and drowned in the Tiber, his body then hanged in front of Regina Coeli. Caruso instead was sentenced to death for collaborationism and executed on 22 September 1944.

21 Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, p. 69.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Behind this shrewd political calculation, it is possible to glimpse the willingness to transform an apparently genuine act of benevolence into an argument of «anti-Fascist demagogy».<sup>23</sup> Alianiello needs to provide without any hesitation an «incontrovertible», irrefutable evidence that while the others «were collaborating with the Nazi-Fascists, we instead were with the good ones». But the «problem», Debenedetti observes, can be easily solved:

Quello che ieri era nero, oggi è diventato bianco. Qual era, sul cartellino segnaletico del fascismo, il connotato più caratteristico? Quali le impronte digitali del fascismo? Diamine, la persecuzione degli ebrei. Quale, di conseguenza, il più incontrovertibile connotato dell'antifascismo? La protezione degli ebrei. I fascisti, quando comandavano loro, deploravano: peggio, punivano il pietismo verso gli ebrei. Mostriamo di esser stati pietisti, di avere avuto questo coraggio, e risulteremo senz'altro iscritti, iscritti d'ufficio, senz'ombra di contestazione, nei ranghi dell'antifascismo. Dài giovinotto, attaccati agli ebrei, tutto fa brodo, anche la carne sbattezzata. Fai vedere di aver derivato a favore degli ebrei il cavo preferenziale della benevolenza.<sup>24</sup>

In this attempt of exculpation, Debenedetti points out, the aid offered to the persecuted Jews is turned into an ambiguous pretext to safeguard the «cleanness» and «purity» of Alianiello's «political record» («la pulizia e l'illibatezza della propria fedina politica»).

Alianello's case thus points out a troubling conceptual and psychological allegory: the idea that the purported assistance and «benevolence» offered to persecuted Jews might have served as an accommodating pretext to dismiss a host of moral and political responsibilities accrued by Fascist Italy, both in the years of the racial campaign and, later on, during the parallel war of aggression waged side by side with Nazi Germany. The «Jewish card» played by Alianello has to conjure up a moral expedient to safeguard his political integrity. In this ethical and political calculation, the saving of Jewish lives had to foster a «culture and politics of collective absolution» able to gain a «hegemonic grasp on post-Fascist public opinion».<sup>25</sup>

Uncovering this self-delusional mechanism, Alianello's case inevitably brings to light the «false conscience» of an entire nation, as well as the mythogenesis of Italy's re-

<sup>23</sup> «Un argomento di demagogia antifascista», *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>25</sup> I borrow here some effective formulations coined by Guri Schwarz, *On Myth Making and Nation Building: The Genesis of the «Myth of the Good Italian», 1943–1947*, «Telos», 164, 2013, pp. 12–13.

nowned postwar «pietism».<sup>26</sup> *Eight Jews* probably illuminates one of the most hidden psychological and political root of such a self-laudatory image of Italians apparently committed en masse to sheltering and protecting Jews from the violence of Nazi persecution. A cliché that, though grounded on one hand on concrete historical evidence, was also destined to overcompensate for the awareness of Italy's active involvement in those same racial policies Alianiello apparently decries.<sup>27</sup>

The demystification of a national false conscience does not exhaust however the critical impact of Debenedetti's text. Because the construction of this collective myth was possible also through the extortion of a «passive complicity» from the very victims of the persecution, who were persuaded, if not forced, to adhere to the same self-delusional vision made up by their «Arian» fellow citizens. After having exposed the pathogenesis of a distorted memory, the conceptual articulation of *Eight Jews* addresses the elaboration by the Italian Jewish community of a substantially «reconciliatory memory»: an elaboration that masks however, Debenedetti argues, a further «imposition», another hideous «soperchieria».<sup>28</sup>

A consolidated historiographical scholarship has investigated the cultural and psychological dynamics underlying the impulse for Italian Jews to prioritize the need for reintegration over a recrimination of the violence suffered during the years of racial discrimination. As observed by Guri Schwarz, «Italian Jewish leadership was generally very cautious about publicly raising the issue of Italian responsibility in racist perse-

26 Focardi, *Alle origini di una grande rimozione*, p. 161.

27 Raul Hilberg, in the section of his *History of the Destruction of The Jews Of Europe* dedicated to Italy, already pointed out the «administrative» difficulties that hindered a full-fledged implementation of the genocide on Italian soil, resulting in a significant lower percentage of victims compared to that of other West-European countries. Hilberg, on the other hand, also remarks that this is not to say «that the Italians were wholly incapable of hurting subject peoples; there were incidents, too serious to be overlooked, against Yugoslavs, Greeks, and African inhabitants», Raul Hilberg, *The Destructions of European Jews*, vol. II, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 703.

28 Cf. Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, p. 60. The term «reconciliatory memory» has been proposed by Carlo Capogreco, *I campi del duce: l'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista, 1940–1943*, Turin: Einaudi, 2004, p. 5. This formula summarizes the results of a preexisting scholarship, see Guri Schwarz, *Identità ebraica e identità italiana nel ricordo dell'antisemitismo fascista in La memoria della legislazione e della persecuzione antiebraica nella storia dell'Italia repubblicana*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1999, pp. 27–34; Id., *Gli ebrei italiani e la memoria della persecuzione fascista (1945–1955)*, in «Passato e presente», 1999, 47, pp. 109–130; Guri Schwarz, Ilaria Pavan (eds.), *Gli ebrei in Italia tra persecuzione fascista e reintegrazione postbellica*, Florence: La Giuntina, 2001; Michele Sarfatti (ed.), *Il ritorno alla vita: vicende e diritti degli ebrei in Italia dopo la seconda guerra mondiale*, Florence: La Giuntina, 1998.

cutions», while a «key element that allowed the Jews to find their place in post-war Italy was their support for what is now known as the <myth of the good Italian>». <sup>29</sup> This tendency «to minimize the relevance of racism and anti-Semitism» in Fascist Italy already emerged in the aftermath of the war. One of its most remarkable and revelatory attestations comes from a book, published in 1946 by Eucardio Momigliano – cousin of the better known literary critic Arnaldo. A former inmate of the Italian internment camp of Urbisaglia, Momigliano condensed an analysis *a caldo* of Italy’s anti-Semitism in his *Storia tragica e grottesca del razzismo fascista* («Tragic and grotesque history of Fascist racism», image 3). <sup>30</sup> Momigliano’s *Storia* represents the first attempt at a global analysis of Fascist anti-Semitic policies written by an Italian Jewish intellectual. The book, however, unwittingly echoes and amplifies the founding elements of a *vulgata* depicting Italian society as «virtually free of the anti-Jewish hatred that existed widely on the rest of the continent», underscoring at the same time the «external» origin of Fascist anti-Semitism as well as the difference of attitudes existing between an innocent Italian people and demonized Germany. <sup>31</sup> In line with a simplistic though widely accepted interpretation, Momigliano refers to the anti-Semitic policy as a campaign

[...] imposta dalla Germania e applicata soltanto per una specie di conformismo o mimetismo che sta a dimostrare quanto in basso fosse giunto, nel periodo fascista, il nostro Paese, tanto in basso da poter rinnegare una sua tradizione e da poter venir meno a vincoli di sangue e di amicizia per cui gli ebrei si erano venuti confondendo con gli Italiani e in alcuni campi ne costituivano la miglior parte. <sup>32</sup>

- 
- 29 Guri Schwarz, *The Reconstruction of Jewish Life in Italy after World War II*, «Journal of Modern Jewish Studies», 8(3), 2009, p. 369: «Reintegration, albeit slow and difficult, was a process that could develop only if the Jews accepted the national myth of the Republic born from the Resistance, tending to minimise collective responsibility for the fascist past in general, and contributing in particular to the legitimisation of the denial of responsibility for racist politics». See also Id., *On Myth Making and Nation Building*; Id., *Ritrovare se stessi: gli ebrei nell’Italia postfascista*, Rome: Laterza, 2004.
- 30 Eucardio Momigliano, *Storia tragica e grottesca del razzismo fascista*, Milan: Mondadori, 1946. The contents of Momigliano’s book as well as their position in the early memory discourse about the Shoah have been briefly discussed by Focardi, *Alle origini di una grande rimozione*, pp. 142–146, and Schwarz, *Ritrovare se stessi*, pp. 111–113.
- 31 Schwarz, *On Myth Making and Nation Building: The Genesis of the «Myth of the Good Italian»*, p. 11; Focardi, *Alle origini di una grande rimozione*, p. 146.
- 32 Momigliano, *Storia tragica e grottesca del razzismo fascista*, p. 9.

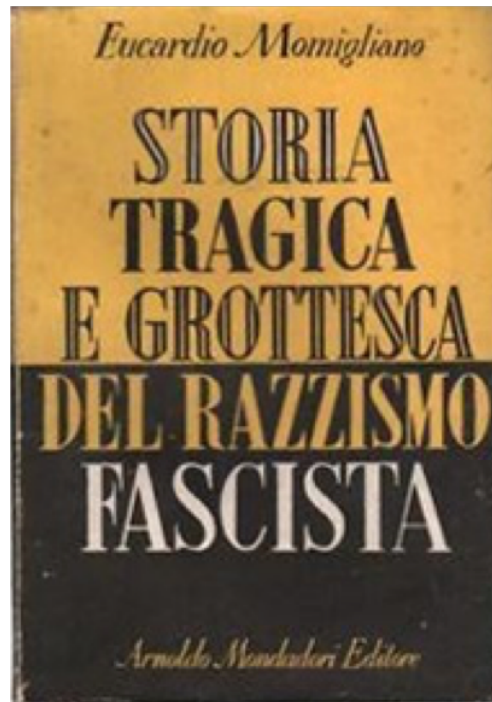


Image 3. Eucardio Momigliano, *Storia tragica e grottesca del razzismo fascista*. Courtesy of Brown University Library.

Besides absolving the Italian society from the responsibility of having autonomously initiated the discriminatory practices, Momigliano radically refutes the suspect of an active involvement of the population in the racial propaganda. Rather, the formula that encapsulates the response opposed by ordinary Italians to Mussolini's racial turn is that of a widespread «conspiracy of disobedience»:

In questa congiura di disobbedienza che insieme era opera di squisita umanità, il popolo italiano rivendicava la sua nobiltà e mostrava l'abisso che lo separava da quel partito che pretendeva di rappresentarlo. L'Italia dimostrava così anche in questo di non aver nulla di comune coi tedeschi. La mala pianta dell'antisemitismo, cresciuta e coltivata in terra tedesca, non doveva né poteva venir trapiantata fra noi.<sup>33</sup>

It might be possible to point out, however, that for Italian Jews the endorsement of this rather «consolatory reading» represented the only way to avoid a far more shattering

---

33 Ibid., p. 136

realization:<sup>34</sup> namely the idea that, even after seventy years of supposed «ties of friendship and blood», the «malapianta» of anti-Semitic hatred was actually able to infiltrate even a country generally detached from widespread anti-Jewish ideologies such as Italy.

Against the background offered by this comforting paradigm, *Eight Jews* raises two fundamental discrepancies. Not all Jewish Italian intellectuals were inclined to uphold Momigliano's thesis about Italy's «conspiracy of disobedience»: Debenedetti's essay demonstrates that the model of reconciliatory memory does not encompass the whole range of cultural and ethical responses to the persecution coming from Italian Jewish culture. Above all, however, *Eight Jews* intend to expose the origins of this memory alteration, rooted in a perverse mechanism of a post-factum psychological violence.

The reconciliatory attitude of the Jewish community, Debenedetti argues, far from being in fact the fruit of a free choice was rather the result of a partly accepted, partly self-imposed obligation embraced in order to better safeguard the mise-en-scene of an Italian anti-Fascist and anti-Semitic «conspiracy of disobedience». It is at this point that the poignant reinterpretation of Shakespeare's Shylock can be gauged in its full meaning. Re-adapting and re-configuring the role usually attributed to the protagonist of the *Merchant of Venice*, in the mask of Shylock Debenedetti recognizes in fact the face of a new, freshly converted «anti-Fascist» who, after having intentionally forgotten his involvement with the past regime, demands to his formerly persecuted countrymen the acknowledgement of his purportedly genuine «anti-Fascist faith»:

Da alcuni secoli gli ebrei sono perseguitati da un terribile tipo: tanto più pericoloso perché suscitato da un poeta eccelso, che gli ha infuso il proprio dono di eternità. E in lui ha condensato antiche e nuove accuse della diffidenza antisemita: da quella dell'omicidio rituale, se così può dirsi, a quella dell'esosità usuraia e inesorabile. Si tratta del personaggio di Shylock. [...] Offesi da questa secolare denuncia, che tutte le ribalte del mondo hanno instancabilmente riproposta al giusto sdegno delle platee, che gli scaffali delle biblioteche di tutto il mondo quotidianamente ridiffondono, quale sentimento possono provare gli ebrei, quando gli tocca accorgersi che Shylock non è solo un'ingiuria,

34 Cf. Schwarz, *On Myth Making and Nation Building: The Genesis of the «Myth of the Good Italian»*, p. 13.

ma una soperchieria: che troppe volte accade proprio a loro di essere le vittime di sempre nuove incarnazioni e imprevedute varietà di Shylock?<sup>35</sup>

«It is possible», Debenedetti continues, «that the case of Alianiello» might have only marginal importance. But it is nevertheless a «symptom», and «to the still wounded sensitivity of Jews», the author continues «it says that the racial campaign is not over. *The persecution continues*».<sup>36</sup>

### The ghetto and Noah's ark

After this devastating critique of a self-delusional and absolutory myth, the focus of Debenedetti's analysis shifts toward the question posed by a moral, more than material, reintegration of Jews in post-Fascist Italy. The wave of self-forged «pietism» that engulfed the collective memory after the war raises, in fact, other two troubling contradictions. At first, the sudden and abrupt change of attitude appears, to Debenedetti, somehow suspect. During Fascism Jews were the object – the «accusative or the dative» – of a «death slogan»: «drive away the Jews, exterminate the Jews». After the liberation, however, the Jews

[...] si sentono daccapo gli accusativi o i dativi di uno *slogan* benefico: «salviamo gli ebrei, ricompensiamo gli ebrei». Dativi o accusativi: cioè, come insegna l'analisi logica, dei «casi». Ciò che li preoccupa, che li mette a disagio è appunto di rimanere un caso: l'eterno, irrimediabile caso ebraico. Lo *slogan* li rinchiude come un Ghetto. Anche se, per avventura, somigli all'Arca di Noè.<sup>37</sup>

This is an «anti-persecution» that reverses the «sign», but also perpetuates the intimate «moral and psychological substance» of the former persecution.<sup>38</sup> Its most immediate result is a precipitous and artificial «campaign of reparation», destined be soon dampened by the indifference of the postwar years. Facing this sudden and unexplained wave of pietism, however, it becomes inevitable to raise a disturbing doubt:

Se prima negli ebrei si puniva l'ebreo, oggi al vedere la situazione, non già corretta, ma capovolta con sì perfetta simmetria di antitesi, può nascere il dubbio che negli ebrei si perdoni l'ebreo. E il perdono richiama l'idea di una colpa, di un trascorso.<sup>39</sup>

35 Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, p. 74.

36 Ibid., p. 74 (emphasis in the original).

37 Ibid., p. 77.

38 Ibid., p. 83.

39 Ibid.

These reflections introduce the other worrying concern pervading the pages of *Eight Jews*: namely the idea that the lack of a critical anamnesis of Italy's anti-Semitic past might induce to dismiss the entire history of Fascist anti-Semitism through purely emotional, if not quasi-religious categories such as those of «guilt», «forgiveness» and «piety». Not being able to develop a substantial analysis of the racial turn achieved in 1938, Debenedetti raises the doubt that Italian postwar society might be destined to simply «forgive» and forget a painful and unpleasant page in its history. In this pseudo-religious absolution of a collective guilt, «pity» represents then the main (un)ethical and affective dimension to commemorate the victims of the persecution, while preventing at the same time an effective understanding of their suffering: «pity» for the «poor Jews», who become in turn senseless victims of a de-historicized violence. However, it is exactly this «supplement of piety» that *Eight Jews* rejects:

Se una sola rivendicazione gli ebrei hanno da fare, è questa sola: che i loro morti di violenza e di fame, i piccini che non hanno resistito al primo sorso di latte finalmente somministrato, dopo mesi di inanizione, nei paesi d'asilo, le donne prese a calci e mitragliate, i poppanti lanciati in aria e impallinati come uccelletti, siano messi in fila con tutti gli altri morti, con tutte le altre vittime di questa guerra. [...] Senza un supplemento di pietà – pietà per i poveri ebrei – che umilierebbe il loro sacrificio.<sup>40</sup>

This passage condenses probably the most intimate core of Debenedetti's work. At its heart, *Eight Jews* aims at a substantial re-configuration of the ethical and historical semantics associated to the victimhood of racial persecution. The postwar reintegration of Italian Jews, Debenedetti argues, cannot be realized through an arbitrary act of «pity» and «forgiveness», all too similar to the arbitrary «privilege» accorded by Alianello to the eight Jews of the Fosse Ardeatine list. Rather, the essence of this «return to life» is to be constituted by the recognition of the «sacrifice» suffered also by the victims of racial persecution in the liberation from Nazi-Fascism. Establishing a link between the condition of the persecuted Jew and that of the «caduti per la libertà» – namely, of people who died because of their active participation to the Resistance – *Eight Jews* intends to inscribe the violence of the genocide within the wider ethical and historical epos of the resistential struggle against Nazi-Fascist oppression. In this way,

---

40 Ibid., pp. 87–88.



Debenedetti's text reveals to intersect with one of the most characteristic features of early Italian literature about political, racial and military deportees, represented by a pressing impulse to foster a «resistentialization» of deportation.<sup>41</sup> Reversing Alianiello's gesture, who separated and isolated again a group of Jews apparently to protect them, Debenedetti assumes an opposite perspective:

E se un giorno, a questi caduti, si vorrà dare una ricompensa al valore, non certo noi, gli ebrei sopravvissuti, la rifiuteremo; ma non si conino apposite medaglie, non si stampino speciali diplomi: siano le medaglie e i diplomi degli altri soldati. «*Soldato Coen... Soldato Levi... Soldato Abramovic... Soldato Chaim Blumental, di anni cinque, caduto a Leopoli, in mezzo alla sua famiglia, mentre, con le mani legate dietro la schiena, ancora difendeva, ancora testimoniava la causa della libertà*».<sup>42</sup>

The separation established by Alianiello, between Jews that had to be saved and other Italians that might be on the other hand abandoned in the hands of the Germans, symbolizes in reverse terms the most unsettling legacy of the anti-Semitic campaign: a discriminatory gesture that perpetuates the same ideology at the basis of anti-Semitic propaganda. Although the space created by this new separation will have in fact the protective features of «Noah's Ark», its inevitable consequence is in fact to seclude once again the «Jewish group» into a repeated condition of minority, a new, protective «ghetto». Persecuted because of their «race» by Fascism, saved because of their «race» in post-Fascist Italy. However, this unsettling psychological continuity raises a disturbing question: «forgiveness, or amnesty? And until when will it last?».<sup>43</sup> The answer is given by Debenedetti in an anecdote describing the moment of the author's return to Rome, after the liberation:

Tornavamo da Napoli, sul fastigio di un camion di noci, sotto la pioggia battente. Uno strano tipo era salito con noi: barba di tre giorni, aspetto da fuggiasco o da evaso, ma gli abiti stracchi tradivano ancora il taglio borghese [...] Più tardi, a un posto di blocco venimmo a sapere che l'ingenuo era un giovane funzionario della Questura [...] Quando il nostro turno giunse, e noi senza ambagi gli declinammo il nostro nome, quel giovane e spassionato dominicano dell'inquisizione poliziesca, quel

41 On this question see Manuela Consonni, *L'eclisse dell'antifascismo. Resistenza, questione ebraica e cultura politica in Italia dal 1943 al 1989*, Rome: Laterza, 2015. Robert Gordon has also remarked how «modes of deportation writing echo certain modes of Resistance writing», *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*, p. 52.

42 Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, p. 88 (emphasis in the original).

43 Ibid., p. 83.

futuro ripopolatore delle carceri d'Italia, ebbe un balzo trionfale, come quando, nei luminosi giorni della sua carriera, la sventata risposta di un malcapitato gli permetterà di saldare fulmineamente una faticosa catena di intuizioni, di concludere in un attimo, con un colpo di scena, una serie di indagini che si annunciava lunga e penosa; di scoprire nel testimonio un reo, di stringere a un tratto l'inerte congerie in un'accusa lampante. Proruppe: «Debenedetti? ebreo?!» E immediatamente quello sguardo professionale da dietro gli occhiali inesistenti, varcando di sotto in su l'arco ciliare ci dardeggiò di sghembo, e condensava un tumultuoso accavallarsi di sottintesi, di illazioni, di scontrose indulgenze: «Ah, per questa volta ce l'hai fatta – esclamò quello sguardo – ma ringrazia l'amnistia. Vattene, vecchia volpe, l'aria del vigilato speciale non te la toglie nemmeno Domineddio».<sup>44</sup>

In this unsettling conclusion, *Eight Jews* debunks one of the pillars of contemporary anti-Semitism, including its most radical and negationist currents: a perverse vision of the historical legacy of the genocide of European Jews that contradictorily sees in the extermination both the punishment and simultaneously the source, of imaginary «privileges» granted to the Jewish community. A molecular, low-intensity prejudice pervading, for instance, an emblematic and frequently stigmatized article published by Cesare Merzagora on the columns of «*La Libertà*» in December 1945, few months after the liberation. The article, titled *Un problema attuale* («A contemporary issue»), deals with the question of the reintegration of formerly persecuted Jews. Merzagora wrote:

Coloro che tornano nelle industrie, nelle banche, nelle compagnie di assicurazione, non protestino se l'epurazione – anche quella non perfettamente legalitaria ma legittima – li ha colpiti. [...] Coloro che tornano ai loro commerci devono comprendere che se vogliono contribuire all'auspicata fusione nazionale non devono riprendere gli antichi sistemi per i quali che entrava in un negozio o in un ufficio il cui titolare era israelita difficilmente vi trovava dei non correligionari all'infuori del fattorino [...] Era proprio questo esclusivismo che in molte aziende dava luogo ad un irradiante anti-semitismo a carattere difensivo.

Bisogna che gli israeliti che ritornano si controllino. L'Italia è cambiata sotto molti aspetti. Essi devono abituarsi a star seduti attorno a un tavolo: non sopra e neanche sotto, come è un po' loro abitudine.

Se tornano con divisa e passaporto americani e magari in veste ufficiale, sfoggiando uniformi amiche ma non nostrane, si ricordino almeno che devono la loro attuale posizione al fatto di essere stati prima italiani. E non si diano delle arie.<sup>45</sup>

44 Ibid., pp. 84–85.

45 Cesare Merzagora, *Un problema attuale*, «*La Libertà*», 19 December 1945. The article was later included in a volume, *I pavidì. Dalla cospirazione alla costituente*, Milan: Galileo, 1946 and accom-

Anticipating these defamatory statements, written by a future President of the Italian Senate, Debenedetti simply observes that the only «claim» advanced by the survivors of the genocide is «not to have special rights»: «il diritto a non avere speciali diritti. Speciali, cioè razziali». <sup>46</sup>

### «The past was past»: censorship and self-censorship in a short-story by Giorgio Bassani

With an extraordinary intuition, *Eight Jews* preconizes a salient critique of the inconsistencies that accompanied the elaboration of the memory of the genocide in postwar Italy. Debenedetti's counter-writing exposes the fragility of self-delusional and reconciliatory myths, the burden of an opportunistic reshaping of the moral landscape of Italian society, as well as a general unwillingness to really address the unpleasant legacy of Fascist anti-Semitism. A few years later, Giorgio Bassani's would have taken up a similar critical engagement, recontextualizing this ethical questioning into a different chronological framework and artistic language.

Between the late 1940s and mid-1950s, Bassani's main creative project coincides with the laboratory of his *Cinque storie ferraresi* («Five Stories of Ferrara»): five short-stories intended to depict a history of «pre-Fascist, Fascist and post-Fascist Italy», which also encapsulate a history of the pre-Fascist, Fascist and post-Fascist Jewish community of the author. <sup>47</sup> The last of these Ferrarese stories, *Una notte del '43* («A Night in '43»), showcases however a perturbing occultation of memory. The story

---

panied by a supportive preface written by Benedetto Croce. The book – and particularly Croce's preface – triggered an intense polemical response by Dante Lattes, *Benedetto Croce e l'inutile martirio d'Israele*, and Ferruccio Pardo, *L'ebraismo secondo B. Croce e secondo la filosofia crociana*, Florence: Quaderni della casa editrice Israel, 1948. On this debate and on other cases of postwar anti-Semitic writings in Italy, see Roberto Finzi, *Tre scritti postbellici sugli ebrei di Benedetto Croce, Cesare Merzagora e Adolfo Omodeo*, «Studi Storici», I, 2006, pp. 86–110.

46 Debenedetti, *Otto ebrei*, p. 87.

47 Cf. Piero Pieri, *Memoria e giustizia. Le Cinque storie ferraresi di Giorgio Bassani*, Pisa: ETS, 2008, p. 53. The first edition of Bassani's *Cinque storie ferraresi* was printed by Einaudi in 1956. In 1980 the book was included in *Il Romanzo di Ferrara* under the name of *Dentro le mura* («Within the Walls»). The textual history of Bassani's Ferrarese short-stories is however extremely complex, as the author continued to correct the texts after their publication in 1956. The 1956 edition of the *Cinque storie ferraresi* included, besides *Una lapide in via Mazzini*, the short-stories *Lida Mantovani*, *La passeggiata prima di cena*, *Gli ultimi anni di Clelia Trotti* and *Una notte del '43*.

recounted by this text culminates in the *mise-en-scene* of a shallow and distorted postwar reparation trial:

Arrivò il turno di Pino Barilari.

Sempre sorretto dalla moglie, si fece avanti e giurò regolarmente, seppure in un soffio.

Ma un attimo prima che, rispondendo alla domanda del Presidente, pronunciasse con chiarezza, quasi scandendola, quell'unica parola: «Dormivo», che di colpo, come la puntura di uno spillo in una vescica gonfia d'aria, aveva risolto in nulla l'enorme tensione generale (il silenzio era assoluto, nessuno respirava, e anche la moglie si era curvata ansiosa in avanti a scrutargli il viso), proprio in quel punto, dal suo angolo, Nino Bottecchiari aveva visto distintamente Sciagura rivolgere a Pino Barilari – l'unica persona a Ferrara che forse sapeva, l'unico testimone da cui adesso dipendeva la sua libertà, e magari la sua vita – qualcosa come una rapida smorfia propiziatoria: e un ammicco, già, un quasi impercettibile ammicco d'intesa.<sup>48</sup>

With a single word – *dormivo*, «I was sleeping» – pronounced in a crowded court hall Pino Barilari, the only eye witness of the massacre of eleven Ferrarese citizen perpetrated by the Salò militia in a night of December 1943, buries under a curtain of silence the unmasterable past of the civil war, facilitating with his «passive complicity» the return to a surreal normality. The imperceptible glance of «understanding» exchanged with Sciagura, the *repubblicino* who organized the execution, further reinforces a pact of silence intended to erase a knot of troubling memories.

However, references to the inconsistencies of memory permeate the entire construction of the *Storie ferraresi*, whose architecture is characterized by a dense network of «thematic and intertextual relations».<sup>49</sup> The pact between Barilari and Sciagura mirrors in fact another «pact» of silence, this time pledged between two Jews, Geo Josz and Geremia Tabet: a pact that occupies a salient position in the narrative polyphony of *A Plaque in Via Mazzini*, a short-story published by Bassani in 1952 and later included in the *Storie ferraresi*.

48 Giorgio Bassani, *Una notte del '43*, in *Opere*, Milano, Mondadori, 1998, pp. 1755–1756. *A Night in '43* was originally published in «Botteghe Oscure» in 1955. For an analysis of this text see Guido Fink, «*Quella*» notte del '43, «Paragone», n. 520–522, June–August 1993, pp. 12–31. All quotations of Bassani's short-stories refer to the 1956 edition published by Einaudi, characterized by polemical nuances and allusions that will be, in some cases, significantly attenuated in later versions of the texts.

49 Pieri, *Memoria e giustizia*. p. 53.

*A Plaque in Via Mazzini* describes the anomalous return of Geo Josz, the only survivor of one hundred eighty Jews deported to Germany in 1943, to his native Ferrara.<sup>50</sup> However, far from focusing on Geo's own viewpoint, Bassani lingers on a far more detailed depiction of the contradictory reactions that his unexpected – and perhaps unwanted – return stirs in the «town's public opinion». Reactions that in most cases surprisingly oscillate between annoyed disbelief («Che cosa voleva, Geo Josz?») and feigned pity («Lui era stato a Buchenwald e, unico!, ne tornava [...] Ebbene, essi erano lì, a sua disposizione, tutti orecchi per ascoltare»).<sup>51</sup> Before long, Geo will find himself in an atrocious and paradoxical situation. Escaped to the genocide and haunted by the memory of his experience, he will be progressively isolated and even despised by his own community because of his condition of survivor and witness:

Durante il resto del '46, e l'intero '47 e buona parte del '48 la figura via via più lacera e desolata di Geo Josz non cessò mai di stare davanti ai nostri occhi. Nelle vie, nelle piazze, nei cinema, nei teatri, attorno ai campi sportivi, alle cerimonie pubbliche: si volgeva il capo, e lo si vedeva là, instancabile, sempre con quell'ombra di rattristato stupore nello sguardo, come se non chiedesse altro che di attaccare discorso. Ma tutti lo sfuggivano, come la peste. Nessuno capiva. Nessuno voleva capire.<sup>52</sup>

This surreal and oppressive atmosphere will come to an abrupt end when Geo, without any predictable motivation, will violently confront Lionello Scocca, an ex-informer of the OVRA (Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e la Repressione dell'Antifascismo, the Fascist secret political police), slapping him in the face in the middle of Ferrara's via Mazzini:

Da principio l'incidente sembrò inverosimile. Nessuno ci credeva. Non si riusciva positivamente a figurarsi la scena: Geo che entrava senza sorpresa, col suo passo fiacco, nel campo visivo del conte Scocca addossato al muro; Geo che colpiva le guance incartapecorite della vecchia spia rediviva con due ceffoni secchi, perentori, «da vero squadrista». Il fatto comunque era accaduto di sicuro: decine di persone avevano visto.<sup>53</sup>

50 The character and figure of Geo are clearly fictional. In 1943–1944 between one hundred twenty and one hundred fifty Jews have been deported from Ferrara, and seven of them survived. To this date, two distinct plaques have been installed on the façade of Ferrara's synagogue to commemorate the victims of the persecution.

51 Ibid., pp. 1673, 1661.

52 Ibid., p. 1675.

53 Ibid., p. 1670.

Banned by a community unwilling to «comprehend» his story, Geo will eventually leave Ferrara. His disappearance however allegorizes the disappearance of an unpleasant and unwanted memory. The conceptual structure of *A Plaque in Via Mazzini* pivots on an abrogation of the past, anticipating a key theme of other Ferrarese stories that Bassani devoted to a bitter depiction of the postwar years such as *The Last Years of Clelia Trotti* and *A Night in '43*. Signs and isotopies of this erasure of memory infiltrate the entire narrative texture of the short-story and its conflicting voices. As already mentioned, the impulse to repel the uncomfortable presence of Geo comes from Ferrara's «public opinion», which judges with suspicion and incredulity the return of that «enormously, absurdly fat» man, of «indefinable age», reemerged alive «from the Germany of Buchenwald, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Dachau, etc.»:

E poi, anche ammettendo che non ci si trovasse di fronte ad un trucco, a una mistificazione, che insomma nel gruppo di ebrei cittadini avviati verso i campi di sterminio nazista un Geo Jozs potesse esserci effettivamente stato, dopo tanto tempo, dopo tante sofferenze toccate un po' a tutti, e senza distinzione di fede politica, di censo, di religione, di razza, costui, proprio adesso, che cosa voleva? Che cosa pretendeva?<sup>54</sup>

With an astonishing and obstinate deformation of truth, Geo's obesity becomes thus the unequivocal proof that deportees in the German lagers «did not suffer, after all, that terrible hunger described by the propaganda», or that Geo himself «had enjoyed a particularly favorable condition». The idea that such physical condition might have resulted from an *edema da fame* is presented as a ridiculous «invention», circulated to awkwardly «justify» the implausible corpulence of the survivor.<sup>55</sup>

But even Ferrara's Jewish community reveals to be incomprehensibly upset and annoyed by Geo's return. Refusing any «sociological alibi to Jewish patriotism», Bassani insists on «a condemnation, sometimes veiled, sometimes explicit» of a «social class that was guilty of having joined Fascism en masse» before the 1938 campaign.<sup>56</sup> The president of the Jewish community Ingegner Cohen «did not want to hear a thing» about the sudden reappearance of Geo and the subsequent necessity to rectify the «big marble slate» that he requested to be erected on the façade of Ferrara's synagogue:

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 1648, 1653.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Pieri, *Memoria e giustizia*, p. 69.

Perfino l'ingegner Cohen, il Presidente della Comunità israelitica, il quale, non appena rientrato dalla Svizzera, aveva voluto dedicare agli scomparsi una gran lapide marmorea che spiccò presto rigida, enorme, nuovissima, sulla facciata in cotto rosso del Tempio (e si dovette poi rifarla, naturalmente, non senza soddisfazione di chi aveva rimproverato all'ingegnere tanta fretta celebrativa: giacché i panni sporchi – carità di Patria insegni! – c'è sempre modo di lavarli senza scandalo), perfino lui, in principio, aveva levato una quantità di obiezioni, insomma non ne voleva sapere.<sup>57</sup>

The plaque in via Mazzini acquires at this point ambiguous as much as disturbing meaning (for the real plaques see images 4 and 5).<sup>58</sup> Far from representing the reference point of a renewed *milieu de mémoire* it rather conveys the tangible symbol of a petrification of the past. As it monumentalizes and apparently commemorates the death of Ferrara's victims of the Shoah, it also seals that event in the past, banning it from the present.<sup>59</sup> The «great marble plaque» constitutes, as pointed out by Lucienne Kroba:

an iconic representation of the veil that has been drawn on the past, exonerating the community from having to re-examine its own behavior and its own changed position in the new post-war reality. In fact, when Geo arrives in town and sees his name carved in the stone he protests, and ultimately brings to life the experience that the plaque is meant to lay to rest.<sup>60</sup>

In the thematic structure of *A Plaque in Via Mazzini*, memory and commemoration are engaged in a contrastive and «hostile interaction».<sup>61</sup> Between them lies a fracture that Bassani aims to expose and denounce. The insistent metaphoric allusion to the «dust» that will soon cover the lucid and polished surface of the marble, evoked by Geo at the end of the opening scene of the short-story, reveals thus an emblematic significance.

57 Bassani, *Una lapide in via Mazzini*, in *Opere*, p. 1648. This paragraph will be later removed from the successive versions of the text, probably to smooth some of its most harsh or polemical nuances.

58 The first plaque, on the right side of the synagogue, commemorates the names of only ninety-six victims of deportation. The second plaque is dedicated to all victims of racial persecution: «Del popolo d'Israele / Oltre sei milioni / Le innocenti vittime in Europa / Del bieco odio razziale // In tutta Italia / Dal fatale 8 settembre 1943 / Oltre ottomila / I deportati i martoriati i trucidati // Oltre centocinquanta / I ferraresi / Immolati»

59 In so doing, the plaque presents an exemplary realization of what Pierre Nora has termed *lieux des mémoire*, monumentalized but artificial sites of memory and mourning, as opposed to the socially alive and diffused structure of *milieux de mémoire*, cf. Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, «Representations», 26, 1989, pp. 7–26.

60 Lucienne Kroba, *In The Aftermath: Modalities of Memory in Il Romanzo di Ferrara*, in Roberta Antognini and Rodica Diaconescu Blumenfeld (eds.), *Poscritto a Giorgio Bassani. Saggi in memoria del decimo anniversario della morte*, Milan: Led, 2012, p. 210.

61 Nancy Harrowitz, *Remembering as a Way to Forget: Bassani and Holocaust Commemoration*, in Antognini and Diaconescu Blumenfeld, *Poscritto a Giorgio Bassani*, pp. 55–56.



Image 4. Ferrara, Jewish synagogue, detail. Photo by Edoardo Moretti, 2015, courtesy of MuseoFerrara.





Image 5. Ferrara, Jewish synagogue. Photo by Edoardo Moretti, 2015, courtesy of MuseoFerrara.

Addressing with a pungent irony Aristide Podetti, the unaware bricklayer tasked to install the slate on the façade of the synagogue, Geo bitterly observes: «You are not taking the dust into account, my dear friend: in a few years, you will see, nobody will notice it any longer».<sup>62</sup> This subtle allusion to the consumption brought about by dust conceals a biblical ascendance, further emphasized by Geo’s remarks about his Jewish heritage («yes dear friend, I am talking with you, with you that, I imagine, are not an Israelite»). Evoking the «negative» and annihilating function of dust, Geo appropriates a symbolism in which the «consumption of time» is associated with the «ineluctable death of a contingent grief»: a decay of memory that the plaque involuntary reinforces, rather than abating.<sup>63</sup>

62 Bassani, *Una lapide in Via Mazzini*, in *Opere*, p. 1651. This passage, included in the Einaudi 1956 volume, will be erased from later editions of the text.

63 Cf. Pieri, *Memoria e giustizia*, p. 95: «Ogni forma di cordoglio per Geo è destinata a perire sotto il manto temporale della polvere. Il giovane che non vorrebbe celebrare la morte dei correligionari evoca l’usura del tempo come ineluttabile morte del cordoglio contingente [...]. Ricordando la funzione obliante e negativa della polvere, Geo fa sua l’emblematica della tradizione biblica che indirettamente confermata con la seconda parentetica». References to the image of dust are scattered in various books of the Bible, cf. for instance *Ecclesiastes*, 3, 20: «All go to one place, all are of the dust, and all will be turned to dust again»; *Job*, 34:15 «all humanity would perish together and mankind would

However, the most disturbing element in this mechanism of memory repression is probably represented by Geo's own physical and psychological transfiguration. At his first appearance in a hot August afternoon in 1945, Geo's physical exteriority carries all the signs of his deportation experience: the strange kolbak covering his head, the «leather coat» and the «tight pants». His speech is frequently intermingled with numerous ««prego» alla tedesca» (i. e. *bitte*), his body marked by unnatural obesity. On the skin of Geo's hands, «soft as it was boiled» but «callous» beyond any imagination, one can distinctly read the «five cipher matriculation number, preceded by the letter J».<sup>64</sup>

In short time, however, these traces of persecution will be carefully erased, while Geo recovers an «honest» and harmless bourgeois appearance. The uniform of the deportee is soon replaced with an «impeccable suit of gabardine»,<sup>65</sup> whereas Geo's own body becomes the prime physical signifier of this transformation:

Piano piano lui dimagriva, si asciugava riassumendo gradatamente a prescindere dai radi capelli bianchi, di una canizie assoluta, d'argento, un volto che le guance glabre rendevano ancora più giovanile, addirittura da ragazzo. Ma dopo che furono rimossi i cumuli più alti di macerie e si fu sfogata una iniziale smania di cambiamenti in superficie, anche la città veniva poco a poco ricomponendosi nel profilo assonnato, decrepito, che i secoli della decadenza, succedutisi ai remoti e feroci e gloriosi tempi della Signoria ghibellina, avevano ormai fissato in maschera immutabile.<sup>66</sup>

Geo's transfiguration is paired with a parallel motion («un moto vasto, ineluttabile, fatale»<sup>67</sup>) followed by Ferrara itself, a motion intended to erase, as discretely as possible,

---

return to the dust».

64 Bassani, *Una lapide in Via Mazzini*, in *Opere*, pp. 1650–1651. This is the first description of Geo presented to the reader: «un uomo basso, tarchiato, con uno strano berretto di pelliccia in capo, era davanti a lui. Alzando il braccio, indicava la lapide alle sue spalle. Come era grasso! Sembrava gonfio d'acqua, una specie di annegato. E non c'era da averne paura, perché rideva, di certo per guadagnarsi la sua simpatia. [...] Ma subito, come pentito, e seminando il discorso di frequenti «prego» alla tedesca si dichiarò spiacente [...] e intanto mostrava le proprie, di mani, callose oltre ogni dire, ma coi dorsi così bianchi che un numero di matricola, tatuato poco più su del polso destro nella pelle molliccia, come bollita, poteva essere letto distintamente nelle sue cinque cifre, precedute dalla lettera J».

65 Ibid., p. 1659.

66 Ibid., pp. 1666–1667: «Strano, non è vero?», the narrator further observes, «Eppure il tempo veniva disponendo le cose in modo tale da far pensare che tra Geo e Ferrara – tra Geo e noi – esistesse, se ciò si può dire, una specie di segreto rapporto dinamico. Difficile, lo so, spiegare con chiarezza. C'era, da un lato, il progressivo riassorbimento da parte del corpo di Geo di quegli umori malsani che alla prima sua comparsa in via Mazzini, nell'agosto dell'anno precedente, aveva dato luogo a tante discussioni e perplessità. Dall'altro lato, c'era il contemporaneo riaffiorare, dapprima timido, poi sempre più deciso e evidente, di una immagine di Ferrara e di noi, morale e fisica, di cui nessuno, in cuor suo, non aveva desiderato a un certo punto di dimenticarsi».

67 Ibid.

the ruins of the past. However, behind the symptoms of this exterior transformation, we are induced to glimpse the workings of a parallel psychological process intended to force a suppression of Geo and Ferrara's own traumatic memories. It is eventually this attempted memory suppression that is reflected in the «secret dynamic relationship» between Geo and Ferrara: the censorship that the community imposes on its own past is mirrored into a parallel and troubling (self)censorship imposed on the survivor himself.

Such dynamics of ambiguous and perturbing memory abrogation will find their most acute expression in the scene depicting the encounter between Geo and his uncle, Geremia Tabet, whose personal history was highly compromised with the past regime. Tabet's character was inspired by the historical figure of Renzo Ravenna, Ferrara's Fascist and Jewish *podestà* until his forced resignation in 1938.<sup>68</sup> Even after the war, however, Bassani's Tabet continues to look at his Fascist past with an incomprehensible spirit of nostalgia. Yet, the relationship that Geo reestablishes with his Fascist uncle is marked by a paradoxical «understanding» intended to seal, as it was the case with Barilari and Sciagura, an even more troubling «pact» of silence:

Era come se d'istinto si fosse stabilita fra i due una specie di intesa, alla quale, con prontezza altrettanto fulminea, si erano subito uniformati anche gli altri membri della famiglia: Tania Tabet, lei si invecchiata e sciupata!, e sempre appesa, con quei suoi occhi smarriti, alle labbra del marito, e così i tre ragazzi, Alda, Gilberta e Romano, che però, con la madre, si ritirarono presto a dormire. Il patto era questo: Geo non avrebbe alluso, nemmeno indirettamente, ai trascorsi politici dello zio, e lo zio, dal canto suo, avrebbe evitato di chiedere al nipote che gli parlasse di ciò che aveva visto e patito in Germania, dove anche egli, del resto – e ciò dovevano comunque ricordare coloro che pensassero di rinfacciargli qualche erroruccio di gioventù, qualche più che umano sbaglio di scelta politica – aveva perduto una sorella, un cognato un nipotino amatissimi. Che sventura, certo, quale fatalità! Ma il senso dell'equilibrio e della discrezione (il passato era passato: inutile starlo a rivangare!) ormai doveva vincerla su ogni altro impulso.<sup>69</sup>

68 On this point see Ilaria Pavan, *Il podestà ebreo. La storia di Renzo Ravenna tra fascismo e leggi razziali*, Rome: Laterza, 2006. Pavan points out how Bassani «ha in buona parte esasperato e distorto la figura e la vicenda di Renzo per farne l'emblema, il simbolo, di una certa generazione di ebrei italiani e fascisti», p. 193. Unlike his literary counterpart, who still after the war shows to be proud of his past Fascist exploits, after the implementation of the racial laws Ravenna detached himself from the regime.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 1665.

In the «pact» construed by Geo and Tabet, two Jews – a former Jewish deportee, and a former Fascist Jew – agree to bury a past of suffering and conflicts: censorship and self-censorship of the unpleasant memories of war and persecution are welded together to further consolidate the acquittal of an embarrassing, or unacceptable, experience.

Probably the literary text that, «better than any other, was able to reconstruct the surreal climate of that period»,<sup>70</sup> *A Plaque in via Mazzini* stages an inconceivable injunction to silence, a command to suppress the memory of persecution. The essence of this imposition appears all the more disturbing as it is interiorized by the survivor himself, who chooses to cancel his own feelings under a pacifying and apparently normalizing silence – a choice that echoes the «passive complicity» denounced by De-benedetti few years earlier. Thus, a short-story that most of all should be devoted to the transmission of the testimony of the Shoah highlights, by contrast, a radical and intentional abrogation of memory. The reading of *A Plaque in via Mazzini* delivers then an implacable and devastating judgment about the deficiencies that affected Italy's post-Fascist culture of memory: behind a commemorative façade, embodied by the polished marble slate fixed on the wall of the synagogue, all the characters of this story, no matter whether they are Jews or not, end up embracing a disturbing culture of oblivion. After all «il passato era passato», «the past was past».

It is against this memorial aphasia, supported by a network of silences and guilty complicities, that Geo will violently protest in the only apparently «enigmatic» of the slaps delivered to Lionello Scocca.<sup>71</sup> In line with a «philosophy of the instant conceived as vertigo of knowledge», Geo will eventually find the strength to break the petrified «crust» of forgetfulness that concealed the trauma of the persecution – however only to disappear again afterwards.<sup>72</sup>

70 Alberto Cavaglion, *Il senso dell'arca*, Ancona: L'ancora del Mediterraneo, 2006, p. 30.

71 Bassani, *Una lapide in via Mazzini*, in *Opere*, pp. 1669–1672. See also the final and revelatory comments of the narrator, p. 1679: «Un enigma, già. Eppure, a guardare bene, quando in mancanza di indicazioni più sicure ci si fosse richiamati a quel senso di assurdo, e insieme di verità rivelata, che nella sera imminente può destare qualsiasi incontro, proprio l'episodio del conte Scocca non avrebbe offerto nulla di enigmatico, nulla che non potesse essere compreso da un cuore appena solidale».

72 Cf. Pieri, *Memoria e giustizia*, p. 106.

## Literature of Counter-Memory

Silence, imposed or accepted self-censorship, a false reconciliatory memory and, encapsulating all these dynamics of distortion of the past, the all-encompassing and all-absolving belief that Italians, after all, are *brava gente*,<sup>73</sup> and therefore incapable of partaking in an extermination policy: it is this hegemonic and accommodating vision that Debenedetti and Bassani radically call into question. Against the background of a widespread erasure of the memory of Italian anti-Semitism, these literary works explicitly assumed a contrastive posture.

This eccentric and divergent position further emphasizes, then, the existence of a poliperspectical and fractured genealogy of Italian literature about the Shoah. The line of development traced by this literature of counter-memory configures in fact only one among the multiple faults and tensions that pervaded, since the immediate postwar period, the «literary field» of writings dealing with the anti-Jewish persecution.

Focusing on the intellectual exchange that took place between Saba and Debenedetti – two Jewish writers who, in their private correspondence, paradoxically accused each other of being anti-Semitic «without knowing it»<sup>74</sup> – Alberto Cavaglion pointed out the existence of a further genealogical divarication. The development of the «Shoah-literature theme» in postwar Italy, Cavaglion points out, might be traced following two alternative and coexisting paths. The first coincides with the «wake» left by Levi's *If This is a Man*, path that may be identified then with the growth of an irruent and flourishing testimonial literature, destined however to clash with a protracted cultural amnesia until the late 1950s. The other centers on the «chronicle of the raid of the Rome ghetto» and of his «narrative outcomes», encompassing the writings authored by Debenedetti, Saba and later on by Elsa Morante, Enzo Forcella and Rosetta Loy.<sup>75</sup>

73 The formula *italiani brava gente* (Italians good people) derives from the title of an homonymous movie directed by Giuseppe De Santis in 1965, dedicated to the Italian participation in the Eastern Front – the *campagna di Russia* – during the Second World War.

74 Cf. the letter sent from Saba to Debenedetti, 3 September 1946, Archivio Viैसेux, Fondo Debenedetti, Serie I, Corrispondenza indirizzata a Giacomo Debenedetti, now reprinted in Giacomo Debenedetti, *Lettere di Umberto Saba*, «Nuovi argomenti», 41, November–December, 1959, p. 27.

75 Alberto Cavaglion, *Il grembo della Shoah. Il 16 ottobre 1943 di Umberto Saba, Giacomo Debenedetti, Elsa Morante (con una postilla su Enzo Forcella)*, in Alberto Cavaglion and Marta Baiardi (eds.), *Dopo i testimoni. Memorie, storiografie e narrazioni della deportazione razziale*, Rome: Viella, 2012, p. 246.

Alongside this first articulation, however, it may be possible to recognize other patterns of development, in a system of ramifications and diffractions that reflect remarkable stylistic, cultural and ethical divergences. In what appears as a polygenetic scenario, another itinerary in this early genealogy of Italian writings about the persecution points thus in direction of a young Giorgio Bassani. With a striking coincidence, in fact, on the same issue of «Mercurio» where Debenedetti published 16 October 1943, the editorial board of the review included also a poem, *Cena di Pasqua* («Easter Supper»), that constitutes the first poetical embryo of a narrative sequence later included in *The Garden of The Finzi Contini* (the poem anticipates the description of the Easter supper presented by Bassani in the third chapter of the novel, image 6).

Further enriching this constellation of writings is eventually the heterodox and scandalous narrative fiction elaborated by Curzio Malaparte in *Kaputt*, published in Naples in 1944, in the same year of Debenedetti's writings and Bassani's poem.<sup>76</sup> A narrative *monstre* loosely based on an aestheticization – and falsification – of Malaparte's experiences as war correspondent on the Eastern front, *Kaputt* recounts with a vivid and «melodramatic»<sup>77</sup> tone numerous episodes ascribed to persecution of Eastern European Jews. The book thus presents the description of a harrowing *promenade* in the Warsaw ghetto and a vivid recount of pogroms and other acts of barbaric violence, often juxtaposed with surreal scenes presenting sophisticated and surreal conversations between the narrator and leading figures of the Nazi German élites such as Hans Frank, Ludwig Fischer – both top Nazi officials in the occupied Polish *Generalgouvernement* – or Heinrich Himmler. Underlying this violently expressionist fresco are however a series of ambiguous and problematic thematic cores, starting from the etymological origin of the word «kaputt», a German term deriving, according to Malaparte: «von Hebräisch Koppâroth, Opfer, oder Französisch Capot, matsch; zugrunde gerichtet, entzwei [*sic!*]».<sup>78</sup>

76 Curzio Malaparte, *Kaputt*, Milan: Adelphi, 2009 (first edition: Naples: Casella, 1944).

77 Cf. Gordon, *La Shoah nella letteratura italiana*, p. 364.

78 Malaparte, *Kaputt*, p. 13.

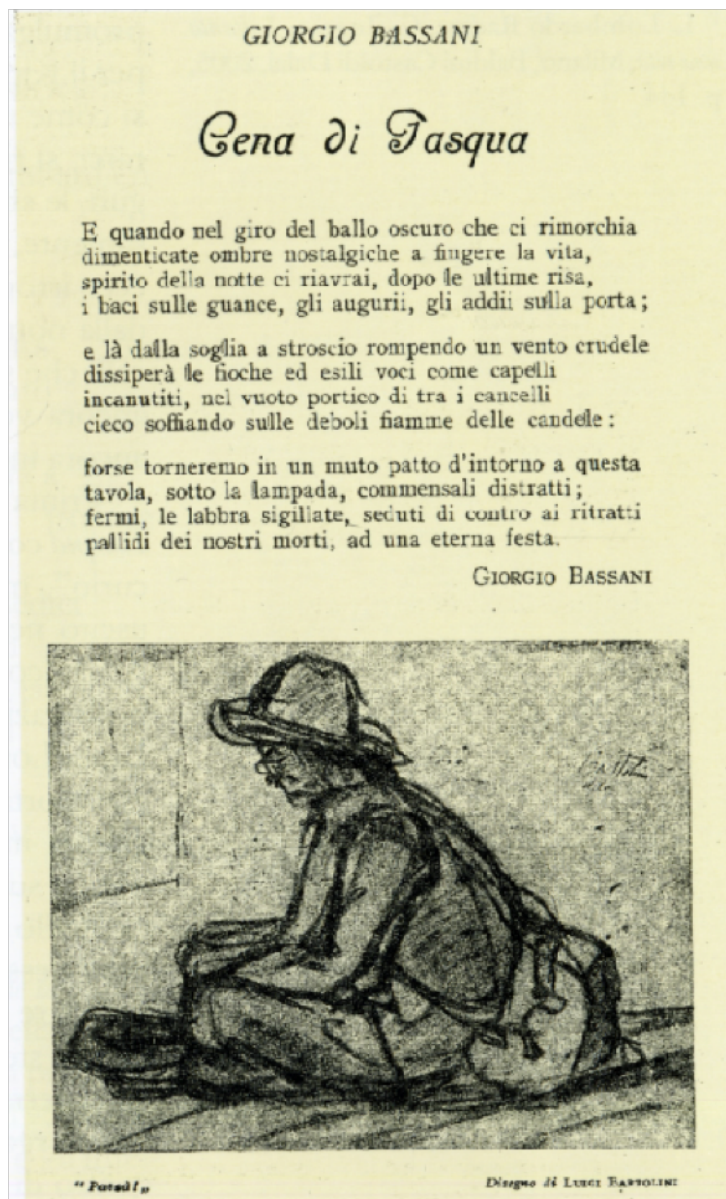


Image 6. Giorgio Bassani, *Cena di Pasqua*, «Mercurio», December 1944. Courtesy of Emeroteca Digitale Gino Bianco.

Debenedetti, Saba, Malaparte, Bassani: The <literary field> of writings engaged in addressing the impact of the Shoah reveals thus a complex structure, marked by a network of relevant stylistic, conceptual and ethical diffractions.

A fundamental question, however, encompasses this constellation of nontestimonial texts and it concerns the posture assumed by these works vis à vis the «removal of the experience of Fascist anti-Semitism» from Italy's postwar public memory.<sup>79</sup> What kind of critical interaction did literary representations of anti-Jewish persecution have with the substantial erasure of the anti-Semitic past from Italian postwar collective memory? How, and with what effects, did these texts respond to the ideological construction of the «good Italian», as well as to the definition on the part of the Italian Jewish community of a largely «reconciliatory» memory of the genocide? Was the relationship between literary memory and collective memory marked by patterns of convergence, or rather by a radical disjuncture?

The answer to such questions cannot be univocal. Rather, this network of cultural responses to the genocide highlights the existence of a fundamental tension, one active between a <field> of literary memories engaged in exposing the limits and inconsistencies of the opposite <field> of public and political memory. Within this interpretive scheme, both *Eight Jews* and *A Plaque in Via Mazzini* configure then an effective counter-writing of diffused memory and political stereotypes traditionally associated with the anti-Jewish campaign in the postwar years. In particular, their atypical intellectual trajectory corrodingly illuminates an incapacitating difficulty to address, on the level of historical conscience, the specifically Italian co-responsibilities in the genocide. Recognizing the position of systemic divergence assumed by these two texts it becomes possible then to identify a further potential genealogy of early Italian literature about the Shoah: a trajectory aiming at problematizing the relationship between the field of literature and that of public commemoration, between the epistemology of the literary discourse and that of a complex – and often conflictual – cultural memory.

---

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Focardi, *Alle origini di una grande rimozione*, p. 141.



## Bibliography

Baldini, Anna: *La memoria italiana della Shoah (1944–2009)*, in Gabriele Pedullà and Sergio Luzzatto (eds.): *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, vol. III, *Dal Romanticismo a oggi*, Turin: Einaudi, 2012, pp. 758–763.

Bassani, Giorgio: *Cena di Pasqua*, «Mercurio. Mensile di letteratura arti scienze», December 1944, p. 207.

Bassani, Giorgio: *Opere*, Milan: Mondadori, 1998.

Bourdieu, Pierre: *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris: Seuil, 1992.

Bourdieu, Pierre and Wacquant, Loïc: *Réponses. Pour une anthropologie littéraire*, Paris: Seuil, 1992.

Capogreco, Carlo: *I campi del duce: l'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista, 1940–1943*, Turin: Einaudi, 2004.

Cavaglion, Alberto: *Il grembo della Shoah. Il 16 ottobre 1943 di Umberto Saba, Giacomo Debenedetti, Elsa Morante (con una postilla su Enzo Forcella)*, in Cavaglion, Alberto and Baiardi, Marta (eds.): *Dopo i testimoni. Memorie, storiografie e narrazioni della deportazione razziale*, Rome: Viella, 2012, pp. 245–261.

Cavaglion, Alberto: *Il senso dell'arca*, Ancona: L'ancora del Mediterraneo, 2006.

Collini, Dario: *La «tempesta sul fiore». Giacomo Debenedetti e la «ferita» della persecuzione*, in Anna Dolfi (ed.): *Gli intellettuali/scrittori ebrei e il dovere della testimonianza*, Florence: Firenze University Press, 2017, pp. 279–290.

Consonni, Manuela: *L'eclisse dell'antifascismo. Resistenza, questione ebraica e cultura politica in Italia dal 1943 al 1989*, Rome: Laterza, 2015.

Debenedetti, Giacomo: *16 Ottobre 1943*, «Mercurio. Mensile di politica arte scienze», 3, December 1944, pp. 75–97; now reprinted in *Saggi*, Milan: Mondadori, 1999, pp. 25–63.

Debenedetti, Giacomo: *16 Octobre 1943*, «Les Temps Modernes», n. 23–24, July–August 1947, pp. 307–326, translated by Michel Arnaud.

Debenedetti, Giacomo: *Lettere di Umberto Saba*, «Nuovi argomenti», 41, November–December, 1959, pp. 8–32.

Debenedetti, Giacomo: *Otto ebrei*, in *Saggi*, Milan: Mondadori, 1999, pp. 64–91.

De Luna, Giovanni: *La Repubblica del dolore. Le memorie di un'Italia divisa*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010.

Dolfi, Anna: *Giorgio Bassani. Una scrittura della malinconia*, Rome: Bulzoni, 2003.

Finzi, Roberto: *Tre scritti postbellici sugli ebrei di Benedetto Croce, Cesare Merzagora e Adolfo Omodeo*, «Studi Storici», I, 2006, pp. 86–110.

Focardi, Filippo: *Alle origini di una grande rimozione. La questione dell'antisemitismo fascista nell'Italia dell'immediato dopoguerra*, «Horizonte. Italianistische Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaft und Gegenwartsliteratur», 4, 1999, pp. 135–170.

Focardi, Filippo: *Il bravo italiano e il cattivo tedesco: la rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale*, Rome: Laterza, 2013.

Focardi, Filippo and Klinkhammer, Lutz: *The question of Fascist Italy's war crimes: the construction of a self-acquitting myth (1943–1948)*, «Journal of Modern Italian Studies», 9(3), 2004, pp. 330–348.

Foucault, Michel: *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire*, in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1971, pp. 145–172.

Ginzburg, Natalia: *16 ottobre 1943: Giacomo Debenedetti e la tragedia degli ebrei romani*, «La Stampa», 14 February 1978.

Gordon, Robert S. C.: *La Shoah nella letteratura italiana*, in Marcello Flores *et alii* (eds.): *Storia della Shoah in Italia*, vol. II, *Vicende, memorie, rappresentazioni*, Turin: UTET, 2010, pp. 359–383.

Gordon, Robert S. C.: *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944–2010*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

Harrowitz, Nancy: *Remembering as a Way to Forget: Bassani and Holocaust Commemoration*, in Antognini, Roberta and Blumenfeld, Diaconescu (eds.): *Poscritto a Giorgio Bassani. Saggi in memoria del decimo anniversario della morte*, Milan: Led, 2012, pp. 55–72.

Hilberg, Raul: *The Destructions of European Jews*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

Kroba, Lucienne: *In The Aftermath: Modalities of Memory in Il Romanzo di Ferrara*, in Antognini, Roberta and Blumenfeld, Rodica Diaconescu (eds.): *Poscritto a Giorgio Bassani. Saggi in memoria del decimo anniversario della morte*, Milan: Led, 2012, pp. 207–234.

Katz, Robert: *Death in Rome*, New York: MacMillan, 1967.

Lattes, Dante: *Benedetto Croce e l'inutile martirio d'Israele*, Florence: Quaderni della casa editrice Israel, 1948.

Levi, Primo: *I sommersi e i salvati*, Turin: Einaudi, 1986.

Luzi, Alfredo: *Esperienza vissuta e scrittura nella poesia di Bassani*, «Ermeneutica letteraria», 9, 2013, pp. 65–82.

Malaparte, Curzio: *Kaputt*, Milan: Adelphi, 2009.

Manacorda, Giuliano: «16 ottobre 1943» e «Otto ebrei», in Tordi, Rosita (ed.): *Il Novecento di Debenedetti*, Milan: Mondadori, 1991, pp. 301–310.

Merzagoria, Cesare: *Un problema attuale*, «La Libertà», 19 December 1945.

Momigliano, Eucardio: *Storia tragica e grottesca del razzismo fascista*, Milan: Mondadori, 1946.

Nora, Pierre: *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, «Representations», 26, 1989, pp. 7–26.

Pardo, Ferruccio: *L'ebraismo secondo B. Croce e secondo la filosofia crociana*, Florence: Quaderni della casa editrice Israel, 1948.

Pavan, Ilaria: *Il podestà ebreo. La storia di Renzo Ravenna tra fascismo e leggi razziali*, Rome: Laterza, 2006.

Pieri, Piero: *Memoria e giustizia. Le Cinque storie ferraresi di Giorgio Bassani*, Pisa: ETS, 2008.

Portelli, Alessandro: *L'ordine è già stato eseguito. Roma, le Fosse Ardeatine, la memoria*, Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2005.

Rothberg, Michael: *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in an Age of Decolonization*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Saba, Umberto: *Scorciatoie e Raccontini*, Turin: Einaudi, 2011.

Sarfatti, Michele (ed.): *Il ritorno alla vita: vicende e diritti degli ebrei in Italia dopo la seconda guerra mondiale*, Florence: La Giuntina, 1998.

Schwarz, Guri: *Gli ebrei italiani e la memoria della persecuzione fascista (1945–1955)*, in «Passato e presente», 1999, 47, pp. 109–130.

Schwarz, Guri: *Identità ebraica e identità italiana nel ricordo dell'antisemitismo fascista*, in *La memoria della legislazione e della persecuzione antiebraica nella storia dell'Italia repubblicana*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1999, pp. 27–34.

Schwarz, Guri: *On Myth Making and Nation Building: The Genesis of the «Myth of the Good Italian», 1943–1947*, «Telos», 164, 2013, pp. 11–43.

Schwarz, Guri: *Ritrovare se stessi: gli ebrei nell'Italia postfascista*, Rome: Laterza, 2004.

Schwarz, Guri: *The Reconstruction of Jewish Life in Italy after World War II*, «Journal of Modern Jewish Studies», 8(3), 2009, pp. 260–277.

Schwarz, Guri and Pavan, Ilaria (eds.): *Gli ebrei in Italia tra persecuzione fascista e re-integrazione postbellica*, Florence: La Giuntina, 2001.

Sodi, Risa: *Narrative and Imperative: The First Fifty Years of Italian Holocaust Fiction (1944–1994)*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007.

Staron, Joachim: *Fosse Ardeatine und Marzabotto: deutsche Kriegsverbrechen und Resistenza. Geschichte und nationale Mythenbildung in Deutschland und Italien (1944–1999)*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002.

Tachibana, Reiko: *Narrative as Counter-Memory: A Half Century of Postwar Writing in Germany and Japan*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998.