



BANCA D'ITALIA
EUROSISTEMA

A conversation with Lia Levi: from personal experience to collective memory

Opening remarks by Luigi Federico Signorini
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Dear Ms Levi, over the past few days, knowing that I was going to welcome you, I finally read *Just a Girl*, the book that made you famous and that I had heard so much about. I was captivated by your book, too, by its light and delicate touch in telling a serious and painfully memorable story in plain and natural words, and by the way the story is evoked through the eyes and thoughts of the child protagonist – the child you were all those years ago. There are moments of intensity and moments of irony, such as when you recount the day of your arrival at the convent, the boarding school that was to be your sanctuary:

As the bus slowly pulls away from the stop, huffing and rattling, part of me is gasping, as if I am drowning – someone wants to make us play blind man's buff with life – while another part is thoughtfully wondering what the uniforms will be like at the convent school.¹

The story is told through the eyes and thoughts of the little girl you were then, as much as through the reflections of the adult who looks back and understands. Your family was spared the tragic fate that swept away so many others, but not the anxiety, the deprivations and the fear.

We shall of course say more about your book.

For now, let us say the Bank is hosting a number of events to mark Holocaust Memorial Day, as it has done in years past, and this conversation is one of them. This is an occasion for us to remember all the people who were exterminated by order of the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945 and to remember the horror of the Shoah, the 'abyss of humanity', as stated in a recent government address. 'An evil,' I quote again 'that deeply affected our nation too, with the infamy of the 1938 racial laws.'²

¹ Lia Levi, *Just a Girl*, Rome, Edizioni e/o, 2020 (1^a ed. 1994), pp. 94-95.

² Giorgia Meloni, Italian Prime Minister, a message for Holocaust Remembrance Day, 27 January 2023.

Holocaust Remembrance Day invites us to reflect, to meet and to share facts, recollections and thoughts, as we are doing with you today, Ms Levi. We must do so, because the unspeakable horror did happen. We must therefore *speak* the unspeakable, learn about it and remember it.

When she was reporting on the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961, Hannah Arendt coined the phrase 'the banality of evil'. It is a phrase that has been much debated, both as identifying a general concept and in its specific reference to Eichmann. I do not wish to take a particular stance. It is a phrase, it seems to me, which evokes what the Shoah has proven: namely that unimaginable evil can become the norm. It is something of which human beings are capable. – For his own part, Elio Vittorini had written:

*Nazifascism. But what does it mean if it is fascism? [...] Could it do anything at all if it were not in man's power to do that thing? I would like to see Hitler and his Germans if it were beyond man's power to do what they are doing.*³

It is possible that absurd ideological positions could arise that lead to unimaginable consequences. 'Such beliefs, however reasonable or absurd some of them may be, could be and were subscribed to by the vast majority',⁴ wrote D.J. Goldhagen in *Hitler's willing executioners*: another distinctly controversial writer, though for different reasons.

So, it is good, it will do us good to remember. Or, in Latin, *Meminisse iuvabit*, the title of a very recent book by Daniele Olschki, which recounts the vicissitudes of a small Florentine publishing house, with Jewish roots, under the racial laws.⁵ I mention this book in homage to our Library, which organised today's event, and I would like to return to it shortly.

Let us now talk about the Bank of Italy. For some years now, to mark 27 January, we have used our intranet to share articles based on papers from our historical archives that shed light on the relations between the Bank of Italy and the Fascist regime, on the racial laws and on how they affected Bank staff.

Gianni Toniolo goes into these matters in his history of the Bank.⁶ As he recalls, the 'Jewish question' affected the Bank in two ways: there was the law ordering all banks (including the Bank of Italy) to dismiss Jewish staff; and there were the financial consequences of the laws dictating the expulsion of Jews of foreign nationality from Italy and imposing working and financial restrictions on Italian Jews. I shall not go into the latter aspect, but I would like to touch on the former and share with you some of the episodes brought to light by our Historical archives.

On 9 September 1938, the Treasury asked the Bank of Italy to carry out a survey of its employees and their race. Governor Azzolini sent a letter out to all Head Office and

³ Elio Vittorini, *Men and Not Men*, Marlboro, Marlboro Press, 1985, p. 163.

⁴ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1996, p. 29.

⁵ Daniele Olschki, *Gioverà ricordare. Meminisse iuvabit*, Florence, Olschki, 2024.

⁶ Gianni Toniolo, *History of the Bank of Italy. Volume I. The birth and evolution of a central bank, 1893-1943*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2022.

Branch managers the following day, requesting them to have all staff fill in forms with details of their race, sign them, and hand them back to him. A few months earlier, Azzolini himself had pre-emptively ordered an internal enquiry based on people's surnames, which showed there were 193 employees of the 'Jewish race', amounting to 4.9 per cent of all personnel. When the official survey was completed, far fewer employees were dismissed ('released' was the term used at the time). Our records show 23 documented cases, though there is no way of obtaining the exact total. We can at any rate infer that more restrictive criteria had been applied.

Of course this is not an isolated case; with the racial laws fully in force at that time, governmental letters were fired off to all kinds of institutions. In the book I mentioned by Olschki, there is a letter sent on 13 September (just a few days after the one received by the Bank of Italy), written in person by Dino Alfieri, the Minister of Popular Culture, to Leo Olschki, the editor. Its chilly bureaucracy is worth hearing:

Please inform me by the 20th of this month if there are any persons of the Jewish race among the members of the Board of Directors or among staff in all departments and at all levels in your company. If there are, you must specify for each person: 1) their exact personal details, their usual residence, their race and the race of both their parents; 2) whether they are married to an Aryan and how many children they have, if any; 3) the date on which they joined the National Fascist Party (PNF) and any military or political commendations; and 4) whether they have any family members (father, brothers and children) that have fallen or been mutilated or injured in war, either for the Fascist cause or in Spain. The same information must be provided for persons of the Jewish race who have converted to another religion. Should there be persons with Jewish surnames, but who claim to be Aryan, such claims must be documented and must go back at least two generations. Furthermore, please inform me by the same date whether you have published any Italian and foreign Jewish authors up until now and which ones and, along with their general personal details and any other information you can give me about the authors, an exact list of works of theirs that you have published. I advise you to carry out this survey with the greatest care and rigour since, given its importance and delicate nature, I shall hold you responsible in the event of any omissions or negligence.⁷

Let us now return to the Bank of Italy. I would like to talk about two colleagues who were fired: Giuseppe Nathan and Maria Giorgina Sacerdoti.

Giuseppe Nathan was the son of Ernesto Nathan, who had been Mayor of Rome from 1907 to 1913, and was the most senior director to be dismissed. Nathan was a Head of Directorate with a dual role in 1938: Bank of Italy delegate in London and Director of the Inspectorate for exchanges and currencies in Rome. In the abovementioned information sheet, which he filled in and signed and which is kept in our historical archives, Nathan declared that he had no relations with any Jewish community, and stated that he professed the old Mazzinian creed and was an Italian citizen who took no notice of his Jewish origins, saying that being Jewish did not make him different. After the issuance of the anti-Semitic legislative measures, Nathan decided to leave Italy with

⁷ D. Olschki, op. cit., 2024, pp. 20-21.

his family and went to Australia, where he stayed until 1939. In 1940, thanks in part to the intercession of Azzolini, he obtained what was called a 'discrimination', a term that has a negative connotation now but at the time meant the opposite: it indicated a kind of milder application of the harsh rules inflicted on Jewish citizens.⁸ Nevertheless, Nathan prudently stayed away from Rome and led a quiet life. It was not until August 1944 that he was recalled to the Bank by Niccolò Introna, the Extraordinary Commissioner in charge of the Bank after the liberation of Rome, and appointed as Head of the central Directorate for War Damage.

Maria Giorgina Sacerdoti was born in Modena and had joined the Bank when she was barely twenty. She was a temporary employee first and was then hired permanently in 1919, working in the Cashier's Office. The staff reports kept in the historical archives describe her as being diligent, industrious and productive. She was the only full-time female employee to be fired, in March 1939. Giorgina was unmarried and had a brother who was unemployed, and she lost her only source of income. The years that followed were hard, a 'painful misery', as she herself put it in a letter to the Governor asking for financial assistance. Azzolini personally gave her several sums of money between 1941 and 1943. Giorgina also recounted what happened to her on 16 October 1943, the day of the raid on the Roman Ghetto: she and her brother managed to escape from their home in via Rattazzi 12, which the Bank had rented to her, minutes before the Germans arrived; just like Lia Levi, they found refuge in a convent in the Monti district. They lost their house, which was given to some evacuees. After the liberation of Rome, in July 1944, Giorgina wrote to Niccolò Introna, the Extraordinary Commissioner, to try and get her house back. We do not know whether she succeeded, but we do know that the Bank took her back in 1946 until her retirement in 1949.

Between 1944 and 1946, 14 of the employees ousted by the Bank for racial reasons were rehired and their salary progression restored.

Lastly, we cannot fail to mention the story of Giorgio Mortara, who was closely linked to the Bank of Italy through his strong personal relationships with Governor Azzolini and with a young Paolo Baffi, a student of his at the Università Bocconi and a future Governor, who had just started in the Research Department. Mortara's ideas and actions were crucial in upgrading and reorganising the Research Directorate in 1936, following the enactment of the banking law. When the racial laws were introduced, Mortara had been working in the Bank for about two years. He was suspended from his teaching job and decided to leave the country. Azzolini tried to dissuade Mortara by offering to strengthen his role as consultant to the Bank, but he and his family left for Brazil at the beginning of 1939. In his memoirs, he recalls that 'thanks to Azzolini's friendly initiative,

⁸ One famous case was that of the architect Vittorio Morpurgo, one of the greatest exponents of Rationalism. He joined the Fascist movement and worked on several important building projects (among which the Nemi Ship Museum, the Ara Pacis in Rome, which has since been replaced, a building that was supposed to host the PNF headquarters and that, once completed after the war, became the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Farnesina, and many buildings in Tirana, when Albania was under Italian rule, including the headquarters of the Bank of Albania, recently restored and enlarged and which I happened to see a few days ago). Morpurgo was one of the few who managed to get 'Aryanisation' from the Race Tribunal; he changed his paternal surname to Ballio, his mother's surname. After the war he changed his name again, to Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo.

the Bank of Italy, together with Credito Italiano and the Banca Commerciale Italiana, transferred a sum of money to my current account in New York, in recognition of my collaboration with them'.⁹

Both Mortara and Nathan would testify on behalf of former Governor Azzolini at his trial, which began early in October 1944, where he was accused of treason for having 'subsequent to 8 September [1943, the day when Italy's armistice with the Allied was announced, after which German troops occupied much of the country], collaborated with the German invaders in Rome, and for consigning the Bank of Italy's gold reserves to them'. During the third hearing of the trial, Nathan recalled Azzolini's personal interventions in his favour, both in having defended Nathan's request for a discrimination and in having tried to maintain it during his service at the Bank. Mortara sent a telegram from Brazil to provide a further favourable testimony. Azzolini was sentenced to 30 years in the 1944 trial. He benefited from an amnesty in 1946, and his sentence was annulled by the Court of Cassation in 1948.

Lia Levi was still a child when this all took place. Her family, which was originally from Piedmont, had moved to Rome in 1941 because of her father's job. Lia was about to start the fifth year of elementary school, but then things turned out differently. Jewish children, including her, were turned away from state schools and their parents lost their jobs, yet her family still held out some hope; the worst did not seem possible at that time. There were worrying signs, but nobody thought that anything tragic could happen in the city of the Pope; in addition, with the 'gold pact', the Germans had promised that, once the 50 kilos of gold requested had been consigned, 'no Jew [would be] arrested and taken away'.

Instead, on 'black Shabbat', 16 October 1943, more than one thousand Roman Jews were taken from their homes to be 'transferred'. They ended up in Auschwitz, and only 16 of them came back.

Lia Levi was saved because her mother had prudently hidden her and her two little sisters in a convent following the Germans' arrival in Rome in September 1943. She stayed in the convent until the city was liberated. She was vaguely aware of what was happening through the filter of her parents. They sometimes took the time to tell their daughters about their decisions, sometimes they would talk together very quietly (but the little girl heard them 'mumbling'), and sometimes they were too anxious to remember to keep the little girls at a distance.

She tells this story in her first novel, *Just a girl*. She has since written many other things as a journalist, screenwriter and storyteller. I am not going to recall her numerous contributions to 'remembrance' over the years. There will be plenty of opportunities to do so this morning.

⁹ Giorgio Mortara, *Ricordi della mia vita*, in *Omaggio a Giorgio Mortara, 1885-1967, vita e opere*, on the occasion of the 20th General UISP Congress, Florence 1985, Rome, Università degli studi di Roma "La Sapienza", 1985, p. 40.

I have a certain personal interest in this 'remembrance'. I had a German grandfather on my mother's side, and on the distaff side, a great-grandmother who came from a family of Jewish origin. While I was going over my notes for this speech,¹⁰ I realised that she could have been related to the Giorgina Sacerdoti who was fired by the Bank of Italy: she had the same surname and was born in the same town. My family was spared (something I only understood as an adult; my mother, who was a little girl at the time, wasn't told anything) because an upstanding German consul turned a blind eye and put the stamp with an eagle and a hooked cross that certified Aryanness on the 'ancestor pass' (*Ahnenpass*) of my grandmother, a naturalised German citizen. He did similar things for many other people.¹¹

Let us preserve the memory of what happened. Through memory, we cultivate reason, compassion, tolerance and doubt, the only antidotes to the fanaticism of 'absurd beliefs' (Goldhagen), and to the horror that 'man has it in his power to do' (Vittorini).

What can Jewish culture tell us about all of this? It is not for me to answer, but I would like to finish with another quote from our guest, taken from a recent speech:

*Judaism is a religion of studies, doubts, questions and discussions.*¹²

Today is an opportunity for questions and discussions.

¹⁰ Here I would like to thank Alberto Baffigi, Anna Rita Rigano and Maria Lucia Stefani for all the information and suggestions they gave me.

¹¹ Gerhard Wolf, German consul in Florence during the Nazi occupation, was given honorary citizenship of the city after the war. A plaque on the Ponte Vecchio says that he 'played a decisive role in saving the Bridge' and 'was instrumental in rescuing political prisoners and Jews at the height of the Nazi occupation'.

¹² Shalom / שׁוֹלוֹם, January-February 2024, p. 7.

