

Italian, American & Jewish

Ottorino Cappelli (January 28, 2009)



Interview with Anthony Julian Tamburri, Dean of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (CUNY): "As an Italian in the US you were automatically identified as a Catholic; but then you were also a Jew, so a 'minority within a minority'..."

How is the your Institute involved in the celebration of Remembrance Day?

"The reasons are numerous. First, we are dedicated to research and promotion of all things and events dealing with Italian Americans. This, for many of us, extends to a wider population that includes Italians living in the United States and Italian culture overall. Second, while the predominant religion among Italian Americans is Catholic, not all Italian immigrants and their progeny are. Third, while much of what is commemorated during this period may deal specifically with Italy, we see this, too, as a component to our overall mission. For to understand more profoundly and more extensively the Italian/American experience, a more intimate knowledge of Italy and its culture and history can only have a most constructive and, henceforth, productive outcome."



[2] [Read the online issue](#) [2] [3] [Download the print issue in pdf format](#) [3] Being Italian and then being Jewish Italian. Did this make life more difficult? What do we know about the experience of this sub-group of Italians who arrived or were born in America and were Jews?



"Considering the bigotry that existed at the beginning of the century, I believe it made things more difficult. Being an Italian was automatically identified as being part of the Catholic minority, which wasn't easily accepted here by the mainstream Protestant culture. But then you were also a Jew, so a "minority within a minority"... And also, of course, you are part of a group that has a certain percent of its population that may also be bigotted against Jews."

Sure, most Italians were Catholics and then some of them became Fascists, of course. It's a peculiar clash, or overlap, between multiple identities: national, religious, cultural, political. Which would prevail? Would "italianità" be enough to create a sense of solidarity within the community? "Historically, I wouldn't know. It's an interesting question and we should ask it to our panelists. I don't know of any specific study on this subject. Based on my personal experience, I grew up in Stamford, CT, in a small Italian/American neighborhood where we had a non-Italian Jewish family, and they were very well accepted. Actually, there were also a few African-American families and they, too, were very much part of the neighborhood. The bond, in retrospect, may have been class, as the neighborhood was clearly working-class.

In broader "sociological" terms, we must keep in mind that there is a difference between someone who came here, say, in his or her thirties, and maintains his "Italian" identity, identifying as an "Italian in America," as opposed to an immigrant, and happens to be Jewish. Then there is someone who was born here and raised by Italian parents who were Jews, and thus grew up as an Italian/American and Jewish. The latter has not been studied to any great length, that I know of. On the other hand, being a minority group—as Italians and as Catholics—may in some instances have helped to be more understanding towards other minorities... certainly within that group itself. And finally, there are well-known, successful instances of Italian Americans who managed multiple overlapping identities. Think of the famous New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who was the son of Jewish mother: he could speak Italian to an Italian neighborhood, he could then go to an upper-class, wasp neighborhood and speak English, and when he went to a Jewish neighborhood he spoke to them in Yiddish."

Speaking of memory—in what ways can memory help our understanding of the present situation and our capacity to move towards the future? You often say, for instance, that the memory of "passage" is the foundation of Italian/American identity. But I have also heard you say that memories should be handled carefully, for they may conceal some dangers...

"I guess that my initial answer would be pretty much a stock answer—we should learn from memory in order to be able to move forward. But if we want to elaborate a little bit, there are two issues that come to mind. First regarding the notion of memory: if memory leads to nostalgia we need to be careful, for nostalgia may sometimes also be a trap and block us from moving forward. The other issue is—and this is where the concept of lived experience comes into the picture—that it is one thing to recall our Italian/American experience, and it is another thing to recall the Jewish experience, that has the horrible component of the holocaust. To have a parent or a grandparent who remembers, that is something we can intellectualize, but we cannot really identify with it in a real visceral sense. In that we need to be accepting of people's notions, ideas, and feelings that we may not be able to "feel." For the Italian American who is not Jewish, for instance, we might think back to the Enemy Alien Act, when our grandparents had to register as Enemy Aliens in this country, and some were even interned. That is painful enough when you think of it, but it pales in comparison to what the Jews have gone through."

Definitely. However, as an Italian American would you say that this Remembrance Day—which incidentally comes only few days after the first African-American has been sworn in as the President of the United States—could be seen as a universal message of peace and tolerance among all races and ethnicities?

"Yes, of course! With a caveat though: I would not speak of "tolerance." I actually think we should go beyond tolerance in a multicultural society. I would rather speak of mutual "acceptance," a concept that evokes a horizontal relationship among equals."

On January 30 (11:00 am-2:00pm), The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute will host the conference "Memoirs and Memories". The event is divided into four sections: (1) John Locicero and



Martin Begun, "Growing Up Italian and Jewish: A Conversation among Friends," (Discussant: prof. Vincenzo Pascale); (2) prof. Robert Zweig, "Return to Naples: My Italian Bar Mitzvah and Other Discoveries;" (3) Gianna Pontecorboli and Simona McCray-Pekelis, "A Conversation" (Discussant: prof. Fabio Girelli Carasi); (4) prof. Stanislao Pugliese "Primo Levi and the Double Bind/Bond of Memory." (For more info [click here](#) [4])

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